

Yonder Mountain String Band keeps rolling along after 2,000 shows

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Feb 4, 2018



Yonder Mountain String Band, one of the nation's top touring "jamgrass" units, brings its genre-busting bluegrass to the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center at 7:30 p.m. as part of the Marshall Artists Series.

Courtesy of the Marshall Artists Series

It was nearly 20 years ago that a twenty-something Ben Kaufmann attending college in Boulder, Colorado, had to call his parents back east with a bit of a confession — he had joined a bluegrass band and thought it might turn into something.

"I come from a very supportive family, and I could have told my parents that I was going to be a rock 'n' roller and they would have had no problem. But when I was like, 'Hey, I am going to be in a bluegrass band,' they were like, 'Ah, are you sure you don't want to go to law school?'" Kaufmann said with a laugh. "Back then it was a tough sell."

Although many contemporary bluegrass bands last about as long as, say, a Hot Pocket, Kaufmann, much to his parents' delight and the delight of fans worldwide, is not living in a van down by the river. He's traveling in the big bus rolling coast to coast and around the globe with one of the top genre-blurring jam-grass units — Yonder Mountain String Band.

Carrying high the late-night festival torch of jam-grass pioneers such as New Grass Revival, Old and In the Way and John Hartford, and rolling up on 20 years in the business, Yonder Mountain String Band brings its festival-built show to the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 10, as part of the Marshall Artists Series.

Tickets are \$37, \$48 and \$70 to see the last night of their winter tour. Opening the show is the Richmond, Virginia-based band The Southern Belles, who have played their high-octane

prog-rocked mix of funky southern psychedelic rock 'n' roll at such festivals as Lockn' and Floyd Fest.

For tickets, contact the Marshall Artists Series Box Office at 304-696-6656 or order tickets online at Ticketmaster.com. You can also visit the box office in the Joan C. Edwards Playhouse from noon to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Kaufmann, a bassist, singer and songwriter, is joined in YMSB by original members Adam Aijala (guitar, vocals) and Dave Johnston (banjo, vocals), as well as relatively new members Allie Kral (violinist and soul vocalist, formerly of Cornmeal) and mandolin virtuoso Jacob Jolliff, who officially joined the band in May 2015, following the departure of founding member Jeff Austin in 2014.



The Yonder Mountain String Band is a mainstay on the festival circuit with repeat performances at major events like Telluride Bluegrass Festival, Summer Camp, Bonaroo, Austin City Limits Festival and Rothbury.
Photo by Brian Spady/courtesy of <http://yondermountain.com/>

This winter tour has included a pretty wild milestone in that the band, which played its first show at the Pioneer Inn in Nederland, Colorado, in September 1998, just went past the 2,000th show mark Jan. 13 at a sold-out show at The Orange Peel in Asheville, North Carolina.

"Being in a band is like being in a big family, and it's a bit like being married to five different people," Kaufmann said. "It's weird passing a milestone like that because there is that sudden realization when you are there on the stage in the moment, like wow, 2,000 shows, and then at the same time, you also have a show the next day and had a show the day before and a week from now, so you can have

this sort of fleeting since of accomplishment but also be like, well, you can't get too hung up on it. I made the joke on stage that I feel like we would probably do another 2,000 shows — just maybe not in the next week. Give me another 20 years."

The first 20 years has seen YMSB rewriting the definition of the bluegrass genre, tossing in tasty bits of funk, rock, R&B and country into its bluegrass blender and spraying it out on stage with a whole lot of energy, which has made the band a staple at such festivals as Telluride Bluegrass Festival, Summer Camp, Bonaroo, Austin City Limits Festival and Rothbury.

"When we were starting out we would show up to these festivals, and we would be like the only example of a band without drums and the only air quotes 'bluegrass' band at the festival. So we would show up at a lot of these rock 'n' roll festivals, and then we would show up at the bluegrass festivals because we were that out there, sort of jam band thing for bluegrass festivals," Kaufmann said. "Then flash forward all of this time, and you have so many artists and bands that are taking the music in all of these different directions, and everyone seems to have a career and pay their mortgage and do what they do which is incredible. To to me the only reason we are able to do what we do now and back then is because everybody else did the heavy lifting — like New Grass Revival, they got threatened at truck stops, that is the hard stuff when you're getting threatened with physical violence because you want to play your music your way."

Because Yonder still to this day on a given night will cover everything from the Misfits and Ween to Flatt and Scruggs, Blind Melon and the Talking Heads, and as the band has worked with such a wide range of producers, it has found itself sandwiched between a very eclectic mix of acts through the years.

"Oh yeah, there have been some weird ones," Kaufmann said, laughing. "Like Yonder, when we are shining, our forte is not, like, perfection. It is not all the right notes in all the right spaces, and we've found ourselves on the bill with Bela Fleck and the Flecktones or the Punch Brothers and these bands that, speaking as a musician, you sit there on the side of the stage and you're like, 'That is the best thing I have ever heard,' and literally every one of these people are redefining their instruments, and so as a musician and personally, those are hard to follow. On the other hand we have had to follow really big loud, crazy rock bands, and then you are looking at it in a different way like, 'How do we do that?' At the end of the day, you make it work and you find your way to make it work. You show up with a little something extra, and you also remember that being who you are is how you got this far. You don't have to reinvent yourself."

That sense of self-awareness and pluckiness to just keep being who they are has come in handy the past few years as the band had to find its sea legs after losing one of its founding members in April 2014.

"What I have come to realize is that in the jam band scene people start to invest a lot of themselves in a band and they are tracking their life by these moments when they saw their favorite band do this thing, and so it was crazy, it was crazy for everybody and people are like, 'Well what now?' and are like 'I like this and don't want it to change,' but the only thing you have to do is to keep going," Kaufmann said of Austin leaving.

"It takes time. When you are doing the improv thing and that is an aspect of your show, it literally requires, 100, 200, 300, 500 gigs and years to anticipate what is coming, and when that starts to flow and you know the songs already and are relaxed about it, then that whole thing starts to flow. You have to water the plants for a long time and then it starts to bloom, but then you are asking people to come and see you in the meantime, and so how do you maintain a career while you are rebuilding it? So everyone was crossing their fingers that we could pull it off, and fortunately, Allie was just born with it. I often make that joke that she steps up to the microphone to take a fiddle solo, and she hasn't even played a note yet and the audience is already cheering ... Some people have it and some don't, and so we are doubly blessed to have Jacob who we all recognize is a pioneer on his instrument. When you talk to other musicians and they get to talking music, everyone knows he is a once-in-a-generation talent, so it has been cool to see him like find his inner rock star, and it is neat to take someone like Jacob — who was just on the bluegrass tack — and then maybe the world doesn't get hip to how awesome he is and put him out front on the rock 'n' roll scene and see him turn the world around."



Armed with the fresh energy of its two newest members, YMSB has chalked up two new studio albums — "Black Sheep," released on its own Frog Pad Records at Telluride Bluegrass Festival on June 16, 2015, "Love. Ain't Love" in 2017 which featured the band's first original reggae song, "Groovin' Away."

Also in 2017, the band released a new live compilation "Mountain Tracks: Volume 6" — the first Mountain Tracks release since 2008 — a collection of live songs from the first half of the band's 2016 touring year.

While Kaufmann said the band is now writing songs for a new record (including one he is working up on piano), it's savoring these intimate club and theater dates touring with talented bands that for the Huntington show includes prog-rock festival band The Southern Belles out of Virginia.

"The running joke is that if you want to win a Grammy, come and open for us," Kauffman said, laughing. "Over the years you look back and you're like, 'If we are lucky we will be opening for them some day,' like Lake Street Dive, and we are standing on the side of the stage like, 'How is this happening now?' and thanking them and thinking, 'OK in two months they won't answer our phone calls.' Like the Southern Belles, they've got this prog rock aspect to it, and I can tell the guys are into Rush, and then you hear like the best Steely Dan song you have ever hear and then it opens up into Pink Floyd. They are just incredible, and every one of them are such good musicians and such good dudes. We have been blessed over the years to meet so many wonderful musicians who back it up by being just really really human beings and great hangs. I could not recommend more highly that people get there early in Huntington and check out The Southern Belles because they are going to rock your faces off."

HEADING TO YONDER MOUNTAIN

WHAT: The Colorado-based, globe-trotting hip bluegrass jam band Yonder Mountain String Band.

WHERE: Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center, 925 4th Ave., Huntington.

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 10.

HOW MUCH: \$37, \$48 and \$70.

GET TICKETS: Contact the Marshall Artists Series Box Office at 304-696-6656, go online at Ticketmaster.com or visit the box office in the Joan C. Edwards Playhouse on the Marshall University campus. Box office hours are noon to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

SPONSORS: Presenting sponsor is The Miller Investment Group at RBC Wealth Management. Other sponsors include David and Kim Robinson, Reger Funeral Home, Community Trust Bank, The Chirico Family, Dr. Jeff and Mrs. Brooke Leaberry, WTCR, KEE 100, The Herald-Dispatch, WSAZ, Marshall University and the Marshall Artists Series.

DID YOU KNOW? YMSB played the Democratic National Convention in Denver in 2008.

THE OPENING ACT: Openers will be The Southern Belles, made up of Adrian Ciucci (guitar/vocals), Tommy Booker (keys/vocals), Aaron Zarrow (drums/vocals) and Andrew Carper (bass/vocals).

THE AFTER PARTY: The Kind Thieves and Vessel will play an after-party at Black Sheep Burrito and Brews, 279 9th St., at Pullman Square. Entry is free with Yonder Mountain String Band ticket stub. Otherwise \$5 cover. Music starts at 10 p.m.

COMING UP IN THE MARSHALL ARTISTS SERIES

• "Chicago" at 7:30 p.m. Monday, Feb. 12. The recipient of six Tony Awards, two Olivier Awards, a Grammy and thousands of standing ovations, "Chicago" features a universal tale of fame, fortune and all that jazz. Tickets are \$97.87, \$81.50, \$70.58 and \$64.04.



- The new hit "Amazing Grace: The Broadway Musical" comes to the Keith-Albee at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 20. A tale of romance, rebellion and redemption, the show follows the story of John Newton, the English slave trader who later became an Anglican priest and eventually an abolitionist. He wrote many hymns, including "Amazing Grace." The musical story of redemption had a three-month run on Broadway (from July to October 2015). Tickets are \$97.87, \$81.50, \$70.58 and \$64.04.
- John Ondrasik at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, March 8. The acclaimed singer and songwriter, best known by his stage name Five for Fighting, will perform on piano along with a string quartet. He burst on the scene some 15 years ago with his Grammy-nominated hit "Superman (It's Not Easy)" and has been a mainstay on mainstream radio ever since. Tickets are \$54.21, \$43.30 and \$32.39.
- The Rec Center at Marshall University presents The Banff Mountain Film Festival at 7 p.m. Tuesday, April 3. The Banff Mountain Film Festival is the most prestigious mountain festival in the world. Right after the festival, held every fall in Banff, Alberta, the Banff Mountain Film Festival World Tour starts to travel the globe with stops in about 450 communities and 40 countries. The 2017-18 world tour features a collection of films that explore the mountain world, highlighting new landscapes and remote cultures, and exposing audiences to adventures and sports. Tickets are \$10.
- Spring International Film Festival, April 5-8, at the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center: Featured films include "Summer, 1993" (Spain), "Call Me By Your Name" (Italy/France), "Graduation" (Romania), "Things To Come" (France), "One Week and a Day" (Israel) and "After The Storm" (Japan). The festival is sponsored by the Cabell-Huntington Convention and Visitors Bureau. Tickets are \$10 per film.

Welcome to the discussion.

Keep it Clean. Please avoid obscene, vulgar, lewd, racist or sexually-oriented language.

PLEASE TURN OFF YOUR CAPS LOCK.

Don't Threaten. Threats of harming another person will not be tolerated.

Be Truthful. Don't knowingly lie about anyone or anything.

Be Nice. No racism, sexism or any sort of -ism that is degrading to another person.

Be Proactive. Use the 'Report' link on each comment to let us know of abusive posts.

Share with Us. We'd love to hear eyewitness accounts, the history behind an article.

