

# MUSICMARAUDERS

## Billy Strings 12.21.18

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### Asheville Music Hall

Asheville, NC

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Billy Strings Asheville show was sold out. So sold out that three hours before the doors even opened there were thirty people waiting in a line in the freezing rain. They were hoping to get their hands on one of the dozen or so tickets that the Asheville Music Hall was re-releasing. It was a very different scene than my first Billy Strings experience, when fifty or so people showed up to see a fairly unknown bluegrass guitarist playing in a Seattle backyard venue dubbed *The Spotlight*. It's amazing how much things have changed for Billy in just the last few years. Back then he was playing in a trio with mandolin player Don Julin. Now he is fronting his own four-piece band that is turning heads, blowing minds and creating a plethora of new fans everywhere they perform. One thing I found interesting was how many people seemed to have traveled to attend tonight's show. I personally talked to people that had come from Atlanta, Ohio and Indiana to join in the fun. When people are willing to travel that far to watch a band play it is quite a testament to how good the music really is. As we were in line waiting for the doors to open, we were joined by a fleet of Asheville Fire Department trucks lining the street in front of the Music Hall. I couldn't help but wonder if the trucks were on hand to put out the fire Billy Strings was about to light inside.



Billy and his band took to the stage at exactly one minute after 9:00 pm for the first of their two sets. It didn't take long for them to begin their attempt at blowing the roof off The Asheville Music Hall. By the second song, "Pyramid Country," off last year's *Turmoil & Tinfoil* release, the crowd was already in as much of a frenzy as Billy's hands were as they worked their magic on his guitar strings. The instrumental gained momentum and intensity until it eventually climaxed, and seemingly out of nowhere, dropped into a version of "Bird Song." The Deadhead filled crowd was smiling and dancing as Billy and bass player Royal Masat harmonized wonderfully on the heart-tugging Robert Hunter lyrics. It was then mandolinist Jarrod Walker's turn to shine as he led the band through a fiery version of "New Camptown Races" that at one point detoured into the classic bluegrass tune "Unwanted Love."

At this point in the program the quartet expanded to a quintet as the band welcomed Hot Buttered Rum fiddler, and Asheville resident, Zebulon Bowles. The thirty minutes

that followed was the kind of music that is quickly making Billy one of the hottest things on the bluegrass/jamgrass scene. The four-song medley of John Hartford's "I'm Still Here," Billy originals "Thirst Mutilator" and "Dust In The Baggie" and The Dead's "Deal," was so intense I couldn't help but cross my fingers that the Asheville Fire Department was still on stand-by outside.

Many people cover John Hartford, but very few are brave enough to add their own verses to his classic tunes, but Billy wasn't scared. He added a few lines that sounded like they could've easily been a new verse to the upcoming "Dust In The Baggie."

*My cigarettes are gone and so is my money.  
So are all my nerves and all my teeth.  
My hair is falling out & I'm getting skinny.  
My friends are either dead or on relief.*



The interplay between "Zeb" and Billy during the instrumental "Thirst Mutilator" made it seem like they'd been playing together for years. It was evident that the band was enjoying the collaboration as much as we were out on the sticky, sweaty dance floor. "Dust In The Baggie" has pretty much become one of the biggest jam vehicles of Billy Strings' repertoire and tonight's version did not disappoint. I mean a Bluegrass song about today's drug epidemic that weaves its way through head-banging heavy metal AND reaches the deepest depths of psychedelia? How could you not love this song? Especially a version that eventually makes its way into quite possibly the fastest and jammiest version of "Deal" in the history of the world. Normally I'm not a fan of set breaks but tonight it was not only welcome, but also very needed. As the band brought the first set to a close with a trippy vocal jam to end "Deal" the crowd seemed happy to have a few minutes to pick our jaws up off the floor and catch our breath before the second set.

After a short twenty-five-minute break the gang came back from the break firing on all cylinders. They opened with a smoking version of "On The Line" before settling into a second set that relied heavily on cover songs. The first cover of the set was a beautiful version of Mac Wiseman's ballad "Shackles And Chains." Billy Strings may be known for fast energetic bluegrass picking, but he used this song to prove to everyone that he hasn't forgotten the traditional roots of the music he plays. His vocals on "Shackles And Chains" paired with the minimal lilting instrumentation behind them would not have sounded out of place on an old bluegrass album from the 1950's. Banjoist Billy failing was then given a turn under the spotlight as he led the band through a version of his own song "So Many Miles."



The most crowd-pleasing moment of the night followed. As Billy strummed the familiar opening guitar part of "Midnight Rider" the crowd erupted with euphoria. The version itself was very short, sweet and to the point but that didn't stop the entire crowd from singing along in unison at the top of their lungs. The jubilation didn't stop there however as they followed "Midnight Rider" with "Freeborn Man." Billy masterfully took his time with the intro, playfully picking little runs on his fret board in between his drawn-out vocals on the first few lines before dropping into a version that was played at break-neck speed. Each band member took turns trading solos and seemingly attempting to outshine one another. Sensing we may need another cool down they lowered the intensity a notch and broke into a beautiful banjo driven version of Billy's own "While I'm Waiting Here."

Another pair of covers "Train, Train" and "Lonesome L.A. Cowboy" were up next before Mr. Bowles re-emerged with his fiddle in tow. What followed was fifteen minutes of "Meet Me At The Creek" that at times got so psychedelic I'm not sure it could any longer have been categorized as Bluegrass music. It got so rowdy that, afterwards, the crowd was left almost collapsing into a communal heap on the floor of the Music Hall. Even Billy seemed extra

pleased with the performance as he remarked before the encore “there is sawdust falling from Royal’s bass ... he played the shit out of it.”

After a quick traditionally played encore of “Roll On Buddy, Roll On” we found ourselves at the end of an amazing evening. Billy and his band came to town and led us on the type of journey that very few performers could pilot. He worked the room so masterfully you kind of forgot he is just in his mid-twenties. My hunch is that this will be the last time Asheville gets to see Billy Strings in a “small venue.” I foresee that as the days roll on and as more and more people experience moments like these his fan base will grow exponentially. Thank you, Billy, please hurry on back to Asheville. We will be waiting.



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