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A Conversation with Andy Thorn (Leftover Salmon) About Blue Ridge Jam

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Pisgah Brewing Company
Black Mountain, NC

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On Saturday, September 22, Colorado legends Leftover Salmon will invade the Southern Appalachian town of Black Mountain, North Carolina. Along with a handful of their musical peers Leftover will be taking over both the Outdoor and the Taproom stages at Pisgah Brewing Company for their Third Annual Blue Ridge Jam.

MusicMarauders was lucky enough to catch up with banjo player Andy Thorn for a few minutes while he was home in Boulder, Colorado to talk about the upcoming event. Since 2010 Andy has been holding down the banjo spot that was first held by the beloved Mark Vann. When I asked Andy if he had any trouble following in the footsteps of amazing players like Mark, Noam Pikelnny & Matt Flinner he replied “I think it would’ve been hard being the first banjo player following Mark Vann. Noam had a tough spot, even though he did an amazing job, to go straight from what had



happened and the tragedy, into trying to replace him would be really challenging.

You know years had gone by when I came in, but it is still a daunting task.” He went on to add “I constantly listen back to stuff he (Mark Vann) did and check out old shows and try to incorporate little bits of his ideas in there.”

During our conversation he spoke about how special it was to have the opportunity to be a part of a band that he was a fan of in his younger years. “I first saw them at MerleFest. My mom took me up there early in high school. She loved bluegrass, and I was a young banjo player. I saw those guys just having so much fun onstage and killing it and I was like wow I think I might be into this. It’s been cool to get to know the guys, Drew first and then Vince, and now they’re like my big brothers.”

When I asked Andy why Pisgah Brewing Company was chosen as the location for this event, he responded “Everybody just loves Asheville and the other really important thing is just loving the venue. Being at Pisgah is so nice. It’s such a beautiful venue. Everybody that works there is great and it’s just easy. It’s such a great place to



play” he said. Adding “It’s just a nice big stage with all the wood. Everybody gets to hang out in the field outside. It’s about perfect.”

When I asked him how the Leftover team went about choosing the bands to invite to the Blue Ridge Jam he commented on how hard it is to get an event like this to come together. “We mention things to our management about people that we want to be there or play with. It’s all so complicated and they just see if they can make it happen. Everybody’s schedule is crazy to line up, but I feel like we got such a good lineup of friends this year.”



So who else IS playing the Blue Ridge Jam?

Black Mountain locals Bayou Diesel will kick off the festivities in the taproom at 4:30 pm. The most interesting tidbit about Bayou Diesel is that their accordion/fiddle player Steve Burnside was in a band with Vince Herman called the Salmon Heads back in the late eighties. For those of you that aren’t familiar with Leftover Salmon’s origins, their very first gig under the

“Leftover Salmon” moniker took place on New Year’s Eve in 1989. On that night a few members of the Salmon Heads couldn’t make the gig so Vince called on a few pickers from Drew Emmitt’s Left Hand String Band to fill in. So in a strange way it’s quite possible that The Blue Ridge Jam wouldn’t even be happening if Steve Burnside hadn’t bailed on a gig way back when.

From there the party will move out to the field for Asheville’s own Jon Stickley Trio. Jon and Andy grew up together in North Carolina and Andy seemed elated that Jon Stickley Trio was on the bill. “He’s one of my best buddies from High School... we’ve been playing together for twenty years... It all started in Durham, North Carolina. We went to Jordan High School and had a little bluegrass band on the side, so that made for a pretty good time.”

Following the Jon Stickley Trio, Grass Is Dead will be playing the first of their two sets in the taproom. Based out of the state of Florida, Grass Is Dead has been putting their own bluegrass spin on Grateful Dead songs for the last twenty years. I asked Andy what it is about bluegrass and Grateful Dead tunes that make them such a natural fit. “The songs work perfectly for bluegrass. Jerry Garcia, who wrote most of the music, was originally a banjo player, so he’s going to have so much of that influence there. The songs just work in the bluegrass style.”

Next up will be Spafford. While most of the bands at the Blue Ridge Jam lean towards the bluegrass/jamgrass style, Prescott, Arizona’s Spafford is the lone exception. In any given Spafford performance you’ll hear hints of rock, funk, jazz, and pretty much every other style of music EXCEPT bluegrass. I asked Andy if having a non-string band type act at the event was a conscious decision. He responded, “Yeah you always want to have a nice mix of music so it’s good to have some bluegrass and then have a jamband for the people that are more into that, to kind of make everybody happy.” He says he has personally seen them play a few times and claims they “Blew him away at Summercamp. They’re a really great jamband.”

Following another quick Grass is Dead set Leftover Salmon will hit the stage for their headlining portion of the show. Since last year’s Blue Ridge Jam Leftover Salmon has released their eleventh album *Something Higher*. Andy spoke a little bit about how these new songs came to be. “Most of the songs off the new album we did not play live before recording them. We just sort of wrote them together in the studio. People had a general picture of the songs, but we arranged them together and figured them out. Now we are expanding them as we play live and figuring out what jams to stretch out and what segues into what. The songs just really work well together, so that’s happening very naturally.” While he says the crowd at Pisgah should expect to hear a lot of these new tunes this weekend he made a point to add that the audience can look forward to “a lot of the old favorites too, for the older fans, that want to hear the old classics.”



As is the trend with most music festivals there will also be a “late night” set. On Saturday that honor will go to Horseshoes & Hand Grenades. Hailing from the bluegrass hotbed of Stevens Point, Wisconsin Horseshoes & Hand Grenades have been turning heads every time they play. In Andy’s words “They’re a great band, they really stick out from other bands, it’s not the same old jamgrass that is starting to be so popular, it’s really refreshing to hear those guys.” he describes them as one of “the most unique bands on the scene right now.”

Of course one of the things that live music lovers get most excited for at events like these is the myriad of possible collaborations that could take place. According to Andy, “I think there will be plenty of that, with all the people that are going to be there, it’s going to be a big ol’ jam.” When I asked him to expand on how collaborations come to fruition he explained, “Certain friends that we really love playing with it’s probably almost just assumed that they’re going to sit in, ya know? Like Jon (Stickley) he’s like ‘oh they booked me for this festival, they probably want me to sit in’, which is so fun, and it’s part of why we book the bands we do, so that we can have special guests come play.” However, he says in the Leftover Salmon world it’s not always so predictable, he claims “a lot of the time we have no idea who is going to get up and sit in. Vince will just see somebody on the side of the stage and we always have some extra mic lines down and even extra instruments and will just hand it to somebody and see what happens.”

I for one, look forward to seeing what happens Saturday out at Pisgah. If there is one thing we have learned over their 29-year career it’s that you never know what could happen at a Leftover Salmon show, much less a Leftover Salmon (in my best Vince Herman impersonation) “FESTIVAAAAAAL.” For those of you that want to join the party there are still tickets available at www.pisgahbrewing.com. For those of you that can’t make it to the Blue Ridge Mountains keep your eyes here at musicmarauders.com and the official Leftover Salmon Instagram account for updates both during and after the Blue Ridge Jam.

www.leftoversalmon.com

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