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A Conversation with Vince Herman & Drew Emmitt of Leftover Salmon

Posted on January 03, 2020 by MusicMarauders

<http://www.musicmarauders.com/2020/01/a-conversation-with-vince-herman-drew.html>

Asheville, North Carolina

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Do you know where Vince Herman's famous "FESTIVAL" holler originated? Because until the other evening I did not. Turns out it was inspired, by of all things a 1967 episode of the Star Trek television series. To hear Mr. Herman explain it, it was "The Return Of The Archons" episode. It's the red hour. They land on this planet and it's a totally mellow, controlled, very proper, Victorianish kind of thing and when the red hour strikes, people just go crazy. Running through the streets raping and pillaging and drinking and going absolutely nuts. This guy dives through a window, comes up, and screams 'FESTIVAL.'" Drew Emmitt added that it came about on a trip to Telluride Bluegrass Festival decades ago when for some reason they began talking about that episode and when they got to the campground, "It just kind of caught on and everyone was yelling 'FESTIVAL.' I mean it seems like an obvious thing to yell, but nobody had really latched onto yelling 'FESTIVAL' at a festival before."



At least that's how they told it to us back on December 20th when we were lucky enough to sit down with the two captains of the musical ship known as Leftover Salmon. In the midst of an uber rare pair of duo shows, having just played Knoxville's Barley's Taphouse & Pizzeria the previous evening and about to take to the stage at the Asheville Music Hall, they were gracious enough to spend a few minutes discussing a myriad of topics with us. Unless you've been living under a rock all year, you've undoubtedly heard that 2019 marked thirty years of Leftover Salmon serving up their unique sonic stew to live music lovers across this great nation.

We asked Vince and Drew that if, on that fateful night when they took to the stage for the first time under the Leftover Salmon moniker, they had any idea the journey could possibly last this long. "We thought for sure it was gonna last one gig," laughed Vince, "that's why we came up with this crazy fucking name." Fortunately for the rest of us, the crowd liked what they heard that New Year's Eve in Crested Butte, because as Vince reminisced, "After the first gig, we had a ton of work the very next day because of what was happening in the Colorado music scene at the time. All the club owners knew each other, so we had a lot of gigs right off the bat." Seemingly in awe himself that Leftover Salmon has lasted this long, Vince joked, "Long term man ... I thought I'd be president of IBM by now ... you know?"

In the years that followed, Leftover Salmon became pioneers of an emerging jam-grass scene that has spawned a plethora of bands following in Leftover Salmon's footsteps. We asked them how it felt to have a whole genre of bands looking up to them and following their blueprint. Again, Vince ever the jokester, immediately quipped, "Old.

It makes us feel old.” Drew Emmitt added, “It does. All these young whippersnappers, but it’s also nice. I feel like we’ve seen a lot of bands come up in the wake of what we’ve done, and get bigger than us, quite frankly. It’s a satisfying thing to know that we inspired that. Look at all these guys. They’re taking this formula and making it work, in all different ways obviously. I just think that maybe we kind of showed how to do it in a way, as far as just getting out on the road in a school bus, and just blazing trails.”



Pointing to the jam-grass trend they spawned, a collective of local Knoxville pickers who go by the name *The Woodshed* warmed up the Tennessean crowd on Thursday night. Impressing Drew and Vince so much, they were invited, on the spot, to back the headlining duo for the bulk of their first set in something that Vince called “an instant band.”

The impromptu sextet ran through an inspired set of bluegrass covers like “Little Maggie” and “Walls Of Time” interspersed with a handful of crowd-pleasing Leftover Salmon originals. Classic Salmon hits like “Rocky Road Blues” and “Ashes and Love” were high points of the set. I asked the two pickers if that was something people could look forward to as these duo shows become more and more common. Drew Emmitt quickly responded, “Yeah, I think there’s going to be some of that happening. I mean we didn’t expect that last night, to have a full bluegrass band backing us up. That was pretty great.” Vince added, “When I go out on solo shows often a bluegrass band will open, and then I play a few tunes, and then play with the band. So that’s kind of a thing I do. In the bluegrass genre, there’s a lot of common tunes. You know there’s a repertoire you can immediately jump into. In this musical form, it makes it easy.”

Another one of the highlights of this first set came during a particularly rowdy version of the classic Leftover Salmon anthem “Hell Yeah I Drink.” Mid song, Vince offered up a few familiar lyrics about having “just one more Jägermeister shot” in an obvious nod to another one of those jam-grass legends that followed in Salmon’s footsteps before breaking into a verse of “Boatman’s Dance.” A short, yet emotional tribute to his fallen friend Jeff Austin.

For the second set they shed the band and dove more into the duo format that we had all showed up to ingest. We asked the old friends how often they’ve done this kind of duo show over the years. Vince responded, “I don’t know that we’ve really done many shows together, as a duo. Have we done any?” Drew’s memory, a little less hazy, reminded him “I think just Hawaii. We did a duo show on Kauai” several years ago at this church. It was awesome. Really fun.”

Acting as a kind of two show rehearsal for their upcoming duo tour in February, those of us in attendance for these shows were lucky to get a sneak peak of what fans elsewhere may expect during the impending tour. Drew spoke a little bit about the pluses of stripping Leftover Salmon down to its core essence: “There’s things that we can kind of pull out of the wood work, that aren’t necessarily in the band rotation, as well as some of the quieter songs that we don’t bust out that often. At the same time it’s also fun to play the songs that we are used to playing with the band too, and you know put a different spin on them.” Which was obvious with songs like “Squirrel Heads & Gravy” and “Last Days Of Autumn.”

Alternatively, Vince spoke of how different it felt for them to grace a stage without a band in tow, likening it to the special shows they did with Del McCoury a while back, “We played an electric set and then did an acoustic set unplugged with Del. Going from full on electric to an around-one-mic bluegrass thing feels kind of empty. You panic, and it feels like that the first couple tunes, but then you kind of get used to that level of sound. You know,

that amount of sound pressure is way lower than the usual thing. You're waiting for that bass to come in, and it's never coming in. So it's definitely an adjustment, but within the context of it, it seems to work."

When we asked Drew how it was so simple for them to slip from a full band setting into a duo he responded, "It's easy, we just know each other, and know each other's music and strengths. We have a ton of tunes we can do, just two of us. It's great to boil what we do down to just the two of us because we are kind of the focal point of the band. Everybody definitely has their role in Leftover Salmon, but largely it's the two of us that it's focused around. So it's nice to break it down to just us. It's almost like you can feel the rest of the band when you're playing these songs, even though they're not there, so we can still feel the music you know?" At which point Vince jokingly interrupted, "I'm certainly used to hearing them more." To which Drew responded, "Well yeah, but you can sort of imagine them being there I guess."

In addition to their time on stage we asked them a little bit about how different the traveling aspect of doing shows like these is. Surprisingly, being just two guys in a minivan didn't seem that different to Vince, "Oh we're crammed together a lot most of the time anyway, so it seems oddly familiar." Over the years, they've obviously mellowed out a bit. Drew even jokingly referring to this run as "The Soccer Mom Mountain Boys ride again." In another sign of them being a tad more reserved these days we asked them what kind of tunes they were jamming on their drives, and who chose what they'd listen to:

Vince: *Whoever is in the passenger seat, whoever can find a news channel.*

Drew: *Yeah we love the news, both of us. We're like junkies, kind of political junkies. There's a lot to keep up with.*

Vince: *There's a lack of liberal talk radio though I'll tell you man, it's all right wing.*



Their inner political addictions reared their head during the Asheville show when they did a perfect version of what is easily one of the most politically charged songs they've ever written. "House Of Cards" off their most recent album *Something Higher*. "House Of Cards" is a very topical song with lyrics about losing control of our country, and the dire political times we are immersed in these days. With its anti-corporate, anti-government sentiment it has already become one of the best modern-day protest songs around. It was one of just many highlights of their Asheville Music Hall set.

In my opinion the Asheville show surpassed the Knoxville show in both musicianship and overall enjoyment. Perhaps it was the extremely attentive crowd that came out on a Friday night to see what Vince and Drew had to offer. Perhaps it was the fact that they covered two of the greatest songwriters of all time over the course of their ninety-minute set. Bob Dylan's "Tangled Up In Blue" and "Everything Is Round" by the lesser known, but equally prolific Seattle folksinger Jim Page. Perhaps it was the epic journey they took us on during "Pasta On The Mountain." Making its way into among other things a "Burning Down The House"/"The Alphabet Song" mash-up as well as a "Hotel California"/"Rocky Top" mash-up, it was classic Leftover Salmon madness. Whatever it was, they captivated the audience for the entirety of their set – a set that included a Christmas song about a mom getting too drunk, a spirited version of "Long Haired Country Boy," and Leftover Salmon standards like "River's Rising" and "Valley Of The Full Moon." It was quite obvious that they were elated to be in Asheville, a town that Vince spoke highly of, remarking from the stage "some of the craziest nights we've ever had have been in this town."

Asking them what the secret is to sharing a stage for three decades without getting to a point they wanted to strangle one another, Vince's answer was simply, "Liking what we are doing." Drew elaborated a bit more, "Also I

think it's important to see the strengths in each other, and not dwell on the things that maybe might annoy you, or things you think you might want to change in somebody. It's kind of like a marriage. Don't sweat the small stuff you know? And it's all small stuff basically." Again taking on his role as the resident Leftover Salmon jokester Vince added that their "marriage" was "waaaaaaaay more successful than my other three marriages."

After such a varied career it was obvious to tell that these two guys are going to have a lot of fun in their different settings as the tour commences in early February. They haven't always had success. There were a few stories they told about early Leftover shows that bombed:

Vince: We were playing a fraternity in Athens, Georgia, and I woke up about 5 minutes before the gig, which started at like 2:00 in the morning or something like that and I just never woke up. I couldn't play. I was as stupid as can be. That's where we came up with the "whrrr-click." "Whrrr-click." Remember back when computers used to go "whrrr-click"? Well my click never got on that night.

Drew: I think one of the worst gigs ever would've been Washington's in Fort Collins. We were playing upstairs and there was a line across the dance floor, of people trying to get downstairs. Nobody was listening to us. We we're playing and they were completely ignoring us. They're standing in line to get downstairs for the disco and I remember our banjo player Mark didn't want to come out for the second set and he didn't. He went and took a nap out in the truck, and did not come out for the second set, he's like 'I can't do it', 'I'm not doing it.' We had to hold down the fort. It was miserable. It was awful. Certainly one of the worst ones of all time.

Not wanting to focus on the bad shows, Drew went on "There have been a lot more good gigs than bad ones. There have been many many magical amazing gigs. So many gigs where I've just walked off stage and thought god damn this is a good band. This band kicks ass. It's so fun." Vince added, "And that's what keeps you going for thirty years man. Not the basement fraternity party that you can't think your way out of."

They didn't bomb these shows at all. Each night was one of those nights that as they walked off the stage I found myself thinking "god damn (even as a two piece) this is a good band. This band kicks ass." Over the course of the two shows, Drew and Vince proved they are ready for this next chapter of the Leftover Salmon journey. As a fan, I too am ready to see what the next thirty years of Leftover Salmon has to offer. As mentioned they are taking the duo show on the road for the bulk of February, and if you can make it to one of the shows I highly urge you to do so. It is a special sneak peek into a part of Leftover Salmon we haven't really been shown over the years, and if the shows are even half as much fun as the two the played here in the Blue Ridge Mountains it will be well worth your time. Even Vince agrees "If last night is any indication, we're going to have a good time with it."

So get out there if you can, enjoy yourself and give the guys a classic "FESTIVAL" holler while you're at it, because despite having it yelled at them nearly every night, they still never grow tired of their calling card. As Vince puts it, "it's a pretty good thing to have people yelling at me every show. I mean it's better than 'Hey there's Kenny Rogers.'"



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