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Julian Davis & The Situation and The Bald Mountain Boys 12.15.19

Posted on December 23, 2019 by MusicMarauders

<http://www.musicmarauders.com/2019/12/julian-davis-situation-and-bald.html>

One Stop Deli & Bar Asheville, North Carolina

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Photo by J. Scott Shrader Photography

“Julian Davis is a younger, better Larry Keel.” “Julian Davis is the next Billy Strings.” These are both actual statements people have said to me in the past few months. Normally I write off bold comparisons like these, but having never had the pleasure of watching him play, I at least found myself wondering if he does indeed live up to the hype bluegrass fans have been hoisting on him. That is why I was very excited when I found out he was playing “The World Famous Bluegrass Brunch” at



Asheville, North Carolina’s One Stop Deli & Bar this past Sunday. With the exception of a few short hiatuses over the years, Bluegrass Brunch has been a weekly event since September of 2012. Each Sunday morning, Asheville live music lovers drag themselves out of bed and head on down to the One Stop to nurse their hangovers with bluegrass music and breakfast dishes with clever names like “Scramblin’ In The Scrambler” and “No Eggspectations.”

For the last few years local bluegrass outfit The Bald Mountain Boys have served as one of the de facto house bands, opening each Bluegrass Brunch with an hour and a half of their self-described brand of “smokin’ mountain grass.” The description is apt – like many younger bluegrass bands they are wonderful at towing the line between the traditional string band sounds that hail from these Appalachian Mountains and the style of music bluegrass has morphed into over the decades. Their Bluegrass Brunch sets often times start out quite loose, and this week was no exception.

The set started with only mandolin player Ben Williams and guitarist Nelson Puckett on the stage playing a surprisingly rollicking duet version of the bluegrass standard "Ain't Nobody Gonna Miss Me." As the sound engineer was getting the early morning kinks worked out of the sound system the rest of the band, one by one, joined their comrades on stage. First banjo player Kendall Huntley, then fiddler Alex Ball, and finally bass player J.D. Smith. As loose as these sets tend to start, they quickly transform into something quite the opposite. By the time the band meandered their way into a near perfect version of "Red Rocking Chair" they were firing on all cylinders as the regular crowd had gathered at the tables of the dark dungeon like bar. Once The Bald Mountain Boys hit their groove it was quite obvious why they are asked to anchor this event each week. Ben, Kendall, and Nelson are all very competent songwriters. Each has an incomparable perspective that creates a nice diversity of original compositions for the band to perform. Add that to a unique cannon of covers spanning the entire history of bluegrass music and you get a journey each and every week that is sure to leave your toes tapping and a smile on your face.

This week was no exception. Some highlights amongst the original songs that made their way into the set list on Sunday were Kendall's "On My Way Home," Ben's "Moonshine," and Nelson's "In The City." "On My Way Home" is a beautifully written tune with lyrics about our collective home here in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Both Ben and Alex carried the tune musically while Kendall delivered his words with such force that it seemed like he truly wanted nothing more than to get back here to his home. "Moonshine," like most of Ben's originals, falls more into the traditional sounding vein. He writes in a manner that it is hard to believe the songs he sings weren't written by bluegrass legends decades ago. Again Alex shone, adding an eerie fiddle backdrop while J.D. kept the groove with ominous yet bouncy bass lines. Meanwhile the other three musicians took turns offering up tasty leads as they collectively stretched out the song into one of the most enjoyable jams of the day. Nelson Puckett's "In the City" is a very fun song about a poor guy who runs into a string of bad luck after falling in love with a nefarious lady. Sounding like it could've easily been written by one of the crop of 1990's jam-grass bands that paved the way for younger bands like The Bald Mountain Boys, it was easily one of the highlights of the set.

One of the best parts about this collective is that regardless of who takes the spotlight on any given tune the rest of them can play under, around, behind and on top of their band mates in a manner that creates infectious soundscapes. Additionally, all five members are quite proficient vocalists creating the type of harmonies that all quintessential bluegrass bands strive for. The rest of their set was rounded out by a few instrumentals, and a handful of choice covers. Most notably, a version of Ernest Tubb's "Saturday Satan, Sunday Saint" which is one of the few tunes the Bald Mountain Boys seem to play almost every Sunday. It's a perfect anthem for the event, as we move from nursing our hangovers to working on our next buzz with Bloody Marys from one of the best bloody mary bars in town. It's almost as if when Ben Williams sings those familiar lyrics, we are actually giving repent for the sins we committed all weekend.

This particular Sunday The Bald Mountain Boys decided to end their set with a pair of covers that point to their more latter-day influences. John Hartford's "Steam Powered Aeroplane" and Danny Barnes' "Get It While You Can" were both impeccable choices for the style of music they play. The Bald Mountain Boys are the perfect example of the old saying "the whole is greater than the sum of their parts." Not to say that separate from each other they aren't efficient at what they do, but together they transcend their own talents and become a force to be reckoned with. Proving why they are quickly becoming one of the best young bands on the scene here in a town that has more local bluegrass music than you can shake a stick at.

Normally, The Sufi Brothers are the second band on the Bluegrass Brunch bill, but for whatever reason they couldn't make it this week, which is how we ended up with the treat we were about to ingest. After a quick changeover Julian Davis took to the small corner stage with his backing band The Situation. From what I gather The Situation is more of a rotating collective than a band with a constant lineup. On this day, The Situation was a three piece. Julian on guitar, fiddle player John Lane, and bassist Logan Perez. The first tune out of the gate was a lilting slow ballad. What struck me initially was Julian's voice. It does not sound like the voice of a man that isn't even old

enough to order a mimosa at Bluegrass Brunch. It sounds more like the voice of someone who ran around with Hank Sr. or Gene Autry back in the day than it does a nineteen-year-old guitar picker who is just breaking into the acoustic music scene.

They followed that with an instrumental tune during which Julian took a moment to showcase those guitar skills I'd heard so much about. Proving just how talented he is and playing lightning fast runs as the now packed bar erupted into applause. Their third song – the original "Somewhere Lonely" – served as proof that not only can he sing like an old soul and play guitar like a man possessed, but he can also write some pretty catchy tunes. A very true to the original version of The Osborne Brothers' "Breaking In A Brand New Pair Of Shoes" was up next. Then after making a joke about the ridiculous amount of Grateful Dead tribute bands he noticed on the One Stop's upcoming schedule, the trio dove head-first into "Morning Dew." It was so hauntingly sung that you could feel the hairs on your neck standing up as it made it's way from a mountain man style ballad to a very un-bluegrass like psychedelic laden jam before dropping on a dime back into a passionate melodic ballad.

Maybe sensing they'd gotten a little too weird during "Morning Dew" The Situation settled into a run of songs more fit for a Sunday afternoon. A spot on take on the Del McCoury version of "Cold, Rain, and Snow." A version of Tony Rice's "Old Train" that proved, that what Julian sometimes seems to lack in confident stage presence he more than makes up for in skill. A scorching version of "Little Maggie" that again made you wonder how these sounds could be coming out of such a young person. A familiar sounding fiddle song that gave the other two members of The Situation a chance to share the spotlight for a few moments. Interspersed into the cover heavy set we were also treated to a few more original Julian Davis compositions.

The two originals that really stood out to my ears were a song he called "Home Sweet Blues" about missing his hometown in rural Kansas and an epic musical saga called "Soul Of Elma Sands." For what seemed like fifteen minutes the three musicians took us on an exploratory journey that was every bit as intricate as the story of the actual murder and court case that inspired the song. The jammed out portion of the song was easily the highlight of the show and the moment I first realized maybe those friends of mine that had been fluffing Julian so hard weren't as far off their rockers as I had assumed. Again, as not to leave us on such a psychedelic note the trio then delivered a bass driven, almost juke jam style version of Bill Monroe's "Can't You Hear Me Calling" before retreating from the stage for a well deserved set break.

After a break lasting only fifteen minutes and clocking in at only thirty minutes you could almost call the second set more like a really, really long encore. "Bluest Man In Town" was up first, which again had Julian sounding more like a modern day Jimmie Rodgers than a kid who is barely even old enough to vote. Fiddle player John Lane again took a few moments to shine on the version of "99 Years (and One Dark Day)" that was up next. In perhaps another nod to the Deadhead crowd that the One Stop caters too, the trio then gave their take on the Dead's "Loser" which seamlessly detoured into Lynryd Skynyrd's "That Smell" before finding it's way to it's final verse. The only real low points of the show followed. "Roll In My Sweet Baby's Arms" suffered from the band not having brought a banjo player along for the gig. Playing that song without one just doesn't seem right, and musically it fell a little flat. The Peter Rowan/Bill Monroe masterpiece "Walls Of Time" also fell a tad flat, as great as Julian's vocal skills are, in my opinion this wasn't the best choice to showcase them. Peter's vocals are just so perfect on that song and the style doesn't lend itself well to how Julian sings. Fortunately, they made up for it with the closing combo of "Midnight Rider" and "Freeborn Man." Neither song really fits in the bluegrass wheelhouse, but they nailed them both.

As he toyed with the audience, we lapped it up. He'd shred, we'd cheer, he'd give us a lick, we'd repay him with hoots and hollers. He delivered both songs like a man possessed, eyes seemingly ready to pop out of his head. If I wanted to be hyperbolic I could say he seemed like a "younger better Larry Keel" or "the next Billy Strings", but I don't want to get ahead of myself or put too much pressure on the kid. He clearly has the skills, both vocally and musically to make it far in this music biz, but he is still green and a tad rough around the edges. He doesn't seem quite ready to lead a band, although I suppose that's to be expected. After all he is only 19 years old and was kind of thrust into the spotlight when his former gig with the Jeff Austin Band came to a tragic end earlier this year. He

does have chops, no doubt, but at times he doesn't seem to leave enough space for his band mates to gel around him. He is a tad awkward when he is interacting with the audience, and like many other young performers he definitely needs a wider array of original tunes to carry his show. Those are the only negative observations I noticed during the immensely enjoyable set. My hunch is that with a few more miles under his belt and a few more years of experience he'll overcome some of those minor flaws.

I know he made a fan out of me the other day and I think it's safe to assume I'm not the only one. I'm guessing that with the buzz he's gaining nationally and the thirst Asheville music fans have for live music, the next time he rolls through town he won't be playing to fifty people trying to enjoy mimosas and "Huevos Banjeros." Again, just a hunch, but I think it's safe to assume he'll be a tad too big for a gig like Bluegrass Brunch next time he makes his way to Western North Carolina. Hopefully, it's sooner rather than later.

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