

# MUSICMARAUDERS

## The Travis Book Happy Hour 9.2.2020

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### The Grey Eagle Asheville, North Carolina

Words by **Jason Mebane**

Photos by **J. Scott Shrader Photography**

*Back in early March when the entire world was thrown into chaos by the arrival of the Coronavirus, we as humans were forced to learn how to adapt to a world we never could've imagined. Like everything else, the live music landscape was drastically altered. If you were at all like me, you initially turned to the plethora of live streams our favorite musicians began broadcasting. Bouncing around between Facebook Live and IGTV we were able to find some semblance of normalcy while acquiring the live music fix we needed to soothe our souls as we attempted to navigate our strange new world.*

*Perhaps at some point you stumbled upon "The Travis Book Happy Hour," a bi-weekly series of streams presented in the vein of an old school variety TV program. If you haven't tuned in to any of these unique streams, let me set the scene for you ... Travis, best known as the bass player and singer for the Infamous Stringdusters, invites a few musical friends to pick some songs and have a conversation about the struggles of making their way through the murky waters they have been tossed into. It was after one of these "Happy Hour" tapings that I was blessed to find myself sitting at a patio picnic table with Travis discussing, not only the series itself, but also the feelings that he's been having over these past few months. I asked him what his initial thoughts were when, he came to the realization that he, and his fellow musician,s had essentially been thrust into unemployment ...*

**TRAVIS:** I wasn't too stressed out. I kind of had a sense that we'd be taking a long time off. I feel like I sort of saw the writing on the wall pretty early on. The last 'Dusters show was on March 11th and I had a really strong sense coming out of that show that it was going to be a while. So my first response was actually probably a lot like how I felt after the election, which was just a ground reversal. Where everything that I sort of thought to be true, all the things that I was orientating my life around, were changed. All of the assumptions I had about how the universe worked and what my purpose was ... all those things sort of changed. It was almost like an out-of-body experience



for a while. I was just kind of hanging out in limbo. I wasn't as concerned about my career or about making music as I was just kind of like "wow this is going to be really interesting."

*Fortunately for Travis's fans he didn't keep his mind off music for too long. He began hosting these "Travis Book Happy Hour" performances back in late June and has produced one every other week since. Unlike many live streams, which are oftentimes just a musician sitting on their porch or their living room couch, Travis chose to take it a step further: Inviting some of his musical friends to join him and broadcasting them from an actual music venue – Asheville's famed Grey Eagle. Also, unlike some musician's streams, Travis has put his own twist on things by setting aside a portion of the show to interview his guests, discussing the trials of what one former guest, Lindsay Lou, dubbed "The Great Pause." Listening to our beloved musicians open up gives fans the feeling they are not only trying to work through these weird times for their own benefit, but also perhaps to help the viewers at home make sense of this crazy new world. These conversations get so deep each week that I even saw one Facebook comment jokingly refer to the "Happy Hour" as "The Travis Book Existential Crisis Hour."*

*I asked Mr. Book why he decided to take these "Happy Hour" broadcasts to the next level, why he wanted to do more than simply just play music, and why he choose to do it in a real venue with in person collaborators ...*

**TRAVIS:** I had sort of been bouncing around the idea of doing some sort of a variety show for a long time. When I started doing some streaming and stuff from my home, I found that there were a lot of things I wanted to talk about. Enough people were giving me some positive feedback that it occurred to me that there was an opportunity to do something more than just play music, and there were enough people who were interested in continuing to conceptualize their own experiences – that there were people who welcomed the opportunity to try to talk through some of these things, to be part of a one-way dialogue about these sorts of existential questions. About what it means to be alive, to be a creator, in these very interesting times. So it was not the first time that it occurred to me to try to do something different like this. Then I came up here [to the Grey Eagle] to play a show with Kyle Tuttle and Lyndsay Pruett and was able to check out the infrastructure. I saw the way that it was streaming, and I saw that we could be socially distanced, and it felt pretty good. That was really the last little push I needed, just having a place to do it, and a crew, and a venue that was interested in trying to do something different.



*He also touched on how different this format is for him compared to the shows he was used to playing before the "great pause" ...*

**TRAVIS:** When I play shows, I try not to talk too much, especially with the Stringdusters. It's kind of a big thing for us – we try not to talk, but now there are things I want to talk about. I want to talk with my fellow musicians. I wanted it to go beyond 'what are you trying to sell these days?'. I was much more interested in taking the opportunity to kind of dig into things a little bit and see what was under the surface. I wanted to try to scare out some of these perspectives that people have about life and, for lack of a better word, about matters of being, matters of spirit. Without getting too heavy into spirituality or any of that kind of stuff, but to dabble in it because that, to me, is ultimately all I'm really interested in. Trying to understand what to do with myself while I'm here. To me that's largely a spiritual question. That is my orientation, and a lot of that is decided by my perspective on what the point of being here is, knowing how to move through my life.

*Travis says he saw the idea of mixing music and spirituality as something that could be beneficial in these odd times ...*

**TRAVIS:** When I get together with my musician friends this is the kind of shit we talk about and no one else is really addressing this space. I think it's an uncomfortable place for a lot of people, talking about these things, but I'm into it. I'm obsessed with it. It's kind of like that once these existential questions get their claws in you what else is there to talk about? Like we can shoot the shit about meaningless stuff all day long and that's totally fun too, but there's some fucking juicy shit to talk about, right? So like let's get down to it.

*Another thing that sets the "Travis Book Happy Hour" apart from most of the live streams is that the Grey Eagle is set up to host a small handful of fans to make up a socially distanced studio audience. For me, this has been a welcomed bonus, watching actual musicians making live music in a real venue rather than only being able to enjoy it remotely. Don't get me wrong, attending these tapings is very surreal. We can't get up and dance, we can't interact with other concert goers. We just show up, in masks, have our temperatures taken and get escorted to tables spaced safely away from all the other fan's tables. However, just being there, as odd as it seems, does something for the soul that watching on a laptop or a TV screen at home cannot. Make no mistake, the main focus of the "Travis Book Happy Hour" is on those watching at home. We are just an added bonus, a prop if you will. Cheering when it is time to cheer, laughing when it is time to laugh, and hopefully giving the musicians on stage some small sense of normalcy. I asked Travis, as the type of musician that feeds off audience interaction, how having a in person audience, even one of just 15-20 people, added to the experience for him ...*

**TRAVIS:** It's huge having a studio audience. It's great to have people in the room at the very least just because you need a clap track. However, something that's been an ongoing process for me is getting away from NEEDING that. When I realized I was dependent on an audience reaction I realized that I had largely lost control of the situation. So that has been an ongoing process of sort of taking it back, taking back the reasons I'm doing this. Taking back my whole ownership over what it is that I'm doing – not needing to do it in the context of that immediate feedback. That's all just made up shit in the mind. You're basing your subjective experience on someone else's subjective experience of something that is subjective to start with. I think fundamentally our role is almost like a service. What I bring to the world and the reaction I get, or what it does for people, I have no control over that. I mean somewhat I do because I'm presenting it but, as soon as my mission is to get a reaction, or to get feedback, or to get more fans, or to make more money, then I'm missing the ultimate point, which is to basically tune in to something and act as like a conduit and to channel whatever it is. Music coming from the cosmos, the vibe that's happening on stage with my band mates bringing songs into form and offering it up. I feel like as a musician, if at that point of offering it up, you need something right then, that's a really vulnerable place to be. You're much better off if you can just offer that up and sort of experience equanimity no matter what you're getting back. In a very roundabout way, I guess what I'm saying is that part of what I'm trying to practice is being able to play without that. Being able to just be in the moment and play, and be myself, and channel the music and be as deep into it as possible while also being completely detached from the outcome.

*Adding that basically ...*

You do your work, you do the best you can, you pretend as though it all matters while also acknowledging that it doesn't matter. You offer it up, but then you allow it to just be. So, for playing in front of people just sitting around tables, or even streaming live on the phone, some people feel like there's something missing there, but I don't feel like there's anything missing from that type of experience. I know that ultimately what I'm trying to do is essentially like a TV show, where it's something that's happening elsewhere, it's hitting people elsewhere. They're having whatever reaction they want to have to it and that's totally fine. When I'm at my best I go on stage and that's sort of like a prayer I say, "let me be whatever I need to be for people tonight." If people need to loathe me or love me, I don't fuck care. Allow me to show up and be whatever everybody needs me to be. That's my role, and that's kind of what I try to bring to the live stream. I'm just gonna do what I do, and I can't let the amount of donations or the number of viewers be the way that I assign value to what I've done that night.

*“Existential Crisis Hour” indeed. Beyond the soul searching and spiritual journey there is also music. On this particular night Travis welcomed Mimi Naja of Fruition as well as fellow Carolinian Lyndsay Pruett. I asked Travis how he chooses his “Happy Hour” guests ...*

**TRAVIS:** It’s largely who is available and who is willing to leave the house in the COVID era. Mostly it is who will come up for no guarantees of money and who has nothing better to do. Because I don’t really have much of a budget. I can’t really offer a lot of money for my friends to come out, but there are people that I want to play music with, people I want to have in my house for a day or two, people I can get into this deep stuff with. Mimi is a prime example of someone who is all about going there because she’s done a lot of searching on her own. She’s done a lot of looking into herself and understanding who she really is as a person. And it’s not been a simple conversation she’s had, which makes someone like her a perfect guest to talk through some of these things with. That’s really where it starts for me. It’s personal relationships and a desire to make music with people.



*Speaking of the music, the music on this night was great. In my opinion, it was easily the best episode of the season. Each episode Travis and his guests focus on a specific theme, for this particular broadcast the theme was “travel.” Wearing many hats, Travis Book the announcer introduced Travis Book the host who in turn introduced Travis Book the musician who in turn dove head first into the first tune of the evening – a solo guitar version of the Infamous Stringdusters song “It’ll Be Alright.” It’s a very special treat to hear stripped down versions of these songs, as well as*

*hear how proficient he is (as primarily a bass player) on acoustic guitar. This particular song, with its message of hope, was the perfect opening number. Travis then went into one of his happy hour monologues admitting he didn’t know if that song is actually true, and that we don’t know if it really WILL be alright. That’s what makes Mr. Book’s personality perfect for a show like this. Even while admitting his anxiety and the uncertainty of these current times, he somehow manages to add a bit of optimism to everything. He can actually conceptualize that in the grand scheme of things none of us really matter, while also admitting that in our own perspectives we truly do matter. For the second song of his portion of the show he touched on the travel theme with a cover of Shawn Camp’s “Travelin’ Teardrop Blues.” In keeping with his positive nature he delivered this somewhat sad set of lyrics with a hint of hopefulness. After another quick dialogue about how the journey we all take between the beginning (birth) and the destination (death), he closed his solo portion of the show with a cover of Benny “Burl” Galloway’s “Give Me Some Wings.”*

*After a quick break to ask for donations because, let’s face it, if we as fans don’t donate to these types of things, they may cease to exist at all, Travis introduced tonight’s guest of honor – Mimi Naja. Mimi seemed as excited as those of us in attendance were, gladly proclaiming “we are in a venue, WOW!” and admitting that this was one of the first times she’d actually been in a real venue with a real crowd since the pandemic started.*

*It must be somewhat bizarre for these musicians attempting to dip their toes back into their normal lives after months and months of not playing in front of actual fans. As mentioned earlier, the interviews Travis does are the most unique part of “The Travis Book Happy Hour.” Not wanting to spoil it for those of you who may want to watch this week’s episode, they touched on the theme of traveling in regards to touring musicians and how not having to do so has helped both Mimi and Travis relearn how to play music ... How to play it for themselves again instead of just for their fans ... Reminding them what they really love about playing music, and how this pause is helping them reevaluate how they will proceed when the pandemic is finally over. They spoke of how they’re attempting to put a gratitude lens on this whole COVID thing, as well as the fears they have in their own existence.*

*After the interview portion of the evening, Travis yielded the stage to Mimi who ran through a quick set of solo songs on her acoustic guitar that all touched on the evening’s theme. Like Travis it was a nice treat to see Mimi’s*

*proficiency on an instrument that isn't the one we most closely associate her with. She began with a beautiful cover of "California Stars" that made it seem like both Woody Guthrie AND Wilco had her voice and musical style in mind when they each wrote their respective parts of the song. She followed that up with an enjoyable cover of the Mason Jennings song "Jackson Square." It not only fit the travel theme with its lyrics about New Orleans, but it also fit perfectly into these confusing times with its words seemingly alluding to this chaotic moment we currently find ourselves in. The Richard Berry-penned "Have Love, Will Travel" rounded out the solo portion of Mimi's set before a fiddle-toting Lyndsay Pruett and the evening's host joined Mimi on the stage for a rousing version of Bill Monroe's "Gotta Travel On." With each of these three musicians having backgrounds based in bluegrass music, this version turned into a rollicking barn-burner of a hoedown, that undoubtedly had some viewers at home hopping off their couches and dancing around their homes. Not to be pigeonholed into bluegrass music the trio then took the Roger Miller classic "King Of The Road" for a spin, with Travis on guitar and Mimi thumping along on the bass while adding amazing harmonies to Travis's take on the country classic. Afterwards, Travis professed his love for country music even joking that if the 'Dusters don't get back together soon he may have to attempt to follow in Blake Shelton and Kenny Chesney's pop country footsteps. What followed was a three-song run of Fruition's most-loved tunes: "Beside You," "Northern Town" and what in my mind was the highlight of the evening, and my personal favorite Mimi tune, "Santa Fe" – the last of which saw Travis's harmonies almost putting Mimi's Fruition bandmates to shame. After one more plug for the evening's sponsors, and another request for PayPal donations the makeshift ensemble ended the show with an amazing song called "Things In My Life" by early bluegrass legend Don Stover. This was the only song of the evening Mimi played her mandolin on, and she fit enough of her remarkably authentic shredding into this version to make up for not having played it all night. The lyrics to this song seemed to tie everything we are experiencing together, with some lyrics seemingly having predicted the pandemic we find ourselves in, "For we often lose some things in life that makes us wonder why," as well as our longing for things to return to normal, "I live in hopes and dreams that we'll meet again someday."*

*And just like that the program was over. The in-person crowd, small as we were, cheered like we numbered in the hundreds. The camera man switched off his cameras, the musicians began packing up their gear, and we all wandered off into the night not knowing when we'll ever get to ingest live music the way we are used to. You could tell each and every one of us felt blessed to have experienced what had just happened. My mind wandered to the people watching at home. I wondered how receptive people have been of these broadcasts. So I asked Travis how the response has been ...*

**TRAVIS:** The people who want this kind of thing, or are looking towards their community to discuss these deeper matters of being, or looking for music with a little more context than just a song – those are the people who are really into it. Not everyone's into it. Our overall viewership has probably gone down over the course of the series but the overall engagement of the people that are involved has gone way up. So by some metrics it's becoming more successful and by some metrics less successful. But in general there seem to be some people who are really psyched.

*With things finally starting to open up a little more, and the music industry attempting to find new ways of adapting, I asked Travis if this was something he felt like he would continue to do until the dust has settled ...*

**TRAVIS:** I don't know if my schedule is gonna allow me to fit in a lot of these shows, but I want to keep doing this. I don't know exactly what form it will take, but it would be nice if I could continue doing it. I feel like I'm finally starting to get the hang of it and starting to figure out exactly what I need to do, but it's also really challenging. The whole monologue element and the conversation element are much harder than I thought they were going to be. So, I'd like to continue, but in reality I'm basically just kind of killing time until the Stringdusters start back up again. Once the 'Dusters are firing on all cylinders, I'll be too busy doing that to do anything else. In a way I'll be back to where I was [before the pandemic], but certainly at some point I won't be playing Stringdusters music day in and day out every day. I need to spend a little more time with my family. I want to spend more time around here and doing this type of thing locally. I absolutely want to do some more of it and more than anything continue to play

music with other people. That has been the single most rewarding part of this whole Coronavirus thing is getting to spend time at home and see the seasons change and getting to play music with all these other musicians. Before this I feel like my role was so simply defined as bassist and singer and role player in the Stringdusters, and there was no time for anything else. I've been writing a lot of music, and I'm working on recording with some of these other ensembles, and in a lot of ways it's a much more interesting existence now than it was pre-Corona. But I do miss getting up on a big stage with a full sound system turned up to eleven and cranking off a set of jam grass in front of a bunch of fired up field hippies. I mean there's still nothing better, but this has given me, and I think everybody else in the industry, a lot of perspective.

*As music fans, we also miss it, and we too are gaining a new perspective. In the meantime we will continue to adapt as best we can. We are finally at a point where in most places we can go see some local band playing at some local brewery, or if we are really lucky go see some of our beloved musicians playing in makeshift places like drive-in movie theaters. However, having been able to go to an actual venue and see actual musicians making actual music means more to this writer than I could even begin to explain. Additionally, seeing a musician take a risk and try to put something like "The Travis Book Happy Hour" into the universe makes me glad to see that these musicians not only care enough about us, their fans, to give us something with some actual content, but also that they care about themselves enough to not let the weirdness of 2020 bring them down. Seeing them try to work through the things they need to work through helps us as a community all make it through to the other side stronger than we were before the pandemic. We all know it's going to be over at some point, but it's the small things like this that make it a little easier on us to keep pushing through the unknown. My fingers are crossed that, even as the live music scene takes baby steps back to normalcy, we all learn something from this and use what we have learned to make the world a better place – to help each other fully realize what our actual purpose in this life is.*



*If you haven't experienced any of these "Travis Book Happy Hour" streams, please, I urge you to seek them out. They will not only get your toes tapping, but they will open your minds to the things in life that really matter. Or at the very least help you realize that the things you think matter in life don't really matter at all.*

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