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Infamous Stringdusters & Red Clay Revival 9.12.21

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Salvage Station Asheville, North Carolina

Words by **Jason Mebane**

Photos by [J. Scott Shrader Photography](#)

I'm going to try not to make this article a Travis Book fan-boy piece. I'm pretty sure he already thinks I'm weird enough without writing a fluff piece on how he singlehandedly saved western North Carolina's live music community from insanity during the first year and a half of the Covid-19 era ...

In the early days of this global pandemic that we still find ourselves smack down in the middle of, we were all forced inside our homes. Having had our "normal" lives ripped from our grasps, it seems everyone around me started taking up new hobbies in an attempt to fill their newly found free time. Some people learned to bake bread, some people took up painting, some people decided now was their time to start planting and tending to backyard gardens or even try their hand at writing the great American novel. Me? I decided to make digging into the music of the Infamous Stringdusters one of my new hobbies. It felt a bit odd to be diving into a band's musical history a decade and a half after they came into existence, but I did. Why I had not done so before is a whole 'nother story. Perhaps it was because they emerged during a time period of my life when I was pretty much burnt out on the hippie bluegrass genre as a whole. Having spent some of the early 2000's in Denver the burnout was almost inevitable. Leftover Salmon was still going strong. Yonder Mountain String Band was on top of the world. The Colorado music scene was bursting with dozens of young musicians abandoning the idea of trying to start a more traditional rock and roll band in lieu of trying their hand at stringed instruments.

In my world, these types of bands had saturated the market so much that by the time the latter wave of jamgrass acts like Greensky Bluegrass and The Stringdusters came into their own I had moved on. I stubbornly ignored them. It's not that their music didn't have merit, it's just that I didn't allow myself to open my mind enough to immerse myself in what they were putting out into the universe. Through no fault of their own, and certainly despite their musical abilities, I just kind of ignored the Stringdusters for the first many years of their existence. Don't get me wrong, when I did permit myself to succumb to their goings on, I enjoyed myself, but I only allowed myself to do so a handful of times over the years. It's not like I completely neglected them, I do recall a few times that I had the time of my life during a Dusters show. I remember a particularly raucous set they played in the wee hours of the morning after a Phil & Friends show at Las Vegas' Brooklyn Bowl. I remember a very spirited set they did with Nicki Bluhm one year at The Northwest



String Summit. I remember an Orange Peel show a couple of years ago where my mind was blown by guitarist Andy Falco trading licks with special guests Billy Strings and Jon Stickley during a set that has been appropriately dubbed “Guitarmageddon.” It’s just that I never paid them any mind once I left their shows. Never bought an album, never downloaded a show, never pressed play on Spotify, again out of stubbornness. That’s on me, not them.

Flash forward to the aforementioned global pandemic. Like most live music addicts, I found myself going through withdrawals once all the show cancellations and postponements started pouring in. A ton of people I know in other cities had no live music at all during the early days of Covid, but here in the Asheville area we were lucky. After the first few months, despite visits from larger touring acts evaporating, a handful of our local bands really stepped it up. Fortunately here in Western North Carolina we are blessed enough to count Dusters bassist Travis Book amongst our local musicians. Not willing to sit around and wait for Covid to pass, Travis did for our local music community exactly what we so desperately needed. He figured out a way to move on. Not only did he begin sporadically hosting episodes of his live stream series “The Travis Book Happy Hour” at The Grey Eagle, but he also started the habit of inviting musician friends of his to form makeshift bands at a little local brewery/bar called 185 King St. in his hometown of Brevard, NC. So while most people were painting, baking bread, and tending to their gardens, there was a small group of mountain dwelling music lovers getting their musical fix pretty much every Tuesday as part of his Casual Collaborations series. Week in and week out we all made the trek out to Brevard’s backyard not knowing what Mr. Book had in store for us, but knowing that whatever happened on that tiny stage was going to fill up our empty cups and get us through yet another week of the uncertain madness that had become everyday life.



It is for this exact reason that I found myself with a (borderline unhealthy) obsession with not only the music Travis was making, but also the positive outlook he put forth during these darkest of days. Like so many of you, I use music to help me get through life’s trials, and with Travis’ shows being one of the only ways to recharge every week, I soon found myself really wondering about The Infamous Stringdusters for the first time. I slowly noticed myself pulling up recordings of their past performances more often than old Grateful Dead shows on the archives. They began to speak to me. Once it eventually did hit me, I began to feel ashamed of myself, I felt foolish for not giving this band their fair chance to speak to my soul. I started digging deep and eventually regretted not giving them their proper day to shine in the musical sun of my mind.

It is with that new-found compulsion in my heart that I found myself quite looking forward to giving the Dusters the chance I had denied them all these years. It is with that new-found enthusiasm that I found myself, this past Sunday, yet again fixated on a stage that Travis was playing on, as I had done dozens of times over the course of the last eighteen or so months. The new friends and community members that sprung out of those Casual Collaborations shows were still surrounding me, but instead of the normal 20-25 of us regular Tuesday night fans there were hundreds if not thousands more of us gathered on a Sunday night in the former junkyard, that has rapidly become one of Asheville, North Carolina’s most relevant venues. Instead of a tiny, overcrowded stage in the back room of a local bar, there Mr. Book was, on a huge stage, surrounded by the band that made him famous in the first place. Instead of the loose, off the cuff, you never know what might happen feel of a Tuesday night, there they were in all their glory, with a lighting show that would have made legends like Candace Brightman and Chris Kuroda themselves proud, and a production value that small local venues like 185 King St. or The Grey Eagle could never pull off. Instead of a couple of friends hanging out on a stage playing whatever popped into their heads, here were The Infamous Stringdusters coming to Travis’ home turf to play to a field full of live music lovers ready to dance the night away at The Salvage Station.

The evening got off to a start with a local band Red Clay Revival. Led by guitarist Doug McElvey, they took to the stage at 6 o’clock on the nose. The Red Clay boys have seemingly become one of the de-facto house bands around

here during Covid. One of the go-to opening acts for larger bands that come to town. I've probably seen them five or six times this past year and they get much better with each and every performance. Be it Doug up there alone for a solo acoustic version of his lyrical masterpiece "This Old Watching Chair" during which he took total command of the oversized stage, or during full band songs which find local legend Zebulon Bowles effortlessly switching between his normal fiddle and the swirling keyboard that flanks him on stage while the rock solid rhythm section of Daniel Lanuccie and Jacob Baumann masterfully hold down the beat, it is obvious why Red Clay Revival keeps getting invited to the party. At times each of the four musicians were seemingly fighting for their places within any given song, yet somehow, miraculously, not stepping on each other's toes. This approach led to amazing sonic soundscapes that not only touched on bluegrass music, but also created musical moments that would not have seemed out of place at a normal rock and roll show, or late-night funk and jazz clubs. With the bulk of those in attendance not being overly familiar with their original music the crowd favorites were a spirited version of "Get Down On It" that wouldn't have sounded out of place on the Yacht Rock Sirius/XM station and a set closing slam-grass cover of the early 2000's MGMT hit "Kids." The latter reminding all of us in attendance that we need not over think our current state of affairs and to "take only what we need from it."

After a short thirty-minute stage changeover The Infamous Stringdusters took to the stage on a mild autumn night to give us a healthy dose of the medicine they peddle. The interesting part of the Stringdusters is that not only are all five members quite proficient on their instruments, but they also have something that many jam-grass bands lack, amazing vocals. Their vocal abilities definitely mirror the type of harmonizing that you'd expect from an old school, traditional bluegrass band more than what we've come to expect from most of their peers in the newgrass genre. In addition to nailing the instrumental/vocal one-two punch, they are also all equally adept at songwriting. Too many improvisational bands use songs as a means to an end, meaning they often treat their songs as nothing more than an excuse to jam. In my opinion, that may be one of the things that puts some people off of our type of music. However, the Dusters are one of the exceptions to that rule. Don't get me wrong, they can, and do jam, but at their core they definitely seem to put the actual songs more in the forefront.

First up was fiddler Jeremy Garrett's song "Carry Me Away," during which dobro player Andy Hall was the first to shine, adding some extremely tasty licks to his band mates' song. They followed that with a crowd pleasing take on "Minglewood Blues," which despite being a fairly straightforward arrangement had the bulk of the fans starting to bop and sway by the banks of the French Broad River. The first Travis song of the night, "Rockets," followed, with its poignant lyrics that again had me thinking about how I'd neglected this band for all these years. "How long until I go? How long until I know?" Only three songs in I was already thankful that I'd gotten over myself and dipped my



toes into the Dusters' waters. Another cover, The Cure's "Just Like Heaven," followed and proved again that banjos and dobros somehow manage to make every song better. Nothing against Robert Smith, but this song seems like it was made for bluegrass picking more than it was for synthed out early 80's pop, turning the somewhat dated feel of the original version into rollicking dance party for the hippies in attendance. What followed was an amazing version of the Dusters original "Let Me Know." With its words of seasons coming and going we were given a glimpse of hope that we may finally be coming out of this long dark Covid winter.

"Let Me Know" also produced the first huge jam of the night. A Stringdusters jam is quite unlike those of other bands. Not only do they each seem to take their turns under the spotlight proving what they can do, but somehow they also manage to empower their band mates creating the backdrop each needs to strut their stuff. They then brought it down a notch, ever so briefly, for "All The Same" that again saw Mr. Book stepping into the vocal spotlight while we got some almost flamenco/Caribbean type guitar work from Andy Falco.

Next up, it was “A Hard Life Makes A Good Song’s” turn to shine. “Hard Life” is one of The Infamous Stringdusters originals that hits me the hardest lyrically. In addition to its deep meaningful prose, the four musical comrades again found themselves pushing musical boundaries while diverting into a weird spacey jam that started slow and built in intensity. Falco almost toyed with the crowd, playfully dangling a metaphorical carrot on a stick in front of us before they collectively, on a dime, dropped into the early Phish classic “Possum.” This wasn’t your run of the mill, throwaway version of “Possum” either, this was a monstrous “Possum.” The kind of “Possum” you’d imagine Trey and The Boys would put forth of if they traded in their drums and organs for banjos and bass fiddles. As the crowd boogied our asses off the band almost unnoticeably found their way into the set closing “Fork In The Road.” In what was an obvious attempt to push us fans the rest of the way over the edge, the middle of “Fork” found its way back into another spacey jam – one that kind of spiraled out of control, almost falling flat on its face, before seemingly by design resuscitating itself and again creating a space for each musician to take turns showing off their instrumental prowess, wandering in and out of sonic weirdness, before barreling headfirst into the end of the tune in grand fashion. A moment so vigorous, that by the time it was over we needed nothing more than a break in the action, which is exactly what we got, as the band (who seemed as equally elated as the crowd) retreated backstage leaving us attempting to regain our composure under the setting sun.

With the pesky sun out of the way, it was time for lighting director Jason Gutworth to add his ingredient to The Infamous Stringdusters’ stew and he wasted no time doing so. The second set opened with a tune called “All That I Can Take” which I had never knowingly heard before, but based on my internet sleuthing is actually an Andy Thorn penned number. As most of you know Andy is one of the best banjoists on the scene, but he is also no slouch at writing a song. Not only did it seem tailor-made for The Infamous Stringdusters style, but as I mentioned Gutworth was blowing almost as many minds as his instrument wielding co-conspirators. In all reality a bluegrass band has no business having this type of light show, yet there we were.

The Andy Thorn tune eventually made its way into what was easily one of the highlights of the night “Gravity.” Andy Hall’s licks creeping their way into and bouncing around the inside of our brains. Travis’ bass so high in the mix that you could feel it rumbling within your innards. The intensity of “Gravity” was eventually replaced by a folksy guitar riff signaling the opening chords of the Dusters take on musical legend Danny Barnes’ “Water Wagon.” Euphoric for me, as a huge Danny fan, Chris Pandolfi did his best to give justice to this fun little ditty which also saw mind melting work from Jeremy Garrett’s fiddle. Speaking of Jeremy Garret, the band then followed up with one of my favorite tunes of his “I’ll Get Away.” Another perfect example of how even though they do things musically that their bluegrass forefathers would never dream of, they still are true enough to their roots to pay homage to the more Bill Monroe side of bluegrass history, making it distinctly clear that, while their peg doesn’t perfectly fit in the traditional bluegrass hole, they’re more than deserving of all the Grammy’s and IBMA accolades they’ve garnered over the years.

“You Can’t Stop The Changes” was up next and, as great lyrics tend to do, it reminded all of us that despite what has been happening in our world the last year or two: most everything is beyond our control and there really is nothing we can do to alter the outcome. Since we can’t stop the changes, we might as well just buckle up for the ride. Speaking of rides, that’s exactly what we were taken on next with a very interesting take on Steely Dan’s “Reelin’ In the Years.” With yet another exploratory jam that had each of the five Dusters taking their turn to shine while being egged on by not only each other, but also the sea of euphoric souls littering the concert field at their feet. It was one of those classic moments where the music takes over and plays the band. You could tell they themselves were a bit blown away afterwards. In as much awe at what had just transpired as the rest of us, showering us with the kudos we deserved



for giving them the energy a band needs from their audience in order to pull something like that off. Moments of musical bliss like these have been increasingly rare lately. Fan bases have always found great joy when the audience and band collectively reach blast off but, given the whirlwind of the pandemic times, it seems to mean even more these days. At least personally, I know I now have an even deeper appreciation for instances like these. Before the great pause there were times I may have taken experiences like these for granted. Now though, I feel like most of us are just happy to be a step closer to coming out the other side of this whole Covid mess. Finding new gratitude from the simple fact that we are lucky enough to be in a space and time where having collective moments like these means more than it ever did in years past.



After the mayhem that was “Reelin’ In The Years” there really was no other option than to cool it down a bit, and that’s exactly what they did. Putting forth an angelic version of “Let It Go” which found the band mates doing their best impression of a group of Sunday morning gospel singers over a very simple, yet lilting guitar/fiddle accompaniment. It gave us the breather we all needed to make it through the set-closing portion of the show which began with what is clearly a fan favorite “Colorado” into a nod to not one, but two of their jamband forefathers offering up “Jack Straw” followed by the Phish version of “2001.” The musical onslaught that was “2001” eventually meandered its way into the highlight of the second set “Peace Of Mind.” Apparently wanting to leave it all on the table they took us on a musical journey that completely encapsulated what The Infamous Stringdusters are about. Complete with improvisational perfection, and even a detour into the chorus of “They Love Each Other,” it was the quintessential type of set closing moment that almost made coming back out for an encore a pointless task.

Thankfully, that didn’t stop them from returning to give us a few more tunes to send us out into the world on. Buffalo Springfield’s “For What It’s Worth” not only found the guys trading verses, but also prompted the crowd to sing along at the top of our lungs almost drowning out the mics from the stage as we all shared a collective moment of joy. They followed that by diving headfirst into a song that I did not recognize, but that instantly intrigued me. As fervent as some of the earlier jams were, this show-closing moment may have eclipsed them all. As aurally pleasing as they had been all night, this may have been the peak. Just pure musical hysteria that eventually found each band member on the lip of the stage jamming like their entire existence depended on it. The crowd worked up into such a frenzy that it seemed like our lives also relied on moments like these. Ecstatic grins on almost every face in the venue.

After a year plus of being essentially robbed of nights like these, we were reminded that Covid hasn’t affected the old adage of “never miss a Sunday show.” This was one for the ages. I don’t know what the immediate future holds for us music lovers. With the Delta variant running rampant and the cold weather approaching, I fear it may be another long dark winter. Don’t get me wrong, I wholeheartedly hope that’s not the case, but it wouldn’t shock me if it was. I do know that personally my longer-term future has a lot of Infamous Stringdusters in it. I am no longer going to perpetuate the mistake I made ignoring them for the last fifteen years. Even if the cancellations and postponements ramp up again, at least we will have the memory of nights like these to help tide us over. Plus, for those of us in Western North Carolina we’ll also have Travis Book’s Causal Collaboration Tuesdays to look forward to as we continue to navigate our way back to normalcy.

[Scott’s Photo Gallery](http://www.thestringdusters.com)
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