

MISSY RAINES & THE NEW HIP

BIO

It's sometimes said that great bass playing vanishes, supporting the music without drawing attention to itself. But history also shows us that when the best bass players step forward as bandleaders, remarkable things can happen. That's why it's time to pay heed to Missy Raines and the New Hip. Missy, a trailblazer in her field for as long as she's been playing music, formed this dynamic quintet to bridge the musical worlds of newgrass, jazz, singer/songwriter and any others they take a notion to explore.

The New Hip's name is at once a subtle tribute to "Birth Of The Cool," the heraldic 1950 album by Miles Davis that Raines cherishes, as well as a wry joke about a life-changing surgery that has allowed Raines to play in her famously physical style without pain for the first time in decades. That liberation resembles the musical freedom enjoyed by this young and vibrant band. The New Hip lets Raines compose and exchange ideas with four players ranging in age from 17 to 27 who grew up enthralled by traditional American roots music and its modern offshoots, just like their boss.

The project's first release is a 5-song EP featuring two instrumentals and three songs that showcase Raines's warm and enveloping voice. A full album is in the works, and the live show, slated for prestigious stages in 2008 and beyond, is a balanced diet of the arranged and the improvised, the sung and the picked.

Raines is the most decorated bass player in the history of the International Bluegrass Music Association and a popular figure in the bluegrass community for her warmth and her passion for the music and its practitioners. She spent years as a valued member of the Claire Lynch Band and half of a remarkable duo with guitarist Jim Hurst. But for much of that time she was dreaming of something beyond that familiar terrain.

"This has been in my head for a long, long time," Missy says. "As early as 1990 when my husband and I first moved to Nashville and I was working for (bluegrass banjo player) Eddie Adcock, I thought that I would love to have a band one day and that it would have drums. How I was going to do that as a bluegrass bass player I didn't know, but I could see it happening."

The journey is clearer now in retrospect than it was on the way. She joined her first full-time band, the eclectic Cloud Valley, upon graduating high school in her hometown of Short Gap, West Virginia. Later she toured and recorded with the Brother Boys, a band she says expanded her mind about what could be achieved by a band playing spontaneously and communicatively. There were eight years with Eddie Adcock, a bluegrass master who always thought outside the box and who collaborated with legends. With Adcock, Missy distinguished herself playing with titans such as Mac Wiseman, Josh Graves and Kenny Baker.

Then in 1995, Missy joined Claire Lynch, a high-profile singer and songwriter whose democratic style allowed Raines to carve out her own voice in the band. It was an even better spot to get noticed. In the late 90s, she won the first of her seven IBMA awards, released her first solo album, and teamed up with Jim Hurst. The Hurst-Raines duo

proved one of the most distinctive and creative acts in bluegrass, one that let both players stretch as musicians and singers.

“That was integral in getting to where I am,” says Missy. “Because it changed the way I approach music. Taking the bass out of the background and leading off songs with it and writing songs on it – that was something people hadn’t seen much of. That put it right in their face, and they responded to it.”

Assembling the new band took years of diligent recruiting and rehearsing, and the journey led her to the bluegrass world’s growing cadre of amazing and eclectic young players.

“I had to find musicians who could do a wide range of stuff. But I didn’t have the music sitting on a record so I could say: ‘can you do this?’ I needed people who were invested enough to help me create this sound and who were good enough to pull it off, and that’s not many people. So I started looking in the very young pool.”

The band consists of 26-year old Dobro player Michael Witcher, brother of Gabe who plays fiddle in a similarly exploratory string band, Chris Thile’s Punch Brothers. Mandolin and guitarist Ethan Ballinger, 22, is a son of Kris and Dale of the respected band the Cluster Pluckers, and he grew up surrounded by traditional music. The very young Dillon Hodges recently won the Winfield Flatpicking Championship at age 17. Drummer veterans, Doug Belote and Tommy Giampietro share duties on the percussion side.

“It’s invigorating to be surrounded by that much excitement and drive and expertise,” says Raines. “They challenge me all of the time. It helps me remember what it was like for me at that age and keeps me motivated and on task.”

For songs, Raines turned among other places to former Brother Boys bandmate Ed Snodderly, a songwriter’s songwriter whose “Basket of Singing Birds,” recorded on the album with amazing grace, sounds like the work of a down-home Leonard Cohen. The New Hip’s instrumentals are by Missy and/or the band, including the scintillating groove of “Stop, Drop and Wiggle.”

“We’ve only begun creating new sounds,” Missy says. “Everybody in the band writes, and I sought them out for that reason, because I wanted a band sound. I’ve always imagined it having the input of everybody and featuring everyone’s talents.”

The New Hip puts Raines on a path trod by bass player/band leader/composers like Ray Brown, Charles Mingus and Edgar Meyer. If her past is any indication, she’ll be one more shining example of why it’s not wise to underestimate the musician – male or female – back there in the band with the big, low instrument.