

THE TENNESSEAN

MUSIC

Mandolin prodigy Wyatt Ellis discusses debut album and his journey to bluegrass stardom

14-year-old mandolin prodigy Wyatt Ellis talks his debut album, "Happy Valley," plus how a century of bluegrass legends have aided his development.

Marcus K. Dowling

Wyatt Ellis no longer gawks at the letterpress posters on venue walls harkening the arrival of a century of bluegrass maestros to the stages the 14-year-old mandolin prodigy plays.

While seated at one of those venues — downtown Nashville's iconic Station Inn — on a balmy February midweek morning, Ellis holds a copy of his debut album, "Happy Valley." It's a record whose release he celebrated onstage at the Grand Ole Opry with Kyle Tuttle of Golden Highway (among many) and players whose experience involves work existing for twice as long as Ellis has existed on Earth.

Age, like time, is immaterial to Ellis' life at present.

To wit, his album features a timeless who's who of the genre, including Sierra Hull, Dominick Leslie, David McLaughlin and Marty Stuart.

'One of his generation's greats'



Artists who were his inspirations just three years ago are now his collaborators.

McLaughlin wrote the album liner notes for "Happy Valley." They include the following statement:

"I am extremely proud to have witnessed Wyatt's burgeoning creative genius over the last three years, and I am honored to be part of his first recording project, 'Happy Valley.' I love everything on this album. There's no filler, that's for sure. Every single tune on this record grabs my attention. I'm sure that anyone who listens is going to be knocked out by it. Wyatt has become one of his generation's greats."

Ellis describes still learning from his collaborators while writing and recording with them as an "amazing" experience. For example, at Johnny Cash's 1979-constructed log cabin studio in Hendersonville, Stuart worked with Ellis on the album's spirited yet smooth lead track, "Blue Smoke."



Hearing the tunes that he crafted as bare-bones mandolin meanderings on the couch at his family's home in Knoxville being played by what he feels are some of the world's best musicians was a "special" process.

"It's wild," he says. "My friends and I — sometimes legends in the country music industry — took a few ideas I had and made a record that I believe unlocked (the rest of his career)."

Iconic inspiration

With the work he's put into creating his debut, he has already progressed to a level of talent comparable to where Stuart was when he was 14 and working alongside acts like the Eagles, Kool and the Gang, REO Speedwagon and Lester Flatt. Or, at the level of talent Ricky Skaggs had risen to at 14 when he began playing with Ralph Stanley.

Sitting with players like Skaggs and Stuart, or even Del McCoury, he has molded his craft into a "tastefully refined" style that involves understanding how the mathematics behind chord progressions impact the depth and resonance of his sound.

Moreover, Ellis is aware of the influence of legacy on his work moving forward.

As a Knoxville native, hearing Bobby Osborne's solo on the University of Tennessee's fight song — the Osborne Brothers' bluegrass classic "Rocky Top" — as a child initially piqued his interest in the genre.



Osborne's passing in June 2023, at age 91, moved Ellis to highlight Osborne's unforgettable influence on his young career. Bittersweetly, he's now a proud steward of the genre's lessons, stories and traditions. Plus, having played on Osborne's final recordings, he can also carry something of his humanity forward in the genre.

Upon Osborne's passing, The New York Times noted that he was an unconventional, unorthodox, untraditional creator who left a legacy that advanced the bluegrass genre.

Achieving the high lonesome sound

Ask Ellis about his inspirations moving forward and, with Osborne's inspiration, the level of success which he desires becomes apparent.

Numerous electric guitarists and jazz players like Bela Fleck and the "Father of Bluegrass," Bill Monroe, are among the names the teenage performer mentions.

"Developing a progressive style as cool as (Monroe's), that's what I want (to accomplish)."

Monroe's "high lonesome sound," characterized by earnest emotiveness and a whimsical relationship to country's stereotypical meters and rhythms, has inspired Bob Dylan, Vince Gill, Alison Krauss and more.

How Ellis' treasure trove of motivation and talent materializes itself moving forward has already taken shape for Ellis insofar as his career aspirations.

"I'm taking the time to focus on what I love to do," he says, "and learn how to do it at a high level for many years to come."