

Masters of Bluegrass #19 – Country Gazette

Formed in 1971, the *Country Gazette* was originally formed as the acoustic bluegrass unit of the country rock band *The Flying Burrito Brothers* – a band that itself was an offshoot of the rock group *The Byrds*. Gazette's first recorded appearance was on the 1971 live album *Last of the Red Hot Burritos*. In 1972, Gazette recorded *Traitor in Our Midst* for Warner Brothers records. After some early personnel changes, the band on record was Byron Berline (fiddle,) Alan Munde (banjo,) Kenny Wertz (guitar) and Roger Bush (bass.) The combination of Berline's contest style fiddling, Munde's inventive banjo picking and Bush's unique slapping bass technique gave the band an instantly identifiable sound. The album art also made a big impression.. The album contained a mix of new songs by former Byrd Gene Clark, several older songs from the Kentucky Colonels repertoire and some original instrumentals including the oft-played Hot Burrito Breakdown. WB was primarily a pop/rock label and distribution was good. Gazette's fan base came largely from Burritos fans, young rock fans intrigued by the Gazette's *new* sound. The Burritos were very popular in Europe, so Gazette made many tours in Europe in the early 1970s. They played many rock showcase clubs throughout the U. S. (clubs that had likely never had bluegrass bands before) and a selected group of bluegrass festivals.

Don't Give Up Your Day Job was their second WB album released in 1973. It contained a similar eclectic mix of songs from various musical genres. Stephen Still's *The Fallen Eagle*, Graham Nash's *Teach your Children*, Lester Flatt's and Earl Scruggs' *Down the Road*, Elton John's *Honky Cat*, Don McLean's *Winterwood*, a Herb Pedersen composition and Berline's popular fiddle tune *Huckleberry Hornpipe*. The vocal sound on the first two albums owed much to the California country rock sounds of bands like the Eagles. While attractive to some, many Bluegrass fans found it alien and not bluegrassy..

Berline left the band in 1974 and was replaced by Texas fiddler Dave Ferguson. Wertz left the band that same year and was replaced by Roland White. The group changed labels in 1976 and released *Out To Lunch*. After several personnel changes, the band eventually settled into a new configuration (1978-82) with Munde on banjo, Roland White on mandolin, Joe Carr on guitar and Mike Anderson on bass. This configuration recorded two group albums and numerous solo projects over the next few years. This version of the band toured extensively (over 250 days a year) and appeared in nearly every state. While most well known bands in the 70s lived and toured east of the Mississippi, Gazette lived in Tennessee, Oklahoma and Texas and traveled to the West coast as often as the East. Due to Munde's early development of instructional materials for banjo, the band found itself performing more and more workshop/concerts where part of the appearance included instrumental workshops.

In 1982, Anderson left the band and was replaced by Virginian Bill Smith. This group recorded a group album and continued to tour until Carr's departure in 1983. Carr went to work at South Plains College in 1984 where he continues to work today. Munde joined the SPC faculty in 1986 and retired from there in 2007. At the time of Munde's departure, White joined the *Nashville Bluegrass Band*. Carr and Munde formed a duo in the 1990s and toured extensively when not teaching. They recorded two albums for Flying Fish/Rounder during the 1990s. Munde reformed the Country Gazette in early 2000 using musicians gleaned from the SPC program. They recorded two albums in the early 2000s.

Since his retirement, Munde has formed the Alan Munde Gazette and maintains an active touring, recording and workshop schedule..

Country Gazette Legacy

This band attracted many new young fans to the music. The wide range of their touring brought good professional bluegrass to many for the first time. Their involvement in teaching was groundbreaking at the time. Their recording of a wide range of material brought unique sounds to the bluegrass audience.