

Masters of Bluegrass #20 Hot Rize

The traditional-yet-progressive Colorado band Hot Rize started its 12 years of full-time performing in January, 1978. The group named itself after the secret ingredient of Martha White "self-rising" flour, the product Flatt & Scruggs promoted in the 50s and 60s. At first, Bluegrass fans were reluctant to embrace this western band, but their undeniable talent soon changed that.

Original band members were Tim O'Brien on lead and harmony vocals, mandolin and fiddle; Pete Wernick on banjo and harmony vocals; Charles Sawtelle on guitar, harmonies and lead vocals. Mike Scap, the group's original guitarist, departed after three months and was replaced by Nick Forster on bass, with Sawtelle switching from bass to guitar. Forster also became the group's emcee and main harmony singer. Hot Rize recorded its self-titled debut album, a blend of traditional and new material, in 1979. Their second album, *Radio Boogie*, came out in 1981.

On the strength of their first records and national touring, Hot Rize rose to prominence in the early 80's, appearing frequently on such national broadcasts as NPR's "A Prairie Home Companion" and The Nashville Network's "Ralph Emery Show". Their stage show gained renown, featuring their strong and soulful bluegrass combined with their wacky but musically deft "alter-ego" country swing band, Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers. Due to the electric band's high entertainment value, they were welcomed at bluegrass events that normally prohibited electric instruments. The group performed in almost every state, as well as Europe, Japan, and Australia.

In 1984, Hot Rize released a concert album featuring the Trailblazers and in 1985 released *Traditional Ties*. *Untold Stories* and *Take It Home* came out in 1987 and 1990 respectively. Many songs from these records, such as "Walk the Way the Wind Blows," "Colleen Malone," and "Just Like You," reached #1 positions on national bluegrass airplay charts. Many of their songs have become bluegrass standards. After 12 years of full-time year-round performing and recording, the group disbanded amicably, all members subsequently pursuing solo careers.

Sawtelle died in 1999 from complications from leukemia.

Hot Rize Legacy

It is unfortunate indeed that many of today's bluegrass fans never experienced the incredible entertaining package that was Hot Rize. Tim O'Brien was certainly the focus of the group and his continuing career gives some insight into the talented group. The previously mentioned songs plus *99 Years*, *High on the Mountain* and *Nellie Cane* have become standards.