

Masters of Bluegrass #21 – The Seldom Scene

The Seldom Scene formed out of the weekly jam sessions in the basement of banjo player Ben Eldridge. These sessions included John Starling on guitar and lead vocals, Mike Auldridge on resonophonic guitar and baritone vocals, and Tom Gray on bass. Then came mandolinist John Duffey, who had quit the Country Gentlemen two years before. Duffey was invited to the jam sessions, hit it off with John Starling, and decided to give music another try

Duffey proposed some rules that the others agreed to, including playing only one night a week at local clubs, doing occasional concerts and festivals on weekends, making records, and keeping their day jobs. Duffey repaired musical instruments, Eldridge was a mathematician, Starling a physician, Auldridge a graphic artist, and Gray a cartographer with National Geographic. The Scene's first home was the Red Fox Inn in Bethesda, Maryland, where they spent six years before starting weekly performances at The Birchmere Music Hall in Alexandria, Virginia.

Duffey's stratospheric tenor anchored the group, but the vocal blend of Duffey/Starling/Auldridge set a new standard that attracted new audiences to what had been a niche music. Their weekly shows included bluegrass versions of country music, rock, and even classical pop. The band's popularity soon forced them to play more than once a week--but they continued to maintain their image as being seldom seen, and on several of their early album covers were photographed with the stage lights on only their feet, or with their backs to the camera.

Though the Scene remained a non-touring band, they were prolific recorders, producing seven albums in their first five years of existence, including two live albums. But the band's philosophy of not touring and maintaining their day jobs eventually caused some changes in membership.

In 1977, John Starling left the group to focus on his medical career, and was replaced by singer and songwriter Phil Rosenthal, whose song "Muddy Water" had been recorded by the Scene on two earlier albums. Around the same time, the group switched record labels from Rebel Records to Sugar Hill. The band recorded several more albums in the 1980s and firmly established themselves as one of the most influential bluegrass bands. In 1986, Rosenthal and Tom Gray both left the band and were replaced by Lou Reid and T. Michael Coleman, respectively. Coleman proved to be very controversial, as many purists objected to his use of an electric bass in what is an acoustic genre, but the albums produced by the band after Coleman's arrival maintained the traditional appeal of any of the Scene's earlier albums.

Reid left the band in 1993, and Duffey convinced former member John Starling to return to the band for the next year. During that year the Scene recorded the album "Like We Used To Be," but Starling did not wish to stay with the band long term. He was replaced in 1994 by lead singer Moondi Klein.

Throughout these changes, John Duffey remained the group's spiritual center and greatest influence, and his initial ideas about keeping a light touring schedule and staying close to home continued to prevail. During 1995 and 1996, Klein and Coleman, along with original member Mike Auldridge, left the group to form a new band called Chesapeake. This new band became a full-time project for its members, and for a time the Scene stopped recording.

Duffey and Ben Eldridge, the two remaining original members, recruited resonophonic guitar player Fred Travers, bassist Ronnie Simpkins, and guitarist and singer Dudley Connell to join the band, and the reconstituted group recorded an album in 1996 and continued live appearances.

Legacy

For 25 years The Seldom Scene remained extremely popular in bluegrass circles even with the near-constant personnel changes. But the band was dealt what seemed a crushing blow in late 1996, when founder and leader John Duffey suffered a fatal heart attack.. Banjoist Ben Eldridge, the sole remaining original member and a significant force in banjo music in his own right, assumed leadership of the band. Former guitarist Lou Reid rejoined the band on mandolin. Initially the new Scene concentrated on live performances, but in 2000 the group recorded a new album, "Scene it All." The Seldom Scene continues to tour, and remains on the Sugar Hill label for future recordings.