

# GEORGE THACKER INTRODUCES THE HARMONICA TO BLUEGRASS

by Andy Garrigue

Bluegrass music is what George Thacker grew up with in rural Tennessee, and that's what he wanted to play. Trouble was, there was no such thing as bluegrass harmonica. And to a certain extent more than 15 years later, there still isn't. But that didn't stop Thacker then and it's not stopping him now. Thacker, like most harmonica players, remembers his first harp and the first song he learned. "I was a foster child, I was 13," he recalls. "And my foster mom gave me an Old Standby. It took me six months to learn to play On Top of Old Smoky."

After a slow start, Thacker learned quickly. "I never read the books, just studied my Charlie McCoy records," he remembers. "McCoy was my main man. I always said to myself if I can play this, I'll make it. Then I'd learn to play it. I can play basically every song that he's done, every one I ever heard anyway. I would love to be to bluegrass what Charlie McCoy's been to country. That would be my dream." With a handful of recent appearances at Nashville's Grand Ole Opry, a debut

recording, *Blazing A New Trail*, just out on bluegrass label Pinecastle Records, and a feature in *Bluegrass Unlimited* magazine, Thacker is pursuing that dream.

Thacker got on the Grand Ole Opry by persistence and luck. "Long story short I was down here at the radio station, met the drummer from the Opry, and he said he'd take me backstage at the Grand Ole Opry. But he told me not to bring no harps. But I put harmonicas in my socks that night and my coat, put all twelve in there. At the Opry, I went to Bill Monroe's door. Bill wouldn't listen to me. I went to everybody's door. It was getting pretty discouraging.

"Now I see Mike Snider on television one time playing harp. I went to his room and called him out. I said 'Mike will you listen to me play one song?' He said, 'Yeah I'll listen to you.' So I waited two more hours, and he came off stage and said 'come on back here boy' and I played him 'Old Joe Clark.' And he said 'Where in the heck did you come from boy?' He said 'would you like to play one on stage?' I said 'you're kidding me.' He said no. We ended up playing 'Orange Blossom Special' and 'Old Joe Clark.'"

"I went to tell the drummer that I was going to play. He didn't believe me. Who gets to play on the Opry the first time you go there? I've been blessed by that kind of coincidence. I ended up playing and getting a standing ovation." Thacker's now been on the Opry eight times.

During the recording of *Blazing A New Trail*, Thacker admits he was nervous. Snider had joined on for free and brought an all-star assembly with him. "These guys were gods," is how Thacker puts it. "Oh my gosh, I was shaking. I was scared, and I didn't want to mess up in front of them boys."

One listen to *Blazing A New Trail* and you know

Thacker didn't "mess up." Thacker's tone is clean and clear, and there's a warmth to his notes that reflects he's playing by feel, not by memory. As on any bluegrass effort, the pace is ferocious, and Thacker's more than up for the challenge. He jumps in with fluid lines dancing around the melody first, and then improvises and cranks up the emotion on a second run through. His playing is fast, sometimes maddeningly so, like McCoy's, but he never leaves the pocket of the song, never leaves the band behind, knowing bluegrass is a team sport. Thacker conveys a range of emotions through this material, from rowdy to patriotic to mournful to soulful.

Despite his energetic upbeat good ole boy persona — owning a *Castrol Express Lube* by day and staying out late leading the bachelor life at night — Thacker remains philosophical about the challenges he faces ahead. "I've went through a hundred things wrong in my life," he intones. "I've been in a bunch of foster homes. I don't know who my parents are. But I think for everything that's happened bad, there's been 15 things that happened good for me. People believe in me and I believe in myself. I thank the Lord. He's given me opportunities." He brings his musings round to his instrument. "I can play rock, and I can really jam, and blues, but I just think there's a place for me in bluegrass. What I'd be happy with one of these days is for people to say 'he was a good bluegrass harp player.' That's what the whole thing's about. Not because of the money or nothing. I just want to make a mark."



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