

THE BROTHERS COMATOSE

A Band to Watch

By Jennifer Mandaville

Photos by Alan Sheckter



I met the Brothers outside the “performers only” porta-potty, moments before they were to step on stage for the Ouray Mountain Air Music Series. It’s where I make all my key connections. After exchanging a round of witty repartee, I handed them our 2014 spring/summer *High Notes Magazine* and suggested they might like to read it. Walking around the front of the stage and surveying the crowd, I settled near front and center.

From the first note, it became clear this was a band overflowing with soulful, resonate song. Rich vocals accompanied by sweet harmonies – and accomplished string musicians, all the way around – are perfectly set-off by seasoned and multifarious songwriting. The kind of songwriting often attained much later in a musician’s career, but something to which the Bros. seem born.

I leaned into to a friend of mine and said, “I’m going to write about these guys.”

THEY CALL IT ROOTS

The Brothers Comatose cut their musical teeth in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, releasing their first album, *Songs from the Stoop*, in 2010, a collection of both covers and original tunes. In 2012, the band released its second album, *Respect the Van*, which carries original favorites “Pie for Breakfast,” “Sleep,” “Modern Day Sinners” “120 East,” “The Scout” and “The Van Song.”

The band is comprised of lead vocalists and brothers, Ben (guitar) and Alex Morrison (banjo), Phil Brezina (fiddle), Ryan Avellone (mandolin), Gio Benedetti (bass) and the newest member Josh Rabie (high-harmonies/fiddle/harmonica). “He’s a great musician and is super fun to play with, so

But, the San Fran-Dead influence might end there. Ben tells us: “Well, we see loads of tourists every day wearing tie-dye and tons of street musicians playing Grateful Dead songs. Being from San Francisco, we get lots of requests to play their songs, but we actually don’t know any. We once did a cover of the Dead covering Waylon Jennings. That’s about as close as we got. ... I just have a short attention span and tend to lose interest in songs over 4 or 5 minutes.”

Ben continues: “Alex and I grew up in a pretty musical household. Our mom was in an acoustic folk quartet when we were kids – two guys, two girls, a couple acoustic guitars and lots of great harmonies. We definitely spent

lots of time as kids, sitting and watching them rehearse. They were definitely an influence of ours. I mean, how could we not pick some of that up?” While the band is considered a string band, they are not a bluegrass band. The similarity ends in the instruments. Influenced by the Stones, they consider themselves an Americana-rock-and-roll-string-band.

The Bros. claim to be rockers who have progressed to these instruments. Telling us: “We used to all be in rock bands.”

Asking for a quick list of inspirations, the band collectively rattles off, “Ronnie McCoury, Chris Thile, Bill Monroe, Devil Makes Three (a punk rock string band), Ralph Stanley ... “his voice sounds awesome,” the Wood Brothers. But, “We sing what our concept of what the sound is. “We are a singing band, not a shredding band.”

And sing, they can.

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we’re gonna see how it works to add a sixth member. I think it’s gonna work out just fine,” shares Ben, when asked if there is anything new with the band.

High Notes co-founder Dale McCurry and I caught up with the Brothers last August, before they opened for Lake Street Dive at the New Sheridan Opera House in Telluride.

When asked about San Francisco and how much of that scene is imbibed into the music they create, Alex recognized being influenced by Jerry Garcia’s “bouncy” banjo and *Old and In the Way* – the 70s bluegrass supergroup that included David Grisman, Jerry Garcia, Peter Rowan and Vassar Clements and was later joined by John Hartford.



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WHOLE LOTTA LOVE

When I spoke to Ben, the band was scheduled to play Bottlerock Festival in Napa the end of May. By lucky luck of the draw the Bros. happen to play the same day as Robert Plant, a huge icon to the boys, well, let's face it – to all of us. Ben tells us: "I have plans to somehow find him and shake his hand and hopefully have him pass along some sort of amazing rock-and-roll sage advice." And who does he want to perform with?

"Uhhh, Robert Plant or anyone from Led Zeppelin ... or the Rolling Stones. We would die ecstatic dudes after that."

I am sensing a theme, here.

"The best thing we ever bought was our van – a beautiful 1988 Chevy G20 conversion van – red" - Ben Morrison

Demonstrating their breadth of musical influence and interest, the band tells us about an autumn harvest festival in San Francisco last year where they were fortunate enough to ask Chris Isaac to come up on stage and sing a few songs with them. "That was totally unexpected and pretty awesome."

If Brothers Comatose fans pay attention long enough, they will pick-up on the band's love for its Chevy van. It was even worthy of a song. "The best thing we ever bought was our van – a beautiful 1988 Chevy G20 Conversion Van – red. It's what got us out on the road in the beginning, and it was our home for a long time," Ben reflected. "It has since proved itself non-road worthy, so we had to get a new one. But the legacy of our old baby lives on forever!"

Collectively the band was asked: If you could meet a musician in Rock and Roll Heaven, who would it be and what would you ask him or her?

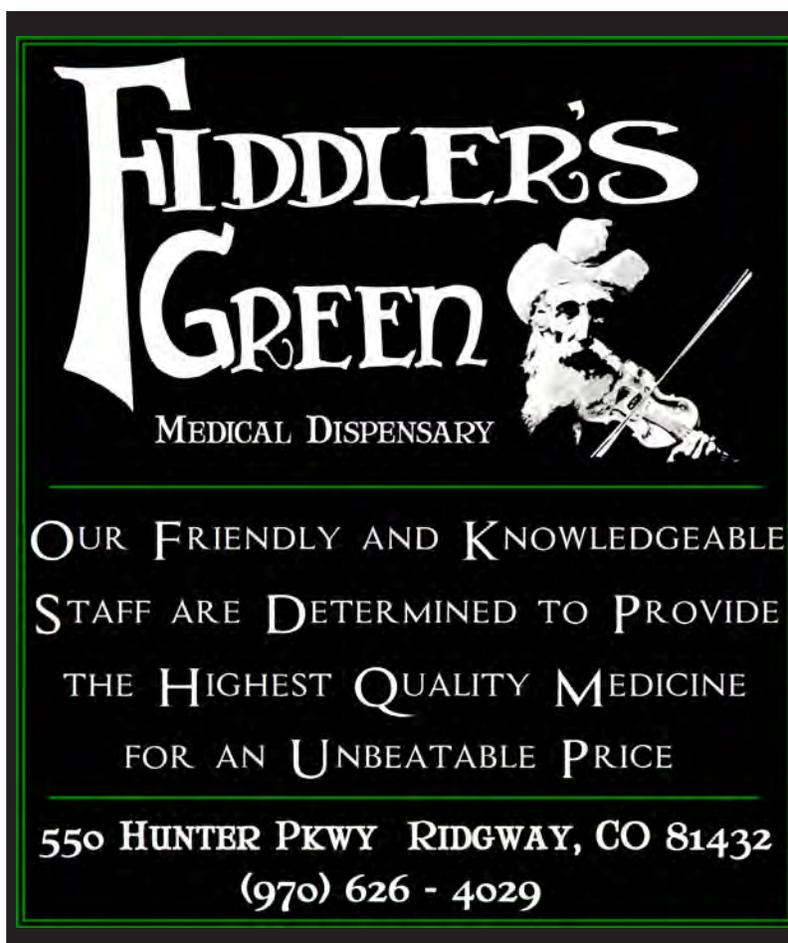
Ben answers, "This is a really tough question. There are so many people I would want to talk to. But, after much deliberation, we would find Robert Johnson who apparently sold his soul to the devil for superhuman musical abilities. ... We would ask him: 'Where did this happen and can we get a contact for the devil?' 'Cause, we'd like to do the same thing."



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LAYING DOWN A GROOVE

The band took a couple of months at the end of the year to compile and arrange the songs they'd been working on and headed into the studio in mid-January to record their third, yet-to-be-named album. In February, the band shared: "We did our pre-production at Gadget Box in Santa Cruz. That's a great studio and we've been meaning to get in there for a while. For the actual album though, we went to a beautiful castle-like studio in Stinson Beach, California, to record. We stayed there, ate there, recorded in all sorts of weird rooms, and it was super fun ... and incredibly beautiful. We were staring out at the ocean during the recording session. We were joking that all our songs would end up way slower because we would get into the beachy-vibe, man. We did all the basic tracks mostly in the same room and then overdubbed vocals and some solos."

Ben continues: "We're almost done recording the album. This record was a bit different because everyone contributed to the songwriting process."

The Brothers participated in NPR's Tiny Desk contest, and were able to feature one of their new songs: "Knoxville Fox-hole" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMuOebyTTeQ>). The band tells us: "Our mandolin player, Ryan, wrote that one. We took a break in the studio one day to record that video in the room where we were tracking. The contest is really cool ... where anyone can enter and have a chance at getting an official slot. A lot of our friends' bands entered, so we had some pretty tough competition. We didn't have much time to produce it since we were busy recording in the studio, but I think it turned out pretty good." Their song was not chosen, but the Bros remain pleased they participated.

Seeing the brothers on stage at the Sheridan in Telluride, I was again caught by the inspired and mature song-writing, sublime instrumentals and vocals that are simply and purely harmonious soul-salve. Ben has the voice a young Kris Kristoferson spent sleepless nights dreaming of, yet was never to attain. Even Waylon woulda wished ... All of this, blended with his brother's and the band's harmonies, make for what might be one of the most relevant bands of 2015. From their opening song, the brothers are clearly having a good time, and the revelry grows into a revival with a contagious and fevered pitch – song after song; they never let us down. These guys are having a good time – and want to convert us. The band plays off the crowd and the crowd returns the favor without hesitation.

I want whatever it is they have.

A little talk with: Ben Morrison: The Brothers Comatose

Editor's Note: *It doesn't take much interaction with the Brothers Comatose to know that brother Ben Morrison is most often the guy with whom to talk. In addition to leading our interview with the band at the New Sheridan Opera House in Telluride, Colorado (see story page 12) High Notes co-founder Jennifer Mandaville conducted a Q&A with Ben via the magic of the internet.*

HN: Do you have any rituals you partake in, before a show?

Ben: Drink five beers. Ha! Just kidding mom. We do usually have a couple beers before the show, get loose, warm up on instruments. Occasionally we do some push-ups to get the blood flowing and maybe do a couple stretches. When we play 'Van Song' we lie down on stage while playing and have to get back up so we have to be loose and limber for that.

HN: Weirdest show?

Ben: One time we played a gig at an event called Sunday Streets in San Francisco. We had to be there at 9am – crazy early for musicians – and we ended up being involved in the tractor tire pull while we played our instruments. We all lined up, with instruments, started playing and then we had to run 100 yards and back with tires strapped to our backs ... all while playing our song. That was a true musical endurance challenge.

HN: Strangest tour story?

Ben: We played Boise, Idaho, a few years back and there was a terrible storm that night. There was incredible rain, hail and super strong winds. It was an odd storm – had a little bit of everything. At one point we decided to walk and get pizza when the rains died down. On that walk through downtown, we saw a huge bird in the middle of a busy street and it looked injured. Our fiddle player was a bit of a naturalist and he took off his shirt and threw it over the bird so it wouldn't get freaked out. We picked it up and took it back to our hotel. We tried calling bird rescue but nothing was open at 1 a.m.

The next morning we took it to the proper bird rescue facility and found out it was a baby Peregrine Falcon that had lived on top of one of the buildings in downtown Boise. Basically, we had the fastest creature in the world staying in our hotel room

overnight. All was good when we brought it to the bird rescue place. They took it back to its nest and it recovered nicely.

HN: A day in the life, on the road?

Ben: Our day usually starts with shitty hotel coffee. Then we load into the van and get ready for our journey to the next town. In the van we listen to lots of podcasts – comedy, stories, science – we do it all. Lots of times we'll figure out the best place to eat some local cuisine in a given town and hit it up for lunch. Occasionally, if there's time, we'll do some sightseeing, swimming in rivers or hiking to the top of a mountain.

HN: Cans or bottles?

Ben: Both. Our good friends at Lagunitas Brewing Company provide us with lots of beer for the road, and they only use bottles. But every now and then it's great to have a canned beer like a Tecate or PBR. You know ... something you can drink several of and not get too hammered.

HN: Boxers, briefs or commando?

Ben: Commando is always a terrible idea as a dude. The zipper is not a very penis friendly addition to pants. As far as I know it's either briefs or boxer briefs for everyone in the band.

HN: The best piece of advice you actually follow?

Ben: Our tour manager's mom once said to us – "Keep your eyes open, you never know what you'll see." I've always loved that. It's funny and poetic.

HN: Apples or oranges?

Ben: Oranges – we want to prevent scurvy on all van expeditions.

HN: The best things you ever bought, stole and borrowed?

Ben: The best thing we ever bought was



our van – a beautiful 1988 Chevy G20 Conversion Van. The best thing we've ever stolen was non-alcoholic beer. One time we were opening up for a band we didn't like very much and Phil our fiddle player crawled over a wall to sneak into their dressing room to steal some beer. We ran out of beer by that point. He was a little drunk and not only dropped a beer and broke it in their dressing room, but when he got back and handed 'em out, we realized that they were all non-alcoholic. The best thing we ever borrowed was probably a banjo that was left at our house after a music party that our parents threw when we were teenagers. Alex picked it up and started going for it. Fortunately that family friend lent it to him for a long while and he hasn't turned back since.

HN: What are your non-musical gifts/talents?

Ben: I can roll my stomach like a belly dancer. Alex has webbed toes. Phil does a great gorilla impersonation. The list goes on and on. I realize it's not quite as exciting without seeing it in person. You'll have to ask us about it when you see us in person. That's gonna be waaaaay better. I promise.