



# LET'S ROLL

## The NY Banjo Summit Tour

Pete Wernick

Oct. 25.... We assemble at the Keswick Theater, Philadelphia. It's impressive just to look around and see an array of amazing musicians I'll be spending the next 11 days with... Béla, Tony, Noam... Russ Barenberg (hey, that makes 3 of the 5 of the original Country Cooking band on this tour), Eric Weissberg, Bill Keith, Richie Stearns, and fiddler Alex Hargreaves, Jesse Cobb (former Stringduster) on mandolin, and bassist Corey DiMario (Crooked Still).

The idea started with a concert in Albany in 2002, presenting New York banjo players... or more exactly, banjo players with "a New York connection." Ten

years later the same promoter, Peter Lesser, proposed a similar concert, and the concept grew into a tour of ten northeastern cities, and here we are... Richard Battaglia on sound, and a nice tour bus with lots of leather seats, coffeemaker and fridge, and a professional driver.

Lots of hurried prep on the first day. Béla is commander in chief, figuring out the program at high speed, consulting with everyone, as genially as possible considering a two and a half hour concert needs to happen with at most three hours of rehearsal time. "Focus" is the name of the game, and a series of ten-minute solo sets gets blended with small ensembles and three numbers featuring the whole cast are conceived and rehearsed, catered dinner eaten, clothes changed, and... the show must go on, and did!

Anyone who likes banjo—and probably even many who don't—would have to like this show. The musicianship is sterling and surprisingly varied. We start with a quick one-turn-for-everybody *Cripple Creek*, then I get to lead off with my little set: *Ruthie* (just me, singing with my banjo) and *Tequila Mockingbird*, Tony joining me

for the double barreled Country Cooking banjo sound first recorded over 40 years ago(!). In between I do a couple of minutes of "how to start banjo," with the G and D7, and what happens when you take a TITM roll and slowly speed it up.

Bill Keith is next, with two medleys,



out blossoming, sweeping sounds taking turns with delicate and deft darting lines, always smooth, always precise, carrying all sorts of musical messages. He has a very appealing medley of African tunes played with a muted tone that evokes the sound of African instruments, and finishes with a Bach violin partita that sounds like a combination of dancing and flying... quite speedy but smooth and well-controlled, with many climbs, coasts, and dives. It all takes an awesome amount of technique that bespeaks untold amounts of disciplined, dedicated practice. That Béla,

one featuring his Keith pegs (*Flint Hill*, *Earl's*, and *Auld Lang Syne*), and some beautifully rendered melodic-style fiddle tunes: *June Apple*, *Cherokee Shuffle*, and *Red Haired Boy*. Noam does two lovely tunes from his new record, the delightful and tuneful *My Mother Thinks I'm a Lawyer* and the hauntingly moody *Broken Drought*. This banjo concert is fracturing stereotypes right and left!

The backing group plays Russ's *Cowboy Calypso* (a no-banjo tune makes great sense here), then a special treat—a rare appearance by a true pioneer of New York banjo, Eric Weissberg. First tutored at age 8 by Pete Seeger and now past 70, Eric can still create his signature sound, picking *Pony Express* as part of a medley of creative tunes, playing *Salt Creek* with me and Bill, and leading up to a big set-ending version of—you guessed it—*Dueling Banjos*. Calls and responses by different pairs of players with various curve balls thrown. This is fun!

The second set features some pretty great solo playing. In fact, it's better than great—wondrous really, when Béla sits in a chair in front of the monitors and lays

Russ Barenberg (guitar), Tony Trischka, Jesse Cobb (obscured), Eric Weissberg, Pete Wernick, Richie Stearns, Corey DiMario (bass), Bill Keith, Noam Pikelny and Béla Fleck. Photo by Jeff Kase

he seems to always reach for new heights, and gets there!

Béla, Tony, and Noam pull off a pair of three-banjo tours de force. I admit I'm not too big on three-banjo stuff, but to their credit, the fearsome threesome never hurt my ears once. The first piece, three fiddle tunes in D played simultaneously, seems to me more remarkable as a "workable experiment" than as a sterling listening experience. Next is a mighty intricate melodic version of *John Hardy*, sounding something like a cheetah dance team... sped up. These guys!

Richie Stearns is next, singing with the full band plus Tony and Béla—the Dock Boggs-inspired *Veins of Coal* and then an Indian flavored tune with a percussive clawhammer style. He's got three open-back banjos in different tunings, going through pick-ups, a floorful of gear with... a wah wah pedal. His wildness bridges

the roots and the future. The energy and drive of his music makes a high point in the show.

Tony's set is more mellow, with highly nuanced and tuneful melodies and complicated chord progressions. *The Danny Thomas*, his last tune, is classic Trischka at his most listenable.

The concert finale is a tribute to Earl Scruggs, and we visit *Pike County Breakdown*, *Jed Clampett*, *Home Sweet Home*, *Mississippi Sawyer*, *Ground Speed*, *Steel Guitar Rag* (yes, a tune Earl did pick, in D), *Foggy Mt. Special*, and then three times through *Foggy Mt. Breakdown* in unison at high speed. Does this get an encore? Guess!

Béla comes out alone and announces he'll play (Don Reno's) *Follow the Leader*, solo. Except Tony comes up behind him, and reaches around with both hands (unorthodox looking, shall we say), to play an unbelievable four-hands duet, with all sorts of "impossible" moves except of course they do them anyway.

The actual final finale is a massive *Reuben* with Richie singing in A, alternating with groups of banjo versions in D...so lots of key changes back and forth, each delivering an uplift, quite exhilarating, especially with all 11 musicians leaning into it at once.

The crowds have been not only super-responsive, they express a lot of gratitude in the lobby after the show. Each venue has a special set-up for us: all 11 musicians seated behind a block of tables, Sharpies in hand, as a line of folks file by with programs, posters, CDs and T-shirts to sign. The shirts say our tour is "5 String with attitude!"

## **Sandyfest**

We knew the hurricane was coming, even before the tour. Like many others, we guessed it might just blow out to sea. But after Friday and Saturday's shows, Wilmington, DE, and Red Bank, NJ, the predictions agreed it would hit Sunday... right in our tour zone.

Early the day of the New York City gig, we learned the city's subways would shut down at 7, so no gig...and same with the next two days in Princeton and Washington DC. Plan Bs were now in effect over a wide area, as people braced. A few of the musicians went to join their families, and the rest of us headed to State College, PA to hole out until Thursday's gig. The Hampton Inn became our new home, and

to save expense, the bus was unloaded into storage rooms and sent away.

State College's version of Hurricane Sandy was very mild, just intermittent rain and no power outage. Our magnanimous friend there, R.B. Powell, lent us his business's 15-passenger van, allowing for some tooling around town. The one planned day off mid-tour was now four, featuring: calling home, jamming, practicing, and TV viewing of the mighty storm wreaking havoc in places we'd just been. Frustrating to be idle, but feeling fortunate to have the Hampton's comforts and necessities. On Wednesday, Noam drove to DC for a plane to Europe to finish a tour with the Punch Brothers. Sad to see him go, no dull moments with Noam around!

The State College gig was one of two with a pre-show meet-and-greet with concertgoers, talking about banjo playing and the tour, and answering questions. I liked this opportunity, and the attendees seemed to as well. Compared to mass-autographing in the lobby, the interactions were less limited, and the conversation interesting.

The next show, in Ithaca, seemed special. With Mac Benford now joining the cast, five of us had lived nearby, including Mac and Richie who still do. I dropped by my old haunt, the Moosewood Restaurant, still right in the spot where I'd play for my supper in the early years. The hometown crowd in the big old State Theater (where I saw the movie "*Woodstock*," about '73) gave us a lot of love. Still a great music town, and that may have been our best show of the tour. Good old Ithaca, cloudy and nippy and spirited as ever.

The tour wound down at The Egg in Albany (interesting and modern) and the interesting and ancient Bardavon Theater in Poughkeepsie. A poster backstage lists luminaries who appeared there: Theodore Roosevelt, Houdini, Sarah Bernhardt, Irving Berlin...and now us!

Good to see Béla's folks at the show, but a bit of sadness is in the air as the tour ends with us all scattering. This has been a very satisfying and exciting time. The hang with buddies old and new will not be forgotten, and the music hit that very high level that all performers live for.

Fortunately for the tour, the stormed-out dates got rescheduled onto the weekend of Jan. 19 (see *NYbanjo.org* for info). Alas for me, I won't be able to make it. Banjo Camp in Colorado calls.

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