

Hot Rize: From Old Grass To New Grass

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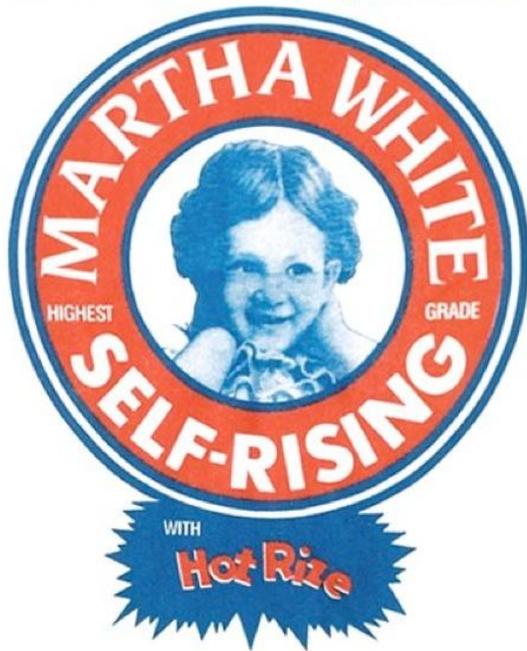
Those were heady days, back in the '80s, when [Hot Rize](#) toured across the country giving their all to make it as working musicians. Bandmates [Pete Wernick](#) (banjo), [Nick Forster](#) (bass), [Tim O'Brien](#) (mandolin) and [Charles Sawtelle](#) (guitar) came together in 1978 and toured until 1990. They continued to play together sporadically until Sawtelle passed away from cancer in 1999. His surviving bandmates brought [Bryan Sutton](#) on board in 2002 to play guitar with them in the scant performances that are today scheduled around

their individual projects. In many ways, Hot Rize led the way in bridging the music of traditionalists to many of the progressive groups like [String Cheese](#) and [Yonder Mountain String Band](#). Wernick, Forster, and O'Brien recently spoke about their history and what inspires them to play the few gigs that they currently schedule.

Hot Rize came together with a simple goal in the beginning. "The original idea for Hot Rize was that we were going to get together for the summer and just play some festivals," Forster explains. "Tim had a record and Pete had a record and the idea was that we were going to get together and play tunes from those records and play some festivals and see what happens. 31 years later we're still playing music together. It was a very easy commitment to make early on."

O'Brien goes a little further to enumerate their goals at the time. "We wanted to play traditional bluegrass with our own stamp on it, but we wanted to try to fit into the genre and pay tribute to it, really," he says. "We also wanted to explore other areas and one of those was doing a little bit of comedy with the Trailblazers and another was writing songs. We mostly walked inside the line of the bluegrass borders but we went outside it a little bit here and there."

"Goodness Gracious, It's Good"



Wernick came up with the name for the group. "That was my idea to use the Hot Rize name; I take credit for that. Hot Rize was the secret ingredient in the Martha White flour, and Martha White was the sponsor for the Flatt and Scruggs television show," he explains. "I had some names for bands tucked away in a file and I suggested the name and everybody said, 'Okay.' Normally it takes longer than that – sometimes it can take forever. The Martha White Company allowed us to print our t-shirts with no compensation. The one stipulation they had when I called and asked them if I could use the Hot Rize name, they said, 'Keep the show clean.'"

The guys outfitted themselves in vintage ties and suits that they purchased from thrift stores. In a time when they could have gotten away with

wearing t-shirts and jeans, they chose to dress up for the stage. Forster explains, "That was the tradition. That's where bluegrass came from. Bill Monroe played in suits and ties and Ralph Stanley and the Osmond Brothers and Jim & Jesse. That's what people did. Now it just happened that people of our generation didn't. But we made a conscious decision to separate ourselves from the pack and it made it such that the older audience and the traditional bluegrass fans could look at us and say, 'Oh, my, look at those nice young men and aren't they good and don't they look good in their suits.' But if people looked closer they would see that we were wearing thrift store suits and we had old '40s ties, big old wide silk ties that were a throwback. We were wearing vintage ties as an homage to the people who came before us. So there was a certain amount of tongue-in-cheek from the get-go." Wernick adds, "Our ties were an indication that we're not just carbon copies of the guys you've been watching. We're winking at you a little bit while we do this."

There was any number of contributions that made the Hot Rize sound unique, but Forster remembers the vocals with particular reverence. "Singing with Tim is a unique thing in my world" says Forster. "I get to sing with a lot of people on [Etown](#) and I have sung with lots of other people in other musical situations but I think it's because we kind of grew up together and I became a better singer and I know Tim did too in the course of Hot Rize. He's always been an amazing singer, just remarkable. Our duet sound, I think, is a distinctive part of what makes Hot Rize sound like Hot Rize."

“We broke some ground, with Pete using the phase shifter [a device Wernick invented to morph his banjo sound] and me using the electric bass and Tim’s mandolin playing style and our songwriting and original material and Charles’ style of playing the guitar and the whole evolution of the show” continues Forster. “It was really ground breaking in a lot of ways. We brought a lot of people to bluegrass that otherwise may not have felt welcome. I’m really proud of that.” Stringing one thought into the next, Forster was eager to talk more about the songwriting associated with Hot Rize.



“I think the challenge in bluegrass music is to write songs that fit the genre and that achieve some level of timelessness while still representing a new body of work. I think that was one of the strengths of Hot Rize. Tim, Pete, and I contributed a bunch of new material. Songs like Tim’s ‘Nellie Kane’ and I wrote a song called ‘Shadows in My Room’ and Pete’s ‘Just Like You’ and some others with that sort of classic bluegrass timelessness to them that were part of the modern bluegrass repertoire. I think that is a really important thing,” Forster observes. “If you look at all the original material that Hot Rize contributed over the years I think there’s a lot of those songs that really stand the test of time and they fit the older style but are touching on more contemporary ideas and more contemporary influence. We were really lucky that we had some fresh songwriting in the band, that we could contribute some new material that wasn’t sub-standard. Original songs are better if they’re good songs. I think that that’s a very distinctive thing that Hot Rize did. It comes from that same thing that we really did our homework. We loved listening to traditional bluegrass and really connected with it and respected it and it was natural to us as songwriters to start with that. I think almost any of [the songs are] memorable because you’re talking about not just nostalgia but these songs are kind of iconic. We started every show with ‘Blue Night.’ ‘Blue Night’ is a song that says to me, ‘Okay, this is Hot Rize.’”

In their heyday, they had a grueling travel schedule. Forster itemized a typical day. “I’ll just give you an example of what our days were like. I was the principal bus driver; Frank [Edmonson, their sound man] and Charles both drove, but year in and year out I did most of the driving. I did almost all the driving pre-Frank. Charles did drive – we had different sleeping patterns, so Charles would do the morning driving and I would do afternoon and evening and nighttime driving. We were a very hard-working band so we would play a gig, sign autographs, sell a bunch of merch at the end and then unwind and pack up. A lot of

times we carried our own PA system and put up our own PA. So we would pack up all the gear and load it into the bus and I would drive at night until I ran out of energy and that was oftentimes at 3 or 4 in the morning. Then Charles would wake up around 8 and he would drive in the morning and we'd go to a truck stop around noon and get some diesel fuel and breakfast. A lot of times we'd take showers in the truck stop and then drive on to the next gig and try to get there around 2 p.m., where we could do a load in and a soundcheck and get done with that by 6 so we could go and have dinner and then get back to play a long show, sign autographs and load up the PA and do the whole thing again."

The bandmembers divided their tasks in accordance with each man's strengths. Forster explains, "Pete, for example, had that logistics gene. He liked to solve the problems of traveling and worked closely with our agent when we finally got one. Charles was a sound guy so he really understood what it took to make things sound good – really helped us with microphone selection and making sure our sound was as good as it could be. I was focused more on driving and managing the merchandise and fixing stuff and crisis management. Tim was focused on material and getting new songs and keeping us full of good ideas about creative stuff. We really played on our individual strengths, both musically and in terms of personality. It was an incredibly dynamic group of smart, capable and talented people. I think it was a happy coincidence that we found each other." While everyone played their part in giving Hot Rize a chance, Forster credits Wernick with really getting the band going down the road to success.

"In our first year, we had only been together for about six weeks when we played at Telluride – the third [year of the] festival. We played on Garrison Keeler's show after we'd been together for less than a month. A lot of that credit goes to Pete, who was our agent. Pete did all the booking and he really worked hard. Our goal was to make \$100 a week. If we could do that we could keep the band together. That was basically it and he made sure that we did – and not a whole lot more than that. He gets credit for really seeing the potential for having an impact on the whole field of bluegrass. He fought hard to make sure that we kept going."

O'Brien imparts a fond story about their booker. "We left Pete behind in a rest area once. Frank was driving and it was late at night and everybody was bedded down except for him. He had the graveyard shift and he pulled in to fuel and Pete got up after Frank got out of the bus, without seeing Frank or Frank seeing him, and went to the bathroom. Meanwhile Frank finished up and paid and got on his way. About 25 minutes later this flashing light pulls behind Frank and the cop pulled him over. The policeman comes up to the bus window and says, 'You got a Pete Wernick on board?' He says, 'Yeah.' The cop said, 'Guess again.'" Forster sheepishly recalls one aspect of the story differently. "That was definitely my fault. I was driving then."

Wernick has tale after tale of memorable events from their touring days. “When Hot Rize was in Sweden on our first European tour, the road manager was a pretty bizarre guy. He booked the tour based upon hearing our first record and he didn’t know anything else about us. He just listened to the record and booked us on a three-week tour and had us going to several different countries. We were relatively young guys visiting Europe for the first time [and] we just put ourselves in his hands,” says Wernick. “We were in Stockholm, I believe, and we played the show and then we asked about our accommodations and he said, ‘I have to work that out.’ So, basically, he didn’t have any place for us to stay and we were living pretty close to the bone and we didn’t have much money. So he says, ‘First we’re going to go to this party.’ Some of us got kind of tired so we find a table that they were serving food on and a couple of us went to sleep under that table. Basically this guy picked up a young woman there who ended up providing us accommodations. We just remember that he seemed to know he could do this and he trusted his ability to find it.” Those who have been to a Hot Rize show know that a staple of their entertainment is their alter-ego band, **Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers**. Forster beamed as he discussed that aspect of their work.



“We all loved that kind of music. In the early days we played a lot of bars and when you’re playing nine-to-one in a bar there’s times when people are really ready to hear a Hank Williams or Bob Wills song. We loved that music so it was really great when we had an

opportunity to bring the Trailblazers on into our show and have them come out and play that stuff. And they were pretty manageable people and they didn’t take up a lot of room on the bus. They were easy to get along with – low expectations.”

Wernick takes the discussion further, “Hot Rize has always had a duality aspect. One was that none of us was from the rural Southeast, yet we were singing the music from the rural Southeast and making it our own, redoing it from the inside as well as the outside. Yet we had all these other influences that made us different from a lot of the other bluegrass people. Then we had the whole Hot Rize/Red Knuckles duality. In some ways we’re hippies at heart.”

Looking at the current batch of progressive string bands it's clear Hot Rize has been a major influence. That might not be obvious to the casual music fan, but as Forster explains, they've left their indelible mark.

"The agency that represented us was Keith Case. They represented John Hartford, Norman and Nancy Blake, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, New Grass Revival, and Brian Bowers, and at the time it was sort of like the hippier side of bluegrass," Forster says.

"We were associated, and rightly so, with the progressive side of things, bands that were jammers, bands that were interested in pushing the boundary and going for it in a new way. I think there was a really interesting crossover between being

progressive and also being respectful of the traditions among all of those people. If you talk to the guys in String Cheese and YMSB and the progressive string bands, a lot of them will point to Hot Rize as a pretty significant influence. A lot of that has to do with geography but it also has to do with the place in time that we occupied. I think we really made a difference and made a mark. The greater musical community may or may not know that."



In 1990 the band members made the decision to go their separate ways and devote themselves to their individual projects. O'Brien explains, "I was feeling like I wanted to do something different. I felt we had really accomplished a lot of good things but I felt like I wanted to try some other things. It was really just time for me."

Wernick believes they went out on a high point. "The first time IBMA gave away their main award for Entertainer of the Year, we got it. It was the last year for the band, so it was kind of like just in time. As we retired, the bluegrass community gave us their highest endorsement. That felt great."

These days Hot Rize plays sporadically. There were only two shows on their calendar for 2009, both in Colorado, and the most recent this past Sunday at the RockyGrass Festival. "Hot Rize just does a few gigs when it's a special occasion or when it's been too long between shows together because we need to check up on one another," O'Brien laughs. "We sort of grew up together and we need to check up every once in a while." Forster elaborates, "There are two things. One is that we've recorded probably 150 songs or something like that with a pretty good percentage of that being unique material to us, either original songs or something we arranged and claim as our own and so for the most

part none of us is playing. So, we've got this great body of material and it's really fun to play those songs. Secondly, we have a thing. When we get together we do that thing and none of us gets that thing in a different context. Musically it's great material and a musical interaction that's really unique. Some of the other factors include schedule, logistics, and opportunity."

Forster agreed that they could do more. "We could easily play more," he says. "There are occasionally pressures to do more. There's a bunch of places we could play where folks would love to hear us play, but I think we are all understandably focused on our own things and that's the way it is right now."

Those individual projects are many. Wernick plays in [Flexigrass](#), [Long Road Home](#), Pete and Joan Wernick, and conducts jam and banjo camps across the country. His activities are itemized on his [website](#). O'Brien plays solo and with different bands and is producing a record for a songwriter from Salt Lake City, with another project involving an Irish band on tap for the summer. His [website](#) details his ongoing projects. Forster is focused on his radio show, Etown, and has been playing on numerous recordings.

When O'Brien reflects on what he learned from Hot Rize and from the Trailblazers he says, "You learn to make fun of yourself because that's the only option. I learned that you take the music seriously and you work your hardest to do what you want to do, but you can't take yourself too seriously. You need to loosen up every now and then. I learned how to work as a team with Hot Rize with what we had in our bag, what our available tricks were and how to use them. We grew together as a group and learned as we went along. It's always been a fun part of my history, those 12 years with those guys, just amazing."

"I don't know how many relationships you've had that have lasted more than 30 years. So, in most people's lives that is limited to the sphere of siblings. We're kind of like that, we're kind of like siblings," Forster sums things up. "Charles was an absolute brother to all of us. Brian Sutton is doing a great job of fitting in and absorbing. Brian, lucky for us, grew up listening to Hot Rize. He's got a great, dry sense of humor kind of like Charles did. So, he's really a wonderful addition to our unit. But Tim and Pete and I have this bond that is unique in my life. I don't have any other relationships like that with people with whom I was that close for that long. And that can be both good and bad, just like siblings. You have this enormous range of common experience. We did all this stuff together. We traveled all over the place. We had so much amazing, indescribable, weird stuff that happened with us uniquely together. That creates a pretty deep bond."

"I was 22 when I joined Hot Rize and in some ways it was my first serious bluegrass band. I grew up with those guys and I learned a lot about music from those guys," continues Forster. "A lot of the sensibilities and the things I came to appreciate about truth in music

and what's real and what's soulful and what's moving in music came from my time in Hot Rize. It was a broad mix of music, it wasn't just bluegrass. Charles made these amazing mix tapes that would have Blind Willie Johnson, and others, like a really cool radio show. We would listen to these cassette tapes for hours as we were traveling. We would all make these mix tapes for each other for the road trips, but the ones Charles made were the most memorable. I learned a lot about soulful music. It isn't just about being fast, it isn't just about speed, it isn't just about energy. It's about what's behind the music and what's behind the singing and what's the emotional depth of a song and how can that be reflected in some way in the actual music."

"Nick and Tim and I have these deep connections and we're like family to each other. It's really hard to imagine what my life would be like without either of those guys," Wernick says. "The Hot Rize band made a huge amount possible for me. It's helped me to achieve dreams that were beyond dreams that I had. I never dreamed I'd be a professional musician. Every time I've ever gotten on stage with Hot Rize that music is exhilarating to play. I have a huge amount of respect for the other band members as people as well as musicians. I'm very grateful to have the opportunity to do my part in what we've been able to make happen as a group. It's so neat that we've inspired kids, we've inspired bluegrass professionals, we've inspired writers, DJs, people who don't even speak English. I consider myself lucky, but not lucky like I drew a lucky lottery number because I worked really hard to make a lot of this stuff happen, so it's not just pure luck. But I'm also lucky it worked out because a lot of people work really hard and it doesn't work out."



"We won Entertainer of the Year from IBMA for good reason, I think, which is we really put on a good show" reflects Forster. "We always thought about that – trying to make an entertaining program for everyone. That included a lot of great music. We had original songs. The music was the first priority, but we thought about how we looked on stage and we thought about pacing and timing and what the setlist should be and the whole evolution of the Trailblazers as an adjunct and a part of our show was a really wonderful kind of coincidence in that it enabled what we were allowed to present to an audience to grow and expand. It was really pretty unique. A good Hot Rize show was a pretty

entertaining evening and we were proud of it."