



Photo by Phil Audibert

Jesse Harper (far left) shares a laugh with David Grisman (stooping at center) at the Paramount Theatre in Charlottesville three weeks ago. All members of Grisman's regular touring band and Old School Freight Train shared the stage for a finale.

deal. They've put out a fabulous sounding musically diverse CD (see sidebar). They are touring with Grisman. They are playing big stages, like Merle Fest and the Paramount Theatre in Charlottesville. And just a few weeks ago Jesse married his high school sweetheart, Kate Melton, who teaches school at Locust Grove. Jesse's on a run...a run of good luck.

Back to earth. The rigors of playing in a successful band have taken their toll. Anne Marie opted for the security of family life and a steady job teaching strings at Woodberry Forest School. She reluctantly left the band. "She had to make that choice, and that's a tough choice for people to make," says Jesse. "It is tough being on the road." She was replaced by Nate Leath on fiddle.

And there's another slight problem...putting food on the table. It's not like they're rolling in dough since this album came out. So, during the week Jesse's "day job" finds him at Woodberry, teaching guitar.

"I make 'em learn to read," he says of his prep school students, some of whom may

have been expecting an easy ride. "I crack the whip over them, just for my own sanity for the future race of guitar players I'm trying to create. I want these guys to read, to know enough about music to have an educated opinion about why something sounds good."

And at night, more often than not, Jesse will be playing in a jazz combo as "a hired gun on guitar." So, it takes a lot of juggling. "You have to teach and you have to make records and sell them and you have to play gigs, and you have to play gigs that you don't want to play, and you have to sit in airports," he says with a note of resignation.

You also have to be a businessman, and you have to be willing to compromise. "It's just like any relationship. At some point you make sacrifices," says Jesse level-headedly. "It's not maybe what I want to do, but overall the big picture is what I want, so the little things aren't going to stop me from doing it," he says of the band dynamic.

What's next? Jesse says the David Grisman deal "opened a lot of doors for us." And he's thinking more and more along the lines of being a singer/songwriter. "I'm not

into playing and picking really fast, like I used to be," he says. In the wings is a "solo album of tunes that I've written that don't fit with Old School Freight Train." But he can't quit the day job quite yet.

"Kick off those walking shoes, and Run....."

Jesse goes down into his small basement music studio, picks up a guitar and lets loose with a display of effortless virtuosity that would leave most guitar players slack-jawed. "I want to learn. I want somebody to teach me. I'm a great student," he says animatedly. Jeesh! It's hard to believe that this guy needs lessons.

"I would love to not teach or be very selective in who I teach," he elaborates. He pauses. "There's a little kid next door who since March has been over here helping me with stuff outside, saving money to buy a guitar. THAT'S the kid I want to teach."

That kid just got lucky.

Luck: When opportunity meets preparedness



Photo by Phil Audibert

Jesse Harper keeps his hands on a guitar three to four hours a day. In addition to playing with Old School Freight Train, he teaches guitar at Woodberry and sits in on jazz gigs and recording sessions in Charlottesville.

*Six feet of water
in the streets of
Evangeline.
Louisiana...
Louisiana...
They're tryin' to
wash us away.
They're tryin' to
wash us away.*

Jesse Harper of Gordonsville soulfully sings the prophetic words as his band, Old School Freight Train, swells behind him. It's a classic Randy Newman song about a flood in 1927, but it conjures unforgettable images of Hurricane Katrina.

Jesse and the band didn't plan it that way. They didn't rush out and record a song about flooding in Louisiana right after Katrina hit to cash in on a disaster. That would be too tacky.

The song appears on their album "Run" which was released last May. But talk about coincidental good timing. Even Subway used their version of the song on a disaster relief TV ad, and stations across the country have aired it on the news.

"We got really lucky," says the soft-spoken Harper from the living room of his two-story brick home on High Street in Gordonsville. And luck is something you need if you're going to make it in the acoustic music scene nowadays.

But how does the saying go? Luck is when opportunity meets preparedness.

How about this story: they were at the International Bluegrass Music Association con-



Photo by Phil Audibert

Old School Freight Train played Fridays After Five at the new Pavilion in Charlottesville recently. From left to right, Pete Frostic on mandolin, Nate Leath on fiddle, Anne Marie Calhoun, former OSFT fiddler, Darrell Muller on bass, Jesse Harper on guitar, and Ben Krakauer, banjo.

vention. They were standing in the hotel corridor jamming, and Ricky Skaggs' manager walked by. The fact that the manager walked by was opportunity. The fact that he stopped and listened was because they were prepared...they were that good.

"Ricky's in bed. It's 2:00 in the morning," says Jesse incredulously. "Ricky got out of bed and came down. By the time we finished playing, it was crazy. Ricky's standing there, Jerry Douglas; Allison Krause walks by. They're all just standing there. The place is packed with people just listening."

Here's another story. Their manager sent a demo they'd made to David Grisman. Grisman is arguably one of, if not the best mandolin player in the world. He started his own record company, Acoustic Disc, which he promotes as "100 percent hand-made music." The band figured the demo would land in a mounting reject pile of broken dreams. "We just assumed they would throw it away. Companies get unsolicited material all the time," shrugs Jesse, realistically. "But, somehow, David Grisman heard it."

Better yet, he liked it! Grisman's secretary arranged for Old School Freight Train to meet and talk with him at a night club in Alexandria. "So we went to the Birchmere and hung out and stayed up late talking about music, and he said, 'let's make a record.' A month later, the paper-

"You have to teach and you have to make records and sell them and you have to play gigs, and you have to play gigs that you don't want to play, and you have to sit in airports."

--Old School Freight Train's **Jesse Harper** on the life of a musician



Photo by Phil Audibert

Framed by a banjo and a bass fiddle head, Jesse Harper is the lead singer and guitar player for Old School Freight Train. He also plays percussion.

work was signed and ready to go." The result was "Run," which, by the way, is the title track of a song Jesse wrote.

*What you got to lose?
Go ahead and choose
Kick off those walkin' shoes
And Run.....*

Prophetic words. Besides the fact that Jesse is something of a long distance runner, these lyrics also tell his story.

It starts his senior year at Orange County High School. Although Jesse had lived as a toddler in Gordonsville and had moved away, he returned when he was 18 to spend a year living with his aunt and uncle, Cynthia and Rudy DeCanio of Rapidan. It was here that he discovered classical guitar, and in true long-distance style, became consumed by it. "I wanted to be Andres Segovia," he laughs. "I was practicing six or seven hours a day."

All that practicing led to a music scholarship at VCU. But then he decided to transfer to William and Mary's pre-med program.

It was the summer before he went to Williamsburg that Jesse Harper had an epiphany. He was in Boone, North Carolina, and he went to a David Grisman concert. "I was freaked out," he says with awe. Little did he know that a band he would lead would record for Grisman's label five years later.

So that summer in Boone, a bass player named Darrell Muller turned Jesse onto Grisman's album, Dawg 90, and Jesse spent the entire summer listening and learning that style of music. He put down both the classical and electric guitars and picked up the flat top. "I wanted to do jazz but I started soaking up the bluegrass and Dawg Music," he remembers. Dawg Music is a creation of Grisman's. It's a style of acoustic music, usually, but not always, played on traditional bluegrass instruments. It encompasses jazz, swing, and salsa. Some people call it Newgrass, but it's really just another branch on the tree.

"Traditional bluegrass kind of came in at the end for me," says Jesse of his roundabout musical journey from classical to jazz to Dawg, and he credits his bandmates from Williamsburg, Pete Frostic (mandolin) and Ben Krakauer (banjo). "Just being around those guys, I started to like the bluegrass stuff."

And so, five years ago this month Old School Freight Train played its first gig. With Darrell on bass, they rounded out the sound by adding Ann Marie Calhoun, also of Gordonsville, on fiddle.

Here it is five years later. They have a record



After the concert at the Paramount, Jesse Harper and his mentor, David Grisman signed autographs and greeted well wishers in the lobby.

Photo by Phil Audibert

The making of Old School Freight Train's critically acclaimed album, "Run" is a story in and of itself.

Other than two covers, all the songs are written by band members. And the music they write is incredibly diverse. There's jazz, there's Latin, there's an Irish jig; there's bluegrass; they even do a cover of Stevie Wonder's song "Superstition" "I really love that," says Jesse of this variety.

"Our band, the idea was to bring in everything we liked...Django Rheinart, we love swing jazz, we love Latin, the funky stuff."

David Grisman was quick to pick up on this. He flew the band out to his San Raphael, California studio to make the record. They were prepared. "We spent years transcribing his music and playing his music and learning all the licks, so when we went out there and hung out with him at his house and he'd start playing a song, we knew what it was and everybody could play the song. That's what inspired him to say you guys can be my band," relates Jesse. And in fact, they spent the whole

summer backing Grisman out West.

But what they weren't prepared for was the fact that Grisman would record them in just four days "live" on a two-track analog machine with no overdubs, not even on the vocals. "We played and sang at the same time," confirms Jesse, adding that next time he'd like to have the luxury to digitally record, edit and overdub.

But the most amazing thing of all was,

just before they went in the studio, Jesse contracted food poisoning and wound up in the hospital for two days. He was so ill he actually tore the lining of his stomach. When he recorded the song about the flood he was woozy from the pain and the medication, "and I don't take any kind of medicines for anything, don't drink or do any of that kind of

stuff. I was just trying to get through this thing in, like, total excruciating pain."

You can find "Run" at most record stores in Charlottesville. Give it a listen. It's a great sounding album. Then listen to it again, taking into consideration what they went through to record it!



Old School Freight Train's album "Run" was recorded "live" in four days on an analog two-track tape recorder with no overdubs.