

PREVIEW: ALISON KRAUSS/
UNION STATION

A woman's touch

BY ART MENIUS

Two score and five years ago a new style of music developed in a Grand Ole Opry band called Bill Monroe & the Blue Grass Boys. Bluegrass became the name of the genre, but boys remained the operative word for a long time. Exceptions tended to be wives, such as Wilma Lee; or girlfriends, usually on bass, like Blue Grass Boy Bessie Lee Mauldin or Sunny Mountain Boy Gloria Belle; or family, as in Donna, Roni and Patsy Stoneman. Nor were the men shy in creating the impression that the women contributed more to the band off-stage than on.

Today the shoe has definitely gone on the other foot. Bluegrass music, with its tradition of male-oriented songs about evil-hearted women, bids fair to become the women's music of the 21st century. Seemingly every day, new all-woman groups swell the ranks of the New Coon Creek Girls, Sidesaddle, the Dixie Chicks, Petticoat Junction and the All Girl Boys. The duo of Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer has managed to establish itself simultaneously in the bluegrass, folk, country, children's and women's markets. Men now compete for coveted sidemen roles with female-dominated bands.

At the apex of this crescendo stands a diminutive 20-year-old from Illinois named Alison Krauss who, with her exceptional band, Union Station, will perform at Raleigh's Rialto Theater on Friday, June 14. Krauss has already packed a lifetime of achievements into the five years since Union Station captured the "Best New Bluegrass Band" title at the 1986 Kentucky Fried Chicken Bluegrass Festival in Louisville.

Krauss comes to Raleigh as the winner of this year's Grammy for "Best Bluegrass Recording" and as holder of the "Best Female Vocalist" title from both national bluegrass organizations. Her third album for Rounder, 1990's *I've Got That Old Feeling*, has sold a remarkable 50,000 copies, while the video of the title track shot up to No. 1 this winter on the Country Music Television cable channel. During the 14 months since Bluegrass Unlimited inaugurated its "National Bluegrass Survey" of radio airplay, Krauss' material has spent eight months at the top and five months in the No. 2 position.

None of this seems to have swelled her head or diminished her own tough self-criticism. Indeed her first thoughts upon winning the Grammy were that others, to her mind more deserving, were not even nominated. Nor does Krauss view herself as a pathbreaker for women in bluegrass; she feels that artists such as Rhonda Vincent, Hazel Dickens and Alice Gerrard have opened the doors for her and her contemporaries.

"I've been fortunate enough to not feel any of that chauvinism," Krauss said in late April. "It was probably there a few years ago, but thanks to [Vincent *et al.*] it's not there for people coming out now.

"Rhonda has been the biggest influence in probably everything I sing. It's a real inspiration to hear somebody that good, and it will always give you inspiration to do better."

Krauss, who exhibits maturity far beyond her years, expresses much more pride in her role as a missionary for bluegrass music in general. "I have people coming up to us after shows all the time saying 'I've never heard bluegrass before, but I really love it.' Maybe that will persuade them to go out to see more bluegrass shows and bring some friends."

She hopes her videos will persuade other labels to follow her lead to promote bluegrass. "[The video's] everybody's favorite secret. We're hoping that it will get out to other people where it will become their favorite thing too."

Openness to a new generation of talented bluegrass composers has helped thrust Krauss and her counterparts into the leading role for bluegrass music. Since joining her first serious band at 12, Krauss has developed a network of songwriters including John Pennell, Nelson Mandrell, Todd Rakestraw and Sidney Cox. "I've always been surrounded by great songwriters," she admitted, adding that she developed her own taste in songwriting "from growing up listening to what they do."

Krauss has sifted through musicians going from good to better until Union Station stands as one of the tightest and most potent outfits on the bluegrass circuit. Californian Alison Brown, who used to be a banjo picker and then she was a stockbroker and now she's a banjo-picker again, left Smith Barney to join Union Station at the beginning of 1989. Besides gaining acclaim for her driving-yet-effortless playing with Union Station, Brown's composition "Leaving Cottonwood" from her Vanguard CD *Simple Pleasures* stands at No. 7 on the bluegrass charts for June. Mandolinist Adam Steffey, bassman Barry Bales and guitarist/historian Tim Stafford joined Union Station just a year ago, though they've played together professionally off and on for nearly a decade.

Krauss and company have maintained both high expectations and artistic control. Krauss, who negotiated her own deal with Rounder at age 14, has already spurned several major-label contracts, preferring to remain in control. For the record they're working on now they have no producer. "We're doing it ourselves," Krauss said. "So we're really excited about that. We'll have everything just like we want it."

Finding the time to do it all remains the biggest obstacle for Krauss and Union Station. After the Rialto show they'll perform in Alabama, Colorado, Missouri and Ohio before jetting off for three days in Scandinavia, only to return to North Carolina for Doyle Lawson Festival in Denton on July 12. ■

Alison Krauss and Union Station, will perform at Raleigh's Rialto Theater at 8 p.m. on Friday, June 14, a show produced by Hoffman Stringed Instruments.

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