

## WYATT RICE LINER NOTES

Enter through New Market Gap Wyatt Rice, the youngest of an extraordinary musical family, into center stage. Bluegrass fans have come to know him over the past six years as a primary component of the Tony Rice Unit. This, his first solo project, establishes him as a decidedly tasteful and evocative guitarist fully capable of making his own musical statements.

The exhilarating "New Market Gap" sets the tone for the project: Wyatt's precise, melodic, and oh so fluid guitar playing leading a group of outstanding musicians through an original, yet traditional sounding piece. It takes its name from the gap in the Blue Ridge Mountains leading from the Shenandoah Valley down to the suburbs of northern Virginia. "I lived in the town and right up in the gap," Wyatt says. "I had already written the tune, and I really like the area, so I decided it would be a good name."

From the new Wyatt leads his right into the hoary on the ancient "Fisher's Hornpipe," breathing life into a tune played on a million back porches. Wyatt demonstrates that his technical mastery serves but as the means to express a true depth of feeling and understanding for the music and its roots. He demonstrates how one can give of himself to a tune, make it as if his own, and never lose sight of the melody.

His innate gift for melody and the exquisite precision borne of long practice shine on the project's most experimental piece, "Swift As Thy Flight." The five minute tune derives not from new age or jazz music, rather "it started out as a clawhammer banjo tune written by Mark Johnson, a friend of ours in Crystal River, Florida. We picked it around the house, and I decided it would be a good guitar tune....It stands out since the others are bluegrass. I have a couple more tunes like it. I want to do some more like that on the next album."

Something new, something old, something borrowed, all unified by Wyatt's ear for melody and tasteful approach channeled through a style that makes it sound so easy. It's what inspires would-be guitarists to buy their first instrument and drives them crazy as they try to get the music out of their fingers.

Such musicality may not be easy to come by, yet one could argue that Wyatt Rice had no choice in the matter. "It was kind of in the family. My dad played a lot and taught it to us at an early age. I started at six with a little Gibson guitar. My dad played Flatt & Scruggs records and had a band out in California, the Golden State Boys. It would of been hard not to pick up on it, I guess."

If you have any doubts about the Rice family talent, check out the recent Rice Brothers album (Rounder 0256) with Larry, mandolinist and composer, Tony, the inventive guitarist and arranger, and

Ron, there as here on bass. The project includes another Wyatt Rice composition, "Original Untitled," named by Tony.

As he grew Wyatt, in the Rice family tradition, came under the spell of the late Clarence White, guitarist for the Kentucky Colonels (please see Rounder 0070 and 0098) and later the Byrds. Before White the idea of lead guitar in bluegrass had been rather limited. George Shuffler picked out some lead for the Stanley Brothers, and Don Reno and Earl Scruggs would occasionally put down the banjo and play the six string. Until White, however, the paradigm held that the bluegrass guitarist played rhythm and sang lead. White changed all that and established standards for soulful expressiveness that others may never match. Wyatt plays tribute to the master with his expressive treatment of "I Am A Pilgrim," which White recorded on his first album with the Byrds, the epochal Sweetheart of the Rodeo.

Wyatt Rice takes up the torch in his own way with a set of Bill Monroe associated pieces that ask the question, what if these mandolin/fiddle oriented tunes had been written for the guitar? The result is shimmering, dazzling treatments of "Wheel Hoss," "Back Up and Push," "Shenandoah Breakdown," and "Panhandle Country." Joining this set is Frank Wakefield's "New Campdown Races," the first important bluegrass mandolin tune written by someone other than Monroe.

Wyatt adopts yet another traditional mandolin piece, "Crazy Creek." "I don't know who wrote that song. I've heard it down through the years and didn't know the name of it. I learned that from [Tony Rice Unit mandolinist] Jimmy Gaudreau. I tried to do it as a guitar tune."

"The songs that I did here, especially the Bill Monroe tunes, I've always wanted to do. I wanted to keep it close to the original sound, but adding a guitar solo. I tried to get the melody out of them and make them into guitar tunes."

By the time Wyatt reached his early teens, older brother Tony had left J.D. Crowe to work with David Grisman, and Wyatt became interested in learning Tony's music. Mastering the music from recordings, he began bugging his brother about playing with him. In 1983 he first recorded with Tony on the Backwaters album and then appeared with him at Winfield, Kansas. He has played with the Tony Rice Unit ever since.

As his high school years came to an end, Wyatt's songwriting career began. Besides the kick-off piece, "New Market Gap," he includes "Davis' Place" on his debut. "That one I wrote here in Crystal River. I have some friends I hang out with in Huntington, West Virginia. We go to a special place, an old bar and grill, there, and its name is Davis' Place."

Besides assembling a stunning collection of tunes for the project, Wyatt rounded up a terrific set of musicians perfectly fitted for his expressive, melody-first style. Just listen to Rickie Simpkins' fiddling on "Swift As Thy Flight." Simpkins earned his reputation as a tasty and expressive mandolinist and fiddler with the

Virginia Squires, one of the most popular young bluegrass groups of the mid-1980s, before joining the Tony Rice Unit in 1989.

Also from the Virginia Squires comes Sammy Shelor, whose crisp banjo work perfectly fits with Wyatt's guitar style. "I met Rickie and Sammy at a festival here in Florida when I was 17 or 18. After they played we got in a jam around the campsite." Since then they played much of the material presented here at countless jam sessions.

Were it not for immigration restrictions Canada's Ray Legere would be one of the most familiar names in bluegrass music today. Legere, who performs with Acoustic Horizon, the 1989 Eastern Canadian Bluegrass "Band of the Year," seems a certainty to win both "Best Mandolin Player" and "Best Fiddle Player" each year at the Eastern Canadian Bluegrass Awards. "He played some gigs with us on fiddle up in New England. I showed him "Crazy Creek" and "New Market Gap," and he could play those super on mandolin. I told him about the album on Rounder and said he'd be the mandolin player."

For the bluegrass insiders already familiar with Wyatt's talent, Ron Rice's bass work proved the discovery of The Rice Brothers project, Ron's recording debut. Although he has chosen not to pursue a full time career in music, he demonstrates again here with his solid bass playing that he, too, inherited a full share of the Rice family talent.

The ensemble made it relatively easy for Wyatt to step, for the first time, into the role of group leader. "It was really fun doing it. A lot of the tunes I'd played before with them before we went into the studio. Everyone knew the tunes, and we'd play them until we'd get the cut. Almost everything was live in the studio, except I'd dub rhythm guitar parts here and there where it sounded empty."

"It has a real good feel to it. Everything went really well in the studio. I was a little nervous about producing and arranging, but Rickie and the other players helped me out. It fell in place, and I let everyone do what they wanted to do. We had a ball in the studio."

That the musicians' fun translates so well on to the recording owes to the always strong work of engineer Bill Wolf, a long time Rice family associate. Wolf serves as the medium, rather than an obstacle, letting not only the happy feeling of the session shine through, but also permitting the listener to hear the full sound of the acoustic music. That awesome clarity proves essential to appreciating the precision of Wyatt's guitar playing.

And so you have yet another successful chapter in one of America's great family musical stories and the first what will no doubt be many solo projects from Wyatt Rice, a young guitarist possessing not just talent, but vision.