

The Seldom Scene, Act I: The Concert Hall of Washington, D.C.'s Kennedy Center was packed with late comers happy to buy obstructed view and standing room tickets for the triple row of balconies that climb to the ceiling. Minks, tuxedos, and jewels blended with sports jackets and blue jeans as Washington's finery settled into their seats beside bluegrass fans to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of a Washington institution on November 10th, 1986.

Bluegrass music more often may conjur images of cabin homes in Caroline than a capacity audience at the Kennedy Center. But that Monday night the best and the brightest, headed by White House Press Secretary, James Brady, bearing a proclamation from President Reagan, gathered there to join such stars as Linda Ronstadt and Emmylou Harris in recognition of the Seldom Scene. And thus the Scene, which has been shattering every bluegrass stereotype since 1971, continued that tradition in spectacular fashion.

Guitarist John Starling, mandolinist John Duffey, Dobroist Mike Auldridge, banjo picker Ben Eldridge, and bassman Tom Gray began the Seldom Scene during November, 1971. From the start, the group featured bluegrass standards, original compositions, and pop and rock songs given a bluegrass treatment. The band won *Muleskinner News*' awards for Band of the Year, Best Album, and Best Vocal Group for 1974, 1975, and 1976. Starling left the band in 1977, replaced first by Phil Rosenthal, and then, in June of 1986, by Lou Reid, who had worked with country superstar Ricky Skaggs. The other four original members have remained with the Seldom Scene.

The group has recorded seven albums for the Rebel label and four with Durham's Sugar Hill Records. The most recent, 1985's "Blue Ridge" recorded with 1970s pop star Jonathan Edwards, was named "Best Bluegrass Album" last year by the National Association of Independent Record Distributors (NAIRD). More than a year after its release "Blue Ridge" remains one of the dozen top selling bluegrass records for Roanoke, Virginia distributors, the Record Depot. In fact, five of the Scene's older releases ranked among their top seventy-five best bluegrass sellers for 1986.

The Scene remains a premier show band, but the audience at the Kennedy Center saw much, much more. After the current group romped enthusiastically through a half dozen numbers, Starling's carefully choreographed show began. Starling rejoined his old compadres, then Duffey, Gray, and Charlie Waller recreated the magic of the early Country

The New Seldom Scene Article

By Art Menius

Gentlemen. Into the spotlight came "Midnight Flyer" composer Paul Craft who has contributed a number of excellent titles to the list of Scene "hits." Ricky Skaggs and Tony Rice dueted on the old tunes as on their Sugar Hill album of a few years back. Skaggs stood alone with his Martin to sing his new Christmas single, later to be joined by his wife, Sharon White.

Backup musicians came and went. Bobby Hicks and Stuart Duncan fiddled, well, like Hicks and Duncan. Reid seemingly played every instrument. Alan O'Bryant, like Duncan, a member of the Nashville Bluegrass Band, added his voice and banjo. Robbie Magruder and Kenny White added drums and piano when appropriate.

And the stars kept appearing. Jonathan Edwards stepped forward to perform tunes off the "Blue Ridge" project. Harris and Ronstadt, the latter in a sequined black cowgirl skirt that Patsy Montana might have worn, sang as both back up and lead vocalists. Then they joined forces for a stunning rendition of "Hobo's Meditation," the Jimmie Rodgers cum Merle Haggard classic included on the new "Trio" album with Dolly Parton.

Some kind of birthday party for a

band formed by accident by erstwhile members of the Country Gentlemen and Emerson & Waldron. I mean, they didn't even want to give up their day jobs. *National Geographic* cartographer Gray and mathematician, Eldridge still haven't.

The Seldom Scene, At The Scene: If it's Thursday, it must be the Birchmere. Thursday night is a ritual activity for the Seldom Scene at the Alexandria, Virginia restaurant which has long been the D.C. area place for bluegrass and folk music. After five years of Thursdays at Bethesda, Maryland's Red Fox Inn, the Scene moved to the Birchmere in 1977.

On a snowy winter night, Eldridge stood in the dressing room displaying his recently purchased banjo—a Gibson RB-3 banjo pot to which a new neck bought in North Carolina has been affixed. Duffey, the athlete, entered complaining of an arm injury that will hinder his mandolin playing. Gary Oelze, manager of the Birchmere and booking agent for the Scene, came in with flight plans to a gig in Interlochen, Michigan and began distributing W-2 forms to the band members.

Gray sat down on the sofa beside the



Phil Straw

At left: The Seldom Scene ca. 1973 L-R Tom Gray, Mike Aldridge, John Duffey, John Starling and Ben Eldridge. Below: ca. 1979 L-R Ben Eldridge, Tom Gray, John Duffey, Mike Aldridge and Phil Rosenthal



William O.T. Smith

visitor. "You can see the reason the Seldom Scene stays together," he volunteered. "We all get paid. You wanted to know the real reason? We're growing old together. You find a groove and stay with it."

At showtime Duffey reached his microphone first, remarking, as Gray lifted his stand-up bass on stage, "Carrying that big thing around can be an advantage . . . I mean the bass."

If Duffey no longer devotes as much energy to his mandolin, his magisterial tenor voice (just listen to him sing "My Little Georgia Rose") still packs more power than a chop on a Loar. Yet his greatest contribution may be as showman and spiritual leader of the pack. Duffey possesses the rare talent of saying just the wrong thing at precisely the right moment.

"Now we're going to do a gospel song," Duffey intoned. "Two new customers are at the door. I'm waiting until we get their money."

On stage the Seldom Scene conveys a sense of fun and spontaneity because, well, they're spontaneously having fun and sharing that with the audience. "We have five different personalities, and they all mesh together on stage," Gray explained following the show. "The audience sees that these five people are having a good time with each other and playing music together in a comfortable environment. Because we've played so much together, we can anticipate what each other is going to do, and if it's something different we can pick up on it and make something out of it."

That enables the Seldom Scene to perform like a solo artist, playing off the crowd rather than going through the mo-

tions of a planned show. "It is spontaneous," Gray confirmed. "We only plan the first one or maybe two songs when we go onstage. If you always do the same things in the same order you feel like you're doing your job as it has been programmed for you. As it is now, we can go out and react to the audience, see what they want."

"The attitude and the approach has always been the same," added Aldridge, whose Dobro has graced the recordings of Harris, Ronstadt, and many more, while adding steel guitar to bluegrass records by the likes of Doyle Lawson and the Lonesome River Band. "It started out as kind of a hobby. It's kind of like a party approach. It's a good-time thing. We don't take ourselves really seriously."

"There's literally no pressure on this band as far as to go out and play perfectly. John's a big asset in that if you mess up, he can sell it as something. So it keeps it fun rather than going out to work. It's like playing at a party because of John."

"The audience is actually paying your salary," said Duffey, "so you owe them the best you can." The Seldom Scene's best has earned them a diverse, frequently urban following that shatters any image of bluegrass as hillbilly music.

"For one thing, we're not a bunch of cornballs," Duffey explained. "We're

basically city people, but yet we're city people who have been raised on this music. Possibly the choice of material [ranging from bluegrass standards to Eric Clapton], and how we present it is also trying to adjust to meet our audience on their level. We treat the people as if they have some brains."

"I think the show also enters into it," Aldridge adds. "You can go see a great bluegrass band, but if you weren't already a bluegrass fanatic, you might not appreciate it, because it's just like listening to a record. Whereas the Seldom Scene, or I might say John Duffey, is an entertainer, first. The combination of having an entertaining show and material that's either based on tradition or the latest stuff put into an acoustic style, I think is the whole reason for the success of this band. We try to make it palatable to everyone whether they're dyed-in-the-wool bluegrass fans or just the average person on the street. This has raised the standard of bluegrass music in general because people see that it can be open to a mass audience if it is done well."

"We can be accepted by all those people because we respect both audiences. We don't go too far up field from bluegrass. We all enjoy the traditional songs, and when we do contemporary songs, it's obvious where our roots are."



On the set of TNN's New Country, 1985 L-R Ben, John, Mike, Jonathan Edwards, Tom, Phil and unidentified cameraman

"We've never considered ourselves a bluegrass band. We've always considered ourselves an acoustic band, and it was a good thing. That's what really set us apart."

The Seldom Scene. Baptizing: The late June heat at Norman Adams' stellar Dahlonega, Georgia, bluegrass festival could melt the frets right off your fingerboard. Fortunately, the fans had an on-site swimming pool and a covered seating area to watch the likes of Bill Monroe, the Osborne Brothers, Jimmy Martin, Tony Rice, and the Seldom Scene. The artists had an air conditioned backstage area.

Lou Reid wiped sweat off his forehead as he talked backstage about his career and new job as lead singer, guitarist, and fiddler for the Scene. "When I was fourteen years old I started a group with Jimmy Haley called the Bluegrass Buddies, managed by Chuck Webster. We ended up with a group called Southbound and did a couple of overseas tours [and an album for Rebel (SLP 1570) in 1977 with Auldridge on Dobro] and after we came back we split up. Then Doyle [Lawson] called me and Jimmy and asked if we'd be interested in forming a group. So we tried it, and Jimmy, and me, and Terry Baucom, and Doyle were the first members of Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver.

"I stayed with them for about three years. We did three albums [on Sugar Hill], and then I was asked to join the Ricky Skaggs Band. So I joined them in '82. I was with Ricky for four years, then I was asked to join the Seldom Scene. I tossed that around for about a year and a

half, and finally I decided it's something I really wanted to do.

"It gave me the chance to be able to sing more," Reid continued. "It's a long, drawn-out story, a lot of reasons that I've moked into one big reason. For one thing, I was a little bit unhappy with being on the road all the time, 258 days a year, and never seeing home and stuff like that. Another reason is that they're one of the biggest influences in my music back when I was first starting with John and Eddie Adcock and people like that. I listened to them more than I listened to Bill Monroe, to tell you the truth.

"I just thought, hey, it's going to give me time to breathe a little bit and be a partner in this group, and it felt good. I thought it would be good for me to be able to sing a lot more lead. I get to do a lot more than I used to, and I don't have to travel the road so much.

"I like festivals. I've been spoiled, so to speak, by playing coliseums and air conditioned concert halls, but this is home to me. This is what I used to do all the time. It's kind of back to my roots."

At first, Duffey led sing-alongs (including an absolutely breathtaking interlude at Winterhawk that drew Charlie Chase away from the customers at his record table to announce "This is what it's all about!") during parts of the Scene's sets, while the band worked up material with Reid. By the time the fifteenth anniversary rolled around, Reid had been fully incorporated into the band, singing powerfully as a perfect counterpart to Duffey, and adding material, such as John Fogarty's "Big Train From Memphis," to the Scene's sound.

The Seldom Scene, After Midnight: Following their show at the Birchmere, the members of the Scene talked about their past and future, while the snow made their paths home more difficult.

"I think we, the guys in the band, are like the people in the audience," Auldridge stated. "We're really typical second generation bluegrass fans. We're not country guys. We weren't born on farms. I think we're typical of the largest population that's been exposed to this music."

"We're middle-class Americans," said Duffey, radio and television spokesman for the National Land Title Insurance Association ("I also did four spots for the IRS, and they said 'thank you' and audited me"). "The music's been on the radio around here since about 1946. It was the Appalachian influx that first brought it here since so many people migrated here during and after the Second World War. Everybody was looking for a job.

"The first generation of country fans and bluegrass fans helped establish the first market for it here, and then those of us who were born here heard it on the radio and picked up on it from there."

"I think the Country Gentlemen of the early '60s made it respectable," Eldridge adds. "I moved to Washington from Charlottesville and Richmond in 1961. You couldn't go hear bluegrass in Richmond or Charlottesville unless you went to some really gut-bucket place.

"I used to go see these guys [Duffey and Gray] at the Shamrock, which was not quite the Stork Club; but the people in there were similar to the people you saw in here tonight. You have everyone from truck drivers to lawyers. It was amazing. . . I really think the Gentlemen transferred things to urban type audiences."

Does the spirit of the early Gents live on in the Scene?

"That's because of Duffey, who was the heaviest influence in that band," opined Gray.

"I promise to try and lose some weight," Duffey quipped.

Auldridge stepped in: "John's always too modest whenever this conversation come up. I'd say there's three or four people that are responsible for the music, and Duffey's definitely one of them."

"I think one of the reasons also that bluegrass caught on with the urban audience back then was because there were groups like the Kingston Trio and Joan Baez," Eldridge said. "There was a big interest in folk music, and the Gentlemen were a really neat transition between those kinds of groups and bluegrass."

"In the early '60s," Duffey recalled, "we were trying to sell ourselves as folk



Mike Auldridge

music because that was the way you could get jobs playing in auditorium concerts. If you were bluegrass, you were lucky to play Watermelon Park one weekend a summer, and the rest of the time you were playing little barrooms.

"There's a revival in folk music right

now that's getting hot, and I think it will have an effect on bluegrass music. I might be mistaken, but bluegrass seems to be in a recession right now. I think this folk music revival is going to do what it did in the '60s. There's a hell of an audience that's going to come into bluegrass from the folk side."

The Seldom Scene, Old Train: But, how do you keep a band together, and sounding fresh, fifteen, going on sixteen, years in a society where people go through six or seven careers in two score and five years?

Auldridge would say, "Fifteen percent of our jobs are work, and that's a pretty good average no matter what you're doing for a living. Also, the fact that we don't travel in a bus together."

"We go to the jobs, and we get there," added Duffey. "Other than flying, we've only traveled together once in fifteen years."

"Also the fact that it's an equal partnership," Auldridge said. "That's the main thing."

"You're not on stage silently hating one person because they're making more than you are," Duffey resumed.

"I think that's the biggest mistake that all bands make," Auldridge agreed.


"It's a group effort," Duffey said, "So everyone should be equally paid,



Lou Reid

beside the fact that we all have basically the same tastes in music. I always have half an ear cocked in case something comes on I think we could do something with."

"The Scene is stable," explained Gray, "because we're all comfortable




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with what we're doing. We're not aggressively trying to do as much as we can and travel as much as we can. We go at a comfortable pace, and we don't have a band vehicle. I'm sure if we did, there'd be some friction. As it is, we enjoy each other when we get together... there's nobody telling you what to do. It's not like a job."

"If someone was told what they had to do," Eldridge said, "then sooner or later they'd find a job someplace else when they got tired of what we're doing."

"Instead of saying we don't have a

leader," Aldridge interjected, "I'd say we have five leaders. It's just weird that it works."

"Also, we're kind of willing to take a chance," Duffey said. "If it works, OK, maybe we'll try that again sometime. If it doesn't, we have brains enough to say we won't try that again, whether it's something you say or something you play."

The discussion of risk-taking among the Scene currently revolves around how to expand their market without losing what they love doing.

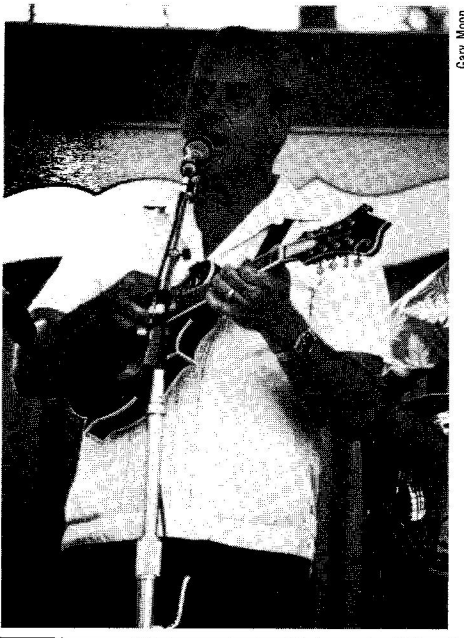
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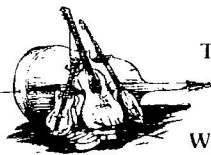
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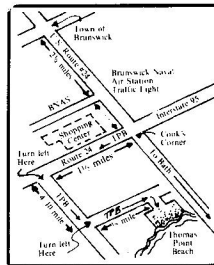
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Ben Eldridge

a bigger audience without compromising too much," Duffey stated. "You never know what's gonna work. You have people saying let's get that Nashville Sound, and you get a lot of people trying, and they do get it, but it still doesn't work. Why doesn't it work? Nobody knows."

"I think that we could possibly reach a bigger audience without compromising too much, Auldridge reasons. I mean, it wouldn't be compromising at all to my tastes, if we had a real tasteful drummer and an electric bass..."

"A good sax man," Duffey interrupted.

"Nooo, and I could play some steel on some things. Ben could play more guitar. A little more commercial sound,

Patty Lindley

but not to the point where it's not us. I think it can be done, whether anybody in the band agrees. I'm not talking about playing country; I'm talking about playing Seldom Scene music, but with a little more commercial sound to it. It would be more palatable to radio."

"I think it would be fun if Tom got an electric bass," added Eldridge.

"Even if it were only on some things, like the stuff I would play steel on, say ten percent of our material and have a drummer on certain kinds of songs," Auldridge continued. "I think it could be done tastefully."

"We've been using a drummer on the last three albums," Duffey responded.

"I mean on stage," Auldridge said. "There's enough talent in the band that if we worked at it we could compete with anybody, but it's real hard to walk out on stage at some of these (mixed) country and bluegrass festivals. Acoustic music just sounds weak by comparison. There's no bottom end, and the same thing happens on the radio. You've got to be able to have a little stronger bottom end, rhythm wise. You could do that in a way that a song like 'Old Train' wouldn't really change."

"It would have the same appeal," concluded Duffey, "But there's no guarantee it would be played [on the radio]."

You never can tell. In 1971 the Seldom Scene abandoned a gig at a local dive because the audience was more interested in Monday Night Football. In 1986 they were hometown heroes on stage of America's premier serious music venue, and the beat goes on with every mandolin chop.



The Seldom Scene in 1986



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