



Sam Bush has plenty of stories to tell from years on the road and sharing the stage with a host of acclaimed musicians, all while developing his own genre. “Some people call me the Storyman,” he says, which also happens to be the title of his latest album.

REVIVALIST AND RACONTEUR

SAM BUSH

LET'S THE MUSIC LEAD HIM

Bush, a Local 257 (Nashville, TN) member, cherishes the art of co-writing, and for *Storyman* he co-wrote every song. Among his collaborators were Jeff Black, Emmylou Harris of Local 161-710 (Washington, DC) and master of songwriting, the late Guy Clark. And, Bush's entire band contributed to the tune “It's Not What You Think.” Among guest artists on the recording are Harris, and Local 257 members Alison Krauss and famed session pianist Pig Robbins. Like much of Bush's work, the music defies classification, pushing boundaries of newgrass to include jazz, folk, rock, reggae, and country swing.

The narrative in *Storyman* is unusually personal for Bush. He and Clark wrote “Carcinoma Blues,” a dark subject, Bush admits. He says, “We both had our bouts with cancer.” Bush recalls how musicians came to the rescue when he was diagnosed at age 30. “That was a life changing moment, being humbled and accepting your friends' help. They helped save my life for sure and it took a financial burden off,” says Bush. He says it put everything into perspective for him and his wife, Lynn. “We realized early on that every day counts; these are the good days and it's up to us to make them that way.”

“Bowling Green”

The song “Bowling Green,” co-written with Jon Randall Stewart of Local 257, was inspired by the person who most influenced Bush's career, his father, Charlie Bush. A big

fan of fiddle music, Charlie introduced his son to the music of Grand Ole Opry fiddler Tommy Jackson through an album package of five 78s. The family farm outside of Bowling Green, Kentucky, was the perfect setting for a budding songwriter and musician like Bush.

“Playing with Tommy was a mandolin player [Hank Garland]. I immediately liked the sound of fiddle and mandolin together,” says Bush, who first took up the mandolin at age 11, proving to be a prodigious talent.

He soon discovered other bluegrass mandolin players, including Bill Monroe, Jesse McReynolds, and Bob Osborne. Bush remembers his dad saying, “Those guys are all great but you need to hear Jethro Burns.” Half of the comedic duo Homer and Jethro, Burns was a virtuoso jazz mandolin player. “My main influences after that were Bill Monroe and Jethro Burns,” says Bush.

From then on, Bush says. “My mind was consumed with music and school days were spent thinking about tunes. I would sit and wonder about where the notes were for the fiddle tunes I was hearing in my head. It would be a mad dash to get home and put an instrument in my hands.”

A drummer in the school marching band, he also played bass violin in the stage band, electric guitar in rock bands, and fiddle and mandolin in bluegrass bands. As a teenager, he was a three-time National Junior Fiddle Champion.

“Everything Is Possible”

Growing up about 55 miles from Nashville, he faithfully listened to the Grand Ole Opry, watched Flatt & Scruggs on TV, and made trips to Music City, which led to unexpected opportunities. While visiting the Roy Acuff museum on Broadway, Charlie Bush struck up a conversation with Bashful Brother Oswald. “My dad told him I played the fiddle. Oswald brought out a fiddle and after I played a couple tunes, he got on the phone and told Roy he'd better get down there, ‘We got a boy that can fiddle,’” recalls Bush.

“Acuff was one of my father's biggest musical heroes. We were both totally overwhelmed,” says Bush. Over the next couple years, Sam and Charlie were frequent visitors to Acuff's Ryman dressing room, which was a running fiddle jam session between Opry performances.

At one Friday Opry show Bush even took center stage. “I was standing on the side stage and unbeknownst to me, Mr. Acuff had told my dad to get my fiddle. All of a sudden my dad walked up with my fiddle and bow and said, ‘Roy's going to put you on. What are you going to play?’”

At some point Bush knew music would be his life. “I realized there was this large world of music and maybe I'd get to be part of that. There was never one conscious decision that I was going to make my living doing this; the music just led me there,” he says.

For Bush, becoming a professional meant joining the union. He has a vivid recollection of taking a Greyhound bus 120 miles to Louisville to sign up at age 17. “When I first started on the road in 1970, you had to file a union contract with all locals for every job,” he says, adding that he misses meeting union reps in each city. He transferred his membership to Local 257 when he moved to Nashville around 1980 to be with his sweetheart to whom he's now been married for 33 years.

“I take great pride in being in the Nashville union; there's a great tradition here,” he says of his local. “Especially in this town as a session player, if you ever have a problem, you have recourse. With working musician Dave Pomeroy as president, our Nashville union is thriving. I encourage young musicians, as they move to town, to join the union.”

Bush moves easily from session to sideman to soloist, lead singer, and bandleader. Following our interview he was heading to a rehearsal of a house band led by Don Was for Charlie Daniel's Volunteer Jam. “There are opportunities in Nashville that you don't find in other cities,” he says.

Among the musicians he's recorded with are: Don Williams, Brother Phelps, Doc



Photos: Shelly Swanger

Watson, Steve Warner, Michael Bolton, Dan Seals, Sawyer Brown, Foster & Lloyd, Keith Whitley, Run-DMC, and Local 257 members Trisha Yearwood, Steve Earle, Kathy Mattea, Suzy Bogguss, and Nanci Griffith. Plus, he's may be the only mandolin player to ever play with KISS.

After high school Bush planned to study violin in college. “After being the junior fiddle champion for three years, at 17, I realized I didn't know enough about the neck of the fiddle. I stopped playing fiddle tunes and took beginning violin lessons for a year. My violin teacher helped me get a partial string scholarship for Western Kentucky University,” he says.

He was bussing tables at the Bowling Green Holiday Inn the summer before college when the band Bluegrass Alliance walked in and asked him if he'd like to move to Louisville and play five nights a week. “I looked down at my busboy apron and said, ‘I'm ready to play!’” says Bush. “I think some of us call that bluegrass college—getting in front of people and trying to learn to sell your music. I went to bluegrass college five nights a week at the Red Dog Saloon in Louisville, Kentucky.”

“It's Not What You Think”

About a year later, in 1971, four members from Bluegrass Alliance—Bush (fiddle), mandolin, guitar), Courtney Johnson (banjo), Ebo Walker (bass), and Curtis Burch (dobro, guitar)—formed New Grass Revival, which created a new sound for the next generation of progressive bluegrass fans. While he's been called the Father of Newgrass, Bush explains that they never set out to do something different, instead the music evolved naturally.

“In the early 1970s we were playing to a lot of hippie type festivals and audience members

would come up to us and say, ‘I don't like bluegrass, but I like you guys.’ And then the old time people might say, ‘That ain't bluegrass!’ And we'd say, ‘yes, we know.’”

“That's one reason we called our band New Grass Revival. There already was a new form of bluegrass. Jim & Jesse, the Osborne Brothers, The Dillards, and The Country Gentlemen were already masters at that. We sort of revived that style a little bit, adding longer jams and rock and jazz influences,” he says.

The band had its own take on song development, he explains. Someone would start a riff, they would all take solos, sometimes going in another direction, and four hours later they'd have a “hippie jamming” arrangement for a fiddle tune. “That was not unique; rock and roll and jazz had been doing that, it just hadn't been done much on bluegrass instruments. In that way, we brought new audiences into the music,” he says.

Walker left after the release of their first album, replaced by John Cowan. After about 10 years, in 1981, Burch and Johnson left the band and were replaced by Pat Flynn (guitar) and Béla Fleck of Local 257 (banjo). After releasing more than 20 albums and touring for more than 18 years, New Grass Revival went out in style playing their final show on New Year's Eve 1989, opening for the Grateful Dead.

Bush spent the next five years in Emmylou Harris's backup band, the Nash Ramblers. “She wanted an acoustic band to sing with for a while and she asked me if I was interested in starting one. I said, ‘No, but I'll play in yours.’ For five years it was a joyful noise and I learned a lot from Emmy; she's a great rhythm guitar player and bandleader,” says Bush who won his first Grammy in 1992 for work on her *Emmylou Harris & the Nash Ramblers* album.

“I learned musical forgiveness from her,” he says. “She was a patient bandleader. Having come from a partnership band [NGR] for 18 years, at times we could be pretty unforgiving with each other. She'd say, ‘We are all adults here; we know when we are making mistakes.’”

Harris emboldened Bush to discover more vocal registers. “She taught me ways to soften up and get more out of my voice and increase my range,” he says.

Following his stint with Harris, in 1995 Bush was a side musician for Lyle Lovett and also played a series of shows with Béla Fleck's Flecktones, where he returned to heavy improvisation. He won a Grammy in 1996 for Best Pop Instrumental Performance for his work on their tune “The Sinister Minister.”

“Play by Your Own Rules”

“I realized I wanted to start my own band again with vocals and improvisation,” says Bush. “He launched a four-piece group with bassist Byron House and ex-Nash Ramblers Jon Randall Stewart (guitar) and Larry Atamanuik (drums). They recorded the album *Glamour & Grits* in 1996.

“For a number of years we didn't have a banjo player,” says Bush. Scott Vestal of Local 257 joined the band on banjo in 2006. “That's when we started to sound more ‘new grass’ again.” Today, Bush's band includes Vestal, Chris Brown (drums), Todd Parks (electric bass, bass violin, vocals), and Stephen Mougins (guitar and vocals) of Local 171.

Live performance, especially during the summer festival season, is pure joy for Bush. One of his favorite recurring gigs is the Telluride Bluegrass Festival where he's performed annually since 1975. Bush is famous at Telluride for his long jam sessions involving A-list musicians; his presence has earned him the title “King of Telluride.”

“It's an overwhelming feeling every time I drive into town; I'm fortunate that they continue to hire me,” he says, recalling his first festival. “It just seemed with the wide open spaces of the mountains of Telluride also came an attitude in the audience that they were wide open and ready for any kind of music. That's one of the reasons that festival has continued to grow and be successful. It is bluegrass by name, but features so many great types of music.”

The man who moved bluegrass into the next generation has some advice for young musicians: “As you go through life as a musician, try to keep in mind the reason you started playing, which is that you love music. Try to keep your attention on why you fell in love with music and what you still love about it. Don't let the music business ruin music for you.”