



THE MUSIC ISSUE

From activists and punk rockers to hip-hop diversity, the RVA music scene is all about collaboration.

the music issue

In the 1960s, many artists thought that music, rather than simply providing a soundtrack to revolution, could change the world.

Some Richmond musicians still hold similar beliefs. And with much of the world's scientific community agreeing that future climate change threatens civilization as we know it, the stakes feel considerably higher.

Musician and environmental activist Laney Sullivan, known for her lovely singing in the worldly folk-pop duo Lobo Marino, is joining with Lily Lamberta of All the Saints Theater Company as part of an anti-pipeline video that will premiere at a big theatrical concert, *Sun Sing*, at the Jefferson Theater in Charlottesville on April 26. They'll join a collective of musicians from around the state performing original music specifically for the pro-clean water project.

Sullivan contributed to the video, "To the River," filmed along the routes of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline and Mountain Valley Pipeline, using a big cargo Sun Bus powered by mounted solar panels. The bus is equipped with a PA system and recording capability that has previously been used playing music to support tree-sitting activists and during protests in downtown Richmond.

The video series, *Who Will Sing for Us*, and concert were spearheaded by Kay Ferguson, the Charlottesville-based director of the coalition *Water Is Life, Protect It*, and founder of *Artivism Virginia*, which uses the arts to educate the public while connecting activists and like-minded artists.

"Together, the ACP and MVP [pipelines] will more than double the greenhouse gas emissions for Virginia," Ferguson says. "These are complicated issues and what we're trying to do is translate. Our motto is first the heart, then the hands, then the feet. ... But we want to keep it positive. The arts know how to do that."

A well-known local activist, Sullivan's meditative work has typically been about watershed awareness, realizing where our water comes from — and she sees a looming catastrophe for the James River.

"Richmond would be impacted from these big infrastructure projects because they would horizontally drill under the James, crossing rivers that feed into the James, like the Cowpasture River, many times," she says, noting safety concerns from leakage and spills. "I always start from my own body. And I don't consent to being poisoned."

Another new song by Lobo Marino for the concert, "Don't Steal the Land," is about respecting the autonomy of our rivers, she says.

"It's our own human fallacy that we think we can own land and do whatever we want to it. It's all interrelated to colonialism, imperialism and domination of the Earth," she explains. "You can't be born and just live anymore, you have to participate in this really fucked-up system just to have a place to drink water and lay your head."

While Republicans' record of anti-environmental stances speaks for itself, Sullivan says that many of the collective's members feel that the Democratic Party too, though it talks an environmental game, is dominated by a corporate mindset.

She points to instances when Gov. Ralph Northam took people off the Air Pollution Control Board, and when he created a council on Environmental Justice, but ignored its report.

In December 2017, the statewide community of environmentalists held a well-attended concert and rally at the National. Ferguson says that it's past time for another uplifting concert, especially for those traumatized by land seizures.

Regarding climate change, Ferguson doesn't see time for a third political party to emerge.

"We have to clean up and reclaim the Democratic Party," she insists. "Really watch those primaries, the number of people who actually select candidates is so small."

Over the past few years, Ferguson says, awareness of water issues has more than doubled. Her goal: getting more people to show up.

Sullivan points to past successes as inspiration, such as public opposition to the untreated coal ash wastewater dumping in the James River.

"There's a lot of power in the consciousness of the people changing," she says. "We want it to become less popular for political candidates to do the wrong thing."

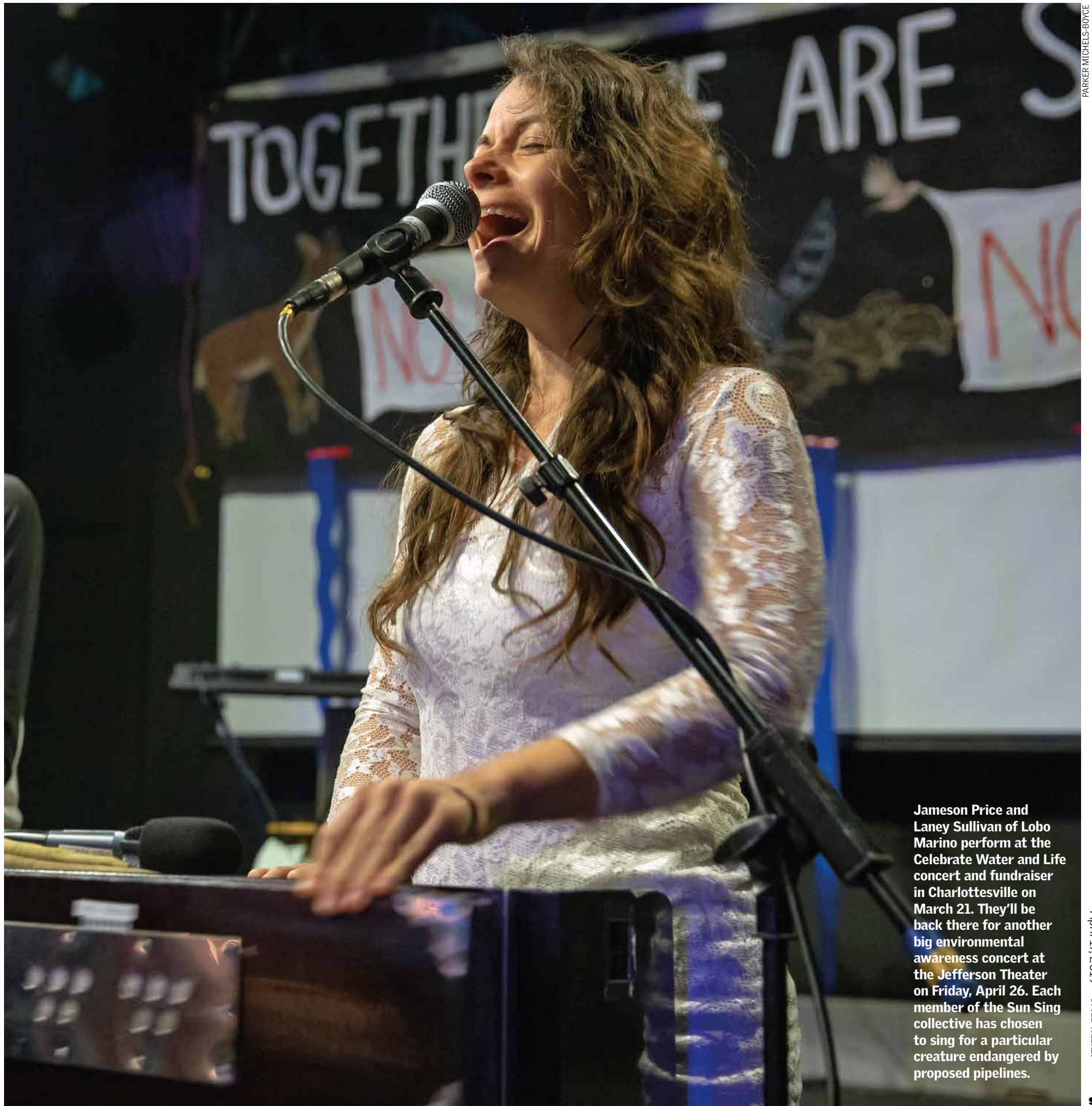
The Sun Sing concert will be held on Friday, April 26, at the Jefferson Theater in Charlottesville. Doors open at 5 p.m. and the show starts at 6 p.m. Admission is \$12 in advance and \$13 day of show. Check out the Facebook page for Water Is Life. Protect It.

Richmond artists join a statewide environmental collective to create an anthem for the No Pipeline movement.

by Brent Baldwin



Water Songs



Jameson Price and Laney Sullivan of Lobo Marino perform at the Celebrate Water and Life concert and fundraiser in Charlottesville on March 21. They'll be back there for another big environmental awareness concert at the Jefferson Theater on Friday, April 26. Each member of the Sun Sing collective has chosen to sing for a particular creature endangered by proposed pipelines.



Tom Applegate, a member of first-wave Richmond punk band L'Amour as well as Beex, has relied on music to get him through all the ups and downs of life.

Punk Rock Teacher

Tom Applegate of L'Amour and Beex teaches second-graders, too

by Kate Andrews

In 1968, when Tom Applegate was 14, his family moved from the Chicago suburbs to the West End of Henrico County. Picture a kid — skinny, short attention span, crazy about playing guitar — plopped down in a neighborhood with no sidewalks or record stores.

Kids thought his accent was funny, and he thought the same of theirs. His dad was off traveling for business, and his mother, a humorist who sold jokes to Phyllis Diller, was making speeches for women's groups.

Young Tom had lots of time to think and strum.

At Freeman High School, he made up a petition to change the rule against students wearing blue jeans. "We had to wear pants with belts," Applegate remembers with disgust. He got called to the principal's office, where the principal said he'd "been sent down here from Chicago by the communists to infiltrate the school."

Now *that* is a punk-rock origin story.

Unlike his older sister and brother, who went on to careers in business and education, and his father, who worked for Reynolds Metals and held multiple doctorates, Applegate dropped out of college to play guitar full-time and become a "gutter man."

He'd go on to start L'Amour with Dave Stover, part of Richmond's first punk wave in 1978, followed by Beex, the legendary metal-punk group fronted by his late wife, Christine Gibson, founded in 1979.

"I was the Keith to her Mick," he says. Beex found regional success in Richmond, New York and the Washington punk scene and opened for Joan Jett but never was signed to a label.

Today, Applegate is a teacher of sec-

ond-graders in Hopewell. In every sense of the word, he's still a punk rocker.

In his North Side house, he has boxes of old flyers and other Richmond rock ephemera and a thousand stories to go with them.

"I saw Patti Smith 25 times," Applegate says. He was friends with her brother Paul, who lived in Richmond and died suddenly in 1994, and Applegate had met Patti and corresponded with her a couple of times but remained primarily a fan.

In 2007, a few weeks after Gibson's death from breast cancer, a friend called him to go see Smith at the 9:30 Club in Washington. He decided to go, maybe get a sign that everything would be all right for him and his daughter, Maria. That he could move forward after losing his wife and musical partner of 27 years, as well as the closing of the preschool where he had worked.

Midway through the show, Patti stopped her song and announced she needed to pee. Lenny Kaye took over vocals. Applegate's friend tapped on his shoulder and motioned for him to turn

around. It was Patti. She hugged him and whispered in his ear, "Everything is going to be OK."

Life hasn't always been perfect for Applegate, but it did turn out OK. He met Linda Burns at a Halloween party in 2008, where he was dressed as Abraham Lincoln and she was a bearded circus lady. She fixed his beard with Spirit gum and touched his face. He felt tingles.

In 2014, he proposed in the most punk-rock way possible, by getting a tattoo on his upper right arm: a heart and the words, "Linda, will you marry me?" She was surprised, he says, laughing.

He also finished his bachelor's degree — 35 years later — at Virginia Commonwealth University and then got his teacher's license. He happily taught second grade in Henrico's East End for eight years.

"Each child is a song," Applegate says. "My job as a teacher is to figure out what key they're playing in and teach them the chords. We just do things and play and sing and dance."

But a new principal didn't appreciate his unorthodox methods, so Applegate got called to the office. The principal didn't call him a communist infiltrator this time, but he needed to stick with the program. Under pressure, he quit three years ago and figured he was retired from teaching, but Linda, who works for the Hopewell school system, got him an interview to teach second grade there.

"They watched me the first year closely in Hopewell," he says. "But it worked. The kids loved me, the parents loved me. The principal said, 'I don't know what you're doing down there, but keep it up.' That's really rare."

In March, Applegate was given an award for incorporating technology into his teaching from the Southside Virginia Regional Technology Consortium. He's so proud, he says he's going to attach a necklace to the plaque so he can wear it around his neck.

And last year, Beach Impediment Records released "Look to the Artist: 1978-1981," a tight, masterfully engineered compilation of archival recordings by L'Amour. It was in the top 10 punk records on Bandcamp. Along with the release, Applegate and Stover have reunited for a couple of shows and may do more. Beex, as it has since its formation, still plays at local clubs periodically, only now Applegate is on vocals.

"I just love rock and roll music," he says. "Playing it is the best thing — ever. It's an honor and a privilege to be able to stand on a rock and roll stage. It's your responsibility to make it rock."

Beex plays June 1 at the Canal Club. \$10.



Justin Laughter, the easy-going, go-to attorney for local musicians' needs, sits in Orbital Music Park rehearsal space and instrument library. He's worked with bands including Gwar, Bio Ritmo, No BS Brass and Carbon Leaf.

Know Your Band

Lawyer Justin Laughter helps Richmond bands navigate a cruel world of legal pitfalls.

by Brent Baldwin

There's a reason why a Richmond institution such as Gwar has stayed flush with severed heads for four decades now — and it's not album sales.

An artist collective operating out of the Slave Pit, Gwar is always working on a bloody potpourri of projects — from videos, figurines and comic books to the GwarBar restaurant in Jackson Ward. And over the years, its members have learned the importance of protecting their copyrighted work from unscrupulous leeches.

To help them navigate the murky waters, they've used a local lawyer and musician, Justin Laughter, who recently helped the band create its fan art policy.

"For a typical band, merchandising matters. But for someone like Gwar, or any musicians who lean into the art, it becomes critical to establish what is and isn't acceptable for fan art," says Laughter, while adding that Gwar remains thankful for its fans, particularly the artists who "make their own Gwart."

Still problems do arise. For example, folks have built and sold identical Gwar costumes for thousands of dollars — or slapped Oderus's face on their own T-shirts, as many did in the wake of founder Dave Brockie's death. Thanks to Laughter, the band now has a clearly defined policy, which you can find on its website. "He has really helped solidify every aspect of our business," says Gwar's Michael Bishop, aka Blothar.

Laughter's local client list reads like a who's who of Richmond music: Gwar, Bio Ritmo, No BS Brass, Butcher Brown, Iron Reagan, Rene Marie, Carbon Leaf,

Prabir Mehta, the Broadberry Entertainment Group, Orbital Music Park, Egghunt Records, Spacebomb Records, Gritty City Records and many others.

Sitting in Orbital Music Park, in Scott's Addition that features rehearsal rooms and an instrument library, Laughter explains that he starts out by learning a band's story and how it can best be told, from the beginning to current day to the band's hoped-for future (see sidebar for a list of standard questions he asks).

"The real value an attorney provides is sitting with someone and talking through the issues so they can make informed decisions," Laughter says.

As the record industry has changed, most working musicians rely on other streams of revenue besides album sales, including merchandising, live shows, licensing and streaming services. The good news is that Congress passed the Music Modernization Act in October, which changes the mechanism for calculating royalties.

"Songwriters and sound recording owners will begin seeing more money

from streaming," Laughter says. "The rates are low, but they will get better. ... Twenty years ago you wanted the A&R rep, now you want the Spotify play list curator."

Tom Illmensee, co-founder of Orbital Music Park, says that Laughter gave advice and guidance when his business was just a fuzzy idea. "He helped us get our business set," he says. "And to decide what kind of startup we wanted to be and our strategy. Our original name didn't work out because of Justin's research."

It seems appropriate that Laughter got into this line of work as an active musician and by working with grass-roots Richmond nonprofits.

While in high school he was in a jam band called Junction that played in the scene coalescing around Dave Matthews Band, Fighting Gravity and Agents of Good Roots. "People were saying Richmond was going to be the East Coast Seattle," Laughter recalls. "I thought it was just a matter of time until we made it."

In a moment of sobriety, he applied to law school at the College of William & Mary after graduating from University of Virginia, figuring he would quit when his band broke through. Things didn't work out that way. After he told his bandmates he was going to law school, Laughter says was kicked out of the band for lack of dedication.

After getting his law degree, he joined Hirschler Fleischer, while playing children's music in his spare time with a band called Silly Bus, learning more about intellectual property law from both endeavors. He also received some steering committee experience with YRichmond, a program of the nonprofit C3: the Creative Change Center. While producing a summer sampler CD for the program, he got to know musician Prabir Mehta at Gallery5, who introduced him to many local groups that would become clients.

Of course, Laughter knows he could be making more money as a lawyer elsewhere, but he'd rather help the Richmond arts community thrive, he says. He also teaches contract drafting at University of Richmond School of Law.

"The reality is most people are intimidated around attorneys, like doctors, they think it's going to cost a lot of money, etc." he says. "People started telling bands that this Justin guy is nice enough, he's dedicated to the community, and he loves music."

Thanks to the positive word of mouth, he's become the go-to guy for legal advice in Richmond's music scene. And he still plays music with Silly Bus, which has more than 7 million views on YouTube, as well as a rock-and-roll band called Flashlight Tag.

He pauses and grins: "Dumb name, I know."

Five Important Legal Questions for Every Band

by Justin Laughter

Who is in the musical group? Is there a key person or persons with hired guns? Or do equal owners and contributors comprise the group? How do the members define success and what are their goals individually and collectively? Disputes arise from failure to communicate. We want members talking, understanding each other and hopefully aligning.

Does the musical group have a legal entity? Music is a business and we want to ensure members protect themselves from potential tort and contractual liability. Our goal is to capture the ownership, control and financial agreement between the members. In particular, a musical group needs to understand how it collectively will make day-to-day decisions, add new members and remove members. Relationships change over time. The band agreement, or operating agreement, is a road map guiding the band during the best of times and the worst of times.

What does the musical group own? This includes tangible goods, such as equipment and the band van. It also includes intangibles — intellectual property. Has the band recorded? If so, who helped create the recordings? Does the band have photos? How about artwork? Most groups are surprised when they learn ex-members may have claims to the groups' sound recordings, or that a disgruntled illustrator may revoke a license for the musical group to use an image on its posters. We must determine who owns what, who should own what and then enter into agreements capturing the proper ownership and control of intellectual property assets.

Who writes the songs? Music publishing is a key source of revenue. We need to understand how the band writes its music. Does a key member bring lyrics and top-line melody to the group to arrange? Do the members collectively write together in joint writing sessions? From there, we may determine who are the songwriters and capture this in a song-split agreement. It's critical to understand the difference between songwriting, arranging and performing. Just because someone performed on a recording does not mean that person is an owner of the underlying composition embodied in the recording. It is best to draw these lines sooner than later.

Has the musical group pre-cleared and protected its name? A group should not adopt a name unless it is sure there is not another group currently using the same or a similar name in the music industry. Plan for success by Google searching, checking social media accounts, using the uspto.gov site, and if able, engaging a trademark attorney to help determine the likelihood of successful registration of a band name. Only once a group has pre-cleared a mark should it begin using its name and filing to register and protect its rights in the trademark. Otherwise, the group could spend a ton of time, effort and money on a band name that 1) it later must abandon due to a third-party's trademark infringement claims or 2) constantly frustrated that other groups with a similar name are creating confusion in the marketplace.



SCOTT ELMQUIST

Spacebomb 3.0

A look inside Richmond's premiere integrated music company that offers a label, publishing, production and management.

by Peter McElhinney

The front of Spacebomb Records' new headquarters is deceptively small.

Behind the unassuming single-story brick and smoked glass facade, the complex of offices, control room and studio space stretches back for more than half of a long block between Robinson and Mulberry, just south of Cary.

It's the label's third home, which started in the attic of founder Matthew E. White's Libbie Avenue house, then combined with Trey Pollard's Songwire Studio in Shockoe Bottom. Starting with White's debut album, "Big Inner," the label built a reputation for a sound at once warmly down-home and stunningly cinematic. Other artists, including Natalie Prass, Cocoon and Foxygen, came to town to record. Then indie-rock powerhouse Glassnote Records came to invest. Hence Spacebomb 3.0, an integrated entertainment company under one roof.

"There are the four main things: the label, publishing, production and management," says Chief Executive Ben Baldwin. "The record label makes money in the traditional way, except we often make the records as well, which is nontraditional as of the last 20 years. The publishing company makes the money from selling the rights of the music ... from radio plays, synching onto

adverts, or whatever. The production [company] is where the artist or the record label pays us to do something, whether it is the strings or a whole record. And the management company as well, which handles a handful of artists around the world."

The advantage, Baldwin says, is cross-pollination of ideas.

"There has been a separation between someone who makes music and someone who works in the music industry and never the two shall meet, other than if you are arguing," he notes. "Everyone in the same space helps keep everyone on the same page."

And it lets them do things in-house that were impossible before. Trey Pollard's lush orchestral arrangements of Prass' "It Is You" had to be recorded in small sections and

see **Spacebomb** on page 14

The Spacebomb crew, front row from left: Cameron Ralston, Zack Cain, Ben Baldwin, Brook Daughtrey. In the back row are Pinson Chanselle, Travis Robertson, Matthew E. White, Trey Pollard, Dean Christensen and Jesse Medaries.

Spacebomb from page 13

then assembled layer-by-layer. Most of the time when a large group of players were required, they went to the larger space at Montrose Studios. With the new space Pollard can conduct a sizeable string section — 20 players for White's next album — with plenty of room to spare.

The label has become the most evolved realization of the unified creative vision of the Patchwork Collective, the concept launched by White along with guitarist Scott Burton and Chris Elford in 2005. "That was what we talked about. Importing people into Richmond, so people could experience this," White says. "And exporting people out so that people could experience Richmond."

What is it about Richmond that makes it special?

"It's not that it is less expensive than [larger markets]," White insists. "It's not just a cute destination. I think it has a lot to do with VCU and Doug Richards in particular. And there is a strong black gospel tradition here." Those two things create a unique environment, he points out, as do the individual musicians who make a difference.

"Trey's writing is because it is Trey. And Trey lives here, period. Daniel Clarke makes a difference. Devonnie Harris makes a difference. Cameron [Ralston] and Pinson [Chanselle] and Alan [Parker] make a difference. It is specific people. There is a unique product here that isn't replicable anywhere else, not in New York or LA or London."

While a core group of individuals play in the house band, and there is arguably something like a iconic Spacebomb sound, the ethos is to keep things as varied as possible.

"I have always modeled the label after Atlantic," White says. "Where there is the flexibility to release a wide variety of music, but [always] a high aesthetic bar."

Reflecting on the mix of musicians at a South by Southwest showcase, which featured Andy Jenkins, Jackie Cohen, Bedouine, Sleepwalkers, Lola Kirk and Angelica Garcia, "They all come from different places, but they are all strikingly artistic. You will be healthiest if [like Atlantic] you can have Led Zepelin, Ray Charles, John Prine and John Coltrane on the same label."

As for the future, Baldwin is optimistic. "We are not advertising, it is the music. Whether it's Matt releasing a Spacebomb record, or someone else [recording] here and releasing on another label, once it is out in the world is it our biggest selling point for us. Every time something new drops, more production jobs arrive at our door. The beast feeds itself."



PHOTO COURTESY BREWERS SESSIONS

Behind the Counter

With a new concert video series, Brewer's Sessions, a Manchester cafe highlights Richmond's growing musical diversity.

by Laura Ingles

Something is brewing in Manchester. Ajay Brewer, proprietor of Brewer's Cafe and owner of the Well Art Gallery, is all about building community and supporting the culture of the city and the neighborhood he loves. He's already one of the busiest guys in town, and when not running a coffeehouse, preparing for the opening of a waffle shop or biking around Richmond with his son Parker, he's now doing what he can to support and promote local musicians.

Inspired by NPR's Tiny Desk series, which invites artists to record intimate concerts at the desk of "All Songs Considered" host Bob Boilen, he recently launched Brewer's Sessions. Collaborating

with local NPR affiliate WCVE-FM (88.9), Brewer, along with a photographer, producer and graphic designer created the first four installments of the series.

Musicians set up behind the counter at Brewer's Cafe, sip on coffee or tea and perform while the cameras roll. With the shop's deep sinks, chalkboard menu, espresso machines and cash register serving as the backdrop for these little concerts, it's funky yet warm. He hopes it will fill a niche in Richmond's music scene.

"When I'm thinking about the life that I want, most people talk about the school their kids go to, the career they have, and completely forget about entertainment and the social scene," Brewer says. "I was kind of over not being accepted in certain circles, in certain restaurants, at certain clubs, so I just created my own vibe."

He has his own musical preferences, but decided early on that he needed more input than just his own. With the creation of an advisory board, he brought diverse faces, voices and opinions to the table, and he wants that diversity to be reflected in the final products.

"What I found was that Richmond's got a crazy independent scene with everything, rock, hip-hop, metal," Brewer says. "I found out so much about the history of music within Richmond, from artists that

are really talented and really making a living off of their art."

The first four videos dropped in March, one each week. Featured artists include the eco-conscious folk group, Lobo Marino, rapper Nickelus F, singer and songwriter Landon Elliott and powerhouse singer

Prominent local hip-hop artists Ohbliv and Nickelus F perform during an episode of Brewer's Sessions filmed behind the counter at Brewer's Cafe in Manchester. You can subscribe to the YouTube channel or look for it on WCVE Music.

Sam Reed, who blends soul, R&B, rock, Southern gospel and jazz.

Brewer hopes to start recording again this summer and release more sessions in the coming months, he says, with the goal being to eventually release a new video every week. Space in the cafe is extremely limited when overrun by artists and the production team, but if you're lucky you might score an invite to one in the future.

For now, the event is private.

Like everything else he does, Brewer wants the concert series to embrace the local scene and expose Richmonders to culture they might not have come across.

"We thought about attracting major artists, but it just isn't even necessary," Brewer says. "We're going to highlight Richmond artists from every scene, every genre."

The videos are available at ideastations.org/brewers-sessions and on the Brewer's Sessions Instagram (@brewerssessions).

Seven Days A Week

A guide to small venues where you can find jazz nightly. by Peter McElhinney

Some places are ephemeral, some last for decades.

When the next club, if it even is a club, paints its name on the late, lamented Strange Matter space, it will be just the most recent layer of a lineage that stretches back through Nanci Raygun, 929 Café, Chronos Café, Twister's, Hubaba's, and the Back Door.

The Friday jazz jam at Emilio's has been going on for almost 30 years.

There is a lot of music in town, and a strong enough jazz scene that it's possible to see something nearly every night. While there have been notable losses over the years, the current set of regular improvisational music series is arguably as strong as it has ever been.

Sundays and Mondays at Cary Street Cafe and Answer Brew Pub

Cary Street has a stellar Sunday night lineup that is scheduled all the way until the fall. With its Deadhead graphics and neighborhood bar vibe, it's a more of a party venue than listening room. That said, curator Jeremy Simmons' great ears and boatload of musician contacts are laying the groundwork for a robust tradition.

Monday is a traditional off day for musicians. In the current absence of any regular big band gig to draw in players, the default hang is at the Answer Brew Pub. The house band here, Mekong Express, is more Paul McCartney meets Steely Dan in a Nashville roadhouse than a hardcore jazz band, but the adjunct Get Fresh Horns include some of the best players in town, and the scene grew out of a long-standing musicians' haunt.

Tuesdays at the Dark Room at the Hof

Tuesday's regular gig is in the Dark Room upstairs at the Hof. It comes by the name honestly as verified by the old camera bodies on shelves and the looming dinosaur carcass of an enlarger stashed in the hall. This intimate, 2,000-square-foot space is dramatically lit, with colorful stage lights, a few rows of folding chairs, high tops and comfy furniture around the



The Latin Jazz Messengers perform as part of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts' Dominion Energy Jazz Café from 6 to 9 p.m. on Thursdays.

perimeter, and a well-stocked adjoining 10-stool bar. Treat Yourself Tuesdays is curated by Peter Lablanc. Bonus: It goes on late enough that those coming from the Jazz Society's long-running second-Tuesday of the month series at Richmond Music Hall can attend.

Wednesdays at the Rabbit Hole downstairs at Vagabond

Talented pianist Macon Mann's totally misnamed Smooth Jazz series takes place at the Rabbit Hole downstairs at Vagabond. Like the Dark Room, it is primarily a listening space, with great acoustics and only one bad seat, at the end of the bar, behind a pillar. It regularly features some of the best players in the area. Occasionally the music spills back into Tuesday, as it does when the great Andrew Randazzo Big Band shows up, or when expat pianist Steve Kessler made his hotly anticipated swing through Richmond.

Thursdays at VMFA and Savory Grain

Thursdays start with the Jazz Society series at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. It is the opposite of intimate, but in a good way. There are few more compelling settings in Richmond. Afterwards there is Coby Batty and the Rhythm Masters at Savory Grain, which has a better food and beer selection than the museum, but nowhere near the number of priceless cultural artifacts.

Fridays at Emilio's

Fridays are a bit of a wild card, but one constant is the long-running jam with Richmond treasure Doc Branch as host at Emilio's. It might be the longest-running, single-venue gig of its sort in the country. Generations of musicians have played there, and occasionally nationally known players have dropped by. The lead in is an early evening set reserved for Virginia

Commonwealth University students and faculty, making for a potentially epic night of unpredictable virtuosity.

Saturdays at Barrel Thief and Café Caturra

For a Saturday night cooldown, there are the polished dinner series in near West End restaurants located just a few blocks apart. Bassist Jason Jenkins has been booking the Barrel Thief for the past few years, with a winning combination of great acoustic players and a huge selection of wine by the retail-priced bottle.

Café Caturra's evening series is anchored by guitarist Chris Whiteman, who brings in a rotating roster of guests. He's an excellent player and adept at carving out something close to a listening space within a socializing crowd out for a weekend dinner. In both cases, plan to stay until the end when the dining crowd thins out. The music swells to fill the void. **15**



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performances and sometimes we'll start out with an MC battle. We film it all, so those who participate get footage of their performance. In the future, we may be doing sketch comedy, skits — kind of like a Richmond version of what Rap City would've been, or MTV Jams — that kind of energy.

We're trying to bridge the gaps in Richmond hip-hop culture.

One of the things that's plagued Richmond hip-hop over the years is how segmented it is, multiple scenes that rarely intersect. It can be based on style of music, or what side of town you're from. You got your core hip-hop scene (Michael Millions, Noah O, Mutant Academy), the trap scene, the gore groups — sort of a goth kind of vibe, the younger guys, the sound-cloud folks, the battle-rap scene, which I'm also a part of. ...

It's a multimedia platform as well. We just released hour-and-a-half episodes [YouTube] where we encapsulate Richmond hip-hop culture — couple of throwback videos, but mostly current ones that intersect with live footage from the event.

Without a regional identity, does Richmond fold into the mid-Atlantic scene on a national level?

We've historically called that a flaw, a lack of identity, or sound and look for Richmond. But I think we're embracing it now. We have a more indie sensibility that comes from the melting pot of Virginia. And we're able to do that now because the internet has changed everything, regions are not exclusive to sounds anymore. New York has artists that sound like they're from Houston or Atlanta. We have artists in Richmond who have been cultivating their sound for years — well-seasoned talent.

If I had to put my money on anybody, I would say Michael Millions, Nickelus F, Fly Anakin, Mutant Academy. It's difficult to say, because everything is more independent-focused than industry-focused. You got guys like Yung Mane doing his thing and myself. We've had big years in terms of pushing things from an independent standpoint, getting coverage from Pitchfork, Complex.

But I think everybody is kind of taking a different approach to breaking through, while keeping the city busy as far as events and shows, content, videos.

Young Flexico, Cole Hicks, Easalio, Illa Styles; as well as producers Name-Brand, Ohbliv, Cashby and videographers: Bc Music 1st, King Z, Mr. Good Evening and Arcani.

You can follow the second season on Instagram @RVARap.Elite or search for it on YouTube. Triangle Theory: a HipHop Experiment "Good Kids Rich City" with Andrew Hypes and Lenny Bones will be held at the Hofheimer Darkroom on May 9 at 6:30 p.m. Events will also be held May 24 and 25 at the Institute for Contemporary Art.

Man with a Plan

With the RVA Rap Elite series, rapper Radio B is bringing Richmond's diverse hip-hop community together.

interviewed by
Brent Baldwin

Within the burgeoning hip-hop scene, Radio B is putting in work.

Last year, the talented rapper released the concept album, "Jesus Never Wore a Suit." He's also behind the Virginia rap battle league, the Southpaw Battle Coalition, as well as RVA Lyricist Lounge,

which has evolved into RVA Rap Elite, a variety showcase for local artists. And he's guest lectured on hip-hop at Virginia Union University.

Radio B is spending a lot of time lately on RVA Rap Elite, which started at Strange Matter last year before moving to the Gold Room for the first three months of 2019, and more recently, Champion Brewing Co. It will be held there April 25 and May 30, before moving to the last Saturdays of each month through October. He says it's transitioning to an all-ages, free event.

Style spoke with one of the city's lyrical heavyweights to hear his thoughts about the current state of Richmond hip-hop and the shape of things to come.

Style Weekly: *How do you feel about the scene today?*

Radio B: I'm pretty much on record stating that Richmond hip-hop is probably the best overall that I've ever seen it. And I've been contributing since probably '99.

Are there any artists you feel are about to break?

But I think everybody is kind of taking a different approach to breaking through, while keeping the city busy as far as events and shows, content, videos.

Young Flexico, Cole Hicks, Easalio, Illa Styles; as well as producers Name-Brand, Ohbliv, Cashby and videographers: Bc Music 1st, King Z, Mr. Good Evening and Arcani.

Tell me about your RVA Rap Elite series?

RVA Rap Elite is a variety hip-hop event: cyphers, an open cypher, live per-

PHOTO COURTESY SICK BAGS



Bunch of Sickos

Trash punkers Sick Bags found a way to get grittier and slimier — minus the booze.

by Hilary Langford

Appearances can be deceiving. Look no further Richmond trash punkers Sick Bags for proof. Leather clad and full of piss, vinegar and raucous energy onstage, the outfit might come off as a little snotty to some.

“People probably think we’re dicks,” says Tony Leet, the band’s founder and guitarist.

“We’re really nice,” says singer Mel Medina, laughing. “Not dicks, I swear.”

Members hardly sound like a band whose current lineup just played their first show in September. The songs are tight, the riffs solid, and performance fierce. Sick Bags pack a punch thanks in large part to the Karen-O-like presence of Medina and the writing chops of Leet.

The self-proclaimed “family with plenty of sibling tension and a little stupidity” is quick to admit bad habits and celebrate each other’s talent. Leet, a veteran of the local scene who played in bands like Dirty Fingers and the Ladies, returned from a

stint living in California where he spent time writing lots of songs but couldn’t find anyone to play with him. He even had a name picked out for the band.

“I was watching a report about bootleg merchandise at Prince William’s wedding, in this case, sick bags with crudely drawn pictures of the bride and groom,” he recalls. “The reporter called them royal sick bags.” Back in Richmond, he convinced Sick Bags’ original lineup to give it a go with one ask: a female singer.

“I always sang in bands and wanted to do something different, in this case, play guitar. I’d never been in a band with a woman,” Leet says. Mutual friends suggested Wild Mel, originally from Los Angeles.

Bassist Tommy Nelson and Paul Kirk, “a total shredder on the guitar” according to his bandmates, rounded out the four piece.

Their first show found Mel where she feels most at home — the center of attention — in this case, on top of the bar singing her heart out.

“This is my first band, so I looked at what ladies like Joan Jett and Suzi Quatro were doing,” she says. “I love it when all eyes are on me, even though Paul does try to get in my way,” says Medina with a laugh.

After she quit drinking, she was a little shy and says it was an adjustment to her performance style. “That was a big part of who I was when I was out. I mean, that’s why someone suggested I might even be

see **Sick Bags** on page 19

Sick Bags from page 18
a good fit for the band.”

She has since proven that it's a fire inside that fuels her stage show, not the booze.

Leet ditched the bottle a few years ago too and says it's given him more clarity and fewer complications. “All of the mistakes I made were due to bad-behavior excess,” he says.

He recalls how he and his drummer once blew all the money they made on

drugs after the show. “I feel like I'm better able to do the band now, it's exciting now, but it was scary having not been sober on stage my entire career,” Leet says. “My idols were idiots, alcoholics and junkies. That's probably why I went so hard. I'm too old to go to jail now.”

The band recently released “Cigarette Spit,” a frenetic three-song 45 and is getting back into the studio shortly with hopes of at least two more 45s in addi-

tion to some tracks on compilations similar to ones it has done in the past such as “Typical Girls, Volume 3” that featured the likes of legendary LA singer and author, Alice Bag of the Bags.

“This lineup's sound is a lot grittier and slimier,” Medina says.

The band will bring that vibe to its first Richmond house show soon.

“Losing Strange Matter was a kick in the nuts, not so much because we played

there often but I've played and gone to shows in every incarnation of that place,” Leet says. “But people in Richmond will always find a way to see live music go down. Always.”

Sick Bags play Banditos with Southside Strangers and Mystery Girl from New York on Sunday, May 12. Free. banditosburrito-lounge.com.

Mutant Rock

Admiring shiny trophies at Rock Falls Tavern with Cruzer.

by Brent Baldwin

Cruzer plays a lot of dive bars. The band members feel comfortable in them.

The trio consists of Michael Cipollone on guitar and vocals, Caitlin “Squaits” Noone on bass and vocals, and Paul Kirk on drums. One could describe their heavily spring reverb music as monolithic, '60s inspired garage rock, with some post-punk, new wave, surf and a little Everly Brothers influence for good measure.

During an afternoon interview at Rock Falls Tavern, members of the trio tell me that, so far today, they've seen an elderly woman flash her breasts on Brookland Park Boulevard and during a break from our interview, a guy puking in the restroom.

Cipollone says he wanted to name the band C.O.K.E. but Noone objected.

“The name Cruzer makes me think of ‘Apocalypse Now’ where they're surfing in a war zone,” Kirk says. “Or mutants on skate boards.” Fittingly, the artist Pizza Boobs (Gabriel Hollington) designed their T-shirts featuring fishnet legs on a skateboard.

The band unanimously agrees that their drummer is their best guitarist, even though he doesn't play it for them. “As a drummer, I play as simple as I can and try to do things that don't annoy people,” says Kirk, who also plays in Sick Bags [see story] as well as an outlaw country band, Old Gun Road.

So what are Cruzer songs about? “Desolation,” says Cipollone, a Cincinnati transplant known for his band, Bummer's Eve. Though he admits that Noone is starting to take over more songwriting duties – which was his plan from the beginning, ever since he first noticed that Noone had a great, direct stage presence for someone who had only been playing bass for about five weeks.

“The new songs are post-apocalyptic,” Noone explains. “Talking about ‘Lost in Outer Space,’ cults, weird Norse mythology re-imagined in kind of a ‘Star Trek’ vibe. The inspiration for one of my most recent songs came from my dog, Valkyrie, who was kind of a



Cruzer is Michael Cipollone on guitar and vocals, Caitlin “Squaits” Noone on bass and vocals and Paul Kirk on drums.

terror as a puppy.”

This isn't an overly serious band. Just touring when possible and maybe releasing a full-length album on vinyl one day would be nice, members say. The important thing is they get along and enjoy playing together, especially when hitting the road – which has become harder with their day jobs lately.

Noone works as a debt collector for a bank: “I love my job ... collecting on people's credit cards and killing them with kindness.” Kirk bartends at Rappahannock Oyster Co. and Cipollone used to work at Hardywood Park Craft Brewery, where his booking of bands like Portland's excellent Jenny Don't and the Spurs didn't go over well. Now he and his wife, Patty Conway, are working on a North Side spot that could bring sweet relief to sad Strange Matter fans (stay tuned to *Style*).

“Metal, indie music, jazz rock are successful in Richmond,” Cipollone notes. “But there's like 30,000 college kids here. I think garage rock maybe isn't as popular as it

is in other cities because Richmond kind of gets passed over a lot [by good bands].”

Cruzer recorded its first EP with Adrian Olsen at Montrose, and the most recent EP, the fiery stomping “Holiday,” with the young Max Gotessman, who Cipollone hired when he was at Hardywood Park Craft Brewery. The band plans to reissue the new EP on cassette with Mary Key at Steady Sounds and there are also plans for a split 7-inch with the band Paint Fumes from Charlotte, N.C.

When members are onstage, nobody is in the spotlight and they say they feel free to be themselves.

“It's not really a thought-up process like some bands have,” Cipollone says. “It's more like a hang-out-at-practice type of thing. We're doing this for fun.”

Cruzer plays Thursday, April 25, at Wonderland with Faux Ferocious and Toward Space. \$10, 9 p.m. And Friday, May 10, at Wonderland with Paint Fumes and Butt.

SCOTT TELMQUIST

April 17, 2019
STYLE WEEKLY

Shepherd's Season

Singer and songwriter Ben Shepherd makes an impression with finely-aged lyricism.

by Hilary Langford

Let's clear something up. Ben Shepherd is not the bassist for Soundgarden. Same spelling, very different sound. This Ben Shepherd is a rising anti-folk hero comfortably making music in the River City after bouncing between here and New York for the past few years.

"I'm extremely lazy, that might come through though," he says. "Maybe I should say I'm just a slow worker. It takes me forever to do things."

It's been a minute since the Nashville-born songwriter released his last full-length, "Eleven for the Road," a stripped down live recording done in one-take at Montrose Recording in 2014 with friends Charlie Glenn (the Trillions and Thao and the Get Down Stay Down) and Adrian Olsen (Avers). "I don't know if Adrian knows what a paradise he's got there. It's just beautiful," Shepherd says.

On May 10, he delivers "Hold the Line," a solid collection of eight songs finely aged over the past two years that mark the exponential growth of an artist. Lush arrangements, swanky guitars and hearty vocals flourish in 30 glorious minutes reminiscent of a young John Prine or Neil Young.

He teamed up with the aforemen-

tioned Montrose crew and Tyler Williams (the Head and the Heart) over a weekend in 2017 and casually cranked it out.

"The idea of working with Ben was always a little thunderstorm in the back of my mind that wouldn't quiet down," says Williams, who first heard him play at a friend's house. "I was blown away by his lyricism and the magnetic deadpan delivery. I'm proud of this record and I'm proud of Ben for writing so vulnerably."

Shepherd is an unfussy character, more interested in talking about dive bars (he recommends the Dugout for country karaoke) and his co-ed baseball league, the Richmond Scrappers, than waxing poetic about music. To him, it's about keeping it simple.

"I don't write regularly, I just wait until I have an idea. The more I play though, ideas start to flicker. For me, it's music first and then words. Figure out what

those even mean later. Just let your brain wander," he says. "The songs that really stick with me aren't like hearing something crazy or striking. More like hearing my own thoughts confirmed by someone else."

Playing in New York had a big impact on the songwriter. It was at the epicenter of the anti-folk scene where he came to admire the work of players like Barry Bliss, Diane Kluck and Jeffrey Lewis. Some of the more familiar names to emerge from the same scene include Beck, Regina Spektor and the Moldy Peaches. There's one thing that holds true for these artists that Shepherd is quick to call out.

"These are people who are lyricists first and foremost. They may be strident singers and not be accomplished players per se, but lyrically it ranges from very on-point to the absurd. It's about content, the performance doesn't really matter" he says.

That said, this guy also digs those who are less substance and more fun.

"I love rock 'n' roll and I love songwriting. But I mean, I like candy rock 'n' roll and pop too. The Ramones are pretty dumb, but that first record was perfect. And I really like Kesha too," he says with a laugh.

Shepherd plans to tour later this fall since his baseball league and day job as a Fan property manager keep him pretty busy during the summer.

"It could be a full band, maybe just me and my musical partner, buddy Kevin Guild, and our stuff in a sedan."

For now, he'll savor the fruits of a few years labor with some local shows and has some deep love and sage advice for Richmond musicians.

"This place is unconditionally supportive," he says. "But people might need to be a little bit harder on each other. That's a catalyst for growth. Compared to New York, they'll tell you if you suck. Doesn't always feel good to hear it, but sends you back to work harder. I crave that."

Ben Shepherd plays his album release show with Piranha Rama and the Trillions on Friday, May 10, at Richmond Music Hall. Doors open at 7 p.m. the show starts at 8 p.m. Tickets for the all-ages show cost \$7-\$9.



SCOTT ELMQUIST

Singer and songwriter Benjamin Shepherd, shown sitting in Bamboo Café, was born in Nashville and moved to Richmond at 18. He'll have an album release show on Friday, May 10, at Capital Ale House's Richmond Music Hall.

In Bloom

Small-town singer Landon Elliott talks about how Richmond opened up his world.

by Hilary Langford

This guy smiles a lot. Whether he's talking about playing soccer in a pocket park with his kid, exploring the West Coast on an electric scooter or Cleveland sports, Landon Elliott remains positively radiant. When we caught up over coffee to discuss his forthcoming album, he was eager to share details about another project he's got going on.

"You realize talking to people that so many lives are changed by different albums. Then you realize how little you've actually heard," he says. "I hadn't even gotten to the Beatles 'White Album!'"

Each week, he explores a record he's never heard, usually the greats, then picks a song to cover live on Instagram. Originally the goal was 52 songs, but he says his list is already around 80. "Have you heard

Beyoncé's 'Lemonade'? I can't make much progress these days because I keep going back to that," he says, laughing.

Elliott is a small town guy. He grew up on the Outer Banks and explains that not much happens in a place with one main road. Music was always a part of things, usually heartland tunes by storytellers like Tom Petty and Bruce Springsteen. But live stuff was a tough find.

"You don't find music every night of the week and after a certain hour," he says.

After college in 2013, Elliott followed his girlfriend to Richmond and "kinda popped my little bubble," he says. "I fell in love with her and this city."

After putting down roots, growth was exponential over the next few years: marriage, kids and an expanded worldview thanks to the diversity of the River City.

The songwriter put together Landon Elliott and the Goods and released a homespun EP that quickly snagged attention, mostly for the from-the-guts vocal performance that hung on every Americana chord like the fading sun on a long summer's night (comparisons to Chris Stapleton are on point).

The buzz intensified when local blog RVATrack featured a stunning video for "By Now" that racked up more than 40,000 views after going semiviral on the internet. One thing was apparent with that performance, Elliott had blossomed. His voice was more robust and his sound more diverse.

"A lot has changed since that first EP. Crazy things have happened in our world, I've got two kids, and I've been listening to music across genres," he explains. "I'm trying to break my tendencies to latch on to two or three things and that be all I listen to."

He hooked up with Scott Lane in 2017 to record his yet-to-be titled debut LP, which will be released this summer on American Paradox Records, a label that has put out stunners like Sid Kingsley's "Good Way Home" and Kenneka Cook's "Moonchild."

"This album has a lot of Peter Gabriel and Phil Collins influence, which might surprise people. Synths and electronic drums, it's all there," he says. "I have no less than 200 unfinished songs and audio clips here in my phone, so I'm excited to get these out in the wild and watch them grow."

Things are kicking up for Elliott, starting with his prime Friday Cheers opening gig for big shot, Lukas Nelson, son of the red-headed stranger.

"His self-titled record has been on repeat in my car. He's a veteran and is so well respected. This last year has been tremendous for him, so it is definitely a pinch-me moment to get to share the stage with him."

With lots more shows planned and what's sure to be plenty of attention once the record drops, Landon says he's committed to keeping things balanced. "I make sure my days start and end with my kids. Gotta be there for bedtime," he says.

Time is carefully carved off in half-hour blocks for writing, researching and playing music. "My calendar looks like a rainbow. Yes, it's color coded. It's really the only system that works for me."

Landon Elliott plays Friday Cheers on Brown's Island with Lukas Nelson and Promise of the Real on May 3. 6:30-9:30 p.m., Tickets cost \$10. venturerichmond.com.

SCOTT ELMQUIST



Tribute Fever

The Whiskey Rebellion turns classic rock into a bluegrass party. **by Karen Newton**

You could say that *Old and In the Way*, the bluegrass band that counted Jerry Garcia among its members, planted a seed in guitarist Ryan Phillips' head.

He attended his first fiddlers' convention in 1999. While at Virginia Commonwealth University in 2003, Phillips was walking home from class when he heard Roy Meyers playing banjo on his Floyd Avenue porch and walked up to introduce himself. The duo began playing daily and before long, in bars.

After making his way through the Grateful Dead catalog, Phillips stumbled on that *Old and In the Way* album, struck by how much was going on in the songs with instrumentation so intricate it felt like classical music. He was particularly captivated by the bluegrass element he heard in some of the cover songs, like a version of the Rolling Stones' "Wild Horses."

So Phillips formed the Whiskey Rebellion in 2004 as an outlet for skillful picking and three-part harmonies and, by 2005, they had a full band.

"We didn't grow up playing bluegrass," he explains of the band's Americana sound. "Our influences are rock and

roll." Before long, they'd been invited to play at the Firehouse Theatre as part of its monthly Front Porch series, an incubator for folk music. They liked the space and thought about doing a regular show because the room worked so well.

After Tom Petty died, the band felt strongly about doing a tribute show. When Firehouse's artistic director, Joel Bassin, reached out about them doing their own show, he was similarly enthusiastic. The show sold out and the band became a fixture every other month, doing a bluegrass-tinged tribute show to a major act — the Grateful Dead, Pink Floyd, the Band, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, the Beatles — and closing with a set of original music.

The challenge for the band is learning all the cover songs for each tribute. For the Grateful Dead tribute, it had performed "Terrapin Station," a long, composed and difficult piece with a lot of parts. "It was super-ambitious, but we worked through it," Phillips says. "We were scared, but we did it, nailed it and, by the time we got through it, that was the big payoff."

Choosing what to play is Phillips' responsibility and he tries not to let what's on the recording keep them from

doing their own thing. He found selecting from the vast Beatles' catalog challenging because the mechanics of what's going on in the music was so integral and important to the songs.

"I look for songs [that] have a folkier, country flair, like the Stones' 'Dead Flowers,' [originally by Townes Van Zandt], which is essentially a country song. It's fun to dig around and find what works," he says.

The Firehouse lineup includes Phillips on acoustic guitar, Myers on banjo, Jesse Wells on fiddle, Tim Deibler on bass, Danny Shyti on drums and Rudy Byzdyk on piano. Myers and Phillips have been around since the band's inception, with Deibler on board for a decade, Wells for close to seven years and Byzdyk and Shyti the newest members. All are full-time musicians. Adjustments are made as needed, like when Phillips played electric guitar for the Pink Floyd tribute or original fiddler Mary Simpson — who now tours with Yanni — is in town and can sit in.

When the band isn't learning new songs for a tribute show, they're on the road every weekend playing private shows and events like Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden's Flowers After 5, which it will play in

August. That schedule kills the weekends, but is convenient for the Firehouse tribute gigs because they're always on Mondays.

Performing Mick Jagger's vocal parts was challenging, but Phillips pulled it off.

"We try to push the limits as much as we can," he says of choosing bands for the tributes. "I'd love to do Queen, but I couldn't pull off Freddie's voice. And it would be amazing to do Led Zeppelin, but Robert Plant's voice is of a different world. We can't splurge that high."

What's interesting about their performances is how they're able to appeal to bluegrass aficionados as well as nonenthusiasts. After the Petty tribute, Phillips got an email from a bluegrass-averse attendee who'd come for the Petty material and decided to take a chance.

"They said they were blown away and that's exactly why we did it," Phillips laughs. "That's what's worked for us for 15 years. Lots of people think they don't like bluegrass, and then they're surprised that we're so likable."

Whiskey Rebellion plays Richmond Performing Arts Alliance's Parking Lot Party, April 27, 4-8 p.m., Dominion Energy Center, 600 E. Grace St.