

Q&A



CHRIS THILE AND YO-YO MA

Two master musicians (plus two more) throw a genre-busting rodeo

THE RHYTHMIC CASCADE OF CHRIS Thile's mandolin kicks off "Attaboy," the first track of a new album with the unlikely title *The Goat Rodeo Sessions*. Thile is known for virtuosity and whimsy, so neither the bluegrass chops nor the album title is a surprise. But 32 seconds into "Attaboy," a deeper-toned, bowed instrument unexpectedly takes the melody. That inherently classical sound is acclaimed cellist Yo-Yo Ma. Classical cello and bluegrass mandolin should by all rights be enemies in the wild, and for a moment the impact is a little like watching a cat and canary skip rope. But after a few seconds it's apparent that the *Goat Rodeo* collective of Thile, Ma, acoustic bassist Edgar Meyer and bluegrass fiddler

Stuart Duncan can send worlds colliding in a sublime way.

A "goat rodeo" is slang for a chaotic situation that, according to the Urban Dictionary website, "requires about 100 things to go right at once if you intend to walk away from it." Indeed, says Ma, "Creating order out of chaos is the order of the day in creation." The foursome appears to have done just that: The album debuted inside the all-genre Billboard 200 album chart. "It's not natural for a creative musician to partake in genre separatism," says Thile, 30, best known for his work with bluegrass trio Nickel Creek (currently on hiatus) and his own Punch Brothers. The awards bestowed upon Ma, 56, during his career range from

16 Grammys to a Presidential Medal of Freedom. We spoke recently with Thile and Ma about their newfound collaboration.

How did this come together?

THILE: Some aspects of the project evolved naturally, and others we sweat over. Yo-Yo is so adept at forging deep, personal bonds quickly, and that makes people want to work hard. But there's always doubt. I've never gone into a project and not had the fear that I was about to make bad music. It was my job as the mandolin player to be the drummer, the glue. And with no plucked instrument companion, I had to step it up and blend my plucked voice with three of the best strings players in the world. That improved

me mightily. I think there's a touch of the euphoria of discovery on this album.

What inspired you?

MA: Friendship and the values of virtuosity and generosity play into the work and inform the process throughout. This album is player-specific inspired. We were creating music that is both shared and tailored to the individual strengths of the musicians and their specific instruments.

So what did you sweat over?

THILE: The same things we relished—like getting a musician like Yo-Yo, who doesn't really improvise, to work seamlessly with a musician like Stuart, who doesn't really read music. Edgar is a great reader, and I'm not; I didn't start reading until I was 16, so I still remembered what it was like to memorize complicated music. Edgar, Stuart and I worked through all that in the writing process, came up with the first batch of tunes and then brought them to Yo-Yo. He made everyone feel comfortable right away. We felt like we weren't all the way there yet, but that this was going to work. We were thoroughly convinced of everyone's musical worth, so we knew if we put in enough effort there was no chance of failure.

What did Stuart bring?

MA: Stuart is a great musician, and watching a fellow string player is always immediately communicative. What Stuart does is to never repeat himself. To listen to anything this man does is to have a great lesson in music.

Did you consider commercial appeal?

MA: I think the equilibrium consists of a balance between the conscious and unconscious elements of music making: That of creating a narrative that strives to keep the maximum participatory attention of a listener using patterns that alternate between the regular and irregular, from which elements of surprise and joy are manufactured. THILE: You have to be careful not to be reactionary. In Nickel Creek I felt beholden to a shapeless mass of taste that I didn't agree with—meaning a public that wanted to hear songs I thought were bad, like things we wrote when we were teenagers and had no idea what we were doing. And so we'd be up there playing music we despised while the Nickel Creek music I really liked, like the last album [2005's *Why Should the Fire Die?*], was what people liked the least. I got to a place where I said, "I don't care what people think. They're not musicians." But then I made music that was ambitious, and

that I'm proud of, but which was at times needlessly esoteric—like daring people not to like it. And that isn't good either. You have to make music from the place of, "I'm going to do this because I love this," not out of a reaction to someone else.

Does fame impact expectations?

MA: I think everyone has to constantly try to figure out who they are and how they fit in a changing world. The gap between internal perception and external reality can be very wide. Or is it the other way around? We know that believing your own press is death. We also know that, ultimately, navel gazing is also death. In life, as in music, a strength can become a weakness and vice versa. So I guess notoriety can be a help or a hindrance

MA: My wife just bought me an accordion for my birthday.

How have bluegrass and classical genres melded?

THILE: Edgar, Mark O'Connor and Béla Fleck deserve a ton of credit for the cross-pollination of bluegrass and classical, but it's funny to think these things have ever been separated. They won't be re-separated. We're heading toward a level of integration that mimics how our lives work, and people now have the width and breadth of musical thought at their fingertips. Music will be as blended together as we are as people.

MA: No tradition exists without it being invented, and it is always the result of the fusion of different roots. Bluegrass and



Yo-Yo Ma, Edgar Meyer, Stuart Duncan, Chris Thile

in creative output, depending on the situation. Being conscious, but not too conscious, and to not take things too seriously but very seriously when need be. That seems to help.

Have you ever considered trying another instrument?

THILE: I wish I had a more serious, working knowledge of the piano. It's such an amazing thought-enabler, and you can see the music laid out in front of you.

'Every tradition is the result of the fusion of different roots.'

—Yo-Yo Ma

classical traditions are no different, and their continued existence and vitality depends on the ability for each tradition to evolve.

—Peter Cooper



'I think there's a touch of the euphoria of discovery on this album.' —Chris Thile