

Hed: Punch Brothers “Punch” CD Prelude to Great Things

By Kelley Rae

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Dek: Chris Thile is to mandolin what Jimmie Hendrix is to guitar, and now, with the combination of the Punch Brothers, he creates a classical approach to bluegrass.

Lede: Thile is no stranger to the stage at his seasoned age of 26, having played mandolin with Nickel Creek since the age of eight – after only three years of study. He made his first of five solo albums when he was a mere thirteen-years-old. His 1997 *True Life Blues: The Songs of Bill Monroe* won an International Bluegrass Music Award for album of the year, and in 2001 he won an IBMA award for mandolinist of the year with successive nominations in 2005, 2006, and 2007. On top of these successes, Nickel Creek’s *This Side* went platinum and won a Grammy for Best Contemporary Folk Album in 2001, among other categories.

In addition to his stint with Nickel Creek and his solo career, he has collaborated with many artists such as Mike Marshall, Béla Fleck, Glen Phillips, Dolly Parton, and Edgar Meyer. After spending 18 years with the beloved Grammy Award–winning Nickel Creek, who parted ways last year, Thile has been out on his own with new his new band, the Punch Brothers, named after a Mark Twain short story, “Punch, Brothers, Punch!”

His fellow band members are some of the most talented in not only the bluegrass world but folk and traditional music. Bassist Greg Garrison has played with Ron Miles and Leftover Salmon; guitarist Chris Eldridge learned from his father, a long-time member of The Seldom Scene; banjoist Noam Pikelny has performed and recorded as a solo artist and has collaborated with acoustic giants John Cowan and Tony Trischka; and violinist Gabe Witcher,

whose fiddle-playing was featured on the soundtrack of *Brokeback Mountain*, played with Jerry Douglas' band for six years, and has also recorded with Willie Nelson, Beck, and Randy Newman.

Thile met Pikelny at the 2005 Telluride Bluegrass Festival in Colorado, and again in Nashville where they met up with Garrison and Eldridge for a jam session, and the connection was instantaneous. Upon realizing their chemistry, Thile called Witcher, who made plans to join the quartet in New York City, where they jammed some more. This impromptu group wound up collaborating with Thile on his 2006 solo album, *How To Grow a Woman from the Ground*, which features covers of songs by the White Stripes and the Strokes as well as by Gillian Welch and Jimmy Rodgers. *The Blind Leaving the Blind*. The quintet then hit the road.

How To Grow a Woman laid the thematic foundation for their latest release, *Punch* (Nonesuch), a novel fusion of classical form with bluegrass style, epitomized in album's centerpiece, "The Blind Leaving the Blind." The 40-minute, four-movement suite has all of the makings of a classical piece of music, but with instruments usually associated with bluegrass. Although long passages are purely instrumental, Thile also works through his divorce and its aftermath through impressionistic lyrics that fall somewhere between a confession and a prayer: "Goodwill's coming by to collect a box/I filled with things I hate about myself/ Things I liked before I got here . . . Lord I'd be in your debt/If you'd help me forget/That heaven's mine for trying"

While Thile wrote this piece, the other tracks were co-written by Thile and his band members, with each musician contributing their individual signatures. The CD ends on its most traditional note, with the gentle and graceful "It'll Happen" – cathartic to say the least.

While Thile's 26 years already seem a lifetime of musical experience, the Punch Brothers' latest release, and their highly-regarded live performances, promise a bright future. So look for a collaboration with bassist Edgar Meyer later this year, and hopefully much more to come.

Sources

<http://nickelcreek.com>

<http://punchbrothers.com/>