

## Review of Concert by Blue Highway at the Lucy Opry on October 11, 2008

by Betty Westmoreland

As an acknowledged fan of **Blue Highway**, this writer continues to be amazed at the band's solid style, talent, and versatility. Taken individually or collectively—they are some of the finest musicians working in bluegrass music. Blue Highway's frequent appearances at the World of Bluegrass, hosted annually at Nashville's Renaissance Center by the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA), have brought the band many nominations and awards. How about 2008 IBMA Song of the Year for "Through the Window of a Train" and Dobro® Player of the Year (Rob Ickes) for the 10<sup>th</sup> time? Admired and respected by their fans and their peers as well, Blue Highway is an awesome presence in bluegrass music.

Blue Highway came to the Lucy Opry in the Bartlett Performing Arts & Conference Center (BPACC) on October 11, 2008, and once again they showed their unbelievable skills in instrumentation and vocal work. One reason for the degree of accomplishment in this band is that they have now been together in the same configuration for over 15 years. With so many bands changing band members frequently, the fact that they are still together and performing at such a high level is amazing.

**Tim Stafford** (guitar, vocals) has roots in West Tennessee and presently resides in Kingsport, TN. He often brings family members to the show, and this year was no exception. His sister Carla worked the record table and also was an audience member. Tim brought along his composite acoustic guitar and broke a string early in the show. He reached for his backup guitar and the music went right on. Stafford has explained in the past that composite is the material used to make the heat shield on the Space Shuttle. The talented singer and guitarist plays licks hot enough to need a heat shield. He also brought his now-famous imitations of Ralph Stanley singing "O Death," which seemed to delight the audience.

**Shawn Lane** (mandolin, guitar, fiddle, vocals) is a native of Cat Town, VA, near Gate City, if that helps to pinpoint the location for you. Now living in South Carolina, Shawn doesn't talk much on stage, but oh how he sings and plays the mandolin and fiddle! In addition to his vocal and instrumental skills, Shawn writes songs for the band and for many other artists. His beautiful "Tears Fell on Missouri," which features his voice, is a fine example of what the talented singer-songwriter can do.

**Wayne Taylor** (bass, vocals) is the spokesman and designated cut-up for Blue Highway. He shares wonderful stories and little glimpses of life with Blue Highway. Wayne is from Abingdon, VA, and he is such a joy to watch as he sings and plays his "broomstick bass," making it all look effortless. Wayne is a real student of the history of the Civil War, as indicated by some of the songs which he and other band members have written.

**Jason Burleson** (banjo, guitar, mandolin, vocals) stands silently on the stage and plays about as clean and solid a banjo as you will ever hear. He lets the banjo (and occasionally the guitar) do his talking. Not surprisingly, Jason comes from North Carolina (Newland, to be exact), which seems to be the springboard for so many good banjo players. Jason Burleson is one of the best!

**Rob Ickes** (Dobro®, vocals) is another member of Blue Highway who doesn't say a whole lot during a show. His resophonic guitar (often referred to as a Dobro®) has taken him to 10 IBMA awards, which must be some sort of record! Originally from San Francisco, CA, Rob now lives in Franklin, TN, near Nashville. His moving rendition of "The Old Rugged Cross" leaves audiences

speechless. It is amazing to watch him perform. He also joins in the vocals on a *cappella* gospel numbers.

#### Set 1

1. Marbletown (written by Mark Knopfler, from the Marbletown CD), 2. Three-Fingered Jack (instrumental written by Bureson and Lane), 3. Lonesome Pine (Taylor featured), 4. Born with a Hammer in My Hand (written by Stafford), 5. Through the Window of a Train (IBMA 2008 Song of the Year, by Stafford and Steve Gulley, from the CD of the same name), 6. Some Day (*a cappella* gospel, from CD Midnight Storm, written by Olive Stockton, Stafford's wife's aunt, for her own eulogy), 7. Monrobro (instrumental written by Ickes and Aubrey Haynie, featuring Lane and Ickes), 8. Tears Fell on Missouri (written by and featuring Lane), 9. Sycamore Hollow (written by Lane and Gerald Ellenburg, about a Civil War incident), 10. Lonesome Road Blues (from the Huber Banjo CD, written by Henry Whittier but often attributed to Wood Guthrie, featuring Bureson and Lane), 11. Wondrous Love (from 2003 all-gospel CD of the same name which took a Dove award and a Grammy nomination; traditional, arranged by Blue Highway, Sacred Harp song from the 1940's, in which each member enters in order into the vocals: Taylor-Lane-Stafford-Bureson-Ickes), 12. Machine Gun Kelly (from Ickes' CD Big Time)

#### Set 2

1. I'd Rather Be a Lonesome Pine, 2. Travelin' Man, 3. Clinch Mountain Backstep (instrumental written by Ralph Stanley, featuring Bureson), 4. Wild Urge to Ramble (written by Lane), 5. Still Climbin' Mountains (written by Stafford and Lane), 6. Seven Sundays in a Row (written by Taylor, Kim Williams, and Larry Shell; dedicated to "Dale," who said he drove 100 miles to hear the song), 7. Two Soldiers (written by Stafford and Wood Newton; dedicated to Peter Smith and others who have been in military service; about two soldiers who have the difficult duty to call upon families who have lost a loved one in battle), 8. Cold Harbor (by Stafford; about a Civil War battlefield in Virginia), 9. Ridin' the Danville Pike (written by Taylor), 10. The Old Rugged Cross (arranged by and featuring Ickes; all band members join in near the end), 11. Nothing but a Whippoorwill (written by Stafford and Gulley). Encore: Little Maggie (instrumental written by Stanley)

Blue Highway just keeps on getting better with the years. While they had some sound problems at this show, the band was on their game. It is a treat to put any of their CDs into the player and hear exactly what they performed. It's not slick or doctored up, but it is without a doubt some of the finest bluegrass music, played by some of the best in the business. This writer is one of their ardent fans and will go anywhere to hear Blue Highway!

Additional Information:

[www.bluehighwayband.com](http://www.bluehighwayband.com)