

RECENT REVIEWS:

"I personally will be meeting these guys by the river, or anywhere for that matter! Steve Smith and Hard Road is an extremely talented 5piece Blue Grass group that has blown me away with their sound...Elijah Copeland's stand up bass skills stood out and kept the train running smooth so to speak and Steve Smith's mandolin...Forget about it! Amazing! But the talent does not end there! Bob Hull and Wayne Shrubsall make the sound complete with their impressive Guitar and Banjo skills, respectively."

candlewickmusic.blogspot.com/2005/11/steve-smith-and-hard-road-meet-me-b

posted by Candlewick Productions at 9:15 PM

Steve Smith & Hard Road: Meet Me By the River (2005)

Steve Smith gets polished more every year without losing his edge. His true grit is diamond dust brilliant in his newest CD Meet Me By the River with his band Hard Road. The band includes Smith on vocals, mandolin, mandola and guitar; Elijah Copeland, bass and vocals; Bob Hull, guitar; Chris Sanders, vocals; and Wayne Shrubsall, banjo and vocals, with special guest Byron Berline on fiddle.

The collection includes a mix of originals, imaginative covers of contemporary songs and some great arrangements of traditional tunes, like the poignant, emotional, Talk About Sufferin', Yellow Rose, a fiesta for banjo and mandolin and a nostalgic, good time, foot-tapping rendition of The Boatman. Would you believe a rockin' banjo solo? Hard Road makes it happen on Bill Monroe's Rocky Road Blues.

Steve shares heartfelt vocals with Sanders and dedicates his interpretation of I'm With You by Joan Baez to "my sons, who will soon leave the nest." Smith gets down on Steve Spurgin's I Owe My Soul, with Berline's fine fiddling driving the message home. Even in such company, it's Smith's own songs that are the standouts in this impressive collection.

Meet Me By the River is a wail tale with a hooky refrain. Bean's Blues, which Smith describes as a "funky little tune," is a refreshing interlude and opportunity for some nice collaboration of mandolin, bass, guitar, and banjo. The high mountain lonesome strings of Look Not Back seem to segue into a sense of peace in the contemporary, simple but sophisticated rhythms of State of Grace. The album closer, Smith's Shepherd's Stove is a last opportunity for strings to party on down and strut their impressive stuff. The CD has a nice flow and style with genre-transcending appeal. It's fine traveling music.

As a vocalist, instrumentalist and songwriter, Smith just keeps getting better all the time. Try to catch him live, if you can. The busy musician performs and tours with several groups and does solo gigs too."There is a lot going on this fall with all sorts of performances including solo shows, jazz and different group shows highlighted by a tour of Ireland with the Jim Hurst Band and the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival with Bill Evans. The Steve Smith Jazz Trio makes appearances when schedules permit," Smith said.

Derrickson Moore, Las Cruces Sun

Steve Smith and Hard Road, *Only So Fast*

Genre: **Bluegrass, Americana**

What happens when a Virginia musician adopts Las Cruces as his home? Give a listen to Steve Smith and Hard Road's *Only So Fast*, a brilliant mix of old-time bluegrass melodies and Americana tunes peppered with lyrics infused with years of desert living.

Smith writes most of the band's engaging lyrics, but vocalist Chris Sanders and bass player Elijah Copeland also contribute to the spirited compositions. Nate Lee provides a haunting fiddle introduction to Sanders and Smith's "Only So Fast." Smith picks up the pace with his hard-driving mandolin playing as he passionately sings about a fleeing youth running down a railroad track.

"Dry Spell" will resonate with Southwesterners as Sanders belts out, "It's been a long hot, dry spell / hardly a change in the weather. . . . / This damn heat has got me beat / I'm tired of cursin' at the weather. / The baby's cryin' / the crops are dyin' / but still there's no change in the weather." The title of "I Shot My Gun" comes from a line in an old blues song that Wayne Shrubbsall discovered. In his catchy country-bluegrass rendition, Shrubbsall's vocal delivery is direct: "Trapped in old New Mexico with no work to be found, / I shot my gun in the heart of town."

In "The Real You," bass player Copeland injects what he calls his Afro-Cuban sound—it really swings. Throughout, Smith's mandolin and guitar, Lee's fiddle, Shrubbsall's banjo, and Copeland's bass lines tightly weave in and out to create a lively bluegrass sound. And I was moved by Sanders's plaintive old-time vocals on "Eden Prairie," which tells the poignant story of a schoolgirl "in trouble." To order, visit www.hardroadband.com.

-- Emily Drabanski

6/2/08 Review of Steve Smith and Hard Road *Only So Fast*
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That darned seal across the top edge of a new CD that's usually such a pain to remove just popped right off and took the cellophane wrapper with it. It was a sign. Everything about this album wants to be enjoyed without effort.

Only So Fast – the first and title cut – gets Steve Smith and Hard Road's signature sound off and running. That compelling combination of precision and wildness conveys the tale of a t-shirted kid running free on a winter morning as told by songwriters Chris Sanders (vocals) and Steve Smith (mandolin, guitar and vocals).

The opening vocals of *Eden Prairie* just make me sit back and soak up the easy harmony of two voices snug as siblings, but it's the storyline of this song – a young girl "in trouble" – that really caught me. The artistry of the writing is so simple and insightful it hurts.

Apparently, *Nate's Rambles* is an instrumental Steve Smith just "let fly" when asked how to compose a tune. *TOon TuNe* is another of these "little ditties" where Elijah Copeland and Steve just sit back and play away. Throughout the album, Bob Stull (guitar) and Nate Lee (fiddle) just do remarkable things to the mix. Throw in *Dune Matoon* with a "ragtime turnaround" and *The Real You* with an Afro-Cuban-Swing sound and, well...it's all enough to make musicians with improvisation envy want to just break their fingers and get it over with.

Save Me features those tight harmonies again and more sweet picking. *Whoa Back Buck* introduces engaging vocal variety a la an ox-driver's wail. "If you're gonna leave, leave me now," pleads the memorable first line of the chorus to *This Dream* – nice use of a classic occasion for heartbroken songwriting. Wayne Shruballs' (banjo, vocals) *I Shot My Gun* is in great company on this album.

But from the first notes Elijah Copeland (bass and vocals) lays down, it's *Dry Spell* that casts an amazing mood for me. It takes everything Hard Road offers and romances a sense of isolation and lamentation over poverty and the summer heat. What an image – farm house, crying babies, young wife, cotton dress, hair clinging to her neck with sweat, looking out a window at the desert. What a song.

Kim McKee's *Rowan Tree* could not be done more beautifully. Chris finds the fine trill that makes the vocal line with absolute grace. Lovely support from Nate Lee on the fiddle. Every hint of embellishment serves the lyric and mood of the song.

From the colorful graphic design to the last note, I'm enjoying this album thoroughly.

STEVE SMITH AND HARD ROAD/ *Only So Fast*

Bluegrass Unlimited November 2008

Desert Night Music DN646

Mandolinist Steve Smith first appeared on the bluegrass scene as part of the Virginia based band, Cloud Valley, which also included banjoist Bill Evans and bassist Missy Raines. Since relocating to New Mexico, Smith has assembled a six piece band that harnesses his eclectic influences into a truly talented and original ensemble sound.□□

No one man show, Hard Road reflects the wide ranging talents of its various band members. Chris Sanders' songwriting and vocals reflect a musical background that extends far beyond bluegrass, while bassist Elijah Copeland, who is given plenty of solo space, has a knack for transforming and elevating a song with his strong and imaginative support. Banjoist Wayne Shrubbsall occasionally throws in a touch of clawhammer as an alternative to the bluegrass roll, and fiddler Nate Lee and guitarist Bob Hull prove great foils for Smith's clean and fluid mandolin work, particularly on the album's three instrumental tracks.

The singing covers a wide range, as well, which can be both good and bad. (Note: I wish all bands, especially those with multiple lead singers, would identify who sings on which track for the benefit of fans that haven't seen the band live, as well as for reviewer drones.) While Chris Sanders' sole female voice is easy to spot, I'll guess that Steve Smith sings lead on the CD's title track and the lion's share of the male lead tracks, and Wayne Shrubbsall is probably the front man on Leadbelly's "Whoa Back Buck" and his own "I Shot My Gun." Sanders' singing is a prime selling point for the band, and it's interesting to hear how it changes in different contexts. On "Eden Prairie," the jagged nature of the chorus's crooked timing keeps the tune and the listener's ear on edge and off balance throughout. However, on the sultry "Dry Spell" and the band's cover of the celtic tinged Kim McGee song "One Lone Rowan Tree," the warmth, depth, and expressiveness of Sanders' voice shine and show how impressive this band can be when at the top of its game.

A quick visit to the group's Web site indicates that only Smith, Sanders, and Lee remain in the band, joined by a new guitarist and bassist. But the skillful arrangements and stylistic diversity of their debut CD shows that Steve Smith & Hard Road possess the talents and vision to retain their distinctive sound even through personnel changes. "Only So Fast" is an encouraging glimpse of the levels to which this band can rise. (Hard Road, 174 W. Willoughby Ave., Las Cruces, NM www.hardroadband.com)

STEVE SMITH AND HARD ROAD - MEET ME BY THE RIVER (2005)

New Mexico has been called the "land of enchantment" and there is some of this special magic in the music of Steve Smith and Hard Road. The sound is a blend of old-time, bluegrass, gospel and Americana folk, and the heartfelt vocals pour out surrounded by pulsing instrumental work like a flash flood moving down an arroyo. "Rocky Road Blues" is a Bill Monroe tune that banjo player Wayne Shrubsall strums with a distinctive swing rhythm joined by Steve's mandolin, Bob Hull's lead guitar licks and Elijah Copeland's rock solid bass work. Steve's eloquent mandolin licks punctuate all the tunes. Wayne's clawhammer style playing is top-notch while Elijah also plays bass for several symphony orchestras. Chris Sanders is also a professor at New Mexico State University where she also directs musical productions. Several of Steve's songs are featured on the album, and his "Meet Me By the River" has Steve's voice blending with Chris' in the tale of the two unconventional lovers. Chris and Steve sing the classic "Talk About Sufferin'" with the Arco bass and banjo providing a stirring counterpoint. Joan Baez's "I'm With You," has a delightful bounce with Chris doing the lead vocals. The instrumental pieces combine banjo, mandolin, guitar and bass with guest Byron Berline's signature fiddle into some rollicking dance music: "The Boatman" from minstrel days and Steve's own "Shepherd's Stove" will set your feet to tapping. The group stays close to their New Mexico base, but if an opportunity arises to see them, by all means see them! *B Hough, California Bluegrass Association*

STEVE SMITH AND HARD ROAD - MEET ME BY THE RIVER [August 2006 issue Desert Night DN 545.

The music of Steve Smith and Hard Road has been described as modern/retro string band music." The contents of this latest release do indeed run the gamut from old-time string band music to contemporary bluegrass. The ten selections offer a blending of original material, including "Meet Me By The River" and "Look Not Back," along with standard bluegrass pieces like "Rocky Road Blues" and "Talk About Suffering." Three particular highlights are Chris Sanders' lead vocals on Joan Baez's "I'm With You," the Steve Spurgin composition "I Owe My Soul," and the band's energetic treatment of the traditional "The Boatman." "Meet Me By The River" is an exciting bit of music that defies being placed into a single musical genre. (Desert Night Music, P.O. Box 7892, Las Cruces, NM 88005, www.desertnight.com.) *Bluegrass Unlimited Aug. 07'*