



BLUEGRASS MASS TO RING FROM THE RAFTERS

*A mashup like collards & communion wafers.
And it works.*

Jen Foster



On a warm September evening in 2014, FBC Minister of Music Mary Alice Seals stood in front of a stage just off Fayetteville Street, tapping her toes to the Gravy Boys, a local bluegrass band. Just blocks from our sanctuary, she joined choir members and serious bluegrass fans Rhonda Lowe and Mary Hauser at the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) festival in downtown. Mary Alice finds inspiration in the traditional hymns she leads for us, but she also loves the sweet sound of bluegrass, the voices in harmony backed up by mandolin and banjo. Saturday nights growing up in Lumberton were spent watching the Porter Wagoner Show, Hee Haw, and Lawrence Welk. As a lifelong southerner, she's no stranger to the kind of front porch music that gave birth to the sound of modern bluegrass she heard the Gravy Boys sing from that stage. And on that fall afternoon, she leaned over to Mary and Rhonda and said, "How would y'all feel if we did a bluegrass mass at our church? I know a guy who composed this really cool choral bluegrass piece...."

Their reaction was somewhere between thrilled and ecstatic. Yes! A thousand times yes! How can we help make this happen? And thus began planning for our church's first experience with *Come Away to the Skies: A High, Lonesome Mass*, a work composed by Wes Ramsay and Tim Sharp, friends of Mary Alice from her seminary days in Louisville, KY.

Tim signed on to conduct the mass at the end of the 2015 IBMA festival and brought in the Chuck Nation Band to accompany the singers. The FBC Sanctuary Choir partnered with the Chancel Choir from Edenton Street United Methodist Church and the Green Hope High School Voices of Hope in a collaboration that brought a sense of community among the three groups and a beautiful combo of new voices to our sanctuary. That experience was so successful that we are doing the mass a second time — on Saturday and Sunday, March 23 and 24.

This time around, the Sanctuary Choir will sing alongside the Raleigh Boychoir, the Singing Statesmen from NC State, and the Martin Middle School chorus. We'll again enjoy accompaniment by the Chuck Nation Band, and Tim Sharp will conduct again with his banjo slung across his shoulder. That's nearly 145 voices singing "Do Lord," 145 people that need to fit together in the front of our sanctuary. The room will be full, and the sound will fill the room.



The love of bluegrass music runs deep in our choir, and a crew of three altos and a soprano are among the most enthusiastic voices. When Anne Bullard, Ginger Graves, Mary Hauser, and Rhonda Lowe once skipped a Wednesday night choir rehearsal to check out the bluegrass festival, they earned a reputation as "the Bluegrass Quartet." They've been enjoying live bluegrass together since the first festival in 2013. While you'll certainly find them checking out downtown Raleigh's venues at the Bluegrass Ramble or wandering among the stages on Fayetteville Street each fall, the rest of the year you might catch them checking out their favorite bluegrass bands, from Chatham County Line to Steep Canyon Rangers. And you can bet they will be singing along. Their bluegrass histories vary: Ginger grew up hearing folks picking a banjo at every small town fish fry, and Rhonda listened to countless bluegrass bands and watched endless clogging at festivals in the NC mountains. Mary came to her love of bluegrass later in life, during long drives between Raleigh and Boone when the only clear station was broadcasting the Americana radio show on Sunday evenings. And while Anne's always enjoyed live music, she didn't really learn to love bluegrass until the festival brought such energy and excitement to downtown.

But today, they all love the genre — the way musicians trade off the lead, improvising and

playing off one another's strengths, the way bands feel different in different venues, the voices blending in beautiful harmonies. And they love the way bluegrass has never forgotten its mountain roots, blending sounds that tie back to the music of Appalachia, pulling threads from jazz, from Irish reels, from gospel. Bill Monroe, known as the father of bluegrass, describes it best: "It's got a hard drive to it. It's Scotch bagpipes and old-time fiddling.... It's blues and jazz, and it has a high lonesome sound. It's plain music that tells a story. It's played from my heart to your heart, and it will touch you."



One of the things that both Mary Alice and the Bluegrass Quartet find most meaningful about the mass is the spiritual depth it brings. There is a familiarity to the words, pulling phrases of hymns that many of us have known since we were children. But the more you hear it, when you can connect with these words in new and different ways, they bring a renewed sense of their meaning. This depth comes not only from the holy music envisioned through a bluegrass lens, but also through the structure of a mass. If you're not in choir, the word "mass" might not mean exactly what first comes to your mind. A musical mass has five elements that are based on the structure of Mass

in the Catholic Church, and that structure will feel quite familiar if you've been paying attention to the elements of our Sunday worship: Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. Through these elements, we ask for mercy, praise God, declare what we believe, celebrate God's holiness, and express thanks to the Lamb of God for taking away our sins. The bluegrass mass takes those ingredients and seasons them with the flavor of old-time mountain music.



Tim Sharp describes himself as "a choral guy" but that modest phrase doesn't really capture his stature in the realm of choral music. Today he serves as the executive director of the American Choral Directors Association, and he travels the world conducting and teaching those who love the way voices come together in chorus. Despite his world travels and extensive training in sacred music, his eastern Kentucky roots continue to

pull on him and helped provide the inspiration for this work.

This piece is almost autobiographical, helping Tim blend the tight harmonies of bluegrass music he was raised on with the choral integrity he's devoted his professional life to. Mandolin and banjo replace the organ we've come to expect accompanying church music. Folk hymns like "What Wondrous

Kyrie
means Lord have mercy

Gloria
gives glory and praise to God

Credo
declares what we believe

Sanctus
means Holy, Holy, Holy and shows our reverence for the goodness of God

Agnus Dei
means Behold the Lamb of God which takes away the sins of the world

JOIN US!

Saturday, March 23 at 3 p.m.

Public performance – free tickets required

<https://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/3618171>

Sunday, March 24 at 11 a.m.

Special worship service – all are welcome

Love is This”
press against
the formality of
a musical mass,
Kyrie all the way

to Agnus Dei. The idea of this mashup seems incongruous, like collards and communion wafers. And yet, it works, a blend of serious choral music with the tuning and rhythm of bluegrass.

Wes Ramsay describes Tim as someone who “knows how to adopt the best elements of widely disparate streams of tradition and wed them into one unified idea. In our fractured world, this is no small thing.” Tim has conducted *Come Away to the Skies* around the world, from Ireland to China, from the Ryman in Nashville to Carnegie Hall. And whether audiences hear the bluegrass sound as familiar or foreign, they tend to respond with a sense of joy in the music. “Toe tapping is universal,” Tim says. He and Wes tried to write in a degree of familiarity that makes the combination work, even if you can’t put your finger on exactly why you love the mix.



Pulling different groups of musicians together takes a lot of preparation and a little bit of magic. Each Wednesday night, our Sanctuary Choir has been practicing the mass while still preparing anthems for worship; the Singing Statesmen from NC State squeeze in rehearsals between calculus class and chemistry lab. The choirs will have done their homework; everyone should know the piece inside and out. Mary Alice will probably fret a bit over the logistics of getting 145 people lined up and looking

good, and the first full rehearsal will still be just voices, piano, and maybe a bit of Tim’s lone

banjo. The Chuck Nation Band won’t arrive with fiddles and mandolins until the final run-through, just hours before the first performance.

And what’s it sound like when all those voices finally come together? Tim says the first thing that happens is that everyone tries really hard to please, to show that they can make his work sound the way he intended. Choirs work hard to honor the piece. They focus on remembering all those details they’ve been working on for months. And then? He spends a big part of rehearsal trying to get folks to relax. “Believe me, you sound **good!**” he tells groups nearly every time they rehearse. He wants them to enjoy the music, to be comfortable enough to loosen up and have fun with it. Wes says Tim can get “groups of strangers to relax and sing together by playing the banjo to them — who knew?”

That “joyful noise” the Psalms call us to create? That’s what Tim’s going for. Audiences, he says, love the piece when they hear joy in the musicians’ voices, when the singing is truly fun. “My goal is to have an experience with them, with this piece,” he says. “When the singers get caught up in it, the audience sees it and it delights them.” And that’s where the magic happens. ✨

