

Punch Brothers

Punch

At the conclusion of *The Blind Leaving the Blind*, the 40-minute, four-movement suite that is the heart of Punch Brothers' *Punch*—the band's Nonesuch debut—composer-singer-mandolin player Chris Thile conjures up the image of a heartbroken young man nursing his psychic wounds at a bar with his friends. In real life, the 26-year old Thile, who was recovering from his own tattered marriage as he developed the piece, took a more constructive approach, joining four of his own musical buddies to form a kind of super group/support group. The quintet did visit some bars along the way, but, more importantly, over the course of two years, these performers helped Thile to realize the most conceptually daring, emotionally cathartic work of an already impressive career.

The line-up of Punch Brothers—whose name is taken from the Mark Twain short story, *Punch, Brothers, Punch!*—is formidable. Thile released the first of five solo albums when he was just thirteen and, by the time he was 20, he was attracting a following among pop, country, and alternative-rock audiences as a member of the Grammy Award-winning Nickel Creek. A *Washington Post* critic recently said Thile “may well be the most virtuosic American ever to play the mandolin.”

His equally youthful, prodigiously gifted band-mates are among the most in-demand performers in the worlds of bluegrass, folk, and traditional music. Guitarist Chris Eldridge was a founding member of the Infamous Stringdusters and occasionally sits in with his dad Ben's band, The Seldom Scene; bassist Greg Garrison has played with trumpeter Ron Miles and Leftover Salmon—along with banjo player Noam Pikelny. Pikelny he has performed and recorded as a solo artist and has collaborated with acoustic music heavyweights John Cowan and Tony Trischka. Violinist Gabe Witcher, a life-long friend of Thile's, is a sought-after session man whose fiddle-playing has been featured on the soundtrack of films ranging from *Toy Story* to *Brokeback Mountain*. Witcher also has recorded with a range of artists from Willie Nelson to Beck to Randy Newman and played in dobro master Jerry Douglas' band for six years.

Thile has often incorporated pieces by Bach and other classical masters into his live performances, but he's taken a fearless leap into long-form composition of his own with *The Blind Leaving the Blind*. Instead of working with a traditional chamber ensemble, though, he employs the instrumentation that has fascinated him since childhood: mandolin, banjo, guitar, violin, and bass. Says Thile, “Ever since I was really little, they are what I identified with. These are very agreeable instruments, so it seems like there are limitless possibilities for them.”

The Blind Leaving the Blind is rigorously structured, yet Thile leaves room for jazz-like improvisation and for the personalities of the players to influence its flow. In fact, Thile only completed the work after he began working with Eldridge, Garrison, Pikelny, and Witcher—performers who were up to its technical demands and willing to become as musically and emotionally invested in the piece as he was.

“I had this idea of a long-form composition that was grounded in folk music,” Thile explained. “But I didn’t have a clear picture of what it would sound like until I met these guys. Then the ideas just started coming. The time it has taken to get the piece into the shape it’s in now has given us the opportunity to let everyone put their stamp on it, which is part of the reason for the piece—the idea that the composer doesn’t have complete control over it. Though much of it reads like a string quintet, there are parts that read like a jazz lead sheet. There is plenty of improvising and lots of stuff that is loosely dictated.”

“We had to jump into this head first,” says Pikelny. “We were initially very intimidated by the scope of the piece and its technical demands. We felt vulnerable individually, but the ensemble provided a secure environment for us to take on the challenge. If we got together ten years from now, I think we would have shied away from trying to do something so ambitious. We have enough idealism, naiveté, whatever you want to call it, to be able to attempt something that really seemed impossible considering where we were technically and conceptually when we first started playing together. The respect we had for one another, and the endless hours working together created a trust and camaraderie that really allowed us to take such a leap of faith.”

Witcher recalls, “For several years, Chris Thile and I had been toying with the idea of starting a band, but because of our wide spectrum of influences and interests we were unsure as to what form this new ensemble would take.”

The itinerant Thile then befriended Pikelny at the 2005 Telluride Bluegrass Festival in Colorado, and hooked up with him again shortly thereafter in Nashville. Garrison and Eldridge were also in town; the four of them got together to jam, and the rapport was instantaneous. As Pikelny recalls, “The night we got together, we were playing and talking about what everyone’s next project would be. Chris was telling us about what he was writing and that he was getting to the point compositionally where he wanted to start working on a large scale piece for the bluegrass instruments. I don’t think we had any idea that evening that he was hinting that we could be the guys to do it with him. I think while the rest of us were just getting warmed up, Chris began plotting and for him, the evening practically became an audition for the quintet.”

The next day the California-based Witcher got an excited call from Thile: “Gabe, I think we’ve got it!” Witcher quickly made plans to join the quartet in New York City, where they would reconvene to brainstorm and rehearse. This ad hoc group wound up collaborating with Thile on his 2006 solo album, *How To Grow a Woman from the Ground*, which featured covers of songs by the White Stripes and the Strokes as well as by Gillian Welch and Jimmy Rodgers. With its recurring images of heartbreak and romantic longing and its live-in-the-studio acoustic setting, the album laid the thematic and musical groundwork for *The Blind Leaving the Blind*. The quintet then hit the road and solidified their union.

On March 17, 2007, the quintet, debuted Thile’s completed *The Blind Leaving the Blind* at Carnegie Hall’s Zankel Hall, as part of the John Adams-curated *In Your Ear Redux Festival*, an event celebrating young composers and players. (The quintet was still trying on band names and billed itself as The Tensions Mountain Boys.)

When the band went into the studio to record their first effort as a group, they were determined to retain the live feel of that initial *The Blind Leaving the Blind* performance. They chose Studio A509 at Legacy Recording in midtown Manhattan, a 4,600 square-foot room with a 35-foot high ceiling often used for large-scale film scoring. Explains Thile, “For this recording, the core of the sound came from three mics placed high in the room, kind of the way you’d record a string quartet. We didn’t want to do any overdubbing; nothing was added. That room interacts with sound beautifully, and we feel that the recording captures that.”

Although long passages of *The Blind Leaving the Blind* are purely instrumental, Thile also sketches the story of his marital breakup and its aftermath through impressionistic lyrics that fall somewhere between a confession (directed, variously, to his listeners, to his ex, and to God), and an impassioned, late night, barstool soliloquy. Thile’s lyrics evoke loneliness, desire, and betrayal as candidly as vintage Joni Mitchell and, as with Mitchell, their specificity gives them the ring of truth. He avoids the familiar verse-chorus structure of a pop song, however, employing his words as recitative: “I wanted the work to be more anecdotal, conversational, and episodic.”

The story of Thile’s relationship was the jumping-off point for a broader rumination about the loss of innocence, the sobering transition into adulthood, the sudden disruption of a young man’s spiritual journey. Thile says, “I grew up in a very Christian household and was not a rebellious child. My folks were great, but protective; I trusted people and I thought people would always look out for me as long as I didn’t go around screwing things up. To run into a relationship that wasn’t honest led to disillusionment with my upbringing as well as my marriage. I just wasn’t prepared for the fact that the world doesn’t always have your best interests at heart. Ultimately, *The Blind Leaving the Blind* isn’t really about how betrayed I felt but the effect that that betrayal had on my worldview.

The four tracks that bookend *The Blind Leaving the Blind* were co-written by Thile and his band mates, with each musician contributing ideas and riffs to these shorter pieces. Though each track stands on its own, the adventurous, shape-shifting arrangements and Thile’s forthright lyrics often reference the sound and subject matter of *The Blind Leaving the Blind*.

The album ends on its most traditional note, with the gentle and graceful “It’ll Happen,” which is the release from the mounting tension of “Nothing, Then.” It’s as if a spell had been broken; Witcher’s violin swells above the simple rhythm and it seems like Thile is finally putting his troubles behind him.

-- Michael Hill