

# ROUNDER RECORDS ARTIST BIO

## Blue Highway

### *Sounds Of Home*

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Creating compelling contemporary bluegrass is a delicate balancing act. Artists must retain the music's time-honored elements while imparting their own fresh take on the music to arrive at a sound that is both timeless and timely. It is a balance that Blue Highway executes with an acrobat's sense of grace and daring, expanding the expressive boundaries of bluegrass through an unrivaled ensemble sound forged from seventeen years of performing together.

Formed in 1994, Blue Highway has, from the start, featured a deep bench of songwriters and lead vocalists, stellar harmonies, dynamic arrangements, and flat-out instrumental virtuosity. Composed of Jason Burleson (banjo, guitar, mandolin), Rob Ickes (Dobro and Weissenborn-style slide guitars), Shawn Lane (mandolin, fiddle, guitar), Tim Stafford (guitar), and Wayne Taylor (bass), the group has developed a robust contemporary take on the bluegrass tradition that makes them among the most influential bands in the genre today. Each member is among the most distinguished performers on his instrument, and the band has garnered numerous awards from IBMA and SPBGMA, two Grammy® nominations and a Dove Award.



*Sounds Of Home* arrives one long decade after Blue Highway's first all-original collection, *Still Climbing Mountains*. Yet while it underlines just how right—and still how rare—that step forward was, it's not just more of the same, not even in the most bird's-eye view. Indeed, to hear how far *Sounds Of Home* is from the earlier album (or even from their more recent *Through The Window Of A Train*) is to be reminded that a step, no matter how big it is, isn't a journey. If the Blue Highway of 2011 could not have made this album without having made those others, it's equally true that the Blue Highway that made those albums could not have made *Sounds Of Home*. Creativity, this album says, isn't a steady state; it's a process, one that ebbs and flows with the years, touching on familiar sounds and themes but finding new ones, too.

Blue Highway's writers have always been notable for the way they reach beyond the usual bluegrass subjects, but this album is especially rich in the variety of directions that it reaches, and in the maturity of its treatments. Who besides Shawn Lane would write a song like "Storm," or bring to life the haunting meditation of the title track? Who but Wayne Taylor could be counted on to come up with the quintessential details that punch home the lament of "Only Seventeen?" Can't you tell from the very first lines of "Heather And Billy" that Tim Stafford and frequent writing partner Steve Gulley are bringing just the right kind of sensitivity and thoughtfulness to a story at once heartbreaking and inspirational? Listening to this set, such questions are no sooner asked than they're answered.

Similarly, while there are no startling new directions in the playing and singing on *Sounds Of Home*, there's an unmistakably new depth and confidence that can only come with years of shared music making. Look at the masterful way each song is framed, the careful choice of instrumentation and arrangement, the thoughtful approach to vocals—still more hallmarks of a unique approach. It would be easy, for instance, for each man to sing his own songs, but the easy way isn't the Blue Highway way. Rather, each song is served up by the best singers for the job, regardless of whose pen they came from. Similarly, it would be understandable if the playing of an award-winner like Rob Ickes or under-appreciated master Jason Burleson got in the way of the nuances of a song—but what makes their playing truly

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great is that it's always in service of the material and meaning, underlining rather than overshadowing. And in an age when it sometimes seems like every song is guaranteed to be delivered by a trio, to hear the deft alternation between trios, solos and duets—and the swift but measured intelligence informing instrumental solos and accompaniment alike—that characterize each of these selections provides a kind of enjoyment and engagement that can only be delivered by a group that has a profound grasp of how to stand apart from the crowd.

Even in the world of bluegrass, where trends and fads don't have quite the same sway they do in more popular genres, there's been a growing tendency to focus on the Next Big Thing, or on artists who bring some easily digestible new story or some easy-to-grasp new musical mannerism to the table, or on a single-minded emphasis on one sliver of the music's rich tradition. And maybe that's human nature—or, at least, the nature of our society in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. But it's one that ought to be resisted, because it makes it too easy for us to miss what's most remarkable about *Sounds Of Home*. Focus on the simple fact of the band's longevity and you'll miss what that year-in, year-out experience of playing together has actually done for the music; concentrate on the simple fact of their reliance on original songs and you'll miss the growing depth and complexity of the songwriting and the way it weaves together the old and the new; highlight the virtuosity of its members and you'll miss the way that they work together, never afraid to tackle hard passages, but always in service of the material.

Ultimately, then, what makes Blue Highway so great, and this album so special, is that they are a band—not only in the way the word is used with respect to a musical ensemble, but in a larger sense, in the way it's used in phrases like “band of brothers.” That they wouldn't have become one without the music is an inescapable fact—but equally inescapable is the fact that it's taken more than just music and talent to make Blue Highway into what they are today, respected, admired and loved by an entire community of artists and fans alike. And really, why would anyone want to escape those facts? Here they are, embedded in some profound, powerful and purely enjoyable music—the *Sounds Of Home* indeed.

