

the CenterStage



Sierra Hull & Highway 111

Friday, December 2

8:00 p.m.

2011-2012
Professional Touring Artist Series



Enriching Lives. Building Community®

Sierra Hull & Highway 111

Friday, December 2
8:00 p.m.

Sierra Hull – Mandolin

Jacob Eller – Upright Bass

Zach Gilmer – Banjo & Guitar

Clay Hess – Guitar & Vocals

Christian Ward – Fiddle

Caleb Gilreath - Sound Engineer





Jacob Eller: Upright Bass

A native Virginian, Jacob was born in Marion, Virginia and grew up in the neighboring town of Chilhowie. He learned to play bass at the age of 15 on an instrument given to him by his father Randal Eller, who played fiddle and sang in the band Cleghorn. This was a local band that played mainly for the fun of it, but these musicians were Jacob's mentors, teaching

him how to work in a band. Jacob began playing professionally in 2003, when he relocated to Berea, KY to play with his good friend Ryan Blevins' band, Canebreak. That same year he started performing with the bluegrass band No Speed Limit before joining Sierra Hull & Highway 111 in 2009.

Jacob has been an active participant in The Crooked Road Tour, which is part of Virginia's Heritage Music Trail, which promotes the musical heritage of southwest Virginia. Jacob participated in two of The Crooked Road Tours; one on the west coast in 2008 and a second on the east coast in 2010.

Zach Gilmer: Banjo & Guitar The 17-year-old Virginia native began playing the banjo at age 10, began formal lessons at 14, and the same year placed third in the Virginia Folk Music Association's (VFMA) Junior Entertainer category. The following year, he placed second in the Adult State Banjo category and in 2007 became the Adult State Banjo Champion.



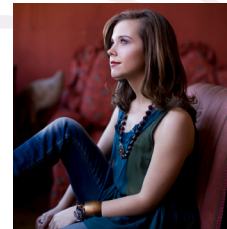
Clay Hess: Guitar & Vocals

Clay Hess began playing guitar at age nine after hearing Tony Rice's landmark recording "Manzanita." His dad bought him his first quality guitar, a Martin D18, for his birthday on which he honed his skills and developed his own style. As he progressed, he competed in and won many guitar contests along the way, including the Ohio State Guitar Championship in 1995. When

Clay was 19 he landed a job at Dollywood playing guitar with the band True Blue.

Eventually Clay left Dollywood to return home to Ohio. In 1999, he was working in construction and had nearly quit playing altogether when Ricky Skaggs called him

and invited him to join his band Kentucky Thunder. Clay thought the call was a joke and hung up the phone. Ricky called a second time and convinced Clay that the offer was real. Clay was thrilled at the opportunity to play rhythm and lead guitar in Ricky's band, where he spent the next three years. During that time, the International Bluegrass Music Association awarded Kentucky Thunder the Instrumental Band of the Year Award for both 1999 and 2000. Clay recorded on three projects with Skaggs, and was awarded a GRAMMY for his participation on the project *Soldier of the Cross*. After leaving Skaggs' band, Clay toured with The Mark Newton Band playing mandolin and then guitar before joining Mountain Heart. In 2009, Clay left Mountain Heart to join Sierra Hull & Highway 111. Though Clay largely considers himself a bluegrass player, his influences range outside of bluegrass and include players such as Stevie Ray Vaughan, Charlie Parker and Leon Rhodes.



Sierra Hull: Mandolin

A good chunk of popular music's real estate has been carved up along lines of age these last half-dozen decades, and we're used to seeing young musicians aim exclusively for young audiences then flounder as they outgrow teenaged listeners' tastes and concerns. Pan-generational mentoring and mingling has done much to insulate bluegrass from this

coming-of-age quandary. Still, Sierra Hull is the rare soul to make it through these years entirely unscathed.

Secrets—the debut album she recorded at 15, and released at 16—struck the ear with sensibilities that seemed both seasoned and fresh; kids' stuff this was not. Three years and a move from her family's home in tiny Byrdstown, Tennessee to Boston's Berklee College of Music later, she's followed with one of the most surefooted transitions into early adulthood put to record. Thirty seconds into the opening track, she sings a line that puts a fine point on it: "I'm not a child anymore."

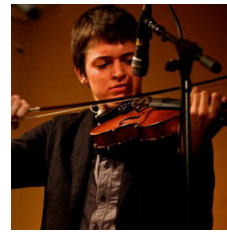
Of course, the evidence of Sierra's uncommon maturity—musical and personal (one might say she embodies the perfect balance of humility and capability)—has been there all along, and won her formidable fans: by age 11, Alison Krauss had called with an invitation to the Opry stage; by 12, Rounder was expressing interest; first Ron Block and now Barry Bales have served as co-producers, and her studio bands

have featured the cream of the contemporary bluegrass crop—Stuart Duncan, Randy Kohrs and Bryan Sutton this time, alongside members of Sierra’s own crack band Highway 111. Then there’s the fact that Berklee gave her the school’s most prestigious award, the Presidential Scholarship, a first for a bluegrass musician; her choice to accept it, to delay her dream of hitting the road full-time after high school in favor of expanding her musical worldview, was hardly a light one.

If ever the “child prodigy” label did Sierra justice, its usefulness has completely fallen away and a distinctive new identity emerged. What you hear on *Daybreak* is one of bluegrass’s few full-fledged virtuosic instrumentalist/singer/songwriters, and one who’s gracefully grown into her gifts. While her mandolin playing has always possessed clarity and fleet-fingered precision, here she attacks her solos with newfound spontaneity and depth of feeling; she calls it “playing with a point to prove.” Her singing—always straight and true—has more heartfelt power behind it, to results Bales describes, simply, as “doing the songs justice.”

As for the songs, Sierra’s first album held just a few originals, but she wrote seven of these twelve, a collection that stands up quite well next to the outside material. There’s a pair of sprightly instrumentals, her first-ever western swing number and several that show her emotional sophistication: in songs that fall squarely in the bluegrass tradition, feelings are out in the open; during country-leaning compositions, she ponders relationships from more introspective angles; and the title track—a breathtaking pop ballad—is the most ruminative moment of all.

Boundaries—age, genre or otherwise—don’t hamper an artist like Sierra. She’s already earned considerable respect in the bluegrass world, and the IBMA’s voting members having nominated her for no fewer than five awards over three years—there’s a good chance she’ll be the first woman to win the mandolin category. But as a player, a singer and a songwriter, she also has remarkable range, the potential to win over ears unfamiliar with Bill Monroe and give performances of broad cultural importance, as she’s done at Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center and the National Prayer Breakfast. Matt Glaser—head of Berklee’s American Roots Music Program—put it this way: “She has no limitations as a musician.” *Daybreak* is certainly a noteworthy arrival; you can’t help but feel it’s also just the beginning. -Jewly Hight, Nashville, Tennessee, January 2011



Christian Ward: Fiddle

Recently relocating to Nashville, from Apple Valley, California, 18 year-old Christian Ward has become recognized as one of the hot, young fiddle players for a new generation of bluegrass. Christian, along with his brother Austin, played at the 2005 CMA Fan Fest with Ricky Skaggs and Earl Scruggs. He is also in high demand as a session player and displays an amazing

virtuosity on his instrument. Christian’s musical taste and maturity in his playing go well beyond his years. He released his first album in 2006 with his step-father Eric Uglum and his brother Austin Ward titled *The Old Road to Jerusalem*, in which Christian contributed a self-penned fiddle tune, “Stonewall.”

Christian began playing the fiddle at the age of nine. He took Suzuki violin lessons while in school and private fiddle lessons from Frank Javorsek. He learned mostly through listening to recordings and observing great fiddle players. Christian’s step-father Eric was, and continues to be, a big influence on Christian’s musical outlook. Eric taught Christian the importance of focusing on the fundamentals (tone, pitch, timing, taste) and exposing him to a wide variety of great music. He taught Christian not to discriminate based on genre but on the depth of the music itself.

Christian has taught fiddle workshops in the US, Canada and the Sultanate of Oman and he has traveled to Japan and Europe as a professional musician.

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