

Bearfoot

Doors & Windows (Compass 4504)

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Bluegrass music from Alaska. It may sound like a bit of a non sequitur but Bearfoot, a band from Anchorage, is proving that the two aren't as unrelated as you might think. Comprised of Kate Hamre (acoustic bass), Mike Mickelson (guitar), Jason Norris (mandolin), Angela Oudean (fiddle), and newest member Odessa Jorgensen (vocals/fiddle), Bearfoot's rise from über talented music camp counselors to an established national touring band has been nothing short of meteoric.

A mere two years after their initial meeting teaching at their namesake's bluegrass camp for kids, Bearfoot earned one of roots music's most prestigious awards – Telluride Bluegrass Band Champions – an honor they share with artists Dixie Chicks and Nickel Creek. Soon, they were touring extensively during summer breaks and became regular crowd favorites at prestigious festivals including Wintergrass, Grey Fox, Strawberry Festival, and six consecutive years at RockyGrass. The original band members (Hamre, Mickelson, Norris, and Oudean) had known each other and played together in various combinations in Alaska's small but vibrant music scene and the community of musicians, fans, parents, and friends rallied around the fledgling band. "We wrangled some support from them in the form of mileage and airline tickets," says Norris. "People wanted to see us succeed and travel. Very few bands in Alaska, particularly young bands, get the opportunity to do that so the community was excited about it and jumped onboard with us. Those same people still go to our shows now."

The original band name was "Bearfoot Bluegrass" but as the band evolved, they dropped "bluegrass" from the name. "We were never really a traditional bluegrass band because there was no one our age who played banjo in Alaska," says Mickelson with a laugh. Bearfoot has adopted the Americana moniker to describe their music but haven't left their bluegrass roots behind. "Even if it's not a bluegrass song, it's not too hard to see where it all came from," Norris points out. "You can definitely tell that we play bluegrass by how we structure our phrasing, our instruments, and how our harmonies are set up."

Although Bearfoot has nine years, major festivals, and three albums under their belt, *Doors and Windows* contains many firsts. This is the first Bearfoot CD to feature guest musicians, in this case Andrea Zonn of James Taylor And Band (fiddle), Andy Hall of The Infamous Stringdusters (dobro), Alison Brown (banjo) and Larry Atamanuik, whose drums also represent another Bearfoot first. The band, all of whom sing, have also elected to rely more on a lead singer approach, with newest member Odessa Jorgensen taking charge of the vocals. California-born fiddle player and vocalist Jorgensen, formerly a member of The Biscuit Burners, joined Bearfoot in September 2008.

Produced by Compass Records' Garry West, *Doors and Windows* is made up of eleven gorgeous songs steeped in the bluegrass music tradition but unafraid to befriend other genres. The opening song, "Oh My Love", has a gentle, rolling melody that speaks to the freedom of loving without fear and is the perfect lead-up and juxtaposition to the toe-tapping traditional, "Single Girl". Bearfoot proves less-is-more on the old-timey inspired "Caroline" (written by former member Annalisa Tornfelt) and their show-stopping a cappella original "Good in The Kitchen". The title track, penned by Jorgensen and featuring hypnotic guitar and fiddle underpinnings, is darkly evocative musical poetry. Bearfoot tackles their first pop cover with a laidback version of The Beatles' "Don't Let Me Down".

"Overall, I think this album is more collaborative," says Hamre. "In the past it's always been 'we have to have a fiddle break, and a mandolin break, and another fiddle break', but this time it's more about the sound as a band than it is about individual solos."

"I think that what's really cool about this album is that it captures our energy and when you listen to it, you want to move," muses Norris. "I don't know if I can say that about what we've done previously; every song is like that. It's physically lifting."

Collaborative, uplifting, energetic, haunting, beautiful, inspired: all words that anyone should feel comfortable with while describing the sound of Bearfoot. With the release of *Doors and Windows* on April 21, Bearfoot will again find themselves atop a cultural mountain where they overlook the past, present, and future of bluegrass music.

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