

Railroad Earth

- a biography

“Railroad Earth deftly blends traditional bluegrass with solid eastern seaboard folk sensibilities and a willingness to work without a net. The result is often spectacular.”

San Jose Mercury News

In only four years, Railroad Earth has carved a path wide and deep throughout the American roots music scene. From their first gigs in May 2001, to their most recent shows for a growing legion of loyal fans, Railroad Earth has been an undeniable force whose superb songwriting, singing and performances from the stage continue to redefine the live music experience for audiences of all ages.

It has been said that from day one, Railroad Earth was poised to become one of the most talked about bands in years. Todd Sheaffer, former front man for popular Jersey roots act From Good Homes, mandolinist John Skehan and bluegrass champions Tim Carbone and Andy Goessling were in between projects when the band members first came together. While they knew of each other from the Garden State’s vibrant roots scene, they hadn’t played together before the fall of 2000. It was during a series of open-mic events, sponsored by the Pocono Bluegrass Society, that the initial four first began playing together. Sheaffer had written some new songs and played them for Carbone, Goessling and Skehan, who helped to adapt them into neo-bluegrass numbers. Within a couple of months, the Railroad Earth line-up was rounded out by the addition of (drummer) Carey Harmon (a former member of The Hour and the Bobby Syvarth Band) and finally, upright bassist, Johnny Grubb.

The band is a fusion of influences and experiences. Carbone and Goessling have encountered musical genres as diverse as swing, bluegrass and R&B in their nearly 30 year history of musical partnerships, while Sheaffer is a singer/songwriter schooled on such icons as Dylan, the Dead, the Stones and Neil Young. With roots in the piano, Skehan plays the mandolin as if his fingers were dancing on the ivories. The group also brings together players of different ages and perspectives. “It’s sort of a multi-generational band, so there are influences that come from different moments in time,” says Sheaffer. “It’s those different energies coming together that have created our sound.”

Just three weeks after the original six band members jammed together for the very first time, they went into a local recording studio and laid down five songs, recorded live with no overdubs except backing vocals. On the strength of that demo alone, they landed a slot on the Telluride Bluegrass Festival, setting in motion the band’s nearly instantaneous rise to notoriety. That was their tenth gig.

To help get their music out to the public, the band returned to the studio to record another five songs exactly the same way, and released the ten demo tracks as their debut album. “The Black Bear Sessions” came out in June 2001, just before the Telluride Festival. The album received critical raves and opened

doors to many other festivals and venues around the country. Following their triumphant performance at Telluride 2001, the legendary Sugar Hill Records, home to Nickel Creek and Dolly Parton, offered the band a record deal. They accepted.

In June 2002, Railroad Earth's second album, "Bird in a House" was released on Sugar Hill Records. After a year of steady touring and strong sales of their debut album, the anticipation was high for "Bird in a House." The album lived up to the hype, receiving high critical praise from the press and Railroad Earth's fans, and showing strong steady sales throughout the U.S. and Europe. *Rolling Stone* best sums up the praise for the album, and Railroad Earth's musical style as a whole: "'On Bird in a House,' Sheaffer and Co. fully flesh out a string band with the loose, impromptu m.o. of back porch pickin'. [It is] less a traditional bluegrass recording than a stylistic celebration of the roots that helped form bluegrass and folk."

Railroad Earth's next album, "The Good Life" was released on June 8th, 2004 to rave reviews and steady sales. While *Bird in a House*, was more of an opportunity to showcase the group's mighty chops while preserving the strength and purity of their classic-sounding songs, on "The Good Life," Railroad Earth—with the help of producer Stewart Lerman (Loudon Wainwright III, Dar Williams)—focused more on serving the song in its purest form. Instead of recording an album of songs they'd initially performed live, these tracks were snapshots of the moment of their creation, arranged specifically to serve the studio experience.

The disc is still very much a Railroad Earth experience, lush with rich mandolins, acoustic guitars, violin, banjo, upright bass and many other musical surprises which confirm the band's talent extends far beyond even their live performances. Praise for the 11-track album, which the *Washington Post* said "mixes string-band instrumentation, freewheeling improvisation and folk-rock songwriting with contagious enthusiasm," continues to highlight this eclectic blend of musical genres and originality.

Performances with nationally-recognized acts such as Phil Lesh and Friends only helps to cement Railroad Earth's reputation as a musical powerhouse that must be heard to be believed. The band's growing legions of fans complete the live experience, and are so dedicated to crisscrossing the country for multiple-night runs with the band that they have earned themselves an aptly-termed moniker: hobos. With nearly 500 shows and tens of thousands of road miles now behind them, Railroad Earth has become a staple on the national touring and festival scene, and this train shows no signs of slowing down.