

Ryan Montbleau Band

Vocal styles reminiscent of the '70s funky R&B with stripped down blues songwriting



“Montbleau’s lyrics are fortified by the voice that delivers them. He mixes the narrative strengths of old-school story tellers like Dylan and Steve Forbert with the quivering melismas of R&B pop.”

— *The Boston Phoenix*

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“Time hangs heavy on the vine/Let’s make wine,” **Ryan Montbleau** sings in the lulling, sensual verse that gives his group’s new album its title. **Ryan Montbleau Band** has been tending its own musical vineyard for a few years, on the patient cusp of a breakthrough. Their distinctive, long-fermenting blend of neo-folk, classic soul, and kick-out-the-jams Americana finally comes to full fruition in *Heavy on the Vine*. It’s an album that represents the product of — and further promise of — a very good year.

Don’t worry if the classic sounds they’ve bottled up remain a little hard to put a label on. “I’m not one of these people who say ‘Oh, we can’t be pigeonholed.’ I honestly wish we could, just so I could describe it quickly to people,” says **Montbleau**. “This record has folk songs, funk songs, country tunes, a reggae tune . . . and the end is almost like prog-rock. It’s all over the map, but it’s all us, and we do it all wholeheartedly. We’ve sort of come up in the jam scene, and that’s where our hearts have been in a lot of ways, but we don’t go off on 15-minute epics. We’re actually trying to make the songs shorter as we go. So I would lean much more toward the Americana thing than the jam thing. But, more than anything, we’re definitely about the *song*.”

To that song-centric end, the sextet hooked up with one of **Montbleau’s** personal heroes, acclaimed singer/songwriter **Martin Sexton**. “I used to dream about getting to meet **Martin Sexton**,” says **Ryan**, “and now we’re getting hired as his backing band *and* he’s producing our record.” They started and finished recording it in two weeks, right before going out on **Sexton’s** tour.

Though he’s long since embraced the full-band ethos, **Montbleau** spent a number of years as an acoustic solo artist at the beginning of his career, so it’s no wonder that he’s making up for lost time by so fully embracing the range of stylistic possibilities fuller arrangements offer. Growing up in Peabody, Massachusetts, he got his first guitar at age nine, but didn’t get the bug to become a serious player or writer till he was attending Villanova University, and then there was no looking back. His first album (the out-of-print *Begin*.) was released in 2002, followed by the live *Stages* — precursors to the first **Montbleau Band** recording, *One Fine Color*, in 2006.

The unusual makeup of the band was somewhat accidental, as he tells it; he never had it in mind, for instance, that he needed a full-time viola player. “It just evolved over the years, because I really didn’t have a sound that I was going for,” he says, before qualifying that claim. “Well, I knew I wanted an upright bass, I guess. And I knew I wanted the drummer in some ways to be more of a jazz drummer than a straight-ahead rock drummer. But that was all I knew. I’ve personally always loved the B3 organ, but the keyboard approach really comes from **Jason (Cohen)**, who’s a vintage gear nut and tone junkie who loves old Rhodes, organs, Wurlitzers, Moogs, etc.”

Having a reputation as a quintessential live band — and surviving off that constant demand — is 90 percent blessing, 10 percent curse. “I used to try so hard just to get gigs, and now it’s like I’ve gotta beat ‘em away with a stick. We always have these opportunities to play, but we want to continue to buckle down and make the art better and keep making the tunes better.” And the shows do stand to get bigger, if the new project reaches its natural audiences: For all its eclecticism, *Heavy on the Vine* is the kind of album that screams “potential mainstream smash” more than obvious cult record — should the stars and mercurial market forces align.



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