



RYAN MONTBLEAU BAND

"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." Following an acoustic tour that Sexton and Montbleau did together as solo performers, Sexton hired the entire group to back him this spring and summer on a tour that included a run of shows opening stadium gigs for the Dave Matthews Band. While they were rehearsing, Martin heard some of Ryan's latest demos and immediately stuck his hand up, volunteering to produce the band's next record. They started and finished recording it in two weeks, right before going out on Sexton's tour. "Martin Sexton may not be a household name, but to me and so many others, he's a legend," Montbleau says. "But one thing he made clear from the start was that he didn't want his fingerprints to be on this record. He wanted us to just play and be us."

The "us"-ness of Ryan Montbleau Band comes through in *Heavy on the Vine* in vivid, funny, touching, and hummable spades. The opening "Slippery Road" playfully examines the fine line of moderation between inebriation and sobriety, a subject familiar to most of Montbleau's contemporaries and more than a few non-musicians. "Carry" is the purest love song Montbleau has ever written, and it's already been in demand as a wedding song by some romantics who've heard it being road-tested. "Fix Your Wings" deals with damage and healing in relationships, with tight gospel harmonies adding to the surprisingly sprightly feel. Both the rocking "Here at All" and the '20s-styled "Stay" address the itinerant musician's thwarted impulse to settle in one place for more than one night at a time. An admirer of Paul Simon, Montbleau reaches some of his greatest lyrical heights in the closing "Straw in the Wind," which asks, "Wouldn't it be nice . . . if you could reconcile the smile you want to feel with the one that you show?"

That last song confronts the duality of lost souls whose public faces don't match their private ones. Ironic, then, that — musically, if not personally — Ryan Montbleau Band revels in a kind of glorious and deliberate stylistic inconsistency.

But Montbleau's never been one to get too hung up on genre. "For the song 'More and More and More,' we had done another weirder version in the studio, with a strange old synthesizer. But Martin said, 'We need to try a Rolling-Stones-in-Nashville, country version of this,' with an

untuned upright piano they had in the studio. And it turned out great. For another kind of country thing, 'I Can't Wait,' I always had in mind that sort of 1/5 Johnny Cash feel. It was all Martin's idea to add a gospel element to 'Fix Your Wings.' On the other hand, 'Songbird' was always supposed to be a reggae tune.

"We just have fun playing all these things. We try to do our homework, too, because we'll go back to some Johnny Cash recordings or Bob Marley recordings or whatever it is to try to get our playing better. But I hope no one ever takes it that we're faking this authentic music or something, when we bounce around so much. We're not trying to force it, or going 'Hey, we need a calypso tune!' We just write tunes, and whatever style suits it, we try to play it as best we can."

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."

By the time of the group's second release, *2007's Patience on Friday*, the Montbleau Band was well established in the pantheon of hometown heroes. That year, the frontman was named best male vocalist at the Boston Music Awards. But "the whole Northeast is kind of our hometown," points out Montbleau. "Those are our biggest shows. You get used to that reception, and then you leave and you're playing Sioux Falls, South Dakota to 15 people on a Monday night. That's rough in a way, but also very good in a way." They're perceived differently in different regions, which offers the opportunity for constant set-tweaking and reinvention. "Some people in the Northeast see us as this party band. But in other places, like Minneapolis, we play mostly listening rooms, so we're seen that way there. Last summer, we played the main stage of the Gathering of the Vibes—a huge jam festival we've been doing for years—in the afternoon, for 20,000 hippie kids camped out by the ocean. And then that night we went to Falcon Ridge, a huge old folk festival, and played the main stage for a hillside of really attentive adults. Just the fact that we can do both those things in one day shows me that what we do is appealing to a lot of different kinds of people."

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. We can't gig ourselves to death. We need to take some time off to create, but that can be difficult to pull off financially. As the shows get bigger, we take in enough money that we can live, and it all continues to get better. I think, what if we didn't do 200 gigs a year, but just did 150? We're working on that." 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.

No one should accuse Montbleau of being aspirationally challenged. His dreams are laid out with half-serious grandeur in "Chariot (I Know)," a centerpiece anthem on the new album. "I

want to run up every mountain/I want to wade through every ocean/I want to gaze upon these fields from clouds above," Montbleau sings, before moving on from the sublime to the absurd with his tongue-in-cheek need to "start off each day swimming/Meet me 18,000 women." From there, he couldn't be clearer that the sky is the limit, even if his feet are well-planted: "I want everyone to love all the words I sing/But the world's too big, the world's too big, I know. . . "

Abject realism and a sense of limitless possibility coexist in Montbleau's ever-ripening mind. "For the last 10 years, I've had this insane desire to just go out there and do this. And I face the realities that, okay, I'm 33 and I'm not selling out stadiums yet. I get more realistic as I go and I also get more appreciative of just being able to do this at all. My goal for a few years when I was starting out was to make a living off playing music, and now I've been doing that for seven years or so, and the goals change as you go. Now the goal is to spend more time practicing and writing and creating, and a little less time doing all the business stuff. These are interesting times. And no matter how many good people you have around you, you still have to be the CEO and run things."

Tempted as Montbleau might be to look toward the big picture, not losing sight of the small one is why the band has maintained such a loyal and evangelistically inclined base. "I still go back to my original philosophy of just one person at a time," he says. "I never even told people 'Bring your friends to the show' at the beginning, because it wasn't about them bringing their friends, it was about them bringing themselves. I'm trying to focus on the one person, because if they come and like it, they *are* going to bring their friends. We're still grass roots in that way." No surprise, then, that those well-tended roots have sprung up into such pregnant vines.

James Cohen ~ drums
Jason Cohen ~ keys
Matt Giannaros ~ bass, vocals
Ryan Montbleau ~ guitar, lead vocals
Laurence Scudder ~ viola, vocals
Yahuba ~ percussion, vocals

Discography

2002 *Begin.* (solo)
2003 *Stages* (solo, live)
2006 *One Fine Color*
2007 *Patience on Friday*
2009 *Stages: Volume II* (solo, live)
2010 *Heavy on the Vine*

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