

SPRUCE PINE

Traditional, but fresh Bluegrass from the Netherlands

They carry with them the legacy of the legendary bluegrass singer and songwriter Charlie Moore who used to live in the little mountain village of Spruce Pine in the great state of North Carolina.

Ever since 1977 they spread the word of bluegrass around Europe and try to win the souls of men for it. Slow-

● Paul Wolters

grass family band and with that they have expanded their range of material. Lou Reid (USA) said: "Spruce Pine pride themselves in doing original material, which I think is great and a little more on the creative side, than just doing traditional tunes". And Milan Leppelt (CZ) wrote: "Their bluegrass impressed me from the first moment". So here is the story of the Spruce Pine Bluegrass Band.

Paul Wolters: How did you become involved with bluegrass music?

Dennis: First of all I became heavily influenced by the sounds of country music. My father played the guitar in a sort of jazzy style to the music of Glenn Miller. He had learned a lot of old country songs, when serving as a soldier in the Canadian army that had liberated The Netherlands. He went with them to Germany and after they left, he served a couple of years in the Royal Air Force and also played in the RAF station band at Luebeck Airfield. During that time he listened to every broadcast of the Grand Ole Opry on AFN and fell in love with the music of Hank Williams and Hank Snow. He sang songs like "Waiting For A Train", "The Lovesick Blues", and even "Mein Vater war ein Appenzeller", complete with the yodels! He later taught me to play the guitar on the tune of the "Wabash Cannonball". From my pocket money I bought every record with the title "country music" on it until I came upon a Starday LP with some

bluegrass songs on it. I really liked them and preferred them to play along with on my father's guitar, because they were more interesting to play than the "just strumming" country songs.

PW: Why did you name your band Spruce Pine, what does it mean?

Dennis: Spruce Pine does not mean a whole lot, sometimes the expression is used for a very straight pine tree. But, also, it is the name of the little community in the woody hills of North Carolina, a place where bluegrass legend Charlie Moore - originally from Piedmont, South Carolina - lived when I met him in 1974. I was working as a youth counselor in Massachusetts and was hitchhiking around and I met him at Smokey Green's festival. He wanted to come to Europe, just as his friend Alan Mundy did before him, while playing with Country Gazette. I promised I would see what I could do, but found no promoter interested in booking a US bluegrass act. I then approached a Dutch and Belgian radio station that organized a country show on a yearly basis. They were interested and from there on I organized a three weeks European tour for him. He asked me to play lead guitar for him. We had a great time. We also recorded two LPs, one of which was issued on the Philips label, called "T for Texas". After he had gone home in December 1976, he left me with the desire to go on, not playing along with records like I did before, but to form a band. I formed Spruce Pine with a couple of fellow students from Leiden and our first gig was on April 5th 1977. We did a lot of student gigs but also played a nightclub in Amsterdam called Boddy's Music Inn.

PW: What is so special about Charlie's music? What other favorites do you have?

Dennis: I like Charlie's music because of his good voice, his great songwriting and understanding of the old country traditions. He wrote many good songs like "I'm Leaving Detroit", "Lorena Go



Home", "The Fiddler", "The legend Of The Rebel Soldier", "Kentucky Girl" etc. I learned a lot by just standing next to him on the stage. I have a lot of favorites in music, both from the country and from the bluegrass field, like Hank Williams Sr. and Hank Snow, Johnny Horton and George Jones (esp. on Starday records) and also Don Reno & Red Smiley, Keith Whitley and Larry Sparks, Jim Eanes, a great singer whom we have accompanied on a couple of European tours and Dave Evans. Also I like Lou Reid's powerful music a lot as well as many of the good Czech bands. Of the girl singers I especially like Becky Schlegel & True Blue and Rhonda Vincent.

PW: Ralph, how did you start out in bluegrass music?

Ralph: There was always music in our home, country and bluegrass music. Me and my brothers, we all got a ukelele at birth. My dad started teaching me the basics on the guitar when I was 6. At that age I got my first guitar then - an old Martin 00-18 - and mandolin and I went on from there, my main influence being the recordings of the Bluegrass Album Band in the first few years. Later I turned to the sound of the Lonesome River Band. When I discovered the sounds of Scott Vestal I really became interested in the banjo and picked it up at the age of 14. My first banjo was a nice blonde Ibanez my Dad gave me, but now I absolutely love my Janish banjo, handbuilt by Pavel Janish in the Czech Republic. Lately I have also been experimenting with the fiddle.

PW: Is the banjo your main instrument?

Ralph: No, not really, it is at the time. I became a band member when I was 11, playing lead guitar on a tour through Austria and Slovakia, we played the Dobro Fest. After a while I switched to the mandolin and later to the banjo, depending on what we needed in the band. During a show I also switch instruments. In 1997 I was asked to play the mandolin in the band of Stan



Spruce
Pine,
1991

PW: What is your opinion about the band's repertoire? What are your favorites?

Ralph: I like to play these songs as I prefer the more traditional kind of bluegrass, so it suits me well. I am interested in newer styles of bluegrass but not so much in newgrass or very progressive stuff. For example I really like Dan Tyminski and his recordings with the Lonesome River Band, but I also love Ralph Stanley and Larry Sparks. I do admit that my playing is not completely traditional, but I like to experiment starting from a traditional basis. The structure of songs should not be too complicated but they can of course - and maybe even must - be innovative. There is no need to try and duplicate what has already been done years ago, the music must continue to grow and develop.

Christopher: I like most of the bands repertoire and suggest new songs every now and then, like for instance Mr. Spaceman, the title song of the new CD. It would be nice to find more pop songs, suited for the bluegrass style and rework them to fit the band. It could be one way to find a wider audience for bluegrass. Some of my favorites are Monogram, Alison Krauss & Union Station, and good CDs with assembled artists like Bluegrass '95.

PW: Christopher, you play the acoustic bass, but I heard you also play electric lead guitar as well, how does this fit in?

Christopher: It doesn't fit in. I have set up my own band for that. It is called The Rampage and we play songs by Guns 'n Roses and more. I like that a whole lot, but I also like playing bluegrass. I like the fact that many of the bluegrass fans are musicians as well. I like going places with the band, meeting people. Every festival is like a family reunion and I like to jam a lot with the other musicians around. Especially in the Czech Republic that bluegrass scene is just great for jamming day and night. We know a lot of the musicians there.

PW: What attracts you in playing in a bluegrass band?

Christopher: I like the many breaks that bluegrass songs have, the positive and happy sounding melodies. For my bass playing I prefer songs where I can work a little on the bass, the more interesting melody lines. But I also like to play the guitar and mandolin when I get the chance.

PW: Tell me something about the bands recordings

Dennis: I made my first recordings while playing with Charlie Moore in 1976, we cut about 25 songs. Then a year later I recorded a mini LP with the Dutch trio AG & Kate, playing lead guitar and in 1981 we cut an LP in Vienna with some Austrian bluegrass friends, calling ourselves "The Loser Mountain Boys", after the Loser Berg in Altausse in Styria. Then in 1989 we were asked to record an album for an Austrian Hitsound label. The LP was called Spruce Pine - "Won't You Sometimes Think Of Me?" after a demo song by Hank Williams, which we re-worked. It contains about six we wrote ourselves. Then in 1994 we recorded the CD "A Tribute To Charlie Moore" for the Strictly Bluegrass label from Nashville. We did 14 lesser know songs by Charlie Moore, while the CD also contains 30 minutes Charlie Moore live on radio. Also we recorded for the IBMA - International Bluegrass CD and a couple of other various artists LPs and CD's. On most recordings we feature Ingeborg Schultze on mandolin and vocals and she is still a regular bandmember. In October 2000 we presented our newest release on the "sexy" Viagrass Records label from the Czech Republic. It shows very

much the influence of the "young generation" like Ralph en Christopher and also it reflects the accomplishments of the work of the European Bluegrass Network. It is no coincidence that we feature 5 of our Czech friends from that heart of European Bluegrass. Roman Zajicek now is a regular member of the band with his fabulous dobro playing and singing. He also builds the most wonderful bluegrass instruments like his birdseye maple RoZa dobro and my exact replica of Red Smiley's prewar Martin D-45, a masterpiece! Then there is the beautiful voice of Karolina Stranska, a member of the Czech EWOB award winning band Lusatian Grass, top mandolin player Zdenek Jahoda and the great fiddler of the 50 Fingers band Pepa Malina.

We also feature three songs by Czech songwriters, even one in the Czech language! The recording of these 19 songs was great fun!

PW: What are the future plans for Spruce Pine?

Dennis: The main thing is we would like to go on playing and touring and bringing bluegrass music to the attention of new audiences, winning new souls. We are planning a 2001 summer tour with dates in Austria, The Czech and Slovak Republic and maybe Germany. Also we are invited to play a couple of dates in England again, which we like very much. Then we have about 25 rough recording made with Charlie Moore in 1976 and 1979. We would like to finish and issue them as they contain great songs. Other plans contain the making of a CD with bluegrass songs aimed at children and also a CD, focussing on duetsongs between Karolina Stranska and Ralph and maybe a few duets between Lilly Drumeva and myself.

Other than that I would like to go on helping to further the European Bluegrass scene through the EBMA and organising the EWOB festivals as well as conducting scientific promotion research into the origins and the influences of bluegrass music in Europe. That should result in a book within a couple of years.

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