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Minnesota *Bluegrass*

Anthony Ihrig Celebrating the Bonds of Music

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Cover Story

Anthony Ihrig

The Show Must Stream On

by Derek Johnson

It was shortly after the COVID shutdown went into effect that Anthony Ihrig woke up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. He had not caught the terrible virus, rather the sleeplessness was caused by the realization that his professional life was now completely on hold. For the past decade Anthony has been making his way through life as a self-employed musician and music instructor. Self-employment is not an easy road but at least you can't be downsized or laid off. Even during the down times there is always a market for music. That is, until now. It was certainly stressful knowing his income was in peril, but what Anthony found even more troubling was the effect the shutdown would have on his social connections and the camaraderie with fellow musicians, students and fans. After all, what bluegrass lacks in its mass appeal it makes up for in the incredibly strong community that encompasses the genre.

Like so many self-employed people, Anthony was, more or less, in control of his schedule. This allowed him to provide care for his daughters during the day while his wife was at work. It also allowed week nights to take on banjo students and weekends to perform with his band The High 48s. Now he was staring at a completely blank schedule and it was daunting. Yes, the loss of income would be a challenge, but let's be honest, bluegrass musicians aren't in it for the money. In fact, they are used to getting by on very little. No, the real challenge would be the

loss of community and the food for the soul which that community provides. So, that evening Anthony was determined to find a way to stay connected to the music.

It takes a resourceful person to thrive in the music business. Musical talent is only part of the equation. The more skills one can bring to the table the better chance one has of success. Anthony is a man of many talents, and in the age of COVID one skill came to the forefront. Simply put, Anthony is a geek. These days being a 'geek' doesn't mean one wears high water pants and has tape holding their glasses together; instead it is a title given to a person who possesses computer

couldn't gather to make music, either live or in the studio, Anthony knew there was no need for a show promoting their latest activities. Therefore, he would conduct interviews which focused on an artists' past recordings. In fact, he thought it would be interesting to focus on a particular past album. They would listen to some preferred tracks, discuss how the songs were written, how the songs were recorded and how the album was produced. The show would be called "Back Catalog Listening Party."

Now that he had a concept Anthony realized it would be beneficial to have a partner in this endeavor. The first person

who came to mind was Ellen Stanley (aka Mother Banjo). Ellen has years of experience hosting her own radio show named Womenfolk, on KFAI FM. Thus, she has plenty of experience as a media personality and interviewer. Ellen also has many connections within the acoustic music scene from her years working at

Red House records. She has also developed many close relationships with Minnesota musicians during her time as the executive director of the Minnesota Music Coalition. Currently Ellen heads her own company called EFS Publicity where she helps advance the careers of many talented artists. Finally, Ellen is a singer, songwriter and banjo player. With all of her talents and connections, Ellen Stanley was a perfect fit. Evidently Ellen thought so too because when Anthony approached her, she immediately said 'yes!'



skills and technical savvy.

Aside from knowing his way around computers, Anthony has also developed many marketing and promotional skills. He has learned how to design websites, create posters, generate e-newsletters, navigate social media, produce creative videos and engineer high quality audio recordings. He was now ready for his next technical challenge. He would learn the art of "live streaming."

The first step was to come up with a concept for a show. Since musicians

It's easy to brainstorm an idea and to draw up tentative plans, but it's a very different thing to bring those ideas to fruition. Anthony would now rely on one of his most important talents, determination. His best move thus far was asking Ellen to work with him because she too is a person of action. As Anthony was diving into the technical aspects of producing the show, Ellen got to work contacting potential guests and working on an interview format. They did not suffer any "paralysis by analysis." Instead, they figured the best way to test Anthony's new concept was to dive right in. Thus, from the time Anthony pitched the show to Ellen to the time of their first live stream only five days had passed. On March 20, 2020, the Back Catalog Listening Party became a reality. The first

episode featured the two hosts, Anthony and Ellen, kicking off the new show with a preview of what was to come.

Prior to launch, the first thing Anthony and Ellen did was ask themselves one simple question, "who do we know?" As it happens the two of them know many talented musicians with connections extending well beyond the Minneapolis music scene. However, their first guests were the beloved Minneapolis string band The Roe Family Singers. Some of the other bluegrass and old-time guests have been: Becky Schlegel, Monroe Crossing, Becky Buller, Chris Silver, Mark Kreitzer, The Barley Jacks, Robbie Fulks, Pert Near Sandstone, Art Stevenson, Eric Christopher, Dom Flemons, Special Consensus and The Okee Dokee Brothers.

The Back Catalog Listening Party doesn't feature bluegrass-related acts exclusively. One could say their overarching genre is roots music with an emphasis on acoustic music. Thus, the show has featured many other great performers such

as: Dakota Dave Hull, Dean Magraw, John Gorka, Sam Miltich, Eliza Gilkyson, Martin Zellar and The Wailin' Jennys.

Whereas most interview formatted shows tend to focus on a musician's latest release, the Back Catalog Listening Party is all about reflection. The artists are asked to pick a favorite past recording and discuss how it came to be. They reflect upon the writing and gathering of material as well as the personnel involved in the recording process. The artists also share

some interesting stories and anecdotes from their personal lives. A bit of time has passed since many of the albums were produced, so it has offered a unique opportunity for the musicians to view their work in hindsight. Anthony states, "The making of an album is a kind of journey. So, to discuss this process is kind of a journey in itself." He has also noted how the artist's perception of their material has evolved over time. Some songs mean different things to them now than when they were created.

A unique feature of the Back Catalog Listening Party is that the hosts and the artists appear together on screen when listening to the songs. This gives you the sense that you are all in the same room listening to music together. Another great feature of the show is the ability for viewers to add comments and ask questions in real time. This not only adds to the feeling of community but allows fans to give instant feedback to the artist about what their music means to them. Let's face it,

musicians involved in the less commercial world of acoustic roots music aren't the highest paid acts in the entertainment business. When the road gets rocky many artists ask themselves, "Why do I do this?" Well, on the Back Catalog Listening Party, musicians get that instant feedback, which provides them with a sense of purpose. It allows them to have a connection with an appreciative audience, which is the greatest currency for any musician.

In fact, Anthony says that when an episode concludes countless guests have said, "Thank you for doing this."

One of the most poignant shows to date was a recent episode dedicated to the memory of Peter Ostroushko. Sadly, the renowned Minnesota musician passed away in March. A few weeks later, for their 52nd episode, the Back Catalog Listening Party featured Ostroushko's *Heart of the Heartland* album.

Ellen invited her Red House Record friends, Dean Magraw, Rich Dworsky and Eric Peltoniemi to join the show and reflect upon the music and artistry of Peter Ostroushko. It was a wonderful and beautiful tribute to an amazing talent. You can watch this episode, and all past episodes of the Back Catalog Listening party, on YouTube. There are a lot of great episodes to choose from, but I consider this one a must see.

If the weekly show with Ellen wasn't enough, Anthony has also been involved in producing other live streaming events. Shortly after creating the Listening Party, Anthony was approached by the producer of the Land of 10,000 Streams Online Music Festival. Like Anthony, the creator of the event, Alan Bengtson, was determined to carry on with music during the shutdown. He wanted to pull off a three-day, live streaming music festival. And like Anthony, it was all new to him. So shortly after learning the basics of live streaming, Anthony was now an advi-



sor for another live streaming event. He brought his emcee abilities to the festival conducting interviews with the likes of Charlie Parr and Ryan Young, as well as John Munson & Dylan Hicks. The festival also featured Anthony performing his first ever live streamed, solo set of music.

When 2020 finally came to an end, and with the shutdown still in place, Anthony took all his newly found expertise and led his band The High 48s in two months of weekly live streams. Every January and February The High 48s have had a standing gig on Saturday mornings called the Bluegrass Brunch. It usually takes place at the Aster Café, which is located across the river from downtown Minneapolis on a historic cobblestone street named St. Anthony Main. The band has kept the tradition alive for the past decade and the idea of missing a year seemed unbearable to them. The obvious solution was to replace it with a series of live streaming shows.

At the packed Aster Café, the Bluegrass Brunch consists of the band performing two sets of highly energized bluegrass music. The online version would be a little different. The technology doesn't yet exist where bands can play together via the internet. Because of a small delay, known as latency, it is hard for musicians to play in sync, especially music that involves the rapid-fire assault of the banjo. Instead, every week for the first 30 minutes, Anthony and fellow bandmembers Eric Christopher and Clint Birtzer took turns playing solo numbers. Bluegrass musicians are used to playing in an ensemble. Performing bluegrass songs solo is a challenge but the three pulled it off beautifully. Anthony took the opportunity to sing some of his original material while accompanying himself on clawhammer banjo, which is new musical

territory for him.

Every week The High 48s invited a different musical guest to join them for the second half of the Bluegrass Brunch. Some of these guests were: Art & Stephanie Stevenson, Chris Silver, Nate Sipe, the band Back Up & Push and, streaming live from Switzerland, Minnesotan Catie Jo Pidel's acoustic trio Caludo. As the guest musicians performed, Anthony, Eric and Clint played the role of on-screen audi-



ence members. In between songs there was a lot of fun interaction between the musicians as well as written comments coming in from the viewing public. In fact, the witty banter was often as entertaining as the music itself. It is this room for interaction which has made these live streams so endearing. It is what Anthony refers to as the "Big Idea." He stated, "I feel like the interaction has been the key to creating connection and community." He goes on to say, "It is really gratifying to see people interacting with each other in the live comments. It might be old friends saying hello or strangers discovering a shared connection but it is real human interaction and you can sense the joy in their dialogue. People really want to connect with each other and we can provide them a space to do that."

Anthony patiently awaits the day when he can return to the stage and play live music with his bandmates. The High 48s will be back at it this summer starting with outdoor shows including an appearance at MBOTMA's August Blue-

grass Festival. In fact, they will be hosting MBOTMA's Jam Camp. If you want to learn how to play bluegrass better, from a talented group of musicians, you should definitely sign up.

It's been a frustrating year for musicians as well as for those who love watching musicians practice their craft. However, Anthony Ihrig and his fellow artists took what they were given and did their best to keep their little piece of the music community alive. In fact, the Back Catalog Listening Party has been such a success that Anthony and Ellen plan to continue producing the show even after this health crisis subsides. So, what turned out to be a stop gap measure has turned into a new institution.

You can catch the show live every Friday at 4pm CST on YouTube. You can also watch all past episodes on YouTube. You can find out more about the show, and even become a Patreon supporter, by visiting their website at BackCatalogListeningParty.com

It's seems like a long time now since the shutdown caused Anthony to wake up in a panic. His public movements may have been restricted but not his creative spirit. Instead of seeking isolation, the shutdown inspired Anthony and his collaborators to carve out a new direction. His talent and drive have not only kept him going during these difficult times, but has also lifted the spirits of so many others. "Even when large in-person gatherings return I believe live streaming will continue to be used in creative ways," Anthony speculates. "To me, the power of music is its ability to bring people together. While live streams can't rival an in-person musical experience, it makes that experience accessible to more people and is another great way to grow a community."