

Amy Gallatin, Roger Williams, and Stillwaters: From New England to the Heart of England

Angie Boothroyd plays fiddle in The Jolenes. Here Angie gives us an insight into the world of Amy Gallatin and Stillwaters

If I were a bluegrass travel agent, I'd send my customers straight to New England. Not Nashville, not the Appalachian mountains. Though perhaps not the first place you'd associate with bluegrass, New England is the genre's best-kept secret, with a thriving scene boasting some of the best musicians in the country.

It was in 1993 that Amy Gallatin packed her guitar and headed east to Connecticut to record her first solo album, *Northern Girl*; she returned to Idaho only to find the pull of the USA's historic north-eastern states too strong to resist, and moved to New England for good the following year. Six albums later, Amy and her band, Amy Gallatin, Roger Williams, and Stillwaters are making their best music so far and are about to embark on their first tour of the UK and Ireland.

The current lineup comprises Amy Gallatin on guitar and vocals, Roger Williams on resophonic guitar and vocals, JD Williams (Roger's son) on mandolin, guitar, and vocals, and Eric Levenson on double bass. And for this particular tour, with the exception of the Scotland dates, the band will be joined by talented fiddle champion Kimber Ludiker.

The current scene in New England has its roots in the 1960s at what was then called Club 47 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Located at 47 Mount Auburn Street, it was a seminal venue on the folk scene, boasting up-and-coming singer/songwriters such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. In 1963 the club moved round the corner to Palmer Street, and by city ordinance the new address was declared to be number 47. The name was later changed to Passim (You would have thought that after all the trouble they'd have stuck with the name!) and it was here that the bluegrass scene started kicking off.

"The special thing about New England is the coffee houses," says Roger. There is a strong tradition of small venues putting on acoustic acts in the area. Bluegrass in particular is more often found at festivals, and in the summer, these are plentiful.

Amy Gallatin, Roger Williams, and Stillwaters are equally at home playing cafes, festivals, and at Cantab's Lounge, whose Tuesday night bluegrass jam has been fuelling the Cambridge scene for the last decade and a half. Neighbouring Berklee College of Music in Boston, the country's most prestigious musical institution, even offers majors in fiddle or banjo these days, providing a font of players who spill out into jams and form bands throughout the New England states.

Stillwaters bass player Eric Levenson is not only the band's musical anchor; he also provides the link to the area's heady bluegrass days of the 1970s.

In 1970 Eric moved in with some musicians, who promptly shoved a washtub bass into his hands. It wasn't easy to play. "The thing about the washtub," he says, "you have to be a really good musician to play it." With no musical background whatsoever, Eric found it a bit of a struggle. And so to save their new bassist (and themselves) any further musical distress, the household decided to chip in and buy Eric his first real double bass.

"I was in the right place at the right time," says Eric. It was a small scene back then, where everyone knew each other. Eric soon got

to know Joe Val of the legendary Joe Val and the New England Bluegrass Boys, the area's best known and loved bluegrass outfit.

Eric recalls one night that Joe's band was playing at Passim's: The bass player would sometimes put down the bull fiddle and play twin mandolin with Joe. One this occasion, Eric seized the opportunity and jumped up on stage and grabbed the bass. "I'm not sure how invited I was," he admits. An invitation was certainly extended at some point; Eric ended up as Joe's bass player, recording several albums with him and playing on many tours.

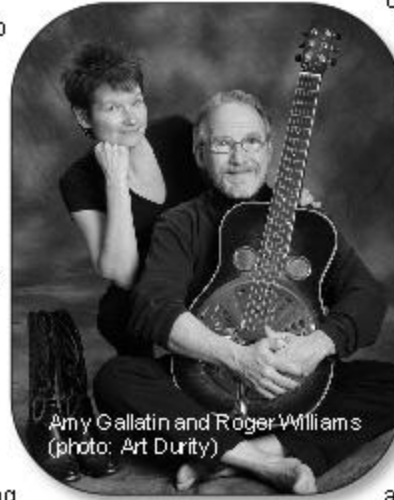
Eric has kept busy on the bass ever since, whether jamming with friends at Cantab's, or with his long-standing house band, Boston City Limits. (Originally called Leicester Flatt, named after Leicester Street where Eric lived, the band was advised to change their name to something more obviously American, and therefore more marketable overseas.)

Roger Williams, another native New Englander, is regarded as one of the best resophonic guitar players in the country. He grew up in Lawrence, Massachusetts in a highly musical family. His mother was Gerry Lee, a famous country singer in the area at the time, and his dad was Curley Williams, who played the Dobro. Gerry would often sing around the house, and from a very young age, Roger would sing along with her, developing an intuitive sense of harmony.

It was Josh Graves' Dobro work with Flatt & Scruggs that brought bluegrass to Roger's attention. He found the use of the resophonic was a "smoother approach to the bluegrass genre." He goes on to explain, "The Dobro is a very emotive instrument, much like the violin." He picked up the Dobro for the first time as a young teenager and, with a few tips from his dad, learned it quickly. Within a year he was already sitting in with a well known band in the area, the Lilly Brothers and Don Stover, at the world famous Hillbilly Ranch in Boston, Massachusetts. Since then he's had an amazing career as a resophonic guitar player, playing with several big bluegrass acts including Joe Val and the New England Bluegrass Boys, where he first met Eric Levenson in 1980.

Roger's son, JD, is carrying on the family tradition as a gifted multi-instrumentalist in his own right, and is now a permanent member of Stillwaters, playing mandolin and guitar. As Amy puts it, "Roger and JD just have this musical consanguinity"; the onstage chemistry is exquisite.

Meanwhile, Amy Gallatin was bounding around the country, singing and playing cowboy songs and country covers everywhere from California to Montana. She even spent a few years as a guest entertainer at a dude ranch in Idaho. "They'd bring my guitar in on a snowmobile and then stick it in front of the fire," she says. (Fortunately, that wasn't the Martin!) Her location may have



Amy Gallatin and Roger Williams
(photo: Art Durity)

Amy Gallatin (contd.)

varied, but never did her aim waver. "I have to breathe, I have to eat, I have to do music," she says, matter-of-factly. Amy's voice hits you like a refreshing warm breeze, her perfect diction and crystal-clear tone seemingly effortless and at the same time passionate. "For me, singing is about conveying emotion," she says. It's hard to believe she is self-taught.

Her interest is in finding great songs to sing and doesn't feel the need to write her own material. "I don't like the 'Here's a song I wrote about my cat' thing," she says.

Her influences are broad, ranging from Emmylou Harris to the Everly Brothers. It was Linda Ronstadt's voice that she strove to imitate when she was teaching herself to sing, and she also cites BB King and blues singer Koko Taylor as influences. Her unique voice is as warm as her personality, and perfectly suited to bluegrass, country, as well as just about any style she cares to sing.

While wintering in New England in 1992, Amy met a mandolin player, Kevin Lynch, who offered to produce an album for her. Amy initially regarded the album as something she might be able to sell to the tourists back at the ranch. As it happened, *Northern Girl* did get a bit of airplay, inspiring Amy to move to Connecticut permanently to pursue her music with all the great musicians she'd met there.

She went on to record two more studio albums in the 1990s, including *The Long Way Home*, a collaboration with Grammy Award-winning Nashville producer Rich Adler, plus a live album recorded on tour in Europe.

But by 2004, Amy was having doubts. Stillwaters wasn't happening and she found herself at a low point with the demise of her all-girl group, Amy Gallatin and the Hot Flashes. ("Kind of like the Dixie Chicks, but given our ages, more like the Dixie Hens.") Casting around for musicians to resurrect Stillwaters, she got back in touch with Roger Williams who she'd done some work with in the past. Although he lived three hours away, in New Hampshire, he lent his full support and encouragement via email, urging Amy to carry on with her music. The two started going to gigs together, harmonising in the car – and the magic, both personal and professional, began. "I was really amazed at his voice and how good a singer he was; he wasn't really known for that, only for his superb Dobro playing," Amy says. "I was also quite flattered that he would deign to sing with me, this Mighty Musician." In the summer of 2005, Roger moved to Connecticut and Amy even gave up her day job just so the two of them could spend more time playing music together.

In 2007 they recorded *Something 'Bout You*, a country album of what one critic called "gutbucket duets". Whereas Amy sounds like she's never so much as been in the same room as a cigarette, Roger's vocals have a slight nicotine tinge which makes them sound all the more heartfelt. Put the two together, and it's finer than whiskey on the rocks. When you hear their jaunty yet heartrending version of Webb Pierce's "I Don't Care", you can imagine what that eureka moment must have been like in the car. "I... don't... care!" Amy's voice soars down the phone to me when I mention it. "I never get tired of singing

that song!"

In 2008 Amy got Stillwaters going again and they recorded the *Phoenix* album, an eclectic collection of rowdy bluegrass toe-tappers, obscure country covers, and self-penned tracks from Roger. "We're not one of those bands that just does the traditional bluegrass classics," Roger explains. Instead they draw from a range of American roots classics and obscure country gems; their sound is smooth but not over-polished; they manage to maintain an energy and an authenticity in their note-perfect playing.

Stillwaters has seen a few changes in the past, but the lineup for the UK and Ireland tour is tighter than ever. It is fluid enough, however, to allow for guest musicians, such as fiddler Kimber Ludiker, who will be joining Stillwaters for this tour, with the exception of the Scotland dates. "She's like nobody I've ever heard," Amy says. "And check this out," she says conspiringly, "Kimber's mom and dad met at a fiddle contest where they were competing, and her mom *kicked her dad's ass!*" The competitive spirit hasn't been lost on Kimber, who's gone on to win multiple fiddle championships throughout the country.

Expect to hear an exciting mixture of bluegrass, some grassed-up country duets, familiar and unfamiliar, as well as some of Roger's catchy originals. "To finally be able to bring music to the UK is huge for me," Amy enthuses, "It's beyond my wildest dreams".

Amy Gallatin, Roger Williams, and Stillwaters will be touring the UK and Ireland from September 3rd to 26th. For dates and venues visit www.amygallatin.com and click on 'concerts.'

By Angie Boothroyd

Catch up with Angie at www.myspace.com/thejolenesuk

