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Thunder A-Coming

Skaggs, ETSU Pride Band to provide masterful mix of music

Ricky Skaggs has played with country and bluegrass legends such as Bill Monroe, Flatt & Scruggs, Ralph Stanley, J.D. Crowe and Emmylou Harris, performed at Carnegie Hall and been a member of the Grand Ole Opry for more than 30 years. In recent years, Skaggs himself has been dubbed a legend, although he told a Kentucky PBS host, “I don’t know that I will ever reach legendary status … I’m just an old country boy.”

On Saturday, March 28, the old country boy from Cordell, Ky., and his band, Kentucky Thunder, will bring “An Evening of Bluegrass” to ETSU’s Martha Street Culp Auditorium beginning at 7:30 p.m.

The ETSU Bluegrass Pride Band is featured as the concert’s opening act. “Our bluegrass program has had a long-term relationship with Ricky Skaggs so it only seems fitting that we actually bring Ricky to ETSU for a concert,” says Anita DeAngelis, director of concert sponsor, Mary B. Martin School of the Arts at ETSU.

“Many ETSU students credit Ricky Skaggs as influencing their music to a large degree,” says Daniel Boner, director of ETSU’s Bluegrass, Old Time and Country Music Studies. “He is an expert musician, vocalist and entertainer, grounded in the traditions and culture of the Appalachian Mountains. It is an honor to have Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder at ETSU, the ‘home of bluegrass, old time and country music in higher education.’ ”

The concert is also the featured entertainment for the 2015 Appalachian Studies Association Conference being held at ETSU March 27-29.

According to guitarist Chet Atkins, Skaggs, “single-handedly saved country music.” Since playing for his idol, Bill Monroe, at the age of 6, and bluegrass patriarch Ralph Stanley’s band as a young professional musician, Skaggs has won 14 Grammys and successfully brought an American music tradition to a general audience.

Skaggs and the band provide their own blend of bluegrass, country, old-time and gospel music. The mix includes classics from greats such as the Stanley Brothers, Flatt & Scruggs and Doc Watson, as well as a nod to Django Reinhardt and Skaggs’ originals. Between songs, Skaggs
shares tales of his father, bluegrass greats, experiences on the road and his faith, liberally sprinkled with his down-home wisdom.

No matter the genre or songwriter and after 40 years of professional musicianship, Skaggs’ performances continue to draw high praise from reviewers. The Lincoln (Neb.) Journal Star calls Skaggs “perhaps the best country mandolin player ever … with fast, fiery soulful playing.”

“Skaggs and his band are just about the best bluegrass has to offer,” says Seattle Times reviewer Owen Smith.

Skaggs counts the current configuration of Kentucky Thunder among the best group of musicians he has ever worked with. “Each and every one of the pickers in Kentucky Thunder totally amazes me in every show,” he says.

Kentucky Thunder has won the International Bluegrass Music Association award for Instrumental Group of the Year eight times. The band includes Paul Brewster on rhythm guitar and tenor vocals; Andy Leftwich on fiddle; Cody Kilby on lead guitar; Eddie Faris on baritone vocals and guitar; Scott Mulvahill on bass and bass vocals; and Russ Carson on banjo.

“Ricky’s band Kentucky Thunder boast artists of the highest virtuosity, not only in bluegrass music, but in all music, period,” Boner says.

Since 1997, Skaggs has been producing his own music on his own record label, Skaggs Family Records. These albums include: Grammy-winning Bluegrass Rules!, Ancient Tones, Soldier of the Cross, Big Mon: The Songs of Bill Monroe, and most recently, Hearts Like Ours featuring Skaggs’ wife, Sharon White of The Whites. “I have to make music that I like,” Skaggs told Western Kentucky University PBS. “I have to make music that makes me feel good, that moves my heart.

“I feel like my fans are happy when I am happy – because the quality of what I try to do is always a high standard.”

More information about Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder can be found online at http://skaggsfamilyrecords.com.

The ETSU Bluegrass Pride Band is one of about 40 bands in the Department of Appalachian Studies, which include several bluegrass, old time, Celtic and country pride bands. Founded in 1982 by Jack Tottle, Bluegrass, Old-Time and Country Music Studies at ETSU is the oldest established program of its kind at any four-year institution and boasts the world’s first bachelor of arts degree in Bluegrass, Old-Time and Country Music Studies. In the program's history, these bands have performed at venues across the United States and onstage with artists that include bluegrass and country music luminaries such as Alison Krauss, Del McCoury, Dan Tyminski, Ralph Stanley, the late Porter Wagoner and Skaggs.

Student members of the ETSU Pride Band that will be opening the concert are Calder Baker from Grand Rapids, Mich., on banjo; Jaime Carter from Spartanburg, S.C., on bass; Tennessee
State Champion fiddler Aynsley Porchak of Woodstock, Ontario; mandolinist Karl Smakula of Montrose, W.Va.; and Ben Watlington from Mocksville, N.C., on guitar.

Tickets are $12 for students of all ages, $25 seniors 60+ and $30 general admission. For information about the ETSU Mary B. Martin School of the Arts, call 423-439-TKTS (8587) or visit www.etsu.edu/martin and @ArtsAtETSU on Twitter and Instagram.