

PITNEY MEYER



DAN WALLACE TALKS TO COUNTRY TRADITIONALIST MO PITNEY AND BANJO PLAYER JOHN MEYER AHEAD OF THEIR *CHEROKEE PIONEER* ALBUM RELEASE

PHOTOS: NATHANIEL MADDUX



Bluegrass music has always been a rich tradition in the heart of Appalachia with its unique mountain sound, a blend of stringed instruments and layered vocals that cut through the whispering pines like a knife cutting through butter. Aside from its distinct sound it is also the best storytelling genre in all of music rooted in tradition with its gospel foundation of creating music in its purest form. Some of the best musicians in the world have come from a bluegrass background where they learned to play their instruments like their fingers are on fire, yet with precision. Mo Pitney and John Meyer are no exception to this rule as they are keeping the tradition of bluegrass music alive with their newest album *Cherokee Pioneer* set to be released on April 18 on all platforms.

John “Johnny” Meyer is a 32-year-old Sheldon, Missouri native who comes from a bluegrass background performing at a young age with his family band. “I started playing my dad’s guitar when I was about 11 or 12 years old, and my mom told me she thought I can play the banjo. She found one for \$50 at a yard sale and brought it home. I started taking lessons on it and that is effectively what got me started into bluegrass music,” Meyer said when asked about how he got introduced to the genre. Meyer began performing with his family band at fairs and festivals within the region and hasn’t looked back since. Meyer attributes his abilities and music knowledge to live jam sessions he has been in over the years stating, “Along the way getting to experience playing music with other people just sitting in a room, I would learn so much from them. I think the opportunity to learn from other living musicians as opposed to a screen, a book, or tablature taught me so much.” He also gives a lot of credit to playing along with albums of his influencers such as J.D Crowe & The New South. “He would come out and play festivals in Missouri when he was still living. I have this memory of sitting 10 feet away from J.D Crowe at the Starvy Creek Bluegrass Festival and he was just ripping it,” he laughed as Mo Pitney jokingly chimed in by singing the chorus of Keith Whitley’s *Ten Feet Away*. “I think that experience of

hearing and just trying to emulate living examples of bluegrass music is what I would say was really influential for me,” Meyer stated.

Mo Pitney is a 31-year-old Cherry Valley, Illinois native who carved his way into the country music scene when he moved to Nashville, Tennessee at age 19. Known for his masterful songwriting and old school vocals, Mo stated that he grew up on bluegrass and wasn’t as familiar with country music like most people would think. “My dad and his brothers had a bluegrass band when they were young called ‘The Pitney’s’.” They travelled around to festivals when they were 15 to about 20 years old. The instruments would be laying around and my dad had a big record closet. I couldn’t begin to tell you how many records and CDs were in this closet that I would play along to like The Drifters, J.D Crowe & The New South, Larry Sparks, and Del McCoury to name a few. I would listen to Larry Sparks and his singing probably more than anybody in the bluegrass world,” Pitney explained. “I moved to Nashville when I was 19 years old, and truth be told that is when I really started to dive into country music. Most people think I was a country music junkie my whole life, but it was pretty much Johnny Cash and bluegrass until I moved to Nashville,” he said with a polite chuckle.

Fast forward to 2010 at The Renaissance Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee which was the setting for the IBMA (International Bluegrass Music Association) convention. This is where John Meyer and Mo Pitney met for the first time, and it would mark the beginning of a life-long friendship. “I met Mo there when we were just picking in the hallway. He was playing guitar, and it looked like he was either straight out of the woods or just out of a Dwight Yoakam movie,” Meyer laughed as he joked about Pitney’s physical appearance. “He was playing the guitar so good, and we got to pick some songs together,” Meyer said describing his first interaction with Pitney. Little did they know at the time that this would be the start of a brotherhood not only in music, but in life and in Christ as well. Pitney explained that over time there was an interesting domino effect that took place as he and John would get together

PITNEY MEYER

to play music. “Beyond music there was a friendship that was happening, and we both had a spiritual awakening with Christ around the same time. Me, John, my brother Blake and others that were around us started thinking seriously about life, music, Jesus, travelling, and family all at the same time and it just kind of clicked,” Pitney said as he described his friendship with Meyer. “A little later in life and not all that long ago, John asked me to come down and play some standard bluegrass music with him at The Station Inn. As we were rehearsing, we started accidentally writing songs,” Pitney said as he and Meyer both laughed.

At this point both Pitney and Meyer decided that since the songs were being written organically that they would pursue the opportunity to make a bluegrass record together. When word got out that Pitney and Meyer were serious about playing together under the name Pitney Meyer, fellow musician Sam Hunt caught wind. Hunt had been following the duo on YouTube where they were posting their jam videos from IBMA and other events. Hunt asked Pitney Meyer to open for him at his show at The Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, Tennessee in March of 2023. “I had moved back home to Missouri in January of 2023 and was working in a carpentry shop. I was working out there and Mo called me on the phone and asked if I know who Sam Hunt is. I said ‘Yes, I know who Sam Hunt is’. Then Mo told me Sam Hunt wanted us to open for him at The Ryman,” Meyer stated describing the conversation. After that, Curb Records approached the duo and told them they should make a bluegrass record. Thus *Cherokee Pioneer* was born.

One of the most intriguing things about this record is how it came together organically. There are so many times when projects are forced, and it comes through in the finished product more times than not. Everything from top to bottom with this record came together in its own time. A Native American theme naturally formed with this album through the songs that Mo and John were writing together. *Cherokee Pioneer* tells the story of the Native Americans in good times and in bad times with love, heartache, tragedy, and everything in between. Pitney and Meyer knew they wanted the project to honour true traditional bluegrass music, but realised for that to happen, they needed to change some things up a bit in their approach when recording this project



to deliver the story in an authentic way. *Cherokee Pioneer* was recorded at Johnny Cash’s cabin in Bon Aqua, Tennessee. “There’s 107 acres there that Johnny Cash owned. It got us away from Nashville and the busy life. We would take walks in the woods and walk the property and, ironically, we were finding arrowheads next to the river, so there was a bunch of Native American history we didn’t know about on that site,” Pitney said as he described the surroundings. Not only was the project going to be recorded in a remote cabin, but

they also made the decision to keep it old school and record to tape.

The decision to record to tape really shows their attention to detail when trying to capture that authentic bluegrass sound the same way their heroes did it in the past. This shows vulnerability as an artist as there is no room for error when recording in this fashion. In today’s digital world artists can just go in and overdub and fix any mistakes. Recording to tape, not so much. “We wanted to record this the same way our favourite old bands did back



then. We also didn't feel like that sound was going to be captured in a shiny studio in Nashville but thought that it would be best captured in a place like Johnny Cash's cabin," explained Pitney. Meyer added to that by saying, "Bluegrass is kind of a hand-hewn music so-to-speak. It preserves the raw materials that are then organised in such a way that it creates a unique sound. There is just something about bluegrass music in a log cabin because they're both kind of telling the same story."

As if everything that was already falling

into place for this duo and this record wasn't enough, another good omen was presented when Pitney first entered Cash's cabin. "My love for Johnny Cash's music brought me to bluegrass music. I walked into the living room of the cabin and there's a family bible laying open in the room where we made the record, and I look down and the first verse my eyes read is 'Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart'. I had this weird flashback of my entire life of how I started playing Johnny Cash's music, falling in love with bluegrass

music, and now here I am standing in Johnny Cash's house making a bluegrass album with my best friends," Pitney explained excitedly.

From start to finish, this record took three days to record. The whole first day was spent setting up equipment and getting the sounds and tones they were looking for. Most of the album was recorded on day two of the retreat, and then on day three they finished up with tracking a few more songs. From a technical standpoint the process was unique as well with the equipment

PITNEY MEYER

that was used, microphone placement, and the positioning of people in the room. "I have had the opportunity to make a couple of country records. I have never made a bluegrass album except for an early bluegrass record I made with my dad and my brother in our house. My brother and I had dreamed about the best way to record bluegrass music. We knew that if there was a way for everyone to be in the same room and hear the music in the same room while being able to look at each person the same way you would in a bluegrass jam, it would make a big difference. We didn't realise that what that actually means is that you must get everything right the first time with no overdubs. The other thing was we didn't all have a separate mix, we all had the same mix, so it forced us to mix ourselves while we were making the record," Pitney explained as he talked about the intricacies of the recording process. Meyer then piggy backed on this by saying, "It is humbling yet invigorating at the same time because it puts you back in the head space of just trying to capture a full performance rather than me just playing my banjo part over and over. As a band, as a group, and as a body we were forced to come to agreement about what we thought was the best performance we had given. That was a new experience for me. I learned a lot and enjoyed it."

While most of the tracks were written by Mo Pitney and John Meyer, there were also a few co-writers on these songs as well. Respected and well-known Nashville songwriter Wyatt McCubbin was a co-writer on *Old Friend*; Pitney's neighbour, Darrell Miller, wrote *Banjo Picker* and *White Corn Graves*; and North Carolina native Danielle Yother also contributed to the album writing *Bear Creek Clay* with John and Mo. In *Bear Creek Clay* the harmonies are chilling as they resemble the unique sound of bluegrass legend Ralph Stanley. Additionally, Pitney and Meyer decided to cover the 1990's John Anderson hit song *Seminole Wind*. Pitney Meyer took this song and put their bluegrass twist on it and really made it their own. "In the middle of writing all these songs I just heard the chorus, while sitting in a jam in the middle of my living room, to *Seminole Wind* in a fast tempo as it just dropped into my head. The second I started singing it, John immediately started singing the harmonies to it and I thought, 'man, I got the bumps on that,'" Pitney explained. "The Seminoles were actually Cherokee and Creek Indians and they had a few slaves that escaped during the Trail of Tears era and went down south and hid in the swamp. So,



it connected the 'Cherokee Pioneer' story as there is Cherokee blood in the Seminoles," Pitney said. In the middle of the album the song *Trail Of Tears* hits home with the Native American story of the events of how they were driven from their land and pushed out west on the Trail of Tears in a brutal and tragic event in Native American history in the 1800's. *Lord Sabbath*, written by Mo Pitney, is an a capella masterpiece that represents the true roots of bluegrass music and pulls the whole album together. The vocals and harmonies in this profound message stand out with Pitney and Meyer's voices blending ever so smoothly.

Of course, every great record has a team of people behind-the-scenes that make everything happen. This project had a great team working on it starting with the venue and special mention being made of Kyle and Lyndie who take care of the property at the Johnny Cash cabin. Meyer stated that Kyle had a big part in opening the door for the opportunity for the duo to record at the cabin. Long-time friend Henry Thompson stayed at the cabin for the three-day recording retreat and cooked all the meals for the team each day and provided refreshments as needed. Two huge players in this process were Daniel Kohavi and Eric Quinlan. Pitney Meyer describes them as being instrumental in pushing them to record to tape, and for getting all the equipment together for the project and making sure things ran smoothly from a technical standpoint. Craig White mixed the album over at Curb Mixing Studio bringing the project to life. Brian and Sally Oxley are the owners of the Johnny Cash cabin and

made it possible to record at the country legend's former home.

As for the musicians on *Cherokee Pioneer* the lineup is second-to-none. Pitney and Meyer described Nate Burey as a musical hero on this project as he played mandolin and sang bass. Mo Pitney's brother Blake Pitney played bass on the record and Mo described this as being special to him as some of his fondest memories of playing music are with his brother by his side. Ivy Philips and Jenee Fleenor played fiddle on the project. Fleenor is a decorated musician as a five-time CMA Musician of the Year recipient and currently has her own band called "Wood Box Heroes".

Both Meyer and Pitney are men of God and are very open about their faith and are using music as a vehicle to spread the gospel and be a beacon of light. This shines through in the way both interact and talk about their experiences from the start of their music careers to now. It adds to the authenticity of the music when you meet an artist and see just how genuine they are in their approach to what they do and their approach to life in general. They have some shows together in 2025 all over the place including Canada and Finland. Excitement is building as Pitney Meyer are bringing back authentic bluegrass music in such a unique way. This record is also unique as it was recorded to tape and is also being mastered to vinyl. You don't want to miss out on the release of this timeless bluegrass masterpiece. [CMB](#)

Pitney Meyer: Cherokee Pioneer is released April 18