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THE BLOG 01/29/2016 09:53 am ET | Updated Jan 28, 2017

Worth the Weighted Mind: Sierra Hull Graduates From an Old School of Thought



By Michael Bialas

It wasn't *that* long ago that [Sierra Hull](#) was the trainee, not the trainer.

Hull, a gifted mandolinist and promising singer-songwriter from Tennessee, had just wrapped up five days as a guest instructor at [RockyGrass Academy](#) in Lyons, Colorado, her first time there as a music professor after attending twice previously as a music professional.

A day later, she was performing the third time of her developing career before a [RockyGrass crowd](#), essentially opening the festival with a noon set in the simmering sun. The date was July 24, 2015, two months before her 24th birthday and what seemed like an eternity before her next album would be released.



Sounding like she was ready to share her new songs with the world right that minute, Hull had to settle for playing a handful of them before RockyGrass listeners who soon found out they'd have to wait until Jan. 29, 2016, to purchase [Weighted Mind](#).

From start to finish, the record took three years to make, "which is quite the path to getting an album out and done," Hull was saying that Friday in July while sitting inside a hospitality tent that had served as one of the Academy's classrooms. "And I'm young, too. So it's not like I have 20 records out. It's like for me to wait that long to make a record is a long time for a young person."

With her ensemble that included innovative double bassist [Ethan Jodziewicz](#) (who's also on the album) and multi-instrumentalist [Justin Moses](#), she felt "glad to sort of be out of the bluegrass box" while playing new songs such as the title cut, "Compass," "Wings of the Dawn," "Choices and Changes" and "Black River." On a record that's pretty and polished, subtle and subdued, her deft touch on the mandolin is as pleasant as the pitter-patter of a spring shower tapping your bedroom window during an afternoon catnap.

There's a lot Hull already knows about making your breaks in the business: jamming as a 9-year-old bluegrass prodigy with Sam Bush at the [International Bluegrass Music Association awards](#); at age 10 at

MerleFest, meeting Nickel Creek mandolinist Chris Thile, who upon hearing her play their “Ode to a Butterfly,” asked, “Do you want to play it together?”; then at age 11 getting invited to perform at the Grand Ole Opry by Alison Krauss, who continues to be one of her closest and most trusted mentors.

All the hard work leading up to those experiences undoubtedly helped pave the way for Hull to sign a deal at 13 with [Rounder Records](#), the prestigious roots label where she and Krauss remain.

Still, Hull admits there’s a lot to learn. And while opening up during this in-depth conversation while the enticing sounds of the Peter Rowan Bluegrass Band played in the background, it was evident that making this latest record while trying to avoid repeating herself was a lesson in patience, perseverance and acceptance.



Establishing her roots

Though her parents were neither wealthy nor musicians, Hull was raised on gospel and bluegrass in Byrdstown, a rural town of about 9,000 in eastern Tennessee near the Kentucky border. She remembers the enjoyment of singing “Jesus Loves Me” at the age of 4 or 5, and mandolinist Doyle Lawson was one of her earliest influences.

“That’s kind of how I got started is playing in church, singing in church and my dad (Stacy) learned to play guitar enough to back us up while my brother (Cody) and I would sing,” Hull said. “My mom (Brenda) sang a little bit.”

At age 7, she was introduced to the mandolin by her dad, but the fiddle was “what I thought I wanted to play,” she said. That changed in 1999 when the Christmas gift from Hull’s grandmother, great aunt and great uncle was too big for her tiny hands to hold.

“Of course, my dad didn’t know how serious I was gonna be about music,” she added. “And he had just bought a mandolin. He had spent like probably 700 or 800 bucks. And that was a lot at the time. I had to save up and buy an instrument.”

“To save my disappointment” while waiting to get a smaller fiddle, Hull was shown a few basics on the mandolin from him and soon learned “Boil Cabbage Down” and “Old Joe Clark.”

She was hooked, and listened to players such as Adam Steffey, Sam Bush, Ricky Skaggs and Ronnie McCoury, and bluegrass groups like Illrd Tyme Out and Blue Highway.

Showing her third-grade teacher the calluses she developed while learning, Hull was asked to play for the class at the Pickett County school where they convened in temporary trailers after a devastating tornado

struck in 1998.

Her first “paid gig” was at a community center in Jamestown, Tenn., where most of the family relatives lived and dad would often play on “a little bitty stage” at local jam sessions.

“There would be local bands that would come up and play,” Hull said. “A lot of those local bands were really great about inviting me to get up and play. They just really embraced me as a young kid. That was really special to be brought into that community with such open arms.”

Sitting in the jam room playing “Lonesome Moonlight Waltz,” Hull was asked to go on stage. She had her doubts, even if the crowd was only about 20 or 30 people.

“And some guy whipped out \$5 and I was like, ‘I don’t know,’ “ Hull recalled. “By the time it got up to about \$15, \$16, I was like, ‘OK, I’ll do it.’ “ *(laughs)*

Kentucky appearances on stages in Lexington (“Lonesome Fiddle Blues” with Bush) for Woodsongs and the Galt House in Louisville (“Big Mon” with Illrd Tyme Out) for the IBMA’s were in front of significantly larger audiences.

In essence, these brushes with musical heroes were as important to Hull as any formal training, which her parents couldn’t afford anyway.



Instead, in the summer of 2005, she toured with her dad, brother and Moses (with Hull at left), the multi-instrumentalist and session player who went on to perform with Ricky Skaggs and Dan Tyminski.

“My dad used to always say, ‘I’m learning to play bass because you can’t afford a bass player and you have to have somebody in your family with you,’ “ Hull recalled. “And he wasn’t a stage parent. If he could have not been on stage, he would have

been fine with that. But he did it for me.”

It all began with those early family excursions to nearby events like the [Smithville Fiddlers’ Jamboree](#) around the Fourth of July, where her interest intensified as she witnessed fiddle, mandolin and banjo competitions while developing lasting musical friendships.

“My parents were great. They really did everything possible to help me,” said Hull, who last July went back to Smithville, about 90 miles southwest of Byrdstown, to receive an award, and was joined by her proud mother.

“Your perception of how big or small something is is so different than when you get older. Like the Smithville Fiddlers Jamboree used to seem so big to me ...,” she said. “And coming back to that, you know I hadn’t been back since I was a kid. ... It seems so little now. ... When you’re a kid, everything seems big.”

Performance artist

During the week leading up to RockyGrass, Hull and other musicians such as Sarah Jarosz, the respected roots artist she met at IBMA when they both were about 13, stayed at the same house in Lyons about a mile down the road from Planet Bluegrass. Jarosz has been a RockyGrass regular since she was 11, first as

a student, then as a performer. Not having that luxury as a child, Hull didn't want that fact to come off like a "pity party."

Students and faculty members wound up the Academy by singing gospel songs while taking a dip in the St. Vrain River — accompanied by IBMA award-winning vocalist Claire Lynch and her guitar.

With three previous albums and a presidential scholarship to Berklee College of Music under her belt, the petite and youthful-looking Hull easily could have been mistaken for a teenage student by one of the adult advance campers she taught.

Yet it didn't take them long to take her seriously. She gladly handed out advice when they asked for it, and her words of wisdom seemed almost as valuable as a private lesson.

"I think sometimes people come looking for the trick, the answer," Hull said regarding the mandolin. "You know, like there's a simple answer. And truly, there is a simple answer but it's not oftentimes the most exciting answer to hear, but it's like you have to do it a lot. You have to work at it.

"They say it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert at something. And even if you practiced hard for three hours a day, three hours of focused practice for 10 years, it would take you that long just to even get to the place where you're pretty good at it. ... It requires a lot of time and dedication to really become good at anything. Not just music, but anything."

A determined Hull remains committed to improving herself, and that includes watching interviews and performance clips of charismatic stage presences such as Michael Jackson, Beyonce and Dolly Parton on YouTube. She even was in the process of reading an 800-page biography on the King of Pop.

"For me, I'm not just interested in being a mandolin player," she said. "I mean, I am but I want to become a better songwriter. I want to become a better singer. I want to become a better performer. ...

"There is something to be said about trying to interact with your crowd. And to connect. A lot of that just comes through experience. ... And it's not always a nervous thing but the adrenaline of having to do a show sometimes, a lot of times makes me feel like I can't quite play and sing at the level that I know I can."

Having performed at RockyGrass in 2007 when she was 15, then again in 2010, Hull has one lasting memory that led to a personal objective.

"I remember catching Del McCoury's closing set the first time I came out here and thinking, 'Well that's really cool.' "

Much has changed in the genre since, and Hull even says, "I'm not sure what bluegrass means to people now," referencing Bill Monroe, *Hee Haw*, Punch Brothers and the Avett Brothers in one breath. She also mentioned running into a woman who said, "I love bluegrass," but didn't know what a mandolin is.



Asked later what she would like to attain as a performer onstage, Hull brought up McCoury, Krauss and RockyGrass, the event where she had just finished her variation of the bluegrass band.

“Well, I love playing festivals like this,” she said. “I hope to continue to. It would be fun to think someday I could close down the set here. That I could do the show I saw Del McCoury do when I was here in 2007. I want to be able to play performing arts centers and have tons of people come. And it’s not got anything to do with fame for me and it’s not got anything to do with money. But at the same time, you do, everybody dreams of getting to a place where that’s not something you have to worry about. ...

“Somebody like Alison has been a great example to sort of strive for in that when she gets ready to tour and she wants to tour, she can go do six months worth of touring and not work six months of the year. ... If you think about having a family someday and maybe having kids of my own someday, it would really be nice to think at some point that I could be at least to that level.”

Weighted Mind over matter

On “Choices and Changes,” Hull sings, “I’m tired of trying to be someone else.”

That might have had something to do with the decision to produce *Weighted Mind* by herself, going into the studio with Nashville engineer Vance Powell to record six songs, many of which included her on guitar and “a little bit of mandolin.” It was a definite departure, but she was ready.

Even before the release date for Hull’s new album was announced, she imagined fans were asking, “What’s taking so long?”

Without a record since 2011’s [Daybreak](#), Hull recalled Craig Ferguson, the open-minded Planet Bluegrass honcho in charge of RockyGrass, the Telluride Bluegrass Festival and the Rocky Mountain Folks Festival, telling her: “I just feel like maybe a lot of people don’t know what you’re doing right now.”

“I know,” Hull replied, having begun work on that third album for Rounder in January 2013.

Soon running into a roadblock, though, it became an issue because she “just kind of wasn’t feeling it. A mixture of that vs. some involvement from the label, management. Not involvement but just questioning me a little bit. Just wondering what I was gonna do as far as direction and material. I’d never had that before but I think part of that was combined with them knowing I didn’t want to do a bluegrass record,” yet it was still “very rootsy” while including some drums and electric guitar.

“And I know it was all good intentions, just trying to get an idea of what I was wanting to do. But I was in a really vulnerable place because I had written all these songs and felt like it was really what I needed to do but trying to find the best way to present them. ...

“Just all the questioning kind of like ... I didn’t like it. And it wasn’t that I didn’t appreciate it. ... If you’re really putting yourself out there in an honest way, you’re fragile. ... Nobody was saying we don’t like it but it was sort of like, ‘Well, this is maybe a little too ballad-ish.’ And some of the feedback I was getting, I just didn’t agree with 100 percent. It was the first time I had ever dealt with that. ...

“At this point, I would hope that I wouldn’t have to deal with that as much. And I love all the folks at Rounder and the management I was working with at the time, like I respect those people, but it’s like, ‘But wait, I’m the artist here. You guys don’t play.’ And it doesn’t mean they don’t know ... (that) they

don't have valid input. It's their label. They have every right in the world to want to know what's kind of going on. But part of the beauty of being on a label like that, too, is that I'm not recording for some Music Row label that dictates every single thing that I do."

Discouraged and disheartened, Hull said, "I had to get away from it. It was like a dark kind of time, musically speaking."

Then she turned to Krauss, her musical confidante, who suggested getting genre-bending banjo player [Bela Fleck](#) to produce.

"And I went, 'OK, well, that's interesting because I hadn't really thought of him because primarily what I was wanting to do was more of a vocally driven record,' " said Hull, hoping to prove she was more than an instrumentalist who sticks to playing "a bunch of mandolin hot licks."

After bumping into Fleck and his banjo-playing wife Abigail Washburn at the IBMA's in 2013, they started talking about the project and he agreed to provide some feedback about some of Hull's selections.



At the time living in Brentwood, Tenn., south of Nashville, it took Hull less than 10 minutes to reach Fleck's home. "So it went from hanging out and playing some of my stuff ... it almost started out like some Bela mentor sessions," she said. "He thought they were good but then he said, 'Well, why don't you just bring your mandolin?' And so I think 'Compass' was maybe the first thing I played for him, which was one of the first tracks I had recorded already. And then he said, 'See, to me, that's really interesting. That's compelling. Just hearing you play mandolin and sing. I'm not sure you need all that other stuff on there.' "

She had doubts about that initially, and remembered telling him, " 'Oh, I don't know. Maybe.' But I kind of just felt like, man, that seems really lonesome. *(laughs)* Like I'd be here at RockyGrass by myself playing a show."

Hull said they worked together for almost a year and still, "I wasn't 100 percent sure he was going to produce it."

They eventually began recording in December 2014 and Hull gave up the guitar to embrace her first love.

"Yeah, mandolin is my home," she said. "I enjoy guitar but there's 100 guitar players out there that sing and singer-songwriters, and I'm not even as good it as they are. So that's not even what I want to do."

Taking Fleck's suggestions and combining them "with things I had already brought to the table," made Hull more confident of her own abilities again.

"It sounds silly to say, but I'm enough," she realized, having written or co-written 11 of the 12 songs. "It's OK for me to just do what I do."

They did bring in Krauss, Washburn and Rhiannon Giddens to provide harmonies on a few songs, including all three on album closer "Black River," and Fleck added his considerable banjo skills on that one and "Queen of Hearts/Royal Tea."

Pleased with the finished product, and particularly proud of her songwriting, Hull concedes that the stripped-down sounds of Weighted Mind are “considerably different” from anything she previously has done. And she credits Fleck for the push from the past, saying, “I feel like he sort of changed my musical life, you know? In this really special way because he was able to free me a little bit from what I felt trapped in, which was almost like too much stuff.”

When presenting her latest work on the road, including the Telluride Bluegrass Festival in June, she hopes loyal and new fans continue to accept her evolution.

“The song structures are different, too,” she said. “The form of the songs are a little bit different. I feel like some of these songs ... We laugh, we said, ‘OK, yeah, something like “Black River,” we could just hear some punk band (*Hull hollers*), ‘A BLACK RIVER RUNS DOWN MY FACE!’ But, you know, it’s like the power of restraint. Like you could add all that stuff, you could make this a total pop song if you wanted, but it’s kind of the fun part about keeping it simple.”

For an old-school dropout, that’s playing it mighty smart.

Festival photos by Michael Bialas. See more from [RockyGrass 2015](#). Publicity photo courtesy of the artist.

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Michael Bialas

Entertainment and sports journalist

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