



Lynch pulling up bluegrass roots, taking new direction

By Mark Jordan

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Last fall, bluegrass singer-songwriter Claire Lynch was practicing with her band when the phone rang at her apartment with the news that the 58-year-old Nashville resident had received one of 50 annual fellowships from United States Artists.

"I was laying on the floor kicking and screaming," Lynch says of the honor, which comes with a \$50,000 unrestricted grant. "The band heard this commotion and interrupted and said, 'What's wrong?'"

Though she can spend the money anyway she'd like, Lynch, who performs Friday with her trio at the Bartlett Performing Arts and Conference Center, plans to funnel most of the grant right back into her music.

"I'm investing my money in a way that will free me up to pursue a couple of side projects, including a Christmas album and putting together a Christmas show for performing arts centers," Lynch says. "That money will be spent quickly, I'll just tell you. It won't take long."

The grant is just the latest in a series of changes that have come lately to the two-time International Bluegrass Music Association Female Vocalist of the Year. Five years ago, after shipping her youngest child off to college, she packed up and moved from rural Northern Alabama to Nashville.

And last year, Lynch left her label home of 18 years, Rounder Records, and signed with Nashville-based Compass Records, headed by musicians Garry West and Alison Brown. Lynch is about two-thirds through the recording of her first album for the label, which will highlight her band of ace acoustic players: bassist Mark Schatz (Nickel Creek, Jerry Douglas), fiddle/mandolin player Bryan McDowell (holder of 21 picking contest titles), and guitarist Matt Wingate (1997 Doc Watson Guitar Champion). "It was just time for me to move on," says Lynch, citing as reasons for the change Rounder's recent acquisition by Concord Music Group as well as her own desire to move in new musical directions. "I was ready for a new team, and also I think Compass will probably support me in the Americana realm more than Rounder would have." News that Lynch might be moving away from her bluegrass roots comes as something of a shock from Lynch, who has been a darling of the genre for almost 40 years. Lynch, who was born in New York but raised in Huntsville, Ala., was barely out of high school when she and her husband, Larry, joined an area band called Hickory Wind.

Changing their name to the Front Porch String Band, they were a rising act on the bluegrass scene in the late '70s and early '80s, but the birth of the Lynches' first child in 1982 put the group on hold for most of the next decade. During this period, Claire became a popular songwriter, penning songs for Patty Loveless and Kathy Mattea.

In the '90s, a new version of the Front Porch String Band formed, and Lynch resumed in earnest her solo career, earning Grammy nominations for 1995's *Moonlighter* and 1997's *Silver and Gold*. She also became an in-demand session singer, backing up the likes of Dolly Parton, Linda Ronstadt and Emmylou Harris.

Over the years, Lynch's music has strayed further from traditional bluegrass, culminating in her most diverse record, 2009's *Whatcha Gonna Do*, which interspersed covers of Bill Monroe with folksier songs like former Memphian Jesse Winchester's "That's What Makes You Strong." (Lynch returned the favor the same year, performing on Winchester's *Love Filling Station*.)

Lynch says her next record will be her biggest departure yet and may rankle the purists among her fans.

"It's my least bluegrass record yet, but it's where we wanted to go artistically," says Lynch, who is already planning to go even further afield on the record after this one with a collection of swing tunes.

"Two years ago, we sat down and said what kind of direction do we want to take and what kind of moves will we make to make this happen. Because of the traditionalists in the bluegrass community, whom I love and cherish, I've really held the line for a lot of years, but I feel that I've grown as an artist. It's time to evolve, and I'm hoping my fans will follow me."



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