

# ROUNDER RECORDS ARTIST BIO

## Tony Trischka

### Great Big World

**Release Date: February 4, 2014**

"It's kind of hard to pin down, because there's so much on it," Tony Trischka says of his new Rounder album *Great Big World*. "It's all over the place, which is kind of where I live."

In a consistently adventurous musical career that spans nearly half a century, Tony Trischka has established himself as both a wildly inventive recording artist and one of America's foremost visionaries of the five-string banjo. Widely regarded as the most innovative banjoist of his generation, Trischka's dexterity and restless creative spirit have inspired generations of fans, and his influence in igniting the world of progressive acoustic music permanently altered the face of American roots music.

Trischka's instrumental expertise and boundless imagination are as sharp as ever on *Great Big World*. One of the most ambitious and accomplished of the artist's career, the album is a deeply compelling showcase for his expansive instrumental talents, far-ranging musical interests and distinctive songwriting skills, as well as his sterling taste in collaborators. The 13-track set finds Trischka embracing all manner of possibilities, while keeping one foot firmly planted in the traditional bluegrass roots that first inspired him to make music.

*Great Big World's* stellar cast includes such longtime compatriots as fiddler Mike Barnett, mandolinist Mike Compton, singer-guitarist Michael Daves and bassist Skip Ward. The album also features such notable guests as Steve Martin, who trades banjo licks with Trischka on the scintillating instrumental "Promontory Point," which they cowrote (Trischka produced Martin's Grammy-nominated 2011 album *Rare Bird Alert*); alt-bluegrass legends Andy Statman and Russ Barenberg, whose associations with Trischka stretch back to the beginnings of all three musicians' careers; Punch Brothers/Leftover Salmon banjo prodigy Noam Pikelny; legendary folk troubadour Ramblin' Jack Elliott; actor John Goodman; acclaimed roots vocalists Aoife O'Donovan, Catherine Russell, Abigail Washburn and Chris Eldridge; and a one-off electric combo comprised of Bob Dylan/Levon Helm guitarist Larry Campbell, Allman Brothers Band bassist Oteil Burbridge and Trischka's son Sean on drums.

Trischka's readings of the Stephen Foster chestnut "Angelina Baker" (sung by Michael Daves and Aoife O'Donovan) and the Woody Guthrie standard "Do Re Mi" demonstrate his fluency with traditional American forms, as well as his ability to infuse those forms with his distinctive sensibility. The artist's own inventive songwriting is showcased on such



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original instrumentals as "The Danny Thomas," "Ocracoke Lullabye," and the playfully ambitious "Single String Medley," which incorporates five new original tunes, each written for a different banjo string. Trischka delivers a stirring solo performance on his album-closing "Swag Bag Rag," written in the style of turn-of-the-century parlor music.

Several *Great Big World* tunes demonstrate Trischka's knack for penning deeply evocative lyrics, as on the heart-tugging album-opener "Say Goodbye (for KM)," a fond tribute to the late singer-songwriter Kate McGarrigle. Meanwhile, his haunting "Lost" is graced by strings, woodwinds and Abigail Washburn's affecting lead vocal. The wistful "I Wonder Where You Are Tonight" is a song by Johnny Bond, which Trischka first heard on a bootleg tape of a live Bill Monroe performance. The album takes an uplifting electric turn on the Trischka-penned "Joy," on which Catherine Russell's soulful vocal breathes vibrant life into a lyric whose verses were adapted by Trischka from, respectively, Buddhist, Christian and Jewish texts.

Perhaps *Great Big World's* most audacious creation is "Wild Bill Hickok," a widescreen old-west mini-opera that features a vivid lead vocal from Ramblin' Jack Elliott (who called it the hardest song he's ever been called upon to sing), supple additional vocals by Mike Compton, and a dramatic reading by John Goodman, which adds to the song's emotional gravity.

The confident mastery and boundary-breaking creative spirit that drive *Great Big World* have been consistent hallmarks of Tony Trischka's long and prolific career. Coming of age in the 1960s, he embraced the free-spirited attitude of the generation of artists who were changing the face of rock, folk and jazz, applying those lessons to banjo music. The results of his trailblazing approach would, in turn, influence the generations of roots-oriented players who followed him.

The Syracuse, NY-born Trischka was first inspired to pick up the banjo in 1963, after hearing it on the Kingston Trio's folk-revival hit "Charlie and the MTA." He quickly fell under the spell of pioneering banjo icon Earl Scruggs, who remains a touchstone for him to this day.

"I was already playing folk guitar, but then I heard the banjo and the sound just grabbed me," he recalls. "It always seemed like the coolest instrument to me. Guitars have *dots*, but banjos have these beautiful inlays, and banjos are works of art. It looked so cool, and it sounded so powerful to me. It was love at first hearing, and it still affects me that way."

He also embraced the iconoclastic approach of legendary bluegrass architect Bill Monroe, whom he met as a teenager, and who told Trischka, "Keep playing them new notes."

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"He was a huge influence on me, and he's still at the heart of everything I do," Trischka states. "A lot of people consider Bill Monroe to be traditional bluegrass, but he was *not* traditional. He took Black blues, and the Scotch-Irish fiddle tradition, and early country music, and put it all together and created something unique. The same for Earl Scruggs; other people were playing banjo music, but he opened it up and knocked down the barn doors. That's always been my attitude all along, just be free to explore and create what you create."

In 1965, Trischka attended the First Annual Fincastle Bluegrass Festival in Roanoke, Virginia and competed in the festival's banjo contest. He later joined the acoustic group the Down City Ramblers, and soon fell in with a fertile community of like-minded upstate New York players that eventually evolved into Country Cooking. In 1971, he made his recording debut with that group on the album *14 Bluegrass Instrumentals*, which began Trischka's long-running association with Rounder Records.

In 1973, Trischka began a three-year stint with the Country Cooking spinoff group Breakfast Special, during which he also recorded a pair of solo albums, *Bluegrass Light* and *Heartlands*. Those releases were unprecedented, innovative works that proved to be massively influential in the emerging progressive bluegrass movement. After another solo effort, 1976's *Banjoland*, he became the bandleader for the successful Broadway show *The Robber Bridegroom*.

In the '80s, Trischka continued to produce well-received solo albums like *Robot Plane Flies Over Arkansas* and *Hill Country*, as well as recording with his new group Skyline, which released the acclaimed albums *Stranded in the Moonlight* and *Fire of Grace*. Also in the '80s, he performed in the film *Foxfire* and on the soundtrack for the original, Off-Broadway production of *Driving Miss Daisy*, and became a familiar presence on National Public Radio through his work on such programs as *Mountain Stage*, *From Our Front Porch*, *Books on the Air* and Garrison Keillor's *A Prairie Home Companion*.

The '90s and '00s brought such notable Trischka efforts as *World Turning*, *Glory Shone Around: A Christmas Collection*, *New Deal*, and *Territory*. In the late '90s, Trischka teamed up with fellow instrumental giants David Grier, Darol Anger, Mike Marshall and Todd Phillips as Psychograss, and formed the five-piece electric Tony Trischka Band, which debuted with the album *Bend*.

In 2007, Trischka released the all-star *Double Banjo Bluegrass Spectacular*, featuring appearances by Steve Martin, Bela Fleck, Tony Rice, and Trischka's longtime hero Earl Scruggs. The latter album won several IBMA (International Bluegrass Music Association) awards, and was nominated for a Grammy. Two years later, he expanded his reputation as one of America's foremost banjo teachers by launching the groundbreaking Tony Trischka School of Banjo,

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an interactive online instructional site that's become a vital resource for students from around the globe.

Trischka produced Steve Martin's Grammy-nominated 2011 *Rare Bird Alert*, featuring performances by Paul McCartney and the Dixie Chicks. The same year, he appeared in, and was musical director of, the PBS documentary *Give Me the Banjo*. In the summer of 2012, he served as performer and bandleader for the bluegrass-infused Shakespeare in the Park production of *As You Like It* in New York's Central Park.

Along the way, Trischka has also recorded and/or performed with a breathtakingly broad array of collaborators that includes Sam Bush, David Bromberg, William S. Burroughs, Keith Carradine, Vassar Clements, Ornette Coleman, John Denver, Hazel Dickens, Jerry Douglas, Nanci Griffith, David Grisman, John Hartford, Levon Helm, Chris Hillman, Garth Hudson, David Johansen, Jorma Kaukonen, Alison Krauss, Roger McGuinn, John Medeski, Natalie Merchant, Edgar Meyer, Jane Monheit, Mark O'Connor, Odetta, Van Dyke Parks, Tom Paxton, Robert Randolph, The Roches, Peter Rowan, Mike Seeger, Pete Seeger, Ricky Skaggs, Phoebe Snow, Bruce Springsteen, Ralph Stanley, Tanya Tucker, the Violent Femmes, Loudon Wainwright III, Doc Watson, the Waverly Consort, the Whites, Tom Wopat, the Boston Pops Orchestra, the Wichita Percussion Ensemble and the National Radio Orchestra of Korea.

"Pretty much all of the old barriers are broken down now, so it doesn't feel like a fight to create what you want to create," Trischka observes, adding, "Even when I'm playing weird modern things, I'm still rooted in Earl Scruggs, but there are just so many more things you can do and so many options to explore. I just think of it all as being part of the whole continuum. I think it's important to hold onto the roots, but I also think that the possibilities of banjo are endless, and that's what keeps me going."