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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

was blown away with the reception it got from music fans. With hundreds of thousands of downloads, he knew he was on to something special. It wasn't long before he found other musicians to join him and take the act on the road. With some lineup changes and various guests over the years, they would earn an Emmy nomination in 2010 for best theme song with *Long Hard Times to Come* on FX's *Justified*.

The band released their most recent album, *Pocket Full of Fire: Gangstagrass Live*, in February — the record showcasing the band's unique style and knack for improvisation.

Over recent years, the lineup has solidified with Rench leading the group on vocals, guitar and beats, Brian Farrow on fiddle and Dan Whitener on banjo. With the hip-hop side filled out by R-Son The Voice of Reason and Dolio The Sleuth, the band is forever looking to push the musical envelope. But don't be fooled; Gangstagrass isn't split down the middle. On the contrary, when they get together, they form the perfect symbiosis of both sides of American music.

No one knows this better than R-Son, who's been working with Rench and Gangstagrass for nearly a decade.

Just two weeks before the MC was born in 1973, the first Hip-Hop show was performed. As a result, he watched the genre grow, creating a unique bond with the music that would last his entire life.

R-Son explains that much like Rench, he had his feet in two musical worlds growing up. While he was listening to Run-DMC growing up, the next minute, he would be listening to Steely Dan thanks to his father. Although he wrote his first rhymes in the first grade, it wasn't until he went to Penn State where he found new inspiration from the likes of The Roots and KRS-One.

Hailing from what he calls an "extraordinarily middle-class background" and a family of cops, he had no interest in writing about a life of crime so dissimilar to his own experience. Rather, he had decided he would focus on making a positive change in the world through music.

"What really got me was the lyricism and the way guys were just putting together stories and building content," he says. "I wanted to be able to affect lives with a song, the [same] way cats had affected mine. As opposed to just a party song or whatever, I wanted to tell a story or say something that cats really could get into."

As he continued digging, he would eventually find the roots of black music tightly entwined with music in this country as a whole. Bluegrass and rap might sound different on the surface, he says, but as you look closer, you realize both genres represent the music of the people. Accessible to everybody, they serve to give a voice to the voiceless.

R-Son would go on to earn two degrees in Criminal Justice before devoting himself to his art. When asked to join Rench on the

road, he quickly checked out their music before joining them on their way to North Carolina. Even though he had never met the other members before then, he knew immediately they were on to something special from the moment he first took the stage with them nine years ago.

"The funny thing about doing it and mixing it with bluegrass is how much the genres — on a lot of levels — are alike," R-Son says. "There's a great deal of storytelling in the outlaw narrative."

Pointing to the old country songs that tell true crime stories of murder and robbery much like rap does today, he points to a particular subsection of bluegrass music known as murder ballads, which told the stories of killing and despair so many decades ago.

"You know, we have this idea where people are like, 'Hip-hop is too violent, blah, blah, blah.' Well, no," R-Son says. "There's a whole section of bluegrass music that exists about people killing people! It's nothing new. For whatever reason, it became new and dangerous because urban youth were talking about it."

What keeps Gangstagrass fresh and exciting for the musicians is built into the music itself. While bluegrass artists play improvisational jams called "picks," a "cypher" in hip-hop is a group of performers getting into a circle with beatboxers, break-dancers and freestylers improvising on the spot. More than anything, they both thrive on spontaneity.

The group's goal is to bring people from all walks of life together for a good time and an experience unlike anything they've seen before. As they travel from place-to-place, R-Son says he's constantly amazed at the wide variety of people coming out for their shows.

"I had a man tell me once, and this is a direct quote, 'I never met a colored boy before, and I did not expect to love your music the way I love it.' And that just blew my mind. I was like, 'Cool, nailed it! For them to recognize at the end of the day [that] dopeness is dopeness, it doesn't matter who it's coming from; [it] exists in lots of different forms,'" he says. "It might not cure racism, but it definitely will allow people to sort of open up to things they never encountered before."

Whether you come out because of a love for bluegrass and country or a love of hip-hop, once the music grabs you, it doesn't let go.

"The MCs are dope; the music is dope, and that's what it's going to be," he says of the upcoming Plattsburgh Blues & Jazz concert on Jan. 9. "And hopefully, whatever part touches you, the entirety of it will help you understand that at the end of the day, we're way more alike than we are different. Most of the things in our lives are pretty similar, and together, we can work out a lot."

Presented by Plattsburgh Blues & Jazz, Gangstagrass will perform at Retro Live on Thursday, Jan. 9 at 8 p.m. Tickets cost \$15 in advance or \$20 at the door. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit plattsburghbluesandjazz.com.