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Asheville guitarist and songwriter Tom Dudley presents the first CD release from his new company, Hoot Holler Music.

Performing was low on Tom Dudley's list when he entered Asheville's music scene in 1995. Originally from New England, he moved here from Atlanta to work as an electronic technician for synthesizer pioneer Robert Moog.

Before taking the technical route, however, Dudley's life was all about performing and composing, and honing an eclectic musical palate. Early on, his parents skipped the traditional lullabies and plugged him into the Carter Family, Flatt and Scruggs and Bill Monroe, as well as Mozart, Beethoven and Bach. He went on to study classical guitar, piano and music theory at the Neighborhood Music School in New Haven, and jazz performance and arranging at Boston's Berklee College. In the late 70s and early 80s, he played in rock and jazz fusion bands and studied the "Newgrass" music of Tony Rice and David Grisman.

But until Dudley moved to Asheville, his acoustic guitar had lived alone in its case for years. Once here, he discovered the jam sessions at venues such as Jack of the Wood, and found himself pulled back onstage. He became a founding member of County Farm, an Asheville-based bluegrass band.

In 2002, Dudley left Moog Music to make his own music, full-time. "When I moved to Asheville," he said, "I had no idea I would end up playing in a working band. Leaving Moog to play music was a huge leap of faith. But I had to go for it."

While busy performing, Dudley felt pulled back to his composing roots as well. His new CD, "Walkin' to the Bridge," is the natural result of his appreciation for Asheville's diverse music traditions. He said, "I was aiming for a real mix of songs. The instrumentation is what you get with a typical bluegrass

band. Guitar, fiddle, banjo, mandolin and bass, but the music covers more ground. There are bluegrass, jazz, blues and Celtic influences. Even a little bebop.”

Another dream of Dudley’s was to gather top-notch singers and pickers to collaborate on one CD. With many of the eleven tunes he composed for this release, he had one of the featured artists in mind. For example, his song “Nightbird” was destined from the start for Cary Fridley, who sings this haunting ballad solo and unaccompanied. Fridley is a former Freighthopper, a group that won the “Talent From Towns Under 2000” competition on NPR’s “A Prairie Home Companion.” One of her specialties is music in the old Madison County tradition. “When I wrote ‘Nightbird,’” Dudley said, “I knew I wanted Cary to sing it. Her voice is pure, clear and strong. It fits the song perfectly, and I was delighted that she agreed to record it.”

One of the nine musicians on the CD is Dudley himself, the sole guitarist, and he also plays mandolin and sings lead on three tracks. Town Mountain’s Robert Greer sings lead on the tongue-in-cheek tear-jerker “Etch A Sketch of Love” and the seriously heartfelt “Don’t Mourn For Me.” Also featured are Daniel Coolik of One Leg Up, Jay Mullenax and Paul Leech of County Farm, and Lance Mills of the Cavemen. Capping off the lineup are Nicky Sanders, who fiddles full-time with Steep Canyon Rangers (2006 IBMA Emerging Artists of the Year), and banjo wizard Ryan Cavanaugh, who tours with jazz saxophonist Bill Evans. The CD was independently produced, and mixed and mastered by Grammy winner Nathan Milner at Studio 411 in Asheville.

Dudley said that his biggest challenge was nabbing the other eight musicians when they weren’t busy with recordings or gigs of their own. “‘Walkin’ to the Bridge’ was more like a long hike,” he said. “It was worth it, though. I learned a lot and got to work with some truly gifted musicians. Live performances have great energy, but you don’t have a lot of control. The sound can be bad, the audience might pay attention or they might not. There comes a time to record in a controlled environment. ‘Walkin’ to the Bridge’ was a studio project, so I had the luxury of crafting it slowly. Now that Hoot Holler Music is formally a company, I’m looking forward to the next release.”

For more information about the CD and the musicians, visit www.hoothollermusic.com

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