

Asheville Symphony and local bands team up for an album

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Singer-songwriter **Matt Townsend** usually performs with an acoustic guitar, either solo or with his band, The Wonder of the World. And he writes his songs for that configuration — drums and bass. But, he says, “a lot of times I’ll hear other parts.” A fully orchestrated tune is just a dream to many musicians, but that vision was realized for Townsend when the Asheville Symphony Orchestra tapped him for a collaborative album project.

The eight-track record, *The Asheville Symphony Sessions*, will be released on Thursday, May 26, with a celebration at The Orange Peel.



Along with Townsend, the album includes contributions from **Rising Appalachia**, **Steep Canyon Rangers**, **Shannon Whitworth**, **Free Planet Radio** featuring **Lizz Wright**, **Electric Owls**, **Doc Aquatic** and **Lovett**.

“To hear the breath of the song come to life through the violins and cellos and the motions of the conductor, well I don’t know what to say about it really, other than it was a deeply moving, profound experience that I feel very lucky to have had,” Townsend wrote on his Facebook page.

Andy Herod (Electric Owls), whose song “Pontiac” also appears on the record, also took to Facebook after hearing the symphony’s string section play his composition: “I’m still not convinced that this actually happened.”

Each song was recorded with various configurations of 40 symphony musicians and each song selected for the recording was arranged by a professional composer. Townsend’s score was conceived by **Michael Bearden**, who’s worked with Lady Gaga and was the musical director for Michael Jackson’s *This Is It* tour.

Other arrangers include local musicians **Chris Rosser** (who wrote the parts for his track with Free Plant Radio) and **Ben Hovey** (who arranged the strings for Herod), as well as **Jonathan Sacks** (who worked on films such as Disney’s *Cars*) and **Van Dyke Parks** (who composed *Smile* alongside The Beach Boys). Parks, a Moogfest alumnus, created the score to Lovett’s song, “Don’t Freak Out.” That track was the last to be recorded for the project and included a children’s choir.

The addition of the kids meant a group of young people had their first studio experience (the crowd in the control room that day cheered them on) and added another strata of community effort.

“The symphony has been on this island,” says **David Whitehill**, executive director of the Asheville Symphony Orchestra. “For the last two years, we’ve tried to reverse that.” While in Washington, he attended a rehearsal of rapper Sir Mix-A-Lot’s performance with the Seattle Symphony. The same symphony did a project with Native American musicians “seeing just what would happen,” says Whitehill.



SONGCRAFT: Andy Herod of Electric Owls, right, records the vocal to his song, “Pontiac,” while Rodney Easter plays bass, and Femi, Echo Mountain Studios’ mascot, naps. Photo by Josh Rhinhart

He continues, “I got to thinking, ‘Well, who are our natives?’ And it struck me that we have all these working musicians — what a nice opportunity to have symphony musicians connect, collaborate, work with and explore other things going on around town.”

Whitehill began bouncing ideas around with Echo Mountain studio manager **Jessica Tomasin** and **Michael Selverne** of Welcome to MARS. A plan — one Selverne describes as a happy accident — quickly came together. “Symphonies are very, very expensive toys to play with,” says Selverne, who produced the local album. “It’s not something people use a great deal. ... Even in the big record world, it’s a constant fight when people say they want to use symphonies.”

In Asheville, instead of a fight, it was a community endeavor. The symphony funded the album, and talent and resources were pooled. **Josh Rhinehart** created the artwork, Tomasin acted as executive producer, and an array of local talent stepped up — including backup vocalists, session musicians, engineers and publicists.

“David was the best client because his answer was, ‘Make it great, I’ll find a way to get it worked out,’” says Selverne. “For a small city, we had the best of everything on this record. We didn’t want for anything artistically.”



MISSION CONTROL: Producer Michael Selverne, left, and engineer Julian Dryer work in the sound booth during the recording of *The Asheville Symphony Sessions*. Photo by Josh Rhinhart

The bands were selected by Selverne, Whitehill and Tomasin, who then shared the initial list of performers at an Asheville Music Professionals meeting. Whitehill says the aim was for a diversity of styles as well as a range of experience, from seasoned musicians like the Steep Canyon Rangers to relative newcomer Townsend. Along with the featured artists, Selverne tapped other musicians such as drummers **Bill Berg** (who played on Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks*) and **Phil Bronson**, keyboardist **Ryan Burns** and guitarist **Marcel Anton**, among others. (It was also Selverne who brought in Bearden, a former collaborator.)

But the most important thing, Selverne insists, is the quality of writing on *The Asheville Symphony Sessions*. "The songs on this record are great, and they'll stand up against anything from New York or LA or Nashville," he says.

Each of the participating musicians received a copy of the score, which they can use in the future to perform with groups of symphony musicians locally or in other cities. Whitehill hopes this recording, and the experience of making the album, will show bands how they can work with a local symphony. While the full orchestra is likely beyond most groups' means, a string trio or quartet, hired for a special show, is within the realm of possibility.

The songs from *The Asheville Symphony Sessions* were selected as the soundtrack to *Julian Price: Envisioning Community, Investing in People*, a locally produced documentary being premiered at the same Orange Peel event. But the collaboration doesn't stop there.

"In terms of the love for the project, its inclusiveness and the support we've received from the community, it amazes me," says Selverne. "We're going to make another one. People want to be on that one if they weren't on this one." While a date hasn't been set, the organizers are already in talks, and Selverne hopes to start as soon as this fall.

"I don't know of any other symphony that's taken on a project like this," says Whitehill. "It feels authentically Asheville."

WHAT: Launch of *The Asheville Symphony Sessions* and premiere screening of the documentary *Julian Price: Envisioning Community, Investing in People*

WHERE: The Orange Peel, theorangepeel.net

WHEN: Thursday, May 26, at 7:30 p.m. \$25