

# CD Review

## Buffalo Galaxy - *New Escape*

by Philip Nusbaum

*New Escape* is a 6-song EP, the first recording of Buffalo Galaxy. This project will go a long way in establishing Buffalo Galaxy's place in the ever-shifting musical landscape.

Each song on *New Escape* grabs listeners' attention. One big reason the songs are so easy to stay with relates to the musical textures that shift within each song. For example in many songs, the rhythmic backings for instrumental and sung portions differ. This is the kind of musical detail that refreshes listeners' ears.

Buffalo Galaxy is able to make these arranging shifts seemingly effortlessly because it keeps its end of the bargain as far as providing musical entertainment for audiences: These guys obviously rehearse, proving the truth of the proverb, practice makes perfect. There is a portion of the popular imagination that holds group musical performance to be a magical result of players improvising their parts all at the same time. Let me set the record straight right now: It ain't so. Buffalo Galaxy's shifts in dynamics, their introductions to solos and exits from them, phrasing of vocalists and all sorts of musical details are the results of rehearsal, and the commitment to rehearsal is why you want to listen to Buffalo Galaxy songs from beginning to end.

A song in early bluegrass frequently

began with an instrumental solo. Then there would be a solo voice singing a verse, followed by a duet or trio singing the chorus. Repeated two or three times and with a formulaic conclusion tacked on, and you had a bluegrass song arrangement. This type of song arrangement

stance of Buffalo Galaxy going above and beyond listeners' expectations.

But soloing does not tell the whole story of bluegrass musical performance or evolution. Bluegrass song arrangements, too, have evolved. While the act of arranging a song seldom receives attention,

arranging a song is crucial for performing a song. Arranging might be defined as the act that prepares a song for audiences. If you listen to many Buffalo Galaxy songs, you hear that they are conceived in movements. Rhythmic accompaniments to Buffalo Galaxy songs frequently change when moving from sung and instrumental sections. These musical details are rarely noticed by listeners but are the very things that grab a listener's attention and fixate the listener on the performance. Additionally, attention to these details makes Buffalo Galaxy a group with its feet on the ground as it pushes on the boundaries of the idiom.

*New Escape* con-

tains an abundance of songs composed in minor keys and sections of songs with minor chords. The predominance of minor gives Buffalo Galaxy bluegrass a dark cast. In truth, bluegrass has always treated dark subjects. However, the first generation of bluegrass songs mated dark subjects to happy melodies. The late bluegrass songwriter Jerry Barney of Fergus Falls, MN, called these songs "happy-sounding sad songs." On the other hand, Buffalo Galaxy is among the con-



shines the brightest lights on the musical feats of singers and soloists, and even today, when bluegrass fans talk about performers, singers and soloists are whom they discuss.

On *New Escape*, there are numerous places where Buffalo Galaxy soloists might cause you to stop everything else to pay attention to the music. There are also many places where the band creates instrumental passages where two instruments share the lead. This is another in-

temporary groups who believe that songs about sad subjects deserve matching musical accompaniments. With a tip of the hat to Jerry Barney, we might call these current songs “sad-sounding sad songs.”

Buffalo Galaxy puts out a fresh sound, but a bluegrass listener will note its connections to traditional bluegrass. There is plenty of fast picking, lead singing, and duet singing with the type of close harmony favored by bluegrass bands. The primary songwriter is guitarist Johnny Kovarik. Johnny’s songwriting is obviously influenced by contemporary pop, and it might be true that the songs on *New Escape* could be performed by pop bands. However, the songs sound natural in the musical settings created by Buffalo Galaxy. In addition to Johnny, band members include banjoist Zach Tauer, mandolinist Jake Rohde, and bassist Peter Whiteman. Each arrangement sounds like it has been suggested by a given song’s lyrics and melody; and the arrangements are the results of hands-on work by all the players.



**Buffalo Galaxy: Johnny Kovarik, Peter Whiteman, Jake Rohde, Zach Tauer**

Buffalo Galaxy’s *New Escape* is a great start. The band worked hard to get this worthy effort to the public during the pandemic of 2020. The CD embodies a

consistently high standard of songwriting and performance. It is bound to satisfy Buffalo Galaxy fans and win new ones for the group.

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