

An American classic

Bluegrass artist David Grisman reflects on a half century in the music scene, still truckin' into 2013

The David Grisman Bluegrass Experience will be performing on New Year's Eve at the Alberta Rose Theater.

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

David Grisman is iconic in the world of bluegrass, having played with a who's who of artists, including Doc Watson, Bela Fleck and Bonnie Raitt, to name a few. He is a mandolin player, composer and producer. While still just a pup (Jerry Garcia of The Grateful Dead gave him the nickname, "Dawg"), Grisman was gleaning insight into the world of music from some of the greatest players in the "old time" music scene.

Grisman has spent 50 years celebrating, studying and playing the old-time music of rural people and places and bringing that musical style to a mainstream audience. He has cultivated the respect of other musicians and a loyal fan base that spans generations.

The David Grisman Bluegrass Experience will play two New Year's Eve shows in Portland at the Alberta Rose Theatre. Grisman spoke with Street Roots to share his thoughts about music, its heritage and its future.

Sue Zalokar: You currently have four active groups: a quintet, a sextet, Bluegrass Experience band and Folk Jazz Trio — it boggles the mind. Bluegrass and jazz are seemingly very different kinds of music. In your experience, how are bluegrass and jazz alike?

David Grisman: Well, I keep going back to what Duke Ellington said: "There are only two kinds of music — good and bad!" Actually there are many similarities for me between bluegrass and jazz. They are both

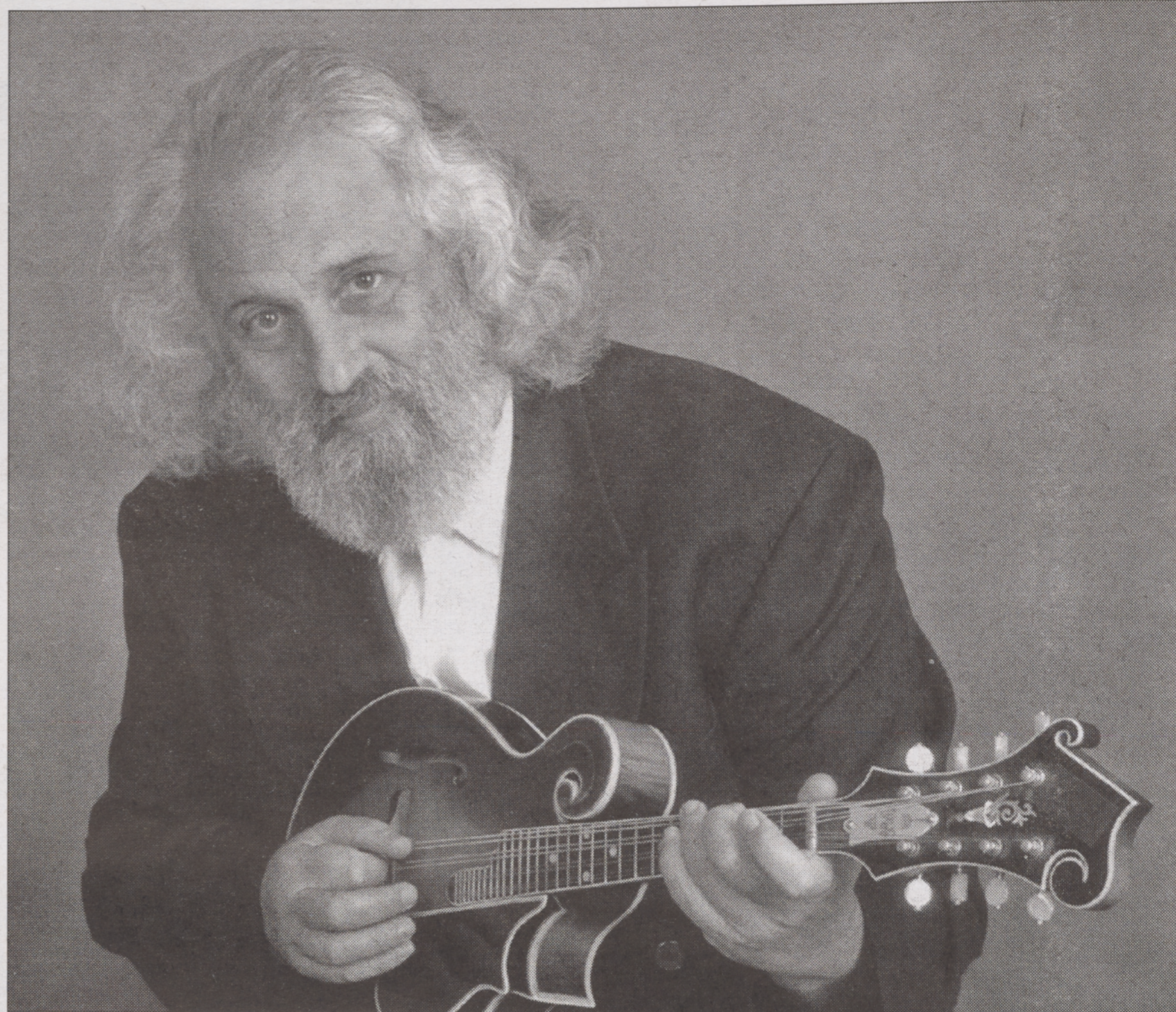


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truly American art forms in that they both developed here and are rooted in many European and African traditions. Bill Monroe's biggest musical influence was a black guitarist named Arnold Schultz, and his music is steeped in blues, which is also a major foundation of jazz. They are both "virtuosic" musics that require a great deal of instrumental and vocal technique, and they both involve a great deal of improvisation, although bluegrass is much more grounded in traditional melody. But I guess for me, they are both extremely challenging and very enjoyable, as well as allowing for a great deal of individual expression. I also love many other styles of music and they all have influenced my playing, arranging and composing.

S.Z.: For you, what is the allure of mountain music?

D.G.: Well it's not so much mountain music as folk music or music that originated in rural environments. I listened to a lot of "old-time" and ethnically derived music that was more or less unaffected by the popular culture of the day and reflected earlier times when music was developed for purer reasons than having a hit record or appealing to huge audiences in the mass marketplace. The influence of commercialism really has nothing to do with aesthetic values, and I find those values largely missing in most contemporary music of all styles.

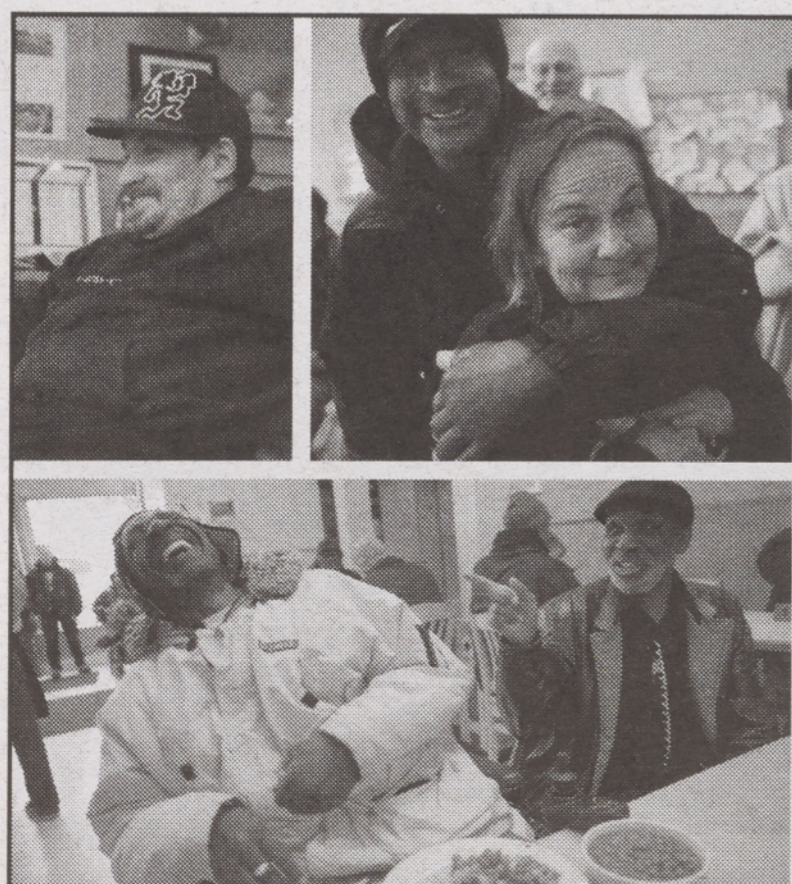
S.Z.: Often, the themes of bluegrass speak to the simple life of ordinary people — people who have experienced poverty on some level. Are there any social, political or personal connections for you to themes of poverty or homelessness?

D.G.: I'm definitely sympathetic to the huge numbers of people all over the world living in sub-standard conditions. I even devoted a recording project to songs of human suffering and tragedy, "Life of Sorrow," but my interests have always been rooted in the music, not the lyrics. I certainly can appreciate the great collaborations in songwriting between composers and lyricists. Yet my ear is usually attracted to the melodies, grooves and other musical elements. I'm not a big fan of mixing music with politics either, although I'm passionate about political issues. That could change, perhaps!

S.Z.: You credit much of your musical aesthetic development to Ralph Rinsler. (Bill Monroe's manager and director of the Folklife Institute at the Smithsonian). You have said that he did more to preserve American folk culture in the 20th century than anyone else. Please elaborate on Mr. Rinsler's contributions to both the musical community and to your own personal musical journey.

D.G.: Ralph was an incredible human

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