



# The Anxiety of Art

*How to Grow a Band* charts the rise of Punch Brothers

**HOW TO GROW A BAND:** Directed by Mark Meatto. Editor, Purcell Carson. Cinematography, Meatto and Ben Wolf. Sound, Dave Sinko and Meatto. Music by Punch Brothers. Starring Chris Eldridge, Greg Garrison, Paul Kowert, Noam Pikelnny, Chris Thile and Gabe Witcher. International Film Circuit, Shaftway Productions, 2012. NR. 88 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

Chris Thile, the obsessive genius behind prog-bluegrass pioneers Punch Brothers, first picked up the mandolin at age 5, and is now hailed by many as the finest player in the world. In Mark Meatto's new documentary, *How to Grow a Band*, there is scarcely any footage of Thile without his instrument; he's always off in the corner, perfecting some lickety-split chromatic run. At one point in the film, Punch Brother banjoist Noam Pikelnny recalls a family legend about his colleague's daunting dedication. "Thile used to practice Paganini when he was sitting on the toilet," Pikelnny says, adding with a bemused smile: "Don't waste time while you're in the bathroom. You could be practicing."

*How to Grow a Band* offers an intimate, behind-the-curtains glimpse of the band formulating, hashing out, rehearsing and recording — in short, negotiating — its challenging debut, *Punch*, a genre-busting album centered on "The Blind Leaving the Blind," a four-movement, 45-minute classical bluegrass suite written in the wake of Thile's 2003 divorce. The occasion is historic. With that formally complex, technically difficult piece for string quintet, Punch Brothers don't simply deconstruct the standard verse-chorus-verse structure of most popular music; like mad scientists, they seek to run bluegrass through the crucible of classical music's ambitious reach, thereby birthing some new, recombinant species of folk music.

The goal for *Punch*, according to fiddler Gabe Witcher, was nothing short of "making music that hadn't been made

before" — to push the artistic envelope through vision, innovation, guts and genius. "And I really feel like this is that," Witcher adds, with less arrogance than awe. The process, however, was not without tension. Pop music is, at its core, a deeply conservative art form, reluctant to move beyond the familiar arc of the three-minute radio single, and truly innovative musicians — Wilco, Radiohead, Prince, Fugazi — run a great risk whenever they start tinkering with the formula.

*How to Grow a Band* is about that risk: its costs and consequences, its ramifications for the band and the audience. "I think that people felt this was my flight of fancy that everyone had to protect me from," Thile says at one point, a comment that captures the anxiety surrounding the pursuit of artistic vision. With unlimited access and using only a single digital camera, Meatto plays unobtrusive witness to the most intense of creative processes, and it's fascinating to see the way the band struggles to find equilibrium. Is everyone all-in on this crazy trip, with equal say and equal influence? And what if, after taking what amounts to a life's pledge, it explodes?

For fans of Punch Brothers, the documentary proves a boon, full of extended live footage, lengthy interviews with the band and commentary from luminaries such as Yo-Yo Ma, Edgar Myer and former Zep bassist turned hot producer John Paul Jones. *How to Grow a Band*, however, is not just a love letter to a great bluegrass band. It's also an engaging, thought-provoking look at the timeless rigors of artistic genesis — the battle to bridge the distance between idea and object, while keeping a semblance of purity intact — as well as a testament to the incomprehensible persistence of desire. It's not just cheese: If you work hard enough, and stay true to yourself, you will get where you want to go. **EW**

*How to Grow a Band* opens Friday, June 1, at the Bijou; [bijou-cinemas.com](http://bijou-cinemas.com)



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