

Rhonda Vincent

To another artist at a similar point in their career, the idea of self-producing a new album, recording it in their own studio, and then releasing it on their own label, would be an unthinkable gamble, fraught with loose ends, complications, and a distracting degree of responsibility. For Rhonda Vincent, however, it is simply the next logical step. Among the most complete and accomplished artists of her generation – in any genre – Vincent was born into a performing family, and from an early age has dedicated herself to understanding and excelling at every element of her craft. She is quick to point out that she is not infallible: in fact, her willingness to take chances and then diligently assess the results afterwards has insured her continuing artistic and professional growth.

“With every album that I make,” she reflects, “I learn something. Sometimes it’s something I could or should be doing, sometimes it’s something *not* to do. I’ve done this all of my life, and I’ve come to realize that if the experience is not pleasant, you need to find something you can take away from it...” She applies those lessons exquisitely to *Taken*, her first album on her own Upper Management imprint, available in stores on September 21, 2010.

Famously crowned as “the new queen of bluegrass” by the *Wall Street Journal*, and indeed the most decorated musician in that field, Vincent’s music is actually much more inclusive and accessible than that banner would suggest, incorporating savvy contemporary touches while drawing deeply from the haunting mountain soul of classic Monroe-styled bluegrass. The presence on *Taken* of special guests ranging from Dolly Parton to Richard Marx to Little Roy Lewis affirms Vincent’s wide-ranging vision.

One of the defining aspects of bluegrass – and a prominent thread running through *Taken* – is that it is, first and foremost, a communal music. While famously self-reliant, Vincent is also proud to acknowledge and incorporate the contributions of the Rage, her longtime backing band, which consists of Hunter Berry (fiddle), Mickey Harris (bass), Ben Helson (guitar), and Aaron McDaris (banjo, guitar). Bucking the trend of recording with overly-familiar session musicians, then taking to the road with a different group of players, Vincent not only uses the Rage throughout *Taken* – she credits them as her co-producers, giving each member the opportunity to contribute to the final product.

“It’s a collective venture,” she says with pride. “Everyone brings something. I’m open to listening to them and asking, ‘What do you hear on this?’ They are free to use their imagination. It’s so nice to let everyone individually critique their own work. We’re coming together for a common goal...”

While Vincent’s new label arrangement introduces a bold new degree of accountability, she has never let business scenarios affect her artistic decisions. “I don’t think that changes anything,” she says. “I’m passionate about the music, no matter what. With every project, I just want to create the best album that I can. When you make a change like this, people assume there’s going to be this big difference in everything you do – but the only difference is the label. It was recorded in my studio, where I’ve been working since 2005, and I recorded it with Bil VornDick engineering, who I’ve worked closely with before.”

Indeed, Rhonda Vincent has earned and benefited from a lifetime's worth of experience, gathered in a remarkably short time. The fifth generation of musicians in her family, Vincent was quite literally born into the business. Her parents Johnny and Carolyn helmed the popular bluegrass outfit the Sally Mountain show, with whom Rhonda made her stage debut at age five, singing and tapping a snare drum. She began playing mandolin onstage at age eight, and quickly mastered an array of stringed instruments, from guitar to fiddle. As she grew as a vocalist and musician, she augmented her love of traditional bluegrass with a growing appreciation for such contemporary mavericks as the New Grass Revival and Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver. She made the transition from being a member of the Sally Mountain Show to a being a solo artist, cutting her first solo album in 1986.

After a series of well-received solo recordings for venerable bluegrass label Rebel Records, Vincent signed to Giant Records for a pair of major-label country projects – an invaluable experience that greatly furthered her understanding of the music business. Her triumphant return to bluegrass began with her 1999 signing to Rounder Records, and continued through a series of acclaimed releases which grew her audience exponentially and made her the recipient of vast critical acclaim, commercial success, radio airplay (with several long-term, chart-topping appearances on the *Bluegrass Unlimited* survey), and heightened visibility in the media, including a top-five video on CMT for “You Can’t Take It With You When You Go.” Her eight Rounder albums (including a beloved Christmas collection *Beautiful Star* and the powerful, in-concert career survey *Ragin’ Live*, also released on DVD) established her as an inventive, intuitively ingenious recording artist, blending the very best of the classic and modern.

With over seventy awards to their name, Rhonda Vincent and the Rage are the most celebrated band in bluegrass, with honors including a coveted Entertainer of the Year award from the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) and a staggering seven consecutive IBMA Female Vocalist of the Year awards. In 2001, Vincent signed a high-profile endorsement contract with Martha White baking products, the company who first sponsored bluegrass icons Flatt and Scruggs in 1953. Like Flatt and Scruggs before her, Vincent now rolls into every show on the Martha White Bluegrass Express tour bus, and she has even composed a new Martha White theme song.

Despite all that she has achieved, Vincent is still seeking new challenges. For *Taken*, she reasserts herself as an instrumentalist, playing all of the mandolin on the album. “It became a personal goal for me,” she explains. “That’s one of the liberating things: it’s on my label, it’s in my studio. Before, I had budget restraints that limited the amount of time I could spend. I’d be so busy that I couldn’t prepare, and I’d just send in Hunter and he’d do it in one or two takes. This time, I mentally prepared myself, and as I get into it, it got so much easier. I’m thrilled that I’ve done it.” Her playing on *Taken* is a handy reminder that she is a notable, underrated stylist on the instrument, capable of everything from funky, driving Monroe-styled breaks on “Court of Love” to the ringing, intricate cross-picking on “Tonight My Baby’s Coming Home.”

Her playing, and that of the Rage, is unfailingly crisp, tasteful, and in full service of the song at hand. *Taken* is refreshingly free of unnecessary ornamentation (vocal or instrumental), with all elements focusing on the spirit of the song at hand. Vincent took special care to consider as many songs as possible for *Taken*, auditioning material from established songwriters and newcomers alike, with quality being the only deciding factor. “Sweet Summertime,” the breezy first single, comes from the pen of new discovery Donna Webster, and is a fond, wistful remembrance that is already becoming a favorite of fans who have heard it in concert. Billy Sherrill’s “Tonight My Baby’s Coming Home,” previously recorded by both Tammy Wynette and Barbara Mandrell, is a clever reverse-trucker song, sung from the woman at home’s point of view and boasting a witty

guitar solo from Ben Helson that combines low, country-style twang with nimble bluegrass flat picking.

While the Rage provides the core instrumental and vocal support on *Taken*, a small group of carefully considered guests were invited to contribute. “I don’t bring in guests just to bring in guests,” Rhonda explains. “It has to be something that makes sense musically. Like, when we were doing vocals for ‘In the Garden by the Fountain,’ I could just hear Dolly Parton singing the high harmony in my head, so I called her, and luckily her schedule worked out.” Dolly’s pristine mountain harmony brings out both the sadness and the joy of the bittersweet track, which features a poignant lyrical twist at the song’s conclusion. Most surprising among the guests is pop hit maker Richard Marx, a longtime friend of Vincent’s, who contributes a devastatingly subtle harmony to the title track, raising the emotional level of the song substantially. Most thrilling to Vincent, however, is the presence of her daughters Sally and Tensel Sandker, who perform in their own band Next Best Thing, and contribute lead and harmony vocals on “When the Bloom is Off the Rose.” “That is one of my proudest moments,” Vincent says of the recording. “Just to hear that played back and say, ‘These are my daughters.’ And you know how family harmonies are. That song has a buzz that you just can’t get any other way. I can’t wait for folks to hear that.”

Taken concludes on a profoundly optimistic note, with Vincent joined by pre-teen vocalists Isaac Moore and Hannah Harper to perform “You Must Have a Dream.” The song’s uplifting message is deepened profoundly by the young vocalists’ astonishingly mature performances, backed by a choir of other young singers. “That song,” Vincent says, smiling, “is different from anything I’ve done.” With a career spanning so many decades, albums, and sessions, that is no small feat.

Looking back on the sessions, which took place between the tireless band’s incredibly busy performance schedule, Vincent immediately credits those around her. “Every person in my band rose to a new level of playing on this project. Hunter blew me away with his fiddle part on ‘Taken’ – I’ve never heard him play with such grace. Aaron’s banjo playing is so tasteful, yet surprising. Ben is only 23 years old and his guitar work has grown so much in one year – and it started out great! Mickey is the rock of the band, a great songwriter and singer in addition to a bassist. These guys can play a tender ballad just as easily as high-powered bluegrass. That’s rare. The abilities and the connections we have amaze me, but you have to do what’s best for the song. In the end, it’s very humbling...”



UPPER MANAGEMENT MUSIC

1036 Tulip Grove Road, Nashville, TN 37076

615-390-8198 • www.uppermanagementmusic.com • info@uppermanagementmusic.com