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By Vernell Hackett

Russell Moore & Illrd Tyme Out is one of bluegrass music's most beloved bands, so it should come as no surprise that Cracker Barrel tapped them to be a part of its CB Records series. The album, *Timeless Hits From the Past Bluegrassed*, is a collection of songs from several genres of music, including bluegrass, country and pop that will be released in January.



"We always look for a bluegrass album to include in releases for our exclusive music program, and as we evaluated our options, Illrd Tyme Out stood out due to their quality and authenticity," says Julie Craig, who manages the music program at Cracker Barrel. "It was kind of mutual, because as we reached out to their folks they were in contact with us."

"The song selection came out of a collective effort from the band members, as well as Josh Trivett and Peter Keiser from Moonstruck Management and representatives from Cracker Barrel," explains Russell Moore, lead singer for Illrd Tyme Out. "We discussed a theme for the recording, and what we settled on and what we felt would work best for us was songs that influenced us as we were growing up in music and helped shape us later in our careers. Of

course every one of us have listened to country music, so when you start talking about that, at our age and what our influences were, you go back to George Jones and Merle Haggard, singers from that era. So we started looking at that era of music and then came forward.?

As group members looked back on music they listened to after Jones and Haggard, they began to talk about entertainers like Gene Watson, John Denver and Travis Tritt, as well as some of bluegrass tunes that influenced them in later years.

The resulting play list went from Travis Tritt's "Modern Day Bonnie and Clyde" to Gene Watson's "Farewell Party." It included "The Old Home Place" by J.D. Crowe & The New South, "Tulsa Time" by Don Williams and "Only You" by The Platters, along with "Golden Ring" by George Jones and Tammy Wynette and "Mama Tried" by Merle Haggard, plus five more classics.

Russell says that one of the songs that made them push the envelope a little bit, as far as what the band has done previously, was the Travis Tritt song "Modern Day Bonnie and Clyde." "It was a song that all of us knew from hearing it on the radio, and we knew that Travis is a big bluegrass fan and plays the banjo. Plus there was the tie with Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs doing the theme song for the movie *Bonnie and Clyde*, which took the banjo to places it had never been before. This song didn't have a banjo on the original recording, but we thought it would sound great on it. We tried to stay with the arrangement as close as we could but add a bluegrass flair to it."

"There was a lot of picking and choosing, weighing out one song against another and the values that it would have for the recording," Russell admitted. "Not only did we look at the influence of songs on us as musicians and a band, but we also wanted to make it appealing for the people who would purchase the CD. If you look at the lineup, most people will recognize the majority of songs on the project. You have to have something that is familiar to the audience that you are promoting to."



Craig said Cracker Barrel was very pleased with the finished product that Illrd Tyme Out brought to them. "We look to the artist, and especially with them, because they have had success over the years due to their talent and the quality they put into their projects, to bring us an album they think will work for what we discussed going into the project. We work with them, think about the opportunities and options for each project, and brainstorm with the band. If it is cover songs, we then look to them for some of their favorite tracks; and if it's a brand new album, we look to them to find great new songs to record. Once we discuss the concept we ask the artist to bring their top favorites to the table and then we narrow that down

"We let them go with their artistic and expertise, work with their producer, and bring to us the best product. At the end of the day, that is what they have been successful doing over the years. Of course we review it, and 100 per cent of the time they bring us the product we need to have."

Cracker Barrel has carried music in their stores since 1969. In 2005 the company started its exclusive music program and have since released more than 30 titles.

"We release four to six albums per calendar year, and each project is only available at Cracker Barrel. "We provide something people who frequent Cracker Barrel can't find anywhere else," Craig says. "From a bluegrass perspective, bluegrass fans are Cracker Barrel guests, so it makes sense to continue releasing those projects."

"I guess for our side of the coin, we are looking at not only representing Illrd Tyme Out and bluegrass in a positive way, but it's an opportunity for us as a band to be exposed to people who have never heard of us or heard our music," Russell says of the project. "This gives us a

jumping board into different demographics. To be associated with Cracker Barrel and its brand is a positive situation. They are a wholesome, family-oriented type company and it's a good thing to be associated with. These are positive things for us. Plus, we love to eat.

"We do frequent Cracker Barrel's when we are touring. Steve and I are the biggest breakfast eaters on the bus; we are up and going before the other people are. You're not going to get anything better than a Cracker Barrel breakfast, because you can get as down in the trenches as you want to get, or you can eat healthy as well."

Russell said that it is definitely a win/win situation for the band. The group will be representing Cracker Barrel during the time that they have exclusive rights to the album, and they will be making appearances to promote the recording. "It's a great thing for us. We're proud to be a part of the mix."

The band invited a couple special guests to join them on the recording. Pam Tillis, daughter of Country Music Hall of Famer Mel Tillis, and Sonya Isaacs, join them on a couple songs.

"We were looking at the songs that we had, and 'Golden Ring' gave us the opportunity to focus on a duet situation," Russell explains. "Sonya had the perfect voice for this song and she was gracious to do Tammy's part on the song. She is a wonderful talent, a great singer and a wonderful person."

"Then we had the song 'John and Mary,' which has been one of our most popular songs over the years. We were looking for a way to remake the song, because it is still one of our most requested numbers in live performances. Pam agreed to be a part of this song, and she ended up not only doing harmony but doing a few lead lines the second verse. It is a creative expressive way that works well; she knocked it out of the park. She is a very gracious lady, a wonderful talent, and her history and career are a testament to that. It was an honor to have her on the recording as well."

One of the differences in this recording than previous ones by Illrd Tyme out is they had a producer work with them. "We have always produced our own records," Russell says. "With our other recordings, we were doing new songs; but because we were doing songs we were all familiar with on this one, we felt like it would benefit us as a band to bring in an outside producer to have fresh ears for the songs, and who had a little more background into the type of material that we were going to record for the project."

"When Barry Bales found out we were doing this he approached us and we felt comfortable with Barry and his knowledge and talent as a member of Alison Krauss's band and the other bands he's been in. When we made the decision to work with him it took a lot of stuff off of our shoulders, so we could concentrate more about the music and let him call the shots as producer, working with us. One of the things he said before we got started was he was not there to reinvent the wheel; he just wanted to listen to us and listen to our ideas, and get the best out of us for the recording. It worked really great."

The group recorded 12 songs in five days, which Russell says is not the norm for them. He said them being able to do that was a testament to Bales and his producing abilities "to make things happen, to get the best out of them and to work to get the songs knocked out and move on. He described their first recordings with a producer as a 'really great experience.'" Russell went on to say that it would not be uncommon for them to spend a couple weeks just doing

the tracks and the vocals, depending on how well things go as they record.

The band will have the full support of Cracker Barrel for the release of the album in January. Not only are stories being placed in various media outlets, but Cracker Barrel will promote the album in-store as well as integrate the band's tour with signage, banners and tour support. They also use social media and each of their respective websites to inform fans about the album release. This project is also available digitally on iTunes and on amazon.com.

Russell Moore & Illrd Tyme Out will celebrate the release of *Timeless Hits from the Past Bluegrassed* on Jan. 7 with several appearances in Nashville throughout the week. They'll appear on *Fox 17's Tennessee Mornings* on Tuesday, Jan. 8 at 9 a.m.; on WSM 650 AM with Bill Cody on Wednesday, Jan. 9 at 9 a.m.; and at Music City Roots later that evening at 7 p.m. Cracker Barrel will present a special CD Release Broadcast event on Thursday, Jan. 10 from 5-7 p.m. on WSM 650 AM when the band interviews with DJ Mike Terry, and then will perform an hour long concert including several songs from the new CD. They'll also perform at The Station Inn later that night beginning at 9 p.m. They'll conclude their media tour with a performance at the Grand Ole Opry on Saturday night, Jan. 12.

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