

BIG SPIKE

Traditional Bluegrass from the Green Mountains

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Press Sheet

New England has country music roots that are just as deep and strong and long-lived as those associated with the Southeast. In fact, swings through Vermont, Maine, upstate New York and southern Canada were the mainstay of many Nashville country acts during the 40's and 50's. Some northeast cities even had their own live stage shows and radio broadcasts, such as Boston's WCOP Hayloft Jamboree and Schenectady, NY's WGY Radio Ranch, which featured local and national country artists on weekly stage shows. Thus it's not surprising to find bands like Big Spike living and thriving in rural northern Vermont!

The members of Big Spike all seem to be drawn to the same elements in country music. The band aims to recreate a sound that is long gone from country music, a sound closer to the honky-tonk and early bluegrass sound of the 50's than it is to what's played in Nashville today. Country music through the 1950's didn't distinguish bluegrass from "country and western"; it was all just "country music", so doing a Webb Pierce or George Jones song bluegrass style, as Big Spike often does, fits right in with the tradition. With two excellent fiddle players in the band, they often revert to the full, twin fiddle sound that was an integral part of early country music.

Banjo player Bill Gaston grew up on 60s/70s rock and roll while living in New Jersey. He began playing guitar in 6th grade, but recalls that he got his introduction to bluegrass music accidentally at the age of 15 by his best friend. "He and I were riding down Route 23 in a pushbutton transmission Dodge Dart, and I picked up a cassette that was lying on the seat and dropped it into the cassette player. It was the Osborne Brothers and the first song on it was Ruby and I just about had a heart attack!"

Bass player Mike Santosusso also got his musical start playing classic rock and jazz. He also spent time playing "in the pit" for musical theater. His first exposure to bluegrass was a recording of the group "Old And In The Way". Mike says, "I loved the drive without the drums, the jazz-like spirit of improvisation, the cool vocal harmonies, and the fact that the music sounded like the musicians were really having a great time." After moving to Vermont, Mike co-founded the popular jamgrass band, "Smokin' Grass" which recorded a number of CD's and toured the country several times.

Guitarist Pete Langdell has been playing traditional music since high school. Better known as a luthier, he is recognized internationally as the designer of Rigel Mandolins, based in Cambridge, Vermont. "One of the coolest things I have is a picture of Bill Monroe playing a Rigel," he says. "He asked to play it at Wintergrass the year before he died. He set the standard for everything in bluegrass, and here he was asking to play one of my instruments."

Fiddler Freeman Corey grew up on a dairy farm in Benson, Vermont. He learned to play from his father, a well-known old time fiddler. He recalls, "My father learned hundreds of tunes from other local musicians, many of whom were farmers and lumberjacks. Once the day's work was done on the farm, my father would play the fiddle or play music from the 20's, 30's, and 40's on the piano. As a child, I fell asleep listening to all those great old tunes."

Mandolin player and fiddler Neil Rossi originally learned to play the banjo after hearing The Osborne Brothers play on West Virginia radio station WWVA. "I thought that was the coolest sound I'd ever heard. I didn't even know what the music was called, but I knew I had to play it," he says. He has previously played and recorded with The Spark Gap Wonder Boys, and with The David Bromberg Band.

Big Spike feels that it's not enough to just do their signature close harmony and impressive instrumental work to keep an audience interested. They feel strongly that it's important to bring a sense of humor and enthusiasm to their music. Says mandolinist Rossi, "With as much rehearsing as we do, we still never think of this as work when we get up on stage. We're having too much fun up there."