

Carolina Blue

“We’re a 12-year overnight success,” said Bobby Powell, laughing. “Three years ago, [Carolina Blue] was playing local BBQ restaurants around our hometown. In 2019, we’ve had about 120 shows all over the country, playing at festivals and venues that we only dreamed about. We’re meeting new people, and our music is appreciated by a lot of folks who are driving hours to see us. That’s very humbling. And we give God the glory for that because we asked Him to turn this into a career instead of a hobby.”

Bobby Powell and Tim Jones co-founded Carolina Blue in 2007. Their latest album – *I Hear Bluegrass Calling Me* – has created a buzz within the bluegrass industry, particularly “*Rusty Rails*,” which has been a stalwart in the top 5 on the bluegrass charts, including #1 for several weeks. Moreover, at least three other songs from the 13-track album have seen chart success. But the highlight of the band’s success thus far came this year when the International Bluegrass Music Association nominated them for three awards: New Artist of the Year, Album of the Year for *I Hear Bluegrass Calling Me*, and Instrumental Recording of the Year for “Fried Taters & Onions,” penned by the band’s banjoist, James McDowell.

“We’re really proud of that song because of the five instrumentals that were nominated for the award, it was the only one that was original and not a cover tune,” said Powell. “How it got its name is sort of interesting. We were playing a festival in Maine and everywhere you looked there were potato fields. Tim Jones, our mandolin player, said we should name it ‘Fried Taters and Onions.’ Back in North Carolina, those two are a staple food, one of my favorites. I’m on a low-carb diet and when we play the song, it practically brings me to tears (laughing).”

Powell is proud that Carolina Blue’s music is original. “Seventy-five percent of our show is original tunes. Our mission statement is to present bluegrass music like Bill Monroe intended it to be without being a Bill Monroe cover band. By far, he is our biggest influence. Our audiences see a lot of heavy fiddlin’ and mandolin work. We do a lot more three-part harmony than Monroe, but we’ll do some bluegrass gospel quartet tunes with just mandolin, guitar, and four-part singing. We like to engage with the audience immediately...we love to interact with them through questions, ask them to sing along and things like that.”

Powell (guitar and vocals) said he and the Carolina Blue band members, which includes Jones (mandolin and vocals), McDowell (banjo and vocals), Reese Combs (upright bass and vocals) and Aynsley Porchak (fiddle, recipient of the 2018 IBMA Momentum Instrumentalist Award), “are on the same page when it comes to music and lifestyle. We’re not a partying band. We’re all conservative Christians and we reflect that as a band, too.”

One thing you will notice immediately is how the band dresses. Porchak’s attractive headwear is a throwback to the 1940s and 50s. Not to be outdone, the male members of the band have taken to that periodic style of dress with ties and hats to match. “We try to dress nicely for our audiences,” said Powell. “Tim and I have two mentors in North Carolina - Roy Chapman and Joe Byers. They taught us to try to dress better than the folks who are paying money to see us play. They told us to respect our audience.”

And about that name: Carolina Blue. Powell said, “Contrary to popular opinion, it has nothing to do with Chapel Hill (University of North Carolina). Tim named the band. He said we’re a bluegrass band and we’re from the state of North Carolina, hence Carolina Blue. We’re proud to represent our home state.”