

# buzz BOX

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## Genre soup Guess what's in it!

**BLUEGRASS**, once wrongfully dismissed with varying degrees of revulsion as the music of uncultured backwater hicks, has been progressively emerging as a palatable mainstream art form. Sandwiched between the soundtrack to *O Brother Where Art Thou?* and the Hackensaw Boys touring with Modest Mouse was the success of Nickel Creek, an acoustic trio who proved to be both strongest and most out of place with collegiate audiences more interested in the big bass of hip-hop or the holier-than-thou pretension of indie rock.

The 20-somethings have been playing together since they were preteens, the product of a promoter who saw great marketing potential in a barely pubescent band that could fuel all the hootin' and hollerin'. It took a few years longer than expected, but it turns out he was right—2002's *This Side* found a surprisingly young audience, and now Chris Thile is one of the most promising mandolin players on the scene.

Sean Watkins matches up against Thile on guitar—he started winning flat-picking competitions at age 16—and his younger sister, Sarah, rounds out the trio on violin and vocals.

The elder Watkins insists that "bluegrass" is a misnomer used for the sake of promotional simplicity, and Thile was once quoted as saying "We'd like it to be genre soup, where you can't see what's in it—as opposed to genre stew, where everything is very defined."

The new album, *Why Should The Fire Die?* trades producer Alison Krauss for the dudes responsible for Smash Mouth and Good Charlotte. And while they blend in a few new formulas with the old favorites, songs like "Scotch and Chocolate" and "First and Last Waltz" follow in the tradition of "Smoothie Song" and "House of Tom Bombadil," proving that it's still on the instrumental numbers that these guys really cook.

**The Hook:** I hear Chris has been violently sick for the past few days. How is he?

**Sean Watkins:** He lost his voice. We did tons of promo, and it just took a toll.

**The Hook:** Is he singing again?

**Sean Watkins:** He can sing shows, but he's not allowed to talk or sing at any other time.

**The Hook:** Yikes. Will that still be the case when you're here?

**Sean Watkins:** He should be better by then.

**The Hook:** Just how long have you guys been doing this?

**Sean Watkins:** We've been a band for 16 years. I was 12 when we started, and Sarah and Chris were both eight.

**The Hook:** Is it odd to become successful after spending so much time under the radar?

**Sean Watkins:** No, it happens to a lot of people. It takes a while for your voice to mature, and things like that.

**The Hook:** How have things changed now that you're older?

**Sean Watkins:** We're playing bigger shows, and we have two buses now, but that's about it.

**The Hook:** Speaking of which, are you really going to try to fill the Pavilion without bass or drums?

**Sean Watkins:** We have a touring bass player, although the other three of us kind of constitute the band in the official sense.

**Sean Watkins:** Scott Thile, Chris' father, used to play bass with you until it started to look like you were going to have a serious shot at success. Did he bow out so that Nickel Creek would be a younger, more marketable act?

**Sean Watkins:** No. He just wanted out—he didn't want to be on the road as much, whereas we wanted to take it as far as we could. It wasn't really a problem having an older guy in the band. Our bass player now is about the same age as Chris' dad.

**The Hook:** Were you determined to move in a new direction with this album?

**Sean Watkins:** Well, I don't think we were ever really bluegrass. People called us bluegrass, but growing up in Southern California, even when we were first starting, it was always bluegrass mixed with other stuff. They're thinking that we used to be bluegrass and now we're not, and to us, we were never really bluegrass in the first place.

**The Hook:** This tour will take you from DC through Charlottesville and on down to Atlanta. Is it intimidating at all to be a Californian bringing bluegrass into the deep South?

**Sean Watkins:** Ha! Not really. If we were playing traditional bluegrass festivals, maybe, but we get booked by all sorts of people. It's not like we're bringing a bastardized bluegrass to people who know nothing else. ■

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