

THE GEORGIA THUNDERBOLTS ROME, GA.

Son of a Preacher Man

The Georgia Thunderbolts dropped their first album, *Can We Get a Witness*, in the middle of the pandemic. Despite being unable to tour, the tunes racked up over six million hits on various digital platforms. “We got some outstanding press as well,” lead singer **TJ Lyle**, who also plays harmonica and keyboards, says. “On *Rise Above It All*, we’ve matured a bit. The first time out, we wanted to make songs that sounded cool. This time, we’re more serious, looking at the things



in life that can knock you down and rising above it all to better ourselves.” Many of the record’s tracks were written by Lyle and guitarist **Logan Tolbert** during the COVID-era shutdown. The arrangements were honed at soundchecks and in Lyle’s home studio, with the band—which also includes bassist/classical guitarist **Zach Everett**, drummer **Bristol Perry** and lead guitarist **Riley Couzzourt**—working

as a team. In the studio, The Georgia Thunderbolts mostly recorded live, capturing several cuts in one take. “If we didn’t nail it, we’d do it again,” Lyle says. “Maybe a few overdubs. One song, ‘It Ain’t Easy,’ a Betty LaVette cover, has a bit of reggae in the guitar upbeats. That was suggested by our producer Richard Young, from the Kentucky Headhunters.” The arrangements are as diverse as the band members’ influences. There’s the bluesy, Motown-meets-Muscle-Shoals shuffle of “Crawling My Way Back to You,” the acoustic country of “Moonlight Play” and a hint of the Allman Brothers’ trademark twin-guitar harmonies on “Wait.” Lyle believes that the musicians’ upbringings, as well as their Southern surroundings, add some nuance to their sound. “There are a lot of great bands in Georgia, like the Allmans, and our music reflects the way we were brought up. My dad’s a preacher. I grew up listening to him preach, so that comes into my vocal style. My folks only played gospel and soul records—Ray Charles, Wilson Pickett, Bobby Womack. I was into all that at a very young age. I never listened to pop radio. It didn’t have the kind of music I liked.” georgiathunderbolts.com **J. Poet**

MOUNTAIN GRASS UNIT BIRMINGHAM, ALA.

Going Wide and Deep

Birmingham, Ala.-based bluegrass combo **Mountain Grass Unit** are bringing a modern approach to a traditional sound, infusing elements of country, jazz, rock and reggae into their original take on string music. Formed by **Drury Anderson** (mandolin, vocals), **Luke Black** (acoustic guitar, banjo, vocals), **Josiah Nelson** (fiddle, vocals) and **Sam Wilson** (upright bass, vocals), the quartet are as influenced by George Benson and Wes Montgomery as they are by Tony Rice, the Grateful Dead, and contemporary roots acts like Jason Isbell and Billy Strings. And they’ve been known to cover bands that bluegrass acts typically shy away from, including Nirvana, Alice in Chains, Bob Marley and Jimi Hendrix. “Our influences are so wide,” Nelson says. Thanks to their combination of intricate harmonies, youthful energy and choice musicianship—Anderson and Black are studying at Berklee—Mountain Grass Unit have already earned a reputation as a top-notch live act, packing more intimate venues on their own and scoring spots at festivals like Bourbon and Beyond or Billy Strings’ Renewal. Earlier this year, the band released an EP, *Runnin’ From Trouble*, which was produced by Mike Harris of Old Crow Medicine Show and mixed by Morgan Jahnig at Hartland Studios in Nashville. “Working with Mike as our producer was a phenomenal experience,” says Black, who describes him as a “great hang” during the session. Wilson says that the track “Smugglin’” serves as a nod to the five-song EP’s overarching theme. “Although it sounds cool to be a cowboy smuggling across the desert, the title more so reflects our vibe as a group,” he says. “Our rigorous tour schedule keeps us on our toes and runnin’ from trouble.” mountaingrassunit.com **Matt Hoffman**



DEBRA GRINER LITTLE FERRY, N.J.

Passion, Prowess and Persuasion

Like many artists, **Debra Griner** sees her songs as an innate form of communication. Folk legend Tom Paxton once called her “a new and welcome voice,” exclaiming that “a careful and thoughtful writer has joined the conversation.” And her latest album, *A Place to Start*, only reinforces those accolades. A follow-up to 2011’s *Bound to Rise* and 2013’s *On the Bluegrass Trail*, the LP finds her leaning into such iconic influences as James Taylor, John Denver, Paul Simon and Joni Mitchell. Her love of music began during her childhood in Bergen County, N.J., and was spawned from the influence of her father, whose music collection introduced her to the sounds of classic country, folk, rock and Broadway musicals. Griner was so enticed by the latter that she moved to New York while still in her early 20s, enrolling at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy. After appearing in different cabarets and various off-Broadway productions, she switched her focus to educating others. Eventually, though, she decided to try her hand at songwriting and officially relocated to Music City. “I’ve been in Nashville for two years now and haven’t looked back,” Griner reflects. “I’ve taken every opportunity to play for an audience. I started a song circle that has turned into a new venue at the Westminster Presbyterian Church Café. So many of my friends are grateful for a place to play with such an attentive and appreciative audience.” Since heading south, she’s also become involved in co-writing. “I love to elicit a feeling in a room filled with people so that we can all experience it together,” she says. “I write from a place of wanting to share something and say things that are important to me.”

debragriner.com **Lee Zimmerman**