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Taking it to the road Local banjo virtuoso Lorenzo Gangi joins Hit & Run Bluegrass

by Caroline Keys

After nine years of lending his three-finger banjo solos and other musical talents to local bluegrass bands including Rough Edges and Iron Lasso, Lorenzo Gangi has taken his show on the road. Through some crafty promotion and good fortune, the 26-year-old picker recently landed the gig as banjo-man for contemporary bluegrass darlings Hit & Run Bluegrass. While touring the country as a banjo player may not be fodder for the average guy's daydream, Gangi says "there was a time in my life when it was all I could think about."

It was Gangi's acclaimed solo debut album, *Fistful of Lonesome*, that secured his spot in the emerging Boulder, Colo.-based band. The record features Lorenzo's clean, sensible banjo accompanied by heavy hitters from both the local and national bluegrass scenes, such as Ian Flemming and Eric Uglum. Gangi handed out copies of the album last October at the International Bluegrass Music Association conference in Nashville hoping to network through the industry.

"I guess one ended up in the right hands," he says.

Hit & Run's lead vocalist and guitarist Rebecca Hoggan heard the album while riding in a bandmate's car, asked whose it was and proceeded to follow up with Gangi, inviting him to audition in Boulder. He started touring with the band in February.

Gangi's refined technique certainly fits with Hit & Run's carefully calculated brand of bluegrass, but his picking style sets him apart in the band's lineup. Known for his stoic playing persona—a far-off gaze that belies his ability to connect with audiences through expressive riffs—Gangi mimics what he calls "a North Carolina bounce" when he picks, an upbeat style reminiscent of former Bozeman banjo player Julie Elkins. It's a style he first picked up from his father, whom he credits as one of his main influences.

"It's a lot like language, learning the accent and colloquialisms of your family," he says. "I still play some of the same licks my Dad taught me years ago."

Gangi's father, Larry Gangi Sr., has toured as a solo artist and played in several Missoula bands, including Mountain Groan, and has mentored his son's musical talents from an early age, placing a quarter-size fiddle in pint-sized Lorenzo's hands when the boy was just 5 years old. The youngster became proficient at the instrument but, according to his father, quit playing because "there were only girls in the violin section of his elementary school orchestra." When Lorenzo switched to the five-string banjo, his father noticed a marked difference almost immediately.

"Right when he started to play banjo," Larry Sr. says, "I could see that he was taking it more to heart."

Armed with his father's teachings, Gangi took the next career step on his own. He attended East Tennessee State University and took classes in the school's acclaimed bluegrass program, the only one in the nation with a comprehensive curriculum including country and old-time course offerings. After a year he returned to Missoula to finish his studies, graduating from the University of Montana with a degree in computer science (Gangi works as a software engineer when he's not touring) and kept up his chops playing at the Top Hat's weekly bluegrass jams.

"Most banjo players learn by playing along with [Lester] Flatt and [Earl] Scruggs recordings," he says. "At the Top Hat, I had to try to solo over some guy singing folk songs. Consequently, I don't think I operate under the same musical rules as contemporary banjo players—I throw stuff in that's frowned upon in some circles."

Indeed, there's a faction of bluegrass purists that would likely pooh-pooh some of Gangi's work. For instance, the novelty song "La Cucaracha" appears on *Fistful of Lonesome* featuring former Missoulian Matt Lindahl—the charismatic singer from Cold Mountain Rhythm Band who made it to third place on Country Music Television's "Nashville Star" in 2004—singing, playing kazoo and hollering back and forth to himself in Spanish while Gangi's banjo vamps on the familiar Mexican melody.

Strictly traditional bluegrass fans would also have found many a frown-worthy moment each time Gangi held court at the Old Post Pub with Iron Lasso. Every member of that posse of pickers—a quintet that included Fred Kellner, Mason Tuttle, Adam Sherba and Ivan Rosenberg—excelled instrumentally, but upheld an outlaw-type mystique, performing bluegrass covers of artists like Tiffany, the Bee Gees and Ray Parker Jr. Kellner recalls Gangi once proving his flexibility when the band challenged the audience to test them with requests, and Gangi responded by nailing, completely unrehearsed, the Beatles' "Yellow Submarine."

"I learned to shoot from the hip with Iron Lasso," he says. "We never practiced so I had to learn how to improvise and kick off tunes on the spot."

Hit & Run's Hoggan can attest to Gangi's knack for spontaneity. He was forced to pick up the band's repertoire quickly once he joined, and made the transition seamlessly.

"Lorenzo has an uncanny ability to perform songs he's never heard, or has heard only once," Hoggan says.

Other than fitting in, however, Gangi doesn't have as much use for his improvisational skills with his new band.

"Hit & Run is the exact opposite [of Iron Lasso]," he says. "All we do is practice. Everybody knows what is going on at all times, what song is next, who plays what break and who plays backup over what... It's tough, cramming 30 songs in your head is an endeavor. But it's getting there and it's worth it because I think the final product rocks." ♪

Hit & Run Bluegrass plays the Crystal Theatre Friday, March 31, at 8 PM. Tickets are \$12 in advance, \$14 at the door and \$2 off for Montana Folklore Society members.

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