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Fifteen Years Later, Bluegrass Is Still Reeling from *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

As the sun begins to dip down over Raleigh on Friday, the International Bluegrass Music Association will be well into its fourth convocation in the state's capital. The streets of downtown will be crowded with local and out-of-town visitors seeking to soak up as much live bluegrass as they can handle. Meanwhile, the band taking the stage at Red Hat Amphitheater will be a work of fiction.

Well, sort of. The Soggy Bottom Boys are indeed a bunch of breathing, tremendously talented humans with honest-to-god instruments that they actually know how to play. But the band itself, an amalgamation of personnel from Alison Krauss and Union Station and the Nashville Bluegrass Band, wouldn't exist without *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the Coen brothers' 2001 film about a bumbling trio of con men who break away from a chain gang to seek a mysterious treasure.

The film's plot is loosely based on Homer's epic *The Odyssey*, set in Depression-era Mississippi. The loveable-hateable protagonists are George Clooney's motormouth Everett, John Turturro's angsty Pete, and Tim Blake Nelson's dim Delmar. Music is central in the story, more so than in any of the films the Coens had made before. With a guitarist, the Robert Johnson-inspired Tommy, the group pulls a fast con by "singing into a can" for a blind record producer. They take their money and split, on the run from the law again. But unbeknownst to them, their version of "Man of Constant Sorrow" becomes a hit and eventually their salvation.

When Clooney opens his mouth to sing, the voice that spills out belongs to Dan Tyminski. He'll lead the ensemble known as the Soggy Bottom Boys: Barry Bales, Ron Block, Pat Enright, Stuart Duncan, and Mike Compton. Once again late Friday afternoon. Tyminski first auditioned for the soundtrack as the guitarist for Alison Krauss and Union Station, but was called back for a solo audition.

"It was a little confusing to me, because I didn't think that I necessarily sounded like I pictured Clooney's voice sounding," Tyminski says. "It was kind of weird, the thought of my voice coming out. Looking at it in perspective, it was a Coen brothers movie, and everything's a little off-center and a little strange."

O Brother, Where Art Thou? is plenty strange with its deft combination of classical mythology and the cultural quirks of the rural South. The soundtrack is a perfect expansion of the film's themes Clooney's beleaguered Everett probably could've written "Man of Constant Sorrow" himself. But putting it together wasn't an easy project. Venerated producer T Bone Burnett worked closely with the Coens to dig up songs that would fit the feel of the film its darkness and its lighthearted hope. Bluegrass is, of course, rife with both.

"What we found when we went in was that they had done an enormous amount of research, listening to all the recorded music from that era that they could find," Tyminski says. He remembers box sets of recordings stacked up in the rehearsal hall where he and Union Station auditioned for their parts.

Burnett then assembled a cracking team of professionals the kinds of musicians who'd spent their lives steeped in this stuff to bring the soundtrack to life.

"He was able to find some of these old-timers who were still alive and still had a great voice and tremendous knowledge, like Ralph Stanley and John Hartford, and bring in young outstanding singers and players that respected this old music and loved it," says Sandy Wilbur, who worked on *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* as its musicologist. It was her job to research the origins of each song to ensure that the film had the rights to all of its music.