

Chicago Tribune

OCTOBER 10, 2001

WEDNESDAY

TEMPO

Sounds of the past, present mark bluegrass awards, fest

By David Royko
Special to the Tribune

LOUISVILLE — The International Bluegrass Music Association's annual Music Awards and festival, which ran through last weekend in Louisville, basked in the glow of "O Brother, Where Art Thou," the movie soundtrack of which drew millions of listeners over the past year into the world of bluegrass and its antecedents, and took the prize for Album of the Year.

At the same time, IBMA looked to a future represented by mandolinist Chris Thile and his group Nickel Creek, which won this year's Mandolinist award and Instrumental Group award, respectively. Thile unseated Ronnie McCoury from the mandolin throne he occupied for eight straight years, but the former incumbent's picking with the Del McCoury Band Saturday night demonstrated that, at this level, picking between "the best" is like splitting, not hairs, but atoms. How the McCoury ensemble, perhaps the most powerful and creative mainstream bluegrass band playing today, manages to keep their sound so consistent yet constantly updated and fresh is one of bluegrass music's true miracles.

As is typical for IBMA's festival, some of the best sets were delivered by artists with profiles somewhat below those of headliners like McCoury, Rhonda Vincent, Ricky Skaggs, Doyle Lawson, Ildred Tyme Out and Blue Highway. One such instance came from Kathy Kallick, whose richly talented band provided her voice — dripping with expression and as gently inviting as a down pillow — with an ideal frame.

On the progressive end of the spectrum, the trio of Todd Phillips, Matt Flinner and David Grier drew upon influences beyond bluegrass to create aural tone poems of eloquence and intrigue. Grier's guitar solo on



AP photo

Rhonda Vincent and Robert Baker, of Rhonda Vincent & The Rage, accept the Entertainer of the Year Award at the 12th annual International Bluegrass Music Association Awards.

"Big Monk" melded quirky Monkish rhythmic lines with the dark-hued mystery of Bill Monroe.

Performing in one of the many showcase suites was Amy Gallatin, who unleashed her pure, silvery voice on music that ranged from bluegrass through western swing and contemporary folk, nailing each style with precision, taste and charismatic humor, and displayed a rare ability to move from sweetness to sassy grit, sometimes within a single phrase.

Nothing at this year's festival was more exciting than "Mark Schatz and Friends." Playing on the Roots and Branches stage, bassist/banjoist/dancer Schatz assembled a quartet that included fiddler Casey Driessen and this year's award winners for bass (Missy Raines) and guitar (Jim Hurst), and perfectly rep-

resented bluegrass music's past and future.

Schatz plays the claw-hammer style of banjo, which predates the dominant Scruggs-style picking associated with bluegrass. Schatz's interests and experience, however, which include jazz and new acoustic music, lend his composing a range and depth that allows him to meld the old and the new in a completely natural, and unique, manner.

The high point of his set was the original instrumental, "Steppin' in the Boiler House." Though the instrumentation and basic techniques might have been a century old, Schatz planted rhythmic landmines within the arrangement while his band propelled the tune with a white-hot tension that catapulted Driessen's incisive solo into a place few country fiddlers have gone.