

Sid Griffin is a multi-faceted musician, author, and broadcaster. An eighth-generation native Kentuckian (on both sides) who currently resides in England. Sid has popped up in literary circles due to the success of his Million Dollar Bash book on Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes as well as the follow up Shelter From The Storm. Griffin has already won a Lifetime Achievement Award in Italy in 2003, and Sid's old band the Long Ryders, the legendary founders of alt-country, have released via Prima Records Ltd. a CD entitled Live 2004: State Of Our Reunion and followed it up with a live DVD release from the same tour.

As a documentary scriptwriter for BBC Radio Two, Sid Griffin had two of his scripts broadcast in 2006, the first on Gram Parsons and the second on the Carter Family, this latter narrated by Dolly Parton. He contributed to several others and completed a Buddy Holly script for the 50th anniversary of Buddy Holly's tragic death which the BBC is currently thinking of expanding into more than a radio documentary.

As a freelance journalist Griffin is a regular contributor to Mojo, Fritz Lang Review, Gaslight, Rock 'n' Reel, Baseball Maniac, Skyway and Country Music International. He has been published in The Guardian, Music Week, Variety, Cash Box, New Musical Express, the L.A. Weekly, BAM and Melody Maker.

Sid's second book, Bluegrass Guitar: Know The Players, Know The Music, was published by BackBeat Books with an accompanying CD which features Sid's bluegrass Coal Porters performing songs alongside ex- Jerry Garcia sideman, guitar whiz Eric Thompson.

An acknowledged expert on the musical career of Gram Parsons, Sid's first book Gram Parsons - A Music Biography (Sierra Books) is still in print. He has contributed sleeve notes to a great many CD reissues by Gram Parsons and The Flying Burrito Bros, The Byrds and Gene Clark. Sid has also compiled and written sleeve notes for reissues by Long John Baldry, Mike Nesmith, Arthur Lee's Love, Joe Ely, Dolly Parton, the International Submarine Band, Steve Young, Tim Hardin, The Everly Brothers, Phil Ochs, Iggy Pop, Nils Lofgren, his heroes Bill Monroe & the Bluegrass Boys, his friend the late Ronnie Lane, Hank Williams, Glen Campbell and for various compilations including Beating Up The Campus, Fallen Angels: An Alt-Country Sampler and Okay, So We Lost: Songs Of The Confederacy, Vol. Five.

Currently Griffin plays with The Coal Porters who are an exciting and dynamic bluegrass combo featuring Carly Frey - fine fiddle and vocals; Dick Smith - ace banjo and vocals; Sid Griffin - vocals, mandolin, harmonica and autoharp; Andrew Stafford, doghouse bass, Neil Robert Herd guitar, sporrán and vocals.

I talked to Sid at the Americana Music Conference in September. We met in the coffee shop where we were joined by Joyce and the Hammon Brothers, friends from Sid's youth in Kentucky for a lively conversation.

AG: Why the switch to Bluegrass?

SG: Because playing electric music was in a cul-de-sac. We had been playing electric music to the same 50 to 350 people every night. We were just not going anywhere. I had started playing electric music in 1970 with the Hammon's in Louisville at age 14. The electric music was not getting us anywhere. I realized that I was rewriting Long Ryder's music. I thought about it and realized that if you want to be an artist you have to grow and step out of the box that you are familiar with. I had friends in LA 30 years ago that were making the same kind of music that they are now. They are refining it, but not growing it. I did not want to end up that way. I would have died if I had stayed doing the same thing.

So Neil, the guitar player in the Coal Porters, and I put together a band playing more experimental music like Wilco does, called Western Electric. The drummer at the time was in a terrible car accident and was in a coma for 35 days, and could not play for months. We had already taken the leap from the 2/4 time Country Rock music which was good. The trouble was that we had already recorded this great CD and could not go out and tour because the drummer was laid up. So we evolved into an acoustic band which was a very wise thing to do. Our audience changed quite a bit when we did so. For the better I may ad.

AG: In England is there a large number of Bluegrass musicians?

SG: There is a large devoted crowd like in the US that just want to hear Bluegrass from 1947 Monroe style. We don't really play that way. I have a friend who is a promoter in Japan and he listened to our CD and commented that "I finally get it. You guys are Bluegrass for people who don't like Bluegrass!" I call our music Alt-Bluegrass. We want to be the world's first Alt-Bluegrass band so nobody can say we weren't any good at because we set the style!

AG: One of my favorite CD's is the Coal Porters live CD of the Gram Parsons tribute concert. Did you start the festival?

SG: Somebody called us up and asked us to put something together because that was the 25th anniversary of Gram's death. It started at ten in the morning and went to ten at night. It was one of the first tribute concerts to Gram in Europe, maybe the world.

AG: When you record in England as a Bluegrass band do you have to educate the engineers on how you want to sound?

SG: People practically people in Europe have never recorded a band like us. There are kids working in the studios who have never recorded a band without a drum kit. Some even have not recorded real drums only synth drums so it is a learning curve for them. Neil Herd our guitar player was an engineer for the BBC so we are lucky to have him there to walk them through it. Let me make it clear that it is not the engineers fault in any way, they are just not used to recording live acoustic bands.

I can tell you that the Celtic people get Bluegrass. It is like Celtic music. The Anglo-Saxons don't quite get it yet, but we are working on them. In Scotland, Ireland, and Wales the crowds and studio people are really into it. The rest of Great Britain is more into Haysced Dixie style of Bluegrass. We have found that playing the festival circuit is better for us. They have ready made crowds and they want to hear our style of music. Even in Galicia in North Western Spain is a great place for us to play too. They are Celtic people who love acoustic music.

AG: Why did you move to England?

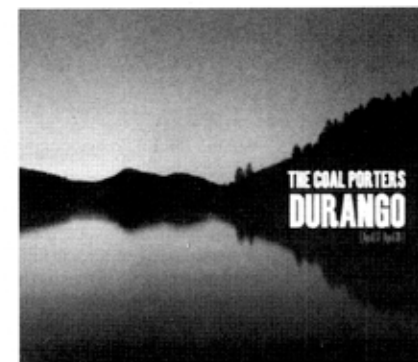
SG: At the time I was married to an English lady, I still am but to a different one (we all laugh)! It was just a lot more practical. She was in a band doing very well so it just made sense.

AG: You are a noted journalist.

SG: And Author!

AG: I have your first book on Gram Parsons and it was wonderful.

SG: Thank you. The last three have been more intense and harder reads. I'm very proud of all my books. Tomorrow there is a book signing. I hope no one throws a shoe or an egg at me like Tony Blair (we all laugh again)!



AG: AS long as you don't wear a BP t-shirt I think you'll be fine!

AG: Do you play music full-time yet?

SG: If I did not write I could not make a living. I'd say it's about 50/50. We are approaching that point of how much time we all want to put into it, but we are not quite there yet.

AG: Do you still have contact with the guys in the Long Ryder's yet?

SG: I do. I email Tom Stevens about every 36 hours. Steven does not read his email very much, and Greg is a publishing guy at Warner Chappell in LA and has done very well.

AG: How did you start playing music?

SG: I started out playing with my buddies here playing CCR songs. My first guitar the strings were literally half an inch off the neck. It was so hard to play. I got it in 1965 for my birthday. It was a Stella.

At a Long Ryder's photo shoot in the 80's Steven came in and said that there was a guy selling a Silvertone guitar and amp in case package for \$150.00 down on the street corner. I went to the tyme machine and took out \$75.00 which was all I had in my account and the guy took it. I used it for years and in the early 90's sold it to Joe Strummer of the Clash.

AG: What is your approach to writing and recording?

SG: Well an idea comes first and I let it marinate in the brain for a while. It is very seldom I would rush to a guitar with a quick thought. Sugar Sugar for the Archie's was written by Jeff Barry in 15 minutes and look how much money that made. I wish I could write that quickly but it just does not work that way for me. I wish I could have one of those eureka moments. Maybe that's why I haven't written any world wide hits yet.

(Joyce offered Sid and his buddies Cheese Curds)

My friend Billy Bragg had me over to his house when he lived in London and brought out a cheese head hat; he said he was in Wisconsin and went to a Packer game and everyone was wearing them. He asked me what it meant. I told him that means you are a cheese head. Billy told me he was afraid to ask why everyone was wearing them.

AG: When you write books is it the same process as songwriting?

SG: No it's latterly headache inducing. I get migraines. I was writing a documentary on Gram Parsons and got them really bad. When I started the Dylan/Band book they came back. My doctor said it was stress. In America they would give you a pill for that, but it is usually the same pill you would take for depression. The trouble is that they make you a little light headed and it's harder for me to be creative and focused.

When you write books the publisher gives you an advance. The more you turn in the faster you get paid, so the stress is always there to meet a deadline, and it's hard to be creative under that kind of stress. My last book Shelter from the Storm was very stressful because I was moving to a new house when the book was due. As the movers were taking things out of the house I was sitting on the floor cross legged with the keyboard in my lap finishing the book.

AG: Do you find it hard to get information from people to write your books?

SG: No I'm pretty good at getting people to talk to me. I don't write about or ask them about their private lives. Just their music. People always want to know that kind of stuff and I'm not interested in that unless it's directly part of the music. I'm not a tell all author. It's not important to me. I don't feel comfortable asking those types of questions.

AG: Looking back at what you have accomplished with your music and writing, are you happy and what are you most proud of?

SG: That's a good question. I'm very proud of my kids. I have been around the world twice and shook hands with everyone. I have sold records and stayed in the black. I don't think that the Long Ryder's is my best yet. The albums are hit or miss. Durango by the Coal Porters and The Western Electric CD's I think are my best albums to date. I was extremely proud of the Long Ryder's live shows. It's too bad that they did not transfer to the studio and recording. I'm proud of my books. The coolest thing I've ever done was headline a concert in Spain for Barcelona 800th anniversary. We played by a show on the side of hill in front of 100,000 people. That was cool!