



# The History of Flatpicking Guitar in the USA

## Part Six: The Next Generation

by Dan Miller

Welcome to the final article in our six-part series on the history of flatpicking. In this segment we will discuss the newest group of flatpickers who have been gaining attention on the bluegrass and acoustic music scene in the past few years. As outlined in the first article of this series, I will refer to this group as the "Next Generation". If you have been following

this series, you will know that we have stepped through the history of flatpicking chronologically by dividing the development of this guitar style into four eras consisting of Pioneers, Heroes, Second Generation, and now the Next Generation Era. We have discussed how the players who are associated with each of these eras built upon the techniques of those players who came before them. As the style developed, the technique was greatly expanded and the Next Generation players are taking it in new directions still.

This new generation of young players consists of those who have reaped the benefits of the creativity of those who have come before them and have begun to make innovations of their own. These are players who, due to their age, never knew that flatpicking was once limited to playing old country songs or fiddle tunes. They have grown up hearing Tony Rice playing jazz and new acoustic music with the David Grisman Quintet and are using Rice and Grisman as their starting points. For the most part, the Next Generation's ideas about flatpicking have no boundaries in terms of genre, melding of various musical influences and ideas, or mixing electric and acoustic guitar techniques. Many of these players are also formally educated in music and are thus able to understand and communicate complex musical ideas.

The Next Generation includes players such as: Cody Kilby, John Chapman, Josh Williams, Chris Eldridge, Andy Falco, Edward O'Day, Adam Wright, Tyler Grant, Matt Arcara, Tony Watt, Justin Carbone, Dustin Benson, Matt Wingate, Jake Stargel, Casey Cook, and Mo Canada. These young players are not only including influences from the flatpickers who came before them, they are also incorporating influences from various other musical styles to great effect; furthermore, they are doing so in positions of prominence. Cody Kilby performs with Ricky Skaggs, Josh Williams with Rhonda Vincent; Chris Eldridge with the Infamous Stringdusters, Andy Falco with Alecia Nugent; Edward O'Day with Adrienne Young, Matt Wingate with the Greencards, Matt Arcara with Joy Kills Sorrow, Justin Carbone with Special Consensus, Jake Stargel with the Lovell Sisters, and Tyler Grant with Drew Emmett.

One other interesting fact regarding the next generation players is that the majority of them have moved to Nashville within the past four or five years and have all become great friends and pickin' buddies. Their friendships have served to significantly "raise the bar" in the flatpicking world as they all jam together and motivate each other to achieve higher levels of skill. I recently wrote an article for *Bluegrass Now Magazine* (June 2007 issue) about a group of ten Next Generation players and their musical "brotherhood." Here is an excerpt from that article:

Bluegrass guitar's chronology entered this 'next generation' era shortly after the turn of the new millennium, and its geographical center has become Nashville, Tennessee. During the first four or five years of this new century, young bluegrass guitar players from various locations around the United States started synergistically moving to Nashville. There are now nearly a dozen of them living in the Music City and they fill some of the most prominent guitar positions in bluegrass music. They are all living in Nashville, they are all good friends, they all play music together, they are all about the same age, they all have great respect for each other, and they are all tremendously supportive of each other's music. For them, it is an amazing time to be a young bluegrass guitar player.

There is not enough space in this article to talk about every one of the great Next Generation players, so we will only discuss five of these players here. I encourage you to refer to back issues of [Flatpicking Guitar Magazine](#) for more information about all of the fine flatpickers mentioned above.

## Cody Kilby



The first of the next generation players to rise to prominence in the bluegrass world was Cody Kilby. Although Cody had gained some notoriety on the contest circuit when he was very young, he became well known to all bluegrass fans when he joined Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder back in 2002.

Cody had grown up playing the contest circuit on banjo, mandolin, and guitar. In 1995, at the age of fourteen, he competed at the National Championships in Winfield, Kansas for the first time. He placed second that year in the guitar competition (behind Mark Cosgrove) and second in the banjo contest. Over the next three years he would return to win the mandolin contest (1996), place third in banjo, and make the

top three in guitar every year—third in 1996, second in 1997, and first in 1998 (becoming the National Flatpicking Guitar Champion at the age of 18). In 1996 Cody released a CD on Rebel Records, titled *Just Me*, on which he played every instrument.

During his years on the contest circuit, Cody's guitar playing was known for being fast and clean. He liked to use a lot of triplets and other fingerboard gymnastics that would make listeners and judges take notice. After he settled into the job with Skaggs, Cody's playing has remained very clean at any tempo, but it has also become more mature and displays more depth as time goes by. Today, Cody is the guy who all of the other next generation players acknowledge as a peer influence. Adam Wright, another of the Next Generation players who has won the National Flatpicking Championship (2001) said, "Josh and Cody are the two guys to watch out for. They are always ahead of the game and they raise the bar for all of us. We respect those guys. Cody was always the guy to beat in the contests and you were seldom able to do it."

In December of 2004 Cody Kilby performed in concert with two of the "Second Generation" players, Tim May and Brad Davis. *Flatpicking Guitar Magazine* filmed the show and released a concert DVD titled [Live in Kansas City](#) (available from Mel Bay

Publications). One of the tunes that Cody played that night was an original instrumental entitled "Old Bud." An arrangement of that tune is provided below.

## Josh Williams



Josh Williams is a professional musician with a lot of experience and an impressive list of credentials. He is currently touring and recording with Rhonda Vincent and the Rage, a band at the topmost echelon of the bluegrass music industry. In terms of tour dates, CD sales, awards, and bluegrass chart appearances, this band is right up there with a select few bluegrass groups which would include Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder, Alison Krauss & Union Station, and The Del McCoury Band. Prior to joining Rhonda Vincent, Josh toured with another nationally prominent act, Special Consensus, for five years. Before that he was out in front of his own highly successful Kentucky-based band, Josh Williams and High Gear. That band, which was together in various configurations for nearly nine years, became a favorite performing group in and around Josh's hometown of Benton, Kentucky. High Gear cut two CDs for the Copper Creek label. His band prior to High

Gear, the Kentucky Youngin's, performed regularly for two years at the Kentucky Opry.

When he was thirteen years old Josh also performed onstage at the IBMA awards show with fellow teens Cody Kilby, Chris Thile, Mike Cleveland, and Brody Stogdill as the Bluegrass Youth All-Stars, a band IBMA President Pete Wernick had put together for the show. With a different configuration of that band and working under the name Young Acoustic All-Stars, Josh performed for a summer at Opryland on the C. F. Martin stage, and cut a CD for Nashville's New Haven Records. In addition to the band projects, Josh has also recorded three solo CDs (two of them on Pinecastle Records), and is currently working on a third.

To recap, Josh Williams has been performing on stage as a professional musician for nearly 15 years. He has played with some of the best bands in the business at some of the most prominent venues in the country. He has recorded on over a half a dozen band projects, recorded three solo projects, and is becoming a highly sought-after session musician—and we have yet to mention anything about his talents as a multi-instrumentalist and songwriter, or his years of success as a contest player. His career to date would be considered a highly successful one for any bluegrass music professional. The amazing part of this story, however, is that Josh has accomplished all of this prior to his 25th birthday.

Like his friend, Cody Kilby, Josh Williams grew up playing banjo, mandolin, and guitar on the contest circuit. Also, like his friend Cody and the other next generation players featured in this article, Josh can do just about anything on the guitar. The next generation players have been exposed to so much great talent, and variety of playing styles and techniques in the players that have come before them, that they

have a very deep well to draw from. It is almost as if these guys have the “style of no style” because they have learned and absorbed so much. Josh Williams is one of those guys.

Below we provide a transcription of one of Josh’s solo tunes “Blue Moonshine.” This song was filmed at a concert performance at the Station Inn in Nashville, Tennessee where Josh performed in concert with Andy Falco and Chris Eldridge. *Flatpicking Guitar Magazine* filmed the concert and will be producing a DVD project that will be available by September 2007.

## Chris Eldridge



Chris Eldridge, son of banjo great and Seldom Scene founding member Ben Eldridge, has been playing on stage with his dad since he was in high school. A player with eclectic taste, Chris’ guitar playing is as much informed by electric guitar hero Eric Johnson as it is by any bluegrass players, additionally Chris graduated from Oberlin College with a degree in music performance. Several months after graduating from Oberlin (2004) Chris moved to Nashville where he dove headfirst into Nashville’s bluegrass music scene. Isolated from bluegrass while at school, Chris is now enjoying the many opportunities to pick both professionally and for fun in the city that is home to country and bluegrass music.

A versatile guitar player whose talents extend beyond bluegrass guitar, Chris said, “I am not just a bluegrass guitar player, but what I do is based on that and nobody at Oberlin spoke that language.” He said that while at college he mostly hung out with musicians from other musical disciplines, like classical and jazz, and exchanged ideas; he even played the electric guitar in a Cajun band—but he missed the bluegrass connection. He said, “In many ways I felt like a lone soldier when it came to playing acoustic-based music.”

Having a great bluegrass lineage and guitar talent, Chris Eldridge probably did not need to go to college to study music to get to where he is today musically. When asked about the college experience and whether or not he thought it was beneficial to him as a musician, Chris said:

Music school was a totally wonderful thing for me. As time goes by I realize more and more what I got out of it. Since I have always been self-taught, what I learned in school did not immediately affect my playing and technique very much. But it did expand my musical mind overall. The depth of my musical mind increased considerably by studying music seriously at a conservatory.

Since moving to Nashville, Chris has spent most of his time performing with either the Infamous Stringdusters or Chris Thile’s How to Grow a Band. His formal training has helped him in both situations. Although each band plays bluegrass-based music, both bands also like to stretch the bluegrass boundaries to some degree. Two of Chris’ bandmates in the Stringdusters, Andy Hall and Chris Pandolfi, are both Berklee

School of Music graduates and being well versed in music theory has also helped with Thile's music.

Regarding his work on Chris Thile's solo CD, Chris Eldridge said:

The Thile project has these crazy ideas. All five of us who are playing on the recording have to be able to speak the same language. Having the educational background makes it easier to take complex stuff, talk about it, break it into chunks, and execute it. I am not a theory guy; that is not fundamentally how I think about music. But I do think that that sort of knowledge is going to help the next generation to move the music forward.

While Chris Eldridge is solidly rooted in the Seldom Scene school of bluegrass, he also has the ability to stretch out and play the crazy and complex arrangements that any of the modern day acoustic players might come up with. Like the others in his generation, he is an extremely versatile player who can do it all. Below I have provided a transcription of Chris' solo to the old fiddle tune "Stoney Point."

## Tyler Grant



Tyler Grant's name has been popping up everywhere in the acoustic music scene over the past few years. In 2003 he joined Adrienne Young's band and toured with her for a year and a half. He also recorded with her on her acclaimed CDs *Plow the End of the Row* and *The Art of Virtue*. In 2004 he hooked up with Casey and Chris Henry and the Two-Stringers. He still performs with that group occasionally and is on their newly released CD *Get Along Girl*. In the fall of 2004 he also toured China for ten days with Casey Driessen (fiddle), Amanda Kowalski (bass), and Abigail Washburn (old-time banjo) as part of a musical cultural exchange. During the first half of 2005 he toured with Canadian fiddler April Verch. Most recently (November 2005) Tyler joined the Drew Emmett Band and is currently on tour with that group. He performed with that band last year at Telluride, High Sierra, Four Corners Folk Festival, Floyd Fest, Harvest Fest, and others.

Although he is more of a band player than a contest performer, Tyler won the RockyGrass guitar contest in 2003 and the Henderson Festival contest in 2005, and placed second at the National Flatpicking Championship in Winfield, Kansas, in 2005. In addition, Tyler has just released *In the Light*, his own solo CD. He has been a busy man in the past few years!

Tyler's first guitar lessons focused on tunes by great rock players like Chuck Berry, John Fogerty, Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, and Jimmy Page. His first guitar was an old Gibson acoustic that his father had bought new in 1963. By the time he was sixteen Tyler owned a Stratocaster and was playing classic rock in a band. He had continued taking lessons for about a year and a half and then struck out on his own. He said, "I had a good ear and I could figure things out." His band's repertoire included material

by The Byrds, Bob Dylan, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Jimi Hendrix, and Eric Clapton.

Tyler graduated from high school in 1994 and entered Grossmont College in El Cajon, California. While he knew he wanted to continue to play music, he did not initially enter college to study music. During his first year at school he took general education classes with electives in piano, voice, and classical guitar. At the end of that first year Tyler "took the leap" and decided to seriously study classical guitar in school. He said, "I fell into the routine of predetermined steps that classical players use to get from one place to the next. We started with scales, then moved on to etudes, then learned simple pieces, then harder pieces. I spent a lot of hours practicing." In addition to studying classical guitar with Fred Benedetti in school, Tyler continued to play in rock, reggae, and funk bands. He also started teaching guitar and had a full student load at eighteen.

In 1998 he transferred his coursework from Grossmont to the California Institute of the Arts (known as Cal Arts) in Valencia, California. Tyler said:

I found the scene there to be very creative and free thinking. Everyone was encouraged to do their own thing and question authority. That experience broadened my horizons in so many ways. I listened to different kinds of world music...Javanese, Indian, flamenco, African drumming, and more.

It was at Cal Arts that Tyler first fell in love with bluegrass music. In 2002 Tyler attended the RockyGrass Festival and said, "I really got hooked! It was more fun to me than any other style of music. The people were great, the music was great, and the community spirit was inspiring." In 2003 Tyler decided to move from southern California to Nashville and see what the acoustic guitar world had to offer there.

What Tyler found when he arrived in Nashville was a lot of bands who were interested in his diverse abilities. His current boss, Drew Emmett said,

It would be hard to sum up in one sentence all of the things that Tyler brings to the band. He is a fantastic person, easy to get along with and a lot of fun. He knows all styles of music quite well. He can play great bluegrass and rock and he is a good harmony singer. He fits in really well with the kind of music we are playing. Our music can go in any direction at any time and Tyler is versatile enough to help us take it where ever it goes.

Although Tyler does not consider himself a contest fiddle tune player, his talent and skill at playing the guitar in any style was enough to place second at the National Flatpicking Guitar Championship in 2005. Below we have provided a transcription to the old fiddle tune "Grey Eagle". This tune appears on Tyler's solo CD *In the Light*, which was released on FGM Records in 2006.

## Andy Falco



Like Tyler Grant, Andy Falco is a guy who grew up playing rock and roll, converted to playing bluegrass while in his early twenties, and then made a long distance move to Nashville. Andy was born and raised on Long Island in New York. He started "fooling around" on a nylon-string guitar when he was in the fifth grade. His older brother Tom, four years his senior, was playing classic rock songs on a steel-string acoustic guitar and taught Andy chord changes so that they could jam. Andy remembers learning to play songs by the Grateful Dead, as well as other popular classic rock tunes like "Sweet Home Alabama." A few years later Andy's brother got a Guild steel string and gave Andy his old guitar. By the eighth grade Andy also had been given an electric guitar for Christmas.

At the start of the eighth grade Andy met a keyboard player who was interested in forming a band. Andy recalls:

Jack Licitra was a guy I met in eighth grade who was a good keyboard player. He had heard that I played the guitar and asked me if I wanted to form a band. We played together all the way through high school, college, and even after college. The band we formed way back in eighth grade eventually became the six-piece Water Street Blues Band. We spent a lot of years playing clubs, and various other kinds of gigs. We stayed pretty busy for a lot of years.

After meeting bluegrass mandolin player Buddy Merriam and attending a bluegrass festival where Doc Watson was performing, Andy began to focus on bluegrass and flatpicking. Andy began spending time going to festivals and jam sessions with Buddy Merriam. Buddy, who was also a bluegrass DJ, started making tapes for Andy. Andy recalls:

Buddy made me tapes of Doc Watson, Clarence White, Tony Rice, and others. The Kentucky Colonels became a big influence because they were a traditional bluegrass band with a lead guitar player. I couldn't get enough of it. Listening to Clarence I couldn't believe that someone could do all of that syncopation. I loved listening to the runs that he would apply to his rhythm playing. Nobody could do it like Clarence.

Shortly after Andy and Buddy started hanging around together Andy was invited to join Buddy's bluegrass band, Buddy Merriam & Back Roads. Andy's cousin was already playing rhythm guitar in the band, so Andy was primarily hired as the lead guitar guy. Andy's background in electric blues carried over to his acoustic playing as he is one of the bluesiest bluegrass guitar players on the scene today.

Andy began playing with Buddy Merriam & Back Roads in 2000 and continued performing with the band until he moved to Nashville in 2004. Regarding his decision to move to Nashville, Andy said, "I had been to Nashville and become good friends with people like Cody and Josh. I knew that the cost of living was more reasonable there than it was in New York, so it was more feasible to play music for a living and be able to still pay bills. Plus, I wanted to come to the source."

Since March of 2005 Andy has been the guitar player for the Alecia Nugent Band. Regarding Andy's role in her band, Alecia Nugent said, "Falco is the kind of band member everyone wants to be in a band with. He's not only a phenomenal guitar player; he's just an all around great guy, and a true professional on or off the stage. His versatility makes him one of a kind, he is a true artist.

In February, 2007 Andy got together with his good friends Chris Eldridge and Josh Williams to perform a show at the Station Inn in Nashville, which was recorded by *Flatpicking Guitar Magazine* for release on DVD. During the set Andy performed his original tune "Missing You." Below we have transcribed Andy's solo. This song will also be included on Andy's upcoming solo CD release on FGM Records.