

HOW TO GROW A BAND

World Premiere, Nashville Film Festival

“How to Grow a Band” is a feature documentary about the formation of Punch Brothers, a now two-time Grammy nominated group in the hands of Chris Eldridge (guitar), Paul Kowert (bass), Noam Pikelny (banjo), Chris Thile (mandolin) and Gabe Witcher (fiddle). The film follows the re-configuring aims of mandolin prodigy Chris Thile as the presentation of his forty-minute bluegrass quintet, “The Blind Leaving the Blind,” pedals him through post-divorce tremors towards a fine-tuned phase of musical friendships. Interviews with Edgar Meyer, John Paul Jones and Yo Yo Ma appraise the group’s unbarred potential.

Director/ Producer

**MARK
MEATTO**

Producer

**MICHAEL
BOHLMANN**

After fielding a groupy’s request for the score to front man Thile’s opus, filmmakers Michael Bohlmann and Mark Meatto pause in their festing to talk about filming the story of a start-up band of experts.

SIM: How did you find the story while it was still experiencing fits and starts, so to speak?

BOHLMANN: Gabe Witcher (the fiddle player) and I grew up together in southern California. So, here’s one of my oldest best friends who’s in the music business, who’s doing something really cool and really new. Here’s Mark, another one of my best friends, who’s been in the film business for many years and is looking to do projects as a director. I

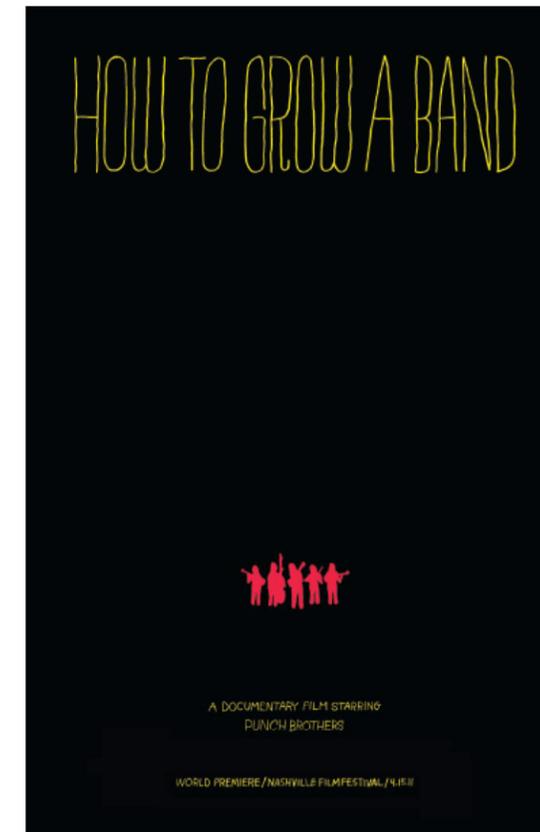
thought these would be great people to put together.

MEATTO: It was actually the night they were coming out of finishing recording “Punch,” their first album. They went down to play a little club show in downtown New York. After we shot that, I agreed: “These guys need to be on the screen, and I want to be a part of that.”

SIM: So together, you combine the viewpoint of a long-time friend and that of a newcomer, in terms of familiarity with the musicians and their music. Terms like “long-form composition” and “lyrically episodic” are new tags to the bluegrass genre. How did you approach cinematic form, specifically settling into a scheme that seems to look like the Punch Brothers sound?

MEATTO: In college, I took a year off to have a nine-month apprenticeship with Ricky Leacock, who’s just a legend in documentary cinema. He passed away recently, and the film is actually dedicated

to him. There are many things that we do in the film that would disqualify it from being called direct cinema, cinéma vérité. But that hand-held thing—small crews working intimately, no tripods, and going for this feeling of “being there” (as Ricky famously talked about)—that’s what I’m after. Then formally, the film itself was found in the editing room. The film does parallel the piece “The Blind Leaving the Blind.” The piece is in four movements, and the film is sort of in four movements as well. That is part of what gives the film some shape in addition to just the chronology of moving



Director/ Producer Mark Meatto



Producer Michael Bohlmann

forward in time.

BOHLMANN: We play the entire piece from start to finish in the film, give or take. But it's not a concert movie. As soon as we decided that "The Blind Leaving the Blind" was going to be kind of the centerpiece of our film, we realized that in itself wasn't going to create the most interesting, compelling story, even if it's an amazing thing to see and watch and hear.

MEATTO: The piece itself, lyrically, is autobiographically based, so the experience of the film is about Chris re-orienting his life and starting over with the new band. That's also what the content of his song is.

BOHLMANN: Being able to weave the two together and have the thematics of the story echo and mirror some of the dynamics and thematics of the piece became the structural framework quite early on.

SIM: How long was the film in process?

BOHLMANN: From tip to tale, we turned on the camera for the first time in October of 2007.

Conceptually, the process was six or seven months older than that, so from mid 2007 to six weeks ago.

MEATTO: Most of that time is editing. The time space of the film is primarily 2008, their first tour. We did the bulk of our photography in that first quarter of 2008, and then we filmed a few more things that ended up being a coda ending for the film.

SIM: Punch Brothers take their name from a short story by Mark Twain titled "Punch, Brothers, Punch," precisely mimicked on the jacket for their first album, "Punch." Which band member is the Twain fan?

BOHLMANN: That was Thile.

MEATTO: They were fond of the line, "It is almost music."

SIM: Almost music and almost a band?

BOHLMANN: The Punch Brothers really came together, initially, to render "The Blind Leaving the

Blind," just as a composition and as a recording. A lot of what our film is about is taking that starting point of a bunch of musicians brought together for a specific goal—for a specific piece of music—and how that turns into a collaborative ongoing enterprise.

MEATTO: Chris was working on this piece and knew he couldn't play it by himself, try as he might. He also knew it was going to take a very particular set of talents to achieve the vision. They all had to play it at half speed to learn it. The love story the film is interested in is the love story of the band. It sort of begins in divorce and ends with them.

SIM: And so your film's title, "How to Grow a Band," adapts the band's earlier name, Chris Thile and How to Grow a Band from the Ground. Why did you resurrect it?

BOHLMANN: We always like the fact that the hard-core fans will recognize that. And there is a bit of irony in the title, "How To." Well there is no "how to," you know. It is going to be its own unique process that is dictated by circumstances and individuals. There is no formula.

MEATTO: If there is, we don't know it.

SIM: What themes will speak to filmgoers?

MEATTO: Heartbreak being the catalyst for change is definitely universal. But also, they all walked away from potentially much more lucrative situations. This was not about money. Thile's former group Nickel Creek was obviously a huge band in a certain way, and all those guys [in Punch Brothers] had far more commercial opportunities. Placing the primary value on the creative work and going from a tour bus back to a mini van show that you can build it back up again. You can start over at zero and grow it.

BOHLMANN: If you consider the financial crisis of 2007-08 as a breakup of sorts, I found myself being able to focus on this project as a renewal of myself personally. I've always thought the subject matter can be both aspirational and inspirational to anyone who's felt the need to press "reset" on life.

MEATTO: And ultimately, it's about not doing that alone.



1 Morelia, Andy V. R., and NFF Board Member Tyler Middleton 2 Susan Tirrill and Henry Barriar, director of "Pig"

