

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Given that Keller Williams' albums feature one-syllable titles that roughly describe their contents, a look at his discography hints at the artist's aggressively nomadic nature. Over the past few years alone, there's a bluegrass covers album (*Thief*), family-friendly music (*Kids*), reggae dub funk (*Bass*), and this year's (*Pick*), a bluegrass record with the Travelin' McCourys – featuring two sons of genre legend Del McCoury. And Williams is of course known for his solo show, in which he live-loops all the parts to become his own band.

“Although I have not been diagnosed, I would think there's an Attention Deficit Disorder that's in play here,” Williams said in a recent phone interview. “And I mean that in the best possible way. I personally can't just focus on one genre of music without losing interest. ... It's very easy for me to play bass and reggae music with one group and the next day play guitar in a bluegrass band. It gives me the most joy to be able to do that. Too much of one thing, it could be bad, and I could slip into a rut where I'm just thinking about other things on stage. ... Once I play solo for many weeks in a row, I'm so ready to play with other people, and vice versa.”

Despite keeping his schedule varied, band and solo settings have their frustrations. In solo shows, he said, “I think that thought kind of creeps in: I wish I could playing with other people, communicating without language. The camaraderie of bands ... is just incredible, and I often miss that. At the same time, ... [when playing with a band] sometimes I can't reach that level of energy that I can reach with my solo act.”

But when Williams performs at River Roots Live on August 17 with the Travelin' McCourys, neither of those should be an issue. “The McCourys is a whole different ballgame,” Williams said. “It's such a joy for me to be able to play with them, I don't think I've ever wanted to be

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anywhere else than up on stage with them at that time.”

While Williams has done bluegrass before – with the Keels, most notably – the Travelin' McCourys features a fuller sound. With the Keels, Williams is part of a trio, playing the mandolin role on guitar and singing distinctive three-part harmonies. That offers “more air, more space” than the Travelin' McCourys, which adds banjo and fiddle to the mix.

“They're just incredible musicians, first and foremost,” Williams said. “They have the unbelievable knowledge of the bluegrass art form. ... What's really fun for me I think is the harmonies. To be involved in a vocal chord that we can create. It just gives me chill bumps.”

The collaboration started with an afternoon in Nashville “to kind of feel each other out, to see if we played well together. ... It was really, really fun, and very natural. That's the beautiful thing about bluegrass. Once you get some people together who never met or played together, everyone understands the formula; it can be as if we had rehearsed. There are a lot of songs that were like that on that first day. It was really kind of cool.”

From there they booked shows – about 20 so far – and they recorded the bulk of *Pick* in three days. It's split between Williams songs and his typically odd assortment of covers, from Steve Earle to Jessie J to My Morning Jacket. The intense, dexterous instrumental break on his own “Mullet Cut” gives the inherently goofy song an urgency and seriousness that's a bit incongruous, positioning virtuoso musicianship against good humor without compromising either.

Williams said audiences can expect a healthy serving from the record at River Roots Live, and also some new covers – although he declined to say what they might be: “I'm operating on the element of surprise.”

Keller Williams will perform at 9:30 p.m. on Friday, August 17, on River Roots Live's south stage. The event takes place in Davenport's LeClaire Park, and admission after 5 p.m. is \$5. For more information, visit RiverRootsLive.com.

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For more information on Keller Williams, visit KellerWilliams.net.

River Roots Live Performance Schedule

Friday, August 17

- 5:30 p.m.: Jason Carl & the Whole Damn Band (South Stage)
- 6:30 p.m.: The Low Down (North Stage)
- 7:30 p.m.: Maps & Atlases (South Stage)
- 8:30 p.m.: The Nighthawks (North Stage)
- 9:30 p.m.: Keller Williams with the Travelin' McCourys (South Stage)
- 11 p.m.: Family Groove Company (North Stage)

Saturday, August 18

- noon: Jordan Danielsen (North Stage)
- 1 p.m.: Orangadang (South Stage)
- 2 p.m.: American Dust (North Stage)
- 3 p.m.: Quiet Corral (South Stage)
- [4 p.m.: Joe Robinson \(North Stage\)](#)
- 5 p.m.: Julia Nunes (South Stage)
- 6 p.m.: Steepwater Band (North Stage)
- 7 p.m.: Eric Sardinas (South Stage)
- 8 p.m.: Tonic (North Stage)
- [9:30 p.m.: Better Than Ezra \(South Stage\)](#)
- 11 p.m.: The Congress (North Stage)