

Ricky Skaggs and Bruce Hornsby perform together in New London.

By ERIC R. DANTON
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With three concurrent musical projects and concert dates for each project scattered around the country, Ricky Skaggs might want to consult a logistician.

There's his long-running bluegrass gig with Kentucky Thunder; a new gospel album, "Salt of the Earth," which he recorded with the Whites; and his new collaboration with pianist Bruce Hornsby, with whom Skaggs performs tonight in New London. It's one of a slew of dates he has to keep straight.

"It's one of those things: 'Who are we going out with this weekend, and what are we doing?'" Skaggs says with a laugh from home in Nashville. "But we're having a great time doing it; it keeps us fresh."

The Hornsby project grew, as such things do, out of chance encounters at concerts and an appearance Hornsby did on a TV show Skaggs used to host. Those meetings led to the piano player contributing to "Big Mon," a tribute album Skaggs put together after bluegrass legend Bill Monroe died in 1996.

"We realized that every time we were together, we were making music, and it was fun music," Skaggs says. "It was effortless, it wasn't pulling teeth to get something, and we wanted to do more. We felt like we ought to try to do a whole CD sometime."

So they did. That CD, "Ricky Skaggs & Bruce Hornsby," came out earlier this year, featuring re-workings of Hornsby's tunes, including "Mandolin Rain," some traditional numbers, a new song written by Skaggs and an oddball cover of Rick James' "Super Freak."

"He actually didn't play me the 'Mandolin Rain' thing until we were in the studio one day, and he plugged his iPod in and we were listening to it on the speakers," Skaggs says. "I said, 'We've got to cut that. That can be a jewel in the crown for this record.'"

Hornsby wasn't so shy about "Super Freak."

"Every time I'd be around him and mention doing a bluegrass record, he'd jump into this Rick James impression, doing a version of 'Super Freak,'" Skaggs says with a wry chuckle. "We worked it up bluegrass. Unfortunately or fortunately, however you look at it, it has become one of the standouts on the album."

RICKY SKAGGS AND BRUCE HORNSBY perform tonight at Garde Arts Center, 325 State St., New London. Tickets for the 8 p.m. show are \$65, \$52, \$45 and \$38. Information: 860-444-7373.