

By Bryant Liggett

It's a friendship and musical partnership that goes 20 years.

Guitar player Jon Stickley and banjo player Andy Thorn's friendship and subsequent musical relationship began in a North Carolina middle school – Thorn had been on the wrestling team with Stickley's younger brother and all three had the same guitar teacher. Thorn was getting into bluegrass and acquired a banjo at his neighbor's yard sale, and he pushed the punk rock-digging drummer that was Stickley into learning mandolin.

"I said, 'Hey, learn to play this mandolin and we can start a little bluegrass band,'" Thorn said. "And he was so good at it in two weeks that I was angry; but all three of us had a little bluegrass band, 'Crawdaddy PA.'"

"I really just liked playing guitar and playing stringed music, too," Stickley added. "So being able to combine the elements of guitar and fast-paced percussive music, bluegrass really clicked for me."

Open mic nights at the urging of their guitar teacher at Chapel Hills Skylight Exchange came next, followed by playing together in bluegrass band Big Fat Gap. Colorado came into their sights when Thorn, on a ski trip to Durango, met some musicians at the old Canyon Music on Second Avenue, resulting in the now infamous Broke Mountain Bluegrass Band. Broke Mountain won the Rocky Grass Band Competition in 2003, toured a bunch and made a record, recently reuniting for one show at the 2019 Telluride Bluegrass Festival.

Currently, both musicians keep busy with their full-time bands – Thorn in the long-running Colorado staple that is Leftover Salmon, while Stickley leads The Jon Stickley Trio. The two have carved out time for a short tour that began last month in North Carolina and is currently zipping around Colorado. The "Sticks -N- Thorns" Tour will roll through Durango tonight with a show at Animas City Theatre. Opening the show will be The Robin Davis Duo. Davis was also a member of the Broke Mountain Bluegrass Band.

North Carolina was fertile ground for the young musicians, a place loaded with jams and musicians willing to foster and shape any young musician willing to learn. Stickley and Thorn were eager students, and in the 20 years that's passed, the two have now graced most major festival stages from coast to coast, and despite 1,447 miles between their respected homes, they both end up on each other's records.

That's because at the core they're friends, and catching the two of them in a duo setting is catching two dudes who have been making music together for the bulk of that friendship.

As they've grown, the music has grown, and after 20 years of playing together, the two have yielded a serious catalog that will be celebrated throughout this tour. A showcase of a friendship loaded with musical creativity while celebrating American roots music, their interest and

inspiration have grown as their friendship has grown. The setlist will celebrate the more progressive numbers they've written in the present as well as some straight-ahead bluegrass of their youth. Good times are at the heart of the whole deal.

"We'll play songs from every different era of us playing together," Thorn said. "It's not necessarily in chronological order; we don't even make a setlist. We just have a big master list and just kind of fly off the cuff because it keeps it spontaneous and fun. And that's the whole point of this project, is fun. We're definitely not taking ourselves too seriously."

"The music has grown over the years," Stickley said. "The stuff that's more recent is maybe a little more developed and complex, but us going back and playing those songs from high school, that's the most fun of the whole thing."