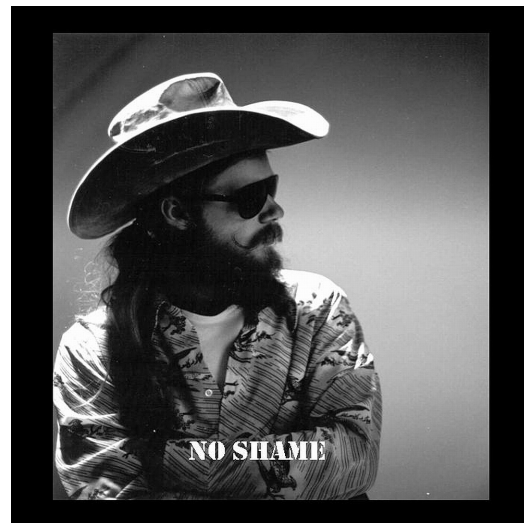


*Frostbitten Grass*  
2002



*No Shame*  
2003



*Acoustic Beef*  
2004



*El Heno de la Muerte*  
2006



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# Philville Records

Finding a clear point of delineation within the construct of memory can often be as fruitless as it is alluring.

With that in mind--and after some lengthy prior reflections--I settled on 2000 as the official year that what became Philville Records semi-functionally manifested itself into existence. Like many endeavors in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan of that era, the seeds of an idea of creating a small independent record label were born out of a lack of available options, very limited resources, and an eye on promoting something which at the time—very few local folks were all that interested in. (And not unlike the beginnings of other small independent record labels, it began as a means of promoting my first band, Frostbitten Grass). I hope someday to do a deeper dive on the full back-story of Frostbitten Grass and the U.P. music scene of that era (without the limited confines of liner notes), but for the sake of brevity, I'll try to focus more on the origins of how Philville Records started out, how it evolved, and the folks that helped out along the way.

In late 2000/early 2001—the (mostly) arbitrarily agreed upon year of the founding of Philville Records--, Ryan Olhouse and I had been practicing acoustic music for a few years, and had just started performing as a duo at open mics for the first time using the name Frostbitten Grass.

Our first attempt at serious recording was pulled together by local musician and sound engineer Sahl Metevier, whom I think we paid \$100 to track us live in Olhouse's apartment. If I recall, Sahl used an early compact digital mini-disc recorder, and we tracked everything live with no overdubs, using two guitars, and singing. We named the demo "Casey's Picks" as you could hear Olhouse's dog Casey barking in the background on several of the tracks.

Armed with our new demo, we set out to get local gigs, but quickly realized that neither of us knew how to run sound, or had any P.A. equipment—which at that time in Marquette, meant no gigs. Olhouse was working at Up Front & Company as a pizza cook, and I finally landed some short term work at the Negaunee Senior Center doing odd jobs for local elderly folks, and getting occasional short stints as a substitute teacher in Marquette, Negaunee, and Ishpeming. Between the two of us, we scraped together enough cash to buy our first rig, and began searching for our first P.A. at Superior Music in Marquette.

We both knew that all the great classic bluegrass bands crowded in around a single microphone, so we figured this was the route to go. Never mind that neither of us had any clue whatsoever what type of microphone worked for that, let alone how challenging it is to run sound with that set up—or how nuts it would be to attempt to perform that way in the local dive bars we were hoping to book.

The guy behind the counter at Superior Music back then was Paul Dornquast. Paul had been in a few Marquette rock bands over the years (the Plaid Billy Goats being the most successful), and he knew infinitely more than we did about the gear we'd need to be able to survive and be heard in the local bar scene. When we explained to him that we thought we could just use a single mic to perform our version of bluegrass in local bars, he looked at us with a wry smile and the kind eyes that a veteran bar band performer saves for unblemished naïve young fools. He gently assured us that sharing a single microphone was an exercise in masochistic insanity, and that we needed both a P.A. system, at least two vocal mics, and electric pick-ups for both of our instruments. He bundled a nice little 600 Watt split channel Peavey together with the other gear, sold us two gold colored AKG vocal mics (we got a deal since no one wanted the gold ones), and sent us out into the dive bars to be schooled by the harsh mistress that is sound engineering for drunk college kids.

Paul was a kindly mentor to me, and was more than generous in explaining things when I invariably came back in begging to understand how to avoid feedback and how to cut through the volume of wasted bar patrons. Paul was also the first guy to tell me about digital recording, and how he was using a Roland 840 GX zip-disk recorder for all of his new projects. He convinced me to seek one out on Ebay (then a still relatively new means of online purchasing), and was kind enough to make photo copies of the manual and a basic introduction to recording digital music. So with that acquisition and those photo copied manuals serving as my gospel, Philville Records was unknowingly birthed into existence.

Around the same point Ryan and I had connected with Paul Dornquast, we befriended Dan Flesher, who was a very well established local musician who lived just east of Marquette, in Skandia. I think we popped up on Dan's radar at an open mic night at the Village Pub, where he enjoyed slamming beers, chain smoking cigarettes, and tormenting us about our gear and sound. After a while, Dan decided to take us under his wing, as I think he saw potential in what we were up to, and likely, also wanted us to get a better live sound so he didn't have to suffer through listening to us torture a P.A. at his preferred venue. Dan had some serious bona fides in acoustic music, though he was humble about it. Locally, he had been in a several great bands (like the Feltliners and Charlie and The Rovenaires), and prior to that, he had toured and played around the Midwest with Art Stephenson (a Wisconsin bluegrass icon). Dan had also played and toured with Jesse Cobb (founding member of the Infamous String Dusters) when Jesse was first branching out from his family band.

Dan had a burgeoning recording business "On Site Studios," which, as the name implies, was a recording operation where he came to your place and recorded whatever you needed on site. Dan started giving me pointers on affordable microphones, pre-amps, filters and effects, and I slowly started pulling together enough gear to make very basic recordings/demos at my place.

My recently acquired Roland 840 GX was essentially a digital version of the classic Tascam 8 track tape recorders that most every musician in my generation had at least seen, or was familiar with. The key difference was that the Tascams tracked to a cassette that you could immediately pop out and put into a stereo for playback, whereas the Roland recorded to 250 MB zip discs, which were coded in Roland language, and only intended for storage. The only way to get the music from the Roland to another playback system (at that time) was to either mix it down to tape, a DAT recorder, or what I ended up using—an RCA dual well CD burner connected via coaxial cable. Home digital recording technology and CD ripping was just taking off (Napster was just beginning its rise and fall), so this RCA CD burner fit a niche for folks that were still afraid of computers, yet wanted to be able to duplicate or burn "live" CD's. It was a very odd and short lived non-computer based way of making CD's, but it worked perfectly for me to mix down to, and made all the difference in being able to migrate things from the Roland console quickly to a PC to burn more CD's and store music files.

The Roland 840 GX only had 8 faders, but you could bounce tracks to the individual faders (virtual tracks) many times over—so again, similar to the older style tape/cassette recorders, but with more headroom to add many more layers of recorded sound. Since my goal was to record music that sounded like the old bluegrass and string band records I loved, I don’t think I ever even used even all 8 tracks in any of our first demos and albums.

After about a year of messing with the Roland recorder in my basement, I started to get the hang of mic placement, and how to use various mics to record a small acoustic group. I was still very much a novice and had minimal experience in mastering or leveling tracks, so when Frostbitten Grass decided to record our first album, we opted to have Dan Flesher help us out—which resulted in our self-titled debut album in 2002.

Out of the twelve total songs on, Frostbitten Grass, eight were tracked and engineered by Dan Flesher at Bob Guidebeck’s home in Skandia, Michigan while the other four were recorded live at Brian Hartman’s family deer camp near Grayling, Michigan using my Roland 840 GX and a large diaphragm microphone. Bob Guidebeck had joined our band on bass in early 2002, and Brian Hartman had also joined the group on banjo. The three songs here on the anthology from that era off of 2002’s Frostbitten Grass, I consider to be the first officially released Philville Records tracks. The fourth song from that era is a live demo of the song, Muddy Water, we recorded in my basement in Trowbridge, Marquette.

**By the summer of 2003** our first self-titled album had been out for a year, and backed by touring and hard work, Frostbitten Grass had booked our first larger festival shows, and was opening for national touring acts. Both as an artist and novice engineer/producer I was really excited to get more experimental and try to learn more about taking advantage of what multi-track recording could accomplish without strictly limiting myself to bluegrass and string music. So on a break from touring that summer, I packed up a bunch of my gear and instruments and headed to my family’s old hunting cabin in Cadillac, Michigan. Over the course of about ten days I started recording my first solo album, No Shame, which was an amalgamation of a bunch of songs that either didn’t quite work for Frostbitten Grass, or were written at the cabin while recording the album. Thanks to the portability of that little Roland 840 GX (about the size of a large briefcase), I was able to take it with me for projects like this, as well as capturing a bunch of live shows from that era. After laying down the majority of my tracks for the album, I travelled down to my sister’s place in Delton, Michigan, and had her record piano on a few of the songs.

As autumn approached that year, Frostbitten Grass had wrapped up our summer touring season, and my buddy and roommate Mike Tripp and I were looking for a better place to live than the slowly decomposing trailer off Highway 492 that we’d been sharing since the past spring. My friend Alex Lawson (founder of Marquette’s only Celtic band at time, the Dreadnaughts), was moving down south, and wanted to rent out his fully furnished house on Highway 550 to someone he knew and could trust. It was a perfect fit, as both the timing and the size of the house were ideal—and there was plenty of room for rehearsing and recording. The 550 house as we started calling it, was directly across the street from Phil’s 550 (an iconic Marquette bodega), in a neighborhood that soon became known affectionately as Philville. [Quick note on that name: I’m sure there are those that might dispute it or claim the idea for themselves, but it was our friend Chal Dundee that I believe coined “Philville” in reference to that little gathering of homes on the side of the Big Bay Highway near Phil’s 550, which checks out with me—as I recall him using the term, thought it was funny, and started using it too. It definitely took root not long after that, as Phil affectionately hung out a “Philville” street sign in front of the store in about 2005 or 2006.]

At that time, Phil’s 550 was still mostly a local landmark due to his use of the big sign outside the store to advertise random thoughts, puns, jokes, and instructions to “Get Naked and Drink Beer.” A t-shirt he made that featured a picture of the young Phil with a quality 70’s era white-boy afro and his tongue sticking out launched him into state-wide (arguably international) recognition years later.

I had gotten to know Phil Pearce, the owner and proprietor, in 1998, when we met acquiring Triumph motorcycle parts at a farm out in Skandia owned by Phil Lutey. The Lutey’s owned Heritage Motors in Marquette, and had also owned the last Triumph/BSA dealer in the U.P. prior to the original Triumph/BSA going out of business in the 80’s. I had bought a 1973 Triumph Trophy Trail off Phil Lutey in 1998, and Phil Pearce owned a 1968 Triumph Bonneville. Lutey had an incredible spare parts collection, and an equally incredible British motorcycle collection—and in those early days of the internet, finding parts for British bikes was not an easy task. That ’73 twin 500 I had vibrated like crazy, and on a long ride out to where I was working for the CCC at Van Riper State Part in 1998, I had rattled off the gear shift lever on the bike, and couldn’t get it out of 4th gear. I went hat in hand to beg Lutey to sell me a spare gear shift lever, and found Phil Pearce roto-tilling Lutey’s garden. Turns out Phil Pearce was trading labor for parts to his Bonneville. We bonded over British bikes, and lamented the masochistic love that was required to keep them running.

So when I moved into the 550 house in 2003, Phil was thrilled to have a bunch of young guys across the street rehearsing, throwing parties, and buying him out of Pabst Blue Ribbon. He was kind enough to extend us a line of credit, helped us keep the driveway plowed out and the band van on the road, loved the music, and would occasionally crash our gatherings to hang out and see what crazy shit was going on in his neighborhood. As Frostbitten Grass grew to a quintet with Sven Gonstead joining us on dobro in early fall of 2003, and Ken Thiemann of Houghton Michigan’s Carp joining us in December of 2003, the Philville scene was happening, and Philville Records finally had an official name and location.

We started recording Frostbitten Grass’s second album, Acoustic Beef in the fall of 2003, through the winter of 2004. I recorded three songs on the album at the 550 house, (B.O., Burnt Garlic, and John Powers), and one song out at Sven’s place in Big Bay, Michigan with Sven’s bandmate Cynthia Pryor from the band Lost Creek, playing fiddle (Hungry Hollow). Sven suggested bringing in his old friend Brian “Looper” Lucas to help us track the other songs on the album as he had far more experience as an engineer than I did, and also so we could perform the songs live--without me having to run the board. We all agreed that we wanted to perform live in a shared space as much as possible, to capture the rhythm and feel of the songs.

Looper and I became good friends, and he was another mentor to me in the world of recording, as Acoustic Beef ended up being tracked in four different locations. The 550 house, Bob Guidebeck’s place in Skandia, Chal Dundee’s parents’ basement in Wisconsin, and lastly, the live room at the University of Wisconsin’s Whitewater campus where Looper worked as an instructor. I traveled down to Whitewater to help mix, produce, and master the album with Looper, and had my first real experience mixing and mastering in a legit full studio space. Surprisingly, for the album having been tracked in so many different environments, the sound was pretty consistent, and Looper’s skills in engineering and mastering were the major reasons why. The album was released in May of 2004, and reflected the diversity of having four songwriters in the band—as well as a sharp turn away from some of the more traditional influences that were more obvious in the first album.

Phil Pearce and I kept in touch and stayed friends over the years, and he passed on too soon in 2018. His generosity and neighborliness will not be forgotten, and Philville Records continues on as a tribute to Phil, co-founder, sage, and purveyor of sundries. [I’ve included only two songs here on the anthology that were recorded at the 550 House, as Philville Records plans to release the full Acoustic Beef on vinyl in 2024 to celebrate its 20th anniversary.]

**Near the end of our 2004 summer touring season**, Frostbitten Grass was staring down the decision of how much harder we wanted to be on the road, and dealing with the financial reality of paying off student loans, bills, and debt as a touring string band. I was ready to tour full time, but the stark understanding of what that lifestyle is like (and the even more cold reality of the lack of financial stability) led to us deciding to take a break. Most of the band stayed in the Upper Peninsula for another year or so before Ryan moved to New York, and Ken headed out to Knife River, Minnesota to start working on his other dream of building a brewery. Sven and Bob had more established roots and owned homes in the U.P., so they stayed in Marquette and kept busy with work and other local music projects.

I headed out west to Bend, Oregon, to satisfy a dream of mine of being a snowboard bum in a mountain town. That lasted about a year and a half before I hit the road again for six months with Francisco Mirabent, one of the best lead electric guitar players that I have ever had the pleasure of working with.

Cisco and met working at a furniture store off Highway 97 in Bend. He was doing sales work for the store, and I started out doing furniture delivery, assembly and repair. Our co-worker, Mel Shippey, introduced Cisco and I after learning both of us were musicians, and the three of us (with Mel as the local ambassador to the ski-bum lifestyle) were fast friends. Cisco and I started playing locally at the pubs and clubs in Bend, and then started doing short regional runs over to Eugene, Portland, and up into some of the small towns along the Columbia River up into Washington. We most often played as a duo, and honed down a sound that blended my bluegrass rhythm background with his East Texas blues lead work. We didn’t start out with a plan for any type of sound in particular, but what we ended up with was unique enough that I started writing songs for a new album.

Moving this far away from Michigan for the first time and processing a whole new landscape and culture was good fodder for new inspirations and new sounds—and it didn’t hurt that the economy at that point in time was so overheated (pre 2008) that I could jump jobs at almost any time I felt the urge. In my relatively short span of time in Bend I worked for three different furniture stores, a local theater company, Oregon State Parks Trust, an Olympic horse jumping ranch, and a cabinet finishing company/house painting outfit ran by lacquer huffing Pentecostals. Between all those day-jobs, and inspired by the characters I met in central Oregon, I wrote El Heno De La Muerte, which Cisco and I took out on a six month tour in the early spring of 2006.

(A quick addendum: Connecting with Cisco provided me an extended family that made Bend, Oregon feel more like home. Rehearsing out at his place with his Mom cooking delicious east Texas and Mexican inspired dinners, and his kid sister Giselle bugging us while we rehearsed—just felt really cozy compared to my often empty apartment.

I really look back fondly about those times and laughing my ass off with his Dad Fernando-- whose English was better than my inability to speak Spanish, and who loved blowing a harmonica to get their dog Lucky to sing and howl. Cisco’s parents are both gone now--way too soon-- but I will always cherish those nights out at their place in Redmond playing music, laughing, and being surrounded by family).

**Please check out the other album insert for more details about this first Volume of the Anthology and to learn about the stories behind the songs.**

**Philville Records Vol. 2 is scheduled to be released in 2023--where the story continues into California and beyond...**



**Special thanks** to everyone that appeared on these recordings, the Philville Records Family, Looper Lucas, the Mirabent Family, Phil Pearce and his family, Ross Johnson and Nate Bett (Cover Photo) who coordinated to make the Phil’s 550 sign once again be a part of a Philville Records Album, the new owners of Phil’s 550 who are keeping the lights on and the sign silly at Phil’s, and the brilliant Cheryl Frei, who has always supported my musical endeavors--and also took the back cover photo. As always, thanks to my Co-Producer Fraulein Kitzenbauer who lent an ear to the re-mastering of these tracks, as well as her (recently promoted) brother, Basil Lajeunesse, assistant to the Co-Producer (former studio intern).