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Bluegrass: Rogers & Johnson

When the Bands Played: Original Acoustic Music Inspired by the Spirit and Emotion of the American Civil War *1/2**

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For all its bloody violence, the American Civil War relied on music to win recruits on both sides. With nearly every regiment boasting a brass band, soldiers often heard the strains of polkas and waltzes played as they winced from the percussive blasts of cannon and musket.

Banjoist Barney Rogers and mandolinist Russell Johnson are veterans of the Triangle's bluegrass community -- Rogers as a music teacher and former member of New Vintage, and Johnson as a founding member of New Vintage and a singer-songwriter with the Grass Cats.

In "When the Bands Played" (available at www.rogersandjohnson.net), they have crafted a brilliant Civil War concept album, with original songs inspired by people and events real and imagined, from a predominantly Southern point of view.

The title track is a musical retelling of a battle that took place near Murfreesboro, Tenn., at the end of 1862. During a lull in the fighting, bands of both sides launched into "Home Sweet Home," as Union and Confederate soldiers lifted their voices in unison.

The album opens with "The Tatham Boys," the story of six brothers from Cherokee County and relatives of Rogers, who joined the fight. It ends with "Headin' South," a postscript to the war that finds a weary Tar Heel veteran returning home "to that little girl he left there a-crying."

In between, the duo's songs capture the fear and loneliness of battle, along with acts of courage as selfless as those of South Carolinian Richard Kirkland, who risked his life to provide water to the wounded and dying at the Battle of Fredericksburg ("Angel in Gray").

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