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Album Review: Keller Williams & The Keels, "Grass" (KW Enterprises)



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Best known for delighting jam-band fans with long and winding improvisational pieces, Keller Williams ([music](#)) shows a drastically different side of his artistry with this mostly enjoyable effort.

Williams, a close cousin in the String Cheese Incident family of friends, leaves the hardcore granola behind to tackle bluegrass with the help of husband-and-wife duo The Keels.

But those who are looking for a batch of Ralph Stanley mountain goodies will likely be disappointed. This isn't your grandfather's bluegrass—this is Keller bluegrass. And, as with everything else the guitarist/vocalist/mad scientist does, that translates to lots of goofy humor and twisty turns.

The group leader, who is competent on more instruments than I can name, uses a mini 12-string guitar on this album. He has, however, removed four of the instrument's strings, which helps give it a more individual voice. (Keller, as fans well know, is nothing if not an individual.) The music is fleshed out by award-winning flat-picker Larry Keel and stellar acoustic bassist Jennifer Keel.

Appropriately, the album kicks off with Williams' own "Goof Balls"—which is probably what most old-school bluegrass fans would deem these three musicians for undertaking a project like this. Still, these cats can play and most of the songs are quite likeable. In particular, the jam of Tom Petty's "Mary Jane's Last Dance" and "Breakdown" (collectively titled here as "Mary Jane's Last Breakdown") is superb. Plus, the renditions of the Garcia/Hunter staples "Loser" and "Dupree's Diamonds Blues" will make more than just old Deadheads smile.

Not everything works here. In fact, the ill-advised bluegrass cover of Pink Floyd's dark masterpiece "Another Brick in the Wall" is every bit as bad as one would expect.

In all, however, Williams once again manages to defy expectations and go home a winner with "Grass."