

MOUNTAINS

WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

Tray Wellington builds bridges with bluegrass



Word from the Smokies
Aaron Searcy
USA TODAY NETWORK

Late last month, I was lucky enough to catch a special musical performance in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. It was a fine morning in high summer, and on the back porch of the Oconaluftee Visitor Center near Cherokee, a four-piece string band launched into the first swirling notes of an original composition. Holding the center of the stage and letting his banjo ring out over the supporting guitar and bass was the group’s leader, Tray Wellington.

Originally from Western North Carolina and currently based in Raleigh, Trajan “Tray” Wellington is a rising star in the world of contemporary bluegrass. Through his performances at national bluegrass festivals, touring with the band Cane Mill Road, and the release of his latest album, “Black Banjo” (2022), under his own name, Wellington has been steadily gaining the attention of his peers thanks to his technical mastery of the banjo as well as his forward-leaning embrace of influences that stretch traditional bluegrass into the realms of jazz and contemporary rap and hip hop.

Twice, in 2022 and 2023, Wellington has been named a finalist for the International Bluegrass Music Association’s New Artist of the Year award, and in 2019, he received the association’s Momentum Instrumentalist of the Year award. As a young Black artist working within a genre historically dominated by white musicians, he has also been featured on CNN’s “United Shades of America.” The Tray Wellington Band’s performance in the Smokies was part of a celebration hosted by the park’s African American Experiences in the Smokies project — an ongoing initiative begun in 2018 to uncover and share previously untold stories of Black life in and around the park.

“I love this area,” Wellington told me after the show. “It’s where I’ve learned a lot of music and met a lot of people I still work with today. It’s still very important



North Carolina-based artist Tray Wellington is a rising star of contemporary bluegrass. In 2019, he won the International Bluegrass Music Association’s Momentum Instrumentalist of the Year award, and in both 2022 and 2023 he was a finalist for the association’s New Artist of the Year award. Photo by . ROB LAUGHTER, PROVIDED BY TRAY WELLINGTON

to me and somewhere I still consider home just as much as Raleigh.”

Having grown up in nearby Ashe County, Wellington remembers making regular day trips to the Great Smoky Mountains and passing through Wilkesboro on his way to pick apples with his grandfather.

“Some of my earliest memories are in the Smokies just riding through and listening to music on the way up and making a whole day out of it,” said Wellington. “My grandpa never played music, but we were always listening, and it kind of gave me a love for music. We’d listen to a little bit of rock, a little country, some western swing stuff, some bluegrass — a little bit of everything.”

Echoes of that eclectic listening can still be heard within Wellington’s albums and live sets. While his original compositions generally fall into the realm of progressive bluegrass or bluegrass-jazz fusion, he might also choose to include a traditional fiddle tune like “Half Past Four,” a rendition of a jazz classic like “Naima” by John Coltrane, or a cover of something more contemporary like Kid Cudi’s “Pursuit of Happi-

ness.” As he curates each release and performance, Wellington takes care to draw on traditions while also pushing the boundaries of what audiences might typically expect of a bluegrass band.

“We don’t want to lose these songs. It’s part of carrying those traditions on,” said Wellington. “Also, people want to be able to know a song every now and then. If you do a song they know, they’re more willing to have an open ear to what you’re doing.”

On the other side, Wellington is especially conscious of the need to reach younger listeners and those, like himself, who haven’t always seen themselves reflected in the bluegrass tradition.

“There’s still this lack of representation within bluegrass,” said Wellington. “When it comes to people of color, LGBTQ+ people, people from different backgrounds, there aren’t many artists in bluegrass trying to bring that in.”

Working in a cover of an artist like Kid Cudi into his set is a way Wellington can honor his own diverse musical interests while also building a bridge to

new audiences.

“That’s what folk music is, you know?” said Wellington. “It’s music that brings peoples together from all different backgrounds.”

The Appalachian landscape itself is also a perennial source of inspiration for Wellington and his bandmates. “If we’re trying to do a writing session we’ll try to get away and go to some place that’s beautiful,” said Wellington. “You need to find that calm place.”

As my conversation with Wellington came to a close, an elk buck galloped across the open field where his audience had just been standing. Soon after, a rooster wandered over from the park’s Mountain Farm Museum to let out a cheerful crow in the sun.

“This is an amazing spot to play music,” said Wellington. “All kinds of people are coming here every day — it’s a great opportunity.”

Wellington’s performance at Oconaluftee was thanks in large part to Antoine Fletcher, the park’s science communicator and the lead of the African American Experiences in the Smokies project that coordinated the event with the financial support of park partner Friends of the Smokies.

“As I stood there in the heart of Appalachia and listened to Tray play his latest album, “Black Banjo,” I immediately understood the importance of the connection of African Americans and Appalachian music,” said Fletcher. “The way he plays is not from days of training but from his lived experiences in the mountains. Every strum of the banjo tells his story and deep connection to the Smokies.”

An interview Fletcher conducted with Wellington on the day of the concert will be shared soon on the park’s growing African American Experiences oral histories webpage. To learn more about the project and listen to other oral histories, find the project page at nps.gov/grsm under “Learn About the Park.”

Aaron Searcy is lead editor for the 29,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, a supporting partner of the African American Experiences in the Smokies project. Reach him at aaron@gsmassoc.org.

Report says juvenile raped at Asheville Mall

Ryley Ober
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

Editor’s note: This story contains descriptions of child sexual abuse.

ASHEVILLE – An individual sexually assaulted a juvenile at the Asheville Mall in May in what is described as a crime against nature, according to an incident report recently obtained by the Citizen Times.

The alleged assault at the Asheville Mall, located at 3 South Tunnel Road, was reported to Asheville Police Department shortly after 2 p.m. on May 28, according to the report. Under the offense’s description, the incident report describes a sex act of penetration from the rear and rectal sodomy. APD spokesperson Samantha Booth confirmed that this act involved a juvenile victim.

The case is still open and being investigated by APD detectives, Booth told the Citizen Times Aug. 14. No charges have yet been brought forth, Booth said. She did not respond to questions about whether the APD has any suspects or leads in the investigation.

When asked why the police had not issued a news release about an alleged

child assault at the mall, she responded by email: “It is not standard practice to send out press releases regarding sexual assaults. Furthermore, there is no immediate danger to the public that would prompt me to send out a release regarding this incident.”

The police department has issued two news releases in the past two months about other child sexual assaults.

Booth did not indicate why the police believe there is no danger to the public given no perpetrator has been apprehended.

Under North Carolina case law, a crime of nature refers to the inserting or receiving of a male sexual organ into the mouth or anus of another, the insertion of an object into another’s genital opening, or oral sex acts. Crimes against nature are punished as a Class I felony under N.C. Statue 14-177.

There have been five assaults reported at the Asheville Mall this year, including crimes against nature offenses, according to APD’s crime analyst. In 2022, there were 13 assaults reported at the mall, also including crimes against nature offenses.

“As we hope you do, we understand that our world may pose many possible

dangers. For this reason, the Asheville Mall implements a strict code of conduct and the youth escort policy,” a spokesperson for the mall, Shelley Matheys-Yugar, told the Citizen Times via email Aug. 15.

In 2020, the Asheville Mall began enforcing a youth escort program that requires those younger than 18 to be accompanied by a parent or guardian on Fridays and Saturdays after 5 p.m., “or at any other time the policy is in effect.” Security will begin monitoring those entering the property at 5 p.m. on Friday and Saturday evenings until close, according to the mall’s website, or “at any other time at the discretion of the mall management.”

The alleged child sexual assault in May occurred on a Sunday afternoon when this youth escort policy would not have been in effect.

Matheys-Yugar declined to answer questions on how many security personnel or security cameras the mall has and what procedures are in place if a crime occurs.

“We are aware of the referred incident and are working closely with our partners in law enforcement to investigate this matter fully. Since this is an ongoing investigation, we cannot comment.”

If anyone has information about the incident, contact the Asheville Police Department, anonymously by texting TIP2APD to 847411 or using the TIP2APD smartphone app. Or call 828-252-1110.

Ryley Ober is the Public Safety Reporter for Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA Today Network. News tips? Email Ryley at rober@gannett.com. Please support local, daily journalism with a subscription to the Citizen Times.

Need help?

If adults know or suspect a child has been sexually assaulted or physically abused, the N.C. SAFE Child Act requires them to report it to law enforcement. If you or someone you know has been sexually assaulted and needs help or resources, contact:

- **Our Voice:** (For ages 13 and older) 828-255-7576, ourvoicenc.org.
- **Mountain Child Advocacy Center:** (For ages 17 and younger), 828-213-9824, mtncac.org.
- **RAINN:** (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) 800-656-4673, rainn.org.

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