



The core members of the Manatawny Creek Ramblers are, from left, Ike Sheldon, Daniel Bower, Josh Scourman and Ted Fenstermacher.

# The little band that could

Perseverance pays off for the Manatawny Creek Ramblers, who will release their first full-length CD at Saturday's Pickfest.

BY DON BOTCH  
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**I**T'S NOT just happenstance that the Oley Valley's own Manatawny Creek Ramblers are releasing their first full-length CD to coincide with Saturday's Pickfest at Frecon Farms Orchard near Boyertown.

"In our eyes, that's our biggest gig of the year," said the Ramblers' frontman and songwriter, Daniel Bower, who books the music for Pickfest. "It's our festival, where we get to be the big band for once."

So it came to pass that the Ramblers will break out "End of the Drought," a nine-song collection of homegrown bluegrass, with an apple orchard as the backdrop and an anticipated audience of 1,500 out in front.

"We're used to playing little gigs," Bower continued, "and we don't look down at them at all. We embrace that. We embrace being a little band that nobody knows, and we like that. Having that atti-

tude, we get a lot of work, because we don't think we deserve more than what we get. But Pickfest is the one gig where we get to be big and famous."

While in the grand scheme of things, the Ramblers may fall shy of being big and famous, the members are certainly household names among those who pay attention to the local music scene.

Besides Bower (Frog Holler, Neo Trio and too many other bands to list) on guitar, full-time Ramblers are Josh Scourman (Frog Holler, Tin Bird Choir) on upright bass, Ted Fenstermacher (East Side Dave & The Mountain Folk Band) on fiddle and Ike Sheldon (Ike Wilder, The Wilders) on banjo. They all add vocals.

Standing in as their schedules permit — and you can expect to see them all on Saturday — are Bob Beach (David Jacobs-Strain, Philadelphia Jug Band)

on harmonica, Brad Hinton (Brad Hinton Band, Hezekiah Jones, Wissahickon Chicken Shack) on guitar and Ellen Houle (The Swinging Foxes, Tin Bird Choir) on snare drum and brushes.

It's no small feat that the band is finishing its 10th year of playing traditional bluegrass, but Bower, who is best known for his drumming, started writing original bluegrass songs on acoustic guitar a while back, and in 2008, the Ramblers released a seven-song EP, "Meet Me By the Moonlight," that included three of those originals: "21," "Married Man" and "Get Me Out Again."

The new CD showcases Bower's knack for writing topical songs that go more than skin-deep.

One such example is "Manatawny," about a farmer who lives along the Manatawny Creek and can't seem to catch a break. The man feels heartened by the end of

the drought, until the skies open up and the creek swells. It's a simple song about a fretting farmer, but it's bound to hit home with anyone in any walk of life who feels like the proverbial waters are rising.

"Moonlight Wood" is another instant Berks County classic in which Bower pays homage to his Moonlight Forest homestead, located along the brim of the Oley Valley near Pricetown.

"It's a special place to all the musicians and friends who spend time recording and practicing and just hanging out there," he said, "and I think it's important to remember that as I'm moving along. Whatever I do, I try to tip my hat to the Moonlight."

"Married Man" gets a makeover on this CD, with another tip of that hat to the newest Rambler, straight out of Kansas City, Mo., Ike Sheldon.

"When Ike started playing with us, he brought this really cool different banjo part that, to me, brought the song alive," Bower said. "And he gave me one of the greatest compliments ever without even realizing it. He had no idea it was an original song. He just assumed it was a Jimmy Martin song. And to me, when you're writing bluegrass, or anything, if it sounds classic to someone, that's the biggest compliment you could get."

Bower isn't shy about returning a compliment to his good friend, who came on board a year ago at a time when Bower thought the Ramblers were finished.

"When (previous banjo player Michael) Beaky left, I thought surely that was the end," Bower said. "I thought, 'All right, this was a fun thing. We had a good run, but on to other stuff.' Because Beaky was the talent part of the band, for sure."

"But we had a couple of gigs still on the books, and I knew Ike could play banjo. He ended up bringing this old-timey, indie folk vibe to the band with his whole way: his style, his capability, his understanding of harmony and his understanding of just being in a band. Ike's pretty much one of my favorite people ever. He's just awesome."

Now, with Sheldon in the fold and some new music to share, the Ramblers don't look like they're going away any time soon.

"Doing the album with Ike kind of helped us to reach a certain self-acceptance that we're fine," Bower said. "We're psyched to just keep movin' on."

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## Buy the CD

The Manatawny Creek Ramblers' "End of the Drought" CD is being released on Daniel Bower's Woodfarm Records label and will be available for \$10 at Saturday's Pickfest at Frecon Farms Orchard near Boyertown. It's also being sold online at [www.woodfarmrecords.com](http://www.woodfarmrecords.com).

