



THE GAINESVILLE SUN

Benmont Tench, a Gainesville native and an original member of Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, is also a fan of Nickel Creek, who is performing Tuesday in Gainesville.

Benmont Tench offers two cents on Nickel Creek

A Heartbreaker weighs in on the acoustic trio

Sure, everybody knows Gainesville native Benmont Tench is an original member of Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. But he's also a sought-after studio keyboardist who played on Sean Watkins' latest solo CD, "Blinders On."

A California resident preparing for the Heartbreakers' 30th anniversary tour, Tench is also a diehard Nickel Creek fan who often sits in with the members at the Los Angeles club Largo. And, Tench said last week, he expects to visit Gainesville in early May — arriving too late to catch Tuesday's Nickel Creek show in his native land.

"It's killing me," he said. "I want to be there so bad."

Few people know Nickel Creek as well as Tench. Sean Watkins, in fact, identifies Gainesville as the hometown of his "really good friend Benmont Tench."

What gives? Why is a Rock and Roll Hall of Famer in his early fifties so taken with an eclectic bluegrass trio in their twenties? Perhaps these excerpts from last week's Tench interview will explain:

- "They know old songs that I've never heard — not just old bluegrass songs, but songs that are by writers who are my contemporaries. They'll just start playing something that'll take my breath away."

- "I was in Nashville last year, and I was going to go grab a

bite with them. Sean said come by the hotel. I got up to the door and started to knock and I realized they were rehearsing ... So I didn't go in. I just sat down in the hall and listened. It was great. Really great."

- "To get to play with all three of them together, that is really spectacular. It's a delight. It really is a delight. I have such a wonderful time."

- "I've seen Chris (Thile) play a Bach fugue or something equally insane. Sara (Watkins), in the shows at Largo, sings a beautiful song call 'Tall Buildings' — it'll just break your heart. And Sean has a song that is 30 seconds long that is just fantastic."

"And they do a mean version of 'Tax Man,' too."

- In fact, Tench recalls falling into that frenzied fire one night after he performed a mellow set with Shelby Lynne for a television taping:

"We wound up playing a lot of slow songs — sort of Tony Joe White-type songs. So I'm in this mellow mood, and I go down to Largo, where Sean and Sara are playing with Chris. I kind of float in the back door. 'Cool, I'll listen to some acoustic music and maybe I'll sit in on something slow.' I walk in, they finish a song and Chris spots me and says, 'Come on up.' And they're playing 'Tax Man' twice the speed The Beatles played it. Absolutely insane!

"And then Chris just goes, 'OK, Ben, take it.' And I'm still in this nice, slow, mellow mood, and I'm like, 'Take what? Take it where?' They're just — I love those guys."

— Dave Schlenker