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**Notes from editor (not for publication):**

Nice conversation, Victoria. I think Jason is awesome.

I like how your questions are specific enough to move the interview along yet open-ended enough to let the artist express thoughts in their own words and leave space for surprises and revelations.

Hey, next time we get together, let's talk about photos. I much prefer original photos, particularly of local subjects, even if they're not as good as supplied publicity photos. Newspapers are about authenticity, not publicity, and letting your interview subject weigh in on the decision is a little too close to the latter for my comfort. (I've had the same battle, for the same reasons and with the same language, with political candidates who were miffed that I used our own file photos of the newsmaker interacting with the community as opposed to a submitted head shot.)

I'll go with the studio shot because I don't want to be a jerk, but we should make sure we are on the same page for future artwork.

**HEADLINE ELEMENTS:**

#####BEGIN HED#####

1 'I just wake up with melodies in my head and ideas for  
2 songs'

#####END HED#####

#####BEGIN SUBHED#####

3 Southern Vermont's own Jatoba returns to Stone Church  
4 with a unique blend of groovegrass

#####END SUBHED#####

5 TEXT BODY:

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6 WITH A mention in *Rolling Stone*, recent tour dates in  
7 New England and New York, and a new album on the horizon,  
8 local favorite Jatoba returns to Stone Church with its signature  
9 high-energy blend of bluegrass (“groovegrass”).

10 Formed in 2008, the trio includes John Jamison of  
11 Guilford (guitar, mandolin, vocals), Jason Scaggs of West  
12 Chesterfield, New Hampshire (guitar, banjo, vocals), and Jeff  
13 Richardson of Saxtons River (upright bass, vocals).

14 As described in its publicity materials, the band and its  
15 members are known for a “unique musical chemistry and a  
16 unique songwriting approach. They seamlessly communicate  
17 through spontaneous composition and improvisation, bringing an  
18 unpredictable and dynamic element to their live performances.”

19 Influenced by their Blue Ridge Mountain roots — where  
20 Scaggs and Jamison grew up — and also by the mountains of  
21 Vermont and New Hampshire where the three have lived for  
22 decades, Jatoba has shared its music with audiences up and  
23 down the East Coast over the last 17 years.

24 The group has shared the bill with the Jeff Austin Band,  
25 Greensky Bluegrass, Trampled by Turtles, Rusted Root, The  
26 Kitchen Dwellers, The Infamous Stringdusters, and Leftover  
27 Salmon. Jatoba has been featured at Northlands Music & n Arts  
28 Festival, Jerry Jam, the Dead of Summer Music Festival, Friendly  
29 Gathering, and FloydFest.

30 The band has ties to the venue on several levels, with  
31 Robin Johnson, executive director of the Stone Church, where  
32 Scaggs operates the sound and lights.

33 Johnson crediting Scaggs and fellow builder Joey  
34 Birchmore as “the primary builders in the transformation” of the  
35 former church sanctuary, including a new dance floor, stage, and  
36 bar.

37 "They even hand built and hung all the acoustic  
38 treatment throughout the church," Johnson says.

39 *The Commons* recently caught up with Scaggs, 44, to  
40 talk about the upcoming tour stop in Brattleboro, the new album  
41 on the horizon, and how he balances the demands of his  
42 building company, his work for the venue, and being in a touring  
43 band, and his family. Following is an excerpt of the conversation.

44 \* \* \*

45 **Victoria Chertok:** I believe the first time I saw Jatoba was  
46 at Jerry Jam back in 2015! And here we are one decade later.

47 **Jason Scaggs:** Yeah, wow! Time sure does fly.

48 We used to love playing Jerry Jam. That was a great  
49 festival. We probably had an electric bass player and a drummer  
50 at that time, because Jeff Richardson, our bass player, was not in  
51 the band at that time.

52 **V.C.:** That sounds about right.

53 **J.S.:** John and I did a couple tours as Jatoba [as a] duo.  
54 We ended up going down South, and then in 2008 — because  
55 we already knew Jeff — we decided to form a trio, to try to do  
56 the whole bluegrass/jamgrass thing. At that time the pioneers on  
57 the scene were Yonder Mountain String Band.

58 John and I grew up in Roanoke, Virginia. Over the years,  
59 we would migrate around and find ways to meet back up and we  
60 kept playing music. We did a lot of traveling.

61 I ended up back in Southern Vermont and started a  
62 different band with Jeff in 2006, Phil and the Fuzz, which was a  
63 Keene State party band.

64 **V.C.:** How did you come up with the band's name?

65 **J.S.:** Jatoba is a South American hardwood tree. We were  
66 thinking about band names, and we looked at this plank board  
67 and it had the word "jatoba" printed on it. And we're like, "Oh,  
68 that word looks pretty cool." So we looked it up and found out  
69 it's an older-species tree. [The definition] said something like "the  
70 roots run deep." It seemed fitting at the time.

71 **V.C.:** How did growing up in Virginia impact your music?

72                   **J.S.:** Roanoke is a larger city and is nestled in a valley  
73                   right around the Appalachian Trail. It's not too geographically  
74                   different from this area. It's fairly rural, and there's a lot of  
75                   bluegrass down there.

76                   Being a teenager in the '90s, we grew up on grunge rock  
77                   like Radiohead and Stone Temple Pilots. For many years, I went  
78                   to MerleFest, a big bluegrass festival in North Carolina, and it  
79                   turned me on to that kind of music pretty early.

80                   **V.C.:** Who were your early music influences?

81                   **J.S.:** Pink Floyd was huge and some of that '90s grunge  
82                   rock. Psychedelic kind of rock was really big for me.

83                   In addition to listening to bluegrass greats, I was  
84                   simultaneously spinning Wu-Tang Clan and OutKast on the disc  
85                   changer.

86                   **V.C.:** How old were you when you picked up an  
87                   instrument, and which instrument did you start with?

88                   **J.S.:** I was first trumpet for from sixth through eighth  
89                   grade in the marching band. And then I got to high school and  
90                   didn't want to be in marching band. I had already started playing  
91                   guitar through middle school. Acoustic is what I kind of started  
92                   on.

93                   **V.C.:** You mentioned that you love to write songs. Tell me  
94                   about your songwriting craft.

95                   **J.S.:** I enjoy creating and writing music. I enjoy melodies.  
96                   I like to think that there's a muse out there that, even in my life  
97                   today, where I just wake up with melodies in my head and ideas  
98                   for songs.

99                   The trick is to try to grab it when you got it, because a lot  
100                   of stuff kind of comes and goes. It's how diligent you may or may  
101                   not be to record those and/or to get some sort of idea onto paper  
102                   or onto recording or on an instrument.

103                   **V.C.:** What has it been like to play with bandmates John  
104                   and Jeff for the past 17 years?

105                   **J.S.:** I feel really grateful for those guys. We've been  
106                   playing music together so long that there is definitely a very

107 strong, intuitive connection when it comes to writing and when it  
108 comes to playing live on stage.

109 We're a pretty improvisational band, even as a string  
110 band, and when you're up there playing on stage, the longevity  
111 that we have as a band has created this kind of safety net where  
112 we can take chances and go out on a limb to improvise, and we  
113 know that we can trust each other.

114 **V.C.:** You say "come dance your grass off" at a Jatoba  
115 show and call your signature sound of bluegrass "jamgrass" or  
116 "groovegrass." What exactly does that mean?

117 **J.S.:** Groovegrass, man. It's just an aggressive kind of  
118 approach to bluegrass. I try to beat box. It's about a pocket. We  
119 want it to get people moving. Bluegrass kind of does that a little  
120 bit already, because it's already a four-to-the-floor kind of beat.  
121 We just want to capitalize on that.

122 **V.C.:** Am I right that your concerts are 99% originals and  
123 1% covers?

124 **J.S.:** You could go as far as say like 95% originals. We're  
125 an original band. We're pretty selective about the covers we play.  
126 It's a great feeling when we're playing shows and seeing people  
127 grab onto words or phrases and sing them aloud with us on our  
128 originals.

129 **V.C.:** What brought you to this neck of the woods  
130 initially?

131 **J.S.:** I used to live in Burlington around the turn of the  
132 century. In 2005, my wife Erin [Scaggs] and I had our first  
133 daughter, Ella, out in Colorado, where we met. Erin grew up in  
134 New Hampshire, so we decided to move to Brattleboro because  
135 this area was closer to her family.

136 **V.C.:** You wear many hats at the Stone Church. How do  
137 you balance your music career with your building company, your  
138 four to seven shows per month that you run sound and light for,  
139 and with your family life with Erin and your kids? How old are  
140 they now?

141                   **J.S.:** Personally, I have the awareness now that I have a  
142 very long-standing history with that place. My construction  
143 company, Homestead Builders, did the build-out and turned the  
144 place into a real music venue back in 2016-17. Bucket list for  
145 sure!

146                   [One] main reason is having a very understanding and  
147 patient partner and family, and the other would be being  
148 stubborn.

149                   Erin's pretty self-driven in a lot of ways, too. She also  
150 works at Stone Church as director of programming and  
151 community outreach.

152                   Graham is 11, Pearl is 14, and Ella is basically 20.

153                   **V.C.:** What's it like doing sound and light at Stone  
154 Church?

155                   **J.S.:** I'm one of a few house techs at Stone Church. We  
156 have a tech director, Dan Richardson, who's pretty phenomenal  
157 in terms of knowing his shit for sure. We're pretty lucky to have  
158 such a competent tech director.

159                   **V.C.:** Jatoba has a fourth studio album coming out early  
160 next spring which you are recording with engineer Billy Strauss at  
161 his studio in Putney.

162                   **J.S.:** Billy's pretty awesome. It's a really full album.  
163 They're all newer songs. There's a couple on there that we don't  
164 play live much, just because it's nice to have some surprise  
165 elements.

166                   With this album, we wanted it to sound really full and hit  
167 really hard. So we've recorded multiple different instruments that  
168 we all have played ourselves to make it sound like a quintet or a  
169 quartet.

170                   **V.C.:** What can the audience expect at your Dec. 6  
171 show?

172                   **J.S.:** From our set, they can expect a super high energy,  
173 raucous good time. We're very much a live, in-the-moment band.

174                   When there's a big crowd, we're kind of feeding off of  
175 them. We end up interacting with our audience. We want to

176 make people to have this circular feeling. And I think we do that  
177 pretty naturally.

178 **V.C.:** I'd be remiss if I didn't ask you about your mention  
179 in *Rolling Stone* last year. Was that a surprise?

180 **J.S.:** One of the freelance writers, Garret Woodward, was  
181 at the Northlands Festival last season, and he caught our set. He  
182 threw us in a review, which was amazing.

183 It was a total surprise, and it feels good to have some sort  
184 of recognition like that, because as a band, you work really hard.  
185 And to have a mention in *Rolling Stone* regardless — like to have  
186 it be your first time, even if it's just a nod — feels really good.

187 \* \* \*

188 Two bands — Jatoba, Armchair Boogie opening — with  
189 take the stage on Saturday, Dec. 6 at Stone Church, 210 Main St.,  
190 Brattleboro. Doors open at 7 p.m. Show is at 8 p.m. This is an all-  
191 ages show.

192 For tickets and information, visit [stonechurchvt.com](http://stonechurchvt.com).

193 For more info on Jatoba, visit [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), or  
194 [YouTube](#).

195 \* \* \*

196 *Editor's note: Stories presented as interviews in this*  
197 *format are edited for clarity, readability, and space. Words not*  
198 *spoken by interview subjects appear in brackets.*

#####END TEXT#####

Bio/COATTAIL:

#####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL#####

199 **VICTORIA CHERTOK** is a contributing writer to *The*  
200 *Commons* and *The Keene Sentinel*. Since 2017, she has  
201 published more than 250 arts and entertainment features,  
202 interviews, and columns in both newspapers, as well as in the  
203 *Brattleboro Reformer*.

#####END BIO/COATTAIL#####

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