

Interview: Joe Newberry

By: Fred Huffnam

Joe Newberry is a Missouri native and North Carolina transplant who has played music most of his life. His powerful and innovative banjo playing has won contests around the country, including first-place at the Appalachian String Band Music Festival, at Clifftop, West Virginia. A fine guitarist, fiddler, and singer as well, Joe also plays with the band Big Medicine, which won first place in the 2002 Traditional Band competition at Clifftop. He also plays banjo and sings with original Red Clay Ramblers Jim Watson, Bill Hicks, and Mike Craver.

When not working as the Public Information Officer for the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, he does solo and studio work, and teaches at such prestigious venues such as The Augusta Heritage Workshops, the Swannanoa Gathering, Ashokan, the Midwest Banjo Camp, and the Ulster American Folk Park in Northern Ireland, to mention but a few.

Big Medicine's recordings: "Too Old To Be Controlled" (Yodel-Ay-Hee 43) and "Fever in the South" (Yodel-Ay-Hee 53), can be obtained from www.cdbaby.com/bigmedicine, as well as music sellers around the nation.

His numerous guest artist appearances include projects with Mike Craver, Jim Watson, the late Tommy Thompson, The Young Fogies Vol. II (with the Tar Heel Hot Shots), and the cast album of Lee Smith's "The Devil's Dream".



The following interview took place a short time after the release of Joe's first solo project, called

"Two Hands" (5 String Productions-CD05003), which the Raleigh, North Carolina, News and Observer called "a treasury of early American music performed by an accomplished artist".



FH: When you were growing up in Missouri, was there music in your family?

JN: My Dad's family loved to sing the old Ozark songs, and some of my best memories are of my Dad, my Uncle John, and my Uncle Steve singing things like the "Golden Vanity," "Barbara Allen," and "When the Roses Bloom Again." My Grandfather Newberry was a hunting and fishing buddy of Vance Randolph, the Ozark folk song collector. My Grandmother Newberry's family farm adjoined the Galbraith homeplace down on the James River, and my Dad tells me that Art Galbraith's father tried, unsuccessfully I might add, to teach Grandmother how to play the banjo.

My Mom's family loved to sing and dance. Mom was quite the Charleston dancer in her day, and my Uncle Tom Fred could tap dance on a handkerchief without mussing it up. My Uncle Albert and my Aunt Holly sang some of the best sacred duets I've ever heard. There was also fiddle music on Mom's side. One of the things I really regret is that my great-Grandmother Hard's fiddle was sold at a yard sale for \$1 a few years before I started playing. No one told me about the yard sale until long after the fact.

FH: Aside from your immediate family, were

there other musicians in your community that served as catalyst for your interest in music?

JN: Aside from my family, I was really lucky to hear some great musicians around Boone County, Missouri when I was in high school and college. Fiddlers like Taylor McBaine, Pete McMahan, and Jake Hockemeyer were all playing great, and seemed glad that younger players were coming up. You can find a fiddle contest somewhere in Missouri every weekend between March and November, and it was great training. Younger musicians like Cathy Barton, Lee Ruth, and Dave Para were big influences on me as well.

When I was in college in the late '70s, I lived at the Chéz Coffeehouse in Columbia, Missouri. There were a number of other musicians who lived at the Chéz, including Dave, John Murdock, Bill Shull, Chris Germain, Heinrich Leonhard, and Bob Atchison. It was an amazing scene, and I feel fortunate to have been a part of it.

FH: When (and what) did you start playing first? (Banjo, guitar, fiddle, singing, etc.)

JN: Well, I have sung my whole life. Whenever we'd travel in the car, we'd sing. I just took it as a given. In fact, the first time I went on a car trip with another family, I remember thinking, "When do we start singing?" and feeling surprised when we didn't sing at all. I took up guitar when I was 14, partly because a cute girl down the street was taking guitar lessons, but mostly because I wanted to be able to play along when folks sang at family get-togethers.

Banjo bit hard when I was 20, and fiddle a couple of years after that, although I didn't get serious about playing fiddle until I was in my late 20s.

FH: When did you take up the banjo?

JN: Dave Para showed me the clawhammer stroke and got me going. My first tunes were the old warhorses, that, incidentally, I still love to play - "Mississippi Sawyer," "Arkansas Traveler," "Red Haired Boy," tunes like that. Other banjo players who got me interested in playing were folks like Joel Zemmer, Cathy Barton, and Jimmy Ruth, Lee's younger brother.

FH: Can you describe your first banjo and other banjos in your life?

JN: I've only owned three. I'm not a big trader and certainly not a collector. In fact, I look at banjos as tools more than anything else. My first banjo was a "King," made in Cotopaxi, Colo. Bill Shull sold it to me. It was not a fancy banjo, but had a very nice plunky sound. My next banjo was made by Bob Momich, which I still love to play, mostly now for fingerpicking. In the mid-90s I ordered a banjo from Kevin Enoch, who blends form and function as well as anyone I have ever seen. It is completely black, very simple, and suits me perfectly. Scott Ainslie calls it the "Stealth Banjo."

FH: Were you trying to play a frailing style or a three-finger Scruggs style?

JN: I concentrated on clawhammer when I started. I would average between four and five hours a day, either plunking away in my room or with my roommates. There was always some kind of music going on, either on stage at the coffeehouse, in the back rooms where we lived, or at fiddle contests on the weekends.

Over the years I have come to really like two-finger and three-finger banjo picking. Finger style banjo is the crack cocaine of the music world. It's totally addictive. And, I know just enough Scruggs style to get myself in trouble at a bluegrass session.

FH: Did you ever build a banjo or any other instrument?

JN: Nope.

FH: What was the first tune you learned to play on the banjo?

JN: It was "Arkansas Traveler."

FH: Did you start out trying to play solo banjo tunes or were you trying to play with a fiddler?

JN: Oh, it was all about fiddle tunes at first, tunes I heard at jam sessions. The first solo banjo piece I ever worked out was "Rambling Hobo."

FH: For decades, families and individuals have made the trip down the ol' "Hillbilly Highway", out of and away from the Appalachian Mountains, to places like Greensboro, Raleigh, Charlotte, and Atlanta, in hopes of finding employment or perhaps to attend one of the prestigious universities in the region, or maybe to settle in a less harsh climate than what the mountains afford. What brought you to Durham, North Carolina?

JN: I wish I had more of an inspiring story about bettering my life, but actually, I came out to North Carolina to visit a friend, and my car broke down. I took a job to get the money to fix it, and decided to stay. Of course, I had heard of the incredible music scene around Chapel Hill, and was spinning records by the Red Clay Ramblers, the Hollow Rock Stringband, and the Fuzzy Mountain Stringband on my radio show on good old KOPN while I was in Missouri.

FH: Did you immediately fall into an active old-time music scene in North Carolina?

JN: The first night I was in North Carolina I went to a music party way out in Chatham County, which is south of Chapel Hill. The party was held in a huge workshop and had been billed as a "Shop Hop." I walked through the door and thought to myself, "wow that guy sure fiddles like Bill Hicks." Of course, it was Bill Hicks.

FH: Would you mind describing the old-time scene around the time you came—the players, the places you played?

JN: After I got out here, I stayed in the little town of Bynum at Rob Golan's house. Rob is an exceptionally talented fiddler, and we played a lot of music together.

Tommy Thompson, the late banjo player for the Red Clay Ramblers, lived in Bynum at the time, and I would run into him at the combination post office/country store in town. He was very gracious and we'd pick from time to time. While I don't play like Tommy, I learned a lot from watching him. He had awesome timing and was very clean in his approach. He also could flat out drive a band.

I started playing music for the Cane Creek

Cloggers shortly after I got to North Carolina. I was pretty interested in what they were doing, because I had never seen a clogging team before. Back in Missouri, you would see square dance exhibitions and lots of jig dancing, what North Carolinians call flatfooting, but no clogging. With the cloggers I started going to fiddlers conventions, and performing at street fairs and festivals. The cloggers also loved to have dance parties, so I played a lot. Since I started life as a guitar player, I would also do fill in work and play in pick up bands at square dances on guitar.

When I started going to fiddlers' conventions in North Carolina and Virginia, I was really impressed at the level of music that was being made in general. And the banjo playing was really impressive...folks like Andy Cahan, Bob Carlin, Brett Riggs, Will Keys, Marvin Gaster, and Bill Mansfield.

FH: Did you ever spend time with any of the patriarchal banjo and fiddle masters from the Galax-Mt.Airy region?

JN: Well, Fred Cockerham was gone by the time I got out to North Carolina, although I certainly listened to him on records while I was in Missouri, and later on field tapes recorded by Bill Mansfield and Wayne Martin. I did, over the years, make a lot of music with Ralph Blizard, and used to play a fair amount with J.P. Fraley. I always end up at Marvin Gaster's RV every time I go to a festival, and I also love to play guitar behind A.C. Overton.

FH: What was the first band you were involved with after settling in NC? How about other bands over the years?

JN: My first band in North Carolina was the "New Chatham Rabbits" with Rob Golan and Jamey Tippens. We were a square dance band only, no vocals.

The original Chatham Rabbits were from right there in Bynum, and played in the 30s.

Nowell Creadick, Carl Jones, Susie Crate and I played together for a while as the Radio Rangers. We got our name because we came together to play for a local radio station's fund drive. Later, Susie and I hooked up with Ted Ehrhard and Allin

Cottrell to form the Piedmont Hepcats. We won the band contest at Fiddlers Grove a couple of times, and played out a fair amount. We had lots of singing in that band.

I started playing with Jim Collier, LaNelle Davis, and Margaret Martin in the early 90s as the Tar Heel Hot Shots. We had known each other from the music scene for years, and one day all ended up at LaNelle's house with instruments in hand. They are all great singers and players, and it was a pretty rocking band. We played together a lot, even recorded a project, but we broke up before it was released. I call it the world's most expensive demo tape.

At Clifftop some years back, Jim Collier and Kenny Jackson and I had some sessions where the music was very transcendent. We kept playing tunes and singing songs, saying after each, "boy that sure is big medicine." A couple of months later we got together again around home, this time with LaNelle, and that's how Big Medicine got started. LaNelle retired from the band last year, and we were lucky enough to get Bobb Head to join us. Bobb also plays with the Stillhouse Bottom Band.

One of the highlights of my musical life lately is playing and singing with Jim Watson, Bill Hicks, and Mike Craver, and it feels great to be part of those great tunes and songs. Like I said before, I don't play like Tommy, but what I do fits in pretty well with the guys. We don't get out a whole lot, given everybody's various commitments, but we generally make it to the Carter Fold and Down Home a couple of times a year. We did manage to play a festival in Northern Ireland last year.

FH: In your opinion, Joe, what makes a good banjo player? Bluegrass and/or old-time.

JN: Timing, and knowing what notes to put in and what notes to leave out.

FH: What do you make of this paraphrased quote from the venerable Steve Arkin: "The banjo, guitar, bass, and all the other instruments in old-time music are merely the flying buttresses in the cathedral of the violin?"

JN: Well, they do call them *fiddlers'* conventions, and the fiddler does get to have a little extra say as far as tunes go. That being said, I'll point out that a band is like a cake; it takes all of the ingredients to taste good.

FH: What kind of programming did you do on your radio show? Was it a country music program, or a country/bluegrass/old-time format, or did you sneak something past the management?

JN: My show was called "Across the Wide Missouri." I co-hosted with Dave Para for a while, then had the helm all by myself later on. The programming was a mix of folk music, plus a healthy dose of old-time and bluegrass music. KOPN is still going strong, and just celebrated its 30th birthday.

FH: Would you mind talking about the "singing" aspect of your early musical education? Did your family sing mostly traditional Ozark Mountain songs? What about gospel?

JN: My family sang lots of different kinds of songs. Being that my Grandfather Newberry was a Baptist minister, of course there were lots of sacred songs in the family repertoire. But, in addition to sacred songs and the old Ozark songs that we sang were popular songs that my Dad and his siblings heard as well. We just liked to sing.

FH: You have won the top prize at Clifftop in the banjo competition. What makes competition something you like to do?

JN: The thing about competitions that I like is the chance to hear so many great players. And Clifftop is something special, because there are a ton of great banjo players there.

Clifftop is really well-judged, and I have always been, as Minnie Pearl would say, "just proud to be there." Over the years, I think that I have been in almost every place in the contest there. I'll tell you, I was just about as happy with fifth as I was with first, since getting in the finals at Clifftop is pretty cool in itself.

FH: Do you have any things you do to prepare

for a competition, in terms of what song you might choose to play, or perhaps you have some routine you do to prepare yourself for that solo time on stage. If so, could you share those with us?

JN: I usually just choose a tune that I am comfortable with, and then I try to do my best. It also really helps if I have been picking a lot before I go up on stage.

FH: What is your advice to someone just starting to play old-time banjo?

JN: Play as much as you can, and find folks to play with. Don't worry if they are better than you, that's how you get better. Stand on the outside of the circle and vow to yourself to make it to the inside of the circle. That's what I did.

FH: Any serious artist hopes to find their "voice" in their chosen artistic path. Do you think you have found your "voice" on the banjo or any other instrument?

JN: Well, if by "voice" you mean the instrument that I am most able to express myself on, that would be banjo. However, I describe my instruments like I describe my children and grandchildren, I love them all...

FH: Would you describe your playing as melodic, ornamental, chordal or as more of a rhythmic backup?

JN: The short answer would be "yes." A slightly longer answer would be that I am able to play in each of the ways you describe, I just adjust for the situation.

FH: You told me that old-time finger picking really appealed to you. Could you elaborate on that?

JN: I don't want to mislead you, I still am totally excited about clawhammer banjo, it's just that I am also excited by fingerpicking. Like I just said, I like being able to express myself in a number of ways on the banjo.

FH: Big Medicine has been quite successful with its live appearances on the old-time circuit, as well as recording and releasing two fine CDs. What do you think makes this band so appealing to the old-time crowd?

JN: I think that folks like the fact that we play what we like, which we call "string band music of the rural South." That covers a lot of territory.

FH: How does the band go about choosing such a far-ranging variety of material to perform and record?

JN: Everybody brings material that they like to the group. One of the things that is great about our foursome is that we like a wide variety of music, but it never strays from its rural roots.

FH: You seem to have a full plate apart from your work with Big Medicine. You mentioned your recent work with the Original Red Clay Ramblers. Did you have to do to anything in particular to fit into their band chemistry?

JN: In addition to being ace musicians, Jim Watson, Bill Hicks, and Mike Craver are great guys to hang out with. They have all been very welcoming to me. They have such a cohesive sound, and play so well together, that it is very easy to fit in with their groove. And it helps that I listened to them so much when I was a young player.

FH: You have conducted workshops, and performed both in the United States and abroad. What common threads have you found in the music and culture of Appalachia with that of Ireland or Australia?

JN: I think Appalachian music resonates with folks in Ireland and Australia because both places have lots of rural areas, and that country people everywhere tend to like country music...

FH: Bela Fleck recently spent time in Africa filming a documentary about the music in several provinces in that country and how he reacted to it with his banjo. Have you ever considered doing something along that line?

JN: Well, I have never considered doing a documentary or anything like that, but I love to play with folks from other cultures. I am really interested in instruments like the Akonting from Gambia that Ulf Jagfors has been studying.

FH: Some proponents of old-time music feel that it is limited as a performance medium. You, on the other hand, by combining

traditional music with narrative theater, seem to have dispelled that notion. Would you talk about your work in theater? How did it come about?

JN: I was a stay at home Dad with daughter Virginia, and I played music in the evenings to bring in extra household money. One of my friends recommended me to the music director of a Raleigh production of "Big River," the musical about Huck Finn. I had a blast playing in the pit orchestra. That led to other music theater gigs, which I loved because they were steady, lasted a long time, and I didn't have to play in smoky bars.

Eventually I started getting involved in what they call "musicians' theater," where the band is onstage and part of the action. One of the directors I worked with, Paul Ferguson, adapts Southern fiction to the stage, and one of his projects was an adaptation of Lee Smith's novel "The Devil's Dream." As you might guess from the title, it has a musical theme, and I was lucky enough to play for the production and serve as the adviser on Appalachian music. I also ended up being the principal songwriter for the play.

I have worked a lot with Paul over the years. One of our most fun projects was "Good 'Ol Girls," which melded the work of writers Lee Smith and Jill McCorkle with the songs of Matraca Berg and Marshall Chapman. All four women are incredibly talented, and it was an honor to arrange and adapt, along with my co-music director Julie Oliver, the music for the stage.

Theater work has slowed down for me, since I now have a full-time day job, but I still do the occasional piece. A few years ago, I music directed and played in "A Tune for Tommy," which Jesse Thompson, his daughter, created with the good folks at Man Bites Dog Theatre in Durham. It was the story of how a caregiver deals with the decline of a parent, and how that person in decline deals with an ever-changing life.

I wrote the songs for a hillbilly music version of "Midsummer Night's Dream" called "Moonshine," and that might get shopped around. I also have

been writing monologues about a fictitious banjo player named John Patterson, which I have been considering turning into a one-act play. My character shares his name, incidentally, with a fine banjo player from Georgia that Art Rosenbaum documented in the 1980s, as well as my high school band director.

FH: I think the way you described Tommy's playing: great timing, clean approach, and able to drive a band, could also apply to you. In what other way would you describe your playing as sounding different from that of Tommy Thompson?

JN: First of all, thank you, what a nice compliment. As far as differences between our playing, Tommy was one of the great drop thumbing banjo players. He used drop thumb for melody a lot. I tend to drop my thumb as a fill note. I also don't venture up the neck quite as much as Tommy did, although I know my way around there pretty well. A big difference in our sound is the fact that he kept a very tight plastic head on his banjo, at least for the early Rambler years. I tend to favor the plunkier sound that one gets from a fiberskin head. I also play over the fingerboard more, while he played over the head a lot.

FH: Talk about your recent solo cd, Joe Newberry *Two Hands* 5SP-CD 05003, how did that come about?

JN: My bandmate Kenny Jackson recorded a solo project with Tim Brown of 5-String productions a couple of years ago, and had a really good experience. I talked with Tim when I was up his way doing a concert last year and he invited me to come up to record a solo project.

I was really interested in the idea of just presenting what I can do with just my own two hands, as opposed to a band sound. And, for better or worse, "Two Hands" is what I sound like. I recorded it in Tim's spare room, which also serves as his recording chamber. He has a very nice collection of microphones and all of the whizbang digital recording technology that you can imagine.

The recording went well, and went pretty fast, in

large part because I was in really good practice before I went. I set out from Durham early on a Friday morning and made it up to Tim's place outside Philadelphia by mid-afternoon. I recorded a couple of hours on a Friday night, had a good 6 hour day on Saturday, and recorded another few hours on Sunday morning. We did a rough mix and I was on my way back home to North Carolina early Sunday afternoon. I recorded 23 tunes and songs, some with multiple takes. I ended up using 20 of them on the project.

FH: You have a nice representation of your work on the banjo, guitar, fiddle and vocals.

JN: Thanks. Like I said, I wanted "Two Hands" to represent what I am about musically, and so I tried to give a good mix of that.

FH: I'd like to ask you about some of the songs and share with you my impressions about the songs with vocals and guitar, if that's alright?

JN: Absolutely.

FH: When I first listened to "On This Christmas Day," it sounded to me like something that already existed in the canon of established traditional Christmas songs. And I mean that as a compliment.

JN: Taken as such. It's nice of you to say that, because that is what I was aiming for. I wrote "On This Christmas Day" before a performance last year in a beautiful old Presbyterian Church in Cambridge, Mass. I had never written a Christmas song before, and I had great fun finding a different way to tell a story that has been told so often. My sister is a pastor, and I told her I had written something for Christmas. I guess she figured that it would be about sugarplums and candy canes. I emailed her the lyrics and she wrote back and said, "Oh, you mentioned God and everything!" (Laughs)

FH: The other three songs with vocal and guitar have, for me, a haunting melancholy, well-grounded in the traditional mountain music themes of outlaws, hard times, home, family, being far away from the latter and so on. And by using some of the words of

Rudyard Kipling, that song can't help but project an image from a faraway time.

JN: As with the Christmas song, my goal in writing things like "Resurrection Day" and "Missouri Borderland" is to make them sound like they have been around a long time. In the case of "I Know Whose Tears," I used the Rudyard Kipling poem "Mother 'O Mine" that was read at Sara Carter's funeral as a basis for a song. I took his words, added some of my own to flesh it out and wrote a chorus. The song works as a band piece and as a solo piece, and it resonates pretty well with folks. I guess that is because it really is hard to go wrong with a song about Mother.

FH: There are so many fine versions of familiar tunes here but two songs jumped out at me as being really unique. It sounds like you are using harmonics to create the beautiful version of "Lost Gander."

JN: Yes, harmonics are what you are hearing in "Lost Gander." My version is based on the playing of Dee Hicks, via Mike Seeger. The playing of both of those men is nothing short of inspirational.

FH: The old festival favorite, Sandy Boys -- Is that done in a modal tuning?

JN: No, it is done in straight A. I guess the trick in my "Sandy Boys" is knowing which strings to mash in straight A to make it sound lonesome. I got my version from Jim Collier.

FH: Here's my list of what banjos I think you are playing on each song:

---Fretless on Rachel, Rambling Hobo, Roustabout, Christmas Eve and Breaking Up Christmas

JN: That deep sounding banjo is actually a fretted instrument with an enormous pot and nylon strings built by Tim Currin of Granville County, N.C. But...it does sound like a fretless banjo in a lot of ways. You are right on banjo choice on everything except "Rambling Hobo," which was recorded using Tim Brown's Bart Reiter.

FH:---Bart Reiter on Country Blues and

Backstep Cindy?

JN: Yes to Bart Reiter on “Country Blues,” but “Backstep Cindy” is the Enoch.

FH:---Enoch on Rocky Island, Swannanoa Tunnel, Lost Gander, Sandy Boys, The Train That Carried My Girl From Town, Protect the Innocent, and Rueben.

JN: Enoch on “Lost Gander,” “Sandy Boys” and “Reuben,” Bart Reiter on “Rocky Island” “Swannanoa Tunnel,” “The Train That Carried My Girl From Town,” and “Protect the Innocent.”

Part of the reason I used the Reiter banjo so much is that I was having bridge troubles with my Enoch. The bridge that had been on there for years crumbled when I struck my first couple of notes warming up at Tim’s before the session, so yikes! He had a replacement bridge, but it was a little higher than I was used to, so the tunes with a lot of work up the neck were done on the Reiter. In retrospect, it worked out well because it was nice to have different sounding banjos on the project.

FH: I realize that the liner notes suggest you played yet another banjo so I know I missed either a few or a lot of these guesses. Could you clarify for me?

JN: Tim Currin’s low banjo, my Kevin Enoch, and Tim’s Bart Reiter - those are the three banjos you hear on “Two Hands.” I took along my banjo made by Bob Momich, but ended up not using

it, so that is probably what confused you. I just wanted to make sure to mention Bob’s name because I have played one of his instruments for so long.

FH: Do you find it interesting that some of the great three-finger style bluegrass players like Mark Horowitz, Steve Arkin and Mike Snyder seem to have directed their attention to playing in the old time style?

JN: I think it’s great that they are including old-time in their very formidable arsenals. It is very exciting to hear how they apply left hand techniques from finger style with right hand technique from old-time. And they all certainly have “the pepper.”

FH: And finally, Joe, what do you see for the future of old time music?

JN: It does my heart good to see the number of people who have embraced old-time music - from my friends’ kids who have been around the music their whole lives, to 20-somethings who come from other kinds of music to old-time, to folks in their 30s, 40s, 50s and beyond who have taken up old-time music because of the upswing in Americana music, and movies like “Cold Mountain” and “Songcatcher.” We are a small tribe, and so each new member is gratifying.

Your can hear Joe play at:

[http:// www.myspace.com/joenewberry](http://www.myspace.com/joenewberry)

About the Author



Fred Huffman has been a long-time writer, illustrator, and collaborator in the acoustic music field. He has contributed to **Banjo Newsletter**, **Bluegrass Unlimited**, and **Muleskinner News**. His design work graced the cover of many LPs and CD’s in the bluegrass field. “I suppose the most memorable projects have included a collaboration with **Bill Keith** for a piece for BNL. I published tab books for **Tony Trischka** and **Danny Weiss**, of Skyline, and I was really happy with how those books turned out.

I suppose one of my favorite record covers was my original version of **Larry Sparks**’s John Deere Tractor. As for recent memorable musical moments, I’d have to say it was seeing **The Sparrow Quartet** at a recent Mountain Stage performance. Huffman resides in West Virginia.