

Joe Herrmann and Dakota Karper

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

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Joe Herrman (master artist, b. 1949) of Paw Paw in Hampshire County and [Dakota Karper](#) (apprentice, b. 1992) of Capon Bridge are participants in the 2020-2021 West Virginia Folklife Apprenticeship Program, studying old-time fiddle. Herrmann is a founding member of the [Critton Hollow String Band](#) and has taught old-time fiddle to many private students and at the Augusta Heritage Center. Dakota Karper, a Hampshire County native, has been playing old-time fiddle for 20 years and runs The Cat and the Fiddle Music School. Herrmann and Karper apprenticed together previously in 2004 (when Karper was 11) through Augusta Heritage Center's former Apprenticeship Program.

See the West Virginia Folklife Program feature on Herrmann and Karper:

<https://wvfolklife.org/2020/12/03/2020-folklife-apprenticeship-feature-joe-herrmann-dakota-karper-old-time-fiddle/>

JH: Joe Herrmann
EH: Emily Hilliard
DK: Dakota Karper

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00:00

EH: Alright, so I already interviewed Joe and Sam so some of the background questions will just be for you, Dakota. But why don't we start off by having the two of you introduce yourselves and tell me who you are, where you're from and when you were born.

JH: I'm Joe Herrmann. I live in Paw Paw, West Virginia. Actually I don't live in Paw Paw, West Virginia. I don't even live in the same county as Paw Paw, West Virginia! But that's where I get my mail. I live on Critton Hollow in Hampshire County, 7 or 8 miles from Paw Paw, West Virginia. And I was born in 1949. That makes me 71 years old if you want to do the math.

EH: (laughs) What about you, Dakota?

DK: I'm Dakota Karper and I live in Capon Bridge, West Virginia. Live and get my mail here. And I was born in Kirby, West Virginia in 1992, so that makes me 28 years old.

EH: Great. Dakota, tell me about your family background and your interest--how that lead or didn't lead to your interest and involvement in old-time music?

DK: Sure! So my folks kind of, the lifestyle they chose to live was to step away from the city and do more of a homesteading kind of life. They wanted to raise their children, homeschool them, play music, have a garden and just sort of get back to being more self-sustaining. So that was the environment that I got to grow up in. My father is a musician who plays banjo and guitar and from a young age the house was always played with him playing music. And I was kind of just like a moth to a light for that, drawn to that music. So when I was about 7 or 8 years old, they got me a fiddle to see if that was an influence that I would enjoy playing and that spring I started some music classes. I started off classically actually for a year or two but my dad was always taking me to the music jam, old-time out at Paul Roomsburg's cabin. And that kind of was the start of this lifelong musical endeavor ever since and I just haven't been able to get away from it.

EH: Nice. And do you play other styles of music?

02:59

DK: I used to play some more classical music--haven't done that in a while. A teeny, teeny bit of Blues music, but really mostly old-time.

EH: Okay. And you two worked together before with the Augusta Heritage Apprenticeship Program. Could you tell me a little bit about that apprenticeship and then what it's like revisiting it? This is a question for both of you.

JH: That apprenticeship was a pleasure as is this one. And working with Dakota is an honor for me because she's so self-motivated and just anything that we work on is gonna be, gonna develop because she takes it and works it, works it over. And so, yeah, it's really great to get back to this after that many years. How many years ago was the first one?

DK: More than a decade ago, yeah.

JH: Yeah, so more than 10 years later, here we are again and it's just even better because we can move really quickly toward anything that we're working on.

EH: Nice.

DK: Yeah, I was, I don't know, maybe 12 or 13 at the most I think when we had the first apprenticeship. I had been playing fiddle for maybe 4 or 5 years at the most I think then. And I remember, the things that I remember about that apprenticeship were some really interesting tunes I'd never heard of. I remember hanging out at your house and you and my dad playing fiddle always after the lesson. So there was this fun connection in that way, that it was music and a whole life, relationship outside, beyond that. And it was great. It was a lot of fun. But I'm really excited to be doing it again now with sort of a firmer foundation in fiddling already established so that I feel like we are going so much further into music, learning tunes and just kind of, the realm of music around it as well. I'm really excited.

EH: Nice, so tell me how the apprenticeship has been going, what you've been working on, and what you do in your sessions, what kind of tunes you've been learning?

05:48

JH: Fiddle tunes!

EH: (laughs) That's good!

DK: (laughs)

JH: We learn fiddle tunes. And so it's kinda free flowing in a way. I think of things that seem appropriate to present to Dakota and then as we go through something, something else pops into my mind and we just follow along wherever that might lead us. And then we talk about thing too. We talk about how we respect the tradition and at the same time, are allowed to put our personal inspirations into it. So we keep coming back to respecting the tradition.

DK: It seems like we often start with the base of the tune. We learn it maybe how it was maybe historically played or just known to us today and then a lot of that interpretation, like learning the [unintelligible] of the history of the music now too. So learning it's okay to sort of interpret or just put a bit of ourselves into the music now because some day that will be recorded as the historical music that was played way back in 2020. You know? (laughs) So becoming a part of the growing history of the music is a fun part.

EH: Yeah, what is--is that what respecting the tradition means to you, sort of being aware of what you're retaining and what you're adding to it as an individual?

07:41

DK: Yeah, we were talking just this morning actually about the way that music is seen and the ways that we can see and respect music. One example Joe keeps giving that's so great is that music can be a sculpture that's like this beautiful piece of art. We practice and we craft in a way to get it to this ultimate point of how we want it to sound and how we want it to look. And that's one way that the music is seen, heard, and played. And it's a beautiful thing to have your music be at that point. But then at the same time, there's also a respect for the tradition of the music in that it was music that was a part of daily lives for

people. It was a part of the way they saw the world around them. And so it wasn't only a still or stagnant part of life. So we can protect the piece of music so that it sounds exactly as we want it to, every bow stroke, every note is where it is but to respect the tradition of the music, we also want it to have that living, breathing essence that it's as much a part of our lives as it was part of the lives of those who wrote the music and passed it down to us.

EH: Yeah, that's really beautiful. I like the acknowledgement that the tradition is dynamic and that's part of it too. You can't, or to just replicate what people have done before is actually antithetical to the tradition in some ways.

DK: Yeah.

JH: It's a balance to be explored and to be struck.

EH: Right, right. And how would you say for both of you music is a part of your everyday life? Dakota, it sounds like it always has been, but now as you're an adult and have your own life, how is music and the old-time tradition specifically part of that?

10:01

DK: Well, in very practical ways, it's besides just being my pleasure and my joy to play music, it's a way to gather socially with people. So it's a way to make connections and relationships with my community, and it's a livelihood for me as well in that I've learned these skills and then have the ability to pass them on to others and make my living that way also.

JH: For me it's been a part of my life since I was, I don't know, probably 11 or 12 years old. And it's just inspired me and as I became older and I played music all through when I went to high school and the little bit of college I went. And when I decided, or when I went off to find a life of my own, I didn't have any problem confirming to myself that playing music was a valid thing to do, without defining exactly what it was--the music to present to the world. I saw it as something very valuable and a valid thing to pursue and that's what I've done. And my life around that has been a balance of getting things done that need to be done and always having music as what I pursue.

EH: Mmhm. Have you been focusing on tunes of a specific region or tunes of a specific fiddler?

12:06

JH: No, no, exactly not that. Like I said, it's kind of freeform and it's only, yeah, actually, yeah, we focus on the tunes of mine! (laughs)

DK: (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

JH: The ones that I know and the ones that I like to play. But no, we haven't gone back a step beyond me to say, okay we're gonna focus on this person's music.

12:38

EH: And is your repertoire, would you say it's like Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, is it broader than that?

JH: It's broader than that because of the world we live in and the music that I was influenced by a lot of contemporaries that were a couple steps ahead of me and also I mean that's one of the things, and so I would collect tunes at festivals, at these festivals that I would go to in the '70s and '80s--were attracting people from all over the country. And all of these people were collecting tunes from all over the country, mostly in the South. A lot of Virginia and certainly West Virginia and Kentucky tunes, but it's a different tradition than it was over 100 years ago when people were isolated and they got their music from their region in the 1970s and 80s and forward from that. It's a pretty wide pool that people are influenced from.

EH: Right. How would each of you describe your specific style? So say you know, at an old-time festival where everyone plays old-time, what is particular about your style of bowing or playing? How would you describe that?

14:18

DK: Well, I guess it could vary depending on the ear listening, but I would think I'm a fairly rhythmic player in my style. Melodic obviously as I play a melody instrument. But I definitely tend to stray away in some ways from crystallizing the traditional way of playing. So I would lean into ways that I could vary in my playing. So I think that folks would consider me to play an interesting fiddle player. I'm not gonna play the same thing twice the same way, I'm gonna add a harmony, I'm gonna add a new bowing. So a changing fiddler, I suppose, with influence from a lot of this Eastern West Virginia way that we play around here.

EH: Mmhm.

JH: And to hear Dakota say that, it is, that's a wonderful thing. But that's the thing in balance that I've spoken about with Dakota is when I talk about a fiddle tune as a piece of sculpture, it's unchanging, and so these are 2 different things. You can listen to somebody play a fiddle tune exactly the same way over and over again and it's beautiful thing. Or you can take somebody like Dakota and everything in between where I'm gonna change it the next time through. So we talk about that balance. You know it's like consider all of these things and where you want, maybe sometimes you can play a piece of music as a sculpture, sometimes you can play a piece of music as ever-changing. So back to your question about style, some things that I highly regard are like tone and intonation and rhythm. I guess that what we all (laughs) those are your basic elements! But, I can listen to a fiddle player and it's scratchy and not the way I would play it and appreciate it immensely. It's different. I want like, because my guide is myself. What musically inspires me is what I want to do, and it's what I want to hear. I want to hear as perfect a tone and intonation as I can get. That's what guides me. But that's me.

DK: You have a lot of finesse.

JH: Finesse--that's a very kind word. Thank you for that! (laughs)

DK & EH: (laugh)

17:15

EH: Nice, yeah. Clarity.

JH: But I get down and dirty about it sometimes too!

DK: (laughs)

EH: (laughs) Right. What is your hope for the future of this specific tradition? Dakota, you spoke of a sort of Eastern West Virginia tradition that maybe is kind of eclectic and maybe more I don't know if it's more modern necessarily, but maybe welcomes more modern influences. What do you see and what do you hope is the future for this tradition?

DK: I guess just that it keeps living, keeps thriving. If it changes some, I'm okay with that as long as people are enjoying it and loving it and it's impacting lives. I think the impact of this music for me, hopefully this isn't wrong, is more vital or important than the specific tune how it's played. I'd rather just see people gathering and enjoying the music, even if it's just morphing and evolving some than have the tunes preserved but without that life in it. So my hope would just be that it continues to thrive and grow and blossom and change if need be, but really continue expanding always.

EH: Mmhm.

19:06

JH: What do you need Emily?

EH: Oh, I was just wondering if you had a response to that question, Joe?

JH: My hopes? Same thing, you know, that it continues, but I'm not worried about that, you know, in terms of "Gee, I hope it continues." I feel pretty confident that it will, that it thrives through the ages and changes. In my life I've seen musical interest comes in waves and seems like there's a pretty good wave of it now. There was back in the '70s.

EH: Yeah.

JH: And it's been pretty strong since then, but now there's a lot of young people it seems that are discovering it and taking it on with incredible enthusiasm and bringing a lot to it!

EH: Mmhn. Yeah, Dakota you mentioned the cabin jam. Can you tell me a little bit about that? That seems like one of the places where the tradition really lives.

DK: Yeah, so you can't talk about the cabin without talking about Paul Roomsburg (laughs) because Paul Roomsburg is this musical figure and hero here in Hampshire County. He owns the cabin, it's on his property, and I believe he grew up--his nannies lived there in the cabin and he would be babysat there. It sat still and falling apart for a number of years until I think around 2000 maybe, somewhere around there.

JH: Maybe, yeah.

DK: Some folks decided to get together and put it together just enough that it wouldn't fall down on them and they could sit in there...

JH: Well no I think the first thing that happened was Paul and his dad decided to buy that piece of property that the cabin is on.

DK: Oh okay, so they didn't have it.

JH: No, they didn't own that, no, so they bought that. Which is connected to the Roomsburg family property.

DK: Yeah, and then they had this cabin and I think that it was, as we talk about that community aspect of music, folks would get together and they'd play music and make apple butter or have a pig roast, or whatever community event was happening and just decided that they wanted to have music more often than just when those gatherings were, so it became just this place that was all about the music. Folks would get together and play, sit down and play old-time music on a Saturday night. I remember a season when it was almost every Saturday that there was a jam happening there. And that was where music--I was introduced to old-time music. When I first went there, I think I could only play "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," honestly, and that was my fiddle. Paul sat me down on a stool and he said, "Alright, we're in the key of A. Just saw on the A string until you hear another note, and then if you can, play that one. And if you can just play the A, then that's okay too." And from that, you know, tunes started to grow. First it was one note, and then I'd catch a couple of the notes in the tune and couple years down the road I was playing every tune. So it's a great place still, music is happening there and will continue for a long time I think. I don't know what the square footage in there is, but...

JH: I honestly think about that. It's probably something like 20 by 20 inside the cabin. And inside the cabin there's no electricity so there are kerosene lanterns and a wood stove and then I don't know how many years ago, a project was lead, I think mostly by Pete, Dakota's father, Pete Hobbie, to expand, to put like a big porch room on it and a kitchen with a wood stove kitchen. And to secure anything that needed securing. So the atmosphere is just ideal.

EH: Yeah, it sounds pretty dreamy.

JH: Yeah, you need to come sometime!

EH: Yeah, I really do! Has COVID impacted that jam?

JH: Oh yeah. I haven't been there since February. We had one last one probably first week of March before we realized, okay we all gotta go home and stay there.

EH: Yeah. Yeah. What about your apprenticeship? I know you adapted but it seems like you're still able to meet, which is great.

JH: Yeah.

DK: So I think we had done 2 classes in March maybe, maybe just one before COVID broke out. So everything went on halt there for a little while. I think maybe we skipped a week or two.

JH: We need to check back with that because I probably owe ya one or two.

DK: (laughs) Yeah!

JH: (laughs) Or you owe me one or two depending on who's getting the most out of this!

DK: (laughs) Right! But then not knowing what [unintelligible] we switched to classes through the computer. It was okay! We were learning tunes.

JH: Yeah! We probably did 3 or 4 of those.

DK: Yeah! And that was great, and then spring time [unintelligible] outdoors throughout the summer and that's been really wonderful to play with another human being in person. You know? (laughs)

JH: Thank God I made that cut!

DK: (laughs)

25:45

EH: What do you think you both will take away from the apprenticeship and how do you think it will impact the life of this tradition?

DK: So not to say that I've mastered this, but we started in March. I feel like I was more aggressive in my playing and being able to sit with Joe and learn this music from him and really observe the way that he's playing, I said the word finesse earlier. He really has this kind of tender way of playing the fiddle that like it's very clear, it's intentional, it's like a caring way that he plays the fiddle. So it's not rough, it's not aggressive. You know? And it's beautiful! It's really just a wonderful respect for the music. And I think that that's something I'm drawing closer to and coming to value a lot more in time and I hope that that's something I carry forward. That respect and tenderness towards the music.

JH: Well I could sit her listen to you talk about me all day long!

EH and DK: (laughs)

JH: No, thank you Dakota. That was...I sense what she's talking about. She is aggressive! And that's not a bad thing! (laughs) That's not a bad thing and everything, everything is a balance of elements that can be applied to it. And so being aggressive in the music is an element and being calm and tender, or whatever the right words are, that's another element. And then going either back and forth between those elements or balancing those elements--it's all part of the art form. All part of the qualities of music that cannot be defined.

EH: Right. Well, oh yeah, and Joe what do you think you will take away?

28:24

JH: I'm inspired by this! So I take away just trying to be a better musician all the time. You know, it's like, Dakota is like, this is really serious, this is the real thing. So I try to bring the best I can to it. That's all, that's just a really good thing.

EH: Yeah. And you're both teachers--has it taught you anything about teaching, either of you?

DK: Yeah! I feel like the way that I teach is quite different from the way that Joe teaches. So watching how he teaches and kind of the--I feel like there's so much around the way that he teaches. So he, he'll teach a tune, a specific tune, and then we'll talk about the tune, and we'll talk about the music and then kind of hash out everything that's around that music, so it's not just, "This is the precise way to play this tune. This is the music." You know? And so I feel like I've learned a lot from him in that it's good to show your life around music as you're teaching and to kind of show that vulnerability to your students. It creates more impact of the music.

EH: Mmhm.

JH: And just hearing Dakota say that, I want Dakota to know, that she can't know how I teach because I only teach this way with Dakota.

DK: Oh! (laughs)

EH: (laughs) Right!

JH: Because, but that's the important thing. The way I teach is I want to be completely open to whoever's in front of me and whatever they're dealing with at the time, rather than to have a program that's designed to do something preconceived. I want to be there right then and so if I had a beginning student that was much younger and much less experienced, they wouldn't be getting the same kind of teacher that Dakota gets.

EH: Right, right. Well is there anything else either of you would like to add?

JH: Well I think you've asked some very penetrating questions!

EH: (laughs)

JH: You've gotten more out of me than I can remember.

EH: Like that country song. (laughs)

JH: Which one is that?

EH: You've forgotten more...er, "I've Forgotten More about Him Than You Will Ever Know"? (laughs)

31:15

DK & JH: (laugh)

JH: I didn't know about that one--that's a good one though!

EH: Yeah. Dakota, anything you'd like to add?

DK: No.

EH: Well thank you both so much. I'm sorry I can't be there in person but I want to--I think we'll probably be able to hire a photographer to take a picture of you. I know that you, that a photographer lives very close to you, Joe. (laughs)

JH: Yeah.

EH: Yeah, so I might get in touch with Lisa [Elmaleh] to see if we can hire her to take a few photos of you and the two of you and then Leenie and Jon.

JH: Do you know Lisa?

EH: Yeah, I know Lisa.

JH: Oh that's great, yeah.

32:16

EH: Yeah.

JH: We are so fortunate that Lisa stumbled into Critton Hollow and that we had a cabin that had just been renovated.

EH: Oh it...Oh it was just renovated when she got there?

JH: Yeah, we had someone living there for I don't know 8, 10, 12 years and they moved out and built another house and then at that point the cabin was--should we burn it down or build it up?--and we...And Sam and I had lived in it for 17 years. And then we decided, no, we're not gonna tear it down, we're gonna build it up. So we spent about a year building it up and then Lisa showed up. Exactly, exactly, well not exactly but it was better than anything I can imagine. But we weren't gonna put it on the open market, but we were gonna have this cabin in the hopes that someone perfect would come along and there she was at the right time.

EH: That's awesome.

JH: And she loves it! She loves it.

EH: Yeah, I visited--when I came and interviewed you, I stopped by her house, stopped by the cabin, yeah. Does she do non-tin type photos?

JH: I think so, I think she could probably give you what you need, yeah.

EH: Yeah, I figured. Cool, well I'll email her and we can figure that out so we can do a profile of you guys up on the Apprenticeship website. Or the Folklife website.

JH: Great. So much appreciate that you contacted me and then when I asked Dakota if she knew anybody and she said, "Yeah, me!"

EH: (laughs) Yeah, that's awesome, I'm really glad it worked out.

JH: Yeah.

EH: And hopefully at some point we'll be able to bring you guys in for a showcase at the Humanities Council and maybe we can do something virtual in the meantime, but it would be great to do an in-person thing once it's safe to do it.

JH: Yeah, so if it doesn't fall within the period of the year as it would normally be scheduled, I would hope that maybe we could just put it off until it was possible.

EH: Yeah, I think we have at least another year on the grant, but we can probably figure something out. I think we could just have the event later and make sure all they money has been paid out. So, we'll figure it out.

JH: We can figure that out, yeah, we can work with that.

EH: Cool. Well thank you guys so much and enjoy the rest of your day!

DK: You too!

JH: Okay, you do the same! Thanks Emily.

EH: Alright, thanks. Take care.

35:13

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END OF INTERVIEW