

Kim Johnson - Master Artist Biographical Information

Date & Place of Birth: November 02, 1952, Clendenin, WV

Residence: South Charleston, WV

Master Bio:

I was born in my grandma's house at Clendenin, WV. Although no one in my immediate family played music, we attended festivals, concerts, etc. whenever we could. I lived at Clendenin for most of my life, until graduating from high school. I then attended Glenville State College, where I was exposed to traditional music at the West Virginia State Folk festival, a yearly event in Glenville that has been happening since about 1950. The folk festival remains my favorite traditional music event to this day.

After graduating from college in 1975, I came back to the Charleston area, found a job, and bought a banjo with part of my first paycheck. When the Vandalia Gathering began in 1977, I was eager to go. I met Clay County fiddler Wilson Douglas there, and he agreed to help me learn to play. I visited him about once a week, with Wilson playing the fiddle and me struggling along with the banjo. It took quite a while, but I began to catch on after a few weeks. I played music with Wilson from about 1980 until he passed away in 1999. He was a wonderful person, and a fantastic musician and also shared many great stories with me.

I had known Lester McCumbers during this time, since he often played at the same festivals as Wilson. Lester had a bluegrass band at this time, with his son Roger playing banjo. When Roger passed away about 1998, Lester played a few years with his neighbor Carroll Hardway. After Carroll passed away in 2002, I started playing banjo with Lester. We played many festivals, and had many fine times until his death in 2015. The only musician I've ever found in my family is Emery Bailey, a fiddler from Calhoun County who was related to my great-grandmother. It is ironic that I played music for many years with Lester McCumbers, who was a close friend of his.

I have also played quite a lot of music with Frank George, Ernie Carpenter, and Bobby Taylor. Currently, I have been playing the last few years with Jesse Pearson and Cody Jordan in their band, the Modock Rounders.

Art Form/Transition

I was always drawn to the traditional mountain sound of the banjo, most especially the frailing/clawhammer style. This is an old sound straight out of the hills.

There were no banjo camps, YouTube lessons, instructional DVDs, etc. when I was learning to play, during the mid-1970s. I realized that if I wanted to learn to play banjo, I had to visit the old people who played the music and sang the songs. It was an adventure nearly every time I went. Wilson Douglas took me to visit Sherman and Burl Hammons. I would never have gotten this opportunity if I hadn't taken the time to get to know Wilson. We also visited Ernie Carpenter, Frank George, Sylvia O'Brien, Ira Mullins, Phoebe Parsons, and others. I am extremely fortunate to have been in a place and time to be able to be friends with these West Virginia legends.

All these older people were very generous with their time, and openly shared their family stories, recordings, and vintage photographs with me. They all felt strongly about sharing their music with others. All these people are long gone now.

I am by no means an expert on West Virginia banjo history and styles. I only know what the older people showed me. And I plan to share this with Cody as best I can.

Accomplishments/Milestones:

Recordings

Boating Up Sandy / Wilson Douglas

Back Porch Symphony / Wilson Douglas

Ole Timey / Lester & Linda McCumbers

Super Hillbilly Hits for Guitar & Banjo Vol III / Rob McNurlin

Keepers / Kim Johnson

Old Tunes & New Blood / Modock Rounders

Home Music / Modock Rounders

Nicut / Lester & Linda McCumbers

From the Country / Bobby Taylor

DVD

That Old Time Sound / Augusta Heritage Center

Possibly my favorite event was playing in the fiddle contest at Clifftop with Lester McCumbers in 2004. Lester won the blue ribbon that year, taking first place among 95 fiddlers of all ages. He had won the senior category several other years, but this one was particularly exciting. Lester was the first fiddler from West Virginia to win the whole thing.