

# Big Muddy

# SOUNDINGS

Folk Festival April 3- 4, 2009

## *Celebrating Our 18th Year at Thespian Hall*

The wise best not amble along the riverbanks these days. The cold, dry north winds offer no friendly comfort, and the river responds, breaking out in ice flows that drift the shallow brown waters and linger and jam at wing dikes and jetties. Keep away, the river says, and wait. A stroll down Main Street is no less inviting, except for the friendly establishments that invite an amiable detour. Hunkered down with comforters and “cuddle duds,” we watch a documentary on monarch butterflies and envy them the pleasant Mexican destination of their dramatic North American migration. We await the warmth and wet of spring, when the bulbs and the buds answer the annual call and a migration of friends heads for historic Thespian Hall.

For our 18th Big Muddy Folk Festival we welcome the return of old friends and visits from some new hot shots. Wordsmiths and tunesmiths and fancy pickers will present of variety of traditional and contemporary folk music reaching back to oral cultural traditions, through the mosaic of early commercial old-time styles to the sounds of new acoustic music. Our festival tries to honor its elegant venue, “a monument to the liberality and good taste of our citizens,” as members of the Boonville Thespian Society envisioned in the 1850s, as we celebrate song, story, tune and dance.

### **Juggernaut Aimed at Festival**

This jug full of guys blew in here a couple of years ago from Louisville, but they all used assumed names and managed to get away. **Roscoe Goose** (washboard, trumpet, cans, blues harp, and snare and first jug), the **Amazing Mr. Fish** (walking bass, running nose flute and washtub bass), **Skip Tracer**, the “Hillbilly Playboy from Hannibal,” (guitar, mandolin, banjo and vocals) and **Smiley Habanero**, the hot guitarist from south of the border, hail from what some believe to be the birthplace of the jug band at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Based on the sounds of the black rural string band, its forms are accessible to even the casual musician and make for a fun group effort, and its special allegorical lyrics awaken the inner trickster. After blues, ragtime and jazz left the “poor man’s tuba” behind, it took the folk revival of the 1960s to bring it back. Jim Kweskin adopted the name for his band, and the Grateful Dead recorded and performed some classic tunes from the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Blues historian Francis Davis says the jug band links the blues to the music of West Africa through the ingenuity of impoverished rural blacks to express themselves musically on whatever they could find, and there are obvious parallels to be drawn between the use of such homemade or ‘nonmusical’

instruments then and similar practices in hip-hop, most notably ‘scratching.’”

### **Riding that Bluegrass Highway**

When the sounds of the fiddle and Dobro perked the ears of country music producers in the early 1980s, bluegrass musicians found more work in Nashville and the style itself enjoyed a surge in popularity. In Colorado, Tim O’Brien and Hot Rize and Front Range were bands in that groove, and the **Chapman** family was there to watch, mostly with front row tickets. Their own musical journey began in the early 1990s when **John Chapman** won a statewide junior division fiddle championship and inspired by his father, **Bill**, to take up the banjo start a bluegrass band with friends. Eventually John switched to guitar and sang lead vocals while brothers Jeremy and Jason took up mandolin and bass.

As the family worked county fairs and bluegrass festivals in the 1990s the hobby pretty much got out of hand as they ran their own studio and moved to the Missouri Ozarks to make travel easier. In 1998 they started winning major bluegrass music awards and developed a national following. As a first-generation family band, the Chapmans admit their bluegrass roots do not reach back through their ancestry. Their reach goes both forward and back in the style, however, as

Bill Monroe tunes share the stage with songs of George Morgan and Sam Cooke and the band exploits its vocal talents as well as their picking.

## Duo From the Far Side

As our friend Matt Watroba wrote in *Sing Out!* some years ago, "It's the typical story: boy meets girl in high school, they play in folk bands, they marry and move to Canada for five years, move back, divorce and form a fresh guitar/accordion duo producing songs that are being sung by amateurs and professionals all over the world. OK, perhaps it's not typical. But then there is very little that is conventional about **Lou and Peter Berryman.**"

While their writing style is their own, elements of it are familiar. There are songwriters who are witty, or wacky, or "out there," who draw from various musical styles, or who are just out see what they can get away with, but the Berrymans combine those in a signature way that puts them in the ranks of Tom Leher, Mark Graham and others no doubt closely watched by the FBI.

Go ahead and laugh, but not too hard that you miss some words. Shake your head and you share this wonder at the process with Peter. "I remember just being totally taken with the idea that you could just write a song," he has said. "It's like you have this blank piece of paper in front of you and essentially it's the same piece of paper that Jimmy Driftwood has in front of him. The potential is there for it to be as much of an actual song as a Jimmy Driftwood song or a Beatles song or whatever."

## Another Guy with a Harp Guitar

The first guy with one for **Stephen Bennett** was his great-grandfather who played on the first Portland, Ore. radio station in a band called the Hoot Owls, as well as saloons in the Yukon. Growing up in New York, Stephen's vague childhood memories include his great-grandfather "Gonky" playing it, but he really didn't know him. There's a photograph relatively famous in the old-time scene of Pres. Franklin Roosevelt sitting with Henry Ford's orchestra that included a guy playing a harp guitar. Stephen didn't know that guy, either, but he might make up a story about him, just to see how far he could get.

The instrument, a regular six-string guitar with six extra lower bass strings, was not how Stephen began his lifelong love affair with twang. A great flatpicker as well as fingerstylist, Stephen also plays the resophonic steel guitar and slide. He has been a

favorite player and friendly picker at the festival in Winfield, Kan., since winning the national championship there in 1987. Stephen's arrangements of classic flattedop tunes are inventive, demanding and run with the best. Ranging through bluegrass, swing, traditional tunes and those of the Beatles, they are happily studied by guitarists everywhere. Stephen also emphasizes his own compositions that reach high and wide into his musicality and his affection the sound of guitar strings.

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## Rare Appearance of Band Named for Rare Dish

Occasionally during a lull in a session musicians will scheme up band names (usually musicians who want to be in a band or in a different band). It's hard to bring it to fruition: there are many more band names than there are bands. Naming a tune, however, is a little easier, since old fiddle tunes often have many names, and you don't even have to make up a tune in order to name one. Squirrel heads and gravy is a delicacy, said Missouri fiddler Taylor McBaine (1911-1994) of his favorite food. "Squirrel Heads and Gravy" is a tune named for that dish, and **Squirrelheads and Gravy** is an occasional band formed and named by **Cathy Barton, Dave Para** and **Bob** and **Melissa Atchison** during some idle afternoon moments in Arkansas 25 years ago. The four friends have shared tunes, songs, meals, living quarters and stages since their days of playing tunes with McBaine, and the tune's composer, Chris Germain. Bob had come to Missouri from Kansas with his fiddle and learned as many tunes as he could from the old-time players in these parts and in Arkansas before moving back to Kansas with Melissa, whom he had met in the school of forestry. The four love to sing harmony, play for dances and laugh, and their rare appearances are usually eventful in one way or another.

## Bob Bovee and Gail Heil

Both early and late, Bob Bovee and Gail Heil have traveled the country with a repertoire of dance tunes, ballads, cowboy songs, humorous and

sentimental numbers, blues and rags since 1980. Bob is a Nebraska native whose family sang and played the old-time songs. His grandparents loved old-time music so much that Bob's playing is a natural, generational extension of a family tradition. Many of the western and railroad songs he does were learned from his grandmother. He plays banjo and Autoharp, sings and yodels, and can drive a dance band with his guitar and harmonica. Originally from St. Louis and not a particularly musical family, Gail came to old-time music by sudden epiphany and began to learn a large part of her fiddling, as well as songs and guitar playing from older Ozark performers.

While coming to old-time music in different ways, Bob and Gail share the conscious effort to preserve the tradition. Nationally known for her efforts in perpetuating traditional heritage, Gail has been a master fiddler with students in both Iowa and Minnesota through state arts apprenticeship programs. Bob has published numerous articles and reviews for *The Old-Time Herald* and *Inside Bluegrass* and has taught an honors course in the history of country music at the University of Minnesota.

## **Locals on the Loose**

**Cathy Barton and Dave Para**, festival organizers, enjoyed a busy and emotional 2008, with several performances on the historic steamboat *Delta Queen* for its last year of overnight passage on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, the release of the tribute album and concert for the late Bob Dyer and the premier of the musical "Gumbo Bottoms," which Cathy co-wrote with Meredith Ludwig. They were also pleased to play for some MoHip historical theater shows at Thespian Hall, as producer Mary Barile presented plays about slave narratives and the history of the Missouri press. Their travels took them to Duluth, Seattle, Knoxville, Milwaukee, Malibu and to a cave outside St. Genevieve. For 2009, they look forward to helping the Turner Hall River Rats serve some more "Gumbo" in Hermann this March, and they plan to return to the studio to record a CD of some of their current favorite tunes.

From the stage, you are still likely to hear their vocal harmonies, a variety of stringed instruments and songs old and new mostly from Missouri and the surrounding region.

## **Missouri Folk Arts Program**

Dedicated to identifying and preserving traditional music and folkways among distinct communities in the state, the Missouri Folk Arts Program marks its twelfth year with the Big Muddy Folk Festival. On Saturday, at the First Presbyterian Church Fellowship Hall, specialists Deborah Bailey and Lisa Higgins will present a two-hour program featuring performances and demonstrations by master musicians and craftspeople participating in the 2008-2009 Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program.

## **Barbecue: A Regional Folk Art**

One of our favorite parts of the Big Muddy is the kind that comes attached to bone. Terry Smith has been cooking up barbecue with the Friends of Historic Boonville board of directors for years to the delight of BBQ enthusiasts and those looking for a well-cooked meal. Some of artistic director's favorite fieldwork is to "collect" samples of the results of the various dry rubs and sauces Terry likes to experiment with. We hope to have some of this fare available for the Friday evening dance as well as souvenir slabs of ribs to go.

## **Festival Wristbands**

Those attending the festival for both evenings also can attend all workshop sessions Saturday morning and afternoon, and will get a wristband with their tickets that will get them into the workshops. Those folks who don't make it to both evening shows or who attend the daytime sessions only can get a wristband at the Thespian Hall ticket office for a \$5 charge.

## **In Memoriam**

**Jim Hickam**, of Jackson, Mo., was one of the first people to buy a ticket to the Big Muddy every year; he usually managed to reserve them months before they went on sale. He also volunteered to organize the open stage at the Presbyterian Church for a number of years. An elementary school teacher for 32 years, Jim died Sept. 5, 2008, at age 71.

**John Knox McCrory**, of Columbia, was a longtime friend of the festival. A number of sets by Dave and Cathy and many a finale included his old-time harmonica playing. He died Jan. 23, 2009.

**Tentative Festival Schedule**

Our **Friday evening concert** will include Bob Bovee and Gail Heil, Barton and Para, another act TBA and the Juggernaut Jug Band, with an old-time dance following at Turner Hall.

**Workshop topics for Saturday** will highlight the instrumental talent and song repertoire of our artists, such as guitar, fiddle, and old-time jam, and sessions of humorous, regional and topical songs and some close-up concerts. An occasional check at bigmuddy.org will keep you as up to date as we are.

**Saturday evening** will feature Stephen Bennett, Lou and Peter Berryman, Squirrelheads & Gravy and the Chapmans.

*Friends of Historic Boonville*

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**[www.bigmuddy.org](http://www.bigmuddy.org)**

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