

# Big Muddy

# SOUNDINGS

Folk Festival

April 13- 14, 2012

## *State of Quiet Anticipation at Thespian Hall*

Winter has made but a half-hearted visit to Central Missouri so far. The starts of buds on the trees wonder, “to freeze or not to freeze.” The Missouri’s water runs lower, exposing at its banks the defense work against high water as well as the snag piles of logs and other debris in evidence of those earlier levee-topping levels. But the water runs brown and free nevertheless – not an ice-flow in sight. It’s neither a complaint nor a prediction, nor an invocation of the Snow Queen. Weather is one of the Midwest’s great vicissitudes; anything could happen between now and mid-April or between the writing and your reading of this. Newsletter.

We don’t always know what will happen at Thespian Hall, plan it and imagine it as we might. We try for as different a mix as our time-space-monetary limits allow. We’re grateful for an open-minded audience that will come to see people they often haven’t heard of before, and we’re usually reminded of that sometime on Saturday night every year. I have always believed that Thespian Hall is more conducive to this effort than most other venues. She lets you know she’s seen a lot of great times in her 155 years and is ready for more.

For our 21<sup>st</sup> festival we await the return of dear friends and favorite performers from past years as well as some guests we have been wanting to see for a while. There will be lots of singing of finely crafted new songs and songs that reach back into our heritage, traditional tunes and some from popular forms 100 and 150 years ago, some spirited step dancing and a possibly critical mass of banjos -- and an audience to bring Thespian Hall alive again. We also have an exciting item for a raffle and fundraiser to bring out the river lover in you.

### **Grace Sisters are Family to Us**

Portland, Ore., and Asheville, N.C. might be ready to call them their own, but we will still welcome home **Leela** and **Ellie Grace**. They have given our festival a lot of music, dance and fun since they were little girls in calico. Since lighting out for the territories five years ago they have garnered acclaim from audiences across the country they cross to meet, as solo and ensemble performers as well as a duo. Both are busy teachers of step dance and singing and of their main instruments, banjo and mandolin, in both music camps around the country and in private lessons at home. Ellie is a Blue-Eyed Girl, an old-time band in Asheville, and she has sparked an interest in country music. Original songs are still a major focus of their performances with writing that is both inventive and musical. Their second album, “Where the Waters Run,” was new when they were here in 2008. They anticipate a lot of traveling to the four coordinates of the country, including the National Women’s Music Festival in Wisconsin. They

maintain a faithful following in these parts, and the Big Muddy may be their only Missouri appearance this year.

### **Fiddle and Banjo Summit**

We welcome back **Alan Jabbour** and **Ken Perlman**, fiddle and banjo masters, respectively, who continue to influence the tradition. A sizable number of tunes exist in the standard repertoire of fiddlers and other old-time musicians (whether or not they know it) simply because Alan learned them from fiddlers in Appalachia and began teaching them to his friends 40 years ago. Chances are slim that in a session anywhere in the U.S. you would not hear tunes linked to the recordings by the Hollow Rock String Band in the late 1960s. A classically trained violinist in his youth, Alan was attracted to Appalachian fiddling while in college. His field collecting evolved into a pre-eminent career in folklore that included the Library of Congress Archive of Folk Song, the folk arts program for the National Endowment of the Arts and director of the American Folklife Center. Ken,

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who as a younger banjo player learned any number of Alan's tunes, widened his interest to the North American Celtic styles, specifically researching the fiddling traditions of Prince Edward Island. He has broken acreage in the melodic clawhammer style, the most complex form of old-time banjo playing, and transposing jigs and strathspeys to the five-string puts it to the test. Ken directs a number of banjo camps around the country with some of the country's best players, providing "48 hours of total banjo immersion" for those who have it in 'em. Together, Ken and Alan take a front-porch pastime to a fine art.

## Friendly River Neighbors Return

When they came out on stage at Thespian Hall two years ago, it was apparent that **Bob Schad** and **Jazzou Jones** were going to entertain the entire room of 600. It was, after all, part of their job descriptions on the legendary steamboat *Delta Queen* and her sister boats. Professional entertainers per se, can be guys who juggle plates on sticks, but these two are terrific musicians who for decades have played for audiences on the river, which warms our Big Muddy hearts. Jazzou (Tom) is quite at home on the piano, but ragtime is his favorite, which he plays with power and finesse. He has composed his own rags as well; many of them river-related, and he can tell you the mile-marker at which they were debuted on which boat. Bob is adept with the plectrum banjo, one of the four-string strummed banjo apparitions that qualify him for the rhythm section of any old-style jazz band, and he is an engaging and entertaining singer as well with a knack for the novelty number. As steamboat cruise directors they helped passengers have a good time before and after they played for them, and it's part of the spirit with which they play.

## Old Missouri French Songs

The French were the first white people to settle in this part of the country, first drawn to the Mississippi valley for mining opportunities. In addition to a number of towns with French names, Missouri boasts of an old Creole (a word whose meaning has changed over the last 200 years or so) culture that has been the subject of intentional preservation during recent decades. But in Ste. Genevieve, Missouri's oldest town, **Patti Naeger** just wanted children to get together and sing like she did when she was a girl. Urged by her seven-year old son and his art teacher, she conspired to form a singing group. "The next

thing I knew we were walking around with the children in costume singing in French." **Les Petites Chanteurs** have since 1988 become a local icon and ambassadors for the French and German community.

They practice every Friday afternoon in the art room of the city's parochial school, and they come from the public school and home-schoolers, too. Naeger doesn't claim to be a vocal teacher, and she refers to the Chanteurs as a peasant group. She hopes they gain a love for singing, good tone and ear training as well as an appreciation the picturesque town's heritage. In 2009, Patti received the Governor's Award from the Missouri Humanities Council for community achievement.

## New Jersey Modern Minstrel

Somewhere I have a picture of **Mike Agranoff** at the 2006 Big Muddy standing with Central Missouri's own tall, thin guy with a red beard, Lee Ruth. Maybe this year we'll do it again with their guitars in hand. Mike has been called the epitome of the modern balladeer. An engineer by trade (not the long-steel-rail type he might sing about); by nights he produces concerts for the Folk Project at the Minstrel Show Coffeehouse, a venerable New Jersey folk venue. He is as much a fixture among Northeast folkies as the lampposts that light the way to the halls.

He is a performer of wit and skill with a deep affection for traditional as well as contemporary folk music. A fine fingerstyle guitarist with a tune list that runs from Tin Pan Alley to fiddle tunes, he also plays concertina, piano and banjo. He is also known as a storyteller, and his own original songs can tell them, too, both with an ear for pun and turn of phrase. His words can leave you in contemplation or in laughter deep down.

**Funding Assistance From  
The Missouri Arts Council,  
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## The Skirtlifters?! Yep.

"Think of dancing," has been the band's standard response, rather than having you conjure a seedy image of a band on the road. And 19<sup>th</sup>-century belles had bigger skirts to lift to the gavottes, gallops and mazurkas of their day. For more than 20 years, the band has been led by banjoist Clarke Ruehling who is

a respected worldwide master of late 19<sup>th</sup> century classic finger-style banjo and also a leader in the resurging interest in the earlier minstrel banjo style. Much of the band's repertoire is based on his collection of period banjo and mandolin instruction books and string band sheet music. The band also includes Columbia's own **T(h)oms, Verdott** and **Howard**, on fiddle and guitar, respectively, and **Kent Beyette** for percussion and dance. The banjo was as much "America's instrument" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the guitar was in the 20<sup>th</sup> (both instruments were brought to this country). As such, the banjo played through a diverse repertoire of folk songs, dance tunes and the cakewalks, two-steps and rags that are syncopated parents of jazz. It has been said that ragtime piano playing was initially an imitation of the banjo.

## How Would You Like To Go Up in A Swing?

It is great to welcome back **Swing DeVille**, five acoustic players who combine the twin fiddle sounds of Bob Wills and the gypsy jazz of Django Reinhardt, and they really cook. **Justin Branum, Clint Hasse, Gary Hunt, Glen Meyers** and **Matt Wyatt** played music maybe 90 percent of the time they were in Boonville in 2010 camping out in the dressing room, passing the guitars around and breaking only to catch a meal and play out on stage. They cut a groove so deep geologists could study fossils in it. While early western swing and gypsy jazz are at their fingertips, they also know a lot of old-time and bluegrass fiddle tunes and popular music of the 20's through the 40's. They also enjoy playing it all on quality vintage instruments.

## Neighborhood Troubadours

As if Thespian Hall couldn't get any dearer to **Cathy Barton** and **Dave Para**, the duo last summer collaborated there with violinist David Halen, concertmaster of the St. Louis Symphony, on string arrangements of some of their recorded Civil War songs. It was an evening they will never forget.

Listen for some interesting tunes they learned at Carp Camp at the 40<sup>th</sup> Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kan., last fall. It has kept them fired up for months. "The Zipper" rules!

The couple are also grateful recipients this year of the Governor's Award from the Missouri Committee

for the Humanities, for exemplary community achievement. Festival co-founder, the late Bob Dyer received this award 10 years ago.

## Festival Workshops

At this writing we are working on workshop ideas for Saturday, but with our roster we can expect sessions in banjo, fiddle, clogging, river songs, humorous songs, songs of the Civil War, ragtime and old time styles. Check our <http://bigmuddy.org> website as we get closer to April. We should also have a good pick-up band for the Friday dance in Turner Hall after the concert.

## The New Queen of the Mississippi You Could Win a Cruise for Two

This is an historic year for river transportation as a brand new paddle-wheeled riverboat will be launched to bring overnight passage back to America's middle rivers after a three-year hiatus. American Cruise Lines is building the *Queen of the Mississippi*, at Chesapeake Shipyard in Salisbury, Md., and she will cruise her namesake this summer. You could be part of this history, as ACL has generously offered a cruise for two on this boat for a fund-raiser raffle.



**Phyllis Dale**, the "red hot mama," who wowed us all at last year's festival and who introduced ACL owner Charles Robinson to Dave and Cathy, has graciously helped make this happen for the Big Muddy. She will be here at Thespian Hall to pick the winning ticket, and Phyllis Dale Travel and Great Escapes Travel will cover gratuities and give onboard credit. The cruise for two will be in next year, 2013, and is valued close to \$10,000.

Raffle tickets are \$20 each, three for \$50, with all proceeds benefiting the Big Muddy Folk Festival. You can purchase them in advance by calling the

Friends office, which might be advisable, because we are limiting the number of tickets sold to 500.

The new boat will be propelled by paddle wheel powered by a diesel engine. She can carry 140 passengers, and is about the size of the *Delta Queen*, which is now operated as a hotel at Chattanooga, Tenn. The *Mississippi Queen*, built in the 1970s, stopped cruising in 2007 and last year was cut up for scrap. Their sister, the *American Queen*, will return to the river this summer under new ownership. ACL last year purchased and now runs the *Queen of the West* on the Columbia River.

## Smokin' in the Parking Lot

Chef Terry Smith represents well the art of barbecue and keeps the grounds around the festival fragrant and inviting. It's a substantial plate for the price with a wide selection of smoky goodness, and the cooks are a clever bunch. You might even take home a slab of ribs after the show to remember us by. We're grateful the Friends board of directors sponsors our prime food event.

### *Friends of Historic Boonville*

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## Tentative Festival Schedule

Our **Friday evening** concert will include Mike Agranoff, Jazzou Jones and Bob Schad, Barton and Para, and the Skirtlifters, and special guests the River City Singers. An old-time dance follows at Turner Hall.

**Workshops on Saturday** again will be held in nearby Turner Hall, First Presbyterian Church and Christ Church Episcopal, for instrumental and song sessions and some close-up concerts. An occasional check at [bigmuddy.org](http://bigmuddy.org) will keep you as up to date as we are.

**Saturday evening** will feature Les Petites Chanteurs, Alan Jabbour and Ken Perlman, Swing De Ville and Leela and Ellie Grace, and special guest, Phyllis Dale.

Call Toll Free 888-588-1477