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Janet Burton

A Banjo Flower Propagates the Art

Janet Burton interviewed by Paul Roberts

A passionate musician whose devotion shines a light of wisdom on a vibrant form of music and its roots in antiquity, Janet Burton propagates the art of banjo playing.

Janet Burton brings to mind Alan Lomax - a musician, folklorist, ethnomusicologist, archivist, writer, scholar and teacher - with whom she holds a lot in common. I met Janet on the Internet banjo community, Banjo Hangout, where she generously shares her musical talents, teaching abilities and insights. Her posts, like "The Devil Eat the Groundhog" represent high-level curricula, as well as performance.

As Janet pursues her awe-inspiring search into the depths of old-time music, she creates an impressive wake of understanding about our musical heritage.

Paul Roberts:

Tell us something about your early musical memories, influences and feelings about music.

Janet Burton:

I grew up in Los Angeles and had exposure to many musical styles. As I reflect back on musical experiences very early in my life I can see how and why banjo picking now fills and enhances my life.

The earliest memory goes back to my mother playing the piano. A couple of the songs I remember and recorded not long ago on Banjo Hangout are her versions of Indian Love Call and Finiculi, Finicula. My father only played records, though in his childhood he played piano for a radio station near the central Pennsylvania coal-mining town where he grew up. I took piano lessons for a couple of years as an 8-9 year old.

By the time I turned five my family went on annual vacations to Yosemite National Park. The guitar-playing ranger would sing in a family-oriented nightly program and when it was time to push off the famous Fire Falls from El Capitan Mountain he would sing Indian Love Call. "When I'm calling you, will you answer true? Then you will hear my love call ringing in your ear, I belong to you." It's a great memory—music with the magnificence of the out-of-doors. I associate my favorite fiddle tunes now with the mountains of Appalachia, Allegheny, the Blue Ridge, and the Ozarks. I respect and enjoy mountain people and have lived in the foothills and mountains as an adult.

Playing guitar was important growing up. A Girl Scout in camp showed me how to play guitar when I was about 9 years old. Tom Dooley was the first song I learned. Eventually I took weekly lessons down the street with our wonderful neighbor Mary Ellen Clark, now in her 80's. Mary Ellen took me as a child to the Topanga Canyon Fiddle Contest and after I learned banjo in college she invited me over to jam when the great fiddler Earl Collins was visiting. Mary Ellen was in that circle of musicians who got to jam with, as well as draw, some of the great players



The Fire Falls coming down El Capitan in Yosemite National Park

when they visited Los Angeles. She recently gave me her pastel drawing of Doc Watson. When I visit my childhood home I still play folk songs with Mary Ellen, like Sail Away Ladies and Tingalayo. Having had her as a childhood mentor is special.

Watching musicals and movies was a part of growing up and bore fruit in my youth and through my adulthood. Disney's *Fantasia* had classical music set to animation. Mary Poppins was the singing magical nanny who showed me that laughter and fun is powerfully good. *The Sound of Music* taught me Do-Re-Me and showed me possibilities in creating a dramatic, musical presentation with children doing the acting and singing. Its title song was also my choir solo in the 5th grade. *The King and I* was the true story of a teacher in Siam. Years later I taught kindergarten to Hmong kids from Thailand and we sang and whistled the song *Getting to Know You*.

I'd say the impact of watching these musicals as a youngster was keen enough to influence my choice in becoming a first grade teacher with music in the classroom. Here are several examples of how I now use music at school: songs are engaging and add to the quality of lessons in language arts, history, math and

science. Instrumental music creates a background conducive for math and writing activities. Students learn from singing and chanting. We collaborate on writing songs appropriate to themes we're studying. Together we make illustrated books from our musical compositions. Holiday performances are heightened when there's live guitar or banjo accompaniment.

Grammar school choir and orchestra were prominent in my early years and through junior high. In choir I learned to sing harmony. In orchestra I played cello. I wanted to play violin, but the teacher said we needed cellos. The highlight of these times was participating in school performances. It's good for kids to be able to perform in front of an audience. I was quite shy, so to do this as a child helped overcome shyness. One time I was playing first cello and the elderly composer of *The Grand Canyon Suite*, Ferde Grofe, was in the audience, crying and clapping with one good hand on his lap as we played his suite. I also think now that my enjoyment of banjo picking is related to having played the cello—the pitch range and the fingering are similar.

Guitar playing was useful when I became a summer camp counselor—something I did for several years. The experience of working with kids in camp as a teenager helped lead to my teaching career choice.

I think the significance of music in my early childhood is that it enhanced my life with beauty and high ideals. I also learned the mechanics of music, like timing, keys, scales, rhythm, and harmony. Music was all around me, but wasn't introduced as a vocational path to follow. I'd call music my lifelong friend.

Paul Roberts :

Could you tell me some more of your adventures in music?

Musical adventures, Paul? That means they were risky and/or exciting. Well, would you find **bear hunting** risky or exciting? Or musical? When I first learned banjo I'd chosen a recreational class at my college. Though the subject was to learn 3-finger Scruggs style, a classmate introduced me to clawhammer and I was smitten. One source for learning was Pete Seeger's now-famous book *How to Play the 5-String Banjo*. The Cumberland Mountain Bear Chase became a favorite. This was in 1974 and introduced me to the idea of hunting with hounds.

Time jump to 1985 and I find myself with my two young children and an injured Plott hound dog walking through the Sierra Nevada forest to a large pine tree after our hounds have treed a beautiful cinnamon-colored bear. If I feel lost, the injured hound isn't and Old Ike leads us. The risky part is getting close enough to the bear to take a photo. I'm afraid the bear will get nervous and jump on me, but I get closer and closer and finally get THE photo that lands on the cover of the April edition of *Full Cry* magazine. That's the exciting part of this adventure, with photography being a lifelong hobby. Whenever I've sung Cumberland Mountain Bear Chase since then, it has more meaning. I still like blowing the same old cow horn before singing a hunting song for kids. It was once used to call the hounds in from hunting (they were trained to think it was dinner time).



Cinnamon Bear

Pete Seeger's song became one of many that students always enjoyed.

Onto another adventure--**performance** is risky and exciting. My husband, Kit, and I have performed together since meeting at the Rough and Ready Fruit Jar Pickers in 2003 and marrying in 2008. This group performs every Sunday at the local Grange and again in the afternoon at assisted living and retirement homes. I'm sometimes found to be leading the entire band of between 10 and 25 musicians when the band leader can't make it. Leading was worrisome for a while till I got used to doing it. Now it's fun and easy, like being in front of a bunch of school kids! When

it's just Kit and I performing we call ourselves Plinky and Plunky, and play for community events emphasizing history.



4-year old grandson Harlan, Kit and Janet playing for Hometown Christmas in Forbestown, 2011

Here's another performance adventure: If you're ever in the old gold rush town of Smartsville on the last Saturday in April, come to our Pioneer Day. Kit and I are in charge of scheduling stage entertainment. If you bring children, they can perform on stage with Plinky and Plunky. (I can't resist a plug here for our event. It benefits restoration of the historic old Catholic Church for community use and as a visitors' center: Pioneer Day promotional video.) You'll also see me portray Lotta Crabtree, who's called the "Shirley Temple of the 1800's. She sang, danced, played banjo, and acted on stage between San Francisco and New York City, dying a millionaire and leaving it all to charity in 1923.

And yet another performance adventure: Huell Howser was the producer of the PBS series "California Gold." He had visited and filmed our little town of Smartsville twice after reading a news article about local citizens who petitioned the government to put the middle "s" back in our town's name after they took it away 99 years ago. Kit is president

of the group (SCRFI) responsible for this. Huell entitled the film "Smartsville and Timbuctoo" and it's now available to see on-line for free. He had the Rough and Ready Fruit Jar Pickers play "Y'all Come" three times for the camera, which made me happy since I'd taught the group this song. Some time after this wonderful event, Huell visited Nashville and made a professional video of his theme song, California Here I Come. He issued a challenge for anyone to post their own version, so our SCRFI group took up the challenge and we added a Smartsville verse. However, he passed away this year and we've never heard if our video won. My mother was 90 at the time and is sitting singing with us.

For Kit and me these performance adventures stand out like little gemstones. We're not professionals, but have lots of fun while sharing our music. There's a lot more going on when you're performing than when you're playing at home. When a performance goes well we're elated.

My most current musical adventure has been to take Skype lessons from the talented clawhammer player Adam Hurt. For me this was a little scary--a humbling experience as I play in front of him for each lesson. He can hear even one note that's off and show me afterwards where I need to focus. But he's most kind and knowledgeable and is able to show me tunes from the sources I'm interested in. Maybe one day I'll relax enough to be able to play really well for him!

Paul, you did the world a great service by producing Adam Hurt's Earth Tones gourd banjo CD. As Huell Howser used to say, "**THAT'S AMAAAAZING!!**" Adventures with our lifelong friend of music are certain to bless us again and again.

Paul Roberts :

You've taken up a really intensive study with Adam Hurt. Would you like to expand on that? How does it fit into your overall interests in the banjo and where you're headed with it? Also, please describe some of your experiences learning banjo before meeting Adam.

My overall interests in banjo relate to old-time music as well as other genres. I've played classical, Celtic, popular, and bluegrass on banjo, but I really like figuring out how to play the southern mountain fiddle tunes. They're mini-symphonies, emotionally charged, aesthetically pleasing. Clawhammer is my favorite way to play them and Adam is, in my book, THE Clawhammerist.

I learned clawhammer through tab books after one person showed me how to claw. I used mostly Miles Krassen and John Burke's books in the 70's. The Santa Barbara Old Time Fiddlers Association held many jams and gave me constant exposure to new tunes. They had a lending library of cassettes with old-time and Irish music. Each new tune learned was like uncovering a treasure. We played daily at the UCSB campus plaza to allow the hardy cloggers to dance and played at a lot of square dances. These are my best memories of college life. But I chose a different vocational path as a public school teacher, and raised a family, never completely putting the banjo down, but not focusing on it. In the last ten years I've picked it up again whole-heartedly, just for fun, without any expectations or long-term goals.

I had the book Earl Scruggs and the 5-String Banjo, but didn't get interested in studying until more recently. Going to four years of summer music camp in Grass Valley beginning in 2005 and taking 3-day courses from professional bluegrass players was helpful. I had one absolutely amazing private lesson from Craig Smith on board a bluegrass cruise ship to Alaska. Books and DVDs from Bill Evans, Tony Trichka, Alan Munde, Pat Cloud, John Hartford, Bill Keith and Jim Mills helped me learn to utilize 3-finger picking as I do now to perform in the Rough and Ready Fruit Jar Pickers. I also use it to accompany singing actors for about twenty songs at the annual Rough and Ready Secession Day musical comedy (based on real history). I learn songs for the play that I'm not familiar with by listening to youtube recordings, for example Mr. Sandman, Maverick, and El Paso, and then figuring them out. I need to play them in any key best for the singer without using a capo. Bluegrass studies have made that possible. Learning by ear and knowing chordal positions are very useful tools.

Here's how I came to take nine Skype lessons thus far from Adam Hurt. After listening to his Earth Tones CD with solos on gourd banjo, I was inspired. I got a gourd banjo myself, as well as Dana Epstein's book Sinful Tunes and Spirituals to learn more about banjo's African roots. The mellow, smooth, earthy tone of his playing is unspeakably beautiful. The sources for his tunes go back to the southern mountain fiddling I'm entranced with. The arrangements are ingenious. I immediately began figuring out old-time tunes on the gourd banjo such as Shelvin Rock, Evening Prayer Blues, and Walking in the Parlor.

I kept teaching myself tunes from Adam's CD, recording them on my Whyte Laydie openback banjo. The CD introduced me to the music of West Virginia's Hammons family, which has snowballed to listening to other southern mountain fiddlers. One of the Earth Tones tunes that was particularly challenging is called Flannery's Dream. It was a Tune of the Week on a Banjo Hangout on-line forum and I recorded it and posted my tab. Adam saw the thread and responded with one of his rare tabbed versions and it was one of those "ah-ha" moments. I'd used a totally different tuning from him, but his choice of tuning made it much easier to play. He mentioned in his post that he gives Skype lessons. I showed this to my husband, Kit. It helps to backtrack here to explain Kit's experience with Skype lessons and how it fits in with my overall desire to improve. He plays mandolin and Mike Compton's music inspired him. After traveling all the way to Owensboro, KY to do a Monroe camp with Mike in a group setting, Kit began four years of individualized Skype lessons with Mike. Kit considers getting to know Mike almost as valuable as his improvement in the mandolin. Mike's wit and intelligence and his total commitment to his music is a constant inspiration to Kit.

When I showed Adam's post to Kit and how mistaken I'd been in my interpretation of his version of Flannery's Dream, Kit figured lessons from the best clawhammer player we've heard would be a good thing. He offered a Skype lesson from Adam as a birthday present last January. Kit and I had been listening to his new CD, Fine Times at our House, and one song, "Haste to the Wedding," ended up on repeat for days. We're convinced that Adam Hurt is the James Bryan of clawhammer banjo, James being our favorite virtuoso old-time fiddler. I took Kit up on the offer, feeling nervous knowing the high caliber of musicianship I'd be facing. I'm a self-taught clawhammer player and find some success at being able to listen to the fiddled tunes I like and adapting them to my own banjo

style. But I knew that embarking on an adventure with Adam as my guide could only be helpful, fun, and stimulating. Working one-on-one has got to be the best opportunity for growth.

Adam's lessons began with learning tunes from Earth Tones and his other recordings, such as John Riley the Shepherd, Brushy Fork of John's Creek, Old Beech Leaves, Hogs and Sheep Walking in the Pasture, Josie-O, Glory in the Meeting House, Temperance Reel, Shortening Bread, and Sandy River Belle. His sources have included Art Stamper, Buddy Thomas, William Stepp, and Sid Hudnall—fiddlers I'm excited to learn about. He has a way of beautifying a fiddle tune on banjo and is generous in sharing his work.



"The Fox" using a cow's horn

We're studying several aspects of banjo that interest us both. Recently he's helped me peer into the Round Peak style with tunes by Kyle Creed and Tommy Jarrell. A future lesson will use a Jarrell tune going up the neck. Another topic is syncopation, interesting to me after having pursued this in a Banjo Hangout Tune of the Week called L & N Rag. (Coincidentally, many Hangout members mentioned Adam's great version of this tune on his Insight CD, another testimony of his talent.) To begin lessons in syncopation Adam showed me how to play Sandy River as played by North Carolina fiddler Marcus Martin. My old-time education is increasing as does my repertoire and technical knowledge of playing the banjo.

Adam's method of teaching is to show me exactly how to play the tune and verbally walk through the two or three parts while recording it. He then sends me the MP3s he records for our lesson. From his recordings I make myself a tab to study and practice from. And practice I must! One tune every three weeks seems to be a good pace for me, giving me time in my busy life to both practice and pursue my other banjo ventures. At the next lesson I'll show him my progress. He's always encouraging, but will also do what a good teacher must do—show me ways to improve and to correct errors.

There was a Tune of the Week I tried to learn in open G tuning called Little Rose is Gone. Then I listened to Adam's recording of it with Chance McCoy and tried his Sandy River Belle tuning (fDGCD). Another "ah-ha" moment. It was much easier and sounded nicer. So I can say Adam's teaching has begun to pay off. I've splurged on an enormous book with over 1,400 tunes called Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes. Because it was pricey I was hesitant to get it. All of the tunes are notated for a fiddle. There are good notes at the end of the book--over 130 pages of just notes and tables. It's been a worthwhile investment and many of the tunes Adam teaches me are in the book. There's something important to me about learning from old-time sources, as if I've been imprinted with that desire. Perhaps it's my father's Allegheny Mountain birthplace, passing on to me a love of mountain music.

We've worked in different tunings and Adam encouraged me to explore in the Sandy River Belle tuning. Paul, you've always encouraged me to compose and I credit you for encouraging inspiration to take over. I ended up with a song I call Harlan's Cave that impressed Banjo Hangout webmaster Eric Schlange and Banjo Newsletter editor Donald Nitchie. Donald allowed me to publish my song in the July, 2013 edition of banjo newsletter. For me that was akin to winning a trophy! This shows how my journey into Skype lessons can take me to unexpected and exciting places.

I'd say that Adam is helping me on this journey of learning the fiddle tunes that I feel rooted in. You could say he enriches the soil. Music is a like a magical garden and cultivating it is what life allows us to do.

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Janet's MP3's	Janet 's Videos on Youtube
Shady Grove With Plinky and Plunky	
Bridget Cruise A Turlough O'Carolan song I'd not heard before	View Banjo Hangout Page (must sign in to the Banjo Hangout to view)
Old Aunt Adkins From Owen "Snake" Chapman's Walnut Gap CD	
Dead Man's Piece The best tone I've gotten from my cello banjo	Sample Janet's VIDEOS below
Koramanti A piece I figured out from the 1668 notation by Sir Hans Sloane after he visited Jamaica	June Apple 3-finger style
Squirrel Hunters On the small scale oak gourd banjo made by Robert Browder	Greasy Coat
	Harlan's Cave



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