

# Mark Johnson

**O**n a gorgeous, seventy-two degree Sunday this past January in Central Florida, Mark Johnson gave me a walking tour of his family's mini-ranch. "Surely," I thought, "horses, dogs, a John Deere tractor, and the sounds of nature are enough to make any man content with his life." Yet as we settled down to the business at hand, I realized that life is just beginning for this clawhammer picker. And the culprit is *Clawgrass*. "Clawgrass," Mark Johnson with the Rice Brothers and Friends, is the first CD to exclusively feature Mark Johnson. First-time projects are everyday occurrences, but there are several items here that make this a significant endeavor. The first item is the noticeable presence of the Rice Brothers: Tony, Larry, Wyatt, and Ronnie. It is a fact that over the years, many "name artists" have lent their talent and prestige to outside projects. And whether it be to help a new artist get a foot in the door, or to repay some personal favor, the results are too often disappointing. That is not the case here. Secondly, the product is good. The insert has several studio pictures (in color); the liner notes are written by folks like Jay Unger and David Holt; and for the cover, Mark contracted a local artist to draw a neat picture of him and his doggie. The music is fresh, diverse, and pleasurable.

Lastly, and most importantly, Mark Johnson is doing it all himself. Self-financing is nothing new to this business, but he is going much farther. He formed his own record and publishing companies, and he is actively promoting and distributing his music. Here, Mark describes himself, his music, the reasoning behind his strategy to start out as an independent, and a report on how he's doing in this wacky world we call Banjo Music.

Mark was born in Manhattan, NY in 1955, and he moved to Florida in 1981. He is married to Sarah Johnson, and they have one daughter, Kayla. He works in the Radiation Protection field, and his outside interests include collecting lanterns and vintage guns, hunting, and, of course, music.

—Wynn Osborne

clean with no clutter around it, then drop out and play quietly with a decent rhythm line while someone else is playing. And if you can't do it, back out and let the rest of the band carry the rhythm. For old-time music fans, I invited Tammy Murray (champion clawhammer picker) to provide some fiddling. We played *Mississippi Sawyer* and *Liza Jane*. These tunes have that old raw sound, except that for a change of pace, the banjo does the lead while the fiddle plays a supporting role. Another old-timer is *Angeline the Baker*, played by fiddler Jason Thomas and myself. It was done with a back-and-forth style—I wanted the instruments to stand up for what they could do in terms of lead and rhythm.

Then there are the guitar and banjo duets with Tony Rice. We did *Forked Deer*, and an old-time clawhammer tune *Colored Aristocracy*. In this one, I wanted to bring out another way to use clawhammer, that is, with good lead guitar, good rhythm, and working the solos back and forth.

**WO:** What about the progressive stuff?

**MJ:** Oh yes—there's *My Sweet Sarah*.

This is the kind of music I enjoy playing with clawhammer. I've already had some success with this formula. I performed one of my own songs, *Move Along*, on Larry Rice's album, "Hurricanes and Daydreams" (Rebel Records, 1985). Wyatt Rice recorded another tune of mine, *Swift Was Thy Flight*, on his CD "New Market Gap" (Rounder Records, 1990).

**WO:** What provoked you to release this project using your own record and publishing companies?

**MJ:** I have to go back to 1992—that's when I recorded the tunes. My original objective was to sell the concept to one of the mainstream record companies specializing in bluegrass and old-time music. For eighteen months, I made a

## Interview by Wynn Osborne

**WO:** So young man, what is *Clawgrass*?

**MJ:** A friend and I were jokingly using the term while playing at a local festival. Some in the crowd overheard me mention the term, and they seemed to like it. After the project was completed, I was trying to think of a title, and the more I thought about it, *Clawgrass* seemed to always come to the top of the list—so it stuck.

**WO:** How did the idea for the music originate?

**MJ:** It really began as an experiment. I had an idea in my mind to bring clawhammer more to the mainstream; I wanted to apply it to the bluegrass new-acoustic folk sounds that the Rice Brothers were playing.

**WO:** How would you characterize your music?

**MJ:** Well, it has a bit of everything: bluegrass, folk, new-acoustic, and progressive clawhammer. For the bluegrass tunes, I included *John Henry* and *Clinch Mountain Backstep*. I played these with the same drive that I tried to have with my 3-finger style. I wanted that same feel too—you know, put your lead in

sincere and sustained effort to get it released. I sent out promo tapes and personally contacted many companies. In the end, however, this strategy yielded no results. At that moment, I realized that if this thing was going to happen, I would have to make it happen myself.

**WO:** It seems like someone would have jumped on this. Why didn't they?

**MJ:** The most often heard reason was that since I wasn't currently touring, and thus buying records from them for resale, it would be difficult for them to recoup the cost. Another hurdle was just simply trying to get a response from someone. Understandably, record companies get bombarded with these things daily—it's not easy to catch someone's ear. Nonetheless, the only thing that I had to show for it all was high phone bills.

**WO:** Have you ever owned and operated a business before?

**MJ:** No, this is the first time. I've done a lot of contract work in the nuclear power industry, but this is the first time that I've had to worry about doing the books, tracking expenditures, handling the paperwork, paying royalties, and so on.

**WO:** Whoa! Time out! Did you say royalties?

**MJ:** Yes. As a matter of fact I have a check ready to go out to Ralph Stanley right now. It's not much, but it's a start.

**WO:** You're kidding, right?

**MJ:** No, not at all.

**WO:** Imagine that—a banjo picker getting a royalty check! Getting back to creating your companies, how did you know where to begin?

**MJ:** I didn't. I just jumped in and got wet. Actually, getting started is really not that difficult. You have to do a fair amount of research and ask a lot of questions. The hard part comes later when you are trying to push the product into the marketplace. For example, three



*Tony Rice, Sherry Boyd & Mark Johnson, Mt. Airy NC*

PHOTO BY MARK BROWN

will do the same. Also, if you do something musically that people like, they will support it.

**WO:** Have you acquired any dislikes yet?

**MJ:** Yeah—phone bills!

**WO:** What advice would you give to anyone going into the business?

**MJ:** You have to be able to take criticism, and take the bad with the good. It takes some time and difficulty to develop a hard skin, but just remember two things: You can't get anything if you don't ask for it; also, the only thing that someone can tell you is yes or no. The greatest advice given to me came from my late father, and that was to just, "Get beyond it, and move along."

**WO:** Any advice for projects in general?

**MJ:** Absolutely. You have to find someone who, firstly, believes in you and what you are doing. Secondly, they have to be sensitive to your budget. I was extremely fortunate to find Ray Valla and his gang at Mirror Image Studios (Gainesville, FL). He was so helpful with his expertise in graphics and the overall "look" of the product. Also, the product has to be top notch—the cover, the insert, and of course the music. You cannot skimp on anything.

**WO:** How were you able to produce such a good sounding product the first time out?

**MJ:** I would have to credit the Rices for that. I can't express how much it meant to have my dear friends Tony, Larry, Wyatt, and Ronnie help me with the project. It really surprised me that they agreed to do it. But even more surprising was their enthusiasm in the studio. They could have just came in the studio and quickly overdubbed their parts. Instead, they took pride in their efforts and in what I was doing. They helped me immensely in so many ways. I specifically remember one example when during the mixdown, we made a

weeks ago I knew nothing about how music distribution worked; I was just throwing darts in the air. Now I have a clear picture of what I have to do; I just have to do it.

**WO:** Are you having any success this early in the game?

**MJ:** So far, it's been beyond my wildest expectations. I am expecting to see reviews appear in several national magazines shortly. I've found some national distributors for the CD, and I am currently in contact with some potential foreign distributors.

**WO:** Is this the only thing you are doing right now?

**MJ:** Yes. For that, I must thank my very understanding and supportive wife, Sarah. I just couldn't do it without her encouragement.

**WO:** What's the most surprising thing learned so far?

**MJ:** It's that for the most part, people in this business are extremely nice and helpful. I have received so much unsolicited and helpful advice from so many people. I find that if you treat people with kindness and civility, they

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call to Billy Wolf in Virginia for some advice. They're not only great friends, but they are also true professionals in every sense of the word.

**WO:** Could you describe your clawhammer style?

**MJ:** To be honest, I couldn't tell you. I don't really keep up with what's going on out there. I can easily recognize differences between the myriad styles that exist, but I've never really taken the time to compare myself to other players. I can't describe it; I just play from the heart.

**WO:** How can you judge your playing without listening to others?

**MJ:** I've really never done that. I've been so fascinated with bluegrass music and with what the Rice Brothers were doing, that I just concentrated on making my music fit that sound. There was really no other interference.

**WO:** What banjo do you play, and how do you set it up?

**MJ:** I play a Vega *Tu-Bu-Phone* #9. It has a gold brass square tube below the stretcher band with holes cut into it. I like a banjo to ring like a bell, and the only banjos that I have found to do that are these Vegas. You can also manipulate the tone easily: you can mute it, bring it up, bring it down—just by the touch. I can also work it just like a bluegrass banjo, that is, get close to the bridge or right up close to the neck. The banjo is also nice because the tone is good when it's played soft, and it's able to take it when you play it hard.

I use a Snuffy Smith bridge (11/16"); I like a high action (3/16" at the

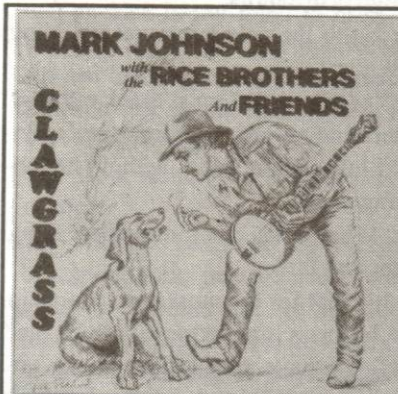
twelfth fret). For strings, I play GHS PF140 (JD Crowe), with 9.5's on the first and fifth strings. They get a beautiful bright tone and produce a lot of sustain.

**WO:** You also play 3-finger style, don't you?

**MJ:** Yes. Actually my first interest was in Earl Scruggs. When I was sixteen years old, someone gave me the album *"The World of Flatt & Scruggs."* I just about ran my parents out of the house with it. I was dying to learn how to play like Earl. But there weren't any local pickers who played that style. Then I found some guys who were teaching banjo at Garrison, New York—Jay Unger and John Cohen. I went to them learn how to play the theme to *"Deliverance."* Of course they just laughed at me, saying, "We can't teach you how to play that style here, but we can teach you the basic rhythm." They told me that if I practiced the brush-brush-thumb lick consistently with my right hand, I would have it in three weeks.

After doing this for a while, I asked them, "When are we going to put the picks on?" They just smiled and told me to hang in there. It was a year later, and I thought, "I just have to learn some Scruggs." I bought my first resonated banjo—a Japanese copy, and some books by Earl Scruggs, Pete Wernick, and Tony Trischka. I basically learned the 3-finger style from tabulature.

In fact, the first time I saw someone pick Scruggs's style was at the old Berkshire Mountain Festival. There was a young looking kid sitting on the back of



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## MARK JOHNSON RICE BROTHERS AND FRIENDS

*"Mark Johnson is an extraordinary talent and his music is authentic. The sound speaks for itself."*

—Tony Rice

*"Whatever the name, this project is one that will shatter and expand any preconceived notions the listener has ever had about clawhammer banjo."*

—IBMA Newsletter Jan./Feb. 1995

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a station wagon playing all Scruggs stuff—it turned out to be Béla Fleck. He was very cordial; I talked with him for about an hour.

**WO:** Who are your favorite 3-finger players?

**MJ:** My top favorites are Scruggs, Osborne, Crowe, and Keith. Then going to a second level, there's Trischka, Munde, and Fleck.

**WO:** Were these players the only influence on your banjo music?

**MJ:** No. My biggest influences are actually guitar players: Tony Rice, Wyatt Rice, Norman Blake, Leo Kottke, and Doc Watson. I must also mention Don Stover—he was the only banjo player that I ever heard who mixed 3-finger and clawhammer styles together. Don's

album "Things In Life" was a real inspiration.

**WO:** What are your short term plans?

**MJ:** Right now I am concentrating on promoting "Clawgrass." I've just completed a press kit to mail to selected promoters, distributors, and radio people.

**WO:** Are you making any personal appearances?

**MJ:** Some. I've had the opportunity to do guest spots with the Rice Brothers and Raymond Fairchild here in the South. I'm hoping to do this more frequently and to expand my coverage. I plan to guest with the Rice Brothers in a few concerts whenever it is feasible. I've also been doing several live radio interviews in various locations.

**WO:** Ultimately, what do you want to

accomplish with your music?

**MJ:** To look my wife in the eye and say, "Honey, I broke even!"

Mark Johnson can be contacted at:

*Bangtown Records*  
C/O Mark Johnson, P.O. Box 3335  
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"Clawgrass" can be purchased from:

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