

MARK JOHNSON & CLAWGRASS

Señor McGuire

Ask bluegrass fans about their image of clawhammer banjo players and I suspect many would describe a musician dressed like a country comedian playing raucous, foot-stomping music; a stereotype fostered by folks like Grandpa Jones and Stringbean. Historically, when clawhammer banjo found its way into a stage show, it was often part of a novelty segment.

Now, contrast Mark Johnson—he plays clawhammer banjo, but Mark Johnson is a musician of the 1990s and he has chosen to play in a modern bluegrass setting. Mark's approach is very different from other clawhammer banjo players. While clawhammer banjo is usually thought of as a fiddle-influenced style, the

playing of Mark Johnson developed from modern bluegrass guitar stylings. He is very different from other clawhammer players in technique, heavy use of his left hand playing chord positions over the entire fretboard. With his right hand, Mark mixes a variety of picking techniques with the standard clawhammer lick, another contrast to the norm. Also, he differs in the setup of his banjo, the way he approaches a tune, and especially in the sound of his music—a result of the songs and musicians Mark chooses to bring on stage with him as Mark Johnson and Clawgrass. Finally, Mark adds a unique element of

soul to bluegrass that is very different from playing a banjo with fingerpicks.

The music of Mark Johnson forms a bridge between traditional clawhammer banjo playing and the use of that style in modern bluegrass. It was no surprise that the revision chose to title his latest CD "Bridging The Gap." Since the release of his landmark CD, "Clawgrass," in 1995, Mark has a new band that is hitting the bluegrass festival circuit with this amazing new sound.

The term "clawgrass" came from a late night picking session. Mark describes, "I was sitting around one night at the Withlacoochee Bluegrass Festival playing clawhammer with friends who were playing bluegrass tunes. I started throw-

By Dick Kimmel

Bridging The Gap Between Bluegrass and Old-Time Music

ing around the word 'bluehammer.' Of course, the reverse of bluehammer is 'Clawgrass.' It was on a whim. When I mentioned it to the Rice family while at the studio recording my first CD, they encouraged me to use Clawgrass as the title for the CD. After that, several positive reviews and magazine articles referred to the style of banjo that I play as Clawgrass."

Mark Johnson has been playing banjo for over 27 years. In Mark's words, "I have a deep appreciation and interest in both three-finger styles of banjo playing; Scruggs, and Keith's chromatic and melodic styles, and, of course, the old clawhammer style of banjo playing." This banjo style found its way into Mark's life by accident. He wanted to learn the banjo style played in the movie *Deliverance*. In 1971 while living in New York, Mark took lessons from Jay Unger, the old-time musician and teacher best known for authoring "Ashokan Farewell." "Little did I know that Jay was not a bluegrass banjo player, but rather a highly accomplished fiddler who was making a few extra dollars on the side teaching clawhammer. Jay showed me the basics of the style. I later went on to learn the three-finger bluegrass style." Mark kept clawhammer as a secondary style because his first love was bluegrass music. But when he wanted to express himself through music, he found he was composing tunes using clawhammer instead of bluegrass style. Clawhammer became the major outlet for his expression.

Today, Mark Johnson lives in the small north-central Florida town, Dunnellon.

This is near Crystal River, Fla., where the Rice clan has resided. Mark expresses that he, "had the good fortune of the Rice brothers' friendship and an exposure to their style of music. This music is the major influence on my style of clawhammer banjo playing and music writing style. It was at their urging that 'Clawgrass' became a reality." In the early 1980s, Mark worked at a Florida power utility with Larry and Ronnie Rice and their late father, Herb Rice "We all became fast friends and throughout the years I was taken under their 'musical wings' causing me to develop a style of my own. I learned that the clawhammer style of banjo need not be relegated to just another support instrument associated with Appalachian folk music. Rather, clawhammer banjo can be an extremely versatile style of playing that can be expanded into many forms of music that seem to represent today's culture." Through the influence of the Rices, Mark developed a unique sense of "band" and rhythm. He is one of those rare individuals who can jell a band like J.D. Crowe can jell a band.

Allen Watkins (a former banjo player with Claire Lynch's band who today plays mandolin with Mark Johnson and Clawgrass) says, "To me, Mark's banjo playing is very unique. He is a very solid three-finger player with a knowledge of the neck, and he applies that ability and knowledge to his style of clawhammer playing. The result is an unorthodox sound not heard with many old-timey banjo players. I am amazed at his original material and his tasteful interpretations of stan-

dards. He has brought the clawhammer style out of the back seat and put it in the driver's seat."

"Mark Johnson and Friends - Clawgrass," Mark's first solo CD, met with instant success. To date, sales of "Clawgrass" are fast approaching 5000 copies, no small fete for a self-produced recording. Previously, Mark had played clawhammer banjo on Larry Rice's "Hurricanes And Daydreams" CD (Rebel Records) and his music writing talents showed up on Wyatt Rice's "New Market Gap" CD (Rounder Records). The Clawgrass CD was recorded in late 1992. The long list of musicians on the CD with Mark included the Rice brothers (Tony, Larry, Wyatt, and Ronnie). The choice of music included his own arrangements of some traditional tunes, several bluegrass instrumentals and an original composition. The format included a variety of banjo/fiddle or banjo/guitar duets, full bluegrass (actually clawgrass) band ensembles, and a banjo solo.

Reviews of "Clawgrass" from all major magazines, whether bluegrass or "on the edge," have been glowing. In a review of "Clawgrass" for (*Bluegrass Unlimited* March 1995), David McCarty wrote, "This CD will fit into the collection of almost any bluegrass fan, whether their tastes run to the hot and progressive branch of the music or the more traditional side." A *Banjo Newsletter* cover story and CD review read, "Every now and then a killer banjo player that nobody has ever heard of comes wandering out of the woods and blows your socks off. Mark Johnson is his name and you're going to hear a lot more of him in the months and years to come. Mark's CD is called 'Clawgrass' and it is absolutely a knockout! Every player should have one."

In 1996 Mark Johnson signed with Pinecastle Records. This label released the first CD featuring Mark's new band, "Mark Johnson and Clawgrass," this past year. Mark notes that, "The title, 'Bridging The Gap' was a term that I often heard used by DJs and in articles and reviews to describe my style of banjo playing. I have been told that I have established the 'high, center ground' between old-time and bluegrass. Hence, I choose the title 'Bridging The Gap' as a concept title for the new project."

Mark Johnson & Clawgrass, L-R: Allen Watkins, Mark, Allen Shadd and Terry Campbell.



Ed Gauvain



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he had developed in the bluegrass world. Prior to the formation of Mark Johnson and Clawgrass, Mark performed as a guest musician with various bands including the Tony Rice Unit, the Rice Brothers, and my group, Dick Kimmel & Co.

The fact that so many people know of Mark Johnson and have had a chance to hear his music is a combination of Mark's hard work as well as the sounds that emanate from his banjo. Mark describes his efforts to promote his music, "I became very familiar with the radio personalities who gave my first CD plenty of airplay. I

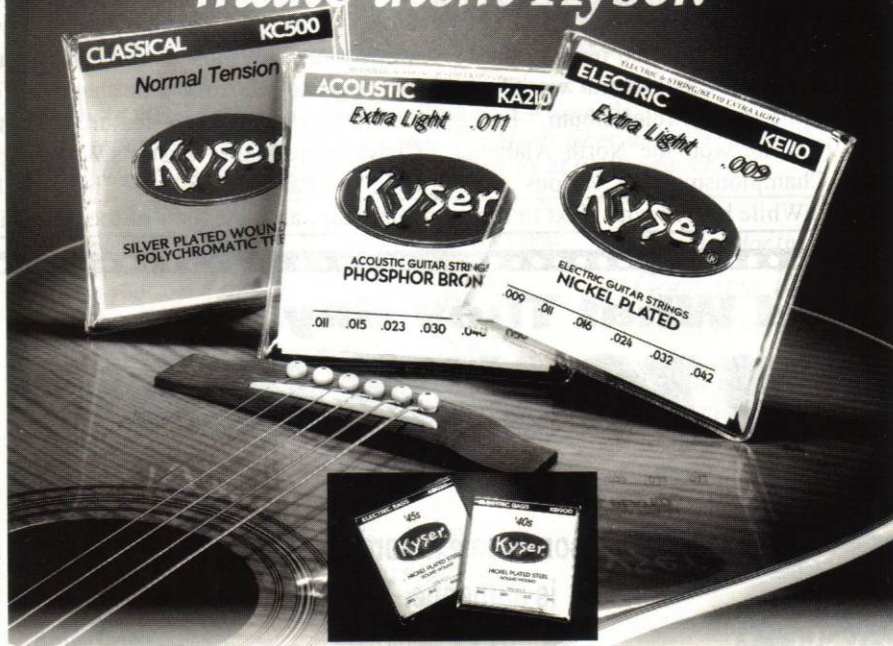
must have written hundreds of letters to record companies, magazines, music associations, radio stations, and most importantly the musicians who are my heroes and who I respect."

I received one of those letters in 1995 along with a copy of Mark's "Clawgrass" CD. Mark knew of me through my clawhammer playing and an article I co-wrote on Vega/Fairbanks banjos for the June 1978 issue of *Pickin'* magazine. Mark relates, "this article resulted in my acquiring the 1926 Vega Tu-ba-phone No. 9 banjo that I play, along with a very fancy Deering Ivanhoe open-back banjo." The open and friendly letter from a complete stranger as well as the fantastic music on the "Clawgrass" CD resulted in my immediately getting in touch with Mark. Mark possesses not only the ability to play good music, but also a wonderful and truly friendly personality that is an important asset when dealing with his fans as well as his music business peers.

The performing schedule of Mark Johnson and Clawgrass is in the best of hands; Mark's agent is Art Menius of Arts Artists, Inc. Mark's 1998 bookings already include a number of prestigious events. Recording plans include a Tony Rice—Mark Johnson duet recording due to the impact of the Rice/Johnson duets on both the "Clawgrass" and "Bridging The Gap" CDs. A second Mark Johnson and Clawgrass CD is already being discussed.

The future for Mark Johnson & Clawgrass will undoubtedly continue to "bridge the gap" between bluegrass and old-time music using Mark's unique clawhammer banjo playing as the bridge. It is apparent that Mark Johnson is not limited by these traditions; he is willing and ready to explore music. With Mark Johnson & Clawgrass the formula is obvious, Mark is trying to achieve, in assembling some of the finest players in bluegrass, his own style of modern bluegrass music grounded with a style of banjo playing that comes from a thorough understanding of bluegrass banjo, the music of Tony Rice and the Rice Brothers, and, especially, clawhammer banjo.

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Dick Kimmel is a BU staff writer from Minnesota. In his spare time he fronts his own band Dick Kimmel & Co., and is on the board for the Minnesota Hall Of Fame and for IBMA's International Committee.