

Mark &

When Mark Johnson and Emory Lester make music, it's much like waging war. The duo unleashes an all-out assault: an incessant, pulverizing, unstoppable blitzkrieg of cascading notes, shifting rhythms and fascinating chord

photo by Michele Warren

Speaking in Tones

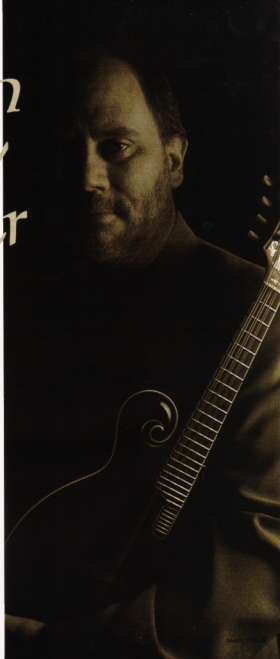
by Dave Higgs
photos by Dane Penland

Johnson Emory Lester

progressions married to moody, spell-binding melodies. Speaking in gorgeous and shimmering tones, they make a quick conquest of any audience that sits before them. For theirs is a new, intensely spiritual and deeply moving kind of music against which resistance is futile. It's their acoustic campaign, and all quickly wilt before the power of its might.

Acoustic Campaign is a fitting title for acoustic masters, best friends and musical soul mates Mark Johnson and Emory Lester's first collaborative effort on Mark's own Bangtown record label. "The name of the album stems from the fact we play 'acoustic' instruments and that we're on a 'campaign' to get the word out on our new sound," Mark says thoughtfully. "And to take over the bluegrass world," Emory adds, laughing uproariously.

The album showcases not only the dazzling instrumental prowess of the duo, but also their ability to convey vivid and unforgettable musical landscapes in tones. The project contains three of Mark's originals, a couple of Sonny James' songs and several tunes relating to the American Civil War, which has long fascinated both Mark and Emory. Mark explains, "The Civil War redefined our nation back in 1865 and continues to define all of us as Americans today in 2003. For me, when I visit places like Gettysburg National Military



Park, it's like entering into a theater of the mind." Whenever he is in the area, Mark visits Little Round Top, [where the Union left behind, despite ferocious Confederate assaults] with "blood brother" and Civil War era banjo maker, George Wunderlich. The two whip out their banjos and play, softly and quietly, out of a deep awe and reverence for the hallowed ground on which they stand. "After six o'clock, when all the tour buses have gone home, the people that really want to be there show up," Mark explains. "They come with a lot of respect and just gather around and listen to us. That's where a lot of the melodies and the feelings that drive those melodies on the CD originated."

In a similar fashion, Emory took pilgrimages to the Outer Banks of North Carolina with a luggage cart full of instruments, keyboards and recorders. "I'd go up into the highest room I could get on the ocean front and sit there in the complete dark with the tape rolling and noodle on my instruments," Emory explains. "As I looked over the waves, I'd think of images like the graveyard at the Atlantic and I'd start playing things I'd never played before. It's the same thing for Mark when he and George are playing up on Little Round Top. It's a very powerful experience, because Mark's totally thinking and feeling what happened there and it's coming through him in his playing."

A defining moment for both musicians occurred while visiting the Antietam battlefield a few years ago. The two were walking down the sunken road and when they got to the Bloody Lane [an 800-yard long road where much of the heaviest fighting occurred], a storm started moving in. "I was talking about who was there and did what at what time of day," Mark recalls, "and you could see it in Emory's face. It was like throwing matches at a gas can—all of a sudden it blew!" And when I brought him some of the Civil War-esque material I was considering for *Acoustic Campaign*, he knew exactly what I was talking about."

Like artists who take their canvases and oil paints to special places to find inspiration to create, Mark and Emory do the same thing musically. "And what's neat," Emory says with growing excitement, "is that we've captured some of those feelings on *Acoustic Campaign*." "If you

it's the opposite of bluehammer." Some friends would tease me and say with their tongues in cheek, "Clawgrass... it's a way of life!" In reality, it's just a moniker that has been associated with me and my style of banjo playing. I just play the way I play and I am grateful for that."

Simply put, "Clawgrass" is Mark Johnson and how he approaches his music, a compelling and unforgettable combination of bluegrass, traditional folk, progressive acoustic, new-grass and old-time music.

Mark attributes much of the sound to his Deering Ivanhoe banjo and its lush warm overtones. "Like Tony Rice," he says, "I try and let the notes ring and just let the deep tones of the instrument come to the forefront. So many traditional clawhammer players are always trying to kill the tone in their instruments by shoving towels in the back to muffle the tone. But, to me, that's like knocking out half a fuel injection system in a car. If you learn how to harness those overtones, how to work with sustain, and how to let your music breathe, only then can the real tone of my instrument come out for the sound I am looking for."

Those deep tones are heard in profusion on such tracks as "Mosby's Rangers," Mark's tribute to Colonel John Singleton Mosby's Confederate partisans who fought in Northern Virginia during the Civil War, a tune which Mark and Emory readily acknowledge as their favorite cut. "That piece was basically only an idea until Mark sat down with me and started to play it," Emory explains. "I just reacted to it. That song really happened in the moment and has everything in it that we're about."

"That's the crux of why I play music with Emory," Mark quickly adds. "It's the spontaneity that I live for." Mark originally intended to play "Marching Through Georgia" in the key of A. "I wanted to play it 'sweet,'" Mark confides. "And Emory picked up on that right away suggesting that I play the tune up in the key of E or F. I play it out of a double tuning on my banjo which gives me the ability to play those real tender minors and a lot of deep backup tone when Emory is taking his break." On "Heartbroken," another Mark Johnson original, the duo "experimented in melancholy," playing the tune slowly with all the achingly lonesome feeling they could muster.

The album includes some old-time fiddle tunes such as "Forked Deer," "Soldier's Joy" and "Cherokee Shuffle," the bluegrass standard, "Jerusalem Ridge," and the traditional Irish air, "The Foggy Dew." In the hands of Mark and Emory, these tunes take on new life, becoming simultaneously more beautiful, moody and introspective. "This Newfoundland friend of mine, a killer sea chanteur named Rik Barron,

showed me 'Foggy Dew,'" Mark relates with amusement. "After hearing our version he came up to me and said, 'You just took 400 years of Celtic tradition and just trashed it. I said, 'Did we do wrong?' And he laughed and said, 'No, that was great!' Mark admits, "We really played with the melody on that one."

Emory even sings a couple of tunes from the songbag of one of his heroes, Sonny James. "I guess I was drawn to Sonny's music because his music was different than most of his contemporaries. He treated some of his music like 'paintings in sound' and that struck a chord with me real early," Emory elaborates. He recalls being captivated the first time he heard "Red Mud" from Sonny's limitedly distributed *Timberline LP*. The original version had the "old drum, old electric guitar and the um, um, um chorus in the background."



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The album features Mark's patented "clawgrass" sound. "I can tell you what clawgrass is," Emory says. "Clawgrass is music played by a musician who creates music. It's not bluegrass, it's not old-time, it's not anything in particular. It's a musician who is bleeding music, painting pictures and using a clawhammer banjo." Mark's style is a unique and compelling mixture of a variety of banjo styles including drop thumb, frailing and three finger. "People used to always ask me, 'Mark Johnson, just what is clawgrass?'" Mark says with a smile, "And I'd reply, 'Well,

"Emory put a 'feel' on that tune and I just went where he told me to go," Mark says admiringly. "And we got this haunting southern kind of poverty thing going. It's a beautiful tune and it gave me range to move around chordally and man, there's such a cool rhythm that goes on in there!"

According to Emory, the original version of "Three Days Out of Omaha," the other Sonny James' tune on the CD, would seem totally corny by today's standards. "It almost sounds comical in a way. It's about a little kid who doesn't know his parents—I guess they are somewhere three days out of Omaha. It's one of those songs that has silly little lyrics but just comes across good this way."

Mark is proud of his musical heritage. He learned clawhammer from Jay Unger while living in New York. After moving to Florida in 1981, by unbelievable coincidence, Mark found himself working at the same local power utility in Crystal River, Fla., with Herb, Larry and Ronnie Rice. "Here's Mark learning the banjo and looking around for someone to jam with," Emory says marveling at his partner's incredible luck as well as the amazing irony and fortuitousness of it all. "He just happens to meet this guy named Larry Rice and then gets together with another guy named Tony Rice. If I knew Mark back then and had known what was happening, I would have taken him to Las Vegas and let him roll the dice a few times. We probably would have been rich!" he muses wistfully.

It was indeed the Rice Brothers who helped Mark define his sound and who were instrumental in the release of Mark's seminal 1994 debut, *Clawgrass*, which propelled Mark into the national limelight. The album featured Mark's stellar and invigorating arrangements of such tunes as "North Carolina Breakdown," "John Henry" and "Angeline the Baker," plus several banjo/guitar duets with Tony Rice. "You know with all that rhythm and backup and lead, I was just kind of steeped in the Rice soup of musicianship," Mark says gratefully. As a result, Mark's music is uniquely his own. "In the far distance there is old time and on the other side there is bluegrass music... I love both of them. But I found myself out here in the middle between the two styles where there are no rules to follow. There's no one to tell me, 'Hey, you're not doing it right'—although plenty of people of told me that through the years. I just do what I do. I was raised by wolves—I was raised by the Rice Brothers!"

Curiously, Mark really didn't understand he had forged a new sound until going to the Bluegrass and Old Time Fiddler's Convention in Mt. Airy, N. C., with David Holt. Mark immediately went to one end of the field and started jamming. Much to his surprise and chagrin, the musicians quit playing, put their instruments in their cases and began walking away. When David returned to check on his friend, he found Mark sitting alone and dejected, outside the men's room. Mark continues the story: "When I told David what happened, he said, 'Oh, you went to THAT end of the field. Mark, you don't play old-time. They only play old-time at that end of the field. You need to go down to the OTHER end of the field.' Up to that point I thought I was playing old-time music, but I wasn't actually."

Mark's music has been hailed as a "missing link" between bluegrass and old-time music; hence, the title to his 1997 Pinacastle outing, *Bridging the Gap*.

With such stellar musicians as Allen Shadd on guitar, Allen Watkins on mandolin, Terry Campbell on bass and Pat White on the fiddle, Mark dove head-first into uncharted waters, putting his patented spin on such numbers as "Sally Ann," "Welcome to New York," and "Sweet Sunny South." Four of the tunes are originals and Tony Rice again shows up to do some sparkling flatpaw work on the duets, "Old Joe Clark" and "Cuckoo's Nest."

Day Jobs

Given the complexity of their music, their sense of dedication to their craft and their enormous contributions to acoustic music, it's hard to fathom that both Mark and Emory would have time for full-time, demanding professional day jobs.

Mark works as an Emergency Planning Coordinator for Levy County Emergency Management, Levy County, Fla., where he is charged with the radiological safety and health of the county residents. He writes, trains, exercises, and implements emergency response plans that involve county commissioners, police, fire/rescue and EMT emergency first responders. "In the unlikely event of an accident, we are trained and ready to respond to it in every way, shape and form," he says reassuringly.

Emory has always been involved in computer-aided design for a number of disciplines, including architectural, mechanical and electrical. He currently lives near Toronto, Ontario, where he is a manager for a company that provides computer-aided engineering support for stadiums and large buildings. He says, "I'm still learning the ropes on how they do things here. We're not getting enough time for music right now, but hopefully that will change soon and get that straightened out."

And, as if that wasn't enough, Emory also did the art, graphics and cover design for *Acoustic Campaign and Cruise the 8*.



Emory's father and grandfather both played bluegrass. Wanting to participate in the music rather than just listen, Emory and his older brother Dale began learning how to play. With the onset of teenagehood, Emory learned rock 'n' roll ("because that's how you got girlfriends"). But when he first heard Jimmy Gaudreau and later, Doyle Lawson, playing with the Country Gentlemen, he was smitten with the mandolin. Another musical epiphany was hearing the David Grisman Quintet for the first time. "After hearing David, I started trying to become the hot mandolin player in the area, trying to gun down the first three rows at every show," Emory reminisces, shaking his head at the impertinence of his youth.

Emory's musical journey has taken him down a number of fascinating paths. In 1980, he did a short stint with Del McCoury & the Dixie Pals, "learning a lot about being on the road." From 1989-1991 he worked as a sideman with nationally acclaimed New Age guitarist, William Ellwood. While touring with Ellwood, Emory played synthesizer, mandolin, violin, guitar and percussion—sometimes switching among all the instruments in the course of the same song. On the weekend that Princess Diana died, Emory performed at several jazz concerts in Martha's Vineyard with Babik Reinhardt, the son of fabled gypsy guitarist, Django Reinhardt, and the Francois Vola Band. He played electric mandolin and electric violin alongside Babik at the event which he cites as "an incredible instrumental experience." Currently, Emory also picks mandolin and guitar with the Gary Ferguson/Sally Love band and he recently produced their new project, *Our Old Home*. Emory's trademark black-faced mandolin is instantly recognized wherever he goes, and reversed whatever type of music he plays.

After recording his first album, *Jerusalem Ridge*, in 1983, Emory started writing his own material. "What I always told my students was

continued on next page



Students: Listen up!

Both Mark and Emory stress first and foremost that music must be FUN! "I try and get my students to enjoy whatever it is they are doing and to appreciate the pleasure and privilege of being able to play at all regardless of their level of ability," Emory reveals.

Mark stresses the importance of learning how to "listen" to all forms of music, especially ALL styles of banjo music. "It doesn't matter if it is three-finger, old-time, or even 4-string banjo playing," he urges. "Try to hear the banjo played by all the great players in every form that they present and try to learn exactly what they're doing to define their sound. With this approach, you will find that your own sound will begin to define itself. And always try to play with people who are better than you as this will naturally force you to play better."

just produced Mark's Pinecastle outing, Bridging the Gap. "Throughout the recording of that CD, Bill kept telling me about this fellow who had very similar musical interests and approaches to his music—a very famous mandolin player named Emory Lester," Mark recalls, much to Emory's delight. When the two finally got together, at Emory's mountaintop home, the musical rapport and friendship was instantaneous. Mark recalls the magic: "Emory and I were just bouncing music off each other. We weren't talking, but this relationship kind of thing just occurred where you know where one person is going musically and the other person follows and then takes the lead. And we knew right then and there that Bill Emerson was right."

"And not only that," Emory quickly interjects, "besides being musical comrades, we also enjoy a lot of the same things—like history, the Civil War and airplanes. I mean Mark and I can talk for hours before we even start to play." The two knew they were musical soul mates from the beginning.

"When I talk to Emory musically," Mark confides, it's like speaking in tones. We're talking back and forth. I know when he's going to go into his lead and I know the tempo, the timbre, the touch, the taste and the tone. I know what he's going to do and I know where to go to get out of his way and to still complement him when he does it."

"The music that happens from that kind of relationship is incredible," Emory continues. "It's certainly unplanned and unscripted. It becomes so much more than we thought it was going to. When you play with a person like Mark, your music just naturally finds new places. *Acoustic Campaign* is full of that process."

Acoustic Campaign might have never come about but for the expertise, friendship and interest of the album's recording engineer, George Hodgkiss, whom Mark calls "the third member of the group." "The care that he put into the project matched our own," Emory states. "He helped us create this sound," Mark says with awe. "I was so excited with the six or seven tunes we did the first day. We both wear nuts driving home playing the tunes over and

over. Not only is George Hodgkiss a great engineer, but a wonderful human being," Emory emphatically agrees: "It makes such a difference in the studio when you have someone who is interested in what you are doing. Instead of looking at the clock, he's trying to figure out how to get more out of it."

George also recorded Emory's most recent venture, *Cruisin' the Eight*, on Emory's Quiet Fire Productions label. With the exception of guest appearances by Mark (who played banjo on "Billy in the Claw Ground"), George (who played trombone on "So What"), Mike Mumford (who picks the banjo on "Mountain Air") and Emory's brother, Dale, (who plays drums and percussion on "Autumn Blue"), Emory played every instrument on the project. The album took Emory and George nearly a year to complete but Emory believes it's his best work to date. "I was definitely more mature as a musician," he states. "I've basically



gone through the Bill Emerson school of 'calm down' and just tried to milk the music for all I could. I tried to paint a picture each time using all the instruments and thinking of them together as one instead of thinking of each individually."

Six of 13 tunes on the CD are Emory's own. "Cruisin' the Eight," with its relevance to the eight strings of the mandolin, was written during one of Emory's sojourns at the Outer Banks. "That's one we used to play a lot with the Emory Lester Set. It's a painting in sound with the mandolin," he states.

On "Salt Creek Revisited," Emory employs one of his favorite techniques of taking a well known tune and playing it in a different key. "If you take a song like 'Salt Creek,' which is usually played in the key of A, and play it in a different key, all of a sudden, it sounds like a different song. The melody stands out much better which, in turn, inspired the creation of a second song, "Salt Creek Revisited." Emory plays the original "Salt Creek" in the middle of the song to "pay homage to it and create the effect of how one came from the other."

In a world characterized by the temporal and the ephemeral, the Mark Johnson &

that I was a mandolin player for probably ten years before I actually became a musician," he says. "I feel like I became a musician when I started writing songs."

And create music he did, utilizing his mastery of the mandolin along with fiddle, guitar, violin, banjo, piano, acoustic bass, mandola, 12-string guitar, synthesizer and percussion to create a myriad of musical styles from bluegrass all the way to new acoustic and jazz which he performed with the Emory Lester Set while living in Canada between 1988 and 1993. That group's self-entitled CD was voted the number two instrumental album of the '90s by the INDIE Acoustic Music Awards. Emory was also named Central Canadian "Mandolin Player of the Year" four times.

In 1993 Emory moved back to Virginia and waxed *Pale Rider*, his instrumental tour de force, with Tony Trischka, Slavko Hanzlik and Roy Rogers. That same year, Emory met a young Chris Thile at the Vancouver Folk Festival and gave him a copy of the album. Chris was spellbound with the disc and used the title track to win the National Mandolin Championship in Winfield, Kan., later in September. When accepting his IBMA "Mandolin Player of the Year Award" in 2001, Chris named Emory as one of his three most important influences.

It was banjo icon and mutual acquaintance Bill Emerson who brought Emory and Mark together. Emory was playing in Bill's band with Mark Newton [with whom he played between 1996 and 1999]. Bill had also



**It's all
in a
name**

Mark was picking with good friend Mike Hyde back in 1992, "enjoying a few beers and having fun sitting around picking all night with friends." After finishing a tune, where Mark played his clawhammer style banjo in place of his Scruggs style, all of a sudden, Mike made a claw shape with his hand and yelled out, "THE CLAW!" The two chuckled, starting throwing around names and all of a sudden "Clawgrass" popped out. Mark didn't learn until years later of the existence of an old-time New England dance band that called themselves "The Old Clawgrass Boys" who Mark credits with being the first to use the term.

The idea for the title Acoustic Campaign was Mark's. However, Mark and Emory spent a good deal of time considering various titles and nearly falling on the floor with laughter in the process. Rejected titles included Clawhammer Man, The Fret Nectar Boys and The Florida Mountain Boys. "We knew we had captured a lot of the drive and passion we both admire in American traditional music and that we had to have an album title that matched the feel and effort of the project. I think we hit it right on the bull's-eye with "Acoustic Campaign," Mark says with authority.

Emory Lester connection is indelible and immutable. "Mark and I are good friends," Emory says, "and we'll always be good friends. And I don't see why we won't still be doing what we're doing in some form or fashion indefinitely. We'll go look at battlefields, we'll travel here, we'll go to this restaurant. . . and it comes right through the music, too. It comes right out in the music and we'll always do this in some way."

"Besides," Mark adds with a big grin, "banjo great Bill Emerson, Master Chief, U.S. Navy. Ret. told us to do it . . . or else!"

For more information on Mark Johnson and Emory Lester check these websites:
www.clawgrass.com and www.emorylester.com



Dave Higgs is the host of Nashville Public Radio's *Bluegrass Roundabout*. He also plays guitar and octave mandolin with Emily Singleton & Camberland Plateau.

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