

Mark Johnson & Emory Lester



One of the great things about good instrumental music is that when you listen, your mind automatically starts painting pictures. The absence of lyrics frees the listener to create mental images suggested by the mood of the tune. When the music is being played by hands like those of banjo player Mark Johnson and

hoedown in the Appalachians. If you've been to Bill Monroe's restored home place just outside Rosine, Ky., chances are that Mark & Emory's version of "Jerusalem Ridge" will take you straight to the front porch of that historic house at sunrise, the morning fog hanging over the ridge. In "Marching Through Georgia" and

sets are featuring more singing—adding even more variety to their stage shows—the crux of their music is instrumental. Specifically, it's "clawgrass," a unique blend of acoustic banjo-based music that comes from Mark Johnson's imagination and influences—a combination of clawhammer banjo technique and blue-

Music That Paints Pictures

By Nancy Cardwell

multi-instrumentalist Emory Lester, you can hear entire movie screenplays in poignant, heart-wrenching songs like Vince Gill's "Hey God" and Johnson's "Heartbroken," both of which appear on the duo's recording, "Acoustic Campaign," released last year. Favorites like "Forked Deer" and "Soldier's Joy" take the listener to an old-time fiddling

another Mark Johnson original, "Mosby's Rangers," you can almost see the gray and blue coats and smell the gun powder, as listeners are transported back to the War Between the States.

Although the new album features two lead vocals from Emory and the duo's live

grass drive, with intricately beautiful original melodies.

Someone once said that "writing about music is like dancing about architecture." This is especially the case when the subject is a new sub-genre of acoustic music. If you haven't heard Mark and Emory yet (and they don't happen to be playing within an eight hour drive from

you any time this week), you may want to put this magazine down long enough to order a copy of the CD from an online music retailer, and then come back and join us in the next paragraph. You won't be sorry.

"To me, the word, 'clawgrass' means 'new music written by Mark Johnson and played with a clawhammer-style banjo,'" Emory Lester explains—"new music" being the key. Mark's music is very new, but it's played on an instrument that's usually associated with old music—and that's the neat thing about it."

"That's a great way to put it," Johnson agrees, "because what [clawgrass] does is force me to go out and experiment with different sounds—things that are out of the realm of the way that clawhammer players would normally approach their music."

Humble about his talents, Mark says, "I'd never want to be arrogant enough to say that I've created a new style of music. What Emory and I do, and what we did before we met each other, is play music. We just don't lock ourselves into the styles of one or two players. I tried to learn something about all the styles of playing banjo, and then it started to all meld together... Scruggs, Bill Emerson, Carl Jackson, J.D. Crowe... and I'm leaving out a ton of them. I could go down the whole list because I've listened to them all, and all I can say is that all of those sounds came together in musical form. Plus, I listen to a lot of other types of music—Celtic music, rock music, all kinds of things."

The recurrent thread in the fabric of clawgrass music, in addition to the banjo, is the drive and finesse and unique rhythm approach of Tony Rice-style bluegrass guitar. This makes perfect sense when you find out that the Rices used to be Mark's neighbors in Florida, and that Tony has been one of Mark's biggest mentors and encouragers. "What I thought I was doing was old-time music, and then I found out I wasn't," Mark says, when he tried to jam with the folks he calls "real" old-time musicians. "I was basically raised by wolves, musically—by the Rices," he laughs. "Their whole approach to music was to go with whatever they created in their minds. They'd show up with a crate of cigarettes every Friday night at Larry Rice's house and say, 'Hey, I've got a new idea, here,' and they'd start trying all this stuff. That's where it came from."

A fascination with American history is another influence that comes across in Mark and Emory's almost-visual instrumental music. "I have this 'theater of the mind' thing going that affects my music, especially when I go to the actual place that I've read about," Mark says. "A lot of them for me are Civil War or Colonial battlefields, or even World War II or Western themes."

"We're massive history buffs, both of us," Emory admits, "and that does feed the music. I know a lot of times my wife and I will go to the Outer Banks in North Carolina and sit there, and I can look out over the water and think about the history that took place there, in 'the graveyard of the Atlantic.' Something happens and ideas come that might not come so often somewhere else. For some reason, this gets converted into music, and it works."

Mark and Emory first jammed together in 1997, after being introduced by banjo stylist Bill Emerson. "Basically he said, 'Mark, there is a man I'd like you to meet. You will like the way he plays and he will like the way you play, and you two will get a duet together,'" Johnson recalls, smiling.

The duo idea stuck—one that has worked on a variety of levels for Johnson. His 1994 debut album on Bangtown Records, "Clawgrass," by Mark Johnson with the Rice Brothers and Friends, was a studio project which featured Mark's banjo style in a musical setting created by Tony, Wyatt, Larry, and Ronnie Rice, Jason Thomas, Tuck Tucker, and Tammy Murray.

His second album, "Bridging The Gap," by Mark Johnson & Clawgrass, released in 1997 on the Pinecastle label, was a band project. Along with Johnson, the group included Allen Watkins, Allen Shadd, and Terry Campbell. Again, Mark featured duos on the recording; three cuts spotlighted the banjo with Tony Rice guesting on guitar.

The difficulty of balancing a day job as the Interim Director/Radiological Emergency Planning Coordinator for Levy County, [Fla.] Emergency Management and family life, with rounding up enough jobs to keep a full band busy took its toll. Johnson persevered through several personnel changes, searching for a workable combination. The economic and artistic freedom found in a musical duo is something that has been attractive to both Mark and Emory.

"The two of us can meet anywhere in the country in a hotel and practice up, and go on stage five hours later and get going on it," Mark says. "It's also a benefit for promoters because where we will charge what is a pretty good price, it's still well below what it would cost to bring a full band in." Johnson and Lester also offer something unique musically that festival producers can plug into the schedule, between two bluegrass bands. The Mark Johnson/Emory Lester duo is like a delectable mound of frosty fruit sorbet in a crystal glass served at an upper class restaurant, designed to cleanse the palate between courses. In other words—a dish of clawgrass between sets can make bluegrass taste even better.

Emory notes the obvious "challenge in a duo is the fact that you have to make the entire sound with just you and one

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other person. You have to spread your wings musically and be able to play very 'range-y.' Really, there's no place that you can stop and take a breather," he smiles. "You have to be painting in the sound all the time. For instance with a guitar—instead of playing one chord through five measures, you can play four or five versions of that chord through those measures and color it in. For many years, when I played in bands I might play a solo and then play some backup, but I could actually take my hands off the instrument for several measures and the band would just keep going on. You can't do that in a duet, because there would be an obvious drop out."

In addition to not stopping, it's *what* you choose to play in a duo that's important, also. "When I play in a duo with Emory—and also when I used to play in duet form with Tony and Wyatt Rice—I learned to

play the melody, and then do all the tag and fill-in licks after each melody phrase," Mark explains, "and then I learned to do all the backup work to get out of the way of the style of the person I was playing with. So for me, it was at least three ways of having to look at the music. When I get behind Emory and he's taking his leads and breaks, I'm working very hard to stay out of his way by playing bass tones and lines and rhythm moves that aren't clashing with what he's doing."

Emory adds, "It's not only the professionalism, but also the musical

ability" that's necessary to pull off a successful duo. "You have to work with somebody you trust," he states simply. "But more so than that, you have to work with somebody who is really into the music. It means a lot to us. When we get together to play, we're real anxious to play. We enjoy the sound of it. As soon as we start to play, we love it so much that it's real easy to get lost in the music and to put everything we've got into it."

The importance of the role of rhythm in a duet setting is a lesson that Mark learned from playing and recording with

Tony Rice. All the way through the eight takes in Rice's home studio that it took to get "My Friend Betty" to perfection on the "Bridging The Gap" album, Mark says Rice would not take a lead. "But it was his guitar playing, and all the rhythm he put in there that made the song," Mark explains. "Rhythm, to me, is probably more important than taking the lead, because rhythm is lead."

A native of Yorktown Heights, N.Y., Mark Johnson learned to play banjo in the early 1970s from a musician more widely recognized as a fiddler, Jay Ungar. Specifically, Ungar is known as the composer of the fiddle tune, "Ashokan Farewell," that entered the national consciousness in the 1980s as the haunting theme of the Ken Burns-directed television mini-series, *The Civil War*. After mastering both clawhammer and Scruggs-style picking, Johnson moved to Crystal River, Fla. in 1981—where he met the Rice brothers by chance, through his day job. Johnson worked at the local power utility with Herb, Larry, and Ronnie Rice.

Mark is endorsed by Deering Banjos and plays a one-of-a-kind Ivanhoe model. "I was introduced to Janet Deering by John Hartford back when I was volunteering with the Tony Rice Unit at MerleFest back in 1992 or '94," Mark recalls. "John Hartford heard my style and said some wonderful things about it, and wrote me a letter later on, saying, 'Mark, I'm looking for a banjo for you.' And he did." Mark's main instrument today has a three-ply bluegrass maple rim with a 20-hole flathead tone ring in it and a maple neck. Set up bluegrass-style with an open back, the banjo is highly ornate and gilded in gold. "Greg and Janet Deering have been so kind to me," Mark adds. "I also play my 1927 Vega Tubaphone #9, which is starting to show some wear and tear. Both instruments are visual treasures. I've got a big, giant flight case, and when I put those two banjos in it and I open it up, people just flock to it," Mark grins.

The Deering is louder than the Vega, although Mark says he doesn't "go just for loudness. A lot of open-back banjo players try to control their sound," he explains. "They don't like overtones, so they put towels in the back of their instruments to mute the sound and get that clunky, old-timey sound. But to me, overtones are like paying for an expensive race car carburetor on a car. I want the

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overtones. You want it to ring, and [he able to] control the timber of the sound coming out. And of course I can put my fake acrylic nails on, which I can file down like tortoise shell picks to change the tone I'm using." Acrylic nails, on a six foot four, "manly man" banjo player? Yes, it's true.

"For the last six years I've been marching into my north Florida county nail salon and getting two acrylic fingernails put on," Mark confesses. "A woman by the name of Leslie Syr has been putting these on, and she's gotten to the point to where she can 'tune' them just right. Just like guitar players take tortoise shell picks and wear them down to where they can change the tone on their guitars, you can do the same thing with these acrylic nails. I carry files with me, and I can change the tone on the instrument by the type of pick I use on them—and those picks happen to be the two tips of my fingernails and my thumb. They last two and a half to three weeks, and it's absolutely worth it. It was funny when I first went in there. At the beginning it was pretty funny, but now they schedule me for the end of the day and all the women who cut hair break out the drinks and say, 'Here he comes!' I get my hair cut there now, too, and they've got my promotional pictures up on the wall."

Across the stage from Mark Johnson, with his ornate Deering Ivanhoe, stands Emory Lester with his trademark black Gibson F-style mandolin. Emory says he "caught the mandolin bug back when Doyle [Lawson] was playing with the Country Gentlemen, and Jimmy Gaudreau was running around. I was in high school, playing rock'n'roll guitar and had a background in bluegrass. My father and uncles all played bluegrass and I did that when I was a kid—I started when I was six. My grandfather played the fiddle, and basically all of us kids wanted to get involved with the family jam sessions. My brother, Dale and I both started playing—little kids with cowboy hats and flood pants and satellite dish ears sticking out," he laughs. "Then when I heard Doyle Lawson, I wanted to get back to playing bluegrass. I'd already done some instrumentally challenging things in rock'n'roll, so that gave me a head start when I picked up the mandolin—just trying to emulate what I was hearing: the clean, clear notes [in Doyle Lawson's playing]."

"In the late '70s, I caught on to the David Grisman thing, and that changed everything for me—like it did for a lot of mandolin players. That's when I started writing tunes and working up some rock tunes bluegrass-style, and I started recording." In 1979 Emory formed a band called Hollywood, with banjo/mandolin player James Hann, guitarist Sheridan Minnick, and bassist Missy Raines; the band performed a mixture of bluegrass and acoustic jazz.

Emory's first solo mandolin album, "Jerusalem Ridge," was recorded in 1983, followed by "Mando Motion" in 1985, an all-original new acoustic project with Emory playing all the instruments, tracked one at a time.

How did he wind up playing so many instruments, so well? "I was a bored teenager," Emory laughs, modestly. "Some of those instruments I didn't really mess with that much until I started writing tunes," Emory says. "I would write a song and I would say, 'Man, if I could have a piano part here, that would be really nice.' So I sat down and challenged myself to come up with an answer to the requirement for that song—and after a while you build up your proficiency. I love music, and at some point in time I ceased being a 'picker' and started becoming a 'musician'—a maker of music trying to craft these songs, no matter what instrument they needed. That's when it started getting challenging," he grins.

Emory moved to Ontario in 1988, where he won the Central Canadian Mandolin Player Of The Year award four times, and performed bluegrass and acoustic jazz throughout the country. His third mandolin album, "The Great Chase," was released on Rodeo Records in 1991, with distribution mainly in Canada. Moving back to Virginia in 1993, Emory released the highly acclaimed album, "Pale Rider," in 1993, featuring an impressive slate of sidemen: Tony Trischka, Ray Legere, and Slavek Hanzlik. A breakthrough album for Emory, it established him as one of the top contemporary mandolinists in the business. In 1995, he released "The Emory Lester Set," an all acoustic jazz project that showcased his songwriting chops. Also in 1995, Emory joined Bill Emerson and former Virginia Squires lead singer, Mark Newton, in the Emerson/Newton Band—a group that played festivals and

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bluegrass venues up and down the east coast of the United States.

In addition to the duo with Mark, Emory plays occasionally with Gary Ferguson & Sally Love, and he has also resurrected the Emory Lester Set in Toronto, after moving back to Canada in late 2002. His newest album, "Cruisin' The 8," released last year, is another mostly original effort with Emory playing all of the instruments and guest appearances from Mark Johnson (banjo), George Hodgkiss (trombone!), Mike Munford (banjo), and his brother, Dale Lester (percussion) on four separate songs. The material draws influences from Celtic, bluegrass, jazz, and New Age music—all presented in the style of Emory Lester and his mysterious black mandolin.

The mandolin he has become so strongly identified with was custom-made for Emory in 1995, when he was endorsed

by the company. It's a standard F-style model with an arched fingerboard. He's also having a new instrument built for him by Michael Heiden—a luthier who has built mandolins for Mark O'Connor, among others.

Mark and Emory's CD, "Acoustic Campaign," continues to collect accolades and national air play. It was also ranked #3 in the list of Top 10 Acoustic CDs for 2002, compiled by IBMA Print Media Personality Of The Year, David Royko, for the *Chicago Tribune*. One more strength of the Johnson/Lester duo is evidenced by the variety of high profile gigs they are attracting, with appearances at venues ranging from straight-ahead bluegrass and folk festivals to Americana events.

"The duo form is new and different," Emory muses, "but the material is very much a part of it, too. We're playing new, freshly written material and that's helped us. If we were only playing old-time tunes in this format, we could play them well, but we wouldn't have garnered the interest we have gotten so far if it hadn't been for the new material and new approach."

Looking forward to the next horizon in his career, Mark says, "The sunrise is the music and the traveling and going to some of these really nice festivals we have lined up, booking more of them, and taking some of this new material out there. I don't know where I'm going to be a year from now. But I know it's going to be good, as long as I can keep my health and keep making more music with Emory Lester and working on these new ideas."

"I think the best is definitely coming," Emory agrees. "We haven't really stretched this thing out, how it can go. I can already see in the schedule that things are building and moving in a good direction. The other thing is that we're buds. We're always going to be pals, and we enjoy each other's company. We have a lot of the same interests—musically and outside of music. I'm sure in one form or another we'll be old and gray with canes, sitting around playing music," he laughs. "Now, if I can just get Mark out of Florida, man. I'd like to get him up in Toronto with a snow shovel."



Nancy Cardwell is the Special Projects Coordinator with the IBMA in Nashville. Originally from the Missouri Ozarks, she grew up in a family bluegrass band and has written about music/entertainment for the past 22 years.

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