

# The DULCIMER PLAYERS NEWS

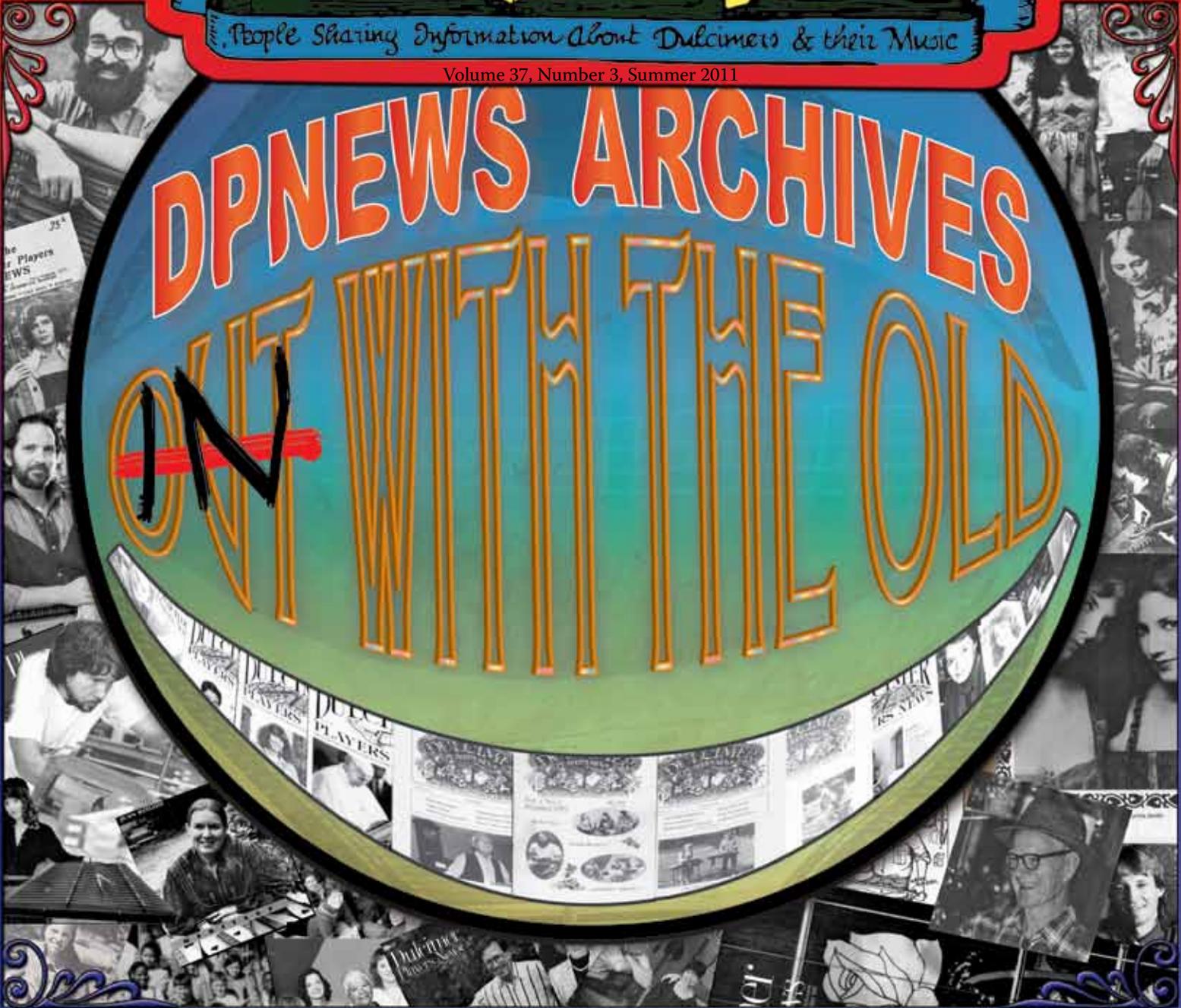


People Sharing Information About Dulcimers & their Music

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## DPNEWS ARCHIVES

~~ON~~ WITH THE OLD



# RAISING THE BAR



**T**he flightless golden eagle sits perfectly still, its perch permanently fixed high atop the dome of the Mississippi capitol. The majestic, eight-foot copper creature has never seen nor heard a hammered dulcimer.

Across the street, Justice Jess Dickinson emerges from the Supreme Court. As he moves past the massive marble columns and down the steps, the raptor's razor-sharp eyes fix on the trapezoidal object he carries. It watches the judge cross High Street, and enter the domain it has silently

guarded for over a hundred years. It is three days before Christmas, 2010.

Inside the capitol's massive, 180-foot-high capitol rotunda, its ornate walls adorned with Italian white marble, Jess (the name he prefers when not in court) sets up his hammered dulcimer and his band, Bluegrass Appeal, treats the eagle—plus over a hundred capitol employees, guests, and elected officials—to the capitol's first concert of Christmas music. Someone in the crowd asks, "How did a Supreme Court justice end up playing hammered dulcimer in the capitol?" The story begins in the dusty

cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta.

It is 1961, and Jess is fourteen years old. After trading ten bushels of personally-picked peaches for his first guitar, he begins hanging around the old timers who sneak him into the smoky beer joints and clubs where musicians sit around on coke-cola cases and play for tips. Jess learns to play a style of gospel and blues known only to Delta musicians. He then forms his first band to play for his own high school prom, and he has flirted with the music business ever since.

In college, Jess forms another rock

band that, one night during a Christmas tour in south Texas, shares the stage with a then-relatively-unknown band called the Triumphs, whose lead singer is B. J. Thomas. (Jess jokingly observes: "He now flies in a private jet while I still wait in line at airports.") Believing music to be his life's pursuit, Jess drops out of college and moves to California.

After a short stint in Los Angeles as a studio musician (and as a Shakey's Pizza Parlor waiter), Jess moves to Arkansas where one night in the Barton Coliseum in Little Rock, he earns \$200 playing the opening set for rhythm and blues superstar Jerry Butler. After the thrill subsides, he realizes, "This isn't gonna pay the bills."

So Jess puts aside his Fender Stratocaster. He and his partner, David Corriveau, open Cash McCools, Little Rock's first discotheque. After a few successful years, David moves to Texas to start the now-famous Dave & Busters chain, and Jess moves back to Mississippi, where he completes college and law school. (Jess again jokingly observes, "Now, Dave flies around in his private jet while I still wait in line at airports.")

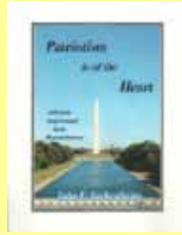
Although a successful lawyer on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, Jess never loses his love for the music, and he never passes up a chance to play. In fact, one of his cases takes him to Los Angeles where he meets Michael Jackson, and somehow convinces the pop star to sing a song while he accompanied on the piano. Jess hungers to play music again on stage. His wish comes true, but on a different kind of stage.

It's now the summer of 1989. Jess and his wife, Janet (an Arkansas girl), drive through the Ozarks. They stop in Mountain View for pizza, and notice at the next table, Grand Ole Opry star Grampa Jones (the father of hammered dulcimer great Alisa Jones). After lunch, they head for the Ozark Folk Center where Jess's musical life is about to change forever.

Mountain View is like no other place in the world. Every afternoon, Ozark musicians bring their fiddles, guitars, mandolins, bass fiddles, banjos, dulcimers, and harpsichords to the town square. They sit in a large circle and play such tunes as "Flop-Eared Mule," "Soldier's Joy," and "Arkansas Traveler."

Located just outside the town is the Ozark Folk Center, the Mecca of traditional folk music. Musicians and

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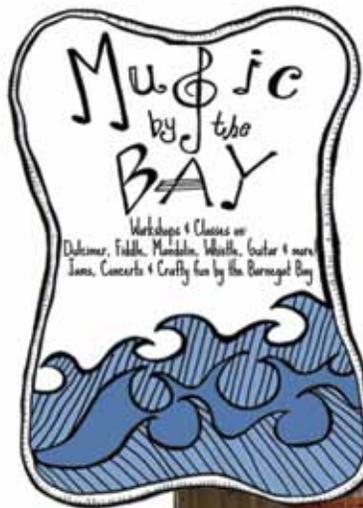
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fans from everywhere are drawn to its relaxed atmosphere, professional sound stage, and 1,000-seat auditorium, where performers are not allowed to stray from the strict genre of traditional folk music.

The Folk Center's jam sessions, Ozark crafts, workshops, and talented musician-employees—for instance, Corner "Moon" Mullins, winner of national and international Merle Travis guitar thumb-picking competitions—are legendary. It is here that Jess has his first encounter with a hammered dulcimer.

"Listen to that!" he says to Janet. "I've gotta have one of those!" Janet, her living room back home already filled with a variety of musical instruments, already knew before he said it. And she knew it wouldn't take long.

As the Dickinsons leave Mountain View, they stop at the McSpadden dulcimer shop (makers of mountain dulcimers) where Janet spots the only hammered dulcimer for sale. The David Peterson-designed instrument is unusual, its twelve treble courses each with four strings, its wooden cover snapped on tight like the top of a guitar case, its strings slightly rusty. Jess—noticing its heavy weight and small amount of rust—momentarily hesitates. But (according to Jess) Janet insists.

Janet, a wonderful vocalist in her own right, instinctively knows what happens next. Without saying a word, she moves to the driver's seat while Jess crawls up in the back of the van with his new dulcimer, a tuner, and a twelve-page instruction book. Janet turns off the radio.

Ten hours later, they are home in Gulfport, and Jess has learned to play a single song—"Send The Light"—which he plays the following Sunday in Church. The audience loves it, Janet is proud, and Jess is hooked.

Although he is determined to play on that stage in Mountain View, Jess doesn't know a single traditional folk song. Then, a window of opportunity opens.

It is the following Christmas, and Jess is surfing TV channels. Someone says "Mountain View," and his hand freezes on the remote. There on the screen is Arkansas Public Television's broadcast of "Ozark Christmas" and the musicians are playing Christmas music on the stage at the Ozark Folk Center.

Over the next few months, Jess works out arrangements of "Angels We Have Heard" and "Joy to the World." He practices the two songs for hours every day until he feels confident he can play both songs without too many noticeable mistakes.

He fires up his eight-track home recording studio and records the carols, over-dubbing with guitar, bass,

silence and a quick prayer, he just begins to play and, according to Jess, "The magic of Mountain View took over."

When he finishes, to Jess's complete amazement, the audience rewards him with a standing ovation. Then, the unexpected happens. "Play another one, Jess!" Deb says. His heart nearly stops—he hasn't practiced any other Christmas songs! So he plays "Send the Light," explaining to the audience that it is a song about Jesus and, after all, Christmas is Jesus' birthday.

Jess becomes a regular on the "Ozark Christmas" show, performing solo and joining other performers, including Moon and Deb Mullins, and Sherrill Kendall, a previous winner of the Arkan-

sas Merle Travis guitar competition. Then one year, heavy snow cancels the show, and Jess just doesn't go back. He puts his dulcimer in the closet beside his Stratocaster, and concentrates on his law practice.

It is now the summer of 1995. Jess's phone rings. His friend Joe Camp (creator of the Benji movies) is calling from the Swannanoa Gathering in North Carolina.

"I just bought a hammered dulcimer



Jess Dickinson with Bluegrass Appeal

autoharp, and a few other instruments, and sends the tape to the Folk Center. A few days later, Ozark Folk Center General Manager Elliot Hancock calls and schedules Jess to play on the show.

It is November 30, 1990, a very cold day in Mountain View. Still, the Folk Center auditorium is packed. In one of the practice rooms back stage, Jess paces the floor, realizing his time is near. A head pops in the door and says simply: "You're on."

Deb Mullins, the emcee for the evening, introduces Jess. He is supposed to say a few words before playing, but mouth to try, nothing comes out. After a few moments of



from a guy named Jerry Read Smith," Joe excitedly says. "You gotta get one!" Trusting Joe's judgment, and pleased with the excuse to get back into the music, Jess calls Jerry and orders a Grande Concertmaster, sight-unseen.

The next year, Jess and Joe both attend the Swannanoa Gathering, and Jess takes a quick trip over to Black

Mountain to meet Jerry, whom Jess calls “the greatest dulcimer maker anywhere—until someone shows me differently” Jess and Jerry become friends.

Jerry invites Jess and Janet to hear Dan Landrum in concert at the opening of Perelandra, Jerry’s new recording and performance studio in Black Mountain. By the time Dan, (accompanied by Steven Seifert) finishes his second song, Jess is completely blown away.

Over the years, Jess and Dan have become friends and Jess booked Dan to help produce a CD project. *This CD is expected to be available later this summer, but you can hear a preview of Bluegrass Appeal on the Summer 2011 DPN Sampler CD.*

Back in 2002 and, after practicing law for over twenty years, Jess decided to run for a seat on the Mississippi Supreme Court. He won a three-person race without a run-off. In 2010 he was re-elected without an opponent—a rarity these days in politics. In addition to performing his judicial duties, Jess forms a bluegrass band called the Bluegrass Appeal.

The Bluegrass Appeal is popular in Mississippi, having performed on public radio’s syndicated show, “Thacker Mountain,” and twice on the University of Southern Mississippi’s “Roots Reunion” concert as well as twice at the Legends of Bluegrass Festival in Columbia. Jess also teaches dulcimer lessons and performs solo for weddings, festivals, and other events.

Sometimes, Jess is joined by his son Sam—a singer, musician, and songwriter—who produced and engineered Jess’ Christmas CD, Christmas Seasoned Hammered Dulcimer. Jess plans to release the CD he is working on with Dan, and he intends to keep performing music until, as he puts it, “God calls me home.”

So what is to be learned from Jess’s story? Well, for one thing, if you find yourself headed for court, take heart. Your judge just might be a hammered dulcimer player who—on one cold, clear, December day—caused an ancient eagle to tap its talons to the music of a hammered dulcimer. **DPN**

*M. J. Haynes is a freelance writer, and is currently the coordinator of the Writing Enhancement Center at Grambling State University.*

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