



Tributes to Jim Reed BanjoCrazy.com Exclusive



Tributes to Jim Reed - Kentucky Bluegrass Banjo Stylist

Don Borchelt, Janet Burton, Don Couchie, and Donnie Gill have each written tributes to Jim from which I quote what follows. – Paul Roberts

Don Borchelt, a leading American banjo stylist, who, like Jim Reed, melds three-finger styles with old-time music, contributes to the art of banjo playing through his free videos (including the series, 'Busking in Harvard Square,' with Ed Britt), sound files, tablature - his participation on Banjo Hangout - and his great website, Banj'r <http://www.banjr.com/>. Banj'r features original tablature arrangements of traditional tunes. "I'm a committed shade tree picker," says Don. "I play three-finger style but lean more towards old-time than bluegrass these days."

Don: Joe Foss, the great World War II Marine fighter ace, wrote in his 1992 autobiography about what it took to survive in aerial combat: "The impulse and the act must be one. The airplane becomes an extension of your body, like an arm or a leg. If somebody's coming at you with a red-hot poker, you instinctively get out of the way. You don't have to think about it. You just do it." This, of course, describes the relationship of any master craftsman to his tools. It is as if the tool in his hand is directly wired to the brain, and it responds instantly to the will. For Foss, his tool was the F4F Wildcat he had "between his legs." For Jim Reed, master banjo picker, it is his 1926 Gibson ball bearing Mastertone. When Jim holds it, killer notes flow out of it that you will hear from no other five-string.

Jim is what they used to call a natural. The banjo world is full of pickers who make it look hard. Why play something easy when a seven-fret left hand stretch will do almost as well? Every lick that flows from these folk's hands is a visual statement, reminding us of just how great they are (in case we somehow forgot). They are very entertaining for sure. The way a circus trapeze act is entertaining. Every time they execute a trick, we hold our breath and wonder if they are going to fall and kill themselves.

Jim is the other kind of picker: the kind that makes it look effortless - the kind that makes us want to go pick up our own banjos and pick - not put them away forever. I could pick Jim out of a festival full of pickers, as could anyone who has been listening to his playing for any length of time. He likes to cover the well-worn old tunes we've heard for years, but they are sown with little subtle differences, whispered musical surprises, that make them bloom all over again. It is harder than it looks. It is only when you listen really close, and try to deconstruct what he is doing, that you are struck by the true depth of his talent. Jim's picking is a gift, pure and simple.

I first got to know Jim back in 2008, when he began showing up in the Banjo Hangout chat room. Jim wasn't much for talking about the intricacies of tone rings and flanges. From the start, he was there to pick and to listen to picking. I noticed he was a real gentleman about it; after picking a tune, he would always wait to make sure everyone else had gotten a chance before picking another. And he would always have something encouraging to say to the other pickers who braved the microphone button, whether novice or experienced.

I started noticing that in that smooth quiet style, he was doing some very unusual moves, and even when I slowed down some of his music postings to try to figure out what he was doing, some of his licks remained a complete mystery to me. An example is his rendition of Ralph Stanley's Hard Times. Jim got a neat little syncopated twist in the minor part that wasn't in Ralph's version, but no matter how much slowed it down, I just couldn't figure out how he did it.

I finally got to meet Jim face to face when he joined up with Don Couchie and I at our campsite the final weekend of Clifftop, in August 2010. Watching Jim picking up close was an epiphany for me. Jim's right hand followed all the rules of three-finger bluegrass banjo, until it didn't. That little twist in Hard Times he got by repeating his thumb in the middle of

Jim heard the note in his mind's eye, or maybe I should say his mind's ear, and he played it exactly as he heard it, as if he was just holding a conversation, with his banjo strings as his vocal cords.

Throughout his picking, Jim employs a subtle vocabulary all his own. He often embeds his slides, hammers and pull-offs in places within his rolls where we don't expect to find them, even though they sound right at home when he executes them. He seamlessly integrates his Scruggs style rolls and Keith/Thompson style melodic phrasing, so that you can't tell exactly where one technique ends and the other begins. Like the early bluegrass pickers who were still rooted in traditional Appalachian music, Jim is not afraid to retune his banjo, but when he does, he still knows the neck from the nut to the twenty-first fret every bit as well as he does in standard open G. He also knows how to exploit each tuning's special advantages. Listen to the recording he posted of Bonaparte's Retreat in C tuning back in March 2011. You can hear the delicate, deep drone of that open 4th string throughout the piece, even though you can't pin down exactly where he picked it; actually, it might just be ringing in sympathy. Either way, he knows enough to let it ring softly and deeply without interference; sometimes it's the restraint that shows true genius. As that clear August afternoon of our first meeting wore into evening, I got to thinking, I'd really love to hear this guy pick with a full bluegrass band, I wonder what he would do with it. No sooner had the thought crossed my mind, I swear, when some guy walked up to our campsite with a couple of other musicians in tow. They were a bluegrass band out of Charleston, he said, and they had come up to the festival looking for a jam session. Their banjo player wasn't able to come, and they had been walking around looking for a bluegrass banjo picker, but couldn't find one. For the next hour or two, Don Couchie and I got to listen to some great up close and personal bluegrass.

Jim picked some of the best bluegrass banjo I ever heard, fit right in on every number just like he had been picking with them for years. His lead breaks were right on the money, and his back-up was tasteful and supportive, original but not in your face. I wasn't surprised.

Jim lives in Sidney, in eastern Kentucky, in the mountains of Pike County, on Reed Hollow Road where he was born, just off of Route 119. His mother lives in the oldest home at the high end of the hollow, and Jim and his siblings live in homes a stone's throw away on either side of the road as you move down the hollow. You don't see that much anymore. As you travel east on Rt. 119 through Floyd and Pike Counties on the way to Sidney, you can see the long seams of shiny bituminous coal revealed in the road cuts blasted out of the bedrock. Like many in eastern Kentucky, Jim has made a good living mining that coal, as a mine electrician keeping the highwall and longwall mining machines running properly day and night. He says he can listen to a machine and in an instant know exactly what is wrong with it. He must be good at it; when he leaves one job, he always seems to have another one lined up within a day or so. If you are a mine owner, you value a man who can minimize your downtime. In the few years I've known him, Jim has retired two or three times, only to change his mind and go right back to work. It must be true that mining coal gets in the blood.

Music has always been a part of Jim's life. His father was a clawhammer picker, and his brothers also play music. Jim grew up picking with fiddlers like Owen "Snake" Chapman, who lived in Canada, Kentucky, just a few miles east on Rt. 119, and Paul David Smith, who lived in Hardy, further up Rt. 119, closer to the West Virginia line. Jim played often with both of these legendary eastern Kentucky fiddlers, and if you listen, you can hear it in his banjo picking. Jim picks his banjo the way these traditional men played their fiddles, with an archaic crookedness that you don't hear from the pickers like Scruggs and Reno, whose music is rooted in the more burnished traditional music of western North Carolina.

Listen again to Jim picking Bonaparte's Retreat, and to the unusual melodic phrasing in the transitions between the strains. In Jim's hands, this fragment of the country western style Bonaparte of Pee Wee King is transformed back into an old Kentucky fiddle tune; it might have spilled from the bow of William Stepp or Luther Strong, but it didn't. It has become Jim's own version, another variation in a long line of cousins in the Bonaparte's Retreat family of tunes.

You can't learn to pick like this by slowing down a few recordings. It had to be in the air when you were growing up. It has to be in your DNA, to be able to hear melody in such an ancient way. When they like Jim are all gone, I fear there will be no more.

To finally appreciate Jim's picking, though, you have to listen to his original tunes. He has made up lots of them, all unique and mellifluous, most named in honor of friends he has made on the Banjo Hangout. There is Boulding's Rock, Couchie's Hornpipe, Deihl's Creek, Donnie's Way Home, Gill Town, and even Don B's Trip to Clifftop, which was a real challenge to figure out, and even harder to get up to speed. And he made it look so easy.

Jim said once in passing that he was invited to join the Bluegrass Boys, but he didn't want to leave his home and family to go wandering around the country. I believe him. — **Don Borchelt**



Janet Burton, a schoolteacher from California, is an influential member of Banjo Hangout, where she regularly posts gorgeous-sounding mp3's from her enormous repertoire of creative banjo arrangements. A highly appreciated member of the Hangout, Janet is renown for great banjo playing, as well as her keen insight, sensitivity and intelligence.

Janet: We're privileged to know Jim Reed through Banjo Hangout, the online international community of pickers. Jim is Banjo Hangout's living link to old-time and bluegrass roots. He's the real deal - raw talent, musically raised by friends and neighbors in a mountainous area of southeastern Kentucky. Encouraged at age 5 to play banjo by his dad, Jim has picked banjo with his family and the best pickers and fiddlers, many familiar to us all. He could have gone pro, but chose a miner's life over 42 years ago. On the Hangout, Jim's videos and MP3s are a precious resource to learn hundreds of tunes that - at 61 years old - his fingers rattle off spontaneously, just for fun. We all look forward to his next musical post and they're truly gems--just check out his video and MP3 files. Jim's kindheartedness and willingness to share his skills are apparent throughout the Banjo Hangout Forums, especially 'Sound Off!' Jim is known for his authenticity and warm encouragement. And if he really likes you, he may write a song just for you. Now, that's the best gift a friend could give. – **Janet Burton**



Don Couchie is a lifelong bluegrass and old-time musician from Ontario, Canada. A clawhammer banjo player and fiddler, Don performs at bluegrass festivals and makes recordings. Don teaches Ojibwe language at a northern Canadian secondary school.

Don: My association with Jim Reed first came about in the Banjohangout chat room a number of years ago. On the first day I met Jim, I was immediately struck by the power and intensity of his playing. From the first notes Jim played, I realized he had many years of experience and a confidence that comes only from a deep understanding of the music he plays. This musical confidence never wanders or wanes and he is musically flexible, sturdy and analytical. It was all these qualities and his gracious nature that allowed me to become fast friends with Jim.

As I learned more about Jim's background in music, it became easy to understand why he is such a fine player. As a young boy playing music with his father and brothers and surrounded by some of the finest musicians in eastern Kentucky, Jim has been raised with the finest music one could hope to hear. He has allowed this music to become part of his soul and it is apparent in everything he plays. Jim always has own personal sound and he always contributes some of his own philosophy into the music.

Jim's repertoire consists of modern and traditional bluegrass music, old-time traditional fiddle tunes, and original banjo compositions that draw heavily on the traditional music that he has listened to over the years. Many of these original tunes are named after the many friends that Jim has made in the hangout over the years. All of these tunes are unique and well planned pieces of music that are challenging to play and interesting to listen to.

I have had the opportunity to play music with Jim at the Clifftop Old Time Music Festival for two years now and I must say that it is a delight to spend time with him. He has a wonderful sense of humor and he is very patient when it comes to learning or teaching a tune. His knowledge, respect and admiration for the music and the musicians around him make him a very pleasant person to be around. His love for the music is apparent in everything he does and the dignity and integrity he carries make for a pleasant atmosphere when Jim is around.

While I was in Jim's company, we spent a long time working over chord progressions and melody lines. He was very patient and determined to get things right and sounding the best that they could be. He is meticulous in his attention to detail and settles for nothing but the best from himself.

Jim is kindly to those musicians who are just starting out and is able to help them with technical and musical advice that can greatly assist their playing and thinking skills. There are few banjo players who have the traditional drive combined with the technical skill and musicality that Jim possesses and he shares that knowledge with a generosity that is unmatched. In short, Jim is a musician's musician who is well deserving of our respect and admiration.

While spending time with Jim, I had the opportunity to meet and play music with Jim's late friend Paul David Smith. The elder Smith had a wonderful repertoire of old time fiddle tunes that were played with intelligence and grace, steeped in the

and a banjo player.

I also had the pleasure of listening to Jim and Paul reminisce about their mutual friendship with the great Kentucky fiddler, Owen (Snake) Chapman. Both Jim and Paul spoke very highly of Snake's abilities as a fiddler. As I spoke with Jim and Paul I began to get a picture of the traditional music scene in Eastern Kentucky that included great musicians like Jim Reed, Paul David Smith, Snake Chapman and Kenny Baker.

For me, Jim has been a gateway to music that speaks to me like no other. His friendship is something that I value as much as family. I'll always look forward to our next meeting to play the music that we love so profoundly. This is the Jim Reed that I know. — **Don Couchie**



Donnie Gill of Southern Indiana has been in love with the banjo all his life. Donnie has been married 30 years to his wife, Sherry and he has two children and three grandchildren. "I love people and hope to leave behind more than I have taken," he says.

Donnie: I met Jim in person for the first time when I went down to Pinson Fork to Smitty's (James Smith) to get my 1926 TB-3 ball bearing banjo that he made a neck for. This was in October of 2010. Jim met me on the road at the bottom of the mountain. We started out with a big hug and a howdy, Jim jumped in with me and off we went to Smitty's. We talked the entire way, as if we had known each other all our lives. He is such an easy guy to get to know, if he takes to you from the beginning. Jim is a good ole boy and likes those that are similar to that, themselves. Once we got to Smitty's, we met up with John Kuhn, Ralph Hatfield and Smitty. We visited and picked inside Smitty's workshop the entire morning. Man we had some real fun and I posted many great MP3's and video's on my Banjo hangout home page, if you would like to get to know Jim and his musical talents a but more.

The trip down to Jim's was a beautiful drive and as I got closer to the area in which he lives, I started to see some beautiful mountains with green tress and Forrest growth on them and others that had been raped by the mining of coal. Entire mountaintops had been removed and flatted to nothing more that a huge flat area with nothing growing on them at all. Many valleys and winding roads and real examples of the country living that anyone would love to enjoy.

Jim lives in a large house, 4600 Sq. ft., with his wife Phyllis of 42 years, their daughter, her husband and their three children: Zoey, Cain, & Mylah. Jim's original home place, where he grew up, burned down and they rebuilt and started over on the same property building his mother a new home right next door to their own.

The community around Jim knows him well and has great respect for him and his family. Most all has loved and enjoyed the music in which he has shared with friends and family for many years. Phyllis shared a story with me about how they would go to the local Food City grocery and Jim would meet people, and they would talk and share stories to the point they would be there for hours. The community knows Jim and loves what he stands for. They have great respect for Jim and his family.

Jim and his family used to drive through the mountains, meadows and valleys on a Mule, motorized mule, seeing many examples of the wild life that lives in the area with them: deer, turkeys and many others. They live between two mountains in a beautiful valley that they call home. Everyone knows everyone - they take real good care of each other and they watch out for each other as well. If they have something in life, they want everyone to have it too. They like to grow together as a community and support each other every way they can.

One of Jim's good friends and music partners is Jackie Ray. They played music together for many years and bonded as brothers over the years they have known each other. Jim has great respect for Jackie Ray and stays in contact even today. They played many festival together and entertained many crowds of people from all over the area. Jim had many offers to go on the road and play for some big named bands and that was just not what he wanted to do. He is a family man and did not want to be away from those that he loved and wanted to stay close to. Jim has a very interesting way of teaching those around him about life. Anyone that has met him is drawn to him and wants to be exposed to as much of his teachings as possible. He is a true mountain man and lives the life that most would want. Many have desires to be more like Jim and live life as he has done - not getting caught up in the fast pace of the new world and material things; staying focused on the values of family and friends and taking care of them the best he can.

mother's house every day for coffee and a visit, each and every morning. He has told me about his mother and how she cooks these great home cooked meals for whoever comes for a visit. She is 81 years young and has more spunk that most people will ever know. Phyllis shared with me that his mother is where Jim gets his fire and lively attitude. She is as tough as they come and is a real example of a great woman who has lived sharing many of her riches with everyone around her. She has educated many with her old time sayings and mountain ways and is a real pleasure just to be around.

Jim has four brothers: John, Doug, Jack, & Ramsey. These boys would come together ever Saturday night and pick and sing, and just enjoy each other for years and years. After Jim lost his brother Ramsey, he fell into a rut and laid the banjo down for a long time. He just did not enjoy it and it was just not the same for him. It took a long time for him to get over his brothers death and get back to music and the banjo, like he had in the past. They were very close and it was like he had lost his best friend.

Today Jim represents himself and his music on the Banjo Hangout web site and has met many new friends and musicians. He loves to share his talents and music abilities with all of us there. He offers his skills to anyone that needs help with nothing more than a think you exchanging hands. He is an extraordinary man and musician and I am sure glad I got to meet him and share in his life's experiences. – Donnie Gill
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