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Jim Reed - An American Cultural Treasure

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Tom Berghan: Jim, you have so much feeling in your playing and everyone who hears you makes that same comment! You have such beautiful dynamics, phrasing, and expression. Now, I know you learned music from your dad and that you grew up in a musical family, and no doubt it all just comes naturally to you, but can you try to tell us about what is going on, inside, when you play?

Jim: Most of the time when I start playing I want flawless playing and I also want to play tunes that I think will make a person hungry for more. I really try to play with a lot of feeling and play a different concept that

no one else plays. Sometimes - all at once - a tune comes into my mind and I have to play it. I have had that happen to me at 2 or 3 in the morning and I have to go and play it. What's funny is that it will wake my wife up. She will say, "What in the world are you doing, Jim?" "I'm picking this banjer." She would say, "My God, is that all you think about?" I'd say, "Well, besides you."

To really answer the question, I know it's the love of the banjo and the challenge of exploring the neck and rolls. That's what I really love.

Watch Jim Reed play WHISKEY BEFORE BREAKFAST :

Tom Berghan: Let's discuss technique. Watching you play, one is easily reminded of Andres Segovia, the great 20th century classical guitarist from Spain, meaning that you exhibit essentially perfect technique, ergonomics, and economy of motion. Your technique is nothing short of amazing. Your hands barely move when you play and your control over your tone and volume is seemingly effortless. When I took lessons from

you, the very first thing you had me work on was hand-position. Where did that focus on technique come from as you grew up?



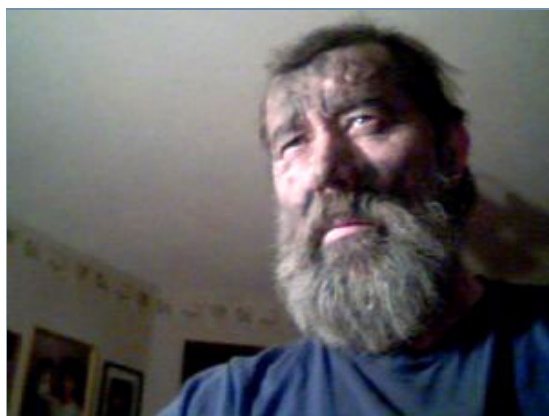
Jim: I really think the hand position is important. For me it puts my right hand in the position to take the workload off my left hand, and take advantage of all the open strings to play. Also, your right hand is arched so the angle of attack is over the strings, for a more direct contact with the strings. Even though my dad played clawhammer style banjo, somehow the three-finger style just came easy to me. I would take his tunes and put them in the three-finger style.

Janet Burton: How do you get your great sound? Do you change bridges, adjust the tailpiece or head and use a certain size string?

Jim: I use light gage Vega strings, and yes, I do change my bridges quiet often, they do make a difference. I also lower my tailpiece close to the hide, to where a piece of paper will slide under it, and that makes a big difference too.

Ian Tofte : Apart from bluegrass bands you have performed with, have you ever played solo on stage? Are you interested in any other type of music, apart from bluegrass and old-time, e.g. rock, folk, country?

Jim: I am strictly a bluegrass man. And yes, I have played solo on stage and other events. Once I was to meet some other musicians at the Moose Club to play one afternoon but I was the only one who showed up. They asked if I would play some banjo tunes for them. I think I played for about three hours or so and it was a lot of fun.



Ken Lucas: What made you choose a miner's life over one on the road with Bill Monroe?

Jim: I thought playing banjo was for fun. I was picking with Kenny Baker when Bill Monroe walked up and told Kenny it was time to go to work. That didn't fit with me. Bill was serious about playing on stage and Kenny told me that when you wasn't playing, Bill worked you on his farm. But mostly it was the money. I could make more money in the mines than playing banjo.

Ken Lucas: When did you learn to fly helicopters?

Jim: I was in the mining business with two friends. We had about 12 mines strung out in Kentucky, Virginia and West Virginia, and it took a while to drive to them. It was too much driving. One day in, 1987, I was at the airport in Pike County, Kentucky when a helicopter came in for fuel. I thought to myself, right there is what I need, so I walked up to the pilot and said, "I need me one of these if I can fly it." He said, "Well, I'll instruct you if you are interested." I took lessons from him and then bought the helicopter from him.

Ken Lucas: What gives you such a smooth touch on the strings when most others go for a harder driving sound?

Jim: Shoot, I don't really think I'm smooth. I really don't know unless it's the banjo I play.

Ken Lucas: What has the Internet and Banjo Hangout done for you as a banjo player?

Jim: I think the Banjo Hangout has been, by far the best of all worlds. I have met new members and all kinds of banjo pickers, the nicest people that anyone could ask to meet - just great friends. I'm 61 years old now and I post the tunes I play on Banjo Hangout for anyone that wishes to learn them.

Ken Lucas: What's your best advice for those learning now?

Jim: I can't give any advice about tabs, I just listen to a tune and then play it, but you have to know the noting. It takes time. I have been picking a banjo for a little over 55 years.

Paul: Tell us a little about your family today.



Jim: My grandkids live with me. So does my girl and her husband. They are here all the time. The girls' names are Mylah Sage and Zoey Page, and grandson Micah Kane, and these kids hear me play all the time. Kane is the only one so far that likes the banjo. Their mom don't, but their dad plays rock and roll, or whatever you call it. Yes, I love these babies. When I was growing up, most of the girls at that time liked rock and roll, but I just couldn't listen to that stuff. We played a show at a grade school and that's when I met the girl I married. It'll be 43 years this December. I guess you could say the banjo picking got that one for me.



Paul: Jim, it's been a great pleasure getting to know you and I look forward to following your latest creative endeavors on YouTube and Banjo Hangout.

Jim: Thanks, Paul. Always great to talk to you.

Special Thanks to Janet Burton.



Paul Roberts BanjoCrazy.com

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Pike Country Break Down



Jim Reed - An American Cultural Treasure

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