

ALL FRETS

July/August 2016



Ron Hinkle

INSIDE...

**ALL FRETS 2016
CINCINNATI
CONVENTION REPORT**

YOU'RE IN THE BAND

**TRANSPOSING FROM
ONE KEY TO ANOTHER**

**RON HINKLE - LONG
LIVE THE BANJO!**

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Ron Hinkle Long Live The Banjo!

My involvement with music and the four-string banjo began before I was born! My father, Myron Hinkle, was a busy professional musician (banjo and piano), and my mother was his biggest fan. She would often go along with him to gigs, and would sing and dance to the music. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I heard—and felt—banjo music while I was still in the womb; you might say I was “born to play!” Dad founded the *Seattle Banjo Club* in 1962 when I was two, and the *Grays Harbor Banjo Band* in 1968; I had no choice in the matter but to be surrounded by banjo music and banjo players throughout my childhood and teenage years!



Dad gave me my first tenor banjo (an Orpheum #1) at the age of six; I promptly drew a farm scene in crayon on the head, indicating that I was not quite ready for a music career! I still have the banjo, but unfortunately, the “art canvas” was lost in a house fire several years ago. When I was 12, I saw my sister - who had recently started playing - *getting paid* for a gig. As they say, “money talks”; I’m almost ashamed to say that this was the final motivation for me to start playing (that’s okay; Linda’s motivation was getting to wear a Roaring 20s Charleston dress!) Since I was constantly immersed in banjo music, I knew the banjo band sing-along repertoire by heart before I started.

Linda and I were members of the *Grays Harbor Junior Banjo Band* in Aberdeen, Washington (along with Ed Alkire, and Randy and Brian Boeholt). With the addition of me, the group name was changed to the *Jubilee*



Jubilee Five at Banjorama

"The Jubilee Five," a banjo group composed of five local youngsters, left this weekend to participate in the Banjorama, a national banjo convention in Sacramento, Calif. Pictured from left are Brian Boeholt, Eddie Alkire, Linda Hinkle, Ronni Hinkle and Randy Boeholt. (World staff photo, Bob Keigel)

Five. For the next five years, we played all over the Pacific Northwest, had our own twice-monthly show on the local TV station, appeared on *The Music Place* at Channel 9 in Seattle, and traveled to the 1973 *Sacramento Banjorama*. Of course, we were also members of the adult band, and played extensively throughout the Western Washington area.

I played tenor for the first year, then switched to the plectrum. Dad was my teacher, but when I made that switch, I was on my own. I taught myself using the Alfred Greathouse *Banjo Players Bible* - thus beginning a lifelong habit of being too stubborn to learn from anyone else! Dad hired a teacher (Hank Dougherty) but I was already starting to lose interest. When I graduated

from high school, I joined the Air Force and put the banjo in the closet; for the next ten years it only came out at family reunions. I can't say I missed the banjo during my time away from it; I needed to find myself - *outside of the banjo world* (which is about all I had ever known) - before I could really get serious about it.

At the age of 28, I was married to my wonderful wife Paige (32 years this summer—talk about “finding myself!”), had a young daughter, and was a professional ski instructor living in Salt Lake City, Utah. I got the itch to start playing again, and went to a local music store (*Intermountain Acoustic*) for information. They put me in touch with Jerry Maxfield, the leader of a banjo group in Provo called the *Silver Strings Banjo Bunch*. Bill Lowery was their lead player, and was leaving soon. I took a couple of lessons from him to get restarted and soon took over as the lead. Jerry in turn put me in touch with Gary Richardson, and he and I founded the *Salt Lake Banjo Club*. For the next two years, I was playing regularly with two groups, including an annual trip to the *Circle the Wagons* banjo gathering in Caldwell, Idaho.



Right at the end of my time in Salt Lake City, I was hired to play a gig with a pick-up traditional jazz group. It was there that I discovered that the natural ability to play chord melody (all I knew how to do at the time) does not necessarily translate into knowing what the chords *actually are!* Learning to be a rhythm section player in tradition jazz bands has been quite an education for me, and I must say that it has become my very favorite banjo genre. I have since had the opportunity to play the style with many west coast groups as well as leading a band both in college and during my career as an Army Bandsman. Now that I have retired from the Army, I am playing again with the *Uptown*



Lowdown Jazz Band out of Bellevue, Washington; since I live in Arizona, I am only playing California festivals with them, but it's a great opportunity to re-establish myself in the world of traditional jazz.

Although I loved playing with bands, at one of the shows in Idaho I realized I really wanted to be on stage as a soloist. There was one problem: I suffered from debilitating shyness and stage fright! To get on stage *by myself*, I obviously needed to overcome this. Of course, banjo players and listeners are a very supportive bunch, so in retrospect, it wasn't so bad. Sticking my neck out as a soloist and teacher has certainly had a positive effect on every aspect of my life. I will al-

ways be an introvert who needs his quiet alone time (and will always be a bit nervous on stage). But, I am now anything but shy!

Shortly after my eyes had been opened by this realization, I met Buddy Wachter - and have been recovering ever since! I had no idea the banjo could be played that way! Meeting Buddy got me started on a lifetime of banjo discovery mixed with a pretty fair dose of frustration. I can honestly say that Buddy woke me up and inspired most of what was to come for me, musically and otherwise. I have only recently *finally and completely* resigned myself to the fact that I will never be Buddy Wachter - *and that's okay!* If I can make *my own* unique contribution to the four-string banjo and realize *my own* musical potential - whatever that ultimately proves to be - I will be satisfied.

Although the years caught up with dad, I got one last opportunity to perform on stage with him and my sister (and brother-in-law Andy Hall) when we formed *Papa Hink and His Little Stinkers* for the 1989 *Circle the Wagons* show. We also did some recording and played at the *Tri-Cities Traditional Jazz Festival* and a few other local gigs. Unfortunately, this was a short-lived venture as dad passed away and distance and busy lives took their toll. I still play occasionally with Linda and Andy.



After moving back to Washington State from Salt Lake City in 1990, I served a seven month *Desert Storm* deployment to the Philippines (I was a Naval Reservist at the time). As soon as I returned home I started college for a degree in Music Education. Although I hadn't played clarinet or saxophone since high school, I was accepted into the program based on my age and maturity, my infectious enthusiasm, and the fact that I played the banjo.



The upshot of the deployment and college is that the banjo went back into the closet with the clarinet taking priority - and about 3-6 *hours* of my valuable practice time - every day. I led a college traditional jazz group, did a few casual gigs, and went to the occasional banjo convention. In short, I had just barely enough banjo activity to maintain my skills, with little chance to improve. All these years later of course, I realize just how valuable that classical education has been to my understanding, playing, and teaching - once I began to apply it to the *banjo*!

I finished my degree in 1996, and took a job as a high school music teacher where I quickly discovered that I did not have what it takes to teach *and control* a large group of teenagers *or* their parents! I resigned after four months and took an apprenticeship as a musical instrument repairman in Portland, Oregon. I began a busy two-year stint with *Pat O'Neal and the Riverboat Jazz Band* and became the banjoist for the *Black Swan Classic Jazz Band*, having the opportunity to record with both groups. I also took gigs with various pick-up groups around the area. This was a great experience for me, but also led me to seek more permanent employment (and benefits) as a musician. Enter the Army!

With my family's approval, I decided to return to an active-duty military career - this time as an Army Bandsman. I had been in the *560th Air National Guard Band* for four years and wished I could do it full-time. As the Army had the best program and offered me an assignment to Germany, there I was, going to boot camp at the age of 38! I got into the best physical condition of my life and finally began to believe in myself. I look back on this experience and realize this was truly the start of the "modern me."

My family and I spent six years in Europe, traveling to over 20 countries and playing the banjo in half of them. I had the opportunity to sit in with banjoists and jazz groups from Germany, Denmark, England, and Belgium and, while serving a six-month deployment to Iraq in 2003, the banjo - in my hands - was heard for the first time since before the days of Saddam Hussein. While in Iraq, I became a "banjo war correspondent" and wrote two articles for *The Resonator* and even got to play for Arnold Schwarzenegger (who was in Iraq on a "hand-shake tour").



During my second military career I spent four years stationed in Korea and traveled twice to China on official tours. I even spent a couple of years in Alabama (yet another foreign country!) where I had the chance to visit and play in New Orleans during Mardi Gras. My career finished at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, where I retired in November of 2014 and plan to spend the foreseeable future.



In short, my Army career was an amazing 15 years which had the unfortunate side-effect of taking me away from the banjo. Now that I am back—retirement and health insurance in hand—I am dedicating the rest of my life to the four-string banjo. Five years ago, in anticipation of my pending career change, I wrote and self-published a plectrum banjo method book: *Beyond Chord Melody; A New Approach to Advancement*. As I never was able to learn much from a book and I couldn't find the technical sort of things that interested me, I started committing what I *knew* to paper, again, essentially teaching myself. This exercise had

the healthy effect of forcing me to research and figure out the things that I was doing, but didn't quite understand, and translate them into print.

Publication of this book led me to the attention of the venerable British company, *Clifford Essex Music Co. Ltd.* In 2011 I was hired by them to update a large collection of pre-Jazz Age plectrum banjo sheet music and to write a column for their magazine, *BMG*. I was then assigned to update an original method book from the early 1920s, Emile Grimshaw's *Plectrum Playing for Modern Banjoists*. As you can imagine, I learned an awful lot from that experience! I do have a couple of other book updates currently in the works for Clifford Essex...a long and slow process.

More importantly, the Clifford Essex experience introduced me to the vast repertoire of banjo music that I previously didn't even know existed! Out of the hundreds of pieces of music given me to update, I have only completed 72. This project - including production of reference recordings - will take me at least the next 15 years to complete! Since the music was written by classically-trained musicians, I have been forced to dig into my own classical training and apply it to the banjo (which is more of an unwritten, "oral" tradition today). At the same time, I have taken on the transcription of all of Harry Reser's plectrum banjo recordings. While there is very little monetary reward for any of this, I enjoy the process and the challenge and my military retirement makes devoting this much time and effort to non-paying projects possible!

A year ago, I decided it was high-time that I had my own website. Being published in a quarterly magazine had ignited my writing urge. However, with only four issues per year, it also proved to be a frustration since

I had so much more I needed to say! *The Banjo Snob* (www.banjosnob.com) has proven to be a great creative outlet as well as an interesting alter ego. I tend to take things a bit too seriously, so the title was meant to poke fun at myself (I am anything but a snob!) More importantly though, that title – and the content therein - reflect my sincere belief that the banjo is a *real musical instrument* worthy of serious study that has not gotten the mainstream respect it deserves. I guess I've been laughed at and/or mocked





a bit too much in my banjo life (a serious issue for the shy kid who became an overly sensitive adult). I consider myself to be a serious musician more than an entertainer; I like to play difficult and beautiful music - at the limits of my ability - and lack the natural, unforced ability to smile while doing so.

I believe that the history of the banjo - including all of the historic styles it has been played in - must be preserved! As with the serious player of any musical instrument, I believe a well-rounded banjoist should be able to play it "just like Harry," or "just like Eddie" akin to classical pianists playing Chopin or Beethoven. In my opinion, without a solid grounding in *history*, there is little hope of moving the banjo *forward* - which it must do in order to become truly relevant to *today*. This is the reason I have become so determined to master Grimshaw, Reser, Peabody, and Bechtel; they were our musical "founders" and if nothing else, we owe it to them out of respect to learn their styles.

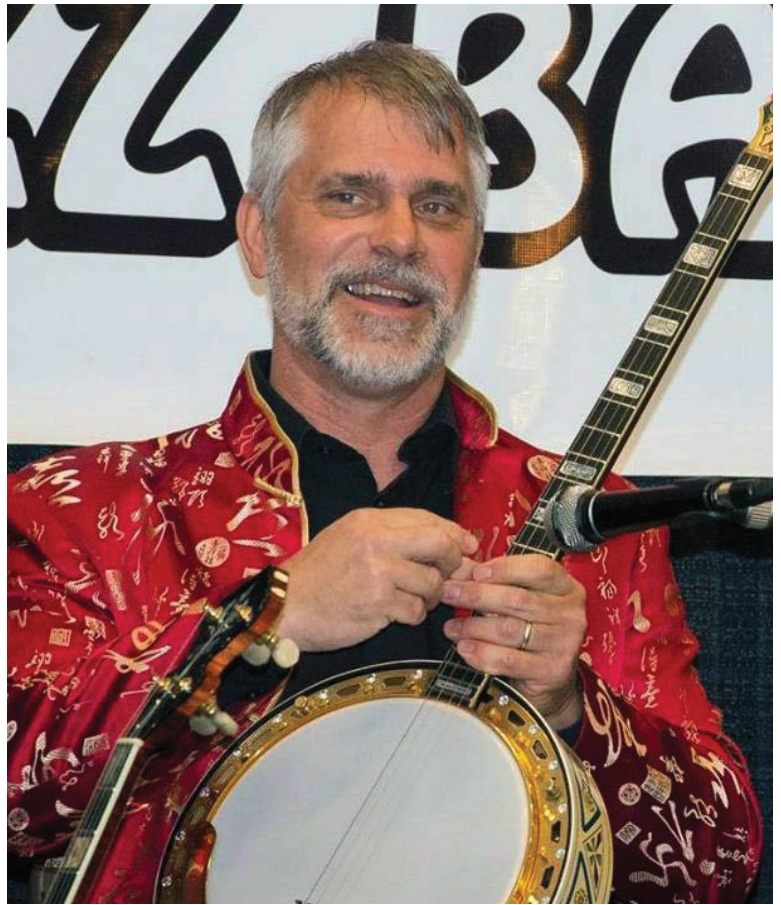
The most exciting thing happening to me right now is my new involvement with young banjoists. Ever since my "less-than-pleasant" experience as a high school teacher, I have been reluctant to get involved as an educator. That changed when I had the opportunity to attend a rehearsal of the *St. Louis BandJos* last summer. Jamming with those kids at the *All Frets* convention in Branson was, quite literally, life-changing! Led by Don Dempsey and Joe Feager - who have done a fabulous job, the *St. Louis BandJos* group has given me new hope for the survival of the four-string banjo. While they are just one small group in one city, they represent what *could* be done in other locales with dedicated leaders and enthusiastic young people.

Not sure if I have what it takes to start such a group of my own, I'm very happy that a way for me to be involved in support via long-distance has surfaced. After meeting with the group via Skype proved to be problematic with a large group trying to deal with poor internet connections, I have recently started coaching two of the *St. Louis* students individually and will hopefully start with a couple more soon. I believe that *every* member of that group - along with the *Houston All Stars* - deserves to be taking private lessons. In this process, I have found that banjo players and groups are very generous with grant funding to make such lessons possible. I was amazed to learn that available grant funding from the *ALL FRETS Foundation* sometimes goes *unused!* This is not due to a lack of eligible students, but more an unawareness of the available funds coupled with a lack of "putting 2 and 2 together" on the part of teachers, *including myself!*

Another connection we need to make is with the young traditional jazz and swing dance folks. There is currently a strong revival in classic jazz music going on in major cities. I believe this trend represents a great opportunity for the four-string banjo as it was so prominent in the mainstream music of the Jazz Age. I am discovering a surprising number of "20-somethings" playing the banjo, many of whom are pro-



fessional musicians with little time for (or awareness of..) the “hobby” banjo world of groups such as ALL FRETS. I believe that in time they will come around when they get more settled in life - *if they are aware of us!* We need to be ready for this new generation of banjoists and start working to attract and to create more! We can start by sponsoring some of them to our conventions, *making it financially possible for them to attend.* Age-wise, I am at the tail end of the fading 1950s-70s “pizza parlor revival” banjo generation. As I came of musical age, we had the actual Jazz Age players themselves to lead the way. *It is now our turn to be the inspiration for the next generation.* I take this as a great honor - not an insurmountable challenge. This is why I’m so excited and optimistic at the moment!



In conclusion, I would like to say that if not for the banjo, my life would not have been nearly as interesting. Because I took the banjo for granted as a kid -and rebelled against it as a young man – it has taken me many years to fully realize and appreciate just how lucky I was to have been born and raised within the four-string banjo community. Banjo players are among the most generous and kind-hearted of all the people I have had the good fortune to meet in my life. The four-string banjo is much more than just a musical instrument for me; *it is a reason for being and a way of life!* Long live the banjo!



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