

Pattie Hopkins:

On Teaching, Performing, and Stepping Out of the Comfort Zone

By Matt Merta

For some, it is more than passion that makes them pursue a career in music. A few may also have been blessed with musical ability nearly from birth. Pattie Hopkins is one such musician. “My mother started my older brother playing the violin at age four, and she always tells me that she had the only two-year-old girl that she knew that would hum Bach minuets. She immediately started me on violin when I turned four and the rest is history! At that age, I just wanted to be involved with music.”

With that, Pattie has never looked back. Her violin and fiddle playing has run the gamut of music styles, from bluegrass to classical, Celtic to jazz, and chamber music to rock and roll. She has performed with the likes of Charlie Daniels, Leon Russell, The Oak Ridge Boys, .38 Special, Ralph Stanley, Bobby Osborne, Mountain Heart, and 1964: The Beatles Tribute Band, as well as her current projects The Kickin’ Grass Band and The Morning After Band. Along with performing, she is a certified instructor for both the Suzuki and American Violin Methods, and currently has two private studios in North Carolina.

At that early age of four, Pattie studied violin following the Suzuki method, which stresses a musical environment for the young student. “Suzuki not only reinforces a musical environment, but also a positive one, which really spoke to me personally. My personal environment as a young child was one of positivity, love, and nurturing.”

At East Carolina University, Pattie received a degree in Violin Performance, which she claims prepared her immensely as both a performer and educator. “It required very long hours of playing plus endless amounts of theory, history, and chamber ensembles. While I was there, I also chose to get my complete Suzuki Pedagogy Certification. At that time, there were only about thirteen schools in the nation that offered that particular program. As a sophomore, I started my private studio, and it would play an important role in my career.” Pattie is certified for instruction for Books 1-10 of the Suzuki Method.

Pattie’s first meeting and eventual work with Mark O’Connor came in a roundabout way. “I chose to perform his First Fiddle Concerto for my senior recital in college. That summer, I attended his fiddle camp near Nashville to perform it for him in a master class. That is when I first had a chance to meet him. Needless to say, I never imagined that I would get to perform with him in the future, as well as dedicate a portion of my life to educating the younger generations on American music.” That connection led to her being one of the first fiddlers to be certified for teaching the O’Connor American String Method.

Although certified to teach both the Suzuki and American Meth-



Photo: Gabriel Nelson

ods, two very contradictory music education programs, Pattie is able to implement both effectively with her students. “As of right now, I teach both methods. I feel they are both vitally important in different ways. My students learn classical from Suzuki, while the American Method provides learning of our own musical heritage plus improvisation.”

While she did not play much outside of her college performances, Pattie did occasionally work with some jam bands for fun. “A few years later I played with a bluegrass project that had a banjo performing mostly traditional stuff, and at that point, I knew that I wanted to be a bluegrass player in some form or fashion.”

Two events cemented her love for live performance of her fiddle playing. The first was the opportunity to perform with Mark O’Connor at the end of one of his method camps. The other was playing on stage with the legendary Charlie Daniels. “I remember opening for the Charlie Daniels Band, then grabbing a seat in the back of the theater to watch the rest of the show. About halfway through their performance, one of our sound technicians grabbed me and said that I was going to play with Charlie Daniels. My first reaction was, ‘Are you serious?’, and it ended up being a very successful performance. One amazing thing about that night was that my parents as well as a few students were in the audience to share such a memorable experience. I got a lot of exposure from that night, and that was a turning point for me as a fiddle player.”



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Somehow, Pattie is able to balance her love for both classical violin and bluegrass fiddle in her busy career. She has been a violinist with the Long Bay Symphony in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, for five years, as well as a member of the Trent River Chamber Players, which allows her to perform classical chamber music on a regular basis in the eastern North Carolina community.

As for fiddle work, her two main projects are the alt-bluegrass band The Morning After Band and the more traditional bluegrass project, The Kickin' Grass Band. "The Morning After was formed about three years ago by Kickin' Grass Band's banjo player Hank Smith. The idea was to form a band with bluegrass instrumentation and not play bluegrass, with a soul/blues female vocalist on top. It is an 'anything goes' approach in which we co-write songs together. This gives me an opportunity to play violin and fiddle pretty much any way I like. It lets me transcend through any genre with my violin, which I feel is a dream for any artist."

While The Kickin' Grass Band is in many ways steeped in traditional bluegrass, there are definitely other musical elements mixed into the band's sound, as can be heard in any of the band's five albums. Pattie explains: "As far as musical backgrounds, each member comes from their own. Vocalist/guitarist Lynda Dawson grew up in vocal choirs; mandolinist Jamie Dawson is in the traditional bluegrass genre; Hank is from bluegrass and jazz; bassist Patrick Walsh comes from classical piano and rock and roll. Together we create a sound which I would describe as bluegrass Americana."

Additionally, Pattie and Lynda have recently formed a duo that performs traditional duets and old time folk songs. "Lynda and I attended the International Bluegrass Music Association conference in Nashville in 2012 without the rest of the band. We performed in the Raleigh Showcase that year as a duo... From that showcase, we toured Great Britain the following autumn. We recorded our first album, *Traditional Duets*, and are touring as a duo again this year. I believe that to really understand the bluegrass genre, you have to immerse yourself in it and live it. This led me to festivals, a lot of jamming and different projects, and getting outside of the box. To get out of our comfort zones leads us to be better musicians, which we all want to achieve."

Pattie spent some time in Nashville around 2008 to pursue a career in fiddling, which led to many gigs in the venues on Broadway, as well as assisting in the development of the Bluegrass Underground Series in McMinnville, Tennessee, which can be seen

on select PBS television stations. However, she returned to North Carolina and opened two studios, one in Williamston and one in her hometown of Greenville. "Ever since I was a little girl, I knew that I wanted to teach in my hometown because there is not a violin or fiddle teacher in the area. Now I teach over thirty students from ages three to sixty-five, from beginners to advanced. I have students that start as young as two years old, [and I also] prepare older ones for college auditions, fiddle contests, and music therapy."

From her experiences as a performer and teacher, what does Pattie see as the biggest barrier for young people learning the violin or fiddle? "I think a big factor is that there is no instant gratification process, which is in a lot of aspects of life today. The fact that learning the fiddle takes many years to develop is hard for a young person to understand. I tell them that is one of the reasons that I chose to teach this lifelong craft. As far as my younger students are concerned, a big part of their education is making sure their parents understand the process. They look to their parents for guidance, support, and instruction, and I know that learning a musical instrument will apply to all aspects of their life if taken seriously."

So how does Pattie view her present and future career as a fiddler? "Right now I have many irons in the fire. I see lots of practicing and continuing education seminars because I always strive to be better at what I do as well as how I educate. I educate because I want to share my craft and experiences with the next generations. I perform because I want to share the stage with other artists, but also help people cope with all different aspects of their lives."



Pattie with student Claire

- www.reverbnation.com/musician/pattiehopkins
- www.kickinggrass.com • www.lyndaandpattie.com
- suzukiassociation.org/people/pattie-hopkins/

[Matt Merta has been writing for various music magazines for the past twenty years. He teaches guitar and bass in Detroit, Michigan, as well as performs and writes songs under the pseudonym Mitch Matthews.]

Gum Stump Squirrel

Tuning: ADAD

Pattie Hopkins

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