



Scott Joss: *Rebel on the Stage*

By Casey L. Penn

Photo: Courtesy Scott Joss

The late Merle Haggard, left, and Scott Joss

“How do you explain improvisation?” wonders sideman and fiddler Scott Joss, of the art that makes him his living. A fiddler for Merle Haggard and The Strangers, Joss has built a career of, in his words, “throwing something against the wall, and hoping it sticks.”

Despite the humble description of his skills, something is obviously “sticking” for Joss, who has been a sought-after fiddler for groups up and down the West Coast since the mid-1980s. He played for Haggard (in two separate stints), Dwight Yoakam (1988-2001), and in earlier years, Norm Stephens, Dennis Barney, and others.

Truth is, years of structured playing led to Joss’ ability to improvise in a way that makes sense. It all started in elementary school in Redding, California, where Joss first recognized the fiddle as his lot in life. He has since navigated from the old time fiddle scene, and contests such as National Oldtime Fiddlers Contest (Weiser, Idaho), to his current role as an improvisational swing, jazz, and country fiddler.

“He was a hero of mine growing up,” says Nashville fiddler and fellow Californian, Megan Lynch Chowning, of Joss. “He went to all the same contests, but he’s a few years older so we didn’t really compete against one another. He was always a rebel . . . kept playing swing tunes in the middle of his breakdowns and could never really play the same thing twice.

“I was always in awe of how much he chose the music over the winning. That was so confusing to this ridiculously competitive

girl. But then, he got the gig with Dwight Yoakam, so maybe he knew what he was doing.”

So, just how did this fiddler morph from staunch old time to wild improv? *Fiddler Magazine* caught up with Joss to learn more about his journey from one end of the fiddling spectrum to the other.

How does a young West Coast boy get started in fiddling?

One day when I was in fourth or fifth grade, a lady named Jana Jae came to play for us. We sat in the gym on the hard floor. Jana was in the middle of us, and we were all around her. She began to play, just by herself.

You’ve heard people speak of esoteric experiences – saying, “This person had light around them,” or “it was the most amazing thing?” Well, that’s what happened to me that day. In listening and watching her, everything around me just disappeared and I knew – without previous interest or knowledge of music or fiddling – that I had to play one of those things. I told my parents, “If you love me, you’ll give me one.” They bought me a little fiddle, and I took Jana’s class.

From there, it seems the stars aligned for you and other young musicians in your area. What was it like to grow up in such a rich musical environment?

It was a magical time in northern California. Jana sparked our imaginations, and there were other influential teachers, too, such



Photo: Courtesy Evelyn Horner

Scott Joss with Evelyn Horner

as Evelyn Horner, Adrienne Jacoby, and others. District 6 of the California State Old Time Fiddlers Association in Redding was born, and an amazing amount of kids took up playing fiddle. Violin players became fiddlers, too, and somehow, acoustic guitar players and bass players were always in the right place at the right time to play with us. As a kid, it seemed quite the phenomenon.

Elementary school lessons and District 6 proved the perfect springboard for me – for all of us – into contest fiddling. There was no struggle to fit, no searching. It was all there and waiting to step into. I played in contests for a good while. I remember my first Junior-Junior division, where I made the top ten – roughly, two years after starting to play fiddle. I played “The Bluebird,” a rudimentary song, but all the people were rooting for me.

It was great fun. It stayed that way for a long time. Some of my favorite tunes came to be “Sally Goodin,” “Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down,” “Beaumont Rag,” and waltzes. I loved waltzes because I connected with them. When I judged contests, it was always one’s interpretation of the waltz that won me over. “Gardenia Waltz” from Johnny Gimble’s *Fiddlin’ Around* LP is still a favorite of mine.

It sounds like it came to a point where you needed a change. Could you talk about your progression into and out of the contest scene? What changed for you, and what was your next step as a fiddler?

I can’t stress enough how much I owe to the old time genre and those who were there when I needed them. I owe my entire career to the art of fiddling and those folks who pushed me to the next levels. As years went by, things became so competitive. It was still enjoyable, but it seemed the better I got, the more competitive it felt. As you were walking up and down the hallway, people would stop rehearsing as you walked by. As the competition became fierce, the fun began to leak out of it for me.

The next natural step for me was to get bored. There were limitations on what you could do – you couldn’t swing, you couldn’t play certain licks, and I didn’t much care for that. Every contest, you played it the same way. I began to move out in the parking

lot, into the dark shadows of the fiddling world, to play with people like Tiny Moore and others who were playing music I had not heard before and who were incorporating improvisation into their playing of tunes like “Sweet Georgia Brown,” and “Lady Be Good.” Tiny was a fiddler and world-class electric mandolin player who played with Merle [Haggard] for years. He was on the fringes.

I started taking what Tiny did and incorporating it into old time fiddling; of course, that was my demise. [laughs] I gave up trying to win in favor of pushing the envelope. I still did okay, won the Men’s division of the California State Championship three times, playing it straight the first time and then going haywire on the third round.

Of course, things have evolved in fiddling since then. Mark O’Connor came along and he got away with the improvisation and won! What he created became the next gold standard... everybody started playing Mark O’Connor’s versions. God bless them, I loved all of those guys, but I decided that I had to make a living. You couldn’t play with a band just because you could play “Sally Johnson” as it’s played in a fiddling contest. Half the time the honky-tonk bands didn’t even know “Sally Johnson.” They were playing the music that made them a living.

You began to move in the direction of country and swing music. How did you become a band player?

I discovered Johnny Gimble. He wasn’t an old time fiddler. He played everything right off the top of his head, and he played it better than everybody else did....

An early band for me, age 15-17, was Easy Pickin. We played Grisman-style bluegrass. I also played early on with Norm Stephens, who played with Lefty Frizzell, and Roy Warmack, a local guitar phenom who played a Gibson Super 400 in a Shamblin (as in Eldon, of the Texas Playboys) style of rhythm that I loved. Because of Norm and his western swing band, Evelyn Horner and I got started in a band setting. We played twin fiddle on Bob Wills’ music. I was free to play whatever I wanted, so that was it for me.

Tiny Moore also let me try my hand at improvisation. He let me fall on my face a few times, but that opened the door for me. He started talking to Merle about me (I learned much later), which led to my first outing with Merle at age 19. He lived here in Redding.

How did it go with Merle that first trip out?

It didn’t go well. I was green, and easily impressed. There I was, a huge fan of Merle’s vocals. I was star struck. Merle was kind to this little kid. He’d hand me a solo now and then, and I would fall on my face. He came to me after the tour and said, “I see a lot of potential in you, but I don’t think you’re quite ready for what we’re doing yet. Don’t let that bring you down. You just need to work harder.”

“In listening and watching [Jana Jae], everything around me just disappeared and I knew – without previous interest or knowledge of music or fiddling – that I had to play one of those things.”

By God, that’s what I did. I swore to myself that would never happen to me again, and it hasn’t. I was set on redeeming myself, and the opportunity came. I went to work with [the late] Dennis Barney and the Nashville Rebels. Dennis was a major country music force in the Sacramento area for many years. I spent a good two years being his right hand man – seven nights a week, plus a live radio show on Sunday afternoons. I learned a lot, and I miss him greatly.

The next time I was invited to play out with Merle I pulled my weight, but by that point, I had developed quite a friendship with Dennis and was having fun playing with him. Merle’s band was pretty guitar-driven, and I wanted to play! I went back to playing in the nightclubs with my friend Dennis. Not as much money, but I was having a great time. In later years, I joined back up with Merle, whom I loved.

You also had a long-running gig with Dwight Yoakum – what led to that?

In 1984, I was in the house band [The Sidemen] at Merle’s resort at Lake Shasta. When stars came through, we opened for them. Dwight came through when “Honky Tonk Man” was about to hit the airwaves. No one had really heard of him yet. His guitar man was also his producer, Pete Anderson.... We opened for them. Later, when they needed a fiddle player, Pete remembered me. Dwight called in 1988, and I played with him for 15 years. Dwight’s career was taking off – I got to be there to see it. Dwight was and is a great friend and artist. I have the greatest respect for him.

You spent a short time trying out the role of singer/bandleader/artist, too. How was that?

It came and went. I love to sing harmony and some people wanted me to be a lead singer. I tried it. I carried my own band, but it really wasn’t my thing. Pete Anderson had a label and asked me to make a record. That was fun, but being out there with a band – trying to get your ideas across to a band that has their own agenda, frankly – that was a wash. Financially, too, I was getting hammered. I wasn’t prepared to let my family starve trying to chase a dream that really wasn’t mine to begin with.

I didn’t succeed at it, but even when you do, it’s not all roses and sunshine. Having been on both sides, I’m happy being the side guy. When the gig is over, I’m done. I don’t have to pretend to be something I’m not or live up to an image that’s not really me.

What would you say to young fiddlers thinking of walking into the world of music, and particularly life on the road?

I don’t see how anyone outside of this life can understand it. [laughs] If you’re coming into it, you better expect some hard choices. It’s not all glory, and there’s no free ride. I’ve missed a lot of birthdays and school plays. My wife, Judy, and my daughter, Kim, have paid a huge cost for me to live this life. You’re going to need your family, and they’ll need you, too. In the midst of it all, and for all these many years, my family’s support has sustained me.

Scott Joss can be contacted at scottjoss@att.net.

[Casey L. Penn (casey@pennwords.com) is a freelance writer and singer-songwriter based in Arkansas. Her byline appears in regional and national publications related to music, health care, and business.]

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