

Not your average Joe

Interview by Maria Wallace

Photo: Wayne Ebinger



Joe Newberry has been a familiar name on the old time music scene for a while. This charismatic multi-instrumentalist, singer and songwriter is now achieving greater recognition, in part thanks to his work with A Prairie Home Companion and the Transatlantic Sessions live tour. Joe is also in demand as a musical collaborator, on clawhammer banjo, guitar and vocals. Newberry & Verch, his duo with acclaimed Canadian fiddler April Verch, recently released their first album. Early this year I had the pleasure of working with Joe on his UK tour with mandolin legend Mike Compton, and while he was in Yorkshire we sat down for this chat.

So how did the Compton & Newberry duo come about?

I had of course heard of Mike Compton for years, from his work with Nashville Bluegrass Band and later on with the *Down from the Mountain* tour and *O Brother Where Art Thou*. In early 2009 I had a friend cancel on a music job he was doing with me and I called Mike to see if he'd want to step in. We traded a couple of messages and CDs back and forth and put together a set list about 30 minutes before the show. From the first note we had this real blend, instrumentally and also vocally, it sounded really good! After that show we decided we would try and do more things together and every year since we've been doing more. From the first year Mike was saying "when are you gonna quit that day job?" and finally in 2016 I got the chance to do that. I left my day job after I got an offer to come be one of the featured singers on the

Transatlantic Sessions tour. I was just so honoured to be part of that and I thought, well, this is too much to pass up. I talked to my wife and she said, book six months' worth of work and go out and do it. And so I have, and now Compton & Newberry are in the middle of a UK tour! Mike and I love playing together and he's a good man, a good travelling buddy and a great musical partner.

Before you took that leap, you were already a semi-pro working musician. How did you come to a full-time music career fairly late in life?

I had done a lot of music work for many years and been lucky enough to have a bunch of my songs recorded by the bluegrass band The Gibson Brothers among others. I was one of those guys who would work as hard as I could work during the week, fly out on Thursday night

or Friday morning to do a show or festival someplace, then come back late Sunday night and be back at work on Monday morning. I tried to give my full measure in both. My work was in the communications field and the last 15 years of my “work life”, I was a public information officer and communications director for the state of North Carolina. Back then my job was to tell the story of the department I worked for, and now I just tell my own story. I like letting people know where the music comes from, whether it’s something I have collected or found or learned or written. People like the back story.

Tell me about the songwriting, is that something you’ve always done?

I wrote my first song aged five, and it was a blatant rip-off of the Kingston Trio’s *Tom Dooley*. It was called *Hang Down Your Head Bugs Bunny*. The story is that Bugs Bunny steals carrots and they hang him! I was one of those little kids that would be put to bed along with all the other young ‘uns, then I would get up in the middle of the night, come down and announce to the gathered adults drinking and smoking and having adult time, “I will now sing a song!” and they would applaud my song and then shoo me back to bed.

I know that quite a few of your songs are favourites with the old time and bluegrass community over here. I believe our very own Jackie Kempton was instrumental in the genesis of one song. Do you find your ear is always attuned for good titles and phrases?

Yes, I was in the UK at Sore Fingers, the world’s most aptly named music camp. We were walking across the campus and it was just such a thing to have Jackie say “those are larks, and they’re singing as they rise”. It was like “oh, there’s a line!” Some songs, you have to work at and some songs are as if you’re taking dictation. The form of *Singing As We Rise* is what we would call a father/mother/ brother song, very traditional. It’s a true song – Mr Monroe said the best songs are true songs. They don’t have to be true life, but they have to be true to life. In this instance *Singing As We Rise* is a true song that’s about all of my relatives that are in heaven. My mother loved to sing, my dad was a working fool - he loved to work, and he was a very hard worker. And my sister was a pastor, so the verse about sister preaching as she rises, that’s Amy to a tee.

Another atmospheric song of yours is Reminiscent – I know there’s a fascinating story behind that one. Tell us a bit more about its origins

One of my cousins was going through her parents’ papers and found a folder that said *Sterling Newberry, 1910*. Sterling was my grandfather and he loved poetry. He had been a cowboy and an oil worker, he was a minister, he had done a lot of things, in Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas. He loved to recite poetry - by the time he was eight or nine he had memorised *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and people would come from far away,

from cities like St Louis, Memphis and Kansas City. They would go all the way down to Arkansas to hear this little farm boy recite Homer. He loved poetry his whole life and he wrote poetry his whole life. In the folder my cousin found poems from 1910 that Sterling had written and one of them was called *Reminiscent*. It was a one-stanza poem, and his stanza was:

*I have felt the sting of Spanish darts down in old Mexico
I know the pain of bullets hot as through the flesh they go
I’ve ridden through the ice and snow out on the Western plain
And felt my blood turn chill and cold beneath the icy rain
All those things may hurt you, yet they cannot compare
With tempest in the human heart which cometh unaware*

I read that and I thought it was just so cool! I was working on a project with my friend, guitarist Jon Shain [which became the 2016 album *Crow the Dawn*], and the producer Dave Tilley said we needed one more song, something a little spooky and haunting. So I said I had this one stanza poem that my grandfather wrote. Jon started playing a melody and I sang those words. But I only had one stanza. And Dave Tilley said, “well you’re a songwriter aren’t you?” So I tried to match the feel of the original, and the way Sterling Newberry used words, in my stanza:

*I’ve heard the hiss of bad men’s knives down in old Arkansas
And howls of the Indian tribes in many a lonely draw
I’ve watched steam rise the lowland, by the river’s muddy shore
And watched Death welcome foes and friends through his eternal door
All these things may scar you, yet none can leave a mark
Like hearing “I have been untrue” as a whisper in the dark*

I remember being so moved by that song at Sore Fingers 2016, when you sang it in the songwriting workshop alongside Carl Jones and Ron Block. I know you’ve taught there a couple of times – how does it compare with other camps you do?

Sore Fingers is based on one of the camps I used to run in West Virginia – Augusta. That notion of instructional time, jams, special classes, tutor concerts – a lot of that is built on the Augusta model. You really do work a long time there, it’s a long day, but it makes for an amazing community. John and Moira Wirtz have done a great job bringing Americans over, bringing UK artists and teachers in too. Because you know, this vine has many roots and a big root for American music is your traditions. My first work in England was at Sore Fingers and many good things have come from that.

Jumping over to the instrumental side, how did you come to play the main instruments you do, and how did you come to old time music?

Guitar came first. I come from a singing family and it was a combination of things. When I was about 14 there was

a wonderful girl in the neighbourhood who I thought was great, and she played guitar. I thought it would be a way to hang out with her, but also it was a way to accompany myself on the old family songs I used to sing. Then my parents gave me a guitar for Christmas – the best Christmas present ever! – and I played that for a couple of years, playing folky stuff. Then when I was about 15 or 16, I was at the Boone County Fair (I grew up in Boone County, Missouri). I was walking across the fairground and I heard fiddle music. It was a fiddle contest and I was just drawn to it. I started backing up fiddlers at contests. Then banjo – I just had to have it. Then fiddle after that, and always singing.

You're known for your banjo and guitar playing but I've never seen you play the fiddle! Tell us a bit about other folks you play music with

Oh, I only play fiddle to annoy my friends...part of it is that I've had the good fortune to play with some of the greatest fiddlers in old time music, like Bruce Molsky, Jim Collier and Rafe Stefanini, and there's nothing I can add to what they do. It's like playing with Mike Compton. Why would I ever try and play the mandolin? He's got that covered just fine, thank you very much! I also sit in the banjo chair of another band, the guys who originally started the The Red Clay Ramblers; Jim

Watson, Bill Hicks and Mike Craver. They asked me to play banjo, we call ourselves Craver, Hicks, Watson & Newberry. It's a long name so sometimes we call ourselves The Law Firm, 'cause that's what it sounds like. I also have a special collaboration with April Verch, a wonderful fiddler and very fine dancer. Her time is mostly taken up with the April Verch Band, but when I've got a little opening in my schedule and she does, we strike and do a run of gigs together. It's fun, really fun! Everything that I do makes me the luckiest guy you'll ever meet. I do what I love, and I play with people that I love, and I just have such good fortune.

Since our interview, Joe Newberry's busy 2017 continued with a packed teaching diary including the Sore Fingers singing class (with Val Mindel) and stints teaching banjo, guitar and singing at camps including Swannanoa, Augusta and Targhee. His festival appearances this year have included Merlefest (with the Transatlantic Sessions band) Grey Fox with Mike Compton and a cruise round the coastlines of Scotland and Norway with A Prairie Home Companion. Joe Newberry & April Verch recently released their debut album Going Home and plan to visit the UK for a short tour in spring 2018 – stay tuned for more information and tour dates! □



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