Craig Evans:

Traditional music champion and documentary film maker - Time stops. Joy starts.

By Bryan Iwamoto

Bryan: Thank you for sitting down with me, Craig. Many people know you as the clawhammer banjo player who, for close to 20 years, played with bands Singleton Street and the Eelpout Stringers. They also may know you as a regular at MBOTMA festivals and jams around town and as a die-hard Clifftop enthusiast.

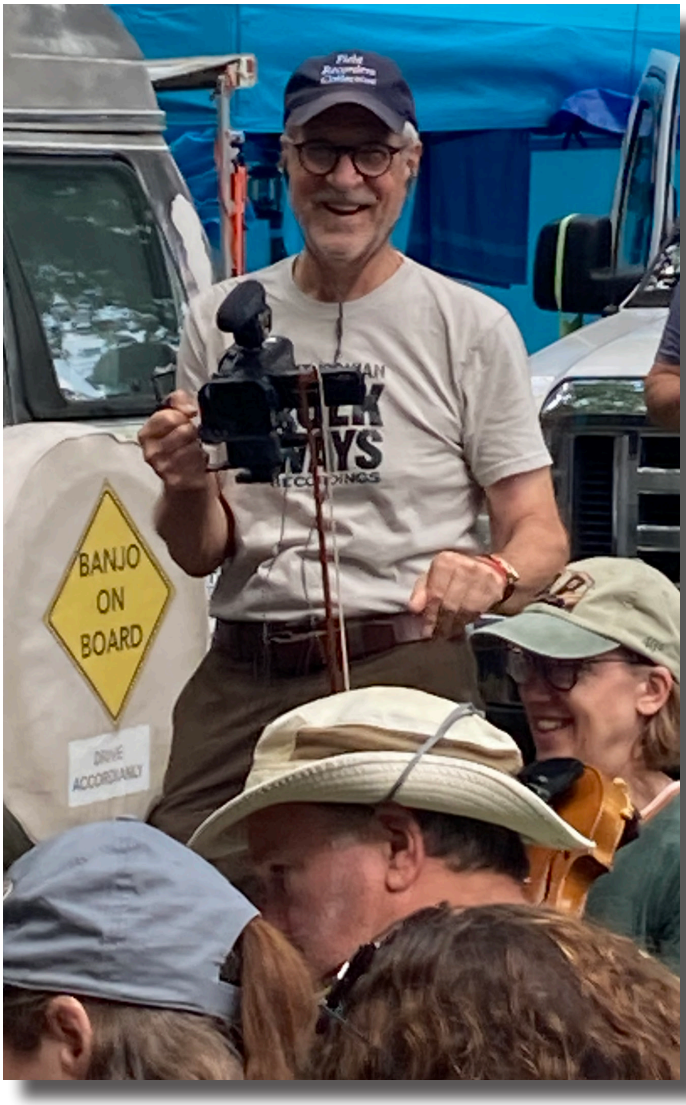
I'm guessing that not as many folks know you've documented more than 200, one-on-one video interviews with old-time banjo and fiddle makers, performers, teachers and historians across North America.

Today I want to talk about your new book, but first tell us the great news about your *Old Time Conversations* DVD video series that preserves the stories about traditional music.

Craig: Thanks, Bryan. I'm excited to announce that my entire film series will soon be accessible and free through streaming. The Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina and Smithsonian Folkways are now collaborating to make it possible. You can go to the Southern Folklife Collection website for updates on timing.

Bryan: Congratulations! The interviews from the video series are the center of your book: *Old Time Conversations: Finding Health, Happiness and Community through Traditional Music*. I found your stories captivating, educational and inspiring. Tell us about your book.

Craig: In three words: "Follow your bliss." That's sage advice from Joseph Campbell, who wrote *The Hero's Journey*. Although I didn't know it at the time, discovering traditional music one-person-at-a-time was to be my journey. You see, I grew up in Early, Iowa, a small farm town. Mom was a church organist, so our house was always busy. People wanted her to play for weddings, anniversaries, dedications and more. Dad would brag that nobody could get married or buried without first checking her schedule. There was always lots of laughter and, occasionally, tears. I saw all the parts of life where music filled the role of connecting the community.



When I was five, I found my uncle's ukulele in my grandma's attic and taught myself to play Peter, Paul and Mary songs. Then, after hearing the Beverly Hillbillies theme song, I saved enough money from walking beans and baling hay to buy a 5-string banjo. Loved its joyful voice! I'd slow down Earl Scruggs records from 33 rpm to 16 so I could hear what string he was playing and when.

About the time I turned 11, my dad asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I told him "I want to be like mom! She's got the best job in town." My dad was a stoic man of the 50s. He said: "That's fine son, but what's your day job?" He meant well, but it told me I needed to do more than just make music. So I put my instruments aside, got degrees in science and business and went off to find good day jobs.

For close to 30 years I did well. Work was interesting, but not what I could call blissful like music. And when my dad died, I discovered nobody was there patting me on the head. I realized I'd been working for his approval for all those years. It was a lonesome discovery, and it coincided with a painful divorce. So, I decided to change course. I dug out my banjo and began playing music again. I met a bunch of new people and I found myself intrigued. They were happy! Little did I know bliss was hidden within.

Bryan: What was it about musicians that got your attention?

Craig: They seemed settled, satisfied, joyful even. It wasn't like any of them were doing extremely well financially, but I could sense an element of peace in their outlook on life. I wanted to hear more of their stories to understand why.

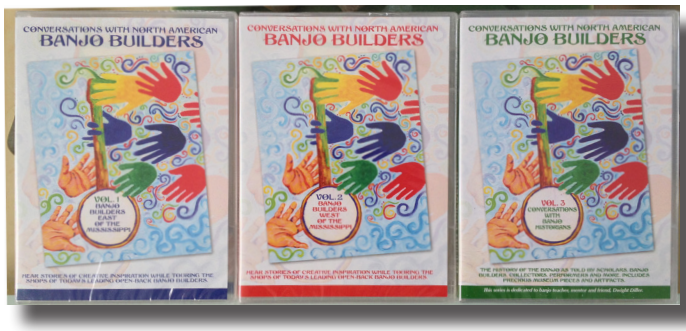
Bryan: Your book is one amazing story after another. I can't imagine how

much time and work it took to document them. What was the spark that got it all started?

Craig: When I turned 60, DeAnne, my artist wife, asked what I wanted for my birthday. I was into banjos. In addition to playing them, they contain history about the development of the United States as well as the story of slavery. I was hooked on learning. And banjos make people happy!

So, I told DeAnne I'd like to travel across the country and talk to banjo makers about why they build banjos—after all, there's little money in it. She thought it was a great idea, so I bought a couple of used cameras, took two courses on documentary filmmaking and announced my project on Banjo Hangout. They too loved my birthday plans.

My first recording trip into the field was a 19-day journey. I interviewed 14 people. Several trips later I'd filmed 50 conversations. I converted them into a four-volume series on Banjo Builders. The DVDs sold like hotcakes. People wrote to me that they were deeply touched by the personal stories. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings called and asked if they could have the documentaries. They too were intrigued. I said absolutely. I want them saved for posterity.



Bryan: You produced a best-selling series of video interviews. Why did you want to write a book?

Craig: First, it wasn't lost on me that viewers were fascinated by the stories in the *Old Time Conversations* films. They saw what Smithsonian Folkways and I experienced, but they also couldn't quite articulate what that was. That's when I started looking deeper. I noticed several common threads of ideas, values and feelings that connected the interviews. I had to write a book that pulled it all together—the wisdom I'd heard. I wanted to share what I learned.

Bryan: Clare Millner's intro to your book really sets the tone for the reader. After sharing her own deeply personal story, she wrote: "Craig revels in the utopia of the old-time community. He wants you to evoke that vision of heaven. Yes, he's got rose-colored glasses on, but don't you have to be able to imagine heaven in order to get there?" What did she mean?

Craig: I'm a romantic. It's hard not to love a group of people that comes together to celebrate or to share sorrow without judgment, because there's trust. Clare's own story is a beautiful example of that. I was cynical in my 50s and 60s. It's hard to trust in business, not that it can't be done. But I needed more from it than a paycheck. I needed the personal trust found in deep relationships. Music bonds people. Those people build communities on that trust.

Bryan: The stories in your book connected me to traditional music beyond playing the music itself. You mentioned that you always learn from the stories people tell you. What stands out?

Craig: It struck me how quickly people would go to the core of their being. They'd share deeply. I think it's because people want to feel and maybe even understand the joy, peace or divinity within themselves and others.

Bryan: Tell me about some of the stories—things that surprised you.

Craig: After making banjos, Bart Reiter would take leftover pieces of wood and make Christmas toys for kids from families who didn't have much. He'd smile telling me about it. Next, he told me about cleaning off people's driveways with his pickup truck. Or bringing them their groceries. He's telling me about what brings him joy. He's a big old softy. I couldn't help but admire him.

Then there's "Doc" Huff. He traveled the world as part of Doctors Without Borders and took his banjo wherever he went. He'd seek out local folks and listen to their native music, often played on a lyre, banjo-like instrument. He'd ask: "What kind of wood is that made of?" Then he'd harvest some of that wood, bring it back home and make banjos out of it.

Mike Ramsey worked through the summer and into the winter making banjos. Then in the spring, he'd fill up his station wagon and drive to folk festivals to sell them. He was known as the Johnny Appleseed of banjos. Mike was following his bliss and having the time of his life. So much so that he quit his job as an executive at Proctor and Gamble just to make banjos—clearly a budget cut. To him, it was well worth it.

Other people would often talk about significant human beings in their lives. Paul Brown told me how he learned about slavery from his mom. People have profound stories that they don't always feel comfortable sharing with others. Music helps lower those boundaries, and communities provide opportunities to share and bond with others.

Bryan: Several times in the book you use the phrase: "Time stops. Joy starts."

Banjo maker Bart Reiter

Banjo maker Patrick "Doc" Huff

Paul Brown

What does that mean?

Craig: It's a Buddhist statement for "being in the moment." The point is, we have joy instantly available to us if we're present in that moment. And we can share that moment with others if they're also present. Music gives us that moment-to-moment opportunity. And it's addictive as hell! You want to do it again and again.

Bryan: Tell us about the people you interviewed. What did they have in common.

Craig: I would say that the vast majority were introverts with a passion or interest. For them, time stops and joy starts, whether it's building an instrument, telling a story, cooking or playing music. They're making a contribution, and they feel safe in it. And they feel safe with people of similar interests. As humans, we want to be connected with others.

Bryan: What suggestions do you have for people who want to connect more with our music community?

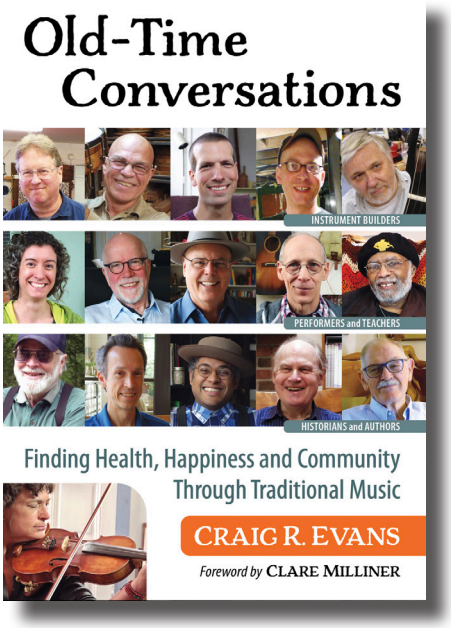
Craig: Traditional music is a community art form, delivered in the moment and original every single time. It doesn't get much better than that. So go to a jam, make some new friends and share the bliss.

Bryan: What if a person is new to jam sessions? They may not be familiar with the tunes and may not know anyone.

Craig: If you haven't been to a jam, give yourself safe space by sitting a little farther away from the center of the action. Try to connect with the experience first. Risk a conversation. Say "hi" to someone. Give it some time. Come back the next week and try learning a few new tunes.

Bryan: I'm reading a lot about research that documents the benefits of playing music with others. What is the gift of being part of the traditional music community?

Craig: First, music lights up your brain. When you play, you're putting together new neural pathways. You learn how to hear harmonies and rhythms. When I went from banjo to fiddle, I learned to hear new rhythms and noticed other musical oddities my brain didn't recognize before. Now I can analyze what I hear, and when I play with two or four



fiddlers, I can hear what each fiddler is playing. Neuroplasticity, rewiring, is a thing.

But all this happens just by showing up and playing. It's also a form of communication. People are talking to each other through their instruments, through their music. Nobody is showing off. In old-time music, the player serves the tune, and the tune serves the community.

Bryan: Your interviews have given you a unique perspective of traditional music and the community that supports it. What does the future look like?

Craig: It's in great hands. Traditional music and arts have kept humanity alive for centuries. It's a part of our soul, if we're lucky enough to take the journey to discover it, like the students at the John C. Campbell Folk School, the premier school dedicated to keeping the traditional arts alive. To help celebrate their 100th anniversary, the school invited me to give presentations about my book and Clifftop to their students. They're finding purpose and living a meaningful life through traditional arts, and I'm humbled and honored to be part of the celebration in April.

Bryan: Thanks so much for your time, Craig. If you don't mind, I'd like to end the article with the last paragraph of your book. It's a great call to action.

Craig: "Don't wait any longer to head out and join the fun. Good adventures and better health await you. I sincerely hope you experience moments when time stops and joy starts. Perhaps you too will agree that it's as good as life can get. See you at the jam!"

Resources:

• Learn more at: oldtimeconversations.com.

• Find a jam session at: minnesotabluegrass.org.

• Find updates about the Craig Evans Collection at Southern Folklife Collection: library.unc.edu

In Their Own Words: Excerpts from *Old Time Conversations* by Craig Evans

"Traditional music is what humans use to express how they feel. No one owns it, so we each make it our own. And when we're finished, the tunes travel on down the river of time until someone else discovers them and through them expresses their human experience." Craig R. Evans

"I think there is something about human beings playing music together that is so powerful and fulfilling, even when you're not very good. You're going through this act of communion. It's the jam session. It's the circle at Clifftop." John McCutcheon, musician and storyteller

"Who hasn't searched for that perfect place, that safe haven, where everyone is glad to see you, and there's an element of the supernatural? Where there's the possibility of achieving zero gravity, floating on a seabed of rhythm and harmony, playing effortlessly. You lift up and are lifted up by your fellow musicians. The many become one." Clare Milliner, musician and co-author of the Milliner-Koken Collection of American Fiddle Tunes

"I knew right away that these were my people. They cared about community. They cared about learning and growing. They cared about nature. They cared about tradition." Trisha Spencer, musician

"Most of us want to sit down and start playing because there is a feeling of togetherness. The place where the beat gets wider and wider, the time slows, and all of a sudden what you couldn't play alone, or what you couldn't play when the groove wasn't happening, you can do just about anything." John Hoffman, musician

"This stuff [music] is so powerful, but it's also fragile. If you start using it for your own glory, it'll walk out. It won't work." Dwight Diller, musician

"The Black Banjo Gathering was a revelation, because I found that string band music is African American music. As you get deeper into the music, you find that the beauty of the music is the cultural interchange that happens between the whole culture, Black and white and Native American." Dom Flemons, co-founder of the Carolina Chocolate Drops

"It blows my mind that you can go back in a time machine 200 years and if you could find a fiddler, we would know some tunes in common." Phil Jamison, historian

"With joy and enthusiasm, Craig Evans paints a picture of a moment in time and in so doing, captures the essence of a community that is not so much geographic in nature, but is, in fact, a community of the heart." Howard Rains, musician and artist