



Tim Brown

**MOST DONE TRAVELING:
A TRIBUTE TO CRAIG JOHNSON**
by Dave Shombert

"It's my belief that any musician owes a debt of gratitude and acknowledgement to those who showed him the way"

Those words were written by Craig Johnson for the liner notes of his solo CD, *Way Down the Road*. His untimely death came on December 5, 2009, just a few weeks after the CD was released. It was a body blow to the old-time music community, especially after the recent losses of Mike Seeger and Ray Alden. I knew Mike only slightly, Ray a little better, but Craig Johnson was a mentor and one of the best friends I've ever had.

We met in 1985. I had been trying to learn old-time banjo for a few months, and a friend recommended him as a teacher. I knew who he was and that he was a member of Double Decker String Band, but no more than that. I approached him after a performance one night at the Birchmere, in Alexandria, Virginia, and asked if he'd take me on for banjo lessons. His shoulders slumped a little, and I thought he was about to say no. Then our eyes met and we just looked at each other for a few seconds. He smiled slightly, nodded his head, and said, "Okay." I didn't know it at the time, of course, but that was the first step on a path that would change my life. I had fooled around with a couple of instruments but really had no idea of how to play. Or what to play, for that matter. Like most beginners, I had heard "Soldier's Joy," "Over the Waterfall," and a few others, and I probably thought that the book I found those tunes in represented all of old-time music. I didn't even know that there was such a thing as fingerstyle banjo. I barely knew anything about music, only that it was important to me on some fundamental level.

The lessons started soon after we met. I'd go to his house in Takoma Park, Maryland, one night each week and we'd sit in the kitchen and go through tunes as slowly as I needed, which was pretty slowly. But it wasn't long - maybe the third or fourth lesson - before he started playing records for me. Kyle Creed, Fred Cockerham, Virgil Anderson, Buddy Thomas, John Carson. Hey, wait a minute, those last two guys were playing fiddle. I'm here for banjo lessons, aren't I? Well, yeah - he would have limited it to that if I had insisted, I suppose, but his view was that I was there to learn about old-time music.

After a couple months of that, he started taking me along on his trips to Galax. Craig was close to Luther Davis and Kahle Brewer at that time, and weekends in

Galax were a regular part of his life. Luther died before my first trip, but we went to see Kahle many times. I was mostly an observer: Craig was there to learn Kahle's tunes and his style, and a greenhorn banjo player couldn't really be part of that. But I got to know Kahle and Edna in their home, see how they lived, listen to Kahle's stories about playing with Pop Stoneman, and see first-hand how music was part of their life. We always stopped at Tommy Barr's fiddle shop on Saturday morning, and we often went to Alice Gerard's house for breakfast before leaving on Sunday. All the way down and all the way back, we would listen to tapes that Craig had chosen for the trip. Different fiddlers, different banjo players, different bands, different styles, different regions of the country. He would explain the differences and tell me about his times with the ones he had known. I learned more about old-time music in the cab of a Nissan pickup than in all the music camps I've ever attended.

Craig was born in Michigan in 1953 and grew up in the city of Wayne. He graduated from the University of Michigan and was active in the 1970s Ann Arbor music scene. After moving to Washington, DC, he played various instruments with local bands, eventually joining Bill Schmidt, John Beam, and Bruce Hutton in Double Decker String Band in 1978. He married Brenda VanLunen in 1989 and they moved to West Virginia shortly afterward, then to North Carolina in 2001. Through all the changes that life brings — the raising of children, changing of jobs, moving to new houses and new cities — Double Decker continued to play together. I cannot think of another old-time band that can lay claim to that kind of longevity. You don't have to be around them very long to see how much they love and respect each other. Each has his own preferences in tunes and songs, and I have never once heard any of them criticize another's choices. Their discography includes two LPs on the Fretless label (*Giddyap Napoleon* and *Old-Time Tunes and Sentimental Favorites*), two cassettes (*Evolution Girl* and *For an Old Time, Call ...*), and two CDs (*Chasing Rainbows* and *The Rest is Yet to Come*).

Craig also played and recorded with some other people, notably Wayne and Margaret Martin (*Birdie*) and Tom King (*Grading Roads*). He had a brief but prolific period as a songwriter back in the late 1970s and early '80s. Despite his being a master of self-disparagement, they were great songs. Many songs have been written about social inequity and the unfairness of life to one group of people or another; Craig had the rare ability to write a song ("Piney Mountain," "Way Down the Road") that told the story through the



eyes of those affected, simply and without preaching, and the message was all the more powerful for the absence of it. Others told poignantly of love ("Keweenaw Light") or loss ("New Harmony"). Those four were recorded by one or more other singers, and by Craig himself on the new solo CD (*Way Down The Road*). Unfortunately, there were many others that never made it very far past his living room.

Craig will be remembered for many things. He was a master of the fiddle, banjo, and guitar, and there was an authenticity to his singing and playing that few could match. He didn't sound like some young guy who was trying to sound like an old guy, he sounded like he

really was the old guy. Some people joked that he had taken old lessons. More than most, he understood the range and depth of old-time music; he could do equal justice to a Tommy Jarrell fiddle tune or a Blind Alfred Reed song. He knew and loved many of the well-known tunes that pervade the festivals, but I think he cared more for some of the obscure material, such as the music of Wilmer Watts or the Woodie Brothers. He was partial to gospel songs and especially fond of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and his recordings

of that kind of material are a large part of his contribution to the preservation of this music. He was a natural as a teacher, whether one-on-one with an individual student or teaching a class of twelve at a music camp. He could make you believe, even in your most frustrated moments, that you would eventually get it. When you finally did, he was as delighted as you were. Perhaps more importantly, he was able to make you listen past the distractions of scratchy disk surfaces and bad microphone placement to the power and true beauty that lay beneath them — to listen to the music, not the recording. We were traveling together when he first heard Jess Morris' version of "Old Paint," and he was so moved by it that we had to pull off the road. It's one of my favorite fiddle pieces to this day, and I'm sure that I would never have fully appreciated it without Craig's influence.

So, here it is: my acknowledgement of the debt. But it's a debt that could never be fully repaid, even if he had lived a long life. To borrow an analogy I once heard Tracy Schwarz use about his friendship with Dewey Balfa, I was the kid outside the candy store with my nose pressed against the glass and Craig was the one who reached out and pulled me inside. But it was more than just learning about music; he was the kind of friend who could be trusted, who I could talk to about anything in my life, and who sometimes shared his joys and sorrows with me. He loved Brenda and their children, Alec and Sally, as much as any husband and father I've known. He leaves behind a legacy of preserved and original songs and tunes, of friendship and humor, of love of music and love of life. *✍*

Dave Shombert