

Columbia River Reader

Randy Sanders interview with Kate Long
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West Virginia flatpicking duo bring their Appalachian traditions to Astoria

Randy Sanders: So what exactly is “flatpicking?”

Kate Long: People who flatpick note the strings with a small, thin pick they hold between their thumb and first finger. It produces a clean, ringing note. When you fingerpick, you pluck the strings with your fingers. Most exceptional guitar players (Doc Watson, Chet Atkins, Steve Kaufman, Robin Kessinger) can do both. Robin is known for his exceptional clarity, complexity, and creativity with a flatpick, but he’s also a great blues player and fingerpicker. In the guitar world, the Winfield national flatpicking title is like the Oscar for best picture.

RS: As a child, you’d go sit on a rock and listen to a man play guitar across the street from you. How much did he influence you into pursuing music as a career?

KL: When I was a kid, I sang my thoughts as I played in the woods, in my room, wherever. Lots of kids do that. But too soon, we get the idea that real songs come from somewhere outside us, not inside us. So we stop singing or even hearing that inner voice. Elmer Hickman helped me know early on that the music belongs to ordinary people too, that it’s not just in the radio or TV. That it is a joyful, important part of life, no matter what other jobs you have or how un-famous you are. Like Elmer, I weave music through my life, but I’ve never been a full-time musician. I’ve been a counselor for runaway teenagers and a teacher, written two books and various other jobs. Right now, I’m a writing coach for newspapers. In the Northwest, I’ve visited the Seattle Times, the Tacoma News Tribune, and The Bremerton Sun as a writing coach.

RS: You will be performing with guitar player Robin Kessinger. Tell me about him.

KL: Robin is one of the best-loved musicians in the Appalachian area. His warmth and humor shine through in his playing. Many guitar players are technically good, but their playing doesn’t move you. Robin stuns people with his technical proficiency while he stirs them with the emotion in his playing. And he’s a lot of fun. Robin comes from a musical family, well-known in folk circles, amazing pickers. His Web site is www.robinkessinger.com. Mine is www.katelong.com. We have one together called www.robinandkate.com.

RS: Being from West Virginia, you have been blessed with some of the purest forms of American music. Has the music changed much over the years? If so, how?

KL: Many Appalachian musicians – Robin and me included – want to learn and preserve tunes the way they were played by people who came before us. How else would people who come after us know their musical roots? It’s a great job – an instant bond – to play those tunes with friends and strangers. At its best, often late at night, it feels like people from the past are playing along with you.

But we also think it’s important to keep branching within the tradition. When you know those roots, you can do that. I weave traditional echoes into new songs I wrote, though the subjects are often modern:

TV preachers, Vietnam, domestic violence, a kid who thinks she's God, a guy who takes a job hauling toxic waste so he can stay in his homeland. Any music that can't add new links is dead. And Appalachian traditional music is living, breathing, and adding new branches. We hope to prove it at the Uniontown Café on April 24th.

RS: I imagine summer nights where folks in the West Virginia hills sit together with friends and family picking tunes and singing deep into the night. Is this an accurate scenario?

KL: It is. But it's not just family and friends. Traditional music cuts across social boundaries. People who ordinarily wouldn't talk to each other often form deep friendships because they love to play the music together. The players may live on different planets in the rest of their lives. But the music makes them see each other as human beings. The West Virginia traditional music community is truly an extended family. We fight, laugh, talk about each other, have feuds, go to family weddings and funerals, and keep seeing each other year after year.

RS: Do you ever invite the audience to sing along with you during particular songs during your performance?

KL: I almost never perform without inviting the audience to sing on something I don't enjoy music division between a few who make music and many who just listen. Music is meant to be shared. I perform some tunes alone, but write others in such a way that people can sing along easily if they want. We hand out chorus sheets at most shows.

I aim to make people see the extraordinary in the ordinary and to move people to laughter and tears. I want those extremes on my albums: the laughter, the tears. I want my albums to move people spiritually. I'll leave it to you to comment on how well I succeed.