

Some thoughts about my collaboration with Robin Kessinger

- *Kate Long*

Robin and I both think of traditional music as a living, growing thing, as a chain whose links are still being formed. We see our collaboration as a link in that chain.

He and I have played traditional music at many of the same West Virginia festivals and gatherings for over 20 years. When we first started playing concerts together, that common ground let us easily cook up fresh versions of old and new tunes.

West Virginia old-time players often call traditional Appalachian music “The Music.” Robin and I come at The Music from different directions. I fell in love with it when I was about seven, after my small West Virginia town got a television station, WOAY.

Television was new then. I watched WOAY as much as I could. It was magical. They didn’t have any network, so lots of local people could get on the air. I watched hours and hours of ordinary-looking people play extraordinary old-time, gospel, and bluegrass.

A WOAY musician lived on my street. I had a little-girl crush on him. I sat on a rock in his yard as he practiced. He couldn’t see me, but I could sing too and pretend he and I were signing on WOAY.

Robin didn’t have to sit on a rock outside someone’s house to listen. The music was in his house. His day, Bob Kessinger, was a great old-time player who quit professional music to become a minister. Robin’s great-uncle Clark Kessinger, a legendary old-time fiddler, was the first old-time musician to sell more than a million albums. Clark’s playing was vigorous and lyrical, but, in my opinion, he wasn’t as soulful or creative a player as Robin is.

All his life, Robin has played old tunes that have no names on them. I write tunes that have my name on them. My tunes owe those nameless tunes a great debt. That’s common ground for me and Robin, those nameless tunes. We respect and honor the echoes of people who came before us, many of them literally rooted in the Appalachian ground. People hear the threads of old-time music, even when we branch into swing or blues.

In a concert, we often start with traditional songs with no writer’s name: an a capella ballad, Shady Grove, fiddle tunes. We play songs with Appalachian names like Jean Ritchie, Hazel Dickens, Billy Edd Wheeler. And Robin adds new dimensions to my songs, many of them stories about ordinary people dealing with life.

People who like rooted music, fine songwriting and amazing guitar work will love this evening. So will people who like to sing. We invite people to sing with us on many songs and often provide chorus sheets.

What will people get from our concert? People say my songs make them think, laugh and feel. Robin’s guitar work will stun them. They’ll see a wonderful collaboration in progress. They’ll laugh a lot. And they’ll leave with a sense of the way this music has moved through time.