

"Keepin' Up With the Jones"

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Don Buedel introduced me to Tom and Anne Jones some time ago at a music party at their home in Wneaton which doubles as a music school. We interviewed Tom and Anne on December 7, 1984, just before a Friday night sing-around.

—Paul Klonowski

How and when did the school get started?

A. It was over 20 years ago, I think. When I was first learning to play the guitar, I would sit on the front porch and practice. I had three little children at the time. I wasn't sitting on the front porch to attract attention, but because they were playing on the sidewalk. People would hear me practice, and they'd come over and say, "Why don't you show me something?" I got started that way, teaching one or two people.

P. Tom?

T. Well, yes, it was a matter of expediency, we had babysitters while we were taking lessons at the Old Town School. They'd hear us practicing when they'd arrive, sort of our last minute practice before class. They'd be interested in what we were doing.

A. They'd ask us to teach them instead of paying. After awhile, their friends wanted in too.

T. There was that fateful year of 1966, when we decided teaching and working another job was getting tiresome after awhile. We were thinking of things we could do to raise money, and you (Anne) decided to start some classes that summer. We put one ad in the local paper, it was "Folk music & guitar classes, once a week, with free hootenanny Saturdays."

A. That was that era.

T. We had our classes, and on Saturday all the people of all levels were invited to the hootenannies, usually in our backyard. I'd plunk on the homemade gutbucket bass.

A. Nobody played banjo yet.

T. It was fun. After awhile, Anne got invited to teach at the Old Town School. She was in their advanced

guitar class. She started to teach there. Sometimes we were going in 2 or 3 times a week, and that got pretty tiresome. I saw an ad in the local paper for a guitar teacher in a school district. Turned out to be a very nice gentleman heading the district looking to start an evening program at Hinsdale South High School.

B. Where were you living then?

A. In Glen Ellyn. When we lived in Chicago (Hyde Park), I thought the Old Town School was too far. I thought, "I'm not going to the north side to take guitar lessons." After we got to Glen Ellyn and there was nobody to learn from, I got desperate, then I started going to the Old Town School. Once I got used to it, it didn't seem very far.

T. Teaching at the Old Town School got tiresome. Actually, we felt guilty about teaching adults all this time. We felt they should go to the Old Town School because they had the greatest concentration of teaching talent.

A. It's hard to make suburbanites go into the city.

T. After 2 years of recommending people go there, I think 2 people went. We decided we weren't competition for them, so we went ahead and started giving classes in the Old Town style.

B. You didn't just start out making your whole livelihood with this. What were you doing before and how did you ease into this?

T. We have choice words for anybody who wants to do the same thing. Choose bluegrass as a career if you like to see the street through the floorboards of your car. The school grew from that one ad we had in the paper. With more students all the time, we had to recruit some friends to teach with us. We had our first experience with group dynamic

A. That was an era when the guitar was really big.

T. It was very easy to get 25 or 30 students everytime you offered a class. We had to turn people away sometimes. That was 1968 - we offered our first guitar class. In '69, we offered the

first banjo class. There were 4 people teaching all night in the same place. We had a big agglomeration in the middle were we'd have up to 85 people at one time.

A. A lot like the Old Town School was.

T. I was working and taking classes at night. When we started learning guitar, that took up our time.

A. Music took the place of everything else.

T. We had programs going in several YMCA's and various places, and at our home, too. We redecorated the basement or our old bungalow for classes. I was working as a mailman at the time, which was ideal because I'd be home in the early afternoon for after school classes. The only problem was getting up early - getting to the post office at 6 A.M.

A. I walked into his classroom once while he was giving a lesson. He was asleep, and the poor kid was sitting there looking at him...

T. I really was, I was playing, but I was asleep. I was moving kind of slow, but...well, it had its moments.

A. As we got busier with more students, we decided that Tom could afford to leave the Post Office.

T. It was really getting to a point when I had to choose between one or the other. We had discussions about it, had seriously considered it a couple of times, but I didn't want to give up a secure government job. But in the late 70's, there was a clamp down on work standards for postal employees. There were requirements postmasters had to fill. A certain number of people they had to fire within a certain age group. It got very difficult for someone who wanted a lot of time away from their job. I wondered whether it was all worth it or not. They really pushed us into a choice. Did I want to do another 15 years of the till I got my retirement, or could I last it out? If they'd let the postman alone to do his job delivering mail, it'd be okay, but there was office politics. We enjoyed the music more. Hard work is our thing, and it gave us some freedom of expression. It was actually an obvious choice when

it got down to it. We had talked with some friends of ours about going into a partnership. He didn't like his job, either. I think he still doesn't like his job.

B. How did you settle on this building?

T. We wanted a place in Glen Ellyn.

A. We'd been there 15 years and things were going really well.

T. There wasn't any suitable property there, so we finally bought this place about 7 years ago.

A. The funny thing was, our enrollment was at an all-time high, but from then on it went steadily down. There's a steady demand, but it's steadily diminishing. The interest in folk music is always is always steady. There'll always be somebody - the Two Way Street Coffeehouse will always be there. But the College of DuPage used to have 12 guitar classes; now they have 3. They're also a lot smaller than they used to be. And at Wheaton North where I used to get 25 beginners every time, I had only 7 last time, which gives you less potential for a continuing class.

T. I don't know what the future will bring. I think our biggest choice has been to stick with what we know, what we like, and what we enjoy, and what we feel is really important styles for people to learn. If you get off on a rock kick, it's so artificially contrived, not "down-home". It's so complex - you can't just sit down and play rock. The electronics give it a different format. It requires a lot of set-up and preparation, whereas you can sit on the back porch and play guitar or banjo with some friends. One of our big difficult choices was whether to expand into areas that are more conventional - try to open a store, follow trends in pop music, lay in supplies of things that will sell. We decided we were more in the education business. We work well as an educational institution, a not-for-profit organization. It seems to be enough to keep going.

B. So, even though you see a diminishing trend, you still see enough to keep going?

A. Well, Tom has a second job. He's had it for about two years now.

T. We've survived. The music business hasn't been good for anyone for the last 3 or 4 years - a lot of stores closed.

A. It's better than it's been. Sales are a lot better than they were a couple of years ago. There were a couple of Christmases when nobody bought a guitar or banjo. And then there were those years way back when it was so easy to sell them. People would say, "I want to take guitar lessons, what should I have?" We'd say, "Buy this," they'd write the check, and that was it.

P. So, you've both been playing music for over 20 years. How many different instruments do you each play?

A. Well, I only play the guitar and mountain dulcimer. The banjo and autoharp, but not enough to speak of.

T. I'm still working on it, but the banjo, guitar a little bit, bass some-times.

A. He used to play the dobro, but more seldom since he got the bass.

T. Occasionally I've been caught strumming an autoharp. The mandolin is something that I haven't tackled yet. The fiddle I've closed myself up in a room with.

A. A fast way to empty the house is to pick up a fiddle. We leave the fiddle and mandolin to Cathy.

P. And for what instruments are lessons offered?

A. Guitar and banjo are the ones we have the most students for. I have dulcimer students. Cathy has fiddle and mandolin, and a few hammered dulcimer students. By far, most of the students are in guitar, then banjo. We don't have classes in the other instruments, just private students, because even if you have 2 or 3 students, they won't be at the same level of ability, or they won't be able to come the same day.

T. A few years back, when we were still in Glen Ellyn, we had a teaching staff of 5 people - a fiddle class, mandolin class, 3 levels of banjo classes.

A. That didn't last too long. That was about the time the movie "Deliverance" came out...oooooh, did we get banjo students. That movie made everybody want to play banjo, but not with very much dedication. They took a few

lessons and quit. Banjo students outnumbered guitar students for awhile. I found that the kind of student you can be least successful with is the one who wants to learn one tune - a student who wants to play "Malaguena" in 6 weeks or a banjo student who wants to play "Duelin' Banjos" in the first 5 lessons.

P. Primarily, you're teaching various folk music styles?

A. Folk music and bluegrass, and on guitar we get into a little contemporary music, but nothing rock or electronic. John Denver and Gordon Lightfoot is about as contemporary as I get.

P. Particularly, Tom, in your banjo playing, also in alot of the fiddle playing that goes on around here, there's a healthy dose of old-time music as opposed to bluegrass.

A. We like old-time music alot.

T. We got interested back when old-time was one of, oh, several categories that were all interesting to us, but if I got into one, it was old-time. We studied with Fleming Brown at the Old Town School. We enjoyed the old-time banjo & fiddle sounds.

A. It was a branch of folk music - the roots of folk music.

T. I used to listen to the old Library of Congress recordings while I was in college. Can't think of anybody else who did that.

A. The University of Chicago Folk Festival always had good old-time musicians. We went to that the first year we were married. It was the first one of those. Frank Proffitt, Doc Watson, (before anyone knew of him, when he was a side man), Horton Barker. We heard Jean Redpath the first time she was ever heard in this area. I heard Bill Monroe before I knew what bluegrass was. Pete Seeger was there one year, and a little boy wanted Pete Seeger to autograph his banjo head. Don Reno was sitting right there, and we said, "You ought to get Don Reno to autograph it too. He's a famous banjo player." The little boy didn't want to get Reno's autograph, so he got Seeger's on the front of his banjo, then turned it around for Reno to autograph the inside.

T. We were sitting there having lunch, with all these legendary people around us: Mike Seeger, Red Smiley. Just by coincidence, we were the only other people there.

P. There's a small shop room down in the basement where you do repairs and instrument building.

T. I started working on guitars that were so bad you couldn't do any harm to them - good kindling. Gradually, I got up enough nerve to work on better ones. I devoured virtually everything that was published on the subject. There was always a workshop where I would work. Then, several years ago, when banjo kits became available, we started having classes in banjo building and repair, sort of an apprentice program. Whatever there was lying around, we'd work on it.

It was about that time we started visiting Weyerhaeuser's facility, and they often had a seconds pile, pieces of wood that had some problems. A lot of the repairs were practiced on our own instruments.

Now we have this class in kit building with three people in it.

A. You've put alot of banjos together.

T. We lost track after 200.

A. Other than that, we've made a few dulcimers.

T. Both from kits and from scratch. We've got one in the works right now that we're trying to inlay silver wire on the fretboard. We're trying to figure out how to do that. This is somebody who really likes that kind of close work.

A. She's already built a very nice banjo.

T. We've got a 13 year-old who's building his own banjo from a kit.

A. You did put one mandolin kit together.

B. Your daughter, Cathy, teaches here as well. What was it like as the kids grew up?



A. Whenever the kids took a nap, I got out the guitar and practiced. Or, when they went outside, I'd play on the porch.

T. That's another interesting phenomenon.

They were all exposed to our friends and fellow players. Cathy, the oldest, worked slowly into it, and got interested in playing. Tom, the second one, was much the same, except he didn't work at it. He seems to have a good ear.

A. He never liked to practice unless there was company in the house. Cathy would shut the door to her room and practice for hours.

T. Tom plays a pretty respectable mandolin. If he worked at it, he'd be good. He plays good gutbucket bass without ever practicing from one season to the next. He'll just plunk right along.

A. He doesn't take an instrument to school with him. He's very good at listening.

T. Bill, the third, hasn't shown an interest until lately.

A. When he was a senior in high school, he suddenly decided to play the guitar, and learned as much in one year as some people do in 5 or 6.

T. He sat in on a banjo class one time when he was about 12. He came back a week later with 3 variations of the tune we'd learned. He didn't continue to play, but it showed he had some interest.

Nathaniel has been the victim. It's taken us away from him more than the others because by the time he came along, we had a full schedule.

A. At least, he hasn't shown any interest yet.

T. I still like that quote from Pop Stoneman, when he was asked how he got all of his 21 or 23 kids to play musical instruments. He said it was easy. You got a bunch of really nice instruments, tuned them up, put them on the bed, and said, "Don't touch."

B. You've talked about the decisions you've made and continue to make, but you've had occasion over the years to stop and say, "Why?" What does this mean to each of you?

A. I don't know. It's just what I enjoy most. I like to share it with other people.

T. I don't sing alot. I wouldn't unless I had to lead the beginner's

classes. I'll find myself sitting in the middle of class seeing all these people with smiles on their faces enjoying what they're doing, and I'll say, well, maybe I'm really doing something good, getting them to play, sharing this music. It's fun.

A. Like any job, you can get tired of it. There's days I'd rather die than go into guitar class, but once it gets started, it's not so bad. Usually I end up enjoying it after all.

T. When we were teaching part-time, we'd hear comments about not trying to do it for a living because when you become professional you become jaded and burned out. I always felt I could refresh myself after a long day of delivering mail by teaching a class. It's something interesting to do. But then we found ourselves becoming full-timers at it. We're constantly weighing different possibilities without getting too commercial and standing behind a counter all day. We've been close to wondering what's going to happen, but something comes along, and we'll think it's all worthwhile. But I think it would be wise to keep your day job.

A. What we'd like is to get enough students so that Tom could quit his job. Then the 3 of us could work together. That would be our dream. If they'd just make another movie like "Deliverance..."

P. You mentioned the Saturday night hootenannies of years ago for the students. Are these Friday night gatherings you have now mostly made up of students?

A. No. The Friday nights are for fun.

T. The Saturday nights were for getting the students together, teaching them how to play in a group. But it was hard to get them to come a second day of the week. We'd have workshops from time to time which developed into a bunch of people who like to pick together.

A. The Friday night group is people we feel are friends. We don't have to be in a business-like relationship with them. We do learn from each other, but it's more on an equal basis.

I like to think there's one night a week when I can sit down and play for fun. We didn't start the Friday night group until after we moved here. I felt it added something that had been missing. I got so busy teaching, spending all of my time with beginners, that I hardly ever got a chance to play with people of my own level. With this group I'm constantly being swamped with people who can play much better than I can. That's a change for the better.

T. Garrison Keiler put his finger on it. When asked, with the success of the Prairie Home Companion, why didn't he move to L.A. with the program, he said, he wouldn't consider it because it took so long to find some friends he could cook spaghetti and pick with, he'd hate to move and have to find a new bunch to pick and cook spaghetti with.