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Guitarist goes 'Fur Peace' after lessons at ranch

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Messenger photo by John Halley

Marjorie Thompson has turned guitar lessons at Fur Peace Ranch in Meigs County into a music career. A biology professor in Rhode Island, she manages to play about 70 shows a year.

DARWIN - Marjorie Thompson is making a sort of homecoming as the opener for this Saturday's Dan Hicks and the Hot Licks show at the Fur Peace Station.

Thompson is a veteran alumna of the Fur Peace Ranch, having taken several workshops at Jorma Kaukonen's guitar school in Meigs County. This time she won't be sitting in the first two rows for the concert, as she has so many times as a student. She will be on stage, and all eyes will be on her guitar.

Thompson began taking classes at the Fur Peace Ranch in 1999. Her hard work to get to know the neck and strings of her guitar has paid off over the years. She's developed her own style and writes her own music, and has toured throughout the United States and Europe, opening for such acts as Hot Tuna, Ritchie Havens, Roy Bookbinder and Chris Smither.

Playing with her heroes has been a thrill, Thompson said, especially opening for an act like Hot Tuna which features Kaukonen on the blues guitar. She's been a big fan of the group since the 1970s, when a boyfriend played her one of the band's records. She has warmed up the crowd as an opener for four different Hot Tuna shows, and she still can't get over it.

"It's a dream come true," Thompson said. "(Jorma's) the captain. It's just such a riot."

Becoming a professional musician has long been an aspiration of Thompson's since she was introduced to the folk music scene and began playing guitar in the 1960s as a child, but she had difficulty finding time to devote to it over the years. She is a biology professor and a dean at Brown University in Rhode Island, had operated a catering business and raised seven children. Music had to be placed on the back-burner, with barely enough flame to simmer.

But in 1999, she took a weekend workshop at the Fur Peace Ranch with Kaukonen, and it changed her life. Kaukonen has always been one of her heroes, and learning by his side made her want to pinch herself.

"I was petrified at first, but when he showed up for the first day, I nearly went through the floor," Kaukonen said. "I've admired Jorma's playing ever since I was aware of it."

Kaukonen called on Thompson to play something. She performed a rendition of "Green Rock Road." He recognized it, and the stardom melted away.

"It was a thrill," Thompson said. "You always start out a little star-struck at the ranch, but that diminishes quickly. Jorma is pretty personable and a joy to be around. He's a born teacher. It's total pleasure."

Thompson began taking classes as often as she could at the Fur Peace Ranch.

"I learned how to use the entire neck of the guitar," Thompson said. "I learned various licks and riffs, and different instrumental techniques that add color and interest to the songs."

Then one day, she wrote a song and it sounded pretty good. She was soon writing more songs, and began playing in coffee houses and bars. Then she started opening for some pretty big names, and her career took off.

While she still teaches biology at Brown University, she manages to do about 70 shows a year, traveling to a location and playing two to three gigs a weekend. She has her own CDs, one of which was produced by Michael Falzarano of Hot Tuna. She also has her own Web site, and her concert schedule is booked through 2007.

Thompson often plays alongside bassist Greg Franklin, whom she met taking classes at the Fur Peace Station.

Thompson has even been asked to teach a blues guitar workshop at the Fur Peace Ranch this spring.

Fur Peace Ranch manager Vanessa Kaukonen said she gets many CDs that students have recorded since taking classes at the ranch, but few have reached the level of Thompson. The school has a 97 percent return rate, and many play at open mic events and bars.

"If they are good enough, they can sometimes open shows for some pretty high-profile people," Vanessa Kaukonen said. "Over the years, we've built up close to 3,000 friendships with people all over the country. That's something we hadn't counted on."

Thompson can fingerpick with some of the best. Most of her songs are original, although they carry the blues tradition so they sound like a different time, Thompson said.

"Playing in front of people has become such a thrill," Thompson said. "It's my oxygen. I am very fortunate to be able to do something that feels this good."

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Reader Comments

Posted: Friday, September 15, 2006

Article comment by: [Caitlyn Thompson](#)

That's my mom! The most amazing woman I know. I think I speak for my siblings when I say that we don't know how she does it either. The article failed to mention however, her jewelry making, and the fact that she is the Left-Overs Queen--makes fantastic meals with whatever has been left over from previous nights of feasting. She really is the best mom ever. Love you!