



Marjorie Thompson has worked hard and excelled at three careers, any one of which would cause many to bow under the pressure. What she has in common with the fingerstyle guitarists and songwriters and singers of the blues, country blues, and folk traditions is that she has lived life fully and made pointed and poignant observations about it.

Originally from New York City, she took up the guitar in the mid-1960's. A desire to study piano was thwarted by the constraints of small apartment living in Brooklyn and Queens; the "consolation prize," at her mother's suggestion, was the \$16 department store guitar she received at age 10. Taught by local teens who wore the cool hippie look and forayed into the jungle of Greenwich Village, she became a passionate and fairly adept young player, in the traditional styles of the Blues artists of the 20s and 30s as well as New York street singer Rev. Gary Davis and the rediscovered Mississippi John Hurt (icons of Piedmont-style picking, they were dramatic influences on popular artists emerging in the 1960s).

After a year of determined and constant playing, she was rewarded with a Guild F-30, similar to John Hurt's, which she still owns. By age 12, Marjorie could pick a solid alternating thumb groove with a detailed melody line, no mean feat even for older, more experienced players. And she loved it.

At the same time, she discovered a strong attraction for science, borne of a precollege program in 1969 that galvanized her passion for biology by the age of 15.

Life's paths brought college and graduate school, and the pursuit of studies at Brown University during the 1970s. Each year she wished for additional achievement in her playing, but each year was largely devoted to studies, and to the demands of "real life."

In 1974, Marjorie received a degree in Biochemistry, followed by a PhD in Biology in 1979. The biological knowledge was quickly put to practical use: the first of her seven children was born in 1980.

A pivotal event in the music world of 1970, and especially Marjorie's music world, was the release of Hot Tuna's first album. Hot Tuna was a spinoff of the popular psychedelic band Jefferson Airplane, bringing together its lead guitarist, Jorma Kaukonen, and bassist Jack Casady in an acoustic duo that drew its themes from the country blues that had shaped and propelled Marjorie's own playing. And while academia and, later, a new and growing family meant even less time with the guitar, the spark remained. Each New Year's, she would resolve to learn "Hesitation Blues" (a Rev. Gary Davis piece) the way Jorma played it so famously.

Beginning in 1983 -- and still going strong -- she has been part of the biology faculty and deanery at Brown, doing what she also loves: teaching and advising students.

But something special and important happened in 1999.

"That spring, I noticed an ad in Acoustic Guitar magazine," she remembers. "A photograph of Jorma Kaukonen himself! He had opened a guitar camp in rural southeastern Ohio. Did my eyes deceive? No, it was true." The Fur Peace Ranch Guitar Camp was offering weekend workshops with Jorma and other master musicians (including Jorma's Hot Tuna partner, Jack Casady).

"I was terrified, but wrote the deposit check immediately."

The first visit to the camp in August 1999 returned her musical pursuits to the fore. She rediscovered the passion and desire to play that she had experienced as a teenager. Something dormant had sprung back to life. She returned repeatedly to the camp in the ensuing year -- she still holds the record for the most-frequent student -- to study with Jorma, now her master teacher and good friend. "Hesitation Blues" was comfortable at last, but she still thought of herself as a guitar hobbyist.

Then things changed again:

Marjorie had played a lot of guitar over 35 years, but had never written a song. In the summer of 2001, she heard songs that were demanding to be written -- the Rev. Gary Davis used to say that songs were "revealed" to him, and the muse now was so strong she understood what he had meant. Past and present influences met and a unique style, a metaphorical voice, emerged. By November of that year she had written 40 songs. There are over 100 now). Jorma's wife and manager and Marjorie's friend, Vanessa, pronounced the songs and Marjorie's performance of them good and urged her to seek an audience.

The diminutive Marjorie, with a full time academic job and a full house -- to say nothing of stage fright -- became her own booking agent and producer. A demo CD opened the door to a year's worth of bookings -- 92 the first year out.

Since then, she has recorded four studio albums of her songs with a proper producer and engineer, and her career as a country blues artist has continued to grow, with neither end nor plateau in sight. She continues to play scores of concerts each year both in the U.S. and overseas. More recently, she has served as Jorma Kaukonen's teaching assistant at Fur Peace Ranch. In 2007 she appeared in the Fur Peace Ranch course list as an instructor in her own workshop, "Songcrafting and Country Blues Essentials," which was quickly filled. Also in 2007 she recorded her fifth album, which like the previous four is filled with quirky, humorous and heartfelt original songs.

Recording and teaching would be enough to consume most people's time, but Marjorie maintains an active tour schedule, playing throughout the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states, as well as European tours and events and festivals around the United States. To find out if she will be performing in your area, check out her [Show schedule](#).

## Right By Me

"Marjorie Thompson came to her recording career late. Although a guitar picker since her pre-teens, life took her on other paths--including that of teaching biology at the university level and being a mom to seven kids--until she was already in her forties. At that time, having been inspired for decades by the playing of Jefferson Airplane/Hot Tuna guitar master Jorma Kaukonen, Thompson attended a guitar camp run by the veteran for the first of several sessions and decided to devote more time to her own music. She began writing songs for the first time in her life and recorded her first album in 2003. Right By Me is her fourth, and it demonstrates that the efforts have paid off big-time: the traditional acoustic country-blues-based songs reveal a deep devotion to the blues greats of the early 20th century that manifests in an original approach, as well as a level of songcraft that artists who've been at it a much longer time would be happy to claim. Like Kaukonen, Thompson writes of matters that affect her inner self--stories are often autobiographical or at least of universally understood sentiments--and she delivers them in a smart, classy style characterized by intricate fingerpicking and heartfelt vocals. Thompson also chose her backing musicians well: Among those bringing the songs to life here are pedal steel guitarist Buddy Cage, mainstay of the New Riders of the Purple Sage, and mandolinist Barry Mitterhoff, who plays with Kaukonen and the present-day Hot Tuna. In addition to her original material, Thompson puts her personalized, old-timey stamp on the Beatles' "When I'm Sixty-Four" and Kaukonen's own "Watch the North Wind Rise," one of his most beautiful compositions, which she gives an Appalachian tint. That she manages to integrate them so seamlessly says a lot about how far her artistry has come."

- Jeff Tamarkin, *All Music Guide*

"Marjorie Thompson opens her new CD, "Right By Me," with a song called, "Don't Look Back," which is essentially a noirish tale of a spiked-heeled lady on a date who decides she doesn't want to see the guy again, and makes sure no one else will, either. It is Thompson's wicked humor blended with a country-folk sensibility that makes the track stand out. But it is her extraordinary fingerstyle acoustic picking and ingenious songwriting ability that makes the entire CD a triumph. She is supported on "Right By Me" by some terrific musicians, including mandolin genius Barry Mitterhoff and pedal steel player Buddy Cage. Some of the other notable cuts include a poignant tale of human interaction called "Ernie And Grace," a juicy ode to edibles entitled "Eat Right By Me," and a sparkling version of Jorma Kaukonen's "Watch The North Wind Rise." So make a date with Marjorie Thompson. Just make sure you have a food-taster nearby."

- Michael Ventre, *MSNBC.com*

"I've been following Marjorie Thompson's music for, well, almost ten years. When I first heard her play, I felt that she had something special. I was right. You just know these things. Right By Me, her fourth and newest CD is certainly her finest outing to date. It is well produced and delivered with depth and conviction. She does a fine arrangement of one of my songs, Watch The Northwind Rise. Thanks Marjorie! The song that really captured my ear though, is America The New. Strong, Marjorie, very strong! This one is a real dandy. They're all good though. You need Right By Me, right by you!"

- Jorma Kaukonen

"Each new album from Marjorie Thompson presents melodic, memorable facets of the life, times and psyche of this modern singer-songwriter who derives her music from the folk and fingerpicking tradition. Sometimes sensual, sometimes political, always relevant and universal in her polished, acoustic presentation, in her fourth CD she again surrounds herself with notable musicians. Featured sidepersons include Buddy Cage on pedal steel - yes, that Buddy Cage who played in New Riders of the Purple Sage, with Dylan on Blood on the Tracks, with Ian & Sylvia on Great Speckled Bird. She provisions us the best mandolinist in the Northeastern Quadrant: Barry Mitterhoff, formerly of Skyline with Tony Trischka, Silk City and, most recently, the touring partner of Jorma Kaukonen. I began to think, listening to this album, that we have finally found the next Phil Ochs -- Marjorie's song "America the New" recalls Ochs' sardonic, trenchant contemporary criticism with the stops-you-could line: "When Social was the word, instead of Homeland, that described Security." And then in "Ernie and Grace" she uses the phrase "There but for Fortune." Shivers up the spine, anybody? Her first song, familiarly titled "Don't Look Back" is an auspicious opening piece about three novel ways to kill your lover. Now that's original! "Come to the River" utilizes a six-string guitar-banjo, with its powerful walking bass, in the Delta blues idiom. "Light of Day," punctuated by Mike Levine's tasteful, lyrical Dobro lines, examines a theme that returns so often in Marjorie's songs - that of self-actualization as, perhaps, defined by theorist Kurt Goldstein who postulated that the drive to realize all of one's potentialities is in fact the "Master Motive" - the only real motive a person has. Marjorie takes the poetic view when she writes: "Sitting in the barroom, perched up on a chair, I must be invisible, and the barman he can't hear." Whether writing of a chance encounter in a darkened parking lot or happily interpreting Paul McCartney's timeless fantasy about sexagenarian life, (with the grandkids, Vera, Chuck and Dave), Marjorie Thompson generously gives us thoughtful themes and mellifluous music. Her musicianship is resplendent with six-string sparkle."

- Stan Jay, *Mandolin Brothers Vintage News*

"Marjorie has released 'Right By Me,' an acoustic flavored offering with that expected finger picking expertise Thompson has been priming o'er these many years. However, it is her strong sense of lyric that shines throughout. Through each unfolding track, she creates a weave of storytelling that can be both whimsical and weighty."

- Don DiMuccio, *RIMotif*

"Marjorie's new CD, 'Right By Me' was a pleasure to listen to. The songwriting is thoughtful, witty, sometimes whimsical but always clever. Her guitar playing is steeped in the Piedmont and Blues traditions, showing that she is an expert fingerpicker. Taken as a whole, this CD simply works. It's wonderful."

- Little Toby Walker

"Marjorie Thompson's singing and lyrics channel the classic folk artist of old, and her playing shows that all you really need is the pure touch of an acoustic guitar, and a heart-felt, soulful song."

- Pete Sears

"Your playing is stellar and your voice is bluesy, angelic and true all at the same time. Everyone who loves acoustic music should buy this CD. Nice work."

- Bob McCarthy

"Great work throughout - it makes me proud to be a Marge-Tone!"

- Pat Donohue

"Singer/songwriter Marjorie Thompson has a great ability to add modern twists to ages-old themes. With Right By Me, her new album of mostly folk-blues originals, she succeeds again at setting ancient stories of human frailty in the contemporary age, ably backed by her acoustic guitar and Jorma Kaukonen sidemen."

- Mark Hanson, *Accent on Music, Grammy-award-winning guitarist*

"I've been following Marjorie Thompson's music for, well, almost ten years. Right By Me is certainly her finest outing to date. It is well produced and delivered with depth and conviction. Strong, Marjorie, very strong."

- Jorma Kaukonen

"I'm tempted to say that I taught her everything she knows, but she's gone so far beyond anything I showed her I'm afraid I might get called on it."

- Chris Smither

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- Stan Jay, *Vintage News*

"Thank you, Marjorie, that's great!"

- Oprah Winfrey

**Marjorie has opened shows for:**

- The Wiyos
- Dan Licks & Hot Licks
- Paul Geremia
- Happy Traum
- Mike Dowling
- Chris Smither
- Guy Davis
- Lori McKenna
- Michael Smith
- Paul Rishell & Annie Raines
- Richard Shindell
- Roy Book Binder
- Jack Casady with Box Set
- Jorma Kaukonen
- Acoustic Hot Tuna
- Jack Casady
- Jorma Kaukonen
- Prof Louie and the Crowmatix
- Chris and Meredith Thompson
- Vance Gilbert
- Geoff Muldaur
- Brooks Williams
- Richie Havens
- Dan Hicks and Hot Licks
- New Riders of the Purple Sage

Press kit photos:



## In the Press:



# The Athens Messenger

Thursday, September 14, 2006

## Guitarist goes 'Fur Peace' after lessons at ranch

Thursday, September 14, 2006



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."

## Reader's Rig



Country-blues and folk guitarist Marjorie Thompson gets the most out of her custom Lizard Eye and Gottschall guitars thanks to their slim, speedy necks.

**WHO SHE IS** Marjorie Thompson is a singer-songwriter/fingerstyle guitarist from Providence, Rhode Island, who plays country-blues and folk music and has recorded four CDs of original songs. Originally from New York City, she took up guitar in the mid '60s and it soon became a lifelong passion. Thompson's busy professional life once sidelined music—she's currently dean of Brown University's biology department, where she has worked for more than 21 years—but attending Jorma Kaukonen's Fur Peace Ranch Guitar Camp six years ago changed that. "After the camp I couldn't stop playing and my progress just exploded," Thompson relates. "The way Jorma breaks pieces down unlocked the door to my own music. His manner, style, and aplomb made me work hard to apply that knowledge to my material." Thompson is now a teaching assistant in Kaukonen's beginning fingerstyle classes, and she plays about 75 shows a year with bassist Greg Franklin under the band name MoSugar.

**MAIN GIG GUITAR** Custom Lizard Eye Orchestra Model (shown above), built by luthier Fran LaMalva ([www.lizardeye.com](http://www.lizardeye.com)) of Groton, Massachusetts. "The Lizard Eye is tailored for me with a somewhat narrower waist because I'm tiny—five-feet tall!" she says. "It has a handpicked set of dark East Indian rosewood, an Engelmann top, bubinga binding, and a modified V neck that is fast and slim because I have very small hands."

**SECONDARY AXES** Collings OM2C and C10, Taylor 814, RahSong OM, and Gottschall Funnelbody flattop, designed and built by Peter Gottschall ([www.gottschall-guitar.de](http://www.gottschall-guitar.de)) in Uttenweiler, Germany. "It has soundholes inside its double cutaways and it projects surprising volume and tone for its size," Thompson says. "It's also very comfortable to play, and has a very fast, slim neck that's perfect for my playing style."

**AMPLIFICATION** Lizard Eye and Collings: Fishman Rare Earth pickups, Monster cable, L.R. Baggs Para Acoustic D.I. For smaller gigs, she uses an AER Compact 60 amp and an AER AG8 monitor. "For road gigs, we recently bought the new Bose Personal Amplification System with a bass module, which is fabulous," she says. "It's easy to set up and it fills rooms we play perfectly, with no feedback, and with a warm, natural sound."

**STRINGS AND THINGS** D'Addario EXP lights, Boss TU-2 and Intellitouch PT1 tuners.

**FAVORITE GIG** "The Coffee Depot, a lovely listening room in Warren, Rhode Island. The gracious hosts and clientele make me feel so welcome that I decided to use the recording of my gig there last December for my fourth album."