

# MELODIC CLAWHAMMER

## *Celebrating the Life & Music of Cathy Barton Para*

Ken Perlman

Cathy Barton Para (1955-2019) was one of the most accomplished and innovative clawhammerists of modern times. Her banjo style was powerfully rhythmic yet intricately lyrical and melodic; it was also intoxicatingly exuberant and simply charming. Cathy was a powerful singer, a strong and engaging performer, and—not the least of her accomplishments—she was an avid and highly skilled hammer-dulci-

*Cathy with her 1970s Baldwin-Ode resonator banjo; photo by Peter Esherick.*



mer player, credited for introducing the instrument to the well-known annual music contests in Winfield, KS. According to her husband and lifelong musical partner Dave Para, her banjo playing was so strong that he often could treat his guitar as a second melody instrument. Joe Newberry tells us “she was the happiest musician I’ve ever seen.”

Cathy was also an extremely effective and beloved instructor of banjo skills. It took me several years to lure her away from the concert and festival trail to teach at Suwannee, Midwest and American Banjo Camps, but it was well worth the wait. She immediately took to the task and no matter how specialized her classes—such as Songs of the Coon Creek Girls, Missouri Contest Tunes, and Texas & Western Fiddle Tunes for Clawhammer—she always had a good-sized turnout and great reviews. And because they were such great performers, I always would ask Cathy and Dave to lead off the concert program.

According to Joe, who was a

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classmate of Cathy, her first foray on stage with banjo in hand was a talent show held at her High School in Columbia, MO. This was in the early 70s right after the movie *Deliverance* came out, and she brought the house down by playing both parts of *Dueling Banjos* on just one instrument! Soon she was performing locally at church socials; community organizations such as the Mid-Missouri Pork Producers and the Soil Conservation District; and even the local coffee house, where she and Dave first met (they were married in 1979).

Impressed by Cathy's musical talent and vibrant persona, influential figures in the acoustic music world took to her from the start and helped her along in her career. By the late 70s she was spending a considerable amount of time at the Folk Center in Mountain View, Arkansas which had recently been founded with help from the well-known country music celebrity Louis Marshall "Grandpa" Jones (1913-98) and his wife, Ramona Riggins Jones. The Folk Center staff quickly became smitten with Cathy and before long Ramona offered her a summer job helping out in a shop called Grandpa's Place. Ramona, it turned

out, was an accomplished old-time fiddler and simply loved having a banjo player around; the two of them played music constantly, which enabled Cathy to add substantially to her repertoire. And at the same time, exposure to Grandpa's powerful banjo style encouraged her to attack the instrument with more assurance. There was one further benefit to this connection; Ramona was a polished and savvy musical performer. She was able to teach Cathy and Dave how to become music professionals—how to introduce a number, how to dress, how to perform, and so on.

Ramona eventually suggested that Cathy

compete in the Tennessee State Old-Time Music Championship, held in the town of Clarksville, not far from Nashville. She beat out a perennial winner—an intricate 2-finger picker named Omer Forster—and won first place in the banjo contest. More importantly, this brought her to the attention of Clyde Forrester, whose brother Howdy Forrester (1922-87) played fiddle in the Smokey Mountain Boys, which was led by Grand Old Opry star Roy Acuff (1903-92). Cathy and Dave soon became frequent guests of Clyde and his wife, which brought them into the orbit of Howdy, Acuff and their musical friends. They



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got to "hang out" in Acuff's dressing room at the Opry, and were frequent guests at some very wonderful music parties. Jamming at these parties was bluegrass style with passed-around breaks, so Cathy had to adapt quickly and raise the level of her playing to meet the approval of these musical luminaries. Apparently Cathy made quite an impression; when John Hartford performed in Boonville in the mid-80s, he mentioned that Acuff often referred to her as his favorite banjo player.

Cathy's banjo playing received further impetus from exposure to traditional fiddlers from central Missouri, an area often referred to as Little Dixie. Dave mentions that even as recently as the 1980s, during the summer if you were so inclined you could attend a fiddle contest at least once a week within a hundred mile radius of their home in Boonville. These fiddlers were not at all used to having old-time banjo backup and expected Cathy to either play melody or a straight chordal backup. One particular mentor was fiddler Taylor McBaine (1910-94); he had no pa-

tience for half-way measures so she really had to step up and play a powerful melodic part to keep up with him.

One aspect of Cathy's life that I just learned about was her connection to the circle of musicians who recorded in the 1970s and 80s for Folk Legacy Records, which was run by Sandy and Caroline Paton. At the time, Folk Legacy was known as the strongest and most "authentic" of the small labels that sprang up in the aftermath of the so-called "Folk Boom." Almost all Folk Legacy artists were great players and great singers: Gordon Bok was probably the best known musician who recorded for them, but there was also guitarist-singer Michael Cooney, Bill Staines, Cindy Kallett, banjoist-balladeer Sara Grey, clawhammerist Howie Bursen, and hammerdulcimer player Ed Trickett. Cathy was a big fan of Folk Legacy in general and of Trickett in particular; and she talked the organizers of the aforementioned Winfield music contests into hiring him. This led to an invitation for Cathy and Dave to come East to play on Trickett's next recording, which led to a meeting with the Patons and a subsequent invitation to appear on several Folk Legacy LPs including a Golden Ring anthology; in 1986 their

own Folk Legacy LP appeared, entitled *On a Day Like Today*. In the mid-80s, the Folk Legacy connection led to an invitation from the Old Songs Festival near Albany, NY which is where I first met Cathy and Dave and heard them play!

Two more aspects of Cathy's music career ought to be mentioned here: festivals and riverboats. Cathy and Dave founded the Big Muddy Folk Festival in 1992, and since then it has been held each April at Thesopian Hall in Boonville, MO. A few years later, they got a call from people connected with the Delta Queen with an invitation to perform on several of its cruises on the Arkansas River. They loved the atmosphere of cruising riverboats and the people they met, and for the next twenty years performing on the boats that plied the Arkansas, Missouri, and Mississippi Rivers was a major aspect of their careers.

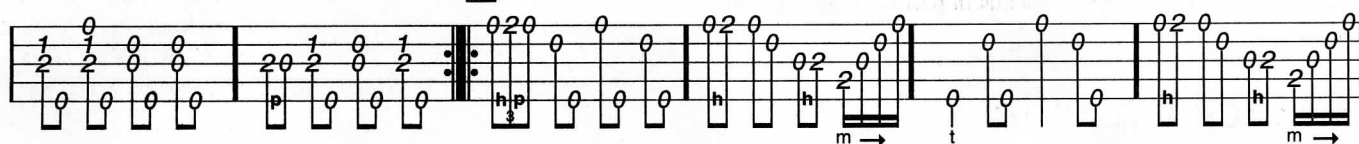
Accompanying this column is a list of all the recordings Cathy and Dave have made over the years, and a tab of one of her favorite tunes, *John Stenson's #2*, which I notated from a YouTube clip made of one of their performances at Midwest Banjo Camp (it's part of a medley that begins with another of their favorites, *Down the River I Go*).

## John Stenson's #2

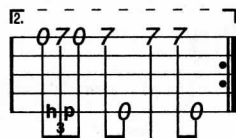
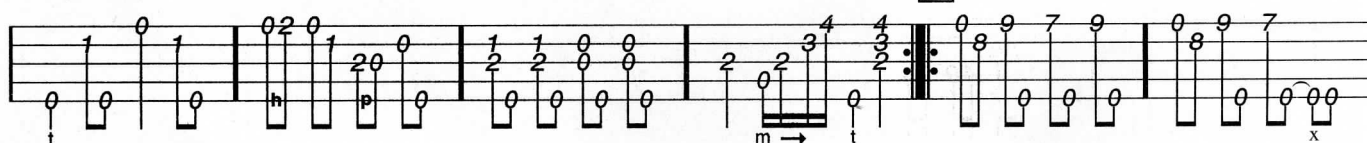
A



B



A'



G Tuning: gDGBD, capo 2. Arr. by Cathy Barton Para. Tab by Ken Perlman

Audio and video online at [banjonews.com](http://banjonews.com)