



'You don't have to be famous ... you just have to be very, very good' - Michael Johnathon



Photo courtesy of Larry Neuzel/WoodSongs Old Time Radio Hour
The historic Lyric Theatre in downtown Lexington is the venue used for tapings of the "WoodSongs Old Time Radio Hour" that airs weekly on KET. The venue seats about 500 people and represents how the show's audience has grown since its creation in 1999.

WoodSongs' tapes 44 shows a year at Lyric Theatre in Lexington

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LEXINGTON — For residents of Murray and western Kentucky, a more-than-four-hour journey to Lexington to watch an event on a Monday evening might be a lot to ask.

However, it that event is a taping of the "WoodSongs Old Time Radio Hour" at the historic Lyric Theatre in the city's downtown area, producer Bryan Klausing insists that the experience is worth the drive.

"It's one road trip you need to take. It's one thing to watch it on TV (it airs at 11 p.m. Fridays on KET in Murray) or to watch it online. However, you get the full spirit of it when you're here and you'll want to come back," said Klausing, who has been part of the team that makes this show happen since 1999 when folk-singer and self-professed "SongFarmer" Michael Johnathon created the idea. It began in a small studio that sat no more than 20 people.

"Then we started expanding," Johnathon said in an interview Thursday as he talked about the show that now is heard on 515 radio stations worldwide, including the Armed Forces Radio Network of the American military. "We went to another studio with a bigger room in Versailles, then we moved to the 150-seat theater inside the public library here in Lexington and we stayed there a few years before moving to the larger Kentucky Theatre (in 2000) which is connected to the library. Now (since 2013) we're in the Lyric, which is an historic venue that mostly hosted African-American acts (such as Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Ray Charles, Cab Calloway, Count Basie and B.B. King), and we found that it is ideally suited for what we're doing.

"We've kept growing and I really believe it's because of what we offer."

What is offered, Johnathon said, is a chance to experience a slice of Americana that he believes has become lost to most people, a time where neighbors would gather on front porches, bring their instruments and engage in musical jams that lasted for hours, mostly of folk, country or bluegrass genres; Johnathon refers to it as "grassroots" music. It is this philosophy that he said is displayed not only with the shows that are presented — most of the acts perform with acoustic sets — but in how the audience mingles while waiting for the start of each show.

that most homes are built with no front porches anymore. We want people to meet with each other and talk about where they're from because they're here for the same reason. These people are hungry for this type of entertainment and it's always better live and in person, and we encourage audience interacting participation," he said of how the show always closes with the calling out of "The WoodSongs ... Old Time ... Radio Hour."

"They're also tired of all of the fighting that's going on in today's world. They're tired of Netflix and digital entertainment. They want something that is real and that they can see in front of them. There have also been a lot of changes in the music business. Not only can you not listen to a CD in a car but the artists, in many cases, aren't allowed to do what they want to do."

And from the artists to the production team, "WoodSongs" is an all-volunteer operation. No one is paid.

"What everyone does here, they do with passion, and everyone feels that," Johnathon said. Yet, in a day and age where many artists are not appearing on programs without a payment agreement, "WoodSongs" is attracting some of the biggest names in music.

Acts that have appeared include famed banjo player Bela Fleck, mandolin star Sam Bush, internationally-renowned guitarist Tommy Emmanuel, multi-instrumentalist John McEuen (most notably of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band) and former Jefferson Airplane members Jack Casady (bassist) and Jorma Kaukonen (guitar), now with the San Francisco group Hot Tuna. In addition, one of the music's biggest names of the 1980s and into the early '90s, John Oates, one half of the duo Darryl Hall & John Oates, has made an appearance; Hall & Oates was inducted to the Rock 'n Roll Hall of Fame in 2014.

Those types of guests may seem somewhat of a counter to a statement Johnathon makes on every show ... "You don't have to be famous to be on 'WoodSongs,' you just have to be very, very good."

"Everybody thought I was nuts when I started this (in '99). 'You wanna do what?!' they'd say. 'Artists are going to play for free?' But what I found is that when you're willing to be honest and up front, passion transcends payment, and that also goes for our crew. I'd put this group against any production crew



Left: Folksinger and self-professed "SongFarmer" Michael Johnathon performs one song each time his "WoodSongs Old Time Radio Hour" is taped in Lexington. He said this because "this is not the 'Michael Johnathon Show.' I still tour for that." Right: The Earls of Leicester, a Grammy-Award-winning bluegrass group, performs during a taping.



Photos courtesy of Larry Neuzel/WoodSongs Old Time Radio Hour



anywhere," Johnathon said.

Klausing said he is proud to have been part of something like this for so long. It taped its 944th show Monday night.

"It's a big labor of love, and I've really been fortunate to have worked with so many great people, as well as seen so many great things while doing this," he said. "Music is my passion. I play guitar and other string instruments and to have the chance to meet some of my heroes through this, you just can't ask for anything more."

In addition, every show now features a WoodSongs Kid, a 16-year-old aspiring musician

who gets a chance to perform. Johnathon said this actually began several years ago when a 10-year-old mandolin player said she wanted to play with Bush. With the audience still present, Sierra Hull, now one of the biggest mandolin stars of her generation, got that chance and a new segment as born.

In addition, Johnathon has recently launched a pair of new programs online. One is the WoodSongs in the Classroom program that is a partnership with the University of Kentucky to emphasize music, history, language arts and more. The second is one that is of particular im-

portance to him, the SongFarmers program that is designed to start a movement of front-porch gatherings to allow artists the chance to share their creativity, the quintessential piece to what he calls "grass roots music."

"We've had 50 chapters form so far and it's something that is quickly taking hold. What's really great, though, is it's happening in places all over the world, and that's what we're wanting from this. We want this to go everywhere," he said.

Tickets and more information about the show, including future artists, are available at www.WoodSongs.com. ■

Photo courtesy of Larry Neuzel/WoodSongs Old Time Radio Hour

Above: Folksinger Michael Johnathon, center, created the "WoodSongs Old Time Radio Hour" that has gone on to host some of music's biggest names. Here, Johnathon poses with John Oates, left, one half of the Rock 'n Roll Hall of Fame duo Hall & Oates, and country crooner John Michael Montgomery.