

The Magical, True Story of the

WOODSONGS

Old-Time Radio Hour

*“You Don’t Have to be Famous,
You Just Have to be Good.”*

To me, WoodSongs is the complete embodiment of everything I talk about ... volunteers, the “free” business model, keeping your Pig tiny, Love is the greatest transaction of the Arts, and the celebration of the front porch spirit.

WoodSongs began in a small, humble recording studio behind a little cafe in Lexington, Kentucky.

The tiny recording studio barely sat 12 people, we had one small college station willing to air it and from the very beginning it was all-volunteer run.

Today, WoodSongs fills the 500 seat Lyric Theatre in Lexington, KY and airs on 537 public, community and commercial stations from Australia to Ireland including WSM, the home of the Grand Ole Opry. It is a weekly TV series on public TV from LA to Las Vegas to Vermont, plus a weekly series on the RFD-TV Network nationwide. The show is broadcast twice each weekend on two channels in 177 nations on the American Forces Radio Network, which includes every military base and US Naval ship in the world. It is available with lesson plans in thousands of schools and has one of the biggest roots music archives in history.

And continues to be all-volunteer run.

As you read this, assuming all goes to plan, WoodSongs made multi-media history by taping its 1000th broadcast.

1000. Ding-dang, that's a lot of anything.

The idea was simple: to create a worldwide stage that would genuinely celebrate the passion and spirit of folk music and art. I wanted to find that massive, global audience that didn't care "*what bin you're in*" or what manager you had or whether or not you were signed to a major label.

Just that you're good.
You believe in your own music.
You are unique and different.

"Popular definition says a folksinger is someone with a guitar singing songs they made up. That is a sad use of the term 'folk music.' I use the phrase as little as possible now."

Pete Seeger

In the beginning ...

The *WoodSongs Old-Time Radio Hour* was born from the heartache of a fellow artist. A very dear friend of mine from Ireland was a poet and songwriter. He made a meager but honest living at the time performing his songs and reading his poetry in coffeehouses, schools, libraries and pubs across Ireland and Europe. He had his guitar and his dreams and the small audiences that he found as he traveled from town to town.

He had no book deal, no record deal. So he decided one fateful day to take matters into his own hand and produce his own album and book of poetry. He also typed and printed a small booklet of his poetry at a local copy center and stapled them together himself. He placed his dreams into padded envelopes, licked them shut and mailed his stuff to the music critics.

And hoped. And waited.

One of them landed on the desk of his hometown newspaper near Cork, Ireland. For some reason, this local music critic just didn't like my friend's work. I have found music critics often tend to be very brutal to the hometown artists. There are

exceptions . . . but the critic in Cork was not. He wrote a scathing, cruel review of my friend's poetry and music.

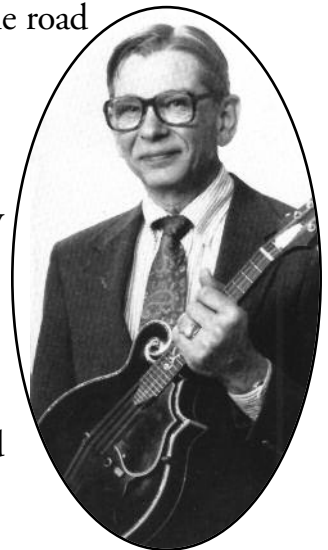
At four in the morning while I was on the road in Iowa he tracked me down, called me and poured out his anguish over the trans-Atlantic phone line. He read the review to me and I was left speechless. What on earth can a poet do to warrant such a terse response? If the critic didn't like his stuff that's fine, he's entitled to his opinion. But to print a veritable warning to the public to stay clear of this and then to actually print the review in his hometown paper? Good god, man, just send him a note and say "*you suck*" and leave it at that. Please don't humiliate the poor guy in front of his family and friends.

The public assassination of his little career was so complete that he decided to do something that only an artist who has reached the very limit of his energy and heart would ever do ... he quit.

After the phone call I sat alone in the dark hotel room, so very sad for my friend. I picked up my guitar and wrote him a song that praised him for trying, for sticking it out as long as he did. I called the song "Ballad of a Poet" and the chorus had the refrain "*teach the whole world to hear your new song.*"

A couple of months later I was off the road and back home in Kentucky. On a sunny spring morning I found myself in the little basement workshop of another friend, **Homer Ledford**. He made banjos, mandolins, fiddles and dulcimers in his tiny home workshop.

I loved visiting him and we would talk about music, musicians and making music. Homer stood in front of his workbench, his carving knives and saws and sanders and other tools were placed around him in a cluttered pallet of disorganization.



Rough sawn wood boards of mahogany and walnut, pine and oak lean against the walls awaiting his miraculous touch that will transform them from dormant slices of trees into living musical instruments.

The Name, the Song, the Idea ...

The aroma of wood chips and linseed oil wafts through the workshop and transports you into an early Americana dream when every farmhouse in the country had a little shop just like this. And somewhere in the conversation, amidst the wood chips and the musical instruments and linseed oil, a new word popped into my head, “*WoodSong*.”

The phrase somehow captured the feeling of music and wood that I was seeing before me. It accelerated the idea of acoustic songs and folk music that I lived and Homer embodied. I liked the word and left Homer’s workshop that day determined to use it in a song. I recall driving down the road and writing the word on the back of an envelope so I wouldn’t forget it.

A few days later I tried writing the song and made a sad discovery: nothing rhymes with the darn thing. The only thing I came up that rhymes with *WoodSong* was “*footlong*,” but that sounds like I’m singing about a hot dog.

So I put it on the creative shelf and waited for sweet mother inspiration to help me out. A few months later it was time for me to record my next album and I began to review my binder of songs to see what might be worth using. One of the songs was “*Ballad of a Poet*.” As I stared at the lyric sheet, it hit me. I changed the tag line of the chorus to include that evasive new word I’ve been seeking a home for. The tag line was changed to “. . . *teach the whole world to hear a WoodSong*” and my song expanded from just a letter to my friend into a tribute to all struggling artists everywhere. The poetry now tipped its lyrical hat to every poet, songwriter, painter, dancer and artist that ever struggled to keep their work and passions alive.

WoodSongs transported from a song for one artist into a tune for every artist. The word turned the lyrics into something much more universal than just a personal message to my friend.

So, I made the song the foundation, the cornerstone of my new album that would be a musical tribute to obscure grassroots music, artists and songs. I got my friends Jean Ritchie and JD Crowe to help me turn *Shady Grove*, a popular old-time mountain song about an over possessive stalker, into an aggressive acoustic rock anthem. A major contribution to the album was made by Homer Ledford himself who played his handmade mandolin.

I included old-timey songs like *Over the Mountain*, an old Uncle Dave Macon tune. The song that was the most fun to record was the tune I wrote for Homer's wife, Colista. "*Colista's Jam*" is a sexy, tongue-in-cheek bluegrass song that, little did I know at the time, would become a major part of the growth of *WoodSongs* as it travelled around the world.

The months went by and the album was released and, sure enough, greeted by the thunderous applause of one hand clapping. As expected, it was nothing more than another folk album in a world full of folksingers releasing folk albums to volunteer folk DJs who already had 100 folk albums on their desk they haven't had time to listen to no less play on their two hour, once-a-week folk show on a little college radio station run by a program director who can't stand folk music.

Alrighty, then. I did what every artist with their back against the wall and no money in their pocket does - I hit the road. I got lucky and landed the opening slot on the summer Judy Collins tour. We played big outdoor amphitheaters like Ravinia in Chicago, Wolf Trapp in Virginia, SPAC in upstate New York and other places.

Every night I would go onstage and play my new songs from my new album, tell the stories that went with each one and end my set with *WoodSongs*. After the concert, the very shy

Judy Collins would leave the stage and immediately return to her hotel room, leaving me, the unknown folksinger to hang out for the backstage meet-and-greet. I had fun, and often felt like Arlo on the Group W bench, just talking and smiling and having a great time that couldn't be beat . . . not really knowing why I was there or what to say.

And then *he* showed up.

The WoodSongs book

A short, bald headed guy wearing jeans, a suit jacket and a tweed vest came back stage after the concert in Chicago. Most of the people would ask me "Where's Judy, dude?" Not this guy. He marches up, sticks his hand out and bellows,

"Michael, you have mah-vellus sentence structure."

It turns out he was a small book publisher and had this great idea. Why not take all those stories I tell on stage, put them in a book and let's all get rich? For weeks I kept thinking about that fellow's idea about writing that book. I ain't never wrote no book before. Could I do it? Heck, how hard can it be to write a book?

Well, I learned quickly telling a story with your big mouth is one thing ... telling the same story while typing with two index fingers is another. So I started writing. And I wrote and I wrote and I wrote. I wrote in hotels across the country, on airplanes and in the backseats of cars, on Jean Ritchie's log cabin porch and in my living room. I even wrote backstage before shows.

And you know what? My two index fingers and mah-vellus sentence structure wrote a 176-page book in just two months time. I collected pictures and I even designed and laid out the book myself, created the cover art and everything. Pete Seeger and Don McLean wrote liner notes for the jacket, and soon enough I was done.

Wow, last year I didn't know what an author was, now I *are* one. My career oozed with unbridled potential. All I needed in a world of six billion people was about 30,000 fans to buy a copy and I'd be all set.

We put together a 10-month tour of concerts in bookstores to introduce the *WoodSongs Book & CD Gift Set* to the public. I played 186 concerts at every Barnes & Noble, Borders, Books-A-Million, WalMart and mom and pop bookstore we could get into and guess what? We sold a bunch of these suckers and slowly earned back the money we invested.

Things actually started happening. The *WoodSongs* CD eventually landed on the national Americana music chart, and after a while the project fulfilled its life and began to settle into the dormant obscurity I expected. I was tired, I was happy and was ready to rest for a while.

Or so I thought.

The birth of the Radio idea

One autumn Saturday afternoon I was on the road and scanning for a radio station to listen to. Radio has always been interesting to me. I was a big fan of legacy radio shows like the *Louisiana Hayride*, the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* and the *Grand Ole Opry*. These were the shows that genuinely loved the music, the audience, and the artists. Those shows introduced the world to unknowns like Bill Monroe, Uncle Dave Macon, Hank Williams and a skinny guy from Memphis named Elvis Presley.

I often scanned the airwaves looking for a left-side-of-the-dial station to listen to. On this particular Saturday afternoon I came upon a somewhat familiar voice, one that I had heard before but never really paid much attention to. It was Garrison Kiellor's radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*.

"Too much talking," says I. But this time I really listened and focused on what he was doing. You know what? It was fun. And funny. I loved hearing the audience, they seemed to be as

much a part of the show as Garrison's stories were. And the music was vibrant and rich and acoustic. I liked it. In many ways, Garrison had a real *folk* show.

As I drove, I began to imagine what it would be like to merge what I learned as a performing songwriter, with what I just heard Garrison do on the radio. Pete Seeger tried a similar idea in the 1950s, a TV show called *Rainbow Quest*. He would sit around a picnic table and talk and sing with grassroots folk artists like Doc Watson or Roscoe Holcolm. But the whole thing seemed like a lot of work, so I let it go and forgot about it.

And then, as fate would have it, a few weeks later a friend of mine, Tom Martin, calls up and says that he is part of a new public radio network and would I be interested in having one hour of radio time, and if I did, what would I do with it?

Coincidence? I think not. But for some reason I turned the offer down. I guess in my mind I pictured myself behind a desk yapping about dusty folk stories and playing old Weaver's records. Heck, I'm the only person on planet earth that would probably tune in to something like that, anyway. How could I possibly find the time for it?

Nope, says I ... *Thanks but I'll pass*. A few weeks go by.

Wait a minute, I think. Was I, crazy? I was determined to re-think this one. Here was my thought process:

Folk music is indeed the grandest art form of music because it is the mother that gave birth to nearly everything we listen to; blues, bluegrass, rock, country, spoken word and even jazz, all come from folk traditions. That being true, it was logical to me that folk music should have the biggest audience on the planet, bigger than rock and country combined.

And what, exactly, is folk music? Folk music is the sound track of America's front porch. Lots of people have arguments and discussions about this, which are frankly boring. Mainly because they miss the point. Folk is not the *music* . . . it's the *audience*.

You my friends, are the main ingredient of what makes folk a wonderful art form. Without you the concept is inert. The audience comes *first*, the song *second*, the artist *last*. The star system has no place in the folk process because it denies the right of the audience to remain first. Don't believe me? Go to any folk or bluegrass festival. The best music, the real music is played in the parking lots and campgrounds, not on the main stage.

My radio show would have to have a live audience. We would have *fun* on the air. In my imagination, I could actually hear hundreds of people calling out the name of the show at the end of every broadcast.

But how on earth did I expect to actually pull this off? We had no money, no resources. If I presented a business plan of my show to investors they would have laughed me out of their office.

Creating the WoodSongs broadcast

I wanted a high tech, fast-paced contemporary broadcast that would sit on the fringes of great traditions of past radio shows, but still pave the way of its own future.

The next thing I did was call my good friend Kevin Johnson. Kevin, or as I referred to him on the air, **Darth Fader** (as in the faders on a mixing board.) He was simply the best audio engineer I knew, had a daring sense of adventure and I hoped he would jump on this. Well, jump he did.

We did five things off the bat that have proven to be the right, albeit difficult, things to do:

- A: Design a distinctive logo, it would be huge onstage and our color theme would be eternally autumn.
- B: A slogan that would get right to the point:
 "You don't have to be Famous, you just have to be Good."
- C: The format would be both music and conversation.
- D: My name would be part of the logo.
- E. My song would be performed first.

We put **my song** first for one very good reason: the *lowest rated portion of a public television hour and public radio broadcast* is the first five minutes when folks are turning the channels to see what's on. When they finally land on WoodSongs most will hear me introduce our featured artists.

My **name** on the show wasn't to make "me" the focus, it was to make WoodSongs different from the other shows. *E-Town, Mountain Stage, Austin City Limits, the Grand Ole Opry* were non-conversational concert set formats and had personality-free, generic titles. WoodSongs had to be claimed, good or bad, by someone. I had to be completely vested, responsible, committed and take all the risk, extend myself and fulfill every promise I made, every obligation I took on and see it through to its end.

This show was the biggest gamble and most serious risk of my career because, if it failed, I could easily crash and burn with it. More than once Kevin would look me in the eye and say, "*Dude, you're crazy.*"

And such was the birth of the *WoodSongs Old-Time Radio Hour*, the most adventurous, grassroots music show on planet earth. I liked the name. We had a great engineer and place to record the program, a crew to pull it all together and a little college station willing to air it.

Now we needed artists to perform, that would be the easy part. Lexington sits in the center of a six hour media circle that has 32 million people in it. We are a few hours from Nashville, Knoxville, Indianapolis, Asheville, Cincinnati, Columbus, and Charleston. Extend the circle to six hours and you embrace cities like Chicago, Memphis, Cleveland, St. Louis and many more. We are also the gateway city to the Appalachian mountains. Artists of all kinds pass our way every day.

Another big decision was *when* to do it. I picked Monday, downtown during dinner time and rush hour. Since Monday's are usually a slow business day for everyone, Kevin offered the use of his recording studio as a place to tape the production as a way to advertise his studio to all the artists.

Monday is magic, my friends, because most artists have *nothing to do*. After all, musicians usually don't perform on Mondays, they are on the road heading home or stuck in some hotel waiting for Wednesday. Most musicians would give their right arm to perform in front of a live audience on radio. I sent emails to my musician friends describing what I was doing, and, lo and behold, I had the first eight weeks of the show booked solid in less than 24 hours.

Now we needed the Audience. Did we actually expect people to attend a radio show on Mondays, 7PM, downtown during rush hour at dinner time to see artists no one ever heard of sing songs nobody knows?

How could that be possible? Why, free tickets and crunchy homemade cookies. I figured if we were going to be starting a big dream on a penny budget, we might as well be as old-timey as we could get. We served homemade cookies, brownies and apple cider.

So, off we started. Kevin's studio was small, the most it could hold was about 12 folding chairs. The first couple months my heart was in my throat anxiously eyeing the door hoping someone would walk in, desperately in fear of the thunderous sound of one hand clapping. But it kept growing. And we stuck with it.

And what made all of this possible? What was the glue that bonded the idea, the music, the artists, the studio and the audience all together into a strong tapestry that ended up broadcasting all over the world? It is our volunteer crew.



Michael chatting with the small group on WoodSongs first show taping.



The amazing all-volunteer WoodSongs Crew

We decided from the start that, since there was no budget and no business plan to make this possible, we would be brutally honest with ourselves and others. WoodSongs would be an act of *passion*, not *payment*.

That's right. As in the beginning until this very day, nobody associated with *WoodSongs* gets paid a penny for all their hard work and effort. I work for free. Kevin worked for free. The artists don't get paid a thing, no matter if they come from New Zealand or New York, Austin or Australia.

I have learned that people will work harder and be more loyal when motivated from the heart than from their wallet, and such is the case with this amazing crew. I will confidently put their skills, loyalty, love for music and appreciation for the artists up against any crew at any show anywhere in the world. They are the best. Among our crew members are lawyers, school teachers, retirees, students, accountants, math professors and general tie-dyed, granola-chompin' hippie types that love the idea of doing a global multi-media broadcast in their spare time.

The anchor of the volunteer crew, aside from our Crew Captains like **Amelia Wisner** and **Tina May** has been **Bryan Klausung**, dependable, sincere, easy to work with and motivated, he has helped and mentored the crew members from the very beginning. The first on-air cast member was a lovely woman with a Irish accent named **Mary Gilmartin**. Her sweet accent gave WoodSongs a delightful international air.

International ... a big word that described big dreams even though we only had one small college station airing the program. For the first 53 weeks of the show, as I struggled to find WoodSongs' voice, we had only one little station airing us, and that was fine. I was more interested in refining what I was doing and getting myself, the crew and artists to sound as national as possible without losing that living room atmosphere I envisioned.

WoodSongs

Words & Music

©Michael Johnathon/RachelAubreyMusic/BMI

Banjo; Performed in the key of D

This is the SONG that begat the ALBUM that begat the BOOKS that inspired the IDEA that became the national RADIO broadcast that turned itself into a public TELEVISION series and found a proactive audience that started WoodSongs COFFEEHOUSES around the world that brought the KIDS onto the stage and formed the CLASSROOM program that showed how important the "FRONT PORCH" is and became the national association of SONGFARMERS and inspired the concept of SONGS OF RURAL AMERICA and performing with symphony orchestras.

VERSE

D D/C# Bm G

You ain't the one— I re-mem-ber Some-thing hap-pened to

A7 D D/C#

you on the road, All your pas-sions have turned in - to

Bm G A7 D

ang-er Now it fol-lows wher - ev - er you go.

CHORUS

G A7 D G

Life ain't for cow-ards and law - yers Dreams don't be -

A7 D G A7 D G

long to the rich Life is a song that's worth sing - ing

(inst.) D A7

So pick up your songs and move

Bm G A7 D

on, Teach the whole world to hear a wood-song.

I don't use a written "script" per say, just some brief notes. Most of the show, we sorta wing it. As amazing as this is to me, the show format is exactly the same now as it was the first day we began taping the show. We usually have two artists per broadcast, each show is 59:00 minutes long. Mathematically, that gives each artist equal time for four songs each.

That has proven to be a somewhat sensitive issue with the show, as most songwriters tend to be lyrically long winded. To be honest, the time limitations also help me keep my original vision for the show intact: something new happens about every three minutes or so, keeping the program crisp, fun and fast-paced.

And guess what? It worked. About ten months after we started, the show was finally ready to present to other stations. The technical term for these stations are "affiliates." Every new station that added WoodSongs to their airplay schedule would become an affiliate of our show. A very good friend, Tammy Farley, took on the job of pitching the show to radio stations.

So, we mailed samples to stations on cassette. Yes, *cassette*. Usually, syndicated shows are transmitted digitally by satellite or sent via compact disc. Not us. We were so poor the only way we could get the show to radio was on a cassette. When I think back on that now, and I am dumbfounded we even got WoodSongs on the air at all. But over 40 stations signed up during the next 10 weeks.

Our very first real affiliate station, apart from our local station, was WJJC in Commerce, Georgia who aired *WoodSongs* faithfully every week . . . yes, on cassette.

Slowly, word began to spread about this new fangled, old-timey-sorta-sounding-but-not-really radio show that was hosted by this folksinger guy. As other stations began picking up the show, our local audience began to sense that WoodSongs might have some validity after all, and began filling our studio each week to overflowing.

One of the regulars who came each week was a young man named Raja, who came with his older brother Harsha, who later joined our cast as the famous *Hotlicks Harsha Sen*. Harsha was a retina eye surgeon and guitarist ... and played every song in the “*Key of C*”. If you can’t figger out the joke, ask a WoodSongs Partner. When Harsha heard about the low quality distribution of the show he immediately offered to help buy a multi-unit CD burner. Without Tammy Farley and Harsha’s help WoodSongs may not have lasted through its cassette days. Soon, we were sending brilliantly recorded shows rich with acoustic music to radio stations on mastered CDs and the number of radio affiliates began to explode nationwide.

Moving Day

And wouldn’t you know it, just when things began getting easier and we were hitting our stride, Kevin called me with a big announcement: His studio was moving a half hour out of Lexington to Versailles (*pronounced: ver-Sales*).

I was nervous about this, although this was in fact a great opportunity for Kevin. After all, who on earth was going to drive that far to see this show? Kevin says, “*Cheer up, our new studio can hold 75 chairs!*” Oh, great, says I. Twenty people in our current studio makes it look packed, but the same 20 people in a room with 75 chairs will look like a dismal failure. As we were now, people had to be turned away at the door . . . which sounded like we were huge. *You can’t get seats at WoodSongs! It must be a great show!* This was the illusion of success that I was banking on, which was now being dismantled by the availability of a bigger, more comfortable room.

So, with a heavy heart and my head hung high, I traveled to the small but lovely horse farm community of Versailles to tape our first broadcast in the new studio. I walk in and, just as he promised, Kevin had 75 seats spread across the back of his studio. Oh, brother, this will be humiliating. I walk into the control room to collect my thoughts and meet with the artists,

telling them about the show, helping them select their songs. And to wait. After a while the clock ticked away: it's showtime. I tune my guitar. I pick up my notes and walk through the door leading into the studio.

And guess what . . . the darn place was packed wall to wall. I couldn't believe it. "*Where on earth did all these people come from?*" I thought. Compared to what we were used to, 75 people sounded like a coliseum to us. The audience was finally taking over the sound of the show because their numbers were growing. My heart was filled to the brim with pride and I knew, I just knew that this show would *someday* be theatre bound.

Actually, "someday" came faster than I could've imagined.

The Central Library Theatre

Week after week Kevin's studio would fill to capacity but I also saw the practical need to get back into the area's media center, which is Lexington. My concern was that our little balloon of success would pop and we would be left with no media support to publicize the shows when we needed it most.

The upside is the show had a better chance to succeed if we moved back to Lexington. The downside was cost. We would have to literally build an on-site recording studio from scratch. So, with the help of David Lord and the *Lexington Convention & Visitor's Bureau*, I eventually got an appointment with Bob Stewart, the head of the Kentucky Tourism and Development Cabinet at our state capitol.

I pitched my idea: How would Kentucky like to have its own *Grand Ole Opry*, *Mountain Stage* or *A Prairie Home Companion* broadcasting its good image and name worldwide? Fortunately, I wasn't presenting a concept on paper. I had a real broadcast already airing on 67 radio stations at this point, not just some figment of my imagination type proposal.

Well, it took one thirty-minute meeting for them to decide to help us. Within a couple of weeks, we had the funding

in hand to buy the mixing boards, amplifiers, cables, mics and stands, stage equipment, recording and mastering gear . . . everything we needed to move the show into a theatre.

But which theatre? I didn't want to blow the illusion of success by moving to a venue too big for the show to handle. What if we moved into a 1000+ seat theatre like Garrison Kiellor has and only eighty people showed up? Not only would we look like idiots, but the artists would feel like they wasted their time and the audience would be so uncomfortable they may not show up again. Whereas if eighty people show up in a studio that holds seventy-five, it feels like a rip roaring success and everybody is excited, everybody is happy.

But it's still only eighty people. Since our show is in fact about the audience, I needed to find a theatre that would keep the reality of the audience and their needs in perspective.

And I found it downtown at the Lexington Public Library. I didn't realize it before, but my hometown is one of the few cities in America with a fully functional small theatre in its library. It has a nice stage and, most important, 135 brand new cushioned seats.

How the audience *felt* became very important to me. How they saw and heard the music and the way they were welcomed into the theater became critical. Folk music is like a grand, churning, magnificent ocean and we invite the audience to board our good ship WoodSongs as we explore and travel this ocean like Vikings, discovering new and unknown waters ... it had to be a special trip for them.

I also developed the WoodSongs Partner idea, a way to fill the theatre each week while giving the audience an unheard of deal for tickets.

So, we were all set. We picked the date of the move. The little theater looked great and sounded great. The crew now had a big job ahead of them. At Kevin's studio the gear was always set up. Now, we walked into a barren theatre and had to set up

and break down the gear before and after every single show. Under Kevin's guiding hand the crew set up all the gear several times to make sure it all worked, hung black curtains to dress the stage and more. I remember the Sunday before our first show in the new theatre, standing on the stage and looking into the theatre . . . it seemed so huge and cavernous. How are we possibly going to fill 135 seats for a show about unknown artists singing songs nobody heard before, downtown on Mondays during rush our and the dinner hour?

Monday came and I set about getting ready. Bryan was working getting the artists situated. Mayor Miller and the staff of Kentucky Tourism would be there. Everyone was working for FREE and doing their respective jobs. Thanks to our wonderful crew, the show went off perfectly. I remember Mayor Pam Miller coming on stage saying on the air: *"Hi, I'm Pam Miller the Mayor of Lexington, and I looove to have my G-String plucked. That's why I'm in the theater audience of the WoodSongs Old-Time Radio Hour"* and the audience roared with laughter.

As the weeks and months went by, my music life and WoodSongs continued to rise and crest and dip and turn. Remember, while all this was going on I was also trying to make a living, nurturing my career on the road performing, writing new songs, and recording another album.

Moving the show into the library theatre turned out to be the right decision. It felt bigger, professional. It retained the intimate nature of WoodSongs that we love but in a grander setting. It was easy for the audience to get to because it was in the center of Lexington, downtown with plenty of free parking.

Best of all, the audience showed up in droves every Monday. Our little theatre packed out wall to wall every week for 57 weeks in a row. We made a special phone number called the *WoodSongs Reservation Hotline* and we began encouraging folks to call ahead to make reservations; and they did. It was not uncommon for the show to be reserved solid for up to four weeks ahead of time.

Over a year passed in our little theatre and the show really took off. More and more artists would submit to be on the show, more stations would take the risk of airing us, our number of affiliates stations swelled and the audience continued its support each week.

Moving to the Kentucky Theatre

Fifty seven weeks in a row the Library theatre reserved out. It was time to allow WoodSongs to grow yet again. Up the road from the theatre was another beautiful hall, the historic Kentucky Theatre. Fred Mills, the longtime proprietor, is a very kind and gentle man whose main expertise in his professional life is the movie business. The theatre looked like an English garden with hand painted murals and star lights twinkling in the ceiling. It was the avantgarde art center for downtown and I wanted WoodSongs to be there.



The management welcomed us with open arms. It was a good thing for them. After all, how many people see a movie on a Monday evening? Not too many. They would love to have several hundred popcorn buying visitors come to the theatre each Monday. The deal was made, hands were shook and the new home of the worldwide broadcast of *WoodSongs* would be the historic Kentucky Theatre in downtown Lexington.

Moving into a larger theatre that seats 300 people took something WoodSongs didn't have and the Kentucky Theatre didn't have: a full sound system and recording rig.

Back to Kentucky Tourism I went wearing my knee pads, this time with **Mr. Jim Host** at the helm as Commerce Secretary. He listened to our 5 minute pitch, looked at his tourism director and simply said, "*Do it. I want this thing as big as A Prairie Home Companion.*"

Without Jim Host, there is no WoodSongs today.

The first thing I decided to do was design a massive 14' wide WoodSongs stage sign of the logo. Why? Branding. No matter how you took a photo, "WoodSongs" would always be seen clearly. When Kevin saw the sign he looked at me and said, as only Darth Vader could, "*Size is everything, dude.*"

In the late spring of 2000, our show moved to the Kentucky Theatre for two special event shows with **Ronnie McCoury** and dobro master **Rob Ickes**. Both shows were a tremendous success. The theatre was packed, the roar of the audience . . . you folks are *amazing* . . . sounded incredible. WoodSongs had become a personality all its own. No one was there for who was on the show, most people didn't have a clue. They just knew that WoodSongs was mining for musical gold and they wanted a piece for themselves.

Within four months, WUKY, one of America's oldest NPR stations cleared a spot on their schedule and gave us a beautiful time slot, Saturday evenings at 8pm immediately following Garrison Kiellor's *A Prairie Home Companion*.

By 2001, the show also became the world's first multi-camera weekly series to broadcast on the internet. This became the seed of what would later become the Public TV series.

About 2004, Judge Ray Corns volunteered to leave his judicial bench to warm up the audience before the show.

In 2008 WoodSongs upgraded its look and production levels, and the webcast became a full-blown TV series designed for public television stations across the country. Now, with help from KET and NETA WoodSongs is broadcast into millions of TV homes across America, giving our hometown much to be proud of and the artists who come to our stage a massive audience to perform for.

This was also the time we were invited to be part of the American Forces Radio Network, broadcasting our show in 177 nations and all military bases and US Naval ships in the world.

The Lyric Theatre

By December 2011 two things happened that would change the fortunes of WoodSongs: the Kentucky Theatre decided to make some needed renovations and the Lyric Theatre offered to be our new home. All in the same week.

Of course, I had the same concerns. 300 folks in the Kentucky Theatre was a packed house. The same 300 folks in the 500 seat Lyric looked, well, kinda empty. But the Lyric Theatre was uniquely designed for a national broadcast with a digital sound system, computerized box office, artist's green rooms, a safer and complete lighting grid and more.

Alrighty, let's do it. One problem: Kevin was concerned. It turned out the position of the mixing rig in the back of the hall didn't give him enough room, as he was a very big man. I used to kid with him that he had a heart as big as the great outdoors and a place to put it. So, I promised Kevin that I would personally build a special platform just for him that would fit and support him. I measured the area, got out my log cabin building tools and built it. It worked, and that platform remains the base of the mixing position to this day.

The first show at the Lyric came, and it was packed. The second show was packed. The third, fourth and fifth, packed. You, our precious audience and family of WoodSongs partners, made the Lyric our new home.

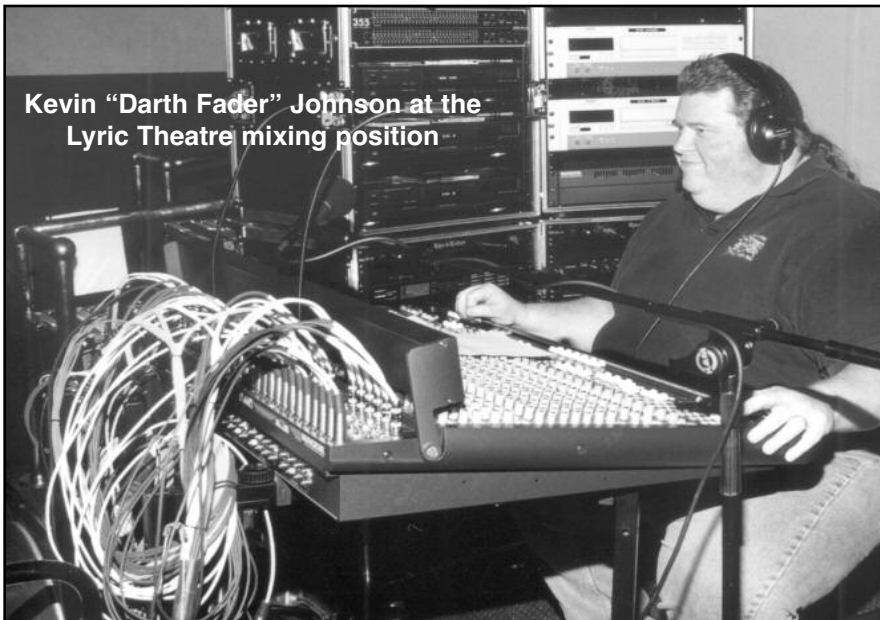
Kevin “Darth Fader” Johnson

It seemed like a normal Monday. The crew was setting up for the show, Bryan was getting the stage wired up, I arrived about 3:30. By 4PM I noticed Kevin wasn't there. Around 4:30 the Lyric took a call from the Fire Department asking for me. I walk to the concession stand in the lobby to take the call.

“Mr. Johnathon, the family asked me to phone you, we regret to inform you that Kevin Johnson is deceased.”

Those were the exact words. I just kind of stood there for a minute to catch my breath. I talked to Kevin that morning and he seemed fine. I brought Bryan, **Jerome Gallt** and **Brandon Eaves** into the green room, shut the door, and gave them the news straight. That night, we did the show as usual and, when the broadcast taping was done, announced to the audience and crew that our dear friend Kevin was gone.

Jerome and Brandon sat in Kevin's chair that night, and have guided WoodSongs every week since then. Kevin trained them both and I know he would be very proud of them.



Kevin “Darth Fader” Johnson at the Lyric Theatre mixing position

Public Television and the RFD-TV Network

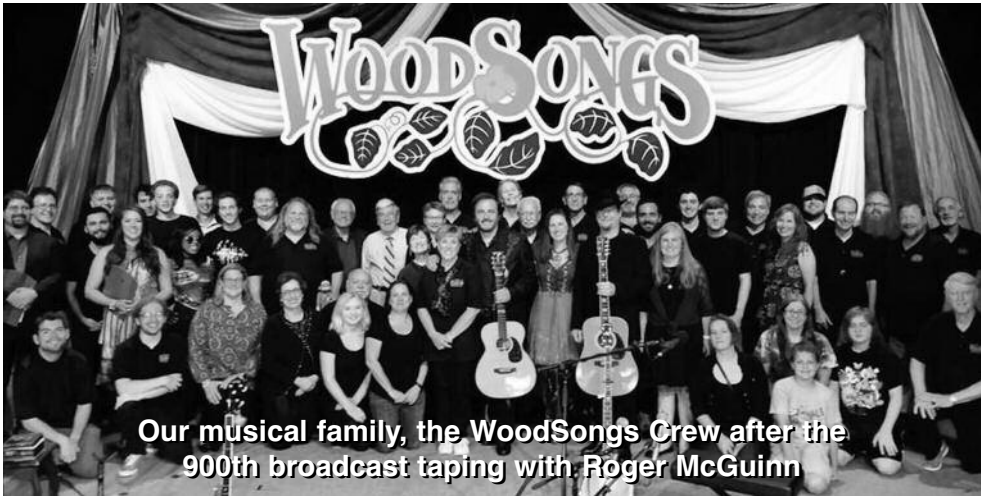
Just when you think things couldn't get any better, along comes **SJ Matthews**. SJ is a brilliant, albeit eccentric, ex-hippy glass blower that has a career in television production. When we went to Ireland to tape a double broadcast on a Saturday night in front of 1,900 fans it was SJ ... and the rest of the crew ... that made it happen. With his knowledge of gear and programing, he used scotch tape, super glue and elbow grease to create a real TV broadcast booth at the Lyric Theatre. He raised the show from the analogue stone age to a modern 16x9 HD broadcast. Today, **Isaac May** does a brilliant job picking up where SJ left off.

Because of his magic touch, WoodSongs exploded across the public TV airwaves, being added to major markets like Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Utah, West Virginia Public Television, ThinkTV, Nashville PBS, Vermont PBS and our own KET-PBS.

So, what's the problem you ask? SJ was so good at what he did that the RFD-TV Network wanted the show too, all 54 million USA TV homes plus DishTV and DirectTV. How hard could it be to take a radio show with no budget and turn it into a weekly commercial TV series with no budget?

Pretty hard. So back to Kentucky Tourism I go with my worn out knee pads, this time with the help of **Mary Quinn Ramer and Lexington Tourism**. We talked over the phone ... *the ding dang phone* ... discussing the possibility and costs of turning WoodSongs into a major national TV show and Commissioner **Kristen Branscum** said yes. Lo and behold, our little radio show was now on a national TV network airing all across America on a fixed time slot. It worked out so well that RFD-TV added WoodSongs to a second day as well.

When we taped our big 900th broadcast with welcomed the legendary **Roger McGuinn** as special guest, Commissioner **Kristen Branscum** was onstage as we took the celebration photo with the entire WoodSongs Crew.



Our musical family, the WoodSongs Crew after the 900th broadcast taping with Roger McGuinn

WSM: the Broadcast Home of the Grand Ole Opry

WoodSongs followed humbly in the footsteps created by many legacy radio shows of the past, least of which is the Grand Ole Opry as broadcast by the powerful 50,000 watt superstation WSM AM. This is the grand master template of all radio and this is the very station that turned the Grand Ole Opry into music history.

Nothing can ever come along to replace that magnificent legacy, we make no claim to it, but we certainly can be inspired by it. I was. Even Garrison Kiellor created *A Prairie Home Companion* after visiting a broadcast at the Ryman in Nashville.

One autumn day in 2018 we got a phone call from a pleasant fellow in Nashville. He was the program director at WSM and they had a spot open up on early Sunday evenings and would we be interested in them picking up WoodSongs?

Well, heck yes! So, as you read this, WoodSongs is being aired twice each Sunday on the powerful WSM AM 650, home of the Grand Ole Opry. This station and its mighty signal broadcasts into at least 26 states and can be heard in parts of Ireland and Europe. They gave WoodSongs not one but two ... TWO! ... time slots early Sunday evenings, the new show followed by a selection from the WoodSongs archives.

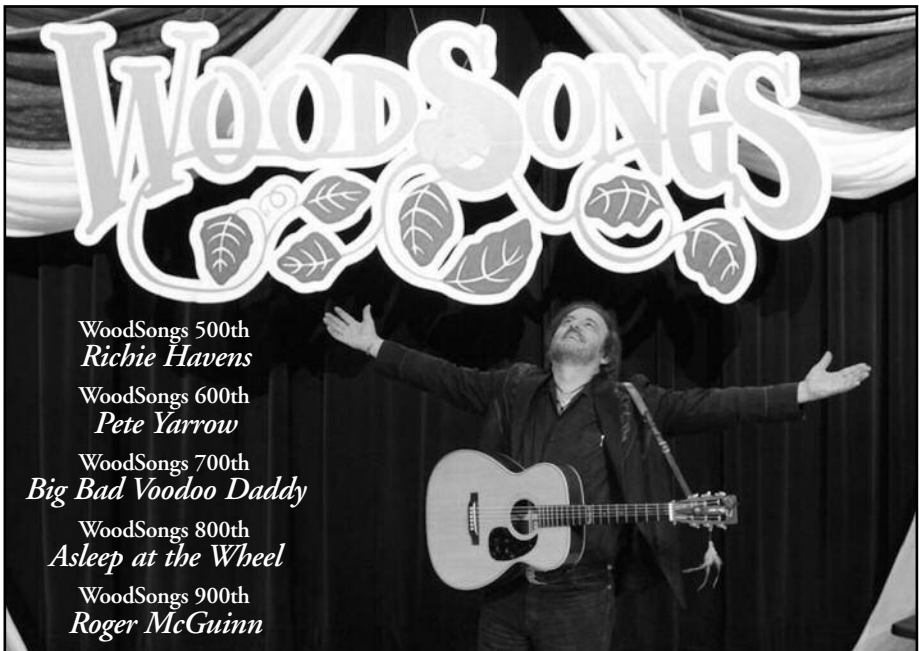
To the credit of WSM, they respect the intent behind WoodSongs so much that they elected, on their own, to air the show commercial free.

Not bad for a little all-volunteer run folk show from rural America in Lexington, KY.

WoodSongs Kids

Kids are the future of the front porch, so giving young performers a place on WoodSongs was the right thing to do. It didn't come without its complaints. As a matter of fact, it got a tad unruly when we first began.

Now it is one of the most popular portions of the show. We have also partnered with the University of Kentucky and, with the wisdom and creative vision of **Doug Boyd** and **April Ballard**, make WoodSongs available with lesson plans for middle, high and college level classes to all teachers and home school parents. Our classroom effort also opens up an unattainable audience for artists as well, and they love the idea.



And so it goes, each Monday our crew continues to arrive at the Lyric theatre to run cable, set lights, mount cameras, assemble the sound system, run sound check, go through rehearsal with the artists and welcome our beloved audience. Local hotels put up the visiting artists for free, local restaurants bring complete dinners for the crew and artists ... for free.

WoodSongs is broadcasting worldwide on an average weekly budget of \$622. No kidding. It goes free to public radio, free to public television, free to American Forces Radio, free to RFD-TV and free to WSM. The crew works for free, the artists come for free and the classroom programs are free to any teacher and home school parent.

I believe that love is the greatest transaction of the arts and I wanted WoodSongs to prove it. And, because of you, it has.

Onward we go. Every Sunday, 44 weeks a year no matter where I am in North America, I make my way back home to Lexington to produce the weekly broadcast of our show.

Thanks for listening, thanks for believing ... and thank you for tuning in to the *WoodSongs Old-Time Radio Hour!*



Lexington's Mayor Jim Gray celebrates our renewal at the historic Lyric Theatre with the WoodSongs crew. Nearly 60,000 people have come through the doors of the Lyric to see a WoodSongs taping on Monday evenings.

A little bit of WoodSongs history in pictures



Michael and cellist Ben Sollee
on WoodSongs in 2007



Show #10 was our first
program dedicated to Kids



Stage manager
Bryan Klausung



WoodSongs stage in 2019.
INSET our audience in 2004

photos by Larry Steur and Dr. Bob DeMattina

Pete Seeger & “Snake Oil” Salesmen

Pete loved the story of *Johnny Appleseed*, spreading his apple seeds as he traveled across the land. Pete viewed folksingers the same way, spreading their songs across the fertile music garden. The growth of the SongFarmers community is not a tribute to Pete in anyway, but it was certainly inspired by the good work that Pete & Toshi did in their home towns. Even though he was a global icon, he focused on the community where he lived. That is what SongFarmers do, cultivating musical seeds in their hometown gardens.

He was ridiculed often for his efforts to save the Hudson River and encouraging people to use music in a non-commercial manner. He said folk music should never be turned into a business, and he regretted any participation he may have had that left the perception it should be.

I receive the same kind of criticism, one person supposedly close to me said they felt I sounded like a snake oil salesman when talking about families, friends, and neighbors coming together in song. That hurt, but I'm sure it hurt Pete as well when people in his own hometown spurned and rejected his efforts to clean up the Hudson river.

My vision for the SongFarmers community, carried on overwhelmingly by the members and not me, was to bring together the national community of front porch musicians the music business left behind. As I write this, we are approaching 60 active SongFarmer chapters from Hawaii to Vermont, all of them bringing their songs, voices, instruments, families, friends and neighbors together once a month sowing seeds in a beautiful, musical garden. If you like to play and sing and don't mind a teaspoon of “snake oil” every now and then you should watch the documentary, and consider starting your own hometown chapter. You can watch it here: SongFarmers.org

SongFarmers are real, that critic's snarky remark is buried in the dustbin of silence. I don't know if there's any medicinal benefits in snake oil, and inferring someone is a salesman implies they're getting paid. I am not and I get nothing for the effort.

In the flourishing SongFarmers community, the snake oil is free.

Songs of Rural America

*How Hard Can It Be for a Folksinger
to Perform with a Symphony Orchestra?*

Well, pretty hard.

Especially for a banjo playing folksinger who can't really read or write music. If you read my last book about the creation of *The Dream*, my song about the Earth at Peace recorded with a 61-piece symphony, you will know that I use the "humming" method for orchestration. I know what I hear in my head, I know what I want, so I hum it and someone more skilled than I will write it out.

I conjured up the idea because of a) my love of the front porch idea, b) creation of the SongFarmers community and c) I often perform with string quartets on WoodSongs.

The idea ignited my imagination and we immediately found the amazing Lora Lynn Snow with The Ohio Valley Symphony and



a wonderful Maestro, **Tim Berens**. Tim was perfect for this project because he a skilled conductor and he is also a guitar playing songwriter. He “got it” immediately.

Tim and Lora came to Lexington to a WoodSongs taping, the next morning we had a nice visit at my log cabin and decided that The Ohio Valley Symphony at the historic Ariel Opera House in Gallipolis, Ohio would be the perfect launch of my *Songs of Rural America* project.

My manager at the time connected me with **Joshua Carter**, a very talented fellow who did orchestration for several artists such as Ben Folds. We had writing sessions in Nashville every few weeks, I would hum the lines I wanted certain instruments to do and he would use the musical brush in his heart and fill in the colors around it.

How hard can it be? It’s like giving birth to a rhino with the horn still attached. But it was a stunning, spectacular experience. Jerome Galt, Brandon Eaves, Lora Lynn Snow, Tim Berens, Bryan Klausing, Isaac May, Colin Johnson, Devon Riley, Nick Embry, SJ Mathews, Melissa and The Ohio Valley Symphony musicians plus the rest of the crew did a world-class job recording, performing and filming the event as the launch for the national tour of symphonies.



The public radio and TV taping of my concert **SONGS OF RURAL AMERICA**, a musical celebration of the spirit of America’s front porch, with The Ohio Valley Symphony and Maestro Tim Berens.

The End ... and the Power of LOVE

I guess the point of this book is simple:

Love supercedes every obstacle we face in life, in family, in friendships, in community ... and in the music business. *Love* for your song is what the audience is looking for. *Love* puts the artist and the audience in perfect harmony, perfect sync. *Love* gathers your friends and neighbors to the spiritual front porch, the grand pulpit of every neighborhood and hometown. *Love* is power. *Love* is real.

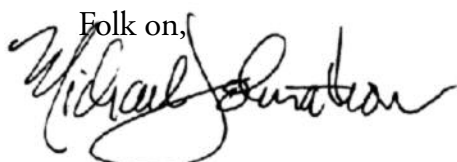
Peacefulness speaks very loudly these days because everywhere you look folks are tense, they are angry, they are upset at the nation, the world and their communities. *Love and Peace*, and I'm not trying to get all kumbaya on you, is the powerful sword that cuts through the dark clouds covering the hearts of your audience.

Use it. Anger and the brevity of the internet present a challenge for all of us ... we must write in brilliant colors to be noticed in a world saturated in beige. The songs have become invisible because memes and social media have replaced our musical voice with noise.

Love colors everything. *Love* builds everything. *Love* is the glue that makes an artist play and write and sing. *Love* is what draws the audience to the artist. *Love* is more powerful than money. *Love* is the greatest transaction of the arts.

I wrote this book because I want us to believe in that again. Pete believed in it and I think he tried hard in his music and life to reflect that. The music business may have changed, but it never had anything to do with the love of music, the love of songwriting and the love for the audience. It's time to embrace that spirit again.

Be well, Create often, Travel Safe, Be Fearless.
... and don't suck.

Folk on,


Folksinger, Tree Hugger & SongFarmer
michael@woodsongs.com

