

Song Chaser: An Interview with Jim Hale

"I labor under the handicap of not growing up with any particular banjo style; I've had to make it up as I go along."

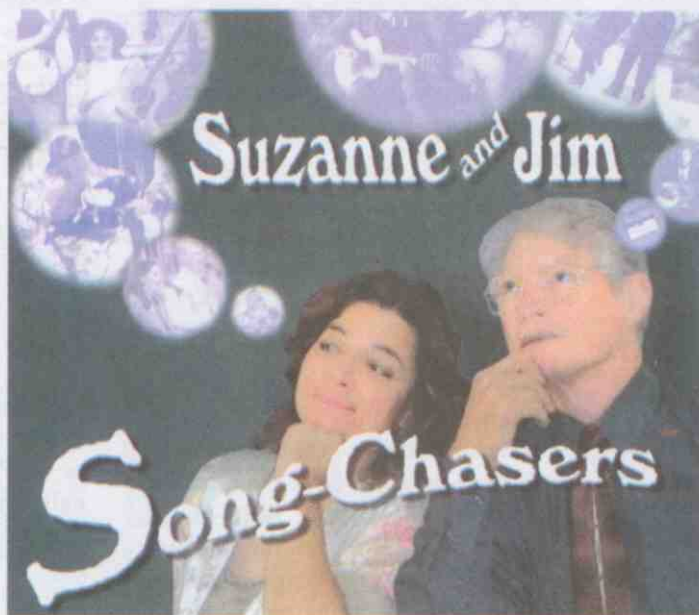
By Bob Carlin

Jim Hale has been a long time friend of *Banjo Newsletter*. During 1978 and 1979, Hale wrote the *BNL* column, "Old Time Tutorial." In fact, Hub and Nancy Nitchie lived near him on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in the 1970s and early 1980s. Jim and I first met in the late 1970s at the Deer Creek Fiddlers' Conventions, where we often faced off in the banjo competition (he usually beat me). It was great to visit with Jim, to recap his journey with the banjo as well as to find out about his current travels with musical (and life) partner Suzanne Jaroszynski. Jim and Suzanne have a CD, "Song-Chasers," where you can hear Jim's banjo playing backing up Suzanne's singing of popular songs from the late 19th and early 20th century that provided much of the inspiration and repertoire for the country musicians of the 1920s and 1930s.

"I remember my banjo-Salute moment," said Hale. "I was eight years old, and we lived in Eudora, a little town between Lawrence and Kansas City. I was late coming home from a baseball game and a dentist who lived on the way was out waxing his car with the Grand Ole Opry playing on the radio and there was a banjo player on it, it had to have been Earl Scruggs. And it froze me. I even left my ball glove behind."

"I didn't start playing then, though. Although I found banjos, they didn't have five strings [but rather four] and since I didn't know any different I tried to make the sounds I had heard. When I was a teenager, I would go to YMCA to box, and as I walked between my father's office and the Y, there were a bunch of bars. I used to hang out at them, where Ted Painter, a tenor banjo player, played. When I asked

him, he played *Foggy Mt Breakdown* for me on the tenor banjo! By that time, I had also played 'at' the guitar for a number of years. When I went off to college at Grinnell in Iowa, a guy named Bob Cantwell [future professor in Folklore at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill] was there during my last semester and he showed me a bit of Scruggs style, the basic roll."



After graduating in 1964, Jim moved to Wichita where his father was then living, and met the "doyen" of Kansas's folksingers, Jackie Kinder. Jackie told him about the festival in Mountain View, Arkansas, and Jim hitchhiked there, where he met Jimmy Driftwood. Jimmy, in turn, took him to meet frailing banjoist Bookmiller Shannon.

Used to bluegrass three-finger picking, Hale found Shannon's playing indecipherable. "I couldn't make sense out of his right hand," recalls Jim. Hale was also around another frailer, Sam Ontjes, who was later to become his partner in the Mossman guitar company, but he still couldn't decode the clawhammer style.

In 1969, Ontjes and Hale started Mossman, with Jim executing the inlay work, which he learned "the hard way" (i.e.: by

doing). Hale left Mossman after a year and went to work for the Toronto Folklore Center and Larivee Guitars in Canada as a guitar repairman. "Paul Hornbeck worked there," says Jim, "and played clawhammer banjo. Paul was in an old time string band called Sweet Evening Breeze with Steve Scantlon and Bernie Jaffe on fiddles. They had that old time sound."

It was through his interaction with Sweet Evening Breeze that Jim finally "got" clawhammer banjo and switched over from the Scruggs bluegrass style.

"The three-finger banjo was a dog fight for me," says Hale. "I could work stuff out but I was never able to do anything without a lot of conscious effort. The clawhammer style feels a lot more natural. I can play along with stuff I don't even know; it just seemed to click with me. Not that I don't have to work at it, I'm certainly a long way from where I want to be. The lifestyle of a performing musician doesn't leave me much time to work on what I want to work on."

In 1975, Jim Hale left Toronto, fulfilling a promise to his then wife that they would come back to the United States if and when the opportunity presented itself. Mike Longworth, no slouch at guitar repair himself (and author of the first history of Martin Guitars), encouraged Jim to move to the Washington, DC area, where there would be opportunities to work on vintage Martin and Gibson guitars. Hale ended up on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, within shouting distance of many musicians looking for a repairman.

"I had more work than I could really handle up until the gas crisis of 1978," Jim recalls, "after which folks didn't want to drive out there [to the Eastern Shore]. About that time I began playing in bands more."

"There were no old-time fiddlers on the Eastern Shore, so I played fiddle for a while out of desperation." Then he met Irish musician Tom Kelly at a fiddlers'

convention in West Virginia. Tom putt together a band together for the competition with Jim and New Englander Jon Cooper (now a well-known builder of violins). When Cooper returned home, Tom and Jim decided to keep playing together. But not before Jon had dubbed the band "The Chicken Spankers."

The duo added Tom's brother Rob on guitar, country fiddler Jon Simmons, and electric bassist Jim Benneman. The only parameter for band membership was the willingness and availability to play.

"It was a band with a lot of energy, balancing a rawness and a lot of ignorance with occasional good musical moments. I think one of our real strengths were that we were willing to make arrangements out of songs rather than just let them all hang out there. I don't remember hearing another band at that time in an old-time context that played in a more orchestrated

way, swapping solos. For some reason, we hit this really bouncy groove that cloggers loved. It wasn't really fast, but it had a lot of groove.

"The Chicken Spankers covered the spectrum, from Tommy Jarrell to Jethro Tull, and brought out some of the worst in my playing because I had to be outrageous. On the other hand, the tonality of the banjo and flute was a beautiful instrumental pairing. It brought out the more subtle side of the music. To offset the timbre of the flute, I tended to make the banjo work more percussively and play a lot of single notes without a lot of brushing."

Before disbanding several years later, the Chicken Spankers won a number of prizes at fiddlers' conventions, and performed at prestigious events such as the Brandywine Mountain Music Convention and the Philadelphia Folk Festival. Several short stints in other string bands followed

for Hale, including the Overkill Band with Simmonds and Steve Hickman on fiddles, and the Red Hot Peppers, with Jim's relocated Toronto friend Steve Scantlon.

From 1982 until 1990, Jim took a hiatus from the banjo, working as a road manager for musician David Bromberg. During this period he broke his left hand, further keeping him from the instrument. Jim finally returned to active performing in 1992. His current and longest running and musical relationship begun when Suzanne Jaroszynski took banjo lessons from him in 1980. They became friends, then partners, and eventually, musical collaborators. "One day, Suzanne just said, 'let's have an act,'" Jim remembers. And they've been touring together ever since 1992, traveling the country in a motor home, and performing nationwide.

Their duo show is aimed at a general audience unfamiliar with traditional old-

Double C tuning: gDGCD, capo 2

Big John Henry

Jealous Hearted Blues

G tuning: gDGBD

*As played by Jim Hale
Source: "Song-Chasers" by Suzanne and Jim
Transcribed by Bob Carlin*

time music and the clawhammer banjo style. In order to interest promoters and audience alike, Suzanne and Jim have developed song-based presentations that focus on historical themes.

"If we were to go out and be an old-time group, we could play forty shows a year. Doing it our way, we play 250 to 300 shows a year. Of course, our heart music is still the recorded country music of the 1920s and 1930s. And we're getting more interested in the source music of *that*—the popular music of the 1870s. We've been doing the research, and building arrangements from the original sheet music used by country musicians as their source.

"I'm using the banjo in a different context than the dance bands of years ago," Jim explains. "The banjo has got to fulfill a lot of roles. It's our melody instrument, so, I've got to play recognizable solos. It has got to be there rhythmically as well, because Suzanne's guitar playing mostly emphasizes the bass notes on the downbeats, so the banjo emphasizes the offbeat. Another challenge in a banjo/guitar duet is to give an audience a variety of sounds. I use the banjo to accompany a ballad, to play fills or solos between verses, to give punctuation to song.

"Much of what it does making rhythm could be done by a tennis racket. It can be at its best in a dance band, where it's the driving force. But it can also be played like a musical instrument. I just heard this guy Adam Hurt; he played *Garfield's Blackberry Blossom* in a way that translates a cranky fiddle tune into a lyrical musical piece. However, there's one other very important feature of a banjo that is overlooked—the banjo surrounding the voice gives an appeal to the singing of people like Bascom Lunsford and Clarence Ashley. It offsets the voice. We're starting to do more things with just banjo accompaniment to Suzanne's voice. John Hartford used to do stuff like that, and that might have inspired me."

Jim uses both his index and middle to play melody because of the different attack he gets with each. His clawhammer playing also uses a lot of drop thumb, and he uses the thumb to accent a lot of "off" beats in both the rhythm and melody.

"I have to do less than I used to," Jim says. "When I broke my hand I lost a lot

of left hand facility. A lot of the intricate physically demanding things I used to do I can't do anymore. And the ten-year layoff caused me to forget a lot of what I knew. Also I have to concentrate on my singing, which simplifies the banjo playing. There's nowhere to hide if I screw up."

Jim has owned a number of different banjos over the years. With the Chicken Spankers, Hale played a Tubaphone 10 3/4" pot fitted with an original Whyte Laydie five-string neck. In the 1970s, Jim also used a converted Gibson trap door and an A. A. Farland with an 11" pot. Currently, he uses a stock Ome minstrel Jubilee model with no tone ring on its 12" pot reminiscent of his A. A. Farland banjo. He has switched to nylon strings and is working with D'Addario to develop a set for modern clawhammer playing. When Jim wants the sound of metal strings, he uses either a Stromberg with a 12" pot and a Kevin Enoch neck or a Kel Kroyden (made by Gibson) fitted with a new five-string neck that works for both frailing and fingerpicking. He strings both with John Pearce strings, the Stromberg/Enoch with lights and the Kroyden with mediums.

Although Jim has done a lot of teaching of both three-finger and clawhammer over the years, traveling has curtailed his taking on students. His teaching is usually limited to workshops at festivals and music stores. Jim approaches each student as a problem solver.

"I'm interested in discovering the way each person learns, and *then* helping them," says Jim. "And I don't believe in tab. There has to be a point when you get

away from the page and make the music your own. Since no two people tell the story the same way, I just feel like they're missing some of the joy in creating."

What's in Jim and Suzanne's future? For the moment, more traveling and playing music for audiences in a variety of non-traditional venues.

"The reason we started traveling and playing music in the first place was that we discovered that audiences see something in us that's attractive. So, we knew that this was a viable business to be in. I think the most important thing to being on stage is to be 100% honest. You have to *believe* it when you're doing it, when you're up there."

Tablatures:

To keep with Jim's theme of fitting the banjo into a song-based duo, I've chosen to tab out two of his instrumental introductions from Suzanne and Jim's CD, *Song-Chasers*. Although Jim uses both his index and his middle finger to play melody, I have no way of knowing which one he uses on which string, so I've indicated all melody notes with an "M". As Jim notes above, he uses a lot of drop thumb for both melody and rhythm, which should be obvious from these two tabs. *Jealous Hearted Blues* is not usually a clawhammer tune, and has uneven phrases. Jim does some interesting harmonic licks, juxtaposing a Bb note against a B in the pickup, first, second and third measures. On the other hand, as indicated in the CD's notes, is a traditional banjo song more commonly known as *I've Been All Around This World*.

BEGINNER'S CORNER

Earl, Simplified

Eddie Collins

The last two months we have discussed the merits of learning transcriptions of Earl Scruggs's solos from the tabs provided in his book. Being that this column is dedicated to those in the early stage of their learning, I offered a list to help those who have tried to figure out which tunes to learn and in what order. The list was based on ease of play and the instructional value of the piece. I specifi-

cally mentioned that some very popular pieces, i.e. *Jed Clampett*, should be avoided by beginners as the skills required to master such a solo have not been learned. This month, rather than avoiding such pieces, we will look at ways to simplify things while still keeping the integrity of the original tune or lick.

Let's begin by looking at *Example 1*—the final D measure lick in the tune, *Your*