

The Tuttles with A.J. Lee - Rising Stars

Dave Porter

Condensed and updated from an article in 'Grass Clippings (Feb/12), the newsletter of the Ottawa Valley Bluegrass Music Association

If you attended the guitar workshop at the Deerhurst BMAC Awards weekend in November, 2011 you saw Jason Jones demonstrating his incredible bluegrass

Membership Award.

His talented kids first achieved notice in 2006 when Jack posted the YouTube of Michael (8) and Sullivan (10) playing El Cumbanchero a la Jesse McReynolds. The video promptly went viral and has now surpassed 1.6 million views. Little did viewers realize, however, that it was sister, Molly (13), on rhythm guitar, who was the most advanced picker of the three.

Molly's musical abilities came to light as more YouTube videos were posted and especially when Jack and Molly released their duet CD, "The Old Apple Tree", in 2007. Recorded in multiple tracks so that the versatile Jack could play other instruments, the highly acclaimed first CD sounds like a full bluegrass band. Produced when Molly was 13, it features her singing lead on 11 songs, and playing impressive lead banjo or guitar breaks almost every cut.

that I convinced Ottawa's Ron Moores of CKCU-FM (93.1) and 2 other radio people to give them a listen. Ron featured their music and commentary on his show, 'The Back 40', for a full hour in early 2011. Soon after, Barb Heller of NCPR, Canton, NY, and Bill Knowlton of WCNY (91.3) - Syracuse NY, gave them shorter segments.

Their amazing progress as individual musicians and as a band has been recognized in spades by their home state Bluegrass Society at Awards Weekends in both 2011 and 2012 In a process that requires 2 ballots to narrow the long lists of nominees to 5 finalists and a 3rd ballot to determine a winner, all 5 band members were finalists in their individual categories in both years. In the final ballot in 2011, members of the NCBS voted Molly Tuttle **Best Guitarist**, and A.J. Lee **Best Female Vocalist**. In 2012, voters selected Molly Tuttle **Best Female Vocalist**, Michael Tuttle **Best Mandolin Player**, and Jack Tuttle, **Best Fiddler**. It is also likely that either Molly or Sullivan would have won the **Best Guitar Player** award in 2012 had there been only one Tuttle name on the final ballot. But the best prize was having their band beat out close to 300 adult bands to be chosen **Best Bluegrass Band in both years**.

Their talent has not gone unnoticed by some key figures in bluegrass circles. In 2007, Dennis Brunnenmeyer (KVMR radio) said: "Molly sings (like) she grew up in the Blue Ridge Mountains 150 years ago." Legendary banjo man, Pete Wernick, commented: "A.J. Lee and Molly Tuttle ... can bring you into a song and create a duet blend that makes the senses stand at attention. It's remarkable that they are both teenagers ... Sullivan



Left to Right: Sullivan Tuttle (16); A.J. Lee (13); Jack Tuttle; Molly Tuttle (18); Michael Tuttle (14)

guitar skills which are all the more amazing because he is only 16 years old.

Now imagine 4 of Jason Jones, plus a bit, all playing or singing in the same band, average age, 15 years old, and you've got "The Tuttles with A.J. Lee" as they were in their showcasing suite in September, 2011 at IBMA.

While still relatively unknown in Canada and even in the eastern states, The Tuttles with A.J. Lee have been piling up accolades as headliners in their home state of California for some time.

Jack Tuttle, dad to three of them and bass player in the band, has performed in several bands and has been a highly respected music teacher in California for many years. In 2007 the California Bluegrass Association (CBA) honoured him with the Distinguished Honorary Lifetime

Meantime, an hour northeast of the Tuttles Palo Alto home, in Tracy, CA, A.J. Lee had begun singing at age 2 and performing by age 4. By age 8 she she had been invited to major bluegrass events including the IBMA FanFest in Nashville. In 2008 she performed for 40,000 people at a NASCAR event in Indianapolis and on National TV and in 2009 she joined the IBMA's instructional video series called "Discover Bluegrass" that had featured Sierra Hull in 2005.

A.J. met the Tuttles in 2004 at the age of 6 while jamming at a CBA festival. She and Molly's 2 brothers began performing regularly with Jack & Molly sometime after the release of 'The Old Apple Tree' and in August, 2010, the band released, 'Introducing the Tuttles with A.J. Lee'.

It was after the release of this second CD

and Michael play strong and agile leads on guitar and mandolin..." And, California band leader, Kathy Kallick, with 15 CD's to her credit, wrote on their latest CD jacket, "The picking is HOT! The singing is complex and gorgeous! Molly has a voice that is unique and very traditional at the same time ... And when she blends that voice with A.J.'s ... chills went up and down my spine... Michael and Sullivan played virtuoso solos that had the audience on their feet and I, myself, burst into laughter, as I do when music delights and amazes me."

More recently, as I learned at IBMA, their showcasing events there earned them a private audition with Rounder Records and Molly was presented with the first Scholarship awarded by the Foundation for Bluegrass Music in memory of Hazel Dickens. She commenced studies at the Berklee College of Music in Boston in January, 2012. This scholarship was especially meaningful for Molly. She says: "I have been singing Hazel Dickens songs since I was 8 years old ... (see 1st CD) ... and I was lucky enough to get to meet her several



Molly meets Hazel Dickens at IBMA

years ago at IBMA. Hazel Dickens has been one of my biggest influences..."

But What Have You Done for Me Lately?

That's where the accolades ended when I first wrote this article in late January, 2012. But these kids have not let up.

On January 30, the popular on-line news service, 'Bluegrass Today' listed as its

lead news item, the Tuttles signing with Roe Entertainment (the same agent that handles Michael Cleveland & Flame-keeper, and Dale Ann Bradley.)

And Molly has been making noise since she started at Berklee College of Music.

In April, she took first place in the Merlefest songwriters contest. In May, she was one of two singers chosen to sing in honour of Alyson Krauss who was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Music by Berklee. The other singer was Alyson Krauss' protégé, Sierra Hull. Also in May, a group of six bluegrass veterans led by Bruce Compton chose 1st semester student, Molly Tuttle, to sing and play guitar as they played a tribute to John McGann, a highly respected Berklee professor of music and mandolin/guitar teacher, who died suddenly.

And On July 20/21, despite being a freshman Molly will co-lead the Berklee bluegrass band in a Saturday Night(!) performance at the Grey Fox Bluegrass Festival, one of the largest in the country.

Meanwhile, her band is having a break-through year having landed main-stage performance spots at two high profile festivals — Gettysburg and Windgap. At Gettysburg they received 3 standing O's and were introduced for their second set as the surprise and the discovery of the Festival. The reception was the same at Windgap. And finally, on-line news service Bluegrass Today, gave the Tuttles 25% of the photo coverage for Saturday at Gettysburg even though they were only one of 7 bands.

Tuesday Night at IBMA, 2011

I had a good idea of what to expect musically when I walked into room 102 at IBMA because I've been a Tuttles fan since October 11, 2008. That was the day I ran across, quite by accident, their YouTube recording of a song I'd played in my 20's and wanted to relearn, called 'Diamond Joe'. Since then, I'd also lis-

tened to their 2 CD's many times over. Despite that preparation, two things immediately surprised me that night.

The Music

First, neither YouTube nor their well-produced CD's do them justice. Whether they were playing their signature instrumental, El Cumbanchero or the old bluegrass standard, Beaumont Rag; or the jazzy Gypsy Palo Alto, composed by Jack, their instrumental wizardry almost made me laugh out loud in



A.J. Lee, Molly Tuttle, Dave Porter, Michael Tuttle, & Sullivan Tuttle at IBMA

sheer amazement. I thought of Kathy Kallick as I sat there.

The transitions from instrument to instrument are impeccably timed and the breaks are not only fast and intricate, but full of the unexpected twists and turns that define creative bluegrass picking. The vocals are equally impressive. Whether it was Molly's lonesome mountain sound in her own haunting composition, 'It's Long Road,' or 13-year old A.J. Lee absolutely nailing Gram Parson's 'Hickory Wind', the voices were crisp, mature way beyond their years, and the harmonies perfect.

The second surprise is related. After listening to their great music on-line or in my car so many times, I had stopped thinking about their ages. But when I finally saw them live, I was once again aware that these guys are kids, incredibly talented kids, but kids nonetheless.

I was first reminded of that fact when I asked Rodney Lee, A.J.'s dad, why the

band did not get out more into the bluegrass festival circuit. He answered: "Well you have to remember, A.J. and Michael just finishing elementary school." Jack added later that the boys do not yet sing in the group because their voices are still changing. But it was the reactions of the band members themselves that were the most telling. Audience applause to one of their breakneck-speed instrumentals often produced silly grins. I'm sure I even heard a couple of



Molly, Sullivan and Michael with Ralph Stanley in Berkeley

giggles. A.J. would look back shyly at bass player, Jack, for support as he patiently encouraged her to introduce her own songs. Even 18-year Molly Tuttle, whom I have watched on YouTube for the past 3 years as she grew up into the pretty college freshman that she now is, seemed to blush with embarrassment at enthusiastic audience response. These youthful reactions take nothing away from their music. They only serve to endear them to the audience more completely.

Meeting the Family

By now you know I'm a die hard fan. The reason is simple. It's fair to say I would not be editor of 'Grass Clippings' and that I would not be practising with a bluegrass band, had it not been for the Tuttles. In his teaching website: Jack Tuttle says: "How inspiration happens is a total mystery, but almost every musician has a story about how they saw some musician or band that just set them off." Of course, it's usually kids who are inspired by adult musicians, but in my case it was the exact opposite.

Some readers know the story. That day in 2008 when, for no particular reason, I clicked on "the Tuttle Kids Play Diamond Joe", I was frustrated and on the verge of giving up as fruitless, my quest to regain my long lost guitar playing skills that had been set aside 30-some

years earlier. But, within two minutes of watching the flying fingers of Molly & Sullivan, I was a Tuttles fan for life and totally re-hooked on bluegrass. A five minute dose of Tuttles videos or CD tracks was all it took from that point on to get me practising again.

Numerous videos and CD tracks later I knew I had created a rather idealized mental picture of this family. It crossed my mind as I rode the escalator down to that room at IBMA that I could discover a bunch of self-centered brats at the bottom. I need not have worried.

Jack Tuttle, and mother, Maureen Roddy and Rodney Lee, father of A.J. could not have been more welcoming and the four young musicians were as polite, and friendly, and seemed as happy and well adjusted as any group of teenagers I have ever met. It was that reception as much as the music that made that evening the highlight of my whole week.

Bluegrass and Silicon Valley

Palo Alto, California in the heart of Silicon Valley seems like the perfect antithesis of the mountains of Kentucky, the Carolinas and Virginia. I had wondered for three years how 3 apparently normal teenagers in that environment could become so totally devoted to bluegrass.

Music has been a part of A.J. Lee's family for generations and one gathers from the YouTube videos of A.J. singing with her mother and sisters that it was mostly country and bluegrass. She seems to



Some of Jack's "School of Bluegrass"

have been destined to sing almost before she could talk. Maureen Roddy, mother of the Tuttle kids explained that the



situation was similar for them.

Jack grew up on a farm near Yorkville, Illinois. His dad, Jerry, played banjo & guitar and formed the first Tuttle bluegrass band with his kids — Jack and his "silver-voiced" sister.

Jack had started on guitar at age 5, added banjo at age 12, after watching his dad, and later added mandolin and fiddle. After finishing an MBA, he decided to sign on as a banjo teacher at the Gryphon Stringed Instruments music store in Palo Alto "until he found a real job". After developing complete courses for five instruments and 10 instructional books, the "real job" was clearly off the agenda.

Maureen, a Palo Alto native, also comes from a musical family. She says she learned to "play a tune or two on mandolin, guitar, banjo and bass," but after becoming hooked on fiddle in Ireland she walked into Gryphon Stringed Instruments looking for a teacher, met Jack, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Teaching the Kids

How did they manage to get all of their kids to become such great musicians?

Jack played in the living room at home very often and had bluegrass music on the stereo when he was not playing. "From the time Molly could talk," says Maureen, she wanted to "play fiddle like daddy." Fiddle lessons at four did not pan out, however. She just wasn't ready. The timing was wrong. However, the timing of a surprise Baby Taylor guitar when she was 8, seemed to be perfect. Jack says progress was slow for the first 9 months but once she realized she could play some things, she began to practice as much as an hour or two a day and has

never looked back. Banjo followed at 10 years old and by 12 she was developing her own breaks, learning instrumentals on her own and had written her first banjo tune (1st CD).

Sullivan started a year after Molly at 7, and Michael another year later at 6. Aside from occasional challenges over who could play faster, both boys report that their motivation was not competition with their sister as one might expect. Instead, they say they used to see Molly and Jack sitting on the couch learning new music all the time and just wanted to join in.

Once all the kids got started, these two parents just seemed to know how to do it right. Lessons were informal but they played with their dad almost every evening. Maureen says Jack never refused no matter how tired he was and she played her part with constant encouragement, keeping distractions like video games to a minimum, and always making sure their instruments were out of their cases, ready to play.

As I watched them play at IBMA, Jack's gentle, encouraging and easy-going style was so evident in every song that I found myself envying those lucky kids who enrol in his "School of Bluegrass", a number of the graduates of which have gone on to state or national prominence.

Here is a family that has it figured out. One only hopes that when their job is done with Molly, Sullivan and Michael, they will have the energy and time to teach others how to teach kids.

For CD's: www.jacktuttle.com or www.thetuttleswithajlee.com