

Legendary Preservation By Greg Tutwiler

Born and raised in Eastern Kentucky in a little place called Pine Hollow, James Reams along with his band the Barnstormers are celebrating 20 years this year. Depending on your geographical location, you may not have yet had the chance to enjoy James' brand of old time bluegrass music – but it won't be long. It's taken him ten years, but he's putting the polish on the soon to be released documentary film "Making History with Pioneers of Bluegrass: Tales of the Early Days in Their Own Words." For the project, James interviewed over 20 of the first generation bluegrass musicians – folks who paved the way. They talked about their history as musicians and life in the early days of bluegrass. Set to be released this summer, the film will become a vital asset to future generations bluegrass musicians.

James recalled how life in Pine Hollow was behind the times, even then. "My dad was in an old time string band," he said, "and he would take me to square dances where they played. I remember kerosene lanterns and saw-dust floors. For a man my age (57) that's sort of strange. Lots of times, that's an older generation than I am. But it was normal to me. And it was part of the tradition of growing up. We even listened to the Grand Ol Opry. I just came up around music. So naturally I picked it up and started to play with dad and in my own bands around town in bars and pubs."

Change In Scenery

Eventually the senior Reams realized that for his family at least, it was time to leave that life behind. "I guess I was lucky. Dad was looking for a better life," James said. So when James was late high school age his dad piled the family "... into an old Nash Rambler with some hard boiled eggs and headed north. We went up to Wisconsin where Dad knew some family and started farming there." It was different, and it was better for the family. And James continued his love for music.



the founding members of The New Lost City Ramblers took a liking to the young James Reams. "We started hanging around together

James remembered that the Fox River Valley where they lived was a big printing area. "I was very interested in printing," he said. So he worked during the day at a print shop and would play little bars, and taverns and opry houses on the weekend. "One day (Late in his 20s by now) I got a wild hair and decided to move to New York City." He packed two cardboard boxes of stuff, a pair of work shoes, and his guitar, and got on a Greyhound Bus bound for the big apple. "I'd never been there before in my life," he said.

He quickly got a job working for a printer in New York, and at night would peruse the folk pubs and bars in eclectic Greenwich Village. Clubs like The Bottom Line and Folk City became his hang-outs. He began playing in those clubs and rubbing elbows with the elite of the day honing his skill and love for string and folk music.

Pickin' With Legends

Tom Paley, who had worked with Woody Guthrie, and was one of

some," James said. He was living over in England, and would come back to the states every other year or so, and we would do some shows together."

At the same time, James was playing with a great fiddler named Bill Christophersen. "I mentioned to Tom that we should record something, so the three of us went into the studio. I was about 30 at the time. After we did the recording, somebody suggested that we shop it around to record labels. I thought they were crazy." But they sent it to Gary Reed in Roanoke, VA at the then national record label Copper Creek Records. The next day Gary called James and offered them a record deal. "All my life I had been playing string music for fun and for passion, but I never thought I'd get a record deal, particularly on a national record label."

The record, *The Mysterious Redbirds* was pretty well received. And so Gary told James he could release some other material. *Barnstormin'* with James Reams And The Barnstormers was next. James had formed the group back in 1993 as a way to get to play more often. Their record was released in 2001, and the world opened up for them.

"We got lots of national attention and all of a sudden people knew my name," he recalled.

One afternoon James and the Barnstormers were performing at a festival in New Hampshire. Ready to head out to the next gig, they encountered van trouble. "We needed some help," he recalled. In addition, their banjo player was missing. "So I went to the biggest bus there on the grounds. It was Vernon McIntyre and The Appalachian Grass. I knocked on the door and they let me in. When I got on that bus I recognized a banjo player named Walter Hensley – the first banjo player ever to play Carnegie Hall,

and the first banjo player to have his own major label release; on Capitol Records. Some think he's one of the greatest underrated banjo pickers of all time. There he was sitting on that bus. At that time, he was retired – working a blue collar job and raising a family, and just playing a few dates with friends."

Calling Him Out

"On a whim, I said to Walter, 'do you want to record a record?' He said, 'I don't know, I haven't re-



corded in a long time. I'd really like to practice and get some material down and we can see where it goes.' So I took the Barnstormers to Walter's house for practice and rehearsals – and we ended up recording an album called *James Reams, Walter Hensley and The Barons Of Bluegrass*. That album was nominated in 2002 for Recorded Event Of The Year by the IBMA, along with the Chieftons and The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. We didn't win, but look who we lost to. We got a lot of airplay though, and the people of the early days of bluegrass were thrilled that a legend like Walter Hensley was back out and recording again."

James got to record another album with Walter, and several more with the Barnstormers for Copper Creek Records. Now James Reams and The Barnstormers are playing nationally in Colorado, and California, and of course on the east coast

from New York down into Virginia. They're celebrating 20 years as a band. But there's something else equally exciting.

The Real Purpose

When James met Walter all of a sudden he realized that there was a story there – his story – and the story of this whole generation of the first bluegrass musicians. They all had a story, and stories. And they were getting older, and we were losing them. So he became fascinated in meeting as many of them as he possibly could and actually documenting it. It was the history of the creation of a musical form stored up in the minds and hearts of these guys. "So we set out filming me interviewing as many of these guys as we could with the idea of turning it into a documentary."

James said that in many cases the folks appearing on the film are no longer with us, and in some cases, this was their last recorded interview. Some of the men featured in the film include Bobby Osborne, Curly Seckler, Jimmy Martin, Kenny Baker, and Melvin Goins, just to name a few. The plan was to make the viewer feel like they were back stage with the legend "just hanging out and shooting the breeze."

With the film almost complete, James lost his partner and love Tina Aridas in 2011 to cancer. Her dying wish was for James to complete and publish the film. And thanks to a Kickstarter campaign and the support of his fans, the film will be ready in just a few months. Stay tuned to this magazine, or visit their website at www.jamesreams.com for up to date information.

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