

## In Memoriam

### THE LASTING LEGACY OF JIM HICKAM – A REMEMBRANCE

Lyn Wolz

Though I was one of the founding members of the reorganized Missouri Folklore Society (MFS) in 1977, I was not able to attend most of the annual meetings between 1978 and the late 1990's because I had gone east to attend the graduate folklore program at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, after which I went off to work at a small college in Virginia. I don't know when Jim Hickam started attending the MFS meetings, but I do know that when I started going regularly again (when I moved to Kansas City in 1995 to start working at the University of Kansas), there was a marvelous presence making himself felt, especially during the late evening jam sessions—a big man with a shy smile and a lovely speaking voice with just a hint of soft southern Missouri drawl. At first you thought he would stay in the background, but then he'd let loose with a rendition of "Butter Beans" or some other absurdly funny song none of us had ever heard, just grinning at the song and at himself. He had an enormous repertoire of songs serious and comic and a fascinating way of playing guitar that I had never seen anyone else use before (or since), but I loved the sound. He could tell a tall tale or a joke with the best of them and spent many a long evening exchanging whoppers with Irvin Rice and other MFS raconteurs. The MFS meetings were, and continue to be, a joy, but the ones since 2008 have left us all feeling like something's missing because Big Jim is no longer there. However, as his good friend Judy Domeny Bowen said at that 2008 meeting, "Let's not mourn for Jim; let's celebrate his life!"....so that's what we did and that's what we do.



**Jim Hickam doing his radio show on KRCU in Cape Girardeau, Missouri**  
(<http://missourifolkloresociety.truman.edu/emails.html> [scroll down to "H"]; acc. 6/6/15)

For those of you who weren't lucky enough to know Jim, I put together this information about him so you could get some inkling of his background and his accomplishments. Though these things weren't the reasons he meant so much to all his friends, this will hopefully help you to get a sense of the person he was. Here are the dry facts of his life as published in the obituary that appeared in the *Missouri Folklore Society Newsletter* (Fall 2008):

James Lester Hickam, 71, of Jackson, MO, died Friday, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008, at Jackson Manor. He was born October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1936, in Cape Girardeau, son of Milford Lester and Elsa May Dow Hickam. Hickam was a 1955 graduate of Central High School and received a bachelor of science in elementary education from Southeast Missouri State University in 1963. He taught sixth grade at Jefferson School for 32 years, retiring in 1996.

Hickam served in the U. S. Army from 1957 to 1959, of which 19 months were spent in Germany. He was a KFVS 12 weather watcher and co-host of *Your Folk Connection* on KRCU radio. He was a much-loved member of the Missouri Folklore Society, serving on its Board of Directors for several years and sharing his musical talent and great sense of humor at numerous Society functions. He was also a member of the SEMO Astronomy Club and active in youth league baseball. Survivors include a brother, Jon Hickam, and a sister, Dorothy Hickam, both of Jackson. He was preceded in death by his parents and a sister. He will be greatly missed.

This bare bones description doesn't do much to bring Jim alive for readers, so now I'll let Jim tell you in his own words how he became interested in folk music. He wrote this piece for the website for *Your Folk Connection*, the radio show he started on station KRCU in Cape Girardeau in 1996 with fellow Shade Tree Folk Company singers (and MFS members) Terry Wright and Barney Hartline.

Among my earliest memories is sprawling on the floor in front of the big radio listening to the "Grand Ole Opry" and hearing the music of old-time string bands with all the colorful characters who made up the Opry cast. In my early high school days, I discovered Burl Ives, Josh White, Harry Belafonte, and Lonnie Donegan. The rhythm and blues being played by Gene Nobles and John R., disc jockeys of the time, broadened my musical horizons. The sudden prominence of the Kingston Trio; Ian and Sylvia; Peter, Paul and Mary; Joan Baez; Bob Dylan, and so many more of the folk performers of that era fueled my growing appreciation of music. The fiddle playing of my grandfather and uncle made a big impression on me as well. These varied sources served to expand my musical tastes beyond the early rock and country being played on the radio.

Somewhere in my late high school years, I bought an old banjo and later a guitar. I was shown how to tune the banjo to an open G and a few chords by my uncle. And when the guitar came along, I lowered the pitch of the little E string and could play what little I knew on the first four strings of the guitar, too. I never figured out how Uncle Dave Macon of Opry fame played his

banjo, but I developed a style of playing that some people, not wishing to hurt my feelings, have called “unusual.”

In 1965, I met a most uncommon man named Ralph “Bones” Gentry. His hospitality to me and many others brought a whole host of pickers and singers together. Among the many, Terry Wright and Barney Hartline came to play and sing. We three formed a trio called “The Shade Tree Folk Company” and played harvest festivals and state parks. We decided to approach the local public radio station, KRCU, about starting a folk music program. To our surprise and consternation, they said, “Sure, why not?” and “Why don’t you guys do it?”

And so *Your Folk Connection* was born. We play a wide variety of music loosely described as folk. The regular listener will quickly discover that each of us brings a selection of music to the program based on our own unique tastes. We feature live interviews with artists and sponsor concerts with some of the leading folkies as they pass through our area.

We owe much to a number of people – David and Suzie Walls of Steele, Mo., for introducing us to many of the singer/song writers; Judy Domeny Bowen for introducing us to Cathy Barton and David Para and their friend, Bob Dyer; the aforementioned Para’s for introducing us to the many performers who have played at their Big Muddy Folk Festival; and to the station manager, Greg Petrowich, for allowing three complete novices to conduct our program in our own blundering manner.

To complete Jim’s story of how he and Barney and Terry started their folk music show, here’s a piece he sent to Cathy Barton and Dave Para—they passed it on to me when I told them I’d like to include something about Jim in this issue of the journal. It’s a fun and unassuming little reminiscence that sounds like Jim’s voice telling a story. I hope you’ll enjoy his recollections and his self-effacing humor as much as we did.

“Somebody ought to start a folk music show!” These words were repeated often in a circle of friends who met for an occasional picking session. In particular, Barney Hartline, Terry Wright and I could be heard chanting this mantra with some frequency. Then one day it occurred to us, “Hey! We are somebody!” And so I was designated to visit the public radio station located on the campus of Southeast Missouri State University to inquire about how to get such a program on the air. We really did not intend for this to be a do-it-yourself project. We just wanted to make known to the station that there was interest out there for such a program. I met with the station manager, Jay Landers, and was pleased that he seemed to be quite favorably disposed to the idea. However, he was thinking in terms of a locally produced show with us as the hosts. I was introduced to the assistant manager, Greg Petrowich, and we three discussed the idea in general terms. I then returned to my friends with the assurance that such a program could, indeed, be started.

Being potential members of “Procrastinators Anonymous” (although we just haven’t gotten around to joining yet), the three of us continued to talk about the idea for several weeks — all talk, no action! Eventually, Barney

decided it was time to do something, and so we three met at the station with Greg Petrowich, who was now station manager. We were taken on the grand tour of the facility as well as encouraged to commit to doing the program for a minimum of three months.

The first challenge we faced was the lack of recorded folk material in the station's archives. Fortunately, each of us had our own collection of LPs, tapes, and CDs at home. We decided to record a couple of shows and see how it went. We then developed a simple format. Our thought was to record in advance so as not to tie ourselves up every Saturday evening by having to do a live show. Also, we were totally new to this and the fear of making on-air mistakes was on our minds. We each brought, without consultation, enough material to fill a twenty-minute segment, and we began recording with the help of one of the station engineers. On June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1996, and with Cathy Barton and David Para's "Marmaduke's Hornpipe" ringing out as our theme, we were broadcast for the first time.

We quickly discovered that we each had different tastes in folk music. The groups who came just at the end of the '60's folk boom heavily influence Terry's tastes—the Beatles, James Taylor, the Eagles, Pure Prairie League, and others of that ilk were favorites of his. The three of us share an affection for the folkies of the '60's, such as Dylan, Baez, Ian and Sylvia, The Kingston Trio, and Pete Seeger. Barney and Terry both feature bluegrass in their sets. Barney tends to favor singer/songwriter types. He prefers music that tells a story and has a story behind it. My own tastes run more to the string band and older-time music. Dave Macon, the Skillet Lickers, the Blue Sky Boys, and Mac Wiseman are more my preference than the bluegrass they evolved into. I have a bent for odd sounds like Lonnie Donegan, Australia's John Williamson, England's the Wurzels, and the Yetties, et al. None of our tastes are exclusionary; we are each apt to play things that come from the others' "territory."

We really have not established any set method of selecting our material. We tend to be three little programs within the context of the hour. We bridge this disjointedness with comments and jibes we inflict on each other's choice of songs. We add information about songs; we tease and criticize and compare renditions of songs with good-natured banter. All said and done, we have a good time enjoying each other's musical choices.

In the course of our show, we have been privileged to have guests stop by. We've done shows with the Grace family and their friend, Sally Rogers. Bill Staines, Bob Dyer, Judy Domeny, Michael Jonathan, Suzanne Vega, and a number of others have also graced our program.

One of the things we hoped to accomplish was to promote folk music at the local level. To this end, we have been able to sponsor several concerts at the university. Our station manager has been very cooperative in helping us in this regard. We've had concerts by Bill Staines; Tom May; Bryan Bowers; Bok, Muir, and Trickett; Barton and Para; Chuck Brodski; the Graces; Small Potatoes; and others. We have used local talent on our fund drive shows, and we've discovered that there is a lot of talent in the area. In addition, we've lent our support to the concert series organized by Jack Smoot, site supervisor for Bollinger Mill State Historical Site.

Our show has been picked up for broadcast by the public radio station in Carbondale, Illinois, and its two repeater stations. We are now heard in western Indiana, the southern third of Illinois, a little of northern Kentucky, and our own little section of southeast Missouri. Our station is in the process of expanding its power and coverage area and has hopes of establishing repeater stations of its own. We three look forward to being heard by an increasingly large number of listeners. Judging by comments we receive and fund drive responses, our audience appears to be steadily growing. Our show's web page can be accessed at [www.yourfolkconnection.org](http://www.yourfolkconnection.org) to see some of the play lists and biographical information, as well as upcoming events in our area.

*Your Folk Connection* is still running on radio station KRCU in Cape Girardeau with Barney and Terry serving as its hosts, though Jim's contributions are not forgotten – here are some of the comments posted by Jim's friends on the Mudcat forum when they learned of his death:

I was blessed to have played in several “house” hootenannies with Jim and always enjoyed his music and loved his stories. He [had] a wealth of knowledge. I kind of figured that the angel Gabriel, being the consummate musician that he is, needed some lessons in playing the guitar in open G tuning, and as many of you know, Jim is just the man for that job.

– Jerry Swan

I am very sorry to learn of....Jim's death. He and I had become friends a few years ago when we met at a festival in Memphis. [He] was very knowledgeable about folk music of all kinds, and we hit it off. One of my fondest memories of Jim is when he came on my tour to N. Ireland. He loved the Giant's Causeway, and just sat on the stones soaking it all in. I have a photo of him with a big smile on his face, the picture of contentment, sitting there absorbing everything - the ocean air, the breeze, the smells, the view. I believe he'd be sitting there yet if we didn't have to go for dinner and a session! When [Jim] asked to borrow my guitar to do his party-piece, I was only too happy to let him tune it to open G and sing away. He was a big man with a big heart, a magnanimous spirit, a gentle soul, and I for one am honored to have known him. – Seamus Kennedy

Jim had a beautiful spirit. He was an easy man to be with, a gentleman and what a joy to be in his company, a man you don't meet every day.

– Declan Ford

I only knew Jim from the Mudcat [Café Forum], but he was so generous spirited and decent that it came across in all his dealings and conversations. I wish I'd known he'd been over in Ireland. I would have made the trip over just to meet him. A terrific chap. – Al Whittle

Jim's passing was a hard thing for all of us, but we're greatly comforted by his lasting legacy—the joy of sharing “home-grown” music with our friends.