

Stringing Along with Michael Shull

By Daniel Elton Harmon



Moseying to the microphone after his introduction, Michael Shull immediately puts an audience at ease with the conversational, genuine affirmation that he's just one of them. There's a major distinction, though: the plain wooden mountain dulcimer he lovingly lays across his lap. He gives a few preliminary strums while connecting with his listeners. All set, he embarks on a spritely rendition of the classic southern hymn "Power in the Blood," followed by the traditional folk song "Cindy, Cindy." For the next hour, Shull entertains and inspires with age-old Appalachian tunes and gospel favorites. Between musical numbers he offers personal reflections; interesting details about the dulcimer, autoharp, washboard and other instruments in his collection; and a bag of corny but still laugh-provoking jokes.

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Shull, now entering his 60s, has performed music in multiple settings on multiple instruments since he was a child. At this stage of his life and career, he reckons mountain dulcimer music is what the Lord had in mind for him to master from the outset. His gift as a dulcimist has earned him regional and national music awards. In the local here and now—at a church, community center or other small performance venue—his strumming, plucking and intricate arrangements are simply a joy to hear.

The West Columbia resident and native has been a regular churchgoer from childhood. "It was not debatable, in my family," he recalls. He received a presentation pen for eight years of perfect Sunday school attendance, but not until he was 12 years old did he commit his life to the Lord at a revival service. "I wanted to serve God and be a witness for Him."

He had no foreknowledge of the plan that was laid out before him, but even then he understood it probably would involve music—a striking, natural trait of the entire Shull family. His father Creighton Shull owned a thriving landscape business but was perhaps more passionate about his avocation as a magician and entertainer. Michael also credits his mother, Doris Taylor Shull, and her parents with instilling music as a central part of his life. "I felt the call on my heart to use the gift He gave me to praise His Name."

As children, Michael and several of his siblings traveled with their parents to engagements throughout the Southeast, enlivening the show with their budding musical talents. They also appeared on regional television. In high school and beyond, Michael played in semi-professional acts of different musical genre and earned extra money as a disco record spinner. Throughout most of his adult years, though, Shull says, "my musical gifts seem to take a back seat to family, marriage and raising kids."

That changed abruptly in Spring 1995. "We were on a vacation in western North Carolina near Waynesville, and I stopped at a dulcimer shop near the Blue Ridge Parkway. There at Balsam Gallery Dulcimers I met Karin Lyle and her father-in-law. She showed me the mountain dulcimer and I was captivated by its sound. I bought a cassette that day and knew I had to have one of those instruments."

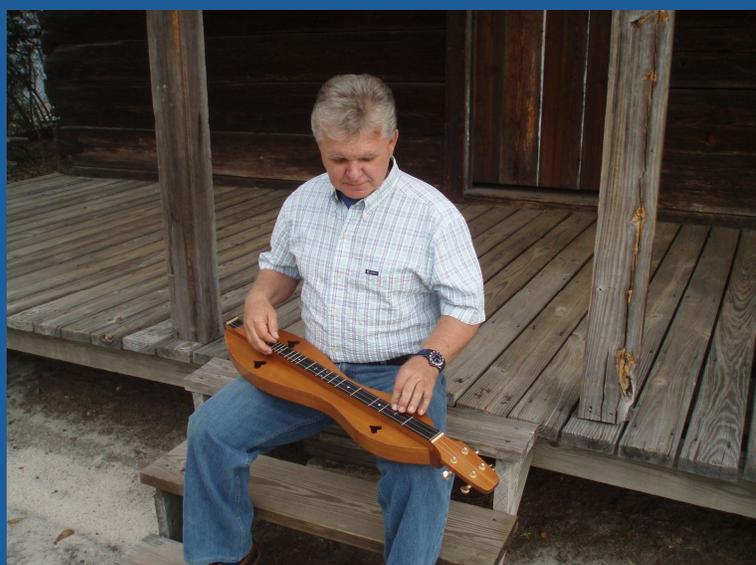
Shull proceeded to devour dulcimer music, spending many hours a day exploring the instrument's possibilities. Entering regional and national competitions, he quickly

became one of the leading proponents of the instrument in America. He won the Georgia state dulcimer championship in 1997 and went on to national recognition at the annual dulcimer championship festival in Winfield, Kansas, repeatedly placing among the nation's five finalists.

He released his first dulcimer recording in 1998. To date he has some dozen recordings and almost as many dulcimer tablature compilations to his credit. His most recent CD is Hymns, Hoedowns and Family Favorites.

Besides concerts and competitions, he often participates in instructional workshops.

At his performances, Shull's jokes usually are on himself. He often tells of taking his dulcimer into a nursing home to play for the residents. "I saw a man lying alone in his room. I walked in and sat down. He said nothing. I played a song for him. He said nothing. I got up, not knowing what to say, and I just said, 'I hope you get better.' He looked up at me and said, 'I hope you do, too.'"



His favorite hymns? "I love the song 'Come, Thou Fount.' I love the old hymns of the church. They're what I knew, and what touched my heart. I saw that when I played songs with expression from the heart for other people, it touched them. I also found that being allowed to be in front of a crowd of people opened a door for my personal witness. If you can make people smile, it breaks down barriers they put up, and they have the opportunity to hear and be touched by the message of Christ.



"The uniqueness of the dulcimer can bring people into a church setting for the first time in a long time. That fateful day [in 1995], stopping and being introduced to the dulcimer, put in play a Divine, guided path—a journey, of sorts, that allowed me to bless people with my expression of music. I play many instruments, but I'm known for what God gave me the ability to do on the mountain dulcimer. God's musical blessing on me is able to move someone's heart from the musical expression through my fingers.

God, not Michael, has to do that.

"I sometimes just sit and play through traditional hymns for comfort in my quiet time. I remember my Mom singing all the countless hymns we sang at church. It draws me back to the time of childlike innocence when I accepted Jesus as my Savior."

For more information about Shull's music and mission, visit him online at www.michaelshull.com

