

# Aaron Jonah Lewis

## Aaron Jonah Lewis: Complex Musician Enjoying the Simple Life

by Susan Marquez

Aaron Jonah Lewis enjoys living a simple life. He practices fiddle and banjo daily, and he enjoys cooking and going on walks with his dog. But there is nothing simple about Aaron. He is as complex a person as one might imagine a fiddle virtuoso to be. And when he started the banjo, he opened a new musical door that has taken him to places he never imagined.

Aaron is a native of Detroit. After living in several places including Maine, Virginia, Germany, and Nashville, he has made his way back to his hometown.

*"I just wanted to be closer to my family."*

Introduced to the viola at an early age, music is something that has always come naturally to Aaron.

"My grandfather owned a junk shop when I was growing up. He came to visit when I was three years old and brought a full-size viola to our house." Being a curious child, Aaron would open the case and look at the instrument. Just before he turned five, his parents took him to Robert Oppelt, a Kentucky native, and internationally recognized musician. "

He lived in Detroit at the time, and I studied with him for eight years. I was a serious classical violinist as a kid, but I learned about fiddle music. Playing fiddle music became an incentive for me if I was good."

<https://youtu.be/5IozMjJN84g>

Aaron attended the Interlochen School of the Arts near Traverse City, Michigan in high school and was accepted into several music schools and conservatories after graduation.

“I knew there was more out there for me.” Deciding to take a couple of years to explore different interests, Aaron met Aaron Greenwood, a Virginia native. “I moved to Virginia and now I tell anyone who hears me play that they have Aaron Greenwood to blame!” In 2001, Aaron made his way to Maine to attend college. Every break he had during his four years of college he made his way to Richmond, Virginia, where he slept on the floor and played gigs. “Richmond has a great music scene. I learned so much there.”

Through Greenwood, Aaron met Ben Belcher.

“Ben introduced me to the banjo. He had not been playing long, but he was already accomplished on many other instruments.” Aaron was enthralled with the banjo, and he began practicing Scruggs rolls while in college.

“Then I saw the claw-hammer style of playing and realized that there was a lot of versatility with a banjo. The instrument just stole my heart. I like to say the fiddle is my wife, but the banjo is my mistress.”

Through the American Banjo Fraternity, Aaron learned about Joe Morley, a British composer and classical banjoist who was born in 1867. “It takes a long time to learn a Morley tune,” says Aaron. “You have to pick and choose which songs you learn carefully, as you’ll be playing them for a long time.”



Photo by Bradley Lohman

Aaron was so drawn to Morley's finger-picking style of banjo music that a friend in Hawaii suggested Aaron make an album of Joe Morley tunes.

"He said I should call it 'Mozart of the Banjo.' I liked the

idea!"

The album was released in January 2020 on the Tiki Parlour label and a wide-sweeping tour was scheduled.

"I was going to tour in Europe, as well as in California, in the South, along the east coast, and all that was canceled due to Covid."

While he was disappointed to cancel all his travel plans, Aaron was even more disappointed he was not able to share Morley's music with live audiences. "I wanted to bring awareness to this exceptional musician. Morley was a child prodigy, the son of a musician who was very well-loved. Yet he died poor and was buried in an unmarked grave."

Other musicians featured on the album include banjoist Ben Belcher, pianists Tessa Hartle and Kevin Allswede, Rachel Pearson on bass, and Aaron's fiancé, Grace van't Hof, on the ukulele. Greg Adams, Archivist at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, says, "Lewis is one of the few performing musicians with the facility to build compelling musical bridges between the printed banjo music and techniques of the 19th century and the instrument's journey into recorded sound by the turn of the 20th century."

Aaron has taught workshops and classes all over the world, and during the Covid pandemic, he has been instructing several students online. When Aaron realized he was not going on tour, he looked around to see how he could be of help in his community. He began delivering groceries to those in need. "My greatest satisfaction in life is performing music but volunteering to help others comes in pretty close."

***Aaron will be featured in a new video to be released soon by the Lovestruck Balladeers, a ragtime band. He is also a proud member of the Corn Potato String band. He says they are "the ears and eyes of America." (Get it?)***



photo by Dermot Donohue