

Go Tell It on the Mountain

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Tara Linhardt Loves Sharing Her Knowledge of Mountain Music through Jamming, Teaching, and Record-Setting Performances

by Stephen Pitalo

Tara Linhardt is an amazing combination that comes around infrequently; she is a talker, a player, and a connector. She loves to communicate about “mountain music,” whether that involves being an award-winning multi-instrumentalist who performs on the mandolin and guitar as her main instruments; a teacher of mandolin, guitar, and ukulele; a live performer at venues from D.C.’s 9:30 Club to the Mt. Airy Fiddler’s Convention; or a historian & advocate of this genre, serving as founding and managing member of The Mountain Music Project which works with preservation, promotion and education about traditional music throughout the world, with its largest focus on two mountain areas of the world: Appalachian and Nepali Himalayan.

Linhardt explained how she loved playing

music. “I love having conversations as we pass notes/riffs back and forth. I love performing on stage. I really enjoy talking on a mic as well as playing tunes into it.”

She finds joy in teaching all ages to not just play notes to tunes, but in seeing the bigger picture of playing music and learning to love playing music in a way that keeps them inspired and motivated long after she stops teaching them.

“I have had loads of my students starting to play their first instrument after they retire, and they still make good progress. I like it all.”



Growing up in Taylorstown, Virginia, meant growing up on top of one of the Catoctin Mountains, where “basically, nothing on our property was flat. It was all woods and was either uphill or downhill.”

She started playing guitar at age seven, but her parents did not listen to bluegrass, “so I did not really know very much about it. I would occasionally see some at the Courthouse concerts in Leesburg (the big town nearby). Our closest town with a music venue was Lucketts, Virginia,” where a bluegrass concert series was held. As soon as 16-year-old Linhardt got her license, her best friend and she went there every weekend they could. “It was mostly small dirt roads between our houses and Lucketts, so our parents let us go pretty easily.”

Linhardt studied classical guitar since her parents believed that if someone learned

classical music, they would then be able to play anything. She took a guitar class in middle school assuming that because she already played guitar, she could easily get good grades with little effort. Linhardt laughed, adding that in high school when she no longer took guitar lessons, she made friends with those who played music and jammed for fun ...without sheet music.

“We ended up going to some bluegrass festivals and eventually the Galax Fiddler’s Convention in Galax, Virginia. It was at Galax that I decided I was going to actually dig in and really learn to play well and learn to improvise and jam out.”

Seeing

so many people from various backgrounds and all ages and a good number of females who “could really pick it hot” really made it click for Linhardt. She could do this!



“It was the moment when it became clear that playing bluegrass and old-time music brought one into a whole community of cool people. A musician in this genre was not all alone with a book in the corner of a room. A musician in this genre was a part of a big party.”

However, these parties weren't like the parties she'd seen before with people just drinking. At these parties, people discussed musical history and instrument building and taught each other new tunes.

“As a nerdy person myself, I felt so excited and so at home, and decided this was going to be for me.”

She said that she has met people who became professional musicians after visiting Galax or similarly structured festivals. “Galax is wonderful because there are no paid performers,” she said. “Within the gates of the Fiddlers

Convention, it almost does not matter who has more or better gigs or a better press kit. What matters is how well one can play the tunes, and of course how nice you are.”

At her first Galax, she had one hand-me-down banjo. Soon after, she bought a cheap mandolin from her friend Slinky. After lending her banjo to a friend, who then lost it, she took that as a sign and focused on the mandolin and guitar, “instead of trying all three at once.”

Linhardt went to school in three vastly different geographical locations: Wisconsin, Nepal, and Thailand, affecting her views on music in a major way.

“I grew up in rural Virginia and was very excited to see as much as I could of the world when I graduated from high school,” she said. She looked for a college that would be huge, so she’d never run out of “cool things to do and interesting people to meet. I also looked for a school that had a lot of ‘study abroad’ options to interesting countries.”

She could figure out customs and languages in European countries on her own later. “I ended up doing my junior year in Nepal and my last year of college in Thailand. I am grateful that I had those opportunities. Living for a school year in those countries really opened my mind to so many ideas and so many angles to view and interact with the world. I highly recommend trying to study abroad to any of the young folks who might read this out there.”

Years later Linhardt wanted to take musician Danny Knicely to Nepal and India because her time in South Asia so impacted her.

“We eventually went to South Asia for a few months and studied language and music while there. We ended up meeting Jake Penchansky in Lhasa, Tibet, and then had dinner with him. We discussed the amazing similarities with the music and

cultures of Nepal and that of Appalachia in the US."

<https://youtu.be/Z7FDQuyzSFQ>

Jake suggested the possibility of finding a grant or two to enable them to document the similarities in a documentary and/or CD project.

"It took a few years, but we eventually did get some grant money and saved up and raised some on our own and headed back to Nepal to make a film and a CD. Then it took a number of years to finally finish with the footage and editing. Our film debut was at National Geographic in Washington, DC on their beautiful enormous screen. We also ended up meeting a Nepali folk music legend here in the US named Prem Raja Mahat. He joined us for the first time on that National Geographic stage for our debut show and screening."

Her musical influences, as you would imagine, are as varied as the countries she's visited, but she still feels that her closest bluegrass compatriots influenced her the most.

"Of course, I sought out mandolin players and discovered many of the regular mando big dogs like Bill Monroe, Sam Bush, Donna Stoneman, Dave Apollon, Tiny Moore, Jacob Do Bandolim, and Jethro Burns."

She also listened to all sorts of guitar players mostly in Bluegrass, Irish, and Swing Jazz genres, but claims inspiration also from players on all sorts of other instruments like the great Vassar Clements, Oscar Peterson, and musicians from South Asia. Her entry into South Asian raga-type things was due to "that John McLaughlin's Shakti album. I wore that thing out when I first got it as a bootleg cassette. With all that said, I have to admit that my biggest influences have probably been the friends I have made over the years who I played and shared music with," the friends who said, "Listen to this recording," who showed her cool jazz or

Irish chords.

“So, though I do think the big recorded stars are always a big part of the picture, the most direct influences on me musically have often been my pickin’ buddies I have made wherever I lived and traveled. This is one reason I highly encourage folks to go to festivals like The Weiser Old Time Fiddlers Festival in Weiser, Idaho, or Galax in Galax, Virginia, or Mt. Airy Fiddlers Convention in North Carolina, or the many others out there that the whole point of the week is to make friends and make acoustic music.”



The bluegrass tradition in Appalachia has a robust history, but Linhardt said it is important to connect the music with the geography and the families involved. She explained that one important aspect of the music is it often includes a

marvelous community of people from diverse backgrounds and political, religious, and philosophical views who come together and enjoy each other through playing and listening to music.

“It really can be a beautiful way to make friends and become part of a sort of extended family of sorts.”

Linhardt has presented at various venues and Universities such as National Geographic, the Rubin Museum, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival Washington, DC, American University, and the Asia Society to name a few. She has lived all over the world, but calls Westchester County, New York, her home.

“When I first moved here,” said Linhardt about her move to New York state, “I searched around for some local bluegrass jams so I could make some local friends and maybe even folks that I could form a band with. I could not find any. I did find a few bluegrass jams in New York City, but I decided that I might as well start something out my way. I made fliers and tried my first jam. I ended up being totally surprised at how many folks came out of the woodwork to come to my jams. After the first couple, I decided I needed to split the jams by basic levels and approaches to keep everyone as happy as possible.”

Linhardt created Tara’s Hot Bluegrass Jam, which had no calling of chords or explanations and included professional-level players on the stage tearing it up alongside others who joined in. She also had Tara’s Slower Jam so folks could try jamming at slower speeds, where all levels were welcome. “I would sometimes call chords or give a little assistance to folks who were working through new material or were newer to playing with others or to improvising.”

Some of her former students in Virginia and New York are leading jams of their own and keeping the jam scenes going.

“I think traditional jams are such a wonderful way to work on

musicianship and to make friends. People who jam together often end up being like family to some extent. I love that about this style of music.”

Linhardt organized the breaking of the Guinness Book World’s Record for the Largest Mandolin Ensemble in the history of the World in 2012. “*Tara and the Galax Fiddler’s Convention Mandolin Ensemble*” broke the record with 389 mandolins and played four tunes for a one-time-only concert in Galax, Virginia.

“I first got the idea to try to set a Guinness Record after I attended an attempt to break a Guinness record for the most ukuleles in a jam in the Washington, DC area. My bass playing friend, Scott Giambusso had invited me to come to that. I was a little annoyed that so many people who were there could not really play ukulele. They had just bought one and they had handed out chord charts to folks on the way in. Sort of snidely I commented to him that if I were organizing something like this with mandolins at Galax, I would not have to hand out chord charts. We would just have a whole lot of folks there who could really play.”

After saying that aloud, she thought... *Hey... I wonder.* She Googled to find out if there was a record for the largest mandolin band. There was.

“It was 389 mandolin players and was set in Germany. I thought about how there are probably mando players registered in the mandolin contest on mandolin night at Galax. I realized that I might really be able to do it.”

She called a few friends in Southern Virginia and North Carolina and they agreed. They could do it.

Linhardt went to work writing the Guinness application, which is similar to writing a grant.

Applicants must pitch the idea and supply specs, but also have vast press coverage and video coverage to improve the

odds of

Guinness approving the record. She worked on it on and off for months and managed to get coverage from local newspapers, radio, and tv stations. Dave Wells helped video the event.

“I used my amazing friend networks more than anything to advertise the event. The Galax Moose Lodge runs the Fiddlers Convention. They had agreed that I could use their stands to put all the players so my camera could capture each person playing so the folks at Guinness would hopefully approve it.”

She recorded the attempt at 2 pm on the Tuesday of the Mandolin contest at Galax. “My assumption and hope were that plenty of mando peoples might already be around since the contest was that night and not much happened up by the stands in the middle of the afternoon.”

They ended up being eight mandolins short of breaking the record once everyone there had signed in, so she announced to the crowd for anyone with a mandolin to come.

“Get out of work. Wake up from their nap. or whatever it took. At Galax, there is never a shortage of musicians who can play basic tunes on a mandolin. We just had no more mandolins. Any fiddle or guitar player could play them if we just had some more.”

Nora Jane Struthers called Barr’s Fiddle Shop in downtown Galax after Linhardt’s announcement. Stevie Barr closed the shop completely and grabbed every mandolin in the whole store. Even the really, nice ones.”

He walked in like a superhero with mandolins tied all around him. He signed them out, telling the folks borrowing them to stand in the front.

“We had enough. We ended up setting the new record at 389 mandolins and mandolin players.” Explaining and coordinating

the event was so exhausting, Linhardt lost her voice.

But Linhardt ended up trying to take the record back after the Greeks in Crete broke their record. In 2015, they did it again with more people and less confusion. There were also more cameras because people knew the goal was reachable.

“Unfortunately, Guinness had changed the way it communicated with potential record breakers. They no longer let anyone talk on the phone with anyone at Guinness. I only could communicate through the online email portal. They took all contact info and phone numbers off the website. I think they basically wanted everyone to buy their \$7000 adjudicators for the events. Anyway, I sent in almost the exact same proposal as I had in 2012. The email I get in response said if you follow your plans you should be fine.”

However, Guinness had not only done away with human interactions on the phone, they decided the venue needed to be indoors with walls so no one could sign in and then walk away.

“I can guarantee no one that came out to our event that day to break the record had any desire to not play. We videotaped the whole sign-in process and the whole playing of our four tunes that I picked out. But, alas, Guinness rejected the second attempt because our venue was outdoors. I even tried to get to the Guinness office in New York City in person to talk to someone, but as I said I saw no evidence of actual humans working there anymore. We ended up with 491 mandolins playing in our band, but Guinness did not approve it for their record books.”

Linhardt has managed to keep bluegrass alive in her life and career during the pandemic by teaching online and staying in contact with her friends and family.

“I have missed the gigs and festivals and all the adventures and friends that I can see in person when I usually go to them. I have done a few recording tracks on people’s projects,

done some live stream interviews, and the like. Of course, I also play music even in quarantine,” she said, “Playing music is not just something one does for a job. It is so important for folks to find something in their life that feels good and just makes the whole world go away.”

<https://youtu.be/Wgt0xWpvJp8>