

Sammy Shelor

photo by Jennifer Buckler

Sammy Shelor

by Susan Marquez

Sammy Shelor has been playing the banjo for as long as he can remember. Both of his grandfathers played banjo, and his great grandfather played the fiddle. “My great grandfather had a grist mill, and back then if you had a grist mill, you also had a still.” Charlie Poole, a banjo picker and singer who led the North Carolina Ramblers, lived about 25 miles east of where Sammy grew up in Patrick County, West Virginia during the band’s heyday in the late 1920s and early 1930s. “Poole liked to play where he could drink. My grandfather was born in 1903, and he would frequent the places Poole played, learning to play the banjo by watching Charlie Poole.”

When Sammy was four years old, one of his grandfathers fashioned a banjo for him from a pressure cooker top. *Hee-Haw* was a popular television show at the time and Sammy watched it with his family. He learned to pick out *Up on Cripple Creek* by The Band, and his other grandfather told him that if he’d learn to play another song, he’d buy him a real banjo. “He bought me a Ventura banjo, and by the time I was ten years old I was playing with local bands. I’ve been totally blessed,” says Sammy. “It’s like both of my grandfathers planned out my life for me, and between the two of them, they kept me supplied with banjos until I went professional.”



With influences including J.D. Crowe, Earl Scruggs, and Sonny Osborne, Sammy became a full-time professional at the age of 19 when he joined Heights of Grass (later called The Virginia Squires). He played with the band for six years.

In 1990, Sammy joined the Lonesome River Band, a contemporary bluegrass band that has been together since 1982. He has been recognized for his exemplary banjo playing over the years, including being awarded five IBMA Banjo Player of the Year awards and being inducted into the Virginia Country Music Hall of Fame. In 2011, Shelor had the honor of receiving the second annual Steve Martin Prize for Excellence in Banjo and Bluegrass. Steven Martin himself joined the band as a special guest on stage when the band performed on the Late Show with

David Letterman. Martin awarded the award check to Sammy while they were seated on the set with Letterman.

Sammy once again shared a stage with Steve Martin in 2016 when Martin was honored with the 43rd American Film Institute's Life Achievement Award, the highest award for a career in film. Sammy and bandmate Mike Hartgrove performed at the star-studded gala tribute in Los Angeles with actor Martin Short.

Sammy learned early on that he was never going to get rich being a banjo player, but he has had a wealth of experiences. "I've been to all 50 states and played in 46 or 47 of them," he says. "I've been on the stage at the Grand Ole Opry. I've been all over the world, working with some very talented people."

For someone who is used to being on the go and being in the limelight, Sammy's life has made a drastic change in the past few years.

He and his wife, Jordyn, had their first child three years and three months ago. "I became a dad at age 54," he says. "It's been a wonderful thing!" Sammy is a self-proclaimed "Mr. Mom" during the week. "My wife works Monday through Friday at a hospital," he says. "At first, when I was on the road, her mom took care of our son."

But then a major pandemic hit, and dates that had been booked for months were canceled. "I have one job out of 11 still on the books for August," Sammy says. "We've already lost three out of eight gigs in September. Traditionally, I worked in the summertime to pay for the wintertime. but so many festivals and concerts have been canceled due to the COVID19 crisis."

https://youtu.be/g0R_IeZyZdw

Luckily, that doesn't mean that the band hasn't been working. "We started recording in January and got a lot done on our first full Gospel album," says Sammy. "Lonesome River Band did

an album in the 1980s before I joined the band that had bluegrass on one side and Gospel on the other. But this will be our first all-Gospel album, which will be a tribute to the Easter Brothers out of Mt. Airy, North Carolina.” Sammy says Mt. Airy is near his childhood home in West Virginia, and he grew up hearing the music of the Easter Brothers. “They lived a very devout Christian life,” he says, “but early on they had some tough times, including some scrapes with the law. We went through over a hundred of their songs and chose ten we wanted to record.”

Sammy says a single will be released in September or October. “We are just waiting to see when we can tour. Everyone in the band is so spread out. Jesse Smathers is in Eden, North Carolina, Mike Hartgrove is in Charlotte, Barry Reed is in Knoxville and Brandon Rickman is north of Nashville. We did one show in Tennessee back in June, where the crowd was socially distanced. We also did a show in Spartanburg, South Carolina that was supposed to be in an auditorium, but they changed it to a drive-in show, which was really a lot of fun. We are hoping there will be more innovative ways to bring live music to fans in the future. We need to be on the road!”