

The Petersons: Branson and Beyond

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by Susan Marquez

When it comes to American roots bands, The Petersens are bringing a new era of music to their home base in Branson, Missouri, as well as surrounding areas. Their show features authentic music, clean comedy, and a heartwarming family experience. The Peterson band features sisters Katie, Julianne, and Ellen Petersen Haygood, along with brother Matt. In 2017 they added Emmett Franz on dobro and mom Karen Petersen on upright bass.

While the Petersen children were growing up, their father, Lt. Col. Jon Petersen, was in the Air Force. "We moved around a lot," recalls Ellen, who is the spokesperson of the family band. "We were always surrounded by music. My dad played the piano and saxophone, and my mom played the trumpet. They played together for us and we always had such fun." As is the case in many families, the children were involved in a variety of activities. "My parents were always running around from the soccer fields to music lessons or whatever else we were doing. My dad wanted to find something we could all do together."

He found just the thing while the family was on a history field trip to Gettysburg. "That same weekend the Gettysburg Bluegrass Festival was going on," says Ellen. "My mom grew up listening to bluegrass music with her dad. We went to the festival and my dad saw several family bands, many sitting around playing music. He said we could start a family bluegrass band!" Jon bought a banjo for Ellen at the festival.

“Ricky Skaggs was playing at the festival along with banjo great Jim Mills. I actually got to talk with Jim Mills, who gave me some of his CDs and some advice on playing the banjo.” Not only did the family get a great introduction to bluegrass that weekend, but they learned that the culture of bluegrass was to raise future musicians in the genre. “The truth is that the kids didn’t really like the bluegrass style, but we loved the people, so that kept us going to festivals. The love of the music came later.”



Jon retired from the Air Force in 2007, and the family was looking for a place to settle down. Karen had family in the Branson area, and a job opportunity for a retired military family presented itself, and the family moved to Branson. Soon after they arrived, they met D.A. Callaway, director of entertainment for Silver Dollar City. “He gave us a few slots to play, which forced us to practice,” laughs Ellen. “We didn’t want to go on stage and look like fools, so we started practicing on our own, without our dad’s urging.”

An opportunity to compete in the Gospel singalong resulted in a regular gig at the Little Opry Theatre at the Branson IMAX. They play every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. They do their Gospel show on Wednesday nights, with Jon joining them

onstage.

As the children in the band get older, their interests and fields of study are as varied as they are. Katie, the oldest Petersen sibling, graduated from College of the Ozarks in 2014 then moved to Oxford, England to study. Most recently she traveled to Nicaragua to teach music and English at a school through Project Hope. "As someone has to rotate out of the band, we have a family meeting to discuss how we will keep the business going," says Ellen. "It's so important for us all to be here, but we love each other and never want to hold anyone back from their dreams." When someone needs to rotate out for a while, the family meets to discuss how they will keep the family business going. "Of course, the sweet spot is when all of us are here."

"When someone has to be out for a while, we take the time to learn more songs and sing lead," Ellen says. "We also play multiple instruments." Ellen graduated from the University of the Ozarks in 2014, then moved to Oklahoma City to work as a laboratory technician. That same summer she auditioned for *American Idol* as its bus tour went through Branson. After her audition, judges Harry Connick Jr. and Keith Urban asked her to play the theme song for *The Beverly Hillbillies* on her banjo. She did, and they stood on either side of her singing the song. "That was a fun moment," Ellen laughs. She ended up making it to the top 48 on Season XIV. After *American Idol*, she moved back to Branson to focus on music, and she earned her MBA at Missouri State University. She is also the first of the siblings to marry.

While Matt may be the lone boy sibling, he holds his own on stage. He is also the director of operations for the band. He graduated from College of the Ozarks in 2017 with a bachelor's degree in business. He handles outside bookings and the technical side of the Branson show. He keeps the band grounded with his comedy. Julianne is the baby of the family, but she also holds her own on stage. She has been the full-time

mandolin player since 2017 after starting off playing the fiddle and clogging when the band started in 2005. She ran sound and lights for the band when she was only eight years old. Now Julianne attends John Brown University.



They are currently on tour with the Bass Pro Shop U.S. Open Fishing Tournament. "It's a lot of fun," says Ellen. "We sing while folks weigh their fish!"

<https://youtu.be/FrG9Wb6eASM>