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Mark Johnson returns from Grand Ole Opry House; *Two concerts set for Ocala on April 29*



Mark Johnson is seen moments before an impromptu interview at lunchtime on Friday (March 31) in Levy County.

Photo by Jeff M. Hardison

By Jeff M. Hardison © April 2, 2017

LEVY COUNTY – Mark Johnson, who is known as the inventor of the Clawgrass style of banjo (which some players call the "thurd style" after the clawhammer and Earl Scruggs' three-finger styles), recently returned to Levy County after a weekend tour where he performed at the Grand Ole Opry House in Nashville, Tenn.

Johnson, whose "day job" is as a planner with the Levy County Unit of the Florida Department of Health, is the former director of the Levy County Emergency Management Department too.

The beautiful Grand Ole Opry House is seen before it fills with 4,400 people in late February, when Mark Johnson enjoyed the opportunity to perform on stage two nights with Mike Snider.

Photos Provided By Mark Johnson



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He continues performing Clawgrass Banjo playing as well as teaching the style.

Whether a person has listened to Johnson's work, or bought albums where Johnson applies that great style, the hottest news for Clawgrass fans is that the award-winning acoustic duo of Mark Johnson and Emory Lester are scheduled to appear in concert at the Ocala Civic Theatre.

There is a matinee show as well as an evening show.

At the Ocala concert, people can listen to Johnson on banjo, where he plays a unique fusion of bluegrass, traditional folk and acoustic styles called "clawgrass."

This form of banjo playing an expansion from an old Appalachian style of playing known as clawhammer. Lester, on mandolin and guitar, is known for his musical creativity and strong lyrical style.

Bass player Kene Hyatt is scheduled to join them as well to bring his talents to this concert.

Inspired by a wide range of music, these talented musicians blend the modern with the traditional to create a fresh new sound.

Johnson and Lester return to Ocala Civic Theatre

for a third time, after successful sold-out concerts in 2009 and 2013.

The Ocala Civic Theater is located at 4337 E. Silver Springs Blvd., in Ocala.

This first concert is on April 29 (a Saturday) at 2 p.m. and the second show is at 8 p.m.

The tickets cost: Adults - \$25; Ocala Civic Theatre Subscribers - \$20; Full-Time Students - \$12; and Marion Players - \$5.

Tickets are available now for purchase.

This nationally acclaimed duo of Johnson and Lester wowed audiences on "The Late Show With David Letterman" in 2012, appearing onstage and through TV screens with actor/comedian and fellow banjo player Steve Martin.

In 2012, Johnson earned the 3rd Annual Steve Martin Prize for Excellence in Banjo and Bluegrass. From there, Johnson and Emory Lester's music careers have taken off with national and international bookings.

The Johnson-Lester duo completed a sold-out European tour too.

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It was in late February, though, when Johnson enjoyed his most recent appearance on a big stage.

Johnson accepted an invitation from Grand Ole Opry Star Mike Snider to come perform with him and his great band in Nashville at the Grand Ole Opry. That appearance was Feb. 24 and 25.

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Mark Johnson (right) is seen with Mike Snider before one of the shows at The Grand Ole Opry House.

Photo Provided by Mark Johnson

Johnson is an authentic American original, and with the history of the Grand Ole Opry, this is among the places where he is bound to have performed.

In Friday (March 31) during a lunch break, Johnson provided an off-the-cuff interview from his trip to the Grand Ole Opry stage.

Snider is a star as a comedian and a musician at the Grand Ole Opry.

Snider plays the banjo using a style very close to the style that Johnson does.

Johnson had contacted Snider in July of 2016 to come up to Raleigh, N.C., for the 2016 International Bluegrass Music Association's big acoustic awards ceremony.

Johnson hosts the Clawhammer Banjo Workshop there.

He calls every great Clawhammer banjo player that he knows to invite to the workshop.

"So I called Mike," Johnson said. "I wanted to talk to him. I had never met him before."

After speaking with Snider then, Johnson found the Grand Ole Opry star was busy on that weekend.

"I can't make it down there," Johnson said Snider told him. "Why don't you come play the Opry with me?"

The two men tried to schedule times in November and December, but there were holiday plans that made it impossible.

After some discussion in January, the found Feb. 24, 25 and 26 would work.

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Tri-County Health Department Director Barbara Locke allowed Johnson to use vacation time to go to the event.

Snider picked Johnson up at the airport. They went to Snider's house where they played banjos for four hours.

"I kept asking him, 'What tunes are we going to play tonight?'"

"Don't worry about it Mark," he says. "We'll just go down to the Opry and we'll figure it out down there," Johnson continued.

After going through security, they reached the dressing rooms, which are like dormitories, Johnson said. The rooms fill up with stars as the time goes by.

Johnson said Snider is a pro. They performed medleys of tunes, and performing in front of 4,400 people was not as intimidating to Johnson as one might think.

They played two nights in a row.

Johnson said he was not worried then or on the David Letterman Show in 2012 as far as the number of people watching him. The one concern he felt before the Letterman show was being in tune.

That was videotaped, he said. And the one thing he would hate to have to relive is being out of tune at such a time.

"Long after you're dead," Johnson said, "they are going to be saying, 'Yeah. He was out of tune on David Letterman.' That's like a terrible eulogy."

There are two venues for the Grand Old Opry. One is the old Ryman Auditorium and the other is the Old Opry House. In 2012, Johnson and many other great banjo players performed in the Ryman Auditorium where they eulogized the late Earl Scruggs.

Opened in 1892 as the Union Gospel Tabernacle, Ryman Auditorium was built through the efforts of steamboat shipping magnate Thomas G. Ryman.

The first venue built specifically as a home to the Grand Ole Opry, the Grand Ole Opry House opened on March 16, 1974 with a ceremony attended by President Richard M. Nixon, who played piano and sang on the show that night.

The late February visit to the Grand Ole Opry House was Johnson's first time on that stage.

At the Grand Ole Opry House, there is a circle of wood that is from the planking of the stage from the Ryman Auditorium, he said.

Backstage, there are a lot of stars who are like family with each other, Johnson said. Off the top of his head during the interview Friday, he remembered seeing Vince Gill, Sharon White, Ricky Skaggs, Bobby Osbourne, and the Oak Ridge Boys and Joe Bonsall.

Bonsall, like Johnson, is very much a Deering Banjo promoter. It had been 10 years since Johnson last saw him.

He commented to Johnson about playing clawhammer style.

Johnson said he enjoyed seeing the high level of talented musicians at the Grand Ole Opry.

He put music in perspective, though, because he enjoys teaching his style of play – and for the more experienced musicians to look at some of the finer points as they swap ideas.

"Everybody is just people," Johnson said. "The people here at the Health Department, you, everybody in Levy County who I used to work for as the EM (Emergency Management) director, they're just people."

"I feel like I have been given a real gift from my Creator," Johnson said in regard to his musical talent. "I wouldn't hoard it. I give back as much as I can. I think that's what makes it so easy to do it -- when you take that kind of an attitude."

Johnson said he is thankful to have met so many wonderful people.

"The people were great at The Opry," Johnson said. "Mike Snider is one of the greatest guys. He's got one of the best personalities. What you see is what you get. He is a real decent human being. We have mutual respect for each other."

"Our friendship has grown," Johnson said. "I've invited him (Snider) to come down here, and I think he's going to take me up on it."