

THE CONTINUING LEGACY OF THE SKILLET LICKERS

By Anne Thurmond

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My husband and I met when we were both studying music in graduate school at the University of Illinois. Paul grew up in Winder, GA, east of Atlanta, so the cold, Midwestern winters were definitely something new for him. Since I grew up in northern Indiana, unforgiving winter weather was a part of life for me. Thinking back, it really is amazing that it was over 20 years ago that we began our life together. Since we are musicians, it probably isn't surprising that many memories we cherish most involve music in some way. There can be such an incredible connection when people experience music together.

On our first date, we saw the re-release of Fantasia. We had both seen the movie before, but seeing it together in the theatre was unforgettable. I remember concerts we've performed together and recordings we've shared. Listening to the song that was playing when Paul proposed to me still makes the memory clearer than ever.

Since then, we have moved eight times to study, perform and teach. We always make regular trips to visit Paul's family in Winder, and it seems to me that these visits also help mark the time for us. Each time Paul's folks, Gail and Harold Thurmond, welcome us to their home, they meet two people who they know and love, but who have changed in big and small ways. Benchmark visits: Paul and Anne dating; Paul and Anne married; Paul and Anne broke and finishing school; Paul and Anne with jobs, with a new baby boy, then with a toddler and a new baby girl...

Of course, Gail and Harold also revel ways in which their lives have changed through the years. They are both retired now, and it's wonderful to see the ways they are exploring interest I didn't even know they had. Gail volunteers as a tutor for elementary school students. Harold loves photography, as well as writing short stories and poetry. Both enjoy acting in community theatre productions, and both have a great love for music. They have sung in church choir, and Harold even taught himself to play guitar and the mandolin which he built himself. They have also been enormous supporters of our music careers, attending as many of our performances as they can. On our last visit, though, Harold gave me a glimpse of his deep connection to music that I will always remember.

Through the years, Harold has told me about "Gid Tanner and his Skillet Lickers," a string band from north Georgia that recorded with Columbia in the 1920s and 1930s. During that time, the group was one of the most popular country bands in America, performing songs that include, "Down Youder," and "Back up and Push," both of which sold over a million copies. Gid Tanner participated many times at the Georgia Old Time Fiddlers' Conventions, which were held in Atlanta every year from 1913 to 1935. In 1928, he won the state fiddling championship, and in 1999 he was inducted into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame. "Anne, this group played 'ol-timey' music. It wasn't Mozart, but they were great musicians."

Gid Tanner's musical legacy continues through his grandson, Phil, and great-grandson, Russell. In addition to performing as "The Skillet Lickers II," they host an open jam session on Friday nights, meeting each week on the family farm in Dacula, Georgia. Harold loves to go, guitar in hand, to join them in a refurbished old chicken house.

On a visit in late December, I asked Harold if Paul and I could go with him. He was eager to show us what it was like. On the way there, he explained the setup to me: people who want to play along on fiddle, mandolin, guitar, banjo, bass, or dobro can join them. There's a tenor sax player who is a regular, too. It was dark and cold outside when we arrived, so we were glad to go in to such a warm and friendly place. Harold introduced us to the guys, and then he found his spot among them.

The end of the room that's set up for the players is equipped with plenty of amplifiers and microphones for whoever might show up. As we sat down at the other end of the room, we were greeted by the people who had also come to listen. I had the impression that many of them could be found in the same spot on any

given Friday evening. Russell Tanner's son, Josh, runs "Skillet Licker Discount," a small store that sells snacks and soft drinks, as well as t-shirts and recordings.

The group sounded great that night. The fast tunes allowed players to improvise with thrilling technique, and the slow ones were lovely ballads that bring out the beautiful sound of each instrument. Harold got to sing solo for "Supertime," "Long, Black Veil," and "Today I Started Loving You Again." His love for this music came through in his singing, making it even more beautiful.

I always like to watch how a performance affects people in the audience.

The energy in this music was so contagious that everyone there that night clapped, tapped a foot, or danced in their set along with the pulse of the songs. During the slower tune, it seemed to me that many reminisced, perhaps remembering who they were with the first time they hear the song, or maybe thinking about a loved one who is now gone.

On the drive home, we talked about details – what chords this song used, who first recorded that other song, which solos we like the best, etc. It's the feeling in the music, though, the feeling in the room that is the most memorable to me. I'm grateful to the four generations of Tanners who have kept Georgia's old-time music alive, and I'm grateful to my father-in-law Harold, who was willing to reveal this meaningful and deeply felt part of himself.

For more information on Gid Tanner and The Skillet Licker, go to www.skilletlickers.org.

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