



FRANK WAKEFIELD
STEVE SWAN GUITARS, KENSINGTON, NOVEMBER 16, 1997
BY BILL AMATNEEK

Jesus Loves His Mandolin Player

I can still remember the first time I heard him play, thirty-five years ago. His music physically hit me as I turned the corner to the theatre. The sound of his mandolin rang out against the red brick walls, hopped over some New England poplars, bounded up the streets of Providence, and stuck right in my ears.

His sound cut. It was woody, it was raw, and even a block away it was blazingly bright.

My ears popped. I was an avid, 22-year-old bluegrass banjo picker and I had come just to hear him play. I chased his sound 'round the side of the theatre and found him outside the stage door leading his band.

His scraggly blond hair framed a ruddy and well-traveled face. He was bent over his mandolin, pickin' and *gleefully* grinnin'. This was Frank Wakefield, hellacious and notorious mandolinist.

His band was rehearsing one last tune, "Blackberry Blossom," before going on stage. Frank's group was tight, though I realized I played banjo a lick or two better than his banjoist.

I didn't say anything of course; I just stood there, smiling broadly, enjoying the music.

They came to the end of the tune, and Frank's banjo man made a big mistake: he put his instrument down and wandered off to find the bathroom. I asked Frank if I could play a tune with him on the kid's banjo, and he said, "Sure, go ahead."

Frank's playing soared. Standing there pickin' with him, I realized that this was the first time I had played with anyone who had music in his veins. Frank was burning up with music. Melodies overflowed the *f*-holes of his old Gibson mandolin.

By the time the tune ended, Frank knew that I cut his banjoist. When the guy came back from the bathroom, Frank fired him on the spot ... and then browbeat him into letting me borrow his banjo to play the concert. I rehearsed one more tune with Wakefield's group, and then they called us to go on stage.

As we walked to the wings to be brought on, Frank asked me what I did and if I would like to go on the road with his band. I told him I was staying in Brown University graduate school to beat the Viet Nam draft, but playing with him sure beat that.

We shook on it.

In that moment I quit one graduate school and started another, got my first professional music job, walked on stage to play a sold-out concert with a musical fireball, and oh yes, exposed myself to the wartime, Viet Nam draft.

That afternoon on stage, Frank taught me a lot.

A bluegrass group's performance involves a stylized choreography with its roots in live performance and radio. With only one microphone for the band, players have to map out their stage moves in advance.

You don't want to be stepping up to the mike to sing a verse at the same time the banjoist is swooping in, peghead

first, to take a solo. You could get hurt.

But we didn't have time to rehearse the tunes or the moves. During the show Frank hovered in the back of the group and gestured me in and out of the lineup as my entrances came. Before each tune ended he would lean over and tell me the name of the next tune and the key it was in.

When the tune was done and the applause had died, he'd turn to the audience and say something like:

"Thank ya s'much. Y'all make us feel so good when you give us a good hand like that, I swear ya do. And now we'd like to sign up for one that we're gonna put a hurtin' on. We call it 'John Hardy.' "

BAM! I had to nail my introduction as he said "Hardy," in the right key and tempo. On stage that day, Frank showed me that this was what he expected of me.

After the third song, Frank introduced his band to the audience. When he came to me he said: "And on the five-string banjo we got an ol' boy who's gonna be pickin' with me til our men come home from Viet Nam, cause that's the only way he's a gonna beat the draft. But why don'tcha make him welcome anyway ... Bill Matnick."

What was that? It didn't matter. The flush of a hot spotlight hitting me and the crowd cheering felt terrific.

The audience ate us up and brought us back for an encore. Frank decided on the Bill Monroe mandolin instrumental, "Rawhide."

Everyone takes a solo on "Rawhide." So, my turn comes, I play my solo, and I'm putting the last four bars on it, when I feel Frank come up behind me. As my chorus ends, he pushes my left hand off the banjo neck. I can't play with that hand now! And Frank starts fretting my banjo with his left hand while I am still picking the strings with my right.

It works! The crowd breaks into applause. They've never seen anything like this.



FRANK-PICKIN'

BY GENE TORTORA

I've never seen anything like this, and I'm doing it.

But it ain't over. Still fretting my banjo and strumming his mandolin, Frank maneuvers his instrument so it is within my reach. And he gestures for me to play his mandolin with my left hand.

Mind you, Frank doesn't know if I play mandolin or not. He's relying on the bluegrass tradition that every picker picks a little on the three fretted instruments: guitar, banjo and mandolin. Fortunately, Frank is right. My dad is a mandolin player and there have been mandolins in my house all my life. So I reach under Frank's mandolin, grab the neck with my left hand and start fretting the notes that Frank is picking. This locks us in a schizophrenic embrace that splits me in half: I'm a banjo man on one side of me and a mandolinist on the other. Frank has taken me to a place I have never been before.

As we hit the first beat of the last sixteen bars, Frank

pulls one more surprise. He kicks the tune up into double-time tempo, hell-bent for leather. We race to the ending, harmonize on shaves and haircuts, and end the tune with a chop that explodes the crowd.

We exit to thunderous cadence clapping and two-fisted whistling, ... a thrilling concert.

I went on the road with Frank's band for about a year. We played East Coast coffeehouses, college concerts and folk music clubs. In New York, we headlined at Gerde's Folk City for a week; Emmylou Harris opened for us. As I got to know him better, I saw why Frank himself is as legendary as his mandolin playing. He is well-known for a kind of talking, "Frank-talk," which relies heavily on double negatives, non-sequiturs, and plain ol' nonsense.

For instance,

[continued in the book ...]