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Flatpicking Guitar

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Frazier**

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Special Women in Flatpicking Issue



Photo: Athena Lonsdale

Rebecca Frazier

Rebecca Frazier is the first woman to be featured on the cover of *Flatpicking Guitar Magazine* and—you know what?—she has earned it. She has worked incredibly hard with a single-minded goal and unwavering determination to get where she is today. And although she has achieved great success, she continues to be very passionate about her music and her guitar playing. She has spent countless hours seeking out and learning from the masters of bluegrass music and remains eager to continually learn more. Her journey is one that should serve to inspire any guitar player, singer, or songwriter who is determined to be in a successful band. As we continue to feature female guitar players in future issues of *Flatpicking Guitar Magazine* I predict that many will point to Rebecca as a role model, inspiration, and guitar hero.

Rebecca began her musical journey with piano lessons in her hometown of Richmond, Virginia, at the age of five. In the third grade she joined both church and school choirs (she attended the same all-girls' school for 13 years). Singing formed a big part of her early life. When she was ten she started attending a summer camp for girls in the Virginia mountains that included a lot of singing and a songfest. The leaders of the songfest rehearsals were usually sixteen-year-old junior counselors. Rebecca was elected to be a song leader by the age of thirteen. She directed a group of 60 singers. Remembering those days, Rebecca said, "I got really obsessed with music."

When she was twelve Rebecca got a Yamaha Dreadnought guitar for Christmas

and began taking guitar lessons once a week. She started learning music from her dad's collection of 60s folk and rock records, including Paul Simon; the Mamas and the Papas; the Byrds; and Peter, Paul & Mary. Although she was enjoying the guitar lessons, Rebecca never gave up the piano. By this time she was executing classical solos on the piano and was starting to perform in piano competitions.

The girls' school that Rebecca attended had traditionally supported a vocal group comprised of the high school-aged students. However, by the time Rebecca reached the ninth grade, the group was no longer active. When she was a 15-year-old sophomore she took it upon herself to talk to the school's director about starting the group again. The director told her that if she took charge of getting the group

Written by Dan Miller

back together and served as its director, then he would support it. She arranged for auditions, selected the members, conducted rehearsals, and wrote the arrangements with no teacher supervision. The group of nine singers practiced once a week and performed at school and community functions.

From an early age Rebecca loved any type of harmonized singing. When she was twelve years old her parents took her to her first bluegrass show. She remembers being excited about the bluegrass harmony, but beyond that really didn't get too excited about the music. She said, "My mom liked bluegrass and had some bluegrass albums. Once, when I was at that age when I liked to hang out with my friends more than my parents, my parents invited me to go with them to an Alison Krauss show but I decided to go out with my friends instead. Later when I was in college I discovered Alison Krauss on CD and I called my mom to tell her about Alison's incredible voice. She said, 'That is the person we wanted you to go see with us!' I guess I had to discover her for myself."

While she was in high school Rebecca stayed very busy with school activities and sports, voice lessons, and her piano studies. She said that during those years her guitar playing was something that she did for relaxation and enjoyment more than anything. During her senior year she decided that she wanted to study voice in college and applied to the voice program at the University of Michigan. She was accepted to the school, but not the competitive voice program. She said, "My first year of college was a musical drought."

It wasn't until Rebecca heard that Alison Krauss CD that she realized she missed the music. She said, "I was studying various languages in school and I took a drawing class. I was drawing, painting and creatively writing and realized that what moved me more than anything—and created the most aesthetically pleasing experience for me—was music. I also missed the social aspect of music. Painting and writing are things that you do by yourself but music is collaborative."

When Rebecca returned to her second year of college, she was invited to join a folk band called The Still as a backup singer. She said, "They were an eclectic group of 'deadhead' English majors who wrote their own songs, plus a talented conga player who studied international

music styles. One of them was a painter. I realized through their example that I could play music and still keep my other interests. I had a huge epiphany the first night I sang with them and watched them take solos and improvise. Before that I thought that other people could take solos, but I wasn't talented enough to do that. Watching them do it changed my attitude. The members of Still were fans of the Grisman/Garcia recording. I heard the CD and said, 'I have to make this a part of my life!' I decided that if there was one thing that I wanted, it was to learn how to play the guitar really well. I began to fit my college schedule around my guitar playing."

Rebecca started taking guitar lessons from a fellow student, Dan Marcus, who was in a bluegrass band called Drive Train. She began going to every Drive Train show in order to absorb what they were doing. She also started listening to jazz music because the guys in Drive Train were into that as well. During summer break Rebecca decided that when she returned to school in the fall instead of just singing in The Still, she wanted to play an instrument as well. Since there were already three guitar players in the band she spent the summer trying to learn how to play the banjo. She came back to school having learned the band's repertoire on the banjo. Unfortunately, The Still was not interested in adding a banjo. They just wanted her to sing, so she decided to move on from the band in order to spend more time on her instrumental interests.

While in Michigan Rebecca had met another aspiring guitar player, Todd Livingston, who lived about 20 miles away and attended school at Eastern Michigan. Todd was a guitar player who had spent the summer learning how to play Dobro. The two formed a musical friendship that continues to this day. During the school year they spent time playing music together and teaching each other what they could pick up from various instructional books and videos. However, Rebecca notes that up in Michigan they were a bit isolated from the larger bluegrass world.

While still at school Rebecca saw an ad for Steve Kaufman's Flatpicking Kamp in *Bluegrass Unlimited* and decided to attend the event in 1997. She said, "I was freaked out by the caliber of musicianship!" She was also "freaked out" that she was staying in the same hotel as Russ Barenberg and that Russ gave her a ride to camp in the morning. She said, "There is no other kind of music where the professionals are that accessible."

Before that first year at Kaufman's Kamp, Rebecca's bluegrass experience was limited to the local band she heard while at college. While the members of Drive Train are fine musicians and all continue to play music professionally, Rebecca said, "I had no real sense of how good people were. I said to myself, 'Oh my gosh...I have so much to work on!'" During the fall of her senior year in college Rebecca also attended her first festival. The

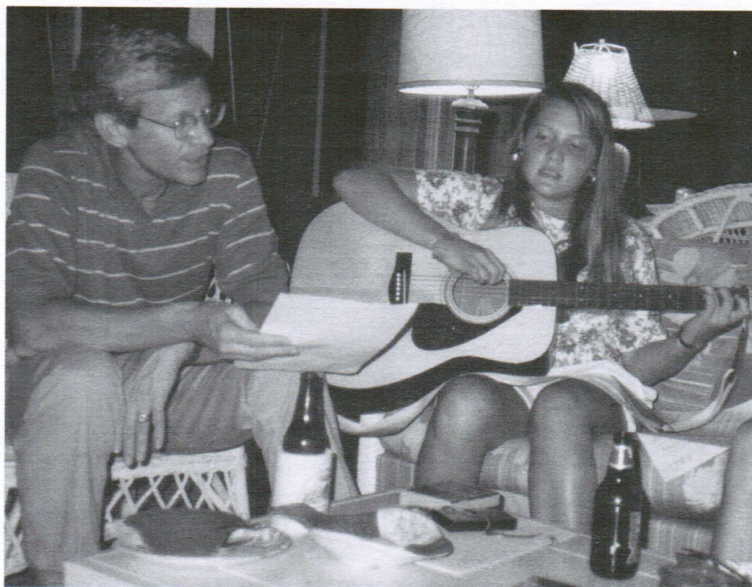


Photo: Dixie Hoggan

Rebecca Singing with Her Father, Cam Hoggan, 1989



Photo: Dixie Hoggan

**Rebecca with the All Night Honky Tonk All Stars, 2001
(L-R Jim Sullivan, Greg Schochet, Rebecca Frazier,
Danny Shafer, Jason Pawlina)**

festival she chose to attend was the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas. She and Todd drove 18 hours to get there. She said, "We saw Nickel Creek play...another eye opener! Watching people jam together who had never met before seemed mystical and magical to me."

Rebecca's teacher in Michigan, Dan Marcus, had emphasized that she work slow and with a metronome. He told her, "If you can't play in time, no one will want to play with you." He also told her that she was trying to learn things that were too hard. He encouraged her to work on simple stuff. She said, "Todd and I started having slow jams everyday."

Rebecca also added music as her second college major, along with her comparative literature studies. Her honors program required that she write a senior thesis. She decided to write her thesis on jazz musician Emily Remler.

Rebecca remembers, "I was looking for female role models. I was learning how to play both jazz and bluegrass and I was worshiping female jazz guitar players." During the same summer that Rebecca attended Kaufman's Kamp, she had also attended the Yellowstone Jazz Camp in Wyoming. A teacher there recommended that she listen to Emily Remler and so Rebecca bought Emily's recordings.

Regarding her thesis, Rebecca said, "My thesis was about gender, race, and ethnicity relating to the authenticity of a musician. Emily was a white Jewish

female who played in the style of jazz greats like Wes Montgomery. I focused on her as an example of virtuosity coming from an atypical background. The question that I tried to answer was, 'Does music stand on its own, or is it connected to a person's gender or background?' I guess part of the reason that I wrote the paper was so that I could feel legitimate as a female flatpicker."

After graduating from college Rebecca went straight to Boston to attend the summer semester at the Berklee School of Music and study jazz guitar. Although she was anxious to be in an environment where she could study music all day long, she got "burnt out" at Berklee after only one semester. She said, "Berklee was jazz. I wanted to play bluegrass and found that I couldn't learn bluegrass and jazz at the same time. For me, the technique and phrasing conflicted. I was more interested in learning bluegrass so I decided to leave Berklee and move to Colorado."

Rebecca moved to Telluride in the fall of 1998 because she said she wanted to live in a "beautiful place." Determined to make a living playing music, she held down various other jobs while working in a duo playing bluegrass tunes and jazz standards with a guitar and Dobro player named Derek Kirby. She said that this experience was a turning point as she learned how to get her own gigs and work with a PA system that she bought with money that

she earned as a waitress.

In 1999 Rebecca moved to South Carolina with a boyfriend but got the bug to be back in Colorado after less than a year on the east coast. On her way back west she attended various bluegrass festivals and became friends with professional players like Mike Marshall and Todd Phillips. She said, "I followed them around and got the opportunity to watch them record with New Grange. I got to hang out and see what that was like. Again, I realized that I had a lot of work to do. I became a fanatic about practicing." That year she also attended a jazz workshop in Palo Alto, California, and the Bluegrass at the Beach workshop in Oregon. In Oregon she studied guitar with John Moore and met Mike Mickelson of the Alaska-based band Bearfoot Bluegrass.

In 2000 Rebecca moved to Boulder, Colorado. She says, "I had dreams looming in my head of being in a bluegrass band. I knew what I wanted." Her old friend Todd Livingston had left Michigan to attend culinary school in Vermont. She found out that he was unhappy being a cook and wanted to play music again. Todd also moved to Boulder and the two "sat around practicing." They wanted to form a band and they wanted it to be with "people who were better than we were." Rebecca said, "I was feeling like I had spent too much time sitting around in a room woodshedding and not enough time playing with other people. I had been intimidated to get out there and play with people who were better than me because I felt as if I wasn't good enough to pick with them. I now realize that the way to improve is to have the courage to jump in there and play with those people who are better than you are."

Rebecca and Todd started playing duo gigs around Boulder and were looking for other young people who were not tied down and wanted to be in a band. The time was not yet ripe. In 2001 mandolin player John Frazier recruited Todd to play in his band Tall Trees Grove. Rebecca got a call to join a group of seasoned musicians who had a country band called the All Night Honky Tonk All Stars. Looking back she is thankful for the learning opportunities she had with that band. She said, "With that band I learned how to work in a professional band and handle management and business type things. Up until that time I was playing two bar gigs a week. I didn't know anything about how to draw people

to a bigger show.” She played mandolin and sang in that band full-time for two years.

Although she was playing in a country band, Rebecca still had her goal set on touring with a bluegrass band. In 2001 she recorded her first solo record, *Born in East Virginia*, at Jim Nunally’s studio in Crockett, California. Mike Mickelson had moved from Alaska to Laramie, Wyoming, to attend school and asked Rebecca to join a part-time bluegrass band with him and Aaron Youngberg. Rebecca and Todd Livingston started driving from Boulder to Ft. Collins, Colorado, on a regular basis to meet with Mike and Aaron, who would drive down from Wyoming. Erin Coats joined them on bass and a bluegrass band was formed. However, Rebecca still had her country gig, Todd was still playing with Tall Trees Grove, and Mike and Erin were in school with Mike still going back to Alaska in the summer to perform with Bearfoot Bluegrass. The time was still not right. They would all meet in Ft. Collins with the idea of just playing for fun. However, seeds were being planted. Rebecca recalls, “It was the first time that Todd and I had played with people with real bluegrass band experience so it was a lot of fun and well worth the drive.”

In 2002 Tall Trees Grove broke up and Rebecca asked Tall Trees mandolin player John Frazier to join their group. Starting in March 2002 the group began performing together. In July they entered, and won, the Rockygrass band competition. This win motivated Rebecca to start working with this new band, Hit & Run Bluegrass, full-time. She dedicated herself to working the business and booking end of the band. They began getting more gigs in Colorado and Wyoming, but Rebecca was cautious about moving ahead too fast with the performances. She said, “I’d learned enough from talking to other bands that if you wanted to tour you needed to have a record to support. So we started to put all of the money we were earning towards making a CD and buying a van. We wanted to be able to pay for those two things, without going into debt, before we started touring widely.”

The band recorded their first record, *Beauty Fades*, in January of 2004. They had saved enough money to do a professional job and thus were able to record with Tim Austin at his Doobie Shea studios. Rebecca said, “We didn’t want the CD to sound like a home recording.”

One of the biggest contributions to the band came when bluegrass veteran Gene Libbea joined them from January to June 2003 (when Erin Coats took a leave of absence). Rebecca said, “Gene approached us after the Rockygrass win and started mentoring and coaching us. We learned a lot from him.” In the summer of 2003 the band won the Telluride band competition. With a good deal of local touring, wins at two major band competitions, and over a year of Gene Libbea’s coaching, the band felt ready to promote their first CD and go out on the road in 2004.

It was in the summer of 2004 that the band headed east for the first time. They were so well received that they sold out the first 2000 copies of their CD during their first two months on the road. In February 2005, the band won the Society for Preservation of Bluegrass Music in America (SPGMA) band competition. Later that year, in October, they were also selected to showcase their music at the International Bluegrass Music Association’s (IBMA) annual convention. Out of that showcase they were able to land a booking agent. Rebecca said, “We started getting a lot busier and more inquiries were coming in. We had invested so much time and energy into this band and now it was starting to pay off.” In February of 2005 they recorded their second CD, *Without Maps or Charts*, in North Carolina

(co-produced by Kenny and Amanda Smith). The band now consists of Rebecca on guitar, her husband John Frazier on mandolin, Larry Gangi on banjo, David Richey on Dobro, and Steve Roy on bass.

Hit & Run Bluegrass continues to tour heavily in 2006. Rebecca said that one of the best things about touring and performing at so many festivals and bluegrass events is having the opportunity to pick with other professional players and learn from them. She said, “In the past few months I’ve had the opportunity to hang out and/or jam with musicians from bands like Mountain Heart, King Wilkie, the Waybacks, the Biscuit Burners, John Lowell, Noam Pikelney, Railroad Earth, the String Dusters, Yonder Mountain String Band, and many others. There is a lot of music learning happening for me.”

Although Rebecca is one of the few female lead guitar players performing at major bluegrass festivals, she said that she has not encountered much negativity from male players. She said, “When I was first starting to jam at festivals other players didn’t usually give me the nod to take a solo. It didn’t make me mad though because most people were very supportive once they discovered that I could play lead.” Rebecca said that she often gets asked why there are not more female flatpickers and she thinks one reason is a lack of female role models. She said, “One



Hit & Run Bluegrass, 2006 (L-R: John Frazier, Rebecca Frazier, Steve Roy, David Richey, Lorenzo Gangi)

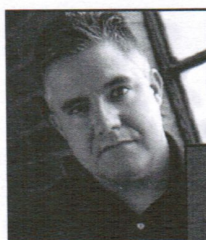
Photo: Athena Lonsdale

St. Louis Flatpick

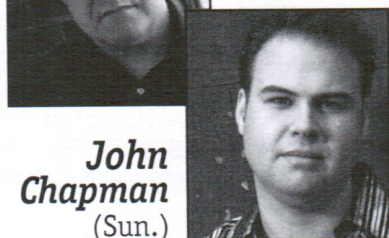
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Photo: Dixie Hoggan

Hit & Run Bluegrass at Summergrass, San Diego, 2005.
(L-to-R: John Frazier, Erin Coats, Rebecca, Aaron Youngberg)

thing that really inspired me was when I heard Glenda Faye's Flying Fish CD *Flatpickin' Favorites*. I said to myself, 'If she can do it, I can do it!'"

Rebecca Frazier has had many turning points along her road to success as a bluegrass flatpicking guitar player. She recalls the days back in Michigan when she first heard the Grisman/Garcia CD and decided that she wanted to play guitar like that. She said, "I thought that was flatpicking. I was really isolated. A friend of mine told me that Jerry Garcia was not really a bluegrass guy and I said, 'What are you talking about?!' I thought that anyone who could solo over a bluegrass song was a bluegrass flatpicker. When I went to Kaufman's camp it became evident that there was a style and a language that is bluegrass guitar. I started to buy recordings by Tony Rice, Russ Barenberg, David Grier, and Dan Crary so that I could understand this language. That camp really inspired me."

Another turning point for Rebecca came when working on her solo CD with Jim Nunally (this recording also included Bill Evans on banjo, Todd Phillips on bass, Darol Anger on fiddle, and Sam Pointer on mandolin). She said, "Jim really helped my rhythm playing." Thanks to Jim's influence Rebecca says that timing and rhythm are her number one priority. She said, "A lot of hot licks don't matter unless you can keep

the drive going. It is more important to me to play with good drive and timing than to take a hot solo."

Rebecca's journey has been filled with determination, passion, perseverance, and self-motivation. To get to where she is today has not come easy and she remains determined to reach new goals in the future. If you want to be inspired to practice hard and improve your playing, talk with Rebecca about flatpicking the next time you see her at a festival. Her enthusiasm is infectious.

When asked what advice she might have for young players, she said, "Get in a band with people who are better than you as soon as possible, even though you might be scared. I wasted a lot of time not doing that because I thought I wasn't good enough. I thought I needed to practice a lot before I was worthy of joining the jam. If I had it to do over again I would get out there and jam from day one!" She also said, "Figure out what players excite you and learn from them. Don't learn just what you think you should be learning, learn what excites you. Passion creates practice time!"

Rebecca plays a Collings D3 guitar with D'Addario EXP13 strings and uses a black Wegen T-140 pick. She keeps her action fairly high because she says, "I like to bang on the guitar."

Why Does This Ol' Town Look Better Now



Audio CD
Track 2

capo 4

Arranged by Rebecca Fraizer

1

G

TAB

6

D G

P

11

G

H choke

15

D G

H H

P P P P bend up