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## [Bluegrass Magic Moments: Jerry Shereshevsky, Flatt & Scruggs, a girl named "Martha White" and December 8, 1962](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

By Nancy Cardwell

The beginning of a new year is a time for reflection?thinking back over the past 12 months and the past in general.

One of the best perks of working for IBMA is getting to pull up a chair in various circles of conversation and listen to members tell stories. I lucked into a recent email exchange between Sab Watanabe Inoue in Japan, Pete Wernick in Colorado, Jerry Shereshevsky in Connecticut, and Dave Freeman in Virginia, on the topic of December 8, 1962?the night Flatt & Scruggs played Carnegie Hall.

Last month marked the 50th anniversary of the Flatt & Scruggs Carnegie Hall Concert, recorded live in 1962 and released the following year on Columbia Records. If the IBMA Award for Recorded Event of the Year had existed then, a cut from this legendary, influential album would surely have been the winner.

Sab contacted IBMA to find individuals who were in the audience that night, for an article in his bluegrass magazine *Moonshiner*, published in Japan. Freeman lived in New York City at the time, but he was out of town. A 16-year-old named Pete Wernick (later one of the co-founders of the band, Hot Rize) was there, and so was Jerry Shereshevsky. In fact, if you listen carefully you can hear Jerry?s voice in the audience, calling out for the band to play the Martha White theme song.

Since my Japanese is not so good, I asked all the gentlemen concerned in this conversation for permission to reprint their stories in this month?s issue of International Bluegrass.

As you read, stop and think about the magic, life-changing moments bluegrass music has brought to you during the past year, as well as over the course of several years. We?d love to hear from you, and continue this series of stories?past and present.

### **Jerry Shereshevsky:**

Here, to the best of my knowledge (and after a 50 year separation), is our story. I was a wannabe musician who was friends with some of the best younger generation of bluegrass musicians in the City. The band was called The Bluegrass Straphangers?with Karl Knobler on banjo, Jody Stecher on mandolin, Ira Solomon on guitar and Bill Friedman on bass. I had

recently met another Jersey Boy, Hank Miller (who played hot, flatpicking guitar like no one I knew), who had a band called the Orange Mountain Boys with banjoist turned fiddler Gene Lowinger and Peter Szego on Dobro. The Orange Mountain Boys eventually merged with the Straphangers, and with additions and subtractions included lots of others over time including Peter Wernick and Winnie Winston.

In the summer of 1962 most of us were in our last year of high school and I was working in a record store in South Orange, NJ. That summer Hank Miller, Gene Lowinger and I, along with our guitar playing friend

Bill Kruvant, drove to Nashville in Billy's father's brand new yellow Pontiac Bonneville air-conditioned convertible. Through my record sales connections, I got us tickets to the Opry and invitations to recording studios and the Ernest Tubbs Record Store "after Opry" show. We had a total blast. The only misfortune was that Flatt & Scruggs weren't there. But we did get to see Jim and Jesse, who sang the Martha White theme song?they too, were sponsored by the company?and we went berserk.

Back in New Jersey we used to drive to the top of the local highest hill and spread out aluminum foil wings for our car radio and listen to (or try to) the Opry and the WWVA Jamboree. So we'd heard the theme, but it didn't sink in until we saw Jim and Jesse do it live on stage, twice.

Cut to November (or October) when we heard the Flatt & Scruggs were coming to Carnegie Hall. It was absolutely mind blowing. The only other ?real? bluegrass we had seen was The Country Gentlemen who did a Sing Out show with Pete Seeger. That, actually, was my introduction to bluegrass, but that's a story for another time. Again, I put the arm on the record sales guy from Columbia, and boy did he deliver! Ten seats, front and center! I think we were in the third row, but wherever it was it was close enough for sweat to hit us from the stage. Karl Knobler, Jody Stecher, Bill Friedman, Ira Solomon, Hank Miller, Peter Szego, Gene Lowinger and two others I can no longer conjure up?plus, naturally me, were there. After the very first song and at every opportunity thereafter we hollered for the Martha White theme song between every song...during and after the applause. The very idea that a commercial jingle could be a genuine bluegrass song with pretty cool banjo and fiddle breaks plus a catchy chorus, was almost unimaginable.

Remember, bluegrass fans in New York City were a very small community. Roger Sprung was the grand old man, and The Greenbriar Boys had a real recording contract with Vanguard, a ?real? folk music label. There was Winnie Winston, and some other kids from New Jersey including David Grisman and Fred Weisz?. I think I knew Peter Wernick by then, and that was about it. Lowinger took up the fiddle because no one else played. Imagine?in a city of several million eastern European Jews there were barely any fiddle players!

Anyway, the second set opened and we, again, begged for Martha White, but this time Lester stepped forward and gave the introduction you hear on the record. He didn't think anyone in New York had ever heard it. He didn't know about us sitting in Hank's car with the aluminum foil car antenna, smoking cigarettes (unfiltered Camels, of course) and basking in the glow of Flatt & Scruggs, Jimmy Martin (on WWVA), and the entire panoply of country stars who were Opry and WWVA regulars. And that was the end of the story?almost.

Several years later, I think it was the spring of 1966, I was a senior at the University of Wisconsin and heard about a special bluegrass festival in Roanoke, VA, where, according to the grapevine, a Bill Monroe bluegrass reunion was going to take place. I had to be there. It was a different cast of characters, but six of us piled into someone's 1960-something Plymouth Barracuda and drove from Madison, WI to Roanoke. We had tents, sleeping bags, perhaps a Coleman stove and not much else. Oh, and instruments. I owned a very special Gibson RB-6. Tom Morgan built the neck on a tenor drum. It was beautiful?gold plated & engraved, with sparkletone purfling, curly maple neck and resonator. It sounded great and was the single most amazing banjo ever. How I got it is another story all together, but I eventually sold it to Mike Corcoran from Chicago and it now resides with him at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada.

After several days and nights of playing, listening and camping (but not showering) we left, sated, and headed back to the Midwest. For reasons I still don't understand we decided to take the long route through Nashville. Perhaps we wanted one more shot at the Ernest Tubb Show. Anyhow, when we got to Nashville we stopped for gas and I noted that we were in Madison, TN. I had sent a fan letter to Earl Scruggs and had gotten a reply from his wife and it was in my banjo case. The address: 44 Donna Dr. Madison, TN. ? I asked the gas station attendant where Donna Drive was, and it was basically three minutes from where we were standing. We got directions and went there?a pilgrimage, of sorts. We certainly didn't expect to find anyone home, and I am certain that we had no plan to do anything more than gaze at the house and fantasize about something grander.

As we pulled up to the house the first thing we saw was the Flatt & Scruggs tour bus in the driveway. It stopped us in our tracks. Now we had to figure out what to do. It was perhaps 8 p.m., there were plenty of lights on in the house, and my buddies literally pushed me out the door, banjo in hand, and I sutter-steeped up to the front door. I stood there for a few seconds (that felt like hours) and then rang the bell. Louise Scruggs answered the door and looked at a very unkempt, bearded, rank smelling kid holding a gold plated banjo, asking if Mr Scruggs, sir, his excellency, might autograph it. Earl then ambled over to the door. He was barefoot. The wall-to-wall carpeting was, as I recall, white. Without missing a beat, he invited me in.

?Oh, umm. I have some friends in the car, sir, and, I mean, maybe, well, you know??

Earl did know, and he told us all to come in. And he insisted that we bring all our instruments in with us. Within minutes Earl was playing my banjo. Richard Faverty, a brilliant photographer was in the car with his instruments...Nikons, and took a ton of photos, all of which we believe are lost to history. Louise ordered pizzas. Earl?s sons Randy and Gary Scruggs joined us, and pretty soon we were picking and singing with (expletives deleted) Earl Scruggs. It was absolutely mind blowing. He was amused by my note-for-note renditions of a few Scruggs classics and amazed at our collective knowledge of the entire genre song book. We, in turn, were were amazed by the hospitality...inviting this scruffy bunch to come into a white carpeted living room, sit, eat pizza and play music with a genuine god?. Wow!

I mentioned my note to Earl and Louise?s reply to me, and I told her about our amazing seats at the Carnegie Hall concert and our whooping and hollering for Martha White. Louise cracked up and told me the back story. The Columbia Record guys were royally [peevied] that night. They were recording the show for an album release and they certainly didn't want it to devolve into a Martha White thing. They were convinced that the Martha White Mills management had

planted us in the audience to hijack the record. Today we'd call it guerilla marketing. But of course Martha White had nothing to do with us. In 1962 none of us had ever actually seen a package of Martha White anything. The record execs finally decided that they had to include the song and he rest is, as they say, history.

Except a few weeks after I returned to Madison a huge box arrived at my apartment from Martha White Mills, filled with flour and mixes, perhaps weighing 50 or even 100 pounds. There was a thank-you note from the CEO of Martha White Mills with an invitation to come visit.

So that's the entire story, as I know it. Hope you enjoyed it. It was sure fun remembering it and the guys I hung out with, the music we made and the fun we had.

### **Sab Watanabe Inoue:**

Thank you, Jerry! I'm sure you were one of the guys who changed the course of my life. In March of 1968 Flatt & Scruggs came to Japan as the first bluegrass act from the U.S. At that time, I thought I was a pretty good banjo player at age 18. But you know how I felt when I saw Earl?. His fingers changed my life and I remember very well that I shouted "Martha White!" after every song which I learned from you! And when Paul kicked off the theme, I felt a strong connection (in Japan we say a "red string") between bluegrass music and myself. I believe they heard my shouts!

After I graduated college I went into bluegrass business which was very rare (and is still rare) in Japan. I married a beautiful fiddler and we raised two kids. One is a professional mandolin player in Tokyo and one is a promoter for bluegrass. My bluegrass life started when I shout "Martha White" and Flatt & Scruggs played it. I felt like I was in the band, and I still don't want to leave that band.

### **Pete Wernick:**

I had seen Flatt & Scruggs twice before [the concert at Carnegie Hall], so had already had the experience of "flipping out" over my heroes. To me, Scruggs was too good to be true! He was like a god to me, looking supremely confident and pleasant in his suit, string tie, and western hat, and always delivering a cascade of sparkling strong notes.

The band was very polished and professional. They had fun putting on a show, and Paul Warren would really get going with his fiddle, sometimes kicking his leg high in excitement while he fiddled. Everyone liked the choreography, watching them move around the stage, gathering for trios and quartets.

New Yorkers were not used to Southerners. Their Southern accents seemed from another world, musical and a little mysterious. Flatt would call us "neighbors," and really seemed to mean it. It was nice that he was so friendly. The portion of the show with Scruggs on guitar was very special. He made a guitar sing... differently from the banjo, but just as magical in his hands.

The thing I remember best from the Carnegie Hall concert was when they first came out on stage. I don't think anyone introduced them, they just walked out to the center of a stage big

enough to hold an orchestra, all about the same height, wearing exactly the same dark suits, string ties, and western hats. They seemed like a tribe of men from another world, an exciting world.

When they reached the two mics, Earl started "Salty Dog Blues." Lester sang the first line and then the Foggy Mt. trio hit: "Honey let me be your salty dog." Just at that exact moment was everyone's "fall on the floor" moment. On the record, you can hear the audience almost erupt in glee right then. We knew we would have a great night. It's interesting that that night was the first time that I and other people in the North heard them sing the Martha White song, with the words "Hot Rize." The song was just heard on the Opry or their TV show, which was not seen in New York, and never on a record. Then it was, of course, on a record. Years later I realized that Hot Rize might be a good name for a band... and sure enough, it is a good name!

It is certainly fun to think back 50 years to the time of this concert and all the excitement we had about our heroes and bluegrass music!

**\*Note from the editor:** We were serious! Email [info@ibma.org](mailto:info@ibma.org) [2] or call 888-GET-IBMA with your life-changing, bluegrass music moments. We'd love to hear about them!

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