Mary Jane Queen, Queen family receive Mountain Heritage Award

Mary Jane Queen (left) accepts the 1999 Mountain Heritage Award on behalf of the entire Queen family from Western Carolina University Chancellor John Bardo.

Mary Jane Queen and the Queen family, performers who have played a major role in helping maintain the folk music traditions of the Southern Appalachian Mountains, were named the 1999 recipients of Western Carolina University's Mountain Heritage Award.

Family matriarch Mary Jane Queen accepted the award on the Queen family's behalf at the 25th annual Mountain Heritage Day, held Saturday at WCU. The award was presented by WCU Chancellor John Bardo.

"Today we recognize a truly outstanding musical family whose ties to authentic Southern Appalachian folk music run deep and true," Bardo said. "Mary Jane Queen learned traditional mountain music from her father, and she has in turn passed on those old songs to countless others through concerts and workshops. The entire Queen family exemplifies the wonderful tradition of passing the

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folk arts down from one generation to the next."

Mary Jane Queen still lives in Caney Fork on Johns Creek, where she was born in 1914. She recalls that both her grandmothers were good singers, and her older brother was "the first person to buy a guitar in the Caney Fork section." Her father, a farmer and blacksmith, also was the best banjo picker around.

"I watched him play – and I helped him sing – all of these old songs many times. And that's how I learned them, and where I learned them," she says.

Her marriage to Claude Queen, a banjo and guitar player, brought together the music and song traditions of two neighboring families. All of their eight children became musicians, singing and learning the old songs "by ear." Over the years the family sang in church, at community events, and anywhere they were invited.

Although all the children are now grown, and some live outside the state, various combinations of the Queen family still perform at events such as WCU's Mountain Heritage Day, and the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville.

Mary Jane Queen has been called "a walking archive of mountain music." She hesitates to guess, but estimates that she knows about 200 songs by heart. Many, like her favorite, "William Riley," are tunes with roots going back to English ballads. Her repertoire includes songs brought to this country by pioneering settlers from Ulster, old ballads formed in early America, hymns and spirituals from Baptist and Methodist traditions, and comic songs that derive from both the European and African-American traditions.

Over the years, Mary Jane Queen has taken care to pass on her knowledge. She has welcomed into her home a procession of students, teachers, folklorists, journalists, filmmakers and musicians – anyone who wanted to learn about what she calls "good old music." She is a past recipient of the N.C. Folk Heritage Award from the N.C. Arts Council.

Mary Jane Queen and the Queen family are the 24th recipients of WCU's Mountain Heritage Award. The award is given in recognition of outstanding contributions to the preservation or interpretation of the history and culture of Southern Appalachia, and in recognition of outstanding contributions to research on, or interpretation of, Southern Appalachian issues. Award winners are chosen by a special committee.

For contest results from Mountain Heritage Day, see page 10C.

Additional Mountain Heritage Day honorees

Among the special ceremonies at the 25th annual Mountain Heritage Day was the awarding of a plaque honoring the late H.F. Robinson, former Western Carolina University chancellor who was instrumental in the establishment of the event. Accepting the plaque from Doug Davis (photo left, far right), former chairman of the MHD committee, are (from left) Kyle Bewsey; Kellen Bewsey; Jeff Bewsey; Josie Bewsey, daughter of H.F. and Katherine Robinson; and Bill Dail. Beverly Lane of Sylva (photo right, left), a staff member in WCU's Mountain Resource Center, accepts the 1999 Eva Adcock Award from Don Wood, chairman of the MHD committee. The award is given annually to a committee member in recognition of long-time and significant service to Mountain Heritage Day.

Mary Jane Queen and the Queen Family receive 1999 Mountain Heritage Award

CULLOWHEE — Mary Jane Queen and the Queen Family, performers who have played a major role in helping maintain the folk music traditions of the Southern Appalachian Mountains, are the 1999 recipients of Western Carolina University's Mountain Heritage Award.

Family matriarch Mary Jane Queen accepted the award on the Queen Family's behalf at the 25th annual Mountain Heritage Day, held Saturday (Sept. 25) at WCU. The award was presented by WCU Chancellor John W. Bardo.

"Today we recognize a truly outstanding musical family whose ties to authentic Southern Appalachian folk music run deep and true," Bardo said. "Mary Jane Queen learned traditional mountain music from her father, and she has in turn passed on those old songs to countless others through concerts and workshops. The entire Queen Family exemplifies the wonderful tradition of passing the folk arts down from one generation to the next."

Mary Jane Queen still lives in the Caney Fork section of Jackson County, where she was born in 1914. She recalls that both her grandmothers were good singers, and her older brother was "the first person to buy a guitar in the Caney Fork section." Her father, a farmer and blacksmith, also was the best banjo picker around.

"I watched him play — and I helped him sing — all of these old songs many times. And that's how I learned them, and where I learned them," she says.

Her marriage to Claude Queen, a banjo and guitar player, brought together the music and song traditions of two neighboring families. All of their eight children became musicians, singing and learning the old songs 'by ear.' Over the years the family sang in church, at community events, and anywhere they were invited.

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