

Arts & Entertainment

Johnson enjoys life with strings attached



Dawn Watson/Daily Nebraskan

Sharon Johnson sights along a bow to gauge if the hairs on a newly finished bow are drying straight.

By Dawn Watson

Sharon Johnson graduated from Kansas State teachers college planning to teach home economics. Instead, she ended up in Nebraska, teaching banjo and repairing violin bows.

Johnson instructs approximately 20 banjo and guitar students individually from her home basement studio. She also gives group lessons through Southeast Community College. The class meets one night a week at The Violin Shop, 1641 S. 17th St., Johnson's daytime violin bow workplace.

Although she grew up in the Western Swing-rich Oklahoma-Kansas border region, and lived in Nashville for a few years, Johnson didn't meet up with bluegrass until she moved to Lincoln in 1970.

In 1971, Johnson signed up for guitar lessons. Her

teacher, a classical guitarist, introduced her to Merle Travis-style fingerpicking, after 1½ years the instructor ran out of Travis pieces and sent Johnson to Steve Hanson, her teacher for the next six years. Sometime during 1974, Johnson recalled, she saw the movie *Deliverance* and like the banjo soundtrack.

"I remember hearing it and thinking, 'What? What are they doing here?' And I wondered if I could do it."

Soon afterwards she bought a banjo, and from that point on the guitar took a back seat, she said.

Johnson loved the bright, shining sound of the banjo. Playing the banjo felt natural. It seemed to combine the dexterity which piano study had given her with the snare drum rhythms of her high school band days she said.

Instrument repair, another side of Johnson's bluegrass career, began at about the same time she took up the banjo. She worked in London Stringed Instrument Repair Shop for four years, learning how to repair bows and build guitar bridges. She also learned some violin repair, including glueing seams and bridge set-up.

Meanwhile, Johnson was working hard on her banjo technique. Two friends asked her to teach them banjo and Johnson reluctantly agreed. Word got around and other students tracked her down.

Johnson found she enjoyed teaching. In 1978 she decided to go with it full-time. She quit her instrument repair job and rented studio space above Thomsen Music. Then Southeast Community College called her about starting a banjo class.

Although Johnson enjoys group instruction, she prefers individual instruction. Group teaching is sometimes hard, because "you can't really tell what everybody's doing. You can't give them full attention," she said.

From the student standpoint, though, group lessons are cheaper and sometimes more comfortable for shy types, Johnson said. They can also be a lot of fun because the students get to play together, she said.

Johnson also enjoys playing with the class. "It's fun to get up in front of a group and work with them and get to know people," she said.

Johnson rarely plays in public, though. When she does perform, it's important for her to feel that she's giving something.

"I didn't want someone just to send me on an ego trip," she said.

Johnson's fourth job, raising two teenage boys by herself, is another reason she rarely performs. "People want me to come out and I'll say, 'I can't, I've got children to get to school.'"



Dawn Watson/Daily Nebraskan

Johnson places a wedge in the frog of the bow to spread the hairs evenly.

Four jobs — private lessons, group lessons, violin bow work and homemaking — mean Johnson is busy. But she makes time for banjo practice.

Melodic style picking is her favorite, but she has also done a lot of frailing style within the last few years, she said. The melodic style challenges her more, she said.

Banjo playing is both a means of self-expression and escape for Johnson. She plays banjo for 15 minutes or a half hour — "more at a shot if I can get it — before facing stressful situations.

The banjo sound is mood-elevating, she said. "I really think it's true what Steve Martin said. I mean how can you get sad out of a banjo? It's bright and it's cheerful."

"Not to say it's all cutesy," Johnson warned, laughing. "Especially jazz."

'Grey Fox' predictability a pleasant surprise

From Out of the North ...

The Grey Fox, directed by Phillip Borsos; screenplay by John Hunter; produced by Peter O'Brian, Barry Healy and Phillip Borsos for United Artists Classics. At the Sheldon Film Theatre, 12th and R streets. Rated PG.
Bill Miner Richard Farnsworth
Shorty Wayne Robson
Kate Flynn Jackie Burroughs

By Steve Abariotes

Richard Farnsworth has been working on Hollywood movie sets for more than 40 years. He began his career as a stuntman and has doubled for some of the biggest film stars. He has played bit parts in

Film Review

The Cowboys, *Tom Horn* and *Comes A Horseman*. He is also one of the best reasons to see *The Grey Fox*.

Farnsworth plays Bill Miner, an outlaw who spends 33 years in San Quentin for robbing stagecoaches. Miner is allegedly the western hero who originated the "hands up!" command.

The film begins with his release from prison around the turn of the century.

One of the primary themes of *The Grey Fox* is how a cowboy from the 19th century deals with the changes that come along in the 20th. The answer: Since there are no longer any stagecoaches around, he decides he might as well rob trains.

Westerns have always had predictable plots and *The Grey Fox* is no different. We see everything coming from a mile away.

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HOTSPOTS

Television

• E.L. Doctorow, the author of *Ragtime* and *Loon Lake* is the subject of *E.L. Doctorow and the American Myth* (8:30 tonight on Channel 12). This hour-long special probes the way America and Americans have influenced Doctorow's writing.

Radio

• Eugene Ormandy is the guest conductor on tonight's edition of the *Philadelphia Orchestra* (8 p.m., KUCV, 90.9 FM). Pieces featured on tonight's broadcast are two Beethoven compositions, "Leonore Overture No. 3" and "Symphony No. 6 in F," and Bartok's "Concerto for Orchestra."

At the Sheldon

• Philip Borsos' *The Grey Fox* opens for a three-day engagement today. Shows are at 7 and 9 p.m. Admission is \$3.

Around Campus

• John Landis' *An American Werewolf In London* will be shown in the Rostrum of the Nebraska Union tonight and Sunday at 7 and 9:15 p.m. The film, which stars David Naughton (a/k/a the Dr Pepper guy) and is directed by John Landis, is being presented by UPC's American Films Committee. While not a stupendous film, *Werewolf's* main claim to fame is Landis' use of special effects, which inspired Michael Jackson to hire him as director of his "Thriller" clip.

• Daniel Heifetz, who will appear in concert at Kimball Hall Friday night, will give two slightly more intimate performances in the lobby of two dormitories. These "mini-concerts" will take place at 6:30 p.m. in Harper Hall Lounge, 1140 N. 14th St., and Sandoz Hall Lounge, 820 N. 17th St., at 8 p.m. There's no admission charge.

Around Town

• Blues harmonica great Charlie Musselwhite will appear tonight through Saturday at the Zoo Bar, 136 N. 14th St. The cover charge is just \$3 tonight, \$3.50 for the remainder of the engagement.



Zoo Bar

Charlie Musselwhite will be at the Zoo for a three-day stand. See Around Town.