

# Vassar Clements could play it all – jazz, rock, folk

The bluegrass world has taken a hit in the past year, with the loss of Bob Paisley and the “so-called King of Bluegrass” Jimmy Martin.

And now, another legend has passed, with the death last week of extraordinary fiddler Vassar Clements, 77, a Tennessee gentleman who touched the hearts of everyone who knew him or heard his music.

The inventor of “Hillbilly Jazz” was more than just another fiddler player.

Clements was a conduit between musical styles. Though he was largely known to the public in the world of bluegrass and folk music, his abilities stretched far beyond.

I first saw Clements in 1991. He was performing with the New England bluegrass band Northern Lights at the once-only Great Woods Folk Festival. But I learned his impact a year later at the Winterhawk (now Grey Fox) Bluegrass Festival, where he once again joined Northern Lights on stage.

Stoic, yet soft-spoken and always impeccably dressed, Clements played from the heart, enhancing and sculpting the music to his own ear.

“I don’t read music. I play what I hear,” Clements once said.

Clements recorded live with Northern Lights on their recent CD called “Three August Nights.” Former lead singer and mandolinist Taylor Armerding remembers Clements fondly:

“He was unfailingly sweet and gentle to those around him – he obviously hung out and played with some of the most famous people in the world, but he treated everybody the same. No big star attitude,” Armerding said. “Second, he loved to play. He lived to play. And again, it didn’t matter who you were or how famous you were – he’d start jamming with you.”

Clements, a five-time Grammy nominee had played with folks like the Father of Bluegrass music Bill Monroe, Paul McCartney, John Hartford and Jerry Garcia. During his career, Clements recorded almost two dozen albums, from his early “Hillbilly Jazz” recording to seminal performances as a member of Old and In the Way (with David Grisman and Peter Rowan) and later with the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band on their landmark “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” album.

The 2005 Grammy for best country instrumental performance went to “Earl’s Breakdown.” by the Nitty



STEPHEN IDE/The Patriot Ledger

**Vassar Clements, left, was largely known to the public in the world of bluegrass and folk music.**

Gritty Dirt Band featuring Clements, Earl Scruggs, Randy Scruggs and Jerry Douglas.

“He got his start in bluegrass, but he was equally comfortable playing bebop and jazz and rock ‘n’ roll and he loved all those genres,” said Jeff Hanna of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. “He could sit in with anybody.”

He even once recorded with the Monkees – by happenstance. He was working on a recording session when someone asked him if he wanted to stay and play on another one.

“I didn’t know until later it was the Monkees,” he said.

His work bridged various styles, including country, jazz, bluegrass, rock ‘n’ roll and classical.

“When the rhythm is good, I can play it,” he told The Associated Press in 1988.

During his career, he recorded on more than 2,000 albums, joining other artists as varied as Johnny Cash, Bonnie Raitt, the Grateful Dead, Bruce Hornsby, Hank Williams Jr. the

Byrds and Woody Herman.

Clements, a Kinard, Fla., native who grew up in Kissimmee, Fla., taught himself to play at age 7 and had no formal training. The first song he learned was “There’s an Old Spinning Wheel in the Parlor.”

“It was God’s gift, something born in me,” he said about his talent. “I was too dumb to learn it any other way. I listened to the (Grand Ole) Opry some. I’d pick it up one note at a time. I was young, with plenty of time and I didn’t give up. You’d come home from school, do

your lessons and that’s it. No other distractions.”

Country and bluegrass singer-musician Ricky Skaggs said Clements developed his own style and influenced many young fiddle players in the 1970s, including Skaggs.

Clements’ uniquely carved fiddle, estimated to be at least 300 years old, seemed to parallel the uniqueness of his talent. They just seemed to fit. He could play with a nod to the traditional, then break into a freeform

performance with intricate phrasings unlike any other fiddler.

People familiar with his work may remember what I call a “Vassar moment.” I witnessed one during a

practice session in a trailer with Northern Lights in 1992, when the band members suddenly stopped playing to simply listen to a Clements’ improvised solo.

“He created a ‘voice’ on the fiddle that is about as distinctive as any I’ve heard,” said Armerding. “It took about four beats or less to tell it was Vassar playing. There aren’t a whole lot of people who leave that as a legacy.”

“... he is quite likely the greatest musical genius/savant I will ever have the chance to play with. He had numerous identifiable ‘Vassar licks’ that would show up regularly, but I don’t think he ever played a break on a song the exact same way.”

“One of the coolest things about being on stage with him,” said Armerding, “besides the astonishing music coming out of that instrument with a remarkable economy of movement, was the way he would get into the ‘zone.’ He would stare off at some far-away place that nobody else could reach, and then play like a man possessed – in a good way. I like to think he’s reached that place now, still playing music that nobody else will ever play.”

*Material from The Associated Press was added to this report.*

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The Patriot Ledger

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