

Is it a fiddle or a violin?



Ann Marie Calhoun on vacation with her immediate family in Hawaii. From left to right: her brother, Joe; her husband, Brian; her older brother, Richard; her mom, Theresa Chi; her dad, James Simpson; Ann Marie, and sister, Mary. Everyone in this picture can play one kind of instrument or another.

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Actually, in Ann Marie's case, it's both. "Same instrument, just different styles," she says of this musical instrument that she first picked up at age three. "I don't even remember learning how to play; I was so young, I've just felt like I've always been able to play."

Generally speaking, a violin is for classical music; a fiddle is for everything else: country, old-time, bluegrass, jazz, gypsy. Ann Marie Calhoun does them all.

There's a good reason for that...her parents. Her mother, a classically trained pianist, was born in China, exiled to Taiwan, orphaned at age eight, and emigrated to the states at 18. Little did she know, when she bumped into banjo-pickin' "hillbilly" and documented descendant of Pocahontas, James Simpson at a church singles club, that they would marry and produce a child prodigy.

And so from the very get-go, Ann Marie had no problem making the cross over from violin to fiddle and back again. "It happened all throughout my life because my dad plays guitar and banjo," she explains. "We listened to that music all while I was growing up and I actually did a lot of fiddle contests when I was younger." Her younger brother, by the way, is an accomplished guitarist. Her older brother plays bass and her sister plays bluegrass fiddle. The Simpsons became "a loosely-defined family band," that played church picnics and the like near their home in Fairfax.

During the week, Ann Marie attended Lake Braddock High School, in the much-vaunted Fairfax County School System... "lots of good classes, lots of good teachers and because of its prox-

imity to DC, I was able to train with a fellowship with the National Symphony." By this time, her parents didn't pay for her violin lessons anymore; she was winning enough scholarships to cover instruction costs. Through the National Symphony she took master classes from "anybody who soloed," ... violinist Itzhak Perlman, cellist, Yo-Yo Ma, pop/jazz artist, Bobby McFerrin, to name-drop just a few.

She even played with the National Symphony itself "somewhere in the back," soloed at the Kennedy Center, and attended the Interlaken Academy of the Arts in Michigan. But during the summer, that violin quickly morphed into a fiddle as she and her family cruised the county fair fiddle contest circuit.

When it came time to go to college, Ann Marie made a career-defining decision...NOT to go to conservatory, but to attend UVA instead. "I wanted to do other things and I wanted to study science in particular." Besides, in-state

tuition made UVA affordable. "In retrospect it was one of the best decisions I made for my musical career because it wasn't conservatory. If it had been conservatory, I would have been on a specific train and path to study classical music." So this multi-talented multi-tasker double-majored in music and biology, with a pre-med option, "to keep all the doors open."

The music department is small at UVA. Ann Marie was allowed to create her own program of independent study, "and got credit for pursuing different styles of music." She studied everything: Indian music, bluegrass, jazz and improvisation from legendary Charlottesville jazz guru, John d'Earth. She even played in a rock band. "It gave me exposure to all different styles of music."

Her first time in a recording studio, she played a commercial. "I'll never forget, the theme song for Cracker Barrel restaurants." She was amazed how much studio time it takes "to produce

three minutes of music."

During her sophomore year, she joined a bluegrass band called Walker's Run, and that same week, the band's guitar player, Brian Calhoun was quitting to pursue instrument building full time. "When I met him, the guitar company was first starting," she remembers. "He took down all his orders on a scrap piece of cardboard that he had laying around his shop. And sometimes he wouldn't even use a pen; he'd just take a nail and etch it into the cardboard. He didn't even do e-mail. He didn't have an email address. He was just this kind of mountain man," she says affectionately.

Married in 2002, Brian and Ann Marie moved to a drafty renovated barn "that had no climate control" near Barboursville. "So we basically saved all our money to have a down payment so we could buy the house." By now, Ann Marie was playing with Americana/New-grass band Old School Freight Train and teaching at Woodberry Forest as well as directing the school's string program. She decided to leave the band because she wanted to teach more "and also to be at home, because I had just married Brian; I was away at work and then I'd leave from work to do more work and then I'd have a weekend where I'd leave to do touring. So I just wasn't at home."

That was three years ago. Now, she's put the teaching on hold to concentrate on her performance career, which, from the look of things, is skyrocketing on a parallel course with Brian's hugely successful guitar making company.

Do they ever get together musically? "Every once in awhile we'll just do something little and fun," she smiles. They both play in the Arab-Appalachian fusion band Kantara which just wrapped up a mini-tour in Virginia and Washington, DC.

Asked what kind of music she listens to, she responds cryptically, "I don't listen to music just for fun. I know that sounds really strange; everyone always thinks that's weird. I have all these huge holes in my musical knowledge of iconic figures. People will drop a name, and it means nothing to me because I don't have a history with that."

Then she mentions Steve Vai, who one of her fiddle teachers once said is "the best guitar player alive." She has an ulterior motive here. "I'm listening to his music because I'm touring with him."



Hot Sauce and Little Black Cats

And so, Ann Marie Calhoun of Gordonsville is sitting in an Indian restaurant in Sao Paolo, Brazil with Ian Anderson and Doane Perry of the British rock band Jethro Tull. And they decide to have a "hot off"...who can stand the most heat in their food. "And they had these levels of hotness you could get, and 10 was the hottest and so he ordered an 11."

Ian Anderson...remember him?...that wild looking guy who stands on one foot and plays the flute in that signature breathy/vocalized style. And yes, he still does that, and yes, the band still plays their mega-hit, Aqualung, and yes, Ann Marie is the fiddle player in the band. She recently returned home to Gordonsville from a two-week-plus tour of



Top photo: Ann Marie Calhoun has called Gordonsville home since 2003. She worked as a chemistry, and conceptual physics teacher and string orchestra director at Woodberry Forest for five years before taking a leave of absence to pursue her musical performance career. Above, dueling fiddle and flute, Ann Marie trades riffs with Jethro Tull band leader, Ian Anderson.

Top photo by Phil Audibert, bottom photo contributed

Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Uruguay, playing to audiences in small arenas and large theatres virtually every night.

"It's exhausting because you spend more time on airplanes than you realize and you spend too much time traveling and too little time sleeping, that it actually becomes pretty grueling." Ann Marie is folded into an easy chair in the comfy and airy living room of her and husband Brian's two-story brick colonial near Gordonsville. "On the other hand," she continues, "it's so fantastic to see new parts of the world and it's so exhilarating to play for big audiences and very excited fans."

Besides the obvious musical connection, Ann Marie and the Jethro Tull band leader have two things in common: "Ian Anderson likes little black cats and I have two little black cats; and he likes hot sauce, and so do I." One of Ann Marie's little black cats is named "Runty." She wrote a piece of music of the same name, and Ian Anderson liked it so much, he recorded it with her. "It was really generous of him to play my own compositions," she says gratefully.



So who won the "hot off?" Ann Marie claims it was a draw. And then, as luck would have it, she fell ill the next day, although she insists it was not hot sauce-related. "I don't do well when I travel," she rolls her huge almond-shaped eyes.

Like the time she wound up in an emergency room in North Africa. "You really appreciate how good medical care is in the U.S., because I get sick when I'm on the road." In that particular instance, she and husband/luthier Brian Calhoun (see May 24th The Insider), were touring with their Arab-Appalachian fusion band, Kantara on a state department-sponsored musical diplomacy mission.

"It was SO different from the health care we have around here," she continues. "You also appreciate how much freedom we have as a people to choose our religion, how the press is not censored like it is in other countries. Also, you appreciate how in the U.S. there're a lot of opportunities and equality for women, and you see that there's different cultural perceptions of women in different places that you go." She pauses a beat. "I'm glad to be an American."

Surrounded by family photos and heirlooms, Ann Marie settles back into her arm chair. Right now, she's grateful to be a long way away from airplanes,



Ann Marie Calhoun takes a solo as Jethro Tull keyboardist, John O'Hara directs the Ra'anana Symphony Orchestra in Israel. This was Ann Marie's first show with the British rock band.

Contributed photo



Jethro Tull band members line up for a group shot backstage during their most recent tour of four countries in South America. From left to right: John O'Hara, keyboards, Martin Barre, guitar; Dave Goodier, Bass, Ann Marie Calhoun, fiddle, Ian Anderson, flute and vocals, Doane Perry, bass.

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busses and North African emergency rooms.

So what is that wild man Ian Anderson really like, anyway? "He's very, very normal," she insists. "Everyone wants me to say he's a wild rock star, but he's very, very normal. He's really easy to get along with; we have good conversations about just any topic. He's very well-educated. We tease him about being a professor, because we'll go to a new town and he'll just look out the airplane window and he'll tell you about the history. He stays up to date with current events. He's very conscious of the context of every performance, and the city and the people and their position in the world and what's going on with them currently and in the past."

The Jethro Tull gig materialized last fall with, like everything else in this business, "a call out of the blue." The father of one of Ann Marie's fiddle students is a local doctor who helped Ian Anderson promote awareness of an ailment called Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT), a blood clotting condition that almost claimed Anderson's life when he was touring in Australia. Ironically DVT is exacerbated by long periods of time sitting in airplanes.

Anyway, the doctor put Ian Anderson in touch with Ann Marie. They e-mailed back and forth; he sent her some sound files; she made a demo in her living room, and included her tune named after the black cat; he liked it and sent her a contract. "I just practiced at home and we had two days of rehearsal at his home in London, and then we went to Israel from there and played our first show." Just like that.

The interesting thing is that Ann had just returned from the Kantara tour of Italy and North Africa, (Morocco and Tunisia- where she fell ill and went to the emergency room). The Lebanon/Israel war was going on at the time. "It was interesting because I was on both sides of the war during the conflict because I was on the Muslim side when I was in Tunisia and then when I was in Israel I was on the Israeli side."

In Israel, Jethro Tull had the entire Ra'anana Symphony Orchestra backing the band up. The tour started in Tel Aviv in September and ended up back in the states in New England in late October. Ann scrolls through her digital scrapbook...her lap top. There she is onstage, up front and center, trading riffs with Ian Anderson, flute vs. fiddle. Here's a shot of her shaking the German president's hand following an acoustic Jethro Tull Christmas concert in Europe; another shot of her

and fashion designer Kenneth Cole, who now designs her wardrobe; more band photos backstage in South America.

Some folks would let that stuff go to their head, but not Ann Marie; today, she's expecting a fiddle student at 4:30. Of her students, she says, "I feel very guilty about abandoning them when I go on tour."

Does she practice every day? "I actually don't practice as often as I should as a professional," she admits a tad guiltily, adding in a stage whisper, "Don't tell my students." She explains, "I practice when I need to, if I have a new job or new music to learn. I practice really intensely, like hours and hours a day until I learn it, like for three days. And then I just do 15 minutes here and there."



Ann Marie Calhoun and Ian Anderson meet the President of Germany following a Christmas season concert in Germany.

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Recently, Ann took a leave of absence from Woodberry Forest, where she has taught chemistry, conceptual physics and directed the string orchestra for the past five years. And while on the Jethro Tull tour, she reflected on "where my life was going and what I wanted to do."

She reached a decision. "Right now is the time for me to do music because teaching is something that will always be there for me, but right now, I have to work on the momentum that I have with performance. And I feel like this is a good time in my life to be traveling and to be doing the sleepless nights and the flights every day as opposed to later on. It made sense for me to extend the leave of absence and take more time off."

Time off??? It sounds more like time ON! Just recently, Ann learned that rock guitar sensation, Steve Vai was holding auditions for a fiddle player.

She missed the deadline, but sent the artist's manager a video of her playing three of Vai's technically challenging pieces anyway. "They were all really, really difficult," she shudders. She had only two days to practice. "My chances are not looking too good," she figured..."one in a million. But the manager showed the video to Steve Vai, and Steve called me right after and asked me to be in the band."

And so, next month, Ann Marie Calhoun will leave her cozy home and guitar-making husband in Gordonsville and she'll jet out to Los Angeles for rehearsals and then go on tour with Vai starting in Paris and ending in Russia! Then it's back to America with Jethro Tull for a tour to just about every major American city.

"I'm something of a musical chameleon," she admits. "I sample from so many musical traditions and play with so many genres of music, that people who see me playing with Jethro Tull compared to people who've seen me playing at fiddle contests, compared to the people who see me playing with a classical orchestra; they have different perceptions of who I am as a musician." Will she record a solo CD? Maybe, maybe not.

Back when she was still at Woodberry, the phone in her office was jangling away one day, and she picked it up on the last ring. "Out of the blue," it's the Dave Mathews Band people calling, asking if she can put together a string quartet to record a few tracks on the "Stand Up" album. "It was a really neat experience," she says, adding that the studio, "was extremely luxurious."

Throughout it all, she never had personal contact with Dave Mathews. "Recording is like that," she says of digital recording technology. But she had plenty of contact with Dave Mathews' producer, Mark Batson, who she describes as "very different." No music was written out. "He would kind of dance instead of conduct, and we all kind of improvised our parts." Ann Marie Calhoun's string quartet appears on tracks 1, 2, 7, and 12 of the album.

"As a musician I love the challenge, kind of like actors playing a new role. I love finding new challenging music, learning the genre and being the best I can at it. It's what makes music really interesting for me, not just doing the same thing that I know I can do every night on stage, but experimenting and taking risks."

Experimenting and taking risks...hot sauce and little black cats.