

George Clark and Dixie Flyer performing at the All American Bluegrass Jam late last month. From left to right: Ferrell Stowe, dobro, Rick Otts, banjo, Clark Shifflett, guitar/vocals, Mike Dunbar, bass and Mike Tater, mandolin.

Photo by Phil Audibert



What is it about bluegrass, anyway?

"I think it's just very organic. It's a real organic music form," says Clark Shifflett of Dixie Flyer. "Don't get me wrong, there's nothing like taking an electric guitar, plugging it in to an amp and turning it up to 11; that's fun too. But I think that in an organic way, bluegrass connects with people...more natural."

Clark has done both, picked up the electric guitar, turned it up and wailed, and, he's played bluegrass on a back porch. And nowadays, he prefers the back porch to the big stage.

"I've been all over the country playing bluegrass, and I've been all over the country, playing country. Let's say that I was down in Dade City, Florida. I can walk up to a crowd of guys who are also holding instruments and start playing a song, and they'll fall right in and start playing too. It doesn't just allow you to connect to the music itself; it allows you to connect to the other people who are connected to the music. I NEVER did that with country," he observes.

He points to the rows and rows of lawn chairs set up in the brand new covered Pavilion at Booster's Park, which by the way kept everybody dry during downpours both Thursday and Friday

nights. "This is a family atmosphere...people are here because they want to hear the music. People go to clubs for a variety of reasons, and we'll leave it at that. People come here because they really want to hear the music."

He remembers in his country music touring days, his band opened once for Randy Travis. "And they had body guards," he says incredulously. "I mean you couldn't get within 30 feet of Randy Travis or you'd have some guy that looked like Arnold Schwarzenegger breathing down your neck wanting to throw you out."

Compare that to Rhonda Vincent. "Very approachable," he says. "You can walk right up to her, talk to her. There's a real connection between the people who play and the people who listen. You don't get that in country...They have this whole thing that they call the mystique factor in country that they really promulgate because they think that it adds to the aura of the image."

Besides, he adds, "I think that country music has gotten just way too crass...whatever I write I should be able to play it in front of everybody...I don't let my kids listen to it. I don't let them listen to that trash. Not to say that everything on

country radio today is trash; I don't mean that at all. I'm sure there are good songs and I have heard good songs on country radio, but it just seems they've pushed the envelope just a little too far for me."

Check out the videos...one step removed from soft porn. "What does a video have to do with country music, by the way?" questions Clark. "So much of the stuff they're putting out, especially with the cussing, is gratuitous... If that's what it takes to make it in the music business, I'll never make it, because I'm not going to write anything that I can't play in front of my daughters."

Besides, writing for Nashville is frustrating. There are rules: "You're actually writing inside a cookie cutter mold, and when you do that, you really limit your creativity," grouses Clark. For instance, here's a rule: no ballads, "because the world is full of them." Instead producers "need a three-minute, positive, not-too-country, up tempo love song." Then the rules change. "I got so sick of that," says Clark adding that his best barometers are his own kids. "If they can sing the chorus after hearing it two or three times, then it's probably a good song."

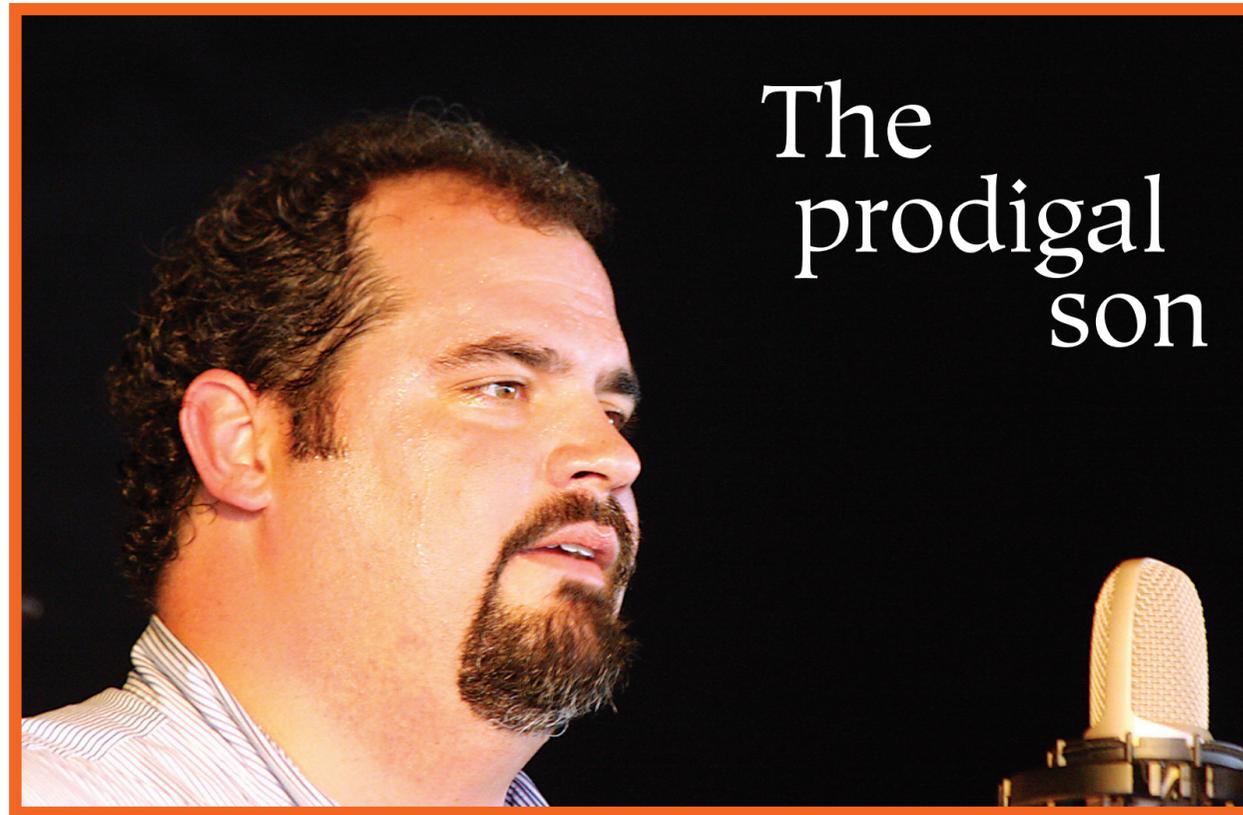


Photo by Phil Audibert

Above, no stranger to backyard bluegrass jams, Clark Shifflett started out playing country rock music in bands that toured up and down the east coast. It was only after he moved to Nashville to become a country music songwriter that he switched back to bluegrass. Below, the cover photo for Clark Shifflett's all bluegrass CD, released in 2005. Clark says he's currently finishing up a new CD project.

George Clark Shifflett wants to become a lawyer.

Say what?

This startling piece of information slips out three-quarters of the way through an interview in his travel trailer parked behind the concession stand at Booster's Park. George Clark, as he is known in the world of Bluegrass music, that guitar pickin', song writin', ballad croonin' native son of Orange, Virginia is planning on studying law at Vanderbilt once he wraps up his Bachelor's degree in Political Science, with a minor in Philosophy. Whew!

And get this: he has already earned an Associates degree from Volunteer State Community College with an emphasis on pre-law. At 35, he just scored a 98 on a college level algebra exam. And he's into debating. In fact he just won a forensics scholarship to



Belmont College in Nashville. He's perfectly content hanging "with the egg heads and the nerds in the political science department."

This great big bear of a man is actually looking pretty lawyerly. Rolling into Orange at 3:30 in the morning, Clark managed to grab a few hours of sleep, grab a bite and jump into the shower and freshen up before his 12 noon interview. He's dressed in a neatly starched and ironed, button-down, blue and white pin-striped shirt and sharply-creased gray slacks.

Clark is about to take the stage at Booster's Park with his band Dixie Flyer. It is something of a homecoming for him. He with his dad, Booster's President George Shifflett, organized the first All-American Bluegrass Jam five years ago. Here it is five years later, and Clark is being billed as the "house" band. It is only fitting that the son is breaking in the new pavilion the boosters just finished.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Clark Shifflett, guitar and band dress shirts in hand, heads from his travel trailer to the backstage area at Orange Booster's Park just before playing a one hour set at the All American Blue Grass Jam.

The new roof over the spectator area has come in handy, providing cool shade from the blazing sun, and shelter from the pouring rain.

"I've been trying to make it in the music business for years and years and years, and in some respects I feel like I have," says a relaxed Clark, who now makes his home in the capital of country music, Nashville. "But, I have got to think about other things. Otherwise I could end up being 50 or 60 and playing these honky-tonks for a living, and that's not what I want to do." He pauses and qualifies that last statement. "Not that that's bad. Don't get me wrong. I still have good friends who play clubs all the time. And I enjoyed it when I did it, but it's just not what I want to do and it's not what I can do if I want to provide something a little better for my kids."

As if on cue, his youngest daughter, Clarissa taps on the travel trailer door, pokes her head in and says "Peek-a-boo."

"Peek-a-boo," he responds back to this living-breathing reminder that he can't play in smoky music clubs forever; he needs to earn a law degree.

What a turnaround. Go back 17 years or so, and Clark is capital F flunking out of VCU with his sights set only as far as the next country rock band road trip. He remembers arriving in Richmond, a 1989 graduate of OCHS with a boatload of musical honors and scholarships to his credit. "I was not ready for college," he shakes his head ruefully. "I was just a country

boy, and all of a sudden they take me to this city. I didn't do well. I didn't do well at all. In fact I ended up leaving VCU, flunking out...totally flunking out." His booming laugh rattles the walls of the travel trailer.

Today it's funny; back then it wasn't. It was a bad time in Clark's life. He was depressed, frustrated. "I did... not... try, did...not...care, did...not...want it," he says tersely.

"Those grades would come back to haunt me," he adds, "they're kind of like luggage and just follow you everywhere." He quickly learned it's hard to get into a school, much less Belmont or Vanderbilt with a transcript that abysmal. But he's done it and then some.

Let's go back to Clark's earliest memory of playing and singing. His dad is cutting a demo in a recording studio and four-year-old Clark is sitting at the controls singing along. "Why don't you get in there and do one," he remembers his dad saying. Snoopy and the Red Baron was the only song he knew; so that became Clark's first "record."

He also remembers his father giving him "a little red guitar," that he pretty much ignored until he was 12, when he approached his dad and said, "Okay, I want to learn how to play this thing. So, show me some chords." George showed him the standard three bluegrass chords: G, C, and D, "and then I just immersed myself in it."

He remembers spending Tuesday evenings with veteran Orange County bluegrass virtuoso, Buck Morris. "We used to give him \$5 to let me come in and sit down with him and just jam. We called it guitar lessons at the time. Really what it was, it was him allowing me to come in and he'd show me some licks."

By the time Clark Shifflett was in high school he had picked up the keyboard and was playing trumpet in the OCHS Marching Band, and the Wind Ensemble, and the Jazz Ensemble. He senses his Dad, a running back of some renown himself, was a little disappointed his son didn't try out for football. "The decision had to be made; you're either going to play horn and be in the band or you're going to play football...I enjoyed playing football, it's just that I enjoyed playing music more," reasons Clark.

And so down the graduation aisle went Clark Shifflett, with an All-State Trumpet and a Louis Armstrong Soloist Award to his credit along with several music scholarships to VCU, and you already know what happens next.

So he's flunks out of VCU, quits Germanna and he's working as a night security guard at Moormont when he meets Diane Sutton of Fauquier County. By now, Clark is playing in a touring country rock band. "These are groups, that's all they do, is hit the road. That's a hard life," he shudders. Still the money wasn't too bad, and country music in the early 1990s

was hot. "As far as playing, I had a hoot, a lot of late nights, a lot of traveling."

He decided he would headline his own band, Dixie Flyer, playing country rock. "So we went and bought a lot of equipment and started knocking on doors around here, local clubs around here, is where it started...before long, we played as far north as New York and as far south as the Bahamas." Did he ever have a bus? "No," he smiles wistfully; "Bus is God's word that you're making too much money," he laughs. He gets a far off look to his eye. "I'd love to have one; that's been a dream of mine."

A consummate practical joker, Clark remembers playing a gig somewhere and staying at a hotel where the rooms formed a courtyard in the middle of which was a swimming pool. "We got up the next morning and there was a cheerleading convention in town." His lead guitar player, "a real smooth operator," was leaning against the door jamb, smoking a cigarette, "and he's looking at the pool and there's just tons of girls; it was like something out of a movie. They're all laying out in their bikinis, and he's just sitting there like a vulture." And he's wearing a pair of loose fitting shorts. "The only thing between him and the Lord were those shorts...I just eased behind him and I dropped them down to his ankles in front of all of those girls, and he turned about 10 shades of red." Clark roars.

By now, Clark and Diane are married; their first daughter is born. "Playing on the road was a lot of fun; the only thing I didn't like about it, I was away from my family a lot." Lauren was born New Year's Day, 1994. "Once she arrived, that was a whole different thing. Now, it was not just my wife waiting at home, it was my wife and child waiting at home. It's terrible when you come in off a trip Saturday night you get in at 4 or 5 in the morning, and it's time to be Daddy at 8 or 9."

So he and Diane got to thinking. "The whole reason I started that band is so that I could try to get into the music business nationally, not just locally or regionally." He refers to Diane. "She's the one who actually suggested that we move to Nashville and give it a shot." And so they did...he and her entire family. It took them two years. They sold their business, Woodstoves Unlimited, to his father. They sold their homes. And he and his mom and his in-laws moved lock, stock and barrel to Nashville, where they established a trucking business. "We moved everybody down there and we've prospered," nods Clark. "That was a huge leap of faith."

As was Clark's bid to become a Nashville songwriter. But within six months, Clark had a song publishing deal in the works, which to a songwriter is like a singer having a recording contract. Into the studio went Clark, recording demos,

songs that he's written that he wants to "pitch" to various country music stars. "When you demo music, you're taking your song and you're bringing in studio musicians and you're putting together a product, marketing it, actually trying to get it plugged." He pulls one of his demos up on the computer. Surprisingly, it's not just him with an acoustic guitar; it's a whole band with arrangements and harmonies and dueling guitars and fiddles and the like.

"I had a couple of songs that went all the way to the cusp, but," he shakes his head in disappointment, "never got picked up." One tune made it to George Strait's manager...a foot in the door. "That would've been a house," he booms, adding he's put songs before Randy Travis and Joe Diffy to name just a few.

"Nashville is all about who you know. I hate to say it but it is very political. And that's just the way it is. And I think that's the way it is with most businesses, really...If you have a distributor, you'd rather buy it from the guy you know rather than the guy you don't know."

All during this, Clark is sensing a change in the wind. Country music is like a crowded Interstate highway; right alongside is this little one-lane dirt road called bluegrass. "I grew up playing and listening to bluegrass, but I didn't really participate in a bluegrass band. My first band experiences were country bands," Clark explains.

He started hanging out at the bluegrass Mecca in Nashville, the Station Inn, "the place where all the blue-grassers go." And he's asking himself, "Why get into bluegrass when the money is in country." Then that soundtrack for "Oh Brother! Where Art Thou?" cleans up at the Grammys and bluegrass isn't looking so bad anymore. "It turned around really quickly and bluegrass was really hot...and I started going down there just to jam, just sit in with the guys and pick and sing." Besides, "I missed the performance aspect because I had been writing; that had been my focus...I missed that."

Next thing you know, Clark forms a bluegrass band that he names after his original country music band, Dixie Flyer, and you know the rest. A CD, "Back Home," was released in 2005. He's currently working on a new one. "You get a little homesick," he says of living in Nashville. "Everybody I knew was back here and so I wanted to re-connect where I was from." Clark waves vaguely around him to indicate the All-American Bluegrass Jam for which he arranges all of the talent and for which his father figures out all the logistics.

"Rubbing shoulders with all the people in the publishing and rubbing shoulders with all the people in bluegrass, this seemed a natural progression...The show's grown every year,

which is good. It brings a lot of business to Orange...Central Virginia is rife with bluegrass fans. They love traditional bluegrass."

About then, he gets up, reaches into a closet and pulls out four clean starched and pressed red and white pinstripe shirts, grabs his guitar, and heads backstage. The shirts are for his four band members. "I've found that you can't just tell them to 'dress nice.'" So, he takes care of the shirts... and the set list... and the arrangements... and the rehearsals... and the



Contributed photo

A publicity photo of George Clark and Dixie Flyer. From left to right, Clark Shifflett (guitar/vocals), John Martin (mandolin), Rick Otts (banjo), and Mike Dunbar (bass).

tour dates...and the everything.

But somehow this scene seems so much more relaxed. He and the band casually tune, chat with fans, take the stage and patiently wait for the sound man to figure out who is playing into which mike. And then with an introduction from emcee, "Sweet" Brenda Lawson, they launch into a blue-grassy take of Bob Dylan's Girl from the North Country.

Clark looks out at the crowd with their lawn chairs and the instant RV park that has sprouted out in the field. "It's doing really well. It's going to be here next year," he says of the annual festival.

George Clark Shifflett, the Prodigal Son, has come home to Orange on his own terms. "There's nothing like getting on stage and performing for people. This is a lot more fun for me because people are actually there to hear you. Back in those days," he refers to his honky-tonk years, "they were there to dance, pick up women, drink, party and all that stuff.... But here they come to hear you."

"I love playing music. I love performing music. I always have. I've always been a performer...You do it because you enjoy it, and if you're really really lucky, you might get something that pays you something." But for Clark, with family and friends, he already has enough. He'll just become a lawyer instead.