

Ohio

THE BEAUTY. THE ADVENTURE. THE FUN. Magazine

March 2016 Issue

Joe Mullins & the Radio Ramblers Headline Southern Ohio Indoor Music Festival

We talk to Mullins — founder of the semiannual southwest Ohio gathering — about bringing bluegrass to a new generation of listeners.

by Jill Sell



Joe Mullins & the Radio Ramblers - Mike Terry, Duane Sparks, Joe Mullins, Randy Barnes and Jason Barie

Joe Mullins likes to watch the kids sitting cross-legged on the floor or leaning against walls, plucking their instruments and singing songs their ancestors knew. Outside the Southern Ohio Indoor Music Festival's main performance hall, the next generation of bluegrass fans and performers find one another. Often, they're just learning to play the banjo or mandolin or have traveled to the showcase of American roots music with their grandparents.

"The kids are just out there in little groups jamming," says Mullins, founder of the festival. "One year I gathered them all up, lined them up, and we had one giant jam on stage. Lots of grandparents took pictures."

Mullins, who lives near Xenia, organizes the semiannual festival that returns to Wilmington each March and November. Although outdoor bluegrass events are common throughout Ohio, indoor ones of the size Mullins organizes don't commonly happen in the state. About 2,000 people a day gather at the Roberts Centre for the spring festival, with 10 hours of music scheduled each day. A second indoor music festival Mullins organizes each November draws similar crowds.

"The emotions and stories that are told through these songs means so much to people," says Mullins. "At a good bluegrass concert, you laugh, cry, fight, kiss and make up — all in 45 minutes."

He should know. The master banjo player is the leader of his own bluegrass group, Joe Mullins & the Radio Ramblers. It includes Mike Terry on mandolin, Jason Barie on fiddle, Duane Sparks on guitar and Randy Barnes on bass. All contribute vocals to accompany Mullins' high tenor voice. The band plays "100-year-old songs to brand new ones," Mullins says, "but all must be music with a message." Mullins himself has enough awards from the International Bluegrass Music Association to fill a country wishing well. His current and former bands have performed at the National Folk Festival, Smithsonian Folklife Festival and the Grand Ole Opry, as well as other venues large and small across the nation.

"Live music, especially, needs to stir a reaction, a memory," Mullins says. "And bluegrass performers are the most accessible of all. Almost all will take the time to talk to people."

Mullins knows what it is like for those interested in this deeply rooted American music to see their idols. His dad, originally from eastern Kentucky, was part of the great Appalachian migration following World War II that brought people from the hills and hollows to Cincinnati and Dayton to find work. Paul "Moon" Mullins was a fiddle player and radio personality in Middletown who helped a lot of people in southern Ohio become lovers of bluegrass music.

"I was fortunate to grow up in a household that had every great bluegrass recording," says Mullins. "And I got to know all these great banjo players of my time: Ralph Stanley, J.D. Crowe, Sonny Osborne. They were all family friends and all took their time with me when I was learning the instrument."

Mullins hit the bluegrass radio airwaves as a disc jockey in the 1980s at age 16. By 17, he was a full-time broadcaster. Thirty-four years later, he's still behind a radio microphone. Mullins owns and operates the locally produced Classic Country Radio — a network of four stations, including WBZI-AM 1500, WEDI-AM 1130, WKFI-AM 1090 and FM 100.3. The stations have a hold on bluegrass and classic country music fans in southern Ohio (as well as neighboring states) like an old lock on a red barn door.

"The Banjo Show" — one of Mullins' two, hour-long, weekday shows — celebrates what he considers to be the "definitive instrument of bluegrass." (He hosts a daily show titled "Hymns from the Hills" as well.) Mullins' 24-year-old son, Daniel, hosts a daily show as well, featuring bluegrass, country and Americana music. Mullins' wife, Tammy, serves as the business manager for the Southern Ohio Indoor Music Festival.

"Sometimes when I am ready to go on stage, it's hard to turn off the business part of my life and be completely relaxed and comfortable," Mullins says. "But when I get home, I take off my suit, pat the dog and light a fire. Then I get in the recliner and try to turn everything else off."

Mullins is focused on the promotion of bluegrass, classic country and gospel because he says that is how the music will endure on any significant scale. But his heart and soul can be found in his delivery of lyrics such as "she left me standing on the mountain" and "we missed you in church last Sunday."

"I've had people come up to us after a performance and say, 'I don't like bluegrass, but I like you guys.' Then I know I have done my job," says Mullins, whose latest album, "Another Day From Life," was released in 2014. "We want to entertain you, but also educate you. Bluegrass music isn't a pile of hillbillies in bib overalls. ... We are serious professionals — singers and songwriters preserving an American art form."