



Rick Jamison

— PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

As a songwriter, writer, guitarist, and oil-paint artist, Rick Jamison is creating a unique place for himself in bluegrass circles and beyond. His songs are as varied as the landscape of Northern California where Rick lives, and his guitar style concentrates on timing, taste, and a wide palette of rich tone. He's also a recognized oil painter whose beautiful California landscapes grace the artwork of his CDs.

Rick was born and raised in the Washington, D.C., area. His father was a big band drummer and leader of his own band, the Stu Jamison Orchestra, although by the time Rick was born, his father had given up life on the road as a musician. Music was still a big part of Rick's early years. He began playing guitar at nine years old when his aunt started him on lessons after noticing Rick play air guitar

while watching the Beatles perform on the *Ed Sullivan Show*.

He stayed with guitar lessons, but his love for acoustic music didn't really begin until he bought his first dreadnought acoustic guitar in 1973. He went to college at the University of Maryland where he first heard recordings of Doc Watson, Norman Blake, and Leo Kottke. Rick began working on flatpicking and became proficient enough to play some dates with another freshman, Harvey Reid, the multi-instrumentalist, singer, and songwriter. It was also during this time that Rick—influenced by contemporary songwriters such as Dan Fogelberg, John Prine, and Kate Wolf—began writing his own songs.

By Chris Stuart

In the late 1970s, Rick worked as a political cartoonist for the *Eastern Shore Times* and won recognition from the Maryland/Delaware/D.C. Press Association for his work. This love of drawing would reappear later in his oil paintings.

In 1980, Rick moved to California where he's lived ever since, mostly in the northern part of the state. Rick says, "California itself is one of the most diverse and beautiful places on earth. So much of the physical landscape has had a huge influence on me, especially the Sierras, the Pacific Ocean, wine country, and California's small towns, like Mill Valley, Santa Cruz, Twain Harte, and Sebastopol. It's fair to say that many of these environmental influences—the desire to be outside soaking it all in, a fascination with the wildness of the West,

a respect for the awesome power of the ocean—have woven their way into quite a few of my songs.”

Rick currently lives in Sebastopol, Cal., with his wife Bettina and a standard poodle named Cedar, whose image forms the logo of his record label, Circus Dog Records.

As a senior writer and intranet editor at Synopsys (an engineering software company), Rick’s job allows him to telecommute, giving him more flexibility for expressing his creative side. “I make my living thinking about words and meanings and communicating information and ideas. In many ways, songwriting is a natural extension of those skills towards a more personal and creative expression. Although my day job and my avocation are quite complementary, only one of those pursuits involves playing the guitar, reaching for unique melodies and tapping into the subtleties of everyday life in a poetic way. On the other hand, my day job certainly pays better.”

Upon arriving in 1980, Rick lived in southern California in the Hollywood Hills. His involvement with the California bluegrass scene began with a fortuitous visit to the famous guitar store and venue, McCabe’s, in Santa Monica. He put a card up on the bulletin board and in a few days was contacted by Dave Richardson, a renowned banjoist and producer in the area.

Dave recalls, “I introduced Rick to his first bluegrass festival at Norco, California, in 1981. Within minutes of arriving, we were jamming with Jimmy Martin as luck would have it! I think that experience had a lasting effect on both of us.” Rick also won second place that day in the West Coast Flatpicking Championship. It was an auspicious beginning.

Rick and Dave soon formed a band, Bluegrass West, which performed until 1983 when Rick moved to Mill Valley in

northern California. He played in various bands such as Grass Menagerie from 1984-1986 and in Homefire (based in Monterey) in 1987 with Jim Hilden on banjo. Rick was primarily concentrating on his flatpicking guitar during these years. “It’s ironic to consider that the intensity I had for continually improving as a guitar player was also something of a distraction that eclipsed my focus on songwriting until the last handful of years.”

From 1988 to 1995, Rick concentrated on his day job in publishing and writing for Internet computer companies, including the highly-respected *InfoWorld* magazine. It was an exciting time to be in computing, but eventually the pull of music brought Rick back to playing and writing songs, and with his wife Bettina’s encouragement, he began performing again.

It was on an trip to Jackson, Wyo., where Rick was going to spend ten days painting, that he became the entertainment for a cabin full of people who enjoyed his guitar playing and singing. One of his guests asked him if he’d ever recorded a CD and the idea to do just that started to grow. Rick had nine originals and he added three more public domain songs to complete his first CD, “Open Spaces,” in 2003.

“One of my early songs, ‘Time Again To Go,’ was recorded in 2003 on my first CD, ‘Open Spaces.’” I had written that piece 23 years earlier while sitting with my brother on the rim of the Grand Canyon on my way out to California where I’ve lived ever since. There’s a decisive ’70s folk-rock influence in the words and melody but, hey, we’ve all got to start somewhere!”

The band that Rick assembled for the first CD included Rob Ickes on resonator guitar, Pat Ickes on banjo, Elida Ickes on bass, Megan Lynch on fiddle, and Phil

Cornish on mandolin. After the recording, Rick put together his first band as a front man, Rick Jamison and Copper Canyon, with Pat, Megan, and Phil, and adding Jerry Logan on bass. The group played mainly the West Coast for two years before Rick left in early 2006 to pursue songwriting and solo recording.

Copper Canyon recorded a CD in 2004, “Tales From The Canyon,” which showcased more of Rick’s songwriting and lead- and ensemble-style guitar playing. Then, in September 2004, over twenty years after they had last played in a band together, Rick and Dave Richardson reconnected at a festival and began talking about a collaboration that would become Rick’s “Magic Hour” CD. As Rick says, “It was like we just picked up the friendship and collaboration right where it left off.”

The two began talking about doing a recording of Rick’s newer material which eventually led to “The Magic Hour,” a 16-song CD of bluegrass, country, and acoustic music that showcases the range and depth of Rick’s songwriting.

“I can’t say enough good things about Rick Jamison,” Dave Richardson says. “Working to produce a project such as ‘The Magic Hour’ was not only a great experience, but a relaxed and easy one. Rick is a talented and accomplished singer/songwriter and artist as well. His creativity on the canvas is matched by his creativity in song. Couple those attributes with a strong business sense, and you have a winning combination. He is not afraid to put his heart out there for all to see.”

“The Magic Hour” was completed in time for the IBMA conference in 2005, and Rick began giving it to artists who might be interested in his songs. As Rick says, “What I wanted to do with ‘The Magic Hour’ was dress up some of my songs in their Sunday best and present them as fully-produced expressions of what was in my head when I wrote them. So I reached out to some of the finest musicians in the business—Cindy Browne, Rob Ickes, Megan Lynch, Dave Richardson, and Erik Thomas—who all deliver stellar performances on this CD. The title of the CD itself is a double entendre. One, the disc contains exactly one hour of original music, and two, the title track is called ‘The Magic Hour,’ a celebration of that special time of evening at a bluegrass festival when the day begins cooling off, you kick back in a couple lawn chairs with your significant other and soak in the

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sounds of the music you love." The collection is indeed a beautiful portrait of Rick as a songwriter, displaying a full range of moods and styles, some songs steeped in bluegrass tradition, and others showing an intimate acquaintance with country, folk, and Americana.

The song "A Bank Too Far" shows Rick's ability to take the theme of the outlaw, in this case Jesse James, and weave new material from the legend. "When I began writing 'A Bank Too Far' about Jesse James' day of reckoning in Northfield, Minnesota, I knew that I was taking on a topic that is deeply embedded in the folklore of the Wild West and well covered by many other songwriters. But I became intrigued with wondering how it might have felt for Jesse to see his whole world come crashing down in a blaze of smoke and gunfire because of his own bad judgment. I followed that bit of inspiration, and 'A Bank Too Far' went beyond the historical basics to tell a tale of sadness, regret, and human tragedy."

Rick's attention to detail in his songwriting is a key ingredient in his success, as is his focus on stories and communicating emotional situations. "A key goal for me when developing a new song is to try to tell a complete story that folks can relate to. I want my songs to be coherent and hold together from beginning to end. I strive for simplicity, both in melody and content. I think about how words sound when they're sung, favoring open vowels and avoiding syllables that tend to stick in your throat. I like to build around a hook—a key idea or phrase—whenever possible. And speaking of melody, I'm always intrigued with how specific phrases seem to tell you how they want to be sung, almost like they write themselves."

As solitary as the profession of writing and painting can be, music has a way of bringing people together, and Rick's collaboration with musicians and producers has yielded some valuable and lifelong friendships. Fiddler Megan Lynch says, "Rick is such a thoughtful player and writer. He takes each song and every performance to heart. He, like many of us, took the long way around to becoming a professional musician and songwriter and is determined not to waste a minute of it."

Larry Carlin, a producer of the Bluegrass Gold Concerts in Mill Valley, Cal., says of Rick, "I have spent countless

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hours listening to 'The Magic Hour.' It is one of the finest recordings I have heard in a long time. Rick is definitely a force to be reckoned with on the national bluegrass scene."

Rick is now concentrating on songwriting and he's particularly interested in hearing from bands who are looking for new material. A tremendously talented artist both on stage and on canvas, music seems to be, at the moment, the most important outlet for his artistic vision. "Music has provided many wonderful opportunities for me over the years as a flatpicker, bandleader, recording artist, performer, and producer, but nothing has brought me as much satisfaction as writing songs that connect with other people."

It's his tremendous talent with words, melodies, as well as his virtuosity as a guitar player, that show what a tremendous artist Rick Jamison is, and why his songs should reach a wider audience.



Chris Stuart is a writer and songwriter based in San Diego and currently leads the band Chris Stuart & Backcountry.

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