

A Decade In, Mountain Music School Expands Vision

When Mountain Empire Community College first launched Mountain Music School in 2004, creator Sue Ella Boatright-Wells had a vision of what she wanted the school to become. A decade later, Boatright-Wells says the school has evolved into so much more than what she dreamed of thanks to the community and the students.



Students from age 10 and up learn to play an instrument of their choice, including beginning and advanced options in "old-time" fiddle, claw-hammer banjo, auto harp, guitar, mandolin, dulcimer, shape note singing, and dog house bass. In addition, a string-band class for intermediate/advanced musicians is offered for students who want to expand their skills in a group setting.

While many are from the region, students are traveling from Canada, Texas, Florida, Maryland and Illinois to learn more about the music and culture of Southwest Virginia.

The idea to hold a week-long camp dedicated to teaching children and adults how to play old-time music was born from a visible need. Boatright-Wells and local musician Ron Short were concerned the music traditions of the past were not being passed

down to the younger generation. They saw a need to provide music instruction to youth while emphasizing the cultural heritage of the Appalachian region.

To continue old-time music instruction throughout the year, Boatright-Wells has worked with Wise Jams Steering Committee, Lays Hardware in Coeburn, The Southwest Virginia Museum in Big Stone Gap, and Norton City Schools to launch the Wise Jams Program. All Wise County students in grades four through eighth have the opportunity to participate in an after-school music program. In addition, high school students can participate in dual enrollment music courses at MECC, including banjo, guitar, fiddle, string band and more.

"We have been able to do so much more than what we ever thought we could," said Boatright-Wells. "Not only do we have the music school, but we now have the JAMS afterschool programs and the music venues in the region. We've had a lot of help, from the Crooked Road venues, the state parks, the school systems and many more. The community really stepped up and supported this cause."

The program has also introduced students to possible careers in the music industry. Notable graduates include Tyler Hughes, a student in the ETSU Old Time String Band program and a member of the Empty Bottle Stringed Band; and Molly Slem, a Belmont University student who is playing the lead role of June in the "Trail of the Lonesome Pine" outdoor drama this summer.

"Mountain Music School set me on the path that I'm on today," said Hughes. "It was there that I began learning how important Appalachian culture was to the puzzle of American culture. Since then I've dedicated my studies and career to learning and preserving Appalachian culture in hopes to educate and promote our valuable corner of the world as a hotbed for diverse music, dance, and art."

For more info on Mountain Music School, go to
www.mountainmusicschool.org