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MAGAZINE



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TALKING TRADITION
WITH JESSE ANDERSON

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at Coppa Cafe

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Little America's
Carefully Curated Update

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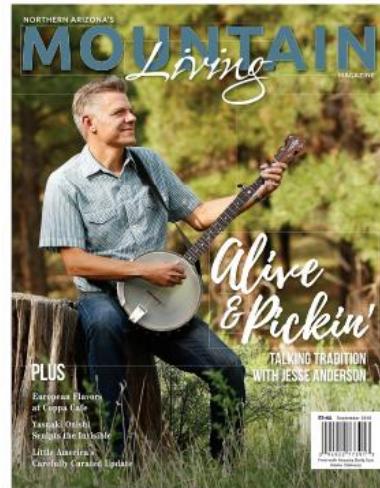
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Alive & Pickin'

Sean Golightly chats with local musician Jesse Anderson about traditional American music, two Flagstaff events that celebrate folk, bluegrass and old-time genres, and the folks who work to preserve those styles.

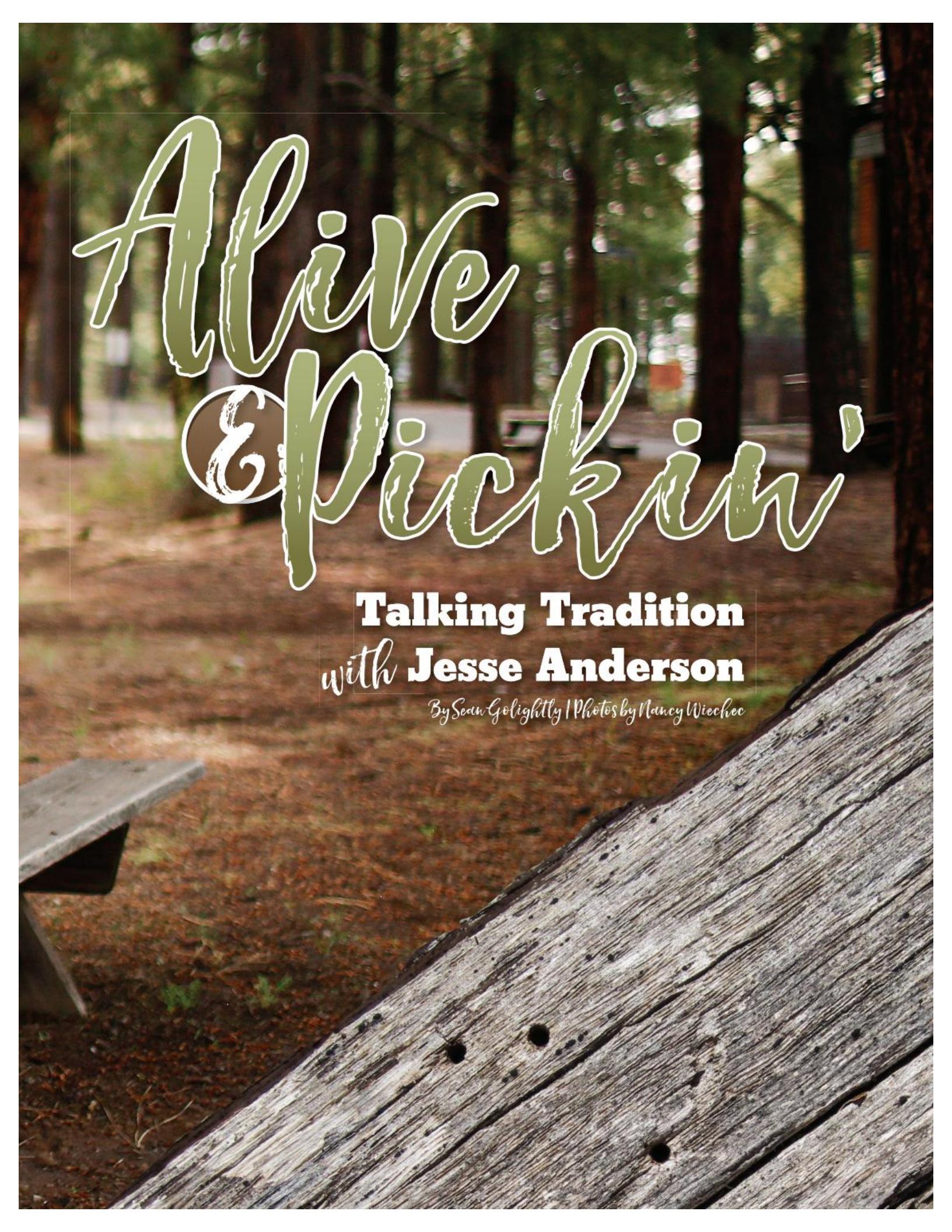


ON THE COVER

Flagstaff musician Jesse Anderson will showcase his style of Americana music at the 13th annual *Pickin' in the Pines Bluegrass and Acoustic Music Festival* this month. Photo by Nancy Wiechec.



Alive & Pickin'



**Talking Tradition
with Jesse Anderson**

By Sean Golightly | Photos by Nancy Wiechec

I'M

in the home of local musician Jesse Anderson. It's a charming, timber-framed house with warm natural light and a colorful interior. But Jesse leads me out of the welcoming living room, downstairs into a laundry den.

"Check this out." He motions excitedly to a wall of diagonal wooden slats. "Ammo boxes," he explains. On close inspection, I see faint numbers and codes marked onto the aged wood. "In the 1940s they built a bunch of these houses out of old ammo boxes from the war." Jesse beams, showing off this dark little corner with pride. While other hosts might try to impress a guest with fine art, a new car or other signs of wealth and success, Jesse chooses to show me a wall. His prized possession is not riches or status, but roots. He's embedded in history, and his ammo box home is just one piece of proof.

Other evidence emerges when we sit down in the backyard to talk tunes. In 1998 Jesse moved to Flagstaff, and he soon found a community that shared an interest in the past. "I got involved with the [Flagstaff] Friends of Traditional Music," he tells me.

Now an established nonprofit dedicated to the promotion and preservation of traditional American music, Friends was a casual club in its early days. "Back then it was pretty loose," Jesse says. "There were monthly contra dances ... two campouts a year ... concerts. ... It was just kind of an informal thing." Contra dance, sometimes called New England Folk Dance or Appalachian Folk Dance, is a social dance with a heritage going back to 17th-century France, England and Scotland. Like his ammo box house, contra dance has history to boot.

While still hosting contra dances, Flagstaff Friends of Traditional Music has grown and evolved to boast a more extensive catalog of happenings, including the Flagstaff Folk Festival



and Pickin' in the Pines, the annual September bluegrass and acoustic music festival that draws people near and far. When it comes to the folk festival, Jesse has supported the event as either volunteer, organizer or performer "every year, for better or worse," since 2001. Similarly, he's found ways to consistently contribute to Pickin' in the Pines.

Surprisingly, when I ask about the work that people like Jesse put into these events, he reveals, "It's all volunteer."

Justifying his annual voluntary toil, Jesse offers, "It's important for the community to have this tradition. ... Community events that happen periodically help give a place a sense of identity."

Evidently, this sense of community importance is shared, as both the Flagstaff Folk Festival and Pickin' in the Pines have found sustained success that Jesse suggests can be explained by the dedication of the volunteers. "Through several generations of organizers, they've

all been really dedicated to the festival, and they've all really made it a part of themselves."

This year, Jesse will perform at Pickin' on Friday, part of a three-day lineup that also includes the Del McCoury Band, Béla Fleck, The Infamous Stringdusters, Seldom Scene, Jeff Austin Band, Dom Flemons and more.

As a performer, Jesse's instrument of choice is the banjo. After bringing one out of his collection, he wastes no time in telling how the banjo fits into antiquity and tradition.

"There've been books written about it," he says. "Banjo-like instruments were brought over from Africa on slave ships by slaves ... and they were played by them for a long time. They don't have any instruments of that era, but there are a few paintings of them. I think there's a painting of someone playing one on Thomas Jefferson's plantation."

Jesse pauses in brief reflection, then adds, "It's kind of a long and sordid tale. ... At some point white people started playing them, partially because they shared space, and partially because of the minstrel show ... and somewhere in that transition [banjo] necks acquired frets." Around that time, the modern banjo, sometimes called the only true American instrument, was born.

When it comes to banjo music, Jesse is equally learned. He tells me: "There are basically two camps of banjo style—bluegrass three-finger-style and what they call 'old time.'" Both of these styles, Jesse explains, "are regimented in the technique. ... It's essential that you do certain things."

After demonstrating his adeptness at both styles, Jesse jokes, "[For bluegrass] you have to keep your pinky planted on the [banjo] head, and my pinky can't go straight. ... I was born that way so I guess I can't play bluegrass." Then he adds, "And I don't really play old time because I can't grow a beard."

Smiling cheekily, Jesse goes on to admit that he doesn't necessarily hold himself to the strict regiments of traditional banjo playing. "I was always interested in trying to play with anything, in any musical situation I got into." When asked if a loose interpretation of the 'rules' threatens the preservation of traditional music, Jesse smiles and refers to Bob Dylan's address after his infamous use of an electric guitar at

the Newport Folk Festival in 1965.

"You can't kill traditional music," Jesse says. "These songs have been around, some of them since Shakespeare's time, and they can't be slaughtered."

Finishing the thought, he picks up his instrument and chirps, "Here's one!" before launching into a jaunty, almost sarcastic melody. "That one always gets me." He chuckles before adding, "That's a tune called 'Aura Lee,' which was a parlor song in the 1890s. It was also the melody for 'Love Me Tender' by Elvis Presley. ... There's your tradition!"

I take his meaning. Tradition is what we make it. Music borrows often, and like everything else, what folds into the

definition of "traditional music" is subject to change.

For Jesse, sometimes that change could come sooner. Outside of performing at local festivals, Jesse has held a steady gig on the Grand Canyon Railway since 2004. Primarily catering to tourists, the job calls for Jesse to play a tight set of traditional songs affectionately known as "trains songs."

"I'm trying to stay positive!" Jesse strains a laugh. "There's a romanticism about trains. ... I knew and know many train songs." Yet, understandably, he's found that playing the same songs and fielding the same requests for 14 years has its challenges. When it comes to the

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clientele, Jesse finds that “maybe their frame of what a banjo can do is pretty narrow. ... Maybe someone wants to get up and sing a song with you, and you’re like, ‘Okay! Let’s do it.’ ... And maybe they can’t sing.” Shaking his head, he snickers. “It’s a wild ride. ... The key is you’re an entertainer.”

To Jesse, maintaining a professional attitude is just as important, if not more so, than playing the music well. “I really pride myself on that, and I really think people appreciate it more than most musicians realize.”

His code of professionalism is simple. “Show up on time, be cleanly dressed, have your instruments ready and in tune, and roll with the punches. ... I’ve been hired for a lot of gigs where those sorts of things are more important than what you may or may not be playing.”

Now bathed in the steady approach of the golden hour, our conversation relaxes. Jesse absent-mindedly plucks the strings, and evening birds begin to swoop mosquitoes in the cool air. Warmth rises from patio bricks as they return the heat borrowed from midday.

From the festivals to the railroads, Jesse’s degree of involvement had me half expecting that he pursued traditional music following some grand design. However, he describes it with much more humility. “There were certain sounds that I was attracted to, then I gained the ability to perform them. Through people I met and situations I was in ... I kind of ended up on this specific path.”

Personally, I believe Jesse’s connection to traditional music is partially rooted in something as straightforward as an attraction to certain sounds, but I think it goes deeper. Like an ammo box house, traditional music reminds us of our place in history and of our small ability to perceive continuity as time sweeps chaotically into the future.

Jesse says it best when describing the moment he stepped into an organizing role for the Flagstaff Folk Festival. Referring to his position of co-organizer, his words could easily be applied to traditional music in general.

“I took it from someone else, and we handed it off to someone else. And to me, that was the greatest thing—you’re like a link in a chain.” ▲

The 13th annual Pickin’ in the Pines Bluegrass and Acoustic Music Festival runs Sept. 14-16 at Pepsi Amphitheater in Fort Tuthill County Park. For more information and tickets, visit pickininthepines.org.

