

Just This Banjo

By Patrick Costello

For my father.

My hero, my mentor, my father, my partner and most of all my friend.
No son has ever had such a cohort in a jam, on stage or in life.

Special thanks go to my Patreon sponsors for helping me make this book happen. I love you all.

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Here we stand before your door,
As we stood the year before;
Give us whisky, give us gin,
Open the door and let us in.
Or give us something nice and hot.
Like a steaming bowl of pepper pot!

~The Philadelphia Mummers

Birdsong brings relief to my longing
I'm just as ecstatic as they are,
but with nothing to say!
Please universal soul, practice
some song or something through me!

~Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi

Even a fish would stay out of trouble if it kept its mouth shut!

~My father

Introduction

"The Arkansas Traveler" is a very old skit performed by minstrels, medicine show performers and Vaudevillians. The premise is simple. A gentleman from the city stops in front of a dilapidated shack to ask directions from a farmer.

The city fellow asks questions and gets funny responses from the farmer as he plays his banjo.

City Feller: "Hey farmer! You been livin' here all your life?"

Farmer: "Not yet."

After each back and forth, the farmer plays a bit of a tune on his banjo.

City Feller: "Hey farmer! Where does this road go?"

Farmer: "Been livin' here all my life, it ain't gone nowhere yet."

City Feller: "Hey farmer! Thought you said that mud-hole weren't very deep?"

Farmer: "Only comes up to here on my ducks."

City Feller: "Hey farmer! You don't know very much, do you?"

Farmer: "No, but I ain't lost."

Near the end of the skit the city feller gets frustrated.

City Feller: "There isn't much between you and a fool!"

Farmer: "Just this banjo."

I love that last joke. It could very well be the story of my life. I have navigated through life with nothing shielding me from the world but my banjo and guitar.

I started playing the banjo to win a bet, but my dream was to be a guitar player. My first guitar was an instrument I salvaged from the trash and patched together with duct tape. I was not sure how to get started, but then I ran across this quote from Woody Guthrie:

The worst thing that can happen is to cut yourself loose from the people. And the best thing is to sort of vaccinate yourself right into the big streams and blood of the people.

I took my banjo and my crappy guitar out into the streets of Philadelphia. No idea of where to go, no money in my pockets and no goal in mind. Into the streets, out into the night and into the bloodstream of the city. Nothing between me and the world but my instruments.

I met saints and sinners. I made music with and for Mafiosos and the IRA. I have sung for and with the sick, lonely and crazy. I played for millionaires and jammed with a man so poor he did not own matching shoes.

I had no armor or protection. Just this banjo.

That is what this book is about. Simple as that.

