

Missouri Folk Arts Program

Vesta Johnson Award-winning Old-Time Missouri Fiddler

Claire Schmidt*

**Dr. Claire Schmidt recently graduated from MU's Department of English with emphases in Folklore and Medieval Literature. During her graduate school career, she served as both an intern and a research assistant at the Missouri Folk Arts Program. Schmidt was instrumental in compiling information to nominate Vesta Johnson for state and national arts awards.*

Although women are historically rare among old-time Missouri fiddlers, Vesta Johnson is quietly changing the face of traditional Missouri music. During the course of her long life, Mrs. Johnson's rare talent as a musician, combined with her work as a gifted teacher and tradition bearer, has brought her national recognition and made her a vital part of Missouri's living musical heritage. In February 2013, Vesta Johnson, age ninety, received the prestigious Missouri Arts Council's Individual Artist award.

Vesta Johnson learned to play the fiddle in 1929. She was taught by her father, mother, and other respected local fiddlers to play by ear and never used sheet music because, as she said, "what ain't worth remembering ain't worth learning!" In addition to her parents, Mrs. Johnson's sister and daughter are also gifted fiddle players, and her grandson Stephen Hall often backs up her lessons

and performances on the guitar. After getting her start playing at house parties, Mrs. Johnson temporarily laid her fiddle aside when she moved to Kirkwood to raise her three children while holding down a factory job assembling controls for refrigeration and furnace units. Mrs. Johnson returned to the fiddle (and also took up the guitar) in her forties, earning herself a place in the competitive Missouri fiddling community. "I gradually started playing dances more and more. I even played fiddle contests—even the women did not play fiddle contests really—it was always men; the judges were men, too. But I made myself get up and do it. There were some tongues wagging, and looks, too. It wasn't always easy but I saw no reason why women couldn't do it."

American fiddle music, once described as "the devil's music," was considered unseemly for women. In the early twenty-first century, fiddling was an essential element in house parties and taverns and was often associated with drinking, dancing, and fooling around—activities deemed unfit for a respectable woman. Women like Mrs. Johnson had to defy the "tongue wagging" to play in public. As a teacher and mentor, Vesta Johnson has worked to make space for women and men to play at dances, in contests, and in jam sessions.

Since 1989, Mrs. Johnson participated as a master artist in the Missouri's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program in eight partnerships. Her apprentice Megan Green wrote in 2006, "I've learned a lot of tunes from Vesta, but I have much more to learn...She's just a wonderful fiddler and person, too. She knows so many tunes I want to learn, and she also has the history and perspective of many years. She knew and played with a lot of the great fiddlers from Missouri, and she tells me about them, too and what she learned from them throughout the years." Mrs. Johnson has taught countless men and women and children, sometimes for free, and always with kindness and insight. In 2012, Mrs. Johnson's apprentice Terrie Brandt wrote that Vesta Johnson "is a true treasure with



Above: Vesta Johnson posed in 1989 with her grandson and rhythm guitarist, Stephen Hall, an accomplished musician himself and a three-time TAAP master artist. *Photo by Howard Marshall*

Right: Apprentice Terri Brandt, the latest in a long line of Johnson's students, increased her repertoire and perfected her bowing during two consecutive years in the apprenticeship program. Photo by Deborah Bailey

Below: Missouri Arts Council chair Nola Ruth presented Johnson with the 2013 Individual Artist Award in the Capitol Rotunda, after the old-time fiddler briefly and humbly spoke to the audience. Photos by Lloyd Grotjan



an unmatched wealth of experience and a vast repertoire from her family and many other great fiddlers now gone. She is a mentor to me and, as a woman fiddler, a role model, too."

Mrs. Johnson co-founded the Missouri Fiddlers and Country Music Association with her late husband in 1974; this organization preserves and promotes traditional Missouri music by hosting jam sessions on the second Sunday of every month as well as workshops, performances, and festivals. Bill Martin, a friend, pupil, and fellow musician noted, "She brings an infectious rhythm to a dance tune that I have not heard from any other player, live or on record, and it's something I am still trying to get myself after all these years. A lot of us, classically trained or not, could learn 'good time' from Vesta Johnson."

Mrs. Johnson's style and repertoire make her an important tradition bearer, not only for the state of Missouri, but also for the United States. She plays tunes that no one else plays, including *Hoghouse Rag*, which she learned from her uncles, and the *Orvetta Waltz*. During the 1960s and early 1970s, she collected recordings of old fiddlers on cassette and reel-to-reel because she was aware that some fiddling styles and tunes were endangered. She is a featured artist on "Now that's a Good Tune: Masters of Traditional Missouri Fiddling" (re-released 2008 Voyager Records) and "I'm Old But I'm Awfully Tough: Traditional Music of the Ozark Region" (1977 Missouri Friends of the Folk Arts). She has also served as a master teacher at every Bethel Youth Fiddle Camp in Shelby County, Mo., since it was

founded thirty years ago, working with hundreds of children over the years.

The Missouri Folk Arts Program is honored to have worked with Mrs. Johnson to introduce her and her music to larger audiences around the state. Congratulations, Vesta!

Mrs. Johnson was nominated for the Missouri Arts Award by Wendy Brumbaugh, director of the fiddle camp. The Missouri Arts Council has called for nominations for 2013 awardees through August 26, 2013. Guidelines and applications are available at www.artsheroesneeded.com.