

A visit with an old friend

Lee Ann Sours

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I walked through the misty rain of a late February day along a familiar path that led to a small limestone building. This was not my first visit, but the latest of many I had made over the years to this small farm on Buffalo Creek west of Neosho, Missouri. However, today the worn leather handle of my fiddle case was replaced with a woven camera strap, and the guitar tuner I often carry was traded for the little voice recorder I had slipped into my jeans pocket. This was not the typical music visit with my old friend Lee Ann Sours, who is an accomplished old-time fiddler in the Southeast Kansas style, but rather a visit to her quaint art studio on the edge of her property where she has created an extensive portfolio of fiber arts pieces.



Lee Ann Sours works at her loom at her studio in Western Newton County, Missouri

I first met Lee Ann Sours and her late husband Jack roughly 20 years ago. I was a young fiddle and banjo player who had recently enrolled in art school, and happened to bump into the couple while jamming at a folk music festival in Joplin, Mo. At the time, the community of old time musicians in our corner of the state was dwindling and becoming more closely knit. Before long I was a regular guest, joining Jack and Lee Ann on banjo at various community dances, farmers markets, and fall festivals. As a studio artist myself, I would soon learn to appreciate the incredible nature of the work Jack and Lee were producing at their studio not far from my own home.

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Sours was born in Ada, Oklahoma. As a child, her family relocated to a farm south of Pittsburgh, Kansas. “When I was a teen I had 1,700 tomatoes, and lived on a farm,” said Sours. “I had a job working at a bull test station, and loaded hay and worked in the fields. When I got interested in the fiber arts, Jack and I had bought a farm in Missouri and I was interested in some livestock I didn’t necessarily have to kill to produce something,” she said. At the farm in rural Barton County, Jack and Lee Ann raised a herd of over 200 sheep and Angora goats. “In the beginning I wasn’t thinking about being a fiber artist. I was just thinking about farming,” Sours added. “We’d send the mohair fiber down to Texas to a warehouse and sell it to buyers from Italy, Japan, and England.” With a large herd of livestock that supplied the fiber, Sours found herself with excess fiber. “I got a spinning wheel and then I got a loom eventually and one thing led to another,” she said with a grin. Lee Ann’s husband Jack had been a prolific potter and woodworker since the 1970s, so making the transition to a working artist seemed like a good fit for her. “He made



some of my tools that I still use.” Jack, who passed away in 2019 created an incredibly impressive portfolio of pottery, woodworking, and large format stone sculpture. The duo often worked together, with Lee Ann’s textile pieces serving as accents to Jack’s pottery or stone work. While Lee Ann began her journey into fiber arts as an adult, she fondly remembers early influences in her work. “I came from country people that didn’t call themselves artists but they were real practical,” Sours said. “Grandmothers made patchwork quilts and used flour sacks to make dresses for their girls.” Although her own grandmother had a spinning wheel, Sours sought help from fellow weavers in Central Missouri. “Jim and Kitty Smith were weavers up in Arrow Rock, Missouri, and Kitty is who took me through how to set up the loom. It’s a really involved process for the first time” said Sours. After returning home to the farm, Sours had forgotten part of the steps of setting up the loom. After doing some research and experimentation, Sours was ready to begin her own loom work.

Sours is directly involved with the process of creating her work beginning with the care of the animal and continuing through the finished weaving. She creates her own natural dyes from materials grown in her own garden, and washes the fiber with her own homemade lye water from the fireplace. Although she uses antique



equipment and processes, Sours powers her studio with a huge vane of solar panels stretched out along the hill that towers over Buffalo Creek. “I have a solar oven sitting here as part of my equipment too,” she said with a smile. “A lot of times I’ll get something out of the garden, mix it up and put in in the solar oven all afternoon. When I get done weaving, supper is ready.”

Sours admits there is a lot of work behind the scenes when creating a finished piece of loom work. From the beginning, much animal husbandry is involved with her work, from making sure the animals are healthy, to knowing what qualities of certain animals make for the best fiber when sheared. Sours occasionally uses fibers from other local suppliers, including yak and alpaca fiber that is sheared by hand. “Then it needs to be combed,” she said. Combing tidies up the fiber and

helps to remove unwanted debris from the material. From that point she dyes the fiber. “You can dye it in the wool or dye it in the yarn. Lately I’ve been into hand painting it. I can achieve more nature-like elements in it when I hand paint it,” she explains. “This is cherry bark, turmeric, sassafras, indigo, walnut, beets” said Sours, holding a large basket containing fibers she had dyed different colors using materials from her garden. Along with using natural materials as a source for dye, she often looks to nature for inspiration for her patterns. “If you’ve ever seen me standing frozen and staring at tree bark, I’m getting weaving ideas,” Sours said with a laugh. More recently, Sours has created scarf designs to sell at the Neosho National Fish Hatchery, based on the shimmering colors of rainbow trout. Nearly every square inch of the studio space is covered with some sort of natural material that is the basis for a future project inspired by the natural world.



As we continued our discussion we moved about the small studio. The space was



filled with finished weavings, a spinning wheel, three looms, and various baskets and bins filled with raw materials for creating finished pieces. My eyes moved to the back of the studio to a large antique loom, looking almost like a broken down piano. “This one has USVA on it, and I think it is from the Veteran’s Association,” said

Sours. “I got it in Stockton, Missouri. I was watching Ozarks Public television and they had the rehab center for veterans in Springfield, and in the scenes they had this exact loom” she said, commenting on the antique loom from the 1940s. The loom is still functional, and Sours uses it for larger pieces. In other parts of the

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studio, Sours demonstrated a 4 treadle loom along with a larger 8 treadle loom that she uses for more elaborate designs. The design is executed by a choreographed dance operated by the feet on the treadles. As a treadle is pushed, a gap is created in the warp yarns to allow a shuttle to be passed through. This threads a separate weft yarn into the weaving to make the pattern. As different treadles are pushed in a certain order, other warp cords are threaded and the finished pattern comes to life.



When asked about how she decides on a design for a textile piece, Lee Ann produced a notebook of handwritten notes for woven designs, along with a handful of vintage books containing patterns. “There are weavers that always go by an exact recipe for something they’ve seen in a magazine, and so they go buy

those exact yarns and thread up the machine the exact same way, but I like to do my own colors or something different so there is always some of my own in it,” she said.

When asked why people keep coming back to the traditional fiber arts, Sours attributes the attraction to the ways of the past. “People like the idea of a connection with an ancient thing. There is an allure to that and I think it will stay around.” NLM