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Local musician Alan Stowell: man of many talents

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Respected musician Alan Stowell plays fiddle with C.P. Heaton on guitar at Tim and Terry's Music and Cafe on Tuesday night. (Tom McCarthy/Special to The Sun)

It's a typical Tuesday night at Tim & Terry's, an old house-turned-music store that also serves as one of the most eclectic music venues in Gainesville.

"It's the only place in town where you can get mandolin strings until 1 in the morning," says Curtis Cooper, 42, spectator, musician and longtime friend of the multi-talented Alan Stowell, who takes the stage every Tuesday.

"Let's play them blues, Cherrill," commands Stowell. Rambling, syncopated guitar and banjo ensue, captivating the small crowd. "One more thing now!" he exclaims.

There is nothing typical about Stowell. He graced an album by Loudon Wainwright III, collaborated with Maria Muldaur, and played concerts with Don McLean (American Pie). He's played music from New England to Florida, Europe to Tokyo Disneyland.

Stowell has also played with folk icons such as Frank Wakefield, John Herald and Gamble Rogers. He played with Bernie Leadon, a founding Eagles member, back before Leadon was famous around Gainesville in the 1970s and afterward.

In the rear of the purple-painted Tim & Terry's - which does double-duty as a restaurant and triples as a quicki-mart - Stowell strums a mix of bluegrass and folk on the guitar, and makes his fiddle sing, backed by Cherrill "CP" Heaton on banjo.

Heaton first collaborated with Stowell 20 years ago in Gainesville. Now the two are collaborating again. They have been playing Tuesdays at Tim & Terry's for more than a year.

"Alan is the best multi-instrumentalist that you'll find," says Heaton. "He never really bothered to bring his mandolin over here, but he's a super mandolin player. He can't play a lick on the banjo!" Heaton laughs.

Sid Flannery is a bluegrass aficionado who has programmed the Saturday morning bluegrass show at 88.5 WMNF Tampa since 1989.

A UF alumnus who worked in Gainesville in the 1970s, Flannery says he first saw Stowell playing solo at The Bench and Bar (later known as The Canopy) on University Avenue, and at the Great Southern Music Hall (which today is The Venue).

"I was a big fan years ago, yeah," says Flannery.

Flannery describes a strong acoustic music and bluegrass scene in late 1970s Gainesville. A number of acts played around, with names like "The Mildew Brothers," and "Red and Murphy." And of course, there was Stowell.

"The guy's got a great touch on the instrument," said Flannery, "a real touch on the fiddle and guitar, and he's a real soulful singer with lots of stage presence."

Flannery recalls the time a group of bikers came in to The Bench and Bar. "It didn't faze Stowell a bit," he says. "I remember him leaning over the stage close to the bikers and playing 'Amazing Grace' on the fiddle while he sang . . . They liked it very much."

Stowell grew up in Orlando "way before Disney," he says, and found his way into folk music through the 1960s coffeehouse scene. He started off on guitar, but gradually segued into fiddle, which he's been playing for almost 40 years.

"I started playing fiddle tunes on the guitar," says Stowell. "Then I was playing with a fiddler and I kind of got fascinated with the fiddle. I started picking it up and fooling around with it, and it sort of stuck, you know?"

He learned bluegrass by ear, and never took lessons.

"I would slow the record down from 33 to 16. That's the way I'd learn. I'd slow that sucker down and pick it up. I sat by a record player all day and learned what I learned. That's a lot of what I play today, stuff that I learned then," says Stowell.

"Bluegrass is complicated to the point of almost being like classical music," says Cooper.

"Everybody who plays it, plays it by ear," agrees Heaton. "You either have to work it out on your own, or by listening to records, or have somebody like Alan help you."

Stowell plays a variety of acoustic music, including folk and blues, not just bluegrass. He, too, can recall Gainesville's acoustic music heyday.

"Oh, it was a very big time," he remembers, thinking back to venues like the Great Southern Music Hall, The Backstage Bar, and the Beef and Bottle on South 441. He mentioned bluegrass festivals of yore at The Barn near Hatchett Creek. "This used to be a big music town back in the '70s. It was a different time back then."

Stowell split his time from 1967 to 1979 between living up North - in New York, Boston and Saratoga Springs, where there are flourishing bluegrass communities - and living in Florida.

He was first lured to Gainesville in 1975 by childhood friend John Tilton, the longtime Alachua potter. "John and I have known each other since we were 7 years old. Plus there seemed to be a more fertile music scene in Gainesville than Orlando at the time."

After returning to live and play music in Orlando, Stowell says he was again enticed back to Gainesville by Tilton in 2002, and he's been here ever since.

Now he teaches guitar out of his home near P.K. Yonge School. "Teaching is good because I can pass on what I know, you know?" he says. "And it's gratifying. Keeps you off the street," he jokes.

Eli Tragash has been taking lessons for a little over a year with Stowell. The 16-year-old Eastside High student has over a decade of classical training.

"I wasn't really getting much enjoyment out of playing classical music," says Tragash, "and I wanted to explore different genres of the things that I could do with the violin. It's worked out great. I really enjoy it."

Tragash played earlier this year at the Sawgrass Fiddle Contest at Paynes Prairie and says fiddle techniques have helped him learn the basis for guitar.

Monica Cooper, 51, is Curtis Cooper's wife and a longtime friend of Stowell. "He doesn't mind sitting there and figuring out what note is best to complement what you're playing," she says. "Most people won't do that . . . and when he's teaching students he's basically going to do the same thing."

The sister of former Eagles guitarist Bernie Leadon, Monica Cooper first backed Stowell on guitar at 23. More recently, she has played in a band with him. She describes her friend as a "natural teacher" and one of her "absolute favorite people to play with."

Back on stage, Stowell and Heaton play "The Roving Gambler," a Depression-era folk tune. Their covers range from Woody Guthrie and John Pryne, to blues, celtic, and '40s and '50s pop. They move into the next song. "Get your kicks, on Route 66," sings Stowell.

Anthony Grajirena, 23, who has been studying banjo under Heaton's tutelage, describes Tim & Terry's as "a nice place to get used to playing out and in front of other people."

"Sometimes we play here, and a bunch of people come in with instruments," says Stowell, "and we just get off stage and sit around the table and have a nice jam session."

Stowell and Heaton have even played with younger acts that blend indy music and folk, for example at Satchel's Pizza with The Turkey Scratch Ramblers.

"Alan's just one of the big talents in town," says Monica Cooper. "People who have heard him are amazed. Every time he plays he really gets people excited about music."