

Joe Mama

Americana Singer-Songwriter

Story by John Bartus

When the National Council for the Traditional Arts staged the two popular Florida Keys Traditional Music Festivals, Joe Mama was the featured local musician who shared the stage with the nationally known award-winning talent. In addition to being a local resource for a plethora of traditional music, Joe plays guitar, fiddle, and banjo, and writes his own songs that combine influences of folk, country, bluegrass, blues, and early rock and roll – a genre that now has its own name: Americana.

At 71, Joe is in his fifth decade of performing and recording. A veteran of the Great Folk Scare of the 1960s, Joe hung out in the musical Meccas of the East Village and Rochester, New York. Hanging and jamming with people like B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, Freddie Neil, Peter Paul & Mary, Richard Pryor, Flip Wilson, Thelonus Monk, and the range of folk, blues, jazz, and comedic talent in the Village left its mark on Joe. Unfortunately, so did the music business.

Joe was the guitarist and singer in an outfit called the Swamp Root String Band with Molly Stouten, Brian Williams, Steve Slottow, and Sandy Stark. Why these names aren't as well known as those in the preceding paragraph has a whole lot to do with the dark side of the music business. Back in the early 1970s, the Swamp



Joe Mama with his custom Nickless Guitar.

Root String Band was signed to Warner Brothers Records and was on the verge of album releases and major national and international tours. While the band was on the road, their manager got into a squabble with the record company. All of a sudden, tour bookings and record release commitments started to vanish one by one, leaving the Swamp Root String Band high and dry without a deal.

What's a musician to do? Keep playing music, that's what! Joe ended up in the Keys with wife M.J. and kept playing a lot of local establishments, operating a motorcycle shop for a while along the way. He was instrumental in helping attract the organizers and talent for the two Traditional Music Festivals we were fortunate to have, and has released a couple of CDs of his own music over the past few years. The most recent, last year's *Sit A Spell*, features a number of Joe's

compositions that take the listener back to a simpler musical time. Joe plays guitar and banjo, Terry Cassidy plays his inimitable three-finger banjo, Ron Baumann plays harmonica like only he can, and Stu Holman plays lead guitar, bass, and mandolin. The result is a collection of stories and songs described by Stu Holman thusly: "Joe Mama sings songs he has written, songs of the sea, songs about life, women, work, good times and bad. He's the real deal, a treasure of true American music."

John Holum, Chairman of the Board of the National Council for the Traditional Arts, wrote of Joe's music, "When I first heard 'Blue Eyed Boy,' I thought it was a blues standard I'd somehow forgotten. 'Ode to Uncle Joe' sounds like something Bill Monroe might have performed when bluegrass was new. Of course, 'The Cell Phone Song' has to be more recent, but didn't I hear it in Oprah's anti-driving-while-phonin' campaign?"

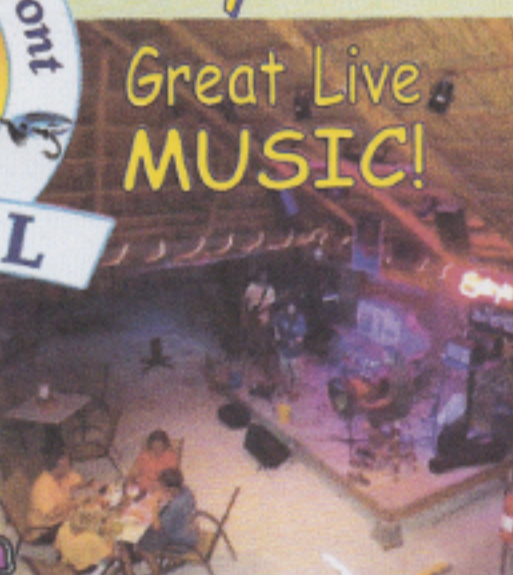
The CD features Joe performing on his custom-built Nickless guitar (crafted by luthier Dean Nickless on Big Pine Key), and also features Joe's take on Terry Cassidy's song, "Henry's Railroad."

So, coming full-circle to 2013, Joe is still going full steam ahead. He just signed a contract with CMG Records in Nashville that might help get Joe's music in front of a wider audience. In the meantime, check out Joe locally each Friday at Burdine's Chiki Tiki, Saturdays at the Bluegreen Hammocks Resort tiki bar, and Tuesdays at Porky's Bayside. While you're there, he would appreciate it if you would pick up a CD... and take your cell phone conversations outside!



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