

Strumming banjos stir Arnie Naiman's soul ahead of concert



By Brock Weir

On a visit to the Mariposa Folk Festival in the 1970s, something 'tweaked' inside Aurora's Arnie Naiman when he was hit by the sounds of Pete Seeger and Michael Cooney.

Seeing how they brought the spirit of the entire audience up on stage with them, it was something he knew he wanted to do, but was at a loss of where to start.

But, \$200 later he had a banjo in hand, picked up Seeger's instruction manual and set about to master the claw hammer.

The following year, he went back to Mariposa. While waiting in line for tickets, he was spied by another musician who challenged him to a jam session. It wasn't quite duelling banjos, but it turned out to be a watershed moment for Mr. Naiman who, at that point, just considered himself a beginner.

'It was my very first jam session and that was a very powerful thing for me. It opened up a lot of doors and I'm still playing with new people and meeting new friends.'

Next Friday, Mr. Naiman will join three of his friends on home turf, performing in The Banjo Special at the Aurora Cultural Centre. Joining him on stage will be Brian Taheny, Chris Coole, and Chris Quinn, all of whom have previously brought their banjos to the Centre.

The group formed The Banjo Special over 14 years ago after Mr. Naiman hit the folk music scene with his wife, Kathy Reid Naiman, a popular children's musician and mainstay at the Aurora Public Library. Aiming to show audiences all the different styles and sounds they could produce with a banjo, they put together the concert.

'We were shocked that the place was just overloaded with people and we decided to do it at least once a year in bigger venues,' Mr. Naiman explains. 'The next year we did two evenings in a row of The Banjo Special. After we noticed how popular it was, we decided to put out a recording.'

Each musician recorded four tracks any way they liked at the Naiman's Aurora-based Merriweather Studio. The CD eventually gained traction in the folk scene, particularly in the United States and here at home on the CBC.

In recent years, he says, he has enjoyed seeing the banjo take on something of a renaissance with the unique sounds of the

instrument popping up in new recordings, sometimes where you wouldn't expect it. He attributes much of this growth to how accessible banjo music has become in venues like YouTube.

Taking to the stage next week, the quartet that is The Banjo Special plan to show of the wide array of sounds one can make from all kinds of banjos, from the standard issue instruments to traditional ones made of gourds.

"We want to show all the nuances that it can have, it can be very strong and fast, or it can be very delicate," he says. "It's a whole new thing for audiences to hear us at The Banjo Special. Having so much variety at the concert makes it a very entertaining evening."

But, perhaps it also harkens back to that fateful day at the Mariposa over 40 years ago.

"There's nothing like hearing the music right up front and it is very powerful," he recalls of that first concert. "There is something that tweaks my soul about the way melodies are formed. Maybe they are a bit bluesy, down to earth, and the music doesn't seem overly contrived like modern music does. I could relate to that music right away, but there is something very soulful about listening to good banjo I clicked into, and maybe it was something inside me."

Naiman, Taheny, Coole and Quinn will perform The Banjo Special on Friday, April 25 at 8 p.m. They will be joined by guests Kathy Reid-Naiman and Leon Taheny. Tickets are \$25 in advance or \$30 on the day of the concert. The event is sponsored by Aurora's Rickard Banjos.