

Singing Daddy's songs: Joyful voice extends legacy

The legacy of Springfield songwriter Johnny Mullins has been secured with the recordings of his songs by hit-making pop-culture icons, but mass media is not the only way his work endures.

Mullins, who died in 2009 after a rich career beginning with the Ozark Jubilee, has another force spreading his songs — simply and directly, ear by ear: his daughter.

Melinda Mullins has been converting her father's massive home audio cache of songs and shows from analog to digital. She has been compiling handout sheets of his tunes in case she runs into someone who wants to learn them.

However, her most effective approach is to simply engage her musical friends by singing his songs in living rooms and around campfires at music festivals. She's making plans to extend her reach by playing more frequently in public.

"To have a real big star do one of Dad's songs would be thrilling, but that's not my focus. It's to just spread the music," she said. "This is what I'm going to leave for the world."

It's a low-key, congenial approach, said her longtime friend Kasey Rausch, a Kansas City-based singer-songwriter who performs frequently in the Ozarks.

"It's a really joyous thing," Rausch said. "When Melinda's sharing songs with me and telling stories about her daddy, I see her light up."

For example, Melinda Mullins related how the musicians of Big Smith decided to record "Forks in the Branch" on the 2004 album "From Hay to Zzzzzz: Hillbilly Songs for Kids."

"It's a silly, fun little song. The reason they recorded it was from me sitting around, pulling out my guitar at a party, and singing this song," she said, then she sang a verse:

Way down yonder in the forks of the branch
The old sow fiddled and the little pig danced
Possum in the gum tree, better get him down
Nickel for his hide when you get him in town

About Johnny Mullins

Growing up in Ridgeley in western Barry County, Mullins taught himself to play guitar and began writing songs at an early age. He started performing in Oregon while working there in the Civilian Conservation Corps.

He moved to Springfield, where he met Porter Wagoner and persuaded him to record “Country’s Comin’,” which was a hit in 1954, the first for both men. It became the theme song for the Ozark Jubilee.

Mullins kept writing songs and, through publisher Si Siman, often placed them with top-shelf singers. Meanwhile, he worked as a janitor for the Springfield school system, mostly at Wilder Elementary.

His songs covered a range of moods, including homespun humor, heartfelt storytelling, love ballads, truck-driving songs and Gospel, Melinda Mullins said.

His two most enduring songs were first recorded by Loretta Lynn — “Success” in 1962 and “Blue Kentucky Girl” in 1965 — and widely thereafter. A few highlights:

- Emmylou Harris’ 1979 recording of “Blue Kentucky Girl” earned Mullins a 1980 Grammy nomination for best country song, and Harris won for best country vocal performance. Wilder Elementary took up a collection so that his wife and daughter could travel with him to the awards show in Los Angeles, Melinda Mullins said.
- Elvis Costello recorded “Success” on his 1981 “Almost Blue” album. Sinéad O’Connor recorded it for her album “Am I Not Your Girl?” and sang it in 1992 on “Saturday Night Live.” It was the show in which she tore up a picture of the pope, which thoroughly deflated Johnny Mullins as he watched the broadcast, his daughter said.

Father and daughter

Melinda Mullins said she sang in shows with her father but never felt the need to learn guitar. A key moment in her development as music curator took place on Father’s Day, 1999, two years after Johnny Mullins was diagnosed with Alzheimers. He gave her his favorite and most precious guitar.

“It was such a bittersweet day because I was so thrilled to have this beautiful old guitar that he had written so many songs on,” she said. “But when he gave it to me, he said, ‘I just don’t think I’m going to be doing this anymore.’ The magnitude of what that meant — it’s a very heartbreaking disease — was really hard.”

Gradually, she began learning the guitar and the songs and began the digital conversion — an ongoing project now a decade old, she said.

Sharing the music

Upon meeting Melinda Mullins about a decade ago, Rausch became a Johnny Mullins fan. She has recorded several of his songs, performs them regularly and has plans for an all-Mullins show.

Rausch said she was especially touched by “It’s Been a Good Day.”

“The story that he told in “It’s Been a Good Day” was almost exactly the same, to the T, as my relationship with my grandfather, right down to being at his bedside when he passed away,” Rausch said.

Recently, Melinda Mullins has been reaching out to like-minded musicians and looking to perform. She and all-around roots musician Bo Brown will be playing a short pre-lunch set on Jan. 25 at the South Side Senior Center, where her mother is very active, she said.

“I’m really motivated now,” Melinda Mullins said. “And I have the means to do it, and we have people doing this type of music.” She mentioned Sugar Thumb and Stag Owens and the Stageroos, among many others, as bands dedicated to reviving old-time country and related music.

“Used to be, it wasn’t cool,” she said.

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