

## Nurturing Musical Roots

**2009 Ralph J. Gleason Award winner Jorma Kaukonen talks about music, teaching, and getting Appalachian kids in touch with their heritage.**

*By Mary Eisenhart*

By the time I got to the [University of Santa Clara](#), in the fall of 1965, [Jorma Kaukonen](#) was already a guitar legend on campus — he'd graduated the previous year, but people were still talking about his playing and trying to emulate his version of "Keep On Truckin', Mama."

Also, his new band, Jefferson Airplane, was picking up quite a following, and would drop by the college for two shows over the next couple of years. By the spring of '67, every aspiring guitar player on campus was spending hours practicing "Embryonic Journey," though probably few knew Kaukonen had developed the piece in Santa Clara's cafeteria.

Years passed and he's been a guitar legend ever since. Jefferson Airplane broke up in 1973 (and was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in March 1996). By 1970, though, Kaukonen and bandmate Jack Casady (who had, in their teenage years, formed a band called The Triumphs in Washington, DC) had spun off [Hot Tuna](#), which tours to this day.



Between tours, Kaukonen and his wife Vanessa operate [Fur Peace Ranch](#) in rural Meigs County, Ohio. It's a place for guitar players of all skill levels to get away from the day-to-day grind and hone their skills. "A friend of mine came up with the name Fur Peace Ranch because it's a 'fur piece' from anywhere, in the local colloquialism," he says, adding with a laugh, "Some people think it's an animal rights thing — not true! Peace seemed like a nice idea also, so we spelled it that way."

The Ranch has evolved a bit since the Kaukonens first saw the possibilities of a beautiful but overgrown rustic property. "My idea of the ranch at the time was a campfire, bales of hay, a bunch of us sitting around in a circle playing guitar," Jorma says. "Vanessa was a civil engineer before we got married, so she was more equipped to deal with the logistics."

Fur Peace now offers comfortable lodgings, healthy gourmet meals, musical fellowship, and intensive workshops with the likes of Kaukonen, Casady, Bill Nershi, Michael Falzarano, Steve Kimock, Chris Hillman and Herb Pedersen.

Most visitors to the Ranch are adults, but younger musicians find their way there also. “We’ve had a couple of kids who came this year that are just unbelievable,” Jorma says. “They’re sort of like old souls channeling something from another place.

“There’s this one kid who’s 14 years old now. This is his second year here. A lot of kids out there can learn to do stuff, and it’s just kind of like, yeah, they’re really playing, but what are they really saying? But this kid really understood the idiom. He’s, like, a blues musician. His family lives somewhere up in New England; his parents aren’t into that kind of music, they don’t have friends who are into it, and there’s no musical community there. He just got it and started to teach himself with instructional videos, and he’s come to the ranch twice. The last time he was here we were playing together and I told his mom, there’s always stuff to learn because you never quit learning, but he’s one of us now. I wanted to give him the secret handshake or something.”

As the recipient of the Rex Foundation’s 2009 [Ralph J. Gleason Award](#), Jorma plans to use the grant to teach Appalachian kids about their musical heritage. Already a number of projects are under way. Vanessa Kaukonen tells us that one of the Ranch’s instructors, Spencer Bohren, will be taking his hour-long documentary concert “[Down the Dirt Road Blues](#)” to a school in Moreland, Kentucky. “The great thing about this approach is that we can reach over 500 kids at one time,” she says.

“‘Down the Dirt Road Blues’ follows the journey of a single song as it travels through America’s history and culture. From its pre-slavery African beginning, the song slowly transforms into Mississippi blues, Memphis dance music, a banjo tune from Appalachia, Hank Williams’ early country music, Muddy Waters’ electric Chicago blues, and finally into folk music and rock ‘n’ roll, with Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones. Spencer’s concurrent narrative gives students a historical context for the changes that drive the music forward.” In addition, Fur Peace is working to help provide music instruction and instruments to students through existing local programs.

“We feel we can do so much more with the grant money if we branch out,” Vanessa explains. “We are currently investigating the funding of music programs locally by awarding grants to local schools, community centers, workshops, and camps outside of the Fur Peace Ranch. This does not mean that we are not taking kids here at the Ranch — we are, but our workshops are approximately \$1,200, which would only allow about nine kids to benefit from the Rex grant. So far, with our current approach, we anticipate reaching over 600 kids directly.”

The Kaukonens promise us updates on their continuing work with the Gleason Award.

Meanwhile, the award also gave me a perfect chance for a long-deferred interview with the campus guitar legend — who, far from giving up rock ‘n’ roll, will be celebrating his 70th birthday in style with Hot Tuna later this year.

“Jack and I have played together for 53 years now,” he laughs, “and when we were in high school, already people were going, ‘Well, you know, you’ve got to have something to fall back on.’ And yes, I did go to school and I actually did get a degree. Like I told Vanessa, I went to college and it didn’t hurt me none.

“People go, what are you going to do when the bubble bursts? I’ve kept in touch with a lot of my friends from school; Jack and I have had the same job longer than anybody we know. Everybody else has reinvented themselves more than once as times have changed, but we’re still doing the same thing we were doing in 1958. How ‘bout that?”

**Rex Foundation:** How did Fur Peace come into being? How did you get into teaching music?

**Jorma Kaukonen:** When I started going to school at Santa Clara in 1962, I needed money. I ran into a friend of mine, Paul Kantner, one of the guys that founded the Airplane; he’d been teaching at the Benner Music Company on Stevens Creek Road. He said, you ought to teach. I’d never really thought about it before, but it sounded like fun.

I started to teach and sort of worked out my own tablature system and all this kind of stuff, and I found that aside from the fact that I got paid better for doing that than for performing, I really liked it. Now Jerry Garcia and all the guys up at Dana Morgan Music in Palo Alto, they’d been teaching for a while. But for all of us, I think, the teaching thing was more of our bread and butter than anything.

So I started out doing it then. Years later, when I left California in ‘84, I moved to New York City for a while, and I got a call from Eddie Simon, Paul Simon’s brother. He wanted me to teach at the New School for Social Research. And I went wow, I’ll be teaching college. Sort of. So I took that gig for two years, and once again I found I really enjoyed it. My teaching style is really anecdotal — I can’t imagine myself being tenured. (laughs)

Every now and then I’d get involved in a workshop or something like that. Well, when Vanessa and I bought the property in Ohio, one of the things we joked about was wow, it would be really great to have a guitar camp.

It’s evolved over the years. In the beginning our classes were a week long, but as time went on we realized that you can’t load people up with that much stuff. If you’re going to do something that intensively it has to be a real school like the Berklee College of Music.



Something else happened along the way also — this is a little bit hard to put into words and it sort of sounds sappy when I say it, but a sort of musical community.

**Rex:** Not sappy at all! We're fans of musical community...

**JK:** I figured you might be. Well, anyway, what happened was, most of our students tend to be adults — mostly men due to the demographic, but not all men. Guys who maybe played guitar in their youth and maybe wanted to play or had some kind of dream — not a fantasy kind of thing, people who really wanted to learn.

Yeah, we have great instructors, and yes, we have great food, and it's clean, and all the things that make a facility work well. But that musical community thing, that was the magical thing, something we couldn't have planned on in a million years. People who keep in touch with each other after they've left, or people who turn their cell phones off when they get here because they're just here to invite their soul and find some measure of serenity.

That's not something you can put in a brochure; like I said, it sounds kind of stupid, but I think you know what I'm talking about. That was magic, you can't plan on that.

So now we have a place where people come — our weekends are from Friday morning to Monday morning, for people of all ages, and they just have a great time.

**Rex:** You seem to have a lot of repeaters.

**JK:** Well, our recidivist rate seems to be about 80%. It's awesome. Especially since we're a disposable-income business, and times are tough out there right now. We're feeling the pinch just like everybody is, but it hasn't endangered us, and people keep coming.

Sometimes they come in spite of this. I had a guy who came earlier this year; he was some sort of attorney from New York, and he just lost his job. We were talking about it and he said, you know, I figured, I just lost my job, what the heck, I'm going to the Ranch anyway. And I said, God bless ya! What a guy!

**Rex:** You'll be using the Rex grant specifically to introduce Appalachian kids to music and teach them how to play. Movies like "Coal Miner's Daughter" give the impression that Appalachian kids spring from the womb playing music, so what's the reality?

**JK:** I'm only really familiar with the part of Appalachia that I live in. It's a sort of a fragile environment because there tends to be not much work.

I do a little bit of work with the kids up at the Tri-County Correctional Institution. It's not like that movie "The Songcatcher" where everybody's up there in the hills playing music. There's a lot of ways for these kids to go wrong; there's a lot of drug and alcohol abuse, all kinds of stuff. It's like anywhere these days, but there's no escape for them.

So it's kind of interesting for a guy like me, who was born in Washington DC but who's loved mountain music almost all my life, to be able to bring this back to kids who might otherwise be listening to music on the radio that I would find unlistenable. Obviously it's not for everybody; we're talking about art here.

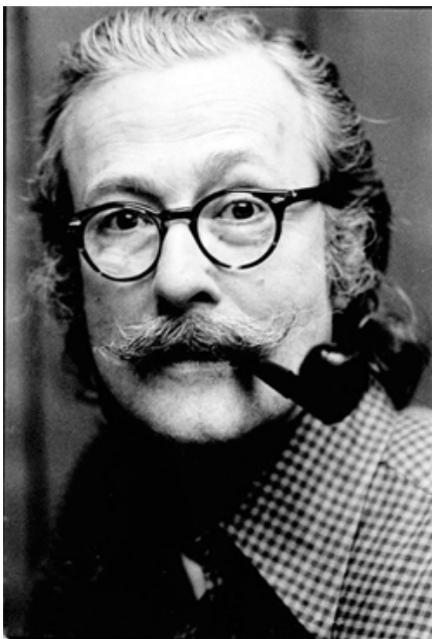
But as we proceed with this project I hope we'll find more of these kids who go "This is my heritage," and really get them excited in it.

**Rex:** What kind of response are you getting with the local kids you've worked with?

**JK:** We had this one kid — this turned out kind of sadly, actually. On some levels he's a success story and in others he's not, because he's not a youth anymore and he's still in jail. But he's one of these guys who learned to play and loved it. It was like he was born to do it. He had other problems in his life and they haven't been addressed yet.

But some of the kids are amazing. You'd like to be able to save everybody, but it doesn't work that way. Some of the kids get set on fire, and the ones that get set on fire by it, I guess the jury's still out because they're still so young, but I think some of them are going to make it.

Vanessa's and my plan is to keep you guys posted on this as it unfolds. I've got to tell you also, you could have knocked me over with a feather when this happened. I'm sort of a regular Joe; I've been in the music business for a long time, but I look on myself pretty much as the guy next door. I am the guy next door to the people who live next to me. They're half a mile away, but you know. It's just a thrill for us to be able to do this. We're honored by the award and I think we can make a difference.



**Rex:** Did you ever have any dealings with Ralph Gleason back in the day?

**JK:** Ralph, what a guy. I remember him walking into the Fillmore. He was such a character. One of the things he did — Jack and I talked about this when I heard about the grant — Ralph was the real deal. Here's a guy that's a bona fide music critic (laughs), whatever that means... He was a real guy. He was a writer, he had a byline. People looked up to him. And when he took us seriously as musicians, it really was an honor.

**Rex:** You talk about the musical community you have at Fur Peace, and there was a musical community back in the Haight also — how do those musical communities reach out into the non-musical community? What are the relationships there and how do they work?

**JK:** I think first of all it starts from mutual respect. My recollection as things started — all of us who play for a living and like to be seen have ego involvement, but in the Haight it wasn't mean-spirited. Everybody really helped everybody else, and there wasn't a lot of this "I'm better than you" kind of stuff.

**Rex:** And there also wasn't a lot of the backstabbing.

**JK:** No, there wasn't. There wasn't at all. I hadn't thought about this before, but to be in San Francisco, to be in the Bay Area in that time was magical, because of that feeling. And as we know that's not a feeling that persisted, really, past the '60s, in my humble opinion. But maybe that's where I got some of the direction that's allowed me and Vanessa to do what it is that we do today.

When I look back at that time, the magicalness of it to me is not the Technicolor of the Haight and the free concerts in the park — that's true, that's part of it — but it's truly that sense of community, which transcended musicians hanging out together. It's really kind of a utopian concept if you think about it, and (laughs) I guess people have tried it and it doesn't seem to work when it expands a lot.

But I live in a small community, and so I live in an area where if you vote on something — for example, we live in an area where there's a lot of unemployment, so levies tend not to pass. But the last time, for the first time in years since I've lived here, we passed a levy raising money for schools. I was amazed. So positive change is possible, and I think that's part of the community you're talking about.

**Rex:** Back in the old days, bands were always playing benefits for the Diggers and the Mime Troupe and all those groups. How has that translated into the modern age?

**JK:** Hm. Well, everything has gotten so much bigger, I guess there are big stars that are always doing benefits for this and that. On the level that I work on, I'm doing a benefit later this year for a recovery/halfway house in Columbus. I'm involved in that; I'm a recovering alcoholic/addict myself, so I like to be able to help out with that whenever we can.

People ask me to do things; sometimes I'm able to do them, sometimes I'm not. But I think it behooves all of us who are blessed like me and my musical buddies, who actually get paid to do this, to be able to plug back in and help out when we can. Like what you guys are doing. I look at it this way, there's a lot of us out there, you and us and all kinds of people, who try in some small way to make a difference. It sounds funny to me to say this because I don't think about it that way a lot, but that's really important to me. I've been so fortunate in my life. I've been able to do what I love to do all my life. It doesn't get any better than that.