

First Thing

ALL THINGS OKLAHOMA

Full Circle

Jana Jae, the queen of country fiddle, hangs her crown in Grove.

By John Wooley

When Jana Jae takes the stage with her new all-female band later this month, where they will play a special gig at the Prairie Song frontier village just east of Dewey, the internationally famed fiddler/violinist will, in a sense, be closing a circle she began as a kid.

"I was 14 when I spent a summer playing with Ann Jones and Her Western Sweethearts – another all-girl band," recalls the ebullient Montana native, who has maintained residences in both Tulsa and Grove for years.

"My first time on the road. It was amazing. We were living in Twin Falls, Idaho, and my stepdaddy was performing in Jackpot, where that all-girl group was playing. They needed a fiddle player, and my mom thought, 'Well, they need *Jana*.'"

She laughs. "I could not believe she wanted me to do that. I was not for it at all in the beginning. She was kicking me out of the house – that's how I felt. But they were a wonderful group. We went from Portland clear through the South and back again, playing all the way, mostly in NCO (noncommissioned officer) clubs. What a marvelous introduction to music as a livelihood."

Even at such a tender age, Jae was an accomplished player, as comfortable with the country fiddle tunes of her grandfather as she was with the classic pieces played by her mother and father, who had met while studying violin at Julliard. Her Idaho home wasn't far from Weiser, where the National Old Time Fiddle Championships were held each year. She would go on to win the female competition there twice in the early '70s.

Her early work with Ann Jones and her success at fiddle competitions – as well as a stint as concertmistress of the Boise Symphony Orchestra – notwithstanding, Jae's real breakthrough came when she joined Buck Owens' band the Buckaroos, appearing all over the world in concerts and before millions of viewers weekly on the *Hee Haw* television show. She and Owens ultimately made their musical partnership a personal one as well, getting married during her tenure as a featured act with the group. While that union did not take, the two remained friends until Owens' 2006 death.

It was after she had gone out on her own as a headlining act that Jae moved to Oklahoma, thanks to the urging of country music



▲ Jae hosts a fiddle camp and music festival in Grove each Labor Day weekend. The event draws hundreds of participants from across the country.

impresario Jim Halsey, whose huge Tulsa-based agency listed her on its talent roster.

“Jim was booking me on the East Coast, all over the place, and I was still living in Burbank, Calif.,” she recalls. “He was trying to get (live-music venue) the Tulsa Opry going at the time, so he said, ‘Well, you ought to move here. We need you on the Tulsa Opry anyway.’”

She lived in Tulsa for years. But then, when it looked as though a widening project for 71st Street was going to take her house, she began looking elsewhere.

“I found this property in Grove, and I thought, ‘Man, this is too big. This is too far away.’ But it was *so* beautiful – right on the lake, and right in nature – that it grabbed my heart,” she says.

“I stood there on the patio and absorbed that view, because I thought, ‘I’ll never live here, but I want to remember this view forever.’”

She called her mother and told her about the place. Her mother responded by asking a curious question: How far is it from Vinita?

“I couldn’t believe it. I barely knew Vinita myself, and she was in *Idaho*,” laughs Jae. “I told her it was about 30 miles away, and she said, ‘Grandmother and Granddaddy used to live there.’”

“Well, Granddaddy was the one who taught me all his fiddle tunes, the *schottische* and the *varsouviana*, the tunes I played that always brought the house down,” she added. “I found out they had courted right where the house was in Grove, on Honey Creek. You talk about coming full circle.”

Needless to say, she bought the place, and she soon assimilated into the community. City leaders made her an honorary Rotarian, and she in turn offered to play five benefit concerts for the town, which went a long way toward funding the construction of a new civic center.

These days, Jae spearheads three music festivals annually in Grove, including the American Heritage Festival, which includes a national old-time fiddling contest, patterned after the Weiser event she won years ago. “Ours is the first week in June, and theirs is the third week in June, so it’s kind of a warm-up for Weiser, which is respected as *the* contest.”

She chuckles. “But I think Weiser is a little worried about us. We’re right in the middle of the country. It could not be a more perfect place.”

She means that it’s a perfect place for a national fiddle contest, of course. But it seems to be a perfect place for Jana Jae as well. 🍀

Know Your IRISH

Sure, you’ve heard of the Luck of the Irish, and have probably claimed that some have possessed it, but did you know that when the phrase originated, it was an insult? A few other phrases with Irish origin have also sneaked into our language repertoire. Find out how they came to be.

KISS THE BLARNEY STONE – The blarney stone is an actual rock that is located on the top of the tower of Blarney Castle in county Cork in Ireland. Kissing the blarney stone is said to bring you the gift of gab. But too much blarney is never a good thing – it can also mean that the metaphorical kisser talks a bunch of nonsense.

POTLUCK – This term meaning a meal with no particular menu, or everyone for himself, was the name the Irish gave to meals in which everyone participating brought a dish to share. The term comes from a time when Irish women would cook dinner together with only one pot so the meal was prepared with whatever ingredients they had that day.

TYING THE KNOT – Of course we know tying the knot is another way of saying that a couple will soon marry. You know, take the plunge, getting hitched, buying the cow, jumping the broom. But “tying the knot” originally referred to the Celtic tradition of handfasting, or tying the hands of an engaged couple together to show their commitment to each other while a marriage contract was agreed upon.

The Perfect Irish Toast

British comedian Eddie Izzard once said that 70 percent of what people react to is how you look; 20 percent is how you sound; and only 10 percent is what you say. Make sure you deliver these traditional Irish toasts with gusto this St. Patrick’s Day.



May the luck of the Irish lead to happiest heights
And the highway you travel be lined with green lights.

May you be in Heaven a half hour
Before the devil knows you’re dead!

May your blessing outnumber
The shamrocks that grow
And may trouble avoid you
Wherever you go