

# Three Generations of Mandolin Players

by Michael Keyes

Artists tend to have long careers, so it is not unheard of to see two generations of professional musicians playing in front of audiences, often in a family band. But three generations of professional mandolin players is unusual, especially when they are the caliber of John Hedgecoth, Red Henry, and Chris Henry.

For the record, John is Red's uncle and Chris is Red's son. John is the mandocellist for the Nashville Mandolin Ensemble (NME), Red is a polymath who produces and plays in his own records, builds mandolin bridges and is a well-known teacher while Chris has been nominated as Mandolin Player of the Year. But the story is much more interesting than that because it includes Bill Monroe, Randy Wood, Steve Gilchrist, Butch Baldassari, George Gruhn and a host of others well known in the mandolin and Bluegrass world.

The center of the entire story is Renee Henry (for Clarene, named after her father), Red's mother and John's sister. Renee does not play an instrument, but she was responsible for encouraging all three in their dreams of becoming professional musicians.

"Renee helped a lot early on when it became obvious both Red and I were going to be professional musicians", said John, "I'd been to Berryville, Virginia in 1967 with Art Aylsworth to see Bill Monroe, Don Reno, Ralph Stanley, Red Smiley and The Osborne Brothers so when I came home and told Renee, she organized everyone for a trip to the 1968 festival. This set a pattern for a number of years to come. Whenever a bluegrass festival was available, we'd all meet there, stay in one motel room Renee had booked, and pick and listen to music all weekend. Renee helped in other ways. She loaned me the money to buy a new Martin HD-28 in 1978 and was Red's banker for important instrument purchases including Randy Wood Nos. 1 and 3."

John Hedgecoth is only a few years older than Red so when he started to play bluegrass music, eventually he drew the attention of his nephew.

"When I was about 13 I converted a Beltone tenor banjo to a 5 string by sticking a fifth string peg into the side of the neck and started playing tunes I seemed to have stored in my mind from listening to all that music. When I was 16, I discovered Mike Johnson who at age 14 had started playing banjo on the Jimmy Strickland Show, one of the Saturday night country music shows on TV. I'd drive across town to his house every chance I got and we'd pick all day, then when I got home I'd call him up and we'd talk about the music all night."

"I discovered Paul Champion in a coffee house in St. Augustine, Florida and he became my biggest influence. He had learned banjo directly from Don Reno and Earl Scruggs. Through him I met Gamble Rogers who taught me about musicianship and stage presence."

"Next year I was a freshman at University of Florida where I discovered 14 year old Bernie Leadon teaching banjo at a music store in Gainesville. His dad had just moved the family from San Diego and was a professor at U of F. Bernie had been in The Scottsville Squirrel Barkers with Chris Hillman and Kenny Wertz, so I got exposed to their music through him. Bernie introduced me to Ray Valla (author of Mel Bay's Deluxe Bluegrass Mandolin Method.) Bob Higginbotham, and Charlie Blake (the first guy I knew who owned a Gibson F-5 mandolin). Bernie, Charlie and I spent countless hours picking apart the Dillard's "Back Porch Bluegrass". That's where I learned to play mandolin. I started playing music with Ray & Hig about that time, and we'd all gather at someone's house for weekend picking parties where we'd play almost non-stop for three days!"

"I began to bring my sister's son, Red Henry, with me to these parties. At first he'd record everything on his reel-to-reel tape machine, then when he was 14 Renee bought him an Epiphone mandolin I found in a Jacksonville music store where I taught banjo lessons. (American Music Store was owned by C.A. Turner, a long time Gibson dealer. He owned a matched pair of Lloyd Loar instruments from 1924-an F-5 mandolin and an H-5 mandola. This was my first exposure to instruments of this quality. It wouldn't be my last.) I recorded a few tunes for Red to learn, and it was no time before he was playing mandolin. I think he had listened to all his recorded tapes of our picking parties and had absorbed the music. Once he had it in his mind, it didn't take long for it to come out his fingers."

It didn't take long for John to realize he was going to be a professional musician. He eventually moved to San Francisco where he worked with Vern and Ray among others. He and his wife-to-be Lynn moved to Hawaii (where they got married) and eventually to Nashville where he worked in various bands with Pat Enright, Mike Compton, Sam Bush, Roy Huskey, Jr., James Bryan and a host of others trying to make a living.

"I went out on the road with Bill Monroe & The Bluegrass Boys in Bill's old Flexible bus, The Bluegrass Special (sometimes known as The Bluegrass Breakdown.) I played with Wilma Lee & Stoney Cooper, Mac Wiseman, Buddy Spicher, and worked the road with Vassar Clements."

In 1978 he started to work for George Gruhn as a repairman, a relationship that would last for decades with John eventually becoming the head of the department.

"I learned a tremendous amount about the old instruments while I was there, and got to work on at least twenty Lloyd Loar-signed mandolins, mandolas, mando-cellos and guitars. In 1980 Steve Gilchrist came in the store with an F-4 copy he had made in Australia. George hired him instantly to work in the repair shop, but Steve had come to learn about the original Lloyd Loar mandolins so he could bring his building up to that level-the ultimate high water mark. Steve worked at Gruhn's for a year, building a dozen or so mandolins, a couple of incredible mandolas, a Loar style L-5 guitar, and a George Gruhn-designed custom arch-top guitar."

"The other great mandolin builder in town was Randy Wood. Randy and George had been partners with Tut Taylor when Tut & Randy decided to open their own place-The Old Time Picking Parlor. Randy began building F-5 copies and converting Gibson A-50 mandolins to A-5s by replacing the short-scale neck with a longer one."

"Sam Bush had one of these and played it for years until he got 'Hoss', his 1937 Gibson F-5."

"In 1991, Butch Baldassari put out the call around Nashville to form a mandolin ensemble. He wanted me to play 2nd mandolin, but as I was working on a 1917 Gibson K-1 mando-cello at the time, I quickly traded George out of it and became the mando-cello player in The Nashville Mandolin Ensemble. We're still going strong after 16 years together. I've played for international mandolin conventions in Italy in 1997 and 1999 with The Nashville Mandolin Trio-Butch, me and Gene Ford "

"I kept in touch with Bill Monroe over the years, played with him quite a few times at The Station Inn, and learned quite a few of his later and perhaps lesser-known tunes. I'd pass these along to Red And Chris, and we recorded one of them on each of the new CDs-'Lockwood' on 'Helton Creek' and 'Farewell to Long Hollow' and on 'Monroe Approved'"

Instruments: Steve Gilchrist mandolin, Gibson Mandocello

"In the mandolin ensemble, I play a Gilchrist 5-C mando-cello Steve built as part of a mandolin quartet in 1994-95. I also use a 1928 Gibson K-1 when I have to fly to shows. My main banjo is a 1935 Gibson TB-3 with a repro 5 string neck by Steve Huber."

Red Henry started his serious bluegrass journey as a freshman in college and by the time he was a second year student at the University of Florida in Gainesville he was deep into the music. He attended weekend long picking parties with Mike Johnson, Bernie Leadon, John and others learning how to play banjo, mandolin and guitar and immersing himself in bluegrass. Renee bought him his first mandolin (an Epiphone A-50) and his good first guitar (a 1956 D-18 that had belonged to a friend, Bob Higginbotham.) He and Mike Johnson formed the Sounds of Bluegrass along with Mike's mother Polly and a friend, Herb Schottland. In 1971 he joined the Air Force as a transport pilot. During this time he obtained his permanent mandolin, Randy Wood #1.

"In March of 1971, while I was in Air Force flight school out in Texas, Mike Johnson wrote me a letter about a mandolin he'd seen for sale at a little festival at Salt Springs. It was the very first mandolin made by well-known instrument builder Randy Wood, and as Mike wrote, 'This is THE mandolin.' Amos Bigham was carrying it around trying to sell it for Bernie Michelle, who owned it.

The price, Mike said, was \$800. I figured that Mike knew just what I was looking for, so I called up Amos Bigham and arranged to buy it." "My mother met Amos at the Lawtey, Florida bluegrass festival in early April and bought the mandolin.

I hadn't had a chance to save up much Air Force pay yet and only had \$350, so I had to borrow most of the money from her."

"A few weeks later, Renee came out to San Antonio for a weekend visit. She carried with her the mandolin on the plane." Randy Wood built this instrument in 1968 well before he had become the well known luthier he is today. When Bill Monroe played it he told Randy that he had to have it but Randy had already promised it to Bernie Michelle. RW#2 went to Roland White but Monroe got RW#3. More on this later. "In the summer of 1973 I was transferred to Charleston, SC, and joined the Low Country Bluegrass Band: George del Porto on banjo, Smokey Joe Ellis on fiddle, Jesse Miller on guitar, and myself on mandolin. We had a good time performing once each week at the Bluegrass Saloon downtown, as well as occasional other paying gigs. By the fall of 1974 I had gotten together with Murphy Hicks, and we were married in October. Murphy, although she hadn't been playing long, played very solid high-energy Scruggs style banjo. By November or so Murphy replaced George, who left the band to concentrate on his urology practice."

"I got out of the Air Force at the end of February. In the early summer Murphy's sister Argen (who later married Mike Johnson) moved in with us and played bass, so we had a compact, flexible 3-piece band with Murphy on banjo and me on guitar. We moved to Florida in the summer of 1975, and began playing local jobs and bluegrass festivals right away."

"We called the band Red and Murphy & Co. and we played bluegrass full time for 11 years, usually keeping a four-or five-piece band together. Three of Murphy's sisters played with us for extended periods- Argen for four years on bass, Laurie for two years on bass, and Nancy for 8 1/2 years on guitar, singing, and songwriting. We performed not only in the local Florida-Georgia area but also as far away as Kansas, Texas, Maine, and Nova Scotia. We just played an awful lot of bluegrass festivals."

Red and Murphy eventually settled in Winchester, Virginia where they set up a successful teaching business, continued to record and produce CDs and had two children, Chris and Casey.

Red is also the inventor of the RH maple bridge which has proven to be a boon to many a mandolin, mandola, mandocello and bouzouki owners ([www.murphymethod.com/redbridge.html](http://www.murphymethod.com/redbridge.html).) The all maple bridge was designed after several years of experimenting and Red guarantees that it will improve the sound of your mandolin or he will give you your money back. To this date he has never had to pay on that promise.

Instruments:RW Mandocello, RW#1, RW#3

"Randy Wood mandolin #1 really taught me to play bluegrass music. It was, and is, a superb instrument; RW#1 mandolin is an outstanding bluegrass instrument, because not only does it have a tone very much like Bill's-- you can "sound like the record" if you want to-- but also, it has a tremendous amount of response and is very versatile. The mandolin really helped and encouraged me to learn Monroe-style bluegrass, because of how powerfully and well it can express Bill's music. But the mandolin is not limited to that and it encourages me to reach out to new ideas whenever I play it, because it has its own musical energy. Also, I can play traditional, classical, or other music on it and it always performs great."

"I played RW#1, and practically no other mandolin, for 30 years and never really needed another mandolin. By then, though, it had had a hard life with three or four neck resets and other major work as well. But then in 2001, Murphy bought Randy Wood #3 out of the Bill Monroe estate sale and surprised me with it for Christmas. It's an excellent instrument and now I usually take it around to play out of the house. In contrast to RW#1 it's in excellent structural condition, and is a very reliable indoor and outdoor performance instrument."

Unlike his father, mother and great uncle, Chris was born into a family of professional musicians. "I had bluegrass programmed into my DNA during gestation then grew up in a musical atmosphere of picking parties, band practices, and festivals. Murphy Method instructional material was osmosed in the day time from the duplicators running. Learned the basics of pickin' from my mother, and Red helped more in later years. We played in a family band for many years."

"Winchester was home to David McLaughlin, Lynn Morris, Marshall Wilborn, Dalton Brill, and other bluegrass folks who influenced me in different ways. I met Bill Monroe at the Grand Old Opry and that made a big impact on me, but I slipped in and out of love with bluegrass, coming around for good around 2000. In 2003, I moved to Nashville and got a job with Dave Peterson and 1946. Then I played with Audie Blaylock. Now I play with Shawn Camp and Verlon Thompson."

"Early on it's hard for me to say how much I was doing it to please/impress/get attention from my parents. It did develop later into a way for me to pay respect to them. I somehow figured that if I was picking good bluegrass, there was no way they could really be that mad at me. When I was focused on learning and writing bluegrass I always knew it was a Kosher activity so to speak. I was always aware of God hanging around the music, and that was highly motivational. Now I pick hardcore grass and traditional country because I've grown into it as a 26 year old. The harmonic possibilities and emotional expressiveness compounded with the tenor of spirituality in this music is highly compelling to me. Plus I love to play fast, and bluegrass approaches tempos and speeds not found in most other genres."

Chris has been on a number of CDs both as a guest artist and as the primary artist. He plays in a band with his sister Casey (banjo) called Casey & Chris and The Two Stringers and on occasion uncle John, Red, Murphy, Casey, Lynn, and Chris will travel together as a band.

As of this writing, Chris was nominated as the International Bluegrass Music Association's Mandolin Player of the Year, an honor that has been bestowed on Sam Bush, and Chris Thile to name a few. He and his sister live in Nashville where they are writing music, playing on recordings and teaching music in addition to their band duties.

Instrument:1981 Randy Wood mandolin

"My mandolin and I both were born in February, 1981. We've been scratched, beaten on, refinished, re-graduated, loved and hated for over two and a half decades. No sign of letting up, matter of fact I find myself more drawn to the mandolin in a very personal way than I ever have been before. It's got a dry, woody, maverick kind of sound that lends itself to huge swells and steady picking. If it had a motto it might be "Lean on Me." It has experienced some dramatic structural situations which have resulted in the bass being attenuated, and overall volume decreased. It was really easy to be really overwhelming before the back was taken off for repair. Since the mandolin no longer had the indomitable nature easily accessible I was inspired to adapt my style and step up a lot of my non-volume-related inside game. I've studied, and continue to study the greatest mandolin pickers, sifting through their ideals and now I feel great satisfaction in learning "my style. I'm learning to try to try as hard as possible without trying."

John, Red and Chris have achieved a lot in their lifetimes with a lot more to go. Family is very important to them and their relationship with each other has made a big difference in how they approach the music and how they reached their respective goals. The combination of talent, opportunity (much of it made by themselves) and a strong family makes them unbeatable.

# Helton Creek

Red Henry

Copyright 2005, Arrandem Music Co., (SESAC)

The musical score for "Helton Creek" by Red Henry is presented in a single system with seven staves. The music is written in a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. The notation includes a variety of rhythmic patterns, such as quarter notes, eighth notes, and sixteenth notes, along with rests and dynamic markings. The first staff begins with a repeat sign. The second staff features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth notes. The third staff continues with similar rhythmic complexity. The fourth staff starts with a forte (f) dynamic marking. The fifth staff includes a piano (p) dynamic marking. The sixth staff concludes with a repeat sign. The seventh staff ends with a final cadence. The overall style is characteristic of traditional bluegrass or folk music.

## Partial Discography

### John Hedgecoth

*Gospel Snake* - The Homestead Act  
*Shinbone Alley All Stars*  
*Nashville Jug Band* - The Nashville Jug Band  
*Plectrasonics* - The Nashville Mandolin Ensemble  
*American Portraits* - The Nashville Mandolin Trio  
*Gifts* - The Nashville Mandolin Ensemble  
*All The Rage* - The Nashville Mandolin Ensemble  
*Bach, Beatles, Bluegrass* - The Nashville Mandolin Ensemble  
*Monroe Approved* - Chris Henry  
*Helton Creek* - Red Henry

### Red Henry

Red and Murphy & Co. recordings on their own label, Arrandem Records P. O. Box 2498, Winchester, VA 2260:

(LP) AR-10, *Riding Around on Saturday Night*, 1977  
(45 single) AR-15, "Grits in the White House"/"Riding Around on Saturday Night", 1978  
(LP) AR-20, *Fast Picks and Hot Licks*, 1978  
(LP) AR-30, *Pall Mall Reds*, 1979  
(LP) AR-40, *My Everyday Silver is Plastic*, 1980  
(LP) AR-50, *I Ain't Domesticated Yet*, 1982  
(LP) AR-60, *Just Remember Where You Could Be*, 1983  
(LP) AR-70, *Reel Time Reel*, 1985  
Tuck Tucker LP *Tucker'd Out*, 1981

### Red and Murphy and Their Excellent Children:

(Cassette) *Granny Don't Dance*, 1993  
(Cassette) *My Dixie Home*, 1994  
Murphy Henry, *M&M Blues*, 1992 (cassette) and 2003 (CD)

### Newer projects:

(CD) Red Henry, *Bluegrass Mandolin and other trouble*, 2000  
(CD) Red and Chris Henry, *Bluegrass and Folk Music*, 2004  
(CD) Red Henry, *Helton Creek*

### Chris Henry

AR110, Murphy Henry, *M&M Blues*, two cuts (one new and one old) of "Leatherjackets"  
AR-120, Red Henry, *Bluegrass Mandolin and other trouble*, guitar or mandolin on three cuts  
AR-1378, Casey Henry, *Real Women Drive Trucks*, lead guitar throughout  
AR-150, Red and Chris, *Bluegrass and Folk Music etc.*, guitar and mandolin  
AR-170, Casey and Chris & the Two-Stringers, *Get Along Girl*, mandolin and vocals  
AR-180 Chris Henry, *Monroe Approved*, mandolin, guitar, and vocals  
AR200, Red Henry, *Helton Creek*, tenor vocals and lead guitar, plus mandolin on 'Rawhide'.

### Resources

<http://www.murphymethod.com/red.html> is the site for some of Red's CDs  
<http://www.murphymethod.com/redbridge.html> is Red's maple bridge site. It is full of information about

his innovative bridges.

<http://www.randywoodguitars.com/> is the site for Randy Wood instruments.

<http://www.soundartrecordings.com/allproducts.shtml> is Butch Baldassari's site. You can find the Nashville Mandolin Ensemble here.

### **About the Author**

**Mike Keyes**, a native of Franklin, Tennessee, has played tenor banjo since 1957 and over the years has learned to play five string banjo, mandolin, and guitar. He earned his way through college and medical school playing in bluegrass and dixieland bands and currently plays in the Irish band "Maggie's Misfortune." He is an expert in sports performance and has written a book and over 200 articles on the subject.

His interest in mandolin started a number of years ago when he played in the Jacksonville band, Sounds of Bluegrass (taking Red Henry's place) and he has played bluegrass and Irish music on the mandolin ever since. He also writes a periodic column about Irish tenor banjo at [www.banjosessions.com](http://www.banjosessions.com) for Mel Bay.

His medical practice is in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin where he practices Psychiatry. You can email him at [mikeyes@charter.net](mailto:mikeyes@charter.net) if you wish to discuss some aspect of this article or go to his web site at [www.mikekeyes.com](http://www.mikekeyes.com).