

Karl Shiflett



Karl Shiflett
By Bob Allen

When Karl Shiflett & Big Country Show commandeered the stage at an American Legion Hall in rural southern Maryland earlier this year, they immediately brought a wave of sunshine into a chilly and sullen April afternoon.

With his doleful countenance and antic stage presence (he bobs and weaves with his bandmates as they share a single mic and sometimes launches into songs with a dramatic high leg kick), Shiflett comes across as a combination of a goodhearted class clown and your favorite uncle.

The first of the band's two sets leaned heavily toward honky-tonk and Western Swing. It included rousing renditions of oldies by Hank Thompson, Porter Wagoner, and Western Swing King Bob Wills. In introducing his reprise of "My Bucket's Got A Hole In It," Shiflett quipped, "This was a big record for us. It took an old Hank Williams song to get us on the bluegrass charts." He was just making the larger point that Big Country Show's music harkens back to a time when there was little or no debate about what's bluegrass and what's not. A time when pace setters like Bill Monroe and Flatt & Scruggs were simply considered "country stars."

During the 1950s and 1960s in central Texas in Limestone County (the birthplace of Bob Wills, to be precise) where Shiflett was raised and still lives, all the local bluegrass musicians were influenced just as much by Bob Wills and Ernest Tubb as they were by Flatt & Scruggs, one of Shiflett's most abiding influences. As Shiflett has noted elsewhere, "I've always referred to our music as country music and not necessarily bluegrass. It's kind of like Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs. That's the way they referred to their music."

Any divisive stylistic distinctions quickly melted away that blustery Sunday afternoon as Shiflett and his superb four-piece band unleashed their talent and charm in that little American Legion Hall. A quarter century into his often challenging career, Shiflett has assembled what is probably his best band lineup ever. And he's finally secured a solid foothold and a following in mainstream bluegrass music.

It was in 1993, after more than a decade as a sideman for various bands, that he formed Big Country Show. In the ensuing years, he weathered numerous personnel changes and at least once had to rebuild the band nearly from scratch. But since the release of 2016's *Sho Nuff Country!* on Patuxent Records, Shiflett and Big Country Show seem to have finally settled in on high ground.

"*Sho Nuff Country!* was, in the opinion of many, the best recording we had ever done," Shiflett says. "For sure, it was our most successful in many years and our biggest boost since our first release on Rebel Records (in 1999)." The album garnered a lot of airplay and saw chart action in the *Roots Music Report*, the Alternative Country Music Charts, and elsewhere. The single "My Bucket's Got A Hole In It" made it into regular rotation on SiriusXM's *Bluegrass Junction* and got daily airplay for nearly a year. By then, Big Country Show—Shiflett on vocals and lead guitar, his son Kris (bass fiddle), Fiddlin' Billy Hurt (vocals and fiddle), Brennen Ernst (vocals, guitar and banjo) Cody Gressett (vocals and mandolin) and Dany Bureau (scrub board)—had evolved into the musical powerhouse it is today.

Along the way, Shiflett has positioned himself in the musical niche he's been pursuing: playing music that's pleasing to both bluegrass fans and to the aficionados of the old-style Texas country sounds on which he cut his teeth. Many of Shiflett's predecessors were backporch-style musicians who migrated from Virginia to Arkansas, then Texas to work in the oilfields. Nearly everyone in his family, going back at least to his great-grandfather, played at least a bit of guitar or fiddle.

Karl was born in Longview, Texas in 1956. When he was still quite young, the family relocated to Limestone County. He first got the itch to pick up an instrument as a boy when he attended a fiddler's contest at the Limestone County Courthouse square for the first time.

"This was the first time I heard Texas-style contest fiddlin' with rhythm guitar accompaniment," he recalls. "It's also where I first saw bluegrass music being played live in a group ensemble with a guitar, banjo, mandolin, fiddle, and upright bass. Although I had seen Lester Flatt & Earl Scruggs on *The Beverly Hillbillies*, it wasn't until I saw and heard the music live and up close that it moved me to want to learn to play. What I saw and heard that day changed my life forever more."

Not long afterward, he saw the movie *Bonnie And Clyde* (1967), featuring Flatt & Scruggs music. "*The Beverly Hillbillies* was also on in about every home in America by then," adds Shiflett, who first started plucking and picking on a rudimentary fiddle he fashioned out of a cigar box. "For me, Flatt & Scruggs stood heads above all other bluegrass groups, and it was their music I patterned my music after. It carried me down a path that has made bluegrass music a lifelong passion for me."

When he was still quite young, he discovered another passion: comedy. At school, he was a self-professed class clown who loved to regale his classmates with skits by David "Stringbean" Akeman that he watched on *Hee Haw!* "I was a skinny kid, so other kids at school started calling me 'Stringbean' and I took advantage of this. Later that same year, I entered a local talent contest

and played a couple of songs and did this bit that Stringbean did about the ‘letter from home.’ That was my first attempt at purposely trying to be an entertainer. I won first place.”

Growing up, Shiflett never missed a chance to see his musical heroes whenever they swung through central Texas. “When I was a teenager I got to see Roy Acuff on a flatbed trailer in the middle of a high-school football field 20 miles up the road,” he vividly remembers. “A year or two later, I got to see Lester Flatt & The Nashville Grass at a high-school auditorium 40 miles up the road. There were only about 20 or 25 folks there, but they put on a show like they were at Carnegie Hall. That left a big impression on me.”

In the early and mid-1970s, he joined his first band, Waco, Texas-based Brazos Grass, which had a weekly spot on AM-radio station KMIL out of Cameron, Texas. After Brazos Grass split, he drifted in and out of other local ensembles, including the Humbert Brothers, Joe Featherston, the Country Travelers, Jackson County, Southern Heritage, and the Coleman Brothers. “I also spent many weekends as a sideman with Bill Grant & Delia Bell from Hugo, Oklahoma.”

During these formative years, he made ends meet with day jobs for the Texas Highway & Parks System and spent a decade or so as a welder’s helper and pipeline inspector for the Lone Star Gas Company. Around 1986, he began working part-time as mandolin and banjo player for the legendary Sullivan Family from Alabama. In the early 1990s, when his wife earned her certification and went to work as a licensed vocational nurse, he was able to leave his day job and work full-time with the Sullivan Family.

“The knowledge I gained about the music business while I was with the Sullivans was invaluable,” says Shiflett, the father of five and grandfather of eight who’s been happily married to his wife, Linda, for 39 years. After two years of a rigorous road schedule and missing his family, he left the Sullivan Family to pursue his life-long dream of heading up his own group.

“At first we went by the name of Karl Shiflett & Big Country. The name ‘Big Country’ to me was perfect, as it let folks know we were from Texas. It’s also the name of a Jimmy Martin banjo instrumental, which let folks know we played bluegrass. But, I also felt that by having the word ‘country’ in the name, it would suggest to folks our repertoire included country music.”

In 1995, the band taped a couple of 30-minute television shows for a local cable station that were titled *The Karl Shiflett & BigCountry Show*. “That had such a ring to it that it soon became our official band name.” There followed several years of hard touring. Meanwhile, Karl was trying to perfect a notion he’d long had—to choreograph his stage show around a single microphone placed at center stage.

“From the beginning, I’d wanted to use one mic like they did in the old days, and everyone told me it couldn’t be done. Then, I saw Doyle Lawson in Canton, Texas around 1994 and he was using a single-mic system. His sound man provided me with the inside information I needed. What makes the single microphone so special is that it’s how bluegrass music was presented when it was originated. And the choreography around the microphone makes for a visually entertaining show.”

By the fall of 1998, when Big Country Show made an appearance at the annual IBMA World Of Bluegrass convention (then held in Louisville, Ky.), they had both their show and their sound down pat. They landed a record deal with Rebel Records.

Their debut release on Rebel, the self-titled *Karl Shiflett & Big Country Show* (1999), stirred up some national attention. “Where The Smoke Goes Up (The Money Goes Down)” written by Monroe Fields made it to number two on the *Bluegrass Unlimited* charts, right below Larry Cordle’s chart-topping “Murder On Music Row.” Shiflett recalls the period from 1999-2003 as “our busiest and most financially lucrative years.”

Although, times got tougher. By June of 2003, a rigorous tour schedule and financial anxieties finally took its toll, and the band broke up. “It was due to stress from being away from our families and not making enough money to live on. I was able to retain two members, my son Kris and Randy Lindley (the original mandolin player who has since departed) and we began the rebuilding process. I didn’t release an album for nine years due to frequent personnel changes. We would start an album, and then someone would quit. I didn’t want to release a CD with someone that was no longer in the band. I probably could have pieced together an album with songs of several different configurations of the band, but I wanted folks to be able to buy a CD of the show they saw on stage.”

During the recording hiatus, Shiflett did have a couple strokes of good luck. For one, Big Country Show became ambassadors for the legendary Bean Blossom Festival in Indiana. “In 2005, our tour bus broke down and Dwight Dillman at Bean Blossom put us in the ‘Bean Blossom Bus’ that Jimmy Martin had used before his passing. We drove the bus for about three years, advertising and telling folks everywhere we went about the festivals at Bean Blossom.

“The other thing that happened around then was a TV show, *The Cumberland Highlanders*, that we were appearing on was picked up by RFD-TV. We had been guests on the show as early as 1999, but this new outlet gave us nationwide coverage. This was big and helped us at a time when we really needed it.” Meanwhile, Shiflett was gradually gathering around him the top-notch pickers that make Big Country Show the juggernaut it is today.

Since 1996, Shiflett’s son Kris has been providing a rock-solid foundation on bass. Dany Bureau (scrub board) joined in 2003. Fiddlin’ Billy Hurt, who plays scorching and soulful mountain-style fiddle and has two albums of his own on Patuxent Music, signed on in 2011. Multi-instrumentalist Brennen Ernst, who plays masterful banjo and acoustic guitar and also has a string of solo releases, came on board in 2013. (On the side, Ernst plays with Hurt in a band called Five Mile Mountain Road. He’s also a first-rate ragtime piano player.) Ernst and Hurt are both fine lead and harmony singers. Newcomer Cody Gressett, who joined this April at age 18, is little less than a prodigy with his fiery Bill Monroe-style mandolin playing and rich Hank Williams-style baritone.

Shiflett says what’s kept him going through thick and thin is the same thing that has always guided and inspired him. “For me, it’s always been about the music. I kinda felt like I have a responsibility to keep it going and pass it down for future generations to do the same. I love the sheer enjoyment it brings me to know we are playing good music and touching people’s hearts.

The camaraderie with band mates and the many friends we've made over the years—that's what it's all about for me.”

This entry was posted on Saturday, September 1st, 2018 at 12:01 am and is filed under [Feature](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.