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Steve Martin gave this banjo prodigy from Northern Virginia a \$50,000 prize

By Eddie Dean

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When Victor Furtado was growing up in the Northern Virginia exurb of Front Royal, he spent his days obsessively practicing his banjo on the porch of his home near the Shenandoah River. Exploring the woods and playing sports was fun, too, but not nearly as fun as figuring out new tunes on his hand-me-down five-string. Home-schooled and the youngest of nine children in a musical family, he realized early on — at church gatherings or the soccer field — how unique his upbringing was.

“Some of the kids played guitar and they’d be hyping their music: ‘Oh yeah! Electric guitar! Pink Floyd, heck yeah!’ ” he recalls. “I’d say, ‘Hey, I play music, too. I play banjo!’ And it would be like, ‘Oh, that’s cool, I guess.’ No enthusiasm. To them, it was not a cool or hip thing at all.”



(Illustration by David Johnson for The Washington Post; illustration based on photos of Steve Martin, left, by Skip Bolen/WireImage/Getty Images and Victor Furtado)

It was no use trying to explain how immersed he was in the old-time music scene, where he was a prodigy sensation. How he'd won top prizes at festival competitions and recorded a CD. How

he'd performed on the hallowed stage of the Grand Ole Opry. How shredding on his five-string felt more like a spiritual calling than a hobby. "My friends thought banjo was dumb, boring music for old people," he says. "They were like, 'We don't want to be hanging out with the old guys at the fire station drinking Pepsi and playing bluegrass. We want to rock out.' "

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Despite the dismissal of his peers, Furtado stayed faithful to the secondhand banjo he'd inherited from his sister Teresa when he was 9. Now, at the ripe old age of 20, his perseverance has paid off. In September, he won the annual Steve Martin Prize for Excellence in Banjo and Bluegrass. For many outside music circles, this may sound like a joke from one of Martin's stand-up routines, but the award is [very real](#), and it is worth \$50,000.

Martin, who has been a banjo enthusiast for most of his life, established the award in 2010, to recognize a performer who has given the judges "a fresh appreciation of this music, either through artistry, composition, innovation or preservation, and is deserving of a wider audience." Besides Martin, the selection board has such luminaries as Béla Fleck and Tony Trischka. Furtado is the youngest (at 19) to be chosen for the prize; previous recipients include Grammy Award winner Rhiannon Giddens.

In recent years, Giddens and others have reclaimed the banjo's rich heritage as a crucial element of African American music. For generations, the instrument carried a stigma because of its association with blackface minstrelsy — and that stigma lingers. Still, while the distinctive twang of the banjo may make some listeners uncomfortable, it is lately enjoying an upsurge in pop culture, where it exudes a positive heartland vibe in alt-rock bands like Judah & the Lion. "The banjo has arcs of acceptance and rejection, and right now its stock is at a high point," says musician and author Stephen Wade, who wrote the liner notes to Furtado's latest CD and is a leading authority on the banjo. "It's being embraced as an authentic cultural symbol of America."

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Furtado has never heard of Judah & the Lion, and his love of the banjo is as natural as breathing. His older siblings had a family band, and the house was filled with homemade music. "As a toddler," he recalls, he would crawl "on the couches, and there were instruments everywhere and I would pluck around on them."

At the age of 8, at the Appalachian String Band Music Festival in Clifftop, W.Va., he heard the archaic yet somehow ageless sound of the clawhammer-style banjo ringing out through the trees. "I liked the warm bounciness of old-time clawhammer," he says. "I knew that's what I wanted to play."

For the next few years, most of his waking hours were spent hunched over his banjo, now upgraded to a top-of-the-line model. His father drove him to festivals, where he began to win top prizes, and he busked for tourists on King Street in Old Town Alexandria, often earning \$100 in

tips in an afternoon. Some YouTube videos his father filmed of Victor's electrifying performances made the rounds. He recorded a CD and was invited to appear at the Opry, where country star Charlie Daniels told him, "Keep on picking, son. You'll go far." (Victor, then 11, had no idea who Daniels was.)

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In 2017, Furtado relocated to Boone, N.C., to join a vibrant old-time scene there. His parents had separated, his siblings had scattered and he wanted to make a go of it as a full-time musician. He soon found himself barely able to pay his rent and working at a Pizza Hut. Help came in the form of fellow musician Eli Wildman, whose family had an old-time string band based in Floyd, Va. The Wildmans invited Furtado to move into a converted shed out back and join the family band.

Around this time, Furtado's talent caught the attention of the Steep Canyon Rangers, Steve Martin's bluegrass band. Their singer, Woody Platt, invited Furtado and the Wildmans to play at their festival in Brevard, N.C., where Furtado had a brief meet-and-greet with Martin, who attended but couldn't perform because of illness. In the meantime, Furtado and Wildman had enrolled at the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston, where they now share an apartment and are in their third semester.

Despite scholarships, it took major loans to cover the tuition, so when Furtado received the \$50,000 award, he was in dire need of funds. "I just sat on the couch for 20 minutes just thinking, 'Whaaat?'" he says. "Then Eli came home, and I said, 'Check this out!'" After a phone call from Martin, he says, the news sunk in.

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Despite his windfall, Furtado still busks with his friends, often outside Fenway Park, where they draw a crowd with their original songs and Furtado's Nechville electric banjo projected at full volume through an amplifier. Furtado says he enjoys the melting pot of cultures at Berklee, where a student's local musical tradition can find a new and appreciative audience. "There's a drummer in my class, and he's from Ghana, and I feel like he grew up in a similar situation that I did," says Furtado. "He grew up around all those African polyrhythms the way I grew up around old-time sounds. It's kind of magical, how there's a story in the music we play."

With a third album — "Dellorto Island," which came out in 2018 on local roots-music label Patuxent Music — under his belt, Furtado remains stubbornly (and happily) cut off from the pop-music world. He wants to pursue a degree in music therapy but is still intent on a performing career as well, in the footsteps of seven of his siblings. He feels a duty to take the communal, grass-roots vibe of old-time music to new places. "There's so much in the clawhammer tradition I still want to explore, but I also want keep that soul and energy of being at a festival," he says. "There's so much history. I think there are things in music and in life that you carry with you, like what your ancestors carried with them. It's a powerful thing, and it's not something to be lost."

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