



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Jonny Mizzone: Now No One Can Complain About Their "Small Hands"

Pete Wernick

It's been an interesting few months lately for the banjo in the media.... A couple of new 5-string stars are burning up the TV waves: One's a 66 year-old "overnight sensation" Hollywood celebrity who's blended his considerable creativity, digital dexterity, and off-the-wall humor into (yet another) new career—as the banjo's Victor Borge, filling concert halls and even holding Paul McCartney's feet to the banjo fire.

The other...is...a 9-year old kid from New Jersey who just happens to be able, after a playing a couple of years, to burn a flawless top-speed version of *Flint Hill Special* (note for note from Earl's recording) while kneeling on his bed surrounded by a stuffed fox and his two talented brothers.

Yes, you've seen the video. People have been emailing it to you, I'm sure, as they have to me. The Mizzone brothers (rhymes with "his own"), better known as the Sleepy Man Banjo Boys, have gone "viral", with 2.8 million YouTube views as of this writing.

When a young guy with very small hands and a casual demeanor (he usually looks at his hands, but he doesn't have to) can play a great banjo tune at about 10 notes per second with solid timing and clear tone...it's bound to get people's attention. So Jonny and Tommy (guitar, 14) and Robbie (fiddle, 12), have made several two-hour drives lately into the big city, and appeared on national TV no less than *four* times this summer.

David Letterman flipped, and two Fox network appearances and a Today Show slot followed. There will be more. The

banjo is being seen and heard played expertly, far and wide. Other kids are bound to be inspired. This has been a long



Jonny Mizzone in the video

time coming. Nothing on this scale has happened since *Dueling Banjos* hit about *forty* years ago. Banjo makers, teachers, and fans, be ready for the tide to rise. Kids in school, watch out, the banjo might just get hip again, you never know!

As your issue of Banjo Newsletter traveled through the mail to you in



Sleepy Man Banjo Boys

late September, the SMBBs as they're called, paid a visit to the IBMA World of Bluegrass in Nashville. I can't report yet what happened, since the magazine went to press before the events. But I have a hunch that it went well. These are nice, pleasant "normal" kids, with a lot of talent. Like many parents, Tom and Cyndi Mizzone realize that the bluegrass world is a safe and wholesome environment for their homeschooled kids. The family of six is having a fun adventure.

As a "banjo journalist" (one of the few with income in six figures, counting the ones to the right of the decimal), I went for the scoop and made contact with the boy wonder, "Sleepy Man" Jonny himself. Nice kid, pretty typical 9-year old without a lot to say, but I did find out that his main banjo heroes are J.D. and Earl, he likes *Sally Goodin*, legos, Tony Rice, and baseball (plays first base), not necessarily in that order.

He's been to "lots" of bluegrass festivals. Playing banjo in front of others is "pretty fun". He opened up to Al Roker on the Today Show, revealing: "It's a really cool instrument. It's really happy sounding." The SMBBs listen to bluegrass in the car on the way to their TV shows, and play license plate games.

Jonny likes playing lead and back-up. He learned from Thom Polinski, who would come to the house to teach, using tab. Jonny plays *Flint Hill Special* the same way every time. but is able to make up solos on his own. He says reading tab is "very easy" and from what he says, it sounds like he can sight read.

Jonny doesn't sing yet, but is a fanatic about tuning, much to Tommy and Robbie's chagrin. He makes them wait while he tunes by ear. And then he earns his nickname by closing his eyes and leaning back as he plays. A guy needs to get his rest!

In case you're one of the few who hasn't seen "the video," this is the most impressive one, taken way back when Jonny was just a lad of eight: <http://devour.com/video/sleepy-man-banjo-boys/>

There are others, *Clinch Mt. Backstep* being a favorite.

There's no big story to how the boys got started in bluegrass. They heard it, they liked it, and started playing instruments with the help of teachers. Playing at church and senior homes helped launch them as performers. YouTube provided inspiration,

with Mr. Scruggs and even yours truly making appearances thanks to the web site that's changing the music world. Jonny picks a Huber TrueTone, recently bought in Nashville.

A few favorite songs: *You Don't Know My Mind*, *Hold Watcha Got*, and *Nine Pound Hammer*.

To fill out the picture that is not exactly an epic yet... Here's their band bio with a few comments I've added:

Nine year-old banjo sensation Jonny Mizzone along with his brothers Robbie (12) on fiddle, and Tommy (14) on guitar, are The Sleepy Man Banjo Boys. Though their combined age is younger than music's Hip-Hop era, it's the 1950s music of Flatt & Scruggs and The Stanley Brothers that inspires them. The Sleepy Man Banjo Boys are the result of faith in God, brotherly love, and a passion for inspiring others with their musical gifts.

Best known for their YouTube bedroom practice videos, with over 2.8 million views within the last few months, this young bluegrass trio has become an overnight sensation—the only such phenomenon in the history of bluegrass music, going back to 1939. Shortly after the videos started going "viral" in early 2011, the phone began to ring. The Ellen DeGeneres Show, Jimmy Kimmel Live, The Tonight Show with Jay Leno were calling, and in summer of 2011 they appeared as musical guests on The Late Show with David Letterman and NBC's Today Show. In July, the boys were contacted by Fox News to appear on the Mike Huckabee show, and the overwhelming response led to an invitation to appear again the following week—the only musical guests to appear on back-to-back episodes in the history of the show.

In June the boys performed with banjo legend J.D. Crowe at a bluegrass festival near their home in western rural New Jersey, and in August the boys were named official Martin Guitar Ambassadors, and made their Grand Ole Opry debut. Their first album, "*America's Music*," recorded at Scott Vestal's studio in Nashville, will appear in September. The group is at the IBMA's World of Bluegrass Fan Fest in Nashville as you read this.

The boys hope to widen the appeal of traditional American string band music to the next generation. The Sleepy Man Banjo Boys invite you to listen and to watch them grow, at sleepymanbanjo.com. They are

starting to write new material and are looking forward to traveling the country and the world to share their gifts.

On that lovely sentiment, let's say goodbye for now to the Sleepy Man Banjo Boys, and look forward to seeing what they'll do next. Thanks guys, for bringing us all a lift in these troubled times!

Visit DrBanjo.com to see the Photo section for recaps of the 1993 Bluegrass Youth All Stars (Thile, Cleveland, Josh Williams, and company) and the 2003 Young American Bluegrass Idols (Jarosz, Hull, Cory Walker, and company) ... and check out the Winter Banjo Camps and many free downloads.

