

Pull up a chair and play for a while: SongFarmers seeking a bygone era

Banjo star Johns to appear on RFD-TV about movement.

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The crowd roared so fiercely he could actually feel the noise — thunderous cheers so loud the shockwaves were slapping his face.

Performing at the Grand Ole Opry all those years ago felt every bit as incredible as Skip Johns imagined it would. Still, there's something special about a family, friends and neighbors enjoying a casual jam session on



FILE

World class banjo player Skip Johns is the local leader of the SongFarmers movement, which seeks to recreate the atmosphere of "front porch" performances of an bygone age.

a country porch, said the internationally renowned banjo-branishing musician from Lake City.

The SongFarmers movement is a revival of the front-porch atmosphere that has faded from modern life, said Johns, who is featured in a new documentary chronicling the growing coalition of musicians and music-lovers.

"Years ago — like on a Friday night — everybody in town would come and gather on the porch, at the general store, in the barn," Johns said. "People

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Pull up a chair and play

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would play. People would listen. People would dance. And people would have a good time. That's what we're bringing back. That's what SongFarmers is about — a sense of community."

"SongFarmers: Building a Front Porch 'round the World" airs Friday on RFD-TV, available through Dish Network and DirecTV. The film is also currently available on YouTube and other streaming services, and any locals who watch it may recognize a lot of familiar faces and places.

There are chapters all over the country, and Johns said two of the most popular ones are the Lake City and Live Oak groups, which he and his wife run.

At the Lake City chapter, which meets from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. the first Saturday of the month at St. James Episcopal Church on Bascom Norris Drive, anywhere from 15 to 22 musicians and up to 200 listeners will show up each time, Johns said.

The Live Oak chapter, which regularly sees about 10 to 15 musicians and 80 to 100 listeners, meets from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. the last Thursday of the month at the Live Oak library on Ohio Avenue.

All genres of music and types of acoustic instruments are welcome, Johns said — some chapters allow electric instruments as well, but not these.

"You're going to hear blues, you're going to hear some jazz," he said. "You're going to hear a lot of old country, you're going to hear Jimmy Buffett. The music genres just kind of blend together."

Anything goes — somebody might bring in a song they've written, or improvise



FILE PHOTOS

Skip Johns strums his guitar as a fellow musician accompanies him on a double bass during a jam session at a SongFarmers gathering last year.

to back another player's tune.

The idea is to give musicians an outlet to perform, share, collaborate and learn from each other.

That kind of environment used to be common before the record industry was born, Johns said — before music became more business than art.

"The reason it went away is money entered the picture," Johns said.

The advent of record players and radios encouraged musicians to try to make a living out of it, Johns said. Music became something to enjoy in private, behind closed doors, he said.

"Families started gathering around the radio instead of gathering on the front porch," he said. "People kind of drifted away because they had other avenues to explore music."

The SongFarmers movement, started by folk singer Michael Johnathon, has been met with a groundswell of support from people all over, Johns said.

"They miss that sense of family, they miss that sense

of gathering and community," Johns said.

Johns readily admits he was one of those who sought fame and fortune.

"I chased money, I chased fame for years — as hard as a human being could do that — but the most gratifying feeling that I've ever had musically is SongFarming," Johns said.

Music is its own language, Johns said, and a lot of people would be talking to themselves without

SongFarmers.

One man who came into a recent meeting had been writing songs for years that he'd never shared with anybody — and that's a common story, Johns said.

"Where else could that man have gone and played that song, and have people appreciate it, and play with him, and encourage him and applaud?" Johns said. "He would have been sitting in his living room had it not been for SongFarmers."



Skip Johns says at the Lake City chapter of SongFarmers, held monthly at St. James Episcopal Church, upwards of 200 people will show up to listen to the 15 to 22 musicians who come to jam