

almost FAMOUS

Meet six Bethesda-area musicians
who have had success
without stardom—and who like it that way

By Virginia Myers / Photos by Patrice Gilbert



John Jennings of Potomac is a stalwart on the local music scene and a frequent name on liner notes for guitar, vocals and songwriting. He gets airplay on indie radio and helped launch Mary Chapin Carpenter's career in the 1980s. But Jennings isn't well known outside of

music circles. He and many other Bethesda-area musicians have the talent to hit it big, but they have chosen to avoid the lifestyle that goes with being a star.

Here are the stories of six talented local musicians.



John Jennings

John Jennings, 55, produced Carpenter's first CD, *Hometown Girl*, and went on to produce and record 11 top-10 singles and two Grammy-award-winning albums with her. He recently produced and played on Carpenter's album *Twelve Songs of Christmas*. A singer-songwriter in his own right, he's also recorded five independent albums; his most recent is *More Noise From Nowhere*, which appeared in January.

Jennings is as much a producer as he is a musician. In addition to Carpenter—whom he dated briefly some 20 years ago—he has produced for John Gorka, BeauSoleil, John McCutcheon,

Robin and Linda Williams, Janis Ian, Catie Curtis, Jen Cass and Bill Morrissey; he's played guitar and sung on recordings by Kathy Mattea, Iris DeMent, George Jones and the Indigo Girls. Jennings was nominated for a Grammy as producer for Record of the Year in 1994 for Carpenter's "He Thinks He'll Keep Her" and has won WAMMY awards from the Washington Area Music Association for producer of the year, best folk/bluegrass instrumentalist, best folk/bluegrass male vocalist, best contemporary folk/Irish instrumentalist, best contemporary folk/Irish male vocalist and video of the year. ▶

So what's his musical style? When pressed, Jennings describes his work as "eclectic. Pretty rocking to pretty minimalist to pretty '30s." He's been compared to Lyle Lovett—who calls him "the consummate artist"—and Richard Thompson. Listen for love songs, political ditties—*I really wanna talk to you, 'cause the last time I looked it was my world too/Before you ruin it for me, I think I need to tell you a thing or three*—catchy tunes, bluesy guitar and danceable beats.

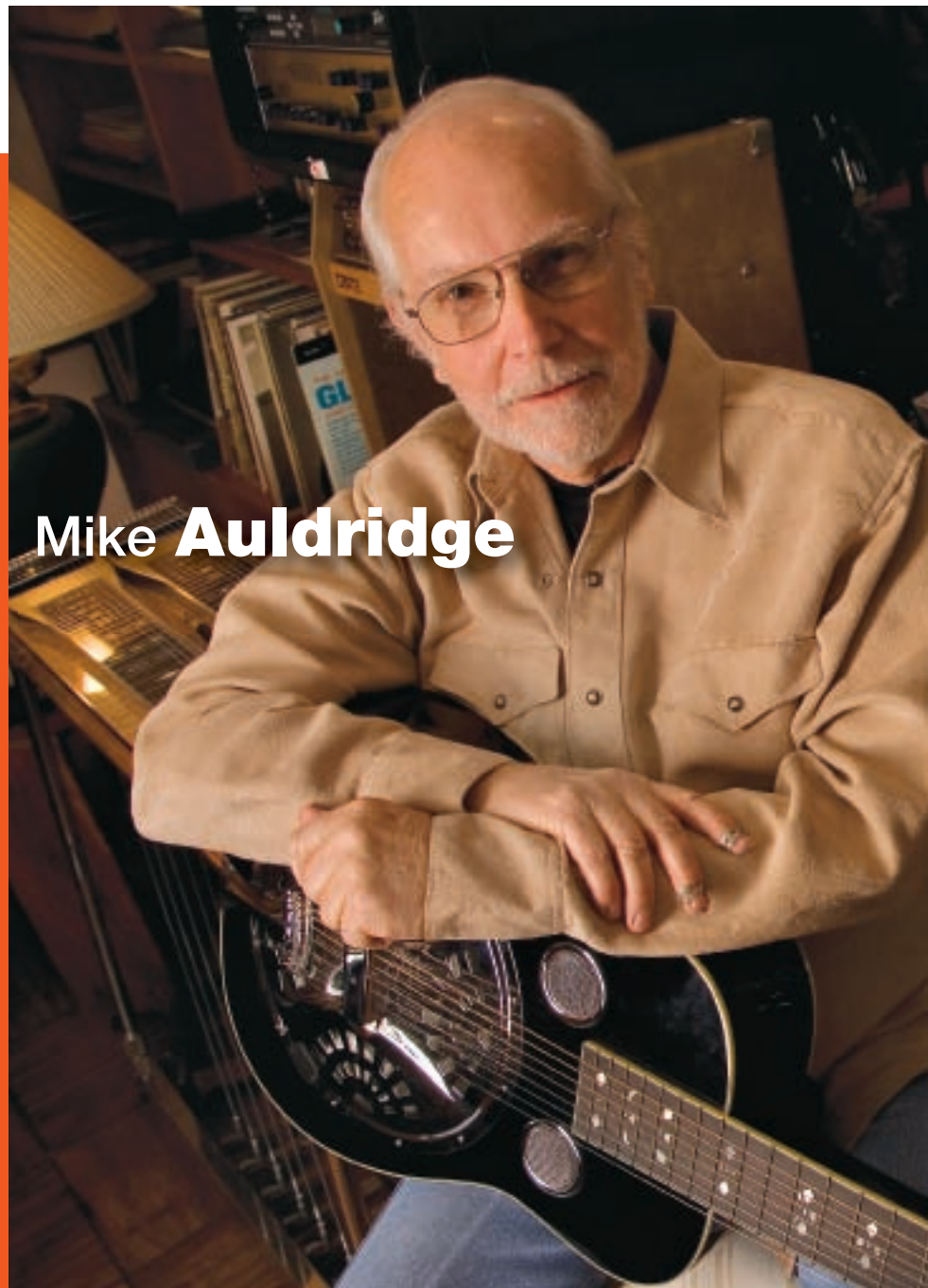
Although he says fame is really not the point—"My solo career is not burning a hole in my psyche"—Jennings does enjoy telling a story from several years ago, when he was traveling in London and someone recognized him on the street. "I'm a little guy from Luray, Virginia," he marvels. "I produce records that have sold millions, I've been nominated for a Grammy and I've been recognized in a foreign city."

It's a long way from his first band, when he would borrow a guitar to play "Secret Agent Man" and "The Sounds of Silence." That was in sixth grade, when he was living in Arlington, Va. Later, as a teenager, he played all over the D.C. area, including in Bethesda. Like so many young musicians, he struggled financially, sleeping on friends' couches for weeks at a time; then, he found salvation in jingles, which he recorded for four or five years. "Being a musician is the only job I've had since 1979," he says.

How did he make it?

"I'm stubborn, and I'm good." Jennings says he's able to "find a way with a song, whether it's mine or someone else's." He's also lucky, he admits. He was fortunate to meet Carpenter in 1982 through Bill Danoff (of the Starland Vocal Band). "We hit it off and started making beautiful music together," he jokes.

Last summer, Jennings, once a Strathmore artist in residence, joined many of his friends on the local music scene at a Joni Mitchell tribute organized at Strathmore. He sang Mitchell's "For Free," about a musician playing on a street corner—a perfect contribution, he says, from a working musician such as himself.



Mike Auldridge

Chances are, if you know what a dobro is, you know Mike Auldridge. If you don't, you might have heard of him from his days with the band the Seldom Scene—or you might have heard his guitar on recordings of Emmylou Harris, Dolly Parton and Linda Ronstadt.

Auldridge, a youthful-looking 70, is a master of what is now known as a resophonic guitar (Gibson guitars copyrighted the name "dobro"). The instrument looks like a standard guitar with

a silver-colored plate under the strings and a hidden cone that amplifies sound—a pre-electrified trick to boost the volume on bluegrass music. A close cousin to the pedal steel guitar, the resophonic guitar is played by sliding a bar up and down the strings while picking with the other hand.

Auldridge learned to play guitar and banjo as a teenager living in Kensington—a place he considered a "real country town" when he moved there from the District at age 7. It was in Kensington



that he discovered the country and bluegrass music of the legendary Hank Williams, Bill Monroe and Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs. “When I first heard it, it just touched my heart,” he says. His uncle, Ellsworth Cousins, was the family hero because he played dobro with Jimmie Rodgers, the first superstar of country music. Auldridge favored the dobro over other instruments. He keeps a framed 1928 photo of his uncle on his studio wall and uses another as his computer screen saver.

Too practical to consider music as a career, Auldridge studied commercial art at the University of Maryland. After graduation, he worked at Souder and Associates, a commercial art firm in Bethesda, once located in the basement of the old Hiser Theater. He later worked at the *Washington Star* until the newspaper stopped publishing in 1981.

But Auldridge never stopped playing, creating a second career with the Seldom Scene—so-named because its members all had day jobs and so were

“seldom seen” on the local music circuit. Auldridge has described those early days as more like a weekly card game than a commercial endeavor. Recalling some of the teasing that went on, even during performances, he says, “It’s been like kids in a tree house. I think this is one of the reasons guys become musicians. You never have to grow up.”

From 1971 to 1976, the Seldom Scene played every Thursday at the Red Fox Inn on Woodmont Avenue in Bethesda, until the Birchmere in Alexandria lured the band members away by tripling their pay.

When Auldridge lost his job at the *Star*, he decided to see if he could make a living with a guitar. With a wife and two small children, it was “scary,” he says, but he’d put aside some money. “When I realized after about six months that I hadn’t dipped into my savings,” he says he thought, “‘I’ll be damned, I’m a musician.’ I was afraid to even hope for that.”

Auldridge, who has lived in Silver Spring for 35 years, now plays with four or five bands, records for top country and bluegrass musicians and travels around the country promoting the resonator guitar designed for him. “I’ve done recordings for 30 years, I have nine or 10 solo projects out and I’ve been on 250 albums of other people. That’s a real nice legacy,” he says. “But the guitar—this is huge to me.” He went through four or five prototypes with Beard Guitars before the instrument was exactly to his liking, and now he calls it “the best guitar in the world.”

Even though Auldridge plays down the Grammy award for a CD that he did with nine other top dobro players, he does recognize his own artistry: “It thrills me to hear the music that can come out of my hands,” he says. But, onstage, he prefers his role as sideman. “I love it if I get applause, but that’s not why I do it,” he says. “I don’t play it for the reward. I play it because I cannot not play it.”

Philippe Varlet



De Danann fueled his interest, and he made a couple of trips to Ireland. Soon, he was playing open mikes and hootenannies—gatherings of musicians who play for themselves and possibly for an audience, which sometimes sings along. When his father, an intelligence official, moved to Washington, Varlet, then in his 20s, joined him and discovered a thriving Irish music scene.

For Varlet, who now lives in Silver Spring, playing is rarely about performing—though he does love a good audience. “Feeling the excitement coming out of the crowds...It feels pretty powerful,” he admits. But stardom has never entered his mind. “What I enjoy most is playing our sessions at Ri Ra,” he says. Every Wednesday and Sunday evening, he gathers with eight to 20 other musicians in a corner of the pub for a freewheeling jam session. Flutes, guitars and bouzoukis, a Greek variation on a guitar that’s been adopted by Irish musicians, are passed around. Varlet, who almost always plays fiddle, generally keeps the beat, though others might start a tune. This is the best jam session in the D.C. area, according to aficionados. Its regulars are known for their technical skill, but beginners are welcome to try to keep up.

Although he prefers a session to “sitting in front of a score and reading the dots on the page,” Varlet has a master’s degree in composition to show that he can do that, too. But it’s the musical tension among the players that Varlet loves, the dynamic nature of the music within the familiar framework of a traditional tune. “A session is a bit chaotic musically,” he says. “But that’s part of it.”

Varlet is one of the most respected fiddle players in Irish music and has added to his reputation by becoming a scholar of the genre. His business, Celtic Grooves, imports traditional music from Ireland. His home studio, where he also gives lessons, has shelves lined with 78s, and he even has the shellac cylinder records that preceded flat, vinyl records, plus a hand-cranked phonograph on which to play them.

For a Frenchman playing Gaelic music in an American bar, Philippe Varlet is as self-assured as any Irishman and for good reason. His friend and fellow musician Tina Eck of Cabin John once called him a “scary fiddle god” because his playing is so precise, and Rob Greenway of Takoma Park, who played with Varlet in the Blackthorn Ceili Band, refers to him as “a mighty force.” Varlet is on call for events at the Irish Embassy and has played for the White House, National Geographic and the Smithsonian. He’s done many festivals and private events and can be heard twice a week at Ri Ra Irish Pub in Bethesda.

Born in Paris, Varlet, 53, came to Irish

music during the folk revival of the 1970s, when people such as Alan Stivell, the father of contemporary Celtic music, put Breton, Scottish and Irish influences together with a rock band sound. Like every other teenager at the time, Varlet says he was “trying to learn a few Bob Dylan songs” on the guitar, but his musical roots were broad: His father favored Dvorak, Liszt and Russian chorales. “I remember being very fond of early music,” says Varlet. When he heard tradition paired with a more modern sensibility, he says, “I just loved the sound.”

During college in France, Varlet joined a band and played guitar, then mandolin. Bands such as Steeleye Span, Planxty and



Jay Summerour

There's nothing quite like the wail of a harmonica to set the mood for some down-home blues. Jay Summerour is a master of the instrument, squeezing out bright, swingy grooves or mournful melodies that carry audiences right back to the summer barbecues and front porches where the music first evolved.

Summerour's trademark Piedmont blues is classic old-time country, and he performs it, singing and playing harmonica, as part of a duo, currently with Michel Baytop on guitar and vocals. For two decades, Summerour, who lives in North Potomac, toured the country with Warner Williams of Takoma Park. Their band, Little Bit A Blues, was considered true to the tradition of established blues duos such as Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. Little Bit A Blues recorded several CDs—including songs such as “Whiskey Headed Woman,” “Black Cat Bone Blues” and “Big Bug in My Beer”—and appeared at blues festivals and concerts such as the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, the Mississippi Valley Blues Festival

and the American Roots 4th of July Festival on the Mall. Summerour continues to play festivals and, with Baytop, recently played in downtown Silver Spring and at last summer's Takoma Park Street Festival.

With just two people onstage, says Summerour, the format makes it easier for audiences to pick out distinct musical voices. “It's more intimate,” he says, yet the duo's sound is rich and full, as Summerour shifts from harmonica to vocals to drums to whistling, and his partner picks the guitar and sings. “I have people say to us, ‘Wow, you sound like a whole band,’” says Summerour. “*We are* a whole band.”

It has not always been duos for Summerour, who played more mainstream music in the 1960s and 1970s. He's opened for Jackson Browne and played with the Starland Vocal Band, the Cambridge Harmonica Orchestra and local favorite Nils Lofgren.

Summerour, who grew up in Rockville, started playing music at age 7, when he took up the trumpet. He switched to

harmonica because it's “easier to carry,” and he naturally gravitated toward the blues, learning from his grandfather Eddie “Smack” Martin, who played harmonica. Just the sound of his teachers' names evokes the blues, and for those familiar with the genre, they are a list of greats: Sonny Terry, James Cotton, Magic Dick of the J. Geils Band. He's also played with and learned from Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown and Junior Wells.

Summerour, 59, remembers playing baseball behind Rockville's Du Drop Inn, a club owned by his great uncle; it is commemorated in an African-American heritage mural outside the Montgomery County Recreation Department. There was also Fisherman's Hall, in the heart

of Rockville at Beale and North Washington streets. The social hall, also known as the Galilean Fisherman's Hall, has a historic marker. His aunt's family owned Johnson's Park in Emory Grove, where there was a dance hall and a ballpark. “That was the big thing for black folks to do, to have a day of games and music,” he says.

It's the music of these days and of the old musicians that Summerour intends to carry on. In addition to playing festivals and concerts and making recordings, he presents blues workshops in grade schools and colleges—filling in the gaps with his day job as a Montgomery County school bus driver. Summerour has had so much contact with the old icons of blues that, he says, “I used to think ‘I gotta be old to play the blues.’” He has let go of that notion. Instead, he feels an obligation—or maybe it's a privilege—to carry the music on, regardless of age. “People [musicians] that are dying off want to leave something, so they'll talk to you,” he says. “Now it seems like it's our turn.”



Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer

They may draw big crowds, but Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer are hardly rock-star material. The middle-aged duo favors rainbow-bright shirts and loose-fitting pants instead of skintight costumes. The concept of “cool” is largely beside the point, as they take to the stage with ukuleles, yodeling, making corny jokes and hula-hooping. It’s just the right approach for their enthusiastic audiences, who wind up participating in the fun. But the musicality that backs up all their high jinks has earned the pair a stellar reputation among folk musicians for their interpretations of traditional tunes, their tight harmonies and their instrumental virtuosity. Still, the women’s biggest fans are small children.

Two-time Grammy winners for the CD *Bon Appetit*, a collection of songs about healthy eating habits, and *cELLABration*, a multi-musician tribute to the “first lady” of children’s music, Ella Jenkins, Fink and

Marxer are fixtures in the children’s music pantheon as well as on the folk scene. In addition to their Grammy wins, the Kensington residents have earned nine Grammy nominations and 40 WAMMY awards; they’ve made more than 30 recordings, played at the White House and performed on stages all over the world—including multiple times at Strathmore.

Marxer, 53, is known as one of the best female guitar players in the country and perhaps the only one who plays Django Reinhardt swing style; Fink, 56, is an award-winning banjo player and a singer with an infectious personality that draws in audiences. Between them, the women play electric and acoustic guitar, five-string banjo, mandolin, steel drums, dulcimer and more. Marxer has even resurrected the old-time cello banjo, a bass version of the conventional instrument, and now has a model designed and named for her. Each has a signature model Martin guitar.

Fink and Marxer, who met at a folk festival in Toronto, have played music together for nearly 30 years. They could cut back on their hectic schedule to enjoy their success, but, instead, they thrive on new projects. Marxer has scored three independent films and is forming a ukulele orchestra, which performed over the summer at Strathmore. Both women have begun playing with local hip-hop artist “Christylez” (Chris) Bacon, whom they met through the Strathmore artist in residence program. For Fink and Marxer, the joy of music is in sharing, and the best concerts are the ones when everyone joins in. “We’re really about kids and families making music together,” says Fink. The duo might slip in a lesson on reading skills (for kids) or social justice (for folkies), but that’s not the point. “The joy and fun of it is primary,” says Fink. **B**

Virginia Myers lives in Takoma Park.