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Television show brings mountain music, landscapes to homebound fans

By Jane Sathe, Features Editor



Martha Hills and Don DePoy, who perform as the duo Me & Martha, are members of America's Old-Time Country Hall of Fame. Their television show is "Mountain Music."

Courtesy of Me & Martha

When the COVID-19 pandemic triggered stay-at-home orders and cascading cancellations, Don DePoy and Martha Hills went from playing 250 dates a year to wondering how they'd reach a particularly loyal audience that already understood plenty about isolation.

The husband-and-wife team behind the musical duo Me & Martha share what they call "Americana rural roots mountain music" everywhere from concert halls to museums to libraries, and "we would go into nursing homes a lot," Hills said. "It was a great opportunity to uplift people. When the COVID hit, we wanted to provide music for the nursing homes."

The duo started mailing DVDs to the nursing homes where they often performed, sharing everything from work songs to classic country tunes to sea shanties and contemporary folk ballads. Then they waited for feedback from the centers' staff members.

"They said, 'Keep them coming, because it's the one bright spot,'" Hills said.

The duo soon decided to meet the demand with a television show.

"Mountain Music," which airs at 10 a.m. Sundays on Charlottesville station WVAW ABC 16 and at 8 a.m. Sundays on WHSV-TV in the Shenandoah Valley, offers viewers half an hour of musical performances and glimpses of Virginia scenery that many fans may be missing these days while the pandemic keeps them close to home.

“I tell people, ‘If you like bluegrass and old-time country music, you’ll like this show,’” said DePoy, who also serves as executive producer.

The first task for DePoy and Hills, who live in the Village of West View in Swoope, was finding the right space to tape their new show.

“We didn’t have a studio,” Hills said. “We live right next to a church, but then the church was sold.

“We called the Frontier Culture Museum in Staunton, and they welcomed us with open arms.”

In addition to the music, “Mountain Music” offers footage of picturesque Virginia landscapes that many viewers have missed during months of limited travel during the pandemic.

“It’s a little bit educational, but it’s also fun, and it’s a place to learn more about the area,” Hills said. “There’s an element of being able to see the sights we ordinarily would see during the drive back and forth to church. Those familiar things bring comfort to people who are stuck at home.”

The audience for the genre is a devoted one. DePoy said that the couple was pleasantly surprised to be recognized during a performance in a remote area of Grundy; audience members recalled Me & Martha from a long-ago performance in a television segment on “Virginia Farming.”

The importance of the educational aspect led the couple to found the nonprofit Shenandoah Music Trail.

DePoy, who teaches bluegrass instruments at Eastern Mennonite University, has a doctorate in American music and popular culture and a master’s degree in education; Hills, a certified MusikGarten teacher, brings 15 years of experience as an early childhood educator in public and private school settings.

The mountain music they love, however, stays at the heart of it all.

DePoy, a fifth-generation musician, first took the stage as an 8-year-old with his father’s band; his mother was the bass player in a family band for half a century. Ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax recorded performances by DePoy’s family and friends in 1940 for the Library of Congress’ Archive of American Folk Song.

“The roots run deep,” said Hills.

Hills plays bass, “and Don plays everything else,” she said, listing DePoy’s contributions on guitar, five-string banjo, dobro, autoharp and mountain dulcimer.

Her husband plays “everything but fiddle,” she said. “We’re a party waiting to happen.”

She came to the party a little later than her husband did.

“I’d never heard bluegrass music, except for the ‘Beverly Hillbillies’ theme,” Hills said.

Once she fell in love with bluegrass, Hills quickly made up for lost time. In 2000, she heard DePoy perform in a band in Belfast, Maine — and felt her life change in a matter of measures. She started learning bass fiddle in 2001. They started performing music together in 2003, soon adding stories and history to their performances.

“I said, ‘I have to have bluegrass in my life,’” she said. “He’s my soulmate, and we enjoy making people happy.”

Over the television show’s 28 episodes, the duo has welcomed a growing company of fellow musicians from the Shenandoah Valley music scene.

Malia Furtado teaches fiddle and violin at The Front Porch. Edd Michael of Port Republic is both a classically trained pianist and a fiddler who has judged many fiddle contests. Bob Driver and Trudy Cole of Staunton perform 1920s and ‘30s blues and jazz. Guest bands have included Bob Prilla and Big Hillbilly Bluegrass, Mark Patterson and Midnight Special, Hats in the Creek, Andrew Carter and Gypsy Hill Ramblers, Just One More, and Spencer and Connor Hatcher.

Another small-screen performance will bring the “Mountain Music” team to a Charlottesville-area online fundraiser.

Me & Martha will be among the performers in the 23-Hour Time Machine Marathon from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Feb. 12; it’s a benefit for the Thomas Jefferson Community Land Trust. Also performing will be John D’earth, Bill Adams, Tanya Manwill & John Paul Owen, Charlottesville Municipal Band, Forrest Swope & Jeff Romano, and Pinstripe 45s.

The event also will include visual artists, including Janice Arone, Susannah Wagner Merritt, Mariah Johnson and Keith Ramsey, plus culinary artists Matt Rhodie of Carpe Donut and Eddie Keomahathai of Thai 99 II. Details about the event, which will raise funds to promote affordable home ownership options in Albemarle County, can be found online at tjclt.org.



Don DePoy and Martha Hills perform as Me & Martha. In addition to guitar, five-string banjo and dobro, DePoy adds autoharp, mountain dulcimer and other traditional instruments to the mix the couple calls "Americans rural roots mountain music."

Courtesy of Me & Martha

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