

An Interview with Joseph Decosimo

Originally Published in Kitchen Music, November 2022



Joseph Decosimo plays a music rooted in relationship.

“Relationships to recorded sound, relationships between the present and past, relationships between black and white people, relationships that shape the contemporary oldtime scenes. I am perpetually trying to make sense of the relationships I’ve had with older musicians who have shared their art and time with me.”

Joseph has spent most of his life immersed in the traditional music of Appalachia and the American South, studying with fiddle and banjo masters such as Clyde Davenport and Charlie Acuff, while also winning national banjo and fiddle contests and teaching at esteemed camps and festivals. He is a well-known figure in the American oldtime fiddle community, while also contributing fiddle and banjo to recordings by fellow Durhamites Hiss Golden Messenger, Jake Xerxes Fussell, and Wye Oak, among others.

“The shape of my life is very different from these musicians I studied with, and I’ve had opportunities that just didn’t exist for them. There’s this sense of trying to understand how am I responsible to their music—how do I do right by them and their art, but also how do I make music that feels right for me?”

Joseph’s most recent record, *While You Were Slumbering* (Sleepy Cat Records), feels like a contemplation of that very question. Grounded in a repertoire of traditional ballads and regional banjo and fiddle tunes, *While You Were Slumbering* is also an imaginative exploration of sound and structure.

“I’m wary of using the label of experimental because I think all music is experimental in some way. That label can exoticize the music in a way that treats the processes of music-making as precious in ways that they aren’t. I just wanted to let these instruments sound how I’ve heard them sound in recordings, but also explore different aspects of textures, phrasing, and pacing.”

“The main thing I wanted to do was make some beautiful music.”

Joseph is supported by musical heavyweights on the record, including living legend Alice Gerrard; improviser, fiddler, and pump organist Cleek Schrey; fiddler Stephanie Coleman; Matthew and Joe O’Connell of Elephant Micah; and Alec Spiegelman (who lends some delightful bass clarinet to the Marcus Martin fiddle tune “Possum up a Gum Stump.”)

“I’ve been working on this project since 2018 or 2019 alongside my friend Cleek, just seeing where things might take us and what we can make, not really knowing what they would become. It became this batch of material that had a certain feel. It can read as traditional to some people, and read as very much not that to others. The main thing I wanted to do was make some beautiful music.”

Pump organ is an unexpected, but welcome constant throughout the record. Cleek Schrey plays an Estey organ that Joseph says spent years in an ashram in New York. Although pump organ can be found on numerous fiddle recordings, showing up in a back-up role on the Midwest fiddle recordings of R.P. Christeson and recordings of Roscoe and Leone Parrish in Virginia, the instrument typically follows a structured progression.

“Cleek developed a new way of playing an organ with this music. Oldtime often has certain chord patterns, and on this record, we wanted to one) make music without guitars, and two) make music that is less bound up in chord progressions. One of the things that inspired Cleek was the sustained way that Irish pipers use the regulators in Irish trad music. So, Cleek experimented with changing chords or drones in irregular places and using less boxy chordal or drone accompaniment that folks are not accustomed to hearing. It gives the fiddle a different space.”

“These ballads were too good to not try to do something with them.”

Most of the record’s repertoire comes from the Cumberland Plateau along the Tennessee and Kentucky line. Joseph, who has lived in Durham, North Carolina for 13 years, grew up near Chattanooga, Tennessee.

“Something that I can’t seem to shake is that I’m perpetually obsessed with the music that comes from the region where I grew up. I can’t seem to avoid going back to it.”

One such fascination is with the music of the Hicks family, most notably Dee Hicks, who Joseph writes in the liner notes, “maintained one of the largest and most significant repertoires of ballads documented in the US in the last century—around 400 songs, 200 of which came from his family.”

Joseph first became acquainted with the Hicks family via folklorist, conservationist, and state park manager [Bobby Fulcher](#), whom Joseph worked for building trails and doing folklore fieldwork. Bobby documented a number of the region’s artists in the 1970s and 80s, including the Hicks family.

“Bobby received an NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] award in 2019, and he invited me and Daniel Hicks to perform at the award ceremony. While I was in Washington D.C., I went to the Library of Congress and visited The American Folklife Center with Dan Hicks and his family. I was there as Dan listened to his family’s music, mouthing along to the ballads. I got obsessed with their family’s music from that point on. In a way, this record developed out of that obsession. I don’t think of myself as a singer, but these ballads were too good to not try to do something with them.”

Joseph says the ballads on the record presented a multitude of challenges.

“I’ve always known that singing is hard. There is this act of finding where your voice sits. The material on the record covers a lot of ground in terms of range, at least for me. Dee Hicks had this gravelly rich low voice. He was not a loud singer, but he sang with conviction and made these pretty big jumps in pitch with incredible ease.”

“When we hear a tune, we hear a person bringing their creativity to bear on a musical idea.”

In addition to the technical challenges of the ballads, Joseph says there was a certain intimidation from a symbolic standpoint. “Ballads have become this sacred thing in how they are presented in the contemporary moment. Historically, the idea of the ballad singer occupies a totally different space in the academic world. Ballads were deemed as worthy of academic study much earlier than instrumental tunes. Ballads are certainly special, but any of this music can be special if we can hear it for what it is.”

Fiddle tunes are equally as valuable, adds Joseph. “They are ideas. When we hear a tune, we hear a person bringing their creativity to bear on a musical idea.”

“I think that the work of interpreting traditional music is a very different project than the work of composing your own pieces. In the interpretive mode, you’re working to connect with a feeling someone else had in a very different context. You’re working to find that feeling and then become a conduit to fresh, meaningful experiences of it.”

He brings up [Virgil Anderson’s version](#) of “Trouble.”

“You can hear that there’s definitely something to it—but I really had to live with it. It takes being patient enough with a song. Once you invest a certain amount of time, imagination, and energy into a song, you start to connect with it in a profound way.”

In the liner notes, Joseph writes that he started singing “Trouble” in the early days of the pandemic. “I was sitting on the porch singing it one drizzly pandemic summer night and the words hit me so hard that my voice just crumbled.”

“A world of being in your own body and mapping it to another.”

Joseph adds that contrary to what some may perceive, there’s a lot of creativity involved when engaging with traditional music.

“There is an element of something like a rote exercise of repeating something that’s been done, but there is so much more to it. There’s a world of imagination and creativity. A world of being in your own body and mapping it to another. No matter what you do, your body is a different body. That inherently makes the music different: one arm doesn’t play like another arm. You have this awareness and relationship with imagined bodies of people making the music you’re hearing. There’s so much imagination that comes into play.”

Regardless of a listener’s familiarity with traditional music, Joseph hopes *While You Were Slumbering* sparks those feelings of connection, embodiment, and imagination.

“One of the things I’ve come to understand, what attracts me to folklore, is this recognition of the unexpected power and beauty in everyday forms of creativity. When given the chance, these things can resonate with people and transcend time and the contexts in which they first existed. I want these pieces to hit with a certain immediacy. They do for me, and that’s enough.”

Purchase *While You Were Sleeping* on [Joseph Decosimo’s Bandcamp](#).