



Michiganite Andy Baker Headlines March 23 CFMS' Concert Series Event

INTERVIEW BY BILL COHEN

Andy Baker, singer/songwriter and yes, veterinarian, believes that music is magical with the power to bind us all together. His performances are thought-provoking and humorous. Andy will perform at **8pm on March 23** at the Columbus Mennonite Church, 35 Oakland Park Avenue as part of the Americana/Folk Concert Series.

Bill Cohen: After 70 years of listening to folk music and singer/songwriters, I often think to myself: "Well, every topic and theme has already been written about and created quite brilliantly. There's nothing left." And then someone like you comes along and proves that's not true. For example, you astound and move audiences with your song about a pilot who helps change people's lives by sky-writing messages like "marry me" or "I'm sorry." Where did you get the inspiration to write that one?

Andy Baker: Well thank you! Bill, you've voiced a CONSTANT anxiety for most songwriters. . . that ALL the songs have been

[See Andy Baker, pg 4.](#)

*Writing music is a wondrous, mysterious,
magical, spiritual act.*

-Andy Baker

A Different Strummer Newsletter Highlights

ANDY BAKER - MARCH
23 PERFORMER
INTERVIEW PG 1

MEET NEW CFMS BOARD
MEMBER JON LEVY PG 2

ENJOY THE FESTIVAL MORE
BY VOLUNTEERING PG 6

SAVE THE DATE &
WELCOME NEW
MEMBERS PG 7



Meet New CFMS Board Member, Jon Levy

BY PETE INSABELLA



Interviewer's note: Jon Levy first discovered the ukulele in 2018 while on vacation in Maui and immediately fell in love with the instrument. He describes his discovery of the ukulele as "a life-changing experience." After spending several years taking lessons and workshops, he started attending local ukulele and folk jams, and ukulele festivals in various states. He also studied under ukulele masters such as [Del Rey](#), [Jim D'Ville](#), and [Peter Luongo](#) to further develop his skills with the instrument. Jon now makes it his mission to spread the joy of the ukulele wherever he can!

Jon Levy currently serves as president of the [Buckeye Ukulele Society](#). He is a new board member and recently appointed Media and Publicity Chair for the Columbus Folk Music Society, and will be managing one of the performance stages at the 2024 Central Ohio Folk Festival.

Pete Insabella: How did you first hear about the Columbus Folk Music Society?

Jon Levy: A friend of mine told me about CFMS a few years ago. I became a member and got on the CFMS mailing list but didn't do anything with it. Then in September 2022

I showed up with my ukulele at an outdoor jam in downtown Worthington. It was a little overwhelming, to be honest, as I'm not very good at playing by ear. But everyone there was VERY welcoming and helped me along. I remember meeting Linda McDonald, Hugh and Ruth Ann Farthing, Steven Ing, and a few others at that jam.

Then in January 2023, I showed up at the Whetstone Recreation Center Saturday morning jam. Again, it was a little overwhelming. But then partway through, Dan Clarke offered to take us newbies into a separate room for a slower paced jam, and magic happened! I've been a part of that group ever since.

Pete: Are you from the Columbus area? If not, where are you from?

Jon: I grew up in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. The high school I went to, Cleveland Heights High, is where Kansas City Chiefs tight end and Taylor Swift's boyfriend Travis Kelce graduated from! I moved to Columbus in 1980 to go to THE Ohio State University and have lived here ever since. My wife Marcia is also from Columbus.

Pete: Are you currently working? Retired? What sort of work did you/do you do in your day job?

Jon: I like to say that I left my job for a ukulele! I retired early at the end of 2023 so that I can pursue my musical and music-adjacent interests full time. I managed a team of technical experts,

helping US Federal Government clients achieve their missions with the help of our software. I began working for IBM right out of college – 38 years!

Pete: What would you like to see happen with CFMS' Media and Publicity Committee?

Jon: I like to think that my superpower is getting people organized, and that's what I am hoping to do with the new Media and Publicity Committee. There are several people already doing great work on media and publicity. I hope to put some structure around it and get more people involved to lessen the workload on any one individual. I also want to think through how we can reach out to younger, more diverse participants, and start leveraging the social platforms that younger audiences use such as Instagram and TikTok.

Pete: How'd you get interested in folk music? Do you have any favorite folk artists or groups?

Jon: I have always been interested in a wide variety of music, such as rock (especially psychedelic rock), New Wave, Reggae, Ska, Bluegrass, Folk, and many other genres. I was a DJ in college at OSU's now-defunct progressive music station, WOSR. Before COVID, I took Gary Puckett's "Turtle Jam" class several times, which really reinforced my love of folk, bluegrass and old time music. Lately I've been listening a lot to The Dead South, Christy Moore, The Highwomen, and Greensky Bluegrass. I've always been a big fan of bands/musicians such as CSN/CSNY, Gordon Lightfoot, Richard Thompson, Cat Stevens, and The Pogues.

Pete: What have you noticed about the level of musicianship at the Whetstone Saturday class?

Jon: I love the Saturday morning class at Whetstone, and its recent offshoot at the Gillie Rec Center. Dan Clarke does such a good job of making people feel welcome at these jams no matter their experience level. We get a good mix of musicianship at these jams, from very experienced players to near-beginners.

Pete: How'd you get interested in playing folk music? What instruments do you play?

Jon: Gary Puckett's Turtle Jam is what got me playing Folk, Bluegrass and old time music – which I love playing. The Whetstone Saturday morning class and some of its offshoots like the Gillie Rec Center jam have only reinforced this. The ukulele is my only instrument so far, and I am a late bloomer, having only taken up the instrument in 2018. Eventually I'd like to dabble with mountain dulcimer, mandolin, and/or harmonica. At the Whetstone and Gillie jams I play a resonator ukulele so I can be heard among the banjos and other louder instruments.

Pete: What are your impressions of the people you've met so far in the Folk Music community?

Jon: One word: Welcoming! Everyone I've met so far in the folk music community has been so welcoming to me, and they are that way with everyone new who shows up. Having recently retired to pursue my musical and music-adjacent interests, I look to many of the people I've met as role models and mentors on how to thrive in "retirement".

Andy Baker, from pg 1

written, that it's ALL been said, that there are NO new ideas. But the fact of the matter is, our seemingly ordinary lives are complex and rich and ever changing. And so are the lives around us, from our crazy neighbors to our dysfunctional families to the world stage. It just takes a watchful eye and a bit of attention to capture those stories. (I know, I made it sound easy. . . it's not!) "Skywriter" was inspired by a podcast I was listening to, where the pilot was telling the interviewer that he'd been asked to write "I'm sorry" across the sky. . . whoah! I jotted the idea down, and soon after I crafted the tale surrounding it.

I think it's important as a writer to have a means to write these initial sparks down, be it a notebook or a phone. . . it's amazing how fast they can fly by you! Then you have to commit to going back to them. . . sooner rather than later. . . to see if the idea really sticks. Many don't, and that's ok. But imbedded in all of this is the practice of LISTENING. . . and that's a skill that every writer needs to keep honing.

Bill: How did you begin your career as a veterinarian and then also morph into a singer/songwriter who was so excellent that he won the prestigious Kerrville Newfolk Songwriting Competition in 2020? Tell us about that journey.

Andy: My father is a veterinarian, and so I grew up working in the field and loving the job. . . so my career trajectory was set pretty early. But I also was a kid who loved music, and would spend hours after school listening to Eagles, John Denver and Fleetwood Mac albums. I picked up a guitar at 13 and learned the chords to "Night



Andy Baker, Press Photo

Moves". . . but it never really occurred to me that I could or should write anything like that.

But then somewhere in my late 20's a bit of depression set in, and music and writing became a vehicle to work through some difficult emotions. I began journaling. . . then a friend handed me an Indigo Girls album. . . and somewhere in the middle of all that therapy, a chemical reaction occurred and I began writing songs.

I was by no means an overnight success. It took YEARS of practice and honing and writing terrible songs before I finally got to Kerrville. . . and I'll be forever grateful for that particular accolade! But really. . . for those of you closeted songwriters out there with day jobs and families. . . it CAN be done. Most of my best writing comes in little moments in between. . . a lunch hour in a graveyard, a drive to the store for milk, a walk on a cloudy evening. It doesn't take a full day off to write a song: it takes the ability to listen and capture small magical moments as they happen in your life.

Bill: Is there any link between your two professions of veterinarian and sensitive songwriter? Are there any characteristics that are shared? Any skills or any meaning?

Andy: I think they both involve big sections of the head and the heart, but in different ways. Medicine demands the ability to navigate a large knowledge field, but equally requires compassion and empathy. Music is a deeply artistic and spiritual venture but also requires a bit of mathematics and language structure. For the most part though, they are different parts of me that live in different rooms. And I think this has been a positive thing.

Writing gives me a break from medicine. . . medicine gives me a break from writing. Work gives me structure and puts limits on my writing time, so when I DO get time to write, it's GO time. I have to be efficient. . . I have to let the dirty dishes sit. But overall, I'm lucky to have both of these loves in my life. Really lucky.

Bill: One of your songs is titled "Blessed Be." Another is simply called "Pray." How do your religious beliefs or your spirituality impact your song-writing?

Andy: I'm the oldest kid in my family with three younger sisters. When my youngest sister was 9, she was diagnosed with a brain tumor, and passed away at 15. This was a seminal experience in my young life, and set me on a seeking path that continues to this day and surfaces often in my writing. Fifty-eight years later I still have more questions than answers, so you could say that I am an Embracer of the Mystery.

I'm certainly not one to promote any kind of belief system with my music. . . what I'm interested in is the shared beautiful struggle to understand ourselves and who we are. . . and why we are all here. . . and I think that's the place I like to shine a bit of light on every once in a while. And it seems like. . . just when my logical mind convinces me that there's really nothing out there but stardust. . . music comes along and upends me. Sometimes it's just a line, or a word, or an idea, and I'm like. . . where did THAT come from?? And then I'm just filled with wonder and humility. Like the feeling of staring into the Grand Canyon or the stars. Writing music is a wondrous, mysterious, magical, spiritual act.

Bill: How many concerts a year do you do "on tour" away from home, and what is it like to be "on the road" with your singing and your original songs? Exhilarating? Lonely? Reflective? Do you have a story or two that might symbolize how it feels?

Andy: With my day job as it is, I don't get a lot of time to tour. I'd say I play 30 shows a year. . . and I'm good with that. I have many friends who are out making a living on the road. . . and I love them and commend them for their work. But I've found that the fewer shows I play, the more I appreciate those shows. And so, a few times a month I

[See Andy Baker, pg.6](#)

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-Andy Baker

Andy Baker, from pg 5



Andy Baker, Press Photo

get to pack up and have an adventure to far off exotic places like Ohio and feel REAL excitement when I step on stage. . . and give my authentic all to the audience, because it's a special night for me too. And I LOVE long lonely drives!! BTW. . . I have a newer song I will share called "Ohio", which I wrote on a midnight drive back from Columbus along I-80. That'll be my road story :-)

Bill: What is it you want your audiences to come away with after they've experienced one of your concerts?

Andy: We've talked about some pretty heady stuff here with lots of capitalized words, and I very much appreciate the deep dive! Much of my music can be thought provoking. . . but I also love humor, and the ability to have a good laugh in this world is essential. . . is there nothing more healing than a good laugh? So, my sets are a bit of a roller coaster ride.

Yes, you will be moved, you might shed a tear. . . but you're gonna laugh as well. We're gonna have a good time. And my hope would be that sometime during the evening you are reminded of how complex and beautiful humanity is. . . and that it's good to be alive in this world. . . and that music is one of the truly magical things that binds us all together.

Enjoy the Folk Festival Even More by Volunteering!

BY RANDI COHEN

If you're coming to this year's folk festival May 4-5, please consider volunteering for a few hours to help the festival run smoothly. It's fun, it's energizing and it'll make you feel great!

Like last year, we are going to need a TON of people to help. Well, maybe not a TON, but oodles and oodles!

We'll have the beer garden and we need people posted at each of the music tents, in arts and crafts, instrument petting zoo, and lots more! We need people willing to help others feel at home, drive golf carts, guard instruments, and help people find seats in the music tents.

None of the work is strenuous except helping to set up and tear down. If you have volunteered with us before, you know it can be really fun to be a part of this. If you have not volunteered with us before, well, it's about time to try (you do not need to be a CFMS member)! And you'll be joining a vibrant community of our volunteers. We even host a post-event volunteer party! But you REALLY NEED TO SHOW UP if you volunteer!

If you are interested in volunteering and/or if you have a friend who wants to volunteer for the Festival this May 4th & 5th at Highbanks Metro Park, please email Randi at: randi@randicohen.com



Welcome NEW Members

Carol Crooks LeighAnn Oettinger
Ed Gerken Joseph Ventresca
Sharon Graham Bill Canonica
Arthur Greenberg Ellie Fabe
Elizabeth Mack

...and Welcome Back RENEWING Members!



Save the Date!

Americana/Folk Concert Series

Andy Baker

Saturday, March 23, 8pm

Open Mic: 7pm

Open Jam: 6pm

Donation: \$15 / \$10 CFMS members

Venue: Cols Mennonite Church, 35 Oakland Park Ave.

Zoom Jam Sessions

Mondays and Thursdays

10am -12 noon. Please contact Jane for more information:

vanaukj@gmail.com

In-Person Jams

Mondays 6-8pm at 4th Ave Christian Church, 296 W. 4th Ave.

Wednesdays 6:30-8:30pm at Gillie Center, 4625 Morse Centre Drive

Saturdays 9:30-11:30am at two locations: Whetstone Community Center, 3923 N. High St and All Saints Lutheran Church, 6770 N. High St., Worthington

NEWSLETTER TEAM

Editor (interim): Diane Boston

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Hold May 4 & 5 for the Central Ohio Folk Festival!

Mark your calendars for May 4 & 5 for this year's festival! To be staged again at Highbanks Metro Park, find more information here.

www.columbusfolkmusicsociety.org/festival.html

Looking for opportunities to play (music) nicely with others? Join the Worthington Squares!

The Worthington Squares meet several times a week, in person and via Zoom, to jam together. These informal jam sessions are a great opportunity to practice your instrument while getting to know some fellow folk music lovers. We also sometimes play at farm markets, metro parks, nursing homes, children's events, etc. All folk instrument players are welcome, regardless of skill or experience!

For questions or to be added to the jam list, contact Jane VanAuken at: vanaukj@gmail.com

And see the current jam calendar here:

<https://www.columbusfolkmusicsociety.org/jam-sessions.html>



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BECOME A MEMBER OF THE COLUMBUS FOLK MUSIC SOCIETY

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Name(s) / Band Name (if applic) _____

Address _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

General Age Range – Born: 1930s-40s 1950s-60s 1970s-80s 1990s-2010s

Phone _____ (Cell) _____ If Band, website _____

E-mail Address _____ Additional e-mail (if a household or band) _____

We are also a growing, vibrant community of volunteers; the awesome force behind our work! Please at least 1 box.

- | | | | |
|--|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> May folk festival | <input type="checkbox"/> General Help | <input type="checkbox"/> Organizational Skills | <input type="checkbox"/> Social Media |
| <input type="checkbox"/> CFMS concert events | <input type="checkbox"/> Graphic Design | <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Musician | <input type="checkbox"/> Web Design |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cooking / Baking | <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership Skills | <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Instructor | <input type="checkbox"/> Writing / Newsletter |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Data Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Legal | Instruments: _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fundraising | <input type="checkbox"/> Musician | <input type="checkbox"/> Publicity | <input type="checkbox"/> None |

MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS ARE DUE ANNUALLY ON DECEMBER 31. one of the membership levels listed below.

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual \$20 | <input type="checkbox"/> Band \$25 | <input type="checkbox"/> Sponsor \$100 | <input type="checkbox"/> Silver \$250 |
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I have included an additional \$15 (postage & handling) to have a printed version of newsletter mailed to me.

To join/renew by credit card, visit CFMS' website: columbusfolkmusicsociety.org (About Us/Join)

OR click here: <https://tinyurl.com/CFMS-Join>

To join/renew by cash or check, please mail completed membership form with payment to: *Columbus Folk Music Society, PO Box 20735, Columbus, OH 43220*. Membership amounts may be tax-deductible.

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