

Chiefland Native Shannon Slaughter Headlines Withlacoochee River Bluegrass Festival



Shannon Slaughter is the proud papa of 6-month-old Rae Carroll Slaughter.

By Terry Witt
Senior Staff Writer

Bluegrass fans at the Withlacoochee Bluegrass Festival Saturday night gave the headline band a standing ovation, but the big surprise for many wasn't the great music. That was expected from *County Clare*.

The surprise was that one of the band's leaders is a Levy County native. Shannon Slaughter grew up in Chiefland loving bluegrass music. He

and his wife Heather formed *County Clare*. Both are accomplished singers and musicians. Their band is nationally known, and for good reason.

They play bluegrass music very well.

The couple lives in Penn City, Ala. where Slaughter teaches history and coaches the offensive line for St. Clair High School football team. His wife is a special education teacher at the same school.

On many weekends, the couple switches from education to performing as *County Clare* with their band of talented bluegrass musicians.

The couple brought their 6-month-old daughter, Rae Carroll, with them to the festival on the shores of Lake Rousseau about 8 miles east of Inglis. She is the first born for the 45-year-old Slaughter. Slaughter and his wife Heather have singing voices that seem well matched to bluegrass music. Their band was tight.

The crowd was rocking heads to the music. *County Clare* was a hit.

Slaughter first performed as a young teenager at the Withlacoochee Blue Grass Festival. The great Boogie Beach of Beachville Bluegrass invited him on stage. Slaughter was hooked. He knew bluegrass would always be a part of his life.

For those unfamiliar with bluegrass festivals, many of the people who attend also play bluegrass music. While the name acts were performing on stage Saturday, a couple small groups of bluegrass performers were gathered among big recreational campers parked at the festival to play the music they love.

That's how Slaughter got his start. While attending festivals, he would stop by and pick a few songs with people he barely knew or didn't know. They would invite him into their circle. He



Shannon Slaughter performs a bluegrass song.

learned how to play guitar from the best, among them Tony Rice. Now he's among the best. The Slaughters enjoy being part of the bluegrass scene.

"It's a culture. It's jamming. You can play with total strangers. The common thread is the music," Slaughter said.



Shannon and Heather Slaughter and County Clare perform on state at the Withlacoochee River

Playing bluegrass music is all about "a groove," he said.

"It's a feel and the harmony is a feel. It's not so much what you hear, it's what you feel."

Slaughter's mother Jennie was part of the crowd Saturday night. She listened to bluegrass music when Slaughter was growing up. He learned to love the music while listening to what she played. Jennie Sharp and her husband Billie Ray Sharp still live outside Chiefland.

The Withlacoochee River Bluegrass

Festival has attracted some of the big names in bluegrass over the years, and Slaughter heard many of them. He writes his own music now. That's how he met Heather. He got word that Heather was a rising star in bluegrass, a great singer, and she was looking for music. She used three of Slaughter's original songs on her first album.

County Clare consists of Shannon and Heather Slaughter and four other guys. They make bluegrass music look easy. They were scheduled to drive back to Alabama after Saturday's concert. The band will also play in Canada and Indiana this year.

"Bluegrass music has become a big part of our lives," Slaughter said. "We work. We play and we try to be good parents. We are humble and grateful for everything."

County Clare is nationally known. Shannon Slaughter also plays in another touring national band, *Grasstowne*. He has played on 10 albums over the past 10-12 years. He will be appearing with *Grasstowne* in November at the Withlacoochee River Bluegrass Festival site.

Playing as the headline act at the Withlacoochee River Bluegrass Festival Saturday was an experience Slaughter had to absorb before it really sunk in. He said it felt odd to him. He remembers his humble start at the festival. He hasn't forgotten his regular job of teaching the kids at his high school, and coaching football.

"I tell my kids (at high school) I'm the happiest man in the world. I teach history. I coach football and I play bluegrass," Slaughter said.

Slaughter graduated from Chiefland High School in 1986. He got his first music gig while working for Skipper's Office Supply in Chiefland and moved to Virginia to play bluegrass music. He earned a bachelor's degree in history at Bradford University in 1996 and earned a master's in 2012 at Sanford University in Birmingham, all the while playing bluegrass music. He has played bluegrass music for 22 years.

Four of the members of *County Clare* are educators. They love to teach kids. They share a love of bluegrass music, and they are good at it.

"Like I tell my kids, find what you're good at and do it," Slaughter said.

You can find out more about Slaughter's band at countyclareband.com.