

# The Burnett Sisters BAND

## BRINGING POWER AND GRACE TO BLUEGRASS



L-R: Anissa, Anneli, Sophia and Kathleen Burnett

Boone and the surrounding roots music scene. One source of their encouragement was the Junior Appalachian Musicians program.

Known simply as JAM, the program was created by the late Helen White in 2000 and is currently run by Brett Morris. In 54 towns across Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and South Carolina, a JAM program is teaching young folks how to play bluegrass and old-time music, offering lessons and hosting free jams.

The Burnett Sisters, featuring Kathleen, Anissa, Sophia, and Anneli, all became a part of the JAM program hosted by the Jones House Cultural & Community Center located in downtown Boone. At the same time, Boone's Appalachian State University created the student-run Appalachian State Old-time Fiddlers Convention in 2008. Held on campus, the event provided the Burnett Sisters and others a chance to go to instrument workshops and to compete in various contests.

Soon, the Burnett Sisters Band was formed. For a few years now, they have perfected their craft, becoming really good on their instruments and are now performing on bigger and bigger stages. To add to their already-impressive training, the two older sisters Kathleen and Anissa will graduate this spring from East Tennessee State University's Bluegrass, Old-Time and Country Music Program.

The end result of all of this roots music indoctrination, schooling, and inspiration is the debut album by the Burnett Sisters, *Long Way Home*. The first single from the group is their fun

take on Vince Gill's "My Kind Of Man, My Kind Of Woman." The cut features wonderful vocals by Kathleen Burnett and guest singer Colin Ray, a long-time friend of the sisters. (Award-winning bluegrass veteran Jeff Parker recently changed his band name to Jeff Parker & Colin Ray to highlight this young man's talent.)

The Burnett Sisters are Kathleen on lead vocals, guitar, and fiddle, Anissa on vocals and fiddle, Sophia on bass and vocals, and Anneli on mandolin and vocals. Joey Cox recently joined the group as the full-time banjo player.

"We recorded this Bee Hive Records album at Stephen Burwell's studio, who also plays the fiddle for Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver," said Kathleen. "We have been inspired by many artists who have befriended us over the years, including the ones that play on our new album. The guest musicians include Stephen Burwell on fiddle and guitar, Scott Vestal on banjo, Adam Steffey on mandolin, Wyatt Rice plays guitar on one song, Josh Swift added some resonator guitar, and fellow Avery County native Jacob Burleson (Volume Five) played some guitar for us as well. Jacob is an amazing musician."

Kathleen's duet on "My Kind Of Man, My Kind Of Woman" with Colin is extraordinary. The song is a combination of bluegrass and old-school country that you rarely hear these days, especially coming from two musicians in their early 20s. "Colin and I have been singing together for about two years now," she said. "He played banjo with our band last year and we had a great time together. We met through the Bluegrass Program at East Tennessee State University in

Johnson City. Our goal was to focus on that old-school country style, and we enjoy singing duets together. We thought that would be a good song to put on the album and see what people think about it."

"It's great to sing with Kathleen because she's easy to blend with and she has a very strong voice," Colin adds. "With a lot of singers, you have to work hours and hours with them to figure out the right vocal moves and how to blend together. But with us, it seems like it happens naturally. It's really easy and I enjoy it."

The band plans on going full-time with their music after graduation day, which is an impressive feat for a family that began to learn music together not that long ago. "My dad gave me a fiddle when I was five years old, and he always told us that it was his dream to be a performing musician and he wanted to encourage us to do the same," said Kathleen. "He started all four of us sisters on the fiddle. And, of course, the community around here is very musical, so we were surrounded by it. They pushed us and put us in lessons and then at one point, they said that we had to choose to do it. So, we began to pay for our own lessons and began to push ourselves, which happens when you have to pay for your own lessons. It was when I was about 15 or 16 that I said, 'Okay, this is something I want to do forever.' It's both a job and a blessing. My sisters are my best friends, so we help each other in different ways. There's a lot of support there and we encourage each other."

The two older sisters and their parents were able to see local legend Doc Watson perform, although the juvenile siblings were too young to remember the show. In the years after Watson's death in 2012, they've embraced his music. "Doc Watson is a huge part of the culture up here in Boone," Kathleen notes. "The kids who live here and are involved in the music all know who he is, and they teach his style of roots music." Her sister Anissa agrees. "Doc is a music hero of mine as well. He grew up right down the road from us in Deep Gap and we've been listening to his music our whole lives. Other than Doc, we also have a lot of older country music heroes like Conway Twitty, Loretta Lynn, George Strait, Marty Robbins, Patty Loveless, Keith Whitley, and The Judds were also a huge inspiration."

When folks hear and see the Burnett Sisters for the first time, they're amazed by the talent of all of the sisters—the

beautiful harmony vocals that can only come from siblings who grew up together and the powerful fiddle playing of Anissa. She has become a force on the instrument. They usually start their show with an up-tempo barn-burner that sheds any doubt as to their bluegrass chops.

Anissa was playing full-fledged fiddle tunes by the time she was six, but it was numerous trips to music festivals and local jams that rounded out her talent. "Our family has taken us to bluegrass and old-time festivals for years. They would always walk us up to jams," she recalls. "To be totally honest, I hated that when I was younger. I didn't want to play with strangers at first or even play a break. They would also always ask us to sing, and I never wanted to sing in front of people. Jamming was just a place to show off what you can do, and little seven-year-old me didn't want to do that. I wasn't a fan of jamming until I was in my mid-teens. But, that comes with age. Also, when I was in my mid-teens, that was when we were no longer forced to practice. We hated it at the time, but I'm so thankful that our parents did that because now I know that I wouldn't be able to play fiddle like I do today if we didn't practice so much."

That was an important turning point for the two older siblings. Once you understand the music and want to play it of your own free will, that's when the magic happens. "I eventually reached an age when I thought, 'Wow, I actually want to learn what I'm doing. I want to meet these people. I want to pursue a career in music,'" Anissa said. "We tried to join every jam we could find and wanted to learn new tunes. In specifically old-time jams, you can learn some of the coolest tunes. Plus, we've met incredible friends and other cool folks through jams. It's a great experience to play in a jam with people you don't know because, suddenly, you know everybody and you're playing tunes with these people and sharing information and songs and singing with them. Music is such a community thing and I can't imagine not doing it."

Kathleen and Anissa are about to graduate from the ETSU program and they see the world in front of them. They're young, but aren't kids anymore, and they're ready to make their mark in the bluegrass world while still honoring their old-time music roots.

"Once we got more into bluegrass music, we did occasionally see this

separation between old-time and bluegrass musicians," said Anissa. "At times when growing up, I thought that old-time was bluegrass music only easier, and that's totally not the case. I see now, while going to ETSU, where they have both an old-time department and a bluegrass department. There's a lot of separation between the two genres. But, honestly, I think a lot of bluegrass musicians accept old-time music more and are trying it out. That's when they say, 'Oh wow, old-time is not what I thought it was. It's actually a fun style of music.' I think most people who haven't yet tried to play the other genre will think what they do about it until they actually try it."

To find out more about the Burnett Sisters Band and purchase their excellent new album, go to [www.burnettsistersband.com](http://www.burnettsistersband.com). "I'm very happy with the end result of this new album *Long Way Home*," Anissa said. "We have a good mixture of songs on there and people are really enjoying it. We've received lots of good feedback on it. While we're in college, it's been very difficult to book a lot of shows. But, once we graduate on May 9th, it will make booking shows a lot easier. So, the plan is to go for it full-time and we think it'll work out very well for us."

"I've thought about this transition from college to a music career a lot in the last couple of months. I'm going to miss my friends, obviously. At times, we would get calls at 12 a.m. from fellow students saying, 'Hey, come on out and jam.' I would try not to do it because I would try and be smart and get my sleep, but sometimes you just have to jam all night. And, my instructors have become friends as well. To have these instructors work with us and sit down with us and actually teach us things—it's nice to learn from people who inspire you. I'll miss the lessons and being around band leaders who are helping us and giving us ideas. We've made amazing connections with people here. Everyone says that your college years will be some of the best years of your life, and that really is the truth."

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