

I'm writing this to introduce you to my old friend Lonnie Knight, a singer-songwriter I've admired as long as I've been in folk music. With the release of his convincing solo acoustic CD, "Better Days," I think you can hear Lonnie coming home, back where he really belongs. For years now, he's been one of the Midwest's reigning guitar gods, playing in some of the most successful rock, blues, country, and pop bands that region has produced.

But that's not how I first knew him. When Lonnie and I were compadres, I was just starting my career in folk music, and he was becoming the biggest star in a Minneapolis folk scene just coming to a boil. He packed all the best coffeehouses, and became a leading headliner on the legendary Bitter End Coffeehouse Circuit. Back then, you could always tell when Lonnie had passed through somewhere, because all the local pickers were playing his arrangements of the current folk standards... or trying to.

I think there have always been two distinct types of folk songwriters: songwriters who play guitar, and guitarists who write songs. Lonnie clearly fits the latter category.

But in that category, there are also two types. There are flashy, hot-licks pickers, who wrap incidental lyrics around their fretboard flash'n'dazzle. Then there are song guitarists, who mold rich, eloquent arrangements around clean melodies that live entirely on their own oxygen. Their guitar arrangements ripple with melodic detail, emotional counterpoint, color, and motion. The guitar is to them what a palette and brush are to a great painter.

Lonnie is a song guitarist of the first order. He never seems to be playing just to play, or to dazzle. Even his solos are smartly conceived comments on the lyrical intent of his songs. They are never "breaks" from the song, but musical statements that move the song forward as surely as the lyrics do. I would unhesitatingly rank Lonnie's guitar work alongside the best song guitarists in the modern folk world, including Richard Thompson, Patty Larkin, Richard Shindell, and Brooks Williams.

On stage, Lonnie is unassumingly charismatic, droll, and innately cool, in the way many instinctive musicians are; but with an alluring something extra I could never put my finger on when I knew him years ago. I saw him play again recently, and knew instantly what that quality was: kindness. Underneath the awesome talent, the inviting cool, the probing intellect, is a deep, genuine kindness.

But it is an honest, unflinching kindness, one that sees life as it really is. It's not that sugary songwriter-kindness that tries to please us by pretending life is something it's not, but a kindness tempered by the hard life he's led. As he searches through the clutter of our disappointments, failures, weaknesses, regrets, unhealed scars, and ailing dreams, that kindness lets him see our lives as we see them, but also as the stuff of song.

His unique blend of hard-won wisdom and kind-eyed empathy gives his writing an intimate credibility, and a redemptive grace. When he sings of "major truths in minor keys," or warns that "this old house won't stand another rain," we know not only what he means, but also how he feels. So when that same soft, slightly wrinkled voice whispers that he still knows how to turn his battered life toward "Better Days," you're sure he's pointing the way for us, too.

I know if you hear Lonnie's music, you'll be awed by his guitar playing; but I think you'll also be drawn to his closely observed, real-life poetry. And I'll bet you end up feeling something else, too; something that cuts to the heart of why folk music continues to thrive in these fast, noisy, and often careless times. You'll feel like you got to know someone worth knowing, someone who means the things he sings; and that in the kind, uncompromising vision of his music, you've heard a friend.

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