

# An Unlikely Fiddler's Dream

By Grayson Haver Currin

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Michael Cleveland had been 13 for five days the first time he picked with the bluegrass demigod [Doc Watson](#) — in a backstage bathroom, no less, at an awards show in Kentucky.

It was September 1993. Peter Wernick, the first president of the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA), had assembled a band of young hotshots to provide a pointed rebuttal to a [Washington Post feature](#) that argued kids didn't care about antiquated mountain music. The teenage quintet electrified its audience, sprinting through a Bill Monroe standard with verve that suggested these sounds were vital to fresh generations.

After the triumphant ceremony, John Cleveland ushered his son — born blind, with one eye; almost deaf in his left ear and partly deaf in his right — to the bathroom. They found Watson, Wernick and a cadre of other genre giants laughing and jamming there, as though the lavatory were a back porch, and the teenage Michael joined for an hour.

“I had no shame, no fear, nothing,” Cleveland, 42, remembered with a hoot by phone from the Indiana home he shares with his father. “I thought, ‘This may be the only opportunity I ever have to hear this person play, to be near them.’ That was pretty much all I wanted to do — raw, high-energy bluegrass.”

The nascent teenager didn't consider how Watson, who had lost his eyesight seven decades earlier at the age of 1, was the counterargument he needed: Teachers had warned Cleveland for years that career prospects for a blind bluegrass fiddler were grim, but he played on.

In the three decades since, Cleveland has become a bluegrass star himself, winning [29 IBMA awards](#) and becoming the organization's most decorated fiddler. He is one of the world's most in-demand and distinctive players, with collaborators that include Béla Fleck, Billy Strings and Vince Gill. “He plays with such ferocity,” Gill said by phone. “But the amount of emotion he pulls out of that instrument is way more appealing than the amount of notes.”

Cleveland has only just begun to funnel his full story into records, documenting the hardships and joys of a difficult life devoted to bluegrass. Alternately woebegone and hopeful, his star-studded “Lovin' of the Game,” out Friday, is an ecstatic document of what the fiddle has meant to his story — and what he hopes to mean to its history.

“For a long time, Michael didn't want to talk about being blind. He never wanted to be the little blind boy that played fiddle, for people to like his music because he was handicapped,” his father said. “He's past that, and I'm glad — he might open up this music for somebody, to inspire them.”

Cleveland was a boyhood bluegrass zealot, not a prodigy. When he was six weeks old, his parents began toting him to bimonthly Saturday concerts his grandparents hosted at an American Legion in Henryville, Ind. In his stroller, friends remembered, he would bounce to the music in perfect time. As a toddler, he became so obsessed with the staple [“Rocky Top”](#) that his parents drove him to Tennessee to meet [the couple who had written it](#); even now, he keeps the cassette they gave him, an hourlong compendium of assorted versions.

Still, Cleveland couldn't play. A nearby fiddler struggled to show his first blind student how to hold the bow or the instrument. Teachers at the Kentucky School for the Blind fared better with a contraption that kept the bow at the proper position, but they were more interested in the Suzuki method and classical music than Flatt & Scruggs. “On the first day, they asked me what I knew about violin,” Cleveland said, catching his breath from laughter before offering his reply. “Well, I don't know much about the violin,” I said, “but I know *a lot* about the *fiddle*.”

Those first few years remained a struggle. One night, though, Cleveland dreamed about playing “Soldier's Joy,” a mirthful fiddle number about payday he'd heard countless times. When he reached for his instrument the next morning, the tune was there.

Though he balked his first fiddle contest, he kept trying, even joining Monroe, the bluegrass fountainhead, onstage at age 9. Soon after he delighted that awards-show crowd in Kentucky, he made his Grand Ole Opry debut with Alison Krauss. But it wasn't Cleveland's back story that people found compelling, like some cloying “American Idol” package.

“You can feel his timing and pulse *so* well, like the drive of a banjo player,” the multi-instrumentalist Sam Bush said in an interview, listing Cleveland as one of perhaps three bluegrass fiddlers ever to have that quality. (The others? [Benny Martin](#) and [Paul Warren](#).) “Then he adds finesse, and he will surprise you.”

As Cleveland's fiddle prowess ballooned, the rest of his life deflated. Though the young musician felt welcome and encouraged in bluegrass, he understood he was different. By 12, he'd endured 30 separate surgeries to correct a cleft palate and lip, to insert a prosthetic eye and to reroute a blood vessel in his brain. He suffered serial bouts of spinal meningitis, and his eardrums were permanently perforated. His parents were then in the middle of an acrimonious divorce that would alienate him from his mother for decades.

“Bill Monroe lost his [mother at 10](#), his father at 16. There are similarities there with Michael you can feel,” said Ronnie McCoury, who began playing with his own father, the bluegrass pizazz magnate Del, at 14. “Michael's life *has* been hard. Those feelings come out on his fiddle.”

Cleveland forwent college, hitting the road soon after his high school graduation in 1999, and emerged as an exciting sideman, passionate about bluegrass's history and quick-witted, too — “a good hang,” as Gill put it. He made several solo records and assembled a band, Flamekeeper. The group kindled unapologetic traditionalism, its intensity making it a fast favorite within staunch bluegrass circles.

But six years ago, while enjoying one of Sam Bush's freewheeling shows, Cleveland considered how bluegrass crowds were aging and shrinking, and how he might do well to adapt, like Bush

or Fleck. His subsequent album, “Tall Fiddler” from 2019, flirted with spirited jazz and hardscrabble balladry. With Bush singing about running from the law, he even dipped into rockabilly.

“Lovin’ of the Game” reinforces that openness. There’s a playful romp about high-stakes love alongside Billy Strings, and a country lamentation for small-town settling with Charlie Starr, of the Southern rock band Blackberry Smoke. The most vulnerable moment in Cleveland’s catalog comes with “Temperance Reel,” a centuries-old tune updated with lyrics about a musician struggling with alcoholism, [as Cleveland did for many years](#). His strings sing with unbridled joy, as if animated by possibility.

“There’s no mistaking I’m a bluegrass player. That’s the biggest part of what I do,” Cleveland said. “But these are ways to push the envelope that, 10 years ago, I wouldn’t have been into.”

After 40 years of bluegrass fixation, Cleveland has become a de facto archivist. Not long before his parents split, an area aficionado handed him a box of 20 mixtapes of great fiddle performances — each dutifully labeled in Braille, with introductory listening instructions. They form the core of his vast basement tape trove. Cleveland has a recording of that bathroom jam with Watson, too, though he will never listen. He was, as he likes to say, “wearing it out,” playing every lick he knew as hard as he could to prove his worth. The youngest inductee into the [National Fiddler Hall of Fame](#), he’s done that.

He’s now focused on what’s next. He tracks fiddle parts for most anyone who asks through the online service AirGigs; John will often hear him alone in the basement, playing through dinner for 10 hours at a time, dabbling in pop and jazz. And, at Fleck’s request, he’s even learning some Bach for their first duo record.

“Bach’s Violin Sonata No. 3 in C major,” he sighed, chuckling at the irony of how being the best bluegrass fiddler brought him back to the classical violin he’d quit. “I know just enough to be dangerous. But yeah, I thought, I can do that.”

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