FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MERLEFEST 2011, PRESENTED BY LOWE'S, ANNOUNCES WINNERS OF INSTRUMENT CONTESTS

WILKESBORO, N.C. (April 29, 2011)—**MerleFest 2011**, presented by Lowe's, held the Doc Watson Guitar Championship on Thursday, April 28 and the Merle Watson Bluegrass Banjo Contest on Friday, April 29.

Ashe County Picker Tops MerleFest Guitar Contest

For Eric Hardin of Warrensville, NC, winning the 2011 MerleFest Guitar Contest was a little bittersweet.

"I'm ecstatic about winning," said Hardin. "I've been doing this contest for eight years, and I have finally won. I do hate, though, that I won't get to play in it next year." Like other previous champions, he will serve as a judge and will be retired as a contestant. After the judges announced their decision, Hardin received his first prize, a Boucher Alencia Goose guitar (retail value $4,500), presented by John Kelley of Musiquip as well as gift certificates from Jackson's Music and John Pearse Strings.

Hardin chose "Whiskey For Breakfast," "Steel Guitar Rag," and "Lonesome Fiddle Blues" to perform for the panel of judges.

This was not the first major win for Eric Hardin at MerleFest. He won the 2004 National Banjo Championship in Winfield, Kansas, then returned home to take the top prize on the five string at MerleFest in 2006. He has also been a consistent top finisher in the National Guitar Championship.

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PHOTO by Jim Thompson, MerleFest Photographer

Caption: (left to right) John Kelley of Musiquip presents prize to 1st place winner Eric Hardin.

Young Pickers Dominate at MerleFest Banjo Contest

Youth dominated at the MerleFest Banjo Contest Friday morning at the Austin Stage – but "the old man" of the finalists took home a brand-new Deering Eagle banjo and gift certificates from Jackson's Music and John Pearse Strings.

Of course, Weston Stewart of Anderson, Ala., is just 21 – but was older than the other two finalists, 16-year-old Tanner Norris of Monroe, N.C., who took second (and won a hardshell banjo case given by Frontier Energy and gift certificates from Jackson's Music and John Pearse Strings), and Alex Edwards, 18, of Salisbury, N.C., who finished third (and won gift certificates from Jackson's Music and John Pearse Strings).

"I wasn't expecting to win," Stewart told the crowd after the announcement of the judges' decision. "I just want to say this is a wonderfully organized event, and there were so many great pickers taking part." In answer to a question by Pete "Dr. Banjo" Wernick, who was one of the judges, Stewart said he was not currently part of a band. "Attention band leaders," Wernick said, "you want to talk to this young man."

Janet Deering, co-founder of Deering Banjo, presented Stewart with his first prize, an Eagle banjo made by the company she and her husband lead. The banjo is valued at $2,400.

Now in its 24th year, MerleFest was founded in 1988 in memory of Eddy Merle Watson as a fundraiser for Wilkes Community College Endowment Corporation and a celebration of "traditional plus" music.

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PHOTO by Jim Thompson, MerleFest Photographer

Caption: 1st place winner Weston Stewart tries out his prize, a brand-new Deering Eagle banjo.

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