Wilkes Community College's MerleFest®
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ON THE CAMPUS OF WILKES COMMUNITY COLLEGE, WILKESBORO, NC

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MERLEFEST 25, PRESENTED BY LOWE'S, ANNOUNCES WINNERS OF INSTRUMENT CONTESTS

WILKESBORO, N.C. (April 30, 2012)—**MerleFest 25**, presented by Lowe's, held the Doc Watson Guitar Championship and the Merle Watson Bluegrass Banjo Contest on Friday, April 27.

Sherrills Ford Picker Takes MerleFest Guitar Contest

Ben Cockman, a guitar picker from the Catawba County, N.C., town of Sherrills Ford, won the 2012 Doc Watson Guitar Championship contest Friday evening.

Cockman ended up on top of a field of 10 competitors from across the region. His flatpicked renditions of the Irish classic "Danny Boy" and the Gershwin tune "Lady be Good" brought cheers from the crowd at the Austin Stage in Alumni Hall on the Wilkesboro campus of Wilkes Community College. They also obviously impressed the judges, Jack Lawrence, Roy Book Binder, and last year's contest winner, Eric Hardin.

As first place winner, Cockman received the opportunity to perform on the Cabin Stage on Saturday and took home a Boucher guitar valued valued at $4,000 from Musiquip, a $300 gift certificate to Jackson's Music, a gift certificate from John Pearse Strings redeemable for one dozen strings, capos from G7th The Capo Company ($193 value), and the opportunity to participate in next year's contest as a judge.

Second place went to Ashe County native Austin Mikeal, who won a $200 gift certificate to Jackson's Music, a gift certificate from John Pearse Strings redeemable for one dozen strings, capos from G7th The Capo Company ($173 value), and the opportunity to participate in next year's contest as a contestant.

The third finalist was Seth Church of Danville, Va., who won a $100 gift certificate to Jackson's Music, a gift certificate from John Pearse Strings redeemable for one dozen strings, capos from G7th The Capo Company ($133 value), and the opportunity to participate in next year's contest as a contestant.

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Caption: Ben Cockman, 1st place winner of the 2012 Doc Watson Guitar Championship. PHOTO by Jim Thompson, MerleFest Photographer

Tennessee Educator Wins Banjo Contest

Brandon Green made it this time.

Back in 2003, then a student at East Tennessee State University, Green traveled from Johnson City to Wilkesboro, N.C., for the annual Merle Watson Bluegrass Banjo Contest at MerleFest. Then, the travel over mountain roads took a little too long and he missed the competition. "I finally was able to come back this year," he said to the crowd, moments after his victory in the event was announced by legendary picker Pete Wernick.

Green is now a graduate student at ETSU and teaches in the university's bluegrass program.

The young educator finished on top of a strong field of 10 banjo pickers from across the Eastern United States. After finishing in the top three, he impressed the judges and the capacity crowd at the Austin Stage with "Rabbit in the Log," a duet with famed singer Laura Boosinger, and an original instrumental, "Haywire."

As the winner of the contest, Green received the opportunity to perform on the Cabin Stage on Saturday of the festival. In addition, Green received a Deering Eagle banjo (valued at $2,400), a $300 gift certificate to Jackson's Music, a gift certificate from John Pearse Strings redeemable for one dozen strings, capos and gift certificate from G7th The Capo Company ($160), and the opportunity to participate in next year's contest as a judge.

Kyle Tuttle of Jamaica Plain, Mass., finished second in the competition. He described himself as "an unemployed banjo picker," but the judges urged band leaders to take a listen to the talented young man. Tuttle won a $200 gift certificate to Jackson's Music, a TKL banjo case from Separk Music, a gift certificate from John Pearse Strings redeemable for one dozen strings capos and gift certificate from G7th The Capo Company ($100 value), and the opportunity to participate in next year's contest as a contestant.

Rounding out the three finalists was Jason Bales of New Market, Tenn. He has played as a regular at Dollywood, but is now a stay-at-home dad, which he called "the hardest work I have ever done." He won a $100 gift certificate to Jackson's Music, a gift certificate from John Pearse Strings redeemable for one dozen strings, capos and gift certificate from G7th The Capo Company ($60), and the opportunity to participate in next year's contest as a contestant.

The judges for the initial competition were Eric Ellis, Mark Schatz and Weston Stewart, who won the 2011 Banjo Contest. Wernick joined the judging for the finals, which featured the performers presenting a duet with Boosinger, followed by an instrumental.

Caption: Brandon Green, 1st place winner of the 2012 Merle Watson Bluegrass Banjo Contest. PHOTO by Jim Thompson, MerleFest Photographer

MerleFest, considered one of the premier music festivals in the country, is held on the campus of Wilkes Community College in Wilkesboro, North Carolina. MerleFest was founded in 1988 in memory of Eddy Merle Watson and is a celebration of what Doc Watson calls "traditional plus" music, a unique mix of music based on the traditional, roots-oriented sounds of the Appalachian region, including bluegrass and old-time music, and expanded to include Americana, country, blues, rock and many other styles. The annual festival has become the primary fundraiser for the WCC Endowment Corporation, funding scholarships, capital projects and other educational needs.

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