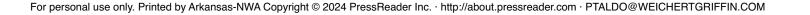


Stellar musician Jenee Fleenor's childhood prediction to be a famous fiddler came true. – Profiles, 1D





Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, Sunday, February 25, 2024



"Jenee should be extremely proud of the career she's built for herself. And more importantly the reputation she has built for herself in the industry, not just as a stellar musician, but as a wonderful human being."

> Barry Bales, longtime member of Alison Krauss and Union Station, 15-time Grammy winner and now member of Wood Box Heroes

Jenee Keener Fleenor

Jenee Fleenor's childhood prediction to be a famous fiddler came true. Friends call her one of the best at her craft and praise her for her humility and gratefulness.

APRIL WALLACE NWA DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

t was the mid-1990s, at a girls' sleepover, when 10-year-old Jenee Keener began making predictions for her grand future.

She put her promise down on paper, writing: "I will grow up and be a famous fiddle player when I am 20 years old." She signed it, sure that this was one of many autographs she would give, folded the note, taped it up, and then gave it to fellow fourth-grader and friend Bethany to keep.

On the outside it bears the date, the time — 3:58 a.m., the prime hour for making grave promises — and warns: "Don't open until [this] year." Bethany took those rules seriously and abided by them. When she opened it up in the 2020s, Jenee Fleenor was the first female to win Musician of the Year at the Country Music Association Awards, a title she has won five consecutive years, 2019 to 2023, so far.

The Springdale native — then Jenee Keener — has played on the road with Martina McBride and Terri Clark, previously spent a decade in Blake Shelton's band and spent more than seven years playing on "The Voice." Fleenor also earned ACM Specialty Instruments Player of the Year twice, in 2020 and 2023, CMA Touring Musician of the Year in 2015 and three MusicRow Top 10 Ablum All-Star Musician Awards in 2019, 2022 and 2023.

Last week, Fleenor's bluegrass band, the Wood Box Heroes, released a new album and kicked off with a performance at the Mountain Arts Center in Prestonburg, Ky.

"As a female, she inspires other (women) in our male-dominated industry for sure," said friend Trent Willmon, a hit songwriter

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Fleenor

 Continued from Page 1E and Cody Johnson's produc and Cody Johnson's produc-er. But that's not what sets Fleenor apart from other musicians. "It's her abso-lutely genius-level talent. I'd put her up against anyone for tone, tuning and taste-

fulness." Willmon and Fleenor Willimon and Fleenor began writing songs togeth er namy years ago, some of which were recorded by Reba McEntire, Blake Shelton and Gretchen Wil-son. As far as studio life, he said it's difficult to come up with fresh musical ideas when playing 10-15 sessions a week, but Fleenor "brings i every time, with a great attitude," Willmon said, not-ing that Jenee always brings attritude," willmon said, not-ing that Jenee always brings her "A game." While she's a fun jokester when hanging with the guys, she's serious about her craft, which he believes is the best of both worlds. "She commands the respect of every musician in town with her playing, and yet somehow still remains yet somehow still remains humble and grateful." Barry Bales, longtime member of Alison Krauss

member of Alison Krauss and Union Station, 15-time Grammy winner and now member of Wood Box Heroes, said Fleenor is the type of musician who always knows exactly the right thing to play and plays it well. He's never heard her play a wrong note or make a mistake.

a mistake. "Jenee should be ex-tremely proud of the career she's built for herself," Bales said. "And more importantly the reputation she has built for herself in the industry, not just as a stellar musi cian, but as a wonderful human being"

MAKING HISTORY

In the days leading up to Fleenor's first time to win CMA Musician of the Year, she knew that she was on some of the ballots. But Jenee didn't realize that she was the first woman to ever be nominated.

Then one day, when she was pulling up to Blackbird Studio, her phone started going off so much that it sounded like a slot machine

going on the main time it that it has bothen you're won at the casino — a constant barrage of dings. "I did not know what to do with that. I couldn't even comprehend that I was nominated, period," Fleenor said. She was overwhelmed with emotion and shed a lot of happy tears. Inside lot of happy tears. Inside all the people coming in to congratulate her. Blake Shelton connected Fleenor with his PR rep. since Jenee had never had a manager or anyone to. what happened. I'm going to do this for my father-in-law, because I think that's what he would want me to do."

performa through. since Jenee had never had a manager or anyone to handle publicity, and things began to move quickly from there Jenee Keener's love of music began in the world of classical training. After seeing in the newspaper a picture of little kids car-

"After that session, I where that session, I thought, Well, this could be a game changer, you know?" Fleenor said. So many good opportunities came all at once, among them a step into the fashion industry. Clothing compa-nies wanted to work think-nies wanted to work think-she was getting ready for red carpte events. A week before her first CMAs, Fleenor was about

A week before ner 11751 CMAs, Fleenor was about to make her Grand Ole Opry debut. Her father-in-law was in the hospital and was in stable condition when Jenee, her husband and mother-in-law started to leave to head to the Ry-man Auditorium that night Her husband told him they were going to see Jenee play the Opry, but then they'd be back.

play the Opry, but then they'd be back. Here father-in-law passed away after they left. Jenese didn't know whether she should go ahead and per-form or not, but evito of the here to go out. They told her she should do it — for him. "That was really hard," Fleenor said. "All I could think was he was sitting in the front row of the Ryman with my daddy," who had died during her senior year of high school. On CMAs night, a cast

said. "It was our time to-gether." Given that she began so young, Jenee can't remem-ber a time she wasn't play-ing, which makes recalling her first recital difficult. But she knows she was 4/2 years old and refinered of of Suruki, which must have been lo or 20 songs. "It was like an out of body experience, I don't re-member this he said." I do remember that I leaned on The second secon



"Everything I do musically just comes from the heart. I hope that's ale Alliance (Photo courtesy of Dov n So

my ear so much." The sheet music was placed in front of her, and the teacher would announce the name of About 10 minutes before About 10 minutes before the performance was to go live, Fleenor found out that she won. It was a whirl-wind, making that accep-tance speech, then getting on stage to perform. They'd had her father-in-law's fu-neral a few days before, and the archive time of cast announce the name of the song, but young Jenee would look at the piano player and ask "How does it go?" so the pianist would hum a couple of bars. Je-nee would say "OK," then launch into the song. She knew the numbers by their melody, not by their names. Raising Jenee up in the classical styte gave her the combination of events "the highest of highs and lowest of lows." The fresh, raw flood of emotions poured right back into her music.

emotions poured right back into her music. "Everything I do musi-cally just comes from the heart. I hope that's what people hear when they hear me play or sing." Fleenor said. That's how her music was the night of her father-in-law's death, straight from the heart. Jence still gets nerves when she's at the envers when she's at the call the strategist from the heart. Jence still gets nerves when she's at the call the strategist from the heart. Jence still gets nerves when a side women, and so when I step into the spotlight, it's just a different weight you have on you's 'fector said. That night, 'I couldn't even try to be nervous. (I hought) Whatever's going to come our the spong to come our it what happened. I'm going to do this for my father-in-Raising Jenee up in the classical style gave her mom visions of concerts, orchestra and Juilliard, but it didn't take long for a love of country music to take root in her talented daugh

Her father had picked Her father had picked up the fiddle shortly after she did and would play the old-time fiddle records – Bob Wills, Merle Haggard and Willie Nelson, among others. When she was abou

and Willie Nelson, among others. When she was about 6, he played 'Faded Love,'' Helen Keener said. "It was a gateway song for me to country music,'' Jenee remembered. Even now, every time she hears it, she still loves every sin-gle thing about it it say subscription of the song statement, '' love the original version of it so much. It takes me all the way back'' At age 8, Jenee began Jalving the Little Ole Orpy in West Fork, which taught her to play in a band, to back up singers, and she found herself 'learning how to land on your feet' amid performing for an audience, something that prepared her for exactly what she does now. **FROMT AND CENTER**

It was one of the hardest

mances she's been

FARER LOVE

a picture of little Kuds car-rying their violins, Jenee's mom felt compelled to sign her up for violin lessons through the Suzuki School when she was just 3 years

old. "I had no idea where it was going to lead," said Hel-en Keener. Putting your kid in music leasons was just what she'd been taught. She had taken piano instruction herself, but she didn't have the musical talent that Je-

"I enjoyed it," Keener said. "It was our time to-cother"

old

FRONT AND CENTER

FRONT AND CENTER Throughout her child-hood, Jence's parents took her anywhere they could get her on a stage. She played various functions, but among the most fre-quent venues was First Baptist Church of Spring-dale. It's now a part of the Cross Church system, but even then, it was still one o the biggest churches in the area.

hersell, but she didn't have the musical talent that Je-nee did. "People had to tell me she was talented." Jenee's teachers were the ones to pick up on her gift, but that didn't mean she didn't work hard for it. In 14 years of Suzuki, Jenee was required to practice a mini-mum of an hour a day. Keener was always in-volved, staying right by her daughter's side as she prac-ticed, and would sometimes bribe her with a trip to Mc-Donald's to ensure she got the practice time in. Helen area. "I remember having to deal with nerves, more so with singing, not as much with fiddling," Jenee Flee-nor said. Sometimes those nor said. Sometimes those nerves would progress to where it cut off the vocal sounds of the throat. "Haw ing to work through those things definitely prepares you for later in life."

you tor later in life." Early on she learned the importance of deep, steady breathing for calming those nerves and getting through a performance. As her musicianship pro-gressed, Jenee kept up both sides — the serious Suzuki leasons and reactache as uri Donald's to ensure she got the practice time in. Helen also attended the music lessons with Jenee and kept notes. At home, she would go over the music with her.

lessons and recitals as well as the more animated craft of fiddling — but there was no question which side was no question which sid winning. "Growing up in Ar-

"Growing up in Ar-kansas, (country) was the sound, the background I heard, and the stories were the stories of my life," Flee-nor said. She played with the old-timers in Springdale and competed in fiddle contests all throughout Arcontests all throughout Ar-kansas, Missouri and Okla-homa. Whenever she won, she'd bring the award in to

SELF-PORTRAIT

Jenee Keener Fleenor

• I'm he aded back to Arkansas: in October. I'm supposed to bring Wood Box Heroes to open

supposed to pring wood Box Heroes to open up the new park in Springdale. • Jenee Fleenor Day is: June 27. I've missed it the past couple of years! • A couple of the female musicians I grew up ad-ming fiddle player: Wanda Vick, who always looks like she enjoys what she's doing, and Ter-orchast I couple of the female musicians I grew up ad-

To clark, a lawayo swita site's doing, and ter-ri Clark. I alwayo loved her and her music. I'd get the Country Weekly magazines and try to put on ny makeup like her. • My advice for getting through nerves on stage: Just breathe. It's really important. It can slow your heart rate down as you breathe through it. • My scariest moment on live TV: playing with Didre Slowers one of serve througe not easily the • my Scanest moment on use it: paying with Ricky Skages, one of my herees, and Emily Ann Roberts. We were performing "Country Boy." one of the fastest bluegrass songs you can play, and it was all live. Once the song starts, you're off to the races, and muscle memory kicks in. • My bluegrass hand is: called the Wood Box Hereore and it's an all test caret of bluegrase muscle.

Heroes and it's an all star cast of bluegrass mu-Heroes and it's an all star cast of bluegrass mu-sicians, including Barry Bales, Josh Martin, Seth Taylor, Matt Menefee. It was always a dream of mine to be a part of a super group of sorts like this, and it fell in our lap the last year, year and a half after playing some gigs up in Michigan. We're just kind of a thrown together, bad@** bard band

 The hardest part of forming the band: was com- The hardest part of torming the band: was coning up with the band name. It took months!
What was the inspiration for the name? Bucce's is paying mbut they are not. I really wanted to be the Rustics, but that name was already the Rustics, but that name was already the reaction is to be was already but that name but and the surface of the word of the sub-radius and the sub-radius and the word of the sub-radius and the sub-radius and the word of the sub-radius and the sub-rad (When You're) looking tor a band name. I pulled up to Buccee's and sent a pic to Josh of these two little figures of Groot and Thor. They were sitting up there at the gas pump and Josh said, 'Well those kind of look like wood box herces.' I took the little guys and put them on my dash buccutoeic to sent on the archiver and 24 b

like 'We're going to take over the world. Who's the hero of Wood Box Heroes? Barry Bales He's a 15-time Grammy winner. He's won Song of the Year at the ACMs with a song he wrote for Chris Stapleton. He's one of my heroes. All of us kind of look behind us like we can't believe Barry Bales is playing bass with us

 Of all your gigs, what's your main thing? Studio work. I've had that dream ever since I was 11 work. I've had that dream ever since I was II years old to be a session musician. It's wild to see it all came true and so much more. • Something special that I wish people got to see and experience: Being behind the scenes of The Voice' to see all that goes into their shows ...

the hair, the makeup, the glam team, your ward-robe. Sometimes I would tell the wardrobe (folks) This is about the music, right? because it would be hard for me to get my fiddle, tune it and get all my gear (ready). • What are you working on right now? I signed a

publishing deal at the end of last year, so I'm diving back into my songwriting, and there's some fun stuff in the works as far as that's concerned

show her classical teachers. "They frowned on it at first, but then they soon en-joyed it," Helen Keener said For talent competitions,

Dufing titols years, hear-ing fiddle on contry radio always drew Jence in. She will be always drew Jence in. She will be always and the second her classette player. When shed saved up enough money, Fleenor would head to Hastings Bools & Re-cords in Springdale and buy country music CDs. Her favorite game was to listen, quess which musi-class which music album, then open the insert to see if she was right. She was good at it, and though there were no other kids who wanted to play it with her, she got better and bet-ter at identifying the artists. "Now I work with a lot of these musicans, that's first, but then they soon en-joyed it," Helen Keener said. For talent competitions, Helen would dress her daughter in square dance, igading it up to hense." At the time, Jenee couldn't stand it. During one such competition in Cassville, Mo, the pair decided to lean into that dynamic. They haf family visiting from Louis-ana, watching the show from the front row. "I come out on stage all (dressed in western getup) and my mom comes out (dressed in western getup) and my mom comes out Practice your classical." Fleenor said. She followed suit, stoically delivering her practice your classical." Fleenor said. She followed suit, stoically delivering her hair style and embarrassing the Louisian amembers of their family to high heaven. They sank down in their seas and her mom left the source and her mom left the

HER BIG BREAK

Fleenor always knew she was headed to Nashville. After high school gradu-ation, she moved there in After m_B, ..., ation, she moved there in 2001 to attend Belmont University, where she began studying commercial music. The Station Inn, the

During those years, hear-ing fiddle on country radio

bluegrass mecca, was one of her very first stops in town, a place she'd been in-troduced to during a fiddle camp she attended when she was II. When she walked in as

When she walked in as a brand new college fresh-man, Larry Cordle was on stage and right next to him was Brandon Rickman, a good friend of Fleenor's from Missouri. She couldn't believe she would know one of the musicians per-forming, Rickman asked where Jenee's fiddle was and invited her to nlw.

"That's the sh*t!' and I didn't know what that meant," Fleenor said, laughing. They had her join them on stage. Cordle was looking for a fiddle player, and the next week he offered her the job. Fleenor was astounded, but accepted the opportunity. She could stay in school and play gigs on the week end.

A year later Fleenor go A year later Fleenor got a call to audition for Terri Clark, an opportunity that arose when they fired her professor who'd had the same role. She first had to admit to him that she got his gig, and then she had to make the difficult decision whether to leave college, since they'd be on the road

so much. In seeking the advice of those around her, some said she could always go on tour, but she wouldn't always have this time at school. Others said the opposite, Others said the opposite, warning her that gigs were not always guaranteed to keep coming. "I really loved my days at Belmont; I learned a lot while I was there," Fleenon

while I was there," Fleeno said, and years later they made her an honorary al-um. "But I just knew I was getting calls to do what I wanted to do."

She went on tour with Clark when she was 19 years old, but Fleenor felt like her whole life had pre-pared her for it. She was so pared her for it. She was so young that she sometimes had to sneak in venues from the back because they wouldn't let underage kids in the door. On the occasion that they played a state fair, Jenee was amped up for the tilt-a-whirl after per-formances, while the rest of the band went straight of the band went straight to bed. But taking the op-portunity set her career of the trajectory she'd always hoped for as a performer

and studio artist. Soon she started to play on Jon Pardi's records, which was a huge breakout moment for her. It all led which was a nuge preasour moment for her. It all led to experiences she couldn't have dreamed up, like Aero-smith's Steven Tyler calling her personally to request him in Maui for 10 days and that time that she had two digs at 30 Rockefeller Cen-ter on the same day — Seth Meyer with Blake Shelton's band and Jimumy Fallon on her own — causing her to bounce from one sound check and clothing change to another. "I get to play these big moments... and now look-ing back, I'm like, 't can't believer 1 got to do that;

ing back, I'm like, T can't believe I got to do that, that's really something, Fleenor said. After the ex-perience of having her first No. I record, which was Jon Pardi's first No. I record, Jenee realized that when people were contacting her for fiddle work it was be-cause they wanted her style specifically. Now "people say. 'Oh.

specifically. Now "people say, 'Oh, I heard this on the radio, and that's you playing on that, right?' I'm like 'Whoa.'

I always dreamed of that happening." April Wallace is Associate Fea

Aprin Walace is Associate rea-tures Editor — Our Town, Profiles, Religion — and can be reached by email at awallace@nwaonline. com or on X @NWAApril.

Profiles

President Brent A. Powers (479) 571-6449 bpowers@nwaonline.com

Associate Features Editor April Wallace (479) 770-3746 awallace@nwaonline.com

Nonprofit/Society Editor Carin Schoppmeyer (479) 872-5049 cschoppmeyer@nwaonline.com

Arts & Entertainment Editor Becca Martin-Brown (479) 872-5054 bmartin@nwaonline.com

Features Writer Aonica Hooper nhooper@nwa

Mail rthwest Arkansas

ocrat-G 212 N. East Ave. Favetteville, AR 72701

Email: ourtown@nwaonline.com



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fast fiddle tunes.

have now," Keener said of the old-time country music. "That made her more versa-tile. Back then she was only 14 to about 17, but she was a great musician. They would play songs she had never heard, but she could take a ride on it."

of these musicians, that's of these musicians, that's kind of crazy for me," Flee-nor said. "A lot of those guys were my heroes. That's what's so wild for me now, getting to be in the studio with them and actu-ally play music with your heroes."

boysl" and launched into fast fiddle tunes. In her teenage years, Jenee began playing at steel guitar conventions in Tulsa, Dallas and Knowille, which Helen believes aided her career and allowed her to meet the old-time country stars like Buddy Emmons and Ralph Mooney. During one convention, Jenee got to play for Loretta Iynn. "It's kind of like she grew up in transition from the older players to the ones we have now," Keener said of the old-time country music.

where Jenee's fiddle w and invited her to play backstage for them. "They kept saying,