

# Swannanoa Solstice celebrates holiday season

**Anne Louise Bouchard**

ALBOUCHA@UNCA.EDU  
STAFF WRITER

A Swannanoa Solstice, a tradition in its eighth year, is a form of calm for everyone reeling from the shopping madness of the holiday season.

"It reminds people that it is a season to not get so caught up with the frantic pace and materialism, but with the beauty of the season," said **Doug Orr, founder of A Swannanoa Solstice.**

**Amy White, a musician for the event,** said the tradition gets people in the mood for the season.

"It's a time of meditation," she said. "They get to sit back and listen to music in a beautiful old theater. It allows time to sit back and relax."

Orr, who also serves as the emcee of the event, and his wife had the idea of starting a tradition for Asheville that was similar to The Revels, a holiday performance that caught on around the country. Once the couple looked into it, Orr said they realized it was very expensive.

"We decided to do something similar and better connected to local culture and music," he said.

Their version combined Celtic music of Scotland and Ireland with Appalachian storytelling.

"This area has a definite Scottish bend to it," said **Al Petteway, a guitarist for the event.** "We know a lot of people who have been here for seven generations or more, so for us to be here for eight years, that's nothing."

Petteway and White, his wife, moved to Asheville from Tacoma Park, Md., because of The Swannanoa Gathering.

"The Swannanoa Gathering brought us here. I've been coordinating guitar for them for 16 years. Every year, we fell in love with the surroundings."

The Swannanoa Gathering is held every summer. It is a series of workshops that allows musicians to come together to teach and learn. Petteway said the gathering sought to keep music in the community and keep it moving forward.

Orr asked some performers from the workshops to perform in the solstice.

"The whole solstice is an off branch of the gathering," Petteway said.

"The term comes from the Dec. 22 return of the sun. It is an ancient festivity that encompasses all the traditions of the holiday season," Orr said.

"It really is a celebration of the time

of year," White said.

Petteway said they try not to cater specifically to Christians.

"It's interdenominational. That is why we call it a solstice. All the different cultures have some sort of celebration around the solstice," the musician said.

A Swannanoa Solstice opened in 2002 to a nearly sold-out evening performance.

"The next year, we had a waiting list, so we opened a matinee performance," Orr said.

The first shows featured performances by Petteway and White along with Robin Bullock.

Petteway said during the first show, they played in front of the curtain in Diana Wortham Theatre because "The Nutcracker" was also being performed that weekend, and they were not allowed to rearrange the set.

Eventually, they were allowed to open the curtain and use the show's Christmas tree as part of their performance.

"Since we are no longer playing the same weekend as 'The Nutcracker,' some volunteers and sponsors come and decorate with fresh greenery. They have done a great job, really wonderful. It's evolved into a big show, family event," White said.

White and Petteway said they both have been surrounded by music since they were young. "I started playing music when I was 10," Petteway said. "I started back when The Beatles were popular. I just wanted to be a Beatle."

White said both her parents were professional classical musicians, but she did not become a musician until later in her life.

"When we got together, I already had a following. We already had a foot in the door," Petteway said.

The pair plays a mix of Celtic and Appalachian-inspired music. "We mix a lot of instruments and get a lot of textures," the Grammy winner said. He and his wife also said most of their music is instrumental with few vocals.

Petteway and White received a grant from Warren Wilson College to photograph Asheville's mountains. The photos are included in a slide show during A Swannanoa Solstice.

Petteway said his favorite parts of the show are the more contemplative moments.

"Amy and I do a short set in both halves. We play really ancient tunes



photo courtesy of Irene Young

**The husband and wife musical duo, Al Petteway and Amy White, will be one of the performing artists at this year's A Swannanoa Solstice. Petteway is a Grammy-award winning artist. The event serves as a nondenominational seasonal celebration.**

that are almost spooky but beautiful to listen to. They are neat arrangements that go back to the 15th century. I enjoy playing that more. The big happy dance numbers are great for the audience," he said.

White said her favorite moments change from year to year.

"Sometimes it's the dancing or piping. It's fun to play with Robin, who we don't see a lot," she said.

"The idea is that it is a tapestry of

music, dance, storytelling, color and images of these mountains. I enjoy the whole picture of it," Orr said. "We try to include a message about peace and that we are all connected in this world and it is a fragmented time, but we should reach across cultures and connect with each other."

*A Swannanoa Solstice takes place on Dec. 19 at the Diana Wortham Theatre at 2 p.m. and 7 p.m.*