

Donna Hughes

Award-Winning Singer-Songwriter
Producer and Multi-Instrumentalist

Award-winning Singer-Songwriter **Donna Hughes** has written over 500 songs during her impressive career. She has albums produced by **Tony Rice** (***Gaining Wisdom***) and **J.D. Crowe** (***Hellos, Goodbyes & Butterflies***) both on the Rounder Records label. Her songs have been recorded by numerous artists throughout the years including “*My Poor Old Heart*” recorded by Alison Krauss & Union Station and performed during the CMA Awards Show in 2005.

Numerous other artists have recorded Donna’s original songs such as: The Seldom Scene, (“*Sad Old Train*” from the album *Scenelined*), Kati Penn, (“*Never Gonna Change*” from the album *My Turn To Cry*), Nu Blu (“*Nights*” from their album *Nights*), Darren Beachley (“*Scattered To The Wind*” from his album *I Love You To The Moon & Back*), and The Snyder Family Band (“*Little Bluebird*” from their *Comin’ On Strong* album).

“Whatever moves me, moves me to write,” she explains. For Hughes, songwriting is an all-consuming endeavor, encompassing all that goes on around her. “My songs are always about something I have seen, done, or felt – or something that I saw someone else do or go through. There is always truth to every song I write, even if it isn’t my truth.”

In 2014, Donna embarked on her biggest endeavor yet by producing and releasing not one, but two new albums in 2014. ***From the Heart*** is her bluegrass album and includes 19 original songs plus two cover songs. The album includes the talents of Scott Vestal (Banjo), Tim Stafford (Lead Guitar), Rob Ickes (Reso Guitar), Jenee Fleenor (Fiddle), Cory Piatt (Fiddle), Zak McLamb (Bass) and Lucas White (Rhythm Guitar).

The second album, ***Fly***, has certainly delighted Donna’s fans that love her piano music, with 8 original tunes, plus 4 cover songs. Donna is joined by Jenee Fleenor (Violin), John Catchings (Cello) and Mark Fain (Bass Violin).

Fifteen of her originals appear on her fourth career album released in 2010, ***Hellos, Goodbyes and Butterflies*** (Rounder) produced by the legendary J. D. Crowe. The album includes the talents of Barry Bales, Rob Ickes, Adam Steffee, Randy Kohs, Buddy Cannon, Melonie Cannon, Jenee’ Fleenor, Bryan Sutton, Scott Vestal, Aubrey Haynie, Joel Keys, Brian Stephens, and Maggie Stephens..

Donna also provided twelve original songs, along with two unique covers (including Cyndi Lauper’s “*Time After Time*” and the beautiful “*Find Me Out on a Mountain Top*” written by Tim Stafford, on ***Gaining Wisdom*** (Rounder Records), Hughes’ first nationally-released album, produced by the legendary Tony Rice, features contributions from an elite group of supporting

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musicians and harmony vocalists such as Alison Krauss, Mary Chapin Carpenter, Rhonda Vincent, Carl Jackson, and Alecia Nugent.

“In Donna,” Tony Rice says, “I heard something that was down to earth, with a definitive southern flavor to it. And yet there was something different about her voice and the way she structured her music that implied a more flexible, adventurous approach.” The resultant sound of *Gaining Wisdom* is deeply influenced by both Rice’s progressive acoustic sensibilities and Hughes’ own wide-ranging musical tastes.

“I love all genres and styles of music,” Hughes says. “My dad loved country and bluegrass, and we shared that. My mom is a classical pianist and loves classical and orchestral music. I loved Elvis when I was a little girl, while in college my friends were into Tori Amos. She is a big inspiration to me, as are Norah Jones, Vanessa Carlton, and John Mayer. Also, I’ve been teaching gymnastics since 1989, so I am forced to listen to whatever the kids and teenagers wanted to hear at the gym, which led to a fondness for reggae, rap, hip hop, and pop.”

All the while, Hughes cultivated a love of acoustic music born of hearing the bluegrass bands brought in to perform at her local church as she was growing up. Raised in a closely knit family in tiny Trinity, North Carolina, Hughes pursued music from an early age, picking out tunes on the family piano at age three and, in her words, “annoying my parents all through my childhood by singing all over the house! I never sang in front of an actual audience until 1996, in church – and I was scared to death. Around that time I started looking for places to sing. I would drive several hours to sing one cover song at a barn dance, or a country music hall. I sang every chance I got...”

Despite earning a B.A. in History and embarking on a career in real estate (with a sideline as a gymnastics coach), music was never far from her mind. She began writing and recording in earnest in 1996, cutting an album’s worth of songs that proved to be more of a learning experience than a career-builder. Continuing to write relentlessly, Hughes spent five years gathering material for her first bluegrass album, 2001’s *Somewhere in Time*. That album picked up word-of-mouth buzz and won her a devoted following among both bluegrass fans and critics, and was followed by the twenty-one track collection *Same Old Me* in 2003. Union Station bassist Barry Bales heard a track from *Same Old Me* on WNCW’s bluegrass program, and brought Hughes to the attention of Alison Krauss, who quickly became a fan of Hughes’ powerful, insightful songcraft.

The album also brought Tony Rice into the fold. “I was over at the home of my friends Steve and Kathi Fox,” he recalls, “and they had *Same Old Me* on the hi-fi. After a few songs, I had to

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ask ‘Who is that?’ The more I listened to her music that day, the more I heard in it. The idea of producing an album of hers intrigued me...As a performer, she has great flexibility. She could sit down at a really good Steinway at one venue, and the next night play guitar in front of a straight-ahead bluegrass band. This makes producing her a great challenge: you want to illuminate what is recognizable and classic about her music – to make clear her very strong ties to bluegrass – while remaining true to what is so special about Donna.”

“Shortly before Christmas of 2003,” Donna recalls, “I received a phone call out of the blue from Tony Rice. He asked if he could produce my next album...it amazed me at the time, because my car CD changer was filled with Tony Rice albums! It was such a welcome relief to get recognition from such an extraordinary musical hero, after all of my hard work.”

Despite the presence of a large selection of A-list musicians, it is Hughes’ versatility as a performer, coupled with her profound gifts as a writer that makes *Gaining Wisdom* such a consistent revelation. Hughes’ songs are emotional, yet are grounded in experience and reality – making them both moving and believable. *Gaining Wisdom* opens with the bittersweet “One More Time,” a song reflecting upon the happier days of a fading relationship, which features the harmony vocals of Alison Krauss and Mary Chapin Carpenter. “Through the years,” Hughes says, “I was heavily influenced and inspired by the music of Alison and Mary Chapin. I never dreamed that they would one day sing on my album.” The song boasts a relaxed rhythmic groove, which Rice feels elevates the resonant poetry of Hughes’ lyrics.

Songs like “*One More Time*” are complemented by more straight-forward bluegrass-leaning performances, such as “*Where Are You, Darlin’?*”, “*Scattered to the Wind*,” and the riveting “*Bottom of a Glass*.” The latter is one of Hughes’ most heartbreaking compositions, a stunningly fresh take on the dangers of alcoholism in which Hughes – rather than condemning her subject outright – creates a sympathetic portrait of a tragedy-bound young addict. “She has the rare ability,” raves Union Station bassist Barry Bales, “to take song topics that others have overdone and write about them from a new perspective.”

While Hughes is a strong rhythm guitarist, piano was her first instrument, and producer Rice was insistent that it play a part in ***Gaining Wisdom***. “Donna sent me demos of songs she’d written,” Rice recalls, “and sometimes she’d play them on the piano. Piano is not a standard bluegrass instrument, of course, but the more I heard her piano playing and how it colored her songs, the more I liked it and the more I felt it had to be heard on this album.”

Hughes learned to play classical piano by listening to her mother perform pieces by Bach and Beethoven and then learning them by ear. “I think being exposed to classical music has helped

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me to construct more innovative-sounding bluegrass chord progressions,” she remarks, “that is different from your run-of-the-mill three-chord patterned songs.” Her knack for composing in minor keys is immediately evident on the haunting “Father Time.” The subject of time’s passing is one that fascinates Hughes. “We are bound, motivated, and controlled by time,” she says. “I hope the dark sound of ‘Father Time’ might remind the listener to stop, and be more grateful of each moment, each day.”

Hughes sees different instruments as a means of stimulating different approaches and perspectives in her songs. “When I speak at songwriting workshops,” she says, “I like to tell people to write songs on as many different instruments as they can play. Write in a different room sometimes, or borrow someone else’s instrument. I get different ideas and feelings when I sit at the piano at Hilltop Studios in Nashville, than I do on my grandfather’s old piano at home.”

Her quest to continually uncover new perspectives is what makes Hughes so remarkable as both a writer and performer, and why she has been referred to by the renowned bluegrass/country writer and producer Carl Jackson as “One of the best new singer-songwriters in the world of bluegrass...” With fellow maverick Tony Rice at the helm, *Gaining Wisdom* makes a powerful statement from an artist who has only just begun her career.

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## **PERSONAL BIO**

Cum Laude Graduate of High Point University, she holds a B.A degree in History, and holds a Real Estate license in the state of North Carolina. Donna also has a love for gymnastics, a difficult but rewarding sport that for many years has proven to all who participate in it, that anything is possible if you work hard enough. She has coached many State and National Champions, and has worked with some of the greatest names in the sport. You will still find her coaching today, to stay in shape. Donna loves all the kids and parents in her “gym family.” Donna loves pets, and has 4 horses, two parakeets, a cat, and two beautiful basset hounds, all of which are very spoiled. An avid listener of all types of music, from Classical, R & B, Jazz, to Country, Bluegrass & Acoustic Music is where she feels most inspired. Donna acknowledges that her accomplishments are the result of having kind, supportive, unselfish parents, always encouraging & willing to sacrifice..... patient and motivating. Donna’s grandfather taught music lessons of all sorts from piano to guitar, and owned and operated a music conservatory many years ago. Donna’s mother learned from him and became very accomplished on piano. Donna’s mother has played for churches, weddings, and many other occasions. Donna learned how to

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play Classical music on the piano by listening to her mother play countless pieces from Bach to Beethoven, asking her to play them over & over again, to later play them back to her mother by ear. Donna feels her Classical music exposure has helped her ability to construct more innovative-sounding bluegrass, different from your run-of-the-mill three-chord patterned songs like many bluegrass songs have traditionally been. Once criticized for that, the difference in her song structure is now highly celebrated, as a song consisting of almost all minor chords was chosen by Alison Krauss.

A couple of weeks before Christmas 2005, Donna lost her father. Two days before Thanksgiving, Donna and her mother were devastated to find out that he had a very aggressive, late stage brain tumor. After he was initially diagnosed with a stroke, they were hit hard by this news. He only lived until December 11. December 20 would have been her parents' 35th Wedding Anniversary. Donna's dad had suffered from rheumatoid arthritis, a very painful condition, for 10 years. He was the most influential person in her life. Thomas Edwin Hughes, born October 11, 1937, had taught school for 30 years, served two terms on the Randolph County School Board, had been a well-known and successful auctioneer for 28 years, and had taught Sunday School at the small church named Westfield Baptist, since he was 11 years old. He had also been a farmer, who helped his parents out on a dairy farm while growing up. Donna's father was always cheerful, happy and friendly despite the pain he experienced constantly with his arthritis. He loved to sing, and went somewhere different almost every night to do so. Ed was known around his home as the "Singing Auctioneer." He was an inspiration to hundreds of people in the community, as he continued to work, and be a vital part of society regardless of his illness. Donna wrote a song about her Daddy entitled "Simple Man," which was on her first self-produced album, "Somewhere In Time." Although her dad will not get to see the album come out, she had played the new version of the song for him a great deal of times. Carl Jackson and Sonya Isaacs did the most fantastic harmony on the song. Donna is so proud of all of her father's accomplishments. Her new album will be dedicated to the loving memory of her dad. A strong man who often donated his time & money - often for charity. He was always telling everybody about Donna and her music, everywhere he went. Just like her song says, "He's always kind to strangers, and he's always kept his word." Life will not be the same without him, but Donna has already begun to capture her pain, and remember the happy times she had with him in song.

**Barry Bales**, bass player for **Alison Krauss & Union Station** said, "Good things turn up in the strangest places. One rare fall Saturday at home, I was listening to "Goin' Across the Mountain", a bluegrass show on WNCW out of Spindale, NC. I don't remember what I was doing exactly. I

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do remember that all-of-a-sudden, I was drawn to the song being played on the radio enough to stop whatever it was. I've listened to and played bluegrass music as long as I can remember – I thought I knew everybody. But this was something fresh, sung by a voice I hadn't heard before. I immediately got on the phone to DJ Dennis Jones and asked who that was I had just heard. He informed me that it was Miss Donna Hughes from the great state of North Carolina, and this was a CD she had put out herself, having written every song on it. Well now. It just so happened that our band was about to head into the studio to begin a new project and we needed some material. This one could definitely work.”

“After getting her number, I called and left a message asking her to send me all the material she had. I wasn't prepared for what I received. Not one, but 3 CD's full of great new songs written by Donna. Donna's songs are a wonderful breath of fresh air in the world of bluegrass today. She has the rare ability to take song topics that others have overdone and write about them from a new perspective. Even songs about lost love are given new life at her hand. Donna also has a particular gift for writing songs that bridge the gap between “traditional” and “contemporary” content. Very few bluegrass listeners of today were born in a cabin or raised plowing with mules, but a lot of our parents and grandparents were.”

“A number of the songs Donna writes speak of a young, modern generation with close ties to rural life of the past. This is a particular segment of the modern bluegrass listener/performer population that Donna represents well. You may reasonably expect to find CD's from Coldplay and Brad Paisley in their collection next to one from Larry Sparks. She also brings that sensibility to her performing style. She has an easy, almost conversational vocal delivery. And the addition of her piano playing is an appropriate extension of her vision and tastes – embracing the musical world of today while keeping closely rooted in tradition. It is my sincere hope that work such as this from Donna Hughes becomes much more prevalent in bluegrass and acoustic music. The music and the listener will both be better for it. Enjoy.”