

Great camp meeting

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If you drafted a list of Mid-Missouri's living legends, Cathy Barton and Dave Para would be somewhere near the top.

The pair has done as much for folk music as just about anyone in the region — or in many regions, for that matter. They founded — and still guide — the Big Muddy Folk Festival, which recently enjoyed its 26th go-round.

As performers, they have kept folk traditions alive, bringing a vitality and warmth to music that, in some cases, dates back close to two centuries.

All folk music is personal music, and Barton and Para play each song as if they've lived it. But the pair's latest release is a different kind of labor of love, one that celebrates music-making friends as much as the music itself.

"Carp Fishing in Missouri" — the title is more resonant than it sounds, as I'll explain — technically contains 17 tracks, but many of those cuts unite tunes that are kindred spirits geographically, spiritually or otherwise, organizing them into medleys.

Folk music can be seen as a self-serious pursuit. So in this case, it is a great idea to judge the record by its cover — Barton and Para further ground themselves in Missouri tradition and show off a silly side in what they call an "odd homage" to George Caleb Bingham's iconic 1845 painting "Fur Traders Descending the Missouri." Barton lounges with her banjo in the middle of a canoe, while a stocking cap-donning Para rows the vessel with his guitar.

What's inside the album is a little more sober-minded, yet no less spirited or friendly. The title references Carp Camp, a jam session held at the well-regarded Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kan. The tunes Barton and Para selected here — and the guests they welcome into the fold — are meant to evoke the family feel of that event.

Barton plays hammered dulcimer and banjo throughout; Para handles guitar and bones. Both sing at times, though much of the album is instrumental. The pair invited a dozen or so guest players to join in, several of them Carp Camp regulars.

In the album's liner notes, Barton and Para explain their connection to the tune and/or its players. Some of the material, and some of these partnerships, have been part of their lives as far back as the 1970s or '80s.

A few tender ballads populate the landscape, but the record is dominated by dance tunes. The strains heard here belong to pre-Civil War tunes, Canadian fiddle tunes, Irish standards, waltzes and pieces that are specifically of Missouri. The picking is all prolific without sounding overly technical, and the harmonies — where they might be found — are thick and warm like musical black coffee.

Most who listen to "Carp Fishing in Missouri" will never make it to Carp Camp. Nor can we go back and visit the old Irish countryside or take a steamboat down the Mississippi. But that is the point of folk music, and what makes its players like Barton and Para so special. They keep this music living, and keep us engaged, by whisking us away to times and places that start to feel like our own. This record is a great camp meeting held under a big tent. You can go back there whenever you wish.

