Governor Beshear presents the prestigious 2020 Milner Award to folksinger Michael Johnathon

• Joining past recipients and legendary Kentuckians including Wendell Berry, James Still, Jean Ritchie, Homer Ledford and many others, Gov. Beshear and the Kentucky Arts Council present the prestigious 2020 MILNER Award to folksinger Michael Johnathon.

• The Milner Award is the most prestigious of the Governor's Awards for the Arts

(ITEM\_Nov, 2020) Folksinger Michael Johnathon is a songwriter, poet, author, screenwriter of the Caney Creek motion picture about Alice Lloyd, playwright of the Walden play performed over 9,000 times in 42 countries, composed the traditional opera about Woody Guthrie and community organizer, launching the national association of front porch musicians called SongFarmers, with over 75 active chapters nationwide.

"What an incredible honor," says Johnathon. "I am humbled and sincerely moved and I want to think Governor Beshear and the Kentucky Arts Council. To stand in the company of Wendell Berry, James Still, Jesse Stewart, my friends Jean Richie, Homer Ledford and so many other proud artists of Kentucky, it is deeply moving and I am more than grateful."

Broadcasting on over 500 radio stations, nationwide on public television including KET, American Forces Radio in 177 nations and every military facility in the world, coast to coast on the RFD TV Network and in schools across America his live audience celebration of grassroots music, the “WoodSongs Old-Time Radio Hour” recently recorded its historic 1,000th program from the Lyric Theatre in Lexington. WoodSongs is unique in the world of radio and television in that it is completely volunteer run.

WoodSongs has attracted everyone from Judy Collins, Roger McGuinn, Norah Jones, Blind Boys of Alabama, Emmylou Harris and scores of others to the bluegrass to appear on the show.

WoodSongs has brought the spirit of Kentucky to radio and TV around the globe and the live audience broadcast has been produced in theatres from Arkansas to Ireland and from its home base at the Lyric Theatre in Lexington. WoodSongs now has a major display for the public at the Kentucky Music Hall of Fame at Renfro Valley.

"Of all the honors and awards any artist can receive, it is the ones from the home community that mean the most," says Johnathon from his Bourbon county log cabin home. "It is the acceptance and encouragement of friends and neighbors that are the fuel for any artist … especially now. Because so much of what I do is community and volunteer run, the award helps validate the heart and spirit of so many that make artistic efforts become reality.

An adventurous performer, Michael recently filmed a concert special for public television, public radio stations across the country and the RFD TV Network with The Ohio Valley Symphony called “Songs of Rural America,” celebrating the music of America’s front porch.

Among his many artistic efforts includes the long running, all volunteer Troubadour Concert Series that presented scores of national level artists from Bill Monroe to Joan Baez, BB King to Mary Stuart and more at several venues in Kentucky including the historic Castle in Versailles, supported by Highbridge Spring Water.

A long time resident of Kentucky, Michael grew up along the Hudson River in upstate New York. One of his neighbors was legendary songwriter Pete Seeger, who encouraged Michael move to the heart of America’s folk music in Appalachia. After settling in the mountain hamlet of Mousie, Kentucky, he began his career traveling nation singing about tradition and the environment called “Earth Concerts” in over 4,000 schools in 14 states.

But it is in Kentucky that he found his greatest platform for art and music.

**“Kentucky is the Rocking Chair of America’s Front Porch”**

"Kentucky is one of the most fertile artistic gardens in America, it is the rocking chair of America’s front porch" he explains. "Can you even imagine being in such legendary company? And look at the fertile garden of artists so deserving of an award like this: JD Crowe, Silas House, Bobby Ann Mason, Nikki Finney, Ron Whitehead, Loretta Lynn, Frank X Walker, the McLain Family Band, Loyal Jones, Everett McCorvey ... the list is brilliant and endless. The role of every artist is to SHARE their stage, SHARE their spotlight and SHARE their audience with fellow artists to keep the Kentucky musical garden growing strong. I believe the power and spirit of Kentucky’s front porch has had great influence worldwide. I believe the brightest spotlight shines on our own living room couch and the greatest audiences are your own children and family. My job as a folksinger is to bring excitement and pride to the greatest of those simple traditions."

Regarding the ARTS and the importance of maintaining the relevance of artistic spirit during the age of COVID, Michael Johnathon has specific thoughts:

Henry David Thoreau said, “To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts.” The arts are the spirit of Kentucky’s “front porch,” the fuel behind the economy, tourism and education. The arts reflect more than a livelihood, it is the reflection of the quality of life Kentucky offers people worldwide.

When asked if he would remove the Arts from the budget to support the War effort, Winston Churchill looked at the reporter and said, “Then what on earth are we fighting for?” The arts aren’t a minor line item, it is as vital as an investment as roads and infrastructure, because it makes people WANT to travel those roads, to WANT to visit Kentucky and enjoy everything our Commonwealth has to offer.

John F Kennedy said, “The arts incarnate the creativity of a free people.” In an era of isolation and frustration, the arts free the human spirit in the ways that transcend politics and economics. It is the poetic wings of the human spirit. It’s not just songs and book, painting and dancing … the arts are the ultimate expression of all the freedoms we enjoy in Kentucky.

In addition to creating and producing WoodSongs, Michael tours America in concert, has released 18 albums, published 5 books, with more on the way. His latest album, The Painter will be released nationwide in February 2021. He resides in a log cabin in rural Bourbon county near Lexington.