



Rachel Thompson/News-Register

Joey McKenzie plays his mandolin during a recording session at Rorschach Studio in McMinnville, which is owned by his longtime friend Keith Sommers, right, who is in the background with another old friend, Jon Sherwood, who is making an EP of several new country influenced songs.

Stopping by



Outside Rorschach Studio, owner Keith Summers reminisces with fellow musicians, Joey McKenzie (center) and Jon Sherwood (right). The three men grew up together in McMinnville and have continued their passion for music all of their lives, McKenzie as a Western swing performer, Sherwood as a musician and music teacher and Somers as a producer and recording engineer.

Music in three players time

Reunion of friends, brings back music made right – by Starla Pointer/News-Register

Although they've been friends and admired one another's musical talents since they were students in McMinnville decades ago, Jon Sherwood, Keith Summers and Joey McKenzie had never played all on the same project. That's changed recently as they've been working to record several of Sherwood's songs, which he hopes to release as an EP through his website, JonSherwoodInSherwood.com [new website: JonSherwoodMusic.com].

In addition to writing the music and lyrics, Sherwood sings and plays guitar on the tracks, which includes *Since You're Gone* and *Will You Still Love Me*. McKenzie plays mandolin and fiddle. He is renowned Western swing musician who spends time in his hometown when he's not touring and performing all over the country. Summers is a seasoned record producer and recording engineer. He plays on the songs, as well.

Their collaboration was inspired last year when Sherwood spent some time reminiscing with McKenzie. They traded tales of their days in Don Boudin's music classes at Memorial Elementary School and Dennis Saunders' choir room at McMinnville Junior High. Sherwood's first experiences with vocal jazz were in Saunders' Pony Express vocal group, for instance.

When the two old friends got around to talking about current projects, Sherwood sang his newly penned *Make It Right*. McKenzie, a 1981 MHS grad, said he realized Sherwood had found a new path for his storytelling. "I was super impressed when I heard him sing live," McKenzie said. "The words, the chords, the message... Jon found his calling writing music." To his buddy, he repeated, "I think you've found something great." McKenzie, who is based in Burleson, Texas, knew he'd be back in McMinnville this summer with his wife, Sherry. So he agreed to lend his skills to Sherwood's recording. Where else to do that but Rorschach Recording Studio, which is run by Sommers. "I played *IMake It Right* for Keith, and he was like, 'That's it,'" Sherwood recalled.

Sommers' studio is located downtown near US Bank, with a nondescript entrance off Fourth Street. He has recorded and produced many musicians there, from James La Rocca to Jerry Naylor to We Three and others. He also has worked with recording for school groups such as the Twilighters and, when Sherwood was teaching at Cook Elementary School, a children's choir. Recently, he recorded Dana Libonati's big band music featured in the June segment of the Keynote Concert Series.

Summers is several years younger than McKenzie and Sherwood; he's a 1987 Mac High graduate. But he already was an exceptional musician in junior high when he and Sherwood met; McKenzie, his neighbor, had heard him playing even earlier. Sherwood was 20 when he first heard Sommers at an event at Brady Woodcock's house. "Keith Blew my mind on guitar," Sherwood said. Their paths crossed often afterward, and they frequently played together with other local musicians.

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McKenzie also shared the stage or jammed with Sommers at times although he, Sommers and Sherwood never took the stage together. McKenzie and Sherwood did, though, many times. When both were in high school, they played together in a trio with another of their classmates. Their group performed rock tunes and songs by popular artists such as Joe Jackson – the 1979 New Wave hit *Is She Really Going Out With Him?*, was a favorite.” We did school talent shows with our shades on, in huge white bel-bottoms,” Sherwood said, recalling the popular fashions of the day. Although their paths diverged after graduation, music bonded the two for life.

Sherwood is the grandson of one of the University of Oregon’s first music graduates, Flavia Sherwood. All four of his grandparents played music, he said. His dad, Jerry, was a teacher and assistant superintendent in the McMinnville School District. He has had a variety of jobs since the days he played music and participated in sports at Mac High. He’s done ministerial work, performed standup and sketch comedy, worked as a waiter and taught music at several elementary schools, including Faulconer-Chapman in Sheridan and the old Cook Elementary in McMinnville. He’s kept performing over the years, too, usually singing pop and rock songs. These days, “I make music mainly for the joy of it,” Sherwood said.

McKenzie, who said he considers himself “to be the luckiest guy in the world,” has been playing music since he was 11 or 12. “I made kid money in junior high” with music, he said. He mastered guitar, mandolin and other instruments, then picked up the fiddle at 17. Even as a teen, he quickly was becoming a well-known, well-respected player and studio musician on the Western swing circuit. “I was enamored with Western swing, with musicians like Bob Willis,” he said, recalling his admiration of the performer and bandleader known as “The king of Western Swing.” McKenzie knew he would make music as a career. “I had no plan B,” he said, amazed now about his early confidence. “I bought an old Caddie for \$00 in McMinnville, and drove it to Texas four times to play,” he said. When a band there offered him a job as its second fiddler, he stayed in Texas and picked up other gigs, as well. Western Swing was more appreciated in Texas than in Oregon at the time, he said, so he was able to make a living playing dance halls and other shows. He also improved his skills and learned more about all musical genres during his time there. “Most working musicians have that perfectionist personality,” McKenzie said. “I shoot for perfect, but I’ll take excellent.” Next month, McKenzie and the Western Flyers will play at the World’s Fair in Osaka, Japan. He said he is excited about his first tour in Japan.

Music also bonded them to their younger friend, Sommers, who was equally passionate. Sommers said he started playing the bar circuit about the time he met Sherwood and other local musicians. He recalled performing in a Christian rock festival that Sherwood organized on Baker Field about 1983; he would have been 14. He took a few side jobs as a finish carpenter in his early 20s. But Sommers said he’s been dedicated to making music full time since he was 25, both as a player and a producer helping other musicians. He took a few side jobs as a finish carpenter in his early 20s. But Sommers said he’s been dedicated to making music full time since he was 25, both as a player and a producer helping other musicians. Sommers has played with several bands, including Dance Hall Days. Another of his bands, Lowcraft, was signed with the Sony Music recording company from 1998 to 2001, and toured in Europe. Lowcraft’s music is still available on Spotify. “Really, music is all I’ve ever done,” he said. “I’m blessed to do it.”

In late June, McKenzie, Sommers and Sherwood gathered in Sommers’ studio to work on *Make It Right*.” It was the first time they had worked together. They took time to reminisce, compare notes on their experiences over the years, and talk about the equipment they like using. McKenzie strummed on one of Sommers’ stringed instruments. “That’s a sweet guitar,” he said approvingly. “I had it rethreaded, but never got around to fixing it,” Somers said, pointing out some cosmetic damage. They turned their attention to another instrument, a resonator guitar or Dobro, hanging on the wall. The unusual looking guitar features a round metal plate on the front. Sommers described how he came to own it. “I inherited that,” he said, recalling how a friend “just showed up” and gave it to him. That prompted McKenzie to tell the story of his first mandolin, which his parents had made for him when he was 13. He still plays the same mandolin, made by George Smith of Portland. In fact, it’s the one heard on Sherwood’s new music. Sommers said he admires McKenzie’s expertise with the mandolin. He’s played the instrument, as well, but “I always just cheated,” he said, downplaying his talents. “If you ever get one, I’ll show you some things,” McKenzie offered. That led to stories of the fiddle camp in Montana, where McKenzie, his wife and his band, the Western Flyers, recently taught. The annual camp always sells out fast, the fiddler said; this year, it was so popular, organizers added an extra week.

The engineer turned to this computerized mixer, which can blend multiple tracks to make a recording sound right. He showed how McKenzie’s mandolin, recorded a few days earlier, brightened the other layers of the music on the song *Make It Right*. Other tracks in the mix included drums played by Josh Humlie of We Three. The next step, Sommers said, would be adding another track with McKenzie’s fiddle. “You build it up as you go,” Somers said, explaining that for this project, he recorded Sherwood’s vocals and acoustic guitar first, then Humlie’s drums, finally the other guitars and McKenzie’s instruments. Some tracks were recorded in one take; others took several. “Unexpected, cool things can happen,” Sommers said. My job is to get to know the people and make them comfortable so I can get the best out of them,” he said. “When it sounds great, you’re done.” As he played the recording-in-process again, Sherwood’s voice could be heard above the instruments.

*I am, I am, I've been a wanderer
You are, by far, you are my home,
I never want to lose, lose your grace
I want your voice to never fade, never fade...
I want to make it right...*