

# Traveling the Bittersweet Highway together

By Don Benjamin, Staff Writer

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As Rene Janiece and Wayne McKinzie prepared for their 2011 wedding in northern New Mexico, things were rolling smoothly along—like a well-planned road trip. Then, two weeks before the ceremony, they encountered a pothole. The wedding band cancelled and the couple couldn't find a replacement. Such a last minute dilemma might have derailed an ordinary couple but it was just a minor bump for the musically gifted pair.

The two had been playing music and singing for much of their lives, but not together. Faced with the possibility of not having live music at their reception, they figured they might as well see what they could do.

"We spent those two weeks learning seven songs to play together," recalled Rene.

"And we figured, hey, we're the bride and groom," said Wayne. "It's not like they're going to throw us out."

2011 turned out to be a watershed year for the couple. As if getting married wasn't spectacular enough, it was also the year they realized that—in addition to making beautiful music together—they could actually make beautiful music, together.

They began attending open microphone venues and six months later, began writing their own original music which they have come to call "Borderland Americana." The first song they wrote together is "All Alone Blues" which was written from Wayne's perspective when Rene was miles away traveling and teaching medical massage classes.

But once they had decided to perform together, a vital question arose: what should they call their duo? Rene had a sizeable list of words that she kept combining and revising and recombining. At first they latched onto a completely appropriate name and billed themselves as "Just Married." Their search for a musical identity continued until, several songs and performances later, the name "Bittersweet Highway" rose to the top of their list.

Why "Bittersweet?"

"Life in general is bittersweet," Rene explained. "Even when things are really good, there's always just a tinge of melancholy." Furthermore, bittersweet is also the name of

a Midwestern vine that has always fascinated her. "It's very beautiful," she said, "but also incredibly poisonous."

As for the "highway" part, both Wayne and Rene have always found solace and inspiration while driving along the back roads of wherever they find themselves. Those insightful rural influences are reflected in Rene's lyrics and in Wayne's music and his paintings. Often the couple drives for miles in silence on rural roads, each lost in their own thoughts. And many of their songs are found this way. Sometimes the chords come first, sometimes the lyrics, as the couple collaborates to produce a finished song.

The couple is abundantly talented. Rene sings and plays upright bass and guitar. Wayne plays percussion, saxophone, guitar, and "just about anything strum-able." Together, their sound is a blend of many styles that merge to create something fresh and original.

Apart from music, Rene is a massage therapist and instructor. Wayne is a fine art painter who went to school on a football scholarship. And, although music is a big part of his life, it's not what he wants to listen to when working in the studio.

"I always have music playing in my head," Wayne explains, "And listening to someone else's music distracts me from finding my own."

And speaking of finding one's own, although their married and musical lives are now entwined in collaboration, it took a while for this talented pair to get together. In fact, they were 800 miles apart when their modern romance began in 2006. That year it was suggested that Wayne investigate specialized training for massage therapists working with his not-for-profit organization in Fort Worth, Texas. The company he contacted was one where Rene was teaching. Their initial conversations, which were all business, took place by telephone and email.

Fast-forward eight months and the two finally met in person at a national oncology massage conference in Toledo, Ohio. Though it would be some time before romance came into the equation, it ultimately did, and eventually the question became where would they live?

Rene wanted Wayne to move to Colorado and—for emphasis—the second song that Bittersweet Highway wrote together chronicles this story. It is called "Should've Come to Colorado." But Wayne didn't, giving rise to the song's alternative title which their fans fondly refer to as "The Butthead Song."

In the end, Rene went to Texas.

They spent two years together in Fort Worth but the city environment wasn't for them so in 2010 they moved to New Mexico. They settled north of Taos, which would eventually become the scene of their 2011 wedding and their first command performance as a musical bride and groom. Later, they moved across the border to the tiny southern Colorado town of Jaroso (population 13) where their love and their love of music continued to blossom.

Using Jaroso as a base, they toured with their music including an appearance six years ago at Cedaredge's Applefest celebration. Since that first local concert, they've returned every year and their time in Cedaredge led to performances at other town venues and eventually to opening for singer-songwriter Dana Cooper at the new Grand Mesa Arts & Events Center (GMAEC) in July 2018.

"Traveling here and performing here over time we got to know so many people," recalls Rene. "And we found the community very supportive and welcoming. We made good friends here."

So it came as no surprise to their new friends that the couple relocated to Cedaredge last year. As new residents, they are settling in nicely. They have become regulars at community gathering places and local events. Wayne's artwork is on exhibit this month at the GMAEC art gallery. Rene is pursuing her therapy work in the unique specializations of oncology massage, manual lymphatic drainage, and vibrational sound therapy. Currently she's in the process of opening a treatment space in Cedaredge's Millennium Wellness building at 175 East Main Street.

And soon Bittersweet Highway will be on tour again as it branches out to regional venues. On March 30, Wayne and Rene will perform at the Creamery Arts Center in Hotchkiss with tickets at the door for the 7:30 p.m. concert or in advance through [brownpapertickets.com](http://brownpapertickets.com). In May, they will appear at the KAFM Radio Room in Grand Junction.

Reflecting on the journey that brought them to Cedaredge, Rene said, "We love it here. The roads less traveled are where the stories are."



Singing in the Rain. For years, the musical duo of Rene Janiece and Wayne McKinzie performed in Cedaredge as 'Bittersweet Highway.' Over time they formed lasting friendships and attachments to the community which inspired them to move to town in 2018. Photo by Don Benjamin