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MUSICAL ALUM PLAYS HER WAY TO TIKTOK FAME

CAROLINE SCRUGGS '14 ELEVATES RARE INSTRUMENT TO SOCIAL MEDIA STARDOM.

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | December 4, 2024*Read time: about 2 min*

Caroline Scruggs is TikTok famous. Not for recipes or fashion, but for playing a little-known instrument called the theremin.

She has mesmerized viewers worldwide by literally out of thin air producing beautiful tunes on the hands-free music maker.

“It’s kind of crazy,” she admits.

So far, her musical posts have racked up more than 10 million views. Scruggs never expected her fame on social media. But then again, she never imagined she would become a thereminist (theremin player).

It all happened very serendipitously.

Scruggs ‘14 majored in [music](#) with a focus on classical vocal performance at CNU and had aspirations of taking her talent to Broadway.

“I worked really, really hard and got a very good vocal foundation,” she said.

But the universe had a different plan for Scruggs. In 2017, on a family trip to Arizona, Scruggs discovered the theremin while visiting a musical instrument museum. She immediately fell in love with the electronic instrument – so much so that the classically-trained musician decided to take her music dreams in an alternative direction.

“At first, I was terrible at it. It’s an extremely difficult instrument to play. Yet, something just clicked in me,” she said. “Playing it felt almost like a second voice to me.”

Scruggs set out on a mission to master the theremin. She taught herself how to play it, leaning heavily on YouTube videos to help. She also turned to the foundations of her Christopher Newport education to help her conquer an instrument that looks like it’s straight out of a sci-fi movie.

To play the theremin, musicians wave their hands in front of two antennas located on either side. The hand distance from one antenna determines pitch and the other volume. What drew Scruggs to it was its unique sound that resembles someone singing.

The instrument was invented in 1920 by Russian physicist Lev Sergeyevich Termen, known by his western counterparts as Leon Theremin, and its history is rooted in Soviet research on proximity sensors.

Despite the challenges and frustration the theremin presented, Scruggs was not willing to give up. She was focused on figuring it out.

“It was an obsession from the beginning,” she said. “I knew it was my instrument.”

Scruggs has made a name for herself in the musical world, creating buzz around an instrument that has never gained much national traction. Her fan base on TikTok and [YouTube](#) continues to expand, and her posts recently caught the attention of the Central Ohio Symphony, which happened to be on the hunt for a theremin player. She connected with the symphony, and recently performed the world premiere of [Linda Kernohan’s Theremin Concerto](#).

“It was incredible,” said Scruggs, who also recently released her first album, [“Space.”](#)

For Scruggs, a multi-instrumentalist, songwriter and creative educator, being able to play the theremin elevates her musical resume to a whole new level. Not to mention, it brings her immeasurable joy.

“It sounds like a voice, an other-worldly voice. Visually, it’s very striking. The way I move my hands looks like I’m casting a spell. It makes everyone do a double take,” she said. “It feels very magical. It makes people feel a little bit of wonder. To be able to foster wonder is everything to me.”

The theremin, she said, turned out to be “my destiny.”

And her CNU education turned out to be the building blocks on which she has built her musical success. Her training as a Captain provided the confidence she needed to venture into different musical territories.

“It gave me the foundation I needed to go out in the world and become fluent in music,” she said.

“It taught me the importance of discipline, of being prepared. It definitely prepared me in really great ways. I am a real life example that anything is possible. You don’t have to do it the conventional way.”
