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THE OLD-TIME HERALD

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO OLD-TIME MUSIC

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Letters

Update to Helton's Discography

The other day I picked up three of fiddler Osey Helton’s Broadway label records from 1924. In your discography (“Whip the Devil Round the Stump, More Stories from the Helton Brothers,” by Bob Carlin, OTH vol. 10, no. 10), you are missing two of the six titles that were done the same day with continuous master numbers. Master numbers 2118-2123, are: 5120 – CRACKLIN’ HEN (mx) 2150-1, and 5121- ARKANSAW TRAVELER (mx) 2151-1. As with the other records, there is no real catalogue number but just the master numbers themselves. My guess is that these were private records for Helton himself, and all of the sides are first takes. As private records, these are very rare, since such recordings were pressed up in very limited quantities, perhaps 50-100 copies.

I have had many Broadway label records of every label type and description over 45 years of collecting, and this is the first time that I have seen something like this with no real catalogue number. It is also unusual that they seem to have been recorded for Broadway records. In the 1921-1935 period, from which these came, they usually listed records from many different labels, but did very little recording themselves.

I hope this input helps.

Henry Schmidt

mp3 Survey Thanks

I would like to thank everyone that participated in the mp3 Survey that we advertised online with the help of the Old Time Herald. The survey will be used in a future article covering the history of audio technology and how it has changed for the old time musician/consumer- from the earliest cylinders to modern digital capability. We appreciate your input.

Ron Cole
Here & There

Events

The Fourth Dare to be Square – West, the square dance callers’ workshop that began in NC, will take place this year in Portland, OR, on Oct. 25-28. Featured callers and bands are Phil Jamison, Bill Martin, and Foghorn Stringband. Info: Caroline Oakley, 503-282-8091, or Bill Martin, www.bubbaguitar.com/d2bs/.

The Southern Mountain Square Dance, sponsored by the Blacksburg (VA) Old-Time Music and Dance Group, has been putting on community square dances since 1981. The Fall 2007 schedule includes the following callers and bands: Oct. 6 - Nancy Mamlin and Uncle Henry’s Favorites, with fiddler Jim Childress; Nov. 3 – Tom Hinds and the Carolina Catbirds, with fiddler Shay Garriock; and Dec. 1 - Beverly Smith and the Dandy Tones with fiddler Jerry Correll. All dances are held at 8:00-11:00 PM in Blacksburg, VA. Info is at www.nrot.org.

The Charlotte Folk Society will present Jim Lloyd and Friends in concert at 7:30 PM on Nov. 9 in the Bryant Recital Hall, Sloan-Morgan Building, 1220 Elizabeth Ave., CPCC Central Campus, Charlotte, NC. Refreshments, jam sessions and a song circle follow the concert. Visit www.folksociety.org for details.

The annual Mountaineer Week Appalachian Fiddle Contest will be held Nov. 3 at 7:30 PM in the Gluck Theater in the Mountainlair at West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV. Registration is at 6:30 PM the day of the contest. Info: 304-293-2702; http://mountaineerweek.wvu.edu.

Jams

The Mountain Music Jam, for many years at Mrs. Hyatt’s house on Brevard Rd. outside Asheville, NC, has been moved to the Western North Carolina Farmers’ Market, held on Sat. from 2:00-5:00 PM. Info: John Roten 828-456-8661.

Organizations

This summer the Southern Folklife Collection at UNC-Chapel Hill received the archives of the Carter Family Fold, Hiltons, VA. Director Steve Weiss tells us that the newly acquired collection contains recordings of thousands of live performances made at the Fold from the
early 1980s to the present, including numerous performances by the extended Carter Family. Southern Folklife Collection www.lib.unc.edu/mss/sfc1/.

The Brandywine Friends of Old Time Music, in the Wilmington, DE, area, has some great old-time concerts coming up. On Nov. 16, there will be a tribute to Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers with the Orpheus Supertones and the New North Carolina Ramblers. On Dec. 14, there will be a concert with Adam Hurt and Beth Hartness. Info: 302-475-3454, www.brandywinefriends.org.

The Blue Ridge Music Hall of Fame will hold its first induction on June 13, 2008, at the Walker Center at Wilkes Community College in Wilkesboro, NC. The Hall of Fame will be housed in the second floor of the Wilkes Heritage Museum in the restored courthouse in downtown Wilkesboro. The Hall of Fame will honor those involved with any kind of music were born or who were active in the Blue Ridge area from GA to VA. Info: Nicole Thompson Perkins 336-667-3171, www.wilkesheritagemuseum.com.

On the Air, Film

Musician and fiddle maker Joe Thrift will appear on PBS’s the Woodwright’s Shop with host Roy Underhill on Nov. 10. Joe will also be playing some old-time music along with Kelly Breidling, Nick McMillan, and Tom Riccio. For more info, check Joe’s new website: www.josephthriftviolins.com.

New River is a musical documentary directed and produced by Tom Sims, about North Carolina’s Campbell and Brooks families (that included Ola Belle Reed and Guy Brooks of the Red Fox Chasers). It will be broadcast on Public TV WHYY’s Arts Comcast Cable Channel (date TBA). Info: www.abovethelinefilms.com.

Artists and Recordings

Here are some of the upcoming performances of Bob Bovee and Gail Heil this Fall. Oct. 19 - South Dakota Friends of Old Time Music in Sioux Falls, SD; Oct. 20 - Gayville Hall in Gayville, SD; Oct. 21 – Omaha Folksong Society and a Fiddle Workshop for the Big Muddy Fiddle Club; Nov. 2 - Rhein River Arts Center in New Ulm, MN; Nov. 3 - Bothy Folk Club in Mankato, MN; Nov. 10 – Box Factory in St. Joseph, MN. Nov. 17 - Hickory Ridge Coffeehouse at Dickson Mounds State Park near Havana,

The Double Decker String Band will be playing at the Waterford Fair, Waterford, VA, Oct. 6-7. Info: www.doubledeckerstringband.com.

Kirk Sutphin and the New Carolina Ramblers will be playing at the National Folk Festival in Richmond, VA, on Oct. 13. On Nov. 18 they will be at the Brandywine Friends of Old Time Music, Newark, DE. Info: www.nationalfolkfestival.com, www.brandywinefriends.org.

Alan Friend’s CD, Had a Dog, features well-known as well as less common old-time songs and tunes. Alan sings, plays banjo and guitar, concertina, and is joined by several members of New York City’s Chelsea String Band. Listen to clips and order at www.cdbaby.com.

There is a new CD, Bubbalon by Bass, put together by friends of bass player Dave Grant, who was killed in a tragic accident in March, 2002, at the age of 46. James Leva, writes in the introduction, “This collection highlights a number of some of the best front and melody guys” in the roots music world. These singers and players loved Dave Grant’s musical vision and delighted in his groove and sophisticated and eclectic rhythmic and harmonic vocabularies. When passing through Charlottesville they would accompany Dave to the studio and have fun....” The sessions have been compiled into a CD, which includes such musicians as Peter Rowan, Dave Matthews, Tim O’Brien, Dirk Powell, and many others. Anyone interested in finding out more about the CD can go to www.bubbalonbybass.com.

Congratulations

Fiddler Joe Thompson of Mebane, NC, was honored in his home state by Senate Joint Resolution 1569 for his and his cousin, the late Odell Thompson’s musical accomplishments. On July 30, friends and supporters gathered in the NC Senate Gallery for the public reading of the special legislative resolution, authored by Senator Tony Foriest (D-Alamance), to honor Joe for his lifetime achievements in music and the performing arts. Info: 919-733-7928; www.ncga.state.nc.us/homePage.pl.

Among those winning ribbons at the 40th Annual Grayson County Fiddlers’ Convention at Elk Creek, VA, June 23-24, were the following. Old-Time Music releases independently produced by devoted musicians. That’s why The Old-Time Music Home Page opened an online CD store where you can get more of those hard-to-find recordings – and the musicians can sell their music without paying a hefty commission. Isn’t that the way the Old-Time Music community should work?


Congratulations to banjo player Rebekah Weiler, 21, who was the first woman to win first place in old-time banjo in the 36-year history of the Smithville Fiddlers Jamboree, Smithville, TN. Her winning tune was “Snowdrop.”


Final Notes

Banjo player Aaron Chaucley Overton, Jr., (known to family and friends as A. C.) passed away on July 27. A. C. was born in 1924 in Granville County, North Carolina, though a tobacco blight soon sent the family south to Chatham County. His father and uncle played the banjo and his mother sang many old songs and ballads. When he was a boy, A. C. learned to play the banjo from his father and uncle. Though his style was rooted in a pre-bluegrass two-finger picking style once popular throughout much of North Carolina, A. C. made it his own: he attacked the strings in both directions with his thumb and “doubled up” on his up-strokes with his index finger creating an unbroken waterfall of notes surrounding the melody. Though he was cheerfully game to play just about any kind of music—“You Gotta See Your Mama Every Night” was a favorite—A. C. always loved the old tunes and songs he had learned in his youth, such as “House Carpenter,” “Railroad,” and “Going to the Army.”

A. C. will always be remembered as a kind, good-natured man, who was always generous in sharing his joyful music with others. For many years, he and his wife Ava opened their home in Garner to visitors for a home-cooked meal, a slice of Ava’s buttermilk pie, and an evening of music-making. Beginning in the 1980s, A. C. began to travel and bring his music to wider audiences. He and his friend and musical partner, Harriett County fiddler Lauchlin Shaw, were featured artists at the 1984 World’s Fair at Knoxville, the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes in Port Townsend, Washington, and the Tennessee Banjo Institute. Everywhere they went, they delighted in demonstrating that “flatlanders” could play great old-time fiddle and banjo music. In 1992 the duo received a North Carolina Heritage Award, and in 1996 they recorded a CD, Sally with the Run-Down Shoes, produced by the Folklife Division of the North Carolina Arts Council.

-Thanks to the North Carolina Arts Council for biographical information.

See OTH, vol. 5, no. 2, winter 1995-96 for an article by Evelyn Shaw on her father Lauchlin Shaw, that includes much information on A. C. Overton and central North Carolina fiddle and banjo music.

Joseph Clyde Johnson, 76, of Ararat, Virginia, passed away on July 27. Clyde was a well-respected musician, playing with the Slate Mountain Ramblers and the Foothills Band, and for 47 years he was the beloved emcee for WPAQ’s popular Saturday old-time, bluegrass, and gospel show the “Merry-Go-Round.” He will also be greatly missed at the Mt. Airy Fiddlers Convention where he had served as emcee for many years, and where he was fond of closing a show with these words, “Don’t worry too awful much about nothing because nothing ain’t never gonna be alright nohow.”
Old-Time Music in Texas

By Sharon Sandomirsky

Texas music was the focus of an entire issue of the *Old-Time Herald* in 1993. After re-reading the article in that issue on Appalachian style music in Austin, I realized that much remains the same after 14 years, though happily the music has grown in enthusiasm, participation, and events. Regular jams are held every second Sunday at the well-known *Threadgills* restaurant (South location) www.threadgills.com. *Austin Friends of Traditional Music* or AFTM (www.aftm.us) continues to provide a meeting place for those who love the old-time sounds. The AFTM has been at the center of the Austin old-time music scene since it was founded in 1974 by Doc Hamilton, David Polacheck, Bernard Molberg, Elizabeth Pittman, and others. AFTM held monthly meetings in venerable music venues such as the Split Rail, Threadgills, and the Armadillo World Headquarters. Informal jamming and an open-mic format brought old-time musicians together and before a wider audience. Leo Sullivan, the resident volunteer sound man, has recordings of many of the early AFTM events.

According to Bernard Molberg, “Here ‘old-time’ music can mean anything from Texas style to Polish fiddling, Czech wedding marches, *conjunto*, cowboy poetry, to western swing.” All these styles are represented in the *Mid-Winter Festival* sponsored by AFTM in addition to other organizations (www.aftm.us). *Texas Folklife Resources* (www.texasfolklife.org) is another organization which sponsors events and programs that promote the preservation of local culture and traditions. Its reach is much wider, both geographically and culturally, than AFTM and well worth following. The June *Texas Folklife Festival*, originally modeled after the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, DC, is an annual event sponsored by the University of Texas at San Antonio’s Institute of Texan Cultures (www.texancultures.utsa.edu/tff). Since 1972, the festival has brought together the traditions, music, art, food and people of over 40 diverse Texan cultures and ethnic groups. The three-day event attracts more than 70,000 visitors, and features 10 entertainment stages, carnival rides, food, arts and crafts demos, kids’ activities, and other family fun. The *Palestine Old-Time and Dulcimer Festival* is about five hours from San Antonio, and brings in considerable national talent during its annual March event (www.geocities.com/palestinefestival). The long-running *Old Settlers Festival* in April (www.oldsettersmusicfest.org) and *Kerrville Folk Festival* in late May (www.kerrville-music.com) do not feature much old-time music in the line-up, but the camping area is full of jammers of all flavors, including old-time.
During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the traditional music of Texas much the same as the rest of the American South’s. The Anglo and African Americans who came here brought along their musical traditions. A Saturday night dance in 1855 would not have featured cowboy songs, as depicted in the Hollywood films. It was more likely to be “Soldier’s Joy” and “Cotton Eyed Joe,” just as you might have heard in the Carolinas. Mexican and European (particularly German and Czech) music had a significant influence on the old-time music of Texas, and Louisiana is a right next door, so we have always enjoyed music of Texas, and Louisiana is right a significant influence on the old-time music of the South’s. The Anglo and African Americans who came here brought along their musical traditions. Texas music in the recording and radio era formed some newly synthesized traditions, like sophisticated western swing and a unique contest style of fiddling. Lovers of Texas-style fiddling can join a jam at Austin’s Artz Rib House (www.artzribhouse.com) on Tuesday evenings, or attend a fiddling contest promoted by the Texas Old-time Fiddlers Association (www.texasoldtimefiddlers.org), in August.

The annual AFTM-sponsored Midwinter Festival will be held February 9, noon to midnight, at the Dougherty Arts Center, with 12 hours of traditional music performances and hands-on workshops. The 2nd Annual Austin String Band Festival will be held October 19-21 at beautiful Camp Ben McCullough in Driftwood, Texas. The festival will feature stage performances, camping, jamming, and workshops. Information for both festivals can be found on the AFTM’s website. A series of AFTM-sponsored house concerts hosted by Elizabeth Pittman have brought many old-time performers to the area in an intimate setting. AFTM also supports Austin’s very active contra dance scene. The revival period of old-time, bluegrass, and traditional country styles was interested in more cultural slices. Molberg remembers that “Austin, like many small college towns, had a wider diversity of folks who were interested in more cultural slices. The revival period of old-time, bluegrass, and traditional country styles certainly had proponents in Austin and Texas. Austin has long been considered the cultural oasis of Texas for those who had something of a Hipster or alternative cultural bias. . . . Austin has a somewhat overblown, yet accurate, image as the ‘live music capital of the world.’ The area is thick with musicians of all types, and this includes folks who love the various hues of the traditional music rainbow.”

Elizabeth Pittman has been an anchor in the Austin old-time scene since the beginning, as an active AFTM member, and leader of Austin’s longest running old-time band, the Double Eagle String Band. In her words, the local scene is “friendly and inclusive, and at its center is a small cadre of advanced musicians.” Other local bands and musicians include the Ridgetop Syncopators, Hold ‘er, New!, duo Dan and Christy Foster, Jerry Hagins, Trent Shepherd, Ralph White, Pistol Love Family Band, Health and Happiness, Onion Creek Crawdaddies, and Big Ernie, to name a few.

Local musician and music history enthusiast Dan Foster found evidence of early archaic sounds of Texas music in the American History Center at the University of Texas. Peter Tumlinson Bell was recorded by folklorist William A. Owens in 1941, on a recording device Owens invented, which used aluminum disks. In the 1960s, Owens archived the Bell Collection at Texas A&M University. Dan found tape transcriptions of the collection here in Austin. Thanks to Ray Alden, the Bell collection, along with the recordings of Tim Wooten’s grandfather, are scheduled for release in 2008 as part of the Field Recorders Collective (www.fieldrecorder.com).

With a lack of access to living primary sources, most old-time musicians in Austin have learned the music indirectly, as part of a general national revival. Molberg remembers that “Austin, like many small college towns, had a wider diversity of folks who were interested in more cultural slices. The revival period of old-time, bluegrass, and traditional country styles certainly had proponents in Austin and Texas. Austin has long been considered the cultural oasis of Texas for those who had something of a Hipster or alternative cultural bias. . . . Austin has a somewhat overblown, yet accurate, image as the ‘live music capital of the world.’ The area is thick with musicians of all types, and this includes folks who love the various hues of the traditional music rainbow.”
Old-Time Music in Missouri
By Cathy Barton and Dave Para

Missouri is a great meeting place, between a prehistoric ocean floor and the last ice age, between the eastern forests and the western plains, between America’s two greatest rivers, and where the North meets the South; its cultural heritage partly reflects its geography. Ozark mountain culture very much resembles that of the southern highlands further to the east, while life and settlement along the Missouri River in the middle of the state and further north reflect its settlement by southern planters. St. Louis faces east; Kansas City, a final destination of the great cattle drives, is a western city.

Missouri fiddling has been presented in the Old-Time Herald many times. Readers may be familiar with names such as the late Bob Holt and Art Galbraith in the Ozarks, Pete McMahan and Cyril Stinnett from Little Dixie and the west, and the tune collections by people like E. F. Adam, Ira Ford, and the legendary Old-Time Fiddler’s Repertory by R. P. Christeson.

Its folksong traditions, especially in the Ozarks, have been well documented by major collectors in the 20th century: Vance Randolph, H. M. Belden, Max Hunter, and Loman Cansler. A prolific freelance writer, Randolph published several story collections in addition to his four-volume Ozark Folksongs. His papers are at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. The papers of Christeson, Hunter, and Cansler are at the State Historical Society of Missouri Western Manuscripts Collection in Columbia. Hunter’s collection is online, (http://maxhunter.missouristate.edu)

Other collectors were active in Missouri in the 1950s and ’60s, especially as recording equipment improved. John Hartford recorded fiddlers in the upper eastern Ozarks. Michael Breid, encouraged by May Kennedy McCord, Queen of the Hillbillies, started recording Ozark ballad singers. He and Howard Marshall studied Art Galbraith’s fiddling, and the Boone University Folk Club in Columbia recorded and promoted central Missouri fiddlers like Cleo Persinger and Billy Lee, and banjoists such as Frankie Fullington.

Richard Blaustein also researched Missouri fiddlers, while Jake Hughes began to amass a collection of home recordings of Missouri fiddlers, some of whom traveled to compete in national and international contests. In the early 1970s, college-aged musicians in Missouri who had been concentrating on Appalachian and old-time styles turned their attention to fiddling traditions in their own state and brought new energy and longevity to the local old-time scenes.

The Missouri Friends of the Folk Arts in St. Louis produced a collection of field recordings by the late Jim Olin and others, “I’m Old But I’m Awfully Tough.” In 1989, a consortium of folklorists and enthusiasts assembled at the Missouri Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Missouri in Columbia produced a more recent collection, “Now That’s a Good Tune.” That project’s ramrod, Howard Marshall, is currently producing a series of recordings of Missouri fiddlers both past and present for Voyager Records (www.voyagerrecords.com), and continues to research and publish articles on Missouri fiddle history. Gordon McCann of Springfield has produced several CDs of Ozark fiddlers for the Rounder label, and is co-editing a major publication of Ozark fiddle tunes with Drew Beisswenger of Missouri State. [An article by Drew Beisswenger on Gordon McCann ran in the April 2006 OTH, vol. 10, no. 4.]

Local fiddle contests largely maintain the vitality of the fiddling traditions and abound in Missouri from spring through fall as towns and cities across the state often feature a fiddle contest as part of a larger event. A fiddle convention without competition has replaced what was considered the state championship at the Boone County Fair in Columbia in July. More influential are the fiddler’s conventions at Compton Ridge Campground near Branson each May and September. What may be the de facto state championship is held at the State Fair in Sedalia in August. In the thick of the mid-summer, many fiddlers can make two different contests in a single Saturday. Prize money is not often substantial, and the events are as much social as competitive. Most of these events do not include contests for other instruments, though fiddlers are allowed at least two accompanists.

Clawhammer banjo is compatible with Ozark fiddling, though not necessarily more prevalent than elsewhere in the state. In central Missouri there is some attempt to revive piano accompaniment. While “Texas style” and “national contest style” continue their influence, many judges have a sense for older Missouri styles, and so do most contestants. Currently, the best contest calendars, though by no means complete, are found at http://fiddle.missouri.org, the web page of the Missouri Traditional Fiddle and Dance Network, and at www.fiddleseong.com, maintained by Wyatt’s Violin Shop in Independence. Other music stores with an ear to the ground for old-time music are Music Folk (www.musicfolk.com) in Webster Groves, (Geoff) Seitz Violin Shop (www.seitzviolins.com) in the St. Louis metro, and the Mountain Music Shoppe (www.mountainmusicshoppe.com) in Shawnee, Kansas.
Peter Lippincott brought contra dancing to Missouri in the late 1970s when the Childgrove Dancers (www.childgrove.org) were formed in St. Louis. This began the local tradition of playing southern tunes for northern dances. The organization remains very active, with a full calendar of events and at least two annual dance weekends; its current venue is at the Monday Club in Webster Groves. The movement took to the west, and regular dances take place in Columbia on Fridays, (http://www.springfieldcontra.org), Kansas City on Saturdays (www.crosscurrentsulture.org), and southwest in Springfield, also on Saturdays (www.springfieldcontra.org). Peter learned in the early 1980s that western swing dancing had not entirely supplanted traditional country dance in Missouri. A hotbed of square dancers taking tunes and sets at breakneck speeds meet regularly in the southern Missouri towns of Ava, Mountain Home, and Gainesville. This was Bob Holt country, and the dancing there is key to understanding his fiddling. The late Edna Mae Davis was a longtime matron of this dance community. Fiddlers John White and Steve Young have organized a nice blend of jam sessions, old-time squares, and contra on second Saturdays at the Community Center in the mid-Missouri town of Hallsville. Celtic ceilidhes and jam sessions also draw some folks from the old-time scene in central Missouri; check www.moceltic.org for events. Also, bass player Kathy Gordon has been posting mid-Missouri events to an email list. Write kgordon45@gmail.com for the most current information out there.

For concert venues in St. Louis, the Focal Point (www.thefocalpoint.org) and Music Folk, both founded by Bill and Janet Boyer in 1975, most consistently feature old-time music, although the Sheldon Concert Hall occasionally includes folk, Celtic and bluegrass acts in their eclectic lineup. You could consult www.folklore.org for the greater metro area events. In Kansas City, Cross Currents is the regular folk music venue, but also Jim Curley’s Mountain Music Shoppe in Shawnee has hosted some fine, intimate concerts in its parlor. In central Missouri, the best folk concert venue is the Community Room of the Daniel Boone Regional Library in Columbia, though the Unity Church has also served as a venue for some individually produced concerts in that town. Also the Cherry Street Artisan Cafe regularly programs old-time fiddling and music, and the Boone County Historical Society supports bi-monthly fiddle sessions. The Springfield House Concert series has carried on for a number of years, and its current venue is at Drury College. The New Coast Gallery in the nearby artist colony of Reeds Springs also produces a monthly house concert.

For formal instruction, the Folk School of St. Louis (www.folk-school.com), directed by Colleen Heine, provides a year-round schedule of regular classes in all the usual old-time music instruments. It draws from the dynamic community of dance musicians in that city. The Missouri Folk Arts Program, based at the University of Missouri in Columbia, also administers a statewide traditional arts apprenticeship program that has included a number of traditional musicians during its 24 years. This June marked the 24th Annual Youth Fiddle Camp in the historic German colony of Bethel, an event originally organized by Missouri expatriate Charlie Walden. Campers stay in historic homes and immerse themselves in fiddling taught individually and in groups by a dozen master fiddlers from across the Midwest. The Autumn Acoustics Festival (www.autacoustics.com) in Hillsboro, in the hills southwest of St. Louis, draws mostly dulcimer players for its October weekends, while the weeklong Heritage Dulcimer Camp (heritagedulcimercamp.org) in Parkville, north of Kansas City, offers classes for both types of dulcimers.

Bill Monroe once remarked that he had gotten more requests for his “Muleskinner Blues” from the state of Missouri than anywhere else, and the state veritably brims with bluegrass festivals of various sizes year-round. Perhaps the largest one is still in the Ozark burg of Eminence in April. Remember, though, that northern Missouri is home to both the Society for the Preservation of Bluegrass in America (www.spbgma.com) and Rhonda Vincent, who has come a long way from her childhood days in her family’s Sally Mountain Show—so don’t overlook that area of the state. Erma Spray has been tracking bluegrass musicians and events for the Tristate Bluegrass Association in Hannibal for many years. Also, KOPN community radio in Columbia dedicates its Sunday evenings to bluegrass and broadcasts a calendar of events. It can be streamed from its website, kopn.publicbroadcasting.net. In St. Louis, KDHX broadcasts most of the folk music in the area. Kansas City is best served by Kansas Public Radio in nearby Lawrence.

The Big Muddy Folk Festival (www.bigmuddy.org) is held in the central Missouri town of Boonville the first weekend of April, in historic 600-seat Thespian Hall. Cathy Barton and Dave Parlet lead a committee for the Friends of Historic Boonville and produced the 16th annual festival this year. Its diverse programming presents folk music and always includes some old-time players. A Friday evening dance and Saturday workshops are part of the event. Some hours south in West Plains, the Old Time Music Ozark Heritage Festival takes place the third weekend of June (www.oldtimemusic.org). It has grown to feature both local traditional musicians as well as bigger-named headliners. The Ozark Celebration Festival (http://ocf.missouristate.edu) is held the weekend after Labor Day at Missouri State University in Springfield. The festival includes a fiddlers’ green, along with song, dance and history. This year the folkloric work of Gordon McCann was honored. As with fiddle contests, old-time music is often part of larger such as the arts festivals, in Florissant, Columbia, or Cape Girardeau and First-Night celebrations in Springfield and Columbia. A large (and free) Roots, Blues and Barbecue Festival (www.rootnbluesnbqq.com) in downtown Columbia this September, is sponsored by the Boone County Bank.

Those wanting a more informal setting will seek out regular local jam sessions or music parties found in old school houses, church buildings, senior centers, or cafes, and held nearly any day of the week. The July-August 2007 issue of Ozarks Mountaineer (www.ozarksmountaineer.com) listed 20 different sessions just in the region around Springfield, in towns like Ozark, Bruner, Anutt, Clio, and Long Lane. The music presented is generally a mix of bluegrass, country, and old-time, depending on who runs it and who shows up regularly.

Old-time music continues to bring generations and new friends together in the Show-Me State, and, like any vital tradition, remains dynamic. Certainly there are events both small and large, that we have forgotten to include here, but the contacts listed probably could connect you with the rest.

We would like to thank Howard Marshall for his help in this article.
One of the characteristics of southern Appalachian square dances that distinguishes them from other forms of American set dances (group dances for two or more couples) is the presence of certain distinctive figures. Contra dances and traditional New England squares are usually made up of different combinations of the same dozen or so figures. In contrast, southern squares are idiosyncratic. Each dance will have a main figure that is unique to that particular dance and from which the dance gets its name. This is one reason why southern squares are often a hard sell to experienced contra dancers, who already know the dozen or so interchangeable contra dance figures but are unfamiliar with the various southern dance figures.

The distinctive dance figures that are unique to the southern Appalachian dance tradition have their roots in a variety of earlier dance forms, including Scottish reels, English country dances, French cotillons and quadrilles, Native American ceremonial dances, and African American dances. Although many of these southern figures are clearly adaptations of ones from these earlier dance forms, over time they have evolved, so that now they are considered to be distinctly Appalachian. A southern square dance figure that can be found throughout the Appalachian region is “Bird in the Cage.”

In this figure, dancers take turns dancing solo within a ring of dancers. I believe that “Bird in the Cage” is of African-American origin, and it is likely an adaptation of the bird pantomime dances that come from the African dance tradition.

In 1721, English traveler, John Atkins observed traditional African dancing in Sierra Leone in which dancers took turns in the middle of a ring.

Dancing is the Diversion of their Evenings: Men and Women make a Ring in an open part of the Town, and one at a time shews his Skill in antick Motions and Gesticulations, yet with a great deal of Agility, the Company making the Musick by clapping their hands together during the time, helped by the louder noise of two or three Drums made of a hollowed piece of Tree, and covered with Kid-Skin.

Enslaved Africans brought ring dances to America. In 1799, a passenger on a boat in New Orleans reported, “We saw vast numbers of negro slaves, men, women, and children, assembled together on the levee, drumming, fifing, and dancing, in large rings.” Similar ring dances were reported in New Orleans in 1819 and in Albany, New York, as early as 1803. Numerous references to ring dances can also be found in slave narratives collected by the Federal Writers’ Project between 1936 and 1938. According to former slave Tinie Force of Kentucky, “Ring dancing was largely practiced during the slavery period. Especially was this practiced in throughout the Purchase Region.”

By the 1820s, dances from both the African and European traditions coexisted at plantation frolics. In addition to African ring dances, slaves danced Scottish reels, English country dances, French cotillons and quadrilles, and Virginia reels. Former slave Robert Anderson (b. 1843), from Green County, Kentucky, recalled a dance with slaves from neighboring plantations: “We had a regular jubilee which lasted the greater part of the night. We danced the dances like the white folks danced them, and then danced our own kind of dances.”

Oftentimes, as in Africa, individual dancers would take turns dancing in the center of the circle. During the 19th century, there are references to this practice throughout the United States, from New Orleans to upstate New York, but also in the Caribbean. They performed the “Turkey Trot,” the “Buzzard Lope,” and the “Chicken Wing” in the center of rings of dancers at Saturday night frolics. The “Buzzard Lope” is thought to have been a survival of an African pantomime dance that imitates the motions of a turkey buzzard. The “Chicken Wing,” however, may have adopted its name (and possibly its footwork) from the “Pigeon Wing,” a fashionable step dance taught by French dancing masters in the early nineteenth century [see: OTH vol. 10, no. 7]. These and other bird pantomime dances, including the “Jay Bird” (the forerunner of the Charleston), are likely sources of the Appalachian square dance figure, “Bird in the Cage,” in which one dancer at a time imitates a bird within a ring of dancers. There is no precedent for this...
dance figure in any of the British or European social dances.

The earliest reference I have found to the “Bird in the Cage” in the southern Appalachian dance tradition is an account of square dance figures from eastern Kentucky written by William H. Haney in 1906. Haney’s description of the dance calls at a mountain square dance include: “First couple cage the bird with three arms around. Bird hop out and hoot owl in; three hands around and hootin’ agin . . . .” In 1917, while searching for survivals of English ballads and folksongs in Appalachia, Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles, like Haney, observed the “Bird in the Cage” at square dances in eastern Kentucky. As with the ballads and folksongs, Sharp believed that the Southern Appalachian dances were unchanged survivals of old English country dances. He did not consider other possible sources for the dance figures, and he likened “Bird in the Cage” to the Scottish “Eightsome Reel.” In that dance each of the four women, and then each of the four men, take turns dancing solo in the center of the set, while the other seven circle to the left and right. The “Eightsome Reel,” however, was not composed until near the end of the 19th century, so obviously it could not account for the presence of the earlier ring and bird pantomime dances in America. Basing his theories on the then-popular idea of cultural evolution, Sharp hypothesized that “Bird in the Cage” was “derived from some sacrificial ceremony” in which “the dancer within the ring may be the victim about to be seized and sacrificed.” Turning again to British sources, Sharp related “Bird in the Cage” to English sword dances and the English Morris dance, “Brighton Camp.” It is more likely that “Bird in the Cage” developed from the earlier bird pantomime dances of the African-American dance tradition rather than being “derived from ancient pagan ceremonials” in England as claimed by Sharp.

“Bird in the Cage” is a good example of the blending of the improvisation, spontaneity, and self-expression of African ring dances with the structure of the European set dances. This combination of dance traditions can be seen in dance calls recounted by former Louisiana slave Christopher Columbus Franklin.

De prompter call, “All git ready.” Den he holler, “All balance,” and den he sing out, “Swing your pardner,” and dey does it. Den he say, “First man head off to de right,” and dere dey goes. Or he say, “All promenade,” and dey goes in de circle. One thing dey calls, “Bird in de Cage.” Three joins hands round de gal in de middle, and dance round her, and den she git out and her pardner git in de center and dey dance dat way awhile.

There are many variants of the dance figure “Bird in the Cage.” It is most common as a visiting couple figure in a four couple square, but it is also used as a two-couple figure in big ring dances for any number of couples. Based on the dance calls which can be heard on many of the early 78 rpm recordings of old-time music from the 1920s, “Bird in the Cage” appears to have been most common in regions adjacent to the Ohio River Valley, especially in West Virginia and eastern Kentucky, where at that time the common form was the four-couple square. This is also where Haney and Sharp observed it at mountain dances. Beyond West Virginia and eastern Kentucky, “Bird in the Cage” appears as a four-couple square figure on several 1927 recordings by Dyke’s Magic City Trio of East Tennessee, and on several of Samantha Bumgarner’s recordings of 1924, where she calls it as a figure for pairs of couples in a big ring. The big ring was, and still is, the common form of square dance in Bumgarner’s section of western North Carolina.

“Bird in the Cage” is a simple visiting couple figure that is easily taught to inexperienced dancers, but it can be fun for other dancers as well. It works well at weddings, festivals, and other situations where the caller is confronted with dancers of varying ages and abilities, and it is a dance figure that is accessible to very small children, as long as couples are formed with a parent and a child. There are many different versions of the dance; every caller will adopt and develop his or her own way of doing it. What they all have in common, though, is the “Bird in the Cage” figure, with each dancer taking a turn in the center of a ring of dancers. In a big ring dance, it is done as a two-couple figure with the “bird” encircled by the other three dancers. I like to call the “Bird in the Cage” as a progressive visiting-couple figure for a four-couple set, in which first four, then six, and then eight dancers participate. This is how Sharp saw it danced in eastern Kentucky in 1917. While I will alter both the wording of the calls and the choice of break figure from one night to the next (depending on circumstances, such as the age and experience of the dancers), here is how I typically call it.
BIRD IN THE CAGE
(The dance calls are in italics.)

Introduction:

All join hands and circle left,
Singing your partner, promenade home.

Main Figure:

Couple number one lead out to the right,
Circle up four with all your might,
(Couples one and two join hands and circle to the left.)
Bird in the cage and shut the door,
(First lady dances in the middle of the circle of three.)
Bird fly out and the crow fly in,
(First lady rejoins the circle and the first gent dances in the middle.
In some versions, the gent is called the “hoot owl.”)
Crow fly out and everyone swing,
(All swing partners.)
On to the next and circle up six,
(Couples one, two, and three join hands and circle to the left.)
Bird in the cage and shut the door,
(First lady dances in the middle of the circle of five.)
Bird fly out and the crow fly in,
(First lady rejoins the circle and the first gent dances in the middle.)
Crow fly out and everyone swing.
(All swing partners.)
Now all join hands and circle up eight,
(All four couples join hands and circle to the left.)
Bird in the cage and shut the gate,
(First lady dances in the middle of the circle of seven.)
Bird fly out and the crow fly in,
(First lady rejoins the circle and the first gent dances in the middle.)
Crow fly out and everyone swing.
(All swing partners.)
Promenade around the ring.
(All couples promenade counter-clockwise to their “home” places.
The couples may have gotten out of order, but at this point they can fix that.)

Break Figure:

Turn your corner with your left hand,
(Allemande left corner.)
Back to your partner for a right-left grand,
(Grand right and left.)
Meet your partner, give her (or him) a swing, and promenade around the ring.
(Swing partner and promenade home.)

(All swing partners.)

This kind of spontaneous flexibility, modifying a dance depending on the situation, is one of the strengths and beauties of southern squares.)
The main figure of the dance, followed by the break figure, is repeated for couples two, three, and four, so that everyone gets a chance to dance in the middle of the set as the bird or crow.

“Bird in the Cage” is a very simple square dance figure, and for that reason I try to make it move as fast as possible—both the music and the pacing of the dance calls. The music should be lively; any fast tune will work. The calls do not need to fit the musical phrases (A or B parts), so it does not require a regular AABB tune. Since the figure is so simple, the faster the music the better. This helps loosen up even the most uptight dancer, who may be self-conscious about dancing solo in the middle of the ring. During the walk-through of the figures, before calling the dance, I suggest that any kind of dancing in the center is fine—clogging, flatfooting, the Watusi, the Macarena, whatever. Even the shyest of dancers will think of something to do once the music starts, and it’s their turn to hop into the middle. They’ll do whatever they know, and it is usually entertaining for the other dancers (and the caller) to watch. When calling the main figure, I don’t wait for the musical phrase to end, but I call for the birds (or crows) to fly out of the ring almost as soon as they get in. I try to minimize the amount of time each dancer stays in the middle. This reduces anyone’s possible anxiety about being in the spotlight, it also adds to the informal spontaneity of the dance, and it shortens the time that the last couple has to wait for their turn to join in (a common complaint from modern dancers about visiting couple squares).

“Bird in the Cage” is one of the first dances that I ever learned to call, and it has remained a part of my calling repertoire for well over 30 years. I often use it either at the beginning of a dance, to loosen people up, or else near the end of an evening, when dancers are tired and not wanting to think or be challenged anymore, but just want to relax and enjoy the music. It is a spontaneous, fast-moving dance that is easy to teach, easy to call, and is accessible and fun for novice dancers, small children, and tipsy wedding guests, as well as experienced dancers.

Phil Jamison is an old-time musician, dance caller, and flatfoot dancer. He is the program coordinator for old-time music at the Swannanoa Gathering, held at Warren Wilson College, Asheville, North Carolina.

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ORA WATSON
WATAUGA COUNTY'S SENIOR MUSICIAN
“MUSIC KEEPS ME YOUNG.”
By Mark Freed

Leaving my office in Boone, North Carolina, one afternoon in May, I drove to the western part of Watauga County for a visit with Ora Watson. I parked my car, grabbed a banjo from the back seat, and walked inside where I found my friend Cecil Gurganus visiting with Ora in the living room. Ora asked me to come closer so she could see me, so I got within a few inches of her face.

“You’re good looking,” she said, giggling as if a teenager. At 95 years old—96 by the time of publication—Ora Watson is Watauga County’s most senior mountain musician, but perhaps the youngest at heart.

Watauga County has long been a hotbed for mountain music and dancing. Doc Watson (of no immediate relation) and his musical extended family are perhaps the most well known. The county has also been home to Frank Proffitt, Andy Cahan. Of all these folks, none has spent more years contributing to the music and dance scene in Watauga County than Ora Watson. Born Ora Mae Isaacs in the western part of the county on June 27, 1911, to Arthur and Mary Fletcher Isaacs, Ora was steeped in music and dance right from the start. Her father played old-time fretless banjo and some fiddle around the house and for parties.

“My dad was awful good on the homemade banjo,” she remembers. “He could play so good and sing.” Kinder Johnson lived in nearby Beaver Dam and made fiddles, banjos, and guitars. “My dad got one and put a cat-skin hide on it,” she says. “It’s thin and it sounds twice better than the other [groundhog].”

Her mother, a religious-minded woman, sang hymns, folksongs, and ballads, such as “House Carpenter,” which became part of Ora’s repertoire. Her mother sang in the church choir at the Cove Creek Baptist Church. When she was barely old enough to stand, Ora would try dancing on her mother’s lap at church when the music started.

“I was born a-dancing,” she told Cece Conway and Elva Bishop during the taping of their short documentary film on Ora titled Born A-dancin’ and Makin’ Music. Ora’s father was also a great buck dancer, and Ora claims to have gotten some of her steps from him.

Ora’s family lived on a 46-acre farm on Isaacs’ Branch, named after her family, where everyone was an Isaacs except two neighbors. “I used to help my dad on the farm in my early days,” Ora remembers. “Before I was big enough to do anything, I’d pull weeds out of the corn.” As she got older, Ora would help drive the horses to plow the fields, take corn to the old Cove Creek mill to be ground for meal, and take chickens and eggs to the local store to sell or trade.

Ora’s cousin Charles Isaacs was a fiddler who played for local dances and conventions and also helped out on the farm. Ora would watch him note his fiddle and try playing along with him. “He was a real good fiddler,” she says, “I learned a lot from him.”

By the time Ora was 11 years old, she had formed a group with her sister Emma and cousin Earle called the Isaacs Sisters Band. Earle played guitar, Emma played mandolin, and Ora fiddled with the group, though she was also learning to play banjo. Ora’s father would drive them around to perform at cakewalks, fiddlers’ conventions, dances, and other events. Ora recalls the group going to Elizabethton to play for a presidential parade (likely for Herbert Hoover on October 6, 1928).

Ora remembers the Isaacs Sisters Band playing at a fiddlers’ convention in downtown Boone at the old courthouse. “Back then there were more women bands,” she says. “There were the Cook sisters and the Gurr sisters. We all played in that fiddler’s convention.”

Competition at that convention ran high. Ora recollects a woman in another band stealing a fiddler’s bow and running it through her hair to keep the rosin from sticking. The fiddler got on stage and ran the bow across his strings, and it slid off without making more than a squeak. Later one of the women asked Ora if they could see her bow, but Ora had already seen the trick, and kept her instrument close at hand. The Isaacs Sisters went on to win the competition.

In addition to listening to family members, Ora heard a lot of good music around the community. Ora used to frequent the local music store on the occasions when Doc Watson played there. One time Doc asked Ora to get her fiddle and play a few tunes. Ora didn’t have her fiddle, so she said, “I tell you what Doc, play ’Step It Up and Go,’ and I’ll go.” She remembers, “I danced out the door.”

Dock Walsh of neighboring Wilkes County was also Ora’s friend. One time the two were walking down the sidewalk in Boone when they came upon a fight. Ora noticed her father was the man on the bottom being beaten and choked. She asked Dock for his guitar.

“I took it by the neck, and it come down hard,” Ora remembers. “That brought [the attacker] off him. A policeman came up, and asked if I was the one that hit him. I asked him, ‘If your daddy was being choked to death, wouldn’t you have hit him?’ The policeman said he would, and he walked off without doing anything about it.”
Years later, Ora ran into the policeman at an event in nearby Foscoe. The man asked Ora, “Do you remember who that girl was who hit that feller in the head with the guitar?”

“I sure do,” she replied. “It was me!”

When Ora was 17, she slipped off to Boone with Dean Payne and got married. “I didn’t want my dad to know I was getting married,” she says, “because he wouldn’t have anyone around to help him work.” Ora and Dean had four children together, Virginia, W.C., Martha, and Dora Dean. Her husband died tragically in 1942 while Ora was pregnant with Dora Dean, and Ora was left to care for her growing family. Her preacher suggested Ora give the children up for adoption, but Ora said she would not, and she raised them with the help of her parents. Ora moved back to Isaacs Branch where she built a small house on a half-acre of land next to her parents’ home.

Ora raised a big garden and canned a lot of food, including creasy greens, beans, and corn. “I would take my baby and take a quilt on top of the mountain and hoe corn ’til dinner,” she says, “then go down and make dinner. Then go back up there and hoe corn all day. That’s hard. I had a hard time.”

During this time, Ora did not do much performing, but she sang around the house and at church. Ora remembers playing music and singing at Henson Chapel with Rebecca Taylor, the preacher’s daughter. One time when Ora and Rebecca were the only two in the room, Rebecca started playing some popular music and asked Ora to dance. The two started cutting it up, but soon the preacher appeared. Rebecca quickly transitioned into “Amazing Grace,” and Ora stopped her shuffling feet.

In church, Ora learned to sing the alto harmony part, and when Thomas Burton and Ambrose Manning came to Watauga County to collect folksongs in the 1960s, Ora was playing a lot of guitar as well. In Folksongs II, Burton and Manning note, “The guitar, which she used to accompany all her songs that follow, is now Ora’s major instrument. She plays in her own style, sometimes with a pick,
sometimes in the folk music way, with the fingers only.”

The songs Burton and Manning collected from Ora reflect only a small portion of her vast repertoire, but still present a nice variety. The collection includes songs she learned from her father (“The Old TB,” “Wild Bill Jones,” and “Careless Love”), her mother (“The Drunkard’s Hell,” “The House Carpenter,” and “Little Bessie”), recordings or radio (“Single Girl” from the Carter Family), songbooks (“Charlie Lawson”), and a schoolteacher (“Yellow Gal,” an old minstrel song also known as “Hey Mona,” which Ora performed for her class in blackface).

When Ora’s children were grown, she began to perform again and play out in the community. Jack Guy’s folk toys store was one regular music spot where Ora and other community musicians could be found playing on the weekends, and it is where she met her second husband, Arlie Watson. Arlie, a guitar and banjo player and singer, grew up in Lenoir, North Carolina, in a musical family.

Ora and Arlie were married in 1969, and they performed together and in bands for ten years, and made a few recordings as a duet. They were regulars at the Pickin’ Parlor in Johnson City, they played at the Smithsonian Institution’s Festival of American Folklife and Busch Gardens in Florida, and they frequented fiddlers’ conventions. Ora and Arlie were also friends with Gaither Carlton, and they would visit at Gaither’s house to play music.

During one gig at the Pickin’ Parlor, Ora was getting ready for a haircut, so she was wearing a wig. Arlie got up and said, “She’d look a lot better if she didn’t wear that wig.”

“So, I knew what to do,” recalls Ora. Arlie wore a cowboy hat to cover his bald head, so Ora pulled off his hat and asked, “Do you think he needs a wig?” They gave her a standing ovation.

In addition to playing as a duet, Ora and Arlie also helped form the Blue Ridge Ramblers with Arnold Watson, Paul Greer, Jim Earp, and sometimes Glenn Bolick. The group featured Ora’s fiddling and dancing, Arnold Watson’s two-finger banjo playing, and Arlie’s singing. The group played regular gigs at local square dances and at Simms Barbeque in Caldwell County, North Carolina.

Wayne Martin of the North Carolina Arts Council heard the Blue Ridge Ramblers perform at a fiddlers’ convention in Watauga County in the mid-1970s. “It was one of my introductions to North Carolina mountain music,” Wayne remembers. “Ora stole the show that night. She was the first woman I had met that was such a strong musician with a good band.” An excellent performer, Ora could raise the energy on any stage by playing fiddle and dancing at the same time, often to her favorite fiddle tune, “Ragtime Annie.”

Arlie died in 1979, but Ora continued performing with the Blue Ridge Ramblers, playing mostly bluegrass music with an occasional old-time fiddle tune. The group performed together until they disbanded in 1993. But, before Arlie passed on and long before the group disbanded, Ora forged another relationship that opened up more playing opportunities and chances to revisit the older music she played as a young woman.

Mary Greene, a Watauga County native, was a student at Appalachian State University when she first met Ora. Mary was playing guitar and dulcimer, helping with workshops and presentations of local traditional musicians. One of her professors, Bill Spencer, asked Mary to run a video camera on Ora and Arlie during one of these presentations, and the friendship began. Mary told Ora she was interested in local mountain music, so Ora invited Mary on trips with her to music gatherings. Mary traveled with Ora performing to her own music and bluegrass music with the Blue Ridge Ramblers and other local musicians, but it was the occasional older fiddle tune or ballad that most interested her. Banjo player Richard Warren was another student interested in learning old-time mountain music, and he and Mary invited Ora to play some music with them.

“We started extracting old tunes and reviving that old-time repertoire, because that is what we were interested in,” Mary says. “We revived tunes in her memory she hadn’t played in years because no one wanted to hear them.” Mary had to convince Ora that people wanted to hear old-time music. “I think that was the start of her resuming that old-time identity,” Mary says.

Soon, Mary and another local musician, Beth Jones, started an all-woman string band with Ora, called the Cacklin’ Hens. (The group also included Barbara Bona for a short while, and eventually Amy Michels replaced Beth Jones in the band.) The Cacklin’ Hens performed at a variety of venues around the region, including dances, festivals, fiddler’s conventions, and other events. And Ora loved to perform.
“Ora dressed like Porter Wagoner,” says Mary, “And she always called performing ‘playing a show.’”

In addition to playing with the Cacklin’ Hens, Ora was also playing regularly at two senior centers in Watauga County, one in Boone and one in Cove Creek. For many years, she played at both centers weekly with good friend Ronnie Hicks and other members of the Watauga County Senior Center Band. In any given week, Ora would perform two days at the senior centers, give a Friday night performance, and play for a Saturday-night dance. She was quite an active musician, continuing to play and dance through her 70s, 80s, and into her 90s.

Ora was in her late 70s when Mary Greene introduced her to members of the Laurel Creek String Band, including at the time Mary, Cecil Gurganus, and Rick Stone. The Laurel Creek String Band provided an opportunity for Ora’s songs, tunes, and repertoire to be featured with a supporting old-time string band. They began to book regular performances, and in 1994 the group made a recording. The recording was a catalyst for Ora becoming a recipient of the North Carolina Heritage Award in 1995, presented by the North Carolina Arts Council.

Ora was featured in an Old-Time Herald Dance Beat article by Phil Jamison in the fall of 1995. The article was in part a response to Ora receiving the Heritage Award, and of course it focused on her unique dancing. “I found an energetic 82-year-old who was eager to share her music and dance,” wrote Jamison. Describing her dance style he wrote, “Her feet slide on the floor in a smooth flat-footed style with a lot of the Charleston blended in.” Indeed, as a younger woman, Ora won many dance contests, including at least one Charleston competition.

I first met Ora during one of her performances with the Laurel Creek String Band about four years ago. After the performance, at ten o’clock at night, Cecil Gurganus brought Ora by my house to play some music. Of course, I was quite impressed to have a 91-year-old musician playing tunes with me so late into the evening. And I was floored when she picked up my banjo and played a bluesy version of “Shortening Bread” far up the neck in a two-finger up-picking style.

Over the past few years, I have had the good fortune of making a handful of visits to Ora’s house with Cecil and...
Mary Greene. Ora will make comments like, “I just can’t remember like I could back in my 80s,” or “It’s bad when your thinker goes out on you.” But once instruments are pulled out of their cases, high spirits, laughter, and lively tunes always follow. I am always amazed at her vast repertoire, and she constantly pulls out tunes or songs that even Cecil and Mary have not heard her play before. For example, during my last visit, Cecil asked Ora if she played “Liza Jane,” and Ora commenced to fiddle a similar tune to that of Marion Reece, who lived in the same area of Watauga County. After playing with Ora for 20-plus years, Cecil had never heard her play that version.

A song list Ora keeps in her fiddle case lists 58 pieces, and in researching for this article, I have found at least 30 tunes not on the list. Listening to some home recordings borrowed from Mary Greene, I have heard Ora play “Freight Train” on the guitar, “Little Brown Jug” on the fiddle, sing “Turn Your Radio On,” and pick out or clawhammer “Cindy” on the banjo. She plays waltzes learned from the radio, sacred songs learned from singing in church, folksongs learned from family members, traditional fiddle tunes, and songs written by musicians she has known throughout her musical career, such as “Bulldog Down in Sunny Tennessee,” from Dock Walsh. She is also amazing at adapting to the tune or situation, playing in whatever key the banjo player is tuned to despite where she might normally play the tune. At jam sessions and forming repertoires for her various bands, Ora’s musical ear allows her to improvise masterfully, and instantly adapt to the tune.

In the liner notes to the recording made with the Laurel Creek String Band, Mary Greene writes, “It was onto the older layers of fiddle tunes, ballads, folksongs, and hymns, learned in her home and from relatives, that Ora added the hits of the country recording industry, shape-note hymns published by the Stamps-Baxter and Vaughan publishing giants, and later bluegrass standards. Ora developed a multi-faceted musical identity that reveals much about the esthetic choices of the traditional home musician as well as the practical choices that govern the life of a working musician.”

My only concern in writing this article is that words cannot do justice to the amazing life and spirit Ora embodies. Of course, there are numerous quips that convey a bit of her lively personality: “I’ve had a lot of fun, and a little trouble too.”

“Lord, don’t go for the good looks every time. Good looks will get you in trouble.”

Or, “I never was sick before I went to the doctor.”

But quips and quotes can’t replace a visit with Ora, hearing her laugh, tell stories, and try to dance right out of her seat while playing “Ragtime Annie.” At 95 years old, Ora doesn’t do much dancing these days, and she hasn’t performed publicly in a few years. So I feel fortunate to know a couple of her good friends and get to visit with her at her house on occasion. And I’m most happy to honor her musical legacy with this article. Ora is a strong woman and a survivor, outlasting generations of musical companions with a vitality I didn’t know existed before getting to know her. Thank you, Ora, for the inspiration, tunes, and laughter.

Mark Freed is a Folklorist with the Watauga Arts Council who lives in Boone with his wife Sunnee and their dog Etta.

This article could not have been possible without the ongoing help of Mary Greene, Cecil Gurganus, Amy Michels, Lynn Salsi, Wayne Martin, Dora Dean and Buck, and of course Ora Watson.
THE STAIRWELL SISTERS
By Chuck Poling

Every so often you may be lucky enough to attend a musical performance where that magic thing happens between the artists and the audience. The crowd and the band start feeding off each other, creating a loop of inspiration and enthusiasm that’s like a firestorm creating its own wind. That’s exactly what happened when the Stairwell Sisters took the stage during the 2007 San Francisco Bluegrass and Old-Time Festival.

The scene was the Noe Valley Ministry, a Presbyterian church that also serves as one of San Francisco’s most intimate and acoustically pleasing musical venues. The auditorium was packed and the overflow backed into the church lobby. The Stairwell Sisters had just returned from a successful tour of Scotland and were already the talk of the town following their January 13 appearance on Prairie Home Companion. The audience was filled with longtime fans and recent converts who had tuned into the popular radio show and loved what they heard. The crowd was mixed with fans of all ages, attesting to the Stairwells’ broad appeal.

The San Francisco Bay Area has long nurtured a thriving old-time music scene centered primarily in the East Bay cities of Berkeley and Oakland. The Berkeley Old Time Music Convention held every September is the highlight of the community’s annual calendar. Past years’ lineups have included legendary figures such as the New Lost City Ramblers, Ginny Hawker, Rich Hartness, and local luminaries such as Eric and Suzy Thompson and Jody Stecher and Kate Brislin. In addition to the concerts, the four-day event includes a fiddle and banjo contest, a cabaret-style open mike, numerous workshops and one king hell of a square dance. There were more jams going on than you can shake a fiddle bow at. While it’s no secret that there’s a lively old-time music community in the Bay Area, there’s a lot more to it than the BOTMC. Old-time music is a year-round affair with events in both the East Bay and San Francisco. Jams, house concerts, square dances and workshops are always popping up, and lively conversations about old-time music are carried on via various websites.

Since 2001, the San Francisco Bluegrass and Old-Time Music Festival has presented a significant array of nationally known performers including Rafe Stefanini, Alice Gerrard, the Reeltime Travelers, Brad Leftwich, Bob Carlin, Frank Lee, the Foghorn Stringband, and Uncle Earl, as well as California acts like Kenny Hall, the Crooked Jades and the Mercury Dimes. And at the center of all this activity are the Stairwell Sisters – five talented and delightful women whose motto is “Good time gals love old-time tunes.”

And just who are Stairwell Sisters? They are Lisa Berman (dobro/banjo/guitar), Stephanie Prausnitz (fiddle), Evie Ladino (banjo/dancing), Sue Sandlin (guitar/tipple/harmonica) and Martha Hawthorne (bass). They present a lively take on old-time music, and are equally adept at delving into a gloomy modal dirge or roaring through a frantic square dance tune. All of the Sisters sing and participate in their delightful stage patter, and in addition to Evie’s clogging and buck dancing, their act demonstrates the lively art of hambone – using nothing but your body to make music. The emphasis on rhythm routinely gets people hopping in the aisles. It’s no coincidence that their last CD was entitled “Feet All over the Floor.” They’re going into the studio this fall to record a new CD produced by country music maestro Lloyd Maines.

The origins of the band are spelled right out in the name. Once upon a time, two co-workers at an audio production company named Lisa and Sue began sneaking off to a stairwell in their workplace, an audio production company, to entertain each other with their voices and guitars. They started performing in local venues and soon found three like-minded souls in Evie, Martha and Stephanie. The Sisters are united by a love of old-time music and a commitment to having fun while they play it. Onstage they display an enthusiasm that routinely sweeps audiences, if not off their feet, at least out of their chairs and into the aisles. They look like they’re having fun and that there is nothing they’d rather be doing than entertaining you. They also share a love of traditional music that each of them came to in different ways.
Sue Sandlin grew up in Fremont, California and learned country music from relatives who encouraged her early on. “My Uncle Bruce gave me a guitar for my eighth birthday—he painted my name and lots of pretty birds and flowers all over it—and taught me how to play it. The first song I learned was ‘In the Pines.’”

Dragged to a contra dance “against my better judgment” by a co-worker, Berkeley native Stephanie Prausnitz found herself captivated by the music the band was playing. “The minute I walked into the dance hall I found my home,” said Steph of her experience years ago in Atlanta. “A friend gave me her old grade school violin and I got started.” Though classically trained on cello as a child, Stephanie made a conscious decision to learn to play old-time tunes by ear, as generations of fiddlers before her had.

“My dad was a fan of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger,” said Martha Hawthorne. “We sang folk songs at home and I also learned a lot of Swiss folk songs from my Swiss grandmother and cousins.” She was also a member of the bluegrass outfit The Mother Pluckers and at one time played in a Tex-Mex group called Café con Leche (both outfits, like the Sisters, were all-female bands). Martha, who hails from Southern California, says that the biggest musical influence in her life is her partner, Bill Foss, with whom she has performed old-time songs and tunes for the past 20 years.

Her family initially shaped Lisa’s musical upbringing. “My Grandpa Harry made a one-string fiddle out of an oil can and a broomstick,” she remembered. “It had a powder puff for a chin rest, and one could swap out the bridge using a walnut or pistachio shell – he insisted that it affected the tone.” Her father, who she describes as, “mad for music and entertaining,” played everything from jazz and bluegrass to show tunes and novelty numbers. “He’s basically a human juke-box,” said Lisa. It was during her years in college that she was introduced to old-time music, and became hopelessly hooked.

Evie Ladin was raised in a New Jersey household where folk music of one sort or another was always present. An accomplished dancer, singer, square dance caller, musician and teacher, she formerly toured nationally with the Ohio-based Rhythm in Shoes. “I grew up with old-time music in the house and on the radio – folks traveling through would stay with us for a night or a year, and we often headed south on weekends for parties and festivals,” said Evie.

However each member found the old-time trail, they’ve been following it ever since. Together this group of talented and dedicated women has produced a unique sound, drawing on all the various sources of musical experience that each of them brings to the table. Several of them have contributed original songs to the band’s repertoire and they collaborate on some very creative interpretations of traditional material.

The Sisters are a close-knit group whose cooperative spirit is most apparent in their do-it-yourself approach to the band. They have produced two well-received CDs themselves, they handle all their own booking and publicity and they design their own print materials and website. While the headaches of being responsible for every little thing can be annoying, it is more than offset, say the Sisters, by the benefits of maintaining control over their creative choices, touring schedules, and recording dates.

“The good aspects are that we’re in control of what and how we want to do things, but perhaps sometimes we spend too much time on details,” said Lisa. “If we hired a manager/booker/larger record company or label, we’d probably be playing out even more. We really enjoy touring but don’t want to do it all the time. We have families and being DIY we can make it all work.”

Added Evie, “We want to keep our quality of life high, call the shots, and keep all the dough we make. We’ve been very lucky, and quite successful, and I imagine a good portion of that is in the music.” The band draws on the diverse talents of its members to accomplish what other groups seek outside help for. “I’ve naturally fallen into booking and management, and Lisa and Sue are very talented graphic designers,” said Evie.

Enlisting the services of an industry pro like Lloyd Maines may seem at odds with the Sisters’ DIY ethos, but the gals are more than happy to have a top-flight producer help them capture the fire, joy and humor of their music in recorded form. And given the serendipitous way in which they met, it just seems that it was meant to be.

The Sisters drew Maines’ attention in Boulder, where they found themselves victim of a scheduling boo-boo and without a gig one night. Figuring that playing for tips on the street was better than making no money at all, they resorted to the ancient tradition of busking to lift their spirits and raise some gas money. And that’s where Lloyd Maines saw them. Impressed by what he heard he was soon spreading the word around to fans and venues about this great act he’d seen. When the Sisters asked him to produce their next CD he enthusiastically agreed.

“I’m very excited to work with Lloyd, mostly because he was attracted to us and really got the energy of the band,” said Evie. “He is a very talented person, engaged with a truly happening music scene, and he was drawn to our music. An ultimate compliment. He really wants to capture that grit on a record, and I think we could use that assistance in the studio.” “I just have no idea what to expect,” remarked Sue. “But because I love his sensibility, I’m just trusting that whatever he does with us is going to be great. I know that we can be a handful sometimes. Five strong personalities, five strong opinions, five different musical tastes. Lord help the man.”

It’s true the Sisters are no shrinking violets when it comes to expressing their opinions. Another shared passion of the women is their involvement in various causes reflecting their common values of justice and equality. “I don’t think that’s what brought us together,” said Stephanie, “but our similar political sensibility sure has helped keep us together. As for me, what makes my life meaningful is to contribute to society, however that expresses itself. It happens for us Sisters, for example, by playing a benefit show or benefit square dance.”

Added Sue, “The war won’t end because someone writes a really good anti-war song, but I do think that culture reflects politics and can sometimes be inspiring, or validating, to the people engaged in that struggle. We just try to be ourselves, and because we’re political people in various ways, sometimes it comes across in our songwriting, and sometimes in the gigs we choose to do – or not do.” Martha’s activism goes back to the Vietnam anti-war movement. “I was inspired by women folk singers like Joan Baez in the peace movement and, later on, Hazel Dickens,” she recalled. She found that music not only provided a means of political expression but was also a way of moving beyond mainstream pop culture. “I hope our songs inspire people to think their own thoughts, make their own music and continue to be alternative voices for building a better world,” she said.
As an all-woman band making some waves in the old-time world, they are frequently asked if they find that old-time music, which emphasizes an ensemble style of playing, is more reflective of a female, cooperative spirit versus bluegrass music, which is stereotyped as more macho, more aggressive, and just more of a guy thing. “As for myself,” said Stephanie, “there is no denying that, as a woman I am drawn to old-time for that reason exactly. But you have to be careful how you speak about these things. There are plenty of bluegrass groups that aren’t competitive, and plenty of women drawn to old-time for other reasons.”

Martha’s perspective is colored by years of bouncing joyfully back and forth between one genre and the other. “I don’t think of bluegrass as macho and competitive, at least among San Francisco Bay Area musicians,” she said. “I’ve loved singing and playing bass in bluegrass jams with musicians that can take breaks in any key, improvise and make vocals sound great.”

Whatever their take on bluegrass is, the Stairwell Sisters were a big hit in Nashville at International Bluegrass Music Association convention in 2005. They were also featured at the 2006 Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival in San Francisco and the legendary Strawberry Music Festival in Yosemite. Add that to their Scottish sojourn, their appearance at Lincoln Center in New York last fall, plus the Prairie Home Companion, spot and you can see that while the Sisters are first and foremost an old-time string band, their appeal goes beyond that audience. Their combination of musicianship, versatility, fun, and energy is creating new fans wherever they go.

With all that they’ve accomplished the last couple of years, the Stairwell Sisters are more in demand than ever to bring their music to increasingly receptive audiences. They’re in the studio this fall working with a major-league producer to cut what’s sure to be a remarkable recording and will no doubt be on the road to promote it when it’s released. More than ever the Sisters will have to walk that precarious line, balancing their families, personal relationships and careers with musical aspirations that have taken them to new and exciting places. But it’s all worth it, for the love of the music that brought them together. These good-time gals really do love old-time tunes.

Chuck Poling is a freelance writer and a native San Franciscan. He also performs with his wife in Jeanie and Chuck’s Country Roundup and is a popular emcee for old-time, bluegrass, and country music events around the Bay Area. He writes about country music, current events, and what he likes to call “creative history” on his blog at: http://blog.myspace.com/jeanieandchuckscountyrundup.
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Jimmy Triplett is a fiddler’s fiddler. With consummate technique, attention to detail, and respect for the traditions of old-time fiddling, Jimmy Triplett has forged a unique style that is elegant yet rough-hewn, accessible yet complex. Best known for playing West Virginia tunes in a manner that taps into their most archaic qualities, Jimmy has also worked to bring attention to the older masters of West Virginia fiddling, having produced the CD reissue of Ernie Carpenter’s Old-Time Fiddle Tunes from the Elk River Country and co-produced the CD-ROM / DVD set One More Time: The Life and Music of Melvin Wine. Although commercially released recordings of Jimmy’s own fiddling are few and far between, he has built a sterling reputation over the years through live performances, several first place ribbons at fiddle contests such as Clifftop, and through frequent appearances teaching workshops at places such as the Augusta Heritage Center, the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes, and the Bluff Country Gathering. I visited with Jimmy this spring at his home in Ames, Iowa, to talk about his experiences in old-time music.

What was your first exposure to old-time music?

The first I remember hearing it was around 1987. They used to have live music in downtown Winston-Salem, at the park, and I would go listen to different bands play. A couple of times the Toast String Stratayers played—that was Paul Brown and those guys, and the Red Hots, and I was just amazed, thinking “Wow, what is this music?” I didn’t even know what to call it, but I remember it made me extremely happy. At the time I was living in Greensboro, North Carolina, and I found my way to this acoustic music store, which was David Sheppard’s. It was great, they had fiddles and banjos hanging up all around, and I tried to describe this amazing music I had discovered. Joe Shelton took me under his wing and recommended an album, it was a Tommy Jarrell record, Pickin’ on Tommy’s Porch, and so I bought that.

I got that recording of Tommy Jarrell and then about the same week I went and bought two other records. One of them was Shakin’ Down The Acorns, the Hammons family LP, which was a real stroke of luck looking back on it, and the other was a great James Bryan album, The First of May. I loved all three of those albums to death, and listened to them constantly that autumn. I remember thinking when I first heard the Hammons family; I just could not grasp how they were making those sounds. It completely mystified me. I think it was “Big Scioty” and “Greasy Coat.” I listened to those over and over and over again just trying to understand them. It gave me such a strange feeling, sort of like that feeling when you wake from a dream.

So did you have mentors when you first started playing, people who were showing you things on the fiddle?

Not initially, no. I just started scratch-playing. There was a book at the library, Beginning Old-Time Fiddle, by Alan Kaufman, and it came with one of those flexi-discs that you have to stack quarters on. I learned two or three tunes from there, like “Ida Red” and “Sally Goodin.” I also went to the Mt. Airy Fiddlers Convention and recorded just about everything that squawked. I had a stack of tapes full of tunes but no idea who was playing them.

I started in ’87, and by ‘88 I was playing music with different people that I met around Guilford College, like Steve Terrill, Mark Hopkins, and Stan Gilliam. A friend of mine from Winston-Salem, Wendy Kramer, was playing the mandolin and she was hanging out with those guys, and that was how I got invited over to jam with them. It was really fun. That was the first band that I played with—Auntie Emma and the Romp Stompers.

I know you did a stint playing drums with Donna the Buffalo. When did that happen?

That must have been around 1995. It was only five or six months total, but it seems like longer because we did so much together. It’s funny because at the time I was in grad school, and I didn’t actually have a drum set. I never practiced; I would just get on the bus, show up at a gig, sit down behind the drum set, and watch and follow their gestures, completely flying by the seat of my pants. Some of the songs would be really fast, and I was so out of shape I could barely keep up. Some of the tunes would go on like ten minutes long, and I was thinking, “I’m dying!” It was funny. But I loved playing with those guys.

You’re primarily known now for playing West Virginia tunes. How long was it before you moved in that direction?

You mentioned earlier that one of the first old-time records you had was Shakin’ Down The Acorns, so were you focusing on West Virginia tunes from the start?

It wasn’t until 1993 or 1994 that I made a switch, and the switch was not specifically West Virginia, it was more like I was going to start from square one, and rebuild my ability to play the fiddle.

What made you want to do that, because at that point you’d been playing for a number of years?

It was just one of those things I go through periodically where I say to myself, “OK, I’m just going to start over,” because I’m not really happy with what I’m doing. I would listen to recordings of myself, and the rhythms really bugged me. I was doing this “whooshy-whooshy-whooshy” kind of thing, and it drove me crazy whenever I heard it. So I decided I was really going to focus on bowing, and then also on maybe one or two fiddlers, and just work on that. Around that time I met Sumio Seo. He was very thoughtful about bowing and was doing some nice things on the fiddle. I also met Ross Mohr, and his playing had a big influence on me, very clear and rich. It was also around that time that I went on a road trip to the Appalachian
Mountains with Helena [Faust] and Ross. We went to Melvin’s place and stayed over, we went to Clyde Davenport’s, and we went to visit Walter McNew. That was really amazing, because before that I guess I had no idea there were still old folks playing this music. Around that same time, Helena and I went down to Lewisburg to visit Mose Coffman. He was in a nursing home. We met Doug Van Gundy, who was just getting started fiddling at that time, and stayed at his place. He took us down to meet Mose.

Was he still playing pretty well?
Well, he didn’t sound anything like he did 20 years earlier, on the recordings, but he was doing the bowing the same. It was just really slowed down and without that polished sound to it, but he played a bunch of really interesting tunes and talked about the people that he learned from. He had a great way of pulling everything together and giving you a mini-music lesson about everything he experienced when he was younger, how he learned the music and stuff like that. But I only got to see him the one time.

So when did you move to West Virginia? What brought you there?
It must have been around 1994. I was spending time with Helena and we decided we were going to just pick everything up and move to West Virginia so that we could start visiting all these great old-time musicians there, like Melvin and Wilson Douglas. It seemed to me like it would be a great thing to go and spend a year and really learn how to play the fiddle from the older generation, and so that was the plan—a year in West Virginia. And that year turned into something like eight years. We started out down around Hillsboro, in Lobelia, in a hunting cabin on Hills Creek, in the middle of nowhere—back where the Hammons lived for a while. Helena was a textile artist, and she had freelance work. I was assisting her and we made just enough money to get by. We were 20 minutes from where Dwight Diller lived, and so we spent time with him and started going around visiting people. Dwight was really encouraging from the moment I met him, and we played a lot of music together. He has such a big heart, and we really identified with his passion for the culture surrounding the music. He let me listen to his recordings of the Hammons family, and would give me another tape to listen to every week or so.

I tried to visit as many musicians as I could find, and I was also listening to a lot of different field recordings, especially from Dwight and West Virginia University. I still vividly remember the day the tapes of Edden arrived in the mail from that archive, and I first heard “Let’s Hunt the Horses.” There’s a lot of repertoire that I learned from field recordings, you know, from people I couldn’t meet because I came along too late, like Burl [Hammons]. I just barely missed meeting him, really. If I had discovered West Virginia music a year or two earlier and realized there were old folks around I would have been able to meet him just before he passed away.

Were Melvin and other guys like that open to having you come around?
Yeah, they were always really open to it. We visited Leland Hall, Lester and Linda McCumbers, Homer Sampson, and we went to see Melvin many, many, many times. Went to see some banjo players and ballad singers as well. We went down to visit Bobby Taylor’s dad, Lincoln Taylor. He loved to talk about the old music, knew about all those guys around Charleston. He talked about Clark Kessinger and those fiddle players and yet Lincoln played so different than those guys. He had a very archaic approach, very idiosyncratic; he would do things that nobody else was doing with the bow, a lot of neat little twists and turns. We were trying really hard to track people down back then. I used to call up Post Offices in small towns in the middle of nowhere and tell them that I was trying to find people who played old-time music, and ask them for suggestions. I never actually found any fiddle players that way, but I did get a couple of interesting stories.

But you didn’t turn up any Jack McElwain recordings or anything like that?
No, nothing like that, although there are a couple of fiddlers that I’ve come across that were probably on the level of Jack McElwain or Edden Hammons, but only a few tunes were ever recorded. There are some great fiddle players that I’m really curious about and would love to hear more of, like Jim Armstead, who was from Calhoun County. Pat Gainer recorded maybe five tunes by him, and he has a really nice style, but no telling what he was really like because there just isn’t enough recorded. And Sherman Gore from down in southwestern West
Virginia, he’s one of my favorite fiddlers who I don’t really know that much about. If I could hear more of him I’d probably put him right up there near the top of the list, but unfortunately there’s only four, maybe five tunes total, field recordings probably recorded in the ‘50s.

So who was left from the Hammons family when you were down there living around Hillsboro?

No one of that generation. Smith Hammons was still alive, but he was really, really old and didn’t play. He was another one of Edden’s kids. Lee Hammons talked about tunes he got from Smith Hammons, but I’m not really sure if he got them from Smith playing them or from Smith playing a recording of his dad playing them. Smith had a recording of Edden playing “Waynesboro” and “Washington’s March” that was made by Chappell. He gave the disc to the family, and Smith had that.

One of the things we liked about being there was that it was so isolated from the rest of the world, and we felt like we were on this special island in the mountains, with the amazing landscape and that whole atmosphere plus a connection with the music and the older culture. And we really felt like we were in the stomping grounds of the Hammons family, like “This is the creek they would have walked up.” We really did feel like we were there with their spirit all around us. So around then I immersed myself in Burl Hammons’ music.

And was it around this time that you got hooked up with the Augusta Heritage Center? How did that happen?

I did the classic thing at Augusta, which is that I just showed up during Old-Time Week, without any invitation, without any role there, and it was a matter of hours before someone was like, “Uhm, what are you doing here? If you’re gonna stay you have to work.” I was like “Uh, OK, I’m playing my fiddle...” Right away they put me in Barb Withee’s bass class and I got to be the fiddle player for that. At the time nobody knew who I was, they were just very open to people coming and helping out, so that was really cool. That was probably 1995, maybe even ’94. I knew that Augusta had an archive of recordings, so I wanted to find out if I could listen to some of it, and they let me go up and look at the stuff. Later on, they contracted me to go through and log some of the recordings. I got to listen to things they had floating around in boxes that no one had heard in years, like Currence Hammond and Ernie Carpenter.

I know you told me once that one of the formative things for you was watching a videotape of Burl Hammons fiddling. Was it around this time that you encountered that videotape?

Yeah. That was formative in the sense of helping me really figure out what Burl was doing with the bow. And from that I sort of reconstructed what I thought was happening in Edden’s playing, and Sherman, and everything else that I listened to beyond that. It was the chance to see Burl playing “Three Forks of Cheat” and “Buffalo Gals” or something like that, you know, not the greatest tune but he was playing it the way he played. I was like “Oh, so that’s how he does it! Suddenly it made sense to me. Before then I was doing what I saw a lot of people do—shuffle, shuffle, shuffle constantly, but he wasn’t shuffling at all in those tunes. He was mostly doing saw strokes. I was just amazed watching his arm move. So I watched that over and over until I could actually remember it. That was when I started really digging in and learning one tune carefully before trying something else. It wasn’t just about trying to accumulate 80 bazillion G tunes, which is how I was before then.

What was it about Burl’s playing that you found interesting, since he was your way in to understanding a particular kind of old-time fiddling? Can you talk stylistically about some of the things that Burl was doing?

My impression of his playing was that it sounded really old, you know, it had something that was different from what I was used to hearing. It was beautiful and stately, and it wasn’t over the top with bells and whistles, it just sounded very down to earth. When I heard tunes like “Shanghai” and “Shelvin’ Rock” and “Big Scioty” and “Cranberry Rock,” I mean those are still my favorite tunes, for the way that they twist, and the phrasing in them, and the combination of very subtle ornamentation.

He was also using much more diversity in his bowing than I was used to trying to play in my fiddling. Like doing things with long bow, not in the sort of Texas style, where the bow just keeps going down, down, down, down, and then finally comes back up, but doing saw strokes, back and forth with the beat, and not doing a constant shuffle. He used a diversity of rhythms, and the phrasing, the accent that went with the music, was very different as a result. It was much more complex, and yet most of the things he did actually seemed to create more space in the music. In other words, if you’re doing too much with the bow then you start to crowd out the melody with all these extra accents that aren’t really complimentary to the tune. Burl’s music is rhythmically very complex, but the rhythm enhances the melody without interfering with it.

What I imagined was that Burl was very connected to his place, where he grew up and where he lived and worked, and that really appealed to me. I could hear that in his music. The thing that I feel when I listen to his tunes is this connection with nature, or that older world where nature was more connected to daily life. I feel something that connects to wild things, wild places. A lot of their music was dance tunes, but even if they talked about “Yeah, this is a tune we loved to play for a dance,” I still didn’t hear it as just a dance tune when they played it. It just had so much more in it.

But yeah, listening to Burl’s music, it was almost like picturing a landscape or the woods. It’s hard to explain, but it makes me feel very peaceful to listen to his playing. Whereas when I listened to Edden, it was like torrential storms, something like that. There was so much more passion and drama. Edden’s “Shaking Off the Acorns” is one of those tunes that knocks you over when you hear it. I definitely learned emotion and power and a way of putting that in the music from listening to Edden.

What about Melvin Wine? I know you spent quite a bit of time with him. What was that like, and how did he influence your playing?

Melvin was such a huge influence for music and everything else. For a while there he was just one of my really good friends, somebody that when I saw him I felt like everything was good, I could just hang out there and feel comfortable, in sort of the same way as with a grandparent. We had a strong connection, and it was really nice to visit him. For a while I was doing a West Virginia Folk Arts Apprenticeship through Augusta. I had spent time with Melvin before that, but it was really through the apprenticeship that I got to see him every week or so.
And we did a bunch of other things, like riding around to festivals. He knew so much about old-time music and the tunes and had so much interest in it, so much care in the way he played the music. And he was a really good teacher, even though he wouldn’t necessarily know exactly how to say what he was doing, but he could guide me and tell when I was doing something not quite right. Sometimes when I thought we were finally doing exactly the same thing, he would point out something I was missing. He knew all those little hooks and turns that he considered to be essential to the tunes, and they were always really interesting things that shifted my focus to a different place, closer to what he was hearing in his head. I could really hear the tunes differently after that. I always go back to Melvin’s tunes. It seems like whenever I’m just wanting to get grounded I play tunes from Melvin, and they come naturally to me now.

Visiting with Melvin was always really nice. It was really great to go there when it was just me and him sort of doing our routine, hanging out, drinking coffee, eating some simple meal that he cooked up, and then just talking about the tunes and stuff. It was especially nice during the first part...
of the apprenticeship, during winter, we’d be hunched right close to his gas stove, as close as we could go, with the coffee sitting right on top of it, and so in my memory it just has this warm and cozy feeling.

Everybody loved to play with Melvin and he loved to play with everybody. He was really good at adjusting to whatever session he was in, and he was also really perceptive about your level and would pick tunes that were good for you at that point, that would make you feel comfortable but would also sort of take you that next step, tickle you a little. He loved to do something that would surprise you, sort of tease you or whatever, even with his music. And he also seemed to be really perceptive and thoughtful about bowing styles and those kinds of things, even though I think he thought we were all crazy when we talked about the “down-ups” and all that silly stuff. It was really funny doing a class with Melvin. Once I facilitated a Master Artist class with Melvin at Augusta, and basically he would play the tune and then I would break it down, and while everyone was paying close attention to me, Melvin would drift off to sleep. It was so funny, so adorable, he’d suddenly wake up and go “Ohh!” and try to get back into it. It was really fun.

How would you characterize his style? What are some of the hallmarks of his fiddling?

I think his playing sounds very old and very traditional. He does a lot of really complex things with subtle ornamentations and rhythms. His delivery is a little bit different and it comes across very different than like Burl or even Ernie Carpenter. I always used to wonder why people didn’t necessarily get excited about Melvin’s tunes in the same way. That always kind of puzzled me, because to me when I hear Melvin play it’s everything that John Salyer or—name another classic fiddler, you know, the Hammonses, any of those guys had. I think that the only difference is that Melvin was just so much in the present, he was right here with us. And then there was something playful about the way that he played the tunes, they had that kind of happy energy to them, but technically, you know, in terms of the bowing and the melodies and the way that he used the rhythm, the accents that he used, they were all very old, and a very pure, traditional sound. I think he represents everything that’s great about old-time music and older Appalachian fiddling. It’s all right there in his playing, and so I think there’s some other aspect of his playing that makes him maybe come across sort of differently so that people don’t necessarily have that kind of gut reaction, I think because he maybe didn’t let the music have that type of intensity, it didn’t go to the intense places that Edden’s playing did, but technically it was built on the same tradition.

A lot of it has to do with Melvin’s personality, and the playfulness of his spirit that comes through in his music. I think one of the things that people hear in a lot of West Virginia music, or the stuff that is quote-unquote West Virginia Music, people think of the modal, dark, scary sounding stuff, the dramatic sounding stuff, but I like a broader idea of West Virginia music, it doesn’t just have to be modal, dark, scary. I mean, there are lots of great tunes like that, but there’s also this whole other beautiful old sound or beautiful natural sound, and Melvin’s playing encapsulates quite a lot of that. He doesn’t have the sort of intense playing style that some of the central West Virginia fiddlers have, but that’s the only thing that’s different. Just about everything he played had subtlety and beauty and yet was also simple and straightforward.
A lot of the stuff I just said about Melvin is also true about Ernie Carpenter. He remains one of my favorite fiddle players. I actually feel like of all the fiddle players I’ve learned from Ernie is the one I most identify with in terms of his way of playing, keeping it straightforward, simple to the core, not a lot of bells and whistles, and seeing very clearly the connection between the tune and where it came from. Every tune that he plays has some kind of meaning. There’s something wrapped up in it, and you can hear it, but it’s not hit-you-over-the-head dramatic, overly intense or overly exciting. Stately is a good word to use when talking about Ernie’s playing, and Melvin as well.

“Yew Piney Mountain” and “Granddad’s Favorite” or the way he played “Old Sledge” and “Jimmy Johnson”—I like the way those tunes sort of breathe, they’re just very full sounding without being cluttered. Ernie’s also a really good example of putting the right amount of tension in the tunes, and he has a real sort of woody quality to the sound he gets.

What would you say makes West Virginia fiddling unique? What would you say are the similarities between the iconic West Virginia fiddlers, and what are their differences, because in many ways they’re very different.

Yeah, in a way I don’t know if there is a stylistic character to talking about West Virginia music, you pretty much have to talk about the different fiddlers, and so it would be just as easy to talk about an old Appalachian style than to talk about a West Virginia style, because some of the things that I think are really great about Burl’s playing or Edden’s playing, you know, I would say those same things about Emmett Lundy, or John Salyer, you know, jumping around the map, so it’s not tied to geography. But yeah, there are definitely similarities between Melvin and Ernie and Burl, just to name some of my favorite fiddle players from West Virginia, and there are also some really big differences. The similarities are that all three of those fiddle players used bowing in such a way that the rhythm was like a subtle complement to the melody. The melody required the rhythm for accents. All three of those fiddlers and a bunch more I could mention share a complex set of bowing patterns. Melvin has a few things that are characteristic of his playing, but a bunch of the things that we would be most likely to say “Oh, that’s a Melvin bowing pattern,” you can also hear that in John Salyer or other people that aren’t from West Virginia, so that stuff, I just think its old-style fiddle playing.

You know, everybody brings idiosyncrasies to the music and they also learn from their peers or their elders, and you can take all those pieces and try to put them together to figure out what is old-time fiddling. The fiddle players that I really, really love, like Melvin, Burl, Edden, and Ernie, those four guys are really good about holding on to things that were done by their elders. So for example Burl’s playing, the rhythms he’s using, he’s not just echoing the tunes of his mentors and reinventing the technique, he’s actually playing in a style that was handed down to him, he’s doing things with his bow that I think, in terms of their essential qualities, would be just like his predecessors. Ernie as well, Ernie learned probably more by osmosis, and you can hear that in his playing, but his bowing sounds very old and very close to something that you would have heard from his ancestors. And then Melvin, we know how perceptive he was about the music. I’m sure he’s doing something very close to what his dad was doing. Where his dad got his style, well, that was from a lot of fiddlers in the area. And it wasn’t something that he received strictly from his own father because his dad just whistled the tunes for him, but he was probably equally dedicated to traditional playing styles from his area. Those are the fiddle players that I really like, for the fact that they respect the tradition enough to maintain a lot of the elements of it, not just the tunes.

But then there are a whole bunch of other great fiddle players who are really idiosyncratic. I think of Doc White for one. He absorbed a lot of the tunes, but it’s through his own filter, and it’s very personal in that sense. I guess if he was the only old-time fiddle player we ever heard from West Virginia, we’d still learn something about how it used to sound, but it would be a real different impression, we wouldn’t necessarily reconstruct in our mind the music of Edden or Burl or the Hammons family in general, but you’d get some of that intensity that comes through the music, and the feeling of the tunes as something that’s connected to the land. Doc was sort of a self-taught renaissance man. He taught himself dentistry and dentistry and photography and I think he probably did...
all of those things with passion and perception, but in his own way, and he was definitely out there, you know. His fiddle playing is like that, too, it’s really wild and exciting and it taps into something that’s in a really different place than what a lot of the other fiddlers were tapping into, but it’s also very beautiful.

There were a lot of other fiddle players around that were like that as well. Some choose to play in a way that’s very traditional; it’s as if they’re receiving a whole set of different things when they learn a tune. They’re learning the melodies, and they’re also learning the rhythm, the bowing, and all that sort of stuff, and keeping all of that going. Others are just sort of taking pieces of it and almost creating something new, you know, so it really reflects different personalities I think. Every folk tradition is like that to some extent, you have some people that take a real disciplined approach to learning everything about it, and then some people who just throw themselves into it whole-heartedly, bringing fresh innovations. Both ways are really good.

Of the other fiddle players in the Doc White category, there’s one fiddle player, Leland Hall, who I spent a lot of time with. His playing is different than Doc’s in the sense that it doesn’t have that kind of wild intensity, where it’s on the edge and just about to go over. Leland’s fiddling is almost dreamlike or surreal. You’d be listening to it and you wouldn’t know where you were in the tune, but it sounded good and it was really beautiful. It was just amazing what he would do on the fiddle, and it’s hard to think he was keeping track of the tune, but he was, he knew exactly what was going on, and he heard it in his head a specific way. It was really fun to watch him play, and to hear him talk about the tunes. He learned a lot of tunes from Ward Jarvis and those old guys, but he plays nothing like Ward, as far as I can tell. He played tunes like “Give the Fiddler a Dram,” and “Wild Horse,” and a tune called “The Bear Chase,” and another one called “Icy Mountain,” from Ward Jarvis.

There were a bunch of fiddle players, especially later on, who were really influential on me, not so much because of the tunes they played but because of the way they played their music. There were a few guys I met that knew maybe only 20 or 30 tunes, but they had sweet, almost gentle
ways of playing. One of them was Ralph Roberts. I really love the way he approaches the tunes, especially when he’s playing solo. You know, they’re just these straightforward old-time fiddle tunes, but he just does something really nice with them. He doesn’t crowd it with a whole bunch of unnecessary stuff, he goes right to the essence of the tune and breathes this really gentle and joyful life into it. I love his versions of tunes more than just about any others.

Another reason I really think Ralph is interesting is that he grew up in the tradition and was around the music all the time, but he didn’t really start playing until he was much older, and so it’s almost as if he started playing at the same time I did. So it’s kind of neat to interact with him and hear how he’s thinking about learning a tune and what he does with it and how he plays them. A lot of us have that problem with getting started, that we have to first clean up the mess, the extra baggage, before we can get right down to the essence or the heart of the music. His music doesn’t have all of that congestion. His playing is just really beautiful and sweet and interesting, I’m always fascinated by his tunes. Like his version of “Lost Girl” or “Give the Fiddler a Dram,” and some of the tunes he learned from friends of mine, like he learned “Old Sledge” from John Gallagher. I mean, he knew that it was an old tune, from his family. Ralph is related to the Hammonses. He knew of the tune, but he learned it fresh from someone he heard at local music gatherings. He does really neat things with the bow, too, some really nice twists that are completely his own inventions, but they work really well, the way he sweeps the bow, sort of diving and cascading.

Another one of those fiddlers was Stanley Propst. He was one of those guys who knew maybe 30 tunes, and he plays very idiosyncratically, but there is something that I really enjoy about listening to his playing that helps me connect with that older sound. I don’t even know if older is the right word, just simple and interesting but not dramatic or overtly exciting. He plays standard tunes, but he does some really interesting things. He tunes his fiddle really low, he plays everything in high bass and counter [AEAE], tunes like “Cumberland Gap,” “Walking in the Parlor” and “Old Joe Clark,” and he played some unusual tunes that he got from another fiddler in the area named Mike Propst.

There was a fiddler from Lost Creek named Earl Alkire that Gerry [Milnes] and
Earl Alkire of Lost Creek, Harrison County, West Virginia, 1996.
Helena and I used to visit. He was a really neat guy. I didn’t really get to know him all that well, I think. I went to visit him maybe three times only. I met him just before he passed away. But he had a really nice way of playing, and his bowing was very different from everybody else. His dad was a first generation Irish immigrant, but his family learned a lot of music from local musicians like the Wines.

There were other folks I met, like a guy named Jim Hollis from northeastern West Virginia who played a bunch of tunes that had sort of a different feeling, not really like central West Virginia, but nice old tunes. He had some neat ones like “Old Hang On” and “Clean Out the Kitchen,” things like that.

I think of you as being pretty much a traditionalist at what you do. Among contemporary old-time fiddlers there are those who are more free or loose or whatever with what they’re doing, in terms of rhythms or tunes or improvisation and things like that. And then there are people like you and Bruce Greene who I think of as adhering more closely to tradition. Is that a conscious thing on your part? Do you even see yourself in that way?

I like it when people do innovative things with the music, I just don’t see myself doing that, like trying to do something really elaborate or develop the tunes or anything. For some reason I’m just drawn to the simple, and I don’t really want to be able to do anything fancy. I just don’t seem to have that kind of ambition. I really like the old tunes, and I really like to be able to play them well and to enjoy them. I feel like I’ve already worked really hard to get the techniques that make it possible for me to do those simple, beautiful things that I like, and I guess I don’t have any real ambition beyond that.

A little bit of my approach to the music and the way I play comes from the idea of wanting to slowly develop my abilities. I’m not pushing it too hard. I just don’t want to take slow steps to get where I’m going. Maybe I’m just not ready to do anything elaborate or innovative yet. I definitely don’t feel like I’m artistically developed enough where I could do that. But I’m comfortable just steeping myself in this current space.

It would be easy for me to say some embarrassing, gushing kind of things when talking about old-time music. I really embarrass myself a lot of times when I start talking about things I love, because I guess I do have all of these strong feelings about it. Old-time music represents something that is really powerful to me, but the only way for me to talk about the beauty of it is with these sort of silly sounding words. But it is such a wonderful part of our culture, for all of the things it represents. It’s so pure and so connected to the world rather than just being about entertainment. The fact that the music exists in that kind of way, as a reflection of the beauty of the world rather than being something that’s just meant to entertain us per se is part of why I think old-time music is really so wonderful.

There is so much Appalachian music that we didn’t get to hear, that was out there way before us. There used to be many, many fiddle players, and now we’ve just got a small representation of a few of them, and so part of the fun that I have is trying to imagine what it used to sound like. There were probably lots of those guys back there who were really competitive about it, but for every fiddle player who was dying to win first place at the local fiddle contest, there were probably 20 that just never got the nerve to even get in the contest and didn’t really want to anyway, they just played around home. That’s how it is in my mind anyway, and...
those are the ones I really love to try to imagine how they sounded. What was their playing like when they were just enjoying their life at that time? I guess part of my impression of the music is a reflection of my current mindset as well. There was a time when listening to West Virginia music, I would connect it with something that was really raw and intense and on edge, and that makes sense because that was where my life was at that time, and now I guess I’m more interested in sitting back and reflecting.

I mean, there are so many ways of listening to old-time, so many different perspectives. You can listen to Doc White get really excited by it just for the fact that its so wild and weird, but I prefer to give him more credit for what he’s hearing and where it’s coming from, so even though his music has this almost savage sound to it, I don’t think he’s playing something that he wants to sound raw or chaotic. It’s something beautiful to him. We have to be real careful to remember that we bring our own perceptions or expectations to it, but that’s not necessarily what it means to them, and so maybe it’s worth thinking a little harder about the music.

Do you think it’s possible to keep that kind of relationship to the music alive today, when communities and traditions are kind of splintered, we’re learning tunes from mp3s and not directly from family or community members, and many people’s sense of being rooted in a place isn’t what it once was?

Yeah, I think it’s completely possible to keep that going. I think that it’s possible in just the same way that we can have all this high-tech stuff in our homes, and yet right outside our door we have these beautiful trees, we have the natural world out there. It’s real easy to feel disconnected from it and forget about it, but it’s also just as easy to remember that it’s right there. You walk outside and there it is, look up at the sky, or out at the mountains. You know, we shouldn’t be disconnected. We’re always a part of it. So I think there’s no inconsistency in being fully in the modern world but also fully connected to nature and the natural world, it’s just that people a lot of times let themselves forget the connection.

The thing about music is that I think everyone assumes that it has to progress forward; that music, if it’s artistic, it’s always leaving the past behind. And so traditional music is sort of in a funny position in that way because yes, it’s art, but the thing that makes it really special is the fact that it’s old and that it’s passed down and something that we hold on to. That’s an idea that I think all of us have naturally when we think about art, that it always has to be new and innovative and changing, but really I’ve let go of that feeling, I don’t need that for the music. I’m happy if it stays the same and I’m treading old ground over and over, back down the same path again and again.

I think many people are familiar with you as a solo fiddler, but you’ve also played in a couple of bands over the years. Can you talk a bit about that?

Years ago I played in a band called the South Surry Serenaders with Gene Anderson, Betty McGirk, and John Calhoun around Winston-Salem. We played for a lot of local square dances, and once we played on the Merry-Go-Round at WPAQ. We even won “Best Upcoming Band” at Mt. Airy one year! A big part of my musical experience was playing with the Rain Crows, which was really just a living room band. It was me and Helena and Leslie Green mostly, although there were other people who played with us, like John Hoffman played guitar when we were in Ithaca.
I very much enjoyed playing with that band. And Helena’s singing is just the absolute best. What she did with those old songs went straight to the heart without unnecessary drama, without unnecessary decoration. It was just like bang, here it is. Her banjo playing was also really, really nice.

Recently I’ve been playing, or sort of dreaming of playing, with Candy Goldman and Jerry Canote in Seattle, for about two years now. We have a really good band sound, and I’m hoping that we’ll get to play more and maybe make a CD someday. First we have to overcome the long-distance that separates us. I’m in another occasional band with Andy Fitzgibbon and Bob Smakula, the Elkins String Ticklers, which was initially a pickup band to play at Clifftop, but we play together every chance we get. It’s really fun to play with them as well.

I understand that you went through a period where you dealt with some physical problems that affected your playing. Can you talk a little about that?

I had really horrible tendinitis, which was a result of doing a lot of different things to abuse my arm. It was 1996 when it hit me, and it was very sudden. I had to stop playing for more than six months before I could really start scratching away again. Before the injury we were playing all the time, I was teaching, playing for dances. I was also typing a lot, and digging in the garden. But it wasn’t because of how I hold the fiddle, because I never had problems with my left arm. It was my right arm, my bowing arm. And I wasn’t mindful of the warning signs at all. I just assumed that if my muscles ached they were going to be sore the next day and stronger two days later. But it was something else – it wasn’t muscles that were aching. That was a hard way to learn about anatomy. But I think it was good to back off. When I listen to recordings of myself back then versus later on, I can tell I relaxed quite a bit. So it was actually a very revealing thing, to be forced to stop playing so much. My sound matured later on not through playing a lot but from stepping back from it.

Are there any other fiddlers you wanted to talk about?

I haven’t said anything about Lee Hammons, one of my major influences, who is another one of those fiddlers who is not sort of technically sensational or flashy, but he seems to know just enough technique to play incredibly beautiful tunes, and he puts it to use in a way that is just above and beyond what most people do with a whole lot more. That’s why he’s sort of this role model for the way that I want to sound. And his banjo playing as well. He’s just a constant source of inspiration for the depth that he puts into the music. He’s definitely rough around the edges in terms of the sound, it’s really raw, but that’s not what you’re listening for; you’re hearing this whole other quality. And so his playing is at the top of my list in terms of capturing that simple beauty, and that majestic grace. And you can hear all sorts of things in his playing, too. You can hear happiness and joy, but then there’s also dire danger in some of his tunes.

Sherman Hammons is another big influence. His playing on “Shelvin’ Rock” and “Old Christmas Morning” is just really, really wonderful, and the tunes like “Star of Bethlehem” that he plays, or what he does with “Lost Girl,” he captures that magic quality of Edden’s music, although without the layer of drama or intensity or drive that Edden’s music has. He’s another one where you can gain a lot of insight on that older generation’s sound. Although he plays really rough and is not clean in terms of his technique, the rhythm and the accents that he puts in the music are just spellbinding.

Do you have any advice for aspiring fiddlers?

I would say first of all spend a lot of time listening, spend more time listening and less time playing at first, and then when you do play, spend about as much time stepping back from what you’re doing as actually trying to play something. Listen, and compare yourself to what others are doing, try to be aware of other musicians, the way they’re playing. You can really learn a lot by watching people and hearing different ways that people do things. I guess sort of the bottom line is to step back and listen rather than just jumping in and plowing forward too soon. I’m not saying don’t be enthusiastic about playing, but take your time.

I would recommend trying to take something simple and learn to do that well first. And simple could mean a lot of things. It could mean picking only a couple of tunes that you’re going to work on, or maybe pick a single fiddler that you want to try to emulate, and figure out what they’re doing, and use that as a stepping stone to other things later on. For me, I knew I wanted to have my music connect with that older sound, but I didn’t know what it was at first, so I felt like I had to proceed slowly and not take anything for granted.

Jimmy Triplett has been a huge influence on my playing. I had been teaching myself fiddle for a year, and decided to trek down to West Virginia and go to Clifftop, and then head up to Elkins to learn from Jimmy at the Augusta Heritage Center. This was in 1998. I had heard of Jimmy from a video under Dwight Diller’s name that featured the two of them playing fiddle and banjo. I dubbed it onto cassette and it basically became the soundtrack of my life for the next year or so. The lonesome sound of all those West Virginia tunes combined with the sparse feel of the fiddle and banjo made for the most perfect sound I’d ever heard. And the fact that it was just two guys sitting in the living room after dinner made it even better. Well, Jimmy was teaching the advanced class at Augusta but I decided to go ahead anyway and take his class, and was met with great encouragement by him from the start. We connected right away, and when we found out we both liked rock music and had played a lot of drums besides strings, I knew I was in the right class. His class was great because you could get exactly what you wanted from it depending on your ability. I was there solely to try to learn how to play the fiddle and hopefully get a tune or two under my belt during the week. I then went away and studied abroad in Munich, Germany for a year and basically played the whole time, much of the time learning from the tapes I made of Jimmy’s class. To this day I still pull out those tapes and always find something new in them that is inspiring just like the first time I heard him play. Jimmy puts an incredible amount of care in every phrase and through his meticulous approach an intense sincerity flows out of every tune. He plays each tune like it’s told him a secret.

Stephen Sammy Lind
Seattle, Washington
Where do you see your music going in the future?

I basically see myself holding on to what I have and just sort of keeping that safe, because I kind of feel like what I’ve got is all I need. I feel really happy with the way that I play. There are other tunes I want to learn, and I always want to practice more, but I’m just really happy to have the music in my life. It’s always going to be a part of my life, and the best music I play is probably going to be those quiet times late in the evening or early in the morning, when everything is calm, because that’s what the music is for me, it’s something that grounds me and helps me feel at ease. That’s how I have it in my life now mostly. Right now I’m not able to get out to play a lot of music, but I’m also not worried about the fact that I’m not getting out because I know that it’s still right here, inside of me. The music is a part of me and it’s safe and I’m not going to lose it. If anything my feelings about it grow stronger. You know, that’s one of the great things about old-time music as well, and you can hear that from a lot of the old folks, the way they talked about it, it was always something that connected them to the past, but it also lived in their heart and soul.

I’m looking to the future as a time when I’ll be playing a lot more, especially to play more with friends. I’m even thinking about learning the banjo so I can play tunes with my wife, Masayo. She plays all my favorite tunes on the fiddle. Right now I’m at a point in my life where I have to dedicate a lot of time to my work, and I currently feel the same way about botany as I did about the music a few years back when it had my full attention. So I guess this is the way I learn things, it’s sort of a full immersion approach, full tilt. So right now I’m pretty much learning all I can about botany while I’m finishing my dissertation, and later on I see family, music, and work coexisting a little more.

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**Workshop**

## MAKING YOUR OWN CD

**By Pete Peterson**

Your band has been playing together for a couple years and getting tighter, and you believe you have a special sound and some distinctive material. You’re thinking it would be nice to have a CD to sell at gigs and you’re wondering what you need to do before you have one that’s ready to sell. Maybe, like some of the 1920s recording artists who heard Henry Whitter on record and said “I can sound better than that!” you think that you can sound at least as good as some of the bands whose CDs you’ve already bought. Keep that optimism—you have some hard work ahead of you. This article assumes that you want to make the best CD that you can for minimum cost and, with that in mind, is meant to help you with some of the decisions you have to make.

There are lots of advantages to having a CD to sell. Many venues require a CD so that they can hear you before deciding that they want to book you. The demo is that they need to work through other people to help you with some of the decisions you have to make.

The disadvantages are two: the work, and the upfront money.

To start the process, look closely, maybe for the first time, at some of the CDs that you’ve bought. Realize that they each contain, first, the CD itself, with a bunch of tunes and songs on it which somebody has recorded, mixed, arranged in an order, and (maybe) mastered; and second, a package with graphics: maybe a picture of the band, some liner notes, acknowledgements, and a list of songs.

You wonder how much money it will take to get that shipment of 500 (or, if you’re optimistic, 1000) CDs into your living room and whether you’ll ever make back your expenses. Unfortunately, hitting the jackpot on sales should not be the primary reason to make your first CD. If you want to make it to document the fun you’ve been having and you don’t care that you’ll probably lose money—that alone can be a good enough reason.

Unless you own a recording studio and are a good graphic artist, you will need to work through other people to make this happen. If those people are already familiar with old-time music, they will probably do a better job and you will have to spend less time educating them. A good place to start might be with vendors who advertise in the Old-Time Herald. A list appears at the end of this article.

### Choices

The first step is choosing a recording studio. Usually studios are rented by the hour for a fixed fee; this fee gives you access to microphones, baffle recording equipment and mixing equipment. Are there enough microphones of differing types to allow one vocal and one instrumental channel for each member of the band? (Fiddle players who sing usually only get one mike for both.) Find out whether setup time is included in your hourly fee. Ideally, you will arrive to see the microphones all set up in the configuration you have described, and you will pay only for the time you are there. Discuss with the studio staff what they will do for you. Ask, for instance, if their facilities will allow you to listen to an unmixed playback immediately after recording a tune or song. Call around and choose a studio and recording engineer that you are comfortable working with. Listen to other recordings a studio has done. This is another area where you get what you pay for—consider budget, convenience, experience, rapport, and everything else.

Once you have picked a studio and set recording dates, start preparing. The most important preparation is simply to practice. If you can’t play it well before you get to the studio, odds are you won’t play it well in the studio. Be ruthlessly honest. Remember Richard Feynman’s comment: “The easiest person to fool is yourself.” A good way past this is to ask a musical friend with a good ear to listen to you, both in rehearsal and during the mixing process, and ask for honest comments.

A big part of preparation is deciding what you are going to record and in what order. A CD can hold almost 80 minutes of music—most of the CDs in my collection are 55-70 minutes long. If, like on the 78 rpm records that much old-time music was learned from, a standard song lasts about 3 minutes, then you’ll probably want to have 18-20 different cuts. Make a list of songs and tunes that you would like to record, discuss it with your musical friend(s), and add extra material in case one or two of your arrangements don’t sound right when you try to record them, or you have copyright problems. (See below)

Now put in some extra work to minimize your costs. Arrange the tunes by key so that you can plan to do everything in one key before moving on. (This is not the order they are going to be on the CD; we’ll get to that.) Make a second list of who plays what on which tune. Plan to start with something that you’ve played together a million times. Remember again: time is money. The less time you spend in the studio tuning, moving from one instrument to another, moving the microphones around, changing keys and getting settled in the new key, the less money you will spend.

A minimalist way of putting together a CD is this: if you’re fortunate enough to own a good computer and you can invest in a few good microphones, preamps, and a program like CoolEdit, then you can do your own recording and production. Carl Baron has produced several CDs using just such a simple system and has stated more than once that the most important thing is his wooden chair where he can sit comfortably, facing the microphone just the right distance away and play.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, a very few studios offer an option where they will pay the costs of recording, mixing, and production; in return for this, the studio owns most of the rights to the CD. This is the system used for most big-label pop music where there is much more money involved, and it is unusual for a band to have enough money to cover the entire costs of production. It’s far less common in old-time music.

### The Recording Process

The big day has arrived and you and your band are in the recording studio, all set up and ready to roll. You’ve brought your lists. You’ll spend a fair amount of time testing out the microphones and getting sound checks. Work out with the recording engineer the signal that the
microphones are live. Work out the “start signal” with your bandmates. It can even be an out-loud count; that can be edited out. Do a couple dry runs—play the first couple measures so you’re used to starting together. Finally, you’re rolling. Play that first tune through—the one you’ve played together a million times. If one of you made a serious flub near the beginning, you will often be told to “keep rolling.” Start again and, hooray, this time you got through it. Without listening to it, play it and record it a second time. Did it feel any different? Any better now that you’re less nervous? Now, unless there has been an obvious mistake, stop and listen to the unmixed version of both. Do you need to record it a third time? If so, then do that right away; if not, congratulate each other and move ahead to the next song you plan to record.

On the next song, now that you are old hands at the recording process, feel free to listen after each take. Remind yourselves that time is money—the meter is running whether you are recording, listening, or using the bathroom. Keep going without a major break until you’ve laid down what you think are acceptable versions of six to eight tunes/songs. And, remember—recording engineers get tired too! Expect the process to be intense and therefore quite tiring. Hint: if you haven’t got what you think is a good take after three tries, stop trying and move on. You can go back and re-record it at the start of your next session. Expect it to take maybe three sessions, if you are really well prepared, to get at least one good take of each cut you’re recording.

Mixing
Mixing is the job of the recording engineer. The good ones will explain to you what they are doing as they go along. Expect to learn a new vocabulary associated with this black art—things like “EQ curve,” “reverb,” and “compression.” What they are trying to do is achieve a blend where you can hear each instrument and voice individually (maybe from a different point in space, since you are making a stereo CD) and have them blend well together, with a nice “warm” sound. You may be able to help them beforehand by picking some CDs from your collection on which you really like the sound. The engineer can use this to help achieve the sound you want. Expect to spend several hours working out proper mixing for the first tune; subsequent ones will go much more quickly. Your role is to provide input when asked. This is where your experienced friend can really help you.

If your band has worked with professional sound in your gigs, you may be able to help the recording engineer get to a good mix more quickly. (Always remember, the meter is running!) If, for instance, you sing some three-part harmonies and you like to have the lead voice strongest, with tenor and baritone softer, say so. But once you’ve said this, it’s the recording engineer’s job to achieve it. He/she can twist knobs better than you can, but you are the ones who have to like the final sound. When you can explain, clearly and concisely, how a sound can be “warm,” maybe you are ready to give detailed advice. While the mixing process is going on, this is probably a good time to get together and decide the order of songs on the final CD, which should not be the order in which you recorded them.

Mixing up keys, tempos, and vocalists so that your listener will not be subjected to five instrumentals in G, all at about the same tempo. Variety is good. Too much variety can be bad. Reach a consensus!

Mastering
If mixing is a black art, mastering is even blacker. Basically, mastering is adjusting the total sound level and degree of compression to the point where a listener or radio DJ can put your CD into his player and expect that the sound level will be comparable to other CDs in his collection. They give Grammies for doing this really well. Don’t skimp pennies on mastering—get it done by someone who specializes in this.

Getting Copyright Clearance
Copyright law, especially as it applies to old-time music, is a mess. To use a metaphor, “One law for the lion and the ox is tyranny.” (William Blake) The copyright laws were written for the protection of large entertainment companies like Walt Disney; it is no coincidence that the latest extension of copyright was passed just a year before the first image of Mickey Mouse was scheduled to pass into the public domain. Old-time music is very small by comparison, yet the same laws apply.

What you need to know: Any song or tune that you can prove to have been written before 1923 is in the “public domain,” which means that anybody...
can record it on a CD without paying a royalty to the composer. Any song written after 1923 is still under copyright; if you record it, you need to obtain a “mechanical license” from the composer or composer’s agency before the dupe house will duplicate your CD. There are lots of gray areas beyond the scope of this article. If, for instance, you learned a song from 1859 sheet music by Webster and Irving that starts “I will twine with the ringlets of my raven black hair,” you probably do not owe anybody money, but if you sing “I will twine with my mingles of waving black hair. . .” you may owe the heirs, successors, and assigns of Ralph Peer, owners of the copyright of the Carter Family songs, some money. As you can see, the system is set up to encourage singer-songwriters; you own the rights to your own creations.

To make 1000 copies of a CD with a copyrighted song lasting 5 minutes or less, you owe the copyright holder $91.00, a little more than 9 cents per copy. Make a list of the songs and tunes under copyright and resolve all the gray areas in your mind, preferably by looking up the song in question in Meade or Russell (see references). If you don’t have a copy [these books are pricey], ask somebody you respect as a scholar of old-time music—they will have a copy. A lot of fiddle tunes are in the public domain, but many are not. Simply googling the tune title in quotes will often lead to the author’s name. Do your homework and ask your scholar friends.

I recommend you go next to the Harry Fox agency online (www.harryfox.com) and follow its instructions. Double-check the Harry Fox information with the ASCAP and BMI websites before spending money. Plan on a few false starts getting through the process, but at the end of it you should have a code of about 12 letters indicating that you (or your band) has the right to make 500 or 1000 copies of a CD with that tune or song on it. And Harry Fox Agency will have your credit card number with the royalty charge plus a processing fee on it. As you can see, doing 10 copyrighted songs or tunes on a CD just added about $1000 to your production costs.

If the song is not in Harry Fox’s database, it gets a little harder. Look at the source you got the song from and see if there’s copyright information on it that lists a publishing company. Google that name and look for an email address or a phone number. Don’t give up, because it’s your job to get all necessary licenses before the dupe house will touch your project. (We once recorded a Porter Wagoner song. After we couldn’t find it in Harry Fox, we learned that he has sold all the rights to his songs to Dolly Parton’s agency. The receptionist ran shrieking down the hall “Kellie! It’s your big opportunity! Dolly Parton’s agency is on the phone!”) When all else fails, you may have to grit your teeth and leave that song off the CD. (Remember the recommendation to record a few extra songs?)

The Other Pieces: Photography, Liner Notes, Layout

You still aren’t ready to send the CD off. You need something for the cover, something for the back cover, and, I strongly suggest, liner notes. Here it is more important to have a really good graphic artist than to have one with experience in old-time music. You can find both! If you decide not to take this route, you need, first, a title for the CD. (For your first CD, it can simply be your band’s name—after that, you have to be a little more inventive.) You also need a friend who is either an artist or a photographer who can design a front cover—usually an illustration or picture with the CD title, maybe a list of the musicians in the band, and as much more as you choose to add. The back cover should contain a list of the songs on the CD, in order, followed by the time. If you are hoping for airplay, the DJ will want to know how long the song is so that he can better plan his show. The back cover should also extend to the spine—make sure the band name and the CD title are on the spine. Make sure the lettering is easy to read and on a contrasting background. Again, look at CDs that you like, and try to make yours look as good.

The insert (the first page of the insert is used to insulate your house.

Pete Peterson, who loves Charlie Poole’s banjo style, Maybelle Carter’s guitar style, and Kellie Allen, is married to Kellie and lives in Oxford, Pennsylvania. He is a member of the Orpheus Supertones, Waking Up Tillie, and Ben Borsche and the Beats.

Acknowledgements:

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Handy References:


THE CHARLOTTE FOLK SOCIETY:  
25 YEARS OF PLAYING WELL WITH OTHERS  
By Wanda Hubicki

Banjo picker Wayne Erbsen, on a North Carolina Arts Council visiting artist residency in Charlotte, North Carolina, must have wondered whether he was barking up the wrong tree, playing old-time string band music amid the skyscrapers and suburban sprawl of the biggest city in the Carolinas. But it wasn’t long before he met up with home-grown guitarist/square dancer Marilyn Meacham Price, who loved the music as much as he did. With Wayne’s encouragement, Marilyn started presenting traditional music events. In 1982 she sent out a call to those who shared her love of traditional music. The result became the Charlotte Folk Society.

Today CFS celebrates its 25th anniversary, looking back on a quarter century of promoting enjoyment and preservation of traditional and contemporary folk music, dance, crafts, and lore in the Carolina Piedmont. Turns out that even big city residents—native Southerners and newcomers alike—are hungry for connections to tradition.

The heartbeat of CFS is the regular public “Gathering” held the second Friday of each month. It’s still at Central Piedmont Community College, where Wayne Erbsen taught all those years ago. And it’s still free, with a hat passed for voluntary donations. Each evening kicks off with an hour-long concert, followed by refreshments, visiting, jamming, and a song circle—time for folks to get to know each other and build a community. Every season’s lineup of local and regional performers reflects Society members’ varied interests in old-time, bluegrass, Celtic, black string band, gospel, Native American, contemporary folk, storytelling, and ballad traditions.

Bringing youngsters into the fold is an important CFS theme. One Gathering each year showcases youth talent. Two high school-age junior members serve on the Society’s Board of Directors. In 2002 the organization inaugurated the Marilyn Meacham Price Scholarship to the Swannanoa Gathering Folk Arts Workshops for musicians age 12 to 21. To date, six talented young people have attended a week of master instruction on the Warren Wilson College campus near Asheville.

Over the years, the Society has introduced thousands of people in the greater Charlotte community to the roots and branches of Carolina Piedmont music. In the 1980s the Society held successful festivals at Latta Plantation Park in Charlotte and presented concerts with the likes of Jean Ritchie and Doc Watson. Members hosted programs on cable television and public radio, including Fiona Ritchie, whose Thistle & Shamrock has become one of America’s most beloved and enduring tradition-based radio offerings. Closer to home, Marilyn Price coordinated folk instrument classes at CPCC taught by CFS members, including a popular “Sunday Night Jam Class” that continued for 14 years and gave hundreds of players their first opportunity to experience the joy of communal music making.

Collaboration is an important strategy for the organization, which is completely volunteer-run. Beginning in the 1990s, CFS launched a seven-year partnership with the Charlotte Blues Society, Levine Museum of the New South, and CPCC to mount an annual spring Folk Frolic festival. In 2004, grants from Foundation for the Carolinas and the local Arts & Science Council enabled CFS to offer two summer Folk Arts Camps to children ages 8 to 12. Another exciting collaboration came in 2005 when CFS teamed with the Charlotte Museum of History to bring performers from Appalachian State University’s Black Banjo Gathering.

Out of the Charlotte Folk Society have come leaders who have shared tradi-

national music throughout the Carolinas, including Doug Orr, founder of the Swannanoa Gathering, and Tom Hanchett, long-time host of Back Porch Music on WUNC Chapel Hill. Society members have gone on to found the Charlotte Blues Society, the Charlotte Autoharp Club, the Charlotte Appalachian Dulcimer Club, the Charlotte Accordion Club, the High Lonesome Strings Bluegrass Association in Greensboro, and the Low Country Music and Dance Society in North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

The Society works to preserve musical traditions that might otherwise be lost to future generations. NEA Heritage Award winner Mary Jane Queen’s traditional ballad singing was first captured on the CFS recording Fist Full of Songs, with liner notes by Sheila Kay Adams. CFS members also produced the recording The Gospel Christian Singers: A Cappella Since 1929, named one of best traditional recordings of 1987 by the Library of Congress American Folklife Center.

CFS began presenting its own Folk Heritage Awards in 1992, with the first honor going to Mary Jane Queen. Since then, recipients have included the Quay Smathers Family, Doc Watson, Alan O’Bryant, Wade Mainer, Harper and Wansie Van Hoy, Wayne Erbsen, Fiona Ritchie, and Joe Thompson. Society member Chester Lorenz was recognized for compiling eight volumes of Forget Me Nots, songs he collected and recorded, then painstakingly transcribed with pen and typewriter. Ruth Kee Wherry and the Kee Family received the Award for their role in Charlotte’s live country music radio of the 1940s and ’50s. Member Tom Phlegar was honored for founding and hosting the Society’s “Old-Time Music Jam Weekend” on his family farm in the Virginia mountains; each July since 1988 some 400-500 people have gathered to jam and socialize.

The North Carolina Folklore Society honored the Charlotte Folk Society for its contributions to the continuation and appreciation of state folklife with its 2002 Community Traditions Award. Today CFS is as active as ever. A 12-page newsletter/calendar goes out to members each month, bolstered by a constantly updated website, www.folksociety.org. In July, 2007, the fifth annual CFS Ice Cream Social & Old Time Jam drew 1500 people to the tree-shaded grounds of the Charlotte Museum of History. In September, thousands more enjoyed four days of music and storytelling presented on the fourteenth CFS Folk Stage at Charlotte’s long-running Festival in the Park.

The highlight of 2007 comes in October. Charlotte Folk Society celebrates its 25th anniversary with a trio of events: a reunion potluck on October 12, free workshops, jams, demonstrations, and mini-concerts during the daytime on October 13, and a ticketed concert that evening. Wayne Erbsen will come down from Asheville with his banjo to make music once again with Marilyn Price. African American fiddler Joe Thompson—just named a National Folk Heritage Award winner thanks in part to a drive coordinated by a CFS member—will share the stage with dozens of other local and regional favorites.

On October 12 and 13, the Charlotte Folk Society celebrates its big anniversary with a series of events. A Homecoming and Potluck at St. John’s Baptist Church kicks off the celebration on Friday. During the day on Saturday, there will be singing, dance, instrumental, and storytelling workshops; mini-concerts, demonstrations, and jam sessions at the Levine Museum of the New South in downtown Charlotte. The Anniversary Concert, held that evening on the campus of Central Piedmont Community College, includes a stellar cast of musicians including Joe Thompson, Wayne Erbsen, Carolina Gator Gumbo, the Kilicycle Cowboys and the Circuit Riders in a program that spotlights old-time string band, bluegrass, blues, native American, and gospel music. For information, go to www.folksociety.org, or call 704-372-FOLK (3655). You are invited to join the Society in celebrating its past as it prepares to move into its future.

North Carolinian Wanda Hubicki has been a vital member of several organizations devoted to regional history, folklore, and traditional music. She is the editor of the Charlotte Folk Society Newsletter.
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Reviews

Masters of Old-Time Country Autoharp

Smithsonian Folkways SW CD 40115


A guitar book I once read stated that the guitar was the easiest instrument to play, yet the most difficult instrument to play well. That writer had obviously never encountered the autoharp with its push-button chords, yet bewildering array of strings. Today the musical world is awash with distinguished guitar fingerpickers and flatpick masters, yet master players of the humble autoharp are still relatively few, and the instrument has mostly maintained its supporting role on the periphery of old-time music.

This CD reissues and expands Mike Seeger’s 1962 LP Mountain Music Played on Autoharp (Folkways FA 2365), the first recording devoted to the autoharp. Mike has added a whopping 14 previously unreleased tracks, and song annotations by Charles Wolfe, and has revised some takes from the LP. The new CD shifts the emphasis of the collection from the music of the autoharp to the players, featuring Mike’s informative notes on the playing styles and the histories of Stoneman, the Benfields, and Snow.

These musicians demonstrate something of the evolution of autoharp playing in the past (20th) century. The eldest, Ernest Stoneman, began playing autoharp about 1901, and his precise, foursquare pinch-and-strum exactly reflects the phrasing of his singing, albeit at a pace many modern musicians would be unable to match. His repertoire of 19th-century hymns and sentimental songs is largely the one he performed as a professional musician, and in 1924 he became the first musician to record accompanied by the autoharp. His sole composition, the quirky “Stoney’s Waltz,” (which is actually a march and has been for 50 years my favorite autoharp instrumental) became in 1957 the first autoharp instrumental to be issued on a commercial recording (on Folkways FA 2315).

The Benfields, sometimes playing twin autoharp, introduce a bit of swing to the instrument with an energetic back-and-forth scratch, and their more modern repertoire (including Pee Wee King’s 1949 pop version of “Bonaparte’s Retreat”) brings the autoharp into mid-century. “Chinese Breakdown,” with Neriah on autoharp and Kenneth on guitar, must be heard to be believed; with Neriah accomplishing what Mike Seeger calls a “remarkable near-chromatic run in the middle of the second, or high, part.” Do try this at home, kids.

Kilby Snow, of course, is the master who set the autoharp up for the 21st century with radical departures from traditional playing. These innovations include an altered tuning for the instrument along with tricky timing of the chord bars to cut off a several-string “slide” into a chord, forever changing the autoharp from Stoneman’s four-square chording to a flexible, lithe, and even bluesy melodic lead instrument. Snow also continued to update the autoharp’s repertoire to include more modern country (“Precious Jewel”) and bluegrass (“Muleskinner Blues”) songs. Try Kilby’s version of Bill Monroe’s “Close By” to hear the autoharp ready to step into contemporary music.

As much as I respect and enjoy this album, I must confess that I find it difficult to listen to 71 minutes of mostly instrumental autoharp numbers at one sitting. The richness and resonance of all those strings ringing at once I find a bit like eating a dinner of chocolate cake and apple pie washed down with flagons of sauterne—too much of a good thing.

After your first listening, put this CD in your changer with some astringent Charlie Poole and Mississippi John Hurt and hit the shuffle. Enjoyed in proper proportions, this album is ready for your next 45 years of listening pleasure.

Jon Pankake

Fiddler’s Dream

Benton Flippen and the Smokey Valley Boys

Music Maker MM079

Benton Flippen: fiddle; Roger Wilson: banjo; Gene Hall: guitar; Andy Edmonds: guitar, vocals; Ernest Joines: bass; Ken Allred: bass

Soldiers Joy/Sail Away Ladies/Fiddler’s Reel/Close By/Reuben’s Train/Texas Breakdown/Fiddler’s Dream/Ragtime Annie/Tomahawk/Fortune/Whistlin’ Rufus/Chinese Breakdown/I Haven’t Seen Mary in Years/Old Joe Clark Reel/Polly Put the Kettle On/This and That/Cricket on the Hearth/Cacklin’ Hen/Liberty/Stone’s Rag/Susanna Gal/Sweet Marie/Peacock Rag/Breaking Up Christmas

Growing up in the Galax, Virginia area I have been fortunate to hear the fiddling of Benton Flippen many, many times. I was a member of Whit Sizemore’s Shady Mountain Ramblers from 1974 to 1980, and the Smokey Valley Boys was one of the bands we always tried to out-play at the fiddlers’ conventions—they often were in the winner’s circle when the prizes were awarded. Through the years, Benton has won literally dozens and dozens of blue ribbons for his fiddling, and he has also been a featured performer at folk festivals throughout the United States. In 1990, he was awarded the prestigious North Carolina Folk Heritage Award.

Benton was 83 years old when this recording was made in 2003. His fiddling is still strong, and the Smokey Valley Boys are in good form. Andy Edmonds and Gene Hall are on guitars. Andy’s guitar style with the runs he uses reminds me of the guitar style that Benton and Lois’s son Larry played with the band years ago. Andy sings on “Reuben’s Train.” (He
is also an up-and-coming fiddler of the region, having learned much from Benton.) Roger Wilson plays a clawhammer banjo he built himself, and he does it well. Ernest Joines and Ken Allred provide the quality bass accompaniment.

Overall, the sound quality of this recording is adequate, but I wish a little more attention had been given to the mixing. It was mixed live as the band gathered around three or four microphones in the studio, and this process doesn’t allow you to go back later and bring a particular instrument up or down. The CD cover is an eye-catching close-up of Benton. There are some minor problems with spelling on the back of the CD with two of the tune titles misspelled.

There are 24 cuts included, and my personal favorites are some of the lesser-known numbers. Tommy Jackson’s "Tomahawk" makes a good old-time tune as does the Bill Monroe-penned "Close By." The title cut, an Arthur Smith tune called "Fiddler’s Dream," is a dandy, and the old standard "Liberty" also stands out.

The old-time music of Mount Airy and the Surry County North Carolina area has a deep foundation. Musicians such as Esker Hutchins, Pate and LeRoy Martin, Fred Cockerham, Tommy Jarrell, Kyle Creed, Ernest East, and many others have left a lasting legacy. Benton Flippen and his music continue to be a significant part of this living tradition.

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A NEW ALBUM FROM

Buell Kazee
June Appal, JA009D, (64:51)

Buell Kazee; vocal, five-string banjo; Homer Ledford: guitar (on one track)

Roll On, John / Jay Gould’s Daughter /
The Lady Gay/Steel a-Goin’ Down (with Ledford)/The Roving Cowboy/Banjo Medley: Blue-Eyed Gal-Rock Little Julie (or Little Girl)-What’ll I Do with the Baby-0-Look Up, Look Down that Lonesome Road-Sporting Bachelors/The Orphan Girl/Black
Jack Davy/The Blind Man/O, Thou in Whose Presence (unaccompanied)/Amazing Grace (unaccompanied)/The Wexford Girl/Butcher’s Boy/Wagoner’s Lad/Short Life of Trouble/Shady Grove/East Virginia/Hook and Line

Buell Kazee, a Baptist minister who was also a fine banjo player and singer, recorded some 50 selections for Brunswick in the late 1920s, an activity that came to a sudden stop when the Depression put Brunswick out of business. Many of the country or old-time musicians of the ’20s, who were forced out of their careers by that economic disaster, wound up in secondary work of some kind, but Kazee just continued with his life as a minister, to which being a performer had always been secondary anyway.

By the middle of the century, his music was known primarily to a small circle of collectors among whom his old 78 rpm discs continued to circulate. But, in 1952, Harry Smith included three of his performances; “The Butcher Boy,” “The Wagoner’s Lad,” and “East Virginia” on his Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music. Being represented on that famous set meets the minimum requirement, at least in some circles, of the old-time music equivalent of canonization, and his reputation as a classic old-time musician began to spread.

It was beginning to occur to people that being one of the great performers of the ’20s didn’t necessarily mean you were dead, and many of the survivors were sought out and were able to revive their careers. Kazee was located and recorded, and was invited to several concerts and festivals including the 1968 Newport Folk Festival. The deeply religious and conservative Kazee must have had greatly mixed feelings at finding his music admired by people, many of whose attitudes toward sex, drugs, and politics (including the Vietnam War) he strongly disapproved. It was an experience he shared with Bascom Lamar Lunsford, among others.

Kazee is not an ideal candidate for “traditional singer,” at least among academicians with strict definitions of what constitutes “folk music” and related matters. His banjo playing and repertoire were drawn from his family and his community, but by the time he started recording for Brunswick, he was a college graduate who had majored in English and Greek and, far more serious to purists, had taken voice lessons. In fact, one of the reasons he began recording was that he needed the money to pay off the debt for those voice lessons, which—as it turned out—were of little use to him in the recording studio where they wanted his “country” singing rather than what he thought of as his “good” voice. “I had to make a record seven or eight times to get it bad enough to sell,” he later recalled. Kazee gave them what they wanted, but he felt that his training influenced his voice even when he was trying to sing in an authentic “folk” style.

Kazee’s singing is, at least for some people, hard to classify. One website refers to his “genteel” voice, “as opposed to the… high lonesome sound,” while another describes him as “a master of the high, ‘lonesome’ singing style.” I wouldn’t call his voice “genteeel,” but he does sing in a relaxed mid-range that contrasts with, say, the intense, high tenor of Roscoe Holcomb. But it is neither Kazee’s singing nor his banjo playing that defines this CD—it is the combination of the two. His excellent clawhammer work is a perfect accompaniment to his singing. The five-string banjo can set the mood and bring a tone to a song as can no other instrument, and Kazee’s performances show this particularly well. “Shady Grove” is a duet for banjo and voice, with the banjo taking the lead, while the minor chords on songs like “The Lady Gay” and “Butcher’s Boy” add a mood of sorrow.

This CD is much enhanced by Loyal Jones’ extensive and informative notes. Jones has provided excellent biographical information, along with a well-thought-out discussion of Kazee’s singing and banjo playing. The notes to the individual songs by Jones, William H. Tallmadge, Deborah Thompson, and James Ruchala include, in addition to the banjo tunings, sources of the recordings, and information on each selection. They are unusually thorough. Good as the notes are, they would have benefited from more careful editing. Track 15, “Butcher’s Boy,” is identified as track 17. The second tune of the banjo medley is identified as both “Rock Little Julie” and “Rock Little Girl.” The notes for each track give the banjo tuning Kazee used, but the note for the banjo medley gives the tuning for only four of the banjo’s five strings. The statement that “One folksong scholar called Buell Kazee, the ‘greatest white male folksinger in the United States’” might carry more weight if the folksong scholar were identified. And some readers may wonder what distinguishes the pages of Trouble/Shady Grove/East Virginia/Butcher’s Boy/Wagoner’s Lad/Short Life of Trouble/Shady Grove/East Virginia/Hook and Line

Ace of Spades/Sally Johnson/Grey Eagle/Ragtime Annie/Beaumont Rag/Straw Bonnet/Sally Goodin/Black Mountain Rag/Red Apple Rag/Lady’s Fancy/Wake Up the Neighbors/Irish Medley Reel/Hot Foot/Killie McCrankie/Scolding Wife/Star Waltz/Brilliancy/Gatesville/Waynesboro Reel/Cape Giradeau/Sunny SIDE/Forty Years Ago Waltz/Sopping the Gravy/Golden Eagle Hornpipe

Texas Hoedown Revisited

Benny Thomasson, Vernon Solomon, Bar tow Riley, Lewis Thomasson

In 1965 County Records released the album Texas Hoedown showcasing three of the masters of Texas-style (now often called contest-style) fiddling. Benny Thomasson, Vernon Solomon, and Bar tow Riley were all at their peak when that LP of fourteen cuts by the three fiddlers, was produced. This new CD issue has ten of those numbers (the other four have been reissued on other County CDs), but also ten previously unissued tracks, and four that were previously released on the Voyager label.

A confession is probably in order here. I must admit to not being partial to Texas-style fiddle, to not being a staunch sup-

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It's very rhythmic and energetic, though sounds less relaxed than Thomasson's. Vernon Solomon's playing ideas from his playing the previous year. Thomasson had played brilliantly at the contest without winning and seeing other long overdue honor, many said. For years the year that Benny took first place, a contest at Weiser, Idaho, in 1974. It was way once. I remember going to the fiddle that he never plays anything the same way once. I remember going to the fiddle contest at Weiser, Idaho, in 1974. It was the year that Benny took first place, a long overdue honor, many said. For years Thomasson had played brilliantly at the contest without winning and seeing other fiddlers take first place incorporating earlier generations of the Thomasson family. I find myself returning to all his cuts over and over, but I am biased toward the more archaic sounds.

The tunes of the other three fiddlers are a mix of the standards of Texas fiddling like "Beaumont Rag," "Sally Goodin," Brilliance," and "Ace of Spades," as well as some more unusual pieces like "Scolding Wife" (Benny's other rejected OKeh side), "Killie McCrankie," and "Lady's Fancy." The backup is primarily guitar, but Vernon Solomon also has piano on most of his tracks. For lovers of Texas fiddle, I'd think this CD is a must; if you have no Texas fiddle in your collection, this could be a fine place to start. There’s not a bad cut, a good mix of the warhorses and the rare, and the sound quality is excellent. It's a great introduction to Texas fiddle.

To order: www.countysales.com

Dewey Balfa with Friends and Family

Dewey Balfa: fiddle, vocals; Rodney Balfa: guitar, vocals; Tony Balfa: guitar; Irvin 'Dick' Richard: fiddle; Allie Young: accordion, vocals; Julian "Winnie" Winston: pedal steel guitar; Jordan King: electric bass; Robert Jardell: Cajun accordion, vocals; Tracy Schwartz: fiddle

1977 Introductions / Perrodin Two-Step / Je Suis Marié Avec Un, Mais En Amour Avec Un Autre (Married to One and in Love with the Other) / 'T'en As Eus Mais 'T'en Auras Plus (You Had Some But You Ain't Getting Any More) / Pleurs Pas Mes Cheres Yeux Bleus (Don't Cry My Beautiful Blue Eyes) / No Name Song / Lache Pas La Patate (Don't Leave the Potato) / 'Tout Les Soirs (Every Night) / Les Veuves de la Coullee (The Widow of the Coullee) / 'J'ai Vu Le Loup, Le R

Today, Cajun and Zydeco music are practically mainstream—there’s even a Cajun-Zydeco category in the Grammies! But back in 1964, when Dewey Balfa first performed at the Newport Folk Festival (receiving a standing ovation from an audience of 17,000), his old-fashioned style of traditional Cajun music was played by a dwindling number of musicians, nearly all of them over the age of 40—and most much older than that. The Cajun people were anxious to leave behind the stereotype of the uneducated, boorish Cajun who could barely speak English; this may be why the Balfa Brothers took a cue from Bill Monroe and wore suit jackets and ties on their first album cover. Even in the late 1970s, when I first visited Southwest Louisiana, only a handful of musicians younger than 35 were playing Cajun music. I remember that most people were mystified by our interest: "Why you want to hear that old chunky-chank music?"

In the 1979 section of this new live CD, Dewey Balfa says: "You know, at home the fiddle art is just about disappearing, in the whole Cajun country you won't find five young people who are picking up the fiddle. It's all people our age, from 35 on up."

That's all changed now, thanks to the commitment and passion that Dewey Balfa felt for his own culture. He returned from Newport fired up, with a mission to revive his beloved traditional Cajun culture, and he succeeded, probably beyond his wildest dreams. He traveled widely, spreading the Cajun music gospel throughout the US, Canada, and Europe. He generously shared his expertise with anyone who wanted to learn, teaching at the music camps that were just starting to spring up: Port Townsend, Augusta, Ashokan. Dewey and Hilda Balfa’s unflagging hospitality was legendary, rivaling that of Tommy Jarrell; they welcomed countless visitors into their home. He helped to found CODOFIL, which revived the Cajun French language, bringing it into the schools. He lobbied successfully for the
first Cajun music festival, and received the NEA’s Heritage Fellowship in 1982, the very first year it was awarded.

Dewey Balfa certainly succeeded in his quest, for today there are countless excellent Cajun bands, dozens of extremely talented young people playing fiddle and accordion, and singing and speaking in that old-fashioned Cajun patois which so nearly died out. His daughter Christine has continued in her father’s footsteps as a musician, teacher, and cultural ambassador.

Dewey, Rodney, and Will Balfa made several groundbreaking albums focusing on acoustic old-time Cajun sounds. Dewey also recorded with other musicians, including Marc Savoy and D. L. Menard. Rodney and Will were killed in a car crash in 1979, but Dewey soldiered on, continuing to be an advocate for Cajun culture, and performing and recording with other musicians including Tracy and Peter Schwarz, Robert Jardell, Steve Riley, Tony Balfa (Rodney’s son), and others. Dewey Balfa died in 1995, after a long struggle with cancer. He was only 65 years old.

What a great pleasure it is to have a “new” Dewey Balfa album! This one is taken from live performances in 1978 and 1983 at the Brandywine festival. The 1978 band included Rodney Balfa on guitar and vocals (and what heavenly vocals!), the older-generation accordion player Allie Young (who outlived both Balfa brothers), and Dick Richard on second fiddle; Tracy Schwarz adds a third fiddle on the “No Name Waltz.” At first, I thought I also heard a triangle, but it’s actually Rodney Balfa’s percussive guitar playing. What a great band! Who needs bass and drums?

The 1979 section is a real showcase of Cajun fiddling. Besides Dewey Balfa’s always gorgeous and heartfelt playing, Dick Richard contributes his “modern” seconding, which is when the second fiddle plays a high harmony above the melody (instead of “bassing,” or playing chordal accompaniment). On “Perrardin Twostep” the fiddlers take turns on the lead, which really allows us to hear Dewey Balfa’s non-modern seconding—I could listen to that forever.

“No Name Waltz,” on which Tracy Schwarz joins Dewey Balfa and Dick Richard, is a special treat, as recordings of Cajun music with three fiddles are somewhat of a rarity. This song also demonstrates Rodney Balfa’s artistry—he makes the most commonplace Cajun lyrics sound like Shakespeare! This and “Tous Les Soirs” are Rodney at his soulful best. On several songs, the brothers sing together, blending seamlessly as only siblings can. If harmony singing had been part of the Cajun music tradition, the Balfa Brothers would surely have joined the ranks of other legendary brother duets (Stanley, Osborne, McReynolds, Everly, Louvin, etc.).

The 1983 band is also amazing, but in a different way. Dewey Balfa is joined by his nephew, Tony Balfa, on guitar (not on fiddle as it says on the sleeve), the 26-year-old Robert Jardell on accordion and vocals, and a couple of non-Cajun ringers: Winnie Winston on pedal steel, and Jordan King on electric bass. My husband Eric says “electric bass is one of the biggest mistakes of the 20th century” and I’m inclined to agree, especially when it’s mixed with acoustic instruments. However, I respect and admire Dewey Balfa’s willingness to embrace new experiences and to play with musicians from all kinds of backgrounds, and on at least one of the songs (“Pine Grove Blues”), the electric bass really integrates with the rest of the band and sounds fine.

The whole band is obviously turned on by Winnie Winston’s pedal steel playing, which is so amazing I don’t even know where to start. For one thing, he really learned the melodies to the songs, not just the sung melodies, but the melodies and harmonies as they are played on the fiddle. At times he mimics a fiddle so successfully that I was convinced I was hearing a second fiddle. He also quotes from the playing of Cajun steel (non-pedal) players like J. W. Pelsia. This gives his playing a stylistic integrity; he never sounds like a refugee from a country-western band.

“Pine Grove Blues” explodes into the stratosphere for nearly eight minutes, with Robert Jardell channeling his musical mentor Nathan Abshire, while Winnie Winston quotes from both the harmony part played on fiddle by Merlin Fontenot and J. W. Pelsia’s steel break on an earlier recording of this song by the Balfa Brothers Orchestra. When he and Robert Jardell start trading licks you can feel the excitement mount. Dewey Balfa fiddles up a storm, occasionally quoting from his own long-ago solos. (“Pine Grove Blues” was first recorded in 1949, more than 30 years earlier.)

The interplay between the lead players is what makes this performance so exciting. One of my favorites, “Midnight Playboy Special,” starts to veer into the near psychedelic, and then is brought back down to earth when Robert Jardell and Dewey Balfa play the melody in unison.

I was just one of many, many musicians who were blessed to spend time with Dewey Balfa. It means a lot to me to hear his voice speaking again. I miss him so much, and am really happy to have this new recording, thanks to Ray Alden and the Brandywine Friends of Old-Time Music.

A “must have” for anyone who loves traditional Cajun music.

Suzy Rothfield Thompson

To order: www.fieldrecorder.com

The Dixie Hummingbirds & The Little Wonders

Recordings from the collection of Brandywine Friends of Old-Time Music

Introduction / John the Revelator / My Soul’s Going to Live with God / These Bones Shall Rise Again / Beams of Heaven as I Go / It’s Going to Rain / Who Are We? The Dixie Hummingbirds! / Swing Low / Nobody Knows the Trouble that I’ve Seen / Jesus is Coming Soon / Standing by the Bedside of an Invalid / Beaming from Heaven / After the Rapture, Where Will You Be? / This World is Just a Dressing Room / Don’t Give Up, Just Hold On / I’m So Glad / Help Me / Let it Alone

How wonderful that sound recordings can transport us back in time—at least aurally—to hear what once existed and no longer does. So it is with the succinctly titled The Dixie Hummingbirds & the Little Wonders, a new CD of performances caught live on stage in the 1980s at the famed Brandywine Mountain Music Convention festival series. Even the festival itself, with a 20-year run from 1974 to 1993 at four locations in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New Jersey, has faded into the hazy past, though resurrected in all its vitality and immediacy on this CD.

Truth be told, the concert heard here never happened, but is rather the stuff of dreams culled from a number of annual Sunday festival appearances by the Dixie
Hummingbirds and one by the Little Wonders. Nor did the two groups ever actually appear together, though the virtual pairing here gets it exactly right, as it might have happened in gospel’s golden decades when hometown groups like the Little Wonders opened the show for touring professional recording artists like the Dixie Hummingbirds.

The concert is introduced by the late Ola Belle Reed, offering background on her long association with the Little Wonders and that group’s role in local radio. Led by Granderson Jones, the Wonders formed in 1941 in Havre de Grace, Maryland, where they were Sunday morning regulars for many years on radio station WJSS. The songs they sing here are rooted in the spirituals—slave songs, creators unknown, drawn from the Bible, a mix of humor, story-telling, life-lessons, and hope for a better home on high. The Wonders’ performance, however, is pure “jubilee,” the upbeat rhythmically-bouncing style identified most with the Golden Gate Quartet from the Tidewater region of Virginia. The Little Wonders offer excellent straightforward journeyman performances, with Granderson Jones’ leads often “rapped out” as Joseph Brooks punctuates with guitar, and Joseph Shivers providing vocal backdrop in the traditional call-and-response fashion. Listeners will enjoy classics such as “John the Revelator” and the ever-popular “These Bones Shall Rise Again.” Of special note is “Beams of Heaven as I Go,” sung at a more soulful tempo, and anchored with the Wonders’ variant on the rhythmic phrase “Clanka lanka lanka” associated with early quartet gospel. The Wonders wrinkle is to sing “Holy lanka lanka,” in any form, an ingenious syllabic device that rhythmically propels a near a cappella vocal performance.

The CD concert continues with the Carolina-bred but Philadelphia-based Dixie Hummingbirds. The Birds, one of the most highly regarded male quartets in the genre, have a history that stretches back to the segregated South of the late 1920s. They graduated from local to national fame in the late 1930s with the release of sixteen a cappella sides on the Decca label. In the 1940s, the Birds moved to Philly, performed regularly on WCAU radio, and perfected their professional style on stage at New York City’s Café Society, the nightclub that defied racial barriers and where Billie Holiday introduced the powerful anti-lynching song, “Strange Fruit.” The Birds continued their trailblazing straight through the 1950s, recording for numerous independent labels, touring country-wide, and establishing themselves as premier “soul gospel” artists on Don Robey’s Texas-based Peacock label. In 1974, the Hummingbirds broke through to the secular market as collaborators with Paul Simon on his smash pop hit, “Loves Me (Like a Rock).”

There are remarkable elements to the Brandywine performances on this CD. For one, the performers here are from the quintessential line-up of the Dixie Hummingbirds at their best. The group was famous for mixing it up, each member capable of singing any part, switching off on leads, which they do to great effect in these performances. Most of the lead work – listen to the opening biographical “Who Are We?” – is by the truly legendary Ira Tucker, a member of the group since 1938. Second lead is James Walker, who joined in 1954. Hear him on “Don’t Give Up, Just Hold On.” Tucker and Walker often worked like double pistons in a supercharged engine, tossing the lead back and forth and building to screaming intensity, and they brilliantly do this on “Help Me.” Paul Owens, another giant in the field, was twice a Dixie Hummingbird, first in 1952 and then, after making a name for himself with some of the other top groups in the genre, rejoining in the 1980s around the time of these concerts. That’s him singing lead on “Swing Low.” James Davis, the man who started the Dixie Hummingbirds back in 1928, and Beacothy Thompson, who joined in 1944, are the primary background vocalists. Howard Carroll, the “B. B. King of Gospel,” is also a wonderful presence here. When he joined in the early 1950s, his soulful and rhythmically complex electric guitar playing forevermore defined the sound of the Dixie Hummingbirds. Reverend Joe Williams and William Leon Bright, two of the Birds’ longtime fill-ins, also appear on these Brandywine sets.

Also remarkable is the nature of the performances. These are tour-de-force renditions, the Dixie Hummingbirds stripped down, unadorned, hot, emotional, and in the same live “house-wrecking” context in which they developed their sound in the first place. Howard Carroll’s guitar perfectly drives the performances. There are stunning glissandos, sophisticated harmonies, masterful pacing, gospel story-telling at its best—in short, performances that take the listener on the same emotional roller coaster ride that made the Dixie Hummingbirds one of the most beloved and enduring groups in the history of black gospel.

This is a CD that captures precious moments in time, not only of the Brandywine festival (noting that the event’s parent organization, the Brandywine Friends of Old Time Music, is still actively promoting American roots music in a variety of ways), but of two important performing groups who herein offer excellent examples in contrasting styles of the African American gospel tradition. Caught in the act, so to speak, and a most compelling keepsake to boot.

Jerry Zolten

Out of His Gourd: Early American Gourd Banjo Instrumentals and Songs

Clarke Buehling

Clark Buehling: banjo, percussion; Darren Notovny: percussion; Skye McGowen: dancing

Juba/Circus Jig/Green Corn/Essence of Old Virginny/Hobson’s Jig/Briggs’ Corn Shucking Jig/Butler’s Jig/Grapevine Reel/Pompey Ran Away/White Cat, Black Cat/Sugar Cane Dance/Carve Dat ‘Possum/Swaine Buckley’s Jig/Green Corn-Oh, What’s the Matter, Suse Ann?/Morceau/Camptown Races/Hard Times Jig/Old Virginny Jig/Love/Anthony Street Reel/Hard Times/Mr. Sherman/Stop Me Home/Far South Reel/Stop Your Foot Out the Sand, Stick It in the Mud/The Arkansas Sheik/Where Did You Come From/African Medley: Barimba-Nginde’s Pigs

Banjoist Clarke Buehling has released a well-timed CD reissue of his 1992 cassette release, Out of His Gourd [reviewed in OTH vol. 3 no. 7]. When this cassette was first released there were maybe a dozen enthusiasts actively pursuing such a deep, detailed history of early banjo music. The material on this recording is, in fact, primarily drawn from printed 19th-century sources, some so obscure that Clarke had to spend a lot of library time digging in the stacks. Since that time there have been several
Among the new tracks, I was really star-
of old-time musicians from the 1920s. 
or music that turn up in the recordings 
in the liner notes the fragments of lyrics 
catch them yourself, Clarke points out 
and spontaneously added. If you don’t 
slides, and other amendments not 
heard at a 2:00 AM jam session. Slurs, 
his banjo as if he were competing to be 
staid. Every performance fires out of 
song here could be accused of being 
rhythmically. Many clawhammer play-
ers, I think, will be surprised by the great 
variation in right-hand technique. Playing 
is often highly syncopated, thumb notes 
fall on beats ahead of index-finger-played 
notes, rests fall between index-finger and 
thumb-played notes, and striking arpeg-
giated chord triplets ripple throughout. 

Clarke’s experience playing old-time 
string-band music is also clear. Not a 
song here could be accused of being 
staider. Every performance fires out of 
his banjo as if he were competing to be 
heard at a 2:00 AM jam session. Slurs, 
slides, and other amendments not 
found in the source material are freely 
and spontaneously added. If you don’t 
catch them yourself, Clarke points out 
in the liner notes the fragments of lyrics 
or music that turn up in the recordings 
of old-time musicians from the 1920s. 

Among the new tracks, I was really star-
tled by “Take Your Foot Out the Sand, 
Stick It in the Mud.” Not only can the 
title be heard as a lyric in Dave Macon’s 
“Railroadin’ and Gamblin’” but also in 
this banjo piece from 1902 you can hear 
the same banjo lick Macon plays under 
this lyric. It’s no surprise that shades 
of Dave Macon can be heard in many 
places on Of His Gourd, but the 
source material for several items in the 
old-time canon is also evident. 

Listeners may be surprised by the 
sound of the gourd banjos used in this 
recording. Even though tuned to the mid-19th-century pitch—E below the 
G banjos are tuned to today—the banjo 
sounds here are bright and lively. I’d go 
as far as to say they have a sharper attack 
in their tone than do many modern old-
time banjos tuned up to A. 

Clarke’s vocals are somewhat mannered, 
but not too much so. His delivery sounds a 
bit Victorian, but not affected. These songs 
may have spent more time in the barroom 
or the minstrel show than the parlor, but 
they are from that period after all. 

Although difficult to find or assign with 
certainty, Clarke includes some pieces 
that may have among the songs 
played on gourd banjos before the banjo 
became part of popular, commercial 
culture. Songs attributable to African 
American sources in the ante-bellum 
period are nearly as scarce as banjos with 
the same sort of attribution. Clarke does 
these tunes justice here. Players wishing 
to recreate the performance of that time 
on gourd banjo reproductions may in 
fact turn to this recording as many of the 
written sources are still difficult to find. 

Clarke concludes the CD with a new 
track, a song he learned by ear from the 
player of a West African instrument very 
similar to the early New World banjo. 

There is one track that Clarke fails to 
mention that may have origins in the 
African American folk banjo tradition. 
“Where Did You Come From” was 
originally published and performed by 
Joel Walker Sweeney of Appomattox, 
Virginia. Sweeney was perhaps the first 
player to take the banjo to the popular 
stage. As a young man in a time where 
was little or no white banjo tradition that 
we know of, he had learned much of his 
music, including perhaps this song, from 
Appomattox-area slaves. As interesting 
as this source is, “Where Did You Come From” is the one track on this CD with 
which I have any complaint. The phrasing 
ning on it has always seemed strange 
to me compared to the written source 
from 1858. I mentioned this to [banjoist] 
Joe Ayers and he had noticed the same 
thing. He thought that Clarke had shifted 
all of the music over a half measure, thus 
changing the accents in performance, 
and the length of the phrases. I’m not 
really musically literate enough to make 
that deduction myself, but I will say this: 
since the original release of the recording 
in 1992, I’ve heard many old-time banjo-
ists playing the piece as Clarke recorded 
it, which is a tribute to his compelling 
performance on Of His Gourd. Modern 
players have chosen to learn from it 
rather than turning to the now freely 
available written source. Thus the folk 
tradition continues to evolve. 

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Meet Me in the Music

Erynn Marshall and Chris Coole

Hickory Jack JH02MC

Erynn Marshall: fiddle, guitar, vocals; Chris 
Coole: banjo, guitar, vocals

Feed Your Horse Corn and Hay/Copper 
Run/The Winds of Shiloh/Rub Alcohol 
Blues/Brushy Fork of John’s Creek/New 
Orleans/Merriweather-Goodbye Girls, 
I’m Going to Boston/Queen in the Meeting 
House/Fine Times at Our House/And 
the Cat Came Back/Tragic Love/Brighter 
Day/Queen of the Earth, Child of the Skies/ 
Maggie Meade-The Darker the Night/Banjo 
Clog/Jenny in the Cotton Patch/Madison 
County Waltz/Stacked ‘em Up in Piles

Erynn Marshall is not only a fine scholar 
of old-time fiddle tunes, but she can play 
them wonderfully. Not only that, but she 
and her bandmates can adapt a tune from 
the Berea archives, where it was collected 
as a solo fiddle tune, and make it work 
in string-band style. This doesn’t happen 
often enough on this CD—there are only 
three fiddle/banjo/guitar cuts, but they 
are all gems: “Feed your Horse Corn and 
Hay” (from Buddy Thomas), “Maggie 
Meade,” and “The Darker the Night” 
(from J. P. Fraley and Paul David Smith),
and “Madison County Waltz,” an original tune by Erynn. She knows Appalachian fiddling so well she can write good traditional-sounding tunes, too. She also knows when not to move something into string-band style; “Glory in the Meeting House” and “Stacked ‘em Up in Piles” are both solo fiddle, and it’s hard to imagine a second instrument improving the performance.

It is said that the “Fiddler is King” (or in this case Queen), but there is no way that this CD could be as good as it is without the fine banjo playing of Chris Coole. As friends who have competed against him in Clifftop know, Coole is a fine clawhammer player. Listen, for instance, to “Brighter Day,” originally from Rufus Crisp, who taught Pete Seeger how to frail the banjo. The surprise is Chris’ skilled, tasteful fingerpicking, shown, for example, in his backup to “Madison County Waltz.” “Rub Alcohol Blues” is classic Dock Boggs, while “Banjo Clog,” also from Boggs, is a great parlor-style classical piece. Chris and Erynn also play excellent backup guitar for each other. For the rare three-instrument cuts, Arnie Naiman is on guitar.

And if this weren’t enough, there’s some excellent singing. In addition to “Rub Alcohol Blues,” Erynn and Chris sing “Tragic Love” (another member of the “Silver Dagger” family), which they learned from the Stanley Brothers. In fact, my only real complaint about this CD is that there’s not enough singing; “Tragic Love” barely whets my appetite.

Having already praised Erynn’s scholarship (not directly relevant to this CD, but Erynn’s book *Music in the Air Somewhere* is a huge contribution to our understanding of the fiddle music and fiddlers of West Virginia), it is not surprising that this CD has excellent liner notes, giving sources, tunings, and instrumentation for each cut. Thanks!

To paraphrase Uncle Dave Macon, “Now, folks, buy this record.”

**Pete Peterson**

To order: [www.hickoryjack.com](http://www.hickoryjack.com)

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**Note to Artists and Record Companies**

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Sally Ann / Wait Mr. Judge / Birdie / Coal Mine Blues / When the Whippoorwill Is Whisping / Goodnight / Rise When the Rooster Crows / Fisher’s Hornpipe / K.C. Railroad Blues / Mississippi Breakdown / Feed My Sheep / Going Across the Sea / My Old Cottage Home / Sporting Cowboy / Deacon From Tennessee / There’s a Light Lit Up in Galilee / Train on an Island.

Some bands innovate within the framework of old-time music, others mine the depths of the tradition. This is a fine example of the latter approach. Wayne and Margaret Martin are joined by Craig Johnson for a program of deep old-time music. They do not impose their will upon the music so much as succumb to the traditional form and blend seamlessly into its depths. This music is homely—as in plain and unadorned. It is played with skill and an unerring sincerity. From the funky opening cut, “Sally Ann,” played here in the unusual key of C, we are treated to honest old-time music with just enough quirks to keep you coming back for another listen.

Craig Johnson is a fine old-time banjo picker, singer, and fiddler. All three aspects are richly displayed throughout this project. Wayne Martin’s fiddle is augmented here by his harmonica and Margaret or Craig’s banjo and guitar playing. The use of guitar, harmonica, and banjo harks back to another time when this combination was more popular with some folks, and it is nice to hear it on several cuts including “Sporting Cowboy” and “Wait Mr. Judge,” from A. C. Overton. The later song is a version of “The Highwayman,” recorded by Charlie Poole. Margaret’s fine fingerpicked banjo sounds great with Craig’s fiddle and Wayne’s guitar and harmonica as all three sing the old Stoneman Family’s “There’s a Light Lit Up in Galilee.” Actually, Margaret’s banjo picking is one of the real highlights of this whole project. “Train on an Island,” the fine tune that wears so well, is treated to her fine banjo approach and her vocal reading that harkens back to the essence of older versions. The song bounces and bubbles along, void of recent vapid readings that have recast it as some sort of transcendental, new-age mantra.

The rustic qualities that prevail on this recording enrich the down-home simplicity of the performances. The songs have that ragged-but-right feel that we find on the old 78s and field recordings. This was not originally a music made primarily for the stage. It was only in hindsight that it has become recognized as a form of cultural and historical comment. Had this material never been recorded originally for mass distribution on broadsheets, then in books, and then, starting in the 1920s on audio recordings, we would not know how deep Johnson and the Martins have planted their music. It is a homemade music with deep cultural roots for all of us to explore and enjoy in its abundant wealth. Highly recommended for fans of music from the true vine.

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Old Time Duets
Jeremy Stephens and Tom Mindte

They Sleep Together Now at Rest / Drifting Too Far form the Shore / Are You Lost in Sin / The Lover’s Quarrel / The Lightning Express / The Lord’s Last Supper / Mansions for Me / Mary of the Wild Moor / Our Darling’s Gone / She Has Forgotten Everything Now / Stormy Waters / Tiny Broken Heart / The Touch of God’s Hand

Country duet singing is one of the most beautiful forms of old-time music, but has not been well represented in the outpouring of new recordings that grace these pages each month. This CD by Jeremy Stephens and Tom Mindte is a welcome exception. And these performances could not be better. Jeremy and Tom’s excellent vocals compliment each other perfectly. The instrumentation is beautiful, simple, and clean; and the excellent recording quality is wonderfully devoid of distracting electronic enhancement. All of the songs here are taken either from traditional sources or early bluegrass repertoires and there is just not a weak cut on the CD. This is a spectacular recording that should be in every old-time music collection. I recommend it without reservation.

KEN LANDRETH

To order: www.pxrec.com

A Long Time Ago-go
Shout Lulu

Paul McGowen: vocals, banjo, guitar; Skye McGowen: vocals, feet, banjo-uke, baritone uke; Pete Howard: fiddle; Carole Anne Rose: banjo-guitar; Curly Miller: bass

Bowling Green / Darling Cora / Hogeye / Dinah / Pateroller / Roustabout / Sail Away Ladies / Uncle Ned / Old Paint / Half-shaved / Be Kind / Piney Woods Gal / Puncheon Camps / Fall On My Knees / Jim Along / I Truly Understand / Merriweather / Last Chance

This Arkansas band consists of the first three musicians listed above—the last two are guests on the recording. The tunes and songs here are standard old-time, and though there’s nothing unique here, the songs are skillfully played with instrumentation that is generally spare: banjo and guitar, or fiddle, guitar, and ukulele, for instance, and four or five banjo solos. Paul sings competently on many songs, with Skye adding pleasant harmony. For variety’s sake, I wish she had done some lead singing too.

The CD packaging is spare as well. The enigmatic title doesn’t appear to have any special meaning. The songs here are well chosen and the playing is superb. If you enjoy the old-time music movement, order this CD before it’s gone.
played what and where to find out which cuts featured the custom-built banjo guitar, for example, or the baritone ukulele. Perhaps it’s my shortfall or my music system’s, but I couldn’t recognize them.

I’d recommend this CD to those who like to sing or hear the standard old-time songs, or who are keen on the banjo and/or ukulele. **TONI WILLIAMS**

To order: www.shoutlulu.com

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**Idle Talk & Wicked Deeds**

*The Flat Mountain Girls*

The second release by this all-women Portland, Oregon, group personifies the high-energy, “let’s-have-fun” approach of many of today’s younger groups. This band has the usual four-piece instrumentation, and singing is their strongest suit. All four get a chance to sing lead. The usual four-piece instrumentation, and singing is their strongest suit. All four get a chance to sing lead. All four get a chance to sing lead. All four get a chance to sing lead.

**FMG 002 2007**

Lisa Marsicek: fiddle, washboard, clogging, vocals; Laura Quigley: bass, vocals; Rachel Gold: banjo, guitar, vocals; Nann Alleman: guitar, mandolin, spoons, vocals

Little Black Train/Sandy Boys/Closer to the Mill/Poor Orphan Child/Lonesome Pine Special/Forgiveness/Greasy Coat/Jealous Hearted Me/My Epitaph/Sleepy Eyed John/Old Yeller Dog/All My Love in Vain/Leaving Home/I Angel Band/Big Scioto

The second release by this all-women Portland, Oregon, group personifies the high-energy, “let’s-have-fun” approach of many of today’s younger groups. This band has the usual four-piece instrumentation, and singing is their strongest suit. All four get a chance to sing lead (some more than others,) ranging from edgy twang to gutsy blues, with full and lush harmonies. Songs range from Carter Family to sassy blues, with just the right sprinkling of traditional breakdowns. These gals have the knack for making each song their own, stamping it with exuberance and their unique vocal sound and arrangement. They’re not afraid to push the boundaries of old-time with wailers like Robert Johnson’s “All My Love in Vain” and Sarah Hawker’s award-winning “Forgiveness.” It’s all in a lighthearted yet sardonic, good-time vein. Highly recommended. **TONI WILLIAMS**

To order: www.flatmountaingirls.com

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**Midnight On The Run**

*Killer Grits*

Mississippi Sawyer/28th of January/Rebel Raid/Black Mountain Rag/Big Scioto/Old Time Blackberry Blossom/Flippin’ Jenny/Fun’s All Over/Fort Smith Breakdown/Ike Ward/Five Miles From Town/Natural Bridge Blues/Broke Down Gambler/Train on the Island/Lost Girl/Lost Indian/Logan County Blues/Knoxville Rag

David Bass: fiddle; Mark Olitsky: banjo; Charlie Pickford: guitar; Alex Scala: bass

I don’t attend many festivals, but when I do, I’m astounded by the ad-hoc bands that form everywhere. They know obscure tunes and sound as if they’ve always played together. But the members are from all over the country, and get together only for a weekend. Killer Grits is essentially such a band: two members are from North Carolina (you may remember David Bass from the Freighthoppers), one from Boston, and one from Cleveland. They formed at a Mt. Airy Fiddler’s Convention, and their music would be only a memory, except that the Rising Tide Project, a non-profit organization, got them into a studio and recorded this all-instrumental album, which I recommend as a festival alternative. You’ll get more sleep, fewer mosquito bites, and no tune goes on for more than four and one-half minutes.

It takes a lot of confidence to start an album with “Mississippi Sawyer,” a piece that almost all fiddlers know. The confidence is well placed: it doesn’t sound like a warhorse. It’s played at warp speed, yet the fiddler throws in a whole bunch of extra notes, and the banjo follows right along. In spite of the tempo, it’s not sloppy. Fiddle and banjo complement each other nicely on all the tunes. Usually, the banjo is playing the bare tune while the fiddle adds grace notes, but often they trade roles, which is the closest the band comes to featuring instrumental solos.

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**When the Roses Bloom in Dixieland**

*Mac and Jenny Traynham—Southern Mountain Melody Makers*

When the Roses Bloom in Dixieland/Gosh!/I Miss You All the Time/By the Cottage Door/Don’t Let Your Sweet Love Die/See That Train/Broken-Hearted Lover/I’ll See God In Everything/The Old Folks at Home/Sailor on the Deep Blue Sea/The Fugitive’s Lament/In My Dear Old Southern Home/Beautiful Stars/Sweet Fern

Mac Traynham: guitar, French harp, vocals; Jenny Traynham: guitar, mandolin, vocals

This is a reissue of a 1985 recording by this husband-and-wife team living in Southwest Virginia, and it holds up as well today as it did back then. Mac is an accomplished, prize-winning fiddler and banjoist (and also a banjo maker), but here he and Jenny focus on country duets from the 1920s, ’30s, and ’40s. I must admit that before listening I half expected these songs to sound, well, *soft,* and quiet. I was pleasantly surprised that they are not. Instead they’re strong...
energetic, thanks to the spare but right-on flat picked guitar accompaniment and brisk, straight-ahead song delivery. The harmony is lovely and smooth, with a sibling-like closeness. Mac sings most of the melodies and Jenny does harmony, but she gets a chance to sing straightforward melody on “Sweet Fern” and “Sailor on the Deep Blue Sea.” Both their voices are clear and unpretentious. The songs are mostly familiar, drawing from the good old Carter Family and several brother duos such as the Blue Sky Boys, Delmore Brothers, and Lilly Brothers. Though Mac and Jenny bring their own sound to the songs, there’s a reverent quality to the singing, a no-frills, traditional feel. On several cuts Mac plays a French harp, similar to a harmonica, which he learned from his father. It adds liveliness and variety to the repertoire. The liner notes are brief and informative, and tell each song’s origin along with Mac and Jenny’s source. Included is a thoughtful introduction/commentary by Wolfe Brothers member Dale Morris, also of the Southwest Virginia area. It was written in 1984 for the initial release.

You can’t beat this CD for good, honest old-time singing, and I heartily recommend it.  
Toni Williams  
To order: www.macandjenny.blogspot.com

Murders, Drownings and Lost Loves: The Roots of Country  
Danny Knicely & Will Lee

Danny Knicely: vocals, mandolin, guitar; Will Lee: vocals, banjo, guitar

Red Mountain Wine / River Underground / Dusty Miller / Footsteps So Near / Watson Blues / Jake Satterfield / Arkansas Traveler / Midnight on the Stormy Deep / Roe Hoe / East Virginia Blues / St. Anne’s Reel / Weeping Willow / Water So Cold / Way Down Town / Pike County Breakdown

I like this album very much. It brings to mind several of my favorite duet albums of traditional old-time coun-

ty songs and tunes, albums such as the two Norman Blake and Tony Rice albums on Rounder, the Skaggs and Rice duets album on Sugar Hill, or the Bill Monroe and Doc Watson live stuff released on Smithsonian Folkways, and the Whitley and Skaggs teenage albums. That’s tall cotton right there, but these guys are really good.

In his insightful and incisive liner notes, James Leva rightly points out that Danny and Will’s duets together here straddle the traditional/innovative divide quite nicely. They’re obviously players with receptive ears and wide-ranging musical experience, and those assets are bought to bear quite positively in their tradition-steeped repertoire. Both are excellent guitarists, as is amply demonstrated on their guitar duets of “St. Anne’s Reel” and “Late Last Night”; on the remainder of the selections, either Danny plays mandolin, with a mostly Monrovian approach, while Will accompanies on guitar, or Will plays banjo, in a melodically-based grassy fashion, while Danny accompanies on guitar. They both sing lead and harmony, and while their singing is perhaps less distinctive, it is very good for all that—these guys know what they’re doing with this material, and they’re just great musicians. Will possesses a very nice deep lead voice, and Danny is a particularly effective high harmony singer.

While the repertoire here is mostly traditional fare, there are a couple of unusual numbers of note. The first is “Footsteps So Near,” a ballad by Tim O’Brien and Nick Forster, that fits right in with the traditional repertoir. The other is a Harlan Howard number called “Water So Cold” which, as far as I’m aware, comes from an old Stonewall Jackson country recording—it’s the only other version I’ve ever heard, at least. Otherwise, the songs and tunes here are either public domain—fiddle tunes like “Dusty Miller,” “Arkansas Traveler,” and “Pike County Breakdown”—all done with nary a fiddle in evidence; it’s all fingers and picks on steel strings of the mandolin, banjo, or guitar—or items from such as Ralph Stanley, Bill Monroe, or Monroe Brothers repertoire. Pickers—or listeners—who enjoy twin guitar duets, banjo and guitar or mandolin and guitar duets and solid traditional duet singing would be well advised to give this album a listen. It’s a sleeper.  
Randy Pitts  
To order: www.mapleshaderecords.com
Indian Creek Delta Boys

Spring Fed Records/Davis Unlimited
SFR-DU-33029

Garry Harrison: fiddle; Lynn ‘Chirps’ Smith: mandolin; Dave Miller: banjo; Dan Baird: guitar, mandolin

Pappy’s Hornpipe/Rush and the Pepper/Devil in the Hay Stack/Widow’s Jig/Golden Grip/Bonaparte’s March/Wolf Creek/Forty Miles from Georgetown Without Any Whiskey/Jump in the Well/ Pretty Little Miss/Mouth of Dry Run/Run Down Boot/Bell Cow/Going To London/Old Mother Flannigan/Tombigbee River/ Brisk Young Soldier/Stella’s Jig

Indian Creek Delta Boys Volume 2

Spring Fed Records/Davis Unlimited
SFR-DU-33042

Where’d You Get That Hat/Wild Goose/Pretty Little Gal/Yell in the Shoats/Lost Indian/Town Hall Jig/Little Bird in the Ash Brook/Cory Dye/Best Timber/Old Kentucky Whiskey/Straun Bonnet/Cackling Hen/Prairie Du Rocher Motion/Mack’s Hornpipe/Money in Both Pockets/Dundas Road/Lone Prairie

The Indian Creek Delta Boys recorded these cuts back in the mid-1970s and released them on two LPs—one in 1976 and the second two years later. It’s a plus to have them available again on these two CDs.

Garry Harrison, Chirps Smith, Dave Miller, and Dan Baird learned these tunes through field collecting in southern and central Illinois, and the old-time musicians they visited ranged in age from 72 to 90 years old. Southern and central Illinois wasn’t known for its old-time music until Harrison and crew made these forays, and through their efforts we now know about these rare tunes and about
such fiddlers as Harvey “Pappy” Taylor, Jesse James Abbott, Noah Beavers, Bob Rogers, and several others. The band’s dedication in presenting these versions as near as possible to the way they heard them adds to the presentation.

The interplay between Garry Harrison’s fine fiddling, Smith’s mandolin playing, the fine banjo work of Dave Miller, and the guitar playing of Dan Baird adds significantly to the band’s sound. Overall, I believe a bass would have enhanced this project, but nevertheless these recordings are once again a welcome addition to the old-time music library.

Dale Morris
To order: www.springfedrecords.com

Old-time Fiddle Lesson, Vol. 1
Matt Brown


Matt Brown grew up in an old-time music family. His father, Tim, has played old-time banjo for many years and is the owner of 5-String Productions. Matt grew up musically in the greater Philadelphia old-time community, learning fiddle from a wide variety of musicians, in a variety of styles. His skill is consummate as both a fiddler and a teacher. This CD contains the bare aural essentials for learning the tunes listed above. It would be a good adjunct to his teaching. Matt says there is a book to follow and it will contain additional information to enable learning.

Fiddling for most folks is a daunting task. This recording provides the notes for each tuning used and then each tune is played slowly and moderately. Not a very inspiring listen for the casual listener but it should provide the student with a clear target for learning the tune. The precision with which each tune is played should make it easier for the learning fiddler to hear the tune sans distractions. A lack of notes is a minus but if you are a motivated student there is much to learn here.

Bob Buckingham
To order: www.5-string.com

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Classic Canadian Songs from Smithsonian Folkways
Various Artists
Smithsonian Folkways SFW40539

Mining back catalog is a favorite revenue enhancer for record labels. On this disc old songs with a Tin Pan Alley feel reside next to Cree incantations, French rowing songs, and drinking songs. Will this material appeal to OTH readers? The Cree pieces will be of interest for the intense drumming that accompanies the singing. Take a title like “When the Ice Worms Nest Again.” Now that is a reference you can remember. For those readers from the Northern States, “The Black Fly Song” ought to have some significance. Then the closing track of moose and bear calls might come in handy as we close in on their domains with our ever-encroaching developments. This is an engaging set of songs that will appeal to those with an interest in things Canadian and folksongs in general.

Bob Buckingham

To order: www.folkways.si.edu

Bridging the Ages
Airtight
Chubby Dragon 1012

Southern Illinois string band including Steve Harrison (banjo) and John Bishop (fiddle, mandolin) from the original Indian Creek Delta Boys, Jesse Danner (guitar) and J. B. Farris (bass). Their rough-and-ready style works best on the square dance tunes and sprightly mountain songs. Bishop’s singing is just right for the songs, too. Six tunes collected in Illinois are included amid this nice selection. Chirps Smith and Garry Harrison are guests on a few cuts. Give this one a try.

Bob Buckingham

To order: www.chubbydragon.com

Books

Polkabilly: How the Goose Island Ramblers Redefined American Folk Music
James P. Leary
Oxford University Press, 2006

Well, no, they didn’t, not really. But the Goose Island Ramblers did contribute another thread to the tangled skein of American music, one which James Leary hopes will become acknowledged through his scholarship. The point of Leary’s book lies in his description of the supposedly white-bread and bland flyover country of the Upper Midwest as, in fact, America’s hotbed of immigrant communities, far more diverse in its pioneer settlement than were the Appalachians or the Deep South. Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan contain “the nation’s largest concentrations of such European Americans as Belgians,
The Lomaxes are hiked out as the self-appointed arbiters of taste who first declared that America’s music flourished “most visibly among Anglo and African Americans” and whose books and recordings promoted a politically conservative and racially nativist view of our folk music to the media and generations of students of American life. The Radical Left, that bugbear of history, is indicted for pontificating that the truest American music promoted progressive social change and that the only genuine American folk tradition was epitomized by the likes of Woody Guthrie, Joe Hill, and Aunt Molly Jackson. Meanwhile, the Goose Island Ramblers just kept playing polkas for happy dancers, singing parodies and Norwegian dialect songs in Madison beer joints, and flying unjustly unknown below the radar of American culture. Leary says the Ramblers “argue for a more inclusive, fluid notion of American folk music, one that exchanges ethnic hierarchy for egalitarianism, one that stresses process over pedigree, one that emphasizes the creolized experiences that unify diverse participants in common musical scenes.”

While one can empathize with Leary’s plea for inclusiveness, one can debate his conclusion that Appalachian and Deep South musics were inflicted on a passive and unsuspecting American public through the cunning of snobby cavaliers and ideological campus dilettantes. Southern music may well have earned its current hegemony through its own worth as well as by its ability to evolve from regional to national stature. The Lomaxes had nothing to do with New Orleans ragtime’s evolution into American jazz, or the evolution of the blues into the international phenomenon of rock ‘n’ roll, or string bands into bluegrass, or hillbilly into the powerful establishment that is today’s country music. Sometimes the music makes its own way despite the best-laid plans of the power elite. If this is so, then polkabill will need to earn its boots on a national as well as on a regional stage. So far, only Lawrence Welk’s polished ballroom version of accordion-led polka music has even briefly engaged national attention. Polkabill, with its musical toilet plungers, “Norwegian War Chant” played on dobro by a guy wearing Viking horns, songs like “My Name Is Yon Yonson (Ay Ban From Visconsin),” and stage patter about snoose and Ole and Lena, may still have some distance to evolve.

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