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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Releases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Esker Hutchins, The Ross County Farmers, Dennis McGee and Sady Courville, Aunt Jenny Wilson, Heywood Blevins, Jeff Goehring. <strong>DVDs:</strong> Hiram Stamper and the Roan Mountain Hilltoppers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Clyde Davenport, Vol. 1, Ernie Carpenter, Banjo Bill Cornett, Lonnie Seymour, Cecil Plum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To order via US mail, send a check made payable to the Field Recorder’s Collective to the address below. $15 each CD, $20 each DVD PLUS $5 for US domestic priority mail. Please check our Web site for additional discs and discounted sets. We accept Paypal and credit cards on our Web site.

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FEATURES

Trends in Old-Time Banjo Playing Part 2: Schism/12
By Ray Alden

Kasper “Stranger” Malone: In His Own Words/24
By Burgin Mathews

A Week in Hogtown:
Old-Time Music in Toronto/34
By Cary Fagan

COLUMNS

HERE & THERE/4

ISSUES IN OLD-TIME MUSIC/8

Old-Time Music And Copyright Laws
By Dick Spottswood

DEPARTMENTS

LETTERS/3

CLASSIFIEDS/42

REVIEWS/43

VOLUME 11, NUMBER 12
AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2009

COMING SOON:
Old-time music in Alaska
Trends in Old-Time Banjo Playing, Part III

Cover photo: Stranger Malone and Clay Sutton play at the 2000 Bluff Mountain Festival in Hot Springs, NC. Photo by Cedric N. Chatterley.

Cover design by Steve Terrill, 97 watt creative group, Greensboro, NC

Printed at Sutherland Printing, Montezuma, IA, www.sutherlandprinting.com
Letters

Corrections

I am thoroughly enjoying the current (June-July) issue, as usual, but think I should point out a few minor flaws in the wonderful essay on Lily May Ledford. The Old Chisholm Trail radio show was done soon after the recording of The Martins and the Coys, both by Alan Lomax in 1944, although the former was not broadcast on the BBC until February 1945. Also, in 1966, not 1968, she performed at the Newport Folk Festival, and not the National Folk Festival in Newport, since the National Folk Festival was a different event and never in Newport.

Keep up the good work!

Ron Cohen

No matter how much I love the Delmore Brothers, I did them a disservice describing their home in a recent review as Sand Mountain, Alabama. Another Alabama resident, Jim Holland of Athens, was kind enough to set me straight. From Jim’s email to me:

“The Delmore family including Rabon and Alton grew up in Limestone County in the Tennessee Valley region of North Alabama. I can take you to their two home places, Clements High School where they won their first contest, and Athens College where they launched their career at another contest. I can even take you to Browns Ferry, about which they sang. Two of Alton’s daughters are still around, and organized a Delmore Days this year.”

To quote Bogart’s character in Casablanca, “I was misinformed.”

Pete Peterson
Here & There

Events

Every third Tuesday at 7:30 there’s an open old-time jam at Keegan Ales, 20 St. James St. in Kingston, NY. For information, contact shoestringband@gmail.com.

From September 4 - 7 (Labor Day Weekend) the Stecoah Mountain Music Convention will be held at the Old Schoolhouse in Stecoah, North Carolina, near Robbinsville. There will be bluegrass and gospel band competitions, and individual competitions in fiddle, banjo, guitar, mandolin, and percussion, as well as a dance Saturday night. Camping is permitted on the grounds. For more information call (828) 479-3364 or visit www.stecoahvalleycenter.com.

The 23rd annual Rockbridge Mountain Music and Dance Festival will take place September 11 and 12 at Glen Maury Park in Buena Vista, Virginia. Admission is $13 a day, or $25 a day for two people, and camping is $10 a day. For more information, call Toni Williams at (540) 291-2414, or visit www.rockbridgefestival.org.

The Greenwood Furnace Folk Gathering will be held September 11-13 at Greenwood Furnace State Park, between State College and Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. For infor-
The 14th annual Ed Haley Memorial Old Time Fiddle Festival will be held on September 19 at the Christian Life Center, 1628 Winchester Avenue in downtown Ashland, Kentucky. Call Gayle Fritz at (606) 326-2134 for more information.

The 39th annual Iowa Friends of Old-Time Music Fiddlers Picnic will be held on September 20, from noon to 6 PM at the Johnson City Fairgrounds, one mile south of Iowa City on Old US 218. Admission is $5 for adults, free for children 12 and under. Call (319) 337-7180 or (319) 337-4952 for details, or visit www.fiddlerspicnic.org.

The 29th annual Florida State Fiddlers Convention will take place October 16-18 at O’Leno State Park in High Springs, Florida. Admission prices (tentative) are, for the entire weekend, adults $45, children (16 & under) $15, and family rate $80; all day Saturday $25 for adults, children under 16 free; and Saturday-night dance only, $8 for adults. Call (386) 454-1853 or visit www.nettally.com/fiddler.

“Always Been a Rambler”

Always Been a Rambler is a treasure trove of recently filmed and rare archival footage, photos and music, this film includes musical performances and interviews by the New Lost City Ramblers, Maybelle and Sara Carter, David Grisman, Pete Seeger, Ricky Skaggs, Doc Watson, and many other masters of old time music. Produced by the Arhoolie Foundation. 58 min plus bonus footage.

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- Bob Dylan

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Registration is open for **Dare to Be Square West – 2009**, to be held from December 12-14 in Seattle, WA. This year’s lineup includes caller and instructor Bob Dalsemer, the Tallboys, and the Small Wonder Stringband (Sandy Bradly and Jere and Greg Canote). Contact Charmaine Slaven at charmaine@thetallboys.com or (206) 335-4274, or Tony Mates at ckyttoo@aol.com, (206) 723-3897; or visit www.bubbaguitar.com/d2bs.

**Recordings**


**Congratulations**


of Canterbury, NH, has been named a **2009 National Heritage Fellow**. Laufman, 78, has been calling dances and performing since 1948, and founded the Canterbury County Dance Orchestra. He performs today in the duo Two Fiddles, with Jacqueline Laufman, with whom he recently published the book *Traditional Barn Dances with Calls and Fiddling*. He has also been the subject of a documentary, *The Other Way Back: Dancing with Dudley*. Visit www.nea.gov/honors/heritage/fellows for more information about this year’s Fellows.

**Final notes**

Jack Allen Sandider, one of the founding members of the Appalachian String Band (along with Charlie McCarron and Tony Thomas) from Harriman, Tennessee, passed away on Friday, May 15, 2009. Jack loved old-time music. He was active in music most of his life and played for several years with his wife, and was very active in playing at pie suppers and fiddling contests. Jack played guitar with the band, including on their three CDs. Two weeks before his passing, Jack and the band recorded a live session in his parlor, since he was not able to travel at the time. Sessions can be seen on YouTube. He was also on the band’s latest CD, *The Sawbriar Ridge Sessions*, which was also recorded in Jack’s parlor, and is named for the area where he lived. He enjoyed performing with the band and sharing his passion for music in many venues. Jack was a beloved husband, father, grandfather, and friend. He will be deeply missed and his charming and endearing spirit will carry on through story and song.

Tony Thomas
We’re trying to get all the banjos Kyle made together. If banjos are not able to be there in person, a picture and description (such as banjo number, year made, scale length) would be great. Also, remember to include the story on how you got your Kyle banjo. These materials will be on display at the show.

Sponsored by:
Kevin Fore of Round Peak Banjos, Lowgap, NC,
Bobby Patterson of The Heritage Shop & Heritage Records, Woodlawn, VA,
The Old-Time Herald, Durham, NC

For more information contact Kevin Fore at (336) 352-4342, or roundpeakmusic@hotmail.com or send banjo information to Kevin Fore, 6824 West Pine Street, Lowgap, NC 27024
OLD-TIME MUSIC AND COPYRIGHT LAWS
by Dick Spottswood

As some already know, I produce the webcast Dick Spottswood Show, also known (affectionately and otherwise) as the Obsolete Music Hour, on the BlueGrassCountry.org site. Since the format focuses on the 1920s-40s, I depend on historic sound recordings to fulfill its mission, and I need enough of them to maintain interest and variety. My usual resources include:

1) Original 78 rpm and vinyl disc pressings

2) Independent overseas producers like Ace, Bear Family, and others who either license from current rights holders in this country or their overseas agents, and produce authorized reissues made directly from source master tapes and discs

3) Non-US reissues of recordings over fifty years old, made from collector copies of published pressings or other sources whose content is legally in the public domain outside this country

4) US-made reissues, either produced by original rights holders (Sony, Gusto, Warner Music Group, MCA, and other original producers), or independent licensors like Rhino, Collectables, Copper Creek, Shout! Factory, who lease from them

5) Unauthorized collector reissues of material not otherwise available

The last category is especially important. Collector sets are created for fans, historians, and other collectors who want access to original recordings that have been otherwise unavailable since they went out of print 70-100 years ago. For the majors it’s uneconomical, impractical, or both to keep them available for low-volume sales. With no commercial or legal incentives compelling them to do otherwise, recorded sound rights-holders have been willing to license material only if minimum quantities of 5,000-10,000 discs are ordered, and pressed in-house. This works fine for high-profile artists like Jim Reeves or Dolly Parton, but less well for 1920s string band performances that were only moderate sellers even when they were new.

Surviving sound recordings date back 150 years, and they’re as relevant to our history as the printed word, photographs, and material artifacts. Without them we wouldn’t know what the Carter Family and Skillet Lickers sounded like, or much about the material they performed. Studying the recordings, we learn what their songs were, what their voices, instruments, and tempos sounded like, and other aspects of their performances. Once we own a record, we can hear it as often as we like, learn from it, and allow it to guide our individual and collective musical development. Imagine what classical music performers and scholars would give to hear comparable documents from the time of Mozart and Bach, and the influence contemporary recordings would have on playing their music today.

Tim Brooks is a good personal friend and collector who has written frequently about the music he loves and the records that preserve it. He is also a leading citizen activist in the effort to persuade the US Congress to amend the Draconian copyright laws covering sound recordings that have been passed in recent decades and upheld in court decisions. Here’s Tim’s contribution, prepared in response to my suggestion that we submit something to the OTH.

What’s “Copyright Reform”?

Several efforts are underway in Washington to change US copyright law for sound recordings in order to encourage preservation and greater access to historical recordings. These proposals may seem controversial to some, but they should be supported by performers, especially those who care about their own—and America’s—musical legacy.

Copyright is a subject that most people are either passionate about or don’t understand at all. It’s mostly been left up to lawyers and large corporations to write the laws, which has led to more complexity than the tax code. They’re so complex that public debate often disintegrates into fear and demagoguery (“Somebody might steal your stuff – so support more copyright laws!”). But the steady expansion of copyright “protections” over the past 30 years, mostly written on behalf of corporations rather than artists, has led to the gradual locking up of much of American’s cultural heritage. Songs, books, movies, photographs, are locked away in corporate vaults, and available only with permission—and payment of a fee. Often they’re not available at all.

Recordings, especially older recordings, are a particularly egregious case. Even specialists in copyright law are often not aware that due to an obscure provision of the law, recordings made before 1972 are treated differently than other types of intellectual property. They are covered by state, not federal, law, and recent studies have found that state laws are particularly harsh. State laws are usually based on common law (i.e., rulings handed down by judges rather than legislation), and offer no provisions for preservation, no fair use, and no public domain, ever. There is no public domain for recordings in the US, no matter how old they are; duplication of deteriorating recordings by public archives is technically illegal; and making use of a recording that has been out of print for 50 or 100 years, or even one for which the original label has long since disappeared, can get you into a lot of trouble.

This is only true in the US, by the way. No other country has such a system.

There are currently two main movements for copyright reform that artists should be aware of. The first, called the Orphan Works Act, would make it possible to use copyrighted material for which no owner can be found without fear of a crippling lawsuit in the rare case that an owner later appears. Many protections for copyright owners have been written into this proposed law. Among them are requirements that the user must make a “diligent search” (as defined by the Copyright Office) for the copyright owner; must mark the work with the author’s name if known; and must pay the copyright owner normal licensing fees if the owner does later appear. It would seem to be a boon to artists to have potential users out searching for them under clearly defined rules, rather than not using their work at all. But despite the support of most creator and user groups, the proposed law has been tied up in acrimonious debate for more than three years.

The other initiative focuses specifically on recordings. Five recommendations have been put forward by the As-
The other recommendations of ARSC and HRCAP are to:

1) Conform the US federal term of coverage for recordings with that of other countries, i.e. 50 to 75 years. The current long term in the US results in two things, neither good: historic recordings are unavailable (according to a recent study only 10% of important pre-1955 recordings are available from the rights holders), or people get reissues of them from foreign countries (because American recordings are in the public domain there). Why should we have to send money overseas for access to our own culture?

2) Pass the Orphan Works Act.

3) Allow anyone to reissue a recording that has been out of print for many years, with a fixed compensation to the copyright owner (a "compulsory license"). It may be reasonable for labels to keep a recording off the market for a few years to build up demand, but not to keep it unavailable for 20, 30, or 100 years. Artists get nothing when their recordings are out of print, and currently they cannot do anything about it. The rights holder (label) has absolute control. This proposal would allow the artist, or anyone else, to put a record back in print, legally, with a fair payment to the label, and to the artist as well.

4) The final recommendation is to update the preservation provisions of federal law to allow archives to make digital copies of older or fragile recordings to prevent them from disappearing altogether. Unbelievably, they cannot do this now legally (although many do anyway).

The Orphan Works Act and the five recommendations of ARSC and HRCAP will no doubt be the subject of much debate over the next few years. Unfortunately there may be a certain amount of sloganeering, opposition for its own sake, or simple fear of change. Artists, particularly those who care about our cultural heritage, should learn what these efforts are really about and support them.

Tim chairs the Copyright and Fair Use Committee for the Association for Recorded Sound Collections (ARSC). We both welcome your observations, interest, and especially your willingness to become involved. Tim’s address is brooks@recordingcopyright.org. Mine is dick@wamu.org.

The Historical Coalition for Access and Preservation (HRCAP) actively seeks signatures for a petition, located on its website, http://www.recordingcopyright.org/joinus.html. If you’d like to sign, click on the fifth icon in the left-hand column.
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Perhaps the word “schism” is a bit severe to apply to this section. Nonetheless, there is a certain division among the ranks of old-time banjo players, with sometimes strong feelings, that has developed as to the purpose of a banjo in old-time music. As Peter Hoover, an early Northern exponent of old-time five-string banjo playing styles, wrote:

Double-note banjo playing is only one half of a unique instrumental style which I call “face-of-the-mountain.” This name is given because it was best developed along the topographic front of the Blue Ridge from mid-Virginia down to Western North Carolina. The other half is provided by the fiddle, which is always the lead instrument in this combination. The banjo, perhaps repeatedly introduced into a musical situation where the fiddle was the unquestioned leader, provided rhythmic accompaniments as well as some snatches of the melodic line, but never achieved more than a shaky a quality with the fiddle. The clawhammer banjo style has been refined by some musicians to the point that one might feel that without the fiddle the raison d’etre for a clawhammer banjo-style disappears.

Peter Hoover told me how he developed his interest in banjo and his style of banjo playing:

In the summer of 1956, after summer camp was over, I visited my parents, who had been attending a chamber music camp at Goddard College, in Plainfield, Vermont. As luck would have it, during the time I was there, a group from Oberlin College, the Folksmiths, gave a concert. One of them, Joe Hickerson, played the five-string banjo, albeit left-handed. But despite his unorthodox playing style, I was taken by the syncopation and bounciness of the sound it made, and resolved to try my hand at it. I had played guitar in a bluegrass band in high school in Washington, DC, and when I started college at Harvard in the fall of 1957, one of my first forays was to a local junk store (Armand Fournier’s), where I bought an old no-name five-string and a copy of Pete Seeger’s How to Play the Five-String Banjo, and sat down to learn. There weren’t many records readily available, with the notable exception of the six-LP Harry Smith collection on Folkways, and no traditional players that I knew of in the Boston area. But there was a small old-time scene that centered around an off-campus co-op living house called Old Joe Clark’s. One of the regulars there was a Harvard grad student named Eric Sackheim, who played five-string, and I attached myself to him to watch and learn. This was the beginning of an active folk scene in and around Harvard Square, centered on Joan Baez and the Charles River Valley Boys. I concentrated heavily on this new music scene and as a consequence flunked out of Harvard. I stayed in Cambridge for the next couple of years, working in a meat-packing plant in Dorchester, and spending evenings and weekends playing banjo and learning. In the summer of 1958, Eric and some friends went down to the Southern Appalachians doing field recordings, and when they came back, I listened avidly to what they had collected. Frailing was pretty heady stuff, quite a change from the bump-titty bump-titty of Pete Seeger, and I was hooked.
The next summer I took off myself for the first of four or five field recording trips to Southwestern Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. Here were traditional players to watch and learn from, in abundance. I continued to play after I moved to Pittsburgh to restart college in 1960, and got into the burgeoning folk scene there that centered around Howard Glasser’s Carnegie Ceilidh at what is now Carnegie Mellon University. When I graduated from Pitt in 1964, I went to the graduate program at Indiana University in Bloomington, and again fell into the local folk scene, regularly playing at country square dances with local fiddlers Jimmy Campbell and Ralph Richardson. When I completed my Master’s there, I moved to Cleveland, to work at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, and was amazed of the lack of a folk scene there. But I gradually got to know people, and eventually started playing for dances, largely for the Biology Department at Case-Western Reserve University. A fiddler there I played with a lot was David Milefsky. David I regularly traveled down to West Virginia State Folk Festival in Glenville, where I recollect jamming with the likes of local fiddlers Lee Triplett, Doc White, and Ira Mullens, and others including Alan Jabbour, Frank George, and Glenn Smith. When I finished my doctoral class work in 1974, I went back to DC on a pre-doctoral fellowship and got into the folk scene there. I finished my doctorate, spent a year there as a post-doc, and worked for another year at the National Museum of Natural History, still playing. I came to Ithaca in 1977 to take a job directing a research institute, a job I spent fifteen years at, and found a vibrant old-time scene that centered around the Highwoods String Band. And I’m still there.”

In 1968, a few years prior to Peter Hoover’s statement regarding functions of the banjo, John Burke wrote an instructional book based on his development of somewhat more melodic style of old-time five-string banjo playing that could both stand on its own and accompany a fiddle. In his book, Old Time Fiddle Tunes for Banjo, John wrote:

I never quite understood why a musician would want to recreate exactly someone else’s music, it is a rather high minded endeavor considering that only recently have reissues of the original records been made available. An unfortunate side effect of this was a sizable number of people began to think that recreating old records was the only thing old-time musicians were allowed to do. When Art Rosenbaum recorded “Coal Creek March,” a writer in the Little Sandy Review criticized his performance on the assumption that he played the tune “faster and more accurately than any old timer could”… Art Rosenbaum is the last person who should be criticized for a lack of familiarity with the idiom of all the banjo players I know. Art has the truest instinct for the spirit of the music; his technical excellence is merely a byproduct of his love for it.

Looking at the tablature in his book, drawn from sources as diverse as Fiddling Doc Roberts and Pete Seeger, one would see the full range of clawhammer technique with drop-thumbing. Further, one could see the left-hand fretting positions occasionally above the fifth fret, as high as the ninth and tenth frets in tunes such as “Leather Britches” and “Sandy River Belle.” It was not common in the South to see any of the older musicians go beyond the fifth fret. That this book was influential among the coming new tide of banjo players in the 1970s could be seen even in summer camp publications. Bob Carlin, Hank Sapoznick, and Lisa Alcott reference Old Time Fiddle Tunes for Banjo in their 1973 10-page Buck’s Rock Camp publication, the Chicken Hill Ramblers’ Book of English and American Fiddle Tunes. How did John Burke come to develop his style? In his book, John wrote:

I didn’t know anything about the banjo or country music when I bought my first banjo. It was hanging in a pawn shop floor window and exerted a fatal attraction on me. I don’t think I had even heard the banjo at the time. Later someone who knew that I had the instrument gave me a record, Darling Cory by Pete Seeger, for my fiftieth birthday.
But I still couldn’t play anything and it wasn’t until that summer that I met someone who could.

In our correspondence, John wrote to me:

Andy Wolf was the only kid in my school that liked old-time music, but at the time mostly guitar and autoharp. Still, that helped because he understood chords. A big thing for me was finding a recording of Buell Kazee. He wasn’t a truly chordal player but he embedded his singing in a very rhythmic banjo style that was continuous and insistent in following the general melody, but with really nice droney texture. That got me into playing a down note with the back of the fingernail, followed by picking off on the first or second string, then another down note, generally on the first string, then the thumb. Whereas most players did thing they called the bum-diddy strum constantly, Kazee did the thing described above and occasionally left out the pick-off note. I still get goose bumps remembering the first time I heard that record.

One summer I hitchhiked to visit a friend in Cape Cod, and took my banjo. I met a man on the street; I think he was with his wife and I think he had cerebral palsy. I do remember that either he or the woman asked if I played and, when I said I was trying to learn clawhammer, I think she suggested he show me something. Oddly, as soon as he had the banjo, he stopped shaking, and I thought his playing was great because he got these extra notes by using his thumb on the inside strings (mostly the second). He showed me how to do that and, believe me; it took me a long time to get that smooth. I don’t recall if his style was truly melodic in the way we think of melodic banjo today, but it was a much fuller sound.

When I got to college in New York City I met lots of pickers, including Pete Wernick, Kenny Kosek, Andy May, Alan Block, Hank Schwartz, Art Rosenbaum, David Freeman, Mark Silver, Ralph Smith, and so many others. I got to be friends with Richard Blaustein at Alan’s shop and we played together a tremendous amount. I would say that the decade between the late ’50s and late ’60s, playing the banjo was my ruling passion. Everything else in my life including college, marriage, work, etc., was kind of shoe-horned in at the edges. In the early to mid-’60s I basically worked out what came to be my “style.” I gave a fair number of lessons in that pe-
riad, and I tabbed tunes for my students, most of whom I taught at the Folklore Center. Izzy Young knew of these tabs and arranged for me to meet Herb Wise, who was doing a series of books for AMSCO about folk instruments. That’s how the banjo book came to be. I also met Stefan Grossman through Alan’s shop, and he eventually set up my recording with Kicking Mule.

At Alan’s shop we played a lot of fiddle tunes. Everyone was getting tapes of 78s of string bands taken mostly from the collections of Dave Freeman and Loy Beaver. I listened to that stuff all the time and worked out banjo versions of the fiddle-band music. “Fiddle tunes,” especially from the old-time perspective, are a class of tunes that typically vary between 4/4 and 2/4 time even within a tune. In that sense, just strumming boom-chuck gives the 4/4 basis of the tune, and pick-off, hammered, and thumb notes add in the unaccented beats of the 2/4 phrases. This makes the “drop-thumb” approach to frailing a pretty good proxy for a fiddle. If you consider what I did to be a “style” then what I did was use my thumb to fill in some of the unaccented notes of a tune by using my thumb on the inside strings. Often this was done in a somewhat counterintuitive way, for example it was often smoother to play the phrase E-F#-G#-A by playing the first note on the open E string with the back of the index or middle fingernail, the next note (the F#) with the thumb on the second string, the G# note on the first string with the back of the fingernail, and the final note with the thumb on the fifth string. Similarly, I often reconstructed typical triplet phrases to anticipate the first beat with a fingernail note, then shoehorn few notes on the next string down by hitting the first with the thumb on the open string and hammering on the next two notes, and finally playing the first note after the “triplet” with a down-picked accented note.
I recall that Michael Cooney often played a wonderful setting of “Arkansas Traveler” with this incredible brute-force technique of playing the first note of the high part with his fingernail, then playing the whole remainder of the measure with just picking off and doing that several times to articulate the melody of that part. This was a much more virtuosic approach than I used, which was just to combine pairs of index/thumb notes that found the unaccented notes on adjacent strings. To do this I had to overcome the well-set notion that it was easier to play the next note up the scale on the same string, which is almost always true on the fiddle.

Anyway, as I learned more fiddle tunes on the banjo, doing the melodic phrases common in fiddle tunes got easier on the banjo. And that’s was all I ever did as a banjo player that was unusual. It was only a style in the sense that it followed the tune closely at a time when most others didn’t follow the tune that closely. Someone like Hank Schwartz played a much more sophisticated approach using the same techniques, but more musical and not centered on fiddle tunes. I sounded fine solo, but was best when I did duets with Andy May. It was like I supplied the recognizable melody in a clean form, then Andy supplied the actual musicality on guitar without actually playing the melody of the tune.

By the early ’70s I played more fiddle than banjo and only did that Kicking Mule recording in the mid-’70s because I got a Wildwood banjo I really enjoyed playing. Still it was more of a hobby since I made my living fiddling. In the early ’80s I stopped performing much, partly because I developed a real problem with degenerative arthritis in my left shoulder. By the mid-’80s I couldn’t even reach up to the banjo peghead to tune the thing without significant pain, and by the early ’90s it was so bad I had stopped performing on fiddle too. In 1997 I had the shoulder replaced and started fiddling again the same week, but I never got back into the banjo. The fiddle is a lot easier instrument for me to stay in shape on, so I just play that. I had a banjo student a few years ago that I really liked and taught him until last year. He got really good on clawhammer technique, but started playing bluegrass banjo in his family’s band and he’s become a wonderful performer.

Funny, I know I learned to read music in grade school, but I never learned...
any banjo stuff from music. I found tablature to be a useful form for teaching, but never really had the patience to learn from tab, although I know I learned some of the Pete Seeger stuff from his tab. I now know enough about reading music to be able to learn simple fiddle tunes, but I rarely do that because the notated settings so often seem uninteresting to me personally.

Hank Sapoznick, mentioned above as a contemporary to the 1970s banjo players, began with lessons and exposure to the New York bluegrass scene through players such as Barry Kornfeld. However, something soon changed his direction, as Hank said in an interview:

The first real epiphany was I went to a concert in 1975; the Folklore Center in New York had been sponsoring great concerts: Doc Watson, Roscoe Holcomb. This was before I was into it. They had a concert of “Music from Round Peak,” and they had some of the people who had been collecting down there, including this fiddle and banjo player named Bill Garbus. I went to the show and I saw Garbus playing clawhammer style, and I just said “My God, that’s the best thing I ever heard.” That’s exactly, exactly the style I wanted to learn. But I didn’t have the cojones to go up and introduce myself to him. By chance, I went to the School of Fretted Instruments which was next to the Folklore Center, and I said I want to learn banjo. They said OK, they have a teacher, and they set me up with him. And who was it? It was Bill Garbus. He was great, it was this beautiful, straight-ahead, Round Peak drop-thumb style. Anyway, I took about a half-dozen lessons with him, working through John Burke’s book.

Hank wrote to me: “When we went through the Burke book that alerted me to the possibilities of a melodic style.” He then discusses what happened soon after:

In 1974 the guitar/bass/banjo player in the Delaware Water Gap was Bob Carlin. He had been a Pete Seeger-style banjo player when we had been working together in a summer camp and I turned him onto old-time banjo, and he produced a wonderful LP for Kicking Mule called Melodic Clawhammer Old Time Banjo. It’s a great record; I’m still thrilled with it. Everything about it was seeing how to develop a more activist style of clawhammer. At that point I was playing different melodic tunes: French Canadian, New England stuff, very note-for-note fiddle tunes, inspired in a way by classic banjo where you would have banjo/piano duets.
I liked the idea of banjo and piano, and
that was a really fun period. One of the
things about clawhammer banjo is that if
you go back far enough, like to the min-
strel style, you realize that the framework
for clawhammer banjo, that “tater’s”
shuffle is only one of a variety of rhyth-
mic option that was available in the frail-
ling or “stroke style,” as they called it. The
minstrel-style banjo wasn’t just in 2/4; they
were playing in 6 and in 9.

Hank recorded several tunes for Melodic
Clawhammer Old Time Banjo, including
“Staten Island Hornpipe,” “St. Anne’s
Reel” / “Gaspé Reel,” “Green Willis”
(as a duet with Bob Carlin), “Speed the
Plough,” and “Off to California.”

Old-time banjo players today must face
this crossroads: do you play in a very
melodic style, or reduce the number of
notes to play in a more rhythmic style?
Mark Olitsky, who currently plays old-
time banjo in a rhythmic style much ad-
mired by other musicians, told me how
he struggled with this decision.

When I first started playing, I guess that
I had the idea that the banjo was strictly
a melodic instrument. As such, I incorpo-
rated as much drop-thumb and complex-
ity as I was able – as much of an acrobatic
event as I could manage. Then I went to
a music festival in the South (Galax).
I heard the most beautiful playing. It
seemed like everyone could play well.
And while the banjo was following the
melody, it was also adding an important
rhythmic element. I noticed that these
players were not necessarily playing note
for note with the fiddle, and that some
used very little drop-thumb techniques
to achieve the rhythms that worked with
a tune. And that’s when I really fell in
love with old-time music. I went home
and tried to play closer to how I heard the
banjo played in the South. I never found
my place in that kind of banjo playing,
but the repeated attempts to do so led to
how I play today.

Yet other young players have gone
in the other direction. Adam Hurt is a
young Midwestern banjo player capable
of playing some very intricate tunes on
the banjo using a melodic clawhammer
style he has developed over the years.
His father is a violinist and his mom a pi-
nist. As Adam wrote to me about them;

Given their backgrounds, they were ea-
ger to get me started with some formal
music training, and everyone agreed
that piano would be a sensible first in-
strument for me. I believe that I began
lessons in 1988, when I was four years
old. My last piano lessons were in about 1997, shortly after the time when I got
bitten HARD by the old-time bug!

When I asked Adam exactly what
cal music towards traditional American
music, he wrote:

Don Paden, my homeroom teacher in
a Saint Paul, Minnesota, public school
from fourth through sixth grade played
several folk instruments—mandolin was
his favorite, but he also played fiddle, gui-
tar, autoharp, and others—and regularly
brought these instruments into his class-
room to show us an art form that we had
likely never known. While Don’s genre of
choice was bluegrass, he wasn’t especially
picky, and a lot of the stuff that he played
in those years I later came to recognize
as the sort of “chestnut” tunes that ap-
pear in both bluegrass and old-time, such
as “Saint Anne’s Reel,” “Soldier’s Joy,”
“Ragtime Annie,” and the like.

There was something about this folk
music and these instruments that
immediately spoke to me; it seemed
more “real” somehow than the com-
paratively contrived-sounding piano
music with which I had never fallen
in love. Sometime in late 1993, during my fourth-grade year
I asked Don
to show me a few things on the mandolin,
which I liked the best of all. I took to it
quickly; once I had a cursory un-
derstanding of the essential techniques,
Don soon had me playing r
eal tunes, the
first of which was “Old French.”

After my father bought me a mando-
lin of my own in April of 1994, I began
taking “official” lessons with a teacher
besides Don. Brian Wicklund, local blue-
grass jack-of-all-instruments, who is
an exceptional teacher of young people,
taught me from then until about 1998
(when I set the instrument aside to focus
entirely on the banjo). He led me through
numerous bluegrass standards, but peri-
odically would teach me a “fiddle tune,”
something that I immediately recognized
as different from—and, in my opinion,
preferable to—the flashier material on
which we spent the bulk of our time. Over
and over again I begged for more tunes
from this category, and soon Brian clued
me in to the related genre of “old-time,”
suggesting that it might be more to my
liking than bluegrass.

It was around that time that Brian
showed me a new thing that he was tinker-
ing with—a five-string banjo, which he
was playing not with fingerpicks as I had
thus far always heard it played, but in a
manner that he called clawhammer—and
I was immediately smitten by that sound!
This was in late 1994. (Incidentally, Don
Paden also played clawhammer banjo as
well as some old-time finger styles, but I
don’t remember having heard him play
this instrument until after I had “discovered” it through Brian.) By the time 1995
rolled around, in addition to continuing
bluegrass mandolin lessons and asking for
as many fiddle tunes as Brian would give
me, I had started clawhammer banjo les-
sions with Marianne Kovatch, who was one
of very few people in the area playing this
style and perhaps the only one in a position
to teach. At the same time, believe it or not,
my parents insisted that I try my hand at
bluegrass banjo lessons with yet another
teacher, as they were worried that I had in-
advertently and out of inexperience chosen
a style of music or playing that would ulti-
mately prove limited, undesirable, or both.
Is there such thing as new-timey?

If there is, Nechville’s new Atlas banjo embodies it. Built in partnership with traditional banjo builder Wayne Sagmoen, the Atlas combines the beauty and craftsmanship of a traditional 19th century open back banjo, with the stunning sound, playability, portability and comfort that’s 100% cutting-edge Nechville.

While the clawhammer style immediately made great sense, the bluegrass approach never really did, and I was allowed to discontinue those lessons once I had convinced my parents that there really was something to this clawhammer stuff (around the end of 1995). Marianne and I met for weekly lessons for a little over a year, and then she sent me off into the wide world of old-time music with lots of “recommended listening.”

In developing his rather unique style of melodic clawhammer banjo, Adam began to use some of the more uncommon tunings for the banjo. When I asked him which tunings he uses a great deal, he said:

For nearly everything in the key of G major, I use a tuning that I know as “Sandy River Belle” tuning, which some people refer to as a “Cumberland Gap” tuning. (I don’t use the latter name because I also frequently play out of the tuning by the same name that the Round Peakers and others often used for that tune...more on that later.) The notes are g-EAD; I tune right up and don’t use a capo. This tuning has suited me so well that I have all but abandoned standard g-DGBD (though I still use its equivalent—aEAC#E—for A tunes). I also use it on occasion to accompany singing in the key of C major, though for really “playing” fiddle tunes in that key it is less than ideal. A lovely version of “Sail Away Ladies” so tuned. Watching and hearing him work in this tuning, I immediately noticed that it was not an open tuning, but that many things were played out of closed-chord shapes. Having been used to the entirely open g-DGDE and comparatively open g-CGCD and g-DGCD and their raised equivalents (and relatively little else in the way of alternate tunings around 1999), this was a completely new concept for me.

When I first played around with this tuning, it was clear that there was no reason to simply search and destroy for a single melodic line as I would in any other tuning, since I could do so much more easily in one of those more familiar open tunings. Instead, I found myself thinking back on those years of music theory learned at the piano keyboard, and recalling what it takes to make a given chord and its inversions. While plenty of music can be played in this tuning out of four basic chord shapes on the second and third frets alone, I began searching for inversions of these I, IV, V, and relative-minor chords elsewhere on the fingerboard. Becoming familiar with all of these chord positions (which are sometimes not completely closed—periodically, I will include a complementary open string in an otherwise closed up-the-neck shape, or omit a fretted or open string entirely) has given me the freedom to find melodies in different, usually higher, registers than I might otherwise be able to do, while keeping regularly present the unique chordal sound that makes this tuning so special.

I have in the past couple of years become quite fond of the “Cumberland Gap” tuning, g-t-Cf#BE for the key of E major (which I prefer for its string tension, even though it may be a bit antisocial!) or f#-BEAD for the key of D major. This tuning intrigued me when I first heard Fred Cockerham use it for “Little Satchel” and a number of folks, particularly Kyle Creed, play one version or another of its namesake tune. Searching for other tunes played in this tuning besides these two stalwarts yielded little, so I have kept myself entertained by working out various tunes in this alternate setting. This tuning is related in some ways to my beloved G tuning, so perhaps it’s no wonder that I can’t get enough of it.

Occasionally, I use “Old G” tuning, g-DGDE, for some G tunes that simply must have that low D note. In a session or band situation in which I am supporting a fiddler, I feel like I can usually work around that note with “Sandy River Belle” tuning, which obviously doesn’t go quite low enough. However, there are times when I really yearn for that note (often when I am playing without a fiddler or other “lead” instrument to sound the note for me!), and then I tend to select this tuning. Besides having one extra note, I find it much more versatile than “Sandy River Belle” tuning, as the long interval between the second and third strings is difficult to negotiate, and chord shapes are virtually non-existent.

On an infrequent basis, I use the following tunings, off the top of my head:

d-AD/Ed-BEBE (sometimes as a “Dead Man’s” tuning with the fifth string tuned to f#/g#, learned from Reed Martin). Also g-DADE (I found this tuning while searching for a compromise between the two aforementioned G tunings) which, in reality, has few of the advantages of either tuning and all of the challenges of both! I haven’t heard anyone else use it and don’t know whether it is “traditional.” Finally e-EG#BE (“Half Shaved” tuning; learned from Dan Gellert), f#-DF#AD/g#-EG#BE (“Reuben’s Train” tuning) and g-EGDE (“Last Chance” tuning).
Bridging the Gap

Two Northern old-time five-string banjo players who have tried hard and succeeded in combining a melodic style with a rhythmic approach to clawhammer-style old-time banjo playing are Reed Martin and Dan Gellert. In 1967 Dan won the Philadelphia Folk Festival banjo contest by playing the tune “Buck Creek Girls” using a melodic yet rhythmic approach, and a fingering in a modal tuning such that the tune came out in the key of G. When I asked Dan what influenced him as he learned to play, he wrote:

Pete Seeger was a real big influence on me! His records were part of my environment from my infancy, and once I started learning to play, that instruction book of his was the only thing I’d ever seen printed on paper which made any musical sense to my ADHD non-linear brain. It was a sort of foretaste of hypertext, with nearly every page full of references to other parts of the book, other books, and above all to other banjoists and their recordings. He, and the Ramblers, and the guys I met at the Ridgewood, New Jersey hootenannies; Larry MacBride (founder of Marimac recordings), Bob Bell, Eric and Marc Schoenberg got me listening to all the stuff that was out on Folkways and just starting to happen on County Records.

Dan met Reed Martin when he went to college in Bloomington, Indiana. They were equally fond of each other’s approach to the banjo, and found an influence in each other’s playing. As Dan wrote to me:

Reed excited me pretty good; I think we were very much mutual influences. I do recall that when I met him I was habitually using my thumb to support my index finger on the downbeat (someone once told me that Wade Ward played like that, though I never saw him). Being around Reed inspired me to actually learn to do some of the double thumb-noting that had been gnawing at my ear ever since I had seen Fred Cockerham and Kyle Creed in New York a year or two earlier.

Reed Martin grew up near Bloomington, Indiana during the period his father Clyde worked as Alfred Kinsey’s first research assistant at the University of Indiana. Growing up in Bloomington, Reed remembers seeing and hearing musicians such as “the McDaniels family with their cigar box fiddle and mandolin. “Golden Slippers” and “Red Wing” are the two tunes I remember them playing in front of the five and dime store on quarter.” Reed visited many folks around his area, such as harmonica player Charlie Fleener and his cousin Homer.
Spriggs, who played a version of the Russian “Sevastopol March” that he called “Sylvester Poole March.” Reed learned that tune when he was 18. Reed’s ability to travel and connect with musicians enabled him to hear many diverse tunes and develop his own style incorporating many techniques. Reed wrote about these facets:

“I went down a country road and came upon a little store; I went in and asked the gray haired man behind the counter, “When you were a kid, who played the banjo here in Aberdeen?” (The Aberdeen Military Proving Grounds country is the last place you would expect to find somebody playing clawhammer banjo.) He told me, “Pearl Walls was the banjo player when I was a kid here.” I asked him, “Where is she now?” And he said, “Go down that driveway right there and that’s her house. She lives by herself down that little lane.” So my sister and I went to her house and knocked on the door and found out that you used to play banjo.” She said, “I’ve got nobody here, so come on in; we can have Christmas afternoon together.” We spent the afternoon with Pearl Walls. She was originally from Banner Elk, North Carolina, Doc Watson country. She had a fretless banjo with no strings on it; she liked my banjo because it had frets. We were treated to some of the tunes from her childhood. One of the tunes was “Johnson Boys” and she said, “That’s probably my favorite fretless banjo tune.”

Another memory is of his visits with banjo player Pete Steele:

Pete Steele was a great Kentucky musician who moved to Hamilton, Ohio, in the ‘30s. He came to Bloomington periodically to visit a friend, Paul Pell. Paul liked to build banjos and he tried to keep Pete supplied with a good instrument so he could stay in shape. I would get a call and go over and listen to Mr. Steele whenever he came to town. He sang words to “Last Payday at Coal Creek,” but since I don’t sing, I sped it up a little to make it more of a banjo instrumental. Mr. Steele had played for many years with another transplanted Kentucky banjo player, Andy Whitaker. Mr. Whitaker was older than Mr. Steele and lived somewhere east of Indianapolis. During all the years he played music with Mr. Steele, nobody had ever gone to meet him. I drove many miles looking for Mr. Whitaker, but with no luck.

He was the source for many of the great tunes which Mr. Steele played, including the “Coal Creek March” and “Last Payday at Coal Creek.” Reed writes about one of his main influences:

Peter Hoover is a great banjo player who came to Bloomington when I was nineteen years old. I met him and he took me over to his apartment, put on his Ampex tape recorder and said “Here, I’ll make you a reel of old-time banjo tunes. We sat there, drank beer, and ate donuts for about three hours. That was the first time I had seen in the clawhammer banjo player move his thumb to different strings. He played tunes that he had collected for years, either at fiddler’s conventions or at people’s houses. Peter Hoover was the first person I knew who had gone out to find rural musicians. He was about seven feet tall, so when he knocked on your door you took him seriously. He is an incredibly smooth, melodic banjo player and was a tremendous influence on me at that time I was just absorbing old-time banjo tunes visually. I could watch somebody play a tune and it would be in my head. It didn’t matter whether I brought it back five minutes later or two years later. That night of watching him play the banjo was so influential that the stuff I couldn’t understand technically stayed in my head. I remember driving down the Pennsylvania turnpike two years later and having big rush of banjo tunes from that night I pulled over at a rest area and figured a three or four tunes that I had seen him play. I had been carrying around the tunes in my head for years but unable to play them and suddenly they came back. When Peter made that tape, I didn’t even have a tape recorder to play it back on, but I carried it around for a long time and still have the tape thirty years later. It is interesting to note the transitivity of the drop-thumb technique, going from Peter Hoover, an early Northern banjo player to visit older Southern musicians, to Reed Martin and, as Dan Gellert mentioned, to him through Reed.

Ray Alden is a banjo player who, over the past 38 years, has collected old-time music from the South. Currently he has been, along with other collectors, issuing field recordings as part of the Field Recorders’ Collective. See their website at www.fieldrecorder.com.

To be continued: Part III of “Trends in Old-Time Five-String Banjo Playing” will appear in the next issue of the Old-Time Herald.
October Old-Time Week
October 25 - November 1

Carl Jones  -  guitar styles
Mac Trayhnam  -  beg.-int. banjo
Riley Baugus  -  int.-adv. banjo
Erynn Marshall  -  beg.-int. fiddle
Dave Bing  -  int.-adv. fiddle
James Bryan  -  int.-adv. fiddle
Gerry Milnes  -  Appalachian Culture
Lou Maiuri  -  Appalachian Dance & Culture

plus Guest Master Artists
Bernard Cyrus and Lester McCumbers

Old-Time Fiddlers’ Reunion
October 30-November 1

Halloween Square Dance
Friday, October 30, 8:00 pm, $5
The Pit, Hermanson Center
Music by October Old-Time Week staff
(Costumes encouraged but not required.)

Fiddlers’ Reunion
Saturday, October 31, 10 am - 5 pm, FREE
Hermanson Center Lounge
Dozens of performances by invited old-time masters
and younger old-time musicians from all over West
Virginia. A freestyle clogging and flatfooting contest
will be held on the stage in the afternoon. Exhibits
and sales by instrument vendors nearby. Tune and
song swaps feature traditional singers from all over
the region, and jam sessions go on far into the night.

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Kasper “Stranger” Malone: In His Own Words
By Burgin Mathews

Kasper “Stranger” Malone left his Kentucky home at fifteen—“in search,” he would later say, “of music”—and the search begun young would consume the rest of his long life. Wherever there was music he was content—for a time, at least, until his wanderlust pulled him in a new direction. Soon after his death in 2005, the Guinness Book of World Records acknowledged Malone for the longest working career as a recording artist, a career which began in 1926 at a recording date with Clayton McMichen’s Melody Men. Late in life, Malone had returned to the studio, sitting in with his friend Elise Witt for a 2003 recording. The recorded output, however, only offers a glimpse into Stranger Malone’s performance history, which encompassed work in old-time string bands, swinging big bands, and symphony orchestras. Malone’s world embraced and effortlessly connected diverse strands of music, recognizing none of our era’s need to separate styles into restrictive genre labels. Malone’s only concern was immersion in music.

He gained his first musical education from itinerant singing-school instructors on their way through Kentucky. His first instrument was a “battered-up” cornet which he would later exchange for a saxophone, an instrument he abandoned in turn for the clarinet. Soon after leaving Kentucky he settled in Rome, Georgia, where he fell in with Clayton McMichen, Lowe Stokes, Riley Puckett, Gid Tanner, and others among the giants of string-band history. He played movie theaters and a miniature circus and played on the radio all over the country. He bounced around the Midwest, sometimes leading his own band but most often acting as a sideman—most notably for trombonist and big band leader Jack Teagarden (“a genius,” Stranger remembered, still in awe decades later). He played in symphonies in Tucson, Denver, and San Francisco. He played on a cruise ship and played in the US Maritime Service Band. He taught clarinet, flute, and bass. For twenty years he lived in Germany, and he once traveled across Ireland with nothing more than a backpack and a flute. In 1993 he came back to Rome, the Georgia town that had once dubbed him “Stranger,” and he stayed there, performing actively until his death at 95.

Refusing retirement, he joined the Rome symphony; he played for nursing homes and elementary schools and folk festivals and coffee shops, especially delighting in performing for the very old and the very young. In addition to the other instruments in his arsenal, he took up the guitar in his eighties and converted a couple of Venetian-blind slats into a pair of “rattlesbones” good for entertaining children.

Born Kanoy Malone (“My mother had a sense of humor”), as a young man he changed the name to Kasper. When he first landed in Rome, he picked up the name “Stranger,” and when he returned there more than six decades later, he was (ironically, this time) “Stranger” again. For his connections to Clayton McMichen and the Skillet Lickers, he was embraced in his later career by the old-time community in particular, but as always, his repertoire and performance, rooted in an era without labels, resisted classification.

For those who encountered him in those later years, Malone provided steady inspiration. Still performing alongside his younger admirers, he offered a rare connection to the dawn of commercially recorded music, and to such legendary figures as the long-gone McMichen, Puckett, and Tanner. But if his greatest passion was for music, Malone’s lifelong sense of searching was not merely musical. He was a genuine seeker, wonderfully outgoing but even more deeply introspective, an avid reader and writer and walker and thinker with, until the very end, a piercing curiosity and an enthusiasm for living that he shared with anyone he met. In 2005, Mick Kinney, a friend and fellow musician, compiled a small booklet of writings and drawings left behind by Malone, scribbled on napkins, on the backs of envelopes, and on any other available scraps of paper. Even a glimpse into these off-the-cuff verses and quick aphorisms suggests the depth and humor in Stranger’s searching. “Poetic thought,” he once wrote, “must flow. It can’t be hoarded or damned up—it must be directed to someone or something to posterity. While I write this, I have visions of it being found long after my departure, and received by some sympathetic soul with joy and understanding.” “I love beauty in its innumerable forms,” he wrote elsewhere, “and wish to be a part of it. On my tabs of paper I record my search for it. An honest search is as good as a casual find.” Later in life his jottings take on increasingly the subject of age, a fact of life which he confronted with stubbornness, grace, and characteristic humor: “I stay away from museums,” he wrote. “They might try and keep me there.” “An old man shakes his head, neither yes or no.” And, a few months before his death: “I’m five and ninety years, mostly five.”

Stranger Malone died in 2005, asleep in his Rome apartment. Earlier in the week he had played a Rome café with Russell McClanahan, a friend and musical partner of his last years; he was scheduled for a recording session a few days later with Elise Witt and Mick Kinney. When Stranger did not appear for the date, Witt and Kinney contact McClanahan, who sent out an email to Stranger’s friends later that day: “I went over this morning.” McClanahan wrote, “and found him in his apartment, surrounded by his books, guitars, flutes, and clarinets. He was lying on his bed with a smile on his face. Next to his right hand was a book called ‘Life is Worth Living.’”

The oral history below comes from an interview recorded in 2003 in Rome. In his own words, Malone offers a unique narrative of American music in the 20th century, providing along the way a window into the life and worldview of a one-of-a-kind man.
I was born in McCracken County, Kentucky. The county seat is Paducah; it’s an area where they raise tobacco. Now, this tobacco they raise is primarily used for cigar wrappers. It’s the black burley: the leaves are about fifteen or sixteen inches long, and it’s a dark, heavy tobacco. It has to be air-cured, and at that time, in the tobacco barns, they would use hickory to cure it, just like they would for curing hams or anything like that.

That’s what we did. We had a dry-land farm—we raised sorghum and tobacco, and that was our money crops. And my family was musical. They didn’t play professionally, but they were all musical, all of them. My father had played organ and my mother played organ, the old pump kind that they had in the parlor. When my father was a young man, he used to sell those little portable-like organs for the churches; they were called Melodians. That was in Trigg County.

I had three brothers, and I’m the last one; I’m the baby. I had one brother that was twenty-four years older than me. That’s a long spread, there. He was a very good musician: he played violin and cornet, and he gave me an old cornet when I was three years old. He bought a new horn and gave me this old battered-up horn, and I used it as a toy, and naturally as time went on I learned to blow on it, and by the time I was five I could play it. Not real great, but I could play tunes.

Later I bought a baritone horn, and he taught me to read bass clef. We would come in from the fields and have dinner, or lunch—we called it “dinner” at that time—have noonday meal; and then the first thing we’d do would be to go out under a shade tree and start playing. He’d play cornet and I’d play the baritone horn, and we’d play out of the hymn books. That continued even ’til the time I went out to conquer the world, in the music business. I left when I was fifteen years old and . . . was in search of music.

I went first to Miami. I had great hopes of maybe working down there, but the cost of living— I had expectations of really getting around musically down there, but I looked it over and I only stayed there about a week. I enjoyed it very much: I went to the beach every day, and some of their lifeguards there, they were singers. They had a male quartet there that really put your hair up on your arm. But musically, to make a living there at that time, I could see it wasn’t
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my place. So I was looking when I came up this way. I hadn't headed home, I was just going north.

I was accepting rides on the highway and my ride ended here, in Rome, at sundown, so I just kept walking in the dark. It was June, and I walked about three or four miles out there, and there was a grocery store that had a porch that was all set up nice and pretty. They were closed, so I just went to bed. Next morning I accepted a ride to about, oh, five miles down the road, to Armuchee, and the band was tuning up. And that's when we struck a deal: they needed some bass playing and I needed a job. They played auctions. We played all over the South.

The very first day I started playing here in Armuchee, I had just started playing and this big hillbilly walked up, and he says: "Who's this here little stranger fella that plays that there big horn?" And they thought, well, that's a good name for him, call him "Stranger." I'm still Stranger in this area. In other areas I'm just Kasper.

Before 1928, every theater had some type of music. After I left home, why, that was one of my first jobs, was to go into the theater here in Rome, Georgia, playing in the Rivoli Theater. It's now a pet shop—you possibly passed it there on the Main Street, they still have the rococo front and everything—but that's where I started playing music, where you had to read music. You really did, because they used the old Sam Fox Library; they still use that in sound pictures today. The music in the background, a lot of it’s from that old Sam Fox Library. They use gallops and hurries and things for excitement, and then pathetic music—basically that hasn’t changed.

Movies were getting to be kind of nervous at that time. They knew sound was coming in, and they had to come out with full blast or not at all. So, I played What Price Glory, and I played The Student Prince. Ben Hur was a very big film that we played. I can’t remember the names of all the big movies at that time. And all that was short-lived, because sound was just around the corner, and when it came in, why, everybody lost their job. There were two thousand theaters here in the United States. And they all had music of some type, and all of the musicians were completely out of work when that happened.

I was getting pretty handy on the clarinet at that time, and McMchen heard about me and he drove over here—Clayton McMchen. He drove over and told me what he had in mind: he wanted to form a trio with Riley Puckett. He’d had this boy that played clarinet before me there working for him, and they had an automobile accident and the boy was killed. So I replaced him, and Mac [McMichen] started the Melody Men, and we made records for three years. We recorded just before my nineteenth birthday. We had two sessions a year, and the first one—I may be wrong on the date on this, but I keep thinking of it as ’25—until 1928. We made, I think, thirty or something sides during those three years, there were a lot of them. [After that] Mac had an idea of starting a thing that was similar to Bob Wills, but that was before Bob Wills really got to be Bob Wills as we know him. But he had the idea that he wanted to start the Georgia Wildcats up in WAS,Louisville, Kentucky. And he was very successful; in fact, he stayed there the rest of his life. I never did see him after that, after 1928.

At that time I did some other recordings with Hoke Rice and Lowe Stokes, and I think Hugh Cross—now, he was a name around here for a long time. But anyway, I did a great wad of recordings on that [first] date. In fact, I went and paid all my debts and bought a new topcoat. That’s another thing, something maybe warned me that you’re not going to be in the South very long. So, so help me, just a short time after that I went to the Midwest and—you need a coat out there, let me tell you!

I did a thing with the Skillet Lickers, too. That’s “A Day at the County Fair.” That’s a very short thing that I did, but I started the recording off with a clarinet solo. It’s, you might say, atmosphere to create the idea of a county fair where they have all the different exhibits and the side shows and the dancing girls and everything; so that’s the way I started the recording. “A Day at the County Fair” was one of their big sellers for a long time. It was just a pretended visit of a couple of country boys celebrating the county fair.

At that time, there was no radio that was listenable here in the South. You might get the stock markets and things like that, but the radio was so filled with static, especially in the summer, and in certain areas there was just no reception. Including Armuchee out there, where I lived, there was no one in town that had a radio.

But at night, especially on winter nights, the reception was pretty good. And the very strong stations, like WSB and WSM,
were very popular. Of course, there were no records at that time [played on the radio], everything was live. But this was one of the highlights of my life, when I first played WSB, because I’d heard that station when I was back in Kentucky. And there was one announcer there that, he wasn’t a put-on at all; he was actually a very honest person. But he had a certain style of announcing that, to me, it was real romantic. He would say: “This is W-S-B: Where the South Begins. We cover Dixie like the dew.”

His name was Lamdon Key. He was very famous through the South, as a colorful person. When I went over there with Mac to do that program, he walked out and I thought, oh, this is real big-time: here I am! It was a remarkable thing.

Mac was a promoter. He was always in the middle of everything, and he knew what was going on. Now, you’ve got to consider that they’re not going to come looking for you if you’ve got a band; you’ve got to get out and show them what you can do, and know what’s going on. And Mac did that: he had a catalogue of everything that was going on in the South, and if they didn’t give him a job, he’d go there and get one.

I remember Mac and Lowe Stokes and I—now this is an odd combination: Stokes was the champion fiddler of Georgia, and Mac was runner-up—and a clarinet. Stokes also played guitar, now, that’s what saved us. We’d go to places that had these big functions, and Mac would get into them, and eventually we’d pick up maybe a couple of their local side people and play dances. We made several trips to South Georgia and South Alabama down there, and kept busy all the time. I remember one especially: we played for a tobacco growers’ association in South Georgia, and we got paid very well. It was, you might say, a rich-boys’ job. And they had this party of people, they had a big fenced-off area, and they had refreshments, plenty. It was Prohibition, but they had refreshments. We were playing along, and somebody got the idea of making a quick dollar, and he did: he passed his hat, and I remember seeing that hat, it was so full of green stuff. I mean, he really had money in there. And he got lost! (Laughs) He disappeared. They’d have fixed him if they would have caught him, but he got away.

And then one night we had to be back for a recording session. We were in South Georgia, and I had to drive the car all the way back. We had an open Buick, a six-cylinder Buick car—most of the cars on the road at that time were the old Model-T Ford, but we had this Buick and it was a very good rig. I had to drive the boys in, but I needed to sleep all the way. I wanted to go to sleep but I didn’t dare, because I had to have them there in the morning. So about nine o’clock, why, in we came. We were there for the recording session—we made that.

What kind of money did you make back then playing music?

Well, you might look at it this way. There were a lot of people who worked in the factory who took home a paycheck of about eight or ten dollars, and a lot of the manual labor was a dollar a day. And we got along very well, due to the fact that Mac was this type person that he would round up work; he’d create work. If it wasn’t there, why, he’d find someone else that is acquainted in the community.
Kasper “Stranger” Malone, third from right, with the Rosebud Kids. One of Malone’s South Dakota radio gigs was with this musical German-American family from the Rosebud Indian reservation. WNAX in Yankton, South Dakota.

and he’d put on a dance or something like that, and we always came away with enough to get along on, and do it real well. We made some pretty good money there at times. Of course, there were dry periods too when we didn’t do so well, but you’ll find that in all business.

A friend of mine used to take me to the fiddlers’ conventions along ’26 and ’27, ’28, and they were big functions there at the old City Auditorium in Atlanta. And I played with the total group at the end when they had these. These were something that I can remember very well; they were a colorful affair. You get all these hillbillies out of the hills around here, some of them only know two or three tunes, and that’s where they ran into problems. They would make a recording and it would sell very good. And then when the next recording session came up, why they didn’t know any others. (Laughs) But that was one of the problems they had with the recording. The Columbia company used to send this recorder down here with the equipment. They did this twice a year, and then they would go back to New York where it was processed. That continued until I made my last recording in 1928. Then I went immediately out West. I went to St. Louis, Missouri, and then I joined a miniature circus playing theaters and toured a while, and then I went to Kansas and started my own band, and did pretty well for a time. Then I went into radio, and from then on I worked in radio exclusively. I worked at a station on the Mexican border, and all the way up to South Dakota and North through these years, and it was a way—in that area—of making a living, and a good one.

I’ve always been guided from one situation to another, like geese that go South for the winter. They don’t think about anything; they go.

So I went to the Midwest and out there. There were a number of places where they had radio stations that had staff orchestras. And they play all day. I mean, the station where I started playing was in York, Nebraska, KFAB. When I was there I was with the International Oil Heaters. Of course, in the summers they don’t need oil heaters, so we lost our sponsor and lost our job. I was told that Yankton, South Dakota, had WNEX, a station that had a staff orchestra that worked the year round, so I went to Yankton. I got there about four o’clock in the afternoon; by 4:30 I was on the air, and at five I had a job! (Laughs) I stayed there, in and out, for about four or five years. In fact, I married a lady there, and we raised a family. I still think of Yankton, more or less, as one of my hometowns. I’ve got a lot of hometowns.

A lot of people do not understand that people could make a living playing dances, and in that part of the country, they still dance to a certain extent—they play polkas, and there’s a lot of Czech-ish people up there. And of course the Scandinavians are in Minnesota, and there are a lot of German people in Minnesota, and they still play polkas. I remember, I was with Leo Terry’s swing band and we used to stop at Manceto, Minnesota, and there’d be four or five sleepers there at this one big hang-out restaurant; they all had sleep buses. In fact, I was traveling with a band that had one. I didn’t play with the band for very long, because I wanted to get back to radio. I didn’t want to be bouncing around on the prairies out there. (Laughs) That whole country up there supported, oh, a number of dance bands. We had very fine musi-
cians during that time, especially at Yankton. Lawrence Welk and his group were there. We had some very fine musicians.

I was with Jack Teagarden’s band for three years. Jack Teagarden had a very famous band. I don’t like the word “jazz,” because it has no meaning; there’s so many different types of jazz that when you mention the name, it splatters—there’s just no channel for it. We had, you might say, an American South sound of the old Dixieland band, and the instrumentation is so that you can hear all the instruments and you can know just about what to expect from them. The clarinet, and the trumpet, and the trombone, and the piano, and drums, and bass. I recorded quite a bit with Pee-Wee Hunt’s band, and he used the same instrumentation.

Jack was a genius, there’s no doubt about it. The trombone players now listening to him can’t believe it—they say, “Oh, no, that can’t be done.” But he did. I’ve worked with other musicians that played very well, but there was only one Jack Teagarden. I’d known that before I’d joined him; I’d heard the word and I’d heard him play.
What was your repertoire like with these dance bands? What were some of the songs you played then?

Well, some of the things that they’re still doing. Now, they didn’t make this cut-and-dry distinction between popular music and old-time music. Most of the groups that I played with, especially on the radio—when you consider that, well, Yankton had eighteen hours of broadcast a day, and they didn’t use any records. They had no programs that didn’t have live music. Of course, a lot of that was taken up with political talks and educational talks and all sorts of different things, but during the day there was usually always some type of music going on, either Western—as we term it now—Western music, or folk music, or a brass band. Now, I played at Yankton like being in a factory: you punch a clock when you go in, and punch it when you come out. But I would play during that time with a brass band, and with a Bohemian orchestra—we played Czech-ish music—and then I had a program with a German band, and I had my own program where I did clarinet with piano and singing; and then I even rang the bells for the sacred service, it was at ten o’clock. I was the factotum, I had to be here and there and everywhere, just like Figaro, Figaro!

But I did enjoy it. In fact, one time I was very comfortable with my situation, and the program director came around, and he said, “Hey. You know what? You’re elected to tell the children’s stories at five o’clock.” So I rounded up as many stories as I could find from their library there and did it for a time, but—I tell you, when you try to find something suitable for a daily broadcast—it kept me humping! I even had to make up a few stories of my own. And then later, when I lived in Germany—I lived in Germany for twenty years, and I was not playing as much as I’d like to—I did some writing. I wrote some children’s stories. And I didn’t submit them for publication because it cost too much money to send them back over here; postage is just frightful, and you can cost yourself a fortune. So actually, I’ve got a big suitcase full of stories that I will let my daughter take care of after I’m not around. Some of them I consider pretty good. Not all of them.

I would think that a lot of people today would be surprised that somebody could move around so much between what people would call “hillbilly” music to brass music and big band music.

Well, at that time—see, we’ve changed all this now. We didn’t do it, you know who did it? The record companies. They control everything. Not the recording industry, but the electric industry that sells the television, and sells radios, everything. They control—they build pretty famous people through there to do just what they want them to do at that time. And these things are not under the control of the people, they’re under the control of the electronic industry, and that started happening after the War. After the War, everything changed. And I can’t say that I like it. I like to see things, you might say, take a spontaneous way of action, and this is—this is built. This is not really the way it should be.

Of course, I’m not running things. I only have one small little corner, and I try to take care of that. Sometimes, even that gets a little tricky. So, that’s the way.

You said that you lived in Germany for twenty years. When did you move there?
Well, I was in Tucson, Arizona, first. I was with the symphony there, and I was a music teacher. I was not a professor, but I was on the faculty at the University of Arizona for thirteen years teaching string bass. And Tucson is a very lively town, musically. We don’t think of it in this area as being really what it is, but they have a lot of music activity there—we had a Pops orchestra, and we also had an opera company, and we did plays, and the symphony was well-paid and a very good symphony. But during that time I was with the university there, I used to go to Europe in the summer; I had three months there when there was very little to do, and then on one of my trips there I met a lady, and we struck up a friendship, and then a couple of years later we were married. So I retired in 1973 and went to Germany, and lived there until ’93.

Actually I lived in Bavaria. I did some teaching there in a boys’ school, privately. This little place that I went to live is 700 years old; the name of it’s Winsbach and it’s near Nuremberg. And the town is 700 years old, and it still only has 5,000 people. And it has this famous boys’ school there and that’s all there is—that and a creamery. Nothing else. But I lived there and I enjoyed it very much. During that time, as I mentioned, I did some writing and I still have a lot of that stuff and eventually it might be published and if not—why, the world won’t miss a great lot, but I have some things there that I actually would like to see published, and I believe eventually they will be. But I don’t want to hassle with it because I’m busy playing now. At ninety-two I’m still active and I hope to keep so right on down the road. I have great things in the offing.

I play very much. I travel a lot, and play for public schools, and I enjoy that more than anything I’ve ever done. One other person and myself play public schools in all this area here. We call it “the biggest small band in Georgia”: there’s two of us, Russell McClanahan and myself. We even get up into Carolina playing other jobs, but our work around here is primarily in schools. And it’s really a rewarding thing, to play for children. I believe in music, and I think by exposing them to that, why, if they want to make the choice of working at it and doing something with it, it’s there—you might say they win by having it present. So that’s the way it is right at this time.

I’m not a teacher always, but I try to come along with the public—I figure a song that is popular and still around after fifty years of hard use and abuse is still worthy of my working at it. So I do songs that are and were popular through the years. Some of these songs I hate to see just fall by the way and not be performed. There’s one especially, I don’t know if you’ve ever heard it, it’s called “Smiles.” “Smiles” was a popular song before the First World War. And it was printed and kept in the small community-sing books for a long time and then eventually dropped out of that. But I do “Smiles” at every opportunity, because I think it’s a great song. (Sings) “There are smiles that make us happy...” I love it. Songs of that nature. “The Glory of Love,” which I consider to be a very fine song. And many songs that are still being used I still like to do them, like “My Blue Heaven.” Now there’s one that swept the country in 1927—I was at the Rivoli Theater there when “My Blue Heaven” came out, and it’s still around.

Oh, the rattle-bones? Yes, I do this for the children now. They hear the words “rattle the bones,” and it doesn’t mean anything. So I made some. Now, my father used to make those for me out of hickory wood—they are real live, and you can really hear them. But I took an old Venetian blind and cut it up and made some rattle-bones. You hold one of them—actually, both hands are employed—you hold one of the bones (we call them bones, they’re wood) between your first and second finger. You hold it very tightly, and the other is between your little finger and the third finger, and it more or less hangs loose. And you can more or less tune them; by having the long end of those hanging down will make more of a bass sound than when it’s pushed up a little ways. So I use the right hand to play the bass-sounding ones, and then I take the left hand, do the same process, and I push the wood part up a little bit and then it has a more, you might say, treble sound. And I play that for the children to show them how the bones are played. And I enjoy it.

When I saw you playing at the Bluff Mountain Festival [in Hot Springs, North Carolina], I remember on one song you played a couple of—
Cedric N. Chatterley

Stranger Malone and Clay Sutton play at the 2000 Bluff Mountain Festival in Hot Springs, NC.
What would you call the music you play today?

Well, loud electric music doesn’t send me anywhere, unless down the road—I get away from it. I like songs that have good lyrics, that make sense, and chords that will lead into other chords and will make a package, you might say. And you don’t make chords at random and slap them on here—“We’ll dab this here”—it’s like some of their painting, it doesn’t excite me either. A bunch of blobs, and that’s it. I like to see things organized. And that’s the way I try to keep things in my life. It’s a little difficult, but that’s what I work at.

I like sentimental music. I feel sentiment about life: I think life is a marvelous thing, and I think we should take care of it. And I like songs that express that idea, that this is a marvelous world, we better take care of it. So I like that type of music. But the nonsense I leave behind.

Burgin Mathews lives in Birmingham, Alabama, and is the creator of the website www.ladymuleskinnerpress.com.

Thanks to Elise Witt and Mick Kinney for contributing the historical photographs for this article.

With so much of his career spent in the radio rather than the recording studio, Stranger Malone left behind only a smattering of commercially-available recordings. His recordings with McMichec’s Melody Men appear sporadically in compilations, most of them in LP format and by now out of print all over again. The Melody Men have still not received full reissue treatment. For four dates in 1954, Malone appeared with Teagarden’s band at Club Hangover in San Francisco; the radio broadcasts of those shows were released in 1995 as The Club Hangover Broadcasts, a highly entertaining double-disc available through Arbors Records. Malone also appears on Elise Witt’s 2003 album, Love Being Here.

In 2007, Malone was the subject of a documentary by George King, titled Who’s That Stranger? In addition to offering a thorough overview of Stranger’s life in music, the film presents footage of interviews and performances by Malone in his final years—still in his prime, in his nineties. Available online at www.georgeking-assoc.com, Who’s That Stranger is a powerful, and highly recommended, testament to Stranger’s rare spirit.
A WEEK IN HOGTOWN
OLD-TIME MUSIC IN TORONTO
by Cary Fagan

It’s early spring and I’m walking along Bloor Street just past Spadina, a dense neighborhood populated by University of Toronto students, would-be artists, and well-heeled professionals who can afford to own the handsome Victorian houses that have been converted back from apartments and rooming houses. A familiar melody floats in the air and I look ahead to see a portly, middle-aged man playing “Temperance Reel” on a penny whistle, baseball cap upturned at his feet. I’m just considering whether or not to give him any money when somebody in front of me starts digging in his own pocket. The person moves forward with a slightly bobbing head of reddish hair, and I realize that it’s Chris Coole.
Chris Coole is an unassuming, thoughtful, and very funny thirty-six-year-old who’s also a beautiful banjo player and singer. He’s not only a fine old-time musician but also one of those responsible for the thriving old-time scene in Toronto—a scene that has emerged from kitchens and living rooms in recent years to become a vibrant part of the city’s diverse musical life. Watching Chris drop his change into the man’s hat, I remember that he himself spent the first ten years after high school busking in the subway. When he couldn’t make his rent he’d pawn his Heiden dreadnaught guitar for a couple of weeks. These days, with gigs almost every night of the week, tours, CD sales, an instructional banjo DVD and students, he manages to hold onto his guitar.

The first time I heard Chris Coole was seven years ago, singing and playing guitar with the Foggy Hogtown Boys, one of Canada’s first-rate bluegrass bands. Only later did I see him perform old-time music with fiddler Erynn Marshall. At that time the only regular band playing that could be considered old-time was the Backstabbers, a lively country string band that plays both old tunes and original songs that sound as if they were written eighty years ago. But now there are a handful of regular old-time bands performing in the city, as well as more occasional groupings and an active jamming culture.

Any music scene is constantly changing—new bands starting up, players moving away, and others moving in—but the spring of 2009 seems like a good time to record the old-time music scene in Toronto. Here, then, is how you might spend a few consecutive days in Toronto, steeped in the city’s old-time sounds.

On Wednesday night I head down to Kensington Market, the city’s version of the Lower East Side, a neighbourhood crowded by successive waves of immigrants who have run its open stalls of vegetables, cheeses, and discount clothes. In more recent years it has become known for coffee houses, after-hours clubs, and the occasional drug bust. Here in a dark, narrow bar called Graffiti’s I step through the door and, the place being so small, am practically onstage with the Kitgut String Band. I take a table near the front.

The band is playing “Big Scioty.” On Fiddle is Jake Foley, bandana round his neck and hair tied back in a ponytail to keep out of the way of his fiddle bow. Beside him seventeen-year-old Frank Evans is playing his Bart Reiter banjo. His sound can be ringing or percussive and his left hand is extraordinarily lithe, touching hammer-ons and pull-offs, moving up and down the fretboard with stunning ease. Jesse Corrigan, the equally young guitar player, sings “Rich Gal Blues” while Jake does “My Dixie Darling” and “Riley and Spencer.” Backing them up on the bass is Neil Evans, Frank’s father, who also plays bass in the Niagara Symphony Orchestra. The band considers their four-part harmony singing to be their unique signature but it is their youthful energy and the blending of fiddle and banjo that really marks them.

Just about the time that the Kitgut Stringband plays their last encore, Crazy Strings is beginning their first set only a few blocks away, at the Silver Dollar. Crazy Strings is beginning their first set only a few blocks away, at the Silver Dollar. Crazy Strings began about a decade ago as a pick-up jam of bluegrass players but in the last couple of years has become a gig for the members of the Foggy Hogtown Boys, plus a hot flatpicker named banjos and will soon be heading off to England to attend the Newark Violin Making School. (Frank’s brother Max, who’ll be returning from university, will take his place.)

After the gig, I sit down with the band at one of the tables. I’d already heard about the wunderkind Frank from Chris Coole, his former teacher. Frank saw a poster when he was ten, advertising the Banjo Special concert held every year in Toronto. The Banjo Special offers about as much banjo as anyone could want in a single night—clawhammer, bluegrass, and Irish tenor—and the house is always packed. It was Chris Coole’s banjo playing that Frank fell for and during a break he went up to ask about lessons. The very next year the Evans family drove to Clifftop, the Appalachian String Band Music Festival in West Virginia. (Clifftop is only a ten-hour drive from Toronto.) Having been coached by Chris, he entered the youth banjo competition in 2004 and came in second place. The next year, playing “Cherokee Shuffle,” he won.

Just about the time that the Kitgut Stringband plays their last encore, Crazy Strings is beginning their first set only a few blocks away, at the Silver Dollar. Crazy Strings began about a decade ago as a pick-up jam of bluegrass players but in the last couple of years has become a gig for the members of the Foggy Hogtown Boys, plus a hot flatpicker named banjos and will soon be heading off to England to attend the Newark Violin Making School. (Frank’s brother Max, who’ll be returning from university, will take his place.)
Mark Roy. (Not long ago Roy fell asleep on the subway on the way home from a gig. When he woke up his new dreadnaught guitar, built by Toronto luthier Alistair Miller, was gone.) While the local bluegrass jammers stand at the bar and listen enviously to the hot licks, a crowd of university undergrads will sometimes break out dancing. But while the music is mostly bluegrass, sometimes Chris Coole will bring out his banjo and play clawhammer, either in a duet with fiddler John Showman or with the whole band. These days, it seems, the border between bluegrass and old-time is becoming blurred.

Chris Coole lives in the Junction, a small, mixed-use neighborhood formed by the crossing of old railway lines, with a main street of old-fashioned stores that feels like a small town circa 1935. At present he rents the top floor of a small house owned by a former student. He owns no car and not much furniture, but of course has many instruments, including a Washburn bowlback mandolin that belonged to his grandfather, and a gourd banjo built by Jeff Menzies, who used to live nearby but recently moved north of the city. Most of the time he plays his late-'70s Vega open-back with a worn fake-skin head on top of a plastic head, and with guitar tuners he had put on because they work better. He got his first guitar at 13 and his first banjo at 17. Back then there was simply no old-time scene in Toronto. One of the only banjo players around was Arnie Naiman, with whom he still plays. He had no interest in university and as soon as he was out of high school he began busking for a living. “I didn’t care about anything else. Not girls. All I cared about was music.” At about 19 he began to go down to the Augusta Heritage Center in Elkins, West Virginia, first to a workshop and the next summer to volunteer for six weeks. For Coole, the experience “totally altered everything.” Later, accompanying the fiddler Erynn Marshall who was researching her MA musicology thesis, he made more trips to the state and became friends with members of the oldest generation of musicians still playing.

When I ask Chris about authenticity in old time music, a complex question that has come to interest me, his simple response is, “It would be inauthentic for me to worry about authenticity.” He points out that he’s an upper-middle class city kid from Canada, not a rural Southerner, and there’s no sense pretending. Besides,
he's never been interested in lifting tunes note for note. (The only musician he tries to stay close to is Doc Boggs because he can’t imagine any other way to play or sing those tunes.) Mostly, Chris says, “I try to play pretty.” Over the years that has come to mean simplifying rather than complicating, stripping a tune down to fewer notes and leaving the listener to “fill in” the rest with his own imagination. He remembers hearing Melvin Wine’s fiddle playing recorded and then slowed down. He was surprised to find that he had “heard” more notes than Wine actually played.

Today’s scene is a direct result of the students Coole taught banjo and guitar and Erynn taught fiddle. He gives Erynn credit for hosting open jams and encouraging their students to play together. “She’s really community oriented.”

Chris has to go; he was going to babysit for one of his fellow musicians in the Foggy Hogtown Boys. He loped down Dundas Street, an ordinary figure in the crowd—which goes to show how little you can tell about somebody just from looking at him.

Debbie Adams and Peter Fleming are the hosts of this week’s Thursday-night jam. The couple (Debbie’s a graphic designer, Peter’s a furniture maker) began as students of Erynn Marshall and Chris Coole. Peter had bought Debbie a fiddle as a gift and took it into the Sound Post, an instrument shop, to have it set up. Erynn worked there, having recently moved to Toronto, and although she wasn’t looking for students Peter made it sound as if Debbie was just the sort of student she liked to teach. Several years on, the couple jam most weeks, hosting often in their open-concept home in the West end of the city. This week the players in the circle include Danny Simmons, fiddler with Makita Hack and the Log Rollers, and Eve Goldberg, a well-known singer-songwriter who is one of three banjo players. But there are newcomers too. A bottle of whiskey appears on a nearby table but the drinking is modest and the talk low-key. “Needle Case,” “Ducks on the Millpond,” “Sally Anne.” The jamming goes late.

In the early 1970s, Arnie Naiman bought a banjo at the Toronto Folklore Centre, just about the only place to get acoustic instruments in the city at that time. He learned to play a couple of tunes from Pete Seeger’s book, unsure of whether he had them right, when he took his banjo to the Mariposa Folk Festival, then held on Toronto Island. All around him, people took out their instruments to play even on the short ferry ride from the harbour. He was in the line for tickets when two women with fiddles asked him to jam. Fortunately, they knew his two tunes.

One of those women, Ellen Vigour, became a lifelong friend. She is the mandolin player in the band Uncle Henry’s Favorites, based in Charlottesville, Virginia,
and Arnie had just come back from touring with them in England.

A lot of great players came to Mariposa in those years, Arnie says: Tommy Jarrell, Roscoe Holcomb, Ola Belle Reed, Doc and Merle Watson, the New Lost City Ramblers, the Red Clay Ramblers, Norman Blake. Arnie remembers a few old time players in Toronto back then and a string band called J. Wringwort and the Heartbreak of Psoriasis. There was the occasional concert at the Fiddler’s Green Folk Club, held in somebody’s living room. He himself played in a duo called the Potato Pancakes, and later in the Extraordinary Stringband, a group that included his wife Kathy Reid-Naiman and, in later years, Chris Coole and Erynn Marshall. Playing a lot with Chris resulted in the recording 5 Strings Attached with No Backing. Arnie is also a part of the annual Banjo Special. He and Kathy play together as Ragged but Right, and their CD, Down Harmony Road, features a number of their old-time music friends.

It’s Friday early evening and another traditional Toronto drinking establishment, the Cameron House (you can spot it by the giant ants crawling up its brick exterior), is jumping to the energetic sound of the Good Right Arm. The band formed when fiddler Tony Allen, a member of the Backstabbers, decided produce his own album. He called in two other Backstabbers, Sam Petite on bass, and Christine Schmitt, whose flat, piercing voice has the mesmerizing sound of a 1930s country radio personality, as well as Chris Coole on banjo. Tony liked the sound so much that he asked the others to join him in a new band. (The name reputedly comes from the fact that new fiddlers are instructed to watch Tony; he is said to have the best right arm in the city.)

With all its members working musicians, the Good Right Arm is the most mature of Toronto’s old-time bands. Tony’s strong fiddle playing, his interesting choice of material (songs and tunes like “Down By the River,” “Old Joe Bone,” and “Aunt Betsy Crossing the Rhine”) and his unpretentious singing leads the way, but Chris Coole’s banjo and guitar
and Christine Schmidt’s leads and high harmony give the band its convincing sound. This is old-time music played with feeling, free of irony, but with verve and precision both.

An MA thesis is not a PhD. Most people hope to write a hundred pages, do some modestly original thinking, and get a good mark. Erynn Marshall’s thesis for the ethnomusicology program at Toronto’s York University became a driving passion. It reached three hundred pages and was published as Music in the Air Somewhere: The Shifting Borders of West Virginia’s Fiddle and Song Traditions by West Virginia University Press. In 2006 she held a marvellous concert celebrating its publication, with Erynn and Chris Coole playing tunes that they had learned during the course of her research.

A violinist in her native British Columbia since childhood, she had been playing old-time for a while but it was deciding to focus her academic studies on traditional Southern music that committed her to its pursuit. Driving from B. C. to Toronto to start school, she listened over and over to a couple of Toronto banjo players on CD: Chris Coole and Arnie Naiman on 5 Strings Attached with no Backing.

“At first I didn’t know anybody,” Erynn tells me on the phone from B. C. “I was starting a new job at a violin shop. But I didn’t get paid for a month. I actually lived off twenty dollars. I decided to go through a period of listening to archive recordings. Listening with new ears. I lived in my own little world.”

Allowed to earn one university credit learning a second instrument, she phoned up Chris to teach her the banjo. She also met an old-time and Cajun fiddler named Matt Haney who had come up from the States for a while.

Like Chris Coole before her, Erynn headed down to Augusta. She met Melvin Wine who was in his late eighties and “still playing with an amazing amount of grace and beauty in an older style.” One day Melvin told Erynn, “You’re good on a bow. You’re playing my music and I’m glad of that.” Wine became one of the seven main musicians that Erynn portrayed in her book.

Erynn also began going to Clifftop every year from 1998, helping to form a Canadian camp at the festival that now flies a Canadian flag and has been named “Utarpia.” She encouraged her students to go down too. “You couldn’t escape the enthusiasm there. You couldn’t not play with other people.” (Last year, Erynn thrilled the
Canadian contingent by winning the Clifftop fiddle contest, the first non-American, and the first woman, ever to do so.

She credits the influence of Chris and Arnie Namiman who are “steeped” in the music and have “really good taste.” She and Chris began performing together, and continued for the seven years they were a couple. They travelled frequently to West Virginia and Kentucky, often visiting three old-time musicians in a single day, driving hours to reach each of them. Chris played and sang on Erynn’s CD Calico, and the two of them collaborated on Meet Me in the Music, subtitled Mostly Old Tunes From Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia. It’s fair to say that Chris and Erynn have been a significant lifeline connecting this urban Canadian scene to the Southern sources of old-time music. As Erynn says, “It’s a powerful experience to realize you’re just another link in the chain.”

Erynn happily admits to being a “bit of an instigator wherever I go. I love getting people together to play music.” She organized that first jam at the back of a downtown bar. But important though she has been for the Toronto scene, the city has proven to be just one stop on her own musical journey. Erynn moved back to British Columbia and is now packing again, heading to Galax, Virginia, where she has accepted the position of concert coordinator for the Blue Ridge Music Center.

On Saturday the temperature suddenly jumps into summer numbers. It seems as if the whole city has come out to roller-
blade, bike, walk, plant flowers. A small crowd gathers at the organic food market in the Wychwood Car Barns (an early-twentieth-century streetcar building that has been converted into artist spaces, a greenhouse, and a nursery school). The parents are glad to have their kids diverted as a pick-up band of enthusiastic amateurs—Debbie Adams (fiddle), Peter Fleming (guitar), Anne Hartman (banjo), Mark Coatsworth (banjo), and Cary Fagan (mandolin)—saw through “Julianne Johnson,” playing over the din of grinding cocoa beans and shouting vendors.

At five in the afternoon, just as Makita Hack and the Log Rollers are about to begin their first set, the city darkens, a powerful wind sweeps through, and rain breaks over the streets. Inside the Local it’s cozy and dim and refreshingly free of TV screens. The pub has a very small stage at the end of the bar where the performers have to squeeze in without smacking one another. Right now the Log Rollers are playing “Nail that Catfish to a Tree” at a good clip, led by twin fiddles played by Danny Simmons and Georgina Blanchard. Woven into their sound is Kim Sedore’s austere banjo playing, Alistair Miller’s rhythm guitar (the same Alistair who builds guitars), and Joe Myke on bass.

The Log Rollers’ repertoire is dominated by standards—“Walking in My Sleep,” “Sandy Boys,” “High on a Mountain.” Twin fiddles are their most obvious signature, but Danny Simmons’ voice on the songs (sometimes backed by one or two harmony voices) also stands out. Lanky, and with deep-set eyes that give him the appearance of a mesmerizing travelling preacher, Danny is the focal point of the band. He has a slightly flattened, rural-preacher look. His first intimate set is dominated by singing and fingerpicking his new guitar—old-time standards, country blues, and originals. There’s a gentle melancholy both to his choice of songs and his voice, although his easy talk between songs is often very funny. He points to the tip jar and asks the audience to help send him to “beautician’s school.” He must have a change of heart because half-way through the second set he asks for help going to “amateur geologist’s school.”

On banjo he plays two requested tunes, “The Cuckoo” and “Squirrel Hunting.” He plays “Shady Grove.” It’s clear that he’s an artist who reveres the past without feeling subservient to it. He sings a new song, “Old Dog,” with haunting banjo accompaniment, and it feels fresh and timeless both.

Outside, the rain has stopped. The streetlights illuminate the glistening street. Chris Coole, banjo case in one hand and guitar in the other, walks up glistening Roncessvales Avenue and heads for home. 

Cary Fagan’s fifth novel, “Valentine’s Fall,” is being published in September. He is also the author of numerous award-winning books for kids. He lives in Toronto. He can be reached through his website at caryfagan.com.
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**Reviews**

**Turkey in the Mountain**
Mac Traynham & Shay Garriock

Mac Traynham fell in love with traditional mountain music and spent many years listening to and learning from the older players, especially in and around the Floyd, Virginia, area where he and his wife Jenny moved years ago—committed to living and raising their children there. Shay came into the area around 1984, looking for someone to show him some fiddle. He found Mac, who introduced him to the old-timers, and together they spent countless hours with fiddlers and banjo players like Ivan Weddle, Calvin Cole, Hick Edmonds, Matokie Slaughter, and others, who were more than happy to pass on their music to younger players who thought so highly of them. Mostly fiddle and banjo, this CD of 22 tunes, is, for the most part, an homage to the old-timers, and together they built banjos and did fine woodwork in his shop at home.

Mac sings on “Shooting Creek,” “Joke and Henry,” “Uncloody Day,” “Big Eyed Rabbit,” “Wreck of the Old 97,” and “Little Maggie.” I really like Mac’s singing; straightforward and unpretentious, it fits well with the music. (Many of you may be familiar with the duet recordings he’s made with Jenny, which have been reviewed in the OTH.)

I could listen to this CD over and over again. It is varied and beautiful with a nice mixture of familiar and less familiar tunes and versions of tunes. The notes are just right, with banjo and fiddle tunings given for each tune, and sources credited. This is truly a wonderful CD with some soulful, driving old-time music. Get it!

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**Disc Two: Impressions of London**

Now that music from any given earthly region, recorded from the earliest days of the medium up into the slippery present, is so overwhelmingly available, there’s been an increasing focus on just how to keep compiling stuff. One would be forgiven for cynically seeing it all as a way to sell the finite amount of, say, 1920s-era string band, blues, hokum, hot jazz and
gospel recordings over and over with one or two "previously unheard" gems to tempt one’s wallet. Yet, when someone such as the label Old Hat does something as amazing as the Good For What Ails You compilation, whatever buyer skepticism there might have been wilts in the brilliance of such a collection.

Atlanta’s Dust to Digital label has perhaps perfected the art of (re)packaging recordings from the 78 era. Their releases certainly feature the cleanest recordings anybody’s heard so far. And collections such as the six-disc gospel comp Goodbye Babylon or the three-disc set devoted to the string bass, How Low Can You Go? are so extensive and intensive as to serve as last words on their subjects. Yet, the label truly dances with the sublime on its guest-curated ethnic collections, most notably this double-disc-plus-book masterpiece, put together by Seattle’s Robert Millis and Jeffrey Taylor. When not performing as the noise/drone/performance duo Climax Golden Twins, Millis and Taylor scavenge 78s from the world over. This set then is a document of those excursions, and as such it’s perhaps the finest commercially available collection of ethnic music out. It has focus in its randomness, a natural ebb and flow in its juxtapositions and ultimately, effortlessly manages to serve less as an example of what such music sounds like (we have the Secret Museum of Mankind series for that); instead it bristles with the kind of DJ’s enthusiasm that allows a listener to hear various cultural connections, making the music itself, and not the who? what? or where? of central importance. That Western swing, early jazz, blues and other forms of North American music bump heads with Cantonese opera or Portuguese fado serves to connect the USA with the rest of the world, something that desperately needs doing.

The Twins have also included oddball snippets that serve as intros to some of the tunes as well. Jesse May Hill’s exorcising “The Crucifixion of Christ” has an old shellac field recording of London streets as its lead-in. The sound of a drunk, slurring something barely decipherable from an old comedy skit slams into a ’50s “stag” recording of “Cockeyed Jenny.” There’s fireworks music from the Zapotec-Teotitlan Indians of Oaxaca, a 1910 Japanese bamboo xylophone-driven water collecting song, the meter-less electric slide guitar of Frank Ferreira’s 1924 recording of “The Farmer’s Dream,” and then moving up 30 years, the Burmese electric slide-punctuated “Shan Village.”

The 144-page book that houses the discs is, other than some brief notes on the tracks and a few pages of commentary on the magic of the these old recordings, devoted to label and sleeve art, old photos advertising victorias and people enraptured by this then new technology. There are sales pitches, newspaper clippings, band photos, and more all combining to celebrate the 78 and the sounds of world cultures they continue to contain. The visuals of the book, united with the sounds on the discs, conspire to re-connect the listener to the novelty of the phonograph as well as the mystery still inherent in the music.

Bruce Miller

To order: www.dust-digital.com

Falls of Richmond
Matt Brown
Say Old Man Can You Play the Fiddle? / If the River Was Whiskey / Mississippi Sawyer / Brushy Fork of John’s Creek / Shornin’ Bread / Shady Grove / Old Sledge / Roscoe / Train 45 / Falls of Richmond / Piney Ridge / Cripple Creek / Green Spruce / Burn Me Down

Falls of Richmond is a new solo album from Matt Brown, featuring fiddle, banjo and vocals (with a little overdubbing). Eight of the 14 selections are fiddle tunes. Six are recorded solo, one is a fiddle/banjo duet, and one is backed up on guitar. Matt’s fiddle tunes are, for me, the heart of the album. Matt is a clearly focused fiddler. His left-hand technique is tasteful and assured, his bowing is rhythmic without falling into a narrow groove, and the result is a nice strong melodic flow.

If I had to pick two favorites from these tunes, I’d say “Roscoe” and “Green Spruce” really caught my attention. The first is a pure and beautiful rendition of a laid-back G tune, with no frills, cross-tuning, or crooks. Matt plays around
with the melody just enough to show what he can do when he has a mind to, but he stays well enough within the bounds of old-time to please the most exacting traditionalists. The second tune is one Matt wrote himself. He says in the liner notes that the tune reminds him of Bruce Greene’s fiddling, and the tune’s name (“Green Spruce”) seems to be a sort of anagram of Bruce Green’s name. Here the fiddle is tuned FCFC, and the result is a haunting, slightly crooked, slightly modal tune, with interesting double stops and a strong bow pulse. I think Matt has written a keeper, though it might end up being moved to cross G or A tuning for convenience.

Matt does a two-finger banjo interpretation of Wade Ward’s “Shady Grove.” Wade Ward’s version is clawhammer, but I really like Matt’s minimal playfulness on this tune, giving it a lively freshness. “Cripple Creek,” played clawhammer in the key of D, rather than the standard G or A, has a light, interesting sound too. “Mississippi Sawyer,” a fiddle/banjo duet, is ably performed, although it’s a pretty generic version and it’s a little long for my taste. Several tunes are over three and a half minutes long, which isn’t bad if what you’re listening to is really riveting. The first tune on the CD, “Say Old Man Can You Play the Fiddle,” does fall into that category, and I loved every second of it. Matt’s version of John Stepp’s “Piney Ridge” (a relative of “Dry and Dusty”) is close to four minutes, and I found it mesmerizing.

Matt does some singing on this CD, too. He cites Ginny Hawker, Tracy Schwartz and the New Lost City Ramblers as his sources for “Train 45,” which he sings slowly, with chordal fiddle backup. An interesting arrangement. Matt’s “If the River Was Whiskey” learned from his father, who got it from Charlie Poole, is interesting arrangement. Matt’s “If the River Was Whiskey” learned from his father, who got it from Charlie Poole, is ably performed, although it’s a pretty generic version and it’s a little long for my taste. Several tunes are over three and a half minutes long, which isn’t bad if what you’re listening to is really riveting. The first tune on the CD, “Say Old Man Can You Play the Fiddle,” does fall into that category, and I loved every second of it. Matt’s version of John Stepp’s “Piney Ridge” (a relative of “Dry and Dusty”) is close to four minutes, and I found it mesmerizing.

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Four and a Half
The New North Carolina Ramblers

When Art Rosenbaum reviewed the New North Carolina Ramblers’ first CD (Old-Time Herald volume 11, number 2, Dec 2007-Jan 2008) he called it “contemporary old-time music at its very best.” Problem: if this CD is even better, as this reviewer believes it to be, how could it possibly be better than old-time music at its very best? James Madison wrote in the Preamble to the Constitution that its first purpose was “to form a more perfect Union” so I guess there’s precedent.

Kinney Rorrer, the group’s banjo player, starts the CD by saying “Well, folks, we’re the New North Carolina Ramblers and we’re going to play you some old-time dance music, the kind of thing that sets people’s feet up to dancing up on Shooting Creek. We’re going to do Posey Rorrer’s ‘Ragtime Annie.’ Let’er go, boys!” For a capsule description of the CD, you can’t do much better. Except that it’s incomplete—it doesn’t mention the singing! Fans of original Charlie Poole recordings will remember that only Poole sang—no harmony! And that’s just the way the Poole sides “Mother’s Farewell Kiss,” “You Ain’t Talking to Me,” “Gypsy Girl,” “Leaving Home”—are done here. Oops—“Leaving Home” is done two ways. After singing and playing the first verse just the way Charlie did it, the band stops, Jeremy dons fingerpicks, and re-starts the song in Western swing style, as Charlie’s son James Clay Poole recorded it. (That band, by the way, was “Charlie Poole, Jr., and the Swingbillies.”) And there’s harmony singing, just as the Swingbillies did it. There’s also great three-part singing on “Aunt Dinah’s Quilting Party” and a couple others.

Another thing this group really does well is Carter Family songs. It’s uncanny how much Darren Moore and Jeremy Stephens sound like Sara and Maybelle. They even got Kirk Sutphin to sing A. P.’s part on “Faded Coat of Blue,” or so the liner notes claim. If you are fortunate enough to catch this band in live performance, you can watch the angle at which Jeremy and Darren hold their hands when playing Carter Family-style guitar. It makes a difference to the tone . . . and provides a measure of how deeply these musicians have dug into the tradition. If, as Sherlock Holmes says somewhere, genius is an infinite capacity for taking pains, these four musicians are geniuses.

The band maintains a ratio of about two vocals for each instrumental. There are familiar tunes: “Ragtime Annie” (with Posey’s quirky timing in the B part), “Golden Slippers” (in C) and unfamiliar fiddle tunes: “Brookside,” “Stony Fork,” and “Fanny Hill.” The last mentioned is from Uncle Charlie Higgins of Galax—one wonders if he had a copy of Cleland’s Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure or if there is a simpler explanation. (Supplemental liner notes can be found on the Old Blue Records website, which is how I am able to attribute the tune to Higgins.) Deserving of special mention is “Back to the Blue Ridge”—one of the Roy Harvey/Leonard Copeland guitar duets, based loosely on “Blue Ridge Mountain Blues,” done wonderfully here by Jeremy and Kirk.

The New North Carolina Ramblers are best, to my ear, doing songs and tunes from the very large Piedmont tradition that includes Charlie Poole and his circle, the older Galax sound, or Carter Family songs. The one song that didn’t gel for me (although I’m glad they tried) was the Skillet Lickers’ “Devilish Mary.” Jeremy nailed Gid’s falsetto, and Kinney does well singing Riley’s lead—but the fiddling is unmistakably Piedmont fiddling and not North Georgia. Turning that around, I can say “This band has its own distinctive sound.” What’s wrong with that?

The CD title, Four and a Half, comes, the band says, from two places: first, they’ve been playing together for about four and half years; second, Darren’s son (seen...
on the front cover, dressed just like the rest of the band) was, when the CD was made, about that age. Remembering that the age of band members ranges from Kinney (retired professor of history) to Jeremy and Darren, both in their mid twenties, including Bailey Moore as the newest member would increase that range by another twenty years, and gives me hope that we are part of a LIVING tradition. I can’t wait for the band’s next CD to learn if they can continue to form an even more perfect band. In the meantime, we have this to enjoy, and I recommend Four and a Half very highly.

Pete Peterson

To order: www.oldbluerecords.com


Back in the 1920s, a stringband making recordings didn’t have to worry if all the pieces sounded about the same; the records were released as singles. It’s only in listening to the performances all at once and in chronological order (as on Documen-
ones. These are not introverted singer-songwriter compositions, but very nice tunes that avoid the rigid AABB structure of traditional breakdowns. I particularly liked Dan Rublee's "Smithland Farm" and "Regarding a Friend (for Kelly Purdue)." The first starts out slowly, like a lament, then picks up speed. The second is a lament in the emotional (though not Scottish) sense, a satisfying, heartfelt tune. Jimmy McCown's "Sleeping Ada" is a beautiful tune, featuring finger-picked banjo and fine fiddle-cello harmonies.

Of the traditional tunes, I particularly enjoyed "Cluck Old Hen" (featuring Jane singing as well as fiddling). The duets "Little Billy Wilson's" and "Julianne Johnson" (the first with Cathy Fink and the second with Jimmy McCown) are both very crisp and exciting. "The Parting Glass" starts out with McCown singing a cappella, after which the fiddle and banjo take over to finish the tune, adding another dimension.

If you want to learn the banjo parts to these tunes, you'll have to do some experimenting, as the tunings are not listed.

The last, "bonus," track is from the 1985 Hadden Rothfield & Carr album, "When These Shoes Were New," and it's interesting to compare Jane's current tastes with what she was doing back then. "Bury Me Beneath the Willow" is sung in a minor key and somewhat dreamy manner. She describes it as an "experimental phase." It reminded me of an even earlier album that I suppose could be called "experimental": the Incredible String Band of the late 1960s. I hadn't listened to the record since it was new, and when I pulled their LP off my record shelf to check the names of the ISB members (they were Robin Williamson and Mike Herron), some seeds fell out of the jacket.

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Barbara Panter-Connah, Jan Smith, Ann Whitley-Singleton

Goin' Down the Valley / Single Girl / Blues, Stay Away From Me / Over in the Gloryland / Sweet Sunny South / Polecat Blues / Bear Creek Blues / I Forgot More / Warwoman Dell March - Muddy Road to Copper Hill - Glory in The Meetinghouse / Sweet Blue-Eyed Darlin' / Leaving Home / Port Arthur Blues / My Handy Man / It's Your Time to be Blue / Get Right Church / Everybody Wants to Go to Heaven / You Done Me Wrong / Fields of November

According to their website, the Rosin Sisters, from the Atlanta, Georgia, area, are a spinoff from an a capella local singing group called the Divas. The main feature of the spinoff is that all three of these talented women also play fiddle. This gives them a chance to explore a few other dimensions of traditional music, such as twin and triple fiddles as well as sung duets and trios.

Perhaps the best example of their inventive approach to the music, though, uses only banjo and guitar accompaniment: their re-formulation of the Carter Family's "Single Girl." Instead of the conventional guitar introduction, the Sisters bust down the door with all three of them singing the chorus. The second harmony voice adds considerable depth to the singing, and a banjo instrumental
adds more variety. The result is a faster, spunkier, less melancholy version than the usual rendition. In fact, a characteristic of the whole album (as Pete Steele once pointed out about his own music) is that you can’t stay mad (or sad) and listen to it. The sheer energy of even the blues pieces will drive your blues away.

The Sisters project that energy in different ways. They speed up some of the pieces (as with “Single Girl” and “Bear Creek Blues”), but sing Bill Monroe’s “Sweet Blue-Eyed Darling” slowly, with only a single guitar for accompaniment. When they venture into the more modern country-western genre, as with “I Forgot More” or “Everybody Wants to Go to Heaven,” their vocal harmonies remind me of the superb harmonies that Dolly Parton, Emmylou Harris, and Linda Ronstadt created for their 1987 Trio album. Even the a cappella “Over in the Gloryland” doesn’t escape modern influences: the Sisters raise the key for the last chorus.

In addition to the energy, this album features unusually high-quality sound, with a lot of presence. The instruments and voices are both crisply distinct and blended at the same time, an effect that requires great skill, whether on stage or in the studio.

The fiddle blues pieces are skillfully done, fancy stuff played up the neck, with authentic slides both on instruments and vocals, including uptown versions of “Blues, Stay Away From Me,” “Polecat Blues,” and “It’s Your Turn to Be Blue” (which also features a harmonica solo by Whit Connah).

The title track, “Sweet Sunny South,” learned from Buddy Thomas, is a modal version of the more familiar Da Costa Woltz’s Southern Broadcasters recording, which allows the sisters to explore some interesting archaic-sounding harmonies with triple fiddles and trio voices. I liked it a lot.

I found the “Port Arthur Blues” to be less successful than most of the other offerings, perhaps because the triangle doesn’t keep a solid rhythm here, and I associate most Cajun music with the need for a strong dance beat. I find it interesting that the Sisters’ version of the Ray Price waltz “You Done Me Wrong” sounds more Cajun to me than “Port Arthur Blues.” Another less successful piece is the Staples Singers’ “Get Right Church,” sung with hand-claps. I find it a little too well orchestrated to be a credible gospel song, and some studio-generated simulations of a congregation are distracting. These are minor quibbles, however, with a generally excellent album, which ends with Norman Blake’s heartbreakingly beautiful “Fields of November,” played slowly and with wonderful fiddle harmonies, reminding those of us who are obsessed by this music that we are the inheritors of a long tradition of beauty as well as roughness.

Lyke Lofgren

To order: www.rosinsisters.com

Put Your Loving Arms Around Me
Bare Bones

Every Knee Must Bow / There’ll Be No Distinction There / I Ain’t Never / You Really Got a Hold on Me / Do Lord / The Man in the Middle / Old Virginia / Shop Around / I’d Rather Be your Number 3 / Oh Lord have Mercy on My Soul / Blind Bartemus / I Loved a Roving Gambler / The Cruel War / Your Long Journey / The Parting Hand / I’ll Meet You in the Morning

Bare Bones are three fine singers, two of whom are named Kimmons. If you’ve been to Clifftop (as most of us have) you have heard Bill Kimmons’ deep speaking voice; he often emcees one or more contests. As you would expect, he’s singing bass here. Becky Kimmons, who is married to Bill, has a wonderful rich alto voice and usually sings lead. The third member of the trio, Mark Davis, is described as singing either ‘tenor or baritone’ which means that his voice is either above or below Becky’s lead. This is all a capella singing—not an instrument to be heard on the whole CD!

As you would hope for husband and wife, Becky and Bill’s voices blend together really well. Mark joins the mix very nicely, resulting in a final sound of the whole of which is more than the sum of the parts. Moreover, they have made some good choices of material upon which to work their harmonic wonders.

Bare Bones performs serious songs, gospel songs, humorous songs, and sad songs. They come from a variety of

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traditions, as the clear and well-written liner notes (thanks, Bare Bones!) show us. Take, for instance, the first song on this CD: “Every Knee Must Bow.” Since that title doesn’t appear in either Russell or Meade, it was probably not recorded anywhere before World War II. It sounds much the liner notes describe it: originating in the black street-singing tradition exemplified by Clay and Scott (recorded by a young Pete Welding back in Philadelphia in 1961) and taken up into four-part harmony by the Nashville Bluegrass Band, now rearranged for three voices.

Black tradition (with an accordion, no less!) to white bluegrass gospel quartet to Bare Bones. The trio also recorded two Smokey Robinson songs, saying about “Shop Around” that “It’s just a hop, skip and a jump from historic black gospel to blues to contemporary pop music.” Absolutely true, especially as they sing it.

The trio has a unique sound. The harmonies and arrangements they choose for each piece, regardless of the tradition it is drawn from, are definitely and distinctively Bare Bones. For example, when they do #62 from the Sacred Harp, “Parting Hand,” the original Sacred Harp harmonies have been supplanted by the distinctive Bare Bones harmony style. Likewise, they render Blind Alfred Reed’s wonderful “There’ll Be No Distinction There,” which Reed simply sings from beginning to end, in a complicated arrangement — with one verse moving, in part, to the relative minor for dramatic emphasis. In many of the pieces, the tempo is not constant; there are parts sung quickly, and parts drawn out with ritards and holds.

All in all, this is an enjoyable CD of unaccompanied singing, well worth getting, especially by those who are looking for fine singing of old-time and more modern material.

Pete Peterson

To order: www.barebonesare.us

Red Rocking Chair / Two Sisters / Shag Poke / Gospel Plow / Valley Forge / Blue Diamond Mines / Jerusalem Ridge / Mannington #9 / Down the Road / Sarah Armstrong / Elk River Blues

Rachel Eddy is a young musician who chooses to express herself in the old-time genre, adding her own touch to the music. I already knew from the Morgantown Rounders CD (reviewed in the Old-Time Herald vol. 10 no 10, April-May 2007) that she was a good fiddler; I hadn’t realized that she is also a dynamic old-time singer and banjo player with a strong artistic vision. This CD expresses that vision. There are some well-known names here as backup musicians: Tim O’Brien on fiddle and bouzouki, Mark Schatz on bass, Russ Barenberg on guitar; there are also names not as well known yet: Jason Jaros, Ben Townsend, Brent Truitt, Jeff Taylor. But this is Rachel’s CD.

In a recent speech, writer Lois Bujold described science fiction today as “an emergent property of the whole seething mass of writers and writing that make it up. It’s a consequence, not a cause, and thus wonderfully resistant to attempts at top-down direction. From the thousands of threads making up the tapestry, some larger picture may indeed emerge, but I am only responsible for spinning my own bright strand, thank you very much. In other words, I don’t believe in an Intelligent Design theory.”

This is a description of old-time today. One set of threads belong to the re-enactors (you know who you are) and another belongs to bands such as the Freighthoppers and Uncle Earl. The music of this CD is closer to the latter, but definitely forms its own thread in the tapestry. It’s not a thread I have been spinning, but I can appreciate it.

Enough generalizations; let’s talk about some of the songs and tunes. There are four well-played instrumentals here: “Shag Poke” (originally collected from Dwight Lamb of Nebraska, who learned it from Hiram Allen), “Valley Forge” (collected from Ramona Jones), Bill Monroe’s

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Pretty Polly / Three Little Babes / Lonesome Scenes of Winter / The Death of William Goebel / Wouldn’t Mind Working from Sun to Sun / The Dummy / O & K Song / Omie Wise / Ida Red - Went Up on the Old Hillside / Battleship the Maine / Long and a Country Jake / The Greenwood Sidey / Three Grains of Corn / The Indian Tribes of Tennessee / Darling Corey / Darling Don’t You Know That’s Wrong / We’re Stole and Sold from Africa / Been a Long Time Traveling / Hungry and Faint and Poor / Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah / Sisters Thou Art Mild and Lovely / Our Cheerful Voices Let Us Raise / Jesus Reigns / By the Grace of God I’ll Meet You / I Am a

Hand on the Plow

Rachel Eddy

“West Virginia music thrives in the capable hands and heart of Rachel Eddy. A fine singer, banjo player, and fiddler, she’s totally at home with old time music and makes it her own both on stage and in the studio.”

Tim O’Brien

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This recording was first released as an LP by June Appal in 1978, recorded and produced by Barbara Kunkle and Rich Kirby. Addie Graham’s grandson it was re-released as a CD in 2008. The CD includes some tracks not on the original LP.

*Been a Long Time Traveling* is an extraordinary recording for many reasons, not the least of which is the way Addie Graham’s life and times are so fully reflected in her songs. Born in the late nineteenth century in Wolfe County, Kentucky, she spent her formative years on the headwaters of the Red River, where she was witness to the incursion of the railroads, large-scale logging of the hardwood forests, and the end of isolation of her community. The sweeping socioeconomic changes in early twentieth-century Appalachia are perfectly mirrored in Addie Graham’s music, making this CD a treasure for all those interested in the history of Appalachian culture.

Her family was her strongest influence musically, which is reflected in British ballads and Old Baptist folk hymns learned from her mother. As the times changed and railroad and logging crews, including both White and African American workers, brought their music into the mountains, Addie Graham added some of their songs to her repertoire. The wild feudal politics of Breathitt County, where she spent her early adulthood, the Spanish American War, and the First World War are all reflected in the songs she sang. Although she lived until 1978, her music shows no influence of recordings or radio, as she stopped adding to her song collection in about 1920. Murder ballads, humorous songs, children’s rhymes, track-lining songs, religious songs, and blues are all part of her amazingly diverse repertoire. If you’re interested in adding to your own store of traditional songs, *Long Time Traveling* is a must-have recording.

Addie Graham’s voice is strong and true, and she sings with an understated emotional depth and clarity that informs each song with meaning. While many of her songs are versions of better-known pieces, some are entirely her own, including the moving “We’re Stole and Sold From Africa,” an Abolitionist hymn passed down through her family. The unusual “Long and a Country Jake,” a humorous music-hall song about a country boy volunteering for the Army in the First World War, she learned from sheet music. She plays a piano accompaniment on “Ida Red” and “Went Up on the Old Hill Side” that somehow, almost eerily, captures the sound of a banjo. The CD also contains her recitation of a topical ballad, “The Death of William Goebel,” a chronicle of the assassination of an early Kentucky governor. Many songs end with a lively comment (“That’s every word of it true!” …” My daddy made that last verse…”) or just a chuckle as she shares something humorous. The editorial decision to leave in commentary adds to the vividness of Addie Graham’s presence; the decision to leave out long narrative allows us to experience the songs themselves without the distraction of too much talking. Addie was a wonderful traditional singer, and spent the last five years of her life (she retired in 1973 and died in 1978) sharing her music at folk festivals in her native Kentucky. Happily, this CD captures the immediacy and grace of her music for those of us who didn’t get to meet her in person.

The CD booklet contains interesting photographs as well as general comments on Addie’s life and music, people she learned from, the politics of her Kentucky community, and the coming (and eventual going) of the O&K railroad. Also on the CD, in PDF format, are more photos, extensively researched commentary on the type of music she sang, as well as background notes on each song. Of particular interest is a fascinating look at the Old Baptist church in Kentucky and its music. None of this is dry or academic writing. Anyone with an interest in Appalachian music will find this to be interesting and informative material.

It’s hard for me to think of anyone who wouldn’t be happy to own this CD. It is a perfect example of a gifted traditional musician presented with intelligence, appreciation, and affection by people who understand her life and her music. How fortunate we are that this project is available to us!

Hilary Dirlam

To order: www.appalshop.org/juneappal
The Stonemans: Patsy, Donna, and Roni

Patsy Stoneman, autoharp, jaw harp, vocals; Donna Stoneman, mandolin, vocals; Roni Stoneman, banjo, vocals; Nate Gower, fiddle; Jeremy Stephens, guitar; Stu Geisbert, bass; Merl Johnson, second fiddle; Tom Mindle, vocals.

Sinking of the Titanic / Remember the Poor Tramp Has To Live / Scotty’s Bow / The Birds are Returning / Ruby / House of the Lord / Tell My Mother I Will Meet Her / I Forgot More than You’ll Ever Know / This Little Light of Mine / Shackles and Chains / Barney McCoy / I Feel Like Traveling On / Prayers and Pinto Beans.

As most of you know, Ernest V. (“Pop”) Stoneman (1893 - 1968) was one of the most influential of the pioneer old-time music recording artists. He recorded over 250 sides from 1924-1934, both solo and with other musicians from the Galax area. When the Great Depression ruined the 78 rpm record market, he moved his growing family to Maryland, outside Washington, DC, where he worked as a carpenter. Along the way, he formed a family band that, by 1947, had grown to 13 children plus parents Ernest and Hat tie. During the second Golden Age of the 1960s, the band became the Stonemans, slimmed down to four or five members who played music that bridged old-time, bluegrass, and country-Western, featuring spectacularly flashy instrumentals by Scotty on fiddle, Donna on mandolin, and Roni on banjo. Singing was always a big part of the act, however, and Pop came along on the shows, sat on stage with his autoharp, and sang a song or two from his 1920s repertoire on each set.

Patsy (now in her eighties) and Donna and Roni (in their seventies) are the only three members of the Stoneman band who are still alive, but I’m happy to report that this 2008 CD shows they’re still in good voice and showing no signs of arthritis. Many of the songs follow the bluegrass tradition of featuring solos on mandolin, banjo, or fiddle. Appropriately, the most flashy bluegrass solos are also on the album’s only instrumental, “Scotty’s Bow,” a tribute to Scotty Stoneman composed by Donna.

Five of the songs are covers of Pop Stoneman songs. His singing style was straightforward and, well, earnest. Patsy performs them pretty much the way he did them, such as on “The Sinking of the Titanic,” the first song Ernest recorded. Pop certainly would have appreciated the addition of trio voices in the chorus. I’m glad that Patsy revived “Barney McCoy,” one of my favorite Ernest Stoneman/Eck Dunford songs. The only Pop Stoneman song that doesn’t closely follow the original is “The Poor Tramp Has To Live,” which Roni sings with a touch of Nashville influence. That influence works very well, though, when she sings “Ruby,” “Shackles and Chains,” and “I Forgot More Than You’ll Ever Know” in a duet with Donna.

Donna’s religious background is represented by her singing “House of the Lord” (her own composition), as well as on “I Feel Like Traveling On” and a rousing tent-revival rendition of “This Little Light of Mine,” which also gains a fine rhythm from Patsy’s jaw harp playing.

The album ends with Patsy’s autobiographical composition about life as a Stoneman, “Prayers and Pinto Beans.” It’s only a brief summary of the whole story, however, which is presented more fully in Ivan Tribe’s The Stonemans: An Appalachian Family and the Music That Shaped Their Lives. (University of Illinois Press, 1993). Pop, who did such a fine job of instilling music into his family, would not be surprised by this new CD. He would certainly approve, as do I.

To order: www.pxrec.com

Vol. 2, Prettiest Girl in Town
Stuart Hamblen

Boy In Blue/ Drifting Back To Dixie/ When The Moon Shines Down Upon The Mountain/ Wrong Keyhole/ I Gotta Feelin’/ By The Sleepy Rio Grande/ The

THE OLD-TIME HERALD WWW.OLDTIMEHERALD.ORG AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2009 53
Sailor’s Farewell/ Golden River/ My Brown Eyed Texas Rose/ My Mary/ Poor Unlucky Cowboy / Texas Plains/ Riding Old Paint Leading Old Bald/ Lopez the Bandit/ Sunshine Alley/ Lola Lee/ Be Just Like Your Daddy/ Poor Boy/ Prettiest Girl In Town/ Whistle My Love Song to You/ They’re Gonna Kill Ya/ Keep Away From The Swinging Doors/ Bluebonnets for her Golden Hair

Stuart Hamblen (1908-1989) was an early cowboy singer, and is also remembered as the writer of “This Old House,” “It Is No Secret (What God Can Do),” and many other songs. Born and raised in Texas, at the age of 18 he became radio’s first singing cowboy on KAYO, in Abilene, Texas. Three years later, in 1929, he traveled to New York to record four sides, three of which appear on this CD.

In 1930, Stuart Hamblen moved to Southern California where he had a long and fruitful career as a cowboy singer and radio personality, often broadcasting under the name “Cowboy Joe” (some of his discs were issued under this name), and appearing in Western movies with John Wayne, Gene Autry, and Roy Rogers.

Hamblen was popular enough to be able to continue making records into the ’30s and ’40s, but apparently developed a serious drinking problem. In 1949, he became born again at a Billy Graham prayer meeting, and devoted the rest of his career to God and Christianity, continuing to record and write songs. According to what I read on the Internet (always to be taken with a grain of salt!) Stuart Hamblen was the Temperance Party’s Presidential candidate in 1952 (running against Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson) and he won over 70,000 votes.

This CD is not a “complete works of” but contains most of Hamblen’s pre-War material, plus some sides from the mid-1940s. BACM has previously issued another Stuart Hamblen CD which contains some of his post-War recordings.

The 7 sides from his first few sessions are the sides that are most likely to be of interest to OTH readers. These are very credible ersatz Jimmie Rodgers waltz-time songs, complete with smooth guitar playing and yodeling. The five solo songs are my favorite; the next two include a fiddle player, and the fiddling is somewhat weak but doesn’t actually detract from the songs. The material is familiar
sounding, especially at first when he is covering “The Boy in Blue” and “Drifting Back to Dixie.” His “Wrong Keyhole” is a bit different from the one I’m familiar with, and “By the Sleepy Rio Grande” turns out to be the same as “My Texas Girl,” recorded several years later by the Carter Family. Stuart Hamblen’s version of this song is much less stiff sounding than that of the Carter Family, and I enjoyed it very much.

After that, things get pretty slick pretty fast. By 1931, he is in Hollywood recording with an orchestra the kind of music that was found in cowboy movies. It doesn’t have much to do with actual traditional material but I suppose since it was recorded more than 70 years ago, it counts as old-time.

I will say right out front that I am not fond of this type of cowboy pop music. I find it very sappy, cloying and clichéd. However, there are many who love this style. There’s banjo, but it’s plectrum banjo. There’s the kind of slick three-part harmony singing (and humming) that was done by the Sons of the Pioneers and similar groups.

There are many songs of cowboys, outlaws, horses: “My Brown Eyed Texas Rose,” “Poor Unlucky Cowboy,” “Riding Old Paint Leading Old Bald,” and the ultra-corny “Lopez the Bandit.” There are sweet pop numbers like “My Mary” and “Be Just Like Your Daddy.” Definitely the creepiest song is “They’re Gonna Kill Ya,” recorded in the mid-1940s. If you can believe it, this is a gleeful racist song about the War, that turns out to be the same as “My Texas Girl,” recorded several years later by the Carter Family. Stuart Hamblen’s version of this song is much less stiff sounding than that of the Carter Family, and I enjoyed it very much.

Lee Triplett, the great fiddler from Clay County, West Virginia, once said—to the late Hedy West of all people—“I wouldn’t sit down if Jesus appeared.” What he might have said to Dr. Jabbour, if accused of practicing “scordatura” upon his Pretty Little Dog, could certainly not be imagined in the pages of this august journal. Mr. Triplett was a straight-forward man. He wore his gun outside his pants for all the honest world to see. Yet Dr. Jabbour would have been correct. Lee Triplett was an unrepentant scordaturist, a life-long practitioner of this dark and obscure art.

Obviously, then, it is entirely possible to be a fine fiddler and at the same time have no conscious or unconscious awareness of scordatura, hemiola, the heptatonic mode, or the Scotch Snap Pattern. It might even be, in a few psychological examples, that becoming aware of these and other features of music when viewed through the lens of the inquiring mind could be a ruinous thing: the famous example of Satie leaps to mind. The poor soul (and genius melodist) is said to have sent himself to the Académie after finding initial success in the world of high musical art, whereupon he was convinced by the scholars that he knew nothing and, gaining this self-knowledge, retreated Paris for his small home-town to ply the banking trade for the rest of his life.

With this small surgeon-general’s warning, let me then say that almost anyone interested in the art of fiddling will find Alan Jabbour’s wonderful book of great and enduring value, to be placed in the bookshelf beside Chief O’Neill’s collections and memoirs, Breithnach’s Ceol Rince na hÉireann, R.P. Christeson’s The Old-Time Fiddler’s Repertory, and more recently the work of Lisa Ornstein. Jabbour has been so kind as to tie his transcriptions and analysis to actual CDs, a link sorely lacking in much of the previous published fiddling work. The fact is and always has been that music is its own universe—learning to read musical notation, or to discuss its characteristics, is not the same thing as learning to play a
good tune or even a good symphony. But this isn’t to say that learning to think analytically about a tune’s character isn’t a joy in its own right. I have always found Alan Jabbour to be a joyful man.

The joy, if you’ve heard Alan playing tunes live or on recordings, is obvious. It was said about the extraordinary Irish fiddler Tommy Potts (his LP, The Liffey Banks, is now in CD format), that he could go into a room to play an air, and would be found at the end of the tune to be sitting in a pool of tears—Seamus Innis being a man to call on for liner notes given that Joyce was in Trieste. Alan’s joy in tunes is no less. As a fiddler lucky enough to have played in sessions with Alan, and to have been influenced by his approach to fiddling ever since I began my own journey down the fiddle path, I have never seen him play without passion and verve. It is thus another, expected, joy, to hear Alan “talk” at length about his work and interest in this collection. And if you should want to learn one of “his” tunes via notation, or by mixing reading the notes with one of the cuts on either of the two CDs which accompany the book, success should follow industry. Alan’s precision makes for fine learning, even when the effort is entirely by ear, and here his precision serves to tie the notes on the page tightly to the notes played.

There isn’t room to quote the annotations in enough length to give you a full appreciation of this work. If you would like to think systematically about fiddle tunes, and learn many features of this body of music when observed by a scholar-player of Mr. Jabbour’s caliber, this is the book for you, without any doubt. And if you simply want to learn some of Alan’s fine repertoire, this book would be like several week-long master classes with Mr. Jabbour. But I have to quote at least a little, to give you the flavor:

The first and second strains [of “Magpie”] begin with the same pickup. Was this tune perhaps originally a song, from which an additional strain was eked? If so, it seems likely that the song strain was the second, because the first strain consists of arpeggiated phrases. I invented the progression from the IV-chord to the V-chord at the midcadence of the second strain (I-2) and taught it to our band [the original Hollow Rock String Band]. Occasionally an accompanying musician, not hearing it the same way, goes back to the I-chord (G). To suggest my own preferred chord, I began playing the tune with a D-F# double-stop instead of the simple D. To my surprise, some musicians began hearing the melody as progressing to an F#, and to this day I occasionally hear musicians playing an F# who must have learned it, remotely and indirectly, from me. But I have returned, chastened, to the simple D at the midcadence. And in truth the I-chord is a perfectly reasonable choice, despite my early preference for a V-chord.” (p. 67)

There is a great deal to think about in this little paragraph. Alan’s book is full of this kind of depth of analysis, including in many cases his reflective self-analysis of his own playing, and how it has changed and evolved over a lifetime of seeing the strings. As with his playing, Alan possesses a mind which sees great detail and resolution. If he were a sports-caster, Alan could tell you what just happened better than you could see it yourself. And he’s willing to share. Tunes Illuminated, then, is a triple threat at the very least. In the actual tunes, written in notation, a fiddle student can find a leg up on a terrific repertoire of fiddle melodies. With the accompanying CDs (also available separately, and each reviewed in past issues of the OTH), any listener can enter the musical realm directly. And with Alan’s accompanying text, the tunes are, indeed and most assuredly, illuminated, with the result that the reader should leave the book with a broader understanding of the musical context of the melodies, and of what a fiddler actually does when playing them.

I have one tiny quibble that I’ll just make known. When I went to Scotland long ago I was told in no uncertain terms that “Scotch” only referred to the elixir, and “Scots” was the preferred locution when an adjective was required. I have followed this maxim faithfully, incorporating it into all my writing, and so I was slightly disturbed to see the phrase “Scotch Snap.” Surely, if a reprint is required (and I hope this review will force the issue in short order!), we can change it to “Scots Snap.” This is how progress is made in the ever upward path towards human perfection.

Bill Hicks

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