FEATURES

Molly O’Day and the Gospel in Old-Time Country Music/12
By Dan Margolies

Speedy Krise, Old-Time Dobro Player/20
By Dan Margolies

The Life and Music of Norman Blake/22
By Daniel Fleck

Bristol Recording Sessions Remembered at Nashville’s Country Music Hall of Fame/27
By Jim Weaver

Posey Rorer of Franklin County, Virginia/30
By Kinney Rorrer

COLUMNS

HERE & THERE/4

ALICE’S ATTIC/10
A Washington State String Trio from 1910/12

WORKSHOP/36
Posey Rorer’s "Flying Cloud"
Transcribed by Clare Milliner and Walt Koken
A Visit with Banjo Maker Mike Ramsey
By Malcolm Smith

DEPARTMENTS

LETTERS/3
CLASSIFIEDS/42
REVIEWS/43

COMING SOON:
Festival Guide
Canebrake Rattlers
Cathy Barton & Dave Para

Praise for Slate Mountain Ramblers

Everyone I know was pleased to read Nancy Sluys’ story on the Slate Mountain Ramblers in the August issue. It was great to learn more about them and hear the well-deserved praise for the whole band. Richard Bowman’s solid, not-too-fancy fiddling puts him at the top of the class. He sometimes doesn’t get the credit he deserves, maybe due to his low-key style, both personally and musically. He’s a musician’s musician if there ever was one, but still very accessible to the casual listener. But what really sets them apart is the family’s welcoming attitude. When I first began attending Galax and other fiddlers’ conventions ten years ago, the Ramblers always made the drop-by-listener feel right at home in their trailer site. They didn’t just tolerate us, they seem to humbly enjoy the attention. Then, once I began playing a few years ago with friends, they again welcomed us into the fold to play right alongside them. That was a thrill of a lifetime. Richard personifies the Virginia country gentleman. He’s always wearing that same great smile and that same red baseball hat. We need more like them in old-time music.

Mark Boyles
Decatur, Georgia

Old-Time Piano Player
Heywood Blevins

Many thanks, OTH: After hearing a track on an LP record many years ago, I had been looking for more tunes by a piano player named Heywood Blevins. I never had any luck finding more of his music. Then, in my first issue ever of the OTH, there it was—a review of a Field Recorders Collective CD of Heywood Blevins with 40 tracks of his music, and information on where to buy it! Bought…played…great!

Bill Cox
Sheffield, South Yorkshire
United Kingdom

More on the Fiddlers of Tennessee Valley CD Review

Here is some information about the Fiddlers of the Tennessee Valley recording reviewed in vol. 10, no. 12. The correct release number of the original LP was DU-3304—the same number as the CD, as is the case with all Springfed Records re-releases of Davis Unlimited material. The original LP had a four-page insert with interesting notes by the late Bill Harrisson. He was the publisher of The Devil’s Box and the founder of the Tennessee Valley Old Time Fiddlers Association, which I believe was founded in 1965. Some of reviewer Jon Pankake’s questions are answered in the booklet. The fiddlers were not limited to one region, but they all played at the TVOTFA Convention in Athens, Alabama. Some tunes were not recorded during actual competitions, but in a room beforehand. The notes give no information on the accompanists, with the exception of crediting Jake Hughes on banjo on the Lena Hughes tracks. The identity of the fingerpicking banjoist who played with fiddler Bud Meredith remains a mystery. Though I have not seen it, maybe the article “Bud Meredith: Kentucky Fiddler” in The Devil’s Box 10 (1976) may give a clue. There is also an article on the 1972 TVOTFA Convention that mentions some artists on the CD in an article by Terry Burcham in Old Time Music 7 (Winter 1972/3).

Many thanks for your good work with the OTH. I was pleased to see that the August 2007 issue (vol. 10, no. 12) had the very same cover as the first edition!

Dirk Verschaeren
Gent, Belgium
Here & There

Events

The Univ. of Kentucky John Jacob Niles Center for American Music puts on an Appalachia in the Bluegrass series of concerts. Past performers have included Rand- dy Wilson, the Carolina Chocolate Drops, Daniel and Amy Carwile, Lee Sexton and Rich Kirby, Travis and Trevor Stuart, David Long, the Reel World Stringband, Ginny Hawker and Tracy Schwarz, and Rayna Gellert and Jeff Keith. On Dec. 7 the Red State Ramblers will perform, and on Dec. 14 Sonny Houston. Info: 859-257-8183, www.uky.edu/FineArts/Music/Niles.

The University of Chicago Folk Festival will take place Feb. 8-10, 2008, with the Pine Leaf Boys, Vesta Johnson, Jimmy Triplet and the Elkins String Ticklers, and more. www.ucfolfest.org.

Beth Hartness and Adam Hurt will appear in concert for the Brandywine Friends of Old Time Music on Dec. 14 at 8:00 PM, Newark, DE. (Location TBA) Info: 302-475-3454, www.brandywinefriends.org.

The Minnesota Bluegrass and Old-Time Music Association hosts a Winter Bluegrass Weekend on Feb. 29-March 2. Among the old-time bands, musicians, and dancers are Sherry Minnick, the Barn Cats, the Lulu Gals, Troublesome Creek, and the Wild Goose Chase Cloggers. Info: MBOTMA, PO Box 16408, Minneapolis, MN 55416; www.minnesotabluegrass.org.

Breakin’ Up Winter will be celebrated Mar. 2-4 at Cedars of Lebanon State Park, Lebanon, TN (I-40 Exit 238, six miles south toward Murfreesboro). Jams, instruction, noted speakers, wax cylinder recordings of your special sound, campfires, good food, cabins in the park, and motels nearby. Info: www.nashvilleoldtime.org/BUW.

The 2008 Conference on the African Origins of the New World Banjo is in the planning stages. To be held next summer at the Akonting Center in Mandinary, Gambia, the 10-day conference will focus on the total Jola akonting culture, and will honor Sagari Sambo for his great contributions to knowledge of Jola music. There will be music and dancing, and akontings and ritis (one-string fiddles) will be for sale. Info: Daniel Jatta daniel.jatta@telia.com, www.myspace.com/danieljatta.

Regular Events & Jams


The Fourth Tuesday Mermaid Jam is going strong in Philadelphia, PA. The old-time music and clogging sessions run from 8:00-11:00 PM and a slow jam starts at 7:30 PM. Mermaid Inn, 7673 Germantown, Ave., Chestnut Hill area. Info: Carl 215-699-7835.


On the Air & Net

Oregon Public Broadcasting’s Oregon Art Beat has aired the piece they did a few years ago on the monthly Portland square dance, with Foghorn playing and Bill Martin calling. It is archived at the website: www.opb.org/programs/artbeat.
The following radio shows are free for downloading through the PRX website: www.prx.org/pieces/177 pre-blues with Robert Crumb and Jerry Zoltan. www.prx.org/pieces/3187 a history of black religious music with interview clips from Ira Tucker of the Dixie Hummingbirds, Isaac Freeman of the Fairfield Four, and many others.

Congratulations

Best wishes for a harmonious marriage to musicians Rhianon Giddens of the Carolina Chocolate Drops and Michael Laffan, who were married on September 1 in Greensboro, North Carolina.


The First Annual Hoppin’ John Fiddlers’ Convention took place at Shakori Hills, near Silk Hope, NC, on Sept. 21-22. Contest winners were: Old-Time Band – Mountain Sounds, near Silk Hope, NC, on Oct. 29 was the largest ever. Musicians performed at an Oct. 25 ceremony emceed by Frank Stasio of NPR’s The State of Things. The program showcased the music of bluegrass pioneer George Shuffler, one of the honorees for 2007, African American string band musician Joe Thompson (past winner and recent recipient of a National Heritage Fellowship), and storyteller Orville Hicks. Info: http://ncarts.wordpress.com.


Last October, banjo player and maker Kevin Fore of Round Peak Banjos, Low Gap, NC, presented Banjo #003, a Boucher copy, to Joe Wilson of the National Council for the Traditional Arts. Wilson presented this banjo at the Blue Ridge Music Center on the Blue Ridge Parkway to US Congressman Rick Boucher of Virginia. This was the very first instrument the Music Center bought for display in the museum. Info: www.blueridgedmusiccenter.org.

The Eleventh Annual Schoolhouse Fiddling Bee took place on Oct. 14, in the Old Avoca Schoolhouse, Avoca, NE. Open Division winners were Jim Harvey, Alana Hux, and Mariah Buettner. In the Fee Fi Faux Division (playing a tune on a non-fiddle) the winner was Cooper Moore who sang and played a tune on the baritone ukulele. In the Hocus Pocus Division (playing with sound effects, dancing, etc.) the winner was Mary Pat Kleven. Twin Fiddling Division winners were Mary Pat Kleven and Anne Studnicka. The 12th Annual Schoolhouse Fiddling Bee will be held on Oct. 12, 2008. Info: www.greenblattandseay.com.

Three NC Folk Heritage Award winners performed at an Oct. 25 ceremony emceed by Frank Stasio of NPR’s The State of Things. The program showcased the music of bluegrass pioneer George Shuffler, one of the honorees for 2007, African American string band musician Joe Thompson (past winner and recent recipient of a National Heritage Fellowship), and storyteller Orville Hicks. Info: http://ncarts.wordpress.com.

Three NC Folk Heritage Award winners performed at an Oct. 25 ceremony emceed by Frank Stasio of NPR’s The State of Things. The program showcased the music of bluegrass pioneer George Shuffler, one of the honorees for 2007, African American string band musician Joe Thompson (past winner and recent recipient of a National Heritage Fellowship), and storyteller Orville Hicks. Info: http://ncarts.wordpress.com.

Old-Time Music in Los Angeles
By Steve Lewis

With four million residents blanketing some 470 square miles, Los Angeles qualifies as a big city. Travel 30 miles in any direction from city hall and you’re within the core of the old-time community. It doesn’t stop there, of course—some folks we consider part of the community routinely travel from San Diego or down from Santa Barbara to participate in activities here. But 30 miles in any direction is the approximate range. We’re pretty spread out. Spread out and spread thin, that’s us. Those two characteristics have a lot to do with the nature of the old-time music scene in Los Angeles.

By necessity we’re a mobile community—as in automobile. While a lucky few live within walking distance of each other, for most of us cars are the only way to get from where we are to where we want to be. Because that’s true for the majority of other folks in LA too, our streets and freeways are perpetually overloaded. The result is slow, tedious drives book-ending most of our musical outings. Travel around LA requires patience and determination.

Trading drive-time for music time is easy. Trading drive-time for music time is a highly user-friendly. The repertoires are largely comprised of common dance tunes in familiar tunings, some songs, and usually a few less-played crooked tunes. There’s no set agenda. Tunes suggestions come from anyone present, and the group follows the lead of whoever starts the tune. Technical virtuosity, while recognized and appreciated, is not required, and all are welcome to participate at whatever level they’re comfortable. It’s a supportive, encouraging atmosphere.

On first Sundays of the month, the California Traditional Music Society (www.ctmsfolkmusic.org), an organization that was founded by Clark and Elaine Weissman, makes its Encino Park headquarters available to us for jamming. The park is located in the San Fernando Valley about twenty miles north of downtown. On second Saturdays Jim Hamilton hosts a Westside jam in Hermosa Beach, a community about 30 minutes (when the traffic gods smile) southwest of central Los Angeles. The third Sunday jam takes place at the beautiful Craftsman-style home of Andy and Barbara Cameron in Pasadena’s historic Bungalow Heaven District. Fourth Saturday jams are held at the Audubon Society’s Los Angeles facility in Highland Park, approximately ten miles east of downtown. Joe Wack leads the jam and he has been known to slip in a crooked fiddle tune from his native West Virginia.

Festivals, contests, and music camps also serve as connecting points for those new to the scene. The granddaddy of the Los Angeles festivals is the Topanga Banjo Fiddle Contest and Folk Festival. (www.topangabanjofiddle.org). Started in 1961 with five fiddlers and 26 banjo pickers, it’s grown into an all-day extravaganza with as many as 120 bluegrass, old-time, and folk musicians competing in numerous instrumental, vocal, and band categories. Held on the grounds of the historic Paramount Ranch movie sets, there’s jamming galore, square and contra-dancing to live music, four performance stages, and over 45 craft and artisan booths in addition to the contest itself. The 47th edition takes place May 18th, 2008.

Since 1980, the Summer Solstice Folk Music, Dance, and Storytelling Festival (ctmsfolkmusic.org) has been an important annual event for our music community. Conceived as a teaching-oriented festival, it brings together accomplished folk musicians from around
the country and the world to perform and to share their musical skills through workshops. Over the years, many top-drawer old-time musicians and singers have performed and led workshops on a wide range of instruments and styles spanning all ability levels. For the uninitiated, it’s a wonderful opportunity to see, hear, and become involved. Active participation has remained the goal, and all scheduled jams as well as all dance bands are officially designated as “open.” It’s two days and three evenings of workshops, performances, dancing, and jams—about as much music as you’d care to make. Probably won’t come as a surprise that it happens on or around the summer solstice every year.

Goleta is an oceanside community about 90 miles north of Los Angeles and home to the Old-Time Fiddler’s Convention (www.fiddlersconvention.org). Though not in LA-proper, it’s an important annual gathering place for the LA old-time crowd. It’s also the only festival around old-time—a whole lot of fun, the event carried some significance because of its truly historical importance. The OTFC is held on the beautiful grounds of the historic Stowe farmhouse. The 37th gathering is coming up next year. On the second Sunday of October, it’s the place to be—and where most of us are.

For many years, the California Traditional Music Society’s New Year’s Camp was an automatic entry on many calendars. After a hiatus of more than a decade, it’s back. New Years Camp happens at Camp Hess Kramer, located in a spectacular sycamore canyon a few miles north of Malibu. Musicians, family, and friends gather to usher in the New Year with three days of music, dance, workshops, hikes, and other fun stuff. Featured musicians conduct workshops, play for dances, and jam. Tom and Patrick Sauber head the list for this year’s camp.

The Second-Ever Los Angeles Old-Time Social (www.triplechickenfoot.com) took place last May. Besides being a whole lot of fun, the event carried some significance because of its truly grassroots beginnings. Spearheaded by Ben Guzman and Kelly Marie Martin, the 2nd LAOTS began with a Friday-night concert featuring performances by Tom and Patrick Sauber, Matt Kinman, and Triple Chicken Foot. The Saturday program offered free fiddle, banjo, and guitar workshops during the day, an evening screening of Walter Spencer’s film, Celebration of Community: Portland Old Time, and a free open-air square dance held under the Spring Street Bridge in downtown LA. Susan Michaels called to music by the Hollywood Boll Weevils and White Lightning. Timed to coincide with the Topanga Banjo Fiddle Contest on Sunday, it made for a unique and fun three-day experience. Both CTMS and FolkWorks graciously lent support, and it was a great success! We’re keeping our fingers crossed for the Third-Ever.

Los Angeles isn’t exactly awash in old-time performance venues. McCabe’s Guitar Shop (www.mccabes.com) in Santa Monica occasionally books a touring old-time—or closely related—act. Local musicians also appear on the bill from time to time. Pasadena’s Coffee Gallery Backstage (www.coffeegallery.com) features local and visiting performers more often, but not on a regular schedule. To find that you need to move closer to LA’s center.

The Echo (1822 Sunset Blvd.) is a music venue located in LA’s Echo Park neighborhood. On Sunday afternoons from spring to fall, the Echo becomes the Grand Ole Echo, with free country and roots music on the inside stage and old-time music played on the back porch while burgers cook on the grill. Triple Chicken Foot performs their high-energy old-time dance tunes and from-the-heart harmony vocals there on a regular basis.

Just up the street, the 321 Lounge at Taix French Restaurant (www.taixfrench.com) hosts a monthly night of roots music produced by fortune-telling multi-instrumentalist Madame Pamita. Drawing from Harry Smith’s Anthology of American Folk Music and Alan Lomax’s field recordings, her show often includes old-time pieces and old-time accompanists.

In the same area, The Hyperion Tavern (323-665-1941) has been hosting a Thursday series of all-acoustic evenings with music from the Homebilies, Triple Chicken Foot, bluegrass picker Shaun Crowell, Madame Pamita, Ukulelar Winter, and many others. This series, along with those at Taix and The Echo highlight a music scene that’s been emerging over the past few years and creating opportunities for old-time music in new settings.

Now and again we have old-time house concerts in different parts of the city. In the past year or so Foghorn Stringband, Mark Graham, Tom, Brad & Alice, Bruce Molsky, and Dan Gellert have appeared. Visiting artists often conduct workshops in addition to performing, so we profit twice over.

The California Traditional Music Society and FolkWorks, our two non-profit resources and sponsors for all types of folk music, each produce concerts featuring visiting as well as local musicians. Their concerts span the breadth of folk music, including old-time. CTMS concerts are held primarily at the CTMS headquarters in Encino Park. FolkWorks concerts take place at various venues around the city.

A number of our old-time bands play for contra dances produced by the California Dance Cooperative. (www.caldancecoop.org) Though not on a regular schedule. To find that you might hear the music of the Screaming Earwigs, the Lone Hill Ramblers, Frank ‘n Friends, the Hollywood Boll Weevils, Turtle Creek, the Burnin’ Tics, Southern Exposure, or the Body Snatchers.

Several important resources help sustain and enrich old-time in LA. FolkWorks, started by Steve and Leda Shapiro, keeps us informed and entertained through its e-zine, www.folkworks.org, David Bragg, in addition to being a fine musician and teacher, writes the “Old Time Oracle” column for FolkWorks. The “Oracle” explores all things old-time with a unique sense of humor and perspective. Fun and informative stuff.

Frank Hoppe’s program “Bluegrass, etc.” on KCSN FM is the place to hear vintage as well as more contemporary old-time music. The show airs Sundays, from 6:00 to 10:00 AM. Even if you’ve heard it all, his program is worth a listen. His on-air calendar helps us keep abreast of what’s going on in the region.

Tom Sauber has had a profound influence on LA’s old-time scene for over two decades. A superb musician and scholar of old-time music, he has preserved and passed along many, many tunes and songs learned directly from musicians of earlier generations. As a teacher, performer, jam leader, radio host, and reference resource, Tom continues to raise the quality of old-time music in Los Angeles for all of us. Individually and collectively, we’ve grown in skill, knowledge and appreciation of old-time under his influence.

So, here we are, spread out and spread thin in Los Angeles—about as far away from the roots of old-time as you can get without a boat. We’re a community with a history older than many of us, enjoying what we’ve got and excited about what’s down the road.
On a recent trip to Nashville, I asked people where I could go to hear old-time music. One after another, people admitted they didn’t know. “How could this be?” I thought. Every other person you meet in Nashville is a musician or related to one, and there is live music everywhere. The young concierge at my hotel was not certain what old-time music was, but was glad to do an Internet search. There we discovered a website for Nashville Old Time String Band Association (www.nashvilleoldtime.org). You might say the rest is history—I had found the motherlode of committed fans and pickers.

Old-time music is indeed alive and well in Music City USA. In a town where country music dominates the music scene, it was good to know that some folks are still interested in hearing and playing some old original tunes.

My initial contact with NOTSBA led me to Pat Gill. Now living in Asheville, North Carolina, she was one of the original organizers of the group and was more than glad to give me some background and the names of additional contacts.

According to Gill, while Nashville has a thriving old-time music community today, 13 years ago that wasn’t the case. “Although Nashville is justly famous for its music, this music has become so commercial that old-time music as we know it didn’t exist for more than perhaps half a dozen people,” she recalled. In 1994 a small group of folks interested in old-time music began meeting at a local high school under the auspices of a continuing education program. “We were committed to carrying on the tradition and fun of learning to play,” Gill continued, “We encouraged new people in the community of all ages to come and learn. Open jams were held several times a month. After a year we decided that a few hours at the end of the day wasn’t enough playing time, so they decided to hold a retreat by renting a cabin at nearby Cedars of Lebanon State Park and play until the cows came home.

The following year the retreat became a weekend-long event and friends from neighboring states were invited to join in the fun. Twelve years later the Breakin’ Up Winter Festival is still going strong and now takes up the entire park with its activities during the first weekend in March. Details are at www.nashvilleoldtime.org. Activities for past festivals have included presentations by experts such as Charles Wolfe and Alan Jabbour, mini-concerts by elder musicians such as Charlie Acuff and Will Keys, pot luck dinners, square and contra dances on Saturday night with the Nashville Country Dancers, a hymn sing on Sunday morning, and plenty of jamming all weekend long. For information on the festival call Dave or Trish Cannon at 615-868-9842 or email rcannon3@bellsouth.net.

“Our objective is to promote traditional music with an emphasis on old-time string band tunes,” Gill explained. “All skill-level musicians are welcome. In those early days, we held a ‘slow’ jam the first Thursday and a ‘regular’ (at-tempo)
jam on the second Thursday of each month. These sessions and provided opportunities for learning tunes and practicing for the dances and group performances. There was also a fourth Sunday jam at a member’s home that was more of a social time with snacks and informal atmosphere,” she said. Now jams are held every week.

While singers are welcome, the emphasis is definitely on instrumental tunes and people are encouraged to get an instrument of their choice and begin learning to play it. While NOTSBA jams are open to the public, they are not “performances” and often there is little space to accommodate guests beyond players.

**Jim Hornsby**, a multi-instrument old-time player, began attending NOTSBA jams eight years ago. He now serves as its board president. “In 2005, the high school where we had been meeting began phasing out its continuing education programs and we were forced to relocate,” he explained. “It was decided, at that time, to become a registered non-profit organization and the Nashville Old-Time String Band Association became an official entity.” The group has grown and prospered over time and now there are weekly jams held primarily at two beautiful locations in Nashville (the Buchanan Log House and Two Rivers Mansion,) as well as a monthly jam and pot luck dinner at a member’s home. In addition the group has a core of musicians who play out in the community for various events. Membership is available, but not required, and the impressive newsletter is available along with schedules and many upcoming activities on the website. In 2006, NOTSBA received a $2,000 grant from the Tennessee Arts Commission to fund a weekend retreat for its 12-member board of directors. “It provided an opportunity for us to define our objectives,” Hornsby explained “and to make plans for the future of our organization.”

The interest created by NOTSBA has resulted in the formation of several other groups of old-time musicians in Nashville. In 2001 the Pegram Jam was started in a local home and has regular jams which are well attended on Tuesday nights. The website is www.pegramjam.com and the contact address is kirk@K4ro.net. The Pegram Jam began when a group of folks (mostly fiddle students) began playing old-time string band music together in Pegram, Tennessee, just west of Nashville, in December 2001. Founders Kirk Pickering and Susie Coleman were told by their teachers that they needed to practice with other musicians, so they offered a room in their home to hold a weekly jam. “Folks have just kept coming every Tuesday since, much to our complete amazement,” Pickering recalls. “We’re now in our sixth consecutive year of playing together every week.” Pegram Jammers play a variety of fiddles, mandolins, banjos, and guitars at every session. There are mostly intermediate to advanced players in the group, and one or two exceptional ones. “There’s a lot of learning going on—and some folks may be learning a second instrument,” Pickering said. “Our players can always be counted on to bring new tunes to share.”

Recently a local Nashville business called the 5 Spot (1006 Forrest Avenue) has made a place for old-time music in its program schedule. Every Wednesday night there’s an Old Timey Pick’n Jam. The contact person is Buck at 615-650-9333. The 5 Spot is an excellent place for music fans of all ages to relax, hang out with friends, and listen to quality, live music. Most shows are free, with a tip jug. The 5 Spot owners Todd Sherwood and Travis Collinsworth are committed to presenting local talent and touring acts can only play if a local band adds them to its show. Another well-known club, the Station Inn at (402 12th Avenue South, Nashville), features a regular schedule of great bluegrass bands, but occasionally there’s an old-time act on the bill. They have a website at www.stationinn.com, or call 615-255-3307.

Next time you visit Nashville, bring your instrument along. There’s plenty of opportunity to jam with people who love old-time music and want to see it preserved.

---

**Final Notes**

Michael A. Stewart, 64, who recorded under the name Backwards Sam Firk, passed away on October 11. As Backwards Sam, Stewart had played guitar and bass behind Yank Rachell and others on several LPs, and made two of his own for Adelphi Records. In the 1960s and '70s, he was known as one of the last, and arguably the best, of the younger generation who learned the pre-War country blues style first-hand. He was particularly close to Mississippi John Hurt, Hacksaw Harney, and Henry Townsend, although he played with many others.

Using his real name, Stewart ran Green River Records, trading 78 rpm records as well as building a renowned collection of blues, gospel, and foreign 78s. To visit him was to be immersed in a world of 78 rpm blues and jazz masterpieces, calypso, or a piece from Turkey or Africa. It’s not that he grew into being a character, an old man living eight miles from the nearest store, with no other house in sight—it was more that he always was that character, someone more to be experienced than befriended. He tried college (he was at Reed at the same time as Ry Cooder), but it was not for him. Buying and selling 78 rpm records allowed him to pay his way, surrounded by the music that defined his life.

No one who played with Backwards Sam Firk could ever forget it. He was, simply put, masterful. More than technique, he had taste. And more than technique and taste, he had originality. From his mentors and from records he did not so much copy notes as learn sounds and how to make them. He played old-time blues as if he were living in the 1930s, as if this were the music of his day. For him, it was.

—Stephen Michelson

---

Clarence “Tater” Tate, age 76, of Jonesborough, Tennessee, passed away on October 17, 2007. Mr. Tate had played fiddle and bass with Bill Monroe, Lester Flatt, Wilma Lee Cooper, and Red Smiley. After retiring from the Grand Ole Opry, he and his wife Lois Starnes Tate moved from Nashville to Jonesborough. He taught in the Bluegrass Department at ETSU for many years.

---

Grand Ole Opry star and country music legend Porter Wagoner passed away on Oct. 28 at the age of 80. Wagoner was born in West Plains, Missouri. He became an Opry favorite known for his rhinestone suits, pompadour hair style, showmanship, and musical partnership with Dolly Parton. His songs, such as “Carroll County Accident,” “A Satisfied Mind,” “Misery Loves Company,” and “Green, Green Grass of Home,” told stories of tragedy and despair. He was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2002.
About five years ago subscriber David Willson of Maple Valley, Washington, sent us copy of this beautiful photograph. In a letter that came with it, David wrote that he had come across the picture while working at the University of Washington Archive in the 1960s. Curious about what kind of music the trio were playing, he had made some inquiries and was delighted to learn that Miss Julia Harris, the daughter of guitarist Scott Harris (right), was still living in Everett, Washington. A short article based on his October 1969 interview with Miss Harris appeared in the Seattle Folklore Society Newsletter, vol. 1, no. 2, December 15, 1969.

About the photograph, Miss Harris told David Willson, “I always loved that picture. It’s a wonderful picture for the era, for the time (about 1910). They all look very nice, don’t they?”

Scott Harris, on the right with guitar, and two mandolinists pose for a studio photograph. Everett, Washington, circa 1910.

Miss Harris told Willson that her father was from Richmond, Virginia, and that he had been born in 1869. Her mother had been educated at Petersburg Normal School in Danville, Virginia, and had been a school teacher. The couple moved to Washington state around the turn of the century. Miss Harris recalls her mother telling her that in 1902, she had “looked out the back window, and there was nothing but woods. It wasn’t a very good experience for her at the time. My father just evidently resigned himself to it.”

“When [my father] first came here [Everett, Washington], he opened a barber shop in what is known as the old post office building. He started barbering when he was just a boy. He had to stand on a stool.”

Harris was self-taught on the guitar, but later he studied so that he could read music. Miss Harris recalled,

“My father’s guitar playing was easy for him—effortless. He [had glaucoma] and lost his sight about 1916. That’s how he happened to start with these entertainments. My mother didn’t sing though—she gave recitations. She was what they used to call an elocutionist. My mother taught me the numbers.

Included with the article was an early 20th-century newspaper article from the Everett Daily Herald, describing the Harris family’s performance for a show at the Tulalip Indian Agency, in Tulalip, Washington, on May 28 [no year given]. About this performance Miss Harris related,
I performed "Lizbeth Ann," by James Whitcomb Riley, and "Trouble in the Amen Corner," quite a long number for a child to have learned. I was about 11. Another was "When Grandma Danced the Minuet," . . . oh, that was a cute little number where I kind of danced a little bit. [Willie, my brother] sang "I Want to Be a Soldier Like Papa." That was awfully cute; I think it may have been a [popular song]. Willie lives in San Diego. He had a very naturally beautiful voice, and it was outstanding. He could play the guitar, too, like my dad, you know; he was self-taught. There weren't even any Victrolas at that time.

The guitar . . . was one of the most popular instruments at that time. But they just had that talent, you know. My father . . . and the two fellows in the picture . . . played for dances there. One of the men's names was Frank Dafoe, but I don't know the other one's name. I don't think he's living now. So many years have passed.

Once in a while there were serenades. I never will forget [when] my father serenaded a family at their home. I think it was usually at night . . . it was beautiful.

I remember one time they were talking about having performed in the Everett Theater. I was too small to really know because I never saw my father perform except at home. His hours were long during the week days and Sunday was the gala time. He played nearly all day on Sunday. I could hardly wait for Sunday to come. He had a book he used quite a bit, Songs that Never Grow Old. "When the Corn is Waving, Annie Dear," is one I know he used to sing. There were quite a few other songs in that book that he played.

Curious about the family's music, David Willson located a copy of Songs that Never Grow Old in the Seattle Public Library. In the Seattle Folklore Society Newsletter, he included a quote from the book's forward which stated that it was "a collection of the old-time songs that have long been tried and forever loved in contrast with the trashy and short-lived ragtime songs of the present day." Some of the songs in the book were "Old Black Joe," "Old Cabin Home," "Old Folks at Home," "Battle Cry of Freedom," "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and "America."

MOLLY O’DAY AND THE GOSPEL IN OLD-TIME COUNTRY MUSIC

By Dan Margolies

Any woman with a voice so pure and so perfectly country that Hank Williams got his first writing gig just to craft songs for her is someone who deserves a listen. Molly O’Day had such a voice. She sang country music in the style of her native eastern Kentucky, but she cannot and should not be pigeonholed simply as old-time or country, as she fused the two so deftly.

She had an undistilled old-time mountain voice with the timbre, depth, slides, and sobs that defy easy categorization or description. A “female Roy Acuff” is perhaps the most common description of O’Day in histories of country music, and it is a term that crops up in interviews with her contemporaries and friends. Her Dobro player, George “Speedy” Krise, says, “She was a great woman too—the female Roy Acuff.” Colin Escott wrote that, “She sang in Roy Acuff’s emotional, full-throated jubilee style.” O’Day sang in the realm of Patsy Montana and Rose Maddox, although she sounded like neither, and she prefigured the singing and songs of Wilma Lee Cooper, Kitty Wells, and Julia Mainer, as well as others. The great Mac Wiseman, who played bass and sang for O’Day in 1946 on her classic sides for Columbia, called her “the female Hank Williams, with that kind of presence on stage and a plain, simple sincerity.” West Virginia old-time musician John Morris believes she was “the greatest female vocalist ever” because she “put more power in a song than anyone.”

That power of O’Day’s voice can be heard on her recordings of “Poor Ellen Smith” and “I Wish I was a Single Girl Again,” and in signature songs like “Tramp on the Street,” “When God Comes to Gather His Jewels,” and “Six More Miles.” She was likewise a master of sentimental songs such as “Drunken Driver” (for which she once received 4000 requests in a single day) or “Please Don’t Sell Daddy Any More Whiskey” (bizarrely accompanied by a crying infant). Most centrally, Molly was a singer of the old-time gospel on many fine songs such as her standard “Matthew Twenty-Four,” as well as on masterpieces like “If You See My Savior,” “When the Angels Rolled the Stone Away,” or “Deeper Than the Stains Have Gone.”

Left: Molly O’Day was a first-rate old-time frailer and she always played a resonator banjo. Right: Molly O’Day at the height of her popularity.
She was also an excellent, driving banjo player. Molly frailed in the powerful style of Lily May Ledford of the Coon Creek Girls. She recorded several banjo numbers between 1947 and 1952, including “Higher in My Prayers” and “Traveling the Highway Home,” and always included her banjo playing in her live shows. But it was singing that truly distinguished Molly O’Day.

Molly O’Day has not disappeared from view, but her music and songs remain oddly unknown to many old-time musicians today. This is especially striking, because she was largely influential and popular in her day and is revered by many fans of early country music. The outline of her life and work is well known thanks to the detailed and vital work of John Morris and Ivan Tribe. Her music is readily available on a two-disc set from Bear Family, and Morris’ Old Homestead Records has released various collections of all of her commercial releases, her 1960s era gospel music, and rare home recordings. Yet O’Day deserves still greater attention from contemporary old-time musicians.

O’Day had a large influence on some of the most prominent singers of the older generation who are still singing today. In her autobiography, Loretta Lynn remembers listening to a battery-powered Philco radio and treasuring the music of “Roy Acuff, Ernest Tubb and Molly O’Day, who was the first woman singer I can remember.” Marge Sullivan, an important traditional gospel bluegrass singer of tremendous power and depth who has been playing as a professional continuously since 1949 with her fiddling husband Enoch, remarked that Molly O’Day had a profound influence on her singing. “I just loved that mountain style,” she recounts in her memoir. O’Day is cited as an influence by Hazel Dickens, and Ginny Hawker sings O’Day’s songs and has even taught workshops on her style. Yet aside from Kari Sickenberger of Polecat Creek, who is blessed with a voice seemingly designed for O’Day songs, none of the young contemporary female old-time country singers I have asked sing her songs or have even heard of her.

So, who was Molly O’Day and why did she turn her back on commercial success decades ago? Why has she not received greater attention today?

Molly O’Day was most active as a radio star and recording artist throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, a period of time often seen as decades too late (or too commercial) for some aficionados of old-time music. O’Day sang in that amorphous and vast middle realm where traditional old-time music veered into early country. Well-known bluegrass singer Mac Wiseman told me, “The music just wasn’t categorized. The terminology didn’t exist because disc jockeys didn’t exist. It was all mostly live music and barn dances on the radio.” That openness encouraged wider play. Wiseman felt that the rise of distinctions within and between traditional music “was the worst thing that ever happened to me—with what I was doing I was getting country airplay!” The performers of that era were not overly concerned with labels. The lines were indistinct and unnecessary.

If it was hard for the record companies and radio stations of the day to categorize the music, it is even harder today. Molly O’Day slips between the cracks. Perhaps she is in some way too country-sounding for old-time fans as well as too country sounding for contemporary country fans. Unfairly, women in old-time music often garner less attention than men, are exoticized as novelties, or are relegated to collections of women singers, when, in fact, they were at the heart of the tradition, as Susan A. Eacker and Geoff Eacker have explored in the Old-Time Herald (volume 8, in “A Banjo on Her Knee—Part I: Appalachian Women and America’s First Instrument”).

But the central reason Molly O’Day is not better known today is because she herself shunned the limelight and the clear path to commercial success as a country singer in order to follow her call to the church. She rejected commercial music for her Church of God in Cleveland, Tennessee, a move that, coupled with the religious focus of much of her subsequent recorded output, has deepened her obscurity to old-time musicians today. As John Morris points out, “She quit too early; she would have been much more popular.” Wiseman says, “She was quite a Christian lady. She had a calling to turn to Christianity right at the height of her popularity.” When O’Day was on the cusp of widespread popularity, with one of the best voices in old-time country music, she chose another path.

Like her contemporary Wade Mainer, who also traversed the fertile borders of old-time and early country, Molly O’Day ended her commercial career and turned to God’s service. This decision brought O’Day peace and a satisfied life. As she sang in “I Have But One Goal”: “I see others living/In manners so fine/Their earthly possessions/Much greater than mine/I’m tempted to envy/The treasures they hold/And then I remember/I have but one goal.”

In the early days, one of the most integral aspects of southern country music was the vibrant and unique stamp of evangelical Protestant Christianity. A high degree of religiosity suffused the music as it did the culture and region. It was also a hallmark of an areas settled by southerners, such as Ohio, Michigan, or Indiana. The Pentecostal Holiness tradition in particular bequeathed much verve and drive to old-time country music. Acuff and O’Day’s recordings were replete with religious sentiments, as was the music of such contemporaries and friends of O’Day as the Bailes Brothers (Kyle, Walter, Johnnie, and Homer), creators of early country masterpieces such as “Dust on the Bible,” “Drunkard’s Grave,” “Whiskey is the Devil (in Liquid Form),” and “You Can’t Go Half Way (and Get In).” The Bailes Brothers often played with or alongside O’Day and they similarly blended the lines between old-time, country, gospel, and bluegrass.

O’Day and the Bailes Brothers were following not just any religious or spiritual tradition, but one of particular potency in the Appalachians. It affirmed the literal truth of the Bible. (As O’Day sang, “It’s all coming true, God’s own Holy Bible/It’s all coming true/Take the Good Book off the shelf dear brother and read it for yourself.”) It demanded strict obedience and self-control, and warned of the fate of transgression and of the costs of drinking and sin. And the music reflected the strong focus upon the conversion experience, imminent End Times, and the afterlife. In 1951, fully embracing her new life, O’Day sang, “How He could change me so I know not how/ But praise the Lord, it’s done, the Victory is won/And it’s different, oh so different now/It’s different now since Jesus saved my soul…”
When My Time Comes to Go

Molly O’Day reinvented herself continuously, beginning with her name. She was born LaVerne Williamson in McVeigh, Pike County, Kentucky, on July 9, 1923, in a place she later described as “near the shirrtail fork of Jennie’s Creek.” Raised a coal miner’s daughter in this area rich in traditional music, the young LaVerne sought new sounds and new adventures at a young age. With her two brothers Cecil (called Skeets) and Joe (known as Duke), she formed a string band for square dances in which she played banjo. LaVerne was enamored of the female singers she heard on the Chicago radio station WLS, such as Patsy Montana (born Ruby Blevins) and especially Lulu Belle Wiseman (born Myrtle Cooper). She also learned the songs of Texas Ruby (Ruby Agnes Owens), a popular performer on the Grand Ole Opry. Both of the latter performed as part of couples (Texas Ruby with Curly Fox and Lulu Belle with Scotty Wiseman), which was a path to commercial success for female singers in that time period that LaVerne would shortly adopt.

At age 16, LaVerne moved to Charleston, West Virginia, to join her brother Skeets, who was playing fiddle alongside Johnnie Bailes in a group called the Happy Valley Boys at radio station WCHS. LaVerne changed her name to Mountain Fern, but did not maintain this name for long. Soon she adopted the name “Dixie Lee” and began to sing with a tenor banjo player called Banjo Murphy working at the same station. Following a confusing array of line-up changes and radio station moves so common to hillbilly radio performers of the era, Dixie Lee, Skeets, Johnnie Bailes, and Little Jimmy Dickens (of Bolt, West Virginia) ended up at WJLS in Beckley in a short-lived group called the Happy Valley Folks. West Virginia was a hotbed of great country music radio, and the evolving bands and crossed paths of musicians (all of them well documented in Ivan Tribe and John Morris’ Molly O’Day, Lynn Davis, and the Cumberland Mountain Folks: A Bio-Discography from the John Edwards Memorial Foundation, 1975) make for interesting if confusing study. Musicians of the region, many of whom knew each other and played together in bands or in shows, competed for the highly coveted slots of radio time. Radio play several times a day was essential for survival, and movement was often the key to gaining audiences. Speedy Krise fondly recalls playing on static-filled stations in West Virginia and Tennessee early in the morning and throughout the day, filling the air with as many songs, jokes, and marketing messages as they could fit into short slots.

The Happy Valley Folks were short-lived as a band, and Dixie Lee soon joined the Forty-Niners, a group led by guitarist Leonard “Lynn” Davis. Born in Paintsville, Kentucky, on December 15, 1914, Davis was an accomplished picker who had been performing professionally in a brother duet since 1936. Dixie Lee, only 17 years old at this point, joined his band with her brother Skeets as a guardian. Davis and Dixie Lee wed on April 5, 1941, and secured a partnership in music, religion, and life.

Dixie sang cowgirl songs for a time, but soon moved toward the material for which she would become famous, including both solo songs and duets with Davis. Both Lynn and Molly “really, really loved the old-time music” of their native Kentucky, according to Ivan Tribe. In the 1940s, Lynn once recorded Ed Haley on a wire recorder, although the recordings were rendered unplayable. Molly especially liked the music of Burnett and Rutherford, and at her request Tribe used to make tapes of their recordings for her. One group Molly O’Day came to like later in her life was a southern gospel group in Huntington, West Virginia, called the Perry Sisters, a group that according to Tribe, “could really cut loose with pretty hardcore stuff.” O’Day used to claim they produced a sound that was the “sweetest thing this side of heaven.”

Seeking exposure and new markets, the band moved around to stations as dispersed as Birmingham and Louisville. During this time, Dixie turned down an opportunity to join a new line-up of the Coon Creek Girls. In Birmingham, sometime before 1943, Dixie learned a song based upon the Book of Luke and written by Grady and Hazel Cole, called “Tramp on the Street.” A then-unknown Hank Williams had rearranged and transformed the song. Upon hearing it sung in this fashion (and observing the four encores it produced), Dixie asked for the lyrics, which Williams promptly gave her. The song soon became Molly O’Day’s signature, and the connection between her and Williams was fateful. An oft-told story from 1946 tells of a drunk and broke Williams trying to sell Davis a sheaf of his songs for $25. Davis paid him but the next day gave the sobered Williams back the songs and told him to keep the masterpieces.

In Louisville in 1942, fiddler Clayton McMichen told Dixie Lee that there was already a singer using her new name, so Dixie now changed her name to Molly O’Day. She adopted the first name Molly, according to Tribe and Morris, because it was similar to the name of Millie Wayne, a singer on WWVA. According to a 1992 interview done by Cochran Lyle, Davis recalled he told Molly, “Well Dixie, you’re Scotch-Irish, so put an ‘O’ on it.” So she came up with the name Molly O’Day. Molly O’Day was a name with glamorous connotations in those days—it was the name of a film actress who had appeared in 21 films in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the name of the first Avon comic book about a “super sleuth” (although that was not published until 1945).

Lynn and Molly enjoyed success and a growing audience in Louisville, but they moved several times over the next few years. In February 1944 they moved back to WJLS in Beckley and began playing with the Lilly Brothers and fiddler Burk Barbour of Pittsylvania County, Virginia. After moving to a radio station in Dallas during World War II, in 1945, Lynn and Molly ended up on the legendary WNOX Mid-Day Merry-Go-Round in Knoxville. By 1946 they had assembled the band with which they recorded their classic sides for Columbia, including Skeets back on fiddle after he got out of the Navy, and a young Speedy Krise, who became one of the pioneers of the Dobro in old-time country music (see sidebar article). They were soon joined by a young Mac Wiseman on the bass. “We was all young then,” laughs Krise. Leslie Keith, the writer of “Black Mountain Blues” (later called “Black Mountain Rag”) and a fiddler for the Stanley Brothers, had recommended Wiseman to Molly. This was not Wiseman’s first gig, but he describes it as “his first association with the big time.” He had “just a wonderful experience working with Molly.”

This band, named Molly O’Day and the Cumberland Mountain Folks, became enormously popular. Wiseman described WNOX as a “farm team for the Grand Ole Opry.” But the band’s position in Knoxville was so strong that they felt confident enough to turn down opportunities to work a regular show on the Grand Ole Opry. Wiseman emphasizes that Molly was “very, very,
Lower left: Lynn Davis and Molly O’Day, Louisville, 1943.
Lower right: Molly O’Day, early 1940s.
Top left: Molly O’Day and Lynn Davis with their first band, the Forty-Niners, and WJLS announcer Jack Pevora.
Top right: Molly O’Day and her brother Skeets Williamson doing some country comedy.

courtesy Bear Family Records
very popular in Knoxville.” Playing in schoolhouses, grange halls, and drive-in theatres (where Speedy remembers people honking their horns throughout the performances) all over the Southeast, they often had to perform two shows in a row to accommodate the crowds.

The live sets usually started with what Mac Wiseman calls “a tempo song,” meaning a fast instrumental piece. Lynn and Molly then would sing several songs. Skeets was always featured on several fiddle tunes in each show. According to Wiseman, he was “very good—more of a breakdown fiddler as opposed to a back-up fiddler.” Wiseman was given an individual slot in the program to sing five or six songs, everything from Bob Wills songs to ballads he knew as a child in Virginia. (Wiseman has now recorded these songs, which he calls “lots of old songs nobody records anymore,” with Jesse McReynolds.) Speedy describes Molly playing serious and gospel songs in her sets, but also playing banjo numbers, telling jokes, and even clogging for the audience. “Molly played a clawhammer banjo, when she wanted to she could,” he says. “She’d get out there and cut up whenever she wanted to. She could be funny. She could stand there and sing those serious Christian songs, and she could be funny, you know. . . . She was a good show person.”

Those who knew or played with Molly emphasize what a gentle and admirable person she was, in addition to being a fine singer. Wiseman stresses that Molly was “a very sincere person.” He says “Molly treated me royally and I admired her so much.” Speedy Krise says that “Molly was a real lady. A Christian person and everything, and Lynn was too. I liked Lynn real well. He was a good operator; he knew how to get things done.” Ivan Tribe, who knew her later in life, describes Molly as “a very soft-hearted and tender person who could be telling you about something and just start shedding tears.” John Morris says she “loved her, she was a wonderful lady.” He recalls Davis as a nice man and “always a wheeler-dealer.”

O’Day’s popularity was driven by her radio appearances, but she was granted the opportunity to record when Columbia Records scout Art Satherley heard her singing “Tramp on the Street” on the radio when he was vacationing in the Smoky Mountains. With Satherley that day happened to be Fred Rose of Acuff-Rose Music Publishing in Nashville. After O’Day was signed, it fell to Rose to find material for her to record. Lynn Davis suggested that Rose hire Hank Williams, who thereafter provided songs to Molly such as “I Don’t Care if Tomorrow Never Comes,” “Singing Waterfall,” “Six More Miles,” “The Evening Train,” and “When God Comes to Gather His Jewels.” All of these songs were recorded at sessions in Chicago and Nashville.

The band was joined for a time by Carl Smith on bass. Smith later played a Speedy Krise song in his solo first perfor-
mance on the Grand Ole Opry on his way to country stardom. O’Day and the Cumberland Mountain Folks recorded a variety of other songs in addition to the Hank Williams songs, including sentimental numbers like “Tear Stained Letter” and “I Heard My Mother Weeping,” old-time songs like “Poor Ellen Smith,” and heart-breaking duet masterpieces like “Too Late, Too Late.” Quite a large number of these songs were gospel numbers that became widely popular, notably “Matthew Twenty-Four.” O’Day’s signature “Tramp on the Street” sold over a million records, and soon became a standard song in the repertoire of many other performers. Molly O’Day seemed headed for a successful career in commercial country music.

It was at this time that Molly had a spiritual and perhaps psychological crisis, which she resolved by embracing the Church of God. The details of O’Day’s conversion are not precisely known, but what emerges from the record is a period of unhappiness, poor health, insecurity, and a search for meaning. Ivan Tribe has a tape of O’Day testifying about the holiness of fame and popularity in what he describes as “almost a performance of sorts, to get right down to it.” In her testimony, O’Day speaks of seeing her name up in lights and on the sides of buses and of being repulsed to find herself so thoroughly consumed with the things of this world. She was so distraught that she was on the verge of suicide. According to Lynn Davis’ recollection, O’Day focused on filling her deceased grandmother’s place in the church, “prais[ing] God, and shout[ing] up and down these aisles.”

After being saved, Molly fulfilled her recording obligations into 1952, but her recordings were all religious songs.

Lynn and Molly traveled unexpectedly to the International Bible College in Saskatchewan, Canada, where they stayed for an academic year. After a bout of tuberculosis and more religious training in North Dakota, Lynn was ordained in the Church of God in Cleveland, Tennessee, and Molly settled into a routine of testifying and religious singing shows. The two recorded for small labels like REM and GRS (which stood for Gospel Recording Service) in the 1960s, and these recordings are still available on the Old Homestead label. John Morris, who first heard O’Day when she was a child in Kentucky on a record his father bought, hoped to record more of her songs but could never get her to do it. She was “very insecure, it seemed like,” and when it came time for her to record late in her life she would get so tense that she would psychosomatically lose her voice. O’Day was “so intent on making it exactly right” that she never did record any new projects. Skeets recorded a fiddle album for Old Homestead on which he is backed by Molly on banjo. Davis maintained a radio show at WEMM in Huntington until his death, and was profiled with Molly in Goldenseal.

Molly O’Day’s religiosity and her style of mountain gospel music is not much in evidence in the mainstream old-time music scene today, although it persists in certain specific places where southern traditions are strongly maintained, such as WPAQ in Mt. Airy, North Carolina, or, much more broadly, as a central component of traditional bluegrass. According to Marge Sullivan, Bill Monroe invited the Sullivan Family to his Bean Blossom Festival for the first time in 1968 expressly because hippies had begun coming to the festival and he wished to make a stand and distinguish bluegrass “as a working man’s music—Christian, gospel, and God-fearing.” Sullivan recognized that bluegrass crowd as one in which “Molly O’Day was the spiritual factor in their lives.” Sullivan said that when she sang songs such as Molly O’Day’s “Matthew Twenty-Four,” “The spirit of the Lord came in a special, special way. Most anybody would understand that. You just have a visit from a higher power that came there to be with us.”

As much as Molly O’Day’s time and her songs were colored by evangelical Christianity, the geography of old-time music and musicians today is even more diverse than the geography of its southern home. There are any number of reasons, including the expansion of the old-time music world, the popularity of fiddle tunes and regional styles and the corresponding de-emphasis on what Wiseman called “story-type songs,” the social realm of fiddlers’ conventions and festivals, and, of course, the growing secularization of the culture in general. Yet it is worth considering the power of religion at the roots of old-time music, and the outlook of one of its greatest performers, for a broader understanding of the music and its place in southern traditions, past and present.

---

Dan Margolies is a historian, banjo player, and beekeeper in Norfolk, Virginia. He has been living and working in Korea for the last several months, but can be reached at dsmargolies@verizon.net.
George “Speedy” Krise is one of the pioneers of the Dobro in early country music as well as the Dobro player credited with being the first to record bluegrass. Speedy is probably best remembered for his excellent playing on Molly O’Day’s classic sessions for Columbia Records, but he also performed on the radio stations of the Southeast throughout the 1940s and 1950s and wrote many country songs that were recorded by Roy Acuff, Carl Butler, Mac Wiseman, and Jim & Jesse, among others. He got the nickname Speedy because (inevitably) he moved slowly, but “deliberate” is a more accurate description. Speedy is a gracious and soft-spoken individual as well as a tasteful player of old-time country music and bluegrass. He is more than just a pioneer of the Dobro in country and bluegrass—he established strong traditional standards in his Dobro playing, singing, and songwriting and has maintained the essence of this old-time country music sound over the years.

Speedy Krise was born in Hinton, West Virginia, on May 7, 1922. His father worked for the C & O Railroad and his homemaking mother played guitar and taught him songs. His mother picked a guitar in what Krise calls “Spanish-style playing . . . fandango kind of music, stuff like that.” His father “didn’t play, but he went around humming all the time.” Speedy always liked “what I call mountain music.” He played as much as he could at local events. “Never did square dance myself, but I always played for them—played for quite a few square dances in my time.” He could play a straight guitar a little bit, but Dobro became his main instrument.

Krise first heard a Dobro played by Bashful Brother Oswald in Roy Acuff’s band. “I guess he was the old original over everybody . . . Everybody knows who he is and wanted...
to play like he did, you know." Speedy began to learn to play the Dobro when Tom Ball, his future brother-in-law, came around the house with one, the first time Speedy had actually seen the instrument played. Speedy soon learned some licks. "I first started to play traditional Hawaiian songs" learned from Ball and also from 78s. "I listened to those old-time Hawaiian players like Roy Smock and Frank Ferera, guys like that." His sister Rene learned to "chord a straight guitar a bit" to accompany him, and later entered them in the amateur contest at Hinton High School. Speedy won first place with the "Hilo March" in the only contest he ever entered.

Krise started out playing "a straight guitar with a raised nut" but later, when playing on WJLS in Beckley around 1941, he was told by a band mate about an old Dobro for sale. It was "all broken up, pieces were in a box and everything, just laying there in a box. I bought it and had it fixed up. And that's the guitar I used on all the recording and radio stuff and everything. And I still have it today." He also still has the same steel that he got from his brother-in-law, though he now plays a newer instrument his daughter bought him that has his name in gold on the edge of the neck.

Speedy Krise moved into playing country music on the radio because "there was no demand for that traditional Hawaiian music at that time." He had been playing on the amateur program at WJLS and playing variously with Little Jimmie Dickens and the Lilly Brothers, and "Walter Bailes, we worked some shows together, stuff like that." Lynn Davis and Dixie Lee (Molly O'Day) and the Forty-Niners, also playing at WJLS, hired him to play for some personal appearances. "I was more onto the traditional Hawaiian music, and later when I started to play with Lynn and Molly I started picking up on the country stuff," he remembers. It is worth noting that Krise, one of the earliest country Dobro players at a time when there were only a handful playing in country music, came into the style somewhat by accident and helped create a new style essentially from scratch.

The live gigs with the Forty-Niners lasted for a time, and when the band left town Krise started his own band, Speedy Krise and the Blue Ribbon Boys, which played until he entered the Air Force in 1941. They played two shows a day on WJLS. "You were a celebrity then if you played on the radio. Every day, everybody would wait for you to come on." In a picture of the band from that era, Speedy appears in riding jodhpurs and the other members were likewise nattily dressed. The other band members were fixtures at WJLS—Roy and Carl Barbour and Ed "Rattlesnake" Hogan. Hogan got that name for singing the "Rattlesnake Blues."

A really striking thing one quickly notices when speaking with any of the original generation of musicians from the 1930s and 1940s is how many different radio stations they recall. Of course, these radio stations were critical to their success as musicians. But it is still fascinating how precisely they can remember call letters of stations across the county and who was playing at them at what times, all from 60-70 years ago. Krise turned 85 in 2007, and says, "It's hard for me to remember any dates now." But he certainly can instantly call up the station names, towns, and the musicians who played on them.

When Krise returned from service in World War II, he went to work as a telegraph operator on the C&O Railroad. One day, as he tells it, "I called my wife from Chicago and said 'I'm in Chicago and I'm with Lynn and Molly, we are going to play music.'" His wife Freda, who married him at age 15 in 1941, was surprised: "I thought he was in Clifton Forge! [Virginia]" Krise took his family and began playing with the band at their WNOX slot in Knoxville. He went on to play on O'Day's major recordings for Columbia, as described in the accompanying article, and had a critical role in honing her sound. On these recordings, Speedy helped establish the standard sound for Hawaiian guitar in early country music. Speedy and Freda were close to Lynn and Molly, remained friends with them long after they quit playing professionally, and visited them at their home in Huntington. Lynn made a good breakfast, according to Freda.

After his stint with the Cumberland Mountain Folks, Speedy played with a series of different bands. Krise's recordings with Carl Butler in 1950 and 1951 are credited with being the first recordings of the Dobro in bluegrass. He knew many of the great performers of the 1940s and 1950s (and points out that "there was only one Roy Acuff"). Krise played at WNOX as a part of a comedy duo with Fred Smith called the Arkansas Travelers, telling jokes interspersed with the tune from which they took the name. He also played with country singer and comedian Archie Campbell at that station.

After Archie Campbell left Knoxville for Nashville, Krise later played in a band called the Green County Boys with Fred Smith, Jack Shelton, and Benny Sims. Later in the 1950s he played in the band of Red and Billy Jean Lydick and the Dixie Drifters over WOAY in Oak Hill, West Virginia.

Although he never wrote any songs that Molly O'Day sang, Krise did pen a number of songs that were recorded and successful, including "Plastic Heart," "The Heartbreak Express," "You Plus Me," "No Trespassing," "Going Like Wildfire," and "You're Sweeter than Honey." After several years in the music business with a family to feed, Krise moved to Akron, Ohio, and took a job at the Cook Coffee Company. They lived in Akron for 44 years, until, as Freda says, it "seemed like home." He played with his sons in a rockabilly band named Bluestone for a time, and with his good friend Glenn Lehman, a multi-instrumentalist with whom he recorded several collections of old tunes and songs. He remembers Lehman, who died in the summer of 2006, as "a good friend, a good musician, and a wonderful guy." Lehman could play "just anything you wanted him to play—mandolin, guitar, fiddle, banjo, he could play it all." The tapes they recorded, including Old Time Dobro and More Sounds of Appalachia, are quite traditional, perched somewhere between the old country and bluegrass he has played since the late '30s. Krise calls it "bluegrass-type and then some country-like stuff." He likes Dobro playing that is "just enough and not too much."

Krise does not think much of contemporary bluegrass, largely because it has veered so far from its traditional roots. Speaking of one of the most prominent players of today, Krise says "I don't like that style of playing much because I don't like to just hear the notes, I like to hear the tune. The song won't even get any royalties like that since he isn't even playing it. They put the title on there, the song, but then you never even hear the song. You hear notes!"

Speedy Krise today lives with his wife Freda in a trim little home in Portsmouth, Virginia. The house features a wall of photographs commemorating his many years playing with the greats of the past. Speedy does not play much any more, although he does enjoy seeking out and listening to traditional music. He goes over to the country, bluegrass, and bluegrass gospel jam at Wayne Willis' Body Shop (profiled in the Old-Time Herald in 2004) and to the nearby monthly bluegrass get-together at the Ruritan Club in Hickory, Virginia.
THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF NORMAN BLAKE
By Daniel Fleck

In late 2000, the music of Norman Blake was featured on the traditional music-based soundtrack of the Coen Brothers’ film *O Brother Where Art Thou?* While the film, a freewheeling adaptation of *The Odyssey* set in the Depression-era South, was a commercial and critical success, the soundtrack became a significant pop culture sensation, winning Grammy awards, reaching the top of the pop music charts and ultimately selling several million copies. Many long-time devotees of the traditional music of the American South observed this phenomenon with some interest and a dose of trepidation as their beloved musical forms gained commercial acceptance, if only for a short while. While Blake’s inclusion in the soundtrack brought his music to a broad audience and certainly won him many new fans, his true legacy far surpasses this brief foray into popular culture. Blake is undoubtedly among the greatest contemporary practitioners of the art of American old-time country music.

Blake also spent a lot of time in his youth listening to country music on the radio and on 78 rpm records. The first music he was aware of was that of Roy Acuff, and he also cites as early influences the Monroe Brothers, Uncle Dave Macon, the Skillet Lickers and the Carter Family. He began playing guitar at age eleven, employing a thumb-and-finger approach. His grandmother taught him his first tune, “Spanish Fandango”, in open-G tuning. At this point in the evolution of country guitar, playing with a flatpick was uncommon. Almost all country guitarists, including the early bluegrass rhythm players played with a thumb and finger.

Shortly after taking up guitar, Blake began playing mandolin. He left school at age 16 to play mandolin in his first country band, the Dixie Drifters, playing the Tennessee Barndance on WNOX Radio in Knoxville. For the next few years, he honed his skills playing around the South in various bands. Drafted into the Army in 1961, he continued to play and perform country music while stationed in the Panama Canal Zone as a radio operator. His bluegrass band, the Fort Kobbe Mountaineers, was voted the best instrumental group of the Caribbean Command, with Norman voted best instrumentalist.

Upon return to the United States, Blake began giving guitar lessons through a Chattanooga music store. One day, a student of his inquired if he had ever heard of Doc Watson, which he hadn’t. Watson is the brilliant multi-instrumentalist from North Carolina who was among the first country guitarists to conceive of the idea of picking old-time fiddle tunes note for note on the guitar with a flatpick. Watson had elevated this innovative skill to tremendous heights with a combination of breathtaking speed, taste, and clarity of tone. Upon hearing this, Blake began employing a flatpick more often and would in time be widely recognized as a pioneer and leading exponent of this physically demanding style. On the evolution of his guitar playing Blake says, “I played with a thumb and fingerpick in my early days, backing up in bluegrass bands, playing more like Maybelle Carter and Lester Flatt. I knew how to use a flatpick because I played mandolin nearly as long as guitar. From time to time, I’d pick on...”

Norman Blake was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1938. At the age of 11 months, he was brought to Sulphur Springs in northwestern Georgia. Regarding the area he grew up in Norman said, “It’s mountainous, the last 50 or 60 miles of the Smokies, Cumberlands, whatever you want to call them. The weather is fairly mild and we’re far enough from the coast not to get the brunt of the storms we’ve been having. The mountains kinda block off things. It probably is a little isolated. If you’re following the Atlanta corridor, Interstate 75 down to Florida, you’re in a whole different world. It’s a little more quiet on this side of the mountains.”

The nearby train depot made a deep and lasting impression on young Norman. Trains and other aspects of rural life would be prominent themes in his later songwriting. “This was pretty far back down in the country and the railroad running through there all through my growing up was just the biggest happening around,” he recalls. “The railroad was the biggest thing we had to relate to. There was a lot of colorful railroad action on the Alabama Great Southern railroad—the steam and the green and gold locomotives. It was quite a scene. It certainly stirred the blood.”

Phil Blank
the guitar with a flatpick, but I thought it was kind of a novelty. When I heard Doc, I thought, well I can do that!” In a 2006 interview by Roy Kasten, Blake said “I always wanted to be self-contained. That was the great thing about Doc Watson. He could sit down with a guitar and sing a song and it was a complete thing. It didn’t require a band. Maybelle Carter was that way. It was full and had everything it needed to support itself.”

By the late 1960s, Blake had moved to Nashville and established himself as a highly skilled and respected country musician on a variety of acoustic instruments. Working with June Carter led to recording with her husband Johnny Cash and appearing on his ABC television program. About this time, Blake married and had two sons. Other artists he recorded and performed with during this time included Kris Kristofferson and Joan Baez. Along with Dobroist Tut Taylor and fiddler Vassar Clements, he was a member of John Hartford’s Aereo Plane Band and appeared on the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band’s Will the Circle Be Unbroken record. In 1969, he lent his expert guitar playing to Bob Dylan’s classic Nashville Skyline record.

Beginning in the early 1970s, however, Blake began to establish his own distinct legacy in American music with a string of extraordinary recordings that continues to this day. Playing solo, in collaboration with other artists, and in various ensembles, Blake is perhaps best known as a flatpick-style guitar player, but he also excels at fingerstyle guitar, mandolin, fiddle, and other acoustic stringed instruments. Furthermore, he is an outstanding composer of original songs and instrumentals in the old-time tradition.

Blake’s debut solo recording, Back Home in Sulphur Springs, was recorded in a single session at a Nashville studio in late 1971 and released the following year, the twelfth release by the upstart Rounder Record label. Combining traditional material with original compositions, instrumental and vocal performances, the record is deeply marked by Blake’s flatpick guitar playing and singing and features occasional overdubbed second guitar and mandolin. Tut Taylor provides his unique flatpicked Dobro accompaniment on some performances.

From the opening track, a traditional song entitled Little Joe (which Blake identifies in the liner notes as “one of my favorite old time songs”), one can clearly discern the emergence of an instrumentalist of extraordinary technical skill. However, this is only half the story as Blake has, in addition, developed a style and sound that is uniquely his own. In some respects, this opening track is a fine introduction to his early music as it clearly displays the integrating of technical virtuosity with a refined subtlety of taste, a defining feature of Blake’s music. In the guitar playing on Little Joe, Blake utilizes a favorite technique in which he slides the fretted note up to create unison notes on the adjacent string.

Sulphur Springs is also noteworthy for Blake’s warm, unaffected vocals and the inclusion of several original compositions, both instrumentals and songs. In Crossing No. 9, Ginseng Sullivan and Down Home Summertime Blues, Blake draws on childhood experiences, his love of trains, and memories of growing up in the South to create new, distinctive songs with an old-time sound. Also included, in addition to traditional fiddle tunes arranged for solo guitar, is an instrumental that defies categorization entitled Warp Factor No. 9.

Here it may be helpful to recall friend and fellow musician Peter Ostroushko’s impressions upon first observing Norman Blake in the early 1970s: “Norman was performing at a coffeehouse at the U. of M. in Minneapolis and, geez Louise, transcendental flatpicking indeed!
This guy was channeling Martian fiddle tunes from other galaxies through his old Martin D-28. He had raised flat-picking to a whole new level that we humans could only dream of. Beam me up, Norman..."

Among the many admirers of the Sulphur Springs record was aspiring musician Nancy Short of Independence, Missouri, who was then living in Nashville. “I spent a lot of time cross-legged on the floor listening to Sulphur Springs,” she says. “I was just so entranced by everything on it. I started out as a rocker so when that came across my ears I thought, ‘wow, this is a relief.’” Nancy met Norman at the Exit/In in Nashville in late 1972, when an ensemble she was playing with was his opening act. On seeing him for the first time Nancy recalls, “I was impressed, just like everybody else. Back in the day, he was wild. Maybe he hit on me, but I think I hit on him. But who can sort these things out?” Nancy was and is a talented multi-instrumentalist. She soon began recording and performing with Norman, appearing on the majority of his recordings and adding a new and powerful dimension with her innovative cello playing. Shortly afterward, they were married and moved into a large farmhouse they built in Rising Fawn, Georgia, just a few miles from where Norman grew up. They remain in their peaceful country home to this day, a haven filled with 78 rpm records, sheet music, gig posters, antique furniture, and a vast store of instruments.

Blake’s two subsequent recordings, The Fields of November and Old and New, consist almost entirely of original songs and instrumentals. In addition to guitar and mandolin work, the records feature for the first time a new musical element that would become an essential part of Blake’s repertoire thereafter, namely fiddle and cello duets with Nancy. Original tunes like Green Leaf Fancy and Dry Grass on the High Fields would come to be described as “hillbilly baroque,” a style of music that would reach its peak during the Blakes’ “Rising Fawn String Ensemble” era of the early 1980s. In these efforts they were often joined by fiddler James Bryan.

Blake’s original songs on these record-
Southern Railroad Blues

to themes identified earlier, Blake expressings are also worthy of mention. In addition to themes identified earlier, Blake expresses, in songs like Greycoat Soldiers, Southern Railroad Blues, Uncle, My Old Home on the Green Mountainside and The Railroad Days, a keen interest in American history, a sort of romantic disenchantment with modern society, and a nostalgia for simpler times. Especially poignant is Billy Grey, an original ballad of ill-fated love that sounds as old as the hills. In these early collections, Blake demonstrates his poetic gifts and begins to assert himself as a contemporary songwriter of note.

In the late 1970s and early ’80s, Blake’s music went in distinctly different directions. Likewise, his choice of guitars shifted. Up until this point, Blake had primarily used a 1934 Martin D-28 on recordings and for performances. Blake now set this aside in favor of a smaller-bodied 12-fret guitar with a slotted tuning mechanism, a style of instrument he has come to be associated with ever since. With a change in hardware came a change in music as, in a series of recordings, Blake now sought to emphasize ensemble work over solo work. The ensemble work of these years is characterized by an emphasis on instrumental rather than vocal work and subtlety over dazzling technique. Norman eventually returned his focus to solo guitar but his playing would be changed hereafter. While still capable of playing “hot licks” and “machine-gun runs” with the best of them, his guitar playing would increasingly be marked by delicacy and refinement, giving the distinct impression that every note he plays is exceedingly precious.

In 1987, Blake performed with and recorded the first of two collaborative records with guitar virtuoso Tony Rice. Rice employs a flashier, more complex and modern approach than Blake, often venturing far up the neck of the instrument. Norman initially expressed reservations about the project. However, the contrast in styles between the two masters ultimately made for a compelling musical dynamic. On the second of the Blake and Rice records, released in 1990, they are joined on three tracks by Doc Watson.

In the early 90s, the Blakes shifted to Shanachie Records and continued their prodigious output, garnering a series of Grammy nominations and extending their already considerable legacy still further. In 1997, the Blakes’ marriage and musical partnership ended but they remarried three years later. “I couldn’t take it after 20 years on the road,” said Nancy, reflecting on this period of their lives. “I had to fall back and regroup. But we discovered after all the mess we’d been through that we still loved each other.” The separation from Nancy clearly had a distressing effect on Norman. On the cover of his 1999 solo recording Far Away, Down on a Georgia Farm, he appears emaciated and unhappy. For the record itself, he composed original songs that are clearly heart-rending laments for his momentarily lost love.

Having weathered the O Brother storm, the Blakes released a recording of duets in 2004 called The Morning Glory Ramblers. It was their least ambitious musical outing but still welcomed by fans of Blake and old-time music. Given the turmoil that had characterized their personal lives in the years preceding, perhaps the rehearsing and setting down on record of these lovely and simply accompanied duets was a much needed act of therapeutic reconstitution and thus a more ambitious project than it appears at first glance. The Blakes’ most recent release, Shacktown Road, was issued earlier this year. While a new Blake release is always a cause for celebration, this most recent collection is especially noteworthy for the inclusion of old friend and master musician Tut Taylor, with whom Blake had not recorded with since the days of Aero-Plain and Sulphur Springs.

On the current status of old-time music, Norman has this to say, “If you say ‘old-time music’ nowadays, the first thing that comes to mind is the fiddle and banjo dance crowd. I feel a little bit put off by that because while I like that very much and have certainly been involved in that, I just feel that old-time music is a broader thing. It’s sort of like bluegrass. You have this straight, blinder approach of what is bluegrass too and it’s gotten to be so generic. And I think old-time music is kind of generic now. And that’s a little sad because old-time music is everything that’s ever gone on for the last however many hundred years. It’s certainly been more than just fiddle tunes.”

Now approaching his 70s, Blake is widely regarded as a master instrumentalist, singer and composer. He has created an impressive body of work over the last 40 years, wide-ranging and enduring. He is both a great resource for his deep knowledge of American music and a source of extraordinary creativity. For Blake, who avoids the spotlight and still refuses to fly in airplanes, the superlatives his name regularly conjures up are peripheral to his ultimate goals of living simply, expressively, and meaningfully, rooted in the past with an eye towards the future.

Daniel Fleck is a graduate student and old-time musician currently living in Memphis, Tennessee. He can be contacted at danino82@yahoo.com.

Sources

**Articles:**


**Book:**


**Videos/DVDs:**

*Norman Blake - Guitar Techniques*. Homespun DVDBLAGT23.


*Legends of Flatpicking*. Vestapol 13005.

*My Dear Old Southern Home*. Shanachie 208.


*Planet Rider*. Central Sun Video.

For discographical information on Norman and Nancy Blake’s 30-plus recordings and for performance information, go to their website: www.somagency.com/NormanBlake/index.html.
The three members of the original Carter family were (l-r) Sara, A. P., and Maybelle Carter. Behind the trio is Maybelle’s husband and A. P.’s brother Ezra (“Eck”) Carter, late 1920s.
It was Galax, Virginia, band leader Ernest V. "Pop" Stoneman who recruited Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family and got them to record for Peer. Stoneman himself was a major country music performer by the late 1920s, and had recorded successfully for OKeh Records, a company Peer had worked for as producer as early as 1924 when he recorded the hit song "The Titanic." Stoneman also recorded for the Edison, Gennett, and Victor labels. (At the time of the 1927 sessions, Victor had not yet been purchased by RCA.) Peer had recorded nearly 20 sides featuring Stoneman in 1926, and wanted to get additional sides by Stoneman and his fellow musicians.

Peer leased an empty warehouse in downtown Bristol (a historical marker now marks the location) for ten days of recording on a state-of-the-art electric recording machine. He would record 76 songs by 21 different acts. The Bristol Sessions captured, for the first time, a true cross-section of southern country music and ultimately proved to be one of the most pivotal and influential events in American musical history. Johnny Cash once said "These recordings in Bristol in 1927 are the single most important event in the history of country music."

Mindful of the power of publicity, Peer invited a reporter from the Bristol News Bulletin to observe a July 27 session at which Ernest Stoneman and Eck Dunford recorded "Skip to Ma Lou." The following day a front-page story stressed that Stoneman had earned $3,600 in royalties during 1926. Many years later Peer said, "This worked like dynamite." Historian Charles K. Wolfe quoted him: "The very next day, I was deluged with long-distance calls from the surrounding mountain region. Groups of singers who had not visited Bristol during their entire lifetime arrived by bus, horse and buggy, trains, or on foot." Wolfe also included Peer’s own description of the goal of the sessions: "In no other section of the South have the prewar melodies and old mountaineer songs been better preserved than in the mountains of East Tennessee and Southwest Virginia...and it is primarily for this reason that the Victrola Company chose Bristol as its operating base."

Mississippi singer and guitar player Jimmie Rodgers recorded two songs as a solo act—"The Soldier’s Sweetheart" and "Sleep, Baby, Sleep"—when a dispute over his group’s name resulted in...
a falling out. The Tenneva Ramblers, the name Rodgers rejected, also recorded several songs. Rodgers would go on to sell millions of records before his untimely death in 1933. Other groups who recorded included the Blue Ridge Corn Shuckers, the Bull Mountain Moonshiners, the West Virginia Coon Hunters, Ernest Stoneman’s Dixie Mountaineers, and Charles and Paul Johnson with the Tennessee Wildcats. Solo musicians included Blind Alfred Reed, B. F. Shelton, Alfred G. Karnes, J. P. Nester, and Henry Whitter. The Carter Family (A. P., Sara, and Maybelle) recorded five songs over two days including “Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow,” “Little Log Cabin By the Sea,” “The Storms Are on the Ocean,” “Single Girl,” “Married Girl,” and “The Wandering Boy.”

According to Carter Family biographers Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, “When they arrived upstairs in the warehouse loft, the walls were hung with blankets. The recording machine was partitioned off by a second set of blankets, and all they could see of it was one horn jutting through a small aperture. Ralph Peer was there, with his new wife (and former secretary), Anita Glander Peer, and with two engineers who ran the recording machine.” The businesslike Mrs. Peer ushered Gladys and baby Joe (Sara and A. P. Carter’s children) over into the corner, while Peer calmly explained to the three nervous musicians that they would have to mount the jerry-built platform, get right up next to the horn, and direct their voices into it. So they climbed up on the wooden stage, and drew in close to one another.

Highlights of the Country Music Hall of Fame’s Big Bang exhibition include the original manuscript of “Old Time Corn Shuckin’” (a comedy skit written by “Pop” Stoneman and recorded by his group as the Blue Ridge Corn Shuckers). Also on display is Stoneman’s Oscar Schmidt autoharp and its handmade
case, which he had used as a resonator, amplifying his instrument by resting it on the case lid. There’s also the Carter Family’s first recording, a 78 rpm disc of “The Poor Orphan Child,” backed with “The Wandering Boy,” which was recorded in Bristol on August 1, 1927, and released the following November.

Still visible on a 1932 recording contract are the faded signatures of A. P. Carter and Ralph Peer that guaranteed the Carter Family $75 per song for two years. The exhibit also displays Jimmie Rodgers’ Underwood Standard typewriter, which he used to type lyric sheets for use during his recording sessions. At his next recording session, three months after the Bristol Sessions, Jimmie Rodgers recorded the hit that made him a national star, “Blue Yodel (T for Texas).” Also on display is a lyric sheet that Rodgers used as a guide when recording his “Blue Yodel No. 9” with jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong in Hollywood in July, 1930. The colorful personality and distinctive vocal style that Rodgers brought to his music would influence generations of singers, from Gene Autry, Hank Snow, and Ernest Tubb, to Hank Williams and Waylon Jennings. Other interesting items include an autoharp used by Sara Carter and the Martin 00-18 guitar used by Jimmie Rodgers on their respective Bristol Sessions recordings. These are on display in the Museum’s core exhibition, Sing Me Back Home: A Journey Through Country Music. A local phonograph dealer ran a small box advertisement in the June 24, 1927 edition of the Bristol Herald-Courier, the first public announcement of the upcoming Bristol recording sessions, which can be seen in the exhibit. There’s also one of the first Carter Family songbooks. Published by Peer’s Southern Music, it includes words and music to “Single Girl, Married Girl” and four other songs recorded at the Bristol Sessions. And finally, on loan from the Carter Family Museum, there’s a fruit tree catalog. Working as a door-to-door fruit-tree salesman, A. P. Carter carried this leather-bound catalog with him in 1914 when he met his future wife, Sara Dougherty, singing and playing autoharp on her front porch.

The Bristol Sessions exhibition continues through December, 2007. For further information on this and other exhibits, view www.countrymusichalloffame.com.

James C. Weaver is a freelance writer specializing in travel, food, wine, and local music. He lives in Flourtown, Pennsylvania.
This photo of Posey Rorer was probably made in West Virginia around 1918.

collection of Kinney Rorrer
Posey Wilson Rorer was born on September 22, 1891 to W. T. and Lucy Abigail Rorer in Franklin County, Virginia, between the hill country villages of Henry and Ferrum. The Rorer family lived a hardscrabble life not unlike most of the residents of the region. In World War I and World War II, Franklin County would lose 33 and 55 men, respectively. However, in the American Civil War, the county had more than 300 men who did not return. The loss of 300 men in a county of 12,000 citizens left a lot of widows and orphans and an enormous amount of poverty.

Seeking an escape from that poverty, the people of Franklin County began to turn the local grain crops into liquid assets. By 1900 there were almost a hundred government-licensed distilleries operating in Franklin County. With the heavy concentration of people of Scots-Irish and German heritage, the local population had the whiskey-making and brewing skills necessary for the success of the industry. However, when Virginia adopted Prohibition in 1914, the legal distilleries closed. Many operators simply went underground and continued to refine their product just in time for national Prohibition which went into effect in 1920. By the mid-1920s, the moonshine trade was booming in Franklin County, especially around the community of Shooting Creek in the southwestern end of the county.

To get an idea of the staggering amount of whiskey produced in that county, one need only look at the amount of sugar hauled into the little village of Ferrum, near Posey’s home place. Whiskey making required a lot of sugar and yeast. Up to ten pounds of sugar was required to produce a single gallon of some types of whiskey. Between January of 1928 and March of 1935, the N & W Railroad transported 19,379,633 pounds of sugar into Ferrum, of which nearly 13,000,000 pounds went to the Ferrum Mercantile Company alone. (For further reading on this topic, see T. Keister Greer’s The Great Moonshine Conspiracy Trial of 1935).

Born with severely clubbed feet, Posey was, no doubt, unable to run and play in the hills and hollows near Henry as other kids did. His family lived in a one-room log cabin with a kitchen in a separate building. The house was furnished with furniture made by Posey’s father. The children wore clothes made by their mother from feed sacks or store-bought cloth. The family produced and preserved their food. Wild game supplemented their diet. Little was bought from the general store in Henry except salt, sugar, and sheets of lead that Posey’s dad used to make bullets. Posey attended school through the sixth grade and helped with chores around the 40-acre farm.

At some point early on, Posey took an interest in music. His father played a little on the banjo and may have encouraged him to play string music. Posey made his first fiddle out of a wooden cigar box, and he made his first bow from a limber stick and horsehair. Posey’s first cousin and neighbor, Bob Moore, was a clawhammer banjo player, and the two of them played for dances in the Rorer home while both boys were still in their teens. Posey’s niece Nanny, born in 1905, stated that her earliest childhood memories were those of Posey Rorer playing for a dance at her home.

When Virginia went “dry” in 1914, Posey’s father, among others, was unable to continue working at the Bailey Distillery in Ferrum. As a result of the poverty in the region, a number of Posey’s childhood friends migrated to the coalfields of West Virginia during World War I. Among those who left Franklin County were Posey’s musical pals, guitarist Jim McMillan and banjoist Harvey Stone. Harvey encouraged Posey to join them.

Above: Posey Rorer operated an electric motor in the coal mines. This was taken at Big Stick, West Virginia, 1917.
near Sophia, West Virginia. By 1917, Posey was working for the Pemberton Coal Company at Big Stick and living in a camp called Hot Coal, West Virginia. Among other jobs, Posey worked as trapper (opening and closing mine doors) and ran an electric coal car in and out of the mines. Prior to Harvey Stone’s military service, he and Posey, along with Jim McMillan, played to entertain their fellow miners around the coal camps.

In the fall of 1918, Posey returned to Franklin County to visit his family. Posey had with him a new musical pal, Charlie Poole, whom he had apparently encountered in the coal fields of West Virginia. Posey found every member of his family confined to sick beds in their one-room log cabin. The Spanish influenza pandemic was raging and the Rorer family was suffering like the rest of the nation. Posey and Charlie nursed the family back to health by giving them “coffee laces”—coffee laced with moonshine whiskey.

Posey and Charlie later joined Homer Philpott, one of Posey’s neighbors in Franklin County, to make a “run of whiskey.” After expenses the trio cleared $3,300, to be split evenly three ways. Poole took his $1,100 and used part of it to buy a fancy banjo. Rorer used his money to go to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, to have his feet straightened. Although the surgeons did turn his feet straight, after breaking his legs to do so, Posey still walked with a hopping motion.

By the early 1920s, most of the Rorer family, including Posey’s father, had moved to the cotton mill village of Spray, North Carolina, just a few miles south of the Virginia state line. The Rorers had joined a large migration of hill country people moving out of Franklin County and the surrounding counties of Floyd and Patrick to find work in the newly built cotton mills. Between 1896 and 1906, more than a half-dozen mills were constructed around the adjoining villages of Spray, Leasburg, and Draper (now Eden), North Carolina. The owners sent recruiters into the nearby hills armed with brochures telling the poor farmers about good wages and good living conditions in the mill villages. Though the wages were low and houses were only adequate, it was still a marginal improvement over living conditions back in the hills. W. T. Rorer, Posey’s 69-year-old father, earned $21.85 for the week of August 7, 1920, for 60 hours of work in the Nantucket Mill in Spray. Though this was only about 36 cents an hour, it was a vast improvement over the 20 cents per
day that he had earned cutting crossties for the railroad in Franklin County.

On December 11, 1920, Posey Rorrer became Charlie Poole’s brother-in-law, when Poole married Posey’s younger sister, Lou Emma. Poole and Rorrer now spent more time playing music together, as Posey had moved across the street from the Poole’s house on Flynn Street in Spray. Sunday afternoons usually found Charlie and Posey, joined by guitarist Norman Woodlief, playing under a large tree in Lou Emma’s front yard. Though the three of them worked in the mills at various times, music began to consume more of their free time. The trio would ramble through the hill country of southwestern Virginia and the coalfields of West Virginia, busking on street corners, courthouse squares, and any other place that would draw a crowd. Calling themselves the “North Carolina Ramblers,” they journeyed as far as Huntington, West Virginia and Ironton, Ohio. By the winter of 1925 Charlie Poole, Posey Rorrer, and Clarence Foust were playing in a series of fiddle contests organized by Rev. Rufus E. Holder. Rev. Holder claimed that the proceeds from the contests would be used to support an orphanage in Bluefield, West Virginia. Poole, Rorrer, and Foust were listed as a trio from Gobbler’s Knob, North Carolina. The name “Gobbler’s Knob” was no doubt made up by Poole—the name turned up in a skit he recorded for Brunswick Records in 1929. The band played at Rev. Holder’s contests in Tazewell, Virginia, and Bristol and Kingsport, Tennessee, among other places. The contest held on March 4, 1925, in Kingsport is especially noteworthy because its results were published in the Kingsport Times newspaper on the next day. In the contest Rorrer was listed as having played “Richmond Cotillion,” “Soldier’s Joy,” and “Mississippi Sawyer.” Posey won second prize losing the first place to blind fiddler Sam Via of Charleston, West Virginia. Posey won over other fiddlers, including D. B. “Dud” Vance of Bluff City, Tennessee, who played “Old Reuben,” “Clover Blossoms,” and “Double Header.” In addition to Vance, A. S. “Uncle Am” Stewart of Morristown, Tennessee, also failed to place in the top three. Third place had gone instead to J. L. Lambert of Mercer County, West Virginia. Posey won over other fiddlers, including D. B. “Dud” Vance of Bluff City, Tennessee, who played “Old Reuben,” “Clover Blossoms,” and “Double Header.” In addition to Vance, A. S. “Uncle Am” Stewart of Morristown, Tennessee, also failed to place in the top three. Third place had gone instead to J. L. Lambert of Mercer County, West Virginia. Posey won over other fiddlers, including D. B. “Dud” Vance of Bluff City, Tennessee, who played “Old Reuben,” “Clover Blossoms,” and “Double Header.” In addition to Vance, A. S. “Uncle Am” Stewart of Morristown, Tennessee, also failed to place in the top three. Third place had gone instead to J. L. Lambert of Mercer County, West Virginia.
Waltz.” Poole, Rorer, and Foust also entertained the audience by playing “The Devil’s Dream,” “Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down,” and “Long-Eared Mule.” What the article did not tell was that Rev. Holder later ran off with all the money, leaving the trio stranded.

By the summer of 1925, the band was confident enough to make its way to New York, hoping to get an audition with a major record label. They took jobs at local factories in New Jersey to support themselves while hoping for an audition. Poole took a day off work and rode the ferry to New York City. Barely able to read a stop sign, Poole found his way to the Columbia Phonograph Company and boldly asked for an audition. A few days later the North Carolina Ramblers were successful with their audition and cut four sides for Columbia on July 27, 1925. The combined sales for the two releases were more than 167,000 copies—a staggering total when even a “pop” record was considered a hit if it sold more than 20,000 copies. Even though the band received only $75 and no royalties for the recording efforts, it did mean that Columbia would be relentless in persuading the band to record again—this time with royalties.

When the North Carolina Ramblers returned to Columbia studios in September of 1926, it was Posey Rorer’s fiddle that led off the session. Posey recorded four fiddle tunes, including “Flyin’ Cloud,” “Wild Horse,” “Forks of Sandy,” and “Mountain Reel” (or “Miss McLeod’s Reel”). Poole recorded two vocals the following day, Friday, September 17, 1926, but Rorer led the recording session the next day with four more instrumentals: “Too Young to Marry,” “Ragtime Annie,” “Little Dog Waltz,” and “A Kiss Waltz.” These tunes were typical of Posey’s square dance style of fiddling.

Posey’s reputation as a back-up fiddler to Poole’s singing led other musicians to seek him out as a back-up musician.
Between March of 1927 and February of 1928, Posey Rorer participated in six different recording sessions backing up such singers as Kelly Harrell, Roy Harvey, and Bob Hoke. His fiddling was heard on Victor, Columbia, Gennett, Paramount, Brunswick, and Vocalion records as well as the budget labels such as Champion, Supertone, Challenger, and Broadway.

Early in 1928, Posey and his brother-in-law Charlie parted ways in a dispute over royalties. In June of 1927, Poole had signed a new contract with Columbia that called for all royalties on records listed as “The North Carolina Ramblers” to go to Poole. This included the instrumentals that Posey had recorded earlier with Charlie that were labeled as “The North Carolina Ramblers” performed by Posey Rorer.” Now, for the second time in his life, Posey felt he had been a victim of financial wrongdoing. During his tenure in the mines of West Virginia he had trusted the owner of his boarding house to hold his earnings for him. When Posey asked for his money for a trip home, he discovered the owner had spent it all. Posey never forgave the boarding house proprietor, nor did he forgive Charlie Poole.

Though Posey never recorded with Charlie Poole again, his recording career was far from over. In September of 1928, Posey Rorer with Preston Young on guitar and Buster Carter on banjo, 1931.

age of 39 in the spring of 1931. The ten sides Posey recorded with Buster Carter and Preston Young showed that he was still at the top of his game as a fiddler. His hard driving fiddling on “I’ll Roll in My Sweet Baby’s Arms” and his soulful sound on “A Lazy Farmer Boy” showed him to still be a versatile and powerful fiddler.

The Great Depression ended many recording careers and broke many spirits, including that of Posey Rorer. With a wife and a growing family, Posey struggled to find work wherever he could. He began working for the WPA as a woodcutter. On Saturday, June 13, 1936, he was found dead in the park a short distance behind his house on Flynn Street in Spray, North Carolina, where he and Poole had so often played together in happier times. He was 44 years old.

Though he died young, Posey Rorer’s legacy as an old-time mountain fiddler lived on. When Folkways Records issued the Anthology of American Folk Music, edited by Harry Smith, in 1952, it contained four cuts featuring Posey Rorer on back-up fiddle. This was more than any other fiddler featured in the series—a testament to the quality of Posey Rorer’s work.

Posey is often described by those who knew him well as a likeable, gentle person with a keen wit. Matt Simmons’ daughter said that her mother did not like many of the musicians that her dad brought home, but her mother really liked Posey because he was a gentleman. One can imagine the shock when Posey’s niece was asked to describe his personality and she replied, “He was mean.” She then told why she held that opinion of him. It seems that, as a little girl, she would get her way by holding her breath until she turned blue. One day she held her breath in front of Posey. He simply picked up a bucket of cold water and threw it on her. She never held her breath again in front of Posey. She added, with a twinkle, “He wasn’t mean. He was smart!”

Kinney Rorrer is from Eden, North Carolina, where he grew up listening to the music of his great-uncle Posey Rorer and Charlie Poole. He plays old-time banjo in the Poole style, wrote a biography of Charlie Poole entitled Ramblin’ Blues: The Life and Songs of Charlie Poole, and co-hosts a weekly radio program of bluegrass and old-time music called “Back to the Blue Ridge.” (www.wvtf.org) Kinney may be contacted at ktrorrer@gamewood.net, or by writing to him directly at 301 Carson Jones Road, Danville, Virginia 24540.

Special thanks to Dr. Patrick Huber of the University of Missouri - Rolla for the information on the newspaper account of the Rufus Holder fiddlers contests.
POSEY RORER’S FLYING CLOUD
Transcript by Clare Milliner and Walt Koken

“Flyin’ Cloud” is a two-key tune recorded by the North Carolina Ramblers (Posey Rorer-fiddle, Charlie Poole-banjo, Roy Harvey-guitar). The band recorded it in New York City on September 16, 1926 as Columbia 15106-D.

GDAE
A VISIT WITH BANJO MAKER MIKE RAMSEY
By Malcolm Smith

Comedian and banjo player Steve Martin once quipped, “You can’t play a sad song on a banjo.” If that’s true, then renowned North Carolina banjo maker Mike Ramsey has spread a lot of joy. Early this year Mike hand-built his 2,000th open-back banjo at his Chantevelle Workshop in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. According to Mike the happiness that accompanies his instruments is reciprocal. “The best part of the job is getting to hear and watch people enjoying my banjos.”

A few years ago, Mike had just finished a fretless banjo for a young clawhammer virtuoso named Adam Hurt. Mike delivered the banjo to Adam at the Annual Appalachian String Band Music Festival near Clifftop, West Virginia, in 1999. Adam, who was 15 at the time, took the new banjo home, after placing in the youth competition with another of Mike’s banjos that he already owned. He practiced on the new fretless, returned to the festival in 2000 and used it to place second in the overall banjo competition, shocking the clawhammer community by being one of the youngest players to ever rank so high at Clifftop. “I can’t describe that feeling very well,” recalled Mike. “It just brought a huge smile to my face, hearing my banjo played like that.”

Upon graduating from college, Mike became a mid-level corporate manager for Proctor and Gamble, supervising production. “I liked the perks and the money,” Mike said, “but the stress and pressure nearly killed me. They just couldn’t quite stuff me in that jar.” After supervising as many as 250 people and overseeing the development of a sawmill operation, Mike left Proctor and Gamble in 1983 to start a small hardwood lumber operation in Ohio. While living in Ohio, Mike learned a lot about hardwoods as he continued to increase his knowledge and understanding of old-time music.

It was then that Mike began the hobby that would become his livelihood. “I met Russ Childers, a banjo player in Octavia, Ohio, and began to take my first lessons on the banjo,” said Mike. After working at it for a while, Mike entered and won his first banjo contest. “Then I knew I was hooked,” said Mike. After working at it for a while, Mike entered and won his first banjo contest. “Then I knew I was hooked, that old-time music was always going to be a part of my life,” he said. In 1986, with the help and encouragement of banjo player Whitt Mead (of the Rhythm Rats), Mike built his first banjo.

“I had ordered a banjo from one of my heroes, Kyle Creed, and Kyle died,” said Mike. “I just couldn’t find an old-time banjo that I really liked the sound of. I bought and sold a whole bunch of them and wasn’t satisfied. So finally, Whitt said, ‘Why don’t you just build one yourself?’ So I did.” That suggestion definitely changed Mike’s life and may have changed the history of the instrument.

Mike built his first banjo in the basement of his Ohio home. He fitted a homemade neck to an old rim that he bought from John Bernunzio, a banjo collector and dealer in Rochester, New York. Mike built his first banjo in the basement of his Ohio home. He fitted a homemade neck to an old rim that he bought from John Bernunzio, a banjo collector and dealer in Rochester, New York. After the first one, he spent considerable time experimenting with various tone rings, rim composition and depth, and other variables in search of what he called “that magic banjo”—the banjo Kyle Creed never finished for him. He was also striving for a banjo design that uniquely accommodated the “Round Peak” style of the Blue Ridge mountain community in North Carolina that fostered such revered old-time musicians as Tommy Jarrell and Fred Cockerham. “We even got out the cornmeal and vibrated it on the head of the banjos to see where the best bridge placement would be so we could get that sound I was searching for,” recalled Mike.

At the same time, Mike began buying and studying older banjos from the late 1800s and early 1900s made by Vega, S. S. Stewart, Dobson, Bacon, and other makers. His goal was to build banjos that paid...
respect to the earlier makers incorporating advancements in technology to accommodate the styles and needs of modern old-time players. He began to ask musicians, sellers such as Bernunzio, and the staff at Elderly Instruments for feedback on the banjos he was making.

Then, in 1992, Mike attended the Tennessee Banjo Institute in Lebanon, Tennessee. There he met Bart Reiter, a more established banjo maker. Bart, a former employee of Elderly Instruments (a popular source for stringed instruments and accessories in Lansing, Michigan), was considered by many to be one of the preeminent builders of open-back banjos. “Bart took time to look at my work, give feedback, and talk to me about how to set up production. He took my dream of building banjos seriously,” said Mike.

As Mike’s skill developed, Bart would send work that he didn’t have time for Mike’s way. These opportunities afforded Mike time to fully develop his craft. In addition, these early encounters sparked a close friendship between the two luthiers that continues to this day. “We share a lot of common interests,” said Bart. “We are not competitive in the least. There is a bond because we both make banjos for a living. I visit him annually.”

At the Institute, Mike also had a chance to show his early prototypes to many famous players, collectors, and retailers for the first time, and the reception his instruments got seemed encouraging. Bart Reiter, John Bernunzio, Elderly Instruments owner Stan Werbin, and purchaser Cynthia Bridge were among the people who enthusiastically encouraged Mike to make more instruments. They provided feedback to Mike from musicians and others about his instruments. At about this time, in the early 1990s, he was learning to perfect intricate inlay patterns in the headstock and neck of his banjos. He had copied some of the early banjo designs as well as creating his own inlay patterns.

Having been fascinated with the planets since childhood, Mike inlaid a Saturn design into one of the banjos he built. The banjo went to Bernunzio’s store in New York and sold immediately, so Bernunzio ordered several more. Mike, still experimenting with the “look” of his instruments, sent banjos inlaid with various other designs. Bernunzio was furious. “Where’s the Saturn?” he demanded. “That’s what people want.” He told Mike that he needed an identity and that everyone loved the Saturn inlay.

Thus the now familiar signature logo of Mike Ramsey Chanterelle Banjos, the Saturn inlay, was born.

Suddenly, music and banjo building began to move from hobby status to a priority in Mike’s life. “I was successful in the wood business, but once again things got big and I needed a change. I decided to dump the stress, start a woodworking business. Out of that, this banjo thing just evolved,” he said. As Mike started filling regular orders from Bernunzio and Elderly, other resellers began calling. In 1994, Mike moved to a place near Appomattox, Virginia, and began constructing his first banjo shop. In 1995, the Chanterelle Banjo workshop was officially christened.

Mike named the business “Chanterelle” after reading the exhibition catalogue from Ring the Banjar! The Banjo in America from Folklife to Factory, an event organized by Robert Lloyd Webb at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1984. In the book that accompanied this monumental display, Webb wrote about an earlier Appomattox area resident, Joel Sweeney, who was a popular Civil-War era banjo player and banjo innovator. Webb stated that many, including late 19th, and early 20th-century Philadelphia banjo maker Samuel Stewart, thought that Sweeney was responsible for adding the short drone or fifth string to the banjo that Stewart referred to in his writings as a “chanterelle.” Although the name is carried on with Mike Ramsey’s banjo line, banjo scholars have disproved the idea that Sweeney added the fifth string.

Once the shop was up and running, Mike’s original goal was to build as many banjos as his hero, Kyle Creed, had. “I was thinking maybe 180 or 190, like Kyle,” said Mike. Quickly, however, the demand for Chanterelle banjos grew and Mike’s banjos began to travel to owners across the U. S. and to several other countries. As the line developed, one of Mike’s goals was to remember that many people who want to play old-time music don’t have a lot of money to spend, so he has tried to keep a reasonably priced “Student” model at the lower end of his line without compromising its sound and playability. Regardless of the cost, Mike’s goal is to put a bit of that “magic banjo” into each of his instruments. “I want each of my banjos to have a little ‘soul’ in them,” he said.

As his work progressed, Mike made a conscious decision not to mass-produce his banjos, to make sure that each banjo
that carried his name was hand-crafted. At the same time, he began to incorporate technology into his shop that could help him keep up with the considerable demand that was developing for his instruments. Having worked in and rejected the corporate production world, he knew that he wanted to remain a one-man operation, dedicated to furthering old-time music rather than making great profits. “I think a person has to be a banjo player foremost to make a good banjo. You have to love the music and have a certain feel for the neck, the sound, and the feel of the banjo,” said Mike. “I just want to build banjos that I would really like to have.”

Although Mike laboriously crafts each banjo, innovations such as those in routers and software have made intricate abalone and pearl inlay design easier, and his shop is a combination of 19th as well as 21st century technologies. Ramsey banjos have also set some new standards among old-time players. For example, in recent years, the Remo Company, a California based manufacturer of drum and banjo heads, was searching for a replacement material for finicky skin heads that were being used on large timpani orchestral drums. They hit upon a synthetic that they called Renaissance. It was an opaque material that had a stable, mylar-like structure. [Read Bob Smakula’s tour of the Remo factory in the Aug. 2007 OTH, vol. 10, no. 11.]

After many years of manufacturing drumheads, the Remo company engineers wondered if the material might also serve as a substitute for calfskin heads on banjos. Many players like the way skin sounds, but are frustrated by calf skin’s propensity to drastically change tension when exposed to changes in humidity. Players of skin head banjos often have to spend a great deal of time tightening and loosening the brackets holding the skin as the weather changes. Remo representatives approached Mike about helping them test the new materials on banjos. Enthusiastically, Mike helped them adapt the product to create a banjo head that many players think sounds as good as or better than skin yet is not affected by humidity. Soon, many Ramsey banjos were leaving Mike’s shop with Renaissance heads and before long, other builders emulated Mike’s example. Renaissance heads are now used by many of the current makers of open back banjos as standard fare.

Using technology and perfecting his own creative abilities, Mike established a one-man production line that is capable of completing an average of one new banjo each day. Considering that at a minimum each banjo neck has to be literally cut out, crafted, carved, and sanded; have a metal truss rod installed on the inside for adjustment; each rim sanded, stained, finished, drilled and assembled; every tone ring finished and installed; each fretboard glued, fret slots cut, and metal frets added and filed; often intricate abalone or pearl inlay designed, cut out, and glued into carefully cut matching impressions in the headstock and fretboard; each wooden piece carefully sanded, varnished and stained; and finally the banjo head, rim, strings, bridge, and tailpiece added so that the action can be set and adjusted—an average of one banjo per day represents a demanding amount of work. “Even though I’m a machinery freak,” he said, “there’s still a whole lot of hand work in each banjo. There’s only certain stuff you can do with machines.”

During his years at the Appomattox shop, Mike also made a conscious effort to help aspiring banjo builders in much the same way that Bart Reiter and others had helped him. Starting in 2000, Mike...
Mike shapes banjo rims and pegheads and cuts and engraves the inlay. Shown are Chanterelle banjos in a range of styles from the simple design of the Student model with a star on the peghead (center left), to the more ornate peghead designs of the “Woody” model (lower left) and a griffon design on a custom-designed instrument (lower right).
began annual and semi-annual banjo building workshops hosted by nearby Holiday Lake 4-H Center. Participants would come to three- and four-day classes during which time each of them would construct a banjo under Mike’s careful supervision and tutelage. Mike would try to pass on the fundamentals of banjo design and setup while at the same time teaching some of the history and lore of the banjo. Each workshop would culminate in a giant jam in which 10-17 brand new banjos would be broken in. Many of the over 100 students who attended these camps went on to build other banjos, while some were satisfied to just have an intimate understanding of banjo construction and their own “magic” banjo.

In 2005, Mike moved his shop to its current location on the outskirts of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. It took over a year to re-establish his production and to begin to fill orders again. During that time a huge demand continued to build for his instruments and he has been scrambling to try to catch up. Mike’s decision to move his shop to Chapel Hill gave him a chance to connect with the vibrant old-time music scene in the community. “We have lots of great players just living down the street, and there are lots of opportunities for us to keep involved in jams and concerts here,” he said.

Mike’s current line of banjos includes ten different designs with a variety of styles of tone rings, inlay patterns, and wood choices. They range from the inexpensive Student Model to intricate copies of the fancy Fairbanks Electric (Custom); a Bacon model that incorporates a familiar “Griffin” inlay with maple, cherry, or walnut rims and a Bacon-style tone ring; to a minstrel style fretless banjo carefully modeled after an early Boucher instrument. One of Mike’s most popular models is the Ramsey Woody, which incorporates an 11-inch or 12-inch rim, a tone ring made of bubinga wood, and an intricate inlay pattern that includes an abalone tree on the headstock with acorns and leaves floating down the fretboard. His latest addition to the line, the 10-24 Model, is a smaller travel sized 10-inch rimmed banjo with a 24-inch scale that uses an internal resonator to provide a big sound.

For Mike Ramsey, the journey from corporate manager to banjo builder has helped him find much joy. “I get up every morning and pray and thank my lucky stars that I’m able to do this, to build banjos,” he said. Mike and his wife Mary are avid old-time music lovers. Mary, who was a Ramsey banjo customer before she became Mike’s wife, is an accomplished clawhammer player and plays the upright bass. Mary often plays Mike’s banjos before he sends them off into the world and gives him feedback on his instruments. Together they love to attend various festivals and contests and are regular fixtures at the festivals in North Carolina and Virginia.

Mike loves to see and hear his nearly 2000 creations out in the world, and he is not above startling a few of their owners. Jim Curley, a banjo player who owns the Mountain Music Shoppe in Kansas City, Kansas, recently told of a man in his store who was carefully eyeing the open-back banjos he had for sale. “I had purchased several Ramsey banjos for my own personal use as well as stocking them,” Jim said, “so when I went over to this guy he started chatting and asked me, ‘what is your favorite open back?’ “Without hesitation Jim answered, “As we speak, I don’t think these Mike Ramsey banjos can be beat. It’s what I play and I love it.” The stranger stuck out his hand and said, “Hi, I’m Mike Ramsey.” Jim jumped back a few feet and then both men laughed. “They’re like my children,” Mike said, “and I like to visit them.”

Mike Ramsey’s banjos can be found on his website, www.ramseybanjos.com.
Classifieds

Musical Instruments

INSTRUMENTS FOR SALE: GUITARS: 1935 National Style 1 Roundneck, $5,500; 1960 Kay K-1 cutaway Archtop, $650; 1920s Majestic Guitar Banjo, 13 3/8" rim; $1,950; 1998 Martin 000-17 Custom, $1,900; 1930’s BANJOS: 1910 Bacon Special, Grand Concert Rim, $4,500, 1925 Vega Whyte Laydie #7, $7,500, 1890 J.B. Shall Pony Banjo, $950; Several great fretless banjos from $700 to $1,600; New Enoch Tradesman Fretted, $895; MAN-DOLINS: Breedlove OO & OF from $885; 1924 Gibson A-2Z, Snakehead $6,500; 1959 Gibson A-40, $1,100; and more! Get the details at Smakula Fretted Instruments’ web site: www.smakula.com or call 304-636-6710.


THEPICKINPARLOR.COM. We are old-time all of the time. Deering, Morgan Monroe, Blue ridge, Kentucky, and more; as well as an extensive selection of instructional books, videos, period songbooks and accessories. The Pickin’ Parlor, 203 West 2nd Street, Park Rapids, MN, 56470; 800-721-7464.

DUSTY STRINGS ACOUSTIC MUSIC SHOP in Seattle stocks fine new and used instruments: guitars by Martin, Collings, Taylor, Huss & Dalton, Goodall, Dell’Arte, Eastman, and Gitane; banjos by Deering, Huss & Dalton, Ramsey, Lee, Vega, and Goldtone; mandolins by Collings, Weber, Eastman, and Mid-Missouri. Call toll-free 866-634-1662 or email: musicshop@dustystrings.com.

Equipment

ODD SIZE REMO RENAISSANCE & FIBERSKYN BANJO HEADS – Most sizes from 10” to 12 1/8”, $19 to $21; Good quality calfskin banjo heads, $45; TKL banjo cases for 11” & 12” rims, $105 plus shipping. Smakula Fretted Instruments, PO Box 882, Elkins, WV 26241, 304-636-6710, www.smakula.com.

Recordings, Books, Instruction

HARP-MAKING MADE SIMPLE Book with full-size plans for 3 different harps. With simple tools you can make a great harp in about 4 days for $150 or less. $25 + $5 S&H. 540-635-2534; www.johnkovac.com.

FLATFOOTING WORKSHOP INSTRUCTIONAL video by Ira Bernstein. 1-3/4 hours, 27 steps, beginning to advanced. Easy to follow. Each step clearly broken down and taught. Also includes 3 performed pieces. Step manual and two different concert performances also available. 179 Flint St., Asheville, NC. 828-255-9393; IraTenToes@aol.com.

BLUEGRASS MUSIC PROFILES magazine features personal interviews with bluegrass music artists. $15/yr for six issues. BMP, P.O. Box 850, Nicholasville, KY, 40340. www.bluegrassmusicprofiles.com; 859-333-6465.
Jeff Goehring with Friends and Family


This CD documents the music of the late Jeff Goehring (1957-2001), fiddler extraordinaire from Columbus, Ohio, and points south. All but the last three cuts were recorded at an unusually disciplined picking party in 1993, with a supporting cast most of us can only dream of. The final three cuts showcase Goehring with his band, the Red Mule String Band, at the 1995 Augusta Old-Time Week. The party recordings suffer a bit from low fidelity, loose instrument placement, a bit of chatter and laughter, and an omnipresent bass, but like most field recordings they compensate for their technical shortcomings with a great feeling of spontaneity, as master musicians playing for fun in several configurations rip through a most unusual collection of tunes. The given titles reflect both Goehring’s skill and hard work as a collector and his respect for his sources, most of whom he knew and sought out in his travels.

Despite the variety of fiddlers and tunes he studied, Goehring succeeded admirably in melding them into his own smooth dance-beat style, and even with the strong contributions of his notable party collaborators, one feels the consistency of these performances: this is unmistakably Goehring’s music. Fans of double- and triple-fiddle will find gems on this album: triple fiddles sparked by Brown’s banjo on “Tennessee Girls,” and “Black Eyed Suzy Anna” (at 5:05 long and fast enough to exhaust the most energetic dancers); doubles playing in octaves on the archaic “Red Steer” and “Head of the Creek.” Fortunately, the bass backs off and finally disappears on the last third of the album, letting us fully enjoy on the Red Mule sides the tightest fiddle and banjo one could wish for.

The general listener may be put off by this recording’s 73 minutes of instruments all played at the same bomp-bomp dance tempo, but fiddlers looking for weird old tunes cleverly streamlined for a modern square-dance beat will find their money’s worth here. Jeff Goehring’s brother Rick and wife Susan have with their musical and technical work assured a place in the music of the future for a fine fiddler.

To order: www.fieldrecorder.com.

Aunt Jenny Wilson

Georgia Buck / Shady Grove / Lone Indian / Soldier and the Lady / How Aunt Jenny Learned / Elk River Boys / Witch Story #1 / Jaybird / I’m All Alone Tonight / The Turkish Revelry / Bottled in Bond / Roving Gambler / Square Dances-Bean Stringings-Quiltings / Shout Lulu / On the Banks of Old Guyan / Warfield / Down in Carolina / Got No Honey Babe Now / Witch Story #2 / Canary Bird / Molly Bonder / Dinah / Roan County Prisoner / Wizard Story / East Virginia

Come spend a memorable afternoon with Aunt Jenny Wilson. She’ll make you welcome as you pull up a chair and she starts singing with her old banjo. Just when you think she has a familiar repertoire (“East Virginia” and “Got No Honey Babe”), she’ll reach into her song bag and knock your socks off with “Elk River Boys” or “On the Banks of Old Guyan,” songs you’ve probably never heard before and won’t likely hear from anyone else. She’ll tell you about the “old blind colored man” who came to her parents’ home and played the banjo in a tuning she had never heard. While he was eating supper, the young Jenny sat down with the man’s banjo and memorized the tuning, and before he left she could play his tune “Warfield,” and as she plays it now, you realize that her “Georgia Buck,” “Jaybird,” and “Shout Lulu” probably had a similar provenance. If you show interest, Aunt Jenny will tell lively stories about life on Peach Creek almost a hundred years ago—the work, the music, the dancing. As the afternoon wears on, she brings out her oldest songs, and you hear that “Down in Carolina” is a version of “Lady of Carlisle,” and her modal “The Soldier and the Lady” suddenly becomes a ballad with the appearance of the lady’s father and seven armed men. Just when you think she must have been transported from the 19th century, she’ll sing you her hillbilly version of “The Hills of Roane County,” which she learned from the radio and the singing of “Little Juanita,” and “wrote in for the ballad.” As the sun goes down, Wilson will open her bag of “haint” tales about cat-women, milk spells, and wizards. You have just spent a most lovely afternoon.

Wilson was born about 1900 and grew up in Logan, West Virginia, so at the time of these recordings she was around 70, still spry and able to play well. She was recorded on visits by Fred Coon and Ray Alden, the last of which was in 1972. As a lifelong tax-and-spend liberal Democrat, I have often wondered why my tax dollars haven’t been employed in locating, documenting, and making available to the public the music of American artists as culturally significant as Aunt Jenny Wilson. My country used to do such work back in the days of the New Deal and the Library of Congress field trips. Nowadays, I guess, we have other priorities, and so the job has to be done.
**BAY RECORDS**

is a folk music record label that flourished (kinda, sorta) from 1972 through 1980 in the San Francisco Bay Area. These CDs are culled from their catalog:

![Banjo Gathering-100% Pure Old-Time Banjos: Unobserved, Unaccompanied & Unadulterated](image)

**Folk Music: The Bay Years, Vol. 1**

Cuts from various Bay records with several previously unreleased tracks as well as copious notes by Michael Cogan in which he tells all!

![The Good Ol' Persons](image)

**The Good Ol’ Persons**

Their first recording

![Kenny Hall and the Sweets Mill String Band](image)

**Kenny Hall and the Sweets Mill String Band**

Contains most of volumes 1 & 2 from original sessions

$16 each includes first-class postage (California residents add $1.28 per CD sales tax). US $19 each outside United States

Visa/Mastercard accepted

Please include card number and expiration date

Make checks payable to: Bay Records

1741 Alcatraz Avenue

Berkeley, CA 94703

email: mcogan@bayrec.com

No phone orders please

by private enterprise in the form of collectors such as Coon and Alden and the Field Recorders’ Collective. If these folks continue to issue American documents as valuable as these recordings of Jenny Wilson, I may have to convert and become—heaven help me—a free-market Republican. Whatever it takes to keep the music alive.

_Ed._

**Banjo Gathering-100% Pure Old-Time Banjos: Unobserved, Unaccompanied & Unadulterated**


This two-CD collection intends, and in part succeeds, in defining the “state of the art” of old-time Southern-style banjo players carrying on and developing the music in the 21st century. Few of the musicians heard in this project grew up in a banjo culture where their grandmother or the man down the road was likely to pick banjo; most did have close contact with players of the old school, as well as learning from fellow enthusiasts and recorded sources. Most have been at it for a good while and some are contemporaries of mine, on one side or another of the 70-year mark. All are devoted to the old-time five-string banjo—it’s repertoire, picking styles, and multitudes of flavorful tunings. The music ranges from very good to excellent. Only a single banjo is heard on each track; the subtitle brags that this is “100% pure banjo, unobserved, unaccompanied, and unadulterated.” These adjectives are intended tongue-in-cheek, as is the threat in the notes: “Unauthorized duplication of this CD will cause the offender to return in future lives as a bluegrass banjo player.” I sense that the compiler, though a fine solo banjo player, feels a need to reassert the worthiness of the solo banjo outside of string-band settings or bluegrass bands, though he is perhaps aware of the fact that the “folk” banjo, throughout most of its evolution from African antecedents to the old-time mountain instrument we are most familiar with, was played alone, and more often than not was paired with the singing of the player. Sure, banjo solo tunes have been around for a long time, and particularly in the area most of the players on this CD are have been schooled in—the strip from Mt. Airy, North Carolina, through Galax, Virginia, and up into West Virginia—solo clawhammer banjo flourished. But think of this: Uncle Dave Macon sang almost everything he picked; in John Cohen’s film “The High
Lonesome Sound,” Roscoe Holcomb tells us that when he decided to take up the banjo he learned 400 tunes and could “sing every one of them;” and Jake Staggers, an African-American musician I recorded in Georgia, never picked a song without singing it—the idea would not have occurred to him. There are only 10 vocal tracks out of a total of 50 on these two CDs, although many of the performers are fine singers; and of these there are no ballads or longer comic songs with banjo. I guess I should heed Mike Seeger’s advice to OTH reviewers not to criticize releases for what they are not. However, since this set purports to set the standard for old-time banjo playing “at the beginning of the 21st century,” I regret the weakening of venerable traditions—wedding banjo and voice—as I also regret that our prime five-string banjo magazine, Banjo Newsletter, has a policy of not including song lyrics or melodies, and only sporadically addresses accompaniment, or the interplay of voice and banjo. One more regret, before continuing to discuss what this collection is: it is too bad that some of the few “old-school” traditional players still active could not be included alongside the many gifted continuers of the traditions (I avoid saying “revivalists”) who are heard here. When I compiled a similar effort 30 years ago for Kicking Mule, The Old-Time Banjo in America, it was easier to include current recordings of living “old masters” like Buell Kazee, Ola Belle Reed, and Buzz Fountain alongside “revival” players like Reed Martin, John Burke, and one heard on the current set, Dan Gellert. To the best of my knowledge, Clyde Davenport, George Gibson, and Lee Sexton are still actively playing, as is Ed Teague, here in Georgia.

What this is a fine collection of mostly solo old-time banjo playing. Some of the players approach the music fairly straightforwardly, not feeling the need to add much innovation, but to simply feel and play the tunes: two examples are Brett Riggs’ straight-up “Sally Ann,” which he aptly describes as “a true workhorse piece of the Mount Airy-Galax-Hillsville area,” and Paul Brown’s lovely “Old Sally Brown.” On another good Paul Brown track, an old-time fiddle tune—Art Stamper’s “The Brushy Fork of John’s Creek” is set as an old-time banjo tune, a good alternative to the contemporary “melodic clawhammer” approach in which every note a fiddler might play is rendered on the banjo; Ed Haley’s fiddle tunes are well-remade as banjo tunes on two tracks here—“The Boatman,” set in an interesting two-finger setting by Rafé Stefani, and “Indian Squaw” by David Winston. Somewhat less well is the transformation of “Jenny Get Around” into a piece somewhat in waltz time. If I had to pick a high point on this fine collection, it would be Dan Gellert’s playing—and singing. Back in the mid-1970s when I was scouting around for banjo players I had not heard for the previously-mentioned Kicking Mule compilation, Mike Seeger told me I had to go to Elkhart, Indiana, and hear Dan Gellert, who, as Mike put it, plays as well as anyone, anywhere. I found that to be true then, and it still is. On his tracks, all with fretless banjo, the tone, attack, timing, syncopation, and ability to introduce inventive variations into a tune while retaining an old-time feeling free of showiness—all these, along with his fine singing, especially in the haunting “Sail Away Ladies” in the sawmill tuning, put him in the first rank, anywhere, anytime. Finally, a personal discovery: in 1962 Pat Dunford and I recorded Kentucky banjo picker Dallas Henderson in Indianapolis, playing “Lost Indian,” which alternated chimes up the neck with a finger-picking second part. It sounded like no “Lost Indian” we had ever heard. Here, Joe Newberry plays “Lost Gander,” learned from Dee Hicks, who was, like Henderson, from the Cumberland Plateau, and the tune is very similar in harmonics and picking. From “gander” to “Indian”—not such a jump.

To order: www.swangathering.org
Esker Hutchins: fiddle and banjo; Dave Spilkia: guitar; Oscar Jenkins: banjo


Every musician exists in a community. That is, every musician learns from others, performs with others, and teaches or inspires others. Our individualistic hero-worshipping society focuses on the artist alone, and ignores the community. Thus, we revere Frank Hutchison, or Eck Robertson, or Charlie Patton, and listen to their recordings as though their music was conceived in a vacuum. Researchers of the present generation have, to their credit, discovered the musical communities of many of our old-time heroes by searching the backgrounds of musicians with reputations and by locating heretofore undiscovered colleagues who have in some cases outlived their famous peers.

Esker Hutchins of Dobson, North Carolina, provides a case in point. A fine fiddler and banjo player, Hutchins learned tunes from his neighbor, the fabled Frank Jenkins of Da Costa Woltz’s Southern Broadcasters, regularly played with Broadcasters banjoist Oscar Jenkins, and was a fiddle mentor to Benton Flippen, yet despite performing at Union Grove never was “discovered” until Ray Alden visited him, tape recorder in tow. In these undated Alden recordings, Hutchins is revealed as a fiddler good enough to have recorded in the Golden Age, and as a banjo picker of competence.

Hutchins has a heavy bow and plays with continuous double-stopping and a strong shuffle, a technique which makes a standard like “Fisher’s Hornpipe” sound more southern and old-time than do the lighter versions of single-string players. On “Wagoner” Hutchins attacks the bass strings on the low part with ferocious husk, yet on “Peacock Rag” he can provide the sliding, bluesy treble noting we expect of this Arthur Smith standard. “Bonaparte’s Retreat,” alas, proves to be the ubiquitous Pee Wee King version. Perhaps the most intriguing Hutchins fiddle piece is the “Unnamed fiddle tune #1.” Far from the tune snatch one might expect, this is a fully thought-out, two-part tune with a treble half that has elements of “Billy in the Lowground,” and a bass half with cunningly syncopated rhythms that will send many listeners to their fiddle cases.

On banjo, Hutchins displays a drop-thumb frailing that in the punch that characterizes the melody notes resembles...
the drive of his fiddle bowing. Most of his banjo tunes are standards, but the high part he adds to “Reuben” up the neck is unexpectedly lovely. Both the “Unnamed tunes” emphasize rhythm over melody, with syncopated variations repeated above and below an insistent tonic note, and one notices the strong resemblance of these pieces to many pentatonic African-American banjo tunes. The same could be said for his “Breaking up Christmas” and the flatted notes he introduces into “Cripple Creek,” raising the tantalizing question of the provenance of Hutchins’ banjo playing. Who were his community mentors on the instrument?

The first two and the last three selections on the CD record Hutchins playing with the Surry County Ramblers on-stage. The festival recordings are of poor fidelity, but one can hear that Hutchins, when pushed to the double-time of these frantic audience-oriented performances, loses the tonal edge he gains at a more relaxed pace, and the home recordings are by far the more satisfying to hear and to learn from. With this fine album, we know just a little bit more of the community of Da Costa Woltz’s Southern Broadcasters, and meet a musician whose name will now be rightfully known to old-time history.

Jon Pankake

To order: www.fieldrecorder.com.

Folksongs of Illinois #2 - Fiddlers


Having grown up in Indiana, Illinois’ neighboring state to the east, and lived and worked in Iowa, its neighbor to the west across the Mississippi, and collected traditional music in both states, I was not surprised on listening to these beautifully produced compilations that the prairies, towns, and big cities of Illinois were and are home to rich and diverse musical traditions. The producers of these compilations searched widely through musical genres and early and...
recent recordings, both field and commercial, and have stretched the definition of “folksong” (perhaps “folk music” would have worked better, as there are many instrumental tracks) to the ultimate: along with decidedly traditional tracks of country fiddlers and Chicago Irish and Polish singers and musicians are performances by folk revival singers and musicians, new songs by singer-songwriters, the work of well-known professionals, and tracks that touch or cross what boundaries may exist between folk and jazz, and pop music. This wider spectrum makes this set different from, say, Dick Spottswood’s 15-volume *Folk Music in America* compilation for the Library of Congress, which also included documentary and commercial recordings of Hispanic, continental European, and Irish music along with Anglo- and African American music; but did not venture into “contemporary folk.” The Illinois project presents not only where the music has been, but where it may be going, whether in Liz Carroll’s masterful and respectful advancement of Irish fiddling or Art Thieme’s rendering of Win Stracke’s re-writing of the Texas folk song “The Brazos” as “Down by the Embarras,” in praise of the rivers of Illinois. These discs were clearly compiled to make for enjoyable listening for the general listener as well as aficionados of “folk song.” Despite the enormous variety presented, and the introduction of musical styles that may be unfamiliar to the audience, no track is rough or demanding, and humor, social commentary, and appealing musical performances are well interspersed. The mastering or re-mastering produces dependably listenable sound quality, even on early recordings. Well-designed and informative booklets accompany the discs.

The notes to the second disk—Fiddlers—begin by marking the prominence of the fiddle among the Illinois pioneers, quoting an early account that at corn-huskings fiddlers were in great demand. Tracks by Harvey “Pappy” Taylor and Noah Beavers, the archaic “Wolf Creek” and “Going to London to Get Me a Wife,” respectively, and the early recording of the tune in jig-time by Tommy Danduran and his Barn Dance Fiddlers—a performance with first and “seconding” fiddle and dance calls—are the most representative of this early era. (A personal recollection—I was with fiddlers Chirps Smith and Garry Harrison, also featured in this collection—when they first met Pappy Taylor in a honky-tonk in southern Illinois in the early 1970s; Taylor was playing a round dance tune called “Herr Schmidt,” I recall. He told us he knew hundreds of old fiddle tunes and had played at as many square dances, but wouldn’t do so any more, because they had gotten too rough, that at a road house there may be drinking, but at least you dance with your girl, unlike a square dance where you swing the girl of another guy, who may take a swing at you or worse.) As elsewhere in the Midwest, immigrants from the South have brought their styles north, which are heard alongside indigenous rural fiddling. An outstanding example here is a spirited “Sail Away Ladies” recorded around 1975 by Tennessee-born Artie P. Crowder. Another Tennessee-born fiddler who made Illinois home was African American Howard Armstrong. He moved to Chicago in 1932 and, with the group that eventually became the famous Martin, Bogon, and Armstrong, played not only blues and southern dance tunes in the black community, but, as the notes tell us played in white communities. They were “helped along by their unique mix of jazz, blues, country, and pop novelties, along with Polish polkas and German waltzes [playing] requests in several languages featuring the singing of the self-educated, multilingual Armstrong.” Here they play a southern tune, “Knox County Stomp,” but their multi-cultural musicality can provide a way into considering many of the fiddle traditions heard on this CD. Noteworthy is the Carpathian fiddler Franciszek Dukla, whose 1927 waltz, with vocal by Jan Wanat, is a commercial release of authentic Polish village music transplanted to Chicago’s North Side. Of course the importance of Chicago in the history of Irish music is well-documented: the definitive collection of Irish dance music was made a century ago by Francis O’Neill, musician and Chicago’s Chief of Police. Commercial companies tapped this rich musical community, as represented here by two hornpipes, “The Boys of Bluehill” and “The Stack of Barley” recorded in 1934 by Pat Roche’s Harp and Shamrock Band, which alternately showcase fiddling, accordion playing, step dancing, along with flute and piano. Irish music in Chicago is thriving, and the previously mentioned Liz Carroll has been recognized as one of the finest contemporary Irish fiddlers anywhere. Her set of movingly and masterfully rendered reels, “A Paddy Fahy Reel” and “The Tempest,” is one of my two personal favorites among all the excellent tracks here, the other being the young Mexican-born fiddle virtuoso Juan Rivera’s brilliant treatment of “Cielito Lindo.” Fiddle enthusiasts and general listeners will have their horizons broadened by Swedish and Serbian tracks. Back to raggy US-spawned music, there is a good track of “Kansas City Rag” by the Prairie Ramblers, long a mainstay of the WLS National Barn Dance, and a dependably brilliant bluegrass treatment of “Windy City Rag” by Alison Krauss with Union Station. This collection is bracketed by tunes played by Garry Harrison and Chirps Smith, two fiddlers who spearheaded the revival of interest in Illinois old-time fiddling. Harrison plays “Green Sleeve” on the first track, and Chirps winds up this splendid collection with “Ol’ Woodard’s Tune.” While there is plenty of good vocal work on the fiddle disc, Disc #1 focuses on songs, again in many genres and languages. A serviceable bluegrass performance of “Nine Pound Hammer” by The Special Consensus opens things up, followed by the Illinois remake of “The Brazos” mentioned earlier. Various Old World groups are represented. Among the fine tracks is one by an exponent of the ceilidh band style of Irish music emerging in the 1930s, pianist Eleanor Kane Neary, playing “Morning Dew,” “Travelers,” and “Sharks Favorite Reels.” An early 78 by Polish Mountaineers, “Dziura Polka,” is aptly described in the notes as “a unique parody [of Stephen Foster’s “Camptown Races’] that’s equal parts Polish, country, and jazz.” Herr Louie and Weasels, with the Hungry Five deliver a 1928 performance of “Down by the Pickle Works, Part 1,” typical of “stage Dutch” ethnic humor. Blues from Illinois, Chicago, and elsewhere, are not prominently represented here (perhaps a future disc in the series will cover this genre more fully); but a blues sited in the state’s most southerly town, geographically and otherwise, is presented in a 1929 Brunswick recording by the man who may have created the “Cairo Blues,” Henry Spaulding. There are two tracks of African American religious singing in widely different modes: a field recording by Deacon James Biggs and the St. John Missionary Baptist Church Choir of “I Love the Lord” is a fine if typical example of a lined-out “Dr. Watts” hymn; and “I’m Coming Home” by the Staples Singers is modern gospel...
at its best. One of the most unusual tracks here is “La Gui-Annee” recorded in the 1940s, which represents a costumed, mummering-like tradition practiced by descendants of French settlers since the 1720s in St. Genevieve, Missouri, and Prairie du Rocher, Illinois, on opposite sides of the Mississippi. Poet Carl Sandburg, native of Galesburg, Illinois, was a prolific early collector of many types of American folk songs, which he compiled in the classic American Songbag and performed widely in lecture-concerts. Here he sings the railroad song, “Jay Gould’s Daughter,” in his easy-going style. There are some local Illinois ballads in this set. “The Hanging of Charlie Birger,” by Carson Robison and first recorded by Vernon Dalhart, is pleasantly rendered by contemporary Chicago singer Janet Bean backed by a smooth studio band. Personally, I prefer old-time local and traditional songs performed in a simpler style, and wonder why something by Jim Howie, a fine traditional singer from Randolph County, Illinois, whose LP “Gooseberry Pie” was issued on Prairie Schooner in 1975, was not included here. Still, there is plenty here for every musical taste: lovers of southern old-time music will enjoy Tennessee transplant Orval Hale’s “Hop Big-Eyed Rabbit” sung to his old-time banjo picking. At 58 seconds, this is the second-shortest track on this disc, the shortest being the last cut, the 57-second, “Wizard Oil,” a radio commercial ditty sung in 1940 by Blue Grass Roy Freeman. All in all, these two CDs are exemplary, sung in 1940 by Blue Grass Roy Freeman.

Silver Trumpet / Cotton Mill Blues / Jubilo/Richmond / It’s a Rough Road to Georgia / Sweet Freedom / The Reckless Motorman/Flying Clouds/Italian Waltz / Milwaukee Blues / Lynchburg Town / The Bluefield Murder/I Can Not Be Your Sweetheart/Anchored in Love/Sweet Sunny South/Charles Guiteau/Fourteen Days in Georgia/Sweet Sixteen/Birdie/White House Blues/The Wreck of the Virginian/Climbing Up the Golden Stairs/Rodes Division

Give an old-time record collector a blind listen to the first track on this terrific disc, and he or she might ask, “What’s that tune? Charlie Poole never recorded that!” The original North Carolina Ramblers did not record “Silver Trumpet,” but the style is squarely in its signature style, with authoritative not-syncopated fiddle (though a keen ear might hear a second fiddle), punchy-solid guitar runs, and the instantly recognizable Poole-style three-finger banjo back-up, all well balanced. The recording is new, however, made by four men well positioned to carry on the legacy of Poole’s legendary band. Kinney Rorrer, banjo picker and singer, is the great-nephew of Posey Rorrer, one of the fiddlers with Poole’s band, which recorded in the 1920s and 1930s, and he came to the music through the earlier group’s records and extensive personal and musical contact with “musical pals” of Poole, such as Norman Woodlief and Lonnie Austin. Rorrer also researched and authored Poole’s biography, Ramblin’ Blues: The Life and Songs of Charlie Poole. Fiddler Kirk Supphin comes from a family of old-time musicians and apprenticed with Tommy Jarrell, Jeremy Stephens, the youngest member of the group, is a prize-winning banjoist, fiddler, and autoharp player, and he...
From Mali to America
Cheick Hamala Diabate and Bob Carlin

“Cotton Mills Blues”
The New North Carolina Ramblers
Kinney Rorrer, Kirk Sutphin, Jeremy Stephens, Darren Moore

The band keeps the storied tradition of the great 1920s and 1930s string bands from southwestern Virginia and southeast West Virginia alive with 24 powerful and passionate performances.

Cheick Hamala Diabate: ngoni, banjos, guitar;
Bob Carlin: banjos; Solo Tounkara: guitar

From Mali to America/N’be Magni/Baba Cissoko/Danaya-Jonny Boker/Boudafo/Allah My Kessey La/Cumberland Gap/Djelilify Tounkara/ Konkoba/Tara-Pompey Ran Away/I Bow

This important and enjoyable CD can be considered on a number of levels. To start with, it’s simply fun to listen to. Next, it can be considered as an aural companion to Peter Szego’s recent article, “Searching for the Roots of the Banjo.” (OTH April-May 2006 and June-July 2006) Also, this is instrumental music made by two masters, searching for (and finding!) common ground, and here, by a man relating to a woman’s narration of her hardships), two songs of presidential assassination, and songs reflecting the South’s social history, the raggy title song (sung with particular conviction—Rorrer tells us that Poole and many other early old-time recording artists worked in the mills), and, most interestingly, “Sweet Freedom,” a North Carolina white version (learned from 1931 recordings by the E. R. Nance family) of the old black song protesting slavery, “Oh, Freedom.”

This well recorded and beautifully produced and annotated disc, produced by Charlie Faurot with Rich Nevins and Chris King (who can be counted on for quality work), is contemporary old-time music at its very best. These talented and dedicated musicians do more than preserve the great Charlie Poole legacy—they extend and expand it, and in the process reassure us that old-time music can be renewed and revitalized in our day without super-charging it, sentimentalizing it, or departing from the richness of the old repertoire.

ART ROSENBAUM

To order: www.oldbluerecords.com.
could serve as a good example of two musicians from different traditions blending their styles to advantageous effect.

Thanks to Szego’s article, I know that Rev. Jonathan Boucher described slaves’ banjos in 1832 as follows: “Its body was a large hollow gourd, with a long handle attached to it, strung with catgut, and played on with the fingers.” It would be hard to give a better description of Diabate’s instrument, the ngoni, which, like almost all African ancestors of the present banjo, is a fretless instrument. Both fretted and fretless instruments are used on this recording. In addition to the ngoni (in regular and 7-string versions) you can hear gourd banjos, minstrel banjos, guitars, and the African bass instrument, the bolon.

The instrumentalists (no vocals on this CD, a deliberate decision) usually follow a pattern. A simple musical theme is stated, and it is developed with rhythmic and tonal variation, tossing it back from one instrument to another. As I listen, I do not hear “harmony” as it has developed in Western European music, but rather the exploration of polyrhythms and overtones. Are you a clawhammer player who always plays in the same spot, over the scoop? Try moving your hand much closer to the bridge. You may not like the sound you get, but it will certainly be different. The varying tone qualities that can be achieved on the same instrument are a large part of the charm and fascination of this CD.

Not only do Carlin and Diabate vary tonality and rhythm, but they also vary the musical scale. By using fretless instruments, the musicians are no longer limited to the 12-tone, even-tempered straightjacket of a piano, guitar, or fretted banjo, but can put their fingers down anywhere. However, they do so consistently—what I hear is that a “scale” with definite microtonalities is chosen for a given piece, and then used exclusively for that piece. A different tune usually has a different scale. This is not peculiar to African music—listen to some of the solo fiddle pieces by Marcus Martin and try to decide whether the tune is major or minor.

It is only by stretching the imagination that this can be considered to be “old-time music.” On two of the tracks an African tune and an American tune are juxtaposed so that the listener can hear a perceived relation: “Danaya/Jonny Boker” and “Tara/Pompey Ran Away.” To my untrained ear, the tunes do seem related. . . but were they played in such a way as to stress the resemblance? Bob Carlin has spent much time learning some of the African traditions in order to bring this music to a wider audience. Old-Time Herald readers may decide to learn some of these pieces, both for fun, and maybe to show their audiences more about the roots of the banjo. Be warned: it will take a lot longer to learn a piece than you thought it would, and while you are learning, you will appreciate more and more the subtleties which make this CD worth buying.

PETE PETERSON

To order: www.5-string.com.

Banjo Talkin’
Cathy Fink

Ishikawa/Mistreated Mama Blues/Boh & Carolee/What the Lord Done Give You/Banjo Pickin’ Girl/Banjo Talkin’/Home on the Range/North Carolina Breakdown/Prayer of a Miner’s Child/Coleman’s March/Oh! Susanna/First String Fling/Walking the Dog/Sunny Home in Dixie/Fun is Money/Old Mother Flanagan/An-geline Westfork (iTunes bonus track)

Cathy Fink, this album’s producer, features the talents of a spectrum of musicians on Banjo Talkin’, as well as her own considerable strengths as composer, arranger, instrumentalist, and vocalist.

The album’s energetic and imaginative collection of tunes and songs showcases an array of banjo-family instruments. Banjo maniacs everywhere will be happy to note that besides openback and resonator banjos galore, banjo uke and cello banjo also make appearances. Marcy Marxer, Cathy’s longtime musical collaborator, ably demonstrates her considerable expertise on the odder banjos. The cello banjo proves to be a surprisingly versatile instrument, fulfilling the roles of lead, chordal backup, contrapuntal companion, and bass.

The opening track, “Ishikawa,” which Cathy wrote to honor a Japanese Bud-dhist priest friend, is a banjo-fiddle duet with fiddler Jane Rothfield. Jane sticks to the melody; Cathy matches her note for note, mostly, while throwing in some chromatic upward runs that really push the tune along.

The title track, “Banjo Talkin’,” also composed by Cathy, is a mellower tune. Simply stated the first time around (with some lyrics for the B part), the second and third times through the tune are ably and delicately elaborated upon, with a pleasantly meditative effect. The first part sounded familiar to me, and my mind eventually came up with the first part of “Old Melinda” as a near match.

Another composition, “First String Fling,” was the result of a mutual assignment with Tony Trishka to come up with a one-string banjo composition in half an hour. Cathy’s half turns out to be a vaguely Asian-sounding tune, which she somehow manages to play in an assured minor scale, while tuned (according to the liner notes) in a major tuning. How does she do it? I wish she had included Trishka’s one-string tune too.

“What the Lord Done Give You” and “Fun Is Money,” both original songs, are as different as can be. In the first song, Cathy’s gospel-type lyrics are accompanied by skillfully frenetic work on a Wunderlich minstrel banjo with a 14” pot. “Fun Is Money” features self-described John Hartford-type lyrics, presumably flowing directly from the unconscious, but clever nonetheless, and backed up by one of Cathy’s Tubaphone banjos.

Bruce Molsky’s fiddle (as well as Marcy’s guitar) is heard with Cathy on a couple of old-time tunes, “Sunny Home in Dixie” and “North Carolina Break-down,” the last composed by Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith. The musicians sound like they’re having fun. I have always had a weakness for “Sunny Home in Dixie” and am glad Cathy included this lesser-known tune. Tony Trishka and Marcy join Cathy on “Home on the Range” on banjo and cello banjo, respectively. I particularly enjoyed the introduction, slowly rendered with all the requisite minor, sevenths, contrabass lines, and sentimental flourishes. Cathy sings a couple of the many verses. Trishka also plays backup with Cathy on her rendition of Lily Mae Ledford’s classic “Banjo Pickin’ Girl,” resulting in a composite clawhammer/bluegrass sound that works well with the vocal. Cathy is joined by Chris Coole on “Old Mother Flanagan,” and Adam Hurt on “Buffalo Gals,” both playing banjo.
Marcy Marxer deserves mention for her multi-tracking on Cathy’s tune “Bob & Carolie” (cello banjo, banjo uke, and uke). The tune itself has a Sousa-like quality enhanced by the arrangement of the various banjo family members, and the result ranges from the slyly humorous to outright musical slapstick. The use of the cello banjo on the traditional “Coleman’s March” gives a dignified and archaic feeling to this tune.

While not strictly traditional or old-time, Banjo Talkin’ is an interesting and sometimes inspired venture into the banjo netherworld, with performances by talented musicians, enhanced by the vision and technical expertise of Cathy and Marcy. Be forewarned: you may want to buy a cello banjo after you’ve heard it.

Peterson

If you love good traditional singing, pay attention here. This is one of the best recordings of great traditional singing to come down the pike in a while.

Johnny Ray Hicks (1925–2000) was a member of the long line of musicians, singers, and storytellers from Fentress County, Tennessee, that included Dee and Delta Hicks (Ballads & Banjo Music from the Tennessee Cumberland Plateau County LP 789).

As a young boy he worked short stints in the coal mines and sawmills, later operated a bulldozer, and in 1944 enlisted in the Army, serving in France and Germany. When he returned he worked at a shoe factory in Baltimore, Maryland, eventually returning home where he worked at different jobs (including a brief stint in jail which led to his writing “Crossville Criminal”).

Folklorist and musician Bobby Fulcher had heard of Johnny Ray Hicks from other members of the Hicks family, who told Bobby that Johnny Ray was a great singer. He looked him up

To order: www.rounder.com

The Red State Ramblers

Old 97 Wrecords 008

Will Bacon: banjo; Kevin Kehrberg: bass; Jeff Keith: guitar, mandolin; Nikos Pappas: fiddle

Martha Campbell/Get Along Down to Town/Preacher’s Favorite/Sandy Boys/Spirit of the Everglades/The Third of November/Beale Street Mama/Barlow Knife/Poplar Bluff/Terrapin Branch/All the Good Times are Past and Gone/Jenny Get Around/Whiskey Seller/Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue/Ways of the World/The Blind Man’s Lament/Traveling That Highway Home/Lost Indian

Four men, all either students or alumni of the University of Kentucky, have combined to form the Red State Ramblers and make a very good CD with both good playing and good singing. All the band members except Pappas sing. There’s three-part harmony on such songs as “All the Good Times Are Past and Gone”—the band added a baritone part to the Bill and Charlie Monroe duet which almost sounds like it had been there all along! In addition to Kentucky tunes and songs, sources also include fiddlers from Oklahoma, New Mexico (a beautiful waltz, “The Third of November” which Nikos learned in his home state), Virginia, West Virginia, and so on. The CD has good liner notes which give sources and banjo and fiddle tunings (if none is given, assume standard tuning), for which I am grateful.

The band plays fiddle tunes with a light, speedy touch. The opening cut, “Martha Campbell” (described as the Kentucky national anthem, just as “Sally Ann” is the Surry County national anthem), is taken at a very fast pace—almost as fast as the Doc Roberts version recorded back in 1925. One of the things I like is that every time I was able to check the source recording, the Red State Ramblers version was at about the same tempo. “Poplar Bluff” is a gem—an Ed Haley tune done just the way Haley recorded it—fiddle and chorded mandolin! (The sound quality here is considerably better.)

Another pleasant surprise is that songs were chosen not just from old-time sources, but from other traditions as well. “Beale Street Mama” was obtained from Milton Brown (and his Musical Brownies) and “Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue” was remembered from Will’s grandmother. (These musicians are younger than I am; I learned it from my mother!) In some cases the songs are second-generation old-time; “Traveling That Highway Home” was learned both from Molly O’Day and the Red Clay Ramblers, and credit is given to both. “Barlow Knife” was learned both from Henry Reed and the Fuzzy Mountain String Band. Good choices of songs in almost all cases; I would have preferred almost anything to another recording of “Sandy Boys”—but they do it well.

What don’t I like? In many cases, the mix buries both the banjo and the guitar so that the rhythm and drive, which must have been present, are barely audible. Good bands feature audible interactions between fiddle and banjo, and sometimes guitar; if they were there, I couldn’t hear them. I believe that this band would sound better live than on this CD. What makes this CD stand out from other recordings of modern old-time bands? Good singing, the fast pace of many of the fiddle tunes, and a willingness to play slowly when the tune deserves it. (Alva Greene’s “Blind Man’s Lament” really stands out here.)

To order: www.old97records.com.
and eventually began to record his songs and stories and encouraged him to begin to sing out. This CD is a combination of those field recordings and recordings from concert performances recorded between 1985 and 2000—mostly songs and a few stories.

Johnny Ray’s biography and singing style is explored more extensively in the fine 31-page booklet by Bobby Fulcher and Brent Cantrell, which includes portions of interviews with Johnny Ray, as well as song notes.

The music of this singer is truly magical. His vocal style is powerful and tense and out-there—mostly unaccompanied with some embellishment, bent notes, held notes, and other characteristics of some of the best unaccompanied singers—stytlistically kin to Primitive Baptist singing. Occasionally he plays guitar behind his songs in a kind of relentless, strong chord backup. His persona is described in the notes as “fierce” and in-your-face. To me, his singing is like that too.

I highly recommend this CD, and it is a must for those of you who love good traditional singing.

ALICE GERRARD

To order: www.jubileearts.org.

People Take Warning!
Murder Ballads & Songs of Disaster 1913-1938

Tomkins Square TSQ 1875

“In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Depression gripped the nation. It was a time when songs were tools for living. A whole community would turn out to mourn the loss of a member and to sow their songs like seeds. This collection is a wild garden grown from those seeds.”

—Tom Waits, from the introduction.

A wild garden indeed. The voice of human angst is presented here in a manner that speaks clearly to folks today. Three volumes address natural disasters, fires, train wrecks, murder, and mayhem—all of the ingredients of a good news broadcast. For all of the technological progress from then until now, we still suffer the same problems. The difference? They addressed the issues with a directness and efficiency and honesty that is lacking today.

The chorus of “Fire, fire, I heard them cry...” is classic for its urgency. That urgency is felt all through this three-CD set of songs commemorating disasters of note. The musical styles range from old-time mountain music to blues to Cajun and Yiddish folk songs. The wide array of songs included on Volume 1 concerning the sinking of the Titanic reflects the wide shock felt by everyone at the thought that man’s best efforts to dominate nature could be dashed so completely. From “El Mole Rachmim (Für Titanik)” by Cantor Joseph Rosenblatt, to the more common “The Titanic” by Ernest Stoneman, or “When That Great Ship Went Down” by William & Versey Smith, to the “Titanic Blues” by Hi Henry Brown and Charlie Jordan, and Frank Hutchinson’s “Last Scene of the Titanic,” this is music from a time when songs were news and news made songs.

Along with songs about the Titanic, there are plenty about train and early airship wrecks like “The Wreck of the Westbound Airliner” by Fred Pendleton and the West Virginia Melody Boys and the “Crash of the Akron” recorded by Bob Miller. Major train wrecks in Virginia, Pennsylvania, and beyond are covered in
The contents of the image are not legible.
and old-time country dance heritage, played bluegrass style and long enough
for dancing...."

It may seem to some people that the band does not cover a lot of new terri-
tory or break much new ground on this CD, but that’s not really the point here.
The Williams and Bras do a heck of a job throughout, one that reflects the four
decades that they have been involved with and performing old-time and bluegrass
music. They have assembled a pleasant, varied, and well-played mix of tunes
suitable for dancing and/or just listening. Much of the material will be familiar
to casual listeners of old-time fiddle music—old standbys like “Dance All Night
with a Bottle in Your Hand,” “Old Joe Clark,” “Chinese Breakdown,” “Arkans-
as Traveler,” “Sugar in the Gourd,” etc. Some of the material comes from more
obscure sources. “Tennessie Grey Eagle” is an unusual version of the tune played
in C, which the band learned from the playing of Jim Herd, a fiddler from the
Missouri Ozarks who settled in Washington. “Samb and Elzie,” which I had not
heard before, comes from Harley’s older brother Wilson, who learned it from their
father Montie Monroe Bray, who was a noted old-time fiddler from central Il-
linois. Finally, there are some tunes from what some might consider outside the
“old-time music” tradition—the French Canadian square dance tune “Glise de
Sherbrooke,” “Beethoven’s Favorite Waltz,” which Phil Williams found in an
old tune book, and the English jig “Cock of the North.” However, all of
these work very well and seem quite at home in the setting given them by this
string band. Although this CD literally has “bluegrass” written all over it, the
music sounds pretty old-time to me. The track on which the band learned from
Montie Monroe Bray is an unusual version of the tune played in C, which the band
learned from the playing of Jim Herd, a fiddler from the Missouri Ozarks who settled
in Washington. “Samb and Elzie,” which I had not heard before, comes from Harley’s
older brother Wilson, who learned it from their father Montie Monroe Bray, who was
a noted old-time fiddler from central Illinois. Finally, there are some tunes from
what some might consider outside the “old-time music” tradition—the French
Canadian square dance tune “Glise de Sherbrooke,” “Beethoven’s Favorite Waltz,”
which Phil Williams found in an old tune book, and the English jig “Cock of the North.”

This wonderful compilation of Cajun and Creole songs about drinking comes
out of the current hotbed of Cajun music—Lafayette, Louisiana. The musicians
are all Cajuns from the area—friends from the University and the local scene.
In a culture where beer figures in as one of the four food groups along with
gumbo, jambalaya, and boudin, it is not surprising that there is plenty of material
to choose from. What I love about this album is the juxtaposition of the spookier
and archaic songs, some sung a capella or with just a lonesome fiddle, along with
the modern dancehall sounds which are more common today. The disc was
conceived of and produced by Josh Caffery, and Joel Savoy did the engineering
at Feufollet Studios. Many of 35 musicians involved in this project are 20- and
30-somethings, and it impresses me that they appreciate the older sounds from
many decades ago, and that they do such a great job keeping that feeling alive.

As Josh Caffery says in the notes, “In these songs Cajuns and Creoles do
far more than just get wasted. In these songs, drunk people dream. They waltz.
They get out their guns and go out in the middle of the night and kill raccoons.
When their bottles are empty, they stomp their feet and play furious driv-

erous, jambalaya, and boudin, it is not surprising that there is plenty of material
to choose from. What I love about this album is the juxtaposition of the spookier
and archaic songs, some sung a capella or with just a lonesome fiddle, along with
the modern dancehall sounds which are more common today. The disc was
conceived of and produced by Josh Caffery, and Joel Savoy did the engineering
at Feufollet Studios. Many of 35 musicians involved in this project are 20- and
30-somethings, and it impresses me that they appreciate the older sounds from
many decades ago, and that they do such a great job keeping that feeling alive.

As Josh Caffery says in the notes, “In these songs Cajuns and Creoles do
far more than just get wasted. In these songs, drunk people dream. They waltz.
They get out their guns and go out in the middle of the night and kill raccoons.
When their bottles are empty, they stomp their feet and play furious driv-

erous, jambalaya, and boudin, it is not surprising that there is plenty of material
to choose from. What I love about this album is the juxtaposition of the spookier
and archaic songs, some sung a capella or with just a lonesome fiddle, along with
the modern dancehall sounds which are more common today. The disc was
conceived of and produced by Josh Caffery, and Joel Savoy did the engineering
at Feufollet Studios. Many of 35 musicians involved in this project are 20- and
30-somethings, and it impresses me that they appreciate the older sounds from
many decades ago, and that they do such a great job keeping that feeling alive.

As Josh Caffery says in the notes, “In these songs Cajuns and Creoles do
far more than just get wasted. In these songs, drunk people dream. They waltz.
They get out their guns and go out in the middle of the night and kill raccoons.
When their bottles are empty, they stomp their feet and play furious driv-

erous, jambalaya, and boudin, it is not surprising that there is plenty of material
to choose from. What I love about this album is the juxtaposition of the spookier
and archaic songs, some sung a capella or with just a lonesome fiddle, along with
the modern dancehall sounds which are more common today. The disc was
conceived of and produced by Josh Caffery, and Joel Savoy did the engineering
at Feufollet Studios. Many of 35 musicians involved in this project are 20- and
30-somethings, and it impresses me that they appreciate the older sounds from
many decades ago, and that they do such a great job keeping that feeling alive.
phone on “Parlez Nous a Boire,” and a wild organ intro by Wilson Savoy on the “Pine Grove Blues.”

This album was recorded at the home of Feufollet members Chris Segura and Chris Stafford, and it has the feeling of friends dropping by, and food being cooked in the kitchen nearby for those midnight appetites. I also liked Jean Arceneaux’s poem called “Charge: LUI” (Living under the Influence), which is printed on the disc itself. I should also mention that all the lyrics in French and English are available to download on the website. This is a boon to those who want to sing the songs, or just understand them better.

Even if you don’t like drinking, this album has enough good stuff to warrant buying it. I’m hoping Valcour Records will put out a compilation of wedding songs and perhaps death songs (there are plenty of those in the Cajun repertoire). They are doing an unusual thing and deserve high marks. Highly recommended!

JEANIE MCLERIE

To order: www.valcourrecords.com

Goin’ Down to Louisiana
Corey Ledet and Cedric Watson

Valcour Records 0001

Goin’ Down to Louisiana/Broken Hearted/Ma Negresse/Black Snake/Colinda/Madame Faïelle/Valse de Cherokee/Let the Good Times Roll/Canray’s One Step/Mama Told Papa/Richard Two-Step/Hungry Man Blues

This disc is the first from Valcour Records in Lafayette, Louisiana. The dynamic pairing of these two musicians, Corey Ledet and Cedric Watson, is like a bright light shining in the world of zydeco and Creole music today. Ledet plays a wailing, soulful accordion that calls to mind the great Clifton Chenier, but there is a lot more than that going on in his complex style. Watson can fiddle just like Canray Fontenot and Eraste Carrière, to name two greats who have passed on, but his playing is a rich gumbo of his own ideas as well. For instance, he takes “Canray’s One Step” to another planet. I’m sure Canray is smiling (with his wonderful wall-to-wall smile) down on Cedric whenever he picks up his fiddle. He also does a killer version of “Madame Faïelle” from the Carrière Brothers. Cedric hails from Seely, Texas, but now lives in Lafayette, Louisiana, where he also plays with the Pine Leaf Boys. Corey “Lil Pop” Ledet grew up in Houston, but now lives in Parks, Louisiana, where he has his own zydeco band. He plays one and three-row diatonic, and piano key accordions equally well. Whether it is a slow groove or a snappy, dancey rhythm, he really makes the notes jump and jive. There is a nice mp4 film clip of these two playing at the Blue Moon Saloon in Lafayette, which can be found on the Valcour site. If that doesn’t make you want to buy this disc, then you can just believe me. These two guys are young, and their styles are still developing, but I hear a lot of the good old sounds I have loved from the early days of recorded Creole music, mixed with the new excitement of today’s zydeco. The Valcour site also has podcasts, and other interesting interviews with these artists and other folks involved with this new label.

The rhythm section has it right, and gives the music a good, solid backup. Clifton was able to play with just his brother, Cleveland, on rubboard, and it rocked absolutely as well as a big band. I have heard a lot of zydeco bands with a mediocre R&B backup band, and that just doesn’t cut it for me. But this disc makes you want to get up and move. The singing is excellent. I was pleasantly surprised to hear old favorites—“Colinda” and “Cherokee Waltz” included, as well as “Black Snake” and “Mama Told Papa.” My only complaint is that I had to go on the website to find the names of all the band members. The first cut is basically “Going to Kansas City,” but a good tune always deserves to be recycled and have a longer lifespan. As producer Josh Caffery says in the notes, “When you listen to this record, it will be easy to draw comparisons to the musical heroes of the past. Don’t forget, though, to think about these young men in the first strong flowering of their talent, changing and renewing the music every time they pick up an instrument.”
Buy the disc and help these musicians and this new record company continue their great work!

JEANIE McLERIE

To order: www.valcourrecords.com

---

It’s Alright/Hey Baby/Someday Baby/
If You Don’t Love Me, Would You Fool
Me Good/Georgia Buck/Long Distance
Call/Fever/One Black Rat/The Things
I Used to Do/Precious Staggerin’ Blues/
Baby, Please Come Home to Me/Wasn’t
I Scared/Wrenched My Ankle/Swinging
the See Saw/Do You Know I Love You/
Josephine/Saints Go Marching In/Sitting
Tight/Ain’t That Loving You Baby/
Chauffeur Blues/Flip, Flop & Fly/You
Got Me Runnin’/Suzy Q/You Don’t Want
Me No More/Don’t Jump My Pony/I Got
A New Home Over in Zion

This CD showcases the music of Precious
Bryant, a singer, guitarist, and songwriter
who was born in 1942 in Georgia. Bryant
very much carries on the tradition of such
East Coast guitarists as Elizabeth Cotten,
Etta Baker, and Algie Mae Hinton, as
well as musicians like Blind Boy Fuller
and Jimmy Reed. She has a gift for com-
municating who she is and her way of
being in the world that comes through in
every note she plays and every word she
sings. She comes across as good-natured
and a bit sassy, and that attitude makes
for some very strong singing. Her guitar-
playing is not fancy, but it is what I would
call sneaky—she has nifty ways of getting
around, and her time is so good that you
feel like your spine is put in the right
alignment just from hearing her play.

The program is a long one, and my own
favorites on it tend to be either the older
numbers like “Georgia Buck” and the
Blind Boy Fuller-influenced “You Don’t
Want Me No More,” or her original num-
bers, like “Precious Staggerin’ Blues” or
“Wrenched My Ankle.” A lot of the mate-
rial on the CD is blues or R&B material
from Bryant’s growing-up years, the ’50s
and ’60s. There are some real warhorses
here, too. I might have chosen to dispense
with “Fever” and “Suzy Q,” but Precious
Bryant likes them, and that is what counts.
In many instances, I like her performances
better than the material she is performing,
but I tend to favor older songs.

This is a strong and immensely likeable
CD by a musician who sounds to be right
on top of her game now. See her in per-
formance if you get the opportunity—she
sounds like she does a great show.

JOHN M. MILLER

To order: www.musicmaker.org.
Reverend Brown accompanies himself out of either G or E in standard tuning (though often tuned low) or playing slide in Vestapol tuning, like one of his early models, Blind Willie Johnson. For whatever reason, the songs where he is playing in G, tuned quite low, especially speak to me. On a few of his songs, the back-up is particularly plain, and it is a treat, somehow, to hear the guitar used so simply, with no apparent calculation to make the accompaniment interesting in its own right. I reckon he figured the guitar was just along for the ride, and you know, he’s right. Rev. Brown employed a pretty pared-back chordal vocabulary, and like Dr. Isaiah Ross and Sam Collins, seems never to have met a V chord that he liked. His phrasing is often “short,” too, for he cuts off the time normally devoted for an instrumental response and goes right into the next vocal phrase. It all makes sense.

I rate this CD very highly and am thankful that Rounder is continuing to make material like this available in its catalog. A word about the Rounder Archive series: the CD does not come with a liner booklet, but extensive notes (including photos) are included on the disc itself as a PDF file, which can be downloaded and printed. If this is what it takes to make the issuing of material like this financially feasible for a large company like Rounder, good for them, for taking advantage of the current technology to continue putting out CDs of this type. I am very pleased to be introduced to the music of Reverend Pearly Brown via this CD, and anticipate continuing to listen and learn from it for many years to come.

JOHN M. MILLER

To order: www.rounder.com

**Legends of American Music**

**The Stanley Brothers: The Definitive Collection 1945-1966**

3 CDs (60 songs and 40 pp. Booklet)

Reissues by Bear Family, Rounder, and Gusto have made it possible to own all the studio recordings by the Stanley Brothers, assembled into neat chrono-logical collections. Serious music lovers (including either you or someone you know) undoubtedly have them already. However, as annotator and Stanley Brothers historian Gary Reid states in his exemplary notes to this set, “It’s safe to say that their esteem and scope of influence are greater today than they were during the scant two decades the brothers performed together.” Time Life implicitly supports Reid’s assertion with the presentation of this attractively packaged three-CD summation of the Stanleys’ career, ending with Carter’s premature death in 1966.

Ralph Stanley’s career was already in great shape before he was featured in the sound track of the 1991 film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* And it’s been in high gear ever since. Much as Bill Monroe’s high profile has kept an awareness of the earlier Monroe Brothers’ music alive, Ralph’s success has burnished and perpetuated the Stanley Brothers’ reputation. He continues to perform Carter’s wonderful songs, as do quite a few others. With Bill Monroe, the Stanley Brothers have come to stand for an idealized purity that characterizes our perception of the early days of bluegrass.

This collection is designed to serve as an introduction and it succeeds, with well-chosen highlights from studio dates, radio shows, and on-location recordings of live appearances, some appearing in this collection for the first time. Gary Reid’s essay covers high points of the Stanleys’ lives and career, and he includes lots of great photos, including the brothers—with and without instruments—in 1939. Though it’s well written, it assumes no prior knowledge on the part of the reader. Even so, we insiders can also read it profitably, and maybe learn a thing or two we didn’t know before. There are brief notes about each selection, helping us understand the music’s origins and place it in context. The whole is handsomely designed and printed on glossy heavy stock, making it a visual as well as musical treat.

I’ll avoid discussing individual choices, since this isn’t designed as a “Best of” or “Greatest Hits” anthology. Those knowing the Stanleys’ full repertoire will inevitably wonder why x was included and y was omitted. That’s just fine—a good primer always makes a receptive reader eager to learn more, and whatever’s missing here can be referenced in the standard collections.

Bluegrass music has been around long enough to acquire a broad sense of its history and main players. This collection introduces two of them admirably and underscores their importance. Think about it as a gift for someone recently acquainted with bluegrass and mountain music, or as a classroom aid for a music history course.

DICK SPOTTSWOOD

To order: http://www.timelife.com

**Dear Old Illinois: Traditional Music of Downstate Illinois**

Compiled and edited by Garry Harrison and Jo Burgess

Dear Old Illinois (3-CD set)

Pick Away Press 2007

This work (book and CDs), named after one of the collected songs, is monumental—the result of years of dedicated effort—a labor of love, born first of all, of love for the music represented here, and secondly, from the desire to document, preserve, and disseminate the material contained in the collection. Garry Harrison and David S. McIntosh are both natives of Illinois and the music and transcriptions here are from their collections.

McIntosh, whose interest was mainly in vocal music and dance, was a Professor of music at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale from 1928–1965. Along with his wife, Eva, he began collecting traditional music in southern Illinois in 1932. His *Folk Songs and Singing Games of the Southern Illinois Ozarks* was published in 1974 and he died in 1979. His collection was archived at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana.

Garry Harrison is a musician who may be familiar to old-time music fans because of his fine fiddling, original tunes, and his recordings with the Indian Creek Delta Boys and The Mule Team. Harrison’s primary interest is instrumental music and he collected from traditional musicians in the northern sections of Illinois, initially in order to learn fiddle tunes in much the same way that so many amateur musicians/collectors have collected from traditional sources in other parts of the country—generally on their own.
time, without outside financial support, and because they love the music. Most of the fiddle tunes here were recorded in the mid to late 1970s. Harrison is currently the Collections Conservator at the Indiana University Library in Bloomington. Jo Burgess, said Garry, “created a database, and other support files that made everything searchable. We both took shares of the editorial responsibilities. There was field work, locating surviving sources and getting information [and] photos of them from descendants. And she [helped] in the actual building of the book…writing text, transcribing, notation program entry, and background information and indexes.”

Dear Old Illinois is quite a book. It is not comprehensive. In the Introduction the authors tell us that the collections “primarily represent the dominant influences among the traditional music of downstate Illinois, music rooted in the British Isles and that of Anglo-American origin.” The ethnic traditions of downstate Illinois are not represented in this book except for one song, “La Gui-Annee” by a group from Prairie du Rocher. The book is divided into two sections: Songs (361 musical transcriptions with words and guitar chord accompaniment) and Fiddle Tunes (391 musical transcriptions with guitar accompaniment), and clocks in at 506 pages. No professional musicians are represented in either the book or on the CDs. The Fiddle Tunes section is broken down into Hoedowns, Waltzes, Schottisches, Jigs, and Other. Keys are given, and tunings if other than standard GDAE. There are photos of many of the musicians throughout the book.

There is thoroughness and attention to detail here that is admirable. Besides the very clear transcriptions, which are user-friendly and designed for learning (and in the case of the songs, set in keys in which a normal person can sing), and the photos, there is information on the musicians and explanations of the methods used in presentation, on the styles, on the definitions used throughout the book, on tunings; plus a thorough examination of the chord accompaniment—more than I was interested in, but which would be of great interest to perhaps a more musically analytical mind. At the end of the book there is an extensive section of background information on the musicians (although I couldn’t find any on Cecil Polley), and on both the songs and fiddle tunes, on who’s playing what (in the case of the fiddle tunes with accompaniment), when a song or tune was recorded, and occasional tidbits of other information or quotes from the artist, such as “Mr.

Dear Old Illinois is quite a book. It is not comprehensive. In the Introduction the authors tell us that the collections “primarily represent the dominant influences among the traditional music of downstate Illinois, music rooted in the British Isles and that of Anglo-American origin.” The ethnic traditions of downstate Illinois are not represented in this book except for one song, “La Gui-Annee” by a group from Prairie du Rocher. The book is divided into two sections: Songs (361 musical transcriptions with words and guitar chord accompaniment) and Fiddle Tunes (391 musical transcriptions with guitar accompaniment), and clocks in at 506 pages. No professional musicians are represented in either the book or on the CDs. The Fiddle Tunes section is broken down into Hoedowns, Waltzes, Schottisches, Jigs, and Other. Keys are given, and tunings if other than standard GDAE. There are photos of many of the musicians throughout the book.

There is thoroughness and attention to detail here that is admirable. Besides the very clear transcriptions, which are user-friendly and designed for learning (and in the case of the songs, set in keys in which a normal person can sing), and the photos, there is information on the musicians and explanations of the methods used in presentation, on the styles, on the definitions used throughout the book, on tunings; plus a thorough examination of the chord accompaniment—more than I was interested in, but which would be of great interest to perhaps a more musically analytical mind. At the end of the book there is an extensive section of background information on the musicians (although I couldn’t find any on Cecil Polley), and on both the songs and fiddle tunes, on who’s playing what (in the case of the fiddle tunes with accompaniment), when a song or tune was recorded, and occasional tidbits of other information or quotes from the artist, such as “Mr.
Goessman learned this song from a tramp by the name of Happy Jack many years ago. Happy Jack was a traveling musician using a banjo.” Makes you want to know more… Or in the case of the “Humane Waltz”: “It is not certain that ‘Humane’ is an accurate interpretation of the title as he gave it verbally, but it is at least similar.” [He] learned it from “a gramophone with the big horn.” It’s fascinating to look through all this information.

I believe, and I think most would agree, that it’s difficult if not impossible to learn traditional music from musical transcriptions alone—there are so many subtleties and nuances of both noting and bowing, which defy systems of written notation, and the serious learner must also hear the music and try to absorb it that way. So the fact that there are CDs of the transcribed fiddle tunes is wonderful. Also, this music can be enjoyed and learned on or at many different levels, and written music (if properly presented) can be a way to learn the song or tune melody, and be an aid to just “getting” the notes. Harrison and Burgess note in the introduction “Traditional music is often learned by ear rather than by reading music. The transcription of the music in this book...was undertaken with recreational musicians in mind, and with the assumption that many are not very (or at all) familiar with written music. Thus, an effort was made to present the music clearly and simply, with the hope of making it possible for even a singer’s or player’s first attempt at learning from written music to result in success.”

The three CDs, which are a companion to the book and can be ordered separately, contain mostly fiddle tunes and an occasional banjo tune/song. The tunes in the book are included on the CDs so fiddlers, if they are trying to learn a tune from the book transcription, can actually hear it. And if you just want to hear the tunes, well, that’s fine too. The music is wonderful if you like fiddle music, and I do. These are field recordings obtained under varying conditions so there are a lot of audio variables—they are not studio recordings. There are many different fiddling styles represented, and different proficiencies—just like real life. You probably won’t love every cut, but you will love enough, and appreciate the fact that this project is out there for us to enjoy and learn from. I should mention also that the guitar playing that accompanies many of the tunes is clearly audible so that aspiring guitar players can learn a lot. Listen to the rock solid Mike Wilson, who plays with fiddler Harry Jones. Wilson also plays nice harmonica along with his guitar on “Green Valley Waltz.”

There are a ton of songs in the book and it is a treasure for anyone interested in traditional song. This begs the question—why were only a very few songs included on the recordings? It’s clear from the Introduction that some of the songs in the McIntosh collection were written transcriptions only, but it also indicated that there were recordings in the archives. I would love to have heard the actual singers and versions of the transcribed songs. What’s there is wonderful. I especially loved “Don’t You Hear Jerusalem Moan” by Delbar Tarpley with fiddle and voice, and “La Gui-Annee” mentioned above.

For anyone with computer and internet capability, there is a really fine and useful website, www.dearoldillinois.com, which tells you about the book, and if you peel away the layers, has guitar, fiddle, and general instruction, a site map, sound clips of the fiddle tunes, and synthesized sound files of all 361 of the tunes —and more—definitely designed to be a companion to the book and CD set, and very useful for anyone wanting to learn the material.

I highly recommend both the book and the 3-CD set. The CD set that came with my book had minimal cover information—the names of the songs and the personnel only. In order to have all the information on the artists and recordings, you will need the book too. Forty dollars for the book and $25 for the 3 CDs. Not bad. 21 or so lattes, 9 movies, 2 tanks of gas, a few meals out… stay home, read the book, listen to the CDs, drink regular coffee, learn a few new tunes…well worth it.

ALICE GERRARD

To order: www.dearoldillinois.com

Books

Fiddlin’ Charlie Bowman: An East Tennessee Old-Time Music Pioneer and his Musical Family
Bob L. Cox
University of Tennessee Press, 2007

This biography’s epigraph is a quote from Bob Taylor, a late-19th-century Tennessee governor: “No ordinary mortal ever felt the raptures of a fiddler; the fiddle is his bride, and the honeymoon is forever.” Bob Cox skillfully uses that theme to illuminate the Charlie Bowman story.

Charlie Bowman (1889-1962) belonged to a second generation of recording musicians. The first, such as Fiddlin’ John Carson (b. 1868) or Uncle Dave Macon (b. 1870), matured during an era when music could not be preserved and when travel choices were limited to the slow horse or the inflexible train. They were in their 50s when they first recorded. Bowman, A. P. Carter (b. 1891), and Charlie Poole (b. 1892) were still young when the first phonograph and the first automobile came to their towns. When they started recording, in their 30s, they also traveled around by car, bringing their entertainment to small settlements as well as bigger cities—trail blazers for the touring musicians who were to follow them.

Charlie Bowman, sixth in a family of nine children, was born and raised on a farm at Gray’s Station (now Gray), Tennessee, about eight miles from Johnson City. When he was ten, he borrowed a neighbor’s homemade banjo and learned how to play it, picking up the fiddle a short time later. At 21, he married Fannie Ferguson, a young widow who already had two children by a husband who had been killed in a mining accident. There were eventually 12 children. Charlie worked at odd jobs, such as carpentry, house painting, and logging with oxen. One of his occasional jobs was more enjoyable than the others: he and his brother Argil, a guitarist, sometimes played for the silent movies in Kingsport. Two other brothers, Walter and Elbert, also played instruments, and the four of them entertained locally as Charlie Bowman & His Brothers. Charlie also did well in the local fiddle contests, and, in 1925, jumped at a chance to join an already successful group, the Hill Billies from Galax, Virginia. That meant almost continuous touring, and recording, as well as broadcasting from a Washington, DC, radio station. The recordings were released on Vocalion as “The Hill Billies” and on Brunswick as “Al Hopkins & His Buckle Busters.” Charlie was very seldom home, leaving Fannie behind to raise the children. Cox leaves you to imagine the difficulties and loneliness she probably faced, for she evidently kept her frustrations to herself.

By the time the Hill Billies disbanded, Charlie had defined himself as a professional musician. He continued to tour, do radio programs, and make records, eventually bringing along two of his daughters, Pauline and Jennie, as the Bowman Sisters. The touring schedule was rugged, as Jennie’s lists of appearances (given in an appendix) show: 96 shows in 1931, covering the eastern US as far north as Maine.
The traveling hillbilly show caught the tail end of vaudeville, often performing in theaters on the same bill as movies. At least one of the troupe had to wear goofy clothes, black out a tooth, and tell awful jokes. Over the years, Charlie hooked up with a number of groups, formed around radio stations that wanted daily local music programs, or by booking agents who arranged the grueling tours.

As far as I can tell from this book, Charlie avoided most or all of the occupational hazards of a traveling musician, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, or driving while asleep. But his neglect of family was finally too much for the long-suffering Fannie so, when all the children were old enough to care for themselves, she left him and got a divorce.

After the end of WWII with the rise of western swing, country-western, and then rock ‘n’ roll, the audiences were no longer interested in Charlie’s music. He remarried, and he and his new wife moved to Union City, Georgia, where they opened a general store which survived a few years before a freeway took all the business away. Late in life, Charlie was rediscovered by collectors such as Joe Nicholas, Eugene Earle, and Archie Green in America. He exchanged letters with them and made tapes of his music. After Charlie’s death, his widow essentially repudiated his life: she pawned his fiddle and threw away his tape collection.

This book covers Charlie’s life very well, as chronicled by his recordings, compositions (such as “Roll On Buddy”), tour schedules, newspaper clippings, letters, and family stories. We’re fortunate that Cox (Charlie Bowman’s grand-nephew) was able to interview a number of people who were present when the events he describes took place. Still, there’s a puzzle here that’s not unraveled: a modern musician’s success depends on mobility; who is the person who loves musical performance enough to sacrifice all the comforts that everyone else prizes? Charlie’s brothers, after all, decided not to tour. Perhaps no writer can make sense of the life of a professional musician.

There are lots of photographs in the book, and I appreciate that they’re located within a page or two of the related text rather than gathered in only a couple of places. Other highlights are the appendices, which include Charlie’s recording sessions, Jennie’s tour and song lists, and (most valuable) some of Charlie’s comedy routines, which contain jokes old enough to be fresh again. I plan to steal some.

As we head into a multimedia age, I hope that a book like this in the future will come with a CD of the music, which would make the story come even more alive and help the reader understand Charlie’s obsession. I don’t fault the publisher for not daring to make this move, though, considering the mess that we call copyright law. As it stands, this is a worthwhile addition to existing biographies of the same genre, such as Kinney Rorrer’s Rambling Blues: The Life & Songs of Charlie Poole and Gene Wiggins’ Fiddlin’ Georgia Crazy: Fiddlin’ John Carson, his Real World, & the World of his Songs.

The errors I spotted were very minor: the standard fiddle tuning interval is described as fourths rather than fifths, and it’s only in our band that dual fiddles become “duel fiddles.”

LYLE LOFGREN

To order: www.utpress.org

A Banjo Pickin’ Girl—The Life and Music of Ola Belle Campbell Reed

Judy H. Marti

Ola Belle Campbell Reed is a name familiar to readers of the Old-Time Herald. You probably know the basic details of her life. She was born in North Carolina and moved north to Chester County, Pennsylvania. Her family owned and operated the New River Ranch in Rising Sun, Maryland, and formed the heart of the “house band” at Sunset Park in Oxford, Pennsylvania. In addition to playing at Sunset Park, Alex and Ola Belle and the New River Boys had a weekly radio show on station WCOJ for many years, originating from the back of the general store the family owned. She wrote and performed a large number of great songs. This story is told in much more detail by Judy Marti, who obtained a grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts to study with, and be an apprentice to, Ola Belle.

It was Hazel Dickens who wrote “It’s Hard to Tell the Singer from the Song,” but this statement is equally true of Ola Belle. Her best songs—“My Epitaph,” “High on a Mountain,” “I Believe,” “I’ve Endured”—all drew on her own life for inspiration. It would be a mistake, however, simply to place her in the “singer-songwriter” category and forget that she also was a source of varied material: traditional ballads (her “Fair and Tender Ladies” is subtly different both in words and tune from any other version I know),
Victorian tearjerkers like “I’m Just Here to Get My Baby Out of Jail,” and such tunes as “Cluck Old Hen” and “Fly All Around My Pretty Little Miss.”

Marti also attempts to explain Reed’s banjo playing. She calls it a combination of “back picking” and frailing, “using the index finger to pick rather than strike the string with the fingernail, prior to the brush stroke and the thumb.” This would mean a combination of up picking (the Seeger “basic strum”) and frailing, sometimes within the same measure. Almost every measure uses hammer-ons and pull-offs as a means of getting melodic notes. If I have misunderstood, this is an indication of how hard it is to teach a style with words instead of a demonstration. This much is clear from listening to recordings: Ola Belle Reed’s playing was simple and distinctive.

This book, while valuable, might have benefited by a tighter focus on Reed herself. In addition to the biography of Reed and her family, words and music (with banjo tab) are provided for all of her compositions (together with a discography) as well as about 25 other songs selected from her repertoire. The book is strongest where it discusses Reed’s life and musical compositions. The other songs, while interesting, are almost all available in other collections, and the discussions focus on the Campbell and Reed family. For instance, the comments on “If Brother Jack Were Here” begin, “Uncle Doc Campbell sang this one, and Ola Belle learned it from him. The song is most likely from the minstrel days. . .”. The song is an 1896 composition by Marks and Stern, and was recorded by Jimmie Rodgers, among many others.

Those complaints are minor. What Marti has done is given us a word-picture of Ola Belle Reed—somebody worth knowing. The best recommendation I can give this book is to say that we bought our own copy, read it, enjoyed it, and learned from it, before I was asked to review it. If I ever meet Judy Marti, I will thank her, and ask her to demonstrate Ola Belle’s banjo playing so I can better learn what she did. That style is worth learning and preserving. So are her songs.

PETE PETERSON

To order: email@broadvalleyorchard.com

A Florida Fiddler: The Life and Times of Richard Seaman
Gregory Hansen
University of Alabama Press, 2007

Until just a few decades ago, pre-Disney central and northern Florida looked pretty much like the southern parts of Georgia and Alabama—a dead-level terrain of tupelo swamp and palmetto scrub. In the mid-1960s when we were in college in Gainesville, my sister and I made regular Greyhound journeys across the state’s sun-bleached roads to our home in its western panhandle. We were entertained as the bus driver bellowed out the names of stops along the way—Sopchopy, Sumatra, and Two-Egg—and we loved the hand-painted signs declaiming “All-Day Sing with Dinner-on-the-Grounds,” “Square Dance,” and “Cakewalk Tonight.” After reading this new book on by folklorist Gregory Hansen, I have to smile and wonder if old-time fiddlers such as Richard Seaman might have been playing at some of these shindigs.

Richard Seaman was born in rural Kissimmee Park, Florida in 1904, a then-remote section of South-Central Florida. He was fiddling for square dances by 1912. Incredibly, the man lived to be 97, alert and fiddling until just about the end of his days, his experiences encompassing most of the 20th century. In this fascinating and readable book, author
Gregory Hansen skillfully weaves folklore and oral history, drawing a portrait of one fiddler’s life through his tall tales, personal narratives, and legends. Though its subject is a fiddler, this book is about much more than that. Richard Seaman’s long musical life was, as the author puts it, “a glorious metaphor for Florida’s cultural landscape.”

Until now, our only major source for learning about old-style fiddling in Florida was through recordings of Arthur “Cush” Holston. Holston was born a generation earlier than Richard Seaman, and his musical legacy survives in a collection of recordings made at the Florida Folk Festival and in 1950s and ’60s field recordings by Marty Schuman, then a young student at the University of Florida. So, my ears perked up at the chance to read first-hand accounts of Florida fiddling and dance in the early part of the century.

Seaman’s vivid memories of childhood, like riding in a mule-drawn cart in Kissimmee Park, evoke life in an earlier century. Throughout these life-narratives and tales, the reader will constantly be reminded that old days were hardly “good,” and in fact were horrendous for certain people—African Americans, Native Americans, and for anyone who was poor. As he recalls his boyhood, Seaman unflinchingly describes those days through the eyes of an innocent young boy, but he also looks back critically with the advantage of a lifetime of accumulated wisdom. Life was certainly tough in Florida before World War I, and even practical jokes and pranks among friends and neighbors could be harsh. Indeed, some of his tales remind us that a pre-WWI Florida square dance could often end with gunfire or, at the least, the sort of Western hoedowns that left people with a fright.

Through Richard Seaman’s narrative, this book takes us from his rough-and-tumble pioneer days in south-central Florida through his more settled adult life in the northeastern Florida city of Jacksonville, to his musical heyday playing with a string band on the radio. His musical life is a good introduction to the emergence of modern bluegrass and country fiddling. Well-known bluegrass fiddler Chubby Wise, known as the “Kissimmee Kid,” though he was of a younger generation, also came from south-central Florida, and both men shared much of the same musical approach and repertoire. Seaman’s early tune lists, as did Wise’s, hint at the older fiddle tradition of the Lower and Coastal South with tunes such as “Shear ‘Em” (aka “Share ‘Em,” “Share ‘Round Ladies”), which is a dance tune typically found from Florida through eastern North Carolina. And like Wise, Richard Seaman embraced the modern country music coming out of the radio. He eagerly incorporated new music and new techniques and did not have a very high regard for the old-style square dance fiddlers of his youth. (One doubts that he would have appreciated Cush Holston!) Though he continued to play some of these earlier tunes, “Orange Blossom Special” was his standard performance tour-de-force and a much-requested favorite of audiences. Descriptions of his bowing technique also hint at modernisms. For example, he enjoyed using a certain staccato bowing technique in which the bow leaves the strings two or three times in a row and descends with a bite. This is a sound familiar in mid-20th-century bluegrass and commercial country fiddling, and it was widespread. Harnett County, North Carolina fiddler Lauchlin Shaw used it in the first phrases of the second part of his version of “Italian Waltz.”

There is no CD accompanying the book, I understand that the author made many recordings of Seaman through the years and that these are on deposit in the State Folklife Collection.

Gregory Hansen wrote this portrait of a Florida fiddler originally as a dissertation, and he now teaches English and Folklore at Arkansas State University, but don’t let the book’s academic origins put you off. His portrait of a Florida fiddler’s life and times is so chock-full of entertaining stories and riveting eye-witness detail, that it is a guaranteed good read for musicians and non-musicians, academics, and casual readers alike.

**To Order:** [www.uapress.ua.edu](http://www.uapress.ua.edu)

**DVDs**

**The Roan Mountain Hilltoppers**

*Field Recorder’s Collective FRC 1002 DVD*

Joe Birchfield: fiddle; Creede Birchfield: banjo; Bill Birchfield: guitar

When I met Creede and Joe Birchfield at their home place back in the early 1980s, Joe and Ethel were very hospitable. They took us in, fed us, and of course played music—Joe’s great rhythmic fiddling and unique versions of tunes; Creede’s hard-driving two-finger style banjo, a perfect complement to his brother’s fiddling. The Roan Mountain Hilltoppers from Roan Mountain, Tennessee, were one of the finest of the old-time string bands, with brothers Joe (1912-2002) and Creede (1905-1999), Joe’s son Bill, and daughter-in-law Janice (who does the emcee work and plays washtub bass, but is not on this DVD). The Hilltoppers were a popular band who got around a fair amount, playing at festivals and other events around the country and locally. The Hilltoppers continue to play today—a high-powered band with Bill now on fiddle, various banjo and guitar players, and Janice on washtub bass.

This DVD, recorded in 1987 when Joe and Creede were 75 and 82, respectively, contains great stuff—classic, powerful old-time fiddle and banjo, and of course Bill’s unique and amazing left-handed guitar playing. He plays the guitar upside-down and backwards, forming the chords by coming down on the neck from above with the fingers of his right hand. Bill also plays beautiful solo lead guitar on “I’ll Fly Away.” Tunes here are played all the way through with close-ups on all instruments so you get a good picture of what they are doing with bow and fingers. They have a great, driving band sound, with Bill and Creede holding down strong rhythm on guitar and banjo and Joe overlaying his strong, edgy fiddling. There’s nothing noisy or sweet here, just good, danceable, hardcore old-time music (and a few gospel numbers—played, not sung).

There is some talking on this DVD. All the band members speak informally and naturally about learning the music, and they relate family stories, giving the listener a sense of their lives and the context for the music.

As with all FRC projects there is little in the way of notes, and the packaging is minimal. Ray Alden, the driving force behind FRC, is trying to get the material out there and available to the public, and we are all grateful to him for taking on the huge project of doing so. There is much more information on the Roan Mountain Hilltoppers on the website (see below). They are a wonderful example of one of the many styles of truly original old-time music. Highly recommended.

**To Order:** [www.fieldrecorder.com](http://www.fieldrecorder.com)
Steve Kaufman's Acoustic Kamps

June 8-15: Bluegrass Banjo, Fingerpicking, Fiddle, Bass, Dobro ™, Old Time Banjo
June 15-22: Flatpicking and Mandolin

Week 1: Bluegrass Banjo: Bob Black, Gary Davis, Janet Davis, Casey Henry, Murphy Henry
Fingerpick: Pete Huttlinger and T.J. Wheeler; Bass- Rusty Holloway, Missy Raines
Fiddle: Bobby Hicks and Barbara Lamb;
Dobro ™ : Curtis Burch, Doug Cox; Old Time Banjo: Laura Boosinger and Jim Pankey
Week 2: Flatpick: Russ Barenberg, Kathy Barwick, Mitch Corbin, Mark Cosgrove,
Beppe Gambetta, John Goldie, Chris Jones, Steve Kaufman and Chris Newman;
Mandolin: Carlo Aonzo, Butch Balsassari, Robin Bullock, Emory Lester,
Don Stiernberg and Roland White

Call 800-FLATPIK - 865-982-3808 to Register

A Musical Event Like None Other
Specially designed for Ultra-Beginners through Professional
Located On The Campus of Maryville College in Maryville, TN
17 mi. So. of Knoxville, TN.

Call or Write for your Kamp Brochure

Your $750.00 Paid Registration Entitles You To:
* Rotating 2 Hour Classes with ALL of the Main Teachers
* All Meals and Lodging (Companion Packages available)
* Structured Slow and Afternoon Medium Group Jam Periods
* Master Classes and Afternoon Focused Panel Sessions
* Ensemble Work, Open Mike Time, Afternoon and Nightly Jams
* Admission to All The Nightly Concerts
* On Grounds “Kamp Doctors” Bryan Kimsey, Jim Grainger and Ken Miller

We’d like to thank Weber Mandolins, Collings Guitars, Ken Miller Guitars and Deering Banjos
for donating instruments for our big Door Prize Give Away! More to be added!

Limited Spaces -Registrations and Kamp Info: www.flatpik.com

Register On-Line    Register Today
Steve Kaufman's Acoustic Kamp
PO Box 1020, Alcoa, TN 37701
865-982-3808   (Operator's and Tape Machines are Standing By 24 hours)

800 - FLATPIK    steve@flatpik.com    www.flatpik.com

Don’t Sleep Through This Opportunity!

Interested in being a corporate sponsor? Write steve@flatpik.com to find out how.

The 2008 Kamp Series is Sponsored in part by ~ Acoustic Guitar Magazine, Collings Guitars,
Comp-U-Chem, Deering Banjos, D’Addario Strings, DR Strings, Elm Hill Meats, Finecases.com, Fishman Transducers,
Flatpicking Guitar Magazine, Janet Davis Music, Heritage Instrument Insurance, Homespun Tapes,
Huss and Dalton Guitars, Mandolin Magazine, Martin Guitars, Mass Street Music, Mel Bay Publications, Naugler Guitars,
PicKing, Pick ‘N Grin, Shubb Capos, Taylor Guitars, Waverly Tuning Machines, Weber Mandolins and Wood-N-Strings