LEAD BELLY
HAPPY BIRTHDAY, HUDDIE!
JANUARY 20, 1889

“I fell in love with Lead Belly... The blues is at the root of everything I do.” - ROGER WATERS, PINK FLOYD

“(Lead Belly is) my favorite performer... our favorite performer” - KURT COBAIN, NIRVANA

“There’s no way I can get away from Big Bill Broonzy or Lead Belly. It’s part of my life. If I’d never heard Lead Belly, I don’t know what I’d be doing now. I played some old Lead Belly tracks the other day and I cried, because that’s all there is. If you boil it all down to intent, sound, grit and giving out, it’s all there in Lead Belly.” - DAVE DAVIES, THE KINKS

Paul McCartney and John Lennon first played together in a skiffle group, the Quarrymen. Skiffle, a peculiarly British scene not unlike jugband music, took off almost simultaneously with rock & roll, and was based largely on the songs of American folk blues singers from the ‘30s and ‘40s, notably Lead Belly. Skifflers reduced these songs to simple three-chord strums, delivered with the reckless energy of youth, usually accompanied by washboard percussion and a single-stringed home-made tea-chest bass. “We loved the blues” - PAUL MCCARTNEY

“I was influenced by Lead Belly, Pete Seeger... and a lot of the folk singers.” - ROGER MCGUINN, THE BYRDS

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COMING SOON:
Fiddlin' Bill Hensley,
Cathy Barton and Dave Para

Photo courtesy Bill Dillof.
Letters

A microphone, not a horn.

I thoroughly enjoyed Jim Weaver’s report on the 1927 Bristol, Tennessee, recording sessions (OTH Dec.-Jan. 2007/08). However I must question his observation that the Carter Family could only see “one horn jutting through a small aperture” from the recording apparatus when they went to make their records, and that they got “right up next to the horn” and projected their voices into it.

That is strange since earlier in his article Weaver observes that Victor Records was “recording on a state-of-the-art electric recording machine.” If that was true, and it is, the Bristol Sessions artists were facing a microphone, and not a horn, which was used in the older acoustic recording process.

Bill Knowlton
Hamilton, NY

Scott Harris of the Washington String Trio

When I opened the latest Old-Time Herald, I experienced a shock of recognition. Viewing the photograph of the Washington String Trio on page 10, I am fairly sure that the guitarist in the photo, Scott Harris, is the same musician pictured on page 259 of the book At the Falls (by Marie Tyler-McGraw, UNC Press, 1994). Harris is identified as a member of the Old South Quartet, a group of African-American singers led by the white banjoist Polk Miller. This photograph comes from the Cook Collection of the Valentine Museum in Richmond, Virginia. The Cooks were photographers in that city from around 1880 until 1951, and they focused particularly on African-American life in the area. Some examples of their work are available online at http://dig.library.vcu.edu, including images of both the Old South Quartet and of Harris, holding his guitar and posed with a banjo as a street musician. A search of Ancestry.com yielded the following information about the life of Scott Harris and his family.

Scott Christopher Harris was born in Virginia in February of 1858 or 1859. By the time of the 1870 census, the family—his father Mason, mother Julia, and brothers Wesley, Braxton, Wilkerson and Thomas—were living in the Monroe Ward of Richmond. In June of 1880, Scott was working as a barber and living with his family at 1113 First Street. Between and 1880 and 1892, Harris relocated to just south of Seattle, Washington, where he continued to earn a living as a barber. He first boarded in Takoma, relocating by 1900 to Everett. The first official appearance Scott and his wife Elise in Washington State was for the birth of their second child, Scott, Jr., in September of 1903.

By 1910, the Harris family owned their home on Maple Street in Everett. Some time after his loss of sight in 1916, Scott Harris disappears from the official record. It is possible his disability became unmanageable for his family and that he lived out his life in a state hospital, or that he passed away sometime after the mid-'10s. Elise was still living in the Harris family home in 1920, but disappears by the time of the 1930 Federal Census. Elise Griffin Harris was around twelve years younger then Scott. The couple eventually had five children, including daughter Julia A. Harris (died 1988), whom David Wilson interviewed in the 1969 Seattle Folklore Quarterly article referred to in the Old-Time Herald article. Julia’s brother, William Alexander, whom she remembers playing guitar like their father, died in 1981.

Bob Carlin
Lexington, NC

Corrections

In the article “Old Time Music Alive and Well in Nashville” by Jim Weaver in the December issue, we gave incorrect dates and contact information for the Breakin’ Up Winter event, sponsored by the Nashville Old-Time String Band Association. The Breakin’ Up Winter Festival will take place March 7-9 at Cedars of Lebanon State Park, Tennessee. To find out more and about how to register, visit www.nashvilleoldtime.org.

Fiddler Kerry Blech, who lives in Florida, pointed out a mistake in my review of Greg Hansen’s book Florida Fiddler. Robert Russell “Chubby” Wise was actually from Lake City, which is in North Florida. I had confused Wise’s birthplace with that of Vassar Clements, who was from Kissimmee in central Florida. It was Clements rather than Wise who was known as the “Kissimmee Kid.”

—Gail Gillespie
Here & There

Events

The Southern Mountain Square Dance has been the New River Valley’s community square dance since 1981 and is sponsored by the Blacksburg Old Time Music and Dance Group. The Spring 2008 schedule has a great line-up of callers and bands: Feb. 2- Phil Jamison and the Reed Island Rounders, with fiddler Betty Vornbrock; Mar. 1- Jim Morrison and Katie and the Bubbatones, with fiddler Kathleen O’Connell; Apr. 5- Allison Williams and the Pilot Mountain Bobcats with fiddler Nancy Sluys; and May 3- Jason Phillips and the Jugbusters with fiddler Bill Richardson. All of the dances are held at 8:00-11:00 PM Saturday night in Blacksburg, VA. Info: www.nrot.org.

The 48th Annual University of Chicago Folk Festival is to be held Feb. 8-10, featuring three days of the best bluegrass, country blues, old-time fiddle, Irish, creole, klezmer, Scottish, Chicago blues, old-time string band, and much more. This year’s performers include: New Bad Habits (Chirps Smith, Dave Landreth, Tim Foss, Dot Kent, and Andy Gribble), Paul Brown, Junior Sisk & Ramblers Choice, Lafayette Rhythm Devils, Geraldine and Donald Gay, Chicago Klezmer Ensemble, Kim Wilson, Chulrua, and Aaron Moore. Info: 773-702-9793; www.uofcfolk.org.

The Breakin’ Up Winter old-time music weekend will take place Mar. 7-9 outside Lebanon, TN. This year’s musicians and lecturers include Charlie Acuff, James and Rachel Bryan, Evan Hatch, Gerry Milnes, Jeff Todd Titon, Roby Cogswell, Susan Kevra, and Martin Fisher, who will return with his wax cylinder recording machine. Info: Pat Gill - 202 New Stock Rd., Asheville, NC 28804; www.nashvilleoldtime.org.

The annual Texas Forest Country Western Swing Music Festival will take place April 17-19 in Crockett, TX. This event will feature such fine western swing musicians as Clyde Brewer and the River Road Boys, Jodie Nix, Bobby Flores, Darrell McCall, and more. The event is held indoors at the handicap-accessible Crockett Civic Center. There is plenty of room for dancing, and RV hookups and camping are available in the area. Info: Chamber of Commerce - 936-544-2359; ckeys@crockettareachamber.org; chamber@crockettareachamber.org; or go to the website at www.crockettareachamber.com.

The International Conference on the African Origins of the New World Banjo Conference will take place July 18-July 27 in Casamance, in the Gambia. The conference program begins with a welcoming party, followed by a day of presentations, socializing, and jamming. Also included are ceremonies honoring elders, the akonting masters. Monday’s programming will be a full day of music by skilled players from the Buchundu, Balanta, Jola, Wolof, and other ethnic groups. There will be an optional trip visiting sites in the Gambia that are historical and relevant to describing the social context of music making, especially the akonting. Info: http://jpdickerson.tripod.com/2008conf/.

The Humboldt Folklife Society Festival is set for July 20-26. The event kicks off with the Annie and Mary Day Fiddle Festival. The weekends are free, family-friendly events with three stages, jamming, workshops, and children’s activities. Weeknights are concerts showcasing old-time and various genres of music, and a barn dance with old-time music. Info: Humboldt Folk Society, PO Box 1061, Arcata, CA 95518; www.humboldtfolklife.org; 707-822-5394.
Jams

There’s a bluegrass and old-time jam at the Phipps Country Store every Fri. from 7:00-10:00 PM. The address of the store is 2425 Silas Creek Rd., Lansing, NC. All ages and skill levels and dancers are welcome. Info: James or Rita Wood, 336-384-2382.

Every Thursday from noon until 4:00 PM there is an old-time picking party at the Ciderville Music Shop, 2836 Clinton Hwy., Powell, TN. Info: 865-945-3595.

On the Air, Net, and Film

Nikolai Fox’s film Music for the Sky premiered at Space Gallery in Portland, ME. The film, which explores a community of eccentric old-time fiddlers playing southern-style fiddle music in the mountains of VT and western MA, revolves around the personalities of eight musicians, each described in a cinematic portrait. Info: Nikolai Fox, www.nikolaifox.com.

The American Folklife Center Catalog, covering field recordings made between 1930 and 1950, is now available online. The new resource, called Traditional Music and Spoken Word Catalog, will provide researchers the convenience of accessing the AFC’s card catalog without traveling to the library. It contains fully searchable bibliographic data representing approximately 34,000 ethnographic sound recordings of the Archive of Folksong Archive. Included among these are the seminal field recordings associated with John A. Lomax’s and Alan Lomax’s Library of Congress collecting work (e.g., Leadbelly, Woody Guthrie, Jelly Roll Morton), and countless other treasures recorded by collectors such as Herbert Halpert, Zora Neale Hurston, Henrietta Yurchenco, Vance Randolph, and Helen Creighton. The new catalog will be part of the site The Library of Congress Presents Music, Theatre & Dance, at http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/html/afccards/.

The University of Rochester has digitized and made available online its collection of public domain scores and music ephemera. This includes copies of S. S. Stewart’s Banjo and Guitar Journal from the 1890s. Originally published as a magazine to promote their instruments, the journal is filled with fascinating commentary on the state of music of the day. The site is: https://urreresearch.rochester.edu/handle/1802/2586.

Artists and Recordings

The Carolina Chocolate Drops’ music is in the Oprah Winfrey-produced film The Great Debaters. The film, which stars Denzel Washington (who also directed the movie) and Forest Whitaker, hit theaters on December 25th. To hear a sample of the music, go to www.ifilm.com/video/2909734. The Drops have a busy February and March ahead. They will be in New York, West Virginia, California, Alaska, and in late Feb. and March will travel to Ireland, Scotland, England, France, and Belgium. For a detailed schedule, go to www.carolinachocolatedrops.com.

North Carolina’s WBT Briarhoppers, whose current lineup is Dwight Moody, Roy “Whitey” Grant, David Deese, and Tom Warlick, now have a website: www.wbtbriarhoppers.blogspot.com.

Fiddler A. C. Bushnell announces the release of his new CD/DVD 2-disc set. Called Dancing on the Water, the music is a mix of old-time, newly composed music, Sanscrit chanting, and mystical poetry. Bands include the Stillhouse Bottom Band, the Happyjoy Band, and Cluckin’ A. To order: A. C. Bushnell- 919-932-3037; acbushnell.com.

John Hoffmann and Mac Benford have a new recording on the 5-String label called It’s About Time. They are joined by Randy Beckmann, Paula Bradley, and their bands the Haywire Gang and Up-South. To order: www.macbenford.com.

New Bad Habits is a new band that includes veteran musicians from the Midwest: Chirps Smith, Dave Landreth, Dot Kent, Andrew Gribble, and Tim Foss. They are to play at the Chicago Folk Festival Feb. 8-10, and at the Minnesota Bluegrass and Old-Time Music Association’s Winter Bluegrass Weekend Feb. 29-March 2. New Bad Habits has a new website with sound clips: www.newbadhabits.com.

Ray Alden of the Field Recorders Collective reports that they have a number of great new projects in the works for 2008 and beyond. Among this year’s releases are to be a two-volume set focusing on 1960s-’70s recordings of the music of the Round Peak area, and a recording of an early 1970s Balfa Brothers and Nathan Abshire concert. Also, watch for several new additions to the “Young Musicians Series,” including recordings...
of the Indian Creek Delta Boys, Chirps Smith, the Horse Flies, Chicken Chokers, Hurricane Ridgerunners, as well as a few surprises. For updates and more info go to: www.fieldrecorder.com.


Performances by MN old-time duo Bob Bovee and Gail Heil include public library concerts at Platte City and Parkville, MO, on Feb. 4 and Oak Grove and Raytown, MO, on Feb. 5; Daniel Boone Regional Library in Columbia, MO, on Feb. 7; Focal Point in St. Louis, MO, on Feb. 9; St. Kilian’s Art Center in Wykoff, MN, on Feb. 15; Tomorrow River Concerts in Amherst, WI, on Feb. 16; Mt. Horeb (WI) Historical Society on Feb. 23. In March they’ll be at the Morris, IL, Public Library March 6; Urbana Country Dance with caller Roger Diggle March 7; Champaign, IL, Public Library March 8; Prairie Grapevine Concert in Springfield March 8, Birmingham, AL, house concert March 16. Info: Bob Bovee and Gail Heil, 18287 Gap Dr., Spring Grove, MN 55974; 507-498-5452; www.boveeheil.com.

**Congratulations**

Cathy Fink received a Grammy nomination for her new solo CD *Banjo Talkin’* (Rounder), in the Best Traditional Folk Album category. Also receiving Grammy nominations were Bob Carlin and Cheick Hamala Diabate in the Best Traditional World Music category for their CD *From Mali to America* (5-String); Bruce Nemirov for his album notes to *John Work, III: Recording Black Culture* (Spring Fed); Christopher King and Hank Sapoznik for *People Take Warning* (Tomkins Square) for Best Historical Album; and the Pine Leaf Boys for *Blues de Musiciens* (Arhoolie) for Best Zydeco or Cajun Album.

The following musicians took home ribbons from the Florida Folk Festival’s old-time fiddle and banjo contests, held Nov. 9-11 at Stephen Foster Cultural Center, White Springs, FL. The event is normally held the Sat. of Memorial Day weekend, but this year the area was beset by the Bugaboo wildfire, so the festival was postponed until Nov. Ribbons went to the following: Junior Division - Kayla Williams, Nathaniel Batey, and Seth Alderman; Youth Division - Lee Staley, Molly Purcell, and Dalla Albritton; Contemporary - Shelley Weiss, Jonathan Hodge, and Lynn Brainard; Rustic - Kay Van Treese, Phil Levy, and Greg Allen; Twin - Shelley Weiss and Anna Kalischmidt, Mattheu Morse and Leah Morse, Vicki Silver and Gailanne Amundsen; Old-Time Banjo – Bill Mansfield, Sarah Carlton, and Wanda Lee. The next Festival and contests are set for Memorial Day Weekend. Info on this year’s contest: www.nettally.com/fiddler/index.html.

**In Our Thoughts**

Bill Birchfield of Tennessee’s Roan Mountain Hilltoppers was hospitalized in December. We hear that he is doing better and wish him continued recovery.

**Final Notes**

Carlie Roosevelt Marion passed away on November 7, 2007, at the age of 94. Born in Surry County, North Carolina, Marion was a well loved figure, known for his fine clawhammer banjo playing and his wardrobe of crisp bib overalls. He was a regular at fiddlers’ conventions, playing with many great bands, and he recorded a cassette with Andy Cahan in the 1988, *Going Across the River to Hear My Banjo Ring* (Marimac 9018C). Marion can also be heard playing his showpiece, “Under the Double Eagle,” on the *North Carolina Banjo Collection* (Rounder CD 0439/40).

Lowell Schreyer, of Mankato, Minnesota, newspaper reporter, historian, banjo player, and author of *The Banjo Entertainers: Roots to Ragtime*, passed away on November 15, 2007. In the summers Schreyer played the banjo on the Mississippi River boat Delta Queen, conducting his research on the banjo at little town libraries and historical societies along the way. He also authored a biography of banjo player Eddie Peabody and wrote chapters to the books, *The Banjo on Record* (1993), and *Ragtime, Its History, Composers, and Music* (1985). A long-time member and contributor to the Banjo Collectors’ Gathering, he will be greatly missed.

West Virginia banjo player Brady “Brooks” Smith passed away on September 24 at the age of 84. He was from Dunbar, in Kanawha County, and had been playing the banjo for more than 65 years. Equally comfortable with clawhammer and finger-style playing, Smith won many awards at festivals and music competitions across the state. He received the Vandalia Award in 2000 from the West Virginia Division of Culture and History. He was the subject of a feature story in *Goldenseal* in Spring 1996, “Brooks Smith: The Making of a Banjo Player,” by Andrew Dunlap. Smith was well loved for his generosity with his music, particularly by the many younger musicians with whom he shared his talents.

Singer and guitarist Lydia Mendoza passed away on December 20 at the age of 91. Born in Houston, Texas, Mendoza became a beloved voice of working-class Mexican-Americans. Known affectionately as the “Lark of the Border,” she was a trailblazer—the first Tejano star of her generation, and the first woman to sing and play a musical instrument in a prominent Tejano band. Mendoza sang songs learned from her mother and grandmother in a graceful, natural style that was a refreshing departure from the dramatic style then popular. Encouraged by her family (including her mother, who was a guitarist), Mendoza was playing the 12-string guitar by the time she was 12, and the violin and mandolin soon after. In 1928, her family answered a newspaper ad that led to recording sessions at the Blue Bonnet Hotel in San Antonio. The music from these sessions resulted in five records on the Okeh label.

Mendoza eventually recorded more than 200 songs—boleros, rancheras, cumbias, and tangos—and she appeared on more than 50 albums. She often played alone, but also performed with her family at tent shows as Las Hermanas Mendoza and the Mendoza Family. Her first hit, “Mal Hombre,” recorded in 1934 on the Bluebird label, established her popularity on both sides of the border, and was followed by other popular recordings, such as “La Valentina” and “Angel de Mis Anhelos,” which established her place in Latin music history.

She received many honors and awards, including a 1999 National Medal of the Arts presented by President Clinton, a 1982 National Heritage Fellowship, and induction into the Texas Women’s Hall of Fame.
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LOWE'S

Oftentimes the easiest dance figures are
the most fun, and if the music is lively
enough, even a simple circle can be exhil-
arating. That is the basic element of the
square dance figure known as the “Bou-
quett Waltz,” with the added feature that
while circles of dancers spin clockwise,
they simultaneously revolve around each
other in the counter-clockwise direction.
That is what makes this figure so much
fun to dance and why it is often com-
pared to the popular amusement park
rides “Tilt-a-Whirl” and the “Scrambler.”
After many years of calling and dancing
the “Bouquet Waltz,” I began to wonder
where this figure came from and why we
call it a “waltz.” After all, it is not danced
to three-four meter waltz music.

The couple dance that we know today
as the waltz originated in Germany in the
mid-17th century, and it became known in
France as early as 1790. When it was first
introduced to America in the early 19th
century, church leaders, who character-
ized it as being immodest and licentious,
condemned it as sinful. By mid-century,
however, the waltz and other new Euro-
pean couple dances (often called “round
dances”) had displaced the earlier coun-
try dances, cotillons, and quadrilles to
become the most popular and fashion-
able dances of their time. While today
we think of waltzes being in three-four
meter, during the 19th century the term
“waltz” simply implied a couple dance
with a turning motion, and the word was
applied to many of the popular couple
dances, including the polka.

The polka is a duple meter couple
dance that originated in Bohemia in
the 1830s. Early on, perhaps because of
its spinning movement, it was referred
to as the “Polka Waltz.” In 1856, Phila-
delphia dancing teacher Charles Dur-
ang described it as follows: “Like the
earth in its orbit, the Polka Valse con-
sists of two circles, a great and small
one. It turns on its axis while it revolves
round its great centre of a circle . . .”
In other words, while the individual
couples spin clockwise, they simultane-
ously revolve around the dance floor in
a counter-clockwise direction. Durang,
who observed its “giddy effect,” wrote,
In 1843, this Valse made the grand tour
of Europe; and soon gained a strong foot-
ing in America: so great was the excite-
ment which it created, that its introduc-
tion into fashionable society may be re-
garded as the commencement of a new
era in the art of dancing.

As the “Polka Valse” moved from
the urban ballroom to rural dance floors,
its name changed over time to the vernacu-
lar “Pokey Waltz.” (The word “pokey,”
as slang for polka, also appears in the
name of the dance the “Hokey-Pokey.”)
The spinning and revolving movements
of the “Bouquet Waltz” are certainly
reminiscent of the polka, and its name is
likely a corruption of these earlier names.
Coincidentally, or not, the words “Bou-
quett Waltz” also appear in the title of a
composition by Austrian composer Jo-
hann Strauss. Strauss, who was known
for his polkas and waltzes including the
“Blue Danube,” composed the “London-
ers’ Bouquet Waltz” in 1867, and this
may provide an alternate explanation for
the name of the square dance figure.

The popularity of the waltz, the polka,
and other new couple dances in the ur-
ban ballrooms of America threatened
the livelihood of the dancing masters,
and as a consequence, before the end
of the 1850s, they devised new country
dances, cotillons, and quadrilles that in-
corporated the steps of these fashionable
“waltzes.” Elias Howe’s Complete Ball-
Room Hand Book of 1858, includes direc-
tions for “Waltz Cotillons,” “Waltz Qua-
drilles,” “Polka Cotillons,” “Polka Qua-
drilles,” the “Mazurka Quadrille,” and
even “Waltz Contra Dances” and “Polka
Contra Dances.” The figures of some of
these hybrid square dances can be heard

called on 78 RPM recordings made as recently as the 1930s. These include the “Polka Quadrille” and the “Waltz Quadrille,” both recorded by the National Barn Dance Orchestra in 1933.

Despite the efforts of the dancing masters to co-opt the round dances and incorporate them into their dance curriculum, the quadrilles and other set dances continued to disappear from urban ballrooms. Some of these hybrid square dance figures, however, had been adopted in rural areas, where they survived into the twentieth century. An example of such a dance figure is the “Pokey Four,” a dance that appears on the Kessinger Brother’s 1928 recording of “Patty on the Turnpike.” The caller is Ernest Legg of Kanawha County, West Virginia, who calls the figure as follows:

**First couple out and circle four, change partners with a pokey four,**
**On to the next and circle four, and change your partners with a pokey four,**
**On to the next and circle four, and change your partners with a pokey four,**
**Half swing and a-home you go.**

In this dance, after the first couple circles left with couple two, the dancers trade partners and the two couples polka around each other. The first gent and his new partner then move on to couple three. The trading of partners and polka are repeated with couple three and then with couple four, so that each gent ends up with a new partner. After all four couples have led the figure, the dancers are back with their original partners.

The following year, the Kessinger Brothers recorded a version of the “Jenny Lind Polka” that they called “Polka Four,” but this time dance calls were not included. Although the “Pokey Four” is different from the “Bouquet Waltz,” it shares a basic pattern of dancers spinning clockwise while at the same time revolving around each other in the counter-clockwise direction.

In 1917, a decade before the Kessinger Brothers were recorded, Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles documented a square dance figure called the “Waltz-Swing” in Breathitt County, in eastern Kentucky. Their description of this dance figure appeared the following year in The Country Dance Book, Part V. It begins with the first couple turning with a left hand in the center of the set. The first man then joins hands with couple two and circles to the left once around. Then the first couple meets for another left-hand turn, and the first man moves on to couple three while the first lady joins hands with couple two. These two circles of three spin to the left while at the same time revolving around each other counter-clockwise. The first couple meets for another left hand turn, and the first man moves on to couple four, while his partner follows up and jogs hands with couple three. Again, the circles of three revolve around each other while spinning to the left. The “Waltz-Swing” concludes with two circles of four (the first couple with the fourth couple and the second couple with the third couple), and these circles of four likewise revolve around each other while turning.

Sharp, who was known for his earlier work reviving and promoting 17th-century English country dances, interpreted this dance as a survival of an old English dance. A visiting couple figure with circles of three in fact can be found in John Playford’s “Rose is White and Rose is Red,” a “Round for as many as will,” published in 1651. While this earlier country dance may have shared the circles of three, the revolving motion, which is the key feature of the “Bouquet Waltz,” was likely inspired by the 19th-century polka, and it does not appear in the earlier English dance.

In 1928, ten years after the publication of Sharp and Karpeles’ book, Ida Levin published a dance instruction booklet for the Recreation Council of Louisville, Kentucky, titled Kentucky Square Dances. Intended as a manual for recreation leaders, she gives instructions for the “old square dances as they are danced in the Kentucky Mountains and elsewhere in the state.” She describes a figure for circles of three, called “Waltz the Hall,” which like the “Bouquet Waltz” is not a waltz. Levin’s dance figure features the left-hand turns by the lead couple and the circles of three (with the gent one couple ahead of the lady), but there is no indication that the circles revolve around each other.

Variants of the “Bouquet Waltz” can be found throughout North America, far from the Southern Appalachians. In 1929, Maud Karpeles, who had earlier accompanied Cecil Sharp on his travels, observed a four-couple square called the “Polka Swing” at Lakefield, Ontario. This dance figure, along with others collected at rural dances in northern Alabama, Kentucky, Ohio, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, can be found in “Some Additional Figures of Set-Running” published in The Journal of the English Folk Dance Society (1930). (The “Running Set” is the name that Sharp had coined for the Kentucky dances.) The first couple moves forward and back, and then the first lady circles with couple two while her partner circles with couple four. At the call, “Three and three and six in a pokey swing,” the rings of three, whilst revolving clockwise, themselves move round each other... making one complete circuit, counter-clockwise.” The “three and three” figure is repeated two more times, as the first lady moves to couple three and then to couple four while her partner follows one couple behind. The figure concludes with two circles of four (couple one with couple four and couple two with couple three), and these circles revolve around each other at the call, “Four and four on the corners all, Take a pokey swing.” At that time, as in Sharp’s “Waltz-Swing” of Kentucky, the term “swing” meant to circle with joined hands.

A western variant of the Bouquet Waltz,” called “Pokey Nine,” appears in Lloyd Shaw’s Cowboy Dances of 1939. Shaw was the leader of a recreational dance program at the Cheyenne Mountain High School in Colorado, and his book contains instructions and calls for over 75 square dances from the western United States. As in Ontario, the first lady circles left with couple two while her partner circles with couple four. But in Shaw’s version, an extra person (sometimes the caller) joins in to circle with couple three to create a third circle. The three circles turn to the left and then back to the right, but do not revolve around each other. The first lady and gent and the extra dancer then each move to the next couple, and the figure repeats. Shaw’s call is, “Three by three in a pokey-nine, Three by three in a pokey-oh, Three by three and on you go.” Shaw acknowledges that “the cowboy pokey is a distant and disinherited relative of the elegant polka,” but he fails to elaborate on this idea.

In 1950, Richard Kraus, who at that time was a teacher of square and folk dancing at Teachers College, Columbia University, published Square Dances of Today and How to Teach and Call Them. It is here that the name “Bouquet Waltz” finally appears in print. In Kraus’ version, the lady first leads out to the right, and the gent follows as she moves on. As in other versions, the circles of three turn clockwise, while revolving around each other counter-clockwise. The call is, “Three by three across the floor, Three by three in a pokey-oh, Three by three and on you go.” Shaws acknowledges that “the cow- boy pokey is a distant and disinherited relative of the elegant polka,” but he fails to elaborate on this idea.
These many variants of the “Bouquet Waltz,” from Ontario to Colorado, are an illustration of the influence that the nineteenth-century polka had on rural square dances across North America. The name “Bouquet Waltz” is likely derived from the “Polka Waltz.” Although the word “polka” is no longer associated with this simple, fun square dance figure, it still provides the same sense of exhilaration that the polka elicited when first introduced to the ballrooms of America 150 years ago. Whether the first lady or the first gent leads the figure is the caller’s option, as are the left-hand turns in the center of the set. These may be omitted depending on the circumstances and the level of the dancers. The dance works well near the end of an evening, when dancers don’t particularly want to be challenged by new or complicated figures, but they just want to enjoy moving to the music. Whichever variant and whatever name you choose—the “Waltz-Swing,” “Waltz the Hall,” the “Polka Swing,” “Pokey Nine,” the “Waltz Bouquet,” “Swing Three,” the “Pokey Waltz,” or the “Bouquet Waltz”—it is a fun square dance.

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

Further Reading:


Kessinger Brothers (with Ernest Legg). “Patty on the Turnpike” (Vocalion 5248), 1928.


The Bouquet Waltz

Here is a simple version of the dance. The exact wording of my calls (in italics) varies from one time to the next.

Introduction:
All join hands and circle left,
Swing your partner, Promenade home.

Main Figure:
First lady out to the right and circle three,
(The first lady circles to the left with couple two.)

Lady move on and the first gent follow,
(The first lady circles left with couple three and the first gent circles left with couple two.)

Three by three around the floor with a Bouquet Waltz,
(While spinning to the left, the two circles of three revolve around each other in the counter-clockwise direction.)

Lady move on and the gent follow,
(The first lady circles left with couple four and the first gent circles left with couple three.)

Three by three around the floor with a Bouquet Waltz,

Lady stay there and the gent catch up, and couple two lead out to the right,
(Couple one circles left with couple four, and couple two circles left with couple three.)

Four by four around the floor with a Bouquet Waltz,
(While spinning to the left, the two circles of four revolve around each other in the counter-clockwise direction.)

Break Figure:
Turn your corner with your left hand,
(Allemande left corner.)

Back to your partner for a right-left grand,
(Grand right and left.)

Meet your partner, give her (or him) a swing, and promenade around the ring.

(Swing partner and promenade home.)

The main figure of the dance, followed by the break figure, is repeated for couples two, three, and four, so that each couple gets a chance to lead the figure. After all four couples have led the figure, if there is enough space on the dance floor, I often end the dance by having all of the sets circle to the left, and call, “Eight by eight around the floor with a Bouquet Waltz.” There is usually an enthusiastic reaction from the dancers as they attempt to revolve around all of the other sets on the dance floor.
How thrilled we were when icons of old-time music like Clarence Ashley, Doc Boggs, Kirk McGee, and Mississippi John Hurt materialized at festivals back in the 1960s, as if they’d stepped full-bodied off the spinning shellac of old records. They were our musical models from a golden era some 40 years past, when the music they recorded was definitive, as we struggled to learn their banjo licks, guitar runs, and fiddle techniques. Some of us are their aging children, carrying on and extending the old-time tradition. For example, among the urban young who were captivated by the meat, bone, and gristle spirit of the old bands were the Canebrake Rattlers. They’ve stuck together as a band for 30 years, and we interviewed three of them in Lanesboro, Minnesota last spring when they appeared at Bob Bovee and Gail Heil’s Bluff Country Gathering. Now that so many of our icons are laid in their graves, the Rattlers channel the old-time songs and performances like no one else. Young devotees might emulate them if they could only purchase their recordings. The Rattlers released three albums: *Old Familiar Tunes* (Flying Crow LP 104, 1980), *Songs of the Hills and Plains* (Cinnamon LP 1201, 1981), and *When The Yankees Came Down* (Marimac cassettes 9006, 1986). All are out of print, with no new releases or world tours planned.

We wanted to learn more about their approach to the music, about the New York music scene of the 1970s and ‘80s, and the Rattlers’ history and influences, so while they were in Minnesota we queried Pat Conte, Bill Dillof, and Tom Legenhausen.
GOING FOR THE MYSTERY:
AN INTERVIEW WITH THE CANEBRAKE RATTLERS
By Lyle and Elizabeth Lofgren

How did you come up with your name? Why “Canebrake,” not “Timber Rattlers,” or “Copperheads?”

Pat: We had no idea there was such a thing as a canebrake rattler. Who thought of it first? I did. Bill did. I did. Bill did. I did. It’s a combination of two things: we had, very early on, a favorite band sound, the Tarheel Rattlers, and at that time, Bill had discovered a Texas fiddle tune called “The Yearlings in the Canebrake,” which was part of our early repertoire. And we put them together one day, and it sounded right.

Tom: I thought we just put the name together for a contest.

P: I don’t think we made a big deal of having a name for a band. I think the name came later—we had been playing for about six months when we put those two things together.

T: We just don’t know.

P: I thought of “Canebrake Rattlers.” Bill thought of the “Major Contay” part.

Bill: I heard Frank Mare, a “major” record collector, call him that often on his radio show on WKCR.

T: That was Pat’s name from high school, Contay.

B: Pat turns to me and said, “Let’s make it more elaborate: Major Contay and his Canebrake Rattlers.”

P: That was a big deal: would it be “the” or “his?”

B: The joke wore thin after awhile, so it became “the,” and now it’s “the Canebrake Rattlers, with special guest star, Major Contay.”

With a band name like that, I assumed one of you was a zoologist.

P: You mean a herpetologist. We met one, and he had seen canebrake rattlers, and said he’d seen enough of them. He said it was not too pleasant. He said that those in particular he didn’t like. So there must be extra meaning to that. We had a business card, and the closest thing we could come to for a logo from this printer was not a snake at all, but a dog.

B: A hunting dog.

P: So “Here, Old Rattler” became our card logo. Because that’s the best the printer could do.

I want to know how each of you got interested in the music. Who wants to start?

P: The first time I heard old-time music was on a Newport Folk Festival record. And it kind of knocked me out. I was a Bob Dylan fan, and I borrowed a Newport record because it had Dylan live on it, but I took the wrong record home. I took the one that didn’t have Bob Dylan on it, and decided to listen to it anyway. And that’s the first time I heard blues and old-time and Cajun and all that stuff that I was hit right in the face with.

So what did you do about it?

P: I wanted to play blues. I didn’t care for old-time music that much. Oh, I liked it a lot, but I didn’t think I could play it. The blues stuff was more inviting. I thought I could play that.

How old were you when you got a guitar?

P: I was seven or eight. I already had a guitar. I was taking lessons, although I was not very good at it. I read notes then, but I can’t really now, because I haven’t kept up. You know, school kid stuff. I wasn’t interested in that. The last music book I got that I really wanted was Highway 61 Revisited. For my last lesson, I was going to learn one of those, but I wasn’t good enough for that, either. I played blues guitar, and I started playing with it, and eventually I got interested in the banjo and actually learned to play banjo from Tom. Tom was a little ahead of me in high school.
You two went to the same high school?
T: Archbishop Molloy, an all-boys Catholic school in Queens. When Pat was starting to play Dylan, I was playing bluegrass. Pat was the only one in school who understood what I was trying to do.
P: I had the records. Some of the first 78s I found were bluegrass. Those were easier to find than old-time. But, you know, nothing’s easy to find as far as country music’s concerned. Tom was playing bluegrass and I was playing blues, but we both discovered old-time at about the same time.
T: We went to a bluegrass festival together in upstate New York, and they had a banjo workshop with Don Stover and Roger Sprung on clawhammer, and they showed us how to do it.
P: We got to see and understand it, not just the sound. Watching Don Stover and Ralph Stanley, we were riveted. I don’t think Stanley played a note at that festival that I didn’t hear.
T: So we were at the bluegrass workshops, and we’d raise our hands and ask, “How do you do that clawhammer again?”
P: We just kept watching so we could get it. Tom was way ahead of me, so I was just dazzled.

So you weren’t playing old-time on the guitar at that time?
P: No. I played guitar and slide guitar, then banjo. I had a fiddle I’d saw around with, but I couldn’t play it until after I’d learned banjo. I played mostly clawhammer.

What was the first old-time piece you learned?
P: The first old-time piece that I absolutely had to learn was Taj Mahal playing “Colored Aristocracy.”

You learned that?
P: Yeah, the best I could. I just thought that was a masterpiece. I was interested in Taj Mahal from the blues angle, but when that came out, it said to me, “All American music is one thing.” I thought that was the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard. I used to listen to it, keep playing it, for a half-hour, mesmerized by that sound.

Tom, when did you first start?
T: Harmonica, and early Bob Dylan stuff. A distant uncle passed away and he had a banjo. Even though I wanted a guitar, my folks could get me this old Sears banjo for free.

It wasn’t even stuffed with cash like the “Old Arm Chair?”
T: No. It was a profound disappointment when I took it out of the case, and realized it was an old piece of crap. An old Sears cheapo.
P: It wasn’t even as good as a Supertone. Five dollars. Supertones were twelve dollars.
T: But then I got the Pete Seeger book and started to try and learn that. And then I would go to the New York City Public Library and get out any record that had a banjo on it. What really knocked me out was Earl Scruggs. That set me off on a bluegrass tear for a couple of years. But then I drifted more and more into old-time music. And in college up at Ithaca, the Highwood String Band, the Correctone String Band, the Swamp Root String Band were playing—Bruce Molsky was there when I was there. I heard those guys in Ithaca, and then I came home from college and ran into Pat.
P: Yeah, one summer he came home, he had a fiddle. And that bumbled me, that he was already fiddling.

Cornell was a hotbed of old-time music?
T: At that time it was—1973 to 1976.

What was it about old-time music that moved you?
P: It’s hard to nail one thing, because, once the fire is lit, it explodes. Everything happens at once. “Da Costa Woltz! Oh my God, what is this stuff?” And you’re in it already.
T: Wade Ward records, County clawhammer records, all that starts to come on at once.

Bill, your turn.
B: I grew up on the north shore of Long Island, went to a private school in Locust Valley, where I had occasion to meet people who were playing old-time music, along about
1962 or ’63. I had the good fortune of having a neighbor, Frank Warner, the folk song collector who had moved up from North Carolina with his family. His two sons, Jeff and Gerret, went to my school, and they had another friend, too, from North Carolina, named Jeff Davis. You talk about a spark igniting—I always had music in the home: folk music, Weavers, Harry Belafonte, Kingston Trio—my father used to buy them. But I had no interest in playing myself until I was walking by a quaint little music store and there was a mandolin in the window, a Zimgar Deluxe for $18, and I just had to have it. I don’t know why—I don’t know what moved me at all. I bought it, and this came to the attention of Jeff Davis, who drafted me to play mandolin with him, and taught me how to play autoharp first, then guitar, and, before you know it, we were doing old-time duets, along about 1963 or 1964. The first real old-time song that I have any recollection of was one that Jeff and I performed together, maybe the first thing either of us performed in public: “The Story of the Mighty Mississippi.” It turns out to have been by Ernest Stoneman, but I think Jeff’s source was the New Lost City Ramblers. He used to go on and on about some guy named Tom Paley.

When old-time or bluegrass bands toured in the Long Island area, they would occasionally spend the night at the Warner’s house, and Frank would invite some of the young folkies over to listen to the band—a house concert—and everyone would sit in a big circle and take turns singing.

**P:** A song swap.

**B:** Exactly. I was frequently invited to those when I was about 15 years old, so I got to hear bands that came up from the South.

**P:** I remember the day I discovered I didn’t want to listen to Bob Dylan anymore. I came back from the Salvation Army—the records were ten cents—and I brought back one where I said, “Who is this guy? ‘Hank Williams and his guitar.’” It was “The Battle of Armageddon,” which I think was his last record—just a guitar and a voice—and I took that home and said, “This isn’t Bob Dylan. This is real!” It just got to me, that music. There was something very, very powerful about that. Bill and his brother used to sing that. That’s how I met Bill. He was in a country swing band.

**B:** It was a bluegrass band—the Smoketown Diner Boys—although everyone thought it was a swing band.

**P:** They were mixing it up.

**Where did you two meet?**

**P:** That’s where it starts. Tom, Mark Farrell (the fourth member of the Rattlers), and I had been playing together, but not performing—just for our own enjoyment.

**T:** One summer, almost every Saturday or Sunday morning, we’d go to Central Park.

**P:** Oh, yeah, we’d do that, too. Old-time music, a trio.

**Learned from the New Lost City Ramblers?**

**P:** No, from 78s. If we couldn’t find the 78, we’d learn it from the Ramblers. We had just been on the sidelines for the big string band contest in New York, the South Street Seaport String Band Contest, on the docks. South of Fulton, way downtown in Manhattan—it was a big gathering, and we’d meet under the highway there and jam around, a whole bunch of people. It was a great gathering place for anyone who loved bluegrass and old-time music.

**B:** Doug Tuchman used to run it.

**P:** Doug is not with us now, but he was responsible for creating an event to get some of our oldest friends together for the first time, and for many times after. Anybody who played music in New York would be there. They had old-time and bluegrass divisions, and prizes. Judges would come out of town, mainly bluegrassers, who were performing.

**B:** I remember Tracy Schwarz being a judge there.

**T:** And I remember talking to Don Stover. He wanted to know where he could buy some Red Man chewing tobacco.

**P:** I really miss that guy. He was great.

Tom and I were just informally playing. At the time, I was already in radio. I was at KCR up at Columbia—I was doing a blues show there—and Doug asked me to help emcee, because Doug had done a bluegrass show there. So I was emcee for one of the contests. And one night, these guys (gestures toward Bill) walk on.

**B:** I had played in a band the previous spring in the Long Island version of this contest, in the old-time category. We thought we were pretty good, but we didn’t place. Tracy Schwarz was a judge. I talked to him afterwards, and he said, “The problem was that you guys aren’t old-time.” It kind of hurt, and I stewed over this until the summer when I entered the New York City contest, this time with a pickup bluegrass band, with my kid brother on the Dobro. I don’t know if we were any good, but we were different. Pat took a special notice of our band, and I got to talking to him afterwards. That’s when Pat and I became acquainted. And there was a party that week.

**T:** Louie invited you guys.

**P:** Yeah, Louie was there. Did you write that down? Louie was there. That was an expression that’s been with me since grammar school. Louie is my friend from back then, my oldest friend.

**B:** The party was coming up, and Pat more or less invited me and my band to the party. I don’t know if the band went, but I went, and we jammed. I was jamming with Pat. All four future members of the band were there. At the same time, I’d been playing with a fiddler named Steve Friedberg. Pat and I got to talking on the front porch, and I learned about his passion for the old 78s. I was still stewing over my contest loss the last spring, and what I wanted to do was to be part of a band that was unsailably old-time. I wanted to be so old-time that it would disqualify all the other bands by comparison, and, as I recall, this was how we got the idea to do what we did.

**Tom, were you at that party, too?**

**T:** Yeah, but I wasn’t part of the discussion.

**B:** Eventually we got together to play. I brought Steve in as a fiddler.

**P:** The elements of two bands becoming one. Steve was classically trained, so we needed him to do all the hard stuff.

**T:** That’s true. When we did “Davy, Davy,” he did the high part.

**So you had a five-piece band?**

**B:** Yes. That was the first band to play under the name “Canebrake Rattlers.”

**P:** We formed in 1977, the same month
as the Double Decker String Band. The next year, we entered the contest, the one I had formerly emceed.

B: In addition to the South Street Seaport contest, there was also one on Long Island every spring. That’s where we first performed, spring of 1978.

P: We formed in the fall of 1977 for the purpose of playing in the spring contest.

T: We played “Indian War Whoop.”

B: Well, that was actually in the New York City contest, the summer of 1978—our second appearance.

P: That was a favorite thing.

T: Having the nerve to try that in a contest... B: The South Street contest was one of the most stunning settings you could imagine: the stage was out on the end of a pier in the East River. And when you’re playing on the pier, you’re looking back at Manhattan, and that night, the moon was over the skyline, and when we did the whoops, it was all resonating, just everywhere, from the PA system. Howling at the moon.

P: You’re facing a long pier; at the end of the pier is the FDR, then the skyline, then the moon. And behind us is the river. And it’s just amazing. I don’t know if we won the first time.

B: I recall us finishing behind Wretched Refuse and Arm & Hammer. There may have been some cash, but the main prize was that Doug Tuchman would set us up with gigs.

P: As a champion string band.

B: At the Eagle Tavern.

P: That was a bar on 14th Street and 9th Avenue in Manhattan—an Irish bar, but the people in charge of hiring were string band-friendly, to complement the Irish music, so we got hired there a number of times. At that time in New York, there really was a following for old-time music. This was a real venue, and it was a very lively time, before the 80s. It was about the last time in New York when it was really happening, and there were an awful lot of musicians there.

T: The first time we played there, nobody knew who we were.

P: We dressed up, too. We took it very seriously about how we looked and the instruments we had with us. We were conscious that, if we were to be photographed, we wanted that picture to look like how we sounded. We got written up in one of the papers, about being really weird.

T: But the first time, the place was actually full.

P: Yeah, it was packed. And there were some kind of luminaries in there—all kinds of people there who’d come to see us. It was just great. I don’t think we played a whole lot of good stuff, but we tried.

Most people who listened to someone like Dylan went on, the next year, to follow the next pop thing—listening to whatever’s in style. What sent you off on a sidetrack?

P: You hear good music, that’s important. That changes your mind. It’s not pushed at you, it draws you in. It’s not a product.

B: It’s a sense of mystery. I always went to the mystery. If I heard something by a performer, I needed to...
know the original source. That represented some kind of mystery to me. If there was an earlier version of the song out there, I had to hear it. And if that came from an even earlier record, I had to hear that. And I think I’m not alone in that. There are a lot of people out there who have a sense of going for the mystery. And many of us have ended up playing old-time music.

T: What attracts you to music is like romance. What attracted you to your spouse? You don’t know. Long ago, I once saw Bill Monroe on television. I didn’t know who he was, afterwards: “Who was that guy with that little instrument?” It was riveting—for some reason, that completely moved me. You don’t know why.

When did you decide you were going to put out a record?

P: We started recording right away. We had a little session down on 3rd Avenue that summer, which we didn’t wind up using. It was a cheap little recording studio. We played at the 3rd Avenue Street Fair in New York—the mayor gave a speech, it was a big deal. We had a recording session that day.

You made a tape, but didn’t make a record?

P: The producer, the guy who had the record company, didn’t like it that much. We did “Great Big ‘Taters,” and maybe five or six things. It was kind of a wasted day. It wasn’t a good studio, either. He was cutting corners. We listened to it, and it wasn’t really that exciting, but a couple of months later, a new studio opened in Manhattan that was really slick. We booked time in there. We got there, and Dave Tarrras, the great Klezmer musician, was finishing up his last album just before us. He was in the studio—it was kind of scary to see him—you know, he’s the guy from the old 78s. He was there for the tail end of his playback while we’re setting up. It was a big old-fashioned room, and it was great, because the engineer was a kind of 1940s fanatic who had old microphones. We asked him if he had any of the old ribbon microphones. He said he’d try it. He hung one from the ceiling. We did “Eighth of January,” by the Arkansas Barefoot Boys, and it came out with beautiful sound. So we recorded our first album: Old Familiar Tunes, on the Flying Crow label. Don Kent, an expert blues collector from Chicago who moved to New York, had his own label of blues reissues, “Mamlish.” He decided to branch out and do some old-time reissues and also some revival music, and we were maybe the second or third record he did of that type. Larry MacBride (who would later start Marimac Records) was on the Flying Crow label, too, with his band, Half-Shaved. And Don recorded another New York string band, the Wonderbeans, based around a wonderful couple, Kate and Lou Giampetrucci. That was in the early days of revival records—there weren’t a whole lot of people making records in New York, although after awhile there were more. But there were a lot of people playing.

And Don Kent put up the money for that?

P: Yes. Making the record was agonizing, because it took a very long time to record, a very long time to process, and then a very long time to be released.

When did you meet Larry MacBride?

P: Through Frank Mare. I was over there every weekend with reel-to-reel tape, copying his 78s. Every week, I’d take the train up and walk across the George Washington Bridge to his house. He was friends with Larry, so we met him.

It’s a sense of mystery. I always went to the mystery. If I heard something by a performer, I needed to know the original source. That represented some kind of mystery to me. If there was an earlier version of the song out there, I had to hear it. And if that came from an even earlier record, I had to hear that.
With that Flying Crow record, did you appear much in public to try to sell it, or did you just let it go through distribution?
P: No, we didn’t sell that many.
T: We’d sell some at festivals, in the early 1980s, like at Brandywine.
P: I was playing blues, too, so I had another band, the Otis Brothers, who were also on Flying Crow. We had an album, The Genial Fat Boys, that was actually recorded before the Rattlers’ album.
Brandywine was the festival that we kind of lived for, and, once the Rattlers were formed, we dreamed about playing there. And it was one of the greatest pleasures.

How many years did you play there?
B: I’d say five or six, over the 20-year course of the festival.
T: It was wonderful. Because we didn’t play out that much, Brandywine was a big deal to us. We would find out, as early as we could, what the theme was going to be that year. If it was going to be “Georgia,” we’d get out the 78s and spend months learning Georgia stuff.
B: The proudest moment I had at Brandywine when the theme was “Arkansas.” Two rural-looking “good old boys” came up to us and said, “We want you to settle a bet. We’re from Arkansas. My buddy here says you guys are from Arkansas, and I say you’re not.” That anyone would think that we really were a string band from Arkansas was flattering.
P: We had steel guitars, a cello, we filled up the stage with instruments. Ridiculous. We had everything. Banjos, mandolins. . .
B: Harmonicas.
P: Different-tuned fiddles.

The University of Chicago still has a festival. What happened to Brandywine?
B: It went for 20 years, 1975 to 1994, but was sort of losing momentum at the end.
P: It wasn’t bluegrass. You’re on the board of directors and the bluegrass thing is working and this thing isn’t . . .
B: They started running out of authentic older musicians—they were dying.
P: Brandywine was just an incredible meeting place of old-timers coupled with the most concentrated parking lot and campground sessions from all over the country that you could imagine. It was the best of two worlds, for being not too far away, and being like a southern fiddle convention.

Did you rely mainly on your own record collection?
P: Frank Mare was a big part of it. He lives in Georgia now, but at the time, he lived in Fort Lee, New Jersey. He was the most generous character you could imagine. He was just happy to provide it. Bill took it to another level after me.
B: Frank asked me to come over one night to record some of his collection. He’d record on 7-1/2” reels. I noticed he was starting at the beginning of his collection, at the letter “A.” I recorded a full reel: 60 songs. And he said, “Why don’t you come back next Friday night?” And this became a tradition. He’d started at “A” because he intended for me to eventually have his entire collection. When I didn’t have anything else going on, I’d come home from work, head over to Frank’s and we’d tape, nearly every Friday night, for years. Then I’d dub work tapes on cassettes, pass them out to the band.
P: And that’s when the arguments started.
T: “Who’s playing high banjo and who’s playing low banjo?”
P: “You can’t do that…”
B: In a way it made things very easy—it settled all arguments. You want to do this? Let’s go back to the 78 and settle it.

If you learn something note-for-note, it’ll sound mechanical. What’s the re-creation process you use?
P: No, we didn’t learn it note-for-note. That’s number one. We weren’t that good. But what we were good at was to make a kind of caricature of the thing, and that was the most fun. It’s not smoothing over the edges—it’s not anything like that. It’s not short-cutting. It’s something else. It’s the way we hear. Nine times out of ten, we agree—we hear it the same way. So there’s not much arguing there. There’s a way to get to the essence of it without being note-for-note.
T: It’s a matter of thinking about what makes it distinctive and what attracts you to that piece, and make sure that, as you play, you’ve cap-
tured that. But of course, somebody else is attracted to other things in the same piece.

P: How many times do you hear someone do what you’ve been doing for years, and you say, “Why didn’t I hear that?” That little thing, right? And they heard it and you didn’t. So you could never do it note-for-note. It’s too much. And it’s not just notes.

B: Hopefully, if we hear this long enough, we don’t have to try very hard. It just becomes the way we play music. It comes naturally.

P: That’s the key thing. Eventually, it’s just osmosis. It’s not directed anymore. So that’s when it feels real good. It’s not work anymore. When we first started playing, it was agony. We tried to copy it, mistakes and all.

Emotional agony?

P: Agonizing over parts and counting and measures and a wrong word and a missing word and—just agony. It would ruin the music, and it would be totally unlistenable—so much work, and people who’d heard a lot of hype about it would look up and say, “these guys suck.”

B: If we get together now even after not having played for as long as a year, we’re a better band than we were then. We’ve listened to a lot, and internalized it all, and we’ve just lightened up.

P: There was a very heavy accent to it, plodding, no life to it. And it kind of ruins a lot of things.

T: Even if we did learn it note-for-note, once we start playing together, we listen to the band and try to play to make it sound good, regardless of whether it was on the record or not.

B: I’m reading a wonderful book about early jazz in New Orleans, and there’s a comment by Joe Oliver, King Oliver, one of the earliest hot bands in New Orleans, and he was talking about the dynamics of a jazz band, and the key word is texture—it’s all about texture. I could say that about our conception of string band music. The other thing he said, and this is a paradox in a way, is that all the instruments of the band blend together to create that texture, one sound; but, on the other hand, you hear each instrument separately; there has to be space between. In this case, room for the banjo to carry out its rhythmic role; there has to be space for the fiddle to lay out the melody on top of the rhythm and the bass. And there has to be space at the bottom for the guitar. We try to blend together and at the same time leave space for each instrument.

But you don’t go any lower than bass from a guitar?

B: We did a short concert at a festival in New York City not too long ago, and every band that preceded us had a bass, some uprights, some electric basses. When we got on, we started in with two banjos and a fiddle, and we proceeded to play that way, a very treble sound, for 35-40 minutes. My son was in the audience, and I asked him what he thought about that. He said that it was a shocking come-down, but after about three numbers, it sounded right and he couldn’t imagine adding anything else to it. There was enough bass in the lower banjo part…

P: Your ears get adjusted to it, just like with surface noise. On first listening to an old record it sounds very wrong, then it sounds good.

B: The modern audience’s ears are trained to hear more prominent bass; up-front rhythm; and a bigger, lusher sound altogether.

P: But we have added instruments that weren’t there. There was never a time when we matched up perfectly. We say, “They might have done that, too, if they’d had the chance.” We did that a lot, and people just thought that was the correct thing.

B: If you’re strange and unfamiliar enough, people say, “That has to be traditional.” Or correct. Or just weird.

Recording and Websites


Pat Conte’s 2000-2002 WFMU broadcasts of “The Secret Museum of Mankind” are archived at www.wfmu.org/playlists/SM.

You can find out more about Moonshine Holler (Bill Dillof and Paula Bradley) at www.myspace.com/moonshineholler.
FESTIVAL GUIDE 2008!

Before you know it, it will be festival and fiddlers convention season again. Be sure and double-check the dates before you plan a trip around an event, bear in mind that some of the competitions require pre-registration, and be aware that old-time music may only be a small part of certain events. Then, pack up your fiddles, banjos, guitars, and jaw harps, and get out there and have fun!

Festival organizers, if we missed you this year, or if you would like to be published in the 2009 Festival Guide, contact us as soon as possible. Email us at info@oldtimeherald.org or use the form that will be posted on our website, www.oldtimeherald.org by November, 2008.

Abbreviations:
  wab: wheelchair accessible buildings
  hp: handicap parking
  arn: advance registration necessary
  afr: no charge to competitors, admission or portion refunded to competitors.

ALASKA
Apr. 7-13 (Juneau)
34th Annual Alaska Folk Festival. No charge, but membership required. PO Box 21748, Juneau 99802; 907-463-3316; www.akfolkfest.org.

July 9-14 (Cordova)
Cordova 4H Bluegrass Music Camp. arn by July 9, early bird by June 1. Kristin Kokburg, PO Box 1053, Cordova 99574; 907-424-3535; cordovabluegrass@hotmail.com.

Aug 5-9 (Chugiak)

ALABAMA
March 15 (Dothan)

July 19 (Atmore)

Oct. 3-4 (Athens)
Athens Tennessee Valley Old Time Fiddlers Convention, Athens State University. Rick Mould, ASU, 300 N. Beaty St., Athens 35611; 256-233-8215, Rick.Mould@athens.edu.

ARIZONA
March 13-16 (Phoenix)
National Festival of the West, Rawhide Western Town. arn prior to event. Mary Brown, Festival of the West, PO Box 12966, Scottsdale 85267; 602-996-4387; www.festivalofthewest.com.

Oct. 4-5 (Prescott)

CALIFORNIA
Jan. 26-27 (Cloverdale)

May 3-4 (San Diego)

May 3-4 (Claremont)
Claremont Springs Folk Festival, Larkin Park; 220 Yale Ave., Claremont 91711; 909-624-2928; www.folkmusicalcenter.com.


May 22-25 (Sonora)

June 8-11 (Grass Valley)
CBA Music Camp, Nevada County Fairgrounds, Ingrid Noyes, PO Box 194, Tomales 94971; 707-878-9067; www.cbamusiccamp.org.

June 13-15 (Santa Barbara)
Live Oak Music Festival, Lake Cachuma Campgrounds in Santa Ynez Valley. KCBX Public Radio, 4100 Vachell Ln., San Luis Obispo 93401; 805-549-8855; elany@kcbx.org; www.liveoakfest.org.

June 20-22 (Woodland Hills)

July 20-26 (Blue Lake)
Humboldt Folk Life Festival, Dell’Arte School. PO Box 1061, Arcata 95518; 707-822-5394; www.humboldtfolklife.org.

July 25-26 (Santa Cruz)
Redwood Mountain Dulcimer Weekend, Benny Doon. Intimate mountain dulcimer workshops under the California redwoods on a private Renaissance estate. Janet Herman, 205 Jackson St., Santa Cruz 95060; 831-429-1691; fasola@coxio.com; www.redwooddulcimer.com.

July 25-27 (Nevada City)
22nd Annual Sierra Storytelling Festival, North Columbia Schoolhouse Cultural Center. 17894 Tyler Foote Crossing Rd., Nevada City 95959; 530-265-2826; ncscc@nccn.net; www.sierrastorytellingfestival.org.

Aug 9-10 (Sausalito)

Aug. 28-31 (Sonora)

Sept. 11-14 (Berkeley)

Sept 12-14 (Bishop)
Millpond Music Festival. Check website for final date decision. ICA 137 S. Main St., Bishop 93514; 760-873-8014; www.inyo.org.

Sept. 20 (Fiddletown)
Fiddletown Fiddlers Jam. arn by Sept. 15. Camping is 6 miles away. PO Box 236, Fiddletown 95629; www.fiddletown.net.

Oct. 12 (Goleta)
37th Annual Old-Time Fiddlers’ Convention Stow House. Competition with prizes. Linelle Glass, 2111 Laguna St., Santa Barbara 93101; 805-682-1593; linkar@cox.net.

Oct. 23-25 (Red Bluff)
Western Open Fiddle Championships, Tehama Fairgrounds. arn. P.O. Box 101, Red Bluff, CA 96080 530-527-6127; www.westernopenfiddle.com.

COLORADO
June 1-7 (Divide)
June 13-15 (Hotchkiss)

Aug. 10-17 (Deckers)
Rocky Mountain Fiddle Camp, YMCA Camp Shady Brook. Workshops, concerts, jams. Mark Luther, E. Wonder View Ave #194, Estes Park 80517; 303-753-6870; www.rmfc.com.

Aug. 29-31 (Pagosa)
Four Corners Folk Festival, Reservoir Hills Park. PO Box 3665, Pagosa Springs 81147; 970-731-5582; www.folkwest.com.

CONNECTICUT
June 5-8 (Preston)
Blast From the Bayou, Strawberry Park. 42 Pierce Rd, Preston 06365; 888-794-7944; www.strawberrypark.net.

June 13-15 (Mystic)
Sea Music Festival, Mystic Seaport. Rick Spencer, Mystic Seaport, The Museum of America and the Sea, PO Box 6000, Mystic 06355-5037; 888-973-2767; www.mysticseaport.org.

Sept. 20 (Glastonbury)
Connecticut Audubon Fiddle Contest, 1361 Main St. (Rt. 17). afrr. Food, silent auction, nature center open. CT Audubon Society Center, 1361 Main St., Glastonbury 06033; 860-633-8402; www.ctaudubon.org.

FLORIDA
March 21-23 (High Springs)

Mar 27-30 (Live Oak)

April 5-9 (Tampa)

April 11-12 (Dade City)
Florida Old Time Music Championship, Sertoma Youth Ranch. Jim Strickland, 1848 Thistle Ct., Wesley Chapel 33543; 813-991-4774.

May 2 – 4 (St. Augustine)

May 23-25 (White Springs)

May 24 (White Springs)
Florida State Fiddle Contest at the Florida Folk Festival, Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center, Stephen Foster State Park. Leslie Green, 352-371-9801; www.nettally.com/fiddler.

Oct 17-19 (High Springs)

Oct 23-26 (Live Oak)
MagnoliaFest, Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park. Magnolia Music & Events, PO Box 51597, Jacksonville Beach 32240; 904-249-7990; www.magmusic.com.
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- JOHN LILLY
- THE SKILLET LICKERS
- CURTIS AND HOLLY JONES
- GOLD RUSH WITH NEEL PENDER
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The Old-Time Herald
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FEBRUARY 2008-MARCH 2008

SEPT. 13 (Blairsville)

OCT. 4 (Athens)
North Georgia Folk Festival, Sandy Creek Park. Concert/performance, children’s event; wab; camping. Athens Folk Music & Dance Soc., PO Box 346, Athens 30603.

OCT. 10-19 (Hiawassee)

IOWA

APRIL 18-20 (Anita)

AUG. 27-SEPT. 2 (LeMars)
33rd National Old Time Country & Bluegrass Festival and Pioneer Exposition, Plymouth County Fairgrounds. 1 hr. before contest. PO Box 492, Anita 50020; 712-762-4363; www.oldtimemusic.bigstep.com.

SEPT. 15-21 (Bloomfield)
The Davis County Country & Old-Time Music Festival, Davis County Fairgrounds. Camping can start on Sept. 16. Davis County Agricultural Society, PO Box 23, Bloomfield 52537; www.daviscountyfair.org.

IDAHO

JUNE 16-20 (Weiser)
National Old Time Country & Bluegrass Festival and Pioneer Exposition, Plymouth County Fairgrounds. af

JULY 23-AUG. 2 (Rexburg)

ILLINOIS

FEB. 8-10 (Chicago)

FEB. 23 (Chicago)

MAY 23-25 (Peoria)
World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest, Hotel Pere Marquette. May 15. Dealers room. Piano Contest, PO Box 583, Decatur 62525; 217-428-2403; pianocfest@aol.com.

AUG. 9-10 (Stockton)
Willow Folk Festival. Preregistered camping only. Pauline Craig, 10645 S. Dixon Rd., Mt. Carroll 61053; 815-244-3590.

AUG. 31-SEPT. 1 (Geneva)
Fox Valley Folk Music & Storytelling Festival, Island Park. Food, art, eight stages. FVFS, 775 N. Evanslawn Ave., Aurora 60506; 630-897-3655; juelu@aol.com.

SEPT. 27-28 (Peoria)
Chinquapin Folk Music & Storytelling Festival, Camp Wokanda. 2218 N. Prospect, Peoria 61603; 309-682-1200; pudp@peoriaparks.org; www.peoriaparks.org.

KANSAS

SEPT. 17-21 (Winfield)
37th Walnut Valley Festival, Winfield Fairgrounds. 1 hr. before contest. PO Box 245, Winfield 67156; 620-221-3250; www.wvfest.com.

KENTUCKY

JUNE 6-8 (Morehead)
Clack Mountain Festival, 1st Street. Jill Vice, KCTM, 149 East Main St., Morehead 40351; 606-783-9001; j.vice@moreheadstate.edu.

JUNE 8-14 (Hindman)
Appalachian Family Folk Week, Hindman Settlement School. PO Box 844, Hindman; 41822; 606-785-5475; www.hindmansettlement.org.

JUNE 13-14 (Whitesburg)

JUNE 19-21 (Tyner)
Stringbean Memorial Bluegrass Festival, Stringbean Memorial Park. RV w/ electric & water. PO Box 359, Gray Hawk 40434; 606-287-0600; www.geocities.com/stringfest.
July 18-19 (Leitchfield)

Sept. 3-7 (Olive Hill)

Oct 16-20 (Berea)
Celebration of Traditional Music, Berea College. Deborah Thompson, CPO 2166 BC, Berea 40404; 859-985-3257; Deborah_Thompson@berea.edu.

LOUISIANA
April 18-25 (Ville Platte)

July 18-19 (Natchitoches)
29th Annual Natchitoches-NSU Folk Festival, Prather Coliseum at Northwestern State University. LA State Fiddle Championship, concessions, traditional crafts. LA Folklife Center, NSU Box 3663, Natchitoches 71497; 318-357-4332; www.nsula.edu/folklife.

MAINE
July 12 (Fort Fairfield)
County Gospel Festival, Farm Park. Janet Kelle, Fort Fairfield Chamber of Commerce, POB 350, Fort Fairfield 04742; 207-472-3802; jKelle@fortfairfield.org.

July 13-20 (Fort Fairfield)
Maine Potato Blossom Festival. Janet Kelle, Fort Fairfield Chamber of Commerce, POB 350, Fort Fairfield 04742; 207-472-3802; jKelle@fortfairfield.org.

July 25-29 (South Hiram)
Ossipee Valley Bluegrass Festival. Ossipee Valley Fairgrounds. Workshops and contests. OVBA, PO Box 593, Cornish 04020; 207-625-8656; www.ossipeevalley.com.

July 25-27 (Fort Fairfield)

July 27 (East Benton)

MARYLAND
July 6-12 Workshops
July 12-13 Festival
July 13-19 Workshops (Westminster)
Common Ground on the Hill, McDaniel College. Festival is at Carroll County Farm Museum. 2 College Hill, McDaniel College, Westminster 21157; www.commongroundonthehill.org.

Aug. 7-9 (Leonardtown)

Sept. 14 (Takoma Park)

 MASSACHUSETTS
April 25-27 (Mansfield)
64th Annual New England Folk Festival, Mansfield Middle and High Schools, PMB 282, 1770 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge 02140; 781-662-6710; www.neffa.org.

April 25-27 (Groton)

May 15 (Lexington)

May 16-18 (Groton)

June 26-Aug. 30 (Plymouth)
Country Dance and Song Society Summer Camps 2007, Pinewoods. Workshops, concerts, jams. Steve Howe, CDSS, PO Box 338, Haydenville 01039; 413-268-7426 ext. 3; www.cdss.org/camp.

Oct. 10-12 (Groton)

MICHIGAN
June 6-8 (East Lansing)

July 11-13 (Harbor Springs)
Blissfest Music Festival. 325 East Lake St, Petoskey 49770; 231-348-7047; www.blissfest.org.

July 18-20 (Marquette)

Aug. 2 (Manchester)
Riverfolk Festival, Carr Park. am by June 15. Riverfolk Festival PO Box 145, Manchester 48158.

Aug 8-10 (East Lansing)
The Great Lakes Folk Festival. Traditional food and arts; camping nearby. GLFF, MSU Museum, West Circle Dr., East Lansing 48823; 517-432-GLFF; www.greatlakesfolkfest.net.

Aug. 29 – 31 (Port Sanilac)

Sept. 5-7 (Remus)
Wheatland Music Festival. WMO, Box 22, Remus 49340; 989-967-8879; www.wheatlandmusic.org.

MINNESOTA
Feb. 29 – Mar. 2 (Plymouth)
Winter Bluegrass Weekend, Radisson Hotel. Jed Malischke, PO Box 16408, Minneapolis; 800-635-3037; www.minnesotabluegrass.org.

March 7-9 (Detroit Lakes)

May 15-18 (Lanesboro)

May 30 - June 1 (Richmond)

Aug. 7-10 (Richmond)
Minnesota Bluegrass & Old-Time Music Festival, El Rancho Mañana Campground. PO Box 16408, Minneapolis 55416; 800-635-3037; www.minnesotabluegrass.org.

MISSOURI
Mar 28-30 (Columbia)
Shakori Hills Grassroots Festival of Music & Dance

April 17-20 Silk Hope, NC

Old-Time, Roots Rock African, Cajun, Zydeco Bluegrass, Country Swing, Latin & more!

Four days, four stages with more than 50 bands. Concerts, nightly dances, workshops, on-site camping, foods, crafts, sustainability fair, fiddler’s and band competition and great friendly folks! All on 75 beautiful acres in Chatham County, North Carolina (Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill area)

www.shakorihills.org

June 20-21 (Halltown)
16th Annual Old-Time Fiddlers Contest and Jam, Snyder Music Park. Clogging, Virginia Snyder, 1347 E. Broadmoor, Springfield 65804; virginiasnydr@yahoo.com.

Sept. 6 (Halltown)

MONTANA
June 1-6, 8-13 (Monarch)

July 25-27 (Red Lodge)
Montana State Old-Time Fiddlers Contest, Red Lodge Middle School. Arl. 413 South F St., Livingston; 509-993-4914; www.montanafiddlers.org.

NORTH CAROLINA
April 17-20 and Oct. 9-12 (Pittsboro)

August 7-10, 2008 - El Rancho Manana
Richmond MN (20 mi W of St Cloud, MN)

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For More Information & Tickets call 800-635-3037 or visit www.MinnesotaOldTime.org
April 19 (Yadkinville)

May 10 (Cooleemee)
The Cooleemee Civitan Club’s Old-Time Fiddlers and Bluegrass Convention, Clement Grove Picnic Grounds. Competitions. Cooleemee Civitan Club, PO Box 517, Cooleemee 27014; 336-998-8877; www.coleemecivitans.org/Festival.

May 23-25 (Union Grove)

May 30 – June 1 (Mount Airy)
Mount Airy Bluegrass & Old-Time Fiddlers Convention, Veteran’s Park. afr. Workshops, concert/performance, competition, children’s event, open stage; wab, handicapped parking; camping. Carlyle Whitaker, PO Box 445, Mount Airy 27030; 800-286-6193; sshc@surry.net.

June 8-14 (Mars Hill)
Blue Ridge Old-Time Week, Mars Hill College. afr. MHC Conferences Office, PO Box 6785, Mars Hill 28754; 828-689-1646; www.mhc.edu/oldtimemusic.

June 13-15 (Eden)

June 21 (Robbinsville)
Mountain Music Championship. Stecoah Valley Center, 121 Schoolhouse Rd., outside Robbinsville. Beth Fields; 828-479-3364; programs@stecoahvalleycenter.com; www.visitsvcenter.com.

June 22-27 (Cullowhee)
Mountain Dulcimer Week, Western Carolina University. Workshops, jams, concerts. WCU, 138 Outreach Center; Cullowhee 28723; 828-227-7397; www.wcu.edu/5046.asp.

June 28, July 5, 12, 19
Aug. 9, 16, 23, 30 (Asheville)
Shindig on the Green, Martin Luther King, Jr. Park. Elly Wells, Folk Heritage Committee; 828-258-3387; www.folkheritage.org.

July 4-6 (Durham)

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July 6-12 (Swannanoa)  

July 6-12 (Swannanoa)  
Swannanoa Gathering - Traditional Song Week, Warren Wilson College. PO Box 9000, Asheville 28815; www.swangathering.com.

July 13-19 (Swannanoa)  

July 18-19 (Sparta)  

July 20-26 (Swannanoa)  

July 25-27 (Asheville)  
Bele Chere Festival. PO Box 7148, Asheville 28802; 828-259-5800; www.belecherefestival.com.

July 27-Aug. 2 (Swannanoa)  

July 27-Aug. 2 (Swannanoa)  

July 31-Aug. 2 (Asheville)  
Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, Diana Wortham Theatre, 2 South Pack Sq. Storytelling. Elly Wells, Folk Heritage Committee; 828-258-3387; www.folkheritage.org.

Aug. 1-2 (Jefferson)  
Jeffersons Rotary Club Olde Time and Bluegrass Fiddler's Convention, Ashe County Park. Food. PO Box 1045, Jefferson 28640; 336-846-0790; amhadmin@skybest.com.

Aug. 9-9 (Swannanoa)  

Aug. 30 (Happy Valley)  
Happy Valley Heritage Old-Time Fiddlers' Convention, Jones Farm, am by 2 pm. Held on the farm where Laura Foster (Tom "Dooley" Dula's lover) is buried. Competitions. 828-726-0616; happyvalleyf@ymail.com; www.caldwellcochamber.org.

Sept. 18-21 (Charlotte)  

Sept. 19-20 (Pittsburg)  

Sept. 27 (Cullowhee)  
Mountain Heritage Day, Western Carolina University. 828-227-3193; mglover@email.wcu.edu; www.wcu.edu/mhd.

Sept. 30 (Carrboro)  

Oct. 10-12 (Mount Airy)  
Autumn Leaves Festival. Mount Airy Chamber of Commerce, PO Box 913, Mount Airy 27030; 336-786-6116; admin@mtnairyncchamber.org.

Oct. 17-19 (Robbinsville)  

Oct. 25 (Brevard)  

Oct. 6 – 14 (Dunseith)  

June 8 – 14 (Avoca)  
Schoolhouse Fiddle Camp For Beginners, The Old Schoolhouse. Deborah Greenblatt, The Old Schoolhouse, PO Box 671, Avoca 68307-0671; www.mastercall.com/g-s/.

Oct. 3-5 (Fremont)  

NEW HAMPSHIRE

July 26-Aug. 9 (Lyman)  
Country Dance and SongSociety Summer Camps 2008, Ongontz. Various camps in storytelling and family week. Steve Howe, CDSS, PO Box 338, Haydenville 01039; 413-268-7426 ext. 3; camp@cdss.org; www.cdss.org/camp.

NEW JERSEY

Apr. 26 (New Brunswick)  

May 9-11 (Stillwater)  

June 21 (Millville)  
Southern Shore MusicFestival, Cumberland County Fairgrounds. Bob Rose, PO Box 472, Bridgeton 08302, 856-455-0328; aros207@aol.com.

Aug. 29-31 (Woodstown)  
Delaware Valley Bluegrass Festival, Salem County Fairgrounds. Box 3672, Greenville 19807; 302-475-3454; www.delawarevalleybluegrass.org.

NEW MEXICO

Feb. 22-24 (Las Cruces)  

May 23 – 26 (Socorro)  
16th Anniversary FolkMadness Music and Dance Camp, New Mexico Tech. 3402 Purdue Pl. NE, Albuquerque 87106; 505-256-5381; debbrunt@comcast.net; www.folkmad.org.

June 21 (Albuquerque)  

Aug. 1-3 (Edgewood)  
Wildlife West Music Festival, near Albuquerque. Roger Alink, PO Box 1359, Edgewood 87015.

Aug. 22-24 (Santa Fe)  
34th Annual Bluegrass & Old Time Music Festival, Santa Fe County Fairgrounds. 3229 Rodeo Rd. Steve Morgan, 488 Pyrite Dr. NE, Rio Rancho 87124; 505-891-2829; www.southwestpickers.org.

NEW YORK

May 23-25 (Altamont)  
Black Creek Fiddlers Reunion, Altamont Fairgrounds. Workshops and slow jams. www.oldsongs.org/blackcreek.
Old-Time Week, July 20-26
with Phil Jamison, John Herrmann, Trevor Stuart, Travis Stuart, Sheila Kay Adams, Rodney Sutton, John Hollandsworth, Gordy Hinners, Carol Elizabeth Jones, Beverly Smith, Carl Jones, Don Pedl, Ron Pen, Meredith McIntosh & more.

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Swing, Jazz, Blues, Country, Western-Swing

NORTHERN WEEK
July 20 – 26
New England, Quebecois, English, Scandinavian

SOUTHERN WEEK
August 10 – 16
Appalachian, Old-Time, Cajun & Zydeco

Old-Time Week, July 20-26
with Phil Jamison, John Herrmann, Trevor Stuart, Travis Stuart, Sheila Kay Adams, Rodney Sutton, John Hollandsworth, Gordy Hinners, Carol Elizabeth Jones, Beverly Smith, Carl Jones, Don Pedl, Ron Pen, Meredith McIntosh & more.

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ALSO:

Traditional Song Week, July 6-12
Fiddle Week, July 6-12
Celtic Week, July 13-19
Guitar Week, July 27-August 2
Contemporary Folk Week, July 27-August 2
Dulcimer Week, August 3-9
June 6-8 (Grove)  

Aug. 21-23 (Wagoner)  
Fiddlers Festival, Western Hills Guest Ranch. PO Box 509, Wagoner 74477; 918-772-2545.

Nov. 6-8 (Wagoner)  
Western Swing Weekend, Western Hills Guest Ranch. PO Box 509, Wagoner 74477; 918-772-2545.

OREGON  
Apr. 10-12 (Rickreall)  
Oregon Old Time Fiddlers Convention. Saturday-evening banquet and dance for OOTFA members. Lew Holt, 1625 19th St. NE, Salem; 503-391-5377; lewholt@aol.com.

May 16-17 (Salem)  

July 31-Aug. 3 (Salem)  

PENNSYLVANIA  
May 15-17 (Williamsport)  

July 20 (Freeland)  
Old Time Fiddle Festival, Eckley Miner’s Village. Arn day of event. 2 Eckley Main St., Weatherly 18255; 570-636-2070; wstrassner@state.us.pa; www.eckleyminers.org.

Aug. 2 (Lancaster)  
28th Annual Old Fiddler’s Picnic. 1050 Rockford Rd. Deborah H. Werner, 1050 Rockford Rd, Lancaster 17602; (717) 209-3270; wenerd@co.lancaster.pa.us.

Aug. 9 (Coatesville)  
Chester County Old Fiddlers’ Picnic, Hibernia County Park. Craft and food vendors, Chester County Parks & Recreation, 601 Westcott Rd. Suite 160, West Chester 19380; 610-383-3812; ccpparks@chesco.org; www.chesco.org/ccparks.

Aug. 15 – 17 (Schwenksville)  

Aug 29 - Sept. 1 (Hamlin)  

SOUTH CAROLINA  
May 12 (Lancaster)  

Sept. 20 (Pickens)  

TENNESSEE  
Mar. 7-9 (Knoxville)  

Mar 7-9 (Lebanon)  
March 21-22 (Clarksville)

June 8-15 (Maryville)

June 15-22 (Maryville)

July 4-5 (Smithville)
Smithville Fiddlers’ Jamboree & Crafts Festival, on the Town Square. Neil Dudney, PO Box 83, Smithville 37166; 615-597-8500; edudney@dtccom.net.

July 11-13 (Murfreesboro)

Sept. 5-6 (Loudon)
Smithville Fiddlers Convention, Legion Field. Limited camping available Larry Smith, PO Box 136, Loudon 37774; 865-458-3036; Larrysmith@bellsouth.net.

Oct. 9-12 (Norris)

TEXAS
March 27-29 (Palestine)
Palestine Old Time Music and Dulcimer Festival, Museum for East Texas Culture; Jerry Wright, PO Box 46, Kennard 75847; 936-655-2945; pickinwright@yahoo.com.

Apr 17-20 (Austin)
20th Annual Old Settlers Music Festival, Camp Ben McCulloch. PO Box 28187, Austin 78755; 512-346-0999, ext 3; www.oldsettlersmusicfest.org

April 17-19 (Crockett)

April 23-26 (Hallettsville)

May 30
Athens 77th Old Fiddlers Reunion and Contest, courthouse lawn. 124 N. Palestine, Athens 75751; 888-294-2847; cvb@athenstx.org; www.athenstx.org.

June 13-14 (Crockett)
World Famous Fiddler’s Contest & Championship Steak Cook-off, Crockett Civic Center. Antique tractor show and craft show. PO Box 307, Crockett 75835; 936-544-2359; www.crockettareachamber.org.

June 13-15 (San Antonio)

UTAH
Aug. 28 -30 (Orem)
Timpanogos Storytelling Festival. 58 N. State St., Orem 84057; 801-229-7050; www.timpfest.org.

VIRGINIA
May 24 (Big Stone Gap)

June 13-15 (Galax)
Galax Leaf & String Festival. Chuck Riedhammer, 276-238-8130; criedhammer@galaxcity.org.

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June 19-21 (Buena Vista)  
Maury River Fiddlers Convention, Glen Maury Park. Arn, check website for details, afr. Janice Burguieres, 403 Hillside Dr., Buena Vista 24416; 540-261-1328; janice@rockbridge.net; www.glenmaurypark.com/mrFc/.

June 21 (Mouth of Wilson)  
Wayne Henderson Music Festival & Guitar Competition, Grayson Highlands State Park. Arn. PO Box 531, Galax 24333; www.waynehenderson.org.

June 27-28 (Elk Creek)  
41st Annual Grayson County Old-Time & Bluegrass Fiddlers Convention. Arn, food available. Brian Billings, 9877 Comers Rock Rd., Elk Creek 24326; 276-655-4527; www.ecvfd.net.

July 26-Aug. 1  
Aug. 9-15 (Port Orchard)  

Aug. 9-17 (Centralia)  

Sept. 5-7 (Port Townsend)  

VERMONT  
June 15-21 (Johnson)  

Aug 1-3 (Ferrisburgh)  

WASHINGTON  
May 23-26 (Seattle)  
Northwest Folklife Festival, Seattle Center. 305 Harrison St., Seattle 98109; 206-684-7300; www.nwfolklife.org.

June 29 - July 6 (Port Townsend)  
Festival of American Fiddle Tunes, Fort Worden State Park. PO Box 1158, Port Townsend 98368; 800-733-3608; www.centrum.org.

July 26 – 27 (Wilbur)  

WEST VIRGINIA  
April 20-25 (Elkins)  
Augusta Spring Dulcimer Week, Davis and Elkins College. Arn by April 1. Augusta Heritage Center, 100 Campus Dr., Elkins 26241; 304-637-1209; www.augustaheritage.com.

May 23 – 25 (Charleston)  
32nd Annual Vandalia Gathering, Cultural Center and Capitol Complex. WV Div. of Culture & History, 304-558-0162; www.wvculture.org/vandal.

June 19-22 (Glenville)  

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GAMBIA

July 18-27 (Casamance)
“Dance! Hell yeah, we dance!” is how Margarita Garza of Houston described why she and a large group of her family and friends made their way to the three-day Tejano Conjunto Festival (TCF), held early every May in Rosedale Park in San Antonio. She isn’t alone. Dancing is at the heart of this festival, and at most times during the weekend the floor is so packed it can be hard to move.
Conjunto music is the sound of Mexican-American South Texas, a fast, powerful, and virtuosic music played with the three-row button accordion, bajo sexto or bajo quinto (12- or 10-string bass), bass, and drums. Conjunto is a compelling music, and as danceable as it comes. It originated on the west side of San Antonio, so the festival is held on something akin to sacred musical ground.

This festival may not be the only conjunto festival in Texas (another prominent one is the annual Narciso Martinez Conjunto Festival each September in San Benito, and they occur all over the state), but it is definitely the most important. People from San Antonio and from across Texas and the world come to the festival to celebrate the rich regional music legacy at its birthplace, to dance, and to have the good times that are the true core of conjunto music. As Ricky Naranjo, son of the accordion great Ruben Naranjo and a fine player himself, put it from the stage, “Conjunto music! This is what we love! This is what we play! This is who we are!”

The conjunto festival is one that most old-time musicians would almost certainly appreciate and enjoy. It shares many elements with old time festivals—non-stop great music and dancing late into the night, emphasis on culture, tradition, and family, and, of course, a good amount of cutting loose and partying. People in San Antonio pay their respects to the musical greats and appreciate tradition, but they attend the festival most of all to enjoy music and life.

Old-time musicians who may not have heard conjunto music are certain to like it as soon as they hear it played right. Like much of old-time music, it is fundamentally a dance music with a lead instrument driving the tune and the other core instruments filling in a driving rhythm with complex precision. Most of the tunes are polkas, redovas, huapangos, and cumbias, and the occasional waltz-time number is thrown in (especially in older recordings and playing styles). One major difference from old-time music is that conjunto is usually amplified, and amazingly so at the festival. “It’s the loudest music I’ll ever listen to,” says Michael Gallagher, an old-time musician in the Sandia Hots band who makes the long drive from Albuquerque to San Antonio.

There are other old-time musicians who make the pilgrimage to San Anto-
nio. Jim Andres, a fiddler living in Berlin, came to Texas along with Cindy Miller, who lives in Washington, D.C. John Jennings, an old-time musician while living in North Carolina, was drawn to conjunto and norteño music when he moved to California. He now plays occasionally with the family band Conjunto Romero and makes an annual trek to San Antonio. Jennings said, “To me it’s all North American folk music, developed by the people, speaking to their lives and part of the daily round. And conjunto is música alegre, it makes you happy and want to dance!”

People also come from all over the country and the world. Large numbers of people who have left Texas for work use the TCF as a homecoming, and return from Chicago, California, New York, Vancouver, Wisconsin, and elsewhere. Noriyoshi “Horonio” Imamura flies in each year from Japan, where there is a small but committed (and talented) conjunto scene. He plays accordion and sings in a band. Horonio says his “heart shook” the first time he heard conjunto music. Since he does not know Spanish, he sings the Spanish lyrics phonetically. Imamura played a tune on stage with Eva Ybarra, one of the few women in conjunto music and a San Antonio native, who had an unusually good set at the 2007 TCF.

Conjunto music is a unique product of the Texas-Mexican borderlands in the lower Rio Grande Valley. The name conjunto simply means “group” in Spanish, and is applied to bands in various kinds of Latin music. But in Texas the name refers only to the accordion-bajo sexto music of South Texas. The accordion is the central instrument in conjunto. It was Narcisco Martinez who first created conjunto music in the 1930s by combining the German polkas of South Texas with Mexican flair on the button accordion. He played precisely and purely, concentrating on the right hand, while his marvelous bajo sexto player named Santiago Almeida set the standard for rhythmic accompaniment. Soon thereafter, master accordionist and stylist Santiago Jimenez, Sr., started a band in San Antonio that brought in the string bass and the style evolved from there. Drums were added in the 1950s. A traditional conjunto consists of only these instruments, although younger bands have brought in others. Today most conjunto accordion players do not play the bass reeds, and usually remove them for greater speed in playing.

The name “conjunto” has gained something of a talismanic power, similar to “old-time” or “bluegrass.” The name itself is evocative of more than just the music; it taps into a deeper sense of community and culture as well as a fierce regional pride. Throughout the festival, artists and announcers on stage proclaim simply, “This is conjunto music!” People wear shirts that say “conjunto to the bone,” or, simply, “conjunto.” Los Dos Gilbertos, one of the major bands featured at the festival, and one that is extremely popular throughout the Rio Grande Valley, has an announcer who, in the middle of many songs, proclaims “The best in conjunto music!” to great effect. (The 2Gs, as they are sometimes known, have an album title that I have appropriated for this article since it so perfectly describes the music.) While in Lerma’s nightclub—a classic, formative, old-fashioned venue that is the CBGB’s of conjunto music—after the first night of the festival, I drank many toasts simply to “conjunto music” at the insistence (and generosity, since he was buying) of Albert Carrillo of Corpus Christi. Why does Carrillo love conjunto so much? “They come from where I come from,” he said. “And the accordion, I love the accordion.”

The 2007 TCF marked a return to traditional conjunto music, what its current director Juan Tejeda labeled “Puro Conjunto Pesado,” or Pure Heavy Conjunto. “The one thing about conjunto music is that it’s an important part of our culture,” he says. Tejeda was the founder of the TCF in 1982 and served as its director for 17 years before taking a hiatus in 1998. The festival is sponsored by the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio.

Tejeda’s years as director marked the rapid expansion of the festival, as it grew in size, scope, significance and length, and now back at the helm he intends to restore those days. For a time, the festival was as long as 7 days with 45 bands playing on two stages, and workshops and special events like the 1989 “Where the Barrio Meets the Bayou” event that brought in Marc and Ann Savoy, Michael Doucet, and Queen Ida. Since Tejeda left, the festival has shrunk a bit and, for a time, lost focus on pure heavy conjunto. In 2007 it ran only for only three days. “Without continuity things get lost. You need someone doing music programming year round” is how Tejeda explains the transformation. Tejeda has decided to reinvigorate the festival by pushing it “back to its roots” and showcasing the major regional stylists who play firmly within the conjunto tradition.
It is important to note that Tejeda has an inclusive view of tradition. He understands that conjunto has been, and continues to be, at heart “a synthesis and hybrid as well as a unique and original ensemble.” He seeks traditional sounds in the bands he chooses but recognizes that all the major innovators of conjunto have added to this tradition by introducing huapangos, corridos, cumbias, and elements of blues, jazz, and rock to polka. Conjunto, though firmly fixed in tradition, has tended to welcome distinctive new sounds. “Polka-ing them out—that and the fusions is what makes the music unique,” is how Tejeda settles it. One example that old-time fans might be interested in is the Tony de la Rosa standard “El Circo,” which is actually a polka version of “Alabama Jubilee.”

There is some significant variation in style within conjunto. The differing styles only sound similar until you have listened to the music enough and trained your ear. Just as old-time has ever-finer distinctions in playing style that the discerning listener can hear effortlessly, so does conjunto. And definitely do not confuse conjunto with norteño music, a similar sounding accordion and bajo sexto music from northern Mexico that tends to feature more singing than conjunto but otherwise might not sound different to the uninitiated. The difference is subtle but, of course, “there is a difference.” Some major norteño players like Ramón Ayala are embraced by conjunto fans. But it is striking how many and how readily people at the conjunto festival dismiss norteño music entirely, despite its close similarity. People stressed to me often that they listen to conjunto exclusively, or confided in me that they also like norteño in the somewhat sheepish way that some old-time musicians might confess to also liking bluegrass. As more than one
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Dancing to conjunto, like the music itself, has regional flair and great energy within the general style. The circle of dancers flows in a counter-clockwise direction and the tunes usually last for ten to fifteen minutes, with medleys drawing out each song and pulling yet more people onto the floor. You see stately older couples gliding over the floor with decades of fusion behind their grace, showboating younger dancers, often including tough-looking tattooed guys, cutting through with flamboyance and style, and, this being Texas, many guys with large cowboy hats, twirling women around with arms over their hats, without skipping a beat or knocking their hats askew. Many couple dance continuously for the entire day.

Conjunto music is a new enough tradition that a large number of the most important musicians and bands in its formation are still alive, and most if not all of them have appeared at the Tejano Conjunto festival over the years. Giants like Valerio Longoria or Tony de la Rosa have only just recently passed on, and it is still possible to see some of the older greats play, such as (to name but a few) Rubén Vela, Los Pavos Reales, Santiago Jiménez, Jr, Flaco Jiménez, Steve Jordan, and Mingo Saldívar. If for that reason alone, a trip to the festival is worthwhile if not essential. There are also many great traditional bands still playing actively for lively scenes in San Antonio, Houston, Corpus Christi, Alice, and elsewhere, that appear at the festival each year.

The 2007 TCF featured a very unusual Thursday opening night concert of Paulino Bernal, a major accordion player in the 1950s who had left conjunto music to become an enormously successful radio evangelist. Friday was focused on the “Valley Tradition,” with the 2Gs, Los Fantasmas del Valle, and the great Rubén Vela, while Saturday featured many big players from the “San Anto, Laredo, Corpus connection,” including such giants of the form as Los Pavos Reales, Mingo Saldívar, Eva Ybarra, and megastar Flaco Jiménez, and popular newer bands like Los Conjunto Kings de Flavio Longoria and Los Texmaniacs de Max Baca. There was also a performance of the student groups from the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center and from Palo Alto College, where Tejeda teaches a group called Conjunto Heritage Taller.

Rosedale Park is a nice setting for the TCF, with a pavilion on a hill covering a large dance floor, and room for many food vendors, beer sales, and some instrument vendors. This is not a camping festival: people come each day. It is cheap too. A three-day pass was only $25. The music continues until midnight, and after that San Antonio has many clubs where you can dance to conjunto until the wee hours, such as Lerma’s, the Bandera Flea Market, and Cool Arrows. Steve Jordan, for example, plays every Friday night, and it is not uncommon to get to see Henry Zimmerle or other such San Antonio greats playing at one of these clubs the night after the festival.

One part of the festival will strike old-time musicians as unusual, though. People are not jamming. This music seems ideal for jams much in the same way old-time music is, with a set body of standard tunes, a strong embrace of the music by fans, and a tradition of being learned by ear. There is much attention given to fostering conjunto among kids. Rosedale Park is huge,
with much room for playing. Also, most conjunto fans I spoke with play at least one instrument and seek as many jamming opportunities as they can find. The festival is participatory, as the many dancers attest, and the park itself seems like an ideal place for jamming given its size (though admittedly, a multiple-accordion jam might be a touch more raucous than one with a half-dozen fiddles). So what is going on? Juan Tejeda says the focus at the TCF has always been on showcasing the major artists and dancing rather than fostering jamming. There is some playing at the festival but not nearly as much as one would expect. There are a few guys (and they are almost all men) wandering around with accordions, a smattering of bajo players, and it is not hard to find amazingly talented kids pounding out the tunes to the appreciation of gathered people.

Surely jamming would not take away from dancing or from appreciating the masters; it could well increase it. It is likely that welcoming or even emphasizing jams in conjunto festivals could very well lead to a new explosion of interest in the music and may assure its persistence in the current time when vibrant regional music is rapidly being subsumed by mass culture. The vitality of both the old-time and traditional bluegrass worlds offers a clear model to be followed in this regard. People getting together to jam at festivals as well as listening to established and new artists is something that helps to sustain the traditions as well as nurture new future talent. And it is fun.

Some individuals are making the change themselves. Robert Gutierrez created a new space for conjunto musicians to jam in an old roadside store his family owned, which he has renamed Mission Trail’s Conjunto Express. Gutierrez, who wears a handmade gold accordion ring, is committed to furthering conjunto music and to fostering players. “The old songs, they just never die,” he said. Before and during the festival he sponsored open jams at his store, and since then he has officially opened the place for weekends of music, serving beer, supplying a drum kit, and encouraging playing at all levels. It is likely that the music there will be an important part of a weekend spent in San Antonio for the festival and hopefully will encourage more jamming opportunities elsewhere.

Marina Rigas will be at the 2008 Tejano Conjunto Festival. She has been coming from Waco to San Antonio for the festival for 16 years. She goes to many other conjunto festivals. But sitting on the edge of the dance floor in Rosedale Park, she says, “They’re not like San Antonio. There’s no place like San Antonio.”

Dan Margolies is a banjo player, historian, and beekeeper, in Norfolk, Virginia, currently living in Seoul, Korea. He can be reached at dsmargolies@verizon.net.

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Even if you already have lots of Marcus Martin recordings, you need this CD. If you have no Marcus Martin recordings, you must correct that immediately, and why not with this well put-together, extensively researched, high quality, enchanting collection?

Marcus Martin (1881-1974) lived in western North Carolina for most of his life, and began to play music quite young. He learned music from his father, a fiddler, and from other local musicians—among his influences were fiddlers Bill Hensley and (J. D.) Dedrick Harris. Known in Swannanoa as a good fiddler, Martin was included regularly in Bascom Lamar Lunsford’s Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville, and appeared there into his old age. Said his son Fred, “I don’t think he ever missed a one until he must have been about 86 or 87 years old.” However, he had mainly quit playing by 1961, and so the young musicians of the ’60s string band revival did not get the chance to learn from him directly. Two of his tunes, however, “Sugar in the Gourd” and “Cotton-Eyed Joe,” were on American Fiddle Tunes, an LP released by the Library of Congress and edited by Alan Jabbour; that is where I first heard him.

Up until now, there have been two main batches of Martin’s music in circulation: recordings made in 1941 by Alan Lomax and in 1942 by Artus Moser, housed in the Library of Congress’s Archive of American Folksong (now the Archive of Folk Culture); and Peter Hoover’s recordings of the late 1950s-early ’60s, now available from the Field Recorders’ Collective (#502). While When I Get My New House Done offers some of the Lomax and Moser recordings, it also brings us recordings made by Jan Philip Schinhan in about 1945-50, and recordings made by Margot Mayo, Stu Jamieson, and Freyda Simon in 1946. Schinhan was at the time on the faculty in the Music Department at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. Margot Mayo was the founder of the American Square Dance Group of New York City, and she worked with Jamieson and Simon, traveling in Appalachia to record folk musicians.

The CD begins with “Daddy Bowback,” a tune you will have heard, but perhaps not under that name. Martin may have learned it from his father, Rowan Martin: “I always beat the straws for my daddy when he played ‘Old Daddy Bowback,’” says Martin. This tune is a version of “Fire on the Mountain,” and it was recorded by Moser and also by Hoover under that name. The “Sally Goodin” here is the tune Bill Hensley called “Georgia Horseshoe,” and Wayne Martin’s extensive notes give a detailed history suggesting the tune may come from Junaluska, a Cherokee leader. It is elegant and sparse, as Martin plays it. “When I Get My New House Done” sounds closely related to Martin’s unusual “Gray Eagle,” the one tuned GDEB, but it is in G and played faster. “The Wounded Hoosier” can be heard also on the AFS recordings but this Schinhan recording is much clearer. Wayne Martin’s notes detail what is known of the history of this fascinating and beautiful tune.

Other tunes not heard on other Martin recordings (as far as I know) are “Snowbird,” “Possum up a Gum Stump,” and “Kiss Me Sweet.” “Snowbird” is also played by Manco Sneed and by Bill Hensley, and, like “Georgia Horseshoe,” is connected to Junaluska and the Cherokee. “Possum up a Gum Stump” has a melody like “Paddy Won’t You Drink Some Good Old Cider,” but here it bears the Marcus Martin elegance—his notes have edges on both sides yet slide into each other, and he leaves lovely spaces between phrases. “Kiss Me Sweet” is quite a rare tune. Wayne Martin’s notes explain that one other version is played by Kentucky fiddler Jim Woodward (available in the Digital Library of Appalachia). Martin’s version is delightful, with pauses and fluid moments. With the title and odd phrasing, it seems that it may have been a song at some point.

Though some of the tunes here are from Moser’s AFS recordings, they don’t seem to me to have gotten into circulation before—or at least they aren’t on my samizdat copy of that material: the rare bit of Martin’s banjo playing, on “John Henry,” for example, and “Walking the Water,” a wonderful, lively, reel-like version of Allen Sisson’s crooked “Walking Water Reel.”

As I’m listing the more unusual pieces here, I find that want to list every single piece on the album, even if it has appeared on the AFS or Hoover recordings; the recording quality is so beautiful that you hear the music anew. Once again you’ll be drawn to Martin’s elegant, angular phrasing, his clarity and subtlety, his pulse that moves somehow simultaneously ahead of and right on the beat. There’s no other fiddler like him.

Mayo, Jamieson, and Simon made a point of recording Martin’s singing, and here he sings two ballads, one serious and one humorous, both absolutely delightful.

This beautifully put together package is essential for any lover of old-time music. In the extensive notes by Wayne Martin we learn about Martin’s life and music; in the notes by Wayne Martin and Steven Weiss, we learn about the collectors and the recordings; on the cover we see Martin in a shirt and tie, resting the fiddle on his chest as he plays, and in the music itself we hear the pure graceful, sounds of a master.

Original versions: The Bonnie Blue Flag/ Oysters and Wine at 2:00 AM/What a Time/ Watermelon Party/Rise and Shine/The “Old Time” Religion/Jerusalem Mournin’/Oh What He’s Done for Me/Watermelon Party/Tobias and Keechungus/Oysters and Wine at 2:00 AM/Pussy Cat Rag/When De Corn Pone’s Hot/No Hiding Place Down Here/ Digi tally remastered versions: The Bonnie Blue Flag, Oysters and Wine at 2:00 AM/What a Time/Watermelon Party/Rise and Shine/The “Old Time” Religion/Jerusalem Mournin’

This recording presents 21 tracks of some of the most amazing vocal music I’ve heard in a long time. Seven of the tracks were carefully transferred from Edison cylinders from 1909, and another batch from seven Broadway 78 rpm recordings from 1928. An additional seven cuts are digitally remastered versions of the earlier songs. The recordings, from Civil War veteran Polk Miller and the Old South Quartette, are not only astonishing musically, but of special historical and musical significance because Polk Miller was white and the men of the Old South Quartette were black. This was a musical combination virtually unheard of in the early years of the 20th century. The CD comes in a handsome package that is part of a booklet, but before going further, be warned that many of the vintage images in the pamphlet come from the darkest depths of the Jim Crow era, and some images and copy represent the virulent racial stereotypes of the time.

While I expected that the age and rarity of the recordings was bound to make for some interesting listening, I was not prepared for the overwhelming power of the actual sound. In a typical arrangement from the earliest period (1909), Miller plays a banjo introduction and launches the first verse each song. But then, on the choruses—hold on to your hats, folks—the quartet roars in. It’s a hair-raising sound. Though much of the Polk Miller-Old South Quartette recorded material was either secular or light-hearted, you can get an inkling of the resonance, passion, and syncopation of the Quartette’s style of singing if you have heard the electrifying black gospel quartet music of Southside Virginia. Voices soar and dive like an enormous pipe organ and pulse with intricate syncopations and dynamic shifts in volume. If this music was “watered down” for mass consumption, it’s hard to imagine the strength of the straight beverage!

Polk Miller (1844-1913) was born in Prince Edward County in southeastern Virginia and grew up on the family plantation, absorbing African-American music, language, and culture. He was a hearty singer, a gifted raconteur and entertainer, and had a steady hand on banjo and guitar. Though it is only really audible on the “Bonnie Blue Flag,” Miller’s banjo style deserves a bit of comment. It will probably be a disappointment to readers of this magazine. Despite claims on period broadsides and playbills that Miller had learned from “real negroes,” Miller plays in an unadorned plectrum strumming style that bears little relation to the vibrant African-American banjo playing heard on 20th century field recordings from Virginia and North Carolina. Though it is possible that Miller’s playing could point to a heretofore unrecognized style of banjo playing, it does not sound remotely like the complex banjo styles documented from the same region. Further clouding the issue is one of the photographs of Miller (shown at polkmiller.com). In the photo, Miller is clearly holding a five-string and his right hand is in an unmistakable down-stroke position.

But that’s just the banjo playing, a minor part of this body of music, which was about the singing of the Old South Quartette. Over the years that these cylinders and discs were recorded, some 20 men performed as members of the Quartette, though we only know the names of two of the singers: James L. Stamper – bass, and Randall Graves - tenor. (Also Scott Harris: See Bob Carlin’s letter in this issue.) Though Polk Miller was a gifted storyteller and a fine singer, these men and the other anonymous members of the Quartette are the real jewel in this crown. What is incredible, if we are to believe turn-of-the-century articles that stated that Miller plucked the singers from tobacco factories in and around Richmond, is that these men represented a random sample of their communities. If that were so, one can only imagine the depth of talent that existed in the African-American tobacco factory employees in the Richmond area. We can also probably never really know if the Quartette members were being true to their own tastes or if they were accommodating their patron and audiences by “playing the banja,” i.e. giving the white folks what they wanted to hear. In any case, their music is a glorious sound. To paraphrase North Carolina fiddler Marcus Martin, the magnificent singing of the Old South Quartette is surely music for the “uplifting of people…”

Among my favorites is the “Bonnie Blue Flag,” the well known anthem of the South, which comes from the 1909 cylinder recording sessions. This song, based melodically on an Irish drinking song in 6/8 time, is the cut on which Miller plays the odd strummed banjo introduction I mentioned earlier. Miller sings the verses alone, but then the Quartette bursts in on the choruses with a soul-stirring “Hurrah, hurrah…” All I can say is that they sure don’t write anthems like they used to, and I’ll bet no one has ever recorded this one with more passion and fervor. The other gem from this era is “Jerusalem Mournin’,” which displays Stamper’s astonishing tuba-like bass and Randall Graves’ agile, leaping tenor. A second era of recordings followed after a 20-year gap. In 1911 Miller had given up touring with the Quartette because of the increasing racist violence shown toward the group in their travels (in the North as well as in the South). Miller had then returned to tend to his Richmond pharmacy and passed away in 1913. In the QRS/Broadway 78 rpm recordings from the 1920s, which were produced in New York, the group is identified as the Old South Quartette, though again there is no identification of individual singers. Among these later period cuts is the charming “Pussy Cat Rag” with its syncopated counterpoint (“Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!”) and its playful sound ef-
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fects (“Meow, meow, meow, meow, that’s the pussycat rag!”). Another outstanding cut from this session is the “Watermelon Party,” which appears to have been written by James L. Stamper. Interestingly, there is a banjo in the song “Oh, What He’s Done for Me,” and again it is in a tremolo or plectrum style.

The CD is packaged stylishly in a 9x9” form that includes a 26-page book, illustrated with period reproductions, photos, and pictures, and includes notes by historian Doug Seroff. Minor quibbles are legibility of the playlist and some of the notes, and the awkward shape of the package, which make it hard to shelve with other CDs. But then, it might be fun to frame it rather than use it for storage of the disk. The notes are fascinating and informative, packed with interesting details about Miller’s life and times. A sample tidbit is that after the Civil War Miller ran a successful pharmacy that sold both human and veterinary products. Sergeant’s dog care products are a modern descendent of the potions made in Miller’s Richmond pharmacy.

Thanks and many kudos to Ken Flaherty, who is an engineer in his “real life,” for devoting his spare time to putting this project together. This is high-quality music from another time lovingly restored and thoughtfully presented. Very much recommended.

GAIL GILLESPIE

To order: www.polkmiller.com.

For further information on this music see Doug Seroff’s original 1988 article “Polk Miller and the Old South Quartette,” which appeared in 78 Quarterly, No. 3.

Franklin George—Banjo and Fiddle Recordings from the Collection of Fred Coon

Frank George: fiddle, banjo; John Hilt: fiddle; Fred Coon: banjo; John Morris: guitar

Bill Cheatum/Wild Horse/Teetotaler/Forked Deer/Arkansas Traveler/Soldier’s Joy/Wind that Shakes the Barley/Rickett’s Hornpipe/Fisher’s Hornpipe/Devil’s Dream/Sailor’s Hornpipe Medley/One More River to Cross/Cripple Creek/Cluck Old Hen/The Boatman/Harve Brown’s Dream/Sourwood Mountain/Salt River/Sugar in the Gourd/Sally Goodin’/Blind Ed Haley (talk) - Goodnight Waltz/Mississippi Sawyer/Black Eyed Susie/Jenny Rowlands/Unknown/Billy in the Lowground/Girl I left Behind Me

Frank George plays 11 tunes on fiddle accompanied by Fred Coon on banjo and John Morris on guitar, then plays banjo for John Hilt as Hilt plays fiddle on 15 more tunes. These are field recordings, and have all of the ambiance one would expect from such. Frank is in good form and plays away at some of his oft-recorded tunes: “Wild Horse,” “Soldier’s Joy,” “Arkansas Traveler,” “Rickett’s Hornpipe,” “Devil’s Dream,” and “Sailor’s Hornpipe,” to name a few. Coon’s banjo is fingerpicked and it sounds like he removed his picks on some tunes, much to the benefit of the proceedings. Morris shadows the fiddle and banjo with his rhythm guitar.
The second part of this recording focuses on music from fiddler John Fitzgerald Hilt on fiddle with George playing banjo. Hilt has made few appearances on commercially available recordings. His playing on the recording Swope’s Knob, Anachronistic 001 (1977), is his primary recording presence along with some appearances on some Union Grove compilations. Over the years, George has recorded in a few different settings but not all that often, so it is good to get the opportunity to hear more of his banjo and Hilt’s fiddling. Neither one of these fiddlers falls into the mold of modern old-time fiddling. Both established their styles within the community of fiddlers who existed in their formative years and it is evident from these recordings that the players had an established rapport. They know the tunes and work their way through them with ease. The tune choices are well played though not exotic. Hilt talks about Ed Haley with great reverence and plays a bit of “Goodnight Waltz” with George playing chordal accompaniment on the banjo. In a nearly six-minute version of “Mississippi Sawyer,” Hilt plays variation, after variation incorporating quite a bit of vibrato at times to give his fiddle a keening edge. He plays two tunes solo: “Billy in the Lowground” and an unnamed tune, and it is apparent that this is a past time he relishes in solitude as well as with friends.

No dates are given for the two sessions documented here, but they have to be close to 30 years old. The music here still has the dust of a hard day’s work on it and has not been tainted too much by modern technology and all of the changes that have taken place since then. This is old-time music as it existed in the late-middle 1900s, and is a valuable artifact for that reason alone. That the music is quite fun to listen to, and the playing vibrant, should be icing on the cake.

Bob Buckingham
To order: www.fieldrecorder.com

The Pine Breeze Recordings
Various Artists

Jubilee Community Arts JCA-1003a


CD 2: Russ Vandergriff: Hickman’s Boys; Ella Hughes: The Poor Scotchee/Princes Boy/All Around the Cedar/Weerly Wheat/Green Coffee; Johnny Was a Miller/Chase the Squirrel/Shoot the Buffalo/She Is Dumb; Blaine Smith and Florence Stewart: A Bottle of Wine and Gingerake/Jeff Davis/Old Chattanooga/Chocaw Bill/Cincinnati/Corn in the Crib/Run, Nigger, Run; “Peanut” Cantrell: Sail Away Ladies/Sugar Gal; Lee Trentham and J.D. Perkinson: Goin Back to Harlan/ Rubber Dolly/East Tennessee Blues; Clay Turner: Pick and a Shovel/The Old Account Was Settled Long Age/Eldia Barbee: Baby, Your Time Ain’t Long/Goin’ to Chattanooga/Glory Land Road; He’ll Roll Me Over the Tide/He’ll Hold to My Hand/Poor Wayfaring Stranger.

In the late 1970s, maybe the early ’80s, when I lived in California, the bunch of us who played music together somehow got hold of recordings of a fiddler named Blaine Smith. I never knew where the recordings came from, who had them first, or anything about Blaine Smith. Someone was passing a cassette tape around and soon we were all playing these wonderful tunes: “Bottle of Wine and Gingerake” and “Chocaw Bill.” Now that this lovely compilation of the Pine Breeze Recordings is out, I know the story. Ron Williams was a teacher/counselor at the Pine Breeze Center, a residential facility for emotionally disturbed adolescents in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Williams got the idea for this project after attending a workshop by Charles Wolfe which encouraged teachers to “use traditional music as a starting point in creative writing lessons for high school students.” He explains:

I had naively assumed that we would easily find local traditional musicians who had been waiting anxiously over the years for a group of emotionally disturbed teenagers to pull up in a State van in their front yard to record their performances of fiddle tunes and ballads passed down through the centuries.

Amazingly, that is what happened. A small grant enabled the group to produce an LP, which led to seven more LPs. All the tracks were recorded by the teens, who also took pictures, did the mixing and editing, and worked on the original liner notes. This two-CD set represents a selection from those LPs.

Eldia Barbee, born in James County, Tennessee, was the first musician the group recorded, and in the friendship that developed, he welcomed many later groups of teens to begin their field-recording adventures with him. Thus, he is the most widely represented musician here. Accompanied by his brother Oscar, on a galloping banjo, he plays some ripping standards, including “Citico” and “Cacklin’ Hen,” as well as some more unusual pieces such as the “Frank Barbee Hornpipe,” an extremely twisty, key-changing, dog-leggy tune.

Homer and Calvin Chastain, also a fiddle-banjo brother duo, play some great danceable numbers. Homer’s fiddling has a bit more of a rhythmic pulse than Barbee’s. Calvin, the notes tell us, “was probably the most skilled banjo player. . . . He had an almost blues-like feel to his playing.” You can hear the heavy, solid sound of it, slightly reminiscent of Odell Thompson. Williams tells us that he used a thumb pick, and a finger pick on his up-picking index finger. I especially enjoy the Chastains’ loping instrumental of “Greenback Dollar.” “Chicken on a Limb” is an impressive solo banjo piece by Calvin. Their “Muddy Road to Ductown” is a very fine dance tune in the “Buffalo Gals” family.

Bob Douglas, widely known from his long career on radio and his playing around Chattanooga and beyond, is represented by some lively tunes, including “Shoot that Turkey Buzzard,” “Climb the Golden Stairs,” and his signature “Sequatchie Valley,” with double-shuffling, bow tricks, and all. His fiddling, lifted along by Ray Brown’s guitar, is forceful, sure, with a clean edge, more modern sounding than the other fiddlers in this collection.

While CD 1 presents only instrumental numbers, CD 2 offers a mixture of tunes and songs, and a variety of instruments:

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Note to Artists and Record Companies
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Clay Turner’s solo banjo, “Peanut” Cantrell’s hammered dulcimer, as well as fiddle-banjo numbers.

Ella Hughes, of Flat Top Mountain, came from a line of ballad singers going back at least five generations. Here she gives us several ballads and children’s songs—wonderful pieces, clear, straightforward singing. Clearly this is just a bit from a huge trove of songs.

Williams stumbled on to Florrie Stewart and her son-in-law, Blaine Smith, when they got lost in following up a lead about a fiddler they’d heard about. Florrie, Blaine, and Florrie’s son, Willie Brandon, were playing tunes in the house where Williams and his wife stopped to ask directions. You’ll have to get the CD and read the notes yourself to find out more about Smith, but I relay Williams’s report that Smith actually played a viola tuned up to fiddle pitch, which brought the strings “a good half-inch” off the fingerboard. Whew, what a grip. His tunes are fluid, slippery, occasionally bluesy numbers. The notes name Florrie Stewart as the accompanist, and we’re told she plays banjo, but someone unnamed is also playing guitar here. In some tunes it’s a chunky style, and in others a more strummy style, so maybe there are two guitar players. This section of the collection is truly wonderful, and the tunes are quite unusual.

Clay Turner, living in Cleveland, Tennessee, and 88 years old at the time of recording, gives us two great banjo songs: “Pick and a Shovel,” and “The Old Account Was Settled Long Ago.” He is finger-picking and singing. As for his style, well, if you were blindfolded and asked to identify the player on “Pick and a Shovel,” you’d swear it was Paul Brown. “The Old Account…” has more of a Virgil Anderson feel. Williams tells us that the group recorded only three of Turner’s tunes and was not able to follow up with him. Sad! But at least we have this.

The collection closes with Eldia Barbee giving two lively songs on the banjo, and then some songs by the Bice Family, all the children of Eldia’s sister Elzia. They sing some sacred numbers in a family stringband and others a capella: two of the sisters do a beautiful duet of “Row Me Over the Tide,” not the Carter Family song, but a hymn I had not heard before.

Little did I suspect in my early days of learning the music that such adventures and characters were behind it all. I hope such stories continue to be revealed in the future, along with the wonderful mu-
sick that carries them. As Williams puts it, "There was no reason to think that the Traditional Music Project at Pine Breeze Center would ever document any traditional music, much less release a series of eight nationally recognized and acclaimed field recordings of significant historical value. Those recordings presented here are proof that there is magic in the music."

MOLLY TENENBAUM

To order: www.jubileearts.org

Cousin Emmy and Her Kinfolks, 1939-1947

I Wish I Was in Bowling Green / Johnny Booker / Come On All You Virginia Gals / Pretty Little Miss Out in the Garden / Lonesome Road Blues / I Wish I Was a Single Girl Again / Chilly Scenes of Winter / Barney-O-Barney / Lost John / Ruby / Freight Train Blues / Milk Cow Blues / Broken Hearted One You Left Behind / Free Little Bird / 3 radio shows and 2 bonus tracks: Arkansas Traveler / Sleepy Lou

Women in early country music have generally been lumped into one of two categories. The first could be called wholesome, domesticated, or non-threatening. Sara and Maybelle Carter, Samantha Bumgarner, and Kitty Wells come to mind. For the second tier, think Rose Maddox, Moonshine Kate, and June Carter. Like vaudeville queens Ethel Merman, Sophie Tucker, or Martha Raye, they were loud, liberated, sometimes comical, and always assertive. Cousin Emmy belonged firmly in the latter camp. She was a bold, talented professional and, except by choice, she was rarely out of work.

Born Cynthia May Carver (1903-1980), Emmy was the daughter of a Kentucky sharecropper while Emmy slowly worked her way into 1930s radio and other country music venues. She was prominently featured with Frankie More’s Log Cabin Gang on WHAS in Louisville and WWVA in Wheeling. There she met a young Grandpa Jones, who successfully pestered her for some informal banjo lessons. He became a great banjo comic in his own right, and his adopted instrument transformed his image and accelerated his career.

Cousin Emmy’s career included very little record making, and even Jim Nelson’s extended and thoughtful notes to this collection don’t tell us how she wound up appearing in front of Decca Records microphones in New York in 1946, or why her landmark “Ruby” was assigned to Decca’s pop music Personality Series instead of its country catalog. Nelson does describe Decca’s growing folk music catalog, then starring the likes of Burl Ives, Richard Dyer Bennett, and Josh White, and it’s apparent that they felt she had more potential as a folk singer than as a country entertainer. With that in mind, Decca held more sessions in March 1947 to create enough material for a Kentucky Mountain Ballads album, which included a booklet by Alan Lomax. On pp. 28-29 of the CD booklet, a photo showing Emmy in her wide open-mouthed, in-your-face hollerin’ mode is juxtaposed with an amateurish drawing used for the cover of the album that reduces her magnificent grin to the discreet half-smile of a demure folk singer. So much for truth in packaging.

Unintentionally the drawing underscored the ambiguity of Cousin Emmy’s appeal. Her audience had until then been primarily country, and they were comfortable with her old-time songs and down-home hillbilly clowning. But that style didn’t sit well with folk fans used to sophisticated concert stage and nightclub performances. Emmy’s fellow Kentuckian Merle Travis tried to bridge the gap on his congenial Capitol Records collection Folk Songs of the Hills, which included brief spoken introductions to each song, designed to give non-rural listeners some context. Merle’s set was released around the same time, and it fared better than Emmy’s equally worthy Decca album, which tanked.

Cousin Emmy was performing in stylized “pioneer” costumes for Disneyland tourists in 1961 when the New Lost City Ramblers heard her. Subsequently she appeared and recorded with them, joining them at Newport in 1965 and on a European tour. They backed her on a Folkways LP record in 1967 (FTS 31015, available from Smithsonian Folkways by special order). Mike Seeger recalls her during that period in a personal memoir added to the CD booklet.

Though not complex, Emmy’s frailing banjo style was personal, artful, and effective. “Ruby” is, of course, at the top of the heap, though frequent manic aside from her rhythm guitarist keep the 1946 version a little off-balance. There’s a nice earlier one taken from a pre-war radio transcription, which should have been copied at a slightly lower speed. “Ruby” is the song that Emmy fashioned out of “Reuben’s Train,” and it became the inspiration for creative revisions by Wilma Lee and Stoney Cooper (“Stoney, Are You Mad at Your Gal?”) and the Osborne Brothers and Red Allen’s (“Ruby, Are You Mad?”) in 1952 and 1956 respectively. Another winner is “Johnny Booker,” a rare banjo song that dates back to mid-19th century minstrelsy. Emmy also has a nice ballad style; her “Barney-O-Barney,” “Chilly Scenes of Winter,” and “Come On All You Virginia Gals” are infrequently encountered, and her thoughtful versions sound very good.

There’s some dross, to be sure. The CD includes three radio shows that don’t include inspired performances by others, with the notable exception of “Some of These Days,” played in straight-ahead Venuti-Lang jazz style by Fiddlin’ Red Herron with guitar and bass. A few Decca tracks misfire too, but most hit the bull’s-eye, especially those selected for the 1947 album. Cousin Emmy was clearly a force to be reckoned with. This CD contains all of her considerable art that survives on record from the early days; it’ll leave you wanting more.

DICK SPOTTISWOOD

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Old-Time Banjo Festival

Laura Boosinger, Kate Brett, Paul Brown, Bob Carlin, Chris Coole, Cathy Fink, Dan Gellert, Rick Good, Gordy Humphres, David Holt, Adam Hurt, Daniel Koulack, Reed Martin, Marcy Marxer, Bruce Molsky, Arnie Naiman, Leonard Podolak, Mark Schatz, Bill Schmidt, Mike Seeger, Bob Smakula.

THE OLD-TIME HERALD: WWW.OLDTIMEHERALD.ORG: FEBRUARY-MARCH 2008: 45
Produced by Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer, this album is inspiring whether or not you’re a banjo player. Some of the performances are technically spectacular, while others are deceptively simple. In all cases, you’re in the presence of banjo masters, and the results are satisfying.

In the liner notes, Cathy Fink explains that this project was inspired by the 1964 Elektra Old-Time Banjo Project. That anthology LP featured 23 banjo pieces, many of which were, even at the time, familiar to old-time enthusiasts (“Old Molly Hare,” “John Booker,” “Old Jimmy Sutton,” etc.). I assume Elektra hoped that a general public, tired of pop faux-folk quartets, would latch onto authentic but fairly simple five-string banjo pieces. I don’t know how well the album sold, but in the long run, the Elektra blues, banjo, and string band projects were valuable as markers of the state of old-time music in the mid-1960s.

Fink and Marxer have put down another marker, during a time when the banjo is no longer an exotic relic of the 19th century, but part of a thriving, living tradition. Instruments on this CD include fretted, fretless, and gourd five-string banjos, banjo-ukulele, and cello banjo. Many of the cuts feature solo banjo. Guitar accompaniment, when used, is subdued. Some of the banjo songs feature vocals, but most are only instrumental. The recordings were made over a period of time, depending on musician availability, but under studio conditions, and so sound quality is excellent. You can find more details on the artists and tunes, as well as musical samples, on the website oldtimebanjofestival.com.

Right-hand styles include lots of clawhammer examples, usually with drop-thumbing, but there are a reasonable number of other fingerpicking styles represented. What the styles have in common is that they’re all very clean, as one would expect from an anthology of banjo all-stars.

One of the changes noticeable since the Elektra anthology is the proliferation of exotic banjo tunings (which are fortunately given in the liner notes): the 33 tunes use 18 different tunings! It’s not surprising that the commonest ones are open-G (gDGBD) and double-C (gCGCD), but I was surprised that nobody used my favorite, the open-D (aDF#AD) tuning. I found the tunings that run the banjo strings down very low to be particularly interesting.

As you could surmise from the musician list, there are no boring or incompetent performances on this record. It’s impossible to pick out favorites, so instead
I'll mention some unusual renditions. “My God, the Spring of All My Joys,” is a hymn sung and played by Dan Gellert using a very low banjo tuning. It sounds like a Library of Congress recording of Austin Harmon. Dan also plays an interesting “Chilly Winds” on a four-string gourd banjo (i.e., three melody strings and a drone), also tuned very low. Kate Brett and Bill Schmidt use two different tunings and picking styles on their banjo duet, “Wild Horses at Stoney Point.” Adam Hurt has a spectacularly delicate solo duet, “Wild Horses at Stoney Point.” Fink herself pays tribute to Ola Belle Reed with “Where the Wild, Wild Flowers Grow.” You won’t go wrong with this one.

To order: www.rounder.com

**Lizard in the Spring**

Elizabeth LaPrelle

**Old 97 Wrecords 011**

Sandy LaPrelle: vocals; Amy Davis: banjo, guitar; Jon Newlin: fiddle; Jim Lloyd: guitar, banjo, jaw harp

Awake, Awake/East Virginia/Sail Away Ladies/Texas Rangers/Peg and Awl/Moonshiner/Liza Up a ‘Simmon Tree/Blind Bartemus/Casey Jones/Three Little Babes/Payday at Coal Creek/Handsome Molly/Hangman/Beware Young Ladies/Little Darling, Pal of Mine/Pretty Saro/Sweet Roseanne/Mole in the Ground

This CD contains some wonderful singing by Elizabeth LaPrelle, with her family and friends. There are unaccompanied solo vocals, vocals accompanied by one, two, and three instruments, three voices accompanied by one instrument. . . you get the idea. They’re all good.

The featured artist, Elizabeth LaPrelle, has a low-alto voice. She has taken the trouble to learn her vocal range, and to pitch songs (especially the unaccompanied ones) in keys that suit her voice and best enable her to put the song across. Depending on whom she has chosen for a source, she sings with or without vibrato. Her voice blends very well with the other singers on this CD. Some of this good blend is achieved through genetics; she is singing with her mother Sandy and uncle Jon Newlin. That is an excellent start; much hard work was put in to get these sounds long before they started giving concerts or entering the recording studio.

LaPrelle has also chosen a nice balance of string band vocals (both story songs and “tunes with words”) and unaccompanied ballads. I am not often a fan of long ballads, quoting the old definition of a ballad as “a song that takes five minutes to sing, and ten minutes to listen to.” But there is something about her singing that draws me into the story, even such a familiar and repetitive story as her Child 95, “The Maid Freed from the Gallows.” This will be one of these CDs that I listen to often.

An unexpected gem was “Casey Jones.” For musicians like me, who get issued blue wristbands at Clifftop (creak! we were forced to learn this somewhere in elementary school, together with “Oh! Susannah,” and forgot what a good song it is. This version, with some wonderful fingerpicked banjo by neighbor Jim Lloyd, came from Wilmer Watts and the Lonely Eagles, and it’s great! Elizabeth LaPrelle was fortunate that her parents provided her with a large collection of vinyl, cassettes, CDs, and maybe 78s to listen to. These included in some cases an intermediate generation; her source for “Peg and Awl” is not the Clarence Ashley recording on the *Anthology*, but rather Hobart Smith. Similarly, “Texas Rangers” was not learned from the Cartwright Brothers but comes via Ian and Sylvia.

That’s another nice thing about this CD: interesting and well-researched liner notes. They provide hard data when available, and speculation when the answers are not known. Example: “We have heard ‘Moonshiner’ from a couple of Kentucky singers. This version is from Roscoe Holcomb. It is similar to a version by Buell Kazee—we wonder if the two versions might have a common source or if Holcomb might have heard Kazee’s recording.” I had the same question about LaPrelle’s “East Virginia” (on which Amy Davis plays some great banjo), which she also credits to Buell Kazee. It sounds very much like the version Pete Seeger recorded for Folkways back in the early 1950s, and Alan Lomax’s notes to that recording say that Pete learned it “from a recording I made of a Salyersville, Kentucky, mountain banjo virtuoso named Walter Williams.” It’s not the Jean Ritchie tune (made more popular by Joan Baez) nor is it the Carter Family tune. Discussions like this can expand fractally. To bring the focus back to LaPrelle, she has chosen some fine songs, sung them well, and told some exciting stories in so doing. Moreover, she has found some good friends and relatives to make music with. Recommended.

**Winkin’ Eye**

James Leva & Purgatory Mountain

Sugar Babe/River of Fire/There’ll Be None On The Other Side/Bulldog/Brushy Forks/Big Eyed Rabbit/Chinkapin Pie/I Tell You Only/Jim and Arnold/Nothing but Gold/Northing for Nothing/Grace in the Meeting House/When We Have Love/Fortune-Winkin’ Eye

In this fine CD, James Leva and Purgatory Mountain offer up a heady mix of updated while tradition-based instrumental work, fine contemporary and bluegrass-flavored vocals, some good original songs by Leva, and an effective, not-so-secret ingredient not usually heard in old-time or bluegrass groups: a percussionist. Not to worry—there is no obtrusive drum set here. Matty Olwell provides tasteful and effective rhythm on hambone, feet, cajon, or bodhran.

THE OLD-TIME HERALD  WWW.OLDTIMEHERALD.ORG  FEBRUARY-MARCH 2008  47
The updated old-time fiddle and banjo tunes and songs here are all fine. I like the group’s swinging take on Tommy Jarrell’s “Big-Eyed Rabbit,” where the line from a related song, “Rockin’ a Weary Land,” which Jarrell sang almost as an afterthought to “Big-Eyed Rabbit,” is here incorporated into the chorus, as “rock in a weary land.” “Glory in the Meeting House” was played on solo fiddle by Kentucky fiddlers Bill Stepp and Luther Strong, the former being Leva’s source. Leva regularizes the Kentuckians’ forceful bowing and syncopated phrasing into a setting more akin to a squared-off Irish reel, but the full band sound enriches his interpretation. The catchy title song, “Winkin’ Eye,” is from Galax musician Fields Ward and was played by Tharp back when he was with Plank Road; it is paired with the Galax standard, “Fortune,” animated by Leva’s great and swinging fiddling—together they make a fine finale for this excellent collection.

To order: www.coppercreekrecords.com

Ordinary Seasons
Polecat Creek

Laurelyn Dossett: vocals, guitar; Kari Sickenberger: vocals, guitar; Riley Baugus: banjo, guitar; Jeff Hersk: bass; Eric Robertson: mandolin; Natalya Weinstein: fiddle

Hills of Mexico/Union in Heaven/Wish I May/The Island/Buckets of Blue/Facing the Rain/Midway Road/On My Own/Sweet Nandina/Kiss Me Over the Garden Gate/Cardinal Pair/Back to The Garden/Paz y Libertad

Ordinary Seasons is a well performed, well recorded collection of songs delivered with a strong old-time country tone. Polecat Creek is the name under which Laurelyn Dossett and Kari Sickenberger perform, in this case with a collection of fine side musicians who blend skillfully with the singers. The CD begins with two traditional songs, and the last selection listed in the notes is a lovely rendition of the Jose-Luis Orozco children’s song “Paz y Libertad” (“Peace and Liberty”). However traditional the sound, this is primarily a modern singer-songwriter project. “Wish I May” was written by Kari Sickenberger’s brother, Dave, who has produced the first cheerful, upbeat, suicidal, sacred song I have ever heard. Most of the songs are by Sickenberger and Dossett, however, and, in them, they address misfortune, sorrow, betrayal, and courage as well as some things not easily defined.

The value of their songs lies in the ideas and the feelings they express rather than the quality of the songs themselves, which have melodies that are usually pleasant enough, if not memorable, and lyrics that sometimes sound like early drafts that need more work. The obscure line “Home is just a price we pay” from Dossett’s song “Midway Road” appears for no apparent reason. Contradiction and paradox can be used, with skill, to great effect, but this line, however clever it may sound, doesn’t fit with the other elements of the song or otherwise enhance it. Occasionally, Sickenberger and Dossett write against themselves—particularly when you consider the songs along with the notes to them that accompany this CD, and which do not always encourage the idea that they have thought through clearly what they are doing. In the note to her song “Facing the Rain,” Sickenberger calls courage a “…quality which is at once rare and ubiquitous,” which might sound less contrived if she explained what she means. Nor do the lines, “Socrates said he didn’t know nothing/So how come I think I’m on to something,” from Sickenberger, “Facing the Rain” appear to have been well considered. Not everyone may find this to be good poetry, but, more important, it is not a good idea to use a misleading misquote to invite people to compare your thinking with that of one of the world’s greatest philosophers. Particularly just after you describe the song, in the notes, as “…about courage (and) an acknowledgment of how little I know about it, or anything else for that matter.” Writing should not depend for its effect on people not reading it carefully enough to notice that it is self-contradictory.

There is a enough of this sort of thing in the lyrics and the liner notes to discourage a sympathetic person who wants to like their songwriting but who also demands a certain amount of emotional or logical consistency—if not both.
Joe Fulton: fiddle; Charlie Beck: banjo; John Hurd: bass; Charmaine Slaven: guitar, feet

Rubber Dolly/Old Bunch of Keys/Paddy Won’t You Drink Some Cider/Jenny in the Cotton Patch/Train on the Island/Debuque’s Hornpipe/Cotton-Eyed Joe/God Don’t Like It/Bonaparte’s Retreat/Pike’s Peak/Raleigh and Spencer/Comin’ Up the Pike/Rockingham Cindy/Drunken Hiccups/Boatin’ Up the Sandy/Big Grey Cat on a Tennessee Farm

I have to admit that on my first listening of this CD I wasn’t that taken with it. Another standard old-time band from the Northwest with flatfooting, I thought. But there was something about it that kept me coming back—besides the fact that I had to review it. That something(s) was the fine musicianship, the tight band sound, and the wonderful singing. This is a young-ish group based in Seattle; three gents and a lady. Their website says they’ve been playing as a group since 2003. They must’ve had a lot of gigs, for in that relatively short time they’ve developed a super-tight band sound that is perfectly balanced and cohesive. Every player is strong: the fiddle has great instrumentation and clarity, with a fullness that reminds me of the two-fiddle sound of the Skillet Lickers. The banjoist plays equally fine clawhammer and three-finger style. The guitar and bass play whomping rhythm, and most of the tunes cook! Tune selection is well thought out and pleasingly varied. From a few standards that they make sound fresh—“Jack of Diamonds” at a nice clip and “Old Bunch of Keys” with a darker tag, for instance—to more twisty and cobwebby ones like “Comin’ Up the Pike,” I was never bored or impatient with the cuts or their sequence. All the players sing and harmonize beautifully, and I especially enjoyed the chorus of “Raleigh and Spencer,” for it was the time I could best hear Charmaine’s voice. Too bad she didn’t sing any leads. I’d never heard “God Don’t Like It” before
this summer; their old-time interpretation of Blind Willie McTell's blues song follows my first hearing Cary Fridley's raw version and it couldn't be more different though equally compelling.

The CD cover is spare. Artwork by Charmaine has a quirky charm. Had there been notes for each cut I bet they would've been quirky too, and fun. It says the CD was recorded live at the studio, though to what extent I'm not certain. But the buoyancy, exuberance, and good time that comes through attests to the energy they generate. Husband Andy made this general comment: "I'd love to go to their party." Enough said.

Toni Williams

To order: www.thetallboys.com

BUFFALO CREEK STRING BAND

Weary Woman Blues

Buffalo Creek String Band

Elkhorn Ridge/Minning Camp Bluees/You Don't Tell Me That You Love Me Anymore/Bile Them Cabbages/Jealous Hearted Me/Bear Creek Bluees/Making Believe/Gospel Plow/Oklahoma Rooster/Please Baby/Walking in My Sleep/Rocky Island/Weary Bluees/Polly's Mountain Kettle/Willow Garden/Roscoe's Gone

The notes to this CD inform us that "Buffalo Creek String Band was formed as a vehicle for Joy and Annie's singing," and the singing you hear on the CD makes you glad that these musicians got together and chose to record. The program here is interesting and varied, with some strong old-time songs: "Elkhorn Ridge" and "Rocky Island"; blues from the Appalachian/African American traditions like "Making Camp Bluees," "Jealous Hearted Me," "Bear Creek Bluees," and "Please Baby"; more modern country songs such as "Making Believe," and fiddle tunes like "Bile Them Cabbages," "Oklahoma Rooster," "Polly's Mountain Kettle," and "Roscoe's Gone."

Buffalo Creek String Band has a very solid instrumental sound, in a variety of different rhythmic grooves. The ensemble sound is nicely varied, with band members switching off on guitar, bass, and banjo. Moreover, the special instrumental touches grab the ear; Jack Burgess plays some strong mandolin on "Mining Camp Bluees" and "Please Baby," and there is some really sweet second guitar (uncredited) on "Please Baby." Scott Dixon's Dobro is welcome wherever it is encountered, though I would have liked to have heard it a bit hotter in the mix and featured on some solos. The bowed bass on "Willow Garden" is a striking sound and gives the song a welcome different feel. The fiddle tunes in the program are well delivered, and make you think that Buffalo Creek would excel as a dance band, too.

Joy Moser and Annie Burgess sing really well together in general, and in some instances, as on "Rocky Island," "Bear Creek Bluees," and "Weary Bluees," get that extra little additional buzz that can make strong harmony singing in this style so exciting. Occasional choices are made that aren't to my taste, as in the downward swoops in harmony at the end of the first three lines in each verse of "You Don't Tell Me That You Love Me Anymore." I prefer harmonies that change as they go, rather than doing the same thing at the same place in the song every time you come to it—but having said that, it is, after all, just a matter of taste. I can't fault the execution of those swoops.

I feel like the program would have been stronger with the omission of "Gospel Plow" and "Walking in My Sleep." "Gospel Plow" sounds rushed, and the vocals sort of rattled off, not expressively inhabited and delivered, as are the vocals elsewhere on the CD. "Walking in My Sleep" seems a bit forced, too, and I think the opening fiddle solo could have been stronger.

Buffalo Creek String Band has done a solid job of music making on this CD. They sound like a real band that has lived with the music it plays for a good while, and is pretty far inside that music. They do justice to the various musical styles and musicians that have influenced them over the years, too. Well done.

John M. Miller

To order: www.old97wrecords.com

Clifftop Notes Vol. 2: Big Ears

Big Ears is an album of Mark Simos' tunes, encompassing diverse styles, settings, and levels of complexity. Listening with big ears means listening with an open heart and mind, which is the way composers create. For the most part, these tunes, though presented in an old-time string band format, are not straightforward two-part simple melodies. Mark takes the basic stuff of old-time fiddle tunes and re-works it into something unique that's well worth hearing.

I decided to listen to this album before even reading the liner notes. I wanted to hear it without anybody else's words (even the composer's, or maybe specially the composer's) pushing me in any particular direction. I did read the names of the tunes and track times. I noted that there were a couple of marathon (for old-time music) tracks. There was also a ten-second tune. I wondered what a ten-second tune ("There It Is") sounded like; maybe something played really fast. "One More Too Many" reminded me that this is a companion album to Cliffhanger, another collection of Mark Simos' tunes.

Did the name of the tune affect his fear that listeners would think that a second album of originals, on the heels of his first, was redundant?

Track 1, the ten-second piece, was a hauntingly familiar chord— beyond the fact that it was a resounding "A." The
next time I turned on my Mac I recognized its cheesy origin. I settled in to enjoy the rest of the music, knowing that Mark’s sense of humor was intact.

The second track, “Aladdin’s Laugh,” is old-timey only in that there are two fiddles playing. Really, it’s an improvised introduction (using free rhythm and a raised fourth scale) to the third tune, “Big Ears.” “Aladdin’s Laugh” was mixed with lots of reverb, which makes for a mysterious and moody sound, in contrast with the sound of “Big Ears,” which is a powerful distillation of what Mark calls the “campground sound,” employing two fiddles, banjo, tenor guitar, guitar, and bass. It’s a hefty 6 minutes and 41 seconds long. “Big Ears” continues the theme of the raised fourth scale (including going from the 2-chord directly to the 1-chord in the second part), and there are some hair-raising fiddle harmonies, or counter-melodies, too, which make for an edgy and exciting piece of music. One feature of this way of presenting a tune is that the melody and chords are somewhat blurred, as are the transitions between parts. It’s hard to pin down exactly what’s happening. The same is true of the slower “Jeff in the Wilderness,” in which the fiddles are sometimes playing only one step apart, producing some modern-sounding altered chords and tone clusters, and, incidentally, a beautiful piece of music. Kudos to the rhythm players, who might have been looking at each other during the session, mouthing “Where are we?” to each other.

All the tunes deserve attention, but several really caught me. The beautiful “Falls of Mann” is a short meditative solo fiddle piece evoking the flow and fall of water, without trying to imitate it. “Found Indian,” by contrast, is a straightforward dance tune. Mark’s liner notes say that the tune “...bears no melodic resemblance” to the traditional “Lost Indian.” To my ears it’s somewhat similar; “Lost Indian” turned inside out, maybe. But it’s different enough to be a great new tune. It’s in the same GGCE fiddle tuning used for “Texas Whirlwind,” which allows for lots of interesting double stops and melodic ideas to emerge. The medley “There It Is again/Second Chance” is, the liner notes tell us, two versions of the same tune. The first, slower, version uses a Scandinavian-sounding scale, opening with just the fiddle and tenor guitar, making for a spare, exotic sound. The whole band comes in on the second part, resulting in a stately tune that might have come from northern Europe a couple of hundred years ago.

One more aspect of this recording deserves mention: no matter who’s playing, no matter whether the pace is contemplative or breakneck, no matter whether the texture is uncluttered or big-band, the rhythm is unfailingly in the groove. That’s probably the essence of the campground sound, although Mark has yet to give us a tune that captures the sound of listening simultaneously to a band playing in C into your left ear while an equally insistent band plays in cross-tuned A into your right ear. If Charles Ives could do it, so can Mark. Maybe on the next CD.

HILARY DIRMAM

To order: www.5-string.com

Voice of the Porkchop
The Brandy Snifters


Since this reviewer has been a fan of the Brandy Snifters for over 40 years, having first heard them on the long-out-of-print String Band Project LP, learning that the band has just released a new CD was grounds first for pleasurable anticipation and then, on hearing the CD, for celebration.

It’s been almost five years since the Old-Time Herald ran its feature article on the Brandy Snifters (vol. 8 no.6), so newer subscribers may not know the legends surrounding them. As far as I know, they are second only to the New Lost City Ramblers in longevity. At one time in the 1960s they said of themselves, “We have been playing together since 1961 and haven’t learned any new songs since 1962.” But as they have said a gazillion times, one should never exaggerate while describing a legend. The Brandy Snifters are Jon and Marcia Pankake, Lyle and Liz Lofgren, and Bud Claeson.

This is a singing band. Only one of the tracks on this CD is fully instrumental; the others are songs of true crime (“Otto Wood,” “Ellen Smith,” “The Murder of the Lawson Family”), unrequited love (“Ain’t It Hell, Boys,” “I Met Her At a Ball One Night,” “I Hope She’s Satisfied”), one’s standing on Judgment Day (“Hide Away,” “Chased Old Satan Through the Door”), food (“I Heard the Voice of a Porkchop,” “Country Ham and Red Gravy”), and many other subjects. Most often, Bud Claeson sings lead, with others on harmony. All of them sing out; the vocals are not understated. This is singing from true old-time tradition and puts the story across with the immediacy that these important topics deserve.

Now that County, Yazoo, Document, and others have been re-mastering and re-releasing the old 78s that the Brandy Snifters use as source material, it is easy to forget how rare these recordings were back in the 1960s, and how hard it was to decide from title alone whether a 78 was worth acquiring. Liner notes on a previous CD described their “infallible method for discovering good material. Look for these key words: ‘Tramp, Hobo, Railroad, Blues, Rag, Stomp, Breakdown, Murder, Death, Burial.’ Contrarily, these key words identify songs to stay away from: ‘God, Mother, Moon, Melody, Lullaby, Heaven.”’ Readers of the track list above will see how the band has stayed true to this selection process; listeners will enjoy the result.

Not only is the music good, the liner notes, which give key, instrumentation, singers, and original source as well as much extraneous but enjoyable material, are a treat. It would be very easy to write this whole review simply quoting the Brandy Snifters on themselves and their music. Printed on the CD are the words “No Slogans—Just Old Music.” The self-referential paradox here would be worth a whole lecture in a course on logic.
Their approach is not one of strict imitation. Liner notes state “Even when we do our best to imitate, the result is different from the original.” Scholars of the future may compare the originals with Brandy Snifters versions and try to identify the subtle differences; we can simply listen and enjoy. If it’s not clear already, I strongly recommend this CD.

Pete Peterson

To order: www.lizylle.lofgrens.org/BrnSnift/BrandySnifterHome.html

Searching for Frank
Franklin & Baytop


Growing up in the Washington, DC, area in the 1940s and ‘50s was a wonderful experience if you liked traditional music. There were several Seegers representing folk music, and there were the Country Gentlemen, Benny Cain, Buzz Busby, Jimmy Dean, Bill Harrell, Patsy Cline, or the Stonemans if you preferred country and bluegrass. The amazing Elder Solomon Lightfoot Michaux ran a tabernacle at 7th Street and Florida Avenue, NW and broadcast unbridled sanctified sermons and music on Sunday mornings (look him up on YouTube). Up the street a few blocks, Bishop C. M. Grace’s United House of Prayer for All People featured more passionate congregational singing and robust trombone choirs.

The blues were a little harder to find, because the city’s tastes ran more to R&B than to older down-home sounds. Holdovers who still preferred them, like John Jackson, John Cephas, and Warner Williams, rarely sought public performance venues. Williams only occasionally played in public before his recent retirement from the Montgomery County (Maryland) government. John Fahey’s book How Bluegrass Music Destroyed My Life gives an account of how he and I ran into Elmer Williams (no known relation to Warner), a congenial bluesman who lived within walking distance of John’s apartment house on New Hampshire Avenue in the DC suburb of Takoma Park, Maryland. John later spotted the wonderful Frederica, Delaware artist Frank Hovington playing guitar on a front porch in Southeast DC, and Chuck Perdue learned of John Jackson’s considerable talents in 1964, when he spotted him at a gas station in Fairfax, Virginia, likewise holding a guitar. In the same year Archie Edwards found me when he called trying to locate Mississippi John Hurt, who was then living in Washington, and whose records had inspired Edwards as a child.

Rick Franklin and Michael Baytop are African American Washington, DC natives who’ve breathed the same air and shared the same musical instincts that guided their predecessors, and have a sense of the blues that sets them above mere revivalists. Both are accomplished finger pickers and decent singers; thus it’s not surprising that they’ve been drawn to the music of the magnificent Frank Stokes (1888-1955), the Memphis blacksmith whose job left him enough time to develop a robust, highly syncopated big-beat guitar style and a solid baritone voice to match. Annotator Barry Pearson observes that Stokes recorded over forty titles in a two-year period, many as one of the Beale Street Sheiks, with his skilled partner, guitarist Dan Sane. Memphis in those days had little jazz, and both black and white social music from there down through much of Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas was furnished by solo and small ensemble musicians like Stokes and Sane.

Franklin and Baytop’s affectionate and effective tribute to them comes off nicely, though some performances seem a little hesitant compared to others. They play together, switching off to slide guitar, mouth harp, and bones occasionally, and only join their voices in harmony in a final hymn. They’re at their best when their two guitars are working together to re-capture the Stokes and Sane nuances, and the sound becomes punchier and more danceable. The CD comes from Patuxent, Tom Mindte’s informal Rockville, Maryland studio and production facility, always a good sign of thoughtful quality. Good notes by the aforementioned Barry Lee Pearson cover the performers,
Mike Seeger...50 years performing & documenting old-time music

"In brushing the dust of time from American folk music, Mike Seeger illuminates the roots of contemporary music and champions their strength."

~ BILLBOARD

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"I was so absorbed in listening to him, I wasn’t even aware of myself. What I had to work at, Mike already had in his genes, in his genetic makeup. Before he was even born, this music had to be in his blood."

~ BOB DYLAN

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www.folkways.si.edu or smithsonianglobalound.org
performances (with song tracings), and a discussion of Mr. Stokes himself.

Much of what we know of him comes from his daughter, Mrs. Helen Kent of Memphis. Her son, and Stokes’ grandson, is Carlton W. Kent, who has achieved prominence on his own. He is the Sergeant Major of the United States Marine Corps, the senior enlisted Marine on active duty.  

Dick Spottswood

To order: www.pxrec.com

Classic Southern Gospel
Smithsonian Folkways SFW CD 40137

They went back through the Folkways archives to put this album together. This has got some great stuff, from well known bluegrassers like Bill Monroe, the Country Gentlemen, and Red Allen, to Dock Boggs, the Poplin Family, and Killby Snow, with shape note and old regular Baptist singing too. Nothing slick, just heartfelt gospel music.

Jim Watson

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Dust-to-Digital DTD-04

This is really great stuff, if you are interested in jazz and swing music of this time period. It’s really great stuff even if you aren’t interested in it. Not so much a showcase of the ol’ doghouse, although there is some of that, but more a demonstration of the development of the instrument as the bottom end and the rhythmic drive for a band. There is a little country music—Jimmie Rodgers, Bob Will, Roy Acuff—but mostly great old jazz and swing. Three discs in a real nice package with notes by Dick Spottswood.

Jim Watson

To order: www.dust-digital.com

Weems Creek Ramblers
Patuxent CD-019

The Weems Creek Ramblers (Andy Martin fiddle, Neil Harpe banjo, Tom Mindte guitar) made this recording on Mindte’s antique 78 RPM recording equipment, attempting to evoke not only the spirit but also the fidelity of the old recordings that many of us learned from. I’ve grown to like the CD more on repeated listening; the roughness in both the singing and playing, while startling at first, is very much in the spirit of the music. They are true to the spirit without being imitative—was it a deliberate choice to do “Baltimore Fire” in A, and “Beale Street” in D, instead of the keys Poole recorded them in? What I liked most: Mindte’s vocals—completely different from the smooth duets he recently recorded with Jeremy Stephens. What I disliked: the banjo playing seemed inspired by Grandpa Jones, which worked well for some songs but not for others. I also protest the complete absence of liner notes!

Pete Peterson

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The Sweetest Way Home
Mac & Jenny Traynham
Southern Mountain Melodies SMM 202
The Traynhamys, known as the Southern Mountain Melody Makers have a really
nice duet sound. Just the two of them, mostly two guitars, and both of them
singing all the way through. Good songs, too. This album is a re-release of an early
’90s album, now on CD for the first time. Nice stuff. Jim Watson
To order: www.macandjenny.blogspot.com.

No Peddlers or Preachers
Dyad
CPS 725
Fairly relaxed album of traditional and
traditional-sounding original numbers
from this trio from the Northwest. All
in all, well played and sung, with a nice
choice of material. Jim Watson
To order: www.copperspine.com

Mama Don’t Allow
Fox and Branch
Doodleywag - CD 202
Dave Fox and Will Branch sing children’s
songs. This sounds like a recording of live
performances of old standards: “Mama
Don’t Allow,” “Bingo,” “Bill Grogan’s
Goat,” “Comin’ Round the Mountain,”
and others are together with introduc-
tions. These guys are good singers who
can get their school-age audiences in-
terested and singing along happily. If I
listened to this CD repeatedly, I would
probably get sick of the introductions
and commentary, but the singing would
hold up just fine. Pete Peterson
To order: www.foxandbranch.com

Coming a Time
Eleanor Ellis
Patuxent CD-138
A well played and sung album of coun-
try blues. If you think of old-time music
as any old-style acoustic music, then this
qualifies—but it’s definitely not classic
string band style. Jim Watson
To order: www.pxrec.com

The Lights of My Home
Shimamura and Munikami
STCD-004
These musicians are good players of fiddle
tunes, and their guest player, Jun-ichiro Fu-
kuda, is a fine banjo player. There are three
vocal numbers, two of them in Japanese.
Overall it’s well played, but contains only
eight selections—about 23 minutes. Jim Watson
To order: aau5760@par.odn.ne.jp

The Old Apple Tree
Molly and Jack Tuttle
Back Studio Records BSR001
If you first listened to this without reading
any liner notes you might think that
this is a wife and husband, and then you
would be wrong—it’s daughter and fa-
ther. Molly Tuttle, at age 13 or so is a fine
player, confident singer and, as we would
say, her future is ahead of her. This is a
nice duet album, mostly in the bluegrass
style, although there a little old-time as
well, with Molly clawhammering the five-
string. Jack Tuttle is also a good singer and
player. Good stuff all around. Jim Watson
To order: www.jacktuttle.com

This Old World
Deadwood Revival
This duo from the Northwest has a ba-
sic old-time sound to their music, a good
portion of which is original material.
Nice enough, although I generally like a
little more gumption. An interesting ver-
sion of “The Farmer Is the Man.” Jim Watson
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Joe’s Basement
Alice Spencer & Her Monkey Butlers
Not your old-time string-band music here,
but old-time jazz and blues, 1920s style,
featuring Spencer’s fine vocals. An excel-
Ient band of piano, clarinet, tuba and tenor
banjo—all can take solos—do just the right
ingstrumentally. Good stuff. Jim Watson
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Celebration: 25 Years of the Charlotte Folk Society
There are over 60 different musicians, all
members of the Charlotte Folk Society, who
play or sing on the 21 cuts of this CD.
There’s old-time, bluegrass, Cajun, Celtic
and various fusion styles here, many tak-
en from members’ CDs. The rest are from
privately made recordings—one from
Union Grove in 1970! Old-time musicians
are going to have their minds stretched
by this CD. (It’s music, Jim, but not as we
know it) Ever hear a 6/8 jig called “New
Rigged Ship?” I play it in 2/4 and call it
“Green Willis.” Rhiannon Giddens, mem-
er of this year’s first place Mount Airy
band, sounds like the conservatory grad-
uate that she is, singing Lori Holland’s
“Didn’t I Dance.” Almost everybody is
going to find a lot of tracks on this CD that
they like, including me. Pete Peterson
To order: www.folksociety.org

Jaybird and the Sparrowhawk
The Prairie Acre
This band from Lawrence, Kansas can’t
make up its mind whether it is playing
bluegrass or old-time music. The tunes
and songs are certainly old-time stan-
dards (including “Sandy Boys,” “Fall on
my Knees,” and “Black-eyed Susie”), but
the banjo and guitar (which take breaks)
are both played in modern bluegrass
style. The fiddle is more rooted in old-
time music—Tricia Spencer was started
on that instrument by her grandfather,
and some of that influence shows. Vocals
and arrangements are very bluegrassly
and up-tempo. Pete Peterson
To order: www.theprairieacre.com

The Nephews
Byron Joseph and Tim Joseph are double
first cousins from Michigan, so not actu-
ally brothers, but have that real brother
duet sound. The album is a collection of
mostly old-time songs done more in an
earnest folk style than string band. Mostly
very pleasant. Jim Watson
To order: beejay2@chartermi.net

Fiddling Poets on Parade:
All Originals, All Traditional
Ken Waldman
Ken Waldman is “Alaska’s Fiddling
Poet.” I don’t know how many other
states have fiddling poets, but I would
bet the list is short. Waldman loves old-
time fiddle music, that’s for sure, and
pairs it well with his poems. The first al-
bum is more kid-oriented and the second
is a two-disc affair split up just as the title
says. There are a nice variety of tunes
with various accompaniment and occa-
sional (fortunately) singing. Jim Watson
To order: www.kenwaldman.com

Mighty Ghosts of Heaven
In the tradition of bands like the Holy
Modal Rounders and Old Crow Medi-
cine Show, the Mighty Ghosts of Heaven
mix traditional American music with jug-
band songs and their own material. With
various ukulele-based instruments as the
underpinning for the group, they have
recorded 17 songs on this, their fifth CD.
I enjoyed their take on “Look Down That
Lonesome Road,” slowed down, with a
totally new set of chords, transforming
it from a rip-roaring banjo tune into a
melancholy parlor song. This is not an
old-time album, but if you want to hear a mix of Americana and newly minted material in an acoustic and uke-based format you might enjoy the Mighty Ghosts of Heaven.

HILARY DIRLM
To Order: www.mightyghostsofheaven.com

Somebody Loves You Darlin' Dick Kimmel and Jerilyn Kjellberg Copper Creek CCD-0245

This album was put together with the idea of showcasing words and melodies. In order to do that, most of the songs are played slow to medium tempo, with Kimmel being the only instrumentalist. Nicely sung and played, a mix of bluegrass and old-time material—a very pleasant album.

JIM WATSON
To order: www.coppercreekrecords.com

Harlan County USA: Songs of the Coal Miner's Struggle Rounder 11661-4026-2

As you might guess, these songs about coal mining are taken mostly from two earlier Rounder LPs, Come All You Coal Miners and They'll Never Keep Us Down: Women's Coal Mining Songs. Some of the songs are from the great 1976 documentary Harlan County USA. Featured are Hazel Dickens, Merle Travis, Nimrod Workman, Sarah Ogan Gunning, Phyllis Boyens, Florence Reese (singing her own song, "Which Side Are You On"), and many others. This is a nice compilation. Gets a Mighty Fine.

To order: www.rounder.com

Needy Time David Evans Inside Sounds (2007)

Memphis-based David Evans, one of our best writers on the blues and a 2003 Grammy winner for his album notes Screamin’ & Hollerin’ the Blues: The Worlds of Charley Patton, has worked as both an educator and producer to advance the genre. Now on this, his second CD, Evans shines as a performer, delivering a spirited set of rarefied blues covers rooted in the styles of pioneering artists such as Tommy McClennan, Sleepy John Estes, Bogus Ben Covington, and Blind Lemon Jefferson. The originality is in the lyrics, most notably the opening track, "Bring the Boys Back Home," inspired by early American war songs but here taking aim
at the current quagmire in Iraq. Most tracks were recorded in recent years but two date back to the late 1960s with Evans performing pre-Canned Heat with that group’s founder Alan Wilson. There are also appearances from blues legend Hammie Nixon and the reconstituted Spirit of Memphis Quartet. Needy Times is an excellent gateway to the blues tradition with liner notes insightful and instructive as only David Evans can deliver.

JERRY ZOLTEN
To order: www.insidesounds.com

Take Me Back April Verch Rounder 11661-7062-2

Verch is a young Canadian fiddler and a real good one. With Dirk Powell producing, they have put together an album that takes you in two directions. There are several straight-ahead fiddle tunes done in the New England/Canadian style, and then there are the vocal numbers that seem to be going in the Alison Krauss direction, although her voice isn’t quite so breathy. It’s all really well done, but I’d like to see some kind of reasonable compromise between the two styles.

To order: www.rounder.com

Books


Fiddler’s Curse is a very interesting read. The book centers around one of America’s best known fiddle tunes, and it offers a detailed look not only into the life of the tune’s composer, but also gives a good view into the country music scene from the 1930s forward.

Whether you like or dislike the tune, “Orange Blossom Special” is one of the most widely known and recorded fiddle tunes in the world. Composed by Ervin Rouse to honor Florida’s Seaboard Air Line train, the piece was first recorded by Ervin and his brother, Gordon, in 1939. The Rouse Brothers were gifted musicians and also complex and colorful characters. Ervin was known for his trick fiddling, and he practiced the art of busking throughout much of his life. His fiddling prowess was often beset with missteps, and his history with alcohol was a major influencing factor. Rouse was eccentric at times. He would sometimes carry $25,000 royalty checks around for months at a time. He also had a soft heart and was known to give strangers money if they came asking.

Despite the royalty income from “O.B.S.” and from another original, “Sweeter Than the Flowers,” Ervin seemed content living simply and never showed any interest of changing his lifestyle. His last years were spent living in a plywood shack on the edge of the Everglades and playing for tips in nearby taverns.

Containing 226 pages and 20 pages of photographs, Fiddler’s Curse is actually the second book that Randy Noles has written about this famous train song. The first version, Orange Blossom Boys: The Untold Story of Ervin T. Rouse, Chubby Wise and the World’s Most Famous Fiddle Tune, was published in 2002. Due to new information, additional stories, more interviews, and also information about Rouse’s appearance on the television program, “The Johnny Cash Show,” Noles decided that an updated edition was needed. Another factor that sparked interest in the subject was the PBS production, “The Special: An American Anthem.” Noles was asked to participate in the project by the award winning documentary Bestor Cram and his Boston-based Northern Light Productions.

Johnny Cash’s death also focused light on his popular version of the tune. Cash was captivated by Rouse’s composition and used his lyrics almost verbatim; however, Cash traded the fiddle lead for a harmonica and saxophone sound. He said the arrangement came to him in a dream. The author’s interviews with some of Cash’s session players are quite revealing.

This book also gives a lot of coverage to another great Florida fiddler, Robert “Chubby” Wise. Maintained throughout his life that he had helped Ervin Rouse compose “O.B.S.,” and this intriguing mystery is examined in depth. Chubby Wise was a well known and respected fiddler, and he will be remembered best for his time playing with Bill Monroe and Hank Snow. He continued to play as a featured performer at bluegrass festivals until his death in 1996.

The Rouse Brothers’ 1939 recording of “O.B.S.” is still available on The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Country Music box set, and the cut shows what a fine fiddler Ervin Rouse really was. I recommend Fiddler’s Curse highly. It opens up to us so much interesting history about the life and times of the ‘Fiddler from the Everglades’.

DALE MORRIS
To order: www.musicdispatch.com

To order: www.rounder.com
This ambitious project includes an amazing amount of information in various formats. Categories of tunes include American, international, and classical. Subcategories of American tunes include Appalachian, Midwestern, Cajun, French Canadian, ragtime, and a special section of Ed Haley’s tunes. International tunes include Mexican, Italian, Venezuelan, and Swedish selections, among others. There are four classical tunes, too.

Tunes are indexed by category in the beginning of the book. In the back of the book is an extensive discography, a short bibliography of other tune books, and a list of websites. There’s a short section called “About the Transcriptions,” which I think should be read before anything else in the book. There’s also an appendix with mandolin information and tablature for the classical tunes. The book is liberally garnished with photos of older and younger musicians as well as illustrations by the author. Anyone wanting to see California musicians Tom Sauber and Greg and Jere Canote through the decades won’t be disappointed, as there are numerous photos of them throughout the book.

The author wisely cautions that the transcriptions are “accurate within reason.” He tells us that people learning these tunes “must listen to the recordings in the discography.” This is such important information that I think it should be placed in the beginning of the book, headed with a caveat in large print to “Read this before going any further.” Why? Because as valuable as transcriptions have been (and continue to be) in preserving tunes for musicians to learn and pass on in turn, all of us growing up in a literate culture have been trained, often without knowing it, to assign a sometimes unwarranted validity to anything printed on a page. Instead of using written tunes as an aid to memory, or as a step to learning them from a live performer or teacher, it is easy for us to fool ourselves into thinking that this is the way the tune goes. Still, it’s very important to record music in this way. Before there was a method of passing music around through easy travel, mass media, electronics, etc., if you weren’t fortunate enough to live with or near someone else who played, you learned from written music. If we’re on the downward slope of the petrochemical age, as some believe, it’s still very important to keep a written record of our music.

But writing a tune down freezes it. Traditional music is alive as long as it passes from ear to hand to ear, always evolving into something else—a fact that sparks lots of lively debate on the old-time community. If we learn tunes from a printed page we must be careful not to freeze them, thinking, “This is how the tune goes.” Rather, we have to remember that it’s the way one person played it once, filtered though the ears of another person who wrote it down.

That said, I really am looking forward to playing these tunes—especially the ones in the international section. It’s a real treat to have tunes from around the world so immediately available.

Some words about the design of the book. The book is conveniently spiral-bound, so you don’t have to wrestle to keep it open to your chosen tune. The tunes themselves are easy to read, measures well spaced, with enough room between staves so that chords, repeats, first and second endings, and measure numbers are easy to see. Sources are identified right below the tunes’ names.

The CD, in mp3 format, contains all 150 tunes. They were recorded from the transcriptions, in synthesized form, which ensures that they follow the written tunes exactly, note-for-note. There are detailed instructions on how to play and save the tunes on your computer. The fact that you have to listen to a pretty unpleasant rendition of the tunes has another advantage: you will be quickly motivated to turn to the discography, or even better, to find live humans to learn from and play with.

Stephen Parker has done a heroic job in putting out this book. Transcribing the tunes was only the beginning. He had to put them into a music notation program, do a bibliography, a discography, record the CD, design the book, index everything, choose pictures, do the layout, get people to copy edit and proofread, and he’s made every effort to make both book and CD user-friendly. All this from an old-time musician who would probably rather be playing the banjo. Give him your vote of thanks by ordering his book.

HILARY DIRLAM

To order: www.ragtime-resource.com

Public Cowboy No. 1: The Life and Times of Gene Autry
Holly George-Warren
Oxford University Press

As you may know, there was a time when Autry was as big a star as anyone. This fine book details how he went from a railroad telegraph man singing in a Jimmie Rodgers style to what Ranger Doug would call the Idol of American Youth. The book basically details his life from birth until his retirement from performing, with just a quick overview of the rest of his life. It includes a list of all recording sessions and films. Gets the big Mighty Fine.

To order: www.oup.com

Fiddlin’ Leo Herron
Augusta Heritage Master Series
DVD AHCM01-05

Leo Herron; fiddle; Gerry Milnes; guitar

Tunes from concert: Ragtime Annie/Corinna Corinna/St. Louis Blues/Soldier’s Joy/Cincinnati Rag/Truck Along My Honey/Patty on the Turnpike/Listen to the Mockingbird/Oh Maria Polka/Devil’s Dream/White Water Jig/Sliver Leaf Clog/Cattle in the Cane/Black Hawk Waltz/Angeline/Waiting for the Robert E. Lee/Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star/Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down/Tennessee Wagoner/I Don’t Love Nobody/Mississippi Sawyer

Audio tracks on DVD: Nobody’s Business/Jenny Lind Polka/Spanish Two-Step/Tick Tock Polka/Mississippi Sawyer/Cincinnati Rag/Unknown Polka/Cattle in the Cane/Durang’s Hornpipe/Fischer’s Hornpipe/St. Louis Blues/Ragtime Annie/Twinkle Little Star

Leo Herron was a Barbour County, West Virginia, fiddler and guitar player. He played on radio station WMMN in Fair-
mont during the early 1940s, and then with various bands in a wide range of gigs. He died in 1998, the year after this DVD was recorded. His fiddling, while a bit past its prime, reveals a wealth of influences from old-time, country, and bluegrass music. This is the only visual evidence of Herron’s fiddle style. He left a very small recorded legacy.

Herron states that he learned bluegrass fiddling from an older black fiddler who worked in the mines. He plays some interesting pieces that are blues and ragtime. He does some of the hokum bowing that is said to have originated with swing fiddlers like Joe Venuti, and later became quite popular with bluegrass fiddlers. Something in his playing says he became quite popular with bluegrass fiddlers. A very small recorded legacy.

To order: www.augustaheritage.com

Yasha Aginsky is a prolific filmmaker based in San Francisco who specializes in documentaries about interesting people that mainstream media consider ordinary, and therefore beneath notice. (www.aginsky.com/cinema/index.html). Stefan Grossman’s Vestapol Video has collected four of these documentaries featuring old-time musicians into one interesting DVD.

Homemade American Music (filmed 1978-79) starts with Mike Seeger and Alice Gerrard playing together, then follows them around the country as they visit with fabulous musicians of the generation born around the start of the 20th century: Tommy Jarrell, Roscoe Holcomb, Elizabeth Cotten, Hank Bradley, Tracy Schwartz, Marc Savoy, Dewey Balfa, Irene Herrmann, Jody Stecher, Will Spires, Eric and Susy Thompson

To order: www.augustaheritage.com

Yasha Aginsky
Vestapol DVD 13103

Homemade American Music
Mike Seeger, Alice Gerrard, Tommy Jarrell, Roscoe Holcomb, Lily May Ledford, Elizabeth Cotten, Hank Bradley, Tracy Schwartz, Marc Savoy, Dewey Balfa, Irene Herrmann, Jody Stecher, Will Spires, Eric and Susy Thompson

(42 min., 1980)

Sonny Terry, Shoutin’ The Blues
Sonny Terry
(6 min., 1969)

Les Blues de Balfa
Dewey Balfa, Will Balfa, Rodney Balfa, Tony Balfa, Allie Young, Rockin’ Dopsie, Nathan Abshire, Tracy Schwartz, Raymond François & the Cajun Playboys

(27 min., 1983)

Cajun Visits
Dennis McGee, Wallace “Cheese” Read, Canray Fontenot, Leopold François, Dewey Balfa, Robert Jardell

(29 min., 1983)

Four American Roots Music Films
Yasha Aginsky
Vestapol DVD 13103

Homemade American Music
Mike Seeger, Alice Gerrard, Tommy Jarrell, Roscoe Holcomb, Lily May Ledford, Elizabeth Cotten, Hank Bradley, Tracy Schwartz, Marc Savoy, Dewey Balfa, Irene Herrmann, Jody Stecher, Will Spires, Eric and Susy Thompson

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Dennis McGee, Wallace “Cheese” Read, Canray Fontenot, Leopold François, Dewey Balfa, Robert Jardell

(29 min., 1983)

Yasha Aginsky is a prolific filmmaker based in San Francisco who specializes in documentaries about interesting people that mainstream media consider ordinary, and therefore beneath notice. This film is more satisfying to me than Homemade American Music, because it goes deeper into the music and allows each song to go on longer.

To me, Cajun Visits is the most successful of the four films: it achieves a good balance between talk and music, the individual shots are longer, and it doesn’t arbitrarily truncate the songs. It begins with Jeanie McLerie (now of Bayou Seco) interviewing Dennis McGee as he demonstrates old styles of Cajun playing: “Two For One” is a creaky see-saw two-step; “Reel de Deshotel” features a complicated tune and rhythm that I can’t imagine being danceable; and on “Pas Janvier,” he stops fiddling in order to sing. Jeanie then interviews Cheese Read, a representative of the next generation behind McGee. His fiddling is smoother, and he sings and plays at the same time. Just when you think you’d like to live there and partake in an authentic folk culture, he and his wife Ella May talk about their garden being ruined by drifting herbicides and pesticides from agricultural spray planes. Canray Fontenot talks about his first fiddle, then plays and sings a zydeco song. Finally, Dewey Balfa talks and plays with Leopold François, an old accordion player, and Robert Jardell, a young man committed to old Cajun accordions. Jardell compares the tragic lyrics of Cajun songs with those of Nashville, calling the latter
farcical, not a music of feeling. In contrast, he says, “Old-style music can break your heart.” Amen.

As with most DVDs, the menu lists a lot of places where you can enter the films. However, it includes only a partial song list, and the notes on the back are minimal. The list of musicians is not complete. Several others make cameo appearances, usually to comment on some aspect of the music or culture.

Comparable documentaries are more complete than these. John Cohen’s films go deeper into the cultures, while the best of Les Blank’s films present longer uninterrupted stretches of music. Still, this DVD is a worthwhile addition to your collection. You see and hear all those wonderful people who have passed on, and you get to marvel at how the then-new generation of tradition carriers has aged.

LYLE LOGGREN

To order: www.stefangrossman.com

Elements of Clawhammer Banjo: A Lesson with Chris Coole

Woodhall Music DVD WM-B-003

Chris Coole started playing banjo at age 17, and has become one of the most respected banjo players on the Canadian old-time music scene, frequently playing with fiddler Erynn Marshall and fellow banjoist Arnie Naiman. He’s been a banjo finalist at the Appalachian Stringband Festival at Clifftop, West Virginia, and has also placed at the West Virginia State Folk Festival banjo contest in Glenville. Chris plays his crisp, clean style on numerous CDs, including recordings he has made with Erynn and Arnie, and on Old-Time Banjo Festival, an old-time banjo recording of various artists recently released by Rounder.

In addition to being an excellent musician, Chris is also a veteran clawhammer banjo instructor. He gives lessons in Toronto and has led workshops at festivals and music camps. Chris has now applied his extensive teaching experience in producing this clawhammer banjo instructional DVD.

Learning tune after tune is like learning phrases—which is not the same thing as speaking a language, and Chris equates music to language. His approach is to use the same tune several times with each new technique he introduces. His goal is to familiarize players with different banjo techniques on one tune that they can then apply to other tunes in their own way, leading to an understanding of the language of old-time banjo.

Elements of Clawhammer Banjo starts at the very beginning level, with Chris demonstrating the basic downpicking stroke. From there he moves to introductory techniques and simple versions of five tunes. He goes back through two of these tunes several times, adding layers of complexity as he introduces each new right-hand technique. He covers pull-offs, hammer-ons, and slow and quick slides in conjunction with the basic strum (the “boom-chuck-a” rhythm), then adds double thumbing and drop thumbing as the lessons progress. He covers enough material that everyone, from complete beginners to more advanced players looking for new techniques or fresh ideas about how to apply those techniques, will find this DVD useful. The tunes he teaches include “Black-Eyed Suzie” and “The Barlow Knife” in G tuning, “Shady Grove” and “Salt River” in G modal tuning, and “Old Molly Hare” in double C tuning.

With the introduction of each new technique, Chris demonstrates practice exercises to enable the student to gain accuracy in that technique before introducing it into the tune. He suggests that learners stop and practice with a metronome before continuing, noting that people taking lessons from him would practice these techniques for a week before coming back for the next lesson.

When he introduces a new tune, Chris plays it several times through at a medium tempo and then breaks it down slowly by phrases. The DVD includes tablature for all the versions of the tunes, which will be helpful when practicing. The tablature is accurate and easy to follow for anyone who has used tab, although there are no instructions for those who may not be familiar with tab notation.

Overall, the video is very well done. Chris has obviously honed his teaching methods over the years. The tunes are well worked out, and he remains consistent in the way he plays them throughout each lesson. He explains what he is doing very clearly and he appears comfortable in front of the camera.

There are a few minor technical issues with the DVD. The vocals are not miked as well as the instruments, so it is difficult to hear Chris’s instructions over the banjo in some places. There are also problems with the navigation. The DVD is conveniently divided into chapters for each tune for the first part of the lesson. However, when double thumbing and drop thumbing are introduced in subsequent sections of the lesson, tunes are

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:

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

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This DVD, produced by Gerry Milnes, concentrates on musicians from four counties (Braxton, Clay, Calhoun, and Gilmer) in central West Virginia. As the subtitle suggests, much of the footage is devoted to octogenarians Lester and Linda McCumbers, but it expands to demonstrate the musical interconnections in a rural community. The musicians, storytellers, and fox chasers presented here are all relatives or friends of the McCumbers. Maps are used to show even the geographical connections. It’s a nice supplement to Kim Johnson’s “A Musical Marriage: Lester and Linda McCumbers of Calhoun County, West Virginia” (OTH, winter 2005).

We get to see quite a bit of Lester and Linda at home, circa 2004. Lester plays fiddle and Linda sings, both alone and with musical neighbors playing banjo, guitar, or harmonica. The tunes are intercut with talk about older musicians and the experience of growing up in hill country. I would guess that the filmmakers started to concentrate on the project around 2004, assembling earlier footage, including the 1973 West Virginia Folk Festival in Glenville and an interview with Linda’s aunt, Phoebe Cottrell Parsons, who died in 2001.

Lester also makes fiddles, and shows each one as he talks about where he got the wood for it. I found his sassafras fiddle particularly interesting—the grain looks like one of the Chladni figures used in acoustics to test fiddle-top resonance patterns.

To the filmmakers’ credit, there are only a few romantic shots of scenic rusticity from the good old days. Conversely, there’s not much about the hardscrabble life, other than Phoebe’s quote from an old-timer, “It’s all right to be poor, but it’s awful unhandy.” Nevertheless, this is a film about entertainment under sparse conditions. In addition to the music, there’s fox chasing, and I learned a lot about the fine points of hound breeding from interviews with Carl Davis and Hubert and Dean White. The earnestness of these discussions brought me back 40 years, when we spent an afternoon listening to Lonnie and Ed Young argue about whether you get more work out of a mule with kindness or with a whip. In keeping with the country no-nonsense approach, Hoy Saville plays an interesting “Fox Chase” on the fiddle: there’s no tune, just hound imitations. Further entertainment comes from skillfully-told stories about: a neighbor with a spastic condition that miraculously disappeared when he played fiddle; waiting all night under a tree for a raccoon that turned out to be a red-eyed mouse; an old-timer eating his first banana.

I assume the film was prepared as a public television program (it lasts exactly one hour), and it’s an overview. The explanatory commentary isn’t necessary for old-time music fans, and none of the tunes or songs are presented in their entirety: it was edited for viewers with short attention spans. Given that a DVD would hold a lot more, I wish it had been possible to include, as extras, less tightly edited material, particularly complete songs. Also, Lester and Linda have a varied musical history. They had a band that played on the radio, and later were a family bluegrass band led by their late son, Roger. They obviously have a repertoire beyond the music presented here. I would have liked to hear that, too.

The story is concentrated on the music of the older generation, with the implication that it’s disappearing. It is, but it’s always being replaced with other music I find interesting. Some of the younger generation who appear briefly aren’t identified at all (I recognized Gerry Milnes and David Bing). Others, such as Kim Johnson, appear only to play banjo with Lester—they don’t say anything. Maybe there’ll be another DVD about how the younger people living in those four counties, the ones who grew up surrounded by radio and TV, integrate the influences of the old-timers into their own lives.

The DVD includes a separate 10-minute blurb for the Augusta Heritage programs at Elkins, in case you need to be sold on it.

To order: www.augustaheritage.com

Music of Heaven
Junior Holstein—Old-Time Music from the Coal River Country
Gerald Milnes
Augusta Heritage Center DVD

This is a DVD about the life and music of William Sherman Holstein, known as “Junior,” from the Coal River area of West Virginia—a little south and west of Charleston. He sings, plays fiddle and guitar, and talks about his life. He is joined at times on this DVD by his nephew and apprentice, Gary Wayne Jordan, who accompanies him on guitar.

When Jerry Milnes makes a DVD of this sort, the music is treated with care and love. Fiddle tunes are played through a number of times, giving ample time for variations in the tune and in bowing. The camera usually includes Holstein’s whole body, allowing aspiring fiddlers to hear the notes played, and also see his bowing patterns. To this non-fiddler, Holstein appears to be a longbow fiddler similar to the way his downstream neighbor, the late Ralph Blizard, used his bow. Songs are also sung in full—his “Roving Gambler” is slightly different from others I have heard, suggesting that Holstein may have learned some of his songs in oral tradition and not from a record.

Junior Holstein is a conscious member of our tradition, describing himself as “one of the last old-time fiddlers who still plays the old-time way.” He emphasizes that he is not a bluegrass fiddler and downplays his own fiddling, saying “I don’t count myself as a fiddler player. I quit too many times.” What this DVD brings out is that Holstein is not just a passer-on of tradition but also a creator. He said of one tune, which he called “Freight Train Blues”:
“I thought this was an Arthur Smith tune but I can’t find it, so I guess I made it up.” Other instruments include “Cabin Creek” and “East Tennessee Blues,” which Holstein calls by the West Virginia name of “Poco River Blues.” To this listener (and watcher) he underestimates his own skill as a fiddler.

An unexpected pleasure was Holstein’s digression into the art of making moonshine. He describes the process in much more detail than I had ever heard before, discussing recipes, equipment, and procedure to the point where I am tempted, like the Skillet Lickers, to fire up a still (which I don’t have) “and make five or six hundred gallons for our own use.” I am really glad that this DVD does not limit itself to music alone, but gives a deeper picture of Holstein and the community of which he is a part with asides such as this. We are also given a glimpse into what Holstein perceives as his relationship with God, and the torments he feels because of Satan. This highly personal topic, covered with care and respect, is so central to his life that the portrait would not be complete without it, discomfiting though it might be to some.

This is a valuable DVD, contains some very nice singing, fiddling, and folklore, and is another good contribution toward the topic, cover because of Satan. This highly personal and is another good contribution toward the traditional fiddlers of West Virginia. Thanks not just to Holstein and Jordan, but also to Jerry Milnes.

Pete Peterson

To order: www.augustaheritage.com;

Howlin’ Wolf—In Concert, 1970

Vestapol DVD 13099

Howlin’ Wolf: vocals, harmonica; Sunnysland Slim: piano; Hubert Sumlin: guitar; Randy Joe Fullerton: bass; S.P. Leary: drums

Highway 49 / How Many More Years / Killing Floor / Howlin’ for My Baby / Back Door Man / I Want to Have a Word With You / Smile at Me / Decoration Day and Sittin’ on Top of the World

To review this performance video of the late blues singer, Howlin’ Wolf is to know what it is to be irrelevant. One might just as well review an earthquake or volcanic eruption; Wolf was that kind of force of nature, and in the face of his performance here, the kind of considerations normally brought into play in musique criticism come up woefully short. I’ll give it a shot, though.

At the time that this video was filmed at the Washington, DC, Blues Festival in 1970, Howlin’ Wolf (born Chester Burnett in Aberdeen, Mississippi, in 1910) was a robust 60-year-old man, big and strong, with tremendous vitality. He’d already had a long career at that point, and was one of the progenitors of the amplified Chicago blues sound. His band here was quite strong—thoroughly familiar with his music and his way of doing things. They take care of the musical background pretty unflappably throughout the course of the performance.

Wolf enters the stage crawling, his rear end waving in the air, demonstrating why he is known as the Tail Dragger. He mugs, shambles around the stage, engages in spoken asides with members of the audience and the band, and eventually winds up planted in a small chair, front and center. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen anyone appear so kinetic while seated. Wolf’s behavior throughout the show is so unusual and so exaggeratedly larger-than-life, that at various points in the performance he seems fierce, kind, funny, sad, dead drunk, demented, sober, sage, smashed out, clownish, and inscrutable. He is, in any event, compulsively watchable. You can’t take your eyes off of him.

As Wolf works his way into the show, it becomes apparent that he is interested not only in singing the blues, but also in explaining the blues. He wants the audience to understand. His performance persona, something I’ve always been leery of in musicians, turns out to be a huge part of the way he communicates with the audience. The music he delivers is highly stylized and personal and very effective, both in a dramatic and musical sense. His singing is simultaneously big and nuanced, and especially on “I Want to Have a Word with You,” simply beautiful. He is ably abetted and supported throughout, most particularly by the great Sunnysland Slim, playing a Fender Rhodes here and Hubert Sumlin, who is just sensational (his signature riff on “Killing Floor” sets an awfully high standard for cool playing). They can go anywhere Wolf wants to take them. There is interview footage included on the video that is brief but fascinating, as far as it goes. Wolf reveals his admiration for Lemon Jefferson and Lonnie Johnson, and surprisingly, his particular hero, Jimmie Rodgers, saying that because he (Wolf) couldn’t yodel, he had to learn to howl. The performance at the end of the video of “Sittin’ on Top of the World” is from a different concert, and Wolf seems a bit more down to earth.

There is certainly no one and nothing like Howlin’ Wolf on the current Chicago blues scene, and there are precious few like him out there performing in any style. If you enjoy well-played Chicago blues and super-charged charismatic performers, you will have a hard time finding better than this DVD.

John M. Miller

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The Guitar of Joseph Spence

Taught by Elijah Wald

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Oh How I Love Jesus / Happy Meeting in Glory / Brownskin Girl / The Glory of Love / The Lord is My Shepherd / Coming in on a Wing and a Prayer. Bonus audio tracks: 55 minutes of unreleased songs and interviews

In this instructional DVD, guitarist and author Elijah Wald offers instruction in and transcriptions of six songs played by the great Bahamian guitarist, Joseph Spence. Spence, who was originally “discovered” by Samuel Charters and recorded for Folkways Records in the late 1950s, gained a sort of underground following among guitarists who were captivated by his irresistibly rhythmic, highly contrapuntal guitar style.

Elijah Wald does a very good job of presenting Joseph Spence’s music. Wald has an engaging and friendly manner, and his enthusiasm and love for Joseph Spence’s music is certainly infectious. Wald touts the intended accuracy of his transcriptions of Spence’s playing, but at the same time, does not claim to have Spence’s touch; it is a sensible balance, for no one has equaled or ever will equal Spence’s degree of familiarity and comfort with his own style. Elijah Wald’s teaching is very practically oriented, and since every piece taught is played in the same dropped-D tuning, much of what will be involved for persons learning the songs off of the video will be developing a knowledge of Spence’s musical vocabulary. I could have used a little more talky about Spence’s counterpoint and discussion of his chordal vocabulary, which was largely derived from church music,
but in fairness, I’m not sure that spending more time talking about such matters would help people play the songs better. I am impressed by the amount of industry Elijah Wald had to exert, listening, experimenting, and revising, to come up with his transcriptions; it’s an enormous amount of work, and the more you strive for accuracy, the more difficult and painstaking it becomes. One minor quibble: the tablature that accompanies the video does not have stems attached to the numbers to indicate which notes are struck by the thumb and which are struck by the fingers, though the standard notation does have that indication made. Why not the tab, too? It is easy enough to do.

Elijah Wald is to be congratulated for the fine job he did on this video, both in the teaching and putting together the transcriptions of Joseph Spence’s performances. Guitarists who use this video are going to have a significant leg up in terms of learning the musical language of Joseph Spence and developing a degree of comfort speaking in that language.

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Festival Profile

THE SAN FRANCISCO BLUEGRASS AND OLD-TIME FESTIVAL

By Chuck Poling

San Francisco is a city that knows how to throw a party. The annual Bay to Breakers race, which started out as a simple athletic event, has evolved into a Mardi Gras-like parade. Halloween attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors to participate or just gawk. Music, art and film screenings of every sort abound and thrive. There’s even a literary event featuring a pub-crawl. So it’s not surprising that the San Francisco Bluegrass & Old-Time Festival should reflect the distinctive, live-it-up attitude of its hometown. Now in its eighth year, the festival runs from February 1 through February 10 — ten days of shows, workshops, jams, children’s programs and a big old-fashioned square dance. Past festivals have also included film screenings of bluegrass and old-time documentaries, highlighted by live performances before and after the showings.

Last year’s festival included over 50 bands at 15 venues and featured headliner Peter Rowan along with many local and regional musicians, including some from as far away as Canada. There were plenty of bands with amusing names typical of this part of the country — Huckleberry Flint, the Mad Cow Stringband, the Deciders, Belle Monroe and her Brewglass Boys, Feed & Seed. And you bet your boots there was a big square dance with Portland’s Foghorn Stringband providing the tunes. You can get updated information on all the fun at http://www.sfbluegrass.org/

San Francisco has long supported bluegrass and old-time music dating back to the folk revival of the 1950s. The ’70s marked resurgence with local artists like Jody Stecher and Kate Brislin, High Country, Eric and Suzy Thompson, and Laurie Lewis. While there has always been enough community support and certainly enough talent to nurture the scene, there had never been collaboration on a major event between the bluegrass and old-time worlds.

The first festival, held in 2000, was the brainchild of Northern California Bluegrass Society honcho Michael Hall. The late ’90s had seen a resurgence of traditional country music and bands like Dark Hollow, the David Thom Band, and the Crooked Jades were performing regularly. City venues like Radio Valencia and the Atlas Café provided a home for the music, while up in Marin County Larry Carlin began the popular Bluegrass Gold series at Sweetwater in Mill Valley.

Putting it all together under the banner of the festival seemed like a good idea to Hall, and he soon had a group of enthusiastic volunteers turning it into reality. Old-time fiddler and festival volunteer Barb Hansen recalled, “We didn’t know how much we could pull off, so we thought of the existing weekly gigs, and filled in a few holes to make it a series of consecutive nights.” The whole concept of a moveable feast seemed fun and appropriate for an urban setting, but having hatched the plan, the organizers found themselves having to improvise as they went along. “We made up some rudimentary programs after hours at an unnamed committee member’s office,” Hansen said. “Chris (Ereneta, of All Wrecked Up) put together a snazzy website, and with the help of the NCBS as an umbrella, legit non-profit, we were off and running.”

The first festival listed 14 bands at 5 different locations over the course of 8 days. In subsequent years the number of shows, performers and venues has increased, with larger and more attractive halls featured. “Jeff Kazor of the Crooked Jades was responsible for the conceptual leap of adding an extra show at a special venue,” according to Chris Ereneta. “He enlisted Kathy Kallick as headliner, and Suzy and Eric Thompson, who assembled a reunion of the Blue Flame String Band. In subsequent years we repeated this model of anchoring the festival with high profile shows in premier venues, later to include the Freight & Salvage, Slim’s and the Great American Music Hall.”

The festival celebrates the common heritage of bluegrass and old-time music and also demonstrates the influence of these tradition-based forms with newer Americana and alt-bluegrass styles. With as many days and venues and as much talent as the festival features, it covers a lot of ground. Shows are always well attended and often sold out.

Old-time music is vigorously represented by a vital, growing community in the Bay Area. The Stairwell Sisters, the Mercury Dimes, and the Squirrely String Band are just a few of the many active groups who perform regularly and have been gaining notoriety outside of California. Over the years, festival workshops have been led by such notable talents as Bob Carlin, Rose Sinclair, Frank Lee, Rafe Stefanini, and Rayna Gellert. The Stairwells’ Evie Ladin leads a popular clogging class each year as well.

The festival has attracted many nationally known headliners. Past festivals have featured such notable artists as Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys, Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver, the Del McCoury Band, Alice Gerrard, Frank Wakefield, Uncle Earl, Dy Branch Firesquad, Laurie Lewis, and the Hot Buttered Rum String Band.

When they came up with this scheme, did the organizers think that it would become an annual event? “That was our hope, and the ease with which the first event came together made it seem quite likely,” said Hansen. “We’d always hoped it would be,” added Ereneta. With continued support from a vibrant community of musicians and fans it looks like the SFBOT has become yet another San Francisco tradition.

The Ninth Annual San Francisco Bluegrass and Old-Time Festival is set for February 1-9 and features the Freight Hoppers, Peter Rowan, the Carolina Chocolate Drops, the Earl Brothers, Eric and Suzy Thompson, Huckleberry Flint, Jackstraw, the Stairwell Sisters, Town Mountain, Belle Monroe and her Brewglass Boys, and many others. For a detailed schedule, go to www.sfbluegrass.org

Chuck Poling is a freelance writer and a native San Franciscan. He is a popular emcee for old-time, bluegrass, and country music events in the Bay Area, and performs in Jeanie and Chuck’s Country Roundup.

The writer would like to thank Barb Hansen and Chris Ereneta for being so helpful and articulate with their recollections of the festival’s roots.
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