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by Howard Marshall

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By Walt Koken and Pete Peterson

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Coy Morton

I note that Coy Morton is listed as Coy Martin in both the liner notes to The Art of Field Recording and in Mr. Buckingham’s review of Mr. Rosenberg’s fine recording. Coy Morton of Whitesburg, Kentucky, has played banjo for over 70 years and is a relative by marriage: Cul len Morton, Coy’s brother, married Flora Gibson, my father’s only sister. Both Cullen and Flora sang and played banjo.

Coy learned to play when he was about 14 years old. He had an older lady tune the banjo for him until he became proficient—lady banjo players were fairly common in the area at that time. The “Fox Chase” was Coy’s signature tune. Some of Coy’s music can be heard on the website of the Digital Library of Appalachia (www.aca-dla.org). He can be seen playing “Fox Chase” in the Appalshop film Tomorrow’s People. Coy did not sing with his banjo playing because an early accident impaired his vocal cords.

George R. Gibson

Brandywine Book Project

As many of you know, Walt Koken, who has played old-time music for over forty years, has teamed up with Clare Milliner, who has annotated fiddle tunes as she learned them over the past twenty years. Walt and Clare are in the process of producing a book of Clare’s manuscripts, along with a database searchable by title, source, tuning, key or mode, and collector. This book of transcriptions is a monumental undertaking, but Walt and Clare are making great progress. The Brandywine Friends of Old Time Music is providing support for the project. The BFOTM, in keeping with its mission of preserving old-time music, has set up a fund for the purpose of defraying the costs of production, printing, and publishing this work. Since the BFOTM is a nonprofit organization, donations are tax-deductible. Also, a donation of $100 or more will guarantee a copy for the donor when the volume is published. Please go to the BFOTM website (www.brandywinefriends.org) for details. Donations, made out to “BFOTM,” can be sent to me at the following address: Sheldon N. Sandler Young Conaway Stargatt & Taylor, LLP P.O. Box 391 Wilmington, DE 19899-0391

Correction

Sharp-eyed subscriber Giles Gamble has informed us that Maybelle and Sara Carter’s names were switched in the caption for the picture of the Carter Family that appeared on page 26 of OTH vol. 11, no. 2 (Dec. 2007-Jan. 2008).

George R. Gibson
Events

The 73rd Annual Old Fiddler's Convention will be held in Galax, Virginia, from Aug. 4 – 9. Tickets are $6/day Mon. – Thurs., $10 Fri., $12 Sat., $40 season ticket, and $40 contestant ticket. Visit www.oldfiddlersconvention.com or call (276) 236-8541.

The 2nd Annual Old-Time Music Weekend will take place at the Brewster River Campground, between Jeffersonville and Smuggler's Notch, VT, from August 8 – 10. There will be lots of jamming, and screenings of Music for the Sky, Nikolai Fox's recent documentary about Vermont fiddlers. Camping costs $20/night for a standard, two-adult site, with extra charges of $5/night for each additional adult. Simpler overflow campsites will be $5/adult. Kids camp free. The gathering itself is free, but a contribution of $5 is suggested for day visitors. Sites can be reserved by calling (802) 644-2126. For more information, contact Mark Sustic (mrksustc@together.net, 802-849-6968, 802-233-5293), or Bill McKone (www.brewsterrivercampground.com, 802-644-2126).

Southern Week at Ashokan (NY) takes place this year from Aug. 10 – 16. Music staff includes the Red Stick Ramblers, Big Hoedown, Alice Gerrard, Rayna Gellert, Brad Leftwich, and many more. Call (845) 246-2121 or visit www.ashokan.org for more information.

Fiddler Matt Brown will hold a workshop and house concert on September 6 at the home of Bill Goldberg and Suzanne Gates in York, PA. The workshop, from 3:30 to 6 PM, will focus on intermediate/advanced old-time fiddle. Space is limited to 15 workshop participants, and preregistration is recommended before July 25. The workshop’s cost is $30. A concert will follow, from 8 to 10 PM, with a jam session afterwards. Concert admission is $10. For information and registration, contact Bill Goldberg or Suzanne Gates at (717) 259-0319, or billonline@localnet.com.

This year’s Dock Boggs Memorial Festival will be held Sept. 12 and 13 at Country Cabin/Appalachian Traditions Village, 6034 Kent Junction Rd., in Norton, VA. The event honors legendary old-time banjo player Dock Boggs and ballad singer and songwriter Kate O'Neill Peters Sturgill. Admission is $10. For more information, call (276) 679-2632 or (276) 679-0961, or visit www.appalachiantraditions.net.

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Dance to:
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Earl White & the Green Grass Allstars

Instrumental Workshops, Late Night Dances,
Dance Workshops and Sunday Sing

Camping: $10/site/night  Admission: $10/day
Phone: 540-463-5214  email: rkb.fest@gmail.com
www.rockbridgefestival.org
Dare to Be Square—West, a music and dance weekend in Portland, OR, will be held from Oct. 9 – 12 this year. Featured callers include Larry Edelman and Bill Martin. Foghorn Stringband and the Queen City Bulldogs will both play for dances, and there will be jamming and workshops all weekend. For more information, see the ad in this issue, contact Caroline Oakley (503-282-8091) or Maggie Brunjes (maggiebanjo@gmail.com), or visit www.bubbaguitar.com/d2bs.com.

The Florida State Fiddlers Association will hold its annual convention from Oct. 17 – 19 at O’Leno State Park in High Springs, FL. There will be jams, concerts, workshops, dances, and more. Special guests this year include Kirk Sutphin and Riley Baugus. The entry fee to compete in the string band contest is one homemade pie. Campsites and a bunkhouse are available onsite. Tentative rates are $30/adult and $10/child 16 and under for the entire weekend, or $60/family for the full weekend, $15/person for all-day attendance on Saturday, and $10/adult and children free for 6 PM Saturday concert and dance.

The Brandywine Friends of Old Time Music will present a concert by the Whitetop Mountain Band at 8 PM on Oct. 17, at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship Hall at 420 Willa Rd., Newark, DE. Tickets are $17 for members of the general public, $14 for seniors, $12 for BFOTM members, and free for those under 17 years old.

Congratulations

Winners at the 2008 Official Florida State Fiddle Contest, held May 24 at the Florida Folk Festival in White Springs, include the following. Junior, Kathleen Johnson (Tallahassee), Kayla Williams (Tallahassee), and Nico Swanson; Youth, Matthew Morse (St. Augustine), Lee Stanley (Micanopy), and Dallas Albritton; Contemporary, Jonathan Hodge (Umatilla), Aisha Ivey, and Lynneay Weissenberger; Rustic, Kerry Blech (Gainesville), Chuck Levy (Gainesville), and Lauren Mayeux (Winter Park); and Twin, Michael and Coty Granatosky, Matthew and Leah Morse, and Kathleen Johnson and Jane Scott.

Congratulations to Samantha Snyder of Lexington, NC, who was awarded the coveted Fiddler of the Festival title at this year’s Fiddler’s Grove Ole Time Fiddler’s and Bluegrass Festival, on Memorial Day weekend in Union Grove, NC. Among the other awardees were the following. Runners-up for Fiddler of the Festival: Katherine Ririe (Winston-Salem, NC) and Roger Howell (Mars Hill, NC); Junior Old Time Fiddler: Katherine Ririe, Veronica Randolph (Front Royal, VA), and Danielle Bishop (Fairview, NC); Junior Bluegrass Fiddle: Samantha Snyder, Hannah Flowers (Mt. Holly, NC), and Amy Boerger (Valdese, NC); Senior Old Time Fiddler: Adam Hurt (Winston-Salem, NC), Emily Schaad (Boone, NC), and Richard Bowman (Ararat, VA); Senior Bluegrass Fiddle: Adam Masters (Asheville, NC), Rose Knotts (Statesville, NC), and Merl Johnson (Asheville, NC); Junior Old Time Banjo: Teresa Furtado (Front Royal, VA) and Max Randolph, Front Royal, VA); Junior Bluegrass Banjo, Sammy Adams (Marshall, NC), Courtney Wright (Waynesville, NC), and Caroline Boerger (Valdese, NC); Senior Old Time Banjo: Marsha Todd (Mount Airy, NC), Jim Lloyd (Rural Retreat, VA), and Josh Johnson (Pumpkintown, SC); Senior Bluegrass Banjo: Alana Flowers (Mount Holly, NC), Jimmy Pascal (Yadkinville, NC), and Tyler Smith (Knoxville, TN); Junior Guitar, Zeb Snyder (Lexington, NC), Daniel Wright (Waynesville, NC), and Sarah Dlugokecki (Mooresville, NC); Senior Guitar: Darel Meadows (Walkersville, WV), Doug McCormac (Asheville, NC), and Daniel Settle (Statesville, NC); Junior Mandolin: Dillon Flowers (Mount Holly, NC), Jacob Moore (Hickory, NC), and Gregory Hefinger (Catawba, NC); Autoharp: Craig Harrel (Houston, TX), Mary Umbarger (Harmony, NC), and Doug Pratt (Cary, NC); Dulcimer: Dustin Sechrest (Elk Creek, VA), Aaron Ratcliffe (Chapel Hill, NC), and Mike Cox (Sabillasville, MD); Bass Fiddle: Kathie Hollandsworth (Christiansburg, VA) and Elizabeth Edwards (Salisbury, NC); Harmonica: Bill Masten (Mooresville, NC), Michael Randolph (Front Royal, VA), and Ferdinand Carson (Greensboro, NC); Dobro: Drew Gray (Salisbury, NC), Peter McCranie (Charlotte, NC), and Jim Robins (Santa Fe, NM); Hammered Dulcimer: Fiona McAllister (Sherrills Ford, NC), Susan Sherlock (York, SC), and Joanne

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VILLAGE VOICES
by Alexis Waller

Maybe you’ve heard the story of how Wayne Henderson had five days until Christmas to come up with a gift for Helen White, his musical partner and girlfriend, and he decided to make a fiddle for her. The only problem was that he’d never made a fiddle before, and he didn’t have any fiddle patterns in his workshop. “But I had a Stradivarius book, and I knew what a fiddle looked like,” Wayne explained. “I’d always wanted to make one. So I made it for her, and she’s been playing it ever since.” After he told this story to an audience of about thirty people sitting around him in Polly King’s cozy living room in Palmyra, Virginia, Helen nodded, smiled, and then, with her bow on the strings, she introduced us to that very fiddle with a beautiful tune. Such an intimate venue was ideal for Wayne Henderson’s mad picking and tall tales, as well as Helen’s haunting voice, rhythm guitar, and fiddle accompaniment.

Henderson and White were giving the inaugural performance of the Village Concert Series, which Polly King and her neighbor, Virginia State Folklife director Jon Lohman, have joined forces to organize and host in King’s Fluvanna County home, located about 30 minutes outside of Charlottesville.

Right at the start, Wayne warned us, “If we get too formal for you, just let us know.” But it certainly didn’t get too formal for us. Jon Lohman baked the chocolate chip cookies himself and Polly King was happy to introduce us to her collection of open-back banjos during the intermission. We kicked things off with the cocktail party of sorts before the concert at Lohman’s place, next door to King’s, where I sampled some smooth Napa of moonshine,” our host informed us! “We produce it locally here in the house where the musicians had set themselves up in front of several rows of folding chairs. While Helen played Wayne’s elaborately inlaid guitar, Wayne gave his latest, a simply adorned guitar that he’d just made for a friend in Virginia, and he decided to make a fiddle for her. The only problem was that he’d never made a fiddle before, and he didn’t have any fiddle patterns in his workshop. “But I had a Stradivarius book, and I knew what a fiddle looked like,” Wayne explained. “I’d always wanted to make one. So I made it for her, and she’s been playing it ever since.” After he told this story to an audience of about thirty people sitting around him in Polly King’s cozy living room in Palmyra, Virginia, Helen nodded, smiled, and then, with her bow on the strings, she introduced us to that very fiddle with a beautiful tune. Such an intimate venue was ideal for Wayne Henderson’s mad picking and tall tales, as well as Helen’s haunting voice, rhythm guitar, and fiddle accompaniment.

Mr. (Brevard, NC); Certified Old Time Fiddler’s Category (55 years old and up): Roger Howell, Jerry Correll (Elk Creek, VA), and Edd Michael (Port Republic, VA); Twin Fiddle: Adam Masters and Merl Johnson, Emily Schaad and Nathan Taylor, and Barb Kuhrs and Betty Vornbrock; Heritage Tune: Diane Jones (Massey, MD); Junior Bluegrass Band: D-Grass (Sarah Dlugokecki, Mooresville, NC), Tarpin Creek (Ben Cockman, Sherrills Ford, NC); Senior Old Time Band: Blue Ridge Rounders (Robert Buckingham, Greer, SC), Laurel Creek String Band (Cecil Gurganus, Todd, NC), and Virginia Creepers (Jerry Correll, Elk Creek, VA); Senior Bluegrass Band: Flower Family Band (Alana Flowers, Mount Holly, NC), Adam Masters Band (Adam Masters, Asheville, NC), and Dry Run Bluegrass Band (Dale Mills, Mooresville, NC).

Prize winners at the 2008 Charlie Poole Festival, Eden, NC, were as follows. Grand Prize, Old-Time 3-Finger Banjo: Walt Koken (Avondale, PA); Old-Time Fiddle: Walt Koken, Adam Hurt (Winston-Salem, NC), Jesse Downs (Valle Crucis, NC), Richard Bowman (Ararat, VA), Clare Milliner (Avondale, PA); Clawhammer/Old-Time banjo: Adam Hurt, Walt Koken, Tom Mylet (Winston-Salem, NC), Greg Adams (Germantown, MD), Marsha Todd (Mount Airy, NC); Old-Time Band: Ubiquitones, Appalachian Americans, Fox Hunt, Eden Barbeques, Slate Mountain Ramblers; Best Rendition of Poole Song: Walt Koken, Marsha Todd, Robert Stokes, Robert Stowe (Stoneville, NC), Jesse Downs; Duet Singing: Conner and Winnie (Elliston, VA), Norman and Gardener (Durham, NC), Emily and Corey Johnson-Erady (Greensboro, NC), Mason and Mead (Pinnacle, NC), Baynes and Eanes (Eden, NC); Flatpick Guitar: Eddie Day (Rural Hall, NC), Matt Kline (Martinsburg, WV), Joey Lemons (Walnut Cove, NC), Jesse Smathers (Eden, NC), Chris Leva (Nelson County, VA); Fingerstyle Guitar: Michael Thompson (Blanch, NC), Brett Hart (Eden, NC), James Ruchala (Ararat, NC), Clifford Orange (Blacksburg, VA), Matt Metz (Harpers Ferry, WV); Bluegrass Fiddle: Jesse Downs, Ben Townsend (Romney, WV), Henry Mabe (Walnut Cove, NC), Katy Griffin (Eden, NC), Ron Beavers (Ridgeway, VA); Bluegrass Banjo: Jay Adams (Pine Hall, NC), Marsha Todd, Matthew Turman (Eden, NC), Jason Johnson (Penhook, VA), Cutch Tuttle (Penhook, VA), and Mead (Blanch, NC), Brett Hart (Eden, NC), James Ruchala (Ararat, NC), Clifford Orange (Blacksburg, VA), Matt Metz (Harpers Ferry, WV); Bluegrass Fiddle: Jesse Downs, Ben Townsend (Romney, WV), Henry Mabe (Walnut Cove, NC), Katy Griffin (Eden, NC), Ron Beavers (Ridgeway, VA); Bluegrass Banjo: Jay Adams (Pine Hall, NC), Marsha Todd, Matthew Turman (Eden, NC), Jason Johnson (Penhook, VA), Cutch Tuttle
(Churchville, VA): Bluegrass Band: Danbury Travelers, Eden’s Road, Southern Gentlemen, Stoneville Strangers.

Online, On the Air

The State Archives of Florida has made available online recordings from Florida Folk Festivals from between 1954 and 1979. Hundreds of hours of free audio can be found at www.floridaemory.com/ Collections/folklife/audio.cfm. The State Archives of Florida has three free CDs available as well, including Shall We Gather at the River: African-American Sacred Music from the Florida Folklife Collection, Music from the Florida Folklife Collection, and More Music from the Florida Folklife Collection. A fourth CD of bluegrass music from Florida will be available this summer.

An article, “The Last Verse: Is there any folk music still out there?” by Burkhard Bilger, was featured in the April 28 edition of The New Yorker. The article was about a collecting trip with Dust-to-Digital’s Lance Ledbetter accompanied by none other than our own reviewer Art Rosenbaum.

Artists and Recordings

The Farmertones, a St. Louis-area band that came together to provide music for the reality TV show Farmer Wants a Wife, has released a new old-time CD. The Farmertones are fiddlers Geoff Seitz and Marc Rennard, mandolinist Curt Buckhannon, guitarist Dennis Buckhannon, and banjo player Dave Landreth.

Final Notes

Jim Gaskin, the “Voice of Renfro Valley,” died on May 3 at the age of 70. During his fifty-plus-year career as a musician and broadcaster, Gaskin won many fiddle contests, hosted the nationally syndicated “Sunday Morning Gatherin’” radio show, and performed in the Renfro Valley Barn Dance and with the Cumberland Rangers. He played at the Smithsonian National Folk Festival with the Cumberland Rangers, and also shared stages with Bill and Birch Monroe, Jimmie Skinner, and Tex Ritter, among other greats. Gaskin was inducted into the Renfro Valley Hall of Fame in 1995, and received a Special Achievement Award from the Alumni Association of Lindsey Wilson College, his alma mater.

Folk singer, labor organizer, storyteller, and poet Bruce U. “Utah” Duncan Phillips passed away on May 23 in Nevada City, CA where he had lived for the last 21 years. He was born in Cleveland, OH, and moved to Salt Lake City when he was young. A political activist, Phillips sang of the struggles of working people and the power of direct action. He was a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies), and he spread the Wobbly gospel through his concerts, featuring such songs as “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum,” the “Preacher and the Slave,” and “Bread and Roses.” He was a prolific songwriter with such classics as “Green Rolling Hills of West Virginia,” “The Goodnight Loving Trail,” and “Rock, Salt and Nails” to his credit. His recording collaborations with Ani DiFranco earned him a Grammy nomination, and he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Folk Alliance in 1997. Phillips often toured with folk singer Rosalie Sorrells, with whom he remained a close friend. As Sorrells put it, “He took the stories of working people and railroad bums and he built them into work that was influenced by writers like Thomas Wolfe, but then he gave it back, he put it in language so the people whom the songs and stories were about still had them, still owned them. He didn’t believe in stealing culture from the people it was about.”

Musician and instrument-builder Clarke Prouty died at his home in Elkins, WV on Thursday, June 5th, 2008, of heart failure. Clarke was an accomplished woodworker who turned from furniture and boat-building to instrument construction in the 1970s when a friend asked him to build a dulcimer. Clarke went on to build additional dulcimers and guitars, but he is best known for his banjos. Clarke was among the first luthiers to return to building gourd and minstrel-style banjos in the 1980s, making 19th century-style instruments for Mike Seeger, Bob Carlin, and others. Clarke was also an avid musician, and could regularly be found at festivals playing instruments of his own construction.

Clarke moved to Elkins from Lanham, MD, in 1998 after retiring from NASA, where he worked at the Goddard Space Flight Center. Among his other duties, Clarke served as the Mission Manager of the Get-Away Special (GAS) program, which allowed low-budget researchers and high schools and universities to have their own experiments carried on Space Shuttle missions. While Clarke was proud of his work in both aerospace and instrument construction, he did like to joke that, “it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to build a banjo.”

Clarke is survived by his wife Sheila, and their four children: Karen, Katherine, Carol, and Scott. Memorial donations may be made to the Augusta Heritage Center Youth Scholarship Fund, Davis and Elkins College, 100 Campus Drive, Elkins, WV 26241.

Doug Van Gundy

Alleghany County, NC, banjo player and instrument builder Fred Roupe passed away on May 22. Roupe was born near Sparta, and was already playing the banjo at the age of six. As an adult, he was a prominent member of the northwestern North Carolina old-time music scene, playing on the radio, in VFW halls, and throughout the mountains with Dell Reeves, Howard Joines, the Little Brown Jugs, Swamp Grass, and others. Later in life, Roupe became a very accomplished instrument maker and repairman. He made more than 25 banjos, hundreds of banjo necks, and some mandolins and fiddles as well. Photos of Roupe at work, and more information about his life and music, can be found by searching on his name at http://artists.blueridge-heritage.com.

Catherine Ann Patterson Gaster of Sanford, NC, passed away on June 12. Born in Harnett County, NC, Mrs. Gaster had been active in the Methodist Church, and enjoyed her grandchildren, working in her vegetable garden, and traveling with her banjo-picking husband Marvin to festivals and fiddlers conventions across the United States.

Autoharp player Jim Snow died at the age of 65 on April 16. The son of the legendary Kidly Snow, Jim Snow too was a widely admired autoharp player in the Carroll County, VA, style. Please see Page 8 for an extended remembrance of Snow.
I’M GOING TO TAKE A TRIP
Joe Riggs

The world of autoharp sounds has been greatly diminished by the recent passing of Jim Snow. Jim died at home on April 16, 2008, from cancer. He was 65 years old. Jim was born to Kilby Snow and Lillie Blanche Isom in Carroll County, Virginia. Like his father, Jim loved music, and his first instrument was a guitar, but his favorite instrument was autoharp. From early childhood, Jim absorbed Kilby’s autoharp playing and techniques, and when Mike Seeger tracked Kilby down on a tip from Pop Stoneman, Jim was there to play guitar and harmonize on vocals for the recording sessions. For some years following the death of his dad in 1980, Jim put down his guitar and harp and went into musical hibernation.

Having become irrevocably obsessed with the Kilby Snow autoharp sound, which I first heard on some of those recordings that Mike Seeger made, I began to research Snow in order to write a story about his life and music. I found that the information available from libraries and archives was scant. To this day, the best sources for details on his music are the liner notes by Mike Seeger that accompanied the two LPs, Country Songs and Tunes with Autoharp (Folkways 3902, 1969) and Mountain Music Played on the Autoharp (Folkways 2365, 1965), and Shanachie’s Traditional Music Classics video with Seeger and Snow. The late Mary Lou Orthey, founder and publisher of Autoharp Quarterly, knew of my quest for information about Kilby Snow, and called one day to say she had met a man, Mike Hudak, who had just purchased two Orthey harps and had performed with Snow. She had asked the Hudaks if I could get in touch with them, and permission was given. I did some interviews and played with Hudak, and set up my harp roughly according to what he said Kilby Snow’s setup had been.

I also wanted to get to know Jim Snow, and over a span of several years I made numerous inquiries trying to locate him, but without success. Then one day I obtained Jim’s address through the late Donnie Weaver and his wife Linda, of the Weaver-DeBusk family. I immediately wrote Jim a letter and introduced myself, mentioning the research I had been doing on his father, and asking if I could come up to visit him and gather information for an article about Jim himself. I also sent him copies of what writing I had done so far. We agreed on a date for the interview, and I drove to Jim’s home near the Herr’s Potato Chips plant in Nottingham, Pennsylvania, where we met for the first time. Bonded by our shared love of the autoharp sound developed by his father, Jim and I formed a friendship that would last many years.

On one of our subsequent meetings, when our talk turned to drag notes—one of the most distinctive features of Kilby’s playing—Jim grinned widely and said, “I’m the only one who can do drag notes now that Dad is gone.” (I’m paraphrasing his words from memory in this article, as these were conversations between friends rather than formal, recorded interviews.) He then paused, tilting his chin down and raising his eyebrows, eyes on me, expectantly waiting for my reaction. I was skeptical, because Kilby’s manner of playing was so unique: he picked left-handed on a right-handed harp below the chord bars, with his left thumb and index finger, dragging up from lower to higher strings with his index finger, and he usually played by setting the harp on the bass edge on his lap, which put the fine strings at the top, back of the harp against his torso. Jim’s harp lay on the checkered oilcloth tabletop, along with a pair of handmade metal picks, and I couldn’t see how he would be able to get the same sound. Reaching for his dad’s old harp, knowing that I was bursting with anticipation, he said, “Here, let me play ‘Greenback Dollar.’” I am sure my mouth fell open as I heard the first of the many drag notes he liberally but tastefully sprinkled throughout the tune. His harp was flat on the tabletop, at a certain angle to Jim, and he was picking right-handed below the chord bars, on a right-handed harp; he was getting the drags by pushing his thumb-pick away from him in a measured and unhurried manner. He made it look so easy, I thought there must be a special music gene for drag notes.

He freely demonstrated how he was making the authentic drag note sound, even slowing the action down for me. I asked if I could share that with other players, and he said,

“Sure, go ahead. But they are probably not going to be able to get a good drag note. No matter if they do see me do it and I explain how to do it, the notes won’t sound the same. Knowing how I do it, or how Dad did it, and then trying to get a drag note up here above the chord bars, is not going to work, because the strings are stiffer down here by the bridge, and you will not get the same sound up here. Dad would never let me or anybody else play his harp up here above the chord bars, because he said it would ruin the sound of the harp for how he wanted his music.

Second, all autoharps sound different already, and the tuning has to be right. Third, you can’t just play a drag note any old place in a tune; you have got to hear where you can put in a drag note and make it sound good, and where it works into the music of the tune. I don’t know how to tell you where that might be. You just have to try it, and see if it is going to sound good, then remember where and how you did it. It is not an easy thing to teach or to do, until you hear and feel where those drag notes fit into the music.

I have heard them so much from when Dad and I played together that I have got the feel for them that you need to work on if you are serious about drag notes.”
It wasn’t until several years later that I thought I might be getting close to mastering the technique. George Orthey, the luthier who made my harps, said one day after hearing me play, “Well, it might not be Snow, but it is definitely sleet.”

In the spring of 1994, Jim was persuaded to go with me to the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering in Newport, Pennsylvania. Jim had never seen so many people playing autoharps in one place, and after much of my arm-twisting and his good-natured resistance, he finally agreed to sign up for the Friday-night autoharp contest. He took first place, and chose a new harp by Tom Fladmark as his prize. That victory won him the title of Featured Performer at the following year’s MLAG. He put on quite the show in 1995, playing the harp up on his shoulder behind his head, then bridging himself up over the harp, which he lay on the stage, and playing under his back. He was an entertainer, and loved the audience’s enthusiastic response. We went to one or two MLAGs together after that, and he enjoyed some local playing engagements. He always had a project underway, often working on his harps, trying new tunings, and changing bars and felts. He told me that he was going to go into the studio and make a cassette tape. He said, “I’m going to call it Father and Son, and Dad will be on one side and I will be on the other.” He made that tape, now available on CD, and was very proud of it.

Sometime in 2005, Jim told me he had gotten a call from Mike Mueller in California, who had invited Jim to come out in May of 2006 to participate in that year’s California Autoharp Gathering, which would have the theme “A Tribute to Kilby Snow.” Jim went, and it was, I think, one of the finest and most cherished times in his life. He never tired of talking about it, how much he enjoyed it and how the crowd had really appreciated his playing. “I didn’t know so many people knew about it and cared about the music we made.” The trip was also the first time he’d ever been in an airplane, and that was another memorable event for him in and of itself. He marveled at the size of the plane inside and out. He mentioned the parallel between his dad’s and Mike Seeger’s touring on the West Coast back in the folk days, and this trip of his own to the West Coast years later. (It was particularly significant to Jim that Mike Seeger was at CAG in 2006.) Jim came home from California energized and happy, and began talking of making his own autoharp, and putting out a DVD to teach people his method of playing and dragging notes. (I mentioned once that maybe “pushing notes” was a more appropriate way...
to describe how he did it.) He was also working on a play list of some of his old favorites that he wanted to record for a solo release. During this fertile time of ideas and projects, he was also in declining health, and he began to have more frequent and longer, more serious hospital stays; but he always had hope. He started building his autoharp frame and explained how it would be different from other harps. When he received the woods that he had ordered, he described how he was going to put it all together to make it a beautiful harp with a beautiful sound.

One night when I asked him on the phone about the progress of his harp, he told me that he had sent it off to the West Coast for it to be finalized and set up, because he just wasn’t well enough to finish it himself. That same evening he said that he had only a few more treatments to go for the cancer. That was the last time Jim and I would ever speak. In his final days, my attempts to call him were met with the answering machine instead of his deep “Hello.” As his messages piled up unheard, the number of beeps before I could record kept growing larger and larger. When I counted sixty-five beeps, I felt an ominous wave wash over me.

In times of grief, I seek solace in music. Jim’s passing initially brought to mind lines and sentiments from some familiar songs: “Gone Home,” “Give Me the Roses While I Live,” “Who Will Sing for Me,” “No Telephone in Heaven,” and “Fifty Miles of Elbow Room.” However, none of these seemed quite right for Jim as I knew him—the Jim who loved to laugh, who won first place at Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering the first time he attended, who made the recording of Father and Son, who took his first airplane ride to California at age 63, and who dreamed up and built the Jim Snow Harp to his own specifications and taste. Reflecting on these times at last brought me to the very song I was seeking: “The Old Gospel Ship.” It resonates with his first experience and wonder at air travel, to a destination that was filled with good times for him. I pictured him there on board, sailing through the air, gazing down at the clouds, checkerboard fields, lakes, and rivers from his window seat, a contented smile on his face, as he bids this world goodbye.

Joe Riggs is an autoharp player and author who lives in Charlotte, North Carolina.
WAS IT REALLY THE BIG BANG?  
THE INVENTION OF THE COUNTRY MUSIC INDUSTRY  
By Walt Koken and Pete Peterson  
Illustrations by Phil Blank

A recent article in the Old-Time Herald, “Bristol Recording Sessions Remembered at Nashville’s Country Music Hall of Fame” (Vol.11, No. 2), reflected the uncritical acceptance of the currently popular rewriting of history that has morphed those few days in late July and early August of 1927 into “the Big Bang of country music.” Less than two years ago, however, the Old-Time Herald (Vol. 10, No. 3) ran Jon and Marcia Pankake’s review of the book The Bristol Sessions: Writings about the BBOCM. In their review, the Pankakes set out just a small part of the evidence which counters such a grandiose assumption, space limitations being what they are. And there is so much more to the story.

What did happen at Bristol, as the Pankakes have pointed out, was the invention of the modern country music industry.

To start with, if those few days in July and August 1927 had really been the “big bang,” then nothing could have come before it, or certainly nothing important. Inconvenient facts, easily available to historians, such as sales of Vernon Dalhart’s 1924 Victor recording of “The Wreck of the Old 97” / “The Prisoner’s Song,” are ignored. In truth, this record had sold over a million copies before Ralph Peer ever worked for Victor. Moreover, Charlie Poole’s first two recordings in 1926 for Columbia Records sold about 167,000 copies. After sales of Eck Robertson’s 1922 recordings opened the eyes of phonograph executives, bands such as Poole and the Skillet Lickers (who sold over a million 78s) began their recording careers. Recordings of Uncle Dave Macon, Burnett and Rutherford, Fiddling John Carson (need we go on?) all were sold well prior to the alleged “big bang.”

What did happen at Bristol, as the Pankakes have pointed out, was the invention of the modern country music industry, currently a bloated, multi-tentacled behemoth that depends on copyrights, authorship royalties, publisher’s royalties, and the other sums paid to large businesses. With its “big bang” festivities, what Nashville and Bristol celebrate is the birth of this industry, not the roots of its music. Country music recordings made prior to Bristol 1927 had a big problem: the songs and tunes being recorded were mostly in the public domain. Even if the song was obviously recent, the author may have been uncertain. The dispute over royalties arising from the questions about who had actually written “The Wreck of the Old 97” was not settled until 1940, and in-
involved at least two trips all the way to the Supreme Court. What was needed was a system by which an artist would claim to have written a song or tune, and would share the rights with a “publishing house.” This was what was created at Bristol. A recent UNESCO publication put the size of the recorded music industry in 2000 at $37 billion worldwide, and $14 billion dollars in the US alone. These numbers are just too big for mere mortals to comprehend, now that Carl Sagan has passed on. Let’s focus on a smaller segment: the two billion dollars each year which changes hands through “intellectual property rights”—copyrights. Where does it come from? Where does it go? As Deep Throat urged Woodward and Bernstein: “Follow the money.”

Where does the money come from? It comes from different kinds of royalties. The ones we are most concerned about are set by law, and periodically updated in different ways by the Congress of the United States. The law regards copyrights as bundles of ownership rights, and incentives for creativity. If one writes a song or piece of music, one has rights in that piece. If someone records that piece (including the composer), the record company must pay a “mechanical royalty” to the copyright holder for each time it is pressed. When that recording is played on the air, the broadcaster must pay a “performance royalty” to the copyright holder. The law states that these royalties are divided into two shares, the “writer’s” share (which can include more than one writer) and the “publisher’s” share (which can also include more than one). By default they are split 50/50, but this figure is negotiable. Reminder: these different kinds of royalties add up, in the US alone, to two billion dollars every year.

To turn it around, any time an artist records your work, a mechanical royalty is due you, first as composer and a second time as publisher. (You did set up your own “publishing company,” didn’t you? Or is that something only the big dogs do?) Every time that artist’s recording is played on the radio, a performance royalty is due you as well. If you or your band is fortunate enough to have your song picked up as background music for a movie, those are separate performance rights negotiated among you, your publishing company, and the movie producer’s office, usually at a higher royalty rate. Mechanical royalties are collected and distributed by the Harry Fox Agency, which takes a small percentage for their labor and has the right to audit record companies to be sure they’re in compliance with the law. Performance royalties are collected and disbursed by ASCAP, BMI, and other performance rights organizations who sell licenses to radio stations, etc. The law is enforced by these organizations, and thus the artists’ rights are protected and supported. The performance rights organizations have been trying to collect license fees from live venues in recent years, so if one plays music from the public domain (old-time music, for instance) at such a place, the establishment owner is taking money out of your fee in some way to pay for such a license. Have you ever filled out an application for Galax and noticed that part where you guarantee that any music you perform is in the public domain? This is how Moose Lodge 733 seeks to avoid paying performance royalties. And who knows how long the Moose can keep that up, given the Draconian conduct of the performance rights organizations.

The performance rights organizations, without a lawsuit to compel them, will not pay money for an arrangement of a song already in the public domain.

Record royalties are completely separate from the mechanical royalty issue. They are negotiated by agreement between the artist and the record company. They are usually withheld from an artist until the record company has “recouped,” through sales, any amount advanced to the artist. In other words, say Record Company X has negotiated an agreement with your band to pay a $1.00 royalty for each CD, and then gives the band a $2,000 advance for a CD. Now the record company must sell 2000 CDs before the artist sees any more money. The problem with this type of royalty is that the artist is unprotected and must obtain a lawyer at his or her own expense to attempt to find out whether the record company is being
Some unscrupulous record companies have even struck deals with artists in which the artist pays for production costs (a proprietary and thus private company matter) out of his royalties, and the artist might never see a dime. If you play old-time music and record a CD for a record company, this could be your lot.

How much of this is new information to Old-Time Herald readers? These are facts about the music industry which escape most people, especially those of us in the old-time music community, since most old-time players don’t record, and those who do record usually don’t take out copyrights on their arrangements. It is supposedly not possible to copyright works which fall into the public domain, such as old-time music. The performance rights organizations, without a lawsuit to compel them, will not pay money for an arrangement of a song already in the public domain. In reality, however, there are different rules for the big dogs and the little dogs. The Nashville songwriting industry is constantly trying to rearrange tunes and songs out of the public domain into a copyrighted form. If, for instance, you use Harry Fox's database to search for “Soldier’s Joy” you will find 25 different people all claiming to have written, or at least arranged, the tune, starting with Randy Scruggs. And they will all be happy to take your money and issue you a license to record it. The situation is even worse for songs. A. P. Carter claimed to have written almost every song that the Carter Family recorded, and assigned his rights to Ralph Peer’s company, which became Southern Music, Inc. Now that the late Charles Wolfe and his graduate students have conducted exhaustive research in primary source materials of these songs, establishing their original composers or origins earlier than A. P. Carter’s claim of authorship, it is clear that most of these songs are actually in the public domain. There is a strong incentive for anybody who records a traditional song or tune to claim authorship and hope for royalties. As one Nashville songwriter said recently, “Change a word, get a third.”

Another article in the Old-Time Herald issue that covered the “big bang” (Vol. 11, No. 2) discussed the music of Norman Blake. Norman and Nancy are both great musicians and can play rings around most folks in any number of traditional styles. But as Highwoods members found during their years together, there is little money to be made simply playing old-time music. The dollars are in songwriting, which is what Norman Blake knows and has been doing for many a year. As he knows, songwriting, very simply, is what separates old-time music from commercial music, both in feeling and in actual practice. If the Highwoods had understood this better in 1972, they might have had a bit better success with their musical endeavors. By way of example, the Highwoods members, who recorded three full-length LPs for Rounder in the 1970s, as well as individual tracks on several anthologies, have no rights in those recordings. They’ve received no mechanical or performance royalties;
and, although they received record royalties, they were basically unsupported by any other branch of the music industry which has, to say it again, a huge profit incentive in copyright royalties.

Our laws, which give incentive to artists to create music, ignore those who keep alive our traditions.

What good does knowing this do us? For better or worse, we’re content to play our versions with our jam-mates and dance bands, and as such, that is the essence of old-time music, much as Norman Blake and many others envision it. But still there are some folks who think that bringing joy to others through music and entertainment should provide the best musicians with a livelihood. These are people who work hard at their art, barnstorm the country just like the big boys do, but somehow come up a bit short. No insurance, no pension, very little Social Security, and sore fingers are what’s at the end of the line for some of us. We would think that this might be one of the issues the OTH is concerned about. We all play music of old-time musicians who were very professional back in the 1920s through the early ‘40s, the time covered by Gus Meade’s book. It wouldn’t hurt the next generation to have some role models like that today.

What’s the solution? We don’t know, but an active discussion of the matter might turn something up. It is at least clear that the present system isn’t working. The concept that one must be born exclusively into a family in which the music passes from one generation to the next (in order to be a true folkie and thus to deserve governmental support, such as it is) is an archaic one in this day and age, and some new criteria are needed. The fiddler born since 1900 who didn’t learn from or wasn’t influenced by recordings and radio play from the 1920s on is a myth. Our laws, which give incentive to artists to create music, ignore those who keep alive our traditions. Grants go to grant writers, not fiddlers. Some countries support their musical heritage. For the most part, ours doesn’t. This was another point made in that UNESCO article. Let us dream, for just a moment, that 1% of that two billion dollars in US royalties was diverted to support traditional musicians. In this country, that would be $20 million, which could mean 400 grants of $50,000 each for different forms of traditional music. Write your congressman. Somebody talk to Senator Byrd, he’s a fiddler!
This song by Norman Blake, from his 1998 Chattanooga Sugar Babe record, besides being a delightful bit of folk poetry, illustrates well the enduring appeal of and continued fascination with Henry “Ragtime Texas” Thomas. Thomas, an African-American Texas “songster,” recorded twenty-three commercial sides in the late 1920s before fading into obscurity. The resurgence of fascination with Thomas can be traced roughly to 1952. In that year, two of his finest performances, “Fishing Blues” and “Old Country Stomp,” were reissued on Harry Smith’s Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music. The Anthology, featuring American folk music in the best sense of the word as represented on pre-War commercial discs and unified by an inspired logic, brought Thomas and his music to the attention of Northern, urban, folk revival audiences for the first time. By way of the Anthology, Thomas’ music captured the fertile imaginations of the likes of Bob Dylan, and Alan Wilson of Canned Heat. In 1968, Canned Heat converted Thomas’ “Bull Doze Blues” into the hit “Going up the Country” while Dylan, on his 1962 Freewheelin’ record, sang a composition entitled “Honey, Just Allow Me One More Chance.” While not a straight cover of the Thomas performance of a similar name, it utilizes some of the same phrases and Dylan freely acknowledges the influence of “a recording by a now-dead Texas blues singer.” Thomas’ most enduring tune is his “Fishing Blues,” a song with minstrel show origins that has become something of a standard in old-time and blues circles, covered by artists as diverse as Taj Mahal, Mike Seeger, and Bruce Molsky. His legacy lives on in the music of those who continue to sing his praises and perform his songs — songs that may well have been lost if not for the creative impulses of an obscure musical itinerant. Biographical information on Henry Thomas remains sketchy. What little we do know of his life comes from the research and detective work of Mack McCormick, who wrote an excellent essay on Thomas to accompany a now-out-of-print LP. According to relatives whom McCormick found and interviewed in the 1970s, Thomas was born in 1874 in Big Sandy, Upshur County, East Texas. His date of death remains unknown, many assuming he died in the early 1930s, shortly after his final recording session. McCormick believes he may have actually met an elderly Henry Thomas on the streets of Houston in 1949, still hoboing and making music, but this remains unconfirmed. McCormick also tracked down a retired railroad conductor who remembered “Ragtime Texas” and provided some anecdotes that fill in the picture slightly. However, to a significant degree, Thomas is destined to remain a figure shrouded in mystery and speculation.

Thomas was one of at least nine children born to his sharecropper parents, who were former slaves, and raised on a farm. Wanting nothing to do with difficult and unrewarding agricultural work, he left home as a youth around 1890 to wander rural communities as an itinerant singer-musician. He rode the rods and played music for his livelihood at country suppers and dances, on trains and street corners, and in hobo camps. His primary stomping grounds was the area of northeastern Texas along the Texas Pacific Railroad line. He made his way up to Chicago several times between 1927 and 1929 and...
recorded twenty-three commercial sides there for the Vocalion label. This would place Thomas among the oldest African-American folk musicians to produce a significant body of recordings. He would have been in his early fifties when he recorded, about the same age Uncle Dave Macon was when he commenced his recording career. Indeed, Thomas' recorded repertoire shares some overlap with that of the great country music pioneer.

As such, Thomas can be considered a pre-blues singer or "songster," although he also recorded some highly regarded blues. His blues often featured an archaic AAA or four-line verse structure, consistent with the so-called "one-verse songs" described in early written accounts of the blues. The older items in his repertoire provide a rare and often compelling glimpse into what nineteenth-century African-American musicianship might have sounded like. His recordings shed light on a range of musical genres including ballads, medleys or composite songs, items that demonstrate white influence, gospel songs, and adapted popular songs. The most prominent lyrical themes in Thomas' music are, not surprisingly, trains and travel, and he made frequent use of traditional verses that "float" freely from song to song and from African- to Anglo-American tradition. For these reasons, Thomas' music is of particular interest to folklorists and those interested in reconstructing an earlier period of black music, and possibly discovering the tangled origins of the blues. In the words of McCormick, Thomas represents "our deepest look at the roots" of black traditions.

Thomas sang in a spirited, rather strident manner borne of years experience serenading audiences on trains and street corners, and somewhat reminiscent of fellow East Texas songster Leadbelly. All of his recordings feature guitar and vocals and nine performances feature the panpipes or quills. This is a simple melodic instrument composed of a series of reed pipes of varying lengths that are bound together and blown. Also known as the "syrinx," it is an instrument that has been widely recalled by Southern musicians and is thought to have African origins. Thomas' use of the quills—he would typically play between verses—represents one of the more striking and unusual sounds to be found on early "race" records. I am unaware of any other examples of the use of panpipes on early commercial recordings, either white or black, although some Library of Congress field recordings were later made. Nor is it an instrument that has subsequently acquired much of a following, although Mike Seeger will play it on occasion with considerable skill and with Thomas likely not far from his mind.

Thomas utilized a few different approaches to guitar accompaniment. His harmonic vocabulary was very limited, some of his pieces being rendered in a single chord. He relied on the basic chord positions, particularly the "D" position, and would often capo the guitar, sometimes as high as eight or nine frets. His most basic instrumental attack can be described as a "rapping" or strumming technique, possibly influenced by banjo strumming. This is a purely rhythmic and percussive style that is fast, good for dancing to, and provides an appropriate foundation for the vocals and simple melodies of the panpipes. A second approach he utilized was single-note bass work, often achieving a drone effect, and occasionally he would use a somewhat more elaborate fingerpicking approach. Thomas was a rudimentary guitar player who was at his best when he was rapping away at the instrument, providing that steady rhythmic foundation and blowing melodies on the quills.
bottleneck or knife-style guitar effort, remarkable for its intense, almost violent right-hand attack. The session concluded with Thomas’ lone sacred performances, “Jonah in the Wilderness” and “When the Train Comes Along.”

Thomas’ final session before slipping into anonymity occurred in October of 1929. It resulted in four issued sides including the all-time classics “Charmin’ Betsy” and “Railroadin’ Some,” quite possibly his greatest tour de force. “Railroadin’” is in fact a hobo’s monologue as he railroaded through Texas and north to Chicago, mimicking the train with his panpipes and calling out the stops as he goes along. “I’m on my way but I don’t know where!” he shouts. It is an unforgettable contribution to that indispensable genre of American folksong—the train song—and perhaps his greatest gift to posterity. Due to its remoteness from our contemporary experience and musical sensibilities, Thomas’ music may be an acquired taste, but as so many subsequent musicians, fans, and scholars have discovered, the rewards are mighty indeed.

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Sources:
A prophetic photograph of a three-year-old Rebekah Ruth Weiler graced the front cover of *Banjo Newsletter* in April of 1989. With her Kermit the Frog toy banjo and a bathroom plunger microphone, Rebekah proudly posed for the camera. Her parents Randy and Patsy Weiler decided to send the photo to their friends Hub and Nancy Nitchie, founders of the publication. The Nitchies enjoyed the photo and decided to run it on the front cover. Today the Kermit-banjo-strumming honor student attends Middle Tennessee State University and plays banjo for the award-winning old-time string band Delmer Holland and the Blue Creek Ramblers.
REBEKAH WEILER: BANJO GAL OF TENNESSEE
By Thomas Brown

I first crossed paths with Rebekah at a weekend-long jam in Chattanooga, Tennessee, hosted by fiddler Gil Sewell in 2004. Gil’s grapevine of old-time music contacts has tendrils creeping around all over the South, and folks had shown up from at least four states. When I arrived Saturday afternoon, there were more fiddlers than you could shake a bow at accompanied by one young lady on the banjo. They had settled in under the shade of a large pin oak, playing tune after tune, and the teen Rebekah was hanging in there with them, clawhammering note for note.

I can usually count the number of teens who show up at area old-time jams on one finger, and this anomalous occurrence was not easily explained. Some of the pieces of the puzzle started to come together later on a very muggy Friday in July, when I attended the 2004 Smithville Fiddler’s Jamboree in Smithville, Tennessee. There on the courthouse lawn again I saw Rebekah, clawhammering away with a band composed of septuagenarians known as Delmer Holland and the Blue Creek Ramblers.

Delmer Holland and the Blue Creek Ramblers are the real deal. Featuring Delmer (fiddle/vocal), Leland Holland (guitar), William Moore (upright bass), and Rebekah (banjo), the Ramblers have a pedigree that stretches back 50 years or more to when first cousins Delmer and Leland grew up on neighboring farms bordered by the Blue Creek near Waverly, Tennessee. The Holland boys often played with Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith and other area musicians.

The Middle Tennessee band has a long string of contest wins, including the 2007 State of Tennessee Old-Time String Band championship in Clarksville, Tennessee; first place at the 2007 and 2008 Smithville Fiddler’s Jamboree; the 2005 Kentucky State Old-Time String Band championship held at Rough River Dam State Park in Kentucky; and many more too numerous to list. The late Charles K. Wolfe called the Blue Creek Ramblers “one of the last surviving authentic Tennessee string bands that calls up echoes of barn dances and sorghum stir-offs. They play with such a drive and old-time spirit that if Uncle Dave Macon could have heard them, he would have shouted ‘hot dog’ and grabbed his banjo to join in.”

During the nearly seven years Rebekah has played with the Blue Creek Ramblers, her skill as a musician has steadily improved and she has also become known for her trademark vintage cotton print dress, white Sunday-go-to-meeting hat, and characteristic “whoops” and “hol-lers” she lets loose with when she wants to show her enthusiastic approval for a well executed fiddle break, or just whenever the spirit moves her.

Rebekah’s picking ability first came to the attention of William Moore who plays the upright bass with the Ramblers. Moore recalls the incident, saying, “Delmer and I
used to go to these festivals and hope to pick up an old-time banjo picker and enter the band competition. About seven years ago, we were at the old-time fiddler’s contest in Clarksville, and we heard a banjo playing down the hallway around the corner, and it sounded pretty good. I told Delmer that I was going to walk down the hall and see who it was. There was this little girl picking away. I talked with her some but she was real shy and wouldn’t talk very much. I said, ‘We would sure like for you to play with us some,’ but she didn’t seem too interested.”

Moore says that several weeks later they crossed paths again with Rebekah at the Smithville Fiddlers Jamboree in July, playing with a band. Again Moore asked, “I wish you’d consider playing with us some.” But as before, she didn’t show much interest. Finally, Rebekah joined the Ramblers in early October during The Mountaineer Festival, at Fall Creek Falls State Park in Tennessee. The gig went well and the band started talking to Rebekah and her parents about playing with them on a regular basis.

Patsy Weiler recalls the telephone conversation with Delmer when he called to discuss her 15-year-old daughter playing banjo with the band. “He called up and talked about what a fine banjo player she was, and then he paused and remarked that he and his wife had raised girls. Delmer then said, ‘If you’ll let her go with us, no one will be uglier to her and there won’t be no ugly talk. There will be no smoking, no drinking, no drugs, and I ain’t going to allow no sparking!’” Patsy laughs that Delmer may have difficulty enforcing the “no sparking” rule.

Rebekah has received other fellowships and scholarships, including a fellowship at a week-long music program held at Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, North Carolina; a scholarship for the Augusta Heritage Old-Time Music Week at Davis and Elkins College in Elkins, West Virginia; and a national scholarship to attend the Banjo Camp North in Groton, Massachusetts. In addition, she has had the opportunity to study under Laura Boosinger, Sheila Kay Adams, Bob Carlin, Ginny Hawker, Cathy Fink, Kristen Scott Benson, Riley Baugus, and the great Wade Mainer.

Laura Boosinger summed it up very nicely when she said, “Rebekah is an exciting young clawhammer player. Since her teenage years, she has made it her business to learn from older players in the old-time way, up close and personal. She has infectious enthusiasm for the music that is clearly demonstrated when you hear her play. She is part of a cadre of young players like Adam Hurt and Matt Brown that will keep this music alive for several more generations.”

Having an opportunity to know and learn from Wade and Julia Mainer has been a real treasure to Rebekah. Of the Mainers she says, “They are such incredible role models and wonderful people.” At Wade’s 100th birthday party, Rebekah says, “Wade and Julia must have performed for at least an hour, and Julia sang the whole time.”

Wade has also learned a little from Rebekah. “I was the first to show Wade an iPod,” she says. “He was very curious about it and wanted to listen to a song on it.”

Rebekah’s list of contest wins and honors has grown steadily over the years.
In addition to the numerous contest wins shared with the Blue Creek Ramblers, Rebekah has won more than her share of championships and placed in more than a dozen old-time banjo contests over the past few years. On a very hot July day in 2007, Rebekah earned the distinction of being the first woman to become the old-time banjo champion in the 36-year history of the Smithville Fiddler’s Jamboree. Another first for Rebekah was in 2004, when she was the youngest woman to win the State of Tennessee Old-Time Banjo Championship.

By 2005, Rebekah had gained the attention of Wayne Rogers, President of Gold Tone Banjo in Titusville, Florida, and in 2006 she became an endorsing artist for the company. Rogers says, “Rebekah is our youngest Gold Tone endorsee. Two or three years ago I noticed the rise of interest in old-time music in the younger folks. Upon meeting her and observing her naturally gifted talent, we decided to offer her a partnership. She is dedicated to her craft and is an exciting performer.”

Rebekah can usually be seen performing with Gold Tone’s White Ladye 250 Plus model, which has a very elaborate abalone ‘Tree of Life’ inlay pattern.

In addition to her Gold Tone White Ladye 250 Plus, Rebekah owns quite a number of banjos (five at last count), and usually has a vintage Vega on hand to use for songs in double-C sawmill tuning. Rebekah also has a Mike Ramsey banjo in the style of a Fairbanks Electric with a scooped neck, which she prefers for some modal tunes such as “June Apple.” When asked why she prefers certain banjos for particular songs, Rebekah said, “Like people having different personalities, my banjos all have their own unique sound or personality. When you are playing in different tunings and want to express different feelings in your music...a one-banjo-sound-fits-all [approach] doesn’t work very well.”

She owns a growing assortment of other stringed instruments, but admits that with her current coursework and banjo playing obligations she doesn’t really have the time needed to master another instrument. On her horizon are plans for an internship and graduate school after she completes her degree in history at MTSU in December of 2008. Rebekah is also fond of chocolate pie and loves Dalmatians.
KEEPING THE TIE HACKER TUNES: NILE WILSON

By Howard Marshall

Nile Wilson, the north-central Missouri traditional fiddler who loved to share his storehouse of rare “tie hacker” tunes, died at the age of 95 on March 21, 2008. The inheritor of numerous rare tunes and local variations on well-known melodies, he enjoyed a national, if not international, reputation for the depth and interest of his repertoire and his central Missouri playing style. For us here in Missouri, Nile and his wife Effie Gillespie Wilson, who passed away in 1995, were famous for their generosity, and for the hospitality they showed at their home in Bucklin, which Nile built. He was always delighted when people expressed interest in his music and his stories about life and work in former times.

Nile Wilson was born August 6, 1912, in the New Boston agricultural community of Linn County, in the north-central Missouri countryside of hardwood forests and rolling prairie farmland. The family farm was in the northeastern corner of Linn County within a mile of the Macon County line. The region was settled principally by Protestants, including many Welsh-American and Scotch-Irish families, and later German-speaking people and others. (After the Civil War, railroads and coal mines brought in new ethnic groups.) The community tended to disapprove of slavery in ante bellum times, but just as across the border state of Missouri, slaveholding families lived side by side with those who did not take part in the system. The two sides of the Wilson family had been in opposite camps during the Civil War. Nile’s mother’s family had a saying that he always remembered: “Abraham Lincoln had a big mouth, sent an army to whip out the South.”

Nile’s mother’s family, the Davises and Moores, were long-established Missourians with Virginia roots. They came from Kentucky well before the Civil War. His grandfather Wilson’s people were from Thorntown in west-central Indiana (Boone County), and had lived in Virginia and Kentucky before that. His father’s mother’s family, the Bobbitts, came to Linn County from Virginia in the 1850s and records show that the family had been in Virginia as early as 1744. All these branches were predominately Scotch-Irish, with strains of English and Welsh.

Nile’s grandfather Isaac Roby Wilson (1843-1906) and a friend named George H. Flint (1848-1917) were Union Army veterans who met in Indiana after the Civil War. Wilson and Flint took jobs hewing railroad ties as the railroads were being built across the Midwest. Part of their job was to help set up tent camps for the itinerant laborers who followed the rails inching westward. In late 1876 or early 1877, Wilson and Flint arrived in Linn County with a group of fellow itinerant railroad laborers. They began hewing ties for contractors in the old-growth, prairie-ringed white oak forest of Baker Township. Farmers who lived within a half-day’s wagon haul of the rail lines could realize additional income by leasing timber to contractors whose crews produced ties.

Tie hacking knew no politics. There were Confederate as well as Union veterans among the tie hackers. For the most part, they were young unmarried men who found themselves with few pros-
pects or roots after the war. In the 1860s and 1870s, railroad labor was among the few decent jobs available. Contractors supplying the railroads found plenty of toughened, unmoored young men with a bit of adventure in them, boys who saw no future or comfort in the postwar environment “back East,” even in the victorious northern states.

The gangs of tie hackers camped in various locations while cutting white oak timber and hewing railroad ties as the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railway worked its way across North Missouri. (Later this line was the Wabash, and today it is the Burlington Northern Santa Fe). These ridges are in the hilly, rolling, glaciated landscape throughout western and northwestern Macon, southwestern Adair, and extreme northeastern Linn Counties on both sides of the Mussel Fork of the Chariton River. It is a comparatively remote landscape with a very small population. Most of the small farm villages of former times have disappeared, and most of the railroad towns have shrunk because of changes in railroading and economy. The Chariton drains into the Missouri some 50 miles south. Much of the old-growth oak woods were logged off, but white oak continues to be harvested along these ridges. The ridge lands are suitable for livestock grazing but poorly suited to agriculture. The best farmland is, as always in Missouri, in the flat bottomlands along the major creeks. There are tree farms in the area focusing on white oak timber improvement. Today there is no apparent evidence of the old camps (they were temporary anyway), but archaeological surveys could yield interesting information at certain sites.

Years after the first wave of tie hackers worked in the region, railroad jobs continued to be important in the community. As a teenager, Nile himself hired out in the summers on an “extra gang” based at Brashear (in next-door Adair County), to “try to make a little money working on the railroad. ... We was given 42 cents an hour.” By this time, the late 1920s, the northern Missouri hardwood forests largely had been depleted, and most of the ties that Wilson’s crew used in their repairs were shipped in from the Ozarks.

Back in Nile’s grandfather’s day, most of the itinerant laborers eventually moved on with the camps, as tracks spiked down across northern Missouri toward St. Joe and the Great Plains beyond. Some, like Isaac Wilson and George Flint, married girls in the community around New Boston and stayed to establish homes, farms, and families. Isaac Wilson married Josephine Bobbitt; Flint married her sister Martha. (Eventually four of Isaac’s brothers followed his path to Linn County, Missouri, where they too found a place to settle.) As Nile’s niece Patsy Jamison put it in May 2008, “Thus ended the tie hacking career, but not the music.”

Farm towns on the frontier often competed to coax a railroad to their community—not unlike local leaders today begging Wal-Mart or McDonald’s to build in their town. Rail routes sprouted brand new towns at intervals of several miles, where a water stop could be set up for filling the engine’s boilers, or wood or coal loaded. Towns launched public relations campaigns in newspapers and sent emissaries in suits to railroad offices in cities like St. Louis and Chicago, but the commerce and industry that came with the railroads, not to mention the houses of prostitution and other unsavory businesses that famously hovered around railroad depots and yards, were not always eagerly anticipated. Of course, the straight line of the railroad missed all but a chosen few farm towns.

It missed New Boston. The town seemed to be satisfied with that. Birdsell and Dean’s 1882 History of Linn County, Missouri describes New Boston as follows:

Not being on a line of railroad, it has not the vanity or importance of towns thus located, and it fears no rivalry. Thus, being comparatively free from jealousy of rival towns, New Boston moves along with a sort of slow, humdrum life, now and then erecting a new building, clearing up a garden spot, or canvassing its future prospects, if a few live and energetic farmers would move into the neighborhood, with large families.

This community of farmers and railroad workers was known for its musicians and dancers. The fiddlers had diverse backgrounds, but many shared traditions of music making founded on older British Isles habits and repertoires, traditions that were abundantly leavened by minstrel tunes, Civil War ballads, German polkas and step dances, brass band pieces, piano rags, Tin Pan Alley songs, jazz, and more. Midnight fiddling sessions at the tie hacker camps in the oak woods must have been something very special.

Wilson spoke often of the influences and music of the colorful whisky-making tie hackers and farm people, but he also spoke of the coal miners, many of whom were emigrants from western and central Europe, Scandinavia, Ireland, and Wales. Along with place names like New Boston, Macon, and Edinburg, in this part of Missouri we see towns called St. Catherine, Wien, Brunswick and New Cambria. It was into this rich cultural landscape, a several-county region called “the Green Hills,” that Nile Wilson was born, and grew up to be one of Missouri’s premier traditional fiddlers. He was a musician steeped not only in the broader repertoires of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Missouri, but also in the interesting and obscure dance tunes swapped and shared by the itinerant railroad workers and local farming people.

Isaac Roby Wilson, Nile’s grandfather, ca. 1870, made soon after his return to Indiana after the Civil War. Wilson and George Flint had begun working as tie hackers in railroad construction camps.
MISSOURI’S VERNACULAR AND FIDDLE REGIONS

Missouri has to have one of the most varied cultural landscapes in the United States. Missourians have dubbed certain parts of the state Little Dixie, the Green Hills, the Ozarks, and North Missouri, names which geographers call “vernacular regions”—regional states of mind that trump official political boundaries and have a special look, feel, way of life—and, of course, music. The fiddle styles of the state align closely with its vernacular regions, and areas such as Little Dixie, the Ozarks, and the Missouri Valley are associated with characteristic fiddle styles. Though things have changed in the last 25 or 30 years, in the past you could just about tell what county in Missouri a fiddler was almost from the instant the bow struck the strings.

Little Dixie is a region that may already be familiar to those readers interested in Missouri fiddling. If you see it on a map, though, you might wonder how on earth Little Dixie wound up in central Missouri and not to the south where you might think it ought to be. Little Dixie, and the Green Hills just to the north, are blessed with rich alluvial soil and gently rolling country which attracted planters from similar country in Kentucky and Tennessee. In the early 19th century they began to grow commercial crops such as hemp and tobacco, recreating the slave-based economy of the plantation South. Today the imprint of the South is still present in many ways from foodways to fiddling. You can get biscuits, home cured ham, and grits at the diners and Little Dixie is known for a style of fiddling that is more similar to that of Central Kentucky and Middle Tennessee than to that of the nearby Midwest.

To the north is a more gently rolling region settled by people who were primarily Midwestern style grain farmers. The North Missouri fiddle style is generally more note-y, more “hornpipey,” with a repertoire drawn heavily from written collections, and typified by the elegant fiddling of players like Cyril Stinnett. The tunes are technically difficult, sometimes set in the flatted keys, and occasionally in jig time. The music is fiery but gets its energy from the left hand rather than the bowing hand. Quite a few of the tunes played in North Missouri have roots in Canada, possibly because people in that neck of the woods could pick up Canadian radio programs.

To the south of the Missouri River is the rugged Ozarks region. The first European settlers were French fur traders who came up the White River. In the early 19th century people of Scots-Irish-English background brought woodman skills, log building, hunting and farming traditions from the hills of Tennessee. Ozarks Missouri fiddling is an energetic and stripped-down hoedown style, typified by the style of fiddlers such as Bob Holt. The music is tailored to a way of dancing which is more of a flat-foot style in which the feet do not get very far from the floor. Ozarks square dancers call it jig dancing and they keep it up through the entire tune—and the pace is frenetic.

There are many other interesting pockets of cultural influence such as the French settlement area south of St. Louis. Missouri fiddler Charlie Walden tells of a woman from the region who could call square dances in French and of fiddlers such as Joe Polittle and Roy Boyer who played tunes with a French Canadian feel not heard in other parts of the state. And, finally, there’s a settlement area that people call Rhineland along the Missouri River between St. Louis and Jefferson City that still bears a German feel to its landscape, food, and fiddle traditions. Musicians such as the Nadler family and Jake Hockemeyer liked to play the hoedowns favored by their Anglo-Scots-Irish neighbors, but they were also partial to polkas, waltzes, and schottisches.

—Gail Gillespie
Nile’s father, Dolph Wilson, competed in the famous WOS radio fiddle contests of the mid- and later 1920s. These events, like the many programs of live fiddle music, were beamed live across the nation from the dome of the state capitol building in Jefferson City, where the radio station was located. The winners in the first WOS contest, on New Year’s Eve 1925, were chosen by the radio listening audience, who were invited to send a postcard, a letter, or a telegram to the station with their vote for first place. In this odd system (modified in succeeding contests), a postcard was worth one vote (one point), a letter two points, and a telegram three points. The contest attracted 82 contestants. It started at 9 PM New Year’s Eve, and paused at 5 AM for a break and some sustenance. The top 15 fiddlers resumed butting heads at 8 AM and the contest ended at noon on January 1, 1926. According to Nile’s son, Garry Wilson, the story is often told that Dolph Wilson won first place in that contest in terms of the number of individual responses sent to the station, but since Dolph’s fans sent postcards instead of the higher-vote-getting letters or telegrams, he finished further down the list.

Nile Wilson grew up on the family farm where his father operated a sawmill. All the Wilson boys worked there. Dolph also operated a custom threshing operation for farmers in the area. Young Nile gained the nickname “Flaxie,” due to his light blond hair.
The source of the name “Nile” has been a topic of speculation among the family for many years, with no clear conclusion. Dolph taught a five-year-old Nile his first tune, “Boatsman,” and soon after, “Raccoon Tail is Rings All Round” (“Shelby’s Mule”/ “Getting Up the Stairs the Monkey”), and “Run Boy Run.” (In my experience, these tunes have become rare in Missouri.) Dolph’s method of teaching his son was as follows, described in Now That’s a Good Tune:

First he’d show me what the scale was on the fiddle. And then, after that, why he’d pick it up and play real slow and show me where the notes were, and then I’d take it and try it, ‘til finally you’d get it, you know. Then, maybe after you got that tune pretty good, they’d think of another one that was something easy. And after you learned the easy ones, why the others, you were on your own after.

A farm accident with a corn shredder nearly ended Nile’s fiddling career. (A corn shredder is a machine that shells corn from the harvested ears, and simultaneously shreds stalks. The shredded stalks become silage, or ensilage, fodder fed to cattle during winter months when pastures are depleted and hay and milled feed scarce and expensive.) It happened on December 2, 1930. Nile was helping his brothers make silage. It was bitterly cold, working in the snow. Nile got his gloved left hand snared in the gears of the corn shredder and the gears pulled his hand, crunching off parts of the second and third fingers on his left hand. He was lucky to lose only what he lost. Through years of knowing fiddlers of Nile’s generation who grew up on farms or themselves farmed, I was always struck by similar stories of lost fingers, hands, and arms in various kinds of labor-saving new equipment, from corn planters and pickers, seed drills, shredders, manure spreaders, hay presses, sickle mowers, grinders, hay rakes, harrows, loaders, ditchers, circle saws, and windmills, to harvesters or threshers of numerous varieties, all of which featured complex, dangerous mechanical parts.

Nile had to give up fiddling for a time, but recuperated and eventually began playing again. In 1931 or early 1932, as he was regaining his left-hand dexterity, a bit of telephone fiddling gave him new confidence. Everyone was on a party line in those days. Nile’s father and his friend John Morelock, who shared an interest in fox hunting, would get on the telephone, and the switchboard operator would plug in their lines. They, and anyone else who happened to be listening in, could hear each other play music. They sometimes laid the telephone receiver in a dishpan, which gave some amplification to the sound. Nile started playing “Billy in the Low Ground” (also called “Billy in the Low Land” in north-central Missouri) a tune Morelock always asked Dolph to play. The listeners on the other end of the telephone line, including Morelock, “never knew the difference,” and thought it was Dolph doing the fiddling. This pleased Nile’s dad tremendously.

The condition of his left hand made certain tunes difficult to note, and the

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GREEN HILLS OLD FIDDLERS’ CONTEST, 1927

A 1927 contest in Bucklin was covered in the local newspaper. Its tone reflects the boosterism and enthusiasm of flourishing farm and railroad towns in the Roaring Twenties (an enthusiasm and economy soon to be all but smothered by the Great Depression). The Bucklin Herald report (November 28, 1927) shows the importance in Missouri of banjos and guitars as accompaniment in fiddlers’ contests. Two of the Wilson clan’s finest, Dolph and his brother Lester, placed in the top six winners.

The Old Fiddlers’ Contest

We must say that Bucklin enjoyed a real treat in the Old Fiddlers’ Contest, held in the building of the Producer’s Exchange, and sponsored by Earle Green and Ed Herriman, of this city. There was gaiety and heart throbs aplenty as the strains of “Arkansas Traveler,” “The Golden Slippers,” and “Turkey in the Straw” rang through the crowded hall bringing visions of happy youth to elders and wonder to the young as they heard with pleasure this pioneer parent of latter-day jazz.

There were fiddlers from many parts of the country present, one even coming from so far away as Chicago. Richmond (Mo.), Rothville, Ethel, Moberly, New Boston, La Crosse, were all well represented. Bucklin put up a real fight having nine contestants entered, and taking one prize. …

The judges, Wes Bailey, Gene Troutman, Charley Parker, Henry Hull and also George Bailey awarded first place to Aubrey Bradley of Moberly, who received a fine new violin. Second place was won by Dolph Wilson of New Boston, his prize being a new auto tire. James Holt, of Bucklin, won third place and was awarded a splendid new razor. Ada Mercer, the only woman entered in the contest, won fourth place and was given a watch chain. Sixth place was captured by Lester Wilson, of Chicago, who received the safety razor.

Prizes, consisting of a number of chickens, were given to the holders of lucky numbers …

The fiddlers were accompanied by the best banjo and guitar talent obtainable in this part of the country …

The merchants of Bucklin are to be commended for the splendid support given to this event, which was one that will be remembered for many moons as a really enjoyable entertainment.

Yes, we still have raffles at fiddle contests, and food concessions are set up by local groups. The prizes no longer include live chickens, but the other kinds of prizes from the 1920s are still handed out. “Arkansas Traveler,” “Golden Slippers,” and “Turkey in the Straw” still echo through community halls, school auditoriums, and tents where fiddle contests and square dances are held.
keys of F and Bb especially difficult to manage. He stopped playing “Fisher’s Hornpipe” in F, for example, where most of the fiddlers he knew played it. Nile disliked having to play waltzes in contests (in Missouri, waltzes feature spots of left-hand vibrato), and he often avoided tunes that needed double-stops, as this too was difficult for his left fingers. Many of Wilson’s tunes were placed in the keys of C and G, partly in order to allow him to play the tune more easily. In spite of this problem, Nile retained his powerfully accented and driving playing style, and continued to be a major competitor at fiddle contests as well as playing at dances and sessions, church services, and various special events. Nile used to joke that, “I used to fiddle pretty good before I lost my fingers.” Despite the loss, Nile retained his powerfully accented and driving playing style, and continued to be a major competitor at fiddle contests as well as playing at dances and sessions, church services, and various special events. Nile used to joke that, “I used to fiddle pretty good before I lost my fingers.” Despite the loss, Nile won the first fiddle contest he entered, playing a borrowed violin in a 1932 Fourth of July picnic in the nearby railroad town of LaPlata (Adair County). The prize was five dollars. As recounted in Now That’s A Good Tune: When I was a boy, a friend of mine and I went to LaPlata... The Fourth of July celebration is what it was, because they had a carnival... I’d seen somebody carrying a fiddle around there, and I said, “What are they going to do here?” and he said, “They’re going to have a fiddling contest on the bandstand, up here.” So I went up and I heard them a little bit. And I borrowed a fiddle and played. And I won first. (So I) had more money to celebrate on. I believe, maybe I played “Leather Britches” for one. You seldom ever heard of anybody playing a waltz at an old fiddlers’ contest. Most of them were hoedowns as snappy as they could get, to see if the fiddler had drive. According to Nile’s son Garry, another accident nearly proved disastrous. While working as a road grader operator (“blade man”) building highways for the Trinidad Construction Company near Mexico, Missouri, in 1958, Nile was helping repair an asphalt paving machine. While he was lying underneath the massive machine, it fell on him, causing him to lose hearing in one ear. Nile eventually recovered from his other injuries, but the lost hearing did not return. In spite of this, he continued to be an outstanding musician. No one would have suspected he was deaf in one ear. Fiddlers’ contests are a staple of old-fashioned celebrations and socials in rural and small-town Missouri. Dolph and
NEW BOSTON CORN SHUCKING, 1938

Among the many events and frolics where Dolph and the Wilson boys provided string music was a corn shucking in New Boston in December 1938. New Boston (population 50), founded in 1846 and named for Boston, Massachusetts, still supports a post office and one church. The event was held in the Anti-Horse Thief Association lodge building, which had a dance floor. The Wilsons and their friends played for dances and socials here on many occasions. J. H. (Herbert) McCollum sponsored square dances and round dances in the Anti-Horse Thief Association lodge. The building, where the local chapter of the vigilance group met, was usually simply called “the town hall,” and used for public events and dances. The corn shuckings were created by McCollum, a businessman and community leader nostalgic for the kind of husking bees he remembered. McCollum sponsored four corn shuckings between 1938 and 1942, when he was called into the Army during World War II. As reported in 1938 by “A Member of the (Kansas City) Star’s Staff,” who drove over two hundred miles to get there:

No Battles for Kisses
New Boston’s Husking Bee Is Just Good Fun
There Is a Scramble for Red Ears of Corn, Then Floor Is Cleared for an Old-Fashioned Dance

New Boston, Mo., Dec. 7. – There were no fights in the town hall tonight, but plenty of boisterous squaring off and flexing of muscles accompanied by the finding of red ears at the old-fashioned corn husking bee. Kisses and fights had been promised by the promoters of the bee, for those were the natural accompaniments of husking affairs in olden times. J. H. McCollum, whose ancestors came here from Kentucky in 1810, was promoter, starter and referee. He “got up” the old-fashioned bee because he got tired of all the hulabaloo over modern corn husking contests. According to McCollum, under the old rules when a husker found a red ear he could kiss the girl of his choice, but had to fight the girl’s husband or fiancé if he raised a fuss about it.

Town a Social Center
New Boston is a community of sixty persons near Brookfield, Mo. It is not to be confused with Old Boston, which burned several years ago. New Boston was built on the site of the old town. This is a social center for families for miles around, who used to drive wagons but now drive trucks and new cars to the town hall attractions...

A crowd of 400 persons of all ages was at the bee. Corn in husks was piled down the middle of the town hall in a strip four feet wide. Men and women who wanted to enter the bee lined up on both sides and soon they were whisked into action.

Dust nearly blotted out the lights, but hoarse cries of triumph and feminine squeals of delight could be heard throughout the hall. Women who found red ears tried to hide them, but were found out and forced to choose someone to kiss.

Young men leaped through the dusty atmosphere holding up two or more ears they had found.

“I’m savin’ mine for a rainy day,” someone shouted.

A Challenge In Fun

“Put up your dukes, Harry,” another red ear finder cried to the escort of a pretty girl.

When the last red ear had been discovered and the last kiss taken the men seized shovels and cleaned the floor for a square dance.

Many of the revelers were in costumes taken from attic trunks, and many men were in the overalls they wear daily in the fields. There began a square dance with the familiar whine of the caller:

“Ho, ho, ho. You and me, Little brown jug don’t I love thee. Swing your partners. One, two, three. Yippeeee!”

Dolph Wilson fiddled for the dancers on an instrument he has played for fifty years. His son Orly thumped the piano, and another son, Leone, picked a tenor banjo.

Prizes for Costumes

Mrs. Russell Wood, a farmer’s wife, won the prize for the best costume. She wore a black taffeta dress with ruffles, a black bonnet and a black broadcloth cape which was worn by her grandmother...

John Kirby, 18, who has been calling square dances for six years, was the best in a calling contest.

Finally exhausted and flushed with happiness after an evening’s fun, the crowd rode home under a huge yellow moon.
Nile Wilson participated in many of these contests and accumulated a reputation as the fiddlers to beat. Nile’s old friend Barry Ford, who lives east of Bucklin in the town of Callao in Macon County, remembers the first time he first saw Nile and Dolph Wilson fiddle. It was at a fiddlers’ contest at an ice cream supper in the small farm town of Cash, north of Callao, in the summer of 1935. Ford was ten years old. He had three great-uncles who played the fiddle in the Callao area, but they did not enter the competition. As Ford recalled, his great-uncles talked it over and agreed that, “No use us playing, the Wilson boys will win it.” Nile won first place, receiving $5.00 cash, and Dolph won third or fourth place, with accompaniment by Leone and Orley.

Today many debate the merits of fiddle contests. Often the best fiddlers do not compete; fiddlers tend to play the same big tunes in similar competitively successful styles; certain repeat champions may develop prima donna egos; playing in numerous contests gives a contestant familiarity with judges and this “recognition” can inadvertently add a point or two in the scoring; the judging is often strange; with judges who know nothing about fiddle, wearing a cowboy shirt and boots adds a few points to the score sheet; competitors tend to take the results too seriously; many fine tunes never get heard by audiences; few, if any, audience members dance; et cetera. But contests are a very longstanding tradition in Missouri. Nile Wilson played in dozens if not hundreds of competitions, like his father and uncles. People at a contest who did not know him might have said, “There’s a contest fiddler.” But in many visits with him at contests, he always remarked that he was not there for mock glory, a five-dollar bill, or a new tire. He was there because contests are where fiddlers congregate, swap tunes, and tell stories. He did not consider himself a contest fiddler.

Wilson considered his principal role to be that of a dance fiddler. During the Great Depression, he was asked to play at a dance hall in North Salem (north of New Boston). His fiddling was so popular that he wound up playing “every Saturday night, rain or shine” for two solid years, 1936 and 1937. As Nile recalled, they danced outside if the weather was fair, and moved inside the old building, which served as a tavern and dance hall, when it rained or snowed. Rain or shine, they danced and the owner sold a lot of bottle beer. Nile’s pay per Saturday night was $1.50.

Both grandfathers, Isaac Wilson and Tom Davis, were dance fiddlers and passed tunes down through the family. Nile also played guitar and seconded at local dances for Dolph and banjo player Aubrey (Orb) Bradley (from Moberly, Randolph County) at the 1920s fiddle contests and programs were broadcast over WOS. Wilson also played five-string banjo in an archaic one-finger up-picking style (one of numerous Central and North Missouri variations of pre-Scruggs finger style and parlor style banjo), as well as tenor banjo, as did his brother Leone and other family members. Later on, Nile’s son Garry accompanied him on guitar, playing the Silvertone archtop instrument they obtained from a Sears Roebuck catalog. In addition to soaking up the music of his father, uncles, and brothers, Nile learned many tunes, both old standards and local tunes, from fiddlers in the neighborhood such as Wes Bailey and Albert Spray.

Nile Wilson’s repertoire covered the spectrum of traditional central and North Missouri fiddling of his generation. He played all the older, traditional big tunes in our region, from “Soldier’s Joy,” “Tennessee Wagner,” and “Billy in the Low Ground,” to “Peekaboo Waltz,” “Sugar in the Gourd,” and “Irish Washerwoman.” He enjoyed playing old ragtime pieces, sentimental songs, waltzes, jigs, schottisches,
and marches popular in the late 19th and earlier 20th centuries, such as “Red Wing” and “Goodnight Waltz,” and he played from the bag of tunes fiddlers in our region heard on records and radio by famous fiddlers such as Arthur Smith, Tommy Magness, Howdy Forrester, and Tommy Jackson. He also enjoyed playing many of the contest tunes that became widespread in the 1970s and 1980s, such as “Tom and Jerry” and “Jack of Diamonds.”

Some tunes in Wilson’s repertoire were inherited through his family and neighbors’ playing, originally learned from the itinerant Irish railroad workers in the late 19th century. Nile’s stories about his grandfather Isaac Wilson’s visits to latenight, homemade-whiskey-lubricated fiddle sessions in the tie hacker camps in his area were exciting and fascinating. These camps were similar to camps in the same part of Missouri where Irish musician Francis O’Neill taught school for a year and collected several fiddle tunes at local dances (before going to Chicago and becoming famous). As most people interested in Irish fiddle music in America know, before he was hired to teach math, Francis O’Neill’s first job in Edina was manual labor on a work crew building a railroad viaduct past the town (see “Irish Echoes in Outstate Missouri,” Missouri Historical Review, October 2005).

A few tie hacker tune titles remained active, such as “Mississippi Snag,” but many other titles were forgotten over the generations, so the melodies accrued practical titles, such as “Tiehacker Number One,” “Tiehacker Rag,” “Tiehacker’s Billy in the Low Land,” and “Oak Ridge Stomp.” In former times, titles with “rag” and “stomp” often indicated a breakdown or hoedown, as in these examples, rather than an actual ragtime piece. Likewise, as often as it means a 6/8-time dance tune, in Missouri, “jig” often means a hoedown/reel/breakdown, and a solo step dance some call clogging.


Center: Wilson in a session at a fiddler’s convention in the railroad town of Tina, Missouri (Carroll County), September 1985.

Bottom: Wilson with young John Williams of Madison, Missouri, at a session in Bucklin in 1999. Williams learned a number of tie hacker tunes from Wilson and recorded several on Fiddling Missouri (Voyager Records CD344, 1999).
Wilson enjoyed playing and passing on to other fiddlers tunes that circulated in his community. Some of these are familiar across northern and central Missouri, such as “Best Old Coon Dog” (from his great-uncle, fiddler Pont Davis from nearby Brush Creek), “Walk Along John,” “Coming Down from Denver,” and a tune Nile just called “an Ed Davis tune” (Davis was a cousin of his mother’s). He also played tunes of more local association in Linn, Macon, Livingston, and neighboring counties, such as “New Boston Hornpipe,” “John Morelock’s Sugar in the Gourd” (a version popularized by New Boston fiddler Morelock, a close friend of the Wilsons’), “Poor Little Pussycat Down in the Cellar,” “Yellow Boston,” “Hal Scott’s Special,” and “Old Reunion.” When Nile played at contests in the 1990s, a typical set of fiddle tunes was “Old Reunion,” “The Waltz You Saved for Me,” and “Leather Britches.”

Wilson played a smooth style of fiddling characteristic of his region of Missouri, which was taught to him by his father, his uncle Lester Wilson, his great-uncle Charlie Davis, and others in the family and community. Nile often demonstrated how one should “roll the bow,” and not play “jerky.” He described his style as, “just old-time square dance fiddling,” and his favorite venue for playing music was always a local community square dance. Like most fiddlers I know, Wilson was not interested in academic debates over the nuances of regional and individual fiddle styles. He did, however, enjoy demonstrating how ironclads, such as “Billy in the Low Ground” and “Tennessee Wagner,” were played by different fiddlers he remembered, a demonstration which could reveal much about the endless melodic variations and bowings that players played within a small geographic area. Nile’s favorite tune was “Leather Britches.”

Wilson was adept at “beating the straws” or “playing fiddlesticks,” as well as playing old-fashioned “second” fiddle. Playing fiddlesticks/beating the straws was often done while the fiddler was in chorded-up tuning (cross-tuned). Nile’s favorite backup for fiddling was guitar, but he also enjoyed banjo and, like others of his generation, he appreciated piano or reed organ (pump organ) accompaniment. In our part of Missouri, the smallish, portable, pump organ was often transported to square dances and sessions of all kinds, but by the 1920s upright pianos, available through mail order catalogs as well as at local stores, had become more popular (even if a piano could not be hauled plac-
Nile's second fiddle playing was typical of the old-fashioned way of one fiddler backing up another. To us, this produces splendid music. To others, it may be an acquired taste. The tradition has the "second" providing thick, sonorous, rubbery, two-note chords below and around the melody. The two fiddlers typically sway melodic passages and snippets of melody, and, on a recording (if the two violins and musicians are reasonably "together"), it is sometimes hard to tell who is playing lead and who is playing second. This custom of fiddle backup (different from the fiddle chop in bluegrass backup), if bowed with appropriate accent and richness, and with the bow digging in just a split second behind the melody notes, to my ears sounds rather like someone chording a reed organ (or perhaps, huffing away on a bagpipe, or squeezing an accordion). It is an effective method, and a technique that deserves to be carried on.

Like most of the Missouri fiddlers of his generation whom I have known, Nile played a handful of tunes in chorded-up (cross-tuned/scordatura) tunings, a tradition going back to the early evolution of violin playing. Most of these were learned from his uncle Charlie Davis, whose farm was near New Boston. These tunes included, "Little Whisky," "Old Coon Dog" (similar to "Granny Will Your Dog Bite"), "Grey Eagle," "Lost Indian," "Rye Straw," and "Sally Goodin" set with "strings chorded" in A-E-A-E, and, with strings chorded in A-E-A-C#, "Rye Whisky" and "Paddy on the Turnpike." As many researchers and collectors have observed, the banning of cross-tuned fiddling by fiddle contest committees in the 1950s and 1960s had an unfortunate dampening effect, and, at least in my experience in Missouri, discouraged many people from playing chorded tunes.

Nile Wilson enjoyed showing how an old song, such as "Buffalo Gals" or "Shortening Bread," was converted by the old-timers into hard-driving hoedowns (breakdowns) for square dancing. He also enjoyed comparing his square dance version of "Leather Britches" with the contest version of the tune played by champion contest fiddlers like Charlie Walden (as demonstrated by Nile and Charlie, with guitarist John Stewart, at a Missouri Arts Council program in Branson in 1986).

His principal violin was a German-made Stradivarius copy, bought from a junk man in about 1970. This instrument was stolen at a fiddle contest in Keytesville while he was listening to fiddler Albert Spray hold forth. But his favorite violin was his father Dolph's, a Strad copy from Byler's Music Store in the nearby town of Ethel, bought by a friend in 1904, who sold it to Dolph for $5.50. Nile kept it in a special display case in his music room.

Wilson worked for many years as a heavy machinery operator and foreman for the Land Construction Company of St. Joe, building highways across North Missouri. He retired in 1980. He did violin repair and setup and re-haired bows in a shop at his home, and built several houses in Bucklin and New Boston. After he retired, Wilson was able to travel to distant fiddle contests and folk festivals, such as the Frontier Folklife Festival in St. Louis, the Great Lakes Fiddle Contest in Duluth, Minnesota, the University of Chicago Folk Festival, the Arbor Day Fiddle Contest in Nebraska City, Nebraska, and the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes in Seattle, Washington, where his style and repertoire were welcomed and appreciated.

Nile became popular around Missouri as a presenter of programs on Missouri fiddling that were sponsored by the Missouri Cultural Heritage Center and the Missouri

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Folk Arts Program (Missouri Arts Council) in Columbia. Wilson taught at the Bethel Fiddle Camp for several years. He was a shy man, and on our trip to the Great Plains Fiddle Championships in Vermillion, South Dakota, in September 1998 (an annual event that always includes one or more Missouri fiddlers), he knew few of the musicians and preferred to watch, rather than compete in, the senior division. Wilson, a true gentleman, was known as a sober and diligent contest judge. He was respected by his peers.

Nile Wilson’s experience and depth as a traditional musician were legendary. His fiddle music both in repertory and style are influential among his peers and younger admirers. This essay has veered between research report, obituary, and personal memoir of a good friend. I hope readers do not mind. Listening recently to several hours of recordings made at Nile’s house, I was reminded how fortunate I was to know him well, as a friend as well as a fiddling mentor. I appreciated the man, his generosity, and his music. I enjoyed many sessions and visits as well as a number of trips to fiddle contests and other events with him. His passing feels to me like someone kicked a column out of the Parthenon. But Nile Wilson’s great tunes live on in the music of fiddle players across the country. 

Dr. Howard (Rusty) Marshall is a Missouri fiddler, Voyager Records producer, author of books and articles on traditional architecture and music, and Professor Emeritus of Art History and Archaeology at the University of Missouri. His book on Missouri fiddling is in preparation; references and footnotes have been eliminated for this article but will appear in the longer manuscript. Special thanks to Garry Wilson, Patsy Wilson Jamison, Margot McMillen, David Cavins (digital images and sound), and Amber Gaddy.

Four of Nile Wilson’s tunes were included on the University of Missouri’s double LP record project called “Now That’s a Good Tune:” Masters of Traditional Missouri Fiddling (University of Missouri, 1989). Charlie Walden and Bill Shull produced a CD of Wilson’s music, Tie Hacker Hoe-down: Old-Time Fiddle Tunes from Central Missouri (Missouri State Old-Time Fiddler’s Association, 1995; reviewed in The Devil’s Box, spring 1996). Three of Nile’s tunes, as taught to the author and John Williams, were included on a 1999 CD, Fiddling Missouri (Voyager Records 1999). Wilson was profiled in the Old-Time Herald (winter 1994-1995), Missouri Folklore Society Journal (1991-1992), and Missouri State Old-Time Fiddlers Association Quarterly (Spring 1995).
Nile Wilson and friends playing at his home, April 1999. Clockwise from foreground, Nile Wilson, John Williams (fiddle), Howard Marshall (banjo), Betse Ellis (fiddle).
Workshop

TWO NILE WILSON TUNES
Transcribed by Walt Koken and Clare Milliner

Tie Hacker No. 1

GDAE

Sugar in the Gourd

GDAE
Festival Profile

SECOND ANNUAL TURQUOISE VALLEY OLD-TIME MUSIC FESTIVAL
By James Whitesell

Like the Appalachian mountains two thousand gas-guzzling miles away, Southeast Arizona is filled with spectacular piney mountains. Also like the distant Appalachians, the Arizona mountains once were filled with the sounds of the fiddles and banjos of the early settlers. But those days passed with changing times and peoples. Southern Appalachian-style old-time mountain music became pretty sparse in Southeast Arizona. Or at least it used to be. When old-time fiddler and basement musicologist John Beland reluctantly left the high-energy Minnesota old-time music world to retire to the short-sleeve-winter climate of Southeast Arizona, he brought his music and his enthusiasm with him. Together with another Minnesota frostbite refugee, Jim Whitesell, and Virginia-bred John Clabourne, he started up an Appalachian-style old-time string band, the Arthritis Brothers. The Brothers (North Carolina-born Earl Rigg has since replaced Whitesell) have played at thirty or more venues of all flavors over the past few years. Old-time Appalachian-style string band music is no longer such a rare event down here.

The next step in performing CPR on local old-time music was to start up a festival. The Brothers put their heads together with fervid music supporter Pete Campbell, the young manager of the gig-friendly Turquoise Valley Country Club in the dusty high desert border town of Naco. The son of a champion step-dancer, Campbell jumped at the chance to develop an old-time music festival. He provided the venue and very graciously agreed to underwrite the festival. Beland and the Brothers lined up the festival ducks and the First Annual Turquoise Valley Old-Time Music Festival made the quantum jump from pickers-on-the-stage reality last October.

Headliners were Tom Sauber, Bayou Seco, and Tucson’s Privy Tippers. Also headlining were the dazzling, eclectic, mostly-Celtic acoustic duo of Landes and Thompson. The festival emcee was that perennially entertaining tall-drink-of-water Arizona legend, Big Jim Griffith. Though a typically lightly attended first-time festival, everyone agreed it was a success. Everyone also agreed that it should be an annual event—and so it is. Year Two is already on the horizon, and will venture a bit farther on the musical range.

The Year One headliners were tickled with the festival and said they’d like to come back. They will—all of them, including contra dance caller Claire Zucker. Tom Sauber is bringing his hot-fingered son Patrick this time around. The expanded festival will also feature four additional groups playing a variety of string music—the lovely Western-flavored harmonies of Motel Arizona; the peppery borderland string band music of El Paso’s Rubio family; a pair of sizzling bluegrassers, fiddler Arvel Bird and multi-instrumentalist Billy Lilly; and the crowd-pleasing Celtic-and-folk-leaning acoustic musician and tale-spinner Christopher Dean.

The festival dates are October 10-12th, beginning on Friday evening, October 10th, with a dinner, old-time fashion show, and a concert. Bands and workshops will run all day long on Saturday and Sunday. Saturday night there will be a square/contra/Cajun/whatever-else-pops-up dance. There is on-site RV and tent camping with toilet facilities. Other accommodations are available in nearby Bisbee and Sierra Vista.

Check the Arthritis Brothers (http://members.epowerc.net/arthritisbrothers), Turquoise Valley Country Club (www.turquoisvalley.com), or the various artists’ websites for further details.

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THE OLD-TIME HERALD WWW.OLDTIMEHERALD.ORG AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2008 39
Festival Profile

FOAOTMAD’S GAINSBOROUGH OLD-TIME FESTIVAL

By David Prat Durán

Once a year, the town of Gainsborough, England, becomes the Appalachians for a week. This year’s Gainsborough Old-Time Festival was my first time, and it certainly won’t be my last. Our weekend started on Friday morning when we flew from Barcelona, my home city, to the English town of Doncaster. The festival, which is put on by the Friends of American Old-Time Music and Dance (FOAOTMAD), is held at Castle Hill School, about one mile north of Gainsborough’s city center. FOAOTMAD takes good care of the attendees, and the festival is well facilitated, with indoor and outdoor campsites, meals and a bar, and—who could forget the most important thing?—good music! Old-time enthusiasts enjoyed a nonstop lineup of events, ranging from concerts by some of the foremost current old-time performers and workshops for musicians to polish up on their skills, to jams for those who simply wanted to let it all hang out.

After leaving our belongings at the indoor campsite, it was time to start jamming and making friends, and of course to have a good old pint of ale. The concerts started at 8:30, each band with its own special flavor. The Down Trodden String Band is a British group with a repertoire drawn largely from the Appalachian tradition, with an unusual instrumentation: mandolin, guitar, banjo, and octave mandolin, giving their music a distinctive style. The Kitty Hawks, another UK-based band, gave us a beautiful show, traditional old-time and contemporary music, with harmonies that created an amazing mix of high and low-some. The Shivers (Chance and Susette), playing old-time country music and featuring the only autoharp of the night, brought the sound of the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers to the festival.

One of the most powerful moments of the night was the Piney Woods show. This was a unique opportunity for people to experience the music of Dave and Tim Bing. There are only good words to say about them; the audience thoroughly enjoyed the wonderful playing of each band member. If you like fast fiddle tunes, grand voices, and amazing banjo playing, this is your band.

The last concert of the night, by Adam Hurt and Beth Hartness, was one that made my mind travel a few thousand miles. Adam’s banjo playing is just perfect and blends beautifully with Beth’s tasteful guitar style. Adam is also an impressive fiddler and gave us a chance to enjoy a few fiddle tunes.

In addition to the concert there was dancing from the accomplished performer Kerry Fletcher, accompanied by Tim Brooks. Fletcher is adept at a variety of styles, from waltzing to clogging, and has many years’ experience in giving workshops. Tim has been playing for dance teams and social dances for over 30 years, as well as being a singer-songwriter. After the concerts the jam sessions started up again, with so much inspiration around that not a moment was to be squandered.

Saturday was a busy day. There were workshops from early morning right up until the evening’s concerts began. There were all kinds of workshops: beginner and intermediate banjo, backup guitar, mandolin, fiddle, upright bass, clogging, singing with the banjo, and beginner flatfoot.

Adam’s “Interpretation of Ed Haley’s Fiddle Tunes on the Banjo” workshop was fascinating, and the attendees came away with quite a few new tools under their belts. Adam is a natural teacher and knows how to make people feel at ease. Beginner fiddle was another not-to-be-missed workshop. Dave Bing is a superb player and teacher, providing participants with the tools required to be a real old-time fiddler.

After spending the day roaming from workshop to workshop it was time for the concerts. Those who missed the first day’s concerts or who simply wanted a little bit more were given a second chance to catch the bands that had played on Friday. Afterwards there was a square dance with Kate Lissauer calling. Once more there were jams everywhere, all around the school, in the dining room, in the hall, and even in the corridor. After a few hours of playing it was about time we got at least a little bit of shuteye.

Despite its being the last day of the festival, on Sunday there were some workshops: Round Peak repertoire, upright bass, duo, slow jam, arrangements for a band, and clogging. At noon it was time for us to leave the festival behind us and head off to the airport.

The Gainsborough Festival is a must for old-time fans all around the UK and Europe. The music, the organization, and the attendees were second to none. There are only a handful of old-time festivals in Europe, and most of these are a mixture of bluegrass, old-time, and Irish. The Gainsborough festival is one hundred percent old-time music through and through, honoring the style by not putting it in the usual box with its close cousins.

Other notable music festivals around Europe with a good selection of old-time music include the Johnny Keenan Banjo Festival (www.johnnykeenan.com), which takes place in a small town in Ireland called Longford—four days full of old-time, bluegrass, and Celtic, with all the music being related to the banjo.

Al Ras is a small bluegrass and old-time festival near Barcelona, Spain. Most of the bands are from Spain, but there is usually at least one international performer. Musicians like Bill Keith, Andy Gllandt, and Tom Corbett have played at the festival.

FOAOTMAD organizes several events throughout the year. For more information, visit www.foaotmad.org.uk.

I’d like to thank Nick Pilley for his help, and all the Gainsborough festival staff for such a job well done.
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Reviews

Round Peak Volume 2
From the Collection of Ray Alden

Tommy Jarrell: fiddle, banjo; Fred Cockerham: banjo, fiddle; Kyle Creed: banjo; Charlie Levee: banjo; Earnest East: fiddle, banjo; Gilmer Woodruff: banjo; Paul Sutphin: guitar; Verlin Clifton: mandolin; Ronald Collins: guitar; Bobby Patterson: guitar; Audine Lineberry: bass; Mac Snow: guitar; Scotty East: guitar; Dave Spilka: guitar

Ducks on the Millpond / May I Sleep in Your Barn Tonight Mister / Tater Patch (1)/Tater Patch (2)/Policeman / Cider / Yellow Rose / Flatwoods / Zach Payne’s Devil in the Strawstack / Pet McKinney’s Sail Away / Yellow Gal’s Boll Weevil / Let Me Fall / June Apple / Lonesome Road Blues / John Henry / Old Joe Clark / Round Town Gals / Wreck of the Old 97 / Tempy / Old Molly Hare / Darling Nellie Gray / Uncle Charlie Jarrell’s Pretty Little Girl / Head Over Heels / Change-a-life (talk) / What We Gonna Do with the Baby / Little Maggie / Back Step Cindy / Playing together (talk) / Breaking Up Christmas / Rouatabout / Cumberland Gap / Fortune / Hell Among the Round Peakers / June Apple / Sally Ann / Stag-o-Lee / Rosalie McFalls / Logan County Blues

Well, the only person on the scene missing was the Jack of Hearts, and maybe Benton Flippen. What a great aural album of memories this is for me, stretching back to almost the first time I went to the “real” Union Grove in 1966. Ray Alden was apparently there that year or the year after; just scooping it all out and getting the little kernel of an idea to record some of this magic, which he started doing in ’69, and right on, as he subtitled this CD “15 years in North Carolina.” It’s all such a treat to hear again, and in this shuffle Ray’s dealt out for all of us.

I’m particularly delighted to hear a lot of Earnest East again. It’s been too long, and he’s been too long gone, and I can see him so plainly in my mind, his steel-gray flat-top and weathered face beaming over the fiddle as he rared down on any number of Round Peak classics. For some reason I learned a lot about one of the classics that isn’t on this CD from Earnest: his “Fly Around” was just terrific, with a great little figure in the first measure, F/E/D/F/E/D, that still use about half the time. Earnest was not quite as subtle with his bowing as Tommy Jarrell (who was?), but he sure had Tommy’s drive. His first fiddling cut on the CD, “Let Me Fall,” sounds so like Tommy I had to look back to the list to see what was going on. And since Tommy is in fact playing banjo on “Let Me Fall,” that surely contributes to the similarities.

One of the great things about this CD is how many of these Round Peak mainstays switch around on instruments. This wasn’t exactly a surprise to me—I’ve seen Fred play fiddle and Tommy play banjo a number of times (and both were disgustingly great on their “secondary” instruments), but it’s very interesting to hear it happening as the CD transitions from cut to cut, and to hear, as well, the basic Round Peak style carried along by its various practitioners. And keep in mind that all of this material was “collected” by Ray, who was meanwhile teaching school up in New York, which you gotta say is like living two lives at once!

I can’t go down the list cut by cut, but some do-not-miss ones, to my ear, include a somewhat more “regularized” version of “Policeman” than I’m used to (perhaps this was one of the circa ’69 cuts Ray mentions); the “Yellow Gal’s Boll Weevil,” which Tommy later attributed to DeFord Bailey I think, but attributes here to a local woman, and which also has at least one more verse than he tended to sing; a “June Apple” with Earnest East on fiddle, Tommy on banjo; Kyle Creed’s “Rouatabout” (and how is it there are two monster versions of this floating around up there—Fred’s “Rouatabout” is surely one of the top five greatest old-time hits of all time); Mac Snow singing “Rosalie McFalls,” which just underlines the purest fact that old-time music is also about singing; and finally, “Stag-o-Lee,” which shows how interwoven the two primary strains of southern American music really were. But of course, really—it’s all good, and you should treat yourself to this collection of classics played by classics. I can’t imagine a better way to explain to someone just what Round Peak music was all about than to drop this in a youngster’s hot little hand. And since I was there some of the time, I can attest that it’s also just a wonderful return to the days of yesteryear. They were indeed this good.

Bill Hicks

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The beguiling lilt and chatter of the old-time banjo and fiddle played in duet remains one of the loveliest of American sounds. A whopping 11% of the titles in the OTH’s list of essential hillbilly 78s (Vol. 11, No. 4) are banjo-fiddle duets, despite the relative rarity of such performances on 78s—an encouraging sign that our guitar-obsessed generation can still appreciate this archaic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century folk art form.

On this album John Hoffmann’s fiddle and Mac Benford’s banjo create instrumental duets that honor the tradition of Burnett and Rutherford, DaCosta Wolzt, Steely and Graham, and other icons of old-time music. Hoffmann proves a formidable fiddler with a welcome penchant for double-stopping on the bass strings, and Benford (the genial Mister Banjo of the late lamented Highwoods Stringband) has lost none of his melodic touch on the instrument. Their five duets provide the album’s highlights: “Old Hen She Cackled,” “Brushy Fork of John’s Creek,” “Three Forks of Cheat,” “Far in the Mountain” (with Benford on a monster banjo tuned gAEAB), and “Getting Upstairs” are performances superbly felt and played.

In trio with Randi Beckmann’s piano, Hoffmann and Benford venture into a
contra dance sound for three cuts, and one hopes that the beautiful “Dinah” (third piece on the Henry Reed Medley) will be picked up by fiddlers hearing this album for inspiration and material. “Bob Wine’s Tune” gives us a taste of John’s pinpoint touch on his Dobson fretless. On most of the remaining titles, Mac and John seem to be playing it safe by including guitar accompaniment as though they felt their audience wasn’t up to an entire program of their ravishing fiddle-banjo duets. On these selections some of us will strain to hear the two intertwined leads against a muddying and hardly necessary guitar backing. On two titles Mac is even credited with an overdubbed guitar part, perhaps a temptation of the Pro Tools system they used to record the album on their laptops.

One trusts that the success of this fine album will encourage Hoffmann and Benford to continue to hone their already formidable artistry and perhaps to offer a future album of all fiddle and banjo duets, which will be both more (duets) and less (string band) than this one.

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Cabin on the Hill/I Am Free/Dream of Mother and Father/If the End of This Were Today/Snow Covered Mound/A Happy Place for Me/My Space Craft Journey Home/Lord We Need A Friend Like You/Turn Back, Turn Back/A Wondrous Place to Rest/The Country Just Beyond/You Will Sing/Give Them Flowers While They Live/Take Me Along/Come and Get Me Jesus/Let Your Light Shine Out/Just Let Your Light Shine Out

This is a recording of some historical importance. From the first track, you know you’re in for some down-to-earth sacred quartet singing. In fact, the very first song, “Cabin on the Hill,” recorded in 1946, is obviously the source for Flatt & Scruggs’ popular version recorded more than a decade later. Most of the first 17 tracks, which were recorded over the next 20 years, are arranged in close four-part harmony, either a cappella or with simple guitar accompaniment. The one exception is the title track, “Let Your Light Shine Out,” which includes Carter Family-style autoharp and guitar, and is the last of the recordings by the original members of the Mullins Family quartet.

The overall sound is much like the legendary Chestnut Grove Quartet, who were contemporaries from the same region of Southwest Virginia. The Mullins Family hails from Clintwood near the Kentucky border, which runs along Pine Mountain. Indeed, Dickenson County, which was also home to the Stanley Brothers, enjoys a rich tradition of gospel music.

The last six tracks represent a “reunion” of sorts. Current members of the Mullins Family quartet, which includes mostly children of the original members, recorded new material in 2005 for this collection. I was not impressed by the singing on these songs or the more contemporary bluegrass accompaniment. There was a bit more drama and modern southern gospel sound in the voices rather than the straight mountain tones of the preceding generation.

Having reviewed one other CD from the Crooked Road Series, I’m impressed by the attention this Virginia Foundation for the Humanities project is bringing to otherwise unheralded musicians and singers. They are to be commended for this important work of preservation and commercial enterprise.

Ed Norman

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The Myers Family & Friends

The Myers family proudly traces its lineage back some 200 years in North Carolina, Tennessee, and North Georgia. Musical patriarch Bert Myers bequeathed his music to his three daughters, Helen, Molly, and Margie, whose career as the Myers Sisters was documented by Joel Cordle in this magazine (Vol. 9 No. 4). Time has thinned the family to Helen and two of Bert’s granddaughters, who with friends Sue and Ed carry on their very rich tradition of family music-making. The four women sing in church-like harmonies against thumping guitars with Ed providing a minimalist up-picking banjo backing on the album’s lone instrumental, an unusual banjo-lead “Spanish Two-Step.”

The women’s vocals will sound familiar to those who have heard 78s of the Coon Creek Girls, the Perry County Music Makers, Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Baker, the Blue Ridge Mountain Singers, and many other female-led groups—not excluding, of course, the Carter Family. In a time of the increasingly professional sound of contemporary old-time music, the Myers group refreshingly comes in your door rather like neighbors dropping by for a relaxed evening of music. Not at all dusty, the group has a repertoire ranging from British broadsides (“The Rambling Boy”) to Nashville (“Five Pounds of Possum [in My Headlights Tonight]”), and they pass the ultimate old-time music test—they make George Jones’ “The Flame in My Heart” sound as though it were coming off a 1927 Gennett 78.

Art Rosenbaum recorded, produced, and annotated the album, as he did the recording of the previous incarnation of the family, Music From Apple Pie Ridge: The Myers Sisters and Lesmie (Global Village CD 314).

The repertoire is well selected and is a balance of familiar tunes, buried treasure, a few banjo-ized melodies from beyond the usual old-time sources, and one original. All the arrangements, settings, and choices of tuning (perhaps the invention of a tuning in at least one case) are Mary Z. Cox’s. “Turkey in the Straw” is excellent, melodically full, and delightfully deviant. It is real old-time music, and sounds like it could have been some venerable old-timer’s version, but it’s all Mary’s—a banjo and bass duet with Jim Crozier, one of several on this disc, and the combo works well whether the bass is bowed or plucked. On three tunes, banjo and bass are joined by Kerry Blech’s fiddle, and that’s also a good combo. The opening track, the artist’s own composition “Ponce de Leon,” played in a C-minor tuning, would make a good movie theme.

On some of the other tunes the melody and its attendant banjoisms are severely pared down from older traditional or composed settings. These renditions would be viable accompaniments but they aren’t really the full tune. This is minimalism that goes beyond the usual simplification that can sometimes make for better banjo music when playing a melody that was originally a fiddle tune. Other tunes are presented in fully realized banjo arrangements in which the musical vision is at a significant remove from music as it was understood in bygone days in Appalachia and other parts of the rural South, and from the nuanced and detailed clawhammer banjo music that is still played there today as a living tradition. The same gap pertains to the “Celtic” tunes played here. No claims to the contrary are made — this collection is called Florida Banjo after all. Still, given Mary Z. Cox’s fluidity on the five-string banjo and her obvious comfort with the instrument, most of the music could have been improved with a bit more familiarity with the origins of the music she is playing. The general public is likely to enjoy Florida Banjo for its polish and easygoing style, but it might have limited appeal for most readers of the Old-Time Herald.

For example, “Peach Bottom Creek,” Wade Ward’s brilliant inversion of “Cripple Creek” in a D tuning, is a tune which was tied to specific banjo moves and techniques, all of which were integral to its identity, all of which are miss-
ing in the rendition here, along with the melody, which is also missing. This is a duet played on two Cedar Mountain banjos by Mary and Lo Gordon, who built the banjos, taught her the tune, and may have learned it from me (!)—but not like this. To be clear, this is not a new version, the making of which is every player’s prerogative, and perhaps their duty as well—this is a threadbare fragment of a good tune. There is a similar loss of detail in the playing of W. B. Carter’s composition “Spanish Fandango.” It is identified in the liner notes as a traditional tune and to be fair, I suppose parts of it had become traditional by the early 20th century. It was first published as a solo guitar piece in the 1850s and subsequently as a finger-style banjo tune. S. S. Stewart published a version in 1884. The tune was a study of what could be done on an instrument tuned to an open chord by a player of average ability. Already a simple tune, it has been reduced here to a thin melodic line with the soloist’s self-generated chordal accompaniment replaced by mandolin and bowed bass harmonies.

The anomalous liner notes also suggest unfamiliarity with authentic traditional music. For instance, the new-agey “Shenandoah Falls” is identified as an “old-time breakdown,” the blues provenance of “Frankie” in its myriad versions is unsuspected, and “Cluck Old Hen” is said to be “more traditional” in A than in G.

The fretless banjo pieces are systematically (but not deliberately) fingered in positions close to the way frets put modal music out of tune but more so. This is not for lack of skill but from a lack of familiarity with the microtonal coordinates of American vernacular music. Mary Z. Cox is a good, clean player with an authoritative touch and who has a lot of presence in her music. If she immersed herself in a two-year course of intensive listening she could be as good as any and better than most. I hope she does. I wish her well. I would never make these criticisms if these renditions were being played casually among friends. Once they are offered for sale to the public and I have agreed to review them for this periodical then my duty is to the potential CD customer with a limited budget and a taste for genuine old-time music. I have not enjoyed finding fault but I did enjoy “Turkey in the Straw.”

JODY STECHER

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John Summers:
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I crashed head-on into John Summers’ fiddling at just the right moment in my own learning curve. I’d already been in the first-hand presence of Tommy Jarrell and Fred Cockerham, Kyle Creed and Earnest East and Benton Flippen, and I’d made a trip up to Marlinton, West Virginia, and dropped in unannounced on Burl and Sherman and Maggie Hammons. (Burl put me up for a couple of days, playing fiddle non-stop, feeding me groundhog stew, and fixing my car in the process so I could get back home—and out of his hair, I expect.) Before that I’d learned from Alan Jabbour and Bobbie Thompson that fiddling is serious business: a tune, as I came to understand it, was not just working the changes and a notable phrase here and there, but something much more exactly what a particular fiddler played. So, then, this is, to put it properly, “Tommy Jarrell’s Fortune,” and this here is “Burl’s ‘Rye Straw,’” as opposed to how the Farr Brothers did it, which no one but the Farr Brothers can even replicate.

These kinds of conversations were happening around the campfires and in the various living rooms, circa 1971, where small groups of fiddlers might gather of an evening, and quite a few pickers who wanted to play some blurred-up Paul Warren breakdown tended to drift away, shaking their heads. I expect that when Doc White’s tapes of John Summers arrived in John Cohen’s mailbox, John and Mike and Tracy were as blown away as I was a few years later. Here’s what John Cohen says about this moment of connection:

Here’s how [Summers’] music got out to the rest of us: in the early 1960s the New Lost City Ramblers were performing at the Ash Grove in Los Angeles, and Mr. and Mrs. O’Leary heard us and later, at a dude ranch in Colorado, told their friend Judge Dan White about it. So when he returned to his home in Indiana, he made these recordings of his friend John Summers for them, and they gave the tape to me in California the following year.

Cohen continues with more lore: “I brought [the Summers tape] home… and gave a copy to our neighbor Art Rosenbaum (originally from Indianapolis). On his next trip to Indiana he located and recorded John Summers. He issued some of these on Folkways’ Fine Times at Our House.” So if I’d happened to find that Folkways LP, I might have heard Summers just a little bit sooner than I did, via Armin Barnett’s own visit and field recordings of Summers in about ’73.

Be that as it may, it’s the fiddling that still blows me away, even today, 35 years after first hearing it, and after listening to a heck of a lot of fiddling and playing a heck of a lot of hours and days and years in the meantime. With John Summers, dead since ’76 and recorded only in the parlor, there is always something more, the deeper you listen. I take it that is the mark of genius and true art. I was fooling with Burl’s “Rye Straw” and also comparing it to Tommy Jarrell’s version when I first heard Summers’ way of doing it. I immediately started working on the Summers version, and I felt good enough about my efforts to record it with the Red Clay Ramblers in the late ’70s. I kept playing the tune through the years, and Libby and I recorded it on our CD in 2000, somewhat improved, I believe, over the earlier Rambler version (and not quite so fast, let it be said). And today I listen to this CD, with John Summers again playing his “Rye Straw,” and I hear things which I don’t quite understand, details of creative brilliance I don’t believe I could ever think up, but which I can appreciate as a fiddler and musician.

I had met “crookedness” before meeting John Summers. Anyone who listened to the old fiddlers of the ’60s or the old recordings of older fiddlers could find crook-
edness here and there. Usually it seemed to be basically the addition of an extra measure or part of a measure, or in some cases a tune with more than the usual two parts. As tunes are attached to dancing, sometimes crookedness was seen as a defect to be corrected. I learned Burl Hammons’ “Big Sciotia” the way he played it for me in 1970, with a repeated phrase in the middle of the A part and unrepeated parts. Later, playing for dances at the Station in Carrboro, North Carolina, in the early 1980s, I chose to repeat the two parts as is standard practice, but kept the extra phrase. These were square dances. That extra phrase will not do in a contradance, so Libby and I don’t play “Big Sciotia” for contras.

But all this personal history is only by way of saying that what John Summers does in most of his tunes, and particularly in “Rye Straw,” is not mere crookedness—difference—but rather the use of musical devices in a conscious, artful way, to create a greater tune than is otherwise possible. You’ll have to buy the CD and listen to “Rye Straw” to actually hear what I’m talking about, but consider how Summers gets from the third part of the tune back to the first part. “Rye Straw” is already quite an amazing invention, by the way. Judge White, introducing the tune on his tape, says it sounds like Summers is playing more than one fiddle, and that’s true enough: there are bits of phrases where he is noting two strings at the same time with the same finger, creating a harmony in 5ths. He also rarely plays a repeated measure back to back—there is always some variation going on within a part, measure by measure. But when Summers returns to the start of “Rye Straw” he descends a long staircase of a phrase spanning nearly two octaves and changing keys in the process as well, dropping grace-notes into the already rapid-fire figures of notes and then—every blessed time, it is no mistake in any sense and he does it not only here on this CD, but in other field recordings of the same tune done in different years—he anticipates the start of the first measure by two beats! Suddenly we’re back into the first part, before we expected to be, and in mid-stream, rip-roaring along in the rocking figure that defines the tune and is found in every fiddler’s version.

This anticipation is simply brilliant, in my book. And it tells me that Mr. Summers heard these tunes in a very eyes-wide-open, creative way. And it probably goes some ways in explaining why he won many contests in his region of the country, long before Judge White made his tape and sent it out to some nice fellows who were playing the old music well enough to attract the attention of the O’Learys, saints preservous anyways. I would say, too, that Summers’ crookedness points back to the other old fiddlers and says, “take note, these things are not mistakes but art and invention.”

There is no tune that Summers touched, not even chestnuts on the order of “Mississippi Sawyer” and “Old Joe Clark,” on which he didn’t leave his Midas touch. Among those which forever amaze I have to mention his “Forked Deer,” “Speed the Plow,” and of course “Fine Times at Our House.” I could reasonably simply list all the tracks. The point is, this CD, brought to us by the perseverance of Ray Alden, is a wonderful historical document, the moment when a master regional fiddler’s music was transmitted to a larger audience, and a great listen in its own right. If you’re reading the OTH, you probably have heard most of these tunes and surely play a good number of them. Yet if you think you know the Summers versions before you listen, you can expect to be truly amazed. This, my friends, is the art of fiddling.

Bill Hicks
The Rocky Road to Dublin/Old Horse and Buggy-O/The Old Hen, She Cackled/Wild Hog in the Woods/Morgan on the Railroad/The Wounded Hoosier/The Highlander’s Farewell/Moonlight/The Lost Girl/Lost Gold Dollar/Green Mountain/Evening Star Waltz/The Belles of Lexington/Shove That Pig’s Foot a Little Further in the Fire/Old Time Blackberry Blossom/Bonaparte’s Retreat/Cincinnati Hornpipe/The Last of Callahan

The 19th century was a time when melody, not groove, reigned supreme in vernacular music around the world, including the music that was made in the southern Appalachian mountains, a place where the relationship between instrumental and vocal music was very close. Virtually every tune had verses; instruments were used to accompany and replicate vocal music, and the lines of demarcation between speech and song, and between song and string playing, were neither hard nor fast. Fretless instruments were the rule, as would be expected from musicians who were steeped in vibrant modal pathways with their attendant slides and microtones.

Old-time banjo and fiddle music in the late 20th and early 21st century has been marked by rhythmic excellence, a tendency to subordinate melodic detail to rhythmic considerations, by a loss of vocal character in the playing, and by the absence of the practical modal awareness that was innate in the music of the departed elders.

The Way It Was, a newly recorded collection of 18 venerable tunes rendered mostly as fiddle and banjo duets, displays all these 21st-century features. There’s a superb and sometimes intoxicating musical unity of the two instruments here. At times Jeff Winegar’s responsive and resourceful banjo seems to cause Martin Fox’s fiddle to dig deeper with each successive melodic repetition, and that causes more and better banjo responses and a rolling propulsion to the music.

A letter to reviewers, many references in the liner notes, annotations on the Internet, and the subtitle “19th Century Fiddle and Banjo” make it clear this project is intended, in the players’ own words, “to replicate the sound of what was once a ‘band’ in our Southern Appalachians.” Uh-oh. The music is very good here. I like it. The repertoire is old, yes, but the timbres, attitudes, intonation, phrasing, and melodic and harmonic sense of The Way It Was more accurately reflect The Way It Is.

The recorded sound is excellent and the sonic clarity reveals a violin (or two?) set up to please a modern player’s sensibilities, a guitar with an extended bass range, and a fretted banjo with a plastic head and some kind of dampening material between the dowel and underside of the head to muffle the ringing, shorten the sustain, and shape the timbre to a 21st-century aesthetic. I think the sound of a fiddle was very different in the 19th century when, for one thing, steel strings were not an option and the first string was always gut. I know these banjo and guitar sounds were unknown then. Good old-time music can be made with these musical tools. It happens every day. But their sound is at odds with this project’s aims and claims.

I also have doubts about the project’s basic premise that a banjo and fiddle together was the typical 19th-century Appalachian band. Let’s not forget that the 19th century began over 200 years ago. Banjos were made of vegetables. Fiddles were common enough in towns and plantations of the lowlands but much of the migration to the mountains of settlers and their fiddles had yet to take place. There is abundant evidence that fiddlers and banjos were played all over the populated regions of Appalachia in the middle and end of the 19th century but almost none to substantiate the notion that the two playing together was the norm, or that just those two constituted a “band.” Virtually all reported memories of that pairing originate in events of the early 20th century. The pairing seems obvious—we take it for granted, yet contemporary 19th-century reports are of one or two fiddles playing for dancing, or of banjo accompanying songs or sometimes playing for dancing with percussion accompaniment. When the fiddle is mentioned along with the banjo it’s either in the context of African-American music from the lowland South or its imitation on the stage in blackface minstrelsy. In both cases the fiddle and banjo are in the company of a number of other instruments.

Most of the selections here are true duets with banjo contributing as much as the fiddle. A few pieces have simple and effective guitar accompaniments in place of banjo. Martin Fox wrote the liner notes and his praise therein for Jeff Winegar’s banjo picking is justified. It would have been unseemly for him to praise his own fiddling but in my opinion he’s a terrific player when he gets rolling. When both players are simultaneously at their best the music is lively, very much in the moment, and personally expressive without losing old-time flavor. Then the music is not only lively, it is also new.

Musicians making traditional tunes their own is a good thing up to a point. These two musicians get almost delirious at times (in a good way) and the sonic excellence of the recording fully captures that happiness. How much happier this listener would be if the best and most beautiful melodic details of these old tunes had not been sacrificed on the altar of peak experience. Also it’s clear that on the tunes that are also song airs the players are not “playing the words” as typical 19th-century players would have done.

The liner notes are detailed and problematic with frequent oxymorons, impossible anachronisms, mistaken speculation about tune origins, tenuous links to fiddling sources, misspellings, and wandering apostrophes. Bad spelling does not affect how the music sounds of course, but it accords with the way some of the tunes are melodically misspelled. There is a grammar and syntax of sorts to the old mountain music that is not always in evidence here. I’m talking about a sense of the music that goes beyond bowing and picking patterns. There is no creeping insinuation of pop, rock, or even bluegrass on this disc but neither does the music sound authentically old. Most of it does sound good.

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This wonderful CD is an attempt to an- swer the question: What did fiddlers sound like in the years before 1840, along the frontier? Sound recording would not be invented for another 40 years or so. This question is important to Chris Wig and Whitt Mead because they work as re- enactors, and they want to get it right.

“Getting it right” means going back to whatever written sources exist, in this case the collections of the Hamblen family (father and son, “arranged and copied” by grandson) and Knauff’s piano arrange- ments of fiddle tunes from 1839. These are supplemented with tunes learned from recordings of older fiddlers such as Hiram Stamper and Marcus Martin. In the Galax area, we don’t know what Green Leonard (1810-1892) sounded like, but we know that Emmett Lundy learned from him, and we have recordings of Lundy. Simi- larly, Stamper and Martin also learned from earlier fiddlers.

This CD is a sequel to Lost Indian: Fid- dling on the Frontier, reviewed in the Old-Time Herald (Vol. 10, No. 6), which was Wig and Mead’s first collection of tunes from this time period. On that CD, standard tunings were used, and a modern, fretted steel-string banjo was used for most tunes. Here, the fiddle is often tuned low, and a gut-strung banjo is the usual accompaniment. (Thanks for giving tunings for each instrument, in addition to the rest of the excellent liner notes!) The sound is more primitive but probably a lot more authentic.

Of the 22 tunes on the CD, there are 11 solo fiddle, two solo banjo, and the rest fiddle-banjo duets. They’re all good. Some are familiar, especially to those of us who bought recent Marcus Martin or Hiram Stamper reissues; many more are heard here for the first time. Tunes new to me included the untitled tunes from the Hamblen collection, “Drummer Boy of Waterloo,” and others. Samuel Bayard called one of his books Dance to the Fiddle, March to the Fife. On the frontier, tunes switched back from one instrument to the other, depending on what was avail- able. Tunes which I know from hearing fife and drum bands included “White Cockade” and “Peter Francisco;” most Old-Time Herald readers will probably know the latter from the Fuzzy Mountain String Band. It would be easier to say simply that there wasn’t a tune on this CD that I didn’t enjoy.

To my ears, and I could be wrong, tunes that they learned from books seemed a little more stilted than ones which they learned from source recordings. A possible reason is this: what’s missing from the printed page is bowing instructions. If you have a source recording, you can make a better guess at how it was bowed. If you don’t, it’s a lot harder. I am not sure of this, and it’s not meant as criti- cism — to have these tunes brought to a new generation is wonderful! We owe Chris and Whitt a debt of gratitude for making this CD — and a good way to show gratitude would be to buy a copy. Recommended.

PETE PETERSON

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Note to Artists and Record Companies

Please send all material for review to the OTH (PO Box 51812, Durham, NC 27717). Do not send to individual review- ers. What gets reviewed is determined at the discretion of the OTH according to space available, balance of old and new, and compatibility with our mission. We cannot review everything that comes in nor guarantee that because we received it we will review it. We do not return ma- terials to the sender. Thanks!
Fiddlin’ Charlie McCarroll: fiddle; Jack Sandifer: guitar; Tony Thomas: mandolin, banjo, vocals; Ray Collett: bass

Smoke Behind the Clouds/Sett’n on Top of the World/Sally Goodin/Bury Me Beneath the Willows/Leather Britches/Green River March/Hometown Blues/East Tennessee Blues/Girl I Left Behind/Rye Whiskey/Whistling Rufus/Georgia Fox Trot/New River Train/Double Eagle/Just a Closer Walk with Thee/Faded Love/Flop Eared Mule/Waltz You Saved for Me/Chicken Reel/Soldier’s Joy/San Antonio Rose/Amazing Grace

The Appalachian String Band is an interesting musical anomaly. Although its members have each been playing music for decades, and are all natives of Roane and surrounding counties in East Tennessee, they began to play as a band just a couple of years ago after having jammed informally for some time. Fiddlin’ Charlie McCarroll is the youngest son of highly acclaimed Uncle Jimmy McCarroll, who recorded with the Roane County Ramblers in the 1920s. Jack Sandifer, guitarist on this recording, also plays banjo and is a singer-songwriter. Ray Collett is identified as “resident bass player and Ambassador” at Yonder Hollow in Rockwood, Tennessee. Tony Thomas (mandolin, banjo and vocals) also writes songs as well as teaching music.

This informal concert of mostly familiar fiddle tunes and songs was recorded in January 2007. The first track starts with one of the band members confessing, “I’ve never heard this one before... but Charlie knows it, so we’ll follow him.” And follow him they do, in a spirited performance of “Smoke Behind the Clouds.” Fiddlin’ Charlie McCarroll is an old-time breakdown fiddler with flawless rhythm and an infectious style; his versions of “Sally Goodin,” “Girl I Left Behind Me,” “East Tennessee Blues,” and other such tunes on this CD are real treasures. Although Tony Thomas takes the occasional short mandolin break, Charlie McCarroll carries the tunes with the other three members of the band providing great rhythm. The tunes are interspersed with well-known songs (“Bury Me Beneath the Willow,” “Just a Closer Walk with Thee,” etc.). Tony Thomas’ voice is sincere and melodious.

There are some problems with this recording that need to be mentioned. It’s hard to hear the fiddle some of the time; this is especially frustrating on “Georgia Fox Trot,” requested by someone in the audience. The fiddle is way in the background, buried beneath the other instruments trying to follow a tune that only Charlie McCarroll knew. It sounds like it must be a great tune...I hope I can hear it again under better circumstances. Some of the between-tunes dialogue is hard to hear, too, and perhaps there should have been more editing done. Tony Thomas’ mandolin is out of tune on some of his solos, which makes for a somewhat stressful listening experience.

All that said, I think this is an important recording, and if you have an interest in old-time fiddling, you would do well to buy it. There are two of Uncle Jimmy McCarroll’s tunes (“Green River March” and “Hometown Blues”) as well as the
better-known breakdowns. “Hometown Blues” might be the mother of “Lee Highway Blues,” or perhaps its child. I have never heard a “Chicken Reel” to equal the one you can hear on this CD. I don’t know when or where they’ll be performing, or if and when they’ll have another CD coming out, but you can email backwoodsrecords@comcast.net to find out.

Hilary Dirlam

To order: 865-457-1936

There is a legend that the British Sporting News reviewed D. H. Lawrence’s masterpiece, Lady Chatterley’s Lover. The review said something like, “The scenes describing gamekeeping are excellent; however, they are separated by much extraneous material.” It would be a disservice to Tony Trishka to write a review discussing only the old-time music on this CD and complain about the rest.

What he does here is illustrate many of the different ways to play the banjo. Starting with the earliest style, there’s old-fashioned stroke style (on a gourd banjo, too!) and a couple of classical pieces from the minstrel era and later, and a clawhammer tune. Other styles represented include straight-ahead traditional Scruggs style, melodic Scruggs style, chromatic banjo, what sounds like flatpicking (on the Celtic Medley),
Travis picking, and even slide banjo. He mixes up styles; the first tune is a very chromatic interpretation of the old harmonica showpiece “Fox Chase,” and from there he moves backward and forward in time.

Many of the tunes here are original. This reviewer finds it impossible to create new tunes, and so I am in awe of people like Mark Simos, Jane Rothfield, Hilary Dirlam, and Tony Trishka, all of whom seem to be able to find wonderful sequences of notes that nobody has thought of before. After you listen to some of these with evocative titles like “Noah Came to Eden”— Trishka says this was “composed after playing a rain-drenched solo set at the Charlie Poole Festival in Eden, North Carolina”— and it starts with a banjo imitation of the start of a rainstorm. As is so often the case with new tunes, I wish I had a time machine so I could fast forward for 50 years and find out which new tunes have “stood the test of time” and are still being played. I bet some of these will.

What were my favorites? Hard to pick them out, there are so many! The classical banjo tune from Joe Morley, “Banjoland.” (Bill Evans is playing second banjo.) Tony’s original “Trompe de l’Oreille.” (Bill Keith took the first solo, Tony the second, then they trade back and forth with Paula Bradley “laying down that bedrock rhythm” on piano.) WHY is the rhythm so important? Because the secret of this tune is that the A-part starts on the downbeat, then four measures in there’s a pickup note and the same four measures repeat, only offset by one beat. Even after this is explained in the liner notes, I still can’t tell exactly how it’s done. This is not just a trick tune, but good music. Bach would have loved it. The very traditional “Leatherwing Bat”—double banjos with Pete Seeger, and Bruce Molsky on fiddle. Wow. What doesn’t work for me? When the tunes get too chromatic and I can’t easily discern a melody, I don’t enjoy the tune (examples: “Salt River” and “Fox Chase”). Although they had nice melodies, tunes on which the banjo is played almost as if it were Travis-style guitar (examples: “Rainbow Yoshi” and “Hawaii Slide-O”) also were not my favorites. I suspect, however, that everyone who buys this CD (as I hope the reader will) will have different favorites. Strongly recommended!

PETE PETERSON

To order: www.folkways.si.edu

Cedric Watson

Cedric Watson: fiddle, accordion, vocals; Jermaine Prejean: drums; Eric Frey: upright bass, banjo, electric bass; Chas Justus: electric and acoustic guitar; Jeffery Broussard: electric bass; Corey Ledet: scrubboard, triangle; Anna Laura Edmiston: background vocals; Kelli Jones: background vocals; Joel Savoy: lead guitar

Cochon De Lait/‘Tit Black/Cedric Zydeco/J’ai été tout autour du Pays/Two-Step de Bouki/La Valse de Grand Basile/Zozo Noir/Ayô t’as Couché?/Tu Seras avec Moi/TexaCreole Two-Step/Lala/La Vielle Chanson de Mardi Gras/Ma Chère Grandmère/La Valse à Bois Sec/Zydeco du Violon

Lafayette, Louisiana, and its surrounding area is the place to be for hot zydeco, Creole, Cajun, and swing music. Many of the musicians who live in that area are excellent in more than one of these styles, and are also proficient on more than one instrument. They are passionate, and talented. They are releasing recordings that reflect a blend of styles and embrace traditional roots.

Mr. Watson is a fine representative from this dynamic Lafayette musical community, and a member of the nationally known Cajun band the Pine Leaf Boys. This first solo CD showcases his fiddling, accordion playing, singing, and composing. His accompanists are a vibrant and lively crew.

Some tunes sound Cajun (“La Valse à Bois Sec”), some sound swingish (“Ayô t’as Couché?”), others are zydeco (“TexaCreole Two-Step,” “Ma Chère Grandmère,” “Zydeco du Violon”). Their buoyancy and zest make me want to dance. The original tunes fit the tradition well; their spirit blends right in with the tunes from Michael Doucet and Boozoo Chavis. Mr. Watson’s singing is comfortable and pleasing and his playing is strong. I can hear traces of Mitch Reed and Canray Fontenot in his fiddling, and I like it very much.

“La Vielle Chanson de Mardi Gras” would better be called “La Nouvelle

FEUFOLLET

Cow Island Hop

the best thing about Cow Island Hop is just how much fun it is to listen to... if you’re a fan of Cajun music you won’t want to miss it.

- Richard Marcus,
Blog Critics Magazine
Juan ANA Tua

School of
Old Time
String Band Music

Books for: Fiddle, OT Banjo, Mandolin, Guitar, Bass Violin, Cello, & Viola

Contact: D Murphy 843 545 5151
Summer Cell 843 359 9673 (June - Sept)
(freemanewer@sccc.tv)

Cello, & Viola

Mandolin, Guitar, Bass Violin, Books for: Fiddle, OT Banjo,

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& Accessories

• Fiddles, Basses, Dulcimers, Restoration & Repairs.

www.jcviolins.com 864.322.2622

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Valcour CD-0005

Chris Stafford: accordion, vocals, fiddle, guitar; Chris Segura: fiddle; Anna Laura Edmiston: vocals, t-fer; Joshua Caferry: acoustic and electric guitars; Michael Stafford: drums; Philippe Billeaudex: bass; w/guests: Tiffany Lamson, Jimmy Breaux, Oscar Courville, Nick Stephan, Josh Leblanc, Chris French, Richard Comeaux, Ivan Klisanin

Prends Courage/Cow Island Hop/Eunice Waltz/Blues de Dix Ans/Madame Bosso/Chère Bébé Créole/Femme l’a Dit/Chère Beth/Sur le Bord d l’Eau/Jolie Fille/Je m’en Vas dans le Chemin

Feufollet has been playing together for ten years, starting when Chris Stafford was eight, Michael Stafford was seven, and Chris Segura was eleven. Along with Joshua Caferry, Anna Laura Edmiston, and Philippe Billeaudex, their talent is undeniable and shines out of this, their fourth recording.

Cow Island Hop is one slick package. The CD and its cover have an appealing design and layout, although true to the form of Valcour Records, one does not learn which of the band members plays what on each tune. This information is given for the guest musicians who play drums, saxophone, trumpet, tuba, steel guitar, and mellotron. The sources of the tunes are identified and show that these musicians appreciate and understand the talents of the past enough to add their own compositions to the Cajun repertoire. I wish that some of the cover space was given to information about the tunes instead of Cajun celebrity endorsements, although Kristi Guillory’s comment, “This is a traditional Cajun album produced through a rock-n-roll aesthetic” is right on target. The CD cover is cardboard, which is a welcome touch in this day of environmental awareness and protection.

Most of the 11 tunes are traditional in origin, and a few are originals. Tempos are mostly some variation of fast, probably a reflection of the musicians’ ages, although Dennis McGee’s “Chère Bébé Créole” is a bit more sedate. “Femme l’A Dit” is a jazzy, saucy number. We much prefer Ms. Edmiston’s singing to Mr. Stafford’s; her voice is prettier, while his has a one-dimensional quality to it that doesn’t appeal to us. (His accordion playing more than makes up for that!) Only “Jolie Fille” features both of them singing together; we wish they had harmonized for a verse, instead of taking turns. Cow Island Hop rocks, and its groove is reminiscent of the Hackberry Ramblers.

This CD is a respectable addition to the Feufollet discography and bodes well for the future of Cajun music.

Nikki Lee and Clelia Stefani

To order: 337-550-5668; www.valcourrecords.com

Hot Time

Fox and Branch

Doodleywag CD-404

Fox and Branch present a program that ranges through blues, rags, fiddle tunes, and prototypical early jazz on this project. It features Will Branch on vocals and guitar, with Dave Fox supplying fiddle, guitar, and washboard. Branch also plays mandolin and kazoo while Alison Gima plays piano with Josh Fox and John Nicholson on banjo on “Booth Shoot Lincoln.” Eric Noden adds harmonica and vocal to “Mr. Jelly Lord” to round things out.

This is mostly music show-type material and should please all fans of that music from an era gone by.

Bob Buckingham

To order: www.foxandbranch.com

Le reader has to keep turning the cover to read all the names.

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Chasin' Gus' Ghost, a film by Todd Kwiat from 2007, explores jug band music from a variety of perspectives, focusing first on the revivalist jug bands of the 1960s and the musicians in those bands, moving into a historical examination of key figures in the jug bands of the '20s and '30s, traveling to a jug band festival in Yokohama, Japan, and concluding with elementary school children in Cleveland, Ohio, being introduced to the instruments and music of the jug band tradition. As a result of the very broad swath that the film cuts in its examination of this music, the feeling is a bit diffuse, with an all-over-the-place quality that really feels like it could have benefited from some additional editing and cutting.

One of the strong points of the film is the interview footage, with very interesting thoughts on the music from musicians such as the late Fritz Richmond, whom the film was dedicated, Geof Muldaur, John Sebastian, Maria Muldaur, Dom Flemons, and Charlie Musselwhite, as well as scholars Samuel Charters and the late Bengt Olsson. The love and enthusiasm these people have for jug band music is obvious, and draws you into the world that gave birth to that music. My favorite portion of the film deals with a road trip Todd Kwiat took to the Memphis area and southwestern Tennessee to seek out the graves of some of the early jug band pioneers, Gus Cannon, Ashley Thompson, and Noah Lewis. There’s a great moment when an older man remembers Noah Lewis singing while simultaneously playing a harmonica held up to his nose. Kwiat and his Tennessee field guide, Fetzer Mills, Jr., also find the ruins of Minglewood, originally a broad swath that the music to transcend cultural differences and shows, as well, how the Japanese players are able to come up with a performance style of presentation that works in their culture. A concluding segment with Sankofa Strings (since re-named the Carolina Chocolate Drops) offers a thoughtful and appropriate perspective from band members Sule Greg Wilson, Dom Flemons, and Rhiannon Giddens as to how it is more effective and specific school-age African-American children to be introduced to jug band music for the first time by African-American musicians and mentors.

This movie is by no means without its flaws. It takes way too long to get to the historical jug band music, and I'm not sure how essential the information on how Todd Kwiat got into the music himself is in the whole scheme of things. My biggest complaint with the movie is that the music, which is ostensibly the entire reason for the movie, is given short shrift. In the entire length of the movie, not a single performance of a song is shown, uninterrupted, from beginning to end, without cutaways, voice-overs continuing over the music, etc. In several instances this is really annoying. What conceivable reason could there be for not showing one complete song from Yank Rachell’s homecoming concert in Brownsville, or the entirety of Geof Muldaur’s beautiful tribute song to Fritz Richmond? A very tantalizing performance of “Brownsville Blues” by Professor David Evans and Calvin Blackmon is jettisoned after one verse. This isn’t right.

Chasin’ Gus’ Ghost is well worth seeing, as an introduction to jug band music and a means of getting perspective on how that music was brought back to people’s attention in the 1960s. I love performance footage of music, though, and the failure to give the performances adequate space to say what they have to say is a serious shortcoming.

John M. Miller
To order: www.chasingusghost.com

Answers to the Old-Time Quiz

1. Jimmy Martin
2. Soldier’s Joy
3. d: all of the above
4. “Moon Shine Kate”
5. “Shag”
6. Gus Cannon
7. Ada Powers: ukulele
8. The Tobacco Tags featured Baucom and George Wade.
9. e: none of the above
11. & 12. William J. Narmour
12. Cousin Emmy: Kentucky
13. Put down that yo-yo.
14. Joe Crowe: fiddle
15. Orpha Lou Powers: mandolin
16. Carrie Belle Powers: guitar
17. Julia Powers: viola
18. The duet mandolin of Luther Cowan Powers: mandolin
20. Dink Roberts: North Carolina
21. Will Keys: Tennessee
22. Calvin Blackmon is jettisoned after one verse.
23. e: none of the above
24. “Moon Shine Kate”
25. 4: all of the above
26. A: Joy
27. B: Joy
28. 1: Joy
29. 2: Joy
30. 3: Joy
31. 5: Joe Crowe
32. 6: Gus Cannon
33. 7: Ada Powers: ukulele
34. 8: The Tobacco Tags featured Baucom and George Wade.
35. 9: e: none of the above
36. 10: 14. Joe Crowe: fiddle
37. 11: & 12. William J. Narmour
38. 12: Cousin Emmy: Kentucky
40. 14: Joe Crowe: fiddle
41. 15: Orpha Lou Powers: mandolin
42. 16: Carrie Belle Powers: guitar
43. 17: Julia Powers: viola
44. The duet mandolin of Luther Cowan Powers: mandolin
45. Banjo Bill Cornett: Kentucky
46. Dink Roberts: North Carolina
47. Will Keys: Tennessee
48. Calvin Blackmon is jettisoned after one verse.
OLD-TIME MUSIC QUIZ

1. What tune was the drunk man insisting the band play on Seven Foot Dilly’s 78 “Square Dance Fight on Ball Top Mountain?”

2. What tune were they playing at the time of the request?

3. Which of these bands had a tenor banjo player on their recordings?
   a. Roane County Ramblers
   b. Hoyt Ming and his Pep Steppers
   c. Eck Robertson and Family
   d. all of the above
   e. none of the above

4. What was the stage name of Rosa Lee Carson?

5. What was the nickname of Surry County guitar player Julius Artis Stanley? (It’s also the state dance of South Carolina.)

6. Who recorded under the name “Banjo Joe?”

7. Match the members of Fiddlin’ Powers and Family with their instruments:
   
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ada</th>
<th>Fiddle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cowman</td>
<td>Banjo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie</td>
<td>Mandolin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orpha Lou</td>
<td>Guitar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrie Belle</td>
<td>Ukulele</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. North Carolina’s Tobacco Tags featured two of what instrument?

9. Which of these bands is fictitious?
   a. The Lonely Eagles
   b. Mumford Bean and his Itawambians
   c. Hillbillies from Mars
   d. Fisher Hendley and the Aristocratic Pigs
   e. none of the above

10. How many children were born to E. V. and Hattie Stoneman?

11. What were the first names of the Mississippi duo Narmour and Smith?

12. Which played fiddle and which played guitar?

   a. Have another little drink and it’ll do you no harm.
   b. Put down that yo-yo.
   c. Take another chaw of Red Man tobacco.
   d. Rosin that bow.
   e. Roll back that rug, shake a leg, and moan.

14. Name the home state of the following banjo players:
   Cousin Emmy
   Lee Triplett
   Jenes Cottrell
   Dink Roberts
   Banjo Bill Cornett
   Phoebe Parsons
   Hobart Smith
   Will Keys