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The Old-Time Music Group, Inc. celebrates the love of old-time music. Old-time music—grassroots, or home grown music and dance—shares origins, influences and musical characteristics with roots musics throughout America. Our magazine, the Old-Time Herald, casts a wide net, highlighting the Southeastern tradition while opening its pages to kindred and comparable traditions and new directions. It provides enlightening articles and in-depth reviews, opportunities for musical learning and sharing, and a forum for addressing the issues and questions that bear upon the field. Recognizing that in roots music ideas and values of many kinds commingle, we strive to represent our interests democratically and to embody the best ideals of race, gender, and generational balance in a context of free and open discussion.
Letters

Regarding reviews

Certain CD reviews that appeared in the last issue of the Old-Time Herald have become the subject of sharp controversy and hard feelings over the last several weeks. Given the intensity of the discussion, this would seem an appropriate time to clarify our editorial policy on the subject of reviews.

In all but a few very rare cases, the materials discussed in the pages of the OTH are sent to us for the express purpose of being reviewed. Artists should be aware that if they seek review in these pages, we can’t guarantee that the reviewers’ opinions will be unequivocally positive. We considered both our reviewers and our readers to be highly knowledgeable about old-time music, and although another listener may have a different, and no less valid, response to any given recording, we believe that our reviewers will express their opinions in a manner that is informative both about the recording and about the wider context of old-time music.

We feel that Jody Stecher’s review of The Way It Was, discussed below, more than met these standards. Jody, who has written reviews for the Old-Time Herald for many years, was highly complimentary about the artists’ musicianship, but detailed his disagreement with the historical premise of the recording. The historical aspect of this controversy is a good example of the sort of debate that we welcome in this magazine. We rely on our reviewers (or readers) were discouraged from being critical. It is our belief that the value of honest discussion far outweighs the benefits of enforced congeniality.

I would like to offer my personal thoughts regarding one subtext of the debate below. Some of the letters we have received have called into question Jody Stecher’s authority on the subject of old-time music, citing in alarmingly hostile terms his Northeastern background and residence in California. I’m a native of the South, and (although I did not learn from them) my family has included many traditional musicians over the generations. I do not believe that by virtue of possessing this heritage, I can claim greater authority about old-time music than a fellow musician of different background. In earlier generations the distinction might have been relevant, but—while regional heritage is still very important, and a justifiable source of pride—for more than a generation now, a large portion of the devotion, creativity, and labor that has kept our music so vital has come from people who are neither from Appalachia nor even from the South. It’s hard to imagine where we would be today without the documentary efforts (as well as the artistry) of the New Lost City Ramblers, Alice Gerrard, Ray Alden, David Freeman, Andy Cahan, Bob Carlin, and far too many others to list—artists who are not natives of the Southern Appalachians. I’d like to propose to fellow old-time musicians that the time has come for us to dispense with regional antagonism.

Sarah Bryan

From Martin Fox and Jeff Winegar

After receiving many positive reviews since the release of Jeff Winegar’s and my CD, The Way It Was: 19th Century Fiddle and Banjo Music, I was puzzled by the lengthy, pedantic, and rather mean-spirited review of the CD by Jody Stecher in the past issue of the Old-Time Herald.

Buried amongst all of the negativity and criticism were some positive comments from the reviewer regarding the music, which we do appreciate.

Much of Mr. Stecher’s criticism seems to revolve around the idea that the fiddle and banjo were not played together prior to the 20th century. We do not believe that the players suddenly decided on the first day of 1900 that it was time to begin to play fiddle and banjo duets. We believe that the playing of these instruments together was a gradual process and that it began sometime after the Civil War in the Appalachians. This is the time period we were attempting to recreate in our CD.

There is some anecdotal evidence to support this idea. Years ago I was fortunate enough to get to know some of the older musicians of the area, such as Albert Hash, Tommy Jarrell, Jont Blevins, and Byard Ray, and they all told stories of their relatives who were active musicians in the 19th century, who played for dances using just the fiddle and banjo ensemble. All of these older players were quite sure of the musical history of their ancestors.

There are many print sources which support the playing together of fiddle/banjo duets prior to the 20th century. In the interest of space, here are four. The first, interestingly enough, comes from the August issue of this magazine, in which our CD was reviewed.

The beguiling lift 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 cited 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.

(Jon Pankake, review of It’s About Time, page 42, Old-Time Herald, August 2008)

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I just saw the review by Jody Stecher of The Way It Was, by Martin Fox and myself. I was born and raised in the Appalachians. Now, that certainly does not make me an expert and I have never tried for such a lofty goal, but I am pretty sure I have better first-hand knowledge of the music from that region than a Brooklyn-born California resident who made reference to “our Appalachian mountains,” as if he were a part of it, in his review. The review was all about slamming the liner notes, and Martin directly. Martin is not only my best friend but a true player and active supporter of the area, the people, and their music. He is appreciative to be mingled with our heritage, and has never attempted in any way to become the typical outsider that wants to show us how it was and how it should be.

Jody spent nine-tenths of the full-page review giving the reader a lesson in correct punctuation and how things were done 200 years ago, which many people, myself included, could debate and reject as [not] factual. He took the entire project and wound it into his own interpretation as it pertained to what we were trying to accomplish. We have several active musician friends in Southwest Virginia and East Kentucky who agree that his feeble attempt of being a self-appointed “Oz” as to what the later 19th century presented as old-time music and how it would have sounded is simply not accurate.

Lastly, everyone is a critic in some fashion, and what is good is always to the eye and ear of the beholder. This was not a music review. If it had been I would not be sending this to you.
Martin Fox and Jeff Winegar received some undeserved criticism in Jody Stecher’s review of their CD. The main point of contention is that the CD, by its title, treats banjo/fiddle duets as the norm in the 19th century, while the evidence to support this resides in the “almost none” category. Stecher does restrict his argument to Appalachia, but folks were settling that area in the 1790s and they came from the East where the fiddle/banjo pairing is documented. I have been researching this question for my set of CDs subtitled *Fiddling on the Frontier*. Here is some of what I’ve found.

There is Nicholas Creswell’s account in 1774 of “Fiddle and Banjo played by two negroes.” In late colonial/early republican times both Ben Carter, grandson of Robert “King” Carter in Virginia, and Randolph Jefferson, Thomas’ brother, both fiddlers/violinists (?), are described by their slaves as seeking solace among the slave musicians until late in the night. These slaves presumably had both fiddles and banjos. An 1843 cover lithograph for the sheet music to *Jim Crow Polka* shows a caricature of four black minstrels, two of whom are playing fiddle and banjo. An 1853 watercolor titled *Lynchburg Negro Dance* shows three black musicians, two on banjo and fiddle. An 1863 painting by John Ehninger called *Old Kentucky Home* portrays a black man and his son on fiddle and banjo. An album run from the 1860s entitled *Black Musicians in Minstrel Line* features four black musicians, two with banjo and fiddle. These are just a few; there are others. Dena Epstein in *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* cites further references; George Gibson cites a number of examples of the gourd banjo in Appalachia, one destination for escaped slaves who are documented by Robert Winans as playing both fiddle and banjo. Admittedly, most of what I’ve cited here is from the African American experience, but other authors, for example, Gerry Milnes in *Play of a Fiddle*, attest to the cross-cultural environment among musicians in West Virginia.

Taken as a whole, I think there is enough evidence, both circumstantial and direct, for me to conclude that the pairing of the fiddle and banjo was not uncommon throughout the 19th century. How much evidence is needed? That will be different for each person and those steeped in academia may require more “proof” than I, but the number of words devoted to criticism is disproportionate to the difference in proof requirements. It would be more prudent to say that we know it was done; we don’t know how it sounded.

**The Authors’ Response**

Jeff Winegar is right that in my review of *The Way It Was*, more space was spent on peripheral issues than on the music on the CD. He is also right to suggest that a review with more details about the music itself would have been more appropriate. On balance, I agree that a music review should be about the music. In my defense I should say that my decision to focus on the issue of 19th-century authenticity was made with friendly intentions. I sincerely regret any harm I may have caused and apologize for the bad feelings my review has aroused. No offense was intended. That I constructed my review so that two paragraphs of quotable praise could be used as promo by the duet without editing or ellipses is evidence of my good will.

I chose to focus on the duo’s claim of 19th-century authenticity for several reasons. I didn’t want to dwell on any perceived musical problems and I figured the duo wouldn’t much mind if I mentioned that there were anchormonies. The second reason was that the duo seemed to be making the claim of 19th-century authenticity very forcefully and since I had reservations about that claim I decided it was necessary to say so and to say why, and that takes up space, so my review was weak on providing particulars about the music itself. If I understand the true situation correctly, the duo of Fox and Winegar intended nothing more than to share some of their favorite old tunes in a solid traditional style and chose the theme of antiquity for the packaging. I now believe I took the claim too literally.

I was also motivated by a concern for the future of old-time music. There are more than a few recordings of old-time singers and musicians who were born in the late and even middle 19th-century whose music reflects the musical style and aesthetic of even older folks. I have based my idea of 19th-century music partially on these, partially on my familiarity with more fully documented musics from other regions and other continents, and from what I know about the 19th-century in general. I think that if we don’t take an impartial look at the variety, subtlety, and depth of real old-time music as it was actually played and sung in antiquity these qualities may vanish from the music in the future. The loss of microtonal intonation is now almost universal and attention to the fine points of old-time melody and ornamentation is getting scarcer even as fiddlers and fretless banjo players are growing more numerous. I accept that state of affairs and enjoy the parts of old-time music which are still vibrant and viable. But I should not have dumped these concerns of mine on the heads of the duo.

I believe I expressed my reservations about this CD without disparaging Fox and Winegar as players or as people. A calm reading of the review will show that I did not criticize Martin Fox personally, as has been charged. The only thing I wrote about him was that he is a terrific fiddler, that his praise of Jeff Winegar’s banjo playing was accurate, and that his modesty in not tooting his own horn was admirable. However I do see in hindsight that I could have better expressed myself throughout with a different tone and far fewer words.

I never suggested in my review that the banjo/fiddle duet never played in the 19th-century. I said that I doubted that it was the defining typical instrumental band for that period in Appalachia. I still think no one knows for sure.

Christian Wig writes at the end of his letter that we know the pairing existed but we don’t know how it sounded. We can be pretty sure how it didn’t sound. We know that there were no frets on banjos until mid-century and that fretted banjos were not common until quite a bit later. We know that steel strings would have caused all but the stoutest instruments to collapse given the typical construction and setup of period fiddles and banjos. We know that guitars tended to be small, shallow bodied, and not deep toned. And we know that the sound of mylar banjo heads was unknown. What musical equipment did and didn’t exist in the 19th century can be verified with a Google search.

I’ve been asked to provide specific examples of the errors I reference in the liner notes. Fair enough. Here are a few. I hope that my detailing them can bring this discussion to a close. I truly mean no harm in presenting them and I hope the duo and other readers will find the following as interesting as I do.

Allen Sisson did not record Rocky Road to Dublin on an early cylinder record.
He recorded at the end of the cylinder era which had begun in the last quarter of the 19th century, and he recorded on a disc. Edison was still issuing some cylinders in 1925 but by then they were transferring the music from disc masters. By the 1920s Edison was recording directly to discs and issuing the music as both 78 rpm discs and, in smaller quantities, as Blue Amberol Cylinders.

My apparent quibbles about grammar were meant to be a door to the bigger questions about music and music history. For instance my remark about apostrophes had more significance than the scolding school teacher stance for which it was mistaken due to my clumsy presentation. The missing apostrophe in “Highlanders Farewell” is connected to some fascinating music history. As many of us remember, Emmett Lundy introduced one of the two renditions he recorded (for the Library of Congress in 1941) with a story connecting this tune to a Scots Highlander bidding farewell to his sweetheart. As such the title would be “Highlander’s Farewell.” In fact this tune is a fragment of a magnificent 10-part Scottish strathspey entitled “The Highlanders’ Farewell to Ireland.” The apostrophe in this case refers to the entire regiment. The tune was published in 1781 in Alexander McGlashan’s Collection, and several times in the 19th century. It’s played often in its full glory in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Parts of the original tune, slightly transformed, make up the four-part Irish reel “Farewell to Ireland,” which the legendary County Meath fiddler Frank O’Higgins recorded for Regal Zonophone just a few years before Lundy recorded his version on the other side of the Atlantic.

The statement that “Highlanders Farewell” was “probably at least fairly common in the early days of the Galax, Virginia area” is an example of what I meant by “speculation.” Another example is the question of whether The Wounded Hoosier is related to the Irish air “The Wounded Hussar.” The titles certainly sound similar but the melodies of these two tunes are unrelated. The Wounded Hussar is a popular melody that has been recorded many times under that name or as “Captain O’Kane,” named for the 17th-century Antrim warrior known as Slasher O’Kane. The melody of “The Wandering Hoosier” is derived from the well-known Irish air, “The Blackbird,” a tune long associated with both fiddle and harp in both set dance and slow air versions. It’s also a much loved song, a political allegory of many verses in which the blackbird represents none other than Prince Charles Edward Stewart himself. This tune is a sibling of the melody that Edden Hammons played as “Queen of The Earth and Child of The Skies.” Sam Bayard has documented its use as a burial march in Pennsylvania.

Again I apologize to all I offended and also to Mary Z. Cox, in whose CD review I also failed to find the appropriate words and tone.

Jody Stecher

In defense of Jody Stecher

I understand that Jody Stecher has received some sharp criticism for a recent CD review, based partly on his Brooklyn origins. With sincere respect to the readership of the OTH I’d like to submit a note on his qualifications for acting as reviewer. I met Jody at the 1965 Union Grove Fiddlers Convention, shortly after the local judges had awarded him the world guitar championship for the afternoon, and before he went on to win it for the evening as well. During the ensuing 43 years, I’ve watched and listened in admiration for his ability to dig up information on living and historical players of Southern music, and more so for his grasp of the music they played and the songs they sang. He has demonstrated this in a long series of his own recordings on numerous labels, and since 1994, the quarterly source for traditional fiddle music!

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 Requests for Information

I read an article in Vol 9, Number 6 regarding Jep Bisbee and the Statewide Old Fiddler’s Contest held in Detroit on Jan 19, 1926. Mr. Bisbee was the winner, and second place went to Frank Woods, my great-grandfather. I am interested in any information regarding Frank Woods—I have been working on our family genealogy and have no information about him, his life, death, his wife Hannah, or any of their children other than my grandfather, Edmund Woods, who died in Minnesota in 1948. Any information regarding Frank Woods would be very welcome. Thank you.

Sue Swendsen, sswendsen@charter.net

We are looking for information on the Hamm Brothers who recorded “He Saved My Soul” for Bullet Records in about 1949. North-central and Northeastern Kentucky have been suggested as possible locales, but we are not sure about this. Does anyone have information on them? We are also looking for information on the Franklin Brothers who recorded “Sweeter Than the Flowers” at WPAQ (Mount Airy, NC), which was later released on the Early Days of Bluegrass series. (Bill and Delmas Franklin, vocal duet; Clyde Franklin, guitar; Bill Franklin, mandolin; Ballard Taylor AKA “Grandpappy Nerit,” fiddle.) Thanks.

Ken Irwin, kirwin@rounder.com

Corrections

I received my OTH yesterday and scanned it, and then became curious about the quiz in the back, and what someone felt were correct answers.

Regarding Narmour & Smith, Shel Smith fiddled on “Rose Waltz” and Willie Narmour played guitar on said track, the reverse of their usual lineup, so the answer regarding instrumental alignments would have to be “Both.”

I visited Lee Triplett and saw him numerous times at festivals in West Virginia and Ohio and never once saw him with a banjo on his knee. Fiddle is what he was known for, so why is he in the list of banjo players? I am not saying he never played banjo (though I never knew him to play one, but perhaps playing it in the closet might be for the best), but it was not his instrument of choice.

Kerry is correct. We meant to refer to banjo player Lee Hammons, but the error slipped by. Also, in the June-July issue, we ran photographs of the Brandywine Festival taken by Russ Hatton and inadvertently failed to ask his permission. Our apologies to Russ for the oversight.
As a member of the generation of old-time musicians who were introduced to the *Old-Time Herald* as children or teenagers (the latter, in my case), I owe much of my understanding of this music and its history to the body of work that the magazine has established in its first twenty years. The contributions that Alice Gerrard, the magazine’s founder, and Gail Gillespie, Editor in Chief since 2003, make and have made, both as scholars and as musicians, enrich the contemporary world of old-time music immeasurably.

After five years, dozens of issues of the magazine, countless all-nighters spent editing, and far too many festival hours spent running the sales booth rather than playing music, Gail has decided to retire from the *Old-Time Herald*. The role of an editor is largely played behind the scenes, so oftentimes readers may not know a whole lot about the person who orchestrates the magazine. On the occasion of Gail’s retirement from the *Old-Time Herald*, allow me to introduce her to those of you who may not know her personally.

Gail Gillespie is, of course, an old-time musician—and a great one at that, who plays just about every instrument you can think of. She is head-spinningly knowledgeable about old-time music. If you need to know the Buckle Busters’ children’s dogs’ shoe sizes, I suggest that you consult Gail. During all these years that she’s been editing the magazine, she and her husband Dwight Rogers have also been tireless supporters of local music here in Central North Carolina, organizing jam sessions, spreading the word about area events, and coaxing shy musicians past their reticence. Dwight and Gail have two great daughters, Amy and Nora, and a granddaughter, Coralee Rogers-Vickers, who is perhaps the cutest child ever to be bragged on by a doting Mamaw and Papaw.

The *Old-Time Herald* staff would like to express our gratitude to Gail for her outstanding work as editor of this magazine.

Another person who deserves a great deal of credit for the *OTH’s* longevity and success is Executive Director Katherine Meehan, whose expert management has kept us afloat in a time when many larger magazines are giving up the ghost—a real feat. Katherine too is leaving the *Herald* after years of dedicated work. Her legacy is an organizational infrastructure so sturdy and efficient that it’s hard to believe old-time musicians have been within a mile of it. Thank you, Katherine, for your great stewardship.

Upon Gail’s retirement, I’ve slid over into the editorial chair. I am honored that Gail and Alice have tapped me to continue their work (and am glad that they’ll still be close at hand!), and I’m delighted and lucky to have as my colleagues Artistic Director Steve Terrill, and Ruth Eckles, our brand-new Business Manager. I hope that readers of the *Old-Time Herald* will also continue to help guide it, by sharing your thoughts about the music in general and the magazine in particular whenever you take a notion. The best ways to reach me are by email (editor@oldtimeherald.org) and on Facebook; communications by more antiquated means, like the telephone (919-419-1800) and MySpace, will also find their way to me. Please keep us up to date on old-time doings in your area, and don’t hesitate to share ideas about what you’d like to see featured in this magazine. It’s like the Cofer Brothers say: When you get a good thing, shove it along.

Sarah Bryan
Here & There

Events

Bubbaville will host the second annual Dare to Be Square West gathering from Oct. 9-12, at various locations in Portland, OR. Featured callers include Larry Edelman and Bill Martin, who will call to the music of Seattle’s Queen City Bulldogs. Visit www.bubbaguitar.com/d2bs to find out about all the events and festivities.

The Shakori Hills GrassRoots Festival of Music and Dance, a world music gathering in Silk Hope, NC, near Chapel Hill, takes place this year from Oct. 9-12. Among the old-time artists scheduled to perform are the Carolina Chocolate Drops and John Specker. Visit www.shakorihills.org or call (919) 542-8142 for more information.

FOAOTMAD (Friends of American Old-Time Music and Dance) will host banjo and fiddle workshops by Dwight Diller and Dave Bing from November 8-9 (beginners) and November 15-16 (advanced), in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire. Visit www.foaotmad.org.uk for details.

Berea College will host the seventeenth annual Christmas Country Dance School from Dec. 26-Jan. 1. Proceedings include evening dances, and daily classes on a variety of English, American, Irish, and Scandinavian dance, music, song, and craft traditions. Registration is due by Nov. 1. Visit www.berea.edu/ccds for schedule and fees.

Regular Events

The fall schedule for the Southern Mountain Square Dance, sponsored by the Blacksburg (VA) Old Time Music and Dance Group, includes: Oct. 4, Bill Wellington and the Virginia Creepers, with fiddler Jerry Correll; Nov. 1, Tom Hinds and the Blue Ridge Rhythm Devils, with fiddlers Rick Martin and Aaron Olwell; Dec. 6, Beth Molaro and the Buffalo Creek String Band with fiddler Jack Burgess. Dances are held from 8-11 PM. Visit www.nrot.org for locations and more information.

Organizations

Berea College invites proposals for the fourth year of its Appalachian Music Fellowship Program. The purpose of the program is to encourage the use of Berea’s non-commercial traditional music collections by graduate students, faculty, public school teachers, performers, and other scholars. Awards are made for a period of one to three months in support of research projects that will contribute to the preservation or promotion of these musical resources. Berea collections of particular interest to the old-time music community include the Kentucky-oriented field recordings of Bruce Greene, John Harrod, and Jeff Titon. The fellowships must be taken up between October 2008 and August 2009. Fellows are expected to be in residence during the term of the fellowship and are encouraged to participate in campus and community activities. Stipend: $3000/month.

The deadline is December 1 for fellowships to be completed between January and August 2009. There is no application form. Applicants are asked to submit a proposal that addresses (1) their interest in Appalachian music, (2) description of the project specifying which Berea collec-
Artists and Recordings

Bob Bovee and Gail Heil will be performing at the Rochester (MN) Public Library on October 11; National Music Museum in Vermillion, SD, on Oct. 17; Crosscurrents in Kansas City, MO, Oct. 18; Great Plains Bluegrass and Old Time Music Association concert and fiddle workshop in Omaha, NE, on October 25; “Kids in the Rotunda” at Overture Center in Madison, WI, on November 15; Neenah (WI) Public Library
on November 23; Ginkgo Coffeehouse in St. Paul, MN, on Dec. 4; Rhein River Arts Center in New Ulm, MN, Dec. 6.

Congratulations

Contest winners at this year’s Appalachian String Band Music Festival (Cliff-top, WV), include the following. Fiddle: Erynn Marshall (Gibsons, British Columbia); Rayna Gellert (Lexington, KY); Chance McCoy (Greenville, WV); Emily Schaad (New York, NY). Youth Fiddle: Isaac Ackers (Chapel Hill, NC); Tessa Dillon (St Albans, WV); William Brauneis (Washington, DC). Senior Fiddle: Walt Koken (Avondale, PA); Jimmy McCown (Hardy, KY); H. O. Jenkins (Dobson, NC). Banjo: Tim Bing (Huntington, WV); Bob Smakula (Elkins, WV); Jim Holland (Athens, AL); Chad Ashworth (Nitro, WV); Cathy Fink (Kensington, MD). Youth Banjo: Corbin Hayslett (Amherst, VA); Daniel Rothwell (Smyrna, TN); William Brauneis (Winston-Salem, NC). Senior Banjo: Jimmy McCown (Hardy, KY); Reed Martin (Cabin John, MD); Marvin Gaster (Sanford, NC). Traditional Band: New Mules (Bloomington, IN); Red State Ramblers (Lexington, KY); Orpheus Supertones (Avondale, PA); Uncle Henry’s Favorites (Crozet, VA); Magnolia Serenaders (Madison, WI). Neo-Traditional Band: Special Ed and the Short Bus (Richmond, VA); La Vivelle (Kensington, MD); Windy City Clock Jobbers (Chicago, IL); Poor Taters (Athens, WV); Vinegar Creek Constituency (Lancaster, PA). Best Original Song: Special Ed and the Short Bus (Richmond, VA). Best Original Tune: Windy City Clock Jobbers (Chicago, IL). Old-Time Flat-Foot Dance, 15 and under: Rebecca Molaro (Asheville, NC); Alice Jamison (Asheville, NC); Zoe Norris (Asheville, NC). Old-Time Flat-Foot Dance, 16-40: Becky Hill (Nashville, MI); Josephine Stewart (Charlottesville, VA); Anna Carter (Minneapolis, MN). Old-Time Flat-Foot Dance, 41-59: Ira Bernstein (Asheville, NC); Andy Edmonstone (Rosewell, GA); Jay Bland (Kennesaw, GA). Old-Time Flat-Foot Dance, 60 and older: Thomas Maupin (Murfreesboro, TN); Daniel Butner (Winston-Salem, NC); Mary Butner (Winston-Salem, NC).

After last year’s Clifftop, we neglected to announce contest winners in the OTH. Our apologies and belated congratulations to the winners of the 2007 contests, who were as follows. Fiddle: Mike Bryant (Harriman, TN); Stephanie Coleman (Durham, NC); Mark Simos (Watertown, MA); Chance McCoy (Martinsburg, WV); Darin Gentry (Brevard, NC). Banjo: Adam Hurt (Winston-Salem, NC); Hilarie Burhans (Athens, OH); Bob Smakula (Elkins, WV). Banjo: Frank Evans (Toronto, Canada); Corbin Hayslett (Amherst, VA); Cole Holland (Athens, AL). Senior Banjo: Walt Koken (Avondale, PA); Jim McKown (Hardy, KY); Mac Benford (Trumansburg, NY). Traditional Band: New Dixie Entertainers (Harriman, TN); Orpheus Supertones (Avondale, PA); Haywire Gang (Natural Bridge, VA); Clef Twangers (Watertown, MA); Cork Burners (Clay, AL). Neo-Traditional Band: Old-Time Liberation Front (Lancaster, PA); Hound Dog Hill (Churchville, VA); Pan-Demonium (Greensboro, NC); Common Taters (Fayetteville, WV); Bull City Six Shooters (Durham, NC). Best Original Song: Hound Dog Hill (Churchville, VA). Best Original Tune: Bull City Six Shooters (Durham, NC). Old-Time Flat-Foot Dance, 13 and under: Molly McGuigan
At this summer’s Old Fiddler’s Convention in Galax, VA, the following artists took home awards in the old-time categories. Best All-Around Performer: Jake Krack (Orma, WV). Old-Time Fiddle: Jake Krack (Orma, WV); Nancy Sluys (Westfield, NC); James Burris (Galax, VA); John Perry (Independence, VA); Marsha Todd (Mount Airy, NC); Amanda Fithan (Pulaski, VA); G.W. Gibson (Abingdon, VA); Cherie Quinn (Ferrum, VA); Angela Hale (Elk Creek, VA). Old-Time Bands: Cabin Creek Boys (White Top, VA); Whoopin’ Holzer String Band (Orma, WV); Blue Ridge Mountain Ramblers (Low Gap, NC); Southern Pride (Galax, VA); Ubiquitones (Greensboro, NC); Grayson Highlands Band (Jefferson, NC); Pilot Mountain Bobcats (Westfield, NC); Backstep (Mount Airy, NC); Slate Mountain Ramblers (Ararat, VA).
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Virginia fiddler Boyd Wilbert “Hick” Edmonds died on June 24th at Smyth County Community Hospital in Marion, Virginia. He was preceded in death by his parents, Charles and Alice Edmonds, and four brothers. He is survived by his wife, Sue Edmonds of Atkins, Virginia; two step-sons, John Atkins and Randy Atkins, both of Atkins, Virginia; three step-daughters, Jeffie Campbell and husband Bill of Marion, Virginia, Cindy Sneed and husband John of Spring, Texas, and Anne Reedy and husband Jack of Houston, Texas; one sister-in-law, Juanita Edmonds, of Christiansburg, Virginia; three step-grandchildren and three step-great-grandchildren. Hick was laid to rest at Chatham Hill Cemetery in Chatham Hill, Virginia. The cemetery is secluded and lies on a small knob overlooking Rich Valley, offering peaceful, pastoral views of the surrounding countryside.

Born in 1913, Hick lived nearly his entire life in the community of Lick Creek in Smyth County. During World War II he was drafted into the Army and became a medic with the 29th Infantry Division. He served in the invasion of Normandy and continued fighting until the end of the European Campaign, then returned home to Lick Creek where he resumed working the family farm. For much of his life Hick lived as a bachelor and farmed land owned by his family. During his time as a farmer he produced wheat, barley, corn, and tobacco, ran a dairy operation, and operated a sawmill at his home to meet local building demands. He continued to farm and run the sawmill until his retirement sometime in the 1970s. In 1977 he married Sue Taylor Atkins, who is a guitarist, singer, and storyteller.

Hick was best known for his old-time fiddling. He began playing in his late teen years and was almost entirely influenced by notable fiddler Beverly Thomson and his two older brothers, all of whom lived on a farm less than one mile from Hick. He was also influenced by early country recordings, his favorites being those of Fiddling John Carson. Hick was later influenced by some bluegrass and modern country artists, but throughout his fiddling career he maintained a pure old-time noting and bowing style. His style was truly old-sounding, rhythmic, and lively, and he had many unique variations of standard tunes that were wonderful, crafted through time by his subsistence upbringing and long agrarian life with few influences from outside his community. Hick was a tenacious fiddler too, being able to saw out tunes up until a year before his death.

Hick has received several awards for his fiddle playing, the most notable of these being in 1998 when he won the second place in the Senior and fourth in the Overall Old-Time Fiddle categories at the Appalachian Stringband Festival in Clifftop, West Virginia. Hick’s fiddle playing was almost always accompanied by his wife Sue on guitar, and their duet playing has become much admired around Smyth County. More recently they gained the appreciation of old-time music listeners far and wide with the release of their CD Whoopee Liza Jane in 2003.

Hick was one of the last surviving “old-timers” in Virginia and the Southern Appalachian region. Fortunately, quite a few of the younger musicians have been lucky enough to experience Hick’s fiddling and life, perhaps most notably within just the last few years when all but a few of the old-timers have passed on, living only in our memories, imagination, and music. We are delighted that Hick’s fiddling will be carried forth, and are grateful to have befriended and learned from this very kind man. The chance will not come again, and will we miss him greatly!

Shay Garriock

Fiddler and fiddle maker Clifford Hardesty, 87, of Canal Lewisville in Coshocton County, Ohio, died on July 8th. Born in 1921, he was one of the nine children of John (a coalminer and farmer) and Florence Hardesty of Coshocton County. He began to play music at the age of ten, when he borrowed his older brother’s fiddle and taught himself to play “Red River Valley,” followed by “Coming Round the Mountain” and “Can I Sleep in Your Barn Tonight, Mister?” As a young man he farmed and worked hauling coal and lime with his ‘39 pickup truck. He later went into the fuel business, operating a service station in West Lafayette. In 1973 he began teaching himself to build fiddles, of which he built scores over the course of the next thirty-five years. Hardesty appears on multiple recordings (including Clifford Hardesty: Ohio’s Master Fiddler), and played and demonstrated at many festivals throughout the nation. He was a teacher and mentor to many musicians in Ohio and beyond.

Artie Traum died on July 20th. Traum was brought up in the Bronx, and as a young man was exposed to the thriving Greenwich Village folk and blues club scene in the 1960s. With his brother Happy, Traum performed at the 1969 Newport Folk Festival, and toured widely in the early 1970s. In the ’70s and ’80s, Artie Traum was part of the Upstate New York folk musicians gathering known as the Woodstock Mountains Review. Throughout his life, Traum was a prolific performer, recording artist, and producer, who also wrote instructional books, produced documentaries, and took part in a great many other creative endeavors.

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Issues in Old-Time Music

OLD-TIME HERALD REVIEWS
by Alice Gerrard

First, let me say that I completely agree with Sarah Bryan’s thoughtful preface to the Letters section, in which she calls for a cease-fire of arguments based on “insider” versus “outsider” or “elitist academic” identifications. Those are truly red herrings and are akin to fear mongering, guaranteed to inflame and stir up negative feelings without regard to real issues.

I completely understand the personal angst and sense of accomplishment that goes into making a recording. It’s your baby, and when you send it out into the world you want everyone to love it as you do. Some of the musicians reviewed in these pages have not made many CDs—maybe just one—and are not used to being reviewed. Others have made lots. When a review comes out that is not glowing, it can hurt a bit—or a lot. I would guarantee that every musician who has ever recorded, especially if he or she has recorded a lot, has received a bad review, or a review that very carefully didn’t say anything, or that, if you read between the lines, convinces you the reviewer didn’t like the project. Here are a couple of excerpts from reviews I’ve been involved in.

“You Better Let That Liar Alone” and “Jolie Blon” are tolerable, the rest is an ol’-timey Cajun nightmare.

[Name] is content, without singing, to strum on his old banjo . . . depressing numbers like one called “Black Lung.” I have no wish to add to the troubles of exploited miners . . . but I wonder if conditions were ever improved . . . by so gloomy a protest song. . . . a really slobbering little number called ‘I Truly Understand.’

The sarcastic tone of that last excerpt (I cobbled together pieces from what was a longer review) is one I’ve never encountered in reviews in the OTH. What I felt on reading this review, besides the initial wince, was that the reviewer didn’t know s—t from apple butter, but that was his/her opinion (and he/she might be kind of a jerk). Recently, I saw a review of a CD in the Washington Post that was very unfavorable. The next day I picked up a copy of People magazine, in which they reviewed the same CD and loved it. That’s the way with reviews—one person loves it, another hates it, and all degrees in between. And sometimes (in my opinion) the reviewer hits the nail on the head, and sometimes misses.

OTH reviewers are generally knowledgeable about old-time music, and often about other forms of music as well. They care about the music, and they care about the people who play it. They are often caught between a rock and a hard place. It’s not easy to review your peers, especially if the reviewer is a musician too (you review a CD this week, you’re probably going to run into the musician at Clifftop or Weiser next week). The OTH is often in a difficult position too. Many times we have sent CDs to reviewers and they send them back, saying, “I really like this person, but I don’t like the CD, and don’t feel comfortable reviewing it.” Occasionally the OTH can’t find anybody who will review a particular CD for that very reason.

The point of reviews is not to hurt anyone. It is to give a critical assessment to the general public, and especially to those who buy CDs, as to what the CD is about and whether or not it accomplishes its stated goal. Critical reviews also help to define the state of the art. If everyone loved everything unreservedly, there’d be no way to make critical assessments or choices. Truly, do you not make judgments in your mind about what is good music and what is not, what you like and what you don’t? If someone makes a CD, and wants people to notice it and buy it, and puts it out there, it will be reviewed—perhaps not always glowingly. Reviewers have opinions, and any given review is one person’s opinion. It’s time to calm down, recognize that fact—and maybe even learn something from what the reviewer says. As Sarah wrote, anyone who disagrees with a review is invited to say so in a letter to the editor (to be edited and printed at the discretion of the editor). The OTH is not a fanzine and has never tried to be one.

The OTH policy has always been (and I understand continues to be, under new leadership) to seek out reviewers who are knowledgeable in general, and more specifically about certain genres: early bluegrass, blues, old old-time, new old-time, etc. Some of our reviewers don’t want to review anything that veers away from traditional; some reviewers like the “edgier”
music; some only want to review reissues of classics; some know a lot more about blues or Cajun than others; and so on.

The review process goes thusly. CDs are sent in to the OTH. Decisions are made as to what to review and what not to review based on a number of criteria. Does it generally fit into the genre of traditional music? (Believe it or not, the OTH gets a lot of stuff that doesn’t by any stretch of the imagination have any connection to traditional music). Is it an important reissue? Does it seem, at first listening, to be a good CD by an unknown musician—or any CD by a known musician who is out there working? Is space available in the magazine? So, from the very beginning of the process decisions are being made about what to review and what not to review. These decisions can be to some extent subjective. Then the reviewer is chosen depending on his or her availability, and knowledge of the genre—i.e., “Here’s a banjo/fiddle recording. Let’s give it to Sam Reviewer since he plays both and is knowledgeable about the genre.” Beyond that, it comes back in, is edited, and goes to press.

Here is an excerpt from the guidelines the OTH sends out to reviewers.

We believe that reviewers need to have a chance to develop their voices. Reviewers have opinions and the old-time music community needs to accept that. If you record something and put it out there, it will be reviewed. Artists won’t always like what a reviewer says, or they may be disappointed in a review—or they may be ecstatic. Our obligation, as a magazine with critical reviews, is to be as straightforward and honest as possible. We don’t subscribe to the notion that if you can’t say something good, you shouldn’t say anything at all. We subscribe to the notion that honest criticism will help set a musical standard and maintain the integrity and credibility of the OTH. Otherwise it just becomes a fanzine.

Over the years, artists have taken issue with reviewers in different ways. Sometimes they write in and say so, other times they resort to name-calling on the Internet. I once had someone corner me and bring up a review that had been printed at least a couple of years before. He had been carrying around a lot of anger for all that time at what he felt was an unfair review, and he was shaking his finger in my face, saying things like, “You’re the editor, you should be more responsible for what people say,” and a lot more about the perceived unfairness of the review itself. I was very conscious of how angry he was, and at the same time scrambling (unsuccessfully) to remember what the review said as he brought up point after point. After I got home a few days later, I looked up the review, and was surprised to see that in general it was a very positive review. There were a few things the reviewer took issue with, but they appeared to me to be minor. However—and this is the thing I’ve found—artists, no matter how critically positive the review may be, are inclined to remember mainly the things the reviewer doesn’t like or takes issue with.

I have talked over the years with many people about the issue of reviews and how they should be handled. Opinions differ widely. It has been suggested that we should print anonymous reviews. As one magazine that prints anonymous reviews puts it: “[Reviews are] contributed individually by a selection of our various reviewers [named at the beginning of the reviews section] covering under the cloak of collective anonymity.” Here are a couple of samples from that magazine’s reviews section:

... utterly forgettable

... even the participation of [name] can’t salvage this pile of crap...

The title song is as bad as anything I have heard . . . [the] first track on a CD that fails to improve.

The OTH has always had a policy of not printing anonymous reviews, though that might be one way to go.

It has been suggested that we shouldn’t do reviews at all—that reviews are the antithesis of what the old-time music community is all about—and that we should just list releases, or a brief description of the kind of music they contain. However, I think people really like the review section of the OTH. Surveys have indicated that the reviews are one of the more popular features of the magazine, keeping people in touch with what’s out there—and there’s a lot out there. What with the availability of digital home recording, recording a CD is within most people’s reach.

It has been suggested that when we get a negative review, we also print a positive review of the same recording. It’s also been suggested that people stop whining and grow up. It’s a never-ending subject, and I personally don’t think it can be resolved to everyone’s satisfaction. But it is definitely worth talking about and keeping the door open to discussion.
What do the Carter family, the Nazis, the FCC, the AMA, 12 million Depression dollars, goat glands, country music radio, rock and roll, and 16,000 pairs of gentlemen’s testicles have in common? The answer is Dr. John R. Brinkley.

One day in the fall of 1918, in Milford, Kansas, a forty-six-year-old farmer named Bill Stittsworth came to see Dr. John Brinkley with a problem. Stittsworth said he had lost his vigor and didn’t have any “lead in his pencil, no powder in his pistol.” The farmer looked out the window, and watching the frisky billy goats, said, “Too bad I don’t have a billy goat’s glands.” He said, “Doctor, I want you to transplant them into me.”

A few days later Stittsworth returned to the clinic ready for the operation. Dr. Brinkley entered the operating room with his mask, rubber gloves, white gown, and a small tray with two goat testicles in the center. After the man was anesthetized, the Doctor cut a small plug from the fresh goat gonads and inserted it in a hole made in the man’s testicles.

When the farmer healed up he reported that “his pencil was full of lead...frisky again.” Nine months later, Stittsworth and his wife were thrilled to have a son, whom they appropriately named Billy.
The Doctor is in

No one was more delighted than Dr. Brinkley. Quick to realize he had a potential financial bonanza, Brinkley hired a publicist and built an ad campaign around “Billy,” his wondrous new operation, and the great doctor himself.

But Dr. Brinkley wasn’t a real doctor. He had been brought up poor in the mountains of Jackson County, North Carolina, near Cullowhee. Born July 8, 1885, he went to live with his Aunt Sally when his parents died. He left home, married a local girl named Sally Wike, and became a snake-oil huckster in a traveling medicine show.

It was in the medicine show that Brinkley realized the value music had in getting and holding an audience. As musicians playing traditional mountain music drew in the crowd, Brinkley would play the part of a doctor and make the pitch for his alcohol-based remedy. It was here Brinkley learned his smooth patter, which folks said could charm a wagon out of ditch.

After the medicine show folded, he moved to Greenville, South Carolina, where he opened Electro Medical Doctors. For $25 he and his partner James Crawford injected patients’ rear ends with colored water. It was guaranteed to cure everything from gout to cancer, plus improve patients’ sex lives. After several months of taking in wads of cash and racking up unpaid debt around Greenville, they skipped town.

The pair traveled to Memphis, where Brinkley met and married Minerva Jones, the daughter of a real physician. Brinkley didn’t want to spoil the wedding festivities by telling her he was still married to Sally Wike.

It wasn’t long before the Greenville, South Carolina, sheriff captured him and Crawford and threw the two of them in the Greenville County jail. With borrowed money they were able to pay off their debts and jump back into helping mankind with their medical miracles.

John Brinkley had always wanted to be a real doctor, but he didn’t want to bother with all that pesky education, so in 1915 he attended a diploma mill called the Kansas City Eclectic School of Medicine. For $150 he got a diploma that allowed him to call himself a medical doctor in Kansas, Arkansas, Texas, and Connecticut. In fact, he began referring to himself simply as “Doctor.”
Medicine in the early 1900s was just beginning to recover from its deregulation under Andrew Jackson’s presidency (1829-1837). Basically, any citizen could practice medicine without fear of reprisal. Although allopathic or “Western scientific medicine” was beginning to take hold, there were many other schools of thought. Eclectic medicine, homeopathy, and naturopathy made use of botanical remedies. There was very little regulation by the government. America was a natural breeding ground for quacks, especially since many of the “scientific” doctors were no more able to cure a disease than the naturopaths. (Andrew Jackson likely died from an overdose of calomel [mercurous chloride] and sugar of lead [lead acetate], prescriptions given to him by his allopathic doctor.)

Moving to Milford

After his medical degree was purchased in Kansas City, Brinkley’s wife Minnie read in the newspaper that a doctor was needed in Milford, Kansas, a small town near the center of the state. They moved there just as the 1918 flu pandemic was breaking out. In one of his few non-self-serving acts, he drove all over the county doing his best to help the victims.

It was after a year of practice in Milford that he performed the first goat gland operation.

Times were hard, but many men weren’t. The Doctor’s high-priced goat gland placebos worked just often enough to get people talking. The word began to spread. Problem customers were bullied or paid off.

Articles appeared in newspapers and men started coming from all over the country to Milford, Kansas, to drop their pants and pay big bucks to get as frisky as a goat again. Soon he was making half a million dollars a year. He became the Midas of Milford, with a 16-room hospital that could not keep up with the demand.

Radio was new. There was no standard format or even advertising, but more importantly to Brinkley, there was almost no regulation.

When Brinkley returned to Milford he built a studio and a hundred-foot radio tower on the grounds of the hospital, and started KFKB, “Kansas First, Kansas Best, the sunshine station in the heart of the nation.” Much of the programming was Doctor’s talk about medical troubles.

“Don’t let your doctor two-dollar you to death . . . come to Dr. Brinkley . . . take advantage of our compound operation . . . I can cure you the same as I did Ezra Hopkins of Possum Point, Missouri.”

“Bedroom problems? Tired by nine PM? Old get up and go just got up and went? Remember a man is only as old as his glands. And Dr. Brinkley is here to help.”

He would croon into the microphone, “Observe the rooster and the capon. The rooster will fight and work for his flock. He stands guard over them, protects them, but the capon eats the food the hens scratch up. He will even sit on their eggs. Do you want to be a capon or a rooster?”

Brinkley refined the operation. Now instead of putting in a plug of goat gland into the man’s testicles he simply put in a sliver of goat testicle in the man’s scrotum and sewed it back up. It was faster, created less infection, and seemed to
Minnie and Dr. John Brinkley preparing a goat gland operation at their hospital in Milford, Kansas.
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have the same rejuvenating placebo effect on many of his patients. Typically, the body of the patient would absorb the goat glands as foreign matter, but infection and sometimes death were troublesome side effects.

Behind the hospital was a herd of Toggenberg goats that the patient could select from, or if the patient had a particularly frisky goat at home he could bring it along. Many people did travel halfway across the country with their own especially horny goats.

Doctor had a low-key, friendly voice and could free-associate for hours over the radio: “My friends, note the difference between the stallion and the gelding. The stallion stands erect, neck arched, mane flowing, chewing the bit, stamping the ground, seeking the female, while the gelding stands around half-asleep, cowardly, listless. Men, don’t let this happen to you.”

There were very few radio stations in the entire country at that time. The radio was something new and miraculous in itself, a voice out of the sky. Rural folks around the country sat around the radio all evening listening to the Doctor and hillbilly music on KFKB. Midwestern musicians like Fiddlin’ Bob Larkin and Cowboy Slim Rinehart kept the rural listeners tuned in.

In 1929 KFKB was voted the most popular radio station in America. Dr. Brinkley was making money hand over fist, and he spent it just as quickly. The town of Milford, built a limousine, jewelry, a yacht, even an airplane.

In 1928 he started an extremely popular half-hour radio segment called “Medical Question Box.” Listeners would write in asking questions about their medical problems. Doctor would prescribe the right combination of his special elixirs.

“When female cramps get a grip on me, I can’t do nothing. Can you help?”

“You’ll need to take Tonics #27 and #52 for four weeks. It will cure you right up. But oh, my friends, you must help me. Remember your letters asking advice must be accompanied by two dollars.”

Doctor had 1,500 drug stores carrying his tonics, which were made mostly of colored water. He told the radio audience what drugs to buy from pharmacists who were in on the scam. The pharmacists kicked back one dollar to Brinkley on each jar sold (at about six times normal retail) and kept the rest of the money. The pharmacists loved it.

Don’t Mess with Doctor

Doctor had his enemies. One of the most determined was Morris Fishbein, editor of the Journal of the American Medical Association. The AMA was a growing but not very powerful organization and had no real authority except a bully pulpit. Fishbein was determined to bring Brinkley down even if it took years.

Fishbein wanted Brinkley’s medical license revoked for “organized charlatanism.” In 1930 the Kansas City Star published the names of five people who had died at Brinkley’s hospital since the fall of 1928. His signature was on their death certificates. Later that year it was discovered that actually 42 people had died there. Some hadn’t even been sick when they arrived. His license was revoked.

At the same time, the Federal Radio Commission withdrew his license for KFKB.

A lesser man might have folded. But when Doctor’s balls were to the wall, what did he do? He ran for Governor of the state of Kansas in 1930. His slogan was, “Let’s pasture goats on the state-house lawn.”

There were only five weeks until the election and he would have to run as a write-in candidate. But Brinkley had a few tricks up his sleeve. In his private plane he visited every county in the state. It was the first time an airplane had been used in a political campaign.

A big crowd would be waiting. Someone would look up and shout, “There he is,” and his plane would circle overhead. The plane would be met by a marching band. Women in nurses’ outfits presented lollipops and balloons to the children.

At a rally he would have preachers and musicians entertain the crowd and cheerleaders would lead a chant to teach the spelling of Brinkley’s name. He drew huge crowds for the spectacle.

His opponents were boring bureaucratic men who began to worry they would lose the election. With three days to go they passed legislation that said any other spelling besides “J. R. Brinkley” would invalidate the ballot. As it turned out, Doctor won the popular vote in Kansas and three counties in Oklahoma, but 50,000
votes were disqualified for incorrect spelling. Dr. Brinkley lost his bid for governor. The time had come to leave Kansas.

Not in Kansas Anymore

To make sure no competition sprang up, Doctor completely demolished his hospital in Milford, leaving a pile of rubble. He moved his entire operation to Del Rio, Texas. Del Rio was right on the border with Mexico, and at the time Mexico was angry with the US government for not letting it have any frequencies on the radio dial. They invited Brinkley to build as powerful a station as he would like on the Mexican side of the border, and blast it back into America. And so in 1932, Dr. Brinkley built 50,000-watt radio station XER in Villa Acuña, Mexico. In 1935 it became the most powerful station the world has ever known—million-watt XERA.

The station was so powerful that it would electrocute birds in mid-flight, make appliances spark, turn on car headlights, make the hair on your arms stand up. If you had a telephone in Del Rio all you could hear on it was XERA. Bedsprings made a perfect antenna so the sounds of XERA played through your dreams. You would be lying in your bed and up from your springs you'd hear, “How many of you suffer from indigestion, bloating, belching, and embarrassing gas?”

Old cowboys remembered when they were mending fences around Del Rio they could poke a tin can onto one of the barbs of the fence and pick up XERA. If you were riding along on your horse you could hold a foot-long piece of barbed wire in your teeth and pick up XERA in your head.

The station reached everywhere in America, into Canada, across the North Pole, and into Russia. The KGB used the station to teach English to its spies. In fact, when the ionosphere and cloud cover were just right you could hear XERA anywhere in the world, including Australia and Indonesia.

Country Music was the Lure

Brinkley programmed clairvoyants, mentalists, storytellers, preachers, evangelists, politicians, and hours of country music. He could afford to bring the best in the business to Del Rio: the Delmore Brothers, the Pickard Family, Lonnie Glosson, the Callahan Brothers, Gene Autry, Jimmie Rogers, Red Foley, Patsy...
Montana, J. E. Mainer's Mountaineers, and from his home town of Sylva, North Carolina, banjoist Samantha Bumgarner and fiddler Harry Cagle. He was even able to lure away from Poor Valley, Virginia, the first family of country music, the Carter Family.

The Circle is Broken

It was the steady income and the warm winters that got the Carter family all the way down to Del Rio. The Carter Family was famous in the Southeast but not nationally. They had never been able to make a living from recording. Once the Depression hit, record sales completely stalled. But in Del Rio they would each get $75 a week and not have to deal with travel, audiences, fans, or agents. Because of the unbelievable reach of XERA, they would amass thousands of new fans and Sara Carter would find her long-lost love.

The Carter Family had become one of the biggest names in early country music in the South with songs like “Wildwood Flower,” “Keep on the Sunny Side,” and “Will the Circle Be Unbroken.” Sara’s compelling voice was at the heart of their sound. Maybelle was the guitar genius and harmony singer. A. P. wrote or found their songs and sang bass in the trio.

A. P. and Sara were married, but it was a strange relationship. A. P. was quiet, quirky, and prone to take off walking down the railroad tracks and not come back for days or even a month at a time, looking for new songs.

While husband A. P. was wandering off in the Virginia hills, Sara fell in love with A. P.’s first cousin, Coy Bayes. Coy was tall, fun-loving, and 14 years younger than A. P. Sara and Coy would sneak off down the railroad tracks and not come back for days or even a month at a time, looking for new songs.

Of course, when A. P. found out, he was hurt and furious. This was a painful, embarrassing, and dangerous scandal in which somebody was likely to be killed.

Coy’s father couldn’t allow it to destroy his family. He packed up the entire Bayes clan, including 32-year-old Coy, and moved out West. They first moved to New Mexico, then finally settled in Indian Valley, California, an old mining area 250 miles north of San Francisco, exactly in the middle of nowhere.

Sara wrote him many heartfelt letters but got no answer. Coy’s parents had been hiding her letters. When she didn’t hear back from him, she stopped writing.

By the time the Bayes family got to California, Sara didn’t even know where Coy was. And because he hadn’t received any letters, Coy had decided that Sara had lost interest in him.

Sara and A. P. divorced, but continued recording and working together. Seven years passed.

In 1938 Dr. Brinkley invited A. P., Sara, and Maybelle Carter to play on XERA. The problem was that Sara and A. P.’s relationship was so bad that they wouldn’t talk to each other. Country singer Patsy Montana had to deliver the messages between them while they were all three standing in the same room.

A. P. would say something like, “Patsy, tell Sara she can sing whatever she wants to tonight. I don’t care.”

Patsy would turn to Sara and say, “A. P. would like you to sing whatever selection you’d like this evening, honey.”

Sara, “Tell A. P. I’ll do as I durn well please. I don’t need his permission.”

Patsy: “A. P., Sara says she will be happy to sing an old favorite tonight.”

Normally Sara would just sing her songs without ever saying a word to the radio audience. But on this still desert night in 1939, feeling particularly lonesome, she stepped up to the mic in the XERA studio and said she was dedicating this song to Coy Bayes, somewhere out West. It had been eight years since she had seen or heard from him.

T’would been better for us both had we never
In this wide and wicked world ever met.
For the pleasures we’ve both seen together
I am sure love we’ll never forget.

Oh, I’m thinking tonight of my blue eyes
Who is sailing far over the seas.
Oh, I’m thinking tonight of him only
And I wonder if he ever thinks of me.

Oh, you told me once dear that you loved me
And you said that we never would part.
But a link in the chain has been broken
Leaving me with a sad and aching heart.

XERA was so powerful it reached all the way into that little California town in the Sierra Nevadas, 1,700 miles away. As luck would have it, Coy happened to be listening that night in 1939 to the Good Neighbor Get-Together show and heard Sara say she was dedicating “Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes” to him. He turned to his mother and said, “I’m going to go get Sara.” His mother said, “Well, Coy, I guess you better go.”
He traveled all the way to Del Rio, Texas, and married her the next week. Sara had found her lost love.

Musicians Were Listening All Over the Country

It was the mid-1930s and budding musicians in remote communities were tuning in to XERA and soaking up the music. Grandpa Jones in Ohio used to put a crystal set in a big washtub to amplify the sound. Everyone in the family would hang his head over the metal tub to listen to J. E. Mainer’s Mountaineers and Slim Rinehart.

Young Chet Atkins listened in Tennessee and learned all the Carter Family songs. Seven-year-old Johnny Cash fell in love with ten-year-old June Carter’s voice. (Years later they got married in a fever.) Doc Watson in Deep Gap, North Carolina, sat in front of his radio hearing Smith’s Garage Band play “Beaumont Rag” on the fiddle every night while he worked it out at home on the guitar. Doc heard the Delmore Brothers play “Big River Blues,” which he reworked into his signature finger-picking song “Deep River Blues.”

For the first time, the entire nation could hear folk and country music. Its popularity began to spread to every corner of the land. Bill Malone says in *Country Music USA*, “In the dissemination of country music throughout the United States, nothing was of more importance than the powerful Mexican border stations. No one can ever know the number of traditional ballads that may have found their way into some remote Midwestern area solely through the means of Mexican radio transmission, an oral process that perpetuated the lives of these songs and made it possible for them to be collected by folklorists at a later date.”

A Six-Inch Life-Size Statue of Jesus

Early country music was the bait, but product sales were the catch. All kinds of things were sold over XERA beside goat gland operations: electric bow ties, hair dye, genuine simulated diamonds, tomato plants, live baby chicks, “Certified Radioactive Water,” a six-inch “life-size” statue of Jesus along with an autographed photo and a wind-up John the Baptist doll. It was the birth of modern commercial radio.

Dr. Brinkley was making more than a million dollars a year, while the average doctor made $3,000.
In the heyday in Del Rio, he had 50 secretaries to handle his mail, and an army of assistant quacks. He and his business partner Mrs. Brinkley built a mansion and had Galapagos turtles, peacocks, and penguins wandering the grounds. There was a pipe organ with an organist hired away from Grauman’s Chinese Theater in Hollywood. The driveway to their mansion was the widest paved road in Del Rio.

He had 12 Cadillacs that were color-coordinated with his home, all red one year, all green the next. They even bought a Cadillac for their son, Johnnie Boy, who was still an adolescent. Johnnie Boy had anything he wanted, even his own bodyguards. People in Del Rio and around North Carolina remembered Johnnie as “incredibly spoiled.”

There were three gigantic yachts anchored in Galveston (one was 172 feet long with a crew of 36), several airplanes, a 13-carat diamond on his right hand and a 10-carat on his left, each as big as a quarter.

Jeanette Carter once said that Doctor invited the Carter family to his mansion. On a wall near the entrance was a large photo of Doctor with a record-breaking 750-pound fish, titled “Tuna Fish and Self.”

“He came down the stairs in a white suit with a monkey on his shoulder, its tail wrapped around his neck. We didn’t see stuff like that in Poor Valley, Virginia.”

The Brinkleys would spend part of the summer sailing around the world on their yacht or flying back to Western North Carolina to visit friends near the old homeplace. They bought a second home near East La Porte, North Carolina, so they could stay for extended visits. Ray Ashe from Jackson County remembers visiting the Brinkleys at their summer home. “Everybody around there thought he was really something. Once he drove up in a red Cadillac with ‘Brinkleys’ emblazoned all around it. He was always nice to us. You would have liked him. He came to visit my grandmother, whom he wrote to regularly. He said he loved her like she was his own granny.”

This was the high-water mark for the Brinkleys. But in the late 1930s, Doctor made two drastic mistakes. He allowed Nazi sympathizers to broadcast on XERA, which raised the hackles of the American government; and worse, he decided to sue Dr. Fishbein for calling him a quack in a magazine article.
The End is Coming

In 1938 Dr. Morris Fishbein wrote an article essentially calling Dr. Brinkley a charlatan. Foolishly, Doctor started believing his own publicity, and decided to sue Fishbein for libel and $250,000 in damages. The trial was to take place in Del Rio. How could he lose on home turf? But two things really seemed to trouble the jury: Brinkley’s admission that he had been injecting people with colored water instead of medicine, and the claim in the advertisements that the goat gland operation was a true graft which, under oath, Doctor admitted it was not.

The jury found that there was no libel, which translated that Brinkley could be called a charlatan as Fishbein had charged. In the past, Doctor had been able to stop most damage suits by using threats, Pinkerton detectives, stalling, or just paying out of court. But by now he had more than a million and a half dollars in judgments against him.

Everything began to unravel as he was besieged from every side. In 1941 Doctor had several heart attacks.

Ironically, it was the last mailing of printed ads for the goat gland operation that moved the Postal Service finally to charge him with mail fraud, after 20 years. Doctor was scheduled to appear in the postal fraud trial in the spring of 1942, but died shortly before, at the age of 56.

Dr. John Brinkley left quite a legacy as the most successful charlatan in American history. He helped in the development of radio by giving regulators something to regulate. He created the modern radio format of commercials, talk and popular music. He revolutionized political campaigning by introducing airplanes, sound trucks, and radio.

Perhaps most importantly, his border radio stations spread early country and mountain music throughout the United States, setting the stage for country music’s great popularity in the late 40s and early 50s, and the folk music boom of the 60s. Brinkley left a million-watt radio station dormant on the border of Mexico. It was taken over in the early 1960s by Bob Smith (AKA Wolfman Jack) who did the same thing for black music that Brinkley did for mountain music. Wolfman spread the sound of black rhythm and blues all across the country and opened the door to grittier rock and roll. As Wolfman said, “We pay our dues to rhythm and blues.” Wolfman Jack talked a young David Holt into buying an autographed picture of Jesus and 100 live baby chicks for $3.99, and introduced this young boy to the sound of Elmore James and Muddy Waters, who sang “I Just Want to Make Love to You.” But that is a whole other story.

David Holt is a Grammy Award-winning traditional musician who lives in the Asheville, North Carolina, area.

There are a number of fine books that include information on Dr. Brinkley:


The Roquish World of Dr. Brinkley by Gerald Carson, Rienhart, 1960

Border Radio by Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, University of Texas Press, 2002

Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone: The Carter Family & Their Legacy in American Music by Mark Zwonitzer with Charles Hirshberg, Simon and Schuster, 2002

Country Music, USA by Bill Malone, University of Texas Press, 1968

For this article I have interviewed Ray and Ruth Ashe, Jeanette Carter, Doc Watson, Wade Mainer, and Lonnie Glosson.
Mississippi State House in Jackson.
Although fiddling as both music and as social practice changed dramatically during the twentieth century, the changes were gradual. The oldest fiddlers active both in the middle of the twentieth century and today have lived through these transformations, sometimes helping change come about, at other times resenting and resisting it. I will illustrate how fiddlers’ lives and activities have changed in the last half-century through a case study of a fiddler who started fiddling in an environment firmly set in the past. He is George Cecil McLeod, a farmer and former Mississippi state senator.

Three McLeod brothers migrated from the Isle of Skye to North Carolina about 1800; then two of them relocated to Mississippi. George Cecil represents the fifth generation of McLeods in the state. His family background thus echoes several broad trends in Southern demography and in the history of American fiddling.

Many Scots immigrated to rural areas of the Southern colonies and later Southern United States, and so their musical taste strongly influenced the formation of composite Southern musical taste. Their distinctive and rhythmically complex fiddling was especially apt for mixing with blacks’ performance practices over the history of blackface minstrelsy in the South. Second, many Southerners interested in traditional music issued from a broad trend in settlement in the South: families of Southerners gradually spread west across the South (very quickly in the McLeods’ case) and often have been in the South for generations. They identify themselves as Southerners more than as members of any ethnic group.

Young George Cecil regularly sought out the company of the two most skilled fiddlers in the area, his uncle and especially a distant neighbor named Jode Denmark, who was born in 1891 into a family in which many of the men fiddled. I found this to be a common pattern among older fiddlers: they had more than one mentor close to home and knew fiddlers both within and outside of their family.

McLeod’s main teacher, Denmark, “had a little farm . . . maybe worked some turpentine and logged wood some. He repaired instruments a good bit.” Even before he made many treks to hear Denmark play, McLeod was regularly exposed to fiddling: “Uncle M. L. Griffin, who married my daddy’s sister, they had eight children, all of them older than I was. They were all talented musically, and my uncle played the fiddle. And that's where the young folks up in Leakesville would gather up on Saturday night to dance. They’d clear the furniture out of one room and the hall, and Uncle M. L. would play, with some of the children accompanying him, some on guitar, and some of the girls would sometimes play piano [or] accordion. They danced in the bedroom and in the hall connecting.”

Fiddlers back then typically started playing later in life than the best fiddlers of today. By the time McLeod finally owned a fiddle, his head was full of fiddle tunes. He was in the tenth grade. His school band director, a violinist, gave McLeod lessons for about six months until the director was drafted. When McLeod fin-
ished high school, he attended Mississippi State University for a year, then went into the Navy for sixteen months. He returned in the fall of 1946 and soon had a semester of violin lessons from the head of the music department at Mississippi State College for Women, about twenty miles east of Mississippi State University, where he was enrolled. He summarizes that he has “had a few violin lessons, but not enough to hurt [my] fiddling.”

McLeod played “Sugar Foot Rag” on his first date with the woman he would marry. “When I met her, I had just learned it, and it was fresh on my mind. I heard that tune one night [on the radio], when I was out in the pickup. And it appealed to me. And I got to humming it. The next morning I got up, and while Mama was cooking breakfast I learned it. And it’s always been one that I liked to play.” This sort of learning process, that is, inexact replication in which a remembered outline is fleshed out anew by individuals who therefore had to command and exercise considerable creative ability, was more common then than now. In contrast, today’s ubiquitous audio recorder allows fiddlers to emulate one another with as much precision as the learner’s technical ability permits.

McLeod’s hearing a fiddle tune on the radio in 1950 fit Southern trends more than national ones. Indeed, fiddling was still part of local daily life during McLeod’s young adulthood in the early 1950s. He performed at square dances and other functions all over the area. He had less time to fiddle in the early 1960s, coincidentally at the same time that fiddling was being pushed aside in popular consciousness. The biographical factor was simple: the McLeods had entered the dairy business, a grueling occupation leaving little time for recreation. The audience for fiddling was shrinking anyway, owing to the inroads of rock music among the young and a concerted effort by the media to make public entertainment more streamlined and thus profitable through economies of scale. But McLeod returned to fiddling. He described his performing hiatus as follows: “Through the ‘50s, I played right smart [a lot]. I got in the dairy business in ’61 . . . And I didn’t play hardly any fiddle from the time I started dairying until I got into the campaign [for state senator] in ’67. Consequently, I wasn’t in real good playing form then, but then after I found out it worked in politics, I got a chance to go to more functions and have more reason to play some, I went back to playing some. And then we had the first bluegrass festival near Chatom [Alabama] here in ’71. So from that point on, I began to hear fiddlers more.”

Thus, the interval between decline and revival of fiddling in this part of the Deep South was remarkably brief, and not so very long ago. Indeed, when Mr. McLeod took up the fiddle again, some of the same forums for performance were there as earlier (though some of these have gradually declined since). The use of fiddling at political rallies was one such forum: McLeod’s opponents didn’t sponsor fiddle music, but he offered it himself, with telling moments of hesitation:

“Even when I ran for office in ’67 and through the ’70s, especially in the early ’70s, I hadn’t even thought about the effect that the fiddle would have when I was campaigning, because it was just something I liked to do . . . But when you’re running, you go through the newspaper offices, radio stations, TV stations, and the local printer to print up stuff to advertise, to get people to remember you to vote for you . . . I’d played in all these rural counties. I’d gone and played at the bake sales, plays, PTA meetings, and dances, and at home . . . Everybody knew I played fiddle. [Before giving a speech, I’d go and play the fiddle . . . And the folks around here were saying: “Now, don’t go and play that thing down in Jackson County [on the coast]. Folks will ridicule you if you do.” ] [But] folks in Jackson County was country folks [even if they had moved to the city]. So I carried my fiddle . . . I got up, introduced myself, and told them I wanted to play a little bit . . . and just slid on into the tune. I didn’t play but just a [few moments] and there was a half a dozen couples up square dancing, and the crowd was clapping and keeping time for them before I quit the tune. . . . And the next week I was down there in Jackson County passing out cards, and I very seldom came across somebody that hadn’t heard of some fellow that played the fiddle.

It is striking both that McLeod’s constituents in rural Greene County thought that the presumably more cosmopolitan residents of a county on the coast would look down on fiddle music, and that those constituents were at least temporarily wrong. These residents of Greene County apparently were self-conscious about their own enjoyment of a slice of culture that was explicitly old-fashioned by then, though it had been right at the center of rural entertainment when many of them were children. That McLeod’s disagreement with their prediction of urban disdain for fiddling was on target was owing to his keen sense of demography; however, the difference in taste that they wrongly thought was in place around 1970 certainly has materialized since. I can’t imagine fiddling being thought anything better than quaint at a political rally in Jackson County now. McLeod still plays at rallies in Greene County occasionally, although he feels that the political rally as an institution has declined considerably. After all, we no longer need to assemble to learn what candidates think. But small traditional political rallies still occur in Greene County, and organizers welcome McLeod’s fiddling out of respect for him.

I attended one held June 13, 2003, on a farm in the county. My impression on arriving was of pickup truck after pickup truck, and of powerful odors of barbeque. Local candidates spoke briefly, as did the Republican gubernatorial candidate in a whirlwind stop. He shook all hands, praised George Cecil’s fiddling, gave a quick speech in which recollections of hunting segued into references to Greene County and then to promises concerning tort reform and other themes certain to resonate, and was gone. Had he heard the fiddling? Had anyone? The fact that it was Republican stalwart and former state senator McLeod who was playing seemed the only reason fiddling was even symbolically valuable.

McLeod’s fiddling is more appreciated these days at another annual political affair, the reunion of former state senators in Jackson. In one room, most of the socializing and politicking goes on, and we all eventually eat a traditional catfish dinner. In a neighboring smaller room, the caterers lay out enormous chilled prawns and oysters on the half shell (our tax dollars at work), and the musicians set up shop. A few of the attending present and former senators and members of their families pay some degree of attention to the music now and again, and most cannot avoid hearing it at some point, since patronizing the restroom entails passing within a few feet of us. But the end result is not a concert for these politicians but rather a contribution to a down-home atmosphere. What’s in it for the musicians? We’re paid nothing (apart from access to the pricey snacks), and it’s not all that easy to hear one another through the roar of hearty conversation. For us, the value of the occasion is in the energy of the situ-
An earlier trip that resulted from McLeod’s visibility as a fiddler and state senator was to the Festival of American Folklife:

In ’74, we went up to Washington. Mississippi was the featured state at the Festival of American Folklife. It was the eighth one they had, and each year they’d feature a state. . . . They took up about 150 Mississippians of various arts and crafts [including a chair maker from up here in Greene County . . . I got to go as a fiddler, mainly because I was in the Senate at the time, and they was trying to cater to the legislature to get funding—you know how that kind of works. I don’t know if it helped them for me to be in there; I didn’t control the legislature or anything like that. But they had good intentions. And I enjoyed going, so I’m not complaining about that.

But they carried a fellow up there from Chunky [near Meridian, Mississippi] . . . as a square dance caller. And I didn’t even know that they was carrying a fellow up there as a square dance caller...

Coming back [from a concession stand, I saw that] fellow on stage, and he was trying to get people lined up to square dance. They had just skadoodles of people. I don’t know if anybody had a count. It was different things going on all over the mall, and a crowd of folks had been there and listened to our music. And [the caller] was trying to arrange a dance for a group including a bunch of college kids. . . . I came around the stage: He could see as I came around that I knew something about it. He immediately called on me to lead [the dancers] . . .

So we got out there. He was calling the figures. Of course the kids [had] seen dancing to fiddle music, [but] they didn’t know anything but skipping. They’d skip from here plumb over to that couch over yonder per skip, and just absolutely mess a dance up because of the long skip. Everybody can’t skip that far, you know. It’s a skip instead of a dance step. But they saw it done in a movie; I remember seeing the same movie. And it was some Tin-Pan-Alley [director’s] idea of a way to put emphasis on it, to show just how hillbilly it was. . . .

And Ralph Rinzler’s wife [Kate] was in charge of the stage up there . . . he was putting on a clinic square dancing, up at the end of the mall. And she . . . had seen me calling square dance when we was playing for ourselves, and she asked me would I go up there and call a square dance. There wasn’t anybody up there at that stage. So Mickey [Davis, a violist who also fiddles] got a guitar picker, and we walked up there [and led a very successful dance].

Thus, at this national event, McLeod found that the little that well-intended younger urban visitors knew about square dancing had not come from personal experience. Instead, what they knew about the main kind of dance associated with older-style fiddling had been filtered through the media, and thus stylized to exaggerate rustic associations. Of course, many Americans in the baby-boom generation—likely including much of the festival audience—learned some square dancing in physical education classes. I remember this well: a gym with its characteristic palette of odors, mixed attitudes on the parts of the participants, and a scratchy variable-speed turntable from which emanated bad renditions of music seldom connected with the older history of the dance, with fiddling.

McLeod still likes to teach square dancing and insists that it be done with as much historical accuracy as possible. True, this process entails his relinquishing his treasured role of fiddler to someone else, and it is not always easy to find an apt fiddler for this purpose. He does not explain steps over the microphone but teaches as he learned, from within the square. He is the man in the head couple and talks and maneuvers others during the dance.

I witnessed him teaching square dancing recently at the Two Rivers Bluegrass Festival (held in his hometown of Leakesville), as one of the activities away from the stage on an evening early in the festivities. Among the participants were a handful of experienced dancers, avid hobbyists who had learned fancy square dancing as part of a club. This presented its own problem: these dancers wished to “help” McLeod by taking over, by teaching the modern fancy western-style square dance.

What of other settings that called for fiddlers or at least offered the sounds of fiddling to the public in Greene County, Mississippi, earlier in the century? Fiddling on local radio ceased when rock music arrived, then returned in a small way with bluegrass, though that faded too after a while. How about fiddle contests? McLeod played at them regularly for fifty years, but their flavor continually evolved, so his tune choices for contests have changed in response. In his first contest, held in Fruitdale, Alabama, in 1949, he played “Pop Goes the Weasel” holding his fiddle not just under his chin, but also upside down, behind his back, and so forth. That contest still retained
much of the feel of 1920s, but times were changing. Later, McLeod did well in a contest through a politically astute tune choice: “In the playoff, I played a waltz, and I played ‘Carroll County Blues.’ And I was in territory close to where ‘Carroll County Blues’ supposedly emerged.”

When McLeod, following his teacher’s advice, began using “Ragtime Annie” in contests, he discovered that other traditional Mississippi fiddlers found his version suspect, in part because a flourish with which he opened the high strain was deemed unusual but even more so because of the inclusion of Jode Denmark’s third strain (one that McLeod hadn’t often heard elsewhere, because it is found almost exclusively in Texas versions). Yes, that strain does appear in the 1922 commercial recording by Texan Eck Robertson, and that may well be why it was in the version McLeod learned, that of Jode Denmark. Robertson’s recordings were sold all over the United States during the 1920s and 1930s but that subsequently became much harder to find. This efflorescence was during Denmark’s youth. Denmark’s repertoire was eclectic, just as Eck Robertson’s had been, and just as McLeod’s would be.

Today, with a lower geographical density of fiddlers and with fiddlers meeting and hearing each other at contests or festivals more often than in each other’s homes, more of a purist attitude has emerged, one not very tolerant of heterogeneity of repertoire or style, despite admiring the eclectic repertoires of fiddlers of the past. Contests, in order to be coherent, need to be divided into categories, and these are often defined by style. Thus, many contests in the Southeast place fiddlers in either the old-time category or that of bluegrass. Elsewhere in the country, a contest may have old-time style separated out from the array of newer solo fiddle styles that are centered on Texas contest style. Such segregations by style have beneficial effects. By protecting styles possessing less “ear candy” than the contest-oriented styles, these separate categories of competition preserve variety of style. And since these styles are of different vintages and appeal to performers of different ages in some parts of the country, the separation allows for the exposure of a broader sweep of the history of American fiddling during contests. McLeod could have easily won more at contests by having become more of a modern old-time purist, that is, if he had sought out an old-time style self-consciously and
meticulously avoided any influences of bluegrass or of Texas fiddling. But that would have been true neither to the letter nor to the spirit of the fiddle tradition he inherited in Leakesville, Mississippi. And his own cumulative approach to shaping a repertoire and style strikes me as an unusually careful—neither labored nor precious but genuinely nuanced—mix of respect for what he learned from his principal teacher, Jode Denmark, with how fiddling evolved in his own life after his apprenticeship years. He reflects on his music more than many fiddlers do but does not obsess about any aspect of symbol or sound. It’s fun, it’s history, it’s part of him, and it’s a way to share this whole package with family, friends, and also with strangers, who thus are more likely to become friends.

Would McLeod pass on tunes in the same sort of intimate environments in which he learned them? The simple answer is no, but the reasons are complex. The chance of keeping fiddling vital in the family and in the neighborhood would depend on some continuity in several spheres, in how daily life in rural areas does or does not encourage extended families to stay reasonably intact and to interact regularly, to what degree fiddling can be heard on a regular basis outside of the home, and whether a musical child would see fiddling as a fun choice for a hobby.

Of George Cecil’s children, a daughter lives at home and a son lives very near-by in McLeod’s former home. Another child lives in Mobile, Alabama, about an hour away, several are in Atlanta, one teaches at Delta State (about two hours away), and a daughter has returned with her air force husband in Hawaii. Since Leakesville has neither the natural resources nor felicitous location that would encourage further growth, having more children in this large family depart than stay isn’t surprising and in fact simply reflects national demographic trends. But, unsurprising or not, this doesn’t help in fostering any sorts of oral tradition within such families. In fact, none of McLeod’s kids took up the fiddle. There were so many other kinds of music around to enjoy as they grew up (a much wider selection than in their parents’ childhoods), and fiddling symbolized patterns of life from which they grew away. Will an apprentice surface outside of the family but within the community, someone who will visit George Cecil the way he visited Jode Denmark? This hasn’t happened yet.

In a sample fortnight, from September 28 through October 12 of 2002, George Cecil McLeod fiddled in quite a variety of venues. His main guitar accompanist for nearly thirty years has been Lee Fulcher, a retired postal worker who lives in Wiggins, about an hour’s drive from Leakesville (they met at a bluegrass festival in the mid-1970s); however, McLeod often invites others to join in. At the annual McLeod family reunion...
in Leakesville, he, Lee, and I played in a corner of a church fellowship hall while well over one hundred family members visited with each other and filled their plates with home cooking. Some folks listened and some didn’t, but even those who hadn’t seemed to have been paying attention later expressed sincere gratitude; it was clear that symbol as well as sound had mattered.

The Pine Belt’s dulcimer club invited him to fiddle a few numbers at their weekly meeting in Hattiesburg and also to join in with their group numbers when possible. (“We play in the key of D,” we were told at this low-pressure jam.) On the way to that event, he and Fulcher stopped off at the county hospital and played for the ward on which Mrs. McLeod was recuperating from hip surgery. He and Fulcher performed one evening at a local restaurant, and they also competed at the state fiddle contest held during the state fair. Last, we three would have played during the opening evening of a local bluegrass festival, but back-to-back tropical storms caused the festival to be canceled. This was an especially busy time for McLeod as fiddler, but the venues were representative.

McLeod continues to do his best to continue to represent his local fiddle tradition and considers it both an honor and a pleasure to do so. To what degree is his case representative? It does seem that most of the venues in which he now plays welcome him partly because he is a fiddler but more because they enjoy his charisma and wish to honor him as an individual. His personal history illustrates broad shifts of fiddling in American culture, first moving from normal entertainment in a very rural area to being viewed as a fun illustration of history, then to being the stable linchpin of a fiddle-based subculture, the fiddle contest environment.

Chris Goertzen teaches music history and world music at the University of Southern Mississippi. He is the author of Fiddling for Norway: Revival and Identity, and coeditor of the volume of the Garland Encyclopedia of World Music about European music. His new book, Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Contests, will be published this November by the University Press of Mississippi.

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Reviews

Texas Fiddle Bands: The Bill Owens 1939 Recordings

J. A. (Jack) Meyers, fiddle; Vee Tuller, guitar; J. D. Dillingham, banjo, vocal; Sam Welch (fiddle) and Family; Ed Gillespie, fiddle; Colonel Ogden and his son Jimmy; Jace Middlin (fiddle) and his Alabama Woeevils

Hell Among the Yearlings / Arkansas Traveler / Durang’s Hornpipe / Rickett’s Hornpipe / Eighth of January / Soldier’s Joy / Little Fish / Leather Britches / Irish Washer Woman / Rustic Dance / Cattle in the Cane Break / Run Nigger Run / Billy in the Low Ground / Give the Fiddler a Dram / Heel and Toe Polka with the Night Cap On / Polka Schottische / Sally Gooden / Patsy Mind the Baby / Cripple Creek / The Bastard King of England / Cornhuskin’ Gal / Listen to the Mocking Bird / Rochester Schottische / Sally Johnson / San Antonio Rose

This remarkable collection is something that veritably came out of nowhere. There is a long saga involved with bringing together several other of Bill Owens’ field recordings that I urge you to read, at www.fieldrecorder.com. In that narrative, Dan Foster (my introduction to these old recordings of Texas fiddlers) describes his odyssey in tracking down the Peter T. Bell recordings initially, and then finding better-quality copies. Marynell Young, Steve Green, several others, and I were all involved at various stages of these voyages of discovery. Marynell went on an alternate trail, failing to find the original Bell disks, but found this lovely treasure, something we knew nothing about prior to her discovery. I hope at some point Marynell will write down her part of the discovery to put on the FRC website. In short, she found digital copies of the original discs in the Cushing Collection at Texas A&M University, and made copies. These items, contained on this CD, were recorded by Bill Owens on an instantaneous disc recorder that he modified in 1939, part of an ongoing documentation of Texas religious and vernacular music he initiated. (Ray Alden has put up a beautifully done website about Owens on fieldrecorder.com, and there are additional related articles there by Dan Foster.) Alas, however, the original recording media and field notes did not survive, so we are mostly are left with some speculation about the artists on this disc, but we do have their music. Marynell Young made an admirable attempt to determine name spellings and tune titles, so huzzahs to her.

There is considerable historical significance in this set, and the Bell set, as Dan Foster discusses on the FRC site. Owens captured some of the few audio recordings of the older Texas fiddle music, pre-contest style and pre-swing. We do hear on this CD that these two styles (now dominant in Texas) made some inroads among the group that Owens recorded, but more about that later.

Bill Owens or some of the musicians talk and announce on some of the discs. The set starts out with a recording session on February 18, 1939, in or near Austin. The musicians, as Marynell identified them, are J. A. “Uncle Jack” Meyers on fiddle, Vee Tuller on guitar, and J. D. Dillingham on banjo. We’ll hear more about them later, too. They have a very nice set of tunes and are a solid square dance band. Their “Hell Among the Yearlings” is not the common D tune usually associated with that title, nor is it the tune that F. Worth denizen Moses Bonner recorded for Victor in 1925, “Yearling’s in the Canebrake.” More than likely, they’d have been familiar with Bonner, who had been quite involved in fiddlers’ associations in Texas. It bears more resemblance to the “Paddy on the Turnpike”/“The Route” group of tunes that some call a “double tonic” because the tonal center shifts from the I-chord to the VII-chord, something many associate with classic Scots folk fiddling, but Meyers’ tune has a more minor quality, or more “modalish,” if you will. They take “Arkansas Traveler” at a moderate pace and I do hear some nuances of the Texas contest style, but it still would make a great square dance piece. Meyers’ “Durang’s” is bouncy and jaunty, notey, and with short bow strokes. His “Rickett’s” is a classic book version, almost like he obtained it from Cole’s 1000 Fiddle Tunes (or its ancestor, Ryan’s Mammoth Collection). “Soldier’s Joy” is kind of a “book” version, with variations, and there is nothing particularly noteworthy in their “Eighth of January” except that it is solid dance music. Following these tracks is one solo performance by Dillingham on banjo and vocal, singing “Diamond Joe.” This is a reprise, of sorts. “Reprise?” you ask? Yes sire and ma’am. This Dillingham fella recorded this tune for John A. Lomax in Austin in December 1935, and it is now housed in the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress (AFS 537-A). This is the source Bruce Molsky used for his reworking of this tune. And no, it is not the “Diamond Joe” that the Cofer Brothers waxed in the 1920s, nor the one that floated around the singer-songwriter scene in the 1960s.

Ed Gillespie, fiddle and vocal, is next up on this CD. We don’t know, however, who else was on this recording session. His “Little Fish” evokes “Bright Sher- man Valley,” with echoes of “Free Little Bird.” “Leather Britches” sounds to me like there are two fiddles on it, and is done rather slowly with a nice sortie into the upper register. The “Irish Wash- er Woman,” in 6/8 time, again sounds like there are two fiddles. I don’t know if Gillespie called the next piece “Rustic Dance” or if someone else put that title on it. It is not the same melody usually associated with that title (though the story of that title could be an entire article in itself), but like that tune, it is in the key of C and is an old-time schottische or clog. Gillespie’s rendition of “Cattle in the Cane Break” is very evocative of Bonner’s “Yearling’s in the Canebrake,” and is almost a missing link in the etiology of this tune that eventually became popular as “Cattle in the Cane” in more modern times. “Run, Nigger, Run” probably owes a lot to the John Carson (1924) and Skillet Lickers (1927) renditions. No doubt, however, that tune was very widespread. Gillespie ends his set with a nice, slow version of “Billy in the Low Ground,” again sounding like two fiddles at work. Jace Middlin’s group has a pleasant peppy sound on “Give the Fiddler a Dram” that sounds like some cross-pollination of similar tunes in the family, using what sounds like fiddles, guitar, bass, and perhaps tenor banjo, banjo, or mandolin. The next two items are listed as “unknown” but the fiddling sounds very familiar. “Wag- oner” sounds like it is surely in Ed Gillespie’s able hands, with some ting- es of Am Stuart and J. W. Day thrown in. It sounds like two fiddles, again, on “Pick the Devil’s Eye Out” with one part sounding like “Eighth of January,” and the obligatory pizzicato.
Marynell told me the next performers’ names sounded like “Colonel Ogden and son Jimmy,” and though it does not sound like that to me, I can’t tell you what it does sound like. So they may remain a mystery. Whoever they may be, they hearken back to the older styles of ranch and social dancing, lots of couple and big-circle formats and non-breakdowns, which is a subject that Dan Foster addresses in his essays on the FRC website. The interestingly titled “Heel and Toe Polka with the Nightcap On” is in fact “Jenny Lind Polka.” Check out Narmour and Smith’s “Heel and Toe Polka” (1929) for another example of this piece. Ogden next plays “Polka Schottische,” which we hear to be a version of “Flop Eared Mule,” which appeared in print as “The Detroit Schottische” in Elias Howe’s mid-nineteenth century publication(s) Musicians’ Omnibus, and has been found in many European folk musicians’ repertoire as something of their own. Next is a bit of a surprise, “Old Sally Gooden,” in A and with a wild guitar rhythm. Their final track, a very nice one, is called “Patsy Mind the Baby” and is an old-fashioned clog.

Sam Welch and Family (Leroy Bowman on guitar perhaps), recorded in Austin in March 1939, finish this set with a more modern sound. “Cripple Creek” is long-bowed, with some pizzicato. “Bastard King” is quite the bawdy piece, sung by Mr. Welch, solo voice and guitar. “Corn-huskin’ Gal” is a fiddle/guitar piece in the style of “Old Richmond,” “Katy There’s a Bug on Me,” which probably knew life at one time as a schottische before becoming a breakdown. It’s pretty notey, and has the feeling to me of the 1930s “Hillbilly radio show fiddling” sound. They follow that up with fiddle and guitar on “Listen to the Mocking Bird,” with the requisite third-position meanderings. Next up is something called “Rochester Schottische,” and while it is a schottische, it is not the melody usually associated with this title. The now-ubiquitous contest tune “Sally Johnson” makes its appearance here, with modern chord backup and perhaps tenor banjo. They end the set with the Texas swing favorite and standard “San Antonio Rose,” very swingy.

So there you have it, a wide variety of styles and sounds, showing how non-homogenous Texas fiddling had been at one time, before everyone seemed to try to sound like whoever had won the previous year at the Crockett fiddle contest. There are wonderful exceptions, of course, and I have my favorites among modern Texas fiddlers, but I prefer the older styles found on this CD (and also surviving in West Texas among members of the Lewis family; someone should record and issue material from them, and do some interviews). I am submitting to the Old-Time Herald a listing of Texas fiddlers recorded prior to World War II who were recorded for the Library of Congress. (You can read this list at www.oldtimeherald.org. -ed.) Examples of their fiddling can be found at the Library of Congress website, in the John A. and Ruby T. Lomax site, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/lohtml/lohome.html.

In listening to J. A. Meyers, with J. D. Dillingham, on this CD, I was strongly reminded of A. J. Miers (sic) and J. D. Dillingham’s recordings for John Lomax, in the Austin area in 1935 and 1936. In digging deeper into some unpublished research by Guthrie Meade, I found that Gus listed this gent as Andrew J. Mears. I then searched for Andrew J. Mears in the Social Security Death Index, and found Andrew J. Mears, born November 19, 1892, died August 1975 in Mansfield, Tarrant County. Unless someone in that area does a more thorough search and perhaps can interview relatives, or does a news-
I did a similar search for J. D. Dillingham and found Jefferson D. Dillingham, born November 25, 1898, died in Austin on May 5, 1998. I found census information on an older Jefferson D. Dillingham, born in 1867 in Kansas, who moved to Tarrant County and appeared there in the 1930 census records. There also was a vague association with this elder Dillingham with the legendary Texas outlaw Sam Bass, but the entry I found was incomplete, so I don't know the nature of the association.

One regret I have is that Bill Owens did not record J. D. Dillingham on his fiddle, something that John Lomax had done, but those discs are in pretty bad shape. Or at least the tape dubs are.

Kerry Blech

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Round Peak Vol. 1

Field Recorders Collective FRC 109

Tommy Jarrell: fiddle, banjo, vocal; Fred Cockerham: banjo, vocal; Kyle Creed: banjo; Charlie Lowe: banjo; Laurence Lowe: fiddle; Earnest East: fiddle; Mac Snow: guitar; Dave Spilkia: guitar


It's great to have this CD of Round Peak music, especially sounding like the music was recorded in living rooms, on porches, and in back yards, which I'm sure it was. The musicians sound right at home and comfortable. It's also great to have some talking—stories and reminiscences—further bringing the listener right into the experience of being there, like the occasional comments at the ends and beginnings of tunes. Fred: "That's a pretty hard one, ain't it?" and Tommy's response, "Damn right, that's the hardest tune I believe I ever tried to play," and Tommy's forgetting the words to "Casey Jones" and he and Fred talking about it. These brought back so many great memories of tunes, songs, food, drink, dancing down around Mount Airy, North Carolina, and will give the listener a bit of this experience as well. It's wonderful that Ray Alden left all this stuff in. It really brings the music and context to life as more formal recordings aren't able to.

Round Peak is the community in which these musicians were raised, a little northwest of Mount Airy at the base of Fisher's Peak in North Carolina. To my thinking, the music that came out of this area was mostly defined by the banjo playing of the legendary Charlie Lowe ("Susanna Gal," track 9) and later Fred Cockerham and Kyle Creed—that single-string clawhammer "double noting" style—on fretless banjos, which both kept rhythm and played melody right along with the fiddle, matching note for note and slide for slide. And Tommy Jarrell was the fiddler who most exemplified the fiddle sound. It was often just banjo and fiddle. Later, bands like Earnest East and the Pine Ridge Boys and Patsy, and Benton Flippen, and others who had very different fiddle styles would add to the Round Peak sound, but always the banjo was the same.

There is lots of singing on this CD, mostly by Tommy, who has always been one of my favorite old-time singers with his bluesy, strained sound, always sounding like he's just short of breaking up his vocal chords. He loved to sing and always felt that the tune was much better if you sang the words to it. And sing he does.

About half the CD is Tommy on fiddle and Fred on banjo. Fred was a wonderful banjo player, right on the money, subtle and yes, soulful, and their duets are typical of the best of the classic Round Peak style. (Fred was also a fine fiddler with a very different style from Tommy.) Tommy and Fred were about the same age and both spent a lot of time learning from and playing with Charlie Lowe, who was 20-plus years their senior. Ten of the 34 cuts are of banjoist and banjo maker Kyle Creed, along with Tommy, and there are
several cuts of Tommy playing banjo with Earnest East (only faintly heard) on fiddle, with Mac Snow on guitar. There is one track of Laurence Lowe (Charlie Lowe’s son) on fiddle with Fred Cockerham on banjo, and one cut from an old home recording of Tommy and Charlie Lowe.

If you’re already familiar with the music of these musicians and have their recordings, this is still a must-have CD for an invaluable glimpse into what it was like to sit around playing music with these guys in informal settings, or, as we like to call it, real life. If you like old-time music and aren’t familiar with these players, or don’t have their recordings, you gotta have it. These musicians are the real thing and these were real moments in time.

ALICE GERRARD

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Galax Gems:
Music of Galax, Virginia in the 1960s


Music of Galax, Virginia in the 1960s. Tommy and Fred were playing duets. The Camp Creek Boys had already been playing together for decades. If you think that was all that was going on around Galax, buy this CD and prepare to have your mind (and ears) opened, if not be to blown away.

Unlike many of the FRC recordings, this CD does not focus on a single musician, but rather gives a sampling of the many combinations of musicians that played together in Galax in the 1960s. If I’ve counted correctly, there are sixteen different musicians here, playing in seven combinations. There are familiar names: Fred Cockerham, Norman Edmonds, Wade Ward, Kyle Creed. And there are less familiar names: Joe Caudill, Ray Vass, Mabel Dalton, Oscar Ramey, and more. Each track features two or three musicians; happily, never more than three, so that each instrument is clearly audible.

For this listener, the best part was buried in the middle of the CD—cuts with Fred Cockerham on fiddle, George Pegram on banjo, and, for several tracks, Ambrose Lowe on second banjo. Pegram was about 15 years older than Earl Scruggs and had developed his own three-finger banjo style well before Scruggs joined the Opry in 1945. Although there are certainly Scruggs-style licks here, this is most definitely old-time music, not bluegrass. Even if they’re singing “Old Country Church,” which they probably learned from the Stanley Brothers.

The CD starts with eight cuts by fiddler Ray Vass, who is described in Kevin Donleavy’s book Strings of Life as one of a number of players “seldom heard by anyone outside Fancy Gap.” Too bad—and, thanks to this CD, no longer true! He is backed wonderfully by Mabel Dalton on piano, an instrument that should be used more often for old-time accompaniment. The first time I heard the piano used for Southern old-time music was Clarice Shelor’s “Big Bend Gal,” recorded at the fabled Bristol sessions. The Shelor Family lived one county over from Fancy Gap.

Something else stood out on this CD—the amount (and high quality) of fingerstyle banjo playing. Bert Dickens (tracks 20-22) played in a thumb-lead, two-finger style very reminiscent of DaCosta Woltz. (Listen to his “Wreck of the Old 97.”) In addition to George Pegram, the seven tracks with Norman Edmonds fiddling had either Charles Hawks or Wade Ward playing three-finger banjo. About the only clawhammer playing here is on the last few selections, with Tom Norman on banjo and Oscar Ramey on fiddle.

If this were a commercial recording, I might be complaining about the lack of polish in some of these performances.

Galax Gems:
Music of Galax, Virginia in the 1960s

Field Recorders’ Collective FRC 609

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Old Countryman's Reel/ Hangin' Around the Kitchen/ Tulsa Hop/ Doc Brown's Dream/ Fisher's Hornpipe/ Vee Latty's B-flat Waltz/ Rachel/ Dusty Miller/ Purcell's Reel/ Sally in the Garden/ Good-bye My Honey, I'm Gone/ Golden Slippers/ Salty River Reel/ Pig Ankle Rag/ St. Joe Hornpipe/ Hell Again! the Barn Door/ Old Parnell/ Jesse Polka/ Bonaparte Crossing the Rhine/ I Don't Love Nobody/ Granny, Will Your Dog Bite/ Stars and Stripes Waltz

This is an all-instrumental CD with fiddle, banjo, and guitar. The tunes are a nice mixture of familiar and unfamiliar material. In the first category we have old favorites like "Rachel," "Fisher's Hornpipe," "Sally in the Garden," "Bonaparte Crossing the Rhine," and "Pig Ankle Rag." Now to me were the title tune, "Old Countryman's Reel," "St. Joe Hornpipe," "Vee Latty's B-Flat Waltz," "Old Parnell," and others. A Midwestern fiddler, especially a Missouri fiddler, would probably reverse the list of which tunes are "familiar" and which are "unfamiliar" but this reviewer didn't get to Missouri tunes until many years of listening to the Skillet Lickers and Charlie Poole and going to Eastern festivals. These are good tunes.

David Scrivner is a young fiddler from Mansfield, Missouri, who was fortunate enough to meet and take fiddle lessons from the late Bob Holt (see Rounder 0432), a fiddler from the generation that included Bob Walter, Gene Goforth, Lonnie Robertson, Fred Stoneking, and many others. Here's how Charlie Walden described Missouri fiddling twelve years ago, in an article for Fiddler: "Missouri fiddlers bow a lot when they play. There is a lot of alternate bowing or saw stroke employed, which makes the notes sound separated and makes the music sound lively and energetic. Phrasing is accomplished by stopping the bow or by slurring two notes and then forging ahead with separate bows. This bowing method also makes the rhythmic accent of Missouri fiddlers sound very much 'on-the-beat' or square. There is not much of the backbeat pulse one hears when listening to Appalachian music or the swing felt in Texas-style fiddling."

This is very much a CD of a fiddler, with a backup band. There's a long-out-of-print cassette of the State of the Ozarks String Band, which was Bob Holt, Alvie Dooms on guitar, and Karen Kraft on banjo. With Bob no longer with us, the band (no name?) now consists of Scrivner, Dooms, and Kraft. The tunes are all well played, but to this listener, the three have not yet "gelled" together into a band. They are several notches tighter than a contest pickup band, or a Clifftop jam. However, there are times when they seem not to agree on chords, or are playing out of rhythm—especially at the start of a tune, when Dooms and Kraft seem to take a few measures to find the rhythm and speed at which Scrivner is playing. Don't get me wrong; Dooms is a fine guitar player, and Kraft a fine "drop-thumb banjo player," as well as doing what sounded like some excellent two-finger picking. But the band has not reached a level at which the whole sound is as good as, or better than, the individual musicians.

The best music, to my ears, is made by those who have a healthy knowledge of and respect for tradition, yet find ways of being creative. This is certainly the case here. "Golden Slippers" is in the key of F, where it sounds wonderful. Sally in the Garden” is a banjo-fiddle duet—no guitar, and I don't miss it on that tune. "Pig Ankle Rag" has a few more notes than when Highwoods recorded it, and they fit perfectly. Again, I can't comment on the tunes that are new to me, but they are all enjoyable.

Respect for tradition, in my thinking, however, includes informative liner notes, giving sources for tunes and tunings. Ideally, they would tell something about how the band came to play this tune in this particular arrangement. None of these were included here, to my frustration.

Is this a perfect CD? No, for some of the reasons mentioned above. Then again, I can't think of any perfect CDs. Is it good enough to recommend to OTH readers? Yes, it is. It will go on the shelf and when I'm looking for some modern recordings of Midwestern fiddle tunes to listen to, I'll listen to one of Chirps Smith's albums, or the two CDs that Rhys Jones made with Jim Nelson and Jeff Miller, or this CD—which is pretty high praise.

Curt Bouterse and Bob Webb met in 1968. Both started out as musicians in the West Coast folk revival, but their diverse musical interests, and Bob’s eventual move East, resulted in their musical partnership being only a sometime thing. “Diverse” is almost too pale a word for the paths each has taken. Curt formed a medieval music ensemble, traveled to Bali to explore musical traditions there, and got a doctorate in world music. Bob went on the road as Tom Waits’ bassist, managed a string band in Los Angeles, and after moving to Massachusetts developed a seminal banjo exhibition for the MIT Museum.

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The most interesting of the instrumentals are the banjo duets. “Waiting for Nancy” and “Bear’s Leaving Town” (both written by Curt in 1978) are exciting listening. Two banjos back up Curt’s rendition of “Sweet Sunny South,” a perfect setting for Charlie Poole’s wistful song. The last track, a “Reuben’s Train” -esque version of “Nine Hundred Miles,” features both Curt and Bob singing, both playing Curt’s gourd banjos. This would be a really stunning finish to the album if it wasn’t a whopping seven and a half minutes long. The singing doesn’t start until five minutes or so into the track. There’s a saying I’ve seen on hats and T-shirts: “Old-time music—better than it sounds.” I believe this track to be a perfect example of that phenomenon. It must have been fun to play; Curt mentions in the liner notes that they played the tune for 20 minutes, probably inducing the tune trance that’s such a great feature of playing old-time tunes. Sometimes it doesn’t translate to listening, though.

The more familiar tunes “Seneca Square Dance” and “Mississippi Sawyers” are played as banjo/hammered dulcimer duets. These are less successful. The instruments are playing in the same pitch range, for the most part, and the dulcimer’s sustain gives a muddy feeling to the mix, covering the banjo’s quicker attack and decay.

Some songs on this CD will be familiar to listeners. Others are less well known, of greater antiquity, with interesting arrangements. I found a couple of things distracting, though. Most of the vocals are way in front of the instruments, giving an auditory picture of voices a few inches from your ears while the instruments are several feet away. The vocal harmonies, though precisely worked out in terms of pitch, don’t always match the phrasing of the lead vocals.

Special mention needs to be made of “Texas Rangers.” I remember listening to the New Lost City Ramblers’ version; the liner notes also cite Ian and Sylvia as a source. I have seldom had such vivid pictures in my mind from hearing a song as I had on listening to Bob and Curt’s arrangement, Curt freely echoing Bob’s meditative vocal phrases on the hammered dulcimer. This form of emotional punctuation is common in Indian classical and ghazal singing, which translates to this song with an eerie effectiveness.

Among the less-well-known songs are “A Long Time Ago,” a humorous capstan shanty with concertina accompaniment, “Ticklish Reuben,” an early-twentieth-century novelty “laughing” song, and “I Only Want a Buddy (Not a Sweetheart),” widely popular in the 1930s, recorded by Bradley Kincaid and Bing Crosby, among others.

The liner notes are a delight. Scholarly background information, instrument details, and general musings are imparted with a light touch and a solid sense of humor.

Hilary Dirlam

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Note to Artists and Record Companies

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Grand Picnic
Mt. Diablo String Band

Harry Liedstrand, fiddle and vocals; Cindy Liedstrand, guitar and vocals; Terrell Liedstrand, mandolin; Carl Pagter, banjo and vocals; Corbin Pagter, mandolin and vocals; Matt Dudman, bass; Farrin Liedstrand, fiddle

Indian Ate a Woodchuck/Old and Gray/Ladies Quadrille/Pine Valley Waltz/Fire on the Mountain/The Happy Tune/Will the Roses Bloom (Where She Lies Sleeping)/Old Billy Wilson/Crockett's Honeymoon/Goodbye, Girls, I'm Going to Boston/Shamus O'Brien/Forked Deer/Taggart's Reel #3 - Wild Goose Chase/Hobb Dye/Tater Patch/Grand Picnic/ Jeff Sturgeon

Mt. Diablo is a familiar feature of the landscape in California's Bay Area. Surrounded by a large wilderness area, home to native plants and wildlife Northern California, it lends its name to this string band, based in Walnut Creek.

Carl Pagter, Harry Liebstrand, and Matt Dudman have been active musicians and organizers in the traditional music scene for many years. (More details are available on their CDBaby page.) Harry Liebstrand started playing fiddle at age four, learning from his father. Moreover, this is a two-generation band. Harry and Cindy's daughter and son play fiddle and mandolin, and Corbin, Carl's son, plays mandolin and sings.

Given the size of the group, and the fact that the band doesn't seem to play out much, they have a surprisingly high-energy, precise rhythm that would enliven a dance or festival stage anywhere in the US. The band's repertoire is drawn from Appalachia, California (via the Sweets Mill Band, of which Harry is a former member), with a couple of tunes from the Midwest and New England thrown in for good measure. All tunes and songs are performed with authenticity and taste. "Old and Grey," learned from Kenny Hall, who got it from a Charlie Poole 78, is sung by Harry with a hard-edged pli-thaleness reminiscent of the singing of Peter Stampfels. Other California tunes include "Ladies Quadrille," "Pine Valley Waltz," and "The Happy Tune," a suitably cheery rag in C. "Will the Roses Bloom Where She Lies Sleeping" (popularized by Flatt and Scruggs) is sung as a father-son duet by Carl (lead) and Corbin (tenor). "Crockett's Honeymoon" is a lovely tune originally recorded in the 1920s by Crockett's Kentucky Mountaineers, who lived in Fowler, California, from 1919 on, making this a great choice for the CD.

The album is well recorded. With so many instruments and quite a few switches of lead and backup vocals, it might have suffered from a lack of clarity. Everything is, however, bright and clear. Cindy Liedstrand's guitar work deserves special mention; she and Matt Dudman (bass) provide a rock-solid rhythmic underpinning for the rest of the band.

The liner notes are well done, citing original sources whenever possible. Last but not least, there is a stunning photo of the Mt. Diablo range on the cover. This is a well-crafted album, and if you want to listen to some old-time music played in the traditional family band style, I recommend this CD.

Hilary DiIam
To order: www.cdbaby.com/cd/mtdiablosb
Chirps Smith: fiddle, Hardanger fiddle, banjo, mandolin

Old Red Barn / Doc Corn’s Tune / Shades of Death Creek / Safe Harbor Rag / Straw Bonnet / Jake’s Best Reel / Little Daisy / Old 22 / Week Before Christmas / Brian O’Lynn / Greasy Coat / Root Hog or Die / Zack Wheat’s Piece / Jump Fingers / Tite’s Old Shawneetown / Dog Tread a Possum up the White Oak Tree / Sourwood Mountain / Red River Jig / The Cat in the Cobbler Shop / Making Hay / Shabroc / Old Reunion / Sweet Bundy / Forty Miles from Georgetown without Any Whiskey / Buffalo Gals / Chapel Hill Serenade / Citaco / Lonesome Prairie

For readers who haven’t heard yet, Mr. Ray Alden, banjoist, resident of Upstate New York, fiddle festival attendee for lo these 39 years and counting, has taken it upon himself, as a life work and duty, to record this elephant in the living room we call “old-time music,” which is nearly as many things as a peck of fiddlers have fingers and toes, and which both was, and maybe wasn’t, and for sure now is again, in a somewhat new form to be sure, because all we can do is be where we are in the river of time. Ray has been toiling away, putting out CD after CD, for quite a number of years. You can give the catalog a look at www.fieldrecorder.com, and also read therein richer notes on most of the CDs he puts out than he can fit on the actual sleeves, which are, in the Alden style, nice simple cardboard affairs, much like small LP records, which I expect give Ray the economic opportunity to produce still more and different CD issues, and saves on the cracked jewel box returns (what a truly stupid package the jewel box turned out to be). Ray’s also collaborated with a good number of other old-time practitioners, so that the various CDs come not only from his own fieldwork and collection, but the collections and works of others. He’s very flexible too—the CDs taken as a whole aren’t just one thing or the other, but tend to fit the situation. The Chirps Smith volume, for example, Ray has taken from the remarkable five-CD collection of tunes Chirps has brought forth over a couple of decades, and if you want more of this great fiddling, featuring in large part the wonderful repertoire of rural Illinois, this would be a real nice place to sample the full body of Chirps’ work first.

Ray is also aware that this music scene of today and recently, which we’ve all just been living in without much forethought as to what sort of cathedral is being constructed (which isn’t any different, or less pure, than that hard work the honeybees are always at, when you think about it . . . chemically, I guess you’d say), sits nonetheless on foundations such as the recent Texas Fiddle Band CD he’s issued—recordings from yet another collector, one Bill Owens, made originally in 1939, before even Bill Monroe’s kind of old-time music emerged from the primordial ooze and got named for the name of his band.

There’s a style to Ray’s work that I really love. It cuts to the chase. When we all get high-speed broadband, you’ll probably be able to download the bits of the whole catalog you happen to want with the flack of a right click, and every puter will feature quad sound, and we can all start selling our CD collections on eBay, like the folks who still have “records” are doing now. These CDs are partways to that click already. Smart. Just because I’m reviewing three of his CDs here, don’t forget: there’s a whole lot more. If you write to his site, don’t fail to thank him, either. Without this work, a lot of great music would be just a hazy memory, moments around some campfire on some steamy or freezing festival night too long ago, conversations with other musicians that too often take the turn of: “Well, I know the name of that one, but I just can’t remember it.” “Can you start it?” “What key was that one in?” I know you known that drill. “How did I get here? This is not my beautiful wife!”

Let’s start with Chirps. I’ve know Chirps Smith since sometime in the early ‘90s. He’s doing fiddling in rather the manner of Mr. Jabbour, meaning that he is scrupulously concerned with documenting the source music, the tunes, as he found them: existing in locality, and being played by particular people, some older than others (from Charlie Walden to Bob Walters). I’m certain he’s learned these tunes one at a time, with care. And then I’m also pretty sure there’s a Chirps Smith style by now, because that’s good fiddling too. And for a fact, there’s a few tunes in this bucket that bear his own moniker as the crafter, such as “Week Before Christmas” and “Lonesome Prairie.” As befits his heritage, Chirps plays in the Midwestern style pretty much, but in this collection I’d say he’s leaning more towards presenting the tunes in themselves (again à la Mr. Jabbour, who’s actually cited as a source here as well), versus, say, how things are set up in a CD like Geoff Seitz’s The Good Old Days Are Here (Oceana Productions OP003,
it’s a fiddle band powering along in fifth gear. The difference is mainly about the “experience” of the CD, I guess. If you’re wanting to learn one of Chirps’ tunes, this CD is perfectly set up for that delightful chore. Chirps introduces each one, plucks his strings for tuning, and sets to work, mostly on fiddle but sometimes on another instrument. There’s no particular “build” to listening to the whole disc as a piece—but then the Internet has made the “concept CD” somewhat outmoded anyway, unless you just demand that your listener do it your way by making the whole hour a single cut. Chirps’ tunes, at any rate, are plumb choice. Some you’ll know some version of; others are totally fresh unless you already know Chirps’ playing. For some reason I was particularly happy to see “Citaco” among the tunes. It’s one I’d heard a long time back at one of those campfires I was mentioning, and I didn’t remember it at all. Now I’ve got it here and I’ve only got me to blame for not learning it. Mama tried.

It’s really great to hear this Renegades CD. There’s not enough emphasis in old-time music on singing, partly or mainly due to the kind of random fact that contests tend to highlight the instrumental when it comes to the old-time category, but also because a lot of good or even great old-time pickers just don’t seem to want to sing. I don’t understand this reticence. Both Tommy Jarrell and Bob Dylan have made it crystal clear that it’s really okay to sing, that you don’t have to be Tammy or Ella to do it, or even do it well. Maybe if Tammy or Ella were actually in the room, you might STFU. Otherwise, believe in your voice; learn the words right, listen to how it’s done, then do it—sing! Anyways, the Renegades never had this problem of reticence, and they didn’t need a contest situation. This CD comes from its original 1993 DAT recording, issued then as a cassette, plus (some or all of, it’s not clear) their 1995 I Need to Find CD. As all four members are songwriters, there’s a lot of original material on the disc, most of it still in the style of that part of old-time music that gets called “early country” or “classic country” sometimes, particularly when it has electric instruments or drums. James Leva, who writes the notes on the cover, calls the band “nascent Americana.” I’d only quibble about the lack of twang here—I just don’t understand why there’s no steel, tele, or light drums, at least from time to time, aside from it being just an arbitrary decision. But I’m speaking purely musically—obviously these folks come out of the old-time world, where electric isn’t appreciated much, and where the tastes hearken back to the pre-electric sounds of, again, the Monroes, the Stanley’s, the Carters, the string bands. I’m in total agreement with James that old-time as a living genre encompasses—must encompass—originality. It has to be happening now; it’s not simply a harder, more manual way of “recording” the past. And bands like the Renegades are evidence that, indeed, old-time music is really alive. Touching the other base, this CD offers great performances of some of the great old-time tunes: “Big Scioti” from Buri Hammons, “Highlanders Farewell” from Emmett Lundy, “Chilly Winds,” “Cluck Old Hen.” If you didn’t hear the Renegades live, or only sorta remember how good they were: voila.

The Horse Flies live in another hemisphere of the old-time planet. Some even say they’re entirely from another planet. Not true, not at all. They began as a band in 1981, up in the environs of Ithaca, New York—a veritable jungle of the old-time, full of Highwoods and Henries (and these days, Buffalo even). This CD gives us five early cuts of their music, recorded at home in 1984, two of them pretty much damn good traditional fiddle/tune cuts—raucous, driving, with clean, rhythmic fiddling and, from the first cut, a very interesting, distinctive take on banjo-playing from Mr. Stearns. Then, with the third cut, the CD shows us the evolution of the Horse Flies into a string band that admits, embraces, accepts the fact that its members live in the ‘80s and ‘90s, can play their instruments creatively as well as with a grounding in sources, and have actually listened (as all of us in fact have, to some or other extent) to all sorts of music. After the first five cuts the CD moves its lens to 1988, where the band is captured in festival concert and great form. By then they’ve added a synth, and are doing not only roaring old-time tunes (some twisted like a cubist’s face, to be sure—evidencing an appreciation both of musical theory and, perhaps, of such deep questions as: “Why, anyway, does a major scale dominate the fundamental character of a Western melody?”). This evolution into a kind of modernity started early, with “Who Threwed Lye,” one of the at-home tracks from ‘84. It blossoms and builds with cuts like “Thank You Frank,” from the festival concert. Meanwhile, they developed a vocal side (apart from the fiddle-tune vocals)—“I Live Where It’s Gray” is just a really neat piece; it’s “old-time” because the Horse Flies are an old-time band. If they weren’t, the song would be just as interesting, and it might get more air in the burgeoning world of, say, satellite radio. By ’88 the Flies are also reaching across genres to the zydeco rhythms of “Iko.” Indeed, one of the very enjoyable things about the Flies is their use and awareness of genre rhythms. Not only zydeco, but also reggae is represented. And they return, after sipping the various umbrella-adorned glasses on the musical table of 1988, to some smoky shine with a good bead, ending with Tommy Jarrell’s “Breaking Up Christmas,” done their way.

This CD is a great listen, end to end. Ray tells us in the notes and to my pleasure that they’ve put out a new CD in ’08 called Until the Ocean. It has to be good. And it’s typical of Ray’s generosity that he would mention it—it’s not, after all, on the Field Recorder label. That’s Ray for you. Go check out his whole site online. I’m sure there’s been new stuff added since I started writing this piece this morning. After all, it’s already lunchtime. Like Mr. Jarrell liked to sing: “Soon be time, soon be time, soon be time, to sit and eat again.”

Bill Hicks

To Order: www.fieldrecorder.com

The Chicken Chokers:
Live at the Eagle Tavern
The Chicken Chokers

Field Recorder’s Collective FRC603

Chad Crumm: fiddle & vocals; Jim Reidy: banjo, vocals; Mark Graham: harmonica; Chip Taylor: guitar; Paul Strother: bass

Jordan / “We’re Not Really Here” (spoken) / Black Snake / Cumberland Blues / When I was a Cowboy / Back Step Cindy / Cacklin Hen and Rooster Too / Tempy / Texas Gals / Casey Jones / John Brown’s Dream / Poor Old Dad / Lost Gal / Five Miles to Town / Ruben / Sally Johnson / John Sharp’s Tune / Months and Months / Grey Eagle

The Chicken Chokers, from Boston, were a 1980s old-time string band. This live recording by Ray Alden documents a 1985 performance at the Eagles Tavern in New York.
York City. The Chicken Chokers sound as if they were in their twenties at the time—they show exuberance typical of that age group as they play hell-for-leather breakdown tunes with technical aplomb. I particularly liked the fiddle-harmonica combination in "Cacklin Hen and Rooster Too," "Tempy," and "Texas Gals." Even better is a harmonica-banjo duet at the start of "John Brown's Dream." If I'd been at the tavern that night, I think I'd have predicted a bright harmonica future for Mark Graham. "Cumberland Blues" (an instrumental that is not the Grateful Dead song) is a nice change from the breakdowns. It's done at the right speed and with excellent feel. I have no idea where it came from, but I like it a lot.

In addition to exuberance, the Chokers display some other youthful characteristics: sophomoricism in some of the words to "Ruben" ("Ruben had a wreck/Broke his friggin' neck . . ."), and a tendency to pitch the songs to the instruments rather than to the voices, resulting in a few instances of severely strained vocals. Traditional singers usually retune their instruments rather than cause pain to either their vocal chords or their listeners' ears.

Some of the songs may be more familiar under other titles: "Jordan" is Uncle Dave Macon's "Jordan is a Hard Road to Travel," albeit with the peculiar imagery of both putting on (rather than pulling off) one's overcoat and rolling up one's sleeves. "Tempy" is mostly Bascom Lunsford's "I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground." "Months and Months" is Uncle Dave's "I Don't Reckon It'll Happen Again."

I'll join the chorus of reviewers in lauding the Field Recorders' Collective releases of previously-unavailable non-studio old-time recordings, and I hope they'll continue. At the same time, I must point out that the accompanying information could be greatly improved. The back of the jacket lists 5 musicians, while the cover photo shows 6, none of whom are identified. Jim Reidy is listed as playing only banjo uke, but a 5-string banjo is clearly being played on several of the cuts. The one paragraph of notes includes the statement, "Kevin Wimmer abandoned violin for fiddle . . ., yet Kevin is mentioned nowhere else, on either the Chokers' or the FRC website. I can understand that the expected sales do not justify printing a booklet. But there should be sensible notes available for records by even urban bands. The CD jacket directs you to www.fieldrecorder.com, but the notes given there for this recording are limited to obscure reminiscences by band members, including one (Stefan Senders) who is not listed on the jacket, and excluding one (Chad Crumm) who is. I'd want some independent commentary similar to that which accompanies a recording by traditional artists, including something about the sources of the music.

LYLE LOFGREN

To order: www.fieldrecorder.com

Old Joe Bone/Down by the River/By the Women Wear No Clothes at All/Ham Beats All Meat/Hang Down Your Head and Cry/The Wandering Bay/Aunt Betsy Crossing the Rhine/Little Bobby/Wink the Other Eye-Kitchener Girl/This World Can't Stand Long/Waiting for the Lord to Come/Hand Me Down My Walking Cane

There is some good music on this CD. The sound is tight in a nice, loose kind of way, and there is a nice mix of tunes and songs. I’m partial to a cello in old-time music, and the group uses a cello to very good effect on several of the slower numbers. There is variety in both material and instrumentation. The CD starts out with a bang, full band, and then proceeds with solo banjo and vocal, then to banjo and fiddle . . . and so on. The pacing is good, with fast, bouncy, festival-style band tunes interspersed with slower, more reflective songs and tunes. The CD clocks in at a little over 39 minutes, which is kind of short. I could have stood to hear a few more songs/tunes.

It’s always good to hear recordings that incorporate lots of singing, which these folks do. Sometimes the singing sounds a bit forced and is a little pitchy here and there, with occasional mannerisms that can be irritating, such as cutting short the words at the ends of lines on "Hang Down Your Head" and "Aunt Betsy." A little more attention to these details would have benefited the songs. That said, I think it’s great that they are putting the singing out there and doing interesting things with the arrangements. There is a very nice version of Jack Anglin’s "This World Can’t Stand Long" with just lead guitar, bass, and vocal.

There are basically no notes and nothing in the CD packaging that says anything about the musicians other than their names and what they play. There are also no sources or credits listed for the tunes and songs. When I went online I found out that Tony Allen (the fiddler and one of the voices here) is from Toronto, Canada, and plays a lot locally with bluegrass, country, and old-time groups. The cover of the CD just lists the title and Tony Allen as the performer, so I’m assuming this is basically his project.

This is a nice CD and even though it’s not clear if they are a band, or play together with any regularity, they fit together very well here, and I hope that this won’t be the last we hear from them.

Big beef: people, if you want folks to buy your recordings you have to say something on the packaging about where they can get them. The only address on Steam was a MySpace address that doesn’t list any ordering information—unless I’m totally missing something.

ALICE GERRARD

Cajun and Creole Traditional Music
The Creole Belles with Andrew Carrière

Delilah Lee Lewis: fiddle, vocals; Maureen Karpan: accordion, vocals; Karen Leigh: guitar, piano, accordion; Karen Cela Heil: upright bass, fiddle, guitar; Andrew Carrière: accordion, triangle, vocals; Myrna Cooper: rubboard, vocal; Lee Burch: mandolin, vocal

Bernadette/Zydeco Tous Pas Tous/Dimanche Après-Midi/Medley Carrière/Domino/Will Bolla Medley-Wade's Blues/Adieu Rosa/Tes Parents Ne Veulent Plus Me Voir/"Tit Galop Pour La Pointe Aux Pins-You Act Sick When Your Man is
The Creole Belles are a working band of four women, plying their music and their joy mostly around the Bay Area of Northern California since 1995. For this, their first recording, they have added an extremely “special guest,” Andrew Carrière, a Southwest Louisiana native whose father was the traditional Creole musician Bébé Carrière. He fortuitously lives in California, and brings enormous authenticity and energy to this recording. Not that such would be lacking otherwise; these four “belles” have listened to their impeccable sources well, and have the chops to carry the concert, the dance, or this recording project. Nonetheless, having Carrière on board adds a great deal, as is evidenced by the fact that he participates in one way or another on 10 of the 18 cuts, including great vocals on all ten cuts and masterful accordion on six of them. My guess is Carrière frequently participates in their live work as well. It’s just one of those things perhaps: a guy in a band called the “Creole Belles” just doesn’t quite make sense.

Carrière is of course his own “source,” a transplanted son of Louisiana. The Belles have learned well, and at close range. Their sources include Canray Fontenot, the Ardoin family, Nathan Abshire, Will [sic] Bolfa, Boozo Chavis, and the incomparable Dennis McGee. The singing of Lewis and Karpan has a country purity that would surely be as at home at the gym in Lacassine or Rayne, Frog Capital of the Universe, as at a weekend night at Freight and Salvage. The Cajun-style fiddling is first-rate throughout, including brief forays into the arcane art of seconding—since Heil also has duties on the bass, and since the group clearly wanted to do an essentially “live” recording, the “seconding” facet of Cajun music is necessarily limited to some extent. It isn’t fair to complain about physics, and if there’s a “Yankee stroke” hiding in Lewis’ right arm, as is hinted modestly in the notes, I sure couldn’t hear it.

One of the very nice things about this CD is its clarity. No doubt a lot of this has to do with the quality of the recording—good mics, good space, good engineer, and of course good playing. I’d guess that a bit of the clarity also reflects the genuine affection and respect the Belles have for their sources. Each tune is, I’d estimate, eminently learnable, at least for the intermediate fiddler or accordion player, and particularly with the assistance of, say, the Amazing Slow Downer. Possibly this is even true of the vocals, at least if the student has some modicum of French to ground him. (For me, sadly, my abilities in French are limited to “Une bière, Monsieur,” and, later, “Une café por favor.” Thus, in my personal Cajun/zydeco fiddling experience I have restricted my conversation to trading rhythmic chops with the drummer. It is the better part of valor to refrain from attempting the Cajun “Aieeeeeee” without some knowledge of la Française.)

If this group is doing a lot of gigs these days I would expect them to be well into their second pressing, and with good reason. You’d want to take a bit of the band home after one of their concerts and/or dances. This CD would definitely do the trick. At the same time, I would say that their reverence to a small degree dumbfounds the pure insanity that inhabits the best Cajun/zydeco bands. And again, Carrière does much here to push the fun meter back into the red zone, as do Delilah’s impassioned vocal stylings, which reminded my musical and life partner Libby of the great Cleoma. It’s a happy compromise for all concerned. Let the bon tons roulette.

To Order: www.creolebelles.com

From Now On
Michael Doucet

Smithsonian Folkways SFW 40177

Michael Doucet: fiddle, octave violin, accordion, guitar, vocals; Todd Duke: guitar; Mitchell Reed: fiddle

Everything I Do Gonna Be Funky/Le Two-Step de Basile/Bee de la Manche/Madame Boudreaux/Chez Denouse/A Closer Walk with Thee/I Know/Reels de Mamou/L’amour ou la folie/Fonky Bayou/Amé-dée’s Accordion/Contredanse de Mamou/Brasse le Gombo Vite (Stir the Gombo Fast)/New Orleans/Wade’s Two-step/Chère Evangeline/Happy One-Step/Madame Young/St. Louis Blues/You Gotta Move

Michael Doucet is probably the best known living Cajun fiddler; now in his mid-fifties, he is a National Folk Heritage Award winner with three decades of world-wide touring with Beausoleil under his belt, plus many side projects including the Savoy-Doucet Cajun band with Marc and Ann Savoy, and Fiddlers Four with Darol Anger, Bruce Molsky, and Rushad Eggleston. Throughout his long career, Michael has never been one to shy away from exploring new musical territory, but he also has served as a direct link between the older (musically active before World War II) generation of Cajun fiddlers and the present-day players.

Michael’s 1989 “Beasolo” (on Arhoolie) was straightforward vintage Cajun, solos and duets with brother David. This second solo CD, “From Now On,” is a different kettle of fish. Starting with the very first cut, a version of Allen Toussaint’s “Everything I Do Gonna Be Funky,” Michael Doucet proclaims his manifesto: Don’t confine me in the ‘traditional Cajun music’ bag. It all depends on how one defines funky, but I must confess that, to me, this Darol Anger-influenced piece does not come off as all that funky; however, there are a number of other genuinely funky, fabulous cuts on this CD, both solos and gorgeous fiddle duets with Mitch Reed. When not exploring New Orleans-style jazz, blues, gospel, and funk, Michael treats us to an excursion into the most old-fashioned, archaic Cajun fiddle styles, and achieves the enviable feat of staying true to his sources while sounding exactly like himself.

Among the non-Cajun cuts are six duets with New Orleans jazz guitarist Todd Duke, whose excellent playing allows Michael to freak freely on the New Orleans jazz and blues songs. Of these, my favorite was “Madame Boudreaux,” in which both musicians sound completely relaxed and at ease. Michael’s composition “Fonky Bayou” is a bit rambling and generic sounding, but fun in its own way, like having a beer in your local tavern while listening to a jam session.

The five fiddle duets with Mitch Reed made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. This is about as good as it gets for Cajun fiddling. If you like the early recordings of Dennis McGee with Sady
Courville and Ernest Fruge, you will love these cuts. “Chez Denouse,” recorded by Dennis McGee as “Two Step de Gran Marais,” is especially beautiful. “Brasse le gombo vite” (a Doucet original) seems to conjure up the Klezmer roots of Cajun music. (Okay, so there aren’t really any!) The rest of the selections are solos, and many of these are also quite wonderful. On the truly funky “Two Step de Basile,” Michael pulls out his whole bag of tricks in tribute to the early Cajun music heroes Leo Soileau and Mayeuse Lafleur. The medley “Reels de Mamou” sounds kind of Bruce Molsky-ish, not surprising since one of the tunes is a version of “Wagonner” from the playing of Wallace “Cheese” Reed, who was a big fan of western swing and, I suspect, influenced by the music of Eck Robertson and other early Texas fiddlers. It’s common practice for Cajun musicians to rework a tune in a different rhythm; it gives a new perspective to old familiar tunes. Wade Fruge’s signature waltz, “Caillette,” becomes “Wade’s Two-step;” Austin Pitre’s “Chere Jones Roses” is played as a reel. The only accordian piece is the solo “Amédée’s Accordion” (“Two Step de Elton”), on which Michael’s strong bassing perfectly evokes the primitive and powerful sound of the old Amédée (Amédé) Ardoin recordings. This is the most rocking piece on the whole CD. The production is spare. This CD was recorded quickly without overdubbing, which gives it a nice fresh quality, definitely not over-produced. The thick booklet includes Andy Wallace’s detailed bio, plus Michael’s notes to the songs, which are written in a playful and conversational style.

Like all of Michael Doucet’s music, this CD is at times self-indulgent but also thoroughly enjoyable. Michael possesses both an impressive command of technique on the fiddle and a free-wheeling attitude; what keeps his music from being superficial is his unwavering passion for and dedication to the old-time Cajun music of earlier generations. He always credits the musicians who influenced him (many of whom he learned from first-hand) and, like Dewey Balfa before him, by doing this he provides the seeker with a road map for exploring the most obscure and beautiful of Cajun music sounds. Funky Buddhist person notwithstanding, Michael Doucet’s connection with the deepest roots of Cajun music is undeniable, as is his stature as the most important Cajun fiddler of his generation.

Suzy Rothfield Thompson
To order: (888)365-5929, www.folkways.si.edu

In the booklets accompanying these CDs, we learn that, “In 2002, Smithsonian Folkways released a collection called Classic Bluegrass from Smithsonian Folkways (SF 40092). It was well received and the label decided to go back into its vaults to craft other Classic releases that would be doors into a far larger world. I’m not sure what that last part means, but inexpensively produced topical anthologies (or samplers, if you like) have done well for SF, both on their own and in pointing attention to the rest of the catalog. Unfortunately, SF’s archival resources often don’t contain many performers’ best work, and uniformly describing the CDs as “Classic” tends to overstate the case. Classic Piano Blues is a case in point. Speckled Red, Memphis Slim, James P. Johnson, Champion Jack Dupree, Victoria Spivey, Roosevelt Sykes, and others were recorded for Folkways and reissued here because of their name value, based on reputations established in the pre-War years when they were in their artistic prime, and performing for their core black Southern audiences. Folkways recorded them in the 1940s and thereafter, when they were performing for blues revival audiences at folk clubs and festivals, and when they were slightly past their prime. That’s not to say that their representations are here aren’t good, but their best efforts were done earlier and elsewhere. Classic African American Gospel is stronger. Kip Lornell’s lively and informative notes offer a brief history of black sacred music in the American South, and concisely identify differences between the genres. His choices span the decades between the 1950s through the 1990s, and
Betty Smith: winning musician.

Child Ballads from this North Carolina Recordings • P. O. Box 2385
Carrol Best: Say Old Man, Lords and Merry Maids All

Guitar, Dulcimer, on the

Dulcimer,

Psaltery,

Traditional Christmas Songs and selections in his unique style. North Carolina Folk Heritage award-winning musician.

Mountain Love Songs and Child Ballads from this North Carolina Folk Heritage award-winning musician.

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convey a sense of continuity between contemporary urban style and its roots. Familiar names—Lead Belly, Elizabeth Cotten, Little Brother, Sonny Terry, Gary Davis—appear alongside less familiar ones whose contributions are every bit as worthy. The Thrasher Wonders were a two-brother-one-sister trio who capably emulated the Golden Gate Quartet on a 1945 performance of “Moses Smote the Water.” The brothers later joined R&B giant Clyde McPhatter in the 1950s as members of the Drif ters. Baptist pastor Brother Willie Gresham sings and responds to his Athens, Georgia, congregation in a spell-binding performance reminiscent of the popular Rev. J. M. Gates records made in nearby Atlanta more than 75 years ago. Alvin Dockett and Blessed is a Washington, DC, large mixed choir inspired by the James Cleveland style that evolved in the 1970s, and whose polished contemporary style retains an abundance of passionate singing and compelling rhythms. There’s a neat relic from the mid-1940s that couples the voice of Rosetta Tharpe-influenced Ernestine Washington with a New Orleans revival band led by cornetist Bunk Johnson, whose music was featured nightly at New York’s fashionable Stuyvesant Casino. Civil rights legend Fannie Lou Hamer had a powerful singing voice; here she leads other Greenwood, Mississippians, mixing old-time scripture citations with contemporary (1963) Freedom Movement sentiments. I’ll resist the temptation to cite other tracks, even when they’re as good as or better than those I’ve singled out.

Much as I like it, I recommend the CD primarily to those whose tastes encompass untrained voices in (usually) unsophisticated settings. Even if you don’t think the description fit, give Classic African American Gospel a listen anyway. It features some good out-of-the-way music and you may well enjoy more of it than you think.

Recording information in both CD booklets is not consistent. Sometimes we’re told when and where a record was made, but elsewhere we’re only shown a record number and date of a previous Folkways release. Instead of artist photos there are vintage generic snapshots of dancers, pianos, night club and storefront scenes in Classic Piano Blues, and assorted worshipers, singers, and preachers in the gospel set. Photos of actual performers would have been nice to include too.

Dick Spottswood

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popular music in the world.” He includes at least two towering classics, which is a gutty move in itself. “Dust My Broom” is surely one of the top five blues pieces ever, and this version from Robert Johnson himself remains a killer no matter how many times you hear it. Then there’s “Another Man Done Gone,” a song recorded by John Lomax in 1938 from the singing of Vera Hall—Scott tells us that this original Vera Hall recording (and she learned it from her mother, which takes it waaaay back) was played by the Library of Congress to commemorate the eightieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. It still resonates of course. Other “covers” (to use a word that doesn’t fit so well in this context) include Son House’s “Grinnin’ in Your Face,” and the J. S. Lenoir/Willie Dixon “Down in Mississippi.” Giving a nod to more modern song-crafting, Scott also includes Tom Waits’ “Little Trip to Heaven,” which, with its swingy changes and very tasty organ playing by T-Bone, reminds us of where the old blues ended up.

Of the original cuts, I think my favorite is probably “I Should Get Over This.” He mixes a lyric which expresses acceptance of loss with a neat dancey Gurian guitar sound, surely one of the underlying reasons that his chosen musical sources are those of much of the world: you can, amazingly, dance to Bob Marley’s “War (We Don’t Need No Trouble).” How is that even possible? Here’s the edge of the knife:

From this window, I see it’s just a game
All the kids out playing stick ball in the rain
And no one keeping score
Who could ask for more

As the man said, I’m bleeding, and I never felt the cut.

On another of his original compositions, Scott plays a gourd banjo in a tuning he learned from Sherman Hammons: “a tuning designed to make playing in the West African minor pentatonic scale—the blues scale—easy.” Thusly we brush aside these genre-fied conceits the way the Mexican bandits brush aside Bogey’s complaints: “Badges? We don’t need no stinking badges.”

A final note on the context of these songs is in order. Putting out a record is an act done in real time, like it or not. Frequently in the land of “old-time” we find artists who suggest they are actually making music in the 1920s or ‘30s, or at least sorta act that way. Sadly, this is of course impossible. The Triceratops is extinct now; all we have is the white tail. Scott dedicates two of his own songs to, respectively, the survivors and victims of Katrina, and the survivors and victims of 9/11. His cover art also refers to Katrina, featuring a remarkable photo by John Rosenthal of a ruined New Orleans church. As with everything else on the CD, bringing these tragedies into focus is done with taste and love. If your focus is a tad wider than the genre to which this magazine is dedicated, you should enjoy every cut on Thunder’s Mouth. Bill Hicks

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**The Best of Lydia Mendoza**

Lydia Mendoza: 12-string guitar, violin, vocals; Maria Mendoza: mandolin, vocal; Leonor Mendoza: guitar, vocal; Francisco Mendoza: pandero, vocal; Enrique Rodriguez: requinto; Narciso Martinez (accordion) y su conjunto; Tony de la Rosa (accordion) y su conjunto; Gilberto Lopez (accordion) y su conjunto

Mal hombre/Tu dirás/Adiós muchachos/Delgadina/Piensa en mí/Se murió la cucaracha/Medalla de Dios/Contestación a “Amor que malo eres”/Aunque me odies/Enredaste mi vida/Si fue por eso/No es culpa mía/Besando la cruz/Luis Pulido/Amor bonito/Flores negras/Pero ay qué triste

When Lydia Mendoza, the premier singer of Tejano music, passed away in December 2007 at the age of 91, the world lost one of its greatest traditional singers. The fact that she sang corridos, boleros, rancheras, canciones, and valses rancheras in Spanish, and that her backup was either her 12-string guitar or various conjuntos doesn’t matter. Great traditional singing is recognizable no matter where it is from.

Lydia was from Houston, Texas, born into a family who had left Mexico during the Mexican Revolution. Her mother and grandmother were musical and taught Lydia and the other children many of the
songs that Lydia sang, as well as the instruments they played. Life was hard for the family. Their relative poverty, Lydia’s father’s struggles with alcohol and the family’s struggles with prejudice against Mexicans and Tejanos, all took their toll. Lydia never went to school. The family moved back and forth from Texas to Mexico, struggling to earn a living as migrant laborers, and eventually decided to try making a living playing music. In 1929 they went to San Antonio to audition for Okeh Records—they were paid $140 to record 20 songs.

One thing led to another and eventually, as Lydia’s popularity grew, she and the family were able to earn a small living with their music playing on the radio, and in restaurants, tent shows, and other venues. By the 1930s she was famous and beloved by her people, who gave her the nickname “La Alondra de la Frontera” (“The Meadowlark of the Border”). She traveled and toured widely up until she suffered a stroke in 1988. She was invited to sing at Jimmy Carter’s inauguration in 1977, and was the recipient of both the National Heritage Fellowship in 1982 and the National Medal of Arts in 1999.

This CD presents the music of a singer—a singer of great passion and deep feeling and love for her culture and her musical heritage. Most of the songs on the CD are of Lydia accompanied only by her 12-string guitar, although there are several with her sister and brother, and with various conjuntos or bands featuring accordion greats like Narciso Martinez.

The CD contains a 36-page booklet with information on the songs, a biography, some nice photographs, and song words with translations. Altogether a nice package.

I was fortunate to have met Lydia Mendoza when we were both part of traditional music tours on the West Coast. She was a consummate professional and I remember asking her about how she managed to convey such emotion night after night with certain songs that she sang over and over. I’ll always remember what she said about how she placed herself mentally in the song, becoming one with the story and the emotion. Lydia Mendoza was a singer’s singer, and a singer beloved by her audiences, especially her Mexican American audiences. This CD is a fine reflection of her art. I highly recommend it to everyone, and especially to singers.

ALICE GERRARD

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I can’t imagine that I need to tell OTH readers who Hazel Dickens is. Born in 1935 and raised in the coal country of West Virginia, Hazel is known as a musician and songwriter, as a crusader for social justice, and as a feminist icon. She first became known for her music as part of Hazel and Alice (with Alice Gerrard). Their debut LP, released in 1965, marked the beginning of a major shift in bluegrass music: it was the first bluegrass album to feature the voices of women, and it changed the paths of countless women old-time and bluegrass musicians. Always outspoken, strong, and resilient, Hazel seems to be very much enjoying her well-deserved status as a revered elder stateswoman of bluegrass, and despite some health problems, continues to perform and travel.

The Life and Music of Hazel Dickens is a CD of forty of Hazel’s original songs, each of which is prefaced by commentary written by Hazel—who refers to her own lyrics as “poetry,” which indeed they are. There’s no musical transcription here; if you want to learn the songs, you’ll need to get the recordings (a detailed discography is provided). A companion CD set to go with this book would have been a major bonus.

Hazel is very articulate, and as one might expect, she doesn’t mince words. If you’ve been wondering about the back stories of “My Better Years” or “Old Calloused Hands” or “I Love To Sing the Old Songs,” here they are! She writes frankly about family, friends, work, coal miners, and about her personal life, including her marriage in the 1960s and how the breakup inspired various songs.

Hazel is probably best known for her outspoken political views, but she also can be very funny and doesn’t hesitate to poke fun at herself. Some of her songs (“Scaps from Your Table,” for example) are clever, light-hearted, spunky send-ups that would be the pride of any professional Nashville country songsmith. However, the vast majority of these songs are extremely depressing and it’s clear that for Hazel, songwriting is a personal catharsis as well as a craft. Every one of the songs is well-crafted. I enjoyed reading the ones that I hadn’t heard just as much as re-discovering the ones that I’ve known and loved for decades.

While reading about Hazel’s life and reading her song-poems, I had to wonder: where in the world did this come from? So many incredible songs, so many interesting thoughts, such a broad and independent perspective on everything from marital relationships to politics. The combination of brains, artistry, and persistence has brought Hazel a long way, yet she has never stopped being herself and has never flinched from self-examination nor from revealing herself publicly through her art.

Working Girl Blues is a great read. It will be of great interest to anyone interested in any of the following topics: women in old-time and bluegrass music; migration from the mountains to the city; the art and craft of songwriting; union politics, particularly in the coal mining industry; life in rural West Virginia in the ‘30s, ‘40s, and ‘50s; etc. The short vignettes, each consisting of one song plus Hazel’s commentary, make it easy and entertaining to pick up this book for a minute or two of browsing. Best of all would be to get out some recordings of Hazel (or others) singing these songs, read what Hazel has to say about the songs, and then give a listen.

SUZY ROTHFIELD THOMPSON

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The name Lomax will of course catch the attention of OTH readers, quite deservedly in this case. Bess Lomax was born in 1921, the daughter of John A. Lomax and younger sister of Alan Lomax. Her “memoir” (it is not intended to be an autobiography) recounts her 60-year professional career as performer, folklorist, teacher, author, and administrator/advocate for the folk arts at the highest governmental levels. The home-schooled Bess began in the 1930’s as a teenage assistant to her father and brother during publication of the classic book Our Singing Country, the first folk song collection to be based on field recordings rather than written texts. Having accompanied her father into Texas prisons to transcribe inmate performances, she followed him to Washington, DC, to work in the Library of Congress archives:

And when I wasn’t reading I was listening, for Alan and I spent hours every day playing back every single song loudly, cataloging each one, transcribing the words, and locating any available field notes. Eventually the patience of our scholarly research neighbors was exhausted, and we were exiled to a small attic at the very top of the Library of Congress with only the pigeons for company. As we listened to hour after hour of field recordings day after day, the dust and the heat blew in as they had perhaps on the singers themselves, and the painted friezes and the gilded decorative panels filtered the roaring aching songs and the crashing shape note hymns down through the ornate and orderly library stacks below us. In the evenings, string quartets would play Schubert and Chopin in the ground-floor concert hall, but in the attic the un silenced and unquenchable voices of southern working people sang on.

By the 1940s Bess was a performing member of the Almanac Singers (Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Lee Hayes, Millard Lampell, and her husband-to-be Butch Hawes). During the War she worked for the government’s Office of War Information, incorporating folk song into propaganda broadcasts, activities which earned for her the 1946 attention of the FBI’s earliest efforts to smoke out “un-American” plots such as labor unions and working-class song lore. In the 1950s she relocated to California and began her life’s work combining her passion for folk song with her calling to educate, beginning as a community guitar teacher and eventually attaining the tenure wars of academe at UC after returning to college to complete her MA. (Her surprising thesis was on a song every American knows and can sing but knows nothing about: “Happy Birthday to You.”)

By the 1960s and the “Folk Revival,” her love for what she calls “the difficulties and splendors of trying to explain things across cultural lines,” her many articles about and research into children’s songs, and her growing network of university colleagues brought her to the attention of the Berkeley Folk Festival’s planners. Other festival work followed, and by 1976 Ralph Rinzler had lured her back to Washington as an assistant director of the bicentennial Festival of American Folklife. She then moved to the National Endowment for the Arts, serving under presidents Ford, Carter, Reagan, and the first Bush, retiring in 1992 and in 1993 receiving the National Medal of Arts from President Clinton in a Rose Garden ceremony. Her account of life as a Washington bureaucrat is clear-eyed: the woman endured the blind alleys, crosscurrents, and conflicts inevitable in any huge bureaucracy, and took in stride the eternal focus on funding. (Imagine trying to explain the concept of “folk arts” to a congressman while simultaneously convincing him to fund your project with the tax dollars of his constituents. Nasty job, and we were fortunate to have had Bess Hawes to do it.)

Astonishingly modest for a person of her accomplishments, Bess Hawes claims that “I am never, inside myself, quite sure what I am being honored for. I have singly produced no books, no films, no songs; all my creative work has been collaborative,” a sentiment she supports with warm portraits of colleagues such as Rinzler and Bessie Jones. Her book concludes, “I have always had the unshakable belief that every single human being has some knowledge of important elements of beauty and substance, whether everybody else knows them or not, and the appropriate introduction of those items of intellectual power into the public discourse has been the unswerving thrust of my work, whatever form it took, all my life.” We will look long in the halls of Washington before we find another like her.

Jon Pankake
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The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance
Chad Berry, Ed.

Pre-dating Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry by more than a year, but gone from the airwaves for longer than many Old-Time Herald readers have been alive, the National Barn Dance was once one of America’s most popular radio programs. Emanating from WLS in Chicago, the National Barn Dance (NBD) offered listeners a mixed musical bag. Although it is commonly viewed as a country music program, its musical identity was rather diffuse, with programming that was, as Paul Tyler notes, a “mix of popular and ‘hillbilly’ styles.” The National Barn Dance boasted an impressive roster of artists, many of whom went on to make bigger names for themselves in other media. NBD alums include Gene Autry, George Gobel (nee Goebel), Red Foley, Lulu Belle and Scotty, Patsy Montana, Rex Allen, Homer & Jethro, and many more.

The Hayloft Gang is a collection of eight essays by as many writers, framed by an introduction by editor Chad Berry and an afterword by documentary filmmaker Stephen Parry. The book was born out of Parry’s work on a film about the NBD, also titled The Hayloft Gang, and was conceived as a companion to it. The contributors approach the subject of the NBD from a variety of perspectives. Paul L. Tyler and Wayne W. Daniel offer essays on the pre- and post-WWII incar-
era of the Great Depression, the pro-
of the NBD largely coincided with the
Postwar Era.” Whereas the early years
bined with the few pre-
ecessors it had in the realm of live old-
tune on radio. The first broadcast
of the National Barn Dance was on April
19, 1924, in the second week of opera-
ings for station WLS. Beginning in 1933
listeners across the country could tune
in the Barn Dance on the NBC radio net-
work. Like any good cultural phenom-
enon, the NBD has its own origin myth;
i.e. that it began by accident when, faced
with a lack of programming for Saturday
night, station janitor Tommy Dandurand
magically produced a fiddle and went
on the air with a few tunes. Tyler pres-
ents evidence, in the form of an advance
newspaper notice about the forthcoming
broadcast of the “first weekly national
barn dance over the radio,” that the
show’s inception was deliberate.

Tyler notes the variety of musical styles
represented on the NBD, and comments
that the mix of hillbilly and pop “never
appeared to be a problem for either WLS
or for much of its audience,” and that
at the time the NBD began “a rubric for
defining the difference between country
music and pop did not exist.” Tyler, and
many of the other contributors, make a
distinction between “rural music” and
what we now call “country music” as a
genre: “In short, some rural musicians,
from all parts of the United States, have
been known to play music that is, accord-
ing to current definitions, unquestion-
ably not country music.”

Tyler provides a good discussion of the
different types of musical acts that ap-
ppeared on the NBD, and groups them as
“Fiddlers,” “Folksong Artists,” “Modern
Folksong Artists,” “Western Song Art-
ists,” and “Novelty Musicians.” He be-
moans the fact that although early NBD
artists recorded extensively, their work
has been poorly represented on reis-
sues, and no recordings of broadcasts
are known prior to 1939. He sums up
the situation somewhat wistfully: “The
National Barn Dance is not well remem-
bered primarily because of the incom-
pleteness of the sonic record”

Wayne W. Daniel picks up the histori-
cal narrative in this essay, “Music of the
Postwar Era.” Whereas the early years
of the NBD largely coincided with the
era of the Great Depression, the pro-
gram came of age in a period when all
of American culture underwent rapid
changes. As Daniel notes, the show
“had to adapt to a society beset by
the fears, demands, and sacrifices of a
world war, followed by a postwar boom
that brought a higher standard of living,
new consumer mass media technology,
altered life styles, changes in musical
tastes, and innovative entertainment
concepts.” These were changing times
for country music—indeed, for all genres
of American music. The number of radio
stations increased, and many continued
to program live music, but it was also the
era in which other media emerged that
would eventually bring about the virtual
death of live radio. Recordings grew in
importance, the world of network radio
was in decline, and television was in its
ascendancy. NBC dropped the show
from its radio network in 1946. A tele-
viscd version of the NBD, the ABC Barn
Dance, was carried on the ABC television
network for thirty-nine weeks in 1949,
but it was not successful.

The program aired on WLS for the last
time on April 30, 1960, shortly after the
station was sold to American Broadcast-
ing-Paramount Theatres, Inc. It was
reincarnated on another Chicago radio
station as the WGN Barn Dance, where
it survived until 1969. He cites no one
cause for the show’s ultimate demise,
but notes that changing musical tastes—
the rise of rock-and-roll in particular—as
one factor.

Chicago historian Lisa Krissoff Boe-
hm’s chapter, “Chicago as Forgotten
Country Music Mecca,” places the Na-
tional Barn Dance within the context of
the city from which it emanated. She
sounds the familiar theme of neglect of
the NBD on the part of historians both
of country music and of the city of Chi-
cago. She argues that the music of the
NBD represented “a Midwestern sound,
true to the city and the region” (p. 103),
but that the connection between the city
and the surrounding rural areas of the
region was rapidly disappearing.

The show’s rustic image was also at
odds with other aspects of Chicago’s
culture. The city’s large foreign-born
population, its rapidly growing African-
American community, and the popular
view of Chicago as the home of corrupt
politicians and gangsters, made it an un-
likely setting for a barn dance, even a vir-
tual one. Boehm makes the astute obser-
vation that while blues had a strong base
in the city’s culture, the rural, white mu-

sical forms did not. A vibrant new style of blues grew and developed in Chicago, while the white rural styles of the NBD increasingly came to represent the music of an older and aging generation. Nostalgia has its limits when it comes to sustaining musical styles.

In this context it is perhaps also worth noting the apparently total absence of any Irish element from the NBD’s musical mix. This is the same Chicago in which Capt. Francis O’Neill did his landmark work collecting and promoting the music of the city’s Irish immigrants less than a quarter century before the National Barn Dance went on the air. That the city’s Irish musical community was not tapped for the NBD may well be due in large part to the insular nature of this community. In the present era much is made of supposed connections between Irish and country music, yet it seems that no such connection was made during the era in which the National Barn Dance flourished.

The remaining essays in the book include: “Early Broadcasting and Radio Audiences” by Susan Smulyan; “Race and Rural Identity,” by Michael Bertrand; “Patriarchy and the Great Depression” by Kristine McCusker; “Cowboys in Chicago” by Don Cusic; and “The National Folk Festival” by Michael Ann Williams. Bertrand’s and Williams’ contributions are the best. Bertrand touches on key issues such as the racial makeup of the radio audience for the NBD, the role of blackface minstrelsy in its programming, and the positioning of country/rural music in opposition to urban jazz. Williams does an excellent job of contrasting what she terms “two forms of theatrical presentation of traditional culture,” the National Barn Dance and the National Folk Festival. One was a purely commercial form of entertainment, disseminated via mass media, and the other was (and still is) a more self-conscious cultural program. She treats this theme at greater length in her book, Staging Tradition: John Lair and Sarah Gertrude Knott, also published by the University of Illinois Press.

The Hayloft Gang is an important book about a chapter in the history of (mostly) country music that has heretofore not received the attention that it deserves. While not all chapters will be of prime interest to all OTTH readers, there is much here that warrants attention from serious fans of the history of old-time and country music.

Paul F. Wells
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To my knowledge, this is the first full-length book on a single Cajun musician ever to be published. Its subject is the life and music of accordionist Iry Lejeune (1928-1955).

Between the mid-1930s and the end of World War II, Cajun bands tended to focus on the fiddle, which was better suited than the diatonic accordion to the exciting new styles of Western swing, hot jazz, and pop music which these bands were playing alongside their traditional Cajun repertoire. Iry Lejeune was largely responsible for the restoration of the accordion to the forefront of Cajun music, where it has remained to this day. Lejeune was born functionally blind; he could see, but barely, and two of his siblings suffered from the same condition. He began playing music at age four, learning from various family members and neighbors, including his uncle, Angelas Lejeune, who had made records with Dennis McGee in the late 1920s. Iry also eagerly absorbed recordings of earlier accordion greats including the legendary Amédé Ardoin. He attended the School for the Blind in Baton Rouge, and began working as a musician while still a student there. Like all professional Cajun musicians of that era (the 1940s and early ’50s), he performed with a constantly changing roster of musicians in a bewildering number of different bands. In 1947, Iry Lejeune’s first recording, “Love Bridge Waltz” backed with “Evangeline Special,” was released. It was an immediate regional hit and subsequent recordings also sold very well, although virtually none of the money went to Iry Lejeune, who by this time had married and had several children. He continued to play and sing his heart out at dances and on recordings until his tragic death at age 26 in a hit-and-run accident.

Ron Yule’s book is not a straight biography, but is a pastiche of short sections richly illustrated with photographs. The author takes a “just the facts, ma’am” approach, presenting his primary source material (all of it carefully attributed) in raw form, and leaving it to the reader to sift through this gold mine of first-person accounts, including Sam Tarleton’s wonderful 1973 interviews with important informants such as Eddie Shuler and J. B. Fuselier. At times I felt that the author had taken all the tales from his informants as literal truth. Since the source material consists almost exclusively of recollections, it reflects the biases, filters, etc., of the informants. In addition, there are almost certainly some tall tales among these recollections! Yule acknowledges all of this in his introduction, but in my opinion, a little more analysis would have strengthened this book. That said, the raw material contains some real gems: detailed descriptions of dance halls and house dances (potato crates were put to many uses), a section about Iry’s life at the Louisiana School for the Blind (Ron Yule interviewed Melva Stringer, who was a student there at around the same time as Iry), weird anecdotal trivia like the fact that Iry would eat “as many as six hot dogs before their trip to the dances in Lake Charles.” Especially vivid are the descriptions of preparations for a house dance and the accounts of the late 1940s Cajun dance hall scene, with details of personnel, schedule, and geography that really give a sense of what day-to-day (actually, night-to-night) life would have been like for working musicians in that place and time.

Thank you, Ron Yule, for interviewing such important informants as Milton Vanoc!’ The chapter on Eddie Shuler, who issued Iry Lejeune’s records, includes some pointed detail about Shuler’s recording methods and the issues of royalties and fairness to the artists. This is one place where Ron Yule does provide his analysis of the raw data. Suffice to say that Eddie Shuler does not come off as the most principled record producer. At first, I found the use of multiple attributions a little confusing but as I progressed through the book, I gradually became acquainted with the cast of characters and began to understand their relationships to one another. Referring to the “musical family tree” was not helpful, as it is not really a family tree per se, but rather a list of musicians in generations before, contemporary with, and after Iry Lejeune. Also confusing was that he same information or anecdote often turned up two
Hands Four . . . and Square Your Sets
Brian DeMarcus
Shake-A-Leg Publications

Brian DeMarcus is a musician, dance caller and organizer, and former Green Grass Clogger, so this book seems a natural expression of his life. Subtitled Contras, Squares, and Mixers, it is just that, and he has composed these dances over a four-decade “love affair.”

Some of the dances seem simple enough, some complex, and others fall in the middle ground, so there’ll be something for everyone. Brian designates which contras are proper and improper, and
Whether the square dances are keepers, in which you don’t change partners, or mixers, in which you do. There are also several big circle dances (my concept of a “mixer”) and Sicilian circles. Other than line dances, that about covers the types of group dances that I know of.

The book is enjoyable on many levels. There’s a lot of humor, including the titles given to certain dances: “Metaphors Be with You,” “Dorna Loon,” and “What the Hey!”

The illustrations, garnered mostly from traditional books, are spare and appropriate, including a depiction of a Hog-Eyed Man. Most dances have footnotes telling how they came to be written; they are amusing and give the reader a feel for the person that Brian is—an outgoing, good-humored, and enthusiastic Alaska denizen who surrounds himself with music and dance.

The dance community is fortunate that Brian has chosen to share his dances and stir them into the traditional pot. I recommend this book for contra and square dance callers, dance enthusiasts, and for just plain old fun.

Toni Williams

To order: bdemar@alaska.net

Crossroads: The Life and Afterlife of Blues Legend Robert Johnson
Tom Graves
Foreword by Steve LaVere

Demers Books LLC, 2008

When a forthcoming book about iconic Delta blues singer Robert Johnson arrived, I contacted a few knowledgeable friends – all cited in the book – and got similar responses. “Another book about Robert Johnson?” And, yes, of course, that it is . . . but with this difference: Crossroads is written not so much for the blues particularist or scholar (read: “fanatic”) as it is for regular folks who appreciate the genre and are curious to know more about Robert Johnson, arguably the most alluring and certainly the best-selling of the recorded pioneers of early country blues.

That said, it should be noted that the true focus here is not on Robert Johnson himself much as on the evolution of the myth and enterprise enveloping him today. Crossroads offers a chronicled unfolding of the discoveries, rivalries, and events that gave shape and impetus to the Johnson “brand.” Author and educator Robert Graves readily admits that from the outset he did not expect “to uncover any new information about Robert Johnson” because so many for decades have fine-combed the Delta for the even the slightest hint of something fresh. What Graves does provide is an imminently readable synthesis drawn from the best scholarly sources of all that’s happened relative to Robert Johnson over the past seven decades since his mysterious death at age twenty-seven.

I know full well the allure of the Johnson myth as one caught up in it back in the 1960s, sparked at the time by the 1966 release of the Columbia Records album Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues Singers, the first vinyl recording of sixteen exclusively Johnson tracks. Until then, other than a track or two on a blues compilation album, the Johnson canon could not be taken in full, the performances available only on rare, brittle, and pricey 78 rpm shellac disks recorded in 1936 and 1937. The success of the Robert Johnson album was due to a combination of factors: the mystique of meager biographical information and no known photographs, but even more so the stories that had been floating around about Johnson’s deal with the devil at the crossroads, trading his soul for the gift of performance, and a writhing-on-the-floor agonizing death attributed to the devil claiming his due.

But then, there were the performances and songs. The urgently strident voice, ebullient guitar technique, complex finger work and chord changes, cutting and shimmering bottle-neck slide, pulsating rhythm, and words that resonated with the myth, making it seem all the more real. That faraway voice sang out of the groove about falling down on his knees at the crossroad, “hot foot powder” sprinkled all around his door, blues “falling down like hail,” “stones” in his “passway,” a “hellhound on his trail,” and he and “the devil...walking side by side.”

Covers of Johnson’s songs by the top rock ‘n’ rollers of the day added to his cachet. Eric Clapton and Cream, “Cross Road Blues,” Led Zeppelin, “Traveling Riverside Blues,” and the Rolling Stones, “Love in Vain,” with the oblique metaphor closing lines about the pain of leaving his woman:

When the train left the station, with two lights on behind.

When the train left the station, with two lights on behind.

Well, the blue light was my blues, and the red light was my mind.

All my love’s in vain.

Those were prime ingredients in Robert Johnson’s resurrection in the 1960s, but the story continued to unfold in coming decades, as ably documented in Crossroads. Graves offers introductory context and divides the book into two sections, “The Life of . . .” and “The Afterlife of . . .” As to the man, we learn the certain true facts about Johnson culled from varied sources but primarily from the work of Johnson’s principle researchers and authors – Sam Charters, Peter Guralnick, Barry Pearson, Bill McCullough, David Evans, Elijah Wald, Gayle Dean Wardlow, and most notably, Mack McCormick and Steve LaVere.

Robert Johnson came of age on a Mississippi plantation, frequented juke joints, and pestered the established bluesmen to let him play between sets. Graves recounts the remembrance of the great Son House: “Robert, he’d get the guitar and go banmamg with it, you know . . . Just keeping noise, and the people . . . they’d come and tell us . . . stop that boy. He’s driving everybody nuts.” House next heard Johnson two years later and could not “believe the change.” “And that boy got started off playing . . . and when he got through, all our mouths were standing open. All! He was gone!”

Robert Johnson parlayed his formidable skills into a career as an itinerant bluesman, intermittently checking in to make-shift Texas studios to record a total of 41 takes and outtakes . . . and from there, the legend was off and running. In Crossroads, Tom Graves overviews the ill-fated appearance at John Hammond’s 1938 “Spirituals to Swing” concert at Carnegie Hall, the complications delaying Columbia’s release of the 1966 Robert Johnson album, and the circumstances that led finally to the release 24 years later of the definitive Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings.

One of the more compelling sideshows in the Johnson story is the rivalry between two of his most avid and earliest researchers, Mack McCormick and Steve LaVere. Both have delivered stunningly in clearing up confusions and mysteries about Johnson’s life, and that includes locating relatives, friends, and lovers, establishing whereabouts, and most excitingly, discovering the two known
photographs of Robert Johnson. One—a grainy photo booth snapshot of Johnson, cigarette dangling from lips—adorns the cover of Crossroads, the rights to the image controlled in the name of Johnson’s heirs by LaVere, who also contributes the book’s foreword. Both the lowlights and highlights of the McCormick/LaVere rivalry seem fairly covered with credit given where credit is due.

Crossroads is a handy guide to the Robert Johnson saga. Graves touches on the salient talking points—the possible film snippet, which bluesman really sold his soul at the crossroads, the Hollywood film, the US postage stamp, the correct recording playback speed, the lost songs, and the lost son! A few moments struck me as out of sync, such as an account of 1950s multi-track recording techniques and brief mentions of Ozzie Osborne and Charlie Daniels. All-in-all, though, Crossroads is a brisk, insightful read, a reliable overview, especially for the blues neophyte or interested fan seeking to learn more about the quintessentially American/African American roots music phenomenon known as Robert Johnson.

Jerry Zolten

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DVDs

Awake, My Soul-- The Story of the Sacred Harp
A film by Matt & Erica Hilton
Awake Productions, AP-001

This documentary film presents the history and present-day state of Sacred Harp singing, an a capella, non-sectarian Christian style of group singing that employs shape notes in the notation of its song or hymn repertoire. It is a perfectly wonderful film, one of the very best documentaries I have ever seen. Filming, interview segments, footage of the Sacred Harp groups singing, historical background, and narration by the musician Jim Lauderdale are woven together seamlessly into a beautiful flowing whole, that at an hour and fifteen minutes in length comes nowhere near overstaying its welcome.

The singers who are presented in the course of the various interview segments (which have a particularly nice flow, because the questions that sparked the interviewees’ responses have been edited out) are a varied and engaging group of people. Most of them appear to have come to Sacred Harp singing through a family history of involvement, but some, like Ted Mercer of Chicago, came to the tradition as adults with no prior exposure to it during childhood. A couple of things strike you about the singers as you watch the film: they do not appear to be of a “type,” according to class, physical appearance, or anything else. What they have in common is their love and total involvement in the Sacred Harp singing.

Many of the singers have studied the history of the tradition. Raymond Hamrick of Macon, Georgia, is a fascinating interview subject. Over ninety at the time of the filming, he was still employed as a watchmaker, and his thoughtful commentary on the history of the music, his process of tune writing, his hopes for the music at his funeral, and other topics draw you into the world of Sacred Harp singing and make you understand much of its appeal. Hugh McGraw of Bremen, Georgia, is given great credit for widening the popularity of Sacred Harp singing in the past three or four decades and is recognized for composing many songs added to the Sacred Harp songbook, but his friendly and unassuming presence gives no indication of the esteem in which he is held in that world. Women play a very
Long rumored to be in production at a backlot studio outside Washington, DC, this year’s most eagerly anticipated summer blockbuster was a one-of-a-kind Creature from the Black Lagoon banjo designed by luthier Kevin Enoch. The homage to Jack Arnold’s 1954 classic was commissioned by Chris Romaine, member of the string band Roustabout, devotee of vintage B-horror flicks, and closet paleo-ichthyologist. Having premiered at a mid-July emergence party at the home of Lars Hanslin and Becky Laird, the Creature Banjo subsequently delighted and terrified audiences at Clifftop and Rockbridge.