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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.

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Letters

Aloha Y’all

Although I once made the comment that there was “too much fiddle content” in the OTH (me being a banjo/guitar/dulcimer player), I’ve recently come to really appreciate the articles and especially the transcriptions of tunes that you bring our community. My middle daughter, try as I may [to convince her to do otherwise], remains steadfastly a classical violinist. Recently I challenged her to play Posey Rorer’s “Flying Cloud,” which was printed for all to learn in Vol. 11, No. 2 of the OTH. Long story longer, she loves it, I love it, and we’re playing that tune together almost nightly. Please keep the old fiddle tune transcripts coming for us!

I also really enjoyed “Goat Glands and String Bands” by David Holt. That has to be the funniest, yet best researched and written, piece in quite a while. Just goes to show that truth is, indeed, stranger than fiction!

Pastor Harry Timmins
Lahaina, Hawaii

Correction

Being Janette was always important to the late Janette Carter. Hence I feel obligated to mention that her first name is twice rendered as “Jeanette” in David Holt’s useful and entertaining article on John Brinkley.

Giles Y. Gambles
St. Paul, Minnesota
Events

From December 5-7, the Suwannee Old-Time Music Weekend will be held at the Steven Foster Folk Culture Center State Park in White Springs, Florida. Special guests this year are the Haywire Gang (Mac Benford, Paula Bradley, and John Hoffmann). Other performers and instructors include Tom Paley, George Gibson, Chuck Levy, Chuck Anton, Fay Baird, and Lloyd Baldwin. Weekend-long admission, including meals, costs $215, with a $75 package available for accompanying spouses. Tickets to Friday and Saturday concerts are $10 each. Call (386) 397-4478, or visit www.folkfiddle.com/suwannee-weekend.htm for more information.


Artists

Bob Bovee and Gail Heil will be performing at the Ginkgo Coffeehouse in St. Paul, MN, on December 4; Rhein River Art Center in New Ulm, MN, on December 6; Blackhawk Folk Society in Mt. Morris, WI, on December 13; Island House Concert in Milwaukee December 14. In the new year they’ll be playing at the Hope Christian Church Concert Series, Shoreview, MN, on January 18 and Oak Center General Store in Lake City, MN, on January 31.

Reissues

Voyager has published a revised edition of the 1989 Grammy Finalist book and recording Now That’s a Good Tune: Masters of Traditional Missouri Fiddling. The original double-LP album and book were produced by the Missouri Cultural Heritage Center, a division of the Graduate School and Office of Research at the University of Missouri, under the direction of Dr. Howard Marshall, and in cooperation with the University of Missouri Extension Division. The 2008 edition was produced and edited by Marshall and Vivian and Phil Williams. The 98-page book with accompanying 52-track CD set may be purchased from the Voyager website at www.voyagerrecords.com, or by writing to Phil and Vivian Williams (Voyager, 424 35th Ave., Seattle, WA 98122) or to Howard Marshall (MarshallH@Missouri.Edu, 573-642-6226).

5-String Productions has released a two-disc box set of recordings by Ernest Stoneman, entitled Ernest V. Stoneman: Unsung Father of Country Music, produced by Christopher King and Hank Sapoznik, with designer Susan Archie. Accompanying the set is a 44-page booklet full of rare photographs, with an introduction by Patsy Stoneman Murphy. Visit www.5-string.com for information.

New from Old Hat is In the Pines: Tar Heel Folk Songs and Fiddle Tunes, a collection of two dozen recordings made by North Carolina artists between 1926 and 1936. Among the musicians represented are Charlie Poole, the Dixon Brothers, Mainer’s
Mountaineers, Parker and Woolbright, and many more. The disc is accompanied by a 24-page booklet containing vintage photographs of early Tar Heel artists. Visit www.oldhatrecords.com for details.

On the Air, On the Net, On Stage

*Between a Ballad and a Blues,* a play about the life of Howard Armstrong featuring live music from the African American string band tradition, premiered at the Carousel Theater at the University of Tennessee in Martin. Upholding the tradition of conferences and workshops include an engagement at the Hayti Heritage Center in Durham, North Carolina, Nov. 19-22; at the National Performance Network in Washington, D.C., Dec. 10-14; and at the Louie Bluie Festival in LaFollette, Tennessee, on June 13, 2009. Written by Linda Parris-Bailey and directed by Steven Kent, *Between a Ballad and a Blues* is performed by the Carpetbag Theatre Ensemble, with Bert Pearcy (Smyrna, TN); Tommy Bounds (Harriman, TN); Shawn Jones (Lyles, TN); Emma Hargrove (Athens, AL); Frances DiGiovanni (Greenbrier, TN); Keely Tomlin (Springfield, TN). Buck Dance (16 & over): Justin Frazor (Smyrna, TN); Jay Bland (Kennesaw, GA); Fran White (Hillsboro, AL); Earl Hawthorne (Dixon Springs, TN); Dudley Richard (Ramar, TN).

The International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) presented its Distinguished Achievement Awards on October 2 at its World of Bluegrass Business Conference. Honorees were Appalshop director and longtime MerleFest promoter Art Menius, band leader Bill Harrell, influential music magazine *Banjo Newslette*r, Nashville's *Ernest Tubb Record Shop,* and bluegrass musicians Alan Munde and Joe Carr.

The Folk Alliance has announced that the recipients of their 2009 Elaine Weissman Lifetime Achievement Awards will be Phil Ochs (Legacy Artist Lifetime Achievement Award), Guy and Candie Carawan (Living Artist Lifetime Achievement Award), and the Old Town School of Folk Music (Business/Industry Lifetime Achievement Award). The ceremony will take place at their annual Folk Awards Show on February 18, 2009, at the Memphis Marriott Downtown in Memphis, Tennessee.

In Our Thoughts

Banjo player Eddie Adcock made medical and musical history in August during the course of his treatment for a hand tremor at Vanderbilt Medical Center in Nashville. Adcock underwent deep brain stimulation surgery to implant electrodes into his brain, and while the doctors worked to fine-tune the electrodes, Adcock, who was conscious throughout the surgery, played his banjo to monitor the state of his motor skills. A film of the procedure has become a 150,000-plus-hit sensation on YouTube. Best of luck to Eddie and his family during his continued treatment and recovery.

Final Notes

Peter H. Smakula, the owner of Cleveland’s Goose Acres Folk Music Center, passed away on September 23. Peter was born in Jena, Germany, in 1936. Having suffered with forced piano and violin lessons as a child, Peter found his musical...
niche in the high school band playing French horn. His interests soon changed when he attended Harvard University and heard Pete Seeger. He immediately bought a Kay five-string banjo and taught himself to play old-time and bluegrass banjo styles. During this time, his abilities as a mechanical genius became apparent. He always tinkered with cars and motorcycles—a lifelong passion—eventually building a few motorcycles for flat track racing.

Around 1970, Peter needed his fiddle repaired, and took his instrument to a renowned local guitar maker. He was charged the then-outrageous sum of $40. The repaired crack opened up within a week. Knowing he could do a better job himself, he added the hobby of instrument repair to his already busy schedule.

He lost his corporate job with General Electric during an economic downturn in the mid 1970’s. To help make ends meet, he started teaching traditional music styles in the Cleveland, Ohio, area. The combination of a steady demand for instrumental music instruction and instrument repairs, and a son, Bob Smakula, who was already building instruments in the family basement, led to creation of Goose Acres Thumb Piano Factory & Dulcimer Works.

In 1977, the business outgrew the basement. After a little research, Pete decided that the University Circle area of Cleveland would be a great location for a store specializing in folk music. Goose Acres Folk Music Center was a hit almost immediately. Lessons and instrument building filled the long business day. Keeping the shop open twelve hours a day left little time for other activities. In addition to the lessons, sales, and repair work, Goose Acres hosted open picking sessions at which old-time, bluegrass, and folk musicians from all over Northeast Ohio would convene for four hours a week. Knowing he could do a better job himself, he added the hobby of instrument repair to his already busy schedule.

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Though Peter never made more than a living with Goose Acres, he was responsible for encouraging a strong old-time music scene in Northeast Ohio. Between his 40 music students a week and building banjos, dulcimers, and autoharps, he had little time for much else. Still, he tinkered on various vintage sports cars and motorcycles. He was also granted a United States patent, number 4508003, for a dual acting truss rod used in musical instrument necks.

Well known old-time musicians got their start with lessons from Pete at Goose Acres, including Mark Olitisky, David Bass, Kevin Enoch, Dirk Powell, and Denise Reese. He is survived by his fiancé Shelia Heaton, sons Peter, Bob, and Eric, daughter Heidi, daughters- and son-in-law, and grandchildren, and Shelia’s children and grandchildren. A memorial tribute web page has been set up in his honor at www.smakula.com/PHSObit.

Robert Stuart "Stu" Jamieson, 86, banjo player, engineer, boat designer, and scholar, passed away on September 23 after a long fight with Parkinson’s disease. Stu and his family had been living in Central Florida since his retirement in the late 1980s.

Jamieson was born in 1922 in Kansu, in the Tibetan-Chinese border country, to a missionary family, and led a colorful life worthy of a documentary film. His Tennessee-born maternal grandfather, William Wallace Simpson, played the banjo, and Stu recalled family members saying that his grandfather’s banjo and singing had “charmed Han Chinese, Salar, Hui Moslems and Tibetans alike, and he soon established a thriving group of missions.” (OTH, Summer 1990) While overseas, his grandfather had met and married a Swedish missionary lady. One of their children was Stu’s mother, to whom William Simpson passed on the family songs and tunes. She sang and accompanied her family on a portable folding organ and autoharp.

The Depression brought the family back to the States, where they moved from place to place as his father preached and raised funds for the mission. In the late 1930s, the family relocated to the mission’s headquarters in New York City, where Stu’s parents felt he and his brother could get a good high school education. There Stu, “by sheer luck,” became involved with folk dance and music, performing with folklorist Margot Mayo’s American Square Dance Group.

In 1946 and 1949, Jamieson, Margot Mayo, and several others piled into an old Oldsmobile coupe loaded with recording equipment and headed south, to record traditional dance music and square dance calls. Among the musicians they recorded were banjo player Rufus Crisp, of Allen, Kentucky, and the remarkable string band of Murph Gribble, John Lusk, and Albert York of Campaign, Tennessee. Jamieson’s great-aunt Oneida Petit lived near Campaign, Tennessee, a small town on the L&N line, and arranged the recording session of Gribble, Lusk, and York at a store down by the train depot. Jamieson’s account of this trip appeared in the OTH (vol. 2, no. 4, May-July 1990). Mayo also had Southern relatives, and her kin in Kentucky alerted her to banjo player Rufus Crisp. Stu traveled back on his own in the summers and learned much of his banjo technique from Crisp. In later years he wrote an article exhaustively detailing Crisp’s style (OTH vol. 8, no. 8, Summer 2003). Older OTH readers may have first heard heard of Jamieson through his California band, Stu Jamieson’s Boys, whose charming versions of “Shoot the Turkey Buzzard,” “All Around the Mountain,” and “Been All Around this World,” appeared on a 1964 Elektra LP, String Band Project. Up until 2002 or so, he remained active, performing at house concerts and festivals, and at music camps he taught what he had learned of banjo playing to a new generation. He was one of a kind and will be sorely missed.

Gail Gillespie

Clifton Ervin, 77, Seattle’s “Ambassador of the Bones,” passed away on September 23. He was born in Tyler, Texas, where as a boy he learned to keep rhythm to the music of local blues players. They taught him how to keep time using objects from sticks to spoons to animal bones. He made his first pair of playing bones with cow bones he found in a neighbor’s field. Later he would fashion them from animals’ ribs by boiling the meat off and cleaning out the marrow with a coat hanger. He also made “bones” from hardwoods such as teak and rosewood.

Ervin, who always thought of himself as more of an artist than a performer, was a graphic artist for the Air Force during the Korean War. A painter, he had studied fine art at Clark College in Vancouver, Washington. He became interested in carving after admiring the beautiful woods at a Weyerhauser sawmill. He began carving bones regularly around 1990, after many people had asked him where they could obtain a set.

He will be missed by his many friends, who will remember him for his genial personality, and his patience and warm encouragement of young people, as well as for the fine bones that he handcrafted and his ability to incorporate them into many kinds of banjo music.

Gail Gillespie
The Cape Breton villages of Judique and Mabou, both in Inverness County, are the center of the island’s Celtic community. Family names like MacDonald, MacInnis, and MacIntyre are common, and, as I heard someone explain, “everyone is related.” In 1997, Hugh A. “Buddy” MacMaster, the dean of Cape Breton fiddlers, provided the leadership to create the Celtic Music Interpretive Center (www.celticmusicsite.com), a nonprofit organization with a mission to collect, preserve, and promote the traditional music of Cape Breton Island. It receives funding from the provincial government and from Nova Scotia Tourism and Culture. Now 84 years old, MacMaster has received the Order of Canada, the nation’s top civilian award, for his work to preserve the music of Cape Breton. (He is also the uncle of fiddler Natalie MacMaster.)

The Center has one full-time employee, Executive Director Joyce Rankin. In addition, there are several part-time employees and a number of volunteers. The center is located in a small office in the Judique Community Center and uses the building’s 200-seat multipurpose auditorium for workshops, concerts, and ceilidhs. The stage backdrop is decorated with a 21-foot plywood fiddle, the second largest in Cape Breton. (An outdoor fiddle sculpture in Sidney measures 42 feet.) Plans are underway to build a new Judique Music Center building on an adjacent property, but concerts will continue to be held at the community building. The Center is open to the public during the summer season and during the week-long Celtic Colours International Festival (www.celtic-colours.com) each fall in Cape Breton.

The summer that I visited the Celtic Music Center, there was a series of workshops in beginning Cape Breton fiddle (taught by Glenn Graham and Stan Chapman) and intermediate and advanced Cape Breton fiddle (taught by Buddy MacMaster). Celtic guitar (Ryan MacNeil), Gaelic songs (Jeff MacDonald), and step and square dancing (Sabre MacGillivray). Graham and MacDonald both gave evening lectures as well, on fiddle styles and Gaelic songs, respectively. Ceilidhs, presented every Wednesday evening during July and August, were hosted by local musicians, husband and wife Joey (piano) and Karen (fiddle) Beaton. I heard a 17-year-old fiddler named Edmond Hayden who was already an accomplished Celtic musician, who performed several old-time tunes brilliantly. Also on the program was another high school senior and accomplished young Celtic musician, Kerri Jeanne MacLellan, who played a piano solo. Kerri Jeanne and her older sister Gabrielle (a fiddler, as is Kerri Jeanne) were working as tour guides at the Center this past summer. Thirty-minute tours and music demonstrations are offered free to the visiting public. The Royal Bank of Nova Scotia sponsors an in-school educational program operated by the Center to increase awareness of Celtic history, culture, and music.

One of the most important tasks the Center has assumed is the preservation of the music of Cape Breton. It maintains two extensive collections of audio tape recordings. One is of commercial
recordings (live stage and studio, 1930 to present), and the other a collection of home recordings. A directory housed here lists the recordings of every known Celtic tune (many thousands) by title, recording company, date of issue, and the artists who performed them. In addition, there is an extensive database on the Center’s website (www.celticmusic-site.com), and a listing of related Celtic links. These resources are all available to the general public.

It is impossible to write about Celtic culture in Nova Scotia without mentioning the community of Antigonish, and Saint Francis Xavier University, located there. The University, where one can study the Gaelic language, is a major research center for Celtic culture. Each summer the week-long Antigonish Highland Games (www.antigonishhighlandgames.com) draw thousands of enthusiastic participants and visitors. Established in 1863, it is the oldest continuous highland games outside of Scotland. The games are exciting and well worth attending.

Getting to Nova Scotia and Cape Breton is easy and relatively inexpensive with Air Canada, which provides regular service from major cities throughout the US. Air Canada flies to both Halifax and Sidney, on Cape Breton, and Judique is only a few hours away by car. Visitors will want to consider staying at one of Canada’s leading hotels, the Delta Sidney (www.deltahotels.com), or in nearby Port Hood at the charming Haus Treuberg Country Inn and Cottages (www.haustreuberg.com). Both provide excellent accommodations and typically friendly Cape Breton hospitality.

James Weaver is a freelance writer whose work focuses on many of the good things in life: travel, food, and music. He has written several articles for the OTH and lives in Flourtown, Pennsylvania.

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VESTA JOHNSON, MISSOURI'S WELL-KEPT SECRET
by Bob Bovee

I’ve known Vesta Johnson since 1977, played tunes with her at her home and on stage, learned from her, and consider her a friend and mentor. She has likewise been a friend and teacher to countless other old-time musicians over the years. I interviewed Vesta at her house last winter, but our visit seemed more like a conversation with an old friend than a formal interview.

You know, both of my folks played. My dad played pretty much all the square dances in the neighborhood. But there was a cousin of my mom’s, he just stayed around different places out in the country and worked during the winter, just fixing fences, or [doing] chores or whatever. He had an old fiddle, and he wasn’t a real good fiddler. I brought home those Christmas seals, a sheet of them, and, of course, back in the ’20s there wasn’t no money. People didn’t have money. But he had worked during the summer following harvests and corn-husking in Kansas. He said, “I’ll buy a dollar’s worth, but you got to learn to play the fiddle.” Well, he taught me; he got me off in a corner of the room and taught me “Golden Slippers.” And that was all the teaching I ever had, actual teaching. And I learned “Golden Slippers,” and I took that dollar to school.

Vesta Johnson was born in 1922, in Linn County in North-central Missouri. While she was growing up, her family had no radio or phonograph, and no electricity, so they made music to entertain themselves.

I lived rural. [Music] would be at your place one Saturday night and my place the next Saturday night, and it would just make a circle in the neighborhood, a dance in their house. And, of course, us kids was little, it was in the ’20s, early ’30s, and we always went. There wasn’t no leaving us home, no babysitters. We went as a family; you done everything as a family. And, I guess, I just lived with it, heard it. I danced when I was seven or eight, ten.

I was nine years old then when my dad said “Here, play the next square.” And I remember playing “Tennessee Wagner” . . . The only thing I ever heard my dad say to me [about how to play] was, when you go down high on the strings, take it kind of easy. Don’t bear down too hard.

When asked about other fiddlers who have influenced her, Vesta will cite lots of players from Missouri and other parts of the Midwest whom she met in later years, such as Dwight Lamb, Cyril Stinnett, Lee Stoneking, and Frank Reed. But she says in her early years there weren’t too many around her area.

My uncles, I had two uncles that played fiddle, and a few fiddlers around like Renn Jones . . . a few fiddle players, and they was all old. . . . about the only waltz [Renn] played was “Shamus O’Brien.” And we always called it “Renn’s Tune.” And then my dad played over the store. It was just an old general merchandise. One-half of it was groceries and the other half was dry goods, in the back was farm stuff. When the store closed at nine o’clock on Saturday night, they opened up the upstairs. The stair steps went up the middle and the stage was right there, and they danced all around . . .

I heard them say one night they had 16 squares, no sound system, [just a] fiddle and guitar. There was a piano on the stage, if someone could play piano. My mom played piano sometimes, just chord with the music. And a caller, they had one caller . . . They could call a square that you could hear to that next street down here.
That’s the way I heard it all my life. Very few fiddlers . . .
most of them had a horse and wagon and they didn’t travel
very far. If one came through, might have a new tune, and
somebody would learn that tune.

At that time, Vesta’s family was living in Livingston County, Mis-
souri, and dances were held around in the towns of Avalon, Chula,
and Tina. (The Tina dances carried on at least into the 1980s.)

About 1938 or ’39, my dad always wanted to go to the Ozarks,
so he packed up and bought a place down there. And I lived
down there and went to high school at Summersville (Texas
County). After he got down there . . . we was kind of living
in a Baptist religious part of that county and they frowned on
that fiddle . . . (for dances) you had to go quite a little way into
Houston. Houston Reunion they always called it. It’s just a big
county fair. They would have a dance floor and would dance
there, because it wasn’t in that area where we lived. Or Ray-
mondsville, they had a dance floor at their little picnics.

For a while Vesta went back up to Livingston County to
care for her ailing grandmother in Chillicothe. Though her
grandfather didn’t play, he did have an old fiddle she could
use, and there were other musicians nearby.

. . . before I was married, [I] played school parties and pie
suppers and things. And there was two boys up the road, the
Hooten boys, one played jug and the other one played guitar.

After moving back to Texas County, Vesta married Steve
Johnson in 1940. For a few years she didn’t have a fiddle she
could use, but when Steve returned from Japan after service
in World War II, he brought Vesta a fiddle. This was the first
fiddle that she could really call her own. Steve and Vesta
moved to Kirkwood (St. Louis) around this time, and she
has lived there ever since.

Though Steve was always very supportive of her music,
Vesta didn’t play much for most of the time she was raising a
family—like many a fiddler. In fact, for about twenty years,
she played only a little for her family. In the 1960s Vesta be-
gan attending fiddle contests and met some of the younger
aspiring old-time musicians in the St. Louis area.

I went to a lot of contests, and I wouldn’t give you two cents
for the contests—but I wouldn’t take a lot of money for the
people I met and the tunes I heard.

Before long, the Johnson house became the center for jams
every Saturday night, and sometimes on Fridays too. These
get-togethers continued at the Johnsons’ until they “[ran] out
of room.” Vesta and Steve and a few other people then formed
the Missouri Fiddlers and Country Music Association (MFC-
MA) in 1974, an organization that’s still going strong and holds
monthly Sunday-afternoon jams at the Kirkwood Community
Center. Vesta would like for the jams to be all old-time, but in
the various rooms you might hear bluegrass or acoustic coun-
try-western music as well as old-time fiddle tunes. The MFC-
MA has run a stage for about thirty years at the Green Tree
Festival in Kirkwood in mid-September. Vesta sets up the stage
acts, some country and bluegrass, but the audience “wants old-
time fiddlers” and she still helps satisfy the crowd.

Vesta has taught fiddle lessons for many years, currently
to eight students, and often through TAAP, the Traditional
Arts Apprenticeship Program from the Missouri Cultural
Heritage Center and the Missouri Arts Council. Primarily
she teaches adults, from bare beginners to players like Bill
Martin, who took up fiddle after playing violin for over thirty years in the St. Louis Symphony. For the last 23 years
Vesta has also participated in the Bethel Youth Fiddle Camp as a master fiddler. The camp is held each June in the historic German colony of Bethel, in Northeast Missouri, and is limited to about 30 or 40 students ranging in age from seven to 17. Around 10 masters teach old-time fiddle and guitar, concentrating on Missouri styles.

Vesta still considers herself primarily a dance fiddler; however, she doesn’t get to play as many dances as she did in past years. Around St. Louis, contra dances seem to be the current favorite, and Vesta says she doesn’t play for those because “I’m that crooked fiddler.” But when she does play square dances at places like Bethel or the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes in Port Townsend, Washington (an event at which she has twice been featured), she’s in her element.

Although she has worked with many accompanists, for many years now her backup musician of choice has been her grandson Steve Hall. He’s not only a terrific guitarist and mandolin player, but also has served as a master fiddler at Bethel. In the last few years the two have performed at the University of Chicago Folk Festival and the Bluff Country Gathering in Minnesota, among other appearances. Steve’s son James is now fiddling, learning tunes passed on to him by his grandmother.

The cousin from whom Vesta first learned to fiddle was missing a finger on his left hand. As a result, Vesta has always played without using her little finger, sliding her third finger up to get notes that would be played with the fourth finger by most fiddlers. That’s given her a very distinctive style—often bluesy, and highly danceable. Even her tunes that seem simple and straightforward are deceptively difficult if a player really wants to get her sound.

Her repertoire includes many of the standards we expect. Tunes that are common to Missouri, or the Midwest in general, and not necessarily found in other parts of the country, like “Old Parnell,” “Bill Powell’s Waltz,” “Adrian’s Hornpipe,” and “Little Home to Go To,” are a large part of Vesta’s repertoire, but many of her pieces are rarely heard from other fiddlers anywhere. In the latter category are “Down Home Rag,” “Waldo,” “Snyder Waltz,” and “Hog House Rag.” According to the notes of the anthology of Missouri fiddlers Now That’s a Good Tune, “She has a rare and diverse repertoire that is probably one of Missouri’s best kept secrets.”

Bob Bovee is a longtime contributor to the OTH, writing both articles and reviews. He and his musical/life partner Gail Heil have played old-time music for a living for more than three decades, and have learned from and performed with Vesta Johnson.

**Discography**

- **I’m Old But I’m Awfully Tough** (Missouri Friends of the Folk Arts 1001, 1977)
- **Down Home Rag** (Marimac 9017, 1988)
- **Blue Flame** (Marimac 9057, 1994)
- **Old-Time Music on the Air, Vol. 2** (Rounder 0391, 1996)
- **Old Liberty** (2007)
- **Washington Lee Swing** (2007)

These last two recordings may be purchased directly from Vesta or from Steve Hall (steve_hall_stl@yahoo.com).
TRADITIONAL MUSIC COLLECTIONS ONLINE
by Dan Margolies
Though old-time musicians harken back to, and often hanker for, the old ways as much as the old sounds, there is no denying that modern technology is ushering in a new golden age in the preservation and distribution of traditional music. Musicians used to trade scarce field recordings, share hard-earned snippets of information and technique, and occasionally have opportunity to buy from the tiny independent labels that valiantly re-released old recordings. Nowadays it is commonplace to have free access to oceans of recordings in a stunning array of digital archives. The problem now is not accessibility so much as making sense of what is available, and having the time to begin even to scratch the surface.

The following list is focused only on traditional American music, with an emphasis on the music of the South. I am reluctantly omitting Internet radio stations and MP3 blogs, of which there are a great number presenting some rare gems.

**ARCHIVES FOR SECRET MUSEUM OF THE AIR WITH CITIZEN KAFKA AND PAT CONTE**

[www.wfmu.org/playlists/SM](http://www.wfmu.org/playlists/SM)

Two years (2000-2002) of this fantastic radio program are archived here, consisting of music from rare 78s from around the world. Many of the thematic shows focus on specific Southern topics, such as "Roots of Uncle Dave," white blues, country blues in the city, and so on. All of the shows are full of rare and essential music.

**BLUE RIDGE INSTITUTE HERITAGE ARCHIVES**

[www.blueridgeinstitute.org/heritage.htm](http://www.blueridgeinstitute.org/heritage.htm)

The Blue Ridge Heritage Archive, at Ferrum College’s Blue Ridge Institute in Ferrum, Virginia, has made available half of its extensive music holdings online. Some of these are also accessible through the Digital Library of Appalachia (see below).
Center for Southern African American Music

www.sc.edu/csam/audio_genre.htm

This site from the University of South Carolina is comprised of sections on blues, prison songs, jazz, sacred music, and work songs. The sound files are drawn from a very wide array of sources, including collections released on Document, Yazoo, Folkways, Rounder, and Shanachie.

The Cumberland Gap Broadcasting Company: The Phipps Family

www.angelfire.com/ky2/cumberlandgapbc/special.html

Here is a site dedicated to the Phipps Family, who played music in a decidedly Carter Family vein. You can download a baker's dozen of their songs, including a number of tracks recorded live at the 1973 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. You can also read interviews and LP liner notes, and see some nice old photos.

California Gold: Northern California Folk Music from the Thirties (Library of Congress American Memory)

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afccchtml/cowhome.html

The remarkable body of recordings online here, from a WPA project, is made up of “35 hours of folk music recorded in twelve languages representing numerous ethnic groups and 185 musicians.”

The John Donald Robb Field Recordings (1944-1979)

http://econtent.unm.edu/RobbFieldRecordings

This extensive and excellent collection of MP3s contains recordings of unaccompanied ballad singing, string bands, fiddling, cowboy songs, and other music from Anglo-, Hispanic, Mexican, and Native American musicians in New Mexico, Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado (as well as a few from the Southeast).
### Digital Library of Appalachia

**www.aca-dla.org/cdm4/dlasmus.php**

This is the motherlode. Quite likely, you have already spent a vast amount of time wandering through this stunning and invaluable collection of recordings. The DLA, formed by the partnership of 12 colleges and universities, has provided the incredible service of making accessible over 3,000 rare tunes and songs played by master old-time musicians from across the region. All the tracks are carefully indexed and hyperlinked. You can search by artist, title, or instrument, or just browse for tunes and download them for free without limit. There are three musical essays that alone are worth a visit to the site, as is access to Berea College’s “Fiddle Tune Search by Kentucky County.” If you only visit one site in this list, it must be this incredible resource.

### Juneberry78s

**www.juneberry78s.com**

The Roots Music Listening Room section of this website offers hundreds of old-time and other recordings drawn from 78s and available as MP3 downloads. The site requests that users limit themselves to 35-40 song downloads per day, but you can listen all you want.

### Public Domain 4U

**www.publicdomain4u.com**

You have to wade through some nonsense at the top of the page, but scroll down a bit and this site provides a great many old-time and blues MP3s, all of them owned by all of us. You can listen online on a nifty little player, or download the MP3s.

### Fiddler's Grove

(Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina)

**www.lib.unc.edu/mss/sfc1/fiddlers/FiddlersGrove.htm**

This collection details the development and music of the festival at Fiddler’s Grove and the convention at Union Grove with music, sound, and photographs.

### Fiddle Tunes of the Old Frontier: The Henry Reed Collection

(Library of Congress American Memory)

**http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/reed/**

This collection, an ethnographic model, provides 184 rare tunes from Henry Reed, recorded by Alan Jabbour in 1966 and ’67.

### Hillbilly Music: Source and Symbol

(Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina)

**www.lib.unc.edu/mss/sfc1/hillbilly/HTML/Home/Home.htm**

This site is worth a visit, though it functions as a teaser for the broader collection, showcasing hillbilly music in a variety of materials and sound clips.

### Florida Folklife Collection

**www.floridamemory.com/Collections/folklife/audio.cfm**

The Florida Folklife Program produced many great recordings and other materials between 1976 and 1995, which are online here. The site features links to four different volumes of music arranged by genre. There are collections of bluegrass and old-time string band music, African American sacred music, and two volumes of music spanning fifty years of recordings. Especially nice are the recordings of the Florida Folklife Festival from 1954 to 1979, along with programs and information on the performers. These festivals featured a great variety of artists, including many famous musicians, and a wide array of styles.

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### Alaska Traditional Music Camp

**ALASKA TRADITIONAL MUSIC CAMP**

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Adult camp, families welcome.

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**www.aktradcamp.org**

**info@aktradcamp.org**
Folk-Songs of America: The Robert Winslow Gordon Collection, 1922-1932
(American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress)

www.loc.gov/folklife/Gordon/index.html

This collection is a re-release of a large portion of Gordon’s rare cylinder recordings, previously available only on LP. The music is raw and incredible (for instance, check out Mary C. Mann singing “Ol’ Man Satan/Drive Ol’ Satan Away” and “Finger Ring,” recorded in Darien, Georgia, on April 12, 1926), and very well described, placed in context with detailed notes by Debora Kodish, Neil V. Rosenberg, and Joseph C. Hickerson.

Música de la Frontera: Archive of Mexican-American Music
http://digital.library.ucla.edu/frontera

Rivaling the Digital Library of Appalachia in scale, information, and significance (though the limits placed on each sound sample due to copyright dilute its magnificence a bit), Música de la Frontera was created out of the collection of Arhoolie founder Chris Strachwitz. This incredible bounty of 30,000 recordings (12,000 from 78s) is “the largest repository of Mexican and Mexican-American vernacular recordings in existence”. Found among these fine recordings are examples of all the many styles of borderlands music.

Alan Lomax Collection
(American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress)

www.loc.gov/folklife/lomax

The name about says it all to anyone with an interest in old-time and other traditional music. Included here is information about the vast materials that Lomax created and gathered that are now housed at the Library of Congress. There are a few sound files here, but for audio you are better off going to the John and Ruby Lomax 1939 Southern States Recording Trip collection (see below).

The John and Ruby Lomax 1939 Southern States Recording Trip
(Library of Congress American Memory)

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/lohtml/lohome.html

The Lomaxes captured these approximately 700 recordings of traditional music on a 6,502-mile recording trip through the South in 1939. Supplementing the sound files here are photographs, notes, and other materials.

The Max Hunter Folk Song Collection
http://maxhunter.missouristate.edu

This page features 1,600 recordings of Ozark traditional folk songs, recorded between 1956 and 1976 by Max Hunter, a traveling salesman from Springfield, Missouri. There are a large number of Child ballads in several different versions, which are cross-indexed. Each song file also helpfully includes the lyrics. The files in the collection are available in RealAudio, as downloadable AIFF files, or, if for some reason you can tolerate a MIDI file, in that format as well.

Cajun Music MP3
http://npmusic.org

Dedicated to fostering enjoyment, appreciation, and understanding of the history of Cajun music,” this presentation makes available hundreds of MP3 recordings of great Cajun music, extensive notes on the music and musicians, and good suggestions for further listening.
**The John Quincy Wolf Folk Song Collection**

**www.lyon.edu/wolfcollection**

This site presents material recorded by John Quincy Wolf between 1952 and 1970, including songs and tunes recorded at the First Annual Arkansas Folk Festival in Mountain View, Arkansas, in 1963. Featured are a collection of Sacred Harp recordings, and a rare recording of Bukka White talking to and playing for Wolf's folklore class in 1970 or 1971. There are also articles and other information.

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**The Honking Duck**

**www.honkingduck.com/78s/index.php**

An excellent, deceptively low-key site, honkingduck.com provides 701 recordings of old-time music taken from classic 78s from the 1920s through the 1940s. The records feature string bands, dance calling, Sacred Harp singing, skits, ballads, popular songs, etc. All of these recordings are from 78s originally owned by Jim Bollman. Honking Duck cautions, "The sound of these recordings is not great. Each tune started on a 'well loved' 78, then went through two generations of cassette tape, then MiniDisc, AIFF, and RealAudio. A few of the beginnings and endings got chopped off along the way. I didn't try to remove any scratches or pops."

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**Folkstreams**

**www.folkstreams.net**

Not actually a music archive, Folkstreams is the next best thing. Available here for viewing are several dozen documentary films on folk music and folk culture, many of them otherwise hard to find. There are excellent films on Bois Sec Ardoin and Canray Fontenot, Sarah Ogan Gunning, Texas fiddling, “T-Bone” Walker, the Balfa Brothers, Texas prison songs, Madison County, North Carolina, ballad singing, and much more.
**The St. James Sessions**

This excellent site features information and recordings from the great but not well known sessions at the St. James Hotel in Knoxville in 1929 and ’30. Artists whose recordings can be found here include the “Appalachian Vagabond” (Hayes Shepard), Ridgel’s Fountain Citians, the Tennessee Chocolate Drops, and Ballard Cross (singing his original version of “Wabash Cannonball”).

**The Northeast Mississippi Documentation Project**

This site features music and images from a 14-county area in the northeastern corner of Mississippi, recorded in 2002 and 2003 by Wiley Prewitt. Among the recordings are music from Church of the Living God in Toccopola, and from a dulcimer festival in Tishomingo County.

**Pilgrim Productions Presents Voices Across America**

An unusual site, Pilgrim Productions provides an array of gospel of music from around the country, including shape note singing, black gospel, bluegrass gospel, Cajun gospel, and several other styles, all of it uploaded by people across the country. This is homemade music of widely varying ability levels, which otherwise would not be heard outside of these artists’ often tiny communities.

**Wisconsin Folksong Collection, 1937-1946**

The collection presented here documents music recorded on four different trips made by “song catcher” Sidney Robertson Cowell in the summer of 1937, and Helene Stratman-Thomas in the summers of 1940, ’41, and ’46. There are many vocal tracks, and recordings of lumberjack songs, fiddle, accordion, guitar, Ho-Chunk drums, Hardanger fiddle, and even instruments like the psalm-odikon and tamburica.
"Now What a Time": Blues, Gospel and the Fort Valley Music Festivals
(Library of Congress American Memory)

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ftvhtml/ftvhome.html

Another fine Library of Congress collection with recordings from the folk festival at Fort Valley State College in Fort Valley, Georgia. The collection also includes tracks from Tennessee and Alabama, recorded by John Wesley Work III between 1938 and 1941. The introduction notes, "One interesting feature of this collection is the topical rewording of several standard gospel songs to address the wartime concerns of the performers."

Musics of Alabama

www.arts.state.al.us/actc/compilation/introlist.html

This is a free collection of thirty recordings of different traditional music styles, compiled by the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture, to highlight the diversity of the state’s folk music. There are four volumes of this collection, though only the first volume is available for free download in its entirety.

Voices from the Dust Bowl: The Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin Migrant Worker Collection
(Library of Congress American Memory)

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afctshtml/tshome.html

This collection features music and other materials from migrant work camps in central California in 1940 and 1941, including “dance tunes, cowboy songs, traditional ballads, square dance and play party calls, camp council meetings, camp court proceedings, conversations, storytelling sessions, and personal experience narratives of the Dust Bowl refugees who inhabited the camps.”

South Georgia Folklife Collection

www.valdosta.edu/library/find/arch/folklife/radio.html

Among other resources here, archived radio shows cover many different aspects of the region’s folklife and music, such as fiddle traditions, Sacred Harp singing, hollering, auctioneering, and hymn-lining.

Traditional Mountain Gospel


Maintained by Dovesong, this site offers MP3s of old-time gospel music from the 1920s-1950s.

Venerable Music

www.venerablemusic.com/samphweb/playing.php

Though this is attached to the commercial site for this retailer, Venerable Radio is a notable standalone feature that is always worth a visit. The selection digs deep and there are a lot of surprises, which is not always the case with this type of sites. There is also a very effective request menu.
Following are a few cylinder sites, in order of overall utility. Though these sites do not exclusively offer old-time music, it is pretty hard not to be entranced by the recordings given their age and rarity, and it is not uncommon to find versions of popular songs among these recordings that reemerged as "old-time" songs.

**Cylinder Preservation and Digitization Project**

[http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu](http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu)

Probably the best cylinder archive site on the Web, this site has very old recordings of all varieties (the oldest dates to 1894). It provides a number of old-time songs and fiddle tunes, as well as Hawaiian music, gospel, and even recordings of whistling. There are a number of different ways to browse the collection, and a streaming radio feature with music by early black artists and composers.

**The Cylinder Archive**

[www.cylinder.de](http://www.cylinder.de)

A good source for digitized versions of extremely old recordings on cylinder from the 1890s to the 1920s, with new material released once a month. The collection at [www.archive.org/details/cylindertransfer](http://www.archive.org/details/cylindertransfer) features many more recordings, all of which can be heard instantly on an embedded player without having to download them.

**Tinfoil.com**

[www.tinfoil.com](http://www.tinfoil.com)

Another site dedicated to very old recordings, which provides a new song each month.

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All images from Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress.
THE ADVENTURES OF A DELTA BOY: GARRY HARRISON AND ILLINOIS FIDDLING
Interviewed by Norbert Sarsfield
For over 30 years Garry Harrison has been one of the leading champions of the traditional music of his native Illinois. Beginning in the mid-1970s with his influential band the Indian Creek Delta Boys, Garry has been playing old-time music from his home state, most of it learned first-hand from an older generation of traditional musicians whom Garry visited, befriended, and recorded. He is also a gifted composer of new fiddle tunes in an old-time vein; his CD of mostly original tunes, *Red Prairie Dawn*, was named Best Fiddle CD of 2000 by County Sales. Last year Garry and Jo Burgess published the wonderful *Dear Old Illinois*, a massive song/tune book and 3-CD set of the traditional music of downstate Illinois. On top of that, Garry’s current band, the New Mules, with Garry and his daughter Genevieve on fiddles, Smith Koester on banjo, and Andy Gribble on guitar, won the traditional band contest at Clifftop this year. (Bass player Abby Ladin is also a member of the band, though she didn’t play with them at Clifftop.) On a sunny Saturday afternoon in late September I sat down with Garry Harrison in Morton Park, across the street from Eastern Illinois University in Garry’s hometown of Charleston, Illinois.

What was your first exposure to old-time music? When did you start playing?

I was about 16. My dad’s old fiddle and my older brother’s banjo were both at home, and my twin brother Terry and I started playing those. I played the fiddle and he played the banjo. We didn’t know what to play, so we’d just make up little pieces. My dad waited until he saw we wouldn’t just lose interest, where we had a few little pieces that we’d made up that we could play again. Then he came in and showed me some real fiddle tunes, “Flop-Eared Mule,” “Ragged Ann,” “Soldier’s Joy,” the old standards, and that was my first exposure to it.

See, my parents were older when I was born. My dad would be up over 100 if he was here now. He played back in the 1910s and ‘20s and ‘30s. It kind of faded back in the 1930s, there after the Depression. There wasn’t as much call for it, so he’d given it up for a lot of years. I think he kept playing on into the ‘40s, but it got to be where they didn’t have as many dances. My mom played the guitar and sang, too. She played on the radio up at Tuscola, WDZ, where Smiley Burnette got his start. They played up there, both my mom and dad. I think it may be where they met.

When did the Indian Creek Delta Boys get together?

Our family had a river camp right where the Indian Creek empties into the Embarras (pronounced Ambrown) River, and in the summer the creek would dry up and leave a little sandbar, no water at all, and that was the Indian Creek Delta. So it was just kind of for fun that we started calling ourselves the Indian Creek Delta Boys.

The first of the Delta Boys were Terry and I and John Bishop, a friend of ours who had heard us and wanted in on it. He got him an old guitar and started playing with us. After a while some others started coming around: Chirps Smith, Dave Miller, and Dan Baird. Those three and I made the first two Delta Boys records. Terry worked nights, and it was hard to get together with him to practice, so he kind of bowed out of it.

We kept playing as the Delta Boys until we started having kids in the early ‘80s. After that we didn’t really play around here much anymore. Once in a while there’d be something we could make a trip out of, and we’d just scare up whoever we could get to go along. But we didn’t play much at all, and through the late ‘80s not at all. Then around ‘93 Doc Holliday and Dave Danner talked me into firing it back up. We didn’t ever play much. I worked in the heating and air trade, and all of these music things are in the summer, and that’s the worst time to try to get time off. Then Doc got out of it and Bish took his place, so the last version of the Delta Boys before I moved to Indiana was Bish and Dave and I.

When did the Delta Boys decide to put out your own record?

By ‘75 we were feeling good enough about ourselves that we went down to a contest in Clarksville, Tennessee, and we made the finals. I think we got 4th or 5th place. We were still wet behind the ears; we hadn’t been playing as a group for more that a few months. But we went down there. We had a fellow with us, Chris Grigoff, who played the harmonica really well. He played fiddle tunes note for note, and I think that helped us. And Dave Miller, our banjo player, won the banjo contest down there. Steve Davis, who was a teacher at the university where they had this contest, he started talking to Dave about making a record. He had his own label, Davis Unlimited Records.

I remember Steve Davis was supposed to be here in Charleston one Saturday morning to record us, and I completely spaced it. They had to come down to the delta to get me. I’d been down there fishing all night. Oh, I was embarrassed as hell about that. But Davis just took it all in fun.
When did you start meeting up with the older musicians around here?

I was about 18. I heard about the fiddlers’ gathering over in Shelbyville, about 35-40 miles west of here. There were still some old-timers going to it, and I heard them play some pieces that I wanted to learn. At that time, anything from “Mississippi Sawyer” to something rare and obscure, I wouldn’t have known the difference. Anything that I hadn’t learned from my dad was new to me, and I wanted to learn it. Then right around that time my dad died, and it set me to thinking that I wished I’d have bothered him more to show me those old pieces.

You know, two different people out at Clifftop this year said to me “Boy, isn’t it funny, those old folks we went around and saw, and we never did think about them dying.” And I said, “Well, I sure did.” I felt the clock ticking every minute, because I knew they weren’t going to be around forever. My folks being old, and they had older brothers and sisters, why I was used to being around old folks. Hell, seemed like they’d die off one a week back when I was a kid, so I was always aware that they weren’t going to be around forever, and if I heard about old folks that played music, I knew I’d better jump. So I started going and seeing them.

Danny Baird, who played guitar with us, he bought an old bass fiddle off a fellow down in Toledo, not far south of here. The guy told Danny that Pappy Taylor down at Effingham had made that bass back in the 1930s. Danny asked him if there was any chance this Pappy Taylor fellow was still around. He says, “Oh no, he’s been dead for years.” Then it wasn’t long after that that we were playing down in Effingham, and after we got done there was a crowd gathered around. Somebody says “Hey, you guys want to go hear an 80-year-old fiddle player?” “Sure,” we said. “What’s this guy’s name, anyway?” And he says, “Pappy Taylor.”

Back from the grave, huh?

Yeah, so we had to go see that, him being dead all those years. We went down there and saw him. It was a place called the Midway Tavern. It was midway between Effingham and Sigel, on Route 45. Then later that same week we went down to his house. He knew all kinds of pieces that we wanted to learn, so we kept going back. We got to know him for about 12 years before he died. We’d go down there and couldn’t get away from him. He lived by himself in a little shack. I’d go down there after work and get out of there at 1 or 2 in the morning, and the last hour would be spent in the doorway trying to get out.

Pap, as we always called him; his proper name was Harvey Taylor, he was one of the very first we met, and we were lucky that way, because that sure sparked our interest in it. And Effingham wasn’t very far, about 35-40 miles south of here, right down the interstate. So I went down and saw him a lot. He got to be an old friend of ours.

It sounds like Pappy was pretty open to having you guys come around; was that the common response among the older musicians you visited? What did they think of young guys like you taking an interest in them and their music?

Well, not all of them had kept it up like he had. But you know, we didn’t hit the door with a tape recorder saying “Can we record you?” We hit the
door with instruments saying “Let’s pick!” So, yeah, they all responded to that, even the ones that had quit it for ages were like, “I’ll give it a try, if I can find the fiddle.” But even the ones who had kept it up hadn’t played with regular non-electric instruments for years. It was as much fun for them as it was for us. We were pretty good at backing them up and they really liked it. They didn’t think anything about the age difference, and I didn’t either because like I said I was used to being around old folks, growing up.

You’ve mentioned Pappy Taylor; who were some of the other old-timers you visited with and recorded?

There was Jesse Abbott. He lived out in the country down by Toledo. Then there was Pete Priest and Odie Griffith close by. And a little further down the road was Harry Elie and Cliff Pulliam and the Fulk brothers. We went and visited a lot of them. And for every one who knew pieces we wanted to learn there was at least one who didn’t. I’d say we visited right at 200 different folks in all.

Now the recorder, it was just to remember the pieces. At that time we didn’t think any further ahead than that, than just learning the pieces. The machine that we used recorded on reels, and it was a good machine. But I’d get home and I’d want to cut out all the talking, just boil it down to the pieces that I wanted to learn. So I started putting them onto cassettes. The machine I used for that was not good at all, just a cheap little cassette machine. But I’d end up with these cassettes, and they were handier than those reels, and I thought so little about saving the stuff that I’d record over the reels. I think it was Chirps or one of the boys who said “Don’t be doing that. Save the originals!” I don’t think anything really got lost, though, because I only reused one or two of the reels, and whatever was on there we probably got again.

So initially you were just field recording in order to learn the tunes. When did you really start to become aware of the historical importance of what you were doing?

I can tell you when that was. It was a few years after we started doing it. We were somewhere playing, it might have been Battleground. There were other string bands there, and we got done playing and some fellow came up to me and said, “Where’d you learn that piece?” I told him, and he said somebody had collected that piece down South. And that word “collected,” it hit me. People collect coins and stamps, but I’d never thought about collecting music. It was a real eye-opener for me. I thought, “So that’s what we’re doing.” It made me aware of the preservation angle, which I’d never seen. I’d just never thought about the future at all. It was a big dose of understanding for me.

You’ve recently put together the Dear Old Illinois book and CDs. It’s a really great collection of traditional music from downstate Illinois. For that project, you brought your field recordings together with another batch of stuff collected by David MacIntosh. Can you talk a little about that?

Sure. Most of the songs are from his collection; most of the fiddle tunes are from ours. He was a professor of music down at Southern Illinois University, in Carbondale. He taught down there for about 40 years. He started back in the ’20s down there. Dave Miller heard about his recordings, and so we went down and saw him at his house. This was shortly before he died. He was about 80 by then. He had everything sprawled all over his basement on tables, just playing with it. There was a notebook, and I saw there was a fiddle player in it. I went down through the list, and it was “Eighth of January,” “Soldier’s Joy,” and then I came to “Ikum Got a Coon Treed.” I said, “Well, let’s have that!” So he played it for me, and I’d never heard it before. Then, I had to wait 20 years to learn it, until we got hold of the recordings. That’s one piece I had to wait 20 years to learn.

He had this giant collection, but he never did anything much with it. He put out some little pamphlets over the years on those party-play games, and he put out one book in the ’70s. It gives 14 complete songs, with the music, I mean, and a number of party-play games. So, we wanted to really document his collection and make it available. His son told me that he asked him shortly before he
So in putting together Dear Old Illinois, what led you to put it together in that way, combining your field recordings with the MacIntosh collection?

Well, he mostly went after vocal music, and we just didn’t turn up much of that. I thought, we had a boat load of fiddle tunes, what a book that would make to put the two together, to present the songs and ballads, and fiddle tunes, both.

It was a job. There were a lot of mysteries when we started going through those recordings of his, especially until we found the written part of the collection. It was a mess. The written part of his collection was stored in a shed. We made copies of it all, and we might have the only copy of it by now. That was 11 or 12 years ago, and it was starting to get gnawed on by mice and mold. It smelled awful. It may be gone by now. We made copies of it, about 8,000 pages that had just been thrown into file cabinets. A lot of the lyrics in the book came from those papers. Then there was a lot of information about the recordings, who these people were, when this happened, where they were from. We wouldn’t have known half of the background information in the book without finding those papers. It was worth going through them, but it was a job. That, by itself, we worked a couple of years on.

We got that all done, and then we started to see what we had. You know, “Barbara Allen,” well there’s 50 versions at least in the papers, and a lot of them there was a lot of versions of. So I thought, rather than you see done sometimes in the books, where they’ll have different complete sets of the lyrics, I didn’t want to do that. To give more than one complete version it would get too long. It’s a big book as it is, you know. So we decided that we’d just boil it down to the best set of lyrics we had. We’d sometimes give more than one tune if we had them, but just one set of the lyrics.

So how long did it take you, from deciding to start the Dear Old Illinois project to when you finally got it published?

It was about 11 years. We worked a couple of years just sorting the papers, and then we’d both make trips to dig up some of the folks from Mac’s collection. He interacted with so many people that we couldn’t investigate anything like all of them, but we wanted to try to represent a few of them. At that time it had been 50 years or so since those recordings were made, and that was plenty of time for people to completely disappear, without a trace. There was a couple of them, from small towns, that nobody had any recollection of, even people with the same last name. They had no recollection of who they might have been.

Of course, that was my favorite part, visiting with the descendents. Just a very few of the people themselves on the recordings were alive, and they were all sons or daughters of (older) people he’d recorded. See, there were some families that he recorded two generations of, and the younger ones were still around, but
even they were in their 80s and 90s, most of them. We went and saw them, to get photos and try to learn a little bit about them. That was fun.

After all that, we started looking for publishers. I didn’t have any idea how you got a book published. We checked out some university presses, but it was seeming like it was going to take too long. So I got in touch with this small publisher up in Indy. They have a real good reputation, and they’re good at what they do, but our book isn’t what they do. They’re used to doing people’s novels. Well, I’d sooner take a beating than to do this stuff, but I bought a book on self-publishing, and I started researching copyright, ISBN number, and all of that stuff by myself. And it was job. I had no idea what I was doing. But I got the thing done, finally, just drug it kicking and screaming into print.

You talked about going back to try to track down some of the sources for the recordings and how they’d be gone, not even a memory of them left in these towns where they lived their whole lives. Most of the people you recorded are gone, most of MacIntosh’s people are dead. You’ve done your part to preserve their music, and to keep it in circulation. Where do you see the music going now and in the future?

I think it’s going to stay the same place it’s always been. It’s always been something that people do to relax, unwind, and be creative, and it gives you a lift. A lot of people seem to have a hard time understanding somebody playing music just for fun. When the Delta Boys would be out playing, there’d be people come up and say things like, “Hey boys, next stop Nashville!” A lot of people didn’t understand that we weren’t trying to get to Nash-ville. That’s one thing I like about it. It’s not music that people play to get rich and famous. They play it because they love it. I don’t think that’s going to change.

Do you think traditional Illinois fiddling, and maybe traditional Midwestern fiddling in general, has gotten the attention it deserves within the larger old-time community, compared to say Kentucky or West Virginia or North Carolina fiddling? Or do you think it’s still kind of under the radar?

Oh no, it has been recognized. I always hear the old Illinois pieces we dredged up being played. You walk from one end of a music festival to another and you’ll just about always hear some of them being played. They’ve got noticed. I think some of them are not even what you’d call obscure anymore. Of course it’s been over 30 years since we started throwing those out there on those Indian Creek Delta Boys records, so they’ve had time to soak in, and they have.

What, if anything, do you think makes Illinois fiddling unique? Is there some essential quality about it that sets it apart?

I’m not a very good one to answer that. I’ve never considered that I know a lot about the fiddle playing from elsewhere. But it seems to me, you take Cajun fiddling and Irish fiddling, those sound different to me. But the old country fiddling from here or there, I just have never been able to tell much difference in it. Then it’s so variable within itself that it gets down to the individual players and the individual pieces. Fiddling from anywhere does, I think. Like Harvey Taylor and Noah Beavers, they didn’t play anything alike, as far as I’m concerned. So how do you say what it is overall when there is that much variation within it?

I think a lot of people, when they think about Midwestern tunes in general compared to Southern or mountain tunes or whatever, think that maybe they’re not-er, and maybe there’s not as much cross-tuned stuff. But the interesting thing to me is that on Dear Old Illinois there’s stuff that isn’t really notey, there’s cross-tuned stuff; it’s just a real interesting mix.

Yes, you’re right. Most of it I think sounds like what they play down South or in the mountains, but then some of it doesn’t. “Rush and the Pepper,” now there’s a good example of one that I don’t believe came from down South. And that’s a funny thing. Jess Abbott was who played that, and he was from down in southern Missouri originally, but he played “The Saint Anne Reel,” and “The Wind A-Shakin’ the Barley,” and a few other pieces that I believe are considered more Northern. I don’t know where he got them. I didn’t know enough about it back when he was alive to ask him. He played those, but he was from way south of here, so who knows? He must have been around somebody from up North at some time. Like I say, it gets down to the individual players.

I was rereading the liner notes to the first two Indian Creek Delta Boys records the other day, and it seemed to me there was a different attitude about the music expressed in those notes compared to the introduction to the Dear Old Illinois book. In the liner notes to the records there was a real strong emphasis put on staying true to the original source, where in the introductory material to Dear Old Illinois you encourage people to take the source material and make it their own, to not feel bound by the original. Can you talk a little about that?

Well, I didn’t write those liner notes. What it says in the book is what I believe, and that is to take it and make it your own. And what else it says is that for some that means holding as close as possible to the source. You know Pap, he learned a lot of his pieces from an old fellow that played with the circus, Joe Dixon. He was telling me one time he was somewhere and this Dixon was there, and he played a piece he hadn’t heard him play before. Well, Pap had to walk a mile or two home and keep it in his head till he got there, and then he got his fiddle out and played it. Do you think it was exactly like the way Dixon played it by the time he got home? People have always done that, made pieces their own.

Can you talk a little about writing fiddle tunes? You recorded a bunch of your original tunes on Red Prairie Dawn. How do you go about writing a new tune?

They just appear. And they disappear just as fast if I don’t get them caught. I’ve lost many a good one over being out on the job somewhere and not having any way to record it. But now I can write them down. I just learned to write music a few years ago. Everything I learned about music I learned my 7th or 8th year of school. There was a teacher who taught us the intervals, and I paid attention. It was easy for me, and it made sense to me. That little bit was the only schooling that I’ve ever had in it. I still can’t read it worth a damn, but if a tune comes into my head I can write it down,
like writing a note to myself. But I couldn’t back then, ten years ago or so. But yeah, they just show up. If they get away, that’s ok, because there’s always more, and maybe some of them are ones I lost before, coming back.

How would you describe your own fiddling? Who were the biggest influences on the way you play?

Pap Taylor and Noah Beavers, they’re good ones to copy. Pap played everything straight-ahead, hard-driving. Even his waltzes were hard driving. And Noah had this delicate bow, you know, all those little ornaments he does. He’s got the rhythms just a-flying in every direction with that bow. Then, Cliff Pulliam, I copied after him too, because he did what I call the ‘back bowing.’ It’s backwards. It breaks it up different; it sounds like it’s talking. I picked that up and caught what he was doing with that. I put it in some of those pieces I made, too. That’s what makes them sound the way they do.

There’s all kinds of little things you can do with your bow. I think that a lot of the ones playing now, my only constructive criticism would be to do some more interesting stuff with the bow. A lot of them have the left hand nailed way better than I do, but if you work on that bow, that’s what makes it talk.

What about instrument making? Can you talk a little about how you got involved in that, and what you’re doing now along those lines?

I started out playing on my dad’s old fiddle, and the neck started to pull out of it. I took it to Odie Griff, who lived over in Cooks Mills at the time, just a few miles northwest of here. That was how I met him. He was also a fiddle player; he’s on some of the Dear Old Illinois CDs and in the book. He fixed it, and he had all these fiddles hanging around in his workshop. I’d go there and look at all these different fiddles, and he’d tell me about them. They weren’t anything valuable or anything, but they were interesting to me.

I got to looking at all those fiddles, and some of them he had apart. I thought, “Well what is inside these things? A bass bar, what in the world does that do?” I just got interested that way. I’d go hang out with him, and one time he asked me if I wanted to buy a box of fiddle-making tools; 20 bucks I think it was. I said “Sure!” Back then you could go to an auction and buy a fiddle for 10 or 20 bucks. I started buying a few of them. I thought, what a great thing, to buy this old piece of junk and turn it back into an instrument that plays good.

I just rebuilt them for several years. Finally I got the notion to make one. So I took a straight-grained cedar shingle from and old house I’d torn down. It was plenty big enough to make the front out of. And I’d bought a load of hard maple from a fellow up at Tuscola. So I built me one. I have a tape of me playing it the day I strung it up. It was New Year’s Day of ’83, I think.

What about the two-point fiddles you’ve been building recently?

Yeah, those are really interesting. I saw an old photo of this fellow, Williamson Hamblen, about six to seven years ago. He’s reared back in his chair, and he’s playing a fiddle with just the two upper corners of the usual four. His father, David Hamblen, was a fiddler too, and Williamson’s son wrote out about 40 pieces from both his father and his grandpa David. Kerry Blech sent me those transcriptions. If you want to hear some of these pieces, Christian Wig just put a CD out lately called Chadwell’s Station, with a lot of them on it. He really does them up right, plays some of them on the old bare gut strings and all. And Whitt Mead plays the banjo on some of them too. It’s a fine recording.

But when I saw that picture of Williamson Hamblen, my eye was just attracted to that two-cornered fiddle. I assumed he made it. I thought, what a great photo, but what a shame we’ll never know what inspired him.
to make a fiddle like that or what he played on it. But we’ve since come to know all of that. The Hamblens lived over in Brown County, Indiana, next county east of where I live now, and my fiddle buddy over there, Bruce Taggart, came up with this book with all of this information about the Hamblens. Williamson did make that fiddle in the picture. He got the two-point idea from a fiddle he bought in the 1860s, and that one is even pictured in this book. He made about 25 fiddles in all, two-pointers and regular four-pointers too.

I decided to make Genevieve a two-pointer for Christmas last year. At that time, all there was to go on was the one picture of Williamson with his. So I made an eyeball copy of it. I had it well underway when Bruce Taggart turned up an original two-pointer made by William son Hamblen in 1888. I went right over and got pictures and tracings and measurements of it. So when I finished Gena’s, I made myself one, and it’s patterned after the original. I’ve got patterns for three different models of the two-pointers now, but I’ve not yet made one of the third model.

Gena had her two-pointer out at Clifftop, so for fun I went showing it off, and nearly everybody that played on it said “What are you getting for these?” You know, it does make a good-looking fiddle, with just the two points. Everybody comments on that. And they sound good. So I guess I’d better get busy. It takes a lot of time to make one though, and it’s hard to find the time. I don’t have a planer or a jointer. I do all of that with a plane, and it’s slow-going. And I make all of the parts for them—I mean pegs, tailpiece, and so on, everything that’s made out of wood. That takes a lot of time too.

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So are you taking orders for the two-points?

No, I don’t take orders. I think people ought to play an instrument before they buy it, if possible. I’d rather make some up and then they can pick from them.

Why don’t you tell us a little about your current band, the New Mules. You guys took Clifftop by storm this year, winning the trad band contest.

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Yes, that was an honor, for sure. The Mules are great. We don’t get together much, you know. Clifftop was only the fourth time we’ve ever played out anywhere. We live in three different states: Abby and I are in Indiana, Genevieve and Smith are in Illinois, and Andy’s in Missouri. It makes it hard. I’ve never done it that way. I’m used to getting together once a week. Thank goodness for the Internet. I put up their vocal parts and everything on the webpage, and they go get them and that’s how we learn. It’s crazy, it’s really crazy. I don’t like it really, but what choice have we got? That’s the way we have to do it.

“Turnip Patch,” that we played in the contest at Clifftop, Gena came up with that arrangement. She did a good job of it. I was in a band years ago that won first prize at Clifftop, and she was along with me. She wasn’t even quite 16 yet. She was in the crowd. And now, to go back with her in the band is quite a feeling for both of us.

Any plans to record?

Yeah, we’ve got some weekends picked out coming up that we’re going to try to get some recording done.

You’ve done a lot over the years. Field recording, playing with your own band, writing original tunes, building instruments, publishing a collection of traditional tunes. Where do you see yourself in the tradition?

Well, as a player, I was part of making the old music available years ago, on those “Crick Delters” records. Then later on I recorded some new pieces, on the Red Prairie record. And I was part of digging up the old fiddle music from an area that had never been documented to speak of, and made it available with the Dear Old Illinois book. So I’d tell you that I feel like I’ve added to the field.

Norbert Sarsfield is an old-time music enthusiast and stay-at-home dad residing in Iowa City, Iowa. He volunteers as a copy editor for the Old-Time Herald and plays fiddle in the old-time string band the Gilded Bats (www.myspace.com/thegildedbats).

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THE OLD-TIME HERALD WWW.OLDTIMEHERALD.ORG DECEMBER 2008-JANUARY 2009 31
THE WORLD'S MOST POPULAR RADIO ARTIST: TUNING IN AGAIN TO CHUBBY PARKER
By Tony Russell
He was born Frederick R. Parker in 1876 in Lafayette, Indiana, about a hundred miles southeast of Chicago. He came from a tolerably well-off background: his father, around the time of Frederick’s birth, was the deputy treasurer of Tippecanoe County. A young man with the same name graduated from Purdue University, a few miles away in West Lafayette, in 1898 with a BS in electrical engineering—an appropriate background for the Frederick Parker who turns up in Chicago a few years later and works successively as a patent attorney, inventor, and electrician. Music was perhaps no more than a hobby for this ingenious man, but he was proficient, or keen, enough to win a place on WLS’s Saturday-night National Barn Dance program, launched on April 19, 1924. He appeared on the show frequently, usually as a solo act but sometimes in an old-time dance band with the fiddler Tommy Dandurand, a streetcar motorman from Kankakee, Illinois, who had lately moved to Chicago.

The late Charles Wolfe believed that Parker was a Kentuckian (he was wrong by only two degrees of separation: both his grandparents were born in the Bluegrass State) and therefore included him in his 1982 book Kentucky Country, where he asserted that Parker “left WLS abruptly in 1926, reportedly upset at the greater success young Bradley Kincaid was having with the same kind of material.” On the contrary, in 1926 Parker could not have been more secure at WLS: in December of that year, the Hammond (Indiana) Times described him as “one of [WLS’s] leading acts . . . at present the most popular entertainer of that station, who has, for the last month, led Ford and Glenn in the number of requests for encores.”

In September 1927, as Wayne Daniel reports in his book Pickin’ on Peachtree, WLS’s director Edgar Bill took a team to Atlanta, where a Sears, Roebuck store had recently opened and the company’s Agricultural Foundation sponsored several shows on WSB, such as Dinner Bell R.F.D. His purpose was to recreate a week’s worth of typical WLS programs on the Atlanta station, and for this he selected Parker as the sole old-time artist. The week culminated with a two-hour presentation of the National Barn Dance, in which the visiting banjoist shared the stage with Fiddlin’ John Carson and other local musical celebrities. The Atlanta Journal described him as “without doubt the premier old-time radio entertainer of the northern states.”

By 1928, his bill matter was even more enthusiastic. In April, when he played the Rialto Theater in Hamilton, Ohio, he was advertised as the “World’s Most Popular Radio Artist In Person . . . ‘Chubby’ Has Charmed Millions Of Radio Listeners All Over The World.” (WLS was among the most powerful stations in the US, and on a clear night could be picked up in Canada and Hawaii, but “all over the world” is something of an overstatement.) An article in the Hamilton (Ohio) Evening Journal reminded its readers that Chubby was “the fellow that sings the quaint humorous songs to the tune of his little banjo from the WLS station every Saturday night,” and quoted a Chicago paper as reporting, earlier that year, that “from October 2, 1926, to July 15, 1927, Chubby received 24,000 pieces of radio mail and telegrams . . . In one single week [in February 1927] he received 2,853 pieces.” These were believed, at the time, to be world records.

Parker, or his employer, was swift to capitalize on his popularity. Within days of that heavy mail week, he was in a Chicago studio waxing radio-tested material like the ancient nonsense songs “Nickety Nackett Now Now Now” and “Bib-A-Lollie Boo.” The company that recorded him was Gennett, but most of his sales were on Silvertone and Supertone, low-priced labels that Gennett manufactured for Sears, which aggressively
promoted them through their mail-order catalogues. Between 1927 and 1931, Parker would produce more than fifty issued sides, though the repertoire they reveal is only about half that size, because he recorded many of his songs twice or three times. His first sides like “Oh Susanna” and “Little Brown Jug” were so successful that three years later Gennett commissioned him to remake most of them, perhaps because the original metal stampers had worn out.

As those titles hint, Parker’s song folio was stuffed with antiques. “Year of Jubilo” was Henry C. Work’s “Kingdom Coming” (1862); “A Rovin’ Little Darkey” was W. S. Hays’ “Little Sam” (1867); “Grandfather’s Clock,” generally attributed to Work, was published in 1876; “The Old Wooden Rocker” was Florence Harper’s composition of 1878. Others of the banjoist’s favorites were “Whoa, Mule, Whoa,” “Darling Nellie Gray,” “Uncle Ned,” and “Oh Dem Golden Slippers”—flowers plucked from the yellowing pages of the “songsters” that were printed in millions from the 1870s to the 1910s. These little books of minstrel-show ditties, comic songs, and read-em-and-weepies may have been his source, but he was not without practical show-business experience: as a young man, between college and moving to Chicago, he had worked for a circus.

Many of the songs Parker offered his public had been recorded before, back in the 1900s and 1910s, and some of his interpretations, like those, were in the old minstrel idiom, with its burnt-cork talk such as “I’se gwine” and “’kaze” (for “because”). But the older recordings were generally made with orchestral accompaniments. What gave Parker’s versions their appeal was his jaunty solo banjo playing, evidently unhampered by what he reported to his draft board in 1918 as a “slight paralysis” in his left hand and arm. Purchasers of his records would also have been grateful for his high but unstrident voice, which cut through the discs’ murk of surface-noise, and the choruses of whistling he often threw in.

Minstrel songs, banjo—are we, perhaps, skirting Uncle Dave Macon country? The two men were of an age, both born in the 1870s, and though they shared only two songs on record—“Uncle Ned” and “The Kissing Song,” which Macon did as “Kissing On The Sly”—they surely knew much of the same repertoire. The banjo connection is a little harder to make. In the best-known photograph of Parker, he holds a five-string, but the evidence of his
recorded playing suggests that he used a four-string plectrum banjo—or, possibly, a five-string with the fifth string absent.

In 1930, Parker gave his occupation to a census-taker as “radio broadcasting artist,” implying that he was now making a living out of his radio work, records, and personal appearances. In the following year, he made a batch of recordings for Conqueror (another Sears label), again reprising some of his earlier hits. Among them were “I’m a Stern Old Bachelor” and “Get Away, Old Maids Get Away,” which finally lent some credibility to that “all over the world” claim by being released in England. A WLS ad had once described him as a “character singer,” and he earned that description with a dialect double-header, “The Irish Christening” and “And That Was Irish Too.”

There may also have been another nod to Henry C. Work. In 1863, Work wrote a sequel to “Kingdom Coming,” “Babylon is Fallen,” in which black America, armed, turns on its oppressor: “We will be de massa, he will be de servant . . . Look out dar, now! We’se a gwine to shoot!” The song opens, ominously, with the words “Don’t you see de black clouds risin’ ober yonder?” It is almost the title of a Parker recording, but his “See the Black Clouds A-Breakin’ Over Yonder” rewrites Work’s call to arms as a paean to the prosperity that, in 1931, everyone hoped was returning, though the cheerful message reads oddly in Parker’s carefully preserved minstrelsy: “Goodbye, old Depression, we’se gwine leave you . . . The bells am a-rinin’, everybody am a-singin’ . . .”

The Conquerors were his last recordings, and he probably bowed out of radio soon after. (Maybe Wolfe was half right, and by then Kincaid’s success was annoying him.) He is not featured in the 1932 WLS Family Album, and the only namecheck in a newspaper that I’ve found from this period is a reference to “Chubby Parker and His Rhythm Boys,” a “good orchestra” from Youngstown, Ohio, who were booked for a dance in Kittanning, Penn-
Only followed that wrong turn but then drove right off the road with his assertion that he “exploited the stereotype of the backward hillbilly,” a comprehensive misreading of Parker’s repertoire, style, and appeal.

Since Smith, few reissuers have paid much attention to Parker’s charming catalogue of old-time comic songs, minstrelsy, and banjo playing, but that oversight has recently been rectified by a CD on the English label BACM (British Archives of Country Music, http://bacm.users.btopenworld.com). Chubby Parker & His Old Time Banjo: Classic Recordings 1927–1931 (the liner notes of which are a much shorter version of this article) includes many of the songs mentioned here, and more—a program that recalls the long-gone meriment of the world of minstrel songs, where grandfather’s clock stands in one corner and a wooden rocker in another, and a jolly fellow with a banjo fends off old maids and runaway mules.


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–Stamford Advocate, CT

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A TALE OF TWO TECHNOLOGIES: REDISCOVERING THE BUFFALO RAGGED FIVE, PIONEERING COUNTRY GOSPEL RECORDING ARTISTS
By Jerry Zolten

In Buffalo, Kentucky, in 1931, the Great Depression had settled in. The rural crossroads in Whitley County — then just a church, a schoolhouse, and a store that doubled as a post office — sits in the rugged southeastern hill country on the Tennessee border, where the Cumberland coal plateau gives way to the Daniel Boone National Forest.

A Depression-era newspaper story told of East Kentucky coal miners living on dandelions. The folks around Buffalo fared a bit better, because there, at least, the terrain favored some farming. People had food to eat and livestock to tend, but the occupation of farming was still far less than lucrative.

In these troubled times, however, there were bright spots, among them the budding country music industry taking shape in Nashville, 200 miles to the west. The distance may have been far, but the airwaves brought it as close as the radio that sat on the table in the front room of many a home. Since 1927, broadcasts of the Grand Ole Opry over Nashville’s WSM had been stimulating an expanding market for the music of rural America. Some early Opry performers – fiddler Uncle Jimmy Thompson, Dr. Humphrey Bate and his Possum Hunters, the Crook Brothers, Sam and Kirk McGee – had already made names for themselves through their recordings on nationally distributed labels like Columbia, Brunswick, Victor, and Vocalion.

By the early ‘30s, the one-two punch of radio and records had produced a number of significant country music stars like Uncle Dave Macon, the Carter Family, and Jimmie Rodgers. Possibilities were in the air. A good musician with the help of a record might be able to get on the radio and make a decent living. Back in Buffalo, Kentucky, that thought was not lost on a group of young singers who decided to have a go at becoming country music recording artists.

The Howard Funeral Home Quartette, a later incarnation of the Buffalo Ragged Five. 1 to r, Jack Skeen, Andy Wilder, Edd Scalf, Carlie Parker.
In late November 1931, the group journeyed some 250 miles to Richmond, Indiana, home to the Starr Piano Company and their flagship record label, Gennett. This was the same year that President Herbert Hoover decreed that the official celebration of Thanksgiving be on the fourth Thursday of the month. The singers from Buffalo spent that holiday on the road, and the next day, Friday the 27th, according to session logs, entered the studio and recorded two songs, “Reapers” and “Our School Boy Days.” Commercial releases on the Gennett imprint had been phased out the year before, but the company still issued records on Champion and Superior. The two sides cut that day were released on the Champion label and credited to the Buffalo Ragged Five.

The Champion label design was glorious, with curlicue filigree around the border, gold lettering against a rich red background, the word “ELECTROGRAPH” just above the center hole, and lightning bolts and scrolls shooting out to let the buyer know that the recording was made using the latest in modern electrical technology. Probably only a few hundred shellac discs were pressed, some going to the group to sell at performances and the rest distributed through Starr piano retail outlets, furniture, drug, and record stores, the Sears catalog, and the like.

A year later, in October 1932, again according to company session logs, the Buffalo Ragged Five returned and recorded six more songs, all religious, for Champion: “Jesus Leads, I’ll Follow On,” “All of My Sins are Taken Away,” “Home Beyond the Sunset,” “Redeemed,” “Give Me Your Hand,” and “I’m Bound for Home.” As with the first, the records were pressed in small numbers, some given to the group, the remainder distributed by the company.

After that, nothing. The musicians presumably returned to their former lives, never to be heard from again . . . at least not on record. Even the Champion label itself soon faded into oblivion. By 1934, it was out of business, leaving behind a catalog of historically important recordings that included regional country entertainers like the Corn Cob Crushers, Hack’s String Band, the Lullaby Larkers (Cliff Carlisle and Wilbur Ball), Otto Gray’s Oklahoma Cowboys, the Jackson County Barn Owls (E. W. McClain and J. O. Harpold), Wing’s Rocky Mountain Ramblers, and yes, the Buffalo Ragged Five.

Cut to the present, the era of the Internet, the other technology in this tale. I was rifling through a stack of battered old flea market 78s when I came across Champion 16526, “Jesus Leads” and “All of My Sins,” one of the 1932 sides by the Buffalo Ragged Five. I didn’t know the group, but their name and the description under it – “Old Time Sacred Singing Acc. by Guitar and Harmonica” – caught my eye. Exactly what I was looking for. I paid the price, took the record home, and was pleasantly surprised by the upbeat performance, four voices in bright harmony skillfully backed by a jouncing flat-picked guitar and harmonica fills. Quintessential Southern gospel on an important label, from a relatively early period in country music recording history.

At the time, I was teaching a college course on American roots music, so I listed the record as a “must-hear” on my syllabus, posting the title and upload-
The Goldens were of Irish descent. Roy, born in 1904, was a self-taught singer. Tall and slim with wavy black hair, “he was so-o-o happy to sing,” said Mary. “It was his life.” By his early twenties he had established himself as a circuit teacher of shape note singing. “He would only use Stamps-Baxter songbooks,” recalled Byrlie.

V. O. Stamps and J. R. Baxter founded a Dallas-based music school in 1924, and later a publishing company that specialized in Southern gospel. V. O.’s brother Frank was the leader of the Stamps Quartet, an immensely popular piano-backed gospel vocal group that recorded prolifically for RCA Victor starting in 1928. By the time Roy Lee Golden had entered the field, Stamps-Baxter was the country’s leading publisher of shape note hymn books. “When each new song book publication became available,” said Byrlie, “[Roy] would look through the entire book. There was not a song in shape note mode that he could not sing.” He would then “earmark the ones he was going to teach.” Byrlie tells me she can still picture “Daddy standing in front of his class, songbook in one hand and slapping his tuning fork on his knee with the other hand.”

Roy traveled from town to town all around Kentucky and Tennessee, away six to eight weeks at a time, two weeks at each church teaching congregations shape note songs straight out of Stamps-Baxter. Mostly he was paid in cash, but also in barter goods. “The church sisters,” she says, “would sometimes even quilt him a quilt.” Byrlie recalls his stories.

Sometimes he would come home with chickens and eggs as part of his pay. At another of his classes, this one lady would come and always ask for song Number 29 to be the one they would study that night. Every night there was this voice: “Number 29!” Finally, the other students began calling her Number 29. At the end of the two weeks he got his pay. There was a quilt with all the students’ names embroidered inside little blocks, and in the middle in a larger block, “Number 29.”

Roy’s brother Ike, born in 1900, though he sang, did not pursue it as a profession quite as seriously. He stayed close to home, working the family farm and picking up extra money as a teacher and later a surveyor. His daughter Mary Mink remembers his unwavering honesty. “It was during the Depression and people in that area were having a very hard time.
My dad went to the bank to pay on a loan. The previous customer had made a deposit of $200, and the clerk, apparently distracted, left the money laying on the ledge. After my dad made his payment, the clerk asked if he wanted to deposit the money on the ledge. My dad told me the money looked so good to him, but he replied, ‘That’s not my money, sir. It belongs to someone other than me.’ My dad could have taken that money and no one would ever have known, but that’s the kind of person he was.”

The center of life for both brothers - for the entire community, really - was the Buffalo Missionary Baptist Church. There folks gathered, not just on Sundays, but throughout the week where, when Roy Lee was in town, he taught singing school. “He taught the shape notes,” says Mary, “and he taught them how to sing soprano, alto, and everything like that.” Church is where the group ultimately came together.

In those formative days, they called themselves the Roughnecks, a “boys-around-town” name, in Byrlie’s view. Mary recollects that he thought the name undignified. “I think the group took a vote and the majority won.”

Roy Golden sang lead, and brother Ike bass. Also from Buffalo were two other singers, Andy Wilder and Jack Skeen. Andy Wilder, a public school music teacher born in 1894, sang low tenor. High tenor Jack Skeen, born in 1900, owned the Buffalo general store/post office and served as its postmaster. Carlie Parker, the Buffalo general store/post office and the Greyhound bus would go. They rented a big cattle truck . . . and we paid a dollar apiece to go . . . long back then . . . going to a singing convention or whatever you might call it. We all stood up in the truck and held on to the top rails as we traveled over those rough dirt roads.”

Then came the making of the records. Mary recalls how they dressed up in those gray suits and walked the four-plus miles to Rockholds, where they caught the bus. “Roy just didn’t sit down there in Buffalo and do nothing. He got around. The group would go anywhere the Greyhound bus would go. They knew they were good . . . and what they wanted to do: make records!”

As to how they knew to go to Indiana and to Gennett, Mary can only speculate. She believes that on his travels, Roy heard that the company auditioned performers, recording them on the spot if they passed muster. This, she guesses, is what happened on the first trip to Richmond in November 1931. Also quite possible, the group could have paid Gennett to record and press records, a common arrangement at the time. Exactly how the deal worked will never be known. However, that the Champion files singled out one group member - Jack “A. J.” Skeen – as a royalty payee suggests the group may have been signed to the label with Gennett picking up the tab . . . at least for that initial effort. If there were royalty payments, though, no one recollects ever getting any. Likely, the only income the group received was from sales of records in their possession. Byrlie surmises that maybe fifty to a hundred records were pressed of that first issue, “Reapers” and “Our School Days.”

The only known copy of that record today is in the hands of Andy Wilder’s son, Gilbert. The record is beaten and cracked with a half-moon chip out of the edge. Nonetheless, the performances shine...
through. Both are medium-tempo shape note-style hymns, with flat-picked guitar anchoring the beat with a rocking-on-the-waves feel as two sets of voices answer back and forth on repeated phrases. Of the two, “Reapers” carries it out best. “Reapers . . . Reapers. That’s what we are today. Reapers . . . Reapers . . . Working all along the way. Reapers . . . Reapers . . . Training in the golden ways . . . We’ll be reapers for the Lord.” Andy Wilder’s daughter Gladys remembers that “all the local people that had Victrolas had those old records.”

In the year between recording sessions, the group continued doing what they always did, performing around Whitley County, but as recording artists were now slightly more in demand. No longer the Roughnecks, they billed themselves as the Buffalo Ragged Five, the name change likely prompted by the record company with marketing in mind. Potential buyers reading the label could at least associate a place name and have an idea of the group’s makeup, the “Ragged” a last vestige of their tongue-in-cheek view of themselves. The record sold well enough that they were welcomed back for a second and more ambitious session in 1932. On their return to Richmond, the group cut six more songs, most of them from the Stamps-Baxter song book, but others possibly written by Roy and Ike Golden. Byrlie and mother Mary don’t know exactly how many songs they wrote, but Byrlie remembers “seeing in the Stamps-Baxter songbook Roy Lee Golden’s name on the right-hand side at the top as the one who wrote the music . . . and on the other side was Ike Golden, the composer of the words . . . just the one song.”

That last session marked the end of the association between Gennett/Champion and the Buffalo Ragged Five, their recording career effectively over. No one in the family knows exactly what happened, but speculation is that the records simply didn’t sell well enough. Mary Golden Saylor remembers they were dissuaded from coming back. “They told them they were a year or two early,” she says, “that there weren’t very many record players. I think they kind of got discouraged . . . and they just broke up after that.” Byrlie adds, “They were told that since they were from the country and there was nobody down there that had very many things to play it on – no communication, no phones, or anything like that – I think they just discouraged them from trying.”
The funeral home, the ad continues, “is fortunate in securing the services of this quartette for the use of its patrons, and this group may be had in funerals upon request,” with the caveat that while the group uses “a guitar in all conventions and singing programs . . . their singing in funeral services will be without guitar.” In bold at the bottom of the page was an announcement that “this Quartette will go on the air over WROL, Knoxville, Tenn., 62 on your dial.”

In spite of this seeming success, however, the long run of the Buffalo Ragged Five would soon come to an end. Andy Wilder, active as a singer and a public school teacher with a diploma from Cumberland College, died unexpectedly in May 1942. He proved to be irreplaceable, and his passing brought to a close the career of the Buffalo Ragged Five.

Carlie Parker went on to work over the years as a farmer, sawmill operator, and carpenter. He continued to perform, and late in life switched from guitar to mandolin, appearing at local churches in a duo with his son Ed. Carlie Parker died in the mid-1980s.

Jack Skeen left Buffalo in the early 1940s to work in a Detroit, Michigan, defense plant. He would eventually move to Frankfort, Kentucky, and then Nashville, Tennessee, where he spent the last years of his life in the care of his son Arvil. He died in 1984.

Perhaps the best way to end this tale is with the words of Roy’s daughter, Byrlie Golden Gray. “This story,” she writes “is the personal side that I would like to get across to the people about some of the struggles that those early artists faced to get this great form of music out to the public. A less than dedicated group would have thought the task too hard. But, if they all enjoyed singing as much as my father and his friends did, the journey was worth the effort.”

Jerry Zolten is a scholar and author of many books and articles on traditional music. He teaches at Penn State.

This article was originally commissioned for the Journal of Country Music, and is printed here with the permission of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

Thanks to Byrlie Golden Gray, Mary Golden Saylor, Mary Golden Mink, Gladys Wilder McKeehan, Velma Wilder Lipps, Gilbert Wilder, Robert Parker, and Arvil Skeen. Thanks, Tony Russell, for sharing.
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P. T. Bell: Master Texas Fiddler

Indian War Whoop / Ladies Fancy / Snowbird in the Ashbank / The Campbells Are Coming / Devil Shearing the Hog / Widow Hays / Haste to the Wedding / John Lee Shot 'em / Evening Star Waltz / Duck Creek / Mike Ashley's Schottische / Natchez Under the Hill / Fisher's Hornpipe / Killie'ma Kranke / Four Roses Waltz / Shake Spear / Morg Williams Cotillion / Sugar in the Coffee / Andrew Coon Waltz / Sixty Days in Georgia / Cotillion / Big Taters in the Sandy Land / Abner Raymaus Cotillion / Mace Bell's Civil War March / Jeff Davis / Dusty Miller / Seamus O'Bryan's Waltz / Old Time Schottische / Leon Alcartez Polka / Old Time Waltz / Cacklin' Hen

Every once in a while some previously unknown recordings come to light that absolutely blow me away. In the case of these lost recordings of Texas fiddler Peter Tumlinson Bell, the praise must go to Dan Foster, a fiddle player and researcher from Texas who single-handedly resurrected Bell's wonderful music and who, along with another champion of old-time music, Ray Alden, has now made this stunning collection of Texas fiddle music available to all of us on this new CD. In 1988 Dan became curious about early Texas fiddle music, and through patient research located a reel of tape recordings from the original discs that William A. Owens had made of P. T Bell in 1941. He then set out to find the original discs and started by writing to all the Bells he could find in Carrizo Springs, P. T Bell's home town. His efforts paid off when he received an answer from Vernier Lee Bell, P. T Bell's grandson, who helped him locate the aluminum discs in the archives of Texas A & M. It is unknown whether there were more that got lost or destroyed. These few rare recordings provide an insight into a world that has disappeared, the Texas frontier of the post-Civil War era. Vernier Bell also gave to Mr. Foster a book of memories of his grandfather, which he had compiled and published, containing many anecdotes and stories of the life and music of P. T. Bell.

Peter Bell was born in 1869, to a family who had come to Texas in 1834 from Burke County, North Carolina. His grandfather Peter Tumlinson, Sr., was a Captain in the early Texas Rangers and fought Indians and Mexican bandits in Southwest Texas. His father Mace Bell ran a cattle business in Carrizo Springs. They were a musical family: Mace Bell played the fiddle, as did Peter's brother, who was also named Mace.

I became aware of the existence of the Bell recordings a few years back, while in Texas for some gigs. A friend from Dallas, David Allen, gave me a stack of CDs of collected fiddle music, the kind of stuff that people pass around to other music aficionados. Among other great music was this collection of tunes played by a P. T. Bell of Carrizo Springs, Texas. When I put the disc in the player and heard the first notes of “Ladies Fancy,” I swear, the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I couldn’t believe how great the music was, or that I had never heard of P. T. Bell before. Just when you think you’ve heard it all! The rest of the tunes were also beautiful and masterfully played. From the grooves of these old homemade discs emanated melodies that I didn’t recognize, and that hearkened back to a time that is forever gone. Tunes included breakdowns, polkas, cotillions, marches, waltzes, and even jigs, rarely found in old-time music.

Peter Bell was a fiddler with a varied repertoire and a complex style. He made extensive use of bow triplets and ornamentations, while maintaining an exceptional drive to his fiddling. It sometimes reminds me of another great early Texas fiddler, Captain James Bonner.

The tunes on this CD range from the obscure (“Duck Creek,” “Shake Spear,” “John Lee Shot ’em”) to the familiar (“Dusty Miller” and “Great Big Taters in the Sandy Land,” both staples of Texas fiddling), and to tunes that are fiddle standards (“Fisher’s Hornpipe” or “Devil Shearing the Hog” [“Stony Point” or “Old Dad”]) but played here in unique arrangements. “Fisher’s Hornpipe” is a real tour de force, played in the key of G, unusual and surely harder to play, and deliciously crooked throughout. Other standouts are “Indian War Whoop,” “Snowbird in the Ashbank” (jam-packed with triplets and also crooked), and of course “Ladies Fancy,” perhaps the quintessential Texas fiddle tune, a five-part monument of a tune in the key of E, played, as Mr. Bell indicates in the spoken introduction, “with the G string run down.” Especially beautiful are the five duets with his brother Mace, also on fiddle: two jigs (“The Campbells Are Coming” and “Haste to the Wedding”), “Widow Hays” (very much like “Dubuque” or “Duck River”), “Mike Ashley’s Schottische,” and one called simply “Old Time Waltz.” In all of these recordings the fiddlers play in unison in different octaves, and it’s hard to tell who is playing what part. They sound equally accomplished. The waltzes, “Evening Star,” “Andrew Coon,” “Four Roses,” “Seamus O’Bryan’s,” and “Old Time Waltz” are all played at a pretty fast tempo and are carefully phrased.

Most of the tunes are introduced by Peter Bell, and it’s great to hear his charming speaking voice. I went back and listened to the original CD I had and this new release is much better sounding, clearer and well balanced, thanks to the work of Dr. Karl Miller and Ray Alden. This collection is essential for anyone who loves old-time fiddle music played at the uppermost skill level. A-plus!

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THE OLD-TIME HERALD WWW.OLDTIMEHERALD.ORG DECEMBER 2008-JANUARY 2009 45
His small cabin was typical of a country home; it had no running water, although the kitchen was equipped with a sink, and some tired-looking donuts were growing old on the countertop. In his tiny front room, dominated by a large pot-bellied stove, Ward sat in a battered arm chair, while Dana and Grey grabbed seats wherever they could. With the addition of a few mike stands and wires, the room was packed with people, recording equipment, and music. Ward was obviously not in his prime, but his playing had a special quality—largely in its rhythmic drive and reedy-throated texture—that grabbed your ears. And his mix of old-style playing with a repertory that ranged from Civil War-era tunes to modern country hits was intriguing for those of us used to categorizing music into fixed eras and styles. Ward played every tune with heart and soul, making no distinction between the archaic and modern. He played what he liked, for as long as he liked, when he liked. When he grew tired, he simply stopped and the taping was over. We piled back into Dana’s Volkswagen, pleased that we had captured the brief moment, but disappointed not to have had more time to dig deeper into his repertory.

James Ward Jarvis was born on March 19, 1894, either in Calhoun or Braxton County, West Virginia (there is some disagreement among the sources). He learned to play fiddle as a child; he told us that his father taught him to play by sitting him in an arm chair. In this way, the young fiddler could hold the instrument by balancing it on his lower arm, supported by the arm of the chair. Instead of angling the bow to play on the different strings, he turned his arm slightly to turn the fiddle! He was still using this technique when we recorded him many decades later.

Although he was raised in West Virginia, Ward moved northwest to the small town of Stewart, Ohio, sometime after 1919, 1894, either in Calhoun or Braxton County, West Virginia, appears once with band accompaniment and, later on the CD, as a solo, in which Ward sounds more comfortable as the tune has many unusual rhythmic twists and turns. The second visit on the CD appears to have been made by Goehring alone. The sound quality is not quite as good as on the initial tracks, but there is a wide selection of tunes played (with some repetition from the first visit), including “Pretty Little Indian,” “Piney Mountain”/“Shelvin Rock,” and “Forky Deer.” Although his intonation is not always certain, Ward more than makes up for this in his hard-driving rhythmic sense and the quality of his tone. The only tune missing from Ward’s favorites is “Banjo Tramp,” a lovely minstrel-era tune that he played with gusto.

Like some other releases from Ray Alden’s Field Recorders’ Collective label, this CD is not for the casual listener, but for the diehard fan of true West Virginia old-time fiddling. The uneven sound quality and repetition of tunes means that it would not appeal to those just acquainted with old-time music. But for those of the lucky few who had the chance to hear Ward play, this is a wonderful homage to a man who held fast to traditional styles while still following his own muse in his selection of more modern material. It is unfortunate that Ward was not among the “rediscovered” who benefited from the old-time revival; but this CD stands as a fitting memorial to his music.
Assam, India, isn’t so far removed from Kentucky’s Banjo Bill Cornett; the wild, sweeping right hand of a particularly energetic komuz thumper from Kyrgyzstan draws comparisons with Uncle Dave Macon’s five-string shenanigans. And so it is with the fiddle. It seems the whole world has some variation on the portable, bowed stringed instrument, and Africa, from the spike-ended rebabs of Morocco all the way to the gas-can-bodied, metal-stringed sekankulas played by Sotho shepherders in the southern part of the continent, is no exception.

This collection, culled from noncommercial recordings made over a forty-year period between the 1950s and ’90s, and brilliantly compiled by Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje, who also recorded the entirety of Disc Two and much of Disc One, displays West Africa’s bowed-string deviations. From imzad players in Algeria to the goonji in Northern Ghana, this collection shows a wealth of praise, political, passion and party music, focusing ultimately on the songs of Ghanaian goonjis. Anyone familiar with the goonji recordings John Chernoff made for Rounder (Master Fiddlers of Dagbon) knows how intense and unbelievably hot this music can get. This collection, while presenting many different styles, revels in the same drones, repetition of phrases, and innate sense of groove as Chernoff’s disc. Here is music that’s New-River-wild, and hypnotic as a good hike in the woods.

The second disc’s first 11 tracks are one interrupted performance praising Dagomba kings. And like an old-time festival session, there are 10 fiddlers. Yet here there are 10 more people on gourd rattles, as well as a call-and-response chorus. The fiddlers pull long, sustained drones, occasionally shifting in lockstep with the rat ters for some of the most precise time changes this side of James Brown. Elsewhere, the disc offers vocal/fiddler and percussion/back-up singer duets that not only show another side of this music, but also give the listener an understanding of a larger ensemble’s basic pulse.

Disc One offers up brief examples from Algeria and Benin, before focusing on DjeDje’s recordings Nigeria and the Gambia. Here, Fulbe fiddlers and frame drummers lock horns, cranking relentless rhythms captivating in their repetition. Aside from the music, there’s a nearly 400-page songbook, containing musical notation, photos, short biographies, lyrics and stories. The amount of information is nearly overwhelming, clearly the product of DjeDje’s academic coursework, and the recordings are as endlessly amazing as the notes are informative. Everybody should hear these discs.

**Bruce Miller**

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**Plank Road String Band:** 

From the Collection of Al Tharp

Run Mountain / Oh My Little Darling / Johnson Gals / Peek-A-Boo Waltz / I Don’t Love Nobody / Forked Deer / Indian Nation / Texas Gals / Cotton Eyed Joe / Going Down the River / Evening Shade / Big Eyed Rabbit / Soldier’s Joy / Raise a Ruckus / Railroadin’ and Gamblin’ / Fightin’ Man / New Morning Blues / James Booker / Cajun Joe / Hell Broke Loose in Georgia / Sail Away Ladies / Reuben’s Train / Rock and Roll Cindy / Fall on My Knees

Brad Leftwich: fiddle; Andy Williams: fiddle; Al Tharp: banjo; Michael James Kott: cello; Steve Gendron: guitar; James Lova: fiddle

A note to all the young cello players who are starting to populate the world of old-time music; get this CD and listen to Michael James Kott’s take on how to play the cello in an old-time band, you may learn something. You can’t see it, but he played it strapped on like a guitar and plucked it, although he did occasionally bow it. You’ll also get to hear one of the best bands to ever come out of the 1970s music revival in this country. If Kott’s playing defined the sound of Plank Road and set it apart from any other band of the time, the twin fiddling of Brad Leftwich and Andy Williams, and Al Tharp’s Round Peak-based banjo playing, anchored it solidly in tradition.

Leftwich and Williams built a tremendous wall of fiddling, being both greatly inspired by Tommy Jarrell, and by the Skillet Lickers and other Georgia bands whose recordings were then very popular with revivalists. I can remember that when I first came upon the old-time music
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in the late ’70s, most people played Georgia and Round Peak/Galax tunes, along with many others drawn from the golden era of recorded old-time music. I don’t remember hearing much of the Kentucky fiddle repertoire later made so popular by people like Bruce Greene. No disrespect to that style of music, but it seems that the kind of tunes that I grew up with, musically speaking, may have fallen out of favor with a lot of the younger players. Or perhaps they never heard them.

That’s why I encourage them to pay attention to great bands like Plank Road and the Highwoods String Band, and buy this CD. Although I have the two original Plank Road LPs, I was very excited to buy this new reissue of the first one, and overjoyed by the inclusion of some previously unreleased material by a later incarnation of the band. And as soon as I got it I handed it to my young daughter Clelia, herself a fiddler, saying to her “listen to this, you’ll love it!” It didn’t take long to get her reaction. She was blown away. She immediately started working on learning “Run Mountain”—the first cut on the CD, which sets the pace for what’s to come later, a program of tunes and songs all played with drive and competence, and more than a little irreverence. She has been talking to all her friends about this great band from a recent time when none of them had yet been born.

The 1976 recordings featured on this disc were made in Lexington, Virginia, by none other than David Winston, a friend and occasional fill-in on the banjo. He told me some pretty wild stories about the recording session, and let’s just say that it was the ’70s and a certain amount of debauchery was involved. Ray Alden has remastered and reissued the album with the sparse graphics typical of this series (not that the LP had much in terms of liner notes), and it’s pretty much like the original: no more, no less, and just as I remembered it, exciting and entertaining.

After opening with “Run Mountain,” J. E. Mainer’s version on steroids, the band takes us through a sequence of 14 tunes and songs (LPs were short), each one memorable. The beginning of “Oh My Little Darling” features some of the best old-time whistling I’ve ever heard, and it always makes me smile. “Johnson Gals,” from the Leake County Revelers, is played and sung fast and hard, and it contrasts nicely with the next track, “Peek-A-Boo Waltz,” nicely sung by Brad. Another high point is the fiddle/cello duet in “Indian Nation,” which features Brad and Michael James. “Going Down the River” is a piece of “dirty, nasty music” (I’m quoting the original LP notes here). “Soldier’s Joy” starts with the memorable introduction by Michael James, “make this ‘n’ sound like burning ticks,” and they sure do. The closing number, “Raise a Ruckus Tonight,” learned from the Georgia Yellow Hammers, is, well, a ruckus, with an a cappella start featuring Steve Gendron on lead vocal.

Another high point of this CD is the inclusion of unreleased material by the “new” Plank Road. The old Plank Road had broken up after the premature passing of Steve Gendron, but Kott and Tharp teamed up with fiddler and singer James Leva to tour Denmark in 1979, ’80 and ’81. This new trio recorded the tracks featured here in Denmark. Their music is more innovative, and features some contemporary songs along with old-time classics such as “Reuben’s Train,” “Hell Broke Loose in Georgia,” “Sail Away Ladies,” and “Fall on my Knees,” and it certainly pushes the boundaries, especially as far as the cello goes, played with ferocity throughout the CD, sometimes as a lead instrument, with machine gun bass runs and great tone. Al Tharp also lays out a terrific rhythm on
the tenor banjo, a rare instrument in contemporary old-time music. James Leva’s fiddling soars above the rest and so does his singing, here in fine form, along with that of Kott and Tharp.

This wonderful CD is a must-have, especially if you are young and play old-time cello, but also if you are a member of the revival crowd of the late ’70s/early ’80s, and you want to bring back memories of those exciting times.

Rafe Stefanini

To order: www.fieldrecorder.com

The Hurricane Ridgerunners
Old-Time String Band of Seattle

Jerry Gallaher, banjo; Mark Graham, harmonica, Paul Kotapish, mandolin and guitar, Armin Barnett, fiddle.

Train that Carried my Girl from Town / Things in Life / NASA Sweepstakes—Last Chance / Reilly and Spencer / Louisville Burglar / Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie / Jimmy in the Swamp—Johnny Cope / Long Gone Lonesome Blues / Stepstone / Darling Nellie Gray / Hangman’s Reel—Sally Johnson—Late for the Dance / Texas Girl / Glory in the Meetinghouse / Rye Whiskey / Trouble in Mind / Ladies on the Steamboat—Crockett’s Honeymoon / Lonesome Pine Special / Immigrant’s Dream—Cottonpicker’s Rag / Southern Moon / Rooster Tone Blues / Prodigal Son

The Hurricane Ridgerunners made some pretty good old-time music in and around Seattle in the late 1970s and early ’80s. There seem to have been two major kinds of bands playing around this time period. There were the ones who took as their model the Hollow Rock/Fuzzy Mountain String Band, and played mostly tunes with not very many vocals (for instance, the Indian Creek Delta Boys, FRC 607). Then there were those who followed the Highwoods or Red Clay Ramblers approach and did a lot of singing (for instance, the Renegades, FRC 602, the Horseflies, FRC 605). The Hurricane Ridgerunners were definitely one of the singing bands.

Of course, all the bands I have just termed “singing bands” had some fine instrumental chops as well. Here, Jerry Gallaher has a light, sure touch on frailed banjo. Anything he wants to play, he plays cleanly and well. Paul Kotapish is a solid backup guitarist for those songs and tunes on which Jerry is playing banjo; and when he plays his fine mandolin, Gallaher plays guitar. We get to hear the state of Mark Graham’s harmonica playing in the late 1970s, which was already awesome, and finally (on the last half of this recording) the blend and interplay of Graham’s harmonica with Armin Barnett’s fiddling.

The band took the trouble to work out some nice two- and three-part harmonies on songs. I enjoyed hearing all five verses to B. F. Hanby’s “Darling Nellie Gray” and getting the full story. “Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie” is taken at a moderate pace, and if somebody ever wonders what a “lonesome harmonica” sounds like, this or “Rye Whiskey” would be fine examples. They’ve added their own take on “Louisville Burglar” by repeating the last line of each verse, which I think adds to the song. “Lonesome Pine Special” was clearly learned from the Highwoods recording and not the Carter Family. As
the late Utah Phillips would say, “Good, though!” Using Dock Boggs’ solo recording of “Prodigal Son” as a starting point, the band sings that song using parallel harmonies, ending the chorus on the IV chord—wow! My favorite, however, was Don Stover’s original song, “Things in Life,” done almost in bluegrass style—one voice on verses, three-part harmony on the chorus, and instrumental breaks between verses—except that the instrumental breaks are done with frailed banjo and/or harmonica.

There were a couple of jarring moments in the vocals. The first cut on the CD is Frank Hutchison’s “Train that Carried My Girl from Town.” Instead of singing “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust/ Show me the woman that a man can trust,” Gallaher sings, “Show me the person that another person can trust.” The rhythm of the song is destroyed and it’s hard to understand what they thought they were gaining. All right, this was the early 1980s, but I still don’t like it. Even worse to my ears, in the Delmore Brothers’ “Southern Moon,” the ethnic reference is changed to “pharaohs singing.” There’s got to be a better choice. I then go on to remind myself that these are recordings made nearly thirty years ago, from a band that no longer plays regularly together, and that we should be very grateful for what we DO have as a record of the days when the Hurricane Ridgerunners were making such good music.

PETE PETERSON

To Order: www.fieldrecorder.com

Sandol Astrausky, Rory McLeod, Hilary Dirlam, Bill Stumph, and Leah Grear

Old-Time Fire on the Mountain / Pat Um on the Back / They Rest Together / Turkey Sag / Going Down to Charleston / Little Satchel / Tennessee Boys / Moonsniper / Indian Squaw / Holloway / Wild Bill Jones / Floyd / Dandy Jim
Yogi Berra famously observed, “You can observe a lot by just watching.” After putting this CD in the slot, I thought to myself, “You can hear a lot by just listening.”

What I heard was five musicians who know the old-time music vocabulary very well, have taken the time to get to know each other and how to make music together, chose nice songs and tunes, and made a very enjoyable CD.

To get a good band, start with a good fiddler. Sandol Astrausky of Rhode Island has lived in Scotland (and studied Shetland fiddling with Tom Anderson) and been part of the New England scene for many years, playing for dances and developing the clear tone and steady rhythm that is only achieved after a lot of music-making. Somewhere about ten years ago she met bass player Rory McLeod. Did I mention “steady rhythm” before? It got even steadier. About three years later, Hilary Dirlam (formerly Hilary Woodruff, of the Arm and Hammer String Band) was visiting her father in Rhode Island, and he introduced her to Sandal and Rory. After discovering their musical compatibility, they added friends Bill Stumph on banjo and Leah Grear on vocals, and the band was complete.

Tunes include two Snake Chapman tunes (the liner notes confused me until I realized who “Owen Chapman” was and why “Pat Um on the Back” sounded familiar), Isham Monday’s “Old-Time Fire on the Mountain” (via Jeff Todd Titon, whose book Old-Time Kentucky Fiddle Tunes includes both a transcription and a copy of Monday’s recording), and a couple of original tunes: Jim Childress’ “Turkey Sag” and Hilary Dirlam’s own “Holloway” – both wonderful! If I had to pick a favorite, however, it would be “Tennessee Boys,” a three-part tune in A, D, and E, new to these ears. Too crooked for many ears, playing it in A! Solo fiddle! I think that’s wonderful! It really DID use that many exclamation points when I said it.)

What did I like (if it’s not already obvious)? The tunes. Many of these tunes were new to me (I already knew “Holloway” from Jane Rothfield’s CD, but here was the author’s version), and have been marked down in my “worth learning” notebook. I liked Leah’s singing too. What didn’t I like? The fact that of the tunes and songs seemed to be played at about the same tempo; I would have appreciated more variety. I also had more attention to detail when putting the liner notes together. I am particularly curious what Track 14 sounded like (on which Bill Stumph is said to be playing guitar); I could only find 13 tracks!

These are minor flaws. What we have here is an excellent CD of friends making music together—fun to listen to. Recommended.

Pete Peterson
To order: www.cdbaby.com/cd/floydtunes

Hell and High Water:
Old-Time Fiddle Tunes
Bill Christopherson

Widow Haley / Belle of Lexington / East Tennessee Blues / Lone Pilgrim - Three Forks of Cheat / The Flood of ’57 / Crockett’s Honeymoon / Shelvin’ Rock / Beaumont Rag / Old Sledge / Leather Britches / Blind Fiddler / Beauty of the Garden / Keys to the Kingdom / Abe’s Retreat / Done Gone / Rocky Pallet / Scary County Rag / Meet Me by the Moonlight / Hell Among the Yearlings / Cotton-Eyed Joe / Blind Steer in a Mudhole

Bill Christopherson is going to be sixty next year. (Sorry Bill, you put your birth year in your Young Fogies biography.) He’s been playing fiddle for more than forty years, starting while still in high school. After being the fiddle player in a lot of good bands, such as the Lazy Aces (Marimac #9008), the Fly by Night String Band (Fretless 146), and the Mysterious Redbirds (Copper Creek 0188), he has finally made a CD with himself as the headliner—and it’s a very good CD.

I can’t do better than to use Bill’s own words to describe it. “This recording hews to the old-time Southern sound. It features modal tunes, breakdowns and rags, played, as often as now, on a cross-tuned fiddle . . . The production is unfussy—the Pro Tools stayed, for the most part, in the toolbox—and the accompaniment is spare: solos, duets and trios are the main fare.”

Every old-time musician has to decide how to balance respect for tradition with the need to put one’s own stamp of creativity on the music. To do a really good job with this, you have to be so familiar with the tunes and sources that they can form the under-layer to the sound-picture you are painting. Here’s one example from the liner notes: “Rocky Pallet—”McMichen’s band, the Skillet Lickers, played this tune in C. Ever notice how well C tunes sit in Black Mountain (AEAC#) tuning?” Dave Freeman of County Records liked the tune so much that he made it the first cut of County’s Skillet Lickers reissue (now County 3509) which has been available since the late 1960s. On that recording, it’s done by at least a five-piece band. I bought this CD from Bill’s own hands earlier this year at a festival and immediately stuck it in the car’s CD player. The familiar tunes of “Rocky Pallet” started up. “Hey, he’s playing it in A! Solo fiddle! I think that’s AEAC# tuning! What a great idea! (I really DID use that many exclamation points when I said it.)

Another example: Melvin Wine’s “Keys to the Kingdom.” It always was a good waltz, but Bill overdubbed a second harmony part on the fiddle and now it’s a great waltz. I can imagine one of Melvin’s fiddling friends coming to visit, and playing that second part. It sounds perfect, and very traditional.

A good quick test of a Southern old-time fiddler: How many Arthur Smith tunes does s/h e play? From Lazy Aces and Fly by Night days to the present, Bill passes this test admirably. This CD starts and ends (not counting the bonus tracks) with...
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Arthur Smith tunes, “Widow Haley” and “Hell Among the Yearlings.” In addition to straight-ahead breakdowns, Smith loved to create crooked tunes. These are so subtly crooked, especially in Bill’s playing, that they sound straight. And enjoyable. (Don’t try them in dances)

The backup musicians here are friends with whom Bill has made music for many years. They are familiar both with Bill’s playing and with the tunes themselves. They add a lot to this CD by playing good, solid, understated backup. Since most of these tunes are guitar/clawhammer banjo/fiddle arrangements, you can hear all three instruments clearly. If the various banjo players had been a little more adventurous, then it would have been a subtly different CD, but this is Bill’s CD with Bill’s choices.

Although Bill claims that this CD “hews to the old-time Southern sound,” there are one or two pleasant exceptions. “Blind Fiddler,” which I know from a very early Jody Stecher recording, was rewritten by singer-songwriter Eric Andersen, and it’s Andersen’s verses that Bill sings. There are also two Stanley Brothers songs—of course, Ralph Stanley refers to himself as an “old-time musician,” not bluegrass. Bill is a very good singer and if I had any complaint about this CD, it would be a request for more vocals. Of course, then there would be fewer tunes . . .

Many of us who play old-time music started either by listening to the New Lost City Ramblers, or by listening to bands that got their start by listening to the Ramblers, and so on. When the Ramblers wanted to do a reunion concert at the Park Slope Jamboree this year and Mike Seeger couldn’t make it, they asked Bill Christophersen to be a guest Rambler for the day. Buy this CD and you can see all the reasons they asked him. Recommended!

Pete Peterson

To order: www.cdbaby.com/cd/billchristophersen

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THE OLD-TIME HERALD WWW.OLDTIMEHERALD.ORG DECEMBER 2008-JANUARY 2009 53
Walter Hurdt and the Singing Cowboys Recorded 1937-1940

This CD contains 29 tracks by Walter Hurdt and the Singing Cowboys and a later incarnation of the same band (minus Hurdt and led by Slim Johnson). These Bluebird sessions, recorded in Charlotte, Rock Hill, South Carolina, and Atlanta, will be appeal to many OTH readers, but will be of particular interest to fans of Western North Carolina’s varied string band music history. Hurdt, who was in his late twenties when these sides were cut, was a newspaper deliveryman for the Asheville Citizen Times, and drove a route through the heart of the Carolinas’ country music territory, between Asheville and Charlotte. As Kevin Coffey points out in his excellent liner notes, Hurdt was influenced by the Callahan Brothers, Cliff Carlisle (with whom he recorded), and Jimmy Rodgers, and the duet and group harmonies in these recordings often have a Delmore Brothers feel. In 1937 he met up with a trio of teenagers from nearby Avery County—Lawrence Wiseman, Cecil Burleson, and Leroy Johnson—whom Coffey describes aptly as “precociously talented and open-minded musicians.” Each young man brought a special touch to the ensemble’s sound, which prevented their recordings of what were sometimes fairly mainstream, loping, homesick saddle songs from sounding like run-of-the-mill cowboy fare.

The first track, “Double Trouble Blues,” is a solo guitar-and-vocal performance by Hurdt, issued by Montgomery Ward, in which he shows a real depth of fluency in country/Piedmont blues guitar techniques. This and the other three 1937 Charlotte sides presented here lean much more towards the Delmore and Rodgers sounds than do most of the later songs, which get deeper into the cowboy repertoire. I was particularly charmed by “I’m Ridin’ Now,” which contains the great lines, “My new gal/She’s red-hot/I could tell you some thing/But I guess I’ll not.”

By far the most striking tracks on this disc are the instrumental pieces that feature “Smokey” Wiseman’s fiddling. Coffey reports in the liner notes that Wiseman (a cousin of Scottie Wiseman) is now in his late eighties and “fiddling better than ever”—a pretty amazing statement, considering the brilliance of these performances from seventy years ago. “Fiddle and Guitar Runnin’ Wild” and “Playing Around” feature some of the most mind-bendingly creative syncopation I’ve ever heard in this kind of music. The then-18-year-old fiddler played just inside the sane

If you’re not familiar with the British Archives of Country Music label, you ought to put down this magazine right away, and go take a look at the BACM website. (The URL is listed at the end of this review). Available through the BACM catalog are scores of CDs that reissue 1920s-’50s country music, ranging from classic old-time to hillbilly swing, with a hefty portion of singing cowboys in between. Fanciers of obscure reissued commercial material will positively salivate to see what’s offered, as will listeners interested in bulking up their collections of some of the well-known country classics of the pre- and early post-War eras. The discs ship from Kent, England, but prices are kept low ($16/disc for US customers, including shipping and handling), as the titles are simply packaged in a plastic sleeve, with liner notes and back cover printed in such a way as to transfer easily to a jewel case if you prefer that method of storage. The notes pack a great deal of detail into a limited amount of space.

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edge of chaos, driving the tunes through rhythmic turns and shake-ups in which for a moment here and there he sounds ir-retrievably lost in crazy energy before getting right back in line with the band and the tune, and proving that he’d had his hands on the wheel all along. It’s exciting stuff, and those two tracks are well worth the price of the CD in and of themselves.

Similarly, two guitar-led instrumentals, “Rhythm in E” and “Guitar Rag” show off the top-shelf virtuosity that this band had at its fingertips. It’s not clear in the notes who is playing lead on these two pieces, but I gather it’s either Hurdt or “Slim” Johnson. Whoever the guitarist is, his playing is what would have resulted had Django Reinhardt spent a lifetime eating barbecue and drinking sweet tea in North Carolina. These two performances are great swing guitar music with a Southern accent.

Like much of the string band music of the Asheville area, the Singing Cowboys’ recordings are hard to classify: they’re not old-time, precisely, and certainly not bluegrass, and though there are strong doses of Western swing and cowboy music, those labels don’t encompass the full spectrum of the band’s repertoire either. Nor are they exactly the style referred to nowadays as “mountain swing” in these artists’ home counties, though the close kinship is evident. The music presented here is an appealing body of recorded work by some highly energetic, creative, stylistically flexible Carolinians whose reintroduction is a most welcome gift.

SARAH BRYAN

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This is vintage Bromberg, and his fans will love it. The instrumentals are played at supersonic speed, yet each note is cleanly articulated. It’s described as a warts-and-all live recording, but I couldn’t hear any warts, as these guys are pros.

The instruments take turns playing elaborate solos, so that makes it more bluegrass than old-time. You wouldn’t mistake these guys for Southerners, though; this genre is New York bluegrass. The fiddle tunes, of course, cry out for speed, but, when the band slows down, as in “Midnight Hour,” the tempo seems too slow. My favorite track is the beautifully expressive “Ookpik Waltz,” the only piece the quartet plays at moderate speed.

There’s lots of singing on this album, including nice harmonies on choruses. Bromberg takes all the leads, though, and I’ve never been a fan of his idiosyncratic singing, which includes tremolo and sometimes seems both too smooth and too rough at the same time.

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