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VOLUME 11, NUMBER 9
FEBRUARY-MARCH 2009

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COMING SOON:
Lily May Ledford
The Hammons Family

Cover: Mike Bryant, photograph by Cedric N. Chatterley.
Cover design by Steve Terrill, 97 watt creative group, Greensboro, NC.
Printed at Sutherland Printing, Montezuma, IA, www.sutherlandprinting.com
Letters

Buffalo Ragged Five

I am Byrlie Golden Gray and I just received a copy of your magazine from Dr. Jerry Zolten. He wrote the article about the Buffalo Ragged Five, of which my daddy was lead singer. The story of how I found a copy of all eight of my daddy’s songs that were recorded in 1931 and 1932 has been awe-inspiring. Some of the songs came from as far away as the UK. I am so thankful that Dr. Zolten took the time to come from Penn State to my little burg of Goshen, Ohio, to interview my 89-year-old mother and get the information that was used in his article. Thanks for making the life of this 75-year-old daughter of Roy Lee Golden of the Buffalo Ragged Five more fulfilled. Seeing his name in print in such a fine magazine did my heart good.

Byrlie Golden Gray
Goshen, Ohio

Traditional music online

I enjoyed the new issue with the traditional music online piece. I will add that there was one that wasn’t mentioned that should be. Joe Bussard’s Country Classics covers a wide base of traditional music and is on several stations. Every Friday at 5 PM Central (6 EST) at www.wrek.org, every Sunday at 8 PM Central (9 EST) at www.wdvx.com. I think the readers who dove into the websites mentioned in the article will find the radio show a welcome addition. Keep up the good work.

Jeremy Rials
Natchitoches, Louisiana

Oberlin and Harvard, and who began recording American Indian music in 1907 for the US Bureau of Ethnology. She wrote much on the subject, and many of her recordings are in the Library of Congress. Folkways published an album of her work, *Healing Songs of the American Indians* (FE 4251).

Lyle Lofgren
Minneapolis, Minnesota

David Holt’s excellent article about Dr. John Brinkley brought me a wave of nostalgia, going back to Gainesville, Florida, in 1970. At the time I was a mandolin-playing college kid who’d go down to the Bent Card coffeehouse on Saturday night to pick with other local musicians who’d gather there. (Some folks I remember picking with at the Bent Card were Doran Oster, Clay Jones, John Morefield, and [longtime OTH Editor] Gail Gillespie.) But there were also many godawful, wonderful weekend-long picking parties at such places as the house of singer-songwriter Dale Crider. Lots of folks came to those parties, and they played all kinds of music.

I was sitting and talking at Dale’s one Sunday with my guitar-and-storytelling hero Gamble Rogers, telling him that I’d just signed up with the Air Force and was heading to an airbase at Del Rio, Texas, for a year of flight school. Gamble proceeded to tell me the story of Dr. Brinkley and his association with Del Rio, and suggested that I could get some good storytelling material out of it. And he was right about that! After I’d lived in Del Rio for a year, and listened to XERA, now XERF, most of that time, a whole storytelling cycle began to emerge from the story of Dr. Brinkley and his famous goat-gland operations.

We’ve told those stories for 35 years now, but it all started with Gamble’s encouragement in Dale’s living room. And if anybody doesn’t believe the story of Dr. Brinkley—and much of if now seems pretty unbelievable—it’s got to be true, because Gamble said so.

Red Henry

Many thanks for the comprehensive list of online music sources in the December 2008-January 2009 issue. My only problem is finding the time to listen to them. I found two of the photographs interesting, and other readers may also.

The man with the horns and tubing on page 12 was Emile Berliner (1851-1929), who invented the disc record in 1888 as an improvement over Edison’s cylinders. In 1901, he co-founded the Victor Talking Machine Company. I’d judge by his age that the picture was taken sometime in the 1920s.

The woman recording the Indian man on page 20 was Frances Densmore (1867-1957), born in Minnesota, educated at
Requests for Assistance

The old-time music community here in Central Virginia is asking the larger community of the Old-Time Herald for help. One of the long-time leaders of our community, Harold B. Hausenfluck, has been looking to broadcast his radio show on the Web. The award-winning fiddler, blind since infancy, lives in an assisted living community after having suffered a stroke and being confined to a wheelchair. A few years ago, with only the use of his left hand, he ran an underground radio station, WHBH 90.3 FM, which aired straight old-time music from 6 AM until 9 PM daily until it was closed by the FCC. The show was grand, and included many rare works and collections that only Harold knew of. We think it well worthwhile for the broadcast to be reborn on the Web.

We are having a hard time finding the necessary expertise or even advice to get this accomplished. If anyone can help get this project started or otherwise give us advice, we will be happy to hear from you. Thank you in advance.

Mark Campbell
mark_campbell@circuitcity.com

As many of you already know, for the past year, I’ve been working on a documentary film called Always Been a Rambler, about the New Lost City Ramblers, produced by the nonprofit Arhoolie Foundation (Chris Strachwitz, Tom Diamant, and myself are the Executive Producers) and directed by Yasha Aginsky. The film is done now, and I think it came out great! It’s a rich mix of rare archival footage and photos, interviews, recently shot footage, and tons of music. It’s not only about Mike Seeger, John Cohen, Tom Paley, and Tracy Schwarz, but also includes great footage of many of the traditional musicians they’ve performed with, recorded, filmed, and otherwise documented—including Maybelle and Sara Carter, George Landers, the Balfa Brothers, Libba Cotten, Roscoe Holcomb, and Hazel Dickens—and some footage of the younger-generation musicians who are carrying on this music—Rayna Gellert, the Carolina Chocolate Drops, Foghorn, etc.

We are looking at a mid-summer 2009 release date, to coincide with Smithsonian Folkways’ release of a 50th-anniversary NLCR box set. We don’t yet know whether our film will be shown on television, but we are applying to various festivals and there will be some showings, which we hope will include some live old-time music. We’ll also be setting up a website about the film, but it’s not in place yet.

You should be able to find a link at www.arhoolie.com when we do get it set up. I’m sure I don’t need to explain how important the New Lost City Ramblers have been, whether directly or indirectly, to all of us who love old-time music. Probably most of us have our own personal story of how Mike, John, Tracy, and Tom have inspired and encouraged us; I know that my life would have turned out very differently if I hadn’t encountered them and their music a million years ago when I was a teenager! This hour-long film was made on a shoestring budget of $200,000, but we ran over by about $25,000. I had the thought that perhaps if I could find 25 people who would each make a tax-deductible donation of $1,000, we’d be able to cover these extra costs. As of today (Jan. 12, 2009) we are about halfway there.
There are a couple of ways that you can help:

1) A tax-deductible financial contribution, made to the tax-exempt nonprofit Arhoolie Foundation. Donors of $1,000 and up have the option of receiving a credit at the end of the film. (To be listed in the credits, donation must be received by end of January 2009). We are happy to receive donations of less than $1,000 as well!

2) Help me to get in touch with the folks you know personally who you think would be able and willing to support this film. This could work one of two ways: either you contact your friends and share this information with them, or share your contact information with me and I will contact them directly, using your name as a reference.

If you would like to make a financial contribution, please make your check payable to the Arhoolie Foundation, and enclose a note saying that your donation is earmarked for the NLCR film. The address is: The Arhoolie Foundation, 10341 San Pablo Ave., El Cerrito, CA 94530. Phone number there is 510-525-7471, and the contact person is Tom Diamant.

If you prefer to make a donation using Paypal, the link is http://www.arhoolie.com/arhoolie.foundation/donate.html.

Some of the folks who have already made donations have done so anonymously, and that is of course an option, or you may wish to have your name included in the closing credits (as long as we receive your donation by end of January).

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or suggestions. Participating in the making of this film has been a wonderful experience, and I am honored to have had the chance to work with many of my musical heroes. Many thanks to those of you who have already contributed to Always Been a Rambler. Your support will help get this film out to those of us who already love old-time music, and hopefully it will make a few converts too!

Suzy Thompson
suzy@ericandsuzy.com
Congratulations

The Old-Time Herald would like to extend congratulations to a special fraternity of old-time musicians who have celebrated momentous birthdays and anniversaries in the last several months.

Hoyt “Slim” Bryant, longtime country music star in the Pittsburgh area, marked his 100th birthday on December 8th. In 1931, Bryant was a teenager in his hometown of Atlanta, working in the electricity industry and studying jazz guitar, when he landed a place in Clayton McMichen’s Melody Men, a band that evolved into McMichen’s Wildcats. He continued to make a name for himself in the country music world as an accompanist to Jimmie Rodgers on the Singing Brakeman’s last recordings, and as the author of popular songs like “Mother, Queen of My Heart” and “Eeny Meeny, Dixie Deeney.” Following McMichen’s departure for other musical ventures, Bryant became the leader of the Wildcats, and in 1940 the band relocated to Pittsburgh. For many years to come they were well-known local TV and radio personalities, and many artists in the area credit Bryant as an early inspiration or instructor. He remains an active member of the local music scene. At his birthday party in December, according to the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, Bryant invited everyone to come back in a decade for his 110th birthday, and added, “I’m Slim Bryant, and I approved this message.” (Many of the Wildcats’ recordings have been reissued in recent years by the British Archive of Country Music, http://bacm.users.btopenworld.com.)

On December 9th, Piedmont North Carolina fiddler Joe Thompson celebrated his 90th birthday. Thompson grew up playing music with his cousin Odell, mentored by the boys’ fathers Walter and John Arch Thompson, who were farmers in the Orange/Alamance County area north of Mebane, where Thompson lives today. The cousins were musical partners for many years, as children and young men, and then, after a hiatus, in middle age. They received the North Carolina Heritage Award in 1991. Odell passed away in 1994, and Joe suffered a serious stroke in 2001. In recent years, however, Joe Thompson has returned to active musicianship, performing with his protegés the Carolina Chocolate Drops, with Bob Carlin, and with other friends. In 2007 Thompson was honored with a National Heritage Award. Please see page 22 of this issue of the Old-Time Herald for an article by WUNC’s David Brower about the birthday festivities, and Thompson’s reflections on his 90 years in the Carolina Piedmont.

Comparative younguns among the artists celebrating major milestones in late 2008, the New Lost City Ramblers marked their 50th anniversary on September 13th. It’s nearly impossible to overstate the importance of the New Lost City Ramblers in the resurgence of old-time string band music. In the early days of the folk revival, when many Americans’ notion of traditional music reflected the rather homogenized pseudo-folk hits of current pop bands, the NLCR set out, both as performers and documentarians, to reintroduce the nation to authentic old-time music and musicians. Over the next five decades, in their concerts and on their many Folkways recordings, John Cohen, Mike Seeger, Tom Paley, and Tracy Schwarz played music learned from the 1920s and ’30s canon of Southern commercial recordings, from field recordings of traditional artists, and directly from elder musicians. The Ramblers are responsible, both individually and as a band, for introducing (or reintroducing) many great traditional musicians to an appreciative public, and for inspiring countless other people to take up, and carry on, the traditions of old-time music.

Online, On the Radio, On Exhibit

The International Bluegrass Music Museum in Owensboro, Kentucky, is hosting an exhibit, up through November of this year, about the life and music of Curly Seckler. Records, posters, and stage clothes are among the many treasures on display. Seckler performed at the opening ceremony in November.

Bradley Reeves and Louisa Trott host a new radio program, broadcast Monday nights from 9 to 11 from Knoxville’s WDVX (89.9 and 102.9 FM), and available online at www.wdvx.com/the_vinyl_frontier. The show features rare recordings, many by East Tennessee musicians, on 33, 45, and 78 RPM records, wire recordings, reel-to-reel, eight-track, and cassette tapes, cardboard flexi-discs, 16-inch radio transcription discs, and acetate disc home recordings. Special focuses are obscure local labels and “the kind of record that may or may not cross over to the digital era.”
The Junior Appalachian Musicians program has a new website at www.regionaljam.org. The site includes many resources both about the JAM program and about Southern Appalachian music and musicians in general.

On John Seroff’s blog, www.tofuhut.blogspot.com, readers can find two essays by his father, Doug Seroff. The articles, which are supplemented with audio files, scanned source documents, and more, are about the Golden Gate Quartet’s rhythmic vocal style and their participation in a 1941 concert at Fisk University, and other events coordinated by Alan Lomax.

Recordings

Carolina Music Ways has announced the release of a new CD, All Roads Lead Home: A Heritage Sampler from North Carolina’s Yadkin Valley. The compilation features recordings by Piedmont North Carolina old-time, jazz, and bluegrass musicians. Visit www.carolinamusiciways.org/YadkinValleyCD.html to find out more.

Concerts, Workshops

Adam Hurt and Beth Hartness will give a concert and lead workshops at the York, Pennsylvania, home of Bill Goldberg and Suzanne Gates on April 25 and 26. Adam’s 4 ½-hour Saturday workshop on Round Peak-style banjo costs $70. Because there are only 12 spots available, pre-registration is recommended. Beth’s one-hour class on old-time backup guitar playing, also on Saturday, costs $15. Saturday night at 8:00 they’ll give a concert, to which admission costs $12. On Sunday morning, Adam will return to teach a two-hour workshop on intermediate to advanced fiddling skills. Registration is $30, and booking your place in advance is also recommended. Hosts Bill and Suzanne can be contacted at 717-259-0319, or billandsuzanne1@verizon.net.

The Blacksburg (Virginia) Old Time Music and Dance Group has released its 2009 Southern Mountain Square Dance schedule: Feb. 7, Chance McCoy (fiddle); Allison Williams, and friends, with Allison Williams calling; Mar. 7, Beverly Smith and Acoustic Heritage with Brian Grim (fiddle); Apr. 4, Jim Morrison and the Reed Island Rounders (Betty Vornbrock, fiddler); May 2, the Carolina Catbirds (Shay Garrick, fiddler) with Nancy Mamlin calling. Dances are held in Blacksburg, from 8 – 11 PM. Visit www.nrot.org for details.

This year’s Suwannee Banjo Camp, held from March 20 - 22 at O’Leno State Park in High Springs, Florida, will feature classes by old-time instructors Bob Carlin, Ken Perlman, Adam Hurt, Laura Boosinger, Paul Brown, Mark Johnson, Brad Leftwich, and Chuck Levy; bluegrass instructors Bill Evans, Bill Keith, and Scott Anderson; and, in the special eight-class African Roots track, Senegalese akonting player Sana Ndiaye, assisted by Paul Sedgewick, Greg C. Adams, and Chuck Levy. Visit www.suwanneebanjocamp.com to find out more.

This year’s Brandywine Friends of Old Time Music concert series, held at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship Hall in Newark, Delaware, features performances by old-time artists Eric and Suzy Thompson on March 27, and the New Lost City Ramblers on May 15. Contact the Brandywine Friends (brandywine-friends.org, concerts@bfotm.org, 302-635-3001) for details.

On April 5, Paul Brown and Matt Brown, performing as the Brown Brothers, will give a 4 PM concert at the Chester County Historical Society in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Contact Matt (matt@fiddler1.com) for more information.

Final notes

Mandolinist Butch Baldassari died on January 10th in Nashville, at the age of 56. A Pennsylvania native, Baldassari’s varied career took him from a college-years job as a croupier in Las Vegas to a position on the faculty of Vanderbilt University’s Blair School of Music. Best known as a virtuosic mandolin player, Baldassari’s style was rooted in his love of bluegrass music, but explored many other musical forms, from baroque music to jazz.

89-year-old Durham, North Carolina, pianist, guitarist, and dancer Quentin “Fris” Holloway died on December 5th. Holloway grew up in Durham County, served in World War II, and was a widely admired for his genius as a mechanic as well as for his artistry—he was said to be able to repair anything from a lawn mower to a bus. Holloway first learned music as a little boy, when his father, who worked as a chauffeur, was given a piano. Playing a mixture of jazz and blues, and achieving renown throughout the region as a buck dancer, Holloway began performing regularly with fellow Durhamite, blues guitarist, and dancer John Dee Holeman in 1976. This partnership
carried both men all around the state, the Southeast, and even overseas, as popular festival and concert performers. Holloway and Holeman received the North Carolina Heritage Award in 1994.

Old-time musician Odell McGuire died on December 8 in Lexington, Virginia, at the age of 81. James Leva and Walt Koken shared remembrances with the Old-Time Herald.

James Leva writes:

Odell S. McGuire, a professor emeritus of geology who taught for 32 years at Washington and Lee University, and a banjo player who spearheaded a revival of traditional Appalachian music in Rockbridge County (Virginia) in the 1970s, was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, on April 19, 1927, to Odell S. and Winifred Claxton McGuire. He could trace the migrations of his family from the Rockbridge area in the 18th century on through Western North Carolina and East Tennessee. Odell served in the Navy during World War II and in the Army in Korea, where he was wounded and received the Purple Heart.

Professor McGuire joined W&L’s faculty in 1962 as an instructor in geology, became a full professor in 1970 and retired in 1994. In 1964 and 1965 he served as a visiting assistant professor at the Virginia Military Institute. McGuire’s scientific interests and publications covered such topics as paleontology, geologic mapping, environmental impacts and land-use planning, geology of the Appalachians, hydrology, evolutionary theory, geomorphology, geo-hydrology, and stratigraphy.

Odell and his former wife, Mata Battye McGuire, have three children, Melanie, Forrest, and Jesse, and three grandchildren, Rosa Puryear, Nicole McGuire Gilbert, and Killian McGuire, and a great-granddaughter, Dorothy Rose Gilbert. Odell was also a transformative figure as he guided a generation of young musicians into the mysteries and joys of traditional Appalachian music. He learned to play the banjo in the old-time clawhammer style. He met and befriended a number of the older generation of traditional musicians, including Burl Sherman, and Maggie Hammons and Mose Coffman of West Virginia, Wade Ward of Grayson County, Virginia, and Tommy Jarrell and Delle Norton of North Carolina. Odell introduced many young musicians to these great keepers of the tradition, thereby inspiring the young, bringing new meaning and purpose to the elders and their music, and ensuring the survival of the traditional music for another generation.

Odell’s passion and guidance helped transform Lexington/Rockbridge County into a hotbed of traditional music in the 1970s. The influence of this new wave of old-time mountain music was felt and recognized nationally and nurtured musicians of renown who have made lasting contributions to the genre. With Odell’s wife Mata running the White Column Inn in Lexington, the McGuire family enriched the lives of many with their energy, intellect, and humanity.

Odell saw the links in all human striving for comprehension, from the ancient Greeks (he taught himself to read ancient Greek), through the sciences, to the encoded wisdom and beauty of a fiddle or banjo tune. A conversation with Odell could range from a discussion of chaos theory and fractals, to his tracing the lineage of soldiers from Rockbridge County who fought with Daniel Morgan in the Revolution, to an analysis of Appalachian paleontology, to the destruction of Long-street’s reputation for questioning Lee’s decisions at Gettysburg, to the writings of Thales and Herodotus, to the stylistic peculiarities of a West Virginia fiddler. His intelligence, endless curiosity and unassailable obstinacy will be missed, and folks will be telling Odell McGuire stories for a long time to come.

Walt Koken writes:

June 1971 was one of the highlights of my life. Mac Benford, Bob Potts, and I traveled east from the Bay Area on a musical pilgrimage, and one of our destinations was the fiddlers’ convention at Marion, Virginia, where Mac had seen Tommy Jarrell a couple years previously. We camped at the Hungry Mother State Park, and at the festival we met many wonderful local characters and musicians, and were quite well received. Amongst the shifting crowds of onlookers that weekend was a person who stood out like a sore thumb. He had bushy black eyebrows and mustache, and was wearing a worn-out old black top-hat. His name was Odell McGuire, and he turned out to be a very interesting person, quite sincere and serious, a wonderful talker, didn’t smile much, but when he did laugh, his toothy grin brightened things up. He was an aspiring banjo player, so he said. He didn’t play with us that weekend. Said he was a professor of Geology at Washington and Lee University, an occupation that afforded him an opportunity to make occasional field trips in the neighborhoods of various old-time musicians and fiddlers’ conventions, especially in West Virginia. He generously invited the three of us to stay over at his house up the road in Lexington after the convention.

We took him up on his offer, invaded his household, and enjoyed the cooking of his wife Mata. She was more than just a faculty wife, and in their sleepy little town the stage was set for this couple and their three young children, Forrest, Jesse, and Melanie (also called Bird), to form the center of what was to become a major old-time music scene. Odell was very interested and well versed in the lore of the old-time things, and his stature as a professor in a “straight” institution lent credibility to our vagabond and alternative musical lifestyle, and thus we became good friends.

Mata opened the White Column Inn in Lexington, a restaurant which became the center of it all, providing both real and musical livelihoods to however many it could support, as cooks, wait staff, carpenters, old-time musicians and dancers. Mata seemed to be the queen bee, and musicians came from afar to live in the area. Odell continued to develop his playing, restored an old log house, and seemed to quietly enjoy it all. Many present-day musicians around the country were once either part of or touched by this scene.

It’s hard to describe just what he did to create the stir around Lexington, and I’m sure he was only a part of it, and he might not have known he was doing anything, but he planted the seed, and was the very core. In that little Virginia city, that small and “straight” center of Old South intellectualism as well as martial education, there blossomed a family, a whole community, of old-time musicians, dancers, music lovers, and other alternative types, almost none of whom were born into the tradition, which continues in some form now, almost forty years later. Thank you all, McGuires, and especially Odell.

Like so many others I’m saddened at the thought of not seeing him again. He’ll always be one of the heroes of the old-time revival to me. Somewhere there’s a photo of him in that top-hat...
2009 FESTIVAL AND CAMP GUIDE

Every year, the Old-Time Herald compiles a list of gatherings that feature old-time music and closely related traditions. This year you’ll find festivals, workshops, dance and instructional camps, and competitions, both in the United States and abroad. Before planning a trip, be sure to visit the event’s website or contact its organizers to confirm that the information listed here remains correct, and to inquire about additional details such as admission cost, handicapped accessibility, appropriateness for children or pets, and travel information. Keep in mind that workshops, dance camps, and instructional camps usually charge tuition, and they often have limited enrollment, so it’s best to plan well in advance. If you know of events that should be added, please let us know!

ALABAMA

Mar. 21 (Dothan)

Aug. 14 - 17 (Mentone)

Oct. 2 - 3 (Athens)

ALASKA

Apr. 13 - 19 (J uneau)

Aug. 4 - 8 (Chugiak)
Alaska Traditional Music Camp, Camp Carlquist; workshops, concerts, dance, jamming, children’s activities, camping. Info: www.aktradcamp.org.

ARKANSAS

Mar. 12 - 14 (Mountain View)

Apr. 17 - 19 (Mountain View)

May 15 - 16 (Mountain View)

July 25 (Mountain View)

ARIZONA

Feb. 27 - Mar. 1 (Tucson)

March 19 - 22 (Scottsdale)

Sept. 12 - 14 (Flagstaff)

Oct. 9 - 11 (Naco)

CALIFORNIA

June 11 - 14 (Grass Valley)

June 13 - 21 (N evada City)
Alasdair Fraser’s Sierra Fiddle Camp, Shady Creek Camp, near Nevada City; workshops, jamming. Pre-registration required, applications received after 2/1 placed on waiting list. Info: 530-478-9004, www.sierrafiddlecamp.org.

July 24 - 25 (Bonny Doon)

July 31 - Aug. 1 (Mendocino)

Aug. 28 - Sept. 5 (Boulder Creek)

Sept. 10 - 13 (Berkeley)

COLORADO

April 17 - 19 (Durango)
Photographer Lynda Folwick of Maryland is a regular at music festivals, and for the last several years she has been photographing members of a satellite demographic in the old-time music world: festival dogs. Lynda and her husband Jumahl often bring their own dogs, Scooter and Django, to festivals. (Scooter, a twelve-year-old shepherd mix, is a familiar sight particularly at Clifftop; you’ve probably seen her guarding her campsite and modeling fashion-forward outdoor gear.) Here are a selection of Lynda’s festival dog portraits, taken in recent years at Clifftop and Rockbridge. You can see more photos of dogs—and musicians—at Lynda’s Flickr site, www.flickr.com/photos/bublynski.

June 12 - 14 (Palisade)

August 9 - 16 (Sedalia)

CONNECTICUT

June 12 - 14 (Mystic)

FLORIDA

March 13 - 14 (Dade City)

March 20 - 22 (High Springs)

GEORGIA

Apr. 17 - 19 (Dahlonega)

July 15 - 25 (Hiawassee)

IOWA

Aug. 31 - Sept. 6 (LeMars)
34th Annual National Old-Time Country-Bluegrass Folk Festival and Pioneer Exhibition of Arts and Crafts, Plymouth County Fairgrounds; workshops, concerts, dance, competition, children’s activities, jamming, open stage, camping. Info: Bob Everhart, 712-762-4363, bobeverhart@yahoo.com.

IDAHO

June 22 - 27 (Weiser)
Aug. 1 - 8 (Rexburg)

ILLINOIS
Feb. 6 - 8 (Chicago)

May 22 - 24 (Peoria)
World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest; workshops, competition, jamming, open stage, concerts, children's activities, dealers room, registration by Feb. 1 for contestants. Info: 217-428-2403, pianostest@aol.com.

Sept. 6 - 7 (Geneva)
33rd Annual Fox Valley Folk Music and Storytelling Festival, Island Park; workshops, dance, concerts, jamming. Info: 630-897-3655, juelu@aol.com.

INDIANA
June 26 - 28 (Battle Ground)

KENTUCKY
June 6 (Morehead)
Clack Mountain Festival, 1st Street; workshops, concerts, dance. Info: Jill Vice, 606-783-9001, j.vice@moreheadstate.edu.

June 7 - 13 (Hindman)

June 18 - 20 (Tyner)
Stringbean Memorial Bluegrass Festival, Stringbean Memorial Park; workshops, concerts, dance, competition, children's activities, jamming, open stage, camping. Info: 606-287-0600, www.geocities.com/stringfest

July 17 - 18 (Falls of Rough)

LOUISIANA
Apr. 17 - 24 (Ville Platte)

Apr. 22 - 26 (Lafayette)

May 1 - 3 (Breaux Bridge)

July 17 - 18 (Natchitoches)
Natchitoches-NSU Folk Festival, Prather Coliseum at Northwestern State University; workshops, concerts, dance, competition, children's activities, jamming, camping, LA State Fiddle Championship, exhibits, narrative sessions, food vendors, traditional crafts. Info: LA Folklife Center, 318-357-4332, www.nsula.edu/folklife.

Sept. 5 (Opelousas)

Oct. 9 - 11 (Lafayette)
Festivals Acadiens et Créoles; concerts, food events, craft fair. Info: www.festivalacadiens.com.

MAINE
June 19 - 21 (Montville)
**July 11 - 19 (Fort Fairfield)**
Maine Potato Blossom Festival; concerts, dance, children's activities, open stage, camping, parade and fireworks. Info: Janet Kelle, Fort Fairfield Chamber of Commerce, 207-472-3802, jKelle@fortfairfield.org.

**July 23 - 26 (Cornish)**

**July 24 - 26 (Fort Fairfield)**

**Aug. 9 - 14 (Montville)**

**Aug. 16 - 21 (Montville)**

**Aug. 28 - 30 (Bangor)**

**Sept. 4 - 6 (Fort Fairfield)**

**MARYLAND**

**May 30 - 31 (Glen Echo)**
Washington Folk Festival, Glen Echo Park; concerts, dances, workshops. Info: www.fsgw.org.

**July 5 - 11 (Westminster)**
Common Ground on the Hill Traditions Week I: World Traditions, McDaniel College Campus and Carroll County Farm Museum; workshops, concerts, dance, jamming. Info: www.commongroundonthehill.org.

**July 11 - 12 (Westminster)**
Common Ground on the Hill Roots Music and Arts Festival, McDaniel College Campus and Carroll County Farm Museum; workshops, concerts, dance, children's activities, jamming, camping. Info: www.commongroundonthehill.org.

**July 12 - 17 (Westminster)**
Common Ground on the Hill Traditions Week II: Old-time and Bluegrass Week, McDaniel College Campus and Carroll County Farm Museum; workshops, concerts, dance, jamming. Info: www.commongroundonthehill.org.

**Sept. 19 - 20 (Frostburg)**
Frostburg State University Appalachian Festival; concerts, film festival, Appalachian culture workshops, children's activities. Info: www.myspace.com/appalachianfestival.

**MICHIGAN**

**May 22 - 24 (Remus)**

**June 5 - 7 (Olivet)**

**July 26 (Berrien Springs)**

**Sept. 11 - 13 (Remus)**
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March 13 – 15 (Detroit Lakes)

May 13 - 15 (Lanesboro)

Aug. 6 - 9 (Richmond)
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For More Information & Tickets call 8
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Several stages with concerts, nightly dances, workshops, and children’s activities. Good food, plenty of campground

Pre-fest old-time instructional camp. Come for the day or camp for the weekend. Call and ask for full brochure!

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Oct. 11
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Oct. 2 -4
(Avoca)
July 13 - 17 (Avoca)
July 8 - 12 (Avoca)
May 10 (Avoca)
June 10 (Avoca)
Oct. 11 (Avoca)
Oct. 2 -4 (Fremont)


Schoolhouse Fiddle Camp for Intermediate/Advanced Fiddlers, the Old Schoolhouse; workshops, concerts, dance, jamming. Info: Deborah Greenblatt, The Old Schoolhouse, www.mastercall.com/g-s.

Schoolhouse Fiddle Camp for Beginners, the Old Schoolhouse; workshops, concerts, dance, jamming. Info: Deborah Greenblatt, www.mastercall.com/g-s.

Old Time Dance, the Old Schoolhouse; concerts, jamming. Info: Deborah Greenblatt, www.mastercall.com/g-s.

May 10 (Avoca)
Old Time Dance, the Old Schoolhouse; concerts, jamming. Info: Deborah Greenblatt, www.mastercall.com/g-s.

June 8 -12 (Avoca)
Schoolhouse Fiddle Camp for Beginners, the Old Schoolhouse; workshops, concerts, dance, jamming. Info: Deborah Greenblatt, www.mastercall.com/g-s.

July 13 -17 (Avoca)
Schoolhouse Fiddle Camp for Intermediate/Advanced Fiddlers, the Old Schoolhouse; workshops, concerts, dance, jamming. Info: Deborah Greenblatt, www.mastercall.com/g-s.

Missouri
Mar. 27 - 29 (Columbia)
Spring Breakdown; dance weekend, workshops, concerts, jamming. Info: mmtd.moissouri.org.

Apr. 3 - 4 (Boonville)

New Hampshire
June 28 - July 4 (Littleton)

Sept. 11 -13 (Moultonboro)

New Jersey
May 22 - 25 (Socorro)
FolkMADness Music and Dance Camp, New Mexico Tech; concerts, dance, children’s activities, workshops. Info: www.folkmads.org.

June 19-20 (Albuquerque)

Aug. 28 -30 (Santa Fe)
35th Annual Bluegrass and Old Time Music Festival, Santa Fe County Fairgrounds, 3229 Rodeo Rd.; workshops, concerts, dance, competition, children’s activities, jamming, camping. Free dry camping. Info: Roger Schense, rschense@comcast.net.

New Mexico
May 22 - 25 (Socorro)
FolkMADness Music and Dance Camp, New Mexico Tech; concerts, dance, children’s activities, workshops. Info: www.folkmads.org.

June 19-20 (Albuquerque)

Aug. 28 -30 (Santa Fe)
35th Annual Bluegrass and Old Time Music Festival, Santa Fe County Fairgrounds, 3229 Rodeo Rd.; workshops, concerts, dance, competition, children’s activities, jamming, camping. Free dry camping. Info: Roger Schense, rschense@comcast.net.

New York
May 22 - 24 (Altamont)

June 13 (Binghamton)
Fiddlin’s Fun Festival, Roberson Museum and Science Center; concerts, jamming, workshops. Info: www.fiddlinsfun.org.
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June 16 - 19 (Oak Hill)

June 26 - 28 (Altamont)

June 28 – July 4 (Ashokan)

July 4 - 6 (Sherman)

July 16 - 19 (Trumansburg)

July 19 - 25 (Ashokan)

July 27 - 31 (New York)

Aug. 9 - 15 (Ashokan)

Sept. 11 - 12 (Brooklyn)

NORTH CAROLINA
Feb. 20 - 21 (Boone)
Appalachian State Old-Time Fiddler’s Convention, Appalachian State University; competition (reg. by 3 PM Sat.), workshops, concerts, dance, luthiers’ gathering, children’s activities. Info: Emily Schaad, Appalachian Heritage Council, ASU, http://fiddle.apps.appstate.edu.

Apr. 23 - 26 (Wilkesboro)

May 9 (Cooleemee)
7th Annual Old-Time Fiddlers and Bluegrass Convention, Clement Grove Picnic Grounds, 201 Poplar St.; competition, jamming. Info: William Davis, 336-284-4167, cooleemee@yadtel.net, cooleemee@comcast.net.

May 22 - 24 (Union Grove)

June 7 - 13 (Mars Hill)
Blue Ridge Old-Time Music Week, Mars Hill College; workshops, concerts, dance, pre-registration required. Info: www.mhc.edu/oldtimemusic.
June 12 - 14 (Eden)

June 13 (Hot Springs)
Bluff Mountain Music Festival; concerts, dance, camping available at Hot Springs campground. Info: 828-649-1301, info@madisoncountyarts.com.

June 20 (Robbinsville)
Mountain Music Championship, Stecoah Valley Center, 121 Schoolhouse Rd., Stecoah (near Robbinsville); concerts, competition, jamming, open stage. Info: Beth Fields, 828-479-3364, programs@stecoahvalleycenter.com, www.stecoahvalleycenter.com.

July 3 - 5 (Durham)

July 5 - 11 (Swannanoa)

July 19 - 25 (Swannanoa)

July 17 - 18 (Sparta)
Alleghany County Fiddlers Convention, Alleghany County Fairgrounds; dance competition, jamming, concerts, camping. Info: Trever Nichols, 334 Reynolds Rd., Sparta, NC 28675.

July 30 - Aug. 1 (Asheville)

Aug. 2 - 8 (Swannanoa)
Swannanoa Gathering Dulcimer Week,

**Sept. 4 - 5** (Lake Junaluska)
**Smoky Mountain Folk Festival**, Stuart Auditorium; concerts, dance, children's activities, jamming, open stage, camping adjacent to Lake Junaluska. Info: Dawn Johnson, 828-452-1688, dcj2905@bellsouth.net.

**Sept. 18 - 19** (Pittsboro)

**Sept. 24 - 27** (Charlotte)

**Sept. 26** (Cullowhee)

**Sept. 27** (Carrboro)

**Oct. 3** (Mars Hill)
Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival, Mars Hill College; workshops, concerts, dance, children's activities, jamming. Info: Liston B. Ramsey, Center for Regional Studies, 828-689-1571.

**Oct. 3 - 4** (Brasstown)

**Oct. 16 - 18** (Robbinsville)

**OHIO**

**Feb. 21 - 22** (Cincinnati)

**May 1 - 3** (Columbus/Galloway)
13th Annual Central Ohio Folk Festival, Batelle-Darby Creek Metro Park, Indian Ridge area; workshops, concerts, children's activities, jamming, open stage, camping. Info: www.cfmis-inc.org.

**May 8 - 10** (Cincinnati)

**May 22 - 24** (Salem)

**June 26 - 28** (Waynesville)
**Appalachian Mountain Music Festival**, High School Park; workshops, concerts, dance, children's activities, jamming, camping. Info: John Noftsger, john@ohioriverminstrels.com.

**July 24 - 26** (Vinton)

**Aug. 21** (Nelsonville)

**OKLAHOMA**

**June 11 - 13** (Grove)

**OREGON**

**July 23 - 26** (Salem)

**Aug. 2 - 8** (Sisters)

**PENNSYLVANIA**

**May 21 – 23** (Williamsport)

**June 24 - 28** (Newport)

**July 19** (Hazelton)
**Old Time Fiddle Festival**, Eckley Miners' Village, 9 miles east of Hazelton; reg. day of event, workshops, concerts, dance, competition, children's activities, jamming, open stage, camping. Info: 570-636-2070, wstrassner@state.pa.us, www.eckleyminers.org.

**Aug. 8** (West Chester)
**Chester County Old Fiddlers' Picnic**, Hibernia County Park; dance, children's activities, jamming, open stage, camping, workshops, crafts, Hibernia Mansion tours. Info: Chester County Parks & Recreation, 610-383-3812, ccparks@chesco.org, www.chesco.org/ccparks.

**Sept. 4 - 7** (Hamlin)
**Fiddlin' Bear Festival** (Lake Genero), Lake Genero; jamming, camping. Info: Pete Peterson, lutrine@earthlink.net, www.sacrasoft.com.

**Sept. 20** (Lyons)

**TENNESSEE**

**Feb. 19 - 22** (Memphis)

**March 6 – 8** (Lebanon)

**March 20 - 21** (Clarksville)
June 14 - 21, 21 - 28 (Maryville)

July 10 - 12 (Murfreesboro)

Sept. 18 - 20 (Bristol)

Texas

March 26 - 28 (Palestine)
Palestine Old Time Music and Dulcimer Festival, Museum for East Texas Culture; workshops, concerts, dance, jamming, camping. Info: Jerry Wright, 936-655-2945, pickinwright@yahoo.com.

Apr. 17 - 18 (Crockett)
Western Swing Festival, Crockett Civic Center; dance, concerts, camping. Info: Jana Brooks, Chamber of Commerce, ckeys@crockettareachamber.org, www.crockettareachamber.com.

Apr. 26 - 29 (Hallettsville)

May 21 - June 7 (Kerrville)

May 29 (Athens)

June 12 - 14 (San Antonio)

Aug. 6 - 8 (Arlington)

Vermont

June 14 - 20 (Johnson)
Northeast Heritage Music Camp, Johnson State College; workshops, dances, jamming. Pre-registration required, open until first day of camp, if space remains. Loaner fiddles available for those who reserve them before May 15. Info: www.langston.com/NHMC.

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**VIRGINIA**

**May 23** (Big Stone Gap)


**June 12 - 13** (Glen Lyn)

**Henry Reed Memorial Fiddlers Convention**, Glen Lyn Town Park; workshops, concerts, jamming. Info: Chris Via, 540-922-2258.

**June 18 - 20** (Buena Vista)


**June 26 - 27**, tentative (Elk Creek)

**Grayson County Old-Time & Bluegrass Fiddlers’ Convention**; workshops, jamming. Info: ecvf@ls.net.

**Aug. 7 - 9** (Medical Lake)


**Aug. 11 - 16** (Centralia)


**Sept. 10 - 13** (Fort Flager)


**Sept. 18 - 20** (Bristol)


**Oct. 24** (Ferrum)

**Blue Ridge Institute and Museum**, Ferrum College; workshops, concerts, jamming. Info: Roddy Moore, 540-365-4416, rmoore@ferrum.edu.

**VERMONT**

**June 14 - 20** (Johnson)


**WASHINGTON**

**Feb. 26 - Mar. 1** (Olympia)


**Aug. 18 - 20** (Bristol)


**Aug. 28 - 30** (LaCrosse)


**Sept. 26** (Milwaukee)


**WEST VIRGINIA**

**Feb. 27 and 28** (Morgantown)


**Apr. 25 - 26** (Gandeeville)

Apr. 24 - 29 (Elkins)

June 18 - 21 (Glenville)
West Virginia State Folk Festival; concerts, competition, dance, crafts. Info: 304-462-5000, information@wvfolkfestival.org, www.wvfolkfestival.org.

June 21 - 27 (Marlinton)
Allegheny Echoes Summer Workshops; workshops, concerts, dance, children’s activities, jamming, open stage, camping. Info: www.alleghenyechoes.com.

July 29 - Aug. 2 (Clifftop)

Aug. 7 - 9 (Elkins)

Oct. 25 - Nov. 1 (Elkins)

AUSTRALIA

Nov. 19 - 22 (Harrietville, Victoria)
21st Annual Harrietville Bluegrass and Traditional Country Music Convention, Harrietville Community Hall Grounds, 220 Great Alpine Rd.; workshops, concerts, dance, jamming, open stage, camping, USA guests plus over a dozen Australian bands. Info: Janet and Nick Dear, 61-3-5368-6888, harrietville@bluegrass.org.au, www.bluegrass.org.au.

CANADA

March 20 - 22 (NanOOSE Bay, BC)
Vancouver Island Fiddle Camp; workshops, dances, jamming, concerts. Pre-registration required. Info: Trish Claire-Peck, 250-754-4611, trish@trishclairpeck.com.

June 19 - 21 (Pakenham, ON)

June 21 - 25 (Tobique, NB)

July 6 - 9 (Sherbrooke, NS)

July 12 - 17 (Orangeville, ON)
Orangeville Fiddle and Step-Dance Camp; workshops, pre-registration required. Info: Bill Elliott, 519-941-5683, bellio@easyfocus.com.

July 1 - 6 (Dartmouth, NS)
Maritime Fiddle Festival, multiple venues
in Dartmouth; competitions, concerts, workshops. Info: www.maritimefiddlefestival.ca.

July 3 - 5 (Souris, PE)

July 10 - 12 (Vancouver, BC)

July 20 - 24 (Salt Spring Island, BC)

July 25 - 29 (Quesnel, British Columbia)

Aug. 6 - 9 (Edmonton, AB)

Aug. 6 - 9 (Saskatoon, SK)

Aug. 23 - 27 (Manotick, ON)

Aug. 24 - 28 (Salt Spring Island, BC)

Aug. 29 (Ottawa, ON)
Canadian Grand Masters Fiddling Championship; competition, contestants by invitation only. Info: www.canadiangrandmasters.ca.

Oct. 9 - 17 (Cape Breton Island, NS)

Oct. 23 - 25 (Orangeville, Ontario)
Orangeville Winter Fiddle Workshop; ages 12 and up, one year experience required. Info: Bill Elliott, 519-941-5683, belliot@easyfocus.com.

DENMARK
Aug. 27 - 30 (Tønder)

FINLAND
June 25 - 28 (Haapavesi)

GERMANY
May 1 - 2 (Bühl)

UNITED KINGDOM
Feb. 13 - 15 (Gainsborough)

May 22 - 25 (Peterborough)
Sacrewell Spring Camp, Sacrewell Farm & Country Centre, Thorhaugh, Peterborough; workshops, jamming. Info: www.foaotmad.org.uk.

Aug. 7 - 16 (Peterborough)
Sacrewell Summer Camp, Sacrewell Farm & Country Centre, Thorhaugh, Peterborough; workshops, jamming. Info: www.foaotmad.org.uk.
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June 21-28: Flatpicking: John Carlini, Beppe Gambetta, Cindy Gray, Mike Kaufman, Robin Kessinger, Uwe Krüger, Tony McManus, Scott Nygaard, Eric Thompson; Mandolin: Robin Bullock, David Harvey, John Moore, Andy Owens, John Reischman, Don Stiernberg, Tim Worman; Bluegrass Banjo: Bill Evans, Casey Henry, Bill Keith, Jens Krüger, Gary Davis; Songwriting/Voice Class: Kathy Chiavola; Jam Instructor: Keith Yoder; Kamp Doctors: Ken and Virginia Miller, Bryan Kimsey, Jim Grainger

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Joe Thompson celebrated a milestone this past December. “Born in 1918, the 9th day of December,” Thompson said proudly at the time, “90 years old. I traveled all kinds of roads a man can travel. Sometimes up, sometimes down, but I never did give up. I kept on moving.”
Thompson is a man of great achievement, both as an artist and as a human being. Bob Carlin, who has accompanied Thompson on banjo for years, says, “He’s the last North Carolina Piedmont African American string band musician who learned in the tradition. He is possibly the last African American traditional string band musician in the United States.” But Carlin says the appeal of Thompson’s music goes far beyond its cultural and historic significance. “He knows how to drive a dance. I’ve played with him at dances, and it’s amazing to watch the way he controls the way the people dance, with the way he structures his music, where he puts the emphasis.”

Thompson was “discovered” by the wider music community in the 1970s. A graduate student named Kip Lornell at UNC-Chapel Hill set out to find and document every African American banjo player in the North Carolina Piedmont. That search led him to Odell Thompson, Joe’s banjo-playing cousin. Lornell was in turn followed by folklorists Cece Conway, Glenn Hinson, and others, who sought out Thompson, his family, and their tunes. Wayne Martin, Folklife Program Director for the North Carolina Arts Council, says he was overwhelmed the first time he encountered Joe and Odell Thompson. “At that time they were the only African American fiddle and banjo players who played that kind of ensemble string band music together.” Martin says. “There were other banjo players—for example Etta Baker and others were playing—but [Joe and Odell] were holding that fiddle and banjo sound together. That fiddle and banjo ensemble was the nucleus of all the square dance music for so many generations. They were the only ones doing it.”

Joe and Odell performed as a duo into the 1990s, touring internationally and playing at many prestigious festivals. “We played all these frolicking tunes. We played every-which-a-way. I can’t tell you all where I been with this fiddle.”

Joe and Odell’s musical partnership came to a tragic and abrupt end in 1994, when Odell was killed in an accident just down the road from MerleFest. He and Joe were staying at a hotel near the festival, and went across the street for some food. When the two returned to their room, Odell realized that he had forgotten toothpicks, and went back out. Odell was hard of hearing. It’s one of the reasons many say that his banjo playing was so loud and forceful. But on that day it was a disability. It’s believed that he did not hear the oncoming traffic and was hit and killed by a passing vehicle.

After Odell’s death, Joe considered giving up music altogether. But he prayed, and says the Lord told him to keep going. It also helped that the musician friends he’d met around the country kept showing up wanting to play. “Too many people were calling for me,” he says. “I had to go on.”

Joe Thompson is one of those fiddlers who has spent his entire life mining a relatively small repertoire of tunes. He still loves to play standard tunes like “Soldiers Joy” or “Old Joe Clark,” and tunes that he learned from his dad like “Black Annie,” “Dona Got a Rambling Mind” and “Corn Liquor.” Wayne Martin says that’s part of what makes Thompson special. Martin says he harkens back to a time when fiddlers each knew a couple dozen tunes and played them hard.

“He’s a lot like Tommy Jarrell in that sense,” Martin says. “He’s not like the fiddlers you meet today at festivals who know hundreds of tunes from all over. He only plays maybe 20 or 30 tunes, but still gets great satisfaction from them because they’re part of his family.”

Thompson learned this music largely from his father’s family. His dad, John Arch Thompson (born 1879), and uncle Walter (born 1882) were both farmers in the Piedmont area of North Carolina. In their off hours they played for dances, called frolics.

“There he is.” Joe Thompson points to a framed black-and-white photograph that sits next to the family Bible on the coffee table. “That’s a bad dude right there. My daddy man, that’s him. That man could play the fiddle. Man, could he play the fiddle.”

Thompson loves to tell the story of how as a small boy he snuck his father’s fiddle off the wall and sawed away during the workday. “There wasn’t nobody at the house except for me and Mama,” he says. “I think he meant for me to get it, because I could get to it too good, and he knows what I was going to do. So I took the thing down and I messed with it, and I felt I could do it.” But it was a full-size instrument, and Joe was just six at the time. He says he couldn’t get it to fit under his chin the way his father did. “And my mama’s cousin come over there, and Mama told him, ‘This boy is about to run me crazy. He want to play the fiddle, and his daddy won’t let him play.’ And he said, ‘Don’t worry about it, I got the thing for him.’”
Thompson says his mother’s cousin traded some seed for a half-size fiddle for him to learn on. It was a huge deal. “See, back in those days,” he says, “people raised food and hogs and fed their families. They didn’t buy nothing new except maybe sugar and salt and stuff.” But this man had just given him a brand-new fiddle to play. “I’m trying to get you to see what you got to do to play. You got to want to do it.”

As Joe remembers it, his dad started taking him and his older brother Nate to dances when he was about 7 years old. He remembers sitting with his brother in straight-back chairs, their feet not touching the ground, beating away on the same tune for upwards of half an hour while dancers spun around them. These were house dances. Thompson says that they would take the furniture out of the house and onto the front lawn, and dancers would gather in the empty rooms. The musicians were in the hallway in-between.

This was rural North Carolina, and whites and blacks held separate parties. The Thompson family performed regularly in both communities. Joe says white people called the gatherings dances, black people called them frolics, but the music and sets were essentially the same. “There ain’t no difference in black and white playing music,” says Joe, “I don’t think, not me. And I been out there a long time. I tell you brother, I been out there a long time.”

While the tunes and the dances were essentially the same, Wayne Martin says, there were subtle differences to how the music was played. “Joe talks about how he would alter his bowing some when he played for African American dancers, that the dancers liked to hear a particular bow stroke or shuffle. So the music was the same, but the bowing was a little different. Really that goes to show you that if you go back far enough this music comes together, and the tunes were played in both communities. Music has always been one way that Southerners have managed to connect across lines of race and class.”

But Martin concedes that there are some tunes, like “Riner’s House,” or “Pumpkin Pie,” that he’s never heard a white fiddler of Thompson’s generation play. Banjo player Alan Julich, who lives down the road in Mebane, says that’s part of the thrill of playing music with Joe.

“I’ve always felt really privileged to do that. For me personally, I learned a lot of the tunes he plays from him. I didn’t know them independently. ‘Little Brown Jug,’ ‘Hook and Line,’ I learned them from him, and a lot of them I don’t play with anyone else. They’re not in the larger repertoire with other old-time players.”

Julich is one of the players who helped him recover from a stroke in 2001. He says that the time immediately following the stroke was difficult for Thompson, “because he really was at the time questioning whether God was telling him that it was time to hang it up.”

Following the stroke, Thompson’s left arm was essentially useless. Julich says he and others brought Joe’s fiddle to rehab and helped him re-learn how to play. “I would literally hold his arm up while he was playing.”

Thompson came back, and people like Julich and Carlin say his playing is as strong as ever. This was not the first time that he relearned his father’s traditions. He gave up the fiddle while serving in the military during World War II. Likewise the fiddle pretty much stayed in its case over the 36 years he worked at White’s Furniture in downtown Mebane.

“I worked all kinds of jobs there,” Thompson says. “Just off the living room where he hosts jam sessions are two dressers that he made while at White’s Furniture. His friends say it’s remarkable that he could work with wood for more than three decades and still have all his fingers. Many of the men he worked with got hurt on the job. “I don’t know how I didn’t,” he says. “But I had the Lord on my mind. I can’t forget the Lord, I don’t know where I’d go.”

The now-shuttered factory is just down the street from where Joe and his wife Polly share a home. The company shut down years ago, but Joe says he’s not saddened to see the huge old brick building sitting idle. “I feel all right, and I tell you why. I worked there long enough,” he says “[that I] bought me a lot, right here, three acres. I built me a house. It wasn’t much of a house, [but] I could live in it.”

It’s in that house that he’s taught his tunes to musicians like Bob Carlin, Alan Julich, Joe Newberry, Larry Veliani, and, most recently, the Carolina Chocolate Drops. Wayne Martin says it has always been important to Thompson that others learn his family’s tunes. He wants the tunes to be played and not just kept in an archive. That’s one of the reasons he says it is so gratifying to see the Carolina Chocolate Drops studying with him.
“That’s one of the most amazing things that has come to pass,” says Martin. “It’s like the culmination of a dream that he had. When he started playing again and going out to the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes, or Carnegie Hall, he didn’t see many African American musicians. But when we were in Washington a year ago when he received his National Heritage Fellowship, there were young African American couples bringing their kids up to meet Joe, and getting him to sign the program book. So it’s kind of an amazing thing that has happened.”

Joe Thompson has lived through the Great Depression, World War II, wars in Korea, Viet Nam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. He is the grandson of a slave. He voted for Franklin Roosevelt, survived the Jim Crow era, and last year voted for the first African American to be elected President of the United States.

Joe says he believes that this music he keeps in his heart is one of the reasons he’s been on the earth for 90 years. Bob Carlin says that, while out on tour, he and Thompson found a way to make light of his age, and of his desire to keep on living.

“The big joke on stage is I say, ‘Joe, tell them who you were talking to.’ ‘I was talking to the Man.’ I said, ‘You were talking to the Man? What were you asking him?’ And he says, ‘I was asking for another year. And he’s going to give it to me, too!’ It’s very funny. That’s been the thing these last five years—he says he’s talking to the Man. And he does, he talks to God a lot. He says he talked to him when Odell died, and he says God told him they took Odell because Odell was done. But he says they left [Joe] here for a reason. He says the Lord told [him], ‘You’ve got more to do.’ . . . I think he does still have more to do. I sure hope so.”

Joe remains optimistic for the future and says he thanks the Lord for every day. “I’m living,” Joe said a few days before his 90th birthday. “If I wake on December the 10th, I’ll be on to another year, start on my way.”

David Brower is from Carrboro, North Carolina, where he plays fiddle and works as a journalist for North Carolina Public Radio WUNC. This article began as a radio story which can still be heard at WUNC’s website. Visit www.wunc.org, and type “Joe Thompson” into the search box at the top of the page.
Mike Bryant stood transfixed when he first heard a fiddle at the age of 23. He claims, “I never heard anything played before that affected me like that. I was convinced that if I could get my hands on a fiddle I could play one. I never felt that way about anything. There was never any type of instrument that grabbed me the way the fiddle did.” However, when he first picked up a fiddle and tried to play, Mike confesses, it was “the most awful thing I ever heard. Everything about it felt strange.”

Now, 31 years later, “Mike is one of the finest old-time fiddlers of my generation” says banjo and fiddle player Paul Brown. Banjo player and poet Molly Tenenbaum, describing Mike’s playing, exclaims, “... oh my, it’s so graceful and delicate and fierce and full and responsive and deep and absolutely raging.” Fiddler Bruce Molsky says, “Mike has always been one of my fiddle heroes. His fiddling never fails to reconnect me with that deep, soulful feeling that made me fall in love with old-time music to start with.”
Music in his blood

Mike was born in Macon, Georgia, on March 14, 1954. His father and mother sang gospel songs together at church and in their home, with his dad playing guitar and harmonica at times. They knew somewhere between 100 and 150 gospel songs. Mike most vividly remembers them playing “In the Garden,” “I’ll Fly Away,” “I’ve Come Too Far to Look Back,” “The River of Jordan,” “I Saw the Light,” and “House of Gold.” Mike’s father also had a repertoire of country songs. “My dad can’t remember all the secular songs he used to sing, but he did remember ‘Lovesick Blues,’ ‘El Rancho Grande,’ and ‘Waiting for a Train.’”

Though there was no old-time fiddling or banjo picking in Mike’s home when he was growing up, his great-grandfather, grandfather, and great-uncle all played the fiddle. He learned a great deal about the family’s musical history from his grandmother.

She told me that my grandfather and his siblings played music. Mostly they played fiddle and banjo. She said my grandfather would get in the middle at a dance and call the dance while he was fiddling, and ‘jig’ around while doing so. My dad told me that my great-uncle Arthur would go to the market with my grandfather and sit up all night long while the tobacco was curing, while my grandfather played the fiddle. Later Uncle Arthur worked for the WPA in Florida during the Depression. He would send his WPA payback home and then play on the streets to make his money for living. Unfortunately I never got to hear any of them play. They had quit by the time I had come along. They did enjoy hearing my parents play when we would go visit them.

Mike learned how to play a little bit of guitar by listening to and watching his dad, but like many teenage boys, Mike was really only interested in playing rock and roll.

“Too Young to Marry?”

Mike met his wife, Marcia, at the Super Slide in Macon. As Mike tells it, “She was 16 and I was 14. I showed up there one day looking for some summer work. I lied and said I was 16 in order to get hired.” They went fishing for a first date, and “managed to get along okay.”

They were married February 13, 1971, about a year and a half after they met. Mike continues, “We had to go to Aiken, South Carolina, because I was only 16 and..."
“Too Young to Marry” in Georgia—even with parental consent. I’m sure most people believed our marriage wouldn’t last long . . . but we will have our 38th anniversary by the time this article comes out, so we did something right.”

In 1972 Mike and Marcia’s first son, James, was born, followed by David in 1973. They now have four grandchildren, ages nine to 15. Mike smiles and says, “We’re proud of all of the kids and grandkids, although we can’t get any of them interested in learning to play old-time music.”

“I know there are a lot of jokes about in-laws, but Marcia’s mom and dad turned out to be the best in-laws anyone could wish for,” Mike says. In fact, after Marcia’s parents moved from Georgia to Tennessee, “we packed up the kids and followed them” about five years later, and Mike helped them build their new house.

While the house was being built, Marcia’s mom started taking clogging lessons with the Tennessee Moonshine Cloggers in Oliver Springs. She convinced Marcia to try clogging, and after one lesson Marcia in turn showed Mike what she had learned. Even though Mike was very reluctant at first, he decided he would like to try it too.

“I wanted to sound like all of them”

Mike’s introduction to fiddling came through his dancing. After taking lessons from the Moonshine Cloggers, he and Marcia joined a local clogging team, the Clogging Ridgers, in 1975. The team won or placed everywhere they competed. They danced to many local bluegrass bands with good fiddlers, but it was a couple of the cloggers, including his friend Steve Moore, who got Mike started playing the instrument.

It was in the back seat of a 1972 Grand Am that Mike first attempted to play the fiddle. He was on his way home from the Renfro Valley Barn Dance in Kentucky with Steve Moore. Steve handed Mike his fiddle and showed him how to hold the bow, and how to move it across the
Mike’s music is my greatest source of inspiration as an old-time fiddler. Of all the musicians I’ve listened to, Mike’s touch on the fiddle and his masterful artistic sense are nothing short of stunning. His fiddling is among the loveliest and most emotionally powerful music I’ve ever heard. He plays with such drive, always pushing the beat, yet incorporates a sense of musical beauty into his playing that I’ve never heard the likes of . . . He has a way of taking the basic rhythmic patterns of a tune and rearranging them into something completely unanticipated, holding some notes out in unexpected places in order to (somehow!) produce the perfect emphasis for the tune at the moment of delivery. This makes his music all the more refreshing to listen to, with a brilliant new set of surprises at every pass of phrase. While I would hazard to say that most good old-time fiddlers have their own sets of rhythmic and melodic variations, I’ve never heard phrasing that enhances the raw beauty and spirit of a tune so well.

Mary Jane Epps

strings between the bridge and the fingerboard. Mike spent the rest of the trip just drawing the bow across the open strings of Steve’s fiddle. Mike claims he “just pushed and pulled the bow” as he tried to learn how to get the right pressure on it, and almost “drove Steve crazy” as he methodically bowed away for hours in the backseat of the car.

After that trip, Mike was determined to play the fiddle. He continued with his relentless practice at home in Tennessee. During his first couple of years of playing, he would come home after a full day’s work as a carpenter and play for four or five hours, and then practice 12 to 14 hours a day on the weekend. He recalls that at first Marcia reacted to his learning the fiddle “by just keeping her fingers in her ears,” until he learned about using a clothespin on the bridge to mute the volume.

Practicing many, many hours a day is not unlike Mike. He is a determined man and has always been a hard worker, since his first job at age 10, picking and hauling produce in the summer. As Mike tells it, “I ended up giving my first fiddle to Bob Moore for $40. I found a fiddle for $40 in the Knoxville want ads. It had been in the attic of the lady I bought it from for several years, so the fingerboard was off. I glued it back on—probably using wood glue to do so. I played it several months before someone told me there wasn’t a sound post in it. I didn’t even know what a sound post was. Steve took me to a farmer and fiddle maker named Clyde Cox, who lived with his sister in the old family homeplace in the Solway area between Oak Ridge and Knoxville. Clyde explained the function of the sound post and installed one. He ended up doing my fiddle repair work and re-hairing my bows for several years. Many years later, I ended up giving my first fiddle to Bob Herring after he lost his instruments in a fire.

Steve pointed Mike in Tommy Jarrell’s direction very quickly after they met. According to Mike, Steve “wanted me to listen to Tommy as much as possible. I really liked Tommy’s fiddling but I wasn’t used to hearing just fiddle and banjo, so it took a little while to get used to.” He also lent Mike a record of Brad Leftwich and David Winston playing “Rockingham Cindy.” That recording served as the Rosetta Stone for Mike to decode and better understand Jarrell’s music.

In addition to Brad Leftwich, Mike was also listening to other young fiddlers as he was learning, including Bruce Molsky, Andy Cahan, Judy Hyman, and Bob Herring. “Bob was a big influence and was always encouraging me,” Mike says. “I heard so many styles of playing when I first started, and I wanted to sound like all of them. I would learn one or two things from one person and try to add it into my next phase of fiddling.”

When asked about the role of clogging on his music Mike explains, “I’m not sure that clogging really had an influence on me musically other than awakening an interest in the fiddle and causing a realization that good timing was essential in playing. I played for a lot of square dances when I first started playing, and I feel like that helped me learn about timing—just recognizing how important maintaining a speed is once you start.”

Mike recalls that when he was first learning to play, he and Marcia “would have to take turns with the record player. I would subject her to Tommy and Fred and she would make me listen to ABBA or K. C. and the Sunshine Band. So we went back and forth like that for a short time, until she saw the light and was converted to old-time music.” In 1978, Mike remembers, “Marcia decided she wanted to learn to play the bass, so we looked until we came across one at the Smithville (Tennessee) Fiddler’s Convention that summer.” He taught her the basics, and she took it from there.

Less than a month after acquiring her bass, Marcia played in the Goat Path String Band on stage at Galax. The band (which also included Steve Moore and Mike on fiddles, George Copeland on mandolin, Buck Van Cleve on banjo, and John Petruzzi on guitar) got fifth place that year.

In his late twenties, after he had been playing for several years, Mike went to visit his relatives in South Georgia. Of the fiddlers in the family, only his great-uncle was still living when Mike and his dad visited the family homeplace in the small town of Ocilla. Mike heard about his great-uncle Arthur’s days working for the WPA in Florida in the 1930s, when he would sometimes busk on the streets. One day, Arthur recalled, he witnessed a man give another fiddler a $20 gold piece for playing “Old Dad.” During one of Mike’s subsequent visits to the family home, Arthur, who had developed Parkinson’s disease and couldn’t play fiddle any more, asked Mike to play that same tune. After Mike finished “Old Dad,” Arthur turned to Mike’s father and exclaimed, “He’s one of them scientific fiddlers.” Mike never figured out exactly what Arthur meant.
After playing for a couple of years in the Goat Path String Band, Mike and Marcia met Brett and Pan Riggs, and the New Dixie Entertainers were soon formed. According to Pan, “Just days after we arrived in Knoxville in June 1980, Brett met Mike and Marcia at the Monday-night dance at the Epworth Community Center, and we spent every weekend together after that.” Mike says, “We really liked the sound they had. From my point of view, we seemed to gel quickly into a band. We had fun hanging out with them and playing music for many years, and still get together whenever possible.” Pan continues, “When we were first getting acquainted, Brett and I would spend entire weekends at Mike and Marcia’s, listening to old recordings and playing tunes, and dancing in their living room. They would feed us and help us newcomers with anything we needed, including truck repairs, home inspections, and furniture moving. Mike can do anything. He moved our upright piano almost single-handedly... He is very disciplined, and was super-prepared for every band practice, bringing out new and well-rehearsed tunes every time we got together. He was and still is the bandleader, and we are the support team. We grew up together musically, so playing together is very comfortable. Our timing seems to be connected, somehow.”

Tom Whyte joined the New Dixies for a few years, adding ukulele, harmonica, and harmony singing. When Tom moved to North Carolina, Morgan Simmons joined the band. Morgan says, “Some of my fondest recollections are linked to playing with the New Dixie Entertainers. During the 14 years I was with the band, we got together practically every weekend for the sheer love of hanging out and making music. Brett and Pan’s son Jake and my daughter Hannah were just toddlers at the time. I used to record our sessions on a boom box, and some of it came out surprisingly well. Amidst all the carrying on, you can hear the kids yelping in the background, beating their toys to the music as they crawled around the floor. Not a bad soundtrack to go with some fine memories.”

Brett Riggs describes his experience playing with Mike in the band. “I’m always awed by Mike’s playing; it just works at every level. His timing, phrasing, intonation, and bowing are first-rate, never rote nor squared off. Mike lays down a rhythm that can stand alone—his solo fiddling is amazing—but he leaves plenty of room for us to get in there and find that place where we can contribute. I love that there’s nothing tentative in Mike’s playing—fast or slow, his music is always powerful, yet always subtle, too. He’s putting it out...
there full-bore and you don’t have to hold back, but you’d better be paying close attention, because he sure hears every note you play, and his fiddle talks right back to whatever you’re saying with your instrument.

Morgan adamantly declares,

An old-time band is only as good as its fiddler, and we were lucky to have one of the very best. Mike is such a strong center, utterly confident and smooth. I marvel at how he can play with such power and volume, and maintain such a relaxed bow. Mike has that rare ability to hear what everyone in the band is playing even as he fiddles away. He knows what he wants in terms of the backup chords, which actually is luxury given how he is constantly learning new tunes, many of them twisted and obscure. Mike is a perfectionist.

“Morgan. Even now, after having been apart several years, when we play together it feels so comfortable. It’s like going home. They are all such great musicians.”

Morgan adamantly declares,

Banjo player David Winston describes what it was like for him the first time he heard the New Dixie Entertainers.

I remember one late arrival to the Mount Airy Fiddlers Convention, cresting the last peak of the Blue Ridge and tuning in for a warm-up dose on WPAQ. Blasting the airwaves from the Veterans Park stage were the New Dixie Entertainers, pumping out “Susanna Gal” with precision and power. But the thing that really made me mash down on the gas pedal was that, along with being firecracker-hot, the music was infused with a soulful beauty. The combination was electrifying.

Greater than music:
A respite from the fiddle
After having played old-time music for years, Mike tells,

It wasn’t that I didn’t like old-time music anymore; it just wasn’t a priority at that time. I did continue playing fiddle in church, and I would play fiddle tunes by myself at home.

My experience wasn’t of my choosing. I know that must sound strange to most folks, but I had no inclinations of any sort towards any type of conversion. I was happy going along the way that I always had. It just turned out that there are greater things than fiddling. It would take too long to explain here but I would be willing to share it with anyone wanting to know about it.

After Marcia and I became Christians, we moved back to Macon in order to help my brother in his church, although I don’t believe we were much help at that time. The biggest regret I have about moving was never explaining to our kids what was going on at that time, and why they were having so many abrupt changes in their lives. They were great about it, though. A little more than a year later Mike and Marcia moved back to Tennessee, where he remained active in the church.
Mike Bryant’s fiddling is pure poetry. And I mean really, really good poetry. Mike has a unique and uniquely graceful way of turning a phrase, and I find his playing endlessly listenable and inspiring. But the stuff that makes his playing magical is the stuff I can’t put into words. Mike turns on the tap, and pure good deep soul comes out. He can play the most familiar old tune and make me weep. He communicates so much through his fiddling, and it is effortless, ego-less, lovely, and badass all at the same time.

RAYNA GELLERT

as an assistant pastor and adult Sunday school teacher. During that time, Mike’s interest in fiddling was reignited, thanks to Brett and Pan Riggs and other local old-time musicians.

Listening and learning

Mike’s advice to aspiring musicians is to “listen, listen, listen, watch everyone you can, and then practice, practice, practice.” He says that he listens to old-time music “simply for pleasure at first. Then, if I hear something I want to learn I’ll continue listening until I have the tune in my head. It’s easier for me to learn a tune that way. By the time I sit down to learn the tune I don’t have to really figure anything out. I’ll play a tune for a while after learning it, then go back, and listen to the tune again to see what I missed. There’s always something that I will have missed.”

When Mike teaches students, he says, “...first I try to get them to understand the importance of listening to old-time music and try to point them in the direction of fiddlers to listen to. I try to teach my students more bowing than anything else. I will use tunes that are appropriate for the bowing lick that I am trying to illustrate so they are learning tunes at the same time as the bowing. I try to use tunes that are fairly easy when doing this. I hope that, from me, they will learn different bowing licks to use and to stay in the context of the tune, although I do like to add variations when fiddling so I try to impart that at the same time; just don’t stray too far.

If fellow Tennesseans Elizabeth Fitch of Nashville and Joseph Decosimo of Signal Mountain are fair representations of Mike’s achievement as a fiddle teacher, then he has done very well. Joseph recently won the traditional old-time fiddle contest, and his band placed first, at the Tennessee Valley Old-Time Fiddlers Convention in Athens, Alabama. Elizabeth’s band were finalists at the same contest. Elizabeth and Joseph have both become wonderful fiddlers, and they attribute much of their success to Mike’s mentoring.

Elizabeth describes her experience with Mike:

I attended the Mark O’Connor Fiddle Camp in June 2006 and had the pleasure of hearing and receiving personal instruction from fiddlers Judy Hyman and Bruce Molsky. I was so excited about the music they were playing that I inquired if they knew any old-time fiddlers in Tennessee I could possibly learn from. Immediately both fiddlers mentioned Mike Bryant and gave me his email address. I drove to Mike’s home near Knoxville for a lesson that would change the course of my fiddling. I was absolutely blown away by his dynamic rhythms and his subtle intricacies in bowing that had clear influence on the sound resonating from his fiddle. It was obvious to me that Mike’s fiddling is a product of a life-long love for the music and not a result of any aspirations for fame or social praise. The music I heard then, and continue to listen to now, comes from an individual with a pure affection for the music itself as well as the time and people it represents. Mike’s fiddling continually inspires me to pursue more tunes and instill more energetic rhythms into those melodies while maintaining a respect for the music and its heritage.
Joseph describes his fiddling apprenticeship with Mike:

After every encounter with Mike’s fiddling, I have gone home eager to dig deeper into the tradition but also inspired to be honest to myself. Mike has taught me that some of the finest fiddling happens when we combine the impulse to root ourselves in older sounds with the impulse to create a sound that is our own. His instruction and playing has revealed that these two seemingly contradictory impulses can be thoughtfully combined, and when they are, something beautiful happens.

Listening and leading

Since he first started playing, Mike’s fiddling has caught the ear of the judges in many fiddle contests around the Southeast. According to Mike, “I haven’t entered too many contests over the years, but I have been lucky when I did.” He has won a dozen or more prizes at fiddler’s conventions in North Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, and Alabama, including two firsts, a second, a third, and a fourth at the Appalachian String Band Festival at Clifftop, West Virginia. He even got second place in the only banjo contest he ever entered, in Athens, Alabama.

When asked to describe the hallmarks of his fiddling, Mike is hard pressed to do so. “I don’t know how to characterize my fiddling. I am able to analyze and understand what I do but I don’t really know what, if anything, makes it unique. I think you would have to ask others that question. I just play what I like and try to get certain sounds while I’m playing. I think that is what most people do.”

Mike’s musical skills extend beyond his own instrument. He also has the abil-
ity to bring out the best music in others. According to Paul Brown, “Mike’s playing definitely leads. But here’s where it can get tricky. Leading is different from dominating. In a jam session, Mike plays as a leader. He holds the whole thing together with his solid grasp of the tune and a fine sense of rhythm, while at the same time fitting in, helping to create a band, an ensemble. It involves deep listening. Mike is a deep listener, and that helps make him a truly great player.”

Rich Hartness adds, “Mike’s incredibly well listened and alert. By far the easiest fiddler to twin with I’ve ever met, and by far the most humble. I always feel lifted from hearing him play or being in his fine company.” Guitarist John Schwab says he enjoys playing with Mike because “he plays with real authority, but never dominates a session or draws attention to himself.” Brett Riggs vividly describes the experience of making music with Mike. He says “I take direct cues from a fiddler’s playing, and what I hear affects not only the way I approach a tune, but how well I execute it. When I play music with Mike, he draws out the very best that I can do—and I think he does this with everyone. It’s always really intense, but joyful, even when he plays phrases or just chords that make me want to cry. For me, music is fellowship, and none is finer than with friends like Mike.”

Farewell to a friend
Steve Moore, the friend who encouraged Mike to take up the fiddle years ago, once told Marcia, “The best thing I ever did with a fiddle was to show Mike Bryant how to hold it.” It seemed only appropriate that Marcia and Mike played at his funeral in 2007. Mike recalled that Steve’s wife Kathy “asked us to play ‘Amazing Grace,’ and to choose a tune that we would like to play. I chose ‘Soldier’s Joy,’ because Steve always wanted to play that tune every time we got together. We played facing the audience for ‘Amazing Grace,’ but put our back to them and faced the casket to play ‘Soldier’s Joy,’ since we were playing for Steve then. The following day at the graveside I played ‘Glory in the Meetinghouse’ solo as everyone stood up to leave. That tune just kind of conveyed how I was feeling at the moment.”

More than music
Mike has “done a lot of things that he won’t tell you about,” says Pan Riggs, “like taking in a troubled teen, doing mission work in Haiti, and helping folks in his church and community, all with a servant’s heart. Although he is soft-spoken and modest, Mike is not tentative. He is perceptive, decisive, and responsive, as you already know if he has been nearby when you needed help.”

David Winston remarks, “It’s been a lot of fun getting to know Mike and Marcia, just through a couple of intense gatherings each summer over many years. Although Mike’s fiddling was the initial draw, it’s been a delight to discover their warmth and depth as people, and wry sense of humor. They’re always among our first stops when arriving at a festival . . . playing with him always reveals wonderful creative surprises, a backward slide into a full chord, an unexpected but perfect variation of melody, an intricate choice of bowing, all of which go toward expressing who he is as a person. What a treat.”

John Schwab says, “Mike is one of the most genuine people I know. He knows and practices humility and generosity, and he always makes me feel welcome. What could be better?”

“Old-time music just has the right appeal”
When it comes to his own favorite fiddlers, Mike says that among those of the older generations,

... [I] really like John Salter’s fiddling. His fiddling evokes so many emotions in me. He, Marcus Martin, and Wilson Douglas have some quality in their fiddling that always remind me of why I want to play the fiddle. I think that I don’t sound like these guys but I do try to get some of the feeling in the music that they were capable of getting. Eventually I also started listening to more “modern” sounding old-time musicians like the Stripling Brothers, Doc Roberts, and Arthur Smith. I love all the different styles. I feel like I’ve learned something from all of them, but John Salter’s music in particular really affects me. He gets such feeling in his music. Tommy Jarrell’s fiddling is the same way, for me. Not all old-time music or fiddling seems to
have that quality, though. There have to be certain sounds and/or bow licks for it to affect me emotionally. It doesn’t have to be the whole tune but can be a certain passage in the tune, even as little as one note that will really grab me. I’ve learned tunes simply because of one note.

Why does he continue to play only old-time music? “Well, I don’t just play old-time music. I listen to a good bit of the old gospel groups from the ’40s and ’50s like the Chuck Wagon Gang, the Statesmen Quartet, the Speer Family, and others. I also play some hymns,” he says. “I played in church quite a bit. After a while of that I realized my fiddling was changing so I had to consciously go back to more of an old-time sound. Mainly I felt like my bowing was becoming too smooth . . . It seems I’m always working to get a better sound or improve my bowing. Sometimes I’m happy, sometimes I’m not.”

Mike pauses and continues, “Old-time music just has the right appeal for me to keep on playing it. There are so many ways to change the mood or feeling of old-time music, too. The fiddle is always a challenge so it doesn’t get boring for me, either. It’s nice to be able to meet folks from all over the place while playing music, people I would probably never meet otherwise.

“There is some special quality about old-time music,” he believes, “the fiddle in particular, which speaks to something inside of me. I’ve always liked old things and maybe the old tunes appeal in the same way, too. Old-time music is, for me, very provocative emotionally. I imagine other people feel the same way about different genres of music. It just happens to be old-time music that affects me.”

Dwight Rogers is a grandfather and old-time musician who lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He currently plays with Shay Garrick, Gail Gillespie, Brett Riggs, and Pan Riggs in the Carolina Catbirds.

A special thanks to Pan Riggs for her editorial assistance and to all of those individuals who contributed to this article.

Though the New Dixie Entertainers’ recording is out of print, there are a couple of places online where you can hear Mike’s fiddling. Visit the Knoxville News Sentinel web presentation of “Songs of Appalachia” (www.knoxnews.com/videos/detail/songs-appalachia-fiddler-mike-bryant), or Mike’s MySpace page (http://www.myspace.com/mike_bryant_tn).
Elza Stone and his sons as the Happy Hollow Entertainers: from left, Sid, Howard, James, and Elza.
In Mark Wilson’s notes for Rounder’s Traditional Fiddle Music of Kentucky: Up the Licking and Ohio Rivers, he mentions “Elzie Stone and his large family of musician from Mt. Sterling,” and also states that George Lee Hawkins had acquired “Brickyard Joe” from the well-known Mt. Sterling fiddler Sid Stone. Rich Nevins, in his notes for Morning Star’s Old Time Fiddle Band Music from Kentucky, indicates that Doc Roberts obtained “New Money” from Elzie Stone of Mt. Sterling at a fiddle contest.

Who were these Stone musicians? If you have not conducted extensive research on the subject of Kentucky fiddlers, have never lived near the northern reaches of Kentucky’s Daniel Boone Forest, or are not related to the Stone family, you are probably not aware of the contributions of Elzie Stone and his musical offspring to the art and continuation of traditional Kentucky music. None of them ever made commercial recordings of the type that have been reissued in recent years for current audiences, and by the time collectors were making field recording trips into their area, many of the Stone family were gone and others were beyond their musical prime. For many years, though, they did make music in and around their home counties of Bath and Montgomery, even venturing further out on occasion.
Elza Roe Stone was born in 1880 in Bath County. His musical heritage is revealed in his own words, quoted in the Lexington Leader in 1926:

My great-grandfather, Valentine Stone, came to this country from England when he was fourteen years of age and settled in Virginia, gaining a wide reputation as an old time fiddler. His son and my grandfather, William Stone, was an old time fiddler. My father, W. B. Stone, was an old time fiddler. The children in each of the families were natural born musicians and from the time they were able to notice anything, showed their musical inheritance by the working of their little bodies as any kind of music was played. I was one of six children, five boys and one girl, and every one was a skilled musician on some kind or character of instrument.

When I was five years old I can remember playing a tune on an accordion one morning sitting on the floor. Then I learned to play the fiddle at six. I learned to play the banjo at eight and at that time it was only a short while until I could play anything I wanted to. I would steal out my father’s old fiddle and take it with me out to the woods and play half a day at a time.

I never grow tired of music. When I am hungry the fiddle satisfies my appetite; when I grow tired it rests me. The music of the fiddle brings me joy; in my sorrow the fiddle brings me comfort. I can always find more in the fiddle than I am able to get out of it.

I never cared for any kind of amusement except music. You can not get enough religion to keep you from playing music if it is born and bred in you as deep as it is in me. According to my viewpoint, whatever is born and bred in you is going to be done by you, whatever it is, good or bad.

Elzie Stone’s skill with the fiddle may best be illustrated by a newspaper report of a contest in the early 1920’s in which he was bested by John Baltzell of Mt. Vernon, Ohio. The article states: “Elza Stone, of Owingsville, was awarded first prize and this is the first time he was defeated in a contest”. The report of another contest held at the Mt. Sterling Court House relates: “Mr. Elza Stone, winner of first prize for the best fiddler, is worthy of special mention here for his superior ability as performer on both banjo and guitar in accompanying other instruments.”

Elza and his wife, the former Eliza Cartmill, herself a skilled banjoist, had eleven children, eight boys and three girls, all of whom played stringed instruments. Starting in the early 1920’s, the Stone family performed in various combinations for many picnics, theaters, schools, contests, and dances in their region. A contemporary newspaper article provides describes what one could expect at one of their performances.

Their programs are old time tunes such as “Turkey in the Straw”, “Sourwood Mountain”, “Arkansas Traveler” and all of the music which brought happiness and joy to homes all over this land in the days of the old-fashioned square dance. They also play the old time slow waltz music. The Stone family does not play the “jazz”.

Beginning in 1926, Elzie and his three oldest sons, Sid, James, and Howard, traveled regularly to Cincinnati and performed as “The Happy Hollow Entertainers” on WLW radio. The radio station received hundreds of telegrams, postcards and letters from folks expressing their enjoyment in hearing the “old-fashioned music” and asking for many more such programs. However, one evening on the long automobile ride back home, Mr. Stone told his boys they thought they were getting “too full of themselves” being radio musicians, and that they needed to get real jobs and make music in their spare time. That was the end of their radio career.

Family members report that Elzie was approached by a promoter from New York wanting the Happy Hollow Entertainers to appear on the radio in that city. Roy Rogers also visited him looking for a skilled fiddler for his band. Mr. Stone told both of them he could not leave Eliza home to raise all those children by herself, so he believed he would stick to his blacksmith trade and play music closer to home.

The Kentucky Courier reported a Stone Family concert at the Mt. Sterling High School Auditorium in 1929:

If Elza Stone, his three sons, Sidney, James and Howard, his two daughters, Misses Mabel and Nancy, and his brother Elinor the banjoist, are not all natural born musicians, then nature has simply quit turning out that sort of product. There is a wide distinction, of course, between the term classic music and the old-time system of playing by rote, and not by note, but the rhythmic effect and harmony produced by these gifted and talented musicians will bring out the melody just the same. Misses Mabel and Nancy touched on a higher key of real cultural appeal and were pleasing to the taste of those who are lovers of the very highest and best in the realm of refined and classic music. In their rendition with violin and guitar accompaniment, and the singing of the old song “Long Ago” by these two girls, the soprano and alto voices are carefully tuned and blended harmoniously, bringing out the melody and sweetness of a very beautiful old song.

After Elzie Stone passed away in 1958, many of his children continued the family musical tradition. The music of the children’s generation ended when the last remaining son, Edgar, died in 2004. Up until shortly before his death, Edgar played the fiddle and guitar with a local band called the Country Boys. succeeding generations include a number of musicians and singers in a variety of musical styles.

John and Gwenn Noftsgger play old-time music as the Ohio River Minstrels and organize the Appalachian Mountain Music Festival held every June in Waynesville, Ohio. Gwenn is the granddaughter of Elzie Stone.

Photo: Elza Stone, right, with Grant Tipton.
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The Blue Ridge Music Center, a National Park Service facility near Galax, Virginia that is programmed and operated by the National Council for the Traditional Arts (NCTA), seeks an energetic individual to coordinate a summer performance series of Appalachian music and to assist in creating a museum-quality exhibit about traditional Appalachian music. Literacy important. Duties include organizing and recruiting volunteers, writing grants and press releases, and financial record keeping. Salary in the mid-$30s, advancement possible. Send cover letter, resume and writing samples to BRMC Coordinator Search, 1320 Fenwick Lane, Suite 200, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Applications may be submitted via email to: work@ncta.net or faxed to: (301) 565-0472.
Reviews

In the Pines: Tar Heel Folk Songs & Fiddle Tunes, Old-Time Music of North Carolina 1926-1936

In The Pines: “Dock” Walsh; Mountain Sweetheart: The Red Fox Chasers; Mis-treated Blue: Carolina Buddies; Johnson City Hop: Carolina Ramblers String Band; Are You Sure?: Dixon Brothers & Mutt Evans; The Rose With A Broken Stem: North Carolina Cooper Boys; Jack Of Diamonds: Ben Jarrell; Otto Wood: Cranford & Thompson; Richmond Square: The Highlanders; Will, The Weaver: Charlie Parker & Mack Woolbright; Lindy: Proximity String Quartet; Working On The Railroad: Blankenship Family; Carolina’s Best: The Grady Family; Banjo Sam: Wilmer Watts & The Lonely Eagles; New River Train: Cauley Family; Little Bunch Of Roses: Clarence Greene; That Lonesome Valley: Carolina Ramblers String Band; Honeysuckle Rag: Blue Ridge Mountain Entertainers; A Pretty Gal’s Love: Whitter-Hendley-Small; Tom Dooley: Grayson & Whitter; The Longest Train: Mainer’s Mountainmen; Sweet Freedom: E.R. Nance Family With Clarence Dooley; Sunny Home In Dixie: Frank Jenkins’ Pilot Mountainmen; My Home’s Across The Blue Ridge Mountains: Carolina Tar Heels

I like this collection so much that I need to be careful not to sound like a press agent. Producer Marshall Wyatt’s Old Hat brand has only published a few issues, but each has hit the mark. In the Pines follows Old Hat’s debut, Music from the Lost Provinces: Old-Time Stringbands from Ashe County, North Carolina & Vicinity, 1927-1931. Here, expanded coverage takes in the entire state and includes solo performances, gospel singing, and other non-dance music.

Familiar names include J. E. Mainer, Fisher Hendley, G. B. Grayson, Dock Walsh, Ben Jarrell (Tommy’s dad), Wilmer Watts, the Dixon Brothers, and the Red Fox Chasers. More obscure, though no less consequential, are Mack Woolbright, Clarence Greene, Clay Everhart, Steve Ledford, and Frank Jenkins. The Carolina moniker is common to several ensembles who boast of their regional identity: the Carolina Tar Heels, Carolina Buddies, Carolina Ramblers (twice), and the Grady Family (“Carolina’s Best”).

Wyatt’s selections have been thoughtfully and lovingly made, reflecting his broad knowledge of early recordings. The level of artistry is consistently high, enough so that you’ll wonder why several of these treasures have remained hidden for so long. Though a number come from scarce Depression-era originals, no excuses need be made for sound quality. Sound restorers Chris King and Jeff Carney have produced sparkling transfers even when dealing with 1920s Gennett-label products, which were sonically second-rate even when they were new, but manage to hold their own nicely here.

An attractive 24-page booklet contains an introductory essay, and song and performance notes for each of the collection’s 24 tracks. There are a number of unfamiliar and evocative vintage photos, including a reversed (i.e. left-handed) one of Charlie Poole from 1930 and a prison image of Otto Wood the Bandit, who looks seriously threatening and not at all contrite! Otto’s quirky storytelling in a couple of readings, for example, seems like a direct descendant of that familiar villain Tom Dula, who sparked the entire folk revival when the Kingston Trio took up his cause 50 years ago, nearly a century after his death in 1866. Though he may not have merited it, Tom was well served by the influential blind fiddler G. B. Grayson, whose superior 1929 version was the first “Tom Dooley” on record.

Otto inspired three different songs, all recorded a few weeks after his death in a movie-climax shootout with the law on December 30, 1930. Most obscure was the straightforward Cranford and Thompson narrative included here from a Champion-label 78—it’s one we missed in Country Music Sources!

The singing fiddler Ben Jarrell (1880-1946) was Tommy Jarrell’s father, and it’s wonderful to hear Ben’s 1927 version of “Jack of Diamonds” to observe how closely Tommy followed it in his own performances. Original copies of Ben’s masterpiece are surpassingly scarce—I once owned a sadly worn pressing that was then the only copy known to exist. A far better one has since turned up and is presented here. Frank Jenkins’ banjo provides exciting counterpoint for Ben’s archaic fiddling, and it’s a performance to be treasured all the more because it was inherited and perpetuated so faithfully by Tommy Jarrell nearly half a century later. Banjo player Clay Everhart played in the Carolina finger-picked style favored by Charlie Poole. The morose “Rose With A Broken Stem” (1901) is one of those schadenfreude-soaked fallen woman pieces that characterized pop charts of the late Victorian era before being consigned to the country music song bag after becoming sufficiently antiquated.

Probably the greatest surprise is the lovely “Sweet Freedom” by the Nance Family, a 1931 reading of the anti-slavery anthem that first was immortalized in the Civil War of the 1860s and memorably revived in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Hearing an abolitionist song performed by Depression-era Southern whites is a gentle reminder of the complex social attitudes that characterize the American racial experience.

I’ll note in passing that “Johnson City Hop” recalls “Preacher and the Bear” and Earl Scruggs’ “Dear Old Dixie,” and that “Carolina’s Best” resembles the popular Hawaiian “Hilo March” (1881) that was revived on an influential 1914 record by Irene West’s Royal Hawaiians, helping spread the Hawaiian music craze during World War I. I won’t go on, though there’s something I could say about nearly every track on this collection. Instead, let me recommend it without reserve and indulge in some shameless self-promotion: In the Pines is featured on a couple of webcast Dick Spottswood Shows in January and February, accessible via either www.wamu.org or www.bluegrasscountry.org.

To order: www.oldhatrecords.com

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Most music is, in a fundamental and positive sense, a diversion. It takes you away, transports you, carries you on its flow and tide, down the stream, out to sea. This is true whether you play or simply listen with attention and let the music take you over. Although this CD, a musical portrait of Nimrod Workman, can transport, it performs another and perhaps more unique and powerful function, showing us a very individual man, standing against the stream, asserting his unique particularity, a survivor of a hard life, a wind-blown cedar on a rocky shore or a cold mountaintop.

I saw Workman perform a few times back in the day, at summer festivals. It was a vivid visual experience, seeing him with his craggy face, gaunt, wailing out one of the great old ballads, talking about his life as a coal-miner, telling a funny tale. He was well into his seventies when I saw him, and these recordings, made at his home by Mike Seeger in 1982, capture him at the age of 87, still in great form. (Workman died in 1994, at 99.) Like many of the great sources of old-time music who influenced those of us who took up the music in the '60s and '70s, Workman had already lived a full life before he ever thought of getting up on some stage far from home. In Workman's case, he'd spent 42 years in the Appalachian coal mines, breathing “bad air” until his lungs broke down, witnessing the labor struggles of the '20s and '30s, “laying in the water up to my chin” down in a black hole, chipping off coal, singing to keep himself company while he filled his car, the “coal black miner’s blues” not just a song but a life tougher than anything the kids at the festivals could imagine. He represents a lost world all in himself: born in eastern Kentucky in 1895, the notes to the CD tell us that his family “boasted frontiersmen, Civil War veterans both blue and gray, and a great Cherokee warrior as forbearers.” Growing up, he experienced the advent of the Appalachian coal industry, and, after the battle at Matewan, marched with Mother Jones for labor rights, and was a life-long supporter of the UMWA and the Democratic Party. 40 years after Matewan, Nimrod Workman was among a group of miners who went to Washington and lobbied Senator Robert Byrd for black lung compensation—which they eventually received. As Workman says to Mike Seeger on the CD, the mine doctors denied it, but “I believe they knew the coal dust gave us black lung all along.” He was surely right of course, and tells the whole story in his song, “42 Years.”

And so, in this CD we are transported by Workman’s music, but also presented this portrait of his indomitable spirit—standing upright in the river of time when so many have been swept away.
away and mostly now forgotten, and coal is mostly dug by big machines out in Wyoming, and the companies still lie about how “clean” it all is. But if you listen to Workman, you’ll have a harder time swallowing the smooth publicity: he didn’t learn this most particular voice of his at some advertising school, or the old modal scales that lived in his heart and came out in all of his music, the mystery of the “high lonesome sound” that hypnotized Seeger, John Cohen, and the other New Lost City Ramblers when they were learning their music in the late ’50s. The coal dust broke his lungs, but it didn’t break his voice or his spirit, and in this album he gives us a full range of life up a coal holler: dance or play-party songs like “Jack Straw Straddle” and “Sourwood Mountain,” songs that make us face the unexpected explosion of passion—“Wild Bill Jones,” “Willow Garden,” “Oh Death,” “Barbara Allen”; and then the old answers to the mysteries—“Great Big Hand of God,” “It’s Real (That Pentecostal Blessing).” And all this music presented as it would have been then, of a cold night by the fire in the cabin, just a voice, high and lonesome. We can’t even remember, these days, how quiet it was back then. And most of us can’t imagine, either, shooting a Wild Bill Jones in the passion of jealousy and then spending our last five dollars on a bottle, passing it around amongst friends while the body cools, and ending with the toast to end all toasts: “Today was the last of the Wild Bill Jones, tomorrow’ll be the last of me.” You kind of believe that Workman might have actually witnessed the events recounted in the song.

I really like the very end of this record too. Mike Seeger, as a collector and documentarian, is also documented himself here, and in the most respectful way. We don’t think, as we listen to Workman, that Seeger’s hand is there throughout, holding the Beyer M160NC microphone and hitting the buttons on the Nagra. But at the very end, we hear Seeger say, “I got to go getting.” And Workman says, “Come on back, Mike.” And Seeger says—surely true—“We had a good time, we had a good time.” This was, after all, a real encounter, a particular visit, on a particular day in 1982. There were two remarkable people in the room, and in the experience of this CD we’re actually experiencing the deft hand of one of them, hard yet silently at work.

Bill Hicks

To Order: www.dragcity.com

Never Grow Old
Mac and Jenny Traynham

Mac Traynham: guitar, banjo, harmonica and vocals; Jenny Traynham: guitar and vocals; Jackson Cunningham: mandolin; Shay Garriock: fiddle.

Tell it to Me / Ragged But Right / My Old Clinic Mountain Home / In the Land Where We’ll Never Grow Old / All I Got’s Gone / The Storms Are On The Ocean / Don’t Let My Ramblin’ Bother Your Mind / Mama I’m Sick / Going Up to Live in Green Pastures / In Those Agonizing Cruel Slavery Days / There’s No Hiding Place / Down Here / Turn Your Radio On / Are You Afraid to Die / Red Mountain Wine / In The Blue Hills Of Virginia

Mac and Jenny Traynham, of Willis in Floyd County, Virginia, are well known to old-time music lovers as exceptional singers and instrumentalists. Never Grow Old is an album of fifteen tracks, most of them heart songs and sacred songs of their native Virginia from the Carter Family, Stanley Brothers, and Stonemans. Though this is primarily a vocal album (there are no all-instrumental pieces here), Mac and Jenny’s guitar, banjo, and harmonica playing (as well as the mandolin playing and fiddling, respectively, of guests Jackson Cunningham and Shay Garriock) are flawless: subtle accompaniment to the voices, but so clear and lovely that they can’t help but stand out.

The Traynhams are both flat-out great singers: relaxed and natural, letting the inherent sweetness and dexterity of both of their voices shine without added ornamentation or mannerisms. Mac has a lovely voice, gentle and strong, and when he sings harmony to Jenny’s lead there is a quality that reminds me of young Doc Watson’s best harmony singing; think of how Doc’s voice weaves around his wife Rosalee’s in their classic recording of “Your Long Journey,” or provides that great setting for Jean Ritchie’s lead on “The Storms Are on the Ocean” (which the Traynhams sing beautifully on this CD). Jenny’s voice has a graceful directness that reminds me very much of the voices of two of my other favorite singers in old-time music, Annie (Mrs. General Dixon) Watson, and Sarah Westhues Owen.

The Traynhams’ selection of pieces here is great fun. The disc begins with two classics of threadbare bravado, the Teneva Ramblers’ “Tell It to Me” (for an electrified and electrifying variant in this song’s family, check out Abner Jay’s “Cocaine Blues.”) and “Ragged But Right,” from Riley Puckett. This great juxtaposition brings to mind visions of good-time cads of an earlier era, boarding house parlor lizards staying always one step ahead of the law, one stumble away from having to trade in their wingtips and celluloid collars for brogan shoes and striped britches. A few tracks later, Mac brings a down-and-out lament of that earlier time into the present day with his rewrite of Ernest Stoneman’s “All I Got’s Gone”: “I lost my job to the Chinese trade/Now I can’t afford to buy American-made/Get my clothes from the Goodwill store/I wear the uniform of the working poor/All I got’s gone, all I got’s gone.”

The sacred songs on this album are really wonderful. With Jackson Cunningham (mandolin, baritone vocals), Jenny and Mac sing a beautifully wistful version of the Stanleys’ “Going Up to Live in Green Pastures.” Another exceptional gospel track is “In the Land Where We’ll Never Grow Old,” an old standard that we don’t hear nearly enough nowadays.

A strange and gently hilarious song, totally new to me, is “Mama I’m Sick.” This serenade of longing for a mother’s cooking (which, given the tune, should be subtitled “What Would You Give in Exchange for Some Pie”), must be the most impassioned musical tribute to food since Big Mama Thornton detailed her “Schoolboy” duet with Fred McDowell to give staccato praise to her favorite meat-and-three. Though everything on this album is great, another song that really shines is Ernest Stoneman and Fields Ward’s “In Those Agonizing Cruel Slavery Days.” It’s performed here with Mac and Jenny on guitars, and with a harmonica-fiddle duet by Mac and Shay Garriock. Shay is a fiddler more people should have a chance to hear. An expert in the tunes and techniques of the old masters of Southwest Virginia, his bowing has gravity and rhythm that any fiddler would covet. He’s one of my favorite fiddlers, and it’s a real treat to hear him on this CD.
Never Grow Old will appeal not only to lovers of the music of Southwest Virginia, but to all fans of old-time playing and singing.

Sarah Bryan
To order: www.floydmusic.com or www.mountainfeverstudios.com

Dream Shadows
Eric and Suzy Thompson

Eric Thompson, guitar, mandolin, banjo, cuatro, vocals; Suzy Thompson, guitar, fiddle, Cajun accordion, triangle, vocals.

Little Bitty Mama / Beaver Slide Rag / Midnight on the Water, K. C. Railroad Blues / Last Kind Word / Gasport Two-Step / Dream Shadows / Lloyd Bateman / Yearlings in the Canebrake, Burt Anderson / Valse de Vieux Temps / Motherless Child / Old Greasy Coat

If I were on the committee, I’d nominate this one for a Grammy.

Old-time musicians, particularly those who put in the effort to get really good at their music, are exposed to certain artistic temptations. Some (especially young fiddlers) play at the top end of their speed limit without regard to musical expressiveness. Facility can lead to boredom if you ignore the heart of the music. If you know several styles, you might blend them into a new music removed from the spirit of any of the sources. The line between having something new to say and having nothing to say is finer and murkier than you might think.

I’m happy to report that Eric and Suzy Thompson fall into none of those traps. Their music is finely honed and presented with loving care. Listening to it is a superb musical experience.

I have always been amazed at how this pair can master so many musical styles (old-time, bluegrass, blues, Cajun, jug band, Eastern European, etc.) and yet sound as if they grew up listening to only the one they’re playing at the time.

Here they concentrate on three Southern styles: old-time mountain, blues, and Cajun. Most of the pieces include wonderful vocals by Suzy, although Eric sings a credible “K. C. Railroad Blues.”

Suzy pays tribute to a forgotten pair of women, Elvie Thomas and Geeshie Wylie, by singing three of only six songs that they recorded. “Little Bitty Mama” is in the bad-girl blues tradition, while “Last Kind Word” and “Motherless Child” (not the religious “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child”) are quiet and introverted, not like a performance; it’s as if you’re overhearing a private lament. By contrast, she plays a raucous accordion and belts out a “Gasport Two-Step” that makes me feel like dancing (and I don’t dance). As always, her fiddling is full-toned and in touch with every note. She also gives a haunting performance of “Lloyd Bateman,” here presented simply, which is just the right approach for a ballad.

Eric is a master on both guitar and mandolin. Here he particularly showcases his guitar work, which is often fast and complicated, but always expressive and never shallowly flashy. Particularly interesting are his guitar breaks on “Beaver Slide Rag” and “Yearlings in the Canebrake.” In the latter piece, the guitar part sounds more complicated than the fiddle part. “Midnight on the Water” is one of my favorite fiddle tunes, and Suzy’s fiddling is here nicely complemented by Eric’s guitar, which supplies rhythm, counter-melodies, slides, arpeggios, and harmonic notes. As far as I can tell, this is all done at once, not through the magic of multiple recordings. “Midnight” segues into “K. C. Railroad.” That’s a combination I never would have thought of, but it works. “Dream Shadows,” from the East Texas Serenaders, sounds almost like a Klezmer piece, and features a nice mandolin solo by Eric.

Liner notes are sketchy, as with most offerings these days, but their website, ericandsuzy.com, has a much more complete set, with several rare photos of old bands and links to other sites if you want still more information.

The CD ends with the only performance in front of an audience presented here: “Old Greasy Coat.” Eric and Suzy are joined by Brendan Doyle, Maxine Gerber, and Larry Hanks on banjos and jew’s harp. A nice warm ending to a satisfying demonstration of their commitment and feeling for the music.

Lyle Loggren
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Won’t Get Trouble in Mind
Buffalo Gals

Kate Lissauer: fiddle; Johnny Whelan: banjo; Peter Dunn: guitar; Sue Clare: banjo ukulele, resophonic ukulele; Sibylle Riesen: foot percussion; Eve Morris: bass.

Big Sciotsy / Squirrel Hunters / Daddy’s Little Lulu / Crawdad / Farewell Trion / Great Atomic Power / Cindy / Cattle in the Cane / Jealous Hearted Me / Peg and Awi, Old Gray Mare / John Henry / Trouble On My Mind / Hell Up Coal Holler / Save It! Save It!

The Buffalo Gals are not an all-girl band, contrary to their name. There is precedent for that; there were women in Bill Monroe’s Bluegrass Boys. (There are also Hotpoint Refrigerators. Think about that one.) Who they are: a good old-time band based in England. What they have done: made a very enjoyable CD.

Thanks to the availability of CDs and of transatlantic flights (in both directions!) it is possible to get very good at playing American old-time music while living in England, if you do your homework. These musicians have done their homework, listening to CDs, traveling to America to get some firsthand experience, and taking workshops from American musicians who spend time in England. Kate Lissauer, fiddler, is originally from the US, can play in several styles, and seems very comfortable with West Virginia tunes. She has even fiddled for the Bing Brothers during some of their trips to England. Kate’s husband Johnny Whelan plays clean, spot-on clawhammer banjo and has been learning some fingerstyle banjo, which fits right in to the band’s sound. Peter Dunn’s solid guitar playing—good boom-chuck connected with tasteful bass runs—contributes a lot, as does the clean, on-rhythm bass work of Eve Morris. Sue Clare fills in rhythm with banjo-uke, and Sibs Riesen adds even...
more rhythm with a step-a-tone board on some of the fiddle tunes. Most of the singing is done by Kate, Sue, and Pete, with Sibs’ vocal present on more than half the singing numbers as well.

On instrumental numbers (“Hell Up Coal Holler,” “Cattle in the Cane,” “Farewell Trion”) the band has a clear, tight sound. Only three of the 14 cuts here are completely instrumental. Tunes like “Big Scioty,” “Cindy,” “Crawdad,” and “Old Gray Mare” are played through a couple times, and then are sung in three- and sometimes four-part harmony. This may be necessary to keep the interest of audiences in British folk clubs, but this listener found it distracting from the beauty of the tunes and how well they are played.

Much more successful was, for instance, their Carter-style treatment of “Jealous Hearted Me,” which was a hit for the Carter Family in 1936, long before it was Minnie Pearl’s theme song. Another one I enjoyed was Sue Clare’s original “Daddy’s Little Lulu,” which sounded so much like a jazz standard than I tried to remember where I had heard it before. It took the excellent and well-researched liner notes (thanks!) to tell me otherwise. The band reached into bluegrass for Jimmy Martin’s “Save It! Save It!” and I’m glad they did. The question that the Louvin Brothers asked—“Are you ready for the great atomic power?”—would have been better answered by playing the same chords used by the Louvin Brothers; I never quite recovered from hearing that unexpected VII chord. Then I asked myself: if they had done it just the way Ira and Charlie wrote it, would it really be a Buffalo Gals song? I quoted in another review my old research supervisor’s comment: “If you don’t have failed experiments, you haven’t been adventurous enough.” That one didn’t work for me. But one that did was singing the words to the blues “Trouble in Mind” to John Salyer’s “Trouble ON My Mind.” What a nice idea!

A band makes choices. As the reader can tell, I didn’t agree with all of their choices, but I liked their sound. Part of what makes their sound good: they are having fun making music together, and singing together. And you can hear it. Catch one of their live shows if you can (it might be difficult on this side of the pond), and buy their CD.

PETE PETERSON

To order: www.buffalogals.co.uk

Old Time Fiddle Tunes, Classic and Minstrel Banjo
The Old 78s

Clarke Buehling, banjo, cello; Curly Miller, fiddle, banjo, bass, cello; Carole Anne Rose, banjo; Shay McGougan, dancing.

Sleigh Ride Galop / Cuban Two Step Rag / The Last Rose of Summer - Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms - Come Back to Erin / Indian War Whoop / Russian Rag / Cat Rag / Too Utterly Too / Plowboy Hop / Thunder and Roses March / Alabama Trot / Far South, She Am Far Away / Miss Jola / Strauss Waltz Medley / Wildcat Rag - Ruth’s Rag / Rickett’s Hornpipe - Old Katoone / Devilish Mary / Wild West Galop / Captain George, Has Your Money Come? / Egyptian Princess / Dream Shadows

Old Time Fiddle Tunes, Classic and Minstrel Banjo is a perfect capsule description of what you will hear once you have bought this CD, as I hope you will. (There, that’s done!) If you come to this CD from the world of old-time music, then you may not yet realize how different the other two styles are. Prepare to have your mind stretched, in all the best ways. A little banjo-playing history (oversimplifying, of course) may be in order here. The banjo playing of the minstrel shows starting in the 1840s, as described in the earliest teaching manuals, was mainly downpicking styles, played on a fretless banjo with gut strings. This was called “stroke style,” which bears some relationship to clawhammer and frailing styles we know today. About 1870, S.S. Stewart introduced banjos with frets, and popularized the idea of fingerpicking melodies on the banjo using the techniques of parlor-style guitar. Stroke-style went out of fashion, and “classic” banjo with banjo orchestras came in, featuring written arrangements for first and second banjo, and cello-banjos. But you didn’t need to read music to play the banjo, and people started using finger-style banjo in bands with a fiddle lead.
You get to hear all three styles here. The “Far South Medley” is described in the liner notes as “one of the most rhythmically complex of composed Minstrel Banjo pieces.” It’s all done as downpicking, and it makes good music. More enjoyable, for me, were the classic banjo pieces such as “Sleigh Ride Galop” “Strauss Waltz Medley,” and “Wild West Galop.” These are wonderful to listen to. Clarke Buehling (who is usually playing lead banjo on these) plays with clear, crisp tone and formality. It is evocative of the white tie and tails that the masters of the classic styles wore when performing these tunes for the first time, a century or more ago. One loses sight of the difficulty of playing these, and just hears music. And even more enjoyable to my ears were the flat-key fiddle tunes of the East Texas Serenaders (“Dream Shadows”) the Roane County Ramblers (“Alabama Trot”), Smith’s Garage Fiddle Band (“Cuban Two-step Rag” and “Miss Jola”), the Grinnell Giggers (“Plowboy Hop”), and others. By the way, there’s no singing on this CD; just good tunes (an alarming number of which were new to me) well-played.

Some of these tunes, especially the classic banjo pieces, were learned directly from sheet music. Others were arranged as banjo trios from the piano score, notably “Thunder and Blazes March,” which I guarantee you have heard before. It’s THE tune that you associate with going to the circus. It’s a treat! Others were learned from the old 78s (yes, that’s where the band name came from), such as “Captain George, Has Your Money Come?” This is one of the few numbers done as a duet: Curly on fiddle and Carole Anne on six-string banjo (it has an extra bass string), and Shell Smith’s guitar part transfers very well to the banjo. (Didn’t the man believe in four-chords?) Less true to the original was “Cuban Two-step Rag,” which was both speeded and squared up to make it playable for dancers, and I like this arrangement even more than the one done by Smith’s Garage Fiddle Band. Here is one demonstration that this band does not simply play written arrangements, or copy the old 78s, but adds their own sense of creativity and musicianship when they believe it will make better music.

If you’ve been a subscriber to the Old-Time Herald for more than two years, you have seen the article on Curly and Carole Anne (January 2007) that describes their music. Reading a description, however, is no substitute for buying this CD and hearing the good music being made by these three people who have studied the old “banjo tutors,” the sheet music from the ragtime era, and . . . the old 78s.

To order: www.theold78s.com

Cold Icy Mountain
Brett Ratliff

Darling Don’t You Know That’s Wrong / Ain’t Gonna Work Tomorrow / Last Payday at Coal Creek / Nine Miles Out of Louisville / Trouble on My Mind / Getting Wild Again / High on a Mountaintop / Blue Goose / Forked Deer / Bumblebee in a Jug / The War is A-Raging in Johnny / Young People Who Delight in Sin / Born in East Kentucky / Cold Icy Mountain / Feed My Horse on Corn and Hay / The Blind Man

Many of us who love old-time and early country music revere those first commercial recordings made in the early 1920s in New York City by Uncle Dave Macon, Eck Robertson, Vernon Dalhart, Earnest Stoneman, and others. And many more of us point to the recordings made in 1927 in Bristol, Tennessee, and featuring acts like the Carter Family and Jimmie Rogers, as perhaps the single most important factor in bringing “mountain” or “hillbilly” music to the listening public. And while the importance of these early recordings is hard to overestimate, there is one thing about them that often passes discussion: with the appearance of these historic sides, regional music styles began to fade. As the radio and Victrola began to appear in the parlors of homes in rural communities, the need for locally produced music was lessened, and music from elsewhere began to influence the native species.

This is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. The local styles of music to which I refer were themselves hybrids of other regional styles, and a mixture of various European and West African folk traditions. But with the coming of the radio and the record player, the changes that happened slowly within a local music happened at a much more rapid rate. Today, on a typical old-time recording (my own meager output included), one might hear music from all over the country on a single CD: an Edden Hammons tune from West Virginia immediately preceding a Skillet Lickers tune from Georgia, and following an Eck Robertson tune from Texas. It seems less and less common to come across a recording dedicated entirely to the music of a single region. This is one of the reasons that Brett Ratliff’s Cold Icy Mountain is such a pleasure to hear.

Brett Ratliff is a young banjo player who was raised in Van Lear, in the coal country of eastern Kentucky. This musically-rich region is home to legendary banjo players and fiddlers, including Buell Kazee, Pete Steele, Buddy Thomas, Hiram and Art Stamper, George Gibson, Paul David Smith, Snake Chapman, and many, many others. It’s no wonder that while the individual tracks on this CD run the gamut of potential instrumentation from unaccompanied singing to banjo/fiddle duets to a five-piece string band, the unifying factor is that all of the material (including the “hidden” seventeenth track) comes from within a few hours’ drive of Van Lear.

I particularly like the selection of tunes that Ratliff includes on this disk; they demonstrate the wide spectrum of music indigenous to his native hills. There are solo banjo and vocal numbers (“Darling Don’t You Know What’s Wrong,” “Last Payday at Coal Creek,” “Trouble on My Mind,” and Buell Kazee’s haunting bit of Victorian melancholy, “The Blind Man”), banjo and fiddle duets (“Nine Miles out of Louisville” with Jesse Wells, and “Bumble Bee in a Jug” with Adrian Powell), and full string-band numbers (“Ain’t Gonna Work Tomorrow,” “Getting Wild Again,” and “Feed My Horse on Corn and Hay”) that feature the Clack Mountain String Band, of which Ratliff is a regular member. I’ll admit to being a little alarmed upon hearing the unbridled treatment that Clack Mountain gives to “Ain’t Gonna Work Tomorrow,” and feared that all of the string band tracks would feature that same relentless festival beat, but my fears were quickly allayed. The band plays with real sensitivity and has a good sense of what each tune wants, whether it’s the knockdown energy of “Ain’t Gonna Work . . .” or the sweet slow drone of Rufus Crisp’s “Blue Goose.” Many young bands seem to be afraid to play a tune as slowly as Clack Mountain plays this one, but the listener
is rewarded for their confident risk-taking with this beautiful number.

Not only is Ratliff a passionate and thoughtful banjo player, but he is also gifted singer with a warm, unaffected baritone voice that serves his music very well, whether alone, as on the unaccompanied “Young People Who Delight in Sin,” which he presents with the pacing and solemnity that it deserves; or intertwined with Karly Higgins’ lovely clear alto on “Blue Goose” and the other string band numbers. And he coaxes a wonderfully full and resonant tone from his banjo that complements his voice and the other instruments, whether he is playing clawhammer or finger-style.

While Cold Icy Mountain is a very fine CD, and highly-recommended, I must take issue with June Appal recordings over the inside of the packaging. While the exterior of the package is attractive enough, the mixed typefaces and unfortunate color scheme throughout the interior (pale blue and yellow on a red-to-black background) render Mr. Ratliff’s useful, interesting, and succinctly-written liner notes difficult to read. A record this good deserves better presentation than this, especially in an age when the sales of physical CDs are on the decline.

Cold Icy Mountain honors both the older musicians like George Gibson and Perry Riley who carried this music forward from the past, and the younger musicians, like Ratliff and his compatriots, who are carrying it forward into the future as a living tradition. To me, this music is not the sound, as suggested in the album notes, of young possums being led across the road by their “grand old daddy”; this music is the sound of radial tires on a new red pickup truck, singing their way across a rain-damp two-lane road at 2:30 in the morning, bringing the band home from a gig. There is real power here, and direction. All of you possums best get out of the road.

Doug Van Gundy

To order: www.brettratliff.com
Dave Ruch: guitar, mandolin, jew’s harp, spoons, tenor banjo, banjo, octave mandolin, vocals; with guests: Joe Bellanti, Josh Assad, Stuart Fuchs, Kevin O’Brien, Geoff Perry, Alison Pipitone, Jerry Raven, Judd Sunshine, Tom Santarsiero, Rob Lynch, John Martz, Dick Bolt, Jim Kimball, Gretchen Banaszak, Phil Banaszak

The Ballad of Blue Mountain Lake / Cabbage Head (Our Goodman) / Montreal Reel / La Bastringue / Wisconsin / The E-Ri-O Canal / Rickett’s Hornpipe / Bald Headed End of the Broom / Roslyn Castle (Two Ways) / Oh! Dat Low Bridge / Ball and Pin Hornpipe / Vic Kibler’s Tune / The Barefoot Boy with Boots On / Shove Your Grog Around / The Year of Jubilo

This is a collection of “traditional songs and tunes from New York State,” as stated on the back cover. Dave Ruch is the main singer and instrumentalist, with backing from lots of friends on a variety of instruments including accordion, fiddle, violin (noted separately in the notes), bass, concertina, various rhythm instruments, and backing or group vocals. Dave is from Buffalo, and is a historian/entertainer, according to his website. He performs for schools, libraries, historical societies, etc., mostly throughout New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio.

This is a nice collection of music, obviously a labor of love—a nice choice of songs with notes as to where the songs are from, and generous credits to his more-than-competent side musicians. He says in the first paragraph of the notes: “...I’d much rather have you hear this music sung and/or played by the old-timers for whom it was a part of life. I come to these old songs and tunes as an interested outsider, and I play them and sing them and present them to audiences because I think they’re fascinating and valuable and somewhat rare.” Yes, many of us would rather hear the originals, if available to us, because therein lies the soul of traditional music—and we can learn much from them. But the classic singers and players are mostly gone, and many of the recordings are not available to us (although with burgeoning online collections, and more and more reissues becoming available, this is less a factor). And musicians and singers must play and sing. So then it is a case of the artist and how he/she interprets the material, and whether the essential soul quality of the music is maintained, no matter what direction you take it.

Five of the cuts are tunes and the rest are songs. The tunes are arranged and played well, often with a somewhat modern flavor, especially “La Bastringue,” which veers off into jazzy (and to my ear completely irrelevant) variations. Dave has a pleasant, unassuming voice, the instrumental accompaniment is fairly minimal, and does not distract from the singing or songs except occasionally when it veers into bluegrass licks, or folk/singer-songwriter licks and rhythms on several of the songs. On one of the songs, “Wisconsin,” I felt the arrangement of changing keys back and forth to accommodate the singing of both Dave and Alison Pipitone was very jarring. Pipitone has an interesting voice, but not one suited to traditional singing, if this song is an example.
Overall, this CD has a folk-with-overtones-of-bluegrass flavor as opposed to hardcore traditional, and will appeal to listeners who find hardcore hard to take. Hopefully, it may also trigger more interest in source musicians and traditional music of the Northeast.

ALICE GERRARD

To order: www.daverruch.com

**Over the Mountain:**
Traditional Country Roots Music
The Elkville String Band with Wayne Henderson

There’s a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere / Otto Wood / The Elkville Shuffle / Cindy / Over the Mountain / Suicide Blues / Indian Princess / Where the Roses Never Fade / The Freight Wreck at Altona / Drake’s Waltz / Jesse James / Bring Me a Leaf from the Sea / Tennesse Grey Eagle / Cat Call Waltz / Shall We Gather at the River

The Mountain Roads website describes *Over the Mountain* as “Music from a time when they really didn’t care whether you called it country, old-time, bluegrass or gospel . . . it was just good music.” Like many string bands in their native northwestern North Carolina, the members of Elkville are at home in all of those genres, as this recording demonstrates. Rather than alternating styles from piece to piece, though, the Elkville String Band combines all their musical influences into an appealingly integrated style. It’s a sound similar to that of Clint Howard and Doc Watson’s Blue Ridge Mountain Boys, whose 1988 *Favorites* is an album that, like *Over the Mountain*, exemplifies the fluidity of styles in this region. While it’s often a valuable thing to maintain stylistic divisions, there are also times when old-time or bluegrass musicians’ strict adherence to one style and shunning of the other’s influence can be a little like Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert’s “Wall of Jericho”—a blanket thrown over a clothesline to separate their beds—in *It Happened One Night* might as well go ahead pull down that barrier to see what kind of fun ensues. The Elkville String Band cheerfully topples the wall, and the result is some very fine music that’s also an authentic portrait of the traditions of the musicians’ native home.

Each member of the Elkville String Band—which is named, by the way, for the town of Tom Dula’s birth, known now as Ferguson—has formidable musical talents and credentials. Fiddler and mandolinist Drake Walsh, whose gravelly singing is one of the very best things about this album, is the son of the great banjo player Dock Walsh, and grew up listening to his dad’s music and sneaking off with the banjo when Dock’s back was turned. Guitarist and singer Herb Key, from Wilkes County, is an accomplished luthier who repairs instruments from Wayne Henderson’s shop, and has been part of many influential bands through the years. Jeff Michael is the youngest member of the group, and a legend in this area for his incredible fluency on whatever instrument he picks up. Bass player Bill Williams is the only band member not raised in Western North Carolina, but having lived and played there for more than thirty years he has become a pillar of the musical community. Joining the Elkville String Band on four tracks is Wayne Henderson, whose flatpicking here is, as always, exceptional.

I like this whole album, but will mention a few special highlights. Herb Key sings a great “Otto Wood,” a song that appeals to the band’s devotion to local history. (At a recent Elkville String Band concert which I attended, the band preceded their rendition of “Otto Wood” by introducing a man in the audience whose grandfather, a lawman, had once arrested Wilkes County’s favorite bandit.) Drake Walsh sings his father’s “Bring Me a Leaf from the Sea,” and a “Suicide Blues” from Percy Mayfield, of all people; his singing is wonderful on both. Jeff Michael’s original “Elkville Shuffle” is my nominee for this festival season’s it-tune. It’s got a catchy simplicity and self-driving momentum shared by tunes like “Winder Slide” and “Chadwell Station,” tunes you’d hear coming from three or four different jams within a single hour at recent Cliffhops. Another especially good instrumental on this album is “Cindy,” led by Jeff Michael’s charging clawhammer banjo.

My only criticism of *Over the Mountain* is of the “More, please” variety. Bill Williams’ bluegrassy tenor singing really caught my fancy, and I’d have loved to hear him sing lead, or to provide harmony on more tracks. But that’s the dilemma, isn’t it, when such multitalented people form bands? It’s hard for audiences to be sated in one concert or album, when each tune or song and each trade-off of instruments reveals a compelling new facet of their musicianship.

SARAH BRYAN

To order: www.elkvillestringsband.net or www.mountainroadsrecordings.com

**Secular & Sacred Songs Recorded 1936-1954**
The Original Chuck Wagon Gang

BACM [British Archive of Country Music]
CD D239

David “Dad” Carter, Rosa Lola Carter, Anna Carter, Jim Carter, vocals with guitar and mandolin

Take Me Back to Renfro Valley / At the Rainbow’s End / Take Me Bak to Col-lerr-dad fer to Stay / Carry Me Back to the Mountains / Echoes from the Hills / Wonder Valley / I’ll Be All Smiles Tonight / Put My Little Shoes Away / Dear Old Sunny South by the Sea / The Engineer’s Child / I Want to Be a Real Cowboy Girl / The Little Green Mound on the Hill / Oklahoma Blues / Will You Love Me When My Hair Has Turned to Silver / Texas Star / Signs By the Side of the Road / I’ve Changed My Mind / I Know My Savior Cares / All God’s Children Gonna Rise and Sing / We’ll Be Happy All the Time / At the Dawning / Love Leads the Way / O Why Not Tonight / I’ve a Precious Friend

The Chuck Wagon Gang started out as the Carter Quartet, playing live on KFYO radio from Lubbock, Texas, in 1935. Waylon Jennings and Buddy Holly came from Lubbock as well, and probably heard some of the Carters’ early music. Pretty quickly, the Cart-
er Quartet became the Chuck Wagon Gang, the name coming courtesy of Bewley Mills, a flour company based in Fort Worth, which sponsored them on WBAI. The moniker came from the fact that Bewley Mills used a little covered wagon in its logo, from which cakes and biscuits were dispensed in promotional contexts. The Gang became so popular in the midst of the Depression that, when Bewley Mills offered a picture of them in return for sending in a coupon from one of their products, they received more than 100,000 responses. (This is part of the context for Garrison Keillor’s famous “Powder Milk Biscuits” sponsor.)

The first half of this CD reflects these early years of the Gang’s development, with a repertoire of sentimental secular songs which reflect the realities of life in the ‘30s, and a nostalgia for better, earlier times—romanticized, no doubt, since the Depression had come to rural life in the ‘20s. Look at the titles, and how many feature themes involving going “back” or “home” or to some idyllic place. The Gang had a knack for spotting the great gems of the genre—nothing, absolutely nothing, can really top “Put My Little Shoes Away,” not even Bill Monroe’s “Little Girl and the Dreadful Snake.” And when such a song is sung with perfection by these two gorgeous female voices, those of Rosa and Anna, both of whom were able to put real pathos and sentiment into each word and phrase—well, it’s no wonder those biscuit coupons kept showing up at Bewley HQ in Fort Worth.

With the 16th cut, the CD shifts to 1952, the peak of the Gang’s wonderful gospel career. The Gang had taken off during the War years, returning to recording and radio in 1948. Before the break started they had already developed their own style, and the move to gospel is in a way a very natural step from the sentimentally secular songs that came first, both in harmony style and framework, and in content as well. Sentimental songs, after all, celebrate the same values we find in gospel—love is true, home is where the heart is, mother is buried on the hill, little Buster’s bronzed shoes sit on the glass-topped coffee table, and in his picture, in his World War II uniform, always 19, he smiles out proudly from the bookcase over by the color TV in the wood cabinet with the doors that never get closed, because that TV pretty much stays on 24/7, with the sound muted and the Fox head-lines scrolling across the bottom. When the Gang sing that “On that happy morning when the Savior comes back again, hallelujah, all God’s children gonna rise and shine (in His Kingdom),” it resonates down to the core. How else do you deal with that photograph, or the child who tells you, dying, to give his toys to his little friends, but to “put my little shoes away?” You assert, in voices as happy and confident and just plain beautiful, as can be imagined, with four-part harmony and a bass-led call-and-response: “Bells up there will ring forever, oh what gladness in that clime . . . We’ll be happy all the time.”

Trying to “explain” the Chuck Wagon Gang is of course a fairly sterile and irrelevant intellectual exercise, when placed against the actual music, which (to quote the Gang again) “will never grow old.” But perhaps you haven’t heard them yet. Another interesting aspect of this CD is its compact exemplification of the mysterious musical transition that occurred, more famously, when “bluegrass” emerged from the primordial ooze of “old-time.” The Carter Quartet might be any number of old-time groups, including the Carter Family, Grayson and Whitter, the Blue Sky Boys—if not a fiddle band like the Skillet Lickers or the North Carolina Ramblers. Their transition to the wonderfully honed gospel group of the ‘50s is more about technical perfection than anything else—just as the Bluegrass Boys are mainly a technically proficient old-time string band. And looked at now, 60 more years down the road, more or less, from “I Like Ike,” it’s a durn sight farther to dawg music, the Horse Flies, and Béla Fleck than back to “I’ll Be All Smiles Tonight.” That’s a waltz about stoicism, which came without benefit of Visa. The ‘50s Chuck Wag-on Gang is as austere as Hank Williams’ band; they do this music to perfection, they don’t gussy it up. They still believe what they’re singing.

Indeed, when Gram Parsons sang “I Like the Christian Life,” that’s where times really changed. And that, of course, corresponded to Vietnam, and to the moment memorialized by Merle Haggard (who was singing like Lefty, who probably had Jimmie Rodgers in mind) when “Nixon lied to us all on TV.” At which point an old man in a recliner in a brick rancher in Lubbock hit the mute button on the TV remote.

BILL HICKS

To Order: http://bacm.users.btopenworld.com
When musicians of different influences and backgrounds come together to play, the result is often a watery deconstruction based in the twelve-bar blues. At least two tracks on Stubble (“Everybody’s Killing Me” and “Early in the Morning”) dwell squarely within that territory and a third, “Sunnyland,” is only rescued by the inclusion of some wild Slavic singing salvaged from the imagined soundtrack to Even Cossacks Get the Blues. This is not to say that the Blue Blokes 3 drop the ball when it comes to blues, or that they need to spend some more time honing their chops: quite the contrary. In fact, as their moniker suggests, most of the tracks here have some blues element at their core, and the English ballad “Lovin’ Henry” reimagined as a droning electric blues, with its delicate interplay of Anderson’s fingerpicked acoustic and Mandelson’s reverb-soaked electric guitars, is the standout among the set. Even though the straighter, more traditional twelve-bar numbers mentioned above are played beautifully, they unnecessarily revisit some extremely well-trodden territory.

Another standout track is the absolutely non-blues, deeply and unapologetically British “Lord Allenwater.” This song was originally collected in 1904 by Ralph Vaughan-Williams from Ian Anderson’s great-grandmother, Emily Stears. And while this tune, like the rest on the record, features non-traditional elements such as Congolese electric guitar and electric saz, they add to the traditional feel of the song, rather than coming across as gimmicky.

Stubble was so obviously a joy to record, and is so obviously an act of love, that it is hard not to like on several levels. That makes sense, because there is a lot to like here. This isn’t country music, it isn’t the blues, and it isn’t swinging; although elements of all of these genres are present on this record. This is a string band in which each of the members brings a different tradition to the table, and the result is a shared sensibility and a CD that hits far more often than it misses. For the more adventurous listeners out there, there are pleasures aplenty to be discovered in the Stubble.

DOUG VAN GUNDY

To order: www.thebeesknees.com/

Music for the Sky
Nikolai Fox

Featuring: George Ainley, Ahmet Baycu, Jim Burns, Michael Donohue, Zac Johnson, Bob Naess, Anthony Pasquarosa, John Specker. Also with: Jon Bekoff, Paula Bradley, Dan Brown, Bill Diloff, Nikolai Fox, Greg Miller, Jo Pace, Alex Scala, Rose Sinclair, Liz Toffey

This film “portrays a community of revivalist old-time fiddlers who play southern-style fiddle music while living in Vermont and Massachusetts. [It] revolves around the personalities of eight musicians…”

I really liked this somewhat enigmatic video. If you are looking for a message or point, it’s hard to tell what that might be. There are no explanations of anything except to name the musicians and where they live. The film opens with an eerie, foggy, dimly lit scene—a jam session?—with musicians playing “Sallie Gooden.” Throughout the film the action goes back and forth between takes of different musicians playing full-length (for the most part) tunes—nice—and scenes of the same musicians in their homes, on their farms, in their work places, at a county fair, and talking about their attitudes about the music, the music’s place in their lives, and their work.

Many of you will be familiar with community life in rural New England and with the musicians in this film. Most have been on the scene for many years, are now in their forties and fifties, and have

influenced (and continue to influence) new generations of players. I showed the documentary to a friend who is not at all familiar with either the musicians or the rural Vermont lifestyle, and he spent some time trying to figure out what the connection between everyone was. Was there a connection? Was it just a bunch of disconnected scenes of musicians? People living off the grid? Since there is no accompanying narrative it could be a little hard to tell. And looking on the Internet doesn’t give much information about the film and the filmmaker. However, my friend liked Music for the Sky very much. I did too.

The music is wonderful, there is a lot of humor, and I feel the film stands as a whole, with or without narrative. There is a particularly wonderful scene of Ahmet Baycu mentoring two younger (20-something?) musicians on their old-time music knowledge. They sit on one side of a table, and Ahmet is on the other side, showing them pictures: “Do you know who this is?” “Ahh, is it Dykes?” [Magic City Trio] . . . and then more pictures . . . It is more than just playing the tunes, it’s knowing about the music, where it comes from, who played it before they did, etc.

The film is full of interesting anecdotes, wonderful scenes of people playing music in their homes and communities, and general talk about their lives and work. Wait ’til you see Bob Naess’s machine gun collection!

Thoroughly enjoyable.

ALICE GERRARD

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CDs

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Nikolai Fox

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