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THE OLD-TIME HERALD
A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO OLD-TIME MUSIC

Volume 12, Number 1 October - November 2009 $7.50

Old-Time Music in Alaska: Then and Now

Trends in Old-Time Banjo Part 3

Mark Campbell and Remembering Mike Seeger

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Letters

Comments on Clifftop

Having recently returned from Clifftop’09, or officially the Appalachian String Band Music Festival, I feel the need to make a few comments about it. It is really one of the premiere gatherings for the playing of old-time music, not only in this country, but in the world today. I enjoyed hearing and playing with musicians who had traveled from France, England, Canada, Norway, and Japan, as well as from Western and Northern states to be there.

Young and old alike are drawn to the beautiful setting to participate in jams large and small, to visit with musical friends, and to take part in the contests. I love all these aspects of this festival. It’s very heartwarming to see and play music with old acquaintances, and it’s humbling to meet folks who remember my string band barnstorming days from thirty or forty years ago. I’ve always gotten a kick out of the contests I’ve attended. It’s a wonderful feeling to be in line to play, and to hear so many various musicians perform, to take part in the friendly banter and small rivalries between the contestants.

For me, this is the fun part of the contests. Although the possibility of earning a prize is exciting, it’s always a toss-up as to the winners, due to many factors such as the effectiveness of the sound system and its technicians, the activities of the performers the night before the contest, the weather, the judges, etc., and I’ve always felt that a sense of humor is a must when entering any contest, since a qualitative judgment as to whose performance was “best” is always a dicey thing, given the number of fine musicians and the variety of styles at these affairs.

I don’t want this to sound like a gripe, but I’m noticing a trend in the Clifftop contests that seems to be leading away from Appalachian style old-time music. Many of the attendees of all ages emulate the contest winners, take home recordings of the finals, and hold these as examples of what and how to play, and thus the contest becomes quite influential. It’s natural for the judges to hold criteria such as tone and pitch as being necessary elements in their decisions, but to set these above the “old-time” or “Appalachian” sound and style changes the nature of old-time music. Now there is quite a range of contest criteria, and one can find at one end of the spectrum the “Western” or Weiser style of contest, which in itself is very interesting, technical, and difficult, and which gives tone, pitch, and inventiveness a large percentage of credit, but most of us who play old-time music would admit that the Weiser contest style is not Appalachian in feeling, which might be at the other end of the spectrum. I’ve felt that the Clifftop contests have reflected a more Appalachian approach to music, but in recent years that seems to be changing.

This year in the finals I heard one contestant play a tune that comes from a wonderful West Virginia fiddler, but it was nearly unrecognizable. It had the downbeat where the upbeat should be, and the second part seemed to have a Miles Davis approach to the melody. Another finalist also played a tune from another celebrated West Virginia fiddler, but sacrificed the wonderful droney “Scots” sound of the original for chords and double stops which changed the nature of the tune completely.

I must say they all played with beautiful tone on fine instruments (although one played a fiddle that was certainly not traditional, having five strings), right on pitch, some of them were obviously classically trained, and they certainly deserved some sort of recognition, but I did not hear anything which I would call Appalachian, neither in style nor melody.

One judge I spoke with had similar feelings, and blamed it on the judging criteria issued them prior to the contest. Many people who heard the finals shared similar feelings about the style of play. There
are many aspects to old-time music, and some people feel that trying to play like the old-timers is not creative, or is uninteresting, and perhaps lackluster, and that the form as a folk tradition should change with the generations. As someone put it, “Why copy somebody else”? There is something to be said for this approach. For instance, is the Western style of fiddling a viable form? Of course it is. It’s a unique and wonderful style with a whole world of adherents. But it isn’t Appalachian by any means.

Likewise the music in the finals lacked certain definite characteristics we think of as Appalachian. The playing was clean, but very modern sounding, and the tune versions either lacked the spark, intonation, or melodic structure of the originals, or if played up-tempo were too smooth, and in a modern “contest” style. Old-time Appalachian music must be connected to the past or it wouldn’t be “old-time”. The versions we play in a large part come originally from musicians who were born in the 1800s, and who in turn learned from their elders. There is much power in this system of learning, and in these early tune versions and styles, and yet these musicians of old were individually unique personalities, and their music managed to reflect both the tradition and themselves. While one can try to play exactly like Melvin Wine, Ed Haley, or Edden Hammons, for instance, one’s personal touch will always shine through, for better or worse.

This music has deep historical meaning. It’s from and about people who lived closer to the earth, who shared skills essential to their survival, and whose music echoed that culture in feeling, tempo, and power, and I think the Clifftop festival should be reflecting that. Let’s honor the ancients, and revere the old versions, as there is something essential in them that is still important and valuable to us. Let’s not be rewarding music at the Appalachian String Band Festival that disregards these values. Let’s keep Clifftop Appalachian and old-time.

**Correction:**

Thanks to George King for the historical photographs of Stranger Malone in the last issue.
Here & There

Events

Matt Brown will give a workshop and house concert at the home of Bill Goldberg and Suzanne Gates in York, Pennsylvania, on Saturday, November 7. The workshop, which will take place from 2:30 to 5:30 PM, is geared towards intermediate-level fiddlers, and costs $50. Dinner is provided for workshop participants. Space is limited to twelve, so pre-registration is encouraged. Entry to the concert, which begins at 8:00 PM, costs $10. For reservations, contact Bill or Suzanne at (717) 259-0319 or susanneandbill@verizon.net.

A fiddlers’ convention will take place November 20-21 at the Hickory Metro Convention Center in Hickory, North Carolina. Contests include old-time and bluegrass band, old-time and bluegrass fiddle, old-time and bluegrass banjo, mandolin, guitar, and vocals. For information contact A. J. and Jill Kirby at (828) 781-5920, (828) 396-2052, or simscountrycloggers@yahoo.com, or visit www.clognc.com.

Dare to be Square West will take place December 12-14 this year in Seattle, Washington. This year’s event features caller Bob Dalsemer, with music by the Tallboys and the Small Wonder Stringband. For details, visit www.bubbaguitar.com/d2bs/event.html.

An old-time square dance weekend will be held January 15-17, 2010, at Cheaha State Park near Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama. Callers will be Phil Jamison and Scott Russell, and music will be by Red Mountain, Peavine Creek Stringband, and the Yahoos. The event, sponsored by Birmingham FOOTMAD (www.footmadbirmingham.org), costs $80 plus housing. (Participants must make their own housing arrangements with Cheaha State Park, www.alapark.com.) For information, contact Susan Davis at (404) 377-6242 or sdcountrycloggers@yahoo.com.

There is a weekly old-time jam Wednesday nights from 7:30 pm to 10 pm at the Green Bean Coffeehouse, 341 S. Elm St. in downtown Greensboro, NC. For more information e-mail gamble18@gmail.com.

On the Air

Yew Piney Mountain, an old-time music radio show hosted by Norbert Sarsfield, can be heard Wednesdays from 6 – 7 PM CST on KRUI 89.7 FM in Iowa City, Iowa. The show also streams live at www.kruiradio.org/listen.

Congratulations

Winners at this year’s Sparta Fiddlers’ Convention were as follows. Old-time band: Slate Mountain Ramblers, Ararat, VA; Turkey Knob Boys, Independence, VA; Local Honey, Traphill, NC; Smokey Valley Boys, Mount Airy, NC; Grayson County Dare Devils, Elk Creek, VA. Bluegrass band: Narrow Road, Mount Airy, NC; Loose Ends, Cana, VA; Double Overtime, Dobson, NC; Creek Junction, Warrensville, NC; New Tradition, Mocksville, NC. Junior Band: JAM Rejects, Sparta, NC; 1st Tyme Out, Ennice, NC; Mountain Thunder, Max Meadows, VA; Bethesda Bluegrass Boys, Durham, NC; The Lonely Rangers, Sparta, NC. Autoharp: Joanne Redd, Galax, VA; Mary Umbarger, Harmony, NC; Ros Wynne-Roberts, Hillsville, VA; Nellie Zuhlke, Galax, VA; Judy Sipes, Lake Junaluska, NC. Old-Time Banjo: Mark Freed, Boone, NC; Nancy Sluys, Westfield, NC; Brien Fain, Mount Airy, NC; Marsha Todd, Mount Airy, NC; Michael Fox, Hickory, NC. Bluegrass banjo: Jeremy Stevens, Danville, VA; Eric Hardin, Warrensville, NC; Steve Lewis, Todd, NC; Jimmy Paschal, Yadkinville, NC; Matthew Turman, Eden, NC. Junior Banjo: Jared Boyd, Laurel Fork, VA; Stephanie Gibson, Galax, VA; Jackson Hagwood, Durham, NC. Bass: Andy Blevins, Bristol, VA; Marty Miller, Dobson, NC; David Chrisley, Wytheville, VA; Jerry Stenburg, Union Grove, NC; Loyd Richardson, Warrensville, NC. Junior Bass: Caleb Hagwood, Durham, NC; Katie Hackett, Ferguson, NC. Dobro: Tom Costner, Pilot Mountain, NC; Billy Bourne, Fries, VA; Robert Ellis, Mocksville, NC; Jacob T. Jones, Millers Creek, NC; Pammy Davis, Pleasant Garden, NC. Dulcimer: Richard Pardue, Salisbury, NC; Dick Lamb, Keezletown, VA; Tim Thornton, Shawsville, NC; Debbie Toney, Ellenboro, NC. Old-time Fiddle: Jake Krack, Orma, WV; Brian Grim, Independence, VA; Erika Godfrey, Mount Airy, NC; Cecil Gurganus, Todd, NC; A. G. Edmonds, Pilot Mountain, NC. Bluegrass fiddle: Lindsey Nichols, Mount Airy, NC; Frank Nifong, Advance, NC; Jordon G. Blevins, Whitetop, VA; Butch Barker, Lansing, NC; Keith Dunn, Mocksville, NC. Junior fiddle: Samantha Snyder, Lexington, NC; Daniel Greeson, Jamestown, NC; Kate Rhudy, Raleigh, NC. Guitar: Zeb Snyder, Lex-
ingston, NC; Jared Sweet, Pounding Mill, VA; Tony King, Galax, VA; Austin Mikeal, Lansing, NC; Danny Castevens, Mocksville, NC. Junior guitar: Jeffrey Roten, Ennice, NC; Chip Moyer, Sparta, NC; Colby Holcomb, Thurmond, NC. Harmonica: Glen Zuhlke, Galax, VA; Daniel Moore, King, NC; Wayne Childress, High Point, NC; Milton Scott, Thurmond, NC; Paul Hiatt, High Point, NC. Mandolin: Connor Lambert, Troutman, NC; Terry Bullin, Elkin, NC; Teddy White, Carthage, NC; Ronald Davis, Hillsville, VA; Jimmy Holder, Union Grove, NC. Junior mandolin: Adam McPeak, Max Meadows, VA; Connor Hagwood, Durham, NC; Justin Willey, Sparta, NC. Vocal: Shelby Mahaffey, Riner, VA; Tommy Connor, Elliston, VA; Jessie Lovell, Fries, VA; Tommy Nichols, Mount Airy, NC; Jeanne Farlow, Trinity, NC. Senior dance: Gladys Williams, Galax, VA; Marsha Todd, Mount Airy, NC; Barbara Bowman, Ararat, VA; Marty Todd, Mount Airy, NC; Danny Easum, Pehook VA; Junior dance: Brianna Dillon, Wirtz, VA; Samantha Wilhelmi, Riner, VA; Makenzie Maitland, Traphill, NC; Ben Huysman, Sparta, NC; Hunter Stewart, Bristol, TN. Children’s dance (participants, not scored): Kitty Amaral, Elk Creek, VA; Matthew Bumgardner, Galax, VA; Ciara Pierce, Roaring River, NC; Olivia Phipps, Independence, VA.

 Winners at this year’s Appalachian String Band Festival (Clifftop, WV) were as follows. Fiddle: Tatiana Hargreaves, Corvallis, OR; Eric Merrrill, New Haven, CT; Emily Schaad, Rhinebeck, NY; Stephanie Coleman, Brooklyn, NY; Rafe Stefani, Elkins Park, PA. Youth Fiddle: Tatiana Hargreaves, Corvallis, OR; Isaac Akers, Chapel Hill, NC; Tessa Dillon, St. Albans, WV. Senior Fiddle: Lester Mccumber, Nicut, WV; Henry the Fiddler, Denver, CO; Walt Koken, Avondale, PA. Banjo: Adam Hurt, Kernersville, NC; Walt Koken, Avondale, PA; Rick Good, Spring Valley, OH; Bob Smakula, Elkins, WV; Nancy Sluys, Westfield, NC. Youth Banjo: Jesse Reist, Lancaster, PA; Brennan Ernst, Luckets, VA; Jared Boyd, Laurel Fork, VA. Senior Banjo: Walt Koken, Avondale, PA; Marvin Gaster, Sanford, NC; JimmyMcCown, Hardy, KY. Traditional Band: The Bailers, Greenville, WV; The Yeah Buddies, Spring Valley, OH; Orpheus Supertones, Avondale, PA; Uncle Henry’s Favorites, Free Union, VA; The Tights, Ithaca, NY. Neo-Traditional Band: Nora Jane Struthers and Her Band, Nashville, TN; The Boston Collective, Boston, MA; The Old-Time Liberation Constituency, Lancaster, PA; Mando Mafia, Charlottsville, VA; Green Willis, Mountain View, AR. Best Original Song: Nora Jane Struthers and Her Band, Nashville, TN. Best Original Tune: Mando Mafia, Charlottsville, VA. Old-Time Flat-Foot Dance, 15 years of age and under: Rebecca Molaro, Asheville, NC; Lulu Furtado, Front Royal, VA; Samantha Thomason, Hellam, PA. Old-Time Flat-Foot Dance, 16 years of age through 40: Josephine Stewart, Charlottsville, VA; Ryan Clover-Owens, Ithaca, NY; Joel O’Brien, Nashville, TN. Old-Time Flat-Foot Dance - 41 years of age through 59: Ira Bernstein, Asheville, NC; Jay Bland, Kennesaw, GA; Jane Henderson, Bloomington, IN. Old-Time Flat-Foot Dance - 60 years of age and older: Daniel Butner, Winston-Salem, NC; Mary Butner, Winston-Salem, NC; Carole Bendick, Winfield, PA.

 Winners at the Fries (VA) Fiddlers’ Convention were as follows. Old-Time Band: Grim Sheepers; Pilot M. Bobcats; Pinnacle Mt. Breakdown; Crooked Road Ramblers; Virginia Creepers. Bluegrass Band: Creek Junction; Mountain Legend Express; Rakstraw Express; Kadzoo; New Ridge Bluegrass. Old-Time Fiddle: Brian Grim; Jake Krack; Richard Bowman; Kilby Spencer; Jerry Correll. Bluegrass Fiddle: Jordan Blevins; Butch Barkman; Kilby Spencer; Jerry Correll. Bluegrass Fiddle: Jordan Blevins; Butch Barkman; Kilby Spencer; Jerry Correll. Bluegrass Fiddle: Jordan Blevins; Butch Barkman; Kilby Spencer; Jerry Correll. Bluegrass Fiddle: Jordan Blevins; Butch Barkman; Kilby Spencer; Jerry Correll.
Mike Seeger died at his home in Lexington, Virginia, on the evening of August 7, 2009, six days before his 76th birthday. He had been living with cancer for more than a decade. Over the long course of his illness, he continued his life’s work as a performing musician, music collector, advocate for old-time music, and documenter of Southern traditional music and dance. He maintained an active solo performing career from his early twenties to the end of his life. In 1958, he was a founding member of the New Lost City Ramblers, a string band that fueled an international revival of interest in old-time music that continues today. Paul Brown offers this appreciation.

It would be nearly impossible to list accurately the total of Mike Seeger’s contributions to the world of old-time music, American cultural and social history, and the lives of the people around him. It is probably safe to say, however, that he did more than any other single person in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to spread the word about old-time music, to provide opportunities to the traditional musicians who made it, and to encourage new generations of players. Those younger people whom he helped show the way were profoundly important to him. In his final weeks, he told reporter and musician Keith Brand for an NPR radio story that his real satisfaction was “for all the people who are playing the music.” And when I visited him a week before his death with my wife Terri McMurray and friends Mary and David Winston, he was moved to tears as he described what had become his greatest joy at the annual Appalachian String Band Music Festival in West Virginia: walking down the lane in the wooded campsite area where he saw people playing and heard music coming from every direction.

Mike told me and others – including filmmaker Yasha Aginsky in the new film on the New Lost City Ramblers, Always Been a Rambler, that he was fortunate in his upbringing. Not only was he born into a family of musicologists, folklorists, scholars, and performers, it was a family that affirmed taking action, had a sense of mission, and surrounded itself with interesting characters. His father, the musicologist Charles Seeger, started out as a proponent of so-called high culture who came to value traditional music and its players strongly. His mother, Ruth Crawford Seeger, was a composer who also cared deeply about old-time songs and tunes. She transcribed many of Charles’ field recordings, and Mike recalled that there was frequently singing at home. Mike’s older half-brother Pete had become addicted to the banjo as a teenager and had embarked on a career as a musician in the service of social activism – a career that brought him both fame and hardship as he found himself with secure positions on blacklists during the McCarthy era and beyond. A sister, Peggy, followed a path that was similar in some respects. As for house guests, Mike casually recalled to me people such as the painter Thomas Hart Benton and members of the renowned family of pioneering folklorists, the Lomaxes. My conversations with Mike over the years clearly revealed his basic understanding that he should pursue whatever interested him, and that to do anything less was something of a waste of the gift of life.

Pursue his interests he did. He started seriously playing music relatively late, at age eighteen. But since he’d already heard lots of music, including his father’s field recordings on aluminum discs at home, he had a good leg up on the task of learning instruments. People around him recall that before long, he was a whiz on banjo, mandolin, and guitar. He took up the fiddle, the autoharp, the jew’s harp. With his parents and their friends having modeled the behavior, he started to record traditional musicians in the Washington, DC, area where he lived at around age twenty. By this time he was playing early-style bluegrass, and swimming in the intense stew of old-time, country, gospel, and bluegrass music that was part of the DC soundscape. The stew became ever stronger as people continued pouring in from the mountain South looking for work, and met urban kids and young adults hooked on folk music and its relatives.

Then, as it emerged in several conversations over our thirty-year friendship, he came to recognize that he was in what could be a lifelong love affair with the older sounds. He said something similar to journalist Keith Brand: “I realized old-time Southern music was really what I wanted to play, because it had so much history that went back into the old, old songs.” To filmmaker Aginsky, he recalled, “Mainer’s Mountaineers and Uncle Dave Macon, Carter Family. That’s what I loved.”

Many of us love things, but tend to keep them for ourselves, perhaps polishing them, or putting them to use largely for our own benefit. But Mike, as he pursued a performing career with great energy, did much more than that. He lived the family sense of mission by documenting old-time musicians. He also expanded it by bringing them and their art before new audiences.

This sort of thing had been done before – most notably perhaps by John and Alan Lomax in the case of Leadbelly. But the New Lost City Ramblers, and Mike on his own, took it to a new level. In doing so, they bridged chasms of culture and time, helping urban audiences start to understand real country music and musicians while groups such as the Kingston Trio focused more on pure entertainment and their own financial success. Mike and the Ramblers affirmed the values, art, and...
lives of the rural musicians at a time when their music was forgotten or dismissed, often even in their local communities.

Affirmation can be a very powerful thing. When I worked at mountain music radio station WPAQ in the early 1980s, the owner, Ralph Epperson, told me one evening that one of his greatest satisfactions was being able to affirm publicly the value of old-time music by putting local musicians on the air for thousands of people to hear, while the mainstream radio industry shunned them in favor of the Nashville country music jukebox. He said that a number of older musicians had mentioned to him that performing on his station had given them new enthusiasm for life, and a new sense of worth in the world.

Mike Seeger practiced the same affirmation throughout his career. First with the Ramblers, and on his own as the Ramblers performed less regularly, he went to great effort to present older musicians on stage and communicate to audiences a sense of their value. He sought out people who seemed to have disappeared, such as the stunning banjoist and singer Dock Boggs. He championed bluegrass pioneers the Stanley Brothers and Bill Monroe as they struggled to make a living against the onslaught of rock and roll and commercial country music. He realized that the housekeeper in his own home as a child, Elizabeth Cotten, was a musician of astounding interest who needed to be heard. He helped her build a career that took her around the world.

And as he appeared with these artists at venues ranging from the Newport Folk Festival to small house concerts and local radio shows, he consistently celebrated them and their achievements, rather than pursuing adulation for himself. My NPR colleague Corey Flintoff recalls that when he worked at a public radio station in Alaska many years ago, Mike and Libba Cotten performed live one day on his show. But Flintoff says he now realizes he didn’t pay anywhere near the attention he probably should have to Mike – because Mike, who could have tried to steal the show or at least compete for notice, was quietly, assiduously directing the attention elsewhere. Flintoff recalls, “Mike stayed in the background, except where he could interject to shine some other light on Libba Cotten and her music. I should add that she, in her quiet way, seemed to be having a really good time because Mike had made these tours possible for her.”

Older generations were not the only ones to benefit from Mike’s drive to share and champion the art and lives of others. His contemporaries, such as the West Virginia-born singer Hazel Dickens, and younger musicians felt the same impact. One of the most common responses I hear from these younger players when I ask for their thoughts about Mike is, “He changed my life.” For example, banjo player Stefan Senders says meeting Mike resulted in a sudden ninety-degree turn in the direction of his life, sending him into a joyous period of learning banjo, hanging out with old-timers, and broadening his view of music and the world. “He heard me and somehow conveyed a kind of respect and recognition and just picked me up right there and supported me…” Then he said, ‘You know, you should go listen to Tommy Jarrell.’ I said, ‘Are you kidding? I thought he was dead.’ He said, ‘No no, you’ve got to do that.’ And he invited me to his house, and he took me down to see Tommy and introduced me to people.” Senders also recalls Mike as a memorably careful listener who would hear things in Senders’ playing that were unique and valuable, and tell him so.

I certainly experienced all of this myself. I met Mike quite by accident one afternoon at Tommy’s home in North Carolina. We talked for a while, started playing music with Tommy, and quickly became musical companions and fast friends. Somewhat to my surprise, he soon invited me to join him on recordings, to perform with him and with some of the old-timers, and form a band with him and Andy Cahan – the Bent Mountain Band. Mike didn’t have to do any of this. But he chose to. Affirmation and example from Mike and Ralph Epperson, not to mention my friend and fellow collector Ray Alden, helped me strengthen commitments that still dominate my life – public service, documenting, interpreting, presenting, and celebrating the work of others.

Mike’s mission-driven life didn’t come without costs. He recalled to filmmaker Aginsky that for part of the first year of the Ramblers, he and his young family were homeless, staying with friends and relatives, as he forged ahead on what he called a combination of ignorance and hope. He had trouble sleeping. In the earlier days of my friendship with him, he could often be nervous, anxious, uptight, tough to deal with, both socially and when we were preparing music to perform. But people of extreme focus, brilliance, and commitment often come with extreme characteristics of all sorts. I found accepting these aspects of Mike, as his friend, was well worth it. His eccentricities were certainly no more challenging than many other people’s, including, I would assume, my own.

As Mike aged, he became steadily more mellow. He seemed to realize that he had some significant accomplishments to his name, and appeared more and more at ease with himself and others. Photos and films bear this out. In the early days, he displays an earnest, almost unsettlingly serious intensity. In later images and film, he’s equally intense, but frequently smiling, laughing, and joking. He became yet more generous and even more willing to fade into the background in public situations. Many of us who saw him at fiddlers’ conventions or parties, even at his own home, took notice of the fact that when he joined a jam session, he was often as not on the edge, playing an accompanying instrument.

He could easily have big-footed these sessions. But banjo player David Winston of Lexington, Virginia, remembers something quite different when Mike showed up at local music gatherings after he moved to the area in the early 1980s. “He’d really focus on who was playing and show his appreciation for the music that was being produced by those people he lived near.” Winston says Mike might look at the group of musicians and go out to his car and get a banjo-ukulele.

“He’s a guy who had masterful command of every instrument that’s used in the music, and had no interest at all in showing anyone how proficient he might be. He wanted to make the best music that could be made in that situation. So he would go and get the appropriate instrument, find a comfortable chair, and start playing. A smile would spread across his face, and the music became better. His presence was one of how to elevate the situation, not how to show people how proficient he was. And that’s a gift, not just a musical gift, but the gift of a lifetime, to have that message conveyed.”

As far back as the decade of his fifties, Mike had a sense of the limited span of life. At that time, he remarked to me that there were certain things he wanted to accomplish, and he would be sacrificing some other activities. I was a little surprised, because I did not normally hear such talk from people his age.

Then he sailed into the list in an unstoppable manner. He phoned one day, and
asked what I thought of the idea of a music festival in the South run by and for musicians, with no contests – something like a Brandywine South, as he called it. I told him I thought it was great. The next thing I knew, in 1986, he had founded the Rockbridge Mountain Music and Dance Festival. He immediately started handing over its operation to the community of musicians around him. The festival continues today, a living, evolving gift from Mike.

He decided traditional Southern flatfoot dancing hadn’t been adequately documented, and set out to rectify that before the old dancers were gone – just as he’d done with autoharp players decades before. The result was the video documentary *Talking Feet*.

Largely in the spacious, cluttered, and fascinating work room at his home, he recorded two impressive albums, life statements in a way, one each devoted to Southern guitar and banjo styles. He archived his field recordings. And finally, he started an ambitious video project, recording banjo players in the South – most of them younger than he. It remains unfinished.

Along the way, he became ill. Those of us who were his friends watched him handle his affliction with grace, and saw with amazement that he never stopped performing or documenting.

I tried to give him some space to accomplish the tasks he felt were important, because I’d spent so many priceless hours with him already. But in 2006, when I was pulling together a new album, I realized that for three of the songs, no other guitar player could possibly do. I asked if he would help me if I promised not to take more than one day of his time. He agreed, partly because two of the songs came from old-timers we had known together, and a third from my own family’s tradition, which he never ceased to celebrate.

I arrived at his house. He looked a bit wan, but he was enthusiastic. We worked through the morning and into the afternoon. He played magnificently. I ran into momentary trouble with the singing of one of the songs. As usual, he was encouraging. By the end of the afternoon, we’d nailed them all. When I listen back to the album, the guitar work still sends shivers up my spine. Mike said that on one of the songs, from the Ward family, he was trying to recall the playing of our mutual friend Fields Ward. He succeeded in that, of course, but with his own striking yet unpretentious identity clearly audible.

What he demonstrated that day was what he had consistently encouraged in all of us: respect for tradition, taking the responsibility to be genuinely creative, and a certain level of humility.

In our final visit with him a week before he died, Mike was happy to talk about music, but he didn’t want to hear any more of it. “I just want quiet,” he said, which was what he had in his big old house on a wooded hillside surrounded by trees, shrubs, and flowers. He was clearly grateful for his many friendships.

We departed understanding that as his life flickered away, he was leaving it up to all of us -- those who happened to be close to him and thousands of people he’d never met -- to continue the music, the collecting, and the affirming.

Mike Seeger is survived by his wife, Alexia Smith; three sons from his first marriage, to Marge Marash: Kim, Chris, and Jeremy; and four stepchildren: Cory, Jenny, Jesse, and Joel, whose mother is Mike’s second wife, Alice Gerrard.

Paul Brown is a musician and music collector. He knew and worked with Mike Seeger for thirty years. He is a newscaster, reporter, and producer at NPR in Washington.
Pete Seeger and later the New Lost City Ramblers always featured singing as a main ingredient in their performances and recordings. Pete’s recordings, whether from the political side (Folkways’ 1941 LP Talking Union and Other Union Songs), those for children (Folkways’ 1951 LP Songs to Groove On), or with a group (Vanguard LP The Weavers Songbook), focused on songs. Only rarely did solo instrumental LPs appear, such as Folkways’ 1954 LP The Goofing Off Suite. Continuing with the singing tradition, from 1958 to 1961 Folkways issued several LPs (The New Lost City Ramblers, The New Lost City Ramblers Volume II, Songs from the Depression, Old-Timey Songs for Children, The New Lost City Ramblers Volume III), all of which concentrated on songs with only the infrequent instrumental (“Black Mountain Rag,” “Colored Aristocracy”).

In 1968, just before large numbers of musicians joined the old-time music revival, the Hollow Rock String Band (Alan Jabbour, Bertram Levy, Tommy and Bobbie Thompson) from the Durham-Chapel Hill area of North Carolina issued an LP of old-time string band music involving artists most influenced by fiddler Henry Reed. They featured tunes such as “Richmond Cotillion,” “Betty Likens,” “Monkey Musk,” “Folding Down the Sheets,” and “Over the Waterfall.” The Fuzzy Mountain String Band, another string band formed in the same area and influenced by the Hollow Rock String Band, released its first LP on Rounder in 1971. Their second LP soon followed, titled Summer Oaks & Porch. Numerous changing members included Bill Hicks, Vicky and Malcolm Owen, Eric Olson, Banton Owen, Tom Carter, Dave Crowder, JoAnn Stokes, Dick Zaffron, and Sharon Sandomirsky. Instrumentals were again the prime focus, and members of the band made visits to record old-time fiddlers and banjoists so that that virtually all their repertoire was learned first-hand. Featured tunes such as “Shooting Creek,” “Double File,” “Old Sledge,” “Sally Ann,” “The 28th of January,” and “Green Willis” were learned from Southern musicians such as Gaither Carlton, Frank George, Burl Hammons, Tommy Jarrell, Taylor Kimble, and Oscar Wright.

It is perhaps the timing of the release of these instrumental LPs, combined with the influx of Northern musicians, somewhat more accustomed to singing than if they had grown up with song as occurred in the South, that tilted the balance of old-time banjo toward that of use primarily as accompaniment to the fiddle rather than the voice. One of the notable exceptions for using the banjo only to accompany the fiddle is that of New Jersey native old-time banjo player Mac Benford. As Mac wrote to me, “I moved to California’s Bay Area in 1967, and began my professional performing career with the much-beloved Dr. Humbead’s New Tranquility String Band and Medicine Show. This group specialized in the recreation of the old-time music captured on 78 rpm records from the 1920s, most especially that of Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers.” Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers were a singing band, and Mac sang many of their songs, some of which can be heard from this exact era in California on the Field Recorders’ Collective’s FRC609, Berkeley in the ‘60s. For Mac, the primary goal was not an academic exercise to recreate the music precisely, but, as he says, “It was all about fun for us and fun for our audiences.”

Mac became equally adept at using the banjo to accompany fiddle tunes, as developed in a later band. As John Lupton writes of this development:

Among the bands that eked out a living busking on the streets was the All-Skate, a band that performed on stilts, and that included fiddler Bob Potts, and the Busted Toe Mudthumpers, featuring fiddle and banjo veteran Walt Koken. When these respective bands and Dr. Humbead’s New Tranquility String Band dissolved at about the same time, all three of them came together as Fat City, a string band specializing in driving fiddle-and-banjo tunes from the repertoires of such early country recording artists as the Skillet Lickers and the Georgia Yellow Hammers. Having two fiddles in the band was unusual enough, but the ability of Potts and Koken to play differing yet complementary styles made Fat City one of the more distinctive outfits in the Bay Area.

A third variation of involving singing with the instrumental abilities of the banjo comes from combining efforts, such as the teaming up of instrumentalist Adam Hurt and singer-guitarist Beth Hartness. Adam was mentioned in an earlier installment of this article as an exponent of the melodic clawhammer style. Adam heard Beth, a guitarist and singer who grew up in the South, on an anthology CD of the Appalachian String Band Festival (commonly called “Clifftop”) and connected with her at a festival. As a team, they go to festivals and give concerts in which both instrumental and vocals can be featured.

The Third Choice: To clawhammer or finger-pick the banjo

As mentioned at the very beginning of this article, if attending an old-time festival, one hears mainly clawhammer banjo playing, but also finger-picking styles. All of the early urban pioneers had to deal with this choice, and usually chose to be able to play in both styles. This choice continued for a while among early revivalists such as Mac Benford. Mac Benford was born in 1940 in southern New Jersey, where his grandfather had worked recording Enrico Caruso for RCA in Camden. While attending college in the late
1950s to early ’60s, Mac became caught up in the folk music boom. At first he heard the Weavers and the Kingston Trio. In the summer of 1959, sailing camp counselor Jack Grant of the Yale folk group exposed Mac to more traditional styles through the New Lost City Ramblers, Dave Macon, and Folkways recordings. Listening to now-classic recordings such as the Harry Smith anthology, Mac said, “when you listen to old 78s, you hear more finger-picking style than clawhammer.” At the time, Mac noticed that the then-current bluegrass style had “the old feeling.” Moving to Berkeley, California, in 1967, Mac was thrown in with good players who had started to make a living through music, and started trying to play in a three-finger bluegrass banjo style. Nonetheless, everyone saw his technique as an old-time finger-picking style. Although on many of Mac’s recordings you will hear him play in the clawhammer style, recently he has had a renewed interest in the finger-picking style. Mac feels that while for years Tommy Jarrell and Fred Cockerham created a “hot wave” for clawhammer, later on, as people listened to Document CD reissues of 78 rpm records, it may have started a “finger-picking is cool” movement. Ironically, Mac also noticed that for many in the bluegrass camp, promoted by players such as Ralph Stanley and Tony Trischka, a “clawhammer is cool” movement has gained ground.

Another urban banjo player who came to play mostly in the old-time finger-picking style was Tom Legenhausen, banjo player with the Canebrake Rattlers. I asked Tom how he learned and developed his style.

Playing with the Canebrake Rattlers, the main influence on my playing was— not surprisingly—records. I started playing banjo in high school. I wanted a guitar, and was interested in Bob Dylan’s early records. However, a distant uncle had recently died, and there was an old banjo in his attic. My parents persuaded my aunt to give me the old banjo for Christmas. I still remember my profound disappointment when I opened the old canvas case to find a tarnished old Sears banjo. It was an old open-back with 30 brackets, and plastic violin pegs, guaranteed not to stay in tune. Nevertheless, I thanked my aunt profusely, got a copy of Pete Seeger’s book, and started to learn. I knew nothing about the banjo, bluegrass, or old-time music. In keeping with my family’s frugal ways, I started taking records out of the New York Pub-
lic Library. They had a lot of older Folkways records, so I was soon introduced to Clarence Ashley and Doc Watson, Dock Boggs, and Wade Ward. However, I was totally taken by Earl Scruggs. I found a copy of Foggy Mountain Banjo. I remember putting the record on for the first time—“Ground Speed” came first, and I was totally captivated. I quit the high school track team so I could spend my afternoons working through the Earl Scruggs’ instruction book.

The next record that made a major difference to me was one of the Newport Folk Festival albums that featured Bill Keith. By now I understood, in general, what Scruggs was doing, but melodic style seemed totally new, and was another mystery. I had saved my money from a summer job, and wanted to take some banjo lessons. I found Roger Sprung in the telephone book—the only teacher in New York that gave banjo top billing over guitar. I took lessons for over a year, and for a little while spent most of my time playing fiddle tunes in Roger’s melodic banjo style. During this high school bluegrass period, Pat Conte was the only person in our school who seemed to understand what I was trying to do. Pat was playing bluegrass, but was collecting everything. I’d go to his house and listen to records–Muddy Waters, and Little Walter—and Pat would loan me Flatt and Scruggs records. We were also listening to old-time music. Pat and I went to the Smokey Green Bluegrass Festival in Upstate New York. Although it was a bluegrass festival, old-time music was in the air. Ralph Stanley was playing some clawhammer in his sets. Stover and Sprung held a banjo workshop. Although the audience probably expected more discussion of bluegrass technique, Pat and I peppered them with questions about clawhammer playing. Don Stover was a good clawhammer player—his “Things in Life” was still a new tune. Sprung is also a good clawhammer player, and they showed us the basics.

The following September, I started college at Cornell. I met Al Lubanes who played old time banjo, and Dan Kornblum, an old-time fiddler, the first week. I was really excited to meet other players interested in playing fiddle tunes. Ithaca was a good place for music at the time. For bluegrass, there was Country Cooking and Tony Trischka. For old-time, there was the Highwoods String Band, up the road in Trumansburg, and the Swamproot String Band visited often. John Specker soon came to town—he and Danny started the Correctone String Band. Bruce Molsky came to town as an amazing guitarist, and quickly became an amazing clawhammer banjo player, and then an amazing fiddler. I was in transition from bluegrass to old-time music. I liked playing fiddle tunes, and soon decided it made more sense to play them in old-time styles, rather than melodic bluegrass. I went to Galax with Al Lubanes, Danny Kornblum, and the Correctones. The most influential records for me at the time were Volume Two of the County Clawhammer [Banjo] records, Wade Ward’s Uncle Wade album, the Tommy Jarrell, Fred Cockerham, and Oscar Jenkins records. I was also starting to learn old-time finger picking. I was listening to Snuffy Jenkins’ Rounder album, but the single
most influential tune for me was Wade Ward’s version of “Ragtime Annie.” That tune—the bass runs, and simple rolls—was a great introduction to Poole-style banjo. At first, my Poole-style playing sounded like bluegrass—it was much too smooth. After a year or two of playing almost exclusively clawhammer style, my Poole-style playing started to sound more old-time, with more rhythmic accents.

While I was getting deeper into old-time music in Ithaca, Pat Conte was playing more old-time music in New York. After I graduated, I moved back to New York, and Pat and I began playing more. Mark Farrell started playing with us, and during the following summer, we played in Central Park almost every Sunday. We had our cases open for change, with inconsistent results. I remember one Sunday when the only contributor was the proprietor of a hot dog cart, who took pity on us and gave us some free hot dogs for a day’s playing. We were playing all old-time music by then—tunes from Clarence Ashley, Tommy Jarrell, and 78s. Pat had the entire County Records reissue series. Later that summer, we met Bill Dillof at the South Street Seaport String Band Contest. We were fairly compulsive about the new band. We picked out a few of our favorite old-time recordings, and started to work on them. We practiced as much as two or three nights a week. We’d play, listening to the original 78 versions of the songs, and play them again. Any dispute was settled by reference to the 78 recording. It was fun, and a great way to learn the older styles. We tried to pay close attention, not only to the fiddle parts, but also to the guitar and banjo parts. We did not want to simply back up the fiddle, we were trying to convey the band sound that attracted us to a particular recording. Rather than develop one style of playing, I’ve tried to learn whatever style fit a particular song. Pat, Bill, and I all spent a lot of time trying to decipher the mysteries of the various old styles. We spent a lot of time listening to Uncle Dave Macon, Frank and Oscar Jenkins, Marion Underwood, Wade Ward, and Charlie Poole, trying to figure out what they were doing. Because so many of the early band recordings feature finger-picked banjo, I’ve spent a lot of time trying to learn the various styles I heard. That is a never-ending struggle, and a never-ending pleasure, since there were so many different styles and variations used by the players.
If you attend an old-time festival, one person you likely will hear playing banjo in the old-time picking style is Gail Gillespie, former editor of the *Old-Time Herald*. I asked Gail how she came to play in that style, and she wrote:

My first banjo was a no-name loaner from Bernard Michelle, an Airman at Eglin AFB, where my family lived in the '60s. In 1963, Bernard, who was a machinist and was building aluminum-rim banjos in the style of Ode, loaned me a ramshackle “attic” banjo. I had first heard a lot of non-bluegrass banjo playing on New Lost City Ramblers LPs. Based on the sounds I was hearing (mostly Charlie Poole and two-finger styles) combined with hints from the Pete Seeger book, and some finger rolls I knew from guitar, I came up with a basic thumb-lead two-finger style. In the late '60s I learned a generic non-Round Peak style of frailing (from Marty Schuman, who had recorded Florida fiddler Cush Holston). By the '70s, when I first met my husband Dwight [Rogers], we realized my style was too brushy to sound right with a band and at that time it was unthinkable not to play clawhammer. So Dwight, who was developing a really cool brushless band style, was the obvious choice for a banjo player.

Flash forward many years later: in the early '90s carpal tunnel froze the fingers on my left hand, sidelining me from fiddling. At that time I was playing a lot with Alice Gerrard, who was doing a lot of Luther Davis/Emmett Lundy-inspired fiddling. That style—done at a stately pace and with lots of “breathing room”—simply didn’t work with my frailing banjo style. My old two-finger style seemed to work much better.

A class from Kinney Rorrer at Augustina in 1994, a workshop from Tom Sauber a few years later, and many helpful tips from Kirk Sutphin inspired me work on developing it more. Beginning in the late '80s and early '90s, I had begun to pay attention to the local finger-style players of central North Carolina, players such as A. C. Overton. Bob Carlin invited me to tag along on several visits to Piedmont banjo players who finger-picked, and I began to listen to recordings he had discovered of the Cooper Boys, and also to Charlie Poole as well as other less-known local musicians who appeared on his compilation, the North Carolina Banjo Collection.

In the early '90s, Alice and I visited Bert Dickens, who had a spare two-finger style, and we visited and she recorded three-finger banjo player Martin Marshall, who lived near Laurel Fork, Virginia. Martin Marshall combined Charlie Poole-style runs with rolls in a very cool way. My banjo picking is very much a work in progress, but Martin’s playing is the goal I always hold in my head when I play: basically a hybrid of what Marvin Gaster called “flat chording” and the roll style he and A. C. Overton favored. I use three fingers, mostly thumb-lead, mostly drop-C (Charlie Poole) tuning, and I try to keep it rolling steadily and every now and then punctuate with bass runs on the fourth and third strings. And of course I had to learn the neck above the seventh fret—a whole exciting new instrument!”
The South Shall Rise Again

There was a time in which old-time banjo styles became more or less dormant among young people in the South. This began when Earl Scruggs’ dynamic three-finger picking style reverberated throughout the South, soon after he joined Bill Monroe’s Bluegrass Boys in the 1940s. As with banjo player Snuffy Jenkins, Earl perfected his own three-finger style after exposure to rural musicians such as Smith Hammett and Rex Brooks. Virtually every young Southern musician who heard Earl Scruggs and became interested in learning banjo after that date wanted to play in this style. Although Earl’s three-finger style was not radically different from some existing Southern styles, his sense of timing and the chords played up the banjo neck added great excitement to the modification of old-time music into what became known as bluegrass music.

Nonetheless the powerful pull of the Scruggs style was not ubiquitous. One example is George Gibson, who was born in Knott County, Kentucky, near the headwaters of the Big Sandy and Cumberland River systems. George learned an older East Kentucky style of banjo from his father and a few neighbors. George’s grandfather, George W. Gibson, was playing banjo in Knott County in the 1890s. This older East Kentucky style of banjo features different tunings, singing with the banjo, and the use of the left hand to add fill notes.

Another Southern banjo player who developed an old-time three-finger picking style based on family influences rather than the influence of Earl Scruggs was Kinney Rorner. Kinney is also a prime example of a Southerner for whom the banjo is an important accomplishment to the voice. When I asked Kinney how his interest in the banjo and his style developed, he wrote:

When I was a child, back in the 1950s, my dad brought home a stack of 78 rpm records recorded by his uncles Posey Rorner and Charlie Poole. I was captivated by the sound I heard coming from those records. I would often lie on the floor doing my schoolwork as I listened to Charlie Poole’s 78s spinning on my sister’s record player. In addition, my dad played the fiddle and would often sit on the couch playing tunes he learned from Posey. He would also tell me stories of the ten years that he had lived at Charlie Poole’s house as a young boy. In the early 1960s, my interest led to my dad buying me a Maybelle banjo for $10. My younger brother Doug had taken up the guitar and he also had a talent for the banjo. He would listen to the Charlie Poole records and show me how he thought Charlie Poole was playing a particular tune. I would often sit in front of my dad’s victrola with my banjo tuned to one of Charlie’s records. I would then play along with the record, again and again, trying to learn Charlie’s style. My brother and I also watched Don Reno and Red Smiley and Flatt and Scruggs on television on a regular basis. I then sought out people who had played with Charlie Poole. A major influence was Ernest Branch of Marion, Virginia, who had learned in person from Charlie Poole.

Branch had recorded with Poole’s guitar player, Roy Harvey, in 1931. Another major influence was Ted Prillaman, who had played for Charlie Poole to dance and could pretty much duplicate Charlie Poole’s style. Lonnie Austin, who died in 1997, had recorded with Charlie Poole and Lonnie would take time to show me chords on the banjo. Norman Woodliff, Poole’s first guitar player, explained to me how Charlie played without finger picks. My dad also encouraged my brother and me to play old-time music by taking us to the home of Buscom Lamar Lunsford. Lunsford showed me how to play “White House Blues” in the D position on my Maybelle banjo. Other local musicians such as Lewis McDaniel, Grey Craig, and Buster Carter were major influences. My style of playing is probably more like Buster Carter’s than Charlie Poole’s, in fact. I even tried to buy Buster’s Orpheum banjo several times because I wanted to continue his style on the same banjo. Though I never met Reid Rakes, I listened to his style via tapes, as I knew he played with Poole and in fact loaned Poole his banjo for what turned out to be Poole’s final recording session in 1930. I am honored to now own Reid’s banjo.

Though the old-time finger style that Poole played in has not survived in popularity to the degree that clawhammer style has, it does have its fans. I met Kirk Sulphin at the Galax Fiddler Contest in 1984 and I was of course of course greatly impressed with his talent on both fiddle and banjo. He could absolutely duplicate the Poole style better than anyone that I had ever met. We began playing together out of a love for the same music and have been friends...
ever since. In the early 1990s I met nine-year-old Jeremy Stephens who, like Kirk Sutphin, was a master musician. Though Jeremy was a Don Reno fan, he took an interest in the old-time music of Charlie Poole, Tommy Jarrell, and others. Jeremy also learned Roy Harvey’s guitar style, which meshed perfectly with the Poole style of banjo. Jeremy had taken an interest in the music by listening to old 78s played on his babysitter’s victrola. Jeremy had contacted me through a radio show that featured bluegrass and old-time music that I was then doing in Danville, Virginia.

I continue to play the Poole/Carter style with an old-time band that includes a lot of the Piedmont North Carolina old-time music. Our band, the New North Carolina Ramblers, released a CD last year that includes the styles and songs of such North Carolina artists as Charlie Poole, Buster Carter, and Wilmer Watts. I also feature old-time music quite often on a radio show that I do from WVTF-FM (NPR) in Roanoke, Virginia.

Jeremy Stephens is currently one of the youngest Southern banjo players who can play both bluegrass and old-time banjo styles. At age four and a half, Jeremy began fiddle lessons, and bluegrass banjo lessons at age five. This interest in music began at age four when Jeremy’s parents took him to the Ferrum Folk Festival, where they bought him a cassette of country blues with tunes by artists such as Josh Thomas (“Heavy Water Blues”) and Dock Boggs. Much later, Jeremy was influenced by records such as Raymond Fairchild’s bluegrass banjo LP. Beginning in 1989, Jeremy heard Kinney Rorrer’s radio show, and continued to listen to the many old-time records played on the show until 1999, when it went off air. Shortly afterwards, Jeremy called Kinney and made personal contact. In the interim of 1998-1999, at age fifteen, Jeremy began to understand clawhammer banjo and realized the continuity in the old-time and bluegrass styles.

Riley Baugus is a Southern old-time banjo player, also younger than Kinney Rorrer, who became interested in old-time banjo through a different route. When I asked Riley to trace his path to the old-time banjo, he wrote;

My dad loved old-time and bluegrass music and was always buying records. He loved to listen to the Stanley Brothers and Flatt and Scruggs. Whenever there was live music happening at an
outdoor festival, my dad would try to get us there to hear and see the music. I remember listening to music with him and feeling like the musicians were performing magic. I wanted to play music, but I didn’t have any idea how to start. When I was ten the school system began offering a strings class in our school. I wanted to learn to play the fiddle and I thought that was what they were going to teach me, but I soon discovered that they had other plans which included Dvořák and Bach. Growing up in a home which held closely to most of the Blue Ridge mountain traditions and ways of life, I had no real knowledge or love for orchestral music. I did stay in the program for five years and I can say that most of what I learned has been very helpful in my life as a musician.

The following summer I did odd jobs and saved my money until I had enough to go to Sears Roebuck and order a guitar from the catalog. The day it arrived I tuned it as well as I could and played it most of the night. I actually played until my fingers bled. After a few hours of sleep, I woke up and started playing again and played on and off for most of the day. I really wanted it. I wanted to learn banjo as well. We didn’t have very much money and my parents couldn’t afford to buy me a banjo, so my dad and I got together some scrap wood that we had around the house and made a banjo. We went to a local music store and bought an Elton tailpiece and some precut guitar fret wire. We carved the tuning pegs by hand from a stick of split maple firewood. We laid them on the windowsill behind the wood stove to cure them out a bit more. We made the head from a thin piece of plywood and the back as well. My dad rolled a piece of 2½-inch molding into a circle for the rim. For stability he put a piece of plywood on the back too, but we didn’t realize the need for a sound hole. It sounded a bit like an electric guitar without an amplifier, but a bit louder. I learned to play enough on it that my dad saw I had enough determination to learn more. We went down to a pawnshop in downtown Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and bought a used Kay banjo for about $80. I still have both of those banjos.

Kirk Sutphin and I met when I was ten and he was eight. We rode the same school bus. His grandfather played the fiddle and knew Tommy Jarrell. He
started teaching Kirk to play the fiddle around then. I was carrying my violin to school for the strings class and Kirk was taking his fiddle to school for Show-and-Tell. I saw he had one and he saw I had one. We immediately became friends and started going to each other’s house to hang out and play. Not necessarily music, but just to play. We would talk about music and try to play some. We kept this up for a long time. In fact we still get together to play music some thirty-two years later.

I started getting really serious about playing Round Peak-style banjo in about 1982 when I started going up to Tommy’s with Kirk. I loved the way the Round Peak style sounded and I knew that was the style I wanted to play. I had been listening to Dock Boggs and Roscoe Holcomb and Ralph Stanley, learning to play finger-style banjo. Clawhammer fascinated me but was difficult to learn until I actually got to see and hear it up close. When we were up at Tommy’s, sometimes he would play the banjo. It was truly magical. I tried to pay attention very closely. We would sometimes go over to visit Dix Freeman, who was a great man in his seventies who played fretless Round Peak banjo as well. Dix was a big influence on my playing, as was Tommy. I was listening to a lot of recordings of Fred Cockerham and Kyle Creed too. Paul Brown was a great banjo player who also lived in the area. All these players influenced me and still do.

Kirk and his dad, Wayne Sutphin, and Terri McMurray, and I started the Old Hollow String Band. Mount Airy, Galax, and Fiddler’s Grove Fiddler’s Conventions were must-attend events for us. At these conventions we would meet musicians from all over.  

Thomas Mac Traynam was born in Virginia in 1954. His father was a minister who, when young, had learned tongue-blocking technique harmonica from African-American kids and, as a result, grew up racially aware. This was something, Mac mentioned, he would pay a price for later on in his career. Mac’s mother came from old English lineage from the old south Petersburg area below Richmond, an area near the Dismal Swamp. From this heritage, Mac grew up with church music harmony singing but simultaneously watched the Flatt and Scruggs Martha White television shows. In high school, wanting to be different, the television influence of guitar and harmonica from Bob Dylan and the Beatles was evident. While in college, at a time when the Hee-Haw television show was popular and “Rocky Top” was a bluegrass hit, Mac heard the Will Circle be Unbroken LP and decided to get a foundation in bluegrass. At the Galax Festival, Mac backed up a friend with guitar and banjo who had gone to Scotland and brought back Shetland Island tunes. Also at Galax, Mac got Pete Parish’s The Wade Ward Way LP, and then heard more and more clawhammer. An old roommate friend, Luke Ward, showed Mac the clawhammer hand motion and rhythm and, as Mac said, “I was shown the road to Damascus.” At Giles County College, Mac took a folklore class that led to visits with Maggie Rader, a fireball two-finger picking banjo player with the flamboyance of Matokie Slaughter of Pulaski, Virginia, who played tunes for him such as Cumberland Gap.

Ray Alden is a banjo player who, over the past 38 years, has collected old-time music from the South. Currently he has been, along with other collectors, issuing field recordings as part of the Field Recorders’ Collective. See their website at www.fieldrecorder.com.

To be continued: Part IV of “Trends in Old-Time Banjo” will appear in the next issue of the Old-Time Herald.
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OLD-TIME MUSIC IN ALASKA: THEN AND NOW
By Peter Bowers

As regular readers of Old-Time Herald are well aware, old-time music is thriving in many areas of the world, far removed from the tradition’s geographic roots in the Appalachian mountains. One such place is Alaska.

It may surprise some that Alaska has a long-lived history of fiddle music that dates back more than one and a half centuries—almost as long as the music from the hills of the old-time motherland in the Eastern US. It is a vibrant musical tradition that first appeared in the subarctic with the early traders, trappers, gold miners, fishermen, and missionaries, then spread to the native cultures, saw a major resurgence in the 1970s, and thrives today in bush cabins, villages, and towns throughout the forty-ninth state. Alaska is a big state (twice the size of Texas), with diverse cultures, topography, and environments. Old-time music is alive and well, from frozen Nome on the Bering Sea coast, through the vast hills and mountains surrounding Fairbanks in the Interior, to the state’s largest city, Anchorage (pop. 600,000), to picturesque Homer on the Kenai Peninsula, to the glaciers and rainforests near Juneau and fishing communities at the southern tip of Alaska’s southeastern panhandle.
Origins

Old-time music in Alaska has its roots in the great Interior region and it is on that region that this article focuses. (Interior Alaska, as loosely defined here, encompasses roughly 120,000 square miles.) In a sense, there are two main beginnings of Alaskan old-time music: the original introduction of fiddle music in the mid-nineteenth century, and Alaska’s version of the great folk music revival in the 1970s.

According to several accounts, the first fiddler on the Yukon River was a Hudson’s Bay Company employee named Antoine Hoole, who was among a trading party who established Fort Yukon in 1847. His French Canadian influence likely helped spread the Anglo-Celtic music and dance tradition to the local Indians, a rich tradition that continues today as a unique style of old-time music known as Athabascan fiddle music.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fiddle music blended with aboriginal singing and dancing and melodic choral singing of hymns introduced by missionaries. This music developed largely in isolation, with only occasional injections of new influences, and today is its own unique style.

Athabascan Fiddle Music

The authoritative study of Alaskan Indian fiddle music is The Crooked Stovepipe: Athabascan Fiddle Music and Square Dancing in Northeast Alaska and Northwest Canada, by ethnomusicologist Craig Mishler. I highly recommend this to anyone with either a casual or serious interest in this music. Mishler observes that, “Outsiders may simply look at Athabascan fiddlers as Indians playing the white man’s music, but they couldn’t be further from the mark. Although initially learned from the whites, Athabascan fiddle music has been cultivated in relative isolation from mainstream American country music. Playing strictly by ear and within a strong conservative tradition that is over [160] years old, Athabascan men [and women] have played a powerful, beautiful sound and a repertory that is different from any other style of fiddle music.

Traditional Athabascan fiddle music developed from two geographic centers within the vast Yukon River drainage. “Upriver” music developed among the Gwich’in and Han tribes of the Alaska-Yukon border area. “Downriver” music evolved some 50 years later among the Koyukon, Lower Tanana, and Ingalik Athabascans. Although
the music is today undergoing newer influences from country and rock and roll—and some say is straying from its fiddle/native origins (a source of some disappointment among some of the purists)—it continues in a number of remote villages.

Gwich’in fiddlers were actively playing for dances in the latter nineteenth century, and were documented at least as early as the 1920s. According to Mishler, the square dances that have been part of the upriver tradition are most similar to the old Kentucky running set. Versions of familiar tunes often have native names, and include “Soldiers Joy,” “Girl I Left Behind Me,” “Saint Anne’s Reel,” and “Ragtime Annie,” while the Athabascan-named “Neets’ee T’lyaa” is a tune that is reminiscent of “Whiskey Before Breakfast.” An all-time favorite is the spirited “Red River Jig” (“Jig Ahtsii Ch’aadzaa”), while another, more recent, popular tune is “Eagle Island Blues.” Some of the more traditional sounds are captured in 1970s recordings by Craig Mishler. The music of Charlie Peter of Fort Yukon and others is preserved on the 1974 LP Music of the Alaskan Kutchin Indians (re-released as a CD, Smithsonian Folkways FE 4070).

Some musicians who maintained the Indian fiddle tradition over the years include Charlie Peter, David Salmon, Jimmy Roberts, Lincoln Roberts, Burns Frank, Silas John, and John Christian. A leading Gwich’in fiddler in Canada was Charlie Peter Charlie, Sr., of Old Crow. Two contemporary Native elders who carry forward the Athabascan fiddle tradition today are Bill Stevens and the Rev. Trimble Gilbert.

Bill Stevens was born in 1933 in a log cabin on a tributary of the Yukon River. Ethnomusicologist Craig Mishler believes that Bill has probably done more than anyone else to bring Athabascan fiddle music to the attention of the outside world, and has helped preserve it for his own people, through his performances, teaching, and recordings. Mishler states, “It’s no wonder they call him Ch’a’adzah Aghwaa (‘He carries dances’) in Gwich’in.”

Bill was raised in a musical community and was motivated to learn fiddle after hearing a fiddler from Yukon Territory named Paul Ben Kassi. In his twenties, he moved to California for a job program. There he connected with the Santa Clara Valley Fiddler’s Association and greatly expanded his musical influences beyond his native roots. He took the second place trophy in the 1978 California Old-Time Fiddler’s Association State Championship, and competed at Weiser, Idaho, and the National Indian Old-Time Fiddler’s Contest in Talequah, Oklahoma. He returned to Alaska in 1982. Shortly thereafter, he became active in organizing the first Athabascan Old-Time Fiddlers Festival. This has been held each year since 1983 in Fairbanks, bringing together traditional musicians from far-flung villages in Alaska and Northwest Canada. Today, over 80 bands and more than 650 people come to Fairbanks for the annual event. This past summer, he led a group of young Native fiddlers from Fairbanks to the fiddle festival at Weiser.
Mary Larsen, in her 1999 article on Bill in *Fiddler Magazine*, notes,

...many of his tunes were brought to Alaska and northwestern Canada from Scottish (mainly Orkney), Irish, and French-Canadian trappers and traders with the Hudson’s Bay Company. Such tunes as “Nihk’iidoo” (“Eight Couple”), “Jig Ahtsii Chi’aadzaa” (“Red River Jig”; actually a reel), “K’oonii T’aii Chi’aadzaa” (“Handkerchief Dance”), “Geh Chi’aadzaa” (“Rabbit Dance”), and “Dat’san Chi’aadzaa” (“Duck Dance”) were quickly adopted by the Gwich’in people and have remained classics in the music and dance repertoire. Also included in his music are old-time tunes such as “Soldier’s Joy,” “The Girl I Left Behind Me” (recorded unaccompanied, as was the Gwich’in tradition until the early 20th century), and “Devil’s Dream,” also standards in the repertoire.

Bill’s music has taken him far beyond Alaska and northwest Canada to such places as the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and Scotland. He has recorded six CDs. Bill’s compilation CD, *Bill Stevens: Fiddlin’ Through the Years, A Collection of Old-Time Fiddle Favorites* (Tenth Planet Records), appeared in 2005.

Another Gwich’in fiddler who has done much to carry on the bush village tradition is the Rev. Trimble Gilbert. Born in 1934 in the remote mountain community of Arctic Village, Trimble has worked tirelessly to carry on this musical heritage and teach music to kids. Several years ago, this Episcopal priest and Traditional Chief of the Tanana Chiefs Conference was honored as a guest artist at the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes in Port Townsend, Washington. In 2001, Trimble and his sons produced a CD, *Neets’aii Gwich’in Fiddlers* (Tenth Planet Records). In the past several years, he has been a teacher in various remote villages with a native village program run by the Rev. Belle Mickelson, Dancing with the Spirit, and this past summer performed on a regular basis for visitors in Fairbanks.

One of the remarkable aspects of the lively traditional Athabascan fiddle style that deserves a special note is an almost universal tendency toward crookedness (containing measures with more or fewer beats than the main body of the tune), with a license for the fiddler to change straight tunes to crooked variations, and to change the number of repetitions (keep in mind that this music has evolved in near-isolation for over a century and a half).

Pamela Swing and Shonti Elder, analyzing this music in an appendix of *The Crooked Stovepipe*, noted two common kinds of variations: the addition of a quarter beat at the end of phrases (often necessitating the use of a 3/4 measure instead of usual 2/4), and holding notes at the end of a phrase as long as two extra bars. They observe,

...because the strong underlying pattern of the fiddler’s footbeats keeps pace with the quarter note beats, any extra beats do not disturb the flow of the tune. These extra footbeats do not disturb the
rhythms of either the guitar players or dancers…. To [our] knowledge, no other tradition of fiddling with the same roots permits so much melodic, rhythmic, and structural variation. One may conclude then that the musical aesthetic of the native Gwich’in vocal tradition has shaped Gwich’in fiddle style.

Ryan Bowers, an avid student and performer of American roots music, adds, “in a sense, this crookedness could be best viewed as a form of improvisation. I doubt that Native fiddlers consciously think of this as changing time signature, but rather are just adding or subtracting a beat here and there.” Track 3 on the CD Neets’aii Gwich’in Fiddlers illustrates this phenomenon, and this is recommended listening as an example of what makes some of the Athabascan fiddle styles unique. If it were square every time through, it might be the same melody as “Whiskey Before Breakfast.” However, “Neets’aiiltlayaa’” has evolved into its own tune, which may be played in a different way each time the tune is performed according to each fiddler’s improvisation.

Music of the Gold Rush

The Klondike Gold Rush of the late 1890s and the Alaskan gold rushes that followed (Nome, Fairbanks, Koyukuk, Iditarod, etc.) saw a huge influx of Euro-Americans to the Athabascan region, especially in the upriver Gwich’in and Han areas. Part of that onslaught of humanity of course included music and dance. While the popular notion of the Klondike, Nome, and Fairbanks dance halls and saloons conjures up more of the ragtime and gay-nineties styles, old-time dance music was a vibrant part of the miner’s social life: Virginia reels, square dances, waltzes, cotillons, and schottisches. Murray observes, “miners enjoyed singing, the theater and vaudeville, but their first choice was a dance….Square dances, reels, and waltzes might be part of every evening if a fiddler or mandolin player was in the neighborhood. Dances were a tradition along the Yukon before the gold rush, especially on the upper river. . . . if the number of times a song is mentioned [in diaries and gold rush accounts] is any indication of its popularity then “A Hot Time in the Old Town” has no equal. A popular gold rush parody of that tune is “Song of the Salmon” written by J.C. Kellum in 1903. During and following the gold rush, old-time music was played wherever musicians and their fiddles, banjos, mandolins, and/or guitars came together. This was especially true during the long, dark winters people spent in their isolated cabins and villages. Although music was played for personal entertainment and rural dances, it does not appear that the commercial heyday of old-time music in the 1920s-1930s, facilitated elsewhere by radio and records, had much of an influence on Alaska. A review of some of the commercial advertisements in the Fairbanks newspaper shows increasing popularity in country music in the 1950s and 60s, but old-time string bands are largely absent.

Doc South: Mover and shaker of the Alaskan old-time music revival

Many observers of the Alaskan non-Native traditional music scene regard Harold “Doc” South as the key figure in our old-time music revival of the early 1970s. I first met Doc in the mid ’70s and had the pleasure of visiting the retired psychiatrist at his home in Palmer, Alaska, in March 2009, along with fellow musicians Danny Consenstein and Tom Hart.

Doc was born in Bloomington, Indiana, in 1928 to Garland “Jack” South and Lula South. The South family’s playing is recorded in the Indiana Collection of the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, by folklorist and friend of the family Guthrie T. “Gus” Meade. Gus pursued a graduate degree from the
Folklore and Ethnomusicology Department at nearby Indiana University-Bloomington, and got together to play fiddle with Doc and his family on a fairly regular basis. Meade, who died in 1991, left Indiana in 1961, and in 1965 began working at the Library of Congress Folk Music Archives. He is perhaps best known for his monumental work, *A Bibliography of Commercially Recorded Traditional Music*. Bob Black, another musician, also recorded some of South family’s music; according to Doc, “he used to follow me around with a notebook.”

Doc learned fiddle largely on his own. According to Doc, it was his cousins, living in nearby Sullivan County, who “loaned me my first banjo and fiddle.” When asked what kind of music this was, he replied, “Back then it was all ‘just music,’ not really country, not really bluegrass, not really old-time. When someone wanted you to play they’d just say ‘bring your music.’”

A major influence on his playing was fiddler and friend of the family Jimmy Campbell, originally from Monroe County, Indiana (also recorded in the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; not to be confused with the more famous bluegrass fiddler of the same name). According to Doc, his dad was 19 and just home from World War I when he first met Campbell. Doc and his family played with Jimmy over the years, and much of Doc’s fiddle style (which he later brought to Alaska, what Doc calls his version of the “Nashville shuffle”) can be attributed to Campbell. Doc said that when he was 16, Jimmy played him the tune “Stoney Point,” which, he always figures, “somehow motivated me to learn more.”

Doc increasingly performed outside his family circle and informal jam sessions. Along with his friend Bob Black, he performed in the early 1950s on an old-time music program on a weekly university radio station run by Bruce Buckley. Doc later played fiddle and called dances on the commercial country TV show called *Hayloft Frolic*, hosted by Bob Hardy. (Both South and Hardy had grown up under the musical influences of Jimmy Campbell.) Later, up until 1970, while living in Laurel,
Indiana, he called square dances for the local city recreational department. With a big grin, he said, “people used to think I did this for a living.”

In 1970, having completed his university program and now licensed as a psychiatrist, he moved to Alaska, where he got a job with the State of Alaska for the State Mental Health Clinic. It is ironic that Doc left the Bloomington area just on the eve of that region’s own old-time music and dance revival. Had he remained, and judging by his subsequent influence on Alaska, he undoubtedly would have been a central figure in that cultural awakening.

Shortly after moving to Fairbanks, Alaska, he saw an ad in the local paper that there was country dancing at the Grange Hall at 21-mile Chena Hot Springs Road. He soon found himself playing banjo and some fiddle with a band called the Pleasant Valley Playboys, consisting of Milt Fuller (fiddle and steel; from Montana), his wife Ruth Fuller (bass), and Ron Thomas (lead vocals, guitar). By Doc’s account, they played country, traditional, old-time, “whatever we could play.”

One day, his son came home and told Doc that an old-time band was going to be playing near the university. Shortly thereafter—and somewhat coincidently—a couple of young musicians with a rowdy band called the Sidewinders named Danny Consenstein and Kent Setzer emerged from their cabins in the woods and, with some trepidation, knocked on the door of his University of Alaska office, saying, “We heard you play the fiddle.” Looking these hippies over, Doc said dryly, “I sure do”. They said they had a job at the Howling Dog at Ester and asked if he’d play with them. Doc asked, “When do we start?” The answer was “tomorrow night.” The rest is history.

The blending of Doc’s strong fiddling and dance calling with the youthful enthusiasm of the Sidewinders is arguably the foundation of the old-time string band revival in Alaska. Aside from several bands playing the very unique Athabascan fiddle music in isolated villages, there were no other bands I know of who were playing Appalachian string band music in Alaska at that time. The Sidewinders (not to be confused with the modern North Carolina band of the same name) formed in 1970 and were originally comprised of Danny Consenstein (fiddle and banjo; today an environmental consultant in Anchorage and fiddler in such bands as Danny and the C Notes), Tom Hart (fiddle, guitar; and fiddler with Raisin’ Holy Hell and Lost Dog), Kent Setzer (fiddle), and Bob Brom (bass). They were joined on clawhammer banjo in 1974 by Robin Dale Ford, today a nationally-recognized singer-songwriter. According to Hart, a local farrier-blacksmith, the Sidewinders were originally more of a jug band, and didn’t really get in the groove of old-time until they recruited Doc, “someone who could really drive that melody with his fiddle.”

The Sidewinders were very much in the mold of other young bands of the late ’60s and early ’70s who actively sought out old recordings of the likes of Tommy Jarrell, Fred Cockerham, and J. P. Fraley. They spent hours in their log cabins during the long, dark Alaskan winters, avidly listening to LPs of the old-timers, and to the New Lost City Ramblers and other contemporary revival bands. In many respects, the Sidewinders were the northern counterpart of the Highwoods String Band, whom many credit with kicking old-time music into overdrive, especially during the “festival years,” and eventually influencing hundreds of musicians across the country. They tried several times without success to meet up with the Highwoods, and finally caught up with Walt Koken and crew during an east
coast visit in 1974 at a festival in Amherst, Mass. During that same tour, while making forays out of a farmhouse in western Pennsylvania, several of the Sidewinders made the pilgrimage to meet icons like Tommy Jarrell and J. P. Fraley.

According to Hart,

…the trip that winter was a tune-collecting and fiddler-meeting trip. Fresh off the southbound mid-winter ferry from Haines [Alaska], Danny and I drove in our newly purchased $150 Rambler station wagon from Seattle to the farm in western Pennsylvania to meet up with the rest of the crew. We stopped every night to play for gas money and inquire about local music. Meeting and staying with Art Rosenbaum in Iowa was a highlight… I was and still am amazed and humbled at the power this music has to open people’s hearts and homes.

The Sidewinders were the old-time house band during the early to mid-’70s, playing at the original Howling Dog Saloon in Ester, Alaska (today the self-proclaimed “People’s Republic of Ester”). (The current, locally-famous, Howling Dog Saloon in nearby Fox is not the same building; the original half-fallen down, rotten building was torn down in the ’80s to make way for the Golden Eagle Saloon, which today stands a few yards away from the original site). For many of us who square danced all night long in the original Howling Dog, there are indelible memories of Doc South’s wild fiddling and energetic dance calling, the non-conforming log and lumber construction, leaning walls, beer-soaked sawdust on the floor, and dance floor that bounced wildly with each stomp.

This was the frontier in many ways: many of us came to Alaska searching for an alternative lifestyle. We lived in cabins in the woods without electricity or running water; we moved far away from families; and for those who stayed, we grew up together as a loose-knit community. In many respects, our friends were our surrogate families. Although many learned or brought music that had originated elsewhere, the music community thrived in the cabins in the hills surrounding Fairbanks and grew up together, forming bonds that last to this day. Old-time and bluegrass music was the perfect medium.

By the mid 1970s, the Fairbanks scene changed. For the first few years of that decade, it was quiet; in many ways Fairbanks was a sleepy little town that had been built of and by the gold rush only seventy or eighty years earlier. In 1975, however, that changed, when the Trans-Alaska Pipeline construction started in earnest and Fairbanks was transformed almost overnight into a boom town not unlike those of the old wild West. For the backwoods, low-income, low-maintenance types like the members of the Sidewinders, the prospect of high-paying pipeline jobs was too much to resist. Doc, of course, wasn’t as tempted because he had a secure (and vitally needed) job with the State.

Doc remarked, “Once the construction got started, the guys in Sidewinders all got jobs on the pipeline and left town.” For him, it meant a transition to a new band, the Doc South Family Band. Joined by his sons Dan and Bill, Robin Dale Ford, another banjo player named Brent Edwards and whoever else was in town “off the line” (back from pipeline construction for R&R) on any given weekend, they continued to fuel the strong interest in old-time music and square dancing that the Sidewinders’ energy had begun. Especially prominent in the South Family Band, of course, was Doc’s wife Louise, who sang, played bass, and in many ways was the “glue” that held the band together.

In the midst of pipeline madness, the local Tanana Valley Community College asked Doc if he would respond to a strong grassroots interest, and teach traditional music, old-time square and round dancing. Doc obliged, and did this for five semesters altogether. (My brother Doug and I first met Doc at these classes.) As a measure of this music’s popularity in this frontier boom-town, Doc commented, “That first class had 47 people in there!” He told all the Tuesday-night music class people that, “Y’all have to come on Thursday night to play for dance class,” so there were some pretty large dance bands for the class.

Many people currently active in the old-time music scene in Alaska owe their start to, or were at least heavily influenced by, Doc, these classes, and/or the old Howling Dog square dances. These include Robin Dale Ford, who credits Doc with getting her started on banjo. Dave Mannheimer (currently an Anchorage judge, for years part of the bluegrass band McCloud) was affected by Doc, as was Tom Walker, a commercial fisherman, and Ken Roy, who later played guitar and sang with Doc. The Rev. Belle Mickelson was another influenced by Doc’s classes, which she “didn’t realize until afterwards were classes, assuming instead they were just big fun jam sessions.”
Belle, the mother of Bearfoot Bluegrass’ guitar player Mike Mickelson, is well known for teaching traditional music to Alaska’s youth. She started the Cordova 4H Bluegrass and Old-Time Music and Dance Camp in 1995. Belle was recently ordained as an Episcopal priest and now teaches music to native kids up and down the Yukon River with her Dancing with the Spirit music program.

Another Alaskan character heavily influenced by Doc during this period was Michael “Wolf” Cartusciello, a mainstay of the popular late-’70s-early-’80s Slop Bucket Band of Denali Park, and later leader of the band Fiddlin’ Wolf and the Campaign Trail Boys, during his unsuccessful (albeit not overly serious) run for Alaskan Governor. Wolf currently splits his time each year between Alaska and the area around Austin, Texas.

According to Doc, “One tall blonde fellow in class had to drive his dog team 20 miles to Nenana [about 60 miles from Fairbanks], where he still had to get his truck started at 50 below zero.” This was Kim Blair, now a log building contractor and superb mandolin builder/player, who by the late ’70s was playing with Slop Bucket, and later with the Estes Brothers Band of Nenana.

Doc and his family moved from Fairbanks to Anchorage in 1979, after Doc became chief admissions psychiatrist at Alaska Psychiatric Institute. Doc continued his ever-popular and inspiring teaching of old-time music and dance well into the 1980s. At the Mountain View Community Center, he taught traditional music classes until about 1985, when he retired from his job and moved to Palmer. There, among many others, Doc hooked up with Kenny Karabelnikoff (a talented guitar player and “my most regular attendee”) and Tom Walker, who came back to town periodically from fishing. Along with an Irishman named John Walsh, this became one of the better-known Irish bands in Alaska at the time, the Muldoon Celidh Band, which played for years at places such as McGinleys, Snow City Café, and Abbey Tavern in Anchorage.

The Doc South Family Band continued to play, in differing configurations and sometimes under other names such as the Thunderpluckers, up until the late 1980s. Doc was joined by others such as fiddler Shonti Elder (originally with the “Open Road String Band”), Maureen Kelly, Stephanie Schmidt (Bissland), and Deb Wessler (who joined the band in 1984, was partner with Doc’s late son Bill and played for years as Homespun). Some of the places the family band played in the ’80s included the Willow Trading Post, Montana Creek Lodge, KSIA Alaska Bluegrass Festival, Alaska State Fair in Palmer, and the Anderson Bluegrass Festival.
Alaska old-time music since the 1970s

Since the great folk revival, old-time music has taken hold anew and spread throughout this vast state. With space limited, and since this article focuses on Interior Alaska, I just briefly mention the regions beyond the Interior—each area (think of large “counties,” each the size of states) deserves its own treatment in future articles. Today, old-time music flourishes in Anchorage, with the likes of Brian DeMarcus (an original member of North Carolina’s Green Grass Cloggers) and his band Fat Weasel, fiddler Sherri Hadley, the Hamre Family Band, Danny and the C Notes, and a new hot old-time band, the Pilot Cracker Playboys. Talketna and Homer are two smaller towns with a vibrant old-time music scene, the former home of the Simpletones and the latter home to Scotty Meyer, keystone of the Improbabilities band (with Richie Sterns, Forrest Gibson, June Drucker and Grant Dermody). Farther to the south, Juneau has long been a hotbed of old-time music, with musicians such as Jack Fontanella, Bob Banghart, Sean Tracey and the Panhandle Crabgrass Revival Band. Seasonally, Robert “Bobo” Bell climbs off his fishing boat, wipes the fish guts off his Helly-Hensen rain gear, picks up his banjo, and along with his band Raisin’ Holy Hell, plays in Juneau bars and neighborhoods.

Another artist with Alaskan roots is Ken Waldman, who has drawn on his 23 years in Alaska to produce poems, stories and fiddle tunes that result in a completely unique style. A former college professor, Waldman has published six full-length poetry collections, a memoir, and has released seven CDs that combine old-time Appalachian-style string band music with original poetry. Since 1994, he has performed throughout the country as Alaska’s Fiddling Poet. Combining both his fiddle and a repertoire of writing exercises, he has led workshops in over 160 schools in 30 states nationwide, and has been a guest writer at over 80 colleges and universities.

Since the 1970s, traditional music has been well represented at festivals and other events around the state. While there are a few comparatively large festivals (Juneau, Anchorage, Anderson), many are small and below the radar, and are deliberately kept that way. This may be part of Alaskans’ “We don’t care how they do it Outside” mentality. I noted with some humor a few years back when the organizer of a small (here un-named) festival at an old gold rush town south of Anchorage actually changed the date of the festival just weeks before when word had leaked to the Anchorage Daily News. The organizers wanted the focus to be “music, not Woodstock.”

Observations of a recent festival near Denali Park capture a few vignettes of just how radical the Alaska old-time music scene can be: non-stop jamming until 7 am, light-all-night summer solstice, smoky campfires and blue tarps sheltering participants from the mountain winds, playing in the shadow of the tallest mountain in North America, and square dancing at midnight. Those who survived the night were treated in the morning to a break in the chilly wind and clouds, and strong cowboy coffee, reindeer sausage and eggs, more old-time tunes, and gospel music led by Alaskan transplant Ginger Boatwright.

The Alaska Folk Festival in Juneau is the largest and most well-known festival in the state. Started in 1975 as the First Annual Southeast Alaska Folk Festival, this week-long event now attracts some 450 folk musicians and several thousand spectators in concerts, dances, workshops, and 24/7 jamming. The latter is especially prevalent at the old gold rush Alaskan Hotel on Franklin Street, which on almost any night during the festivities will see old-time, bluegrass, Irish, and/or Cajun music in its rooms and hallways. A guest artist(s) is invited each year; no other musicians are paid. Old-time musicians who have appeared as guest artists have included J. P. Fraley, Mike Seeger, Hedy West, Ralph Blizzard, Ginny Hawker, Kay Justice, Tracy Schwartz, Mac Traynham, Tom, Brad and Alice, Bruce Molsky, and the Carolina Chocolate Drops.

Other festivals around the state include Fairbanks (one-day winter and summer festivals featuring mainly local musicians), Anderson Bluegrass Festival (the largest summertime music festival in the state, just north of Denali Park), Talkeetna Moose Dropping Festival (a quaint little historic town several hours north of Anchorage), and the Anchorage Folk Festival (which sponsors several events throughout the year). Another small, selective festival which has focused on old-time music over the years is the Boardwalk Boogie in Pelican, (a four-and-a-half-hour ferry ride from Juneau), which last year celebrated its 10th anniversary and featured “Outside”

**Reflections**

Alaska is an intense, extreme place. The old-timers in Appalachia may have had that, too. We had a flavor of it from the crazy recordings and skits of Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers and Uncle Dave Macon, but we actually did it. There are fiddle tunes called “All Night Long”, or “Dance All Night with a Bottle in Your Hand,” and we took that seriously.

In the midnight sun of summertime, walking out of the bar at 5 am meant walking out into the bright lights. In the wintertime, the intensity was different: it might be forty below and the northern lights were dancing right above your head. Intensity is the operative word.

Today, Alaskans have a reputation of being among the wildest, most intense players on the old-time scene. In many ways, it’s still the wild west: few roads, few rules, no sheriff. Our brand of old-time and bluegrass music is different than back East because of the intensity of the place we live.

The other part of the experience is the cabin music scene. People get “cabin fever” in the long darkness of winter and desperately need to socialize with others at the bars or visiting other cabins. We danced and played in small cabins. We cooked, ate, took saunas, jumped in the snow. The dancing and music also reflected that Alaskans are participants, not observers. Lots of people played instruments, or danced. The music was — and still is — crazy, raw, intense and exciting. It is really alive.

One young musician from Juneau once said that he got started playing punk and later switched to old-time when he found how similar it was the way it is played up here. We often “trash” fiddle tunes: there’s nothing academic about the way we play up here. Distorted electric guitar and Uncle Buck’s (leader of a raucous band called Five Buck Fiddle) fiddling are really not that far apart.

Danny Consenstein, Founding Member of the Sidewinders.
bands such as Foghorn and the Wilders. Other big events sometimes include old-time music, such as the midnight sun festivals in Fairbanks or Nome, the start or end of the 1,000 mile-long Yukon Quest sled dog race in Fairbanks, and the week-long celebrations in March marking the end of the 1,200 mile-long Iditarod sled dog race in Nome.

Alaska has a lively dance scene, especially contra dances. Well-organized groups in Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Juneau put on dances throughout the year and host annual summer dance camps at selected beautiful locations in the Alaskan wilderness. In addition, a surprisingly large number of music camps exist for a state with a population as small as ours; these draw top instructors from all over the country. Two of the big attractions of these camps, for both students and guest artists alike, are their spectacular outdoors settings and intimate atmosphere.

The mindset and intensity of Alaskan old-time musicians could perhaps be best summarized by none other than the late Mike Seeger. In 1982, Mike was the guest artist at the Alaska Folk Festival in Juneau. In those years, the festival ended with an all-night jam and dance in the old Gold Rush part of town along Franklin Street. I was playing banjo as part of a large amorphous jam and happened to end up next to Mike, who was at the time playing a borrowed bass. As I recall, to ward off the cold and drizzle, someone had loaned him a winter parka. As he peered out of the fur-ruff-rimmed hood, he leaned over to me, and, half shivering, said, “You guys are all crazy up here!” Given the context of that night and the untamed Alaskan old-time music scene in general, I think most of us would agree, and would even take that as a compliment.

Originally from the hills of Pennsylvania, Pete Bowers moved to Alaska in 1974. He plays banjo and guitar in the temporarily-dormant old time band, Five Buck Fiddle, more recently with the Blaze Kings, Dang! and Lost Dog. An archaeologist and part-owner of a consulting firm in Fairbanks, he can be reached at pmb@northernlanduse.com.

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Let’s start at the beginning. How far back can you trace your passion for old-time music?

I guess it goes back to my father taking me to the Highland Games, before I could hardly remember, with the drums and the marching and the whole thing. I still love rhythm—rhythm and dance. I guess that’s why I like playing dances, because it’s all about the rhythm. It’s a communication between people, an agreement between everyone.

When did you first pick up—what was first, banjo or fiddle?

My family moved to Waynesboro in 1962 and our neighbors were musicians—banjo players—and had cut a record at the local record printer. A folksong. I thought it was very exciting. There was a folk revival boom in the area. Everybody was learning to play banjos and guitars, and so I learned both at the same time, as I recall, pretty much in the same period. I was ten or eleven years old.

I remember there was a music festival at the Eastside Speedway. By then, just about everything was bluegrass. I showed up at the festival looking for anybody playing old-time and demonstrated what I could do. I guess the old guys there thought it pretty unique that somebody was still playing that style.

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They stuck me up on stage with a microphone in front of my banjo. I was pretty nervous.

I was flattered they put me up there. I think they thought it was interesting that young people were still picking up the old style, and that was very memorable, the contrast between the old and the new.

That was a pivotal time, wasn’t it? Just when sources of old-time were still around and there was some hint that this was something really special worth trying to preserve.

Well, yes, that’s what I’m saying. To me, there’s a very thin thread, you know. Down around the Galax area there was still plenty of old-time, but if you compare the bands, bluegrass to old-time was like three to one, and that’s not too unlike the numbers nowadays. There was a time when the young people of my generation really started flocking to Galax.

The folks who were in large part leading the old-time music revival.

Yes. The young, more free-flowing type of people were tending toward the old-time. The more liberal people, to put it frankly.

Ironic, huh? The more liberal free-flowing types, with a more conservative view of music. You’re starting to make connections at the festivals, then, about music styles. How did you start identifying the old-time masters?

When I first went to Galax, I really didn’t know… I was so overwhelmed by the amount of bluegrass I really had trouble finding any [old-time].

But I had friends back home playing folk music and we started figuring this out together. I had already got up with Pete [Vigour]. We were in the church folk mass choir. One day he and I were walking out — he was a year older than me and I guess we were in high school by this time — and he said, “You got a ride home or anything?” I said, “No, I’m going down to the library. I want to look up how to make guitars.” He stopped for a second and said, “I’ll go with you. My dad’s got tools in the basement.” So we started building guitars. In fact, we each made a guitar. During that time we started looking up musicians around town.

Around town?

Pug Allen was our neighbor over in Stuart’s Draft. He had a house across...
from the Meadow Muffin Restaurant, and I wasn’t a fiddler then so I really didn’t appreciate him as much as I should have, in retrospect. Then we started getting out to festivals in Southwest Virginia—Galax and Stuart.

Stuart is where we ran into Herbert [Pitzer] and Harry Dickson, West Virginia musicians, and that was a real introduction to the old-time world. We were walking across the outfield and they asked us to come up and play with them on stage and I had no idea what the tune was. Pete had a washtub and I had my Sears & Roe-buck guitar, and it was a D tune that went to C— “The Cuckoo’s Nest” or something like that. We totally messed it up and then afterwards, they said, “Thank you, boys, thank you,” and we thought, “Wait a minute, we totally screwed up the opening of the festival” and we couldn’t believe they were thanking us.

It was really at this time that these festivals—small home-grown festivals—were popping up on farms and raceways. Yes, the late ’60s and early ’70s. Stuart was a town festival. It didn’t last long. When I graduated high school, I moved across to Charlottesville to attend the University there. I met Armin Barnett from Chicago, and he was studying with Franklin George. Armin and Bill Hicks were going out collecting in that area. We actually had an “Alternate Galax Festival” outside of Charlottesville one year. We were tired of the crowds at Galax. Peter Hoover, Gerry Milnes—and I think Alan Jabbour was there. Armin and Bill Hicks and Carl Baron, those folks. It was a gathering of the young collectors at that point. Peter Hoover had just finished a trip up and down the Shenandoah Valley, but by then, the focus had turned over into Greenbrier towards West Virginia. I went over and met the Hammons family and then started going up to Glenville, to the West Virginia State Folk Festival, and that’s where I met Melvin [Wine]. That’s where I met all the people that I really ended up studying for the next thirty years: Melvin Wine and Ernie Carpenter and Wilson Douglas.

Melvin Wine—as much as any of the older masters—seemed to be very aware of his role as a teacher. Always inviting people down. “Come down and visit me. I’m just off the Interstate.”

Melvin was a fixture at Glenville before the hippy element showed up, and he and a lot of people were really disturbed that here were these people with no shoes… And he actually talked to his pastor who said, Listen, these people are coming looking for music and music is a form of—of ministry—of goodness, you know. Melvin fully embraced everyone after that. Many people see Melvin as a second father, frankly.

He invited me out to his house for lunch on the way to a festival one time and he was learning “Dubuque” from a tape he got from a young person in Ohio. I bet that Melvin showed me this tape because he was saying to me, “I’m Melvin Wine, I’m in charge of my music, I’m going to learn what I want to learn and this is how I choose to learn to do it. I am both a student of my father and a student of the guy across the river whose music I appreciate.”

He also played “Wednesday Night Waltz” in his style, which is very different from the slick version most folks learn from. I still play it. It’s an absolutely charming piece.

Melvin was extremely popular, but at the same time, his fiddle style is very embedded in their family tradition and it’s very different.

Really unique.

It’s absolutely a unique style, and to really get into Melvin, there’s a lifetime of work. I was learning something the other day, and it gets a very particular sound. You’ve really got to approach it on his terms, in his style, and it’s very difficult.

Who else have you studied?

Well, I was really enthralled with French Carpenter. He cut an album, or half an album, some of the prettiest tunes I’ve ever heard, so I really started studying him. I could hear French Carpenter through Ernie and Wilson Douglas, a protégé of French Carpenter. I started doing the circles that Wilson Douglas did and I’m really just now just starting to realize what the circles will do for the French Carpenter style.

What about Virginia fiddlers?

I was going between West Virginia and North Carolina, and Southwest Virginia hadn’t really gotten much attention. The highest-profile Virginia fiddlers weren’t really as celebrated as they should’ve been. They were put on the commercial stage of Galax but they weren’t put into an institutional setting like— I mean, in West Virginia, Davis and Elkins sponsored the Augusta Heritage Series where you could do workshops with those guys.

That gets to the issue of style. As you were collecting, coming home and really studying how a tune goes, were you consciously saying you’re going to play the tune in So-and-So’s style?

Yes, but as I’m collecting I’m sitting there with them and seeing what they’re doing and trying to learn as much as I can when I do see them. Melvin’s got a very different style from a North Carolina style, and one thing that really struck me was the contrast. At the first of June, I’d be listening to Tommy Jarrell and two weekends later, I’d be listening to Melvin Wine. They’re very different fiddlers and I tried to resolve this in my mind. A lot of people were either Round Peak fiddlers or West Virginia fiddlers. When I was in Charlottesville, I was sort of equidistant from the two but I was really stunned by how they were really two different camps. I was still studying architecture at that point and trying my best to learn, but it was really rather slow, so when I graduated in ’77, I concentrated on collecting. Most of my stuff, the bulk of my collection, really starts then. The following year I came to Richmond and met Harold [Hausenfluck]. By the time I got here the old-time music scene had blossomed, the Wednesday-night dances with Harold leading the music. Armin pointed out to me how Harold had such a deep grasp of the music.

Had you already made that connection between music and dance when you moved to Richmond?

Yes. When I was in college, we had dances. In fact, we had the Camp Creek Boys come up and do a dance, and that was really special because it was Fred Cockerham and Kyle Creed and I forget who else came up at that time. Kyle Creed brought his banjo albums up and sold them
Mark Campbell

John Herzog

at the Prism Coffee House. Kyle Creed really sold his style on the world. Today, in every session the banjo playing is basically dominated by a Round Peak/Kyle Creed style influence.

Do you hear something in Harold’s music that caused a shift in your own playing?

Well, the banjo and fiddle: it’s all linked. I started out playing what some people would consider a folk style banjo but it really is based on Samantha Bumgarner’s style, which is a pretty normal style. And Phoebe Parsons of West Virginia. Actually she used to do vaudeville and she had her banjo, but she had that—as someone deemed here recently—“a loping style of banjo playing” which was a much broader geographic style.

Then when I was in Charlottesville, I was playing Round Peak banjo, but when I met Harold, I started playing my old loping style again.

“Loping,” can you explain that?

To me the Round Peak style of rhythm is “dink-a-dink-a-dink-a-dink”, while the old loping style is more like “dink-ditty-dink-ditty-dink.”

Right. Now, what about the fiddle?

I started out learning West Virginia fiddling, and then figured if I was going to play all the great Virginia stuff I was hearing—the music Harold was recording and learning from—then I was going to have to learn to shuffle. Harold’s a big shuffler and it really fits with the banjo style that he plays. He understood the Virginia fiddle and banjo styles. Harold is a unique fiddler in that he does his own arranging. I think it’s brilliant arranging; firmly based on Virginia-style musicians. You can hear what that is if you listen to the collections of folks like Harold and Mac Traynham, Mike Seeger, and Skip Ashby.

One thing I’ve learned from Harold was to listen to the bow changes and the open strings and the very small things Harold can hear so well. Maybe because he’s blind.

Most all the musicians he recorded are now gone. The only way to learn is exactly the way Harold had to learn all his music, by listening. Harold became an expert in that. Of course, he was also a piano tuner, so he knows his music. He can hear that stuff so well.

I learned from Harold how to listen to open strings, and also where the bow changes and how a person is attacking a piece of music. I’ve retro-applied that and as I learn more I’m able to hear more. I think in old-time music, it’s almost impossible to separate technique from the tune, and when people say “Make a piece of music your own,” I think that means you’re going to take your—I guess your range of techniques and apply it to any tune. And to me, that’s putting you in front of the tune. And if you have one style, you’re going to change the tune from the style you heard it in to your style.

When I want to make something my own, I go learn the style that my favorite version was played in. I mean, that might be an artificial construct too, but to me, I like a tune because of its style.

You’re listening to all those details like where and when the finger’s placed and as you say, how the bow changes—

Mostly where the bow changes. The fingers tell you the tune, but it’s the right hand, the bowing hand, that’s all the texture and that’s all the history of that region and of that person.
and of that person within his region.
When I’m learning a tune I try to imagine I’m just sitting there next to them, next to this musician and learning it stroke for stroke, finger for finger, because, you know, the way I spent my youth learning this music was sitting down with these guys. So it’s out of respect that I want to learn their style. It’s out of respect for the person, but at the same time, it makes it very difficult to learn more than a couple of styles. I consider myself a West Virginia fiddler that has pretty well indoctrinated himself in Virginia fiddling, but I really have never conquered North Carolina fiddling. I’ve studied Ed Haley at length, but I think he was capable of so many styles, and I can hear that he plays tunes very different one from another. The Ed Haley style is a very broad thing because he was very well traveled and he was capable of soaking up not just tunes but styles. So you can’t just play an Ed Haley style. It’s sort of a set of styles.

Well, I’m studying your playing, of course, and trying to learn a tune but then every time we play something like Sally Anne you play it a little differently. You pull a note here, push a note there.

This is true, too, and to me, that’s the self I put into it. When I’m playing a certain style, if the banjo player’s not going to be playing that style, I need to change the style I’m playing. The music is fluid. I almost have to go back and refresh to the basics and to influence the people around me. All of a sudden there’s a commonality of sound and all of a sudden you reach that sound where it all makes sense.

Is your own style evolving?

Oh yes. I’ve been concentrating much more on Virginia music and particularly music from Galax north because that’s where I started.

What are you listening to? What are you hearing?

Well, of course, I have the Lundy recordings. I think of him as a “strutting fiddler.” Lundy himself says that music back then was slower and I began to think about that: that a lot of the session music is really highly influenced by bluegrass. It’s fast and it’s got the big double bass, and the banjo is almost a rhythm instrument. Almost an accompanying instrument.

And it’s driving.

And it’s driving. You know, you listen to Lundy and it’s delicate and it’s got a hop-step in it, which has sort of been left out in the modern session music. It’s one thing I’m trying to recall. It’s almost more important to be dance music, of different types of dance, than it is just to be gung-ho hard-driving. There’re plenty of Southern Highland schottisches. Leaving those behind is a tragedy to me.

Ed Haley played a lot of schottisches, polkas. And if you listen to Jabbour’s collection of Henry Reed, that’s got marches, polkas, and waltzes. I love to change up the rhythm and, of course, an accompanist has got to recognize that, too. The old guys rue the fact that the music has gotten faster and, in fact, I wonder if some of that isn’t older people slowing down and trying to enjoy the music before they’re gone.

You’ve said that sometimes the distinctions in style are not that distinct.

Yes. I worked really hard to learn an Emmett Lundy piece and then I was working on a Melvin Wine piece and it was almost exactly the same bowing. In fact, it was very difficult to keep the two tunes apart once you broke them down to their bowing.

I was just learning “Bob Wine’s Tune” and, of course, Bob is of the older generation. He’s Melvin’s father. Melvin’s “triple lick” (as Harvey Sampson calls it) is very similar to Lundy’s shakes.

It opens up a question about really identifying these specific regional styles. When you study art history and architectural history really small things like ornament details can travel halfway around the globe with trade and military conquests. Do you think that it’s kind of a romantic notion that specific styles are specifically rooted in place and don’t ever move? I’m sure historians think about this a lot more than we do.

Yes. Well, I don’t think that music is so rooted in the hollows. I think people are much more mobile. I’ve been researching Peter Hammons. He was in Kentucky. Then he moved into western West Virginia, then he moved into southeastern West Virginia, then he probably moved to central West Virginia. So there was a lot of movement going on before the 1870 census. Style might be just as time-sensitive as it is regionally sensitive because if they’re playing the exact same thing at the same time, it’s an indication that that might have been the prevalent style at that time.

I think what you have to ask is, “Where was somebody at a particular time and what were they playing?” The Galax area tunes and the Round Peak tunes, there’s a huge overlap and probably the difference between may have more to do with time than with geography. You can see the Emmett Lundy licks in the new Round Peak music but it’s been very much changed, probably by time and the influence of modern music.

Then getting back to this idea of a Virginia style: how would you describe that?

Well, there’s almost a one-to-one relationship between the drop-thumb of the banjo and the “cut back” or shuffle of the fiddle bow. I think the banjo style has really pushed the bowing style in Virginia and in North Carolina, more than in West Virginia where the fiddle really takes the lead. Round Peak fiddle seems to have a more continuous shuffle, while the Virginia style seems to use the shuffle more sparingly. More at the end of phrases.

I’ve always enjoyed the breakdown of form into its constituent pieces and rebuilding it back up. To me, it’s an architectural construct: music as sort of a flowing architecture. In fact, in school I heard them call architecture “frozen music.”

So when I play a fiddle tune, it’s breaking it down in time and for me, space, because it’s spatial. The fingering is spatial and the right hand is breaking down the rhythm. You’ve got the overall rhythm, then you’ve got the pulsing within that and then the breakdown of the notes and then the breakdown of shuffle within that. And then comes the fluidity of it, the fluidity and the emphasis. Different fiddlers have their little signature slides and holding of certain notes, so I try to replicate that with them. I try to replicate being
with the people that did these tunes. To me, it’s a way of honoring them, you know, playing in their way, in their style. It means I’ve taken the time to figure out what they’re doing as if they taught me. In some cases, they have.

Most of the sources are no longer around for us to sit beside. The direct transmission of traditions has really changed.

Yes, I think so. I’m sure that when World War II broke out and the whole idea of “staying home on the farm” literally changed, that the music started changing. Many of my favorite fiddlers died about then: Fiddling [Cowan] Powers of the Powers Family had his fatal heart attack the night I was born. And Ed Haley died, I think, in 1951: two years before I was born. So there wasn’t a chance to learn directly from these people. There wasn’t that much being passed down and, of course, bluegrass came along at that same time. Exactly post-War. Some people say the traditional died at that point, but we know better.

Well, direct transmission of many sources died, maybe. But the values are persistent, and the respect for styles. I think it’s part of a larger phenomenon that makes old-time interesting and exciting to young people now: this new revival. The move away from things manufactured and disconnected from human experience, an appreciation for community—connection—and working with your hands, DIY.

And now the problem for the young people is that there are so many options. How do you decide what you’re going to play? I went through my period of learning from those meager recordings I had. I wore out the Camp Creek Boys album. With the coming of the web, there are tens of thousands of outlets for source material and now these kids can sort of tap into that and tell each other about it and then they can go off to the festivals. So they’re finding their values—This is a prescreening, but now the screening is not just the people that have access to the festivals or somehow access to music by accident, but they access it because people of like values can send them a link to YouTube. And it’s that easy.

So much stuff—all those digital archives online. Or, how many versions of “Soldier’s Joy” on YouTube? 150? What we’ve been talking a lot about here is building an attitude about studying the masters and their style.

That’s exactly what I was getting to. That’s why I think I’m so interested in Virginia music, because it’s our own heritage and it hasn’t been studied as much as other regional styles. Because I’m learning, too, you see I’ve had to go back to the sources and not only refresh but learn more, so I have jumped into the teaching role in part to learn myself.

I think what we’re doing in the workshop is learning how to really break down a tune. How to listen critically. Pay attention to rhythm—back to circle bowing—and watch the bowing as much as listen.

Oh, yes, it’s all about bowing. And rhythm. I mean, especially if fiddling is based on dance, and if you think about it, a fiddle had to carry all the baggage—I mean, right up through the Hammonses. They didn’t have guitar. The guitar is very late to the mountains and so the older styles I really like are the styles that hold down the rhythms necessary to accomplish the job.

I’m really happy to have a banjo class, too, because, as we were saying before, in Virginia and North Carolina the banjo and the fiddle are integrally tied together. So if you teach fiddle and banjo at the same time, then you can develop that style together and it makes a lot more sense.

You talk about how old-time traditional music has a real place in the modern world and I’m wondering how that fits—or doesn’t fit—with what you were thinking about when you were studying modern architecture.

Well, I guess I see modern architecture as sculpture. I went through the education that architecture is the machine for living and I think we live very differently now, but I think socially the old music is better community-based than our modern institutions. I mean, look at square dancing. At the end of the evening probably at some point, you get to hold hands—swing and look in the eyes of every woman in the hall.
And I can guarantee, I picked my wife out because she was the best swinger in the hall. It was right. You know, it was right. There was a balance—here’s a girl that’s 5’2” but we could perfectly balance.

That’s important to you: to connect. I’ve heard you say that when you’re playing a tune in a style that you’ve really thought about, people stop and listen. You say you play for other people. You can play music to please yourself, and that’s how you usually start out. You’ve got to please yourself first, but you can throw a lot of imagination into what you’re doing. You imagine it’s great, but the next level is what somebody else thinks of your music and all of a sudden, you’ve got to start playing the music to please them. Well, it’s been my philosophy that if you execute to the degree that the famous musicians before you did, if you do it to an equal level of expertise, people will hear and know something’s going on that’s special. They don’t know what it is. And the same with architecture. We used to use a term [in architecture school], the immediate obvious—when something is immediately obviously correct.

Well, it has an aesthetic experience and even if people can’t identify what that is exactly, they still enter into it.

It’s like the Vietnam Memorial. There’s something right about it.

And it’s so powerful. There were people who wanted to put up a statue of a guy of the Vietnam-era Army holding a gun. That is the lowest-common-denominator architecture. The Vietnam memorial is moved to the next level where it becomes meaningful on so many levels. Everyone’s name is there. You can go and copy a name out and see who the contemporaries are of that name and so forth. And you go down into it, then you come back out of it. It has a million times more power than a statue of some guy holding a gun.

Because people can connect on a personal level. It’s such a simple idea.

So you get to something that’s really meaningful but you have to think about it.

We have our community of folks working on style. At the jam last night, people were bringing tunes that fit the style we’ve been playing, and it was very exciting to play a new tune. So that’s the power of the community and that’s what was powering these other communities.

From experience, it’s clear to me that music communities such as Mount Airy and Galax have lasted and prospered owing to their dedication and respect for their traditions. I will always work to build a community of old-time musicians with a strong historical identity—just as it has always been done, one friend at a time.

Laura Chessin, who teaches graphic design at Virginia Commonwealth University, is a fiddler and a student of Mark Campbell and Virginia styles. This interview was very much a collaborative effort and an ongoing conversation through both words and music.
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*not recorded by the original Carter Family (see below)

The Original Carter Family, Sara, A. P., and Maybelle, as most Old-Time Herald readers know, recorded almost 300 songs for RCA Victor between August 1927 and October 1941. Ten years after their last recordings, a “fast-talking minister and businessman” named Clifford Spurlock (the quote comes from Zwonitzer and Hirschberg’s biography of the Carter Family) persuaded A. P. to go back into the recording studio to make records for Spurlock’s Acme Records. A. P. persuaded Sara’s son Joe, who persuaded his sister Janette, and happiest of all forlonely A. P., Sara agreed to participate. (Her husband Coy Bayes stayed away) They recorded 58 sides altogether; the first 26 in a series of sessions in 1952, the rest in 1956.

The Original Carter Family sound was distinctive, wonderful, and capable of being deconstructed and imitated. With a few exceptions, Sara sang lead; if there was a second voice, Maybelle sang tenor, and A. P. would sometimes add a lower part, “bassing in,” as he called it. Maybelle played guitar, usually with a thumb pick, tuning or capoing so as to play using C-position chords. Sara played rhythm autoharp; less often, she played a second guitar. A. P did not play. For the Acme sides, we have either Janette or Joe (sometimes both) playing guitar in their aunt’s style and Sara playing rhythm autoharp. Judging by vocal range (Sara by now had been a heavy smoker for over thirty years, and her voice had dropped) Sara is still singing lead, and Janette is singing Maybelle’s tenor. A. P. contributes his usual bass-baritone line, and Joe sings, we are told, a few times.

Re-reading what I have written, it seems like trying to explain the beauty of rainbows to a blind person. It feels really good to hear another two full CDs of songs done in the Carter Family style. As can be seen from the asterisks above, nearly half these songs are ones not recorded by the original Carter Family. Some of them are already fairly well-known (“The Titanic,” “Railroading on the Great Divide,” “Gently Lead Me,” and others) thanks to revival bands that somehow got copies of the Acme records or learned them directly from the Carters. (Department of Synchronicity: In the New Lost City Ramblers DVDs, you can watch and hear Mike Seeger talk about visiting Sara Carter in her home in Angels Camp, California, and hearing her sing “Railroading on the Great Divide” and hearing her say “I’d really like it if you did this song.” Mike paused and said “It’s quite an experience to have a song pitched to you by Sara Carter.”) Some are completely new to these ears (starting with “Precious Raindrops”) while others show what relatively common songs such as “Angel Band” or “I Shall Not Be Moved” will sound like when done by Carters. There are also songs recorded by the original Carter Family which are being re-done by the Acme group. To pursue the visual metaphor, this is the chance to view Monet’s water lilies at different times of day. Have you ever wondered what “Wildwood Flower” would sound like sung by the Carter Family in harmony? Or thought that “Engine 143” would make more sense with a couple more verses in the middle?

The only thing that keeps me from giving an unqualified recommendation is my belief that this should not be the first Carter Family CD in your collection. If you don’t have any, buy a few original Carter Family CDs first, and then, once you are hooked, buy this. (Even though there are the typical sketchy JSP “liner notes.”) Please.

PETE PETERSON

Dock Dock talks about performing / Down South Blues / Peggy Walker / Intro to Papa Build Me a Boat / Papa Build Me a Boat / Intro to Black Bottom Blues / Black Bottom Blues / Country Blues / Intro to Prayer of a Miner’s Child / Prayer of a Miner’s Child / The Wagoner’s Lad / Pretty Little Napanee / Intro to Sugar Blues / Sugar Blues / Omie Wise / My Loved Ones Are Waiting For Me / Bright Sunny South / I Hope I Live a Few More Days / Mistreated Mama Blues / Turkey in the Straw / Intro to Drunkard’s Lonely Child / Drunkard’s Lonely Child / Banjo Clog / Intro to Rowan County Crew / Rowan County Crew / More about the Rowan County Crew / Intro to Coal Creek March / Coal Creek March / Mixed Blues / One Little Word / Wabash Cannonball / Will Sweethearts Know Each Other There? / Dock’s birth (talk) / Sugar Baby / Intro to Hook and Line / Hook and Line / Spanish Fandango / Reuben’s Train / Cuba
Over a decade ago now, this Norton, Virginia-based musician’s initial commercial records, all made between 1927 and 1929, saw reissue on Revenant records, a label bankrolled by steel string acoustic guitar giant John Fahey. Since the label also reissued everything from outtakes of avant-blues sculptor Captain Beeheart, the minimalist drones of Jim O’Rourke and the deathless two-chord mania of rockabilly god Charlie Feathers, Boggs, a quarter century or so after he died, found an audience outside the perimeters of the folk scene that had initially welcomed his rediscovery in the 1960s, the one that heard him via college and folk festival appearances like this one at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. And there’s simply no way to hear so much as a few notes of opening tune “Down South Blues” without immediately understanding what all the fuss had been about.

Pensive, moody, at times painfully hesitant and a small village away from hi-fi, the stuff on this disc further proves what a complete musician Boggs was. He brought a seriousness to the term “banjo player,” a phrase all too often either preceded or followed by bad jokes. Anyone with copies of the ’20s recordings, or better yet, the Folkways LPs seen to by Mike Seeger, already knows the material. This disc merely echoes the other recordings’ might, which doesn’t mean it’s not indispensable. “Rowan County Crew,” “Drunkard’s Lonely Child,” and “Prayer of a Miner’s Child” are perhaps even more harrowing here than on their studio counterparts due to the fact that there was an audience present to bear witness.

If Boggs’ life was more peaceful in the 35 or so years between his Lonesome Ace recordings and Seeger’s fateful ’63 visit—during which time Boggs didn’t even own a banjo—one can’t help but wonder just how much music like this weighed on his mind. And it’s difficult to say what was more disturbing for Boggs, hearing it in his head and not playing it, or finally trotting it all back out again.

Yet, as painfully intense as his music could be, he seemed to feel right at home, telling lengthy stories about his recording career and subsequent retirement, his account of the disaster that inspired “Coal Creek March,” which is perhaps the most declamatory tune on this disc, and even humorously of his own birth. Between the ballads and blues are clogs, light-hearted tunes and traditional pieces, including a rare stab at clawhammer playing (“Hook and Line”). Elsewhere, song collector Kate Peters Sturgill, cousin of A. P. Carter, provides not only back up guitar, but a few tunes of her own, spelling Boggs. Unfortunately, his playing behind her is awkward—at one point, he tunes in the middle of one of her songs. But once he gets into his version of the standard, “Reuben’s Train,” which rides on a suspense on par with Clouzot or Hitchcock, you forget all about it. By the time Boggs closes with “Cuba,” he manages to render all notions of musical boundaries quaint. Like other twentieth century musical masters such as John Coltrane, or the above-mentioned Fahey, Dock Boggs worked within a well-rooted tradition. Yet his music is so singular it obliterated the very framework it leaned on. Perhaps this has helped spread his music across boundaries not previously delineated in space.

Bruce Miller

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Take Me to the Water: Immersion Baptism in Vintage Music and Photography, 1890-1950
Photographs from the collection of Jim Linderman, with an essay by Luc Sante and notes by Steven Lance Ledbetter

Dust-to-Digital DTD-13

“Record collectors and photograph collectors share many traits,” writes Jim Linderman in the introduction to Take Me to the Water, a new book and CD from Dust-to-Digital. The comparison is very true. The intimacy of experiencing an artist’s voice through the first-generation medium of a 78 rpm record is closely akin to staring into an old photograph, seeing a moment of the long-ago past with a clarity that’s only one step removed from the real thing. There’s the fun of the hunt as well; there’s nothing like leaving an antique or junk shop with a stack of old records or old pictures, and the satisfying grime on one’s fingertips that comes of handling dusty shellac records or sifting through photographs backed with that powdery black paper used in old photo albums.

Take Me to the Water brings together a remarkable photo collection—that of Jim Linderman, who collects photographs of immersion baptisms—with a soundtrack of baptism-related music from the 78 rpm era.

The photographs are stunning, individually and as a collection. They cover roughly the first half of the twentieth century, the majority dating to the first decades. Many depict large congregations assembled on the banks of a river, while the preacher and the candidate, in the foreground, prepare for the baptism. Others show smaller gatherings, and sometimes only the preacher and the candidate are in the frame. In formally posed scenes, all eyes are on the camera, while in many other pictures all eyes are on the baptism in progress. Candidates are shown before, during, and after immersion—being dipped backwards, fully submerged, splashing out of the water in their soaked garments. Baptisms are in rivers, lakes, and millponds. In several photographs, baptism take place in holes cut in the ice of frozen rivers.

The book is designed and printed in Dust-to-Digital’s characteristically beautiful quality, in rich sepia tones. Some photographs fill the pages, while others are presented in such a way as to convey a sense of the photograph as an object—showing the full print, borders and all, or the board backing of cabinet cards. Special thanks to the designers of this book for reproducing the backs of so many of the photographs. Collectors find that sometimes the story told on the verso is as compelling as the picture itself. The back of one is particularly intriguing, showing heavy water stains, as if the photograph itself had been submerged.

An essay by Luc Sante gives a helpful explanation of the various practices of immersion baptism in different denominations. Further illuminating what may be an unfamiliar concept to some of this book’s audience are a selection of Biblical references to baptism. The book concludes with Steven Lance Ledbetter’s detailed and engaging notes to the music.

Tucked neatly in the back cover, among wave-printed endpapers, is a CD that will be of great interest to readers of this magazine, a wonderful collection of old-time and early gospel recordings of songs about baptism. The disc begins with a dramatized baptism scene issued by that most prolific preacher of the early 78 rpm era, Rev. J. M. Gates. The wish to be baptized, he declares, “is as much natural as it is for a little duck to desire water.” Rev. Gates sings and enacts a baptism, while the brethren and sisters gathered to portray an assembled congregation “amen” and “all right” their encouragement. Washington Phillips then explains the
beliefs and doings of the various denominations in his “Denomination Blues”: “The Primitive Baptists they believe/You can’t get to Heaven unless you wash your feet . . . the Missionary Baptists they believe/Go under the water and not to wash the feet.”

After the hypnotic “John the Baptist” by Rev. Moses Mason, familiar from the Harry Smith Anthology, Dock Walsh sings the first country gospel song in the collection, “Bathe in that Beautiful Pool,” with slide banjo. A few tracks later, Walsh returns with the Carolina Tar Heels, in a wonderfully eccentric performance of “I’ll Be Washed,” in which the suspenseful vocal arrangement gives the impression that the musicians are crouched in a dark corner, waiting to spring out at you.

Elder J. E. Burch introduces his sermon with a poignant reminder of the era and original audience of these recordings:

“The subject in which we will use at this hour, it might seem a little common, but it’s true. The subject is WASH. You wash-ladies understand that it’s essential that you wash your garments clean. And in the same like mind, our God almighty wants His garments clean.

The sermon gathers steam until the congregation breaks into song with a highly syncopated clapping and stomping, a clever transition into the next track, Frank Jenkins’ super-syncopated “Baptist [sic] Shout.”

The album, which contains 25 tracks, is a well-balanced mixture of country string band performances and African American preaching and quartet singing. The selections are well chosen, and thoughtfully sequenced. My quibbles with the album are few. One track seems out of place, Bill Boyd and his Cowboy Ramblers’ “Sister Lucy Lee,” a comic song about baptism at odds with the deep sincerity of the other performances. And while the sound quality is excellent nearly throughout, one pair of tracks, the two sides of Rev. R. M. Massey’s “Old Time Baptism” are taken from a copy of the record with so much stripping and surface noise that the listener has to strain to follow the performance. The recording couldn’t be more relevant to this collection, but given its condition, might have been better left out.

Those are small criticisms, though, of what is a very special release. Take Me to the Water is a moving and gorgeously presented collection that readers of the Old-Time Herald will enjoy very much.

SARAH BRYAN

To order: www.dust-digital.com

Pine to Pine
Big Medicine

This is the third CD by this North Carolina band, and a good one! The boys of Big Med do not disappoint. It used to be mostly boys, with LaNelle Davis on bass and vocals on the previous recordings, but now it’s a fully testosterone-driven band with Bobb Head handling the bass and some harmony vocals.

Dunbar / Red Rocking Chair / Lady of the Lake / Lone Pilgrim / My Rough and Rowdy Ways / The Waves on the Sea / Brushy Run / What Does the Lonesome Dove Say? / Texas Gales-Blackberry Rag / I’ve Got No Honey Baby Now / Bury Me Out on the Prairie / Fire on the Mountain / Meet Me Tonight / Tie Your Old Dog, Sally Gal / Tombigbee River

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THE OLD-TIME HERALD WWW.OLDTIMEHERALD.ORG OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2009 45
This band has always walked a fine line between old-time and bluegrass, especially in the vocal arrangements. Jim Collier and Joe Newberry have voices that are well suited for both, and Kenny Jackson, with a background in bluegrass and almost 30 years served in the old-time trenches, also has a delightful voice. Although I miss LaNelle’s vocals, the songs here are still beautifully performed.

Most old-time bands nowadays are lucky to have one good singer. Big Medicine has four! It’s not fair… And let’s not forget that they are all proficient on many instruments.

Although this is not just a vocal album, the songs stand out for me. First of all the choice of material is excellent, drawn from sources from Jimmie Rodgers to the Watson Family, and Joe Newberry himself, who contributes his own composition “What Does the Lonesome Dove Say?,” which the title of the CD refers to. Joe is a top-notch songwriter with a gift for composing songs that sound timeless. It’s a rare gift and it shows in this song. And let’s hear it for the return of “whoo-hoo-ing!” I think a CD of Joe’s songs is overdue. “Lone Pilgrim,” one of Jim’s favorites, is arranged a cappella, and is slightly faster than the Doc Watson original, but the result is, once again, excellent.

“Red Rocking Chair” is the version that I’ve heard too many younger old-time musicians sing and record too many times, and I swore if heard it again I’d scream, but this one is, again, nicely sung by Joe and by Kenny Jackson, and I found myself liking it a lot. Their way still retains power without causing this reviewer a musically induced diabetic coma. Kenny trades his fiddle for the guitar on “My Rough and Rowdy Ways,” a Rodgers classic that the band handles masterfully. “The Waves on the Sea,” from the Carter Family via the Johnson Mountain Boys, is also well performed.

Bobb contributes some fine singing and guitar playing on “Bury Me Out on the Prairie,” a Delmore Brothers song I wasn’t familiar with, and a nice surprise too. Jim takes up the fiddle duties on the Stanley Brothers’ classic “Meet Me Tonight,” with tasteful bluesy breaks and also a fine lead vocal. The last song and final cut, “The Tombigbee River,” is sometimes called “The Gumtree Canoe,” and it’s a lovely waltz-time love song that always evokes for me visions of peace and older, simpler times.

As much as they are a great singing band, Big Medicine are also great interpreters of instrumental fiddle tunes. Kenny Jackson is a solid fiddler and guitar and banjo player, and, of course, a fine singer. Joe Newberry excels on banjo and guitar. Jim Collier has contributed to the recent return of the mandolin to old-time music, and here he displays his expert picking on it and on guitar as well. Bob Head, as previously mentioned, ties it all up with his bass playing. “Lady of the Lake,” from Norman Edmonds, is true to the original version down to the typical Uncle Norm end tag. “Texas Gales / Blackberry Rag” is a nice tribute to one of Jim’s main inspirations, the Watson Family of Deep Gap, North Carolina. Jim spent some time with Arnold Watson when he was a young man, and he even owns the harmonica that Arnold played on “I’m Troubled” from the Watson Family album. “Dunbar,” “Brushy Run,” “I’ve Got No Honey Baby Now,” “Fire on the Mountain,” and “Tie your Old Dog, Sally Gal” are all well played in full string band fashion.

If I haven’t made it clear yet, I like this band and this CD. Do yourself a favor and add it to your collection today.

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“A collection of 16 a cappella songs, ranging from old ballads to modern songs of heartbreak, plantation songs of the antebellum South to 1960s Motown, and songs that have been hiding out in Appalachia for more than a century. Bare Bones delivers tight harmony, strong rhythm, and sheer delight in the music of words.”

“I love this CD! It’s one of my favorite banjo CDs of recent years and reminds me of why I got into this music in the first place.” – John Salmon, Sugar in the Gourd Radio

“The Worried Blues / Jesse James / Soldier’s Joy / Goodbye Booze / John Henry / Otto Wood the Bandit / Marching Jaybird / Sweet Betsy from Pike / What a Friend We Have in Jesus / Poor Boy A Long Way from Home / Ever See the Devil Uncle Joe / The New Prisoner’s Song

A long time ago, but not in a galaxy far away, even before the formation of the New Lost City Ramblers, there were musicians living in and around New York City who were learning to play the banjo. They were learning frailing and up-picking from Pete Seeger’s banjo book (this was the second edition with the yellow cover, we hadn’t even gotten to the third, red-covered 1961 edition yet), from Tom Paley, and from...
each other. Some of those musicians were named Billy Faier, Erik Darling (who went on to replace Pete Seeger in the Weavers), Dick Weissman, and yes, Peter Siegel. They developed a distinctive sound with little or no double-thumbing and lots of hammer-ons and pull-offs to get melody notes. You can hear Siegel playing in this style on Elektra’s Old Time Banjo Project and String Band Project—both made in the early 1960s. All of this was done with very little contact with Southern musicians—for example, Tommy Jarrell in those days was running a grader for the North Carolina highway department and few if any Northerners had ever heard him play.

Here it is, fifty years later, and Peter Siegel still plays banjo in the style described above, as does his friend Eli Smith. And it sounds great! Smith, I learned from Google, is also from New York City and is a member of Peter Stampfel’s Ether Frolic Mob, together with John Cohen and others. It’s a small world here in old-time music.

This reviewer likes self-descriptive CD titles. Of the twelve tunes here (both played by two banjos), five are completely instrumental, the other seven are vocals. Some are primarily banjo tunes with a few words, such as “Ever See the Devil Uncle Joe” which is Uncle Dave’s Macon’s “Hop High Ladies”—the last line of Smith’s chorus is “Don’t mind the weather if the wind don’t blow.” (How do YOU sing it? What I hear Uncle Dave singing is something like “Such a getting upstairs I never will know.”) “New Prisoner’s Song” is sung well here; this is Dock Boggs’ self-pitying “For seven long years I’ve been in prison,” not the more familiar melody and words that go with “If I had the wings of an angel.” There are pretty standard covers of Poole’s “Goodbye Booze” and the Carolina Buddies’ “Otto Wood the Bandit” and some nonstandard words to “Jesse James,” as well as a very unexpected melody for “Sweet Betsy from Pike”—the usual words were sung to the tune of Woody Guthrie’s “Pastures of Plenty”—which, in turn, is Woody’s adaptation of “Pretty Polly.”

On the wholly instrumental selections, the two banjos, both played in that distinctive style—lots of left-hand work and little or no double-thumbing—blend well with each other. It works for fast tunes (“Soldier’s Joy,” “John Henry”) and for slower, more contemplative tunes such as “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” and “The Worried Blues” which is better known as “Lonesome Road Blues” — the use of that title led me to wonder if they had learned it from one of the earliest commercial banjo recording artists—Samantha Bumgarner.

Why no liner notes? (Growl.) At the very least, I would have enjoyed learning more about Siegel and Smith themselves, and what strange wonderful trip led them first to old-time music itself, and then to playing in that particular style. Moreover, I would like to know about the tunes and songs and how the artists came to learn them—where does “Marching Jaybird” come from? (This was the only tune completely new to me, and it’s a gem!) Despite these complaints, I enjoyed the album and recommend it.

Pete Peterson

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Singing’ on the Range
Art Dickson
BACM CD C 243

Pioneering Canadian Cowboy Group
Charlie Herald and his Roundup Rangers
BACM CD C 255

A Lonely Ranger Am I
Roy Rogers
BACM CD C 251

On its website, the British Archive of Country Music (BACM) is described as “a library of over 500,000 country music tunes, history and biographical works, plus magazines, publicity data, sheet music, song books, photographs, videos, and all manner of memorabilia and artifacts... the Archive not only houses US recordings but country music from all over the world where the media, record producers, or serious collectors may come and browse.”

The Archive’s catalog contains over 250 offerings, including sets like most of those above, whose focus is on less traditional sounds and styles from the Southwest that dominated country radio and movies after 1935, and whose historical interest may trump aesthetic appeal. These performers, along with many others like them, represented the evolution of country and Western music as it adapted to evolving tastes and new mediums. They achieved varying degrees of stardom, doing so less as bold stylists or innovators than as journeyman entertainers responding to the tastes of their record, radio, TV, film, and community audiences.

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Unless I’m mistaken, BACM’s diverse catalog takes advantage of computer technology to produce CDs and printed notes in limited quantities. If the on-demand process isn’t particularly profitable, it is an efficient way to make obscure and overlooked material available, allowing both individuals and institutions to build representative to comprehensive country music reference collections without huge investments. Transfers are usually made from collector copies of commercial pressings, so sound quality can vary from track to track and from one set to another. Nevertheless, the following collections perform a service and provide documentation of artists and songs unavailable elsewhere.

Jules Allen (1883-1942) was a working Texas cowboy who made early (1928-29) versions of songs that even then had become part of the folk song canon, thanks to John Lomax and other collectors. Stylistically Allen is a forerunner of Burl Ives, whose low-key vocals, simple guitar accompaniments, and preference for narrative songs were a catalyst in the folk revival a generation later. Unhappily a few others are in a harsh blackface dialect; at least one (“Po’ Mourner”) is offensive enough that a warning about its content would have been appropriate.

Oklahoma-born Johnny Bond (1915-1978) is remembered for writing some classic country songs (“Ten Little Bottles,” “Cimarron,” “I Wonder Where You Are Tonight,” among others), for his long residency on Gene Autry’s Melody Ranch CBS radio show, and for his book-length treatises on Tex Ritter and the recordings of Jimmie Rodgers. This CD is compiled from 1950s broadcast transcriptions and commercial discs, and some tracks are apparently published here for the first time.

Jimmy Dean (b. 1928) is another Texan, though his performing career took off in Washington, DC, where he was discharged from the Air Force in 1948. Sporting an accordion, Dean and his Texas Wildcats hosted a local TV show in the early ‘50s that fostered the developing careers of Roy Clark, Billy Grammer, and Patsy Cline. Its success led to further Jimmy Dean TV shows in 1957 (CBS) and 1965 (ABC), before he graduated from show biz to become the titular head of a successful sausage factory in 1968. These recordings include the early hits “Bummin’ Around” (1952) and “Big Blue Diamonds” (1955), but not Dean’s biggest success, “Big Bad John” from 1961. Incidentally, the unidentified bluegrass banjo player on the cover snapshot is Smitty Irvin.

Art Dickson’s name is new to me. He composed original cowboys songs in the
1930s and '40s, and recorded a number of them with his Lone Star Serenaders and Harmonicowboys on 1940s Lang-Worth radio transcriptions, which included cover versions of other contemporary country songs. Dickson's singing style is old-fashioned and a little stentorian; his band features prominent accordion and violin.

Charlie Herald (1891-1960) from Manitoba recorded with his Roundup Rangers from 1933-35, a group of young musicians who mixed Scots-Irish dance tunes with cowboy-theme songs and old standards, a unique formula designed to match western Canadian tastes. Fiddle, accordion, and harmonica are featured, and the leader’s exuberant tuba is prominent too. Even though most of Herald’s records were made for RCA in Montreal, their sound quality is barely adequate, and some pressings used for remastering have audible wear.

The Roy Rogers collection assembles selected solo recordings from 1938-52. Unlike Gene Autry, Roy didn’t have many record hits, even though his movies were always popular. The sources are Columbia, RCA, and Decca 78 rpm discs whose original sound quality is considerably better than the low-end transfers on this CD.

Johnny in the Briar Patch
Old-Time Missouri Ozarks Traditional
Fiddle Music
Jeremy Myers

This CD consists primarily of fiddle tunes from a promising young fiddler with excellent intonation and a lively sense of history. Myers will no doubt improve upon his bowing so as to give each note of a phrase, whether eighth or sixteenth, its due. Using overdubs, he backs up his fiddling of standard tunes (and two originals) with clean, simple guitar. He also plays banjo on a few cuts, and sings in a gentle, unaffected style.

Note to Artists and Record Companies

Please send all material for review to the OTH (PO Box 61679, Durham, NC 27715). Please do not send to individual reviewers. What gets reviewed is determined at the discretion of the OTH according to space available, balance of old and new, and compatibility with our mission. We cannot review everything that comes in nor guarantee that because we received it we will review it. We do not return materials to the sender. Thanks!
Some time in the middle of this wonderful film, Tracy Schwarz tells the story of somebody who came up to him after a Ramblers performance, and said “I’ve been wanting to ask you. . . did you want the violin to make those noises?” If you play old-time music (especially fiddle) you can appreciate this story. Perhaps the greatest contribution that the Ramblers have made was to show us that yes, you DO want the violin to make those noises, and what’s more, it’s fun to listen and dance to, and best of all, to make them yourself.

Are there any of us who are unaware of our debt to the New Lost City Ramblers? To generalize: I know very few of us whose involvement with old-time music cannot be traced to the New Lost City Ramblers—either directly to them, or through listening to Highwoods or Fuzzy Mountain, who in turn got started by the Ramblers, or a later generation. Now that the Ramblers have, sadly, played their last concert, a fifty-year retrospective seems a fitting tribute. Thanks to Yasha Aginsky, Arhoolie, and others, we have that tribute.

This film shows the history of the NLCR both in interviews and with concert footage from their formation in 1958 until almost the present day. The film is not chronological; we see John Cohen, Mike Seeger, Tom Paley, and Tracy Schwarz as young twenty-somethings, the older men in their seventies that they are today, and everything in between. Long hair and beards come and go, voices drop with time and go back up as we go back to young Ramblers.

One of the things that pleasantly surprised me was how much footage was available from the early years. In one of Pete Seeger’s “Johnny Appleseed” columns from the mid-’60s, he complained about how humanity was losing the opportunity to SEE and hear...
a lot of music because a good video camera cost about ten thousand bucks. Fortunately for us and for this film, people thought the NLCR worth recording, so we have not only the Folkways records from those days but also video recordings and films made at concerts and TV shows. There are also many short segments of the Ramblers with rediscovered old-time musicians from this time period.

This is not a conventional movie. It does not have a plot, nor does it discuss except briefly the obstacles that have been overcome if you have spent your adult lifetime having always been a Rambler. Moreover, this film is not all about the NLCR, but features footage of other musicians. Some the Ramblers discovered, or rediscovered: Clarence Ashley, the Balfas, Sara Carter, Elizabeth Cotten, Roscoe Holcomb. Some are among those they have inspired: David Grisman, Rayna Gellert, the Carolina Chocolate Drops. But the focus is on the Ramblers themselves, their singing, playing, and interactions with each other.

I don’t believe that any piece of music is performed in its entirety; you get a verse, chorus, and an instrumental break, and then on to the next song or topic. To get
the whole song, you’ll need to buy one of the NLCR CDs—you won’t be able to watch them, but you’ll hear them doing it. At one point there is a voice-over by Bob Dylan, saying how the band listened to all those old 78s and field recordings and selected out the best, and that “the Ramblers themselves have stood the test of time, just like the originals.”

Many people in the old-time community understood how important it was that this film be made and supported it during its production. Particular credit is due not just to director Agin-sky but to Suzy Thompson, who is one of the three producers listed in credits at the end. What we get to see on the DVD is the result of many hours spent watching and listening to film, videos, and still shots, and putting it all together. Thanks in part to Suzy’s drive, Mike Seeger was able to see and enjoy the final cut of I’ve Always Been a Rambler a few months before he left us. The last song of the film is the Delmore Brothers’ “Gonna Lay Down My Old Guitar.” I cried.

Do I need to say “Recommended?”

PETE PETERSON

To order: www.alwaysbeenarambler.org

Best of the Flatt & Scruggs TV Show, Volumes 7 and 8

The weekly television show that Lester Flatt, Earl Scruggs, and the Foggy Mountain Boys did under the sponsorship of Martha White Mills, and that ran from 1955 until the band’s breakup in 1969, has long had near-legendary status among the band’s fans. It was widely supposed that all of these shows had been lost until copies of 36 were acquired by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum via two separate sources in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Hall of Fame, in conjunction with Shanachie Entertainment, has been issuing selected shows on DVD; the two volumes at hand are the latest installments in what is projected to be a ten-volume series.

Each DVD contains two half-hour programs or simulated programs (more on that in a bit). Shows followed a consistent format. The announcer (usually T. Tommy Cutrer) would identify the show and its sponsor, and then introduce Lester Flatt. Lester then served as emcee, introducing the musical numbers and whatever individual band member happened to be featured. The music usually began with an instrumental or other fast number to get the program off to a brisk start, and then moved to a more moderately-paced vocal. From here they would segue into one of the famous commercials for Martha White products, featuring a recipe demonstrated by a prim Southern housewife while T. Tommy provided commentary.

Other segments showcased the talents of various band members and guests. There was plenty of Paul Warren’s superb, highly-charged fiddling, sometimes accompanied by the full band but often in tightly-woven banjo-fiddle duets with Earl Scruggs. In addition to their top-notch instrumental work on Dobro and bass, respectively, Josh Graves and Jake Tullock provided comic relief with the sort of cornball routines that were at one time part and parcel of nearly every country music show. Curly Seckler played mandolin and added his distinctive tenor voice above Lester’s leads. Of course, there was always at least one sacred song on every show, when Lester called for the band members to “gang around the microphone with the Foggy Mountain Boys quartet.” Earl Scruggs often sat aside his banjo and picked up his guitar for the gospel numbers, and treated listeners to some exceptional finger-style guitar work. Programs typically included about ten musical numbers; a generous helping for a half-hour show.

Although most of the repertoire is drawn from the Flatt and Scruggs canon, there are numerous pieces that the band never recorded for commercial release. Among the real surprises is a performance of “Whoa, Mule, Whoa.” by Paul Warren, in which he plays Earl’s banjo while Earl plays guitar (volume 8, track 9).

A highlight of volume 7 is the inclusion of the earliest show to survive, dating from 1955 or 1956. This is five or six years earlier than the other material on these two volumes, and in the series as a whole. The performers are noticeably younger, and play with a bit more fire; the version of “Cumberland Gap” on this show is a good 20 beats per minute faster than the one in the chronologically later episode that precedes it on the same DVD. In this early show Josh Graves plays bass for most of the program, picking up his Dobro only for a solo number, “Eight More Miles to Louisville.” Guesting on this show was “Kentucky Slim” (Charles Elza) who treats the viewers to some fine tap dancing, or what Lester terms a “pork chop dance.” Careful observers of instruments will note that when Earl plays guitar in this show he is using a Gibson (a J-45, I think) rather than the more familiar Martin with the double pick guard. Jud Collins serves as the announcer on this show rather than T. Tommy Cutrer.

The other program segments on these two discs are compilations from various original shows from 1960-61. This patchwork approach was done “to avoid excessive duplication of songs found on earlier DVDs in this series.” This is certainly justifiable from a programming point of view, but will no doubt bother some modern viewers. Continuity watchdogs will be sure to note the costume differences between different portions of these compiled shows.

The band was in its prime during the years covered by the DVD series (1956-1962), with ensemble playing that has rarely, if ever, been surpassed. All members of the Foggy Mountain Boys were highly-professional and superbly-disciplined performers and musicians. They never crossed over into bland slickness, however. They were country performers, playing for a country audience, a more modern incarnation of the professional string bands of the pre-WWII era.

The shows owned by the Hall of Fame are film copies of programs recorded on two-inch videotape. Many were in need of extensive preservation and restoration work. A short feature on Volume 7 gives a brief overview of the processes by which this was accomplished. Each volume includes the same eight-page brochure of notes by Jay Orr of the Hall of Fame staff. Brief notes specific to each program are printed on the inside of the DVD case.

If I had to use a single word to describe these shows it would be “comfortable.” The performers are completely at ease with themselves and their audience, and this ease is communicated to the viewer. You almost feel as though it’s your own living room in which the musicians are playing, rather than a television studio—
which, of course, was one of the aims of the show in the first place. The programs on these DVDs come from the time when Flatt and Scruggs were for the most part still playing for the friends and neighbors down home, before “The Ballad of Jed Clampett” and the theme from Bonne and Clyde carried them to national attention and brought about a sea change to their repertoire. In the notes to the DVDs Scruggs is quoted as saying that the target audience for the shows was “mainly rural, and that the broadcasts were scheduled around suppertime when viewers would be done working in the fields for the day.

There is plenty of wonderful music on these DVDs, as there is on earlier volumes in the series. To paraphrase Lester Flatt: Gang around the old TV set and enjoy some of the finest music the South had to offer. Goodness gracious, it’s good!

PAUL F. WELLS

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Books

Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Contests

Chris Goertzen
University Press of Mississippi

A new book by musicologist and fiddler Chris Goertzen brings us welcome discussion of a topic many fiddlers and musicians scorn but many others embrace. Yes, that would be old-time fiddler’s contests. Framed by a sketch of the history of American fiddle traditions, and with substantial interviewing of several of today’s contest fiddlers, Professor Goertzen’s emphasis is on the present more than on the past. This is a good thing. Goertzen performs old-time fiddle music and participates in fiddler’s contests, and at the same time is based in the academic world of seminars, teaching, and scholarship as a faculty member at the University of Southern Mississippi, and this versatility and depth helps bring valuable perspective.

Goertzen shows us that the quirky business of fiddle contests is as interesting as any topic in the ongoing evolution of old-time fiddle and dance music. With its festival environment and circles of seasoned musicians of every stripe, the contest is where campaigns over “what is traditional music,” the “cultural negotiations,” and the style wars continue. And, as Goertzen says, now that dances are fewer and fewer, in many instances the local fiddle contest offers an important opportunity for fiddlers to gather to visit, exchange tunes, and socialize. Moreover, the contest is where the two major nationalized styles of contest fiddling have emerged and exert influence on younger musicians. On one hand, there is the Appalachian music-derived contest style (some may call it “festival style”) promoted at events like those at Clifftop, West Virginia, and Galax, Virginia, and, on the other hand, there is the Texas-derived national contest style (a.k.a. “Weiser style”) that is promoted at places like Athens, Alabama, Hallettsville, Texas, and Weiser, Idaho.

Competitions have been part of the fiddle and dance landscape and a performance venue for musicians since colonial times. No doubt contests were alternately delightful and vexing back in Virginia in 1736 just as they are at Clifftop and Weiser. Up to now we have had a very short list of useful looks at fiddle contests. Among the best are Richard Blaustein’s dissertation at Indiana in 1975 delineating the rise of old-time fiddlers’ associations in the 1950s and 1960s (a groundbreaking study), Sharon Graf’s work, such as her 1999 dissertation at Michigan State (“Traditionalization at the National Oldtime Fiddlers’ Contest: Politics, Power, and Authenticity,” soon to be published in book form), and Sherry Anne Johnson’s 1999 article in the Canadian Journal for Traditional Music, “If You Want to Win, You’ve Got to Play It Like a Man.” These projects share with Chris Goertzen’s Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Contests an approach that seeks to shed light on why fiddlers’ contests have been a staple community event in North America since the 1700s.

As Goertzen writes, contests and fiddling serve as “symbolic anchors,” “reminders of the past that aren’t just pictures on the wall or tales in books but that are celebrated through actions.” This summary serves as well for the contemporary as for yesterday’s interconnected (if often distant) galaxies of old-time music and fiddle contests.

Goertzen’s book is a good, brisk voyage through this complicated netherworld of fiddling competitions and a solid introduction to the contest business. Several spots could use a bit more research or a second look, as in wee details that only fiddle fanatics might notice—such as claiming that the tunes “Ricketts Hornpipe” and “Money Musk” are “northern today”; that, “Of the wide assortment of forums avail-

able to the early twentieth century fiddler, the contest or convention was the only one based on listening passively to tunes” (but what about radio, records, touring shows, square dances, etc.?); and that most of the fiddle tunes played today are essentially traceable to the British Isles (in my experience only perhaps a third of the tunes played in competition rounds at a major contest like Athens and Weiser derive from ancient British melodies). The last point, about the dominance of the British-based repertory, is more than a trivial blip; repeating that familiar stereotype, even when the author adds in “blackface minstrelsy,” undervalues the immense importance of dance music from the Continent, tunes from the late nineteenth century brass band movement, and the vast influence on the North American fiddle repertory of Tin Pan Alley.

I have noticed that fiddle enthusiasts and scholars have often been critical, if not dismissive, of fiddle contests and especially of the monster cavalcades like Galax, Weiser, and Hallettsville. I have noticed that contests tend to freeze the repertoire through influential players’ constant flogging of a dozen or so fancified and sanctified “contest tunes.” They can discourage fiddlers who do not play the fashionable contest repertory in one of the “national contest styles” (either the national contest style that evolved out of Appalachian fiddling or the national contest style that evolved out of Texas-based contest fiddling as extrapolated through the machinery at the National Oldtime Fiddler’s Contest in Weiser, Idaho; note that each style is no longer rooted in a cultural region of the US). Contests tend to create and support a star system of virtuosos to the exclusion of everybody else. Contests don’t really represent “the best fiddlers,” but rather the best of the fiddlers who for one reason or another happen to participate in the proceedings on a given day. Because they are essentially concerts, contests have helped further erode old-time dancing. In addition to these matters, I have also noticed that contest judges and audiences value smooth young violinists and virtuosos more than rough old-timers. But wait—did not many of the same processes take place in the early days of radio and commercial records when the exciting performances of Clay- ton McMichen, Eck Robertson, and Arthur Smith were delighted in and copied...
right across the planet? How much was lost when fiddlers in the 1930s started overwriting their memory banks with Nashville recordings or professional “barn dance” radio broadcasts of “Black Mountain Rag” and “Rubber Dolly,” or the sweet innovative swing music of the territory dance bands like Milton Brown’s and Bob Wills’ out in Texas?

At the Titanic contests and conventions Dr. Goertzen discusses, such as Athens, Alabama, Galax, Virginia, and Weiser, Idaho, as well as some of the smaller regional events such as the annual contest in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, only a small number of the hundreds of fiddlers in attendance sign up for the contest. Many shun the contest entirely, keeping to themselves and their picking buddies in the tent islands in the festival campgrounds or nests of folding chairs down the hallway, where jam sessions (often unfriendly toward outsiders) and socializing are paramount. Likewise, most of the diehard contest fiddlers never bother to wander over to visit the bluegrass, Irish, Appalachian, or swing music suburbs at these big events. In post-folk song revival and post-fiddlers’ association times, walls have been mortared up between those who like fiddle contests and those who don’t, and everybody’s biases now have a venue. A book like Chris Goertzen’s can help everyone see some of the broader history of contesting and help us consider adopting a more generous and informed view of fiddlers’ contests in the richly complicated flow of time, taste, and music.

Weiser style, along with the Appalachian-based generalized fiddle style, which are the two major non-regional viral fiddle styles (there are others, such as Irish fiddling and Cajun fiddling, but these nationalized styles have, as far as I can tell, virtually no impact at major old-time fiddlers’ contests) are forcing out of existence or driving underground great regional and ethnic fiddling styles and old dance music repertoires. People like Chris Goertzen prefer cultural versatility, diversity, complexity, and choice, but, as he says in a valuable section on Senator George Cecil McLeod and his fiddling family in Mississippi, today’s (contest) “purist attitude … one not very tolerant of heterogeneity or repertoire or style.” (Readers of OTH will recall Chris Goertzen’s article on McLeod in the November-December 2008 issue, and a previous article on McLeod in the fall 2004 issue of American Music.)

In another insightful observation, Goertzen writes about a state fiddle contest in Jackson, Mississippi, that is happily decorated with numerous child violinists. Goertzen takes up the issue and his account will sound familiar to those who take part in fiddle contests anywhere in North America:

… this contest is primarily for kids … and few are skilled. That most are new to the craft is made clear by who accompanies them. Some have their parents on stage, but most have their teachers supporting them on guitar. Two studios dominate. … a solid professional fiddler proficient in various American styles and in modern Irish fiddling, teaches most of the kids who actually sound like fiddlers. Even more youngsters study with a couple who are classical musicians but know little about fiddling. It’s common nationwide for violin students in the Suzuki method to be dragged to fiddle contests: any chance to perform is “good for them.” But, however cute these kids may be, and however valuable to them the experience may be, when they arrive in droves the beginners’ portion of any fiddle contest becomes excruciating for the audience. If these children skipped the contest, would it shrink out of existence? Or would more real fiddlers show up? Will some of the budding violinists be seduced by fiddling?

Many of us have been to contests where that scenario is replicated. Goertzen wonders if the scores of “cute” and amazing young violinists in contests are helpful or not helpful in nourishing the deeper traditions and the time-honored community of vernacular fiddle music, a community where fiddlers used to pay their dues before being crowned by the tribal elders. It is a tough question, and anyone who comments on the absurdity of a well-polished teenage violin student fiddling memorized book tunes in an old-time fiddler’s contest “against,” let’s say, Buddy Thomas, Joe Pancerewski, Pete McMahan, Tommy Jarrell, or Major Franklin always sounds inappropriate and narrow-minded.

Goertzen’s discussion of the big events like Galax and Hallettsville are important features of his book. At these large and successful festivals with contests attached, as the author writes about Galax, “all the drawbacks of festival gigantism were said to be virulently active.” He confirms the presence of the virus but winds up having a fine time. Goertzen draws important distinctions between contests in the Appalachians and Southeast, where the competitions are “ensemble oriented” with many divisions for different kinds of bands and instruments and where the banjo (the banjo!) is still respected, and contests in the Midwest and West where most fiddlers’ contests focus solely on the violin (often there is a category for best accompanist, which there means best swing guitarist).

At Weiser, the contest claims to be “national.” But this is much too ambitious and self-congratulatory. In my experience, several other contests have been as important and attractive to fiddlers over the years, not least the big bash in the hills near Galax, Virginia. In its early years in the 1950s, the Weiser administrators used the word “national” simply to mean that anyone from any state in the Union (and Canada, too) was invited to compete. (We had one of those national contests in Salisbury, Missouri, in 1967, modeled on Weiser, and a bunch more in the very strange place called Branson in recent years.) Only in the 1960s did the Weiser chamber of commerce crank its PR into overdrive and lay claim to hosting “the” national contest. As Goertzen writes, Weiser does fit the bill as “arguably the largest American fiddle contest and certainly the one that is the most broadly publicized and most efficiently run.” I’ll vouch for that.

As Goertzen implies throughout his book, fiddle contests once were dance-oriented. A good, seasoned dance fiddler with good “drive” and a good tune could do well in the competition. This old connection between fiddling and dancing has snapped under the weight of Weiser-style fiddle and guitar playing (accompaniment style is crucial to the overall effect), and through the evaporation of old-time dancing in many communities. As Phil and Vivian Williams often say, many excellent young contest fiddlers have never seen anybody square dance, nor have they had the opportunity to play for dancers. The administration at Weiser actively supports and tries to attract concert violinists-cum-old-time-fiddlers, professional fiddlers from country music shows, Nashville cats, young entertainers, and anybody with a Texas address. But even these pooh bahs of the profession won’t win at Weiser unless they perform in the national contest style and can fiddle “Sally Johnson” and “I Don’t Love Nobody” pretty much like Mark O’Connor or Terry Morris did it
decades ago (fill in the blank for your favorite Texas-based National Contest Style champ). But remember that fiddle contests have always been for listening. They’ve always been concerts.

Goertzen offers solid documentation of the Weiser experience, from the weirdness and self-delusion of judging (with a nice account of the judges’ perfunctory question-and-answer session before the contest), to festival campground neighborhoods such as Stickerville (mainly Appalachian fiddlers who avoid the contest, interspersed with some equally fine swing and jazz musicians), the Institute, and Tin Town (rows of motor homes near the football field where most of the “contest” style fiddlers jam), and other pockets of vitality and delight running the gamut of world fiddle styles. Having judged at Weiser as well as competed in the contest, Goertzen’s account feels spot-on to me. Unlike most contests in my experience, at Weiser the judges are sequestered, back in the high school library. This is supposed to help solve problems of fairness and objectivity, but as a former judge at Weiser I can tell you that it doesn’t. Another device to attempt fairness (impossible, of course; judging is a subjective act) is the system by which, with five judges, the scorekeeper ignores the high and low scores (in 2009 Weiser went to three rather than five judges, and the jury is out on whether it improved things). Just don’t go to Weiser and expect to place high by playing anything but National Contest Style, a style that embraces “a pure, by playing anything but National Contest Style, a style that embraces “a pure, by playing anything but National Contest Style, a style that embraces “a pure, by playing anything but National Contest Style, a style that embraces “a pure, by playing anything but National Contest Style, a style that embraces “a pure, by playing anything but National Contest Style, a style that embraces “a pure, by playing anything but National Contest Style, a style that embraces “a pure, by playing anything but National Contest Style, a style that embraces “a pure, by playing anything but National Contest Style, a style that embraces “a pure, by playing anything but National Contest Style, a style that embraces “a pure, by playing anything but National Contest Style, a style that embraces “a pure, by playing anything but National Contest Style, a style that embraces “a pure,

There are other important themes in Chris Goertzen’s fine book, such as his visit to Hallettsville. The “Fiddler’s Frolics” and state competition at Hallettsville is a big event in a state where fiddling is very important. Hallettsville (and the major competition at Crockett as well) has been influential across the contest fiddling landscape, and it is where, as Goertzen says, “real” Texas style contest fiddling prevails. A chapter on the action “away from the stage” offers valuable documentation and commentary. As we have noted, much of the excitement and action at a fiddler’s contest is over in the campground, coffee shop, parking lot, and motel lobby, where people congregate to enjoy music, food, and socializing. The fiddle contest crowd is a community. Much of the attraction is, as Goertzen writes, “food, fun, and carnival,” and, as he suggests throughout the book, much of it is layered with the bittersweet vapors of nostalgia, mythic history, and selective memory. The carnival aspects of the fiddle festival are especially important to family and friends who may or may not be avid musicians or diehard fans of old-time fiddling. Families can plan vacation trips around the dates for Cliff-top, Athens, or Weiser, and there is typically something for everybody.

One of Goertzen’s commentaries concerns the importance of what are often called “fiddle jockeys,” people and sometimes music stores who set up tents to sell and swap violins, bows, cases, and accoutrements as well as other instruments, books, recordings, and the like. Most fiddlers take time to wander by the sales and swap area, sometimes asking a “vendor” to check over a violin or bow for needed repairs. It is a pleasant moment simply to visit about this or that tidbit of fiddle lore with another person who digs the subject. Some fiddle jockeys and shop owners set up basic tools and equipment so they can re-hair bows or make emergency adjustments and repairs on the spot—an important service for fiddlers who may be in dire need or who may live far from a violin shop. Occasionally a lucrative deal is struck for the vendor; a surprising bargain had by a customer, but in most cases the result is good public relations and the likelihood that a potential customer will contact the shop at a future time to dicker and deal.

A major portion of Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Contests presents information the author derived from interviews with a number of fiddlers. Goertzen worked through a questionnaire to elicit notions of their activities, backgrounds, learning experiences, attitudes toward contests, and other important aspects of fiddling. In this complicated and thought-provoking section of the book, we have comments and glimpses of a wide range of “southern” fiddlers, meaning they appear in this book on “southern fiddling and fiddle contests” and that the author had the opportunity to interview them. Some are well known, such as Bill Birchfield, Tony Ludiker, Richard Bowman, Jimmie Don Bates, and Daniel Carwile, and all have interesting things to say.

A final chapter, followed by interview material from Richard Bowman (Virginia), Bobby Taylor (West Virginia), Lark Reynolds (Kentucky), and Wes Westmoreland III (Texas), is called “Styles and Meanings in Southern Fiddling.” Despite the rather misleading title (a number of fiddlers discussed in this book are not Southerners), this chapter presents suggestive ideas. A fairly complex passage analyzes one of the ironclads of the American repertory (traceable to Britain), “Leather Britches,” comparing notated versions—one from the 1790s (Scotland), one from Appalachia (Virginia, Brian Grim), and one from Texas in the Texas contest style version (Jimmie Don Bates). Here Goertzen offers further explanation of Texas fiddling:

Texas fiddling, and by extension most contest performance, is more oriented toward melody, both the relatively involved original contours that begin a performance and the subsequent pervasive variation of those. The melody is always there, and always audible, but the surface is in constant and fascinating flux (emphasis mine). The version transcribed here from the playing of Jimmie Don Bates is fairly compact. … (it) certainly doesn’t reflect the even more leisurely and luxurious unfolding of ideas typical of jamming. … its unusual brevity presents an especially clear demonstration of the essential features of Texas fiddling. He was accompanied by two guitarists playing chunky, crisp jazz chords in the typical Texas manner. … The resultant total form of the performance is logical and dramatic, a kind of musical narrative very different from the texture-based complexity of old-time versions, which can vary in length quite a bit without changing the

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There is a division at Athens for “Classic Old-Time Fiddle.” But here as elsewhere, a separate division proves nothing. The most focused “contest fiddlers” enter the open divisions, and in those divisions the Texas-derived Weiser style brings home the bacon. Moreover, the Classic Old-Time fiddlers do not have a chance to compete in the finals on Saturday night, when the Tennessee Valley Fiddle King is decided in a play-off between the winner of the Senior Division (age 60 and up) and the Junior Division (age 15 through 59). This means that, no matter how fine a fiddler may appear in the Classic Old-Time Division, Texas-derived National Contest Style is preferred and will be featured in Saturday night’s main event. The same few multi-part, high-octane breakdowns (hoedowns) mounted in full contest array are played by the Junior fiddlers, as Goertzen says, arguably the best fiddlers in the various divisions, at Athens as at Hallettsville, Denver, Branson, or Weiser—“Sally Johnson,” “Dusty Miller,” “Sally Goodin,” “Tom and Jerry,” “Grey Eagle,” and other venerable old-time fiddle tunes converted into nuclear-powered “contest tunes.” Goertzen’s discussion of the judging, the Junior fiddlers’ performances and styles, the Saturday night showdown for the top trophy, purse, and “King” title, and his post mortem comments, are trenchant.

The author suggests that contests such as Athens, Galax, and Weiser do remain “regional” contests, mainly because they draw from their geographical regions for the bulk of their fiddlers, but I also sense that Goertzen feels that they illustrate qualities that, even if changing, make their preferred fiddling styles “regional.”

“...these differences in style...are modest when compared with how much the regions of southern American fiddling share...at all fiddle contests, they keep traditional what they can, and quietly modernize when doing so is convenient and doesn’t undercut the general ambience. Everything at a fiddle contest explores diplomacy between past and present; it’s all memory as repaired by nostalgia, and all in the service of...maintaining a comforting—and invigorating—picture of small-town life in a rosy past, back when people got along, tried hard to do their best, and loved a wholesome frolic but, above all, cared for family and community.

I would have appreciated many more photographs, old and new. And I’m still not entirely comfortable with the book’s title—the title focuses on the South and Southern fiddlers and the book spends a lot of time in Idaho and talking about National Contest fiddling. But I congratulate the University Press of Mississippi for bringing out Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Contests. Chris Goertzen’s very personal and pithy account of his adventures on the contest trail, Southern Fiddlers and Fiddle Contests is guaranteed to be highly interesting to anyone interested in the dynamics of American vernacular music. Highly recommended.

Howard W. Marshall

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