**Remembering Ray Alden**

**Trends in Old-Time Banjo Part 4**

**The Hammons Family**
During the last project-filled months of his life, Ray Alden worked to restructure the Field Recorders’ Collective as a new not-for-profit entity under expanded leadership. By continuing to preserve and produce recordings of valuable and original performances of traditional old time music, the members of the FRC are dedicated to making Ray’s dream come true.

As a tribute to Ray and his lifelong work and love of old time music, Bruce Molsky and the FRC produced this very special collection of Ray playing with many of his friends. This is available for the standard price of $15. In addition, we will include the Ray’s Dream CD free to those who purchase at least 5 other FRC CDs.

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Bascom Lamar Lunsford

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The Old-Time Music Group, Inc. celebrates the love of old-time music—grassroots, or home grown music and dance—shares origins, influences and musical characteristics with roots musics throughout America. Our magazine, the Old-Time Herald, casts a wide net, highlighting the Southeastern tradition while opening its pages to kindred and comparable traditions and new directions. It provides enlightening articles and in-depth reviews, opportunities for musical learning and sharing, and a forum for addressing the issues and questions that bear upon the field.
Here & There

Events

Georgy Alabam, a winter weekend of old-time square dancing in the foothills of the Southern Appalachian mountains, with callers Phil Jamison and Scott Russell and music by Red Mountain, the Yahoos, and Peavine Creek String Band. Jan. 15, 16, 17, 2010, will take place at Cheaha State Park, near Anniston, Alabama. For information: visit http://sites.google.com/site/bfootmad/georgy-alabam or contact sdcviss@ mindspring.com, (404) 377-6242.

Players and listeners are invited to the Spring Rally of the American Banjo Fraternity and a free performance of 1900s music at the Genetti Hotel, 200 West Fourth St., Williamsport, Pennsylvania, 17701, USA, 1-800-232-1388 or 1-570-326-6600. Time 7:30 pm., May 22, 2010. This presentation features solo and group performances on five-string banjos of different sizes using nylon strings and bare fingers, no picks. For further information, please go to www.abfbanjo.org.

Congratulations


Final Notes

Old-time musician and music collector Ray Alden, founder of the Field Recorders’ Collective, passed away on September 19, 2009. For an extended remembrance of Alden, please see page 4.

Southwest Missouri fiddler Fred Stoneking passed away October 5, 2009. Born in 1933, he grew up on a farm in Clinton, Missouri, in a large family of musicians. His father Lee Stoneking was a well-known fiddler in Missouri who, when Fred was young, led various band configurations of his children for dance halls in Deepwater and Urich. Community square dances were still held in homes during Fred’s childhood, and Fred remembered hearing fiddle music in many doorways. Fred fought in the Korean War in early 1950s, and after that lived in California, Wyoming, and for twelve years in Arizona. He eventually moved back to Clinton, and worked as a welding foreman for 18 years. He was primarily a guitarist until the mid-1960s, when he started to see prize money for fiddle contests rising. He won his first fiddle contest in 1966, beating his father (who was proud of the fact). After a short stay in Nebraska, he retired in Springfield where he focused more on fiddle playing, judging contests, and fiddle repair work. In nearby Branson he was occasionally seen playing at Silver Dollar City, the Shepherd of the Hills theater, and with the Horse Creek Band. In 1996, Rounder released an album of Fred’s fiddle playing called Saddle Old Spike (Rounder 0381). His children Alita and Luke have continued his legacy as musicians, and Alita in particular is known as one of the country’s top contest fiddlers.

Drew Beisswenger

Correction

In the last issue we ran the wrong date of birth for Mike Seeger. He was born August 15, 1933.

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THE OLD-TIME HERALD WWW.OLDTIMEHERALD.ORG DECEMBER 2009- JANUARY 2010 3
Rememberances

THE CONNECTOR
RAY ALDEN (JULY 2, 1942-SEPTEMBER 19, 2009)
By Paul Brown

For Ray Alden it was never enough to discover, learn, and analyze the music; organize, illustrate, preserve, package, and distribute the wealth; teach, experiment, and recreate -- or create his own. No, he had to pass right through to the human level, and become part of and blood of those families where the music came from, with friends made everywhere he went along the way.

–Pat Conte

Ray Alden died of cancer at his home in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, on September 19, 2009. He was 67 years old. A musician and polymath, he documented scores of players young and old over several decades, encouraged others to pursue their passions for old-time music and its many variants, and connected hundreds if not thousands of old-time music enthusiasts. He shared his sound recordings and visual images through a succession of iconic LP and CD albums. He was never a professional folklorist or musician. He was a high school mathematics teacher who retired at age 53 to pursue his many interests, including music. Yet his recordings are arguably some of the most important in old-time music from the late 1960s onward.

He became concerned that field recordings would be placed in inaccessible archives. Anxious to share the joy of his experiences with the musicians he’d met over the years, and wanting to help other documenters do the same, he founded the Field Recorders’ Collective. It releases field recordings to the general public. Ray hoped that sales of FRC albums would also financially benefit the artists who had been recorded, as well as their families. Ray Alden was a member of the board of directors of the Old-Time Music Group, which publishes the Old-Time Herald. Paul Brown offers this profile and remembrance.

The heat was unrelenting, the sunlight almost unbearably bright on a Piedmont North Carolina summer day back around 1979. Ray Alden’s gigantic, beat-up second-hand Olds 98 made the turn ahead of me onto NC Route 65 and slowly gathered speed, pushing its clunky bulk towards the small community of Belews Creek. All the windows in the bedraggled car were wide open.

Any pretensions to elegance intended by its maker were either long gone or now a bad joke. Ray wore a ball cap, as did his riding companion, Jim Miller, whose arm was carelessly slung over the top of the bench seat. They were talking idly about who knows what. You couldn’t have seen two guys happier, farther from the cares of work or school.

Our two-car motorcade turned left onto Fulp Road and rattled along to a mobile home where longtime friends of Ray lived. We ambled up onto the narrow porch. Dozens of coffee cans did duty as pots for someone who clearly loved nurturing flowers. Ray gave a little shout and a peck on the door, there was a call back from inside, and we walked into the dimness to find a large man in overalls, an elderly woman, and an older man who was trying his best to look through thick glasses but did not seem to see all that much.

I took a little breath and felt a brief tremor of weakness through my arms. We were in the presence of Fred Cockerham, one of the greatest old-time fiddle and banjo players ever.

As soon as he knew who’d stepped in, Fred called out to Ray in a foggy baritone, and a smile spread steadily across his slightly puffy face.

His health uncertain, Fred had moved with his wife Eva and son Odell to Belews Creek from their cabin in Lowgap, in the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains. They were now living next door to Fred’s devoted daughter and son-in-law, Juanita and Wade Tyson.

Ray, Fred, and Eva chatted about music and friends. The Cockerhams’ son, Odell, who’d been disabled after being hit in the head in a fight years before, sat in his overall in a lounge chair, smiling and hand-rolling one cigarette after another. He steadily piled them on a tray table like timber at a miniature sawmill.

Eventually, Ray suggested Fred get out his fiddle and we play some. Fred said he wasn’t sure he could do much. Ray gently encouraged him. The fiddle appeared. We tuned up. Fred started in on his trademark version of “Susan Anna Gal,” a joyful dance tune from the Round Peak tradition and one of many variants on the “Shady Grove” theme. The clear tone, the slip-slide phrasing, the startling, unexpected turns of bowing heard on Camp Creek Boys touchstone recordings from County and Mountain Records, were all there, even if the volume wasn’t. It was pure Fred Cockerham.

When he wound up the tune, he shook his head slightly. “Pretty weak,” he sighed in a review of the job he’d just done. Ray said it sounded great. We agreed. It did. It just wasn’t loud. Fred played a few more, including the droning “Fall on My Knees.” Eva called across the room and said Fred would sometimes play that one all afternoon, and she loved it.

Against our protests, Eva fixed a comforting meal. She laid out green beans, pinto beans, fried chicken, and potatoes. The chatter was easy, the body language amongst Ray and the Cockerhams relaxed. Before we left, Ray suggested to Jim and me that we pool some money for the food Eva had provided. It wasn’t a usual thing to do in the South, where hospitality is ingrained and a host might take offense. But these were unusu-
al times. Ray knew – and had mentioned quietly out of their earshot – how skimpy Eva’s and Fred’s resources were. Eva objected at first, but Ray quietly, warmly insisted. His smile overwhelmed, though it was in no way overbearing. Eva let her protest slip away. Ray gave her a big hug. We said our goodbyes and made our way out.

Talk to people who knew him, and you’ll find this was classic Ray Alden. His friends and acquaintances say he seemed to create a zone of trust and comfort nearly anywhere he touched down. Here was a New York Italian kid, Renato Giacomelli Alden–Ray said his father, a minister, had added the last name “Alden” when he encountered discrimination after emigrating to the US—who had grown up to connect young and old, urban and rural. He was crossing cultures, putting others at ease, sharing his enthusiasms as broadly as he could, encouraging other people to do the same. Received in the Cockerham home practically as an adopted son the hot summer day we were there, he had also invited Jim and me to come with him and share the relationship and its benefits. We were only two of many people who’d received this sort of invitation from him. The stories people tell show that in the old-time music world, there was nearly always a string back to Ray. No matter where you went, you found someone who knew him.

People who did know him say his way of conducting himself had the effect of expanding the old-time music community. If he didn’t start an epidemic, as Malcolm Gladwell describes “connectors” helping to do in his book The Tipping Point, perhaps that’s just because our society is fairly well inoculated against the major spread of something that can sound as raw as old-time music, and that provides so little in the way of material riches.

People who met and knew Ray also say his presence tended to create a sense of trust or safety—and a gentle gravitational pull.

Ambrose Verdibello worked as a volunteer at the Great Hudson River Revival (Clearwater) festival in Croton-on-Hudson, New York. Ray was also there, coordinating music at the old-time stage in the 1980s and ‘90s. Verdibello recalls, “When I was done doing whatever I was doing at the front gate, checking people in, I’d go over to this old-time stage and more often than not Ray would be in the center of some jam session, and I sort of made note of this guy who always seemed to be in the middle of people playing tunes and such.” Verdibello later became fast friends with Ray, playing with him in the Southern Schoolhouse Rascals and collaborating in the Field Recorders’ Collective.

Fiddler Jay Ungar, who founded the Fiddle and Dance Camps at Ashokan in New York state and wrote the popular tune “Ashokan Farewell,” featured in Ken Burns’ TV documentary The Civil War, also worked at the Revival. He coordinated the dance stage, and recalls interacting with Ray there and observing him in settings from parties to festivals at least as far back as the early 1970s. “He had an ambition about him that was very host-like,” Ungar says, “and yet without being the obvious center of attention. So he was kind of a center, in a very generous way, that invited other people in.”

For much younger musicians, it was possible to take Ray’s place in the scene for granted, as though it had always been that way. But an astute observer would come to understand otherwise. Thirty-three-year-old fiddler Emily Schaaf of Rhinebeck, New York, met Ray around the year 2000. She had attended Ungar’s camp for the first time two years before, as she branched out from the classical tradition which had been her musical base from childhood. She decided to travel south to seek out and learn from old-timers. She recalls that when she shared her idea with Ray, he responded quickly, “Oh, I’ll help you meet some of these people!” He put her in touch with Kentucky fiddler Clyde Davenport and introduced her to guitarist and singer Mac Snow of Mount Airy, North Carolina, among others. She says at the beginning, Ray seemed “kind of a figure who had always been a part of the landscape. But I noticed later how he had set himself where he did. I noticed that it wasn’t something that he just did and was good at, but that it was deeply, deeply important to him, that he appreciated people who really cared about the music.”

A look back on Ray’s life reveals that he set himself where he did, as Schaaf puts it, over and over again, because he’d had to. He’d grown up in the Bronx, Manhattan, and a succession of other places including upstate New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania as his father took ministerial positions at Baptist and Presbyterian churches. Conversations with his friends reveal he always seemed to consider the Bronx his real childhood home—and not always a hospitable one. His father died of cancer in his forties in 1951. Ray was nine years old.

From there on out, Ray often had to fend for himself. He had to protect himself, and create his own path.

After his father died, Ray and his mother lived in Italy with his father’s family for about a year. Then they lived for a time with his maternal grandfather in the Bronx. His widow, Diane Alden, says Ray recalled feeling alone and vulnerable, an outsider, during this time.

“When he was in Italy, he was the American,” she writes. “When he lived in the Bronx, his contemporaries in his Italian neighborhood did not quite know what to make of him, with the name Alden: was he a bona fide Italian? His grandfather in whose home he lived had no use for him and was quite unkind, to put it mildly. He and his mother had a difficult life for many years. They were very, very poor. His mother worked more than one job for very low pay; she worked as a switchboard operator. They lived by the elevated train . . . One room in the grandfather’s apartment was by a curve, so the noise must have been earsplitting. His mother would walk long distances to pay bills rather than buy a stamp. How she managed to put him through New York University is beyond me.”

Venetia Alden and her son Ray eventually moved to a new housing project in the Chelsea district on Manhattan’s Lower West Side. It was built by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. There, Ray met Bill Chaleff, a few years his junior, who’d moved in at the same time with his family, when the project opened. They remained deep friends for life.

Chaleff’s recollections mirror the stories of the somewhat lonely, self-protective boy related by Diane Alden. The gregarious Ray Alden the old-time music community knew had not yet emerged.

“He was much more modest then,” Chaleff says. “I wouldn’t say socially backward. But in a room with twenty people or so, he was on the lower end of being likely to initiate or start talking or something of that nature. He was always perfectly mannered and would respond civilly and normally. He was not recalcitrant, but somewhat reserved.

“He spoke about growing up in the Bronx on Arthur Avenue in a pretty tough neighborhood, and he had to scout around different ways to walk to school because the kids would take his lunch money or other things from him. So he was street-wise and savvy at an early age, and maybe that made him a little more cautious.”
How did this reserved, street-wise city kid find old-time music? And how did he come to be seen as a central figure by so many people in the old-time music community? When he was asked, Ray could provide answers to the first question. He could seem almost puzzled if asked the second one. Family and friends may provide the best answers there.

Mountain music, as Ray wrote in *Banjo Newsletter* in 2003, “was not exactly the rage with the southern Italians in my Bronx neighborhood.” In the same interview, he wrote that he’d discovered Appalachian music and the banjo when he heard a Weavers album in 1959 at a summer camp where he was working: “Hearing that high banjo intro to “Darling Corey” played by Pete Seeger excited me as nothing else had.”

It began. He started learning banjo, and wrote that he became interested in old-time music listening to Chaleff and friends practicing at Chaleff’s apartment. He also listened to bluegrass and urban folk music. But he wrote that New York City bluegrass seemed mostly about competition, and urban folk “didn’t seem concerned with real folk music.”

Then the catalytic event occurred. “What set me on fire,” he told *Banjo Newsletter*, “was going to 78 rpm collector Loy Beaver’s New Jersey home for a small concert. Tommy Jarrell, Fred Cockerham, and Oscar Jenkins stopped over on their way back (to North Carolina) from Newport (the Newport Folk Festival in Rhode Island) in 1967. The entire evening they sat in the living room playing and singing, much as they would at home. I was just a few feet away the whole night. Even though I had previously heard Fred, Earnest East, and Kyle Creed at a Friends of Old-Time Music concert (in New York City), hearing it up close in a home atmosphere made a tremendous impact.”

Ray told *Banjo Newsletter* that the night at Beaver’s home changed his life musically. He desperately wanted to learn the style he’d heard. But he didn’t have much concentrated time available: he was pursuing a second master’s degree while teaching math full-time at Stuyvesant High School in New York.

So he started making trips south to hear music. He took in the Union Grove Fiddlers’ Convention in North Carolina with his future wife Diane in 1968 over Easter break. That summer he visited Fred and Eva Cockerham at their Lowgap cabin. And he told *Banjo Newsletter* and others that he started recording his visits so he could play along with the tapes at home and learn. From the outset, he used good equipment—an indication he understood the recordings might be of lasting value to others later.

Learning to play was anything but easy for him. Chaleff, who was classically trained on piano and recorder and enjoyed playing bluegrass, remembers some of the tribulations.

“His feelings would be hurt and he would try to understand what’s going on. And I would say, ‘Ray, you’ve got to listen and when people change from one part to another part, you have to stay in time.’ . . . Some of the groups, when they could hear his stumbling, were as gracious as they could be when they would
ask if he could stand out for a song and then come back in. But others were pretty brutal about it.”

Eventually, Chaleff says, through tremendous concentration and practice, Ray became “a truly extraordinary musician.” Diane Alden says he would sit for hours at a time, tapes of the masters rolling, headphones on, determinedly practicing on the banjo.

Chaleff carries one deep regret when he thinks about all of this. “At the very first, Ray said, ‘I’m going to go down south and learn from some of these guys. Would you go with me?’ And I never went with him on any of those trips, and to the very end of my life, I will kick myself. My life took a major turn because he took me on these trips. I wanted to go very, very badly.”

And, says Spilkia, as Ray had found and reveled in the acceptance of the old-timers, he helped Spilkia find self-acceptance.

“Sometimes you read a story where this person is a major influence on my life,” Spilkia adds. “Really for me, it was Ray. My life took a major turn because he took me on these trips. I wanted to go very, very badly.”

Fred Cockerham and Ray Alden

“I had this eating problem back then. I was a very picky eater, and I was inhibited by it. In fact the first time Ray invited me to go down south, I turned him down, because I was a bad eater. I felt I’d be embarrassed. Big deal, was his attitude. He was always that way.

On the other hand, Ray’s drive and focus could be tough for Spilkia to handle at times. How I viewed him changed over the years. Part of me later chafed a little bit, because I might want to do things a little differently. Ray loved to swim.

He would always find these opportunities to swim. I wanted to go hit the next musician, tape the next guy, and he would want to get in his swimming. He had his quirks. He had a lot of interests, music being a passion. He loved these Kung-Fu movies. I remember one day we were in North Carolina . . . And there was a Bruce Lee movie at the drive-in movie theater. But he didn’t want to pay for the ticket. So he took the car and drove in through the exit, turned the lights off, if you can imagine a stealth vehicle. I was a little nervous that we would get caught. Because we hadn’t paid, we didn’t have sound. But Ray didn’t care. I was watching the movie. I didn’t have a particular interest in it. The decisions weren’t always as democratic as I would have liked them to be.

At still other times, Spilkia felt he just couldn’t quite keep up. But then, he said, Ray might do something that would create a peak experience.
One summer, he recalls, he and Ray stayed in a house in Meadows of Dan, Virginia, for two months. Spilkia says the only time he was unhappy was at the Galax Old Fiddlers’ Convention.

"Somebody invited Ray to be in their band. I was by myself. I felt kind of alone. The second day, I didn’t even go back. I stayed at the house."

That night he brought back the Hot-mud Family. He got Tommy Jarrell to come over, he got Taylor Kimble to come over. We had an unbelievable jam session at the house that night. Ray had arranged the whole thing.

Spilkia said Ray’s social abilities left him more and more in awe. “It seemed like he was the central person, that everybody knew Ray some way or another. I would never meet anyone myself, it was always through Ray. When we had a group, the Chucklebusters, Ben Steele and his Bare Hands (1970s bands in New York), these groups were organized by him.”

And the bands were fun, according to those who were in them— including this writer, who briefly played with Ben Steele. The band names themselves were intended to make people laugh. Bill Chaleff, who was in the Chucklebusters with Ray, Spilkia, and fiddler Bill Garbus, says Ray was ever more into a good laugh as he spent more time down south. The Chucklebusters told jokes and performed skits. “Sometimes,” Chaleff recalls, “we were laughing so hard we couldn’t get the lines out.”

As Ray’s contacts widened and his successes in meeting people compounded, his desire to record and promote music extended across styles, geographic distance, culture, and background. He had produced acclaimed albums of North Carolina and Virginia musicians including Music From Round Peak and Eight Miles Apart, the latter documenting the Kimble and Shelor families of Southwest Virginia. But he’d not just been recording old-timers. His tape machines had captured many younger musicians from more urban roots who’d been drawn to old-time music as he had— through hearing the old traditional players in person or on recordings, and finding themselves driven to participate because they found the music sincere.

He came up with a two-volume LP set titled Visits, a selection of his recordings of older and younger players. He released a volume focusing on younger, primarily urban musicians, calling it The Young Fogies. Toshi Seeger says she approached him to coordinate an old-time music stage at the Great Hudson River Revival festival. He did that. And along the way, says Diane Alden, “he became very interested in local people . . . who played, representing different ethnic traditions . . . And so just as he loved the old-time music, he really, really was interested in music from all over the world . . . and had become fairly knowledgeable about it.”

Ray began to bring these people into the festival. “He took his job at the Clearwater very seriously,” says Diane Alden. “He would spend days and days and days going to the Bronx and Brooklyn trying to find people . . . . And at the same time he got a grant from the Westchester Arts Council to produce The World in our Backyard,” a CD of ethnic music from the Aldens’ local area.

But Diane says Ray didn’t just set out with his gear and show up. When he went to record people, she says, “he had some background knowledge about them and their music. He was prepared. Same thing with the old-time music. He would prepare.”

He also recorded ethnic music far beyond the New York metropolitan area. In 1994 he made a two-month cross-country trek with Bill Díllof on which the two documented a huge variety of styles. From those recordings he released the second volume of The Young Fogies, and two albums of ethnic music entitled The American Fogies. In the notes to American Fogies, he wrote that the collection represented a spherical rather than flat Euclidian view of the American musical landscape. He also revealed that his careful preparation and networking skills had much to do with the success of the expedition.

Prior to my two-month cross country trip I spent a year networking by telephone. It became evident that more diverse types of traditional music were accessible in America. Each part of the country is attuned to the surrounding musical cultures. Speaking to a musician in Austin, Texas, I was referred to someone in Houston familiar with Texas Polish, Czech, and Tejano music. When I called Albuquerque, New Mexico, I was informed of the availability of both Native American and Spanish music. Friends in Louisiana connected me with sources for both Cajun and Creole music. When I left in early October 1994 I knew that I would be recording more than just traditional Southern music.

As the trip progressed, he continued networking and involving other musicians. Fiddler Suzy Thompson of Berkeley, California, is one of several people who recall Ray asking her for suggestions of people to record. He also asked if he could use her house as a recording site. She and her husband Eric happily offered it.

In the mid-1990s, as the Great Hudson River Revival turned more and more to big-name acts, Ray parted ways with the festival and started the Field Recorders’ Collective. With his vast web of social and musical contacts at hand, he and a small group of collectors and enthusiasts began to compile field recordings and release discs to the public. Tim Brown of 5-String Productions was Ray’s original business partner in FRC, but later withdrew. Dozens of FRC CDs are now available.

Ambrose Verdibello, who is now Executive Director of FRC, says Ray did most of the work himself—and bankrolled most of it too. A board of directors including Verdibello, Susie Goehring, John Schwab, Diane Alden, Kilby Spencer, Jim Garber, and Lynn Frederick, with some advisors, intends to keep the enterprise going under nonprofit status.

As he recorded and documented music, Ray allowed other interests to flourish. He saw some home-built speakers at Bobby Patterson’s Heritage Records studio near Galax, Virginia, and felt compelled to develop expertise in speaker physics and design. He was approached to write two books on speaker design, which he did, and he started a speaker-building class at Stuyvesant. It’s now under the wing of his former faculty colleague Mike D’Alleva, who calls Ray a mentor in numbers of ways.

Beyond all this, Ray painted pictures, sometimes with mathematical themes. He designed banjo necks, studied inlay designs and carving, and continued to make photographs. And he wrote repeatedly— in Sing Out magazine, and in the liner notes to albums— about how much the spirit of community and the generosity he’d found in the rural South had impressed him and affected his life.

Younger musicians who’d been playing old-time styles clearly recall Ray’s visits to their homes and communities. They say he never acted like a collector, but rather was a music-loving, fun-loving friend who especially enjoyed whipping together a great Italian meal. They report he recorded them, accepted them, and encouraged them to think about what they were doing in new ways.

Guitarist and fiddler Susie Goehring of Kent, Ohio, says, “I guess the big thing for me was that he was doing this with the young people, taking a snapshot of people.” Goehring’s late husband Jeff had
done large amounts of field recording, so as Susie Goehring puts it, she was already familiar with the idea and the process. But she says when Ray came to visit, it was more poignant and obvious because it was our younger generation, rather than just recording the older guys, who seemed historic already. It seemed like he had a good vision... He helped us all take ourselves a lot more seriously as being a legitimate part of the tradition. We may have been born at a different time, a different place, a different place in history. But he made us understand that we were the people who would make it continue. He legitimized our part in the history of the music.

Guitarist Jeff Claus of Ithaca, New York, says,

I always had the sense in my interactions that he just wasn't judgmental. And it turned out in the old-time music community that there was a stripe of judgmentalism, people deciding what was and wasn't appropriate. He didn't have that. He seemed to have an appetite for what was and what isn't. You can think of geographical regions, but he seemed to think also of space in time as regions.

Claus says the band in which he plays, the Horseflies, including fiddler Judy Hyman (his wife) and others, "recorded some pretty out-there stuff; some people might have thought it abusive of the tradition, but we didn't think that way." And he says he and Hyman always felt Ray was one of their big supporters.

"Ray did not seem to be interested in people preserving the tradition rather than messing with it," Claus says. "We've been called 'creating from the tradition.' He was always really excited about that, in the same way he was excited about meeting an old person with an interesting repertoire... And I actually think he loved both the tradition and the creating from tradition."

Hyman agrees that Ray was interested in all facets of what was going on with the music. She says, "When he did a last round of documenting young people in their late fifties and early sixties, he saw this as a branch of what had happened in old-time music that fit into his understanding of what he was trying to capture."

Banjoist and fiddler John Hoffmann, also of Ithaca, says Ray's final illness had the somewhat unexpected effect of nudging him to refocus a little more on his own music, and not just the music of others. Hoffmann says within his final year, Ray knew he was playing better, developing finger-picking styles and achieving better timing than he ever had. "He knew he was focused. He said that. It was exciting... It was obvious that this was a thing that was keeping him going. And once again, he was showing us. He was doing his thing, but he was showing us, and telling us to do it.

And so it appears that, starting from privation and loneliness, Ray Alden built himself into a creator and a connector, using the tools of focus, will, smarts, heart, and sheer effort. Ambrose Verdibello sees that first component as crucial: "He had this ability to create this laser focus and follow it, and not really pay attention to anything else. And that is really unusual. And I think one of the elements of genius is having that odd capability to focus on things to the exclusion of all others."

Verdibello says the capability could be both frustrating and rewarding to the people around Ray: "He could be very focused, very distracted, you had to rap your knuckles on his head to get his attention, but when he was focused on you, you knew you had one hundred percent of his attention."

And Diane Alden says Ray was so focused on music and musicians when they traveled south in the early days that eventually she stopped going on those long trips. She accompanied him on shorter trips and would sometimes fly to meet him on the longer ones. She says even if she didn't travel everywhere with him, she fully supported his interests and could not imagine having stopped him from reaching for experiences that were profoundly important to him. She says she helped with copy editing, suggestions, organization, and making guests feel welcome at their home. The two of them also took to traveling to Italy every other year, both celebrating Ray's Italian heritage. "I just watched him over the years and he was always growing, he just changed and grew and grew and grew," she says.

As for heart, Verdibello says, "Ray had a way of making you feel, but not in a false way, that your ideas had value, that you were good at what you did. He always was very, very diligent about making sure to compliment people on their accomplishments or ability or personality. He was very socially adept in that way, just a true friend. You could just depend on him."

As his cancer progressed, Ray continued to visit with friends, plan for the future of FRC, and travel to as many music events as he could. He attended the Mount Airy Bluegrass and Old-Time Fiddlers Convention in North Carolina, and the Appalachian String Band Music Festival at Clifftop, West Virginia, in 2009.

That amazed Mac Snow, who says, "He drove all the way down here and back I don't know. I thought he wanted to come down to the Mount Airy fiddlers' convention awful bad. 'Cause I know if it'd been me, I wouldn't have tried it." Emily Schaad says what she calls Ray's "making it possible for himself" to attend those conventions was one of the things that helped her understand how deeply he felt about the music and his friends. "He clearly set his heart on it and made it happen through some amazing amount of determination. He wanted to see people again and be around it all."

I was gathered with my wife, Terri McMurray, and some friends in a tent late on an extremely dark, misty night at Clifftop 2009. We were playing "Sally in the Turnip Patch," an original tune by fiddler Benton Flippen. I had first recorded Benton playing it for a retrospective CD of his music. Ray was the person who had really opened my eyes and ears to Benton, inviting me back in 1975 to come hear him up close, rather than just listen to recordings. Ray's documenting music and producing albums had set an example that helped move me to do the same. As we wrapped up the tune, we heard an unmistakable voice ask through an equally unmistakable Bronx Italian accent, "Is that 'Sally in the Turnip Patch?" A large shadowy figure had appeared at the tent doorway, with another figure nearby. Ray and Ambrose Verdibello had found us, by ear, following up on a discussion earlier in the day about getting together to play.

Ray told us how much he loved the tune. He said he'd been telling everyone he knew to play it, and that another of his friends, fiddler Palmer Loux, had recorded it. I realized he was connecting people to a tune just as he connected us to one another. He said he was sorry he'd just missed out on playing it. "Heck no, you haven't missed it!" I replied. "If it was good the first time, it'll be better the second time!" Ray let out his characteristic belly laugh.

They stepped in from the cold damp. Ray tuned up his banjo, Ambrose his fid-
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George Gibson, mentioned earlier as a banjo player who learned an older East Kentucky style of banjo from his father and a few neighbors, has made some interpretations regarding young banjo players. He wrote:

*Old-timers in East Kentucky learned to play by emulation; that is, they duplicated the sounds they heard by listening, by casual observation, and without formal training. Learning by emulation was probably prevalent at one time throughout the mountains. It stemmed from a strong cultural bias that prevented young mountaineers from questioning their elders closely about a task or skill. Children were expected to learn by listening and observation. For instance, I was putting gears on a team of mules and plowing by the age of twelve. I never asked my father how to do this – it was something I was expected to learn on my own.*

Stuart Jamieson, who recorded Rufus Crisp in 1946, said Aunt Liz Hill of Floyd County was a talented banjoist who played a stroke style with the banjo lying in her lap. He also described the playing of Blind Hobart Bailey of Hippo, Kentucky, who sounded the fifth string by picking up with his thumb. Stuart was surprised to learn that I knew of other people who used this technique for picking the fifth string – he thought Hobart’s move was unique and developed only because he was blind. Picking up with the thumb is a result of learning by emulation, and occurs when a casual observer of stroke playing mistakenly thinks the fifth string is picked as the thumb moves up.

Learning by emulation produced a wonderful diversity of styles. Wiley and Little Monroe Amburgey, two brothers close in age, played very dissimilar styles: Wiley played a conventional stroke style, while Little Monroe played a very unusual two-finger style. They learned by emulation from their father, Jasper Amburgey, a banjo maker who played dulcimer as well as banjo. Old-time banjo players live in dispersed communities today, and are connected by the telephone, the computer, and gatherings at festivals and colleges, where old-time music is played and taught.

Gibson concludes,

*The lack of a cultural support system and the wide dispersion of old-time banjo players makes it necessary for most people today to learn banjo by imitation; that is, the playing style they are learning is broken into discrete steps by a teacher, and the student learns to play the style almost exactly as taught. Gifted players who learn by imitation are more likely to excel and improve the style they are taught. I believe this is demonstrated by the outstanding technical expertise of banjo players today in both the bluegrass and old-time communities. A result of learning by imitation, however, is the tendency towards a standardization of playing styles. Many people who teach banjo at colleges and festivals today learned by imitation from other teachers. The original teachers learned from a very few older people in the mountains and elsewhere. Over the last few decades playing styles from North Carolina and West Virginia have become popular, with the playing style from North Carolina the most ubiquitous. It is rare to hear someone at a festival today that does not play one of these styles. There is an emphasis in Round Peak on playing fiddle tunes note for note. This “fiddle” style probably developed after the introduction of the guitar and string bass. I call East Kentucky banjo the “singing” style since there is more of an emphasis on filling notes with the left hand to create a fuller sound for both singing and dance. When playing with a fiddler, East Kentucky banjo players tended to sacrifice notes for brushes to provide a solid rhythm for the fiddler.*

This is not a completely unique analysis of old-time banjo styles. In an even more barbed criticism, R. D. Lunceford, from Washington State, wrote,

*Unfortunately, a lot of the variety in old-time music, both in style and repertoire, has been supplanted by a bland uniformity fostered by the festival scene. Where once there were many styles of playing, one or two seem to have been folded together to form the basis of a generic style. To the detriment of what was most certainly a varied and diverse tradition, less well-known ways of playing are often held up for comparison to the currently en-vogue style and sometimes dismissed as being inauthentic.*

Lunceford’s comment was instigated by the comments of an Eastern banjo player.
who referred to a tune as being “west-of-the-Mississippi,” which Lunceford took as a suggestion that the tune was intrinsically inferior. This unfortunate comment is by no means a widespread or shared viewpoint in the old-time banjo community. Clelia Stefanini commented on this facet: “I think a lot of people at festivals play in similar way because it’s all about having fun and getting together. As people stay longer with the music they listen more and more to old sources and develop their own sound.” Bruce Molsky added, “I disagree with the notion we all sound alike. I can pick out most fiddlers or banjo players; everybody has their own unique voice. You just have to be willing to listen for it. I think people like Dave Winston, Paul Brown, Dirk Powell, and Richie Stearns have their own style. Mike Seeger and John Cohen are stylists who can sound like a lot of the old musicians” In the next few sections, we explore some examples.

Learning Banjo Virtually Solo

Contrary to George Gibson’s belief that almost everyone in the old-time banjo revival learns note-by-note from an instructor, some musicians come to it almost alone. Four banjo players who fit in this category are Paul Brown, Pat Conte, Carl Baron, and Nate Layne.

In the Depression era, Paul Brown’s maternal grandmother (with her two girls) moved to Garden City, Long Island, after Paul’s grandfather, a Navy pilot, crashed in his plane in 1924. Every summer his grandmother sent him to their home place in Bedford County, Virginia. When growing up, Paul’s mother listened to African American musicians Harry and John Calloway, learning songs such as “Going Down to Tampa,” “Red Clay Country,” “The Bad Man’s Ball,” and the lullaby “Black Sheep Gone to Pasture.” As a youth, Paul heard his mother’s old recordings of Leadbelly, Pete Seeger, and Harry and Jeanie West. Paul’s uncles raised enough money to send his mother to Vassar, and for a few years before WWII, she went to the Highlander Folk School. Paul’s mother brought him to square dances at Kensico Dam near Valhalla in Westchester, New York, in the 1950s, featuring a live bluegrass banjo player. All of these exposures set Paul afire and he began asking for a banjo despite having taken piano lessons from age five. After a bad auto accident in a trip out west when Paul was ten years old, a dark and gloomy summer ensued. Finally, his mother let him have banjo, but only “if he would pay for it.” Lawn work gave Paul the $39 needed for a banjo in a few months from the Sears catalog. Music lessons in Tarrytown came from a person who only knew popular songs on the guitar, but at least Paul learned how to tune the banjo in G. Paul began listening to records, and only by ear, figured out chords and how to play his mother’s songs. Paul was isolated in Briarcliff schools as the only banjo player. He only met others interested in old-time music when he got to Oberlin College, including Dave Molk, Dave Winston, Brad Leftwich, and Rodney Miller. At Oberlin, Paul learned more tunings, and saw and learned the clawhammer style. Dave Molk let Paul hear a reissue of the Bogtrotters, a big moment, as Paul realized these were same songs his mother knew, though some words were different. Paul later went to visit Fields Ward in Maryland, which began a friendship that lasted until the end of Fields’ life. Paul moved south in the late 1970s and spent time with musicians such as Tommy Jarrell, Benton Flippen, and his future wife Terri McMurray. Paul is currently a reporter for NPR.

Pat Conte first heard the banjo in late 1960s after a 1961 Newport Folk Festival double-LP came his way. Pat was mesmerized by Pete Seeger playing “East Virginia,” Hylo Brown playing with Earl Scruggs, the New Lost City Ramblers, and blues musician John Lee Hooker. Beginning his astute record collecting methods, Pat went to a local Jamaica furniture store and found Flatt and Scruggs’ “Randy Lynn Rag” and some Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry records. The first banjo he saw came from the uncle of his classmate/band mate Tom Legenhausen. Tom showed Pat some of the bluegrass techniques he learned, but Pat never related to that style. He became obsessed both with Wade Ward’s clawhammer style, which he can now play faultlessly, and also with old-time finger picking styles. Although Pat is primarily a guitarist, hearing Taj Mahal playing “Colored Aristocracy” secured his passion to play clawhammer style. As Pat said to me, “It just became all mixed up.” Thus recordings became Pat’s source to emulate the styles he heard and attempted to duplicate with his hands.

Carl Baron, born in 1943, grew up in Brooklyn with parents who supported Henry Wallace in 1948 and attended leftist rallies. A consequence was seeing Pete Seeger at a concert when he was still a child. Carl started with and continued piano through high school, later playing recorder and clarinet, but always sang folk songs. After a friend of his sister left a guitar at his house, Carl learned to play and then asked for his own guitar at age fifteen. Carl went to Colorado and stayed from 1964 to 1972. In 1970, he went to the Festival of the Smokies in Denver and met West Virginian fiddler and banjo player Frank George, influencing Carl toward traditional music. Moving in 1972 to Charlottesville, Virginia, and meeting Mark Campbell and Armin Barnett solidified this interest. While staying in the area, Sam Rizzetta loaned Carl a banjo. Carl took two “lessons,” amounting mostly to observations, one from Dwight Diller and one from Odell McGuire, who said to him, “Stop waving your thumb around like a flag in the breeze.” The rest he picked
up from watching banjo players such as Tommy Thompson. Carl said to me, “The banjo was the first instrument where what I figured in my head and what came back to my ear was the same thing I sent out to my fingers.” In the 1980s, Carl wrote “Doctor Cranium’s Banjo Chord Chart” for the Old-Time Herald.

Nate Layne was born in 1970, in the Richmond, Virginia, area. Although Nate heard bluegrass when he was a teenager, he listened mostly to pop and punk rock/alternative music. A good friend of Nate’s had the power to sway him toward a kind of academic vigor when his friend intensely researched the evolution of punk music. While in college, Nate’s girlfriend’s father gave him a banjo, which he took to with gusto. Nate made up his own style—he had never heard of clawhammer banjo—even making up his own compositions while in a band. Later, in the early 1990s, while dating a girl from Ferrum, Virginia, Nate went to a festival and heard the duet of clawhammer banjo player and singer Larry Sigmund and Barbara Poole. This influenced Nate to sing, and gave him the last piece of puzzle, igniting his interest in the genre. Without other influences, Nate used the banjo to play melody and trained his voice to match the rhythm and melody of his banjo playing. Nate said that it took a long time to develop the harmonic relationship of his voice to the banjo. Nate went to the University of Virginia to research old 78 rpm records and listened to recordings by people such as Dock Boggs. He recorded with a cassette machine placed up to the headphones provided by the school, determined to learn as much as possible. “It’s always been a solo thing for me; I’ve always felt like an outsider looking in.” Nate is most attracted to the blue notes, played by musicians such as Dock Boggs, Byrd Moore, Roscoe Holcomb, and Gwyn Foster of the Carolina Tar Heels.

Innovations in Old-Time Banjo Playing

A further complication of the critique that there is a lack of diversity among young revivalist old-time banjo players is the development of innovative styles and tunes by musicians in northern New York State. The story of John Herrmann reveals one such development of an innovative style.

John Herrmann grew up in northern New York. Around 1970, near Rochester New York, John heard Steve Slottow playing clawhammer banjo in the Wade Ward style. Later, in 1972, he heard Al Tharp and Dave Winston in Lexington, Virginia. John noticed that Al Tharp had taken a rock-and-roll sensitivity to the Round Peak clawhammer style. John’s style synthesized that influence, and he also heard the Round Peak clawhammer banjo styles directly from Fred Cockerham and Kyle Creed. Back in northern New York, John played with the Henrie Brothers, who were influenced by John Specker and the Correctone String Band, which featured Mitch Babkus on tenor banjo. This synthesized a sort of a syncopated rhythmic 3-3-2 feel in John’s playing. Richie Stearns, who became a very influential young banjo player in the Ithaca music scene with the Horse Flies, often came to hear both the Henries and the Correctones. Likely these influences are part of what helped Richie Stearns develop his off-beat calypso-rhythm clawhammer banjo style. Richie once asked John, “How do you learn all those tunes?” John answered, “I don’t know all those tunes, I’m just faking it.” John then told me, “Richie became the best at improvising of everyone.” Later, John learned some of Richie’s techniques after he developed his innovative style.

After meeting Bruce Greene, John returned to a more traditional style. He produced and played on the Fiddle and Banjo cassette with Dirk Powell, then on One-Eyed Dog with Dirk and Tom Sauber. When John played with the Wandering Ramblers, he learned how to play unison notes above the fifth fret using a lick similar to that of Richie Stearns and Mark Oltisky. To do this, John uses his index and middle finger, whereas Tom Riccio, another clawhammer player, uses his
thumb and index finger. John discovered this technique playing at a square dance in Morgantown, West Virginia.

Innovation occurs not only in playing technique, but with the tunes that are played as well. Fiddler Garry Harrison has provided an entire CD of his original tunes, such as “Ol’ Bob,” “Road to Westfield,” “Dull Chisel,” and “Red Prairie Dawn,” which old-time banjo players have taken to and learned. Old-time banjo players such as Dave Landreth have issued CDs that feature original tunes such as “Big Ol’ Wren,” “Thumpin’ on a Well Rope,” “Stranger in the Garden,” “Swimming to Lindsey,” “Johnny’s All Tied Up,” and “Mama’s Got a Chip in Her Head.” I asked Dave about these tunes and how he developed his playing of old-time banjo and he replied,

I guess I started experiencing music at a very young age. We were pretty poor. Me and my siblings were the first generation born off the farm. I had a little Mickey Mouse crank uke thing but I was always fretting it and pulling the strings. We had a little TV and could get Ed Sullivan on it. I saw Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Blind Boy Steve Wonder, musicians like that. I think that is where I got the concept of strings and fingers. My grandfather noticed this and made my mother aware that I was really trying to play it. The reason I bring it up is because I was always making up little ditties. As time went on my older brother began playing at the guitar. I used to sneak it into my room at the threat of an ass-whipping. It went like that until I was in my teens and I began learning some pop tunes. It was mostly a solitary thing. There were a couple of garage bands. Then when I was twenty-four, in 1976, I first heard the clawhammer-style banjo. It was an epiphany. I heard a guy in a local folk band and I was hypnotized by it. I went out the next day with all my money and rented a banjo and got finger picks and a Scruggs book. I struggled with that for weeks.

I got frustrated and just went to the guy’s house, and we spent the next few weeks together, and he got me started. All the time I did not know any tunes. He was just showing me how to play it, so I would make up stuff until I began to understand the music. I met Bill Rints and it really got rolling. He was introducing me to other old-time players like Ivan Dodge, Flores Lamb, and the Crick Delters. The traditional stuff was dominant, but I still liked making up tunes and with this new haiku-like format. I have always found satisfaction in the creative process. I was a six- and twelve-string player and aside from Leo Kottke and John Fahey I was making everything I played. Eventually I grew away from the guitar and just fell into the banjo. Saturday mornings were the time I love best. Coffee, maybe some smoke, and hours of playing anything that came into my head. One time I had this groove going and I got on the phone and called Chirps all excited about this “new” tune I had “made up”. I was all excited, so I played it for Chirps over the phone and I asked what he thought. He says to me “Why Dave that’s ‘Cotton Eyed Joe,’ just a little different.” We laughed our butts off.

One of the most innovative young old-time banjo players is Richie Stearns. Richie has played with the Horse Flies, Natalie Merchant, 10,000 Maniacs, the Improbabililies, the Renegades, and many other groups over the years. Richie wrote a little about how he came to develop his innovative style and the main band he has played with over the years:

I got into playing music at fourteen in junior high, with a pack of like-minded hippie kids. Except the kind of music we were exposed to was string band and jug band music. Locally there were some very active bands in these genres, while on our record players we had Lou Reed, Bob Marley, the Beatles, the Stones, Doc Watson, Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, and the Skillet Lickers. The doors were wide open in those days. We went to experimental free schools that fostered creativity and independence above all. So while we were being tutored and steeped in acoustic fiddle music by mentors we found in the local music scene, we were also sent early on the road to thinking for ourselves, making our own kind of music.
A bunch of us put together our own fiddle band in 1974 which carried me to the doorstep of my next band, the Horse Flies. (Tompkins County Horseflies was the name we first used when we started doing fiddle music gigs locally in ‘79 or ‘80. The original band included Judy Hyman, Jeff Claus, John Hagood, and myself.) After a few years, we started reinterpreting the traditional compositions, adding our own music to some songs, or changing the words in others, and then writing our own compositions from scratch. I was one of the principal writers in that group. In 1985-86 we made Human Fly, our experiment in merging modern influences with traditional Appalachian fiddle music. People liked that record, and shortly thereafter we added a percussionist, Tuki Masuko, and a keyboardist, Peter Dodge, to further experiment and to try to duplicate live the vision we had drawn in the studio for Human Fly.

The Return of Old-time Banjo to African-American Roots

A number of academics and musicians have kept alive an interest in the African American roots of the banjo and how it was used in string band music. Academics such as Cece Conway, Tony Thomas, Glenn Hinson, and Kip Lornell, as well as banjo players Stu Jamieson, Bob Winans, and Bob Carlin have not only researched these roots, but visited African American musicians who kept this tradition alive to record and learn from them. Joe Thompson, an African American fiddler who resides in the Piedmont region of North Carolina near the Virginia border, plays traditional black string band music. Joe plays fiddle and sings in his grandfather’s style of music, which can be traced in America to the 1700s. Joe’s fiddling father imparted to Joe the discipline of “practicing until you got it right,” even when he began at five years old. Joe and his older brother Nate played in their father’s band with their uncles, later including their banjo-playing cousin Odell. Among black string bands, the banjo often set the pace whereas the fiddle served as accompaniment. Dances would be held as often as six nights a week at community events such as corn-shuckings or tobacco-stripplings, for both black and white audiences. Folklorist Kip Lornell, who became acquainted with Joe Thompson, noted that, while racial segregation existed in Thompson’s hometown during the 1930s and ‘40s, nonetheless daily side-by-side connections between working-class blacks and whites enabled them to share their cultures. Thus, even in Jim Crow times, black musicians such as Joe were accepted by whites because of their musical ability.

One of the most encouraging current developments in this field is that the young African-American group the Carolina Chocolate Drops are able to play this music commercially full-time. The Carolina Chocolate Drops, composed of Rhianne Giddens and Justin Robinson from the North Carolina Piedmont, along with Dom Flemons from Arizona, studied under Joe Thompson. They also were influenced by black musicians such as Odell...
Another hopeful aspect of this movement was the gathering of many people interested in the roots of the banjo at the Black Banjo Gathering in 2005. All of these actions and measures have been a stop-gap, preventing the complete loss of an important part of our musical heritage. More information about this event and African-American roots of the banjo can be found at http://www.blackbanjo.com.

Bob Carlin, a white banjo player, became one of the important figures in studying and playing the styles of African American banjo. As Joe and Odell Thompson became well-known, they performed at Carnegie Hall in New York City and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. Just as their musical revitalization was peaking, Odell met with an accidental death in 1994. Bob Carlin then began to play banjo with Joe. I asked Bob Carlin about how he became interested in this facet of old-time banjo playing. Bob wrote to me saying, "I've always agreed with the statement that "those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it," and that a knowledge of the history of old-time music and banjo music and musicians and musical styles would improve and inform my own playing. This was reinforced and made even more important when I made my first trip to North Carolina and Virginia in 1975 under your influence. Partially due to curiosity and partially in an effort to make a living, I expanded my skills base to include a myriad of "jobs" around playing music and performing. I did radio, wrote about the music, taught myself to do fieldwork and library research, learned how to teach the banjo in workshops and through audio and video recordings, taught myself how to engineer and produce records.

Getting back to the history, part of the banjo's "forgotten" history, when I was coming up in the late 1960s and 1970s, was the African and African American influence and connections. Glenn Hinson and Kip Lornell were both interested in these connections and had done fieldwork and issued LPs of which I became aware. Bob Winans was investigating these connections as well. I worked at the Library of Congress in the mid-1980s on two LPs of recordings from their collections and so partnered with Charles Wolfe and Stu Jamieson on issuing two Tennessee black string bands on the CD Altamont. One thing always led to another and I was always gathering bits and pieces and trying to make sense of the history for myself.

During the mid-1980s, while living in Philadelphia, I was able to locate Nate Thompson, a black banjoist found by Glenn Hinson. Through Nate I met his fiddling brother Joe. I visited with Nate through 1989 when I moved to North Carolina and worked with both Nate and Joe at the Tennessee Banjo Institute and in a concert I programmed in Philadelphia for the American Folklife Society. Once settled in North Carolina, I promoted some events with Joe and his cousin Odell through the visiting artist program and began visiting and playing with them on guitar. When Odell passed in 1994, I became Joe's banjoist because I was the closest at that time to playing the "family" style, having studied and helped teach the way Nate and Odell played. Although I'm not the only one playing with Joe, I've had the longest history and been the most constant of those outside of his family (with Wayne Martin probably a close second in that regard).
Banjo Players, Banjo Builders

A number of old-time banjo players became infatuated with building the banjo. Kyle Creed, who was well versed in reading blueprints and building edifices, was one of the first banjo players to build old-time banjos popular with young musicians. Later in his banjo building career, Kyle began making 12-inch-rim banjos, which have become a near standard for old-time banjo players today. One of the first of the young musicians to build in this style while Kyle was still alive was Dave Forbes. Gail Gillespie told me this story involving Kyle and Dave Forbes.

Dave Forbes and my husband Dwight were in line for the fiddle contest at the 1980 Galax Fiddler’s Convention and had just advanced to a spot inside the crowded big yellow tent. Kyle, who was in line behind, walked up and greeted them and casually circled them several times. All the while he was eyeballing Dwight’s banjo. It was a 12-inch-pot maple instrument that Dave Forbes had made, very similar to the type that Kyle had recently been making, except that Dave had added an extra inch to the depth of the rim. After figuring out the banjo wasn’t one of his, Kyle muttered to Dwight, “Mighty deep pot you got there… neighbor.”

One of the most influential centers for old-time music and building banjos in Ohio was the Goose Acres store. Two banjo players and builders emerged from the store, Bob Smakula and Kevin Enoch. What follows is how they both developed as players and builders. Bob Smakula’s family moved to Ohio from Massachusetts in 1958 when he was in second grade. After
Bob’s father Peter saw Pete Seeger in 1960, he bought a Gibson RB250 banjo in 1963. Other than his great interest in motorcycles, Peter’s interest was in playing both bluegrass and Pete Seeger styles. Once in Ohio, after reading a news article about Peter Hoover and his involvement with music and the Cleveland Natural History Museum, they invited Hoover for dinner. Peter Hoover exposed the Smakula family to traditional music, much of which he had recorded with his own field recordings. Bob, influenced both by his father and the lesson he took from Hoover, took to both the banjo and the social aspects it engendered, all of which was amplified through a trip to the Glenville, West Virginia, festival in 1974.

Bob’s father was good mechanic and found it an easy transition to repair a Vega Regent banjo. Bob, in this environment, built his first dulcimer at age 13, completely self-taught. Soon after, Bob met Doug Unger and became influenced toward banjo building. After years of building dulcimers and autoharps, from 1983 to 1989, both Bob and Kevin worked together, building close to 350 Goose Acres banjos with Peter. During that time, they tried to keep Peter away from smoking cigarettes in the spray booth. Bob quit the Goose Acres store in 1989 for Elkins, West Virginia, as his wife had work with the forestry service. Bob currently does more repair work and restoration of old banjos than building banjos. He sees young people buying new instruments that don’t need restoration such as new fingerboards and neck resets, whereas he finds that older folks like the older instruments.

Bob Smakula played in the Able Brothers String band with Mark Olitsky during this period. Kevin Enoch was born in 1957 in Cleveland, Ohio. Although there was no family music, Kevin started guitar as a teenager with some lessons and by mimicking guitar players he saw at dances. Kevin’s dad, a carpenter by trade, listened to country music while working. At 17, Kevin developed an interest in bluegrass banjo and, at a craft festival, heard two fellows playing clawhammer banjo and fiddle. In 1977, Kevin heard a radio ad about the Smakula music store, and took clawhammer with Bob Smakula’s father Peter. Kevin got to know Bob, and in time he wanted to build dulcimers. In 1983, Kevin helped assembling the new Goose Acres store, then began working part-time, then full-time, at the store. In 1989, Kevin got an Ohio Arts grant to study engraving with Doug Unger. Influencing his banjo playing, Kevin met Mark Olitsky and other musicians at jam sessions at Goose Acres. Kevin and Bob Smakula played in the Able Brothers String band with Mark Olitsky during this period. Kevin left Goose acres in 1989, after Bob left. For a while, Kevin worked with his dad, and then worked for one year in the reproduction of fine furniture, nearly solo. In 1990, Kevin moved to Asheville, North Carolina, and nearby Swannanoa, where he made banjos for years. Then he moved to Maryland with his wife, Kate Brett. In 1992, he began taking custom banjo orders. Kevin noticed that everyone wanted the Kyle Creed twelve-inch-rim Round Peak-style banjos, and maker Dave Forbes had stopped making those types. Kevin ordered twelve-inch Cox rims and began making them. Since then, the few exceptions to this style among Kevin’s banjos have been those such as the eleven-inch Dobson-style banjo Kevin built for Adam Hurt, using a Bill Rickard Dobson-type tone ring.

Mike Ramsey has become one of the mainstay builders of old-time banjos. Born in 1949, Mike first learned fiddle while in college in Tennessee. He then became interested in old-time banjo, especially after his friend Russ Childers helped straighten out his right-hand style. Years later Mike got a Stewart-MacDonald banjo kit and made two banjos for himself, but was not satisfied. Mike searched for the right banjo, however, Kyle Creed had died and Dave Forbes had just tripled the price of his banjos. In Ohio, Mike’s friends Whit Mead and Paula Bradley suggested that he keep making his own. Mike’s production attempts went from one a year to five, to ten, and soon he had made 100 banjos. Moving from Ohio to Appomattox, Virginia, Mike built a complete wood-working shop. A Banjo Newsletter article led Mike to make banjos professionally instead of doing other woodwork. Stan Werbin of Elderly Instruments convinced Mike to work with them and, as of September 2008, Mike has made 2,200 banjos. Mike feels driven to get the sound he wants and plays the banjo every day. “It’s in my blood,” Mike says. He now has shop in Pittsboro, North Carolina.

Riley Baugus, mentioned earlier in an earlier installment of this article, is not only a top-notch banjo player, but a builder as well. I asked Riley how he began making banjos, and he replied, "I started building banjos seriously in 1995. I didn't have very much money and couldn't afford a really nice banjo to play. I had asked Kevin Enoch about..."
making one for me and I had planned to buy one from him when I got the cash together. At the same time I had a friend who worked at the facility in town where they mulched up all the scrap wood from the city, including Christmas trees, tree trimmings, and machinery pallets. My friend discovered that some of these pallets had skids on the bottom that were made from cherry and American black walnut. He gave me two of the walnut 4x4s. I decided to try making a nice banjo. It came out well. I used a Whyte Laydie kit for the rim that I bought from Stewart-MacDonald. I liked making them and people started asking if I would make them one. It started from there. I took a long time off from making them, but I am starting to make some again now.

There were not too many musicians that were Kirk Sutphin’s and my age. At Galax one year I met Dirk Powell, who was a young banjo player and fiddler from Ohio with roots in Eastern Kentucky. We became friends and started playing a lot of music together. Several years later, in 2002, Dirk was asked to be the musical coordinator for the film Cold Mountain. I had been building banjos for about six years. Dirk liked the way they sounded and told film director Anthony Minghella and music producer T-Bone Burnett that he thought it would be great to have banjos in this film set in North Carolina made by a North Carolina banjo maker in North Carolina. I sent one out to Los Angeles for them to see and they called me about a week later from the props department of the film and said they would like for me to make them 3 banjos, in a homemade style of the Blue Ridge Mountains, circa 1850s. I had to make all of them exactly the same. If there was a knot in one of the necks, I had to simulate that same look on the other two.

A couple of weeks into the building of the instruments, Dirk called me and said that they needed someone to be the singing voice for one of the characters, Pangle, a ballad singer who played banjo, lived in a cave, and was a bit simple of mind. Dirk asked me to send a recording to both Anthony and T-Bone. I got the call a couple of weeks later to come to Nashville and do the prerecording for the film. After we finished the first recordings, we came back to Nashville several months later to do some additional recording. At this point I had only been a singer and banjo maker in the project.
Kevin Fore grew up in the Round Peak - Beulah community of North Carolina. His great-grandfather Doc Golden is related to the Flippen and Sutphin families, and Kevin is a double-cousin to Kirk Sutphin. Although Kevin grew up knowing area musicians Gilmer Woodruff and Dix Freeman, he was drawn at first to dirt track racing. Kevin raced in the dirt track racing circuit for three years from 1998-2000. Becoming allergic to dust, Kevin went with his uncle to the Alleghany Ruritan Square Dances and heard Mac Snow’s son Steve playing clawhammer banjo. Kevin bought a banjo and took bluegrass lessons until Kirk Sutphin gave him a home recording of Tommy Jarrell and Fred Cockerham. Tom Mylet, who had lived for years near Kyle Creed, gave Kevin a CD showing Kyle’s technique. Kevin is now an expert in that style, and to date has issued two CDs which illustrate this very nicely.

Kevin became experienced in heating and air sheet metal work through his father. Relating this to the banjo, he took measurements from one of Kyle Creed’s homemade banjos, and proceeded to make one. Riley Baugus helped Kevin by showing him how to finish with French polish. Canadian banjo maker Jeff Menzies gave Kevin some old Formica supplies, the same type Kyle used in his fingerboards, just as Kirk Sutphin found him a sheet of Formica from a salvage place in Winston-Salem. Today, Kevin has a website showing and selling his Kyle Creed-style banjos, which can be found at http://www.roundpeakbanjos.com.

Banjo building is not by any means restricted to the East Coast. The West Coast has many fine, relatively new builders such as Brooks Masten. Brooks wrote to me telling how he got into the banjo. I grew up in San Pedro, CA and as a teenager became very interested in music and surfing. In 1981 I was introduced to the LA punk rock scene by my friends at school. I was too young in 1981 for my parents to let me go to punk rock shows, but they did let me see the Rolling Stones and Prince. Living in Los Angeles County I was able to see hundreds of bands and went to shows at least a few times a week. In 1987 my living situation and the LA situation as a whole was becoming too alcohol- and drug-infested for me to keep up with, not to mention the extreme violence that was happening with gangs and crack. I took a camping trip to Oregon in the spring of 1987 and decided that Oregon was to be my home. I left LA in the fall of 1987, with my tail between my legs. Little did I know it, but I moved to Oregon at one of its best musical periods in history. I saw Nirvana play their first show in Portland with the Melvins and there were only twenty people there. In 1990 I started my first band called Runtmeyer with Raenie Kane, who had also moved to Oregon. Neither Raenie or I had any musical lessons, we just went down to her basement and played and played until we could play. We found a guitar player who couldn’t play either and we found a great sound. I played bass in Runtmeyer until I found my first banjo in 1992, then it was time to eliminate the electric aspect of music. Plus after ten years of continually going to see very loud music, I was ready for a change, and old-time music fired me up just like the punk rock did years earlier. When I first heard Hobart Smith, I had the realization that he had cut out a real life for himself and all the punk rock kids at that time were just spoiled and angry upper-middle-class white kids. That just wasn’t what I was after. I needed something real again. So I sold my bass equipment and headed back south. In New Mexico I played electric banjo in a sonic folk/improvisational nine-to-twelve-piece band called the Lords of Howling, and toured the West Coast with them twice. In New Mexico I met Stephen Owsley Smith, a master stringed instrument maker, who turned me on to Uncle Wade Ward, Ed Haley, and Clarence Ashley. Steve also introduced me to the lifestyle of an instrument maker. When I reached Alabama, Edwin Wilson in Huntsville directed me to Clifflap. At Clifflap, I spent hours with Ed Haggard and Bob Smukula drooling over old banjos. I walked up to strangers and asked to look at their banjos. I immediately went to my car and dismantled my banjo so its sound wouldn’t pollute West Virginia. It was a ’60s Vega with a plastic head and tennis racket neck. I took the neck off, and undid all the brackets and removed the head; I told it, “You won’t to play again until you have a skin head and no frets.” Yes, I talk to banjos.

In 2005 I had to move back to Portland to rejoin my son and put all my efforts into my banjo making. I currently play banjo in the Earl White String Band and banjo in the Eugene string band the Tee-totallers. I currently work 30-45 hours a week making banjos, filling custom orders. I spend at least an hour a day practicing guitar or banjo, because music makes it all happen.

Ray Alden was a banjo player who, over the course of more than 38 years, collected old-time music from the South. He founded the Field Recorders’ Collective, which can be visited at www.fieldrecorder.com.

To be continued: Part V of “Trends in Old-Time Banjo” will appear in the next issue of the Old-Time Herald.
KYLE CREED - A 1966 INTERVIEW
By Charlie Faurot with Tom Mylet and Kirk Sutphin

Kyle Creed was a man of many dimensions. He built and ran his own country store, organized wagon trains and string bands, built banjos, carpentered across the United States (and Iceland), and played outstanding fiddle and banjo.

From his first recording in 1965 to his appearances at fiddle contests and festivals, Creed’s clean, concise banjo playing resonated among banjo players across the country and was quickly picked up by the younger players. Today his style can be widely heard on contest stages, in the fields behind, and on the CDs of the musicians who play in his style. He is one of the three major banjo players – along with Fred Cockerham and Tommy Jarrell – whose playing was at the old-time roots of today’s Round Peak style.

One distinctive feature of Kyle’s playing was that he played over the neck, his first finger never over the head, and the thumb hitting the strings as low as the twelfth fret. He was the only old-time banjo player whom I recorded from 1956 to 1972 who played that way. That list includes the Round Peak group of Kyle, Tommy Jarrell, Fred Cockerham, Gilmer Woodruff, and Esker Hutchins. It also includes other great clawhammer players such as Lily May Ledford, Willard Watson, Gaither Carlton, Buell Kazee, Woody Wachtell (who learned from Rufus Crisp), Sydna Myers, Matokie Slaughter, Mildred Thompson, Glen Smith, George Stoneman, and Wade Ward. Kyle didn’t have a problem with his thumb hitting the fingerboard because he set up his banjos with a high action so that the strings near the rim had lots of clearance.

Kyle never made a scooped-out neck, but he helped popularize the form. Other people who played over the neck had a problem because of the low action on their “regular” banjos. In the early 1970s, several young banjo builders began making banjos with scooped-out necks which give the player room for his thumb and fingers. One of these was Bob Flescher, who made a scooped-out neck for Ray Alden. Bob wrote to me in a recent email, “I attended my first Galax convention in 1969 with the idea of meeting Kyle and Wade Ward. I saw and recorded every possible banjo picker I could find there and I guarantee Kyle was the only banjo picker to play over the fingerboard, so that style was not the popular style some make it out to be… Several years later I went down to a festival in West Virginia, Kyle drove up to meet me there. I had set up tables to sell banjo parts for Liberty Banjo that I owned. Kyle went to sleep under one of my tables. When he awoke he heard some “Round Peak,” although it wasn’t called that then, picking, and he said, “Everywhere I go I hear myself playing.”

I agree with Bob that the term “Round Peak music” hadn’t arrived yet back in the mid-1960s. It was commonly used in the 1970s. Without Kyle, the term might never have come into existence. Just think of the number of banjo players who now play above the rim; the number that alternate the first finger and thumb the way he did. Even Fred Cockerham might never have started playing the banjo again (he always considered himself first and foremost a fiddler) had Kyle not made him the fretless, slot-headed, gold-speckled, Formica-topped banjo he used until he died.

This interview took place in Kyle’s store on November 26, 1966, before he began building his house in back, and before he began building his own rims for his banjos. He didn’t waste a lot of time with words. You’d ask him a question and he’d give you a direct answer. If he wanted something done, he went and did it himself. If he needed help, he got some friends and got the job done. His banjo playing and fiddling reflected that approach to life. Of all the Round Peak musicians, he is the most economical—with minimal extra notes, but all the notes necessary.

As much as possible I have used Kyle’s exact responses. His words are in regular type. Commentary is in italics.

When and where were you born?
1912, September 20. Well, the post office was Round Peak. You know, that was between Mount Airy and Low Gap…Surry County, North Carolina. We lived on top of the ridge near Beulah schoolhouse, west of Route 89, about a quarter of a mile. There were five girls and five boys. My father was Quailey Creed. He was a carpenter, bricklayer…and a farmer. He went to West Virginia and worked in the coal mines. He was a fiddle player and a banjo player both.

Did he teach you?
Not too much. I used to listen to him a lot. But you see, he’d been gone from home a long time and I really hadn’t started playing much until he was gone.

When he came back from the coal mines, did he bring songs?
He probably did, but I don’t just remember about that. He played fiddle and banjo…and was a bass singer in the church choir.

What was the principal crop you had?
The money crop was tobacco. And of course, you had your corn and wheat and oats, just general farming you know. Chicken and what you could eat, just a regular farm. But tobacco was always the money crop in Surry County. That’s what they used for money.

When did you attend school?
I’m not sure. I think I went to the regular school a mile away. Probably from first grade until I was 15, 16 years old. I worked on the farm, and in the coal mines.

When and where were you married?
I married a girl named Mildred Smith. She was from Low Gap…Surry County, North Carolina. My wedding was on November 26, 1966, before he began building his house in back, and before he began building his own rims for his banjos.

How did you meet your wife?
She was from Low Gap…Surry County, North Carolina. My wedding was on November 26, 1966, before he began building his house in back, and before he began building his own rims for his banjos.

What was the principal crop you had?
Tobacco. And of course, you had your corn and wheat and oats, just general farming you know. Chicken and what you could eat, just a regular farm. But tobacco was always the money crop in Surry County. That’s what they used for money.

What year did you first record?
1965. Before he began building his house in back, and before he began building his own rims for his banjos.

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When did you first start playing the banjo?
Gosh, I wanted to play it ever since I was a little fellow, but I never did get to it. I guess I got started when I was maybe 13 years old and then I got to where I could pick a little bit and then, you know, then I kind of give it up while I worked away from home a few years. Let’s see, now when did I sell Grandpa Lowe’s fiddle? I was about 16 and I decided to make a banjo one day. Granddaddy and I was out a-cutting wood, flue wood to cure tobacco with, and I decided to split me out a banjo hoop out of that wood and made me a banjo.

“Flue wood “ is about 6 feet long. The tobacco down here used to be “flue cured” with wood, as opposed to burley tobacco that is “air cured” like in Southwest Virginia and Kentucky. The flues (the furnace part) are made of either stone or brick, about eight feet long by three feet wide, two in each barn, and from that is a metal stove pipe that heats the barn, and the smoke is vented out the front of the barn under the shelter.

Kirk Sutphin

Pretty soon I learned to play. Had a couple of guys help me out. Baughey Cockerham was instrumental in helping me out. He was a real old man, still living, but he is one of the best. No relation to Fred [Cockerham]. [Maybe] a distant cousin. He was an orphan; he was raised by a Lowe. I learned more from him than anyone else right on the start.

And then uncle John, I worked with him some, you know. [He played] about the same things we have now and maybe a few others, you know.

What was the first tune you learned?
Gosh, I don’t really know. I believe it was “Reuben.” It was in A or G; it would be a G tuning. I know the one I had the hardest time with was “Arkansas Traveler.”

You know, Charlie, they used to cure tobacco with wood. They would [hang] it in a barn and cure it with [a] wood [fire]...Three days and two nights you had to stay with it. We’d sit around those tobacco barns and you had plenty of time to learn. Baughey used to come over and stay, and I’d go over with him and we stay up all night.

We’d sit there and pick the banjo. You went ahead and worked in the daytime. One guy, maybe two or three, tended to the barn in the daytime. When night come, you’d go visit with each other, you know. If you didn’t have a barn to stay with, you’d go to visit the other guy and just sit with him, you know, just to keep him company. You had to watch that thing [the fire] all night long. Every few minutes you had to watch that fire, keep your barn at a certain temperature, you see. To dry it out.

I remember when we used to go to town with a load of tobacco. You’d load up one morning; it was about seven, eight miles from where I was raised to town, Mount Airy. You’d get it loaded by noon [if] you’re lucky and then you’d drive to town. You’d get there about night and unload your tobacco and get it on the [warehouse] floor. There was a camp room there, had a fire, bunks in there for fellows to throw their bedrolls on, and you could cook in there if you wanted to. A lot of times someone would have a fiddle or a banjo and you’d take turns. Some of them would sit up all night. Next morning you’d sell your tobacco and get home by midnight.
Where did you get your first banjo?

Made it. I made it with a drawing knife, pocket knife, a hand saw, and a brace and bit. I killed an old cat and made a head out of it. I used poplar wood, because it split good and worked good. First fiddle I ever had I made it too, actually my own fiddle. Of course my Dad had a fiddle, and a banjo too, I had access to any time I wanted but I never did get up [around to using them.]

What were the other occasions when you would be playing banjo music around home when you were growing up, besides tending the tobacco barns?

Oh, around, local, you know, dances, gatherings, parties, any kind, or just playing for the fun of it, anything. All the time someone’s coming around to play with you, or you want to go over and visit with them and play. And in the wintertime in that country then, you’d have a square dance every Saturday night somewhere in the neighborhood, and maybe once in the week.

They used to have what you call a working. You know, the neighbors would gather in and cut wood all day for one neighbor. That would cure his next year’s crop of tobacco. That was what you’d call a wood-chop. Well, nine times out of ten they’d have a square dance that night because . . . the girls, they would jump on the guys having the wood-chop and say, “You got to have a dance tonight.” Well, along about the middle of the evening, why, most everybody in the neighborhood was there anyway, had known about it, you know. And, if there was somebody else they’d want to know about it, somebody just took off and let them know and they’d come.

The same way with corn shuckings. Barn raisings. You know, they build them out of logs—they’d all come in and build that barn. At night they’d dance.

Christmas time they always took a week. Had a dance every night for a week, at some house in the neighborhood. They’d start about two o’clock in the afternoon and dance until everybody give out, about four in the next morning most times. And there, while they was there, they’d make up where they were going to dance the next night. So they’d all meet.
Who’d supply the food?
Whoever was having the working. And the neighborhood women, they’d go in and help prepare it, but he had to feed them. And I’ll tell you what it was about like, Charlie. You remember one evening we ate dinner down at Fred’s. His birthday. Well that’s about what the table looked like every time you’d have one of them workings. For dinner and supper.

A lot of time they were having a wood chopping, they’d have a quilting. The women folk went and had some quilts. They already had it patched up and ready, but they had to stretch it and quilt it, you know... keep the padding [in place].

What kind of songs what they be playing?
For dancing. Like we would now. “Let Me Fall,” “Sally Ann,” “Step Back Cindy,” “Pretty Little Pink,” “Arkansas Traveler,” “Mississippi” and all them old tunes. “Flop-Eared Mule.”

What about these old ballads, like “Barbara Allen”?
I’ll tell you about that. Not too much of that going around in our neighborhood. Not too much. Now you know how Paul [Sutphin] sings now. Now that is more [like the old songs.] They didn’t want to listen to that singing; they wanted to hear some hot music to dance by. That’s what they wanted.

When did kids start going to these dances?
Well, I used to go to these with my daddy as far back as I can remember. He’d go to play fiddle, I’d go if I wanted to. If I didn’t, I’d stay home. Started square dancing when I was about ten years old.

Is there a distinction between square dancing and flatfoot dancing?
Oh yeah. Sometimes someone would feel like flatfooting they’d just jump up there and go at it. One old guy, he used to tickle me. He’d stand right in the corner all night long, if you played all night long, over in the corner right where the musicians sit, stand right there and dance every tune you played, flatfooting. He never did square dance, but he’d stand right there and dance every time. I used to call some.

Was there a special way to call?
Oh yeah. There’s different fiddlers you know. They don’t dance the kind they used to dance much no more. Lot of these new fellows, the younger people don’t even know what you’re talking about when you say “Lady around the lady and the gent also.” You know, it’s all something else.

Normally you’d sing and rhyme in rhythm with the [music]?
Some did. That makes it better if you did that.

When did you get your first store-bought banjo?
Oh, gosh, I don’t know. I really don’t know. It seems like I ordered me a fiddle from Montgomery Ward before I ever got a store-bought banjo. I guess I was married before I owned one... really a Northern banjo. I used to make necks for different people, you know, and if I remember right before that I got hold of two hoops, pretty good, and made him a neck, and he gave me the other one for me. That’s about as far back as I can remember about the banjos.

Were there money-raising parties?
Well, what they done then, they’d have what you’d call a box supper. Now they call it a bake sale. The women folks in the neighborhood would bake cakes or pies. When they did it, they’d pack a box with lunch in it for two. They’d put that box up and sell it and didn’t let nobody know whose box it was. And the highest bidder got it and he got it open... they’d have them in schoolhouses most times you know—and she’d have to go over and sit with him—the seats would sit two pupil—and share that box together. Then they’d have a cake. And they’d bid on the prettiest girl, so much a bid I think what’s they used to do. And you had a girlfriend, or somebody you’d want to cut the cake with. You’d start her, and get all the other guys you could to help, and the one who got the most votes got to cut the cake.

And then they had a can of pickles and you put that out for the ugliest man. Now that’s one of the fund-raising things that you’re talking about. And they call it a bake sale now, but it was a box supper in those
days. And you didn’t know whose box you were bidding on, because they had their name in the box. You bought, you found out who you got to eat supper with.

Did some professional bands come around and play at these schoolhouses?

Yeah, Charlie Monroe and Bill. They used to come down to Beulah . . . and Grayson and Whitter used to come around right much, and old man Mainer, J. E. Mainer, he used to come around. [Another was] Roy Hall; he was the best singer I ever heard and the best guitar player. He’s dead now; you know he got killed in a car wreck. Now, he’s got a cousin or two now, they’re twins, they’re still in the music business. They was up at my store here last winter a year ago, one of them was her . . . with Charles Hawks and some of the boys. Used to have music up there on Friday nights. Different groups would come to play up at my store.

You didn’t know Rafe Brady, did you? He was one of the good fiddlers in the days when I just started learning. He was a first cousin to Roy Hall. He was one of the best guitar players I ever heard. He used two picks on his fingers and one on his thumb and he’d pick out a tune just like you would on a bluegrass banjo. I believe he’s the other side of Martinsville. He used to be with medicine shows . . . These medicine shows wouldn’t come around too often. Most times they’d hit these tobacco market towns in the fall of the year, at the tobacco market time when the guys had a little money.

Was there much music-making during the summer when you were working on the tobacco?

Not too much, you was pretty busy. Sundays is all you had. When I was grown and married, we grewed tobacco a few years, and me and Fred [Cockerham] and Paul [Sutphin] used to play every Sunday somewhere, if you didn’t have to cure tobacco. If you had to cure tobacco, you had to stay with it on Sundays.

When was the first fiddle contest you remember?

Gosh, I don’t know. We used to have them in schoolhouses all over the country. I don’t believe I entered one until after I was married. My father did. He’d go to them and to school breakings and make music for the school breakings. Like the end of the year, the school’s over for the year, the pupils would rehearse a play of some kind, you know, act it out and then they’d have string music. At Christmastime they’d have a Christmas tree at the schoolhouse and the children would exchange gifts, and they’d have music then. They didn’t have dancing at school breakings. Sing songs and entertain anyway; I don’t remember any square dances.
Did you ever play over the radio?

When I was down at Chapel Hill, there were some of the best guitar players and banjo pickers down there. It was just pitiful the way they could play and nobody knew about it.

We used to go over at Danville on Saturday afternoon and play on radio, ’28, ’29, before I was married. This guy and myself and another fellow was making music together and he said, “Let’s go to the radio station at Danville.”

The leader arranged to have them to play 15-20 minutes on Saturday afternoons over a Danville, Virginia, radio station. He picked the guitar with a thumb-pick and three finger-picks. “Lot of them use to pick like that.” Kyle didn’t remember his using a capo. “The capo business has just come in the last few years. I mean, they had a capo, but you hardly ever seen a guy use one. Paul never used one in his life. Only when somebody’d force it on him. Say, ‘Here’s my guitar.’”

Fiddle contests?

[There weren’t a lot of fiddle contests when I was growing up.] Then about the time I had grown up and got married, we had them right off... They have them at Beulah, at Dobson, they had what you call consolidated schools. They took these little schools out of the country and put three or four of them in one and run buses to them. They just about died out when Galax started. [The first Galax contest was held in April, 1935.] Galax and Union Grove were about the only two that kept going. Prizes were usually $5-$10 for the first place band and ribbons for the individuals.

[One reason the contests began dying out was that]...there wasn’t too much money floating about this country then [1930s]. They just didn’t have money to pay to go in. Also the professional musicians—Monroe Brothers, Grayson and Whitter, among others—were coming around, were stiff competition for the fiddle contests.

When do you remember guitars?

The first guitar that I remember was along about ’25, late ’20s. They didn’t help me at that time. But I sure miss them now if you drop them out. I guess you’re used to them more than anything else. It helps carry the time, but I have seen the time when you could sit down and play by yourself just as you could with two or three helping. But you don’t do that any more because you don’t practice by yourself anymore. If that guitar will play with you, it’s all right to have him with you; if he don’t, you’re better off away from it. That’s just plain talk, everybody knows that. [Now] I think a guitar will help; it gives you a little background and carries you along. It’s better.

When did you start leaving this country?

I worked with my dad some. Learned a little stuff and then in the early ’30s, people began to come to me and get me to do things for them. I was supervisor for a fellow down at Mount Airy when Jim Baldwin heard about me, and he come up there and wanted me to take a job as a foreman. [I] worked for him a couple of years. Then the War come along in ’39. This defense work came up and they were crying for help. I and a couple of other guys decided to go to Newport News. There was a lot of work and higher wages. [We got jobs] at Fort Eusted. I got in pretty good with the contractors and they kept me on.

I had my fiddle [and banjo] with me at Newport News. After I got started there, we needed help and I got Fred and Paul to help me. That was when we first started working as a group, [although] we had played some together before that. We didn’t play for money, most time just played for entertainment. Usually the way they worked this, around these dances, usually several guys in the community could make music. They didn’t specify any special fellows to come make music, just anyone who wanted to go went. And they would take turns. Well, me, Fred, and Paul hit it off pretty good together. And Ernest [East] used to play a lot with us too. He’d play guitar and we’d switch off on the fiddle. Me, Fred, and Paul, we were more solid to each other; we’d worked together more. When Paul got married, he slacked off for a year or two and Ernest, me, and Fred worked together. Ernest would play guitar and me and Fred would swap on the banjo and fiddle.
[They would] call me back when they’d get another job. It got to where you couldn’t get materials to do anything so I came back home and decided to go into the saw-mill business. I bought a mill from a friend who wanted to sell. I ran until the timber run out and then I decided to take it to Oregon. Went out there and sawed there a couple of years.

Come back. Had lots of experience in construction. Went to New Mexico with H. H. Ewing. It had advertised for some supervision to go to Roswell, New Mexico. When I got to New Mexico, I met a couple of guys who had guitars, and we got to talking about music. They were looking for someone who could play a fiddle and I said, “Well I can play one a little.” So I wrote home and had Percy mail me my fiddle. But it got lost . . . somewhere in Texas and when it finally caught up with me I was in Colorado. I worked in Colorado on the Willow Creek Dam job [which was built 1951-1953].

I played [the fiddle] for quite a few dances out there. The people out there liked the music, but the guitar players had the same kind of lick they got in Texas. [In the ’50s a lot of Texas guitar players would pair their bass runs with a chord change, a style they called “sock” guitar. Good examples are the guitar back-ups on Old Blue 701, on which the back-ups span three generations.] And oh boy, they could get the drunkest on beer in that country. The first thing they did, they’d bring in a case of beer and set it right down by the musicians.

With the exception of the second trip to Oregon, Kyle’s wife Percy didn’t go with him. They returned to Virginia in 1960 and bought a store in Galax.

I lived down below the store in a house I rented until could get me one built. John Patterson, that’s Bobby’s father, came by the store. Someone had told him I could play a fiddle so he cornered me up there and said, “They tell you can play a fiddle. Well, my boy’s trying to pick the banjo. I wish you’d come down and play a little with him and help him out.” So I said, “Better than that, you just come up to the house some night.” So Sunday night here they come and that’s how come I got started fooling with it again.

That made me think of getting down below the mountain with my old buddies. I usually play the banjo when I’m with Fred and Paul. Years ago you used to do seconding on the banjo, not clawhammer. Like you’re going to play “San Antonio Rose” or a waltz or something like that, you can’t do good with a clawhammer banjo. Well, Fred, he don’t play like that; he don’t play by chords, and I learned to do that on a long-neck four-string banjo.

With which finger do people play the clawhammer banjo?

With your first finger. Now, years ago, when you wanted to get lots of noise, you had an old skin-head banjo, and there was a lot of dancing going on, you had to make a lot of noise. I’ve used both fingers at one time.
Kyle devised his pick so he could play in either direction, clawhammer or fingerpick. At the local dances, even to this day, there are a lot more waltzes and two-steps than I believe most people imagine—almost half. So it’s important to be able to fingerpick as well as clawhammer.

To the best of my knowledge, Kyle only used the brass from a pre-sealed beam headlight reflector for his fingerpicks. He would cut out what is essentially an upside-down T. Always looking to do things the quickest, most practical - if not safest - way, Kyle cut them out on his bandsaw. One evening he was doing just that when the plate that covers the opening the blade goes through went flying, the headlight material went flying, as did Kyle’s hat. My immediate reaction was to ask if he was OK. I thought he might have cut off his fingers but Kyle, always cool, just did his little whistle and said something like “They’ll do that sometime,” and went back to doing the same thing.

I think he liked the brass because it was soft and isn’t real metallic sounding. Even with the high action on his banjo tuned up to D or A and using that fingerpick, he had an amazingly delicate touch.

Tom Mylet

Opinions of old-time versus bluegrass?

You know, the old-time near died out one time. Old-time had more rhythm, more of a tune. Bluegrass is more of the same, over and over. They play the same thing; if you take the fiddle and guitar away, you get the same thing. You turn your tunes when you play old-time on the banjo, you carry the tune just the same as you would on the fiddle. They do on the bluegrass, but not as much as they do on the old-time. They all sound like “John Hardy,” all sound alike.

You take Fred’s fiddling. You could follow Fred’s way of fiddling playing on a tune you never heard before. You can’t do that on a bluegrass fiddler; he’s a-running with chords, you don’t know what’s going on. Same way with a bluegrass banjo. If you don’t know the tune, you can’t follow him on it, and you can on a clawhammer because he don’t carry the tune right-on. You might follow him on a chord, back him up, giving him backing-up on a chord and a guitar, but you can’t play it out with him on another lead instrument unless you know it, because he won’t take you to wheres you know what he’s doing. I don’t especially have against bluegrass. I love bluegrass. Now you take for a ballad, or something like that’s down pretty slow, or a waltz...[it’s good]. The faster they can play and the more noise they make the better
they like it. And when you pass a certain speed, it don’t matter how good a musician you are... I can tell the difference myself. When you go to pushing me, get me faster than the time and rhythm for that tune is supposed to be, it don’t sound as good. You can’t get all your notes, and if you get them in there, they don’t have time to come out until you’ve choked them off for another.

Why haven’t you taken up bluegrass?
I quit for so long, I done well to do what I did with the stuff I knew.

How did you learn your new songs?
Well, it depended on whether I liked the way it sounded when the other guy was playing it. If I liked it, I’d learn it. If I didn’t, I didn’t even bother with it. You just get it in your head. If you like it, then you’ll catch it. If you don’t, you won’t. Then, of course, you got your lick at it; you won’t be like the other guy no-how.

Charlie Faurot has recorded old-time music in North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, New Hampshire, Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas. He recorded County Records’ first live LP in 1965, and Rounder Records’ first LP. From 1965-1972 he worked on over 60 LPs. His current efforts include recent CDs by the New North Carolina Ramblers (on his own label, Old Blue Records), a parlor guitar CD for County Records, and a Kyle Creed banjo instruction CD on Old Blue. More information can be found at www.oldbluerecords.com.

Tom Mylet and Kirk Sutphin are North Carolina musicians who learned old-time music from older Southern icons like Kyle Creed and Tommy Jarrell. Their additions to this article come not just from time spent with these musicians but also time spent with their families. Kyle’s two daughters, Ida Lou Creed O’Neal and Lenore Creed Gonyo, kindly loaned some of the photos used in this article.
I went to Pocahontas County, West Virginia, just out of college, in August of 1969, to teach high-school English. I was aware of the urban folk revival of the 1960s and its music. Somewhere in the back of my mind was an idea of finding folk musicians in these mountains, but I had no idea what they would sound like. I knew nothing about old-time music and could not play a note on any kind of instrument. I was, however, looking for a dulcimer. I had promised a girl named Barbara, now my wife of many years, that I would try to find her one. My quest for that led me to the Hammons Family.

Dwight Diller’s mother worked in the school board office and heard me inquiring about dulcimer makers. I had not met or even heard of Dwight at that time, but she told me I needed to meet him and directed me to the home of an old man whom Dwight had been visiting lately: Lee Hammons. This was in the fall, probably October, of 1969.

He lived only half a mile outside the town of Marlinton, on a road that ran up a narrow hollow beside a little stream. At times, it ran under the stream. The softer and more pleasant parts of the surface had been carried away, leaving huge, exposed rocks to devour passing mufflers and tailpipes. Mr. Hammons later told me that, when he and his neighbors went to build the road, he had wanted them to put it above the run; but they wouldn’t listen.

His home, which he had built himself, stood at the top of a steep, muddy path, among bare wooden outbuildings, numerous trees, and a weedy yard. Covered in that kind of brown siding that is meant to look like brick, it was not pretentious, but it was snug and solid and in good repair. Mr. Hammons welcomed me warmly and invited me in. It was a snug place, neat as a pin. A wood fire in his King-O-Heat stove was keeping the living room more than toasty enough. There was even a painting of a cheery fireplace on the wall behind the stove. He was...
eighty-three years old, and he liked it warm. He was stooped a little with age but wiry and vigorous, with thick, white hair under the old brimmed hat that perpetually covered it. He had merry blue eyes set deep in their sockets, a puggish nose, prominent jaw, and cheeks sunken in from loss of most of his teeth. Besides the hat, he was dressed in a plaid flannel shirt, gray work pants with suspenders, and nearly always, a cotton jacket. A little trace of the Navy snuff might have been on his lips. A No. 2 can always stood by the stove to serve as cuspidor.

Yes, he said, he was making dulcimers, and he would sell me one for thirty-five dollars. As he later explained, he had seen his daddy make them when he was "just a chunk of a boy," but he had never attempted one himself until very recently. A girl who played one at the music contest during Pioneer Days that year had allowed him to trace its outline and the placement of its frets. (Pioneer Days was a week-long festival held every July in Marlinton to celebrate the town’s heritage.)

I came back a couple of weeks later and picked up the finished dulcimer. It was handsomely made, of "white walnut" (butternut), and he claimed it was strong enough to stand on without hurting it. He had made the metal tailpiece himself and whittled its tuning pegs out of beechwood. Truth to tell, though, it did not play very well. His method of tracing the fret positions was not accurate enough. Not only that, but he did not have any real fret wire. He cut short pieces of metal ("pieces of old dipstick," as Dwight described them) that ran only part-way across the fingerboard, and drove them into chiseled or knife-cut slots. Later, when we found a source for fret wire and he sawed slots for it all the way across the fingerboard, the instruments he made were more in tune. But they never were quite perfect.

During that first visit, Mr. Hammons got down his banjo and played it for me. I have to admit that I was not much impressed with the music at first. I was accustomed to folk music, played on full-toned guitars and stuffed with social significance. I had heard banjos, but their thin sound and what I thought of then as frivolous songs did not appeal to me. It was only gradually that the beauty and the significance of his music began to soak in, but right from the start I appreciated his witty remarks and was fascinated by the stories he told. In the dim room, steeped in wood smoke, in the red glow from around the stove door, a long-ago past seemed to come alive. There was, for example, the time when he was about ten years old and came upon a big dog in the woods. When he got up close to it, suddenly it turned and curled its lip to bare its enormous, sharp teeth at him. Then he realized that he’d been walking behind a wolf. Some quick subtraction, and I figured that this had happened seventy-five years before; but it seemed to belong to a past much further back than that.

For his part, I think that he simply welcomed company. He was a recent widowder. The three grown sons who lived with him were off working most of the time, cutting and delivering firewood, among other things. The youngest son, Harold, married around the time of my arrival. He and his wife continued to live with Lee, but she stayed busy around the house and eventually had a son to care for.

Lee had only recently purchased a banjo (a plastic-body Harmony) and started playing again. The first tune he played was "Cumberland Gap," and behind his version of that there was a story: it was the last tune he had learned before he quit playing, in 1923. He could remember the year because the man he learned it from, Oce Cottrell, worked for him when he was running his own operation; and he knew that that was in 1923, at a place called Red Run. Lee had
a pulp job and finished it, but a man had a contract cutting timber on the adjoining tract and was tired of the work. “So,” said Mr. Hammons, “I bought him out—everything he had—and he walked away with just what he was wearing.”

One day Lee set his brother-in-law to “bumping knots” off the logs while Oce and another man sawed together on the “docks.” The other man,

Tom Simmons—he called himself Tom Simmons, but he was a moonshiner—him and Cottrell had a falling out one day and come up shouting at each other. Both of them said, “I am not a-sawing with him any more!” and they both wanted to bump knots instead. I said, “You’ll continue to saw or go walking down the tracks.” Both of them quit. When Cottrell left, he took his banjo with him, and that was the only one in the camp.

So Lee didn’t play the banjo for years and years, until shortly before Dwight Diller came along and started learning from him.

The playing that ended then had started when Lee was about sixteen. His mother played well, though not very often, and she taught him his first tune, which he called “The Baby Laughed and the Baby Cried, I Stuck My Finger in the Baby’s Eye.” As for his father, he gave this information:

Lee: I used to know a lot of songs that I could sing. I forgot all of them.
Wayne: Did you quit singing when you quit playing the banjo?
Lee: Yeah, I quit fooling with it.
Wayne: You could play some songs, though, and sing— sing them at the same time?
Lee: Uh-huh. [pause] My daddy, he could. He’d sit down and play the banjo and sing, and never miss a note.

So, although his father used the banjo to accompany songs and Lee himself once did the same, he had quit doing that entirely by the time I knew him. Partly this was because he seldom sang at all. If asked for the words to a tune he would just recite them. On rare occasions, though, when he did sing a snatch of song, a fine baritone voice and the old singing style were evident.

Another change that might have come about recently in Lee’s playing was his choice of tunings, which surely would have affected his repertoire. He played nearly all of his tunes in the “high-tenor, low-bass” (two-Cs) tuning, and most of the rest in “high tenor” (G-modal). In former times he had played many fine pieces in other tunings. I know this because more than once, when someone else had the banjo in another “key,” Lee would take it in that tuning and play some piece he remembered. Why this is so, I can only speculate. He said that he had once suffered from a “bone felon” at the tip of his left middle finger. The doc-

With those exceptions, Lee Hammons’ banjo style came virtually out of a time capsule. His “Cumberland Gap” is interesting in its own right: unlike any other version I have heard, it is played in G-modal tuning. But it is also interesting that the year he learned to play it, and then retired from playing, was the same year as the first release of an old-time music recording. I shouldn’t make too much of this, I suppose. He doesn’t seem to have stopped playing the fiddle, on which his style was equally archaic. He did listen to the radio and watch some television, and he was well aware of country music figures as diverse as Jimmie Rodgers, Merle Travis, and Stringbean; he picked up new tunes, including a few from the Hobart Smith LP that I loaned to him; but his style of playing had been fixed long before the mass media came along, and it remained virtually untouched by all the progressions of country music since 1923.

It was Lee’s opinion that old-time music (instrumental) is fundamentally dance music. Timing was everything. He even said that when the fiddle and banjo are played together, the banjo should lead because the rhythm was better that way. Surprisingly, he did not think much of Burl Hammons’ fiddling. “Some people’s playing won’t do for square dances,” he said, “because there’s not enough music (rhythm) to it. Burl’s playing is good to listen to, but they can’t dance to it.” He had his differences with Burl’s brother, Sherman, but he much preferred Sherman’s fiddling to Burl’s.

Lee Hammons was not related to Burl and Sherman, but he knew them and had known several members of their father’s generation well. Before coming to Marlinton to work in the tannery he had lived for a long time in Webster County, where the other Hammons family hailed from. Their Uncle Edden was a friend of his and a close neighbor when they both lived at “Provement Lick” (on the Greenbrier River, near Buckeye, West Virginia). Uncle Pete Hammons, he recalled, would come and stay at his (Lee’s) daddy’s house for days at a time. He was not their relative but the uncle or great-uncle of Burl, Sherman, and Maggie. He played for them and entertained...
them with his comical ways until “we all hated to see him go. Daddy would say, ‘Pete, you better stay on awhile longer,’ and he would do it.”

Lee and his father, Steve Hammons, used to play together at platform dances. Sometimes, for a joke, Steve would just stop dead for a minute and watch the dancers get all mixed up. Then he’d play on, and they’d straighten up all right. He also made up his own version of a verse to “Sally Ann.” It was supposed to go,

Sally Ann is the gal I like,
She goes to the ball and dance all night.

But Steve always sang,
Sally Ann is the gal I like,
She goes to the dance and bawls all night.

When he was “a chunk of a boy,” Lee and his cousin Sid Hammons were staying with an uncle, who had a big log house. They were working for him and had their room up in the chimney corner, which they reached by an outside ladder. Their Aunt Ginny’s old “Maltee” cat had the run of the place and would climb all over them in bed and jump at them and claw them. One day Lee was climbing up the ladder with Sid right behind him when the cat jumped out at them. Lee ducked, but the cat caught Sid full in the face and knocked him to the ground. Sid grabbed him and took him to the woodpile and chopped his head off then and there with the axe. Next to groundhog hides, cat skins made the best banjo heads, so Lee said, “Sid, being as you’ve killed the cat, let’s put him in the banjo,” which needed a head. They rubbed the skin with the brains (to make the hair fall out when they held the inside of the skin to the fire) and somehow disposed of the rest of the remains. Then they put the hide on the banjo and played it that same night at a dance—an apple peeling or corn husking. Aunt Ginny was even there herself, but she never did know what became of her cat.

When not playing for dances, Lee was dancing himself. He said they’d go to one and a fight would break out, so they’d go to another house. Sometimes they’d dance at three or four houses in one night.

Dulcimers were not the only things Lee Hammons made, and woodworking was not the only work he had done. He had made at least one fiddle, out of black birch, and it must have been a good one. He said that Edden Hammons would come and leave his own fiddle and take Lee’s homemade one with him when he went to play somewhere. Lee’s father was a wonderful carpenter, he said, who had made many a coffin. Lee never made but one, and that was for a little baby. He didn’t like that task, so he never made another.

On my first visit, I saw a finished gun cabinet on his porch that someone had made for him. Later, working with him in his shop, I saw him making ornamental boxes, puzzles, turkey callers, toy banjos, “soople jacks,” and other items—mostly for his grandchildren. A “Jacob’s ladder” that he had made hung on one wall of his living room. One item that he made with Dwight was a little man, whittled out of a board, with a hole in his chest and an arrow sticking through the hole. The arrowhead and the tail of the arrow were much bigger than the hole, and the puzzle was to figure out how it got through the hole. It was a single piece, and so was the man, and they were not made of the same kind of wood. The secret, which neither of them would tell me for a couple of weeks, was that the arrow was made of “white lin” (basswood), which is very springy. Squeezed tightly in a vise, the arrowhead compressed almost to the diameter of the shaft. Released from the vise, it slowly returned to its original size and shape.

In his long life, Lee had also sawed railroad ties for the B&O; been a coal miner; built streets for the WPA; sold soap, laundry powder, shoes, and fruit trees during the Depression; worked in a tannery, at a paper mill, at a dairy, and as handyman on
a Long Island “duck ranch.” But his defining era seems to have been the time when he worked in the woods, when the virgin forest was timbered in his part of West Virginia. He worked in any number of the lumber camps—up on Cranberry, on the Cherry River, at Dogway, on Cheat—as a teamster, a timber cutter, and a straw boss.

When he worked for a sawmill owner, sawing ties for the B&O Railroad from the railroad’s own timber holdings, some of the ties he cut were solid cherry—“the prettiest you ever saw.” He protested that they could get a lot more money by selling the wood for better uses, but they didn’t seem to care. One of the trunks was so big that he cut eight ties out of its diameter.

“They didn’t have chain saws when I was in the woods,” he said. “If they did, I reckon there wouldn’t be a stick of anything left.”

As a teamster, he drove a team of two big draft horses to drag logs down to the railroad siding, where they would be loaded onto the cars and hauled to the sawmill. There were couplers to join the logs end-to-end, and the team would pull strings of ten or a dozen linked this way.

To help them endure the work, the horses were dosed with arsenic. It was good for them, but it had to be done right. The first day they were given one drop, the next day two, and so on until the tenth day. Then the dose was started over again at one drop. If you stopped, the horse wouldn’t die, but he wouldn’t have any strength left. Some people used to take it the same way, but Mr. Hammons never would because “it’s just the same as a dope habit.”

It was as hard on the men as it was on the horses. Once he had a string of pulp logs and hadn’t noticed where a birch log, “the size of a stovepipe, maybe,” had fallen across the trail. He used to walk near the end of the string, and this time the last log, “a little short one, six foot or so,” upended and flew forward when it hit the snag in the trail. He heard it and turned around in time to stop it with his arms, “but if it’d caught me in the back of the head, I’d’ve been clean gone! I didn’t walk so far behind the team after that.”

When he was only sixteen he worked for fifty cents a day in Webster County, driving “trucks” of logs down a wooden tramway, built with high trestles over the hollows. This would have been around 1902. A worker called the “hustler” drove a team of horses to bring the trucks up the mountain; and when it was loaded with logs a truck would be driven down the tramway without the horses. The only control on the truck was a brake pole. It was dangerous work, and Mr. Hammons said he was the only driver that never had a wreck.

He did get hurt once on that job, though, when a big white lin log fell on his foot. It split the sole of his heavy shoe, “took the meat” off his calf, broke some toes, and dislocated his ankle. It was two years before he could get around well, and he still had trouble with that leg in 1975, when he told me the story.

A good many of his stories would refer to other times when he was recovering from some injury or another. One winter he was laid up with his knee split open by an axe. Another time, he got a half-inch splinter in his eyeball when a limb he lopped off while cutting pulpwood sprang back at him. Then there was the weather. He remembered days so cold that he’d seen horses shiver. “You could go out and hear the trees splitting open. They wouldn’t allow you to have a fire;” but one very cold day, they built one anyway. When the foreman told them to put it out, one of the workers said, “you’ll have to whip me to put out that fire,” so they were allowed to keep it going.

On his WPA job, breaking up rocks for the streets of Marlinton, there was also a rule against building fires, but, according to Lee, once it got down to 24° below zero. A man named Calhoun decided he’d rather get fined than freeze to death. He was wearing a pretty light jacket and “slippers” (low-cut shoes), and the snow was up over his knees. A splintered stump was nearby, where a hickory had fallen. The two of them broke off a pile of splinters, and it wasn’t long till they had a good fire going. Then the foreman came charging up. They were sure they’d be fired, but without a word he turned his back to the blaze and warmed himself up, too. When the boss of the whole operation showed up, he said, “Boys, I know we ain’t allowed no fires, but it’s too cold for anybody to work without one. Just don’t all of you stand around it at once. Some of you come and warm up, warm your tool handles, and then go back to make room for the next fellow.” And he turned his back and moved closer to the fire.

Lee had a foot frozen once. He was supervising a group of men who’d never worked in the woods and didn’t know anything about it, so he did as much work as anybody. It was really cold, and the snow was deep. He had a pair of Cutter
boots that shed water, only one of them had a thin place at the heel. He worked all morning, and when he went in to eat his dinner, the snow must have started melting and leaked through. His foot got to hurting bad after he’d been out awhile in the afternoon. He toughed it out, though, until it got dark, and it had stopped hurting by then. When he went to take his boot off, it was frozen to his sock.

The sock was froze to my foot, and I had scales of ice between my toes. I put my foot in a pan of cold water—that’s what saved it. Later a man come up that had a brand-new pair of four-strap arctics that was too small for him. He said they cost him four dollars, but he’d sell them for three. With them on and a pair of slippers underneath, I never had no more trouble.

There was a forest fire on the Cherry River one time. Mr. Hammons said it was started by a man who didn’t get his pay from the lumber company. He had a pulp job that he didn’t want to finish, but the company came to look at it and said he hadn’t done enough to get his hold-back. (They always held back part of your pay till you finished.) So he set it on fire.

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He helped to cut the biggest hemlock tree, he said, that was ever seen on the Cherry River company’s property. A seven-foot saw wouldn’t reach across it: they had to notch it and then go around it with the saw. Its top had been broken off in a windstorm, but they got five twelve-foot logs out of the standing part and a couple out of the broken-off part. It took a railroad car for each one of the logs, and when they got to the mill they didn’t get lifted onto the track, they got rolled by the loader.

The WPA work wasn’t all he did during the Depression. He already had a large family, and he sat down and studied how he was going to feed them all. He reckoned that “people didn’t have a lot of money, but they still had to keep clean.” So he would buy soap, soap powders, shoes, fruit trees, and other necessities or useful items, and sell them door-to-door. Once he even got a load of such stuff and sold it right out of the car, illegal though it was.

That story shows the way he thought. His reasoning was sound and practical. He seemed able to adapt to any circumstance, meet any challenge, bear any hardship, and have some fun out of it in spite of everything. He had an eighth-grade education, which was the standard for his place and time, but his abilities and interests ranged...
beyond anybody’s standard. Dwight Diller and I both concluded that he was a genius—one who, born into other circumstances, would be remembered as a great man.

In the logging camps, music was rife. These places were surely important in the dissemination of tunes and folksongs, for the men employed in them came from all over, brought their musical talents with them, worked far from any town and had to depend on their own resources for entertainment. Lee Hammons learned tunes there from a number of fiddlers and banjo players: Uncle Dave Baldwin and Tom Riggsby, a preacher who had no prejudice against the fiddle, were two from whom he learned tunes. He knew the older generation of fiddlers in the (unrelated) family of Burl Hammons and Maggie Parker—Edden, Pete, and “Stutterin’ Jess” Hammons—as well as Burl and Maggie themselves and their brother Sherman. He knew Charlie Radigan (or Ratigan), the man who composed “Jay Legg,” the well-known West Virginia murder ballad. Radigan was a “comical fellow” with a big black moustache, black hair, and a thin face. He couldn’t play any instrument, but he was a good singer and could make up songs right on the spot. He would “rhyme them up in his head” and make a “ballad” of them later. He also sang songs that he did not compose, of course, one such being “The Muskrat Song.” He had a lot of verses to it. The only one Lee remembered was,

Ever seen a muskrat, Sally Ann,

Them long, slim tails dragging through the sand?

Maggie Parker, by the way, also knew Charles Radigan, on the North Fork of Cherry, when they first logged there. She thought he might have been from Arkansas. He sang “The Arkansas Bum” (her name for the song whose most famous version is “My Name is John Jo Hanna”). She said that Lee Hammons knew the wife of Jay Legg—or in other words, the woman who had him murdered—but I never heard him mention that, himself.

One story of Lee’s shows the importance of music to men in the camps. The old man Pete Hammons got into a fight one time, and the other man got Pete’s fingers in between his teeth. “Let go!” Uncle Pete yelled, “you’ll ruin my fiddling.” And right away, the man did let go.

Music was an abiding, lifelong interest of Lee himself, and Sherman once told me, “I don’t believe I ever met a fellow that loved music like Lee Hammons.”

When I visited him, or any of the Hammons, the conversation often turned to music. One surprisingly common topic was sound posts. He had some humorous stories about an annoying frequent visitor—an ignoramus and a compulsive liar—whose name is best left untold. He came to Lee’s home one time with an old guitar and said, “That guitar’s got free sound posts in it!”

“That’s nothing,” Lee shot back. “Burl Hammons has one that’s got six!”

Most of my visits were during the Nixon years. I made some remark about Republicans once, and Mr. Hammons mildly replied, “Well, I’m a Republican.” His daddy, he said, had been Republican before him. Lee Hammons and his father represented those mountain Republicans that Lincoln had relied on for help in holding back the Confederacy: patriotic, opposed to slavery, and willing to stand up for their beliefs. He told me that when we entered World War I, he tried to sign up but was too old. He tried to lie about his age, but the old man Walton, who was in charge of signing up the volunteers, knew his true age and wouldn’t let him.

I met him only a couple of months after the first moon landing—assuming that the landing actually did take place. Mr. Hammons maintained that it did not. His actual reason for doubting it was religious: “It’s written in the Bible that the moon was put there for other purposes. It’s there to light the sky by night.” He could also back his opinion with some pretty shrewd reasoning, though. “If they could land on land when they got to the moon,” he asked, “then why did they have to land in the water when they got back here?”

He believed in the Bible, word for word, and sincerely followed the principles he found in it. He said it’s the “New Bible” (New Testament) that we are to follow. I asked him once why some preachers were so opposed to fiddle music. “It’s written in the Bible that it’s a sin to play an instrument with less than ten strings,” he said. He had no problem with the fiddle himself, of course, nor with dancing; and he could point to Tom Riggsby, a fine fiddler he had known in the logging camps, who was also a preacher. What he was bitterly opposed to was drinking. Even his favorite tunes were ones that carried an anti-liquor message, such as “Jack of Diamonds” and “The Drunkard’s Dream.” He blamed alcohol for a great deal of the world’s troubles, and in his own experience, a great deal of people’s troubles really were due to alcohol. His only uncharitable acts, that I ever saw, were directed at alcoholics.

One of these was the incident in which he forced me to learn the banjo. I was not working at that time and walked up nearly every day to work in his shop with him. One day a man that he knew, clearly under the influence, brought a broken old banjo that he wanted Lee to buy. It was really not even a banjo but a factory-made pot and a homemade neck that didn’t fit it. Lee turned it down, but the man insisted until he bought it for only thirty-five dollars. He was satisfied that he hadn’t paid what it was worth, and seemed to regard it as the man’s just desserts for being drunk. “Now,” he said, “I can take this and fix it up and make a nice banjo out of it, and you can buy it from me and learn to play it.”

After so many dangerous occupations and serious injuries, it is ironic that Lee Hammons’ life ended because of a little footstool in his own living room. He had broken his hip in 1977—had fallen when he was weak from the flu—and when I visited again, in September of 1980, he had tripped over his footstool and fallen again. He had been bedfast in the state hospital for over a year, and had largely lost the use of his hands. No longer able to play tunes, he doodled them to himself to pass the time. He sang for the nurses and recited fiddle-tune verses for the orderlies, including a mildly naughty one that they said was “awful.” He was clearly a great favorite of the staff. I made a second visit, with Sherman, a couple of days later. Sherman played the fiddle for him, and he gave Sherman—or said he could have—a fiddle that someone had left for him to fix several years ago and never reclaimed. Sherman accepted it “for a keepsake.” On Christmas Eve of that same year Lee Hammons died, at the age of 94.

Wayne Howard is a retired programmer/analyst now residing in Chicago, Illinois. He lived in Pocahontas County, West Virginia, from 1969 until 1972 and in Charleston, West Virginia, from 1972 to 1974. He plays the banjo and sometimes the fiddle. His tapes of the Hammons are in the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, with copies in the archives at West Virginia University. Believing that there must be other tapes not yet deposited in any archives, he urges the owners of such tapes to ensure their preservation and make them available to others by donating them to an appropriate institution.
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BOWLING GREEN
Alice Gerrard and Mike Seeger

Although Alice and Mike are true champions of traditional old-time music, their performances were not limited to mere reproductions of collected material, but included original songs and tunes and covers of classic country music and blues. Needless to say everything was unmistakably their own.

This recording consists of 26 cuts, almost enough for two separate CDs, so I will not describe every single cut and I’ll leave some surprise to the listener. The CD opens with the title track, “Bowling Green,” which they learned from Cousin Emmy, one of the many great older musicians and entertainers to whose music Mike helped expose new audiences in the 1960s. Mike’s driving banjo playing in the knock-down Kentucky frailing style, one of the countless styles he learned and mastered in his lifetime, is a perfect background to their driving vocals. Another pair of great vocal duets follows, “St. Louis Blues” and “Fugitive’s Lament,” which have twin guitars, with Mike taking tasteful leads. “Sugar Baby,” learned from another of Mike’s rediscoveries, the legendary Dock Boggs, features Mike’s perfect Boggs-style finger picking (probably played on Dock’s own Gibson Mastertone, which Mike ended up with), and the vocals arranged in a duet style. The original songs and tunes on the recording are all very good. The haunting “Love Was the Price,” written by Alice, features a dramatic fiddle/cello break that stops you in your tracks. I am not a fan of the cello in old-time music, but I really like it here as it is played by Mike in a simple and tasteful way. “Needmore,” another original by Alice, is a minor-sounding A tune that stuck with me and made me want to learn it. “New Freedom March” is a joyful original Mike wrote for the autoharp and on it he also overdubs guitar and mandola, with Alice on piano.

Many of the other selections are drawn from such illustrious sources as the Carter Family, the Monroe Brothers, and the Blue Sky Boys, most of whom Mike and Alice had actually met. Imagine that. Other standouts for me are “Coal Miner’s Blues,” “Victory Rag” (which I remember trying to play on the autoharp back in my younger days in Italy, after having heard Mike play it with the New Lost City Ramblers), “You Done Me Wrong,” a wonderful country song from the great George Jones—and especially three cuts which feature none other than Tommy Jarrell, “Pretty Polly,” “Sweet Sunny South,” another vocal duet with Tommy on fiddle, and “Flatwoods,” the final track, which has all three of them on fiddle. What a way to close a CD.

All in all an outstanding collection of music from two music legends.

Rafe Stefanini

WHERE DO YOU COME FROM?
WHERE DO YOU GO?
The New Lost City Ramblers

Volume 2: The Early Years
Colored Aristocracy / Hopalong Peter / Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down / When First Unto This Country / Sales Tax on the Women / Rabbit Chase / Leaving Home / How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live? / Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Back Again / I Truly Understand You Love Another Man / The Old Fish Song / The Battleship of Maine / No Depression in Heaven / Dallas Rag / Bill Morgan and His Gal / Fly Around My Pretty Little Miss / The Lady of Carlisle / Brown’s Ferry Blues / My Long Journey Home / Talking Hard Luck / The Teetotals / Sal Got a Meatskin / Railroad Blues / On Some Foggy Mountain Top / My Sweet Farm Girl / Crow Black Chicken

Volume 2: Out Standing In Their Field
John Brown’s Dream / Riding on That Train / The Titanic / Don’t Get Trouble in Your Mind / Cowboy Waltz / Shut Up in the Mines of Coal Creek / Private John Q / Old Johnny Bucker Wouldn’t Do / I’ve Always Been a Rambler / Automobile Trip through Alabama / Who Killed Poor Robin? / My Wife Died on Saturday Night / Little Satchel / Black Bottom Strut / The Cat’s Got the Measles, the Dog’s Got the Whooping Cough / Dear Okie / Smoketown Strut / The Little Girl and the Dreadful Snake / Fishing Creek Blues / Depression Blues / Black Jack Daisy / Victory Rag / The Little Carpenter / On Our Turpentine Farm / Parlez-nous à Boire / Valse du Bambocheur / Old Joe Bone
I feel like I have to begin this review by saying that I don’t think we can overstate the importance of the New Lost City Ramblers to old-time music and what has happened with it for the last fifty years. Over and over again I talk to old-time musicians of my generation, those who began playing the music in the 1960s or ’70s, and they say that they would never have found the music, started playing it and gotten to the point they are without the Ramblers. Even those of us who grew up hearing old-time music in our families and communities owe a debt of gratitude for the way the NLCR opened a path to allow this music to be performed and respected in more than a limited geographic and cultural setting. I know they opened my mind, making me realize the music I had heard in my family and at the fiddle contests we attended was not only “cool,” but also introduced me to the breadth and depth of old-time music. So, right off the bat, I advise you to go out and buy this three-CD treasure chest.

“Where Do You Come From? Where Do You Go?” consists of two previously released CDs compiled and annotated by Jon Pankake in the early 1990s from the NLCR’s vinyl output and a third disc of material selected by Mike Seeger, John Cohen, and Tracy Schwarz with notes by Ray Allen. There’s a vast amount of material here: 81 cuts, over three and one half hours of music, along with a booklet for each disc totaling 88 pages of notes. It’s all bound in a handsome cardboard album.

The original members of the New Lost City Ramblers, Mike Seeger, John Cohen, and Tom Paley, performed and recorded together from 1958 to 1962, when Paley left the band. In those four years they recorded an astonishing amount of music, nine LPs and two extended-play 45s, of old-time songs gleaned from rare 78 rpm records and field recordings. The first disc of this set, titled “The Early Years”, is from these releases. I can imagine the difficulty Mr. Pankake must have experienced in choosing the songs for one CD from those Ramblers’ albums. Every fan has his own favorites and plenty of those favorites will not be among the songs on this CD, but there’s not one of the included cuts that doesn’t deserve to be here. It does make you wish for a complete NLCR set. It’s impossible in the confines of a review to go through each selection, but suffice it to say that there’s an abundance of Tom Paley’s creative banjo and intricate guitar, Mike’s robust fiddling, mandolin and autoharp, John’s solid guitar and banjo work, and masterful vocals from all. And, as Jon Pankake states, this was a band greater than the sum of the individual talents.

After Paley’s exit from the Ramblers, he was replaced by Tracy Schwarz who brought the influence of early bluegrass and more modern country music, Primitive Baptist singing, and eventually Cajun music to broaden the scope of the NLCR repertoire. One of the great vocalists in old-time music (or any music, for that matter), Tracy played numerous instruments and his expert fiddling gave Mike Seeger, who had always needed to hold down the fiddle spot, the freedom to explore other instruments further. The second disc of this set covers the period 1963-1973, from Tracy entering the group up to the time when they stopped performing together as a regular touring band, with cuts from the seven long-play records the NLCR made during that period.

But it was never enough to the Ramblers just to perform and record old-time music. A prime goal was to search out traditional artists, both those who had recorded in the 78 era and those known only to their own community, to record them and to present them in concert and festival settings. The Ramblers helped...
create or revive musical careers for some of these old-time masters, introduced them to new audiences and inspired a new generation of musicians. The third CD of the set includes a few of the archival recordings the NLCR learned from (the original “Colored Aristocracy” and Crockett, Wade, and Fields Ward doing “Cluck Old Hen”), selections by the Ramblers themselves, and numbers by some of those elders the Ramblers recorded over the years. You’ll hear recordings made at home or in other informal settings of Rev. Gary Davis, Dellite Norton, Arthur Smith and the McGee Brothers, Clarence Ashley, Libba Cotton, Sara and Maybelle Carter, Dock Boggs, Eck Robertson, Roscoe Holcomb, and Dillard Chandler, live cuts of Cynthia May “Cousin Emmy” Carver, Kilby Snow, and the Balfa Brothers . . . all musicians the NLCR brought to the attention of the greater folk music world. There are also two pieces from 1970 by a group of younger San Francisco-Berkeley old-time players following in the Ramblers’ wake, just a hint of the great underground old-time movement spawned by the Ramblers’ pioneering work.

Many of the recordings of these traditional artists were issued by members of the Ramblers on Folkways or later Smithsonian-Folkways, but a few of the cuts have never been previously released. What a treat it is to hear Eck Robertson fiddling with Mike and Tracy’s accompaniment in a cottage at the Newport Folk Festival or Cousin Emmy with the NLCR live at the Ash Grove in Hollywood in 1967 exhibiting the exuberance that made her one of the most popular hillbilly entertainers of the 1940s. Arthur Smith’s driving fiddle version of “Cady Hill” was taped by Mike Seeger at Kirk McGee’s house but not issued on “Old Timers of the Grand Ole Opry,” the LP release of these field recordings. John Cohen taped Reverend Gary Davis at home in 1954 singing “I Belong to the Band,” a song he had recorded on 78 almost twenty years earlier. I think there will be some surprises for almost every listener in these three CDs.

The importance of this set makes me feel like I should ramble on and on about every cut. I should elaborate on the fact that, though many people felt the NLCR just copied the old versions as closely as possible, they were actually a very creative and innovative band in their own way. Instead of swampy you with verbosity, I’m going to suggest again that you buy this and listen for yourself, read the insightful notes, learn about or reacquaint yourself with the Ramblers, and simply enjoy a wealth of exceptional music. This is a fitting tribute to a band that in fifty years of existence with only one change in personnel has provided us with superb music, honored that music and the players who went before and inspired generations to listen to, play and perpetuate the music themselves. And thank you John, Tom, Tracy, and Mike for leading the way.

BOB BOVEE

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The Shelor-Blackard Family

Susanna Gal (2) / Sandy River Belle (2) / Flying Indian / Coon dog / Watermelon Vine / Flop Eared Mule / Untitled Tune / Ten Thousand Charms / Billy Grimes the Rover (2) / Talk / Callahan / Rich Mountain / There’s a Lock on the Chicken Coop Door (2) / Yellow Rose of Texas / In the Shadow of the Rock / Old Aunt Katie / Yellow Cat / Put Your Foot Down / Big Ben Gal (3) / Old Joe Clark / Arkansas Traveler / Whistling Rufus / Iowna / Sally Ann / Under the Double Eagle / Clog Dance / Sourwood Mountain / Fire on the Mountain / Billy Grimes the Rover / Old Richmond / Sally / There Was an Old Woman / Iowna / Talk / Sweet Sixteen (2) / Hell Broke Loose in Georgia / Mississippi Sawyer / Callahan / Wonderful Love

Over the years, I’ve listened many times to four 78 RPM sides that Victor recorded in Bristol, Tennessee, in 1927: “Billy Grimes, the Rover” and “Big Bend Gal” (really “Big Ben Gal,” according to the notes) by the Shelor Family, and “Sandy River Belle” and “Susanna Gal” by Dad Blackard’s Moonshiners. I noted the similarities, but didn’t find out until much later that both the groups were identical: Joe Blackard (banjo and voice), his daughter Clarice Blackard Shelor (piano), her husband Jesse Shelor (fiddle), and Jesse’s brother Pyrus (fiddle). They never recorded again. Per Ray Alden’s notes to this album (at www.fieldrecorder.com), they were asked to record more, but decided to be a family band that stayed home. In 1975, Ray Alden and Dave Spilkia found Jesse and Clarice in Meadows of Dan (great name for a town!), Virginia. Their children, a granddaughter, and a nephew would regularly get together with them on Sundays to play, and the family generously allowed the city folk to tape them. Their most common instrumentation arrangement was fiddle, piano, and guitar, and they are mostly instrumentalists, except on pieces which Clarice sings.

The original four Shelor-Blackard recordings are also reproduced here, so you can compare the 1927 and 1975 versions. Joe Blackard’s banjo and singing are missing in the later versions. As an offset, Clarice, who played only rhythm piano on the originals, adds melody and ornamentation to a steady chording beat. These recordings raise the question of why the piano appears so rarely on 1920s old-time records. By the end of that decade, there must have been quite a few homegrown pianists in the Southeast. Perhaps record producers, with an eye to what sold in the past, discouraged new bands from using the piano, particularly to carry a melody.

Some FRC issues are recordings of musicians, amateur or semi-pro, in public performances. This one is a true field recording of people in their own homes, and the feel and sound is very much like Library of Congress field recordings from the 1930s. Recordings like this one are valuable because they demonstrate the variety and some of the real functions of tradition, expressed as home music rather than as a set of rehearsed show pieces. When you listen to them, though, you need a different mindset from the one you have when listening to studio recordings. Instrumental balance isn’t perfect, and some tunes are very short snippets. Many of the instrumentals are in the one- to two-minute range: not long enough to put anyone into a fiddler’s trance, but long enough to learn the tune if you’re so inclined.

Like many Library of Congress informants, Clarice knew some old ballads, but only as fragments. Examples are “Sally” and “There Was an Old Woman” (“The Two Sisters”). The family sang three very satisfying trio gospel songs, “Ten Thousand Charms,” “In the Shadow of the Rock,” and "The Old-Time Herald"
and “Wonderful Love.” Unlike some of the collectors, Alden and Spilkia did not steer the informants into a specific repertoire, so we get a sampling of what interested this family. In addition to the fiddle tunes and ballads, Clarice sings old pop songs, such as “Iowa,” and the minstrelsy “There’s a Lock on the Chicken Coop Door,” learned from a 1920 recording by Harry C. Brown and the Harmonizers (also included, for comparison, on the CD).

No review is complete without a few picayune observations: the artist attributions do not appear to be completely accurate, particularly for “Old Joe Clark,” which, per the list, is played by nobody. And the webnotes mentioned above were evidently written shortly after the 1975 recording and were not updated for this release. For the record, here’s what I found for the earthly existence of the Shelor band members: Jesse: 1894-1985; Clarice: 1900-1989; Bill: 1916-1987; Joe: 1920-1995. But, of course, without the efforts of Alden and Spilkia, we would have had almost nothing of their legacy. So I, for one, am grateful.

LYLE LOFGREN

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Campbell’s Corner: The Ola Belle Reed – Alex Campbell Radio Shows

Old Joe Clark / Bring Back My Blue Eyed To Me (twice) / I’ll Be All Smiles Tonight / The Uncloudy Day / Soldier’s Joy (twice) / Can’t Get You Off Of My Mind (twice) / John Hardy / Wildwood Blossom / Dark and Rainy and I Gotta Go Home / I’ll Wear a White Flower For You (twice) / Pretty Polly / My Pretty Fraulein / Steel Guitar Rag

I spent more than a few 1950s adolescent Sunday afternoons at the New River Ranch in the company of Alex and Ola Belle and the New River Boys and Girls, whose ranks included fiddler Sonny Miller, an idiosyncratic country singer who called himself Cactus Bill, Deacon the Steel Driving Man (who played Dobro, of course), and other local talent from the lower Susquehanna River communities in northeastern Maryland and southeastern Pennsylvania. They served as the warm-up outfit for visiting country and bluegrass bands, and everyone from Hank Williams to Bill Monroe worked that little outdoor stage alongside them at one time or another. The shows were open-air events that took place rain or shine, and audiences sat on splinterly boards resting on upturned cinder blocks anchored in the dirt.

When the Ranch closed in 1960, Alex and Ola Belle moved to Sunset Park in Oxford, Pennsylvania, around twenty miles up the road. Alex also opened a store, Campbell’s Corner, where he conducted regular broadcasts of the group for many years. These broadcast excerpts come from “One day in May, 1960” according to producer Ray Alden’s note though, given several song repetitions, this seems unlikely. The material consists of old and recent country and gospel hits interspersed with fiddle tunes, birthday announcements, ads for feed supplies, Dr. Pepper, fresh produce, and other features once standard for the live local country music radio shows that were obsolete even then in many parts of the country. Alex (Ola Belle calls him Alec) is a consummate pitchman, and some of the price quotes (twenty eggs for eighty-nine cents, four pounds of bacon for a dollar) might make us nostalgic for simplier times, at least until we recall that the national minimum wage was still less than a dollar an hour.

Noticeably missing here are Ola Belle’s original songs and banjo playing, even though she was capable of both at the time. Later she would perform for folk music audiences, where her songs of nostalgia and personal emotion re-invented her for new county and urban fans in the 1970s. Here she’s content to sing the songs her listeners knew, and help brother Alec out with homegrown commercial pitches —she’s pretty good with them too! The sound quality is what you’d expect from off-the-air tapes made from an AM home radio signal fifty years ago, and I suspect this CD will be of more interest to broadcast historians than music fans.

DICK SPORTSWOOD

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Tennessee Banjo
Addie Leffew and Claude Wolfenbarger

Rambling Boy / Pretty Polly / Wake Up This Morning / Cumberland Gap / Lonesome Road / Free Little Bird / In The Pines / Shout Lula / Darling Corey / Careless Love / Pretty Polly / John Henry / Sourwood Mountain / Lonesome Grove / Old Joe Clark / Black Eyed Susie / My Husband’s A Drunkard / Cackling Hen / Step It Up And Go / Old Reuben / Cripple Creek / Sourwood Mountain / Sinful To Flirt / Tragic Romance / The End Of The World / I Don’t Love Nobody / She’ll Be Coming Round the Mountain / Wildwood Flower / Wreck Of the Old 97 / Black Eyed Susie / Old Joe Clark / Jesse James / Loving Henry / Muddy Road / Poor Ellen Smith / John Hardy / Buffalo Gals / Eight More Miles To Louisville / Pallet On the Floor / The Old House / Please Come Back Little Pal / Cumberland Gap

Four sentences sketching how Peter Hoover found the banjoists Addie Leffew and Claude Wolfenbarger in the Tennessee town of Thorn Hill sometime in the early 1960s is all the biographical information provided for this Field Recorders’ Collective release. To that I can add two facts from the Internet; it appears that Lefew lived from 1912 to 1987 and is buried in Thorn Hill; there is a house for sale on Claude Wolfenbarger in the same town.

Undoubtedly someone, Mr. Hoover perhaps, can provide more background. Until that time, all I can address is the music present here, and I’ll begin that by noting that there are forty-two tracks with a running time of fifty-two minutes and forty-six seconds. That’s an average of just over a minute per song. And since seven of the tracks (all Leffew’s) run between a minute-fifty and two-and-a-half minutes, quite a few (mostly Wolfenbarger’s) run less than a minute, including a twenty-nine second version of “Cumberland Gap.” Most of the tracks have time for a couple of verses, allowing the per-
form a variation or two. Additionally, there are four tracks played by both performers, giving the listener the chance to compare styles.

Leffew plays solo banjo on the first twenty tracks. Nine of those include her vocals. Her performances run the range of tempo from the slow and plaintive “Lonesome Grove” and the bluesy “Woke Up This Morning” and through medium tempo tunes such as “Careless Love” and “Rambling Boy” (with the melody of “John Hardy”) up to a fast gallop on such tunes as “Black Eyed Susie,” “Cackling Hen,” and “Sourwood Mountain.” I found in her banjo style a tendency to flatten the melodic curve, making it almost monotone and sometimes even obscuring the melody, but she keeps the interest and the energy by a pulsing and insistent backing of sharp strums mixed with drones and rolling fills. Vocally, as best exemplified by “Rambling Boy,” she has a confident delivery comfortable to the low and middle registers. In the high register as on “Lonesome Road,” she sometimes strains.

Wolfenbarger plays solo banjo on twenty-one of the twenty-two remaining tracks, singing on “Muddy Road,” and a capella on the haunting murder tune, “Loving Henry.” By contrast, he is more precise and faithful to the melodic line. When he does “Tragic Romance,” “Wildwood Flower,” or “Wreck Of The Old 97,” you know exactly what he is playing. You can also note quickly that he is more on the beat melodically and that his performances, backed by his own foot stomping and a lighter strum that leaves more space, are more rhythmically even-handed and danceable. It is arguably less exciting than that of Leffew, and he does stay essentially in the same medium tempo from track to track, but of the two I found his tracks more enjoyable. Wolfenbarger also includes a few more lesser-covered numbers, including “Sinful To Flirt,” “The End Of The World,” “Please Come Back Little Pal” and the aforementioned “Muddy Road” and “Loving Henry.”

It should be remembered that this is a field recording from the 1960s and so comes with all the usual suspects (coughs, warbly sound, fluctuations, room noise, and comments). Still, Tennessee Banjo offers a welcome glimpse at two traditional performers otherwise known mostly to their local community.

Pretty Polly / I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry / Little Margaret / Before I Met You / Brown Eyes / Wildwood Flower / I Feel Like I Gotta Travel On / Long Journey Home / Cumberland Gap / Roll in My Sweet Baby’s Arms / Cripple Creek / Faded Love / Old Joe Clark / Down the Road / Little Betty Ann / Tennessee Waltz / My Home’s Across the Blue Ridge Mountains / Short Life of Trouble / Cheyenne / New River Train / Handsome Molly / Billy in the Low Ground / Columbus Stockade Blues / Little Maggie / Home Sweet Home-Silver Bells / All the Good Times Are Past and Gone

It’s amazing to me that, as prominent as these two musicians were in the old-time music scene of the 1960s and ’70s, there have been few recordings of them available in the CD era. The Field Recorders’ Collective here gives us a glimpse at Obray Ramsey and Byard Ray in a rare live concert recording made by Ray Alden. I think this is from 1970, but the notes don’t make that clear. It’s definitely a “warts and all” release, but it’s high time some of their music was in circulation again.

Obray Ramsey grew up in Western North Carolina on the edge of the Smoky Mountains learning a large repertoire of traditional songs from his mother and grandmother. As a youngster he learned guitar, but he usually preferred to sing unaccompanied. In 1953 Bascom Lamar Lunsford persuaded Obray to perform at the Asheville Folk Festival. Lunsford loved Ramsey’s singing and decided he’d sound even better with banjo accompaniment, so he gave him a banjo. Obray learned to play it proficiently, primarily in a pre-bluegrass finger style, and in the 1960s recorded a few LPs for the Prestige International and Riverside labels. His plaintive vocals and delicate but energetic picking made him a favorite with many younger players coming up in those days and his songs were covered by many, including the Grateful Dead’s version of “Rain and Snow” on their first LP.

Byard Ray (1910-1988) was Ramsey’s cousin, born into a family of fiddlers including his father, mother, and great-grandfather. He took up the fiddle as a young boy, influenced especially by fiddlers born in the mid- to late 1800s like J. D. Harris, and became an accomplished player who in later years would pass on his skills to other aspiring fiddle and banjo pickers at such places as Berea College and the Swannanoa Gathering.

But the “big break,” the event that for a brief time would put Obray and Byard in the public eye, came with the inclusion of them and their music in the movie Zachariah, dubbed “the first electric rock western.” I remember seeing the film when it came out in 1971, a godawful vehicle for psychedelic rock bands like the James Gang who rode around with their electric guitars slung over their saddle horns. The only redeeming feature was Obray and Byard dancing in the dust playing a fiddle/banjo duet. At the same time the two went into the studio to record for a major label with a bunch of studio rock musicians, the duo being dubbed White Lightning and the LP File Under Rock, if memory serves me right. They also did a concert tour to promote the record and/or the movie.

Ray Alden recorded the New York City concert of the tour, Ramsey and Ray with a guitar player, Fred “unknown last name” according to the cover notes, but Byard calls him “Jim” on the recording. We can all be thankful that the studio musicians weren’t present. The songs, as you can see by the titles, are predominantly standards of old-time and bluegrass with a few country-Western and Western swing numbers thrown in. I don’t know if this is a representative repertoire for these musicians or if they were trying to strike a note of familiarity in their big-city audience. Unfortunately most of Ramsey’s more unusual and rare ballads and songs were not performed for this show.

Byard Ray’s vocals are smoother, more influenced by popular country music than Obray’s, and he sings lead on Hank Williams’ “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” “Before I Met You,” Bob Wills’ “Faded Love,” the reworked traditional song “I Feel Like I Gotta Travel On” popularized by Billy Grammer in 1959, “Tennessee Waltz,” and the bluegrass version of “Roll in My Sweet Baby’s Arms.” Obray Ramsey handles the more traditional ballads “Little Margaret,”
“Pretty Polly,” and the mountain songs like “Handsome Molly,” “Pretty Betty Ann,” and “My Home’s Across the Blue Ridge Mountains.” Obray’s “Long Journey Home” follows Byard’s “I Feel Like I Gotta Travel On,” the two songs being practically the same. It seems they realize the similarity when they get into the second one and comment on it, but I think I would have separated the tracks on the CD if I had been editing it.

Both these musicians seem to have been influenced instrumentally by bluegrass music. Obray’s banjo picking has more of a bluegrass attack than on his earlier recordings and he uses (or perhaps overuses) harmonic chimes as if it was something he had recently learned and had not recognized how sparingly it should be employed. Byard’s fiddling, especially behind vocals, is a little smoother and more “uptown” than I prefer, but on several instrumental pieces, probably tunes they had played much longer, like “Billy in the Low Ground,” “Cumberland Gap,” and “Cripple Creek,” the style is more solidly in the old-time style. An exception to my ear is the Bill Monroe composition “Cheyenne,” the tune most prominently featured in their film spot, clearly a newer part of their repertoire.

There is much to recommend this CD. Very little of these two players is available and Ramsey’s singing is almost always worth paying close attention to. Still, this is hardly an exceptional showcase of the duo’s music. The performance is filled with missed endings, problems of rhythm and timing, uncertain harmony singing and a feeling of being unprepared to do a full concert together. It does give us a sense of their warmth and humor and ease of playing together, but let’s hope someone sees fit to reissue more of their earlier recordings.

To order: www.fieldrecorder.com
Often when I meet contemporary old-time musicians and tell them that my day job is director of the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University, I am greeted with reactions ranging from quizzical looks to downright scorn. Eager to assert their old-timeyness, they assure me that they want nothing whatsoever to do with any form of popular music. If I’m in a good mood and feel like taking the time, I assume my educator’s mantle and patiently explain that much of what we now know as old-time music was, in fact, a pop culture phenomenon, the result of (primarily) Southern, (primarily) rural musicians taking their music to wider audiences via the then-new mass media of radio and recordings. Further, the repertoires of folks like Fiddlin’ John Carson, Riley Puckett, Charlie Poole, Uncle Dave Macon, et al, owe at least as much to popular culture sources—songbooks, sheet music, earlier recordings—as they did folk tradition. Case in point: this double-CD set of the complete recordings of the North Carolina-based Red Fox Chasers. The music of the Chasers illustrates quite clearly that many of the respected figures in old-time music did not turn their backs on the world of popular music; quite the opposite, in fact, as approximately half the songs on this collection are the products of professional songwriters and were originally published in sheet music form. Granted, most of them were a generation or more old at the time they were recorded, rather than the cutting-edge hits of the day, but this fact largely reflects the more slowly-moving pace of cultural change in the era and in rural areas in general.

Several of the pop songs that the Red Fox Chasers recorded were also done by other early hillbilly artists. “The Girl I Loved in Sunny Tennessee,” written by Stanley Carter and Harry Braisted and published in New York in 1899, was also recorded by Charlie Poole, Ernest Stoneeman, Roy Hall, Asa Martin and James Roberts, and others. “Katy Cline,” a well-known re-working of the 1853 song, “Kitty Clyde,” was also done by Stoneeman, as well as by the Blue Ridge Highballers, Crockett’s Kentucky Mountaineers, the Monroe Brothers, among others. “What is Home Without Babies,” a variant form of the Charles K. Harris song “What is a Home Without Love,” was done by over a dozen others in the hillbilly era, and has recently been recorded by Ricky Skaggs on his collection of music recalled from his childhood, _Solo: Songs My Dad Loved._ “Sweet Fern” derives from “Sweet Bird” of 1876 and was, of course, also recorded by the Carter Family.

The influence of popular culture extends to the Chasers’ instrumental repertoire as well. “Arkansas Traveler” and “Turkey in the Straw” were staples of the blackface minstrel stage of the nineteenth century. “Under the Double Eagle” was a military march that was frequently printed in sheet music form, and “Twinkle Little Star” is a variant of the melody of a similarly titled song published in 1876.

The importance of this sort of material in the old-time repertoire is, of course, well-known, and I hardly claim to be making a new observation by highlighting its presence. Nevertheless, it is sometimes valuable to be reminded of the varied strains of American music that fed into what we now know as old-time music, and of the key role that the realm of pop culture played in swelling this stream.

The Fox Chasers certainly drew on several of the other strains as well, including gospel music, earlier hillbilly recordings, local traditions, and their own imaginations. “Wreck on the Mountain Road” tells the tale of an accident involving a lumber truck in Floyd County, Virginia, in which the driver lost his life. “The Murder of the Lawson Family,” the work of fellow Tar Heel Walter “Kid” Smith, recounts a grisly crime committed in Stokes County, North Carolina, in 1929. Smith’s recording of it with his group, the Carolina Buddies, may have been the Fox Chasers’ source. Their “Naomi Wise,” about another Carolina murderer, is quite different from the traditional piece recorded by G. B. Grayson and others, and comes probably from Vernon Dalhart’s recording of a Carson Robison song, “Stolen Love,” “Two False Lovers,” and “Virginia Bootleggers” are attributed to members of the band.

Stylistically the Red Fox Chasers may not be everyone’s cup of tea. Virtually all the songs feature the harmony singing of (primarily) A. P. Thompson and Bob Cranford. They are capable vocalists—both were trained at a shape-note singing school—but the unchanging texture becomes wearing after a few tracks. Their instrumental work, however, was first-rate. Thompson was a rock-solid rhythm guitar player and Cranford was a fine harmonica player. Fiddler Guy Brooks possessed considerable technical skill, shifting seamlessly into third position at times on “Arkansas Traveler” and “Turkey in the Straw.” Banjo player Paul Miles was also highly competent; his playing complements Brooks’ fiddling extremely well.

Ten of the tracks in this compilation are actually by Bob Cranford and A. P. Thompson as a duo. These were recorded in a pair of sessions for Gennett in 1931 at which Miles and Brooks were not present. In addition to strictly musical items, the four installments of “The Red Fox Chasers Makin’ Licker,” a comic skit in the mold of the Skillet Lickers’ “A Corn Liquor Still in Georgia,” are included as well.

The album is well-produced and attractively packaged. Christopher King transferred the source 78s and the sound is clean and bright. A 12-page brochure with notes on the songs and a short biography of the band, written by Kinney Rorrer, accompanies the discs.

The Red Fox Chasers are not as well-known or as influential among today’s old-time music audience as are their contemporaries such as the Skillet Lickers or the North Carolina Ramblers. The availability of this CD set may change that.

Paul F. Wells

To order: www.tompkinssquare.com

Cherokee Shuffle / Jimmy in the Swamp / Lost Indian / Cousin Sally Brown - Glory in the Meetinghouse / Sweet Bundy / Flow- ers of Edinburgh / Molly Put the Kettle On / Cabin Creek / The Golden West / Say Old Man, I Want Your Daughter / New River Train / Highlander’s Farewell / Stump-tailed Dolly - Cumberland Gap / Forked Deer

Adam Hurt’s business card describes his music as “elegantly innovative clawhammer banjo.” Each of those three modifiers is true. Starting with the last two words, this is a clawhammer banjo CD. Adam plays banjo on each of the fourteen cuts, often with guitar accompaniment; five tunes are done with Stephanie Coleman playing fiddle. Innovative? As you
will hear, Adam has been “taking the old instrument to new places that honor tradition and stretch it as far as it will go.” (That’s actually a phrase that the late Mike Seeger used to describe what Marcy Marxer does with the cello banjo, but it fits Adam and Adam’s playing perfectly.) Elegant? Again, just listen! Every note played is lovingly chosen. This is a completely instrumental CD; no singing.

If this CD is compared to Adam’s last CD, *Insight*, reviewed by this writer in the OTH (October-November-2006), one hears the banjo played in much the same style. Adam has always had a sure, light touch through which a tune’s notes are obtained by almost continuous double-thumbing and very few brush strokes. In the hands of others, this can result in a loss of drive, but Adam keeps a steady, strong rhythm at all times. The fifth string is used, usually unfretted, to get melody notes and as a way of achieving that strong rhythm already described.

A criticism that could be leveled against *Perspective* is that the CD breaks no new ground; Adam continues to play “elegantly innovative clawhammer banjo” in the same style, as solo banjo, with guitar accompaniment, and in standard string band setting with guitar, Adam’s banjo, and fiddle. While true, I think this misses the point implied by the CD’s title. Breadth is, indeed, no greater, while depth is . . . deeper. Maybe at some time in the future some musicologist will compare these two CDs to Books I and II of Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*—the same style, covering the same ground, but with more maturity.

One of Adam’s great strengths is his ability to transfer the fiddle tunes of Ed Haley onto the banjo. “Lost Indian,” “Cabin Creek,” and “Forked Deer” are all excellent examples of this. The last mentioned was, Adam says, filtered through the fiddle of Mark Simos. This reviewer has known and played “Forked Deer” for a VERY long time—it is the first cut on the first side of the first New Lost City Ramblers Folkways record, which I bought around 1962. I didn’t hear the five-part Ed Haley version until much later, and Mark’s version (as he plays it on the Cliffhangers’ *On the Edge* CD) later still. Listening to all of these sources, one by one, you can hear what Adam has added to that which has come before.

Probably the most traditional-sounding cut, on first listen, is Wade Ward’s “New River Train.” Then, on looking at the liner notes, you notice that Adam is playing not in the double-C tuning you expect (you DO have FRC 507, *Wade Ward—Banjo and Fiddle*, don’t you?), but the banjo is tuned in fourths, like the bottom four (bass) strings of a guitar. In addition, the fifth string is tuned a fourth above the first string. The tune is now in the key of B. I think Ward would have liked it; his friend Kyle Creed played “Little Satchel” in that tuning. What has been lost is the ability to play this tune with a fiddler in the traditional key; however, much has been gained.

This project would not be as successful as it is without the other musicians, especially Beth Hartness. Beth’s guitar (played in her unique style) and Adam’s banjo have a symbiotic relationship that turns really good music (such as Adam achieves with Andy Edmonds or Kenny Smith playing guitar) into magically wonderful music. Stephanie Coleman’s fiddling also adds a lot. I was charmed by the harmonies that Stephanie and Adam created working up their arrangement of Lotus Dickey’s “Sweet Bundy.” (I wish Stephanie would make a CD featuring her own fiddling.)

When reviewing *Insight*, the question was raised whether Adam’s distinctive style would be picked up by others,
whether it would turn into a musical dead end played only by Adam. I am not the only person who has heard Adam’s influence showing up in other banjo players; Jane Rothfield (who teaches banjo north of Mason and Dixon’s line) remarked recently that she is hearing this way of playing in her students, and when she asks “Have you taken one of Adam Hurt’s workshops?” the answer is often “Yes.” So—buy this CD, and enjoy it. If you are a banjo player, take one of Adam’s workshops and decide which of Adam’s innovations you would like to add to your own playing. But be sure to buy this CD.

PETE PETERSON

To order: www.adamhurt.com

Knoxville Rag / Lowe Bonnie / Devils Dream - Last Chance / Milwaukee Blues / Eadle Alley / Old Christmas Morning / Charming Betsy / Jake’s Got a Bellyache / Riley the Furniture Man / Tupelo Blues / Chattanooga -Sheeps and Hogs Walking Through the Pasture / When the Good Lord Sets You Free / Baptist Shout / Bob McKinney / Life’s Fortune

The Haints are three lovers of old-time music, two of whom are married to each other, and all of whom sing well together, play well together, and have combined their talents to create a very enjoyable CD. The usual lineup is: Erynn Marshall, fiddle; Jason Romero, banjo; Pharis Romero, guitar. Pharis and Jason share the lead vocals.

Good bands (I think I’ve used this line before) happen when the whole is more than the sum of the parts. Anybody who was at Clifftop 2008 to see and hear Erynn Marshall shatter the glass ceiling, becoming the first woman to win first place in the fiddle contest, knows (understatement alert) that Erynn is a good fiddler. In fact, she reprised one of her winning tunes with a solo performance of French Carpenter’s “Old Christmas Morning” on this CD. Jason Romero not only plays banjo, but builds some very nice ones too! (Check out www.romerobanjos.com.) He seems equally at home with both clawhammer and finger-style banjo, and with guitar. Pharis Romero is a solid, understated backup guitar player. She is so good, and blends so well into the total band sound, that you hardly notice what she is playing. It’s just there. Does a fish notice water?

This is a band that has used both their instrumental chops and singing to demonstrate respect for tradition, and show how they can build on it. For instance, Melvin Wine played “Eadle Alley” as a solo fiddle piece. Here it is arranged for string band, and it works! Another example: Jimmie Tarlton recorded “Lowe Bonnie,” his version of Child #68, as a solo with steel guitar. The Haints chose to use two guitars, harmony singing, and Erynn’s fiddle. They changed the melody so subtly that I had to go back to Tarlton’s original to convince myself that a change had been made. Similarly, Frank Jenkins recorded “Baptist Shout” as a banjo solo, but here it is with guitar backup and a banjo-uke keeping rhythm. They credit it both to Jenkins and to Kirk Sutphin—who plays it (on his CD Old Roots and New Branches, County 2711) with guitar accompaniment using Frank Jenkins’ old banjo!
Jason’s three-finger style is clearly built on both Jenkins’ and Sutphin’s, but he has added a few licks which weren’t present back in 1927. Charlie Poole’s “Milwaukee Blues” is transposed to G so Pharis can sing lead, and one misses Odell Smith’s wonderful double-stop which opens the Poole recording, but enjoys the three-part harmony. For all these examples, this is not a criticism but rather an example of what is meant by simultaneously respecting tradition and building on it.

Respect for tradition also means digging to find some of the best old fiddlers and bands to use for sources. (It also means well-researched liner notes, for which THANK YOU!) Sources here include, in addition those already mentioned, Hoyt Ming of Mississippi, the Cofer Brothers (in their incarnation as the Georgia Crackers) Land Norris, Henry and Buddy Thomas. I suspect that “Riley the Furniture Man” would make a good Rorschach test. Everybody hears the words differently. Pharis’ mellow voice seems perfect for Henry Thomas’ “Bob McKinney” and I like the edge she uses in “When the Good Lord Sets You Free,” but her true strength is blending and choosing harmonies, like she does for “Lowe Bonnie.” That doesn’t take away from Jason’s lead, but a good lead singer will sound even better when there’s a harmony singer or two around.

Have I finished? No, I need to pick a few nits. While I am glad that there are 17 different tunes and songs on this CD, I don’t think putting two unrelated tunes together into a medley is necessarily a good thing. I would have made each of them into a separate cut. But that’s a personal preference. And I found one error in the liner notes—Burnett and Rutherford never recorded “Knoxville Rag”; the recording is by Taylor, Moore, and Burnett. (It’s on the Document “Burnett and Rutherford” CD, so I can imagine how the confusion occurred)

I really enjoyed this CD and recommend it highly. The band is now separated by most of a continent—Pharis and Jason live in Cobble Hill, on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada, while Erynn has recently moved to Galax, Virginia. It will be harder, but I hope they make the time to see each other, dig in, get even tighter, and give us more music like this CD. If I’m not listening to dead guys, I would like to find more modern bands out there who can make music as well as the Haints.

PETE PETERSON

To order: www.thehaints.com

Some Cold Rainy Day
Eden & John’s East River String Band

Ain’t No Tellin’ / Nobody’s Business If I Do / One Dime Blues / Slidin’ Delta / Every Day in the Week / Some Cold Rainy Day / Bye Bye Baby Blues / Future Blues / I Had to Give Up Gin / Rolling Log Blues / Crow Jane / Do Dirty Blues / On Our Turpentine Farm

Eden Brower and John Heneghan are a couple deeply in love with the country blues of the 1920s and 30s, and with each other. Their sources are old 78s from the Columbia 14000 series of “race” records, not the Columbia 15000 “country” series that this magazine’s readers are probably more familiar with. This means they get reissue material from the Document 5000 series, not the Document 8000s. Who says segregation is dead?

Like everybody else who plays music and digs really deeply into the tradition, they found themselves faced with the choice: copy the old recording as closely as possible or try for the spirit? Heneghan described their approach in an interview in The Villager, a newspaper for those who live in New York City’s Greenwich Village: “You have to do your own thing with it, or else you’re not making music, you’re just like one of those Black Sabbath cover bands.” Their approach, then, uses the source recording as a starting point, and adds their own flavor. Heneghan’s guitar playing sounds to these ears to be very close to the source recordings; John Hurt’s songs are played in a very different style from songs learned from Skip James or Blind Lemon Jeffery. While Brower’s voice lacks the edge of Bessie Smith or Lottie Kimbrough, or a modern interpreter like Maria Muldaur or Suzy Thompson, she is confident enough to use her own voice, and thus the duo has its own sound. Brower also adds a rhythm ukulele to Heneghan’s confident guitar playing.

Consider the income level of people making those country blues recordings and the kind of guitar they could afford...
to buy. Probably a cheap ladder-braced guitar, as Dan Margolies pointed out in an article in the Old-Time Herald (Winter 2005). A good deal of the distinctive sound came from those guitars—and Heneghan has taken the trouble to find one, have it set up properly, and play it on this CD. It snaps and buzzes—and sounds beautifully authentic. (Aside: Norman Woodlief, Charlie Poole’s first guitar player, could only afford in 1924 a guitar looking exactly like the one Heneghan is photographed playing.) Again—choosing the “right” guitar has gone into creating the band’s sound—respect for tradition, while adding their own take on the material.

I’ve been talking too much about technique, and not enough about the music that you’ll hear. “Blues” is a term that covers a whole lot of ground, from the country ragtime of Mississippi John Hurt to the urban hot blues of, say, Bradley and Cole doing “Nobody’s Business If I Do.” Brower and Heneghan do it all on this CD, with everything in between. My favorite cut was Bertha “Chippie” Hill’s “Some Cold Rainy Day,” on which the duo is joined by Terry Waldo on piano, giving them a fuller sound. In live performances, the duo is often joined by Dom Flemons of the Carolina Chocolate Drops. I wish some of that was on this CD, or might make it onto a future CD! But what we have here, just two people singing and playing the blues, is a lot of fun to listen to.

PETE PETERSON

To order: www.eastriverstringband.com

**Pride of America**

The New Mules

Garry Harrison: fiddle, plains dulcimer, mandolin, vocals; Genevieve Harrison: fiddle, mandolin, guitar, vocals; Smith Koester: banjo, vocals; Andy Gribble: guitar, vocals; Abby Ladin: bass, vocals

Jolly Old Soul / C & A Breakdown / Orphan Left Alone / Lucian Smith / Take Warning, Young Ladies / Liza Jane / Pride of America / Shoe Cobbler / Turnip Patch

I’ll get this out of the way right now. This is one of the most refreshing new CDs to come down the pike in quite some time. When I first got my copy of Pride of America, it stayed in the CD player for days, and remained in constant rotation for several weeks. Even though the band, for the most part, uses the standard old-time string band line-up of fiddles, banjo, guitar, string bass, and occasional mandolin, they manage to create, within that format, a distinctive and original sound. Individually, all are accomplished musicians, but as an ensemble they come together like a well-oiled machine, with Garry and Genevieve Harrison’s soaring fiddles propelled by the pulsing rhythm section comprised of Smith Koester’s driving, yet melodic clawhammer banjo, Andy Gribble’s insistent, powerful guitar, and Abby Ladin’s spot-on string bass. Even taking into consideration the high level of musicianship on the CD, some might take the Mules to be just another old-time (hot) string band, if it wasn’t for one thing – their repertoire.
They’ve managed to unearth a completely new vein of material, which includes both songs and tunes, which has never before been commercially recorded. The credit for this mainly goes to Garry Harrison, who spent a great deal of time in the 1970s and ’80s conducting a sort of musical archaeology, searching out older fiddlers and other senior musicians throughout the central and southern part of Illinois and documenting their repertoires, most of which had been acquired in the early days of the twentieth century, before the widespread popularity of 78 records and hillbilly radio shows. Along the way, he discovered the work of David McIntosh, a native of southern Illinois who taught music at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale from the late 1920s through the mid-1960s. McIntosh began collecting traditional songs from his students and expanded his collecting to include older relatives and acquaintances of those students. Over the years, he amassed a substantial collection of traditional folksongs, which his son deposited at the Archives of Traditional Music at Indiana University after McIntosh died. A few years ago, Garry, along with Jo Burgess, published a collection called *Dear Old Illinois: Traditional Music of Downstate Illinois*, which contained transcriptions of tunes that Garry and his Indian Creek Delta Boys cohorts had collected alongside transcribed versions of folksongs from McIntosh’s collection. The bulk of the material on “Pride of America,” with a few exceptions, comes from these two collections. The title tune, an instrumental fiddle tune, was taken from a nineteenth-century manuscript. “Jenny Get Your Hoecake Done” is a minstrel-era song/tune taken from sheet music. “Liza Jane” is hybrid version of that widely played tune learned from “numerous senior Illinois fiddlers,” while the tune “Yellow Jacket” is a Garry Harrison original.

While the instrumental pieces on the CD are interesting, unusual, and very well played, it is the songs and the way the band has revived and arranged them that really make this an outstanding CD. There may be some debate over whether or not there is room for creativity, invention, and growth in old-time music. As if to put these arguments to rest, Harrison has taken unaccompanied performances of obscure and esoteric folksongs, and giving them the full string band string band treatment, often taking solo vocal lines and arranging them for multiple voices.
The songs themselves make for fascinating listening, both as pieces of music and as pieces of history. It is common for many contemporary old-time performers to draw the bulk of their material from ’20s–’30s era 78s and similar sources. The topic of those songs, as one would expect, often reflect the places and the events of the time period of those recordings. While some of the songs on this CD share some of the universal themes associated with old-time music (an orphan’s lament, lost love, etc.), many of them, because they were collected from sources born a generation before the 78 era of the ’20s and ’30s, reflect earlier, preindustrial times, and deal with sometimes arcane and at times supernatural subject matter, using language (some nonsensical) that some may find rather archaic. In addition, to some folks who live in, or may once lived for a time in southern Illinois (myself included), it may be a pleasant surprise to hear versions of old folk songs that mention familiar or nearby places.

Of course, a song is only as good as its performance. The singing in the band is mighty good in general, but there are some standouts. Abby Ladin’s plaintive singing on “Take Warning, Young Ladies” is quite lovely, while Garry’s deep voice makes for just the right touch on the songs he tackles, especially “Walking Out One Morning” and “Shoe Cobbler.” On the latter, I should mention that Garry also plays an instrument which he invented and calls the plains dulcimer. It looks like a cross between a mandolin and a dulcimer, and sounds like the latter. For my money, though, Gena’s vocals are what give this CD its edge. Her singing is wonderfully unaffected, and reminds me of 1940s female hillbilly singers like Mattie O’Neill, Cousin Emmy, or Molly O’Day, especially on “Orphan Left Alone” and “Across the Plains of Illinois.” In fact, it wouldn’t be that much of stretch – if we were able to travel back through time about 60 or so years – to envision this band performing some of these songs on radio stations in places in Illinois like Tuscola, Harrisburg, West Frankfort, and Carbondale, where hillbilly singers and bands once held forth on live radio shows. Since that is not possible we can take comfort in knowing that the New Mules are around and active today, drawing on a wealth of old, forgotten songs and tunes, and bringing them to light and breathing new life into them once again.

JIM NELSON

To order: www.newmules.net

Fiddler’s Reel / Last Days in Georgia / Widow’s Lament / Oklahoma Waltz / Johnson Boys/ Red Hawk Waltz / Ladies of the Lehigh Valley / Green Grows the Laurel / Rock the Cradle Lucy / Kiss Waltz / Wild Horses at Stony Point / Nobody’s Darling / Forks of Sandy / Nachusa Waltz / Foggy Mountaintop / Black Hills Waltz / Chicken in the Snowbank / Orvetta Waltz / Black Mountain Rag / Sweet Marie

This is not the first band from Grayson County, Virginia, to call itself the Buck Mountain Band. The first one, with Wade Ward and Charlie Higgins, played around Independence, Virginia (a few towns away from Galax), in the 1930s and 1940s. Most of the members of this band live near Buck Mountain and chose the name to honor both the older band and the Grayson County geography.

This band consists of Bob Taylor, fiddle, Sue Taylor, guitar, Dan Peck, banjo or guitar, Amy Boucher, banjo, Larry McPeak, guitar, and Debbie Larson, bass. Not all band members play on every tune here; often they play just with Bob, Dan, and Sue. Bob’s fiddling is sparse but rhythmic. Dan or Amy plays simple, accurate clawhammer banjo, and Sue and Larry play solid rhythm guitar, with very few runs. Debbie’s bass playing adds a lot without drawing notice to the bass—just what a good bass player should do.

Almost half of the twenty songs and tunes here are in waltz time. The band somehow has a more full sound on waltzes, which they play smoothly and cleanly. Songs in waltz time include the wonderful tearjerker “Nobody’s Darling” sung by Larry, and Amy’s happy “Green Grows the Laurel.” When the band plays 2/4 tunes and songs, they play at a moderate tempo, never at clogger speed. (Interestingly, another Grayson County band, the Wolfe Brothers, also likes to play at this speed.)
Larry McPeak is primarily known as a bluegrass singer in bands with his brothers (The McPeak Brothers) and with the VW Boys, but he shows here that his heart can definitely be in old-time music. “Nobody’s Darling,” as already stated, is a gem, as is his original “Widow’s Lament” and “Foggy Mountain Top.” McPeak used Samantha Bumgarner’s 1924 recording of “Foggy Mountain Top” as his source, rather than the Carter Family’s or the Monroe Brothers. Similarly, for “Nobody’s Darling” they cite Jimmie Davis’ 1935 recording and not the Grayson and Whitter recording that I associate with the song.

I’m very curious about the band’s source for several tunes. First, for “Johnson Boys.” It’s not the Civil War version about “the many deeds of daring/That were done by the Johnson Boys” that the New Lost City Ramblers got from the Grant Brothers, but a more modern version where they go “riding in a Chevrolet” and are not very good at courting. It’s fun. I also wonder whether Slim and McMichen’s Melody Men is still with us and still making good music. We are blessed.

The British Archive of Country Music puts out reissues of some of the less-well-known figures from early country music. Because Bryant did not front his own band in the 1930s and moved to Pittsburgh in 1940, his name is not as famous as people who have their own Document CD. But his music is well worth listening to. Skillet Lickers fans may remember that McMichen left the Skillet Lickers in about 1931, complaining that the band was too mired in “hill-billy” music and unwilling to play the kind of music that Mac thought would be popular. When Mac set up his own band, Slim Bryant was the first person he recruited—somebody who had learned to play guitar from jazz guitarist Perry Bechtel. (Where have you heard of Perry Bechtel?) Among other accomplishments, he was the man who persuaded Martin Guitars to make a special guitar with 14 frets before the fingerboard—which turned out to be the prototype for the Dreadnought line.

The Wildcats were Slim Bryant (guitar), his brother “Loppy” (bass), Kenny Newton (fiddle), and Al Azzarro (accordion). Yes, accordion. Remember that the band was based in Pittsburgh. I suspect that a fair number of their gigs came from places that wanted polka music—such as can be found here with “Barbara Polka.” You can dance to a lot of this music. If you enjoy late-’30s Western swing, such as Leonard Slye (who later changed his name to Roy Rogers) and the Sons of the Pioneers were singing, you will certainly enjoy Bryant. In fact, there are several covers of Sons of the Pioneers songs here including “Over the Santa Fe Trail.” There’s also a version of “Are You Tired of Me, My Darling” that clearly did not come through the Carter Family—I wonder where they got it?

This CD, by the way, contains some really good singing—four people who have learned to sing and blend well together, and had the musical knowledge, whether through training or instinct, to find close harmonies.

No, this is not your standard fiddle-banjo-guitar string band music. Instead, this is exploration along one of the roads that old-time musicians took after the string bands of the 1920s had gone out of business. It’s well worth listening to.

To order: www.bacm.users.btopenworld.com

Howard “Howdy” Forrester
The MGM Recordings

Rutland’s Reel / Fiddler’s Waltz / Leather Britches / Dog In the Rye Straw / Brilliancy / Strictly Forrester / High Level Hornpipe / Sally Goodin’ / Say Old Man / Cruel Willie / Clarinet Polka / Gray Eagle Hornpipe

The contents of this CD originally appeared as a monaural LP, Cub 8008. Cub was a sub-label of MGM, for whom Forrester’s boss Roy Acuff worked briefly at the time. The record was probably made and released in 1958, shortly before new LP releases routinely appeared in stereophonic sound. Howdy Forrester was one of a select number of brilliant Nashville fiddlers in the 1950s—the list includes Tommy Jackson, Dale Potter, Tommy Vaden, Benny Martin, and a few others who worked primarily in bluegrass, Paul Warren, Mack Magaha (who later joined Porter Wagoner), Tater Tate, and Kenny Baker.

Howard Forrester (1922 - 1987) was born in Hickman County, Tennessee, and taught...
himself to play while recovering from a bout of rheumatic fever. At age 16, he played alongside Arthur Smith with Herald Godoman’s Tennessee Valley Boys on the Opry and on records. He met another fiddling partner and lifelong friend Georgia Slim (Bob Rutland) shortly thereafter, when Slim replaced Arthur Smith in the band. In 1940 the pair moved to Dallas and became members of the Texas Roundup on KRLD in Dallas, where some remarkable airchecks of their twin fiddling were made.

Though Howdy played on the Opry with Bill Monroe in the early ’40s before joining the Navy, the two didn’t record together. He became one of Roy Acuff’s Smoky Mountain Boys 1951, beginning an association with Roy and with the Acuff Rose publishers that would last until Howdy’s death. This collection was followed by another for United Artists in 1963, and later LPs for Stoneway and County, all long out of print.

This set displays Forrester’s immaculate technique, with phrasing, timing, and other qualities that his musical contemporaries admired and emulated. Historian John Rumble has credited him as a central figure in the development of modern Texas longbow style, praise that this superb collection underscores. The program ranges from well-known to obscure tunes and a couple of originals. “Rutland’s Reel,” named for Georgia Slim, is the set’s masterpiece, a multi-strain piece with attractive chord changes (the tune’s also recently been dusted off and beautifully played by twin fiddlers Patrick McAvinue and Michael Cleveland on a new set released under McAvinue’s name, on Patuxent CD-174).

Other high points include two hornpipes, the original “Strictly Forrester,” a fancy version of “Say, Old Man, Can You Play the Fiddle” with lots of variations, and “Clarinet Polka” (known as “Dziadunio Polka” in the 1910s, when the tune was still exclusively Polish), played as a duet with Smoky Mountain Boy Jimmy Riddle’s chromatic harmonica. I’m less fond of “Cruel Willie,” a beautiful dirge that loses its character as the rhythm section (one to two guitars, bass, and piano) applies a mindless beat. Elsewhere the group states a basic pulse but otherwise keeps to the background, keeping time. “Brilliancy” and “Sally Goodin’” hark back to the celebrated Texas fiddler Eck Robertson’s versions from the 1920s (both on Eck Robertson, County CD-3515), though Howdy reinvests each with ideas of his own. He and Georgia Slim were fond of the theme and variations format, perhaps because both were such gifted improvisers who admired each other’s playing.

One disappointment is the lack of documentation provided in the notes—no date or place of recording, no participant names nor discussion of the music. Instead the booklet offers only a two-paragraph biographical note that ends when he was sixteen. There’s no mention of his work with either Acuff or Monroe.

The recordings feature the dry, super-clean studio sound typical of mid-’50s “hi-fi” records. A worthy companion set is the CD Georgia Slim and Howdy Forrester: Twin Fiddling Texas Style (Tri-Agle-Far TR 710), assembled from mid-’40s air checks made when he rejoined the Texas Roundup on KRLD from 1946 to 1949. The recorded sound is older and grittier, but the ambience is spontaneously informal, and their solos and duets catch fire again and again. If you can find a copy you’ll be glad you did. Even if you can’t, and if you admire superior fiddling with a high gloss, be sure not to miss The MGM Recordings.

Dick Spottswood
To order: www.artscenterofcc.com/spring-fed.html

This Old Hammer
John Miller

John Miller has been playing and singing country blues for at least four decades and has gotten really good at it. Even in the worst years of segregation, there was a lot of interaction between white and black musicians; they bought each other’s records and learned from each other. OTH readers would do well to remember this and listen to his music. His sources and heroes include Bo Carter, Elizabeth Cotton, Big Joe Williams, Clarence Ashley (“Walking Boss”). Few of these songs are direct covers; they are instead arrangements “in the style of.” Miller has a pleasing voice and fantastic instrumental chops. Not only can he play well in each of the styles whose exponents are named, Big Joe Williams, Clarence Ashley (“Walking Boss”). Few of these songs are direct covers; they are instead arrangements “in the style of.” Miller has a pleasing voice and fantastic instrumental chops. Not only can he play well in each of the styles whose exponents are named above, but he’s also made teaching DVDs for Stefan Grossman’s Guitar Workshop detailing how to play like the first three named. Have I convinced you yet? Stretch your mind a little. Recommended.

Pete Peterson
To order: www.johnmillerguitar.com

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