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Fiddle - Jesse Milnes, Dave Bing, Charlie Walden and Alan Jabbour
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Guitar - Jim Watson
Mandolin - K. C. Groves
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Coordinator – Joe Newberry

OCTOBER OLD-TIME WEEK: 10/26-11/2
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Fiddle – Erynn Marshall, Jesse Milnes and Dave Bing
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THE OLD-TIME HERALD

Volume 13, Number 9

$5.00

2014 FULL SUMMER AUGUSTA SCHEDULE

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TRADITION COMES OUT OF THE PAST, BUT IT HAPPENS IN THE PRESENT

An Interview with Gerry Milnes
Old Time CDs from the Field Recorders’ Collective

- The Hellbenders (FRC700) featuring Bruce Molsky, James Leva, David & Mary Winston, and Dave Grant
- Sherman Hammond (FRC701) - West Virginia’s Sherman Hammond was an accomplished singer in the traditional Appalachian style and a fiddler in a fine, archaic style reminiscent of his Uncle Edden. He learned banjo from a wide circle of West Virginia musicians.
- Harold Hausenfluck, Volume 2: Banjo Workshop (FRC702) - Harold describes a wide variety of banjo tunings and traditional styles which he demonstrates on many classic and unusual tunes learned from the masters.
- Jerry Lundy with Hilary Dirlam (FRC703) - The grandson of the great Galax, VA fiddler Emmett Lundy, Jerry Lundy (1942-2001) was a skilled and driving fiddler who was well respected in bluegrass as well as old-time music circles.
- Calvin Cole, Fancy Gap Banjo (FRC704) - Calvin Cole (Fancy Gap, VA) played clawhammer-style banjo with tremendous precision and drive. Though he was old enough to have been recorded in the 1930s by the Library of Congress, these recordings (made by Peter Hoever in 1960) show Mr. Cole still at the top of his game.
- Parley Parsons, Old Galax Fiddling (FRC705) - A member of the last generation of fiddlers firmly rooted in the local style. Parley’s playing was immediately recognizable as having been influenced by Emmett Lundy (b.1864-d.1953) and Charlie Higgins (b.1878-d.1967), two iconic older Galax fiddlers.

FULL CATALOG LISTING

Field Recorders’ Collective, 6206 Washington Street, Ravenna, OH 44266

You can order via our website and pay using PayPal™ or credit cards. To order via US mail, send a check made payable to the Field Recorders to the address below. $15 each CD, $20 each DVD PLUS $5 for 1st Class Mail (Ohio residents please include applicable sales tax).

Field Recorders’ Collective, 6206 Washington Street, Ravenna, OH 44266
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May 2014
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The Old-Time Music Group, Inc. celebrates the love of old-time music. Old-time music—grassroots or home grown music and dance—shares origins, influences and musical characteristics with roots musics throughout America. Our magazine, the Old-Time Herald, casts a wide net, highlighting the Southeastern tradition while opening its pages to kindred and comparable traditions and new directions. It provides enlightening articles and in-depth reviews, opportunities for musical learning and sharing, and a forum for addressing the issues and questions that bear upon the field.

Cover: West Virginia musicians photographed by Gerry Milnes. Clockwise from top left: Glen Smith, Carson Dobbins, Sarah Singleton, Homer Sampson, Maggie Hammons Parker, Ernie Carpenter.

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Letters

Dispatch from . . . Dublin

It is quite fitting that a group of old-time enthusiasts kick off each week at the Thomas House in Dublin’s city centre. It has proven to be a comfortable relationship, our old-time music jam and this New York-style dive bar. For most of the week, there are all sorts of music genres, from rockabilly onwards through to punk, that emulate various forms of American culture through the decades. The fashion sense of the patrons and indeed the staff – including silver-quiffed Kev, the owner – also pays tribute to the iconic pop culture which has oozed style from the US since the 20th century.

But before those rock-and-roll sounds and styles get into full swing for the week, on a Monday evening the godfather of home-styles get into full swing for the week, on a

In fact, pret-

es of old-time and its hypnotic groove.

ers, who now orchestrates old-time jams Stringband,

bers of the successful trio the Rough Deal

Keogh (both of whom used to be mem-

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is discussed fr

om 9 PM onwards outside

of fiddle styles and tune variations one

or another might have found.

All of us who regularly attend this group – myself, Brian and Colin on clawhammer banjo, Aisling, Luke and Mario on fiddle, and Paul on guitar – have pretty much honed our interest and sound from attending the stalwart Irish old-time jam on Saturday afternoons in the Cobblestone pub in Smithfield in Dublin. That session, and also its equivalent in Cork, hosted by banjo player Mick Daly, have championed old-time music in Ireland for almost two decades.

Pretty much anyone who lives in or near Dublin has made a weekly pilgrimage to this jam, hosted by banjo player Bill Whelan and guitarist and singer Ben Keogh (both of whom used to be mem-

ber of the successful trio the Rough Deal Stringband, along with fiddler Tim Rogers, who now orchestrates old-time jams in County Mayo with his new group, the Clow Bay Critter). It is at this session where I first heard and later grew to understand the nuances of old-time and its hypnotic groove. In fact, pretty much all old-time players around Dublin (and possibly Ireland) could say the same, with the exception of Brian, who grew up in Putnam County in upstate New York, with John Cohen and Pete Seeger for neighbors.

From attending this session, for a long time without our really knowing each other that well, a common repertoire of tunes was learnt from the driving rhythm of Bill’s clawhammer playing – Bill is pretty much single-handedly responsible for teaching all of us banjo players the basic claw pattern – and songs from the magnetic pitch of Ben Keogh’s vocal range.

That Cobblestone session is getting close to 20 years old and has metamorphosed into a flag-bearing session. Perhaps it was for this reason that a group of us, not wanting to interfere terribly with the well-honed routine and repertoire of that jam, found each other and decided to host an alternative gathering, in much the same vein, but drawing on what other influences we had.

This led to a summer, unsuccessful albeit great fun, trying to locate the right premises to host another old-time jam in Dublin. And this in turn led to the inevitable setting-up of a Facebook page, Old Time Music Dublin, to reach out to anyone else out there who might be interested in this nugget of quality music. Pretty soon, people were coming out from around the country (banjo-picking gal Fionnuala from the west in County Sligo, for one), to find out just who else was into this music they had come to accept as their own little quirk.

In time, after trying and failing to explain to various bar managers that we were looking for a place to meet and play, as opposed to running a paid gig, finally the Thomas House beckoned. Brian had the brainwave to approach the American-obsessed Kev and broach the idea of a jam in his “dive bar.”

Now, several months later and with several special guests dropping by while on tour from the US, the Thomas House is proving to be an apt home for our little old-time jam in Dublin.

It was a coincidence, of course, but the fact that we’ve settled into our little corner on Mondays, setting the standard for the week and music ahead, does seem to be quite fitting in the lineage of the music that makes up this bar and its varied patrons.

Will we still be sitting there in 20 years? Will we still be talking about bowing tech-

niques or banjo tunings and what new (old) tune we’ve uncovered? Well, I guess you’ll have to drop by and find out.

Derek Copley
Dublin, Ireland
Here & There

**Events**

The Education Center at Homestead National Monument of America, in Beatrice, Nebraska, will be the site of this year’s Monumental Fiddling Championship and Acoustic Band Contest on May 24. For more information visit nps.gov/home/ or call (402) 223-3514.

West Virginia’s Mountain Dance Trail will host Dare to Be Square in Helvetia, West Virginia, May 30 – June 1. Workshops for aspiring and advanced callers will be taught by Mack Samples, Lou Maiuri, Will Mentor, Phil Jamison, Michael Ismerio, Janine Smith, and Ellen and Eugene Ratcliff, with music by Andy Fitzgibbon and the Iron Leg Boys and Dave Bing and the Full Moon Boys. Admission will cost $50 ($40 early bird price), and $5 for the nightly dances. Rustic camping is available.

The Kenton, Barn on Dream Acres near Spring Grove, Minnesota includes a Summer Solstice Dance at 8 p.m. June 21 with Chirps Smith and Dot Kent; the Lanesboro, Minnesota Barn Dance June 21 with Chirps Smith and Shawn Glidden; Rio Grande Scenic Railroad Music Festival, Alamosa, Colorado, July 4-6; Laura Ingalls Wilder Family Festival, Walnut Grove, Minnesota, July 19 with Pop Wagner; Riverside Concert, Rochester, Minnesota, with Ken Waldman, August 7; Minnesota Bluegrass & Old Time Music Festival, Richmond, Minnesota, August 8-9 with Pop Wagner; Spring Grove, Minnesota, August 13 with Pop Wagner; Lanesboro, Minnesota, Barn Dance, August 16 with John Plomondon and Pop Wagner; Minnesota State Fair, St. Paul, Minnesota, August 21-22 with Pop Wagner; St. Paul, Minnesota Farmers’ Market, August 23.

The 13th annual Cowan Creek Mountain Music School, June 23 - 27, 2014 will offer courses in banjo, fiddle, beginning and lead guitar, mandolin, harmony singing, old-time string band, and square dancing. Faculty include Andy Fitzgibbon, Jimmy McCown, John Harrod, Sarah Howard Montgomery, Erynn Marshall, John Haywood, Jesse Wells, Ron Howard, Randy Wilson, Karly Dawn Milner, Sarah Wood, Cari Norris, Carla Gover, Erin Stidham, and Don Rogers.

Kids on the Creek is $100. Adults and to kids ages 11 and older. Tuition is $200 for Kentucky residents and $250 for out-of-state students. Tuition for Kids on the Creek is $100. Youth scholarships are available. Registrations are due by June 10. For a complete schedule and registration information see cowancreekmusic.org or call (606) 633-3187.

Mac and Jenny Traynham will be offering music workshops this summer at their home in Floyd County, Virginia. Classes will be offered on May 30-31, June 3-5, June 8-10, July 4-7, and July 11-13.

We believe in the joy & strength that traditional dance, music & song bring to individuals & communities.

We bet you do too.

So join us for a week this summer that’s so much fun, your frown will disappear, you’ll feel 10 years younger & you’ll want to stay forever.

June-August 2014
MA, NH & WV

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Celebrating our Centennial in 2015
Old-Time Week, July 20-26
with Mac Benford, John Herrmann, Ellie Grace, Alice Gerrard, Carol Elizabeth Jones, Gerry Milnes, Phil Jamison, Anna Roberts-Gevalt, Elizabeth LaPrelle, Paul Kovac, Sheila Kay Adams, Gordy Hinners, Ron Pen, Jeff Keith, Don Pedi, John Hoffmann, Joseph Decosimo, Eddie Bond, Josh Ellis, John Hollandsworth, Rayna Gellert, Wayne Erbsen, Kevin Kehrberg, Rodney Sutton & more.

The Swannanoa Gathering
Old-Time Week, July 20-26
with Mac Benford, John Herrmann, Ellie Grace, Alice Gerrard, Carol Elizabeth Jones, Gerry Milnes, Phil Jamison, Anna Roberts-Gevalt, Elizabeth LaPrelle, Paul Kovac, Sheila Kay Adams, Gordy Hinners, Ron Pen, Jeff Keith, Don Pedi, John Hoffmann, Joseph Decosimo, Eddie Bond, Josh Ellis, John Hollandsworth, Rayna Gellert, Wayne Erbsen, Kevin Kehrberg, Rodney Sutton & more.

Total: 15 artists

The Berkeley Old Time Music Convention
Ginny Hawker & Tracy Schwarz
Joseph Decosimo and the Bucking Mules
Franklin George & Kim Johnson
The Cliffhangers
Earl White Band
The Onlies
and more!

Workshops, Movies, Concerts, Stringband Contest, Square Dances, Kids' Stuff, Jamming & More!

www.BerkeleyOldTimeMusic.org

Shindig on the Green will celebrate its 48th year with concerts on the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Stage at Pack Square Park in Asheville, North Carolina. Concert dates are June 28, July 5, July 12, July 19, August 9, August 16, August 23, and August 30. Also in Asheville, at the Diana Wortham Theatre at Pack Place, the 87th Annual Mountain Dance and Folk Festival will take place July 31 – August 2. Visit folkheritage.org for details.

The 10th Annual Big Horn Mountain Festival is scheduled for July 11 – 13 at the Johnson County Fairgrounds in Buffalo, Wyoming. The festival will include fiddle and guitar contests, and the Wyoming Banjo and Mandolin Championships. Visit bighornmountainfestival.com for ticket information.

The California Bluegrass Association will host the Golden Old-Time Campout August 21 – 24 at Liberty Glen Campground at Lake Sonoma, California. Tickets and details can be found at cbaontheweb.org or facebook.com/cbaoldtime.

This year’s Guildford Banjo Jamboree will be held September 19 – 21 in Guildford, Victoria, Australia. It will feature concerts, workshops, jam sessions, and a dance. Details are at banjojamboree.org.

This year’s Mountain Dance and Folk Festival at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina, on September 27, will mark the event’s 40th year. In addition to old-time, bluegrass, and gospel music, shaped-note singing, and traditional dance, there will be many other events including a Cherokee stickball game, chainsaw competition, demonstrations, and workshops. Visit facebook.com/MountainHeritageDay for more information.

On exhibit

Making Music: The Banjo in Baltimore and Beyond, an exhibition about the history of the banjo in Baltimore, Maryland, is on display at the Baltimore Museum of Industry through October 18. See the advertisement in this issue for details, and visit thebmi.org for directions to the museum.

The NAMM (National Association of Music Merchants) Museum of Music Making in Carlsbad, California, is hosting the exhibit Banjo: A New Day for an Old Instrument. The show, which explores “how all elements of the indus-
try — musicians, manufacturers, dealers, consumers, songwriters and publishers — interact in a musical ecosystem centered on the banjo,” will run through October 31. More information can be found at museumofmusicmaking.org.

In June and July, the exhibition Wicked Good Fiddling: 200 Years of Fiddling, Fiddlers, and Fiddle Making in Maine will be on view at the Portland (Maine) Public Library. Curated by Paul Wells and Tom Wilsbach, the exhibit celebrates Maine’s “rich heritage of fiddling that encompasses Yankee, Franco-American, and . . . Irish-American cultures . . . by bringing together . . . photographs, printed and manuscript tunebooks, sound recordings, concert flyers, and dance cards—that document the Pine Tree State’s vibrant fiddling traditions.”

Congratulations

At this year’s Great Southern Old Time Fiddlers’ Convention, held on March 15 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, winners were as follows. Fiddle: Nikos Pappas, Tyler Andal, Kevin Martin. Banjo: Micah Spence, Daniel Binkley, Daniel Rothwell. Traditional Song: Jana Michelson, Johnathan Weaver, Marcy Paulson. String Band: Diatonic Dukes, Hogslop String Band, Hamilton County Cut-Ups. Dance: Thomas Maupin, Jay Bland, Chris Gray.

At this year’s Surry Old Time Fiddlers Convention, on March 28 and 29 in Dobson, North Carolina, contest winners were as follows. (Hometowns are in North Carolina unless otherwise noted.) Adult Fiddle: Tessa Dillon, St. Albans, West Virginia; Kilby Spencer, Crumpler; Robbie Anders, Galax, Virginia; Erica Testerman, Lansing; Chris Testerman, Lansing. Youth Fiddle: Kitty Amaral, Elk Creek, Virginia; Liam Purcell, Deep Gap; Noah Prudencio, Galax, Virginia. Twin Fiddle: Kilby Spencer, Crumpler, and Jacob Bowen, State Road; David Blackmon and Russell McCumber, Elkin; Marsha Todd and Richard Bowman, Mount Airy; Debbie Gitlin, Walkertown, and Betty Vornbrock, Hillsville, Virginia; Erica Testerman and Chris Testerman, Lansing. Adult Banjo: Robbie Anders, Galax, Virginia; Brett Martin, Elk Creek, Virginia; Jared Boyd, Laurel Fork, Virginia; Marsha Todd, Mount Airy; Amanda Wright, Lenoir. Youth Banjo: Samuel Tsolis, West Jefferson; Bethany Bare, Jefferson; Travis Watts, Mount Airy. Adult Guitar: Eric Hardin,

At the Florida Old Time Music Championship, held April 4 and 5 in Dade City, Florida, winners were as follows. (Hometowns in Florida unless otherwise noted.) Senior Fiddle: Andy Thomas, Quincy; Gailanne Amundsen, Longwood; Phil Levy, Tampa; Carol Taktikian, Edgewater; Jay Gimelli, Chiefland. Beginning Old-Time Fiddle: Cookie Polly, Tavares; Patsy Wiley, Leesburg; Banjo Dewey, Paisley; George Kerr, Hudson. Old-Time Banjo: Gailanne Amundsen, Longwood; Pete Peterson, Oxford, Pennsylvania; Angelee Krieger, West Palm Beach; Clayton Jones, West Palm Beach; Ron Whisler, Edgewater. Beginning Old-Time Banjo: John Simmons, Orlando; Christopher Stewart, Land O Lakes. Harmonica: Joe Reina, Lutz; Bruce Spratling, Inverness; John Shannon, Arcadia; John Simmons, Orlando. Dobro: Harold Thomas, Dade City; VGO, Clearwater/Safety Harbor. Autoharp: Pete Peterson, Oxford, Pennsylvania; VGO, Clearwater/Safety Harbor; Gailanne Amundsen, Longwood. Old-Time Singing, Men: Joe Reina, Lutz; Pete Peterson, Oxford, Pennsylvania; Clayton Jones, West Palm Beach; Greg Allen, Palmetto Bay. Old-Time Singing, Women: Kellie Allen, Oxford, Pennsylvania; Cindy Roy, Tampa; Birdi Smock, Mattlacha; Carol Taktikian, Edgewater. Old-Time Singing, Groups: The Kriegers, West Palm Beach; Andy’s Angels, North Florida; Twin Sisters, Orlando/Tampa; Just in Time, Edgewater. Finger-Picked Guitar: Andy Thomas, Quincy; VGO, Clearwater/Safety Harbor; Wanda Lee, Flagler Beach. Appalachian Dulcimer: Gailanne Amundsen, Longwood; VGO, Clearwater/Safety Harbor; Jay Gimelli, Chiefland; Michael Vickey, Northeast, Pennsylvania. Hammered Dulcimer: Michael Vickey, Northeast, Pennsylvania; Chris Collins, Port Charlotte. Rhythm Instruments: Kristi Hamilton, Dogtown; Carol Taktikian, Edgewater; Cookie and Don Polley, Tavares; Banjo Dewey and Dew Props, Paisley. Flat-Picked Guitar: Michael Krieger, West Palm Beach; Andy Thomas, Quincy; VGO, Clearwater/Safety Harbor; Richard Hardy, Minneola. Mandolin: Angelee Krieger, West Palm Beach; Richard Hardy, Minneola; VGO, Clearwater/Safety Harbor; Jay Gimelli, Chiefland. Old-Time String Band: Gusty Gail and the High Winds, Longwood; Corn Family, Tampa; Mojito Sippers, Palmetto Bay; New Southern Broadcasters, Jacksonville; Just in Time, Edgewater. Bruce Hartmann Best Hat Award: VGO. Cousin Thelma Bolton Service Award: Clay Black, Ron Whisler, Carol Taktikian, Edward Lee Flemming Jr. Award: Clayton Jones.

The following were winners at this year’s Georgia String Band Festival on April 26. Fiddle: Austin Derrberry, Unionville, Tennessee; Mickey Nelligan, Decatur, Georgia; Evan Kinney, Stone Mountain, Georgia. Banjo: Micah Spence, Chattanooga, Tennessee; Austin Derrberry, Unionville, Tennessee; Laney House, Adairsville, Georgia. Singing: Micah Spence, Chattanooga, Tennessee; Kevin Martin, Sandy Springs, Georgia; Walter Robertson, Calhoun, Georgia. Buck Dance: Betty Jo Bailey, Calhoun, Georgia; Chad Guerrero, St. Paul, Minnesota; Micah Spence, Chattanooga, Tennessee. String Band: Stone Mountain Wobblers, Stone Mountain, Georgia; Gordon County Goober Mashers, Calhoun, Georgia; Uncle Shuffield and His Haint Hollow Hootenanny, Rover, Tennessee.

Final notes.

Banjo player, mandolinist, and music store proprietor Harry West died on January 25, at the age of 87. He was the longtime co-owner of Harry & Jeanie West Fine Musical Instruments, located in downtown Statesville, North Carolina. West was born in Germany, and served in the US Army. He met his future wife Jeanie (whose family name is also West) in Asheville, North Carolina, where they married in 1951. The Wests performed as a traditional music duo for many years, appearing regularly at the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville. Among their recordings are Favorite Gospel Songs and Songs of the Southland, recorded for Folkways in 1957 and 1963, respectively. Harry was a collector and dealer of musical instruments for nearly 70 years. Jeanie West and their son James continue to operate the family business in Statesville.

Pete Seeger died on January 27 in New York City, at the age of 94. The following remembrance by Jeff Place appeared on the website of Smithsonian Folkways, and is reprinted with permission. For the full text and references, visit folkways.edu/peteseeger.

Pete Seeger was a giant of our time. Growing up in a musical family, he had a long and productive career as a folk song leader and social activist. His father was the musicologist Charles Seeger, and his mother Constance was a classical violinist. At one point during his youth, Seeger and his brothers traveled extensively with their parents, entertaining communities throughout the countryside. When he was sixteen, he accompanied his father to Bascom Lamar Lunsford’s folk festival in Asheville, North Carolina. It is there that he first encountered the banjo and fell in love with it.

He went to Harvard hoping to become a journalist, but did not find what he was looking for there. In 1938, he settled in New York City and eventually met Alan Lomax, Woody Guthrie, Aunt Molly Jackson, Lead Belly, and others. The quality of music coming from this group immediately captured his attention. He assisted Alan Lomax at the Library of Congress’ Archive of Folk Song and was exposed to a wonderful array of traditional American
music. Many in this group of musicians eventually formed the Almanac Singers in 1940. In addition to Pete, the group included Lee Hays, Woody Guthrie, Bess Lomax, Sis Cunningham, Mill Lampell, Arthur Stern, and others. They lived in a communal home, “The Almanac House,” in New York. The group performed for gatherings, picket lines, and any place where they could lend their voices in support of the social causes they believed in. Later, after World War II, many of the same people became involved in the musical organizations People’s Songs and People’s Artists.

In 1943, Seeger recorded in New York during a production of Earl Robinson’s Lonesome Train. While recording, he stopped by Moses Asch’s little studio and recorded several Spanish Civil War songs for his first acetate discs on Moses Asch’s record label. This was the beginning of a very long and prolific relationship between the two men.

In 1949, Pete Seeger began to perform with three other musicians: his old partner Lee Hays, who had a booming bass voice, Fred Hellerman on guitar and vocals, and Ronnie Gilbert, a young woman with a soaring voice. They called themselves The Weavers and played lovely arrangements of American folk songs, many written by old friends such as Lead Belly and Woody Guthrie. Some of their more popular songs were “Michael Row the Boat Ashore,” “It Takes a Worried Man,” “Wimoweh,” and “Kisses Sweeter Than Wine.” But none was more popular than the double-sided 78 rpm hit “Goodnight Irene,” which was learned from Lead Belly, and Hebrew folk song “Tzena Tzena Tzena.” These tunes reached number one and number two, respectively, on the Hit Parade in 1950.

Later that same year, the book Red Channels appeared. In the anti-Communist hysteria that followed World War II, Red Channels accused well-known Americans, mostly from the arts, entertainment, and journalism fields, of being communists. Seeger’s name appeared in the book and very soon afterward The Weavers’ television program was cancelled, as were many of their performances. Thus began a seventeen-year period when Pete Seeger was forced to operate as a blacklisted musician. As late as 1967, when the blacklist had mostly faded, Seeger still had difficulty getting on network television.

Many of the members of the New York folk music scene were suspected of harboring communist sympathies. Pete watched as one-by-one his friends and colleagues were called before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Membership in groups like People’s Songs was bound to get you subpoenaed. Finally, on August 14, 1955, it was Pete’s turn. When queried by the committee, he refused to answer any questions about his political beliefs, stating that, “these are very improper questions for any American to be asked.” His uncooperative testimony made it likely that he would be charged with numerous counts of contempt of Congress. This eventually transpired in July 1956, and was followed by an indictment in 1957. The trial came much later, hanging over Seeger’s head for the rest of the decade.

Unable to ply his trade in the most lucrative locations and travel without scrutiny, Seeger’s music went underground. This became a period of explosive energy and creativity. Biographer David King Dunaway notes that from 1954 to 1958, Seeger released six LPs per year. During the blacklist, Seeger supported his family by constant traveling, playing small venues, releasing numerous albums, producing documentary films, and authoring a fairly popular book on how to play the five-string banjo.

Moses Asch, who in 1948 had started his Folkways label, was an old friend and supporter. He couldn’t have cared less about the blacklist. During the ‘50s and ‘60s, Folkways published dozens of Pete’s records. While the blacklists were worried about Seeger singing before Middle America on the television, radio, or in nightclubs, his children’s records were entertaining a new generation of youngsters in schools and summer camps, where he was also known to make appearances. His great children’s albums from this period remain best-sellers today, including his own story, Abyayo. His series American Favorite Ballads taught a whole generation of young Americans the great American folk songs that Seeger himself had learned.

Many of the young people who heard Seeger in the 1950s became the leaders of the “folk song revival” which began later that decade. Musicians like the Kingston Trio’s Dave Guard were inspired to take up music. It is unfortunate that as the “folk revival” peaked and young groups were landing lucrative record contracts, the man who started them out was blacklisted. During this time, the major music businesses took full advantage of the blacklist by cashing in on appropriation. There was even a network television show called “Hootenanny” that would not allow Seeger to perform—the very man who, along with Woody Guthrie, had introduced the public to the word “hootenanny.”

As part of a campaign to arrange shows for Pete, his manager Harold Leventhal coordinated what he called “Pete Seeger Community Concerts.” These were intended to “present Pete to an audience outside the confines of the metropolitan area of New York under the auspices of various community groups.” Seeger played dozens and dozens of college “gigs,” which he later noted as “some of [his] most important work.” Without much notice, he would arrive in a college town, do an interview on the college station, play the show, and be gone before the anti-Seeger protesters could organize a rally against him. During 1958 and 1959, leading up to a 1960 concert at Bowdoin College in Maine, he performed in Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado, Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Minnesota. In the early 1960s, Pete played concerts around the world, entertaining in many countries and learning great topical songs, which he brought back to the US.

In March 1961, Seeger was tried on the contempt of Congress charge, which resulted in conviction. He was subsequently sentenced to ten years in jail. Thankfully, in May 1962, the Court of Appeals decided that the indictment was faulty and threw out the case. Now able to move freely and without the cloud of prison hanging over his head, Seeger began to increase his involvement in social activism, especially the African American civil rights movement. He marched in the South with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and others. He gathered at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, and participated in re-working the hymn “I Will Overcome” into the iconic anthem “We Shall Overcome.” He was also a strong voice against the Vietnam War, penning great anti-war songs like “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy” and “If You Love Your Uncle Sam (Bring ‘Em Home).”

The fight to protect the environment also captured his attention. Seeger heard the phrase “think globally, act locally” and it got him thinking about his own area around Beacon, New York. His home was on a hill over the Hudson River, which by the mid-1960s had become a festering polluted mess. Seeger and friends built the sloop Clearwater and sailed up and down the river, performing and raising awareness of the problem. Ultimately, the river became cleaner and cleaner and the pol-
luters were stopped—demonstrating what Seeger’s strong-minded perseverance could accomplish.

During the latter years of his career, Pete Seeger released the occasional album and frequently performed for any group or cause that could use his help. He always valued the idea of music as a way of bringing a community together around a common cause. His favorite concert performances were those where he led and the audience did most of the singing. In January 2009, he sang “This Land Is Your Land” in front of hundreds of thousands of people on the Lincoln Memorial steps during the inauguration of Barack Obama as President of the United States. A Kennedy Center honoree, Pete Seeger has been suggested as a worthy recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. In 2014, he was nominated for a Grammy award for Best Spoken Word Album. His performances, recordings, and books all leave seeds behind that grow with those who have experienced them.

In July 2013, his wife of almost seventy years, Toshi Ohta Seeger, passed away. Their marriage was a true partnership. It was Toshi’s organizational skills in working with Pete that allowed him to accomplish as much as he did.

Just days before his passing, he participated in the yearly celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr., in Beacon, New York. Up until the very end, he was out there doing what he felt was right. His voice and presence will truly be missed.

Jeff Place

The long, cold, New Hampshire winters will be a little colder in coming years without the familiar driving beat of one of the greatest masters of a uniquely New England style of traditional music. This past February, beloved pianist, accordionist, and tune writer Bob McQuillen passed on at the age of 90. He played his last country dance this past December. McQuillen was a torchbearer for contra, a style of fiddle music and dance that was brought to New England with its earliest European settlers. It differs from other forms of American folk dance in its use of straight lines rather than squares or circles, in its unique calls, and in its orchestration—which is fiddle-driven, but uses a piano or accordion beat.

Born in Boston, “Mr. Mac,” as his fans across the nation called him, moved to rural New Hampshire as a very young child and developed a love for New Hampshire’s indigenous form of country dancing and its music. After meeting a French Canadian piano player named Johnny Tromby as a young dancer, McQuillen learned quickly to emulate his style both on the piano and the accordion. In 1947, he was hired as an accordion player in the Ralph Page Orchestra, the quintessential contra dance band of the era. Eventually, he replaced Tromby as the piano player in the band.

As a young WWII vet returning to New Hampshire after two stints in the Marines, McQuillen developed his own unique piano style behind Page’s calling. He called this style “boom chacking” because he used his left hand to put down the bass line and his right hand to provide the chord accompaniment to fiddle tunes. The drive he created soon became a favorite of contra fiddlers, callers, and dancers across the region, and eventually across the nation. He gained great notoriety for his playing and eventually left the Ralph Page Orchestra to play backup for the legendary fiddler Dudley Laufman and his Canterbury Country Dance Orchestra. Laufman and the Orchestra, with Mr. Mac’s help, became prominent leaders of the national revival of contra dance music in the late ’60s and early ’70s, and on into the present.

McQuillen was also well known for his day job as an industrial arts teacher in Peterborough, New Hampshire, and later as police chief of Dublin, New Hampshire. In 1972, he wrote his first tune, “Scotty O’Neil,” naming it for one of his students who had died a tragic death. This began a 40-year tune-writing career during which he authored over 1,500 tunes in the contra style. Many were named and written for individuals, like “Amelia,” a well known waltz that was written for a friend’s baby daughter. The girl was born while Mr. Mac’s friend and bandmate was living in a crate that he used to slide his piano out easily so that he could play outdoors.

His music and his style of playing spread way beyond the confines of his beloved old New England. For the past 30 years he played at house parties and music camps on the West Coast, including the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes in Port Townsend, Washington. His unique piano style, as well as many of his tunes, have been adopted as standards by contra dance bands worldwide.

Mr. Mac will be remembered not only for his tunes and his style of playing, but also for his great sense of humor that he would often exhibit in the middle of dance (much to the caller’s dismay) by telling chicken jokes. Many spontaneous tributes can be found on the Internet, as well as a documentary film about McQuillen entitled Paid to Eat Ice Cream. In April, the annual New England Folk Festival near Boston featured a storytelling session dedicated to the many legendary exploits of McQuillen’s life in old-time music.

Bob was always in love with music and life. In the last few months before his death, when his failing health had taken some of his unstoppable spirit, he told one of his best friends and fellow musicians that, “this dying thing is so cool.” The love that contra dance enthusiasts had for McQuillen was evident in his final days as hundreds of musicians lined up outside his hospital room, waiting to play and sing for him.

On May 3, friends, family, and fans from across the nation filled Conval High School in Peterborough, New Hampshire, to celebrate Mr. Mac and his music. The service was followed by a contra dance at the town hall and more private service the next day.

Malcolm Smith

An Alabama treasure was lost when William Eugene “Gene” Ivey, 88, of Ider, Alabama, passed away on March 16, 2014. His influence in the areas of instrument making, fiddling, teaching, and the traditional music culture of Alabama’s Sand Mountain region, were wide and diverse, reaching people spanning from the beginning fiddle player, to the luthier student learning to craft instruments, to players of all instruments at all levels. He was one of a kind. He was always welcoming to everybody, and encouraging them to play. Gene was truly an amazing man, and music was a huge part of his life. He gladly
shared his stories of how he came to play music, how he came to make instruments, and other life experiences.

Saturday jamming at Gene’s workshop in Ider was a wonderful experience. His house was in a very rural area up on Sand Mountain. He lived down a dirt road, with a homemade sign that read “Drive Slow. Dust Zone.” His workshop was just to the side of his house. Each Saturday would be different. There at his workshop, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, was all this music. Dobro players, fiddlers, banjo players, mandolin players, upright bass players, and guitar players, some from surrounding states, would venture over to play with Gene. Bluegrass tunes, old-time fiddle tunes, Irish tunes, blues, gospel songs, waltzes, breakdowns, and old Arthur Smith tunes are just a few that come to mind when I remember these jams. Lots of singing too. His wonderful wife Louise would be right up in there singing, along with other friends. I loved singing “Camping in Caanan” with her. Louise passed away a few years ago. She was a real sweet lady.

On one occasion, I remember bringing my two young sons, then about ages four and six, with me, and before we left, Gene went over to his garden and picked a few cantaloupes and gave them to the boys to take home and eat. This was Gene. Once a year, Gene would call everyone and invite them to Fiddler’s Picnic, held the third Saturday in July at Ider Community Park. Players would start showing up about nine o’clock in the morning, and break off into jam groups, spreading out all over the park. Everyone would bring a potluck dish, and at noon jamming stopped, grace was said over the meal, and everyone ate lunch. Once appetites were quenched, the music resumed, going until about three in the afternoon. These picnics were a huge social event. Friends got to visit, play tunes with each other, and meet new people too, as kids roamed and played on the park’s playground. Crowds varied over the years, but usually about 100 people attended this event.

Gene was a member of the Alabama Music Hall of Fame, listed as a master fiddle maker, and his instruments have been displayed at the Smithsonian. He made mandolins, guitars, fiddles, and an assortment of other instruments, his technique mainly self-taught. Gene was the kind of man who could craft just about anything he needed. Some people can just look at a tool, a design, or realize they need something, and just go make it. At one jam, he had an enormous ice cream maker over in the corner of the shop. He designed it for making ice cream to sell at Ider Park during their annual Mule Days celebration. It looked like a 40-gallon drum he had mounted a motor on, with a fan belt, and it would make an enormous batch of ice cream in one batch. I had never seen an ice cream maker this big, all home-made.

One night, Gene had the tragedy of his workshop catching on fire when he was asleep. He and Louise slept right through most of the fire, and the local fire department knocked on their door and woke them up. A neighbor had seen the fire burning and called the fire department. Gene’s shop burned to the ground, and it was a total loss, instruments and equipment included. This was just a setback, and being the man he was, the next year he rebuilt the entire shop, and started again making his instruments.

Gene was a man of faith, who served as deacon of Five Points Baptist Church. A veteran of the US Marines, Gene fought in hand-to-hand combat in the South Pacific during World War II. He had owned Ivey’s Service Station and Tire Center for many years. He was also a master mason and member of the Ider Ashlar Lodge, and a charter member of the Ider Rescue Squad.

With Gene’s passing, the music community experiences a great loss. During his 88 years, he influenced so many people. I wonder just how many people crossed paths with him over the years. This humble, smart, polite Southern gentleman, this amazing craftsman, this teacher, this wonderful Sand Mountain native musician, who introduced so many to his culture of music and craftsmanship, has left us. Alabama has indeed lost a true treasure.

Steve Overby

Bluegrass guitarist George Shuffler, 88, died on April 7. Shuffler grew up in Burke County, North Carolina, where he taught himself to play a mail-order guitar. He went on to play as a professional musician for most of his life, including twenty years with the Stanley Brothers. He toured and recorded extensively with bluegrass bands and his own family gospel band. In his later years, he often played with banjo player and singer Laura Boosinger.

His musical experience was long and varied. As a young teenager, he played with a local band that recorded in Leavenworth for broadcast on WHKY radio in Hickory. When he was 18 years old, he began playing with the Melody Mountain Boys, a band that included his brother John Shuffler, Curly Williams, and Lester Woody, who also played with the Stanley Brothers. From there he went to the band Mustang and Gravy. Charlie Slade, who was one half of the Mustang and Gravy act, split and formed his own band, and George went with him. They played at local venues and radio stations and at the Jamboree in Spruce Pine, North Carolina. George also played with Jim and Jesse McReynolds, and later he joined a band with Hope Jenkins and played in Asheville for a couple years.

When George returned home to Burke County, he got a call from Carter Stanley asking him to join the Stanley Brothers. He was with the Stanley Brothers for twenty years, playing both bass and guitar. John Write, author of *Traveling the High Way Home: Ralph Stanley and the World of Traditional Bluegrass Music*, has written that, “For an extended period during the 1960s George Shuffler was such a vital part of the Clinch Mountain Boys that the act might well have been called a trio rather than a duo.”

Shuffler developed his signature style of cross-picking guitar while playing with the Stanley Brothers. Ralph and Carter would leave spaces at the end of musical phrases to give them a chance to catch their breath, and George was left to fill in the space. His guitar playing has influenced generations of bluegrass guitar pickers. George also introduced “walking” bass playing to bluegrass music with the Stanley Brothers. “Even today, some twenty years after he left bluegrass, instrumental fans are fascinated by his unique and original cross-picking guitar style and his immediately recognizable four-four or ‘walking,’ bass” writes John Write.

Following his work with the Stanley Brothers, he performed with Don Reno for a few years and then he formed the Shuffler Family Band, which played bluegrass gospel. That group toured extensively and recorded a number of albums. In 2007, Shuffler received the North Carolina Heritage Award, his home state’s highest recognition for traditional artists.

Mark Freed

(Adapted from a profile originally published in the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area’s Traditional Artist Directory, at blueridgeheritage.com)
TRADITION COMES OUT OF THE PAST, BUT IT HAPPENS IN THE PRESENT
AN INTERVIEW WITH GERRY MILNES
By Scott Prouty

This interview is the first in the Old-Time Music Group’s Revival Generation Oral History Project. Over the coming years we will be gathering stories of old-time musicians who came to the music in the 1960s, ‘70s, and early ‘80s. As future interviews are completed, they will appear in the Old-Time Herald. We invite readers to share suggestions about people, groups, and questions you would like to see featured in the project. -editor

The Old-Time Herald ran a feature article about Gerry Milnes over 20 years ago (vol. 3, no. 2 Winter ‘91–’92). Already an accomplished musician and author at that time, Milnes had just moved with his family to Elkins, West Virginia, to take the job of Folk Arts Coordinator with the Augusta Heritage Center at Davis & Elkins College, after living on a farm in central West Virginia for the previous 15 or so years. He has now lived in the state for 40 years, and though not formally trained as a folklorist, he has conducted extensive fieldwork in music, crafts, and folk culture in parts of the state that hadn’t been as thoroughly documented prior to his arrival. It may be argued that West Virginia musicians were under-documented on the whole by the recording industry in the 1920s. Fortunately, subsequent field recorders such as Louis Watson Chappell, Patrick Gainer, Dwight Diller, Thomas Brown, and Alan Jabbour and Carl Fleischhauer worked to make up for the oversight, and Milnes’ work fits in well with theirs to provide a picture of West Virginia’s traditional music in the 20th century (and into the 21st).

Milnes retired in May 2013 after producing countless workshops, concerts, articles, films, and recordings with that fieldwork. He also wrote two well-received books about West Virginia’s musical traditions and German influence in Appalachia. It seemed like a good time to catch up with him and get his thoughts on the current state of traditional music, while also reflecting on the many artists he has documented and befriended over his career. We met in late October 2013 at his cabin on the Shavers Fork of the Cheat River, just outside of Elkins, West Virginia. –Scott Prouty

Fieldwork

To start with a general question: in your role as a documentarian, did you have a certain mission or goal as you sought out the older generation of musicians and folk artists?

My main introduction to seeking out musicians was music itself. But I quickly became more conscious of and interested in the context of the music. I found that while the music was connected to people it was also connected to place and to culture and to things like that. So I think I quickly expanded the scope of how I viewed old-time music to include the context that surrounds it. And that led to all kinds of other interests. I’ve always been keyed in on the music but it led in other directions as well. I’ve become interested in things like folk architecture, folk spirituality, and all kinds of things...but it was music that led me to all those other aspects of culture. I always had that interest in music as the main focus.

You spent a lot of time with an older generation of musicians—I guess it would be roughly your grandparents’ age group?

Yeah, when I get around people who are your age I feel like I was fortunate to have been a little bit older and to have known that older generation. But generation after generation has been saying that same thing. It just keeps on going.

What was the appeal of those folks in particular? What was it that they had that people born more recently didn’t have?

Well, I think it was the sense that they really owned the music. They didn’t have to decide what kind of music they wanted to play. Music was old-time string music to them. That’s what was played in their family, that was what was played in the community. They weren’t bombarded like people today where every kind of music you can imagine is coming through their earphones. So there was this older generation that really didn’t have to make that choice, and that kind of set them aside as being a little bit different than what’s going on today. Today people have to choose what kind of music they want to play. These people, they didn’t really have to choose. It was pretty much settled. But the music always continued to slowly change, generation to generation.

There was a limited amount of music available.

Right, and that tended to keep traditions intact.

What would draw you to somebody? What about them – either themselves or their art?

I’ve always had this kind of romantic idea that hidden away in all the holes there’s people who’ve never played in public before. For a long time that actually was very true. I met all kinds of people, especially when I lived on the edge of Braxton County [West Virginia] and started really focusing on the music there. I think I kept a list [when people] told me about fiddle players in Braxton County, and the list has got to be well over 200 fiddle players who lived in Braxton County.

Many of them weren’t still living but I ran across enough good fiddlers right in Braxton County to produce a whole CD of fiddle music from that one county. I found that pretty exciting, you know, that there was that much music and a lot of these people – nobody had ever heard of them before but they were playing there all their lives.

Was it that they had lost whatever their original audience was and you could help?

Yeah, partly that. Most fiddle music is dance music and square dancing declined even though in Braxton County it never quite died out. It still goes on there. Every little town at one time had dances, and they had dances in houses before they had public spaces to dance in. If what you play is dance music and...
So you lived, as you mentioned, near Braxton County, and you also lived here in the Tygart River Valley in Randolph County. You lived as a neighbor, if not locally then in-state, to a lot of folks you were meeting and documenting. Do you think all of that resulted in a different quality of relationship? I think being a permanent resident of the area where you are trying to do your research and do your documentation – I think it has huge advantages, yeah. In fact, folklorists have said to me, “Man, you’re so fortunate to live in the field that you’re trying to document. Your area of research, no matter whether it’s music or something else – it’s all right within easy striking distance,” and so, yeah, I think it’s a big benefit to do that.

Do you now or have you always considered yourself a folklorist?
No. I sort of backed in the back door and somebody else considered me a folklorist before I did.

What’s your relationship been like with more academically oriented folklorists?
Ah, actually kind of strange. I think there’s a certain clique that’s hard to get into if you haven’t done all the prerequisite, work and I wish I’d done that, actually. You know, I just felt my way along through life and ended up doing what I did. I certainly think that’s the way to go, the academic field, even if you’re going to end up documenting music in the field and aren’t very connected to the academic side of things. I think that background has to help.

So did it matter at all that you were from somewhere else?
I think it mattered to the people that I was documenting?

Yeah, to them.

I never got any resistance. I don’t know how many hundreds and hundreds of doors I’ve knocked on. I only had one person who I knew was a musician, maybe two, who really didn’t want to play. I can think of two out of hundreds and hundreds and hundreds.

Here’s an interesting take on that. I remember the first time I knocked on Blackie Cool’s door. Somebody up in Valley Head had told me there was a guy lived up on Point Mountain there who was a great musician. So I go up and knock on his door — this guy’s name is Blackie Cool. He comes to the door and I said, “I heard you’re a pretty good guitar player and fiddle player.” And he said, “No, I haven’t played in twenty years.”

So we kept on talking and he invited me in. He gets his guitar out of the closet and it’s in perfect tune without a speck of dust on it! And I realized that he was maybe trying to feel me out by saying that he didn’t play anymore. But obviously he played and loved to play and ended up actually playing a lot around in public after that. Blackie’s recording that we made, a vinyl disk, is out of print, but it really needs to be available again. He was a great player. Clayton McMichen once asked Blackie to join his group.

The Augusta Heritage Center

The previous Old-Time Herald article was published a few years after you moved to Elkins. Once you were hired as Folk Arts Coordinator at the Augusta Heritage Center, what difference did that make to your documenting approach? Well, one thing is that before I lived down on Birch River…

In Braxton County?

It was actually in Webster County, right on the line. Before I lived there, I lived here in Tygart Valley for a year and a half or two years, and I’d met a whole slew of musicians up the valley, and some of those folks were still living when I came back. I was away for 15 years but I had done a lot of fieldwork, and when I came to Augusta all of a sudden I had the capability of producing a lot of that for the public. And so I had zillions of contacts, not only from down there where I had lived but also from this area. I was able to just increase what I was doing and it was a great thing for me to be able to just really go at it in a much more systematic way.

How did the opportunity at Augusta come about? Michael Kline had been doing that job.

Mike Kline had been doing it. He left and it was empty for six months or so. And so Margo [Blevin, Director of the Augusta Heritage Center from 1981 to 2006] contacted me and asked if I was interested. The timing was about right so we made the jump.

So it wasn’t something you even had to apply to?

No, I didn’t have to apply. I think Margo was considering a few different people. At first I was still living in Birch River and I was kind of working there and traveling to Elkins maybe two days a week or something. And then we decided it would be much easier to live up here.

As part of working at Augusta – maybe you were doing some of this before you worked there full-time – you were able to present folks on stage and on recordings in a more amplified way. Was that something they were into doing? Some more than others?

Yeah, you know, music is a performance art and to do performance art you almost have to have an audience.

Right. It’s a different audience, though, in some ways?

Yeah, it was a different audience, but I brought a lot of people to Augusta as guest artists. We used to call them “visits,” where they just kind of talked about their lives and played their music and answered questions. I mean, who doesn’t like to be appreciated? And that’s what was going on.

Obviously there was a ready-made audience there.

There was an audience there of people at Augusta who specifically appreciated what they did. And a lot of the guest artists, they would be taken aback by how much interest there was in what they did. Playing around home for the last forty years or something, they hadn’t had much appreciation, so it was a way for them to not only pass on a little bit about what they did, but also be appreciated for it.

Looking at it from my perspective, there’s a bit of a generation gap between those older folks and then your generation. There was this in-between generation that did not take up traditional music. Maybe they played music, but more likely it was modern country music or bluegrass or something else.

I guess it was both the industrial revolution and what was going on with popular media. When you think about it, even today, there’s still a few of that older generation left, people like Elmer Rich and Lester McCumbers and Frank George. Frank George was a guy who was kind of in that middle generation. When I first met him he was in his early 50s and he was playing and appreciating musicians who were in their 80s at that
time. He was one of those people who did fit in that gap, I guess you’d say.

But there weren’t that many.

But there weren’t that many. And why? It’s a good question.

Pennsylvania

So how did your own generation and peer group influence you in all of this? I mean, getting you to West Virginia and getting you interested in these old-time ways?

Growing up I did have an interest in music. When I was in high school I was playing bluegrass banjo. Through that, I got to hear a couple of old-time musicians play and I was much more attracted to that. I was living in Pennsylvania with a lot of musicians. There was a young old-time music scene going on around there and over in southern New Jersey where I had lived. We were having square dances in this old farmhouse where I lived in Pennsylvania with a bunch of musicians at Pocopson. There was an old fellow named Phip Cressman near there who played the banjo, and he was traveling to festivals down in West Virginia and he told us about the Glenville and Ivydale music festivals. Then I made some trips south with a local guy named Jesse Sanner, and we visited the [Currence] Hammonds family, other West Virginians, and people like Taylor Kimble, Fred Cockerham, Tommy Jarrell, everyone we could find.

Was Phip Cressman your age?

He was older than I am. He was one of those in that gap, I guess you could say. He kind of turned me and others on to music in West Virginia, and so by the early ’70s I was traveling down here and visiting musicians. Then moving here was a quite a change, because there was this really hot young old-time music scene going in Southeastern Pennsylvania, but it wasn’t a hot young music scene here. So I guess that naturally you just turned to the people who played it, and they were all old people, pretty much. Even though there’s still young people around who play string music, it’s mostly bluegrass, especially when I came here. Now there are more young fiddlers around here than you can shake a stick at.

I spent a lot of time with your field recording collection in the last year, digitizing it, and there are some recordings made in Pennsylvania before you moved here; so you were into doing that...
before you came to West Virginia. What made you first want to record someone? Did you have models or any examples you were following?

Well, that farmhouse where I lived was less than a half a mile away from the old Lenape Fiddlers’ Picnic. And I met a lot of old fiddlers there, Pennsylvania fiddlers, Pennsylvania-German fiddlers, and fiddlers from York County. I went to Sunset Park in West Grove, Pennsylvania, and they used to have a fiddlers’ reunion there, they called it a fiddlers’ picnic. And that was the model for the Fiddlers' Reunion that I started at Augusta, that and the Lenape Fiddlers’ Picnic. It was a non-competitive event. I liked the idea that people played with each other as opposed to against each other at all the contests. But contests do have their place. I did get to know some old-time fiddlers at those events and recorded some of them.

Did they have that similar idea where everyone would get on stage for 10 or 15 minutes and take turns, an open mic kind of thing?

Yeah. There was a public stage and all around the grounds there would be people playing in little groups, kind of like the music in the campgrounds at festivals these days.

West Virginia Music

So changing the subject a little bit, what do you think makes traditional music in West Virginia unique? Can you put your finger on that? And whether it is different from other parts of Appalachia? Saying, “West Virginia” encompasses a lot of different subregions, but that’s the ground you’ve been working in.

Yeah. If I was to compare it to, say, music from down in the Round Peak - Galax area, to me the music here is a little more melodic and less rhythmic—a little less black-influenced, in my opinion. But saying there’s a West Virginia style, boy, it’d be hard. There’s fiddlers in Kentucky and fiddlers in Ohio that could fit right in. There’s a body of music that seems to be kind of unique to West Virginia, especially central West Virginia. I probably have more questions than answers because it’s so easy to say, “There’s this regional style,” but when you really get down to it …

What qualities do you think make somebody a great folk artist or musician, such as Edden Hammons, for example?
To me, the ultimate goal, and it’s what I see in fiddle players, is that their music also represents their personality. If they’ve really gone far in their music, their personality and disposition shows up in their music. Somebody like Leland Hall, a Braxton County fiddler who was just a really quirky guy, his fiddle playing was really quirky, too. Some people are real perfectionists and it shows up in their music. I think when you fiddle like your personality, you’ve reached some kind of a goal, there.

Do you see the same kind of thing show up in folk art? Or is that a little different?

It’s kind of the same thing. Music is folk art and folk art is an expression of values—which brings up another whole thing, that the values that are in old-time music for the most part are these rural, agricultural kind of values that aren’t really part of the community anymore. However, another important reason for folk art to occur, to exist, is nostalgia, and that plays a big part not only in folk art in general but the music itself. So people are attracted to it because it reminds them of something that happened in the past. Tradition comes out of the past, but it happens in the present.

Melvin Wine

Like you said, you knocked on hundreds of doors and met hundreds of people over the years. Some you knew better than others. Can you talk a little about your relationship with Melvin Wine?

Yeah. I met Melvin before I moved to West Virginia because I’d see him at the Ivydale festivals and I saw him at the folk festival at Glenville. When I moved to Birch River in 1976, I think it was, I was not all that far from where he lived, so I developed a friendship pretty quickly. I used to make molasses on the farm and Melvin showed me how to do that and lent me some of his equipment, used to come over and make that.

Melvin was a real interesting person, because he was really smart and he had a lot of folk wisdom. He didn’t read or write and never learned, and never went to school more than two or three months in his whole life. So it was really interesting riding around the country with Melvin, going someplace to play music with him. He was really keen about landmarks – he could drive anywhere, and having gone there once he really
knew where he was, what was around him. He had a real different take on life, being illiterate in a literate society, a pretty interesting take on life. He’d thought deeply about lots of things.

We were in DC one time playing for the folk song society up there, and someplace in downtown around the Mall, there’s a piece of public art called The Awakening. [The statue has since been moved to the National Harbor complex in Maryland.] And it’s this giant, probably 50-times-natural-size human coming out of the earth – a knee is sticking up here, and a hand, and the head’s coming out. Melvin was so moved by that, he was just so taken by that piece of art that it was really striking. It was a real statement about public art, because he was really taken by that. The Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, none of that phased him.

Of all the folks that you knew and presented in recordings and in concert, he must’ve been the most well traveled and also probably, outside of the state, the most popular. Everybody was fond of Melvin. What do you think it was that drew people to him?

Well, of course it was the music but it was also the man. He was a kind, friendly guy. To him, everybody was included. At times, that would be detrimental because he would go to a place like Vandalia to play and before he played, if he was in some kind of a jam session and there was somebody playing spoons or whatever, they would be included, they came on stage with him. It was all-in with Melvin. Nobody was left out. Because that’s just the kind of person he was, he was a really friendly, warm, loving guy, and loved life, loved people. And a lot of that came back because a lot of people liked him.

Certainly a lot of people are still playing his tunes and talking about him. Now we’re restarting the Melvin Wine tribute in Sutton; it was a big hit last year. Melvin’s been gone for what, 10 years now? And they decided to revive that and it sounds like it’s going to keep on going now.

(For 14 years, Gerry Milnes and the Augusta Heritage Center produced an annual birthday concert for Melvin Wine, starting on his 80th birthday, which featured local West Virginia musicians as well as musicians who traveled great distances to pay tribute.)

The Dulcimer

Of the discoveries that you made over the years, musical or otherwise, what have you been among the most important?

I always thought dulcimers were something played by pretty girls in gingham dresses at folk festivals…When I started rooting around a little bit in Braxton County, it turns out that it was a big deal there. A lot of people don’t know it, but Melvin Wine grew up with a dulcimer in the house. The Hammonds family had a dulcimer in the house; that is, the Hammonds family that I knew (the Currence Hammonds family on the Williams River, who then came to Tygart River Valley).

So I’ve always been kind of curious about that instrument because up until the folk revival in the ’50s, ’60s, I didn’t think very many people had ever heard of a dulcimer. It was this weird thing that people were latching onto but it turns out that there was quite a folk tradition in Central West Virginia. Probably more so than anywhere else. I’ve just always been curious about that because back in the 19th century there were commercially made banjos and fiddles, but there were never commercially made dulcimers, going way back. It’s truly a folk instrument.

You know, I’m not a big fan of the music. I like fiddle and dulcimer music, actually, but it’s something that I just happened to stumble on. I don’t think anybody would’ve known it was such a strong tradition if I hadn’t unearthed a bunch of that stuff in Braxton County. I wrote about it in my book Play of a Fiddle.

Banjo Players

Were there any musicians that you felt didn’t get the attention or appreciation they may have deserved, for whatever reason? Anyone you were involved with?

Well, when I first came to Tygart Valley in 1975 there was some great old-time banjo players. And they’d never, ever played out in public.

People like Cletus Johnson?

Cletus Johnson and his brother Arthur D. Johnson, and their sister Jesse. They were great banjo players but the public never really got to hear them, and they never got that appreciation back, either. And had that occurred I think they would’ve also gotten more enthused
about it and played a lot more, if there had been an audience to appreciate what they did. But that never happened with them.

Was it because they didn’t live long enough, or—?

Yeah, nobody was around to pay attention to them. You know, I’d made some field recordings when I lived there and then I moved down to the next county and I was doing other things. And by the time I got back up here, a lot of those guys were gone.

Filmmaking

All of your earlier recordings were on magnetic audiotape, and at some point you really got into film as the primary means of documentation.

It struck me once that those early collections that the Lomaxes did when they traveled through the South … just think if they were carrying a film camera instead of just a sound recorder! By the early 1990s almost anybody could afford one, and so it just seemed to me that if you’re going to look at documenting folk culture in a serious way, the way to do it best is easily accessible. Also, the digital age was getting started and I realized that not only was the format becoming accessible but good quality was really becoming easily accessible to anybody. It was no longer a situation where you needed really expensive cameras to shoot film and really involved editing processes and everything. Almost right away by the early ‘90s, you could start to do that on a desktop computer. So it just seemed to me like the way to go as far as documentation went.

Going back to ‘94 when I realized there were a lot of old people in the state, I talked to Margo Blevin, the Director [of the Augusta Heritage Center], and since we had the capability at that time to do some serious film documentation, I ran around the state with a local guy who was a cameraman and shot a lot of film. It’s in the Augusta archive now and I think it’s really valuable stuff. People like Phoebe Parsons and Melvin Wine, Leland Hall, Clyde Howes – just everybody I could think of. We went out about two days a week, and did that for several months. I’m glad we did that, because it’s good stuff and it’ll be around for awhile.

Phoebe Parsons of Orma, Calhoun County, West Virginia
How do you see all of this documentation being used in the future? And when were you doing it, were you doing it more for your own learning purposes or were you thinking about the future?

In the beginning, I was thinking about actually capturing, documenting people before they were gone. The film I was just talking about, there’s lots of 80-year-olds, 90-year-olds in there. Then later on I started getting into filmmaking and editing myself, so it was more project-oriented, not so much thinking in terms of trying to document everybody who deserved to be documented. Also, around that time I was getting into subjects other than just music, other aspects of folk culture—although almost everything I’ve done is music-related or has music in the background. Some project-oriented films I made concentrate on specific people or specific subjects. I’ve already gone back and used a lot of that older footage, including in an upcoming Augusta film about dance that I’m working on with Becky Hill. So capturing all that old music and dance footage is proving worthy.

The Old-Time Tradition Today

Now we’re at the point where there are only a few of those older-generation musicians, at least among fiddlers, that are still around. What do you see as Augusta’s role in all of this going forward, as these old-timers are gone?

Well, I hope Augusta will continue to present the living traditions as they exist. Those guys are gone but there’s people replacing them, and maybe they’re not of that age and ilk where they were just family- or community-oriented in all their learning and everything, but what’s going on now is just a great thing. There’s a lot of great musicians around now, probably more so than there were 30 years ago. I think it’s a good thing. I hope Augusta keeps presenting whatever is the living tradition. I think it will, I think I see a bright future for folk and traditional arts. It’s still an alternative to the more popular kinds of music and art and it’s never going to be accepted on the grand scale that pop music is or whatever, but it’s always going to offer an alternative to that. And it’s still kind of rooted in a culture, however, not in any specific geographical place or associated with a time period.

My last Augusta project was this square dance project called the Mountain Dance Trail. The dances around here now, high school kids and college kids make up the majority of the dancers, and that’s great. That’s going to ensure that it has a future. It still is seen as this alternative thing, it still is seen as something other than what is the normal music that most kids are going to like and everything, but I think it’s going to last and I like that there’s enough interest. It’s great art, in my opinion, so I think it’s got a bright future.

Had Augusta not come about in the ’70s and really taken off in the ’80s in a bigger way, would all of those traditional musicians you featured not have had as much exposure? Do you think that it would’ve otherwise died off, or maybe held on but less strongly?

Well, that brings up another interesting situation, in my mind, in that I put a lot of emphasis right around the areas where I’ve lived. I’ve always wondered, “What if I lived five counties away? Did the same thing exist there? And how many people remained unknown?” It makes me realize the importance of fieldwork and that I was very lucky I could pursue that to some degree while working at Augusta.

Square Dancing

I think there’s still plenty of work to be done even though we talk about all the old people being gone. There’s still things out there to be discovered and found. Maybe not so much just traditional music but with other aspects of folk culture that exist. I never knew there was this much interest in square dancing until we started looking, and I think we’re up to 14 little local towns in West Virginia that have community dances. What is it, “Seek and ye shall find?” If you don’t seek, you’re not going to find. I love a quote from Zora Neale Hurston, who said, “Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.”

There’s definitely a square dance rage happening nationwide. Has that had any effect on the interest in the state, or is it coming more from the communities?

It seems to be both. Some places, like the dance scene out at Henderson, West Virginia, it’s been there for a long time and it’s stronger than ever. Right around here it seems to be the young resurgence that’s really pumping it up. I play every year at this 4-H dance, and there’s hundreds and hundreds of kids there, all square dancing to live music and live calling. You know, it could really take off, who knows?

In the ’70s, you mentioned this hot young scene and square dancing going on in Pennsylvania. Were some of the community dances highlighted by the Mountain Dance Trail happening back then too?

Oh, even more so. When I was living down next to Braxton County there were five different communities in that one county that had dances going on. Dances kind of moved from houses to public spaces.

Did you experience most of them in public spaces?

Oh yeah. I was too late to be in touch with real small, local scenes where people were still having dances in their houses, even though I did that, or we did that. When I started playing for dances in Braxton County, I was playing pretty regularly for about 14 years. Fire halls, grade schools, community halls, places like that.

Germans in Appalachia

You’ve mentioned quite a few projects; you also wrote a book on German influence and Germans in Appalachia.

It’s called Signs, Cures And Witchery. Yeah, you know, the Germans have gotten a bad shake. Everybody knows that there were a couple of wars that kind of turned everybody against them, but way before those wars, German influence in all of the Southern Appalachians was really strong. Nobody seems to be very interested in finding out what their contributions were to traditional music. I guess we could say that the dulcimer came from Germany originally, but fiddlers did as well, and all of the earliest American fiddle makers were German.

There were even uprisings against Germans here in this county during the Second World War. But the Germans who came here, back in the 18th century, they were really influential, as much so as the Scots-Irish people who were also a major contributor to the population. To see that neglect happening within the general public is one thing but to realize that scholars have turned their backs...you can find books about Scots-Irish influence in the Appalachians — many, many, many books—you can find whole academic conferences about Scots-Irish influence. But where are the books about the German influence and contribution? There are lots of books written about the pioneer days here in the Southern Appalachians and you won’t even find the word “German.” It needs to be corrected.
Retirement

You mentioned that you were working on finishing up the Mountain Dance Trail film. You retired in May 2013; what do you see yourself getting up to going forward?

I’d still like to do a little bit of film documentation and I’d like to make a few more films.

What about teaching and things like that? Do you do much of that?

Yeah, I’ll probably do it a little more. I don’t know if I told you, but I’m going to make maple syrup here. I’ve got about 50 sugar trees on this property and eight or 10 on the neighbors’ that I can tap if I wanted. If you look up there in the woods you see these little orange dots on trees all over the place.

Would you ever do any kind of farming again?

Just more gardening. That’s enticing to me, I like that stuff. The maple syrup’s going to be fun, a lot of work. I found out about some guy in Wisconsin who makes these pans that are designed with flutes on the bottom. There’s a whole lot more surface and they’re much more efficient, so I’m getting one.

Back when you first moved to the state, you were doing more of the subsistence-style living and farming, and you were learning from folks around you. How much of those old-time ways are still part of your life?

Well, here I am heating with wood. [Laughs] It’s nothing like on the farm, when we were really isolated and really doing everything. Not on that scale anymore, but I like it, and I like anything that has to do with being close to the Earth.

As promised, Gerry Milnes has stayed busy in retirement. Since this interview was conducted, the Augusta Heritage Center has put out a new Milnes-produced recording of Southern West Virginia musician William “Junior” Holeshine. He reports that his maple syrup operation is thriving. The most recent recording of Gerry Milnes’ own music consists of material he collected from musicians living in and close to the Monongahela National Forest, made with his son Jesse Milnes and daughter-in-law Emily Miller. Gerry is available for concerts or workshops, and he has much to share with the old-time music community both within and outside of West Virginia.
By Walt Koken

B

ob caught a plane from Oakland
to Kansas City, where he hooked
together with his former band mate
Bob Naess, who was headed to a west-
ern North Carolina college to teach glass
blowing. From there, he took a bus to
Westminster, Maryland, where Mac
picked him up. Doug and Jenny and I
headed south from Spencer in my old '54
Ford panel truck, same model as Mac's
and fit out much the same way, with a
bench seat up front, a plywood bed with
a mattress at seat-top height covering the
back, with room for instruments and gear
underneath. We arrived quite late at the
farm where Mac lived, so we got sleeping
quarters situated and crashed.

The morning brought sunshine and a
nice breakfast spread. We discussed our
travel plans to head to the Union Grove
fiddlers' convention the next day. We
would have to take two vehicles. Doug
and Jenny and I would ride in the panel
truck, and Bob and Mac would take Mac's
VW station wagon, and we would travel
tandem in case of vehicle trouble.

That early spring day was beautiful. It
was planting time. We decided to step
out into the yard and try a few tunes. It
took a while to get all the instruments in
tune in the cool air and warm sunlight
as we stood in a circle. It seemed that I
was the pivot point for the five of us, as I
was the only one who had really played
with everybody, so when we got in tune
I just broke into an old reel that I knew
we all played. The sound filled up the
yard, filled up my ears, quieted the birds
chirping, and I swear my feet weren't
touching the ground for a few moments.
Wow! We really had something, and I
thought each of us felt it. It tickled our ears,
and I swear my feet weren't
touching the ground for a few moments.
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Wow! We really had something, and I
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We were well received at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the Mall in DC, where we were hired to perform and also allowed to enter the band and individual contests. We played the Old Dominion Folk Festival in Norfolk, Virginia, in the fall, and several other smaller venues.

In the late summer after returning from the Galax fiddlers’ convention, we recorded our first album. Bob rigged a maple pole boom to hang two microphones out in the yard, and Doug set up his recording equipment next to it with a long extension cord from the house. We were still tuned in Galax tuning. In those days there were no electronic tuners, so all the bands waiting in line to play in the contest tuned to each other, and as the excitement increased, so did the pitch. The recordings certainly did not have a “studio” sound, and radio stations were reluctant to play them because of that, but the pitch of Galax and the high spirits of the music on the record caught the ears of many.

The kind people at the Smithsonian were trying to help us by making us part of their Touring Performing Arts Division, and we were advised by their lawyer Ward Hamilton to change our band name before we published our LP. Apparently many folks in the Washington, DC, area had been going out to hear a group called Fat City, and were disappointed that it wasn’t our band; it was a couple from the Baltimore-Washington area who were backup singers for a very popular recording artist at that time.

Changing our name was not easy for us to do. We thought of calling ourselves Fire on the Mountain. It might work. Somebody suggested we consult the Book of Changes, or I Ching. We didn’t know how to use it as a group, so we looked up the two trigrams, “Fire” over “Mountain.” It said it was the wanderer, the fire traveling along the mountain, with warnings to be very careful treading in strange territory. It did not bode well.

We finally decided on the name Highwoods, with its possible double meaning. In our interpretation of Charlie Poole’s “[Coot] from Tennessee,” we always sang, “I’m gonna live in the highwoods ’till I die...” We lost a lot of Fat City String Band fans with the name change, but we titled our new album on Rounder Fire on the Mountain. It was released the following January, and it helped to pay our way to and from many gigs.

Little did we know that we would impact the world of old-time music so strongly over the next few years. We were not only rejuvenating the genre with the younger “citibillies” across the country, but also amongst the children of the old-timers. In those days, when we played fiddlers’ conventions and festivals in Southwest Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, West Virginia, or Kentucky, the few people who played old-time music were mostly older folks. There were not many young players who weren’t doing bluegrass, even those from the families of the old-timers. When we got gigs playing at bluegrass festivals, many older folks would come up to thank us and tell us that they came to these affairs hoping to hear some old-time music but usually only got bluegrass fare. In recent years people from all over have told me they began playing after hearing us for the first time. Many folks started up old-time music scenes in various places after we performed in their area, or after we played with them in their homes, or at our All Skate Jamboree music party that we threw every year, or just sitting around the table at my house on Morris Road in Alpine, or at Mac’s or Bob’s or Doug’s and Jenny’s. Many faces come to mind. I think we planted some seeds.

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Square

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Children get in free
I was very handy when I was young. During World War II, when I was eight years old, my father was called away by the New York National Guard. I learned to do everything around the house. My sister was useless. My mother was useless. So I learned how to do everything. Later it used to drive my father crazy. He was an engineer. But when he would try to fix something, he’d take it all apart, and then not only did he not know how to fix it, he didn’t know how to put it back together again. So when he was out I would look it over. Somehow I would know how to fix it and put it back together again. Then I’d just leave it there. He would never say a word about it. I was handy.

So one time in the early ’60s I saw a dulcimer and thought, “Okay, let’s make a few of these.” At the time I was in the Army, and I could use the craft shop as long as I wasn’t selling anything. So I went ahead and made dulcimers for my family in the Army’s craft shop, but I didn’t really know what I was doing.

I got to know Howie Mitchell, who was a major performer with dulcimers at the time. He told me that the curator of stringed instruments at the Smithsonian was a friend of his. He said that I might be allowed to go into the archives of the Smithsonian. So he took me up there, and I thought I’d die and gone to heaven. They had millions of dollars’ worth of instruments in the attic of that place. There was a table with a blanket on it, and he said, “You can get down any instrument you want, one at a time. You can look it over, use mirrors, and figure it out. Then put it back where you got it and get something else out.” I spent two days in the attic of the Smithsonian going through the instruments. I had originally thought about building a balalaika, but I got diverted. But that gave me a lot of information to go with.

I made the first two dulcimers on a plank across the washer and dryer in the basement of our house in Washington in 1964. I was a Captain in the Army at the time, working in a research laboratory at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. There were [very few] people in the whole country that made mountain dulcimers back then.

For a while I made hammered dulcimers. I made about 200 of those. I made two harpsichords, one of which is still played regularly with the San Antonio Symphony. I made at least a couple hundred bowed psalteries, and I got my kids to help me make limberjacks. As near as I can figure, my kids and I made somewhere near 10,000 limberjacks. I was just going from one thing to another.

My wife Mary Lou and I started to put in applications to sell at major craft shows. Some shows would have 250 potters apply, and they’d only have space for 20 potters. But in the musical instruments category we would be the only application, so we’d get accepted.

At one show, by the middle of the first day we had sold 300 limberjacks and all 17 dulcimers we took with us. And we still had one day to go! That was my first realization that my hobby could return an income.

So my wife and I went to craft shows, and we would sit there at our booth showing our instruments. Behind my barn today there’s a kind of porch thing sitting there at the edge of the woods—that was our booth. I built that thing out of wood from a 150-year-old cider mill and towed it more than 15,000 miles all over the Eastern United States.

One time my mother gave me an old black-box autoharp, a little one, and said, “I don’t play this, and your wife is a mu-
“So I gave it to my wife, and she fooled with it a little bit. Then we were at an auction sale, and they opened up a box and said, “Looks like some kind of instrument parts in here.” I said, “Wait a minute. Let me see that.” It was an autoharp made in the 1916 - 1920 time frame. It was all apart in pieces, but it was all there. I went up and looked at it and said, “It looks like junk, but I’ll give you a quarter for it.” “SOLD!” He was glad to get rid of it. So I brought it home, and very slowly, that’s how I learned. I could see all the parts of it, and it was not all that well made. The old autoharps had a brace that was attached to both sides and also to the top and back, which completely deadened the sound. Can you imagine putting posts in the middle of a guitar so it stops the vibration of the top and the back? It would sound terrible! Well, I tried to figure out a way to get rid of that brace. And that was the birth of what I call the Liberty Harp.

We were in Philadelphia for my youngest son’s wedding. At four o’clock in the morning after we’d partied ‘til midnight, I got up. I gathered all the paper I could find in the hotel room and started drawing pictures and descriptions, because I’d figured out how to build an autoharp so the frame did not attach to the sound board at all. It had to be secured to it, but it didn’t stop the sound. That was the biggest single improvement I came up with. I was inventing these things myself as I went, because I had nobody to teach me. Later I learned some things from Dick Boak at Martin Guitars, a good friend of mine. He showed me every detail of what they did there. And I do something similar to what they call scallop bracing. That’s what I use on harps now to get better sound.

The Carter Family

Somebody told us we ought to go visit the Carter family and see what they were doing down there. They have a festival once a year. So we took our instruments down and set up, and Joe Carter [son of A. P. and Sara Carter] took a liking to us. My wife was a good player, and he was glad to see somebody playing the autoharp. So Joe took his guitar and played with us for a while. We didn’t know anybody there, but we drew a lot of attention because of Joe. He would sit there and play with us, and somebody would come running and say, “Joe, you’re on stage in five minutes.” So he’d say, “Stay right here. I’ll be back”—I don’t know where he thought we’d go—
and he’d come back and play some more.

That’s when Joe’s sister Janette came along, and she said, “Oh, you have autoharps?” “Yes, I have autoharps. Would you like to try one?” She said, “Yeah, I would.” And she played it and said, “That’s really nice.” I said, “Janette, if you’d like to have that, I’ll give it to you.” Meanwhile my wife was standing behind her, silently mouthing the words, “That’s my harp. That’s not her harp!” But I gave that harp to Janette. The family still has it. Janette Carter was an unbelievable woman.

Mike Seeger

We were at a show at Tarzana, California, and I was walking across the parking lot there, and Mike Seeger called out to me. He said, “I’d like to have you make me a harp.” He gave me a lot of specifications for it, but I had no idea what the man was talking about. So I said, “Mike, I don’t know music like you do. Is there any way you would remotely consider coming to my house and spending a few days with me? I will make you anything you want.” He said, “Oh, would you let me do that?” So Mike came up and spent four or five days with me.

That was another huge step for me, because I’m deaf. If I took my hearing aids out I’d hear no sound whatsoever. So why on earth is someone building instruments who doesn’t know anything about music and is deaf? The answer is because I love to do it, and I love the people I get to meet.

Mike lived in Lexington, Virginia, down in the Shenandoah Valley, and he said, “Anytime you do anything new, you call me, and I’ll meet you and go over it.” I said, “I would love it if you would play my harps and tell me what you hear and what you’d like to hear.” He did that for 10 years. And I made several harps for him, which he played on some of his recordings.

I give 100% credit for what I make, as far as sound is concerned, to the coaching of Mike Seeger.

He would tell me, “We don’t want to hear that sound there. Do you hear that buzz sound there, George?” “No, Mike, I can’t hear that buzz sound. You tell me.” We would go through it like that. His hearing was phenomenal. He would hear the tiniest little sound. On one harp he said, “You have a metal rod in there somewhere.” I said, “Well, yeah. How to do you know?” And he said, “Just listen.” He said, “Get it out. Don’t let any metal rod in it anywhere.”

Two years before he died, I took an instrument to him and said, “Mike, where
do we go from here?” He sat and played
it and said, “I don’t have anything left to
tell you.” I haven’t changed that harp de-
sign since then. It was his coaching and
his ears that enabled me to do it.

Setting Up Shop

I retired from the Army in 1981, and I took
my first harp and a couple of other harps
that I had made to a show up in New York.
I sold two harps at that show. I have never
been without orders from then until today.
The shop I have now I had built in 1982.
When I got seriously into building au-
toharps I decided I needed more shop
space. I had retired, I knew I was going
to be in one place, and I wanted a shop
that would do the job.

My shop is homey. It’s got a lot of junk
in it. I operate by “heaps.” I know every-
thing that’s in every heap. I tell my kids,
“If you want to work with something, go
ahead and work with it. But put the tools
back where you got them, or I’ll never be
able to find them again.”

We used to go to Florida in the wintertime.
I’d close up the shop for five months. When
I would come back I’d be back-ordered 40
harps. I’d get all my back-orders done be-
fore it was time to go to Florida again.

At the time I kind of believed Oscar
Schmidt’s claim that “autoharp” was a
registered trademark of theirs. It turns
out that it is not. It was registered by the
original guy back in 1890. He went bank-
ruped and went out of business. And when
you are bankrupt and go out of business,
your trademarks go away. But to begin
with I didn’t use “autoharp.” I called my
instrument a “dulci-harp” because I made
dulcimers, too. I came up with a different
name so there wouldn’t be any question
about it. I since learned that “autoharp” is
not theirs, but I still use “dulci-harp,” and
people are perfectly happy with it.

Wood

The first step in building an autoharp is
to cut a tree down.

In this part of the country you very sel-
dom have trees that are two feet in diam-
eter or larger, because it was all cleared
off 100 years ago. So when you find an
opportunity, you take it.

I thought I had no walnut tree of any
size on my property, but I saw a tree
down in my holler on a real steep bank.
I thought, “That’s either a cherry tree or a
walnut tree;” because the tent caterpillars
had covered it. I managed to climb down
without killing myself, and found out that
it was a walnut tree, 28 inches across.

So I called my son Scott, and said,
“Scott, I need you to come up and help
me cut down a tree.” He said, “What do
you want me to do?” I said, “I want you
to take this cell phone, stand over there,
and when the tree falls on me, call 911!”

It turned out the base log to that tree was
42 feet long, perfectly straight-up. I’ve been
making harps with that tree now for eight
or 10 years. It will last me as long as I need.

I’ve learned a lot about wood. When I
pick a piece of wood to make an instru-
ment, I don’t know why I pick that certain
piece. I just think it will work better and
sound better, and more often than not I’m
right. That’s a very hard thing to teach.

I found a guy who lives next to the Red-
wood National Park in California. He has
a contract with them so that if a redwood
tree in the park goes down he can buy it.
Redwood doesn’t rot out very fast, and
it rots from the outside. So if you have
a tree that’s 10 feet in diameter and six
inches on the outside is rotten, you still
have a nine-foot diameter tree. So I use
the wood I’m getting from him in the
tops of all of my George’s Choice harps.
Some of the redwood is 2,000 years old!

I was talking to a man who is a well-
known guitar maker and asked him where
he got his Sitka spruce. He told me the
name of the guy in Oregon who cuts for
Martin Guitar, and I now buy Martin’s
rejects. Martin needs their stuff to be eight
inches wide, and I need it to be six and a
half inches wide. If a piece has a blemish
near the edge, he cuts it off, and I’ve got
a perfect piece. He sells it to me for half of
what Martin’s paying for the perfect piece.
I’ve got boxes of it in the back of my shop.

I don’t kiln dry anything. After I cut
down my tree that I had here, it was five
years before I started using the wood. The
upstairs of my barn overhangs about two
feet on the side. It is open just enough
for the air to flow through. So I stack my
wood right up there. The wind blows
through summer and winter. I can bring
the wood down to around 12 - 14% mois-
ture that way. Then I bring it down and
cut it into flitches [lengthwise cuts from
tree trunks] and stack it on dollies behind
the stove. I leave it there for a year. When
the moisture reaches 5 - 6% I get it down
and re-saw it. Then I put it in stacks that
will become bottoms and tops, and they
sit there until I need them. When I get new
stuff I put it on the bottom and take it off
the top as I need it. So I have that wood in
some kind of status of being aged for at
least five years, maybe as much as 10 or 15 years, before I'm actually using it, but I get the reliability I want.

People are always concerned about their instrument cracking. I don't have cracks anymore. You know how the Gibson archtop guitars are? The soundboard's arched. Well, if you put an arched top in and the humidity dries out, the arch flattens out and it doesn't split. When the humidity comes back, it rides up a little bit, and it absorbs what would be a split. Also, when I'm ready to close the instrument up, I put a heavy, wet layer of shellac on the inside of everything, inside the top, inside the back. That doesn't prevent humidity from creeping into the wood, but it slows it down.

When I first did the archtop, it came about accidentally. We were sitting at craft show, and my wife was playing. It was a rainy day. We were under our "porch" roof, and the air was just a mist. Every once in a while, I would take a towel and dry off her harp. And by the end of the three days, her harp had a sound—wow! When something like that happens, you start figuring out—what did that? I realized the top of her harp was bellied because of the humidity. So now I had to figure out how to make it do that on purpose. So how do you make it do that on purpose? You cut the braces that go inside so they are shaped to do that. You have to build the instrument at the right humidity. If you have high humidity, when it dries it's going to flatten out too much. It's going to crack. You do it with correct humidity. I maintain no more than 50% humidity and 72° in here. I have a dehumidifier, and I keep a spare. I have a gas heater. I have a stove. I maintain less than 50% humidity in here no matter what the weather is. So when I build the instrument, there's a good average humidity. You don't build in bad humidity, or it'll go out of shape on you.

I was down visiting Patsy Stoneman in Tennessee, and she had a cherry tree in her back yard, about 20 inches in diameter. I said, "Patsy, if your cherry tree ever blows down, save it for me." About a week and a half later, she called me and said, "George, I don't how you did it, but that tree fell down!" I said, "Good. Don't let anybody cut it up." I went and got it and brought it back up to my shop.

The Mulberry Harps

Joe Carter came to me one day and said, "I heard a guy playing a fiddle that's
made out of mulberry wood.” I thought, “Mulberry wood? I think of mulberry as being more like a bush.” But I said, “Joe, if you want me to make a harp out of mulberry wood, I’ll need a mulberry tree that is more than two feet in diameter.”

So about a year later he called me and said he was coming up. He came up with an old rattletrap of a pickup truck, and he had a log in the back there that was 35 inches across and nine feet long. He said, “I want you to make one for me, one for my cousin June [Carter Cash], and one for June’s daughter Carlene.” I thought, “Wow, I’ve made it to the top echelon!”

It had dawned on me that I’d never seen anybody make any kind of instrument out of mulberry wood, and if it was so good, instrument makers would have figured it out. So I made the three harps, and they played, but they were just short of awful. I really didn’t know what I was doing with that wood. It was harder than what I’d been using, and it just didn’t come out with the right sound. He wanted them made with the mulberry on the top and Sitka spruce on the back. The sound was thin and poor.

I took the finished harps down to Joe and said, “I’m a little disappointed with these harps. It’s going to take some playing-in for them to get their sound quality up,” which is true with any new instrument. It doesn’t sound as good as it does after you have played it for a while.

Joe said, “I’m going to go down and see Johnny [Cash] and June, and I’ll take those two harps to them.” I thought, “Oh geez, there’s got to be some way to get out of this.” But he took them. Later I said, “Joe, what did Johnny think about them?” He said, “He thought it was a little tight, that it needs a little playing-in for them to get their sound quality up,” which is true with any new instrument. It doesn’t sound as good as it does after you have played it for a while.

Joe said, “I’m going to go down and see Johnny [Cash] and June, and I’ll take those two harps to them.” I thought, “Oh geez, there’s got to be some way to get out of this.” But he took them. Later I said, “Joe, what did Johnny think about them?” He said, “He thought it was a little tight, that it needs a little playing-in for them to get their sound quality up.” And I said, “That’s the understatement of the year.”

But I then made good-sounding harps for June’s two sisters, Helen and Anita. A couple weeks after that Helen called me up on the phone. She said, “A funny thing happened. My sister June was over here to visit me, and she... went and carried off my harp!” I said, “Helen, don’t say a word to her. She has a harp in her hands that’ll sound good.” I said, “I’ll make you another one.”

June had that harp for, I guess, a little more than 20 years, and she played it all the time. They need to be restrung now and then, and I wanted to get ahold of her harp and restrung it for her. So I was down at Carter Fold and called down to the House of Cash and said, “I need to get my hands on June’s harp.” And I was told, “You can’t do that. She’s in Jamaica now.” I said, “I just want her harp, I don’t need her.” They said, “You don’t understand. She doesn’t go anywhere—ever—without that harp with her, no matter what.”

I was telling this to Janette Carter, and she said, “Now, George, you don’t say nothing to nobody.” Then I heard her in the office saying, “Okay, June, I’ll tell him.” She told me, “They are up at Maybelle’s house, and she’ll have one of the girls bring it down.” It turned out that when they wanted some peace and quiet they would go to Maybelle’s house and tell everyone they were in “Jamaica.” Janette said that they wanted me to come up to the house and visit a while when I was done re-stringing the harp. So I did.

The most valuable harp I ever made is in the Birthplace of Country Music Museum that will open in Bristol, Tennessee; it’s affiliated with the Smithsonian. It’s made entirely of wood from the cabin that was the last place that A. P. Carter lived. I’m working with Dale Jett, who is A. P.’s grandson, and they’re thinking about doing one with wood from the cabin he was born in.

Mountain Laurel Festival

By 1987 I was making a significant number of instruments, and people were saying, “We ought to find a way to show off what you do and teach us about autoharps.” We knew a lady from Kent Island, Maryland, and she was crazy about autoharps. I invited her and her husband to come and spend a day with us. We invited quite a few other people, everybody we could think of who knew anything about harps. We had about 20 of us for a picnic on the front porch of our house. We made dinner, played and had a wonderful time. Someone said, “When are we going to do this again?” I said, “Do what again?” “Get together and play like this.” “Oh, we hadn’t really decided that.” But we thought, “Well, why not?”

We did it for four years like that, a private party. People brought tents and camped, but I didn’t even have a well or a port-a-potty. All we had was an outhouse. But we grew into it. Eventually we’d rent a 40-by-80-foot circus tent. We contracted a restaurant in town that would bring a lunch meal, and at night we’d have dinner and do our concert in their wedding hall. At the end of a weekend the restaurant owner would hand me a bill for $6,200 or so, and I’d divide that by 125 people. I’d say, “You each owe me $52 for your meals.” They loved it. It was perfect!
In 1990 Bryan Bowers, Mike Seeger, and several other significant performers came. Mike and Bryan got us over on the side and said, “Look, you can’t keep this as a private party. You’ve got to go public with it. It has a life of its own.” So then we changed and started paying the performers—pitifully—and people had to buy tickets. We did that from 1991 until 2000 when Neal Walters and some others took it over and made a contract with Little Buffalo State Park in Perry County, Pennsylvania, to rent their campground. We now hold the festival every year the week before the Fourth of July, and 300-350 people show up. We always have at least six or eight people from the British Isles, one from France, a couple from Switzerland, a guy comes over sometimes from the Czech Republic, and there are always a few from Japan—12,000 miles away!

1,500 Harps

When I first started, I looked at the market and thought about the number of people we had coming to the gatherings. I figured 200 harps should absolutely saturate the market. So I made 200 harps, and I still had orders stacked up. Somewhere along the way Tom Fladmark started to apprentice with me, and I said, “Tom, I’m going to go to 500, and then I’m going to retire.” I got to 500 and went whizzing past that. “Well, we certainly ought to be able to make 1,000,” I said. “I’ll do a 1,000, and then I’ll retire.” And he said, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, you’ve been telling me that for 10 years now.” Well, we got to 1,000, and that’s the one that’s in the Birthplace of Country Music.

Now my goal is to get to 1,500, and I’m in the process of filling orders that will get me up to that number. But I will continue to make some instruments as long as I’m able. In fact, I’ve already started making parts for about a hundred more.

I’ve reached the age where, if I’m getting a little tired about two o’clock in the afternoon, I go down and sit on my porch and watch the trains go by. My back has been operated on twice. I don’t want to do that again. So I take care of it.

I’m very fortunate. My mother and father were both born in 1892 and lived to be 95. Their life expectancy when they were born was 60. My mother had two sisters that lived to be 102. My doctor says, “If anybody has the genes to make it to 100, you’ve certainly got to have them.”

I take a lot of pleasure in the fact that people like the stuff that I do. Huge satisfaction. That’s part of why I still like to build instruments. In all the later years I was in the service, I would go to the office in the morning and look at my desk. A pile of papers would be sitting in one box, and at the end of the day it would be sitting in another box. And that was my day’s work. To have the satisfaction of taking a piece of wood and turning it into a musical instrument filled out something that I needed.

You remember Orville Redenbacher, the popcorn guy? He said, “Find something you like to do, strive to do it better than anybody else, and then you will have the most perfect job in the world.” And I have that job.

This article is the result of a November 2012 interview conducted by Brian Lockman at George Orthey’s workshop in Newport, PA. Brian Lockman is president and CEO of the non-profit Pennsylvania Cable Network. Nancy Lockman is a former editor at the Bureau of National Affairs, Inc. Brian plays banjo and Nancy plays guitar with the Buc Hill Aces.

Visit ortheyautoharps.com for more information about George Orthey’s instruments.
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Reviews

Imaginational Anthem, Volume 6: Origins of American Primitive Guitar


On this compilation of early (1923-1931) guitar recordings from Sylvester Weaver, Sam McGee, Riley Puckett, David Miller, Lemuel Turner, Frank Hutchison, and Bayless Rose, one of the first things noticeable is that these tracks are most likely taken from a limited selection of old 78s. You can tell this because, with one exception, each of the artists above is represented by two tracks, and in each case, those two tracks are the opposite sides of the same 78. The one exception is Frank Hutchison, who is represented with only one piece, “Hutchison’s Rag,” a somewhat staccato, bass string-driven number that meanders about through a succession of licks and doesn’t seem to go anywhere. One can only wonder why the B side, of the record, “Miner’s Blues,” was not included. His missing slot is taken by a third track from Sam McGee, “Knoxville Blues.”

Basically, there is little that is wrong with this practice. In fact, it happens quite frequently with compilations. It does mean, however, that the listener gets potluck and not necessarily the most representative tracks. In the case of the great Sam McGee, that is not a problem here. “Buckdancer’s Choice,” “Franklin Blues,” and “Knoxville Blues” are among his best solo recordings and if you’re going to show someone what makes McGee great, you can’t go wrong with those pieces. A similar argument might be made for Sylvester Weaver. His classic “Guitar Rag” is certainly his most notable recording, and the flip side, “Guitar Blues,” is a solid piece. David Miller’s best-known piece is “Jailhouse Rag” and distinctive of the era; for an introductory overview, it deserves to be included. His “Cannon Ball Blues,” on the other hand, has its moments, but a track from another performer might have been better. I’m not sure what to make of the Riley Puckett pieces, “Darkey’s Wail” (a sort of “John Henry” variant played in a slide style) and “Fuzzy Rag,” both from 1927. They’re okay tracks, but if they are his best in those styles or simply what was available, maybe another player should have been included instead.

About Lemuel Turner and Bayless Rose, both somewhat obscure performers, it is harder to say whether these are representative tracks. In that Turner only recorded four sides and Rose six, I guess they are, or are close. I have not heard any of their other work to know if they did better. Both do give performances deserving of a collection highlighting early guitar playing. Turner offers some beautiful slide work on both “Way Down Yonder Blues” and “Tramp Waltz.” Rose counters with “Jamestown Exhibit,” a mix of old ragtimey sounding pieces. His other track, “Frisco Blues,” is a little less exciting, alternating short, spare slide lines with short passages of train-like bass string fills.

Considered as an introductory compilation meant to show the variety of performing influences (parlor, blues, ragtime, Hawaiian) that colored the early country guitar styles, this recording does a reasonable job. The sound quality ranges from fair to very good and several key performers are, along with a couple of lesser known but worthy artists, covered. But there are some selections of questionable value. Widening the search for representative sides would have helped. In short, a pretty good sampler, but not an overwhelming one.

Bill Wagner

To order: tompkinssquare.com

Note to Artists and Record Companies

Please send all material for review to the OTH (PO Box 61679, Durham, NC 27715). Please do not send to individual reviewers. What gets reviewed is determined at the discretion of the OTH according to space available, balance of old and new, and compatibility with our mission. We cannot review everything that comes in nor guarantee that because we received it we will review it. We do not return materials to the sender. Thanks!
Calvin Cole (1908-1992), an excellent banjo player, was recorded by Peter Hoover in 1960 on one of Hoover’s trips through the Round Peak area of North Carolina and Virginia. Hoover’s tapes became the first part of this CD. Most of these tracks are short solo banjo pieces, played three or four times through with little or no variation. The last six tracks on the disc, from Dewey Cole’s (Calvin’s son) collection of radio broadcasts, show how well Cole’s playing fit into a band setting. This is an all-instrumental CD.

Much of what we know about Cole comes from Kevin Donleavy’s wonderful book Strings of Life (reviewed in OTH vol. 10, no. 1, Fall 2005). Cole was sixteen when he first heard Wade Ward play banjo, and his style was heavily influenced by Ward’s playing. His friends also lived in the Fancy Gap area on the Virginia-North Carolina state line (hence the CD title), and are listed by Donleavy; they include Dan Tate, Sel Lowe, Wilson Ramey, Claude Richardson, and others.

Cole’s style of playing is very much in the Round Peak tradition. When he plays solo pieces, though, he tunes into double-C or G, not the D or A that we usually associate with these tunes. He uses the “Galax lick” at least once per tune (particularly in double-C). Distinctive, to my ears, are his full brush strokes, which add to his excellent rhythm and timekeeping. His playing reminds me a lot of Kyle Creed’s, but of course Creed is much better known. In a band setting, Cole again plays the melody, without ornamentation or variation, not quite doubling the fiddle. The Rock Creek Ramblers had a sound very much like the Camp Creek Boys.

As happens so often, somebody else, in this case Pete Seeger (in his How to Play the 5-string Banjo—what color is YOUR cover?) said it better than I can, writing of the people from whom he learned banjo: “Often they knew only a few tunes apiece, and maybe only one method of strumming . . . Yet what they knew, they knew well, and the simple, rippling rhythm of their banjo had more art in it than many a hectic performance piece by a professional virtuoso.”

Thanks to the Field Recorders’ Collective for issuing this. It’s worth hearing.

PETE PETERSON

To order: fieldrecorder.com
Jerry Lundy  
Fiddling from Old Time to Bluegrass

Jerry Lundy, fiddle, guitar; Hilary Dirlam, guitar


This new release from the Field Recorders’ Collective features the fiddling of the grandson of old-time fiddling luminary Emmett Lundy. Jerry Lundy was best known for his fiddling with his cousin Ted Lundy’s bluegrass band and later with Bob Paisley and the Southern Grass, but he loved playing old-time fiddle too. This collection was recorded on cassette by Lundy himself in 1991 at Augusta Old-Time Week during an informal jam with Hilary Dirlam. She says in the notes that she was hearing some of the tunes for the first time, but that is not evident from these recordings. The two play beautifully together.

There are several different approaches to handling tunes here. On one end of the spectrum are “Lost Indian,” “John Hardy,” and “Forked Deer,” which are embellished and full of well-rehearsed licks, and sound as if Lundy might have learned them from his bluegrass circles. On the other end are tunes such as “Flatwoods” and a unique version of “Silly Bill,” both of which display Lundy’s mastery of subtle improvisation, the kind in which the listener never loses track of the core melody. Like many others of his generation, Lundy was fond of the fiddling of Arthur Smith—three of Smith’s showpieces—“Fiddler’s Dream,” “Red Apple Rag,” and “Florida Blues”—are presented here with great reverence for Smith’s style. Lundy shines the most in the more challenging pieces like the Smith tunes and “Snowflake Reel,” “Durham’s Bull,” and “Smoky Mountain Rag.” There is an intriguing C tune here called “Pierre” that I’ve not heard or seen anywhere. Also there is a nice guitar duet with Dirlam called “Water Mill.”

There is a lot here for old-time musicians to appreciate. Lundy’s fiddling is neither patient nor eager—it sat right in the middle, and it feels good. In many of these recordings he expands the tunes as he goes along, becoming freer and taking chances. I imagine he was very fun to play with. He is good at tight, single-bowed phrases, but can also draw the bow long to get a smooth, cascading feel. At times he reminds me of a slightly less aggressive Art Stamper. It would be nice to know more about where he learned his tunes. Also, I wonder if he spent any time with his grandfather. He was only 10 years old when Emmett Lundy died, but maybe they spent time together? The younger Lundy plays two of his grandfather’s pieces on this recording, but I am not able to detect any influence of the senior Lundy.

The CD is packaged just as you would expect for a Field Recorders’ Collective release—in a cardboard sleeve with the track listing, a short biography of Lundy, and a note from Dirlam on the back. The sound quality is a little muffled, but quite good considering the means by which it was made.

To order: fieldrecorder.com

Roy Andrade
the old-time music scene for many years now. They took home the band contest blue ribbon from the Surry [County, North Carolina] Old Time Fiddlers Convention in 2013. Although he was raised in New York State, Paul was exposed to Southern music from an early age via his mother, who taught him old-time songs that she learned as a child in Virginia. He studied classical piano starting at age five, began playing the banjo at age 10, and later learned fiddle and guitar. As a young man he moved to North Carolina where he spent serious time with Tommy Jarrell and many other older-generation musicians, including Fields Ward and Luther Davis. He performed and recorded with Mike Seeger and became a radio announcer on the local early-morning “Feed and Seed Show.” Benton flippen was another mentor and musical collaborator. (The Modern Mountain Boys occasionally served as Benton’s backup band during the last few years of his life.) Eventually Paul made his way up the journalistic ladder to become a reporter and producer with National Public Radio in Washington; you may have heard him deliver the news or an in-depth story on the arts. Last year Paul left NPR, but he continues to do freelance stories for them, and I’m really glad about that!

Terri McMurray is an ace banjo player who started playing as a child, and has lived in North Carolina for decades. She too spent time learning from Tommy Jarrell and other older-generation musicians. John Schwab’s guitar playing has graced many fine old-time bands including the City Ducks and the Hoover Uprights. His instructional manual, Old Time Back Up Guitar: Learn From the Masters, reflects the countless hours that he has put into divining just what those folks were playing on the old records.

The three main sources here are Tommy Jarrell, Fields Ward, and Benton flippen, all of whom Paul and Terri spent time with. And it shows. The renditions of the pieces learned from these men have the feel of a well-loved, broken-in pair of shoes that just fit the feet perfectly, and are good for walking and dancing. In the fiddling most spectacularly, Paul Brown truly plays these tunes in his own style; they are not overly careful reconstructions, nor are they in the modern old-time fiddle style propagated by Bruce Molsky (whose fiddling, I hasten to add, I very much love and admire!). There’s some good grit here, especially when his fiddling conjures up Benton flippen’s very distinctive intonation and playfulness.

The banjo playing, by both Terri and Paul, is also excellent. Paul’s finger-style banjo is as good as you’ll ever hear. He also finger-picks one song on the guitar (“Booker Red,” learned from the singing of his mother). Terri’s banjo plays more of a support role.

Paul does all the lead singing, with support from Terri and John. His vocals recall Mike Seeger’s, but his voice has its own distinctive timbre, honed perhaps by so many years of radio broadcasting, Fields Ward counseled Paul never to sing faster than he could talk, and always to pick a key that was comfortable, and he appears to have taken this advice to heart. He sings just a little behind the beat, in a laid back, almost offhand but very engaging fashion, and, to my ears, his singing style owes nothing to contemporary pop or folk music.

Next time, I’d like to hear all of them sing more full-out, take more chances with the singing, and give it a little bit of edge, at least some of the time.

The repertoire here consists of old favorites, but each one has an unusual twist—different lyrics or a rare source. The way that the familiar is mixed with the unfamiliar is both exciting and soothing. Standouts include Luther Davis’ “Shady Grove,” “Red Apple Rag” (à la Benton flippen), Ed Weaver’s “Cluck Old Hen,” “Walking in My Sleep”—they’re really having fun with this one.

Excellent marks for production! This recording sounds like it didn’t get very fussed over; hard to know whether this is artful production or just circumstance. (It could be both.) The mix is perfect, as are the sounds of the instruments. The music is presented in a straightforward, matter-of-fact way, with very much the same feel as the informal visits during which much of this music was learned. I also like the length of this CD: 39 minutes of music, like an LP. That’s about right for my attention span.

Special mention must be made of the fantastic cover art, a portrait of the group by Texas fiddler Howard Rains. The notes are brief but informative, giving the source and noting where the tune is related to another tune. My only beef is that notes do not list who is playing what on each cut. For those wishing to experience collector’s schadenfreude, the instruments played are also listed. (1934 Washburn 5259 guitar, anyone?) Highly recommended!

SUZY ROTHFIELD THOMPSON
To order: mostlymountainboys.com
Rhys Jones and Cleek Schrey, fiddles; John Herrmann, banjo; Susie Goehring, guitar; Meredith McIntosh, bass.

Indian Corn / Newt Payne’s / I’ve Got a Bulldog / Chase the Squirrel / Hooker’s Hornpipe / Black Eyed Susie / Indian Eat the Woodpecker / Sleepy Eyed Joe / I’ve Got a Girl in Baltimore / Gilsaw / Coal Harbor Bend / The Dying Cowboy / Cluck Old Hen / Hell on the Wabash / I’ll Roll In My Sweet Baby’s Arms / Speed the Plough / The Wedding of Nancy Ann / (Bonus Track)

Back in 2010 at Clifftop, Rhys Jones was hobbling on crutches with a large cast on his foot. He and four friends (there are five toes on a foot; coincidence?) won the Bigfoot band contest under the appropriate name “Bigfoot,” and although the reason for the name is gone, the name has stuck. They have stayed together, gotten a tight band sound, and show off the many facets of the band on this, their first CD together.

Rhys Jones and Cleek Schrey blend so well together that it is often difficult to tell that there are two fiddlers on this album. Close listening (which is worth the effort) reveals that they start with unison fiddling and once the ear is used to that, add a few harmony notes, and sometimes drop into different octaves, while maintaining the same bowing patterns. Interestingly, the identical bowing probably contributes more to the unison sound than the actual notes played. Go figure. John Herrmann’s distinctive banjo playing gets the melody notes, and provides rhythm and drive, Susie Goehring plays understated and spare backup guitar, and Meredith McIntosh provides the low-end sound. Everyone except Cleek Schrey sings at one time or another. But the heart of the band, and the heart of the sound, is the two fiddles.

Jones grew up in the Chicago area, spent a few years in Brooklyn—where he met Schrey—and now resides in Fauquier County, Virginia. He and other band members have listened to a lot of source recordings by groups such as the Sweet Brothers, Buster Carter and Preston Young, and the Georgia Crackers, to take three examples from the CD. (Posey Rorer played fiddle on the original Carter and Young recording of “Roll in My Sweet Baby’s Arms.” Here the fiddles are tuned AEAC#, which gives you that wonderful unison double stop.) There are also tunes learned directly from Jones’ Chicago friend and mentor Chirps Smith, such as “Indian Corn,” “Hell on the Wabash,” and “Chase the Squirrel.” After moving to Virginia Rhys met John Ashby’s descendants (who still play as the Free State Ramblers—check out Field Recorders’ Collective FRC 108 for more John Ashby), and learned “Sleepy Eyed Joe.” How many fiddle tunes do you know in the key of E?

Most of the tunes and songs are done with the full five-piece band, but there are a few with the spare sound of fiddle(s?) and banjo or guitar providing a nice contrast and change of pace. There is also some good singing. The liner notes, however, seldom reveal who is singing lead on a given song, so I cannot single out particular singers. I felt they caught the rowdiness of both “Bulldog” and
“Baltimore.” We read that Susie sang “The Dying Cowboy”—and she does it very well. My other complaint about the liner notes: tiny gray type on a gray-white background. Or am I just getting old and needing better glasses?

Perhaps the best compliment this CD has gotten came from a visiting friend: “It’s one of the CDs that I take along to listen to on trips. I’m not the only one who listens, either. I’ve heard some of the tunes they recorded showing up in jams.” Buy a copy (and maybe listen to source recordings as well for a fuller perspective) and they can start showing up in YOUR jams, too!

Pete Peterson
To order: www.cdbaby.com/cd/bigfoot1

Indian Run Stringband

Billy in the Lowground / Hold the Woodpile Down / East Tennessee Blues / Hello Stranger / Bootlegger’s Blues / Garfield’s Blackberry Blossom / Dixie Darling / Texas Gals / Rain and Snow / Big Scioty / Up On the Blue Ridge Mountain / If the River Was Whiskey / Richmond Blues / Ookpik Waltz / Lee Highway Blues

Old-time bands seem to be of two types (unless, of course, they’re somewhere in the middle, or something else). On the one side, there are those who are archivists, constantly searching out obscure songs and musicians and filling their liner notes full of tunings and sources. Their recordings are both product and historical document, as well as fun. On the other side are the entertainers. They know what they’re about and often choose material that will please the crowd. Their recordings are generally produced to sell or to meet the demand when someone comes up after a show and asks, “Do you have a recording?”

That brings us to the Indian Run Stringband, out of Blacksburg, Virginia. Three of the members—fiddler/mandolinist/vocalist Paul Herling, banjoist/vocalist Ginger Wagner, and guitarist Mark Barbour—have long pedigrees in the music, dating back to the ’70s and ’80s.
Bassist Kristie Dorfler is more of a newcomer, coming from the classical world. Together, they are on the entertainer end of the spectrum, and that is reflected in their debut CD.

Yes, they include a brief mention of where they found some of the tunes, citing such folks as Uncle Dave Macon for “Hold the Woolpaint Down,” the Mississippi Sheiks for “Bootlegger’s Blues,” and Fred Price for “Lee Highway Blues.” There it ends. No tunings. No long origin stories. Moreover, the material they’ve chosen is predominantly standards. The aforementioned “Bootlegger’s Blues” would qualify as the most obscure of the 15 tracks. The rest, from “Billy In the Lowground” to “Hello Stranger” and “Rain and Snow” (done here as a pensive banjo and droning bowed bass duet, with Wagner on the vocals) everyone has heard and, whether they’d admit it or not, enjoys. After all, there is a reason those tunes are popular, and that is because they are pleasing.

The band is at their best on the instrumental tunes. “Garfield’s Blackberry Blossom” gets a nice airing, pushed along by some long, Puckett-like guitar runs from Barbour. Herling also gives a good kick to “Texas Gals,” “Billy In the Lowground,” and “Big Scioty,” throwing in a few twists here and there. His standout tracks, indeed the standout tracks of the recording, are, however, “East Tennessee Blues” and “If the River Was Whiskey.” Those come together best, probably because of the infectious, swingy beat and good feeling. Herling is also at his most inventive, creating some very good lines and variations. “If the River Was Whiskey” features his best singing here, though “Dixie Darling” is a close second, with “Up On the Blue Ridge Mountain” just behind that.

Both sides of the coin, archivist and entertainer, are needed, but the name of the game is still entertainment. The Indian Run Stringband gives us a good bit of that with this debut.

We have posted on our web site 293 tunes played by 100 traditional fiddlers, from 50 years of field recordings, representing the broad diversity of fiddlers and fiddle music found in the Pacific Northwest. These mp3 files are freely downloadable. To reach them, go to the web site and click on the microphone image in the upper right corner. Besides fiddlers residing in the Pacific Northwest, the recordings include some fiddlers from elsewhere who were recorded here and have been influential on Northwest fiddlers. This is an ongoing project and more will be added.

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Peter K. Siegel and Eli Smith
The Union Makes Us Strong

There Is a Power In the Union / The Death of Harry Simms / Babies In the Mill / Join the Union Tonight / Talking Union / The Death of Mother Jones / Casey Jones / The Union Scab / The Durham Lockout / Which Side Are You On? / Song For Bridges / The Preacher and the Slave / Scissor Bill / Talking Union Voter / Coda: Look For the Union Label

How these lyrics fall upon your ears will depend: which side are you on? Management or labor? The elite or the rabble? Either way, the lyrics will be hard to ignore and often hard not to find moving. When they tell of Harry Simms, age 19, killed for backing the union in Harlan County, Kentucky, or of the little kids rising at five in the morning for another day in the textile mills, or when they ask, “Would you be free from wage slavery?” those are powerful images. At the very least, they make you pause.

What is rarely in question is the power of the music itself. You can say what you want of the early union and labor movement, but, be it through a martial spirit or sentimentality or through a co-opted popular tune, they
knew how to get their point across with music. That music and its power is the focus of this project from Peter Siegel and Eli Smith.

By now, both Siegel and Smith should be well known to the old-time and acoustic music communities. Siegel gained recognition with the Charles River Boys and is a prominent producer, engineer, and music historian. He plays guitar and banjo here, singing lead on six tunes. Smith is currently a member of the Down Hill Strugglers, hosts a radio show, and teaches. Here he plays banjo, guitar, slide guitar, and harmonica, and sings lead on seven tracks. Augmenting the duo here and there are mandolinist Andy Statman, fiddler Craig Judelman, and guitarists Walker Shepard and Bob Marlin.

Both Siegel and Smith evoke the feel of these songs quite well. With his rougher-hewn and lower vocal delivery, Siegel comes across with the warmth of good fellowship and grandfathery advice, sentimental one moment, sly and rousing the next. His is the kind of voice that works well on such tunes as the two talking blues, the poignant “Babies In the Mill,” and the militant “Song For Bridges,” which details the struggle of Harry Bridges against the International Longshoreman’s and Warehouseman’s Union. He’s at his best, however, on the anthem-like “There Is a Power In a Union,” (co-opting the tune “There Is Power In the Blood”), juxtaposing the benefits of joining with those of what could happen if you’d rather remain satisfied with the way things are.

Smith, on the other hand, has a more strident, emphatic delivery and it is to him that that sort of tune falls. “The Death of Harry Simms” is a tragic tale told over modal Dock Boggs-like banjo, and Smith’s higher, anguished voice underscores that tragedy perfectly. He and Siegel use a similar banjo-guitar duet (based on John Cohen’s arrangement) on “Which Side Are You On?” and here his voice is more pleading than anguished. Those are his best tracks, but his version of Joe Hill’s “The Preacher and the Slave” (which uses the hymn “In the Sweet Bye and Bye” to chastise religious leaders for weakening the movement with promises) and the force of his version of “Join the Union Tonight,” a call to action based on the tune “Hold The Woodpile Down,” are both high points.

This is a nicely packaged set of 14 songs, powerful in message and presentation, and managing to be both fun and historically informative.

BILLY WAGNER
To order: cdbaby.com/cd/petersiegellelsmith1

The Stonemans
The Stoneman Tradition

Patsy Stoneman, autoharp and vocals; Donna Stoneman, mandolin and vocals; Roni Stoneman, banjo and vocals; Nate Grover, fiddle; Jeremy Stephens, guitar and vocals; Stu Geisbert, bass; Tom Mindle, vocals

Have I Told You Lately That I Love You / Going Home / Donna-mite / On The Banks of the Wabash, Far Away / The Raging Sea, How It Roared / Rubber Dolly / Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down / Catfish John / The Boys from Nanjemoy / Bury Me Beneath the Weeping Willow Tree / Good, Good Girl / Tribe’s Tune / Ring the Bell, Watchman / Where the Soul of Man Never Dies

This is the second album put out on Patuxent by the three Stoneman sisters. (The first one, The Stonemans: Patsy, Donna & Roni, recorded in 2008, was reviewed in Old Time Herald, vol. 11, no.12.) Patsy is now in her late eighties, and the other two are not that much younger. They’re singing as well as ever, and can play mandolin, banjo, and autoharp with more facility than I could ever hope to achieve. They prove that, if you start early and keep playing, you can still be producing great music long after everyone else has retired.

Their parents, Ernest and Hattie Stoneman of Galax, Virginia, made a large number of records in the 1920s and ‘30s, but moved to the Washington, DC, area for work when record sales dried up during the Great Depression. On weekends, they put their large family (13 children who survived to adulthood) to work as a family band, so the sisters learned to play instruments around the same time that they learned to walk. When they grew up, many of the children went into other lines of work, but about five of them (including Patsy, Donna, and Roni) formed a bluegrass band, The Stonemans, and continued performing. Ernest (Pop) joined them on many appearances, seated in the middle of a singing, dancing throng, playing his autoharp and occasionally singing one of the old songs he’d made popular.

The band’s approach to the music, however, was bluegrass, played fast and with highly-ornamented instrumental solos.

This album is a sequel to the first one, both conceptually and in the choice of backup musicians. The esthetic still leans strongly towards the classic bluegrass era, producing a fine country sound with nobody tempted to throw in any jazz chords.

The CD’s title reflects the fact that about 1/3 of the songs were originally recorded by their parents on Victor, Okeh, or Gennett 78s. The sisters’ renditions stand up well compared with the high standard set by Ernest and Hattie. Examples are “The Raging Sea, How It Roared” and “Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down,” which are squarely in the parents’ tradition without being imitative.

One of the songs, “Ring the Bell, Watchman,” composed by Henry Clay Work, is new to me. It was recorded by Ernest as an instrumental, and I can understand his decision. Work was much more talented as a tunesmith than as a lyricist.

Other winners are “Going Home,” composed by the late Scotty Stoneman, which has a very nice tune; and two classy instrumental compositions by the Stonemans: “Donna-Mite,” a dynamite mandolin virtuoso piece, and “Tribe’s Tune,” a tribute to Ivan Tribe, who wrote a biography of the Stonemans in 1993 (The Stonemans: An Appalachian Family and the Music That Shaped Their Lives, University of Illinois Press, 1993).

They also present bluegrass versions of a couple of country-Western songs I love. One, “Catfish John,” came to my attention by way of Jerry Garcia, while the other, “Good, Good Girl,” is a Roni Stoneman composition that’s new to me, but is now a favorite. I only wish I could still drink beer so I could cry into one.

LYLE LOFGREN
To order: pxrec.com, (301) 424-0637

Jerry Zolten and R. Crumb
Chimpin’ the Blues

Chimpin’ Intro
Cecil Scott and his Bright Boys: Lawd Lawd Lawd / Frenchy’s String Band: Texas and Pacific Blues / Macom Ed and Tampa Joe: Warm Wipe Stomp / Eddie Head and Family: Down On Me / Rev. J. C.

East River Records
ERR1006

THE OLD-TIME HERALD WWW.OLDTIMEHERALD.ORG VOLUME 13, NUMBER 9 41
Chimpin’ the Blues is a 60-minute, one-shot radio show, originally recorded in June 2003 at Penn State University’s campus radio station WPSU, and aired the following September. The hosts, both avid collectors of 78 rpm records, are Jerry Zolten and R. Crumb, the famous comic book artist. The show was not recorded in real time, but it also was not scripted, so there’s some back-and-forth enthusiasm between the two, with excellent anecdotes and rants from Crumb. The rare 78s, from their collections, were originally recorded between 1927 and 1936. I would recommend this CD to anyone who loves the old music.

I must admit I wondered if I would want to hear this whole CD, complete with the spoken intros, more than once, but I’ve now listened numerous times and find that I’m enjoying the talking more and more. R. Crumb loses no time in deflecting the attention from R. Crumb the famous artist to the records and the music; his self-deprecating souness disappears completely when he waxes rhapsodic about his 78s. He and Zolten geek out about the musicians, the circumstances of the original recordings, and the instrumentation, and share anecdotes about the musicians and speculations about connections between string band music, jazz, and blues. It reverberates with a deep love of the music, and what little one-upmanship there is about owning this or that rare record is presented in a humorous and low-key fashion. Since the show was edited, nobody goes on too long, there are no awkward silences, nobody fumbles for a word.

Besides the music, my favorite part of the CD is Crumb’s powerful rant on why 78s are the best way to listen to recorded music. He explains how 78s focus the listener’s attention, since you have to put the needle down, then three minutes later you have to take it off and make a decision about what to listen to next. He does this in a much more eloquent way than I just did, well worth hearing. The mastering is truly masterful. I’ve heard nearly all these selections before, but I felt as though I was hearing them for the first time. Extra-clean copies were evidently used and whatever processing was done appears to have been minimal, revealing layers of music that for me had previously been obscure. It makes me realize how horrible mp3s are and how crummy some of the reissue CDs have been, especially when the reissue is going for completeness and not necessarily for the most pristine copies of the 78s.

The packaging features (of course) a beautiful full-color cartoon by R. Crumb, interesting liner notes in the full-color booklet, but, oddly, no discographical information aside from date of recording. From these 78 fanatics, I would have expected label info, matrix number, personnel, etc. but for that one must consult Godrich and Dixon. I was relieved that the notes actually discuss the music, unlike the thick booklet for The Stuff Dreams Are Made Of (another anthology of 78s with cover art by R. Crumb).

And now, on to the music! Every single song is fantastic. There’s not one that I don’t totally love, and it was a pleasure to hear them all in such splendid clarity. For the most part, Zolten and Crumb chose very obscure sides. I had never heard the delightful “Texas and Pacific
Blues” by Frenchy’s String Band, with its trumpet lead on a “Richland Woman” / “Midnight Special” / “Rubber Dolly” / “All Night Long” type song. There are two wonderful gospel sides, “Down On Me” by Eddie Head and Family, which has a very rural down-home feel, and “I’ll Just Stand and Wring My Hands and Cry” by Rev. J.C. Burnett with a congregation of women singers and apparently Fats Waller on organ (although it doesn’t sound anything like his other recordings on organ that I have heard).

The one non-American song is “Guenee Tini” by Cheikhia Tetma, an amazing North African singer accompanying herself on a plucked stringed instrument, perhaps an oud. The timbre of this instrument is eerily similar to the juxtaposed cut by Louie Lasky, “How You Want Your Rollin’ Done,” with its percussive solo single-string guitar wizardry. In addition, the structure of the Cheikha Tetma song echoes the blues; it’s a line that is then repeated, echoing the first two lines of a twelve-bar blues. I think maybe it is a lullaby: hypnotic, light, floating yet also very grounded and soothing.

Hearing “Walk Right In” by Cannon’s Jug Stompers made me so happy; like for so many others, the Rooftop Singers’ hit was the match that lit the fuse for me, when I was seven years old, marking the start of my life-long fascination with jug band music. I walked right in and never walked out. But the heart-breaking anecdotes about Gus Cannon and Peg Leg Howell made me sad that these and so many other influential songsters endured years of poverty and ill health.

I enjoyed the banter about the music and musicians, and wished I could have chimed in a few times. There’s a brief discussion about whether there are one or two guitars on Lottie Kimbrough’s “Rolling Log Blues,” but, according to blues guru John Miller, the sole guitarist is Miles Pruitt, who substituted a super-light string for the G string and tuned it an octave high. Otherwise, it would be impossible to get the sounds that are on that record. Occasionally, Crumb and Zolten tease by mentioning records that they DON’T play for us. I wish they’d played Gus Cannon’s “Can You Blame the Colored Man,” for example. Kudos to John Heneghan of the East River String Band for putting this out. I hope that Zolten and Crumb will consider putting together a Volume 2 of Chimpin’ the Blues some day!

Alice Gerrard’s grounded, honest approach to both music and life has graced us for decades. My family and I have been touched by this living legend, who would be the last person on earth to refer to herself that way. She’s a treat to know, and so is this CD, her first solo effort in 10 years.

Gerrard’s original songs are thoughtful and poignant. Her vocabulary is both sparse and rich, using words that paint beautiful pictures of life to which all listeners can relate.

The imagery she uses makes memories alive, as when she asks what to do with those old letters. “Should I read ‘em, burn ‘em, or hold ‘em close?” I can see that trunk in the attic, holding packets of ribbon-tied letters from long ago, and feel the truth of her question. In the song “Sweet South Anna River,” the image of being dressed in a silv’ry gown and floated down a river with wildflowers in my hair appeals to me far more than being buried in the cold, cold ground.

Here’s another excerpt, from the title track “Bittersweet,” that speaks to my personal experience of living long:

Hot summer day in my little home town
House needs paint, kinda tumble down
Just like me, tryin’ to hold on
Bittersweet, bittersweet…

I sent “My Once True Love,” the song about a past relationship that asks, “Do you sometimes think of me?” to the man who was once an enormous part of my life. He replied that he did. Thank goodness!

The recording is excellent and comfortable, sounding great in the car or on the computer. Gerrard’s supporting cast of instrumentalists is stellar: Laurie Lewis, Tom Rozum, Bryan Sutton, Todd Phillips,
Stuart Duncan, Bob Ickes, Rushad Eggleston, Barbara Higbie, Simon Chrisman, Andrew Conklin, and Steven Strauss. So are the lovely voices that harmonize perfectly: Laurie Lewis, Beverly Smith, Tom Rozum, and Chloe Tietjen.

This CD sustains Alice Gerrard’s tradition of great work, and makes a happy addition to her already extensive discography. I love this CD.

Nikki Lee

To order: alicegerrard.com

Woody Guthrie
American Radical Patriot

Disc 1
Lost Train Blues / Growing up in Oklahoma / The Railroad Blues / More talk of growing up in Okemah / The gang of kids Woody hung around with / Rye Whiskey / Old Joe Clark / Alan Lomax asks for a tune / Beaumont Rag / Alan asks for another one / Green Valley Waltz AKA Who’s Gonna Shoe Your Pretty Feet? / The troubles and tragedies that fractured Woody’s family in Okemah / Greenback Dollar / Lomax asks about the boll weevil / Boll Weevil / Seven Cent Cotton / Wish I’d Stayed in the Wagon Yard / Interlude / Dust Bowl Refugee / Contractors duping the desperate / The dust storm of April 14, 1935 / Dust Storm Disaster / Foggy Mountain Top

Disc 2
The end of the world / So Long, It’s Been Good to Know Yuh / Dust storms devastate the farmland / Talking Dust Bowl / Migrants arrive in California / Do Re Mi / Hard Times / Songs about hard times / Bring Back to Me My Blue-Eyed Boy / Songs about outlaws / Billy the Kid / Billy the Kid and Pretty Boy Floyd / Pretty Boy Floyd / Jesse James / Jesse James and His Boys / Takin’ it from the rich and givin’ it to the poor / Jesus Christ / Songs about bankers / The Jolly Banker / Another song about the depredations of the bankers / I Ain’t Got No Home / Hundreds of thousands made homeless / Dirty Overhauls / The story of Mary Fagan / Mary Fagan / The origins of the song

Disc 3
Origins of the song, continued / Chain Around My Leg / Let’s sing some blues / Nine Hundred Miles / Worried Man Blues / About the “Worried Man Blues” / Lonesome Valley / Railroad blueses / Walkin’ Down That Railroad Line / Interlude / Goin’ Down the Frisco Line / Riding the Rails / Going Down the Road / Interlude / Seven Cent Cotton / Wish I’d Stayed in the Wagon Yard / Interlude / Dust Bowl Refugee / Contractors duping the desperate / The dust storm of April 14, 1935 / Dust Storm Disaster / Foggy Mountain Top

Disc 4
Breathing in dust / Dust Pneumonia / Leaving the Dust Bowl / California Blues / Jimmie Rodgers / Migrants arriving in California / Do Re Mi / Refugees pouring into California / Dust Bowl Refugee / California as one of the 48 states / Will Rogers Highway / The flood that took over 100 lives / Los Angeles New Year’s Flood / A good horse / Stewball / Interlude / Stagger Lee / Interlude / One Dime Blues / Interlude / Git Along Little Dogies / Interlude / The Trail to Mexico / Gypsy Davy / Introducing an old song / Hard Ain’t It Hard

Disc 5

Disc 6
The Girl in the Red, White, and Blue / Labor for Victory / Farmer – Labor Trail / Jazz in America, No. 93 / Whoopy Ti-Yi, Get Along, Mr. Hitler / Jazz in America, No. 116 / Sally, Don’t You Grieve / Narrator / Dig a Hole / ND Avenue / Intro / The Veedee Blues / Intro / Blessed and Curst / A Case of ND / ND Seaman’s Letter / ND City / ND Day / A Child of ND / V. D. Gunner’s Blues / Brooklyne Towne / Narrator / The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done (AKA The Great Historical Bum) / The Old Cracked Looking Glass / Hard Times in the Durant Jail / Empty Boxcar, My Home / The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done

DVD 7 (DVD)
Oregon Trail / It Takes a Married Man to Sing a Worried Song / Hard Travelin’ / Grand Coulee Dam / Roll On, Columbia / The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done (AKA The Great Historical Bum) / Jackhammer Blues / Pastures of Plenty / Talking Columbia / Ramblin’ Round / Washington Talkin’ Blues

Disc 8 (78 rpm record)
VD City / The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done

Three albums in the extensive catalog of Woody Guthrie sound recording releases have been nominated for the prestigious Best Historical Album Grammy Award: Live Wire (Rounder Records, 2011), a one-CD package that documented a single, long-forgotten, and meticulously restored 1949 concert, as well as My Dusty Road (Rounder Records, 2009) and Woody at 100 (Smithsonian Folkways Records, 2012), box sets that provided differently focused overviews of that multi-faceted artist’s music. While bringing widespread attention to Guthrie’s songs and performances, those three albums generally overlooked other aspects of his recorded legacy, including his interviews and radio work. Guthrie was a fascinating interview subject, combining a penchant for vivid if understated storytelling with keen powers of observation and analysis; and he was a talented radio actor, his voice displaying deadpan wit, dry irony, and keen timing. Examples of both types of recordings can now be heard in the newest historical album of Guthrie material, American Radical Patriot.

A box set released in October 2013 by Rounder Records, American Radical Patriot compiles over six CDs Guthrie’s various recordings made at the behest of the US Government. Some of Guthrie’s interviews and music performances recorded by Alan Lomax for the Library of Congress had been released on LP by Elektra Records in the 1960s and on CD by Rounder Records in the late 1980s, but American Radical Patriot marks the first issuance of the complete Library of Congress recordings. According to the album notes in American Radical Patriot, “Lomax wanted to know where Woody came from and what he had to say, and why he wrote what he wrote.” In addition to including the entirety of Lomax’s remarkably unguarded conversation with Guthrie, in which the Okemah, Oklahoma, native reflected on his hard-traveled life, the Library of Congress recordings documented numerous performances by Guthrie of well-known folk, country, and blues standards as well as his own compositions.
At the time he recorded for the Library of Congress—1940—Guthrie, age 27, was largely unknown. His recordings for Lomax, fully included herein over four CDs, were Guthrie’s first-ever, and it is exciting to hear him unselfconsciously sharing several of his then unfamiliar but now classic “Dust Bowl ballads” with an interested listener (Lomax).

American Radical Patriot likewise includes several radio skits, including two made for the Office of War Information during World War II (unheard by the public since their original airing). In these skits Guthrie appears as an actor or as a performer of thematic songs he had written on commission to advance the skits’ narratives. Among the previously uncollected odds and ends from Guthrie’s public service career included here are some home demonstration recordings of songs that Guthrie composed for a late-1940s public health service VD education campaign. These latter songs confirm (if there was ever any doubt) that Guthrie was a remarkably versatile songwriter who could convincingly compose songs on virtually any topic.

Additionally, the box set features all of Guthrie’s extant recordings of the powerful circle of songs he wrote while employed by the Department of the Interior’s Bonneville Power Administration. Most of the BPA recordings have been previously available, such as on Rounder Records’ single-CD Columbia River Collection (1990), but American Radical Patriot makes available for the first time a rare minor-key version of “Pastures of Plenty,” Guthrie’s renowned song composed for that project.

Complementing the six CDs are two curios. The first is a DVD containing a revelatory 1999 documentary film (produced at the University of Oregon) that explores Guthrie’s BPA stint. The second is a 12-inch 78 RPM record specially manufactured for American Radical Patriot. On one side is a 1951 home recording of Guthrie performing his own composition “The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done [AKA The Great Historical Bum]”; on the other side, underscoring Guthrie’s significant role in the urban folk revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s, is a 1961 recording of Bob Dylan performing Guthrie’s song “VD City.”

The well-researched album notes for American Radical Patriot, written by box set producer Bill Nowlin, are available in two versions and several formats: an abridged short version (inserted into the box set over approximately 50 pages, interspersed with period photographs and various relevant graphics), and the 256-page “complete” version (available as a PDF download from a file embedded into the first CD on the box set, as a free e-book available online, and as an inexpensive Print On Demand hard copy). Nowlin, as a co-founder of Rounder Records and as a prominent Guthrie scholar, is clearly committed to bringing Guthrie’s legacy to the widest possible audience, and American Radical Patriot should expand general awareness of the full complexity of this difficult-to-categorize American genius.

Shortly after being interviewed by Lomax, Guthrie began recording for both major commercial companies (specifically, RCA Victor) and small folk music labels run by Moses Asch (most importantly, Folkways Records). Ironically, by the 1950s, the same federal agency that launched Guthrie’s recording career—the Library of Congress—shunned him after Duncan Emrich, chief of the Library of Congress’s Archives of American Folk Song and an alleged FBI informant, finger-pointed Guthrie as an unpatriotic radical. Emrich’s questioning of Guthrie’s unwavering if complex passion for America was of course partly a result of McCarthy-era hysteria. As a result of American Radical Patriot, such a misguided assessment of Guthrie’s patriotism will not happen again, as the box set convincingly illustrates the range and depth of Guthrie’s public service work. By bringing that work fully before a new generation of Americans,
Florida is a peculiar place, and so much of that peculiarity is thanks to its being a place to move to. As anyone who has ever read Zora Neale Hurston will tell you, it has long been a haven of rich African American culture. Members of the African diaspora had found their way to the Sunshine State from the Caribbean when Florida was still in Spanish hands. This history, mixed with an early twentieth century influx of Southern blacks determined to get out from behind the mule and the indentured servitude of sharecropping, who came from other states to Florida after the end of legal slavery, must have created one hell of a musical stew. Hurston found it a rich place to collect folklore in the early twentieth century, including music by the hard-driving dual harmonica and guitar trio led by Booker T. Sapps. She found literally books’ worth of material in the state, which not only guided her anthropological surveys but her fiction as well. Yet the blues recording boom of the 1920s had passed, which likely explains the dearth of shellac-pressed aural evidence of the state’s musical fruits.

In the mid-1970s, Peggy Bulger and a handful of NEA grant-given souls were determined to change this. Bulger’s work, with cohorts Dwight DeVane and Brenda McCullum, coincided with the establishment of the American Folklife Center in Washington, DC, as well as the yearly Folklife Festival performances on the Mall. Traveling the South, Central, and Panhandle regions of the state to find African American sacred and secular musicians, Bulger, DeVane, and others ultimately compiled a double LP and booklet funded by the Florida Folklife Center. Titled, then as now, Drop on Down in Florida, the collection featured one LP of blues and one of gospel. Yet, no doubt due to lack of distribution outside the state, most people, even obsessives of folkloristics, there’s twice as much music too, sounds persistent as a catbird in summer but subtle enough to influence a spring housecleaning without drawing attention to themselves. And anyone who was frustrated by Williams’ paltry three tracks on the vinyl can now hear an extra 10, including snippets of interview as well as examples of his harmonica work. No doubt, in the under-recorded subgenre of one-string musicians, Williams is the king. His door, or yakked board, playing makes up in sheer buoyancy and drive what it lacks in variety. The only recording session ever documented of Emmett Murray is also here, with two extra tracks. Murray, who plays a gentle but pungent solo electric guitar, shows a style as unique in its way as anything from the North Mississippi hill country. With pinches of early country, and unusual finger-snapped chords, he takes his cues from work gang “Captain” songs, familiar blues lines as well as observations of his own. His guitar, undistorted but still jagged, seems to wrap itself around and under his voice, making it hard to imagine one without the other.

The sacred disc is stronger still, featuring tracks performed by a few of the musicians on Disc One, as well as multiple examples from the Southeast Alabama and Florida Union Sacred Singing Convention in Campbellton, in the extreme northern Panhandle.

It’s a powerful polyphonic earful of what took place 35-odd years ago at a convention originally founded in 1893. And then there’s the book. The original LP release boasted 24 pages, which, keep in mind, filled a book nearly as large as the cover that housed it. However, Dust-to-Digital has added radically more substantial notes, changing the focus from discussion of the state’s musical fruits to-Digital has added radically more substantial notes, changing the focus from discussion of the state’s musical fruits to-Digital has added radically more substantial notes, changing the focus from discussion of the state’s musical fruits to-Digital has added radically more substantial notes, changing the focus from discussion of the state’s musical fruits...
the three originally released tracks, plus the extra ten, comes to some 30 pages, including photos not found in the original release. Here we get a sense of his Silas Green minstrel beginnings, complete with commentary from Williams himself as well as people who recall hearing him, bolstered by information on his one-stringed instrument, noting not only its African origin, but also its appearance in South America and the Caribbean.

Waide has also given the secular material massive written updates, including not only notes on the tunes not included with the original LP, but his own recent travels in the Florida Panhandle in search of what might be left of the African American shaped note singing tradition. His additions are supported by new notes from Florida folklife grant recipient Doris Dyen, who vividly recalls visits to the shaped note and Primitive Baptist church services heard here. Overall, the book is so packed with explanations about shaped note singing itself and on various churches and their services, song lyrics, and bios on the musicians, that it feels as if these recordings are only now receiving the attention they have long been due.

Frankly, a truly worthy review of this collection would need a book as long as the one included here, but it’s as crucial as it is amazing to have this release of musical gold from an overlooked source—improved upon at that—re-claim its space in record shops and music collections worldwide.  

Bruce Miller

To order: dust-digital.com

The Mary Lomax Ballad Book: America’s Great 21st Century Traditional Singer
Art Rosenbaum

In his authoritative introduction to The Mary Lomax Ballad Book, Art Rosenbaum simply yet eloquently asserts that the book documents “a family’s living heritage of American folk song, remarkable in its breadth and richness and valuable in that it has been recovered at this late date.” The book focuses on the balladry of two sisters, Mary Payne Lomax and Bonnie Payne Loggins, both of whom learned a body of ballads and songs from their father Lemuel Payne (1884-1968). Living and farming in Habersham County, Georgia, Payne is remembered for having been, in Rosenbaum’s words, “a fine and prolific singer of traditional ballads and songs.” Payne’s two daughters—especially Mary—and son Bunyon loved their father’s music, and Mary and Bunyon transcribed the texts of many of the ballads and songs that Lemuel knew. Mary kept this repertoire alive, generally consulting the transcribed texts while singing, into the 21st century; Bonnie, because she did not learn to read, continued to sing her father’s material from memory. Yet, until now, this family repertoire went largely unheard outside of Habersham County (where Mary Lomax lives) and nearby White County, Georgia (where Bonnie Loggins lives). While Lemuel Payne’s performance style was never adequately documented (Rosenbaum knows of only a couple of low-fidelity cassette recordings featuring Payne’s vocals), Rosenbaum’s field recordings of Mary and Bonnie, combined with Bunyon’s and Mary’s earlier written transcriptions, provide remarkably full documentation of this family’s rich music legacy.

The Mary Lomax Ballad Book features two CDs containing 59 recordings of Mary and Bonnie singing ballads and songs for which they remembered the accompanying tunes. Rosenbaum digitally recorded these performances at the women’s homes, and the unaccompanied singing, accordingly, sounds at home—relaxed yet focused. The sisters in their respective recordings sing longer, older (and often tragic) traditional ballads from the British Isles and from pre-industrial America as well as more modern (and sometimes quite humorous) lyric folk songs. A few of Rosenbaum’s recordings of Mary and Bonnie were first issued by the Dust-to-Digital label on The Art of Field Recording: Fifty Years of Traditional American Music Documented by Art Rosenbaum, Vols. I and II, but most of the recordings are made available for the first time on the two CDs included with The Mary Lomax Ballad Book. The mastering on these CDs, by widely recognized sound engineer Mike Graves, is state of the art, which places these recordings among the best-recorded performances ever of traditional ballads sung in an older, noncommercial style.

This collection is effectively organized: each individual recording is numbered to correspond with the text, and, for each ballad or song, the text features a cross-reference with another relevant ballad index (whether Francis James Child’s famous collection of British ballads or Malcolm Laws’ compendium of “native American” ballads), concise yet helpful scholarly headnotes, and transcriptions of lyrics. Also included are the lyrics from twenty of Lemuel Payne’s ballads and songs for which the sisters could not recall the original tunes.

The Mary Lomax Ballad Book features simple yet effective design work by noted graphic designer Susan Archie. Visual motifs used on the covers and elsewhere within the book are borrowed from folk art, an approach appropriate for this project given the fact that Bonnie Loggins is a self-taught “folk” painter known in art circles across northern Georgia. Other aspects of book production, it should be noted, are problematic. There are numerous minor proofreading oversights within the text, though most are inconsequential. Due to decisions made during the book production process, some of the photos used in The Mary Lomax Ballad Book are printed in a way that lacks the sort of visual contrast necessary to embolden and illuminate black-and-white images, and hence some of the images herein seem lifeless, gray. (This must be particularly galling to Rosenbaum, who is an acclaimed visual artist as well as a Grammy Award-winning music historian.) To be fair, such shortcomings do not mar the overall power of this book one iota, yet it can be hoped that a second edition of The Mary Lomax Ballad Book will quietly correct such production miscues.

“I would maintain,” states Rosenbaum in the aforementioned introductory essay, “that Mary and Bonnie possess the finest and most varied body of American folk songs, learned in family oral tradition, to emerge in the 21st century.” Whether or not Rosenbaum’s statement is true (after all, the 21st century is still quite young, and it is possible that a similarly magnificent family repertoire of American traditional ballads and songs will be discovered by some future folklorist), The Mary Lomax Ballad Book is undeniably significant. It is a trustworthy treasure-trove of recordings and information documenting one family’s ballad tradition, and it is a must-have for every American music library and Appalachia/Georgia regional studies collection.

Ted Olson

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WOMEN GUITARISTS
By Paul F. Wells
In an earlier installment of the Attic (OTH vol. 13, no. 1), we took a look at a few female fiddlers of an earlier era, and noted that they were rarities in their day. Historically, a more common role for women in the realm of old-time music has been that of accompanist for their fiddling male partners. Depending on the region and local norms, this could mean playing either piano or guitar. Gender roles certainly were a big factor here: the men did the serious, out-front work of playing the fiddle while women provided the back-up. But there also are considerations of which instruments have been deemed acceptable for women to play; there is a long history of the guitar being seen as more of a “women’s instrument” than a man’s, in the parlor and elsewhere. In this issue we look at a couple of female guitarists who are pictured with male fiddlers, and two others who posed for the camera with no evident musical associates.

Our first image features a handsome, well-dressed, and well-groomed couple in a studio shot of unknown location and date. Their attire and hairstyles provide perhaps the best evidence for estimating the age of the photo. Based on my own limited knowledge of such things, gained largely from seeing photos of my own ancestors, I judge this to be from around the first decade of the 20th century. Perhaps some OTH reader with a strong knowledge of fashion history can narrow the possible time frame more precisely. No maker’s name is visible on the headstock of the woman’s guitar, nor does the instrument have any particularly distinctive features that might help identify it, and therefore date it. It seems to be an example of the generic sort of instrument that was common at the time.

The fiddler’s face is a wee bit out of focus and he seems to be staring into the middle distance at nothing in particular. The very self-possessed young lady, on the other hand, looks deliberately—even coquettishly—at the camera. Or the photographer. The enigmatic look on her face invites viewers to ponder what thoughts might have been going through her mind.
I likewise have no information about when or where the photo of the couple standing with their instruments was taken. Their attire suggests that they were from the Southwest; indeed, the woman’s outfit looks as though it could have served as inspiration for the costume designers for the musical Oklahoma! Perhaps they did hail from the Sooner State, but this is little more than a hunch on my part—a hunch that is amplified, albeit irrationally, by the fact that the man bears an uncanny resemblance to Will Rogers! In any case, these folks—like so many others we have seen in this series, including all those in our current group—clearly have dressed up for the occasion of having their picture taken; these are not duds they would wear for doing farm or ranch work. The fancy paisley fabric of the woman’s dress indicates that this was a garment to be worn only on special occasions. Their pose suggests that this was something of a promotional shot for their musical services. Perhaps they were set to provide music for a local dance, maybe even at a wedding.

If this woman’s guitar had a maker’s name on the headstock, the placement of her hand prevents us from seeing what it was. Again, the instrument looks to be a generic mail-order guitar, though the bit of purfling around the sound hole and the fancy white ivoroid binding on the body set it a cut or two above average.

The young woman seated by herself with a small guitar on her lap certainly wins the prize for the showiest outfit in this issue’s grouping. Her fancy white dress is even frillier than that of the woman in the first photo, and her hat is a real milliner’s showpiece. She has even dressed up her guitar with a big ribbon on the peghead. Her guitar is exceptionally small—perhaps a special “woman’s model?”

The next photo comes from a studio in Keokuk, Iowa, a small city tucked into the far southeastern corner of the state, at the confluence of the Mississippi and Des Moines rivers. Cross the Des Moines and you’re in Missouri; cross the Mississippi and you end up in Illinois. Keokuk has never been a very large city; its population has shrunk from 14,641 at the time of the census of 1900—which is probably around the time this photo was taken—to 10,780 in 2010. Nevertheless, our young guitarist appears to be quite polished and urbane; there is no hint of anything rural about her. We cannot know who she might have played her small guitar
for, but I will hazard a guess that it was only for family and friends within the confines of the home parlor, rather than in any public venue. There is a penciled inscription on the back that is nearly illegible, but as best I can make out it says: “for grandma from Cora.” And a second line: “Hello grandma, here I am.”

Young Cora’s way of life was probably a world away from that of the African American couple in our final image. That these folks have endured some uncommon hardships in their lives is indicated by the fact that the man’s left foot is missing; he has only a wooden peg in its stead. Their clothing is a good deal less refined than that of the other people featured here. The man’s one remaining shoe is rough and appears to be too long to fit him properly. The overalls that he wears under his long coat are similarly ill-fitting; he has had to roll both legs up quite a bit. Nevertheless, one still gets the impression that they took pains to look their best when getting their picture taken. Both of them look intently at the camera, and project a sense of strength, determination, and pride.

What might their story be? And what sort of music did the woman play? We shall never know, of course, but I like to think that music brought them a measure of pleasure and contentment, whatever the other circumstances of their lives might have been.
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Tradition Comes Out of the Past, But It Happens in the Present

An Interview with Gerry Milnes