

**Bluegrass and
Old Time Music:
Buried Roots of
Early Days**

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Don Cusic, Editor

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Introduction

By Don Cusic

This special edition of the International Country Music Journal, *Bluegrass and Old Time Country Music: Buried Roots of Early Days*, is a collection of articles, most written by country music scholar Wayne Daniel, that profile early pioneers of country and bluegrass music, most of whom have been left behind and forgotten by current fans and historians of country music.

There are profiles on Gid Tanner, fiddling champion Mrs. J.P. Wheeler, the Blue Sky Boys, Fiddlin' John Carson, the Holden Brothers, Curly Collins, the Rice Brothers (the actual writers of "You Are My Sunshine"), Hal Burns, Jim Gaskin, Chubby Wise, Josh Graves, Grady and Hazel Cole, Lulu Belle and Scotty, Cousin Emmy, the Amburgey Sisters, Wilma Lee Cooper, Jumpin' Bill Carlisle, Pete Cassell, Chick Stripling, Boudleaux and Felice Bryant, A.P. Carter, Bill Monroe, Doyle Lawson and Curley Williams.

There are articles about the gospel roots of bluegrass, the Renfro Valley Barn Dance and the songs "Rocky Top" and "Tramp On The Street."

In addition to these articles, most of them previously published in small magazines with limited circulation, there are academic articles about the creation of the song "Orange Blossom Special" by Gregory Hansen, Czech bluegrass music by Lee Bidgood and teaching bluegrass in K-12 schools by James Akenson.

Most of the chapters in this Journal present important, but largely forgotten, people and events that are an important part in the history of bluegrass and country music. These "buried roots" give an insight into the tree of bluegrass and country music since

the first commercially successful country record, “Little Old Log Cabin Down the Lane” b/w “The Old Hen Cackl’d and the Rooster’s Gonna Crow” was recorded by Fiddlin’ John Carson in 1923.

Mountain Soul: The Epic of Bluegrass

By Wayne Daniel

For 200 years, ever since the first Scots-Irish settlers ventured into Appalachia, fiddles stashed under wagon seats or behind saddles, the hills of the South have nurtured a musical sound that speaks to the heart of the pioneer and to American perseverance. Quite a lot of the nurturing has taken place in Georgia. Often the musicians have been kinsmen who got together, as southerners used to do more than now, for church outings, homecomings, house warmings and square dances. Out came the fiddles, banjos, mandolins and hand-made versions of instruments left behind in the dark moors of Ulster and amid the light heather of Inverness. Their music said who these people were. The descendants of those wandering Gaels, the mountain people of Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina and Georgia, display even today a sense of self that's as enduring as their steadfastness and as sure as their loyalty to blood kin and friend. In their music these qualities have always been strong. They echoed the bardic ballads of Ireland and the old songs and lyrics of Scotland — love songs, wedding songs, children's songs, and songs about things that go bump in the night. These musicians made a distinctive American music that now has appeal far beyond the Cumberland and miles away from Rabun Gap.

When this traditional music of the South—the ancestor of bluegrass — went commercial after the advent of radio in the 1920s, the kinsmen who'd played at square dances and homecomings were among the first to go for glory. They'd come a long way for it. In the ways of their Celtic ancestors, these mountain families passed father-to-son a certain talent for the fiddle and the banjo.

And mothers taught their daughters the ballads their mothers had taught them.

The New South was hungry for the sound. The Depression started early here, and in Atlanta, Birmingham, Charlotte and Nashville tens of thousands of mountain families, having despaired of bringing a crop out of rocky highland soil, confronted big-city greed and the realities of an industrialized South. Atlanta cotton mills paid a grown man \$7 for a 60-hour week and his children over age 10 considerably less. In Cabbagetown, and in a thousand other mill villages from one end of Dixie to the other, good men and women, swallowing the cotton dust that would bring a hard early death, scarcely could afford the cornmeal for hoe cakes much less side meat. As much as they needed food and decent shelter they also needed music that was theirs. In those days in Atlanta moonshine came whistling down Bankhead Highway, and the music of the mountains came on the radio. There's still a little white liquor around but it's the music that has prevailed — and the best of it is bluegrass.

In the 1920s, country music on the radio and on records was played by semiprofessionals. Almost always it was a family affair. Atlanta's Fiddlin' John Carson, the first southern white folk musician to have his songs recorded and marketed on a commercial basis, appeared on WSB, The *Atlanta Journal's* new radio station. With him on the air were his wife and daughters. One of his daughters, billed as Moonshine Kate, became a regular in Fiddlin' John's act and toured and recorded with him.

A few years later, Gid Tanner, another fiddler in Atlanta, took his 17-year-old son, Gordon, into the recording studios as a member of the Skillet Lickers band. Young Tanner, who'd learned the fiddle from his father, made "Down Yonder" so popular that it remains a staple in the repertoire of bluegrass fiddlers.

And everybody knows about the Carter Family — a husband

and wife, the husband's sister-in-law and the wife's first cousin. The Carters, who first recorded in 1927, left to their successors a lode of songs that includes "Wabash Cannonball" and "Wildwood Flower."

Brother acts were commonplace. Typically one brother played guitar, the other the mandolin. One sang tenor harmony, the other baritone. In the 1930s such brother acts were heard on practically every radio station in the South. Record companies sought them out, and their music was pressed on thousands of 78 rpm discs. From these brother duets evolved not only the musical style called bluegrass but also the very name itself.

The man responsible for the name was Bill Monroe. And the name more or less got its start in Atlanta. Bill was born the last of eight children in 1911, a Kentuckian whose family mined coal and farmed. His mother sang mountain ballads and played the fiddle. A maternal uncle, also a fiddler, gave young Bill his blessing. "When I first can remember him," Monroe told historian Neil Rosenberg, "he'd bring his fiddle and he'd stay a night or so, and after supper, why, we'd get him to fiddle. We'd just all gang up around him and listen to him fiddle —maybe for an hour, an hour and a half."

By the time Bill was twelve years old he was playing guitar to his uncle's fiddle and going around to square dances on the back of a mule. At 18, Bill, who'd learned the mandolin, formed a trio with his two older brothers, who both fiddled. And now and again, Bill worked with them until the two older Monroes died. They played all over the Midwest. Then Bill and Charlie Monroe, billed as the Monroe Brothers, headed for Dixie where they made records for RCA Victor and performed on the radio.

The turning point was in Atlanta. During Bill's peregrinations around the country, looking for radio jobs, he stopped for a while here and met a musician named Cleo Davis. Together they formed

the Blue Grass Boys. A year later, in October 1939, the Blue Grass Boys played on the Grand Ole Opry.

But there's more. In 1945, Monroe hired a musician from North Carolina named Earl Scruggs, who played the five-string banjo in a way not widely heard in country bands at that time. He used his thumb and first two fingers — each reinforced with picks to produce a sound and technique that was decidedly different from the old-time (frailing style) of playing. The addition of Scruggs' five-string banjo sound to those of the fiddle, the rhythm guitar, the bass and the mandolin resulted in what is now considered the composition and sound of the classic bluegrass ensemble. Music scholars consider that the birth of bluegrass music occurred when Scruggs first began performing with Monroe's Blue Grass Boys. The family-act tradition in bluegrass about is the Lewis family of Lincolnton, Georgia. Three generations of Lewises: Roy "Pop" Lewis to his grandson, Lewis Phillips — with brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins and in-laws in between. At bluegrass festivals they frequently filled the stage with as many as eleven pickers and singers. Traveling over 100,000 miles every year in a customized Greyhound-size bus, the Lewis Family brought to their listeners the culmination of several generations of family involvement in gospel music, which is their specialty.

"My daddy had a gospel quartet and my sisters played the piano," Pop says. "We all went to singing schools and sang every chance we got. I wanted a fiddle so bad when I was growing up, but my daddy was real religious, and he was afraid I might not turn out too good if I took up fiddling. But when I got grown, I bought myself a fiddle, a banjo, and a mandolin."

Pop's wife was the daughter of a Congregational Holiness preacher and an accomplished singer and guitar player when she and Pop married in 1925. "We used to make music together," says

Pop, “and as the children started coming along they showed an interest in all those instruments around the house, too.”

There were eight children, all of whom became musicians. The beginnings of the Lewis Family act go back to the late 1940s when four of the boys organized an old-time country band to perform at community functions in Lincoln County. When two of the brothers dropped out, Pop and the three girls in the family filled their places. As Pop’s children had children, they joined the act.

Bluegrass festivals saved bluegrass in the 1950s when country music was infiltrated by rock ‘n’ roll influences and assaulted by Nashville record producers who desired to make the music more sophisticated — and presumably more commercial. People who preferred the purer sounds looked to the bluegrass of Monroe and his imitators as the last bastion of authentic traditional mountain music. In the 1960s folk-music enthusiasts from all across North America were attracted to the folk-like sounds of bluegrass bands and to vocal stylings that betrayed a true debt to the southern folk tradition.

Because radio disc jockeys took their cues from the country music tastemakers in Nashville, who considered bluegrass “too country,” the performers of bluegrass found themselves cut off from their fans. As a remedy they invented the bluegrass festival in 1965. Festivals give pros and semiprofessionals the chance to play to paying audiences. From a half-dozen to as many as 50 bands take turns on stage in programs that usually last from 7 p.m. to midnight on Fridays and from noon to midnight on Saturdays.

This article originally appeared in *Creative Loafing* (June 21, 1986, pp. 1A, 11A).

Obituary: Bill Monroe

By Wayne Daniel

What if there had been no Bill Monroe?

Bluegrass music as we know it today would not exist. As World War II was drawing to a close, the trend in country music was away from its roots. The electric steel guitar was soon to become the signature instrument of the genre. The electric straight guitar and drums were already accepted instruments in many country music bands, whose leaders dreamed of the riches and renown of super stardom. The five-string banjo was considered to be a novelty instrument and had been largely relegated to the custody of country comedians. The glory days of the mandolin, along with the hillbilly brother duets who had popularized it, were on the wane. The dimly lit bar would soon replace the brightly burning home fireplace as a favored locale in country music lyrics as songs about mother and home took a back seat to those chronicling the dangers and delights of cheating and drinking.

Bill Monroe bucked this trend. With characteristic stubborn determination he elected to continue to sing traditional songs in a traditional style and to promote the playing of traditional tunes on traditional instruments. Through his high standards of musicianship, his relentless quest for rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic perfection, and his belief in the worth and dignity of the music he loved, he served as a cultural conduit, bridging the gap between a generation reared on old-time music and one that had to acquire a taste for it. Monroe articulated his role as the bearer of a musical tradition in an interview with writer James Rooney: “I have always been proud of the people I came from in Kentucky and growing up the way that I did in the country and to learn what old-time music was really all about and to study it ever since I was

a young boy and then to make it do something later on in years and to originate a music.”

What of this music so dear to Bill Monroe? It was the music of his parents, his ancestors, and his neighbors. Of his father who was a dancer and his mother who sang old-time songs and ballads and played the harmonica, accordion, and fiddle. His was the music of a maternal uncle, old-time fiddle player Pen Vanderver, and of a black friend named Arnold Schultz who was a blues-style fiddler and flat-picking guitarist. Monroe’s music was also that of shape note singing schools taught in local Baptist and Methodist churches. These were the influences that shaped the music of Bill Monroe as he performed at dances, play parties, and impromptu jam sessions in the vicinity of his birthplace, Rosine, Kentucky. These were the musical elements that he took with him when, at the age of 18, he left Kentucky to join his brothers, Charlie and Birch, in the Chicago area where they worked in factories by day and made music at night. These were the musical traditions from which Bill and Charlie fashioned the hard-driving, fast-paced, high-pitched, instrumentally-dexterous sound they introduced to radio and record-buying audiences when they decided to become full-time professional musicians performing as the Monroe Brothers. These were the components of the sound that won for Bill Monroe a lifetime spot on the Grand Ole Opry. These were the ingredients that he skillfully blended together to form what today we call bluegrass music.

What if there had been no Bill Monroe?

We might be having to visit a museum to see a mandolin, occupying a place alongside the lute and the zither as examples of musical instruments that were once popular but now had fallen into disuse. Unquestionably, Bill Monroe made the mandolin popular beyond the wildest dreams of Orville Gibson and Lloyd Loar. Before Monroe the role of the mandolin in hillbilly music

had been mainly that of rhythmic accompaniment with occasional breaks that stuck strictly to the melody line. In the hands of the man from Rosine the instrument became a driving force in acoustic string bands. He exploited its potential and demonstrated its virtuosity. His aggressive and forceful style with its textures, dynamics, resonances, and melodic complexities inspired a host of followers, admirers, and imitators. Forced to take up the mandolin because his older brothers had exercised first dibs on the guitar and fiddle, Monroe was determined that a third-choice instrument would not make him a second-class instrumentalist. As he once explained to James Rooney, “When I started to play the mandolin I wanted to be sure that I didn’t play like nobody else, and I was going to have a style of my own with the mandolin. And I worked it out until it did become a style.”

What if there had been no Bill Monroe?

The body of American music would be much the poorer for the absence of his many compositions. Try to imagine a jam session or concert of string-band music without “Summertime Is Past and Gone,” “It’s Mighty Dark to Travel,” “Little Cabin on the Hill,” “My Little Georgia Rose,” “Uncle Pen,” “Raw Hide,” “Wheel Hoss,” and “Jerusalem Ridge”. And what about “Kentucky Waltz”? If Bill Monroe had not written that song, there probably wouldn’t be a “Tennessee Waltz” either. Composers Pee Wee King and Redd Stewart acknowledge that they were inspired to write their famous waltz after having heard Monroe’s earlier song. One also wonders what song Elvis Presley would have put on his first record if Monroe had not written “Blue Moon of Kentucky”.

What if there had been no Bill Monroe?

A lot of very talented musicians, no doubt, would be pursuing careers in fields other than music. The number of fiddlers, guitarists, banjoists, vocalists, and bassists who have graduated from the Blue Grass Boys School of Music are legion. Many, after having

been exposed to Bill Monroe's approach to the art, have gone on to become stars in the genre of which their one-time mentor is the acknowledged father. In recalling former Blue Grass Boys who have done well, those who readily come to mind include Clyde Moody, Lester Flatt, Earl Scruggs, Don Reno, Carter Stanley, Mac Wiseman, Jimmy Martin, Vassar Clements, Sonny Osborne, Bill Keith, and Carl Story.

Then there are the untold numbers of bluegrass musicians who, though they never worked in Monroe's band, were influenced by his music through records, stage concerts, and radio broadcasts.

What might these musicians have learned from Monroe? In an interview with scholar L. Mayne Smith, the father of bluegrass summarized his approach to his music: "You always play it the best you can. Play it good and clean and play good melodies with it, and keep perfect time. It takes really good timing with bluegrass music, and it takes some good high voices to really deliver it right." No better lesson could be learned by any musician in any genre.

What would have been the fate of many present-day bluegrass musicians if Bill Monroe had not been there when they needed him?

Take, for instance, Earl Scruggs. No one can argue with his colossal talent and the importance of his contribution to bluegrass music. But, at a certain juncture in his life, he needed Bill Monroe to showcase his musical gifts. Who else in Nashville was looking for a banjo player in 1945?

Although most of the musicians who worked with Bill Monroe have acknowledged their debt to that apprenticeship, Monroe, himself, felt, at least at one time, that some would prefer to conceal their association with him. In his book, *Bluegrass: A History*. Neil Rosenberg quotes a statement that Monroe once made from

a bluegrass festival stage: “It’s a shame a lot of bluegrass people ... don’t want to be on a show with you or something, if the folks will think you started them. Well it’s the truth, so they shouldn’t a-mind that and they should be glad that they got a start, they’d-a probably had to plowed a lot of furrows if they hadn’t-a been in bluegrass music.” Or spun a lot of yam in a textile mill, or filled a lot of hoppers with number nine coal.

Country music enthusiasts old enough to remember listening to the early days of the Grand Ole Opry will recall the wistful little poem with which emcee George D. Hay always closed the show. If Hay, the man who, when he hired Bill Monroe for the Opry, vowed never to fire him, had been living and emceeing the program on the Saturday night following Monroe’s death, he might have altered his closing words slightly to inform listeners that

... the tall pines pine
And the pawpaws pause
And the bumble bees bumble all around,
The grasshoppers hop
And the eavesdroppers drop
While, gently, another great musician slips away.

A Bill Monroe Chronology

- Born: Rosine, Kentucky, September 13, 1911.
- Starts playing mandolin: about 1920, at the age of 8 or 9.
- Leaves Kentucky for Chicago area: 1929, at age 18.
- First professional work: 1932 - 1934, as a square dancer with a radio station WLS (Chicago) road show.
- Performs with Charlie at Chicago World’s Fair (Bill on fiddle, Charlie on banjo): 1933.
- Monroe Brothers (Bill and Charlie) form duet: 1934.
- Monroe Brothers make first records: 1936.
- Monroe Brothers disband: 1938.

- Blue Grass Boys formed: 1938.
- Hired by Grand Ole Opry: 1939.
- First Blue Grass Boys records (Victor): 1940.
- Lester Flatt joins Blue Grass Boys: about 1944.
- Earl Scruggs joins Blue Grass Boys: 1945.
- Lester Flatt leaves Blue Grass Boys: 1948.
- Earl Scruggs leaves Blue Grass Boys: 1948.
- First long-play album (Decca, DL 8731): August 1958.
- First appearance at event called “bluegrass festival” (Luray, Virginia): July 4, 1961.
- Inducted into Country Music Hall of Fame: 1970.
- Dies: September 9, 1996.

This article originally appeared on *The SEBA Breakdown*, November 1996, pp. 1, 6.

Bill Monroe and Czech Bluegrassers: Imagination and the Production of Place in Music

By Lee Bidgood

Introduction

At a bluegrass jam in a Prague pub in 2003 a guitar player, upon learning that I was an American fiddler, came up to me and confessed that he had originally thought (before the age of the internet) that the song “Orange Blossom Special” was a Czech creation. I didn’t get a chance to speak further with that individual, but the interaction sticks with me, especially since I grew up in North Florida not far from the actual origin of that song in the Jacksonville area. That a Czech would think this is a song about an orange-colored train moving through a Czech landscape seemed inconceivable to me.

I however, had yet to learn about the Greenhorns, a group who helped spread bluegrass-related music making among Czech speakers in their heyday during the 1960s and ‘70s. I was just beginning to grasp the extent of Czech Americanism—projects by which Europeans recreate aspects of the United States on their own soil and on their own terms—and the degree to which terms like “country” and “bluegrass” have come to have their won meaning in the Czech landscape.

Ideas about authenticity are key to place-identities in bluegrass—and scholarship, as Carney’s study of origins and Cherre’s reliance on Appalachian linguistic traits indicate. Many insider and outsider descriptions of bluegrass music

characterize it as an intensely “real” form of country music, due to its acoustic sound, rural origin stories, the small-scale nature of bluegrass industries, etc. Scholars are more reserved about this characterization but acknowledge the existence of the perception, for example stating that bluegrass has attracted fans “with a traditional bent” (Malone and Neal 323). Richard Peterson discusses the role bluegrass served within the country music industry as a venue for “hard core” expression of traditionalism in (150-155).

Peterson further maintains that authenticities in country music are fabricated as part of a renewable industrial system that hinges on audience imagination and artist creativity. I extend his ideas by arguing that Bluegrass’ appeal to bluegrass participants is based in a sense of place that is to a significant degree constructed and/or imagined. In seeking to understand the connections between place and imagination, I provide an alternative to essentializing narratives of heritage and place-identity that have accrued to bluegrass in its relatively short history.

I will contrast some of the early history of bluegrass with cases from my research in bluegrass-related music making in the Czech Republic to make points through this essay, to provide extreme examples of the imaginative fabrication of place that is part of the production of bluegrass. My intent in this essay is not to compare Czech and American approaches to bluegrass, but treat them as equally part of the same “Bluegrass diaspora” that followed the postwar folk boom. It was in this period (when it saw the greatest geographic growth) that bluegrass became culturally embedded as an icon of rurality and placedness. Bluegrass is thus an excellent case for considering how music making and the imagination of geography are key parts of the manipulation of space and sound that make life livable.

Real Imaginary Geographies

The idea of an imagined geography is not new. Colonialist “perceived geographies” are a central part of the problem that Edward Said found in *Orientalism*. This line of thinking that has been maintained, for example in Morgan’s critique (2000) of political ideologies instilled through geography pedagogy (Morgan) and in Gregory’s casting of the United States’ “war on terror” as a similarly biased form of colonialist place-making (2004). Considering imagination and sense of space is becoming more common in current geographic literature, including the volume from Janowski and Ingold that highlights heritage, archaeology, and anthropology, as well as courses like Bruce Erickson’s “Imagined Landscapes” (GEOG 4250) at York University.¹

While bluegrass music is deeply rooted in a sense of place, and is subject to an array of imagination (including idealization, and nostalgia), geographical studies of bluegrass-music making have not connected the two. Carney’s factual geographies of bluegrass and country music address the more “apolitical” issues of diffusion and development in spatial understandings of culture and change, with a heavy emphasis on the birthplace of musicians that leaves the actual impact of their music unconsidered (Robbins 10). Studies by Vincent Cherre Matthew Sweet focus on song texts, and include reception as a part of the phenomenon of bluegrass, but focus on the Appalachian region and on text in ways that limit their findings. John Bealle’s study of stage talk, while not focused on place-making, provides tantalizing discussion of the way performers use place-references to structure festival performance interactions (Bealle).

The practice of translating or transforming a landscape – what I call “re-placing – is a common practice among European

Americanist hobbyists. Americanism is a common Central European project, one that has flourished before, during, and after the Communist era as a distinctly regional and bottom-up response to global socio-political situations. Americanism often emerges as a transformation of commercial media—in forms of active consumption.

The media that are significant for Czech bluegrass-related Americanists come from the United States, partly—some are European in origin. For example, many of my Czech colleagues have told me in interviews that they were inspired to play bluegrass by images of the Wild West informed in part by American cowboy films, but were shaped more profoundly by the Western novels of German author Karl May. May's stories, about the Apache Winnetou and the German immigrant gunfighter Old Shatterhand were published in the 1890s. They were later translated into most European languages and made into German films that present a distinctively European (and largely fictional) image of "America" that is still widely circulated through TV reruns. Sammons (1998) provides a critique of May and other Americanist German authors from a United States-centered perspective, while Goral's work (2014) on use of "western" imagery in the two cold-war-era German states provides a view more rooted in Central European mentalities.

Persisting into the twenty-first century, Czech Americanists embody Alexei Yurchak's reinterpretation of "re-territorialization" in the Soviet sphere—they reproduce elements of "America" but at the same time have "shifted, built upon, and added new meanings to it"(Yurchak 116). Yurchak's view of discourse (Bakhtin 75) imagines voices that are not "self-enclosed" but which "call back and forth to each other, and are reflected in one another," an idea that takes on spatiality in geographer Doreen Massey's characterization of places as socially illuminated

collections of simultaneously interactive stories (Massey 130). The discourse of Czech Americanist music-making, then, while “transitional” (Schechner 99) can emerge in durable re-creative sites. The recasting of place in bluegrass can occur over years, among vast numbers of people, and while I describe the process as imagination, this process can have very real effects

In this essay I add to this framework the playful consideration of European re-creation of “America” by Ruth Ellen Gruber in her work on Jewish tourist sites and the “European Wild West.” Gruber’s notion of the “real imaginary” is a way of considering the production of fanciful and factual elements in the construction of expressive spaces (Gruber 1994). Using terms like “hyperreality” and “new authenticities,” Gruber emphasizes the additive nature of the European creation of “real-imaginary” Americanist projects that resonate with the work of nostalgia and ingenuity in societies that have been traumatized by events like State Socialism or the Holocaust—the sorts of culture-space interactions geographers Massey (1994) and Mitchell (2000) describe in their work to outline space and place not as fixed entities but as fluid interactions. Music is fruitfully considered as music-making, and thus place as well, through processes of place-making.

I choose these ideas as foundations for this study since they present the bluegrass experience as an emergent process that starts with acts of music- and space-making on a small-scale level (Small). This music takes place in a thriving subculture that affords participants agency and flexibility as they negotiate space and sound with local and globalized forces (Slobin; Krister and Malm). Although they may be inspired by fantasy, musical sound provides bluegrassers with a means to carve out actual spaces for their dreams.

Bluegrass Background: Strategic Geographic Essentialism

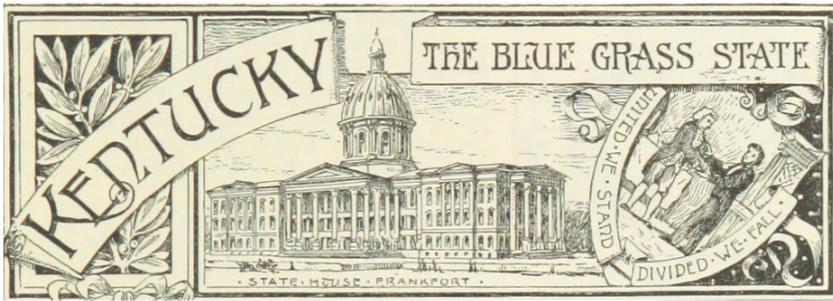
The history of the term “bluegrass” reveals considerable imaginative effort at the root of the music’s history. While bluegrass is often considered an iconic element in Southern culture, geographic examination of putative “Father of Bluegrass” Bill Monroe’s life might tend to associate him with the Midwest more than the South. Furthermore, Monroe’s creative and entrepreneurial image-creation as a performer and bandleader wove a mythical history and “place” for bluegrass music, one that has even come to inform factual geographies.



**[2. Image: “Gray’s Map of Kentucky and Tennessee, detail” -
3. Image: “Kentucky, 1895” - CAPTION: “Gray’s Map of Kentucky
and Tennessee shows Rosine Kentucky’s situation on the
Paducah and Elizabethton line, what later became the Illinois
Central Railroad; the 1895 image shows Ohio County’s location
in the western part of the state, in the orbit of metropolises like St.
Louis and the northern Indiana industrial centers near Chicago,
where Monroe would eventually migrate for work. Maps courtesy
of Kentucky Secretary of State.”]**

Monroe was born in an area more linked to the Ohio River and the industrial and agricultural economy of the Plains and Great Lakes than that of Appalachia or the Piedmont, regions often linked with the development of bluegrass (Huber). In his biographical portrait of Monroe, Richard Smith indicates that Monroe’s hometown of Rosine lies far from the bluegrass region of the state

in the hardscrabble farm and coal fields of the Pennyroyal area and on opposite end of Kentucky from the Appalachian mountains with which bluegrass music is often associated (Smith 206). Like many low-income rural families, the Monroes were subject to the pressures that pushed the “great migration”; Bill and his brothers moved north seeking industrial jobs. Monroe’s work in the Chicago area in the oil industry led both to exposure to mid-western swing and New Orleans jazz (which Monroe has alluded to in his discussions about the tune “Milenberg Joy,” and to his first musical employment as a precision square dancer for the WLS National Barn Dance touring company (Rosenberg 29; Cantwell 47).

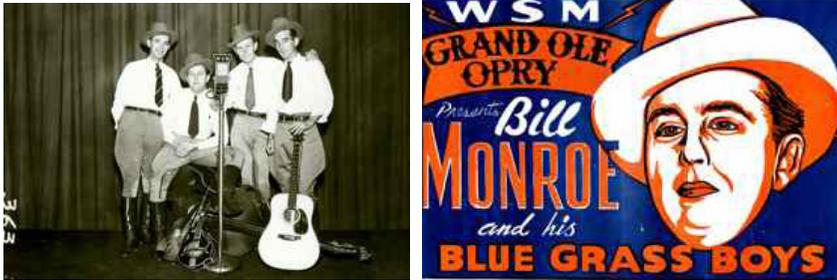


[4. Image: “Blue Grass State” – CAPTION: “This image of Kentucky as the “Blue Grass” state was published in London in 1891.”]

The “Blue Grass” regional designation was adopted through strategic synecdoche as the nickname of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, calling attention to the relatively wealthy region around Lexington in the central-northern part of the state. After separating from his brother Charlie, Bill Monroe as a savvy entrepreneur chose the “Blue Grass Boys” band name to establish, through a bit of geographic creativity and essentialism, a recognizable brand associated with his home state. Instead of opting for hillbilly garb or simple suits, Monroe chose to dress his early band in jodhpurs and snappy Stetson hats. With these gestures Monroe followed

Kentucky in seeking to cultivate a refined image of rural gentility in referring to the high-class horse-country of the Blue Grass region.

Monroe assembled a cast of “Blue Grass Boys” and annealed an array of musical and theatrical elements together with his own



[5. Image: MonroeBand – Caption: “Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys in the early 1940s, wearing their riding britches and high-class Stetson hats. Image © Grand Ole Opry, LLC, used with permission]

[6. IMAGE – MonroePoster – CAPTION: “A publicity poster for Monroe’s band as part of the Opry cast, likely from the early 1940s. Courtesy of Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Leon McIntyre Collection.]

fiery spirit and searing mandolin chops to create his distinctive “bluegrass” sound and show. The mix of new compositions and instrumental innovations, popular song, gospel, fiddle tunes, brother duet harmonies, comedy, heritage, and reverence made Monroe sound both new and old, an in-between state that would persist through the establishment of “bluegrass” in the 1950s and beyond

As this sound grew popular with other performers in the nascent country music scene, Monroe’s territorial possessiveness also led to use of the term “bluegrass” out of exigency, on radio broadcasts. When Monroe’s rivals played an imitation of his style, it could be called “bluegrass” so as to avoid invoking Monroe’s actual name-- and provoking a quarrel with the notoriously hot-tempered Monroe. Everett Lilly recalls that while performing with Lester Flatt and Earl

Scruggs after their stormy departure from Monroe's band, he heard audience members asking "would you please do an old bluegrass tune?" In Lilly's view, "the public named bluegrass music...through the fear to speak Bill's name to them" (Rosenberg 102).

The new "bluegrass" designation soon came to indicate a rural-rooted expressivity with powerful emotional and commercial resonance not limited to musical practice. A shift in usage from "Blue Grass" to "bluegrass" in business, government, and informal terminology that paralleled or followed the rise of the musical term indicates the currency of "bluegrass" as an imagined territorial designation.²



[7. Image: "Blue Grass Restaurant" - Bluegrass Restaurant
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/ctod/2682641173>
Photo credit: ctbirdsong

No changes were made to the original image.
License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/legalcode>]

[8. Image: "Bluegrass Inn on Broadway in Nashville"
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/edgebrook/4804789342>
Photo credit: Marko Forsten

No changes were made to the original image.
License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/legalcode> - CAPTION : "These two images show the range of usage for the "Bluegrass" and "Blue Grass" terms today. "]

As the “bluegrass” term became commonplace in the 1950s and ‘60s, Monroe lost his distinctive musical “brand” but gained folkloric cachet as the “Father of bluegrass music.” The other side of this coin, however, was that by the end of the 1960s bluegrass had developed—through the poetic license of the folkloric process celebrated during this period--into a panoply of -grass forms: jazzgrass, rockgrass, newgrass, etc. The dilution of what remained of the geographic relationship with the Blue Grass was compounded by the blurring of music-stylistic boundaries as well. Through the second half of the twentieth century “bluegrass” became a flexible and intrinsically “representational” (Cantwell ix) medium that afforded diverse participants means to convey a variety of meanings--meanings that were real and tangible even for participants from places far removed from rural areas of Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, or any of the homelands claimed for “bluegrass.” Gardner’s work on music festivals and the creation of portable community is a recent case study, but earlier examples abound, for example the California innovations of the Kentucky Colonels and the string band scene of Boston and NYC in the 1960s-70s (Rosenberg 132-161, 192). In the twenty-first century, the “place-making” involved in bluegrass music-making has become less about actual geography, and more about imagined connections as well as sonic and social relationships.

Media, place, and movement

As in the United States, Czech interest in bluegrass was from the beginning mediated by the exigencies of performers’ lifestyles, as well as the nature of broadcast and recording technology. Rosenberg has pointed out that the Monroe Brothers and other early country groups undertook “Great migrations” very different from their contemporaries in rural locations through the south –

the followed media forces, traveling to seek jobs at radio stations, not taking part in the larger flows north and west from the west of the Appalachians, or east from the ridge.

These movements, shaped by the contours of the mediascape not the actual landscape, have become a normal part of life for professional musicians of all kinds, but it is striking that these artists who were forging the prototypes for the most place-based of musics (country and bluegrass) would have done it at the same time that they were leading the *least* placed-based of lifestyles.

In contrast Czech musicians do not experience the “road life” nearly as much as their American counterparts do (whatever their genre of performance) as the country in which they travel to perform is small enough to traverse in a few hours of driving. Czech artists (even bluegrass ones) do tour abroad, but the vast majority work in-country. There are many American country songs about traveling, “the road” and the hardships of the life of traveling musicians. While there are Czech songs about traveling—and hard traveling by musicians—many of them are translations of American songs. I sense that when Czechs sing about travel, therefore, they are imagining a geographic malaise: what it must feel like to be far away from home.

Media have provided another way to cast sounds and feelings in space—for both American and Czech bluegrassers. Rosenberg’s account of the early development of bluegrass in the United States and Canada indicates how central radio and other media were important to the growing interest in this style (Rosenberg 68-103).

The genesis of the Greenhorns (one of the early Czech bluegrass-related bands) reveals the important role that media has played in spreading and shaping bluegrass as both a large-scale and local phenomenon. Marko Čermák, the group’s founding banjoist,

first heard bluegrass sounds from US military radio broadcast out of the AFN studios in Munich, West Germany. Čermák recalls hearing “bluegrass as it should be” played by Earl Scruggs and his banjo—likely on the daily afternoon show “Stickbuddy Jamboree” in which deejay “Wagon Wheel Willy” spun thirty minutes of “country and western RE-corded music.”

Tuning in to the show, Czechs like Čermák became part of the network of audiences in the United States who heard and were electrified by the sounds of the five-string banjo and the bluegrass lineup.³ In a very real way, European listeners were in another version of the same mediascape as those listening to those same sounds in the United States—the boundaries between physical territories were blurred by media.

The rise of social media has meant that Czech bluegrassers today are even more at home in the mediascape that surrounds them. Firstly, they, like the rest of us, can find a panoply of historic recordings by significant players and recorded concerts by current stars, just a click away. The wealth of instructional videos on sites like YouTube, as well as the growing industry of lessons taught through video chat applications online, or through asynchronous video exchange makes learning about bluegrass much easier than it was in past decades.

In addition, production of media on sites like YouTube and Facebook allows Czech bluegrassers to create their own thriving music mediascapes, with complicated topographies of aesthetics, relationships, and even commerce. In addition to bulding a sense of community, this activity maps the virtual world of music within Czech-language cyberspace, and in faint ways, upon the Czech landscape itself. At the same time, social media sites place Czech and American videos side-by-side, or in the same lists of search results, eliding the geographical distance that separates these musicians in real life.

Bluegrass as part of the Czech Landscape: Photos



[16. Image - Greenhorns71back CAPTION: "The album "Greenhorns '71"—featuring the group's adaptation of "Orange Blossom Special"—ushered in the era of the group's greatest success, when they gained an enduring foothold in Czech musical life. From author's collection.]"



[9. Image: CountryClubJihlava2003-cropped - CAPTION: "The Country Club in Jihlava, 2003, venue for bluegrass groups in the bluegrass-rich Vysočina Highlands region between Prague and Brno."]



[10. Image: Hustopece-Dilna-2009-PIC_1661 - CAPTION: “Daily schedule at the 2009 bluegrass workshop in Hustopeče, one of the largest weekend teaching events held in the Czech Republic. Photo by the author.”]



[11. Image: BanjoJamboreePoster2004. CAPTION: “As the poster announces, Banjo Jamboree is the oldest European bluegrass festival. The official festival of the Czech bluegrass association, it is held annually just east of Prague in the town of Čáslav. Photo by the author.”]



[12. Image – Jamgrass festival-Blackjack
CAPTION: Blackjack performing at the Jamgrass festival in the southern Bohemian town of Jindřichův Hradec under a banner indicating that hybridized forms of the “bluegrass” term proliferate in Czech as well. Photo by the author.”

Bluegrass: Invasion vs. cultivation

The natural landscape often provides a sense of fixity in space, as it seems more permanent than human-built environments. Doreen Massey (2005) contends that this view is an illusion as natural landscapes, like socially created spaces, are events that are in flux—albeit often in a slower state of change. Biological communities are part of the fluidity of natural spaces. If we might consider bluegrass as a transplant in the Czech Republic—part of the changing ecology—we might also see it as a weed - one that has been so prolific that it has outcompeted existing “native varieties” of vernacular or “folkloric” music.⁴ The flourishing of tramping and tramp song within Czech society underscores the problem of “folklore” in Bohemia, especially in the region surrounding Prague. In conversation, I have found that many Czechs—including Czech ethnomusicologist Zuzana Jurková—cite a lack of a vital local Bohemian folklore among their reasons for explaining the flourishing of Czech bluegrass.

The patchwork of microregions in neighboring Moravia (the region to the east and south of Prague)—each with their own *kroj* (folk costume), dialects, dance and song styles—presents a

different situation. Antonín Dvořák and other collector-arrangers of folkloric music drew heavily on these regions, more than they did from the western part of the Czech-speaking lands. In the heartland of Bohemia there are fewer distinctive “folkloric” practices to celebrate. The south Bohemian Strakonice bagpipe traditions and the songs of the Chodsko region located near Domažlice on the western border with Germany are exceptions that seem to prove the rule (Markl and Karbusicky).

Another way of looking at the transplanted practices that make up Czech Americanism, though, is to view them as non-native varieties that have been intentionally cultivated. Invasive plants are often identified as those that thrive and spread in “disturbed” areas of a landscape, and there has been a riot of disturbance in Central Europe during the last 150 years, the period in which I argue that Czech Americanism emerged. However, my person-centered perspective leads me to consider Czechs’ Americanist projects as acts of cultivation, not submission to a globalizing invasion. I am reframing our view on Czech Americanism thus both in terms of the timeline of transplantation (dating back to ca. 1900 if not earlier) and the intimate integration of the transplanted American elements into the Czech landscape.

Thus adoption of American elements could be seen as part of the continuity of urban folkloric music, such as staropražské písničky of composer Karel Hašler and other “old Prague” songs” comparable to the 19th century musics preserved in Vienna, the Wienerlied and Schrammelmusik (Jurková 2012) The overlap between these musics and bluegrass-related music-making is slight but strong - an example is Petr Kus, who is a pillar of the Czech bluegrass world as a mandolinist, bandleader, and songwriter, and also plays bass with the band “Šlapeto,” who play staropražské lidové písničky.

Conclusion

There are arguments that bluegrass as a species has Old World roots. Many horticulturists and biogeographers hold that Kentucky bluegrass itself (known formally as *poa pratensis L.*) is not native to the Americas, but was brought by European settlers.⁵ Furthermore, while it is cultivated for its durability and utility for applications like golf courses and ball fields, in some habitats on the United States' plains the grass is considered an invasive that harmfully outcompetes native species.⁶ This bit of biological trivia becomes a playful way for European bluegrassers to establish their connections to the music: The Bluegrass Boogiemens, one of the top bands in the Netherlands list on their website an early modern classification of bluegrass as “any of several American grasses of the *Poa* genus and having a bluish cast, earlier called Dutch grass.”⁷ Geographer and political ecologist Paul Robbins argues that a critically informed sense of space and place can serve as a “seed” rather than a “hatchet,” leading to “progressive,” reparative understandings of phenomena such as the imagined spatiality of bluegrass as it is cultivated by Czechs (Robbins 13; Sedgwick 124). European Americanism, blending humor, passion, and calculation is indeed a richly diverse—perhaps organic—bottom-up response to the pressures of global economies and politics.

This essay's juxtaposition of Bill Monroe's creative place-making with the production of bluegrass as an emplaced part of Czech life is a striking one, but one that indicates the importance of considering imagination in music making. Fictions are an important part of culture—and fictional (and partly-fictional) places are similarly significant. Bluegrass has become a productive imagined geography, worldwide, and serves as a prime example how place as a fluid, constructed aspect of culture. The commitment of Czech bluegrassers to the real imaginary places they build through

bluegrass shows that these spaces are nonetheless a necessary part of studying the geography of music.

Ethnomusicology today emphasizes views of music as a social process—one, I would add, that can thrive in individual or corporate imagination, but which can also real in powerfully tangible ways in the spaces between people. Doreen Massey’s description of space articulated in time—with spaces negotiated by different and sometimes competing senses of time—thus illuminates Schutz’s conception of musical participation as the mutual-tuning-in relationship” of simultaneity (Massey 2005, 140; Schutz, 161). Actors inevitably imagine themselves into or out of simultaneity not only in the organized time of sound, but in the resonant architecture of space. Thinking of that resonating space in-between as a *place* requires an additional step, however, understanding the meanings and beliefs that shape participants’ perceptions and their imaginations. Our understanding of musical sound gains greater depth when we consider the real-imagined territories where sound relationships take place.

Endnotes

- 1 More on the York class here: <http://imaginedlandscapes.wordpress.com/>
- 2 Ambiguity persists, with both terms used seemingly interchangeably. Lexington's Blue Grass airport (founded 1940) keeps the two-word phrase (<https://www.bluegrassairport.com/history.html> accessed 7/26/2014) and the Kentucky governmental website provides mixed messages, with the State Nickname as "The Bluegrass State" but the State Silverware Pattern as "Old Kentucky Blue Grass, the Georgetown Pattern" (<http://migration.kentucky.gov/stateSymbols.htm> accessed 7/26/2014). In the present day, use of the term of "Blue Grass" tends to indicate a feeling of antiquity or heritage.
- 3 Musicians often listened the radio as they traveled by car; Robert S. Jamieson explains that he had to pull over the car into the ditch the first time he heard Bill Monroe (Jamieson 53). John Hartford's song "On the radio" described how he "bounced off-a all four walls" hearing early bluegrass-style broadcasts; John Hartford, *Good Old Boys* [Audio CD] (Rounder, 1999).
- 4 Defining "folk" can be contentious: Anthropologist Andrew Lass (1989) critiques the Czech construction of "the folk" and traces modern ideologies and conceptions of Czechness and of "Czech folk culture." Evoking present-day concerns of identity politics, Lass argues that Czech notions of an "other" ca. 1900 used Moravian folkness to support constructions of Českost (Czechness) based on exclusion of non-Czech groups such as Germans and Roma (gypsies).
- 5 For a discussion of arguments for and against the "native" hypothesis for *Poa pratensis* see Cronquist et al. (1977).

- 6 While the USDA NRCS fact sheet on *Poa pratensis* notes that the variety “is excellent for ball fields and other heavy use areas such as camp grounds, golf fairways, and picnic areas”; see Tony Bush, “Kentucky Bluegrass Plant Fact Sheet,” http://plants.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs_popr.pdf. On the other hand, the Global Invasive Species Database includes it in their listing of non-native invasive plants, outlining its negative effects on native species in the northern Great Plains; see <http://www.issg.org/database/species/ecology.asp?si=1419&fr=1>.
- 7 <http://bluegrassboogiemer.nl/introduction/> accessed 4/7/2015.

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Making a Joyful Noise Unto the Lord: The Gospel Roots of Bluegrass

By Wayne Daniel

No bluegrass program would be complete unless it featured at least one gospel song, and those who attend bluegrass festivals know that, by the time the festivities are over, they will hear a great deal of gospel music. And that's the way they like it.

The bluegrass fan's love of gospel music has been sufficient to sustain several professional groups —the Lewis Family, the Easter Brothers, and the Sullivan Family, for example —whose repertoires consisted entirely of gospel material. Even those groups who are known primarily for their renditions of secular songs and tunes usually include one or more gospel songs on their stage shows and record albums. What festival audience would let the Country Gentlemen, Doyle Lawson, or the Johnson Mountain Boys leave the stage without doing a gospel number? And to what other sub type of bluegrass music would a group devote an entire album? Bob Artis, author of a book entitled *Bluegrass*, was correct when he wrote that “Religious music has kept scores of good bluegrass musicians and their families fed and clothed.”

Lester Flatt recognized the importance of sacred music in his career. Speaking of the quartet singing that was always a prominent feature of every program by the Foggy Mountain Boys, and later the Nashville Grass, he once said that “it's played as big a part in our show as anything, because so many people like the sacred numbers.” During the days when he was on television Flatt found

that it was the gospel material that drew the fan mail. “I don’t care how hot a number you’ve got out,” he once told writer Howard Wight Marshall, “you won’t get the mail on it like you will on the sacred numbers.”

Ralph Stanley is another bluegrass artist who talked about the role of sacred music in his performances. “I always do religious music,” he once said. “I don’t ever remember going on stage without [singing] some hymns.” Stanley said he sings them because he likes them. He has also discovered that “the people seem to like [them] too.” He was probably speaking for other performers, as well as himself, when he said, “I can put more in a sacred song than I can just an ordinary song.” He stated that he felt he’s doing himself, and “maybe other people too, more good” when he sang gospel songs.

Bluegrass groups and performers who include gospel material in their repertoires are carrying on a tradition that is as old as commercial country music itself. The very first country music record — Fiddlin’ John Carson’s Okeh disc made on June 13, 1923, in Atlanta, Georgia — had a secular text, but a melody that since 1881 had been associated with a sacred song. The title and words were about “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane,” but the tune was one to which churchgoers were accustomed to singing “The Lilly of the Valley.” America’s first country music recording artist, however, did not limit his gospel offerings to this one tune. During his career Carson recorded other sacred songs, including “When the Saints Go Marching In,” “Bear Me Away on Your Snowy White Wings,” “I Want to Make Heaven My Home,” and “Take Your Burdens to the Lord.”

Religious songs have long been an important part of Bill Monroe’s music. Before turning professional, he and his older brother, Charlie, once won a singing contest with “He Will Set

Your Fields on Fire.” In 1936 when the Monroe Brothers, by then veterans of almost ten years in show business, made their first record, it was a gospel song, “What Would You Give In Exchange for Your Soul?” This song—which was also their first hit record—within just a few weeks after being released, sold 100,000 copies. When Bill took his Blue Grass Boys to the Grand Ole Opry in 1939, the songs by the Blue Grass Quartet were among the most popular numbers they did. Opry listeners—among them future country and bluegrass artists—were inspired by the quartet’s interpretations of such sacred fare as “Where the Soul Never Dies,” “This World Is Not My Home,” “I’ll Have a New Life,” “I Know My Lord Will Lead Me Out,” “The Old Country Church,” “He Set Me Free,” and “Life’s Railway to Heaven.” Monroe was quoted as saying that “We’ve always played a gospel song wherever we go so that the people would know that the Blue Grass Boys knew right from wrong.”

When, in 1938, Roy Acuff auditioned before a live Grand Ole Opry audience for a regular job on the show, it was a gospel song that won him a contract. Years later he recounted the experience to Dorothy Horstman, author of *Sing Your Heart Out Country Boy*. “That night,” he recalled, “along with my fiddling [He played “Old Hen Cackle” and “Turkey Buzzard.”], I did ‘Great Speckled Bird,’ and when I did it, the audience stood and cheered and cheered. I tried to leave but they brought me back two, three times. I went on home to Knoxville, not knowing whether I was even going to be accepted on the Opry or not. They sent me my mail, bushel baskets full of it, and it startled the WSM management. Two weeks later, they called me and asked if I would take a regular job. The song brought Roy Acuff to the Opry. I didn’t bring it, it brought me.”

Among bluegrass artists and their fans religious music speaks of a shared experience. This common denominator establishes a

bond —a spiritual kinship —between artist and performer. The bluegrass singers and musicians who were influenced by Christian religious beliefs and church music are legion. For example, in the liner notes to their gospel album, *Calling My Children Home*, three of the four singers who then made up the Country Gentlemen refer to this aspect of their backgrounds. As a child, wrote Charlie Waller, “I attended church; one of the highlights of going to church was the gospel singing.” Doyle Lawson recalled that some of his earliest childhood memories are of listening to his parents singing gospel music, and Bill Yates stated that gospel was his father’s “music and his life, as it is my mother’s.”

As a youth Jimmy Martin sang in church in his hometown of Sneedville, Tennessee; Wilma Lee Cooper got her start in gospel music with her family; Mac Wiseman recalled the days when “we’d all gather around the old pump organ [played by his mother] and sing hymns”; Dave Evans spoke of the importance in his life of his mother’s moral and religious teachings.’ The list goes on. A large percentage of the fans who flock to hear these artists in person and buy their records can give similar testimonies.

The distinguishing element of gospel music is the gospel song which, according to *A Dictionary of Protestant Church Music*, is “a simple harmonized tune in popular style combined with a religious text of an emotional and personal character in which, rather than God, the individual (and/or the individual religious experience) is usually the center. The text, primarily concerned with the conversion experience, life after death and personal companionship with Jesus, is usually subjective in nature, developing a single thought instead of a line of thought. .. The melodic, harmonic and rhythmic style is often associated with the style of secular music, often drawing attention to itself and away from the text.”

A gospel song is different from a hymn. Evangelist Phil Kerr explained the difference in his book *Music in Evangelism*. “A hymn,” he writes, “is a prayer-song. . . addressed directly to some member of the Holy Trinity.” In other words, a hymn is a prayer that has been set to music. Hymns are meant to be sung “with reverence and solemnity—in the attitude of prayer.” A gospel song, Rev. Kerr continued, “is a testimony-song. It is addressed to people” rather than to Deity. When a gospel song is sung, Kerr said, “it can very appropriately be with all the enthusiasm which would be put into a spoken testimony.” The tempo of a gospel song is usually faster than the tempo of a hymn. The rhythm and pace of a gospel song combine to produce a music that is likely to make listeners and performers want to pat their feet.

The history of religious music can be traced all the way back to Biblical times —t o the psalms of David and even to the fourth chapter of Genesis where we read that Jubal was “the father of all such as handle the harp and organ.” In more recent times we can identify, in the music of American rural church life, two important movements whose influences intermingled to create a social and emotional atmosphere that facilitated the growth and development of gospel songs. These two movements were the religious camp meeting and the introduction of shaped notes into the teaching of music.

Early camp meetings, whose origins can be traced back as far as 1800, took place outdoors during the summer months and were sponsored and attended mainly by Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. Entire families congregated at the camp-meeting sites, bringing, in their horse and mule-drawn wagons, sufficient food and clothing to last for a week or longer. Temporary shelters of varying degrees of sophistication were thrown up to provide sleeping quarters, while the cooking and eating of meals took place in the open, a format not unlike today’s bluegrass festivals.

The crowds at a single camp meeting numbered in the hundreds and sometimes thousands. Evangelistic-type preaching and congregational singing were the main features of the religious services that the primarily rural folk had come to attend. One music historian states that at these camp meetings “many favorite hymns were altered by faulty memory and that many new songs were created to satisfy the need for music which everyone [including the many who were illiterate] could sing.” It should be noted that camp meetings are still being held in this country and that they play a very important role in the religious life of many Americans.

The shaped-note method of musical notation was an outgrowth of the singing school movement. Singing schools, which began in America as far back as the early 1700s, were inaugurated for the purpose of improving the quality of psalm singing in the churches because singing had deteriorated markedly in the New England colonies. The singing school movement eventually spread to the farthest reaches of the expanding nation. Singing teachers traveled from community to community to hold their usually week-long schools in rural churches, schools, and other community buildings. Their pupils were the residents, both young and old, of these communities and frequently included “graduates” of previous singing schools. The singing schools continued to be held, primarily in rural areas, up to modern times. Jimmy Martin’s stepfather, used to teach in just such a singing school.

The books used in the singing schools covered the rudiments of music and provided song material of primarily a religious nature. Through the efforts to simplify musical notation and theory by the compilers of the singing-school books, there emerged a system based on “shaped notes,” the essence of which is the use of differently shaped note heads to indicate the diatonic scale degrees. The first such system, known as fasola, was introduced around 1800. One version of the system consisted of the following

four shapes: * (fa), * (sol), * (la), * (mi). The scale was fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la, mi, fa. The most popular collection of four shaped-note songs was then, and is now, *The Sacred Harp*.

A seven-shaped musical notation method, known as the do-re-mi system, was introduced later. Of the several seven-shape systems that were proposed, only one was in use by the turn of the century. It was composed of the following notes: * (do), * (re), * (mi), * (fa), * (sol), * (la), * (ti). These shaped notes became popularly known as “buckwheat notes.”

The advantage of a shaped-note system of musical notation, as one music historian has pointed out, was the fact that “a rustic musician did not need to have extensive preparation before he was able to notate and harmonize his own creations or to record those which were spontaneous outpourings of a religiously inspired congregation.” According to Ralph Rinzler, Bill Monroe, as a youth, learned to read music from shaped-note hymnals while attending singing schools. The shaped-note system survives in the sacred harp singing that is heard today, especially in the southeast.

Also important in the development of modern gospel music have been the various revival movements in America and the evangelists who, especially in the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth, attracted large followings. The first of the evangelistic movements, known as “The Great Awakening,” began in the English colonies of this country in 1739 and was characterized by expressions of religious excitement and fervor. This period in America’s religious life ended around 1744.

Probably the most influential of the nineteenth century evangelists was Dwight L. Moody whose revivals, like those of the past, were accompanied by musical performances either by congregations or by soloists or ensembles. It was a musician, Ira D. Sankey, that Moody recruited to conduct the musical activities

of his ministry. Sankey, who sang in a “powerful baritone” voice, “touched and conquered his audiences everywhere.” One who heard him observed that “Mr. Sankey sings with the conviction that souls are receiving Jesus between one note and the next.” In fact, the revivals conducted by Moody and Sankey gave birth to the term “gospel song,” as Sankey described what he was doing as “singing the gospel.”

One of the gospel songs arranged by Sankey for solo and congregational singing was entitled “The Model Church.” Now, over a hundred years later, we can hear the words of that same song, in an arrangement by Doyle Lawson, on J.D. Crowe’s gospel album, *The Model Church*, which features, in addition to Lawson and Crowe, Larry Rice and Bobby Slone.

Following the success of the Moody-Sankey team, the employment of a charismatic musical director became standard practice among professional evangelists. In the early part of the present century one such popular team was composed by evangelist Billy Sunday and his song leader, Homer Rodeheaver. An interesting sidelight in the history of both country music and evangelism occurred in 1919 in connection with Rev. Sunday. That year Mrs. Billy Sunday attended the seventh annual Georgia Old Time Fiddlers’ Convention in Atlanta, Georgia. At the time the Rev. Sunday was conducting a revival in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and his wife visited the Atlanta convention “to look over the fiddlers” before Fiddlin’ John Carson and ten of the “best known” fiddlers in Georgia were to go to Chattanooga the following week “to wield the bow and shake a foot at Billy Sunday’s revival.” One would seem justified in concluding that Rev. Sunday recognized that the folks who liked the gospel music they heard at his revival meetings would also like old-time fiddle music. It would also be interesting to know just how Sunday used the fiddlers in his revival, given the attitude toward fiddle music that then prevailed

among many people with religious convictions. About this same time a young A.P. Carter's ambitions to become a fiddler were being thwarted by his pious parents who objected to the music of the instrument that many folks called the devil's box.

In the meantime, shaped-note singing schools had spawned singing conventions and the all-day-singings-with-dinner-on-the-ground which are so familiar to present and former residents of the rural south. To meet the demand for new material created by these singing events, publishers of gospel songs were needed. Many gospel singers with an eye for business rose to the occasion. Of the several gospel music publishing houses that got in on the act, the two best known were probably the James D. Vaughan Music Publishing Company of Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, and the Stamps-Baxter Music and Printing Company of Dallas, Texas. To increase sales of their songbooks these publishers employed a number of promotional schemes, including the use of radio broadcasting and phonograph records to bring their music to the attention of the widest possible audience. Heard on the air and on records were a number of Vaughan and Stamps-Baxter quartets, many of which were composed of singers who worked in the printing shops during the day while pushing company songbooks at singing conventions at night and on weekends.

By the advent of radio and the recording of popular music in the 1920s, the interaction between gospel music and old-time string music — which would later evolve into hillbilly music — had become firmly established. It is not surprising, then, to find musicians who were equally comfortable at performing in both styles. Within a few weeks after Atlanta's radio station WSB — the South's first radio station — went on the air in 1922, listeners were introduced to the Reverend Andrew Jenkins who, with his two daughters, regularly presented programs of gospel music on the station for the next several years. During this period WSB's

audience was also treated to programs containing a “variety of barnyard medleys” presented by Blind Andy and his old-time fiddlers. Blind Andy and the Reverend Andrew Jenkins were one and the same person.

Jenkins, who was also a composer of no small dimension, turned out both gospel and secular songs with equal ease. For example, “Ben Dewberry’s Final Run,” Jenkins’ composition about a train disaster, was a 1928 hit for Jimmie Rodgers, while his “God Put a Rainbow in the Cloud,” copyrighted in 1931, became a gospel standard.

Other pioneer Atlanta-area musicians who worked both sides of the musical street were fiddler Bill Chitwood and banjoist Bud Landress, well known for their recordings as the Georgia Yellow Hammers. They could run through such fare as “Pass Around the Bottle” and “White Lightning” at one recording session, lay down their fiddle and banjo, and at another session add their voices to quartet recordings of gospel songs like “Precious Memories” and “Walking the King’s Highway.” This became a pattern for the country and bluegrass artists who followed in the wake of these early performers.

If, as some folks claim, there has been a noticeable absence of such versatility in the repertoires of the latter-day performers of what is now called country music, such is not the case with bluegrass artists. As Dorothy Horstman has pointed out, “Bluegrass, with its reverence for old songs and old forms, has become one of the chief repositories of older gospel [material].”

There is no denying a recent statement by Peter Rowan who said, “I don’t think you can underestimate the influence that Christianity has had on bluegrass music.”

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Doyle Lawson: The Gospel Side

By Wayne Daniel

“I’ve always loved gospel music as far back as I can remember. And I always thought, as much as I like that music, surely somebody else out there would like it (too). I’m real blessed and fortunate to be able to do what I do, because I love it so much.” If fans and critics can be believed, there are a lot of people out there who love the music that Doyle Lawson is talking about, especially when he is the performer.

A native of Kingsport, Tennessee, Doyle established an enviable reputation as a bluegrass vocalist and multi-instrumentalist (mandolin, guitar, banjo, fiddle) during the 60’s and 70’s while performing with three top-flight bands, Jimmy Martin and the Sunny Mountain Boys, J.D. Crowe and the Kentucky Mountain Boys, and the Country Gentlemen. In 1979 he formed his own bluegrass band, which he called Quicksilver. Just over two years later the group was described as “one of the strongest voices in today’s bluegrass music.”

From the beginning, Quicksilver’s repertoire contained liberal helpings of gospel material. Encouraged by favorable reaction, Doyle gradually increased the proportion of gospel songs on his records and stage shows. Of the ten albums recorded by Quicksilver, five have been exclusively gospel. As to the gospel content of his stage shows, Doyle says that “Right now it could be as much as fifty percent or more. It depends on where we are. I try to read the crowd. We do an awful lot of gospel, and a lot of times (a show) will turn into just an all-gospel thing. “We keep a request sheet” at the table where the group sells their records, he says, holding up the latest one containing a list of song titles. “Every one of these is a gospel song.” Doyle and his band frequently

presented all-gospel concerts in churches and at Christian supper clubs such as the Joyful Noise in East Point, Georgia, and the Hallelujah Supper Club at Newton, North Carolina.

Doyle's heavy commitment to gospel music is explained by his early musical experiences. "My daddy sang in a quartet in church since I was barely able to remember," he explained. "He sang all a capella music in and around east Tennessee. (The quartet) would visit churches. They didn't sing for money. They did it because they loved the Lord and they loved to sing. At first Mama sang alto (in the quartet), and then her health got real bad and so she had to quit singing. My sister who is four years older than I am sang with Daddy until she got married. Then he had a second cousin (who) stepped in when my sister stopped."

Although he was not an active participant in his family's musical activities, Doyle was there absorbing the sounds that would one day bring him success as a purveyor of bluegrass gospel music. "Daddy used to go to the singing schools," Doyle reminisced, "and back when I was a small child I remember going to some of them with him. Of course at that time it didn't mean a whole lot to me."

All the members of his father's quartet attended singing schools, and according to Doyle, "they all learned how to read their part. "They practiced pretty faithfully, about every Wednesday night. When they would practice a new song, they would sing their notes first and rehearse it that way with each one singing the notes he was supposed to sing. That would imbed the melody (in their minds). Then they would go back and start singing the words.

"We were living on the farm, and one of the things I looked forward to was going and watching and listening to them practice singing. I didn't realize how much of a lasting impression that had on me until I (grew) up and all these songs started coming

out. I remembered a lot of them, and recorded them with different groups down through the years.”

As those acquainted with Doyle Lawson’s record albums and stage shows can guess, the influence on his style and repertoire is not limited to what he picked up from his family. “I remember hearing the Blue Grass Quartet of Bill Monroe. And of course Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs and the Stanley Brothers were a big influence on my bluegrass.”

There is also the black gospel influence that one detects in Quicksilver’s gospel music. “When I was a small boy there was this black quartet that used to come and visit our church,” Doyle said. “And as I recall, Daddy and (his quartet) would (visit a black church to sing). That was the first live black quartet music I heard. When they sang (I was impressed by) the feeling they had -the projection they had. I’ve never quite gotten over it.

“Then one time Daddy brought home this record by the Bells of Joy, a black quartet. It was an old 78 record called ‘Let’s Talk About Jesus’. I wore that thing out.”

Early on, Doyle discovered that bluegrass and country were not the only kinds of music to be heard on the radio. “In those days,” he recalled, “WLAC in Nashville played a lot of black quartet (records). Late at night with the radio turned low I would listen to (such black groups as) the Soul Stirrers, the Swan Silvertones, the Bells of Joy, the Gospel Harmonizers, and the Five Blind Boys. I’ve always loved black gospel.” Among the gospel songs recorded by Quicksilver that have also been recorded by black gospel groups are “Jesus I’ll Never Forget,” “Jesus Gave Me Water,” and “Jezebel.”

When Doyle begins selecting songs for an album he has rich sources from which to choose. “I’ve got such an abundance of gospel material due to the fact that my dad sang for so many years

and collected those great old song books that he passed along to me when he stopped singing,” he elaborates. “I’ve got lots and lots of black quartet stuff that I’ve collected over the years.” Additional sources of material for Quicksilver songs are contemporary songwriters, notably Pete Goble, Randall Hylton, Leroy Drumm, and Doris Dunn, who have written songs for Doyle’s albums.

“What I look for in a song,” Doyle says, “are melody, message, and how well (the message) is told. You have some songs that have the makings of a good song, (but) the story sort of folds up and they drift along trying to say something they never say. I try to stay away from (songs like) that.”

When Doyle finds a song that meets his criteria with respect to melody, message, and structure, he next asks himself, “Do I hear us singing that? If I hear us singing it, who do I hear singing it? Because I’m the leader of the band doesn’t necessarily mean that I have to sing the lead on every song. I sing lead whenever I feel like it fits me.” If Doyle thinks the lead part of a particular song better fits some other member of the group, then that person sings the lead.

Despite several changes in Quicksilver’s personnel, the group, according to one album reviewer has “always managed to sustain a consistent high level of quality in their music.” As of January 1, 1989, Quicksilver consisted of Doyle who sings lead and alternate tenor and plays primarily mandolin; Russell

Moore (lead, alternate tenor, guitar), Ray Deaton (bass vocals, electric bass), and Jim Mills (baritone vocals, and banjo). Speaking of this group, Doyle says, “I think the band that’s together right now all love this kind of music. Nobody is doing this because it’s their job. It is their job, but they do it because they love it, too. They like to do it, and I think it shows in the overall performance.”

When Doyle, whose Quicksilver records have been on the Sugar Hill label, takes his band into the recording studio to make an album, he has complete control over the session. “Barry Poss, who owns Sugar Hill Records, has been so good to work with,” Doyle noted. “He doesn’t even come to the studio. When he hears (an album) is when I send him the finished product.”

With respect to planning the contents of an album, Doyle says that he is a “theme-oriented person. I like for each song to complement the other. I don’t like to have weak songs in an album. There used to be a trade expression, ‘that would make a good filler for an album.’ I don’t believe in fillers. I believe if a song does not stand on its own as being worthy of a spot on an album then it shouldn’t be there to begin with.”

Doyle’s efforts in the studio have garnered consistently high marks from album reviewers. Three of Quicksilver’s five gospel albums have earned “Highlight LP” status in the review pages of *Bluegrass Unlimited*, the premiere publication for bluegrass music enthusiasts. The first one, *Rock My Soul* (1981), was, a reviewer said, “a masterpiece that must be heard to be fully appreciated.” When the second one, *Heavenly Treasures* (1983) was released another reviewer called it “well-nigh perfect bluegrass.” “A memorable four voice combination” is how a reviewer characterized album number three, *Beyond the Shadows* (1986). A reviewer of Quicksilver’s a capella album, *Heaven’s Joy Awaits* (1987), predicted “it will probably stand as a classic jewel of bluegrass gospel singing.” *Hymn Time in the Country* (1988), its reviewer said, “is a must for any bluegrass record collection.”

Making records is only one aspect of a bluegrass musician’s job. There are also the stage shows for which songs must be selected. For Doyle Lawson spontaneity is the rule of the game as far as stage performances are concerned. The choice of songs for

a given set is an impromptu decision. “I feel different on different nights, and that helps,” Doyle says. “You sing better what you feel like singing.” Furthermore, he adds, “We don’t program the show.” The group decides ahead of time on the first three or four songs of a set, but “from then on I wing it. That keeps us fresh.”

Staying fresh is part of Doyle’s constant push for excellence. “I’ve always been a pusher,” he once told a writer for *Bluegrass Unlimited*. “If I’m doin’ good, I want to do better. I’ve never been as good as I want to be -as good as I can be. I hope I never get as good as I want to be.” More recently he said, “If I ever get to the point where I (am able to) say, ‘I’ve done all I can do, I can’t do anything else, then it’s time for me to quit.’”

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Fiddlin' John Carson

The World's First Commercial Country Music Artist

By Wayne Daniel

Country music historians have long recognized the importance of Atlanta, Georgia, in the genesis and development of commercial country music. This city of the deep south, which rose like the Phoenix from the ashes of the Civil War, has been referred to as a “pre-Nashville Nashville,” a former country music capital, and the cradle of commercial country music. Whenever the history of country music in Atlanta is recounted, one name that appears over and over again is that of Fiddlin' John Carson, a man who became a prototype commercial country musician, establishing industry precedents and paving the way for the likes of Jimmie Rodgers, Roy Acuff, Johnny Cash, and a whole host of old-time and bluegrass fiddlers.

In studying the life of Fiddlin' John Carson it is sometimes difficult to separate legend from fact, and for help on that score one looks in vain to Carson himself. He seems to have recognized the importance of legend to the enhancement of his image, but for the most part, he appears to have stood aside and let legend take its course, basking in the popularity and notoriety that it brought him, perhaps giving myth an assist only when it showed signs of failing to serve his purposes. Beneath the veneer of legend and myth, however, one finds sufficient documentable facts to leave no doubt regarding the claim that he was, indeed, the world's first commercial country music artist.

Fiddlin' John Carson was born on March 23, 1868, on a mountain farm near the north Georgia town of Blue Ridge, a few

miles south of Copperhill, Tennessee. On his tenth birthday the future fiddling champion received from grandfather Allen Carson his first fiddle, a Stradivarius reproduction, made in 1714. It was among the Carson family belongings that had been brought to Georgia from Ireland almost 100 years earlier.

The gift did not fall into idle hands, because the very next year an eleven-year-old John Carson had learned to play the instrument well enough to upstage a famous politician. In the spring a 1879 young Carson, along with a number of other north Georgians, crossed the state line into Tennessee to attend a political rally. Under the youth's arm, protected by a homemade pillowcase, was his ancient fiddle. As the day wore on and the speeches grew longer and duller, someone in the crowd, noticed the boy with the fiddle and asked him to play a tune. Young John obliged, and in a manner that quickly drew the attention of the weary listeners away from the political speaker. Soon one and all were moved to marvel at the remarkable performance of the youthful musician. The main speaker that day was Bob Taylor, himself a fiddler and subsequent governor of Tennessee. When he learned the name of the boy who had stolen his show was John Carson, he announced that "From now on [the boy's name will be] Fiddlin' John Carson"; and that's the name by which he has been known ever since. This would not be the musician's last association with politicians.

Fiddlin' John Carson's reputation as a fiddler grew rapidly, and he was soon in great demand to provide the music at square dances and other north Georgia gatherings. By the time he was 15 he was called the "king fiddler of all the Blue Ridge."

Carson's renown would not long be restricted to his native environs. Around the turn of the century he won his first fiddling contest under somewhat unusual circumstances. "I was in Atlanta in a little trouble over some whiskey," Carson once told a newspaper writer, "when they had the contest." To be more candid, he was in

jail after having been caught red-handed at his still where he was trying to supplement his income as a country fiddler by running off a little moonshine. Carson, who was allowed to keep his fiddle in his cell, used the instrument to bolster his spirits and those of his fellow inmates. When the sheriff read in the paper about the upcoming fiddlers' contest, he decided to give his accomplished inmate a break. "John," said the music loving lawman, "if you'll give me your word of honor not to run away, I'll let you attend this fiddlers' convention. Then, if you win a prize, I'll turn you loose for good."

"Danged if I didn't win the championship," Carson later recalled. "Gettin' arrested for making liquor was the best thing that ever happened to me. I didn't have a chance to get sure-enough famous till I went to jail." This would not be the last fiddlers' convention the new champion would attend.

In 1913 a group of bow wielders attending another fiddlers' convention in Atlanta organized the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Association), an organization that held, for the next 22 years, an annual contest in the city to determine who was the best rosin and bow artist in the state of Georgia. Fiddlin' John Carson was one of the most familiar figures at these yearly events, winning first prize on more than one occasion, serving sometimes as master of ceremonies, and, above all, adding color and a touch of humor to the proceedings as he proved himself to be the consummate showman. Audiences were alternately "moved to tears" and "tickled to death" by his singing, fiddle playing, and comedy routines.

One year Carson allegedly brought to the convention, not only "Old Betsy," his prized fiddle, but also his dog, Trail, who, at one end of a length of plowline, trotted along at his master's heel, causing one observer to describe the hapless canine as "the sorriest looking hound that ever bayed the moon." When

informed by convention officials that no dogs were allowed, Carson informed them that his was “no ordinary dawg,” and by way of proof, he struck up a tune on his fiddle and commanded his four-footed companion to “Speak up, now.” And “While he played,” recalled a spectator, “old Trail sang. His song was the echo of a fox chase under a Georgia moon, then a memory of the biggest coon ever treed. As he warmed to his work, his master’s playing became gradually a mere obligate to his solo. When he paused, Mr. Carson laid down his violin with the air of an artist satisfied with his work.” The talented animal, however, was not unlike humans with artistic endowments, and could, according to Carson, be quite temperamental at times. “Trail will wake ‘em up tonight if he’ll sing,” Carson predicted. “But he’s queer. Apt to get skeered of a whole passel of folks like we’re going to have tonight.” Those who heard Trail’s impromptu performance placed bets that if he could only be persuaded to perform on stage he would be the sensation of the evening.

Not content to merely fiddle and clown for the audiences at the fiddlers’ conventions alone, Carson frequently invited other members of his family to join him on the stage. His wife sometimes beat straws as her husband fiddled; one of his daughters was known for her buck dancing; and another daughter, who went by the name of Moonshine Kate, gained considerable renown as a singer and banjo player.

When Atlanta’s WSB, the South’s first radio station, went on the air on Wednesday, March 15, 1922, Fiddlin’ John Carson took note of the event. Eight days later, on his fifty-fourth birthday, Carson, with “fiddle and friendly grin,” showed up at the primitive studio on the fifth floor of the *Atlanta Journal* building. He informed those in charge that he “would like to have a try at the new-fangled contraption that had people sitting around everywhere

with earphones clamped to their heads.” He was allowed to go on the air, and the response of WSB’s listeners to his fiddling and singing was decidedly favorable. Within minutes after he began massaging the airwaves with his homespun ditties and fast-paced breakdowns, the telephones began “jumping up and down with requests from listeners who liked this return to the old-time mountain music that John Carson had been playing and singing for years.” One of the station officials later recalled that Carson “had a repertoire that apparently was limitless,” and on that first broadcast he “played and sang until... exhaustion set in.” Thus it was that Fiddlin’ John Carson became the first genuine old-time country musician to present genuine old-time country music over a radio station.

The resounding success of his first radio broadcast firmly established Carson as one of the most popular radio personalities in the nation and assured him the distinction of being one of the most often heard performers on WSB throughout the 1920s. Although the frequency of his radio appearances declined during the 1930s, Carson’s biographer, Gene Wiggins, noted that Georgia’s most famous fiddler was heard intermittently on WSB even in the 1940s.

On his visits to the WSB studio during the 1920s Carson brought with him various and sundry of his musician friends whom he called his “cronies.” Their banjo and guitar accompaniment to Carson’s fiddling introduced radio audiences to the typical sound of old-time string band music. From time to time Fiddlin’ John’s wife came to the station to beat straws for him, and on more than one occasion his daughters contributed to the variety of his programs through their singing and guitar playing.

In those early days of radio, when the airwaves were less crowded than they are today, even weak stations could be heard for vast distances, especially at night, and WSB listeners from places

as far away as New York, Colorado, and Canada bombarded the station with letters, telegrams, and telephone calls in response to Fiddlin' John's programs. During one thirty minute broadcast featuring the famous fiddler, the studio logged in 100 telephone calls and telegrams from listeners requesting their favorite songs. By 1927 the station reported that Carson had received "letters of praise from listeners in practically every state in the Union." A letter, written in 1923 by a husband and wife in Oklahoma, was typical of those reaching the studio. "A bunch of us listened to your old-time melody program last night," the couple wrote. "It came in clear and strong and we voted it the best thing we've had since we installed our radio. Fiddlin' John was great, and we request, if possible, to let us hear him again soon."

Carson's popularity on the radio attracted the attention of the editors of *Radio Digest*, which featured the Georgia champion in a 1925 issue of their popular magazine for radio fans. "Radio made me," Carson was quoted in the publication. "Until I began to play over WSB, more than two years ago, just a few people in and around Atlanta knew me, but now my wife thinks she's a widow most of the time because I stay away from home so much playing around over this part of the country."

Like hundreds of other hillbilly radio entertainers who followed in his footsteps, Carson published and sold a songbook containing some of his most popular "mountain ballads." An announcement of this venture appeared in the *Atlanta Journal* in 1931, along with the information that he was beginning a "new series of programs at WSB, appearing every Friday at 5:30 and every Saturday at 9:45."

On June 15, 1923, just over a year after Carson's historic radio debut, an article appeared in the *Atlanta Journal* announcing that " 'Canned music' recorded by local musicians will be made for the

first time in Atlanta by Okeh Company, of New York.” Among the artists listed to etch their skills in wax was Fiddlin’ John Carson. Sometime before, Polk Brockman, an Atlanta furniture dealer and Okeh record distributor, who was aware of Carson’s popularity, had decided that records by the now nationally famous fiddler would have commercial value. When Okeh executive, Ralph Peer, expressed misgivings over the outcome of Carson’s performance on the two tunes he had fiddled and sung before the recording horn, Brockman persuaded him to press 500 discs for the local trade. A mere week after the initial pressing had gone on sale, the Atlanta merchant placed an order for additional copies. At that point the unbelieving Peer, recognizing the gold mine that he had almost written off, could hardly move fast enough to get Carson back into the recording studio (this time in New York) and signed to an exclusive contract. With Carson now the first country musician to have his records marketed commercially, the country music industry was launched. Four years later it received additional impetus with the historic recording sessions in Bristol, Tennessee, by Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family.

To initiate his recording career, Carson chose two of the tunes that had been most popular with his radio and fiddling convention audiences, “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane” and “The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster’s Going to Crow.” “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane” was written by Will S. Hays, a popular 19th century American composer who also gave the world “Molly Darling” and “We Parted By the River.” Other songs that, over the years, have been sung to the “Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane” tune include “The Little Old Sod Shanty on My Claim,” “The Little Red Caboose Behind the Train,” and “The Lilly of the Valley.” Some of the words that Carson sang as he played “The Old Hen Cackled” on his fiddle can be found in a book called *Negro Folk*

Rhymes, Wise and Otherwise, published in 1922. The tune itself is a lilting melody that he played somewhat slowly, giving it, as one critic has noted, “a quite original character, more suitable as a parlor entertainment than as a dance piece.”

During Carson’s affiliation with Okeh, which lasted until 1931, he had approximately 150 selections released. In 1934 he switched to the RCA Victor Company to record an additional 19 sides that were released on the Bluebird label. Carson’s repertoire, as represented by his recorded output, was remarkably varied. It included popular songs from the Gay Nineties such as “After the Ball” and “The Baggage Coach Ahead,” topical songs like “The Death of Floyd Collins” and “Little Mary Phagan,” sacred songs such as “Bear Me Away on Your Snowy White Wings” and “I Intend to Make Heaven My Home,” traditional fiddle tunes like “Arkansas Traveler” and “Soldiers’ Joy,” and humorous skits with such titles as “Corn Likker and Barbecue” and “The Medicine Show.”

Carson’s records met with tremendous success. Ralph Peer was quoted saying that within a short time the first record sold 500,000 copies. In September of 1924, slightly over a year after his first record, Okeh officials reported that Carson’s “homely ditties are as much in demand in the Rocky Mountains as in Georgia.” Fifteen representative selections from Carson’s original recordings were re-released in 1973 on an LP album from Rounder, *The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster’s Going to Crow*.

Having achieved the status of a multi-media entertainer through his radio, phonograph, and fiddlers’ convention exposure, Carson found himself in great demand for personal appearances. Gene Wiggins writes that “John had long been a recognized crowd drawer. Circuses, medicine shows, and other forms of entertainment visiting Atlanta often employed him to draw crowds.” After 1923 Carson’s personal appearances were not

limited to the Atlanta area. During the 1920s *Atlanta Journal* writers, wishing to promote one of the biggest attractions on the newspaper's radio station, made frequent references to Carson's travels around the country to perform at fairs, barbecues, and other places of entertainment. After one such tour Carson reported that "I've seen most of Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, Illinois, and other foreign lands since I left, and it only makes me want to come back to Georgia." By 1934 it was reported that he and his daughter, Moonshine Kate, had traveled together to entertain in thirty-two states, Canada, and Mexico.

Just as Fiddlin' John Carson's first documented public appearance took place in a political setting, so did his last. Just nine months before he died he played his fiddle in the senate chamber of the state of Georgia. Between these two performances he was several times associated with politicians and political causes. He allegedly once fiddled in the White House for Woodrow Wilson, and was an outspoken supporter of Tom Watson, a dominant Georgia political figure who, after being elected to the U.S. Congress in 1890, introduced the first resolution for rural free delivery, earning himself the title "father of the R.F.D." Carson used to sing a song of his own making with a verse that said

"I got a Watson dog and a Watson cat.

I'm a Tom Watson man from my shoes to my hat."

Several successful candidates for governor of Georgia — including two Talmadeges, father and son — used Fiddlin' John and Moonshine Kate as crowd collectors at their campaign rallies. A defeated contender once complained that "Fiddlin' John Carson was employed by his opponents to go to the various polls in Atlanta singing his [songs in support of the winner]," and insisted that "this was taking unfair advantage of him" and that he lost votes "through the work of Carson." William Anderson, biographer of Georgia's former governor Gene Talmadge, described Carson's duties at

the political rallies in the 1930s. “Atlanta singer and composer Fiddlin’ John Carson was a country singer who had seen better days, but he could set a foot a stomping with little effort. He and his daughter, Moonshine Kate, came on with the organization, and it was their function to entertain the crowd before Gene arrived. They also set the tone for the speech, appearing as corny, redneck characters, a little down and out, but happy.” Carson who, during his lifetime, had been a horse-racing jockey, a textile mill worker, and a house painter, spent his last working years as an elevator operator in Georgia’s capitol building, a job he earned for his help in advancing the political careers of Georgia governors Gene and Herman Talmadge.

The evaluation of Carson’s artistry by modern-day musicologists of the folk and country genres has been generally favorable for a performer of his era and musical persuasion. Tony Russell called Carson “a wonderful old joker, a singer and fiddler evocative of an age before records, a personality as saltily unique as any in country music’s extravagant history.” In comparing him with Uncle Dave Macon, Russell found Carson “no less remarkable” and “scarcely less entertaining.”

“Carson’s true artistry,” wrote Norm Cohen, “was in his singing; there is not another commercial hillbilly singer who could match his beautifully ornate, melismatic vocals.” With respect to Carson’s fiddling, Cohen considered it “capable of great artistry” which, at its best “was truly beautiful.”

Bob Coltman’s remarks on Fiddlin’ John’s style sound unflattering, but they were not meant to be disparaging. They were intended, rather, to emphasize the fact that the generally accepted rules of music theory did not apply in Carson’s case. Coltman described his music as “rampant, barbaric, careless of rhythm or pitch. You can’t acquire a taste for Fiddlin’ John by listening to

anybody else,” he said. “He’s the only one of them there is... By the standards of the highly developed performing art that country music has become, Fiddlin’ John sounds like a visitor from another world.” No matter how harsh to the modern ear, however, from the music of Fiddlin’ John Carson there runs a thread of continuous development to Bill Monroe, Merle Haggard, and Willie Nelson.

Fiddlin’ John Carson died on December 11, 1949, at the age of 81. A country music historian has credited him with making the first phonograph records “that made the industry aware of the vast untapped potential market for southern Anglo-American folk music.” Another has said that it was Carson’s first recording that marked “the real beginning of the hillbilly music industry.” Despite such accolades, Carson has not yet been accorded the full recognition that he deserves. For example, he is not a member of the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville. However, steps Johnny Carson, grandson of the famous fiddler, decided that it was time that his grandfather and other pioneer country music artists — Gid Tanner, Riley Puckett, and Clayton McMichen, for example— from the Atlanta area received some public acknowledgement for the part they played in advancing country music. The younger Carson, along with some other concerned fans of country music, created the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame, and in 1983, at the premiere awards ceremonies held at the Atlanta Historical Society, Fiddlin’ John Carson became the first of seven artists to be enshrined.

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Gid Tanner

By Wayne Daniel

More than a decade before the Grand Ole Opry made its radio debut, and almost a half century before Nashville became known as Music City USA, Atlanta, Georgia, was fast becoming a burgeoning center for old-time country music. There in 1913, following a Georgia fiddlers' gathering that featured three days of mountain music concerts and a grand finale contest to determine the state's champion fiddler, the Georgia Fiddlers' Association was formed. The new organization's officers, consisting of some of the best known fiddlers from around the state, agreed that henceforth they would hold an annual convention. The promise was dutifully kept for the next 22 years. These annual events, held in Atlanta's Municipal Auditorium, attracted rural musicians from all over the Southeast who came to the big city to play their fiddles, banjos and guitars, and to compete for prizes and the coveted title of Georgia Fiddle Champion. Widely publicized by Atlanta's three daily newspapers, these old-time music extravaganzas attracted the attention of national record company executives and local radio station managers and helped the Gate City of the South earn a reputation as the cradle of commercial country music.

One of the most popular performers at the annual Atlanta fiddlers' conventions, and a key figure in the city's emergence as an important regional field recording center, was a fiddler by the name of Gid Tanner. Born June 6, 1885, at Thomas Bridge, near Monroe, Georgia, some 40 miles east of Atlanta, James Gideon Tanner began playing the fiddle at the age of 14, learning on an instrument inherited from an uncle. After his marriage when he was 21, Gid settled in the small town of Dacula in Gwinnett

County, 40 miles northeast of Atlanta, and proceeded to make his living as a farmer.

Gid's first documented appearance at a Georgia Old Time Fiddlers' Convention was in 1914 when he was 28 years old. By this time he had gained a reputation, not only as a popular fiddler, but as a singer and comedian as well. He was "perhaps the greatest novelty of the evening," a newspaper reporter wrote. Described as "a husky youth with tan face and shoes, roan hair, a mouth as flexible as a minstrel show [performer's], and a voice which ranged from a high falsetto to a rumbling bass," Tanner "fiddled and sang 'Everybody Works But Father.'" To round out his act he presented a series of parodies of various individuals and types well known to the convention audience. "His reception was so enthusiastic," the reporter concluded, "that it was with difficulty the performance was permitted to proceed." A writer at the 1919 convention referred to him as "Laughing Gid Tanner...the red-faced vocalist...whose mouth will easily hold three full-sized eggs -without breaking a shell."

Gid allegedly knew the chorus and verses of 2,200 songs, but the one most favored by his audiences was "I'm Satisfied," which he sang in alternating falsetto and bass registers, or, as one listener put it, in "a voice that range[d] from coloratura soprano to basso more than profundo." Years later, Gid's son Gordon remembered the song. In a low tone, according to Gordon, Gid would sing, "When I's young, I primped and shined/Now I'm married, I've got to walk the line." Then in his high voice he -would sing, "I'm satisfied." When Gid sang the song at the fiddlers' conventions, the newspapers reported that he "brought down the house," and frequently was forced to repeat the song several times "before the audience would let him go."

Gid's grandson Phil, who was 18 years old when his grandfather died, recalled that Gid "was an entertainer. It came natural to him. He was the type of person that liked to see people laughing and having a good time." Similarly, in 1927, while touring the South in search of mountain ballads, folk song collector Ethel Park Richardson paid Gid a visit and found him to be "one of the funniest men the Lord ever made."

Gid was always willing to cooperate with promoters of the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Conventions to create an air of suspense and tension in efforts to lure folks to the shows. Newspaper reporters had a field day feeding accounts of the shenanigans of the rustic revelers to the paper's readers. In 1925, for example, it was reported that Gid had "discovered that marble dust from quarries at Stone Mountain [the world's largest mound of exposed granite located 15 miles east of Atlanta] moistened by the tip of the tongue [was] far superior to any resin yet invented for loud fiddling purposes." When word spread that Gid was "preparing to use his moist delivery in his numbers during the fiddlers' convention," competing fiddlers reportedly registered protests with convention officials. At the time the story appeared in print, the officials "had declined to rule out the use of the moistened marble dust," leaving imaginative readers to speculate on what they might have to look forward to in the way of conflict at the following evening's contest.

In 1915 reporters at the fiddlers' conventions began to play up a continuing supposed rivalry between Gid and his most famous fiddling contemporary and a contest regular, Fiddlin' John Carson. One reporter stated that it was difficult to "make first choice in popularity" between the two and that betting was about even between them. "They have been running a close race for popularity all week," he wrote, "and that one of them will win the medal seems certain." But such was not the case. After the contest was over, an explanation of what happened appeared in print. "The

judges had a tough time deciding third and fourth places between Fiddlin' John Carson and Gid Tanner, and after an hour and a half of deliberation brought the two favorites forward for a second try-out. Carson was awarded third place and Tanner fourth."

Gid Tanner was a prominent feature of the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Conventions until they ended in 1935. He is frequently referred to in newspaper accounts as the star of the show. He was often called upon for encores and seemed to delight in trying out new songs on his audiences. In 1919 he introduced convention goers to "several new ballads devoted to local events." Again, in 1921, it was reported that he was "on hand with several new homemade ballads which he said eclipsed all his past efforts in that line." Preconvention publicity for the 1924 convention said he would appear "in a new repertoire of songs."

Whenever he appeared at the conventions Gid was greeted with great excitement. Arriving early for the 1929 session, a reporter entered the auditorium lobby to find "Gid Tanner, the two-voiced wonder from Dacula...surrounded by an admiring throng as he leaned a way back in his chair and chortled: 'I've traveled this world over, ten thousand mile or more, but a saddle on a milking cow I never seen before.'

"It was a Rabelaisian ditty concerning the discoveries of a returning husband and a series of surprises, and Mr. Tanner sang it with gusto, while his bow fairly danced across the wire strings of 'Old Bet.'"

Gid Tanner won first place at a Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Convention at least once, and might have won more often had he not been so popular. Like Fiddlin' John Carson, Gid's reputation and popularity caused him to be considered unfair competition, and he was sometimes paid to appear at the contests under the condition that he would not compete. Such was apparently the

case in 1927, for example, when an Atlanta newspaper reported that both Carson and Gid were “under contract to appear at all the sessions” of that year’s convention.

In 1924 Frank Walker, a talent scout for the Columbia Phonograph Company, went looking for a recording artist to compete with Fiddlin’ John Carson, whose records on the Okeh label were doing quite well. The market for such recordings had been discovered the year before when Carson cut the first record made specifically for devotees of old-time rural music. Looking no further than the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers’ Conventions, Walker settled on Carson’s most potent rival, Gid Tanner. Years later, Gordon Tanner recalled his father’s account of how the recording agreement was sealed. When approached by Walker about going to New York to make some records, Gid, who perhaps had never been out of the state of Georgia, was adamant. “Can’t go,” he replied. “I got to plow.” Walker countered with, “You would go for a little money, wouldn’t you?” Gid’s response revealed that the proposal had taken a turn to his liking. “Well, I don’t know,” he said. Sensing imminent capitulation, Walker sweetened the deal. “Would you go if we got somebody to go with you? Do you know of anybody?” Gid did. “Well, there’s a blind boy,” he replied. “We’ll go talk to him.”

The blind boy was Riley Puckett, vocalist, banjoist and influential guitarist from Alpharetta, a small town 25 miles northeast of Atlanta. Nine years younger than Gid, Puckett had been blinded shortly after birth from the misapplication of medicine for an eye ailment. Known to Gid from appearances at the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers’ Conventions and likely from other associations, Puckett had already been heard on WSB, Atlanta’s then two-year old radio station. Ahead of him lay a much-acclaimed career as a solo recording artist.

Putting his plowing on hold, Gid rounded up Puckett, and the two left for New York. On March 7, 1924, they became the first Southern rural artists to record for Columbia. Over a two-day period they cut a dozen songs, including a vocal solo by Puckett, “Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane,” a cover of Fiddlin’ John Carson’s debut record. Puckett recorded an additional seven vocal numbers, and Gid demonstrated his rosin and bow technique on three fiddle tunes, “Buckin’ Mule,” “Black Eyed Susie” and “Alabama Gal/Give the Fiddler a Dram.” Puckett provided guitar backup on the fiddle tunes.

Gid and Puckett went back to New York in September and between them cut another 30 sides. During three days in the studio Gid recorded three fiddle tunes, “Sourwood Mountain,” “Cripple Creek” and “Cumberland Gap,” and two tunes on which he also sang, “Georgia Railroad” and “John Henry.” Gid played backup fiddle on Puckett’s recordings.

The reception given the records by Gid and Puckett indicated that there was a market for old-time music in string ensemble format, and record companies found no shortage of duets, trios and larger combinations of banjoists, guitarists, fiddlers and washboard artists willing to put their efforts on wax. When Frank Walker decided it was time for Columbia to record an old-time string band, he thought of Gid Tanner. Gid, by then a veteran recording artist, recruited the services of two more of his music-making comrades, fiddler Clayton McMichen and banjoist Fate Norris, to join himself and Puckett to form a group they called The Skillet Lickers. The name was one to conjure up visions of poor mountain folks so down on their luck that they were reduced to licking their cooking pots to obtain the most minute morsel of nutrition available from their meager fare.

The original Skillet Lickers consisted of Gid and McMichen on fiddle, Puckett on guitar, and Norris on banjo. Clayton McMichen,

born near Atlanta in 1900, was noted for his smooth fiddling and modern stylings. After leaving The Skillet Lickers, he plied his trade in other cities, settling finally in Louisville, Kentucky, where he continued to pursue a show business career that lasted well into the television era.

The Skillet Lickers' first recording session was held in Atlanta on April 17, 1926. Between then and the disbandment of the original group in 1931, they recorded 88 songs and tunes for the Columbia label, all in Atlanta. Their recorded repertoire consisted mainly of traditional tunes that were basically instrumentals designed for dancing and entertainment.

The early Skillet Lickers band has been called "one of the finest and most popular of the hillbilly string bands to record during the 20's and 30's."

In addition to their strictly musical numbers, The Skillet Lickers recorded several rural drama skits with such titles as "Kickapoo Medicine Show," "A Fiddler's Convention in Georgia," and "A Corn Licker Still in Georgia." Reminiscent of vaudeville routines, these sketches, which often ran to several record sides, consisted of dialogue and snatches of tunes that attempted to recreate the sounds associated with traditional medicine shows, fiddlers' contests, moon-shining and such other activities familiar to rural record buyers.

In 1934 a new Skillet Lickers band was formed to make what proved to be the last records by a group of that name. Made up of Gid, Riley Puckett, Ted Hawkins on mandolin and Gordon Tanner, who played fiddle, this band drove to San Antonio, Texas, where they recorded 27 sides for the Bluebird label. The most popular tune from this session, which was held on March 29 and 30, was "Down Yonder."

Although Gid Tanner's recording career ended in 1934, his career as an entertainer proceeded full-steam ahead. Until his

death he continued to perform on stage and radio and to enter fiddle contests. He won his last first-place trophy at the age of 71. Gid died May 13, 1960, three weeks shy of his 75th birthday.

The story does not end there. One of Gid's most faithful disciples had been his son Gordon, who had learned from his father how to fiddle and entertain. As a child Gordon accompanied Gid to fiddlers' contests and impromptu concerts on the streets of Atlanta where he buck danced, played the washboard and banjo, and sang such mournful ballads as "The Letter Edged in Black." As he grew older and polished his musical skills, Gordon assumed a more mature role in his father's show business activities. In fact, it was the 18-year-old Gordon who played fiddle on the 1934 "Down Yonder" record. Gordon, in turn, passed his talent and love of music down to his son Phil, who was born in 1942. After Gid's death they worked together in a band they called Skillet Lickers II with Phil playing rhythm guitar as well as fiddle. Gordon Tanner died in 1982.

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Women's Lib and the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Conventions The Story of Mrs. J. P. Wheeler, Georgia's Reigning Woman Fiddle Champion

By Wayne Daniel

With rare exceptions, the conventions of the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Association appear to have been primarily a man's world. The few documented instances of females appearing on the program prior to 1929 reveal that they were mostly teenage fiddlers, hymn singers, or banjo pickers. These participants were likely to have been looked upon more as novelty attractions than as serious contenders for the Georgia State Fiddling Championship.

In 1913, at the very first of these conventions, Savannah Singley, a nine-year-old girl of Loganville, Georgia, played the banjo in accompaniment to one-armed fiddler Col. A. V. Poole's rendition of the show's opening tune, "Soldier's Joy." In 1916, when Shorty Harper of Morgan County won the state title, Louise Hall, a fourteen-year-old girl from Gilmer County won the thirty dollar second prize. The *Atlanta Constitution* of Friday, January 28, 1916, in describing the previous night's program, speaks of a "little Miss Brown, of Gilmer county, still in her teens (who) fiddled and patted her foot with all the enthusiasm of a regular old bow puller ..." (Given the knack of contemporary newspapers for typographical errors and the mangling of names, one would not be surprised if it happened that Louise Hall of Gilmer County and

Little Miss Brown of Gilmer County were really one and the same teenage fiddler.) It was also at the 1916 convention that Nancy Hall and her Mountain Chanters “brought tears to many eyes with hymns of far off yesteryear.” In 1920, a fifteen-year-old girl named Anita Sorrells (the papers misspelled her name as Soers) played “Casey Jones” in competition and won second place behind R. M. Stanley, “white haired and wrinkled,” who captured the first prize with his offering of “We Will Follow Jesus.” According to Gene Wiggins, Rosa Lee (also known as Moonshine Kate), daughter of Fiddlin’ John Carson, was playing banjo at the conventions as early as 1924.

Apparently, it was not until 1929 that the old guard of Georgia’s male fiddlers became concerned about the encroachment of women upon the field that they had for so long dominated. At the end of the decade which Frederick Lewis Allen in his book, *Only Yesterday*, describes as the one that saw the latest styles lifting women’s skirts “far beyond any modest limitations,” “supposedly ‘nice’ girls ... smoking cigarettes — openly and defiantly,” the abandonment of the corset, the introduction of flesh colored stockings, and the vogue of bobbed hair, rouge, and lipstick, a presumably mature and serious woman fiddler had the nerve to register as an entrant in the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers’ convention. The applicant, a resident of Sumter County in South Georgia, was Miss Emilia Wells, who stated that she was a self-taught country fiddler.

Upon receipt of Miss Wells’ application, Professor Alec Smart (Smart’s first name appears in print variously as Aleck, Alec, and Alex), secretary of the association, is quoted in the *Atlanta Journal* as saying:

Personally, I have no objections ... Looks like the women are running men out of every kind of job, from driving cars to flying. But up in the mountains where most of our fiddlers come

from they have always figured that the place for a woman is in the cabin, doing the cooking and looking after the children, with some plowing and hoeing in season. And they certainly are not used to women fiddlers. I reckon we'll have to take a vote on it.

The papers did not report on the outcome of Miss Wells' bid for a chance at the Georgia fiddling crown, but it is likely that she was allowed to compete in the contest.

The following year, 1930, again saw a woman entrant. She was Mrs. Anita Wheeler of Powder Springs -- the same Anita Sorrells who, in 1920, had won second place. Now married to J. P. Wheeler, and the mother of two children, Mrs. Wheeler once more won second place which that year carried an award of twenty-five dollars. But this was not the last time the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Association would hear from the feisty Mrs. J. P. Wheeler. She would be back in 1931 to carry off the first prize and become Georgia's first and only woman fiddle champion. Also in 1931, Mrs. Wheeler entered the Interstate Fiddlers' Convention held in the Atlanta city auditorium and again "sawed her way to victory." Willard Neal of the *Atlanta Journal* magazine wrote:

Winning this contest means the championship of the United States, according to Professor Alex Smart, master of ceremonies, and that, of course, is the same as best fiddler in the world.

In 1934 Mrs. Wheeler returned to the annual state convention in Atlanta and for a second time was crowned champion fiddler of Georgia.

The story of Mrs. J. P. (Anita Sorrells) Wheeler begins on February 6, 1905, in Cobb County, Georgia, on a farm near Lost Mountain, about five miles north of the town of Powder Springs and twenty miles northwest of downtown Atlanta. On that day she became the first child born of Dudley Maddox Sorrells and Annie Lena Estes Sorrells.

Mr. Sorrells barbered, farmed, and ran a chicken peddling route. “He’d hitch up his mules and wagon and go out in the country and buy chickens and eggs and butter, and take them to town (and frequently to Atlanta) and sell them,” Anita, who later became Mrs. Bob Mathis, explained. “He also bought and sold pigs,” she adds.

On the side, Mr. Sorrells made music. In fact, practically every member of the Sorrells family for several generations was a musician. Grandfather Sorrells, who was a fiddler, taught his children to play instruments with son Dudley concentrating on the fiddle. “They had their own band,” said Mrs. Mathis, “then when we kids came along we had our own band.” At one time or another, the Sorrells Family Band with which the young Anita played fiddle, also included her father, her uncle, Clarence Sorrells, her brothers, Dudley, Jr., who played guitar and banjo; Marshall, a guitarist; Russell, who played guitar, banjo, and piano; and a sister, Lorine, who played mandolin. Only one of Dudley, Sr.’s children, Lindley, did not play an instrument. When some member of the family could not perform with the band, there was always a neighbor who could fill in.

“We’d go play for miles around where anybody was having a get-together and wanted some music,” Mrs. Mathis reminisced. “We played in people’s homes, at churches, and for square dances. We did it mainly for fun, except we got paid for playing at square dances. They’d take up so much (money) on the corner at the dances.”

As a rule, the Sorrells Family Band performed somewhere about once a week. “But during Christmas time,” Mrs. Mathis noted, “we’d be playing somewhere every night for two or three weeks.” According to Mrs. Mathis they played the standard string band numbers and fiddle tunes such as “Soldier’s Joy,” “Katie Hill”

and “Arkansas Traveler.” “None of us could sing,” she lamented. “It’s a shame one of us couldn’t have a good voice, but we didn’t. So our music was all instrumental.”

Mrs. Mathis began playing her father’s fiddle when she was eight years old and played for her first square dance two years later. “I’ve played until daylight several times and never got tired,” she told a newspaper reporter in 1934. The night in 1923 that she married J. P. Wheeler, Anita Sorrells was playing for a square dance at the hotel in Austell, Georgia. “During the break,” she explained, “we slipped away from the hotel and got married, and then came back and I finished playing the dance.”

Mrs. Mathis was essentially a self-taught fiddler. “I just picked it up from watching my father. I learned the tunes and then did my own maneuvering.” In 1934 she told the *Atlanta Journal’s* Willard Neal:

Fiddlers are never taught; they do their own learning. We figure that music comes from a person’s soul. If you have it in you, you can play; and if you haven’t, there is no use trying to learn. If a person taught you how to play a tune, you would simply be playing his music, and not your own.

Mrs. Mathis’ uncle, Clarence Sorrells, was responsible for bringing the family band to its first fiddlers’ convention in Atlanta. “He thought there was nothing like us kids. He would gladly take us anywhere to play. Our dad came with us to that first convention, but he didn’t perform on the stage. Our uncle did, though.”

Among the popular fiddlers whom Mrs. Mathis met at the Atlanta conventions, she especially remembered three, but for different reasons. “Ahaz Gray was one of the best,” she recalled. “He was such a smooth fiddler.”

Then there was Fiddlin’ John Carson. “When I first decided to enter the fiddlers’ contest,” Mrs. Mathis relates, “John Carson

didn't want me to play because I was a woman. He had a daughter they called Moonshine Kate who played banjo with him. It was all right for her to play, but he didn't want me to play in that fiddlers' contest. So the other fiddlers said, "Well, o.k., if she don't play, we don't play' So I played." Mrs. Mathis' evaluation of Carson's fiddling is short and to the point. "He never was a good fiddler."

Mrs. Mathis favorite fiddler was Clayton McMichen. "Right after we met, which was at one of the Atlanta conventions," she narrated, "he came to Powder Springs and looked me up. So we started going together and went together for three or four years, I guess, and at one time we were engaged. I learned some of the tunes I play from Clayton when we used to play together at parties and square dances. While we were going together he gave me a phonograph. I don't have it now, but I've wished many times that I had kept it."

Among Mrs. Mathis' most prized possessions is a small brooch in the shape of a fiddle. "In later years, after he was married and after I was married, Clayton sent it to me. After we broke up and went our separate ways, I kept in touch with his sisters, and he sent me the pin."

Mrs. Mathis last talked to McMichen about a week before he died. She and Mack Compton, another of McMichen's fiddler friends, were visiting in the home of one of McMichen's cousins in Powder Springs when they all decided to "call Clayton up on the telephone and chat with him."

Over the years Mrs. Mathis has owned only about three fiddles. "Daddy gave me a small fiddle back when I was younger. Then when I got married he gave me his fiddle. He had gotten it from Clayton (McMichen) on a trade. Some of the prizes I won were with the fiddle Clayton used to own. Then my brother had this one that I have now, and I kinda liked it better, so I swapped the one my daddy gave me to my brother for this one." Made of curly maple the fiddle bears an 1854 date.

Mrs. Mathis' early fiddling career was not restricted to winning prizes at state and regional contests in Atlanta and performing with the Sorrells Family Band. For a while in 1925 she played the fiddle with the Dixie String Band, a group of Atlanta musicians that also included J. F. Marshall, fiddle; C. S. Brook, guitar; and John Dilleshaw, guitar. The band numbered among its accomplishments several broadcasts over Georgia's most powerful radio station, WSB in Atlanta. According to the *Atlanta Journal* of January 16, 1925.

The Dixie String Band made its radio debut at WSB Thursday night at the advanced hour of 9 o'clock and registered pleasantly with the big audience tuned in at that time. (The group's music) harked back to the olden days for most of their numbers which ranged all the way from "Sweet Bunch of Daisies" and "Silver Threads Among the Gold" to "The Cat Rag" and the "Spanish Fandango."

The Dixie String Band was heard intermittently over WSB for more than a year, but by July of 1925 the name of Mrs. J. P. Wheeler was not listed in the newspaper radio logs as being a member of the group.

In 1926 the then Mrs. Wheeler ventured beyond her native state to enter a fiddling contest in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Sponsored by the Old Fiddlers' Association, the event lasted two days and attracted an audience of 2500 people. According to a newspaper clipping in Mrs. Mathis' possession, she played "Howard Cotillion" and "Soldier's Joy" at the preliminary session of the convention. She doesn't remember what she played in the contest, which she ultimately won. The silver loving cup she took home to Atlanta with her reads:

First Prize, Old Fiddlers' Contest
March 8-9, 1926
Presented by Shyers Credit Jewelers
to Mrs. Anita Wheeler

The year 1926 was also the one in which Mrs. Anita Wheeler won fourth prize in a fiddlers' contest that was broadcast over WSB. The *Atlanta Journal* for October 14, 1926, reported that:

The old-time fiddler contest was staged by the Sears-Roebuck Agricultural foundation, and broadcast from the crystal studio in the automobile building (of the Southeastern Fair at Atlanta's Lakewood Park). Four cash prizes were offered by the foundation, the first prize of \$50 going to Mr. (J. C.) Price (of Clanton, Alabama) the winner.

Others sharing in the cash awards, in accordance with the number of votes (in the form of letters and postcards from listeners) received, were J. F. Mitchell, Atlanta, second prize, \$25; S. G. Lynch, Monticello, third prize, \$15; and Mrs. J. P. Wheeler, Atlanta, the only woman in the contest, fourth prize, \$10.

Twenty-two contestants, all total, participated in the broadcast, every fiddler receiving some votes. The votes came from listeners in twenty states according to announcement by George C. Bigger (sic; should be Biggar), local secretary of the Sears-Roebuck Agricultural Foundation, who announced the awards and handled the broadcast.

After Mrs. Mathis' first husband, J. P. Wheeler, died in 1933, she and her two children, a daughter and a son, continued to live in Atlanta, and in 1934 she was again performing with a group called the Tennessee Firecrackers, headed by Louie (Slim) Bailey, who doubled as announcer and blackface comedian. Other members of the group were Armin (Curly) Fox, who was billed as fiddler and yodeler; Ira Green, guitar and banjo; Tweet Roark, left-handed guitar player; and Jimmie Brown, buck and tap dancer. In addition to appearing on their radio broadcasts, Mrs. Mathis made personal appearances with the Tennessee Firecrackers.

Mrs. Mathis thinks it was sometime in 1935 that a man named Lowrie Montgomery dropped in at the WSB studios inquiring

about girl musicians, “They gave him my name, and when he contacted me I joined his all girl group, which was called the Oklahoma Cowgirls. The other girls in the group were Geneive Daigle, who played drums, and two sisters, the Murray Sisters. One of the sisters played guitar and one played mandolin, and they sang together. “We were called the Oklahoma Cowgirls, but none of us had ever been to Oklahoma,” Mrs. Mathis confessed.

“I played with them for about a year,” Mrs. Mathis continued. “We played theaters around Atlanta, in other parts of Georgia, and in Alabama. Later on, I left my children with my in-laws and went on a tour of the midwest with the group. Montgomery had a great big car that we traveled in, and at night we’d stay in a hotel or motel. We played in restaurants and theaters in Chicago and surrounding area and in towns in Ohio and Indiana. One time we played at a corn shucking contest in Indiana. We rode and played on a fire truck in the parade that they had in conjunction with the contest.”

Mrs. Mathis has forgotten the exact location of the corn husking contest with which she was involved, but it may have been the one held on November 7, 1935, on a farm near Newton, Fountain County, Indiana. Originated in 1924 by the future Secretary of Agriculture and vice-president of the United States, Henry A. Wallace, corn-husking contests were great social events in the Midwest during the 20s and 30s, some attracting as many as 70,000 spectators and contestants. The 1935 contest at Newton was aired nationwide by the National Broadcasting Company.

It was shortly after the corn-husking contest that the Oklahoma Cowgirls disbanded somewhere in the vicinity of Indianapolis. Mrs. Mathis returned to Atlanta, where she worked for a candy manufacturer and for the National Biscuit Company until her marriage in 1937 to Bob Mathis of Rome, Georgia, and Atlanta. Mrs. Mathis and her husband lived in Atlanta and in Rome where

she worked for four years in a department store as a sales clerk and seamstress. During this time Mrs. Mathis was playing the fiddle only occasionally -- “just for little family get-togethers, but nothing steady.”

In 1942 Mrs. Mathis moved with her husband, who by now was employed by Campbell-Taggart Associated Bakeries, to Houston, Texas. From then until 1968, the year that Mr. Mathis died, the couple lived in Houston, Atlanta, and Dallas, as Mr. Mathis was transferred from city to city by his employer.

“When we moved to Houston,” related Mrs. Mathis, “I kept after my husband for us to take square dance lessons. I had never had a chance to learn to dance, because I had always had to play. Finally, they were starting some classes not far from where we lived, and we took lessons there. While we were taking lessons all the music was on records, but after the course was completed we danced to live music. Well, the man who gave the lessons found out that I could play the fiddle, and from then on when he’d finish a course he would get me to furnish the live music. And that’s when I hung a guitar around my husband’s neck and taught him to play.”

While in Houston, Mrs. Mathis, for a year and a half, played her fiddle every Saturday night at a square dance for the employees of the telephone company. At various times she had other musicians to play bass, mandolin, and/or banjo with her and her husband.

In 1974, six years after her husband’s death, Mrs. Mathis returned to Atlanta. After going back to Atlanta, she contacted her nephew, Jack Sorrells (son of Lindley, the only one of her brothers who did not perform with the Sorrells Family Band). A resident of Douglassville, Georgia, Jack was a guitarist and bluegrass banjo picker. He and Mrs. Mathis soon started performing together for nursing homes, charity benefits, and company parties.

Mrs. Mathis remembered most of the old fiddle tunes she has played so many times, including “Casey Jones”, the first tune she learned to play and the one that won her the second prize in 1920; and “Katie Hill,” the tune she played in 1934 when she was named Georgia fiddle champion for the second time. Of all the tunes she played, she particularly liked “Hop Light Ladies” and “Flop Eared Mule.”

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Bill and Earl Bolick Remember the Blue Sky Boys

By Wayne Daniel

“Of the many mandolin-guitar groups of the thirties, none was of greater importance, in terms of tradition, than Bill and Earl Bolick, popularly known as ‘The Blue Sky Boys.’ “So writes Bill C. Malone in his book, *Country Musk U.S.A., A Fifty Year History*.

Evidence of the importance of the Blue Sky Boys to present-day bluegrass music is readily available. Bill Foster, leader of what has been described as “one of the most popular bands on the southern festival and concert circuit,” stated that in the early days of his musical career he and his brother Jim developed a style in which they tried “to sound just like the Blue Sky Boys.”

The Bolick brothers’ influence on today’s bluegrass music is a matter, not only of style, but of repertoire as well. At any bluegrass festival, chances are that the audience will hear at least two or three songs that were recorded and popularized years ago by the Blue Sky Boys. A Lewis Family set, for example, is likely to feature such songs as “The Sunny Side of Life” (recorded in 1936 at the Blue Sky Boys’ first recording session) and “The Sweetest Gift, A Mother’s Smile” (a post-war release by the Bolicks).

However, when you talked to the Blue Sky Boys about their music, there is one point that they immediately endeavor to make clear—their sound “was not bluegrass.”

“Although we played a number of songs rather fast,” Bill explained, “I don’t feel we ever had a bluegrass sound. I associate bluegrass strictly with the Monroe high-pitched type singing and fast, hard-driving instrumental, featuring the Monroe style

mandolin and stereotyped by the Scruggs banjo. If music isn't of this type, I don't consider it bluegrass. Definitely, we never had this type sound. Most of our songs were sung at a moderate pace in a key that fitted our natural voices. We were definitely softer."

In his book, Malone goes on to state that the Blue Sky Boys' "personal popularity, gained largely through radio and personal appearances, was exceeded by no other duet—not even the Monroe Brothers—in the southeastern states during the late thirties."

The radio and personal appearance career of the Blue Sky Boys had its beginnings in 1935 at WWNC, Asheville, North Carolina, when Bill, born October 29, 1917, was seventeen years old and Earl, born November 16, 1919, was fifteen. In the fall of 1935 Bill, Earl, and fiddle player Homer Sherrill appeared on the station as the Good Coffee Boys sponsored by JFG Coffee. To the radio audience they were John, Frank, and George—names suggested by the JFG in their sponsor's name.

At first Earl played guitar accompaniment to their singing, and Bill alternated between the guitar and mandolin. "We both felt our singing sounded better with the guitar-mandolin combination than with two guitars," Bill related, and apparently their listeners shared this opinion. "People kept requesting that I play the mandolin more," Bill continued. Eventually he switched completely to the mandolin as his instrument on all their numbers.

Earlier in 1935 Bill had appeared on WWNC with the Crazy Hickory Nuts, a Crazy Water Crystals sponsored group consisting of Homer Sherrill (fiddle); Homer's brother Arthur Sherrill (mandolin); and Lute Isenhour, a five-string banjo player.

Subsequent pre-war radio concomitant personal appearance engagements took the Bolicks to WGST in Atlanta, Georgia on three different occasions (March-June, 1936; February-July 1937; January, 1938-December, 1939); WSOC in Charlotte,

North Carolina, and a two or three week stint with J.E. Mainer (August, 1936); to WPTF in Raleigh, North Carolina (December, 1939-April, 1941); and to WFBC, Greenville, South Carolina (May-August, 1941).

The Bolick brothers' first appearance on Atlanta's WGST in March of 1936 followed directly on the heels of Bill and Charlie Monroe, who had been at the station for about a week. The Monroe Brothers played their last WGST radio show at 12:15p.m. on March 3, and the Bolicks made their initial appearance at 7 a.m. on March 4. During this first Atlanta stint, Bill and Earl were known as the Blue Ridge Hillbillies, a name given them by J.W. Fincher, manager of the Georgia-Carolinas division of Crazy Water Crystals, the Hillbillies' sponsor at WGST.

After a three month's stay in Atlanta, Bill and Earl, on June 16, 1936, entered an RCA Victor recording studio in Charlotte, North Carolina, to make their first phonograph records. The session director, Eli Oberstein, was surprised to see the Bolick brothers when they made their appearance at the studio. As Bill recalled, "When we quit in Atlanta (shortly before the recording session), Mr. J.W. Fincher or members of his company (the Crazy Water Crystals Company) informed RCA that Earl and I weren't working together anymore, and wouldn't be fulfilling our recording agreement. Earl and I thought our agreement was still in effect as we hadn't been notified differently. Homer Sherrill and two fellows, Shorty and Mack, who replaced us in Atlanta, recorded in our stead as the Blue Ridge Hillbillies, the name we had used in Atlanta. Thinking we had cancelled our engagement, and thinking we were only curious onlookers, Eli became a bit upset when he noticed our presence."

Once the misunderstanding was cleared up, however, Bill and Earl were allowed to record, and ten sides from the session

were released on the Bluebird label: “I’m Just Here to Get My Baby Out of Jail,” “Sunny Side of Life,” “There’ll Come a Time,” “Where the Soul Never Dies,” “Midnight on the Stormy Sea,” “Take Up Thy Cross,” “Row Us Over the Tide,” “Down on the Banks of Ohio,” “I’m Troubled, I’m Troubled,” and “The Dying Boy’s Prayer.”

When the question arose regarding a name to put on the Bolick brothers’ records, Oberstein expressed the opinion that it would be better to adopt some name other than the logical “Bolick Brothers,” since so many brother acts were already recording. “We kicked the idea around a bit,” Bill says, “and came up with the Blue Sky Boys, a name taken from the Blue Ridge Mountains and higher elevations near Hickory, North Carolina, area commonly referred to as the ‘Land of the Sky.’ So as not to lose our identity, our recordings came out with our names, Bill and Earl Bolick, listed in parentheses, beneath The Blue Sky Boys.”

Between their first recording session and their entrance into military service, the Blue Sky Boys, at seven different Victor sessions, recorded eighty additional sides, all but three of which were subsequently issued. Of those not issued, one was because of a lost master, and another could not be issued because the master was broken.

The Blue Sky Boys had been at WFBC, Greenville, South Carolina, only a couple of months in 1941 when World War II intruded upon their lives. Fan mail was heavy, and requests for personal appearance engagements were coming in at a gratifying pace. “I’m sure we would have been booked solid within another month,” said Bill, speaking of this stage in the Blue Sky Boys’ career. “I gathered up several days mail and carried it in to Jim Reid (program director at WFBC). I told him I felt that with response like that (at the time the Blue Sky Boys were drawing more mail than any act that had ever appeared on the station), we should

certainly have no trouble in getting a sponsor. He readily agreed with me and said he would get to work on it immediately. He also agreed to allow us to sell pictures, books or anything along that line on our radio programs.

“Not long after that, Jim called me where I was rooming and asked me if I could come to the station and talk with him. When I arrived he told me we would be given ‘a substantial raise beginning next week. His offer was, by far, the largest amount we had ever been paid. I know of no outfit that had been offered that high a salary prior to World War II—not in the south. Most worked as we did, on a sustaining basis. Sadly, I reached in my pocket and handed him a notice from the draft board telling me to report for duty on August 11, 1941. In no more than two weeks we were in the armed forces and didn’t return to entertaining for over four and a half years.”

Eighteen months of Bill’s military duty was served in the Pacific theater where he participated in the initial landings on Leyte Island in the Philippines and Okinawa. Earl, who was a medical paratrooper with the 82nd Airborne Division, won several medals and decorations, including the Purple Heart with Oak Leaf Cluster and the Silver Star.

After World War II (Earl was discharged in September and Bill on Christmas Day of 1945), the Blue Sky Boys resumed their singing career in March, 1946, at WGST in Atlanta where they stayed until February of 1948. For six or eight months their Atlanta programs were heard also via transcriptions on radio stations in Macon and Savannah, Georgia. The Atlanta tour was followed by engagements on WNAO, Raleigh, North Carolina (March, 1948-March, 1949); WCYB, Bristol, Virginia (March-December, 1949); WROM, Rome, Georgia (December, 1949-April, 1950); KWKH, Shreveport, Louisiana (April-August, 1950); and a second tour of duty at Raleigh’s WNAO (August, 1950-February, 1951).

Before disbanding in February of 1951, the Blue Sky Boys, after the war, recorded some thirty-six sides for RCA Victor at recording sessions in Atlanta (September, 1946.; January, 1949), New York City (May and December, 1947), and Nashville (March, 1950). From this period of their career came the Blue Sky Boys' biggest hit, "Kentucky," a song composed by Karl Davis and Harty Taylor. "As nearly as I can estimate," Bill stated, "we sold approximately a half million copies of that record."

Country music historian Douglas B. Green stated that "The Blue Sky Boys were famous for their religious songs and sentimental tunes of the 1890s and earlier, as well as for their well-known versions of American and British folk songs." Commenting on the Blue Sky Boys' repertoire, Bill said it consisted of "a good fifty per cent religious type songs. The rest of our programs were split between traditional and contemporary folk music."

The Blue Sky Boys learned their material from a variety of sources. "I learned the tunes of a few songs from my maternal grandmother," Bill noted. "When she would visit with us I continually aggravated her to sing me some of the old songs she knew. I remember her singing songs such as 'Sing a Song, Kitty' and 'Cindy.' I cannot recall, however, learning the complete words to any song from her.

"My mother was much the same way," Bill continues. "She was the first person I can ever recall hearing sing 'Bonnie Blue Eyes,' but she only knew a verse or two."

According to Earl, his and Bill's father frequently sang around the house. "Especially on Sunday mornings we'd wake up hearing him singing hymns," Earl recalled. "We definitely learned a lot of our hymns from him," Bill added. "I can directly associate him with songs like 'When the Ransomed Get Home,' 'The Hills of Home,' 'Only Let Me Walk With Thee,' 'No Disappointment in Heaven,' 'An Old Account Was Settled,' and many, many more."

The song, “Are You From Okie,” so closely identified with the Blue Sky Boys, and adopted as their theme song in 1938, was learned from Lloyd Price, a singer who lived near Bill and Earl while they were growing up and with whom they did some occasional singing.

Bill also pointed out that a lot of the Blue Sky Boys’ songs were learned from Lute Isenhour, the five-string banjo player with the Crazy Hickory Nuts. In addition, Bill said, “our radio audience sent us a lot of songs, and publishers continuously sent us hundreds, even thousands, of published songs. I learned to read music to a certain degree, and in this manner learned a lot of songs.”

“Sometimes we would rewrite old songs, making up a little here and there, and maybe adding a verse when we knew only part of a song,” Earl explained. “Many of the old-timers sang a song exactly as it sounded to them,” Bill elaborated. “There were many times a lot of the words just didn’t make sense. When this happened I always tried to rewrite it enough to make it understandable.”

Ed Davis in a 1974 article in the *Greensboro (North Carolina) Daily News*, wrote that “Bill and Earl Bolick developed a style of close harmony singing that is at the very foundation of a great deal of what is called country music today, and they perfected it to the point that their music served to define the style.”

Bill Bolick explained how he and Earl developed their style. “Both of us realized from the very beginning that in order to produce good, clear harmony, one had to sing at a moderate pace in order to be understood, and softly if your voices were to blend. From the first, we strove to keep the harmony and lead separate. Many of the early duets did what we termed ‘ran together.’ In other words, they sang identical notes instead of lead and harmony. This is one thing we were very careful about. If you will listen to any song we ever recorded, I don’t think you will find one where we

sang portions of a song without clearly separating the lead and harmony.

“We always tried to sing in our natural God-given voices. We never attempted to copy anyone’s style, or sound like them. We didn’t try to see how high we could sing, or how loud we could sing. We tried to sing in a key that we felt would suit our voices best, without yelling or straining. We didn’t play our instruments loud. When it was necessary that the harmony reach a high pitch, I learned to reach these notes without increasing the volume of my voice so the sound that I attained wouldn’t be any louder than Earl’s lower-pitched voice. We must have been pretty successful at this, because over practically all the radio stations we ever worked, the control men would tell us that we were easier to ‘ride gain’ with than anyone they had ever worked with, regardless of who it was. This simply meant that they seldom had to touch the controls to bring us up or down. Our voices and music usually stayed within an acceptable level.”

All of the Blue Sky Boys’ pre-war recordings were vocal duets by Bill and Earl accompanying themselves on guitar and mandolin. When asked to describe his mandolin style, Bill replied that it is “altogether different from the bluegrass” style. “From the very first I never simply chorded while we sang. Over the years I worked constantly to develop a sound that would be similar to a third voice of fiddle background while I was singing harmony with Earl. I felt it was a very difficult style. Even the few duets that have been influenced by us have never tried to duplicate my style while singing. I didn’t always accomplish, on every song, what I really wanted to do, but had we continued playing, I think I could have. If you will listen to the mandolin on our Victor recordings of ‘Kentucky,’ ‘I’m Glad,’ ‘Sold Down the River,’ ‘Behind These Prison Walls of Love,’ ‘The Unfinished Rug,’ and ‘Where Our

Darling Sleeps Tonight,' I think you will get a pretty good idea of what I was trying to do, how difficult it was to do, and the distinct difference from the bluegrass style. We always felt the singing was more important than the instrumentals, and for that reason didn't try to make the instrumental work outstanding. We tried to develop a style of playing that would enhance our voices."

At the Blue Sky Boys' first two recording sessions Bill played a homemade mandolin he had bought in an Atlanta pawn shop. "I think I paid eighteen dollars for it," Bill reminisced. "I understand it was made by a fellow named Hembree. It was made of oak with F holes and curved top. It sounded so much better than the mandolin I was playing, which was a cheap one, I simply thought the tone was beautiful. The mandolin I had been playing was a production-line job that could have been equaled anywhere for six to ten dollars."

The mandolin heard on Bill's later recordings is a Martin, Model 20, made in 1929. Bill purchased the instrument new in 1937, for seventy-five dollars, from the Cable Piano Company, a then popular Atlanta music store. "I understand that less than three hundred of this model were ever produced," Bill noted. The instrument's sides and back (which is curved) were made of curly maple and the arched top was spruce. The pick guard, fret board, and bridge were all made of genuine ebony.

On all Blue Sky Boys radio programs, personal appearances, and recordings prior to 1940, as well as on the records made at their first 1940 session (February 5, 1940), Earl played an 0-28 herringbone Martin guitar that belonged to Bill. Made in 1929, the guitar was purchased by Bill in 1935 for seventy-five dollars. In 1940 Earl purchased a D-28 herringbone Martin. Through his father's connections he was able to obtain the instrument at a wholesale price of ninety dollars.

Throughout their career Bill and Earl Bolick performed with a third person in their act. During the Good Coffee Boys days and the first two jobs at WGST in Atlanta, the third musician was Homer Sherrill, a fiddle player, who served as emcee at personal appearances. According to Bill, he, Homer, and Earl sang very little, if any, together. When Sherrill left the Blue Sky Boys in 1937 he joined the Morris Brothers.

Richard “Red” Hicks, like the Bolicks, a native of North Carolina, joined the Blue Sky Boys in 1938 and performed with them until October of 1940. “When Red joined us,” Bill related, “we immediately started working on the trios and usually included at least one on each program.” Hicks sang lead to Earl’s bass and Bill’s tenor. Many, perhaps half, of the hymns heard on Blue Sky Boys programs during this period were done by the trio. Hicks, who played guitar and mandolin, sometimes played mandolin duets with Bill and sang two or three solos each week on the radio programs. As Bill recalled, Hicks usually sang western and semi-pop songs like “Home in Wyoming,” “Riding Down the Canyon,” “Silvery Moon,” “Gold Mine in the Sky,” and “Red Sails in the Sunset.” He was particularly fond of the western songs that were in vogue at the time.

When Hicks left the Blue Sky Boys he was replaced by a native of Gilmer County, Georgia, Samuel “Curley” Parker, who was a part of the act until they were separated by the war. He rejoined Bill and Earl after the war and remained with them until June of 1949, except for a brief period from the fall of 1947 until January of 1948 when he was replaced by Joe Tyson whose home was in the Carrollton/Villa Rica, Georgia, area. According to Bill, Curley, whose previous experience had included that of fiddle player with the Holden Brothers, had not done much singing before joining the Blue Sky Boys. “But in several months,” Bill added, “we had him singing a pretty good lead. All in all, I believe

his voice blended with ours better than anyone else that ever sang with us. We received as many requests for some of our trios as we did for our duets.”

Parker, who was the first musician besides Bill and Earl to record as a member of the Blue Sky Boys, joined the Bolicks for their 1946 and 1949 sessions in Atlanta and the May 1947 session in New York City. These sessions produced, in addition to “Kentucky,” such Blue Sky Boys favorites as “Dust on the Bible,” “Sold Down the River,” and “The Sweetest Gift, A Mother’s Smile.”

The last musician to perform with the Blue Sky Boys before their break-up in 1951 was fiddler and bull whip artist, Leslie Keith, who replaced Curley Parker. Joining the Bolicks in June of 1949 while they were working at WCYB in Bristol, Virginia, Keith had previously worked for another entertainer named Curly King. “When we hired him, we didn’t even know he did a bull-whip act,” Bill explained. “We learned later he had presented it with the Stanley Brothers and Curly King’s group. The main thing that surprised me about Leslie was his ability to do things without practice. He was also an excellent banjo player, using the old-time clawhammer style. Here again, he seldom practiced. He didn’t have a five-string banjo of his own. When he played it, he used mine^ He told me he could play the harmonica similar to Wayne Raney, but didn’t own one. I bought him several cheap ones, and surprisingly, he could do selections like “The Fox Chase” and “Pan-American Blues” very well. I always felt his background playing was a bit rough for our type of music, but he was certainly gifted in many ways.”

Keith joined the Blue Sky Boys at their last pre-1951 recording session which was held in Nashville. Songs recorded at this session included “There’ll Be No Broken Hearts for Me” and “Where Our Darling Sleeps Tonight,” both of which were

written by Bill and Earl; Karl Davis' "The Unfinished Rug"; and a re-recording of Bill's arrangement of "Sunny Side of Life."

In 1946 William A. Farr attended a Blue Sky Boys concert at Tyrone School near Atlanta. In an article in *Sing Out!* magazine he recalled that "Unlike others who had come from radioland sporting cowboy hats, stomping and yelling, they stepped quietly onto the stage dressed in business suits. Instead of mouthing ungrammatical greetings..., Bill thanked us for the applause but requested that we listen to their songs."

"Our stage shows lasted approximately an hour and a half," Earl explained. "We would sing for thirty-five or forty minutes, then we'd have our comedy routine, do a fast number, and close with our theme song." While Earl was dressing for the comedy part of the show, Bill usually sang a solo (frequently of a comic nature), told a joke or two, and did a selection or so with the other member of the group. It was also at this time that the third member of the group usually did his specialty.

Beginning in 1938, the Blue Sky Boys' comedy routine centered around a character called Uncle Josh, who, according to Earl, who played the part, "was an old man who thought he knew everything, but didn't know anything." Before Uncle Josh came on the scene the comedy act had consisted of Earl playing blackface and Bill playing either blackface or a rube character. In creating Uncle Josh, Bill explained, "we were striving for something different, as most acts in those days either worked blackface or rube comedian or both."

Those who saw Uncle Josh on stage remember his baggy trousers, more or less held up by a giant safety pin and untrustworthy looking suspenders; his floppy felt hat; and his oversized shoes. Wire-rimmed spectacles perched low on his nose, a corn cob pipe, and a rummage-sale coat and tie completed his costume. While Leslie Keith was with the Blue Sky Boys he combined his whip

act with the Uncle Josh routine in a performance which, Bill said, “never failed to bring the house down.”

Unlike many of the early country music radio shows, whose exact content and format have long since been forgotten, typical Blue Sky Boys programs have not only been preserved on electrical transcriptions, but in manuscript form as well. For a full year—from May 9, 1939 to May 9, 1940—a dedicated fan sat beside her radio each day and faithfully wrote down the names of the songs and performers on the Blue Sky Boys’ programs on Atlanta’s WGST and Raleigh’s WPTF. This daily program log, now in the possession of Red Hicks, revealed, for example, that on Tuesday, May 9, 1939, the program featured “I Anchored My Soul,” “Picture on the Wall,” “Treasures Untold (by Red),” and “Some Glad Day.” On Thursday May 9, 1940, the last day for which a record was kept, the program consisted of “Just A Little Talk With Jesus,” “Sunny Hills of Tennessee,” “I Dreamed I Searched Heaven for You,” and “Pharaoh’s Army Got Drowned.” Also included on the Blue Sky Boys’ radio programs were announcements of personal appearance dates, a short comedy routine, at times dedications, and commercial announcements on those programs that were sponsored. Each program usually included one or more religious songs.

“Your popularity in our days of entertaining was judged by the fan mail you received,” avered Bill. “This was the only method they had of judging the size of your listening audience.” The Bolick Brothers always drew good mail response, despite the fact, as Bill pointed out, that they usually performed on small radio stations in areas dominated by much more powerful stations. “Too,” said Bill, “prime time over the air, which we seldom had, meant a great deal (in determining the amount of mail an act could expect to receive).”

Continuing, Bill said that “In a short time after we (the Good Coffee Boys) started at WWNC in Asheville, we were drawing quite a lot of fan mail every day. The station management, I think, was as surprised as we were at the volume. They informed us that no group that had ever performed over the station had ever come near to consistently drawing that much fan mail.” While they were working at newly christened WNAO, Raleigh, more than half of the mail received by the station was addressed to the Blue Sky Boys.

Bill and Earl, after their break-up in 1951, performed together only intermittently. They gave a concert in October of 1964 at the University of Illinois, followed in 1965 by concerts at Carnegie Hall, the University of California in Los Angeles, the city auditorium in Atlanta, and at a Saturday night jamboree near Hickory, North Carolina. In 1974 the Blue Sky Boys appeared at Duke University and at bluegrass festivals at Camp Springs, North Carolina (two); Watermelon Park, (Berryville), Virginia; Crazy Horse (Gettysburg), Pennsylvania; and at Lake Norman, North Carolina. They gave their last concert in April of 1975 at Duke University.

Since 1951 the Blue Sky Boys entered recording studios on three occasions to record four albums. In August of 1963 they recorded two albums in Nashville for Starday and in May of 1975 they returned to Nashville to record a Rounder album, which was also recorded in the Starday studios. An album recorded by Capitol in their Hollywood studios in 1965 was reissued in 1976 by the John Edwards Memorial Foundation at UCLA.

After their breakup, Bill and Earl Bolick led separate private lives. Earl, who was a machinist worked at the Lockheed-Georgia Company in the Atlanta suburb of Marietta, resides with his wife and youngest of three sons in Tucker, another Atlanta suburb. Bill

retired from the United States Postal Service, and his wife moved to a home near Hickory, North Carolina, not too far from the town of West Hickory where he and Earl were born and spent most of their childhood.

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Roots of Bluegrass: The Holden Brothers

By Wayne Daniel

The ranks of early country music abound with brother acts, and the influence of these pioneer performers on the style and repertoire of the present generation of bluegrass musicians is readily observable. Among the better known examples of brother teams that flourished during the thirties and forties are Bill and Earl Bolick (The Blue Sky Boys), Bill and Charlie Monroe, Alton and Rabon Delmore, Bill and Joe Callahan, and Walter, Johnnie, Kyle, and Homer Bailes. But there were numerous others (for example, the Morris Brothers. In fact, brother acts were so popular with early country music fans that at least one pair of unrelated performers embarking on a country music career in the 1930s decided that it would be to their advantage to assume the role of a brother duet. They consequently became Jack and Fairley, the Holden Brothers, and before breaking up in the late forties they had established a following that embraced much of the southeast, the southwest, and the midwest.

Jack, whose real name is Milton Jackson, was born in Pickens County, Georgia, near the town of Talking Rock, on March 13, 1915. Although his parents were not musicians, he grew up listening to gospel music. “Three of my uncles and an aunt had a quartet,” he recalled. “They studied the music of James D. Vaughan and were great followers of his.”

Jack’s early contact with sacred music influenced the subsequent repertoire of the Holden Brothers. “No matter where we were,” Jack explained, “when we did a show we’d close every radio program with a hymn. I just always liked to do that.”

Jack's uncle, Wiley Jackson, was a guitar picker, and Jack learned the rudiments of the instrument from him.

In addition to the live music that was available, Jack did not escape the other musical influences common to his generation: the radio and the phonograph. On the radio he recalled listening to such Grand Ole Opry performers as Uncle Dave Macon, Sam and Kirk McGee, DeFord Bailey, and especially the Delmore Brothers, who were his favorites. Among the phonograph records he listened to, those of Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family impressed him most.

Just across the mountain a few miles, in neighboring Gilmer County, Fairley Holden, who would sing tenor to Jack's lead, was born a little over a year later, on October 24, 1916, near the town of Ellijay. Fairley, too, had an early introduction to music. His father played the fiddle, banjo, and piano, and at an early age Fairley, himself, learned to play a little on the guitar by watching a neighbor who was a country picker. While growing up in the north Georgia mountains, Fairley, on Saturday nights, would visit a neighbor who owned a radio to hear the same Grand Ole Opry stars that Jack was listening to, and like Jack, Fairley, too, preferred the Delmore Brothers over all the others.

The Holden "brothers" met at Highlands, North Carolina, while they were both serving in the Civilian Conservation Corps (or Three Cs, as it was frequently called), one of the depression-fighting organizations of the Franklin D. Roosevelt era.

"I was driving a truck out of Ft. Mack (Ft. McPherson, near Atlanta, Georgia) for the Three C headquarters," Jack recalled, "and when I went to Highlands, North Carolina, looking for some more truck drivers at the Three C camp there, Fairley tried out. He got the job and was transferred to Atlanta. Back at Ft. Mack we lived in the same barracks. We both had an interest in music, and

we started trying to sing together. Right off, we were able to do pretty good. We tried to imitate the Delmore Brothers, because we thought they were the greatest in the world.”

To provide an accompaniment for their vocal duets, Jack and Fairley, on a day off, took a trip into nearby Atlanta in search of guitars. They found what they could afford in a pawn shop on legendary Decatur Street.

“I paid four dollars for mine,” said Jack. “It was a little Stella, and I was crazy about it.”

Within a short time Jack and Fairley were getting a pretty good act together. “I picked lead, trying to copy on my six-string guitar the licks the Delmore Brothers were making on the tenor guitar,” Fairley related. After numerous practice sessions in the barracks they attracted the attention of Atlanta country music entrepreneur, George “Sleepy” Head.

“They came by the radio station where I was working,” Head recalled, “to try out for a spot on the air. I thought they had a good sound, so I put them on.” The station was WATL, located in the Henry Grady Hotel in downtown Atlanta. Fairley remembered that first radio program.

“The mike had not been tightened enough when it was adjusted for our heights,” he laughingly explained, “and right in the middle of our song it began slipping down. As it slid down, we just leaned over and kept singing. By the time our song was over, the mike was almost on the floor, and so were we.”

Fairley and Jack had a regular Saturday program on WATL for about six months. “We also did some performing at people’s houses in the area,” Fairley said. During this time they billed themselves as Fairley Holden and Jack Jackson. “Sometimes we used the names Slim and Smokey, too,” Jack added. “Fairley was Slim and I was Smokey.”

Fairley recalled that “No Drunkards Shall Enter,” “Southern Moon,” “Going Back to Alabama,” and “Don’t This Road Look Rough and Rocky” were some of the songs they sang in the early days.

Upon their discharge from the Three Cs in 1936, Jack and Fairley took their guitars and hitch-hiked to Akron, Ohio, earning spending money along the way by picking and singing wherever they could find an audience. “We didn’t even have cases for our guitars,” Fairley noted. “The sun split the end of mine ‘till it looked like a bear trap, but I kept playing on it because I couldn’t afford to buy another one.”

Soon after arriving in Akron, Fairley and Jack found jobs in a steel mill at nearby Barberton. It was not long, however, until they were supplementing their factory pay by performing in local night spots. Radio appearances soon followed. “This fellow heard us singing,” Fairley said, “and got us a job on WJY there in Akron selling patent medicine. We got three or four dollars a piece for three shows a week.”

“Our sponsor was the Kelley Products Company,” Jack continued, “and they called us the Kelley Brothers. Well, we decided we didn’t like being called the Kelley Brothers, so we started trying to think of another name. We thought about Jackson, but decided it was too common a name. We finally settled on Fairley’s last name and started calling ourselves the Holden Brothers.”

Other country music acts in Akron at the time were Grandpa Jones and the famous fiddler, Natchee the Indian.

After six or eight months in Akron, Fairley and Jack, who now felt they were getting good enough to go into show business full-time, headed south looking for a job. They wound up in Charleston, West Virginia. By this time Fairley and Jack had

added a fiddler to their act in the person of fellow Georgian Curley Parker, the first of many musicians who would combine talents with the Holden Brothers over the next several years.

According to Jack, he and Fairley always tried to carry four people in their act, frequently complementing their two guitars with a fiddle and a banjo. In those days every country music group was expected to have a comedy act, and on many of their shows, the entire Holden Brothers cast would double as comedians. “Most of the groups like ours would have just one comedian,” Jack said, “but all of us would participate in the comedy acts. We’d put down our instruments and really put on a show.”

Upon their arrival in Charleston, the Holdens were directed to one R.D. Wolfe, a booking agent from Nashville, who happened to be in town. “We went to his hotel room and auditioned,” Jack recalled, “and right there, Johnny on the spot, he offered us a job —our first professional job. He sent us to Bristol, Tennessee, where we worked personal appearances and did a daily radio show on WOPI. We worked with a fellow named Shorty Aliff and his wife. Shorty had a trick rope and whip act, and we were called the Del Rio Cowboys. Of course, Fairley and I never had been out west, but Shorty and his wife had. He claimed he had worked in the movies with Hoot Gibson.”

It was in Bristol that the Holdens first met Tennessee Ernie Ford. “Ernie put me on the air the first time I ever emceed a show,” said Jack. “We were in the WOPI studio getting ready to go on the air and Ernie said, ‘Who emcees this outfit?’ Well, none of us had ever done any emcee work at that time,” Jack admits, “but I said, ‘I might as well,’ and that’s how I got started as an emcee.”

The Del Rio Cowboys stayed in Bristol for about six weeks before returning to Charleston. “And then he (R.D. Wolfe) booked us all the way back to Charleston,” Jack related, “with one-night stands in theaters and auditoriums up through Kentucky. Talk

about a promoter! Boy, R.D. didn't know where to stop. I never will forget the first Kentucky town was plastered with posters and window cards. It looked like a circus bigger than Barnum and Bailey was coming to town. We packed the house that night."

In Charleston, the Holden Brothers act appeared on WCHS and made personal appearances in the area. This would be one of several periods of employment at Charleston, sandwiched between extended stays at Bluefield, West Virginia, and Raleigh, North Carolina.

Curley Parker recalled the days in Charleston. "We were regular performers on the Old Farm Hour, a barn dance type show that was broadcast by WCHS on Friday nights." According to Curley, they appeared on the Friday night show in order to repay the station for the daily shows on which they were allowed to advertise their personal appearances. Fairley recalls that on other occasions in Charleston their daily radio shows were sponsored by a real estate company and by a chain of independent gasoline stations.

During the Holdens' first stay in Charleston, Cowboy Copas and Natchee the Indian were among the other country music acts at WCHS. "Cowboy Copas was one of the best friends we ever had in the business," Jack reminisced. "He gave us some of the best advice we ever had. He said, 'Every time you boys sing I think of the Delmore Brothers. I know they're your favorites and you're trying to build an act like theirs, but you're building the Delmore Brothers; you're not building the Holden Brothers. What you ought to do is get your own style and swing away from the Delmore style.' And we did."

It was also while in Charleston that the Holden Brothers first experimented with selling song folders on the radio. "I'd have eight or ten songs printed on a sheet of paper," Jack explained,

“and then we’d fold it a certain way with our picture on the front and call it a song folder. Then we would advertise it on the air for 10 or 15 cents, and the orders would start coming in. Back in the early days, during the depression, I can remember a number of times having to wait ‘till the mail came with orders for song folders before we could eat breakfast.

“Eventually we sold enough song folders to buy a 1936 Chevrolet,” Fairley added. “We’d draw as much as a hundred pieces of mail a day.” Among the songs that found their way into Holden Brothers song folders were “No Drunkards Shall Enter There,” “Don’t This Road Look Rough and Rocky,” and “Maple on the Hill, Number Two.”

During one of their stints at WHIS in Bluefield, West Virginia, Jack met his future wife, Frances Thompson, who lived in nearby Princeton. Frances, who would later become Jack’s singing partner and help him write songs, was the piano player with a gospel group whose program preceded the Holden Brothers show on WHIS.

Among the other acts with whom the Holdens worked in Bluefield were Ezra, Ray and Ned, the Cline Family (see BU-May 1980); Bertha, Opal (later Mattie O’Neal and Mrs. Salty Holmes), and Irene (later Martha Carson) Ambergey, the Sunshine Sisters; James; Leslie Keith; and Joe Woods and the Pioneer Boys. The Holden Brothers’ act at Bluefield included, in addition to Curley Parker, a man named Ralph Hambrick who did a comedy routine as “Uncle Zeke.”

Around 1940 the Holdens left Bluefield for a brief sojourn in Raleigh, North Carolina, taking with them Curley Parker and his brother Ruel who also played fiddle, as well as bass and mandolin. In Raleigh they added a banjo picker named Sleepy Perkins to their act. Perkins also doubled as comedian. It was here that the Holdens met the Blue Sky Boys who worked with them on WPTF.

After the job in Raleigh, the Holdens returned to Bluefield, and from there, sometime in 1941, they went to Dallas, Texas, where they worked with Gus Foster and the Texas Roundup Gang on Dallas's 50,000 watt station, KRLD, filling a spot that had just been vacated by the Callahan Brothers. According to Fairley they were also "on the road all the time" filling personal appearance dates. By this time Curley Parker, who had left the Holdens for a job with the Blue Sky Boys, had been replaced by fiddler Skeets Williamson, brother to Molly O'Day. Also working with Gus Foster at the time were the Buskirk Brothers and two prominent fiddlers, Big Howdy Forrester and Georgia Slim.

Around the latter part of 1941 Fairley and Jack experienced what was probably the biggest break of their career. They were hired by John Lair on Renfro Valley and thus gained the opportunity of appearing on two network radio shows. Jack vividly recalled this important milestone in their career. "In those days when you auditioned for a job at Renfro Valley, it was before a live audience on the barn dance. The song that Fairley and I sang for our audition was "There's a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere" (Elton Britt's World War II hit). I sang lead and Fairley would join in on the last line of each verse. We got four encores. That was such a thrill to me. In all the show work we had never done many encores. And now we were doing four."

While at Renfro Valley, the Holdens made personal appearances, did daily radio shows during the week, and appeared on the Saturday night Renfro Valley Barn Dance and the Sunday Morn-in' Gatherin', both of which were heard on the CBS network.

Jack recalled how he, Fairley and Jerry Behrens, their partner at Renfro Valley, were selected to sing the theme song for the Sunday Mornin' Gatherin', which at the time was sponsored by the Ballard and Ballard Flour Company. "John Lair had all the

acts who were to appear on the program to meet with him and an official from the flour company to try to come up with a theme song. The producer of the show tried all day to write one, and everybody tried to sing everything he wrote, but nobody could do it. So John Lair tried his hand, and he came up with some words and music which everybody sang except us. We were sitting over out of the the way trying to avoid having to sing it, but John looked at us and said, ‘All right, it’s the Holdens’ turn. Let’s get it, boys!’ When we finished, the flour company official jumped up and said, ‘That’s it! That’s it!’ “

Jack still remembers that theme song which brings to mind another famous singing commercial about flour.

“The old hen she cackled, the rooster crowed,
It’s breakfast time in Old Renfro;
Where we’ll never go back on our country raisin’,
Good hot biscuits we devour,
Made from Ballard’s Obelisk flour,
And the way they taste is plumb amazin’ . “

“Then we had a little instrumental break, and the announcer would say, ‘Good morning. Welcome to the Renfro Valley Sunday Mornin’ Gatherin’, brought to you by Ballard and Ballard.

“Then we’d come back and sing:
“Here’s music and fun for a quarter of an hour,
And a few kind words for Obelisk flour.
And the way they taste! Yes, ma’am, it’s plumb amazin’ .”

At the time the Holdens were there the Renfro Valley cast included such acts as Molly O’Day and husband Lynn Davis (see BU-Sept. 1974); the Travers twins, Ruth and Ruby; Eller Long; Shorty Hobbs; Slim Miller; Barefoot Brownie Reynolds; fiddling Red Herron; Ernie Lee; Randall Parker; and the Coon Creek Girls.

It was while at Renfro Valley that Jack and his wife wrote “No Wars in Heaven,” a song which they, as well as Jimmie Davis, would one day record. A decade later, during the Korean War, this World War II inspired song would be the subject of a touching letter which Jack received from a lady in Indianhead, Pennsylvania. The writer said that her son, who had been killed in Korea, had requested that “No Wars in Heaven” be sung at his funeral. She was asking Jack if he would send her the words to the song so that her son’s request could be honored. Jack and his wife sent the bereaved mother two copies of their recording of the song.

The Holden Brothers’ career was at a high point in Renfro Valley when World War II caught up with them. Jack was drafted into the Army and Fairley served a hitch in the Navy. Following their discharge from military service the Holdens regrouped at Renfro Valley, picking up where they had left off two years before. After a short time, however, Jack’s and Fairley’s career goals began to diverge and they separated. Fairley stayed on at Renfro Valley as a soloist, while Jack put together a new band and moved to another area.

Jack’s new band, which he called Jack Holden and the Georgia Boys, consisted initially of himself, singer Claude Sweet, fiddle player Wayne Midkiff, and Emory Martin, a one-armed banjo player. Jack explained how Martin was able to play the banjo with only one arm. “He used a regular five-string tuning,” says Jack, “and noted the banjo with his left arm, which ended just above his elbow, and picked with his right hand like anybody else.

“When I would introduce him on stage,” Jack continues, “I’d say, ‘This man is not coming out here looking for sympathy. He’s a musician, and he’s going to put you on a show. Now let’s make welcome the world’s one and only one-armed banjo player.’ The audience loved him.” For the novelty effect, Martin sometimes played the banjo with his toes and his teeth.

Jack Holden and the Georgia Boys worked at WHIS in Bluefield and at WHIG in Dayton, Ohio, before going, in 1947, to Topeka, Kansas, and a job at WIBW. Just prior to this move, Jack and Fairley were reunited, and the Holden Brothers' music was carried to new audiences on the Great Plains.

The only commercial recording by the Holden Brothers duet was made while they were at Topeka when they sang "Dust on the Bible" and "Mother's Not Dead, She's Only Sleeping" for the White Church label. "The record sold real good," Jack recalled. "We sold them mail order for a dollar a piece. We sold 1500 the first week after it was released."

Jack Holden and the Georgia Boys also recorded during the Topeka period. Their label was Red Barn, the country music companion to the White Church label. The six sides they recorded were "Black Mountain Blues"/"Beneath the Old Kentucky Moon 'Y' Mama Quit Teasing Me," and "Drifting and Dreaming," composed by Jimmy Skinner, with fiddler Wayne Midkiff playing "Mocking Bird" on the flip side.

While at Topeka, Jack and his Georgia Boys, in competition with a number of other bands in the area, won the title, "Best Country Band in the Midwest."

In 1948 the Holden Brothers broke up again, and this time the separation would be permanent.

Fairley left Topeka and resumed his career as a solo performer, specializing in novelty songs like "When Grandma Got Her Teeth in Upside Down." He worked in such cities as Knoxville, where he appeared on the WNOX Mid-Day Merry-Go-Round with Lonnie Glosson and Homer and Jethro; Detroit, where he played in the same nightclub with Moon Mullican; and Atlanta, where he became a member of the WSB Barn Dance troupe. Among his fellow performers at WSB were Bill Carlisle, Cotton Carrier, Buck

Glosson (Lonnie's brother), and the Smith Brothers, Tennessee and Smitty.

In 1952 Fairley joined Ernie Lee and other stars from Cincinnati's WLW in an overseas USO show that carried them to Germany and France.

After becoming a solo performer, Fairley landed a recording contract with King. Some of the eight or so sides he recorded were the novelty songs he did so well like "Don't Monkey 'Round My Widow," "My Little Darling 'Cootsie-Coo," "The Intoxicated Rat," "Oh That Nagging Wife of Mine," "Port to Portal Pay," and "Keep Them Cold Icy Fingers Off of Me," which was his best known.

Fairley's last work as a professional musician was in Detroit for Casey Clark on WJR's Big Barn Frolic. In the fifties he left show business and took a job with an Atlanta trucking firm. He retired and made his home in Atlanta with his wife. The only performing he did was at an occasional private party.

In 1949 Jack moved from Topeka to Atlanta where he was soon appearing on the Dee Rivers country/gospel station WEAS. By this time Jack's wife was performing with him under the name Frances Kay. Jack's Atlanta group, which was called the Dixie Home Folks, at one time or another, included Tip Sharp; Wayne Midkiff; James Padgett who, with his wife Mary, worked the southeast bluegrass festival circuit; fiddle player Johnny Crider; mandolinist Eldon Hooper; and Paul Bennett, composer of "Almost Home," a song that was recorded by Cowboy Copas.

While at WEAS, Jack and his wife, using the names Jack Holden and Frances Kay, recorded about a dozen sides for RCA, including "Empty Tomb," written by Wade Mainer who, along with his Mountaineers, at one time appeared with the Holdens on WEAS; "When the Hell Bomb Falls"; "Standing By His Side"; "No Wars in Heaven"; "With a Ring in My Pocket"; "Jesus and

Me”]; and “They Locked God Outside the Iron Curtain.”

In addition to his work as a country music entertainer on WEAS, Jack also worked for the station as a disc jockey and as a sales and service representative. In the 1950’s he was sent to Memphis to manage KWEP, the Dee Rivers station there.

Jack said that shortly after he had taken over the Memphis station a young fellow came out with his guitar looking for a job. “I told him that I had just made the decision to eliminate from the station all performers who didn’t have sponsors. ‘I’m not going to put Eddy Arnold or Gene Autry or anybody on without a sponsor,’ I told him. I said, ‘If you can get yourself a sponsor I’ll put you on.’ He told me that he was selling appliances for the Home Equipment Company, and he believed they would sponsor him. Sure enough, in a few days, he was back with a sponsor, and that’s when I put Johnny Cash on the air the first time he ever had a regular program.

Mrs. Holden, who was also working at the station at the time, remembered Johnny Cash. “He was such a clean cut, nice looking person. He was also very shy. At first when he’d come to the station to do his program, all he would say was, ‘Is Jack here?’ Never ‘Good morning’ or anything, just ‘Is Jack here?’ “

According to Jack, Mrs. Holden soon recognized that this young fellow possessed more than average talent. “She told me one day, ‘Jack, that old boy’s commercial. You ought to listen to him.’ “

“I think it was the fact that he was so different,” Mrs. Holden interjected. “Then, too, he sang a lot of his own material, which is good. And I told Jack that if the right people ever heard him, he would go places.”

Shortly afterwards, Cash’s first record “Hey Porter”/”Cry, Cry, Cry” was released, and, as Jack puts it, “he tookoff and ol’ John’s been going good ever since.”

Jack recalled that another highlight of his career occurred while he was at KWEM in Memphis. On January 13, 1956, he was named Mr. Dee Jay USA by Nashville's WSM.

Jack was with the Dee Rivers stations for approximately fifteen years. After leaving them around 1962, he worked as disc jockey and sales and service representative for several country and gospel stations in the Atlanta area. Later, he was with WLAW in Lawrenceville, Georgia, located some thirty miles northeast of Atlanta. He used the name he assumed back in the thirties. Mrs. Holden is the station's bookkeeper and traffic manager.

Jack, Frances, and their daughter, Lynda Lou, performed regularly as a country-gospel trio. Jack accompanied the group on his Martin 000-28 guitar which he bought in 1938. Lynda Lou's fourteen year old son, Marc, played drums with his mother and grandparents. Mr. and Mrs. Holden made their home in Tucker, a suburb of Atlanta.

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The Rice Brothers: Hillbillies With Uptown Ambitions

By Wayne Daniel

“We didn’t go in for what we called dyed-in-the-wool hillbilly. We was hillbillies, but we didn’t play hillbilly.” That’s the way, after the passage of some 40 years, Paul Rice remembered the music of The Rice Brothers, an act built around himself and his brother Hoke. Despite their efforts to overcome what Paul called the “corny” image of some of their contemporaries such as The Blue Sky Boys, The Rice Brothers’ music was firmly rooted in the hillbilly string band tradition of the Southeast.

Hoke Rice was born January 8, 1909, some 50 miles northeast of Atlanta, Georgia, in Hall County. Four years later, on July 23, 1913, while the family was still living in the same Chestnut Mountain community near Gainesville, Paul was born. Their father, a preacher and cobbler, repaired soles during the week and saved souls on Sundays. From their mother, who played five-string banjo, fiddle and piano, the Rice brothers inherited their musical talent.

Around 1920, when Hoke was 11 years old and Paul was about seven, their parents separated. Mrs. Rice later married a textile mill mechanic and part-time musician named Rufus M. “Bud” Silvey. He subsequently encouraged and helped shape the musical development of his two stepsons. In pursuit of his textile trade, Silvey and his family lived in several small towns in Georgia. Silvey’s musical enterprises, which later included Hoke and Paul, encompassed a wider circuit and took them to small towns in several Southeastern states.

In his late teens, Hoke took guitar lessons from a classical and pop-oriented guitarist, thus laying the foundation for the jazz

and pop stylings that characterized the music of his professional career. By 1929, after having served his musical apprenticeship with his stepfather, he was making a name for himself in the Atlanta area as a solo performer. Into the early 1930's he was a sought-after guitarist by record company executives who brought their portable equipment to the city to record local artists. He recorded with both blues and hillbilly performers and fronted his own band as a vocalist on several records. In addition, he could be heard regularly on Atlanta radio stations.

Paul Rice, like his brother Hoke, also broke away from his stepfather in an attempt to establish an independent career. In the 1920's he worked on WSB and recorded with Fiddling John Carson and with Gid Tanner. In Gainesville, Georgia, while working in a textile mill, he organized his own band to play at dances for mill employees.

Around 1934 Hoke and Paul pooled their talents to form a brother act that took them to radio station jobs in Cincinnati; Roanoke, Virginia; Baltimore; Washington, D.C.; and Shreveport, Louisiana. According to Paul, their work experience during the Depression decade also included a 13-week stint at the Village Barn in New York City and a six-month tour of duty with the 1936 Texas Centennial. These jobs were followed by the brothers' return to Atlanta in 1937 for a relatively long sojourn of two years in their old stomping grounds. During this time they were heard regularly on radio stations WSB and WAGA and briefly on WGST toward the end of their stay.

Calling themselves The Rice Brothers Gang, the act, during this second stint in Atlanta, expanded to a five-person band that included a saxophone player. The presence of a horn affirmed the Rices' commitment to a sound that they considered to be a cut above the typical hillbilly string band of the era. "We always did the old pops," Paul explained.

Sometime in 1939, Hoke and Paul returned to Shreveport, Louisiana, where they became regular performers on KWKH. They performed on the popular KWKH *Saturday Night Roundup*, staged in the larger towns around Shreveport, such as Monroe, Louisiana; El Dorado, Kansas; and Lufkin, Texas. For a while Hoke and Paul also appeared daily over KTBS on a mid-morning program sponsored by Southern Maid Donuts. For this show they were billed as The Southern Maid Donut Boys. While in Shreveport they became associated with country singer, recording artist and politician Jimmie Davis, two-time governor of Louisiana. Paul may have wished later that they hadn't. As the acknowledged composer of "You Are My Sunshine," Paul sold the song to Davis for whom it became a hit record and tremendous money-maker. According to a story in the Shreveport Times of September 16, 1956, Paul sold the song to Davis and his partner Charles Mitchell for \$35, money he needed to pay his wife's hospital bills. The Rice Brothers' bass player, Reggie Ward, told writer Louise Hewitt that "they asked me to sign as a witness the typed document transferring all rights to Davis and Mitchell."

Paul Rice recalled that, inspired by a fan letter, he wrote "You Are My Sunshine" in 1937, while in Atlanta. "Where I got the idea for it," he said, "a girl over in South Carolina wrote me this long letter, about 17 pages. And she was talking about I was her sunshine, and I got the idea for the song and put a tune to it."

On September 13, 1939, The Rice Brothers Gang recorded "You Are My Sunshine" in New York City for Decca. Between 1938 and 1941, Hoke and Paul recorded more than 50 additional songs for the same label. Their recorded repertoire, instrumentation and interpretation reflect a desire to shed the hillbilly stereotype in favor of a more sophisticated sound. They recorded with clarinet, saxophone, steel guitar, amplified straight guitar, acoustic guitar, bass and harmonica. Among the songs they put on disc were such

pop favorites as “Marie,” “On the Sunny Side of the Street,” “Mood Indigo,” “In a Shanty in Old Shanty Town” and “Yes, We Have No Bananas”.

As was the case with so many other Americans, the Rice brothers’ lives were profoundly affected by the events of World War II. The war ended their career as a musical act -when they both entered military service. After returning from his war duties, Hoke took a job with an appliance firm in Shreveport, a city in which he made his home until his death on May 26, 1974.

Following his discharge from service, Paul worked as a musician in Chicago. In the late 40’s he returned to Atlanta where he became a member of The TV Wranglers, an act which, for seven years, was seen daily on an Atlanta television station. Paul retired from the music business in 1960. He died at his home in an Atlanta suburb on January 22, 1988.

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Times Ain't Like They Used To Be: Kentucky Pioneer Country Musician Curley Collins Remembered

By Wayne Daniel

In 1992, Yazoo Records released a video titled “Times Ain’t Like They Used To Be.” Through previously unpublished film footage, this project provides viewers a glimpse of pioneer country musicians performing their music in styles that were in vogue between 1928 and 1935. The visual images of this video contain clues to venue, costume, and performance mannerisms that enhance the sound and present a fuller representation of the era’s music than can be captured on records alone. At a distance of almost a century, it can be both humbling and inspiring to contemporary country and bluegrass musicians and their audiences to pause and contemplate the lives and times of their early counterparts who, out of the folk music traditions of this country, forged genres that are performed and enjoyed today.

Before his death in 1986, one of Kentucky’s numerous talented and versatile country musicians, Curley Collins, talked at length to media representatives about his career that began when he was 14 years old. Although Collins never had a hit record, he represented that legion of unsung country music heroes who, during the 1920s through the early 1950s, depended for a living on personal appearances and the radio stations from which they were allowed to advertise their show dates. Like the Yazoo video, Curley’s story takes one back to an era in the evolution of country

music that existed before television, rock'n'roll, and the Nashville sound wrought forever their changes on the character of the genre.

The country music era that Collins knew was one in which performers traveled the unpaved back roads and pre-interstate highways of this country in often unreliable automobiles to fill show dates in small town theaters, rural school auditoriums, and clapboard country churches. There, without benefit of sound systems and in the glow of kerosene lamps, they entertained small, but appreciative audiences, many of whom had spent their last hard-earned dime for the privilege of listening. Collins, like many of his contemporaries, knew the joy and economic relief of invitations to free meals and lodging received from adoring fans, and when these were not forthcoming, he knew how to sleep and prepare meals on the sides of roads that were populated by too few and too expensive accommodations of rest and nourishment.

Travel, to Collins and his fellow country music performers, meant up to six people and as many instruments crowded into one sedan with an acoustic bass lashed to the top. The concept of a tour bus never entered their minds. Collins knew the emotional toll of pulling up stakes every few months to move to a new radio station and a new territory where he would be welcomed as a new voice and a new personality by listeners who would attend his personal appearances at least once. And when all the receptive venues within a reasonable distance of the radio station had been booked, and audiences were anxious to savor new talent, he knew it would be time to make another move. Curley Collins knew how to adapt to new working conditions—how to adjust to new band leaders, how to form new musical partnerships, and how to use his talents to create a balanced show and cater to the different tastes of different audiences.

In short, Curley Collins was a professional pioneer country music artist whose career illustrated in microcosm the generation

of performers who paved the way for today's stars of bluegrass and country music.

Ruey "Curley" Culbertson Collins was born July 28, 1915, near Catlettsburg, Ky., a tiny town in the eastern coal field region of the state at the confluence of the Big Sandy and Ohio Rivers where the states of Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia come together. Curley's great-grandfather, Conaway Collins was proud of his fiddle and banjo and possessed a considerable ability to play them. A love and talent for music was handed down to succeeding generations who sang and played a variety of instruments as a matter of course. "We all just learned," is the way Curley's father, Neal, explained it. "No one ever taught us." Neal, whose expertise on the banjo was recognized by the Smithsonian Institution, compounded his descendants' musical proclivities by marrying Maggie McKnight, a woman equally gifted as a musician. A favorite family story tells of her playing pump organ in church when she was so small her feet couldn't reach the pedals. She sat in the lap of her grandmother, who pedaled while Maggie played. Other musical connections in the Collins family include the Amburgeys of Letcher County, Ky. Through his great-grandmother, Polly Amburgey, Curley is a fourth cousin once removed to the famous Amburgey Sisters, a pioneer all-female string band whose members became famous individually as gospel singer Martha Carson; banjoist and songwriter Mattie O'Neill (also known as Jean Chapel); and singer/ fiddler Minnie Amburgey.

Curley Collins grew up listening, not only to family members making music, but to country music on radio and records. In addition to programs on nearby radio stations, the Collins family tuned in to such distant broadcasts as the WLS National Barn Dance from Chicago and the Grand Ole Opry on WSM in Nashville. The family's record collection included songs and tunes by such

performers as the Carter family, Jimmie Rodgers, Gene Autry, and Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers.

Neal Collins was in great demand in his community to provide music for dances and other social gatherings. When his children came along they learned to play instruments, and before long he found himself the head of a family band. Curley often related how he learned to play banjo so he could take his place with the group. “When I was ten years old, my father set me down in a kitchen chair with a five-string banjo and told me that when he came home, I’d better be playing a tune. He gave my mom orders not to let me up except to eat and go to the bathroom. When he came home I was playing a tune.”

Curley soon learned to play the guitar, an accomplishment that contributed to him becoming the only one of Neal Collins’ children to pursue a career as a professional musician. “A friend of the family, Dolpha Skaggs, who was police chief of Catlettsburg, had a group named the Mountain Melody Boys,” Curley recalled in later years. “They were on WSAZ in Huntington, W.Va. One of the group, Chuck Wiggins, was ill and Chief Skaggs asked my father if I could stand in for him on guitar. When Chuck did come back to the group, Chief Skaggs kept me on to play tenor guitar and banjo.” Chuck Wiggins later played guitar with Pee Wee King’s Golden West Cowboys. In his autobiography, *Hell Bent For Music*, King states that Wiggins was his “right hand man for a long time” and told how this guitarist and comedian was traveling with the Golden West Cowboys the night when King and Redd Stewart wrote “The Tennessee Waltz.”

Curley Collins, who was in his early teens at the time, could not have handpicked a better act than the Mountain Melody Boys with which to train as a professional country musician. The group was organized primarily as a church and Sunday School group in

late 1927 or early 1928 by nonperformer Dolpha Skaggs. They quickly attracted a large following and soon found work making personal appearances at regional theaters and other venues. They made their radio debut on WSAZ in February of 1928, and in April of 1935 they became the first band to broadcast on the newly launched WCMI in Ashland, Ky. In 1938, the group went to New York where they played a six-week engagement at the Village Barn, appeared on the weekly CBS radio network's Major Bowes' Original Amateur Hour, a show that auditioned up to 700 fame and fortune-seeking acts per week, and signed a contract with another network amateur program, NBC's Town Hall Tonight, the show that discovered Frank Sinatra.

Curley was not with the Mountain Melody Boys during these heady days in New York. He had gone on to what presumably he considered to be greener pastures. While still working as a member of the Mountain Melody Boys he had teamed with his younger brother Ransome, guitarist and mandolin player, and a friend, fiddler Clarence "Slim" Clere, to form the Prairie Pals. Between 1933 and 1935, this group performed in the same general area as the Mountain Melody Boys, and Curley worked in both acts. When Ransome dropped out to spend more time on his schoolwork, the Prairie Pals became a quartet with the addition of guitarist, comedian, and bass fiddle player Tex Forman, and fiddler Reedy Reid. The Prairie Pals were heard regularly on radio station WCMI in Ashland, Ky., and filled show dates in the area. After leaving the Prairie Pals, Slim Clere continued his musical career in Charleston, W.Va., and was associated for several years with T. Texas Tyler, who became widely known for his post-World War II hit "Deck Of Cards."

The mid-1930s was a busy time for Curley Collins. In addition to working in two bands and angling for a better job

in the entertainment business, he found time to get married and start a family. When Curley's matrimonial aspirations did not fare well with the mother of the prospective bride, the young couple resorted to the age-old ploy of elopement. Curley, who was 20, and Hazel Maddix, his bride-to-be, who was 17, sought the knot-tying services of the legal establishment in an adjoining county noted for not demanding too much in the way of age verification for those in search of matrimonial bliss. Miss Maddix, reluctant to lie about her age, wrote "21" on a piece of paper and put it in her shoe so she could truthfully tell the judge that she was "over 21."

Records show that Curley, apparently innocent of the qualms experienced by his sweetheart, gave his age as 22. Curley's new mother-in-law was irate after learning of the nuptials for the first time when they were announced on the radio where Curley was performing. Slim Clere, who was around at the time, explained in later years the likely source of the future mother-in-law's attitude toward the minstrel suitor. He spoke of a kind of stereotyping that early hillbilly musicians had to contend with.

"People thought a fiddle player was just about as ornery as you could get," he said. "People would not hire a hillbilly musician for anything, as they thought they wouldn't work at anything besides music."

While Curley was getting adjusted to married life and cultivating the approval of his wife's family, he had an opportunity once again to join a new act. In the spring of 1936, a native of Dry Ridge, Ky., Garner "Pop" Eckler, brought his locally famous Barn Dance Gang to Ashland where they put on a show at the Grand Theater. Eckler and his group appeared regularly on two radio stations, WLW and WKRC in Cincinnati. Earlier, Eckler had appeared on WCKY in Covington, Ky. Sharing the bill with Eckler on the Grand Theater show in Ashland were the Prairie

Pals, who performed as a group, as well as featuring Tex Forman as a comedian and Reedy Reid as a breakdown fiddler. In short order, Eckler had incorporated the Prairie Pals into his band that was soon renamed Pop Eckler and His Young'uns.

Curley quickly learned something about fan loyalty and the popularity of Pop Eckler's radio show. "We had a show at seven o'clock in the morning on WCKY in Covington, thirty-five miles away," he recalled. That was early for entertainers, who frequently had been out filling a show date until the wee hours of the morning. To be on time at the station Pop and his band often tested the vigilance of the police department in enforcing the speed limit. "They had a speed trap all the way to Covington," Curley continued. "Twentyfive miles an hour, and if you got to making twenty-six, they'd give you a ticket. They hauled us in one morning. I forget what our fine was, but Pop paid it, and when we got on the air that morning, he started telling listeners about the speed trap." The law enforcement officers who were listening made overtures of peace to Pop, and things were soon patched up between them. "From then on," Curley said, "there was a cop waiting on us, and he'd blow his siren and take us into Covington as fast as we wanted to go. We didn't have any more worries about being late."

In July of 1936, an official at the 50,000 watt radio station, WSB, in Atlanta, Ga., invited Pop Eckler's group to become members of the station's popular Cross Roads Follies program. WSB had a long history of country music programming dating back to 1922, the year the station went on the air. Artists such as Fiddlin' John Carson, Gid Tanner's Skillet Lickers, Riley Puckett, and Clayton McMichen had gained national popularity, in part, through their broadcasts over WSB. The Cross Roads Follies had been on the air for five months when Eckler and his group joined the

program. It was a mid-day variety show featuring several country music acts. During their stay at WSB, Eckler and His Young'uns shared time on the program with such well-known performers as Pete Cassell, Hank Penny, Cousin Emmy, and "Rocky Top" composer, Boudleaux Bryant.

Eckler's group arrived in Atlanta amid much fanfare from the *Atlanta Journal*, the daily newspaper that owned WSB. A picture appearing in the *Journal* on July 5, the day before the group's first broadcast, identified the personnel as Eckler, Curley Collins ("who plays instruments, sings, and dances"), Red Murphy ("the dancing Demon [and] trick harmonica manipulator"), Tex Forman ("chief comedian and all-round cut-up"), Reedy Reid ("old-time fiddler deluxe"), and singer Katherine "Kay" Woods ("the Belle of the Blue Grass.")

As was the general custom in those days, WSB did not pay a salary—an arrangement that required the artists to hustle for personal appearance dates in order to make a living. Curley Collins remembered well those early days in Atlanta. "When [we] came to Atlanta, show dates were scarce," he later recalled. "Being down on our luck, Pop, known for his persuasive ways of talking, got all of us free rooms at [a] rooming house [on] West Peachtree Street. The first eleven days that we were in Atlanta we had soup beans three times a day. On the twelfth day we had a show date at Carrollton, Georgia, and we each made four dollars. On the way back to Atlanta we bought steaks and had a feast."

Pop Eckler's stage shows became legendary events within WSB's immediate listening area, the territory sufficiently close to Atlanta to allow the group to make an evening show date and get back to the station in time for their radio program. The diverse talents of the Young'uns enabled Eckler to present a show that featured comedy, banjo, fiddle, and harmonica instrumentals, and a variety of vocal numbers ranging from old-time ballads to

gospel songs. By grouping various members of the six-person act into duets, trios, and quartets, Eckler's shows achieved the variety that usually required a much larger cast. "By September of 1936," according to Curley Collins, "Pop and His Young'uns popularity had grown to the point where we were performing seven days a week. In some instances, we were playing three shows a day. [We] played in just about every nook and cranny of the state, including a place in the heart of the Okefenokee Swamp. [We] also played show dates in Florida, Alabama, North and South Carolina, and Tennessee."

When Pop Eckler noticed blanks on his show date schedule, he found ways to fill them. Curley Collins remembered that "in 1937, Pop started sponsoring fiddlers' contests all over Georgia. Pop knew that I could play one tune on the fiddle, "Cacklin' Hen," and insisted that I enter the fiddlers' contest [that he sponsored] in Rome, Ga. Because of the reaction of the crowd after I finished, the only encore I could give them was to play "Cacklin' Hen" once more. The prize was a big old Crosley radio, and when I finished, I went over and sat on the radio. The crowd went wild, and everyone knew I was the winner before it ended.

"When we returned to Atlanta, unknown to me, Pop bought me a fiddle for a hundred dollars. I practiced six to eight hours a day under Pop's supervision. In early 1938, in Macon, Ga., I won a fiddlers' contest playing 'Lost Train Blues,' which I played with no accompaniment and talked. I won this contest over a very popular musician called Big Howdy.

"On June 18, 1938, Pop sponsored a fiddlers' contest [billed as the National Fiddlers' Contest] at the City Auditorium in Atlanta. There were 84 contestants and I am very proud to this day that I was the winner. The National Fiddlers' Championship was mine."

In December of 1936, WSB underwent a change in ownership and by 1940, new management had revamped the station's country

music programming. As a result, Pop Eckler and his group moved to other radio stations in Atlanta and other cities. Shortly before his death, Curley Collins told Charles Ganzert, producer of a documentary radio program on the history of country music, about his experiences after he and Pop Eckler left Atlanta to work their way to Wheeling, W.Va., as performers with the Scotts Exhibition Shows. “We traveled in automobiles,” Curley related, “and sometimes, it was three or four weeks at a time we never seen a bed. In the summertime, we’d take the seats out of the car alongside the road or anywhere, and some [would] lay on the seats and some [would] lay inside the car. Whenever we had to shave, we’d drain the water out of the radiator and take one of the hubcaps off and put the water in the hubcap, so we’d have hot water to shave with. We had another little gimmick, too. At that time, we was traveling in a 1927 model Packard, and we had a ‘29 model Chrysler [that] had a great big cover over the manifold all the way up and down the engine, and we’d keep that shined real good and warm up our baloney and bread [on it].”

Wheeling, W.Va., was a logical destination for Curley. Since 1933, the city’s radio station, WWVA, had been broadcasting the Wheeling Jamboree, a Saturday night stage show cast in the mold of the Grand Ole Opry. By the time Curley reached Wheeling, WWVA (at 50,000 watts) was the most powerful station in the state, and the Jamboree was one of the most popular and best known shows of its kind in the country. Wartime demands, however, interfered with Curley’s and Pop’s aspirations to establish themselves on the show. “We joined the cast of WWVA for a short time,” Curley said, “[but] Pop, being an ex-railroad man, was called back to work because of the oncoming war. That is when we went our separate ways.”

Curley moved to Charleston, W.Va., where he worked briefly on WCHS with former Mountain Melody Boy and Prairie Pal,

Slim Clere. But Curley's patriotism won out over his desire to further his entertainment career, and he was soon on the move again. "I went to Pittsburgh, Pa., [and went to work] on a defense job, received a promotion, and was sent to Chicago," he said. "Feeling a desire to serve my country actively, I wrote the draft board in Atlanta, and they welcomed me with open arms. I was inducted into the Army at Fort McPherson in Atlanta [on October 23, 1943]. The first night on base, I won a contest and was offered the opportunity of working with Special Services and remaining at Fort McPherson. However, I still wanted to serve as an active soldier. I enjoyed playing for fellow servicemen in chow lines in the European theater of World War II."

After his discharge from the Army on October 4, 1945, Curley lost no time getting back into the music business and, in short order, he was reunited with two former fellow performers, Marvin Taylor and Benny Kissinger, with whom he had worked while at WSB in Atlanta. "After my discharge from the Army in 1945," Curley said, "I heard a friend of mine, Marvin Taylor, on a radio station in Richmond, Va. He was with a group called Jack Gillette and the Tennessee Ramblers. I contacted Marvin and joined their group right away. The group consisted of Jack Gillette, Don White, Marvin Taylor, Slim Idaho, and myself. We played show dates while performing on WRVA. When we needed another man to play bass and sing, I contacted my old buddy Benny Kissinger, and he and his brother joined our group. We then went to WWVA for a short while." While at WWVA, Curley worked on the Jamboree with such artists as Hawkshaw Hawkins, Pete Cassell, and Millie Wayne. After the Tennessee Ramblers disbanded because of "conflicting commitments," Curley and Benny Kissinger returned to WRVA where they became long-time performers on the station's Old Dominion Barn Dance.

The Old Dominion Barn Dance made its debut on Richmond's 50,000 watt WRVA in September of 1946. Though a relative latecomer to the radio barn dance scene, it soon became one of the most popular shows of its kind among country music fans and one of the most sought after venues by country music artists. The Old Dominion Barn Dance was one of several barn dance shows which, in the mid-1950s, was broadcast regularly on the CBS radio network's Saturday Night Country Style program. Such country and bluegrass music acts as Mother Maybelle and the Carter Sisters, Mac Wiseman, Grandpa and Ramona Jones, Don Reno and Red Smiley, Wilma Lee and Stoney Cooper, and Flatt and Scruggs, were all regular performers on the show. The manager and emcee of the Old Dominion Barn Dance, which originated from the stage of the Lyric Theater, was Sunshine Sue Workman, a singer and multi-instrumentalist whose work on radio stations from California to Virginia included a stint on the WLS National Barn Dance in Chicago.

Curley and Benny were perennial favorites on the Old Dominion Barn Dance until its demise in the mid-1950s. When Curley decided to get married for the fourth time, he and his bride, Kathleen Williams, made it possible for Curley's fans to attend the wedding. Before an overflow crowd, the ceremony took place on Saturday night March 19, 1949, on stage during a performance of the Old Dominion Barn Dance, and the "I dos" were broadcast over WRVA. It was more than three years before Hank Williams made headlines with his October 1952 marriage to Billie Jones during performances of the Louisiana Hayride show on the stage of the Municipal Auditorium in New Orleans.

After the Old Dominion Barn Dance folded, Curley took a nonmusic-related job from which he retired in 1979. He did not give up his music, however. In their spare time, he and Benny Kissinger continued to work as a team and performed regularly on

local television stations and stage shows. For several years, they were regular performers on Virginia's Lil' Ole Opry, a Saturday night country music show along the lines of the Old Dominion Barn Dance, that was staged in Mathews, Va., on the Chesapeake Bay. In 1981, Curley and Benny journeyed to Nashville where they recorded an album titled "Benny And Curley Sing, Nashville Picks," punctuating the title to show that their singing was backed by some of Nashville's top session musicians. Heard on the album are Hoot Hester (fiddle), Jimmy Capps (guitar), Lloyd Green (steel guitar), Lightning Chance (upright bass), Buddy Harman (drums), "Pig" Robbins (piano), and Ray Edenton (rhythm guitar). Some 35 years earlier, Curley and Benny had cut two records for Nashville's Bullet label. "One was 'In The Same Old Way,' sung by Benny Kissinger and written by me," Curley recalled. "Flip side was 'Nothing To Lose,' sung by Benny [and his brother] Bud Kissinger. The other was 'It's No Use,' sung by Benny, and the flip side was 'My Blue Eyed Baby,' sung and composed by myself."

Curley Collins, at the age of 71, died almost literally with his boots on in a Richmond, Va., hospital on October 27, 1986. He and the band, Shades Of Country, for which he played fiddle, were preparing for a show when he became ill and was rushed to the hospital. The band learned of his death just minutes before going onstage.

Curley had been inducted into the Atlanta Country Music Hall Of Fame in 1984 and was inducted posthumously into the Old Dominion Barn Dance Hall Of Fame in 1991.

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Claude Davis, Hoke Rice, Curly Fox and Those Other Carolina Tarheels

By Wayne Daniel

A North Carolina-based group called the Carolina Tar Heels has been called “one of the great hillbilly string bands of the 1920s and 1930s.” This group, originally composed of Gwen Foster and Dock Walsh, was named by Ralph Peer at its initial recording session in Atlanta in 1927. In 1978 Old Homestead Records reissued a collection of 78 r.p.m. recordings that were made between 1927 and 1930 by Walsh, Foster and others under the name Carolina Tar Heels.

In the early 1930s there was another musical aggregation known as the Carolina Tarheels. Although this group probably never made any records under that name, it was well-known in the Southeast from appearances on stage and radio. At least three members of the group, however, recorded fairly extensively as featured artists, as sidemen and as members of other groups. This other Carolina Tarheels band was the first hillbilly act to enjoy an extended tenure at Atlanta’s WSB, a powerful radio station that played an important role in the dissemination of country music from the early 1920s to the early 1950s.

While at WSB the Carolina Tarheels’ operations were typical of those of the early ‘30s radio hillbilly acts. The group had a daily program on the station and, for a time, was the featured act on a Saturday night barn dance-type show that played to a live theater audience while being broadcast over the radio. During the week they made personal appearances at schools and theaters in the listening area. In addition to presumably announcing their

show dates on the radio, the Carolina Tarheels enjoyed additional extensive publicity in the pages of the *Atlanta Journal*, the daily newspaper that owned WSB. In time the group's personal appearance schedule was handled by the Georgia Artists' Bureau, a booking agency that seems to have had actual, if not official, ties to WSB. For several years the booking agency was run by Mrs. Lambdin Kay, wife of WSB's general manager. During the 1930s the agency handled bookings for WSB's hillbilly artists.

On Sunday, November 29, 1931, the *Journal* reported that "A new battalion of mountain minstrels, the Carolina Tarheels, fresh from successful appearances before the microphone and on the stages of Carolina theaters rolled into Atlanta . . . Saturday in time to aid nobly in the *Journal's* broadcast of the Georgia Tech game at Athens."

In this first of many stories about the Carolina Tarheels the *Journal* published over the next two years, readers were told that "The Tarheels are progressive exponents of old-time music, mixing highly modern rhythms, yodeling and other fancy trimmings with their ancient ballads of the Blue Ridge. There are half a dozen of them in the outfit and all are expert manipulators of the guitar, the fiddle, the banjo, the harmonica and the like.

A little over a week later, a story stated that the Tarheels were appearing daily at 2:30 p.m. over WSB. The writer called them "an aggregation of modernized old-time fiddlers" whose music was "a combination of hillbilly and Broadway melody" that was proving popular with listeners.

In mid-December, readers of the *Journal* were told that "When off the air [the Tarheels] have been kept busy in Atlanta and vicinity filling engagements for dances, banquets and entertainments of all kinds."

By the end of March 1932, the Carolina Tarheels were working a tight schedule of personal appearances in the middle

Georgia area. According to an itinerary published in *the Journal*, for example, they were booked every night except two over a twelve-day period between March 29 and April 9. The demand for their appearances may have inspired the formation of the Georgia Artists' Bureau and motivated its manager and WSB to actively seek similar acts to feature on the station and book when the Tarheels left WSB.

On May 2, 1932, the *Journal* published what it called "an unusual letter, written by the good citizens of Jasper, Georgia, on behalf of the Carolina Tarheels." The letter, signed by "approximately 150 persons," requested that WSB "give the Carolina Tarheels thirty minutes on the air instead of the regular fifteen minutes." WSB responded by giving the Tarheels a thirty-minute program on Saturday nights from 11:30 to midnight. Called a Broom Dance, this show, said the *Journal*, was a "homely type of program that has met with section-wide approval."

By June the Saturday night Broom Dance program was on the air for a full hour, eleven to midnight, and the Tarheels enjoyed immense popularity among WSB listeners as evidenced by the volume of their mail and demand for personal appearances.

While on a South Georgia tour they made a foray into north Florida to do a show in Quincy. On their return to Atlanta they resumed their daily afternoon broadcasts and Saturday night Broom Dance on WSB and began a week's engagement at the Empire Theater, one of Atlanta's several neighborhood movie houses.

The Tarheels' next extended tour began in May 1933 and lasted until August. The group had, said the *Journal*, received a contract "to appear over a circuit of theaters in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, and thereabouts." When the Tarheels returned to Atlanta they found that WSB's Saturday night Broom Dance had evolved into a variety show featuring, in addition to the Tarheels, a

wide assortment of pop artists. Called the Georgia Jubilee, the new show was directed by Billy Beard, who had assumed the position as manager of the, perhaps newly formed, Georgia Artists' Bureau.

Beginning in September 1933, the Georgia Jubilee was presented from the stages of various Atlanta theaters. "The decision to take the show into a theater," *Journal* readers learned, "was reached after huge crowds had jammed WSB's studios for the last three Saturday nights eager to watch the all-star cast in action."

For some reason, the identities of the individual members of the Carolina Tarheels were kept secret. On April 27, 1932, the *Journal* published a picture of the Tarheels showing five men. Since the picture showed only the members' heads, no instruments were visible. The caption read as follows: "The Carolina Tarheels, one of WSB's outstanding attractions, will put on a real jamboree Thursday night in the City Auditorium under the auspices of the Theodore Roosevelt Auxiliary No. 2 Spanish-American War Veterans. Here they are, but they will not reveal their identities. They say their show is the thing and who or what they are does not count. Anyway, here's how they look."

Finally, in a November 20, 1932, *Journal* article that listed the Tarheels' itinerary for the following month, the identities of the group members were revealed. "Members of the Carolina Tarheels," the article stated, "are Claude Davis, guitarist, violinist and vocalist; Hoke Rice, tenor banjoist; Carolina Clyde, guitarist and harmonica artist; Rudle Kiser, yodeler; Chuck Rogers, blackface comedian; Louie Bailey, rube comedian and Ester Mae Davis, 'Carolina Sunshine Girl.' " Fiddler Walter Propst of Concord, North Carolina, once a member of the Carolina Tarheels, recalls that noted fiddler Curly Fox, also, at onetime, was a member of the group.

In early March of 1934, about a week after the Tarheels left WSB, Fox brought his own band to WSB. Called the Tennessee

Firecrackers, this group included Louie “Slim” Bailey, announcer and blackface comedian; Ira Green, guitar and banjo player; Tweet Roark, left-handed guitar player and Jimmie Brown, buck-and-tap dancer. The Firecrackers left WSB in December of 1934.

Arnim Le Roy [Curly] Fox, born in Graysville, Tennessee, on November 9, 1910, was destined to become the best-known former member of the Carolina Tarheels. His musical experiences, following his work in Atlanta, included stints with Lew Childre and the Shelton Brothers.

Usually fronting a band called the Foxhunters, Fox played on radio stations throughout the south, including those in cities like New Orleans, Shreveport, Louisville, Nashville, Birmingham, Memphis, Little Rock, Tulsa, Cincinnati and Houston. His show business credits included recordings on such labels as Columbia (first with the Roane County Ramblers and later with Texas Ruby), Decca (with the Shelton Brothers), King (with Texas Ruby) and Starday (with Texas Ruby).

In 1939 Fox married Texas Ruby Owens whom he had met several years earlier. She was already an established female vocalist in the country-western field. The Curly Fox and Texas Ruby duo became one of the most popular acts in country music. For several years during the early 1940s they enjoyed top billing on the Boone County Jamboree and other radio programs on Cincinnati’s powerful WLW. In the mid-1940s they joined the Grand Ole Opry cast where, for several years, they were one of that show’s most popular acts.

In 1963 Texas Ruby met a tragic death when her Nashville-area home burned. Following his retirement a few years later, Curly Fox moved back to his hometown, Graysville, Tennessee, where he now lives.

After Curly Fox, Hoke Rice became probably the most widely known ex-member of the Carolina Tarheels. Born in Georgia

around 1909, Rice was exposed to music from the beginning. His mother played banjo, fiddle and piano and his stepfather, Bud Silvey, was well-known as an old-time fiddler throughout the Southeast. Prior to joining musical forces with the Carolina Tarheels, Rice had become a popular and respected musician in the Atlanta area. An accomplished guitarist, he was in demand as a sideman at the field recording sessions held in Atlanta by the major New York labels. During those years Georgia's capital city was an active and popular field-recording center and it appears that Rice had ample opportunity to practice his craft.

Hoke Rice's recording activity was not limited to Atlanta. According to country music historian Tony Russell, Rice seems to have been in New York in the spring of 1929 cutting 78 rpm discs for the QRS label. The output from this excursion included "Chinese Breakdown" backed by "Macon, Georgia Breakdown" with artist credit listed as Hoke Rice & His Southern String Band and the following selections featuring Rice and his guitar: "Waiting For A Train," "Lullaby Yodel," "Ain't That Kind Of A Cat Yodel," "Down In A Southern Town," "Way Down South By The Sea," "I'm Lonely And Blue," "The Dirty Hangout Where I Stayed Part 1" and "The Dirty Hangout Where I Stayed Part 2." Rice's artistry can be heard, along with other performers, on several other records that were made on this same recording trip.

Rice's musical endeavors were not limited to tunes and songs with an appeal to the hillbilly audience. In April of 1929, he was in the Gennett studios in Richmond, Indiana, where he provided guitar accompaniment to blues singer Mary Jones' renditions of "You Lied About That Woman," recorded back-to-back as Part I and Part II. Rice also once recorded a couple of instrumental duets with Atlanta's blues pianist Catherine Boswell.

Early in his career Hoke Rice made several records as Hoke Rice and His Hoky Poky Boys. Selections under this credit include

“Brown Mule Slide,” “Georgia Jubilee,” “Put On Your Old Gray Bonnet,” “Wabash Blues,” “Georgia Gal” and “I Don’t Love Nobody.”

Shortly after the breakup of the Carolina Tarheels, Hoke Rice teamed with his younger brother Paul to front a progressive country band billed as the Rice Brothers Gang. The Rice Brothers performed on stage and radio in such cities as Atlanta, Cincinnati, Roanoke, Virginia; Dallas; Washington, D.C.; Baltimore; New York and Shreveport. In Atlanta they were members of the Cross Roads Follies, WSB’s most popular country music radio program of the 1930s. While enjoying considerable popularity on radio station KWKH in Shreveport the Rice Brothers made the acquaintance of country music star and one-time Louisiana governor, Jimmie Davis. According to a 1956 *Shreveport Times* story, Paul Rice, sold Jimmie Davis and his partner, Charlie Mitchell, a song called “You Are My Sunshine” for thirty-five dollars. The Rice Brothers had recorded the song on September 13, 1939, for Decca with composer credit listed as Paul Rice. Their recording of “You Are My Sunshine,” however, never enjoyed the popularity of the recording of the song later made by Gene Autry, Bing Crosby, Wayne King and Davis, who recorded it in February of 1940.

Between 1938 and 1941 the Rice Brothers recorded more than fifty sides for Decca, none of which can be said to have been chart busters. In the 1940s the group disbanded and Hoke pursued a non-music vocation until his death.

The third member of the Carolina Tarheels to record extensively was Claude Davis who was born Claude W. Dennis in Salisbury, North Carolina, on February 25, 1895. Davis was a professional name. According to his step granddaughter (daughter of Ester Goodman McClain, the one-time Carolina Sunshine Girl), Katherine Smith of Charlotte, North Carolina, Davis never had

any formal music training, but was an accomplished performer on several instruments, including fiddle, piano, guitar and mandolin.

“Daddy Claude,” said Mrs. Smith, “had a high tenor voice and was billed as the Silver Toned Tenor. I remember when they would ‘gig’ at our house when I was just a very young child and how much they enjoyed it. Daddy Claude was quick to point out if they were off pitch or other mistakes. I think he loved music more than anything in his life.”

Davis seems to have embarked on a music career early in life. A newspaper clipping shows an old picture of Davis playing fiddle in a Concord, North Carolina, band called the Cannon Mills String Band. According to the picture caption the band was started in 1908 and disbanded several years later.

In a note accompanying a discography of fiddler Lowe Stokes (with whom Davis recorded) published in *Old Time Music* magazine, Tony Russell wrote that “Claude W. Davis is remembered by Stokes, Bert Layne and a few other musicians as having been active around the Chattanooga, Tennessee, area—where, certainly, someone of that name was involved in the putting on of fiddlers’ conventions during the ‘20s . . . Davis played in some of the touring ‘Skillet-Lickers’ bands but his participation in ‘official’ recordings by the circle is unproved. He did, however, record quite busily for several labels between 1928 and 1932, often using songs he had written himself or in collaboration with Layne.”

Claude Davis, presumably, is the Davis who, under artist credit, as Davis & Nelson recorded “Charming Betsy,” “When The Flowers Bloom In The Spring,” “I Don’t Want Your Greenback Dollar,” “Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland,” “Every Little Bit Added To What You Got,” “I Don’t Bother Work” and “I Shall Not Be Moved” for the QRS label. The Davis of the Davis

Trio that recorded “The Only Way (Waltz)” and “Sleepy Hollow (Waltz)” for QRS is also presumed to be Claude Davis. Among Davis’ other recordings are “Over In The Hills Of Carolina” and “When Flowers Bloom In Springtime” (Brunswick, ca. 1930); and “Standing By The Highway” and “I Don’t Want Your Gold Or Silver” (Columbia, 1931). Aural evidence indicates that an Okeh pairing, “Thinking Of The Days I’ve Done Wrong” and “When Maple Leaves Are Falling” with artist credit listed as Jewel Davis is, in fact, Claude Davis, or Claude Dennis, if you wish to be 100% accurate.

“Changing times and bad health,” said Claude Davis’ granddaughter, “put an end to his career as a musician, but he always played for his own enjoyment.”

Davis died on May 25, 1961, at the home of his granddaughter in Charlotte, North Carolina.

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The Serious Side of Roni Stoneman

By Wayne Daniel

One of the most cherished traditions in country and bluegrass music is that of the performing family group. In addition to numerous brother and sister acts, we have had the Carter Family, the Pickard Family, the Phipps Family, the McLain Family, the Lewis Family, the Whites and the Stonemans. With a history of involvement in commercial country music that goes back to the early 1920s, the Stoneman Family has been recognized by the Country Music Association as “the longest continuous act in Country Music.”

Ernest V. Stoneman, founding patriarch of the Stoneman Family act, was born on May 25, 1893 in Carroll County, Virginia. Heir to a long line of musicians, the elder Stoneman, who was remembered by family and fans as “Pop,” early in life learned to participate in the downhome singing and picking that was an integral part of the lives of his family and neighbors. By the time he was in his teens he was an accomplished performer on such instruments as the harmonica, Jew’s harp, banjo and autoharp.

When he discovered that his kind of music was in demand by makers of phonograph records, Pop Stoneman made himself known to talent scout Ralph Peer of Okeh records. The result was a recording contract that placed Stoneman before a recording horn in New York on September 4, 1924 for his first recording session. For the next ten years he was one of the most prolific recording artists in country music, making available to an appreciative public 78 rpm records bearing such titles as “John Hardy,” “Sinking Of The Titanic,” “Hallelujah Side” and “Lonesome Road Blues.”

During his heyday as a recording artist, Stoneman traveled widely, making personal appearances with an accompanying band that included his wife, Hattie Frost Stoneman, who played fiddle and banjo. When the Stonemans' numerous progeny (thirteen of the twenty-three children born lived to maturity) came along, they, too, learned to pick and sing and became members of the band. The best known of the performing children were Patsy, Donna, Jim, Van, Scotty and Roni.

The folk music resurgence of the 1950s and 1960s created a demand for the Stonemans' kind of music and for several years they enjoyed a popularity that put them on the most prestigious stages in the country and brought widespread exposure via television and recording contracts. In 1967 the Stonemans were voted top vocal group by the Country Music Association.

After Pop's death on June 14, 1968, Roni, Patsy, Donna, Van and Jim decided to keep the family group going. Over twenty years later, country music historian Ivan Tribe, who was writing a book on the Stoneman Family, said "their continued commitment to their musical heritage is unabated. As a performing family group in country music, their longevity is unequalled and their fame surpassed only by the Carters."

Undoubtedly the most recognizable member of the Stoneman Family is Roni (born Veronica Loretta) who, had the role of Ida Lee, has, for over twenty years, been ironing and making menacing gestures toward her unkempt "husband" Laverne on the syndicated television show "Hee Haw!" Other "Hee Haw!" comedy roles played by Roni include Mophead, maid at the Empty Arms Hotel and the exercise lady on the segment of the show that also features the glamorous girls. Roni displayed her musical talent as an accomplished banjoist when she joined forces with such other five-string virtuosos as Grandpa Jones, Roy Clark and Mike Snider.

During an interview in Nashville, Roni was persuaded to be serious for a couple of hours to talk about herself, her family and her career. Being serious must be no easy task for a person who once said, “I was put here on earth to make people laugh.” But Roni Stoneman does have a serious side and the interview revealed that beneath the Ida Lee exterior resides a warm, sensitive and caring person.

Roni was the seventeenth of the Stoneman children and by the time she came along, their Washington, D.C. area, home was running over with pickers and singers. “I never knew until I was in the third grade at school that there was another world besides the world of music,” she said. “I thought everyone in the whole world played an instrument and sang. I thought making music went along with breathing and walking.” When she started to school Roni said that she found it hard to identify with the family of Dick and Jane because nobody in the story-book family carried an instrument.

There never seemed to be enough instruments to go around in the Stoneman household and the children frequently fought over them as other children might fight over a doll or wagon. Roni says, “I remember one time Scott saying, ‘I’m going to lay this banjo down for five minutes and don’t you touch it.’ So while he was gone, I grabbed it and started playing. When Scott came back I didn’t want to give it up, because I was just getting hot—I was on a roll. And we started fussing over it.

“Later Daddy came in one evening with pieces of a banjo that he had carved out at work. He said, ‘Well, dad blame it, Roni,’ — he never cussed in his life, but he would say ‘dad blame it’ — I carved you out the neck of a banjo today, since you fought so much over the other one the other night.” After Pop put the pieces of the instrument together Roni had her first banjo.

“We were never told to play an instrument,” Roni said, “But if we seemed interested, Daddy would make us one.”

Roni's interest in the banjo was inspired by a story she heard from her grandfather. "My grandfather Frost told a story many years ago when I was a little girl. He said that once when there was a fair at the Galax Fairground in Galax, Virginia, a young lady came with her mother and father from Saddle Mountain. She was sitting on the back of a covered wagon picking a banjo and he followed that wagon for miles to hear her play. Well I loved my grandfather Frost very much and he loved me in spite of myself. And I wondered if it would please him if I learned to play the banjo like that young lady. But I never could learn to play the clawhammer style.

"Earl Scruggs had a great bearing on my banjo style. He played so plain and so smooth. You could hear each note." Roni first learned about Scruggs from her brother Scott. "One day he came home and said, 'I heard a guy named Scruggs play the banjo and Roni, he's wonderful. I'm going to watch his fingers. I'm going to learn everything he does and I'm going to teach it to you.' I said, 'Well, Scotty, maybe I won't be able to.' And he grabbed me and said, 'Don't you ever say you won't be able to. Just because you're a girl don't make you stupid. You've got hands and fingers just like a man and you're going to play like a man.'"

Roni may have learned to play the banjo like a man, but she has been called the "Queen of the Five-String Banjo." Being able to play like a man was not of much help when she decided to go against a man in a banjo-picking contest. "I was playing in a banjo contest up in Pennsylvania," Roni related. "The first prize was a new Vega banjo and I needed one so bad." The competition was soon narrowed down to two people, Roni and a man from New York. "So the judges called me in," Roni said, "and they said, 'We can't give you the banjo for first prize. You're a girl and shouldn't win first prize.'" She had to settle for second place.

Roni played a 1950s Gibson Mastertone arched top banjo that she bought in a music store in Baltimore, Maryland. “It still has the same plastic head it came with,” Roni said. “It has so much dirt on it. The other day I got a cloth and tried to clean it up, but I was afraid to get it too clean. I was afraid it would lose its soul. This is not just a banjo—this is a war horse to stand what I’ve put it through. I don’t take care of it properly,” she explained as she shows how the back is worn from having been dragged across countless stages when she said she was so tired she could hardly stand up and play, much less carry a heavy banjo when she didn’t have to.

One of Roni’s earliest recollections of performing in public was when the family entered a band contest in Washington, D.C. “One day Daddy came home,” Roni recalled “and said, ‘Hattie, they’re having a contest at Constitution Hall with Connie B. Gay and we’re going to take all the kids and go up there and get in that contest and see if we can win.’” The winning band would be awarded a television contract. “So Daddy went across the creek to talk to my older brothers, who had moved out of the house, about entering the contest. But by this time they had gotten away from Daddy’s old-timey music and had bought electrical instruments. When he came back he said, ‘Well, Hattie, the boys ain’t going with me. They say that I’m outdated. They said that my music is too old-fashioned and I won’t win.’ My mother said, ‘Ernest, the only thing I know to do is get my fiddle in tune and I’ll go. We’ll take the little ones with us and we’ll go.’ Mama made me and Donna feed-sack dresses and we went to Constitution Hall and won the contest. And we were on the Connie B. Gay television show for 62 weeks.”

Roni also remembered the family’s performing on radio when she was a child. “We were on this little radio station out in the middle of the boonies, but we liked it because we got to

pick and grin. They would stand us kids up on soft-drink crates so we could reach the microphone. I knew there were a lot of old people listening to us. So this one particular day we were all out at the radio station. Everybody got to sing their song and I said, 'I've got a song to sing.' Daddy said, 'All right, it's Roni's turn to sing.' I said, 'I want to do a song for all the shut-ins called 'Little Rosewood Casket.'" I sang that song with all the gusto of an eight-year-old." Pop Stoneman thought Roni's choice of song was inappropriate for dedicating to shut-ins and when they went off the air he let her know with that device all too familiar to the Stoneman children, the hickory switch. Through an oversight, the door between the studio and the room where the punishment took place was left open and the radio audience became privy to a Stoneman family domestic crisis. "And the phone started ringing," Roni said. "'Don't whip that girl,' the listeners were calling in."

Pop Stoneman had a hard time accepting Roni's antics. "I was not a mean kid," said Roni. "I never was a liar. I never stole anything. I was just squirrely or something. Different. But Daddy didn't like my humor." Roni says that it was Mac Wiseman who convinced her father that he should leave her alone and let her be a comedienne. "We were playing Las Vegas. The Stoneman Family was backing up Mac Wiseman. Mac was singing these serious songs and I was cutting up. He sang a song about 'my canoe is under water now' and I would go 'gurgle, gurgle, gurgle,' into my microphone. Then he sang a song about 'my banjo is unstrung' and I would go 'Bong! Bong!' After we got off the stage Daddy was yelling at me in the dressing room. Mac came in and said, 'Pop, she didn't bother me. Just let her alone. People love her. They like for her to do things like that. Let her have fun and let the people have fun with her.' And after that, Daddy left me alone."

Roni landed her job on "Hee Haw!" because of her favorite movie actress. "Marjorie Main, who played Ma Kettle, was my

favorite actress when I was growing up,” she explains. “Most girls my age liked Esther Williams and glamorous stars like that. But I liked Marjorie Main because she reminded me of the Stonemans. I learned to talk like Marjorie Main. I learned every inflection of her voice. When I used to play in bars in Washington, D.C. with Scotty I would use that voice to keep the drunks from fighting. It would make them laugh. When the people at “Hee Haw!” called me in to read for the Ida Lee part they said that they needed a skinny Marjorie Main. And I said, ‘Shoot fire. I’ve got that.’ When they heard me they said, ‘That’s just what we want.’”

The leading role in a domestic scene is an appropriate one for Roni Stoneman for she is a domestic person. “I’m a home person,” she confesses. “Isn’t that strange? I like planting flowers. I clean the yard. I can paint and fix things. I like to go down the street and talk to neighbors and have coffee with them. I like friends.

“People are like an upper to me. A natural upper. I love them. I really do and it has nothing to do with picking and grinning. It comes from somewhere. I don’t know where.”

Roni loved bluegrass music. “I love bluegrass music because it makes me feel real good deep down in my soul,” she once told writer Don Rhodes. “It gives me such a warm glow. It makes me feel like someone has given me a good, warm toddy.

“Bluegrass music is my heritage, of course,” she said in a later interview, “but we didn’t call it bluegrass. Bill Monroe gave the music its name because he’s from the Blue Grass state. But my grandfather and my great grandfather all picked the same instruments and did the songs that they do now.”

As a performer Roni Stoneman owed a lot to her brother and her parents. From them she learned that only a job well done deserves a reward. When she started playing the Washington-area honky tonks with Scotty, he told her, “You’ve got to learn how to do it right, or you don’t deserve to get paid.” Roni also

recalled the words of her father: “If you can’t play it right and you can’t entertain them folks out there, I don’t care if you are our brother, sister, or aunt, or grandmother, you don’t belong on the stage.”

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Well Traveled Rhodes: Meet Dusty and Dot

By Wayne Daniel

The Rhodes children were apt pupils of their fathers' instruction and four of the six—Ethmer Cletus (Slim); Beatrice (Bea); Gilbert Ray (Speck) and Perry Hilburn (Dusty)—became professional musicians. “Slim, who was the oldest child, traded his fiddle for a guitar,” Dusty explained. “Speck [who later gained national recognition as comedian on the Porter Wagoner syndicated television show] learned to play the five-string banjo and my sister Bea and I played fiddles.” Under the tutelage of their father a new country music band, consisting of pre-teen and teenage children, was born. “We called ourselves the Junior Arkansas Travelers,” said Dusty. “After we got our act pretty well polished up we got on the radio at KBTM in Paragould, Arkansas. After that we started playing at schools, pie suppers and events like that. Sometimes we’d make \$1.50 or \$2.00 a night for the whole band. Back then in the early 30s that was good money.”

In 1932 the elder Rhodes decided to take his children on the road. “Daddy traded a milk cow for a 1927 Chevrolet which we then traded for a 1928 Chevrolet so we’d have transportation and we hit the road,” Dusty explained. “He built a big cardboard box and covered it with oilcloth. We tied it on top of the car to hold our instruments, blankets and things. All eight of us climbed into the car and we left for California. The only way we could all get in the car was because most of us were children.”

In the small towns on their route to and from California and up and down the West Coast the Rhodes children played on street corners for whatever small change their audience was willing to toss into the ever-present hat. “As I look back on those years

now,” Dusty reminisced, “I realize that there’s not much dignity in playing on street corners for handouts, but you’ve got to start someplace. One of the problems with the present generation is that most of them are not willing to start at the bottom. Too many of them want to start at the top.”

For the next several years, as soon as school was out, the Rhodes family would be off on another summer-long trip, performing on street corners and wherever else an audience could be assembled. During these years they were frequently booked into theaters by a vaudeville booking agency. “We performed in 43 states and in Mexico and Canada,” Dusty stated. “The money we made in the summers put us through until the next summer. One summer we made enough money to buy a 36-acre farm with a three-room house near Pomona, Missouri. Our daddy found out there was more money in show business than there was in farming, so he quit farming.”

It was in 1934 while the Rhodes family was on one of its annual musical odysseys that Dusty, who until then had been known by his real name, acquired his nickname. “We were playing on a street corner in Jefferson City, Missouri,” Dusty recalled, “when a state senator saw us and invited us to perform before the legislature the next day. He said he would give us a dollar each. Well, when he introduced us he said, ‘Here’s Dusty Rhodes and the Log Cabin Mountaineers.’ I’ve been known as Dusty ever since and later we called our group the Log Cabin Mountaineers.”

Dusty said that the youthful Rhodes family performers inspired another father to start a family group that later became famous country music stars. “‘Pop’ Wilburn, father of the Wilburn Brothers, saw us playing on a street corner in a town in Arkansas, and he said, ‘If those kids can do it, I believe mine can, too.’ So for Christmas that year,” Dusty continued, “he bought his sons, Teddy and Doyle, a guitar and a mandolin.”

According to Dusty, life on the road was filled with surprises and interesting experiences. Take, for instance, the time they met Henry Ford. “In 1936 we were on our way back from New York,” Dusty elaborated, “when we found ourselves near Detroit, Michigan, about one o’clock in the morning. We couldn’t find a tourist court to spend the night in. They didn’t call them motels back then,” Dusty explained. “They called them tourist courts. So we drove out into the country and found a country road and pulled off to the side and spent the rest of the night in the car. The next morning about sunup this man woke us up. It turned out that he was a guard on Henry Ford’s estate. Unknowingly we had spent the night in Ford’s driveway right in front of the guard house. The guard had let us stay there because we were driving a Ford. We asked him if there was any chance that we could meet Mr. Ford. The guard told us to go out to the Ford Museum in Dearborn and he would see what he could do. Sure enough, a little while after we got there, here comes Henry Ford with two bodyguards. He was a real nice fellow and after we talked to him for a while he asked us to play him some music. He really did like country music. Then he asked me if I would like to play one of his fiddles, so I said, ‘Sure.’ He sent for it and when they brought it back, he said, ‘This is a genuine Stradivarius violin and is worth \$150,000.’ “He asked me if I would play ‘Red Wing’ for him because that was his favorite fiddle tune. So I played ‘Red Wing’ and several other fiddle tunes for him on that Stradivarius fiddle. Well, I have to admit that I didn’t like it any better than the one Daddy made for me.”

Dusty also liked to tell about the time he came in ahead of legendary fiddler and one time Grand Ole Opry star Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith at a fiddlers contest. “It was in 1933 in Nashville,” Dusty said. “The promoter was Larry Sunbrock. I was thirteen years old. My sister Bea and I decided to enter the contest. We were told that the winner would get to perform at the World’s Fair in Chicago.

I won first place, Fiddlin' Arthur Smith came in second and Bea won third place. Well, for some reason the playoff in Chicago got cancelled.

“Fiddlin' Arthur Smith was from Dickson, Tennessee,” Dusty said, “and I never dreamed then that someday I would live in his hometown.”

In 1938 the Rhodes acquired a sponsor, Mother's Best Flour and went into radio work full-time. “They billed us as the Mother's Best Mountaineers,” said Dusty, “and we were with that sponsor for fourteen years. We were on the air first at KWOC in Poplar Bluff, Missouri. My oldest brother, Slim, was always the emcee and Speck was the comedian. I played the fiddle. We played country, western and gospel music. We all sang solos. Speck, Slim and I would sing trios. We did Bob Wills type western songs and Roy Acuff type hill country songs like ‘The Precious Jewel.’ And we'd also play breakdowns on our programs. All the time we were on the radio we would book out on personal appearances every night. Sometimes we'd play a show date so far from the station that we'd have to drive all night to get back to the station in time for an early morning broadcast.

“Our sponsor kept moving us to new radio stations. In 1941 they moved us to KLCN in Blytheville, Arkansas. In 1942 we moved to KARK in Little Rock and in 1944 we went to WMC in Memphis. For six years that we were sponsored by Mother's Best Flour we were on the South Quality Network and our programs went out over 42 stations. Our broadcasts covered an area that was bounded on the north by KMOX in St. Louis, on the east by WSM in Nashville, on the south by WWL in New Orleans and on the west by KVOO in Tulsa, Oklahoma.”

In 1942 the Rhodes family performed at a Fourth of July celebration in Halls, Tennessee. Appearing on the same bill with them was a cowgirl singer from Memphis named Garnet Leif

Arnold. Two years later she was Mrs. Dusty Rhodes. Miss Arnold, who later adopted the name Dot, was born and reared in Memphis. As a child she amused herself by playing on a Sears Roebuck guitar that belonged to her brother. Encouraged by her mother who was a music teacher, Dot began entering and usually winning local talent contests as a singer and yodeler. One of her specialties was “Freight Train Blues.”

When she was eighteen years old, Dot donned a cowgirl outfit made by her mother and successfully auditioned for a job at Memphis’ WHBQ. For two years she had her own radio program sponsored by a ladies’ clothing store that also kept her wardrobe up to date with the latest styles. Because of her local popularity as an entertainer Dot, known to her radio audience as the Wonder Valley Sweetheart, was hired by the leader of an all-girl music group called Angelina and the Cowgirls. With this act she toured the south, later winding up in Chicago where Angelina’s Cowgirls became part of Patsy Montana’s troupe. This was while Patsy was reigning queen of the singing cowgirls and a star of the WLS National Barn Dance. During a summer vacation Dot and Dusty were married and Dot traded her show business career for a career as wife and mother to the four children who came along over the years.

Dot’s child rearing practices included teaching her children to sing harmony and play musical instruments. In 1952 Dot joined the family television show, which was known as the Slim Rhodes Show, on Channel 11 (WMCT) in Memphis as a solo vocalist. Not relishing the idea of leaving her children in the care of others, Dot made them a part of the program. Thus it was that at the ages of eleven, ten and five, respectively, Gordon, Sandra and Donna Rhodes were launched on a show business career. Perry, the youngest of the Rhodes children joined the show later at the age of three. The children became one of the most popular features of the television show.

Over the years, in addition to making personal appearances and appearing on radio and television, various combinations of members of the Rhodes family have made records. Slim recorded several singles on the famous Sun label of which “Romp And Stomp” was the most popular. Speck recorded a comedy album he called “Hello Sadie This Is Speck.” The title song, inspired by Speck’s comedy role on the Porter Wagoner Show in which he was shown talking on the telephone to his girlfriend, Sadie, was written by Dusty and Dot. At one time Dot and daughter Donna had separate recording contracts with the Epic label. In the late 60s, Sandra and Donna, billed as the Lonesome Rhodes, enjoyed some success as a country duet for RCA. Dusty has put his fiddle artistry on several singles and an album and he and Dot recorded an album of gospel songs that was well accepted.

The first of the original Rhodes family of entertainers to leave the business was Bea who gave up her career as a performer when she got married in the early 1940s and lived in Arkansas. Slim died in 1966 following an accident. Speck became a free-lance comedian working out of Nashville. The oldest of Dusty’s and Dot’s children, Gordon, was the only one who did not work in the entertainment field. Sandra and her husband, Charlie Chalmers, operated a recording studio, The Record Ranch, in Mammouth Springs, Arkansas. Donna and Perry were on the Nashville Network’s “Nashville Now” show as two of the four backup singers. “They’re the two in the middle,” Dot pointed out.

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Happy Hal Burns and the Garrett's Snuff Varieties

By Wayne Daniel

When radio stations started using electrical transcriptions in the 1930s the marketing of country music was profoundly affected. In fact, it is difficult to imagine what the history of country music would have been like in the absence of the widespread use of this method of disseminating the music.

To an industry accustomed to marketing recorded speech and music on 78 r.p.m. 10-inch and 12-inch discs, electrical transcriptions represented a revolutionary new technology. The first transcription masters, like those of the old 78 records, were made of wax. After 1935 they were made of acetate. The master was sent to a pressing plant where 12-inch or 16-inch shellac discs for distribution to radio stations were made. After 1945 the final discs were made of vinylite. The discs played at a speed of 33¹/₃ r.p.m. Prior to 1938 transcription recorders and playback machines generally operated with the stylus moving from the inside to the outside of the disc.

The use of transcriptions allowed country music artists to be in two places at once. By transcribing early morning radio programs in advance for later airplay, radio performers could be miles from their home base returning from an evening show date while they were being heard at the regularly scheduled time (via transcriptions) by listeners to their radio shows.

The most important benefit of transcriptions to country music was the fact that they enabled artists, without having to leave their home base, to be heard in live-performance formats on many radio stations in many parts of the country. Thus it was that such acts

as the Sons Of The Pioneers, Slim Bryant, Lulu Belle and Scotty, Roy Acuff, Bob Wills, Asher Sizemore and Little Jimmie, Bradley Kincaid and Lew Childre, while living and working out of one city, could be heard on radio stations in numerous other cities around the country. The end result was greater exposure, which in some instances led to other opportunities, including commercial recording contracts.

Most transcriptions were made to simulate a live radio program, complete with introductions of performers and songs by an emcee who frequently was the leader of the musical act featured on the transcription. Listeners had the feeling that they were hearing a live program from their local radio station. Some transcriptions were designed to be stopped at appropriate intervals by a local radio station's announcer who inserted commercials for sponsoring products. Consequently a program could have different sponsors on different stations. Other transcriptions carried their own commercials with the result that the program had the same sponsor on all stations on which it was carried.

One country music artist of the 1930s and 1940s who enjoyed, through transcriptions, a popularity far beyond his home turf was Hal Burns. While appearing live on WMC in Memphis, Tennessee, and playing show dates out of that city, he and his Garrett's Snuff Varieties were heard regularly, by means of transcriptions, on radio stations in ten states.

Prior to his move to Memphis, Burns had been heard on radio stations in Birmingham, Alabama, and San Antonio, Texas. Following his tenure with the Garrett's Snuff Company, which ended when he was drafted for service in World War II, Burns' career included disc jockey jobs at several radio stations, country music promotion, song writing and work as a performer on radio and television stations in Birmingham.

Harold Frank Byrnes (he changed the spelling of his last name after getting into show business) was born around 1908 in Muleshoe, Texas, a small panhandle town about seventy miles northwest of Lubbock. He could not remember his parents. He was told that when he was about three months old they left him at an orphan's home in Detroit, Michigan, where they had gone looking for work. Young Burns was subsequently transferred to an orphanage in Boston, Massachusetts, and until he was sixteen years old, his life was spent in a series of foster homes in that area. "I was in five different homes before I decided I was going to run away," Burns said. "I ran away and joined the Army. I was sixteen as far as I know. I told them (the Army recruiters) that I was eighteen and I joined the cavalry."

The Army sent Burns to Fort Clark in Brackettville, Texas, where he spent three years. There he became an expert horseman, a skill that he found useful on a number of future occasions. It was also while he was in the Army that Burns came under the influence of pioneer country music artist Jimmie Rodgers. Fascinated by Rodgers' yodeling, Burns began imitating him and soon developed a reputation among his fellow servicemen as an accomplished yodeler and singer.

Following his discharge from the Army Burns went to San Antonio, Texas, where he got a job slicing bacon for the lowana Bacon Company. When, one day, he attended a personal appearance by Jimmie Rodgers, another country music career was born. Years later, Burns described his reaction to that concert. "Jimmie came out and I saw the way he acted. He put his foot on a chair, put his guitar on his leg and started singing and yodeling. I liked that yodeling and I thought, now that's what I can do."

Burns realized that to make a mark in the country music business he would have to be able not only to sing and yodel, but

to play an instrument as well. Again, inspired by Jimmie Rodgers, he chose the guitar as his instrument. Unfortunately he didn't own a guitar and didn't have the cash to buy one but he was not to be deterred. "So," he recalled, "I went down to a San Antonio music store and got acquainted with a lady there. I told her, 'I don't have any money, but I want to buy the cheapest guitar you've got.' So she sold me a Stella for \$2.50." Burns was now confronted with a new problem. He didn't know how to play his new guitar and didn't have the money for lessons. Ever the philosopher, Burns simply put into practice a dogma that became a guiding principle throughout his life. "They say if you've got a little guts, you can get out of the ruts," he explained. Back to the music store he went. "I says, 'I don't have the money to buy records, but I want to learn to play the guitar like Jimmie Rodgers. Can I borrow one of your records and take it in here and listen to it?' "

Day after day, Burns took his guitar to the music store, borrowed another Jimmie Rodgers record, took it into the listening booth and learned a new chord or run. Within a short while he was appearing on a San Antonio radio station billed as the lowana Kid. He had persuaded his employer, the makers of lowana Bacon, to sponsor him. This was the late 1920s or early 1930s. During this period of his career Burns also, at one time or another, sang in a San Antonio hotel nightspot (in exchange for a room), sang at a hamburger stand (for hamburgers and tips), worked in a shoe store and performed in movies.

The movies in which Hal Burns appeared were made in San Antonio. They were part of a series of six western one-reel musical shorts made by National Pictures. A San Antonio newspaper at the time reported that the production would be known as *Songs Of The Plains* and featured "the old, home-made tunes which once lulled Longhorn steers to placidity on their last bedding grounds."

According to another newspaper story, the movies in which Burns appeared were titled *Songs Of The Plains*, *My Gypsy Sweetheart* and *Cowboy Romeo*. Appearing with Burns in these movies was one-time well known cowboy singer Jules Verne Allen.

It was while Burns was singing at the hotel that he came to the attention of M.A. Williams, Southeastern distributor of Crazy Water Crystals based in Birmingham, Alabama. Williams persuaded Burns to return with him to Birmingham to take a job singing country songs and the praises of Crazy Water Crystals on the radio. When they first arrived in Birmingham, Williams assigned Burns to one of his female employees. "He would give me an hour a day with her," Burns recalls, "and she would go over my script with me. She would tell me how to pronounce this word, that word and I would underscore it. So in two weeks, I was ready to go on radio and had my first job with WAPI [sponsored by] Crazy Water Crystals." He was billed as Happy Hal Burns, the Doctor of Happiness. He sang the current hillbilly and western hits, read poems backed with organ music and told listeners about Crazy Water Crystals. The year was 1934.

It was during those early years in Birmingham that Burns organized his first band which he called the Tune Wranglers. The original members were Burns; George Allen, who played straight and Hawaiian guitar and Jackie Boy Pennington, fiddler and guitarist. A little later Birmingham resident Hank Penny, then in his teens, joined the group as comedian. During the next two or three years Burns added new personnel and moved from WAPI to WBRC, another Birmingham radio station.

Burns and his Tune Wranglers were enjoying a high level of popularity among radio listeners and stage show audiences in the Birmingham area when the Garrett's Snuff people in Memphis, Tennessee, came looking for a hillbilly act to sell their product to

radio audiences in the South. According to Burns, several bands around the country were being considered, but his group was given the job because it drew more mail from listeners than the others.

The job for Garrett's Snuff required that Burns and his band move to Memphis where they had a live program on WMC. This was in the late 1930s or early 1940s. By 1942 Burns' show, known as Hal Burns and the Garrett's Snuff Varieties, could be heard by transcriptions on radio stations in Alabama, Georgia, West Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Florida. Burns had to drop the Happy from his name because another radio station in Memphis already had a Happy who was sponsored by Garrett's competitor, Bruton Snuff—Happy Dan the Bruton Man. The Garrett's Snuff folks didn't want radio audiences to become confused with two Happys selling snuff on the air. At WOOD in Chattanooga and WNOX in Knoxville, commercial announcements from Garrett's snuff were inserted live into the Varieties' programs by Archie Campbell. At the time Campbell was known to radio listeners as Grandpappy, a cracker-barrel wise-cracker.

The Varieties' format was that of the typical hillbilly radio program of the era. It featured solo and group singing, instruments, comedy, and a sacred song as the closing number. Like all radio shows and musical acts, the composition of the Varieties was fluid, with artists frequently joining and leaving the group. At one point in 1942 the show's personnel included, in addition to Burns, Kid Clark; Jack Pennington; the Love Brothers, Lonnie and Eb; Johnny Sorrels and Tillie Thrasher. A 1942 Garrett's Snuff publication gave brief biographical sketches of the cast members.

Kid Clark, an accordion player, was a native of North Carolina. His first radio job was at WPTF in Raleigh. Jack "Jackie Boy" Pennington, a native of Birmingham, who played fiddle,

also served as comedian. His vocal renditions were described as “inimitable.” Lonnie and Ralph “Eb” Love were natives of Somerset, Kentucky. They were the show’s brother duet, a type of act that was a popular feature of many radio shows of the 1930s and 1940s. Johnny “Honolulu Johnny” Sorrels, a native of Beaverton, Alabama, had played on radio stations in Honolulu, Hawaii, before joining with Burns. Tillie Thrasher, the show’s comedienne, was billed as the “Judy Canova Of The South.” She was a native of Dalton, Georgia.

Then there was Sissy, the singing dog. Burns found Sissy, a toy terrier, on a Birmingham street one morning on his way home from a radio broadcast. The apparent victim of a hit and run driver, the tiny animal had a broken leg and appeared to her rescuer to be more dead than alive. Burns nursed her back to health and in the process taught her a number of tricks that he incorporated into his radio and stage shows. “The biggest thing she did was sing,” Burns reminisced. “She sang ‘Home On The Range.’ It sounded just like me. She’d sing on my shoulder. Sit up there and put her feet on the front of the guitar. I’d change chords, like from C to D and she’d get right up there and change with me.” Burns taught Sissy, who was a part of his act for sixteen years, about a dozen tricks. On stage, at her master’s command, she would sneeze, applaud and stagger like a drunk person. On the radio, her barking was part of the theme that brought the Varieties on and took them off.

Like many hillbilly shows of the 1940s, Hal Burns and the Garrett’s Snuff Varieties fell victim to World War II, when, in 1943, its leader was drafted. Upon his discharge from the Army in 1945, Burns found that the country music scene had changed. Rather than put together another band, he decided to become a disc jockey. His first job was in Tulsa, Oklahoma, at KVOO, one of the radio stations that had aired transcriptions of the Garrett’s

Snuff Varieties. After a few months he moved on to KWKH in Shreveport, Louisiana, where his disc jockey show, called Hal Burns' Hillbilly Hayride, became one of the station's most highly rated programs.

Judging from a description of his program that appeared in a KWKH publication, Burns was not your typical disc jockey. Readers were informed that "The 'Hillbilly Hayride' is a record show featuring all the country's top-notch hillbilly performers. Listeners are asked to write in telling us which hillbilly is their favorite recording artist. The next program features the numbers of the artist receiving the most votes. The show has been a consistent mail puller since its inception . . . and its mail count mounts enormously as each week goes by. The studio audience has grown to such proportions that [the studio is not] able to handle it. Arrangements have been completed to move the show to one of the city's auditoriums where the large and for a record show, unprecedented crowds can be adequately accommodated."

Following his stint at KWKH Burns moved to California where he took a job as manager and emcee with Bob Wills. After a couple of years with the king of western swing, he returned to Birmingham where he remained. After returning to the Pittsburgh of the South, Burns was involved in almost every imaginable type of show business. He was active in community and charitable organizations and was once courted as a potential candidate for governor of Alabama.

When television came to Birmingham, Burns was ready. His Happy Chappies and Hal Burns' Varieties shows, seen on WBRC-TV, featured such artists as Bill Powell, Country Boy Eddie, Buddy Clark, Diddy-Bo Leslie, Smiley Wilson, Kitty Wilson, Charlie Best, Charlie McDill and Ruby Levy. In addition to the radio and television appearances, Burns and his bands played

show dates at schools and theaters around the state. Burns also worked as a disc jockey on the city's radio stations and promoted country music shows that brought the nation's top country music acts to Alabama.

During his busy lifetime Burns found time to compose a number of country music songs. His "Cross My Heart I Love You" and "Nothin' But The Best For My Baby," were recorded by Bob Wills. His composition, "Cowtown," was recorded by George Strait. Burns noted that, among other songs he has written, are "Little You Care," recorded by Wesley Tuttle; "Gotta Have Some Lovin'," recorded by Tex Ritter and "Your Real Sweet Heart," recorded by Al Dexter. Like his contemporary Red River Dave, Burns was a topical songwriter. He wrote songs about his experiences in the Army ("Sad Sack"), presidential candidates ("Go, Go Gold water," for example), flying saucers ("I See Your Face In A Flyin' Disc"), Alabama's gubernatorial candidates, savings stamps, eating out, and books.

Burns wrote and recorded a humorous song titled "Hungry Herman" after traveling around the state with local gourmet Herman Moore, author of a book called *Eating Out In Alabama*. Burns' song "A Book A Day," written to motivate people to read, was adopted by the Alabama Library Association as the theme for one of its National Library Week promotions. After undergoing open-heart surgery a few years ago Burns wrote "My Achin' Heart Is Now A Happy Heart." It was recorded and used by the Alabama Heart Association as part of one of its annual fund drives.

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Jim Gaskin: Old Time Fiddler & Voice of the Renfro Valley Sunday Mornin' Gatherin'

By Wayne Daniel

As the crow flies, it's less than forty miles from Russell Springs, Kentucky, to Renfro Valley, Kentucky, but it took Jim Gaskin almost 20 years to make the trip.

According to the United States Census Bureau, Russell Springs had a population of 536 in 1940. While Jim was growing up there during the late 1930s and early 1940s the radio was a valued item in the Gaskin home. "And we listened to the Renfro Valley programs," he recently reminisced. There was the Renfro Valley Barn Dance broadcast over the CBS radio network on Saturday nights, the early morning Renfro Valley Folks program during the week, and the Renfro Valley Sunday Mornin' Gatherin' on Sundays. "And they did the songs that I liked," Jim adds, "the old songs, the old traditional music. I would think, oh, if I could ever get to Renfro Valley. I just knew that was some place I wanted to be. I'd try to visualize what Renfro Valley was like. It wasn't that far from home, but in that day and time, in rural Kentucky, it might as well have been on the other side of the earth, because I couldn't get there."

The Renfro Valley entertainment complex was centered around an auditorium built to resemble a barn. It was created in 1939 by John Lair, Red Foley, Cotton Foley, and Whitey Ford (known to millions of radio fans as the Duke of Paducah).

When the first barn dance show was broadcast from the stage of the barn on November 4, 1939, a long-time dream of Lair, a native of the Renfro Valley community, was fulfilled. Before then

Lair had been associated with the National Barn Dance at radio station WLS in Chicago. Although the show, which was heard on the NBC radio network, was designed to recreate the atmosphere of an early American shindig, Lair had visions of greater authenticity. He wanted to produce a barn dance in a real barn in a real rural community using as many resident musicians as possible.

The Renfro Valley Barn Dance was a major force in the promulgation of country music during the 1940s and 1950s. Following the advent of television, the radio broadcasts of the barn dance were terminated, but the show continues as a stage presentation, following closely the format originated by John Lair. During its March through November season the show was attended by hundreds of visitors every Saturday night.

When Jim Gaskin finally got to Renfro Valley he was invited to stay because he went as a musician who could play and sing the same old songs and tunes that had made the valley world famous as an important guardian of traditional folk and country music. Jim had learned to play the fiddle, and when he was fifteen or sixteen years old had organized a string band he called the Cumberland Rangers, a name inspired by Lake Cumberland that was located near his home. Then, he relates, about the time he graduated from high school, “I wrote to Mr. Lair and told him what we had, and they wanted us to come up and play. He put us on the Barn Dance, and that was one of the biggest thrills I ever had in my life.” Lair invited Jim to join the Barn Dance cast as a full-time fiddler, but since he wouldn’t hire the other members of the band, Jim declined. “I said, ‘Oh, I want to keep my boys,’ and Mr. Lair chuckled and said, ‘Well, I don’t blame you, but anytime you’re not playing somewhere else, and you’re here by 6:30, you can play.’ So we had that kind of relationship. When I wasn’t playing somewhere else, I’d go to Renfro Valley.”

At a very early age Jim had exhibited a talent for music, an ability he inherited from his parents. “My mother’s people were all singers,” he explained. “They didn’t sing professionally, but they were church singers. They studied music. They went to the singing classes that were taught, and my grandpa on my mother’s side was a song leader. Then on my father’s side, my great-grandfather was a fiddler, and there are several of us in my generation who play instruments and sing. I grew up with music in the home. We’d sit around after supper at night and sing. My dad was a bass singer, and we’d sing for our own pleasure.” Musical influence from outside the family, in addition to the radio, included records, especially those by Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family, that Jim listened to on his grandfather’s phonograph.

When he was about 5 years old Jim made his debut as a public performer. A one-armed itinerant musician from Texas named Cowboy Jack Alexander came to Russell Springs to put on a show and wound up staying for a summer. Traveling in a covered wagon, Cowboy Jack and his wife, Wanda, set up camp near the Gaskin home. From those headquarters they made excursions into nearby neighborhoods to put on stage shows. “Jack was somewhat of an attraction,” Jim recalled. “People would come out to see a one-armed man play a guitar.” When the Alexanders discovered that they had fortuitously camped next door to a talented young singer they immediately made arrangements to have Jim join them on stage as a featured act.

To Jim Gaskin the stage has been a sort of second home since those early childhood experiences. After the stint with Cowboy Jack, he began singing with a band that was composed of some of his older cousins. By this time Jim was seven or eight years old and was beginning to take an interest in musical instruments. “I started plunking on a ukulele, and a mandolin, and a guitar. I really couldn’t play them” he modestly proclaims. “I played at them.

And these older boys [in the band] tolerated me. I guess I was in their way, but they were awfully good to me.”

Then Jim’s father bought a fiddle “and I pounced on that thing and started working on it,” he laughed. Fortunately there were several local rosin and bow artists around for Jim to learn from, and before long he developed into a credible fiddler himself. He described some of his early musical activities. “We had play parties around in the community. We’d gather in somebody’s house and play and sing for our own pleasure. I played a lot during my school years. We boys would form little bands and play at all the school functions. While I was in school they built a radio station, WAIN, in Columbia, Kentucky, which was not very far away. They used a lot of local talent, so in 1952, I got on the radio there playing fiddle for Lyle Helm on a show called “Smile Awhile With Lyle.” I played several times with him, just as a guest, and then I organized a little band and got my own program on the station.

The band that Jim organized consisted at various times of different musicians from his circle of acquaintances. The ones who “stuck the longest,” he states, were, besides himself on fiddle, Billy Kassem, lead guitarist; Shorty Kell who played open-chord guitar; Lonnie Brown who played guitar behind the group with, as Jim puts it, “a thump rhythm something like Hank Williams used in his band. From time to time we’d use mandolin, too,” he added, “and we’d sing in different combinations. This band was the Cumberland Rangers, the group that later performed at Renfro Valley. “It was the typical country band of the time,” Jim said. “We worked out of the radio station. Of course, we didn’t get paid anything for performing there, but that was the stepping stone to booking theaters, schools, VFW halls, county fairs, and pie suppers. Sometimes we’d play as many as three pie suppers in one night. We stayed busy.”

Following his graduation from high school, Jim entered Lindsey Wilson College in Columbia, Kentucky, attending on a music scholarship. He continued to make music, and after college performed in a night club in Louisville; sang bass in a gospel quartet called the Jubilee Four; appeared with Pat Kingery and His Kentuckians on a barn dance radio show on WKAY in Glasgow, Kentucky; worked the Lake Cumberland Barn Dance, which was staged on Saturday nights in Jamestown, Kentucky, and broadcast on a delayed basis in fifteen minute segments through the week over WAIN; and performed on WEZJ in Williamsburg, Kentucky, with Pap Jones and the Younguns, a band that also included Grand Ole Opry guitarist Charlie Collins. Another member of Pap's band was Dean Huddleston, who also became a Renfro Valley musician.

In the fall of 1960 Jim moved to Irvine, Kentucky, where he took a job as manager and later owner of radio station WIRV. "We had the [live] music there," Jim reminisced, "probably 10 or 12 local groups. We had a Saturday show we called the Down Home Jamboree. It was run barn dance style even though it was in the radio station studio. It was fast—onesong acts—one right after the other, and we'd go like that for 3 or 4 hours. It really gave the station a boost, because it was a unique situation. Here was a station that was doing something that [other stations] had already thrown away and said that's no good anymore."

It was in Irvine that Jim met Asa Martin a pioneer country musician who achieved early fame as a recording partner of fellow Kentuckian Fiddlin' Doc Roberts and, as a radio performer, on such stations as WLS in Chicago; WHAS in Louisville, Kentucky; WLW in Cincinnati; and WLAP in Lexington, Kentucky. At the outbreak of World War II Martin left the music business and went to work for a steel company in Middletown, Ohio. In 1960 he retired to a farm outside Irvine, Kentucky, where he expected to

spend the rest of his life in peace and quiet. “All those years, til the late ‘60s, I’d never thought of music,” Martin once told *Louisville Courier-Journal* writer Alanna Nash. “Then I ran across these boys, my Cumberland Rangers — Jim Gaskin , Gilbert Thomas, Earl Barnes and Grady Brazeale—who just started comin’ to my home wantin’ to play.”

Jim Gaskin continued the story. “We got together and developed a great friendship. We organized us a show and got back on the road and started a daily radio program on WIRV.” Complementing Jim’s fiddle were the mandolin, played by Thomas; the autoharp and guitar, played alternately by Brazeale; and Barnes who played five-string banjo. “It was about this time,” said Jim, “that the colleges and universities got interested in folk music and started having folk festivals, and so we were riding high on that. We were working those festivals with people like Lily May Ledford and Fiddlin’ Doc Roberts. We were together 12 years, and during that time we played the National Folk Festival at Wolf Trap Park (in Vienna, Virginia) twice, we did a concert at the Smithsonian Institution, and made several TV specials and one documentary movie.” Their repertoire, according to Jim, consisted of representative selections from “old traditional hillbilly music. We did a lot of recording,” he adds, “we recorded seventy something sides. Rounder’s released some of them.”

One release from the Martin/Cumberland Rangers recording sessions was an album titled *Dr. Ginger Blue* on Rounder Records containing 16 numbers, including fiddle solos by Jim on “Rutherford’s Reel,” “The Cat’s Meow,” and “The Chapman Schottische.” Jim is the featured vocalist and fiddler on another cut, “Lost John.” His fiddle is also heard on all but two of the remaining selections, and he played guitar on these.

Jim’s association with Asa Martin ended on August 15, 1979, when Martin died of an apparent heart attack only a few days after

he and the Cumberland Rangers performed for the directors of Project Concern at Irvine.

In the late 1970s Jim began performing with another pioneer country music and bluegrass artist, Jimmie Skinner. “He and I had been friends for a long time,” Jim explained, “and then I started working a lot of shows with him as his fiddler and singing on them, too. I worked his last show with him in Shepherdsville, Kentucky, on October 26, 1979.” Skinner, a native of Berea, Kentucky, died a short time later at his home in Tennessee. Jim Gaskin remembered a prophetic incident that occurred on that last show. “He [Skinner] broke a string on his guitar, and Glen Hancock, who was playing second guitar took his instrument from around his neck and handed it to Jimmie and was going back stage to put a new string on Jimmie’s guitar, and Jimmie turned to him and said, ‘Don’t bother, Glen this is my last one.’ And it was the last song he ever did.”

Comedians who appeared on stage with Jim frequently kidded him about being so skinny. It’s true that he was tall and lean, and it’s easy to understand why. He gives the impression of a person who burns up calories as fast as he consumes them, for he is not one to let grass grow under his feet. In addition to his involvement in old-time music, Jim found time, over the years, to serve in every capacity from disc jockey to owner at some half-dozen Kentucky radio stations. He wrote numerous songs and tunes, including the musical scores for several outdoor dramas. He and his wife, Rubyann, operated, for several years, a variety show house in Stanford, Kentucky, and ventured into the music publishing business. Jim frequently traveled to Nashville to do session work in the recording studios. “I’ve always felt like I could do a little bit of about anything that I set my mind to,” he confessed.

No doubt Jim’s wide range of interests and high energy level were among the characteristics that John Lair admired in him. They were some of the many traits that the two had in common.

Over the years, Lair and Jim kept in contact with each other, Jim said. “And in the spring of 1981 Mr. Lair said, ‘Isn’t it about time you just throw in with me?’ And I said, ‘Yes, sir, I will.’ And he said, ‘It took me twenty-five years to get you.’ I came as a fiddler and to help out with singing on the Barn Dance and on the Sunday Mornin’ Gatherin’,” Jim elaborated. “And gradually my duties started expanding.” Jim became an indispensable part of the entertainment process at Renfro Valley. He took care of the sound system; sang bass in the Home Folks quartet; played fiddle; played guitar and sang as a duet with long-time Barn Dance regular Bob Baker; sang duets with his wife, Rubyann; wrote for the valley newspaper, the *Renfro Valley Bugle*; served as chief engineer at the local radio station, WRVK; and was assistant manager and engineer at WDFB which served the Junction City/Danville, Kentucky, area. He was probably most widely known as the master of ceremonies on the “Renfro Valley Sunday Mornin’ Gatherin’”, the semi-religious, inspirational show presented live from the stage of the old barn on Sunday mornings and broadcast via tape by a syndicate of more than 65 radio stations across the country. According to Jim it was sometime in 1982 that Lair called him in and said, “Jim, I’d always had you in mind to take over the Gatherin’. The time has come; you’re going to have to do it.”

Before Lair’s death in 1985, Jim got to know him quite well. “I personally rated him a genius,” Jim avered. “He was one of the most effective, spontaneous writers that I’ve ever seen. We’d be putting together a show and need a song and he’d wander off over to the side and reach and get a piece of paper—a paper sack or maybe an old show poster—and two minutes later he’d have a song. And he’d come up to some of us and say, ‘Now, I want it sung like this,’ and he’d hum off a little tune. In a few minutes we’d have the song we needed for the situation. He had the ability of a natural showman. He was able to sense what was

going over with the people and when a show was sagging and needed picking up.”

Despite Jim’s varied talents and experiences in music and other aspects of show business, he said that he is “first and foremost a fiddler.” And he was quick to give credit to his old time music partner of Dick Burnett. The two of them recorded together fairly extensively in the 1920s and, according to country music historian Charles Wolfe, during the 1930s and 1940s, they played on street corners, at fairs, and for occasional dances. It was on a street corner that Jim first heard Rutherford play. “Blind Dick Burnett and Leonard Rutherford would come around Russell Springs and play out on the street corners, at the stock yards, at the county fair, or anywhere they could find a crowd. They’d play just for donations. And I never was as fascinated with anything in my whole life as I was the way Leonard Rutherford played that fiddle.” This was when Jim was 7 or 8 years old, and his father had just bought the fiddle that so captured the youngster’s attention.

“I never passed up a chance to listen to Rutherford play,” Jim vowed, “and I’d stand beside him and imitate, in the palm of my hand, the notes that he made on the fiddle, and I’d watch the motion of his bowing arm. Then I’d go home and try to repeat what I’d seen. Finally I got to where I could play a few tunes, and somebody told Rutherford that I was learning to play the fiddle. So occasionally he’d hand me his fiddle and say, ‘Here, you take it a while.’”

Other well-known fiddlers whose influence Jim acknowledged include Clayton McMichen; Fiddlin’ Doc Roberts; J.E. Mainer; Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith; Slim Miller, a former fiddler on the Renfro Valley Barn Dance; Casey Jones who, Jim noted, once played with Pee Wee King; Gid Tanner; and Natchee the Indian. Jim said that he has also learned a lot from Bee Lucas, his fellow-fiddler on the Renfro Valley Barn Dance.

Jim owned eight or ten fiddles, and like most fiddlers he kept searching for a better one. “I’ve got a weakness for fiddles,” he admitted. “I can hardly pass one up. Especially if it’s in pitiful condition, I’ll buy it and try to fix it up. I fixed up two this past winter.” The fiddle Jim usually played at Renfro Valley is a Roth that his wife bought in a pawn shop for \$60. One of his prize possessions is a fiddle that was once owned by Leonard Rutherford. Jim related that he acquired it from a friend who, in turn, had gotten it from the owner of a grocery store where Rutherford had swapped it for groceries sometime before his death.

Like all good fiddlers, Jim took care of his instruments. “A fiddle’s like a dog,” he explained in the wellmodulated bass voice familiar to “Sunday Mornin’ Gatherin’” listeners. “If you neglect them they get mean. They’ll go dead and sound terrible if you leave them boxed up too long. Periodically I get my fiddles out and open up the cases and set them around the walls behind the TV set or the stereo. Just let that sound vibrate the wood. It keeps them lively. As many fiddles as I’ve got, it would work a man to death to play them all. There’s something else about a fiddle,” Jim continued, “they’re very temperature conscious. Bee Lucas and I, at the barn, when we’re not playing our fiddles, we’ll hold them next to our bodies before a show to let that wood warm up, especially if it’s a cool night.”

Many of the fiddlers whom Jim mentioned as having influenced his approach to the art have been competitive fiddlers. Jim, however, was not an enthusiast of fiddling contests. “I won some championships back through the years,” he said, “but they never did bring me the satisfaction that they should have. I never did feel like there were really dependable criteria for judging. It depended entirely on the tastes of the judges—that’s the bottom line, regardless of what kind of specifications you put on it. There were times that I placed ahead of fiddlers that I knew I couldn’t

beat, and there were times that fiddlers placed ahead of me that I knew were not as good as I was.”

Because of the frustration he experienced in connection with competitive fiddling, Jim calls the fiddling event that he conducted every year at Renfro Valley a fiddlers’ gathering, rather than a fiddlers’ contest. Jim says that at the Fiddlers’ Gatherin’, held the first full weekend in November each year, “we recognize the individuality of each fiddler—that each one is the best in the world in his or her own unique style. Fiddlers can just relax and play to their hearts’ content. By handling the affair in this manner, we drew a lot of the older fiddlers who wouldn’t want to compete, and we have younger ones who don’t feel confident enough to compete. We had them all ages.”

John Lair, as always, knew what he was doing when he hired this lanky fiddler from Russell Springs because Jim possessed those qualities that one expects in a Renfro Valley musician—talent, dedication, and a down-to-earth personality.

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Rocky Top: The Song and the Man and Woman Who Wrote It

By Wayne Daniel

“PLAY ROCKY TOP!”

What bluegrass music fan or performer has not heard the Pavlovian response by someone who has just been stimulated by the sight and sound of a five-string banjo? Although the man or woman on the street may never have heard any other bluegrass song, chances are good that he or she has heard “Rocky Top.” This classic of the bluegrass genre has been recorded a hundred times, and more than five million copies by various performers have been sold throughout the world. Every few weeks the song is recorded for the first time by another artist.

The popularity of “Rocky Top” has not been restricted to bluegrass devotees alone. There’s even a reggae version available — a six-minute rendition by a group called African Dreamland. Folks who have attended University of Tennessee football games allow that it gave them quite a thrill to hear 90,000 fans singing about how there “ain’t no smoggy smoke on Rocky Top.” “Rocky Top” has been used as a pep song by the University of Tennessee’s Pride of the Southland Band. “In fact, it has become more popular than ‘Fight, Vols, Fight’ and ‘Down the Field,’ which have been our traditional fight songs for years,” said University of Tennessee band director, W.J. Julian. “‘Rocky Top’ has become so popular and [so] caught the spirit of the fans,” he continued, “that I am sure it will be our most played fight song for years to come. [It] lifts the spirit of our team and fans every time it is heard.”

What is it about “Rocky Top” that makes it so popular?

When we attempt to dissect this composition we find that,

like most songs that capture the fancy of the masses, the essence of its beauty is its simplicity. With respect to lyrics there are just enough clever rhymes —like “city life” against “pity life” —and phrases —such as the one about the girl who was “half bear, other half cat” —to attract attention, but not enough to over complicate the song and weight it down. The same is true with the melody. It is basically simple, but has sufficient variety in the chord progression to lift the song above the mundane I, IV, V chord pattern. The chord changes, however, are not so difficult that the tune is beyond the skill of the average performer. One of the most striking features of the melody line is the fact that it “moves,” and the words, primarily monosyllables, “walk” with the tune. That, no doubt, accounts for its appeal as a pep song, not to mention its popularity among clogging groups. The melodic piece de resistance, from the standpoint of variety, occurs in the refrain when the composers lower the seventh tone by a half step to create the feeling of a sudden key change. This device is employed three times, first for a full measure and twice later for a half measure each.

The basic theme of “Rocky Top” is nostalgia —the longing for a simpler way of life. When it comes to selecting a subject with mass appeal, a songwriter can seldom do better than try his or her hand at developing the “yearning for the good old days” idea. And so it is that these elements —simple, but catchy lyrics, an interesting melody line, and a topic with universal appeal —in the hands of master craftsmen, combine to form a hit song.

So you tell yourself that it must have taken hours or even days to put all these ingredients together in the correct proportions.

“We finished ‘Rocky Top’ off in about ten minutes,” declared Boudleaux Bryant as he explained how he and Felice, his wife and song-writing partner, came to write one of their biggest hits. “This was in 1967,” he went on. “Chet Atkins asked us to write some material for an album with appeal to the senior citizens

called ‘Golden Years.’ The artist was to be Archie Campbell who was doing a show in Gatlinburg [Tennessee] at the time. We went over to Gatlinburg so we would be near him while we did the writing. Well, we spent several weeks writing songs about ‘sitting in rocking chairs’ and ‘the children are all married and gone’ — that sort of thing. Finally, Felice got so depressed she said ‘Let’s do something different. Let’s do something bright — up tempo.’ I wanted to hurry up and finish the job we were doing, but Felice was insistent, and at last I said ‘O.K., O.K.’ and started singing ‘Rocky Top.’ Ten minutes later we had the song down on paper and were ready to get back to work on the material for Archie Campbell. I promptly forgot about ‘Rocky Top.’”

“We had just gotten back to Nashville when Sonny Osborne called to see if we had any new songs he and Bobby might do on a new album they were getting ready to cut. We invited him over to the house to look over what we had. He wasn’t especially bowled over by what he saw until Felice happened to think about ‘Rocky Top’ which was still packed up with the things we had brought back from Gatlinburg. Sonny took a look at it and said ‘That’s it! That’s it!’”

“Shortly afterwards the Osbornes cut the song on a Decca album and it’s been doing right well for them ever since. That first cut sold around 150,000 copies, and the song later won the BMI high performance award for the most performed song.”

Who are these people who have written what many consider to be the national anthem among bluegrass tunes?

Boudleaux Bryant was born on February 13, 1920 at Shellman, Georgia, near neighbor and carbon copy of that other more famous South Georgia hamlet, Plains. The elder Bryant, an attorney and veteran of World War I, named his new son after Lucien Boudleaux, a Frenchman who had saved his life during the

war. While growing up in south Georgia where, “as a young boy,” he once told writer Dorothy Horstman, he “learned how to milk cows and plant turnips on the farms of [his] relatives,” Boudleaux was exposed to the area’s most popular music — gospel and what was then called hillbilly, including old-time fiddling. His musical training, however, was in another vein. From the age of six he received formal instruction on the classical violin, and among his teachers were two former members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

After graduating from high school in Moultrie, Georgia, Boudleaux went to Atlanta where he continued his classical violin training at the Leffingwell Conservatory while playing violin with the Atlanta Philharmonic Orchestra. During his first few months in Atlanta, Boudleaux also played with a “little symphony” that was heard Sundays on Atlanta’s radio station WSB and with an orchestra sponsored by the WPA, President Roosevelt’s depression-fighting organization. It looked at the time as though Boudleaux Bryant was well on his way toward a career as a classical violinist. But a chance event changed the course of his life and perhaps the course of country and bluegrass music as well.

“There was a fellow named Painter who had a fiddle shop in downtown Atlanta,” Boudleaux explained, “and I used to hang out there a lot. He made really fine fiddles, and he had an apprentice named Ernie Hodges who was also a fine fiddle player.” Hodges, who lived in Waynesville, North Carolina and still made fiddles, had come to Atlanta in 1934 to play fiddle with Red and Raymond, a father-son country act that was featured on WSB’s “Cross Roads Follies,” one of the longest running country music shows on radio.

“Well, one day around the middle of 1938 I was sitting in the shop playing scales on one of their violins when a man [named Gene Stribling] came in and stood around listening to me.” Gene

Stribling was known to radio station WSB listeners as Uncle Ned, leader of the Texas Wranglers, another popular act on the Cross Roads Follies.

“Finally, [Stribling] asked me if I knew any hoedowns. Of course I knew tons of them, and when I played him a sample of what I knew, he told me who he was and that he had just lost his fiddle player. He said he needed someone to go on a show date with him that night to play the fiddle and asked me if I would like to go. I said I would, and I made fifteen dollars that night. That was more money that I was making in a week on my other jobs.” After filling in on additional personal appearances, Boudleaux accepted a full-time job with Uncle Ned and the Texas Wranglers.

After a few months with the Wranglers he joined the Radio Cowboys headed by Hank Penny, who had just brought his band to Atlanta and WSB from radio station WDOD in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Boudleaux’s stint with Penny took him to jobs at radio stations in Birmingham, Alabama; Chattanooga, Tennessee; and Greenville, South Carolina, before returning to WSB in Atlanta. He can also be heard on the Vocalion records cut in Memphis, Tennessee, during this time by the Hank Penny band. Among the tunes recorded were some of Boudleaux’s earliest compositions.

A seasoned entertainer of rural audiences and veteran of numerous one-night stands in schoolhouses and theaters throughout Georgia and adjoining states, Boudleaux, in 1940, left Atlanta for Washington, B.C., where he took a job as entertainer in a supper club. The next several years found him engaged in a wide variety of musical endeavors, mostly with jazz and pop bands, around the country. He played in clubs in Detroit, Chicago, Memphis, and Milwaukee. It was in Milwaukee, in 1945, where his band was playing a cocktail lounge at the Shrader Hotel, that Boudleaux met Felice Scaduto, a sometimes singer who, later that year, became Mrs. Boudleaux Bryant.

Following his marriage, Boudleaux continued to work the night club circuit, playing in Cincinnati, Oakland, Boise, and Chicago again. In 1947 or 1948 he teamed with Ernie Newton, formerly with Fred Waring and the Les Paul Trio, and took a job with the So Easy Flour Company, “We made transcriptions that were played on radio stations around the country. They also sent us on a personal appearance tour of the south. We would go into such towns as Dothan, Alabama, and Meridian, Mississippi, to introduce So Easy Flour. We’d get a daily fifteen-minute radio spot on the local radio station and stay in each town about two weeks.” The So Easy Singers’ music was designed to appeal to a wide range of musical tastes.

In 1949 Boudleaux joined a tent show troupe playing in Green Bay, Wisconsin. When the tent show folded he was left to his own resources, chief of which was a wife with a good voice. “I rented a guitar and Felice and I worked up a duet that we could book into night clubs.” They also worked as a disc jockey team on a Green Bay radio station.

All the while Boudleaux and Felice were writing songs. By 1949 they had about eighty songs that they were trying to get published. “We sent out hundreds of letters,” Boudleaux recalled, “to publishers, artists, record companies.” Finally, Fred Rose of Acuff-Rose Publishing Company in Nashville took a liking to one of the Bryants’ songs called “Country Boy,” and in a short while Little Jimmy Dickens had turned it into a top ten hit. In 1950, at Fred Rose’s suggestion, the Bryants moved to Nashville which became their base of operations.

To call Boudleaux and Felice Bryant successful song writers understates the case. Their compositions have made big hits, not only for Little Jimmy Dickens and the Osborne Brothers, but for other artists such as Carl Smith, the Everly Brothers, Eddy Arnold,

Webb Pierce, Jim Reeves, Bob Luman, Sonny James, and Ernie Ashworth.

How do the Bryants go about writing a hit song?

“Sometimes we work separately, but most of the time we work as a team,” Boudleaux explained. “We do our song writing wherever we happen to be. Generally, we just work together, filtering ideas. Once we get a promising musical phrase, things start happening. Then we begin to mould the idea —working to it, around it, and so on. We enjoy that sort of work.” It is not necessary for the Bryants to have a musical instrument at hand while they are composing. “I can hear notes and chords in my mind,” Boudleaux stated, “and whatever we can hum I can write down.” Boudleaux added that their inspiration comes from artists who ask them for songs.

“Rocky Top” is not the only song by the Bryants that has been popular with the bluegrass audience. “Georgia Piney Woods,” “Tennessee Hound Dog,” “Muddy Bottom,” and “I Can Hear Kentucky Calling” also came from their pen.

“‘Rocky Top’ will ultimately be our biggest hit,” Boudleaux concluded. “It just keeps growing. When we were in England we found that the song is just as popular over there as it is in the United States.” One of the Bryants’ favorite recordings of “Rocky Top” is by a Czechoslovakian bluegrass group singing in their native tongue. Boudleaux recognized the tune, but the only time he understood the words was when they said “Rocky Top” which sounded just like the way fans said it at bluegrass festivals in Lavonia, Georgia; Hugo, Oklahoma; Bean Blossom, Indiana, or wherever.

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Josh Graves: A Dobro Virtuoso

By Wayne Daniel

This was an interview published in 1982 and I have left it in the present tense because it seems to capture the essence of Josh Graves, a legendary dobro player.

“He’s popular with the people. He’ll talk to them for hours.” A bluegrass festival promoter is speaking. “He has a lot of friends,” comments a popular bluegrass musician.

“He’s a very versatile musician. He plays more instruments than most people know about.” So says a veteran bluegrass festival emcee.

“I still consider him the best Dobro player around,” declares a long time fan of bluegrass music.

These are the responses elicited from persons associated with bluegrass music when asked the question, “What do you think of Josh Graves?”

On a hot July afternoon on the banks of Shoal Creek, that flows behind the bluegrass festival stage at Lavonia, Georgia, Josh, who is also called Buck, Graves reflects on these and other things that have been said about him and his music and shared some of the varied experiences that have been his during more than forty years as a professional musician.

“I was born in east Tennessee — Tellico Plains in Monroe County in the foothills of the Smokies,” he begins. The date was September 27, 1928 and his parents named him Burkett. This name, however, would not long survive as the one to which he would answer. The daring nature of a growing boy, a mother’s wrath, and a neighbor’s wit would see to that.

“When I was just a little boy,” Josh explains, “we had this wild pony, and mother told me to stay off of him. But one Sunday

morning I slipped out the window and tried to ride him. Just about the time I threw my leg over his back, mother cut down on me with a hickory switch. A neighbor who lived across the creek saw what was going on and yelled ‘Look at Buck Jones,’ and the name ‘Buck’ has stuck with me ever since.”

When it comes to nicknames, Burkett Graves is twice blessed. The other sobriquet by which he is equally well known derives from the early days of his career when he was billed as Uncle Josh in the comedy team of Uncle Josh and Aunt Jeroshia. Later, he would revive the name and play Uncle Josh against Jake Tullock’s role as Cousin Jake.

Josh’s father, who was a blacksmith, played harmonica, and his wife played the organ. There were many other musicians in the family, but Josh points out that none of them took their music seriously except himself.

“Once a month my daddy would give a party,” Josh continues, as he talks about his childhood which was spent near Maryville, Tennessee, located some thirty miles northeast of Tellico Plains. To provide entertainment at these parties his father would hire two black musicians. “One played the little old tater bug mandolin, and one played a guitar,” Josh recalls. “And I sat right at their feet and listened to them play. They played the blues. I guess that’s one thing that inspired me to want to play. The first instrument Josh tried to master was the five-string banjo. “But I couldn’t play the thing,” he admits. “I had an uncle who had a banjo, and I tried and tried to learn to play it, but I found out my little old hands were so short I couldn’t make the chords. Then I put a clothes pin up under the strings at the top of the neck and got me a table knife and started playing it like a Dobro.”

Josh’s interest in the Dobro sound was inspired by the playing of Cliff Carlisle whom he had been listening to on the radio and on Jimmie Rodgers recordings. “Cliff turned me on to that thing,” he

asserts. “And when I was nine years old I went to hear him when he played at Wildwood, Tennessee. After the show he was talking to some men, and I was just standing there looking at him. But he had enough time to come over and talk to me, and that really impressed me. Cliff lives up in Lexington, Kentucky, now. I see him once in a while, God love him. I hope he lives to be two-hundred years old.”

A little later Josh acquired a National Dobro. “One of those old metal jobs,” he explains, “that would break your back, and they still will.”

Josh obtained his first significant job as a professional musician at the age of fourteen. “I took that old National and went to Knoxville and went to work for Cas Walker, bless his heart, at WROL. Cas paid about sixty bucks a week for a group. I’d go back home with a roll of money in my pocket, and they thought I was a whiz. They would listen to me on the radio, and I’d dedicate them a tune, you know. I thought I was tough.”

In Knoxville Josh played with Esco Hankins’ band. “He sang like Roy Acuff,” Josh explains, “and he’d say, ‘Play like Oswald.’ But I wouldn’t do that. No sir. I love Oz, and there’s nobody going to touch him on what he does, but I’ve got to play my way or I can’t play. Esco got a little mad at me for that.” Josh was with Hankins, off and on, from 1943 until 1950, performing with him, not only in Knoxville, but in Rome, Georgia, and Lexington, Kentucky.

During his off periods with Hankins, Josh worked some with country artist Jack Greene and for a while even quit the music business altogether to take a job as a construction worker. Around 1950, he replaced Bill Carver as Dobro player with Wilma Lee and Stoney Cooper, who were appearing on the WWVA Jamboree in Wheeling, West Virginia. His four-year stint with the Coopers gave Josh his widest exposure up to that time because of WWVA’s extensive listening area, which reached well into Canada.

“Stoney Cooper taught me more about show business than anybody,” Josh reminisces. “He was a gentleman, and I was as wild as a guinea —twenty two years old. They’d take me to the hotel every night and walk me to my room. I’d say good night to them and then go down the fire escape going to a party. I guess I was a problem child. But Stoney tried to look out for me. He bought me clothes, and I called him Pappy. I loved him so much. He’s dead now and gone, but that memory never dies.

“Wilma Lee was a fine lady. She still is. She was the one I was afraid of. She kept an eye over the group, and I guess that was good back in those days.”

It was around 1949 that Josh first met Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs who, at the time, were based in Lexington, Kentucky. That was when, according to Josh, he learned “to like the stuff they were doing.” It was not until May 14, 1955, however, that he became a member of the Foggy Mountain Boys, following a brief period with Mac Wiseman. Josh remained with Flatt and Scruggs until their split in 1969, sharing in the varied trials and triumphs that this duo experienced during those fourteen years. Josh once told writer George Martin of the Foggy Mountain Boys’ harried schedule as they hopped, skipped, and jumped across the country to fill stage, television, and Grand Ole Opry commitments. “I didn’t have a day off for six months when I came with Flatt and Scruggs,” he said.

Josh was with Flatt and Scruggs while bluegrass history was being made: when the Martha White Flour commercial became a national hit; when Flatt and Scruggs got caught up in the folk music boom with appearances at the Newport Folk Festival and the release of such albums as *Folk Songs of Our Land* and *Hard Travelin’*; when the Foggy Mountain Boys played at Carnegie Hall; when countless millions of television viewers and movie

goers were introduced to bluegrass music through “The Ballad of Jed Clampett” and the theme music of the film *Bonnie and Clyde*.

When Josh went to work with Flatt and Scruggs (as a bass player incidentally), for all he knew, he would be with them for only fourteen days. He never dreamed they would keep him fourteen years. “They said, ‘Come down and try out for two weeks,’” Josh recalls. “‘If we like you, and you like us, you’ve got a job.’ Well, two weeks went by, and they called me in. I thought they were fixing to send me home. But they said, ‘Which had you rather play, the Dobro or the bass?’ And I said, “Man, are you giving me a choice?””

As is now well known, Josh opted for the Dobro, and he’s not sorry. Of his fourteen-year tour of duty with Flatt and Scruggs he says, “I enjoyed it; really, I did. I’m going to tell you something about those boys,” he continues. “If they said, ‘I’ll meet you in the morning at nine o’clock out there in front of your mail box,’ you could count on that. And you never had to go looking for your money. They’d bring it to you.”

In his book, *Old As the Hills*, Steven D. Price states that the unamplified steel guitar had not been associated with bluegrass music prior to Josh’s appearance as a member of the Foggy Mountain Boys. He goes on to say that Josh “turned the Dobro into a powerful lead voice, slipping and swooping like a barnstorming biplane” and credits him with inspiring many young musicians, notably Jerry Douglas, and for contributing to the decision of the Dobro Company, which had stopped manufacturing the instrument, to resume production in 1956. Another Dobro player who acknowledges his debt to Josh Graves is Mike Auldridge who says that the way he learned to play the instrument was by slowing down the Flatt and Scruggs records that featured Josh.

Another bluegrass historian, Bob Artis, writes in his book, *Bluegrass*, that Josh's inclusion in the (Flatt and Scruggs) band resulted in a shift from the hard bluegrass sound, as heard on pre-Dobro songs like 'Til Go Steppin' Too' and 'Thinkin About You,' to a softer, hillbilly sound on such numbers as 'On My Mind' and 'Some Old Day.'

"I believe I can explain that," Josh responds. "What they wanted to do was to get away from the Monroe sound. They wanted a little something different, and they came out with 'On My Mind' and 'Randy Lynn Rag.'"

When Flatt and Scruggs split in 1969, Josh, along with Paul Warren and Jake Tullock, remained with Flatt to become the Nashville Grass and to return to a more traditional bluegrass sound.

According to bluegrass historian Neil V. Rosenberg, bluegrass fans who earlier had expressed "dismay at the Nashville sound of the recordings and of their disappointment at live shows [of the Foggy Mountain Boys during their last three years of existence]" were soon writing enthusiastic letters to the bluegrass journal s rejoicing that "Lester's [Nashville Grass] sound was the good old traditional bluegrass sound."

After two years with Flatt and the Nashville Grass, Josh joined the Earl Scruggs Review where he stayed for another two years. "I loved every one of those boys — Gary, Randy and Stevie — and I still do," Josh confesses. "But, you know, if you play acoustic guitar, like I have to do," he continues, "and I won't change it, and I never will. I couldn't see myself putting a pickup on it. Though I know the money was good, but your heart's not there, you know. I love Earl Scruggs. He taught me a lot of things. I just figured if there was some money out there, I was going after it. Sounds blunt, but be your own boss. Do what the heck you want to do. That's what I had to do." And so Josh Graves, after two years, left

the Earl Scruggs Review. “In 1974, I broke out on my own, and that’s where I’m at today,” he says in summary.

Before Josh became acquainted with Earl Scruggs, he played the Dobro with his thumb and index finger, in the manner of his childhood idol, Cliff Carlisle. “But when I met Earl Scruggs, I changed it all. He taught me the three-finger roll. That man is a genius,” Josh extols. “He sat and worked with me like I was his brother.” As a result of Scruggs’ instruction, his banjo style was adapted to the Dobro; and in writer George Martin’s opinion, “the Dopera Brothers’ resophonic guitar probably has reached its greatest success in the capable hands of” his willing student.

Josh’s right-hand technique is not all he learned from Earl Scruggs. “My timing — “ he explains, “Scruggs taught me that. If you hear me out there — I don’t care who I’m with — if it comes down wrong, I’ll come down with them. If they do it wrong, I’ll do it wrong with them. It doesn’t disrupt what they’re doing. You’ve got to learn to adjust to it.

“There are a lot of banjo pickers,” Josh continues, “but there’ll never be another Scruggs. If it hadn’t been for him, I guess I’d be back in east Tennessee hoeing corn. I almost got in a fight [at one festival] over him. This guy was putting Earl down, and I can’t stand that.”

When you hear Josh on the stage these days he most likely will be playing his R. Q. Jones guitar. However, he owns two vintage instruments, including a 1929 Dobro which he obtained early in his career for eight dollars. He says that the older instruments, which he played when he was with Flatt and Scruggs, will never be played again. “I raised a family with them, and I just laid them down. I might lose them — I did one time, but I got them back — so I won’t take them out again.

“I name my guitars,” Josh observes. “I have one named Julie, and the 1929 model is Cliff-after Cliff Carlisle. The one I’m

playing right now is Elbert. I named him after a friend of mine in Kentucky. You know, after a while, your instruments get to be like your friends. The name Julie, Josh hastens to explain, was inspired, not by a woman he ever knew, but by an acquaintance who owned a gun by the same name.

After having used Gibson strings for a long time, Josh now uses GHS strings. “As hard as I play, for the front two strings, I like eighteens (.018”),” he notes. “I put a twenty-six (.026”) on the third and thirty-six (.036”), forty-six (.046”), and fifty-six (.056”) on the fourth, fifth, and sixth. Most kids will say, ‘Give us a fourteen or a sixteen on the first two strings.’ But the way I came up, working behind Flatt and Scruggs, I learned that you had better come drawed back with something. If you put a fourteen on the front, you’ll never be heard.”

For his picks, Josh prefers a National thumb pick and Dunlop finger picks. He likes a thumb pick “as big as you can get it.” He uses a Stevens bar.

Although Josh is best known for his Dobro playing, he is also an accomplished flat-top guitarist, and his stage shows usually feature a couple of solos on that instrument. Josh is also a composer of considerable merit and can boast of almost fifty BMI-licensed songs with his name listed as composer or co-composer. His first recorded song was “World of Sorrow” on the Mercury label. In 1959 he received a BMI award for “Come Walk With Me” which was recorded by Wilma Lee and Stoney Cooper. “I wrote that song for Benny Martin, but it didn’t come down that way. He didn’t cut it. Wilma Lee and Stoney picked it up — I’m glad they did — and Benny played the fiddle on it,” he remarks with irony. Other compositions from Josh’s pen, either alone or in collaboration with others, particularly his friend, Jake Lambert, include the well-known, “Evalina,” “Roustabout,” and “The Good Things Outweight the Bad.”

A reviewer of Josh's recent album, *King of the Dobro*, notes the presence of "some extraneous sounds ... such as clarinet and drums."

"Oh, I get cut up a lot of times," Josh concedes. "I have about ten albums out now, and maybe I'll use a pedal steel one time, and maybe a snare drum. When I do that I'm trying to get a play on the radio stations. You know —and I know —that at the radio stations, when they hear a banjo on a record they're not going to play it. I don't mean to offend anybody; I'm not trying to get above my 'grass people, but *King of the Dobro* is playing on a lot of stations. If it was strictly 'grass it wouldn't get that play."

Josh has a large following in Canada, especially in the Ottawa Valley area where he usually plays the club circuit during the winter months. He notes that his recording of "Maiden's Prayer" from the *King of the Dobro* album has received a considerable amount of air play in Ottawa.

Josh and his wife, Evelyn, were married in 1945. "She's been an inspiration to me," he says. "She's stood by me in the good times and the bad times, and I love her for that." The Graves have four children, three boys and a girl. The oldest son is a policeman in Hendersonville, Tennessee, and the second is a country music artist who records for CMH under the name of Billy Troy. The youngest son, Brian, still in his teens, is also a musician with leanings toward rock. The daughter, who is married and has three children, lives in Madison, Tennessee.

Looking back on his long career, Josh expresses the hope that he has "helped somebody down the road." When he hears it said that his style has been copied, he considers it an honor. "I just hope that I've done something out there that the young people will enjoy. If I've done anything that they like—if I've helped in some way—that's my reward."

With these words, Josh uncases his Dobro and heads for the festival stage. It's about time for his second set of the day to begin. At the same time, a nine-year-old boy from Atlanta, with parents in tow, works his way to a front row seat where he sits in rapt attention watching every move of Josh's hands as he plays such tunes as the mournful "Rosewood Casket," the rambunctious "Shuckin' the Corn," and that chestnut among country tunes, "The Great Speckled Bird." If Josh notices this young admirer, perhaps his mind wanders back forty-four years to that memorable day in Wildwood, Tennessee, when another nine-year-old boy stood in awe of a great Dobro player.

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Chubby Wise: Dean of the Bluegrass Fiddlers

By Wayne Daniel

“I love the people. I enjoy getting up there performing and getting the ovation. [It] makes you feel like you’ve proved something... you’ve done something worthy of their thanks.” Chubby Wise explained why, at the age of 71, he still maintained a demanding schedule of performances at bluegrass festivals and other places where fiddle music was in demand. Retirement was not yet on his agenda. Rossi, his wife of 36 years and current manager of his professional career, declared that he will never retire. “It’s his life,” she asserted. “If he ever had to make a choice to give up me or his fiddle, I’d take my suitcase and leave. Because he could live without me, but he couldn’t live without his fiddle.”

Chubby had just received a standing ovation at the end of his first set at a bluegrass festival at Jekyll Island, Georgia. He had promised to meet for an interview immediately after the set, but it was almost 45 minutes before he arrived at the designated meeting place only a short distance from the stage. He has been bombarded along the way by a horde of old friends and new fans, each with a story to share, an album to be autographed, or a desire to be photographed with this bearded cherub. Finally arrived at his destination, the dean of bluegrass fiddlers had a few words to say on that aspect of his career. “I’ll visit with anybody, have a picture made with anybody, and autograph for anybody. When I get to where I’m too good to do that I’ll stay at the house, brother, and get out of show business.”

The speaker of those words was born Robert Russell Dees on October 2, 1915, in Lake City, Florida. His mother died at the

time of his birth, and he was adopted by his father's sister and her husband whose name was Wise.

At an early age Chubby developed an interest in music through the influence of his adopted father who was a country fiddler of considerable local renown. "I have loved music as long as I can remember," Chubby noted. "When I was just a little boy—I'll say six or seven years old—I learned to play three chords on an old five-string banjo—drop thumb style we called it." He later "fooled around with an old flattop guitar."

Chubby grew up on an eighty-acre, two-horse farm in an area where square dances, or "frolics" as he calls them, were held regularly in the homes of his neighbors. At many such entertainments Chubby, as a child, played the banjo behind his adopted father, who was in demand as a square dance fiddler. "I never will forget," Chubby reminisced, "the first money I ever made [was at one of those dances]. Back then they'd pass the hat. They'd say, 'These boys got to have money for their strings.' Me and my dad made thirty-seven cents apiece. And I'll tell you, I went to town, and I was the richest boy in Columbia County with that thirty-seven cents."

Chubby also never forgot another one of those Florida square dances, the one at which he fell in love with the fiddle. It was at the home of Fiddlin' Bryan Purcell, one-time champion fiddler of the Sunshine State. "I was about eleven years old," Chubby related, "and I still remember sitting in the corner [listening to Purcell play the fiddle]. I loved that fiddle so well, and I said to myself, 'That's what I'm going to do—learn to fiddle just like that man.' So I got hold of an old cornstalk fiddle, and I've stuck right with it."

During his years as a teenager Chubby played the fiddle at local square dances over a wide area of northern Florida and entered numerous local fiddlers' contests, most of which he won.

Married for the first time before he was eighteen years old, Chubby soon left the farm for Jacksonville, Florida, where he

drove a taxicab by day and played his fiddle in bars by night. He was a member of a band that, in addition to his fiddle, also included a banjo, a guitar, and a washboard for rhythm. “Our salary was a free lunch the next day,” Chubby recalled. “We’d play in the bar till it closed, and we had a kitty for people who wanted a special request to throw a nickel or dime in.”

It was while he was in Jacksonville that Chubby met the Rouse brothers. According to Chubby the Rouses came to Jacksonville from North Carolina. One night in 1939, he recalled, they visited the bar where he was playing. “At intermission,” said Chubby, “Ervin wanted to know if he could play the fiddle and pass the hat. So he [played] about fifteen minutes, he and his brother, just a fiddle and guitar. He was a showman, a great fiddle player — a trick fiddler—one of the finest. He’d just tear an audience all to pieces. If there was three dollars [in the audience] he’d come out with a dollar and a half of it. That’s how he made his living—going from bar to bar, passing the hat. Well, Ervin and I got to be good friends.”

One night Chubby and Rouse decided to inspect a new streamline passenger train which Chubby said was “parked at the Union Station for people to go through and look over. It was such a clean, high-class type of train,” he recalled. And they called it the Orange Blossom Special. On their way home, Chubby related, Rouse said, “‘Doc’ —he called everybody Doc—’let’s write a tune and call it ‘The Orange Blossom Special’.” On arriving at Chubby’s apartment at four in the morning, and while his wife prepared breakfast, “we got our fiddles out,” he continued, “and set on the side of my bed and wrote that melody. I bet it didn’t take us forty-five minutes. It just came to us.” After breakfast, Chubby recalls, Rouse suggested that they go get the tune copyrighted. But Chubby had his taxi job to consider. “I said, ‘Ervin, I haven’t got time to fool with a fiddle tune. I’ve got to go check on my cab in a

few minutes and go and try to make some beans to feed my young un.’ I said, ‘If you can do anything with that fiddle tune, buddy, it’s all yours.’ And it was. He did something with it. And that’s how ‘The Orange Blossom Special’ was born.” Subsequently, Chubby related, they started performing the tune in the bars. The Rouse brothers, who later added words to the tune, recorded it in June of 1939, and it began to make its way into the repertoires of every country fiddler in the land.

Around 1940, Chubby moved to Gainesville, Florida, where he took a job as fiddler with the Jubilee Hillbillies, a band that was performing daily at WRUF and making personal appearances and playing for dances in the area at night. On a Saturday night in 1942, while listening to the Grand Ole Opry, Chubby heard Bill Monroe announce that his fiddle player, Howdy Forrester, was going into the Navy. “So I didn’t do a thing in the world,” Chubby narrated, “but catch a train the next day and went to Nashville.” Back stage at the Grand Ole Opry, he continued, “I just walked in like a big rooster from Florida with my fiddle under my arm and said [to Bill Monroe], ‘Bill, my name’s Chubby Wise. I’m from Florida, and I hear you need a fiddler, and I think I can fill the bill.’ He said, ‘Do you know any of my stuff?’ I said, ‘Yeah, I know some of your tunes.’ He said, ‘Play me a breakdown.’ And I played ‘Katy Hill.’ ‘Pretty good,’ he said. And he played ‘Footprints In The Snow.’ That’s the first tune I ever I backed him on. I took my chorus on ‘Footprints In The Snow,’ and that’s all he I wanted to hear. Then he said, ‘Go get your clothes. We’re leaving in two hours.’ That’s how I got my job with Bill Monroe. I stayed with him nearly seven years.”

Chubby Wise admitted that he was not a bluegrass fiddler when he joined the Blue Grass Boys. “I was a country fiddle player,” he explained. “Bill Monroe taught me how to play bluegrass. He taught me the long blue notes. Many a day, in motels and hotels — him with that mandolin and I’d have my fiddle — he taught me to

play bluegrass music. He'd say, 'Now do it this way,' and I'd try. And he'd say, 'No, that's not what I want.' And he'd show me on the mandolin — 'Now this is what I want.' And finally, when I'd get it, he'd say, 'Yep, that's what I want.' "

During his tenure with Monroe, Chubby played fiddle at all six of Monroe's Columbia recording sessions which yielded thirty-six released songs.

As a member of the Blue Grass Boys at this time Chubby was a member of the band that bluegrass historians agree defined the genre. "It was," wrote Bill Malone in *Country Music U.S.A.*, "classic bluegrass at its zenith." In addition to Monroe and Chubby, this model band included guitarist and lead singer Lester Flatt; banjoist Earl Scruggs; and Cedric Rainwater (Howard Watts), who played bass. In recognition of his performance on these seminal recordings. Robert Herridge, resident fiddler at Gilley's Club in Pasadena, Texas, described Chubby as "the first true bluegrass fiddler on record." California state fiddle champion Paul Shelasky called him "the Original Bluegrass Fiddler."

In 1948 Chubby left the Blue Grass Boys to join Clyde Moody and his Radio Ranchmen at WARL in Arlington, Virginia, where they worked for country music entrepreneur, Connie B. Gay. Moody was co-composer with Chubby on a song which, aside from "The Orange Blossom Special," garnered sufficient popularity to earn Chubby a secure position in the ranks of country music songwriters. The song was "Shenandoah Waltz" for which Chubby wrote the melody and Moody provided the words.

In the fall of 1949 Chubby rejoined the Blue Grass Boys for a brief stint that ended in early 1950. For the next four years he played his fiddle in Detroit, Michigan; Versailles, Kentucky; and the Washington, DC area. In 1954 he joined Hank Snow's Rainbow Ranch Boys, beginning an association that lasted on and off for the better part of sixteen years.

While still with Snow, Chubby, in 1969, recorded an album for the Stoneway label of Houston, Texas. A single from this album, the Bob Wills standard “Maiden’s Prayer,” was a smash hit in Houston. Encouraged by the enthusiastic reception of his records in Texas, Chubby decided to leave Snow, move to the Lone Star State, and try to make it on his own as a single act. After a busy seven years working clubs and other places of entertainment in Texas and surrounding states, Chubby and his second wife, Rossi, returned to Florida, his native state. Chubby established himself as a regular on the bluegrass festival circuit, operating from his home base in Glen St. Mary, Florida. If visitors came to the Christian Fellowship Church in nearby Macclenny, Florida, they were likely to hear Chubby playing there, too. In early 1985, he and Rossi began attending church again after having been inactive Christians for many years. This return to their faith provided Chubby with an opportunity to bring his music to an audience that otherwise might never have heard him. “I take my fiddle to church every Sunday,” said Chubby. “I look forward to that.”

In addition to his historic recordings with Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys and his sessions with Hank Snow, Chubby, over the years, recorded extensively with other artists, including Flatt and Scruggs, Mac Wiseman, Red Allen, Hylo Brown, Merle Haggard, Frank Wakefield, Charlie Moore, Howdy Forrester, and the Boys From Indiana. Chubby’s recording activity, however, was not restricted to that of a sideman. He also had more than twenty solo albums to his credit. These albums, most of which were recorded on the Stoneway label, reflect the wide versatility of which Chubby is capable. He not only recorded bluegrass music, but hoedowns, mainstream country, western swing, pop and polkas as well.

When you saw Chubby performing on stage during the 1980s, he played a fiddle that he had owned for over twenty-five years.

“It’s a Strad copy,” he explained. “Joe Greene, a fiddle player in Nashville, found it for me. There’s no telling how old it is. It’s battle scarred, but it’s got the quality, as you can hear.” Chubby once told Mike Carpenter and Don Kissil that “A fiddle is worth just what it is to the man that’s playing it. ‘Cause I have played some . . . fine fiddles that... would sell for \$5,000, and I wouldn’t trade my \$200 fiddle for ... any of them.”

Chubby was more concerned with the music that came from the instrument than he was with the instrument that gave the music birth. “I cater to tone,” he responded when pressed to evaluate his playing. “Instead of playing two notes, I take one note and try to make it sound good.” Chubby was aware of the importance of the melody line of a tune. He believed that “When you don’t play that melody you lose the audience. If they can’t hum it or whistle it, you’re in trouble. They think you’re lost.” Neil Rosenberg, in his book, *Bluegrass: A History*, noted that Chubby had “gained the reputation of establishing high standards for bluegrass fiddling,” and acknowledged the “smoothness and richness of tone” that he achieved under the tutelage of Bill Monroe.

What did Chubby tell young fiddlers who asked for his advice? He told them what he once told Ricky Skaggs: “Create a style of your own and stick to it. Put in a lot of practice.” If young fiddlers follow his advice, and if they love music, Chubby believed that “sooner or later they’ll be able to accomplish their goals.”

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Chubby Wise died on January 6, 1996.

Fiddlelore and Mytheory in the “Orange Blossom Special”

By Gregory Hansen

It’s April 3, 1993 in Jacksonville, Florida. Three state heritage award winning fiddlers are being presented in a narrative stage by Bob Stone, a folklorist with the Bureau of Florida Folklife Program. Early in the session, he asks Chubby Wise, “Can you tell us a little bit about how the ‘Orange Blossom Special’ came to be?”

Robert “Chubby” Wise responds:

“Yes, I can. That’s one I’ll never forget. The late Ervin Rouse ...”

Another of the fiddlers, Richard Seaman, remarks that he knew Rouse.

Chubby continues:

Well, he and I got to be pretty close friends, and one night he had been out. After we had got off, why we run up on each other and went to the old Union Station. At Park and Main, I believe. It’s a new building now. But at that time, it was Union Station. We went in and had some coffee. They didn’t have no big oranges there at that time of the morning, so we just come up with a cup of coffee. And we were sitting there talking about the Orange Blossom Special. And on the way home, I never will forget how Ervin put it, he said, “Doc.” He called everybody “Doc.” That was his byword. He says, “Let’s write a fiddle tune when we get to the house and call it ‘The Orange Blossom Special.’”

And we took our two fiddles out and sit on the side of the bed at about four o’clock in the morning at 809 East Adams Street. And ladies and gentlemen – so help me – in about forty-five minutes we had the melody on that fiddle tune wrote.

I told my wife a lot of times, I said, “Lady Luck didn’t smile at me and Ervin: she laughed out loud when we wrote that one because it got to be the biggest fiddle tune that was ever written.” (Hansen 2007, 40)

The remaining fiddler, George Custer clarified that the Orange Blossom Special was a train out of New York. Chubby noted that it ran from New York to Miami, and George added that it made stops here in Jacksonville on the Seaboard Railroad Line.

Richard Seaman noted that he worked for the Seaboard and that he knew the Orange Blossom Special, before Chubby added the coda to his tale:

Now I had nothing to do with getting the words. His brother, Gordon, and his brother Ervin, wrote the words on that. And they were the first ones ever to record it as far as I know. They put it out on this old Bluebird label, which was a subsidiary of RCA at the time. And I heard it through the grapevine – I don’t doubt it – but somebody told me that the tune has been recorded by around one hundred different artists over the period of years.

And here’s the beauty of it. But it’s not so beautiful, but it happened. I gave Ervin my half – just like you’d share a cigarette. I never will forget it. He said, “Doc, let’s go get the fiddle tune copyrighted.” I said, “Ervin, I don’t have time to fool with no fiddle tune, I’ve got to go check on my cab in a few minutes and go to work. If you can do a thing with it, it’s all yours.” He done something with it for him.

And I want to say that I’m very grateful. I’m not hurt one bit about it. But I figure this, I’m lucky enough to help write a fiddle tune as big as ‘The Orange Blossom Special.’ And it opened a lot of doors in the business for me – as you know. (Hansen, 40-1)

The story’s irony was resolved by a masterful rendition of the fiddle tune that afternoon. The live performance by Chubby backed by Jimmy Quine revitalized the crowd-pleaser that afternoon.

Adding to the irony is the recognition that many fiddlers regard the song as a clichéd warhorse in the bluegrass repertory. When requested to play the tune at a recent concert, for example, the eminently quotable Mike Snider explained that even though he'd "rather have a minor case of AIDS" than have to play the tune, he'd go ahead and give it to the crowd in Paragould, Arkansas at a KASU Bluegrass Monday event.

The irony flows even deeper. Richard Seaman's interjection, "I knew Ervin" and his mention of working as a railroader on the Seaboard Air Line displays an intimate knowledge of the history of the Orange Blossom Special. Richard Seaman had worked at in the station's machine shop, and he knew railroaders and early country musicians in Jacksonville dating back to the 1920s. A few days after the festival, I was talking with him over a Coke at his home, and Richard talked to me about Chubby's account. He explained that he, too, had played with Ervin Rouse over the years and that Ervin had debunked Chubby's account. Richard also explained that the tune was written before the train even stopped in Jacksonville. Richard laughed and explained, "Somebody's lying." Other bluegrass musicians and country music scholars concur. Chubby told the story in similar versions for decades, and the story of the song's origin is the subject of Randy Nole's books *Orange Blossom Boys* and *Fiddle's Curse* (2002 and 2007). The consensus is that the song was composed before the train was exhibited in Jacksonville, just as Richard affirmed.

Deluged in even more irony, it's important to note that Richard, himself, was known for incorporating tall tales into his own performances.

On my sister's farm, one time, I was out there working, and I saw a big rattlesnake. That was the biggest rattlesnake that I ever saw in my life. And all I had to kill him with was a hoe. You know, I had a hoe in my hand. So I tried to chop his head off with

that hoe. And he was a big snake, and he fought hard. And I was a'beating at him and a'hoeing at him and trying to kill him.

And during the process, he bit the hoe handle. He almost bit it in half. And his venom was so strong and so powerful that after I got him killed and looked over there, that hoe handle started swelling. The hoe handle swelled up as big as a log. You never saw such a thing.

The truth if I ever told it.

So I got a log cart, and I carried that old log to the sawmill and had it sawed up into lumber. And I brought it back, and I built me a mule shed to put my mule in. Well, it worked all right, so I put my mule in it that night. I went to the house and went to bed. The next morning, when I got up and went out there and looked, the swelling had all got out of the lumber. And that there mule shed had shrunk up and just literally shrunk my mule to death. (Hansen, 83)

The tale is a variant of Tale Type 1889M: *Snakebite causes objects to swell*. By interjecting the phrase “The truth if I ever told it,” he used verbal irony as a form of phatic communication to whimsically frame the story as fiction. In later years, he was to draw from his repertoire of at least three dozen tall tales to craft his stage patter when playing his fiddle tunes in performance. Some of the tales constitute elements of the folklore about fiddling, or what Louis Attebery has termed *fiddlelore* (Attebery 1979, 328). This folklore about fiddling is a vibrant element of musical traditions and the resource enriches our understanding of the cultural context for music. The folkloric themes allow us to explore Wise’s claims of coauthoring the tune. The stories and beliefs become especially interesting when we inquire how these stories are resonant with scholarship in folklore and mythology. As does myth, Wise’s story of the origin of the “Orange Blossom Special” reveals symbolic truths about experience that are connected to the genesis

of a cultural tradition. Not only the tale but the tune, itself, can be connected to major elements of mythology. The connections between the tune and the tale demonstrate the centrality of origin stories to the establishment of culture heroes through narrative. Also present in this complex are other dynamics relevant to folklore and mythology, including the evocation of mythic time and mythic space as a wellspring for creative expression. In these respects, this song in particular and the genre of bluegrass in general continue to serve as resources for enacting beliefs about an individual's place within a grander system of communally held meanings in country music. To understand the persistence of these mythological processes, it's useful to first understand how folklore about fiddling is a vibrant aspect of contemporary musical culture.

Richard creatively incorporated fiddlelore into his stage patter on numerous occasions. Using the symbolic resources of fiction to play with the emotional resonance of learning to master a challenging instrument:

When I first started learning to play the fiddle, I didn't know much about it. It was one that was in the house where I was born and raised. So when I first started playing, my mother said, 'Look here son, I can't stand that.' She said, 'I can't stand that. That's too much.'

So, she wouldn't let me play in the house. She made me go out there and practice, sitting on a stump out in the field. And I went out there to play and to try to play. She finally told me the better that I played, the closer I could get to the house.

It was five years before I ever played a tune in the house. And, even that was risky! (Hansen, 183)

It's not unusual for storytellers to tell tall tales in the first person. Richard Seaman displays his subtle cleverness, here, when at the age of eighty-eight, he realized that his tales could be appealing resources for giving younger audiences a sense of

the context playing the tunes at house parties, a tradition that virtually died out in Florida by the 1940s. It's also not unusual for fiddlers to incorporate their own experiences into their stage patter, and it's clear from the stories of both Richard and Chubby that they may be tempted to stretch the truth in their stories. Chubby and Richard's storytelling follow similar characteristics of using hyperbole to embellish the truth. What's intriguing about the difference between these two examples of fiddlelore is their connection to a major shift in music that flourished in the 1920s and 30s before culminating in the establishment of new genres of country music by the 1950s. Although generalizing about music genres and history, and attempting to characterize any fiddler as representative of a tradition is usually a dubious undertaking, at best, Richard Seaman and Chubby Wise's musicianship both exemplify important cultural and historical patterns that yield important insights into the development of America's musical heritage.

To understand how bluegrass fiddling is directly connected to Florida's old-time fiddle traditions we can further explore what Chubby Wise contributed to the music. First, it's important to recognize that Wise's bluegrass fiddling is so deeply rooted in old-time styles. Even though bluegrass fiddling is a more recent style that was pioneered by Wise and other musicians, there are numerous connections between both styles. It's also important to recognize that although Chubby Wise wasn't Bill Monroe's first fiddler, he was a major contributor to the development of the genre in the 1940s (Rosenberg 1985, 51-7). Prior to the development of bluegrass, both Richard Seaman and Chubby Wise had expanded their musical interests beyond playing for dances into playing with string bands in Florida. The connections between early country music – often labeled “old-time” string band -- and bluegrass are also important to consider. Early string bands often included old-

time hoedowns and waltzes in their set lists, but they frequently also played sentimental parlor songs, Tin Pan Alley, ragtime, and eventually western swing and early honky-tonk in their stage shows. Chubby Wise grew up in this milieu as the music was changing. All of these genres have influenced the development of bluegrass in general and Wise's fiddling in particular.

His childhood and early life was difficult. Born to unwed parents in St. Augustine who shipped him out to live with a surrogate family in rural north-central Florida, Chubby Wise's childhood was less than idyllic (Noles 2002, 54). He did, however, spend time with his biological father, John Henry Dees, from whom he first learned to play banjo and fiddle (Noles 56). Chubby performed at frolics and other events, and he also discovered that he could make a fairly decent income by busking for change. After moving to Jacksonville, and driving cab during the Great Depression, he discovered that playing on street corners, in barbershops, and in storefronts provided opportunities to move out of a hard-scrabble existence, typified by the folk expression "root-hog or die." When World War II broke out, Chubby was declared ineligible for military service due to a severe leg injury he had suffered fifteen years previously. This classification, however, opened up an attractive opportunity when he took a trip from Florida to Nashville when he heard the Bill Monroe needed to replace Howdy Forrester in the Blue Grass Boys. In Wise's own words, we have the beginnings of his contributions to the shift from old-time into bluegrass:

I went to work for Bill either in '42 or '43. I was in Gainesville at the time with a group called "Jubilee Hill-Billies," working out of WRUF. I heard Bill announce that Howdy was going into the Navy. That's how come I come to get the job.

He said, "I got to have a fiddler." He said, "My fiddler's going to the Navy, Big Howdy."

And I just caught a train and went to Nashville. And I walked in like a big dolt, and I said, “I’m from Florida and I play the fiddle and I want the job. I understand that you have it open.”

And I’ll never forget it. Bill was a very unconcerned type of fellow, you know. He was quick. He talked real fast – quick – there’s just no “yes or no” about it. He’s just “that’s it.”

And of course, I didn’t know too much. I had heard Howdy play a couple of things. And Howdy always played them double-stops on “Footprints in the Snow.” Oh, it just slayed me. And I told Bill, I said, “Oh yea, yes sir, I know them.” And I said “How about Footprints in the Snow.” Let me play that one with you. I can play that one real good.” So I did it. And he said, “Well, play me a breakdown.” And I knew I would be able to play “Katy Hill.” And he said, “You got your clothes with you?”

And we were in the dressing room in Nashville at the Opry. I said, “No sir. They’re at the hotel.” And he said, “Well, go get them. We’re leaving in three hours.”

That’s how I got my job with Bill Monroe. I was with him for about seven years, so I must have held out pretty good. (Hansen, 52)

Bill Monroe is credited with creating bluegrass music as a distinctive genre of country music in the 1940s. His early musical life history is similar to Richard Seaman’s and Chubby Wise’s. All of the musicians come from rural communities, and all moved into cities to find work by the 1930s. They all played old-time tunes for square dances, and they all expanded their repertoires to include the new range of genres that were played by string bands in music shows. Monroe, however, took the string band tradition and created a distinctive form of musical expression.

This history provides resources for understanding various aspects of bluegrass fiddling that add to the genre’s distinctiveness. Many of these techniques were honed, if not fully established, by

Chubby Wise during his early career with Bill Monroe. He was his principal fiddler when most music historians recognize how Monroe was crystalizing a new sound that could clearly be heard as a “bluegrass” during the early and mid 1940s.

As we know, *bluegrass music* is notoriously difficult to define. One promising way of conceptualizing bluegrass, however, is to shift away from attempts to characterize the entire genre and focus more on specific styles of playing instruments that tend to show up in the music. In this respect, there clearly are distinctive elements of bluegrass that are directly connected to the fiddle tradition represented by Chubby Wise. To understand his contributions to bluegrass, it’s important to keep in mind that Monroe wanted to create a new approach to country music that sounds old.

This image was connected to an earlier era, but it was also connected to the southern mountains. Chubby Wise, himself, characterized bluegrass as “mountain music.” Once again, our trope of irony emerges as Monroe was not from Appalachia, having grown up outside of Rosine in western Kentucky. But he was so effective in creating a new genre that many listeners believe that they are listening to old, even ancient, mountain music when they hear a bluegrass band. The audio-illusion works, in part, because Monroe created his music after he had mastered the old-time string band style. It also is central to the ironies and paradoxes of image-making within bluegrass.

In the opening strains of the “Orange Blossom Special,” we can hear distinctive elements of bluegrass fiddling. Wise’s distinctive fiddle style erupts over the band’s accompaniment. His long, jazzy fiddle lines restate and develop the melody in the opening strain of the “Special.” Chubby Wise then adds richly nuanced phrases that evoke the sound of an old-time fiddler who is crafting intricate and soulful variations on a hoedown, but elements of his bluegrass style makes it different from old-

time fiddling. There's a distinctive quality to Wise's fiddling that features slurred notes, slides, and rhythmic patterns that are prevalent within blues music but usually more understated in most old-time string band music. As Bob Stone acknowledged in the festival presentation, Chubby helped to put "the blues into bluegrass" (Hansen, 52). The style marks a major shift from the short-bow techniques that Wise commonly heard among old-time fiddlers, and he credits Monroe with showing him out to put the "long, bluesy bluegrass fiddling generally is featured within ensemble playing. The old-time fiddler is likely to be a dance fiddler, but bluegrass music isn't performed for square dancing. Old-time fiddling can be fast, but the tempo of a bluegrass breakdown is too fast for most dancers – other than highly energetic cloggers or freestylers. Rather, the musical context for bluegrass is a seated audience or a picking party of fellow musicians. It's music that Monroe created for playing in tent shows, opera houses, and live country music shows. He also emphasized how it could appeal to audiences listening to live shows on radio airwaves or through the newly developing recorded sound media. Monroe knew that the new media were displacing the older forms of entertainment. The frolics that he played with is fiddling uncle, James Pendleton Vandiver, and he realized that the free-for-all would most likely be preserved less in vibrant communities and more in tributes to the tradition such as the one he offered in his classic bluegrass tune "Uncle Pen." Monroe's new musical genre worked paradoxically to preserve the old-time sound while also displacing it with a commercialized professional genre that Alan Lomax famously characterized as "folk music with overdrive" (Lomax 1959, 108). Bluegrass is played for down-home entertainment, but Monroe also created it as a new form of country music that could be mass marketed nationwide – and now internationally.

This shift adds to our understanding of Chubby Wise's tale about the origin of the "Orange Blossom Special." The song is likely derived from a lost tune called "The South Florida Blues" that Ervin Rouse played by the early 1930s (Noles 2007, 74). The blues influence is clearly apparent in the lyrics, which follow the familiar AAB lyrical form characteristic of the blues genre. It's important to recognize that Gordon Rouse submitted the "Orange Blossom Special" for copyright on October 20, 1938 and that Ervin Rouse is credited as its composer (Noles 2007, 67). The Rouse Brothers recorded the *Special* on June 14, 1939, but their Bluebird recording was the first version of the song to be released. Curiously, it was actually preceded by an earlier recording made by fiddler Tommy Magness in January of that year (Noles 2007, 83). Magness's part in the story is central, for Noles credits him as introducing the song to Bill Monroe during his first short stint with the Blue Grass Boys in 1940-41 (Noles 2007, 89). The "Orange Blossom Special" predates the crystallization of bluegrass music as a genre, and it was already a part of Bill Monroe's repertory before Chubby Wise joined the band. When he discovered that Monroe was already playing the tune, Chubby had an instant resource for bolstering his fiddle-playing credentials, namely, his connections to the song's origins.

The problem, however, is that Richard Seaman is right when he commented on Chubby's account of the tune's beginnings by averring that "Somebody's lying." Randy Noles documents that the Rouse Brothers submitted the copyright papers for the song three days before the exhibition tour for the Orange Blossom Special got underway (Noles 2007, 67). Noles explains that Chubby's account would put the composition of the song on November 9, 1938, when it was on display at Union Station in Jacksonville whereas the Rouse Brothers's account has them writing the tune earlier. Wise told the tale for over 50 years during his career -- but

only in abbreviated form when he was with the Rouse Brothers. Ervin explained to Richard Seaman that the two fiddlers did play together in Jacksonville but that Chubby had nothing to do with the Special's composition. Over time, as more information emerged, numerous fans began to ask, "Why did Chubby claim co-authorship?"

It's conjecture, but the claim actually has a context that makes the tale not quite a damn lie. Although it can't be fully documented, those who knew the Rouse Brothers regard it likely that Wise and Ervin Rouse played together after a night of fiddling in Jacksonville, Florida during the fall of 1938 (Noles 2002, 66). If they played the "Orange Blossom Special," it's possible that the tune's title wasn't fully announced and that Chubby added to what he heard. Furthermore, it's unlikely that even that tune was composed out of whole cloth. The "Special's" melody and various musical breaks in the tune are common musical elements that make it a pastiche of various fiddle tunes and blues licks. If they played the tune together, it's understandable that Chubby may have misremembered – or selectively remembered – a conversation about copyrighting the tune. It's also common for fiddlers to have tunes associated with their own repertory as numerous tunes of unknown origin become ascribed to fiddlers who played them well. This likely happened when Chubby Wise made the shift from playing with smaller bands in Florida to performing on the Grand Ole Opry and country music shows with Bill Monroe. Finally, to give due credit to Wise, he contributed unique fiddle lines to versions of the tune, and he played an important role in popularizing the tune for a mass audience. Any outright prevarication can perhaps be absolved by understanding the context of popularizing the music and the shift from early string band music into bluegrass. The temptation for self-aggrandizement by embellishing the truth was seductive. Wise

recognized the cultural capital of associating his Florida roots with what was to become an icon in country music. The truth can sometimes get in the way of a good story, and Chubby Wise knew he had a good one.

The “kernel of truth” in what’s likely a highly fictional narrative is that Chubby Wise likely did know the tune before becoming part of Bill Monroe’s Blue Grass Boys in 1942. This initial connection and Wise’s subsequent contributions to the tune are both integral to the sense of identification that he felt with the “Orange Blossom Special.” It’s understandable how he felt that co-owned the tune even though that claim is different than co-authorship. Why Chubby made the initial claim to authorship and how like likely came to believe the story are perhaps unanswerable questions. As we shift away from historical scrutiny and begin to explore the symbolic resonance of the story, perspectives from the study of mythology become especially useful for elucidating the other dynamic elements of storytelling and deeper symbolism expressed through the narrative. The story can be read less for its historical veracity and more for its symbolic truth, and these meanings are surprisingly consistent with an ancient history of mythic narration.

Myths are some of the oldest narratives preserved in print. Mythographers have compiled anthologies of myth for over three millennia. The history of this scholarship reveals a great diversity in how myth is assessed and analyzed. Gregory Nagy asserts that the Ancient Greeks of the fifth century connected myth to a process of narrating from memory and that it was integrally connected to their notion of truth as *alêthia* as that which “must be remembered absolutely” (Nagy, 241). Nagy also writes how Greek writers at this time also began to set “myth” apart as it became term in contrast with “truth.” Subsequent to this distinction, the relation between myth and truth remains an important theme in

contemporary scholarship. On one hand, elements of early critical appraisals of myth as untruth remain in various programs of demythologization. The critique shows up often in popular use of the term a la Kermit the Frog's running gag in the "Muppet Movie" where he explains to a tough bar patron that it's a myth that frogs will give you warts. Despite Kermit's goodwill, the limited view of myth as a synonym for "untruth" remains a problem as it has wide currency in pop culture including shows like "Mythbusters" and the equation of urban legends with myth.

On the other hand, scholars have worked to rehabilitate myth – markedly influenced by Giambattista Vico – who focus on the value of myth as resources for expressing important values through the richness of metaphoric, literary, and other forms of artistic expression. In this discourse, myth proclaims symbolic truth, and various literary scholars and cultural critics suggest that a broad range of cultural expression can be read as myth. While most folklorists are open to readings of history and culture through the lens of mythological study, we tend to take a more restrictive idea of myth. Alan Dundes titled his compilation of major essays on mythology as *Sacred Narrative*, and most folklorists think of myth in relation to a corpus of stories within a genre that pertains to accounts of cosmological origins and the establishment of deep values integral to a range of cultural institutions (Dundes 1984). It also is Dundes who gives us the term "mytheory." Although he expresses his gratitude to his wife for suggesting that he didn't use the term as a title for his book, his witty coinage does suggest ways that scholarship can integrate myth with theory to provide unique perspectives on cultural expression. Drawing from "mytheory" provides useful resources for understanding Chubby Wise's involvement with the "Orange Blossom Special" in relation to wider interests in mythology.

First, scholars emphasize the importance of etiological stories in the telling of myths. These stories provide accounts of origins. They call attention to the creative moment that is enshrined in a narrative, and Chubby's account of jamming with Ervin Rouse after meeting him in Jacksonville's Union Station presents an engaging story about how the tune was inspired by a glimpse of the new train. By directly connecting with Ervin and even verbalizing his idea of quoted speech, Wise tells a vivid tale. He emphasizes how they wrote the tune at a specific place, and 809 East Adams Street has a wonderfully ironic allusion to the first inhabitant of the Garden of Eden. The tune was written, he asserts, in forty-five minutes, so there's a sense that of immediate, perhaps *ex nihilo*, creation in the story.

Origin stories often include wider mythic theme by commemorating mythic characters as culture heroes or culture bringers. These mythic figures are significant because they bring a new cultural contribution to humankind. Prometheus brought fire to humans, and the Rouse Brothers gave us the most-recorded fiddle tune of all time. Some of the culture bringers are also mythic heroes – semi-divine beings whose liminal status serves to tamper with boundaries between the natural and the supernatural. If not a demigod, then the culture hero is often venerated, even to the point of apotheosis. In Wise's account of the origin tale of the fiddle tune, it's notable that he connects the account to his time with Bill Monroe. Here, Monroe is clearly a culture hero who brings forth a new musical form. Notably, Chubby Wise, himself, is also a contributor. He supports the hero's creative act by contributing his own skill as one of the original fiddlers in the band. Curiously, there often is an element of tricksterism within the personality of these culture heroes. Once again, this theme is resonant with Wise's stage persona as he was known for his witty stage patter, exuberant personality, and propensity to be a bit accident-prone.

More significant to our story, is the temptation for tricksters to play a little loose with the truth. While it's not accurate to label Chubby Wise a "liar," his account does display selective memory, and he casts a narrative that wouldn't meet a historian's devotion to veracity when writing accounts of the past.

A symbolically resonant connection between myth and bluegrass music is importance of mythic time within stories and symbols. Folklorists often look at the importance of "mythic time" as a time-before-time that is integral to the setting of a myth. Mythic time is a period prior to the present age, and it includes elements of a pure and prelapsarian past where the original humans dwelt in a bucolic setting and lived closer to the spiritual beings who allowed them to tend a garden, till the earth, or watch over the flocks. In mythic accounts, however, this time has come to pass. The tellers of the tales explore what it means to be cast out on their own, and the narrative frequently espouse a yearning to return to the pristine past in an idealized place. The sense of dislocation and disruption is so common in bluegrass that it's become a playful cliché when musicians chose to jam on "Cabin songs" and laments the loss of the old homeplace. The resonance, however, is real and evocative. It's integral to the ethos of bluegrass. Furthermore, the quest for the happier past is resonant with broader themes in country music that explore tensions between the rural past and the industrialization that has come to stand for modernity. Rather than solely dismissing this yearning as dewy-eyed Romanticism, thinking of this tension in terms of mythology suggests a long history of contrasting values evident in agrarian life with a shift into new challenges created through changing economies. Neil Rosenberg's characterization of bluegrass as "musical baseball," and Don Cusic's writing on baseball and country music provide vivid imagery that show the appeal of the mythic space within a garden-like setting in American culture – especially as these

settings are enacted on a baseball field situated in an urban area (Rosenberg 20 and Cusic 55). Here, bluegrass music evokes imagery of an Elysian field in the theater of the mind.

Writers focus on relationships between musical images, emotion, and aesthetics. Judith Becker's study of deep listeners, for example, demonstrates that vibrant images are often linked with emotional and aesthetic processes that lie deep beyond conscious awareness. As concrete imagery unites with narrative and sound in a vast system of neural networks, Becker explains that deep listeners may open themselves to levels of awareness that induce states of consciousness described as trances (Becker 2002). The folklorist Gregory Schrempf describes this experience of the transcendent as a "cosmic moment." Schrempf writes that how "moments of intense, transcendent, harmonizing personal experience" are described as epiphanies, peak experiences, the sublime, and as flow" (Schrempf 84). Individual myths may inspire, or be inspired, by these cosmic moments. They may also show up as numinous phenomenon in myth as characters gain an experience of the sacred within quotidian life. Furthermore, mythic rituals may evoke a sense of the cosmic moment as the enactment of holy writ or sacred narrative. Those participating may feel deep connections to others as their own sense of having an individual self is loosened and released. In a cosmic moment, the evocation and celebration of a heightened sense of community is placed into the foreground, and Victor and Edith Turner's discussion of this state of *communitas* is connected to what Becker describes as a consequence of deep listening (Turner 10-14). The creation of a cosmic moment clearly is not confined to the mythic past. Gospel musicians bear witness to the power of a cosmic moment by asking "Can you feel it now?" (Hinson 269). The cosmic moment also emerges in secular musical traditions. Blues musicians name the cosmic moment in performance when they call out "That's what

I'm talking about." Ballad singers may strive to communicate the emotional core of a lyric or narrative folksong to present the song. Almeeda Riddle advises a singer to let others enjoy the ballads by putting "yourself *behind* the song" so that the music will "hold them without anything that you do" (Riddle 122). In square dances and jam sessions, fiddlers may describe the creation of these cosmic moments as "fiddle zen."

Elements of bluegrass music's aesthetic values connect vividly to the mythologist's descriptions of cosmic moments. Songs may express cosmic moments in their lyric's content. The repetitive and even ritualistic elements of playing music can shift listener and performer alike into altered states of consciousness that move beyond entertainment into the entrainment that precedes deeper trances. The cosmic moment, itself, is described well in bluegrass musicians' colloquial speech as "cooking." When a band is cooking, the attribute is usually collective – as in members are cooking together to create a musical experience that is greater than the sum of its parts. To cook is to create a cosmic moment where individual artistry combines with ensemble playing. It is both a consequence of performance and a goal of performance. Cooking, here, is a strong metaphor for blending and simmering ingredients in a stew of creative expression. Like cooking, bluegrass music making is a visceral process that pushes its connoisseurs into to the sublime.

Creative processes in bluegrass also have parallels to mytheory in other respects. Notable are ways that the overall formal elements of the bluegrass music genre connect to the mythic genre through the process of bricolage. Claude Lévi-Strauss discusses the process of bricolage most directly in his ironically titled *The Savage Mind*. Lévi-Strauss contrasts two types of creative processes at work in the mind of the myth-maker. He typifies one creative process as the work of the engineer. In

this mode of action, the engineer symbolizes creative processes that are highly abstract, emphasize the theoretical, and strive to create original forms of expression where novelty is valued more than a remembrance of things past (19). Lévi-Strauss contrasts the engineer's dominant mode of working with the work of the bricoleur. In this second mode of creative expression, the artist is cast not so much as an innovator but rather as a creative arranger of pre-existing cultural material. It's clear that Lévi-Strauss sees overlap between the work of the engineer and the bricoleur, but the dichotomy remains useful for describing how myth works in a storyteller's creative imagination. Just as the bricoleur finds new ways for creatively recycling pre-existing materials as would a do-it-yourselfer, the myth-maker takes existing cultural motifs, mythic themes, and stock characters and reworks them into new narratives. This process of layering and reworking elements of the past into new forms of cultural expression is explored in a range of folk arts and musical expressions. Robert Plant Armstrong's distinction between synthetic and syndetic arts provides a useful amplification of the process (128). In synthetic expression, the new composition is a blending of formal elements that are altered in the creative process to such a degree that the older influences are difficult to identify. In syndesis, the artist or musician strives less to alter existing forms but rather to cast an accretive construction where pre-existing forms are clearly evident. In Greek mythology, for example, the syndetic process is evident in the plays of Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides. The classic tragedians emphasized reworking and exploring existing myths, epics, and legends to create their dramas – knowing full well that their audiences already knew the basic narratives and characters. The power of the plays came not so much from the appreciation of original dramas but rather through the audience's recognition of deep insights that these playwrights gleaned from the system of

resources available through the mythic traditions. Lévi-Strauss's structuralism emphasizes the work of the bricoleur. To identify and interpret the logic of myth, he posits an individual myth as a bricolage – or a work cast into words by the bricoleur (Levi-Strauss 1966, 16-36).

Lévi-Strauss died at the age of 100. (Incidentally, outliving poststructuralism). If he were with us today, he'd be interested in looking at bluegrass as bricolage. Various writers have emphasized the hybrid qualities of the musical genre. Bricolage is heard in bluegrass through the syndesis of European instrumental music, American variations on music of the British Isles, African-American blues and jazz, interweavings from gospel music as well as through influences from parlor songs, polka, and eventually rhythm and blues, rock, and reggae. Whereas other forms of world music may emphasize originality by literally synthesizing diverse influences – oftentimes more as textures than as integral elements of the genre – bluegrass's hybridity works a bit differently. The musical *mélange* emphasizes the presence of the pre-existing genres. When listening to a tune like the "Orange Blossom Special," listeners expect to hear the shuffle bowing prevalent in hoedowns, and they will recognize the blues form that underlies the lyrical form and the tune, itself. Experiencing the creative artistry of the band as a group of bricoleurs is essential to bluegrass aesthetics.

Looking at the tune as a bricolage also suggests deeper themes that are resonant with Lévi-Strauss's structuralism. When the syndetic elements are isolated and placed within historical, cultural, and social contexts, a number of major themes begin to emerge. If we place ourselves in the audience of the Grand Old Opry 70 years ago and experience the excitement of hearing the tune for the first time – as Neil Rosenberg so vividly describes – it's evident that part of the appeal of the song comes from the juxtaposition of the modern world, symbolized by the luxury liner, versus the presence

of the older rural past as symbolized by rural images of Florida's sandy beaches and orange groves (Rosenberg 51-52). The train symbolizes the modern, industrialized world of the future. The return to Florida marks the yearning for the old homeplace and its old-time values. The overall theme in this opposition between the modern and the old-time is the desire to return home. The image of Florida in the song is something of a folk utopia, like Diddy-Wah-Diddy or the Big Rock Candy Mountain (Congdon 136-8). It's resonant with a long history of casting Florida as a magic kingdom, a fantasy land where hope springs eternal, and the Fountain of Youth may perhaps still be found. In the song, Florida becomes a mythic space and the return to the Sunshine state is an odyssey back to mythic time. Working out tensions between accepting the advantages of modernity versus a longing for the past drives the song, and the lyrics are more about moving back to the country rather than celebrating the brave new world of the industrialized locomotive. The story in "The Orange Blossom Special" and in countless bluegrass and country songs is resonant with themes in a vast array of myths. Namely, they express the hope that a return home will bring about restoration and renewal and perhaps the experience of a universalizing cosmic moment in the song's performance.

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So You Want To Promote a Bluegrass Festival

By Wayne Daniel

This article is dated—it was published in 1983—but it still captures the essence of staging a bluegrass festival and the advice it gives it still sound, so it is included in this book.

You've been to a lot of bluegrass festivals, and you know they're a lot of fun. The crowds usually seem to be large. The promoters always look happy. They must be making a lot of money. And look at the place. It used to be a cow pasture. And where did all these pickers come from? It seems that every hill, valley, creek, county, and hamlet in the country has a band named for it. Then all of a sudden you have a brainstorm. You should promote a bluegrass festival.

But wait. Before you start booking bands, you'd better give this thing a little more thought. Maybe promoting a bluegrass festival does require more than an abandoned cow pasture and a half-dozen or so amateur bands. Maybe you ought to talk to an experienced promoter before you make the plunge.

The first thing Harold Galloway of Marietta, Georgia, promoter of the annual Armuchee Bluegrass Festival at nearby Rome, will tell you is, "If you want to get into festival promotion in order to make a lot of money, forget it." He, as well as other promoters, insists that there's not a great deal of money to be made from promoting festivals, but they'll tell you that there are other rewards.

"I do it because I like the music," says another promoter, Norman Adams of Dahlonega, Georgia, "and I enjoy meeting people and seeing them have a good time."

Well, Harold and Norman may not be getting rich, but nobody's noticed that their families are going hungry as a result of their involvement in bluegrass festival promotion. Harold has been promoting the Armuchee festival since 1973, and Norman's Dהלonega festivals begin their sixth year in 1980, during which time he's expanding to no less than three of these events. So you say to yourself, "If they can keep promoting festivals year after year, so can I." It's obvious that you're determined to get into the act, so take careful note of what else the experienced promoter has to say on the subject.

"The first thing the would-be promoter must decide," Harold says, "is what kind of festival to promote." There are basically two kinds of festivals: the kind that features all amateur bands and the kind that features all professional acts. There are also festivals that feature a combination of amateur and professional talent, but usually these are either predominantly amateur or predominantly professional festivals. Harold's Armuchee festival is an example of the kind that features strictly amateur talent.

"The main reason I use only amateur bands," Harold explains, "is because I want to give new bands—the young bands—the amateur bands—a chance to perform. Consider the professional groups," he continues, "they had to start somewhere, and I like to think that I'm providing the starting place for some future professional group or individual performer. In order to keep bluegrass music alive, we have to develop our young talent to take the place of the older professionals as they retire and pass on."

Harold also points out that the financial investment required for promoting his kind of festival is considerably less than that required for the festival that books primarily professional talent.

"I don't promise the bands that play at my festival a cent," Harold states, "but I do treat them fairly, and I treat them all alike."

Money for the bands comes from what's left over after I pay expenses. If attendance is low, then the bands are naturally going to make less than they do when attendance is high."

Harold doesn't draw up a contract with each band that performs at his festival. "I just get a verbal agreement from them," he says. "I need to know in advance who's planning to show up so I can use their names in my advertising." But if an established band shows up at his festival wanting to play, Harold usually lets them, even though there has been no previous verbal commitment. This practice, however, has its problems.

"The problem with having so many bands," according to Harold, whose last festival featured more than twenty-five groups, "is that your shows run too late into the night."

The promoter of a festival that features professional talent finds himself in a completely different set of circumstances.

"It's an entirely different ball game," Norman emphasizes. "In the first place, you have to deal with a booking agent rather than some member of the band. You must enter into a written contract with each group's agent. If you're going to use professional talent, be prepared to make financial guarantees, with half paid in advance.

"You're involved in a much bigger gamble when you deal with professionals than when you use amateur talent," Norman continues, "and because the financial investment is greater, the promoter who books the pros has to charge more for tickets than the promoter who features amateurs does. Sometimes people don't understand that this is why they have to pay more to attend one festival than another."

Why does Norman book professional groups at his festivals?

"I feel like I can have more variety that way," he responds. "I try to have different artists from year to year." People like to see

and hear the professionals as well as the amateurs, he reasons, and his type of festival affords them the opportunity to do so.

Once you have settled the issue of the kind of talent you're going to engage for your festival, you must turn your attention to the more mundane aspects of festival promotion. According to Harold, planning and organizing a bluegrass festival is a year round job, and just as soon as one of his festivals is over he starts working on the one for the next year. He lists the following as some of the "nitty-gritty" details of festival promotion:

1. Location. In selecting the geographic location for a bluegrass festival, several factors must be taken into consideration. "You don't want to choose a location that's too close to where other festivals are held," Harold warns. When he started his Armuchee Festival in 1973, the closest festival site around was fifty miles away. "One way to find out if any festivals are being held close to where you're thinking of putting one on," Harold points out, "is to consult the annual festivals guide in *Bluegrass Unlimited*."

The next thing to consider is accessibility. Can bluegrass fans find your festival? Are there good roads and highways leading to the location? Another thing to think about relative to location is whether or not overnight lodging is readily available. Although most bluegrass fans prefer to camp, some like the convenience of a motel.

2. Time of year. "Try to find a weekend for your festival so that there's not one nearby on the weekend before or the weekend after," Harold advises. "Once you select a weekend, hold on to it," he goes on, "you want your festival to become a habit with the fans, and changing the time will confuse them." Again, the festival guide is a good source of information on festival dates.

3. Length. Most festivals are weekend affairs, although some last as long as a week, plus the weekend before and the weekend after. If you're planning on a weekend festival should it be one, two,

or three days long? Some promoters consider Sunday a loser since, by then, many fans are ready to go home if they've been around since Friday. Harold says that Sunday attendance at his festival has been on the increase lately. He features gospel bluegrass on Sundays and, as he points out, "For some folks, the best bluegrass music is gospel bluegrass." Harold's festival is also held on Labor Day weekend so that most of those in attendance on Sunday aren't faced with having to get up and go to work the next morning.

4. Advertising. "It pays to advertise" is a slogan that is no less important in bluegrass festival promotion than it is in any other business operation. "Advertising in *Bluegrass Unlimited* is a must," Harold declares. "For my Labor Day festival I run an ad in the August issue." The next most important advertising device, according to Harold, is the handbill. He posts these in local music stores and other places and distributes them at as many as possible of the festivals that precede his during the year. He lists newspaper and radio advertising as next in importance.

The direct mailing list is also a good way to advertise, Harold notes, but it may take a while to develop a good file of fans' names and addresses. "I've been working on one for five years," Harold says, "and it's just now becoming useful. Finally, Harold points out that one of the best means of advertising is word of mouth advertising. "If you want people to come to your festivals," he says, "have good ones, and word will get around."

5. The festival area. The festival area should be easily accessible by automobile.

This means good roads, among other things. People are not likely to be anxious to return to a place where they've been stuck in the mud. The same is true for the parking and camping areas. To avoid the possibility of having stuck automobiles and campers to contend with, you may want to consider paving or adding gravel to the parking area and roads within the camping area.

Most people like to camp in the shade, and this should be kept in mind when selecting camp sites. They should also be located as conveniently as possible to the concert area, rest rooms, and food concessions. The camping area should also be level.

Lighting is another consideration that must be dealt with. Adequate lighting should be provided in the concert, concession, and rest room areas. Lighted parking lots are desirable, but not always found. Some lighting in the camping area is usually welcome, but probably not essential.

Should the concert area be covered? “A bluegrass festival is better when it’s held outdoors,” Harold maintains, but there’s no denying the convenience of shelter when the inevitable rains come. If your festival is to be held in a rainy part of the country or during a typically rainy season of the year, a shelter may be a wise investment. If a permanent shelter is out of the question, you may want to investigate the possibility of renting a tent. Shelters provide protection from the sun as well as from rain, but the selection of a concert area that takes proper advantage of trees can often solve the problem with the sun.

Then there’s the matter of seating. Some promoters get by with no seats at all, in which case fans are advised to “bring folding chairs.” Perhaps the simplest kind of seats the promoter can provide are those of the cinder block and two by six board variety. Depending on the location and the size of the budget, consideration may be given to renting folding chairs, especially if the concert area is under cover.

A covered stage of adequate size is essential. A stage with a backstage assembly room for musicians is highly desirable. A stage with an adjoining air-conditioned sound-proof warm-up room sounds too good to be true, but such can be found at least one festival.

6. Rest room facilities. Rest room facilities are a very important consideration. The kind with flush toilets and hot and cold showers are most highly prized by festival goers. Their construction, however, can take a big bite out of the festival budget. If permanent rest rooms are not feasible, the minimum that should be provided are portable chemical toilets. These usually rent for a reasonable fee, and should be provided in adequate numbers and in strategic locations. With respect to rest rooms, it might be wise to check with your local health department to make sure you are in compliance with any existing health regulations.

7. Concessions. Concessions for food and arts and crafts are found at most festivals. They can be a source of additional income and provide a service to the fans. "I charge a rental fee to concessionaires," Harold says, "but I don't charge the musicians who want to set up a table and sell their records during the festival." The promoter, then, must consider what type of facilities, if any, he will provide for concessionaires. Again, a check with the local health department may be in order regarding food concessions.

After all permanent facilities have been built, there arises the problem of the maintenance and protection from vandalism when they are not in use. Several days before each festival the area should be prepared for the upcoming event. There will be grass to cut and equipment to be checked and put in order.

Finally, there's the problem of garbage disposal and cleaning up to be dealt with. Garbage cans should be plentiful, large, and properly located. Litter should be removed periodically from the concert, rest room, and concession areas, and patrons should be encouraged to keep parking lots and camping areas clean. Periodic garbage pickup must also be scheduled. When the festival is over, a major cleaning up is necessary. In connection with keeping the festival area clean, the promoter must not forget to set some type of policy regarding the presence of pets.

8. The master of ceremonies. “The emcee is a very important person at every festival,” Harold states. “It is up to the emcee to set the tone of the festival, to keep things moving, and to handle emergencies like power failure or something happening to the sound equipment. The emcee can do a lot to create a festival’s entire image.” People who have had stage, broadcasting, or other public speaking experience usually make good emcees. It also helps if the emcee likes bluegrass music and is familiar with the groups he or she must introduce.

9. Sound. “You must have good sound,” Harold emphasizes, “and the capabilities of the sound system should fit the size of the crowd.” Sound systems can be bought or rented. In some cases, a local music store may have a sound system that a promoter can use in exchange for free advertising.

10. Alcohol and drugs. Harold and Norman both emphasize the fact that they do not allow alcohol and drugs inside their concert areas, and this seems to be a fairly common rule at festivals. “I try to run a family-oriented festival,” Norman states, “and I enlist the cooperation of local law enforcement agencies to help me do just that.” Harold’s festival is also designed to attract the whole family. “I hire security guards,” Harold explains, “and my instructions are that they must not harass the patrons, and they must not let anyone harass them. The important thing is for the security people to be visible. But I don’t have any trouble,” Harold concludes, “because bluegrass music seems to have a soothing effect on people.”

11. Program planning. One of the final details in planning a festival is the preparation of the actual concert program. “I try for variety,” Harold says. “I don’t put two fiddle players back to back, and if there are two bands that sound a lot alike, I try not to put them close together.”

12. Cost. The cost involved in promoting a bluegrass festival will, of course, depend on a variety of factors. Will amateur or

professional talent be used? Does the promoter own the festival site or will it have to be leased? What has to be done in order to get the festival site ready? What equipment must be bought or leased? How much building must take place?

Harold says that, depending on the situation, one might be able to put on a festival using amateur talent with an initial investment of as little as a thousand dollars. He feels that, on the average, it will take about three festivals for a promoter to break even.

When considering the costs involved in promoting a festival, the question of ticket prices naturally arises. To reach a decision on this issue, the promoter must consider the prospective audience and what it can reasonably afford to pay. Find out what other promoters are charging at nearby festivals similar to the one you have in mind. In setting ticket prices, as well as in other aspects of festival promotion, Harold says that there are two musts. "You must treat your patrons right, and you must treat your musicians right," he says.

What is the future outlook for bluegrass festivals? Norman Adams predicts that "bluegrass music is going to get bigger than rock and roll." If it continues to grow in popularity as it did in the past ten years, he may not be far from right.

It has been estimated that in 1970 there were only about 100 radio stations in the country devoting a significant amount of programming to bluegrass music. Estimates for 1979 place the number of such stations at somewhere between 300 and 500.

The number of record companies issuing at least ten bluegrass albums per year increased from an estimated 15 to 20 in 1970 to 35 to 40 in 1979, and reliable sources estimate that the sales of bluegrass records more than doubled during that same period.

The increased popularity of bluegrass music during the past decade is reflected by increased sales of banjos, fiddles, and other bluegrass instruments. The manager of a music store located in

one metropolitan area reports that in 1970 his store sold only about 50 banjos representing some three different brands.

By 1979 he was selling 300 banjos per year to customers who could choose from among more than a dozen brands.

Perhaps the best indicator of the rise in popularity of bluegrass music during the seventies is the phenomenal growth of bluegrass festivals. From an estimated 25 festivals held in the United States during 1970, the number, by 1979, had grown to an estimated 500 or more.

Whether they succeed or fail, there undoubtedly will be a number of new bluegrass festivals springing up over the country during the next few years. Will yours be one of them?

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Grady and Hazel Cole and “The Tramp On The Street”

By Wayne Daniel

In 1877 White, Smith & Company of Boston published in sheet music form a song entitled “Only A Tramp!” that was composed by Dr. Addison D. Crabtre. The first verse of the song tells about a night watchman finding, dead on the street, a tramp who, according to a coroner, had died of starvation. In typical Victorian fashion, the composer waxes didactic in the second verse and asks the listener, “If Jesus was here and asked at your door/A place to rest in, and food from your store/As once he thus wander’ d with poverty’s stamp/Would you turn Him away as only a tramp?” The chorus tells us that

*He’s somebody’s darling, somebody’s son,
For once he was fair, once he was young,
Yes, someone has rocked him a baby to sleep,
Now only a tramp found dead in the street.*

One suspects that the late gospel singer and songwriter Grady Cole was familiar with Dr. Crabtre’s song. Dorothy Horstman, in her book, *Sing Your Heart Out Country Boy*, states that Cole’s composition, “The Tramp On The Street,” was “patterned after” Crabtre’s song. The title and chorus of the country gospel classic, which was made famous by Cole during the late 1930s and 1940s, bear a strong resemblance to the earlier song. The only substantive difference between Cole’s chorus and Crabtre’s chorus occurs in the last line, in which Cole writes, “He was left there to die like a tramp on the street.”

Although Cole may have been inspired by Crabtre’s composition, he took the idea and made it into a quite different song. Instead of the anonymous tramp in Crabtre’s first verse,

Cole, in his first verse speaks of the Biblical Lazarus who was left to “die like a tramp on the street.” Cole’s second verse summarizes the death of Jesus on the cross and concludes with the statement that he, too, was left to “die like a tramp on the street.” Cole’s third verse closely parallels the last half of Crabtre’s second verse by asking the listener how he would respond if Jesus should “come and knock on your door and ask you to give the crumbs from your floor.”

Cole concludes his song with a second chorus that refers to Jesus as “King of the Jews” and names Mary as the mother who “rocked her darling to sleep.”

“The Tramp On the Street” was first recorded by Grady Cole and his wife Hazel in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1939 for RCA Victor. It was released as Bluebird 8262. It has since appeared on records by more than twenty artists, including such diverse stylists as Molly O’Day, Joan Baez, The Lewis Family, Rose Maddox, Patsy Montana, Peter, Paul and Mary; the Seigo Brothers and Naomi, the Staple Singers, and Hank Williams.

One of the best known recordings was the one by Molly O’Day. According to country music historians Ivan Tribe and John Morris, O’Day learned the song from Hank Williams. Tribe and Morris also state that virtually all later recorded versions seem related to the O’Day rendition, which is sung to a different tune from that of the Coles.

Grady Cole was born on August 26, 1909, near LaFayette, a northwest Georgia town with a population at the time of about 1500. After graduating from high school at nearby Trion, he moved to Rome, Georgia, where he worked in a textile mill for a living and studied and performed music as a hobby and second source of income. One of Cole’s co-workers at the textile mill was a young lady named Hazel Key, who had been born and reared in Blue Ridge, Georgia. Cole and Key were married on August 18, 1930.

Upon her marriage, Hazel Cole became not only a wife but also her husband's singing partner. She also learned to play bass fiddle to help fill out the instrumental accompaniment to their harmonizing. At first they sang together for their own pleasure and to entertain their friends. Hazel once recalled that on summer evenings, while singing on the front porch of their home in Rome, they attracted large audiences from among their friends and neighbors. Even then a large percentage of the Coles' repertoire consisted of songs that Grady had written.

In 1934, according to Grady, he and Hazel "began their career in music in a big way." This was the year they started singing on radio station WRGA in Rome. Grady once wrote in one of the several song books he compiled that he and Hazel featured their "own songs on the air and soon became WRGA's most popular artists." Their program was billed as the WRGA Studio Revue. Grady wrote that they "worked just about every school auditorium, theater, church, and club house, with return engagements, within a radius of 100 miles around."

The Coles made their recording debut in 1939 with RCA Victor. Twenty-five of their songs were recorded for the Bluebird label. They included the gospel songs, "I'm on My Way to a Holy Land," "You Can Be a Millionaire with Me," "The Tramp on the Street," and such secular songs as "What a Change One Day Can Make" and "Shattered Love". According to their son, Jack, the Coles' second and last recording session took place around 1950 for the Gilt Edge label. He says that among the songs recorded at that time were "There'll Never Be Another Like Jesus," "I'll Take the Bible," "I'll Follow Jesus All the Way," and "I'm Getting Ready for Heaven."

In the early Forties the Coles moved from Rome to Atlanta, where their lifestyle was a continuation of what it had been in Rome. They worked in a textile mill, sang on the radio, and made

personal appearances. Their radio home in Atlanta was WGST. The station's managers once stated that the Cole family drew "more fan mail than any other group ever featured over this station over such a period of time." By this time the second of their two children, Jackie, who was born in 1933, was part of their act. (Their older son, Billy, did not take part in his parents' music career.) In addition to singing trio numbers with his parents, Jackie sang solos suitable to his age and endeared himself to a public that found performances by talented children irresistible. During his teen years, Jackie sang lead in the trio to Hazel's alto and Grady's baritone.

During their career the Coles sang on radio stations in Gadsden, Alabama; Dalton, Georgia; Nashville, Tennessee; and Knoxville, Tennessee.

In Knoxville in the mid-Forties the Coles were hired by Lowell Blanchard to appear on the Tennessee Barn Dance and on a daily program heard on WNOX. The Coles were heard by means of transcriptions on many other stations. At one time, according to Grady, one of their transcribed shows was heard on 73 stations. They also appeared with Lost John and his Allied Kentuckians on a transcribed program that reportedly was carried by more than 144 radio stations.

In the late 40s Grady and Hazel Cole returned to Georgia and set up residence in East Point, a suburb on Atlanta's south side. They became involved in church and evangelistic work and for a while sang with a local evangelist who conducted street meetings and preached from court house squares on Saturday afternoons in the small towns surrounding Atlanta.

Jackie stopped performing with his parents around 1951. In 1957 he was called to the Baptist ministry and pastored churches in north Georgia and Tennessee.

Grady and Hazel stopped performing in the early 1950s. Hazel took a job in an Atlanta textile mill and later became a welfare caseworker with Economic Opportunity Atlanta. Grady continued to teach music and write songs. Jack states that at least 75 percent of his father's compositions were based on gospel themes. He says that Grady was deeply concerned about spiritual things and was inspired by the regret that he had not pleased the Lord. "Everything had to be quiet when he was writing songs," Jack says. "He had to get in a place all by himself. He would spend hours writing songs. He had perfect pitch and was very sensitive to a foul note." Hazel, too, recalls her husband's dedication to his music. "He wrote every day," she once told a newspaper reporter. "That's all he would do. It was his life."

Grady Cole died in 1981.

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They Left Them to Die Like “The Tramp on the Street” The Story of Grady and Hazel Cole

By Wayne Daniel

In 1939 when Grady Cole and his wife, Hazel, recorded “The Tramp on the Street” for RCA Victor’s Bluebird label, they never dreamed that fifty years later the title of the song would be used to describe their own personal circumstances. The song tells how Lazarus and Jesus, though they had seen happier times, were left to die like tramps on the street. Written by Grady Cole, “The Tramp on the Street” became an immensely popular song among gospel, country, folk, and bluegrass singers, and over the years it has been recorded by more than twenty professional artists besides the Coles. Ironically, however, Grady Cole’s financial rewards for his song never came close to what one would expect from a composition so widely recorded. He died in 1981 in a Roswell, Georgia, nursing home in great need of the royalties that were not forthcoming. Two years later, his widow was forced to leave her mobile home in north Georgia because she was no longer able to make the monthly payments.

The story of Grady and Hazel Cole, which is a story in microcosm of the country music industry from the twenties to the fifties, began in 1909 in north Georgia. On August 26 of that year Grady was born near LaFayette. A trading center for farmers and the scene of numerous skirmishes during the Civil War, it was then a town of just over fifteen hundred inhabitants.

Grady’s birthplace, near the Chattahoochee National Forest, is located some 80 miles northwest of Atlanta and about 25 miles

south of Chattanooga, Tennessee. Rome, Georgia, lies about 35 miles to the south, while to reach Nashville and Knoxville in Tennessee, one would have to travel approximately 150 miles to the northwest and northeast, respectively. To all of these towns during the course of his career, Grady would travel in search of fame and fortune. In the end, his fame would considerably exceed his fortune.

Grady was one of two children and the only son of Mr. and Mrs. James M. Cole who, when Grady was five years old, moved their family to Rome, a city that would be Grady's home for the next twenty-eight years.

Early on, Grady developed an intense interest in music. He bought every book on music instruction that he could lay his hands on, and through diligent effort combined with an extraordinary talent, he soon became a self-taught master of music theory. By the time he was 16 he had written his first song. In 1929, at the age of 20, Grady began teaching himself to play the guitar and was soon playing and singing in local bands.

Rome, Georgia, in the 1920s, had a population of about 15,000. Located at the confluence of the Oostanaula and Etowah Rivers, it was a commercial-industrial city whose inhabitants found employment in textile mills, stove factories, and other manufacturing plants. Grady, after graduating from high school in nearby Trion, worked in a textile mill to earn a living while pursuing his interests in music making and song writing.

In the meantime, Hazel Key had moved to Rome where she, too, found employment in the same textile mill in which Grady worked. Hazel had been born some 50 miles across the north Georgia mountains near the town of Blue Ridge, the birthplace of Fiddlin' John Carson, the world's first commercial country music artist.

Following their marriage on August 18, 1930, Grady and Hazel's duet singing became a popular source of entertainment among their friends and neighbors. Hazel recalls that in the summertime they would attract large and appreciative audiences as they sat on their front porch singing Grady's original compositions and other popular songs of the day. By then Grady was already performing on WRGA, the local radio station, and their friends began to urge Hazel to join him on the air.

As in other parts of the country at this time, the effects of the depression were being felt in Rome, and those who possessed a skill or talent that could be exploited as a source of additional income were quick to do so. Country music entertaining was one of the fields to which numerous persons with musical talent turned in search of that extra dollar to help make ends meet. This was the beginning of the golden age of radio, and the airwaves crackled with the sounds of fiddles, banjos, guitars, and hillbilly singers who sounded just like the hometown boys and girls and men and women who had been making that kind of music all their lives. It had not been long since Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family had proven that a railroad worker from Meridian, Mississippi, and a rural family from a remote village in the foothills of Virginia could become rich and famous putting their music on phonograph records. No doubt Grady and Hazel Cole's decision to seriously pursue a career in country music entertaining was, in part, inspired by such examples of how ordinary people, like themselves, were meeting with great success by singing and playing on the radio and making phonograph records.

At last the wishes of their friends prevailed, and in 1934, Grady and Hazel began singing together on WRGA in Rome. They soon became the most popular performers on the station, and their program, known as the WRGA Studio Revue, ran for more than four years. They had no trouble getting sponsors, as

firms like Sears Roebuck, Standard Oil, and local furniture and department stores kept them on the air. Jimmy Kirby, WRGA's program director at the time, later recalled that after the Cole's first program, "the station was swamped with telephone calls and letters to the effect that the listeners wanted more and more Grady and Hazel." In 1939 Grady wrote that "We have a large room at home which we call our Music Room. We have it completely sealed with post cards, our fan fail." During this time, Grady once remarked, they "worked just about every school auditorium, theater, church, and club house, with return engagements, within a radius of 100 miles around."

Grady did not limit his musical activities to playing the guitar and singing. Every minute he could spare from his job at the mill and his radio and personal appearance work he spent writing songs. By 1941 he could boast of 35 songs published by a New York publisher and available in sheet music form.

Grady also somehow found time to teach music. "Everywhere we moved," his son Jack recently recalled, "as soon as we got settled he'd start teaching guitar classes." But Grady Cole was not content with studio teaching alone. In characteristic fashion he tried his hand at mail-order music instruction. In 1941 he described this venture in a letter to a trade magazine. "I have established a very nice little business here [at home]. Many of our friends insisted on coming to us so that we might teach them music and to play the guitar. So I planned out a method by which I can teach them music and their favorite instrument by mail. So with the use of printed illustrations, diagrams and phonograph records I have a very nice school already built up to about 40 students. As they complete the course, which extends over a period of three months, I present them with a nice certificate of diploma. It's lots of fun." Grady called his enterprise the Liberty School of Music.

Prior to Grady and Hazel's radio debut as a duet on WRGA, two sons had joined the Cole household. The oldest, Billy, was born in 1931, and Jack Olin, whom they called Jackie, was born in 1933. Jackie soon showed evidence of having inherited his parents' musical talent, and when he was three-and-a-half years old he made his first radio broadcast. He soon became a regular and important member of the Cole family act, joining the ranks of other child stars in the entertainment world. It had not been long since a pre-adolescent George Gobel, billed as "The Little Cowboy," had been a sensation on the National Barn Dance in Chicago. Asher Sizemore had already catapulted his young son, Jimmie, into country music stardom as a feature attraction on the Grand Ole Opry. And, of course, these were the days when little Shirley Temple reigned supreme in Hollywood. Audiences have never been able to resist the charm of a talented child performer.

According to Jimmy Kirby, Jackie Cole was an immediate hit with his renditions of songs like "Fly Birdie Fly" and "Beautiful Morning Glory." Grady once said of Jackie that "his greatest delight is to sing on a stage." As Jackie grew older, he began to sing lead on most of the family's songs, with Hazel singing alto and Grady singing baritone.

Early in his career, Grady conceived the idea of selling song books containing his compositions. The first of these, which appeared in 1939, sold more than 1500 copies, and second and third books sold more than a thousand copies each. These early song books were like the fourth which appeared in 1941 — they were home produced, mimeographed booklets. According to Jack, his father did all the typing, the editing, the mimeographing, the artwork, the stapling, and the "publishing." The title page of the fourth book informs the reader that it was published by Liberty Music Service of Lindale [a suburb of Rome], Georgia, the name

of the business under which Grady conducted his multitude of musical activities. The early songbook contained only the words to the songs with chord changes indicated at appropriate places. The fourth book contained a one-page crash course in music theory with diagrams for the guitar chords needed for the songs.

The introduction to the fourth songbook, which was titled *Echoes From Happy Valley*, contained a short biographical sketch of the Coles. Readers were assured that they [the Coles] are “just plain folks’ like yourself.” Each of these early song books contained 25 songs, all of which were written or co-written by Grady. The fourth book contained some of the Cole’s most popular songs, including “I’m On My Way To A Holy Land,” “You Can Be A Millionaire With Me,” and that most famous of all Grady Cole songs, “The Tramp On The Street.”

As Grady and Hazel became more widely known, their song books became more sophisticated, with glossy covers, pictures, and the songs arranged “for voice and piano” in sheet music format. The publishing of these later song books was done professionally by firms like Chart Music Publishing House of Chicago and Dixie Music Publishing Company of New York. Jack Cole remembers the song books. “I’ve stood in many a theater lobby and sold those books,” he recently reminisced.

Grady Cole, ever the indefatigable musical entrepreneur, left no stone unturned in his efforts to carry his music to larger audiences. As soon as he thought he and Hazel were ready, he began to contact record companies to try to arrange for an audition that he hoped would lead to a recording contract. This was in the late thirties, and with each passing year country music was gaining in popularity. Roy Acuff had just joined the Grand Ole Opry, John Lair and Red Foley were busy getting the Renfro Valley Barn Dance established, Bill and Charlie Monroe had decided to go their separate ways, and the Boone County Jamboree had just become the newest of the

Saturday night barn dance radio shows, broadcasting over WLW from the stage of the Emery Auditorium in Cincinnati. Juke boxes were consuming 30,000,000 records per year, and no small fraction of them were by country music artists. The Rock-Olas and Seeburgs located in small-town cafes and truck stops along the highways had worn out many a 78 rpm pressing of such top selling country records as Bob Wills' "San Antonio Rose" and "Steel Guitar Rag," Roy Acuff's "Wabash Cannonball," Gene Autry's "There's A Gold Mine in the Sky," Jimmie Davis' "It Makes No Difference Now," and Wade Mainer's "Sparkling Blue Eyes." Grady Cole's ambition was undoubtedly set aflame by all this activity in the country music field, and he must have longed to hear his own songs sung on the Grand Ole Opry and played on jukeboxes.

In 1939 Grady's attempts to obtain a recording contract at last bore fruit. Following a successful audition with representatives of the RCA Victor Company, Grady and Hazel journeyed to Atlanta where they recorded several songs that were subsequently released on the Bluebird label. Grady's success in landing a recording contract was probably due, in part, to his ample supply of fresh, original material. The hours he had spent writing songs had paid off, for by then record producers were looking for original compositions. Recording star hopefuls at their auditions were usually asked, "Do you have any songs you wrote yourself?" Many good musicians were refused recording contracts because they didn't have anything original.

Among the songs recorded by Grady and Hazel in 1939 were "I'm On My Way To a Holy Land," "Shattered Love," "You Can Be A Millionaire With Me," "Forbidden Love," "What a Change One Day Can Make," and "The Tramp on the Street." All of these, in time, became very popular with record buyers and radio listeners, and some, in addition to "The Tramp on the Street," were recorded by others. "What a Change One Day Can Make," for

example, was recorded by the Bailey Brothers on their Rounder album entitled *Take Me Back to Happy Valley*.

Jimmy Kirby, the Cole's long time mentor at WRGA in Rome, eventually moved to Atlanta where he became associated with radio station WGST, a station owned by Georgia Tech. Around 1942 or 1943, Kirby was instrumental in getting the Coles a spot on WGST. Here they performed, not only under the name Grady and Hazel Cole, but also as the Country Cousins. They found themselves to be just as popular with Atlanta-area listeners as they had been at Rome. The Cole's had been at WGST for only a short time when Grady was able to announce that they were averaging 75 cards and letters per day. On one day alone they received 115 pieces of mail. They received letters, not only from listeners in Georgia, but from fans in Alabama, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Florida, and "quite a scattering from other states," according to Grady.

World War II was underway during most of the time that the Coles were at WGST, and like most musical acts of this period, Grady and Hazel added patriotic songs to their broadcast and personal appearance repertoires. Jackie, especially, was called on to help out with this type of song. According to Grady, he made quite a hit with war songs like "You Won't Know Tokyo When We Get Through," "Hitler's Last Roundup," and "The Devil and Mr. Hitler."

While at WGST, the Coles made personal appearances with other Atlanta area country music acts. For a while they appeared every Saturday on the stage of Atlanta's Joy Theater with Riley Puckett, Gid Tanner, and a group called the Blue Ridge Mountain Boys who were appearing on another Atlanta radio station. Grady was able to report in 1944 that they played to "a packed house on every show." Another Atlanta area personality with whom the Coles shared show dates was Pete Cassell who, like Riley Puckett, was a blind singer and guitar player.

As had been the case while they were broadcasting in Rome, the Coles seem to have encountered no problems securing sponsors for their programs on WGST. Among the firms for whom they broadcast were the Southern Agriculturist, a regional magazine for farmers, the Retonga Medicine Company, and the Allied Drug Company. These were the days when patent medicines like Peruna, “the tonic that helps to win fights with colds,” Carter’s Little Liver Pills, and Pinex, “for quick relief of coughs due to colds,” kept hundreds of hillbilly artists on the air from coast to coast. Loyal listeners bought these products, not only for their ailments, but for the box tops which, when mailed in to the radio station, would bring in return a picture of the sponsored artist.

WGST’s managers once stated that while the Coles were at their station they drew “more fan mail than any other group ever featured over this station over such a period of time.” During this last year at WGST the Coles were paid a weekly sustaining fee of thirty dollars.

Jack Cole believes that it was in 1945 or 1946 that he and his parents moved to Knoxville, Tennessee. They were hired by Lowell Blanchard to appear on the WNOX Tennessee Barn Dance and to broadcast daily on the station. Having opened in 1942, the Tennessee Barn Dance, at the time the Coles joined it, originated from the stage of Knoxville’s 1800-seat Old Lyric Theater, with a segment being broadcast over WNOX. Over the years this Saturday night hillbilly radio and stage show was home to some of country music’s brightest stars. Among those who shared billing there with the Coles were the Delmore Brothers, Riley Puckett, Lost John and His Allied Kentuckians, Sam and Kirk McGee, Johnny Wright (husband of Kitty Wells), Chet Atkins, the Birchfield Brothers, and Wally Fowler and the Georgia Clodhoppers.

Upon the Cole’s leaving WNOX, Lowell Blanchard, in a letter of recommendation, wrote that “they have a tremendous

listening audience and a large following in this part of Tennessee.

During their career the Coles were also heard in person on several other radio stations in the southeast, including WSB and WATL in Atlanta; WJBY, Gadsden, Alabama; WBLJ, Dalton, Georgia; WOOD, Chattanooga; WBIX, Rome, Georgia; and WLAC in Nashville. The Coles were also heard by way of transcriptions on many more stations. At one time, according to Grady, they had a transcribed show that was heard on 73 stations. They also appeared with Lost John and His Allied Kentuckians on a transcribed program that reportedly was carried by more than 144 radio stations. While the Cole family was in Nashville, Grady, according to Jack, was manager of a music publishing company owned by Wally Fowler.

In the late 1940s the Coles returned to Georgia, making their home in the south side Atlanta suburb of East Point. A final recording session, which Jack said took place in 1950, resulted in the release of several sides on the Gilt Edge label. Jack recalls that some of the songs recorded at this time were “There’ll Never Be Another Like Jesus,” “I’ll Take the Bible,” “I’ll Follow Jesus All The Way,” and “I’m Getting Ready for Heaven.”

After returning to Georgia, the Coles became involved in church and evangelistic work. For a while they sang with a local evangelist who conducted street meetings and preached from courthouse squares on Saturday afternoons in the small towns surrounding Atlanta.

By 1950 Jackie had stopped performing with his parents. He enrolled in a vocational school and later took a job as billing clerk with a trucking firm. It was here that he met his wife, Audrey, whom he married in 1951. In 1957 he was called to the ministry.

In the early 1950s the Coles stopped performing. Hazel worked in an Atlanta textile mill and later as a welfare case worker

with Economic Opportunity Atlanta. Grady continued to teach music and write songs, and near the end of his career he stated that he had written more than 500. Of these, Jack estimates that at least 75 per cent were based on gospel themes. Grady's later songs were written at a time during which country music was undergoing some drastic changes, and the Cole's career, in part, was a victim of these changes. Their retirement from radio coincided with the termination of the era of the live country music radio program, as television supplanted radio as the premier home entertainment medium. The new post-war breed of country music artist, in a relentless quest for the cross-over hit, was looking for songs that would appeal to the tastes of an audience brought up on pop music. The Nashville sound and rockabilly were just around the corner.

Throughout his career, Grady encouraged other song writers to develop their craft, and when he encountered someone whom he thought had talent, he would collaborate with them on the "Hold it! I swallowed my harmonica!" writing of a song. His compositions bear such co-composer credits as Calvin Van Pelt, Mrs. Earl Smith, Sally Waters, Bessie King, and George Blackwell. One of the more famous of Grady's collaborators was Riley Puckett. Among the papers that Grady left behind is a copy of the published sheet music of one of their joint endeavors, "True Love is Hard to Find." Pete Cassell was another musician with whom Grady wrote songs. Their "Just a Message (From The One I Love)" was recorded by Cassell.

Grady Cole never penned another song to match the popularity of "The Tramp on the Street," a song recorded by such diverse stylists as Molly O'Day, Joan Baez, the Lewis Family, Patsy Montana, Peter, Paul and Mary, the Staple Singers, and Hank Williams.

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Lulu Belle and Scotty: Have I Told You Lately That I Love You?

By Wayne Daniel

On April 12, 1924 —the year voters were urged to “Keep cool with Coolidge” and a Model T Ford could be bought for \$290 —a radio broadcasting station made its debut in Chicago. The new station was owned by Sears, Roebuck & Company, and to remind listeners of this fact, it was assigned the call letters WLS which stood for “World’s Largest Store.” Radio was then in its infancy with only about 500 stations on the air nationwide and a mere two-and-a-half million receiving sets around to pick up their signals. Sears, Roebuck & Company was interested in radio as a way to “reach out” to American farmers, particularly those in the Midwest, who constituted the mail-order firm’s largest and most loyal group of customers.

WLS was exactly one week old when, on Saturday night, April 19, 1924, it introduced its listeners to the National Barn Dance, a lively variety show reminiscent of square dances, barn warmings, husking bees, and other homey get-togethers that rural Americans had invented years before in their search for ways to relieve the drudgery, monotony, and isolation of life on the farm.

When John Cooper moved his family to the Chicago suburb of Evanston, Illinois, in 1929, the National Barn Dance and the other country-flavored shows at WLS were among the most listened to radio programs in the Midwest where such names as Tommy Dandurand, the Barn Dance’s first fiddler; Grace Wilson, “The Girl With A Million Friends”; five-string banjo player Chubby Parker; Bradley Kincaid, “The Kentucky Mountain Boy with his

‘Houn’ Dog Guitar’; and George D. Hay, Barn Dance emcee and future Grand Ole Opry celebrity, were already household words.

Cooper, listening in on his newly purchased crystal set with earphones, decided that, good as the WLS stars were, they were no better than his talented 17-year-old daughter, Myrtle, who could sing and play guitar. Then and there an idea began to form in John Cooper’s mind.

In a short while he followed through on this idea, and Myrtle found herself in the tow of her father on the way to the WLS studios where she auditioned for a job on the station. Years later, she recalled that memorable day. “I had never sung on a microphone before,” she explained. “I was accustomed to singing in high school auditoriums and other places where there were no microphones, and to be heard you had to project. So when I sang as loudly on the microphone in Studio A there at WLS as I had been doing on stage, I just about blasted them out of the control room.”

On their way back home John Cooper broke the news to his daughter that she hadn’t gotten the job, but that she was to go home, learn how to tone down her voice, and go back for another audition in a week or two. At the second audition, station officials were somewhat more impressed than they had been at the first one. To Myrtle’s father they said, “Well, she’s got something. We don’t yet know what it is yet, but we’re going to give her a chance.”

At that point WLS talent developer John Lair, subsequent originator of Kentucky’s Renfro Valley Barn Dance, took Myrtle under his wing. The first thing he did was to give his new protégé a new name. His choice was Lulu Belle, because as he kiddingly explained to her later, she sounded a lot like a dog he once owned that had a similar name.

The second thing Lair did was to team Lulu Belle with Red Foley who was already an established and popular singer at WLS. “They introduced me on the Barn Dance as Red Foley’s

long lost girlfriend from down around Berea, Kentucky, where he was from,” Lulu Belle reminisced. “They told the listeners that I had heard him singing on the Barn Dance and had decided that I wanted to come up and sing on the radio, too.”

The third thing that Lair did to further Lulu Belle’s career was to let her act naturally! She was a resourceful, self-confident girl who had always been one to keep on top of a situation. A natural-born comic with a sort of sixth sense about putting herself over on stage and on the air, she immediately established a warm rapport with her audiences.

If Daddy Cooper had gotten Lulu Belle her job, Mom was going to see that she kept it, and with that end in mind she set about to assist John Lair in creating a professional image for her daughter. “Mom made a sort of a Mother Hubbard calico costume for me,” Lulu Belle related with that same giggle in her voice that endeared her to a generation of radio listeners. “Daddy and I went out and bought a pair of high-topped, pointed-toe shoes that laced way up. Mom pulled my hair back and attached a matching dime-store pigtail that hung down over my shoulder and put a big red bow back there to cover up where the pigtail was connected to my hair.” As one eyewitness observed, Lulu Belle was “‘home-folks’ personified.”

“Mom also made a little black box for me and wrote ‘Hope Chest’ on it. I carried bubble gum and candy and peanuts and all kind of junk in it. The ‘hope chest’ had a little lock on it with a key, and I’d wear the key around my neck. Once in a while one of the comedians would grab my key and ‘hope chest’ and run out through the audience with it with me right behind him.” The audience loved such shenanigans, but Lulu Belle confessed that “it didn’t go over very well with the acts who happened to be working on the stage, as you can well imagine, because we were taking away from them.”

From Harty Taylor who was with the Cumberland Ridge Runners, another Barn Dance act, Lulu Belle bought a triangular-shaped guitar that looked like it was made from packing crates. “I paid him ten dollars for it, and we called it my ‘soap-box guitar,’” said Lulu Belle “We put a little mirror on the front of it, and when I’d sing a song called ‘Winking At Me,’ I’d shine the mirror through the spotlight on some old boy sitting in the audience, and I’d sing, ‘He’s winking at me. How can I sing when he’s winking at me?’”

Thus attired, equipped, and coached, Lulu Belle, in 1932, began her career at WLS, making radio and stage-show audiences laugh by singing such songs as “Hy Rinktum, Inktum, Doodee” and “Going Out West This Fall” with Red Foley on the National Barn Dance and the station’s other music programs.

Lulu Belle’s career skyrocketed. Her rise to fame, according to one WLS executive, was a result of “the home-like songs she sang, her wholesome comedy and her ability to be natural.” Within a few months, as she recalled, she was headlining her own road show, touring the outlying countryside with performances in theaters and school auditoriums during the week and getting back to Chicago in time for the Barn Dance on Saturday nights. She was also soon making phonograph records on the Conqueror label, both as a soloist and as a duet with Red Foley.

In 1933 Lulu Belle’s fame spread from the Midwest all across the country when the Barn Dance, sponsored by Alka-Seltzer, was made a full hour feature of the NBC radio network’s Saturday evening schedule.

Perhaps the greatest event of Lulu Belle’s career came in 1936 when listeners voted her the most popular woman on radio in a poll conducted by *Radio Guide* magazine. To become “1936 Radio Queen” Lulu Belle edged out glamorous NBC pop singer Jessica

Dragonette and soap-opera star Joan Elaine. Among both men and women Lulu Belle came in fifth behind Jack Benny, Eddie Cantor, Nelson Eddy, and Lanny Ross. It was the “thousands of ballots, coming from the hills, villages and rural districts of America [that] turned the tide for Lulu Belle,” wrote a contemporary newspaper columnist. “I ain’t never been a queen before,” giggled Lulu Belle, when the announcement was made on the Barn Dance. “But I sure do want to thank all the folks who helped me win this honor.”

While Lulu Belle was busy launching her career in Chicago, another aspiring musician, a young man from the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, was also beginning his climb to stardom. Scott Wiseman was born on November 8, 1909, on a farm near Ingalls, North Carolina, some 40 miles across the mountains from Boone, where Lulu Belle had been born on Christmas Eve in 1913.

From his mother Scott learned the Native American and old English ballads that were the special heritage of those of his generation who grew up in the North Carolina mountains. An uncle, “Honey” Waits, taught him to play the five-string banjo in the traditional trailing style. When he was eleven years old, Scott sold a pig for \$4.95 and bought a mail order guitar, and by the time he was in his teens he was a serious collector of Southern folk songs and a regular performer on the guitar and harmonica at local square dances.

After a year at Duke University, Scott transferred to Fairmont (West Virginia) Teachers College where, in addition to a college degree, he earned, during his senior year, an award as the school’s most outstanding student. He was also president of his senior class. To help pay his college expenses, Scott worked at WMMN in Fairmont as an announcer, program director, and singer of mountain ballads.

Bradley Kincaid, always on the alert for new sources of folk songs, heard about Scott, and lost no time in scheduling a trip to North Carolina to visit the young ballad collector. Through their mutual interest in traditional music, the two quickly developed a liking for each other. From the encounter Kincaid gained a clutch of new songs (including “Cindy” and “Pretty Little Pink”) and Scott got a new job; it was Kincaid who recommended that WLS hire Scott to perform on the National Barn Dance.

“Bradley had a great influence on me,” Scott once wrote Kincaid’s biographer, Loyal Jones, “and is largely responsible for my decision to make a career in music instead of teaching.”

Kincaid had sensed that, as well as being a talented performer, Scott also possessed those other qualities that the WLS management required of their entertainers: “sincerity, friendliness and genuineness [and] the common touch. When, in 1933, he joined the Barn Dance as ballad singer and guitar and harmonica player, Scott was billed as Skyland Scotty because he came from that part of North Carolina that is known as the “land of the sky.”

About the time Scotty became a member of the Barn Dance troupe, the Lulu Belle/Red Foley team was beginning to break up. “Red fell in love with Eva Overstake, who was singing on the station with her two sisters as the Three Little Maids,” recounted Lulu Belle. “When they got married she wanted to sing with Red.”

Before long a Barn Dance official suggested that Lulu Belle work up an act with Scotty. “He was a long, lean fellow with a shy smile,” Lulu Belle once wrote, but they hadn’t seen much of each other because they performed on different touring units. The first number they sang together on stage was “Madam, I’ve Come To Marry You,” and on December 13, 1934, Scotty accomplished in real life the mission he had expressed in the words of the song.

“We thought people wouldn’t care for us on the air any more, since we were ‘old married folks,’” said Lulu Belle, “but our WLS

listeners seemed to like us twice as much as a team.” When the first of their two children, a daughter named Linda Lou, was born, the Wiseman’s thought for sure that they would have to give up radio then, for as Lulu Belle said, “They wanted us all to be young and single. But we were wrong again,” she confessed. “Thousands of gifts came to us when we sang ‘Somebody’s Coming To Our House.’”

As a team Lulu Belle and Scotty were highly successful. Known as the Hayloft Sweethearts, their popularity has been attributed to Lulu Belle’s “ready wit and rollicking sense of humor” and Scotty’s “fine banjo and guitar playing, and [his] easy-going, friendly manner.” Their act featured “sparkling novelty tunes, sweetheart and homefolk songs, patter and comedy skits.”

In those days, one measure of a radio performer’s popularity was the amount of mail received from listeners. Lulu Belle and Scotty did not fall short on that score. In one fan letter the writer vowed that “The Barn Dance would be dry and monotonous without Lulu Belle and Scotty,” and another listener wrote that he had a pair of kittens that he had named Lulu Belle and Scotty.

Near the end of their professional career it was reported that Lulu Belle and Scotty held more box office records at theaters, parks, county and state fairs than any other act in the middle west. In 1943 *Billboard* magazine listed them, along with the Weaver Brothers and Elviry, the Hoosier Hot Shots, the Sons of the Pioneers, Roy Rogers, and Roy Acuff, as one of the six “greatest money-getters” in the country music business.

Soon after signing on with the Barn Dance, Scotty was awarded a recording contract. In December 1933 he recorded four sides for Bluebird, and a session in the spring of 1934 resulted in 10 releases on the Conqueror label. After Lulu Belle joined him on radio they began to record together, and over the years, they had numerous releases on a variety of labels. Success on radio, records

and stage was followed by movie contracts, and between 1938 and 1943, Lulu Belle and Scotty were featured in seven films: *Shine On Harvest Moon* (Republic, 1938), *Country Fair* (Republic, 1939), *Village Barn Dance* (Republic, 1940), *Swing Your Partner* (Republic, 1942), *National Barn Dance* (Paramount, 1943), *Hi Neighbor*, and *Sing, Neighbor, Sing*.

Lulu Belle and Scotty are perhaps best remembered for the many novelty songs they sang on the NBC Alka-Seltzer National Barn Dance. One of the most popular of these was “Does the Spearmint Lose Its Flavor On The Bed Post Overnight?” a song composed in 1924. Among other novelty songs they sang were “Gotta Quit Kicking My Dog Around,” “When Grandpa Got His Whiskers Caught In The Zipper Of His Shirt,” “Hominy Grits,” and “Which Would You Rather Have On Hand, A Grand Baby or a Baby Grand?”

Not only was Scotty a collector of old songs, he was also a composer of considerable merit. “He could take an everyday phrase,” declared Lulu Belle, “and write a song around it. I don’t know how he did it. He’d get the idea in his head and put down the words, and then he’d get a tune. They just came to him.”

One of Scotty’s best known compositions was “Mountain Dew.” The original lyrics were written by North Carolina folklorist, Bascom Lamar Lunsford. Keeping the same melody and the words of the chorus, Scotty wrote a new set of verses, and he and Lulu Belle recorded it for Vocalion in 1939. Ironically, they were never able to sing the song on the Barn Dance. At WLS, Lulu Belle explains, “You weren’t allowed to sing anything about liquor, or cigarettes, or divorce, or anything that sounded the least bit shady or crude.”

Scotty, who has been described as a man “honest as the day is long,” bought the rights to “Mountain Dew” from Lunsford for twenty-five dollars, and through the years split equally with

him the royalties from the song, although such a sharing of future income was not in the agreement. More than two decades later, according to Lulu Belle, when the soft drink, Mountain Dew, hit the national market, and Scotty received a settlement from the beverage company for use of the song in advertising, he gave half the proceeds to Lunsford.

Another of Scotty's songs that has been highly popular is "Have I Told You Lately That I Love You?" which he wrote in 1944 while recuperating in a Chicago Hospital. "Lulu Belle was visiting me one afternoon," Scotty told Dorothy Horstman, author of the book *Sing Your Heart Out Country Boy*, and whispered to me before she left 'Have I told you lately that I love you?' As I lay there thinking tender thoughts about her, it occurred to me that this would be a good title for a song. I got paper and pencil and wrote the first verse and chorus down that afternoon. When Lu came the next day, I sang it to her. She said, 'That's pretty good.'" Gene Autry was the first of many artists to record the song, and in the mid-seventies Scotty reported that it had sold approximately 10 million records.

Except for a brief stint for about 18 months in 1939 and 1940 at WLW in Cincinnati, where they starred on the Boone County Jamboree, another Saturday night barn dance-type radio/stage show, Lulu Belle and Scotty were affiliated with WLS and the National Barn Dance until their retirement in 1958. In addition to the Barn Dance they also appeared on such other WLS radio shows as Dinner Bell Time, the Merry-Go-Round, and Smile Awhile, as well as their own program. During their heyday Lulu Belle and Scotty were guests on numerous radio and TV shows such as the Grand Ole Opry, Red Foley's Ozark Jubilee, and the Steve Allen Show.

It was in the mid-1950s, Lulu Belle believed, that the Wiseman's were the stars of a syndicated 15 minute radio program

called Breakfast in the Blue Ridge. Although the programs were transcribed in a recording studio in Chicago, the announcer informed listeners that they were hearing “those favorite sweethearts of the airwaves ... in the kitchen of their home near the village of Spruce Pine ... in the heart of American’s scenic wonderland, the Blue Ridge Mountains.” The programs featured songs by Lulu Belle and Scotty and their guests, comedy skits centered around such domestic routines as putting up a fence, listening in on the party-line telephone, and various village social events. Scotty would frequently give a short history of one of the old ballads and folk tunes that constituted a large portion of their repertoire. “The programs were so realistic,” Lulu Belle relates, “that we were told that the local milk man thought we were really at home in our cabin at Spruce Pine and began leaving milk there.”

The cabin in the Blue Ridge was indeed real. Located on a 500 acre farm, it served as the Wiseman’s vacation retreat during the time they lived in Chicago and Cincinnati. Then in 1958 when they retired they built, on the farm, a larger house which became their permanent home. It was here that Scotty farmed, raised Black Angus cattle, taught school, worked as a speech therapist (Just before leaving Chicago he had earned a master’s degree in speech therapy from Northwestern University.), and played an active role in various local civic activities. It was here that Lulu Belle cooked, canned and kept house, took a nurse’s aide training course, worked as a volunteer at the Spruce Pine Community Hospital, served as chairwoman of a three-county Red Cross chapter, and got involved in politics.

In the 1970s Lulu Belle served two terms in the North Carolina General Assembly representing Avery, Mitchell, and Burke counties. She was the first Democrat to serve her district since 1922 and the first woman ever to fill the position.

Scotty Wiseman died of a massive heart attack in 1981 in Gainesville, Florida, while he and Lulu Belle were returning to the mountains from a Florida vacation. Lulu Belle later married Ernest Stamey, a life-long friend and neighbor of the Wiseman family. Ernest, who retired from a thirty-three year law practice in Hialeah, Florida, and Lulu Belle continued to spend their summers on the farm in North Carolina. They spent their winters at their homes in Miami Springs and Marco Island, Florida, where Lulu Belle, ever the devoted housewife, took time out from cooking and flower gardening to join her husband at his favorite pastimes, fishing and exploring in the Ten Thousands Islands.

For an act remembered to a large extent for novelty songs and comedy routines, Lulu Belle and Scotty have had a considerable impact on traditional country and bluegrass music. Aside from the folk songs that Scotty collected, his original compositions have been well received by other artists. In fact, according to country music historian Charles Wolfe, “Mountain Dew” was so closely associated with Uncle Dave Macon that many people thought he had composed it. Dorothy Horstman has written that it was the song Loretta Lynn sang at the pie-special the night she met her husband, Mooney.

Another of Scotty’s compositions, “Remember Me When The Candle Lights Are Gleaming,” written in 1939, enjoyed immense popularity. In the 1940s it was a nationwide hit for T. Texas Tyler, who adopted it as his theme song, and some forty years later Willie Nelson brought the song to the top of the country charts. “Remember Me” was also the theme song of the Bailes Brothers throughout most of their career. Among the bluegrass artists who have recorded the song are Jim and Jesse and the late Charlie Moore who, along with the Country Gentlemen, recorded another of Scotty’s songs, “Brown Mountain Light.”

Charles Wolfe in his book, *Kentucky Country*, states that Lulu Belle was one of the role models for Molly O'Day when the latter started her singing career. As one of the first women to attain star status in the country music field, Lulu Belle no doubt inspired many other aspiring female singers.

Ralph Rinzler noted that the radio broadcasts of Lulu Belle and Scotty were one of the sources of the early performing repertoire of the Monroe Brothers, who themselves, once toured as exhibition square dancers with a WLS road show.

In recognition of their contributions in the field of country music, Lulu Belle and Scotty were nominated for the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1979 and 1980. Scotty was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Association's Hall of Fame in 1971.

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Scotty Wiseman died on January 31, 1981 and Lulu Belle died on February 8, 1999.

Cousin Emmy: A Popular Performer Country Music History Almost Forgot

By Wayne Daniel

If Cousin Emmy had done nothing except teach Grandpa Jones how to play the five-string banjo (which she did) or introduce the world to the bluegrass classic “Ruby” (which she also did), hers would be a rightful claim to a page in the annals of country music. But this pioneer performer of old-time music did much more. She emerged from a childhood of severe poverty to become a driver of new Cadillacs; she performed on some of the most powerful radio stations in the southeast; she helped to popularize and preserve many American folk songs; and she entertained her radio and stage-show audiences like they had never been entertained before.

But many fans of old-time country and bluegrass music have never heard of Cousin Emmy. She seems to be one of the many pioneer entertainers who have slipped through the cracks in the history of country music. Her biography does not appear in any of the standard country music encyclopedias, and other books on the history of country music mention her name only in passing—linking her with other early female artists like Rosalie Allen, Jenny Lou Carson, and Molly O’Day as women who “paved the way” for the likes of Kitty Wells, Tammy Wynette, and Loretta Lynn. Magazine articles on Cousin Emmy have been few and far between. In his book, *Kentucky Country*, Charles K. Wolfe states that Cousin Emmy has “received only a fraction of the recognition due her for her contribution to American music.” In an effort that helps atone for this negligence, Wolfe devotes a page and a half of his book to this native Kentuckian.

Cousin Emmy, whose real name was Cynthia (some sources erroneously say Joy) May Carver, was born, the next to youngest of eight children, in 1903 near Glasgow in Barren County, Kentucky. Her father was a sharecropper on a tobacco farm, and the family home was an isolated, two-room log cabin located 18 miles from the nearest railroad. It had “cracks between the walls,” said Cousin Emmy, “so big that you could a-throwed a cat between them without touching a hair.” Poverty and hard work were her childhood companions. By the time she was eight years old she was working in the tobacco fields, hoeing, worming, suckering, and stripping the plant that yields Kentucky’s most important crop.

“When spring time came, I knew what that meant,” Emmy once recalled. “Time to get up and clear up some ground. Had to be burning plant beds and getting in crops of tobacco.” Not one to buckle under adversity, she made the best of a bad situation by manipulating circumstances to her own advantage, a skill that, over the years, she would hone to a sharp edge. Calling on an innate resourcefulness the youthful Cynthia May turned her father’s tobacco patch into a stage on which she unknowingly rehearsed future stage shows and radio programs. She was always a show-off, and when left by her parents to work in the tobacco fields with the other children, she would use her singing, dancing, and leg-slapping routines as bribes to get them to do her part of the work.

It has been reported that Cousin Emmy’s formal education was of only two weeks duration, and that she learned to read by “poring over mail-order catalogues.” Apparently she never perceived her lack of formal schooling as a particular handicap. “I ain’t educated,” she once remarked, “but I’m sincere.” Years later Emmy, speaking of the hard times she experienced in Kentucky, told an audience, “I thank God thousands of times that He give me the talent and the good common sense to get out of there ...

don't send me back there no, never no more." In spite of her relief at having escaped the drudgery of life as a tobacco sharecropper, however, Emmy never felt too proud to admit that she had done everything on the farm. "I'm not ashamed of it; I'm proud of it," she once told her listeners.

Cousin Emmy did have talent —inherited from a musical family and nurtured in a region of the country rich in the folk songs that would provide the staple of her career. "We were always singing around home," Emmy recalled later in life, "and I learned them ballads from my great grandmother." Emmy also learned to play some 15 musical and quasi-musical instruments including banjo, fiddle, guitar, harmonica, tenor guitar, ukulele, trumpet, accordion, piano, twelve-string guitar, jaw harp, dulcimer, hand saw, rubber gloves, and "a tune I make by just (slapping) against my cheeks with my hands," as she would say. One number that she performed in the hand-slapping mode was "Turkey in the Straw" which, she said, she learned "out in the new ground, chopping out corn." From rubber gloves, which she would blow up, Emmy could coax a tune by controlling the sound of the escaping air. And although she won the National Old Fiddlers' Contest held in Louisville, Kentucky in 1936 —being the first female ever to win the honor —the five-string banjo was Cousin Emmy's trademark.

A turning point in the life of Cynthia May Carver occurred when, as a young girl, she heard a radio for the first time. It was in a general store in Glasgow, and she later confessed that "I sat right down there in the store and cried." She decided, then and there, that she was going to be a radio entertainer. But when she informed her parents of her ambitions, she was rewarded with a whipping from her mother who, no doubt, felt that a skilled tobacco wormer should not be harboring such highfalutin' designs. Cynthia May remained undeterred. While perfecting her skills as a singer, musician, and comedienne at local bean hullings, pie suppers, and

quilting parties, she continued to dream of the day when she could be a performer on the radio.

Fortunately, Cousin Emmy had some relatives who were already in show business. They were her cousins, Noble (“Uncle Bozo”) and Warner Carver, also of Barren County, whose band, known as the Carver Boys, enjoyed a wide reputation as radio stars, recording artists, and “the band to beat in fiddle contests.” According to Charles Wolfe it was with this group that Cousin Emmy, playing her five-string banjo, began her career. They were performing on radio station WHB in Kansas City at the time.

Cousin Emmy soon found, however, that it was not always easy to get any radio job she happened to want. Toward the end of her career she told a California audience of an experience she once had with an official at WHAS in Louisville. John Cohen later reported the story in an article in *Sing Out!* magazine. After she auditioned for the job “this man said I’ll call you,” Emmy related, “he didn’t have no intentions of calling me, but I believed him. So I sat right by the telephone in a rooming house... I waited four days. The man never did call me.” When Emmy tried to arrange an interview with the official, his secretary told her he was not in. Not to be outdone, the ingenious Miss Carver, a few days later, tried another ploy. Arriving at the station early in the morning, she conned the janitor into letting her into the office of the man she wanted to see. Once inside she proceeded to hide in the private restroom that opened into the man’s office. “Then when I saw that dude come in,” Emmy narrated, “I come out just before he hit that rest room. And I looked him right in the eye” and called his name. “He says, ‘Honey, what are you doing here?’ ‘Well (she replied), I just come back to find out why you told me that story.’ And he said, ‘Honey, you ... got backbone —I’m going to give you a job.’ He put me on that there radio station and in two weeks I was the biggest thing that ever hit any man’s radio station.”

Emmy was not known for downplaying her talent and her ability to attract a large radio audience. “Darlin’,” she once told a reporter, “I’m the sweetest singer of mountain ballads that ever came out of the foothills.” Cousin Emmy also enjoyed a reputation as a calculating businesswoman. For the benefit of an outsider she might pat her pocketbook and say, “I’m getting along.” To a booking agent or the manager of a radio station she would insist that “I know and can prove that I outdraw ... anybody else. So you just go ahead and put me on top of that there pile where I belong.” Once, when discussing her songs, Emmy stated that “I have a copyright on the most of them. I learned that right quick when they began stealing them songs from everybody and making money on us poor old hillbillies, and we didn’t get a dime out of it. I thought it’s time to do something about it. I learned this right fast, after I got out of them sticks.”

From around 1935 to 1937, Cousin Emmy held forth at WHAS in Louisville, Kentucky. As a youngster, Gene Wiggins, later an English professor at North Georgia College, used to listen faithfully to Cousin Emmy when she was on WHAS. As he recalled, her program came on very early in the morning. “Emmy once played ‘Wang, Wang Blues’ on the guitar,” he remembers, “in a way which was impressive to me. While on WHAS, Emmy would always dedicate one song to ‘all you shut-ins’ and one to the children. She would say, ‘Pull your little chairs up to the radio.’ “

The year 1937 found Cousin Emmy at WWVA in Wheeling, West Virginia, where she was a member of the famous WWVA Midnight Jamboree which was heard “in countless American homes” every Saturday night from 11 p.m. to 2 a.m. Grandpa Jones was among the almost 50 performers who shared billing with her there. It was during these days together on the Jamboree that Cousin Emmy taught Grandpa Jones how to play the five-string banjo. Jones later reminisced about the experience to writer

Charles K. Wolfe. “I thought that was about the finest thing I’d ever heard, Cousin Emmy playing that thumb string lick like she did,” he said. “I kept after her and after her, and finally she got mad and said, ‘Well, I’ll just teach you this lick.’ And she did; I’d watch her and pick it up.”

A show-business gimmick that Cousin Emmy frequently used was to sponsor amateur shows and contests as part of her personal appearance programs. This technique allowed her to present a full evening’s program without having to carry a lot of professional musicians on her payroll. While Emmy was at WWVA, two brothers, Bud and Benny Kissinger of Fairchance, Pennsylvania, performed on such a talent show when Emmy made a personal appearance in their area. After the show, “Emmy came around and she took our names and address,” Benny Kissinger recounts, “And we thought nothing of it. So one Sunday, I guess it was in the winter of ‘37, Emmy pulled up in front of our house. And that very Sunday we packed our clothes and went to Wheeling with Cousin Emmy. And that’s how we (Benny and his brother) got started in the professional end of the business.”

Kissinger recalls that during the time they were in Wheeling with Emmy, “Uncle Bozo” Carver joined the act for a while. “He did sort of a homespun music—you know, back porch stuff. In Wheeling we were on the air for picture rings, and they sold for a dollar. It was all mail order stuff.” Kissinger states that Emmy paid him and his brother thirty dollars a week plus a dollar for each personal appearance date they played. Approximately a year after the Kissinger brothers joined her act, Emmy left Wheeling and returned to WHAS in Louisville where she and her group stayed for about a year.

In October of 1939 Cousin Emmy took her band, by now called Cousin Emmy and Her Kin Folks, to Atlanta and a job as one of the feature attractions on the Cross Roads Follies, a popular country

music program heard on Atlanta radio stations WSB and WAGA. In addition to the Kissingers, the Kin Folks included a fiddler named Tiny Stewart who would later change his name to Redd, join Pee Wee King's Golden West Cowboys and become famous as the co-composer, with King, of "Tennessee Waltz." At that time Johnny Creasy was the group's business manager and sometime comedian. In addition to appearing on the Follies, which was heard around noon on both WSB and WAGA, Cousin Emmy had a fifteen-minute program of her own at 10:30 on Friday mornings on WSB. After leaving Atlanta, Cousin Emmy and Her Kin Folks did short stints at WHAS in Louisville and at WNOX in Knoxville, Tennessee.

In 1941 Cousin Emmy took her act to KMOX in St. Louis, and it was here that she probably reached the peak of her radio career. Appearing twice daily on the station, Emmy's show was sponsored by a hair dye and a cough remedy. By March of 1942 it was reported that Emmy and her Kin Folks "are also making transcriptions for (a drug company) to be played on commercial programs from coast to coast."

At the time KMOX was a 50,000 watt station with an alleged two-and-a-half million steady listeners. It is not surprising, then, that the flamboyant Cousin Emmy soon came to the attention of a Time magazine reporter whose amazement and incredulity at her carryings on over the air are evident in every sentence of an article appearing in the December 6, 1943, issue of that periodical. The 5:25 a.m. program was described as consisting of square-dance music, a female duo, a comedy rube act, a western instrumental trio, and Cousin Emmy who described her own part of the show as follows: "First I hits it up on my banjo, and I wow 'em. Then I do a number with the guitar and play the French harp and sing, all at the same time. Then somebody hollers, 'Let's see her yodel,' and I obliges. And then somebody hollers, 'Let's see her dance,' and I obliges. After that we come to the sweetest part of our program —hymns."

Cousin Emmy's radio programs, described by station engineers as "hopped up," were the kind that reputedly rattled studio windows and crackled the airwaves from "Canada to Guadalcanal."

One of those who heard Cousin Emmy's early morning program on KMOX was Professor R.M. Schmitz of the English department at Washington University in St. Louis. Although the professor assumed a somewhat condescending attitude toward what he called Emmy's "wailing and stomping," her "pious and profane hillbillery," and the "distinctly professional carnival air about her and all her works," he exhibited a keen interest in the folk songs that constituted a large portion of her repertoire. "I discovered (in Emmy's music) an almost forgotten —at least pretty well neglected —past full of the simpler, quieter ballads from her youth in the cave country of Kentucky—" he wrote. Schmitz persuaded Emmy to make some private recordings for him of some of her folk songs and invited her to perform with him at the St. Louis Art Museum to illustrate a lecture on "The Ballad" that he gave there in February of 1944.

"I don't know much about art, but it's mighty educational, I reckon," remarked the ingenuous Cousin Emmy, all the while, as was her custom, taking everything in stride. A newspaper reporter predicted that "the strains of some of Cousin Emmy's arias (were) going to sound right peculiar in the stately galleries where formal paintings by the old masters are exhibited," but supposed it would be all right since it was "all in the interest of culture."

In 1944 the approximately 40-year-old Emmy was described by one of her acquaintances as "an earnest, soft-spoken person with a very white face, dimples and teeth that flash in a slightly oversized mouth when she talks." With her abundance of "platinum-colored-hair" held in place by a row of gaudy ribbons, Emmy exuded an aura of "immense enthusiasm, and a masterly capacity for mugging." Her usual costume at this time consisted of "an ill-

fitting gingham dress, thick, white, cotton stockings that wrinkle at the knees, and high, black, pointed-toe shoes.”

It was in 1943 or 1944 that Mac Acheson, an Atlanta singer and steel guitar player, went to St. Louis to take a job in Cousin Emmy’s band. “We stayed in St. Louis no time really (after he went to work with Emmy),” Acheson recalls. “And then we went to Louisville, Kentucky, and worked on WAVE.” According to Acheson, another singer named Bill Drake and a sister team, Jean and Ruth DeVore were with Emmy at WAVE. “We played (personal appearances) all around Louisville and all around Kentucky and Indiana,” Acheson relates. “When she’d do a show she’d pack the house twice every night, practically, at those little school houses. Ah, she was a showman that wouldn’t wait! She played banjo and sang ‘Ruby’ and all those songs like that, then she’d play fiddle—played good fiddle. She’d play old hoedowns and stuff like that and dance around on the stage. She was a real character.”

Cousin Emmy, in the fall of 1945, paid a return visit to Atlanta where, for several months, she was featured regularly on the WSB Barn Dance. The songs that Cousin Emmy sang and played on the Barn Dance were typical of her repertoire and included “John Henry,” “Rabbit Soup,” “Ain’t It Hard To Love,” “Ground Hog,” “Foggy Mountain Top,” “Milk Cow Blues,” “Ruby,” “Free Little Bird,” “Lonesome Road Blues,” and “I Wish I Was Single Again.”

After her stint in Atlanta Cousin Emmy returned to KMOX where she worked for another season. Sometime later she moved to the West Coast where, in 1961, she was “discovered” by the New Lost City Ramblers, a group then consisting of Mike Seeger, John Cohen, and Tom Paley. At the time, Emmy was performing at Disneyland where she was one of several West Coast country music acts presenting a program for the amusement park’s Country and Western Night attraction. John Cohen described Cousin Emmy’s appearance that evening. She “was dressed in a white sequined

dress, with a necklace that sparkled to the back row, high heels, and blonde hair piled on in the latest of fashion. Her delivery was like Sophie Tucker from the country, and she was introduced as the ‘first hillbilly star to own a Cadillac.’”

Under the guidance of the New Lost City Ramblers, Cousin Emmy enjoyed something of a comeback. In 1965 she “stopped the show” at the Newport Folk Festival and appeared with folk singer Pete Seeger on a television program called “Rainbow Quest.” In 1966 she toured Europe with the New Lost City Ramblers and the Stanley Brothers. Her post-1960 itinerary also included concerts at places like the Ash Grove in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C.’s “A Festival of American Folklife (1971),” the University of Utah at Salt Lake City (1973), and school auditoriums in the Berkeley and Palo Alto, California, areas.

Although Cousin Emmy made her name primarily through radio appearances, she did achieve some measure of success with records and movies. In 1947 she recorded for Decca an album of 78s under the direction of folklorist Alan Lomax. This album, which was called *Kentucky Mountain Ballads*, included “Come All You Virginia Gals,” “Pretty Little Miss Out In The Garden,” “I Wish I Was In Bowling Green,” “Johnny Booker,” “I Wish I Was A Single Girl Again,” “Lonesome Road Blues,” “Free Little Bird,” and “Lost John.” Her biggest hit, however, was “Ruby,” a Decca 78 rpm single (backed by “The Broken Hearted One You Left Alone”) recorded at about the same time. “The most money I made was on Ruby,” she told her audience at the Ash Grove in 1967. Her Decca album was later reissued as two 45 rpm extended play discs bearing the English Brunswick label and carrying the titles “Kentucky Mountain Ballads, Volume 1 and Volume 2.”

Through the efforts of John Cohen, Mike Seeger, Peter Bartok, and Tracy Schwarz, Folkways Records, in 1968, released a long-play album by Cousin Emmy called *The New Lost City Ramblers With*

Cousin Emmy. The album contained 16 songs and tunes including “Old Tim Brooks,” Emmy’s version of the horse race saga that is better known as “Molly and Tenbrooks,” “Ruby,” “Bowling Green,” and “Lost John.” A selection by Cousin Emmy, “Come All You Virginia Gals,” is included on the recent Time-Life album titled “The Women.”

Among Cousin Emmy’s movie credits are roles in *Swing in the Saddle* (Columbia Pictures, 1944) and *The Second Greatest Sex* (Universal Pictures, 1955). Emmy once told an audience that she had also appeared with Jimmy Wakely in a movie called *Under Western Sky*.

Some of Cousin Emmy’s contemporaries felt that she was a religious person. In the early 1940s it was reported that she was a “teetotaling, non-smoking, unprofane Baptist who forsakes parties ... gives the church 10% of her income and attends services regularly.” Professor Wiggins recalled her commending one of her guitar players to a late 1930s radio audience because “he doesn’t drink. We go around and we have the best time and we stay sober,” she added. According to Wiggins, Emmy, in the late thirties, would occasionally give an on-the-air religious testimonial. She once said, “Religion is the sweetest thing there is, and I know because I happen to have it. Harpo Kidwell said that Cousin Emmy once told him that the reason she had such large audiences at the personal appearances was because “I give 10 per cent to the Lord.”

Cousin Emmy died on April 11, 1980, in Sherman Oaks, California. If ever a monument is erected in her honor, a suitable inscription would be the advice (as recorded by John Cohen) that she gave to an audience at the Ash Grove in 1967: “Don’t give up. If you set out to do something, do it or bust, honey. Just keep on and you’ll get it.”

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The Amburgey Sisters: Pioneer All-Female String Band

By Wayne Daniel

In the 1950s Martha Carson was the reigning queen of country gospel music. Her hit recording of her own composition, “Satisfied,” was responsible for her becoming a member of the Grand Ole Opry and a frequent guest on the era’s most popular network television programs. At about the same time Minnie Woodruffs was the female voice heard on some of Bill Carlisle’s biggest hits such as “Too Old To Cut The Mustard,” “No Help Wanted,” and “Is Zat You Myrtle?”. Meanwhile, Jean Chapel, sometimes known as Mattie O’Neil, was about to become a successful Nashville composer who would pen songs for the likes of Eddy Arnold, Jerry Wallace, Connie Francis, and Dean Martin.

What do these three women have in common? For one thing they are sisters, and for another, they got their start in the entertainment business as an all-female string band. They were contemporaries of Lily May Ledford and the Coon Creek Girls, another all-female string band widely acclaimed for their pioneering efforts in that particular subcategory of country music. In fact, Martha, Minnie, and Mattie were at one time themselves members of the Coon Creek Girls band. Although the contributions of Martha, Minnie, and Mattie to the all-female band phenomenon have been overshadowed by the prodigious publicity accorded the Coon Creek Girls, the band composed of the three Amburgey sisters was performing in public prior to the Coon Creek Girls’ debut which took place on the Renfro Valley Barn Dance over Cincinnati’s WLW on October 9, 1937. Furthermore, to Martha, Minnie, and Mattie belongs the distinction of being the first all-sister string band to perform widely on stage, radio, and records.

The parents of the Amburgey sisters were Robert Amburgey and his wife Gertrude Quillen Amburgey who were of hardy mountaineer stock. They made their home in the coal mining region of Letcher County in eastern Kentucky, near the Virginia line. Their house was the next to last one up the holler out from Neon, Ky., which appears on today's Kentucky maps as Fleming-Neon. Robert was a carpenter and a brattice man, builder of coalmine support structures. Gertrude kept house, looked after the cows and chickens that were the source of much of what the family had to eat, and tended to her children, of whom there would eventually be six; three girls and three boys.

The Amburgeys lived less than 50 miles, as the crow flies, from Poor Valley, Va., home of the legendary Carter Family. Like the Carters, the Amburgeys and the Quillens were musically talented. The Amburgeys were noted for their ability to play string instruments, and the banjo was the one that Robert Amburgey chose to concentrate on. The Quillens, on the other hand, were singers. They sang the Stamps-Baxter-type gospel material and traveled over a wide circuit of eastern Kentucky visiting churches where they performed at all-day singings and shaped-note singing conventions. Gertrude Amburgey, who did not bestow full approval on her husband's banjo picking, persuaded him to join herself, her father, and her brother in forming the Quillen Quartet which was well received by congregations who loved the gospel harmony they performed.

Into this rich heritage of string instrument and gospel music the three Amburgey sisters, Bertha (Minnie), Irene (Martha), and Opal (Mattie Jean), in that order, were born. "We just had a love for the string instruments," Martha says. At an early age, Minnie adds, "we were trying to sing, too. We were trying to get into the act." She says that seeing and hearing their parents singing before

church audiences impressed them as very glamorous. “And we thought we wanted to do that, too,” she said.

In addition to the music their family made, the girls listened to such programs on the radio as the Grand Ole Opry. As they grew older, they began to want their own instruments to play. By this time the Depression was in full sway across the country, and the Amburgey household was not spared. “Back then, people didn’t have money,” Minnie says. “So we started figuring out how we could get us a guitar,” Martha adds. “I had a little pet calf that I traded for a little used guitar from one of our school friends. It broke my heart to get rid of her. I learned to play on this little old guitar. It had Hawaiian wigglers painted all over it and a rope for a strap. The strings were setup so high I got risings on my fingers.” Martha essentially taught herself to play the guitar. “I took it to an uncle who lived up at the head of the holler who played guitar, and he tuned it for me, and he showed me two or three chords, and from there,” she said, she was on her own.

Mattie was the second of the sisters to take up an instrument, and at first she played the mandolin. “She tuned that mandolin to make it sound like a banjo,” Minnie says, “and with your eyes closed you would have thought that was what it was.” A man who lived in the neighborhood had a real banjo for sale, but the lack of money presented somewhat of a problem to the aspiring young musician. When it came to acquiring the means for making music, however, the Amburgeys always proved to be resourceful. The family was confident that a way would be found for Mattie to have the banjo. No doubt at considerable sacrifice, Robert Amburgey sold some of his carpentry tools to get the money for the instrument. “He loved his tools,” Minnie says, “but he sold enough to get Mattie a five-string banjo.” Mattie learned to play the instrument by watching her father play. “She watched our daddy play,” Martha explained, “and then she would look in the mirror till she got her fingers to doing like his did.”

The addition of one more instrument would turn the Amburgey sisters into a full-fledged band, and close at hand to accept the job was the oldest, Minnie. When it came her turn to get an instrument, she set her sights on a fiddle that she saw in a pawn shop three miles away in Neon. “It had dust on it an inch thick,” Minnie says. The price tag announced that the fiddle could be bought for eight dollars. “So we asked our mother if we could have that fiddle,” Minnie recalled, “and she said, ‘I don’t have any money, but go down there and ask him if he’ll take eight big hens for it.’” The deal was made, Mrs. Amburgey killed and dressed the hens, and Minnie and Martha toted them the three miles into town and brought home the coveted fiddle. Like Martha with the guitar and Mattie with the banjo, Minnie taught herself to play the fiddle. She had heard the instrument on the radio and had seen it played on stage by Grand Ole Opry artists who made personal appearances in the area. “Big Howdy [Forrester, Grand Ole Opry fiddler] was my favorite,” Minnie said. A month after she got her fiddle Minnie won a fiddler’s contest at Whitesburg, Ky., where she played “Cacklin’ Hen.” The prize was 15 dollars.

Mrs. Amburgey used the money Minnie won at the fiddlers’ contest to buy enough material to make all three girls matching dresses. The all-female string band was now complete. “When we got all our instruments,” Minnie said, “we started practicing. That old house we lived in had a hang-down light—just a bulb—in the center of the room. We played like that was a microphone, and we sat there and sang our hearts out, playing and singing.” They decided to call themselves the Sunshine Sisters, and even made up a theme song that they would later use on a real radio station. “We wrote our theme song underneath that light bulb,” Martha said in preface to her recitation of the words:

We are the Sunshine Sisters
Dropped in to say “Hello.”

We hope you'll like our program
Of songs of long ago.
If you like our program
Send in your requests.
We are the Sunshine Sisters
We'll try to do our best.

By the middle of 1936 the Amburgey sisters had a polished act, their reputation was spreading throughout the county, and they were in demand as entertainers. "Anywhere they'd open the door and want us to play we'd go," Martha said. "We played for all the miners' doings and churches and for politicians." She especially remembered one political campaign they were involved in. "I'll never forget that," she says. "About 14 hours a day we rode in this van which had a little P.A. system set up in it, and we sat and we sang into that microphone. My fingers were running blood [from playing the guitar]. We got 15 dollars a week."

The Amburgey sisters trio featured Mattie as lead singer, with Martha singing baritone and Minnie singing tenor. "We were doing a lot of the Delmore Brothers songs that we had learned and a lot of the bluegrass-type things," Martha says. "We also had a hymn program. We did just a variety of the old mountain songs and the sacred songs." Minnie interspersed the vocal numbers with fiddle breakdowns, playing such tunes as "Fire On The Mountain," "Cindy," "Boil Them Cabbage Down," and "Black Mountain Rag."

In 1938 the Amburgey sisters made their first appearance on radio when they became members of Asa Martin's troupe of radio entertainers in Lexington. Martin was one of Kentucky's best-known hillbilly performers from the 1920s until his death in the 1970s. He had a long association with a Kentucky fiddler named Doc Roberts. Martha explained how they got the job with Martin. "This guy heard about us, and he came to tell us about an amateur

contest they were having in Lexington at WLAP radio station—looking for girl singers,” she recalled. “So Poppie hocked a bunch of his tools to get the gas money to take us, and Mommie went with us. We won that contest, and the man there [Asa Martin] wanted us to stay and take the job as an all-girl band there at WLAP in Lexington.” They took the job, but “of course we didn’t get paid for it,” she said.

“He told us he couldn’t pay us anything, but he would pay our rent and pay for our food,” Minnie adds. “We didn’t get any money at all while we were there.” They stayed in Lexington about a year, and according to Martha, they “got so homesick we’d cry. The old pigeons would get out on the windowsills [where the girls were living] and make their mournful sounds, and we were so homesick we were about to die. But we didn’t want to go back and let all the neighbors say we were failures. We were determined to stick it out.” She said that they “were on the radio every day, and we were going out and doing shows in the little towns around Lexington.”

The Amburgeys were working as a trio, using their real first names, but billing themselves as the Sunshine Sisters. At the time a dynamic female country singer, multi-instrumentalist, and comedienne named Cousin Emmy was working at WHAS in Louisville, 75 miles west of Lexington. “She came by Lexington,” Martha said, “and offered us a job to come and work for her.” Unfortunately, the job with Cousin Emmy did not work out as the Amburgey sisters had expected. They were seldom allowed to appear on the radio with her, and they did not work show dates with her. “She hired us just to bury our talent, because we were competition to her,” Martha declared. After only about three months with Cousin Emmy, Bertha, Irene, and Opal returned to their home in Letcher County, but they would soon leave again.

It was now 1939, and the Amburgey sisters were more widely known as a result of their radio exposure. Again, a local

acquaintance paid them a visit to tell them about another amateur contest, this one at WHIS in Bluefield, W. Va., some 90 miles east of the Amburgey home. “It was a Ford dealer’s amateur hour,” Martha recalled. “Our daddy had this old car that the muffler was busted in it, and it roared like a P-38. So he hocked a bunch of tools again to get gas to take us to Bluefield. We didn’t have enough money to stop and go in a restaurant to get anything to eat, so [our daddy stopped at] a store and said, ‘Children, we’ll have peanut butter sandwiches.’ So we had peanut butter sandwiches, riding along, that old muffler a-roaring, and poor little Opal ate too much peanut butter, and she got sick. We finally got to Bluefield [and] got us a hotel room and cleaned up. We had to walk up these stairs to the radio station, and Opal was about to vomit. She was so sick—she was green. ‘I can’t sing,’ she said. She was our lead singer. We told her, ‘You’ve got to.’ We didn’t think she was going to make it, but she performed, and we won [the contest] and got our own show on WHIS, sponsored by the Chicago House Furniture Company of Chicago, 111.” At last the Amburgey sisters were able to use the theme song they had composed under the light bulb some two years earlier.

During their stay at Bluefield, the Amburgey sisters, now becoming well-known as the Sunshine Sisters, worked with such other WHIS country artists as Joe Woods and the Pioneer Boys, the Buskirk Family, and Lee and Juanita Moore.

It was not long until the Sunshine Sisters were caught in the far-flung net of John Lair, who constantly trolled the airwaves listening for talent for his own radio programs. As Martha recalled, “John Lair tracked us down and called us to come to Renfro Valley” to join Lily May Ledford as replacements for two of the Coon Creek Girls who had left the band.

Lair, who got his start in radio with the National Barn Dance at WLS in Chicago, had opened a music complex in his native

community of Renfro Valley, Ky., in 1939. His radio programs, which included the Saturday night Renfro Valley Barn Dance and other shows heard at various times of the day and on various days of the week, were affiliated, at one time or another, with both the NBC and CBS radio networks. In addition, Lair, at times, kept two tent shows on the road as well as booking his artists into school houses, theaters, and other venues in the midwest and southeast. “He booked us out at all the fairs and other places as the Coon Creek Girls,” Martha said. Among the other acts whose tenure at Renfro Valley overlapped that of the Amburgey sisters were Ernie Lee (later emcee of WLW’s Midwestern Hayride), fiddler Guy Blakeman, Homer and Jethro, fiddler Slim Miller, Shorty Hobbs and Little Eller, and the Pine Ridge Boys (Marvin Taylor and Doug Spivey).

The Amburgey sisters’ next move was to Atlanta. In December 1939, the Atlanta Journal, owner of radio station WSB, was bought by the Cox enterprises of Ohio. The new owners immediately set about to revamp WSB’s hillbilly programming. A WSB executive, J. Leonard Reinsch, hired John Lair, with whom he had been associated at Chicago’s WLS, as a consultant to do the job. Consequently, WSB’s new country music format greatly resembled what had been coming out over the air from Renfro Valley for the past year—early morning shows, noontime shows, and a Saturday night show called the WSB Barn Dance. Lair took several of his Renfro Valley acts, including the Amburgey sisters, with him to Atlanta. It was Lair who decided that in their new location they would be called Minnie, Mattie, and Martha, the Hoot Owl Hollow Girls. He failed to tell them who would have which new name. “He didn’t tell us he was changing our names,” Martha said. “We found out after we got into Atlanta and picked up the Atlanta Journal [which carried a picture of the trio], and here we are Minnie, Mattie, and Martha, the Hoot Owl Hollow

Girls. We got in our room and said, ‘Which one of us is going to be which?’ We decided that I would be Martha, Bertha would be Minnie, and Opal would be Mattie.”

Lair persuaded the station to hire Renfro Valley resident Ricca Hughes to go to Atlanta to play the part of Aunt Hattie, the “mother” of the Hoot Owl Hollow Girls, and to serve as a comedienne on the WSB Barn Dance. Others with whom the Amburgey sisters worked during the approximately ten years that at least one of them was at WSB included comedian and western swing band leader Hank Penny, the Swanee River Boys quartet, the Sunshine Boys, another quartet specializing in gospel songs, vocalist Pete Cassell, Dwight Butcher, fiddler Boudleaux Bryant who, years later with his wife, wrote the bluegrass classic “Rocky Top,” and their former acquaintance Cousin Emmy.

The Hoot Owl Hollow Girls were well received by WSB listeners and by audiences who came to see them when they made personal appearances with other Barn Dance acts in the small towns of Georgia, South Carolina, and Alabama. Like many female hillbilly artists of the day, they dressed in full-skirted gingham dresses and high-top shoes. The trio’s repertoire was quite varied and included folk songs like “Old Dan Tucker,” shout tunes such as “Ground Hog,” spirituals like “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” and gospel songs such as “Turn Your Radio On.” The sisters’ versatility, both vocally and instrumentally, allowed them to assume other roles on the air and on stage. Minnie played solo fiddle tunes and teamed up with Mattie and the two other fiddlers in the Barn Dance cast, Boudleaux Bryant and Chick Stripling, for harmony fiddling featuring two, and sometimes three, fiddles. Mattie sang such solos as “Night Train to Memphis,” “I Wonder Why You Said Goodbye,” and the Jimmie Rodgers standards “Peach Pickin’ Time In Georgia,” “Muleskinner Blues,” and other “Blue Yodels.” Her yodeling went over especially well with

listeners. She later became a featured fiddler on the Barn Dance and other programs on which she served up spirited renditions of such tunes as “Orange Blossom Special,” “Patty On The Turnpike,” and “Back Up And Push.”

Shortly after going on the air in Atlanta, Martha began singing with her husband James Roberts, and they became arguably the most popular country music act on the WSB Barn Dance. Martha had met and married James, an accomplished mandolin player and son of fiddler Doc Roberts, when she and her sisters were working in Lexington with Asa Martin. James and Martha, who were dubbed the Barn Dance Sweethearts, chose Carson as their professional surname. They specialized in gospel songs like “He Will Set Your Fields On Fire,” “Keep On The Sunny Side,” and “I’ll Fly Away,” such tear-jerkers as “Lonely Mound Of Clay,” “Precious Jewel,” and “Will The Circle Be Unbroken;” and sentimental love songs like “Maple On The Hill,” and “When It’s Time For The Whippoorwills To Sing.”

In 1941 the Hoot Owl Hollow Girls ceased to be an all-sister act when matrimony claimed Minnie for its own. After going to Atlanta she had met Charles “Ducky” Woodruff who, along with his brother Wilbur (Curly), was working as the Woodruff Brothers on Atlanta’s WAGA on a show headed by Pop Eckler. Shortly after their marriage, Minnie and Ducky moved to Cincinnati where Ducky took a job in industry and Minnie worked intermittently in the music business. For about a year she performed on a Saturday night barn dance broadcast from Cincinnati’s WKRC and worked show dates with the other members of the cast that included Bradley Kincaid, Little Joe Isbell, Sleepy Marlin, Cowboy Copas, Fiddlin’ Red Herron, and the Davis Sisters, one of whom became known to country music fans as Skeeter Davis. From time to time, Minnie also made guest appearances on the Renfro Valley Barn Dance and some of John Lair’s outside bookings. During the height of

Martha's solo career Minnie and Ducky moved to Nashville and worked with her for a while. "We sang duets, and Charlie [Ducky] was master of ceremonies on her show," Minnie said. "In 1954, Charlie and I decided that we were away from our [three] children too much, so we retired from show business. We both took jobs with the Government—Charlie with the Department of Insurance and myself with the Department of Revenue. Due to disability, Charlie had to resign in December of 1981. Following his death in March, 1982, I resigned after 25 years of service." In 1990, Minnie married Bob Garcia, and they continue to make their home in the Nashville area.

According to the *Atlanta Journal*, which regularly ran a preview of the WSB Barn Dance in its Saturday edition, other female musicians who, at one time or another, worked as part of the Hoot Owl Hollow Girls trio after Minnie, and later Mattie, left WSB, were Cassie Nell Coleman, Kitty Wells (not the well-known singer with the same name), Viola Turner, and Jane Logan, stage name of Lily Carrier. Martha recalled that Mildred Frederick also was a member of the group for a short time.

By 1943 the Hoot Owl Hollow Girls were no more. The second of the Amburgey sisters to leave the act was Mattie. She first went to Cincinnati and worked at WKRC with Minnie for a while. She returned to Atlanta and again joined the WSB Barn Dance cast. While in Atlanta the second time she met and married Salty Holmes, former member of the Prairie Ramblers, a group that was a star attraction on the WLS National Barn Dance for many years. Mattie and Salty worked the Southeastern nightclub circuit, did some radio and television work, and recorded together for the King, London, and MGM labels. They had a daughter and later divorced. Mattie settled in Nashville, changed her name to Jean Chapel, and embarked on a new career as a songwriter. Among her hits were "Going Through The Motions (Of Living)," recorded by

Sonny James; “Lonely Again,” a chart record for Eddy Arnold; “Triangle,” a hit for Carl Smith; and “Lay Some Happiness On Me,” recorded by Dean Martin. Mattie remarried, and in 1990, she and her husband moved to Florida where they made their home near Mattie’s daughter.

After the departure of Minnie and Mattie, Martha and James remained at WSB. They enjoyed increasing popularity as a duet, a fact that led to recording contracts with the White Church and the Capitol labels for which they recorded several of their most popular songs. Early in 1950, James and Martha left Atlanta to take a job on the Mid-Day Merry-Go-Round on WNOX in Knoxville where their fellow artists included Bill Carlisle. Shortly after they left Atlanta, however, the marriage as well as the duet fell apart, and that is when Martha embarked on her highly successful solo career in gospel music. She later married country music promoter Xavier Cosse, and they had two children, both boys. After Mr. Cosse’s death in 1990, Martha continued to make her home in the Nashville area which also served as the base for the continuation of her career which included concerts and visits to the recording studio. “I love the road,” Martha said. “I love to get out there with the people.”

The Amburgey sisters did not record extensively together. For the King label, as Mattie, Martha, and Minnie, they recorded “Tennessee Memories,” a song written by Martha, and “You Can’t Live With ‘Em (And You Can’t Live Without ‘Em),” which was composed by Minnie. The sisters’ usual instruments and Salty Holmes’ string bass are heard on this record. Using the name Amber Sisters, Minnie, Mattie, and Martha recorded eight sides for Capitol: “Lonesome Road Blues “/”When I Want Lovin’, Baby, I Want You,” “I’ve Waited Too Long”/ “One More Time,” “Cherokee Eyes”/ “Useless,” and “Look What Followed Me Home”/”So Tired Of Your Runnin’ ‘Round.”

The story of the Amburgey sisters is the stuff of which Horatio Alger stories are made. It is the story of how three talented youngsters overcame the obstacle of meager financial resources in search of a dream. It is the story of how three professional women survived and came out winners in what then was essentially a man's world. "If you want to do something bad enough, you can do it," Martha declared. "We're living proof."

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**Wilma Lee Cooper,
America's Most Authentic Mountain Singer**

For years the role of women in country music has been a topic of discussion by critics and historians of that field of popular entertainment. From one extreme come statements such as that of author Dorothy Horstman who said that "Country music until the very recent past was an almost completely male-dominated art form. As men traditionally ruled southern rural society, so they monopolized its popular music, relegating women to the status of minor performers or worshipful fans." On the other hand, we find writers who share the opinion of Robert Coltman who stated that the contributions of women to the development of country music "were remarkable in many ways, exerting an effect out of proportion to their numbers. It can be argued," he continued, "that women's presence helped change the nature of country music by 1940 in directions that, if the field had been left to men, might never have been taken."

With respect to bluegrass music, the statement made in 1975 by Steven D. Price in his book, *Old As the Hills*, appears to have gone unchallenged. He said that "Bluegrass is almost an exclusively male province, most likely because the early bands... had no women members, and people just assumed that Bluegrass... was a fraternity." Price goes on to say that "musicians have been

associated with loose living, so playing in a band was considered too damaging to a woman's reputation."

If bluegrass and country music have indeed been dominated by males, the domination has not been complete, and no performer has been more successful in overcoming the sex barrier (whether real or imagined) than Wilma Lee Cooper who made her mark in both musical categories.

Born in Valley Head, a hamlet located at the edge of the Monongahela National Forest in the rugged mountain region of eastern West Virginia, Wilma Lee Leary, at the age of five, embarked on a musical career that has been conspicuous by its adherence to the traditions from which it sprang. "I sing just like I did back when I was growing up there in those mountains of West Virginia," vowed Wilma Lee during an interview. "I've never changed. I can't change. I couldn't sing any other way."

The daughter of musically talented parents, Wilma Lee, along with her two sisters, Jerry and Peggy, cut their musical teeth on gospel harmonies. "I got my start in gospel music with my family," she explained when introducing the sacred numbers that audiences have come to expect at her performances. "Mother and Daddy would sing nothing but gospel — the old four-part harmony, shaped note style — and my daddy had a fine bass voice." Among the many religious songs composed in the Leary family repertoire were church hymns like "Amazing Grace," and gospel standards such as "Farther Along," "He Will Set Your Fields on Fire," and "Jesus, Hold My Hand."

After several years of performing to local audiences in churches and school auditoriums, the Leary Family, in 1938, achieved national recognition when they were selected, through regional and state talent contest eliminations, to represent the state of West Virginia at the Nation I Folk Festival in Washington, B.C. As a result of this exposure, Mr. Leary obtained a job for the

family at radio station WSVB in Harrisonburg, Virginia, where, according to Wilma Lee, they had “the most popular show in that whole area. People loved a family that sang the gospel music,” she said, “and we had the listeners!” In 1941 the Learys increased their following when they moved to WWVA (then a 5,000 watt station) in Wheeling, West Virginia.

While Wilma Lee was growing up and learning the rudiments of show business as vocalist and guitar accompanist with her family, some forty miles, as the crow flies, northeast of Valley Head, at Harmon, West Virginia, another young musician was listening to the Grand Ole Opry every Saturday night and aspiring to play the fiddle like his idol, Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith. Dale Troy “Stoney” Cooper took his first step into professional musicianship at an early age when he accepted a job as fiddle player with a group known as the Green Valley Boys, headed by a chap named Rusty Hiser. It was while Stoney was performing with this band on radio station WMMN in Fairmont, West Virginia, that the Leary Family heard him and decided he was the one they needed to replace Mrs. Leary’s brother, who had given up his job as summertime fiddle player with the family to return to his regular vocation as a school teacher.

Stoney took the job and, although he didn’t know it at the time, his association with the Leary family would be permanent. Stoney and Wilma Lee were married in 1941, and when their daughter, Carol Lee (later the leader of Nashville’s Carol Lee Singers), was born, the couple became temporary show business dropouts while Stoney drove a soft drink delivery truck in an effort to provide a better living for his family.

After six months Wilma Lee and Stoney, who had grown tired of their no doubt relatively prosaic existence as housewife and truck driver, resumed the country music career that they never again would abandoned. This time, the Coopers struck

out on their own, and during the next several years the course they pursued provided a classic example of the routine followed by country music acts of the 1930s and 1940s. They toured the country, performing on some radio station and making personal appearances in an area until the territory had been “worked out” and then moved on to another locality. As Wilma Lee frequently pointed out when discussing her career, “We made our name in the days of the radio;” in the days before the success of an artist was measured almost solely in terms of the number of hit records sold.

The first stop on the Coopers’ musical odyssey was radio station KMMJ, Grand Island, Nebraska, followed by stints of varying durations at WIBC, Indianapolis; WJJD, Chicago; WMMN, Fairmont, West Virginia; KLCN, Blytheville, Arkansas; WWNC, Asheville, North Carolina; WRVA, Richmond, Virginia; WWVA, Wheeling, West Virginia; and finally WSM and the Grand Ole Opry, which they joined on January 12, 1957. Stoney, along with Wilma Lee, was a member of the Grand Ole Opry cast until his death on March 22, 1977. Wilma Lee then continued to be one of the show’s most faithful performers and almost solitary reminder of the kind of music on which the Opry was founded. While at Grand Island, Nebraska, and Indianapolis, the Coopers were joined by the rest of the Learys, so that for a while the entire family was again performing together. Later, when Wilma Lee and Stoney had their own band they often called it the Clinch Mountain Clan in honor of a range of mountains near their ancestral home.

During the ten years (1947-1957) that Wilma Lee and Stoney served their second hitch at Wheeling’s WWVA, they experienced the greatest exposure of their career up to that time. By then the station, which had increased its power to 50,000 watts, blanketed the northeast and much of Canada. Other country music stars and future bluegrass notables who, over the years, shared billing with the Coopers at WWVA, included Pete Cassell, Hawkshaw

Hawkins, Billy Grammar, George Morgan, Toby Stroud with Don Reno and Red Smiley, and Big Slim, the Lone Cowboy. In 1947, the manufacturers of Carter's Little Liver Pills hired Wilma Lee and Stoney to do a series of transcribed shows that were aired over twenty different 50,000 watt radio stations over the country. Recording sessions with Rich-R-Tone (1947), Columbia (each year from 1949 to 1953), and Hickory (1955 and 1956) added to their stature. By the time they joined the Grand Ole Opry they were a well-established country act with a large following.

The question of whether or not Wilma Lee's musical style should be classified as bluegrass has been frequently debated. She, herself, said, "I would said my style is just the old mountain style of singing. I am traditional country. I'm a country singer with the mountain whang to it." In 1950 the Harvard University Library of Music personnel, during a field trip south to collect the Coopers' music, christened them the most authentic mountain singing group in America, and Wilma Lee believes that the description is still applicable to her present style. "Who else," she asked, "is doing my kind of music? I don't know of anyone [who is doing it] professionally.

"When we came into Nashville, they started classifying music — giving it a name of some kind," she continued. "And they would say we were bluegrass, but Stoney would say, 'We're not exactly bluegrass. We're just country.' And they would say, 'Yes, you're bluegrass.' Then you don't know what to call yourself."

According to Wilma Lee, "People put you where they want you," and no less authority than Bill Monroe told her that she fit in the bluegrass category. Wilma Lee emphasized that fans have a say in the matter, and to her their views are important. "I was doing that Gail Davies song, 'Bucket to the South,'" she related. "I thought it was just a good old country sound, but some of my fans called, and wrote me, and said they thought that song just didn't

fit me. They said it was just a little too rocky and rolly for me. So I quit doing it.”

Several factors contributed to Wilma Lee’s acceptance by bluegrass audiences. First, there’s her voice, which has the range, timbre, and punch usually associated with the bluegrass sound. The lively, rollicking nature of her stage performances, coupled with an unmistakable aura of sincerity that can be described best as old-time country soul, appealed to the bluegrass devotee. In addition, the instrumentation of the Cooper band, with its fiddle, Dobro, and Scruggs style banjo, has long been identifiable as that of a bluegrass band. Finally, there’s the matter of repertoire. Many of the songs Wilma Lee recorded, as well as those she sings on stage, were drawn from bluegrass sources or have become bluegrass standards, due, in part perhaps, to her own efforts. On their very first trip into a recording studio, the Coopers carried with them Bill Monroe’s “Wicked Path of Sin.” (One of the earliest recordings, circa 1947, of the bluegrass style that was not by Bill Monroe.) Wilma Lee’s subsequent recordings included such now bluegrass favorites as Cousin Emmy’s “Ruby” (recorded under the title, “Stoney, Are You Mad at Your Gal”), Don Reno’s “I’m Using My Bible for a Road Map,” “Shackles and Chains,” “He Will Set Your Fields on Fire,” “Sunny Side of the Mountain,” and Bill Monroe’s “Uncle Pen.”

In his essay on the Coopers, writer Robert Cogswell stated that they were associated with the Roy Acuff “school” of music and that when they moved to WJJD in Chicago, Wilma Lee was welcomed there as “the she-Roy Acuff.” “Well, we both have strong voices, and we both sing loud,” Wilma Lee comments by way of explanation. “He’s like a mountain singer. He grew up there in those mountains of east Tennessee. So I guess our [similar] backgrounds have a lot to do with it. I was one of Hank Williams’ favorite women singers and Roy Acuff was his favorite

male singer. So, you see, there's the two styles again. Hank said that what he liked about me was that I sang out. I opened my mouth and sang out, he said."

The careers of Wilma Lee Cooper and Roy Acuff have been linked in other ways, too. They first met in 1938 in Harrisonburg, Virginia. "He came there to work a circuit of theaters in the surrounding towns," Wilma Lee recalled, "and he brought his whole group up to station WSVB to be on the Leary Family program and advertise his show dates." In Dorothy Horstman's book, *Sing Your Heart Out, Country Boy*, Acuff related a happy sequel to his early contact with the Learys. While performing in Virginia he heard Wilma Lee sing an old prison ballad called "The Hills of Roane County." He liked the tune and later, when he wrote "The Precious Jewel," his third most popular song (after "Wabash Cannon Ball" and "Great Speckled Bird"), he subconsciously set the words to the melody of the song he heard Wilma Lee sing several years before. It was not until afterwards that he realized the two songs had the same tune. Fortunately, "The Hills of Roane County" was in the public domain, and Acuff was not liable for copyright infringement.

There is considerable overlap between Wilma Lee's recorded output and that of Roy Acuff. At their first recording session, at least five of the Coopers' sixteen cuts were songs also recorded by Acuff: "Little Rosewood Casket," "What Will I Do," "Two Little Orphans," "This World Can't Stand Long," and "What Good Will It Do?" There may have been more, but five unissued masters from the session have been lost, and no one connected with the event seems to remember their titles (Editor's note: According to information uncovered in files four of the five unreleased titles were: "Mathew Twenty Four," "My Dreamboat is Drifting," "Things that Might Have Been" and "Blue Mountain Girl")

Other songs recorded by both Wilma Lee and Acuff include “Willie Roy, the Crippled Boy,” “The Legend of the Dogwood Tree,” “Each Season Changes You,” “I Want to Be Loved,” “Wreck on the Highway,” “Great Speckled Bird,” and “When I Lay My Burden Down.” In 1972 Wilma Lee and Stoney did an album on the Skylite Country label entitled, *A Tribute to Roy Acuff: The Great Speckled Bird*.

The Coopers’ long-time use of the Dobro, too, has been a constant reminder of the similarities of their music to that of Roy Acuff. Stoney was the band’s first Dobro player, introducing the instrument into the band in the early forties. Other Dobro players who served time with the Clinch Mountain Clan include Josh Graves, who was with the band for six years, and Bill Carver, a performer with the group both before and after Graves’ stint. Another Dobroist, Ralph Jones, was with the band for a short time.

Wilma Lee was noted for the clear diction of her vocal delivery. She explained that there are two reasons why she always made it a point to pronounce her words plainly when singing. “When I was a kid growing up, you got your songs off the radio. While someone was singing a song you’d try to write it down. Many times someone would be singing, and you couldn’t tell what they were saying. Just because of that I have always made it a point, when I sing, to try to speak my words as plainly as I can, so folks will know what I am saying.” She noted further that she sings a lot of story songs, and if listeners don’t understand the words to that type of song they miss the story, and as a consequence, they won’t like the song.

Another characteristic of Wilma Lee’s performances was the proficiency of her microphone technique, an accomplishment that enables her to put her songs across effectively even when forced to perform with inferior sound systems. “Back in the old days of show business,” she explained, “we only had one microphone, and

you learned to use that mike in and out. You worked it. As you came to a low note you leaned in a little closer so the note would be stronger, and when you came to a note you were hitting hard, you would lean back a little. The whole band had to learn to work the microphone in and out. When one person finished he would move back and the next person would move in to the mike to pick his part.”

An early ambition of the Coopers was to have their music recorded commercially. Once achieved, however, they found that the life of a recording artist was not without its frustrations. Artists and record producers, for example, don’t always agree on what songs should be recorded. “We were due for a recording session,” Wilma Lee remarked by way of illustration, “and we heard this tune called ‘I Dreamed of a Hillbilly Heaven.’ It had just come out on a little label. This was before Tex Ritter or any of them had it. So Stoney called [their record producer at the time] and said, ‘I sure would like to do this song,’ and the producer’s reply was, ‘Oh, that song’s not going to do anything.’” “Hillbilly Heaven” became one of Tex Ritter’s biggest hits.

The Coopers were sometimes faced with the difficulty of working with a producer who was not what one would call an old-time music enthusiast. Recalling one recording session that took place under such circumstances, Wilma Lee said, “We barely got four sides recorded. They just didn’t understand our kind of music.”

There have been producers, too, Wilma Lee noted, who “wanted me to record material that I don’t sing on stage — would never sing. It really doesn’t help you much [to record songs] if you don’t sing them [on personal appearances],” she lamented.

In addition to Rich-R-Tone, Columbia, Skylite Country, and Hickory, the Coopers’ music can be heard also on singles and/or albums released by Decca, Power Pak/Gusto, Rounder, DJM

(a compilation from their work with Hickory between 1955 and 1964), County (a reissue album released in collaboration with Columbia), and Starday. From the Coopers' recordings have come four top-ten country hits, "Come Walk With Me," "There's a Big Wheel," "Big Midnight Special" (all three recorded for Hickory in 1959), and "Wreck on the Highway" (1961). Other songs that were of particular help to Wilma Lee in retaining her popularity over the years include the Grady and Hazel Cole standard, "Tramp on the Street"; Juanita Moore's "The Legend of the Dogwood Tree"; and "Walking My Lord Up Calvary Hill," written by Ruby Moody.

After Stoney's death, Wilma Lee recorded two albums for Leather Records of Roanoke, Virginia, "A Daisy a Day" and "The White Rose." "Leather lets me select my own material for recording," she happily reports. "For the first album I selected all of the songs but one, and for the second album I chose them all. I pick what suits my voice and style," she added. Said Leather Records president, Mike Haynie, "Artists of Wilma Lee's experience can be trusted to select their own material. She knows what she's most comfortable with."

The Coopers' early recordings have been lauded as "classics" and "masterpieces of old-time mountain music." Some of their later efforts, however, were criticized for the apparent determination of record producers to move their sound "further and further [away] from real country music" through the overly prominent use of electric instruments, drums, and background voices. With the release of her *A Daisy a Day* album, reviewers' plaudits bordered on the ecstatic as they welcomed Wilma Lee back into the camp of true and unadulterated old-time music. "The album," wrote one reviewer, "is a pleasant journey through the hallowed corridors of traditional music." Wilma Lee admitted that "After I lost Stoney I have tended to stay with the authentic music. Instead of hunting new songs I have stayed more with those good old songs."

Besides Josh Graves and Bill Carver, a number of other prominent figures in the old-time country and bluegrass fields have been members of the Clinch Mountain Clan. Among them are fiddle player, Tex Logan; banjoists, Johnny Clark and Vic Jordan; guitarist, George McCormick; and mandolinist James (Carson) Roberts. The first banjo player (other than Wilma Lee) to perform with the Cooper troupe was Chuck Henderson, a North Carolinian who was hired in the early 1950s while the band was based in Wheeling. “Stoney felt we needed a banjo,” Wilma Lee stated. He told writer Douglas B. Green that he had liked the sound Bill Monroe had been getting with the banjo. “It was a snappy, sassy style,” he said. “It had some class.”

Wilma Lee’s later band consisted of three musicians, all of whom came from the state of North Carolina. Gene Wooten played Dobro and sang bass and baritone; Terry Smith played bass and sang tenor; and Marty Lanham played banjo. Tater Tate played fiddle with the Clinch Mountain Clan on Grand Ole Opry appearances and sometimes accompanied the group when they went on the road. “I don’t hire musicians who drink or are on dope,” said Wilma Lee. “When you see my band,” she told a bluegrass festival audience, “you’ll know I have the kind of people I’d be happy for you to meet wherever we might happen to be.”

Wilma Lee, herself, played a strong rhythm guitar. Having long since laid aside the mail order instrument on which she learned, she played a D-45 Martin that was bought second hand. On occasion Wilma Lee played banjo on some of her songs, using what she called the “old flog style” in which she picked out the melody with her index finger.

Following Stoney’s untimely death, Wilma Lee was forced to make a choice between giving up her career or carrying on without her husband and professional partner of many years. She, of course, opted in favor of the later alternative.

Stoney, before his death, had been the person out front and the primary decision maker for the team, but then the full burden of maintaining a successful act fell on Wilma Lee. “It’s up to me now,” she mused. “I’m sure I don’t do it like Stoney would do it if he were living, but he’s not here, so I’ve got to do the best I can.’

“Stoney had a great foresight,” she continued. “It’s what they call ESP now. He could foresee things ahead down the road before they happened. He could see where the industry was going—how it was pointed. I remember back in the Wheeling days —around 1950 —we were working high school auditoriums and the parks. One day he said to me, ‘I think we ought to try to work a drive-in theater. I see drive-in theaters being a big business for shows.’ So he booked one, and my goodness!” she exclaims, “we had every speaker filled up and no place to put the rest of the folks who wanted to get in. After that, we started working the drive-in theaters in the summer. Then other acts picked up on the idea.”

Bill Carver, former Dobro player with the Clinch Mountain Clan, for one, did not fear that Wilma Lee could not hold her own as the brains, as well as the talent, of her outfit. According to him, she was never really very far removed from the decision processes, even while Stoney was alive, especially during the later years. “She can carry the show,” he declared. “She has a college education (a B.A. degree in banking from Davis and Elkins College of Elkins, West Virginia), and she’s a good manager.”

Carver recalled that in the old days Wilma Lee, when necessary, could even drive the band’s bus for hours without any apparent loss of vigor and exuberance. This vigor and exuberance that have long been the hallmarks of Wilma Lee Cooper, showed no signs of abating. “I figure you’ve got to stay active,” she philosophized. “It’s good for you. You just can’t sit down and not do anything. That will make an old person out of you. You have to stay busy.”

In addition to all of the other details of a show business career, Wilma Lee, since Stoney's death, assumed the task of doing her own booking. She made about a hundred personal appearances a year (not including the Grand Ole Opry and television specials) as compared to about twenty a year immediately prior to Stoney's death. Because of declining health during the last few years of his life, Stoney did not feel up to the demands of so full a calendar of show dates. "But after I've lost Stoney," Wilma Lee observed, "I've worked more and more every year, and 1981 has been my biggest year."

As Bill Carver said, "She's a great trouper. She loves the road; she loves the fans; she loves the music. That's her life. She couldn't function without show business, and she can keep going as long as she wants to."

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Stoney Cooper died on March 22, 1977.

Wilma Lee Cooper died on September 13, 2011 at the age of 90.

Carol Lee Cooper retired from the Grand Ole Opry on March 24, 2012.

The Saga of the Maddox Brothers and Rose: A Country Music Success Story

By Wayne Daniel

No story from the annals of country music is more remarkable than that of the Maddox Brothers and Rose. Their story could have been the model for Horatio Alger's first rags-to-riches novel. Theirs is a tale of how, within a decade, a family with grit and gumption exchanged faded overalls and patches for one of the most expensive wardrobes in show business. Theirs is the story of progressing from the perils of traveling in railroad boxcars to the luxury of riding in Cadillacs; from making music for fruit tramps in California to entertaining audiences at the Grand Ole Opry and the Louisiana Hayride. The story of the Maddox Brothers and Rose reminds us that truth is indeed stranger than fiction.

The Maddox family were heirs to that ancient American impulse to move westward. "Mama had always wanted to go to California," recalled Rose, youngest of two girls and next to youngest of all the seven Maddox children. The Maddox family had long since come to accept the fact that what their mother wanted she usually got. Thus it was that in 1933 Lulla Maddox, of Boaz, Alabama, and her husband, Charlie, renounced a life of sharecropping, sold their meager earthly possessions and with their five youngest children, ranging in age from seven to sixteen, set out on foot for what Lulla Maddox pictured in her mind to be a land flowing with milk and honey where gold could be picked from the trees like leaves.

"We got thirty dollars for all of our belongings, a milk cow, two mules and a wagon," said Fred, who would become a driving

force behind the future country music act. “We walked to Gadsden [about fifteen miles south of Boaz] and then walked and hitchhiked to Meridian, Mississippi.” One night, somewhere along the way, the Maddoxes accepted a ride on the back of a truck with what they thought was a cow. When daylight came they discovered that the bovine passenger was really a buffalo. “At night we slept in the pine thickets,” Fred related. “I bummed our way from Alabama. I’d go to restaurants and stores and houses to get our food. At one farm house they gave us sorghum and biscuits.”

It was near Meridian, Mississippi, that the Maddox family made the acquaintance of a traveling couple who tutored them in the illegal art of hitching rides in empty railroad box-cars. They learned their lesson well and during the remainder of their trek to California, the Maddoxes traveled with relative speed and security over the country’s west-bound railroad tracks. Train crews, moved to sympathy by the spectacle of this migrating family and turning the other way instead of turning the family in to the railroad police, assured the Maddoxes of a safe trip.

When at last they reached California, the Maddoxes found that the gold that had lured Lulla Maddox to the West Coast was to be found only in the sunsets over the Pacific Ocean. Instead of a land flowing with milk and honey, they found that California was a land of fruits and vegetables, all of which had to be plucked from a reluctant soil or pulled from hostile plants in the heat of summer or the chill of spring and autumn. The Maddoxes became migrant workers or “fruit tramps” as they were called, the type of workers made famous by John Steinbeck’s novel, *The Grapes Of Wrath*. Driving a newly acquired 1931 Ford and sleeping in a tent at night, the Maddoxes followed the crops up and down the fertile valleys of California and as far north as Oregon and Washington.

To take their minds off callouses and aching muscles the Maddox children turned to music, a talent that had inhabited

Maddox genes for generations. Grandpa Maddox, according to Johnny Whiteside who is wrote a biography of Rose Maddox, was an itinerant fiddle player and preacher who chose as his venues the rural communities and country towns of his native South. His son, Charlie Maddox, in turn, became an accomplished banjo player and a younger son, Foncy, reputedly was adept on several instruments. It was Foncy who taught Charlie's oldest son, Cliff, to play the mandolin and the guitar. The other Maddox children, for the most part, were self-taught on the other instruments that they would eventually play in the band that brought them fame and fortune: Don became a fiddler, Cal took up the guitar and harmonica, Henry was the mandolinist, Fred played bass and when necessary Rose also played bass, learning, she says, by watching Fred. Fruit tramping paid sufficiently well for the Maddoxes to buy a radio, the dial of which spent a lot of time tuned to stations that played country music. "We used to listen to the Carter Family, J.E. Mainer, Roy Acuff and Bob Wills," Fred recalled.

One of the radio stations that the Maddox family listened to was XERB in Rosarita Beach, Mexico. "Cal heard an advertisement on the station," said Fred, "for 24 guitar lessons and a guitar, all for \$13.95. He ordered it and when it came it was [like a] little Martin. He and Cliff [who had followed his parents and siblings to California] started singing together."

The Maddox budget was also good for an occasional dime to be spent on a weekend movie. That's where Rose first heard the Sons Of The Pioneers. "I had always wanted to sing," Rose said, "and I fell in love with the Sons Of The Pioneers." She said that then and there she vowed that she was going to become a professional singer.

After picking fruit all day the Maddoxes spent their evenings picking their banjos and guitars and singing. "We would sit around the campfire in those migrant camps," Fred reminisced "and play

and sing. We were the entertainment. Everyone would get up and dance to our music.” It was in those camps that they honed to a sharp edge a performance style that would one day make them stars of stage, radio and records.

In addition to fruits and vegetables the Maddoxes also picked cotton. “We picked cotton in the valley around Fresno,” Fred said. “Cliff was a worker. He could pick 400 pounds of cotton a day and never bat an eye.” Fred, however, was a different matter. Claiming a life-long aversion to work, he was inspired in 1937 to put the labor of the fields behind him. “It was in September or October,” he remembered. “We were in the cotton fields. There was frost on the cotton. I was dragging one of those big old cotton sacks with about ten pounds of cotton in it when I sat down and started thinking. Mama and Cal and Cliff were way ahead of me. They turned around and said, ‘Fred, what are you doing?’ I said, ‘I’m a-thinking.’ And they said, ‘What are you thinking?’ And I said, ‘I’m a-thinking we ought to go into the music business.’”

After an impromptu family conference, Lulla Maddox, with the same self-confidence that had brought her and her family to California in the first place, gave Fred’s music-business idea her blessing. Casting aside their cotton sacks, the Maddoxes proceeded to put their plan into action. “Me and mama went into Modesto looking for a sponsor,” Fred related. “We went to the Rice Furniture Store and talked to the owner, Mr. Rice, about sponsoring us on the radio. He said he would under two conditions: that I do the announcing and that we have a girl singer. I’d never even seen a microphone, but I told him I’d do the announcing. I also told him we had a girl singer.” The girl singer Fred had in mind was his unsuspecting eleven-year-old sister Rose. In addition to singing, Rose read the commercials on the air.

When the Maddox Brothers and Rose made their radio debut on Modesto’s KTRB in 1937 they did it like they had done all their

other undertakings—with a flourish. “We got 10,000 letters the first week we were on the air,” Fred said. “KTRB was about five miles out from town and folks would walk out to the studio to see us perform.”

Fred took his natural joviality and gift for gab into the studio and in short order became a popular emcee. Following a few bars of the group’s theme song, which varied over the years and included “Oh, Susannah” and “I Want To Live And Love,” he would greet the radio listeners with “Yes, sir and howdy folks. How are y’all out there this afternoon? Give us a great big smile, will you? Thanks a million, folks.” And then he was into the show, introducing the members of the group and their songs that ran the gamut of gospel, honky-tonk, country, folk, hoedowns, westerns and what we would today call bluegrass. On their program for February 19, 1940, which has been preserved on an Arhoolie long-play album, their numbers include “A Cowboy Has To Yell” (written by Cal), “Let Me Ride My Pony Down The Sunset Trail,” “Once I Had A Darling Mother,” “Hold That Critter Down” and “I’m Talking About You.” On another radio program from 1945 that was also released by Arhoolie we hear “If You Ain’t Got The Do-Re-Mi,” “I Might Have Known,” “Til Reap My Harvest In Heaven,” “Don’t Hang Around Me Anymore,” “The Girl I Love Don’t Pay Me No Mind,” “Write Me, Sweetheart,” “A Sinner’s Prayer Is Never Answered,” “I’m A Handy Man To Have Around” and “I’ve Rambled Around.”

Chris Strachwitz, owner of Arhoolie Records, remembered hearing the Maddox Brothers and Rose on the radio. In the liner notes to the album, “Maddox Brothers And Rose, 1946-1951, Volume 2,” he wrote, “I believe the Maddox Brothers and Rose introduced me to American Country Music when I listened to them broadcasting live over KTRB about 1948 when I was living with my family in the Monterey area. As a recent immigrant from

Europe I had never heard music like that in my life! I continued to hear their records and transcriptions on many radio stations but mainly over the powerful border station XERB broadcasting from Rosarita Beach, Baja California, Mexico.”

The Maddox Brothers and Rose soon added personal appearances to their daily work schedules, playing mostly in ballrooms, rodeo bars and clubs. Like their radio shows, which were eventually heard on numerous West Coast stations, the Maddox’s stage shows were upbeat and fast-paced. “We hit that stage . . . and we took them by storm,” said Rose, describing one of their stage appearances. “They didn’t know what had happened.”

“Folks would come and bring their children to those big dance halls,” Fred recalled, “but they didn’t dance. They’d gather around the stage and watch us. We went along with the crowd and tried to give them what they wanted—comedy and music.” Their every number was a “happening” which, in addition to the usual words and music, included sound effects, ad libbed comments, raucous laughter and the acting out of songs.

Up and down the West Coast the Maddoxes followed the rodeos, playing in nearby taverns after the rodeo events were over. Most of the time these barroom gigs were played for tips only. After they became an established act and began performing in the ballrooms, they tried to negotiate for a flat-rate contract. When that was not possible they usually worked on a percentage basis whereby they got 40 percent of the door and management got 60 percent. Fred says that their pay per show varied from 50 dollars to a thousand dollars. While on the road, traveling from one show date to another, he says that they would work for the lesser amounts to avoid as many idle nights as possible.

The Maddox Brothers and Rose was known as “The most colorful hillbilly band in America.” At one time they reputedly

owned 25 uniform changes in all the colors of the rainbow. “We wore bellbottom trousers,” Fred said. “That was mine and mama’s idea. Those costumes were expensive. A custom-made shirt and pair of pants would cost up to \$700.” Pictures of the group in their heyday show that their costumes were elaborately embroidered and profusely decorated with appliqued flowers, hearts and other designs. Their accessories, such as neckerchiefs, hats and boots were carefully color-coordinated.

Another colorful feature of the Maddox Brothers and Rose act was their mode of transportation. In those days before customized busses had become the norm in travel for country music artists, the Maddoxes traveled to their show dates in Cadillacs. “We all had a Cadillac apiece,” says Fred. “Mama had one, too, and she couldn’t even drive. Rose drove it for her. A new Cadillac would last about six months on the road. Between 1949 and 1959 I owned fourteen Cadillacs.” Traveling in separate automobiles contributed to family harmony Fred says. The Maddox’s convoy of Cadillacs pulling into those West Coast rodeo towns must have made an impressive sight.

To round out their show business career, the Maddox Brothers and Rose, beginning in 1946, recorded many of their songs on 78 rpm. records. “Mama and Rose took a big old acetate demo disc of our songs down to Los Angeles,” Fred says. “This was the days before there was such a thing as a tape recorder. They took it to Capitol Records, but were unable to get a contract because the person who would have to O.K. it was at home sick. So they took the demo to 4-Star and they signed us to a contract. We did better with 4-Star than we would have done with a big label. We were 4-Star’s special thing.” The Maddoxes’ most popular records were “Sally Let Your Bangs Hang Down,” “Whoa, Sailor,” “The Philadelphia Lawyer,” “Gathering Flowers For The Master’s Bouquet” and “Tramp On The Street.” In addition to 4-Star, the

group recorded for Columbia and Decca with some of their 4-Star cuts being re-recorded on King.

In 1952 the Maddox Brothers and Rose took their show to Shreveport, Louisiana, where they received top billing on the popular Louisiana Hayride, a barn-dance type country music program. Here, Fred said, they shared the stage with such acts as Hank Williams, Red Sovine, Faron Young, the Wilburn Brothers, Jim Reeves, Slim Whitman, Bill Carlisle and the Browns. After performing on the Hayride on Saturday night, the Maddoxes, like the other acts on the show, spent the following week making personal appearances in the area blanketed by powerful KWKH, the radio home of the Hayride. On-the-air exposure on the Hayride where they were able to announce their show dates helped boost attendance at their shows. The Maddoxes were on the Louisiana Hayride for about two years.

During their career the Maddox Brothers and Rose made two trips to Nashville hoping for a spot on the country's premiere country music showcase. "Me and Rose and Cal went to Nashville in 1941 to audition for the Grand Ole Opry," said Fred. "Mama was with us and we were driving a brand new black Chevrolet." Fred says that their efforts to get a job on the Opry met with failure because Jack Stapp, an Opry official, didn't consider them hillbilly because they were from California.

In February 1949, basking in the spotlight that had been turned on by several hit records and a reputation as crowd pleasers par excellence, the Maddoxes landed a guest appearance on the Opry. In a statement for the liner notes to the Arhoolie album, "The Maddox Brothers & Rose On The Air, Vol.2," Rose said, " 'Gathering Flowers For The Master's Bouquet' was a national hit for us—the Opry brought us to Nashville specifically for that song. Our segment was broadcast on the Prince Albert portion of the program, which was the network part, but it didn't go to

California, except KTRB carried it that night and they recorded it for us.” The Maddoxes also sang “I Couldn’t Believe It Was True.” The entire Opry segment, including the two songs, their introduction by emcee Red Foley and Rose’s introductions of the songs, can be heard on the Arhoolie album.

Lulla Maddox played a dominant role in the careers of her children. On the video, “The Life And Times Of Rose Maddox,” Rose said, “Mama ruled the roost. When she said ‘Jump,’ we said, ‘How high?’” In 1950, readers of *Country Song Roundup* were told that “Mom Maddox is always in the background, listening with a critical ear to see that every number is done at its best. All their success is due to Mom’s coaching and advising on their every move. Wherever they go, Mom goes, too.” Fred was the booker, promoter, emcee and manager of the group. “I managed the group through Mama,” he confesses. “You know, being brothers and sisters they weren’t going to listen to me. So I would go through Mama to get the others to do what I wanted. If she asked them to do something, they’d do it.”

While the figure of Lulla Maddox looms large in the saga of the Maddox Brothers and Rose, little has been recorded about her husband. Among all that has been written about the Maddoxes one finds few references to Charlie Maddox. “He was a loner,” said Fred. “He was not involved in our music business. He just played the banjo for his own amusement.” As Fred recalled, his father made only one appearance on the radio with the group. “It was about 1939 or ‘40,” Fred explains. “He played the banjo and sang ‘Shout Lou.’ “

The Maddox Brothers and Rose’s musical career was in full swing when World War II intervened. Cal, Fred and Don were drafted. Cliff escaped the draft for medical reasons and Henry was too young for the draft. While in service Fred was a cook and Don was in the signal corps. Back home Rose worked with other

bands, got married, had a baby and divorced. After the Maddox boys returned from the war, the group reorganized in 1946 and continued their careers as entertainers until their final breakup in 1956 when they became a casualty of the rock and roll craze. Rose once explained to writer Rich Kienzle how it happened. “We could see the change was coming,” she said. “The big dance halls were going out. The night clubs were not hiring groups. They would pay a single artist as much as they would pay a full group.”

Rose, Don and Fred became the only survivors of the original performing group. Cliff died in 1949, Cal in 1968 and Henry in 1974. After the breakup Fred became a night club owner/operator. He retired and made his home with his wife in Delano, California. He occasionally could be prevailed upon to favor audiences with his singing, comedy and vigorous bass playing. Don, after leaving the group, went to college and studied agriculture and operated a cattle farm near Ashland, Oregon. He sometimes played his fiddle in church, but otherwise was not involved in music. He said he didn’t miss show business and if he had it to do over again he would not pursue a career in music.

Rose, like her brother Don, made her home in Ashland, Oregon, but she was not, by any definition of the word, retired. She continued to perform and record after she and her brothers broke up. Her career spanned six decades and three musical genres—country, bluegrass and gospel. Despite a serious and prolonged illness in 1989, Rose drew on an inner strength that appeared to characterize the Maddoxes, and performed again. “I was so weak I couldn’t walk,” she told newspaper writer Linda Schnell shortly after going back to work following her illness. “My music has got me through a lot of hard times,” she added. Appearing recently on the Nashville Network’s “Nashville Now” television program Rose talked about her new band, the Foggy Notion Band, so named, she said, because “I never had the foggiest notion that I

would ever have my own band.” She talked about an upcoming gospel album, the bluegrass festival appearances, other show dates, and her grandson, Donnie Maddox who, carrying on the Maddox tradition, performs with his grandmother.

Over thirty years went by since the last live performance of the Maddox Brothers and Rose but they still enjoy a large following. Writers still loved to retell the story of their phenomenal rise to country music stardom; record companies continue to re-release their records and still legion are their fans, composed both of those who remember their stage and radio shows of the thirties, forties and fifties and those who have only recently discovered them through their reissued record albums.

The following is a partial list of the reissue albums by the Maddox Brothers and Rose.

**Arhoolie 5016 Maddox Brothers and Rose, 1946-1951,
Volume 1**

Midnight Train/Move It On Over/Careless Driver/Whoa Sailor/
Milk Cow Blues/Mean And Wicked Boogie/Brown Eyes/Honky
Tonkin’/ New Mule Skinner Blues/Time Nor Tide/Philadelphia
Lawyer/George’s Playhouse Boogie/Blue Eyes Crying In The
Rain/Sally Let Your Bangs Hang Down/I’ve Stopped My Dreamin’
About You/Gonna Lay My Burden Down/Water Baby Boogie.

**Arhoolie 5017 Maddox Brothers and Rose, 1946-1951,
Volume 2**

Oklahoma Sweetheart Sally Ann/I’m Sending Daffydills/
Mule Train/It’s Only Human Nature/Step It Up And Go/Dark As
The Dungeon/(Fay Me) Alimony/Don’t Bother To Cry/I Want To
Live And Love/Shimmy Shakin’ Daddy/I Wish I Was A Single
Girl/ South/Eight Thirty Blues/Your Love Light Never Shone/
Texas Guitar Stomp/Detour #2/Hangover Blues/I’d Rather Have
Jesus/I Still Write Your Name In The Sand.

**Arhoolie 5024 This Is Rose Maddox
(with the Vern Williams Band)**

Philadelphia Lawyer/Let Those Brown Eyes Smile At Me/
Old Black Choo Choo/Single Girl/Dark As A Dun-geon/This
Old House/Sally Let Your Bangs Hang Down/Rusty Old Halo/
Dream Of The Miner's Child/Ashes Of Love/Silver Threads
And Golden Needles/Foggy Mountain Top/Amazing Grace/
Rocky Top.

Arhoolie 5028 Maddox Brothers & Rose, On The Air

Theme & A Cowboy Has To Yell/Let Me Ride My Pony
Down The Sunset Trail/Once I Had A Darling Mother/ Hold That
Critter Down/I'm Talking About You/I'm Going To The Hoedown
(Theme)/Theme & Small Town Mama/Mama Please Stay Home
With Me/If You Ain't Got The Do-Re-Mi/I Might Have Known/I'll
Reap My Harvest In Heaven/Don't Hang Around Me Any More/A
Sinner's Prayer Is Never Answered/The Girl I Love Don't Pay
Me No Mind/Write Me, Sweetheart/I'm A Handy Man To Have
Around/I've Rambled Around & Theme.

**Arhoolie 5030 Rose Maddox, A Beautiful Bouquet,
(with the Vern Williams Band)**

We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder/ Life's Evening Sun/Church
In The Wildwood/When God Dips His Love In My Heart/I Can't
Feel At Home Anymore/Farther Along/I'll Fly Away/In The Sweet
Bye And Bye/ Kneel At The Cross/Turn Your Radio On/Beautiful
Bouquet/Take Me In The Lifeboat/If We Never Meet Again/Swing
Low Sweet Chariot.

**Arhoolie 5033 Maddox Brothers & Rose, On The Air,
Volume 2**

Gathering Flowers For The Master's Bouquet (Grand Ole
Opry guest appearance)/! Couldn't Believe It Was True (Grand

Old Opry guest appearance)/KTRB Theme & Regal Pale Beer Ad/The Goldrush Is Over/ Almost/Too Old To Cut The Mustard/Breathless Love/Lord Take My Hand/KTRB Theme Out/Walkin' In My Sleep/Fred's Boogie Woogie/Introduction By Fred & Rose/Nobody's Love Is Like Mine/Texas Playboy Rag/Lost John Boogie/Meanest Man In Town/Freight Train Boogie/Kiss Me Quick/Fried Potatoes/KTRB Theme Out.

BFX 15076 Maddox Brothers & Rose, Rockin' Rollin'

Paul Bunyan Love/I Gotta Go Get My Baby/Let Me Love You/No More Time/I've Got Four Big Brothers (To Look After Me)/Old Black Choo Choo/Ugly And Slouchy/The Death Of Rock And Roll/Stop Whistlin' Wolf/Love Is Strange/A Short Life Of It's (sic) Troubles/Empty Man-sions/Looky There Over There/You Won't Believe This/I'll Find Her/No Help Wanted.

BFX 15083 Maddox Brothers & Rose, Family Folks

Tall Man/I'll Go Steppin' Too/One-Two-Three-Four/Did You Ever Come Home/I Wonder If I Can Lose The Blues This Way/Marry Me Again/Burrito Joe/I'm A Little Red Caboose/Cocqita Of Laredo/On Mexico's Beautiful Shores/I'll Make Sweet Love To You/Kiss Me Quick And Go/Little Willie Waltz/Let This Be The Last Time/Wish You Would/A Beautiful Bouquet.

**King 669 The Maddox Brothers and Rose,
A Collection Of Standard Sacred Songs**

Tramp On The Street/I Just Steal Away And Pray/I'd Rather Have Jesus/When God Dips His Love In My Heart/Farther Along/The Unclouded Day/Flowers For The Master's Bou-quet/I'll Fly Away/In The Land Where We'll Never Grow Old/Dust On The Bible/I'll Be No Stranger There/He Set Me Free.

**Pickwick JS-6163 Rose Maddox,
Sing A Little Song Of Heartache**

Sing A Little Song Of Heartache/I Want To Live Again/
Gambler's Love/ Lonely Street/Alone With You/Stand Up Fool/
Down To The River/George Carter/Somebody Told Me.

SEE - 251 Rose Maddox, California Rose

Alone With You/Let Those Blue Eyes Smile At Me/If You
See My Baby/ Long Black Limousine/From A Beggar To A Queen/
Stop The World And Let Me Off/Curlly Joe/When The Sun Goes
Down/My Life Has Been A Pleasure/Johnny's Last Kiss/White
Lightnin'/Long Journey Home/Stand Up Fool/Down To The
River/Somebody Told Me/I Want To Live Again/ Silver Threads
And Golden Needles/ Bluebird Let Me Tag Along/Lonely Street/
Gambler's Love.

Stetson HAT 3029 Rose Maddox Sings Bluegrass.

Rollin' In My Sweet Baby's Arms/ Down, Down, Down/My
Rose Of Old Kentucky/Cotton Fields (Back Home/ Uncle Pen/I'll
Meet You In Church Sunday Morning/Old Slew Foot/Each Season
Changes You/Blue Moon Of Kentucky/Footprints In The Snow/
Molley And Tenbrooks/The Old Crossroads Is Waitin'.

Stetson HATC 3079 Rose Maddox, Glorybound Train

That Glorybound Train/This World Is Not My Home/Drifting
Too Far From The Shore/The Great Speckled Bird/ An Empty
Mansion/Kneel At The Cross/Smoke, Fire And Brimstone/ When
I Take My Vacation In Heaven/ Wait A Little Longer, Please Jesus/
How Beautiful Heaven Must Be/I'll Reap My Harvest In Heaven/
Will The Circle Be Unbroken.

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Rose Maddox died on April 15, 1998.

Fred Maddox died on October 29, 1992

Renfro Valley, Kentucky: The Valley Where Time Stands Still

By Wayne Daniel

In 1940, a year before the United States entered World War II, Ralph W. Griffin, describing a musical attraction called the Renfro Valley Barn Dance that had recently opened in one of Kentucky's most rural communities, wrote that "Except for its size the barn [housing the show], is just about what one would expect to see upon any reasonably prosperous farm. Inside it is floored, equipped with its capacity of ordinary collapsible seats and a peanut roast, while across the front end there is a large and well-lighted stage. The lighting effects come from unique electric lanterns and orthodox foot-lights. Ears of corn are strung upon the walls and baled hay is piled about helter-skelter, among pieces of harness and farm machinery. The performers come and go at will. They sit or lounge about upon the bales of hay and upon the floor. Quite often they are to be seen down in the audience, chatting with friends. There is much ad libbing and impromptu clowning, not to mention a lot of good-natured horseplay. There is no curtain across the front of the stage and once the show starts it is practically continuous. It opens ... with a thirty-minute broadcast, the program for which is prearranged, well executed and the technique of which is familiar to most radio listeners. One may wander about the parking lot which surrounds the barn and there see car license plates representing possibly fifteen different states, and just any number of Kentucky counties. Swanky limousines may be seen parked alongside ancient farm trucks [and] large busses vie with farm wagons for favorable parking space. Inside

the barn, overalls are seated alongside expensive tailored suits, while gingham dresses rub shoulders with Paris gowns.”

Almost half a century later, in the summer of 1986, a Saturday night visitor to Renfro Valley found that the only things missing were the farm wagons in the parking lot and the radio broadcast. The very same barn was still standing and served its original purpose. The farm wagons were replaced by motor homes, pickup campers, and compact imports. The entertainers, although they are different individuals, are the same in type. They are down-to-earth, friendly, exuberant, and mostly local people dedicated to the preservation of old-time music.

The stage is still adorned with swags of hay, ears of corn, and odds and ends of leather harness. In fact, one suspects that these items of decoration are the exact same ones that captured the attention of the writer in 1940. For, after all, as the publicity brochures tell us, this is “the valley where time stands still.”

Renfro Valley, Kentucky, is located on the edge of the Daniel Boone National Forest, just off Interstate 75 on US 25, sixty miles south of Lexington, Kentucky, and 120 miles north of Knoxville, Tennessee.

At first, Renfro was merely the name of a creek that trickled through the woods and meadows near Mt. Vernon, Kentucky, and was known only to the few mountain folks who called the area home. Then, in the 1930s, John Lair, who had grown up beside the creek and later gone to Chicago and secured a job in radio, was trying to think of a name for a group of Kentucky musicians he had brought to the big city to be on one of the country’s most powerful stations. He decided to call his ensemble of guitarists and banjo pickers, the Renfro Valley Boys. Various entertainers he subsequently managed for stage and radio became known to their far-flung fans as the Renfro Valley Folks, and the area from which

Lair and most of them came was soon known around the world as Renfro Valley, Kentucky.

To appreciate Renfro Valley, one must become acquainted with John Lair. He was born on July 1, 1894, in Rockcastle County, Kentucky, and grew up in the community that he later named, not far from the barn he built to preserve part of the traditions to which he was heir. The culture that helped shape the young Lair included a mixture of both sacred and secular components. On Sundays there were church services to attend where the congregation sang hymns and songs of a serious nature, a community leader imparted words of wisdom and advice to the young folks, and a circuit-riding preacher occasionally dropped by to treat the worshippers to a real sermon. On weeknights entertainment was to be found at such community functions as play-parties, square dances, pie suppers, and singing bees. John Lair absorbed his culture like a sponge, and every personality, building, song, conversation, and event with which he came in contact was transformed into an impression that found a permanent niche in his brain. One day he would draw on this store of impressions to build one of the country's greatest monuments to nostalgia, Renfro Valley.

One of his earliest childhood memories provided the inspiration for a life-long endeavor and achievement in a field in which he would become a recognized expert. He wanted to learn more about some of the old English ballads and nonsense songs he had heard his mother and grandmother sing when he was still small enough to sit on their laps. Decades later, when he had finished his search, he possessed one of the largest collections of folk music ever owned by a private individual.

John Lair was not, himself, a musician, but before he was ten years old he had organized a string band — the first of many that he would put together during his lifetime. This first musical

act to feel Lair's managerial touch was composed of some young friends who could play the fiddle, the banjo, and the guitar. Their clandestine rehearsals in the cellar under the Lair home were nipped in the bud by John's grandfather who considered such doings a frivolous waste of time. He informed the youthful entrepreneurs that "There's no good in the man who plays a fiddle or parts his hair in the middle."

Education was valued by John Lair's elders higher than the pursuit of musical ambitions. The future entrepreneur's earliest formal learning experiences took place in the old Redbud School, a Renfro Valley landmark which, built during the Civil War, survived as the oldest—perhaps the only—log school building in the nation. For his high school education Lair walked to Mt. Vernon, six miles away, where he paid his expenses by running a trap line. When, in 1914, he and two classmates celebrated the completion of their studies, they became the first high school graduating class in the county.

After high school came John Lair's first introduction to the world outside of Renfro Valley. "I never got out of the Valley until World War One came along," he once wrote. "Then I left, going with the first group of inductees from Rockcastle County. I never attended officers' school and never got higher than first sergeant but had many interesting experiences." He was one of a small group of recruits placed on special duty in Washington, D.C. It was here, he often recalled, that he was "bitten by the music bug." As a result of his assignment to the production staff of an Army show called "Atta Boy," he was introduced to the ins and outs of stage production, met several of the top figures in show business, and had the pleasure of having one of his poems recited on a Washington stage by a famous actress.

Following his military stint, Lair returned to his native Kentucky where, for a few years, he taught school in such places

as Pine Hill, Livingston, and Mt. Vernon. From teaching he moved into the publishing field and for a while ran a small town newspaper. When the paper had to suspend publication as a result of a railroad strike, he accepted a position in the investigative branch of a large insurance company, a job that took him to Boston, New York, and finally to Chicago.

“Along about this time,” Lair later recalled, “I got interested in a new thing called radio that was just coming out. Naturally I got interested in the Sears, Roebuck station, WLS [in Chicago], where Bradley Kincaid and Chubby Parker were singing the very first of what we call country songs on radio.” Lair was hired as music librarian by WLS, and from that position he was able to exert his influence on other aspects of the station’s operation. One of the first things he did was to go back home to Renfro Valley and vicinity to round up local talent to put on the air as members of the National Barn Dance and other WLS radio programs.

“Next time I was back home,” Lair relates, “I got a couple of my old school boys, Karl Davis and Hartford [Harty] Taylor, to come to Chicago and I got them on WLS. Soon I had been able to add Hugh Cross, Doc Hopkins, Gene Ruppe, Linda Parker, and Slim Miller, and we got on the air with what I believe was the first commercially sponsored program on WLS.” Lair called his group the Cumberland Ridge Runners, and using a programming format that would become his trademark, he presented the act to their radio audiences in mountaineer sketches that station officials once noted “touched so many hearts.” In addition to their radio and stage work, the Cumberland Ridge Runners recorded for the American Recording Company.

Other musicians were destined to find themselves under Lair’s tutelage. In later years the man from Renfro Valley wrote that he had “discovered, developed, or helped many outstanding acts in our field. These include such well-known stars as Red

Foley, Homer and Jethro, Merle Travis, George Gobel, Lulu Belle, and A'nt Idy and Little Clifford. Others less known, but scarcely less talented," he continued, "are Old Joe Clark, Jerry Bird, the Coon Creek Girls, Shorty and Little Eller, Ernie Lee ... and many more talented performers." He also might have mentioned Pete Stamper, Molly O'Day, Jim Gaskin, Patty Flye, Jo Fisher, Virginia Sutton, and others.

All the while he was collecting songs for the WLS music library and seeking and developing talent for the station's rural-oriented programs, John Lair's mind was back home in Renfro Valley sorting and arranging those impressions he had stored up as a youth. As early as 1932 he was saying that his greatest ambition was to get back to the farm. Disturbed at seeing the young folks in his home community "growing up and drifting away from the simple diversions that were so much a part of the history of the valley," he determined to do something to reverse the trend. As a 1946 Renfro Valley publication put it, "He wanted to preserve the ways of life of Early America —the old-fashioned neighborly spirit—the uncompromising honesty and sturdy independence. He wanted to rebuild the pioneer Renfro Valley settlement as a place where future generations could come for a glimpse of America in the making."

Although the WLS Barn Dance program was designed to simulate an old-fashioned rural hoedown, Lair wanted to give radio listeners the real thing. His dream was to be able to broadcast a barn dance from a real barn using local musicians, and he wanted that barn to be located in Renfro Valley. To make his dream come true would require a lot of money, and money, during the depression years of the 1930s, was not in plentiful supply. Nevertheless he persevered, and in 1937 he acquired a sponsor, the Keystone Steel and Wire Company, that was willing to pay for a Saturday night radio show to be called the Renfro

Valley Barn Dance. Since the real barn at Renfro Valley was not yet ready, interim measures had to be employed. The first show on October 9, 1937, like several subsequent ones, was staged at the Cincinnati Music Hall with a radio broadcast over radio station WLW. Most of Lair's cast had left WLS with him and, as he later recalled, it included crooner Red Foley; fiddler/comedian Slim Miller; Milly and Dolly Good, known as the Girls of the Golden West; Lily May Ledford and the Coon Creek Girls; and the comedy team of Little Clifford and A'nt Idy. A year later, the Saturday night barn dance, which had achieved widespread popularity through its broadcasts and touring shows, was moved to the stage of the War Memorial Auditorium in Dayton, Ohio.

Meanwhile, Lair, Red Foley, Red's brother, Cotton Foley, and Whitey Ford, known to radio fans as the Duke of Paducah, had formed a partnership for the purpose of getting things ready in Renfro Valley. Old log cabins were restored, new ones were built, and the 900-seat barn for staging the Saturday night show was rushed to completion. On Saturday night, November 4, 1939, radio listeners across the country who had their sets tuned to Cincinnati's WLW heard the announcer say, "Friends, the long-awaited moment has arrived, and we are now about to take you down to Renfro Valley, Kentucky, for the first broadcast of the Renfro Valley Barn Dance from the big barn just completed as the future home of this popular program. It bids fair to be a big night in Renfro Valley. Since three o'clock this afternoon the hill folks have been coming in on foot, on horseback and in big farm wagons. At least three hayride parties are reported on the way and reservations have been made from five states, so plenty of strangers and 'furriners' will be on hand for the opening tonight. And now, it's time for us to join them—so let's go to Renfro Valley and the Renfro Valley Barn Dance!"

Following the theme song, “We’re Gonna Have A Big Time Tonight,” John Lair took over the microphone with “Howdy, folks! Welcome to the Renfro Valley Barn Dance coming to you direct from a big barn in Renfro Valley, Kentucky—the first and only barn dance on the air presented by the actual residents of an actual community.” The songs heard on that first program were “Chicken Reel,” “Free Little Bird,” “Cacklin1 Hen,” “Wake Up Susan,” “Turn Your Radio On,” “When It’s Harvest Time, Sweet Angeline,” “Buffalo Gals,” “Winking At Me,” “Dixie Jamboree,” “Old Shep,” “Turkey In The Straw,” and “Leave Me With A Smile.”

When listeners to the barn dance were invited to write in for a free picture of the cast, the station received 53,000 requests within the next four days. The number of requests eventually reached a total of 253,000. On some Saturday nights as many as 10,000 people sought admission to the barn; it was frequently necessary to keep the show going all night long to accommodate all who had bought tickets. Noting the popularity of the barn dance, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), through the facilities of WHAS in Louisville, picked up the broadcast for airing over its network of radio stations.

Other radio programs followed. On weekday mornings CBS carried the Renfro Valley Folks program, and on Sundays, beginning in 1943, they broadcast the semi-religious Renfro Valley Sunday Mornin’ Gatherin’.

John Lair’s seemingly boundless range of interests and talents led him to become involved in other ventures. In addition to overseeing the business and artistic aspects of the Renfro Valley complex, he found time to establish a museum, write songs, continue adding to his collection of folk and popular music, and initiated a monthly newspaper. The museum, housed in a huge log structure near the barn, displayed “relics, antiques, and historical

articles,” as well as gifts and keepsakes sent in by listeners to the radio broadcasts.

His newspaper, the *Renfro Valley Bugle*, was still mailed to thousands of readers each month, then, as now, contained news of goings on in the valley, stories about the barn dance performers, letters from readers, recipes, quilt patterns, poems, songs, and other down home features.

The many songs Lair wrote during his career covered a variety of topics and were widely recorded in addition to being sung frequently on the radio. Perhaps the best known of his songs is “Take Me Back To Renfro Valley,” which he wrote in 1935. The song, mourning the loss of “old familiar faces” and the changes that had taken place in the valley “Since the days of long ago,” was the theme song of the CBS network program for twelve years. Another of his songs that became popular was “Freight Train Blues,” which he wrote especially for Red Foley, who recorded it in 1934. Roy Acuff’s recordings of the song in 1936 and 1947, however, have been the ones most widely heard.

A religious song, “One Step More,” which Lair wrote, was inspired by his memories of “old mountain people” he had known as a boy. As he told writer Dorothy Horstman, these people “led a pretty hard life and, as they neared the end of it, looked forward to that hour when they would take that one last step from earth to heaven with the hope of better things to come ... I tried to write a song for them,” he concluded.

His comedy song, “Keep Them Cold Icy Fingers Off Of Me,” was a hit for former barn dance star Fairley Holden.

With the coming of television, the Renfro Valley Barn Dance broadcasts, like most live radio shows, were cancelled by the network. But folks kept coming to Renfro Valley and to the show continued to provide them with entertainment as a stage production. In fact, weekend visitors to Renfro Valley from March

through November found almost more entertainment than they can get around to in such a short time. On Friday nights there was a gospel show that featured two or more groups of performers. This program was under the direction of Knoxville, Tennessee, resident Jim Waggoner, a veteran of the gospel music scene who has been involved in staging gospel shows at Renfro Valley since 1950.

On Saturday nights, music lovers had the option of attending two shows. They could buy a ticket for the first program in the original barn and a ticket for the second show in the “Red Barn across the street,” as it was called by Renfro Valley folks. Or they could reverse the procedure. Audiences were entertained at the original barn by the more tradition-oriented singers and pickers whose instruments were acoustic, with the sometimes exception of electrically amplified straight lead and pedal steel guitars. Here they were treated to some of the same hoedowns and songs that were heard by visitors during the 1930s and 1940s. In the newer Red Barn they listened to contemporary country music, the content and style of which was familiar to listeners to present-day country music radio stations.

On Sunday mornings everyone was invited to attend the Sunday Mornin’ Gatherin’ where admission was free. This program, which was built around a theme, featured old-time songs of a serious nature, both religious and secular. The program usually advanced some moral precept or left the listener with an idea for philosophical consideration. Those weekly shows were taped for distribution to a syndicate of more than sixty-five radio stations, serving an area from Texas to New York and from Michigan to Florida.

On several weekends during the season Renfro Valley management staged special events that provide entertainment in addition to the regular fare. These added attractions included a

square dance festival (first weekend in May), an antique automobile show (first Saturday in June), a June Jubilee (third Saturday in June), the John Lair Day Talent Contest (first Saturday in July), a bluegrass festival (second weekend in July), an all-night gospel sing (first Saturday night in August), a reunion day for family, church high school, and other reunions (Labor Day), molasses festival (second weekend in October), and a fiddlers' gathering (first Friday in November).

The slate of entertainers at Renfro Valley in 1987 represented a wide variety of stylists that ranged from stand-up comedians to gospel quartets. Some of the performers, like Old Joe Clark, had been members of the barn dance cast for decades. Others, such as Marge and Deb-by Rhoads, a mother/daughter duet, were relative newcomers. A typical program featured vocal soloists in renditions of old-time parlor ballads, novelty songs, fancy yodeling, bluegrass songs, and slightly more up-to-date country tunes that one observer dubbed "early juke box." The performers pooled their individual talents into various combinations and re-combinations to form all-male, all-female, and mixed quartets, trios, and duets who performed under such stage names as the Southern Belles and the Homefolks Quartet. In an attempt to evoke a rural image, John Lair was always particular about the names his acts assumed. In her autobiography, Lily May Ledford told how Lair insisted that she and her sisters call themselves the Coon Creek Girls rather than the Wildwood Flowers because he thought "a more country name might be better."

John Lair died on November 12, 1985, but the fruit of his labor survives. The Renfro Valley entertainment establishment was owned and operated by his children. According to his daughter, Ann Henderson, they plan for Renfro Valley to continue its time-tested format as one of the last showcases for the presentation

of traditional music. “The formula has worked for almost fifty years,” she said. “It fills a spot in the present-day music scene.” For, remember, in Renfro Valley, time is obliged to stand still.

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The Traditional Roots of Jumpin' Bill Carlisle

By Wayne Daniel

A generation of fans grew up listening to Bill Carlisle's energetic renditions of such novelty songs as "Too Old To Cut The Mustard," "No Help Wanted" and "Is Zat You Myrtle" and watching him punctuate these songs with his trademark flatfooted high jumps on the stage of the Grand Ole Opry might never have realized that he is the product of country music's most revered traditions and that his radio, stage and recorded repertoires included a considerable amount of serious material. Strange as it may seem, the man who made hits with such zany tunes as "Knot Hole," "Big At The Little, Bottom At The Top" and "What Kinda Deal Is This" was also capable of turning out major-label recordings of songs with titles like "When I Grow Too Old To Dream," "Sin Has Caused So Many Tears" and "Don't Be Ashamed Of Mother." Bill alone and with his brother Cliff, billed as the Carlisle Brothers, recorded, in true brother-duet tradition such serious and risqué fare as "Sally Let Your Bangs Hang Down," "I'm Sorry, That's All I Can Say," "Goin' Down The Valley One By One," "Sparkling Blue Eyes," "Little Pal," "I Know What It Means To Be Lonesome," "[Down At The] End Of Memory Lane" and "Ram-shackled Shack On The Hill." They were the first to record the haunting World War II hit "Rainbow At Midnight."

Bill Carlisle was born December 19, 1908, in Wakefield, Ky., some thirty miles southeast of Louisville. He was one of seven children—five boys and two girls. The family later moved to Louisville where the elder Mr. Carlisle worked in a nursery selling fruit trees and shrubs.

The Carlisle household provided many opportunities for Bill and his brothers and sisters to develop an interest in music. “My daddy taught music,” Bill related. “He was a religious man and he sang a lot of hymns. We’d all get together every once in a while at nighttime and sit around the old fireplace and sing hymns together.” Bill said that his father could read music and tried to teach him and Cliff to read too. “We didn’t want to fool with it, because we didn’t have the time to mess with it,” Bill says. “We wanted to do it like we heard it. I learned to read [notes] a little bit, but not fast enough to pick up a book and [sight-read the music].”

Bill recalled that the family owned a record player and he listened to records by Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter Family, Vernon Dalhart and the Skillet Lickers. His favorite singer was Jimmie Rodgers who inspired him to be a yodeler. “On a lot of my records I used to yodel,” he said, “but anymore it seems like I have strained my voice or something. My ‘yodeler’s’ not there like it used to be.”

Other music could also be heard near the Carlisle home. “There was a man next door who played a guitar,” Bill explained, “and he taught me some chords. I got my first guitar from Sears. It was a Silvertone. It was an archtop guitar. I never did like an archtop guitar, but I didn’t know at the time [why] I didn’t like it.” Later, he owned several flattop guitars, including three Gibsons.

Bill Carlisle established his career during the days when country music artists, who were called hillbilly performers back then, depended to a large extent on live radio performances to build their reputations. In fact, Bill got his start in the music business performing on radio. “About 1929 we had a show we called the Carlisle Family Saturday Night Barn Dance on WLAP which was in Louisville at that time [WLAP is now licensed in Lexington]. We had an hour show.” It was exclusively a family program which featured Bill; his dad; his brothers, Marion, Louis, Milton and Cliff and his sisters, Regina and Henrietta. The program

was broadcast in the radio station studio before an audience. “The studio was small,” Bill recalled. “We couldn’t get many people in it. But they’d just come and sit and clap and have a good time.” During the week, Bill said, the family played show dates at school houses in the area.

Bill’s stint at WLAP was followed by a series of jobs that took him to some of the major radio stations in the southeast and culminated in him being asked to join Nashville’s WSM and the Grand Ole Opry. The first stop on this radio-station odyssey was Charlotte, N.C. “From WLAP Cliff went to Charlotte, N.C.,” Bill said. “I wasn’t into [a music career] that far yet. I was just doing a radio show. I was working at Ford Motor Company down there on the Ohio River in Louisville. So Cliff went to Charlotte and he and Fred Kirby teamed up at WBT.

“After about four years Cliff came back home and he wanted me to join him [in Charlotte]. So I decided to go with him. I [took a job at radio station] WSOC. Cliff was on WBT. This must have been about 1935.” The move to Charlotte marked the beginning of Bill’s commitment to a full-time career in music. “After I went into the music business I never had another job on the side,” he said.

“We moved from there to Charleston, W.Va.,” Bill continued. “We went up there and worked together on WCHS. That was the hillbilly graveyard, I called it. We didn’t make any money. Evidently when they built the school houses they didn’t expect to do shows. They’d just have a big room [that would] maybe open up in the middle. There’d be sliding doors and they could make an auditorium out of it. It wouldn’t hold many people. So we didn’t stay there long.

“We went to Knoxville on the Mid-Day Merry-Go-Round from there. That was WNOX. Cliff and I were there together for about thirteen years and I was there for about five years after Cliff

left.” Bill recalled that he and Cliff first went to work at WNOX in about 1940. According to country music historian Willie J. Smyth, WNOX was Tennessee’s oldest radio station and number eight in age nationwide. During the 1930s and ‘40s the Mid-Day Merry-Go-Round was one of the nation’s most important country music showcases and WNOX became known as a springboard to the Grand Ole Opry. Numerous country music artists polished their acts at WNOX before moving on to the Nashville show. The Mid-Day Merry-Go-Round was directed by Lowell Blanchard who, Smyth said, joined the WNOX staff in 1936. In addition to appearing on the daytime program, Bill and Cliff Carlisle performed on a Saturday night show that was first called the WNOX Carnival, a name that was changed to the Tennessee Barn Dance in 1942. Among the country music acts whose tenure at WNOX overlapped that of Bill Carlisle were the Swanee River Boys, Archie Campbell, Johnnie (Wright) and Jack (Anglin), Eddie Hill, Riley Puckett, Grady and Hazel Cole, Shannon Grayson, Chet Atkins, Cowboy Copas, James and Martha Carson Roberts, Wally Fowler, Molly O’Day, the Lilly Brothers, Charlie Monroe and Homer and Jethro.

Around 1949 Bill took his act to Atlanta where they appeared on the WSB Barn Dance and other country music programs on 50,000 watt WSB. Bill’s co-performers at WSB included the Sunshine Boys, a quartet that featured Tennessee and Smitty Smith, Fairlie Holden, Cotton Carrier and Sunshine Slim Sweet. After a stay of about two years in Atlanta, Bill returned to Knoxville. “Lowell Blanchard talked to me,” Bill says. “[He] said, ‘Come on back home’ and I went back up there. We did awfully good there in Knoxville.”

Bill said that he was asked to join the Grand Ole Opry on two different occasions. “I came to the Opry [for a guest appearance],” Bill recalled, “after we had ‘Too Old To Cut The Mustard’ that came out just before we went to Atlanta. They liked us so well,

they said they'd like for us to join the Opry. They said be ready in about three weeks to come down here [to become regular members of the Opry]. I went back to Knoxville and told Lowell that I had a job at the Grand Ole Opry. Well, it was about two weeks and I called [the Opry management] and Mr. Jim Denny said, 'Well, Bill, we decided to hold up on that a while.' I had already given my notice [at WNOX] and I had too much pride to [tell Blanchard that the deal had fallen through]. So I told my wife, 'I'm going to write some letters to some of the big shows like down at Shreveport and Wheeling [W. Va., to try to find work]. Most of them said they were full and didn't need anybody. I told my wife, 'I'm going to write a song called "No Help Wanted."' 'In the meantime [management at KWKH in Shreveport, La.] wrote to me and said, '[We'd] be glad for you to come down, Bill, but you'll probably be like most of them—you probably won't stay.' So I went on down there. As I came through Nashville I recorded 'No Help Wanted.' So it wasn't two months before that thing was nearly at the top of the charts and so then WSM contacted me and wanted me to move up here. I just held off a while. Then we had 'Is Zat You Myrtle?' and we decided to come on up.'" Bill joined the Opry in 1953.

While at KWKH in Shreveport, Bill shared stage and microphone with such country music artists as Jim Reeves, Hank Williams and the Maddox Brothers and Rose.

Bill Carlisle's musical efforts were not restricted to stage and radio performances. Throughout his career, either alone or with Cliff, he has found time for the recording studio. A Carlisle discography prepared by Gene Earle reveals that, beginning in 1933, these recordings have been released on such labels as Vocalion, Melotone, Banner, Oriole, Romeo, Perfect, Conqueror, Regal Zonophone, Decca, Bluebird, Montgomery Ward, King, Federal, Maple Leaf (Canada), Mercury and Athenion. As late as

1984 a long-play album of Bill's biggest hits, titled *Busy Body Boogie*, was issued by Bear Family Records.

The largest output of Carlisle Brothers records came from Decca, for whom they recorded between 1938 and 1940. This was the era of the brother duets and Decca may have considered the Carlisle Brothers their brother act to compete with other brother acts such as the Monroe Brothers, the Blue Sky Boys and the Mainers who were on other labels. Other brother acts recorded for Decca during the 1930s and 1940s and some half dozen such acts appeared on the Decca label before the Carlisle Brothers made their debut. Most of them, however, recorded only three or four sides or less. For some reason, apparently, they did not pan out as a long-term brother act for Decca. Besides the Carlisles, the most prolific brother duets who recorded for Decca made their first appearances on the label at about the same time as the Carlisle Brothers or just after. These were the Delmore Brothers, who recorded twenty sides during 1940 and 1941; the Rice Brothers, who were heard on 56 sides between 1938 and 1941 and the Shelton Brothers, who recorded extensively for Decca between 1935 and 1941.

Bill Carlisle possessed the dual talents that increased a country music artist's chances of success: the ability to sing and the ability to write songs. "The first song I ever wrote and recorded was called 'Rattlesnake Daddy,'" Bill said, "and it was a smash hit. I thought, 'Boy, I've got it made now.' I think I made fifty dollars on [it]. That was when they paid a flat fee for each song." Bill's recording of "Rattlesnake Daddy" was made in 1933 in New York and released on the Vocalion label. "I'll tell you what inspired that [song]," Bill related. "I was living in the country at that time and I killed this rattlesnake. I tanned his hide and I put it over a leather belt. I said, 'I'm a rattlesnake daddy now.' That made me write that song. I was 21 years old."

Perhaps the biggest Carlisle Brothers hit was “Rainbow At Midnight,” which was released on the King label. “‘Rainbow At Midnight’ was written by a friend of mine by the name of Arthur Q. Smith who was booking Cliff and me at the time,” Bill said. He wrote [the song] and offered to sell it to me for fifteen dollars and I wouldn’t take it, because, I said, ‘Arthur, [I would] feel like I [was] stealing from you.’ I said, ‘That’s a hit,’ because it was right at the time when the war was over. I said, ‘We’ll record it. I’ll make the first record on it and you’ll make some money.’ And he promised me he wouldn’t sell it. And do you know, he sold it before mine was released. He sold it to Lost John Miller.” Bill said that the high tenor on “Rainbow At Midnight” was sung by Archie Campbell and that the song was recorded in “the studio up there in Knoxville.”

Bill’s Decca records were released under the artist credit Bill Carlisle’s Kentucky Boys. The pseudonym Clifford Brothers was the artist credit on some recordings made by Bill and Cliff. The Clifford Brothers name, according to Gene Earle, was used for the few bawdy songs the Carlisles recorded.

Despite the large quantity of serious material that Bill Carlisle recorded over the years, he will be remembered in the annals of country music as a singer of novelty songs. “Cliff and I did some serious stuff,” he said. “We did a lot of bluegrass back years ago, but seems like I could always do better with novelty songs.”

During his career Bill livened up his shows with a rube comedy routine in which he played the part of Hot Shot Elmer. His penchant for comedy goes way back. “When I was in school,” he confessed, “the teacher was always after me because I was trying to make the rest of the kids laugh. I guess I was wanting to put on a show then. I just enjoyed making people laugh.” He started doing comedy on stage while he was working in Knoxville. “When you go out on a show date,” he said, “everybody is supposed to have

a comedian and so I decided I'd take a shot at it. I did a character called Hot Shot Elmer—barefooted and no teeth.”

Bill's reputation as a jumper grew out of his comedy act. “Cliff and I, on our shows,” he explained, “would do a little act [in which] we'd [pretend to] get mad at each other and I would stand flatfooted and jump over a chair back and forth, staying out of his way. So I started doing it when I recorded. When I'd be recording one of these fast tunes, if I felt like jumping I'd jump.” He acquired the name Jumpin' Bill Carlisle after he joined the Grand Ole Opry where he was expected to do a little jumping when the spirit moved him. His acrobatic stunt was not without its risks; it was reported that on one occasion he split a new pair of trousers while jumping on stage.

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Bill Carlisle died on March 17, 2003 at the age of 94.

Cliff Carlisle died on April 5, 1983 at the age of 79

Pete Cassell, King of the Hillbillies

By Wayne Daniel

The standard against which many old-time country music aficionados compare performances of such songs as “Freight Train Blues,” “Where The Old Red River Flows” and “One Step More,” is the way they were sung by Pete Cassell, an influential country crooner of the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s. By the time of his untimely death just short of his 37th birthday, Pete had established a wide following as a result of his recordings and appearances on radio stations in the southeast. He was billed as the “King Of The Hillbillies” long before 1943 when Dizzy Dean bestowed the title on Roy Acuff.

Pete Webster Cassell was born in Cobb County, Ga., near Atlanta, on August 27, 1917. He was the only child of Roy Wesley and Rebecca Jane Ledbetter Cassell. When he was three days old, Pete was robbed of his sight through a physician’s misapplication of medicine to the infant’s eyes. As a result of this misfortune, Pete Cassell was destined to join songwriter and gospel singer Andrew Jenkins and the legendary singer/guitarist Riley Puckett as one of three Atlanta-based musicians who, although sightless, made significant contributions to the field of country music.

Because of his blindness, Pete obtained his education in special schools. As an elementary school pupil he attended special classes at a public school in Atlanta where he lived with his mother and his father, who was a lineman with the Georgia Power Company. Pete received his high school education at the Georgia school for the blind in Macon.

“Pete was always interested in music,” his mother once recalled. “Country music and religious music were his favorites.

He spent a lot of time listening to records and the radio. The piano was the first instrument Pete learned to play. He learned on a piano that belonged to a woman who lived in the same apartment building with us.” By the time he went away to school in Macon, Pete had also learned to play the guitar. Except for some lessons he took at the school for the blind, he was a self-taught musician.

As a youth Pete sang a lot in church. “He wouldn’t sing vulgar or suggestive songs,” he mother said. “He said he had to ‘feel’ a song before he could sing it.”

Pete himself once wrote of his early interest in music that singing and a desire to be on radio were in his mind as long as he could remember. Following his schooling in Macon, Pete entered law school in Atlanta, but soon dropped out in order to pursue a career as a country music entertainer.

Pete made his professional debut in 1937 on radio station WDOD in Chattanooga, Tenn. He soon returned home to Atlanta to perform with a group called Uncle Ned and His Texas Wranglers, a featured act on the Cross Roads Follies heard on Atlanta’s WSB. Among Pete’s fellow performers with Uncle Ned were Boudleaux Bryant, future composer of “Rocky Top,” and fiddler Chick Stripling who later worked with the Stanley Brothers.

Despite the group’s name, none of Uncle Ned’s Texas Wranglers were from the Lone Star State. Uncle Ned, whose real name was Gene Stripling, was from Macon, Ga. Most of the other members of the group were also Georgians. Like many other country music acts of the 1930s, Uncle Ned’s Texas Wranglers assumed a western name and dressed in cowboy clothes in order to capitalize on the public’s interest in things western.

In the years that followed, Pete worked again at WDOD in Chattanooga, Tenn.; WWVA, Wheeling, W. Va.; WAGA and WSB, Atlanta; WROM, Rome, Ga.; WARL and WEAM, Arlington,

Va.; and on stations in Springfield, Mo., Milwaukee, Wis., and Scranton, Pa.

Early on, Pete established a large and loyal group of fans among listeners to WSB and WAGA in Atlanta. People used to hurry home from the fields during their lunch hour so they could listen to him on the radio. Around 1939, while working on the Cross Roads Follies, Pete won a yodeling contest that was staged as part of a Southeastern Fiddlers' Contest held in Atlanta. In addition to his stint on WSB's Cross Roads Follies in the late 1930s, he performed as a solo act on two different occasions on WSB during the 1940s.

Pete made his debut on the WSB Barn Dance on Saturday night March 15, 1941. In addition to working the Barn Dance, he was also heard on the Georgia Jubilee, WSB's midday show that featured the station's entire roster of country music artists, and on the Cracker Barrel program, a mid-morning show on which some half-dozen of the Barn Dance artists performed. Pete's fellow entertainers on the Barn Dance included James and Martha Carson, the Swanee River Boys, Cotton and Jane Carrier and his buddies from the Cross Roads Follies, Chick Stripling and Boudleaux Bryant.

From November, 1943, to sometime in February, 1945, he had his own program, varying in length from 15 to 30 minutes, on Atlanta's WAGA. During much of this time his program was part of a midday block of programs that featured individual live shows by the Sunshine Boys, the Light Crust Doughboys and Lew Childre. The Sunshine Boys and the Light Crust Doughboys consisted of the same personnel. As the Sunshine Boys they sang sacred music with piano accompaniment. When time came for the Light Crust Doughboys' program, the members of the group picked up fiddle, guitar and other string instruments and presented

a show of western swing and Sons of the Pioneers' type music. The radio audience thought they were hearing two different groups. Also, during part of this time, Pete Cassell's show was carried by NBC's Blue network. Pete, the Sunshine Boys and Lew Childre worked together on personal appearances.

On February 24, 1945, Pete returned to the WSB Barn Dance where he remained until around the first of June. After leaving the Barn Dance, he returned several times as a guest performer. Those appearances were always announced in advance in the *Atlanta Journal*, the newspaper that owned WSB and readers were assured that Pete would sing his most popular songs, "Where The Old Red River Flows" and "Freight Train Blues."

Between his jobs on the Cross Roads Follies and the WSB Barn Dance, Pete worked at WWVA in Wheeling, W. Va. There he was a featured yodeler and singer with Hank and Slim Newman's group and on the Radio Roundup, a show that also included Elaine Smith, Dale Cole, the Davis Twins and Tommy Nelson. Ivan Tribe, in his book, *Mountain Jamboree: Country Music in West Virginia*, states that in 1940 Pete was a member of the station's Goodwill Tour, a touring package show that put him on stage with Doc Williams, Frankie More and others.

By 1946, Pete was back at WWVA in Wheeling, where, during the next few years, he worked again on the Jamboree with such acts as Doc and Chickie Williams, Elaine Smith, Shorty Fincher's Prairie Pals, Joe Barker's Chuck Wagon Gang, Wilma Lee and Stoney Cooper, Hawkshaw Hawkins and Smiley Sutter. In 1946, Pete won the annual WWVA Hillbilly Popularity Contest.

In addition to his duties on the Wheeling Jamboree, Pete had his own program on WWVA. Aired at 12:05 midnight, the show was called Pete Cassell's Old Country Store. In a picture booklet that Pete prepared for his listeners, he wrote, "All my life I wished for a chance to operate a real old-fashioned country store."

I first got my inspiration and my dream of owning and operating a typical country store quite a few years ago from the two Perkins boys. They had at that time (and still have) just such a store in the little Mount Bethel community [of Cobb County, Ga.] This is my answer to you, my listeners and friends, as to why I chose to call my program Pete Cassell's Old Country Store."

Typically, Pete included a sacred song on his programs. In the same booklet in which he talked about the country store was a picture of a country church with the following caption: "When I was a small boy spending weekends on my grandfather's farm, I attended church and Sunday School at a little country church about a mile and a half up the road from the farm. That was the first church I ever attended. The Mount Bethel Methodist Church, nine miles east of Marietta, Ga., in Cobb County...From now on you will know that this is the place that gave me the inspiration for calling it the Old Country Church."

Pete's sincerity, heart-felt singing and down-to-earth philosophy endeared him to WWVA listeners just as they had to his listeners to radio stations in Georgia and other parts of the country. A star was placed in the Walk of Fame in Wheeling in honor of Pete's memory.

While working his first stint on the WSB Barn Dance, Pete met Ruth Hamlin, who became his wife. "My father worked for the United States Government," the former Mrs. Cassell explained. "He was transferred to Atlanta where we lived during my last two years in high school. I was working as a waitress in a restaurant near the WSB studios when I met Pete. He and a lot of the other WSB artists came into the restaurant to eat. We first became good friends, then on October 26, 1941, we got married."

Pete once wrote of his wife, "Not only does my wife read all the mail to me from you good friends, [she also helps out by] driving the car on various long personal appearances we make,

handling our finances, answering the mail and looking out for [our daughter] Jean.”

The Cassells had two children, Jean, who was born in Atlanta in 1945 and a son, Roy William, who was born in Arlington, Va., in 1952.

Ruth described herself as Pete’s mail clerk. “It took most of the morning to sort his mail,” she recalled. “A lot of times he was paid on a ‘per inquiry’ basis. Part of his pay depended on how many requests he got through the mail for the products he advertised on the radio. He was a pretty good pitch man. He wrote his copy in braille to read on the air.”

Ruth felt that, because of Pete’s blindness, he was not able to obtain a lot of jobs that he otherwise could have had. He seems, however, to have adjusted quite well to his handicap rather than wallowing in self-pity. Performers who worked with him on stage frequently commented on how well he worked a microphone. It was said that before a stage performance he would have someone walk him to the microphone so he could orient himself to its location. When it came time for him to perform he would walk unassisted to the exact position of the microphone.

In addition to his radio and stage work, Pete reached additional audiences through his recordings. On March 12, 1941, in New York City, he recorded six songs for Decca, including “Freight Train Blues.” In the late 1940s he recorded for the Majestic and Mercury labels. Some of his recordings were released on other labels such as Varsity and Coral. Pete also recorded selections from the Bible for the Variety label under the title “The Talking Bible.” In 1965 a long-play album containing nine of Pete’s songs was released on the Hilltop (Pickwick) label.

One of Pete’s last radio jobs was at WARL in Arlington, Va., where he worked with the late Connie B. Gay. Among his fellow performers on WARL were Roy Clark, Jimmy Dean and Grandpa

and Ramona Jones. On July 29, 1954, during a planned short vacation from work, Pete died of a coronary thrombosis in Key West, Fla. His body was returned to Georgia for burial and he now rests in the Mt. Bethel cemetery in Cobb County where his mother and father are also buried.

Ruth Cassell later remarried and lived in Florida with their daughter, Jean. The Cassells' son, Roy, died in November, 1991, at his home in California.

Pete Cassell's career, though brief, was influential and his artistry was highly regarded by his contemporaries. A writer for a country music magazine published in the 1940s wrote, "Pete started singing from WDOD, Chattanooga, in 1937 and was a great favorite. He had a style of singing that was different and when he left WDOD and went to Atlanta, he had more imitators than any artists I have ever listened to. The same thing happened when he left WSB for WWVA about 1940."

The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Country Music stated that Pete had "a fine smooth voice which anticipated the likes of Jim Reeves." Bill C. Malone, in his book, *Country Music U.S.A.*, referred to Pete as a "smooth country crooner" and placed him in the same category with Zeke Clements, Hank Locklin, George Morgan, Red Foley and Eddy Arnold.

Jack Greene, a one-time Atlanta musician, who rose to fame in the 1960s, was one of Pete Cassell's many admirers. Greene's first chart hit, released in the mid-1960s was "The Last Letter," a song that Pete had recorded for majestic in 1947. Greene, no doubt, had heard Pete sing the song many times, on record as well as on the WSB Barn Dance and the Wheeling Jamboree.

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Good Old Songs, Good Old Jokes, Good Old Boys: Old Joe Clark and Terry

By Wayne Daniel

On stage he wore high top shoes, a beat-up old hat, nondescript pants and a railroad conductor's vest covered with medals and badges pinned there by fans and well-wishers. Wire-rimmed glasses perched low on a prominent nose that stood guard over an expanse of gray whiskers. Around his neck hangs a 1928 Washburn five-string banjo that he picked in a pre-bluegrass style using his thumb and index finger. He is introduced to the audience as Old Joe Clark. Before singing and picking such old-time songs as "Mountain Dew," "Lonesome Road Blues" and "The Bald Headed End Of A Broom," he told you about some of the people he had known and the unbelievable experiences that had befallen him. Like the romance with one of his elementary school teachers that was nipped in the bud because of their age difference—she was 18 and he was 35. Or how his first three wives died from eating poison mushrooms and his fourth wife died from a fractured skull. (His fourth wife refused to eat mushrooms.) He liked to poke fun at his fellow entertainers and members of the audience. "You're looking mighty melancholy tonight," he will say to a musician on stage or someone sitting in the front row. "A head like a melon and a face like a collie."

Off stage Manuel D. Clark, Jr., described the character that he portrayed for more than forty years as a member of the Renfro Valley Barn-dance, as a touring country music comedy act and as a popular attraction at bluegrass festivals around the country. "The part I'm betraying," he punned, "is an old 75 or 80 year

old back-woodies country gent that had been used to hard work and only getting to town on Saturday evenings.” It has also been said that Old Joe Clark was “an ornery old cuss who talks too loud, is always right (he said) and was a likeable fellow when he was quiet. He got on the show and they couldn’t get him off. He wouldn’t let anybody say anything and he chewed his whiskers to keep his breath sweet.”

Seeing Old Joe Clark in action was to wonder if the stage character is based on a real person. “He is the type of people my forefathers were,” Manuel Clark explains. “And to me there is still none better. In order for me to do the part of Old Joe Clark I knew I would have to pick someone in my early life that I admired and live as close as possible to the part.

“Old Joe Clark is made up from several kinfolks and other real close neighbors. The walk, the talk, the standing habits, feeling in my pockets, fumbling with my watch chain and the tobacco chewing—these are habits taken from seven or eight real honest to goodness homefolks whom I knew and admired very much in my childhood. After every performance folks come to me telling me that they had an uncle or a grandpa or an old neighbor that was as much like me as if I was them.”

Clark was born on August 6, 1922, in Erwin, an East Tennessee hamlet located deep in the heart of the Appalachian Mountains, a stone’s throw from North Carolina. As a youngster, he had a wide variety of interests—comedy, music and radios. When vaudeville shows came to town, he and his buddies could be counted on to be in the audience. “We followed after that stuff,” he reminisced. Not only that, but “we learned the acts and could do them—blackface, rube, slapstick and different characters.”

Growing up where and when he did, Clark would have been hard pressed to avoid being exposed to music. “I learned the old

songs from my people and from my people's homes and I would go and listen. And when politicians came into town they'd bring musicians with their guitars and their fiddles and their banjos and I would sit and listen to them." He not only listened; he absorbed. "I learned all the instruments on my own," he related. "I'd listen to them and then I'd go out to the barn and sit and pick my tunes. Really, I learned in the barn." At the age of thirteen he decided to enter the banjo picking contest that was part of the Southern Fiddling Contest held at the Federal Court House in Greenville, Tennessee, a larger town about 25 miles from Erwin. Clark described the event in an article he once wrote for a now defunct Mt. Vernon, Kentucky, newspaper. "I boarded the truck [bound for Greenville] that was loaded with old fiddlers and well-wishers. As we chugged along I can remember it seemed as if there was more moonshine than there was riders in the big truck.

"On Friday the first night passed along, and they hadn't even gotten to all the fiddlers expected to be called. Well, I was getting a little 'cold footed' as a thirteen-year-old boy would do, but everyone assured me I would get my call late Saturday night. On that particular Saturday night I didn't think I had ever seen as many banjo pickers. Most of the entertainers were old timers at the game and hadn't shown up the first night of the contest, but they were here now. Just knowing I had lost flat-footed, I gazed at the well-known pickers that I had heard so much about. I was sure many of them were much better than I. I was really down-hearted.

"But my time came and I bounced out on the stage to pick my banjo. The very tunes I had practiced for the last two weeks had been picked fifteen or twenty times each. My favorites that I hankered so much to pick were nearly worn out, those being 'John Henry' and 'Sally Goodin'.' I had just one last choice for a tune that hadn't been tried. It was thought of as a French harp tune that

I had learned, ‘The Fox Chase.’ Boy, there’s no way of my telling you how the crowd went wild as they raised the roof. I was named Grand Prize Winner.

“A five-dollar gold piece was the award for the first place winner of the banjo picking division. I also got my picture in the Greenville newspaper. They shot my picture, but I’m still, to this day, looking for the prize money. A five-dollar gold piece in those days was equal to a man’s paycheck this day and time.” To Clark’s immense disappointment the promoter of the contest had absconded with the prize money and the gate receipts as well. “Thinking [he] would return,” Clark wrote, “I waited ‘til 2 a.m. Since this was my first real taste of show business on stage, I was hoping against hope that he would come back. However, my uncle tried to assure me that the man had gone and now I know he really had! Finally, I agreed to go home. Broken hearted I was and empty handed with nothing more than a little white first prize ribbon.”

It was radio that had the greatest appeal to the youthful Clark. “Radio was big time in those days,” he declared. “And I wanted to be a radio announcer. I didn’t want to be a comedian.” Become a radio announcer he did—on his own radio station and at the age of fifteen. He and some of his friends traded a banjo for a radio transmitter that had been fashioned from an old Atwater-Kent receiver by a retired sailor. Without benefit of license or official permission they installed the transmitter in a barn and went on the air as WSET, call letters inspired by Erwin’s South Walnut Street on which Clark resided. For a turntable they used an old hand-wound phonograph on which they played 78 rpm records. Most of their programs were live, however and they even included a Saturday night barndance. Unfortunately the venture was short-lived due to a lack of appreciation for youthful entrepreneurship on the part of a Federal Communications Commission agent who came calling in response to local residents’ complaints of

interference with other broadcasting stations.

In the meantime, Clark had been pursuing his interest in music. He and two of his friends and fellow classmates, Kenneth Scott and Jimmie Sizemore, had been getting together to make music and by 1937 they had developed into a band of considerable ability. Performances at schools and other local events provided them with valuable experience and no small amount of fame in the area around Erwin. The group, consisting of Sizemore on guitar, Clark playing banjo and Scott who played guitar, soon gained sufficient confidence to enter a talent contest sponsored by Cliff Carlisle. To their unbounded joy they won first place, which brought with it an invitation to appear as guests on Carlisle's radio program on WWNC in Asheville, North Carolina.

By this time Manuel D. Clark had become Speedy Clark. "In school," Clark explained, "I was so slow about anything they put me to doing, it took me two or three days to do it. Because I always had to think it over. Well, one day my teacher sent me to the furnace room to dust erasers. I dusted the erasers and then sat down and talked to the janitor until I heard the school bell ring to get out of school. I went back to my room and as I walked in the teacher said, 'Well, Speedy has got back.' And I was Speedy from that time on."

The band in which Speedy played a leading role continued to practice, to perform before a paying audience at every opportunity, and to make guest appearances on country music radio programs in the area. When it came time to give the band a name appropriate to its achievements, it was Speedy who christened it the Prairie Cowboys. These were the days of the singing cowboy, Saturday afternoon horse operas at the local movie house, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers and the Sons Of The Pioneers. The original Prairie Cowboys consisted of Jimmie Sizemore, rhythm guitarist, vocalist and straight man; Speedy Clark, band leader, banjoist

and comedian; Dick Jones, lead guitarist and tenor vocalist; Fred McInturf, harmonica player and Harry Hollifield, mandolinist and tenor vocalist. Over the years the personnel of the band changed. Others who performed with the group included Shug Mulkey, Bob Bennett and Patsy Sizemore. By 1941, the group had landed its own radio program on WJHL in Johnson City, Tennessee. In 1942, new members were added to the group and it split into two bands. One group, called the Moonlight Drifters, was composed of Bill Bailey, Speedy Clark, Shorty Sheehan, Deward Bennett and Shug Mulkey. The other group was known as Jimmie Sizemore and the Tennessee Pals and consisted of Jimmie Sizemore, Patsy Sizemore and Ray Atkins. The two groups performed together on the radio and on personal appearances. Each Saturday morning both bands were heard on WJHL's Barrell of Fun program broadcast from the stage of the Bonnie Kate Theater in Elizabethton, Tennessee.

By 1943, World War II had taken its toll of band members as some went into the armed services and others took jobs in defense plants. "I didn't think I would have to go to service," Clark says. "I only had one eye. Got the other one knocked out when I was a kid playing with airplanes. Well, I was called to service," he exclaimed. "With one eye! They put me in there because I was a fighter, I reckon. I was a military policeman and also I did all kinds of work for the Post adjutant general."

When the war ended Clark lost no time picking up his musical career where he had left it almost five years before. "Within a few weeks of getting back into the swing of show business," he explained, "We formed a fine band consisting of Ray and Shug, the Mulkey brothers; Shorty Sheehan; Kentucky Slim and myself. We were called the Lonesome Pine Boys. In a very short time we were doing very well in radio and transcriptions. We were propositioned by several big radio outlets. The best offer came from WLW in Cincinnati. They asked us to come up there and

appear on the WLW Hayride. Mind you this was still radio, for television was just in its very first stages.” Before Clark’s group got to Cincinnati, however, Randall Parker and Tommy Covington, performers on the Renfro Valley Barndance, caught their show at the theater in London, Kentucky. They liked what they saw and heard and persuaded the Lonesome Pine Boys to take a job with Renfro Valley owner John Lair. “Mr. Lair gave us a full week’s pay and told us to go home and rest and be ready to go out June 8 on the Jake Sawsberry Tent Show. Clark explained, “That was Mr. Lair’s Mid-Western States Renfro Valley Tent Show that handled mid-western states. We played Indiana, Illinois, Ohio and Kentucky. This was in the year of 1946 and we had the grandest time any of us boys had ever had. We played to, by far, the greatest crowds we had ever played in front of. To this day, when spring comes I have tent fever just like most people get spring fever.

“In the middle of September, when the tent-show touring season was over,” Clark continued, “we all came back and became regular members of the Renfro Valley Folks. Mr. Lair wanted the whole band until he got us all up here and then I was the one he wanted. He cultivated me like he wanted me. He kept telling me, ‘I want this’ and ‘I want that,’ and the first thing you know I was doing about anything.” When Lair opened radio station WRVK, with studios at Renfro Valley, Clark was given a job as disc jockey. “That’s what I really wanted to do all along,” he emphasized. “I liked radio.”

Except for a stint of about three years between 1949 and 1952, Clark remained at Renfro Valley. In 1949 he left the valley to take a job on a barndance show in Middletown, Ohio, operated by Smokey Ward, a former Renfro Valley Barndance entertainer. Clark’s association with Ward, he relates, was followed by a tour with Bill Monroe. “We were working a lot of package dates with Grand Ole Opry artists,” he elaborated. “One Sunday we were

working with Bill Monroe and he asked me if I would like to go with him. I said, 'Yes' and joined him the next month. I stayed two years with him before returning to the Renfro Valley Barndance. He put me on as a single act with his band. I was not one of the Blue Grass Boys, but his comedian. I was on the Opry and went out with Bill on personal appearances. Bill was a great friend and a big help to me. We remained the best of friends." Others touring with Monroe at the time, Clark said, were Jamup and Honey, Lou Childre and Hal and Velma Smith.

Clark noted that even though he never had the opportunity to appear on any of Monroe's records, his banjo did. "Rudy Lyle," he said, "played my banjo on some of Bill's recordings such as 'Sugar Coated Love'." The instrument in question was a 1934 Gibson Mastertone, RB-3, with bow-tie inlay design. "I bought it in 1936 at a music store in Elizabethton, Tennessee. It cost \$100.00. I traded an S.S. Stewart in on it. They allowed me thirty dollars on the S.S. Stewart, which had cost \$45.00 new. Well, I like to have never got that Gibson paid for. I paid it off a dollar or two dollars at a time."

"I first started out as a ballad singer," he mused while recalling the early days of his career when he was known as Speedy Clark. "I sang all those Bradley Kincaid and Doc Hopkins type songs."

During his long career, Old Joe Clark, the comedian, played to many a straight man and Old Joe Clark, the vocalist, harmonized with quite a few tenors and basses. His biggest thrill, however, has come with the opportunity of performing with his son, Terry. The youngest of his father's four children, Terry became Old Joe Clark's sidekick and straight man at the age of ten.

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Chick Stripling – Dancer, Comedian, and Old-Time Fiddler

By Wayne Daniel

If they gave gold medals for an entertainment triathlon event, Chick Stripling would have been a strong contender for the prize. He received high marks from fans and peers for his abilities in three areas—fiddling, comedy, and dancing. “He was a truly outstanding and talented entertainer and a very fine old-time fiddler,” said fiddler Frank Maloy, who knew Chick in the 1950s. “Chick was one of the finest buck dancers I ever saw,” said Jim McReynolds, recalling the days when Chick worked with Jim and Jesse on the South Georgia and south Alabama television circuit. “He was probably the best comedian I ever saw in any of the road shows [that worked Sunset Park],” said Lawrence A. Waltman, owner of the oldest country music park that is still in operation, Sunset Park in West Grove, Pa., where Chick worked during the latter years of his career.

James Wilson “Chick” Stripling was born March 4, 1916, in Tifton, deep in the heart of South Georgia, 60 miles from the Florida line. He was the fourth child of the three boys and three girls born to Mary Jane Lott Stripling and Charles Chris Stripling. The elder Mr. Stripling, who worked in the Tifton Post Office, played several instruments, including fiddle, banjo, and guitar. One of Chick’s brothers, now deceased, also played fiddle, according to his cousin Elwood Stripling.

During his early years Chick lived with his family in Tifton, but he also spent part of his youth on a farm west of Lenox, a tiny town located about 15 miles south of Tifton. Chick’s father bought

the farm and moved his family there because he thought a rural atmosphere would be a better place in which to rear his children.

In addition to his exposure to music in the home, Chick had other relatives who were musicians. There were also fiddle contests in the communities and small towns of the region and they provided opportunities for Chick to hear and learn from other musicians living in a wide area of South Georgia and north Florida. By the time he was in his teens he was performing regularly in a band that included relatives as well as other local amateur musicians. They worked the local fiddlers' contests, played for home-hosted square dances, or frolics as they were often called in Chick's part of the country, provided music for commercial dance halls, and performed on a local radio station.

Elwood Stripling stated that around 1937 or 1938 a man by the name of Gene Mills from South Carolina brought a country band he called the Twilight Playboys to nearby Moultrie to work on the radio station there and put on tent shows in the surrounding area. Mills hired Chick to work in his band.

It was only natural for Chick to add dancing and comedy to his entertainment arsenal. "He was always a comedian," said his sister Mrs. Mary Evelyn Willingham of Ashburn, Ga. Mac Atcheson, a musician who worked with Chick in Atlanta in the 1940s, said that Chick was a comedian both on stage and off stage.

Buck dancing, the other talent that Chick drew on for his stage act, came to him as naturally as comedy. "He was dancing by the time he was four or five years old," recalled Elwood Stripling. "Chick was really talented with his feet," said Frank Maloy. "He told me that when he was a kid he wore out the kitchen rug dancing." Chick's approach to entertaining was to capture the audience one way or another. Before going on stage he knew he could play a fiddle tune, and if that didn't stir up the crowd, he had his comedy routine to fall back on. "And if that don't make 'em

laugh,” he used to tell Jim McReynolds, “I’ll put my feet to work.” On the shows he worked with Jim and Jesse, Chick played fiddle only as a novelty feature, offering up such tunes as “Johnson’s Old Gray Mule.”

In 1938 or 1939, Macon, Ga., native Gene Stripling (no relation to Chick) whose country band, Uncle Ned and the Texas Wranglers, had been since 1937 a featured attraction on the Cross Roads Follies heard on Atlanta’s WSB, took his act to south Georgia to play a show date. “They put on a show at a school house down here,” recalled George Godwin of Lenox, Ga., who grew up with Chick and his brothers. “Chick got Uncle Ned [Gene Stripling] to put him on stage.” Uncle Ned was sufficiently impressed with his performance that he hired Chick on the spot. For the next eight years Chick was one of the most popular fiddlers, comedians, and buck dancers to be heard on Atlanta radio. After the Cross Roads Follies was dropped from WSB’s schedule, he became a member of the cast of the WSB Barn Dance that went on the air on November 16, 1940. Except for some brief interludes every now and then, Chick was heard regularly on the Barn Dance until at least the spring of 1946.

Other musicians who, at one time or another, worked with Chick in Uncle Ned’s band on WSB, included singer guitarist Pete Cassell, Sammy Forsmark, “Rocky Top” co-composer Boudleaux Bryant, and a girl singer and bass player named Cassie Nell Coleman. Miss Coleman and Chick Stripling were married on October 29, 1939. They divorced in 1944, without having had any children, and Cassie Nell returned to Macon where she again worked for a short time with Uncle Ned who, in the meantime, had also moved to that city. Later, she and her sister, Tinkie, worked as a vocal duet on a Macon radio station. Cassie Nell remarried, and she and her husband made their home in Metter, Ga. Those who knew Chick in later years say that he married again. Chick is

believed to have had at least one child, a son, but efforts to locate him on behalf of this article were unsuccessful.

While working on the WSB Barn Dance, a Saturday night combination stage and radio show, Chick was also heard on WSB's daily midday hillbilly program, the Georgia Jubilee, and other of the station's programs that featured country music. The artists on these programs made personal appearances in schoolhouses and theaters throughout Georgia with occasional forays into Alabama, Florida, and South Carolina. Chick's fellow performers on WSB included the Swanee River Boys, James and Martha Carson, Hank Penny, Cousin Emmy, Pete Cassell, and several other fiddlers, such as Bertha Amburgey (sister to Martha Carson), Blackie Hastings, Shorty Steed, Boudleaux Bryant, and Bobby Atcheson. Chick frequently joined the other fiddlers to play duets and trios.

Among the fiddle tunes that Chick played most frequently on the Barn Dance were "Cacklin' Hen," "Runaway Train," "Wagoner," and a tune he is reported to have composed himself, "Colquitt County Hoedown." Colquitt County is located in the South Georgia area in which Chick grew up. According to the *Atlanta Journal's* radio pages, another tune that Chick played several times on the WSB Barn Dance was one they called "Don't Forget The Fiddler." Listeners who were knowledgeable about fiddle tunes must have been puzzled when they heard that title announced on the air, especially when they recognized the tune as one they had always known as "Give The Fiddler A Dram." An examination of WSB's music index reveals that the tune was catalogued under the first title with the second title in parenthesis. Apparently Cox Enterprises, owners of both the *Atlanta Journal* and WSB, had a prohibition about printing and announcing a tune title that mentioned the consumption of alcohol.

Harpo Kidwell, a harmonica player who worked with Chick on the WSB Barn Dance, states that Chick would periodically take

a leave from the Barn Dance and go on tour with Bill Monroe. This tendency to move around from group to group and location to location seems to have been characteristic of Chick throughout his career.

In the 1950s after the WSB Barn Dance, like most of the live country music radio shows, had ceased to exist, Uncle Ned and His Texas Wranglers were back in Macon playing show dates, dances, and appearing on the local radio and television stations, WMAZ and WMAZ-TV. “Chick used to come through and work with us periodically,” said Frank Maloy, who was a member of Uncle Ned’s Macon-based band. “He’d come and stay a short while and play a tune on the fiddle. We were on radio and TV in Macon and were working primarily for dances and occasionally for a show. Chick would go along, and when we would take intermission, he would put on his little comedy act and do his specialty dance number, the buck dance and tap steps. It was a deal like Lew Childre used to do. He had a kind of running dialog where he’d be dancing and talking all at the same time. Chick was of the older generation of fiddlers. He was influenced by the fiddlers who came along before the radio. You could truthfully say that his fiddling was the true traditional old-time style.”

Frank Maloy’s brother, Joe, who played lead guitar in WMAZ-TV’s house band remembers Chick’s visits to the station. “He was a good backstage comedian,” he said. “He always kept the other entertainers laughing.”

Frank Maloy stated that a fiddler who had an influence on Chick was Clayton McMichen. “A number that Chick loved to play was ‘Georgiana Moon,’ and he learned it directly from Clayton McMichen,” Maloy said. “He did a great job on ‘Listen To The Mockingbird,’ and he showed me a little part to that tune that I’d never heard before. I asked him where he got it, and he said that Clayton McMichen showed it to him.”

It is not totally clear exactly when Chick was associated with McMichen. Some of Chick's South Georgia acquaintances think that McMichen probably attended some of the fiddle contests in that area where Chick would have heard him play. At some point in time Chick appeared on stage with McMichen. In 1959, while interviewing McMichen, Fred Hoeptner and Bob Pinson found among his "strictly in the '30s" souvenirs a poster for an Old Time Fiddlers' Contest that listed among the performers Clayton McMichen and "Chicken [sic] Stripling— National Champion Buck and Wing Dancer."

In 1955 Jim and Jesse McReynolds moved to Lave Oak, Fla., where they starred on a Saturday night show called the Suwannee River Jamboree. In 1959 they took their act 35 miles north to Valdosta, Ga., and became the featured attraction on the Lowndes County Jamboree heard on WVOP, a 5000-watt Valdosta radio station. During this period in their career Jim and Jesse shuttled back and forth between such cities as Savannah and Thomasville, Ga., Tallahassee and Pensacola, Fla., and Dothan, Ala., putting on weekly half-hour television shows. In addition they found time to book personal appearances in the surrounding small-town schools and theaters. "We were working a school date at Adel, Ga., in 1957 or 1958, when Chick Stripling showed up and asked if he could do something on our show," Jim McReynolds recalled. "We had heard of him through his work with Monroe and Flatt and Scruggs, so we let him go on. He was such a talented person." As Uncle Ned had done 20 years earlier, Jim and Jesse hired Chick. "He was a regular member of our group for a couple of years," Jim said. "We used to go up to his parents' farm at Lenox and bird hunt. Chick's mother and father passed away while he was working for us."

Chick's penchant for peregrination expressed itself during his tenure with Jim and Jesse. "He left us for about two or three months and did a tour with Ernest Tubb," Jim recalled.

There were many other groups with whom Chick worked over the years. According to writer Gene Wiggins, Chick worked with Fiddlin' John Carson entertaining at political rallies during Herman Talmadge's 1946 race for governor of Georgia. The Lily Brothers first met Chick in the late forties when he was working for Bill Monroe. "Chick later went to work with Red Belcher at WWVA in Wheeling, W. Va.," Everett Lilly recalled. "He told Red about us, and that's how we got a job on the Wheeling Jamboree. But Chick did only one show on WWVA after we went there." (The Lilly Brothers went to work at WWVA in 1948.) Nashville booking agent Lance LeRoy remembered seeing Chick on an Augusta, Ga., television station in the early 1960s, appearing with Charlie Moore and Bill Napier. According to Johnson Mountain Boys fiddler Eddie Stubbs, a disc jockey and bluegrass historian, Chick played bass fiddle for Jimmy Martin in 1962. Chick also worked with the Stanley Brothers and with Don Reno and Red Smiley. One of Chick's last jobs was at Sunset Park in Pennsylvania. "He worked here in 1966 with our home band Alex and Olabelle and the New River Boys as a comedian," said Lawrence Waltman.

According to his obituary in *Bluegrass Unlimited*, Chick died November 19, 1970, at Alexandria, Va. Apparently, his last years were beset with poor health and financial difficulties. Tom Reeder, a disc jockey at WKCW in Warrenton, Va., knew Chick from the 1950s until his death. In fact, Reeder helped plan Chick's funeral. Pallbearers were Bobby Stephenson, Paul Justice, Roy Justice, Tom Reeder, Stewart Brooks, and Red Shipley, all musicians and/or radio personalities from the Washington, D.C./northern Virginia area. According to Reeder, Chick was buried in Alexandria.

Chick Stripling left behind only a small sample of his talents. He played a fiddle tune, "Chickie's Old Gray Mule" on the Stanley Brothers Gusto album *1983 Collector's Edition-Volume 3*. The same album contained a bass break and an audible dance routine

by Chick on the song “Mama Don’t Allow.” These tunes were originally recorded at the King studio in Cincinnati, Ohio, on May 4, 1962. Chick can be seen and heard on the video “Rainbow Quest With Pete Seeger and Guests Featuring Stanley Brothers, Clinch Mountain Boys & Cousin Emmy.” In addition to playing bass behind the Stanleys, Chick performed a brief comedy routine and put his feet to work on a dance number he calls the “Butter Paddle Buck And Wing.” The video was originally made around 1966, approximately four years before Chick’s death.

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The Legacy of A. P. Carter

By Wayne Daniel

Had it not been for the deep religious convictions of A. P. Carter's parents, he might have gone down in history as a great fiddler rather than as a composer, song collector, and the patriarch of the first family of country music. "His parents were very religious," said A. P.'s daughter Janette. "They bought him a fiddle, but they didn't want him to play for dances. They thought that kind of fiddle music was the devil's music. Before the Carter Family ever recorded, Daddy was offered a contract by a record company to make fiddle records. They wanted to call him 'Fiddlin' Doc.' But his mother persuaded him not to do it."

Thus the musical career of A. P. Carter took a different turn. The story of the Carter Family - A. P., his one-time wife, Sara, and his brother's wife, Maybelle, who was also Sara's cousin - has been widely told and is well-known to everyone with the slightest interest in old-time country music. It is a story that starts in the ancestral home of the Carter Family, Poor Valley, which, in the words of Janette Carter, "lies in a long lay of land between Clinch Mountain and a large hill called the Nob." If you want to find Poor Valley on a map, look westward from the Atlantic Ocean, along the Tennessee border, in the toe of the state of Virginia, in Scott County, about halfway between Kingsport and Bristol. You won't actually find it on the map, but you will find the names of many neighboring geographic sites: the nearby North Fork of the Holston River; Hiltons, the closest town; U. S. 29 that skirts the valley on the south; and County Highway 613 to the north.

The story of the Carter Family is the story of A. P. Carter who, as a young man, roamed the hills and valleys of western Virginia on foot selling fruit trees and listening to and remembering the

ballads and tunes sung and played by the folk of the Appalachian Mountain. It was on one such trek, to Midway, Virginia, that he heard Sara Dougherty playing an autoharp and singing “Engine 143.” He declared her the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

The story of the Carter Family includes the marriage of Sara Dougherty and A. P. Carter and the marriage of Maybelle Addington and Ezra Carter. Before Maybelle made the group a trio, A. P. and Sara sang as a duet. In her book, *Living With Memories*, Janette writes of her parents’ first personal appearance. While returning to Poor Valley after a trip to visit relatives in Charlottesville, Virginia, the Carters’ car broke down. Without money to pay for the vehicle’s repair, A. P. and Sara made arrangements to stage an impromptu show at a nearby school. They drew a paying audience of sufficient size to bring in enough money to pay for the repair of their car to get them home. But mostly the singing Carters sang for their own pleasure and that of their family and neighbors. Until 1927, that is.

The now familiar story of the Carter Family would not be here for the telling except for what happened in August 1 and 2, 1927. It was on those two hot summer days that the three singers from Poor Valley first put their music on wax in what has come to be acknowledged as a watershed event in the history of country music. Members of the Carter clan who considered themselves more practical than A. P., whose reputation as an eccentric was known throughout the valley, rolled their eyes when he announced that he, Sara, and Maybelle were going to Bristol, Virginia, to make phonograph records for Ralph Peer and the Victor record company. But go they did, and those who snickered lived to witness the phenomenal popularity of the Carter Family. From these sessions a mere six sides enough for three records - were released. Some 300 others would follow over the next 14 years. Also to follow

were radio broadcasts and personal appearances in school houses, churches, and theaters. Although Carter Family programs featured primarily the voices of Sara, A. P., and Maybelle and Maybelle's guitar and Sara's autoharp, the baggage of the touring act always included A. P.'s fiddle. "He never played it much," June Carter Cash once recalled, but he always carried it. Janette remembers hearing her father play the fiddle. "He played it well," she has written, "though never on record."

The story of the Carter Family is the story of three Virginia mountaineers who, in 1938, moved to the flatlands of Texas where, for the next three years, their music was beamed all across the United States and Canada from the powerful border radio stations, XERA, XEF, and XENT, located along the Rio Grande River. "And so," according to June Carter Cash, "began a new way of life for simple mountain people." The move boosted Carter Family record sales and earned them thousands of new fans among radio listeners.

The story of the Carter Family continues with the story of the large body of traditional and once popular commercial songs that A. P. Carter rescued from oblivion and almost certain extinction and reintroduced to the public decked out in fresh and enduring arrangements. How poorer old-time country and bluegrass music would be without such Carter Family songs as "Wildwood Flower," "Wabash Cannonball," "I'm Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes," "Foggy Mountain Top," "Keep on the Sunny Side," and "Will the Circle by Unbroken."

The story of the Carter Family is the story of Maybelle Carter and her daughters, Helen, June, and Anita, who, after the breakup of the original Carter Family in the early 1940's, carved out a career for themselves as Mother Maybelle and the Carter Sisters. Their musical journey took them to Charlotte, North Carolina;

Richmond, Virginia; Knoxville, Tennessee; Springfield, Missouri; and finally to Nashville and the Grand Ole Opry. This chapter of the Carter Family story includes June Carter's joint career with husband Johnny Cash, and the career of Carlene Carter, June's daughter by a former husband, Carl Smith.

The musical career of A. P. Carter ended where it had started - in Poor Valley. After the original Carter Family disbanded he returned to his boyhood home. He opened a country store, occasionally promoted musical events at an outdoor park near his home, and with Sara, son Joe, and daughter Janette, recorded for the Acme label. A. P. Carter died on November 7, 1960. His body lies in the Mount Vernon Church Cemetery just up the road from his home, but his spirit lived on in the work of his children who perpetuated the Carter Family musical legacy in the shadow of Clinch Mountain.

A. P. And Sara Carter had three children, Gladys (now deceased), Joe, and Janette. Since 1979, they and their descendants operated the Carter Family Memorial Music Center in Poor Valley. The enterprise was founded and directed by Janette. "Daddy told me before he died," Janette explained, "that if his work was to be carried on, I would have to be the one to do it. So I promised him, 'I will carry on your work.' All I'm trying to do is preserve the traditional bluegrass and old time music." Inspired by a passage in the Bible, Joe named the music center's concert venue, located in the Maces Springs community, the Carter Fold. In Jeremiah 23:3, we read, "Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply,"

For a number of years, every Saturday night at 7:30 (8:00 during daylight saving time) Janette presented a music show from the spacious stage of the rustic, 1,000-seat music shed. Janette served as mistress of ceremonies, and she, playing autoharp,

and Joe, playing guitar, started each program with a selection of vintage Carter Family songs such as “Wildwood Flower,” “Keep on the Sunnyside,” and “You Are My Flower.” Their opening was followed by the main attraction, featuring a performance by some local or regional bluegrass or old-time country act. Janette’s son, Dale, ran the sound. Only acoustic instruments were allowed on stage. A dance floor in front of the stage filled up quickly when the band went into a hoe-down tune or waltz number. Local residents of all ages helped to keep alive such traditional dance styles as buck dancing and clogging. Although dancing was encouraged, Janette announced the rules at the beginning of each program: “No dancing to hymns. Dance decently.” The audience was also asked to applaud at the end of songs only, not during their rendition. The shows were advertised as family entertainment. According to the center’s official brochure, “No intoxicants are sold and drinking is strictly prohibited.” A. P. Carter, frustrated in his own ambition to become a professional fiddler, would no doubt have been happy to see that the art form flourished among the scenes of his childhood. He would also have been pleased to find that his daughter saw to it that every Saturday night “The Program is Morally Good.”

To find the Carter Fold take Route 709 out of Hiltons to Route 614 and turn east. You’ll know you are on the right road when you see the sign that tells you that you’re on the A. P. Carter Highway. About three miles down the road you’ll come to the Fold on your left. A short distance farther, on the right, is the A. P. Carter homeplace. About a mile up the road, sitting far back on the left, was the home of Maybelle and Ezra Carter, later owned by June and Johnny Cash. A side road to the left will take you to Mt. Vernon Methodist Church and the cemetery in which A. P. and Sara are buried. Nearby, but unfortunately closed to the public, is the home in which A. P. Carter was born.

Next to the Fold is the old A. P. Carter Store, which he operated from 1945 to 1950. It now serves as a museum, housing hundreds of Carter Family memorabilia: photographs, 78 rpm records, books, musical instruments, show clothes, and other items recalling the golden age of country music which, as country music historian Bill Malone has pointed out, was in many ways dominated by the Carter Family. Alas, one item is missing from the museum's vast collection — A. P. Carter's fiddle. The instrument, according to Janette, was lost track of somewhere along the way. Nobody knows what happened to it.

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Curley Williams: Country Fiddler, Western Swing bandleader, Composer of Pop Music Hit

By Wayne Daniel

Hank Williams had written the song and the “C” must have been a typo in the credits: “H” Williams instead of “C” Williams. Or maybe they thought a relative of Hank’s had written the song, following the tradition of Elsie McWilliams who wrote songs for her brother-in-law, Jimmie Rodgers.

The composer of “Half As Much,” however, was Curley Williams, who was unrelated to Hank. Recorded August 10, 1951, at the Castle Studios in Nashville, Hank Williams’s recording of “Half As Much” hit the *Billboard* country music charts on April 25, 1952, remained there for 16 weeks, and topped out at the No. 2 spot. Rosemary Clooney’s recording of the song first appeared on the pop charts on May 16, 1952. During its 26-week residence on *Billboard’s* chart, her version of “Half As Much” also made it to the No. 2 position. Clooney’s recording occupied a spot on the *Cash Box* chart for 18 weeks where it readier No. 1. Not a trivial accomplishment for the creative output of a South Georgia country fiddler turned songwriter.

Curley Williams was born Dock Williams near Cairo, Georgia, on June 3, 1914. The farm on which he was born and raised was located in the Little Sink Militia District of Grady County, less than 20 miles from the Florida line. Out of eight children, Curley was the seventh son born to a country fiddler who was also the son of a country fiddler. Mindful of the old adage that a seventh son

was destined to become a doctor, Curley's parents considered it appropriate to christen their seventh son Dock. Years later Curley observed that the old saying obviously has its exceptions. Among Curley's seven brothers, three became musicians and all three of them, Sanford, J.D., and Joseph, were members of Curley's bands at one time or another.

"My father played fiddle and guitar," recalled Curley's daughter, Morelle Henry. "He was self-taught. The fiddle he played belonged to his grandfather. One of the first things I remember about my daddy is when he used to play for dances in South Georgia." Back then, making music was a sideline, as the Williamses earned their living raising cotton and corn.

Country music artists who wanted to get ahead in the 1930's and '40's had to have radio exposure. Every town of appreciable size had a radio station and most of them featured one or more hillbilly bands. Curley and his group, then called the Santa Fe Trail Riders, made their radio debut on WPAX in Thomasville, Georgia, around 1940. Like almost all country music groups of the time, Curley and his band changed radio outlets periodically, always in search of larger audiences. Curley's stint at WPAX was followed by jobs on two other South Georgia stations, WMGA in Moultrie and WALB in Albany.

Curley's big break came in December 1942 when he was asked to take his band to Nashville to join the cast of the Grand Ole Opry. The band that performed on the Opry consisted of Curley, vocals and fiddle; Joseph Williams, rhythm guitar; Sanford Williams, bass and comedy; Clyde "Boots" Harris, steel guitar; Joe Pope, piano; and Jimmy Selph, vocals and guitar. Boots Harris had joined Curley's group earlier in the year at Albany, Georgia. In his biography of Hank Williams, Colin Escott explained that, at the time, Harris was working with Hank Williams whose band was

on tour backing Tex Ritter. The tour included Albany where Ritter and Hank played a show date with Curley. It was then that Harris, who was 17 years old, decided to cast his lot with Curley.

Upon the arrival of Curley and his group in Nashville a problem arose concerning Curley's name and the name of the band. Up to then he had been known by his real name, Dock. The name Doc Williams, however, was in use by Andrew Smik who adopted the appellation in 1936. He and his band, the Border Riders, achieved widespread recognition as a head liner on the WWVA Jamboree in Wheeling, West Virginia. To avoid confusion, as the story goes, WSM's George D. Hay, originator of the Grand Ole Opry, suggested that his new artist take the name Curley, because of his curly hair, and call his band the Georgia Peach Pickers, because most of them were from Georgia.

Curley and the Georgia Peach Pickers were heard regularly on the Opry on the 9:00 to 9:30 segment sponsored by Royal Crown Cola and on the 10:15 to 10:30 portion for such sponsors as Weatherhouse and Walrite. From time to time they also made appearances on the show's other time slots, including the NBC network show sponsored by Prince Albert Smoking Tobacco. Their musical offerings included songs like 'There Is No Love To Die', 'Smoke On The Water', 'Hang Your Head In Shame', and instrumental such as 'Blue Steel Blues', 'South', and 'Steel Guitar Twist'. While on the Opry, Curley and his Georgia Peach Pickers worked with such artists as Curley Fox and Texas Ruby, the Cackle Sisters (Carolyn and Mary Jane De Zurik), Paul Howard and His Arkansas Cotton Pickers, Zeke Clements, Pee Wee King and the Golden West Cowboys, Bill Monroe, Roy Acuff, Minnie Pearl, and Ernest Tubb.

"Doc" Ramblin' Tommy Scott, a Toccoa, Georgia, native who became famous touring the country with his Snake Oil

medicine show, also appeared on the Opry during Curley's stay on the Saturday night radio/stage program. Prior to joining the Opry, Scott had worked on several radio stations around the Southeast, including one in Anderson, South Carolina, where a man named Jim Bulleit was an announcer. After Bulleit, who later founded the Bullet Record Company, took a job at WSM he arranged for Scott to become a member of the Opry cast. "Jim Bulleit was the Artists' Service Manager [at WSM]," Scott recalls. "And he said, 'Curley needs some [personal appearance] dates.'"¹ Consequently, Scott continued, "We made a deal, so we went on the road together. I had a stretch out limousine, and Curley had, I believe it was a LaSalle, and it had three seats. And we took those two and tied the bass on top and took off for Florida. [After our last Opry set] we'd drive all night. Those roads were not like they are now. So by the time we'd get in to Florida it would be late Sunday afternoon. We did this twenty-six times. We'd head out of there after the show Friday night and drive just as hard as we could tear back to Nashville and all day Saturday and get in just in time to go on the air. Then we'd go down [into] south Alabama, over into South Carolina. It like to killed all of us."

On his show dates with Curley and the Georgia Peach Pickers, Scott says he usually opened the show with his ventriloquist act featuring his Charlie McCarthy-like dummy, Luke McLuke. Scott provided comedy for the shows as well as playing guitar, and sometimes piano, in Curley's band.

Scott remembered the Royal Crown Cola programs on the Grand Ole Opry. "They'd roll [bottles of RC Cola] across the stage and they'd have a fifty-pound block of ice in an upright little ice box and it chipped up, and the drinks were just stacked all on the top, and while the show was going on two little girls would be opening those things and giving them to cast members who back

then sat on the stage when they weren't performing. Meanwhile, says Scott, the audience was "out there fanning it was so hot. There was no air conditioning in that old building," Scott also recalled that "back then they didn't pay anything. You did it for free on the Opry. In fact, they took ten percent of what you made out on the road." In his biography, *Hell Bent for Music*, Pee Wee King recalled those free Opry performances. "Our 'payoff,'" he stated, "was that we became known as Opry stars and could announce our show dates on the air."

On November 12, 1943, Curley Williams and the Georgia Peach Pickers entered into a one-year recording contract with Columbia Records with the intent to record six sides. The contract stipulated a half-cent royalty on 90 percent of the per-side revenues with an advance payment at union scale. Fulfillment of the contract was delayed because of the protracted ban on recording following the 1942 strike of the American Federation of Musicians. Contract renewals kept the deal alive until after the recording ban was lifted. Curley and the Georgia Peach Pickers cut their first records for Columbia on February 20, 1945. On that first session the group recorded some of their better known songs, such as 'Jealous Lady', 'Georgia Steel Guitar', and 'Southern Belle' (from Nashville, Tennessee). Curley and his band made several return visits to the Columbia studios in 1952. In addition to their own recordings, Curley and his band can be heard playing backup on records by Zeke Clements, Johnny Bond, Clyde Moody, and Fred Rose, who recorded as the Rambling Rogue. Two long-play albums of Curley's recordings were issued: *Radio Favorites* on Old Homestead records and *The Original "Half As Much"* on the Cow Girl/Boy label.

The June 1945 issue of *The Grinder's Switch Gazette*, Minnie Pearl's fan magazine, announced that "Curley Williams

and His Georgia Peach Pickers have gone to California this month where they have a contract with the Western Music Corporation to play shows and dances throughout the Western States. Jack Charmella and Farris Coursay, guitarist and drummer with the WSM staff orchestra, join the Peach Pickers to form an eight-piece band.” Jimmy Selph stayed behind in Nashville, and the next month found him working solo on early morning shows, Monday through Saturday, on WSM. From the August 4, 1945, issue of *Billboard* magazine we learn that “Curly [sic] Williams and the Georgia Peach Pickers, of the Grand Ole Opry, and favorites of the entire South, have been signed to a long-term contract by Foreman Phillips and are currently playing at the Venice Pier Ballroom, Venice, Calif.”

While on the West Coast, Curley and his band appeared in a movie for Columbia Studios. Titled *Riders of the Lone Star*, the feature-length film was a Durango Kid series western starring Charles Starrett. Others appearing in the 1947 movie besides Curley, the Georgia Peach Pickers, and Starrett were Smiley Burnett, Virginia Hunter, Steve Darrell, Edmund Cobb, Mark Dennis, George Chesebro, Lane Bradford, Ted Mapes, Peter Perkins, Eddie Parker, Nolan Leary, and Bud Osborne. In the movie Curley and his band play and sing ‘Oh Monah’ and ‘Let Me By’. They accompany Smiley Burnett on a song or two, and play a dance tune at a birthday party.

A few years later the music of Curley Williams and His Georgia Peach Pickers was again recorded on film in a series of short takes made by his friend from Grand Ole Opry days Tommy Scott. On these films, which Scott says were of individual songs made at the Strickland Film Company in Atlanta, Georgia, we hear Curley and his group performing such tunes as ‘Barbecue Rag’, ‘No Not Now’, and ‘Southern Belle’ (From Nashville, Tennessee).

Curley's songs, along with those of such other artists as Tommy Scott, Ed Jordan's Tennessee Farmers, and the John Daniel Quartet were later issued as videos by Cattle Records.

Riders of the Lone Star was still fresh on the minds of the Saturday afternoon western movie and popcorn set when Curley Williams once again made a career change. This time he elected to become a part of the bustling country music scene at KWKH in Shreveport, Louisiana, where the soon to become legendary Louisiana Hayride had taken to the air less than three months earlier. An article in the July 4, 1948, *Shreveport Times* acquainted readers with the fact that "Curly [sic] Williams and his Georgia Peach Pickers, the most recent addition to KWKH's galaxy of folk stars, will begin a new program series on KWKH beginning Wednesday. The Peach Pickers will be heard each Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday at 12:05 p.m. In addition to being regular stars on KWKH's 'Louisiana Hayride' each Saturday night, the group is heard each morning, Monday through Saturday, at 5:30 a.m., and again on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at 6:30 a.m."

The article stated that members of the group, in addition to Curley, were Lee Purvis, piano; Boots Harris, steel guitar; Sanford Williams, bass; Joseph Williams, guitar; and Danny Johnson, electric guitar. Also featured with the group, according to the story, was "Georgianne, twelve-year-old singing star and Curley's daughter. Georgianne has joined the act since they started with KWKH." Little Georgianne (as she was actually called), whose real name was Morelle, sang on several of the Peach Pickers' Columbia records and appeared in the films made by Tommy Scott in Atlanta, Georgia. Later in the month, an ad in the *Shreveport Times* stated that the Georgia Peach Pickers presented "a variety program featuring heart songs, sacred numbers, and novelties." Among the country music luminaries with whom Curley and his

group were associated on stage and radio in Shreveport were the Bailes Brothers, Red Sovine, Sheb Wooley, Cousin Emmy, Johnnie and Jack, Kitty Wells, Harmie Smith, Zeke Clements, and Hank Williams. Curley and Hank were regularly booked on the same roster for personal appearances in the area, and the two became good friends. Curley's daughter, Mrs. Morelle Henry, states that Hank and his wife Audrey often visited and took meals in the Curley Williams' home. She says that Hank liked her mother's home cooking, especially her homemade biscuits. Curley and Hank collaborated on the composition of a couple of songs, 'Honey Don't You Love Me, Huh?' and 'No, Not Now' (with Mel Foree) that both Williamses recorded.

In 1949 Curley pulled up stakes and headed for Memphis, Tennessee, where he and his band appeared on WMC radio and WMC-TV. Curley's brothers, Joseph and Sanford, instead of going to Memphis, returned to California. The Memphis *Commercial Appeal* of Friday April 15, 1949, announced that the Georgia Peach Pickers would begin performing on WMC, both AM and FM, the following Monday. In addition to Curley and Boots Harris, the Georgia Peach Pickers lineup in Memphis, according to the *Commercial Appeal*, included Billy Simmons, piano; Millard "Smokey" Paul, guitar; Jack Ford, rhythm guitar and vocals; and Jimmy Summey, bass player and comedian. At WMC radio, the Peach Pickers had regular early morning and midday time slots. Their television appearances were scheduled during the evenings, usually on Wednesdays. Another country music act appearing on WMC radio and television at the time was one headed up by Slim Rhodes, brother of comedian Spec Rhodes and fiddler Dusty Rhodes.

In March of 1950 Curley Williams and the Georgia Peach Pickers left Memphis and settled in for a relatively long stay in

Anniston, Alabama, a town with a population of about 31,000, located halfway between Atlanta and Birmingham. The band again experienced personnel changes. Boots Harris and Jack Ford made the move to Anniston, and new additions included pianist Wimpey Jones and guitarist Jack Pruett, who later worked with Marty Robbins and married Norma Jean Bowman who, as Jeanne Pruett, had the number one country hit “Satin Sheets.”

In Anniston, Curley and the Peach Pickers worked a regular radio schedule on the city’s WHMA. Their programs, according to Boots Harris, were heard on a regional network that included stations in three other Alabama cities, Birmingham, Montgomery, and Dothan. In addition, the band made personal appearances and played for dances in the area. They had a long-term gig playing for Saturday night dances at the Anniston VFW Club.

As things turned out, Anniston was Curley’s lucky city. It was there that he composed his most popular song, “Half As Much.” After the song became a hit for Hank Williams and Rosemary Clooney, Curley told *Anniston Star* reporter Elise Sanguinetti that the song was “a complete accident.” He said he “went down to WHMA-fooled around a bit down there-thought up the words-put some melody to it, recorded it, and I was back home in one hour.” Curley’s wife Louise told Dorothy Horstman, author of *Sing Your Heart Out, Country Boy*, that when he played the song for his band, they all laughed at him. But Fred Rose offered a flat fee of \$10,000 for the song, but he refused, opting to take his chances on royalties. That was a smart move on Curley’s part; according to Mrs. Henry, her father’s heirs continued collecting royalties on the song.

After about four-and-a-half years in Anniston, Curley made the last move of his career. In 1953 he took his family and band to Montgomery, Alabama. There he worked on radio station WSFA

and, for a couple of years, had a show on WCOV-TV. He also bought a Montgomery night club, the Spur, which he operated until his death on September 5, 1970.

Curley will probably be best remembered by connoisseurs of old time country music for what Colin Escott calls his “light, jazzy, sophisticated western dance music.” In 1945 the country music magazine *Mountain Broadcast* and *Prairie Recorder* called the Georgia Peach Pickers “one of the best hillbilly swing bands.” Some of the old-timers still left in South Georgia remember Curley as a country fiddler who inspired a lot of pre-World War II square dancers to shake a leg. “People in South Georgia still remember Curley Williams,” said Tifton, Georgia fiddler Frank Maloy. “He was a good, versatile player. He couple play country, swing, and pop.” “Doc” Rambling Tommy Scott, who knew the chief Georgia Peach Picker as only one entertainer can know another, remembered him for another reason. “Curley was one of the greatest human beings you’d ever meet,” he said. “He was a gentleman in every way. He and all his brothers were just great people. They are a credit to country music.”

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Eddie Stubbs – Second Generation Bluegrass Fiddler

By Wayne Daniel

In 1980 when the Johnson Mountain Boys, a traditional bluegrass band based in the Maryland/Virginia/Washington, D.C. area, first began to attract national attention, they were referred to as a “band on the run” because of the high levels of energy and enthusiasm they brought to their stage performances.¹ The term was applicable, not only to the way the Johnson Mountain Boys put on a show, but to other aspects of their career as well. Since becoming a full-time band in 1981, the group recorded five albums for the Rounder label (*Johnson Mountain Boys*, *Walls of Time*, *Working Close*, *Live at the Birchmere*, and a gospel album, *We’ll Still Sing On*, during their first five years. During those five years they toured Africa for five weeks as part of the United States’ cultural exchange program, performed in Canada and in the United States as far west as Colorado and Arizona, and made a guest appearance (December 13, 1985) on the Grand Ole Opry. Country music historian Bill C. Malone, writing in the new edition of his *Country Music U.S.A.*, referred to the Johnson Mountain Boys as “the bluegrass band of the future” and “the hope of traditionalists everywhere.”² In his book, *Bluegrass: A History*, Neil V. Rosenberg called them “the most talked about band” in the Washington area and noted that they had become “one of the most popular groups on the (bluegrass) festival circuit.”³ Making no small contribution to the success and critical acclaim of the Johnson Mountain Boys was the band’s fiddle player, the young, dynamic, multi-talented Eddie Stubbs.

Edward Lawrence “Eddie” Stubbs was born November 25, 1961, at Bethesda, Maryland, the oldest of four sons of

Lawrence and Mary Katherine Offutt Stubbs. Eddie has grown up in Gaithersburg, Maryland, in Montgomery County, where his ancestors on both his mother's and his father's side of the family have lived since around 1840.

Both of Eddie's parental great grandfathers were fiddlers, as well as his father, who began playing when he was sixteen. At the age of four Eddie was introduced to the instrument by his father, and shortly afterwards he could do a credible job on his first tune, "Boil Them Cabbage Down." He began private violin lessons when he was in the second grade, and enrolled in the string instrument music program at his school in the third grade. He continued to study violin in school until he graduated from high school in 1979. Besides his father's fiddling, Eddie was exposed to other music in his home. He listened to his father's collection of bluegrass and country records and tuned in the bluegrass and country music programs that were available on the local radio and television stations. He developed a special love for the country music of the forties, fifties, and sixties.

Eddie's early experiences as a public performer included winning fourth place in a talent show that drew 35 contestants when he was nine years old. "I played 'Boil Them Cabbage Down,' 'Pop Goes The Weasel,' and 'Turkey In The Straw,'" he recalled. "I was competing against people playing electric country music of the era," he added, while Eddie's back-up musicians played acoustic instruments: bass, guitar, and banjo. His act was labeled bluegrass, and this was the first time he heard the term applied to music. A few years later, Eddie won first place in a fiddlers' contest. During his junior high and high school years, Eddie frequently played at school variety shows, community functions, and other events in a three-man band that included his music teacher, Ellsworth Briggs who played upright bass, and his junior high school principal, Wayne Busbice, better known as Buzz Busby, a popular mandolin

player and bluegrass vocalist who had migrated to the Washington, D.C. area from Louisiana.

When he was 16 years old Eddie made his debut as a fiddler with a full-fledged bluegrass band. “In July of 1977,” he related, “I went to Hyattstown, Maryland, (to attend) an all-day bluegrass show, and I met this group called the Bluegrass Image (that was on the entertainment bill for the day).” One of the band members was Ernie Bradley, the banjo player who had played backup for Eddie at the talent show seven years earlier. “He wanted to know if I had my fiddle with me — which I did — and if I would get up and play with them,” said Eddie. “So I did, and I remember we just tore them up. We played ‘Orange Blossom Special’ on every set. (While) I was up there on the stage playing, one of the band members, Mack Wollard, walked over to me and asked me if I would be interested in joining the band.” The idea appealed to Eddie, but it was not until the following April that he was able to perform with the band on a regular basis. According to Eddie it was “one of the best bands in the Frederick, Maryland, area. They worked a lot. I was the sixth member.” Mack Wollard played the guitar; another fellow, Gene Beachley, played guitar; Ernie Bradley played banjo; Bob Fream played the mandolin; and Larry Robbins, who is now with the Johnson Mountain Boys, played bass.

In August, 1978, Eddie met the Johnson Mountain Boys for the first time. “I was working at the Montgomery County Fair,” Eddie related. “Wayne Busbice had booked me in there with him as a featured performer, (and he had also booked) the Johnson Mountain Boys, who were an up and coming bluegrass band in the Washington area.” At the time, the band was composed of Dudley Connell, vocals and guitar; Francis “Frannie” Davidson, banjo; David McLaughlin, fiddle; Ed D’zmura, mandolin, and Mark Prindle, bass fiddle. After hearing Eddie’s performance, Connell

approached him about playing fiddle with the Johnson Mountain Boys to replace David McLaughlin, who was leaving the band (temporarily as it turned out) to go to college. Eddie agreed to take the job, began practicing with the group, and on November 16, 1978, he played his first job with them, a concert at the Baltimore College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland. At first he worked on a part-time basis while holding down day jobs as a house painter and a printing press operator then, on February 28, 1981, Eddie quit his day job to become a full-time musician.

Eddie was one of a cohort of young, second-generation bluegrass fiddlers that included Elaine Sprouse (fiddler for the Osborne Brothers), Johnny Warren (Curly Seckler and the Nashville Grass), and Mike Hartgrove (the Bluegrass Cardinals). Following in the wake of such originals as Chubby Wise, Kenny Baker, Buck Ryan, Scotty Stoneman, Paul Warren, and Benny Martin, these younger artists carried forward and built on the bluegrass tradition. In addition to his father, Eddie acknowledged his debt to fiddlers Paul Warren, Tater Tate, Sonny Miller, Carl Nelson, Tommy Jackson, Mack Magaha, and Scotty Stoneman.

“Paul Warren, who played with (Lester) Flatt and (Earl) Scruggs was my biggest influence,” Eddie vowed. “That’s one reason I liked them so much -- I really liked Paul Warren’s fiddle playing. I don’t play that much like him. I wish I played more like him. I never saw Paul Warren,” he added, “which was a really big let down in my life. But Johnny Warren (Paul’s son) and I are good friends, and he plays just exactly like his father. If you ever heard him play, it’s just like hearing a ghost.” Johnny has taught Eddie some of his father’s licks and distinctive breaks.

Speaking of Clarence “Tater” Tate, one-time leader of the Shenandoah Cutups, Eddie says that “he’s been one of the few people that has sat down and worked with me on fiddle tunes.”

One of the tunes he taught Eddie is “Smoky Mountain Rag.”

“Also,” Eddie continued, “a guy who showed me an awful lot — and I’ve been picking up a lot more on his style of fiddling -- was Sonny Miller, who never really got the credit he deserved. He was a real (Bill) Monroe style fiddle player. When he died he was playing with Del McCoury and the Dixie Pals. Sonny and I were really good friends for about two years, and he helped me with my fiddling. I’ve also learned a lot from Sonny by listening to his records.”

One of Eddie’s greatest idols was Scotty Stoneman, a man he never met, but whose influence has come to Eddie through his father, who was a personal friend of Stoneman. “Daddy ran into Scotty at a show date where the Stoneman Family was performing, and he took a liking to my dad and really showed him a lot. Daddy used to go over to see him about once a week, and they used to pal around. They’d go out in the woods and build a camp fire and sit around the fire and fiddle.” Eddie listened to a lot of Stoneman’s records. In fact, “I’ve got almost every recording that he ever made,” he noted. “Scotty’s favorite kind of fiddle playing was lonesome fiddle playing, and that’s the stuff that I really picked up on.” Eddie, who worked as a disc jockey at Washington, D.C. area radio stations and for the Voice of America, once prepared a three-hour radio program in tribute to Stoneman.

Eddie’s fiddling style is not solely the product of what he has learned from other fiddlers. Nine years of public school music also had their effect. “By playing music in school,” Eddie explained, “I developed an appreciation for all forms of music. In school I was playing every day. Regardless of what I was playing, I still had my hand in the right position, and I was fingering the keyboard. I wasn’t playing bluegrass or fiddle tunes, but I was playing every day, and the notes were the same.” He admitted that if he

had applied himself more during those school-days lessons, they might have been even more beneficial.

Eddie's repertoire of fiddle tunes includes old-time standards such as "Wake Up Susan," "Sally Johnson," and "Sugar In The Gourd"; show pieces that include "Black Mountain Blues," "Orange Blossom Special," and "Listen To The Mockingbird"; and his own compositions. "I've written, probably, about 10 tunes altogether," Eddie said. "The first fiddle tune I wrote was a tune called 'Eddie's Hoedown' that I recorded on the Copper Creek label (*Johnson Mountain Boys* 45rpm, extended play). It was the first record that I was ever on. Then I wrote a tune called 'The Montgomery County Breakdown' which I titled after the county I live in. Another tune I wrote and we recorded is called 'Sugarloaf Mountain Special.' The Sugarloaf Mountain is a mountain about 25 miles from where I live. I've written several other tunes," he concluded, "including a couple of waltz tunes."

Eddie's musical talents are not restricted to the fiddle. He can also play the guitar and banjo. Although recently his banjo has spent more time in its case than out, for a while during his high school years, it appeared that it might replace the fiddle as Eddie's primary instrument. Eddie talked about those years. "Between the eighth and ninth grade I developed a strong interest in the banjo. I remember looking through my dad's records and running across records like the original cut of 'Foggy Mountain Breakdown' on Mercury and the 'Banjo Strut' and 'Bugle Call Rag' by the McCormick Brothers, and some of this stuff was really urging me on. I really wanted to get heavy into the banjo, so I said, 'I'm going to get me a banjo and learn how to play.' Well, it kinda offended my dad. He said, 'I really don't approve of your fooling with this banjo.' He was afraid I was going to let the fiddle go by the wayside. But the banjo was what actually drew me heavily into bluegrass

music. I got the Earl Scruggs (instruction) book and record that he put out, and I set out to buy every Flatt and Scruggs record I could get my hands on.” He even gained sufficient proficiency on the banjo to win second place in a contest. Eddie found, however, that when it came to performing with bands, fiddle players were more in demand than banjo players, and as he matured, the fiddle again became his dominant instrument.

Not only is Eddie an accomplished instrumentalist, he is also a singer whose voice, with proper exploitation, could very well take him to greater heights musically than the fiddle. His is not the stereotypical high lonesome bluegrass voice. He has a mellow, full-bodied voice, and a wide range that allows him, not only to serve as bass singer in the Johnson Mountain Boys quartet, but enables him to reach the higher registers required by the several country solos that he frequently sings on stage. One of his greatest vocal assets — and one that more singers would do well to emulate — is his almost perfect diction. Every word he sings is clearly enunciated, and he has learned to use the microphone to the best advantage. Although he has his own style, once cannot help but think of Ernest Tubb when Eddie sings, especially when he does Tubb’s hit of several years back, “Waltz Across Texas.”

Eddie takes his singing just as seriously as he does his fiddle playing. “I always sang from my throat, and my tone wasn’t any good, and I just wasn’t doing it right at all. I’d hear John Duffy (mandolin player and vocalist with the Seldom Scene bluegrass band) say, ‘If you’re going to sing, you’ve got to learn to sing right, whether you’re singing opera or country or whatever. You’ve got to learn to sing from the diaphragm.’ So I went to see a voice teacher and took voice lessons for six months. I was fortunate that I had a good voice teacher. He’d been teaching for like 20 years, but he’d never taught anybody country music. The thing that I

really appreciated about him was that he wanted to teach me to sing correctly, but not inhibit the style of music that I was doing. It really helped me.”

When on tour Eddie carried a double fiddle case. On one side is a Hopf and on the other an instrument bearing the name Duke. “My father bought (the Hopf) before I was born from a coal miner who was living in my dad’s hometown, Kensington, Maryland. He needed some money, and my father paid him 10 dollars for it. I played the fiddle for years, and on the night of my eighteenth birthday, my dad came down to this club where we were working and he got up and gave me this fiddle on stage.”

When the Johnson Mountain Boys scheduled their African tour in the fall of 1984, Eddie, not wanting to take his Hopf overseas, went looking for another fiddle. “I went up to Hanover, Pennsylvania, and visited with Chris Warner who used to play banjo with Jimmy Martin back in the late 60’s. He ran an instrument shop there. I bought three fiddles from him for three-hundred dollars. One of them had written in the back the word “Duke.” It’s an English fiddle with the brand name Duke of London. It was made about 1800. It’s an atrocious looking instrument, and it’s the thinnest fiddle I’ve ever seen. It’s only about an inch and a quarter thick, but the middle of the back is really scooped out, and that’s why the sound projects from it (so well).”

Although he has not yet developed any hard-core fetishes with respect to setting up his instrument, Eddie, like all good fiddlers, does have some preferences. “I like the bridge kinda flat,” he elaborated. “I play a lot of double stops, and I like the action pretty low.”

“I use Jargar strings. They’re steel strings made in Denmark. They make two different grades. They make a regular, and they have a forte, and these strings are thicker and heavier. They take

a little while to get used to, but they're loud. They're wound tighter. I play very hard. I was going through bow hair like Grant (went through) Richmond. In 1982 I had my bow re-haired 62 times. Then Bill Weaver at Weaver's Violin Shop in Bethesda, Maryland, said, "Why don't you try these Jargar strings?" Eddie took the advice, and because of the new strings' tighter winding, he reported that his bow re-hairing problem was alleviated. "My problem, I discovered was the bow hair getting caught between the loose winding of the other brand of strings, and it was ripping the hair. So (now) when I buy fiddle strings I hand pick every string. I pull the string out and look at it. I look at the winding, and if it's wrapped good and tight and it's good and smooth (I buy it)."

Regarding bows, Eddie related that "I've got two really good bows that are made out of pernambuco wood." His favorite is a Bausch that he bought used. He stated that, "It was made about World War II. I like a heavy bow — one that weighs about 60 to 62 grams. My father had always played with a heavy bow."

Eddie's father became concerned when he thought his son was losing interest in the fiddle. This was not the only time that Eddie and his father failed to see eye-to-eye on an issue. As with all youngsters fortunate enough to have caring parents, Eddie's aspirations and ambitions did not always coincide with what his elders thought were in his best interests. There is no hint of bitterness or acrimony, however, as Eddie recounted some of the conflicts he encountered on his way to becoming a professional musician. He remembered the festival at which he first met the Bluegrass Image when he was sixteen. "I hitchhiked up to the show, which is something I never did. Being from a strong moralistic upbringing, you just didn't do things like that. So I caught the dickens for that." Then his father found out that he had joined the Bluegrass Image. "Ernie Bradley (banjo player with the group)

came to the house with a band shirt for me, and I brought it out to the kitchen table at dinner time and showed it to my dad, and he about went through the roof. He said, 'Edward, no more. They're going to have to find themselves another fiddle player. We're not going to have you out every weekend.' I went in the other room and I just bawled like a baby. I couldn't handle it. It was like my whole world had ended."

His father eventually relented and allowed Eddie to perform with the band. When Eddie became a member of the Johnson Mountain Boys he was still in high school, and his father again intervened. According to Eddie, "He said, 'You can play one night a week. And when you graduate from high school you can play as much as you want.' He was as good as his word, but I went through some right rough times with Daddy. I can still remember one particular incident. They (the Johnson Mountain Boys) were playing at the Red Fox Inn (a night club in Bethesda, Maryland) one night, and I wanted to go down and play (with them). I had my driver's license at the time, but he wouldn't let me go (alone). He said, 'I'll take you down, Edward, but you're only playing three sets.' I can remember at 12 o'clock Dudley (Connell) begging him to let me stay and play that last set, and he would not. And out the door we went, and I was practically in tears."

Although at one time Eddie's father bemoaned the fact that he had ever let his son know there was such a thing as a fiddle and told folks "It's the worst thing I ever did, because I'm losing my son," things changed. Eddie, speaking of his parents, said, "They're proud of me. They support me." And with their blessing Eddie looked to the future in anticipation of great things, not only for himself personally, but for the Johnson Mountain Boys as well.

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NOTE: Eddie Stubbs became an award winning disc jockey on WSM-AM and announcer at the Grand Ole Opry after he left the Johnson Mountain Boys and moved to Nashville.

Teaching Bluegrass: Arts Integration

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Abstract

Bluegrass music provides a useful roots music tool for teaching a variety of skills, content, and mandated standards in the Kindergarten through twelfth grade curriculum. Using Bluegrass in the classroom also helps fulfill the mandate for Arts Integration. This discussion demonstrates that Bluegrass music may be used in social studies and language arts and other subjects to help teachers ensure on-task behavior, engagement in factual and higher order thinking, and development of academic vocabulary.

Introduction

Bluegrass may seem to be an unusual topic to teach in the Kindergarten through twelfth grade classroom beyond the obvious scope of music education. The work of a third grade student dealing with Bill Monroe, however, suggests that Bluegrass offers teachers a wide variety of unexpected linkages in subjects such as social studies and language arts plus makes possible one avenue for successful Arts Integration (<https://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators/how-to/series/arts-integration/arts-integration>). After dealing with “Blue Moon of Kentucky” the third grader wrote:

I think Bill Monroe was sad because he had to leave his home state and had to travel. He might be sad because his lover left him. He might be sad because something of his might have gotten stole. He might not have got what he wanted. He might have lost a family member. He might have lost a good friend. His wife might have past away. Somebody in his family might have got hurt very, very bad.

One need not get caught up in recurring debates of “What Is Bluegrass, Anyway” (WIBA) to recognize the value of Bluegrass as a topic for incorporation into the elementary, middle school and secondary school curriculum. Bluegrass constitutes a significant genre of American music related to other forms that may be loosely grouped under the Country Music ‘Big Tent.’ Bluegrass shares common historical, demographic, geographic, and stylistic roots with genres ranging from Cajun, Honky Tonk, and Western Swing to Americana, traditional string band music, and even contemporary Nashville oriented Country Music. All of these forms share a commonality in their roots in the Anglo-American experience in North America and particularly the southern United States to which large numbers of immigrants from the British Isles passed into the Appalachian ridges and valleys. This Anglo-American experience includes substantial interaction with other racial and ethnic groups particularly that of African Americans (Fisher, 1989, p. 6). With the exception of instrumentals, these varied forms of Country Music use melody and instrumentation to frame lyrics that are story oriented and clearly about common experiences. Like all styles under the Country Music Big Tent, Bluegrass reflects a wide variety of cultural forces and events ranging from the Civil War to Vietnam and cultural forces including race, ethnicity, gender, economics, social

status, migration, and technological change. Kentucky specifically mandates the teaching of Bluegrass in standards such as “recognize, describe and compare various styles of music” and specifically mentions Bluegrass. (<http://education.ky.gov/districts/legal/Documents/Kentucky%20Core%20Academic%20Standards%20June%202013.pdf>). Tennessee state standards include mandates to deal with roots oriented music such as “Interpret different texts and primary sources to describe the major components of culture including language, clothing, food, art, beliefs, customs, and music.” (https://www.tn.gov/assets/entities/education/attachments/std_ss_gr_3.pdf) National music education standards include statements such as “ Identify the context of music from a variety of genres, cultures, and historical periods.” (<http://www.nafme.org/wp-content/files/2014/11/2014-Music-Standards-PK-8-Strand.pdf>). This discussion now focuses upon sample teaching strategies and materials designed to illustrate the power of Bluegrass within the context of the classroom. This discussion is by no means exhaustive and merely points to the metaphorical tip of the iceberg illustrating the staggering potential for inclusion of Bluegrass in the elementary, middle school, and secondary school curriculum.

Sample Bluegrass Lessons

A twelfth grade creative writing class provides the initial example in which the author used Bluegrass connected to conventional content. The specialized skill development of creative writing proves remarkably amenable to Bluegrass despite the surface incongruities. A lesson based upon the history of Bill Monroe taught by the author engaged students with cinquain and ballad structure at the same time as it dealt with factual and higher order thinking skills based upon maps and other data. The lesson delivered the content through a specific set of goals and objectives consistent with lesson plan development demanded of classroom teachers.

Goal: The learner will understand the significance of Bill Monroe to the development of Bluegrass music.

Objectives: The learner will...

1. Fill in a graphic organizer concept map dealing with the five themes of geography using content derived from Bill Monroe's life.
2. Analyze the attributes of Rosine, Kentucky from maps, and generate six factual statements vertically using the letters of Rosine.
3. Create a cinquain about Rosine, Kentucky.
4. Identify and define vocabulary terms through graphic, symbolic representation.
5. Read a history of Bill Monroe and create a two stanza ballad summarizing and interpreting Monroe's history.

The lesson began by establishing the significance of Bluegrass in the minds of the creative writing students. The author posed the question "What does a small Kentucky town and University of Tennessee football have in common?" The linkage to University of Tennessee football provided a common denominator that no student could miss. Students then heard a portion of the Osborne Brothers 'Rocky Top' The author identified the Osborne Brothers version of Rocky Top as being performed in a style known as Bluegrass, a style enjoyed even by rock stars such as Jerry Garcia of The Grateful Dead. Next, the question "How can creative writing, Bluegrass, and a small Kentucky town be connected?" pointed to the transition for substantive investigation.

The sustained, structured involvement with Bluegrass and Bill Monroe began with a concept map graphic organizer designed to build on the 'Five Themes of Geography' (region, movement,

human-land interaction, location, and place) taught in most history and geography courses.

Insert Country Music Graphic Organizer About Here

Bluegrass and the ‘Five Themes of Geography’ served as an ‘Advance Organizer’ around which information about Bluegrass could be conceptually structured. Students worked in groups to examine varied maps of Rosine (<https://www.mapquest.com/us/ky/rosine-282086839>) tasked to identify sufficient material to write a series of sentences structured around the vertical arrangement of Rosine.

Insert Rosine Sentences About Here

The varied scale meant that factual statements could differ between groups. Students generated statements such as “Southeast of Rosine is Windy Hill Road,” “Railroad intersects at Everetts Park,” and “Highway 62 runs east through Horton to Rosine.” Subsequently, students generated a cinquain format requiring the first line to a noun subject, the second line to consist of two adjectives, the third line to consist of three verbs, line four to be a complete sentence, and line five to be a one word synonym for the word in line one. One student cinquain consisted of the following:

Rosine
Small town
Hop, skip, jump
Railroad tracks go through the town
Kentucky

Students thus became acquainted with Rosine, generated insights from a data source, and then translated their knowledge in a creative writing form.

The second phase of the lesson engaged students with a history of Bill Monroe (<http://brebru.com/musicroom/country/bluegrass.html>). Key vocabulary, a major emphasis under Common Core (<http://www.corestandards.org>) and other national reform efforts in recent years, received emphasis for purposes of decoding, actual pronunciation, as well as demonstrating meaning. Graphic representation of meaning received emphasis as well as identification and organization between terms that related to each other.

Insert Monroe Vocabulary About Here

Terms such as ‘virtual,’ ‘reformed,’ and ‘signal’ all carry subtleties capable of throwing off readers. ‘Virtual’ connotes something quite different from the current meaning of Virtual Reality countered by students used to donning special VR goggles as they enter computer generated three dimensional dynamic settings. ‘Reformed’ would not mean the usual process of the political arena such as studied in the Progressive Era of the early 1900s or the religious meaning as student in the Protestant Reformation in middle school and secondary social studies. Likewise, ‘signal’ didn’t mean something related to the control of traffic or a nonverbal communication. Each engagement with the vocabulary terms sustained the involvement of students as they thought about meanings that could throw off their processing of the Monroe biography. Additional engagement with the vocabulary list included enclosing closely related words such as ‘inhibited’ and ‘introverted’ inside elliptical orbits and drawing arrows from terms with similar prefixes such as ‘inestimable’ and ‘unrivaled.’

Students then read the Bill Monroe biography with an assignment to create a ballad of two four-line stanzas. Two student generated ballads follow.

Student Ballad 1

Old Kentucky's own mandolin man
His name is William Monroe
Forget the frills
Those he knows call him Bill
Playing on the farm his mamma fed him Kentucky cuisine
He learned to play music, the mandolin you see
Good rhythm and blues
When he plays he's free

Student Ballad 2

Born one William Smith Monroe
To a family already seven strong
The youngest one to come and go
And leave us with his song.
From the Bluegrass Boys to the Opry
To the Monroe Brother in Kentucky
Came the "Blue Moon of Kentucky"
Uncle Pen," "Roanoke," and another one.

As with cinquain, the ballad writing required students to first process information and then translate the information into their own unique arrangement. Upon completion of the ballad and cinquain writing, students shared their ballads. A final concluding segment resulted in new items being added to the graphic organizer. The creative writing helped sustain the focus of the map of Rosine, Kentucky and on the biography of Bill Monroe.

A second example of dealing with Bluegrass and Bill Monroe came from a third grade lesson. The author received a request from a former student to come to McMinnville, Tennessee—home and final resting place of Dottie West—and teach a social studies lesson. The goals and objectives for the third grade lesson on Bill Monroe state:

Goal: The learner will understand the location of Rosine, Kentucky as the home of Bill Monroe ‘The Father of Bluegrass music, the component instruments, and visual image of Monroe’s professional image.

Objectives: The learner will:

1. Color a ‘T’ orange, hold up the ‘T’ when they hear the terms “Rocky Top” Tennessee” while listening to the Osborne Brothers version of “Rocky Top.”
2. Fill in a concept map graphic organizer with the three types of communities (rural, urban , and suburban) , the South, and Rosine.
3. Plot McMinnville, Tennessee and Rosine, Kentucky on map, connect the two towns with their writing instrument, and verbalize the direction of Rosine from McMinnville.
4. Identify by pointing to major roads in Rosine, place their writing instruments, roads, plot the location of likely goods and services, and justify the choice of location.
5. Color a circle with a K blue, move the blue circle from above their head to their torso when the lyrics ‘Blue Moon of Kentucky keep on shinning’ are sung, and rustle the circle to approximate a ‘shimmering’ sound during the mandolin solo.
6. Place writing instruments on the photograph of Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys pointing to professional image items such as hats, suits, and ties.
7. Place string on each of the Bluegrass Boys’ instruments and conclude that Bluegrass emphasizes stringed instruments.
8. Color the state of Kentucky outline blue, bow head at the slow fiddle opening, move the Kentucky outline in the

shape of Kentucky, and sing the phrase “Thank God for Kentucky and the whole U.S.A.”

The lesson began with questions regarding Mothers Day and Fathers Day. The introduction then shifted to father images such as George Washington and that a special type of music called Bluegrass had a ‘Father’ by the name of Bill Monroe. Consistent with the first objective, the third graders then colored a large ‘T’ orange, and held up the orange ‘T’ if they had ever heard the song “Rocky Top.” As “the Osborne Brothers version of “Rocky” played students held up their orange “T’ each time the Osborne Brothers mentioned the terms ‘Rocky Top’ and “Tennessee.”

Consistent with the objectives, the lesson emphasized that Bill Monroe grew up in a small community named Rosine, Kentucky. A concept map graphic organizer then helped the class review the three key concepts around which their entire third grade social studies revolved by filling urban, rural, and suburban communities. The lesson then flowed through the remaining objectives engaging, involving the third graders as required by contemporary teaching models by which teachers throughout the country find themselves evaluated.

Insert Photos of Hwy Signs and Rosine Railroad About Here

From observing photographs of Highways 62 and 1544 and railroad tacks, placing their writing instrument on the railroad tracks and highways on a map of Rosine, to holding up their blue circle K as they heard Bill Monroe sing “Blue Moon Of Kentucky keep on shinning,” to pointing at Monroe’s professional attire (http://www.billmonroemusicpark.com/?page_id=63), to placing string on each of the instruments, and holding up the state of Kentucky outline and singing “Thanks God for Kentucky and he whole U.S.A..” students remained on task.

A different form of student engagement provides students an opportunity to react to content such as the Civil War taught in multiple grades throughout the United States. Teachers wishing to deal with Controversial Political Issues (CPIs) may deal with the volatile issue of the Confederate Flag. History deals with factual information, but changes over time bring alternative perspectives based upon changes in economic, political, and social power as well as in scholarship. Such changes virtually always involve race, class, and gender. One need not cite a myriad of works to realize that Jim Cullen's *The Civil War in Popular Culture: A Reusable Past* represents a fine, single sample of the complex nature of a changing past. Cullen's discussion of "Gone With The Wind" provides one example.

Margaret Mitchell's interpretation of the Civil War...reflected her highly specific milieu as a Southern, white, upper-middle-class woman in the 1920s.

...The duality between feminist self-assertion and traditional self-abnegation became a crucial tension in the novelist's life and work. (p.68, 71)

Indeed, Faulkner didn't miss the mark with his proclamation that "the past isn't dead. It isn't even past." The Confederate Battle Flag flying over the South Carolina Capitol provides adequate evidence. As part of a skillfully crafted inquiry into the Confederate Battle Flag CPI,

Insert Reno And Smiley Power Point Slide About Here

Bluegrass lends itself nicely to a factual analysis of perceptions. Reno and Smiley's "Confederate Flag" and the album cover for "Bluegrass is Timeless: Stonewall's Brigade" provides a case-in-point. "Confederate Flag" lends itself to comparing the sentiments supporting the removal of the Confederate Battle Flag flying over South Carolina state capitol to those opposing the decision.

Other Bluegrass content allows students to engage in comparing textbook content and other sources to descriptions of battles. Reno and Smiley offer a surprisingly detailed description of the battle of Atlanta. Teachers often engage students with an Atlanta experience by using textbooks, “Gone With The Wind” and other sources (<http://www.civilwar.org/battlefields/atlanta.html>). Reno and Smiley’s account of the “Battle of Atlanta” provides an opportunity to read other ‘texts’ and compare. Venn Diagrams, T-Charts, and concept maps all lend themselves to systematic and thorough comparisons. As seen in the Reno and Smiley Power Point slide there exist other ways of analyzing data regarding the ‘Battle of Atlanta’ including Rank Ordering and Post-It notes. In each case, students must know factual information, but must use the factual information to engage in higher order thinking skills and justify their conclusions.

In a similar, less controversial manner, songs by Bluegrass groups such as Dry Branch Fire Squad offer opportunities for the use of other tools to engage in sophisticated analysis of Bluegrass music and sentiments about the Civil War. Semantic Differentials provide a tool through which students listen or read material and then have to make evaluative decisions. Semantic differentials use word pair opposites such as Fast vs Slow to gauge perception about a content course. In this particular case Dry Branch Fire Squad’s “Someone Play Dixie For Me” deals with ideas that lend themselves to word pair polar opposites such as Pro-War vs. Anti War, Sentimental vs. Cynical, and Pro Union vs. Pro Confederacy.

Insert Semantic Differential Bluegrass Civil War About Here

After listening to songs such as “Someone Play Dixie For Me,” students then must make a mark somewhere between each set of word pair opposites. Most significantly, students must be able to verbalize the reasoning in term of song content that justify

their markings. The Semantic Differential thus demands careful attention to factual detail, but includes a higher order thinking skills component in which interpretation must be exercised.

The final example for this discussion deals with teaching about river systems in Tennessee and their connection to the larger mid continental watershed of the Mississippi River. Two Bluegrass songs contribute to a lesson developed specifically at the request of Northfield Elementary in White County, Tennessee near Sparta (home and final resting place of Lester Flatt).

Insert Northfield Elementary Power Point Slide About Here

As with all valid instruction, the lesson stressed student engagement, Academic Vocabulary, and a variety of higher order thinking skills supported by factual data. The lesson began with a mathematical pseudo formula and a line of questioning designed to make students begin to think about the rivers, transportation arteries, and the connection of rivers into comprehensive systems. The lesson included non Bluegrass music such as the Delta Rhythm Boys early 1940s ‘video’ of Dry Bones (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hYeQUXXYvK0>), Charlie Daniel’s “Get Me Back To Dixie.,” Alabama’s “Tennessee River,” and Matraca Berg’s “Oh Cumberland.”

Two Bluegrass works provided critical to the development of the fifth grade lesson. The lesson focused on Balsam Range’s “Caney Fork River” and the Linville Ridge Band’s “Back To Dixie.” Student’s plotted the Caney Fork river’s path through Middle Tennessee in relation to Interstate 40. Students drew the meandering path of the Caney Fork River and labeled each of the five times it crossed under Interstate 40. They then gave their partner a ‘high-five’ each time during Balsam Range’s ‘Caney Fork River’ that asked “How many times do I have to cross that old Caney Fork River? Subsequently, they listened to the Lineville

Ridge Band sing “Back to Dixie” as it proclaimed “I’m going down to the Cumberland River in the state of Tennessee.” Fifth graders then plotted the course of the Cumberland River to its confluence with the Tennessee River. The author further engaged students by working on Academic

Insert JEA Teaching Photo About Here

Vocabulary such as confluence, tributary, and watershed in which they pointed to the confluences, confirmed that the smaller river contributed to make a larger river even larger. Upon completion of the lesson maps linked the Caney Fork, the Cumberland, the Tennessee River, the Ohio River, and the Mississippi River into a comprehensive watershed. In a brilliant link to a seemingly unrelated concept, a fifth grade boy commented at the end of the lesson that the river system is like University of Tennessee football coach Butch Jones. It is “Brick-By-Brick” referencing Coach Jones’ mantra (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HgoGEDW9Z8g>) about building the Tennessee football program in a systematic manner. Such insight earned the fifth grader a ‘high-five’ from the author.

Conclusion

This discussion of using Bluegrass music in the elementary, middle school, and secondary curriculum merely scratches the surface of a remarkable number of teaching strategies and materials. Each teaching strategy easily fits within standards and teaching models mandated by state departments of education and are consistent with many demands brought about by Common Core and other education reform initiatives. Regardless of current educational reform initiatives, the Bluegrass based teaching strategies reflect research based concepts that effective teachers engage students in a wide variety of teaching methods, maximize

time-on-task, provide feedback to students, and engage students in higher order thinking skills. Common Core emphasis upon Academic Vocabulary and higher order thinking skills flows easily throughout the lessons from their introduction to conclusion. The use of Bluegrass also proves consistent with the increased emphasis upon Arts Integration of recent years. Bluegrass, it's just not for pickers anymore!

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Obituary: Lance Leroy (May 26, 1930-December 17, 2015)

By Nancy Cardwell

Lance LeRoy, 85, the founder of one of the top talent agencies for bluegrass music, The Lancer Agency, passed away December 17, 2015 at his son's home in Mt. Juliet, Tennessee. The elder LeRoy was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease two years ago, and he suffered a stroke the week before his death.

In addition to his first client, Lester Flatt & the Nashville Grass (1969-79), LeRoy represented a number of important artists during the past 46 years including The Bluegrass Cardinals (1978-97), The Johnson Mountain Boys (1983-88), The New Coon Creek Girls, Jimmy Martin, The Sally Mountain Show, Rhonda Vincent, Del McCoury, Lonesome Standard Time, Mike Snider, and others.

Lance LeRoy will also be remembered as the founder of the International Bluegrass Music Association in 1985. He was inducted into the International Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame in 2000, and he received IBMA's Award of Merit (later re-named The Distinguished Achievement Award) in 1994.

Lance LeRoy was a larger than life character, as well as a respected authority on bluegrass music and its history and a visible spokesman for our industry for many years. Originally from Tignall, Georgia, he grew up the son of a mail carrier. The LeRoy family owned one of the first radios and phonograph players in the area, and neighbors would gather in their yard on Saturday nights to listen to *The Grand Ole Opry* from an open window.

A fan of Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys, and later a self-described "Flatt and Scruggs groupie," Lance took up

violin lessons in the 8th grade. When he became more interested in learning fiddle by ear, the violin lessons ended and he began playing square dances and 100-watt radio shows with Buster and Lawrence Simmons and the Georgia Mountain Boys.

LeRoy studied accounting in college, leaving Georgia to take a finance job in Washington, D.C. He continued to work as an accountant and auditor based out of Atlanta from 1952-66, before moving to Nashville. Lance and his wife, Myrtle were married in 1953. LeRoy handled accounting duties and prepared taxes for Lester Flatt dating back to 1966, so it was natural for him to assume the booking and business management role for Flatt when Lester and Earl Scruggs disbanded the Foggy Mountain Boys in 1969.

LeRoy and Lester Flatt founded Allied Artists with Bobby and Sonny Osborne in 1975. When the brothers bought out Lester and Lance's shares in 1977, LeRoy and Flatt formed The Lancer Agency, utilizing the nickname Lester Flatt gave his old friend. LeRoy continued to guard the legacy and business interests of the Flatt family after Lester passed away in 1979, and he continued to sign and develop the careers of several additional, impressive artists in the bluegrass genre.

LeRoy was a serious record collector who enjoyed early country music and Western Swing as much as he did bluegrass. Friends like Marty Stuart, Larry Stephenson, Roland White, Ronnie Reno and Dan Hays, among others, recall spending hours with Lance at his home, listening to his favorite records and telling stories.

“He was one of a kind,” White said. “I used to go to his house three or four times a year, and he would play records for me—old country albums dating back to Jimmie Rodgers, all the way up to the newest bluegrass records. He and Myrtle were very welcoming people, loved by everybody. He did a lot for our music.”

Lance was a sought-after writer of liner notes and magazine articles, as well as an accomplished, self-taught photographer. He wrote for publication under the pseudonym Brett F. Devan. “I made that name up purely out of the air to sound like a British blighter,” LeRoy said, “so I could say whatever I wanted without making my friends mad.”

LeRoy wrote the melody for two Flatt & Scruggs songs included on *The Story of Bonnie and Clyde*: “Reunion” and “Get Away,” and he composed the song, “Sailing for Glory,” recorded by The Bluegrass Cardinals in 1980. Former Cardinals David Parmley, Larry Stephenson and Dale Perry were joined by Steve Day and Kenny Ingram to perform the latter song at Lance’s funeral in Nashville, December 21. The Earls of Leicester also performed “Lord I’m Coming Home” based on a Flatt and Scruggs arrangement.

In addition to the bands he booked, Lance was always helping folks in the bluegrass community behind the scenes as a mentor and trusted friend. He played an Elton Britt record for “Ranger Doug” Green, inspiring the young singer to approach yodeling in a new way and later form Riders in the Sky with two friends. As Lester Flatt’s business and road manager, Lance was responsible for making sure that 14-year-old Marty Stuart completed his correspondence courses to finish high school while on the road with The Nashville Grass. LeRoy booked Rhonda Vincent’s first national appearances in the early 1980s when she was still a member of her family band, The Sally Mountain Show. Lance produced his friend, Paul Warren’s only fiddle album after Warren died, piecing together tapes of live concerts and radio shows. LeRoy encouraged Del McCoury and his family to move to Nashville, a turning point in the legendary artist’s career.

“During his peak years from the 1970s into the early 1990s, Lance LeRoy was considered to be the best agent there

was in bluegrass,” notes Eddie Stubbs of WSM and The Grand Ole Opry, as well as a former Johnson Mountain Boy. “Having Lance represent your group gave you immediate credibility with the talent buyers he reached out to. Operating the first bluegrass agency out of Nashville, Lance LeRoy, in the opinion of many, was the prototype for others which followed.”

In an interview for the IBMA publication, *International Bluegrass* in 2005, LeRoy told this writer: “From my earliest days in the business, I strove to enhance the image of this music by things such as having printed the best possible quality stationery, buying an \$850 IBMA Selectric typewriter (in 1969 dollars), and getting a multi-line telephone system—even though there was no one but myself answering it. I also bought a Code-a-Phone answering machine that surely must have been a prototype, as well as securing a Pitney-Bowes postal meter. All of these tools I felt were necessary to project a professional image for my agency. With that mindset,” he continued, “it seemed to me that all of bluegrass needed a similar representation. So I sat at my typewriter and pounded out a form letter that February 1985 morning, outlining my thoughts and suggesting—no, urging—that some of us get together and discuss starting a bluegrass association by whatever name, with a top of the line awards show. I mailed copies of that letter out to some prominent artists and a few others who were influential in our business. Of course the import of that letter or its future significance never entered my mind.”

A meeting organized later the same year by LeRoy at BMI headquarters in Nashville resulted in the organization of the International Bluegrass Music Association. It’s interesting to note that IBMA’s Leadership Bluegrass program continues to meet annually in the same room at BMI where Lance gathered his

friends and associates in the music business to talk about forming a trade association.

The writer, Nelson Henderson once said, “The true meaning of life is to plant trees under whose shade you don’t expect to sit.” Through his personal example of consummate professionalism tempered with endless passion and enthusiasm for bluegrass music and the artists who play it, as well as his work with the IBMA, Lance LeRoy certainly laid a foundation for generations to build upon in future years.

But industry influence aside, what really remains of our lives is the impact we have and the kindness shown to others. Fred Bartenstein quotes Lester Flatt in a 1978 article Don Rhodes wrote for *Bluegrass Unlimited*: “When asked if a certain act would be on this year’s show, Flatt replied, ‘To tell you the truth, I leave that up to Lance LeRoy. I don’t even know if I’m going to be on it. Lance has been my right arm for eight years. He’s a good, honest man. You don’t find anybody like him every day.’”

“Lance LeRoy was a force in bluegrass music,” Larry Stephenson said in a recent *Bluegrass Today* article written by John Lawless. “I go back to the mid ‘70s with Lance and of course, my time with The Bluegrass Cardinals. When I started my band in 1989, he helped me in many ways. Then I moved to Nashville in 1992 and our friendship blossomed. I spent many hours at his house, going through his record collection and learning about our music. I loved him like a Dad, and I’ll miss him forever.”

“Someone once said a leader is simply the person willing to take the first step, and I always considered Lance to be the one who created IBMA,” former IBMA executive director Dan Hays notes. “His call to other leading figures in music led to the first meetings of the organization, and he continued to rally the industry to work toward greater professionalism in bluegrass his entire life. Some

would say that bluegrass was in need of being ‘saved’ when IBMA was formed in the mid ‘80s, but Lance had confidence the music itself was in great shape with extraordinary talents. He believed we just needed to up our business skills and invest—together—in a variety of efforts that helped get broader exposure for the music through marketing efforts, increasing broadcast outlets, and getting the music on more stages. The integrity of a peer-voted awards process was always high on his agenda; one of his passions was the Bluegrass Hall of Fame, and he took a very active interest in helping assure our pioneers were honored with the integrity they deserved. Lance was never more than a phone call away, but he didn’t wait for it to ring. He was quick to get in the car and drive hours when needed to attend any meeting I ever asked of him, and he was the type of friend that was always willing to help while never asking a special favor in return. By his example, I learned much can be accomplished by working together for the good of the whole community.”

“I had a wonderful professional, but far greater personal relationship with Lance LeRoy,” Eddie Stubbs, who also officiated Lance’s funeral, adds. “For 17 years (1997-2013) Lance and I worked closely on the IBMA Hall Of Fame Nominating Committee. Lance researched and authored the candidate biographies and inductee plaques—with his requested tweaking input from myself—before submitting to staff for final critique and approval.”

The first International Bluegrass Music Awards show was held in Owensboro, Kentucky in 1990, five years after LeRoy sat down at his Selectric typewriter and pounded out a letter to his peers in the industry, urging them to come together to form an organization to promote professionalism and networking in bluegrass music. “Lance LeRoy’s vision certainly paid off,” Stubbs notes, “as he witnessed three decades of the IBMA’s progress, including a

prestigious Hall of Fame and 26 Awards shows. *May every past, present, and future member of IBMA and all who support and attend its programs, never forget the indelible imprint Lance LeRoy made on the organization, and bluegrass music.*”

Resources: Traci Todd and Don Rhodes, *Bluegrass Unlimited*; Fred Bartenstein, *Bluegrass Hall of Fame Inductee Biographies*; Eddie Stubbs; Dan Hays; Roland White; Vic Jordan; Larry Stephenson; John Lawless, *Bluegrass Today*

Contributors

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