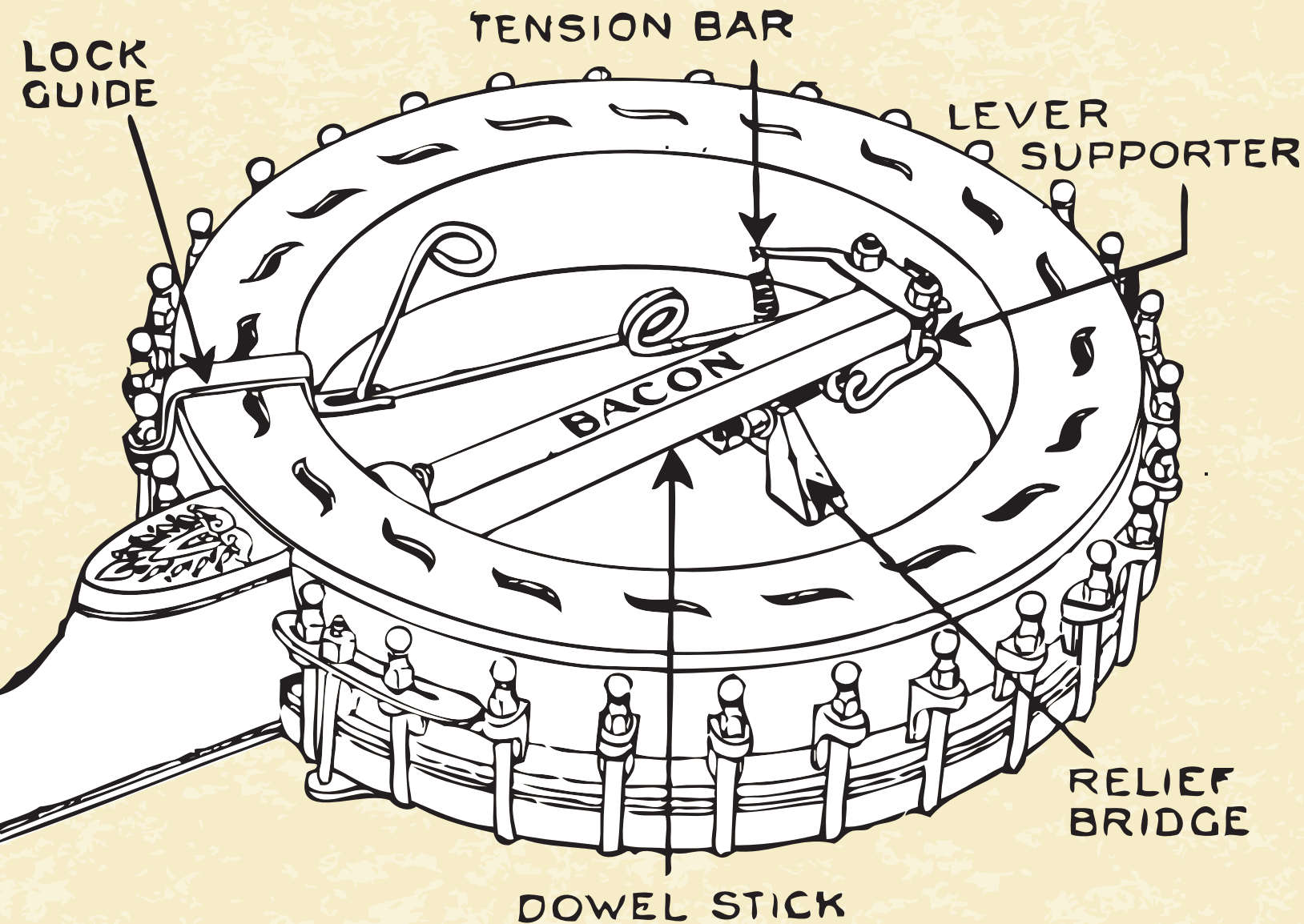


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A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO OLD-TIME MUSIC

VOLUME 12, NUMBER 8 DECEMBER 2010 - JANUARY 2011 \$7.50



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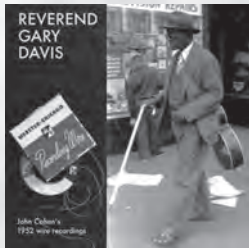


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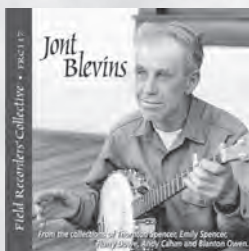


Reverend Gary Davis

FRC116

1952 Wire Recordings from the collection of John Cohen

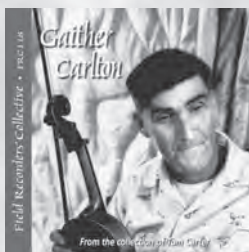
John Cohen recorded Gary Davis in Davis's home in 1952 using a wire recorder. These recordings from John's collection pre-date the Smithsonian Folkways release of his 1953 tape recordings ("If I Had My Way") and do not duplicate any of the material there. A rare visit with a blues master, relaxed and in his prime.



Jont Blevins – Grayson County, VA Banjo Player

FRC117

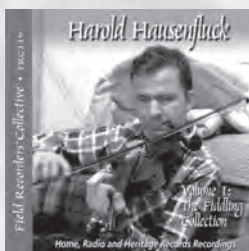
This disc represents one of the masters of the old clawhammer banjo styles of Virginia and North Carolina. Jont Blevins was respected by his peers for being one of the finest banjo players around. On this volume, taken from tapes made by some of the many who came to visit and learn from him, he plays many of the great local tunes of his area. He also plays in some rare tunings that aren't often heard today.



Gaither Carlton 1972

FRC118

This is the very first full-length recording devoted entirely to Gaither Carlton (of Deep Gap, NC), a revered and highly influential figure in the world of old-time music. A superb banjo and fiddle player, Carlton toured extensively with his son-in-law, Doc Watson, during the folk music revival of the 1960s and early '70s. Tom Carter's field recordings, made a few months before Carlton's death in June 1972, capture Gaither Carlton in top form, validating his legendary stature among old-time musicians.

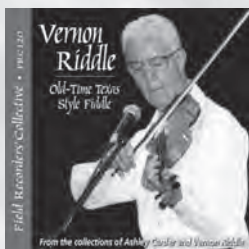


Harold Hausenfluck – Vol. 1: The Fiddling Collection

FRC119

Home, Radio and Heritage Records Recordings

This first volume of Harold Hausenfluck's music focuses on his powerful fiddle playing, gleaned from personal, radio and Heritage Records recordings. Harold pays homage to some of his fiddling influences (John Carson, Joe Birchfield, Tommy Jarrell, Norman Edmonds, French Carpenter) with stylistic accuracy and great feeling. Harold also plays a number of tunes that are largely unique to his repertoire.



Vernon Riddle – Old-Time Texas Style Fiddle

FRC120

As a young man in the Air Force stationed in Amarillo, TX in the 1950s, Vernon Riddle spent a great deal of time with legendary fiddler Eck Robertson. He learned a great number of tunes from Eck as well as from other iconic Texas fiddlers, including Benny Thomasson, Jack Mears, and the Solomons. This collection presents Vernon's fiddling from his Texas years up through his time in Spartanburg, SC in the early 1990s.

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

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Correction

In the last issue, an editorial mistake created a nonsensical sentence in Pete Peterson's review of *Charlie Monroe's Guitar Style*. Pete had originally written, "It also helps to know that a pentatonic scale uses only the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th and 6th notes of the regular eight-note scale." Through the magic of copyediting, this sentence was altered in such a way as to assert that there are six notes in a pentatonic scale. The mistake was on the editor's part, and not the reviewer's. Apologies to Pete.

Cover photo: Illustration from the 1913 *Bacon Professional Banjo* catalog
Cover design by Steve Terrill, 97 watt creative group, Greensboro, NC
Printed at Sutherland Printing, Montezuma, IA, www.sutherlandprinting.com

Letters

Year-end request for support

Dear readers,

In the spring of 2010, the *Old-Time Herald* marked a momentous anniversary. **The April-May edition of the Herald was our 100th issue!** That issue represented so much of what is exciting and precious about old-time music and the community who loves it. We had a story about the young luthier **Jeff Menzies**, who from his home in Canada makes exquisite gourd banjos in the tradition brought to the New World by long-ago African musicians. There was a biographical article about 94-year-old **fiddler Sleepy Marlin**, whose career dates all the way back to the days when he beat Clayton McMichen in a fiddle contest. And there was a reminiscence about time spent with West Virginia traditional music icon **Maggie Hammons**, revealing that in addition to being the masterful musician known to so many of us through field recordings, she was also a deeply caring soul who took care of her family and community with the ancient herbal remedies preserved in her memory (and now in the *Herald*).

Throughout 2010 the *Old-Time Herald* was proud to offer its readers this kind of exceptional content. Along with Wayne Howard's series about the **Hammons family**, we had Anna Roberts-Geval's profiles of **Kentucky women fiddlers**, and our late friend Ray Alden's series on the **rising frontiers of old-time banjo music**. We had stories about **Béla Fleck's** collaborations with **African musicians**, **Ginny Hawker's** blending of old sacred and modern country music sensibilities, and **Mississippi John Hurt's** life and art. Articles about the **Field Recorders' Collective**, **Dust-to-Digital**, and **Mississippi Records** labels showcased the ways that recordings of traditional music are being lovingly shepherded into the digital age. And then there were the photographs! In 2010, we have been privileged to publish for the first time some truly memorable portraits of artists, including Wayne Howard's beautiful pictures of the Hammons family, and Dr. John Rudoff's stunning portraits of Mississippi John Hurt, and a great many fantastic historical images.

From the rural South of a century ago to today's international horizons; from the songs of griots in the Gambia to luthiers in Toronto; from a family gathered in the parlor to the tens of thousands of modern-day festival-goers; from shellac and vinyl to the digital frontier (and sometimes back to vinyl!): this is old-time music, and this is the *Old-Time Herald*.

2010 has been a difficult year for the world of music journalism, and several great magazines covering traditional and independent music have succumbed to this dire economic climate. The nonprofit Old-Time Music Group, which publishes the *Old-Time Herald*, is tremendously fortunate for the annual support we receive from the magazine's readers. While subscriptions and advertising pay for paper and ink, it is your annual financial support that truly enables us to weather these hard times, supporting a staff of three fellow musicians and old-time music lovers dedicated to seeking out and sharing with you the best stories about our music. We are deeply grateful for your support.

Please help the *Old-Time Herald* carry on our essential work. We are the only one out there telling these stories, many of which would otherwise be lost to the ages – and most importantly, we are a crucial part of the survival of this music, helping pass on our heritage to new old-time musicians all around the world. Please support the *Old-Time Herald* with a tax-deductible donation today!

With gratitude, and best wishes for 2011,

Sarah Bryan
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Here & There

Events

On December 12, **Bob Bovee** and **Gail Heil** will be part of the **Northwoods Opry** for the Midwest Fish and Wildlife Conference in Minneapolis, along with Dick Kimmel and Company and Adam Granger.

On December 19, there will be a **concert and banjo raffle** in Pickens, South Carolina, to benefit Upstate South Carolina banjo player and teacher **Al Osteen**, who is confronting a serious illness. The event will be held from 1 to 7:30 in the Pickens High School Auditorium, at 111 Blue Flame Drive. The concert lineup includes Jesse McReynolds, Little Roy and Lizzy, Kristin Benson, Charles Wood, Jack Lawrence, Tony Williamson, Leroy Savage, Craig Smith, Scott Huffman, Jeff Foxall, and Curtis Blackwell. Raffle tickets are being sold for a 1931 Vega Whyte Laydie, with a reproduction neck and a new case. Raffle tickets are \$10 each and can be purchased by contacting Betty McDaniel at 864-878-4257. You can also send a check (made out to Al Osteen) to Betty at 792 Holly Springs Rd., Pickens, SC 29671. The drawing will be held at the Al Osteen Benefit Show.

The **Friends of American Old Time Music and Dance** will hold their **2011 festival** February 18 – 20 at the Queen Elizabeth High School, in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire, England. The lineup includes the Mostly Mountain Boys (Paul Brown, Terri McMurray, and John Schwab), Tamara Loewenthal and Jamie Gans, Jock Tyldesley, Vera Van Heeringen, and the Gollywhoppers (Emily Poole and Andrew Henley). There will be concerts, workshops, competitions, and more. For more information visit www.foaotmad.org.uk.

The **2011 Spring Rally of the American Banjo Fraternity** will take place May 19-21, at the Genetti Hotel, 200 West Fourth St., Williamsport, Pennsylvania. The event's featured composer is Emile Grimshaw. There will be a free performance of 1900s music, featuring solo and group playing on five-string banjos of different sizes, using nylon strings and bare fingers. For more information, visit www.banjofraternity.org.

The National Council for the Traditional Arts has announced that the **2011, 2012, and 2013 National Folk Festivals** will be held in downtown Nashville, Tennessee. 2011's event will take place on Labor Day weekend, September 2 – 4. The festival is free to the public. For



The Swannanoa Gathering

Come celebrate the **20th Anniversary** of Warren Wilson College's folk workshops this summer in the heart of North Carolina's beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains.

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ALSO:

- Traditional Song Week, July 3-9
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- Celtic Week, July 10-16
- Guitar Week, July 24-30
- Contemporary Folk Week, July 24-30
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In print and online

The Mississippi Development Authority is producing a series of historical markers in its Country Music Trail program, and recently unveiled a marker commemorating the **Leake County Revelers**. The occasion was marked by a festival in Sebastopol, Mississippi (Revelers fiddler Will Gilmer and guitarist Dallas Jones' hometown), on October 30, and was attended by many descendants of the Revelers. The Mississippi Old-Time Music Society and Alan Sibley and the Magnolia Ramblers performed, and community members mounted an exhibit of Revelers memorabilia. The marker's permanent home will be in front of the Sebastopol City Hall, which will also be the site of a future exhibit about the Leake County Revelers. The Country Music Trail will in time include 40 sites commemorating Mississippi musicians and songwriters. You can find out more about the Trail at www.visitmississippi.org/music.

Bob Newby has announced the debut of a new web community, **LuthierBuilt.net**. The site is an all-around resource regarding luthiers and lutherie, including articles, blogs, a luthier directory, and many other features. According to Newby, "It allows players to easily contact and communicate with the luthiers they are interested in working with. Individual luthiers may present their personal backgrounds, audio and video of their instruments being played, embedded viewing and browsing of their own websites, their shop journals, and more." The site is offering a free enrollment period for the rest of 2010, with discounts for the coming year's membership.

The website Hillbilly-Music.com will soon be producing a new electronic quarterly magazine, **Country Music Chronicles**, to be issued in PDF format on www.hillbilly-music.com. The magazine, for a popular audience, will focus on the history of country music through approximately the 1970s.

Congratulations

Loyal Jones, longtime scholar of Appalachian heritage, and father of old-time singer Carol Elizabeth Jones, received Kentucky's 2010 Folklife Heritage Award in the Governor's Awards in the Art. The ceremony was held on October 28 at the State Capitol in Frankfort.

OZARKS

Clawcamp

Mtn. View Arkansas
Folk Center
March 21-25, 2011



EAST

Scratchcamp

Fur Peace Ranch
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Scratchcamp is for clawhammer banjo players and old-time fiddle students starting "from scratch" or those wanting to work on the basics.

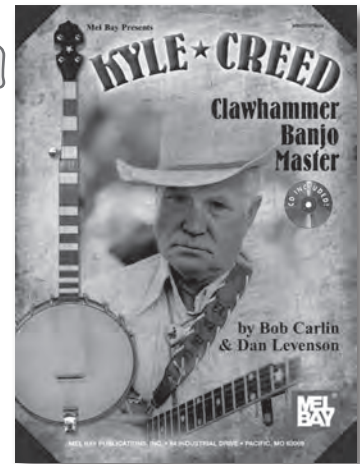
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Just as this issue was going to press, the 2010 **Grammy Award nominations** were announced, with old-time and other traditional musicians among the honorees. Nominated in the Best Traditional Folk Album category are *Genuine Negro Jig* by the **Carolina Chocolate Drops** (Rhianon Giddens, Dom Flemons, Justin Robinson), a Nonesuch release; and *Memories of John* by the **John Hartford String Band** (Bob Carlin, Matt Combs, Mike Compton, Mark Schatz, and Chris Sharp, joined on this album by Alison Brown, George Buckner, Béla Fleck, Tim O'Brien, Alan O'Bryant, and Eileen Carson Schatz), a Red Clay Records/Compass album. Two Valcour releases are among the nominees in the Best Zydeco or Cajun Music Album category, the **Pine Leaf Boys' Back Home**, and **Cedric Watson and Bijou Créole's Creole Moon: Live at the Blue Moon Saloon**. **Béla Fleck's Throw Down Your Heart, Africa Sessions Part 2: Unreleased Tracks** (Acoustic Planet Records) is nominated in the Best Contemporary World Music Album. (See *OTH* Vol. 12, No. 5 for Chuck Levy's interview with Fleck about his African musical experiences.) In the Best Album Notes category, **Gage Averil** is honored for the notes to *Alan Lomax In Haiti: Recordings For The Library Of Congress, 1936-1937* (Harte Recordings), and **Doug Seroff** for his notes to *There Breathes A Hope: The Legacy Of John Work II And His Fisk Jubilee Quartet, 1909-1916* (Archeophone). *Alan Lomax in Haiti* is also nominated in the Best Historical Album category.

In our thoughts

Fiddler **Earl Murphy** of Athens, Georgia, suffered a heart attack on October 10. His friend Nancy Hartness reports that Earl was soon back home and fiddling, and is doing well. Well-wishes can be sent to him at 160 Hunnicutt Dr., Athens, GA 30606.

Final notes

Illinois fiddler **Cecil Polley** died on August 12, at the age of 100. He was born in Fancher, Illinois, and grew up farming, playing baseball, and, from the age of 12, playing fiddle in a family band with his father, grandfather, and aunt.

Polley farmed for many years, and raised whiteface cattle. In 1969 he retired from farming, and began a new career as an animal control warden in Montgomery County. He and his wife Nellie

were avid square dancers, and he was active in the community as a Mason and through his interest in Democratic politics. Until the age of 98, he appeared in area parades driving his Allis Chalmers tractor. He was also a collector of political memorabilia, and is remembered for his enthusiasm for such favorite foods as fried chicken, ham and gravy, tomatoes, and butterscotch pie.

In 1969, Polley formed the Country Ramblers, a band who played throughout Central Illinois. He was a charter member of the Illinois Old Time Fiddlers Association, and competed in fiddle contests until the age of 97. He finally laid down the fiddle in the final year of his life, playing for the last time at his 100th birthday party.

Virginia banjo player **Hobart Crabtree** of Big Stone Gap died on September 25, at the age of 73. Nearly twenty years ago he produced six cassette recordings of his gentle banjo playing, which have more recently been reissued in CD form. Crabtree had suffered for many years from Alzheimer's Disease, and was no longer able to play the banjo, but continued to be an influential artist through his recordings. Daughter-in-law Lydia Marcassa Crabtree is assembling memories of Hobart Crabtree and his music from the old-time community, and is researching the location of banjos that he made and sold years ago. If you can add to Lydia's collection of memories, please contact her at lydiamarcassa@att.net.

Warren Argo passed away on September 27 at the age of 67, after suffering a heart attack. He was a huge presence from coast to coast in the social dance community, whether he was running sound, or playing music, or teaching banjo, or replacing an engine in the car of some musicians passing through town, or just bringing a friend a new IPA he had discovered.

Warren was born in the Bay Area, and grew up in Fresno, California. He went to college at Fresno State, graduating with an engineering degree, and he started playing music there with a pair of engineers, Hank Bradley and Chuck Pliske. They were friends for life, and this fact modeled many facets of Warren's life - if you met Warren, you were in it with him for the long haul.

He eventually moved to the Northwest, helping to start Morningtown Pizza. And he became a Gyppo. In Seattle in the '70s, there was only one dance in town, and it

was started by the Gypsy Gyppo String Band. They helped turn on a whole new generation of urban enthusiasts to square dancing and contra dancing, people who had never been anywhere near a grange hall or community center, and they inspired people to learn to play.

In 1976, the Gyppos played at the 4th at the Fort, a one-day festival at Fort Worden dreamed up by Joe Wheeler, which became the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes the next year. Warren never missed one—34 straight. He was in for the long haul, and he filled every conceivable role at the gathering: faculty, tutor, Centrum board member, volunteer, and eventually manager for more than a decade. Often he ran the sound system for the legendary dances held in Building 204, and he was part of the awesome crew that stripped two layers of linoleum from the big halls in that building, revealing maple dance floors.

It was the same with so many other gatherings—40-plus years at Sweets Mill, thirty-five-plus years with the Northwest Folklife Festival, 17 years with the Alaska Folk Festival, how many years at Pinewoods - in for the long haul. This is what he did.

Bob McQuillen wrote him a waltz.

What can we take away? He never complained, ever. I once drove with him from upstate New York to his beloved Washington State, with five people and a dog, in 68 hours. It wasn't until we were in Spokane that anyone noticed tears streaming down his face—he was allergic to the dog, and never said a word because he didn't want to make a special stop for antihistamines.

He was vulnerable — he recognized the eternal weaknesses of people, accepted them in others and himself. He understood the power of forgiveness. But Warren's greatest feature was this—he always made you feel good about yourself, always, made you feel valued, made you welcome. His hugs were legendary, and he had an exuberance that belied his years. If you knew him, and feel that you'd like to honor him, then hug the hell out of the next person you see. And the next.

He left us a little too early. As his friend Dave Trop said, "I wanted to see Warren as an 80-year-old."

Memorial contributions to defray family expenses may be made at www.warrenargo.com, or by sending a check to Chuck Pliske, 3808 39th Ave. SW, Seattle, WA 98116. (Check should be made payable to: "For the benefit of Warren Argo.") Lots of great photos and memories of his

friends can be found here:

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Warren-Argo/142176245826504>

Peter McCracken

Guitarist and mandolinist **Bob Boardman** died on October 16 in Olympic National Park, at the age of 63. The Port Angeles, Washington, resident, who had previously lived in Port Townsend for many years, was a regular volunteer and attendee of the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes and a familiar face in the region's traditional music and dance scenes. He was a member of several bands, including the Wharf Rats and the Black Diamond Fiddle Club. Boardman was a diabetes nurse and educator, who worked closely with members of the Lower Elwha and Makah tribes, and it was the Lower Elwha tribe who hosted his memorial service. In addition to his music and healthcare work, Boardman was a skilled woodworker and cabinet maker. He was also a dedicated hiker, and it was in this pursuit that he lost his life.

Robert Clifton Stripling passed away on October 26, 2010. Born February 18, 1920, he was eight years old when his father, Charlie M. Stripling, and his uncle Ira Stripling recorded "The Lost Child" and "Big Footed [Man] in the Sandy Lot." Robert was an eager observer as the Stripling Brothers prepared for subsequent recording trips to New York, Chicago, and New Orleans. When he was ten, his mother taught him to play the chords to "Little Brown Jug" on guitar and taught his younger brother, Lee Edwin, to play them on mandolin. It was not long before the boys became the primary backup musicians for their father, playing for fiddlers' conventions and staying up late at night to play for dances. He and Lee also attended southern gospel or "new book" singing schools together and became fine harmony singers, practicing for hours as they picked cotton.

During their service in the Civilian Conservation Corps and World War II, Robert and Lee both became more interested in swing music than in their dad's old-time music, yet they still revered his talent and legacy. Robert helped Dave Freeman reissue the Stripling Brothers' recordings on County Records and served as the chief source of information about Charlie Stripling for my book about old-time fiddling in Alabama, guiding me on several road trips to Kennedy, Alabama, and environs. He spent many hours with me going through collections of West Alabama newspapers of

the 1920s and '30s to find articles listing Charlie Stripling as the winner of local and regional fiddlers' conventions.


Robert spent his adult years repairing airplanes at Hayes Aircraft in Birmingham, running a homeless shelter in downtown Birmingham, and preaching at Cane Creek Baptist Church in Warrior. After suffering a stroke and the death of his beloved wife Margie, he found time and incentive to return to the guitar and fiddle. In 2000 he and Lee were on staff at the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes in Port Townsend, Washington, and the next year performed at MerleFest in North Carolina, making many lasting friendships at both.

Two weeks before his death he allowed me to interview him for a radio program about an event the Alabama Folklife Association was sponsoring in Belk, Alabama, six miles from Kennedy. In the interview, on-line at www.arts.state.al.us/act/1/radioseries.html, his knowledge, enthusiasm and sense of humor come across loud and clear.

Sherry Stripling, the daughter of Lee, writes:

*With unfortunate timing, my Uncle Robert Stripling died at age 90 just 18 days before the family music was honored at the Charlie Stripling Fiddle Fest and Fish Fry in Belk. His presence was missed at the event not only as a vital part of this heritage, but also for his guidance and impeccable memory. His recollections were key to the accuracy of filmmaker Jeri Vaughn's documentary *Winging My Way Home: The Stripling Fiddle Legacy*, which premiered there.*

Robert's leadership qualities were evident in his role in the Civilian Conservation Corps in the Great Depression; the swing bands he led in North Africa in World War II, and in his second career as a Baptist minister. Closer to home, his eight younger brothers and sisters made few decisions throughout their lives without seeking Robert's opinion. Not long ago, my sister and I got terribly lost on unmarked rural roads while trying to find the old home place near Kennedy, Alabama. Despite dips that cut out the cell phone, Uncle Robert talked us back turn by turn from a county away, using churches as landmarks.

Robert was the oldest of Charlie Stripling's nine children. Among the five surviving children is Elsie Mordecai, 86, of Kennedy, a fine player of gospel songs and old-time fiddle tunes on the piano. 

Joyce Cauthen

20 YEARS OF THE OLD-TIME HERALD AT MERLEFEST

By Alice Gerrard

Since 1990, the Old-Time Music Group (OTMG)—the nonprofit organization that publishes the *Old-Time Herald*—has booked and administered the Traditional and Dance Stages at MerleFest, at Wilkes Community College in Wilkesboro, North Carolina. As our tenure ends it seems appropriate to write a brief history of our role in the development of the traditional area at MerleFest.

MerleFest, first held in 1988, was founded to pay tribute to Doc Watson and his late son Merle, and to help raise money for Wilkes Community College (WCC). Around 1989, “B” Townes, who was vice-president of development at WCC, applied to the North Carolina Arts Council for a grant to help fund performances by traditional artists at MerleFest. “B” had previously met with Ralph Rinzler of the Smithsonian and George Holt of the North Carolina Arts Council, and Ralph suggested that MerleFest include traditional music in its lineup—appropriate, since the festival is held in Doc’s backyard, and it would further pay tribute to Doc and his heritage. The initial idea was to have the Arts Council partner with WCC in administering and programming a traditional stage. The Arts Council gave them a small grant and suggested that they contract with the OTMG to administer and program the stage. From 1990 to 1993 the Arts Council provided funding to help pay for traditional artists. In turn, MerleFest paid us a stipend for our work in booking, administering, and advocating for traditional artists. “B” Townes, who had no particular investment in traditional music as such, deserves credit and thanks for having the will and patience to trust our judgment and let us develop this aspect of the festival when other competing and commercial interests might have dissuaded him.

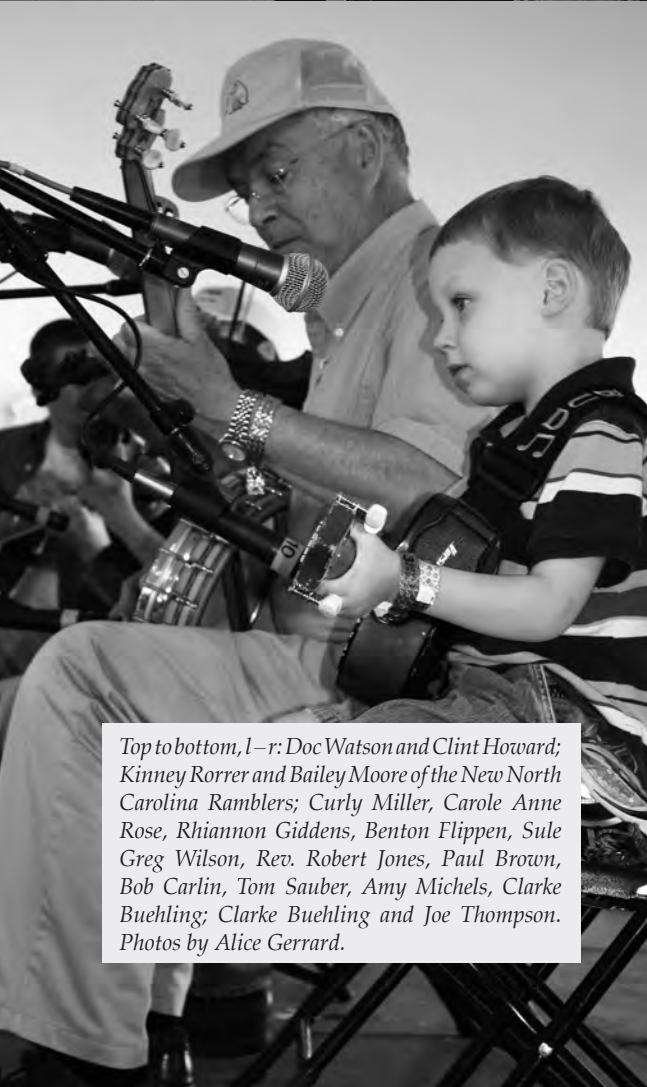
The OTMG felt a deep commitment to having high-quality traditional dance programming, as well as music, at MerleFest. Expert dancer, long-time Green Grass Clogger, caller, and traditional music advocate Phil Jamison, who was also the “Dance Beat” editor of the *Old-Time Herald*, became involved in MerleFest in 1992, when we asked him to administer a dance area. Around the third or fourth year of our work with MerleFest, Phil persuaded “B” to incorporate a Dance Stage and tent into the festival, and helped facilitate the building of the dance floor so that dancers would no longer be dancing on grass or pavement, as they had been previously. The Dance Stage featured daytime family square dances, dance workshops of various kinds, and evening Cajun dances, square dances, contra dances, and an occasional line dance, swing dance, or just plain bust-down.

Over time, the Traditional and Dance Stage area became a kind of a refuge for acoustic music, a place where you could meet and see and hear the musicians up-close and personal. Gradually, smaller acoustic jam sessions developed in the traditional area, and it became its own kind of self-contained festival. At first, the Traditional Stage and Dance Stage were outside the ticket-taking boundaries, so that people would often come and just spend their time at the festival hanging out in this area, not having to buy tickets. MerleFest soon realized they needed to include the Traditional and Dance Stages within the confines of the festival-proper, and after the first or second year, they gave us a bigger tent to accommodate growing audiences.

There are relatively few motels in Wilkesboro, and finding affordable housing for the artists has always been a huge problem. Large numbers of festival-goers reserve motel rooms from year to year, so

rooms are in short supply, and the motels command very high prices during the festival weekend. Often, the traditional performers were housed up to 45 minutes away in Boone, Jonesville, or Lenoir, in Comfort or Holiday Inns—or at a certain independent local motel on the outskirts of North Wilkesboro. It is a small, down-home motel, run by a very nice couple who love music and invite musicians into the lobby on the ground floor to jam and socialize (often providing liquid refreshment). Some traditional artists who were housed there were taken aback when they arrived, having passed by the Hampton Inn, the Red Carpet Inn, and the Holiday Inn to end up at this kind of 1950s, Route 66-style place—knowing that other MerleFest performers were being housed in more deluxe accommodations. Others enjoyed staying there, mostly because of its smaller size and the nighttime jamming, which didn’t happen much on the festival grounds. We learned to include in the contracts a memo as to whether or not artists could or couldn’t, or shouldn’t, or wouldn’t, be housed there.

Unlike most of the artists whom the MerleFest organizers hire, the traditional performers we hired generally didn’t have managers and agents to intercede on their behalves. It was up to us, with the help of “B” and the volunteers, to help make sure they got a fair wage, were housed comfortably, and were treated well and with respect. With “B”’s help and the help of all the volunteers and organizers, we were able to make this work. Although the mostly little-known or unknown traditional performers didn’t draw in the large audiences that Dolly Parton or Elvis Costello did, they added immeasurably to the overall feeling of the festival, and gave a much-needed dimension to it, helping to pre-



Top to bottom, l-r: Doc Watson and Clint Howard; Kinney Rorrer and Bailey Moore of the New North Carolina Ramblers; Curly Miller, Carole Anne Rose, Rhiannon Giddens, Benton Flippen, Sule Greg Wilson, Rev. Robert Jones, Paul Brown, Bob Carlin, Tom Sauber, Amy Michels, Clarke Buehling; Clarke Buehling and Joe Thompson. Photos by Alice Gerrard.



Top to bottom, l – r: Violet Hensley and Brad Leftwich; Earl Murphy shows award from the Old-Time Herald; Thomas Maupin and Willette Hinton dance, as Robert Dotson and Rodney Sutton look on. Photos by Alice Gerrard.

serve, validate, and encourage local traditional music, introducing people to music they might not have heard before, and giving traditional music a highly accessible platform at a huge festival attended by people from near and far.

Over the years, we worked together with the MerleFest organizers and all the volunteers to create a wonderful area of mainly acoustic traditional music and dance. After each festival, Phil and I would discuss what we thought went wrong and what went right; I would write up a report, and later we would have a meeting with "B" and others, at which we would all air suggestions and concerns. Growth wasn't without problems. For instance, sound, especially electric bass and drums, bled into our area from other stages. (After several years this has mostly been fixed.) There were communication problems, last-minute logistical snafus, and the other inefficient, sometimes irritating stuff that happens with a large, new festival, a volunteer organization, and the learning processes thereof. At the same time, much of this has contributed to a kind of informal, sociable atmosphere that is fun to be a part of.


Over the years legendary musicians, both local and national, graced the Traditional Stage. Among them have been Ralph Stanley, George Shuffler, Art Stamper, Etta Baker, Janette Carter, Ralph Blizard, John Jackson, Melvin Wine, Joe and Odell Thompson, Benton Flippen, and the Fairfield Four. Diverse ethnicities, traditions, and ages were represented, by artists such as the Deer Clan Singers, Solazo, and the Mennonite Brethren Choir, Daniel Rothwell, Bruce Molsky, and the Wilders. Local traditions were honored by artists such as Earnest East, John Dee Holeman, Enoch Rutherford, the Gospel Jubilators, Matokie Slaughter, Oscar "Red" Wilson, and the Roan Mountain Hilltoppers. And of course Doc Watson played there every year with Clint Howard, Kenneth Price, Clarence Howard, Garet Howard, and usually one or two others—bringing to mind the 1960s, when Doc toured the country with fiddler Fred Price (Kenneth's father) and Clint Howard.

We would often have themes: "African Roots of the Banjo" with Cheick Hamala Diabate, Béla Fleck, Mike Seeger, and others; "Harmonious Voices" with Pete and Joan Wernick and the Double Decker Stringband; "Road Warriors" with, among others, Tony Ellis, Tater Tate, and

Bobby Hicks, talking about life on the road; "Banjo Pickin' Women" with Linda Williams, Kate Brislin, Debbie Grim, and Kate Brett; "Carrying It On," which included younger players and dancers like Stephanie Coleman, Adam Heller, and Sarah Jamison; "Fathers and Daughters" with Rafe and Clelia Stefanini, Rick Good and Emma Young, Carl and Kelli Jones, Phil and Alice Jamison, and Thornton and Martha Spencer; "Pushing the Boundaries" with the Hix and Mando Mafia. One year we featured a couple of old-time bands from overseas, the New Billiken Stringband, and Ida Red. I'll never forget the New Billikens on stage in their traditional Japanese clothes, playing American fiddle tunes. But they also played a traditional Japanese song, which was wonderful. We persuaded Ida Red's Polo Burguière, a great old-time fiddler from France, to show off his expertise on a traditional French goatskin bagpipe as well. There were lots of such wonderful moments. During the last couple of years the *Old-Time Herald* paid tribute to some of the artists in a performance segment we called "Respected Elders." Plaques of appreciation for their contributions to traditional music and dance were presented to Benton Flippen, Violet Hensley, Joe Thompson, Robert Dotson, Clint Howard, Thomas Maupin, Lena Mae Perry and Wilbur Tharpe of the Branchettes, and Earl Murphy.

Dance workshops featuring different dance styles included some of the best traditional dancers in the country, young and old: Thomas Maupin, Willette Hinton, Dot Kent, Robert Dotson, Chris Ginn, the Green Grass Cloggers, John Dee Holeman, and many more. And without Missy and Frank Billisoly, our sound engineers over the years, who fully understood our needs and worked with us in getting the best possible sound, all of it would have been impossible.

There were hot days, there were cold days, there was rain. There was calm and there was chaos. Willette Hinton got lost on the way up the first time he came; tried to call me on my cell to get directions, and it was a Saturday when there was cell-phone overload and a ton of noise, and I couldn't understand a word he said. He got there just the same. One time after a big rain, even though we were covered, there was a lot of water in the Traditional Tent, and we dragged over some nearby bales of straw and covered the worst spots. Turned out, the fire department thought the straw would present a fire hazard, so



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volunteers dutifully raked it all out. There was the time a group ended up at their motel to find out that the air conditioning was spewing out mildewed air. One of the artists' wives had a severe allergy and would have ended up in the hospital if she'd had to stay there. It was already Saturday, so we had to do some scrambling and room-switching to make that problem go away. When the musicians' contracts grew from one page to 18 and full of legalese, several of the traditional artists just didn't bother to send them back (or perhaps even to read them)—"I'll be there if nothing don't happen." And they always were there. The organizers always worked with us and grew to understand (although a bit reluctantly) that all of this goes hand-in-hand with the way people live their lives in different ways. It's not a one-size-fits-all situation.

There were many memorable moments. There was the time the Carolina Chocolate Drops were playing on the Traditional Stage; Rosa Lee Watson was in the audience, and it started to pour just as their set was ending, so she couldn't leave. Out of respect, the Chocolate Drops continued playing until the rain stopped and she could leave. There was the time John Paul Jones, of Led Zeppelin fame, hopped on stage and played some impromptu mandolin with Uncle Earl. There was the time 94-year-old Arkansas fiddler and dancer Violet Hensley, not to be outdone by (much younger) North Carolina dancers Willette Hinton and Justin Robinson, got down on all fours during a dance workshop to do the rabbit dance. There was the once-in-a-lifetime workshop with guitarist Etta Baker and fiddler Violet Hensley, with David Holt, the moderator, trying to be diplomatic while caught between two powerful and talented old women who were vying for music and age points. (David handled it with grace and good humor). There have been, and hopefully will continue to be, many such moments to be treasured.

During the last few years, the Wilkes Acoustic Folk Society has hosted jam sessions in the Traditional Stage area, and there has been a dance board on the grass outside the tent, where dancers can dance informally to impromptu music sessions—all of which has added immeasurably to the informal acoustic feel, and the accessibility of the music. The Traditional area is like a festival within a festival—a place where one can hear good, traditional, non-commercial music. And audiences come back year after year,

many just hanging out, sometimes without ever going to the main stage area.


It's important to note that in developing MerleFest, the organizers have helped the local economy a great deal. When NASCAR left in the late '90s, it was a blow, and MerleFest has come to assume an important role, not only in bringing money into the region, but by providing local nonprofit organizations a means of raising funds by selling food, merchandise, and services at the festival; and by raising awareness of and appreciation for local music and dance. It's kind of amazing to see how the festival has grown and become more efficient in what started as a mainly volunteer endeavor. Even with all the creeping corporateness of Lowe's, Burger King, etc., it still remains a marvel.

I am sad to see some things give way. For instance, allowing performers the opportunity to sell CDs in the tent where they perform served several purposes. It brought in a little more money for the artists, as people tend to buy more right after hearing an artist play. It provided opportunities for the artists to talk with the fans—Clint Howard, or Joe Thompson, or Etta Baker, or the Pilot Mountain Bobcats, would be right there to talk to their fans and autograph their CDs if called upon—it's part of the tradition. And it brought more business to the *Old-Time Herald* as people gathered around to buy CDs and pick up magazines. When they disallowed CD sales in the Traditional Tent, artists just didn't sell as many. People had to fight their way into the vendor tent, which was a way away and usually very crowded. We were able to continue displaying and selling the *Old-Time Herald*, but a personal and fun element was gone with the loss of CD sales.


At the main stage, a wall went up on the side so that people standing backstage couldn't see what was happening on the stage; and backstage became more and more crowded with big donors gaining access, so that often, artists couldn't find time to wait in the food lines. It seemed that there was less concern for the artists in general. We understand with regret that this can sometimes be the price of getting huge, as we think some fundamental aspects of the festival and the culture behind it are diminished in the process. This past year, for the first time, families of artists were denied backstage access (which included meals).

In spite of some philosophical differences, we feel that MerleFest is a truly miraculous event, and are cognizant of

what the festival means to the region, economically and culturally. We are grateful for the opportunity to have worked with Wilkes Community College, "B" Townes, and all the organizers and volunteers. We feel a great sense of accomplishment; we leave a wonderful creation that we hope will continue to bridge the major gap between twenty-first-century realities and the precious music that we love.

We have received many emails expressing thanks and appreciation for our 20 years' work at the traditional areas of MerleFest. We thank each and every one of you for your kind thoughts. We want the artists who graced our stages to know how much we have enjoyed working with every one of them, and how precious their music and dance is to us. And we appreciate all the support from the fans who have and will continue to be loyal audiences of the Traditional and Dance Stages over the years. We hope we'll have many occasions to be together in the future. 

Musician and songwriter Alice Gerrard is a longtime advocate for traditional music and dance, and is the founder of the Old-Time Herald.

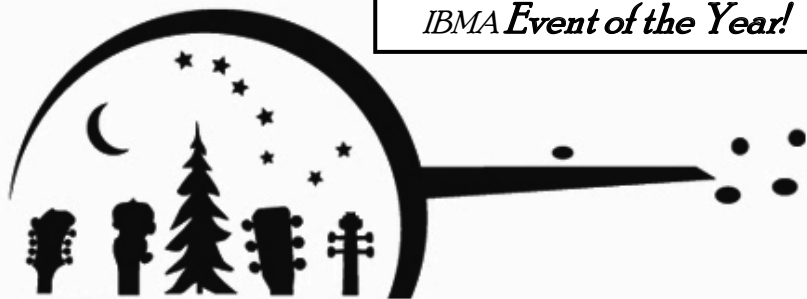


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FRED BACON AND THE EARLY DAYS OF THE BACON BANJO COMPANY

By Paul Heller



Collection of the American Banjo Museum

Bacon Factory, Forest Dale, Vermont, c. 1910



A century ago, one would have been as likely to find a banjo in the parlor of a Boston Brahman as in an Appalachian cabin. Some of the finest banjos were made in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Forest Dale, Vermont, launched what was to become one of the premier banjo manufacturing facilities in the country, under the command of Frederick J. Bacon.

Bacon's connection with Vermont spanned four decades and two rural villages. He was a year-round resident of Forest Dale (a village in the town of Brandon), where he started the Bacon Banjo Company in 1906. He later summered in Newfane where, retired from the concert stage, he coached banjo students and dabbled in painting. Both Fred and his first wife, Cassie, passed away in the picturesque village above the Connecticut River.



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"The banjo is the greatest of musical instruments when it is played well," Bacon proclaimed. "In tone quality it is very much like the harp, and its flexibility of playing is unexcelled, for in the hands of a skilled player it is as good for classical music as for dance tunes. It is the only original American instrument, and is coming into its own as the greatest of them all." His hyperbole notwithstanding, one may surmise his feelings about his favorite musical instrument.

Fred Bacon liked to tell a folktale about how the banjo got its name. The minstrel Joel Walker Sweeney, he maintained, played the instrument for Southern troops during the Civil War. As his reputation as an entertainer spread, officers in the Confederate Army requested his presence at more formal affairs. "This entertainment," according to Bacon, "became known as 'Joe's Band.'" A name for the instrument was coined by reversing the phrase, 'Joe's Band' to 'Bandjoe'. While the story has not one shred of truth, Bacon thought it made good fun to tell from the concert stage.

Sweeney and the blackface minstrels of the middle part of the nineteenth century were critical to the popularization of the banjo, for they represented an early use of the instrument by white musicians. The minstrel performers appeared throughout the country and introduced the instrument to denizens of the Northeast, who sought to adapt the banjo to more refined purposes. It became a staple of the formal Victorian parlor, and found wide popularity in colleges, where the banjo club became a standard extracurricular activity in the Ivy League. In 1866, it was reported that there were over 10,000 banjos in Boston. Proper ladies learned to play, and an instruction session was memorialized by Mary Cassatt in her impressionist painting "The Banjo Lesson."

Enthusiasm for banjos was so great that a number of companies including Bacon's were established to satisfy market demand, each extolling enhancements that led to a flurry of banjo improvements that continued until the advent of the Second World War. In Philadelphia, the S. S. Stewart Company produced a wide variety of models. In the Northeast, the Dobson family started several companies that emphasized modifications to the tone chamber. Later, the Fairbanks Company developed tone rings that enhanced both volume and tone, and produced banjos with the Tubaphone and Whyte Laydie tone rings, considered classics of banjo manufacture.

An old photo of Fred Bacon shows him with a Fairbanks Whyte Laydie banjo.

Fred Bacon was born in Holyoke, Massachusetts, in 1871, orphaned shortly thereafter, and reared by his great-aunt in Connecticut. The banjo was on an upward trajectory. Smitten by the sound of the five-string played in touring minstrel shows, he first learned to play the fiddle, and at age twelve took lessons from one of the great nineteenth-century banjo maestros, A. A. Farland. Farland called himself "a progressive banjoist," and his repertoire included pieces by Liszt, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn, as well as Rossini's *William Tell* overture, which somehow became a staple of the nineteenth-century banjoist's play list. Farland and his cohorts established the genre of music that became known as classical banjo. These erudite banjoists played European classical compositions, but just as often performed popular standards of that era such as songs and tunes by Stephen Foster and Dan Emmett, and a variety of sentimental songs made popular by the minstrel shows.

From the beginning Bacon showed aptitude, and soon embarked on a career as a traveling musician with medicine shows, Wild West shows, and instrumental ensembles. He toured under the name Nebraska Fred in Bronco John's Wild West Show, and his likeness was displayed at the Boston Museum (a performance venue) as "The Banjo Kid." By 1897 he was proficient enough to organize the first of many ensembles, the Bacon Banjo Quintet, and became a featured act in concert halls. He performed regularly as part of an ensemble, with his wife Cassie (they married in 1897), or as a solo artist.

It was in solo performance that his memorable recordings were made for Victor and Edison. The *Edison Phonograph Monthly* of April 1916 remarked, "One of the best known banjo soloists before the public, Mr. Bacon is known on the vaudeville stage from coast to coast. His playing repertoire includes grand opera, descriptive and popular selections and the familiar old "home melodies" always dear to his heart. One critic said that his playing was so wonderful he could make his banjo talk as clearly as though it was a human voice." The imitation of the human voice was a crowd-pleaser for Bacon. His forte was coaxing sounds from his instrument reminiscent of the Lord's Prayer. A reviewer in the *Galveston Daily News* remarked in 1908, "The words seemed to really pop from



Fred Bacon, from a 1901 issue of Cadenza



Bacon Factory, Forest Dale, Vermont, c. 1910

the strings as he gives imitations of an old colored minister saying the prayer and another of a little girl saying a prayer in sing-song voice."

Another famous selection played and recorded by Bacon was the plantation song, "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground." It followed the standard form for many of his records. The tune was played though once at a brisk pace. It was played a second time at what seems like an impossibly fast tempo and performed flawlessly. The final iteration was back to the normal speed.

Two other classical banjo virtuosos of the early twentieth century were Fred Van Eps and Sylvester "Vess" Ossman. Like Fred Bacon, these two were actively engaged in defining the genre and were popular concert hall performers and recording artists. Van Eps, and Ossman in particular, expanded the repertoire to include ragtime, a relatively new medium for composers. It was Van Eps and Bacon, however, who became innovators in banjo technology and produced instruments bearing their names. For Van Eps, it was

the challenge of producing an instrument suited to the primitive recording studio that motivated his design. For Bacon, it was the desire to improve the instrument for the concert stage.

When Fred and his wife Cassie moved to Vermont, they adopted Green Mountain traditions and had the idea of producing maple syrup as a vocation. An early-twentieth-century directory lists Bacon's occupation as sugar-maker. Shortly thereafter, however, he is listed as a musician, and mention of a Bacon Banjo Company in Forest Dale occurs as early as 1906. It is generally thought that Bacon contracted with the Vega Company in Boston to produce his first instruments, but there are circa-1910 photographs of a banjo factory in Forest Dale with the craftsmen assembled in front. It is unclear if the instruments were entirely made on the premises or merely assembled there.

Fred and Cassie built a home in Forest Dale, called Stonehurst, which was completed 1907. The *Brandon Union*, a local newspaper that covered the village of Forest Dale, gave this account.

"Stonehurst": That's the name of the cottage that Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Bacon have been building this summer in Forestdale, and which is now practically finished.

The cottage is unique, and what is better still, it is supposed to be a most comfortable residence in all seasons, notwithstanding the extremes of heat and cold which our climate is liable to reach. The cottage is built upon the point of a hill at an elevation of 650 feet above the sea. It is in the foothills of the Green Mountains and Moosaloomoo, with its 2,500 feet of elevation, is only about five miles away. The Neshobe River steals by the point of the hill 75 feet below "Stonehurst" and then continues its journey to the beautiful valley of Otter Creek in plain view from the piazza of the cottage. Beyond Otter Creek Valley the Hubbardton Mountains loom up in the distance, refusing to be obscured by the nearer but lesser neighbors. The cottage faces south by west, its dimensions are 29 x 33 feet and the piazza, 33 long by 9 feet deep, is a pleasant and roomy observatory.

Both the cottage and the barn are Portland cement outside. They are first boarded, then covered with heavy building paper, then lathed with a metal lath, and the cement laid upon the outside similar to a hard finish. The roof is covered with shingles dipped in red creosote.

The underpinning and outside chimney are of cobblestone, and the large fireplace in the reception hall, with its blazing white oak logs, completely cures the worst attack of the blues. For who is so hardened that, sitting in the cheerful warmth of the open fireplace, they can build other than lovely air castles in the glowing embers of the white oak? The cellar, seven feet clear under the whole house, hints of the rosy-cheeked Spy and Baldwin and the mulled cider and the popcorn bursting into blossom over the open fire. Inside everything is finished in quartered oak or Georgia Pine. A hot water system is installed, the plumbing is of the best, and, in fact, everything about the place is of the best, and, we should like to hear that never-to-be-forgotten "Home, Sweet Home" when the Bacons play it the first time in the light of that open fire."

The Bacons were accepted into Forest Dale society, and their departures for concert tours were announced in the local news section of the Brandon Union. When Fred was thrown from his favorite horse, Babe, in front of the Post Office, that was reported as well. They performed for neighborhood parties, as well as traveling across the country to appear before large audiences in concert halls. In 1914 the local newspaper announced their performance as part of "the moving picture show" in Brandon, and observed, "Mr. and Mrs. Bacon are known from Nova Scotia to California as the best banjo players the world has yet produced. They have been heard in every big city in the United States and everywhere they are unhesitatingly acknowledged the best . . . The very best banjoist is a Brandonian and about once each year our people have an opportunity to hear him . . . Go early for your seat."

Visitors to Stonehurst included guitarist William Foden and mandolin player Giuseppe Pettine. Along with Bacon they comprised the nationally known Big Trio, which rehearsed at the Bacons' home and performed at local venues.

By 1910 Fred had begun selling banjos from Forest Dale. A catalog survives from 1913 that describes a range of instruments

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The rim is made of four layers of $\frac{1}{8}$ in. well seasoned rock maple, with nickel-plated bell flange, over which head is drawn. The bottom of sounding chamber is 3-ply maple veneers and outside edge is bound in handsome inlaid marquetry. The neck is made of selected curly maple with three strips of black and white veneers through center. Best XXX Rogers head and universal patent keys. Handsome pearl design set in peg head, and pearl position marks. This instrument has both a powerful tone and beauty.

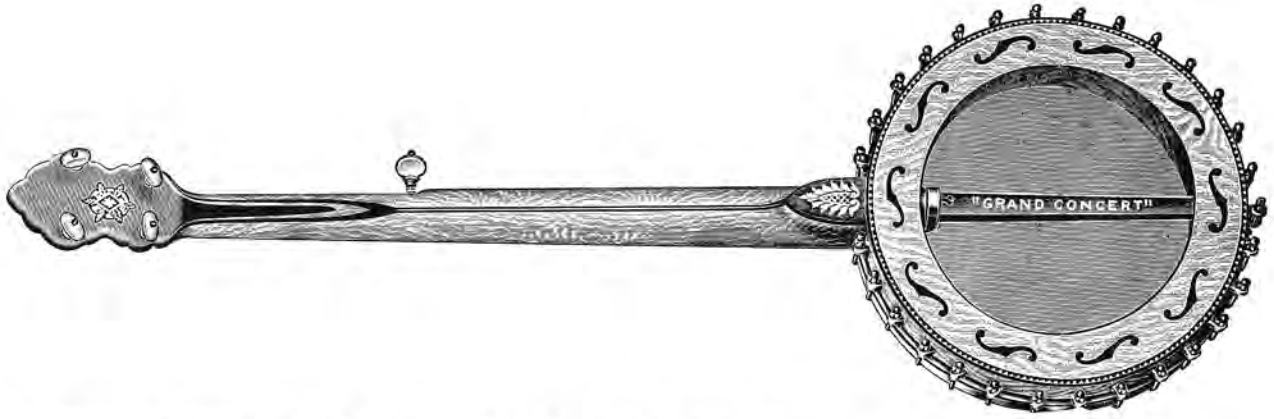


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Bottom of sounding chamber made of white rock maple, bound with fancy colored marquetry.

Straining hoop same as "New Special."

The neck is made of choice white holly, with 3 strips of veneering through center. Front of peg head is inlaid with a beautiful floral design of choicest mother of pearl. Pearl keys with gold plated trimmings.

Made in 2 sizes: 11 inch Rim by 19½ Fingerboard; 11½ inch Rim by 20½ Fingerboard.

Positioned to suit customer.

N. B. This instrument can be had in curly maple if preferred.

From 1913 Bacon Professional Banjo catalog

Collection of Paul Heller

available for purchase. The least expensive banjo listed was the Bacon Professional No. 1 for \$40. The neck on the No. 1 was made of cherry and the rim of rock maple, a sensible selection for a Vermont banjo. The No. 2 used maple for both the neck and the rim, which was constructed of four layers of 1/8-inch maple. This model also incorporated a tone ring, and sold for \$55. The models were enhanced at each grade, culminating with the Special Grand Concert, for \$125, which employed white holly veneer, ebonized holly, and rock maple. Elaborate carving distinguished the heel of the neck and pearl inlay offered distinctive contrasts in ornamentation. Like all Bacon banjos of this vintage, it featured a donut-style resonator, which distinguished these instruments from other banjos manufactured at that time. Bacon offered a soft-pedal mute on his top-of-the-line model, a feature that became standard on his Silver Bell banjos years later. It is worth noting that all of the standard instruments described in this catalog were five-string banjos. Four-string or tenor banjos would achieve

great popularity in the next decade, and the famous Bacon banjos made later were almost exclusively tenors.

These Forest Dale products are well-made, fine-playing banjos, but were not of the caliber of the higher-end instruments made in Boston by the Vega Company under the exacting standards of General Manager David Day. Bacon contemporary Cliff Spaulding, with good humor, referred to these Vermont-made Bacons as ax-handle banjos—instruments fashioned by country artisans better-suited to making ax handles than fine musical instruments. He also called them "shoe-polish banjos" in reference to the crude finish applied in the Vermont factory, which appeared to have the same color as the liquid red-hued cordovan leather dressing applied from a bottle. Spaulding visited the Bacons at Stonehurst and joined them in playing for the resort hotels around Lake Dunmore when he was in Vermont.

The final page of Bacon's 1913 catalog contains letters of endorsement from purchasers. One is from "Master Frank

C. Bradbury, Phenomenal Boy Banjoist."

Dear Mr. Bacon. Received the new 11 ½ 'Special' and 'Grand Concert' De Luxe a few days ago, and I must say these two excel my Bacon No. 3, which my father gave me two years ago, and I thought this was the best banjo in the world. You are certainly giving the banjo fraternity a most wonderful instrument.

Bradbury was a child prodigy, born in Bethel, Vermont, in 1896. He was a student of Bacon's and one of the last in a long line of classical banjo players to perform on the concert stage and make commercial recordings. He stayed at Stonehurst with Fred and Cassie while studying under Fred's tutelage.

The demand for Bacon banjos was sufficient to require expanding his factory in 1913. A report in the *Hartford Courant* noted that Bacon's banjos were an improvement over other makers' instruments, "having a sounding chamber which sustains the tone, mellows it slightly, and yet adds to its brilliancy."

A 1907 advertisement in *Cadenza* used an indirect approach in promoting their

Teachers and Performers on the Banjo

Read carefully notices below, then get in a good quiet corner, and do a little hard thinking before you place your order for a new banjo.

Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Bacon, who are playing at the Majestic Theatre this week, are without a doubt the most skillful performers on the banjo that have ever visited this city.

Mr. Bacon has invented a special and improved banjo, and the music they bring from their instruments almost equals a small orchestra.—*The Dallas Morning News*, Dallas, Texas—November 11, 1906.

Mr. and Mrs. Bacon, banjo experts, are the best in that line ever seen in this city. The instruments they use are very powerful and have a most delightful quality of tone.—*Moline Journal*—September 1906.

Mr. and Mrs. Bacon, who are playing here this week, are the greatest banjo players ever heard in Shreveport. The banjos they use are very loud and musical, and they do not have to resort to the "pick" to be heard.—*The Shreveport Journal*—Shreveport, La.—December 11, 1906.

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instruments. Addressed to "Teachers and performers on the banjo," the ad contains quotes from reviews of their performances in which the tone of their banjos is extolled: "Mr. Bacon has invented a special and improved banjo, and the music they bring from their instruments almost equals a small orchestra." "The instruments they use are very powerful and have a most delightful quality of tone." "The banjos they use are very loud and they do not have to resort to the pick to be heard."

The Bacon Banjo Company's existence in Forest Dale was to last only a few more years, and as the now middle-aged Fred and Cassie Bacon's attention turned from the concert stage to banjo manufacturing, more suitable environs were established in Groton, Connecticut. By 1914 they were living most of the year in New London, Connecticut, across the river from Groton, the future home of the banjo factory. It was in New London that Fred began publishing *The Banjoist*, a magazine directed toward prospective players of Bacon banjos. It contained short reports from musicians, advertisements for Bacon banjos as well as instruments by other makers, advertisements for accessories, instructional tips, and musical scores. *The Banjoist* was by no means unique. Most manufacturers published a house organ that extolled the virtues of a particular style of musicianship or the benefits of a particular brand of instrument. The magazine does mark a level of maturity of Fred Bacon as a businessman, who possessed an uncanny sense for promotion. It was a new era for the banjo, Bacon realized. The days of the classical banjoist playing the five-string in a concert hall were waning and the future of the instrument was as that mainstay of the jazz age, the tenor banjo. "From 1910 to 1914 the tenor banjo made meteoric strides in supplanting the five-string instrument," said Bacon. "The tenor banjo is blessed with many advantages over its five-string predecessor. Foremost is probably the comparative ease with which it can be played and its tremendous volume and carrying power which automatically opens up its greatest field—that of the dance orchestra." Ironically, the tenor banjo reached its highest expression in a company owned by a five-string banjo virtuoso.

The Bacon Banjo Company of Groton, Connecticut, was incorporated in 1915 with capital stock of \$50,000. Fred and Cassie Bacon, and Mr. and Mrs. E. Oliver Winship of Groton, were the prin-

cipals, and their first factory was an old house situated where a wharf jutted into the Thames River. Mr. Winship was a local physician and property owner in Groton. As Bacon developed his manufacturing facility there, he turned to a great banjo innovator for guidance. David L. Day brought his enthusiasm for the banjo to the Boston-based Fairbanks banjo company, where the Day-inspired Whyte Laydie and Tubaphone banjos became the standard for professional and amateur musicians alike. In 1922 he joined Fred Bacon at the new plant in Connecticut as Vice President and General Manager. The significance of this union may be inferred from the fact that the logo on the instruments manufactured in Groton no longer read "Bacon" but "B&D" for Bacon and Day. A report on the banjo facility at 169 Thames Street appeared in the *Hartford Courant* on February 13, 1930.

The factory equipped with the latest motor driven machinery to aid the worker, is situated by the roadside overlooking the Thames River and where from one part of the plant Long Island Sound is visible two miles away. With beautiful and healthy surroundings, artisans skilled in the art, working under ideal conditions—what else can be expected other than the production of art rather than commercialism.

The great Silver Bell banjo was brought into production in 1923, and immediately achieved high marks among the jazz musicians of the roaring '20s. Fretted instrument expert George Gruhn of Nashville, Tennessee, regards the Silver Bell as "unsurpassed" in quality. He has written that the Bacon and Day "instruments were prized for their exceptional volume and cutting power, as well as their beautiful craftsmanship." He goes on, "we can only speculate what might have happened if Earl Scruggs or some well-known bluegrass player had used a Bacon & Day model." Gruhn suggests that the popularity of the Gibson Mastertone banjo would have been eclipsed by the fine instruments produced in Groton. The Silver Bell was a high-end banjo for the professional musician, and it was expensive. In the 1920s a top-of-the-line B&D banjo had a list price of \$900, while a high-end Gibson sold for \$450. Bacon made much of the fact that his instruments were for the discriminating (and well-heeled) musician. In press releases dating from the era of his promotional tours the great expense of his instruments was often noted, and in

TESTIMONIALS FROM THE BACON CATALOG

PORTLAND MAINE, June 20, 1912.

Dear Mr. Bacon: You certainly have the best yet in banjos. Have played all of the leading makes but the "Bacon" passes them all. You have my best wishes.

Most sincerely,

S. A. THOMPSON, Y. M. C. A. Bldg.,
(Composer and Soloist).

C. S. De Lano—soloist, composer and inventor of the famous "So/natone" string, says: "My entire class now play on BACON banjos, and there is positively no banjo I have ever tried which equals them."

Mr. De Lano has both a "Special" and "Grand Concert."

Geo. C. Krick, Germantown, Pa., noted guitar soloist and teacher of the three instruments, says: "After playing the 'Bacon' banjo under every condition I believe it is the best of any. Its resonant, powerful tones are superior to any I have ever heard."

(Mr. Krick owns a Special Grand Concert.)

Mr. B. V. Kershner, soloist and composer, says, under date of Aug. 24th, 1913: "The Special 'Grand Concert' Bacon banjo has any thing beat I ever heard for tone. The workmanship is perfect. You have the privilege to use my name at any and all times, and you can rest assured I will make the banjo players sit up and take notice, when they see and hear this banjo."

J. J. Derwin, famous as banjo soloist and composer, says: "Your banjos are the best I have yet used—great carrying power."

Mr. Derwin uses a "Bacon" New Special.

MINNEAPOLIS, MINN., Sept. 1, 1913.

F. J. Bacon, Forest Dale, Vt.

My dear Sir—Replying to your recent favor requesting some expression from me regarding the 11 1/2 "Grand Concert" banjo, would say, I am very much pleased with it.

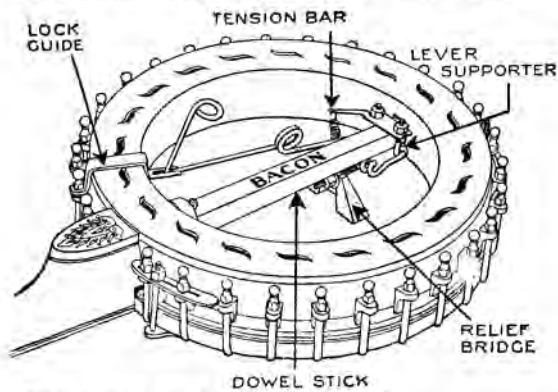
My observations lead me to believe that it is the greatest tone sustaining banjo I have ever used, and it is extremely sensitive to the touch.

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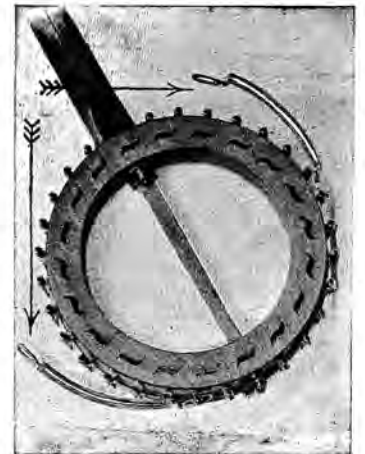
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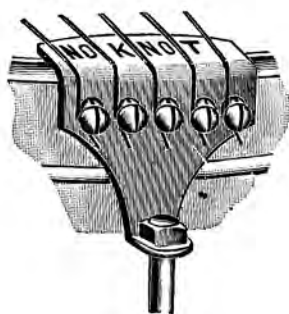
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For illustration of tailpiece see cut of Special Grand Concert Banjo on page 7.

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1925 at the Hippodrome in New York, a gold-plated model was presented to the Prince of Wales.

The Silver Bell was a popular instrument with a devoted following. Silver Bell banjo clubs were formed as far away as New Zealand, and loyal musicians were effusive in their tributes, even composing banjo solos in honor of the instruments. Charles Shibley's "B&D March" was dedicated to his friends F. J. Bacon and D. L. Day, and published in 1924 by the Bacon Banjo Company.

With the success of his new factory in Groton, Fred became a tireless promoter of his products. While demand for his style of performance had waned, he still traveled constantly to offer workshops in schools and music shops, all with the intention of promoting his banjos. In Davenport, Iowa, an ambitious one-day schedule for the sixty-year-old included

a 9:00 AM performance at Davenport High School followed by an appearance at Rock Island High School at 10:45. At 3:15 that afternoon he gave a recital at the Family Theater, followed by an appearance J. H. C. Petersen's Music Store at 4:00. At 8:00 PM he offered another show at the Family Theater. The announcement noted that he would hold a special meeting at the Chamber of Commerce at which he "will be glad to meet with any player or others interested in the banjo. There will be a talk on banjo playing and on the construction and use of the banjo." Bacon was easily persuaded to sell the instruments he toured with, and consequently many banjo enthusiasts' claims that they own Fred Bacon's banjo are true. He also appeared on radio stations throughout the country and once, as a publicity stunt, performed a live broadcast from the cockpit of an airplane.



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Fred and Cassie moved to a home in New London, but found a summer place in their beloved Vermont. They left Forest Dale for Newfane, a much easier commute to Connecticut, and finally retired there in 1939.


The Bacon Banjo Company thrived through the 1930s and, as musical tastes changed, the demand for tenor banjos followed the path of the five-string. When a hurricane destroyed the factory in 1938, Bacon and Day decided to sell what was left of their enterprise to the Gretsch Company. Still living part-time in Newfane, Cassie and Fred occasionally played music and instructed students at their home on Brattleboro Road. Fred also spent quiet hours at his easel painting with oils and watercolors.

During the years of the Great Depression, Fred worked for the WPA, teaching music and giving the occasional concert. Cassie, in failing health for over two years, passed away at Brattleboro Memorial Hospital in November of 1936.

Fred continued under WPA auspices to conduct an orchestra for stringed instruments as a demonstration that "the average citizen of the Green Mountain State could be taught to play some instru-

ment and thereby acquire a worthwhile hobby." The orchestra's performance in Townshend, Vermont, in February of 1938 included solo performances by Fred and Frances Westphal of Newfane, who was soon to become Bacon's second wife.

Fred and Frances spent much of their time in Newfane, which by 1939, after the company was sold, became the their permanent home. They both taught music and repaired instruments for their neighbors and friends, while Fred continued to play, arrange, and compose music for the banjo. After years of arteriosclerosis, Fred succumbed to cardiac failure on the night of November 18, 1948. Four days later he was buried near Delia Aldrich, the great-aunt from Rockville, Connecticut, who raised him from the age of four following the death of his parents.

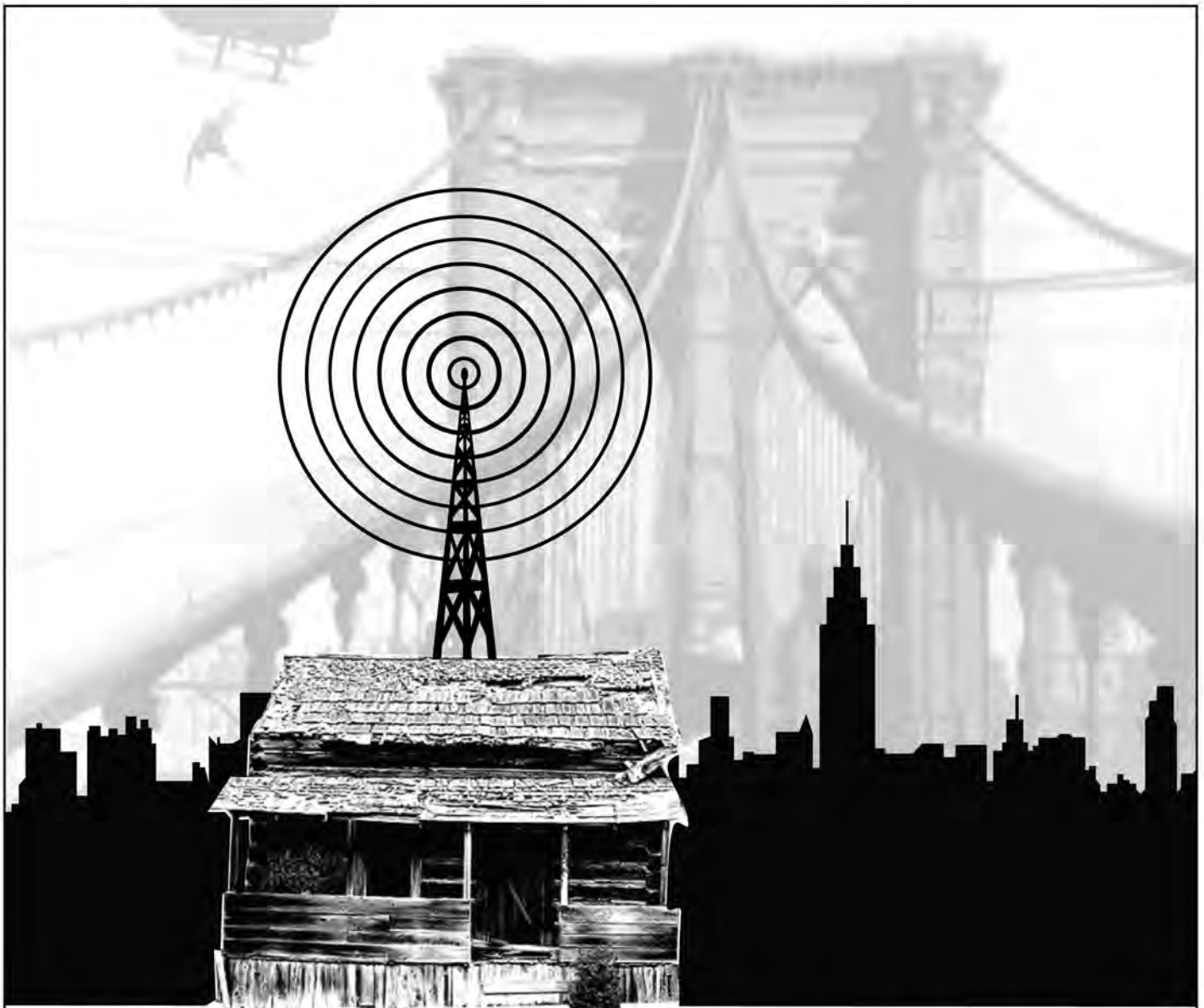
While Fred Bacon's life in Vermont is seldom acknowledged in the Green Mountains today, his legacy lives on with collectors and banjo players, who cherish his instruments and recordings. 

Paul Heller is a retired librarian, innkeeper, and local history buff. He also buys and sells vintage banjos.

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Bob Walters

A MISSOURI VALLEY GATHERING:

HONORING BOB WALTERS, DWIGHT LAMB, AND THE MISSOURI VALLEY FIDDLE STYLE
By Israel Tockman

“If we’re going to play Missouri tunes, we’d better step it up a notch,” said Jim Lansford of Galena, Missouri.

In a sidewalk session outside the auditorium in Tekamah, Nebraska, Lansford was setting the bar high to honor the lives of two fine fiddlers and the style that shaped their playing.

Set on the wide flanks of one of the continent’s greatest rivers, Tekamah is one of many small farm communities that sprouted to take advantage of the fertile loess soils left behind by glaciers during the last ice age. In addition to corn and soybeans, the valley has nurtured an especially rich musical tradition.

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the death of “Uncle” Bob Walters, the great Missouri Valley fiddler, who died on Christmas Day, 1960. On October 16, musicians from Virginia, Missouri, Idaho, Illinois, Minnesota, Washington, Montana, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Iowa gathered in Tekamah to celebrate Walters’ life and music, and to pay homage to his protégé, Dwight Lamb of Onawa, Iowa.



Israel Tockman



Israel Tockman



courtesy of Dwight Lamb

Sanford Walter, Bob Walters, Hiram Walter, Ed Mahoney, Floyd Davis, Casey Jones, Frame Davis



The event, organized by Dwight and Bill Peterson of Canton, South Dakota, also served as the first Walters family reunion in more than twenty years. Family members came to remember the music-filled reunions of the past when Uncle Bob, family, and friends played the intricate melodies of the Missouri Valley repertoire into the night.

Actually, of the fifty or so family members who attended, only a few were old enough to remember Bob Walters, who died of emphysema at the age of 71. Each of Walters' four children has passed away, but four of his grandchildren, and a lot of great-grandchildren, cousins, nieces, and nephews showed up with instruments and potluck contributions.

The family is scattered so far and wide that some members had never met. Others had not been together for many years. Margaret, daughter of Bob's guitar-playing brother Harold, said that she'd not seen Bob's grandchildren, now all grown men, since they were small boys.

Those who knew Bob Walters remember a tall, good-natured and loving man who smoked but would not touch alcohol. The music that rang through the hall in October also brought back deep memories of a man who lived to play the fiddle and could play just about anything he wanted to.

Walters came from a musical family. His brothers Sanford, Clayton, and Hiram all played the fiddle, while Harold played guitar. Their father, Wilse, was a great fiddler. According to Dwight Lamb, Walters often said his dad had the best bow arm of anyone he knew. Grandfather Elijah or "Ike" also fiddled, and carried tunes to Nebraska when he migrated from Kentucky.

Bob Walters farmed outside of Decatur, Nebraska, until drought, grasshoppers, and the Great Depression forced him to give it up. It appears he was more into fiddling than he was farming, anyway. Walters' wife Goldie told Dwight that Bob often returned to the house twice during a workday to grab his fiddle and untangle a tune that was haunting him.

To say that Walters was successful as a contest fiddler is putting it lightly. He told tune collector R. P. Christeson that he won thirty-four of the thirty-eight contests he entered. Walters reportedly triumphed at so many fiddle contests that he was eventually forced to stop competing and become a judge. Whereas many players polished a few tunes to perfection for contest performances, Bob could play with



courtesy of Dwight Lamb

l-r, Dwight Lamb, Bob and Goldie Walters



courtesy of Dwight Lamb

Bob Walters with R. P. Christeson (r).

skill and grace for hours. According to Dwight Lamb, an opponent in a northern division silver cup fiddle championship withdrew from the contest after Walters refused to compete unless each contestant played for an hour without stopping.

After he quit farming, Walters pursued his passion and became a radio fiddler in the late 1930s or early 1940s. He had radio shows in Shenandoah, Iowa, at KFAB in Lincoln, and finally at KMAJ in Grand Island, Nebraska. That's where Dwight got his first taste of Bob's fiddling. Dwight first heard him on KMAJ in 1946, where Walters also worked as a janitor to supplement his income. Times were tough and the Walters family lived in a moldy basement in Grand Island, which may have contributed to Bob's lung problems. Walters also repaired instruments and re-haired bows.

Dwight Lamb has lived his whole life in Northwestern Iowa. He was born in Moorhead, and the family settled a few years later in Onawa. Today he is a retired postal clerk, and he also served as the mayor of Onawa for three terms.

In addition to hearing great local fiddlers over the airwaves, Dwight grew up listening to his father, Clarence. Clarence learned most of his tunes from the radio playing of Missouri fiddler Casey Jones. Though he was drawn to fiddle music, Dwight started out playing the accordion, inspired by his maternal grandfather, Chris Jerup, who played the Danish button box. By the time he got his first car and tracked down Bob Walters to learn the fiddle, Dwight more than knew his way around the accordion, and could second Bob's playing.

Dwight's quest to find Walters was tough even though the two men lived pretty close to one another. Tekamah, Nebraska, sits across the Missouri River and south about 25 miles from Onawa, Iowa. Today the river is easily crossed on a \$1 toll bridge connecting Onawa, with Decatur, Nebraska. The bridge existed in the mid-'50s when Dwight was seeking his mentor, but it didn't quite cross the river. Engineers built it on the Nebraska side of the river with plans to re-route the Missouri under it later, but, after the bridge was constructed, they ran out of money, and it sat islanded there for six or seven years. So, in order to visit Bob, Dwight had to cross the river at Missouri Valley, Iowa—a seventy-mile roundtrip journey. Walters must have been happy to have such an eager and able student, and he welcomed Dwight with open arms.

Bob Walters never recorded commercially, but thanks to Dwight and the efforts of R. P. Christeson, Walters was one of the most extensively recorded old-time fiddlers of his generation.

Dwight spent a lot of time with Bob during the last six years of his life and has an extensive stockpile of reel-to-reel recordings that he made at these musical gatherings. Dwight's parents even made recordings of his mentor to send to him while he was in the service in France, so that he could keep Walters' tunes in his head. The quality of most of these recordings is quite high, and Dwight and his family managed to capture a large slice of Walters' repertoire. That's saying a lot, considering the multitude of tunes Walters played. Uncle Bob seemed to be equally comfortable coaxing quadrilles, reels, hornpipes, breakdowns, waltzes, and swing pieces from his old Dutch fiddle.

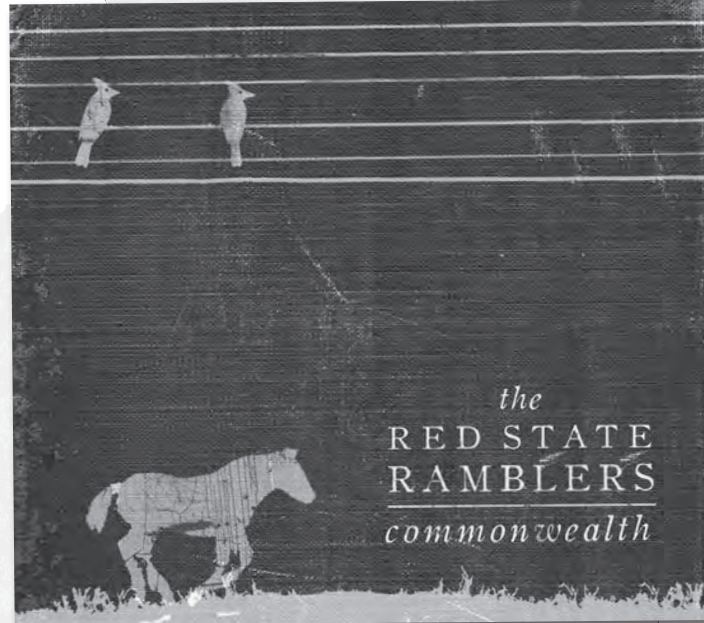
There are many notable recordings in Dwight's collection. A couple that stand out are "Beaux of Albany," and Walters' father's version of "Cuckoo's Nest." The tunes were recorded shortly before he died, and despite Walters' state of physical decline, his playing is magnificent, complete with bow triplets and "cuts," or as R. P. Christeson termed them, "32nd notes."

Bob Walters is particularly well represented in Christeson's *The Old-Time Fiddler's Repertory*, and recordings of him make up the bulk of the 41 cuts on the book's companion LPs. Christeson bought a wire recorder in the '50s and recorded Walters extensively, agreeing to the condition that he provide Bob with copies of the recordings after having them pressed. Christeson also recorded other Midwestern fiddlers such as Cyril Stinnett and Bill Driver.

The Missouri Valley fiddling style is intricate, and the tunes are, on the whole, more notey than tunes from the Southeast. They also tend to be played at a fast clip. The region's repertoire consists of reels and hornpipes, waltzes, and quadrilles, as well as breakdowns. Some of the tunes are in Bb, and many have A and B parts that are in separate keys. It is a unique style. The few tunes that would likely be familiar to someone more steeped in Southern fiddling might sound quite different. In addition to his brothers and Clarence Lamb, other fiddlers of note who shared repertoire with Bob Walters were Ed Mahoney, Cyril Stinnett, Casey Jones, and Lonnie Robertson (who lived in Southern Missouri).

The evening before the Walters family reunion, early arrivals gathered at

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Israel Tockman

Dwight Lamb, Ronnie Walters, Greg Walters, Dave Landreth



Israel Tockman

Nate Kemperman and Dwight Lamb

the Onawa Senior Center to play tunes with Dwight. Dwight, a southpaw fiddler, plays very well despite having had a stroke a couple of years ago, which affected his left side. He plays a standard-strung fiddle, which means he has to play “over the bass” in order to hit the high strings—a challenge for “righties” seeking to learn tunes from him by watching.

Bill Peterson, the event’s primary organizer, was there with bandmates John Everist and Nathan Glazier. The three are members of the Fiddler Nelson string band, a Sioux Falls, South Dakota-based group of musicians who mostly play Missouri Valley tunes. In 2001, Bill received a grant from the South Dakota Arts Council to study under Dwight, and the two have remained close.

After gathering for an extended breakfast at the Onawa Café the next morning, the out-of-towners made the drive over the river to the Tekamah Auditorium. Lines of cottonwoods, already shorn of leaves, framed the banks. The air was glazed with dust from highway construction and combine work in the stubble fields.

The Tekamah Auditorium is familiar territory for family members who remember musical gatherings from the days when Uncle Bob would hold court there. As it must have in the old days, the main hall rang with music from two o’clock in the afternoon until past midnight (excepting an hour or so when everyone tucked into the gigantic potluck meal).

For most of the afternoon and evening, Dwight was at the center of a circle of musicians cranking out busy, graceful Missouri Valley tunes like “Adrian’s Hornpipe,” “Lantern in the Ditch,” “Thunderbolt Hornpipe,” and “Hell in the Mud.” In addition to the members of Fiddler Nelson, among the many folks who came to play with Dwight were Kim and Jim Lansford, Dave Landreth and Andy Gribble of St. Louis, Minnesotans Bob Bovee and Gail Heil, fiddler Ron Kane (formerly of the Deseret String band), banjo player Rick McCracken, Judy Lungren of the Dead Fiddlers Society, Montana fiddler Bill Sevores, Sioux Falls fiddler Ken Duda, Lynn Garren and Bill Boyle from Chicago, and Jim Nelson and Dedo Norris. Wilbur Foss, who has presided over the South Dakota Old Time Fiddlers for 35 years, played alongside Dwight and then passed out free cassettes of Midwestern fiddlers.

Dwight broke out his old button box and played his grandfather’s Danish tunes

while Nate Kemperman, Dwight’s first protégé, accompanied him on the fiddle. Kemperman received an Iowa Arts Council grant to study with Dwight in the ‘90s, and Dwight has bequeathed to him Bob Walters’ old fiddle, which he bought from R. W. Christeson.

Melding the musical celebration with a family get-together not only continued a long-standing Walters family tradition, it also made for a more meaningful experience, as the tunes triggered emotions and inspired stories and memories which then provided a living context for the music. In the luncheon hall, family members hovered around photos of Walters in his youth and at the radio station, as well as some of the medals and trophies he won. Rod Moore and Dick Walters talked about the old dowed barn their grandfather built without a single nail.

At about five, food started coming in the door. Family members began showing up with casseroles, pies, pots of chili, hams, and the most enormous mound of fried chicken I’ve ever seen. After dinner, Walters’ grandchildren Dick, Rod, Ronnie, and Ray talked about the days when Dwight would come to family reunions and play with Bob for hours without stopping.

Greg Walters, Bob’s great-grandson, who plays a set of bones he carved out of a single willow stave, became emotional while talking about the impact these old tunes have on him. He told a story about how deeply the music has worked its way inside. Years ago, he’d been at a music festival and someone was playing a tune that struck him; the music was evocative and familiar, but he had no idea why. He asked the player what the tune was and where she’d learned it. “Sorry,” she said, “I don’t know the name of it, but I got it out of that old *Repertory* book.” Hearing his great-grandfather’s music played by a stranger had stopped him in his tracks, despite the fact that he’d only been two years old when Bob passed away.

The tunes continued after dinner. Ronnie and Dick Walters, who play in a country-western band, got out their guitars, and Greg joined in with the bones. To make sure everyone stayed awake after such a huge feast, Gail Heil called a square dance and got everyone up and moving. Small groups broke off and played into the night. And when everyone else was truly worn out, Nathan Glazier fiddled much of the repertoire, backed by Bob Bovee on guitar. Nathan has only been fiddling for a couple of years and already has an impressive familiarity with these great tunes.



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Israel Tockman



The weekend wrapped up with an afternoon in Dwight's trophy-bedecked music room in the rear of his home in downtown Onawa. A jug of "Missouri tea" made its way onto the coffee table, and Dwight sat in his rocker and played, ringed by the members of Fiddler Nelson and many others.

Dwight played Bob Walters' "Natches Under the Hill," which he said was like no one else's version he'd ever heard. He also cranked out "Turkey Knob," stating in typically humble fashion, "That's kind of the running gears of it." Remembering the loops and slides of the "Trombone Rag" proved to be a bit more difficult for everyone.

Before we walked out into the clear Iowa afternoon, Dwight led everyone in the first fiddle tune he had learned, "Coming Down from Denver." That

this quick and complicated piece was Dwight's first attests to his great skill as a musician, and to the flame of inspiration that passed from the strings of Uncle Bob Walters. 

Israel Tockman grew up near the terminus of the Missouri River in St. Louis. He learned to play old-time banjo in a fire lookout among fractured limestone and Missouri River-bound snow in Northwest Montana. He works for the US Forest Service, writes, and cooks in Missoula, Montana.

The authour thanks Dwight Lamb, Bill Peterson and the other members of Fiddler Nelson as well as the Walters family for keeping the music alive. This article is indebted to the fine essays by Dwight Lamb and Mark Wilson that appear in the liner notes of Dwight's two Rounder releases and "The Champion."

All that can be said about the tunes pales in comparison to hearing them played. Many readers are probably familiar with Bob Walters and the Missouri Valley style. Those who are interested in pursuing the Missouri Valley fiddling tradition further might avail themselves of a series of new releases from Missouri Valley Music. You can get a taste of some of the recordings by going to www.fiddle.missouri.org.

Dwight and Bill Peterson worked together to re-release *Old-Time Fiddle Classics in the Missouri Valley Style*, a collection of two LPs Dwight made with his favorite guitar accompanist, Elvin Campbell. The original records were released in the late '60s and early '70s and exemplify Dwight's playing at the height of his powers.

This year Bill and Dwight released an album of Dwight playing button box accordion in the style of his grandfather, Chris Jerup. This recording features a few recordings of Jerup himself, as well as old recordings of Dwight accompanying Bob Walters, and recent pieces in which Dwight is joined by friends like Nate Kemperman, and Danish musicians Mette Jensen and Kristian Bugge. Dwight also has two tunes on Rounder's *North American Traditions* series—"Joseph Won a Coated Fiddle" and "Hell Agin the Barn Door."

Dwight and Bill also collaborated on the *The Champion*, a 2009 release of 80 cuts of Bob Walters' fiddling, handpicked mostly from Dwight's trove of reel-to-reel tape recordings. The bulk of the recordings were made in the six years before Walters' death, and the quality of the recordings as well as Walters' refined and graceful playing are remarkable. The first disc in the set contains a PDF file of an essay on Uncle Bob, as well as photos, and extensive comments on the tunes by Dwight Lamb and University of Pittsburg professor Mark Wilson. Wilson, who was interviewed by Kerry Blech for this magazine in 2001, is the man behind Rounder Records' *North American Traditions* series, and helped Dwight produce his Rounder releases.

Those interested can also refer to an interview with Dwight Lamb that appeared in the Winter 1989-1990 issue of the *Old-Time Herald*.

If you want to hear and play some of these tunes, and meet some great folks from the Missouri Valley, keep your calendars open during mid-October, 2011. The Walters family plans on continuing the tradition. All are invited.

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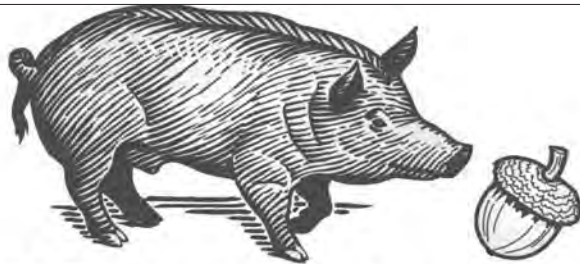
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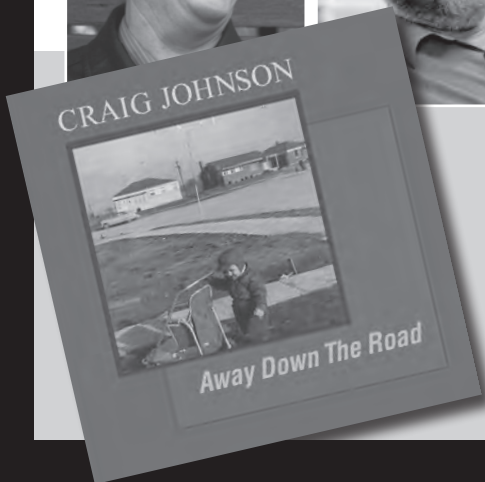


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Reviews

Bloody War: Songs 1924-1939



Tompkins Square TSQ-2479

Zeke Morris - Just as the Sun Went Down / Jimmy Yates' Boll Weevils - Bloody War / Buell Kazee - The Faded Coat of Blue / Coley Jones - Army Mule in No Man's Land / Darby and Tarlton - The Rainbow Division / Red Patterson's Piedmont Log Rollers - The Battleship of Maine / Frank Hutchison - Long Way to Tipperary / Fiddlin' John Carson and his Virginia Reelers - Dixie Division / Dixon Brothers - The Old Vacant Chair / Earl Johnson and his Clodhoppers - Johnnie Get Your Gun / Ernest Stoneman - Uncle Sam and the Kaiser / Grayson and Whitter - He is Coming to Us Dead / Darby and Tarlton - Captain Won't You Let Me Go Home / Wade Mainer and Sons of the Mountaineers - Not a Word of That Be Said / William and Versey Smith - Everybody Help the Boys Come Home.

With but two exceptions, the fifteen songs in this enjoyable collection of war-related recordings from 1924 - 1939 focus not on tunes meant to stir patriotism or to rally the people for a military cause, but rather on the disruption and the sense of loss caused by war. The two exceptions are "Dixie Division" from John Carson and "Uncle Sam and the Kaiser" from Ernest Stoneman.

The Dixie Division (31st Infantry) was formed from National Guard units from Georgia, Florida, and Alabama and was sent to France in 1917. The song, written that same year, was meant to extol their valor and perhaps to show that the sectionalism of the Civil War was truly over. Carson sings the verses and chorus in a strident voice over a march-like banjo strum, and then to underscore the unit's Southern heritage, shifts to a rousing instrumental medley of "Dixie," "Swanee River," and "Are You from Dixie?" However, as a nod to national unity, he inserts "Yankee Doodle."

"Uncle Sam and the Kaiser," recorded in 1925, features Stoneman's standard

harmonica and autoharp, and also his somewhat belligerent lyrics. At one point Uncle Sam tells Bill (the Kaiser) to take his pill. Later Stoneman uses the derogatory term for Germans of the day, "bosch." Since the war had ended before he wrote this, I'm not sure who he was rallying and what for.

You might think "The Rainbow Division" from Darby and Tarlton, or "The Battleship of Maine" from Red Patterson's Piedmont Log Rollers, or "Johnnie Get Your Gun" from Earl Johnson and his Clodhoppers, would also be of that militaristic type, but that doesn't hold true. "Johnnie Get Your Gun" comes the closest. While the Rainbow Division (42nd Infantry) is mentioned only in passing by a soldier worried over his girl's faithfulness, and the U. S. S. *Maine* is cited only as a cause for a set of humorous verses by an unhappy Spanish-American War soldier, "Johnnie Get Your Gun" was originally a rallying song. The phrase was once a recruiting cry and was used in Cohan's "Over There." In Johnson's version from 1927, only the original chorus remains, while the verses have been completely demilitarized.

In company with "The Battleship of Maine" is Jimmy Yates' Boll Weevils' cover of "Bloody War," a jazzy recounting of the comical adventures of a draftee in WWI. Darby and Tarlton's "Captain Won't You Let Me Go Home" is of a similar theme, as is Coley Jones' defiant spoken blues about a black hosteller forced to walk an "Army Mule in No Man's Land." Underlying them all is a sense of seriousness, for funny as their tales are, these men are in the fight, not just upset with military life as in Berlin's "Oh, How I Hate to Get up in the Morning."

The remaining songs reflect on the loss and misery caused by war, and include Grayson and Whitter's classic "He is Coming to Us Dead" and Frank Hutchison's jaunty instrumental version of "Long Way to Tipperary," as well as a lyrical piano and violin version of "Faded Coat of Blue" sung by Buell Kazee in 1928. Zeke Morris and his simple guitar strumming tell of the final moments of two soldiers dying on the field in "Just as the Sun Went Down," and the Dixon Brothers perform "The Old Vacant Chair," recorded in 1936. The liner notes mistakenly state that "The Old Vacant Chair" is the Civil War-era song by George F. Root. Vacant chairs are a common theme in songwriting, and this is one of the other chairs. Interestingly, it doesn't mention

war, but the image of a missing family member would apply. Who wrote this one, I haven't determined, but the Dixons give it a nice sentimental airing. The collection ends on a rollicking blues duet of guitar and tambourine from William and Versey Smith in 1928, in which they plead "Everybody Help the Boys Come Home." That a portion of the sales of this recording goes to help the soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan reminds us that the plea is all the more immediate.

BILL WAGNER

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The Freight Hoppers Mile Marker



David Bass, fiddle; Frank Lee, banjo, vocals; Isaac Deal, guitar, vocals; Bradley Adams, bass

Been to the East Been to the West / Scandalous and a Shame / I Saw a Man at the Close of Day / Lost Indian / Taxes on the Farmer Feed Them All / Hound Chase / The Train That Carried My Girl from Town / John Hardy / Shelvin Rock / Going Across the Sea / Sharp's Hornpipe / Down on Me / Hell Bound for Alabama

I first met David Bass back in the mid-'90s, when he was primarily busking for a living. I jammed with him at parties and found his relentlessly energetic fiddling to be as impressive as it was, sometimes, hard to follow. During that period he played with an excellent New York State-based band called Cool as Grits, with Mike Fleck on banjo, David Long (and perhaps one other) on guitar and vocals, and (if memory serves) Alex Scala on bass. (They released a fine, but scarce, cassette of that name). In many ways, this album was the progenitor of the Freight Hoppers—with a similar band texture and outstanding vocals. It also strikes me, details aside, as the antecedent of all the bands with which David Bass has recorded.

In 1992, give or take, David moved to North Carolina and teamed up with Frank Lee and Cary Fridley to form the



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Freight Hoppers. It's hard to imagine that anybody who was at Clifftop in '95 or '96 could possibly have missed the whirlwind of energy as they jammed, standing up for (what seemed like) days on end, on the lawn between the stage and the dining hall. Whatever your personal preferences in string band music, you couldn't help but be impressed with their blistering tempos, kick-ass drive, tight groove, and exuberant-yet-polished vocals.

The Freight Hoppers' first recording was launched in 1992 with a nice self-produced cassette called *Going Down the Track with a Chicken on My Back*, but they really hit their stride with two exceptional CD releases on Rounder: *Where'd You Come From Where'd You Go?* (1996) and *Waiting on the Gravy Train* (1998). These two albums really demonstrate what all the fuss was about, starting with David Bass' force-of-nature fiddling, Frank Lee's smooth singing and clucky banjo style, and Cary Fridley's solid guitar, and rambunctiously adroit Gid-Tanner-style falsettos. In addition, Danish bassist Hanne Jørgensen provided solid and supportive bass playing that managed to keep it all under tight control. This was a winning formula.

Consequently, the Freight Hoppers had very good run back in the '90s, taking first place in the traditional band contest at Clifftop in '96 along with prizes at Galax and Rockbridge. They were selected as one of the top thirty acoustic artists of the "Next Generation" by *Acoustic Guitar* magazine in '97, and placed second in the "Talent Show from Towns under 2,000" contest on Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion*. Moreover, both their Rounder albums climbed to the top 20 of the Americana charts. Within the old-time universe, their visibility and popularity rivaled or exceeded such popular revival bands as Highwoods, the Horseflies, and Big Hoedown. Plus, they brought in a whole lot of new recruits to the genre.

But in 2002 the Freight Hoppers disbanded as David underwent a (successful) heart transplant operation. Two years later the newly invigorated David formed the Forge Mountain Diggers with Allison Williams on banjo and Tom Bailey on guitar—a fine band that continues to this day. In 2007, the Freight Hoppers reconvened, this time with Tom Bailey on guitar and Isaac Deal on bass. Now with their new CD, *Mile Marker*, Isaac Deal has moved over to guitar and Bradley Adams has come aboard on bass (as is often the case in old-time music, you can't tell

the players without a program). The result is a band that is every bit as polished and exciting as the original (although I really do miss Cary Fridley's falsetto). The band provides a manifesto in the liner notes that proclaims *Mile Marker* to be (as the name suggests) "a mile marker in our musical careers, our spiritual fulfillment, and financial independence." It just might be; it is very good.

From the first rip-roaring track, "Been to the East Been to the West," it's clear that the Freight Hoppers are back. Isaac Deal's tenor is sweet, but with an edge. He blends beautifully with Frank Lee's smooth lead singing. Arollickingly funky rendition of "Scandalous and a Shame" is drawn from Blind Willie McTell's version with overtones of the Gid Tanner melody in David's fiddling. Grayson and Whitter's "I Saw a Man at the Close of Day" gets a beautiful rendition here—tight and moving.

Another corner of the Freight Hoppers' sound is to reconfigure old songs in new, and usually effective, ways. Such it is with John Carson's "Taxes on the Farmer Feeds Them All." Frank Lee has devised a mesmerizing bluesy/modal melody and plays lovely and simple lead guitar with an equally sensitive fiddle accompaniment.

An interesting tune that I hadn't heard before is "Hound Chase" from Arnold Sharp of Ohio. It sounds to my ears to be an AEAC# tune—similar in flavor to (say) "Three Forks of Cheat." A challenge for any banjo player—but Frank is on top of it.

One of my favorite tracks is John Carson's "Hell Bound for Alabama"—a tune separated at birth from the Skillet Lickers' "Ride Old Buck to Water," but with a cool modal tag at the end of the refrain. I can't remember having heard anyone play this since Lisa Ornstein and Andy Cahan's *Ship in the Clouds* cassette.

Both vocally and instrumentally, the band's sound is similar not only to the Freight Hoppers' previous incarnations, but also to the other bands in which David Bass has fiddled, from the 1980s to the present. This is not a bad thing—they've all been excellent bands with outstanding talent, and fine choices of material. As an experiment, I lined up all these albums on a playlist in my iPod, set it on shuffle, and tried hard to guess which band and configuration I was listening to. There were differences to be sure, but they are subtle. And, naturally, the principal defining characteristic throughout is David Bass's driving and unique fiddle style.

The consistent sound from band to band is, in many ways, a testament to Bass's vision of how he wants a string band to sound, although I'm sure his bandmates were, and are, in accord. That four bands with the same fiddler should sound similar almost goes without saying. But the other elements align as well. For instance, Frank Lee, Mark Olitsky, Mike Fleck, and Allison Williams are all excellent banjo players—and they all blend elements of the Round Peak style with what can be described as an Ithaca-inspired rhythm groove and texture. Moreover, all the lead singers have been clear, strong, and polished.

One thing that has puzzled me is trying to identify the principal sources of David's fiddle style. I suppose I could have asked him, but why make it so easy? As a non-fiddling banjo player, I have a hunch that he has taken the busy bowing style used by Tommy Jarrell, Fred Cockerham, and others to play songs with lots of whole notes and/or lots of open space ("Lonesome Road Blues" or "Wild Bill Jones" for example) and adapted it to a much wider repertoire. I also notice that his fiddling on slower tunes and songs has become more lyrical, without sacrificing his trademark drive.

The packaging of the CD is very nice—a three-panel digipak with a pocket for the CD, it features four nice band photos and nice chatty-yet-succinct liner notes that provide sources for most of the tunes. Produced by the band, *Mile Marker* was recorded at Rubber Room Studio in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and nicely mixed, mastered, and engineered by Jerry Brown. Whether you are one of the uninitiated or are already in the know, you're going to be tapping your toes and humming along. Buy it! Buy them all!

STEVE ARKIN

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The Knuckle Knockers



Bill Foss: banjo, mandolin, vocals; Karen Celia Heil, guitar, fiddles, vocals; Martha Hawthorne: guitar, banjo, vocals; with Maxine Gerber: banjo; Brendan Doyle: banjo

Georgia Blues / Shipping Port / Little Black Train / Stacker Lee / The Cyclone of Rye Cove / Christmas Time in the Morning / Soldier Girl / Can't Feel at Home / Step in a Hole / In the Pines / Wildcat Rag / Dinah / Cannonball Blues / Brushy Fork of Johns Creek - Little Bobby / All Night Long / Hometown Waltz

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much time learning to play together and weld themselves into a band that is more than the sum of three good musicians.

Most three-person string bands use fiddle, banjo, and guitar. The Knuckle Knockers do only a few numbers like that; more often Karen Celia Heil plays fiddle, Bill Foss doubles the melody on mandolin, and Martha Hawthorne provides solid guitar backup. Of the forty old-time musicians honored in R. Crumb's trading cards, the only two bands that play this way are the wonderfully named Mumford Bean and his Itawambians, and the Doc Roberts Trio. When they are singing, Karen often plays "lead guitar" while Martha is described as playing "rhythm guitar" and Bill is on mandolin, which is a nice way to do Carter Family songs.

Not only does the band blend instruments well, their voices blend well. In fact, there is some fine singing here. Start with the Carter Family songs: "Cannonball Blues," "I Can't Feel at Home," "Rye Cove," and "Little Black Train." (Their liner notes, available from their website, credit the last song to Cisco Houston and Woody Guthrie, but I feel certain where they got it.) Since the Knuckle Knockers are two women and one man, they can and do adopt the Carter Family's vocal approach, adeptly avoiding the pitfalls of re-enactors by sounding like themselves. Instrumentally, their liner notes indicate some of the work that has gone into sounding like this; on "Rye Cove" they say "Bill tries to imitate the sound of Sara's autoharp with his sweeping mandolin chords," while on "Can't Feel at Home" you see that "Karen uses the old time boom chuck chuck chuck" which produces a very different sound than the usual boom-chuck. Interestingly, the liner notes spend much more time discussing how the instrumental sounds are achieved than the vocal blend. However, the singing is executed with such down-home grace that the listener will well appreciate the attention the Knuckle Knockers have given to their vocal work.

Some other songs that I enjoyed were Martha's original "Soldier Girl," "All Night Long" from Burnett and Rutherford, and Samantha Bumgarner's "Georgia Blues," which is a version of "Going Down this Road Feeling Bad." A real gem is the band's rearrangement of Ed Haley's "Stacker Lee" into a string band piece. In addition, there are some good instrumentals played here: a couple of John Salyer tunes, the Ray Brothers'

"Hometown Waltz," and Martin and Hobbs' "Wildcat Rag." (Martin and Hobbs, by the way, are the source for festival favorite "Hot Corn, Cold Corn.")

This appears to be the band's first CD. Lots of wonderful singing, excellent tunes, and musicians who blend together in that good old-time way.

PETE PETERSON

To order: www.knuckleknockers.com

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If this were 1935 and I were around to answer the question, "Where can I hear some really good singing with voices blending together beautifully?" I would say, "Start with the Carter Family, and maybe listen to these two young brothers named Delmore," and go on from there. Here it is 2010, and if somebody asked me the same question, I would say, "Check out the new CD by Cliff Perry and Laurel Bliss."

Their first CD, *Old Pal*, came out around 1994. They had already achieved a wonderful blend, switching lead voices effortlessly, and here it is sixteen years later and everything they did well then, they do even better now. (Cliff's hair was already white; it's even whiter now.) They have broadened their choice of sources: in addition to their obvious love of the Carter Family, (four songs), there are songs from James and Martha (Carson) as well as from four brother duets, the Delmores, Louvins, Stanleys, and Bailey Brothers. (Aside: "James Carson" was actu-

Meghan Dudle

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how well he brings that skill across on the recording, particularly when he is singing. With most performers, you only hear what they sing or play on the record. On this recording, when Holt is singing a song such as "Reel and Rock," or "Sail Away," or "Texas Bound," with its fun, devil-may-care lyrics, or singing a story song such as "The Preacher and the Bear," or his own "Goodbye, Goodbye," you can almost hear him grinning or giving you a sly wink and a nod. Uncle Dave Macon comes to mind, though Holt is far less bombastic than the Dixie Dew-drop. Still, they both share that vaudevillian know-how, and that quality goes a long way to raising the level of enjoyment, even for songs that are standard-worn. Throw in the guitar work of Doc Watson, a performer equally adept at entertaining, and you get a recording of high spirits.

For those who missed this recording the first time around, there are twelve songs. Ten of them are of the traditional variety. The other two were written by Holt; "I Got You" is an anniversary song to his wife, and "Goodbye, Goodbye" pays tribute to the *Mountain Lily* steamboat that once plied the river from Horseshoe to Asheville, North Carolina. The album opens with the "Shady Grove" variant "Reel and Rock," which has a marvelous and lively flow. From there, the highlight tracks include, among many, a staple from Doc Watson's days with Clarence Ashley, "Free Little Bird," a smooth rendition of the Carter Family's "Dixie Darlin'," "Texas Bound," and the doleful but hopeful gospel tune "Meeting is Over," sung here over slide and finger-picked guitar. Holt and Watson also perform a nifty harmonica and hambone rhythm duet on "Raincrow Bill Goes Up Cripple Creek," further strengthening their vaudevillian technique.

Most of the songs here, excepting "Raincrow Bill" and "Meeting is Over," are a hybrid form of old-time and bluegrass. There is no fiddle, but there is Dobro. The banjo work is all clawhammer, but the use of individual solos between verses and choruses leans to bluegrass. Joining Holt and Watson are Doc's son Merle (making his last recordings before his death) on fingerstyle and slide guitar, Dobroist Jerry Douglas, bassist Buddy Davis, electric bassist Wayne Kirby, and vocalists Bucky Hanks, Kathy Chiavola, Richard Carpenter, and Steven Heller. Holt's banjo is predominant and he handles all the lead singing. Equal promi-

nence is allotted to Doc's guitar leads, with Merle contributing some good work here and there on what is and always was an album worthy of reissue.

BILL WAGNER

To order: www.davidholt.com

Meghan Dudle You Are Always in My Dreams



Half Sashay Music

Little Bessie / Hannah at the Springhouse / Down the River I Go / All I've Got's Done Gone / Rocky Mountain Goat / Don't This Road Look Rough and Rocky / Cotton-Eyed Joe / Kaiser Waltz / Spring Fever / Elk River Blues / Old Joe Clark / When the World's On Fire / That's It / Rocky Road to Dublin / West Ran Away Out with My Heart / You Are Always in My Dreams

Meghan Dudle lives in Minnesota, dances with the Wild Goose Chase Cloggers, and has played fiddle with several bands, including, for several years, a group called the Ditch Lilies. In this, her first solo album, she demonstrates that she's a versatile musician, presenting a variety of traditional music authentically, but with feeling.

This is a type of "solo" album that's becoming more common: Meghan plays and/or sings on all the cuts, but uses other musicians in various collaborations. The result: a variety of musical sensibilities that holds our attention better than a band that always uses the same combination. In this case, a total of ten other musicians contributed to the performances. Arabica Studios did an excellent job of making a clean recording — the acoustics are just right.

So a clogger is going to play all square dance tunes, right? No. She starts out with a beautiful version of Clyde Davenport's "Little Bessie" on unaccompanied fiddle. It's a mournfully expressive piece, like an old ballad, but without words. The fiddle is in standard tuning, but the low-drone harmony makes it sound as if some type of special tuning were used.

There are lively dance pieces, of course, and some beautiful waltzes. The backup

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musicians have obviously all played for dances before, because they keep a steady beat going, which Meghan enhances with her bow work. In fact, much of the artistic expressiveness of both the fast and slow pieces is due to her skillful attack, combined with slides, tasteful double-stops, and the excellent rhythmic sense you expect from a dancer. She has the skill to channel the great fiddlers that are the sources for her tunes: in addition to Davenport, they include Melvin Wine, Doc Roberts, Ernie Carpenter, and the Stripling Brothers. In fact, she even applies a Stripling pizzicato to her "Cotton Eyed Joe" (played in AEAC# tuning). I can be authoritative about this, because she lists her sources and fiddle tunings in the notes. This was once common practice, but with the disappearance of meaningful notes, the sources and tunings have disappeared also. Kudos to Meghan for swimming against the tide.

About 2/3 of the numbers are instrumentals, but none of them sound alike. Even in the breakdown pieces, Meghan has a tonal clarity unusual for a fiddler. She also allows the tunes to breathe. Some of my favorites are "Little Bessie"; "All I've Got's Gone" (from Doc Roberts, not Dave Macon); "Elk River Blues" (Er-

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nie Carpenter); "That's It" (fancy uptown fiddling with a good-time flavor, learned from the Mississippi Sheiks); and the title tune, a beautiful two-fiddle waltz (from the Stripling Brothers).

On the vocal numbers, Meghan sings melody with one or two other harmony singers. The smooth, close harmony used here is more typical of the Midwest than the mountains. I particularly enjoyed "Down the River I Go" (Double Decker String Band); "Don't This Road Look Rough and Rocky" (Flatt and Scruggs); and "When the World's On Fire" (Carter Family).

LYLE LOFGREN

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**Maw
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Bluegill BG005, 2009

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What'll I Do with the Baby-O? / The Dowry Mule / Little Glass of Wine / This World Can't Stand Long / Venus Eyes / Factory Boy / Highlander's Farewell / Starry Crown / Betray My Trust / Cluck Old Hen / Tapestry of Woe / You Led Me to the Wrong / Advice for the Young and Foolish / Warfare / Laundry Song

This all-mom group from the Lawrence, Kansas, area has made an album with a unique and interesting concept: songs of warning, wrongdoing, and murders—things your mother would warn you about. (Their web address, listentoyourmaw.com, evidences this too.) Some are traditional and some original, with a few good old instrumentals thrown in for variety.

Fun is a big factor in this recording, with some of the songs tongue-in-cheek, such as the original "Factory Boy," in which the tables are turned and the woman does the killing, and "Betray My Trust," the lyrics of which go "If you ever betray my trust/ I will flay you like a hare/Hang you over my door/So that all who enter there/Know never betray my trust." "Laundry Song," another origi-

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nal, is performed exquisitely as an un-accompanied mountain ballad, but the subject is picking up your dirty clothes. (Such a *mom* thing!) Three of the band members sing, and the vocals at times are rich, rousing, and exuberant. These women write songs with an authentic feel. "Dowry Mule," "Venus Eyes," and "Factory Boy" all could've been plucked from the annals of Appalachian folklore, and I was surprised to find they weren't.

Though the playing isn't spectacularly wowing, it is old-timey and competent for supporting the songs. There's a bit of unevenness to the recording; a voice might sound the slightest bit off-key on one song; then the harmonies are lovely on others ("Warfare" and "Betray My Trust"); or the tempo lags here and is super solid on the next cut. These imperfections are secondary, though, to the overall effect of the album, which is a genuine good time. I look forward to hearing another collection when these folks have seasoned, both individually and as a band. Recommended especially for those who enjoy singing.

TONI WILLIAMS

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took over). The early recordings of Dennis McGee are magical, but also mysterious and murky, making it difficult to decipher what the fiddlers really are doing (especially Ernest Fruge's seconding), although I confess that for me, the mystery adds to the attraction. I don't know if Linzay and Joel have actually duplicated these early sounds note for note, but they get as close as I've heard, without sounding forced or academic in any way.

Joel and Linzay cover the earliest, most archaic Cajun fiddle sounds (Dennis McGee's playing), folk sounds ("Si Tu Voudrais Marier"), dancehall classics ("Tous les Soirs"), and early Cajun blues ("Mercredi Soir.") Starting right off with the very first tune that Dennis recorded in 1929, they romp and stomp through repertoire learned from McGee, Courville, Fruge (both Ernest and Wade), Cheese Read, etc. It's what McGee and Fruge (or Courville) might have sounded like had they been able to record using twenty-first-century recording techniques. Besides being excellent listening, this CD ought to be very useful for students of Cajun fiddle, as it's very easy to figure out what they are playing, both the playing and the recording quality being nice and clean, and the tempos not too fast.

Most selections are fiddle duets, some fiddle-guitar duets. Joel's guitar backup is right in the pocket. All the music here is very unforced, without affectation, untouched by rock and roll, disco, rap, or any of the other late-twentieth-century pop music styles. This music is not innovative, just beautiful.

There is one original tune, the modern-style old-time sounding "Missouri Heights." And there is one old-time tune, "Wagoner," on which Linzay trades off the fiddle lead with Joel who picks it on the guitar. I like this, but it could have more fire. If I have any criticism to make of this CD, it's that I wish it had just a little more edginess—not the modern kind, but the "what the heck is going on?" feeling of some of those early recordings. The only cut on which they seem like they are really going for that is the fantastic version of "Valse à Pop," which is pretty much a note-for-note recreation of the 1930 recording, played at a similar breakneck pace, and has the same dizzying, about-to-fall-off-the-edge feeling as the original. Bravo!

The vocals are excellent. Linzay does most of the singing, with Joel contributing a wonderful version of Blind Uncle

Gaspard's "Mercredi Soir," accompanied only by his own bluesy fiddling, which is hauntingly beautiful. Both men sing in a very natural way, not trying to imitate, not being theatrical, just letting the music speak through them. There's some harmony singing here, which wouldn't have been found in the early years of Cajun music (for a sample of "Cajun harmony," listen to the recordings of Dudley and James Favor (sometimes written Fawor), such as "T'es Petite et T'es Meon"; you can hear this on Neal Pomea's site—see below).

This CD was made in an afternoon—recorded simply, the way the old recordings were made. It makes for excellent listening; the recording quality is excellent, and it's easy to imagine Joel and Linzay in my kitchen making this music while I'm stirring the roux for an hour or so. The running time is just over 38 minutes, so it's possible to listen to the whole thing in one sitting.

Neal Pomea has put up the source recordings for all of these pieces on his amazing "Hadacol It Something" website, well worth checking out: www.npmusic.org/artists.html.

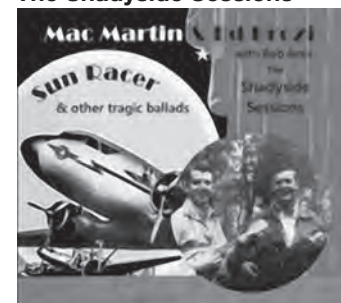
The packaging is a simple sleeve; no liner notes. It would have been nice if Joel and Linzay had written something about the sources, perhaps on the Valcour Records website, but Neal Pomea has taken care of that on his Hadacol site.

Highly recommended.

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ken Engagement / God Have Pity on the Blind / Wreck of the 1262 / Asleep in the Briny Deep / In a Little Village Churchyard / The Lover's Return / The Death of Floyd Collins / God Made Everything

Ed Brozi was a new name to me, but I was well aware of Mac Martin, a bluegrass mainstay of the Pittsburgh music scene. Back in 1969 while I was in that area for the holidays, I went to Walsh's Tavern to hear Martin perform with his band, the Dixie Travelers. It was straight-ahead, traditional bluegrass and it was evident that Martin's roots ran deep. That night has remained a vivid memory for me, though I've had little chance to hear Mac Martin since, except for a few recordings.

After moving to Pittsburgh from rural Fayette County, Pennsylvania, in 1942, Brozi met Mac Martin and they started playing and singing old-time country songs together, material from the Blue Sky Boys, Carter Family, Mainer's Mountaineers, etc. When Martin's bluegrass band formed and was working regularly, Brozi would often sit in and sing the old numbers. In 1970, around the time Martin and his band cut their first record for Rural Rhythm, Mac and Ed Brozi made the first of the recordings on this CD at

a home in the Shadyside neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Another session in 1972 yielded additional cuts.

The repertoire featured here is heavy on tragic and sentimental numbers, many quite obscure. The title song, "Sun Racer," is about a plane crash, and it's one I've never heard or seen any references to. Sun Racer was a TWA passenger plane that went down in 1935 near Uniontown, Pennsylvania (south of Pittsburgh), and I expect the song is a local composition, maybe even a Brozi original. (Readers, let me know if you have any information on this one.) Others completely unknown to this reviewer are "Rock My Cradle Once Again," and the insipid "God Made Everything." Of particular appeal to me were "God Have Pity on the Blind," "I'm Free at Last," and "Asleep in the Briny Deep"; but most of the cuts are enjoyable. My guess is that Brozi learned the majority of his songs from 78 rpm records and, in addition to the artists mentioned above, songs seem also to have been drawn from Vernon Dalhart, Jimmie Rodgers, the Dixon Brothers, and other, less obvious recordings.

The real focus of each track here is the song and the singing, with Martin's vocals smooth and expressive and Brozi's

with a more piercing, raw approach. I love both and, though I fear many listeners may be turned off by his style, to me Brozi is an excellent example of the power of pure, unfettered, and unpretentious rural music. The biggest disappointment for me was expecting to find vocal duets on this and, instead, getting solos with Martin doing lead on five songs, Brozi on the rest. Only on "I'm Free at Last" does Brozi add tenor harmony. It's true that these songs are mostly ballad-style story songs with no chorus, but to me they still cry out for harmony. Accompaniment is two guitars, with Martin providing simple but sufficient breaks and Bob Artis adding mandolin for two selections.

The sound quality is very good for non-studio recordings; notes are scant with little real information on where the singers learned their material. There is a sameness throughout, since all songs are slow to medium-tempo tragic/sentimental fare with unvaried accompaniment or approach. Nothing essential here, but I find it pleasant and consider it a fine view of the transition of old-time to bluegrass. It should prove enjoyable to listeners of both genres.

BOB BOVEE

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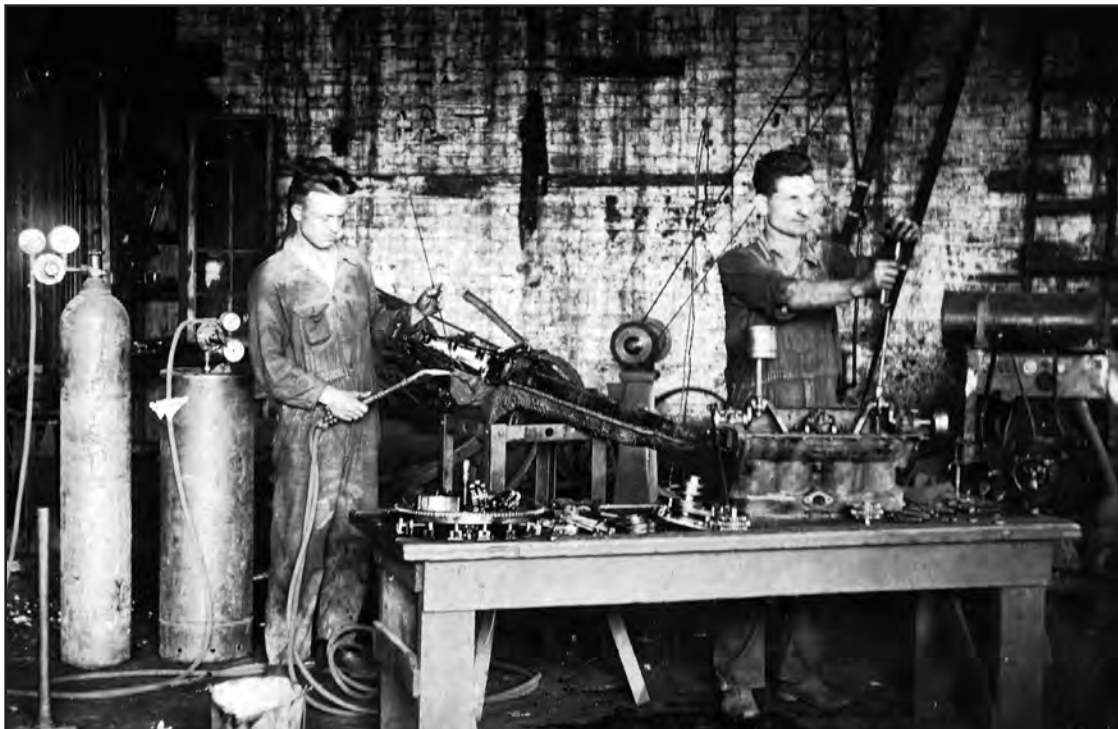
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Attic

Juanita McMichen Lynch of Battletown, Kentucky, was kind enough to allow the Old-Time Herald to reproduce these two photographs from the personal collection of her father, legendary fiddler Clayton McMichen. The group portrait of Bert Layne, Riley Puckett, McMichen, and Slim Bryant bills the group as the Skillet Lickers, and was made as a publicity shot while the foursome was playing for WCKY Covington in 1931. In the second photo, we find McMichen working as a mechanic. Bert Layne reminisced in 1974 that "McMichen was the durndest mechanic you ever saw too, outside of playing the fiddle, and he was a genius at that. He could just do anything."



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