

Mountain Promise

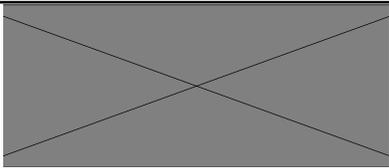
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MUSIC in Appalachia



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Mission of Brushy Fork

For more than one hundred years, Berea College has served the people of Appalachia.

The Brushy Fork Institute carries forward this commitment by working to develop strong leadership in the mountains.

Working with both existing and emerging leaders, we draw on local understanding and vision to help communities build for tomorrow.

On the cover: Top, the Wolfe Brothers, courtesy of Birthplace of Country Music Alliance; bottom left, Sparky Rucker; bottom right, Art Stamper, courtesy of Berea College Appalachian Center.

Birthplace of Country Music Alliance

**Celebrating and Preserving
the “Big Bang of Country Music”**

by Bill Hartley,
Executive Director of Birthplace of Country Music Alliance

The mountains of southern Appalachia have long been recognized as a fertile breeding ground for traditional music. From the earliest settlers, the relative isolation of the region, a variety of traditions—Anglo and African, urban and rural, popular and folk—were fused together to form what eventually became country music.

In the summer of 1927, Ralph Peer, a record producer for Victor Talking Machine Company, traveled to the mountains of Appalachia with a novel idea – to record this musical tradition for commercial sale. Artists throughout the mountain empire traveled to Peer’s make-shift recording studio in a warehouse in downtown Bristol, on the Tennessee side of the street. Over twelve days, Peer recorded seventy-six performances by nineteen different groups, capturing a wide cross-section of music including old pop and vaudeville songs, traditional mountain ballads, fiddle and banjo tunes, and gospel songs.

While many of the musicians who recorded in Bristol in 1927 returned to their daily lives or achieved only modest success, others were discovered as the first country music “stars.” Ernest “Pop” Stoneman and his family were early pioneers in recorded music, and Stoneman’s *Sinking of the Titanic* became one of the first million-selling records in country music. The Carter Family (A.P., Sarah, and Maybelle) went on to record more than 300 songs, many of which have become standards in country, folk, and bluegrass music, while their distinctive style of guitar playing and harmony singing have influenced countless musicians. A former railroad worker who traveled from North Carolina to first record at the Bristol Sessions, Jimmie Rodgers blended blues, jazz, hillbilly, crooner,

In 1998, Congress declared Bristol, TN-VA, the “Birthplace of Country Music.”

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and vaudeville styles into a new prototype of American music, as he became country music's first superstar—the “Father of Country Music.”

The success of Peer's recordings, particularly those by the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, marked the beginnings of commercial country music, and have been called the “Big Bang of Country Music” by historians. The influence of these recordings has been felt around the globe by generations of musicians in a wide variety of genres: country, bluegrass, folk, rock and roll and blues. Based on these reasons, in 1998 Congress declared Bristol, Tennessee-Virginia the “Birthplace of Country Music”.

In the 1940s and 50s, regional radio stations helped to fuel the emergence of a new style of traditional music – bluegrass. Live programs on these stations helped provide a start to bluegrass music's pioneers, including the Stanley Brothers, Flatt and Scruggs, Mac Wiseman, Jim and Jesse McReynolds, and a host of regional bands that influenced the development of the genre.

Traditional mountain music thrives today throughout the hills of Appalachia. Members of the Carter and Stoneman families continue to play and record the traditional songs, and each Saturday night, the Carter Family Fold, located at the old A.P. Carter Store in Hiltons, Virginia, hosts family-style, old-time music. Within a 100-mile radius of Bristol, more than 100 venues and 200 festivals offer regular old-time, bluegrass and country music events and continue to nurture this truly American art form.

Also working to nurture and promote this music is the Birthplace of Country Music Alliance (BCMA), a grass-roots, non-profit organization whose mission is: “to bring national and international recognition to the people of the southern Appalachian region, the musical



This mural in Bristol celebrates the Carter Family's contribution to country music.

...during the coming year, the activities of the BCMA will provide an economic impact of \$1,604,615 to our region...

and cultural heritage of the region, its role in the development of country music, and its influence on music around the world.” The BCMA carries out its mission through three main avenues: the preservation and promotion of our region's musical heritage, educational programs, and promotion and support of live music. Based on estimates from Americans for the Arts, during the coming year, the activities of the BCMA will provide an economic impact of \$1,604,615 to our region, sustaining 53 jobs.

The BCMA preserves and promotes the region's rich musical heritage through the daily operation of its museum. Displays trace the evolution of southern Appalachian music, from its diverse origins to the recording studio to the form which is continued by artists in our region today. The museum also hosts a wide range of educational and community events, including a weekly “jam session” for beginning musicians, occasional lectures and demonstrations, and performances by local musicians. Last year, more than 30,000 individuals visited the museum, representing 49 states and 23 foreign countries. The BCMA also preserves the region's musical legacy by conducting oral histories of artists from the region.

The BCMA promotes community pride in the musical heritage of our region by bringing live music to our residents. The organization sponsors a variety of concerts and special events which feature both nationally recognized and local artists. The highlight of these events is a free weekly live radio show.

The BCMA engages and educates the public, especially youth, about the musical heritage of the region. The organization provides presentations and performers to the schools, creates educational materials for instructors, provides in-service

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to area teachers, and conducts workshops for the general public on the region's musical heritage. The BCMA also sponsors a scholarship for the ETSU Bluegrass and Country Music Program and encourages young musicians to perform at its events, giving these younger musicians experience, while highlighting that the region's musical traditions will continue with the next generation.

The BCMA promotes cultural tourism with the goal of increasing the region's economic development. The 75th anniversary of the Bristol Sessions in 2002 and the 2003 Smithsonian Folklife Festival brought millions of dollars of national/international media exposure to the region, its artists, and musical heritage. To build on this momentum, the BCMA will continue to expand its website as a tool to provide information about the region, its artists (both historic and contemporary), and its venues. In the first six months of 2004, more than 315,000 unique visitors have accessed the website.

In the last year, the BCMA has continued to plan strategically to build on past successes and take advantage of new opportunities. New opportunities include working with other venues, tourism officials, and economic development agencies to further



The Birthplace of Country Music Alliance sponsors various educational activities, including a museum.

develop a music heritage trail in Southwest Virginia. "The Crooked Road: Virginia's Heritage Music Trail" will link venues such as the new Ralph Stanley Museum, the Carter Family Fold, the Birthplace of Country Music Museum, the Blue Ridge Music Center, the Galax Fiddler's Convention, the Floyd Country Store, and the Blue Ridge Institute. For more information, visit their website at www.thecrookedroad.org.

The BCMA has also recently acquired a location in downtown Bristol which will serve as the future home of the Birthplace of Country Music Cultural Heritage Center. This

center will house our museum, educational activities, performances, and other programming and is expected to draw more than 75,000 visitors annually.

For more information about the Birthplace of Country Music Alliance, our activities, and the region's musical heritage, please visit our website: www.birthplaceofcountrymusic.org.

Eastern Kentucky Promotes Country Music Highway

Like Virginia, eastern Kentucky has been working to promote cultural tourism around the region's musical heritage. Running almost the entire length of Eastern Kentucky, the Country Music Highway is devoted to the rich heritage and history of the region. The highway winds through sites that have been home to more than a dozen well-known country music stars, including Loretta Lynn, Wynonna Judd, Naomi Judd, Billy Ray Cyrus, Tom T. Hall, Ricky Skaggs, Keith Whitley, Dwight Yoakam, and Patty Loveless.

Paramount Arts Center in Ashland, the Pavilion Country Music Shrine in Lawrence County, and the Mountain Arts Center, which features the Kentucky Opry in Prestonsburg, and numerous state parks.

For more information about the Country Music Highway, visit the web site of Tour Southern and Eastern Kentucky at www.tourseky.com. Click on the Country Music Highway link.



Community Improvisations

Learning and Teaching Through Music

by Guy and Candie Carawan, Highlander Research and Education Center

Teachers and learners; learners and communicators. Based at the Highlander Center in Tennessee, we've been on a path for forty years learning from people and passing on what we have learned through music and song. It's been a fabulous journey.

Established in 1932 in rural Tennessee, the Highlander Research and Education Center is a unique school for adults. The work at Highlander is based on the principle that ordinary people in our society can bring about meaningful change in social conditions by having access to information that impacts their lives, by analyzing that information based on their own experiences, and by uniting to act upon the knowledge they have gained. This approach has been effective throughout Highlander's history—in early southern labor organizing in the 1930s and 40s, in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, and in environmental and economic justice work beginning in the 1970s. Thanks primarily to Zilphia Horton, an early staff member and the wife of founder Myles Horton, Highlander has a long tradition of using the cultural riches of communities—singing and songwriting, dance, theater and poetry—to strengthen the educational process.

We met at Highlander Center during the Civil Rights Movement and have spent much of our working lives based there. As we think back over our many years working with Highlander's cultural programming, we have seen music enhance learning and sustain efforts to challenge serious problems. How is it that music accomplishes so much in terms of bringing together people to strategize about how to make basic changes and build a more democratic society?

We have worked with southern people at the grassroots who are struggling with the most serious issues in the region. Using their songs honors them, sustains them, and helps them recall the roots and strengths of their communities. Sharing songs with



photo by Jack Parker

Candie and Guy Carawan

one another helps them understand in a deep and appreciative way the people with whom they will need to become allies in their work. As people come from communities in the deep South and in Appalachia, they are often shy and uncertain about meeting people from different communities, sometimes different races, and different economic backgrounds. They come with a need and desire to confront some serious problem in the community. And they bring with them a wealth of cultural knowledge and creativity—songs and stories deeply embedded in the community, musical skills, humor, and dances.

These cultural resources will serve as building blocks toward trust and understanding that will enable people to learn from one another and work together. Our role has been to tap these resources, to draw people out, to help them express themselves through their music and their cultural knowledge. Working with people deeply within their own culture, encouraging them to explore in-depth their heritage have been important. We ourselves have had to gain some knowledge and background on the cultures of people with whom we work, and we have had to learn about their experiences in confronting

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Lessons on Music and Cultural Organizing

- Work with groups deeply within their own culture. Encourage them to explore in-depth their heritage or their specific tastes.
- Honor the deepest and oldest traditions in a community—especially when they are linked with struggle for survival or for change. At the same time, honor the new expressions that are often emerging with younger people as they confront realities in their lives. Hold gatherings where younger and older people learn from each other.
- Affirm groups by taking an interest in what is going on culturally in the community. Offer support and help document issues. Bring people to a central place to celebrate their cultural forms.
- Weave cultural expression throughout every workshop, whatever the topic. Also have workshops specifically for cultural people—organizers and carriers—so that they don't feel so isolated in the struggle.
- Draw cultural expression and creativity from everyone present. Make an effort to honor and involve people who are especially skilled or who are carriers of a really deep and important cultural aspect.

Learning and Teaching Through Music

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issues. In Guy's case, the ability to improvise an accompaniment to a song on his guitar or banjo has been helpful.

In this kind of cultural exchange, there is the potential for cross-generational learning. Often the older folks teach history and experience through their songs and stories. At the same time, younger people share their concerns through their own cultural forms. Creating an intersection of expressions brings together the diverse generations. One example of this kind of interchange took place at a Highlander workshop.

A room at the Highlander Center was filled with veterans of the Civil Rights Movement and young, contemporary African-Americans. It's a weekend for cultural workers, and we are sharing freedom songs, rap and hip hop, stories and challenges. Early on someone said, "I can't stand rap music. I just don't understand it." Some of the young people answered with "We shall overcome just doesn't get it for us. What's this 'shall?' We overcome every single day." After three days of listening, learning, challenging, struggle and laughter, the group created a rap in which the refrain was "I overcome."

I overcome...the slums, ghettos in decay
I overcome...adversity always coming my way
I overcome...the rejection of my peers
I overcome...the silence of my fears
I overcome with my sisters and brothers
I overcome so in turn we can help others.

By the end of the workshop the entire group was rapping and singing of overcoming together.

Over the years, we have organized many specific cultural workshops. In the early 1960s, freedom singers and song leaders came together to share the growing repertoire of freedom songs. By 1964, there were powerful singing movements in Nashville, Albany, Selma, Birmingham, several parts of Mississippi, and many smaller communities. Each movement was invited to send to workshops song leaders to teach and to learn freedom songs.

A few northern singer/songwriters were invited to these workshops as well. Especially important was the participation of some older traditional artists—singers from the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina, Doc Reese who carried the songs of the Texas prison system, Mississippi fife player Ed Young, and others. Folklorists Willis James and Alan Lomax attended some of the gatherings and encouraged the reclaiming of a rich African American culture in the contemporary struggle for freedom.

The inclusion of the older folk artists was important but controversial. Some of the young freedom fighters felt those traditions were outdated and associated with slavery. In defense of traditional artists, freedom singer Len Chandler had these

reflections:

I went through this scene, man. I was ashamed of my grandmother's music. I went to school to get a degree and things were all put in a nice little box, a package of the Western World's music. But there was nothing in that box about my music. Even the spirituals were fitted out for a white audience to sound nice and polite. This music (from the sea islands) is great, and the boys on radio and T.V. have stopped you from hearing it—but this is it man, this is the stuff.

These workshops not only contributed to a powerful singing movement, they helped the younger people feel their full strength as part of a larger community.

As Highlander's work moved into the Appalachian region in the mid-1960s, we paralleled this work in coalfield communities. Again, younger Appalachian organizers and song makers had a chance to hear such veteran singers as Nimrod Workman, Sarah Ogan Gunning, Florence Reece and Hazel Dickens, sing of past struggles in the mountains. They began to understand they were part of a continuum of resistance. Such knowledge can be empowering.

Workshops at Highlander in the 1970s and 80s also helped bridge racial barriers in Appalachia. African-Americans are a small percentage of coalfield populations and they often keep a low profile. But as communities organized around issues of poverty and resource protection, people found common ground and began to work together. Sharing each others songs and stories once more provided a deep emotional bond.

In this musical and educational journey at Highlander, we have been facilitators rather than teachers. We have also recorded the rich tradition of song making in documentary albums and books to share with a larger world. We continue to learn from the many people we meet working through important challenges.

Birth of an Organizing Song

Just after World War II, striking tobacco workers in Charleston, SC, adapted the words of "I Shall Overcome," a spiritual dating back to the days of slavery, to reflect their struggle for workers' rights. Two of the women carried the song to the Highlander Folk School, where it was adapted and became a theme song. Zilphia Horton sang it at union and community gatherings throughout the South. Guy Carawan introduced it to young freedom workers in the early days of the Civil Rights Movement. Pete Seeger and others brought the song to the American public and it has inspired peoples' movements around the world.

We Shall Overcome

We shall overcome,
We shall overcome,
We shall overcome someday.
Oh deep in my heart, I do believe
That we shall overcome someday.

We'll walk hand in hand,
We'll walk hand in hand,
We'll walk hand in hand someday.
Oh deep in my heart, I do believe
That we shall overcome someday.

We shall live in peace,
We shall live in peace,
We shall live in peace someday.
Oh deep in my heart, I do believe
That we shall overcome someday.

The truth shall make us free,
The truth shall make us free,
The truth shall make us free someday.
Oh deep in my heart, I do believe
That we shall overcome someday.

We are not afraid,
We are not afraid,
We are not afraid today.
Oh deep in my heart, I do believe
That we shall overcome someday.

— — —

Find several books and cds related to protest and organizing songs on the Highlander Center's web site: <www.highlandercenter.org>.

Online Sound Archive

Berea College Offers Unique Recordings of Old-Time Music Performances

Berea College is known for its collection of Appalachian literature and music in the Special Collections and Archives at Hutchins Library. The College's Appalachian Sound Archives is mainly comprised of non-commercial sound and video recordings that document Appalachian culture and history.

Harry Rice, sound archivist at Berea, has been working on a project to make portions of the Appalachian Sound Archives available online to visitors who otherwise might not have access to these resources.

"Our star attraction is the fiddle music, which includes a unique collection from throughout Kentucky," Harry explained. He went on to say that the tunes available on the new web page are just a small taste of what is housed in the library's Appalachian Sound Archives. Mainly, the materials are from field recordings and events at the College, such as the annual Celebration of Traditional Music.

The music includes tunes for banjo, dulcimer, fiddle, and guitar and folks songs and tales primarily from Kentucky. Other recordings on the site were made in North Carolina, West Virginia, and Tennessee. Visitors to the site can perform searches based on titles, performers, genres, or location of the song (county and state.)

The old-time fiddle and banjo performances feature field recordings made between 1970 and 1990 and include many performers who have never recorded commercially. Many of the performers

documented are no longer living and their tunes and playing styles are disappearing from present-day memory. The collection also contains Old Regular Baptist singing and preaching, including lined-out hymns.

The site contains approximately 300 titles as of summer 2004, and new recordings are being added. Web site users can view information on the recording, such as the song title, performer's name, and a description that includes where and when the piece was recorded. Each recording on the site is available as a digital audio file and can be heard online, though with slower dial up connections, download times can be long.

The site is hosted as part of the Appalachian College Association's Digital Library of Appalachia, which contains not just sound archives, but papers, photographs and other resources. Currently, Berea College and Warren-Wilson College in North Carolina are the only institutions with sound archives on the site.

Visit the site at <www.berea.edu/Library/Special/specialsound.html>. For more information on the project, contact Harry Rice, Sound Archivist, Hutchins Library, Department of Special Collections and Archives, Berea College, Berea, KY 40404; phone: 859-985-3249; e-mail: harry_rice@bereda.edu.

Our Fall Issue Will Focus On:

Outsourcing of Jobs and the Effect on Appalachian Communities

The information highway and the global economy have impacted the ongoing quest for sustainable, high wage jobs in rural communities. Now a trend of outsourcing is causing what looked like promising economic engines to grind to a halt in these communities. If you have a story about outsourcing's effect on Appalachia, contact us using the information on page 2. Deadline for the fall issue is September 30, 2004.

What's the difference?

Bluegrass Music & Old-Time Music

by Wayne Erbsen, Native Ground Music

Since the movie *O Brother* came out in 2000, bluegrass music has had a new burst of popularity. This is a strange phenomenon because by its truest definition, there was very little music in the film that could be honestly be called "bluegrass." To try to clear this up, let's back up and explain what bluegrass is and isn't.

Bluegrass music evolved from an earlier type of country music we now call old-time music. As it's commonly played, old-time music is a mostly instrumental stringband style with a beat that's designed for square dancing. As such, the music is spirited and upbeat.

The main lead instrument in old-time music is the fiddle. The fiddler normally chooses the tunes, sets the rhythm, begins the tune, and signals to the other musicians when the tune will end.

Another key ingredient in old-time music is the banjo, which is played in what is called "clawhammer style." This is a rhythmic style with the right hand striking or brushing down on the strings.

An old-time band would also feature a guitar player who keeps the rhythm and plays a few runs, but does not play the melody. Additional instruments in an old-time band often include a string bass, which keeps the rhythm and occasionally a mandolin player, who plays chords and also helps keep the rhythm.

In old-time style, the instruments generally all play together all the time, with no breaks or solos. The melodies used in old-time music tend toward the traditional tunes brought over from the British Isles by Scots Irish immigrants in the mid to late 19th century. Newly composed tunes are rare in old-time music.

Although bluegrass evolved from old-time music, it is now quite different. In contrast to the happy, danceable sounds of an old-time stringband, bluegrass music is often sad music based on themes of hard times. One tongue-in-cheek writer called it "A celebration of pain."

Bluegrass music is mainly a vocal style, where the instruments support the voices. The typical bluegrass

In old-time, the fiddle is boss, and in bluegrass, most often the singer takes the lead.

singer sings at the top of his or her vocal range, and often there are two, three, or four part harmonies. The songs themselves often dwell on themes of loneliness, heartbreak and nostalgia.

In contrast to old-time music which is strongly fiddle-influenced, in bluegrass no single instrument dominates. Instead, the banjo, fiddle, mandolin or guitar take turns playing breaks or solos, while the other instruments play back-up. In bluegrass style, the banjo is played with finger picks in a three-finger style as developed by Earl Scruggs, from Boiling Springs, North Carolina.

In some ways, bluegrass is akin to jazz or dixieland, because the instruments taking solos or breaks freely improvise off the main melody, while the rest of the band lays down a solid rhythmic foundation. In addition to influences from jazz and dixieland, bluegrass also draws heavily on the blues. This is expressed most often in notes played by the fiddle and sometimes the mandolin and the guitar. Some bluegrass singers also sing an occasional "blue note."

So to put this in a nutshell, old-time music is mainly an upbeat instrumental dance music while bluegrass is a vocal style where the instruments freely improvise. In old-time, the fiddle is boss, and in bluegrass, most often the singer takes the lead.

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Rural Roots of Bluegrass

— Songs, Stories & History —
by Wayne Erbsen

reviewed by Donna Morgan, Brushy Fork staff

In *Rural Roots of the Bluegrass*, Wayne Erbsen informs the reader that the book is not meant to be a definitive history of the genre or a complete songbook. Instead, he provides a showcase of songs that influenced the development of bluegrass.

In the first section of the book, he describes how the original old-time music came to the region with immigrants and was preserved as an integral part of southern mountain heritage. He discusses how songs were collected and published by folks like Olive Dame Campbell and Cecil Sharp. Erbsen follows decades of the transition of old ballads and other songs with dark themes of lost love and murder into that “high lonesome sound” of bluegrass.

The reader learns how banjo, mandolin and guitar were popularized and made available through mail order catalogs and other sources. People who played traditional music were able to add these instruments to the fiddle that had been brought over from England and Scotland with the early settlers. Banjo, guitar, fiddle and mandolin are now standard in bluegrass string bands.

A good portion of the book follows the story of Bill Monroe who, through the Grand Ole Opry, brought to the public “a new kind of country music that sounded old.” The musical sound was dubbed bluegrass after the name of Monroe’s band, the Blue Grass Boys, and the genre became an American icon.

The next section of Erbsen’s book serves as a guide for aspiring bluegrass musicians and provides what he calls “2 cents worth of music theory.” He describes playing techniques for guitar, banjo, mandolin and fiddle. He includes a section on singing with a particular emphasis on the harmony that sets bluegrass apart from other folk and country music.

After readers get a good dose of history and musical technique, Erbsen opens a treasure trove of more than ninety tunes that have been passed down for generations. The book presents traditional songs



and include a wide variety from English ballads and Scots-Irish fiddle tunes to gospel hymns and Tin-Pan alley tunes.

Along with the musical notation and lyrics of each song, Erbsen offers historical information about the song’s origins and profiles of the performers who recorded them and brought them to the public.

The songs include titles such as *Angel Band*, *Cripple Creek*, *Darling Cory*, *The Girl I Loved in Sunny Tennessee*, *In the Pines*, *Leather Britches*, *Little Rosewood Casket*, *Man of Constant Sorrow*, *New River Train*, *Pretty Polly*, *Shady Grove*, *Turkey in the Straw* and *the Unclouded Day*.

Profiles of performers include some well-known names and others who have been obscured by the passage of time. The reader can learn about such singers as Bradley Kincaid, the Coon Creek Girls, Charlie Poole, Earl Scruggs, Samantha Bumgarner, Jimmie Rodgers, Stringbean, Zeke and Wiley Morris, Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith, the Blue Sky Boys and Eck Robertson.

Sprinkled throughout the book are several vintage photographs that provide the reader with a glimpse of both the performers who recorded this music and the mountain cultures that inspired the tunes and lyrics.

Whether you are a fan of traditional and bluegrass music or a performer looking for original lyrics and histories, *Rural Roots of Bluegrass* is an interesting and entertaining read. For those readers who want to experience the music, the author and singer Laura Boosinger offer a companion cd for purchase.

Rural Roots of the Bluegrass is available from Native Ground Music, 109 Bell Road, Asheville, NC 28805; www.nativeground.com; e-mail: banjo@nativeground.com; phone: (800) 752-2656.

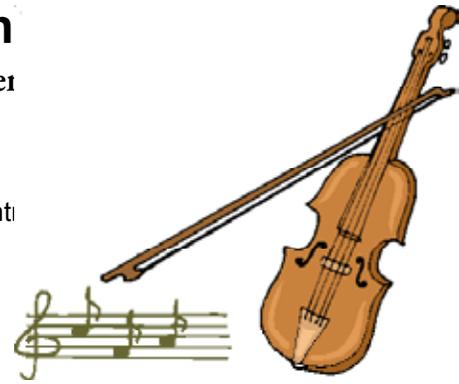
Music of the Southern Appalachian

An Historical and Musical Background on the Southern

by Mike Seeger

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Mike Seeger is an old-time mountain-style musician and producer of documentary recordings of Southern traditional music.



The music you will be reading about here is from the Blue Ridge and Southern Appalachian mountain regions of Virginia, West Virginia, southward through Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, and barely into Georgia and Alabama.

This area is to the west of the flat tidewater and piedmont areas of the Atlantic coastline and includes some broad valleys with good agricultural land, such as the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia, as well as many smaller valleys, some just wide enough for a little bottomland next to a creek. The eastern mountains are not nearly as tall as the Rockies; they generally rise 1,000 to 3,000 feet with a maximum of 6,000 feet, and are forested with a variety of deciduous and evergreen trees and many smaller bushes and flowers. Some mountains are green, rolling hills, but in certain areas, such as in the southeastern area of Kentucky and some of West Virginia, the mountains are quite steep and rocky.

After Native Americans, the first people to settle in this region came from the British Isles in the mid-1700's. These early settlers included Scots-Irish but were primarily English. A small number of immigrants later came to this area from Germany. Although there were some large landholders, most settlers farmed just enough land to provide for themselves. There were certainly some craftspeople and some small industry to supply local needs, but until the late 1800's there was little industrial development. Little slavery existed in the area largely because the hilly land didn't lend itself to the plantation system of the flat land to the east and south. The mountains were more difficult to farm, less accessible, and therefore not as desirable as the tidewater and piedmont, so that many of the less wealthy settlers, or those wanting more independence and isolation, sought to live there.

For the most part, people were pretty self sufficient in these mountain areas, although they

often had furniture, tools and food utensils made by experienced regional craftspeople. Clearing of land and the building of houses and barns in the new country were often community events and were followed by ample food, socializing, music playing and dancing. Most food was raised by each household and only a few items were store bought. Little money was needed or used. The work could be hard, but many older people say that it was a more satisfying, less hurried existence than today.

Communities were also nearly self sufficient culturally, and almost everyone could either sing, play an instrument, dance, or tell a story, usually in a style distinctly their own. English-language culture was dominant. The most popular instruments were the jew's harp and fiddle. Less often one would encounter a plucked or hammer dulcimer, some other home made instrument or possibly a flute or fife. Old stories, tunes and songs were unwritten and passed down through oral tradition and were traded with travelers and new settlers. Songs were sung solo, by a group of family members or by a church congregation, almost always without instrumental accompaniment. Songs ranged from the oldest British ballads and humorous songs to religious songs, and naturally, to newer creations by community members inspired by the new environment. Southern music was and still is a very important part of life for most rural (now working class) people.

The most important element in the creation of American musical styles has been the interaction of English/European and African cultures. Spirituals, jazz, ragtime, blues, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, rap - and in the rural southeast, the banjo-and-fiddle string band and many of the later developments in commercial country music - were all products of this

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interaction, which was all too often plagued by the cruelties of exploitive racism.

During the first two centuries that African slaves and their descendents were in America, Anglo Americans took little notice of African-American music, thinking it too “primitive.” This music ranged all the way from sounds transported directly from their homeland to the composed European music some slaves played for their masters. During this period, African-Americans created new genres of song and melody as they mixed the music of their native homes with the harmonic and rhythmic structures they found in the new country. In the early and mid-1800’s a few Anglo Americans began taking notice of African-American banjo music and songs, adapting them to their own use. Some were professional entertainers who learned to pick the banjo and composed songs based on what they heard African-Americans doing, often for blackface minstrel shows which portrayed African-Americans in derogatory stereotypes. It was during this period that the mixing of peoples in the armies of the civil war, the development of the minstrel show, and to some extent, the popularity of black religious music, accelerated the process of African - English musical interaction, a process which continues today. It must be emphasized that until very recently this process consisted largely of white exploitation of black creativity.

With emancipation in the 1860’s, more African-American people moved into the mountain areas, which tended to be less racially polarized. In addition to bringing their native banjo to the region, by the late 1800’s African-Americans had also introduced newly evolved guitar styles along with a new type of song, the intensely personal blues. In time the banjo and the guitar were blended with the old fiddle and song traditions to create the beginnings of a truly American string band tradition. Around the turn of the century some European instruments such as the french harp (harmonica), mandolin, and the recently invented autoharp made their appearance by way of mail order catalogues, travelling salesmen, and the increasing contact with national urban culture.

Although some music notation, usually from northern cities, came with instruments, rural men

[The] period between about 1870 and 1930 was the golden age of old-time southern Appalachian music...

and women didn’t “play by note” (read music) and each devised their own personal way of playing rural-style music on their new instruments. This period between about 1870 and 1930 was the golden age of

old-time southern Appalachian music. The old songs and tunes were still vital, and there was still a role for them in everyday life, yet there was much new music being created.

As railroading, timbering, coal mining and cotton mills began to bring industrialization to much of the mountain south around 1900, southern traditions began changing more rapidly as people moved from subsistence agriculture to industrial work. New inventions, such as automobiles, radio, and the phonograph pretty much finished the movement to a dollar economy, as it was no longer necessary—or desirable—to be self-sufficient, as one could buy anything now, including music—if one had the money.

By the late 1920’s, the effect on southern culture was revolutionary. Formerly, a family would gather around and listen to a story or unaccompanied solo ballad (narrative song) at night before bedtime or would sing while doing chores, but now they listened to a radio or phonograph performance by a professional musician in a studio miles away. Or perhaps they had a public dance at an auditorium instead of a community work gathering at someone’s home. By the mid 1900’s fewer and fewer singers and musicians were transmitting local songs or participating in old-time family music, since virtually all were influenced by or learning totally from recordings by professional country-style musicians. The old songs and ways, which had built on centuries of tradition, especially unaccompanied singing and the quiet instruments such as the trump (jew’s harp), fiddle, dulcimer, and later the banjo, simply went out of fashion. Performance styles became more professional, homogenized, and showy. New songs were influenced increasingly by urban music, and their tunes and themes became less varied. The banjo and fiddle gave way to the guitar, which became the most prominent instrument amongst both professional and amateur players. Newer styles

of music created for public performance, such as hillbilly, country and western, and bluegrass evolved from the older traditionals, which had been deeply rooted in the rural communities of southern Appalachia.

Since many of the emerging professional writers and performers were raised in a rural environment, some of that traditional feeling, some of the musical elements, the style of expression, and the use of story persisted in country-style music. But if you hear someone making music in a southern Appalachian home today nearly all of the songs and styles will have been learned from a recent commercial recording.

The questions are often asked, "Why was traditional old-time music so important in the rural South?" And since it is so rare anymore, "Why did they give up the tradition so quickly?" Neither question can really be answered satisfactorily, but there are some certainties.

If one values music highly, as most southerners do, and the only way you could have it is to make it yourself, as was the case in the pre-media rural South, then you had to make it yourself. There wasn't a tradition (or the possibility in this non-affluent culture) of paying people to play for them. So they were content, perhaps proud, to be able to provide for themselves musically. Perhaps it was also that there was such diversity: there were long, centuries-old narratives; songs expressing humor, sadness, love, anger; songs about local recent occurrences; and so forth. There were tunes, mostly on the fiddle, that could be slow and lonesome or that would make you want to dance. It was their theater, their classics, their popular songs, their dance music: they were self-sufficient agriculturally and culturally. It was a body of music that was a big part of their heritage, belonged to them, and was always accessible all day, anywhere.

There are a number of certain reasons why home/self-made music went out of style earlier in this century, and nearly all of them relate to the establishment of an industrial consumer economy. Though cultural change and development is inevitable, prior to the advent of electronic media change occurred far more slowly and for different reasons. This change to the commercial media

In traditional rural communities... music was not treated like a commodity; it was more like a natural resource.

domination of culture, however, killed a rich, long-lived tradition and within about 25 years left commercial music products in its place. In traditional rural communities, money

had not been used very much, and music was not treated like a commodity; it was more like a natural resource. For a brief period when electronic media first appeared, producers mined some portions of traditional music such as fiddle tunes and string band music. Then when those products were sold (in effect, the natural resource, like a mine, was worked out), the market had to develop new country-oriented sounds to sell more products.

Why did formerly rural people buy into this? For one thing, it was certainly easier to tune a radio than to learn to play an instrument. And as often stated here, southerners love their music, and many thought that professional musicians were "better." (They sounded smoother but a little less "country," usually.) Also, in the beginning, radio and recordings were new "toys" and they could be perceived as progress, as part of a desirable prescription for socially and economically upward behavior as one became a part of national culture. The older songs were associated with old times and hard work, with being "hicks" or "hillbillies," someone from the "lower" rural class.

Rural people tried to travel the fine line of bettering themselves yet retaining some of the togetherness of community with other southerners by embracing a new country-oriented music which had a broader and more popular appeal. Another factor in the decline of homemade music was that most of the old structures of family and work were being destroyed by or adapted into the dollar economy. Long days were spent working in factories and there was often too little time for family and community gatherings. It must be added that a lot of the newly created music was really good and interesting. The problem is that most of the old ways, both positive and negative, were overwhelmed and nearly buried by the new diversions of automobiles and commercial forms of entertainment.

Over the past 25 years or so people all across the United States have been searching for ways to reconcile modern life and material progress with some elements of older traditional cultures to fit

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Reflections in an Election Year



by Peter Hille, Director, Brushy Fork Institute



We must all hang together or we shall surely hang separately.

—Benjamin Franklin

As we head into the fall of this election year, we will be bombarded with advertisements designed to shape our perceptions and motivate us to vote one way or another.

Some of these ads will be positive and focus on issues and solutions. Many more will seek to appeal to fear, emotion and deeply held biases, in an attempt to sway our allegiance. Most, if not all, will seek to portray stark, black-and-white distinctions between the candidates and the parties. Inevitably, this barrage of slick, professionally produced messages will have one consistent effect: a deeper division in a nation already more divided than we have been since the 1960s or, according to some experts, since the Civil War.

One sharp observer noted that every four years, our politicians destroy all the social capital in our nation with their negative campaigns. Then the next week they go back to Washington and work with one another but leave our communities divided and damaged. Is this really necessary?

We may hear that campaigns are getting worse, the ads more negative, the attacks more personal. A quick read of history will challenge this assumption. Our rough and tumble politics have often had a hard and even violent edge. Cassius Clay, Kentucky Senator in the years before the Civil War, typically opened his speeches by placing a Bowie knife on the podium, and had to use it on more than one occasion. We do not need to think of going “back to the good old days” in seeking a more civil civic dialogue. We must go forward.

How do we do this? First, we all need to understand that the world we live in is complex, and any one-liner sound bite is never going to address

that real complexity. We end up with competing and seemingly opposing oversimplifications as the candidates try to define themselves and each other in ways that will translate into clearly defined positions that they think will speak to distinct constituencies. In other words, they say what they think will get votes. There is not a simple, one-line answer to terrorism, health care, social security, education, or poverty.

Second, we need to pay far more attention to what our elected officials do once they are in office. We cannot limit our participation in civic life to voting, and only about one-third of us even do that. We need to educate ourselves on the issues, learn the details of the legislation being proposed, and let our representatives know what we think. If we don't, how can they represent us? Absent the voices of citizens, they will hear only from paid lobbyists angling for legislation to support special interests. The actual work of developing legislation is far more complex and nuanced than the simple slogans tossed out on the campaign trail.

Third, we need to avoid the “us versus them” mentality that currently divides us. Our nation is threatened and our world is in turmoil. How can we imagine that being divided among ourselves serves our best interests? Osama bin Ladin must be chuckling in his cave.

Fourth, let's just ignore what the candidates say about each other. After all, what matters is how they plan to address the issues, and after the election their opponent will be out of the picture anyway.

Finally, let's tone down our own rhetoric, and encourage others to do so. Try to find the good sense in the other person's argument, and avoid broad generalizations about other parties or other ideologies. Effective solutions will likely incorporate ideas from both sides. There is value in the middle ground.

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their late twentieth century need for self-made entertainment and recreation. Some people search for cultural identity, for roots, and a few people in the South are exploring these older styles of music and taking them back into their everyday lives. They have been joined and encouraged by musicians throughout the country who love southern music, especially the fiddle-banjo-and-guitar string band and early country harmony singing. In some areas such as the Galax, Virginia/Mt Airy, North Carolina region, you will find perhaps a hundred people playing these kinds of music, most of them reared in the area and mostly in their thirties or older. At the Fiddler's Conventions in these areas you would hear several hundred old-time style musicians from all over the United States and some from foreign countries. They rarely play for money, and very few are full-time professional musicians—they work at factories, as carpenters, computer programmers, in their own businesses, though rarely as executives. Through the alternative media, they have chosen the elements that they wish to make into their own sub-culture.

Some associated elements of southern folk culture such as the story telling and flatfoot and buck dancing are also enjoying a period of revival as part of this movement. Other aspects of the tradition such as unaccompanied ballad singing have not been so fortunate, and are now very rare.

What place can this music play in today's life?

Perhaps I may write more personally here. I would be playing this music whether or not it is my profession. (I'm pleased that it is.) This is the music that I was raised with (though by college-educated parents), and it includes a lot that I have learned more recently from older traditional rural musicians or their recordings. It has those great old love songs and ballads, the story songs. It has blues, topical songs and humorous songs and a world of instrumentals that I enjoy playing when I am alone at home or with my string-band-music friends. This music connects me to the past, it expresses feelings and thoughts about life. It is a pleasure every day, either as I play myself or as I listen to others—usually, these days, to younger musicians, who will be experiencing the same pleasure for many years to come. I hope you experience some of that pleasure, too.

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Look around at your neighbors, your co-workers, or your friends, who may belong to the other party or favor a different candidate. Are they bad people? Or is it possible that good people, smart people, patriotic people, may differ on some issues. Can we develop the ability to “agree to disagree” on some things and look past that to see how much we truly share? The national parties may decide that a scorched-earth, no-holds-barred campaign might win them a few more votes. But for those of us who live and work in communities, our best hopes will always lie in what we can build by working together.

So, look for the ideas, not the ideologies; get out there and vote; and no matter who wins, let's keep a close eye on them after they get in office! As they say, democracy doesn't work unless we make it work.

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