

THE WHITETOP MOUNTAIN BAND

1. **CACKLIN' HEN**
2. **LOST JOHN**
3. **RAKE AND RAMBLING BOY**
(Emily, Thornton, & Martha Spencer)
4. **SANDY LAND**
5. **WALKING IN MY SLEEP**
6. **BREAKIN' UP CHRISTMAS**
(Kilby Spencer - fiddle)
7. **YOU CAN'T TAME ME**
(Emily Spencer & Argil Hensley)
8. **FLORIDA BLUES** (Blake Rash - fiddle)
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– Trio Music & Fort Knox Music Inc.)
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17. **MY OLD HOME IN WHITETOP MOUNTAIN** (Emily Spencer)
18. **BULL PLUS 10%** (Thornton Spencer)
19. **GREEN PASTURES**

The Whitetop Mountain Band:

Thornton Spencer – fiddle

Emily Spencer – vocals & banjo

Martha Spencer – guitar, vocals, & fiddle

Spencer Pennington – guitar & vocals

Michelle Lyle – string bass

Guests on tracks 6, 8 & 16:

Kilby Spencer or **Blake Rash** – fiddle

Mark Handy or **Amanda Wright** – banjo

Debbie Bramer – bass

All compositions by Thornton, Emily, and Martha Spencer, are © by Tradition Music Co./BUG Music Co. (BMI). All songs not credited otherwise are P.D. and arranged by the Spencer Family and © by Tradition Music Co.

Produced by Chris Strachwitz, Joe Wilson and the Whitetop Mountain Band

Recorded "Live" at the Blue Ridge Music Center's small theatre near Galax, VA by David McLaughlin of Winchester, VA

Photos by Amy Hauslohn of Galax, VA unless otherwise noted

Graphic design by Morgan Dodge

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10341 San Pablo Ave, El Cerrito, CA 94530

THE WHITETOP MOUNTAIN BAND



ARHOOIE 522

BULL PLUS 10%

KNOWING WHERE YOU ARE FROM:

The Whitetop Mountain Band

The Whitetop Mountain Band has the sound of a place. That place is the region near Whitetop, the second highest of Virginia's Appalachian peaks, a place with a musical community that reaches back almost 200 years. Thornton Spencer (11/12/1935), leader of the band, is the unofficial musical historian of that place and a man who kept on playing old time music through the years when it nearly died out because of mass culture. He has also been a patient teacher of the older musical traditions for over 25 years and sometime he will hopefully put his knowledge of it all into a book.

Thornton grew up in the band. It was headed by his older brother-in-law, violin maker and luthier, Albert Hash. A delightful self-taught native

genius, Hash led the band with irrepressible good humor and unstinting community dedication until his passing in 1986. Thornton then took over band leadership, and his wife, Emily Paxton Spencer (10/4/1952), a member of the band since 1975, took over Albert's self-appointed volunteer teaching job at the Mt. Rogers Combined School in Whitetop.

A year earlier Albert had been upset when the county dropped brass band music instruction at the school. The area is remote, and the school only had eighty-odd students enrolled from kindergarten to grade twelve, but Albert, his daughter Audrey, and Emily decided that this outrage needed the antidote of string band instruction. So while other primary and high school students

imbibe John Philip Sousa and learn military-style marching, kids here learn the Devil's Dream on fiddle, banjo, guitar or dobro, and engage in highly aerobic flatfoot dancing. Emily still directs the program, and it has become famous and much imitated in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

When Thornton brought Emily home to the mountains from Northern Virginia, he took her to meet and play with the great keepers

of the Whitetop sound. Emily's highly rhythmic "clawhammer" banjo style is one she learned from Jont Blevins of Whitetop, Lawrence Russell of Marion, Va. and Enoch Rutherford of Gold Hill, Va. and it is especially well suited to the style of dancing done here. Among the best places to see that dancing is at the Allegheny Jubilee, a dance held at a hall on Main Street in Sparta, North Carolina, every Friday night. The



(l to r) Kilby, Martha, & Thornton

© by Chris Strachwitz

Whitetop Mountain Band provides the music, and the owners have reinforced the building because the dancing makes it flex. The Round Peak old-time banjo style heard in eastern Grayson and Carroll counties, VA and in Surry County, NC has been adopted by string bands from Long Island to Maui, but the folks in western Grayson County know that their sound will always be different. "It's for the dancing," explains Thornton.

Emily has long been the vocal mainstay of the band, and she has a store of songs that speak to and reflect the conditions of life here. A song is also a reflection of the person who taught it to her, and she feels their presence as she reaches back to that learning.

Thornton and Emily's children, now adults, were born into the band. Kilby Spencer (6/27/1982) who only occasionally joins the band, is genial and quiet, but brings great intensity

and passion to his fiddling. Now a college student, Martha Spencer (1/26/1985) was dancing as soon as she could walk and often jumps off the bandstand to clog with the best of them, and brings an irrepressible energy and glee to her performance on fiddle, banjo, bass or guitar. Her delight with the music and her energy make her the center of attention whenever she is on stage. She has spent her entire life in Whitetop, Va.

So the band has the Spencer family as its base, but the Spencers also consider band mates Spencer Pennington and Michelle Lyle to be part of the family as well as many of the dancers and Mark, their family physician and stand-in old-time banjo player. "We're a together bunch," says Emily.

Whitetop Mountain is perched near Virginia's border with Ashe County, North Carolina, and Johnson County, Tennessee. So the Whitetop community has an historic



(l to r) Spencer, Michelle, Emily, & Martha

© by Chris Strachwitz



Thornton

musical interaction with those places. Among the many musicians who influenced Albert and Thornton is G. B. Grayson, who made great recordings in the 1920s, and lived a few miles south of Whitetop in Johnson County. But Thornton will tell you that other fiddlers who left as much echo in the Whitetop sound include Howard Wyatt, Corbit Stamper, and Munsey Gaultney. He would never say so, but Thornton himself must be added to that list, and he may now be the most important of all.

It is an area rich in great guitarists: Wayne Henderson, Estil Ball, and Doc Watson have been neighbors of this band. Among Thornton's favorite rhythm guitar players is Spencer Pennington, of Ashe County, a member of the band with good tenure, and a fine old-time singing style. Bassist and singer Michelle Lyle brings a strong rhythmic foundation to the band, is a fine harmony singer,

and lives eastward of the band in the "lower counties." That's very helpful when the band is traveling and gets "snowed out" of the high country and needs a place to stay.

Whitetop is a beloved place. The mountain is a meadowland, treeless except for a grove of rare red spruce (the greatest tonewood in North America). It is snow covered for much of the year, and is visible at huge distances. The band is also beloved. It keeps its own sound and an enduring commitment to the sound of its own small community in a cookie cutter world.

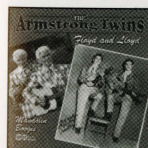
The dancers who happily follow it remind us that "fan" derives from "fanatic." "I've been to a few hundred different dances," one Allegheny Jubilee fan told me, sniffing at the world of other dances. "They are rest homes compared to this one."

— Joe Wilson

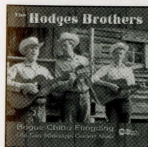
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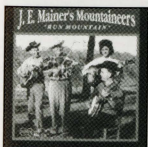
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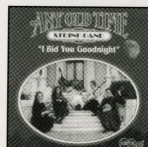
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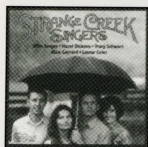
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Run Mountain
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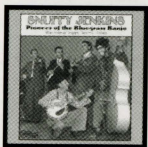
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