Virginia Traditions

Blue Ridge Piano Styles

No state can boast of longer lasting and more varied folk traditions than Virginia. Many of her material traditions - such as barns, houses and plows - remain as permanent, unchanged documents of her early settlers' life style. Her performance traditions - songs, tales and fiddle tunes - also help us understand something of the everyday social life and beliefs of Virginia's people. These performance traditions, however, because they have been continually changing and developing from the moment of their creation, are difficult to identify and document accurately. The BLUE RIDGE INSTITUTE of FERRUM COLLEGE exists to seek out and document both the material and performance traditions found in Virginia.

The piano is not usually thought of as playing a large part in folk music, but as this album of Blue Ridge piano styles illustrates, many types of mountain music did involve and feature pianists. A number of styles have been performed on piano - blues, ragtime, stringband music and pop - and all are represented here. The cuts are from early commercial recordings and recent field recordings and feature both solo performances and piano music as part of a group. Traditional fiddle and banjo tunes were among the earliest musical forms picked out by ear on pianos in mountain homes, but later repertoires grew as sheet music became widely available. This album attempts to present the wide range of musical styles performed on piano in a small area of the Upland South and thereby to highlight a previously unrecognized aspect of Virginia's musical traditions.

★ A BOOKLET OF FULL DESCRIPTIVE AND ANALYTIC ★ NOTES IS ENCLOSED.

***Front cover — Lucy Terry, courtesy of Kinney Rorrer.
***Back cover — Lewis Miller's drawing of "Music on Piano," courtesy Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, Williamsburg, Virginia.
***This record produced under National Endowment for the Arts/ Folk Arts Grant No. R80-54-242.

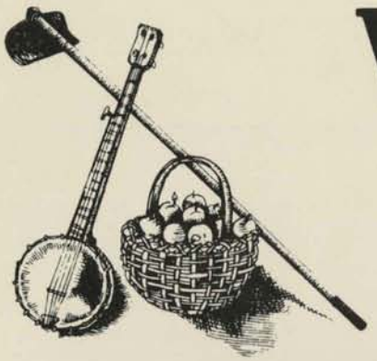
BRI 005

SIDE I

1. CUMBERLAND GAP — Gary Patton....1:25
2. FISHER'S HORNPIPE — The Hillbillies....2:57
3. BIG BEND GAL — Shelor Family....2:44
4. ST. LOUIS BLUES — Dorothy Zeh....2:20
5. GENERAL GRANT'S GRAND MARCH — Haywood Blevins....1:25
6. DOUBLE QUICK MARCH — Haywood Blevins....2:44
7. FLOP EARED MULE — The Highlanders....2:59

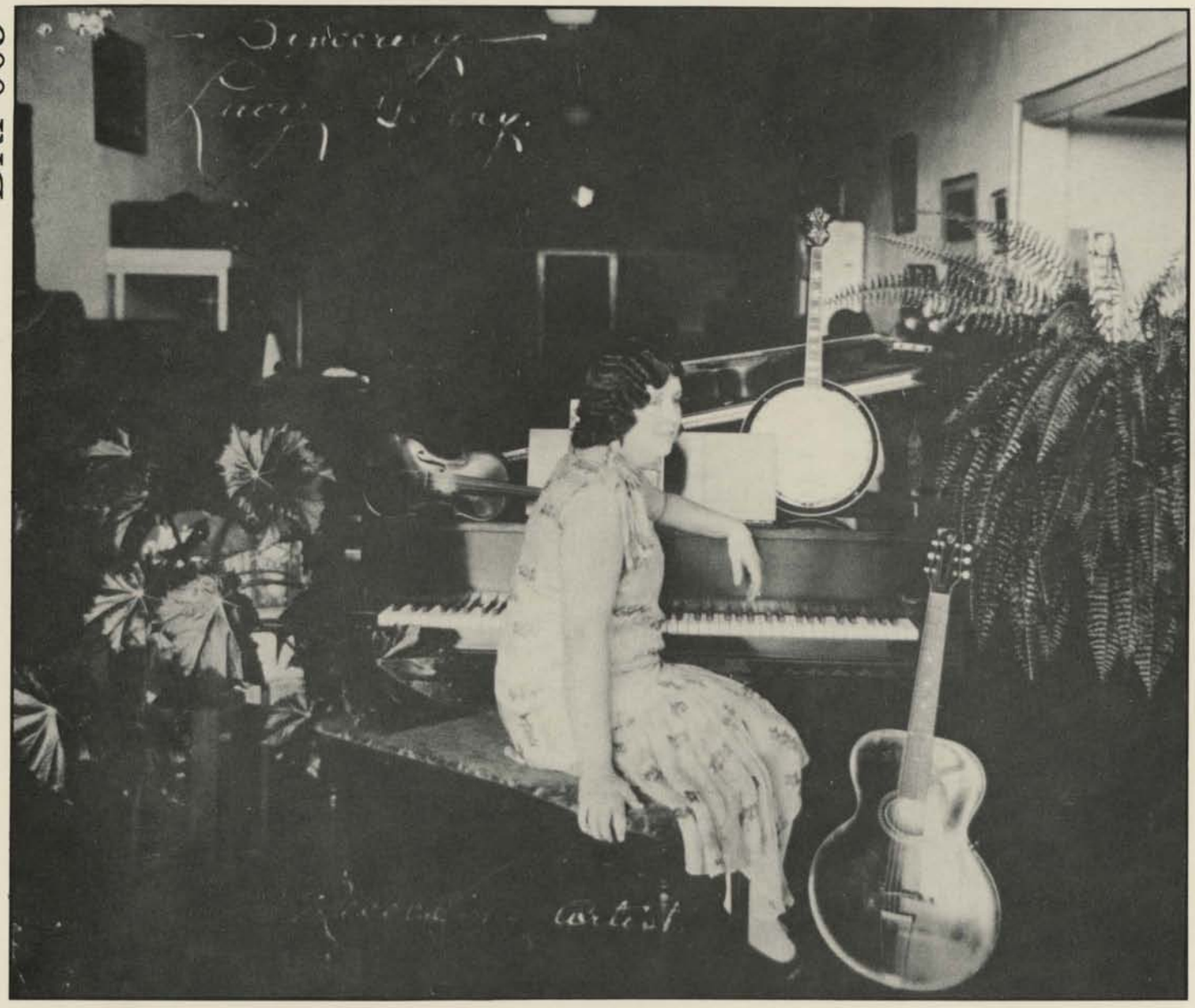
SIDE 2

1. TURN YOUR RADIO ON — Jennifer Crawford....2:26
2. T's FOR TEXAS — Gary Patton....1:58
3. CARAVAN — Janie Carper....2:13
4. BLUE RIDGE RAMBLER'S RAG — H.M. Barnes' Blue Ridge Ramblers....2:52
5. FLY AROUND MY BLUE-EYED GIRL — Hobart Smith....2:32
6. DILL PICKLE RAG — Thelma Thompson....2:41
7. GOLDEN SLIPPERS — Jennifer Crawford....1:39



VIRGINIA TRADITIONS

BRI 005



Blue Ridge Piano Styles

Lucy Terry, a member of the Highlanders String Band
Photo Courtesy Kinney Rorrer

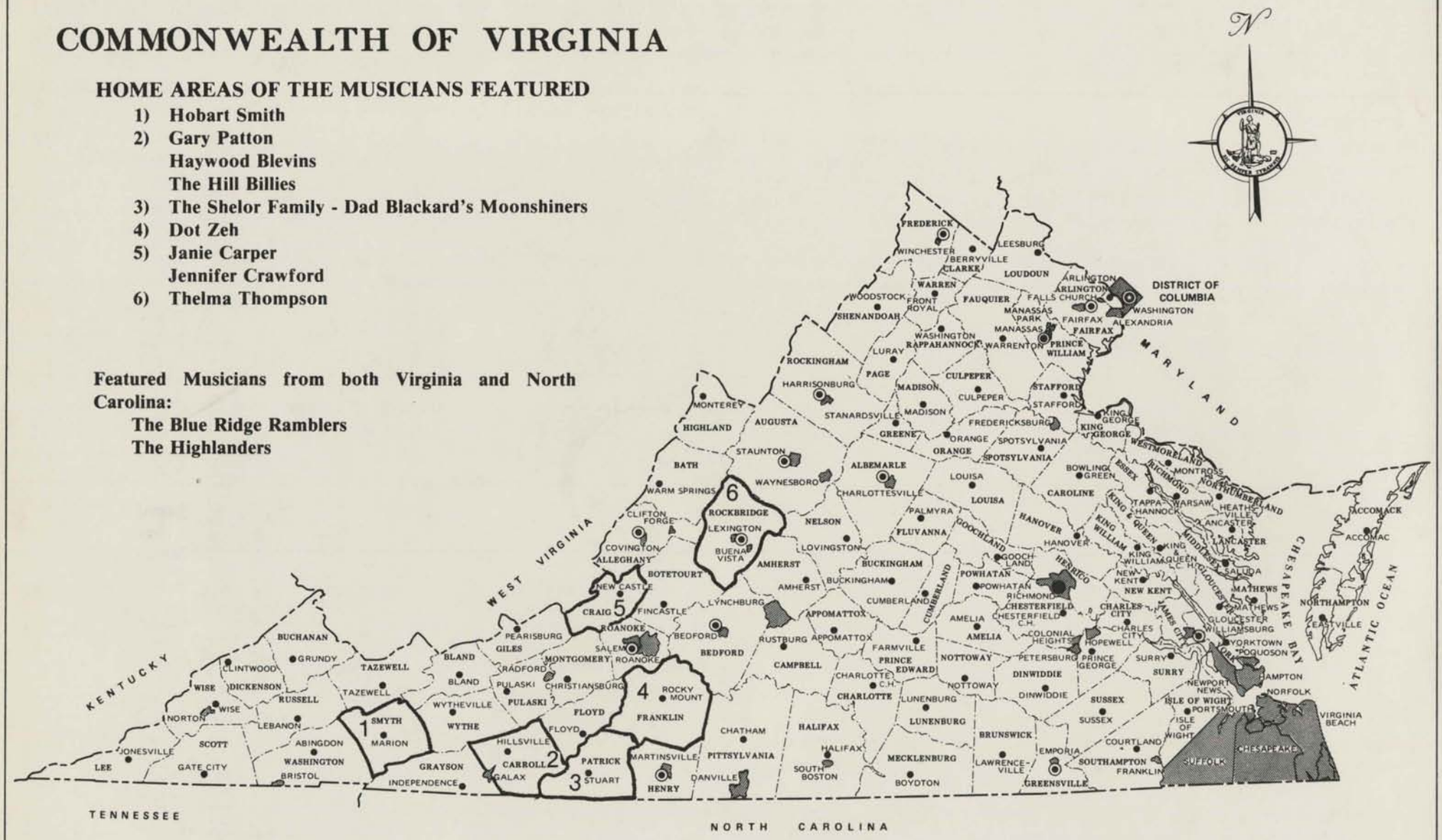
COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA

HOME AREAS OF THE MUSICIANS FEATURED

1) **Hobart Smith**
2) **Gary Patton**
   Haywood Blevins
   The Hill Billies
3) **The Shelor Family - Dad Blackard's Moonshiners**
4) **Dot Zeh**
5) **Janie Carper**
   Jennifer Crawford
6) **Thelma Thompson**

Featured Musicians from both Virginia and North Carolina:

The Blue Ridge Ramblers
The Highlanders



Introduction and Historical Background

Introduction

The first releases in the "Virginia Traditions" series have examined three different styles of folk music. BRI 001 documented the continuing tradition of fiddle and banjo music in black culture; BRI 002 explored the singing of Blue Ridge; BRI 003 showcased blues music from the western Piedmont; and 004 documented native ballads in Virginia. This fifth installment in the series is an album of piano music from the mountains of southwestern Virginia. It features both contemporary and vintage recordings and shows the many styles that are found in the area of the Blue Ridge.

This album departs from the earlier installments in the series, focusing on a particular instrument, rather than a style or type of music. Here the instrument is the common thread running through all the selections. *Blue Ridge Piano Styles* also differs from earlier albums by moving away from what has long been considered the musical "core" of folk tradition — ballads and blues — and venturing toward the fringes where distinctions are less readily apparent between folk, popular and classical styles. Taken as a whole, the music on this record is a stylistic hybrid that does not fall neatly into any specific category.

By concentrating on a single instrument, the album is able to examine a number of myths and stereotypes that surround the piano in hillbilly music. Few people consider the piano a country instrument, and fewer realize the Blue Ridge has more to offer than just fiddle and banjo tunes. More often than not, the piano is associated with classical, jazz, pop or other styles. This album unveils a world of music connected with the instrument in this region that is infinitely more complex and sophisticated than the stereotypical notion allows.

While the piano has become well-known as a classical instrument, it has enjoyed no little success as a folk instrument, too. Its greatest rise to prominence has been in connection with blues music and to a lesser extent country-and-western music. The characteristics of the instrument account for much of its success. The instrument is easy to play and has fewer idiosyncrasies than other instruments such as the fiddle. Virtually anyone can make a pleasant sound on it merely by striking a key. The piano does not need the constant attention in tuning that other instruments, such as the banjo, do. It makes a fine accompaniment to other instruments and to the human voice. And unlike other folk instruments, it can be played in any number of keys and in any number of rhythmic styles. Finally, it is easily adapted to different types of music.

This album takes a look at many of the traditional styles played on the piano. While the emphasis is clearly on mountain string music, traces of blues, ragtime, swing and pop music are also heard on some of the cuts. The instrument is featured solo and in a group context. But despite its wealth of materials and styles, the album is not exhaustive. It does not explore black piano traditions and gives little mention to gospel music. However, it does open up a vastly unexamined area of Virginia folk music in hope that other ways of playing the piano will be documented at a later time. While limited, the record still shows the breadth of styles associated with the instrument in the Blue Ridge.

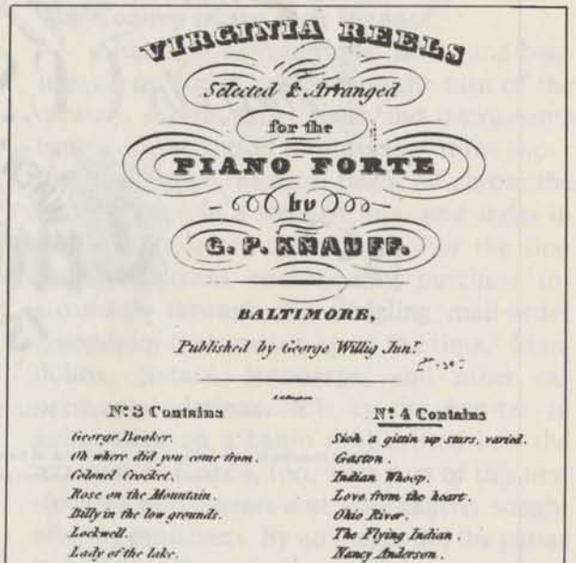
History of the Piano

The *pianoforte,* or simply the piano, is of European descent and has evolved over the last 250 years. Since the early 18th century, inventors have altered and added to the instrument in order to achieve its bright sound, sustained tone and musical versatility. Only in the last 100 years has the instrument become standardized in its shape and construction. Until the mid-1800s, the size and shape of the instrument could vary greatly according to the country and opinions of the builder. Most of the early pianos resembled the modern-day grand, although some inventors experimented with upright designs. The modern upright and spinet, as we know them, were not successfully developed until almost the turn of this century.

While no one knows who invented the first piano, most historians give credit to an Italian named Bartolomeo Cristofori. Sometime around 1711, he produced an instrument based on the clavichord, but with some important differences. His instrument became the forerunner of the modern piano.

Cristofori revolutionized this family of keyboard instruments by changing the manner in which they produced their sound. Previous to his invention, they made their sound by plucking the strings with mechanical fingers. Cristofori's instrument employed small hammers in place of the plucking device. When the strings were struck, he discovered the instrument had a brighter and more sustained tone. He named the instrument the pianoforte, the Italian words for soft and loud, because the tone could vary depending on how hard the keys were struck. This important invention set the piano apart from other keyboard instruments and accounts for its evolution independent of the clavichord family.

While the piano may have originated in Italy, it truly developed in Germany. There early builders added several features that vastly improved its design. They devised a steel framework to support the tension created by the large number of strings needed on the instrument. They also proposed the idea of varying the number of strings for each separate tone. Their instruments, for example, had just one string for each bass tone, but


VIRGINIA REELS

Selected & Arranged

for the

PIANO FORTE

by

G. P. KNAUFF.

BALTIMORE,

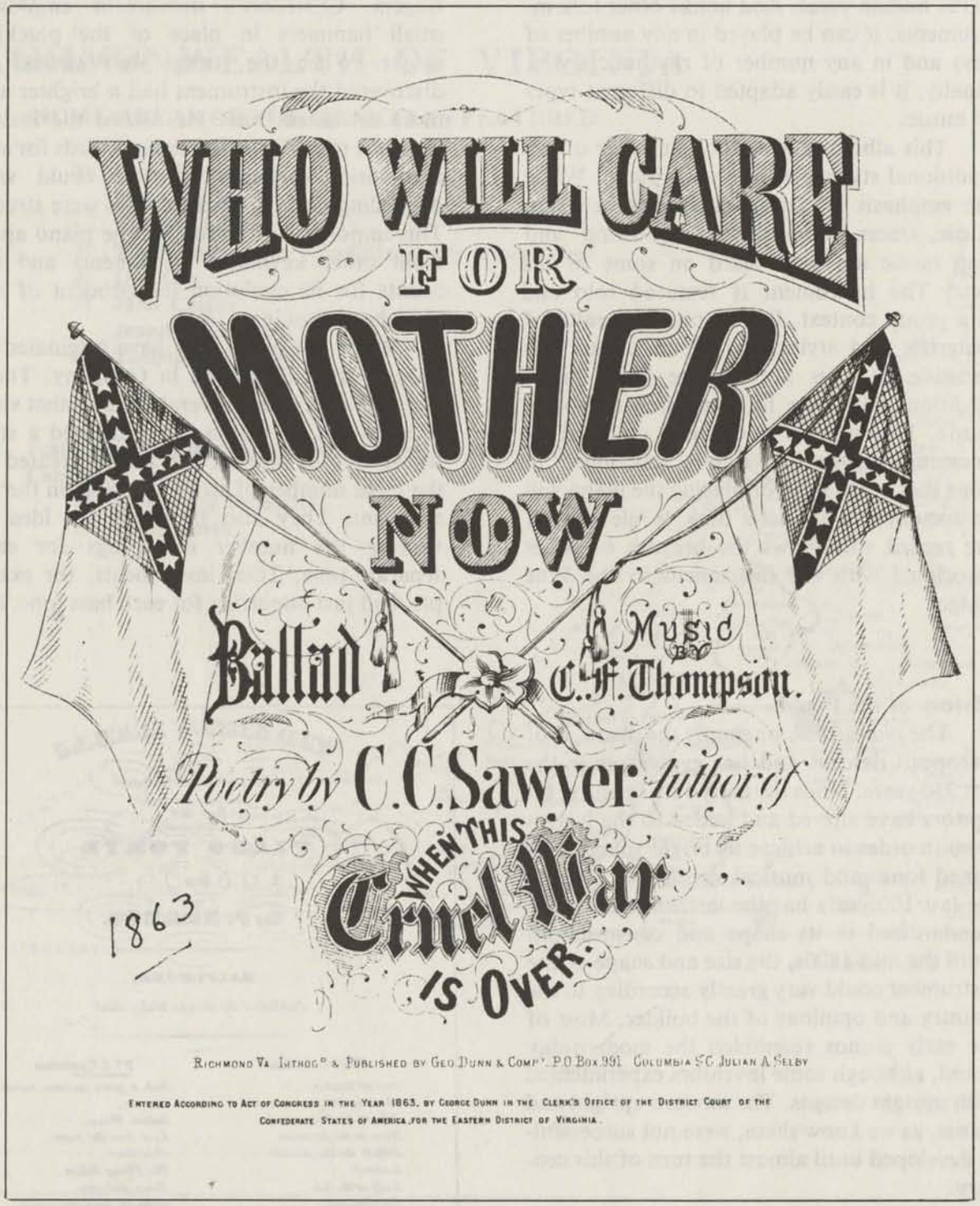
Published by George Willig Jun.r

No. 3 Contains	No. 4 Contains
George Booker.	Stick a gittin up stairs, varied.
Oh where did you come from.	Gaston.
Colonel Crocket.	Indian Whoop.
Rose on the Mountain.	Love from the heart.
Billy in the low grounds.	Ohio River.
Lockwell.	The Flying Indian.
Lady of the Lake.	Nancy Anderson.
Scotts favorite.	Midnight Serenade, varied.

In 1839, George P. Knauff of Farmville, Virginia published a collection of traditional fiddle tunes transcribed for the piano.

as many as four strings for each higher tone. Other contributions included a dampening mechanism that varied the sustenance of the notes and a general agreement on the shape and construction of the instrument.

Production of pianos began in this country as early as the 1770s, but it was not until the mid-1800s that large-scale manufacturing took place. By 1850 the large companies such as Chickering and Steinway had already started mass-producing instruments. With the coming of the industrial revolution, all but the most minor improvements were made in design and a parade of companies offered pianos to the American public. By 1900 these instruments were virtually the same as their modern counterparts featuring an upright or grand design, a wood and metal frame, a full range of 88 keys, and three footpedals for various effects.[1]



Courtesy Blue Ridge Heritage Archives, Ferrum College

"The affecting incident recorded in this beautiful song occured after one of our great victories. The fallen hero, in the arms of his comrades, had no anxiety about himself or his condition, but fixed his last thoughts on earth on His Mother." (From inside cover of sheet music)

Early Music in the Blue Ridge

By the time that pianos became readily available to the general public, traditional music was well established in the Blue Ridge. The music of the region included many different styles, but all were largely based on the imported traditions of settlers from the British Isles. Traditional songs and tunes were certainly "cultural baggage" that these immigrants brought with them. The folk hymns and ballads of the Blue Ridge settlers spoke of the region's musical debt to Scotland and Ireland, but the intimacy of the relationship appeared even more obvious in the string music. Throughout the upland South, but especially in the Blue Ridge, the transplanted fiddle and dance tune traditions of the British Isles found fertile ground in which to regenerate. Perhaps nowhere else in this country has traditional music based on the British model matured so fully. The fusion of this tradition with an Afro-American instrument—the banjo—meant the formation of a style that had already matured by the time the first pianos came onto the musical scene. Up until the end of the 19th century, these two instruments were probably the only ones easily found in the region. This tradition of fiddle and banjo music formed the musical standard against which all subsequent styles and instruments were measured.

The tradition in the Blue Ridge survives even modern times. Fiddling continues to be thought of as a fundamental and necessary part of mountain life. The instrument is synonymous with regional music. The association dates back as early as the 1770s, when reports indicate that the instrument was in common use at country frolics and dances.[2] For reasons unknown, the fiddle appealed to the early settlers and survived, while other instruments of British traditions

[1] I have borrowed heavily from a fine article about the history and development of the piano for much of this information. See "Piano, Pianoforte" in the *International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians* as cited in the bibliography.

[2] Dena Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 83.

Pianos.— Weight, boxed, 900 lbs.

Our WINDSOR pianos are comparatively new in the market, but during the past year we have done a very successful business in this line. Our sales have been large and with hardly an exception (it is impossible to please all) every instrument has given the best of satisfaction. We are daily in receipt of testimonials, praising their merits in the highest terms and it is evident that the people are beginning to realize that it is to their interests to *buy pianos at first hands* instead of paying enormous profits to middlemen. We intend to keep the Windsor up to the highest degree of excellence, and any new improvements in actions, etc., are at once adopted, as we aim to produce a piano with all modern improvements at our established prices, rather than continue on old styles at reduced prices. We therefore recommend our *Windsor Pianos*, not only for faultless mechanism, but purity and brilliancy of tone, superior workmanship, artistic design and finish of cases. In every instrument we use the double repeating actions constructed on the latest improved system, the touch is prompt and elastic and they have a remarkably pure and evenly balanced scale; full iron frame bronzed and polished; we have recently added the new "third pedal." The cases are of all the latest styles of wood, finely finished, highly polished and with finely carved trusses and panels, adjustable music rack and continuous nickel plated hinge on top and fall board; in fact great care is given to every detail with the one object in view of producing a first-class upright piano.

EVERY PIANO IS WARRANTED FOR FIVE YEARS, bears our trade mark "Windsor," also our firm name, which is positive evidence that our confidence in them is unlimited. Satisfaction is guaranteed in every case as you will see by referring to our offer on preceding page in regard to sending them out on trial.

25507 Windsor Piano (style A), as described above, 7⅓ octave, ivory keys, overstrung scale; three strings in unison (excepting wound bass strings), elastic double repeating action, with nickeled hammer, rest rail and brackets; height 53 in.; length 62 in.; depth 28½ in. The case on this style is made of 'built up" hardwood with highly polished surface and finished in imitation of Rosewood, Ebony or Mahogany. Price, including plush stool and scarf, $170.00 net (no discount).

25508-9

25508 Windsor Piano (style B), same style as 25509 (see cut), with full swing front music desk, full size full iron frame, 7⅓ octave, ivory keys (overstrung scale), elastic double repeating action with nickel plated hammer rest rail and brackets; THREE PEDALS; height, 56 inches; length, 62 inches; depth, 28½ inches. This case is double mahogany veneered, highly polished and finished either in natural color, or in imitation of Rosewood or Ebony and is indeed a very handsome piano. Price, including plush stool and scarf each $195,00, net (no discount).

25509 Windsor Piano (style C), as described see cut, with full swing front music desk, full size 7⅓ octave, ivory keys, full iron frame, overstrung scale, elastic double repeating action, with nickel plated hammer rest rail and brackets; THREE PEDALS; height, 56 inches; length, 62 inches; depth, 28½ inches. This case is double veneered, highly polished and can furnish either the genuine figured American walnut, oak or San Domingo Mahogany. This piano will rank, equal, in every respect, to the very best grades. Price, including plush stool and scarf, $210.00 net (no discount.)

NOTE.—We wish it understood that our Windsor Pianos are not to be classed with the inferior instruments with which the country is being flooded, as we would not under any circumstances allow our name to be associated with any article that we could not thoroughly recommend. We have a special catalogue of our pianos and organs. Mailed free. We do not claim that they are equal to a "Steinway," which cannot be purchased at less than six hundred dollars each, but we do claim they are equal in every way to the medium grades that are sold by agents at from $350.00 to $400.00.

Piano ad in the 1895 Montgomery Ward's catalog.

such as the pipes never achieved much popularity.

Modern belief has it that every community had its fiddler in the early days of this area and that this music was one of the few forms of entertainment for settlers. Indeed, it must have been the musical mainstay of the Blue Ridge. The mountaineer called on it at occasions ranging from square dances to school closings, depended upon it as an accompaniment for ballads and hymn tunes, and danced to its music either alone or at community gatherings. Little wonder that along with the banjo, the fiddle has become the most widely recognized character in mountain music.

The banjo evolved in the 18th and 19th century from a number of African string instruments brought over by black slaves. As early as 1690 accounts in this country were written about slaves playing instruments referred to as the "banjar" or "banjor."[3] Up to the 1850s the instrument had different shapes and two, three, or four strings. About that time a Virginian named Roscoe Sweeney claims to have added the short 5th, or drone string which gives the instrument its distinctive sound.

Although the banjo derived from black tradition, white musicians quickly adopted the instrument as their own. It found a home in at least three different styles of music; the minstrel show tradition and as part of the black-face comedy circuit; the light-classical banjo orchestras of the late 1800s; and the companion instrument to the fiddle in the southern highlands. The Anglo music of the Blue Ridge has remained by far the most vigorous and dynamic of the three. With the addition of the 5th string, the banjo could imitate the sound of the pipes with its drone. It also provided a fine rhythmic accompaniment to the fiddle. By the turn of this century, the practice of playing the fiddle with the banjo became widespread throughout the mountains. From this combination, a subsequent "band" style emerged.

The Coming of the First Pianos

Although the traditional fiddle and banjo style predominated around the turn of the century, several other styles and instruments caught the attention of musicians throughout the Blue Ridge. Musical tastes all across the country were in a state of flux, and styles in this area reflected the change. For the first time, musicians could easily purchase instruments through the fledgling mail-order companies that sprang up at the time.[4] Mandolins, guitars, autoharps, and other experimental designs such as the ban-tar (a guitar neck on a banjo rim) drifted into the mountains. Pianos, too, were part of this new stock of instruments and were eagerly sought after by musicians. By no means did the guitar outsell the others. In fact musicians seemed to have little preference for it. Ragtime music swept the country and people everywhere were fascinated with its new sound. Com-

[3] Epstein, p. 36.

[4] The reprints of early Sears, Roebuck catalogs provide much information about these instruments. For comparison, note the differences between the instrument sections of the 1927 Sears catalog and the 1897 edition (see bibliography for citation).

posers such as Scott Joplin offered their sheet music for sale and even had it available in remote areas of the mountains. These years before the first World War were also critically formative ones for blues music. All kinds of contemporary music opened up to the introduction of instruments, especially pianos.

The demand for accompanying instruments also came from the church. The hesitancy of the religious leaders in the century before to allow instruments in the church service had passed in all but the most conservative of sects. As religious groups got further away from the hymns of their fundamentalist ancestors, their interest grew in the more modern, upbeat numbers that called for string accompaniment. This movement alone must have caused a tremendous number of pianos to come into the area, but the demand for all instruments rose during this period. Certainly the Blue Ridge, while somewhat isolated as a region, felt the effects of these trends and responded accordingly with changes in the musical styles.

Clarice Shelor, one of the musicians from Meadows of Dan featured on this record, recalls the period well. Sometime around 1910 her father bought her a piano through a furniture store in Roanoke, some 70 miles away. A traveling salesman came through the area and sold the instrument on a subscription basis. The company put the piano on a train and shipped it from Roanoke to Stuart, a town at the foot of the Blue Ridge. From there the Shelors hauled the instrument by wagon the 1000-foot climb up the mountain to Meadows of Dan. Her first tunes were learned not from sheet music, but from listening to her father play the banjo and trying to imitate his sounds. She became quite proficient at accompanying the fiddle and banjo tunes of the community. Few people, if any owned guitars and the local musicians seemed to like the strong, steady rhythm of the piano. Local residents of nearby Laurel Fork still speak of the 4th of July celebration when Clarice and her father arrived by truck with the piano strapped to the bed. They backed the vehicle onto the grounds and entertained the crowd with their music throughout the day. Clarice also remembers taking the piano to squaredances if the hall didn't have an instrument for her to play.

Two other musicians tell similar stories about their first instruments. Dot Zeh from Rocky Mount says that a blind salesman from Danville sold her family their first piano. The company put the instrument on the train and shipped it to the station in Rocky Mount where it was subsequently hauled home. Although Dot's father played in a stringband called "The Possumhunters" and she learned their standards such as "Soldier's Joy" and "Shootin' Creek," she preferred the pop tunes that were locally in demand at dances. Haywood Blevins of Galax recalls that his father bought a piano specifically for the girls in the family. The instrument arrived by wagon. After uncrating it in the front yard, he sternly warned the boys not to touch it at all. Woodie, however, often snuck into the parlor to practice when everyone else was gone and in time could pick out the Civil War marches he learned from his grandfather. He also practiced on the old upright in the auditorium of the school he attended. His father learned of his secret talent one day when a local piano teacher dropped by the Blevins home to encourage them to let her give young Haywood lessons. Woodie wanted nothing of note music and refused to play anything but marches and banjo tunes.

Unfortunately, recorded documentation from those early days does not exist (before the days of recording machines). We have little way of knowing for certain what string music sounded like before or how widespread was the acceptance of accompaniment instruments. The first firm evidence comes in the 1920s when commercial record companies sent agents all over the South in search of talent. These companies soon discovered the market in stringband recordings and very quickly began cranking out 78s to fill the demand.

The Problems of Early Recordings

Commercial recordings of Blue Ridge musicians represent a wealth of documentation about instruments and early styles of music. The period of the late Twenties and early Thirties saw quite a few bands from Virginia recorded. More often than not, however, the bands appeared with a fiddle-banjo-guitar combination and rarely with pianos. Why, with all the pianos that must have been in the area, did so few make it onto record? Charles Wolfe, a noted scholar of early string music from the mountains, has offered one explanation:

> "Record company executives very early formed a stereotyped notion of what a mountain stringband should sound like, and they exercised more than a little influence to make sure the bands they recorded conformed to this stereotype. Often that meant not recording the piano. The Hill Billies, the first classic string band, featured a piano, and later even the 'piano accordian' of Fran Trappe. Many of the radio performers in the '30s and '20s used pianos. On the early Grand Ole Opry, the bands of Dr. Humphrey Bate, Theron Hale, Uncle Jimmy Thompson, W.E. Poplin, and George Wilkerson's Fruit Jar Drinkers all used pianos. Uncle Dave Macon and fiddler Arthur Smith each toured with bands that included pianos — and piano players who were, and still are, adept at playing breakdowns. The trouble is that few, if any, of these piano players made it onto records."[5]

Perhaps the recording executives had a personal bias against the piano, or maybe they thought the instrument sounded too "uptown" for the hillbilly series listed in their catalogs. Some evidence indicates that the prejudice arose not only in connection with certain instruments, but also in selection of styles for inclusion on records. One related incident concerns an exchange between Clayton McMichen and Lowe Stokes of the Skillet Lickers band and Frank Walker, the famous early recording executive with Columbia Records. The Skillet Lickers, one of the premier old-time southern stringbands, wanted to try some pop-sounding tunes during one of their New York recording sessions as a diversion from their usual traditional material. When told of their wishes, Walker replied, "If I want violinists, I can stick my head out the window and whistle. I didn't bring you guys all the way up here from Georgia to play violin music."[6] The suggestion that Walker, and others, took a dim view of pianos in old-time music is not farfetched. Such an explanation would account for the paradox between the popularity of the piano with rural audiences and its infrequent appearance on early records of old-time music.

[5] Letter from Charles Wolfe, 3/22/79.

[6] Richard Nevins, *The North Carolina Ramblers* (Canaan, N.Y.: Biograph Records, 1972), liner notes.

Despite the reluctance of the early recording companies, several stringbands from Virginia featuring the keyboard did make it onto 78s. Most notably, these bands included the Hill Billies, the Shelor Family, H.M. Barnes' Blue Ridge Ramblers, and even Charlie Poole and members of the Ramblers. The biases of the New York companies also had little effect on the instrument's popularity with rural audiences and musicians, and it remained in common use. In time, however, the guitar became the preferred instrument for stringband accompaniment and the use of pianos in groups lost some appeal. At no time, though, did it drop from sight and its popularity lives on.

The attitudes of the early 78 makers has had a significant effect on scholarly studies of music in the Blue Ridge. The instrument was all but ignored in the field recordings of the early collectors of folk music. In Charles Purdue's listing of Library of Congress materials from Virginia, for example, less than half a dozen recording entries of piano musicians are even mentioned. The same is true of those materials from the Virginia Folklore Society. While the oversight was probably not an intentional one on the part of fieldworkers, it does point to the general feeling that other styles and instruments were more important to document. The work of Alan Lomax is one notable exception and his recordings of Hobart Smith on the piano, for example, are some of the few in existance. More recently George Foss, Tom Carter, and Blanton Owen have taped piano players, but their research has touched on just the Shelors and Haywood Blevins.

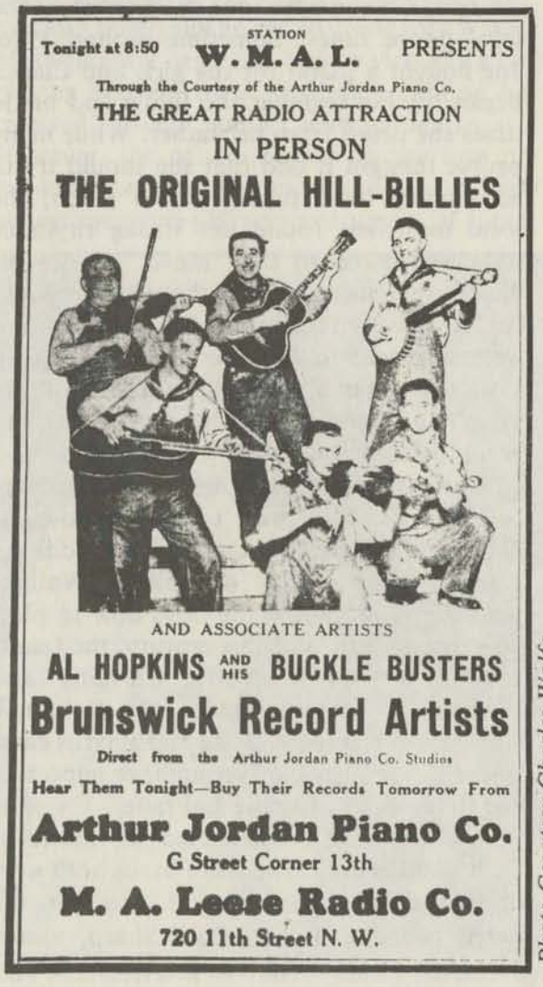


Photo Courtesy Charles Wolfe

The Music on the Record

The music on this album surveys the piano styles of white musicians in southwestern Virginia roughly from 1924-1979. It features the piano in a band setting and as a solo instrument. The recordings themselves came from many sources including 78 records, early field tapes, albums and new tapes made specifically for this series. Each selection contains extensive notes about the performer, the tune played and how the recording came about. Most of the musicians were tracked down with the help of other researchers, although several called the Institute after an article about the project appeared in *The Roanoke Times.*

A few words need to be repeated from BRI 001 about geography. . .Folk traditions do not always follow such neat lines as county and state borders. And in this age of mass communications and changing communities, where a person lives does not always correspond to where his roots lie or the source of his musical inspiration. Haywood Blevins, for example, lives in Sparta, North Carolina but grew up near Galax and shows the musical influence of that community. Lonnie Austin now lives near Eden, North Carolina, and played music in New Jersey and New York, but is quick to confess his musical debt to Franklin County, Virginia. While all the musicians may not now live in the Blue Ridge Mountains, their music certainly belongs here.

Notes on Featured Musicians

FISHER'S HORNPIPE — The Hill Billies -Recorded in New York City. No recording date available. Originally issued as Vocalion 5017A.

The Hill Billies, one of the earliest recorded stringbands, organized in the spring of 1924 with personnel from Carroll County, Virginia and Watauga County, North Carolina. The original group consisted of Alonzo Elvis "Tony" Alderman, John Rector, and the Hopkins Brothers, Al and Joe. Rector formed the group after returning to his home of Galax following a dissatisfying recording session with Henry Whittier's Virginia Breakdowners. The members of the group met by chance in Tony Alderman's barber shop, and after some discussion about the Breakdowners group, decided they could make better records. Rector played the banjo, Tony and Al provided the fiddle lead, and Joe backed the group on the guitar. Al occasionally switched over to the piano to round out the group's sound. The group auditioned for Victor that summer, but it was not until the following year that they made any recordings successful enough to be released. Early in 1925 they traveled to New York City to audition and subsequently record for Ralph Peer and the Okeh company. Following their session, the famous exchange occurred between Peer and Al Hopkins, where the former asked about the name of the group. Al is reported to have replied, "We're nothing but a bunch of hillbillies from North Carolina and Virginia. . . . call us anything you like." That name appeared on the six sides released from the session, much to the band's apparent delight. The name made a hit with the record buying public and the group has even been called the band "that named the music."[7] The group even went so far as to try and copyright their name, but they had little success.

Within a month of their release, sales of their records proved popular enough to merit the group being hired by a Washington, D.C. radio station. Based with the station WRC, the band became known all over the East Coast through their appearances in

[7] See Joe Wilson, *The Hill Billies* (Floyd, Virginia: County Records, 1973), liner notes: Bill Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1968) p. 43; and in Burt Goldblatt and Robert Shelton, *The Country Music Story* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Castle Books, 1966), p.217.

Photo Courtesy Joe Wilson

The Original Hill Billies, (from left) Tony, Chas, Al and John.

schoolhouses, fiddler's conventions, and showhouses from Tennessee to New York City. From their home in Washington, they built a following and kept in touch with their fans through radio broadcasts. They even entertained at a party given for President Coolidge. The popularity of the band spread further following their appearance in a movie short produced by the Vitaphone company. The film toured as part of the package tied to Al Jolson's *Singing Fool* and the Hill Billies became known to literally thousands of people across the country.

With their success, the Hill Billies left Okeh for a more lucrative contract with the jointly-owned Vocalion and Brunswick concern. Their records subsequently were released under their original name, but also under the new title, "Al Hopkins' Buckle Busters," presumably in an attempt to sell more records. In the later Twenties the personnel of the group went through numerous changes and included such fine Blue Ridge musicians as Uncle "Am" Stuart and "Dad" Williams, a trick fiddler from North Carolina. In 1932 the group disbanded after the death of Al Hopkins in an automobile accident. Hopkins will long be known for giving a name to this particular genre of traditional music and also for introducing the piano to commercial recordings of country music.

"BIG BEND GAL" — Dad Blackard's Moonshiners (The Shelor Family). Recorded in Bristol, Tennessee on August 3, 1927. Originally released as Victor 20865 and RCA LPV-552.

Dad Blackard's Moonshiners, better known in the Meadows of Dan area as the Shelor Family, recorded four sides with the Victor company in the late Twenties. The group consisted of Joe "Dad" Blackard on the banjo; his daughter, Clarice Blackard Shelor, on the piano; and her husband, Jesse Shelor and his brother, Phyrus Shelor, on the fiddles. As with so many of the early recording stringbands, the Shelor Family reflects the music of their native region, a body of music largely untouched since the settlement of the area. With the subsequent re-recording of Clarice in the mid-seventies, their direct knowledge of music spans almost a century and reaches from the end of the Civil War to the folk-revival movement during the last ten years.

Joe Blackard, the leader of the group, was born in Patrick County just before the Civil War and grew up in the Meadows of Dan community. As a youngster he learned to play the banjo and immersed himself in the fiddle and dance tune tradition that thrived in this section of the Blue Ridge. After his marriage in 1892, he remained in the Meadows of Dan area and developed a reputation as both a banjo player and singer. He limited his music to leisure time and supported his family by working as rural mail carrier. He had two daughters both of whom inherited their father's love of music. It was the younger of the two, Clarice who took an interest in the local dance tunes. Sometime around 1906, Joe bought a piano for the girls and Clarice began piecing together the fiddle and banjo tunes she heard from her father. While many people thought it odd that she should try to accompany these pieces with a piano, the local musicians found her strong rhythmic style well-suited to their music. Clarice indicates that many people thought the piano couldn't be used to accompany fast tunes and were surprised to hear her able to keep up with the popular breakdown tunes of the area. In any case, Clarice became a proficient accompanist to her father's banjo.

The two Shelor brothers, sons of a Baptist minister, also grew up in Meadows of Dan. While their father played the fiddle, it was another local musician, Wallace Spangler, who taught the boys how to play. Just after the turn of this century, the family moved to Spray, North Carolina and operated a boarding house for cottonmill workers. While there, Jesse and Phyrus came under the influence of yet another important old-time fiddler, Charlie LaPrade.

World War I interrupted the music of both families and Jesse and Phyrus both were drafted in the Army. In 1918, however, the noted ballad collector, Cecil Sharp, visited Meadows of Dan and found a rich source of tunes with Joe Blackard. He printed five songs from a "Joe Blackett" of Meadows of Dan, but Clarice vividly recalls the visit and

the dozens of ballads her father sang.[8] Following the War, Jesse and Phyrus returned to Meadows of Dan and played with the Blackards.

Clarice and Jesse married in 1919 and settled to raise a family in their home community. In these early years, they limited their music to community gatherings and social events and did not play as an organized band. They did, however, follow up an ad in the Hillsville newspaper about a talent search for the Victor company. They went there to audition, signed with the company, and arranged a recording date in the summer of 1927 in Bristol. That year they recorded four sides in a deserted millinery shop where engineers had set up a studio.

Victor found sales of the records very good and requested another session, but the group never did respond. The death of both Joe Blackard and Phyrus Shelor in the Thirties plus the demands on Clarice and Jesse with raising a family put an end to music for a while. More recently Jesse has had to virtually stop playing because of a crippling condition he received through contact with garden spray. However, the couple passed on the love of music to their children and grandchildren and almost everyone plays an instrument of some kind. Clarice has gone on to record since the Bristol session and appears on the "Old Virginia Favorites" series and on a release from the Heritage label.

Photo by Pete Hartman

Clarice Shelor

Photo Courtesy Bobby Patterson

Dan Blackard and the Shelor family the day before the RCA recording session, 1927. Left to right: Pyrus, Joe Blackard, Jesse, Clarice, and Little Joseph.

ST. LOUIS BLUES — Dot Zeh - Recorded in Rocky Mount, Virginia by Rod Shively of Outlet Records, March 2, 1981.

Dorothy "Dot" Zeh has played piano now for over forty years and commands several styles that have evolved during that time period. She grew up in Redwood, a community just outside of Rocky Mount, and remembers that the first piano the family owned was bought for her sister. However, all the children in the family showed a talent for music and even as a youngster, Dot took lessons in classical music. Unlike her sisters, though, she also showed an interest in jazz, blues, and ragtime. She successfully concealed this love from her teachers for many years, fearing that they would frown on any type of playing by ear. One teacher, Mrs. C.B. Willis, discovered her talent with popular music when she began getting reports about her student playing in a Rocky Mount dance hall. At Dot's next lesson, Mrs. Willis requested that she entertain her with a selection of these popular pieces, which Dot did. Nothing was ever said about not playing by ear again.

She continued her formal training in music during her years at Longwood College, but never stopped learning the popular music of the day. In addition, she joined a local stringband called "The Possumhunters" that played all the traditional squaredances around Rocky Mount. While her father never belonged in the band, he ocassionally would sit it on their practices and play the banjo. After graduating from Longwood, Dot returned to Rocky Mount to live and raise her family. Local groups and clubs constantly called on her to entertain. Among these organizations was the Lions Club, which sponsored minstrels from time to time. These programs were much like the traveling medicine shows except club members blacked up and performed comedy skits and musical numbers. Dot regularly performed in these shows with jazz and blues tunes. In recent years Dot has expanded her repertoire through listening to records and reading sheet music. She continues to perform in public and frequently makes appearances at local retired people's club meetings.

[8] Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932. Reprint edition, 1960).

FLOP EARED MULE — The Highlanders -Recorded in New York City in July, 1929. Originally issued as Paramount 3171 (2911-2).

The people of southwestern Virginia need no introduction to the name Charlie Poole. During the late Twenties and early Thirties, he and his North Carolina Ramblers were known to spend weeks at a time in the area around Franklin and Floyd Counties, Virginia. They were known by young and old as excellent musicians, fine entertainers, and unreformable pranksters. Even today people speak of the band and around Shootin' Creek section, one need not go far to hear about their many stunts. Few people realize, however, that Poole recorded with more than one group. In 1929 and 1930, he secretly recorded a series of records under a band pseudonym and featured the piano playing of Lucy Terry.

In 1929 Poole was an established star under exclusive contract with Columbia Records. He came to New York City that year to make a new series of records and wanted to change his sound to something a little more "uptown." Frank Walker, then A&R man for the company, refused to make recordings with this new combination of twin fiddles and a piano, and insisted that Poole stick with the proven formula of fiddle, guitar, and banjo. Not to be discouraged, the group secretly contacted the rival label Paramount through Lucy Terry's husband a salesman for the firm. Since Poole was under exclusive contract with Columbia, the recordings had to be a very secret affair with the Poole name being used in no way. When the records did hit the market, they were released under several names including "the Highlanders," "The Tennessee Mountaineers" and "Chumblers Breakdown Gang." Later that week, Poole and the Ramblers went on to record for Columbia under their original name. Lucy Terry cut several piano rolls for the Gulbransen Company, but to the best of my knowledge, they were never issued.

"Flop Eared Mule" features both members of the Ramblers and other musicians brought up just for the session. Lucy Terry plays the piano, her brother, Roy Harvey, plays the guitar, Poole provides the banjo, and Lonnie Austin and Odell Smith fiddle. Little is known about Lucy Terry and Odell Smith, while the rest of the band is easily recognized as members of the North Carolina Ramblers. Of the group, only Lonnie Austin is still alive and now lives in Eden, North Carolina.

Curiously, 1929 was not the first time that Poole showed an interest in recording with a piano. Several years earlier he traveled to New York with Lucy Terry and recorded "Don't Let Your Deal Go Down Medley" and "Sunset March." He hoped that Columbia would release these banjo/piano duets through their pop music catalog and gain him a new audience. However, the company released them under their country label and did poorly in sales. It sold only 8,000 or so copies at a time when his other releases had sold over 75,000. The disappointing sales figure may explain Walker's reluctance to change Poole's sound. He may well have feared that the record-buying public would not like the more modern sound and the addition of the piano to Poole's band.

Photo by Andrea Graham

Dot Zeh

TURN YOUR RADIO ON, GOLDEN SLIPPERS — Jennifer Crawford, CARAVAN — Janie Carper - Both recorded on May 6, 1979 in New Castle, Virginia by Pete Hartman.

The family has always played an important role in the transmission of folk traditions and nowhere is that more evident than in the Carper family of New Castle, Virginia. Over four generations have lived in this valley over the mountain from Roanoke and every one has been known for their musical talent. The present generation of Carpers is no different with 33-year-old Janie and her 32-year-old cousin, Jennifer Crawford, both fine piano players.

Roy Carper, Janie's father, showed no small amount of influence in the repertoire and style that they play. Roy grew up in the original family homeplace and learned music from *his* father and grandfather. His dad played the piano and fiddle and his mother was known to "knock out a tune on the banjo." Often times, the family and friends would gather at the house on Saturday or Sunday nights and make music until the next morning. Roy, now 71, remembers his grand-

father telling of playing for square dances all over Newcastle and the surrounding Craig County.

Janie and Jennifer grew up in much the same way musically and have very early recollections of get-togethers in their homes. Not only did they learn the traditional pieces that Roy played, but also "note pieces" learned from a piano teacher in town. Both learned the notes of music, but never enough to disorient them from playing by ear. They could easily switch from one method to the other and from one style to the other depending upon what the occasion demanded.

Yet another influence had a bearing on their individual styles and repertoires. Up through the mid-Fifties, New Castle thrived as a resort town with the abundant mineral springs in the area attracting many urban visitors. Dance halls flourished as part of the resort atmosphere and both Janie and Jennifer attended the dances held there on the weekend. They recall that squaredances would alternate weekends with the more popular dances of the times. Occasionally, swingbands would tour the area and play for gatherings. Janie and Jennifer listened to both types of music. As a result, the two have truly incredible ranges in the songs they play. Their tunes vary as widely as "Soldier's Joy" to "Darktown Strutter's Ball" to "In the Mood" to "Choo-Choo Boogie." Jennifer has expanded her range even more by becoming a church choir accompaniest and by playing in a Roanoke nightclub group, "The Highlanders." Janie's music, on the other hand, has remained very much along the traditional lines and she plays fiddle and guitar in addition to the piano.

Photo by Pete Hartman

Jennifer Crawford

Neither Janie nor Jennifer have many recollections about how they actually learned traditional tunes on the piano. The best they remember, they tried to follow along with what the fiddle and banjo played. Their parents encouraged them to play along with others during the musical get-togethers and swear that the two girls almost wore out every record in the house trying to learn new songs.

Photo by Pete Hartman

(Left to right) Janie Carper, Roy Carper and Jennifer Crawford.

BLUE RIDGE RAMBLERS' RAG — H.M. Barnes' Blue Ridge Ramblers - Recorded in New York City on January 28, 1929. Originally issued as Brunswick 346.

Along with the Hill Billies and the Highlanders, another group emerged in the late Twenties that incorporated the piano into its instrumentation, used both North Carolina and Virginia musicians, and played the vaudeville circuit. H.M. "Hank" Barnes organized the band in 1928 to play the Loew's Theater circuit on the East Coast. The band alone consisted of as many as ten members and featured Lonnie Austin, at one time fiddle player for Charlie Poole, on the piano. Barnes himself did not play an instrument, but direct-

ed troupe which also included the Bowman Sisters, daughters of the legendary Tennessee fiddler, Charlie Bowman; "Dad" Williams, who also played with the Hill Billies; and Kyle Roop, an early comedian. Barnes consciously stressed the southern mountain roots of his musicians and as Charles Wolfe has noted, "went to great pains to stress the 'hillbilly' aspect of his music. . . it seems a calculated and at the time novel effort to get mountain music into New England and the northeast."[9] Surprisingly two diaries kept by different members of the group have surfaced in the past couple of years. Lonnie Austin, piano player for the band, kept one and Jennie Bowman, who toured with the group, kept the other.[10] Between the two, they document the period in the band's history from 1928-1931. The diaries reflect the numerous dates played in the north and show what a rigorous and exhausting schedule the group maintained. From the two diaries, the group seemed as equally at home in rural North Carolina and Virginia as when they were playing at the Steel Pier in Atlantic City or in the theaters along Broadway.

As energetic and innovative as the group may have been in their performances, their music did not always reflect the same characteristics. Most of the recordings of the band have a raucous and unorganized nature with everyone playing something close to the melody and everyone joining in the singing. The group thrived on well-known, straightforward, familiar pieces of the day and played a combination of pop standards, southern dance tunes, and marches. Presumably they chose this mixture so as not to alienate the sensibilities of their northern audiences with some of the less familiar hillbilly songs.

The group, however, does provide an important piece in the overall mosaic of music at the time. They demonstrate the willingness of southern musicians to experiment with their music and show rather dramatically through their diaries how receptive northern audiences were to their experiments. Unfortunately, the Blue Ridge Ramblers are one of the few such innovative groups to get on record. They moved freely back and forth from folk to pop material and tried to adapt the "big band" style to hillbilly music. The use of piano adds a jazz element to the band that is absent from other groups using the instrument at the time. Their combination of instruments and songs must have made them popular wherever they went. Other reissues of the group, though, are probably not forthcoming. Stringband enthusiasts consider the band too pop-oriented and fans of early jazz do not feel comfortable with their hillbilly numbers. In any case, the group points to the creativity of early Virginia musicians and this reissue is a tribute to their innovation.

Photo Courtesy Charles Wolfe

H.M. Barnes' Blue Ridge Ramblers

FLY AROUND MY BLUE-EYED GIRL — Hobart Smith - Originally issued on Prestige International's *Southern Journey* Series, INT-DS 25004. No further discographical information available.

Mystery surrounds one of the most famous musicians featured on this album. The music of the late Hobart Smith of Saltville, Virginia, has been known to lovers of folk music since the thirties and forties. However, only one cut of his outstanding piano playing has ever been issued. All other releases feature his fiddle and banjo music and his fine singing. Efforts to track down other piano recordings have proven fruitless. Few even knew that he could play the instrument.[11]

Smith grew up in a log cabin in Smyth County, Virginia, and was exposed to tradi-

[9] Charles Wolfe, "Up North with the Blue Ridge Ramblers: Jennie Bowman's 1931 Tour Diary," *Journal of Country Music,* Vol. VI, No. 3 (Fall, 1975), p. 136.

[10] Ibid, p. 136-145 and reprint of Lonnie Austin's diary, *Old Time Music,* #17 (Summer 75), p. 9-10.

[11] Strangely enough, however, the booklet to the Folk-Legacy *Hobart Smith of Saltville, Virginia* record indicates that a forthcoming release will feature him on piano. Repeated calls to various sources around the country yielded no information about any such record in existance. Is this song then the sole Hobart Smith cut available on record?

tional singing from birth. Other members of his family have shown considerable talent for music with his sister, Texas Gladden, being the most famous. He attended some of the first festivals at Whitetop and met the early collectors of folk music such as Richard Chase and Alan Lomax. When Eleanor Roosevelt attended the festival in 1936, Hobart and his sister, Texas, were among a number of singers that caught her attention. She subsequently invited them to the White House, where they performed for the President. Hobart's reputation for traditional music spread through the recording work that followed with Alan Lomax. He recorded a number of discs for the Library of Congress, Folk-Legacy Records, and Prestige International. Throughout the Fifties and up until his death in the Sixties, he enjoyed many tours of this country performing his music. His name was one of the first to be mentioned for possible inclusion on this album of piano players.

DILL PICKLE RAG — Thelma Thompson -Recorded in Natural Bridge, Virginia on February 9, 1979 by Pete Hartman

Thelma Thompson grew up in the southwestern portion of Virginia and in the community around Welch, West Virginia. Her father ran a string of businesses that included such diverse interests as real estate, garages, coal futures, and movie theaters. In those early days of motion pictures, projectionists constantly had to battle the problem of film breakage. Thelma's father installed a player piano in his theater to entertain the patrons during such delays and to introduce silent films. When customers began complaining about hearing the same music all the time, Thelma suggested that she play part of the time, too. She learned all types of pieces including rags, waltzes, popular tunes of the Thirties and squaredance numbers that were traditionally found in that portion of the region. Her first job in the movie house started her on a part-time career as a pianist. She joined a local band soon afterwards and began making the rounds to dancehalls and squaredances. Her father went on to expand the entertainment lineup at his theaters, which gave Thelma the chance to meet other musicians and film stars as well. She vividly recalls the name of one act - The Carter Family - that made an appearance at the theater and on another occasion she became the envy of every child in the neighborhood when Tom Mix stayed over for the night at her house.

Photo Courtesy Thelma Thompson

Thelma Thompson

In the Thirties her father's business concerns were hit hard by the depression. After being swindled out of some coal land, he decided to move the family to a farm he had invested in near Natural Bridge. Thelma, however, stayed near Welch so that she could attend special classes in piano at the local high school. When her teacher discovered she played entirely by ear, Thelma was discouraged from continuing her studies. More training would have meant an end to playing the popular and traditional pieces that she had built her repertoire upon.

Thelma quit the program and returned to Natural Bridge with her family. There she settled and began raising her own family. Her children and their cousins showed the same love of music and the different generations formed the "Perkins Family Band." The group regularly played on radio stations in Harrisonburg and on the early days of television on WDBJ-Roanoke. They played a mixture of tunes, but still depended most upon

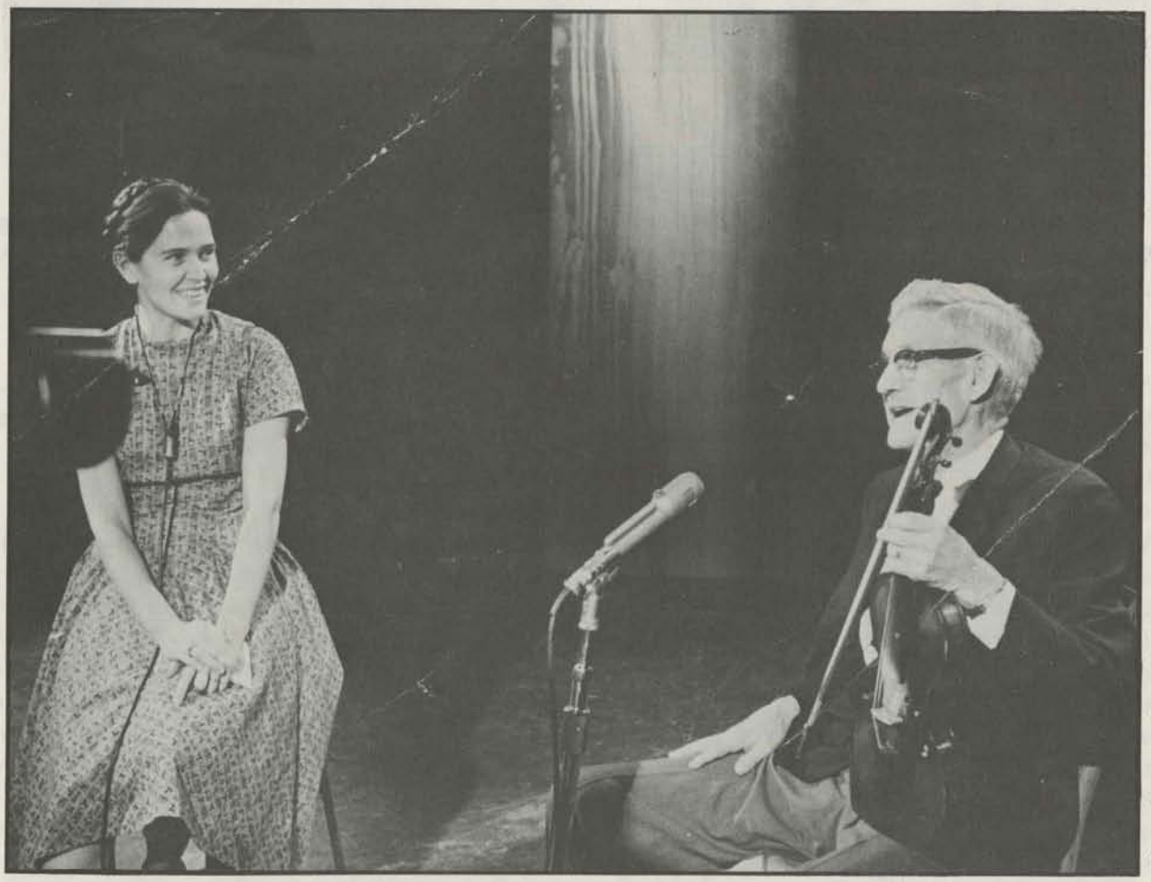


Photo Courtesy Chris Gladden

Hobart Smith (right) and friend.

their traditional songs. Since the early Fifties the group has stayed together, but now includes a younger generation of children.

GENERAL GRANT'S GRAND MARCH, THE DOUBLE-QUICK MARCH — Haywood Blevins - Recorded by Pete Hartman in Sparta, North Carolina on March 15, 1979.

Haywood "Woodie" Blevins played the piano for over fifty years and was well known for his talent on the keyboard around his native home of Galax, Virginia. The Blevins family has deep roots in the Baywood section of Grayson County and Haywood even held the original deed of land to the family farm that his ancestors signed in the late 18th century. His earliest memories were of his grandfather, a veteran of the Civil War. His grandfather entertained him as a youngster with stories of the War and tales about his time spent in a Union prison camp just before the end of the conflict. He often played marches and tunes that he learned in the service and could tell stories of incidents that related to each march. In addition to his musical talent, Haywood's grandfather had artistic ability and gave Woodie a series of sketches of the Yankee prison camp where he spent time. spent time.

Haywood also learned music from his father, who was a banjo player. Haywood's interest in the piano extended far beyond just playing. By the time he was eighteen years old, he has learned to tune and rebuild instruments. Haywood's reputation as a tuner and repairman spread far and wide and his clientel stretched from North Carolina to Maryland. He divided his time between tuning the piano, farming and even occasional factory work in the mills around Galax. A disagreement with a plant foreman caused him to leave home in the early Thirties. He and his wife moved to Maryland for several years, only to come back to Galax to take over the family farm full-time. They lived there until Appalachian Power Company bought the place for the New River Dam Project. He lived in Sparta with his daughter and her family until his recent death in 1980.

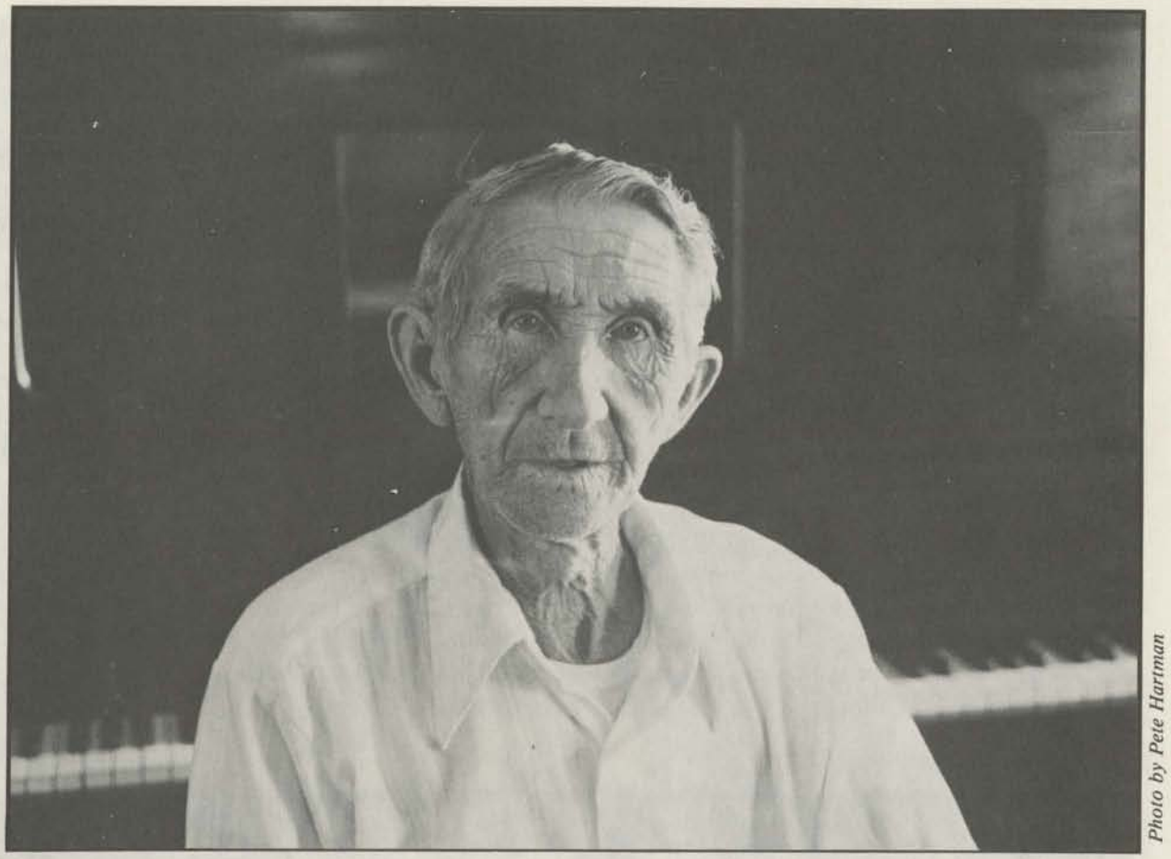


Photo by Pete Hartman

Haywood Blevins

As with many of the other tunes that Woodie plays, these two have a dramatic story behind them. It seems that there was once a deserter from the Union forces that fled from his troops and made his way south to the edge North Carolina line. There the military police caught up with him and tried him on the spot. His sentence was death before a firing squad. They set a locust post in the corner of a fence row and tied the prisoner to it. When all had gathered around him, a firing squad of a dozen men marched into place to the tune of "General Grant's Grand March." In another corner of the fence stood twelve guns - six loaded and six unloaded. The captain of the squad ordered his men to choose a weapon. After they returned to their position, the captain turned to his prisoner and said, "Now if you have anything to say, you'd better say it during this hymn, because you're going to die." The band played, but the prisoner remained silent. As the last note of the hymn sounded, the squad fired and the prisoner's head dropped. The troops didn't stop long enough to claim the body, but marched away to the tune of "The Double-Quick March."

CUMBERLAND GAP, T'S FOR TEXAS — Gary Patton - Recorded by Pete Hartman in Woodlawn, Virginia on March 15, 1979.

Gary Patton borrows from any number of musicians and styles in his piano playing. His father provided his most notable influence by teaching Gary the traditional fiddle and banjo tunes of the area. On many Saturday and Sunday nights, the family would gather with other musicians and Gary's dad would play the fiddle. Like many other young people growing up around Galax, Virginia, Gary enjoyed a steady diet of country music heard over the radio and was attracted to the music of piano players such as Floyd Cramer and Jerry Lee Lewis. It was another local musician, however, that inspired him to stick to the

piano. Haywood Blevins, also lived in Galax and regularly came to the Patton house to tune their piano. During one such visit, Gary's father recorded him so that his nine-year-old son could learn the tunes. Gary became so proficient at imitating Blevins the two claim that only they can distinguish the differences in their styles.

Gary's interest in music continued throughout high school and before he was twenty, he had mastered the piano, guitar, and pedal steel. He played on and off with several country bands before going full-time with such semi-professionals as the Easter Brothers gospel group. However, the demands of playing on the road and spending too much time away from home always caused him to give up the life of the professional musician. He now lives in Woodlawn, just outside of Galax, and works for his father in a family-owned sand and gravel business.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Eight Miles Apart: Old Time Music from Patrick and Carroll County, Virginia. Heritage XXII.

Old Originals, Vol. I, Rounder 0057.

Old Originals, Vol. II, Rounder 0058.

All Smiles Tonight, The Shady Mountain Ramblers with Gary Patton, Heritage XXXIV.

The records listed above and in the notes can be ordered from one of the mail-order houses given below:

County Records
P.O. Box 191
Floyd, Virginia 24091

Rounder Records
186 Willow Avenue
Somerville, Massachusetts 02144

Photo by Pete Hartman

Gary Patton

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