

Virginia Traditions



Early Roanoke Country Radio



Few areas of the country can boast of more diverse folkways than Virginia. Many of the state's material objects such as barns, tools, and furniture reflect the traditions which shaped the lives of our early settlers and the generations of Virginians that followed. The Commonwealth's performance traditions—songs, tunes, and tales—also tell of a shared heritage involving all classes of people in every facet of life. Traditions naturally change over time, thus documentation of Virginia folk culture is an ongoing process essential to our understanding of the past, present, and future. THE BLUE RIDGE INSTITUTE of FERRUM COLLEGE strives to record the folkways of Virginia as a whole and to foster a greater appreciation of our folk roots through an array of interpretive programs. BRI Records is one such program.

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

***Front Cover — The Roanoke Entertainers and Hayden Huddleston in the WDBJ studio in 1930, courtesy of Charlie Holloway.

***Back Cover — The Wanderers of the Wasteland in the WSLS studio in 1947, courtesy of Woody Mashburn.

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BRI Records, Ferrum College, Ferrum Virginia 24088.

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VIRGINIA TRADITIONS

BRI 010



Early Roanoke Country Radio

The Roanoke Entertainers and Hayden Huddleston in the WDBJ studio, 1930. (Courtesy Charlie Holloway)

Roanoke Country Radio Time Line 1924-1954

WDBJ

1924 — Signs on the air

N & W String Band (late 1920s)

Bent Mountain Four (late 1920s)

Roanoke Jug Band (1928-31)

Salem Highballers (late 1920s)

Vinton Ramblers (late 1920s)

Blue Ridge Fox Chasers (late 1920s)

WRBX

1929 — Signs on the air

Neuman's Stringband (early 1930s)

Blue Ridge Ramblers (early 1930s)

Roanoke Entertainers (1930-37)

Charlie Holloway (middle 1930s)

Talton Aldridge (middle 1930s)

Rice Brother's Gang (middle 1930s)

Garden City Bluebirds (middle 1930s)

Carl Barber (middle 1930s)

Bob Crowell's Stringband (middle 1930s)

Glenwood Howell (1935-36)

"Saturday Jamboree" (1935-39)

Texas Troubadours (1935-42)

Billy Altizer's Stringband (1936-39)

Mundy Family Stringband (1936-39)

Salt and Peanuts & the Gang (1937-40)

Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge

Entertainers (1939-43)

Johnnie Autry (1941)

Jay Hugh Hall & the

Happy-Go-Lucky Boys (1941-42)

Buck Mountain Ramblers (1946)

The Tinker Mountain Boys (1946)

Tommy Magness &

the Orange Blossom Boys (1947)

Smokey Graves &

the Blue Star Boys (1949-50)

Tommy Magness &

the Tennessee Buddies (1952)

Flatt and Scruggs &

the Foggy Mountain Boys (1952)

1920's

1930's

1940's

1950's

WSLS

1940 — Signs on the air

Big Lick Entertainers (early 1940s)

Virginia Hillbillies (1941-42)

Virginia Pioneers (early 1940s)

Wanderers of the Wasteland (1943-47)

Dixie Playboys (1948-53)

Woods Sisters (late 1940s)

WROV

1946 — Signs on the air

Jay Hugh Hall & the

Happy-Go-Lucky Boys (1946-47)

Country Cavaliers (late 1940s)

Wayne Flemming (late 1940s)

Wanderers of the Wasteland (1947)

"Blue Ridge Jamboree" (1947-49)

THIRTY YEARS OF ROANOKE COUNTRY RADIO

Between 1924 and 1954 four of the Roanoke Valley's radio stations — WDBJ, WRBX, WSLS, and WROV — broadcast thousands of live programs featuring local and regional country music artists. Performers as diverse as the Roanoke Entertainers, the Mundy Family String Band, Billy Altizer's Stringband, Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers, and the Dixie Playboys, along with announcers such as Hayden Huddleston, Irving Sharp, and Mel Linkous became household names. These media personalities helped to rouse Valley residents out of bed each morning with a blend of music, farm news, weather reports, and downhome humor. The twice-daily WDBJ programs by Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers, hosted by Irving Sharp and sponsored by the Dr. Pepper Bottling Company, between 1939 and 1943 represent the apex of this era. By 1954, live country radio broadcasts were anachronistic in light of rapidly changing radio formats and the emerging television industry. This recording pays tribute to the musicians, the announcers, and the radio stations which assured the Roanoke Valley's place in country music history.

The Early Days

Roanoke country radio began at midday on June 20, 1924, with station WDBJ's first broadcast. The Richardson-Wayland Electric Corporation engineers were making their initial test of the twenty-watt transmitter in order to monitor its power and the quality of the signal. No doubt nervous, a fiddle-playing employee, Ray Jordan, and an unidentified aged man playing the banjo joined together to perform the traditional dance tunes "Turkey in the Straw" and "Soldier's Joy" as well as the turn-of-the-century popular song "Darling Nellie Gray."

Radio, which was little more than a novelty for most Americans in 1924, would quickly establish itself as the most potent force in disseminating hill-billy music from its southern home to a nationwide audience. Nashville was not yet known as "Music City," and southern cities such as Louisville, Atlanta, Charlotte, and Richmond fostered their own distinctive country music scenes. In fact, what was then called "hillbilly," "old-time," or "country" music could be heard across the southern United States and in many midwestern "border" states such as Iowa and Indiana.

Radio instantly transmitted talk, news, and music to its audience, thus freeing people from the restrictions of listening to music on phonograph records or attending live performances. As radio stations spread across the country during the 1920s, so too did live broadcasts of country music. Such powerful early radio stations as WLS in Chicago and KDFA in Dallas featured regularly-scheduled country music shows. In the Southeast, the airwaves



Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers, 1938, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. (Courtesy Mrs. Bill Brown)

between Washington, D.C., and Atlanta provided an open invitation to entrepreneurs.

Substantial printed information about early radio programming in Roanoke is difficult to obtain because until the *Roanoke Times and World-News* purchased WDBJ in 1931, the newspaper did not regularly print the complete daily schedule for either WDBJ or WRBX (which signed on the air in 1929). It is clear, however, that local performers dominated the live broadcasts heard over WDBJ until 1929 when the station joined the fledgling CBS radio network. As soon as it signed on the air, WDBJ began featuring Roanoke Valley entertainers on fifteen- or thirty-minute segments.

Vinton guitarist Willie Wright is one of the few surviving veterans of Roanoke country radio who broadcast prior to the Depression. Wright recalls:

We played about every Saturday...from eight until nine. That was when Raymond and Emmitt Neighbors and I played together [as the Neuman Stringband]. I just got with all those fellows and they were playing on the radio. That used to be the thing, to hire live musicians. The N & W Stringband was one of the first bunches here in Roanoke — the original N & W Stringband, about 1928. Claude Harris was a conductor on the Shenandoah, Charlie Doss and Jigger Coleman worked on cranes down there. Charlie got permission to use that N & W name from "Old Man" Sykes. They played over WDBJ, too.

When Wright first broadcast about 1929, WDBJ

was very sensitive to its audience's requests, and the station and its employees were eager to please the listeners. WDBJ's audience was not comprised exclusively of Roanoke Valley residents because at night the station's "DX" (a phrase that referred to "Distance Unknown") programs regularly brought its signal into homes across the eastern United States and eastern Canada. In addition to telephone calls,



Bob Reiley, circa 1920. (Courtesy Bob Reiley)

letters, and telegrams from Virginia listeners, WDBJ often received country music requests from as far away as Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Nova Scotia.

One example of this phenomenon comes from the files of E. R. Woolridge, the fiddle-playing leader of the Roanoke Entertainers and a fixture on Roanoke radio from late 1930 until 1937. The Roanoke Entertainers regularly broadcast over WDBJ, including many Saturday night DX programs, and occasionally over WRBX. The written program script for one of the Roanoke Entertainers earliest broadcasts is reproduced below exactly as Woolridge typed it:

**Program WDBJ November 13, 1930.
9:05 to 9:35 P.M.**

Ladies & Gentlemen, once again we have with us the ROANOKE ENTERTAINERS in an all request program of string music. We are pleased at this time to acknowledge the many requests received this week and will get to just as many as we possibly can. You would no doubt like to know the personnel of this band, which is composed of:

E.R. Woolridge, Violin.
Spark Plug Lucas, Mandolin.
H.C. Holesapple, Banjo.
C.W. Holloway, Guitar.
R.L. Lucas, Guitar.

OLD GREY MARE, For Geo. W. Harris, Martins Ferry, Ohio

RED RIVER VALLEY, For Mrs. L.E. Cummings, Laural Fork, Va. & C.S. Hunley, 644 Albermarle Ave. S.E., Roanoke, Va.

OVER THE WAVES, (Waltz) For Floyd S. Hoffman, Brosius, W. VA.

HOME BREW RAG, For Mr. and Mrs. Paul Keaton, 3558 Bosworth Rd. Cleveland, O.

SPRINGTIME IN THE ROCKIES, For Mr. James Wilson, Kitzmiller, Md. John H. Cooper, Roanoke, Va. Mrs. Dillon and Mrs. Litrell, Roanoke, Va.

WHAT IS HOME WITHOUT BABIES, For Katherine Crantz, and Eugene Martin, City [Roanoke]

RED WING, For Miss Celia Riley, Hollins, Va. R.M. Arnold, Truesdale, Pa.

THEY CUT DOWN THE OLD PINE TREE, For Alma Anderson, 115 Broad St., Salem, Va.

THE OLD RUGGED CROSS, For E.G. Flora, 403 Elm Ave., Roanoke, Va.

Boys you have here exactly 22 requests for CARRY ME BACK TO OLD VIRGINIA. How about it? Allright, CARRY ME BACK TO OLD VIRGINIA for

R.G. Hobson, Grant Ave., Phila, Pa.
H.L. Reynolds, Coulter Ave., Ardmore, Pa.
Mrs. Margret Goudy, 738 Roselawn Ave., Akron, Ohio
Geo. W. Russell, Milbury, Mass.
M.W. Hargrave, Pemberton, N.J.
John S. Owens, Betterton, Md.
Anthony Bayer, 119 Park Ave., Passaic, N.J.
Mr. Woolridge retained dozens of written copies



Roanoke Entertainers poster, circa 1934. (Courtesy Roanoke Times & World-News)

of Roanoke Entertainers programs from between 1930 and 1936, and this example is typical. It also underscores the informality of such broadcasts and the interaction between the musicians and their audience. This relaxed attitude is evident on the Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers' fifteen-minute WDBJ broadcast that opens side two of this record.

Almost as well known as the local country musicians themselves were the announcers. At WDBJ one of the pioneering radio voices belonged to Hayden Huddleston, who was widely referred to as the "red-headed announcer." Although Huddleston worked in nearly every facet of radio (and later television and commercial advertising), his earliest associations were with country music and especially with the Roanoke Entertainers. When this group was invited to New York City to perform over the CBS network in early February, 1931, they took Huddleston with them. The *Roanoke World-News* published a detailed amusing account of this trip for the network broadcast, which the Entertainers shared with Crockett's Mountaineers of Kentucky:

It isn't often the diners of the Memphis Special have a real old time string band to furnish 'music with their meals,' but that's what happened last week when the Roanoke Entertainers, radio performers from WDBJ, and Hayden Huddleston, the red-headed announcer, left here for New York.

There were six in the party, five musi-

cians with their banjos, guitars, and fiddles, and the announcer who drawls and slurs his R's. They had a drawing room, for this gang of Roanokers was traveling in style. They were on their way to the Big Town to play before the Columbia Broadcasting System audition board. In addition they had auditions with both the Columbia and Brunswick Phonograph Companies.

No sooner had the train started than "Spark Plug" Lucas grabbed his mandolin. The strains of "Smokey Mountain Bill" soon began breaking through the partitions of the drawing room. E.R. Woolridge, the southpaw fiddler, began to itch and out came the old saw horse. This was the signal for "Fatty" Holsapple, "Gloomy Gus" Lucas and "Ladies Man" Holloway, began to chime in... 'How'd you like to play in the diner where all the folks could hear the music?' asked the conductor. That was all they needed. The Roanoke Entertainers tramped up to the diner. A few spaces were cleared and it was only a few minutes before the car was filled. Then another recruit was added to the band in the person of a big, six-foot engineer from West Virginia. This boy was really big — how he could dance. He stepped the 'Arkansas Traveler,' 'Chinese Breakdown' and a flock of others...

The boys finally arrived in New York. Huddleston, who had been reading about the Big Town for many a day, decided that the best way to get his outfit to the Manger Hotel was to hire a taxi cab — so they piled in. After a light breakfast, off to the



Hayden Huddleston, circa 1931. (Courtesy Mrs. Doris Brown)

Columbia Broadcasting System audition studio on Madison Avenue. They passed with flying colors and made such a hit that Audition Manager Wonders asked them to play on the regular network Saturday afternoon with 24 stations in the hook-up. Not content with this, the Entertainers flocked to the National Broadcasting Company studio, where they played in another audition, passing this with room to spare.

This was enough for the day, so the boys decided to see and hear some of the bands that broadcast over the Columbia network to WDBJ nightly. Up to Yoeng's Chinese-American restaurant on Broadway galloped the crew from Roanoke. Two tables were placed together and they listened to Paul Tremaine and his band from Lonely Acres. But the music didn't hold 'em very long. The sights of the big restaurant, one of the largest in New York, were all Greek to the Roanokers, but they had the time of their lives. And it wasn't long before the other diners heard that the Roanoke Entertainers, radio performers, were on hand...

Bright and early Saturday morning the Entertainers hustled down to 1819 Broadway, where they passed an audition for the Columbia Phonograph Company. They will return to New York in the near future to make several records. Then back to the Columbia studio, where at 2 o'clock John Mayo, Columbia announcer, introduced the band with 'Ladies and Gentlemen, presenting a program of unusual entertainment, the Roanoke Entertainers, under the personal direction of Hayden Huddleston, and now I turn the microphone over to Mr. Huddleston who will announce and direct his own program.' With that, the Roanoke Entertainers went on the air, playing "Lights in the Valley." The band played six numbers, including the popular tune, "Smokey Mountain Bill," and it was not long before telegrams began coming in. The Entertainers went over with a bang.

But, like everything else, there is an end to all good things. The Entertainers remembered that Roanoke awaited them, so Saturday night they again boarded the train. On the return trip the entertainment feature was cut short. The boys played for about an hour, then came sleep — welcome after two wild and hectic days in the Big City.

The Roanoke Entertainers, first of local musicians to play over a national network, are back home today carrying on in their everyday life. For this band is made up of men who work every day. They are not professional musicians. They're going to New York again shortly to make phonograph records and they will again broadcast

over the Columbia network. And a lot of folks heard about Roanoke, Virginia, Saturday that never heard it mentioned before. Such is the power of radio.

Significantly, radio exposure led two early Roanoke area broadcasting groups, the Salem Highballers and the Roanoke Jug Band, to be documented by commercial record companies in 1929. Both of these stringbands broadcast over WDBJ during this period, and a talent scout from the Okeh Record Company apparently heard their broadcasts, liked their music, and invited them to Richmond, Virginia, for a recording session. This was the only commercial recording done by either group, though both remained active into the early 1930s.²

For a brief period between 1929 and 1935 WDBJ had local competition. Low-power WRBX also featured many country musicians on their daily schedule, which included Roanoke Valley talent almost exclusively. Several WDBJ artists such as fiddlers Ed Newman and Billy Altizer broadcast over WRBX as well. The station featured a Saturday night DX country music show that came on at midnight and continued until about 3:00 a.m. Nevertheless, because of its very low power and short time on the air, WRBX is little more than an important footnote in the story of Roanoke country radio.

From 1935 until 1940, WDBJ remained the only radio station based in Roanoke. Throughout the dark years when the United States was emerging from the Great Depression, its daily lineup was peppered with country music, most of which was performed in the Kirk Avenue studios. As noted



The Texas Troubadours, 1934. (Courtesy Lawrence Sink)

earlier, the morning wake-up show invariably consisted of a mixture of country music, news, commercials, and farm information. Sign-on occurred about 5:00 a.m., though the precise time varied and was dictated by sunrise. The musicians themselves often read some of the commercials and entertained their audience with jokes and music. Around noon, some members of the early shift would return for another fifteen- or thirty-minute program. There was usually an additional country music broadcast around 7:00 p.m.

This was the era when Irving Sharp, a fixture in Roanoke country music and broadcasting history, first became associated with WDBJ. Sharp began his career exclusively as an entertainer — a teller of stories and jokes and a keyboard artist and bass player. He played a variety of popular songs and sometimes filled in as a musician when one of the studio bands needed assistance. All of Sharp's work was with WDBJ-affiliated artists and he himself occasionally broadcast on the station. (Many of these musicians, such as the Roanoke Entertainers, Eve Nininger [a popular keyboard player], and the N & W Imperial Quartet [a black gospel group], were being booked for local appearances by the WDBJ Artists Guild.) In 1936 Sharp was asked to join the WDBJ staff as a musician and announcer, and he was often assigned to the country music programs. During his career Sharp would work with some of the region's most important artists — Billy Altizer's Stringband, the Texas Troubadours, and Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers.

The aforementioned *Roanoke World-News* piece about the Roanoke Entertainers' New York City trip makes particular mention of the fact that the band members were not professional musicians. This was true for nearly all local country radio artists throughout the 1930s. E.R. Woolridge was employed by the Skyline Lumber Company; with the exception of Billy Altizer, each member of the Roanoke Jug Band worked for the American Viscose plant; and the musicians with the N & W Stringband, of course, worked for the N & W Railroad. Another popular group, the Texas Troubadours, included Ed Newman (engineer for WDBJ), Lawrence Sink (police communications officer), and Paul Byrd (brick mason), for all of whom music was a second job.

The income that radio broadcasts helped to generate, usually in the form of paid personal appearances at dances or as entertainment at other social functions, helped the musicians weather the economic trials of the Depression. These musicians were struggling to support themselves, and some were starting families. For many country musicians, in fact, their avocation proved to be an ideal way to enjoy themselves and bring in some badly-needed extra income.

Many of Roanoke's early country radio artists launched their careers when both they themselves as well as radio were in adolescence. Radio was exciting and new. Most of the broadcasting was done live in local studios using staff musicians to sing popular songs, perform classical music, and

play the theme music for locally-produced dramatic series. Young people with innovative ideas and vivid imaginations were attracted to radio, where their talents for aural creations were appreciated.

Just when WDBJ and its presentation of country music had settled into a comfortable pattern in the years prior to the Second World War, changes in the electronic media were occurring in and near Virginia. More radio stations were signing on the air. By 1940 WBIG (Greensboro, North Carolina), WLVA (Lynchburg, Virginia), WOPI (Bristol, Virginia), WDVA (Danville, Virginia), WHIS (Bluefield, West Virginia), and WSVB (Harrisonburg, Virginia) were broadcasting from locations within 150 miles of Roanoke. This was well within WDBJ's previously undisturbed daytime coverage area, and it represented the first regional competition for air talent and sales.

The increasing number of radio stations broadcasting within this 150 mile radius was, however, a boon to the region's country musicians. Each of these stations featured live country music on a regular basis, and they were always searching for new talent. Accordingly the opportunities for professional music careers increased. The overall professionalization of American country music had begun slowly during the middle 1920s with the advent of radio and the special "old-time" and "hill-billy" record series on commercial labels. These early recordings document the regional nature of country music and its strong folk roots, which are far removed from the homogeneous, often synthesized sound of contemporary "Nashville country." By the late 1920s such nationally-recognized performers as Uncle Dave Macon, Jimmy Rodgers, and Riley Puckett were all working as professional musicians. In addition to recordings and personal appearances, live radio broadcasts were instrumental to their success.

Western Swing, Cowboys, and Professionalism

By the early 1930s the link between radio work and live public performances by local country musicians was firmly established. The musicians who performed live over WDBJ and WRBX wisely used their regular broadcasts as a springboard for lucrative local appearances. The income from showdates and dances was vital for many of Roanoke's musicians who were struggling through the Depression.

These appearances were held in churches, fraternal halls, schools, and community buildings throughout the Roanoke Valley and southcentral Virginia. A live performance by one of the local radio groups was a major event that drew big crowds everywhere. An admission of twenty-five cents for adults and ten cents for children was standard, and the proceeds were split with sixty percent for the band and forty percent going to the sponsoring organization. Most of the engagements were initiated by local civic clubs or schools that wanted to raise money through good family entertainment. These radio artists were booked because



Roy Rogers (center) visiting with Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers in the WDBJ studios, circa 1940. (Courtesy Woody Mashburn)

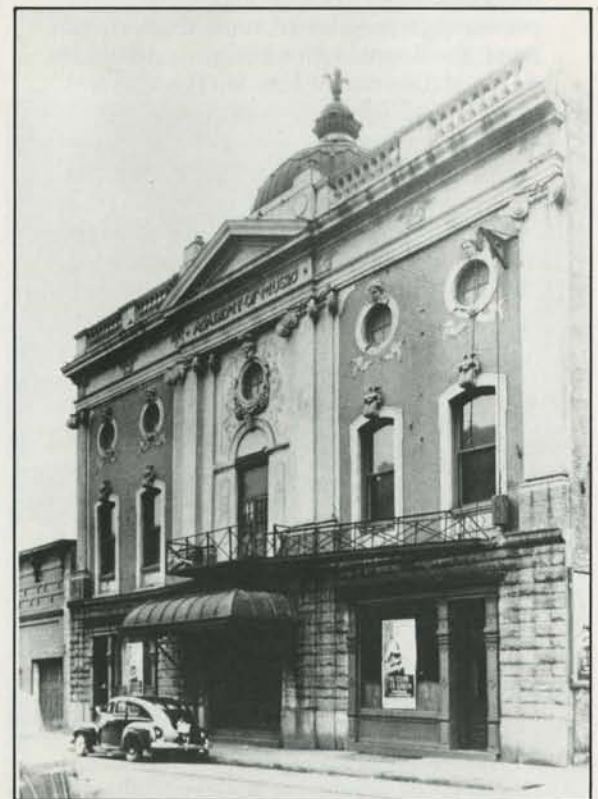
the organizations understood the drawing power of radio.

Nearly all of the local hillbilly groups that broadcast over WDBJ and WRBX in the 1930s did live showdates. The popularity of their music was strong in the Roanoke Valley and was reinforced by the professional programs held at the Roanoke Academy of Music and the American Theater, the two local showplaces for professional musicians performing in the Valley. Prior to the second world war, the Delmore Brothers (Alabama), Bill and Charlie Monroe (Kentucky), the Sons of the Pioneers (California), and Riley Puckett (Georgia) brought successful shows into Roanoke. This list underscores not only the local interest in country music but also the development of a performance circuit crucial to the well-being of professional musicians.

The shows given by the Sons of the Pioneers also signal another significant influence upon Roanoke's country music prior to 1940. The Sons of the Pioneers, while interpreting popular songs and incorporating improvised solos in their music, made western themes an integral part of their music and costumes. Under such national trends the cowboy image strongly impacted upon country music everywhere. Thus while collectors from the Virginia Folklore Society and the WPA were scouring the Blue Ridge Mountains in search of traditional fiddle tunes, native American ballads, and British ballads, many of Roanoke's country artists were singing about the wild west and lonesome doggies in the late 1930s.

The western mystic was more than a quickly-passing fad, for western garb, novels, films, and

music captured the entire nation's imagination. Books by Zane Grey, the films of Tom Mix, and Gene Autry's records were all the rage across the United States. Roanoke was caught up in this myth



The Academy of Music, circa 1940. (Courtesy Virginia Room, Roanoke Public Library)

and its strong masculine cowboys, renegade Indians, and colorful clothing.

The interest in western music among Roanoke musicians was specifically fueled by radio broadcasts and commercial recordings. At night Roanokers could listen to radio stations from across the country, and they frequently heard programs from midwest and southwest stations such as WLS (Chicago), WCKY (Cincinnati), KNOX (St. Louis), and KDFA (Dallas). These stations all featured regular broadcasts by such nationally-known western groups as the Modern Mountaineers, Milton Brown & His Musical Brownies, the Prairie Ramblers, Bob Wills & the Texas Playboys, Pee Wee King, and the Girls of the Golden West. Bo Smith of the Tinker Mountain Boys recounts that in

[Mashburn], Clayton [Hall], and I always liked the Sons of the Pioneers. We just got to singing their songs, and that was about the only type of songs we sang with the Wanderers of the Wasteland [1943-1947]. I liked Bob Wills alright and Jimmie Wakely's outfit. I always liked good smooth harmony, and that's about what you got with those western groups. We used to hear the Sons of the Pioneers every night. I first heard them about 1932. I'd rather been playing western music, but...Roy [Hall] didn't care for it much and I was playing hillbilly with him, but I still liked western better.⁴

This record clearly demonstrates that a western-



Newspaper publicity for Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers, circa 1941. (Courtesy Roanoke Times & World-News)

his boyhood he "loved the Sons of the Pioneers. [I] used to get up in the morning, hear their music on the radio. I believe it was the harmonizing...the way they could harmonize would chill bumps through your arms! They could really get those western songs. I always liked the Chuck Wagon Gang, Red Foley, and Bob Wills, too."⁵

The impact of this music upon the Roanoke country radio artists who began performing in the middle 1930s is profound. Wayne Watson speaks of this music, which first captured his imagination when he was about twenty:

When we came to Roanoke [in 1939] we sure wasn't western. We were playing hillbilly music...old-time. But Woody

influenced style was an important part of south-central Virginia's country music by World War II. Roanoke's Texas Troubadours often sang the smooth, three-part harmonies that so captivated Wayne Watson and his contemporaries, and it is especially evident on their performance of "Happy Roving Cowboy." The 1948 performance by the Wanderers of the Wasteland, "Look Down That Lonesome Road," further illustrates the western swing influence in their use of a steel guitar, piano, and the partially-improvised solos the musicians performed.

Western swing did not dominate country music radio in Roanoke, but its impact reflects the Valley performers' interest in different styles of music.

Country music on Roanoke radio during the 1930s and 1940s is a confluence of styles. One element is the traditional dance-oriented instrumental, such as Virgil Simmon's "Patty on the Turnpike," "Georgia Wagonner" by E.R. Woolridge, and the Texas Troubadour's version of "Union County." Such tunes and the earlier selection by the Roanoke Jug Band represent an older, more conservative side of Roanoke country radio.

It is impossible to overlook the impact of jazz and popular music on local country artists as well. The influence of popular jazz guitarists such as Carl Kress and Django Rheinhardt can be heard on the work of tenor banjo virtuoso Paul Byrd. Byrd could easily move between hillbilly tunes such as "Union County" and the more harmonically and rhythmically complex "Lollipop," which he learned from a commercial phonograph record. Vocalist and guitarist Glen Howell grew up with the hillbilly music of his family, but his smooth tenor voice betrays an interest in popular singers such as Bing Crosby.

Roy Hall and the 1940s

In addition to these stylistic influences was the emergence of bluegrass. The roots of this music came to Roanoke radio in 1939 when Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers began to broadcast over WDBJ. The arrival of Hall, a native of western North Carolina (considered to be the birthplace of bluegrass), heralded a new era in Roanoke country radio. Hall's appearance marked a major new step in the professionalism of Roanoke's country musicians because the Blue Ridge Entertainers were the first out-of-town band to move to the Star City and earn a full-time living from their music.

During their nearly four-year tenure in Roanoke, Hall and his band gained an immense audience. Through their popular broadcasts and showdates, Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers and other western North Carolina stringbands such as J. E. Mainer's Mountaineers are generally credited with developing the basis for bluegrass.⁶ Only the absence of an Earl Scruggs-style, three-finger-picked banjo kept the Blue Ridge Entertainers from fitting the basic criteria of a traditional bluegrass band.

Throughout Hall's Roanoke stay, WDBJ was his only outlet for broadcasting. These shows were generally presented live at 6:30 a.m. and at noon. Only rarely was the band forced to miss their Monday through Friday radio broadcasts. One instance occurred in December of 1942 when the group took off several days to spend Christmas with their families. The program that opens side two of this record is one of these shows, which was transcribed (pre-recorded) for broadcast in the band's absence. Its typical format — the opening theme, an uptempo fiddle tune, a sacred number, a vocal duet, and the request for Roy Hall — was used on dozens of occasions.

Broadcasts paved the way for Hall to book Valley showdates, which provided the band members with a steady income. Wayne Watson recalls

that the musicians split the week's fees equally but that Roy Hall kept all of the profits from the twenty-five-cent songbooks sold over the air. These almost-daily showdates were often booked several weeks in advance and took the band to innumerable small towns located within 150 miles of Roanoke. The

dates were informally arranged, often by a phone call, sometimes by letter. Hall eventually devised a standard contract, for he took care of all of the group's business arrangements. By the time of Hall's death in 1943, the Blue Ridge Entertainers had built a strong regional following.

Like many of the professional and semi-professional country music ensembles, Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers were a close-knit, family-oriented band. Kinship was a reality for the Blue Ridge Entertainers because in addition to Roy Hall and his brother, there were the twins, Saford and Clayton Hall (no relation to Roy and Jay Hugh Hall). Furthermore, Wayne Watson was a cousin to an earlier band member, Clato Buchanan.

Because they were so popular and had daily WDBJ broadcasts, Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers represent the best example of radio's power to create a widespread audience. Woody Mashburn played guitar with Roy Hall during Hall's halcyon years in 1941 and 1942 and recalls:

We were on in the morning from 6:30 to 7:00 on WDBJ. We'd leave out according to how far we'd have to travel in the afternoon for the showdate. We'd get back and sleep for an hour and a half, maybe two hours, do our program. Then we'd go back to bed and go back out that afternoon. Sometimes we'd have to go 150, 200 miles. We'd go down to Marion, Chilhowie [Smyth County]...on over to West Virginia, to Bluefield and Princeton. That was altogether our living. We didn't depend on sponsors at all, just showdates altogether. I got to see about every city and community in Virginia, playing showdates in about every place, because we got requests to play about every night. We played six nights a week, but we couldn't cover everything. It was just impossible to play everywhere that people wanted us to play. People wrote to us [and] we had boxes of mail coming in daily wanting showdates. About the only thing we could do was to pick out where we wanted to play and go in a different direction to keep it from getting monotonous.⁶

These patterns changed when Mashburn left Roy Hall. Soon after leaving Hall, Mashburn formed the Wanderers of the Wasteland and began performing as a leader. This band performed over the less-powerful WSLs, and as a result:

We played closer [to Roanoke]. I had to get back in at a decent hour so I could sign the station [WSLS] on and do disc jockey work [in the morning]. When I got home [from the factory], I'd change clothes and be ready to go out on a showdate. We'd play somewhere like Boones Mill or Ferrum, Virginia [Franklin County]. A lot of times we'd play Vinton or Bonsack [Roanoke County], just places fifteen or twenty miles out.⁷

When WSLs first signed on the air, WDBJ enjoyed a primary and secondary coverage area that contained nearly 1.2 million potential listeners in three states. By contrast, WSLs covered only an area of about forty miles around Roanoke, though at night their north to south directional signal carried well into West Virginia and down to Greens-

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-AND HIS-

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Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers poster, circa 1940. (Courtesy Rufus Hall)



Woody Mashburn, circa 1946. (Courtesy Woody Mashburn)

boro, North Carolina. These differing coverage areas held important geographical implications for early country musicians performing on Roanoke radio, for there was a direct correlation between a station's coverage area and the showdates the musicians were able to book. Naturally, the larger the station's coverage area, the greater the number of potential fans who might write in for bookings.

The relationship between radio and live performances is further illustrated by Bob Reiley's career, which began in 1930 at the age of twelve on WDBJ. Although he played with numerous Roanoke country radio groups during the 1930s and 1940s, it was not until about twenty years later in 1950 that Reiley led his own group, the Shenandoah Pals. They broadcast over WBLT in neighboring Bedford County. Like Mashburn, Reiley kept a scrapbook including letters requesting showdates. These letters and postcards date from 1951 and accurately reflect WBLT's 250 watt signal, which covered the area between Lynchburg and Roanoke.

More and more radio stations were springing up in or near Roanoke. In 1946 Roanoke's third major radio station, WROV, began operating, and like its predecessors it featured a healthy dose of live country music. One of the station's early announcers was Lee Garrett, whose early morning country show, "Blue Ridge Jamboree," ran for several years. Garrett also hosted a live program in 1948 that occasionally featured veteran fiddler Tommy Magness.

Not long before his WROV program, Magness led another popular group, The Orange Blossom Boys, who broadcast over WDBJ. This band followed the usual format — daily radio programs that

led to showdates. Like Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers, Tommy Magness & the Orange Blossom Boys were sponsored by Dr. Pepper and traveled the often grueling "kerosene circuit" (so named because many of the schools and community centers were still illuminated by kerosene lights).

Despite the difficult circumstances endured by these musicians, humor often found its way into their lives. Humor in the form of jokes and sketches that harkened back to the minstrel and vaudeville stages was heard and seen on most showdates, and the musicians were always searching for new material. Wayne Flemming recounts how a minor tragedy provided the Orange Blossom Boys with comic relief while they were on their way to a showdate in the fall of 1947:

One of the Valleydale meat trucks and another truck had a wreck, over near Catawba somewhere. One truck had hit that meat truck square on and did a lot of damage. Saford [Hall] and Clayton [Hall] were with us, and that night they were telling Tommy about it [on stage], and they made a joke out of it. Saford: 'Tommy, when we were coming over here we saw the awfulest wreck you've ever seen in your life!' Tommy: 'What was it?' Saford: 'One of them big Valleydale Meat trucks was coming down the road and another truck coming this way. It hit the meat truck in the side and tore it all to pieces!' Tommy: 'Was there anybody hurt?' Saford: 'No, but it sure tore the liver out of the truck!'

Generally, however, the comedy was less spontaneous and more carefully planned. Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers also featured several elements of comedy as a part of their personal appearances. Wayne Watson recounts his role in their shows:

I'd dress in an old pair of pants about twice too big for me, wore those old suspenders, wore an old shirt, and an old cap of some kind, and had an old red wig, and black out my teeth with eye-brow pencil — make it look like I didn't have many teeth. With Roy I went as Lonzo. On most of them [routines] Roy would play straight man.... I'd tell them that I got a skinny gal, but I didn't like her because she was so skinny that she could drink a Coca-Cola, put on a white dress, and look like a thermometer. Then I decided to get a fat gal. There was a lot of advantages to her because you could lay in the shade in the summer time and she'd keep the north wind off of you in the winter. I always liked to see a fat woman laugh because there was so much of her having a good time. Sometimes the others would be in it, especially if we put on a marriageless wedding or a ghost story. We'd all play in that. It was like a skit and didn't last but about ten minutes.'

By the late 1940s country music radio in Roanoke was very popular on all three local stations and in all

of the surrounding towns and cities. Country music and radio had enjoyed a strong partnership in the Roanoke Valley for over twenty years. The continued expansion of radio within 150 miles of Roanoke and the broadcasts by the great number of country musicians increased the movement of country groups among the radio stations in Southwest Virginia and neighboring states.

One of the dangers of exploiting the broadcasting and showdate circuit was in saturating an area. Regularly-broadcasting country musicians could very easily "work an area dry" and begin to lose their bread-and-butter personal appearances. When this happened, they would usually move to a station in another market. This trend was nationwide and not limited to Roanoke.

Movement by professional or semi-professional country musicians in and around southwestern Virginia during the 1930s and 1940s was largely determined by the location of radio stations. Musicians traveled from station to station in order to open up new markets for their music. By 1950, there were radio stations broadcasting live country music in Bristol, Harrisonburg, Lynchburg, Danville, Bedford, Martinsville, Pulaski, Covington, Wytheville, Lexington, and Bluefield as well as Roanoke. In nearby North Carolina, Winston-Salem, Greensboro, High Point, Hickory, Durham, Raleigh, Burlington, and Mt. Airy each had stations. West Virginia radio stations were located in Bluefield, Beckley, and Oak Hill.

Musicians moved from station to station, remaining long enough to build up a following and to book showdates. The musicians stayed for as long as they could sustain an audience for their music. As soon as



Virgil Simmons, circa 1947. (Courtesy Woody Mashburn)

their requests for showdates lulled, they moved on to new territory or they simply regrouped and moved to another local radio station. Sometimes internal squabbles also led to the formation of re-constituted bands.

These patterns held true in Roanoke. For example, even before Roy Hall was killed, his band was undergoing changes in key personnel. By late 1943 three of its most important members — Woody Mashburn, Wayne Watson, and Saford Hall — had reformed as the Wanderers of the Wasteland and were anchoring WSL's morning line up. When Mashburn left the Roanoke Valley about the middle of 1948, he was still leading a group called the Wanderers of the Wasteland that was broadcasting over WROV, but the group now included guitarist Ralph Hamrick, bassist Bill Thomas, and fiddler Virgil Simmons. However, another group of musicians — Glen Howell, Paul Byrd, Lawrence Sink, and Roy Lemmon — who had played with the Wanderers of the Wasteland remained with WSL and were known as the Dixie Playboys.

At other times, individual musicians moved from one location to another in order to perform with a new group. Bass player and guitarist Gordon Reid, for instance, moved first to perform as a staff musician over WSVA in Harrisonburg, Virginia, in 1937, where he remained for five years. Not long before Roy Hall's death, Reid joined Hall's Roanoke group and broadcast over WDBJ. In 1944, he moved back to WSVA for several months before shifting to WJHL in Johnson City, Tennessee. Reid then left music for about a year before moving out to KNOX in St. Louis to back up a former Roanoke comedy act, Salt and Peanuts. After one year in St. Louis, Reid took a job playing over WHIS in Bluefield, but within six months he moved back to take a position broadcasting daily over WDBJ. In 1949, he joined the Dixie Playboys (WSL) and has since remained in Roanoke playing music part-time.

The Final Years

By 1950 bluegrass and honky-tonk music were also becoming important parts of the American country music scene, though in Roanoke the more traditional groups and those influenced by western swing continued to dominate the airwaves. In the fall of 1947 bluegrass was just beginning to be heard on Roanoke radio stations, and Frank Huffman of WDBJ decided to try his hand at producing and promoting records. He started the Blue Ridge label in Roanoke, and his first and possibly only record was "Sitting on Top of the World" and "Powhatan Arrow," by Tommy Magness & the Orange Blossom Boys. This was Roanoke's first record company, and it is not surprising that Huffman took his chance with a popular country radio group affiliated with his own station. The Tommy Magness broadcast that closes side two of this album illustrates the repertoire of his popular band, which mixed bluegrass and old-time tunes but was also acutely aware of contemporary country songs.

Shortly thereafter, probably in late 1948, Peter and Ray Hash decided to launch a record company that also looked towards country music. The Grand Record Company was Roanoke's second commercial record label, founded by the two brothers who started and owned the Grand Piano Company. They first approached Woody Mashburn, who had experience recording with Roy Hall. Mashburn provided them with the expertise, and Grand Records was born.

Grand Records was in the mainstream of American independent record labels, which proliferated during the late 1940s. The company held its first session in the WSL studios, for there were no recording studios located in Roanoke until the 1950s. Two sides were cut by the Wanderers of the Wasteland, who by that time had picked up a powerful local audience. A second recording session followed about six weeks later, but commercial success proved elusive. The records sold well in Roanoke but not outside the area. About one year later the Hash brothers revived their label with two discs by the reconstituted Wanderers, performing then as the Dixie Playboys. These records did not sell well either, and the Grand Label went out of business, no doubt plagued by poor distribution and little promotion outside of Roanoke.

Live country music on radio, however, would only remain strong into the early 1950s. It was still heard in the morning, which was considered prime time for this music. In the minds of local radio executives at least, country music remained oriented towards a rural audience. For example, in addition to playing country music, Glenwood Howell also covered local farm news for WSL. When WSL television signed on the air in 1952, Howell made a smooth transition to this new medium.

Early television was similar to the first few decades of radio, and country music in the early 1950s was as much a part of television as it was radio. WSL-TV had a number of live country shows on during the early to mid 1950s, many of them sponsored locally. The Dixie Playboys, Doug Wilson & the Trail Dusters, the Sunny Valley Boys, and Smokey Graves & the Blue Star Boys each performed on television shows.

By the time WDBJ-TV signed on the air in 1955, live country radio had been dealt its final blow. One of WDBJ's most popular television programs was a local "wake-up" broadcast, "Top of the Morning." Don Reno, Red Smiley & the Shenandoah Cut-ups were the show's regular band for many years. It was hosted by former radio personality Irving Sharp. Perhaps more than any other local show, "Top of the Morning," which began as a live country radio program done in front of cameras, illustrated the transformation of live country radio to live television.

In most respects, live country music on television and radio were quite similar. Both mediums enjoyed heavy local and regional sponsorship, a mixture of music and comedy, and a relaxed informal ambience. Who better to make the transition to television than musicians familiar with the timing and format

of radio? This general trend was noted by Burt Levine, who has managed WROV since 1954:

It was the period when you got the transition of the radio networks, too. TV was breaking out all over. They were moving the top talent on radio — the Jack Bennys, all of the mystery shows, the comedy shows — over to television. We saw that local advertisers could replace the national advertisers for whole programs. [I came to Roanoke] at a time when I saw the transition of local radio celebrities over the national ones because all of the national radio celebrities were turning their attention to television. All of the local celebrities — the Huddlestons, the Sharps — went, too.¹⁰

In radio the formats were changed to fit national trends. Radio was no longer the adventurous, locally-oriented medium it once was. With increased competition, radio stations sought to target more selective, lucrative audiences. Very narrow formats like "Top Forty," "All Talk," and "Easy Listening" slowly evolved and became codified. Records and talk predominated, and by 1954 live country music on Roanoke radio was passe.

ENDNOTES

1. Willie Wright, interview, Vinton, Virginia, November 14, 1984. (This and all subsequent interviews were conducted by Kip Lornell and are housed in Ferrum College's Blue Ridge Heritage Archive.)
2. More information about the recording activities of the Roanoke Jug Band, the Salem Highballers, and Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers can be found in Kip Lornell, *Virginia's Blues, Country, and Gospel Records, 1902-1943: An Annotated Discography* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1988).
3. Bo Smith, interview, Roanoke, Virginia, November 25, 1987.
4. Wayne Watson, interview, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, November 17, 1987.
5. Neil Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1985) is generally considered to be the standard source for information about the development of bluegrass.
6. Woody Mashburn, interview, High Point, North Carolina, May 15, 1985.
7. Mashburn interview.
8. Wayne Flemming, interview, Roanoke, Virginia, November 4, 1987.
9. Watson interview.
10. Burt Levine, interview, Roanoke, Virginia, December 9, 1987.

GROUP HISTORIES

Billy Altizer's String Band (1935-1939): Led by the former Roanoke Jug Band fiddler, this ensemble played over WRBX and WDBJ and occasionally performed as the Roanoke Footwarmers. By about 1937 the band was featured regularly on WDBJ's hillbilly show, "Saturday Jamboree." The late 1930s edition included Henry Haslip (banjo), John Garman (bass), and Willie Wright (guitar), and the group played hillbilly music. Altizer died of a heart attack in 1939.



Buck Mountain Ramblers, circa 1946. (Courtesy Betty Amos)

Buck Mountain Ramblers (1945-1947): The Buck Mountain Ramblers was a stringband led by Lonnie Amos (fiddle) and his three children: Ed Amos (banjo), Paul Amos (fiddle), and Betty Amos (guitar). The group broadcast over WDBJ after winning a three-week talent contest on WDBJ in 1946. (They had ousted a tap dancer in the finals.) Shortly thereafter the Buck Mountain Ramblers disbanded as the children grew up and moved from home.

Country Cavaliers (1948-1950): Led by Wayne Flemming, the Country Cavaliers were a WROV mainstay during the late 1940s. Flemming was a Mount Airy, North Carolina, steel guitar player who had performed over the Grand Ole Opry in the middle 1940s before settling in Roanoke in 1946. After a stint with Tommy Magness & the Orange Blossom Boys, Flemming settled into a day job working with office equipment and led the Country Cavaliers on their nightly WROV broadcasts. This was strictly a radio band that featured a wide-ranging repertoire: popular country hits, western swing, and Hawaiian tunes. The Country Cavaliers usually included Warren Poindexter on guitar and bass player Bill Thomas.



The Dixie Playboys, circa 1948. (Courtesy Glen Howell)

Dixie Playboys (1947-1953): For nearly six years the Dixie Playboys entertained Roanoke Valley country music fans on their showdates and their WSLs radio programs. Led by Glenwood Howell, the Dixie Playboys were all veteran radio artists with wide-ranging experience. The group's repertoire focused on country tunes, but it included a strong element of popular music sprinkled with western and cowboy songs. These numbers were often led by Wayne Flemming's steel guitar or Roy Lemmon's accordion or piano. In terms of repertoire, personnel, and instrumentation, the Dixie Playboys were an updated version of the Texas Troubadours. The Dixie Playboys' repertoire was preserved on two commercial discs — "I'll Be Gone," "Henry Street Boogie," "Dixie Playboy Stomp," and "Was I to Blame (For Loving You)?" — released by the Grand Record Company about 1948.

The Dixie Playboys featured a number of fine musicians over the years, but at its core were Glenwood Howell, Paul Byrd, Lawrence Sink, and Roy Lemmon. The fiddle player was usually Virgil



Norman Wheeler, circa 1948. (Courtesy Glen Howell)

Simmons, though Norman Wheeler or Billy Augenbright sometimes filled in. Bob Pauley was often heard on the guitar before he returned to Indiana about 1951.

By the time the Dixie Playboys stopped playing on WSLs in 1953, live country radio in Roanoke was decreasing in popularity. Soon thereafter Glenwood Howell made the transition to television with his variety and entertainment program, "Straw Hat Hoedown," which included many of his country radio compatriots.

Flatt And Scruggs (1952): Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys comprised one of the most important pioneering groups in bluegrass. The two men met while playing together in Bill Monroe's band in 1947. By the following year Flatt and Scruggs decided to branch out from their famous band leader in order to form their own group.

Their first radio work was over WCYB in Bristol, Tennessee, which carried their daily broadcasts beginning in May, 1948. Over the next few years Flatt and Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys shifted from one southeastern radio station to another, moving on when the market for their personal appearances dried up. Their stops included WNOX in Knoxville, Tennessee, and WPTF in Raleigh, North Carolina.

In 1952, about the time that Tommy Magness was leading the Tennessee Cut-Ups in Roanoke, the Foggy Mountain Boys landed a six-month engagement on WDBJ. Their daily programs proved to be quite popular, and their songbooks sold well in the Roanoke market. Shortly after they left Roanoke, the group moved back to WNOX, where they gained the sponsorship of Martha White Flour. By the summer of 1953 this affiliation had brought Flatt and Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys to Nashville's powerful WSM and a permanent place in country music history.

Floyd County Ramblers (1927-1931): Based in Floyd County, this band consisted of friends and neighbors who lived in and around the small community of Check. The Ramblers consisted of Walter Boone (harmonica and vocal), Banks McNeil (fiddle), John Willie Boone (guitar and vocal), and Sam McNeil (banjo). They had been playing together for about one year before they began broadcasting over WDBJ in 1928.

In late December of 1929 the Roanoke Valley was shocked by the brutal murder of Freeda Bolt by Buren Harmon. The members of the Floyd County Ramblers responded by popularizing a somber ballad about Bolt's murder. The song apparently caught the attention of the Victor Record Company, and the Ramblers were invited to New York City. There the group recorded six selections in 1930: "The Story of Freeda Bolt," "Step Stone," "Ragtime Annie," "Sunny Tennessee," "Granny, Will Your Dog Bite?," and "Aunt Dinah's Quilting Party." The Floyd County Ramblers later broadcast over WRBX before disbanding about 1931.

Smokey Graves & the Smokey Valley Boys (1948-1950): Burlington, North Carolina-based fiddler Smokey Graves brought his band to Roanoke in 1948 for a WDBJ program that remained on the air for just over one year. The band featured popular country songs and bluegrass as well as more traditional hillbilly music. On showdates the crowd was entertained by the comedy of bass player Chuck Johnson, who portrayed a country rube and told jokes.

The band had moved from North Carolina *en masse* and also included Herman Yarbrough (fiddle and mandolin) and Johnny Burton (guitar). However, local musicians such as Bob Reiley (fiddle) and Paul Jefferson (bass and banjo) eventually joined the band for short lengths of time. By mid 1950 Grave's showdate bookings had become less frequent, and the band returned to North Carolina in order to broadcast over Burlington's WBBB.



Smokey Graves & the Blue Star Boys, 1949. (Courtesy Bob Reiley)

Jay Hugh Hall & the Happy-Go-Lucky Boys (1939-1941 and 1946-1948): Although he was often overshadowed by his younger brother, Roy, Jay Hugh Hall nonetheless played a significant role in Roanoke country radio. Jay Hugh and Roy began playing guitars and singing together while they were youngsters growing up near Marion, North Carolina. Their first professional radio work was on Spartanburg, South Carolina's WSPA, where they often performed as a trio with Clyde Moody.

The careers of Jay Hugh and Roy Hall are linked because they often, though not always, played together. In the mid to late 1930s Jay Hugh frequently teamed with Wade Mainer and His

Mountaineers on several North Carolina radio stations stretching from WPTF in Raleigh to Asheville's WWNC. For a while Jay Hugh led his own band, the Happy-Go-Lucky Boys, which moved to Roanoke in 1940 to tour as the second Dr. Pepper-sponsored unit when the Blue Ridge Entertainers could not fulfill all of their show dates. This group also recorded "Darling I'm Still In Love With You," "No Letter In The Mail," "Come Back Sweetheart," "I Hope She's Satisfied," "Happy-Go-Lucky Breakdown," and "Watcha Gonna Do With The Baby?" for the Bluebird label in 1940.

Following Roy Hall's 1943 death, Jay Hugh went into the army and spent most of the next two years in the Pacific Theater. He returned to Roanoke in 1946 to reform a band that sometimes included the youngest musical Hall brother, Rufus, on guitar as well as Hank Angle on banjo, Norman Wheeler on fiddle, and Shorty Peters on mandolin. Known variously as the Happy-Go-Lucky Boys and the Blue Ridge Entertainers, this rather fluid group did some showdates and broadcast over WROV, playing music similar to that performed by Roy's band before his death.

Jay Hugh Hall grew disillusioned with music as a full-time career. By 1950 he had taken a job with Readymix Concrete and had relegated music to a secondary status. Hall continued to play the guitar for his own pleasure and occasionally with friends until his death in 1974.

Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers (1939-1943): Clearly the best known and most commercially successful of all of the local country radio artists, Roy Hall moved his group to Roanoke from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in 1939. Hall came at the request of Bill Davis, owner of the local Dr. Pepper Bottling Company, who promised that his company would sponsor the group's broadcasts over WDBJ. It was a highly successful musical and business union that lasted until 1943.

In addition to performing over WDBJ, Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers played hundreds of live show dates throughout Southwest Virginia and occasionally into southern West Virginia and the piedmont region of North Carolina. Many times the band was engaged six days per week, taking only Sunday off. These showdates were heavily promoted during the group's twice-daily WDBJ broad-



Happy-Go-Lucky Boys, circa 1946. (Courtesy Rufus Hall)



Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers, 1939. (Courtesy Mrs. Bill Brown)

casts, and they provided Hall's band with a steady income. The Blue Ridge Entertainers' local and regional popularity was further bolstered by a series of commercial recordings that appeared on the RCA Victor label in 1940 and 1941. Among their more popular recordings were "Don't Let Your Sweet Love Die," "Can You Forgive?," "I'd Die Before I Cried Over You," "Little Sweetheart Come and Kiss Me," "'Neath The Bridge At The Foot Of The Hill," "Natural Bridge Blues," "I Wonder Where You Are Tonight?," and "Polecat Blues."

The music of Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers mixed traditional stringband tunes, religious songs, and popular country songs into a blend that strongly resembled bluegrass. Although Clayton Hall (no relation) sometimes provided a three-finger style banjo and Jay Hugh Hall (Roy's older brother) occasionally played the mandolin, these two important components of a traditional bluegrass band were not fully integrated into the band. Despite these departures from the classic bluegrass format, nearly all of that genre's other musical features — tight harmony singing, highly ornamented fiddling, use of the string bass, and repertoire — were present. At least two members of Hall's band, Wayne Watson and Clato Buchanan, came from western North Carolina, the birthplace of Roy and Jay Hugh Hall. It is significant that several other groups that were flirting with the bluegrass sound — Wade Mainer & His Mountaineers, Snuffy Jenkins & Pappy Sherrill, and the Morris Brothers — also played throughout western North Carolina during the mid to late 1930s.

Other key members of the Blue Ridge Entertainers were fiddler Tommy Magness, who later played with Roy Acuff and led his own band, and guitarist Woody "Lucky" Mashburn. They were often joined by the multi-instrumentalist Hall twins, Safford and Clayton, of Ararat, Virginia. Occasionally local musicians such as Gordon Reid and Glenwood Howell would fill in on bass or guitar for absent members.

Roy Hall's business acumen and his innovative music brought the group great success, but it is impossible to predict how far Roy Hall would have

gone in the country music field. The Blue Ridge Entertainers built a strong following in Virginia and North Carolina. Roy Hall's tragic death in a single-car traffic accident in Roanoke's Eureka Park on May 6, 1943, cut short the career of a singer who might have been one of country music's biggest stars.

Little Hillbillies (1948-1954): With a very descriptive name, the Little Hillbillies from Bedford County was a fluid group of neighborhood children. The band quickly settled down to include four stable members between the ages of eight and twelve: Shirley Hunter (guitar and vocal), Jimmy Meadors (guitar and vocal), Eddie Johnson (banjo), and Bobby Wheeler (fiddle). Initially the Little Hillbillies played around Bedford and Franklin Counties. They were introduced to radio in 1949 when they performed over WBLT's children's hour and were soon given their own fifteen-minute program.

Though they never had a regular radio program in Roanoke, the Little Hillbillies often appeared as guests of WDBJ artists Smokey Graves and Tommy Magness. By 1953 they had also appeared on Glen Howell's hillbilly television show, "Straw Hat Hoe-down," that aired over WSLs-TV. The Little Hillbillies were brought to Richmond about 1954 and made regular dates on WRVA's "New Dominion Barndance" before splitting that same year. The group's most famous member, Shirley Hunter, had a career in bluegrass and Nashville country music before returning to Bedford County.



Little Hillbillies, circa 1950, at WBLT in Bedford, Virginia. (Courtesy Shirley Hunter)

Tommy Magness & the Orange Blossom Boys (1946-1948): Tommy Magness first came to Roanoke as part of Roy Hall's band and spent the next thirteen years in and out of Roanoke. Between 1944 and 1946 Magness was employed by Roy Acuff, who toured across the country. Tommy Magness & the Orange Blossom Boys lasted from June, 1946, until early 1948 and broadcast over WDBJ. The group was staffed with proven country musicians: Saford and Clayton Hall, Wayne Flemming, Warren

Poindexter, Slim Idaho, and Jay Hugh Hall. In September, 1947, the group made one commercial disc for the Roanoke-based Blue Ridge label, "Sitting on Top of the World" and "Powhatan Arrow." The group permanently disbanded when Magness left town in 1948.



Tommy Magness & the Orange Blossom Boys in the WDBJ Studio, 1947. (Courtesy Curtis Downey)

Tommy Magness & the Tennessee Cut-Ups (1952 and 1953): After performing throughout the South, Tommy Magness returned his base of operations to Roanoke in 1952. Magness formed the Tennessee Cut-Ups, one of the first true bluegrass bands to regularly perform over Roanoke radio. The band featured Don and Vernon Reno, and when Don Reno decided to leave the group, he was replaced by Johnny Vipperman. Reno joined guitarist Red Smiley and eventually took over the Tennessee Cut-Ups when Tommy Magness left Roanoke. Reno & Smiley gained regional fame as bluegrass musicians and as the musical hosts of WDBJ-TV's "Top of the Morning" show between 1955 and 1962.

Tommy Magness & The Cut-Ups did an eight-month stint over WDBJ and recorded a series of discs for the Federal label. Late in 1953 Magness again left the Roanoke Valley and eventually returned to his native Georgia, where he stopped playing music professionally in order to drive a truck.



Fred Mundy's Band, 1936. (Courtesy Lois Firestone)

Mundy Family Stringband (1935-1940): This was a family group started by its patriarch, A.P. Mundy; other members included Cline (mandolin), Mildred (guitar), Mrs. A.P. Mundy (vibraharp), Lois (accor-

dion), and Janis (guitar). Their first radio work was heard over WRBX's Sunday hymn program. Shortly thereafter the Mundy Family Stringband, which was occasionally billed as the Mundy Orchestra, began broadcasting over WDBJ.

Their WDBJ broadcast led them to book many live programs. Between January, 1936, and December, 1939, the group performed at 381 dances or other live engagements including bookings for the Buchanan Post Office banquet, the Log Inn of Salem, the Copper Hill (Floyd County) Barn, the Veterans Hospital, Oyler's Tea Room, the Academy of Music, and the Bonsack Fiddler's Convention. The nearly \$4,000 in revenues generated from these jobs underwrote a family trip to Texas in 1936 and to California the following summer. The group disbanded about 1940 when the children began to raise families of their own.

N & W Stringband (1926-1930): Named for their place of employment, the Norfolk & Western Railroad, the N & W Stringband was featured on WDBJ as early as 1927. Among its early members were "Jigger" Covington (guitar), Charlie Doss (banjo), and Claude Harris (fiddle). The band also performed at official N & W functions and on their own programs. Though it apparently did not play over the radio after 1930, the N & W Stringband seemed to exist well into the 1940s before disbanding. Frank Webb revived the N & W Stringband name in the 1970s.

Rice Brothers (1934-1936): As early as 1934 this band was broadcasting over WDBJ as part of the station's "Saturday Jamboree." It is unclear if these are the same Rice Brothers who worked with Roy Hall in central North Carolina and who recorded for the Decca Record Company in the 1930s.

Roanoke Entertainers (1930-1938): Formed at the suggestion of WDBJ station manager Ray Jordan, this quintet was a fixture on the local airwaves for nearly a decade beginning in October, 1930. All of the musicians were local businessmen with a strong interest in and love for traditional stringband music. The group was led by E.R. Wooldridge, "the Left-Handed Fiddler," who served as its booking agent and manager. Other core members were Gus "Spark Plug" Lucas (mandolin), H.C. Holesapple (banjo), Charles Holloway (guitar), and R.L. Lucas (guitar).

The Roanoke Entertainers maintained a high profile, broadcasting over the CBS network during the first week of February, 1931, and on WRVA (Richmond) and WMAL (Washington, D.C.) shortly thereafter. While in Washington, the Entertainers sang before Congress on March 4, 1931. In addition to their WDBJ programs in Roanoke, the group also



Roanoke Jug Band, 1929. (Courtesy Walter Keith)

broadcast over WRBX in 1934. Throughout its seven-year existence the Roanoke Entertainers were on the air several times a week and broadcast hundreds of fifteen-minute and half-hour programs.

The group's radio career included sponsorship by several local companies, and the Entertainers often adopted the sponsor's name for short periods of time. The Mick-or-Mack Entertainers (1931), the Whiting Oil Troubadors (1931), the Garst Brothers Milkmen (1931), the Little Jim Entertainers (1931), the Reliable Service Grocery Entertainers (1932), and the Ideal Merry-makers (1933) were among their radio names. Another of their short-term sponsors was the Crazy Water Crystal Company in 1934.



Charlie Scott & His WDBJ Harmonizers, circa 1941. (Blue Ridge Heritage Archive)

The group actively pursued showdates, and E.R. Wooldridge contacted innumerable schools, civic clubs, and church programs throughout the Roanoke Valley and as far south as North Carolina trying to sell the Roanoke Entertainers' talent during the depths of the Depression. Like many country music groups, the band helped to raise money for local community groups by playing for square dances, usually for sixty percent of the gate receipts. The Entertainers eventually took jobs for groups as diverse as the Big Lick Lodge #818 Ladies Auxiliary, the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen, and the Salem Lions Club Minstrel Show. At least some of their minstrel show programs were presented in blackface.

By the late 1930s Wooldridge was booking fewer personal appearances and the Roanoke Entertainers were doing fewer radio programs. By 1938 the group had disbanded though the individual members continued to play music. The final living group member, E.R. Wooldridge, died in 1974.

Roanoke Jug Band (1927-1932): Formed primarily by employees of the American Viscoe plant in Vinton, the Roanoke Jug Band was a popular stringband that played throughout southcentral Virginia. The group never used a jug among their instruments; its inclusion was merely for novelty. Group members included Billy Altizer (fiddle), Ray Barger (guitar), Richard Mitchell (mandolin), Mahlon Overstreet (guitar), and Walter Keith (banjo).

Like their contemporaries, the Roanoke Jug Band played at fiddlers' contests and on showdates as well as over WDBJ. In fact, it was their radio broadcasting that brought them to the attention of Okeh record company officials. The Okeh company called them to Richmond where they recorded four selections in 1929: "Johnny Lover," "Stone Mountain Rag," "Triangle Blues," and "Home Brew Rag." The pressure of family life and the Depression closed out the band's career about 1932.

Salem Highballers (1926-1931): The McCray Family formed the Salem Highballers when Henry McCray organized his sons into a formal stringband to play for neighbors in the Roanoke County community of Catawba. Soon after their formation, the band, which consisted of Henry McCray (fiddle), Fred McCray (guitar), Robert McCray (banjo), and Carl McCray (guitar), began a short broadcasting engagement on WDBJ. During their five-year career the Salem Highballers played on WDBJ many times. Like the Roanoke Jug Band, the Salem Highballers were invited to Richmond by the Okeh Record Company, and there they recorded "Salem #1," "Snow Bird on the Ash Bank," "Dinah, Old Lady," and "Going On To Town" in 1929. This group played together until the early 1930s.

Charlie Scott's Harmonizers (1941-1943): This Covington-based string band had a regular WDBJ engagement in the early 1940s. Co-led by two brothers, Charlie and Lloyd Scott, they travelled down Route 220 from Covington to Roanoke for their weekly radio program. Other members of the band were guitarist Lester Flatt, fiddler Laurence Herron, and banjoist Wallace Spicer. The group was formed in order to play one night for WDBJ's "Saturday Night Round-Up," but they stayed together because of their almost instant popularity. With the exception of Spicer, who worked for the West Virginia Pulp and Paper Mill, each member of the band was employed by the Burlington Mills Corporation.



Shenandoah Pals, 1949. (Courtesy Bob Reiley)

Shenandoah Pals (1949-1950): The Shenandoah Pals were formed by Roanoke radio veteran fiddler Bob Reiley, who worked as a sideman for many groups on WDBJ. Included as band members were guitarist Willie Wright, whose first radio work was heard over WRBX in 1930 as a member of the Vinton Fox Chasers, and bass player H.L. Tuck. The Shenandoah Pals played many showdates around the Roanoke Valley and made guest appearances on WDBJ. For several months they had a regular program on Bedford's WBLT.

Texas Troubadours (1933-1942): This group began when Lawrence Sink (guitar, banjo, and vocals) teamed with Ed Newman, WDBJ's fiddle-playing engineer. Until the early 1940s the Texas Troubadours played their western-influenced country music over WDBJ and in 1934 and 1935 occasionally on WRBX. Heavily swayed by the harmony singing and western myths of the Sons of the Pioneers, the Texas Troubadours were one of Roanoke's first radio groups to perform western swing and cowboy tunes.

In 1936 the duo was augmented by tenor banjo virtuoso Paul Byrd, a Roanoke native and brick mason who had made his radio debut over WRBX in 1935. Byrd's style fit perfectly with that of Sink and Newman, bringing their music an even more improvisatory and exciting tone reflecting Byrd's interest in jazz and popular songs.

Glenwood Howell joined the Texas Troubadours as a vocalist, guitarist, and bass player about 1938. Howell's addition was evolutionary and natural because of his well-established connections with WDBJ as an announcer and solo artist and his interest in western music. With Howell joining the group, they could now emulate the vocal trios of the much-admired Sons of the Pioneers.

Another occasional member of the Texas Troubadours was guitarist and vocalist Clyde Dooley. Together they fulfilled their regular WDBJ

engagements and performed at scores of personal appearances. Many of these showdates were held in conjunction with other Roanoke country artists such as the Tinker Mountain Boys, Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers, and Toby Hostetter & the Blue Ridge Liners.

The Texas Troubadours stayed together until 1942, when Paul Byrd was called to serve in the army and the other members decided to move in slightly different musical directions. Over its nearly nine-year existence the Texas Troubadours left a strong mark as the local musical innovators who brought western music to Roanoke.

Tinker Mountain Boys (1938-1941 and 1945-1946): Formed in the late 1930s by two brothers, Paul and Bo Smith, the Tinker Mountain Boys (named after the mountain located in northern Roanoke County) first performed in Botetourt and Roanoke County. The brothers began playing in public while they were still in high school, and their early radio work in Convinton took them away from school on a regular basis. These broadcasts brought them into contact with Lloyd Scott and Lester Flatt, both of whom later played with Charlie Scott's Harmonizers on WSLs. Flatt, of course, later became a bluegrass legend after he teamed with Earl Scruggs to form the Foggy Mountain Boys.

The group played many showdates with other Roanoke-based country music bands such as the Texas Troubadours. For at least several months the Tinker Mountain Boys advertised these showdates and locations at movie theaters on specially-made, three-minute "trailers" that preceded the main film. The precise time and location for each showdate was announced on posters set in the theater's lobby.

World War Two helped to split up the group when its mandolin player, Beverly Overbaker, entered the armed services in 1942. In 1945 the

group reformed and played over WDBJ for several months late in 1945. They stayed together for nearly a year before disbanding in 1946. Neither of the Smith Brothers returned to music as a full-time profession.



Wanderers of the Wasteland, circa 1947. (Courtesy Woody Mashburn)

Wanderers of the Wasteland (1943-1947): Formed by Woody Mashburn, Wayne Wright, and Clayton Hall in late 1943, the Wanderers of the Wasteland evolved out of Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers. What separated the Wanderers of the Wasteland from Roy Hall's outfit was a deep-seated interest in western themes. Roy Hall was caught up in hillbilly music and early bluegrass, but a love for the Sons of the Pioneers united the Wanderers of the Wasteland. Their theme song, "We Are Wanderers of the Wasteland," and their cowboy attire mirrored an admiration for western music.

Affiliated with WSLs from their inception, the original Wanderers of the Wasteland performed some showdates but concentrated their efforts on radio work. By 1945 Wayne Watson had moved to Nashville and Clayton Hall was working with other local groups. Mashburn eventually filled in with Roy Lemmon on keyboards, bassist/guitarist Glenwood Howell, guitarist Bob Pauley, and fiddlers such as Norman Wheeler, Virgil Simmons, and Bill Sloane. In 1947 the group switched to WROV for a short engagement.

Mashburn kept the Wanderers of the Wasteland together until he decided to return to High Point, North Carolina, late in 1947. Just prior to Mashburn's departure, the group recorded "Look Down That Lonesome Road," "Wednesday Night Waltz," "New Spanish Two-Step," and "Bob's Boogie" for Roanoke's Grand Record Company. Mashburn took the name with him, forming a Wanderers band that performed in piedmont North Carolina.



Texas Troubadours, circa 1936. (Courtesy Lawrence Sink)



Three members of the Virginia Hillbillies (standing with false beards) are amongst these WSLs performers, all of whom were sponsored by Bobby's Supermarket, circa 1941. (Courtesy Jack Woods)

Lesser-Known Figures in Roanoke Country Radio:

Talton Aldridge: In the middle 1930s this vocalist/guitarist had his own shows on WRBX and WDBJ.

Johnnie Autry: In 1941 Autry was in Roanoke briefly. He played the guitar and sang and worked with the Texas Troubadours over WDBJ and on showdates. Weiss is alleged to be Autry's correct last name, and several musicians have suggested that he came to Roanoke from Harrisonburg, Virginia.

Carl Barber: This singer and guitarist had his own show on WRBX about 1934.

Big Lick Entertainers: These musicians had a three to six month engagement on WSLs about 1943. One of its members was guitarist Lester Flatt.

Blue Ridge Fox Chasers: This was a WDBJ stringband that dated from the late 1920s and included Fred Jordan (fiddle), the brother of station manager Ray Jordan.

Blue Ridge Ramblers: This band included Jack Reedy (banjo) and Walt Slater (fiddle). The Ramblers worked over WDBJ about 1928.

Bob Crowell's Stringband: Crowell led this Roanoke group, which performed on WDBJ in 1936 and 1937.

Garden City Bluebirds: Sollie Lynch (fiddle) was a member of this stringband, which operated out of southeastern Roanoke County and broadcast briefly over WDBJ about 1935.

Hypes Sisters: This duo worked as vocalists with a number of local country radio groups on WSLs and WDBJ in the early 1940s.

Bob Jackson: Jackson was a guitarist, vocalist, and clog dancer who sometimes broadcast as a solo artist over WRBX. He was a regular guest on the Roanoke Entertainers' WDBJ programs in 1934.

Junior Cavaliers: A group of children, including Ed Newman on fiddle, formed this group which played hillbilly music over WRBX in 1932 and 1933. The group was later billed as Ed Newman's String Band in 1934 and was the forerunner of the Texas Troubadours.

Neuman Stringband: This was a WRBX band from the early 1930s. It consisted of Willie Wright (guitar), Raymond Neighbors (fiddle), and Emmitt Neighbors (banjo).

Roanoke County Ramblers: The Roanoke County Ramblers was a stringband that occasionally performed Hat on over WRBX's Saturday night barn dance broadcast during the early 1930s.

Salt & Peanuts: Salt & Peanuts was not a country act but rather a popular vaudeville husband and wife comedy team that often utilized country musicians as part of their act. They worked on WDBJ in the late 1930s before moving to KNOX in St. Louis. During the 1950s they retired to live near Bluefield.

Mel and Patsy Jean Steele: This was a husband and wife duet featured on WDBJ about 1947. Their accompanying musicians included many well-known Valley artists such as Clyde Dooley (guitar) and Jack Wood (guitar and fiddle).

Vinton Ramblers: This group, which consisted of Bob Carroll (fiddle), Bill Blankenship (banjo), Scale Eanes (fiddle and banjo), and Willie Wright (guitar), briefly broadcast over WDBJ about 1930.

Virginia Hillbillies: Between November of 1940 and the spring of 1942, this band had a regular broadcast sponsored by Bobby's Super Market. Members of the Virginia Hillbillies included Jack Woods (guitar and fiddle), Andy Anderson (tenor banjo), Junior Richardson (guitar), Albert Garnett (dobro guitar), and Carl Beckner (bass).

Virginia Pioneers: These western swing enthusiasts included Joe Pittman on guitar and Duke Thomas on banjo. The band broadcast over WDBJ in the early 1940s.



Ken Wiley's String Band, circa 1934. (Courtesy Lois Firestone)

Ken Wiley's Stringband: This WRBX group broadcast about 1934 and was led by fiddler Ken Wiley.

Woods Sisters: Joy and Fay Woods played the guitar and banjo around Roanoke in the late 1940s. They performed over WSLs and also later appeared on Glenwood Howell's television program, "Straw Hat Hoedown."

A GENERAL ROANOKE RADIO HISTORY

In 1920 radio was passing out of the hands of amateurs with their homemade sets and into the control of commercial, full-time organizations. In March, 1920, Lee DeForest installed a transmitter on the roof of San Francisco's California Theater. Shortly thereafter the Westinghouse Company launched KDKA in Pittsburgh, followed by WWJ, which was operated in Detroit by the *Detroit News*. By the middle of 1921 radio broadcasting had blossomed so quickly that the United States government began to regulate the industry. The first commercially-sponsored radio broadcasts were aired the following year.

The Roanoke area was soon encircled by radio stations broadcasting from Boston, Pittsburgh, the District of Columbia, Norfolk, Charlotte, and even Bluefield, West Virginia. In 1923 the *Bluefield Telegraph* initiated WHAJ radio, but when an engineer turned over a battery, the spilled acid burnt a hole in the carpet of newspaper owner Hugh I. Shott's office. The angry and powerful Shott immediately ordered the station to cease its operation.

Frank Maddox of the Richardson-Wayland Electric Corporation of Roanoke began selling parts to build radio receivers about 1920. Lacking a commercial license but very anxious to try broadcasting, Maddox enlisted the aid of a country music band to set up in Richardson-Wayland's downtown building and broadcast over his amateur station, 3BIY. The broadcasting band attracted so many people to the broadcast site the Roanoke police were called in to disperse the crowd.

In 1922 the demand for commercially-made radios and for parts and labor was so brisk Maddox enlisted the aid of a fifteen-year-old radio buff at Vinton High School. This young man enjoyed building and repairing radio sets so much he soon went to work for the Richardson-Wayland Company full-time. That teenager was Roanoke's long-time media personality Hayden Huddleston.

The Richardson-Wayland Electric Corporation applied for a broadcasting license in November, 1923, and in May, 1924, received the federal government's permission to build a transmitter and broadcast with twenty watts of power. Maddox, Huddleston, and Bob Avery (another Richardson-Wayland engineer) immediately set to work, and the transmitter was completed within six weeks. Roanoke's first commercial radio station, WDBJ, was ready for its initial broadcast.

Country radio in Roanoke mirrors the development of four of the Valley's radio stations — WDBJ, WRBX, WSLS, and WROV. It is impossible to distinguish between the history of Roanoke country radio and the development of radio in general in Roanoke. Because WDBJ was on the air the earliest



WDBJ studios on Jefferson Avenue in the late 1930s. (Courtesy Curtis Downey)

and enjoyed a virtual monopoly over the local airwaves for sixteen years, it played the most significant role in guiding and shaping Roanoke's tastes in country music through the middle 1950s. More importantly, WDBJ was a local institution people in the region came to rely upon for news, information, dramatic presentations, sports, talk, and music.

WDBJ

WDBJ became Roanoke's first radio station with an initial broadcast on June 20, 1924. There were then 536 licensed radio stations across the country, though relatively few in the Southeast. Over the ensuing two years WDBJ's power increased from fifty watts to 250 watts, and the format also grew from sporadic morning and evening daily broadcasts rarely lasting more than two hours to a regular six-hour daily schedule.

WDBJ's first studios were located in the rear of the Richardson-Wayland Building, but during the winter of 1926-27 they were moved downtown to the second floor of the Grand Piano Company. By this time Hayden Huddleston was known as the "Red Headed Announcer," and his job included hosting most of the local country music programs. 1927 also marked the creation of the Federal Radio Commission to regulate the broadcasting industry, an event that would later impinge upon WDBJ.

By 1929 the station had firmly settled into new, state-of-the-art facilities atop the Shenandoah Building and was broadcasting over twelve hours a day at the power of 500 watts during daylight and 250 watts at night. Its signal now covered the entire Roanoke Valley and several adjacent counties. WDBJ had also joined the fledgling Columbia Broadcasting System, which provided the station with a link to live major network broadcasts by nationally-known musicians and a variety of dramatic programs.

Ray Jordan, who joined Richardson-Wayland in 1918 and moved to WDBJ in 1924, became the program director in 1929. In 1930 he took over as station manager. Jordan was the firm, guiding force

over WDBJ and oversaw its transition from a low-power station to a twenty-four hour a day regional giant that eventually included FM. He was the manager when WDBJ hired such well-known announcers as Irving Sharp, Dexter Mills, Dudley Townsend, Charles Ballou, Hal Grant, Jack Weldon, Bob Youse, Irving Waugh, and Paul Reynolds.

The next major change at WDBJ came in 1931 when the Times-World Corporation, publishers of the *Roanoke Times-World News*, purchased the station from Richardson-Wayland. In 1934 the station received permission to boost their nighttime power to 500 watts, which carried its signal to an even wider audience eager to listen to the talents of nationwide entertainers such as Kate Smith, the Boswell Sisters, Walter Winchell, Benny Goodman, and Phil Harris. WDBJ also broadcast dramatic productions such as the "Romance of Helen Trent," "The Women in White," and "One Man's Family." Local programs included shows produced by the WDBJ Dramatic Guild as well as music programs such as the Thursday Morning Music Club and the Melody Aces.


WDBJ's dominance in the Roanoke Valley market is underscored by a survey that appeared in the July 5, 1938, *Roanoke World-News*. The report indicated the station's primary and secondary daytime coverage area included sixty-two counties and just over 1,000,000 listeners. The same report stated that ninety-seven percent of all Roanoke radio owners that were surveyed listened to WDBJ at some point during the day.

WDBJ continued its mixture of drama, local news, and music throughout the 1940s and increased its coverage area in 1941 when the power was increased to 5,000 watts daytime and 1,000 watts at night. After World War Two the station followed the national trend of fewer live and local programs in favor of network programs. Network programs were less costly to the station because they required fewer station personnel, but they also altered WDBJ's "sound" and unique local appeal. By the middle 1950s WDBJ's daily lineup was much like that of other CBS affiliates across the country.


Further change at WDBJ radio occurred in 1955 when WDBJ-TV was launched by the *Roanoke Times & World-News Corporation*. By the late 1950s the Federal Communications Commission was expressing concerns that Roanoke's daily newspapers, its premier AM and FM stations, and a powerful television station were owned by the same corporation. In 1959 when WDBJ-AM and WDBJ-FM were sold as part of a divestiture, the call letters of the AM station were changed to WFIR, while the FM became WPVR-FM. Both stations are now owned by Gibbons Broadcasting; WDBJ-TV is currently operated by the Schurs Corporation.

★The Right Number is 1240!
ON YOUR DIAL

1240 is WSLS Here's what you get!



"WOODY and HIS CORN"
at 6:00 A. M.
News - Novelty Music - Weather - Time
and Corn



at 6:30 A. M.
"THE KOUNTRY KLUB"

Advertisement for early morning radio on WSLS, circa 1946.
(Courtesy Glen Howell)

WRBX

Roanoke's most ephemeral station, WRBX, went on the air in 1929 after two years of work on its transmitter and tower. The station was owned by the Richmond Development Corporation, the same company that built the Valley's water reservoir, Carvin's Cove, in affiliation with the Roanoke Water Department. Its first studios were in the Hotel Roanoke, but by 1933 WRBX had moved its operation to a Crystal Springs location in south Roanoke.

This new facility was self-contained and included two small studios and office space. Popular vocalist Sid Tear sang over WRBX in 1934, and he recalls that during good weather the station's live children's program was often broadcast from outside because the tiny studio could only accommodate twelve participants. WRBX's operation was so small that when Dexter Mills performed as a singer, the WRBX newspaper would grandly list "Dexter Mills and his Orchestra" even though Mills generally sang with only a pianist's accompaniment.

WRBX shared a frequency (1410 kilocycles) with WHIS in Bluefield, West Virginia, which was put on the air in June, 1929, by local businessman Hugh Ike Shott. WRBX and WHIS traded two- and three-hour blocks of airtime between 6:00 a.m. and midnight, with WHIS beginning and closing each broadcast day. The Roanoke station beamed its 250 watt signal from a transmitter located on nearby Mill Mountain.

By 1935 a combination of the ongoing Depression and the overwhelming local presence of WDBJ forced the owners to reconsider the plausibility of operating WRBX. Apparently unable to obtain a clear frequency and increase their power, WRBX could no longer make money. The station sold its equipment and its frequency to WHIS, which was then able to broadcast for a minimum of eighteen hours a day. Some of WRBX's "on-the-air" talent such as announcer Melvin Barnett also moved to Bluefield to work for WHIS.

WSLS

In October of 1940, WSLS became Roanoke's third radio station. WSLS was partially financed by

the Shenandoah Life Insurance Company — hence the call letters which stood for Shenandoah Life Station — and it was the first major local competitor to WDBJ. By 1940 the industry had grown to the point where WSLS's owners could staff their new station with a mixture of radio veterans and local talent.

The owners turned to Edward and Philip Allen of Lynchburg, who launched WLVA in 1932. The Allen's brought in a staff headed by Jim Moore, who had previously worked at WBT in Charlotte, North Carolina, before coming to Lynchburg to manage WLVA. Moore hired announcers from Richmond and New York City but was interested in retaining a local flavor on the station. By 1941 Moore launched the "tri-city network" with WLVA and Danville's WDVA. This linkage, which lasted for approximately two years, increased each station's talent pool through its ability to broadcast live sports and musical programs from any of the three locations.

WSLS further diversified its mass appeal by joining the Mutual Broadcasting System in November, 1940, insuring a balance of local, regional, and national programming. On the station's second anniversary WSLS added the "Blue Network" of the National Broadcasting System, enabling it to compete with WDBJ's lineup of news, dramatic programs, and music.

Because of the amount of money that the Shenandoah Life Insurance Company was willing to invest in WSLS, its studios were first class, and the station went on the air with 250 watts of power for twelve hours daily. At this time WSLS occupied about 1,900 feet of floor space on the seventh floor of the old Shenandoah Life Insurance Building in

downtown Roanoke and employed eleven staff members. Led by Jim Moore's experienced hand, WSLS soon expanded its broadcasting day to eighteen hours including approximately three hours of tri-city network programming. In October, 1947, WSLS put the Valley's first FM station on the air, and one year later WSLS's power on AM was increased to 1,000 watts. WSLS staff included such important local media figures as Lee Garrett, George Chenault, Hayden Huddleston, Glenwood Howell, and Mel Linkous.

In 1952 the Shenandoah Life Insurance Company launched the Roanoke Valley's first television station, Channel 10, and WSLS's AM radio power was increased to the present 5,000 watts. The station remained atop the Shenandoah Life Insurance Building until the middle 1950s when the radio and television studios were moved to the present downtown location. In 1968 the entire electronic media branch was sold by Shenandoah Life. Roy Park purchased WSLS television. Jim Wheeler bought the radio operation, moving it to its present location in Salem and changing the call letters to WSLQ-FM and WSLC-AM.

WROV

WROV became the final major radio station in Roanoke to broadcast live local country music when it signed on the air December 15, 1946, to the sounds of the Blue Ridge Entertainers, led by Jay Hugh Hall. WROV was financed by a coalition of local businessmen including Leo Henebry, Kirk Ring, Ernest Mitchell, Wallace Clement, Lambert Beeuwkes, J. Randall Knisley, and Howard Beasley. The station began broadcasting a 250 watt day/night signal that covered the entire Roanoke Valley.

WROV's studios occupied the top floor of the Mountain Trust Building in downtown Roanoke, and they included a large, state-of-the-art sound-proof room for live broadcasts. In addition to a variety of live programs, WROV was affiliated with the Mutual Broadcasting System, which brought "The Lone Ranger," Jack Bailey's "Queen For A Day," and "Double or Nothing" to its listeners.

The station owners launched the Roanoke Valley's second television station, Channel 27, WROV-TV, in 1953. This low-power UHF station never developed into a profitable operation, and after approximately one year WROV-TV ceased broadcasting. About the same time, WROV added an FM station to its organization.

The partnership that owned WROV (AM, FM, and television) decided to sell its holdings in 1954. WROV-AM was bought by Burt Levine early in 1955. WROV-TV's equipment was sold to the Roanoke World-News Corporation, which had spent several years trying to obtain an FCC license for WDBJ-TV. The FM equipment was sold to Lee Hartman & Sons, and the new FM operation became WLRJ, named for Lee Hartman and his two sons, Ralph and Jack. By the summer of 1955 WROV radio moved its entire physical plant to its present location on Cleveland Avenue.



WRBX truck, circa 1931 (Courtesy Roanoke City Water & Sewer Services)

MUSICAL SELECTIONS

Side One

- 1) Texas Troubadours: Radio Medley of "Barnacle Bill the Sailor," "Washington & Lee Swing," and "Sweet Georgia Brown" — Lawrence Sink (guitar and vocal), Ed Newman (fiddle and vocal), Hayden Huddleston (announcer), circa 1934. 5:17.
- 2) Roanoke Jug Band: "Stone Mountain Rag" — Richard Mitchell (mandolin), Mahlon Overstreet (guitar), Billy Altizer (fiddle), Ray Barger (guitar), Walter Keith (banjo), October 19, 1929. 3:13.
- 3) Texas Troubadours: "Happy Roving Cowboy" — Glen Howell (vocal and bass), Paul Byrd (tenor banjo), Lawrence Sink (guitar and vocal), Ed Newman (vocal), November 6, 1941. 2:28.
- 4) Texas Troubadours: "Lollipop" — Paul Byrd (tenor banjo), Lawrence Sink (guitar), circa 1939. 1:33.
- 5) Texas Troubadours: "Natural Bridge Blues" — Glen Howell (vocal and bass), Ed Newman (fiddle), Lawrence Sink (guitar), Paul Byrd (tenor banjo), October 30, 1941. 1:48.
- 6) Roanoke Entertainers: "Georgia Wagoneer" — E.R. Woolridge (fiddle), Charles Holloway (guitar), November 20, 1942. 1:21.
- 7) Johnnie Autry: "True Blue Bill" — Johnnie Autry (vocal and guitar), August, 1941. 2:29.
- 8) Dixie Playboys: "Paddy on the Turnpike" — Virgil Simmons (fiddle), Glen Howell (bass), Bob Pauley (electric guitar), Clyde Dooley or Gordon Reid (guitar), circa 1948. :55.
- 9) Dixie Playboys: "Cherokee Maiden" — Glen Howell (lead vocal and bass), Lawrence Sink (guitar and vocal), Clyde Dooley (guitar and vocal), circa 1951. 1:51.
- 10) Wanderers of the Wasteland: "Look Down That Lonesome Road" — Woody Mashburn (vocal and guitar), Wayne Flemming (steel guitar), Glen Howell (bass), circa 1948. 3:15.
- 11) Dixie Playboys: "Union County" — Glen Howell (lead vocal and bass), Virgil Simmons (fiddle), Paul Byrd (tenor banjo), Lawrence Sink (vocal and guitar), circa 1950. 1:39.
- 12) Dixie Playboys: "God, Please Protect America" — Glen Howell (lead vocal and bass), Roy Lemmon (accordion), Paul Byrd (tenor banjo), Lawrence Sink (vocal and guitar), Gordon Reid (vocal and guitar), circa 1952. 2:15.

Side Two

- 1) Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers: "Theme and Introduction" — Irving Sharp (announcer); "Fisher's Hornpipe" — Tommy Magness (fiddle), Clayton Hall (guitar), Wayne Watson (bass); "Cause Mother's Hair to Turn Grey" — Roy Hall (vocal and guitar), Jay Hugh Hall (vocal and mandolin); "Remember Me" — Wayne Watson (lead vocal), Roy Hall (bass vocal and guitar), Bill Brown (tenor vocal), Clayton Hall (alto vocal); "South of the Border" — Roy Hall (vocal and guitar), Irving Sharp (whistling); "Bill Bailey" — Tommy Magness (fiddle), Clayton Hall (guitar), Wayne Watson (bass);

December 15, 1942. 14:15.

- 2) Tommy Magness & the Orange Blossom Boys: "Theme and Introduction" — Ralph Swope (announcer); "Cotton-Eyed Joe" — Tommy Magness (fiddle), Warren Poindexter (guitar), Saford Hall (bass), Clayton Hall (guitar), Slim Idaho (pedal steel guitar); "As Long As I Live" — Saford Hall (vocal and bass), Clayton Hall (vocal and guitar), Slim Idaho (pedal steel guitar), Tommy Magness (fiddle); "No Depression In Heaven" — Warren Poindexter (vocal and guitar), Slim Idaho (vocal), Clayton Hall (vocal), Warren Poindexter (guitar), Tommy Magness (fiddle); "Texas Playboy Rag" — Slim Idaho (pedal steel guitar), Tommy Magness (fiddle), Clayton Hall (bass); "Foggy River" — Clayton Hall (vocal and bass), Slim Idaho (pedal steel guitar), Tommy Magness (fiddle), Saford Hall (guitar); "Theme and Closing" (Ralph Swope — Announcer); April 26, 1947. 15:00.

RECOMMENDED READING

- Kip Lornell. *Virginia's Blues, Country, and Gospel Records — 1902-1943: An Annotated Discography* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988).
- Bill Malone. *Country Music U.S.A.*, second ed., (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).
- Neil Rosenberg. *Bluegrass: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).
- Ivan Tribe. *Mountaineer Jamboree: Country Music in West Virginia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984).
- Charles Wolfe. *Tennessee Strings* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977).
- Charles Wolfe. *Kentucky Country* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983).

SUGGESTED LISTENING

- Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs & the Foggy Mountain Boys: (County Collector Series)
The Golden Years, CCS-101.
Blue Ridge Cabin Home, CCS-102.
You Can Feel It In Your Soul, CCS-111.
- Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers:
Roy Hall & the Blue Ridge Entertainers, County 405.
- Sons of the Pioneers:
Riders in the Sky, Bear Family BFX 15254.
- The Tobacco Tags:
Songs of the Tobacco Tags, Old Homestead 156.

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