



# mountain music of kentucky

2  
DISCS



Smithsonian/Folkways

# mountain music of kentucky

Compiled and Annotated by John Cohen

## CD #1

### BILL CORNETT

1. Old Age Pension Blues 1:59
2. Hook & Line 1:01
3. John Henry 3:58
4. Pretty Polly 2:54
5. Old Reuben 1:40

### J. D. CORNETT

6. Spring of '65 2:28
7. Sally in the Garden 0:30
8. Barbara Allen 0:29

### OLD BAPTIST CHURCH

9. When We Shall Meet 6:09
10. Amazing Grace 6:26

### ROSCOE HOLCOMB

11. Across the Rocky Mountain 3:39 (*Holcomb*)
12. Graveyard Blues 2:24
13. Cripple Creek 0:58
14. True Love 3:43

### MARION SUMNER

15. Sally in the Garden 0:48
16. Lost Indian 0:51
17. Hollow Poplar 0:55

### GEORGE DAVIS

18. Death of the Blue Eagle 1:53 (*George Davis*)

### WILLIE CHAPMAN

19. Little Birdie 1:19
20. Lost Indian 0:58
21. Jaw Bone 0:54
22. Bunkers Hill 0:39
23. Cacklin' Hen 0:48
24. Julie Ann 1:09

### BILL CORNETT

25. Born in Old Kentucky 2:20
26. Buck Creek Girls 0:59
27. Sweet Willie 1:53
28. Cluck Old Hen 1:23

### ROSCOE HOLCOMB

29. Coney Island 1:41 (*Frank Hutchison*)
30. Baby Let Your Hair Roll Down 2:03
31. Wayfaring Stranger 3:09

CD #2

ROSCOE HOLCOMB

1. Stingy Woman 1:57 (*Holcomb*)
2. East Virginia Blues 3:26
3. Single Girl 1:53
4. Black Eyed Susie 1:24
5. Hills of Mexico 2:52

MARTHA HALL

6. Foreign Lander 0:49
7. Kitty Alone 1:14
8. Young & Tender Ladies 0:39

GRANVILLE BOWLIN

9. Charlie's Neat 0:45
10. Cotton-Eyed Joe 0:40
11. Little Sunshine 0:51
12. Wild Bill Jones 1:39

HOLINESS CHURCH

13. Great Speckled Bird 1:32  
(*Guy Smith, Dutchess Music, BMI*)
14. Clap & Shout 1:31
15. Cry from the Cross 2:36  
(*Johnnie Masters, APRS, BMI*)
16. Clap & Shout & Shriek 1:22

MR. & MRS. SAMS

17. The Wagoner's Lad 2:29
18. The Absentee 1:50
19. The Coo Coo 1:17

JAMES CRASE

20. Marthis Campbell 1:26
21. Sally Goodin' 1:39
22. Fiddler a Dram 2:10
23. Fox Chase 2:25
24. Old Joe Clark 2:24
25. Fire on the Mountain 1:41
26. Ways of the World 1:17
27. Inch Along 1:28
28. Skip to My Lou 1:54

LEE SEXTON

29. St. Louis Blues 1:39  
(*W.C. Handy, Handy Bros. Music Co., ASCAP*)
30. Pretty Polly 2:11
31. Fly Around 0:49
32. Fox Chase 0:55

GRIGSBY & YOUNG

33. Ruby 2:00
34. No Letter in the Mail 2:30  
(*B Gregory & B Carlisle, EMI Mills Music, Inc., ASCAP*)
35. Fair Miss in the Garden 5:18
36. John Henry 1:09
37. Rocky Island 1:56



J.B. Cornett plowing with mule

## MOUNTAIN MUSIC OF KENTUCKY

Notes by John Cohen

These 1959 recordings present the vigorous music of Kentucky mountain people. They sang and played banjos with a terrific energy that is almost unheard of now. They learned their music in a setting totally different from our contemporary life, in an era before people got their experiences from TV or their music from Nashville, when people plowed with mules, canned beans and tomatoes from their gardens, and reclined on front porches with slatted wooden swings attached to rafters by metal chains. Their musical memories provide us with a glimpse of a pattern which had endured for centuries.

Roscoe Holcomb remembered:

"I've played for square dances till the sweat dripped off my elbows. Used a bunch of us get out, maybe go to a party somewhere, 'n after the party was over, the moon'd be a-shinin' bright, you know, 'n we'd all start back home 'n gang up in the road. Somebody'd start his old instrument, guitar or banjer 'r something 'r other, 'n just gang up in the middle of the road 'n have the awfulest square dance right out in the middle of the highway."

This music had a distinctive east Kentucky sound, although its origins were elsewhere across the Appalachians. It was recorded in living rooms, front porches, dance halls, and churches in the mining communities, lumber camps, and isolated houses of the rural valleys outside of Hazard, Kentucky.

*The local people who performed on these recordings were sought out because someone said that they played banjo or knew old songs.*

Many singers offered American ballads such as "Pretty Polly," "Wild Bill Jones," "Old Reuben," and "John Henry;" songs that have remained popular for close to a hundred years in the Appalachian repertoire. They were usually the first songs that came to singers' minds. Since 1950 they have been transformed from old-time music to bluegrass style, and in this way they continue to circulate today. But in 1960 I edited them out. My search was for music which I had never heard before, songs which were unfamiliar, and I found them. Today I wonder why I omitted the popular ballads, though, for they were the doors which opened into a diverse, ancient, and particular Kentucky repertoire. The antiquity of the repertoire now seems secondary to the forceful performance of the music.



Back then the musicians were less concerned with audience reception, recording criteria, or stylistic finesse. They sang with an energy that came directly from them. Their voices didn't have to be measured against the standards of the entertainment industry, and their styles were from a time when music served only family or community. Their music reflects a whole way of life, a total experience of hard work and hard living, of inherited cultural awareness mixed with a sure acceptance of one's place in the world. In a sense, the singers were certain of their tradition and did not feel compelled to convince anyone about it.

When this record was first issued in 1960, the Kentucky folklorist D. K. Wilgus commented in the *Kentucky Folklore Record*, "The music which Cohen found so much alive will appear to outsiders and even some residents as an undercurrent if it appears at all. Indeed, the 'progressive' citizens of Hazard may be affronted by Cohen's report, which is none the less true because it presents the core without the peeling." Another Kentucky reviewer, Billy Edd Wheeler, in *Mountain Life & Work* (1960), wrote, "The ballads on this record are not the smooth versions that come back to us from folk singers of the city, and may disappoint even a few natives of Appalachia who rarely hear this music in its element."

The Appalachian musical tradition has been characterized as a handing down of songs unchanged from generation to generation. Jazz tradition, by contrast, presents many improvised variations on a single theme. But hearing Banjo Bill Cornett's distinctive version of a song, you realize that Appalachian tradition has produced endless variations on its themes as well. In jazz the variation takes place within a single artist's performance, whereas in country music it takes place horizontally across a whole generation. Just listen to Cornett's "John Henry" or "Old Reuben"; although the texts and melodies are familiar, his timing and phrasing are singular. His versions bear his unique stamp, even as he announced that he was performing the old, "original" versions he heard as a child. The net result has been an incredible, individualized diversity within the defined repertoire of Appalachian mountain music.

#### THE SOCIAL SETTING

Music is the celebration of the hard life in eastern Kentucky. The songs and ballads are a way of holding on to the old dignity. Music is not an escape; it presents a way to make it possible for life to go on. In earlier years, these hills provided enough land for people to live on, but now the soil is worn out, farms have given way to mining, and machinery is replacing the min-



ers. People say they don't know if things are going to get any better.

These recordings were made before the introduction of strip mining into the coal industry, which re-energized the local economy but ultimately left the mountains and valleys in ecological distress. While the rest of America was experiencing some kind of prosperity, at that time eastern Kentucky was not. It has always been intriguing to realize that while the mountain people of Kentucky descend from early settlers, they have remained poor. Something in their cultural tenaciousness has doomed them to economic hardship. Something about the terrain of the mountains has left them isolated and stranded in America.

In 1959 the coal mining business was at a low point, and it affected everything else. Mining was the mainstay of the local economy, and there were tensions between rival unions (the Southern Union and the UMW) and between independent mines and large company mines. In a climate of unemployment and industrial violence, a silent tension was felt everywhere. I observed loaded coal trucks burning by the roadsides and saw destroyed mine tipples.

*I had come to Hazard to record local music, in part hoping for songs which would comment on the current situation. The topical material I sought never materialized, but instead a rich cultural lode was revealed.*

#### THE MUSICAL SETTING

Eastern Kentucky has a distinct musical reputation, which is not contained in a single stereo-type but reflects the differing visions of those who reported on it. Merle Travis' album of coal mine songs (*Songs from the Hills* on Capitol records) came out in 1949; it contained songs about the mines, "Dark As a Dungeon" and "Sixteen Tons" ("What do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt"). Travis sang, "It's a long way from Harlan, a long way from Hazard, just to get a little brew." Jean Ritchie's beautiful voice offered another vision of Perry County, where Hazard is located. Jean had brought her ballads and dulcimer to New York and could be heard on radio, in concerts and recordings (which were not available in Kentucky).

Kentucky's musical reputation included protest music from the 1930s, with songs about labor strife sung by Aunt Molly Jackson and Florence Reese's "Which Side Are You On" from bloody Harlan County. There also were Alan Lomax's 1937 field recordings of fiddler Luther Strong and the vigorous banjo and voice of Justice Begley from the Hazard area, issued by the Library of Congress. From the 1920s, Kentucky singers John Jacob Niles and Buell Kazee had left their mark through concerts and commercial recordings. In 1917, the nearby Hindman Settlement had provided a



base for the Englishman Cecil Sharp during his folk song collecting activities. Sharp was led to old British-derived ballads and didn't report or observe the other music which co-existed there. (For more about Sharp's observations of the area, see David Whisnant's *All That Is Native and Fine*, p. 122). Jean Thomas, "the Traipsing Woman," had instituted her vision of a quaint Kentucky festival early in the century, and Gertrude Knott produced the National Folk Festival in Kentucky in the 1930s. I was aware of these competing musical perceptions when I set out in 1959.

*I asked people for old music in order to get a sense of what they considered valuable or memorable from their past, what they considered local or traditional.*

None of the people on this record ever used the word "folk" to describe or categorize what they did, although the terms "hillbilly" and "country" did come up. Those who performed for me were not relics trapped in the past or rejecting of the present. They were musical hold-outs, and my quest for their old music was a means to get at their sense of self-regard and identity.

The musicians around Hazard constituted a network spread across the region, not clustered in one town or community. There was no formal communication between them or a shared social setting for their music. However, the

singing influences from the ballad tradition, Old Baptist and Pentecostal Holiness churches, and banjo styles derived from both Anglo and African sources together constituted a local style.

#### BANJO STYLES

The sound of east Kentucky five-string banjo playing reflects both Afro-American and Anglo traditions. A great variety of banjo tunings are used to accommodate the different musical scales that are part of the Anglo ballad tradition. Certain banjo styles also were derived from 19th-century Minstrel shows and Medicine shows. A few recordings here preserve early slave-style banjo picking and timing: listen to Banjo Bill Cornett's "Old Reuben," Willie Chapman's "Jawbone," and James Crase's "Fox Chase," which are marked by asymmetrical and jagged rhythms.

The distinctive regional banjo sound is from a two-finger picking style used by many of the performers here, including Roscoe Holcomb, Lee Sexton, Willie Chapman, and Granville Bowlin. In this approach, the thumb (using a thumb pick) alternates between picking out the melody on the lower strings and striking the fifth string to produce a drone. The index finger produces a secondary, punctuated drone on the first string. The fifth and first strings are essentially used as rhythmic ele-



Roscoe Holcomb, Daisy



ments, setting up a pattern which surrounds the melody. (Sometimes first and fifth are plucked simultaneously in a squeezing action: bum-pa/dum-pa/ dum, chik [thumb- first/thumb- first /thumb, squeeze].) The musical challenge is to adjust this pattern to allow the melody to stand out. Each banjo player does this a little differently.

This basic clankety pattern can be used as accompaniment, although some of the singers use the banjo to play melody along with the voice. Many local banjo pickers also used the *frailing* style associated with dancing.

Earl Scruggs' bluegrass style was affecting both younger and older banjo players at this time. In July 1959, at the first Newport Folk Festival, I asked Earl Scruggs, "How would you describe your style?" He said, "Well, I've studied it several ways. There's never been a definition for it. The only thing is—it's just the old country picking with a little something added—you might say—a little modernization and so forth. I used to play with just the thumb and finger and played more the old-time stuff."

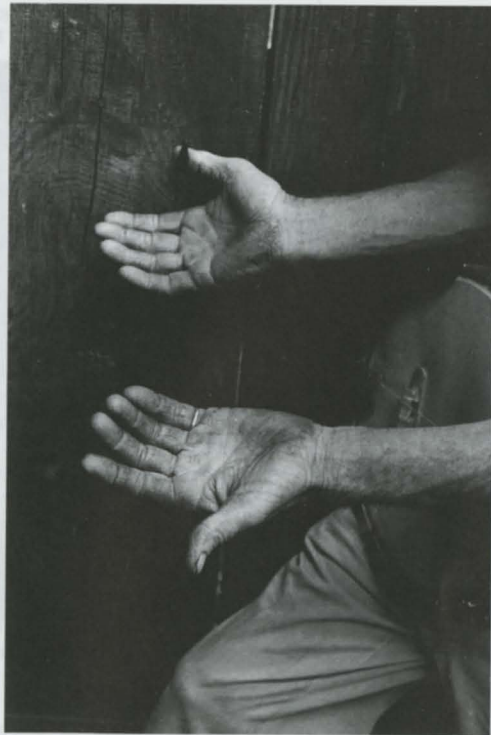
His "little something added" would be the third finger, which reconfigures the pattern as a series of three-finger rolls, introducing a rag-time syncopation to the basic pattern. Some of Lee Sexton's tunes contain bluegrass banjo *licks* done with the two-finger style. Willie Chap-

man used metal finger picks to get the brilliant sound of bluegrass banjo from his two-finger style. Old-time banjo pickers in other parts of the Appalachians use other two-finger styles. For example, in North Carolina the melody is picked out by the index finger, not by the thumb, as in Doc Watson's, Wade Mainer's, and Bascom Lamar Lunsford's music.

#### SINGING STYLES

There is no single style of singing in this region. The vocal influences include the ballad tradition, country, hillbilly, blues, church singing (Pentecostal/hillbilly), and ornamented Old Regular Baptist. Several of these have fused into bluegrass, with its high, lonesome sound.

Old Regular Baptist church singing, heard on tracks 9 and 10 (disc #1), is related to a style from the islands off the coast of Scotland (listen to *Gaelic Psalms from Lewis*, Tangent Recordings TNGM 120, for comparison). With its leader-response arrangement called *lining out*, the congregation sings unaccompanied, without harmony or stressed beat. The melody is ornamented. The slow, stately pace follows what can be called *ballad meter*. The phrases are long, drawn out, and sung with inner intensity and much feeling. The entire congregation joins to make a single voice. This sound emerging from the breathing and phrasing of a whole



Roscoe's hands, cracked by work in cement



community can best be understood by singing along with it. Many of Ralph Stanley's bluegrass gospel records evoke this Old Baptist style.

Roscoe Holcomb said that the local black congregations practiced the "real slow" style of unaccompanied Baptist singing: they still did it the "real old way." Photographs from 1915 on the walls of the Old Baptist church in Jeff documented a racially integrated congregation. Black and white relationships appear to have shifted; by 1959, the congregation was all white.

The Regular Baptist approach to church music contrasts with the musical style heard in the Holiness Pentecostal churches, which uses guitars and banjo as accompaniment. The Holiness musical experience is wildly emotional, extroverted, and inclined towards a transformational state that may include dancing, speaking in tongues, and going into trances (and sometimes handling snakes). In its hand clapping and rhythmic emphasis, the Holiness approach reflects a cultural affinity with African music. However, in the trance-like atmosphere, people often "lose" the beat (listen to track 16, disc #2). Much of the Holiness repertoire is heard on country radio and on commercial records. "The Great Speckled Bird" is a Roy Acuff classic, and "The Cry from the Cross" was recorded by the Stanley Brothers.

Roscoe Holcomb, who loved to sing unac-

companied Old Baptist songs, also participated in Holiness church services. Roscoe said,

"Music's all right in church—I love to hear it. The Old Regular Baptists they don't believe in stringed instruments in church. Ever since I can remember,... the Holiness had guitars. Now any kind (of instrument) a man brings in, they use it."

Roscoe reconciled the conflict between churches by quoting the Bible.

"King David played a stringed instrument.... Well, I knew this old fiddler who had to leave the Regular Baptist church because he loved to play the fiddle. I remember him just setting on the hill across from the church, playing them old Baptist hymns on his fiddle, the tears a-streaming down, fallin' on the rosin."

The conflict is personal and runs deep.

"Music is a gift, I believe that God gave it to me, and I believe it enough, I'm going to let him take it. I ain't going to quit, whether it's wrong or not. But I did quit for ten years. We had nothing but the Old Regular Baptists up in this country then, and they don't believe in music in churches. They seemed to think it was wrong, and they made me think it was wrong, but I found out different. It's just what you make out of it. You can make harm out of about anything."



*Roscoe Holcomb at Holiness service, Daisy*

Many people who have heard Roscoe Holcomb's singing have commented on its being influenced by the blues as much as by the Old Baptist style. This merging of two great American musical traditions is also noted in bluegrass singing as articulated by Bill Monroe (from western Kentucky). Many songs in Roscoe's repertoire came from blues singers such as Barbecue Bob and Bessie Smith. Although his social allegiances were with the white community, his personal expressive aesthetic easily crossed racial boundaries.

#### SINGING AND BANJO ACCOMPANIMENT

Banjo Bill Cornett and Roscoe Holcomb sing in the irregular ballad meter while using the banjo accompaniment as a rapid-fire pulse. This distinguishes them from the other performers in this collection. Although their styles of banjo picking are very different from one another, they both use the banjo accompaniment to allow their voices freedom unconstrained by regular musical constructions. Their banjo accompaniment accommodates their breathing patterns, which are expressive and unpredictable. Cornett and Holcomb extend certain sung notes beyond the dictates of customary timing, apparently for aesthetic reasons, to emphasize a particular note, not to emphasize the text or story content. Most frequently it is certain high notes which are held for an

extended duration, sung at the top of the singer's vocal register. (Ralph Stanley continues this tradition in his bluegrass music.)

Cornett's and Holcomb's practice may be a reflection of the strength of the oral tradition, less than of the banjo's musical dimensions. Charles Seeger has pointed out the conflict which existed in rural areas in the 19th century between Old Time Singing schools (which conveyed a written music tradition) and ballad singers (who followed an oral tradition). The travelling singing teachers would set up schools in rural communities for a few weeks and teach the elements of music with conventional music notation, and sometimes shape notes. They were stymied by the aesthetic held by old ballad singers who didn't follow these same rules. Ballad singers had their own ideas about the pulse, beat, or tempo, and the length of measures. Seeger suggested that the only way to annotate their music was to use a  $\frac{1}{4}$  rhythm. Ballad singers would hold certain notes beyond the beat, "introduce embellishments, attack notes without regard for standard pitch and include many exceptional and often irregular items."

To get a sense of what Seeger was alluding to, listen to the fragment of "Barbara Allen" sung unaccompanied by J. B. Cornett of Mason's Creek (track 8, disc #1). This individualized approach to singing seems also to be in conflict



*Mr & Mrs John Sams, Combs, KY*

with the regular rhythms of guitar and banjo. Yet Roscoe Holcomb declared that his instrument says the exact same thing as his voice.

Ralph Rinzler, who was closely associated with Bill Monroe, told me that Monroe was disturbed by Roscoe Holcomb's approach to music. "How can he start to sing a song without knowing what he was going to do in advance?" ("Knowing" used in this sense is equivalent to "planning out.") This question, which tells as much about Monroe's definition of music as it does of Roscoe's, suggests that these two positions represent an opposing aesthetic within the rural music tradition. Yet for many people, Bill Monroe and Roscoe Holcomb share the same aesthetic, as heard in the "high, lonesome sound." Of the two styles, it can also be said that Bill Monroe and bluegrass have a "good" gestalt (configuration), where things are clearly comprehensible, planned out, and orchestrated, whereas Holcomb (and many other old-time mountain musicians) have a jagged, unpredictable contour to their music.

#### COLLECTOR AS RECOLLECTOR

Most of the people who were recorded for this collection have since died, and there is no way to restore them or the lives that shaped their music. What more can be said to further illuminate their performances? The collector may

turn to the criteria of academic folklore or to aesthetics as a way of broadening the conceptual horizon, or may turn to the recollections of the experience of the music itself.

Since such a long period of time has elapsed since these recordings were made, we can observe changes in the sociological landscape of Kentucky and changes in the landscape of folklore scholarship. While earlier collectors of songs viewed the singer as "informant," they were really more interested in the "information." Style, if noticed at all, was not considered as important as content.

I would like to address the validity of personal recollection and memory as integral components of documentary field recordings. "Documentary" carries with it the myth that it is objective, but it is also personal, subjective, and the result of the vision of the documenter, who points out and selects even as he or she "collects."

The "memory" of a performance departs from the sense of "objective" and "documentary." Yet remembrance itself has a special value. Thirty-five years after these performances, I retain impressions which came with the music and which reach beyond the sound; the space, the setting, the textures, temperatures, and light of day were all part of the impact of the music. There was also the communication between two humans: the direct-



*Homemade banjo*





*Holiness service, Leatherwood*



*Holiness service, Daisy*





ness and lack of guile, the singer's willingness to convey these old stories, the musician's disposition to perform. Even the look of the musician, his or her unique human presence, was an integral part of the music. The performers shared their own memory, not as facts or bits in a folkloric puzzle, but as sound and sentiment from their own lives.

I suggest that the nature of memory itself is part of the experience of music, and for that reason I will devote some attention to my perceptions of the performers back then. Although I intersected with those Kentucky lives only briefly, their impact has remained, and it is that which I will attempt to communicate.

#### FINDING THE MUSICIANS

I had been led to believe that there would be very little electricity in the Kentucky hills and that I'd need a jeep to get up the back roads to isolated mountain hollows. In preparation for this recording adventure I located early portable equipment (in 1959, the portable tape recorder was only an experiment, and cassettes were unheard of). What I found in east Kentucky in 1959 was that the houses had not only electricity but television.

I arrived with an introduction to Jean Ritchie's family, who lived in Viper, near Jeff. Their hospitality provided me an anchor and

welcome, and they sent me to a sweet ballad singer named Martha Hall, who had taught songs to Jean Ritchie. Mrs. Hall sent me to her neighbor Mr. Cornett, who had other ballads.

A chief element in finding the musicians was transportation. Having travelled to Kentucky by bus, I stayed in a rooming house across from the freight yards in Hazard and purchased a used car, which broke down during my first trip out in the country. A helpful garage mechanic named Combs traded it for one of his, which also broke down on account of sand in the fuel system, a result of recent floods in the hills. (Hear "The Flood of '57" by the Stanley Brothers.) Becoming entangled in horse-trading with cars, I spent a lot of time at rural garages, making inquiries about local banjo players during car repairs. I created lists of local musicians and became aware of a network of banjo players spread out across the region. My only "methodology" was to visit them. On the day I exhausted the list of names, I decided to drive down the first dirt road which led off the hardtop and into the hills. In this random way I met Roscoe Holcomb.

The dirt road led over a small bridge, then crossed the railroad tracks of the L&N leading into a row of wooden houses. I asked a kid standing there, "Are there any banjo players here?" He pointed to the second house in the far



row, and from the distance I could hear a banjo. I visited there with Odabe Holcomb and his aunt Mary Jane, who both played some tunes. At some point they said, "Oh there's Rossie. He plays." They called him in and he sang. The first impact of his sound was puzzling and very moving, for it was as if I'd felt this music already even though I had never heard it before.

These many recordings attest to the fact that I was welcomed, and many people were willing to share their music with me. Yet I have always wondered about the implicit arrogance of any collector's stance, for in this role you have no choice but to be part confidence man, part academic, part spy. Since the Beat Generation and the counter-culture '60s, I guess it's also possible just to "dig the scene." In the most self-critical light, collecting music from innocent informants is an exploitative act—taking from them to serve a function such as a term paper, or credits towards a degree, writing a book, or producing a record. These issues of moral stance and responsibility were explicated and expiated in James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, written in the '30s, and reissued in 1960. In its most positive aspect, the collector-informant relationship is a matter of mutual appreciation between musician and collector. It is not a formal investigation for scientific

purposes or a detached entering of data. Making a sound recording becomes an acknowledgement of the achievement of the musician. Indeed, with my quirky recording equipment (an odd machine involving a hand crank, a large fly wheel, earphones, and no playback or rewind) set out on the floor, I most often found myself on bended knees at the feet of the singer or musician. I consider it a privilege to have experienced music this way and am indebted to the musicians who allowed me to record them under such non-commercial circumstances.

Still, I expected and encountered an unmistakable sense of mistrust from many quarters. *Life* magazine had reported that Federal Tax Law enforcement officers, posing as folk song collectors, had arrested a lot of bootleggers after Prohibition. I learned from Banjo Bill Cornett that he viewed folk song collectors as suspect; he'd been warned at the National Folk Festival that folklorists would take his music from him and copy-right it in their own name. There were local people who thrived on raising doubts, based on fears and years of exploitation. Ten years later, there were whole organizations whose posture was to defend the mountaineers from outsiders in the name of preserving local culture. Suspicion starts with a feeling of being different from the mainstream culture and comes down to a power struggle over who controls the means of representation.



Coal tipple & porch



The sequencing of songs on these records loosely follows the order of the visits to the musicians' homes. While I met some of the performers only briefly, I have attempted to retain a sense of the time spent with them. Roscoe Holcomb's music is in several sections, for I visited him many times.

#### THE VISITS

This is how I remember the visits:

The very first recordings I made were of BANJO BILL CORNETT. I came to his house with two officials from the United Mine Workers who knew him. Although the only time we met was during this session on his porch, Bill Cornett sang vigorously during the visit. He was a terrific performer, his rich musical ideas pouring out from the first moment he started playing for us. He was at ease with the Union men, but I felt his apprehension about me as an outsider; he said he was suspicious of "folklorists" stealing his songs and consequently declared authorship to most all of them. He was a confident person, yet seemed gruff and abrupt about the music he knew so well. He had little doubt about its importance and that he was preserving and passing on something precious and vital.

He had held political office, and he was considered a local hero for singing his composition

"The Old-Age Pension Blues" on the floor of the Kentucky legislature. Beyond his personalized versions of old songs, he claims to have written "The Drunken Driver" and taught it to Molly O'Day. He died shortly after our recordings were made and never got to hear them. In a tantalizing way, he announced that he had tape recordings of his best songs in the house. Since his death, his family has kept those tapes for themselves.

WILLIE CHAPMAN was in love with the banjo tunes. He aspired to an ambitious banjo style and never stopped reaching for it. His musical performances were a sort of contest to play on the edge of his capability, going for something beautiful just beyond his reach.

Willie lived in Lothair, just a few miles out of Hazard. When I met him, he was retired from coal mining and worked training horses. He played his banjo as recreation. His tunes were creations based on familiar themes, not accompaniment for dancing or backup for songs. It would be hard to dance to the beat of his music actually, because of the irregularities of his rhythms. However, the pulse heard in his foot tapping remained steady. He played in the local two-finger style and had recently started to use metal finger picks to give his banjo more of a bluegrass sound. Musicologist Sam Charters commented that some rhythms of Willie



Hazard, KY



Chapman's banjo had an African sound.

In many of Chapman's pieces there is a high second section, played up the neck of the banjo (something like the third part of Pete Steel's "Coal Creek March"). This part is freer and more independent than the lower part, departing from the dictates of the melody, and was added to create a sort of musical high.

JAMES CRASE's music was expansive. His memories went back to the end of the 19th century, and though his fiddle bowing was past its physical peak, you could feel the fluidity and the complexity that he had resolved in his music. He played crooked tunes that contained qualities treasured by an earlier generation of fiddle players. Now, these are a lost art. On "The Ways of the World" he uses low drone strings, and on "Fiddler a Dram" he holds the bow still and moves the fiddle under it.

Listening to his fiddle playing, I thought I was hearing Library of Congress recordings from the 1930s. I asked him if he'd ever heard of Luther Strong, one of the incredible Kentucky fiddlers recorded in their prime by Alan Lomax in 1937. "Heck," he said, "I used to play against Luther in many a fiddle contest."

The experience of music as played in Crase's home that day combined the warmth of jolly memories with the terror of the present.

Even as he recalled tunes from his past, you could sense the tension; no photos were allowed, in other rooms there were people who didn't reveal themselves, the curtains were drawn to the outside, and there were rifles standing behind the closed doors. Willie Chapman (who led me here and stayed with us) fortunately raised our spirits, shouting out, "Boy, that's a good one," when Crase was fiddling. When Crase was joined by his grown daughter on guitar, I knew we had gotten to a place where "Skip to My Lou" touched family recollections. Such joyful nonsense shared with a child would tend to insure that the next generation would continue this musical tradition. James Crase's son Noah is a well-known bluegrass banjo player in Ohio.

I "discovered" ROSCOE HOLCOMB in the little lumber camp at Daisy by following my intuition. Once I met him, I hung out at his place to record his music whenever he felt up to it. Often he would apologize that he was too tired after his day job as a construction worker and would show me the cracked skin on his hands from pouring concrete. The skin on his banjo head was also cracked, and he used borrowed banjos for some of the recordings. He was a painfully open person and described himself as a worried man.

At the first song he sang for me, with his guitar tuned like a banjo and his intense, fine voice, I was deeply moved, for I knew this was what I had been searching for—something that went right to my inner being, speaking directly to me. It bridged any cultural differences between us. The free meter of his singing played off against the punctuated pulse of the instrument. The story was an old ballad he had rewritten, his sentiment was profound and not at all detached, and the pentatonic melody and singing style evoked bagpipes and Middle Eastern music. The way he sang made me think also of the blues as well as of bluegrass. He approached the notes singing them flatted or sharp.

He was a little, wiry person, stooped from hard physical work, coughing from asthma, black lung, and too much smoking. Yet after I heard a few moments of his music, he seemed gigantic and full of inner strength. Roscoe was right in the center of conflicting Appalachian values: raised in the old-time ways before mining, he recalled old ballads, square dance tunes, Holiness and Regular Baptist songs, yet he had a strong feeling for the blues. He made his own versions of songs, had been a moonshiner, had worked in

the mines, had broken his back in the lumber mill, was married to the wife of a man who had died in a mine accident, and was raising her kids. His house was the last one back in the holler, situated separate from and above the lumber camp. He had to walk through the camp to get to the road, and everyone there knew him. Having no car, he was dependent on rides or public buses, and in earlier years he used to walk over the mountains instead of around them.



J.B. Cornett, Mason's Creek, KY

MARTIN YOUNG AND CORBETT GRIGSBY used their music to entertain the public, and they put on a good show. Their music served to remind folks of farm country. Both men dealt with the Hazard community in their daily work as a barber and

school principal, respectively. In the 1940s they had performed on the local radio station, and Grigsby had hosted a regular 15-minute talk show on WKIC. My recordings were made in Martin Young's living room, which was a bit more uptown than those of most of the other performers. There were a carpet and stuffed chairs, and a canary who started to sing in response to the music. (The bird is audible in the background on track 35, disc #2.) It was a

rare treat to hear the two men laugh in harmony in "Rocky Island," but their need to entertain crept compulsively into all the music. The end of a long ballad was completed with a wobbling voice, as if to distance the singer from the old-fashioned sentiments which had been sung so beautifully.

MR. & MRS. JOHN SAMS lived in a house above a busy road. (You can hear the sound of passing cars on some of the recordings.) I visited without introduction. They were generous and open to sharing their music with me, and Mr. Sams played the banjo vigorously while his wife sang forcefully. Besides old ballads, she sang an original church song called "The Absentee." At first it was done delicately with voice alone, but when she added a thumping guitar, the song became something which could fit into a Holiness service. Although Mr. Sams played strong frailing banjo, he set it aside to sing "The Coo Coo" unaccompanied. His version had the free rhythm which is done best by voice alone. Their house was full of children and grandchildren; the visit took place on their crowded porch.

GRANVILLE BOWLIN took great pleasure in playing his banjo. In his punctuated two-finger style, most notes were of equal loudness. He liked the brassy, clanky sound produced by his

resonator banjo. On "Charlie's Neat" you can hear how the banjo says the same thing as the voice, but in "Wild Bill Jones" the banjo and voice each follow their own course, and their timing doesn't always coincide; the phrasing of his singing is at odds with the rhythmic pulse of the banjo. "Bad Eye" Bowlin had been a miner and had lost a finger off each hand in mine accidents. At this time he was a farmer.

MARTHA HALL had taught some of her ballads to Jean Ritchie. She lived up on a quiet country road, and quite willingly made these recordings on very short notice. When she sang, it felt like she was sharing fragments of something precious that had been put away for safekeeping. But in recalling the ballads, a wistfulness and joy returned; the act of singing rekindled warm feelings. In the middle of the 20th century it was a thrill to meet someone who could still sing about "brave commanders where the wild beasts howl and roar."

JAMES D. CORNETT was plowing with a mule in the bottom land beside Mason's Creek, Middle Fork, when I met him. We talked out in his field, and eventually he invited me to join him for lunch, which his wife prepared. The table was set with a large number of jars, each packed with different vegetables from the gar-

den, to be eaten with fresh corn bread and fresh milk. To this day, I can't separate the taste of this food from the sound of his songs. His fragment of "Barbara Allen" reflects a tune family which Charles Seeger discusses in *The Variants of Barbara Allen* (Library of Congress record LPAAPSL54).

I thought "The Spring of '65" was about events he had taken part in, especially when he explained that the words "paying cash for cuff" referred to how "they'd been playing around and had to pay for what they tore up." When J. D. Cornett sang, the story became so alive that I thought he'd even written it. But as it turns out, versions of this song have been located in Indiana and in Vermont. (The Library of Congress checklist of recorded songs in the English language [1940] lists three recordings of this song under the title "I came to this country in 1849" [or 1865]. One was recorded in Hazard in 1937, and the other two are from Kentucky as well. The song is published in Lomax's book *Our Singing Country* [p. 231], and Pat Dunford recorded a version in Indiana on *Fine Times at Our House* [Folkways FS 3809]. The notes state, "According to Helen Harkness Flanders, the



Mr & Mrs Willie Chapman,  
Lothair, KY

song was composed in a lumber camp around Rutland, Vermont in 1875.")

LEE SEXTON was perhaps the best-known banjo picker in these parts. He learned some of his two-finger picking from Roscoe Holcomb and used it for bluegrass songs. He played square dance tunes at a local beer joint every weekend. He was also one of the cleanest and fastest banjo frailers I ever met. His bluegrass songs were sung and played in an old, local way. He said his father still delivered the mail on horseback. "Lee Boy," as he is known locally, worked in the Blue Diamond mines up on Leatherwood (at \$24.50 a day) when there was work, and drove thirty miles around the mountains to get there each day. When he worked at the

face of the coal, he figured that he went so far into the mountain that he was practically right back under his home.

I had heard a recording of "Saint Louis Blues" that Lee had made for Jean Ritchie eight years earlier. It had acquired many bluegrass devices, while his old-time songs had remained essentially the same over the years. In 1994 he made a solo record for June Apple.



MARION SUMNER had returned to Hazard after spending time in Nashville playing country fiddle for a duo called Johnny & Jack. His professionalism added another aspect to the old fiddle tunes he recorded for me. He was extremely adept, and his musical approach fit in with many styles of country music, which gave it a less local identity. Of all the musicians on this album, he was the most aware of the commercial value that could be applied to music. A few years after this album was issued, he heard that it had sold 440 copies and assumed that meant 440,000! His brother Bobby Sumner had played fiddle on the Stanley Brothers early Rich-R-Tone records. I met Bobby in a road house playing square dance tunes with Lee Sexton and Odabe Holcomb (Roscoe's nephew).

Several other musicians had tried to find commercial applications for their music. Lee Sexton had spent time at Renfro Valley, and George Davis (the Singing Miner) was a disc jockey at the Hazard radio station. He also had a live show which featured some old-time music, and many people in the area listened.

GEORGE DAVIS had worked in the mines for thirty-eight years before becoming a disc jockey. He would only sing one song for me, and I believe he was saving his other original songs

for more remunerative uses. One of these songs, "The Coal Miner's Boogie," had been issued on Rich-R-Tone records, and he hadn't been compensated. He claims to have written an earlier version of "Sixteen Tons," which Merle Travis and Tennessee Ernie Ford made into a hit. I think the reason Davis let me record "Death of the Blue Eagle" was that it referred to 1932 and didn't have any contemporary possibilities, whereas most of his other songs were of ongoing interest to coal miners. Since he worked in downtown Hazard at the radio station, he wore a white shirt and tie and a suit jacket. I believe he was the only performer on these recordings who dressed this way. He was a true minstrel of the coal fields, and his songs were the history of the miners' concerns, while his means of communication was the commercial arena.

Commercial country music was heard on the radio constantly, and the phonograph was a source for some people's repertoire. There was nothing old fashioned about the scene around Perry County, and old-time music didn't only signify ballads and banjo tunes. Although I had encountered rare antiquities among people's memories, their favorite songs came from all parts of the past. The hillbilly marketplace was a part of their music. Grigsby and Young regularly sang many commercial hillbilly songs. There was

a curious resemblance between their version of "Going to Rocky Island" and one recorded about the same time by the Osborne Brothers. "Ruby Are You Mad at Your Man" was a bluegrass version of the way Cousin Emmy (also of Kentucky) had recorded it in the '40s. One could never be certain whether these songs had been conveyed orally or by phonograph, for by the '40s popular and traditional music were both available on commercial records.

Many of the local musicians who played instruments talked fondly of Sam & Kirk McGee, performers from the Grand Ole Opry. Of all the radio musicians they were among the most down-home old-timers, and had performed with Uncle Dave Macon.



Granville Bowlin, Sassafras, KY

#### AFTERMATH

Although all the performers received copies of the record in 1960, I wonder whether it had much impact on their lives. However, *Mountain Music of Kentucky* did have an impact outside of the mountains. It was reviewed in the *New York Times*. The *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote, "This is one of the greatest records in the entire literature of American folk song." Their reviewer said Roscoe Holcomb was "a true genius of the white blues and the Anglo-American bal-

lad." Lee Sexton and Marion Sumner have since made solo records (on June Apple), and George Davis made one for Folkways (*When Kentucky Didn't Have Any Union Men*). Roscoe Holcomb received great recognition. He made three other records for Folkways, toured Europe, California, did festivals and a few concerts in New York and Boston. He appeared at the Newport Folk Festival as well as at the University of Chicago. He also became the

subject of a documentary film I made, *The High Lonesome Sound* (Univ. of California Media Extension/& Shanachie video). His recording of "Single Girl" was included in the sound track of the Antonioni film *Zabriskie Point* along with the music of the Grateful Dead and Pink Floyd. Roscoe continued to work in

construction jobs until his death in 1981. German TV once filmed many of the artists on this record, and TV's "Dukes of Hazard" made that city widely known. The singing of Martha Hall was imitated by Maria Muldaur. The Holy Modal Rounders recorded James Crase's "Give The Fiddler a Dram," and the Byrds also played Crase's version of this tune on a synthesizer. The New Lost City Ramblers recorded "Death of the Blue Eagle" on *Songs from the Depression*

(Folkways). A copy of my entire collection was given to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. The organization Appalshop opened its office in Whitesburg, Kentucky, in 1969 and made claim to this cultural territory. They have become documenters as well as activists concerned with many aspects of mountain life. Dependent on grants from outside the region, they assume possessive and competitive positions as caretakers of this material.

In retrospect, I didn't go to Kentucky in 1959 with the intention of doing anything significant and the people I met weren't thinking of being recorded. I was given to believe that the hills were full of folk song collectors. (This turned out to be untrue; actually Alan Lomax was one of the only other people making field recordings that summer.) It was an opportunity to look into something which moved me musically. My band, The New Lost City Ramblers was preparing to record an album of songs from the Depression, and this trip was also part of my research. I hoped that the publication of the recording would send the music on and that the people who shared their music with me might be aware of the possible effect they have had on others.

These recordings were made on a portable crank-it-up Magnamite tape recorder, loaned to me by Walt McGibbon. The microphone was an Electro-voice 636. Moe Asch provided much of the tape. Each selection was recorded upon first performance; there were no "second takes." I would like to thank Mike Seeger for the use of editing and copying equipment. Thanks also to Jean Ritchie for starting me off in the right direction and to Nobel Hobbs of the United Mine Workers, who gave me much assistance around Hazard. Diane Alden and Jon Pankake helped edit these notes. Special thanks to the kind people of east Kentucky who gave of their time, energy, and music. Their memory has left its impact.

As previously mentioned, these field recordings were made by John Cohen in 1959 using a Swiss-made Magnamite recorder. This machine had battery-powered electronics, but the transport was mechanically wound and incorporated a flywheel to keep the speed constant. To prepare for this project, the full-track analog tapes on 5" reels were transferred to a Macintosh-based hard drive by being played back on a Swiss-made Nagra III recorder which also has a full-track head as well as a very gentle transport which was not apt to stretch or break the tapes. Another aspect of the Magnamite machine is that it featured a "modulometer" which indicates audio peaks, as opposed to a vu meter which indicates an average audio signal. As a result, with no way to monitor the recorded signal aurally in the field and a misunderstanding of the metering of this borrowed machine, some of the tracks (primarily vocals) have distorted peaks due to overmodulation.

Once in the digital domain, the work of editing and mastering began. David Glasser at

#### TECHNICAL NOTE:

Airshow uses the Sonic Solutions digital editing and mastering workstation with NoNoise(TM) audio restoration software. A first run of deackling, a NoNoise algorithm—used more frequently for removing surface noise from old acetates and vinyl recordings was applied to reduce the distorted audio peaks. It was also determined that the Magnamite had recorded slightly slower than 7.5ips. That meant the

recordings sounded fast and higher pitched when played back. The speed was dropped the equivalent of .4 semitones using the Sonic Solutions varispeed capability. After sequencing and equalizing the tracks, a second pass of deackling was tested to see if the distortion could be further reduced without adversely affect-

ing the musical quality of the recordings. We believe the result is an improved "listenability" to these fine recordings of traditional artists from Kentucky.

Lea Anne Sonenstein and Charlie Pilzer assisted in the NoNoise(TM) processing work.

PETE REINIGER, January 1996



Lee Sexton, Line Fork, KY



## CREDITS

This collection was conceived, compiled, recorded, sequenced, and annotated by John Cohen and contains over 60 minutes of additional, previously unreleased material. Originally compiled, recorded and annotated by John Cohen in 1959 as Folkways 2317.

Photos by John Cohen

Production supervised by Anthony Seeger and Amy Horowitz



George Davis "The Singing Miner," Hazard, KY

Audio and technical coordination by Pete Reiniger

Mastered by David Glasser at Airshow, Inc., Springfield, VA

NoNoise(TM) sound restoration by Lea Anne Sonenstein and Charlie Pilzer at Airshow, Inc., Springfield, VA

Notes edited by Carla Borden

Production coordinated by Mary Monseur and Michael Maloney

Special thanks to Anne Elise Thomas and Jeff Place

Design by Visual Dialogue

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Folkways Records was founded by Moses Asch and Marian Distler in 1948 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In the ensuing decades, New York City-based Folkways became one of the largest independent record labels in the world, reaching a total of nearly 2,200 albums that were always kept in print.

The Smithsonian Institution acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987 to ensure that the sounds and genius of the artists would be preserved for future generations. All Folkways recordings are now available on high-quality audio cassettes, each packed in a special box along with the original LP liner notes.

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# mountain music of kentucky

Compiled and Annotated by John Cohen

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## CD # 1

BILL CORNETT *tracks 1-5*  
J. D. CORNETT *tracks 6-8*  
OLD BAPTIST CHURCH *tracks 9-10*  
ROSCOE HOLCOMB *tracks 11-14*  
MARION SUMNER *tracks 15-17*  
GEORGE DAVIS *track 18*  
WILLIE CHAPMAN *tracks 19-24*  
BILL CORNETT *tracks 25-28*  
ROSCOE HOLCOMB *tracks 29-31*

## CD # 2

ROSCOE HOLCOMB *tracks 32-36*  
MARTHA HALL *tracks 37-39*  
GRANVILLE BOWLIN *tracks 40-43*  
HOLINESS CHURCH *tracks 44-47*  
MR. & MRS. SAMS *tracks 48-50*  
JAMES CRASE *tracks 51-59*  
LEE SEXTON *tracks 60-63*  
GRIGSBY & YOUNG *tracks 64-68*



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