A black and white photograph of Roscoe Holcomb, an elderly man with a serious expression, wearing a dark hat, glasses, a light-colored shirt, a dark tie, and a textured suit jacket. He is holding a banjo across his body. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

*the high lonesome sound*

**ROScoe HOLCOMB**



Smithsonian Folkways

# ROSCOE HOLCOMB

## *the high lonesome sound*

Compiled, produced, and annotated by John Cohen

The legendary Roscoe Holcomb performs 21 powerful songs shaped by the hard times and conflict between old and new that marked his life in the Kentucky mountains. A hard-hitting singer and banjo-player, he also performs unaccompanied ballads, banjo and harmonica solos, and with a guitar. These recordings from 1961, 1964, and 1974 were previously released on three different Folkways LP records and had a powerful influence on the folk music revival. Accompanied by extensive new notes and photographs by John Cohen. 71 minutes

1. MOONSHINER 1:58
2. OLD SMOKY 3:41
3. LITTLE BIRDIE 2:25
4. HOUSE IN NEW ORLEANS 3:47
5. TROUBLE IN MIND 2:15
6. THE WANDERING BOY 4:31
7. HOOK AND LINE 1:51
8. MARRIED LIFE BLUES 1:47
9. OMIE WISE 4:31
10. WILLOW TREE 2:56
11. BOAT'S UP THE RIVER 3:45
12. IN THE PINES 2:22
13. FOX CHASE 1:21
14. LITTLE GRAY MULE 1:09
15. I'M A FREE LITTLE BIRD 1:54
16. LITTLE BESSIE 10:03
17. MOTHERLESS CHILDREN 4:53
18. DARLIN COREY 3:35
19. ROLL ON BUDDY 2:22
20. A VILLAGE CHURCHYARD 7:05
21. WALK AROUND MY BEDSIDE 4:31

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THESE RECORDINGS were made in 1961, 1964, and 1974. They were previously issued on Folkways Records as *The Music of Roscoe Holcomb and Wade Ward*, *The High Lonesome Sound*, and *Close To Home*. All vocals and instrumental accompaniment are by Roscoe Holcomb, with Mike Seeger and John Cohen joining him on "Free Little Bird." The film *The High Lonesome Sound* featuring Roscoe Holcomb, is available from Shanachie Video. The Smithsonian Folkways album *Mountain Music of Kentucky* presents the context of Roscoe's music, and contains an additional 12 performances by him from 1959, along with other recordings from Perry County, Kentucky. The notes discuss Roscoe's singing and banjo picking style.





ways all gave an edge of his music. Although he rarely talked about the poverty he was raised in, it clearly shaped his outlook. He never saw himself as important, and he was neither assertive nor ambitious. Yet there was something heroic and transcendent in his singing. It had a power that went straight to the listener's core. His spiritual concern was beautiful and always present, revealed with a sharp, cutting expression of pain. He said,

"You know, music—it's spiritual. You can take just a small kid, I've noticed, that can't even sit alone, and you pull the strings on some kind of instrument, fiddle or banjo, you watch how quick it draws the attention of that kid. And he'll do his best to get ahold of that. It draws the attention of the whole human race. You never see a man pick up an instrument but what everybody is looking and listening at this music. It sounds better to some than it does to others; some can learn it, and some can't learn it, and that's why I say it is a gift."

His inherent sense of musicality was highly developed; the finely honed quality of his voice coupled with the wildness it conveyed. As Bob Dylan commented, "Roscoe Holcomb has a certain untamed sense of control, which makes him one of the best."

Roscoe's banjo picking had a basic clanki-

ness, a pulse that might be used for dancing. It gave him the latitude to also convey odd timings, and to dwell on elongated notes. He would play the melody on his instrument duplicating the nuances of his voice. "I always make the music try to speak as nigh as I can—as the words that I say. I try an' make it speak what I do."

He lived at the far end of a holler beyond a lumber camp in Daisy, Kentucky. To get to his home you crossed a stream and then climbed a steep hill to a white house set back against the woods. There was a vegetable garden in front of the porch and a few sheds behind the house. The parlor was heated with a wood and coal burning stove, and the kitchen stove provided additional warmth. On the front porch was a wooden swing hung from the ceiling with chains. Roscoe often sat there in the early morning with his coffee and cigarette. Most social visits took place on that porch, as did the music making.

The writer Joel Agee, who worked with me on the film *The High Lonesome Sound*, painted his own word picture of Roscoe in a story titled "Killing A Turtle" (published in *Double Take Magazine*, 1996).

"The tiny village of Daisy, some twenty wooden houses scattered in a valley among rugged hills, and the long haggard face of one of its denizens, Roscoe Holcomb, look-

ing old in his early sixties, with thin sad lips and creased cheeks, deep-set puzzled blue eyes shaded by a wide-brimmed hat, bony hands plucking the banjo strings, singing with a high reedy voice:

Uhcross the Rocky Maa-oon-taaaaaaa-  
aains... Awaaaaaan-drinahdid-gooooo...

An alien sound interferes: it's Chubby Checker on the radio, Roscoe's daughter is dancing the twist and maybe protesting against the folkways we're here to record. Roscoe quietly puts down the banjo and looks out over the hills, as he often does, sometimes for hours. There is time in those hills, he told us that: "Way back inna ole Pro-high-bishun days you could hear the sound of banjers comin' down clangity-clang from all over dem hee-ills."

In 1959 there was a sense of tension in Roscoe's home. His old ways were in conflict with the rest of the household. He was tolerated, but there was little feeling for his music, which was met with indifference or scorn. When I encountered him then, his music making had become a solitary affair.

Yet there were a few people around the lumber camp at Daisy who really liked his music; they called him "Rossie." Especially Aunt Jane (Mary Jane) Holcomb, his cousin who lived just down the hill. She picked the

*"Roscoe Holcomb's music is at once so archaic and so abstractly avant garde...the exultation of despair...the most moving, profound and disturbing of any country singer in America."*

—JON PANKAKE

## NOTES BY JOHN COHEN

Roscoe Holcomb has attained legendary status as a hard-hitting singer and banjo player although he has never been widely known. Since his death more than fifteen years ago, his reputation has grown but without much knowledge of the life that shaped his music.

When I first met Roscoe Holcomb in 1959, I had no idea what he was about. I only knew that he usually worked at construction jobs, and that the way he sang his songs had a great effect on me. Now, after almost forty years, I have come to realize I was hearing a man confronting the dilemma of his own existence.

It was only after his death that I began to wonder what drove him, what forces shaped his life and music. In returning to an old interview from 1962, I began to see correlation between phrases in his songs and elements in his life. Fourteen years after his death I returned to Daisy, Kentucky, to find what I could learn from those who remembered him, stories that might flesh out his picture.

Appalachian posture, hard work, hard life, broken health, coal mines, lumber mills, moonshine, and conflict between old and new

banjo, and her adopted son Odabe was learning from Roscoe. Odabe sometimes accompanied Roscoe on guitar at Holiness Churches. Others including "Lee Boy" Sexton from nearby Linefork, had played music with Roscoe in earlier years. And Roscoe's niece had happy childhood memories of dancing to Roscoe's banjo. But in his later life he was separated from those who loved him in his youth. His musical community was gone. With his playing he transmitted the warmth of times gone by. Except for these few neighbors and outside visitors like me, his music wasn't much appreciated at home. He was estranged from what defined him.

Some local musicians such as Lee Sexton, Odabe Holcomb, and Bobby Sumner played music regularly at Russel's Roadhouse, a bar-room and dance hall near Jeff, Kentucky (not far from Jean Ritchie's family home). Roscoe, who was of an earlier generation, did not go to places like that.

Roscoe had been raised in a family and community that shared traditional Appalachian rural values. But this lifestyle experienced great stress as the twentieth century evolved. He said, "Farming's about all there was in this country until the coal mines came in here. Man made his living on the farm."

The lumber and coal mining industries brought modern outlooks with them. To build the railroads, immigrants from the

cities were brought in. They introduced new cultural values to the mountains, and Prohibition introduced moonshine as a way of survival. (see *Night Comes To The Cumberlands* by Harry Caudill for more on this history).

Roscoe contrasted these developments with the earlier life he had known.

"Course there was railroad work. That gave a lot of people work, n' still they farmed, raised their own stuff to eat. [It was] one of the best living's a man ever lived when you raise all your vegetables and have three or four big hogs to kill. Plenty of milk and butter, n' your own eggs. Raise your own chickens; n' you don't have to go to the store for it—you got it. It's all pure food, buddy, and that's the reason the old generation lived longer and stronger than they do today."

"I guess the coal mines have been here before my time, but there was only just a few...The first mines started n' they made their own pushcarts and pushed the coal out of the mines n' hauled it in a wagon to the railroads. Then they got the trucks, n' it kept building up. Then they got the coal machines to cut the coal and shoot it, and motors to haul it with...But the big mines don't use no stock (mules etc.) at all. It's all machine. It's getting too much machinery—taking the work away from the people."



Ethel and Roscoe Holcomb  
Daisy, Kentucky, 1959

Roscoe was brought up in the Old Regular Baptist church which adhered to a strict belief that stressed singing but didn't allow any playing of instruments. Roscoe's attraction to music as a child, however, lead him first to the harmonica and eventually to the banjo and guitar used for accompanying songs and dances\*. String instruments were also part of the recently founded Holiness Church. He was caught between the Old Baptist values which he had been raised in and those of the Holiness church which welcomed his participation. He sang with the Holiness when I first met him.

"Ever since I remember, the Holiness had guitars. Guitars is mostly what's used, but now they use anything—any kind a man bring in they use it. Music's all right in church. I love to hear it. The Old Regular Baptists, they don't believe in stringed instruments in church—no kind of [instrumental] music in church. I guess a lot of people doubts the Holiness, but I think Holiness is nothing more than living a good clean life. You have to be holy before you can be righteous. But they have a thing that everybody can't see: some don't believe in talkin' in unknown tongues, some don't believe in this shoutin', jumpin' up and down, dancin' and so on. But that's their belief, and I can't fall out with a man because he believes something.

He's got a right to believe his beliefs as well as I've mine. Let him live his life and I'll live mine. Well that's the way the world oughtta stand, I think."

Roscoe loved to sing Old Regular Baptist hymns at home. He would sit alone in his parlor, singing from the Old Baptist Songbook, rekindling feelings, reliving elapsed pleasures, and immersing himself in sounds and sentiments from his past. This was one of the comforts his music offered him, especially in his late years.

On a few occasions Roscoe performed the Old Baptist songs at his public concerts. He sang unaccompanied with a level of intensity that touched every audience (on this cd the recording of "The Village Churchyard" is from a live performance at one of his concerts). You could sense his involvement in the song, and it was almost embarrassing to be let in on so personal an experience. His closeness to the song texts seemed to dispel any sense of audience and concert hall. He never became so professional that he distanced himself from the meaning of the song or from his own memories about it.

A few times while singing these long songs from the Baptist songbook, he would choke up. It was never clear whether this was due to the strain put on his voice, which was weakened by years of asthma, coal dust, and



*Roscoe Holcomb, Odabe Holcomb, Holiness Service  
Daisy, Kentucky, 1962*

smoking, or to his memories and inner feelings about his mother, and about the hardships of poverty on children.

His final performance of an Old Baptist song took place at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on May 7, 1978. He couldn't finish the song and left the stage in a spasm of coughing, with the audience stunned in silence. The next day, despite his weak condition, he was determined to catch the first bus back to Kentucky. After a day and night of travel and a bus window that wouldn't close in mid-winter, he got back home. He took sick, was hospitalized, and never recovered. He died in 1981.

Roscoe did not see himself as a musician, although he did admit to having a 'fine' voice. Above all, he loved to work. Physical labor had set the rhythm of his life. He spoke of standing in wet mud up to his chest to build the interstate highway system, and he talked of pouring hot tar on roofing jobs. By 1962 his deteriorating health and the economic depression in Eastern Kentucky seriously limited him. From what he said about his life, it was clear he was deeply troubled about this. I retain vivid memories of Roscoe sitting on his front porch, frustrated with his failed legacy and forced inactivity.

"My living was hard labor: construction work, coal mines. It's all hard...hard living. But I love to work whenever I'm able."

*JC. Are you not working these days?*

R. Ain't able. I don't know what's gonna happen. I thought I was getting better but it was just a thought...I wasn't. That's what got me worried. If I was to get a job, I couldn't hold it. It would be more worries. A man just as soon have his brains shot out as to be in that condition, the way I feel."

### ROSCOE'S MUSIC

Roscoe Holcomb has come to symbolize an ideal of the folk song revival: a bed-rock "roots" traditional musician free from adulteration by the commercial recording and academic worlds. He had a backwoods "purity" sustained by isolation, and if I hadn't found him and recorded him, he would never have looked outside his home community for listeners. Woody Guthrie, Bill Monroe, the Stanley Brothers, Dock Boggs, Doc Watson, and Jean Ritchie are artists known as traditional musicians within the folk revival; yet compared to them, Roscoe was an authentic homeboy, a back-porch musician. As Carter Stanley put it, "you could feel the smell of woodsmoke in that voice."

Roscoe remained a home musician and never had the desire to play professionally or to be recorded. He was one of the last generation whose music was shaped before the influence of records and radio. He never changed



*Roscoe Holcomb and Ralph Stanley singing from the Old Baptist Songbook during a tour through Germany*

1966

or adapted to the new styles although he certainly knew many songs which could be traced to recorded sources.

His style of singing contained church and blues elements: bending notes, extending phrases, singing sharp, singing flat, the ways of ornamenting certain notes, and especially the breathing and the intense energy level. Roscoe's singing has become known as "the high lonesome sound." I made up that phrase in 1962 to describe his special qualities, and the term has traveled widely since then. Today it is the generic name for all bluegrass singing.

His repertory includes songs that are well known throughout the Appalachians. There are unique elements in his music that reflect an earlier era, especially in his unusual banjo tunings and the modal melodies they accompany.

Many have commented that he was as much a blues artist as he was country singer. The old blues did occupy a special place in his life, one close to his personal feelings.

"The blues—there ain't no church music or religion to it, and no what I call square dance music in it. It's just a man who had the blues, and he made them, I guess.

*JC. When do you sing the blues?*

R. When I get blue (laughs). Sometimes, you know, you feel like playing certain songs. I feel like playing an old ballad, I feel like playing some religious song. I sit down, I feel lonesome—and it just fits me

plum through. Then again I pick up the guitar—the guitar's mostly for the blues—and I get started singing some old blues. It's just according to how a man feels, to what he's got on his mind when he takes a notion to play one. That's the way I feel. It's just to satisfy me, to pass the time away. I play if it suits me. It's all right, I don't care if it suits anybody else or not, just so it's done me good (laughs). I'm getting it off me, see.

Country music of the packaged Nashville variety was on the radio and TV in his house. Roscoe told me he had high regard for one woman who performed regularly on the Porter Wagoner TV show, and it was the only time I heard him speak so admiringly of another singer. He said that when he was younger he could sing like that. The singer, whose name he couldn't recall, was Dolly Parton.

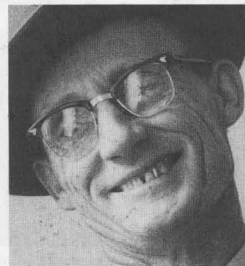
The texts of his songs give little indication that Roscoe might have been singing about his own life. An Appalachian singer supposedly passes on what was known earlier. But when viewed in the context of his life, Roscoe's songs begin to make statements about his personal experiences. They are more than just folk songs from an Appalachian songbag. Somebody else might sing the exact same texts, but the meanings and associations would be different. Songs, like greet-

ing cards, provide a way to express feelings that are difficult to speak about.

It is more than coincidence that aspects of Roscoe's life are reflected in autobiographical lines such as, "There's no love so true and tender as a mother's for her boy" from "The Wandering Boy," and "Hey you stingy woman, come sit down on my knee. You know I love you woman, but you sure don't care for me" from the "Stingy Woman Blues," and "I've been a moonshiner for many long years."

The blues he sang voiced his perspective on women and loneliness, while his religious songs touched on Roscoe's sense of the spiritual: motherless children, poverty, and the power of mother's love. Ideas of loss and abandonment were at the core of his feelings. The Appalachian repertory provided a vocabulary for his musical expression. His style lifted the texts to another plane.

Wherever he went Roscoe made an impression. His very first stage appearance was at the University of Chicago Folk Festival in February, 1961. I traveled to Kentucky in order to accompany him on the bus trip. I decided not to make any suggestions about how to act or dress for this occasion. Ringing



in my head was the story of Big Bill Broonzy appearing at Carnegie Hall in overalls and Leadbelly dressed in prison stripes for the newsreels. No need to repeat that! I'd only seen him in workclothes at home. But Roscoe went on stage dressed in a blue suit, white shirt, bold tie, red, white, and blue tennis sweater, and his rimmed hat. His first song was met with great applause. He warmed to this reception, so he put down his instrument and removed his jacket. After the next song he dropped the sweater on the floor next to the jacket. He wound up doing his set in his shirtsleeves. Shedding his formality, he revealed to the audience the down home person he always was.

Jon Pankake and Paul Nelson recall meeting Roscoe at that first University of Chicago

Folk Festival:

"We had the privilege of engaging Roscoe Holcomb in a private conversation. Roscoe is a man's man who returns your handshake firmly and looks you straight in the eye when he speaks to you. He is slender and soft-spoken—yet tough enough to have endured a hard life in the Kentucky coal mines. Twice mine accidents have extracted the toll of a broken back from his body. We



talked of farming, unionism, the depression in Kentucky, his friends, and his music. Rossie is an extremely intelligent and articulate person. His feeling for people and his complete immersion in life give his conversation a sensitive, almost visionary quality. There is really only one topic of conversation with him, and that is the meaning of human experience. His every word is a reflection of his thoughtfulness and deep insight—he wouldn't know the meaning of 'small talk.' He speaks of the people of his region with the poeticism of a good writer, and he knows and understands their poverty, their violence and their lonlinesses. When the talk got inevitably around to music, we asked him about the musical likes of young people in Perry County. 'They like the old-time music,' he said, 'but they don't hear much of it anymore.' ...Someone came to get Rossie. We watched him walk away wondering if we had talked to a great man—or to a man who only seemed so because he had miraculously come to us from a time and place before the race of Americans had fallen" (from the *Little Sandy Review*, no. 12, 1961).

There are competing images of Kentucky mountain life, divided opinions over what the outside world should see. My photograph of Roscoe, used on cover of the 1960 album

*Mountain Music of Kentucky*, showed him standing in his work clothes with his banjo in front of a shed by his house. His wife Ethel objected to the image of Roscoe. She was especially bothered by the fact that the shed was shown rather than her nice white house. Roscoe commented,

"You see, we live in these old mountains here and we've been raised up pretty rough, and a lot of people does the best they can. And they take it as if you take the worst you can find to make a picture to take back to New York to show the people. That's the way a lot of them feel about it. Course it don't matter to me."

A few years later, a German TV crew came and filmed many of the artists from the record *Mountain Music of Kentucky*. When they showed Roscoe he was seen singing on his front porch, dressed in a white shirt, wearing a tie and a new fedora hat. Their narration described him as a strange man "living far back in the woods on nuts and mushrooms which he gathered from the forest floor."

## HISTORY

When I met him in 1959 he said he was 48 years old, which means Roscoe was born around 1911 (the same year Bill Monroe was born). He lived all his life in the tiny community of Daisy, Kentucky, except for the few times he left to find work or to get away from personal predicaments. Daisy was about ten miles from Viper, Kentucky, where Jean Ritchie was raised, and she suggests that they are distant cousins. At a recent (1995) Holcomb family gathering I learned that Roscoe's mother was an Osborne and a direct relative of the well-known bluegrass musicians the Osborne Brothers.

Roscoe told me that way back "in the old revolution war" (probably a reference to the Civil War) his ancestors had come to Kentucky from North Carolina, "on account of some troubles." He said their name wasn't Holcomb back there; they took up the new name on their arrival. Once, on a brief concert tour through the mountains (for Ann Romaine), Roscoe showed apprehension about singing in North Carolina. He feared that some descendant might remember the "troubles" and recognize him.



Roscoe Holcomb and John Cohen  
1965

He had been a moonshiner in his youth: "That's been twenty year ago I guess, since I fooled in it. I used to make it, sell it, drink it; anyway a man could have it, that's the way I fooled with it. It used to be you could get it just about anywhere up here—25 to 50 cents a pint. I've sold many a pint for a quarter."

He remembered about banjo playing:

"I used to play for square dances a lot. I've played 'til the sweat dripped off my elbows. Used a bunch of us get out, maybe we go to a party somewhere. And after the party was over the moon'd be shinin' bright. You know we'd all start back home and gang up in the middle of

the road. Somebody'd start his old instrument guitar or banjer or something or other and just gang up in the middle of the road and have the awfullest square dance right out in the middle of the highway. People could have real good times back then. Nobody raised no trouble or anything. And it didn't matter how much you was out. Why people would trust their girls out, you know, with boys and neighbors. Nowadays they won't do

it—so much whiskey. People get drinking: a bunch get drunk and they want to raise some kind of trouble.”

When I revisited East Kentucky in 1995, I learned that Roscoe lived with his parents until he was about forty years old. When his mother died and the family household broke up, he was very deeply affected. Some recall he had a drinking problem for a period after her death, yet he told me he promised his mother on her deathbed he would never take a drop again. And he was proud that he hadn't but admitted to having drunk a lot before then.

Within a few years of his mother's death he married Ethel, a local woman who had lost her first husband in a coal mine accident. She and her three children had inherited the house and were collecting her husband's insurance, which made them relatively well taken care of. Roscoe's new family didn't have much connection with his old-time values. I have memories of him alone tending the garden and doing the chores. I recall Roscoe hilariously chasing an evasive chicken through the corn with a gun in his quest for our chicken dinner. I recall his wife commissioning her portrait on black velvet while he went to the unemployment office.

Like many other men, Roscoe had to leave the mountains to find work. Earlier, during

WW II, Roscoe worked briefly in the truck farms of southern New Jersey. He recounted a dream he had there about getting a girl pregnant and then returning to Kentucky, where he was confronted with a baby said to be his. He has a daughter living in Indiana, although he didn't raise her. At some point he worked in southern Indiana in a factory that manufactured wire coil windings for the automotive industry. He said he got sick from the copper dust in the air and had to return home.

In 1995 I spoke with several women who were Roscoe's nieces. Their childhood memories of Roscoe were full of warmth and music. They told me of the unhappy circumstances around his final illness. Ethel wouldn't permit them to take Roscoe from the nursing home. Nor would she permit Roscoe to visit home, although he longed to. After he died, there were two final services for him—one in the church of Ethel's denomination and a second, Old Baptist ceremony. Although these stories are colored by personal accusations, they contained a repeated theme that speaks to Roscoe's inner distress throughout the years I knew him.

In 1995 I drove back into the lumber camp at Daisy where Roscoe had lived. All the houses were gone, and the dirt road was edged in immense weeds, taller than my car. Further up the holler, Roscoe and Ethel's house was also gone, replaced by a large new

house built over the foundation of the old one, which had burned down. We entered the house, which in my memory was a crowded series of three small rooms and a kitchen. Now there was an enormous living room with wall-to-wall carpet, a long line of velour couches, new nick-nacks and prints with gold frames, and a big ceiling fan. It was formal, glitzy, and up-to-date.

A handsome woman entered. She was related to Ethel, who had died recently. She had long, honey-colored hair, short pants, and solid legs. She sat down next to me as I showed a bit of my video *The High Lonesome Sound* on the large TV which dominated the room. When she saw him on the screen she said, “That's my uncle Rossie. He was my favorite. I loved him. When I was a little girl he would bring me candy and gum, and he'd sit me down on his lap between him and the guitar or banjo. He had a gold tooth.”

She was totally open about her love of Roscoe, and I was startled from my deep resentment of Rossie's mistreatment to this emotional, warm remembrance.

But I had found what I had been seek-



Roscoe Holcomb and Bill Monroe  
1965

ing....memories of Roscoe in which his goodness lived on and he was still appreciated.

## MUSICAL INFLUENCES

Roscoe's music was strictly in the old-time style of Eastern Kentucky, albeit one which converted and absorbed influences from phonograph records and radio. Other regional banjo players share this style, which incorporates modal scales, odd banjo tunings, and old Baptist singing. Lines of similarity on a musical map connect Dock Boggs in Norton, Virginia, Hayes Shepherd in Jenkins, Kentucky, Lee Sexton in Line Fork, Morgan Sexton in Leatherwood, and Roscoe Holcomb.

The list of well-known commercial recording

artists from Eastern Kentucky includes Grandpa Jones, The Osborne Brothers, and bluegrass fiddler Kenny Baker. But Roscoe wasn't a recording artist, and his style reflected home traditions.

Roscoe was not particularly concerned about the sources of his music, and he rarely recalled where or from whom he learned a song. Clearly some of his blues can be traced to records by Blind Lemon Jefferson, Barbe-

cue Bob, and Bessie Smith, but I never heard him talk about them as people or as voices on records. Possibly he learned these songs from someone who had learned them from recordings. Roscoe sang "I'm Going Back To Coney Island," and commented that he had worked briefly at the Coney Island amusement park near Cincinnati, but he never mentioned Frank Hutchison, whose recording of the song was widely known in the mountains. Once I played Roscoe the Carter Family recording of "Single Girl." He was quite amazed at how different it was from his version of the song, because he believed that he had been singing their version. The one artist he clearly talked about as a source was Dock Boggs. Roscoe had seen him perform long ago and knew of his old recordings. In fact, in 1959 Roscoe provided the first living clues that Boggs was from this region of the mountains. Roscoe was hesitant to record "The Man Of Constant Sorrow" although he sang it beautifully, because he had learned it from Ralph Stanley's bluegrass recording. It was as if he wouldn't sing a song unless it had become part of himself.

### THE BLUES SINGER

The blend of Anglo and Afro traditions has been an integral part of Southern country music, from the "blue yodel" of Jimmie Rodgers to the "bluegrass" of Bill Monroe,

Dock Boggs and Roscoe shared this tradition, and some of their best known songs were blues. Indeed, despite his power as a singer of ballads and religious songs, some people view Roscoe as a blues singer because of the depth of feeling he touched in that music. Although he made a distinction between blues and Baptist songs, he moved easily between them, for stylistically they are very similar. Richard Nevins in *Before The Blues* contends that "before the Civil War there did not exist in America two distinct bodies of music, one White and one Black. Both groups shared a common tradition and repertoire. Indeed the divergence of White and Black music into two separate genres doesn't become clear until the turn of this century.... White and Black fundamentalist church congregations were singing the same hymns in the same limited modal scales, the exact same scales that defined the secular ballads of that time, and later (1910-1920) became the melodic base of what was to become the blues." Roscoe sang the blues because it was already there in his culture and within himself in sound, style, and feeling.

### TRAVELS WITH ROSCOE

From 1959 to 1980, we knew each other as individuals who had reached across a wide cultural gap. Traveling together was in the here and now. I never saw him as an "infor-

mant," and he didn't see me as an agent or folklorist. In this way we developed a strong mutual appreciation.

I felt uneasy about his first trip to New York in 1961 for having put him into this unfamiliar setting. I asked if he thought he could live in New York City. He said "it's not that I wasn't cut out for it. It's just that I wasn't sewed up right." He also observed there were more people on the streets at midnight in Greenwich Village than there were in Hazard on a busy Saturday afternoon.

In the early days of the folk music revival, MacDougal street was alive with coffee houses and clubs. Rossie and I went to the Gaslight Cafe where Tom Paxton sang a song which included some nasty words about the High Sheriff of Hazard. Roscoe saved his comment until later "He shouldn't be saying those things about Charlie Combs."

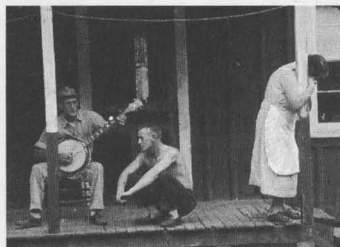
In the dead of winter it was very cold sleeping in my Third Ave. loft. Roscoe had a fit of coughing, his asthma and emphysema kicking in after too much smoking. He was turning red and I didn't know how to help.

Desperate, I gave him a glass of chartreuse liqueur which Moe Asch had given me, and Roscoe's cough went away. Rossie said it was the same cure for the cough his mother used when he was a kid; she would dissolve some hard candy in whiskey and have him drink it. I sent him a bottle of chartreuse for Christmas.

In 1964 in New York, I took Roscoe to see Charley Chaplin's silent movie *Modern Times*. Watching the dilemmas of the little tramp, Roscoe laughed harder and louder than anyone else in the theater. His laughter turned to uncontrolled coughing, and I helped him out to the lobby to recover.

At the Berkeley Folk Festival in 1962, we walked around the

immense campus together. It was his first trip to California, and I was curious about his reaction to the thousands of students, the strange eucalyptus trees, the immense buildings. What he commented on were construction techniques, especially the system of waterproofing used for the roofs of concrete buildings, which related to the kind of work he did in Kentucky.



Roscoe Holcomb, Odabe Holcomb, Mary Jane Holcomb (still from *The High Lonesome Sound*)  
1962

At the UCLA folk festival in 1963, Roscoe did something I haven't ever figured out. He had been sharing a house with Doc Watson, Clint Howard, and Fred Price at Ed Pearl's place on the beach. They had been playing at the Ash Grove in Los Angeles prior to their festival appearance. There was a big crowd in the large festival auditorium, and Roscoe and I were standing in back of the audience. Tom Ashley and the whole gang (Fred, Clint, and Doc) had just finished a very down-home number, and during the applause, Roscoe walked down the aisle onto the stage, right across that, and off into the wings, as if he was unaware of the several thousand people there and the concert going on.

Roscoe toured Germany in 1966 with the Stanley Brothers, Cousin Emmy, the Cyp Landrenau Cajun Band, and the New Lost City Ramblers. We also performed in Switzerland, Stockholm, and London. After a concert in NYC at the start of the tour, a man told Roscoe that his performance had upset him. Thinking the man was looking for an argument, Roscoe said, "Buddy I was singing that for me, not for you." The man replied it wasn't that he disliked the song but, "it was just too close to home."

Roscoe would carry his Old Baptist Songbook with him in his pocket, and on the tour he and Ralph Stanley sang the unaccompanied hymns together in the bus. They sat side

by side, with Carter leaning in from the seat behind singing with them from the book. Clearly they had all been raised on these songs, and there was a wonderful affinity between Ralph Stanley, the professional, and Roscoe, the home musician. Roscoe once performed Baptist hymns with the Stanley Brothers on stage in Bremen.

Once when it was time for Roscoe to appear on stage, he introduced his performance to the German audience in English; it didn't seem to matter whether they understood him. He announced he wasn't feeling too well and talked a bit about his hard life, that his back had been broken in a lumber mill accident, and that he'd try to do the best he could for them. He wasn't asking for pity; he clearly had to "get it off him" how he felt before singing.

Several times, after his appearances at colleges and festivals, young women musicians would show their appreciation. One wrote him sincere and open letters of admiration, and Roscoe had to hide these so his wife wouldn't see them. Learning of this the woman then wrote him more, but signed the letters "Robert." Another time, two women from California drove to Daisy looking for Roscoe. They created a potentially scandalous stir in the community, where they camped out in their van parked in the lumber camp. In Stockholm two young women

appeared at our hotel room just to have their picture taken with Roscoe. He wasn't prepared for this.

In the early 1970s he made an appearance at Sarah Lawrence College. We showed the film *The High Lonesome Sound*, and he sang for a class studying anthropology through dance. After a few songs, Roscoe was surrounded by young women who asked if he had ever danced. He said he had been a good dancer when he was young. They begged him show them, and it was one of the craziest and most unexpected things to see Roscoe, who was in his 60s and physically bent and broken, suddenly doing some snappy clog dance steps while I played the banjo. He

was extremely agile, and eventually was dancing with his body arched way back, his shoulders almost touching the floor. I never had seen him, or anyone else, move this way. It only lasted a few seconds and never happened again. He must have been a fantastic dancer years ago.



Roscoe Holcomb, Sonya Cohen, Eck Robertson  
Newport, 1965

Roscoe's music transcends the pain and hard times. His individual experiences lifted a common repertoire to something unique. Part of his high lonesome sound came from the feel of tension generated in his singing. He pitched his songs at the top of his vocal register, insuring himself a challenge to reach and hold those high notes. He attributed this to a "fine voice," but sitting in front of him was like feeling the edge of a sharp instrument. His "wild control" gave expressive form to his feelings. His music embodied his life and soared above it all.

*Footnote: During his final years, in phone conversations from the nursing home, he told me of a recurring dream he had of fields of marijuana. (We had sheltered him from the pot-smoking which went on at festivals throughout the 1960s and 1970s, but I also knew that marijuana growing had become a big industry in the hills of Kentucky, a continuation of the moonshine tradition.)*



## ABOUT THE SONGS

Many of the secular songs on this record were performed widely during the folk-revival of the 1960s, but Roscoe Holcomb was never aware of that tradition. His versions were learned by him from within the local East Kentucky repertoire and from outside, pre-war (WW II), commercially recorded sources.

### 1) MOONSHINER (FW 2363) *unaccompanied*

Roscoe also performs this song with banjo. Versions of this tune are also found in Ireland, and Kenneth Begly of Middlefork, Kentucky, and Daw Hawson of Clay County, Kentucky sang it with guitar for Alan Lomax at the Library of Congress in 1937.

### 2) OLD SMOKY (FW 2363) *voice and banjo (tuning FFFAD)*

Bradley Kincaid recorded this song commercially in the 1930s. Burl Ives made it popular in the 1940s. Pete Seeger introduced a group singing version. Tom Glazer popularized it further as "On Top Of Spaghetti." Roscoe returns it to mountain tradition. Recently, the Wildcats (Stefan Sender, Rafe Stefannini and Carol Elizabeth Jones) recorded an arrangement of Roscoe's version, acknowledging his irregular timing.

### 3) LITTLE BIRDIE (FW 2363) *vocal and banjo (tuning ECGAD, played in C)*

For this tune, Roscoe has a type of up-picking which is different from his usual banjo style. Many other Kentucky banjo pickers use a similar up-picking for Little Birdie; the style travels with the song. Willie Chapman from Lothair (*Mountain Music of Kentucky* SF 40077) picked it, as did Morgan Sexton from Leatherwood (June Appal 0055). John Hammond recorded it commercially in the 1930s (Yazoo 2014- *The Music of Kentucky*) and Ralph Stanley (from Virginia) first recorded it for Rich-R-Tone in the fifties using the same banjo picking style.

### 4) HOUSE IN NEW ORLEANS (FW 2363) *vocal and guitar (tuned CGDGBE)*

Clarence Ashley made an early commercial recording of this song in the late 1920s. It is also known as House of the Rising Sun. Although there were very few commercial recordings of it in the twenties and thirties, the song was widely dispersed in tradition. Most folk revival versions (Josh White, Woody Guthrie and later Dave Van Ronk who gave it new chords) can be traced to Alan Lomax. The Animals rock n' roll version propelled it further. Lomax collected two versions of The Rising Sun Blues from Daw Henson and Bert Martin in Clay County, Kentucky in 1937 for the Library of Congress. Doc Watson learned

his version directly from Clarence Ashley. Roscoe's version seems to be his own.

### 5) TROUBLE IN MIND (FW 2363) *vocal and banjo (GDGBD)*

Fields Ward recorded this for John Lomax in Galax, Virginia, in 1937 (for the Library of Congress). Earlier it had been recorded commercially by Chippie Hill, Louis Armstrong, Richard Jones (© 1926), as well as by country artist Cliff Carlisle. Country and Western versions were done by Jimmie Revard and The Oklahoma Playboys, and Bob Wills. Other blues recordings include Bill Broonzy, Johnny Shines, and Memphis Slim. Many folk revival versions followed including Barbara Dane, Ronnie Gilbert, Dave Van Ronk, and eventually Janis Joplin. We don't know Roscoe's source.

### 6) THE WANDERING BOY (FW 2368) *unaccompanied*

source: Old Baptist Songbook. Roscoe sings this (with lining out) in the film *The High Lonesome Sound* (Shanachie Video)

### 7) HOOK AND LINE (FW 2368) *voice and banjo, frailing (CGGBD)*

This popular banjo tune (affectionately known as "Hook and String") is also a fiddle piece. Banjo Bill Cornett plays it on *Mountain Music of Kentucky* SF40077. The Library

of Congress check-list gives five recordings (1937 and 1938) all from East Kentucky. Roscoe performs it here as he did for dances. He said that when everybody would get real tired, he'd break into the old Jimmie Rodgers tune, "California Blues" (Blue Yodel #4) and the dancers would get tickled, start laughing and find new strength to dance on.

### 8) MARRIED LIFE BLUES (FW 2368) *vocal and banjo (tuning F#DF#AD), picked high up the fingerboard.*

The third verse is similar to the text of "Sally Goodin". An old 30s recording of this probably was Roscoe's source.

### 9) OMIE WISE (FW 2368) *vocal and banjo (tuned ECGAD-played in D).*

Roscoe claimed it was his idea to apply this odd banjo tuning to this song. Versions of "Omie Wise" are widespread, yet all retain the basic facts, including the name of the murderer. The actual crime took place in 1808 in North Carolina. *The Old-Time Herald* magazine (Spring '97) printed a very thorough article about about this song as history.

### 10) WILLOW TREE (FW 2368) *vocal and banjo*

Dillard Chandler also sang the "weeping willow" verse in "Awake Awake" on *Old Love Songs and Ballads*, Folkways FA2309. The

(weeping) willow tree represents sadness, and is depicted on many nineteenth century grave-stones. The Carter Family song "Who's that Knocking at My Window" contains a similar text.

**11) BOAT'S UP THE RIVER** (FW 2368)

*vocal and guitar*

The idea of being waterbound, marooned, or cut off is also heard in the Field Ward's song "Waterbound." The image of a boat (or a person) adrift is current in many blues (i.e. Rambling Thomas's "Po Boy" on *The Anthology of American Folk Music*, edited by Harry Smith, Smithsonian Folkways SF40090). Roscoe's song contains floating verses from other blues. There is a song by this title recorded in Texas in 1940 on The Library of Congress Checklist.

**12) IN THE PINES** (FW 2368)

*voice and guitar*

This much-recorded song, from Leadbelly to Bill Monroe to Kurt Cobain to Last Forever, is transformed once more by Roscoe's blues style and his highest singing.

**13) FOX CHASE** (FW 2368) *harmonica*

**14) LITTLE GRAY MULE** (FW 2363)

*instrumental-banjo (fraild) tuning GCGCE*

Roscoe said, "I made up this tune. Years ago I played it in a local banjo contest and

when I finished, an old man stood up, slammed his hat on the floor and shouted "That's the first time I've heard the Wild Boar in 40 years. Then the crowd went wild."

**15) I'M A FREE LITTLE BIRD** (FW 2368)

*voice and banjo (John Cohen guitar, Mike Seeger fiddle)*

**16) LITTLE BESSIE** (FW 2368)

*voice and guitar, from the Old Baptist Song Book*

The Stanley Brothers recorded this song in Bluegrass style.

**17) MOTHERLESS CHILDREN** (FW 2374)

*guitar and voice*

Around Kentucky this song is often heard in the Holiness Churches. The Carter Family recorded it commercially in the 1930s, as did Blind Willie McTell. Later recordings were done by blues singers Josh White (who sometimes recorded as The Singing Christian), Fred McDowell, Mance Lipscomb, Robert Pete Williams, as well as the Staple Singers. Roscoe sings it as if he were saying "mother's little children."

**18) DARLIN COREY** (FW 2374)

*voice and banjo (f#dgad)*

Dock Boggs' version of Country Blues seems to be the source, but Roscoe changes some of the words and adds a verse from

Boggs' "Danville Girl." The song is also known as "Hustling Gamblers."

**19) ROLL ON BUDDY** (FW 2374)

*voice and banjo*

This song is related to Nine Pound Hammer (as recorded by Merle Travis). Rufus and Palmer Crisp (from Allen, Kentucky) sang it as "Roll On John." There are several 78 rpm commercial recordings from the 1930s, including one by Charley Bowman and his brothers. It was heard in the folksong revival (by the Greenbriar Boys) and remains popular in Bluegrass music.

**20) A VILLAGE CHURCHYARD** (FW 2374)

*unaccompanied, from The Old Baptist Songbook (recorded at a concert performance in Cambridge, Mass. 1972).*

The Stanley Brothers recorded this with instrumental accompaniment on King records (King LP750). Ralph Stanley later recorded it sung unaccompanied (Rebel 1508).

**21) WALK AROUND MY BEDSIDE** (FW 2374)

*voice and guitar*

This is sung in the Holiness Church. I first heard a version of it around 1947, sung by a group of Black kitchen workers from South Carolina.

There are also several filmed performances of Roscoe available on Vastapol videos. (*Legends of Traditional Fingerpicking, Legends of Old Time Music*, and *Shady Grove*) distributed by Rounder, 1 Camp St, Cambridge Mass 02140. The video of *The High Lonesome Sound* is available from Shanachie Video. (tel. 800 497 1043)

Twelve earlier recordings of Roscoe Holcomb can be heard *Mountain Music of Kentucky* SF CD 40077.

Roscoe also can be heard on "Zabriskie Point" MGM records (alongside the Grateful Dead, Pink Floyd, and Patti Page). This album was recently reissued by Rhino Records.

FOR RELATED RECORDINGS LISTEN TO:

*Mountain Music of Kentucky*, Smithsonian

Folkways CD SF40077

*The Music of Kentucky*, Vol 1 & 2, Yazoo CD

2013, 2014

Morgan Sexton, *Rock Dust* June Appal 0055

Lee Boy Sexton, *Whoa Mule* June Appal 0051

*Dock Boggs*, Smithsonian Folkways (forthcoming)

Dock Boggs, *Country Blues: Complete Early Recordings* (1927-29) Revenant CD 205

*Old Regular Baptist Songs: Lined-Out Hymnody From Southeastern Kentucky* Smithsonian Folkways CD SF40106

Compiled from Folkways albums: *The Music of Roscoe Holcomb and Wade Ward* FA 2363, *The High Lonesome Sound* FA 2368, *Close To Home* FA 2374

The recordings of Roscoe Holcomb were made by:

Sanders' Recording studio, w. 47th Street in 1961 (*Music of Roscoe and Wade Ward*).

Peter Bartok at Steinway Hall, 57th Street NY (*High Lonesome Sound*) in 1964.

Mark Wilson at a live concert "The Village Churchyard" in Cambridge, Mass.

John Cohen and Blanton Owen at Roscoe's house on the front porch in 1974 (*Close To Home*)

## CREDITS

Compiled, annotated and produced by John Cohen

Photographs by John Cohen (except for page 13, photographer unknown)

Sound supervised by Pete Reiniger

Mastered by Charlie Pilzer at AirShow, Springfield, VA

Production supervised by Anthony Seeger and Amy Horowitz

Production coordinated by Mary Monseur and Michael Maloney

Marketing Director: Brenda Dunlap

Cover design and layout by Visual Dialogue, Boston, MA

Editorial suggestions by Peter Seitel

Special thanks to Jeff Place for providing song and discographic information from the Smithsonian Folkways Archive.

Thanks to: Moe Asch for his continued support in making these recordings and for always slipping Roscoe some extra money in person. To the folks in Berkeley, California, who gave Roscoe his guitar, and to Mike Seeger for encouraging the Vega company to give Roscoe a banjo (The earlier recordings were made with John Cohen's instruments). To Tracy Schwarz and other musicians whose admiration of Roscoe's music have helped keep the flame burning. To Mark Wilson for the excellent "live" concert recording, and to Jon Pankake for his written contributions over the years. To Roscoe Holcomb, who gave us much more than can be put on a record. His diverting stunts and inventive word plays lightened the whole endeavor.

## ABOUT SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS

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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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Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies  
955 L'Enfant Plaza, Suite 2600, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC 20560

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