



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

Dock Boggs

His Folkways Years 1963-1968

2 discs



Dock Boggs,

Age 9

DISC ONE

- 1 **Down South Blues**
2:08
- 2 **Country Blues**
3:48
- 3 **Pretty Polly**
2:52
- 4 **Coal Creek March**
1:53
- 5 **My Old Horse Died**
1:43
(Dock Boggs)
- 6 **Wild Bill Jones**
2:08
- 7 **Rowan County Crew**
3:06
- 8 **New Prisoner's Song**
2:51
- 9 **Oh, Death**
3:15
- 10 **Prodigal Son**
3:52
- 11 **Mother's Advice**
3:38
- 12 **Drunkard's Lone Child**
4:04
- 13 **Bright Sunny South**
3:36
- 14 **Mistreated**

Mama Blues
1:49
- 15 **Harvey Logan**
3:24
- 16 **Mixed Blues**
3:49
(Dock Boggs)
- 17 **Old Joe's Barroom**
2:46
- 18 **Danville Girl**
2:33
- 19 **Cole Younger**
1:48
- 20 **Schottische Time**
1:13
- 21 **Papa, Build Me A Boat**
2:40
- 22 **Little Black Train**
2:51
- 23 **No Disappointment**

in Heaven
2:28
- 24 **Glory Land**
4:00

DISC TWO

- 1 **Banjo Clog**
1:47
- 2 **Wise County Jail**
1:48
(Dock Boggs)
- 3 **Sugar Baby**
2:50
- 4 **The Death**

of Jerry Damron
4:13
- 5 **Railroad Tramp**
3:10
- 6 **Poor Boy in Jail**
2:54
- 7 **Brother Jim Got Shot**
1:56
- 8 **John Henry**
3:27
- 9 **Davenport**
1:41
- 10 **Dying Ranger**
3:25
- 11 **Little Omie Wise**
3:23
- 12 **Sugar Blues**
1:22
- 13 **Loving Nancy**
2:26
- 14 **Cuba**
1:26
- 15 **John Hardy**
2:02
- 16 **Peggy Walker**
2:52
- 17 **I Hope I Live a Few**

More Days
4:07
- 18 **Turkey in the Straw**
0:47
- 19 **Calvary**
3:30
- 20 **Roses While I'm Living**
3:21
- 21 **Leave It There**
3:20
- 22 **Prayer of a**

Miner's Child
3:17
- 23 **Coke Oven March**
1:00
(Dock Boggs)
- 24 **Ruben's Train**
2:19
- 25 **Cumberland Gap**
2:26
- 26 **Careless Love**
4:05

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Down a Lonesome Road: Dock Boggs' Life in Music

We were unable to include Barry O'Connell's complete essay in this CD booklet due to space limitations. Readers may download the complete piece from the Folkways website: <http://www.si.edu/folkways/40108notes.htm>, or send your name and address and US\$3.00 to cover postage and handling, to Dock Boggs Notes, Folkways Mail Order, 955 L'Enfant Plaza Suite 7300, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC 20560-0953, USA for a printed copy.

Introduction

"Let us now praise famous men." Dock Boggs belongs among them. Most of his life was lived in the obscurity this Biblical passage celebrates. He deserves fame for his efforts to live true to what he believed his God expected of him. Never a conventional life, his was also shaped by extraordinary gifts. Among them was an almost instinctive capacity to newly see and hear the events of his world. Dock worked 45 years in coal mines; only for a short period was he able even to imagine he might make a living as a musician. Like many miners he refused to be a company man, a particularly courageous stance in those days when the coal companies held tyrannical power. He spoke out, resisted, named his own course, and followed it. From early pre-World War I days, he was a believer in union, in the United Mine Workers, quick to educate his fellows in the early 1930s about a company's attempt to thwart the creation of the UMW local by offering a company union in its stead. "Emmet," Dock told the miner promoting the company union, "that paper you got ain't worth a dime. Anything the company's head of and rules and runs, why it isn't gonna do the men very much good." He survived all the years underground without suffering either injury to his limbs or to his spirit, a feat which bespeaks luck and brilliant skill. He never bowed to the subtle arts or flagrant acts of the powerful who controlled his work world, the communities he lived

in, and the political structure.

His music tangibly registers Dock's gift for impressing his own design upon experience, his refusal to accept anything simply as it was given to him. The musical talent was not, I think, something grafted on that set apart an otherwise ordinary man. It was, instead, integral to all his ways of being. It was also an achievement both taken from him and renounced. And so his music must have been a haunting, frustrating, and puzzling possibility for him during the almost 35 years he lived without playing or singing.

Dock Boggs became famous in the conventional sense—that is, known to a public beyond his home precincts of Wise County, Virginia, and Letcher County, Kentucky—twice in his life. In 1927 he recorded eight songs for the Brunswick recording company in New York City and a few years later, four songs for Lonesome Ace in Chicago, a one-man company which went under in 1929, shortly after the recordings were made. Dock's hopes for a recording career went with it. He was initially discovered exactly as most important mountain musicians were. Recording executives, in this case from Brunswick, traveled through the Southern mountains auditioning talent to create recordings for a whole new musical market of country folk and rural migrants to the cities. Their tastes and interests were being discovered and catered to by the new recording industry and by radio, beginning in the mid-

twenties and reaching a peak in the first years of the Depression. The Brunswick people came to Norton, Virginia, to set up at the hotel, and of some 75 musicians who came forward, Dock was one of the few banjo players. His distinctive sound apparently caught the talent scouts from his first notes. They only needed to hear him play a few bars of his "Country Blues," a rearrangement of a traditional song entitled "Hustlin' Gamblers," and of "Down South Blues," a song he had adapted to the banjo and his voice from a blues record. His being recorded constitutes an important chapter in the documentation by commercial record companies of the history of the Anglo-, African-, and ethnic-American musical traditions.

This first musical career was short despite Dock's efforts to record more and to make music his source of livelihood. His second encounter with fame lasted longer, though it did not occur until the 1960s, the last decade of his life. Several of his Brunswick sides enjoyed an underground reputation among students of American country music, a small group at first but one aware of the cultural riches available on early commercial recordings. Charles Seeger, John and Alan Lomax, the painter Thomas Hart Benton, Robert Gordon, and Harry Smith were among the members of a group who kept Dock Boggs' music alive in a cultural world distant from the rural cultures that created and sustained such music. The folk revival of the 1960s generated new collectors who

searched out practitioners of the vernacular music of White and Black Americans. New musicians never before recorded were brought before the college-age and urban audiences that supported the revival. Many musicians known only through older recordings or lore were located and once again performed before audiences very different from the rural folk and working-class city dwellers whose music this actually was.

So it was that Dock Boggs' second career began. Three weeks after Mike Seeger located and met Dock in June 1963 at his home in Norton, Virginia [described by Seeger in this booklet], Dock made the first of what would be many festival appearances in the next seven years—at the American Folk Festival in Asheville, North Carolina. These seven years also included three Folkways albums of his music [reissued here]—far more than had been recorded in the late 1920s—and an album of excerpts from Seeger's interviews with Dock.

This essay draws upon nearly 40 hours of interviews with Dock taped by Mike Seeger. The tapes record a range of situations and reflections: Dock's and Mike's first meetings; the first festival appearances and Dock's nervous introductions to his songs, as well as his later, personally and musically more assured performances; times at his home in Norton, Virginia, chatting casually over meals or in cars en route to one or another musical event; reminiscences about his life and the sources for his songs and his style; and several intense, inti-

mate, troubled talks with Mike Seeger, the man Dock came to see as his closest friend after their unexpected meeting in June 1963.

Two important dates: April 29, 1954, when Dock worked his last shift in the coal mines; and the date more difficult to verify, when Dock pawned his banjo to a friend and gave up making music. In the 1960s he repeatedly commented that he had not played for 25 years and spoke of having just begun to play shortly before Mike Seeger appeared. Twenty-five years before 1963 would have been 1938, but Dock had ceased being an active musician a good while before that year.

The evidence for a specific date is fragmentary, but Dock implies in one statement that he pawned his banjo during a "bank holiday" in the midst of the Depression. He needed cash desperately, he remembered, and none of the banks were open. The bank holiday may well have been the one of early spring 1933, just before F.D.R.'s inauguration, when virtually every bank in the country had closed to prevent runs on their funds. The economy was so straitened in the Southern mountains by early 1930 that Dock was unable to continue playing for money. People simply had no cash, let alone surplus funds to support buying tickets for dances. Recordings were an even greater luxury. After Dock recorded four sides for the Lonesome Ace Company in late 1929, he was able to sell them locally for only a short time. By June 1930 he was forced to return his stock to Lonesome Ace

for a credit of \$70, the cost at wholesale of some 140 recordings.

His many references years later to when he gave up playing indicate how slowly his hopes died. It may well not have been until sometime around 1938, the "25 years ago" of 1963, that Dock finally resigned himself to a life in the mines. The banjo, temporarily pawned to a friend in 1933 in expectation that such hard times could not last much longer, would not be his again until retirement. Choosing then to revive his banjo-playing, Dock's only expectation would have been the recovery of memories of a time when he hoped for a different life. How long before Mike Seeger's visit he retrieved the instrument is not clear. Sometimes he said he had gotten it only a few weeks earlier, at others that he had been practicing for about six months. His recovery of his astounding technique and of many of his songs so that he could record and perform immediately after meeting Seeger was, in any case, a remarkable feat. It attests to both will and a superb musical talent. A musician of such quality might conceivably, after so many years, bring back his music with a few months' intensive practice, but I would guess that Dock in fact had labored longer, perhaps from 1956, the second year of his retirement.

Recollection has its own rhythms, times when details and textures flood the mind and times when it seems parched, barely able to mark the simplest chronologies. The mind turns back upon

itself differently in response to another's questions than it does in its own seemingly random ruminations. Mike Seeger's questions direct the early interviews, as does his effort to reconstruct a basic outline of Dock's life; as time passed and the relationship between the two men deepened, Dock seemed to return to what most concerned him: the rupture in his musical career and its causes; his religious beliefs and practices, particularly in terms of whether his playing music was sinful, as some of his community insisted; and his anxieties about a return to active music-making.

The historical importance of Dock Boggs' life as a coal miner is equal not only to that of his musical achievement but also to that of the powerful and famous who so often dominate history textbooks. To explore and to celebrate his role in the lives of his fellow workers and neighbors propose standards of value which violate those still taught to most Americans in school, enforced at work, and played out in the media. Only from lives such as his can we learn the full dimensions of American history. Incarnated in them are the dilemmas and promises of a democratic society that continues, however falteringly, in a struggle to realize itself. Dock's were the struggles carried on by working-class Americans: to discover and possess a measure of dignity, to earn a living in an economy which denies steady and decent work to most, to hold a marriage together against strains and humiliations, and to leave something of worth

for and in those who come after.

Dock worked the mines from the time he was 12 until he was 56, 1910 to 1954. In those 44 years he and his fellow miners knew brief periods of prosperity. Their capacity to sustain themselves in a constantly disrupted economic world requires recognition and respect. For a while, jobs would be plentiful and the pay good, as in the years just prior to and following World War I, enough so that many were able to unionize, a sign of stability and workers' economic independence. At other times jobs were scarce, the union destroyed or weakened, the pay barely enough—conditions so bad that in times like the early Depression, miners who had work were compelled, in return for starvation wages, to accept near feudal dominance by the coal operators. The Second World War brought prosperity again for seven to ten years, but then a new wave of mechanization threw almost three-quarters of the miners permanently out of the industry. By the time of Dock's retirement, he lived in one of the most economically depressed regions in the United States. The young and able-bodied migrated out to find work, while the aged and the injured—an especially large group in coal communities—remained, often in terrible poverty and loneliness.

Musical Influences and Social Changes

Speculations about what impels artists rarely do justice either to their art or to the wonderfully

perplexing human mystery of it. But reconstructing the process by which a particular artist acquires the basic craft for his expression can be valuable. Musical biography of a figure like Dock Boggs also has other merits. Not enough is yet understood about the history of American country music, its evolution, or the specific innovations within its traditions which steadily reshaped the music from the late 19th century to the present. Many musicians in the vernacular traditions have some distinguishing stylistic signature, but few are consistent innovators or inventors who build upon and extend significantly the expressive range of the music they inherit. Dock was one of these few.

Dock Boggs lived in a place and time of particularly intense and fast change. Youngest of ten children, he was born on February 7, 1898 in West Norton, Virginia, a railroad and mining center not yet a decade old. The motive and shape of economic change in the region were already settled by his birth: industrial capitalism dominated by a single extractive industry in which most owners directly pitted themselves against workers. The few other enterprises in the region were too marginal to complicate or soften the starkness of the conflict in the coal fields. His older siblings might have known a sharply contrasting way of life. Some were children when the senior Boggses were nearly self-sufficient farmers in the relative isolation of the southern mountains before the railroads were built to develop the timber and coal in

the last decades of the 19th century. Before Dock's birth the southern mountains protected an economy slowly being integrated into a regional market economy. Cash was scarce and people's expectations and relationships were relatively steady and sustained. Dock's father bore the brunt of transition from a settled and agrarian life to earning wages and living in a small industrial city. The senior Boggs, born in 1849, moved from farming to blacksmithing and carpentry, two useful skills in a railroad and mining town. The oldest children must have shared some of the shocks of the many changes: the abandonment of three farms, each one successively smaller than the last; accommodation to the rhythms and authority structures of industrial work; the adjustment to urban-like environments and a diversity of peoples—mountaineers from different locales, African Americans from all over the South, as well as European immigrants.

By the time Dock was born, the family possessed only the remnants of an agrarian past. Dock's experiences were shaped entirely within the rawness of the new industrial world. The pace of change was fierce. When he went into the mines in 1910, the coal industry was on the verge of one of its periodic surges of expansion. New rail lines were being rapidly built, more coal camps and mines opened up throughout the region, and more African Americans and immigrants came to the region in large numbers to provide the labor. The

boom was particularly strong in the border counties of eastern Kentucky and southwestern Virginia where Dock lived, and it would not abate until a minor depression in 1921-22.

Older musical cultures were changing as much as the economic and social structures. Here Dock worked both as a progenitor of change and as a transmitter of older practices. Music was an important part of his family's daily activities. At least three of his older brothers played the banjo and sang: John, the oldest son, Dave, and Roscoe. His sister, Jane, the oldest child, also sang and played the banjo. And Dock recalled his sisters Annie and Laura as memorable singers. His father was also a fine singer. He played no instruments but he "could sing by note," that is, he could read music, an ability to be remarked in any vernacular musical culture, in which people usually learn and play by ear. Lee Hunsucker, Laura's husband and a Holiness preacher, was also an important musical influence, teaching Dock many of the sacred songs in his repertory.

All of the musical members of the family sang in styles that had persisted for at least several generations and, in some cases, for as long as a century or more. The banjo, their instrument, had been incorporated into mountain music more recently. Originally an African-American instrument, it entered Anglo-American musical worlds through the minstrel show and probably reached the mountains around the time of the Civil War.

Modal tunes common to mountain fiddle and ballad music could readily be accompanied by the banjo. Except for Roscoe, all the Boggsses played banjo in a style that had been stable for at least a generation. The banjo was frailed in the "knock-down" or "clawhammer" style. Banjo and fiddle combined made a string band of sorts, though solo banjo was the preferred instrument to accompany songs. The oldest songs in Dock's repertory, the ones longest in tradition, he learned from his family: "Pretty Polly," "Poor Ellen Smith," "John Hardy," "Cumberland Gap," "Little Ommie Wise," and others. Some derived from English ballads, others from American broadsides, a few—like "Ruben's Train"—date from the late 19th century and would have been new to Dock's much older siblings.

This music belonged to the occasions of an agrarian life. Songs passed the time and could tell amusing and diverting stories. Banjo and fiddle entertained large family and community gatherings like the play parties and dances that followed corn shuckings, bean stringings, molasses stirrings, house and barn raisings: "maybe they'd have a dance or a bean stringing, or a gathering where there'd be a bunch of young people . . . there'd be six or eight or ten couples to dance . . . times I remember it commencin' nine or ten o'clock in the night and dancing plum 'til after daylight. And maybe not having anything to dance by—just an old banjo. Played three or four old-time banjo

players to death nearby, they'd be near plum out for 'em to shake their foot by." Even after the Boggs family settled in Norton, portions of the old life remained available in the rural areas nearby.

Dock played in such communal settings, but during his most musically active years—in the Twenties—a new context for music-making became available. Some musicians could begin to imagine making a livelihood of what had before been simply an integral part of community life. Commercial radio came into being. In its first decade it depended primarily on live broadcasts and, in its need to fill hours of time, was open to every kind of performer. Initially independent of radio, though soon increasingly tied to it, was the emerging record industry, equally hungry to discover musicians and musics through which to expand a nascent market. Dock's music could now become a commodity consumed apart from a community of familiars, by an "audience" engaged with "performers" who would, in time, themselves become commodities of a kind. Audience though they might become, many of Dock's listeners, and those who bought his records in the 1920s, continued to share a cultural and occupational world. They were miners, occasionally other industrial workers, and those still trying to live on the land, though for most of them farming provided only a part-time alternation with wage-paying jobs.

In the 1960s, his appreciators were college students and professionals in towns and cities far

from the coalfields. Something called "folk music" had become one of the musics of choice among parts of an urban, professional populace with no roots in any part of the South. He sometimes wondered, pleased though he was that they valued his music, what grounded their interest. This change in his audience represented almost as deep a shift in cultural context and history as the movement to music-making as a profession. For Dock it was also a more disorienting change than the earlier one, demanding and frightening as that may have been. His place as a musician in his own working-class culture had been taken, in his thirty-year absence, by younger musicians whose innovations moved country music beyond where he had taken it. Bluegrass, country-and-western styles, and rock-and-roll—all derived from the same vernacular roots as his—were by the 1960s the popular idioms among his own people.

Dock's capacity to move across these different settings and groups testifies not only to his having greater musical gifts than his siblings, but also to his having acquired his music in an environment characterized by the interactions of an astounding variety of cultural groups: African Americans from all over the South, Hungarians, Italians, Greeks, Poles, Ukrainians, to name only a few. Each embodied different musical traditions. Added to the mixture was the presence of people from other, formerly isolated, parts of the southern mountains who brought rich local stylistic traditions, differ-

ent songs, and alternative verses to familiar ones. A world of bounded and comprehensible sounds had erupted. Some “old-time” mountain musicians found much of these new musics only cacophonous, but every musician, whatever his or her cultural group, could not help picking up something from the others. The interchanges were not equal in frequency or quality. Mountain musicians exchanged most with those from other parts of the mountains simply because less translation was required. The ear and pulse did not have to be re-oriented. African Americans and native-born Whites also influenced each other greatly in the new milieu. Non-English speaking immigrants maintained many of their own musical traditions for at least a generation, but they seem never to have much influenced the rapidly evolving musical scene in the southern mountains. (In contrast, in Louisiana and Texas various European ethnic musics intermingled freely with their Anglo- and African-American counterparts, eventually to create distinctive syntheses.)

In the mountains the presence of so many culture groups and subgroups created a rich and exhilarating musical world. The explosive combinations of styles, instruments, and new songs that resulted constituted an expressive feast, and one of the great periods of creativity in American musical history arose from it. New social formations and the coming of a fully industrialized capitalist economy also meant that every mode of expression was

being tested and pressed by experience, requiring new forms and eliciting powerful feelings. Innovation and synthesis were also promoted and accelerated by the needs of commercial radio and records, themselves institutions of the new.

Early in his musical development, Dock Boggs was drawn to African-American music and to styles and songs brought to his region by White musicians traveling up from Tennessee and from other sections of Virginia and eastern Kentucky. Sound recordings became an additional source. We know that recordings provided at least one of the routes through which the blues reached and moved Dock. They also promoted a more rapid exchange of styles and songs among Anglo-Americans within the region. He learned “Railroad Tramp” from a record, probably from the version made by Ernest Stoneman in 1927, and he knew Riley Puckett’s singing only through records. His fascination with African-American music most distinguished his music, however, and stimulated his creation of a banjo style which combined elements of African- and Anglo-American instrumental styles.

Dock’s reminiscences evoke a small boy entranced by music, with an ear already sharp, and original enough by the age of nine or ten to seek new sounds beyond the family world.

Two especially magical stories about his early musical experiences involve African-American music and musicians and signify his intense

attraction. In one he remembers back, perhaps to quite early childhood, to one of his first hearings of “John Henry.” “There’s a Negro used to walk from Dorchester to Sutherland, and on weekends he’d take his guitar and be walkin’ up the track . . . where I lived . . . I’d get out and follow him. . . . His name was Go Lightning. And he was very nice and kind and I’d beg him—I was just a little boy, of course. Music always thrilled me when I was a boy. Seemed like I just could hear a piece, a sad piece, a lonesome piece—why, it’d thrill me from the top of my head to the soles of my feet. And so, I’d walk along after him, I didn’t have no nickels and dimes to give him . . . Course he picked and he’d take up a collection . . . but I’d beg him to sit on the end of the ties, and I’d follow him plumb from Needmore . . . to Sutherland a lot of times to get to hear him play two, three, four pieces and a lot of times I heard him play ‘John Henry’ and I learnt it partly, learnt some of the words from him.” Other White mountain musicians of this generation tell similar stories about the first time they heard a Black musician; their vivid recollections register how striking the music was to them.

Dock’s other story specifies the primary influence on his banjo style. It probably occurred at about the time Dock started working in the coal mines. Though he was only twelve, the fact of his working full-time would have given him the kind of freedom and the knowledge to “play hooky,” as he put it, at night and go from Norton to

Dorchester, the mostly Black neighboring coal town. Dorchester then had about three thousand residents, just before World War I. Most worked the coke ovens, jobs so dangerous and unpleasant that they often were reserved for Black people and immigrants. One night Dock decided to go over to hear an African-American string band at a dance. The instrumental combination, familiar now to any bluegrass fan, was then unusual and memorable: mandolin, banjo, guitar, and fiddle. Dock told this story many times. In each version he portrays himself hovering at the edges of a crowd of African-American dancers and listeners, or as hiding outside and overhearing. He most noticed the banjo player: “I heard this fellow play the banjo. . . and I said to myself—I didn’t tell anybody else—I want to learn how to play the banjo kinda like that fellow does. I don’t want to play like my sister and my brother. I am gonna learn just how to pick with my fingers. . . . It was several years before I got hold of a [banjo].”

Near this time one of his brothers brought another Dorchester musician to the Boggs’ house. Jim White was a blue-eyed Black man who played in a brass band. But he also played banjo and picked the tunes note by note, a style Dock was already drawn to, in contrast to the knockdown frailing style used by Jane and John, his two oldest siblings. Dock’s rendition of “Turkey in the Straw,” itself a tune in African-American tradition, followed closely what he remembered of Jim White’s

playing of it.

Even before large numbers of African Americans settled in the coal counties of central Appalachia, Black musicians had traveled through parts of the mountains leaving traces of their music in the practice of some mountaineers. Some were peddlers, others exclusively wandering minstrels, some were early railroad workers. Black folk music of the late 19th and early 20th centuries influenced White country music profoundly. Neither proximity to Black musicians nor the coincidence of hearing the music itself, however, explains why some White musicians responded directly to this world of sound and rhythm and others did not. Blacks and Whites throughout the South had been exchanging music for at least two centuries so that what had once been distinctively West African or British now represented two intimately related, mutually derived musics. Yet Dock's engagement with African-American music remains exceptional in its intensity and particularity.

Until he got his first banjo, Dock played on Roscoe's. Roscoe taught him "Cuba" and was musically and personally closer than John, the much older brother. Roscoe's banjo-playing may have shaped Dock's, since he also favored picking the notes: "Brother Roscoe, he didn't pick the 'knock-down' way, but he just picked with one finger and a thumb . . . and some pieces he picked pretty well." Homer Crawford provided the other identifiable formative influence. An itinerant musician

and photographer from Tennessee, he taught Dock "Hustlin' Gambler," the basis for "Country Blues." He also showed Dock some more of the D tunings Dock favored. Other musicians were also sources, but most came after Dock had established his basic style: Jim Begley, who taught him "Schottische Time," and Byrd Moore, with whom Dock played on and off for 15 years, and from whom Dock learned parts of his version of "Careless Love." They had in common a banjo style (though Moore usually played the guitar) that emphasized picking instead of frailing.

Dock's serious playing did not begin until he was married in 1918: "Commenced playin' I played for parties, bean stringin's, first one thing and another where they'd have a party in the country. . . I was just a 'playing for the fun of it.'" Sometimes he played alone, other times with a guitarist like Byrd Moore or Gus Underwood, a fellow miner, or Charlie Powers, one of the musicians of the Powers Family band. It may also have been during these ten years before he recorded that Dock had a small string band with a father and son named Holland, two fellow miners.

The years from 1918 to 1927 became hard ones. In the first years of their marriage, Dock and his wife Sara enjoyed what would turn out to be their greatest economic prosperity. Dock had a contract job in the mines in 1918, an arrangement through which part of a mine was in effect leased to him. He gave it up, however, because Sara wanted to

move near her family. Hard times followed, for the Boggs family and for the whole area, when the market for coal became depressed after World War I. They moved several times between southwestern Virginia and eastern Kentucky, wherever there were jobs in coal. Wages got so depressed that Dock couldn't make a living from mining and went into bootlegging. Mountain people had for years depended on making liquor to cushion economic depression, but it was also a rough business: "You know I never was bloodthirsty, wanting just to kill somebody. But I come awful near to gettin' killed and killing people myself. But back then you had to be [ready] to stand firm on what you was. If people thought they could walk on you, they'd absolutely do it."

The dangers of bootlegging were, however, only a symptom of the strained social and economic fabric of a region so rapidly developed. Population had increased enormously within a generation through the immigration of people of very different cultures. A subsistence agrarian culture had been replaced by an industrial order. People had to create new social forms to organize their lives, and their capacity to do so was challenged by the persistent boom and bust cycle of the coal industry. They were forced to move again and again in search of work often enduring working conditions of such savagery that few social restraints could hold. Violence filled the Boggs's lives. Dock himself engaged in several gun battles, was ambushed,

his life threatened by a local sheriff. He also fought bloody and often drunken battles that left him or his opponents disabled for days. In one, he broke a finger so badly that he couldn't load coal for a month.

This violence was not, as some writers would have it, an inexorable element of "mountaineer" character. The conditions for dependably ordered human relations did not exist because of the governing political economy. These were years when the operators uprooted the United Mine Workers wherever they had achieved organization and repressed any attempt at unionization. Men and their families were unprotected. Miners were forced to work long days for low wages. Injury and death were common. The coal owners often openly disregarded the well-being of the miners, and this only reinforced other factors subverting people's capacities to maintain order in their own terms. There was too much death. "There's so many of my buddies and my friends I worked with that are dead, and gone, done dead and gone, so many of them killed in the mines, several that's been shot and killed."

Dock's married life had its troubles. He and Sara discovered, early in the 1920s, that she could not have children. He drank, played music, bootlegged, and otherwise carried on like a "rambling man," the admiring and damning term used in the region for any musician. Sara strongly objected to some of these activities, the music especially. And

Dock did not get along with her family. Matters were tense enough that one time Dock badly beat one of his brothers-in-law and, at another, he feared being killed by his wife's relatives.

Music played no clear role either in sustaining or enmeshing Dock in these days. His recollections about most of the Twenties rarely focused on it. He continued to play, adding slowly to his stock of songs, perhaps even practicing with some regularity. No evidence exists to indicate that he had any great ambitions for his music. When Dock told and retold the story of his audition for the Brunswick people in 1927, its central element was a tone of surprise and naivete—as though the whole experience had just “happened” to an untutored country boy accidentally blessed with musical skill.

Talent scouts were just beginning to comb the southern mountains for prospects, so Dock may well have never thought of making records, though I suspect otherwise. The eight songs he recorded are sung and played with the kind of power only available to a musician deeply involved in his art. Everything we know about Dock's musical life from young boyhood on indicates he was persistently engaged in it and ambitious. He once commented that his brothers and sisters “were limited to just a few pieces, four, five, six maybe ten, twelve pieces is all they could play. And after I got me a banjo of my own I commenced trying to reach out and learn other pieces.” In a chaotic

decade, music may not have proved a stable center for Dock, but it seems to have supported the hope, however inchoate, of escaping the worst of his life while it gave him the means to express some of the exactions and terrible beauties of his daily experience.

Music as a Livelihood

His audition at the Norton Hotel in late 1926 or early 1927 changed Dock's life. Once the opportunity to record became a reality, Dock realized that through music he might make a very different life for himself than he had ever imagined. At stake was not only escaping the coal mines but, more transformatively, being able to devote himself to what he loved. He soon became intensely ambitious for musical success, aware of his ability and its worth.

Dock could not have known how dependent his expansive sense of opportunity was on the final boom of an inflated economy. The three years, 1927-1929, during which he moved towards a musical career, were the most prosperous ones of the decade, even in the coalfields. National companies like Brunswick, RCA Victor, Vocalion, and Okeh competed for new musicians, customers, and markets. Radio stations came into existence with hours of air time to fill. People like Dock's neighbors had a little surplus to spare for an occasional record or a ticket to an evening of music at the local school. When Dock went to Chicago some-

time in the summer of 1929 to record for Lonesome Ace, he reasonably assumed this would be but one of many recording sessions to come. He had been promised more sessions by Brunswick, and other companies had also expressed interest. In October the collapse came. The effects were gradual for many Americans, but in the Southern mountains the Depression came swiftly and severely.

People dream about second chances as redemption for disappointment and failure. Life never lends itself to exact repetition, and so no one ever experiences such dreams. Dock may have come as close as anyone can.

He loved singing and performing again. A kind of peace sometimes came with it. But though he became more polished in his introductions, more able to appear relaxed in performance, he never felt free with the folk revival audiences. He sensed his status as an object. Though proud of earning enough money from the music to buy his first new car, other satisfactions eluded him. He probed painfully to locate the sources of his discontent. There was also Dock's own vital rediscovery of his music. Listening to the records he made in the 1960s is to encounter a music made anew, marvelously unlike the singing and playing of anyone else. At his best he might have been singing to his own soul.

To the end he was extraordinary. He let noth-

ing important rest, thinking about and making new as much as he could of what he felt and heard. He died February 7, 1971. It was his birthday. His music remains.

-Barry O'Connell, Amherst College

Barry O'Connell's acknowledgments: the late Ralph Finzler, Richard Derbyshire, and Gary Floyd of the Folklife Program, Smithsonian Institution, generously supported the project with tapes and time, advice, and training for Barry O'Connell. Gary Floyd deserves special thanks for duplicating all the interview tapes. Madeline Casey, English Department, Amherst College, transcribed several of the tapes.

Dock Boggs,
Napoleon Boggs
(a nephew),
and Lee Hunsucker,
c. 1915



Some Personal Notes

Mike Seeger, 1998

When I was about 7 years old, my parents let me begin to use the valuable variable-speed turntable phonograph that my mother used to transcribe music from field recordings for her folk song books. It was our only electronic music equipment, as my parents didn't want us listening to the radio. Our family record collection consisted mostly of field recordings of Southern traditional music and a few early 78rpm recordings of the same kind of music. One was an aluminum disk of Dock Boggs' "Danville Girl," which I learned about 15 years later was a copy of his 1927 Brunswick recording.

My father and mother were recent converts to the sounds of traditional rural music, having been schooled in formal concert music, in which they were avant garde thinkers and composers. An important event in their conversion to advocacy of traditional music took place during one of the occasional gatherings at artist Tom Benton's apartment in New York City in about 1932, during which he played Dock's 1927 Brunswick recording of "Pretty Polly" for them. My father told me later that this recording, made only about 5 years earlier, helped him and my mother realize that, contrary to then-current musicological opinion, there really was a living American folk music. They evidently liked that recording well enough to copy it

onto the aluminum disc, which we could then play like all the other "field" recordings with an often-sharpened cactus needle. There was no easy cassette copying then.

For me that sound took a special place within the field recording world of Lead Belly, the Ward Family, Jimmie Strothers and so many others. Early re-releases of Dock's "Pretty Polly" on a late 1940s album by Alan Lomax and of "Sugar Baby" and "Country Blues" on Harry Smith's 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music* reminded me of the serious, raw, other-worldly power that Dock's music possessed.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, a few of us enthusiasts and players of old-time music—John Cohen, Ralph Rinzler, Art Rosenbaum, and a few others—began searching out some of those early country recording artists, and at the top of my list was Dock. But where to look? I remember asking Ernest Stoneman and others, but no one had heard of him. Then, after a New Lost City Ramblers concert at Antioch College in early 1963, I met collector and musician Gus Meade. He also was interested in Dock Boggs' music. He told me of meeting a cousin of Dock's who was working nearby in Ohio, and who had mentioned Dock's long-ago whereabouts as around the mines near Mayking in Kentucky.

So on our way back from a New Lost City Ramblers tour in southern California in early June, my wife, Marj, our three pre-school children,

and I started a side trip from Kingsport, Tennessee, up into southeastern Kentucky. We had no idea whether our information was correct or even if Dock might still be living. Our first numbered road soon turned into rough dirt, and our heavily loaded Studebaker Lark station wagon helped grade the road a time or two as we struggled up the mountain.

In the first town we encountered, Eolia—not so much a town as a group of houses—was a country store and post office where we asked about Dock Boggs. It turned out this was the home community of Dock's wife Sara, and they directed us to Hemphill, where they thought they still lived. On our way to Hemphill, we stopped in downtown Neon, a coal mining town, and asked our way. Yes, they knew Dock, and our conversation quickly went beyond geographic directions to discussion of his music style: "He doesn't second (play back-up) while he sings, he picks the tune." This musical discussion on the streets of Neon indicates the depth of importance and understanding of music in Eastern Kentucky.

We followed our new directions over the mountain and into Pound, Virginia where we met a cousin who had seen Dock at a recent funeral, and on to Norton, a small coal mining and coke producing town in southwestern Virginia. It was late in the day, and the post office was closed, and Marj suggested looking in the phone book. Look in the phone book for Dock Boggs, the banjo pick-

er with that rough, wild voice? But listed he was, and after a call we went to visit him right there in Norton, at a modest, clean little house overlooking the railroad yard and coke ovens that bisected the town.

I certainly wasn't prepared for this. I could hardly believe that this was the Dock Boggs, alive and clear of mind. I'm sure I expressed admiration of his music but I know from later talks with him he wasn't sure what I was up to. Someone had recently come for a visit looking for songs to sing and, he expected, to copyright.

In a way Dock was better prepared than I was. He had just recently reclaimed his old Gibson Mastertone banjo that he had pawned to a friend nearly 25 years before and had started playing again. Dock and his wife, Sara, welcomed us in their home and warmed to our family, and we had a brief visit before it was time to get a motel and put the kids to bed. I returned later that evening and we had a good visit, during which he recorded a few songs and a brief interview. I asked him if he wanted to play for some of the audiences who liked old-time music, and with his OK, I contacted Newport Folk Festival, the American Folk Festival in Asheville, North Carolina, and Folkways Records, all of whom wanted to engage him.

About two weeks later I returned to Norton, and we traveled to Asheville, where he played his first performance for city folks—probably his first public performance in at least 30 years. Most of

his earlier performances had been fairly informal and close to his home and friends. We started recording immediately, and in July he traveled to Cambridge to play at Club 47 and to Newport, Rhode Island, for the Folk Festival, where he played "Oh, Death" as the red and blue lights played on billows of fog that rolled out of the darkness and across the stage.

He wasn't always at ease as a performer when away from home. Even when he recorded in New York in 1927, he recalled having the recording director call for some whiskey to settle his nerves. At Newport Folk Festival, where he played for more than ten thousand people, he definitely needed support, this time not by alcohol but by my reassurance that they really wanted to hear him and valued his music. I don't think that the tranquilizer I gave him affected him at all. Alcohol probably would have been better, but I didn't think that would be appropriate. He was trying to live right.

Playing for small friendly audiences, especially around home, is where he really loosened up and let go.

I usually visited Dock and Sara several times a year. I'd always stay with them in their small home either in Norton or later in what remained of a mining camp called Needmore. I'd sleep in an old country bed under tons of those beautiful old quilts made by Sara, Dock's sister, and others.

My remembrance of a day there starts with

hearing Sara up well before daybreak with the radio on, getting breakfast ready—at least one kind of meat, some eggs, always biscuits, gravy, store bread if you wanted it, which I didn't, jellies, fried or stewed apples, and so forth. Dinner and supper always included plenty of meat, potatoes, well-cooked greens with fat meat, and canned green beans out of Sara's garden, where she was often busy in the summer. In those years they had plenty. Dock would always give thanks before each meal, and often they'd apologize for the humble fare which always seemed a feast to me.

Then we'd talk a little and Dock and I would look over songs, go to his sister's house to record, or perhaps ramble around a little in the car, visiting. A couple of times we went to visit Scott Boatright, with whom he'd played music in the late 1920s. Dock wanted me to meet his friends and help them get recorded too.

On a couple of occasions I went to Sara's holiness church with them. Dock and I sat in the rear while Sara got involved in the powerful music and preaching. I could really see how people could get carried away with the wide-open emotional energy in that big room. But Dock didn't. Like many older independent Southern people I've known, he had deeply held religious beliefs, fundamental perhaps in the purest sense, and kept his own church within.

Our best recording studio was the front room of his sister Laura's home, an old frame house out

in the country near Guest River. Laura was widow of Lee Hunsucker, the source of many of Dock's songs. It was quiet there and it had those serene old country sights and smells that are just about gone now. Dock was relaxed and could best concentrate on his music and songs there.

When we first started recording, he wanted to have guitar backing on a lot of his songs. He arranged for a local guitar-player friend of his to back him on our first session, but it simply didn't work. They seemed to be in two different musical worlds. I admired the playing of Hub Mahaffey on Dock's old Vocalion records and so became his guitar player by default as well as his occasional opening act, agent, and recordist. He always wanted guitar on more pieces than I did, so we settled on accompaniment only for the songs where he felt the need most strongly.

We presented concerts a number of times together, each doing a set on our own, with me backing him on some of his songs. In the beginning he asked for guidance with songs to sing for his new citified audience, so we planned his sets together. He relied on this less as time went on. He occasionally requested songs for me to do on my sets.

Dock was a physically big man. In his youth and early manhood he'd loved a good time, a drink or two, testing his strength in a fight, and testing his will, too, during those rough-and-tumble moonshining and gun-toting prohibition times.

He was big in his world view too: a union man, working alongside and admiring the music of African-Americans; thoughtful, viewing the world from a working man's viewpoint and favoring those, like himself, who struggled on the bottom socio-economic rung.

And he had dark times as well, as you can sense from his songs. His banjo music was rarely comedic, although much old-time banjo music was; it was intended to engage you, to move you.

Likewise, in conversation, he was always telling you what was on his mind directly and trying to get the same in return, to engage you. This included matters of religious belief. One of my regrets is that I didn't talk directly with him about that; I think he could have considered anyone's belief and dealt with it. He was a big man.

I wish I could remember more of our time and travels together. I was always trying to find out what his life was like 30 or 40 years before, and his memory was certainly better than mine is now as I try to recall our time together 35 years ago. Perhaps some random remembrances will give you a feeling for what it was like then.

As we drove around Wise County, he would tell who lived in this house and that one, what happened, who got shot or arrested or whatever. Some stories were long, especially as we passed the little house where an over-bearing lawman had broken in on him as he was entertaining a few of his music fans in the late 1920s with a little liquor

and music. Dock stood his ground, the lawman left, but Dock left Virginia for several years to avoid possible jail time.

As we drove the far-away highways, talk was of the old days and anything else. We traveled together sometimes on Anne Romaine's Southern Folk Festival, which toured in the late 1960s presenting Southern traditional and topical music to Southern audiences. He and Elizabeth Cotten developed a good friendship. He liked her music, too. He had told me earlier that if he were to start all over playing again, he would want to play guitar like Mississippi John Hurt.

I got Dock to record one of my favorite stories of his exploits. Though it would be far better in his own words, I'll summarize his 20-minute story here. I think it illustrates Dock's young, rambunctious wit and how some people entertain themselves. As he told the story, his tone of voice ranged from good-natured storytelling to injured anger at being arrested, and at various times during the story, scorn, taunting, and empathy for "Aus." I believe this took place in the late 1920s:

Dock recommended a friend, Aus, who needed work, to be the assistant to the constable, "Banjo" Haynes. After Aus got the job he went to "fee-grabbing," that is, arresting people for minor offenses, including alcohol-drinking. Dock and a couple of his friends went to a place where they sold a little wine, and Webb, one of his buddies, claimed that wine wouldn't make him drunk. Dock

said it would, and they proceeded to test their claims. After about a half a gallon of wine and 30 minutes, Webb began bragging about how good a fighter he was, and in good spirits they decided to go outside and "spar some," not try to hurt one another. "We's good friends, just acting the fool, playing, you know." Aus appeared and arrested them both and said he'd take them to jail that afternoon. Dock pleaded, saying it was all in good fun and they weren't bothering anyone else, but it was no use. So off to jail they went. Aus didn't return that night as he was supposed to, and next morning the judge, a friend of Dock's, sent for them and asked why Aus hadn't appeared. Dock said he didn't know but had heard that Aus himself had gotten drunk that night and wrecked his car. As he started writing out the papers, the judge noted that the overnight jail stay had caused Webb to lose a "shift of work" that day. Dock was on the night shift and could still make his shift. The judge wadded up the papers and threw them in the waste basket and said "Hell, dismissed. I'll learn him [Aus] to tend to his affairs..."

Though Dock was free, he still had a fine to pay and couldn't get the money to pay it. The judge was leaving the bench soon, and Dock didn't want the judge to be responsible for the fine and was determined to serve his time in lieu of paying the fine. Besides, since he knew everybody at the jail, he knew he wouldn't be mistreated. On his way to see the judge, he had a drink. He convinced the

judge that he should serve his time in jail, so the judge reluctantly signed a permit to jail, as well as a release and said "You hunt old Aus up and make him take you to jail and don't you show him this release. You can get out after 12 o'clock tonight." Dock determined to stay all night, and the judge even gave him a dollar to pay his cab fare back home. Dock arranged to have Aus come and pick him up, but Aus didn't come on time. Dock went to Aus's house about 7 o'clock and after an unanswered "peck on the door," he went on in. Inside, there was "a great big fire burning in the grate, there was the bed turned down, clean . . . and me about two thirds drunk anyhow and I's sleepy." He pulled off his clothes and went to sleep for a few hours in the assistant constable's bed. [Dock laughed as he told this part of the story.] When Aus and his girlfriend came in, Dock said he wanted to go to jail right then. Aus had just drained his car radiator to keep it from freezing, and while he was refilling it for the trip to jail, Dock bought some whiskey from Aus's girlfriend to drink on the way to jail in Whitesburg. The jailer, whom he knew well, got him a couple of blankets and never even locked the door and Dock went to sleep. The next morning he showed his release papers, waited for breakfast with the jailer's family, and then thumbed a ride back to Neon, where he bought a few drinks with the unused cab fare and went to work that night.

Such stories were entertaining for us both. And

it made me marvel at this man who survived the guns, fights, alcohol, and 40-odd years in the mines, and yet still possessed 10 fingers and his wits. But it wasn't all smooth and easy. After a program in a Blackey, Kentucky community center, we shared a sleeping room. In the morning he had a rough awakening, having dreamt of "burning hell." Certainly a man who sang serious songs of death, drinking, and jail must have had some darkness within. We all do. But Dock worried about things. His concerns about music, carousing, heaven, and hell were certainly not helped by a rigid, jealous church. And by about 1965, he had started occasionally drinking alcohol again.

On one of my recording trips, after I had known Dock for a couple of years, I arrived at his house in Norton to find that he was seriously into drink. He was high in the best sense of the word, as if his entire intellect—and all his worries and cares—had been set free. He was jolly, imaginative, as witty as anyone I've heard or read of anywhere. I don't recall any other such experience. It felt like I was in some rare novel of old times. Of course, I wanted to use my recording machine but I felt that it wouldn't be fair. It might have been. I wished that some of my friends could be there to enjoy this. Harry Smith, Jon Pankake—they would've had a great time. So I listened and occasionally took part in his carrying on, which demanded full participation of anyone there. He wanted acceptance and especially understanding.

His wit was occasionally barbed playfully towards Sara. She wasn't amused, although a few times I think she was suppressing a smile; she'd seen it before, she knew it, and she, unlike me, was not just a visitor. (She certainly didn't understand or accept his boisterous drinking, but she loved him and I doubt that he would have lived into his 70s without her.) So for a while that day we had constant jolly talk as Dock carried on, and I got a sample of what it might have been like in the 1920s. As I recall, we weren't able to record on that trip.

I've often wondered if his second—his 1960s—music career was good for him. When I first met him, he seemed at peace, and many of the frustrations and old disappointments of trying to make a career in music in the late 1920s seemed to have faded. He was living a sober, retired life, occasionally going to church. But all the old sparks were there, though diminished, and his new engagement in music caused old rumblings in his psyche to surface again: drinking, religion, success, and what else only he knew. His second musical career helped him to express his music, to feel accomplishment and worth (if not entirely in the eyes of some local church members), and to travel and meet with young urban people. He often said that he was happy to be able to pass on his music and these old songs to the younger generation, and he loved, really loved, talking with the young people he met in his travels.

He got some local notoriety again too. A local aspiring banjo picker—I think he worked in a hardware store—bought a copy of Pete Seeger's *How To Play the Five String Banjo*, then came to Dock to learn more. Jack Wright, a college student, singer, and songwriter from nearby Wise, befriended Dock and started the Dock Boggs Festival, which has survived 30 years.

In 1964, he was able to buy his only new car, a sign of success which made both of us happy.

His very last years, when he was not well, were a difficult time for him. He was not able to travel as much and perhaps was hoping for more than was possible. For us, his friends and lovers of his music, his second musical career was certainly worthwhile, as we would have not had any of the music on these recordings or have known what kind of a person he really was. I'm sure he would smile to realize all the good attention he's been getting around the time of his hundredth birthday. All of his music recordings are available again, Barry O'Connell has written the excellent biography excerpted in this booklet, Greil Marcus has devoted a chapter to him in *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes*, and he remains a strong part of the lives of many of us who knew him. Once again, younger generations are becoming intrigued with his life and music and are singing his songs, in ways that are reminiscent of his style and feeling. I like to think that we, including Dock, were—and are—all the better for

all of his music.

Dock's banjo picking style

Dock usually played the melody of his songs while singing rather than accompanying himself with just the chords. He played clawhammer style on only a few songs, none of which are on this recording. His basic technique is a mixture of parlor guitar playing and a banjo technique usually called "up-picking." With this style he plays the fifth, fourth, or third strings with his thumb, the second string upwards with his first finger, and first string also upwards with his second finger. When playing melody on the second string he picks upward with his index finger, following occasionally with a downward stroke on the first two strings with his second finger. And when playing melody on the first string, he picks upward with his second finger and he occasionally follows with a stroke downwards across the first two strings with his index finger. Very logical. When he played songs in his "modal" tunings in the key of D such as "Pretty Polly" or "Country Blues," the combination of his melody-playing with playing of the other open strings, especially the fifth string, gave his playing its distinctive, sometimes dissonant sound. It was a style possessed by no other recorded player. It perfectly fit a lot of the older, previously unaccompanied songs in mountain tradition.

Mike Seeger's Acknowledgments: Thanks to Alexia Smith for helping me with this project and especially with editing these notes. Sincere thanks to Barry O'Connell for his thorough, thoughtful essay. Additional thanks to Norm Cohen for searching out the origins of "Down South Blues."

The Songs

In the following notes for each song are listed the banjo tuning at standard pitch, recording date, and Dock's source for the piece. His brother-in-law, Lee Hunsucker, was his main source. Some of the composed songs are rooted deeply in tradition and may be versions of older songs. Note: Dock often tuned his banjo below standard pitch, sometimes by as much as three half-steps.

-Mike Seeger,
Rockbridge County, VA, August, 1998

Disc One

- 1 Down South Blues **gDGBD**
24 September 1963

Dock learned this from one of the at least five recordings of it made in 1923 by female African-American blues singers with piano accompaniment. It was originally a three-line blues; he made it two-line and added a verse. All verses are basically traditional in character.

2 Country Blues #CGAD

26 June 1963

Song and basics of banjo style were learned from Homer Crawford, an itinerant photographer, fiddler, banjoist, and singer from Tennessee. It was originally called "Hustling Gamblers." Dock renamed it and added several verses.

3 Pretty Polly #DGBD

24 June 1963

This is one of the first pieces he learned when he began to play the banjo in his teens. He sometimes sang the last line "He threw her in the river where the water's 20-foot deep."

4 Coal Creek March gDGBD

23 September 1963

Dock couldn't remember who in particular he learned this from; he'd heard it from a number of players, first when he was in his teens.

5 My Old Horse Died gDGBD

23 September 1963

This is based on a verse from an advertisement from Banker's Life Insurance. Dock added words to it and set it to the tune of "Chicken Reel," a popular fiddle, banjo, and dance tune.

6 Wild Bill Jones gDGBD

14 December 1963

Dock learned this before he started playing banjo, from his oldest brother.

7 Rowan County Crew gCGBD

23 September 1963

He learned this about 1920 from brother-in-law Lee Hunsucker. Dock sang it for years before he evolved this very unusual arrangement at a seventh-fret position in the key of G.

8 New Prisoner's Song gCGBD

24 September 1963

Dock may have learned this fairly well-known song from his sister. It was also on at least one 1920s commercial recording.

9 Oh, Death #CGAD

26 June 1963

Dock learned this about 1930 from Lee Hunsucker, about whom he said, "I learned a lot of these old songs—half of them or more—from him 'cause he didn't play any kind of music-instrumental music—but he was a good singer and he was all the time singing . . . He could just memorize, seemed like, a song [if he] heard it sung a couple times and could sing it very near word by word, and the songs stuck with him."

10 Prodigal Son **f#CGAD**

14 December 1963

From Lee Hunsucker, about 1930.

11 Mother's Advice **gDGBD**

14 December 1963

From Lee Hunsucker, about 1930.

12 Drunkard's Lone Child **f#CGAD**

30 June 1963

From Lee Hunsucker, about 1930.

13 Bright Sunny South **gDGCD**

14 December 1963

From Lee Hunsucker in 1920s or 1930s. Dock evolved this banjo arrangement in mid-1963.

14 Mistreated Mama Blues **gCGBD**

23 September 1963

This is from a 1920s recording by a piano-accompanied blues singer, probably Sara Martin. Dock changed a few words.

15 Harvey Logan **gCGBD**

24 September 1963

From eastern Kentucky guitarist-singer Clintwood Johnson.

16 Mixed Blues **gDGBD**

3 June 1964

"It's my composition." -Dock Boggs

17 Old Joe's Barroom **gCGBD (played in G)**

3 June 1964

Dock learned this from a recording in the 1920s. He sang it as he worked in the mines and added verse 6.

18 Danville Girl **f#DGAD**

4 June 1964

Dock learned this from his brother Roscoe, who played it with one finger and thumb in this tuning.

19 Cole Younger **gDGBD**

3 June 1964

From Lee Hunsucker.

20 Schottische Time **gCGBD**

3 June 1964

Dock learned this long ago from an aging Tennessee blacksmith, Jim Begley, during a Sunday gathering with a few friends and some whiskey in a "field, kind of out in the woods" near Dorchester, Virginia.

21 Papa, Build Me a Boat **gDGBD**

3 June 1964

Dock learned this from Charlie Powers, who recorded with the Fiddlin' Powers Family band in the 1920s and was a member of Dock's band in the late 1920s.

22 Little Black Train gCGAD

4 June 1964

From Lee Hunsucker. The fifth-string tuning probably not intentional.

23 No Disappointment in Heaven gCGBD

(sung in G)

3 June 1964

Source unknown.

24 Glory Land f#DGAD

3 June 1964

From a written text given to his oldest sister by a traveling evangelist in the 1930s. Dock gave it this tune.

Disc Two

1 Banjo Clog gCGBD

3 June 1964

Dock cited many possible sources for this piece: Jim White and another local African-American banjoist both played it, as did Byrd Moore, who recorded with several string bands in the 1920s. All, including Dock, played it differently.

2 Wise County Jail gCGBD

4 June 1964

Dock put this song together about 1928 after an incident in which an overbearing lawman broke into his home and caught him enjoying music and liquor with some friends during prohibition times. Dock ejected the officer, packed up all his belongings, and left Virginia within hours for Kentucky to avoid arrest. He stayed there working in the mines until about the time the officer was shot to death a few years later.

3 Sugar Baby gDGCD

4 June 1964

Dock probably learned this from his oldest brother John, who used the same banjo tuning. This tuning is usually played in the key of G; here it is played in the key of D. Dock's sister Jane and brothers Dave and Roscoe also picked the banjo.

4 The Death of Jerry Damron f#CGAD

3 June 1964

The composer of this song is unknown. Damron's sister, Mrs. Millard Gamble, gave Dock the words to the song in the early 1930s shortly after the accident, with the hope that he would record it.

5 Railroad Tramp gCGBD

4 June 1964

Dock learned this from a phonograph recording of a singer accompanied by guitar in the late 1920s.

6 Poor Boy In Jail gDGBD

3 June 1964

"That's a song, some poetry that I picked up . . . I don't know where I got that." Dock composed the tune.

7 Brother Jim Got Shot gCGBD

5 June 1964

Dock learned this song about 1906 at a Sunderland, Virginia school house performance by the Lineback Family. They played fiddle, guitar, and banjo and were selling ballots (song sheets) and, Dock was fairly certain, pictures and song-books, none of which he could afford.

8 John Henry gDGBD

4 June 1964

From early childhood Dock heard this song from local banjo players, guitar players, and singers, but he especially remembers a Black guitarist known to him only as "Go Lightning" and a White guitarist, Clintwood Johnson.

9 Davenport fCFCD

27 July 1966

As a child, Dock heard his oldest brother John play this piece. He developed his version of the song later from memory.

10 Dying Ranger gCGBD

10 February 1968

Dock learned this about 1929 from fellow musician and miner Gus Underwood, a guitar player and singer, as they performed together in school-houses and restaurants in southeastern Kentucky.

11 Little Omie Wise gCGBD

10 February 1968

Learned as a child from his sisters Laura, Annie, and Jane. Dock worked it out with the banjo in his teens.

12 Sugar Blues gCGBD

10 February 1968

Dock learned this in the early 1920s from a recording of an African-American woman accompanied by a piano. He was pretty sure the vocalist's name was Sara Martin. He made this arrangement of the song in the mid-1960s.

13 Loving Nancy f#CGAD

10 February 1968

The text of this song was given to Dock about 1929 by a neighbor woman, Ms. Holbrook, who knew of Dock's music and wanted to help him by giving him this old song. Ms. Holbrook probably learned the song from her mother in southeastern Kentucky around the turn of the century.

14 Cuba f#DEAD

26 July 1966

Dock learned this from his brothers, mostly brother Roscoe, who played it with forefinger and thumb not clawhammer style.

15 John Hardy gDGBD

27 June 1963

Dock learned this from his oldest brother John and sister Jane, who both played it "knock-down" or clawhammer style on the banjo. Dock's style here is his usual mixture of thumb lead and what is usually referred to as "up-picking."

16 Peggy Walker gDGBD

26 July 1966

Dock couldn't remember who gave him the tune and a typewritten copy of the words for this song in the 1920s.

17 I Hope I Live a Few More Days gCGBD

26 July 1966

Dock's source for this song is someone from the Phillips family, who were relatives of his, about 1930.

18 Turkey In The Straw gCGBD

10 February 1968

Dock heard both Anglo- and African-American men playing this on the banjo, but patterned his version after the latter, which he preferred. He claims the sliding part at the end of the tune.

19 Calvary f#CGAD

10 February 1968

From Lee Hunsucker, who had a Holiness song book which included this song.

20 Roses While I'm Living gDGBD

27 July 1966

Dock learned this in the 1930s, when he lived in Hayman, Kentucky, from a neighbor, Bertha Holland, who put the song together.

21 Leave It There gDGBD

20 June 1968

Dock said he learned this from Lee Hunsucker and also was aware of its being in printed songbooks.

22 Prayer of a Miner's Child f#DGAD

26 July 1966

From a poem printed in the UMWA Journal, written by a teenager, Shirley Hill of Dragerton, Utah, in the mid 1960s. After reading the poem, Dock wrote Hill asking for and receiving permission to make it into a song.

23 Coke Oven March #DF#AD

10 February 1968

Dock made this instrumental in the mid-1920s, based on a melody from a friend's old wind-up music box.

24 Ruben's Train #DF#AD

3 June 1964

"I learned that from my brother Roscoe."

25 Cumberland Gap #BEAD

5 June 1964

Learned from Dock's brothers, some of whom played it in a similar style. His brother John, however, played it clawhammer style, with "double noting," occasionally using his thumb on the middle strings.

26 Careless Love gDGBD

10 February 1968

Dock heard this song from at least a dozen different people and from phonograph records as well. Verses were easily made up, he said, and he may have added some of his own.

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Discography

Dock Boggs: *Country Blues, Complete Early Recordings 1927-1929*. Revenant 1998.

Anthology of American Folk Music.

Smithsonian Folkways (SFW 40090) 1997

Mike Seeger: Southern Banjo Sounds.

Smithsonian Folkways 40107 1998.

Selected field recording projects by Mike Seeger on Smithsonian Folkways Recordings:

American Banjo, Three Finger & Scruggs Style

Smithsonian Folkways 40037

Close To Home (SFW 40097)

Mountain Music, Bluegrass Style (SFW 40038)

Mike Seeger has many recordings on Folkways and Smithsonian Folkways. For a complete list, visit <http://www.folkways.si.edu>. For a complete discography and other information, see Mike Seeger's website: <http://mikeseeger.pair.com>.

All of Dock Boggs' 1920s recordings were re-released in February, 1998, on Revenant 205, a CD/book entitled *Dock Boggs, Country Blues*. On that collection it is interesting to note the great change in his style between the 1927 and 1929 recordings. He tuned his banjo three keys lower (his D tuning down to A!) and his performance style became much closer to what you hear on these recordings. This probably happened as he adapted to semi-professional performance, often with a string band, and added a lot of new songs to his repertoire.

Full notes from the three original LP releases are

available at modest cost on request from Smithsonian Folkways mailorder. A recording of interviews released on Folkways (*Excerpts from Interviews with Dock Boggs, Legendary Banjo Player and Singer, FW 5458*) is also available through Smithsonian Folkways Mail Order. Visit our website to hear sound samples from that recording.

Credits

Recording Sessions

1963 June 24, 26, and 27 recording dates were at Asheville, North Carolina Civic Center between sessions of the American Folk Festival. July and September sessions were at the Guest River home of Dock's sister, Laura Boggs Hunsucker, Lee's widow. December session was at the home of Mike and Marj Seeger, Roosevelt, New Jersey, where Dock and John Hurt were staying between concerts. Nagra recorder used on most of these sessions was kindly lent by Peter Seeger. Dan Seeger was present and assisting on June session.

1964 June 3-5 sessions were at Laura Hunsucker's home. Nagra recorders and D24 microphone were courtesy Newport Folk Foundation and Peter Siegel.

1966 July 26 and 27 sessions were at the Seeger home, Roosevelt, New Jersey after the Newport Folk Festival. Nagra recorder was courtesy of the Newport Folk Foundation.

1968 February 10 session was during the day

at the Canterbury House, a coffeehouse where Dock and Mike were playing for several days. June 20 session was at his sister Laura's home in Virginia. Nagra recorder was courtesy of the Newport Folk Foundation.

Original Folkways releases and reissue produced by Mike Seeger

Guitar accompaniment by Mike Seeger

Notes by Barry O'Connell and Mike Seeger with assistance from Alexia Smith

Mastered by Charlie Pilzer at Airshow, Inc., Springfield, VA

Sound supervision by Pete Reiniger

Reissue production supervised by Anthony Seeger

Reissue production coordinated by Mary Monseur and Michael Maloney

Art direction and design Scott Stowell/Open, New York, NY

Cover photo by Dan Seeger, 1963

Archival photos courtesy Dock Boggs

Editorial assistance by Peter Seitel

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About Smithsonian Folkways

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings is the nonprofit record label of the Smithsonian Institution, the national museum of the United States. Our mission is the legacy of Moses Asch, who founded Folkways Recordings in 1948 to document “people’s music,” spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. The Smithsonian acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987, and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings has continued the Folkways tradition by supporting the work of traditional artists and expressing a commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding.

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Dock Boggs,

c. 1927



“Only from lives such as [Dock Boggs’] can we learn the full dimensions of American history. Incarnated in them are the dilemmas and promises of a democratic society that continues, however falteringly, in a struggle to realize itself. Dock’s were the struggles carried on by working-class Americans: to discover and possess a measure of dignity, to earn a living in an economy which denies steady and decent work to most, to hold a marriage together against strains and humiliations, and to leave something of worth for and in those who come after.”

Barry O’Connell, from

Down a Lonesome Road:

Dock Boggs’ Life in Music