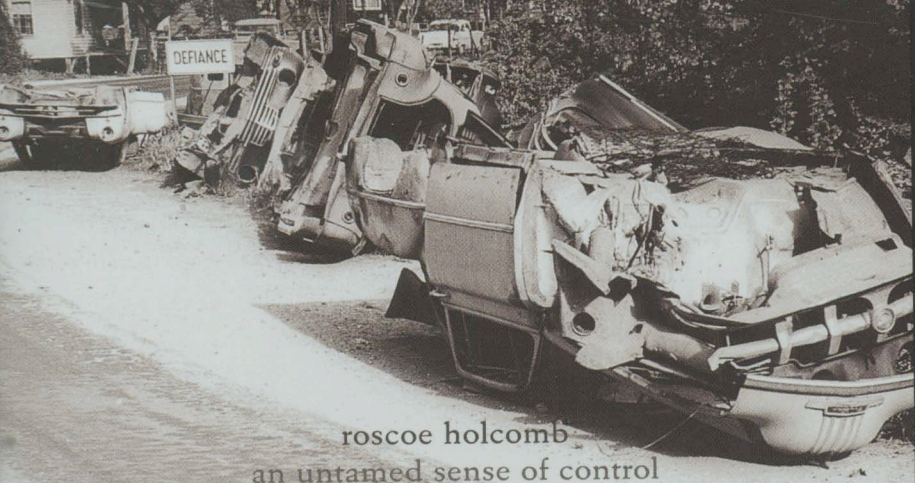


roscoe holcomb
an untamed sense of control



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings



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Bob Dylan stated, "Roscoe Holcomb has a certain untamed sense of control, which makes him one of the best." Eric Clapton called Holcomb "my favorite [country] musician." Holcomb's white-knuckle performances reflect a time before radio told musicians how to play, and these recordings make other music seem watered-down in comparison. His high, tense voice inspired the term "high lonesome sound." Self-accompanied on banjo, fiddle, guitar, or harmonica, these songs express the hard life he lived and the tradition in which he was raised. Includes his vintage 1961 "Man of Constant Sorrow." Extensive liner notes and photographs by John Cohen.

1. SWANNO MOUNTAIN 3:14
2. ACROSS THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN 5:19
3. GRAVEYARD BLUES 2:57
4. SINGLE GIRL 2:58
5. LITTLE MAGGIE 2:58
6. BORN AND RAISED IN COVINGTON 2:14
7. BARBARA ALLEN BLUES 1:26
8. COAL CREEK 1:28
9. ROCK ISLAND PRISON 1:31
10. I AM A MAN OF CONSTANT SORROW 2:56
11. COMBS HOTEL BURNED DOWN 2:29
12. THE HILLS OF MEXICO 2:29
13. KNIFE GUITAR 1:14
14. MISSISSIPPI HEAVY WATER BLUES 2:13
15. CONEY ISLE 1:47
16. TRAIN THAT CARRIED MY GIRL FROM TOWN 1:58
17. MILK COW BLUES 2:06
18. BLACK EYE SUSIE 1:11
19. DARLING CORY 3:37
20. I AIN'T GOT NO SUGAR BABY NOW 2:47
21. SITTING ON TOP OF THIS WORLD 2:39
22. FRANKIE AND JOHNNIE 5:08
23. FOGGY MOUNTAIN TOP 1:48
24. FAIR MISS IN THE GARDEN 3:49
25. WILLOW GARDEN 3:23
26. TRUE LOVE 6:24



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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11. COMBS HOTEL BURNED DOWN 2:29
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13. KNIFE GUITAR 1:14
14. MISSISSIPPI HEAVY WATER BLUES 2:13 (Robert Hicks)
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JOHN COHEN

John Hartford wrote, “See, I just really love Roscoe Holcomb’s sound. These other people tell me I’m hearing all this pain and all this stuff—but that’s not what I think of. I can’t tell you what I feel—I just love it. Maybe there’s some deep psychological reason going on that I don’t understand with my limited hillability.”

Roscoe played blues on the banjo, played guitar with a jackknife, sang unaccompanied sorrowful songs, Old Baptist chants, old-time popular songs as well as mountain ballads with a searing intensity and an unpredictable sense of rhythm: Roscoe Holcomb was a Kentucky musician with a fine voice and, as Bob Dylan called it, “a certain untamed sense of control.” His ideas about music were shaped before the advent of radio and phonograph told home musicians what their music was supposed to sound like.

His musical sensibility was shaped by the hard life he lived and the tradition he was raised in. His high lonesome sound has continued to touch people long after his life has passed. Musicians inspired by his voice have attempted his performance style, in all its rough intensity. But they don’t capture his musical workings. Their attempts to duplicate the unreachable qualities of his music flattered him. But in his uniqueness, he can’t be imitated.

For those on the path to discovering American roots music, Roscoe Holcomb’s sound seems to be the end of the line. Listeners may start with bluegrass, folk songs, old-time string bands, or Appalachian ballads, but once they get to his music, there is no next step. Holcomb’s music makes great demands on the listener and makes other music seem watered down in comparison. Experiencing his performances of “On Top of Old Smoky,” “Single Girl,” or “Across the Rocky Mountain” causes the well-known versions of these folk songs to appear sweetened and smoothed. It was not Roscoe’s intention that his sound be more intense than someone else’s. His music is a projection of his self, and a reflection of his experience with hard work, low wages, and his bond with Appalachian life. It is a music that is uncompromising and makes no effort to

accommodate. Although nobody else can sound like Roscoe, he has come to serve as one of the archetypal inspirations of Appalachian music.

The blues fiddler Howard (Louie Blueie) Armstrong noticed and commented, "Roscoe only plays the music itself. The rest of us—Beethoven, Bach, Louis Armstrong—put in our decorations and ornaments. Roscoe just plays the music straight without any of that other stuff."

It isn't difficult to identify Roscoe's style: his fine, thin voice, his clanky banjo licks, his rhythms built on pulses, his elongated phrases of breathing which have little to do with symmetry or balance, and the way he approaches the notes in a melody—shaped by both the blues and the Old Baptist singing traditions. The listener recognizes the feelings of intensity and pain that are communicated. Roscoe never noticed the expressiveness of what he created, except to sometimes comment, "That's a touching song." But once after a New York concert, a man told him he was upset by Roscoe's song, "it was just too close to home." Roscoe thought the man was looking for an argument and said, "Buddy, I was singing that for me, not for you."

The first recordings of Roscoe were done at his home in Daisy, Kentucky, in 1959. This CD presents other performances from later studio recordings and live concerts as well as some from Daisy, Kentucky, in 1972. There is some duplication of repertoire between 1959 and later recordings and certain evident changes in the performances, which were affected by his declining health and his infrequent high spirits. Some of the best performances came from a tour we did in 1973—recorded live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, by Mark Wilson. Other songs are from his LPs that were never reissued on CD, and one cut came from a party at Phil and Vivian Williams's home in Seattle. All the performances here are new on CD. There are also a few songs and banjo tunes left over from recording sessions that were never released.

The previous CD of Roscoe's music, *The High Lonesome Sound*, featured his singing, especially a few long, unaccompanied hymns from the Old Baptist song book. They reflect something that persisted from his childhood, even as his musical horizons expanded to include Holiness Church songs, blues, and ballads. The strictness of the Old Baptist Church tradition (see SFW CD 40108) forbids any other type of music, or any instrumental music: banjo, guitar, or fiddle. Because of these constraints, Roscoe was in conflict about the different kinds of music he played. However, he presented

Old Baptist hymns at his concerts for the audiences of the Folk Revival. As an introduction he said,

Here's one of the Old Baptist song books that everybody sings back home. It's a song that the old preacher leads and the rest follers [follows].... They get a way back on them spurs and have a memorial—get a bunch of good singers and the old preacher lining this out, and they get started singing 'til it echoes over them valleys. Boy, it really goes good. I reckon I love them because my Daddy and Mother both gone to this Old Regular Baptist Church, and these are the only songs they ever sang. They are long but they are good.

On a 1966 tour of Europe, Roscoe and Ralph Stanley sang these Old Baptist hymns together in the touring bus, as well as on stage with the Stanley Brothers (right). In a recent twist, from the once-forbidden to the widely accessible, Ralph Stanley appeared at the Grammy Awards in 2002 on national television singing an unaccompanied Old Baptist vocal hymn, "Oh Death."

The distinctive nuances of this Old Baptist singing contain rich ornamentation, prolonged phrases, and a high, tense, reedy voice. On the record of Gaelic psalms from Lewis (Scotland) (Tangent TNGM 120) you can hear this same type of singing, lining out, as well as overlapping heterophonic vocal performances. It is a style free from the constraints of written music or four-part harmonies done in lock step. You realize the continuity of this sound echoed in unaccompanied Appalachian ballad singers and in some bluegrass singing today.

These qualities persist in everything Roscoe sang or played: the ultimate expression of the individual, uneasy or unwilling to fit into a group, band, or chorus, preferring the irregular and erratic to a sense of smoothness. His singing and phrasing answer to his personal sense of timing, and to the nature of his own breath. Bill Monroe, the father of bluegrass, was puzzled by Roscoe's approach. He asked Ralph Rinzler, "How can



Roscoe go out on stage without any idea of what he is going to do?" Yet in reviewing many recordings of Roscoe's performances over twenty years, you find a strong adherence to the way he played each piece: he did each song the exact same way. His performance was not an improvisation, but a distinctive and consistent aesthetic at work, with "a certain untamed sense of control."

Roscoe's music is available on Smithsonian Folkways Recordings' *Mountain Music of Kentucky* and *Roscoe Holcomb: The High Lonesome Sound*. In the notes to these albums I wrote down everything I knew and felt about him, as if it would be the last opportunity to do so. But now five years later, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings has decided to release another collection of his music, and I am attempting to look at the stories, cobwebs, and corners I missed last time around. In addition to memories of Roscoe and his music, I deal with my own motives, agendas, and doubts when I first interrupted his life with my unanticipated presence, camera, and tape recorder.

I first met him in Kentucky on my first collecting field trip. 1959 was a time when the "vision" of the urban Folk Revival was in need of "revision," and Roscoe's music presented me with the weapon to achieve a change in that perception. As a child, I had heard records of the folk singers Burl Ives, John Jacob Niles, Richard Dyer-Bennet, and later the Almanac Singers and the Weavers. They always referred to a source where these old songs existed in their home atmosphere, in the hands of an old tradition, cradled somewhere in the heart of a mountain farmer or a Kentucky coal miner. I longed to experience the music at that source, even as the urban Folk Revival went the opposite way producing the Kingston Trio, the Limelighters, and other commercially misdirected collegiate brother groups. I was looking for music that rang true, and the closest I had come were the Library of Congress Folksong Records (thank you, Alan Lomax) and some old hillbilly records on scratchy 78s or on Harry Smith's Folkways *Anthology of American Folk Music* (SFW CD 40090). So when the opportunity presented itself, I went to Kentucky to look around and hang out in the rural mountains. It was there I met Roscoe.

His way of doing the songs was a revelation, and though I was acquainted with much of his repertoire, I was continuously surprised and filled with new insights when comparing his way to what I already knew. For me, to hear Roscoe sing "On Top of Old Smokey" completely annihilated the Burl Ives version and the group sing-along

arrangements that followed. Some Madison Avenue songwriter had already converted the song into "On Top of Spaghetti," and little children were singing it in nursery school and around the campfire, while I was being blown away hearing Roscoe sing it his way. From then on, I could never go back to my early experiences of folk singing. For me, Roscoe's music was radical, and avant-garde, as well as being hard core and rock bottom, and it put me in touch with another view of music. It affected my outlook throughout the 1960s, right up to the present national public interest in roots music.

But there were other experiences that came with Roscoe and the music: he and I had come from different worlds. Sitting together watching the news on TV with him and his wife, we had radically different interpretations of what was going on in the 1960s. These differences weren't a conflict between us but opened to new horizons for me. There were many such experiences: for example, it was most healthful to share fresh tomatoes and corn from his garden during the height of summer, but in the autumn it was a revelation as his diet switched to store-bought white bread and baloney. Following the first chilly nights of September, across the porches of East Kentucky, beautiful, bright-patterned, handmade patchwork quilts would appear, hanging out to be aired after a summer in musty storage chests. It was an unprecedented surprise to be confronted with this beautiful display of abstract art that lasted exactly one day, a visual experience that equaled a visit to the Museum of Modern Art... the country version of contemporary aesthetics. Of course I didn't share the functional need for warm blankets, nor the deep sentimentality of family connections that came with each quilt. In my mind I began to hear resemblances between Roscoe's sparky banjo tunes and the vibrating red and green patterns on cousin Mary Jane Holcomb's quilts (some of which I eventually acquired).

This never felt like "folk art" or "Americana." The landscape of East Kentucky consisted of wrecked cars by the roadside, working people living in shacks near brick houses owned by coal mine operators, dirt roads which opened into tarred roads, loaded coal trucks struggling over the hills producing a trail of black exhaust smoke and fumes that discolored the landscape—and Roscoe's conversation, which was full of the rhythms of East Kentucky language, inventive poetic images that defied the rules of grammar, frequent quotes from the Scriptures, and a delight in images of violence and bloody details. There was his indelible description of man a whose hand had been pierced by

a big, rusty spike. He wasn't hesitant about including cruelty in his talk, and threw in anything that would convey an experience in a more heightened way. It was a colorful language totally different from the correct structures of academia or even of "polite society." He told of a local man who was always drinking and passing out in the barroom on Saturday nights, so often that his buddies got tired of dragging him home. One night they tied him over a wooden rail fence and pulled down his pants so that people coming to church on Sunday morning would be confronted by his bare ass. Roscoe joked about another guy who had "backslid so many times that the crawfish came out to shake hands with him." (Try to figure that one out.)

In 1966, after we had taken Roscoe on a three-week tour of European concerts, where he'd received some compensation, the local Perry County Department of Social Services cut him off of the "happy pappy" program that had been his only source of income.

John, they want to know how much my expenses was so they can take it from what I made for they can't read the bills. Even what you tell them they will take out of what I made... (personal letter, April 1966).

Since he was unemployed and unable to work, I went to Kentucky to plead with the County to restore him to the program, but they didn't listen. In fact, someone in that office tried to convince me that Roscoe wasn't a good singer, and offered to take me to someone who was a "better musician."

It seemed that Roscoe's music wasn't much appreciated in this locale: there were far smoother musicians around. The local Hazard radio station wouldn't play bluegrass at that time, sticking more to the Nashville hits of the day. Although the area was populated with many excellent local banjo players, fiddlers, and singers, few had access to the radio, and even as his reputation grew outside Kentucky, during his life Roscoe was barely acknowledged at home.

I had appeared in Hazard, Kentucky, in 1959 with a tape recorder. I was unannounced and uninvited, looking for old songs. I was already familiar with many songs in Roscoe's repertoire, and I experienced his music as it related to versions I knew from records and books. Although I had come to Kentucky to document what I heard, inevitably the

undertaking required me to become an editor: I was put in the position of determining which songs of his repertoire he sang to the public, how he was presented, represented, and photographed. Like it or not, my task was to shape Roscoe's image. I was uneasy with this situation, but then again, there were few alternatives. It forced me to consider whether I was steering him to meet the needs of academic folklorists or the Folk Revival. Since my own interest was in the different tunings used on the five-string banjo, I gravitated towards those songs that were accompanied with odd tunings. As luck would have it, Roscoe's abundant music was rich in these sounds. We enjoyed the same stuff. However, I couldn't figure how much my mind was shaping his music, or his music was shaping my mind. I was receiving this tremendous gift of music from him, at the same time I was adjusting my aesthetic commitments to his music tastes. Looking back on that time, I realize that my decisions were essentially determined by the sounds and music that moved me in ways that went beyond what I could explain.

It was another matter when Roscoe's records were released in New York City. The head of Vanguard Records, who was looking for new material for Joan Baez, asked why Roscoe had such an ordinary repertoire. Clearly, we had different agendas.

Over the years I knew Roscoe (1959-1981), his health got worse and worse. He always was a worried man, concerned about the lack of employment and his own physical deterioration. He felt compelled to explain the hardships of his life before every performance, making excuses for his inability to do as well as he hoped and that "he'd do the best he could." The unrestrained force of his performance reached across the limits of his strength. It was always a revelation to witness such power emerge from an unobtrusive, complaining country man.

Yet Roscoe was always looking for a joke, something to lighten the situation, and he devised little stunts that diverted us backstage. I remember a reviewer at a New Jersey concert commented on Roscoe joking backstage, and agonizing onstage. He called Roscoe phony, and said the audience should be wise to the sham. This review hurt me deeply, and reminded me of the impossibility of my intentions in bringing Roscoe away from his home environment. And it fueled my anger at some of the insularity spawned within the Folk Revival.

I've saved every letter Roscoe wrote to me. They are in pencil, on simple lined paper torn from a notebook. His handwriting was difficult to decipher, and his phrases a mixture of formalities and declarations that barely disguised the difficulties they conveyed. Although he was an untrained writer, his letters made me aware of my own degree of security and privilege, as well as the rougher edge to his experience.

MARCH 1967

...I would like to talk to you about other things as well and...John you no how people are about me around here—they still trying to give me a hard time—but it is hard to keep a good man down....

JUNE 1963

Hi John. How are you fine I hope...this leaves me OK. I have been working in the garden as I haven't got no other work to do. I lost my job an I don't know where I will find a nothern' at. Well John, I got a letter from Peat Seeger. He said he really like the way I played and sang. John I have been getting letters from just about everywhere.... I sure glad to hear that I hope to get more pretty soon if I don't I will have to leave here to find work. Well John tell Penny hello, I sure do hope you all the best of luck in this world and in this world to come.... Come an see us when you get ready. So try to get some more work for us—very far I have to go somewhere to find some work. So be good and good luck for you and Penny so anc [answer] real soon from your old friend, little Rascal Halcomb.

DECEMBER 1964

...Well John I am havening it britty tuff. I only get 7 days work a month—you no that isn't much. I have been very sick, I only way 116 lbs. The State Board of Health give me a 6 month singing treatment. I think it is OK I can sing like a bird. Ho Ho....

NOVEMBER 1961

...Johnie, I rather you would be with me for as you no that I never travel very much. If you can get some place for us both I had rather be with you.... John they are about to have more trouble at the coal mines. I hope they are no body killed if they are they will be a young war. I hope they get it settled.

JANUARY 1963

...[G]ood to here from you an to get that check for it sure did come in a good time.... It sure has been a hard old time with me but I hope some day this old Bad Luck will turn to good. The kids say hello they said they would like to hear you play that old Bago again. They still talk about you playing so funny little songs.... love as a brother, Rascal

FEBRUARY. 1963

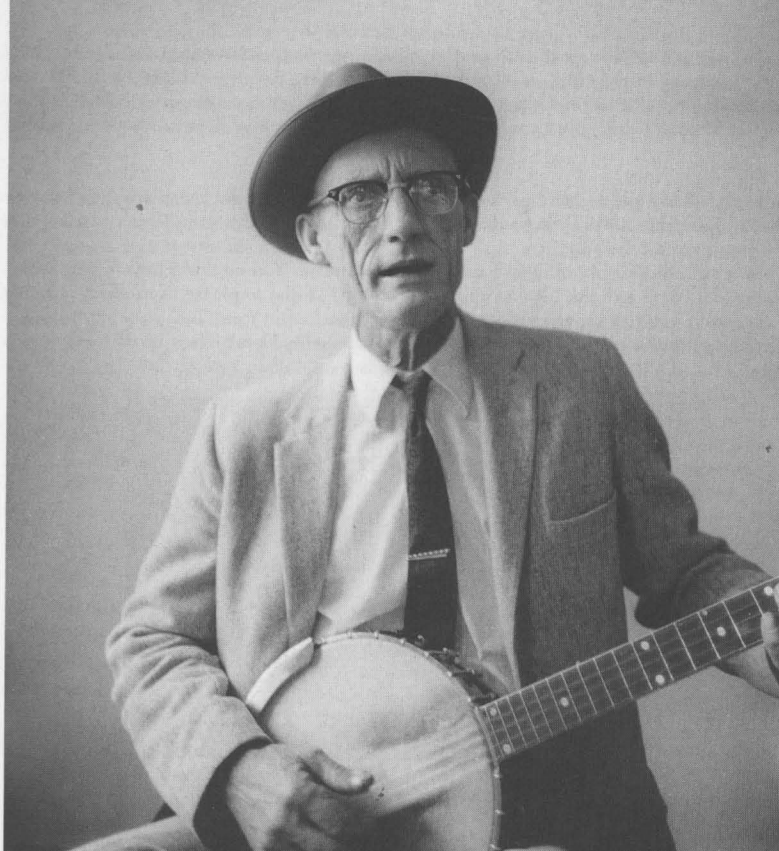
...I was talking to Shepherd an they are all out on a strack [strike] they are shooting one nother like rabbits. As for myself I have worked three days this year. Boy it sure is pretty rough around here....

John you asked me about what I thought about music. You no that I love to play when some one come around. I lov to go to church too—I like to please every body. I think it is good to suit all crowds if I can. I always try to....

It takes a long time to make a musician...me especially. I ain't never made it yet.



Music party in Minneapolis, 1964 (L-R: Roscoe, John Cohen, Jon Pankake)



song notes

"The year that I started to learn to play the banjo I learned four hundred tunes and could sing practically every one of them. That's why I say it is a gift to some people, and some people can't learn it, and I believe that God give it to me and I believe it's enough, I'm going to let him take it. I ain't gonna quit..." (personal interview, 1962).

1. SWANNO MOUNTAIN, *banjo and voice. Recorded in New York City, 1964.*

Roscoe's account tells of "16 brackets in my banjo, shine like silver, shine like gold." He learned the song in a lumber camp near Hazard. Other versions from North Carolina are titled "Asheville Junction" and "I'm going back to the Swannanoah Tunnel," where sledgehammers "ring like silver and shine like gold." The song was recorded commercially in the 1930s by Bascom Lamar Lunsford, who also recorded it for the Library of Congress.

2. ACROSS THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN,

guitar and voice. Recorded at a concert in Cambridge, Mass., 1973.

Roscoe composed this song, bringing together parts of other songs he had heard. For him it is a "touching song" for it says, "I'll never forget my mother's looks, God bless her sweetly smile." The story is based on a broadside ballad—most likely the Crimean War was its original setting. The "Rocky Mountain" verse is also heard on cowboy-song "Dying Ranger." To produce this special sound the guitar is in an open tuning like a banjo. The lowest string is run up to G, to double with the next string (ggdgbd).

3. GRAVEYARD BLUES, *guitar and voice. Recorded in New York City, 1961.*

This was a popular blues recorded by many artists including Bessie Smith in the 1920s–30s. Roscoe was rarely concerned about where a song came from, as long as he found something in it. He converted all kinds of music into his own East Kentucky style.

4. SINGLE GIRL, *banjo and voice (guitar, John Cohen).*

Recorded at a concert in Cambridge, Mass., 1973.

The banjo is in D tuning (f#df#ad) and played way up the neck. Roscoe's 1959 record-

ing of "Single Girl" was used in the Michelangelo Antonioni film *Zabriskie Point*, heard alongside Pink Floyd and the Grateful Dead. Roscoe always thought he was playing the Carter Family version of this song until we listened to theirs one day. Rose Maddox recorded a version closer to Roscoe's tune.

5. LITTLE MAGGIE, *voice and banjo. Recorded in New York City, 1964.*

Roscoe has created an unprecedented setting for "Little Maggie." While he retained the original melody, his inclination to introduce strange notes into the accompaniment reveals his unconventional sense of music. He has stretched the timing and the phrasing in ways that give a new/ancient aspect to this well-known song. "Little Maggie" had been recorded in the 1920s by Grayson and Whitter, and later by Ralph Stanley, and has become a bluegrass classic.

6. BORN AND RAISED IN COVINGTON, *voice. Recorded in New York City, 1964.*

This broadside ballad appears on old 78s as the "Boston Burglar" (by Riley Puckett), and as the "Louisville Burglar" (by the Hickory Nuts OK 45169). In Laws' book *American Balladry from British Broad-sides* it is called the "Boston Burglar" (L 16), and is related to another song called "Botany Bay." Versions of the song have been collected throughout the U.S. Roscoe's singing locates it in Covington, a Kentucky city across the river from Ohio. Roscoe sings several unusual verses, particularly: "He used to wear the old straw hat, but now he wears the crown." I had remembered Roscoe singing it years ago, but could not locate any recordings of his performance in concert or studio sessions. Yet I was quite sure I had heard it. On the final day of mixing this CD we found this tape recording from 1964 in another category in the Folkways archive.

7. BARBARA ALLEN BLUES, *harmonica. Recorded in New York City, 1964.*

I asked Roscoe, "What's the first music you heard?" His answer: "I know the best music ever I heard, the one I thought the most of was a harp, mouth harp. I would follow it—I was just a little feller—I'd follow it a long ways to hear it played. That's the reason I think music is a gift, 'cause the first time I heard music I just really loved it. I just couldn't keep away from it." As he grew older, Roscoe's breathing got more difficult. Coal dust, emphysema, too much smoking, and asthma took their toll. The mouth

harp is an intimate instrument, directly connected to the musician's breath, and Roscoe always got exhausted playing it. But he put in all the good notes that he loved. If you listen carefully, you can hear his foot beating a pulse on the floor. His melody was the classic "Barbara Allen" done in stretched-out blues style.

8. COAL CREEK, *banjo. Recording date unknown.*

This banjo piece was recorded at a party in Seattle where Roscoe was on tour with Mike Seeger. It is the only time we ever heard him perform it. Roscoe would often come up with unexpected bits of music which never got recorded. This tune is very similar to Pete Steele's well-known version of "Coal Creek March" done for the Library of Congress.

9. ROCK ISLAND PRISON, *fiddle. Recorded in New York City, 1964.*

Roscoe appreciated good fiddling, and a few of us experienced him playing tunes on the fiddle. This is the only known recording of him fiddling. He is not in great shape here, but certainly is in touch with the particular sound of Kentucky mountain fiddlers such as James Crase, Mannon Cambell, William Stepp, and Luther Strong.

10. I AM A MAN OF CONSTANT SORROW, *voice. Recorded in New York City, 1961.*

Roscoe was hesitant to record this song because he had learned it from a 78 by Ralph Stanley done in the 1950s. This was the only time Roscoe ever talked about learning from a recording—all his other songs were learned from somebody in person. Yet much of his repertoire can be traced to early recorded sources. This beautiful, unaccompanied performance of the "Man of Constant Sorrow" presents a home version of a commercial record. It also serves to document a stage in the evolution of the song, which started as a string band version by Emery Arthur in the 1930s, shifted from a solo to an operatic arrangement with the Stanley Brothers, and eventually became a bluegrass favorite. Most recently the Stanley Brothers's version became the hit song of the film and record *O Brother Where Art Thou?*

11. COMBS HOTEL BURNED DOWN, *banjo and voice.*

Recorded in New York City, 1964.

The song documents a fire in Hazard. Roscoe learned it there, and believed it was com-

posed by Banjo Bill Cornett (see *Mountain Music of Kentucky* SFW CD 40077).

12. THE HILLS OF MEXICO, *banjo and voice. Recorded in New York City, 1961.*

This odd song has been collected widely among banjo players, and no two versions are the same. Usually there is a weird or crooked melody used. It is sometimes called "Barker's Creek." Another version can be heard done by George Landers on *High Atmosphere* (Rounder 0028). Woody Guthrie recorded a version as "Buffalo Skinners" with an odd melody accompanied by one guitar chord. There is also a jollier cowboy version that tells the same story.

13. KNIFE GUITAR, *guitar. Recorded in New York City, 1964.*

During the recording session, Roscoe whipped out a pocket knife, retuned the guitar, and played this tune. It resembles some of Frank Hutchison's guitar pieces from the 1920s and the pedal slide guitar tunes such as "Steel Guitar Rag," which were popular on country radio in the 1940s.

14. MISSISSIPPI HEAVY WATER BLUES, *guitar and voice.*

Recorded in Daisy, Kentucky, in 1972, on Roscoe's front porch.

The song can be traced to an early race record made by Robert Hicks (Barbeque Bob) in the late 1920s. It was Hicks's most popular record. Roscoe sings it in a high register that evokes Bill Monroe's vocal sound. This performance blurs the distinction between blues and bluegrass. Roscoe's different ways of playing guitar can be heard here picking out a distinct set of melodic high notes, with his basic strum pattern at odds with the rhythm of this melody.

15. CONEY ISLE, *guitar and voice. Recorded in New York City, 1964.*

This song was originally recorded by Frank Hutchison of West Virginia, around 1927. Roscoe hadn't heard of him, and associated the song with the amusement park by this name near Cincinnati where Roscoe worked during WWII. Frank Hutchison was an important early recording artist from 1926 to 1929. His version of "Stackalee" was included on Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* (Smithsonian Folkways 40090), and Bob Dylan recorded Hutchison's version on *World Gone Wrong*. The pop-

ular country singer Cowboy Copas had a hit in the 1950s with this song done as "I'm Going Back to Alabam."

16. TRAIN THAT CARRIED MY GIRL FROM TOWN, *guitar and voice.*

Recorded in Daisy, Kentucky, 1972, on Roscoe's front porch.

The song was originally recorded in the late 1920s by Frank Hutchison. Roscoe's performance follows Hutchison's guitar licks closely. Hutchison played around West Virginia in local stage shows and schoolhouses. With the guitar in opening tuning, this sound attracted the attention of mountain musicians. Doc Watson made his own hot guitar picking version of this song in the 1960s.

17. MILK COW BLUES, *banjo.*

Recorded in Daisy, Kentucky, in 1972, on Roscoe's front porch.

Roscoe played this as a banjo tune and a guitar tune. Sometimes he sang it too. His banjo arrangement hits some strange blue notes, and reminds me of how Don Reno chopped out a tune on the five-string in bluegrass style. This song had been performed and recorded by Sam and Kirk McGee in the 1930s. Most likely based on earlier blues from black tradition, the words equate milk cow to woman-as-provider. It was a popular blues sung by Kokomo Arnold. Arnold's song was one of Elvis's first singles in the 1950s.

18. BLACK EYE SUSIE, *banjo and voice. Recorded in Cambridge, Mass., 1953.*

At this performance, Roscoe introduced the tune this way: "I was raised way out in the country, Nobody bothered but us. We danced 'til we took a notion to quit." While Roscoe frails the banjo, his thumb plays the fifth string in double time.

19. DARLING CORY, *banjo and voice.*

Recorded in Daisy, Kentucky, in 1972, on Roscoe's front porch.

Roscoe's banjo tuning and much of the text here is close to Dock Boggs's "Country Blues" recorded in the late 1920s. Roscoe also brings in the "forty miles through the rock and fifty through the sand" words from Boggs's "Danville Girl." Roscoe's song also retains verses from the earlier "Darlin' Cory." In 1959 Roscoe gave us the first clues that Dock Boggs lived "somewhere around here" in the same region of the mountains.

Although he had never met or heard him in person, Roscoe's use of Boggs's banjo tuning (f#cF#ad) tells something about how these songs connected the musicians.

20. I AIN'T GOT NO SUGAR BABY NOW, *banjo and voice.*

Recorded in Daisy, Kentucky, in 1972, on Roscoe's front porch.

This is close to the version recorded by Dock Boggs. The song was also recorded later by Charlie Monroe, and is included in Bascom Lunsford's *30 and 1 Mountain Songs* (1929 song folio as "Red Apple Juice.") "Who will rock my baby when I'm gone?" Roscoe's text is ambivalent as to the age and gender of the baby.

21. SITTING ON TOP OF THIS WORLD, *banjo and voice.*

Recorded in New York City, 1964.

Roscoe does this in his blues style. The song was made popular by Sam Chatmon and the Mississippi Shieks, and was well known throughout the South with a wide range of different verses.

22. FRANKIE AND JOHNNIE, *guitar and voice.*

Recorded in Cambridge, Mass., 1973.

This is the popular, well-known arrangement of "Frankie and Johnnie" which is similar to Jimmy Rodgers's version. Roscoe stretches the story out, as if it were an old ballad. Charlie Poole did another version as "Leaving Home," and Frank Hutchison did it as "Frankie." Louise Foreacre called it "Frankie Was a Good Woman," and Fred Cockerham called it "Frankie Baker." Foreacre and Cockerham both did it as a banjo piece with an odd tuning. Most texts conclude with "this story has no moral," but Roscoe sings it as, "this story has no tomorrow." Roscoe's snappy guitar accompaniment incorporates the now-famous Lester Flatt bluegrass G run.

23. FOGGY MOUNTAIN TOP, *knife guitar.*

Recorded in Daisy, Kentucky, in 1972, on Roscoe's front porch.

Roscoe rarely planned out what he was going to play next, especially at home. On his front porch he took out his jackknife and played the first thing that came to him. This time it was the Carter Family song "Foggy Mountain Top," which Maybelle Carter had

originally recorded with a slide guitar.

24. FAIR MISS IN THE GARDEN, *guitar and voice.*

Recorded in New York City, in 1964.

This old broadside ballad is heard widely throughout the Appalachians. Cousin Emmy recorded it commercially in the 1940s, and the New Lost City Ramblers combined her text with Roscoe's melody. The Stanley Brothers learned it from the Ramblers and recorded it commercially. Most recently Ralph Stanley recorded it as a duet with Alison Krauss. As Roscoe played it, this is a "one-chord" tune on the guitar.

25. WILLOW GARDEN, *banjo and voice; (guitar, John Cohen).*

Recorded in Cambridge, Mass., in 1973.

Roscoe's version of "Willow Garden" is unusual in that he doesn't use three-quarter time but finds his own rhythm, which better suits his sense of music. I don't recall Roscoe ever using waltz time. This old song was recorded by Grayson and Whitter in the 1920s, by J. E. Mainer in the 1930s, and by Charlie Monroe in the 1940s. It has become a bluegrass standard.

26. TRUE LOVE, *banjo and voice. Recorded in Cambridge, Mass., in 1973.*

Roscoe's text to "True Love" resembles the Stanley Brothers' version, but his melody and extended phrasing are distinctly his own. The Stanley Brothers recorded this song first on Rich-R-Tone Records as a 78, and later on Columbia. They called it "Little Glass of Wine," and their recordings were very popular throughout the Appalachians. When Carter Stanley heard Roscoe sing this backstage at the University of Chicago Folk Festival, he said, "Well, at least we got the words right." The song is found in a few folk song collections from Vermont and Michigan, and is listed in "American Balladry from British Broad sides" (Laws P30) as "Oxford City" in the chapter "Unfaithful Lovers." Broad sides were single sheets of paper with the words to a song printed on them, sold widely and cheaply. The plot of "True Love" is like a scene from Shakespeare, where the lovers realize they "have both drunk poison from a glass of wine."

INFORMATION ON THE SOURCES OF THESE RECORDINGS

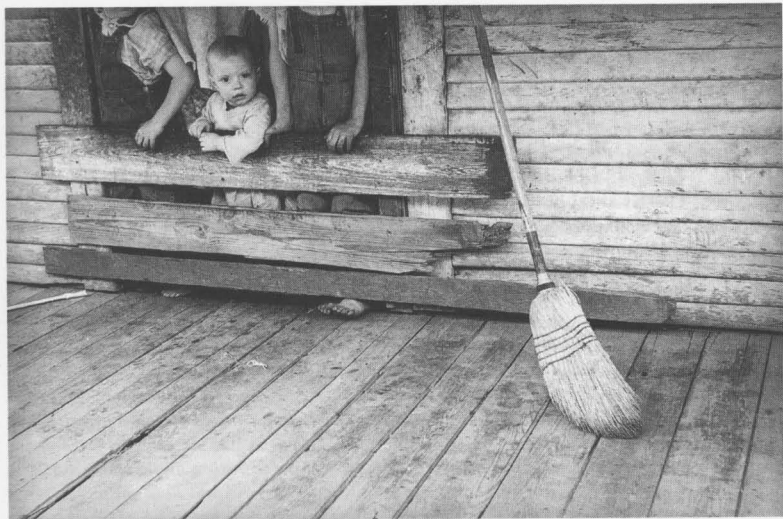
1961, *Music of Roscoe Holcomb* recorded by John Cohen at Sanders Recording Studio, 46th St. and Times Square, New York City, FA 2363.

1964, *The High Lonesome Sound* recorded by Peter Bartok at Steinway Hall, New York City, FA 2368.

1972, *Close to Home* recorded by Blanton Owen and John Cohen on Roscoe's front porch, Daisy, Kentucky, FA 2374.

1973, concert performance recorded by Mark Wilson, Cambridge, Mass.

Date unknown, "Coal Creek" recorded by Phil Williams in his living room Seattle, Wash.



John Cohen's photographs are published in *There Is No Eye—John Cohen Photographs* (Powerhouse 2001). For more information go to www.johncohenworks.com

CREDITS

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