

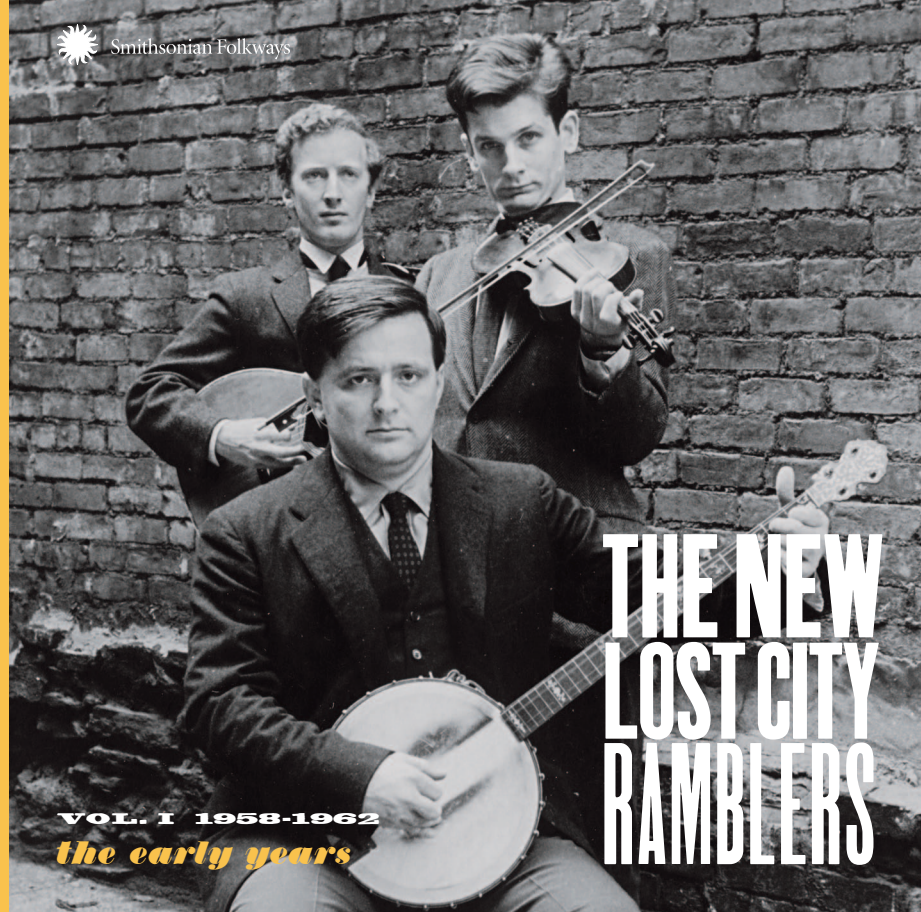


Smithsonian Folkways



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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**VOL. I 1958-1962**

*the early years*

# THE NEW LOST CITY RAMBLERS

**VOL. I 1958-1962**  
*the early years*

1. **Colored Aristocracy** 2:05 (*Sanford Rich*)
2. **Hopalong Peter** 2:04 (*Frank Dumont*)
3. **Don't Let Your Deal Go Down** 2:26
4. **When First Unto This Country** 2:48
5. **Sales Tax on the Women** 3:14 (*Dorsey Dixon-Wade Mainer/Jaymore Music, BMI*)
6. **Rabbit Chase** 2:30 (*Charlie Parker*)
7. **Leaving Home** 3:05 (*Charlie Poole-Norman Woodlieff/Charlie Poole Publishing Inc.-Original Rambler Music Inc., admin by Bug, BMI*)
8. **How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live?** 3:34  
(*Alfred Reed/Peer International Corp., BMI*)
9. **Franklin D. Roosevelt's Back Again** 2:19 (*Bill Cox*)
10. **I Truly Understand You Love Another Man** 2:29  
(*George Roark/Peer International Corp., BMI*)
11. **The Old Fish Song** 4:52 (*James Howard*)
12. **The Battleship of Maine** 3:05
13. **No Depression in Heaven** 2:56 (*A.P. Carter/Peer International Corp., BMI*)
14. **Dallas Rag** 2:02
15. **Bill Morgan and His Gal** 2:56 (*Halsey Mohr-Will Mahoney*)
16. **Fly Around My Pretty Little Miss** 2:31
17. **The Lady of Carlisle** 3:32
18. **Brown's Ferry Blues** 2:46 (*Alton Delmore-Rabon Delmore/Vidor Publications Inc., BMI*)
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20. **Talking Hard Luck** 2:40
21. **The Teetotals** 1:00
22. **Sal Got a Meatskin** 3:24
23. **Railroad Blues** 2:41 (*Sam McGee/Morganactive Songs Inc., ASCAP*)
24. **On Some Foggy Mountain Top** 2:25 (*A.P. Carter/Peer International Corp., BMI*)
25. **My Sweet Farm Girl** 2:22 (*Clarence Ashley*)
26. **Crow Black Chicken** 2:35

# *the early years*

**JON PANKAKE**

**July 1990**

When some future scholar compiles the history of folklore, our century will be noted as the point at which the locus of collecting, preserving, and disseminating folklore changed from the printed page to the electronic media. In the first half of the 20th century, folklorists began to use disc, tape, wire, and film rather than writing to collect and preserve sung and played folk music, and a parallel documentation was carried out by the fledgling entertainment industry, which inadvertently preserved some dying folkways among its immense production of ephemera such as films and phonograph recordings.

In the second half of the century, the recorded legacy of our dwindling oral culture, a legacy that had accumulated largely unnoticed in archives, vaults, and private collections, began to come to light and to generate a cultural phenomenon of its own—young musicians, largely college-educated and urban, learning folk music not by hearing and emulating elder musicians within their families or communities in the age-old way, but by hearing and emulating the recorded sounds of musicians often decades and cultures distant from them. The media powering this new transmission of music were the reissue LP (such as the key 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music* on Folkways) and the home tape recorder, via which dubs of unissued and out-of-print material could circulate. The face-to-face “oral tradition” had become the ear-to-speaker “aural tradition” of a new century and a new technologically defined community.

The New Lost City Ramblers will leave barely a blip in the history of

the entertainment business, as they predicted in their jokes about their “long-playing, short-selling” albums on the Folkways label. But they have nevertheless earned the touch of immortality for their central role in our discovery of the folkloristic riches preserved electronically in the early years of our century. As individual performers, Mike Seeger, Tom Paley, and John Cohen had during the 1950s become interested in performance style in American folk music, exactly that dimension of the music which recordings uniquely capture. In 1958 they formed The New Lost City Ramblers with the explicit intention of performing American folk music as it had sounded before the inroads of radio, movies, and television had begun to homogenize our diverse regional folkways.

They studied and learned from commercial 78 rpm discs of “hillbilly” musicians recorded in what has come to be called the Golden Age (1923–1940), from blues and “race” records of the same era, from the bluegrass recordings of the post-war period, from the field recordings on deposit in the Library of Congress. In turn, they began their own field trips to seek out and record and learn the music of older rural musicians who still played and sang in the old way. Over the next twenty years, the Ramblers poured forth a steady stream of their own performances live and recorded, albums of their field recordings, and festival performances and workshops in which they introduced musicians they had met in the South to urban audiences of the folk song revival of the 1960s. Their lasting influence was greatest upon a relatively small but important part of that urban

audience—those few who wanted not only to study the music seriously, but who also wanted to learn to play the music themselves, actually to be the heirs of a musically rich American culture which by the 1960s largely existed only in the scratchy echoes found on primitive recordings, and in the memories of an ever-fewer number of elders.

Within a couple of years of touring college campuses and coffeehouses, the Ramblers—to their great surprise—began to meet dozens, and eventually hundreds, of young urban musicians who had become inspired by the Ramblers’ example to begin to play old-time country music learned in the “aural tradition,” either from the Ramblers’ own performances, from the archival recordings to which the Ramblers had directed them, or even directly from musicians the Ramblers had introduced to urban folk festivals.

The history of this movement is as yet unwritten, but some of its raw material can be found in a remarkable document titled “The Young Fogies Gazette,” a newsprint pamphlet included in the 1985 LP *The Young Fogies* (Heritage 056). The “Gazette” contains autobiographical sketches of over a hundred influential amateur and professional musicians, mostly urban and East or West Coast dwellers, who currently play some form of music largely inspired by the example of the Ramblers. These musicians in turn have recorded their own albums (*The Young Fogies* provides an excellent sampling of their music), made their own field trips, produced their own documentaries, and have kept traditional songs, instrumental styles, and vocal techniques alive and evolving. A professor of art carries on the

Kentucky banjo styles of Pete Steele, which he learned from Steele's Library of Congress recordings; a design engineer plays traditional fiddle styles he learned from rural masters at the Galax Old Fiddlers Convention; a woman who works on a word processor experiments with the old-time fiddle electronically enhanced with a phase shifter, and the music inspired by the Ramblers begins to take on strange and exciting new configurations.

The Ramblers were terrific stage personalities as well as teachers and disseminators of old-time tunes and performance styles. Like all successful professional musical groups, the Ramblers possessed magnetic, individually distinctive personalities that "jelled" in their interplay onstage: like their contemporaries The Beatles, The New Lost City Ramblers were greater than the sum of their individual talents. Though the group had no official leader, Mike Seeger often of necessity functioned as the M.C. in their concerts, introducing the group's numbers while Paley and Cohen retuned. Handsome, with a Lincoln-esque shock of hair and cheekbones, he alone of the three seemed somehow Southern and courtly in the gentlemanly manner of older musicians such as Dock Boggs. The group's most versatile musician, he was also their educator, concerned always to provide the insight that would link their music with the culture and the musicians from which it came. In contrast, Tom Paley was the group's Puck, quintessentially witty, thoroughly urban and intellectual, given to outrageous puns and wordplay, a master teller of jokes, and a breathtaking showman on finger-picked guitar and banjo.

Of all the Ramblers, he seemed most to savor the incongruity of it all: a Yale-educated college math teacher playing the generations-old music of Southern mill hands and farmers for post-Eisenhower urban college audiences. John Cohen was the group's William Blake, a visionary role befitting his artist's training and talents. In retrospect, he seemed most aware of the evolving mission of the Ramblers, most aware that the group was about something more than entertaining, was carving out some yet unknown place in history and inspiring many of its audience to become a new kind of musical community, and he often struggled to articulate this evolving vision both onstage and in the poetic essays he wrote for the Ramblers' albums.

In 1962 Tom Paley left the Ramblers to pursue a teaching and eventually a musical career in England, and the phase of the group's history documented on this disc ended. Within the year, however, the Ramblers regrouped with Tracy Schwarz joining the band and bringing with him skills in ballad singing, fiddling, and bluegrass and Cajun music that would enlarge and enrich the band's repertoire through their 20th anniversary in 1978 and beyond.

Hearing the Ramblers' earliest recordings now, listeners are less likely to make a mistake common in 1959 when their first album appeared: that they were scholarly imitators in the manner of the academic, amateur Dixieland bands of two generations ago, who would get together to memorize and play by rote classic early jazz tunes they laboriously

transcribed from beloved old 78 rpm recordings. Those who in the last thirty years have sought out the original recordings from which the Ramblers gathered their repertoire can best appreciate the astonishing creativity which Seeger, Cohen, and Paley brought to their music. Far from imitating, they managed the feat of learning the musical syntax of old-time song—the instrumental attacks and licks, the vocal shadings, the interplay of ensemble lead and support—and then used their mastery of this syntax to re-create in their own voices new performances which boasted all the spirit and sweetness and bite that the old masters such as Sara Carter and Charlie Poole bequeathed to history in their recordings.

The first recordings of The New Lost City Ramblers are now themselves historical documents: older, in fact, than were most of the 78 rpm discs the Ramblers resurrected at that time. Logically, as time goes on, the distance between the Ramblers and their sources will diminish in significance, until discographers of the future will simply regard them as just another old-time country string band who learned tunes from the recordings of other musicians (as did, in actuality, several 1930s old-time bands such as The Blue Sky Boys and Mainer's Mountaineers). Since we are told that history repeats itself, perhaps it is time for The New Lost City Ramblers themselves to be discovered by a new audience exploring their cultural past through the laser-powered electronic medium of the compact disc. The irony will be most appreciated, of course, by those earlier cultural explorers, The New Lost City Ramblers themselves.

# *track notes*

## 1. COLORED ARISTOCRACY

*Mike Seeger, fiddle; Tom Paley, banjo; John Cohen, guitar / From The New Lost City Ramblers Folkways FA 2396 / Source: Sanford and Harry Rich on fiddles, Rensel Rich on guitar, Elmer Rich on mandolin, Arthurdale, West Virginia, 1936. Library of Congress 3306 B2.*

Illustrative of the “lost” material the Ramblers introduced to urban audiences, this unusual fiddle tune contains remnants of ragtime from early in the 20th century. Although the Riches were white musicians, the tune’s title may indicate an origin in African-American musical tradition, possibly as a cakewalk. Tom invented the banjo break out of sheer wizardry, and the Ramblers have added the C chord, changes which perfectly complement the original tune and make the performance the Ramblers’ own, a re-creation rather than an imitation. In the generation since the Ramblers recorded it, the tune has become a standard in East Coast contra dances.

## 2. HOPALONG PETER

*Mike Seeger, lead vocals, fiddle, and mandolin; Tom Paley, vocal and banjo; John Cohen, bass vocal and guitar / From Old Timey Songs for Children Folkways FC 7064 / Source: Fisher Hendley and His Aristocratic Pigs Vocalion 04780*

The delightful imagery of this nonsense

song becomes nearly surrealistic in its pictorial precision, something of the effect one notes in the early Disney Silly Symphonies animated cartoons. Mike takes advantage of Tom’s banjo breaks to change instruments from the fiddle to the mandolin and back again.

## 3. DON’T LET YOUR DEAL GO DOWN

*John Cohen, lead vocals and banjo; Tom Paley, tenor vocal and guitar; Mike Seeger, fiddle / From The New Lost City Ramblers Folkways FA 2396 / Source: Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers Columbia 15038*

The song’s title refers to its origins as a blues about gambling, and a contemporary of Charlie Poole’s reported hearing the song before 1911. Poole’s string band arrangement, featuring the GEAD ragtime progression and the banjo chorded up the neck, was innovative to country music in the 1920s, and the great popularity of Poole’s 1925 recording made the song a standard that survived into the bluegrass era.

## 4. WHEN FIRST UNTO THIS COUNTRY

*Mike Seeger, vocal and autoharp; Tom Paley, banjo / From The New Lost City Ramblers Volume Two Folkways FA 2397 / Source: Maggie and Foy Gant with guitar, Austin, Texas, 1935. Library of Congress 65 A2.*

Mike has sung this lovely, sad American ballad for about fifty years, first hearing it as a child when his mother, Ruth Crawford Seeger, transcribed the Library of Congress field recording for publication in John and Alan Lomax’s *Our Singing Country* (1941). The voices on the battered aluminum disc of the Gants’ performance are difficult to make out. I think I hear the last line of the fourth stanza as “Til I stole a fine gray horse from Captain William White,” which reading would explain the pursuit in the fifth stanza. Mike and Tom have created a beautiful and original accompaniment for this ballad, with the banjo gently peppering the sweet lushness of the autoharp.

## 5. SALES TAX ON THE WOMEN

*Tom Paley, lead vocals and Hawaiian guitar; Mike Seeger, tenor vocal and guitar / From Songs From the Depression Folkways FH 5264 / Source: The Dixon Brothers Bluebird 6327*

The discography of millworker-musicians Dorsey and Howard Dixon contains an unusually high proportion of original songs, among them “Wreck on the Highway.” “Sales Tax on the Women” was very likely composed by Dorsey, though the conceit of taxing women was

used in at least one earlier country song of humorous protest, Ernest Thompson’s peculiar “Don’t Put a Tax on the Beautiful Girls” (Columbia 168).

## 6. RABBIT CHASE

*John Cohen, vocal and banjo / From Old Timey Songs for Children Folkways FC 7064 / Source: Charlie Parker Columbia 15154*

The unique charm of Charlie Parker’s banjo fable lies in its scaling down the traditional hunting epic and the imitation of the fox chase to the intimate level of a child’s excitement over the prospect of catching a rabbit. In an amazing example of the urban folk revival feeding material back into tradition, John reported, “I have performed it for mountain people in Kentucky, and they were so amused that they took out a tape recorder and recorded me doing it.”

## 7. LEAVING HOME

*Tom Paley, vocal and guitar; Mike Seeger, fiddle; John Cohen, banjo / From The New Lost City Ramblers Volume Two Folkways FA 2397 / Source: Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers Columbia 15116*

In many ways, “Leaving Home” is the definitive “old-timey” song, combining elements of many of the popular and



folk traditions that found a place in “old-time” music. Charlie Poole has taken the Leighton-Shields Tin Pan Alley version of the 19th-century “Frankie and Johnny” ballad familiar to both white and black musicians, set it to a 20th-century string band ragtime accompaniment, emphasized the witty vaudevillian-style patter chorus, and retold the story with knowing editorial comment (“These love affairs/Are hard to bear”). Poole worked similar magic on older material in many of his recordings, notably “The Highwayman” and “He Rambled.” The NCLR early on mastered Poole’s style of counterpointing banjo and guitar in a pianistic manner against a syncopated fiddle lead, and popularized this infectious string-band style among a generation of city players.

## 8. HOW CAN A POOR MAN STAND SUCH TIMES AND LIVE?

*Mike Seeger, vocal and fiddle; John Cohen, guitar; Tom Paley, banjo / From Songs From the Depression Folkways FH 5264 / Source: Blind Alfred Reed Victor 40236*

The composer-fiddler Blind Alfred Reed was one of the eccentric geniuses captured on early commercial country music recordings, a folk poet whose every song bears the signature of his indignant

moral conservatism. Hard-times songs and complaints about merchants and doctors are endemic in the music of poor rural people, but Reed’s compositions stand out within this tradition for the mournful loveliness of their tunes and terseness of their diction: “We can hardly get our breath, taxed and schooled and preached to death....”

## 9. FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT’S BACK AGAIN

*John Cohen, lead vocals and guitar; Tom Paley, vocal and lead guitar / From Songs From the Depression Folkways FH 5264 / Source: Bill Cox and Cliff Hobbs OKeh 05896*

The original Cox and Hobbs disc was recorded in 1936, about a week after Roosevelt’s re-election, and demonstrates how early country recordings could function somewhat as broadsides, commenting on and conveying popular attitudes about newsworthy events. The Ramblers have substituted Tom’s hot picking for Bill Cox’s harmonica accompaniment.

## 10. I TRULY UNDERSTAND YOU LOVE ANOTHER MAN

*Tom Paley, lead vocals and banjo; Mike Seeger, vocal; John Cohen, bass vocal / From The New Lost City Ramblers Folkways FA 2396 / Source: Shortbuckle Roark and Family Victor 40023*

Although the stanzas of this song are “floaters” which appear and reappear among many lyric country songs, they are here consolidated by the touching chorus into a coherent love lament unique in the Ramblers’ repertoire. The vocal harmony is perhaps the most complex ensemble singing the Ramblers recorded, and doesn’t attempt to reproduce the Roark Family blend of children’s and adult voices.

## 11. THE OLD FISH SONG

*Mike Seeger, vocal and fiddle / From The New Lost City Ramblers Folkways FA 2396 / Source: Blind James Howard with fiddle, Harlan, Kentucky, 1933. Library of Congress 74 A.*

This performance is one of the most remarkable in the history of the folk song revival. In it Mike introduced to urban audiences the archaic art of ballad singing to one’s own fiddle accompaniment, and a song as utterly charming as it is rare. The conceit of retelling Bible stories in latter-day vernacular appears commonly in African-American tradition, but surprises us in the repertoire of the Anglo-American Kentucky fiddler James Howard. “The Old Fish Song” displays unexpected structural sophistication by setting its ancient story within a frame

from which the narrator reiterates Jonah’s lesson for both his interior (the “buddy” in his lap) and exterior (the person hearing the song) audiences, a technique of storytelling Melville employs in Father Mapple’s Jonah sermon in *Moby Dick*.

## 12. THE BATTLESHIP OF MAINE

*Tom Paley, lead vocals and banjo; John Cohen, vocal and guitar; Mike Seeger, fiddle / From The New Lost City Ramblers Folkways FA 2396 / Source: Red Patterson’s Piedmont Log Rollers Victor 20936*

Songs about the Spanish-American War lingered on among rural musicians for a generation, gradually losing their topical relevance until they became, like this one, generally applicable to any war. This comic depiction of a confused country boy dragooned into fighting an absurd foreign war came to have startlingly new relevance for Ramblers’ audiences of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

## 13. NO DEPRESSION

*Mike Seeger, lead vocals and autoharp; Tom Paley, tenor vocal and guitar / From Songs From the Depression Folkways FH 5264 / Source: The Carter Family Decca 5242*

Songs of the Carter Family, with their



instantly recognizable guitar and auto-harp accompaniment, were from the beginning a mainstay of Ramblers performances and were in turn adopted widely among city musicians following the Ramblers' inspiration. This A.P. Carter composition is among the Carter Family's most poignant songs in its portrayal of the journalistic reality of the Depression against the visionary prophecy of a looming apocalypse.

#### 14. DALLAS RAG

*Mike Seeger, mandolin; Tom Paley, banjo; John Cohen, guitar / From The New Lost City Ramblers Folkways FA 2396 / Source: The Dallas String Band Columbia 14290*

The Dallas String Band recorded this masterpiece of early country jazz for Columbia's "race" series in 1927. The Ramblers discovered the strong African-American element in old-time string-band music well before scholars such as Tony Russell began formal study of the influence of black musicians on white, and one of the great strengths of the NCLR as teachers of a generation of urban musicians was to make clear and accessible the previously overlooked multiracial heritage of string-band music. Ramblers concerts invariably included songs and musical

styles they learned from African Americans, whether from recordings such as The Dallas String Band's or directly from musicians such as Elizabeth Cotten or Mississippi John Hurt.

#### 15. BILL MORGAN AND HIS GAL

*John Cohen, lead vocals and guitar; Tom Paley, banjo and tenor vocal; Mike Seeger, fiddle / From The New Lost City Ramblers Volume Five Folkways FA 2395 / Source: Buster Carter and Preston Young Columbia 15758*

This jolly sendup of early credit card materialism is in the "parlor style" of string-band music associated with the Virginia-North Carolina border, with very precisely syncopated fiddling backed by finger-picked banjo and guitar counterpointed somewhat as the right and left hands of a simple piano accompaniment.

#### 16. FLY AROUND MY PRETTY LITTLE MISS

*Tom Paley, lead vocals and banjo; Mike Seeger, tenor vocal and fiddle / From The New Lost City Ramblers Volume Three Folkways FA 2398 / Source: Samantha Bumgarner Columbia 146*

The guitar became common in Southern string bands only in the 20th century, while the combination of banjo and fiddle may have originated among African-

American musicians as long ago as the late 18th century. Tom and Mike revived this old American sound for their audiences, and Ramblers concerts usually contained a banjo-fiddle duet such as this one. Though they list the Samantha Bumgarner recording as a source, Tom's and Mike's performance reflects the influence of many versions of this popular breakdown.

#### 17. THE LADY OF CARLISLE

*Mike Seeger, vocal and guitar / From The New Lost City Ramblers Volume Three Folkways FA 2398 / Source: Basil May, with guitar, Salyersville, Kentucky, 1937. Library of Congress 1587.*

The Seeger family introduced this magnificent ballad to urban audiences. Charles and Ruth Seeger obtained the Library of Congress recording of Basil May in the early 1940s, and sang the song with their children. Mike and Peggy Seeger in turn introduced it to folk song revival audiences in America and England in the late 1950s.

#### 18. BROWN'S FERRY BLUES

*John Cohen, vocal and guitar; Tom Paley, vocal and lead guitar / From Tom Paley, Mike Seeger, John Cohen Sing Songs of the New Lost City Ramblers Folkways FA 2494 / Source: The Delmore Brothers Bluebird 5403*

Although the Delmore Brothers' recording career spanned the Golden Age to rock 'n' roll, from 1931 until 1956, their unique combination of boogie, blues, hot guitar licks, and close harmony was generally unknown to city audiences until the Ramblers introduced this "white blues" on their debut album in 1959. Tom has considerably elaborated on Alton Delmore's original lead picking.

#### 19. MY LONG JOURNEY HOME

*Tom Paley, lead vocals and guitar; Mike Seeger, tenor vocal and mandolin / From The New Lost City Ramblers Volume Three Folkways FA 2398 / Source: The Monroe Brothers Bluebird 6422*

Another of the Ramblers' interests lay in discovering and demonstrating the origins of bluegrass within the older country music recorded before World War II. Here, Mike re-created the innovative pre-bluegrass mandolin picking of Bill Monroe: hotly paced, fluidly picked, and melodically varied in each instrumental break. By comparing this performance to the lead picking in "The Dallas Rag," one can appreciate Mike's mastery of completely different country mandolin styles.

## 20. TALKING HARD LUCK

John Cohen, vocal and guitar / From The New Lost City Ramblers Volume Three *Folkways FA 2398* / Source: Lonnie Glosson *Conqueror 8732*

The narrator of this talking blues exemplifies the American eiron, a character who pretends to be a hick but who is far cleverer and more sophisticated than he lets us know—the mask worn so successfully by Will Rogers. This mask may be inherent in the form of the talking blues with its laconic stanzas setting up their one-line snappers, a technique used to great effect by Woody Guthrie in his topical talking blues. Here, behind his head-scratching rhetoric, the speaker conceals a cruel misogyny, a knowing sexuality, a cynic's view of government, and a poet's way with words.

## 21. THE TEETOTALS

Mike Seeger, Tom Paley, John Cohen, vocals / From American Moonshine and Prohibition *Folkways FH 5263* / Source: "Teetotalers," Mr. and Mrs. Crockett Ward, Galax, Virginia, 1937. Library of Congress 1360 B2.

The temperance movement of the mid-19th century generated songs ranging from weepy and moralistic ballads to militant marching anthems, all composed to denounce the evils of drink, extol the fate that would befall drinkers,

or pronounce the virtue of those "taking the pledge" of abstinence. The best of these songs survived among rural people long enough to be recorded by both amateur and professional country musicians during this century's Prohibition years of 1917–1932. The Crockett Wards of Galax recorded for John A. Lomax many songs they learned before the turn of the century. "Teetotalers" has the militant air of songs associated with activities of the Prohibition Party or the Anti-Saloon League or the Woman's Christian Temperance Union during their years of influence.

## 22. SAL GOT A MEATSKIN

Tom Paley, lead vocals and guitar; Mike Seeger, tenor vocal and (capoed) guitar on first and third breaks / From The New Lost City Ramblers Volume Three *Folkways FA 2398* / Source: Cliff and Bill Carlisle *Panacord 25639*

The sung tenderness of this love song (for lack of a better descriptor) contrasts oddly with its bawdy subtext. When the Ramblers interviewed Cliff Carlisle, he confirmed that in Kentucky vernacular "meatskin" is a euphemism for a maidenhead.

## 23. RAILROAD BLUES

Tom Paley, vocal and guitar / From The New Lost City Ramblers Volume Three *Folkways FA 2398* / Source: Sam McGee *Decca 5348*

Sam McGee "from sunny Tennessee" was the most interesting white guitarist to record on old-time records. His music combines concepts and picking techniques from both black and white guitar traditions, from the blues and ragtime of street singers to "parlor" styles popular in the 19th century among genteel young middle-class women. While Tom seldom imitated the licks of musicians he studied on old recordings, here he recreates very closely the string-popping syncopation of McGee's playing. His revival of McGee's guitar performances popularized masterpieces such as "Buck Dancer's Choice" and "Railroad Blues" among revival guitarists.

## 24. THE FOGGY MOUNTAIN TOP

Mike Seeger, lead vocals and mandolin; Tom Paley, lead guitar and tenor vocal; John Cohen, guitar and bass vocal / From The New Lost City Ramblers *Folkways EPC 602* / Source: The Monroe Brothers *Bluebird 6607*

The Ramblers had studied both the 1936 Monroe Brothers and the 1929 Carter Family recordings of this song, and their performance contains elements of

both sources, leaning heavily toward the jazzier Monroe version. Again, Tom's guitar break is original with him, and a beautiful example of the way the Ramblers learned to augment creatively the music they heard on old recordings.

## 25. MY SWEET FARM GIRL

John Cohen, lead vocals and guitar; Mike Seeger, tenor vocal and banjo; Tom Paley, autoharp / From *Earth Is Earth Folkways FF 869* / Source: Clarence Ashley and Gwynn Foster *Vocalion 02780*

While many old-time musicians knew folk material of hair-curling obscenity, such material didn't find its way into their public performances, live or recorded, for obvious reasons. An exception is the occasional double-entendre bawdy song such as Clarence Ashley's "My Sweet Farm Girl," which displaces its sexual references onto an elaborately innocent but equally transparent parallel narrative. The Ramblers recorded four bawdy country songs on an EP titled *Earth Is Earth*, the unsigned, hilarious liner notes for which betray the unmistakable wit of Tom Paley.

## 26. CROW BLACK CHICKEN

*Tom Paley, lead vocals and guitar; John Cohen, vocal refrain and banjo; Mike Seeger, falsetto vocal and fiddle / From The New Lost City Ramblers Volume Four Folkways FA 2399 / Source: The Leake County Revelers Columbia 15318*

The Ramblers customarily ended their shows by busting the place up with a full string-band number that allowed them to display all the energy, exuberance, wit, and roaring tunefulness of old-time music at its roistering best. The Leake County Revelers were actually one of the more sedate string bands to record in the Golden Age, so the gusto poured into “Crow Black Chicken” here derives not from the old recording but from Paley, Seeger, and Cohen at the top of their form.



## *credits*

Originally recorded for Folkways Records  
by Moses Asch, Peter Bartok, and  
Mike Seeger

Compiled and annotated in 1991  
by Jon Pankake for Smithsonian  
Folkways Recordings

Anthology production supervised by  
Anthony Seeger and Matt Walters (1991)

Remastered by Malcolm Addey, Mike  
Seeger, and Matt Walters (1991)

Cover design by Carol Hardy (1991)

Cover photo by Robert Frank

Booklet redesign and layout by  
Visual Dialogue (2009)

Executive producers: Daniel E. Sheehy  
and D. A. Sonneborn (2009)

Production managed by Mary Monseur

Production assistance by Eileen Dorfman

Editorial assistance by Carla Borden

### **Additional Smithsonian Folkways**

**staff:** Richard James Burgess, director  
of marketing and sales; Betty Derbyshire,  
financial operations manager; Laura  
Dion, sales; Toby Dodds, technology  
manager; Spencer Ford, customer service;  
Henri Goodson, financial assistant;  
Mark Gustafson, marketing; Helen  
Lindsay, customer service; Keisha  
Martin, manufacturing coordinator;  
Margot Nassau, licensing and royalties;  
Jeff Place, archivist; Pete Reiniger,  
sound engineer; Ronnie Simpkins,  
audio specialist; John Smith, sales and  
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Special thanks to Mike Seeger

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**VOL. II 1963-1973**

*out standing in their field*

**THE NEW  
LOST CITY  
RAMBLERS**



**VOL. II 1963-1973**

*out standing in their field*

1. **John Brown's Dream** 1:32 (arr. Tommy Jarrell-Fred Cockerham/Wynwood Music Co. Inc., BMI)
2. **Riding on That Train 45** 2:19
3. **The Titanic** 2:59
4. **Don't Get Trouble in Your Mind** 2:15 (Frank Blevins)
5. **Cowboy Waltz** 1:49 (Woody Guthrie/TRO-Ludlow Music Inc., BMI)
6. **Shut Up in the Mines of Coal Creek** 2:49
7. **Private John Q** 2:03 (Roger Miller/Sony ATV Tree Publishing Co. Inc., BMI)
8. **Old Johnny Buckner Wouldn't Do** 3:01
9. **I've Always Been a Rambler** 3:16 (G.B. Grayson/Peer International Corp., BMI)
10. **Automobile Trip through Alabama** 3:15
11. **Who Killed Poor Robin?** 3:52
12. **My Wife Died on Saturday Night** 2:18
13. **Little Satchel** 2:47 (Fred Cockerham)
14. **Black Bottom Strut** 2:09
15. **The Cat's Got the Measles, the Dog's Got the Whooping Cough** 2:55
16. **Dear Okie** 2:14 (Doyle O'Dell-Roby Sooter/Sunshine Music Co., BMI)
17. **Smoketown Strut** 2:16 (Sylvester Weaver)
18. **The Little Girl and the Dreadful Snake** 2:31 (Albert Price/Tannen Music, BMI)
19. **Fishing Creek Blues** 2:01 (Tracy Schwarz/Stormking Music Inc., BMI)
20. **'31 Depression Blues** 3:31 (Ed Sturgill/Lonesome Ace Publishing, BMI)
21. **Black Jack Daisy** 2:31
22. **Victory Rag** 2:05
23. **The Little Carpenter** 2:50 (James Howard)
24. **On Our Turpentine Farm** 2:51 (Wesley Wilson-Harry McDaniels)
25. **Parlez-nous à Boire** 3:35 (Dewey Balfa/Flat Town Music Company, BMI)
26. **Valse du Bambocheur** 2:59 (Dewey Balfa/Flat Town Music Company, BMI)
27. **Old Joe Bone** 1:59

# *the new lost city ramblers: carrying on an american “folk” tradition*

**JON PANKAKE**

**January 1993, Minneapolis, Minnesota**

In the study of old-time songs, one occasionally encounters an example which opens great vistas of cultural history. One such example is “Rhinordine,” a ballad recorded in 1934 by the Gant Family of Austin, Texas, for John and Alan Lomax of the Library of Congress. The ballad describes a mountaintop encounter between a young woman and a mysterious armed man. Fearing the wrath of her parents for her forbidden wandering, she collapses into his arms as he promises to protect her. She asks his name; he tells her, “Rhinordine,” as the song ends. The Gants’ performance offers a much-changed American version of a British ballad more than two hundred years old, called in English texts “Reynardine.” In these ancient versions, Reynardine appears to be a Green Man or Iron Hans, who has magical powers of seduction and who, from his castle in the deep woods, responds to the call of his name. By the time he has arrived in Texas, however, Rhinordine has become more prosaic, pleading, “I said, kind Miss, I am a bum although I’m not to blame.”

We would like to know exactly how Rhinordine traveled from Sussex to Austin, at what times in his history the details of his story were changed, and who reduced him from a Green Man to a Texas bum. Such knowledge would be the stuff of a most interesting folklore study. But the details of this story are lost forever. The only thing we can be sure of is that Rhinordine’s long journey from England to Texas was not conducted orally, handed down from one singer to another across generations in the way of folk ballads in cultures less literate than America’s.



In 1836, a book called *The American Songster* printed “Rhinordine” in a text so close to that sung by the Gant Family a hundred years later that we can be sure it is directly or indirectly the source of the Gants’ version. What is most astonishing about the *Songster* is that it presents “Rhinordine” not as the ancient ballad it already was, but as a “modern and popular song.” The *Songster* names thirty informants from whom its songs were collected, and all of those further identified were popular performers in the New York theater. Many songs in the book carry headnotes stating, “As sung with the greatest applause by Miss Clara Fisher in the musical farce of *The Invincibles* at the Park Theatre,” or “As sung by Mr. Sloman, at the Baltimore Theatre, with unbounded applause.”

As mind-boggling as it is, the prospect of “Rhinordine” being sung from the stage in Poe’s New York may be more characteristic of many American folk song histories than one of uninterrupted generations of oral transmission. American folklorists have learned to be skeptical of the concept of “pure” folk songs uncontaminated by exposure to popular cultures; indeed, the classification of texts as either meritorious, orally transmitted “pure” folk songs or unworthy “popular” songs which have appeared in print or on recordings often proves an unproductive one.

Perhaps a more valuable conception of the American “folk process” is one suggested by Norm Cohen in the notes for *Minstrels & Tunesmiths* (John Edwards Memorial Foundation LP-109, 1981). Cohen describes

an American tradition of “domestic” performance by amateur musicians coexisting with “public” performance by professional musicians who have access to the media, with many songs moving back and forth between these two arenas of performance during their histories. Thus, “Rhinordine” appears publicly in print on 18th-century broadsides, perhaps based on earlier oral versions; it is then learned and sung by singers who cause it to be printed again in the 19th-century *Songster*, from which it is learned by the Gants or their sources; and it is returned by the Gants to public access once again via the 20th century aluminum recording disc of the Lomaxes. The same song has been both “folk” and “popular” at different times in its history, perhaps changed as much by professional musicians for purposes of public performance as by oral circulation among domestic musicians.

As public performers of domestic songs with histories similar to that of “Rhinordine,” The New Lost City Ramblers thus belong to a very old American tradition. They are the modern counterparts of those long-ago New York theater singers, performers who have taken old songs sung by amateur musicians in domestic settings and performed them “with unbounded applause” from the public stages of their own era, and in doing so have made the songs available to the media of their time. In addition to print, however, the Ramblers have had access to phonograph records, videotapes, films, television and radio broadcasts, cassettes, and CDs. Many of the songs performed on this album—“Black

Jack Daisy,” for example—have experienced just such a process of transmission as has “Rhinordine,” with the Ramblers’ performance providing only the most recent means of returning the song from a domestic to a public setting. From the Ramblers’ performances, the songs have taken on a new life among the amateur musicians inspired by their example to sing and play old songs.

### ***The New Lost City Ramblers: 1963–1973***

The story of the relationship between The New Lost City Ramblers and their audience among the folk song revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s has been told in a previous collection, *The New Lost City Ramblers, The Early Years 1958–1962* (Smithsonian Folkways 40036, 1991).

Upon Tom Paley’s departure from the Ramblers in 1962, his place was taken in the group by Tracy Schwarz. Born in New York City but raised in New Jersey and Vermont, Tracy first heard country music on the radio at about the age of eight, and began to play the guitar at ten. During his college years in the late 1950s, he took up the fiddle in the active bluegrass scene in Washington, D.C., and continued playing during his nearly two-year military service tour in Germany. By 1962, when he joined the Ramblers, Tracy brought to the group a mastery of smooth, early bluegrass-styled fiddling and an agile tenor voice which could handle both bluegrass harmonies and the Primitive Baptist solo style which he used in his unaccompanied ballads. His skills extended the temporal

range within which the Ramblers could work both forward into the modern country music of the bluegrass era, and backward into the most archaic forms of folk song documented on folk song recordings.

The music heard on this collection samples the best of the recordings made by the Ramblers from 1963 through 1973. Most striking are those performances which convey their mastery of very specific regional musical styles, such as the manic double-fiddle Mississippi dance music of “Old Joe Bone” or the precise Virginia-North Carolina “parlor” fiddling of “Old Johnny Buckner Wouldn’t Do.” No less impressive is the sense of constant innovation displayed during those ten years, manifest in the Ramblers’ command of Cajun music, their original instrumental settings for unaccompanied songs such as “Black Jack Daisy” and “Who Killed Poor Robin?” and their continuing exploration of the African-American influences upon traditional Anglo-American string music.

Many of these performances were directly inspired by the Ramblers’ association with traditional musicians they invited to share their stages during the later 1960s and the 1970s—Dock Boggs, Clarence Ashley, Elizabeth Cotten, Maybelle Carter, Cousin Emmy, Dewey Balfa, Roscoe Holcomb, the McGee Brothers, and many more. When the final history of the Ramblers is written, their role as interpretive intermediaries between the folk music revival and traditional musicians who would otherwise have never been known to contemporary urban audiences may well overshadow their importance as performers.

By the 1970s, the restless individual creativities of Mike Seeger, John Cohen, and Tracy Schwarz had become impossible to accommodate within the structure of a touring band, and family obligations of all three increasingly made a collective practice, travel, performance, and recording schedule untenable. John had established a second career as a distinguished filmmaker, work which took him not only to Kentucky and North Carolina but also several times to Peru, and he was working toward tenure as a professor of art as well. For a time in the early 1970s he performed with Lynn and Jay Unger and Abby Newton as the Putnam String County Band, playing old-time and more contemporary music.

Tracy began farming near York, Pennsylvania, and toured and recorded with his wife Eloise and son Peter as Tracy's Family Band, playing a mix of old-time, bluegrass, Cajun, and Tracy's original songs. Increasingly involved with playing and writing about Cajun music, Tracy traveled to Louisiana to learn the Cajun accordion and to produce in 1975 the first albums of instruction on the Cajun fiddle. In 1984 Peter received an apprenticeship grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to study Cajun fiddle with the late Dewey Balfa, and for a time Peter, Tracy, Dewey, and Dewey's nephew Tony Balfa performed as the Four Bachelors.

In the early 1970s, Mike and Tracy had begun performing more modern country music as the Strange Creek Singers, with Alice Gerrard, Hazel Dickens, and Lamar Grier. Mike had continued his work

as a soloist throughout the years with the Ramblers, but beginning in the 1970s he also recorded and toured Asia with Alice, taught folk music in college, produced a dazzling library of documentary recordings of old-time musicians, formed an old-time band called the Bent Mountain Boys with Andy Cahan and Paul Brown, produced videotapes of old-time musicians and dancers, and represented America at a world congress of jew's harp players in Russia.

Since their 20th-anniversary concert at Carnegie Hall in 1978, the Ramblers have performed together only occasionally, while continuing individually to carry on their calling of exploring, interpreting, and documenting in image, print, and performance the domestic arts of rural people who would otherwise have been denied access to the 20th-century's public—that is to say, global—media. A reunion tour in the summer of 1993 marked The New Lost City Ramblers' 35th anniversary.

With the centuries of American music at their command, they continue to surprise and astound us, performing “with unbounded applause” old-time music, learned from domestic musicians, for the public of the 21st century and beyond.

# track notes

## 1. JOHN BROWN'S DREAM

*Mike Seeger, dulcimer; Tracy Schwarz, fiddle; John Cohen, banjo / From On the Great Divide Folkways 31041 / Source: Tommy Jarrell and Fred Cockerham County 713*

While Tracy plays here in classical tuning, Tommy Jarrell played “John Brown’s Dream” with his fiddle tuned to an open chord of octave pairs (AEAE), allowing him to play the melody in turn on the upper and on the lower pair of strings, and to sound prominent drone notes throughout. In their unique arrangement, the Ramblers have added Mike’s dulcimer with its twin drone strings to re-create the intensity of Jarrell’s performance of one of his signature tunes.

## 2. RIDING ON THAT TRAIN 45

*Tracy Schwarz, vocal and fiddle; Mike Seeger, banjo; John Cohen, guitar / From Gone to the Country Folkways 2491 / Source: Wade Mainer and Zeke Morris Bluebird 7298*

Tracy’s driving bowing and bluesy singing rather hauntingly resemble those of Steve Ledford, the great fiddler and singer on the original Mainer-Morris recording. That version of “Train 45” was among the first hillbilly recordings reissued for an urban audience, as part of John A. Lomax’s set *Smoky Mountain Ballads* in 1941.

## 3. THE TITANIC

*Mike Seeger, lead vocals and autoharp; Tracy Schwarz, tenor vocals and second guitar; John Cohen, bass vocals and lead guitar / From Remembrance of Things to Come Folkways 31035 / Source: The Carter Family Acme 1000*

In one of their more obscure performances, the Carter Family recorded this ballad for the small Acme label after the departure of Maybelle Carter for an independent career with her daughters, and her replacement in the original group by A.P.’s and Sara’s guitar-picking children, Joe and Janette. Mike has created an autoharp lead such as Maybelle might well have played. The last two lines are stunning in their juxtaposition of emotional naivete and technological prescience.

## 4. DON'T GET TROUBLE IN YOUR MIND

*John Cohen, vocal and banjo; Tracy Schwarz, guitar; Mike Seeger, fiddle / From Radio Special #1 Folkways 603 / Source: Frank Blevins and His Tar Heel Rattlers Columbia 15280*

Frank Blevins’s string-band masterpiece rather improbably joins desolate “white blues” stanzas to a sprightly dance tune, one that takes wings from its abrupt first-line shift to the subdominant. John has interpolated some stanzas from a field recording of the Kentucky banjo master, Rufus Crisp.

## 5. COWBOY WALTZ

John Cohen, mandolin; Mike Seeger, fiddle; Tracy Schwarz, guitar / From String Band Instrumentals Folkways 2492 / Source: Woody Guthrie Folkways FP 10

Among the most ubiquitous of country recordings made in the 1920s and 1930s, the instrumental waltz and the religious song have largely been passed over by folk revival musicians. The Ramblers themselves included in their recorded repertoire only one example of each. Woody Guthrie may have put this lovely waltz together himself from memories of the Oklahoma dances he played. It borrows melodic elements of the “Tulsa Waltz,” recorded in 1929 by Guthrie’s fellow Oklahoman, Jack Cawley.

## 6. SHUT UP IN THE MINES OF COAL CREEK

Tracy Schwarz, vocals / From Modern Times Folkways 31027; Source: Mrs. Elsie Lee Ward Brown, collection of Ed Kahn

Tracy’s unaccompanied ballad singing style owes much to country church singing, especially in the delicate “feathering” of the notes at the ends of lines. The song has been traced to a 1902 explosion at the Fraterville Mine in Tennessee, in which nearly two hundred miners died, and its text allegedly derives from letters and verse recovered from the

mine. Mrs. Brown learned the song from a 1929 commercial recording by Kentuckian Green Bailey (as Dick Bell) on Challenge 425. Tracy’s performance returns the song to commercial recordings and to an audience far removed from but still touched by a long-ago tragedy.

## 7. PRIVATE JOHN Q

Mike Seeger, lead vocals, lead guitar, and mouth harp; Tracy Schwarz, tenor vocals and banjo; John Cohen, guitar / From Modern Times Folkways 31027 / Source: Roger Miller Smash MGS 27049

Miller’s original recording was released only about three years earlier than the Ramblers’ 1968 performance, making “Private John Q” by far the newest country disc they ever worked from. Led by Mike’s bluesy mouth harp, the Ramblers have imagined an instrumental setting which reveals the old-timey song hidden within Miller’s modern Nashville hit, and which establishes Miller’s beleaguered private as a brother in arms to the befuddled G.I. in earlier hillbilly songs such as “That Crazy War” and “The Battleship of Maine.”

## 8. OLD JOHNNY BUCKER WOULDN'T DO

John Cohen, vocals and guitar; Mike Seeger, fiddle; Tracy Schwarz, fiddle / From On the Great Divide Folkways 31041 / Source: Walter Smith (as Jerry Jordan) Supertone 9407

The Virginia singer Walter Smith was one of the most interesting of the “Golden Age” artists whose long-forgotten music the Ramblers resurrected for their audiences. A professional medicine show entertainer who performed as “Old Toby,” a red-winged clown, Smith owned a repertoire of songs which, like “Old Johnny Bucker,” had deep roots in 19th-century popular culture, songs which had been performed from the minstrel and vaudeville stages by both black and white musicians, and taken up in turn by their rural audiences. On his 1929 recording session, Smith was accompanied by a crack fiddle and guitar team, Posey Rorer and Norman Woodlieff, both veterans of Charlie Poole’s North Carolina Ramblers. John, Mike, and Tracy have one-upped Rorer’s and Woodlieff’s synchronized fiddle and guitar accompaniment by adding a second fiddle which takes octave flights.

## 9. I'VE ALWAYS BEEN A RAMBLER

Tracy Schwarz, vocals and fiddle; John Cohen, banjo; Mike Seeger, guitar / From Rural Delivery Number

One Folkways 2496 / Source: G. B. Grayson and Henry Whitter Victor 40324

The blind fiddler Gillam Bannom Grayson was one of the most melancholy and moving singers of the Golden Age of country recordings. Tracy here captures much of Grayson’s lonesome magic in a song whose protagonist’s depth of feeling is matched only by the Tennessee limits of his horizons (“Went on to Johnson City / Going to see this wide world o’er”).

## 10. AUTOMOBILE TRIP THROUGH ALABAMA

John Cohen, vocals; Mike Seeger, banjo / From Rural Delivery Number One Folkways 2496 / Source: Red Henderson and Emmett Bankston OKeh 45283

Surely the most bizarre side ever released on old-time recordings, this monologue depicting the comic resurrection of a Ford automobile became a favorite Ramblers performance through John’s mastery of the art of deadpan. Red Henderson was a professional entertainer working out of Atlanta in the 1920s with Earl Johnson’s string bands, but we have no information on what role this recitation may have played in his performances or what part he played in its composition. Whoever first imagined it displayed a thoroughly American love of and skill at

depicting surreal, kinetic action of the kind that also informs the Disney Silly Symphonies cartoons, the Sut Lovingood stories, and the Krazy Kat comic strips.

## 11. WHO KILLED POOR ROBIN?

Mike Seeger, vocals, guitar, and mouth harp; Tracy Schwarz, fiddle; John Cohen, banjo / From *On the Great Divide Folkways 31041* / Source: Mrs. Edith Harmon, near Maryville, Tennessee, 1939 Library of Congress AAFS 2907 A2.

In a superb feat of folk revival musicianship, the Ramblers have here created a beautiful, simple, and tasteful string-band setting for Mrs. Harmon's eerie, minor-key unaccompanied ballad. The aesthetics of this performance are those of the late Norton, Virginia, master banjoist and singer Dock Boggs, whose "graveyard" music not only lives on but continues to blossom and bear anew in the creativity of the musicians who came under his spell.

## 12. MY WIFE DIED ON SATURDAY NIGHT

Mike Seeger, vocal and mouth harp; John Cohen, banjo; Tracy Schwarz, guitar / From *String Band Instrumentals Folkways 2492* / Source: Dr. Humphrey Bate and His Possum Hunters *Brunswick 271*

Cheap, portable, and easy to learn, the

harmonica was very likely the most widely played musical instrument in America in the first half of the 20th century. Well documented on pre-World War II country recordings, the instrument has fared poorly among "revivalists," who have preferred the more versatile fiddle, banjo, and guitar. Consequently, early recordings of both Anglo- and African-American masters of the mouth harp remain lesser known and seldom studied. The harmonica-led breakdowns of Dr. Humphrey Bate were featured on the earliest broadcasts of the Grand Ole Opry, and Bate's recordings for Brunswick remain among the most exciting performances of the dance music ever recorded. The Ramblers' tribute to Dr. Bate is an early example of Mike's continuing interest in and developing skill on the mouth harp.

## 13. LITTLE SACHEL

Tracy Schwarz, vocals and three-finger banjo; John Cohen, clawhammer banjo; Mike Seeger, guitar / From *On the Great Divide Folkways 31041* / Source: Fred Cockerham County 713

Within ten years of The New Lost City Ramblers' first performances, young musicians and scholars stimulated by their example were seeking out and

documenting contemporary old-time musicians such as Fred Cockerham, whose banjo-accompanied solo performance of "Little Satchel" is one of the treasures recorded during the folk revival. The song is Fred's own compilation of and elaboration upon lines and images from the "Silver Dagger" / "Katy Dear" family of ballads. The Ramblers have created an entirely new setting for Tracy's high lonesome vocal performance, combining clawhammer and finger-picked banjo in the contemporary double-banjo style of early bluegrass musicians Happy Smith and Larry Richardson.

## 14. BLACK BOTTOM STRUT

Mike Seeger, mandolin; John Cohen, guitar; Tracy Schwarz, spoons / From *Remembrance of Things to Come Folkways 31035* / Source: *Three Stripped Gears OKeh 45553*

John Godrich and Robert Dixon in their authoritative *Blues and Gospel Records 1902-1942* list the mysterious Three Stripped Gears as "more than likely" African-American musicians. The group recorded in Atlanta in October-November 1931, at the same time as did the Mississippi Sheiks, who, in 1930, had recorded mandolin rags similar to "Black Bottom Strut." The two groups may well

have shared personnel, perhaps even mandolinist Charlie McCoy. John Cohen observes that the original recording of "Black Bottom Strut" "has rhythm guitar plus a second guitar which plays very strange passages and runs. The spoons were Tracy's addition, and several of the weird guitar parts have drifted over to the mandolin." Tracy provides an unexpected coda by tossing the spoons onto a triangle they had on hand at the session for the Cajun pieces.

## 15. THE CAT'S GOT THE MEASLES, THE DOG'S GOT THE WHOOPING COUGH

Mike Seeger, vocals and guitar; Tracy Schwarz, fiddle / From *Remembrance of Things to Come Folkways 31035* / Source: Walter Smith (as Jerry Jordan) *Supertone 9407*

Walter Smith recorded this song at the same 1929 session as "Old Johnny Buckner Wouldn't Do," and Rorer and Woodlief provided the same refined and intricate fiddle and guitar accompaniment, the latter played in F fingering capoed up to G. Tony Russell has pointed out that the title sentence of "the Cat's Got the Measles..." appears as part of the refrain of a British dance tune, but the text's reference to the devil and the good gal and the sexual brag of taking women from

the monkey men appear in many blues, indicating a mixed Anglo- and African-American origin for this song.

## 16. DEAR OKIE

*John Cohen, vocals and guitar; Tracy Schwarz, fiddle; Mike Seeger, banjo / From Modern Times Folkways 31027; Source: Doyle O'Dell Exclusive 33X*

Doyle O'Dell's Okie-California composition is the closest the Ramblers came to performing in the Western Swing idiom of country string band music influenced by big-band jazz phrasing and rhythm. The lyrics depict the post-Depression Oleanna of Southern California with a sly mixture of humor and irony worthy of Woody Guthrie at his wittiest.

## 17. SMOKETOWN STRUT

*Mike Seeger, guitar / From String Band Instrumentals Folkways 2492 / Source: Sylvester Weaver OKeh 8152*

The origins of American finger-picked folk guitar are aurally untraceable, since the earliest recordings we have of folk guitarists capture masters such as the African-American Sylvester Weaver already performing in full-blown and sophisticated styles. We can conjecture that the right hand owes a debt to 19th-century parlor guitar and banjo picking

techniques, but the unmistakable swing of "Smoketown Strut" can only have come from a mating with ragtime piano in some long-forgotten exchange of musical ideas before World War I. The title refers to the smoke-grimed industrial tenement district in Louisville, Kentucky, where Weaver lived. Mike's beautiful performance here reflects his longstanding interest in the African-American origins of old-time guitar picking.

## 18. THE LITTLE GIRL AND THE DREADFUL SNAKE

*Mike Seeger, lead vocals and mandolin; Tracy Schwarz, tenor vocals and fiddle; John Cohen, guitar / From Radio Special #1 Folkways 603 / Source: Bill Monroe and His Bluegrass Boys Decca 28878*

The sentimentality and the symbolism of this song will be equally risible to urban, Freudian-educated audiences, but the dying child has a long and honorable lineage in popular and folk song, and to Southern rural audiences this song describes an all-too-real danger. Mike sings Jimmy Martin's lead and Tracy sings Bill Monroe's tenor harmony in one of the Ramblers' earliest excursions into "pure" bluegrass, lacking only the banjo and string bass of Monroe's classic band.

## 19. FISHING CREEK BLUES

*Tracy Schwarz, fiddle; John Cohen, guitar; Mike Seeger, banjo / From Rural Delivery Number One Folkways 2496*

Tracy composed this lovely and unusual fiddle tune in 1964. He recalls, "Right after viewing the opening of the World's Fair on TV, I turned the set off and took out my fiddle. Nothing I already knew matched my mood, so I started noodling around with the exact sounds I was after, and lo and behold, out came a tune." Tracy's friends vetoed his original title, "World's Fair," and so the final title honors Fishing Creek in York County, Pennsylvania. Tracy detects in his composition the influences of tunes such as "Cripple Creek," Bill Monroe's "Brown County Breakdown," and the Stanley Brothers' "Suwannee River Hoedown," but the tune is true to so many fiddle tunes that it can sound "Ozark" on one hearing and "Texas" on another. In recent years, other fiddlers have taken up the tune and, in the ways of tradition, it is now played by musicians who have no idea of its recent origin or of the identity of its author.

## 20. '31 DEPRESSION BLUES

*Mike Seeger, vocals and banjo, Tracy Schwarz, guitar / From Modern Times Folkways 31027 / Source: Ed Sturgill and His Banjo Big Pine Records 677M-7157*

While most folk revival musicians have limited their excursions into old-time music to dance tunes and instrumentals, the Ramblers have shown an unusual interest in the often bitter "hard-times" songs of coal miners and other rural industrial workers. The long shadow of former miner Dock Boggs inspires the performance of this song, which Mike learned from a recording by its composer, Ed Sturgill of Appalachia, Virginia. Sturgill, who knew Dock and was influenced by his music, issued his performance on his own record label. The tune resembles that of one of Dock's laments, "The Bright Sunny South."

## 21. BLACK JACK DAISY

*John Cohen, vocals and banjo / From Remembrance of Things to Come Folkways 31035 / Source: Dillard Chandler: Old Love Songs and Ballads Folkways 2309*

John enjoyed a remarkable three-way creative relationship with Dillard Chandler of Sodom, North Carolina. As a folklorist, John recorded Chandler's songs and issued them on the album *Old Love Songs and Ballads*; as a filmmaker, he documented Chandler's life and place in his community in his film *The End of an Old Song* (1967); as a musician, he created this banjo setting for Chandler's



unaccompanied version of the British “Gypsy Laddie” ballad. The banjo is in a modal tuning, FCFBbC.

## 22. VICTORY RAG

*John Cohen, guitar; Mike Seeger, autoharp / From String Band Instrumentals Folkways 2492 / Source: Maybelle Carter*

John learned this pretty rag from Maybelle Carter when the Ramblers played the Ash Grove with her in 1963, and Mike created an autoharp accompaniment and lead with which to complement the guitar. Maybelle Carter recalled learning “Victory Rag” from a guitar player at the Old Dominion Barn Dance in Richmond, Virginia, in the 1950s. She subsequently recorded it on her album *Pickin’ and Singin’* (Smash 27041). The Ramblers’ recording of this tune has popularized it over the years as a standard display piece for city guitar and autoharp pickers.

## 23. THE LITTLE CARPENTER

*Mike Seeger, vocals and fiddle; John Cohen, banjo / From Gone to the Country Folkways 2491 / Source: Blind James Howard, Harlan, Kentucky. Library of Congress AAFS 1376 B2.*

The familiar ballad theme of the triumph of love over wealth and position

receives an exceptionally tender treatment in this rare item from the song-bag of Blind James Howard. Some years ago, we stumped a well-known folklorist with this song; he had never encountered anything like it and could give us no leads on sources or printed versions. The diction and the mysterious rituals of handkerchiefs and finger rings would seem to point to an Old World origin for the song. John has added a banjo accompaniment to Mike’s fiddling, in the spirit of Howard’s fellow Kentuckians, Dick Burnett and Leonard Rutherford.

## 24. ON OUR TURPENTINE FARM

*John Cohen, lead vocals and guitar; Mike Seeger, tenor vocals and mandolin; Tracy Schwarz, vocal interjections and guitar / From On the Great Divide Folkways 31041 / Source: Pigmeat Pete and Catjuice Charlie Columbia 14485*

This performance marks the Ramblers’ sole excursion into the African-American genre of “hokum blues.” Popular during the 1920s, hokum set its typically rowdy or ribald stanzas within a hot, jazzy accompaniment, revealing the humorous, “good-time” shadow side of the country blues. “Pete” and “Charlie” were pseudonyms for Wesley Wilson and Harry McDaniel, whose stanzas here display

what John calls “the cruel realities of country living.” In the spirit of hokum, John has added the last stanza as a comment on certain artists he has known.

## 25. PARLEZ-NOUS À BOIRE

*Mike Seeger, vocals and lead fiddle; Tracy Schwarz, second fiddle; John Cohen, triangle / From Remembrance of Things to Come Folkways 31035; Source: Dewey Balfa, Basile, Jefferson Davis Parish, Louisiana*

“Parlez-nous à Boire” was the first recording of a Cajun song by folk revival musicians. The Ramblers continued to perform Cajun music in their appearances throughout the 1970s, and Tracy began to play Cajun accordion as well as the fiddle.

## 26. VALSE DU BAMBOCHEUR

*Tracy Schwarz, vocals and lead fiddle; Mike Seeger, second fiddle; John Cohen, guitar / From On the Great Divide Folkways 31041 / Source: Dewey Balfa The Balfa Brothers Play Traditional Cajun Music Swallow 6011*

In 1987 Michael Doucet of the band BeauSoleil presented Garrison Keillor with an award on behalf of the Cajun people of Louisiana in appreciation of Keillor’s role in popularizing Cajun music to a national audience on his radio program *A Prairie Home Companion*. In retrospect, the award could have been

given to The New Lost City Ramblers; they introduced Cajun songs and performing style not only to Keillor but to all of us who discovered the “soul music” of the folk song revival through the Ramblers’ own performances and those of Cajun musicians such as Dewey Balfa, with whom they shared their stages.

## 27. OLD JOE BONE

*John Cohen, vocals and guitar; Mike Seeger, fiddle; Tracy Schwarz, fiddle / From Rural Delivery Number One Folkways 2496 / Source: Carter Brothers and Son OKeh 45289*

The Ramblers reserved their place in Old-time Music Heaven with their re-creation of the music of this wild, obscure Mississippi band. The Carters play irresistible, driving dance music on twin fiddles tuned and played in octaves and accompanied by a guitarist who shouts out stanzas and rhythmic nonsense syllables. The sung syllables may possibly be intended as a supplementary rhythm instrument, in the manner of Scots mouth music, or “diddling the chorus.” The Ramblers customarily closed their sets with a rousing performance of a Carter Brothers and Son tune, occasions which became, says John, “an exercise in improvisation within the limits of great consistency and madness.”

## *credits*

Originally recorded for Moses Asch and Folkways Records by Peter Bartok and Chris Strachwitz

Compiled and annotated by Jon Pankake in 1991

Anthology production supervised by Anthony Seeger and Matt Walters (1991)

Remastered by Henk Kooistra at Soundmirror

Cover photo by Robert Frank

Cover design and layout by Visual Dialogue, Boston, MA

Editorial assistance by Ed O'Reilly and Carla Borden

Executive producers in 2009:  
Daniel E. Sheehy and D. A. Sonneborn

Production manager: Mary Monseur

### **Additional Smithsonian Folkways**

**staff:** Richard James Burgess, director of marketing and sales; Betty Derbyshire, financial operations manager; Laura Dion, sales; Toby Dodds, technology director; Spencer Ford, fulfillment; León García, web program specialist; Henri Goodson, financial assistant; Mark Gustafson, marketing; David Horgan, e-marketing specialist; Helen Lindsay, customer service; Keisha Martin, manufacturing coordinator; Margot Nassau, licensing and royalties; Jeff Place, archivist; Pete Reiniger, sound engineer; Ronnie Simpkins, audio specialist; John Smith, sales and marketing; Stephanie Smith, archivist.

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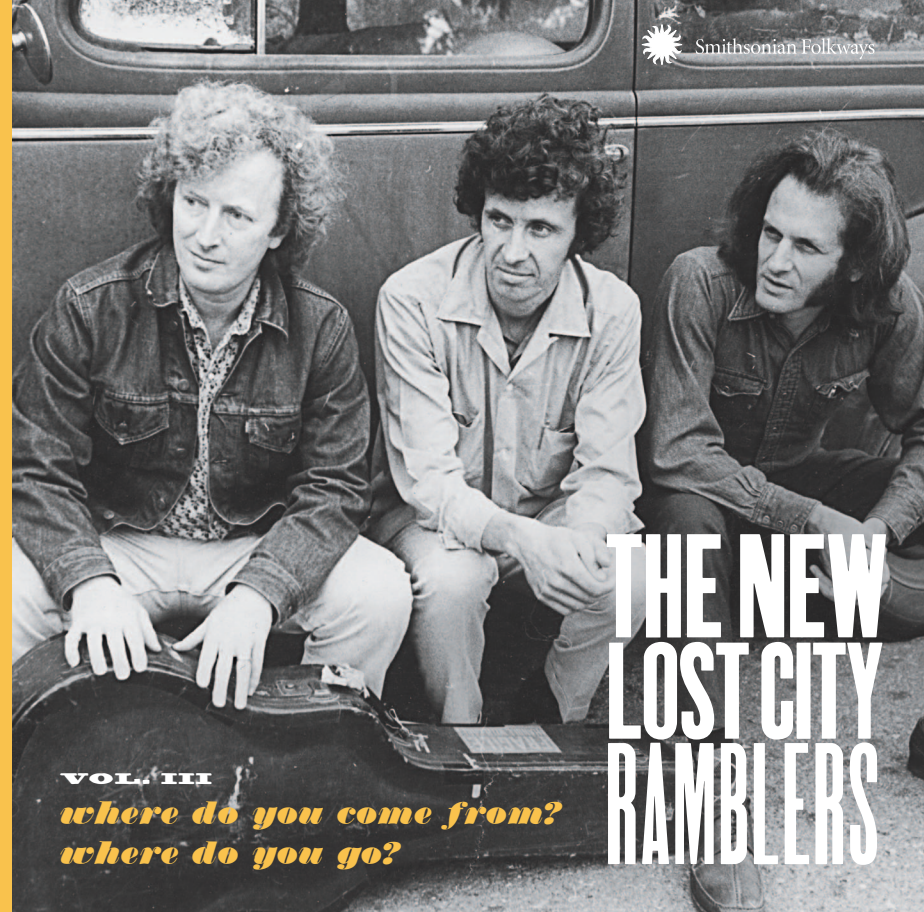
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# THE NEW LOST CITY RAMBLERS

**VOL. III**

*where do you come from?  
where do you go?*



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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**VOL. III**

*where do you come from?  
where do you go?*

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2. **Cluck Old Hen** Wade, Crockett, and Fields Ward 1:31
3. **Young Emily** Dellie Norton 2:03
4. **Going Down the River** New Lost City Ramblers 2:40
5. **Billy Grimes the Rover** New Lost City Ramblers 2:26 (*Richard Coe-William H. Oakley*)
6. **Pretty Little Miss** New Lost City Ramblers 3:20
7. **Dark and Stormy Weather** New Lost City Ramblers 2:24 (*A.P. Carter/Peer International Corp., BMI*)
8. **Sioux Indians** New Lost City Ramblers 3:01
9. **Moonshiner** New Lost City Ramblers 3:07
10. **Long Lonesome Road** New Lost City Ramblers 2:56
11. **Cotton Eyed Joe** New Lost City Ramblers 3:14
12. **New White House Blues** New Lost City Ramblers 2:41
13. **Milwaukee Blues** New Lost City Ramblers 2:31 (*Charlie Poole-Norman Woodlieff/Charlie Poole Publishing Inc.-Original Rambler Music Inc., admin by Bug, BMI*)
14. **Poor Old Dirt Farmer** New Lost City Ramblers 3:40 (*Tracy Schwarz/Tradition Music Co. admin by Bug, BMI*)
15. **Cady Hill\*** Arthur Smith & Sam and Kirk McGee 1:22
16. **I Belong to the Band** Rev. Gary Davis 3:56 (*Gary Davis/Chandos Music, BMI*)
17. **Freight Train** Elizabeth Cotten 2:38 (*Elizabeth Cotten/Sanga Music Inc., BMI*)
18. **I'm Leaving You** Sara Carter Bayes and Maybelle Carter 2:35 (*Alton Delmore-Rabon Delmore/Vidor Publications Inc., BMI*)
19. **Walking Boss\*** Clarence Tom Ashley 2:28 (*arr. Clarence Ashley/Stormking Music Inc., BMI*)
20. **Mother's Advice\*** Dock Boggs 2:48
21. **Hills of Mexico** Roscoe Holcomb 2:29
22. **Galax Rag\*** Kilby Snow 2:49 (*Kilby Snow*)
23. **Say Old Man, Can You Play a Fiddle?\*** Eck Robertson, Tracy Schwarz, & Mike Seeger 2:50
24. **Awake, Awake** Dillard Chandler 4:12
25. **Bowling Green\*** Cynthia May "Cousin Emmy" Carver with the New Lost City Ramblers 3:49 (*Cynthia May Carver*)
26. **Madeleine** Dewey & Rodney Balfa, Allie Young, & Weston Bergeau 2:54 (*Adam Hebert/Flat Town Music Company, BMI*)
27. **Fishing Creek Blues** Sue Draheim, Mack Benford, Eric Thompson, Jody Stecher, Hank Bradley, Will Spires, Kenny Hall, Holly Tannen, & Larry Hanks 2:39 (*Tracy Schwarz/Stormking Music Inc., BMI*)
28. **Sally in the Garden** New Tranquility String Band & friends 2:21

\* indicates previously unreleased tracks

# *where do you come from? where do you go?*

***the new lost city ramblers at 50***

**RAY ALLEN**

On a warm March evening in 1963, John Cohen and Tracy Schwarz pulled into Amarillo, Texas, in search of an old-time fiddler named Eck Robertson. John and Tracy, along with fellow musician Mike Seeger, had just completed a week's stint at Dallas' PM Coffee House and a concert at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. The trio, known collectively as The New Lost City Ramblers, was scheduled for a six-week tour of California, prompting Mike to head due west out of Dallas with his young family in tow. John and Tracy decided to take advantage of the lull in their schedule to make the 350-mile detour northwest to Amarillo to follow up on rumors of Robertson's whereabouts. They were eager to locate the legendary fiddler, whose 1922 Victor recording of "Sallie Gooden" was considered a classic by collectors of vintage country records. His rendition of "Brilliancy Medley," reissued on Harry Smith's 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music*, was well known by urban connoisseurs of folk fiddling.

When John and Tracy stopped at a motel to inquire about Robertson, they were delighted to discover that he ran a used instrument shop right across the street. Tracy recalls their initial meeting with seventy-five-year-old Robertson the next day:

*He was loquacious, talked for about an hour, about his career and all. And then he picked up the fiddle and started playing "Leather Britches," in the place where people usually play it, in first position. And then he switches up to second position, up the neck with no open strings. And he lifts his*

*eyes up at us with this little sly grin like saying—don't you know this is a good fiddler here, I'm one of the best!*

John and Tracy recorded Robertson's stories and tunes, and later that summer Mike returned to make further recordings that would subsequently be issued on County Records. The Ramblers brought Robertson out of retirement, arranging for him to perform and serving as his accompanists at the 1964 UCLA Folk Festival and at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival.

By 1965 the Newport Folk Festival had become the nation's premiere showcase for folk artists ranging from chart-busting pop crooners to backwoods balladeers. Indeed Eck Robertson was not the only traditional musician to appear at Newport in 1965 at the behest of the Ramblers. Roscoe Holcomb, whose modal banjo tunes and archaic vocal style offered a window into 19th-century Appalachia, had been located by John on a trip to east Kentucky in 1959. Cousin Emmy, another Kentucky banjoist and songster, met the Ramblers in California in 1961. Mother Maybelle Carter, the iconic country music guitarist and singer from Scott County, Virginia, started to connect with urban audiences at festivals and coffee houses at the prompting of Mike and John. The old-time string band of Sam and Kirk McGee with Fiddlin' Arthur Smith, favorites of Nashville's Grand Ole Opry, had been recorded by Mike in 1957. And bluegrass legend Bill Monroe and Appalachian balladeer Horton Baker had appeared with the Ramblers

at previous festivals and workshops. While the 1965 Newport festival is best remembered for Bob Dylan's high-amp rock performance, the untold story is the event's burgeoning commitment to traditional music thanks to the efforts of the Ramblers and festival advisers Ralph Rinzler, Alan Lomax, and Pete and Toshi Seeger. Folk aficionados flocked to the main stage to hear superstars Dylan and Peter, Paul and Mary, but they also swayed and occasionally stomped to the sounds of old-time string-band music, bluegrass, country blues, and Southern spiritual singing performed by traditional musicians hailing from small rural communities.

The Ramblers' appearance at the 1965 Newport festival occurred during the height of their popularity and influence on the folk revival. In addition to a busy coast-to-coast touring schedule, they had just returned from a sojourn to Australia and were planning their first trip to England. Their Folkways albums of mountain string-band and early bluegrass music had reached thousands of urban folk enthusiasts and college students. LP albums produced from their field recordings of Holcomb, the McGee Brothers, Dock Boggs, Elizabeth Cotten, and a host of other Southern folk musicians had brought the sounds of the music's originators to the ears of eager city listeners. And at venues like Newport and the University of Chicago Folk Festival the Ramblers presented traditional artists on stage and in workshop settings where traditional and "revival" musicians could meet and mingle. As performers, documenters, and presenters of Southern folk music, the Ramblers had successfully injected

a shot of folk authenticity into the post-war urban folk revival that had been dominated by commercial singers and topical singer/songwriters.

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The four men who performed as The New Lost City Ramblers were born in New York City and as youngsters had no direct personal contact with the rural Southern communities whose music would captivate them as adults. Yet each experienced the sounds of Southern country music at an early age. Mike Seeger, the son of the erudite musicologist Charles Seeger and ultra-modernist composer Ruth Crawford Seeger, was reared on folk music field recordings that his mother transcribed and his family sang in their home in suburban Washington, D.C. John Cohen, a native of Queens and suburban Long Island, grew up hearing folk music at leftist Catskill summer camps, listened to traditional country records as a high school student, and helped organize hoots at Yale, where he received his BFA and MFA degrees in art and photography. Bronx-born Tom Paley (an original Rambler who was replaced by Tracy Schwarz in 1962) collected old 78 rpm country and blues records and followed Woody Guthrie around before entering graduate school at Yale to study mathematics. Tracy Schwarz, whose father was an investment banker and mother a classically-trained pianist, was mesmerized by the snatches of country radio that infiltrated the airways of his suburban New Jersey home and fascinated by the neighboring farmers who befriended him during his childhood summers

in rural Vermont. Though city born and suburban bred, the Ramblers immersed themselves in the sounds of traditional Southern mountain music, initially through recordings and later through visits to meet, record, and commune with rural artists.

Following their first public appearance at the Carnegie Recital Hall in September of 1958, the Ramblers were thrust to the forefront of what came to be known as the “traditionalist” or “purist” wing of the folk music revival. In their first four years, Mike, John, and Tom turned out nine Folkways LPs and two EPs, and played over a hundred and fifty engagements at folk festivals, urban clubs, and college campuses. On disc and on stage their ability to emulate with remarkable accuracy the instrumentation, styles, and repertoires of Southern mountain string-band and early bluegrass groups made them unique among city players. They carefully listened to commercial country music records made in the 1920s and 1930s and to early Library of Congress field recordings like the one that opens this disc. “Colored Aristocracy,” performed by the Rich Family, was recorded by Mike’s father Charles Seeger at a West Virginia fiddler’s convention in 1936. Comparing the original Rich Family recording of the piece to the Ramblers’ rendition that appeared on their first 1958 Folkways record demonstrates the Ramblers’ mastery of what critic Jon Pankake called the “musical syntax” of traditional mountain vocal and instrumental styles. But equally important, the comparison reveals how the Ramblers skillfully re-created the spirit of those old sounds with their own



fresh arrangement while maintaining a vital stylistic link to the original.

When Tom Paley left the Ramblers in the summer of 1962, the group lost a superb guitarist and banjoist whose sardonic wit had become a hallmark of the Ramblers' stage shows. But Tracy Schwarz was an outstanding fiddler and vocalist whose presence freed Mike from his fiddling duties to spend more time on the banjo and mandolin. Tracy enabled the trio to expand its repertoire to include more bluegrass and 1940s country songs as well as the older ballads he sang in a plaintive, unaccompanied mountain style. The Ramblers would go on to produce another seven Folkways LPs and play hundreds of live shows with Tracy until they curtailed their full-time touring activities in the early 1970s.

The Ramblers' musical achievements alone were sufficient to earn them a significant chapter in the history of the post-war folk revival. But that was only part of their story, for unlike most urban folk musicians, they were not satisfied to learn tunes and techniques solely from records or at song swaps. Rather, they insisted on traveling back to the source. They hauled tape recorders and cameras south to document the lives and music of scores of traditional folk musicians, and then shared that music with Northern audiences through the Folkways recordings they produced.

Mike was eighteen when he and his sister Peggy discovered that the Seeger family's African-American domestic worker, North Carolina-born Elizabeth "Libba" Cotten, was a superb guitar picker. Using an early reel-to-reel tape recorder and a hand-held microphone, Mike recorded fifteen

pieces of Cotten's lilting blues, ragtime, and church songs. He would later re-record Cotten and produce an album of her music for Folkways Records titled *Negro Folk Songs and Tunes* (FG 3526, 1958).

Sometime in 1955 Mike purchased his own forty-pound portable Mag-necord recorder and began recording bluegrass musicians at country music parks in Maryland and southern Pennsylvania. In 1956 he recorded a number of Southern-bred bluegrass players in the Baltimore/Washington area and made a quick swing to the Carolinas to record banjoists Snuffy Jenkins and Junie Scruggs. The following year he issued his first Folkways record under the title *American Banjo: Tunes and Songs in Scruggs Style* (FA 2314), an LP credited with introducing many urban folk musicians to bluegrass music. He continued to return south to record more bluegrass and mountain music for Folkways. Singer and multi-instrumentalist Ernest Stoneman, autoharp virtuoso Kilby Snow, old-time banjoist and fiddler Wade Ward, and Grand Ole Opry stars Sam and Kirk McGee with fiddler Arthur Smith were among the traditional artists Mike documented on his early Southern sojourns. A superb sampling of their music and Mike's additional field recordings of fiddle/banjo tunes, blues, and ballads can be heard on *Close to Home: Old Time Music from Mike Seeger's Collection, 1952-1967* (Smithsonian Folkways SFW CD 40097, 1997).

In May of 1963 Mike made what proved to be one of his greatest discoveries. He had gotten wind that Virginia coal miner and banjoist Dock Boggs was still alive in eastern Kentucky. The late 1920s recordings of

Boggs's bluesy banjo pieces were among the most haunting tunes reissued on Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* collection. After rumbling across the rutted roads and through the tiny hamlets of east Kentucky with his family, Mike was directed over the state line to Norton, Virginia, where he eventually found Boggs. Two months later Boggs appeared at the Newport Folk Festival, and later that year at a concert sponsored by New York City's Friends of Old Time Music. Mike would record and produce *Dock Boggs* (FW 2351, 1964), *Dock Boggs Volume 2* (FW 2392, 1965), and *Dock Boggs Volume 3* (FW 3903, 1970) for Folkways, occasionally accompanying Boggs on guitar.

Just as Mike's first experience documenting traditional music was with a transplanted Southerner—in his case, Libba Cotten—so was John's. In 1952 John began photographing South Carolina-born street singer and guitar picker Reverend Gary Davis in his home in Harlem. The following year John hauled a Pentron reel-to-reel tape recorder to Davis's apartment and began to tape his extraordinary blues-inflected gospel songs accompanied by elaborate ragtime-influenced guitar picking. Though it would be fifty years before the recordings would be edited and released on Folkways as *If I Had My Way: The Early Home Recordings of Reverend Gary Davis* (SFW 40123, 2003), John's career as a documenter of traditional music had begun.

In the spring of 1959 John made his first trip south to research and record material for an album of Depression songs the Ramblers had begun to assemble. Armed with contacts from Jean Ritchie and the United Mine

Workers Union, he traveled by bus to Hazard, Kentucky, where he bought an old car and set about combing the back roads in search of traditional musicians. For the next five weeks he photographed and recorded the traditional banjo styles of Roscoe Holcomb, Lee Sexton, Willie Chapman, and Granville Bowlin, as well as local ballad and church singing. Nat Hen-toff, who reviewed the resulting Folkways LP *Mountain Music of Kentucky* (Folkways FA 2317, 1960) for the *Reporter*, commended the music and compared John's superb portfolio of accompanying photographs to Walker Evans's work in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. John would return to eastern Kentucky in 1962 to shoot black-and-white footage that would eventually become the acclaimed documentary film *The High Lonesome Sound*.

In 1963 John traveled to the North Carolina mountain communities around Big Laurel Creek in Madison County. With the help of two transplanted Northerners he had met in California, Peter and Polly Gott, John photographed and recorded an extraordinary group of unaccompanied ballad singers. The most impressive, Dillard Chandler, is heard along with Lee Wallin, Berzilla Wallin, Cas Wallin, and Elisha Shelton on *Old Love Songs & Ballads* (Folkways 2309, 1964) and again on *Dillard Chandler: The End of an Old Song* (Folkways FA 2418, 1975). In 1967 John began to film the enigmatic Chandler, chronicling his life and his role as a traditional songster in a rapidly changing North Carolina community. The project resulted in John's second important film, *The End of an Old Song* (1972). During the filming John recorded additional ballad singers, including

Chandler's cousin Dellie Norton, whose highly stylized ballad singing is heard on this disc. On another southern swing to visit the Gotts in 1965, John recorded a trove of old-time banjo tunes and ballads from traditional performers Frank Proffitt, Gaither Carlton, Sydna Myers, George Landers, Wade Ward, Fred Cockerham, E. C. Ball, Dellie Norton, and Lloyd and Dillard Chandler. His edited recordings were released a decade later on Rounder Records as *High Atmosphere: Ballads and Banjo Tunes from Virginia and North Carolina* (recently re-released as Rounder CD 0028).

In April of 1961 Mike and John traveled south together, stopping to record Virginia banjoist/fiddler Wade Ward and east Tennessee banjoist and medicine-show entertainer Clarence "Tom" Ashley. The latter was well known to city players for his 1929 recording of "The Coo Coo Bird" that appeared on Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*. Recently rediscovered by Ralph Rinzler, Ashley had come out of retirement to perform the previous month for New York City's Friends of Old Time Music. Next John and Mike visited banjo legend Earl Scruggs in Nashville and tagged along with his band on a brief bus tour. Their final destination was Union Grove, North Carolina, where they recorded and photographed a gathering of fiddlers. The resulting Folkways LP, *37th Old-time Fiddler's Convention at Union Grove*, North Carolina (Folkways FA 2434, 1962), captured the lively old-time fiddle and banjo traditions that continued to thrive in the mountain communities of southwest Virginia, eastern Tennessee, and western North Carolina.

The Ramblers' efforts to locate traditional musicians sometimes took them to unexpected places. In the summer of 1961, while playing a four-week engagement at Hollywood's Ash Grove coffee house, Mike and John came across a surprising scene at Disneyland's Country and Western Night show. There, opening for Roger Miller, they heard Kentucky banjoist Cynthia May Carver, better known as Cousin Emmy. Carver's clear country voice and energetic frailing banjo style were well known to the Ramblers and aficionados of Southern traditional music through her 1947 Decca album *Kentucky Mountain Ballads*, edited by Alan Lomax. She was a veteran of Kentucky country radio and Los Angeles country music clubs, where she performed after she moved to Southern California in the 1950s. Carver welcomed the opportunity to collaborate with the Ramblers and to play for new urban audiences, who would soon hear her at the Ash Grove. The Ramblers would arrange for her to perform with them at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965, tour with them to Europe in 1966, and record *The New Lost City Ramblers with Cousin Emmy* (Folkways FTS 31015) in 1968.

During the Ramblers' early years neither Tom nor Tracy had the time or showed the inclination for Southern fieldwork. From 1958 through 1961 Tom struggled to balance his Ramblers' touring schedule with a full-time college teaching position. Soon after joining the Ramblers, Tracy moved to rural southeastern Pennsylvania, where he threw himself into a childhood dream of farming. Although he occasionally played music with local Pennsylvania fiddlers and worked with numerous traditional musi-

cians at folk festival workshops, it wasn't until later in his career that he became seriously involved in documentary work. At a 1974 University of Chicago Folk Festival Tracy was asked to play second fiddle for the legendary Balfa Brothers Cajun band. Dewey Balfa, the group's leader who had first met Tracy at the 1964 Newport festival, was so pleased with the performance that he approached Tracy about collaborating on a Cajun fiddling project. Tracy visited Dewey in Basile, Louisiana, in February of 1975 to play and record. Two instructional albums resulted: *Traditional Cajun Fiddle: Instruction by Dewey Balfa & Tracy Schwarz* (Folkways FM 8361, 1976) and *Cajun Fiddle Old & New with Dewey Balfa* (Folkways FM 8362, 1977). In addition to fiddle instruction, the latter included a full side of live Balfa Brothers' performances recorded by Tracy at Cajun dances and radio broadcasts. In 1984, following a decade of immersion in Louisiana music, Tracy recorded *Les Quatre Vieux Garçons* (Folkways FW 02626) with Dewey and Tony Balfa and his son Peter Schwarz. One of the tracks, Tracy's original composition "Poor Old Dirt Farmer," was inspired by his own farming adventures in south-central Pennsylvania.

In April of 1959, when the Ramblers were still a part-time operation, Mike set up a concert at Washington, D.C.'s Pierce Hall, a small venue attached to All Souls Unitarian Church located on 15th and Harvard Streets, NW. According to a review in the *Gardylloo* fan magazine, a small but enthusiastic crowd was enamored with the Ramblers' special guest, guitar picker and singer Libba Cotten. The event marked the first of what

would be many efforts by the Ramblers to share the stage with traditional performers who, unlike themselves, actually learned their music in the small Southern communities where they were reared. In December of 1960 the Ramblers and Cotten repeated their show at a Greenwich Village concert produced by folk music impresario Izzy Young. That successful event inspired John and Ralph Rinzler to organize New York City's Friends of Old Time Music (FOTM), an association dedicated to bringing traditional Southern string-band, bluegrass, spiritual, and blues singers to perform for New York audiences. The first FOTM concert held on February 11, 1961, featured the Ramblers, Rinzler's Greenbriar Boys, Jean Ritchie, and, straight from east Kentucky, Roscoe Holcomb. John introduced Roscoe as a construction worker from a little town called Daisy: "I met him several years ago when I was down there collecting songs and trying to find out what the music was about, see where it came from. And now I guess we're giving you and ourselves a chance to hear what it really sounds like. So here's my friend Roscoe Holcomb." John sat on stage with Holcomb, helping to introduce tunes, explaining the intricacies of banjo tunings, and occasionally providing second guitar accompaniment.

The formula of matching traditional performers with better-known city players had proved successful several weeks earlier at the first University of Chicago Folk Festival. The Ramblers had brought Holcomb and Cotten to join Virginia balladeer Horton Baker, North Carolina banjoist Frank Proffitt, and bluegrass legends the Stanley Brothers, along

with a host of urban performers. One of the latter, Sandy Paton, described the scene:

*The audience was alternately enchanted and electrified by each of these great artists. The producers of the festival must have known moments of trepidation prior to the first program, for people who were active in the field had long assumed that, in order to get urban audiences to listen to folk music, one had to “interpret” them—that is to say, translate them into a more familiar vocal style, namely that of “art” or “pop” music. That first evening in Chicago proved, without a doubt, that this was no longer true, if, indeed, it had ever been true at all. Urban audiences not only could but most certainly would appreciate the opportunity to hear genuine folk artists in live performances.* Sandy Paton. 1967. “Folk and the Folk Arrival,” in *Dimensions of the Folk Song Revival*, eds. David De Turk and A. Poulin. New York: Dell Publishing pp. 41-42.

On stage the Ramblers played the role of educators and cultural facilitators. When appropriate they would fill in the background on the artists and their music so that unfamiliar urban and college listeners could make sense of the songs and tunes they might be hearing for the first time. In more informal workshops the Ramblers dug deeper, helping artists to demonstrate traditional singing styles and instrumental playing techniques, and encouraging participants to learn to play the music for themselves.

The Ramblers’ efforts to stage traditional music for audiences at the

University of Chicago Folk Festival and FOTM were refined in the mid-1960s at Newport, where Mike and Ralph Rinzler were members of the festival’s Board of Directors and the latter served as a full-time fieldworker. Their early attempts to re-create informal folk performance in formal stage settings served as models for Rinzler when he organized the first Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in 1967. That event would be a culmination of the vision Rinzler and the Ramblers had been working toward during the early 1960s folk festivals and FOTM concerts: the dignified presentation of traditional artists located through field research in an arena that mixed education, entertainment, and the politics of cultural equity.

Pete Seeger, Alan Lomax, and Ralph Rinzler were unsurpassed in their respective efforts to perform, document, and present American folk music to urban audiences during the post-war revival. But neither they nor anyone else could match the Ramblers’ versatility in all three domains. The Ramblers were consummate musicians, meticulous documentarians, and innovative presenters of traditional music and the musicians who created that music. They carried out their mission with impeccable skill, a steadfast respect for the originators of the music, and an unwavering commitment to foreground the accomplishments of their traditional mentors over their own.

The occasion of the Ramblers’ 50th anniversary is an apt time to pause and reflect on the traditional lines “Where do you come from? Where do you go?”—queries posed to the elusive trickster figure Cotton Eyed Joe in

the old song that bears his name. By now the answer to the first question should be clear. It was the bygone sounds of mountain singers and pickers, captured on hissing Library of Congress field recordings and scratchy old 78 rpm records, that first inspired the Ramblers. Their subsequent discovery of living practitioners of Southern folk music allowed them to delve deeper into the musical styles and traditional culture that had become so central to their own lives. And the promotion of those traditional artists to audiences outside the South afforded them the opportunity to further connect with urban listeners who, like themselves, were in search of authentic experience that the world of commercial music had failed to deliver. In turn, some of their fans would take up the music for themselves—which leads to the second question.

Where do you go? The Ramblers' impact on reviving and popularizing old-time mountain music has been immense. Of course it is impossible to accurately calculate how many city and college folks they inspired to pick up fiddles and banjos. But by the mid-1960s, Mike, John, and Tracy were noticing pockets of new old-time musicians popping up across the country in and around college towns and urban clubs. One particularly rich scene, documented on the final cuts of this disc, was developing in the San Francisco Bay Area, centered around the Freight and Salvage Coffee House on San Pablo Avenue in Berkeley. This was, Mike wrote in 1972, "a time of great musical ferment," when the Ramblers first met and jammed with these kindred spirits who, like them, had become obsessed with "the

creativity and joy in the true maturation of rural folk music played by (mostly) city folk." Mike and John were so impressed with the quality of the playing that in 1970 they began recording various configurations of the best Bay Area players. Two years later Mike produced the Folkways LP *Berkeley Farms: Oldtime and Country Style Music of Berkeley* (FA 2436), and John's recordings were recently issued on a Field Recorder's Collective CD *Berkeley in the 1960s* (FRC 609, 2008). The seeds of old-time music sown by the Ramblers for more than a decade were coming to fruition through a new generation of urban musicians.

Some forty years later the old-time music movement continues unabated. The flourishing of this music in our modern world can no longer be understood as simply the revival of an esoteric and vanishing folk music style by urban romantics. Today string-band and early bluegrass music have become indelibly woven into the rich tapestry of American roots music. We can hear the venerable sounds of old-time music on National Public Radio, numerous public TV stations, and even YouTube; download the songs from iTunes or Rhapsody; read about the artists in *The Old-Time Herald* magazine; and, most importantly, experience the music live at countless concerts, contests, festivals, and house parties north and south. "I think we've been part of the process of seeing the music continue as a valuable daily part of people's lives," Mike ruminated in a recent e-mail. "And our old-time music continues along under the rumble of all the other changeable, churning racket."

# track notes

## 1. COLORED ARISTOCRACY

*The Rich Family: Sanford Rich, lead fiddle; Harry Rich, second fiddle; Elmer Rich, mandolin; Rensel Rich, guitar / Source: Library of Congress field recording by Charles Seeger, Arthurdale, West Virginia, June 24, 1936*

Mike's father, Charles Seeger, made this recording during his tenure with the Special Skills Division of the Resettlement Administration of the WPA. One of Charles's colleagues, Fletcher Collins, had organized a fiddle contest at Arthurdale, an early government-planned community in north-central West Virginia. Following the contest Charles recorded one of the contestants, a high-spirited string band fronted by twin fiddlers Sanford and Harry Rich. Mike recalls that the recording eventually found its way into the Seeger home: "As a child this was one of my favorite recordings and one of the ones I played on the fiddle early on. Since I liked it so much and it wasn't a well-known tune, I played it for John and Tom and they added chords. I don't think I played them the original recording. Since then, through many playings and recordings the tune has been changed considerably." The 1958 Ramblers' recording of the tune that became the source for many city players can be heard on *The New Lost City Ramblers: The Early Years*,

1958–1962. In 1996 they re-recorded the tune on *There Ain't No Way Out* (Smithsonian Folkways CD 40098), this time more closely emulating the chord structure and swing of the original Rich Family performance.

## 2. CLUCK OLD HEN

*Crockett Ward, fiddle; Wade Ward, banjo; Fields Ward, vocals / From Music of Roscoe Holcomb and Wade Ward Folkways FW 2363, 1962 / Source: Library of Congress field recording by John Lomax, Galax, Virginia, 1937*

John Lomax's recording of the Ward Family, made at the 1937 Old Fiddlers' Convention in Galax, Virginia, offers a window into the music culture of 19th-century Appalachia. Before the guitar came on the scene, lively dance music was provided by driving fiddles and banjos like those played here by Crockett and Wade Ward of Independence, Virginia. Note that in the second part of this three-part (ABC) tune, the fiddler picks the strings to imitate the cluck of a chicken. In a dance context this simple modal melody would be played over and over while a caller chants out directions to dancers.



### 3. YOUNG EMILY

Dellie Norton, vocal / *From* Dark Holler: Old Love Songs and Ballads SFW 40159, 2005 / *Source:* Field recording by John Cohen, Sodom, North Carolina, 1967

The unaccompanied ballad is one of the oldest forms of Anglo-American folk song found in the upland South. “Young Emily” is most likely derived from a British broadside and has strong currency throughout the southern Appalachians; sometimes it is sung under the name “The Driver Boy” or “Young Edwin in the Lowlands.” John recorded Dellie Norton of Sodom, North Carolina, in November of 1965 while working with her cousin, Dillard Chandler, who is heard later on this disc. John reflects:

*Dellie Norton’s singing style is the most exaggerated of the singers around Sodom, where in 1916 Cecil Sharp collected English folk songs including “Young Emily.” Her songs were known as old love songs, performed unaccompanied for family and friends. Her singing style is distinctive—listen to how she holds certain notes for unusual lengths of time; her different vocal decorations and turns of melody; and her way of throwing her voice into falsetto yips and the end of a line. These colorations follow no logical structure but reveal an intuitive re-*

*sponse and feeling in the performance. Dellie was a welcoming person with a sly, cynical sense of humor, who spoke with pride of the wild events of her earlier life. All of her many kin sang this ballad, “Young Emily,” and argued about who had it the right way.*

### 4. GOING DOWN THE RIVER

Mike Seeger, autoharp, harmonica, vocal; Tracy Schwarz, fiddle and vocal; John Cohen, guitar and vocal / *From* Rural Delivery No. 1: The New Lost City Ramblers FW 2496, 1964 / *Source:* Dr. Smith’s Champion Hoss Hair Pullers Victor 21711, 1928

The Ramblers learned this humorous ditty of escape and adventure on the river from an old 78 rpm record made by a twin-fiddle band from Arkansas with the amusing moniker Dr. Smith’s Champion Hoss Hair Pullers. Smith was not a musician but a surgeon from Izard County who organized fiddle contests in the 1920s to promote Ozark folk culture and tourism. The tune is played in the key of F. Note the tight harmony trio singing and the unusual sonority created by Mike’s harmonica line that doubles Tracy’s lead fiddle melody.

### 5. BILLY GRIMES THE ROVER

Tom Paley, guitar and vocal; Mike Seeger, fiddle; John Cohen, banjo / *From* New Lost City Ramblers, Vol. 4 FW 02399, 1962 / *Source:* The Shelor Family (J.B. Blackard) Victor 20865, 1927

Recorded shortly before Tom left the Ramblers in the summer of 1962, this superb arrangement of “Billy Grimes” is one of his best vocal efforts. The theme of the rover turned desirable suitor due to his unexpected wealth is common to many British and Anglo-American ballads. But this particular piece was actually copyrighted by Richard Coe and William K. Oakley in 1850. The Ramblers learned it from a string-band version recorded by the Shelor Family for Ralph Peer during his legendary 1927 Bristol Sessions.

### 6. PRETTY LITTLE MISS

Tracy Schwarz, fiddle and tenor voice; Mike Seeger, mandolin and lead voice; John Cohen, guitar / *From* The New Lost City Ramblers with Tracy Schwarz: Gone to the Country FW 02491, 1963 / *Source:* Lyrics from Cousin Emmy De 24213; tune from Roscoe Holcomb

This bluegrass arrangement of the traditional song “Pretty Little Miss” combines lyrics from a Cousin Emmy recording with a melody learned from Roscoe Holcomb. Recorded not long af-

ter Tracy joined the Ramblers in the fall of 1962, the song reflects the group’s increased interest in early bluegrass material and was the first of a number of songs that would feature Mike and Tracy’s tight duet harmonies. When the Ramblers played the piece for the Stanley Brothers in November of 1962 during their visit to New York, Ralph and Carter Stanley were so impressed that they recorded it for King Records the following year, crediting the Ramblers with the arrangement. In 1997 Ralph Stanley and Alison Krauss recorded a similar version for Rebel Records on *Clinch Mountain Country: Ralph Stanley and Friends*.

### 7. DARK AND STORMY WEATHER

Mike Seeger, lead voice and autoharp; Tracy Schwarz, tenor voice and second guitar; John Cohen, bass vocal and lead guitar / *From* Remembrance of Things to Come: The New Lost City Ramblers FW 31035, 1973; first issued by Verve/Folkways FT/FTS-3018 in 1967 / *Source:* The Carter Family Bluebird 8868, October 14, 1941

This tight harmony trio number demonstrates the Ramblers’ mastery of the Carter Family vocal and instrumental sound, with a few original twists. Tracy and Mike’s tenor and lead vocal parts are filled out by John’s bass, creating an

all-male version of the original Carter sound that featured two female and one male voice. The autoharp lead was Mike's addition and does not appear on the original Carter Family arrangement. Writing for the liner notes to the original 1967 release, Mike notes, "This is a fairly old song and I have seen the chorus in several folksong collections. I rather suspect the Carters 'collected' the chorus and perhaps a verse, and composed the remainder. The tune and harmony lean towards bluegrass, especially in the use of the flatted 7th with a IV chord in the third line." The lyrical imagery moved John: "I always loved the phrase 'the cloud hangs over center,' showing how the weather and the position of a cloud can convey a feeling which is parallel to 'my love's gone away on a train.'"

## 8. SIOUX INDIANS

Tracy Schwarz, vocal / From *Remembrance of Things to Come: The New Lost City Ramblers FW 31035, 1973; first issued by Verve/Folkways FT/FTS-3018 in 1967* / Source: Library of Congress field recording of Alex Moore of Austin, Texas, by John and Alan Lomax, 1940

This 19th-century Western ballad reveals Tracy's proficiency at the high, tense, mountain singing style. In the liner notes for the original 1967 release

he observed the song to be "a ballad which states simply what the originator felt profoundly. Such songs remain in the oral tradition primarily for their narrative role, and secondarily for their musical aspects, and therefore will often be unaccompanied so as not to distract the attention of the listener from the message." A similar version of "Sioux Indians" is found in Malcolm Laws' noted collection *Native American Ballads*.

## 9. MOONSHINER

John Cohen, guitar and vocal / From *American Moonshine and Prohibition Songs: The New Lost City Ramblers Folkways FW 05263, 1962* / Source: Library of Congress field recording of Daw Henson of eastern Kentucky by Alan Lomax, October 1937

With little respect for law or authority, the rugged and reclusive moonshiner became an iconic figure in mountain culture and the subject of numerous folk songs. Regarding his arrangement John recalls, "I was always attracted to some of the low-register Appalachian singing and to the irregular sort of a non-symmetrical guitar rhythm that I heard on an old Library of Congress recording by Daw Henson." About ten years ago, backstage at Madison Square Garden, Bob Dylan told John how much he liked his

recording of "Moonshiner." John responded, "Do you mean the recording I made of Roscoe Holcomb?" and Dylan answered, "No, I mean your recording of the song." John had forgotten that he had recorded "Moonshiner" on the Ramblers' *Moonshine and Prohibition* album in 1962, around the time Dylan first arrived in New York. Roscoe Holcomb's version of "Moonshiner" can be heard on *The High Lonesome Sound: Roscoe Holcomb* (Smithsonian Folkways SFW 40104, 1998).

## 10. LONG LONESOME ROAD

Mike Seeger, vocal and guitar; John Cohen, fiddle; Tracy Schwarz, fiddle; Penny Seeger Cohen, autoharp / From *The New Lost City Ramblers with Tracy Schwarz: Gone to the Country FW 2491, 1963* / Source: Library of Congress field recording by John Lomax, Galax, Virginia, 1937. Uncle Alec Dunford and Crockett Ward, fiddles; Fields Ward, vocal and guitar.

This sad song stitches together floating verses and mournful fiddles. The text is organized in unusual three-line, twelve-bar verses in ABB form. The tune is a cousin to "Fall on My Knees" that was popularized by Tommy Jarrell and Fred Cockerham. This arrangement is one of John's rare appearances on fiddle. Mike first heard "Long Lonesome Road" from the Dunford/Ward field recording

that his father had brought home from the Library of Congress. He recalls the song was "a favorite of mine ever since I first heard it, before I was in my teens. I think we even sang it as a family when I was young."

## 11. COTTON EYED JOE

Mike Seeger, fiddle; Tracy Schwarz, fiddle; John Cohen, guitar and vocal / From *The New Lost City Ramblers: On the Great Divide Folkways FW 31041, 1975*. Source: The Carter Brothers and Son Okeh, 1928

This 1973 live recording made at the Boarding House in San Francisco by Chris Strachwitz was inspired by the wild double-fiddle sound of the Mississippi Carter Brothers and Son string band. The Ramblers often closed their concerts with a driving Carter Brothers and Son number like "Cotton Eyed Joe." Referring to the frenzied flow of the nonsense lyrics and the relentless shuffling fiddles, John observes, "It has become an exercise in improvisation within the limits of great consistency and madness." Regarding the spoken introduction, "It was made up on the spot and never repeated!"

## 12. NEW WHITE HOUSE BLUES

Mike Seeger, banjo and vocal; Tom Paley, mandolin; John Cohen, guitar / From *Aravel Record #AB1005*, 1961; reissued in 1978 as Tom Paley, John Cohen, and Mike Seeger Sing Songs of the New Lost City Ramblers *Folkways FA 2494*, 1978 / Source: Bob Baker

While the Ramblers are best known for their renditions of old-time string-band material, Mike's interest in bluegrass occasionally resulted in arrangements like this version of "White House Blues." Mike recalls learning this song from Bob Baker, the leader of the Pike County Boys, a Baltimore-based bluegrass band with whom he occasionally played before he joined the Ramblers. Baker heard the song from his parents, who were natives of Pike County, Kentucky. Played without picks, Mike's banjo leads combine driving Kentucky clawhammer with some ideas from his bluegrass experience. His high, tense singing reflects the influence of bluegrass pioneer Bill Monroe. The unique text, set to the tune of "White House Blues," is a brash blues complaint rarely heard in the mountain or bluegrass tradition—hence the renaming as "New White House Blues."

## 13. MILWAUKEE BLUES

Tom Paley, banjo and lead vocal; Mike Seeger, fiddle; John Cohen, guitar / From *The New Lost City Ramblers Folkways EP (FW EPC602, 1961)* / Source: Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers *Columbia 15688*, 1930

In their early years the Ramblers were smitten by the bouncy "mountain parlor-style" string-band sound of Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers, whose name in part inspired their own. "Milwaukee Blues," a humorous chronicle of the vicissitudes of hobo life, is one of several Poole favorites that the Ramblers recorded with Tom singing lead. His understated vocal and delicate banjo picking combine with Mike's jazzy fiddling and John's flowing guitar runs to evoke the spirit of the original 1930 recording.

## 14. POOR OLD DIRT FARMER

Tracy Schwarz, vocal and fiddle; Peter Schwarz, bass; Tony Balfa, guitar / From: *Les Quatre Vieux Garçons*: Dewey and Tony Balfa, and Tracy and Peter Schwarz *Folkways FW 2626*, 1984

Tracy's fiddling on this original piece is a mix of Appalachian and Cajun blues styles in the low-D cross-tuning (DDAD). His high, tense singing suggests a strong Cajun influence. Tracy wrote the song

in 1965, the same year he had bought a farm in York County, Pennsylvania. That summer the area suffered a severe drought. "So one day I was out there trying to put in a patch of a special grass touted by the Department of Agriculture, but I ended up out there just stirring up the dirt and making things even drier. And that's what gave me the idea for the song—looking at that ground that was obviously not going to produce anything." The melody is inspired by the traditional song "Rye Whiskey" and the tune "Nonc Bob" from Dewey Balfa's father. In 2007 Levon Helm, formerly of the rock group The Band, recorded a version of "Poor Old Dirt Farmer" for Vanguard Records. The CD, *Dirt Farmer*, won a 2008 Grammy for Best Traditional Folk Album.

## 15. CADY HILL

Arthur Smith, fiddle; Sam McGee, guitar; Kirk McGee, banjo / Source: Field recording by Mike Seeger at Kirk McGee's home near Nashville, Tennessee, November 1957

Mike first heard the McGee Brothers in 1955 at the New River Ranch near Rising Sun, Maryland, where they played in Grandpa Jones's band. He was so impressed that he decided to contact them when he made a trip to Nashville

in 1957. "I approached them with the idea of making a Folkways recording. Shortly before going to Nashville, Kirk mentioned that they used to play with Arthur Smith and that he was nearby and could they include him in the session. I'd heard Arthur's music and was elated—although they had toured extensively as a trio in the 1930s, they had never been recorded commercially." This particular recording of "Cady Hill" was made as a test for instrument balance at the beginning of the session, explaining in part its loose, off-the-cuff feel as well as its brevity. The trio's driving sound, led by Smith's exuberant fiddling, is equally at home at a mountain square dance and on stage at the New River Ranch or the Grand Ole Opry. Most of the remaining material Mike recorded that day in McGee's home was later released on *Look! Who's Here: Old Timers of the Grand Ole Opry: The McGee Brothers and Arthur Smith* (Folkways 2379, 1964).

## 16. I BELONG TO THE BAND

Reverend Gary Davis, guitar and vocal / From *If I Had My Way: The Early Home Recordings of Reverend Gary Davis SFW 40123*, 2003 / Source: Field recording by John Cohen in the home of Reverend Gary Davis in the South Bronx, 1954

John began visiting and recording the blind South Carolina-born street singer Reverend Gary Davis after hearing him at the Lead Belly memorial concert in 1950. “Initially I was blown away by his guitar,” recalls John, “but eventually came to be most moved by his singing, which at times resembled Ray Charles’s great vocal style. In these home recordings Reverend Davis was sometimes joined by his wife Annie, and sometimes by a fellow preacher, McKinley Peebles. At that time Davis and Peebles sang out in the streets of Harlem.” Davis’s version of “I Belong to the Band” loops together floating gospel verses and a hallelujah chorus over a punchy, blues-inflected guitar accompaniment. His original recording of the song was made in 1935 for ARC records before he migrated to New York.

## 17. FREIGHT TRAIN

*Elizabeth Cotten, guitar / From Negro Folk Songs and Tunes Folkways FG 3526, 1958; also reissued on Elizabeth Cotten: Freight Train and Other North Carolina Folk Songs and Tunes Smithsonian Folkways SFCD 40009, 1989 / Source: Field recording by Mike Seeger in the home of Elizabeth Cotten, Washington, D.C., 1957. This track is newly re-mastered.*

Elizabeth “Libba” Cotten was one of the most influential African-American figures of the folk music revival. A native of Carrboro, North Carolina, she was working as a domestic for the Seeger family when Mike and Peggy realized her extraordinary guitar skills. This recording, made by Mike in late 1957, served as the source for what would become one of the folk revival’s most popular guitar-picking tunes. Cotten’s inspiration for the song was her childhood memories of her and her brothers watching freight trains run by their home in North Carolina. In early 1959 Mike and Libba Cotten were invited to play at Swarthmore College, and later that year she performed with the Ramblers in Washington and New York concerts. Following her appearance with the Ramblers at the 1961 University of Chicago Folk Festival, she went on to enjoy an acclaimed career as a professional folk singer. In 1984 she was awarded a Grammy. Mike recalls recording the piece in Cotten’s bedroom on Capitol Hill in Washington with four of her young great-grandchildren sitting on the floor in front of her.

## 18. I’M LEAVING YOU

*Sara Carter Bayes, lead vocal and second guitar; Maybelle Carter, harmony vocal and lead guitar / From Close to Home: Old Time Music from Mike Seeger’s Collection 1952–1967 SFW 40097, 1997 / Source: Field recording by Mike Seeger at the home of Coy and Sara Bayes, Angel’s Camp, California, April 24, 1963*

Cousins Maybelle and Sara Carter of Scott County, Virginia, were original members of country music’s most beloved family group. Mike helped arrange for Maybelle to play at Hollywood’s Ash Grove coffee house in 1963, a move that would connect her with a new urban audience who were familiar with the Carter Family’s late 1920s and 1930s recordings. Their distinctive harmony singing and Maybelle’s fancy guitar picking heard on the Delmore Brothers’ love song “I’m Leaving You” are hallmarks of the Carter sound. Mike recalls making the recording in 1963 when the Ramblers were on a West Coast tour:

*Folklorist Ed Kahn and I offered to drive Maybelle up to visit her cousin Sara, with whom she had performed for so many years as the Carter Family. We had a two-day visit with these two exceptional women, and we enjoyed the close, warm relationship between them as they talked about their families, made music,*

*played cards, and recalled their adventures in the 1920s and 1930s. This is one of the few songs that we had full takes of, and you can hear their ad-lib but totally musical togetherness. As I recall, there was no rehearsal or re-takes. Maybelle plays this song with a flat pick, which she did occasionally. I believe she’s playing in F, with a capo. I remember my surprise at her easily playing two different B flat chords on her trusty Gibson L-5 guitar.*

## 19. WALKING BOSS

*Clarence “Tom” Ashley, banjo and vocal / Source: Field recording by Mike Seeger at Clarence “Tom” Ashley’s home in Shouns, Tennessee, April 13, 1961*

Tom Ashley was well known to urban “revivalist” audiences from his 1929 recording of “The Coo Coo Bird,” which appeared on Harry Smith’s 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music*. Ashley was rediscovered by folklorist and bluegrass musician Ralph Rinzler at the 1960 Union Grove Old Time Fiddlers Convention. Rinzler and the Ramblers arranged for Ashley and his band—which included the virtuoso guitarist Doc Watson—to perform at the University of Chicago Folk Festival, the New York City Friends of Old Time Music (FOTM), and the Ash Grove coffee

house in Hollywood. Shortly after Ashley's New York City debut at a March 1961 FOTM concert, Mike and John visited him in east Tennessee. John recalls Ashley having been so moved by his FOTM experience that he began remembering more old songs from his younger days, including "Walking Boss," an African-American track-lining piece that he learned while playing around the West Virginia coal fields. Similar versions of "Walking Boss" were collected in Alabama and Mississippi, suggesting the song's widespread prevalence in the South. Additional information on this and other Ashley songs is found on *Original Folkways Recordings of Doc Watson and Clarence Ashley, 1960–1962* (SFW 40029, 1994), compiled and annotated by Rinzler. John sings an Ashley-inspired rendition of "Walking Boss" on *The New Lost City Ramblers: On the Great Divide* (Folkways FW 31041, 1975).

## 20. MOTHER'S ADVICE

*Dock Boggs, banjo and vocal / Source: Field recording by Mike Seeger at Dock and Sara Boggs' home in Norton, Virginia, June 12, 1963*

Dock Boggs was another Appalachian artist known to many urban folk musicians and fans from early recordings

that appeared on Harry Smith's 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music*. Regarding this 1963 recording, Mike recalls: "This was recorded during our first meeting as we were just beginning to get acquainted. Since the tapes I made that day were intended for audition purposes only, the recordings were very informal, and Dock started singing before I could start the recorder and gave an unusual, quiet rendition of one of his favorite songs, better known as 'Hold Fast to the Right.'" Boggs's bluesy intonations and spare banjo playing produce an unusual accompaniment for a traditional text that relates sage maternal advice about adhering to the strict tenets of the old-time religion. Boggs would eventually enjoy a second career singing for city and college audiences with the help of Mike and the Ramblers.

## 21. HILLS OF MEXICO

*Roscoe Holcomb, banjo and vocal / From Music of Roscoe Holcomb and Wade Ward Folkways FW 02363, 1962 / Source: Field recording by John Cohen in New York City, February 1961*

John first met and recorded Roscoe Holcomb on his initial trip to east Kentucky in the summer of 1959. In February of 1961 he brought Holcomb north to the

University of Chicago Folk Festival and then to the first Friends of Old Time Music concert in New York. During that visit he recorded Holcomb's extraordinary version of "Hills of Mexico." John recalls, "Roscoe was the most intense singer I have ever encountered, essentially a home musician who had no aspirations to go on radio or make recordings. He considered himself primarily a working man. His musical style was shaped as much by Old Regular Baptist singing as it was by the blues. Referring to his high-pitched singing, he said he had a 'fine voice.' I made up the phrase 'the High Lonesome Sound' to describe his style." A similar version of this traditional cowboy song was recorded by Woody Guthrie in 1945 and released under the title "Buffalo Skinners" on a Smithsonian Folkways CD with the same name (SFW CD 40112, 1993). In 2007 Ricky Skaggs and Bruce Hornsby recorded Holcomb's version of "Hills of Mexico" for Sony Legacy Records.

## 22. GALAX RAG

*Kilby Snow, autoharp / Source: Field recording by Mike Seeger made onstage at the Unionville-Chadds Ford Junior Senior High School auditorium, Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, August 27, 1966*

Kilby Snow of Grayson County, Virginia, was probably the most innovative Appalachian autoharp player of his generation, with a repertoire ranging from ancient ballads and fiddle tunes to more recent bluegrass and country songs. Mike first met him on one of his Southern recording trips in 1957. He was particularly impressed with Snow's "left-handed playing technique which enabled him to play slurs, or, as he called them, 'drag notes,' by playing two or three adjacent open strings upward in pitch very accurately with the chord bar released. No one else has been able to match the driving speed, accuracy, and hard touch of his virtuoso style." "Galax Rag" is one of Snow's own tunes based on a 1926 recording of "Going Down to Lynchburg Town" by the Blue Ridge Highballers.

## 23. SAY OLD MAN, CAN YOU PLAY A FIDDLE?

*Eck Robertson, fiddle; Tracy Schwarz, guitar; Mike Seeger, mandolin / Source: Field recording by Mike Seeger in a Newport, Rhode Island cottage, July 1965*

After visiting the legendary country fiddler Eck Robertson in Amarillo, Texas, in 1963, the Ramblers arranged for him to perform at a number of urban venues including the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. Mike recalls: "We played several

tunes with him onstage. I especially remember this small, aging man in the backstage performer's tent surrounded by Bill Monroe, Kenny Baker, Tex Logan, Arthur Smith, and Kirk McGee listening intently to his legendary arrangement of 'Sallie Gooden.' On the last afternoon of the festival I arranged for a place to record, borrowed a Nagra recorder and microphone, and we recorded this and five other pieces." Robertson employs an EDAE fiddle tuning for this unusual multi-part tune. His different melodic variations emphasize the major and minor thirds of the scale, resulting in an intriguing uncertainty as to the tune's major or minor identity.

## 24. AWAKE, AWAKE

Dillard Chandler, vocal / *From Old Love Songs & Ballads from the Big Laurel, North Carolina Folkways FW 2309, 1964; and/or Dark Holler: Old Love Songs and Ballads SFW 40159, 2005*

During a 1963 trip to the mountain communities around Big Laurel Creek in Madison County, North Carolina, John recorded Dillard Chandler singing this sad love song. Chandler's tense vocal delivery and extended phrasing exemplify traditional a cappella mountain singing style, while his final verse is unique.

Variants of "Awake, Awake" are found in the celebrated ballad collections of Cecil Sharp and Malcolm Laws, attesting to the song's strong currency in the southern Appalachians. Similar versions of "Awake, Awake" were recorded by a number of early commercial country singers including B. F. Shelton as "O Mollie Dear," the Oaks Family as "Wake Up, You Drowsy Sleeper," the Callahan Brothers and the Blue Sky Boys as "Oh Katie Dear," and the Carter Family as "Who's That Knocking at My Window?"

## 25. BOWLING GREEN

Cynthia May "Cousin Emmy" Carver, banjo and vocal; John Cohen, guitar; Mike Seeger, mandolin; Tracy Schwarz, bass / *Source: Field recording made at the Ash Grove, Hollywood, California, April 23, 1967; recordist unknown*

After hearing Cousin Emmy at Disneyland in 1961, John and Mike arranged for her to play at a number of folk music venues including Hollywood's Ash Grove, where this recording was made. John would later recall that Carver's Kentucky ballads and flamboyant stage presentation came across as a mix of Hollywood and hillbilly: "Her music was as we knew it, but instead of coming from a farm kitchen, it was coming from a spangled jukebox." She learned this song from an

old African-American man who worked on her father's family farm near Lamb, Kentucky. Additional recordings of Cousin Emmy can be heard on *The New Lost City Ramblers with Cousin Emmy* (Folkways FTS 31015, 1968) and *Cousin Emmy and Her Kinfolks 1939-1947* (Bear Family Records CD 16853, 2007).

## 26. MADELEINE

Dewey Balfa, fiddle; Rodney Balfa, guitar and vocal; Allie Young, accordion; Weston Bergeaux, drum *From Cajun Fiddle, Old and New with Dewey Balfa Folkways FW 3362, 1977 / Source: Field recording by Tracy Schwarz at C.C.'s Lounge in Basile, Louisiana, February 1975*

The popular Cajun two-step "Madeleine" relates the woes of a man whose lover has left him to go out to sleep "*dehors dans l'grand brouillard*" (literally "outdoors in a big fog"; to "sleep outdoors" is a Cajun euphemism for an extramarital affair). Tracy recorded the Balfa Brothers performing it in February of 1975 during a live radio broadcast of the Basile Cajun Hour from C.C.'s Lounge in Basile, Louisiana. In the liner notes to the original Folkways LP, Tracy described the scene:

*In 1975 Dewey had two radio shows and a dance Saturday, and by hunting around the dial one could find other shows too.*

*The Basile Cajun Hour is special in terms of what is to be found nowadays on the AM broadcast band in the USA—it's live, almost a thing of the past in most areas and it takes place in a bar with a dance floor. Nothing dull about this. The establishment, C.C.'s Lounge, looks quite ordinary from the outside and at 4:45pm is almost empty. However, by 5pm it was jam-packed with happy, noisy listeners and dancers. Most of the selections are intended to be for dancing and the band is set up that way—electric pickups on all instruments and drums for a heavy beat. The tempo is either waltz or two-step, with waltzes favored 2 to 1.*

## 27. FISHING CREEK BLUES

Sue Draheim, fiddle; Mac Benford, banjo; Eric Thompson, lead guitar; Jody Stecher, guitar; possibly Hank Bradley, Will Spires, Kenny Hall, Holly Tannen, and Larry Hanks / *From Berkeley in the 1960s Field Recorder's Collective FRC 609, 2008 / Source: Recording by John Cohen at Peter Weston's Pacific High Studios, San Francisco, California, 1970*

In the late 1960s John and Mike took notice of the rich old-time music scene that had sprung up in the Bay Area. John recalls that, during the Ramblers' touring visits, musicians would gather to jam at a large house on Colby Street on the



Berkeley/Oakland city line. “They were all independent musicians, full time exploring old-time music, busking, and lifestyles, in various configurations. Forty years later, most of them are still performing around the Bay Area.” This particular group, he reminisces, “produced a musical high, a meeting of minds and excellent musicianship which never coalesced into a single band.” The tune “Fishing Creek Blues” was written by Rambler Tracy Schwarz in 1964 and named after a creek that ran behind his house in rural Pennsylvania. Note Eric Thompson’s high register guitar variations on the melody, suggesting the influence of bluegrass and foreshadowing a sound that would soon be popularized by acoustic rocker Jerry Garcia, an old high school friend of Thompson’s.

## 28. SALLY IN THE GARDEN

*New Tranquility String Band and friends: Sue Draheim, fiddle; Will Spires, fiddle; Larry Hanks, jew’s harp; Eric Thompson, lead guitar; Ron Tinkler, second guitar; Dave Ricker, mandolin; Mac Benford, 5-string banjo; Holly Tannen, lap dulcimer; possibly others / From Berkeley Farms: Oldtime and Country Style Music of Berkeley Folkways FW 2436, 1972 / Source: Recording by Dave Wirt and Reg Paradis at Guerrage Productions, Berkeley, California, February 1970*

Mike’s *Berkeley Farms Folkways* LP was an early effort to document the late 1960s burgeoning Bay Area old-time music scenes. Banjoist Mac Benford and fiddler Walt Koken (another Colby Street regular not heard on this recording) would go on to form the nucleus of the Highwoods String Band, probably the most popular old-time group of the 1970s. Others remain active in the ongoing folk music scene. Mike suspects that a 1928 recording of a three-tune medley by the Crockett Family Mountaineers was the source for this version of “Sally in the Garden.” The guitar, lap dulcimer, and jew’s harp join in with the main melodic lines of the fiddles and banjo to create an exceptionally rich textural effect.

**Ray Allen** is Professor of Music and director of the American Studies program at Brooklyn College, CUNY. He and Ellie Hisama recently co-edited *Ruth Crawford Seeger’s Worlds: Innovation and Tradition in Twentieth-Century American Music* (University of Rochester Press, 2007). He is currently completing a book tentatively titled *Gone to the Country: The New Lost City Ramblers and the Urban Folk Music Revival*.





## credits

Co-produced by John Cohen, Mike Seeger, and Tracy Schwarz

Essay and annotations by Ray Allen

Archival assistance by Jeff Place

Photos by Chris Strachwitz

Audio restoration and mastering by Pete Reiniger

Executive producers: Daniel E. Sheehy and D. A. Sonneborn

Production manager: Mary Monseur

Editorial assistance by Carla Borden

Art direction, design, and layout by Visual Dialogue

### **Additional Smithsonian Folkways**

**staff:** Richard James Burgess, director of marketing and sales; Betty Derbyshire, financial operations manager; Laura Dion, sales; Toby Dodds, technology manager; Spencer Ford, fulfillment; Henri Goodson, financial assistant; Mark Gustafson, marketing; David Horgan, e-marketing; Helen Lindsay, customer service; Keisha Martin, manufacturing coordinator; Margot Nassau, licensing and royalties; Jeff Place, archivist; Ronnie Simpkins,

audio specialist; John Smith, sales and marketing; Stephanie Smith, archivist.

Thanks to Peter Bartok, Chris Strachwitz, and others for recording the New Lost City Ramblers.

Thanks also to Katharina Budnick, Jesse Hart, Fritz Klaetke, and Jason Roth.

*Always Been A Rambler* is a new documentary film (2009) about the New Lost City Ramblers. It includes rare archival footage and photos, interviews, and recent performances by the band, some of their early influences, and some of the musicians influenced by NLCR. Directed by Yasha Aginsky and produced by Chris Strachwitz, Suzy Thompson, and Tom Diamant of the Arhoolie Foundation, it's available as a DVD (with bonus footage) and will show in a limited number of theaters during 2009 and 2010.

For more information, go to:  
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