

JUST AROUND THE BEND

Survival and Revival in
Southern Banjo Sounds

MIKE SEEGER'S LAST DOCUMENTARY



Smithsonian Folkways



Smithsonian Folkways

Just Around the Bend: Survival and Revival in Southern Banjo Sounds
Mike Seeger's Last Documentary

SFW CD 40207

©© 2019 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

JUST AROUND THE BEND

Survival and Revival in
Southern Banjo Sounds

MIKE SEEGER'S LAST DOCUMENTARY



Smithsonian Folkways

Welcome!

You're invited here to a celebration of the old-time, traditional music played and sung by banjo players from in and around the southern mountains. Their musical roots go way back in time, yet their music-making is an integral part of their lives today. Each has a distinctive way of playing that comes from his or her musical lineage, life experience, and innermost feelings. We invite you to get to know these special people and their music, as well as the musician who interviewed and recorded them. And we invite you to explore the ways you, too, can enter into the vibrant, ongoing community of old-time music in the South and across the United States.



DEDICATED TO MIKE SEEGER,

1933–2009

**THIS IS A CELEBRATION OF OLD-TIME
TRADITIONAL MUSIC
PLAYED AND SUNG BY BANJO PLAYERS**



TABLE OF CONTENTS

6	Track Listing
9	Introduction: A Journey Complete
12	Map
15	Portraits
44	Glossary
45	Disc 1 Song Notes
53	Disc 2 Song Notes
59	DVD Song Notes
70	What We Heard from the Players
74	Join the Old-Time Music Party
75	Credits

Disc 1

NORTH CAROLINA, VIRGINIA, AND WEST VIRGINIA

RILEY BAUGUS

1. Sally Ann
2. Pretty Polly

BRIEN FAIN

3. Darlin' Nellie Gray
4. Long Lonesome Road

DEBBIE GRIM YATES

5. Nancy Blevins
(with Brian Grim, fiddle)
6. Billy Wilson

TINA STEFFEY

7. Cumberland Gap
(with Susan Trianosky, guitar)

MARSHA BOWMAN TODD

8. Hop Light Ladies
(with Richard Bowman, fiddle)
9. Sandy River Bells
(with Richard Bowman, fiddle)
10. Richmond
(with Richard Bowman, fiddle)
11. Soldier's Joy
(with Richard Bowman, fiddle)

JERRY ADAMS

12. Sandy River
13. Country Blues (Richard Dale Boggs/Figs D. Music, Inc. o/b/o

Stormking Music, BMI)
(with Sam Adams, guitar and vocal, and Sammy Adams, banjo)

PETER GOTT

14. Rabbit Song
15. Whistle Blow (1)
16. Whistle Blow (2)
17. Cumberland Gap (1)
18. Cumberland Gap (2)
19. Liza Jane

FRANK GEORGE

20. Sugar Hill
21. Liza Jane

DAVID REED

22. Preacher and the Bear

JOE AYERS

23. Old Jawbone
(with Gabriel Ayers, tambourine)
24. Jesus Gonna Make Up
My Dyin' Bed

RHIANNON GIDDENS

25. Georgia Buck
26. Cripple Creek

Disc 2

KENTUCKY

GEORGE GIBSON

1. Wild Bill Jones
2. Story of Morgan's March
(spoken)
3. Morgan's March
4. Big Stone Gap

JOHN HAYWOOD

5. John Henry

MATT KINMAN

6. Cold Icy Mountain
7. The Cuckoo
8. Morphine

CLIFTON HICKS

9. German War

BRETT RATLIFF

10. Lost Hornpipe
(with Jesse Wells, fiddle)
11. Fair and Tender Ladies

JESSE WELLS

12. Whitesburg
13. Going Across the Sea

ALABAMA AND TENNESSEE

ROBERT MONTGOMERY

14. Going Across the Sea
15. Old Rattler (Dave Akeman/Carlin
America/Fort Knox Music, Inc./Trio
Music Company, Inc., BMI)

LEROY TROY

16. Bully of the Town
17. Cotton-Eyed Joe

Mike defined Southern old-time music (which he played and sang as well) as "the home music made by American Southerners before the media age."



Introduction

A Journey Complete

IT WAS A WINTRY DAY IN JANUARY OF 2009 WHEN MIKE SEEGER SET out on the first of two 2-week trips to interview and record banjo players, in Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, and West Virginia. We were four: Mike; Yasha Aginsky, the San Francisco filmmaker and longtime friend who had offered to join the project out of an abiding interest in old-time music; Yasha's assistant, Slava Basovich; and myself, Mike's wife and (for this and many projects) his assistant. Somehow we all fit into Mike's Honda Accord sedan, along with our luggage and cold-weather wraps plus camera, sound recorder, microphones, lighting equipment, many coils of cable, and plenty of other audio and video equipment. We had a tight schedule and a small travel budget.

The second foray was easier. It was in June, the sun smiled on us much of the time, and we splurged and took two vehicles. By that time, Yasha had produced a rough cut of January's video footage, already a beautiful piece of work. We knew that with this trip behind us, there would be more than enough material for the two CDs, DVD, and extensive booklet Mike envisioned.

Soon after that June trip, Mike was diagnosed with a rare blood cancer called multiple myeloma. Treatment was attempted, but to no avail—the cancer proved unusually aggressive and resistant. Mike went home from the hospital into hospice care; his close family gathered; and ten days later he died, on August 7, 2009.

Mike's hope was that Yasha would finish the video, that musician/historian/producer Bob Carlin would compile the CDs in his absence, and that I would see the project to completion. Here is the result. Of course, it's not quite the same project. Now it's *our* take on Mike's take on the "survival and revival" of the

old-time banjo in the South. Bob has compiled the two CDs from many hours of recorded music. And with Mike gone, Yasha's video acquires another dimension as a portrait of Mike Seeger the documentarian as he visits and records people he loves and admires, playing the music to which he had devoted his life.

Old-time music and the banjo

Mike defined Southern old-time music (which he played and sang as well) as “the home music made by American Southerners before the media age.” These were the songs and tunes, and the ways of singing and playing, which people had learned from family and neighbors in an evolutionary continuity stretching back generations. The songs included ballads, hymns, and play-party songs; the instruments, fiddle, banjo, jew's harp, dulcimer, and eventually guitar—songs and sounds of a variety only hinted at here.

In the 1920s, the rise of commercial recordings and radio had preserved some of these sounds for the future, as recording company scouts searched the countryside for new material and found old-time music riches. But the “music industry” inexorably changed the making of the music, as Mike often pointed out; people began listening to music from way beyond home, letting go of their own strand of tradition.

Thirty and more years later, Mike sought out old-time singers and players, in the 1950s and '60s, when it was still possible to find many people living whose music-learning dated from before the media age. Sometimes they had been recorded by record companies or song collectors, and he could track them by name (though often by a circuitous path); sometimes he just went looking, asking around, mostly in out-of-the-way rural places. Mike recorded interviews and music of a great many music-makers. Some of them he brought to festivals and other venues; he produced recordings of many. And he learned their music for his own concerts, always acknowledging the musicians he'd learned from, often with a story. His mission was to bring the best of this “home music” to a wider audience—and to encourage listening and playing.

Now, returning to fieldwork in his 76th year to document the sounds and context of this revival/survival—to which his own work over decades had contributed—Mike recorded both music and interviews, in the players' homes and other congenial settings, just as he had on those early journeys.

“Revival and survival”: that's what Mike saw in old-time banjo playing circa 2009 in the South, its place of origin, and that's what he wanted to investigate. He chose a couple dozen among his many “favorite” old-time Southern players (“favorite” was a favorite word of his). Mike wanted to represent a variety of

playing styles, variations of both clawhammer (down-stroking) and picking (up-picking). He chose players in different stages of musical development, from eager newcomers to seasoned players to elders with long musical memories. And he was interested in the variety of uses the music has in the players' lives: some play mostly at home and some for community events, for example, and a couple are full-time musicians. They come from seven states and range in age from their 30s to their 80s. The resulting collection of conversation and music gives a sense of the current vitality and context of traditional banjo music, and old-time music generally, in its Southern home.

Besides listening to their music, you can meet these players in person, in their own surroundings, by watching the enclosed DVD. More background on each, gleaned from Mike's interviews, follows, along with notes on the songs on both the CDs and DVD and suggestions on how to join the party yourself.

Alexia Smith, 2014



From left to right: Slava Basovich, Debbie Grim Yates, Brian Grim, Mike Seeger, Alexia Smith, Brian's wife Georgeanna Grim and baby Chloe.





**This is a celebration of the
old-time, traditional music made
by banjo players in and around
the Southern mountains.
Their musical roots go way
back in time, yet their
music-making is an integral
part of their lives today.**



PORTRAITS

North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia



RILEY BAUGUS

(born November 28, 1965)

Geography counts for Riley Baugus. His father moved from Alleghany County, North Carolina, in the Blue Ridge, to Winston-Salem in the 1950s, looking for work; his mother's family had a similar trajectory; and both families brought their culture with them. So while Riley grew up in Walkertown, near Winston-Salem, "we lived the Blue Ridge Mountain lifestyle."

Riley's love of Southern music came from his parents, too. Both his parents grew up in churches with a tradition of unaccompanied singing, and the family listened to bluegrass, old-time, country, and gospel. His musical horizons were broadened in the "Strings" classical music program at school, where he learned violin technique. The big draw for him, though, was bluegrass and especially old-time music, though the two musics were not clearly differentiated in his surroundings when he was a kid. He saved up and got a made-in-Taiwan guitar from the Sears catalog—"it was like fretting a fence"—and taught himself some chords. Later, Riley's dad made him a banjo.

Then, in fifth grade, he met eight-year-old Kirk Sutphin, whose people, like Riley's, had also come from the mountains in search of work and whose grandfather Sid had been teaching him old-time fiddle. The two became fast friends and "followed the path" of music together, visiting and learning from the renowned fiddler and banjo player Tommy Jarrell and other traditional musicians. To these two youngsters, says Riley, music "was a thing to do that seemed special.... Playing music was an important thing, to us."

Music continued to be important through Riley's years as a welder and blacksmith, and he played with a number of bands. Then he got the chance to contribute to the music for the movie *Cold Mountain*—making a 19th-century-style banjo in duplicate for use on screen, and singing a ballad for the soundtrack. The film brought with it premieres, concerts, the “Great High Mountain” music tour—and a boost in Riley's confidence that he could earn a living as a musician and banjo-builder. He took the leap and left the welding shop. These days he tours solo or with Dirk Powell or Kirk Sutphin, and his duo with traditional flatfoot dancer Ira Bernstein has taken him on tours abroad.

Asked about the future of old-time music, Riley says: “It's not dead; it's up and coming!” He finds gratification in bringing his music and culture to people, and he sees young people “fall in love with it.” He contrasts pop culture with “cultures of origin” that address questions of meaning: “Where do we come from, why are we here, what are these feelings I'm feeling and how do I express them?” As he likes to put it, lots of people are looking for “a culture that comes from earth, not from asphalt.”



BRIEN FAIN

(born December 12, 1971)

Brien, born in Patrick County, Virginia, was “raised up in the old-fashioned way,” and music was a big part of that. Families would “swap out work,” getting together for a hog killing for instance, and have some music. On Saturday folks might hang out at a country store; Sunday was visiting day; summers included dirt-track racing, square dances, and fiddlers conventions; winters, coon hunting at night and hunting for squirrel, rabbit, and deer in the daytime—all occasions that often included music.

Brien believes the old ways survived in Patrick County because of its isolation along the eastern slope of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Besides, he says, the mountain people of Patrick and nearby counties “are fun-loving people,” and there's no better fun than music. As for the survival of the music into the present, Brien credits the city people who came into the mountains seeking it in the 1950s and '60s, in his parents' time. “If it hadn't been for you yourself and a few others,” he said to Mike, “this music would have done died out.”

Musical traditions run deep in Brien's family. His mother's father was an elder in the Primitive Baptist Church, so he heard those unaccompanied church songs; and his mother had brothers who played guitar. His father came from a different church tradition, but he sang some of the old ballads like "Brown Girl" and "Barbry Allen," and he played banjo. Brien played mandolin and guitar as a youngster. Then, when he was 15, his father died, and Brien picked up his daddy's banjo and learned to play by listening to the few tapes he had of his dad's playing. "I tried to emulate my dad. I thought so much of him I wanted to carry on everything he'd done."

Mike observed that in speaking of his neighbors the Foddrell family, from whom Brien learned "Long Lonesome Road" (track 4; see below), Brien didn't mention that they were black. Brien feels there was no racism in the community when he was growing up. "Everybody was poor; what difference did it make what color you was?" In the eastern part of the county, he notes, two families had owned slaves—Reynolds and Pen, later founders of tobacco companies. But in the mountainous west, he said, blacks and whites worked, played music, hunted, and fished together—they depended on one another for work and for times of enjoyment.

Growing up, Brien worked on the farm and in sawmills. Then after high school he went to work in a shop that built racing engines, and he has done various kinds of mechanical and machinist work ever since. He likes work involving a lot of math. Since our conversation with him at his home in Mount Airy, North Carolina, Brien and his wife Doris have moved back to Patrick County, where the ancestral Fains settled in 1763; he now has his own machine shop, and they raise chickens, cows, and a big garden.



DEBBIE GRIM YATES
(born June 24, 1971)

Debbie Grim Yates, banjoist, and her older brother Brian, fiddler, tell a story of a family re-rooted in Virginia soil. Their maternal grandfather was a fiddler from the Whitetop, Virginia, area, long rich in old-time music. He moved to Pennsylvania to work in the coal mines, and there he played "a lot of swing and did a lot of entertaining"—though it was actually his wife

Debbie, Brian's grandmother, who taught brother Brian his first fiddle tune.

Then, when Debbie was six or seven, her parents moved the family back to Whitetop, drawn by the land and the music. The siblings got lessons at the fire hall there, Debbie learning banjo from Emily Spencer and Brian learning fiddle from Thornton Spencer and Albert Hash—all old-time players in the Whitetop Mountain Band, all known for their extensive teaching.

Debbie, starting out, found it was easier “to know a singing song” first, for learning it on the banjo—the words helped her catch the tune. Later she could follow the fiddler, most often her brother, or watch a guitar player and strum chords. Soon the Grims were playing every Friday night for the Whitetop square dances, with their mother on guitar. And the family went to festivals every weekend all summer long, where Debbie and Brian continued learning from other players. Debbie had to play fast and strong to keep up with the fiddlers, she says—“I didn’t have a choice!”

Debbie got interested in pottery and discovered the family-operated Mangum Pottery of western North Carolina, trading banjo lessons for pottery lessons. She now does production pottery for Mangum and has her own business making functional pieces sold at several shops. For her, the music and pottery are “intertwined.”

As for Brian, the accompanying video gives a glimpse of the life on his farm in Grayson County, Virginia, where sheep dominate the audio. Our recording session took place on the big porch of his big log house, built with the help of friends. This is where the Grims carry on old “house party” traditions, gathering friends for food and music and visiting: Breaking Up Christmas in January, and a lamb roast in July. Brian's work life also includes a mail route and spring sheep shearing for nearby farmers.

The Grims are the core members of the Konnarock Critters, the lively and much-loved dance band, now playing only occasionally since Brian and Debbie began having family responsibilities. Music at Debbie's home in the community of Konnarock, Virginia (near Whitetop Mountain along the Blue Ridge), now involves the whole family. Debbie plays fiddle as well as banjo; her husband Tim plays guitar; 12-year-old Molly plays mandolin; 10-year-old Sadie plays banjo or bass; and everyone sings. Very much as her parents did, Debbie and Tim are taking the family band out to play and sing for local community occasions.



TINA STEFFEY

(born September 11, 1980)

We met with Tina Steffey, her mother Susan Trianosky, and Rhoda Kemp at Rhoda's home in Roanoke, Virginia. Rhoda is a close friend of Tina's and a big influence on her banjo playing, and all three women play in the Grayson Highlands Band. That's the same band Tina's grandfather played in while she was growing up in Ashe County, North Carolina, in that area of the

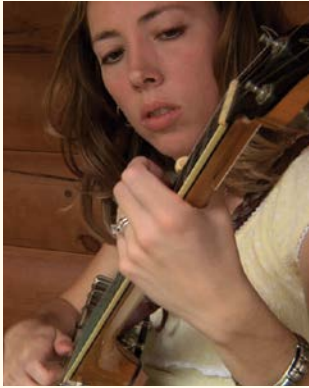
Blue Ridge Mountains where North Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee meet.

As a kid, Tina loved going along with the band on the southwest Virginia square dance circuit, a different dance every night, where she joined in the dancing. Then at age 12 she began learning to play—her grandfather made her first banjo—and was “eat up with it” in those years. Since kids her age took no interest in old-time music, she hung out mostly with older people; it's different now, she comments, with lots of good young pickers coming along: “Where were they when I was that age?” In her teens, she joined the family band.

Today she still plays with the Grayson Highlands Band, usually in North Carolina, and at family gatherings—“big pickings at Mom's house” in Mountain City, in Johnson County, Tennessee (neighbor to Tina's home county in North Carolina). And she sometimes plays with her husband, the bluegrass player Adam Steffey, who has taken up learning old-time fiddle tunes on the mandolin and joins in the family jams.

Rhoda, born in 1929 in Roanoke, also grew up playing in a family band, which—except on Sundays!—would “rock the house every night.” Her parents were from Meadows of Dan, on the eastern slope of the Blue Ridge, in Patrick County, Virginia, and moved to Roanoke when her father got a job there. Both her father and grandfather were old-time fiddlers.

The women discuss what it's like to be a woman in traditional music. As a child, Rhoda says, “I didn't know girls didn't play.” Then, in her busy adult life, working 27 years at General Electric and bringing up seven children, she gave up playing—a pattern not uncommon among traditional women musicians (and sometimes men) of her generation. It wasn't until she later began going to music festivals that she met other female players. As for Tina, two generations later, she early on decided, in response to a taunt by a man: “I will not play like a girl!” She still enjoys surprising members of what she calls “a bit of an old boys' club” in old-time music with the power and drive of her playing.



MARSHA BOWMAN TODD

(born March 11, 1982)

Marsha joined her dad Richard Bowman's band, the Slate Mountain Ramblers, at age nine, playing mandolin. The Ramblers play for dances most Friday and Saturday nights, usually in the Mount Airy, North Carolina, region where they live. Richard is the band's fiddler, Marsha plays banjo, Marsha's mother Barbara plays bass and calls figures, and

various others join in on guitar.

Marsha's first instrument was cello, played as bass, which she started at age three; mandolin and guitar followed, then banjo at age 12. Richard wanted her to learn music "like the rest of us did—just on her own." So nobody showed Marsha how to play banjo: "I would pick up things from different people, and mold it into my own." Marsha says she tries to "make it match what the fiddle is doing; sometime it's easier than others."

Marsha spent a year in the old-time and bluegrass program at East Tennessee State University, where she joined a bluegrass band and played with them for four years. She finished college back home, so that she could continue in the family band as well. Once out of school, she "needed a real job," and now works as a payroll and billing clerk in the finance department at Pike Electric. She married Marty Todd in 2006, and they built the handsome log house near Mount Airy where we recorded her and Richard.

Marsha and her parents go to every fiddlers convention in the area, because she wants to play with the people she sees only once a year, both old-time and bluegrass musical companions. And in the basement of Marty and Marsha's house, there's a wall full of ribbons; Marsha has been entering competitions since she was three. "You win some and lose some, but it's all fun."

Marsha appreciates how she was brought up: "Mom and Dad never told me I had to play. Ever." She would do the same with her own children. "Cramming it down the throat probably ain't the best approach to getting a young'un to play."



JERRY ADAMS

(May 7, 1947–June 21, 2013)

Jerry grew up in Madison County, in the mountains of western North Carolina. At age 10 or 11, he began going regularly to visit Lee and Berzilla Wallin, of the Wallin family that is widely known for its musicians and ballad singers. But Jerry didn't pay much attention to music in those days; what he went for was the Saturday "shoot," where you'd pay a quarter or a dime per shot and the best shot would get the pot. Jerry tells how he and his fellow shooters started out using 22s, and then somebody got a "hog rifle"—an old muzzle loader—and everybody switched to those: that was much more fun, with all the cleaning and reloading involved and the "big clouds of blue smoke."

Then, at age 14, Jerry was diagnosed with Bright's disease and had to spend a year on bed rest. As it happened, Jerry's uncle Nolan had given him a banjo; and on one of Jerry's rare outings, to the Carolina Jubilee Theater in Hot Springs, he met Peter Gott (see portrait below) and heard him play banjo with his bluegrass group. On a subsequent visit to the Wallins, Peter was present and taught Jerry his first banjo tune, and that long Bright's disease year gave him time to keep on learning.

Jerry was soon playing regularly on his family's Sunday visits with Columbus Gunner, who raised tobacco for Jerry's father and was "a great banjo-picker" in the same local style. On Tuesdays, he'd go to the Wallins' to play. He played with a couple of boyhood friends as well, until they got drafted and Jerry went to work and "sorta slid the banjo under the bed," getting it out only occasionally.

After studying at Mars Hill College and the University of Georgia, Jerry became a pharmacist in Newport, Tennessee. He and Doug and Jack Wallin, along with Jerry's son Sam, took to practicing music in a corner at the pharmacy, and in 1993 Jerry built a new store with a sound-proofed back room especially for music. The practice sessions grew into a weekly jam, drawing musicians from all over (Jerry retired in 2010, and the pharmacy building has become an Amish food store).

Jerry credits "outsiders" like Peter Gott with bringing attention to the music of his community and helping it survive. Nowadays, he says, old-time music is "kinda out there," whether in urban or rural settings: "It's just where you can find it." To get young people interested, he notes, you have to support them, take them around to hear people play. Mike responded that "what you can hear easiest is the more commercial types of sounds," and Jerry replied succinctly: "TV."



THE ADAMS FAMILY

We recorded Jerry, along with his son Sam and Sam's 13-year-old son Sammy (who has since graduated from high school), in the little music building Sam is fixing up for music in Shelton Laurel. Sam and his family live right there, and Sam works nearby in a quarry running various kinds of machinery, while Jerry was on a visit back to home ground.

Jerry said he couldn't get young Sam interested in old-time music, but in 11th grade Sam found it himself through a football buddy whose whole family are "avid musicians." Since then, Sam said, music is a daily presence in his life. He plays fiddle, having learned tunes from Doug Wallin of the nearby Wallin family.

Sammy, in his turn, took to playing as soon as his grandfather Jerry put a banjo in his hands. He plays by ear and likes Scruggs style (used primarily in bluegrass music). Earl Scruggs occasionally uses a pair of cam tuners to facilitate retuning strings in mid-phrase; Sam proudly tells of how at age seven Sammy figured out on his own how to play "Home Sweet Home" "using the tuners—that's the honest truth!"

Music is a living part of this family, as they gather with friends and jam; "that's what this building is for," says Sam. When Mike asks if he thinks old-time music is going to go on, Sam's response is emphatic: "Absolutely!"



PETER GOTT

(born September 19, 1937)

Mike, Peter Gott, and his wife Polly Gott became friends in the 1950s at a music camp in California and have had many visits over the years, almost always at the Gotts' beautiful homestead in Shelton Laurel, a remote, small valley in the mountains of western North Carolina.

It was during his college days at Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York, that Peter started playing the banjo, learning partly from Pete Seeger's book *How to Play the Five-String Banjo*. Then Peter heard a recording of western North Carolina old-time banjo-picker Obrey Ramsey playing "Pretty Polly" and "Little Maggie"—and "I thought that was the best thing I'd ever heard in my life." Deepening interest led Peter and his wife Polly, both Northeasterners, to want to live in the South, where this music came from. And so, as Peter describes on the video, in 1961 they found their new home.

Peter and Polly took up the old way of life prevalent then in Shelton Laurel: gardening and canning, heating with wood, keeping chickens and a cow. After renting for a while, they bought land, and Peter built a log house "in the old way," cutting and hewing the logs and using only hand tools. Even before the house was finished, a neighbor asked Peter to build one for him, and Peter eventually went on to build many more.

In their early years in Shelton Laurel, Peter and Polly spent long hours visiting neighbors and listening to their music—ballads and songs as well as fiddle and banjo music. Peter learned the banjo styles of Lee Wallin, who played clawhammer, and of George Landers, who had a distinctive way of picking. With three other neighbors, Peter formed a bluegrass band that played at shows in the nearby town of Hot Springs. Everybody in the area loved banjo music, according to Peter, whether old-time or bluegrass. When Mike asked him how he was so good at becoming part of the local community, Peter replied, "It was the banjo that did it."

At one of Peter's band's shows in Hot Springs, a man from the nearby town of Sodom asked him if he'd call a dance there (traditional dancing had been dormant for 15 years). Peter said, "Yes...but I don't know how." Well, they made it work: his interlocutor knew the calls and spoke them to Peter, then Peter, who has a good strong voice, shouted them out for the dancers. There was another dance the following week, and every week thereafter for four years—with Peter

calling. Peter then started a dance in his own community of Shelton Laurel, which continued every Saturday night for two more years, until the rowdying effects of guns and moonshine brought it to a stop.

Mike and Peter mused about younger generations of players locally. Peter and Polly's children Tim and Suzy learned music from their parents, and for years the family bluegrass band played in coffeehouses and at summer festivals. Peter says a handful of younger folks are "carrying it on very authentically" and still live in the area, or at least come back; he mentioned Sheila Adams, known for her ballad singing; Jerry Adams (included in this collection); and several others. Mike noted a difference: those people perform, he said, whereas "the music has lived in your life here, and in the lives of the people who were originally here, as just part of everything that goes on." Peter seemed to join in Mike's observation when he said about old-time music in this area so rich in musical tradition: "I do wonder how it will continue."

Peter was playing the Vega tubaphone banjo he bought in Vermont about 50 years earlier.



FRANK GEORGE

(October 6, 1928–November 15, 2017)

Frank was born in Bluefield, West Virginia, right on the Virginia line in the mountains. His father played banjo and fiddle, and his mother, who read music some, played the piano. When Frank was five, his father made him a boy-size banjo, and by the time he was seven he could "play tunes recognizable"—and in fact won second prize in a talent show in Bluefield.

Frank's grandfather lived with the family, and while his parents were at work (his father was a carpenter and joiner, his mother a nurse), the two spent a lot of time together. Grandpa, born in 1856 in Greenbrier County, was a link to some very old musical influences: he had grown up in a family that had slaves, and they stayed on as workers after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. He spent a lot of time with them and learned dance and banjo from them. Black people, Frank noted, played fiddle and banjo for whites' dances in those days. In addition, some of his grandpa's tunes were picked up from traveling shows at

the Elks Opera House: brass bands, old-time music, vaudeville, blackface.

Frank played for square dances in the 1940s and '50s, at such venues as the Elks Club, Woodmen of the World, and a golf-course club. He played at the Tazewell “stock market” (stock of the four-footed kind), at shooting matches, and in contests, winning “a drawerful of medals” for both fiddle and banjo. He won his first fiddle contest in 1950, and his last prize, a second, at Glenville, West Virginia, in 1990.

Frank also spoke of visiting black communities along the Virginia-West Virginia border: Kelly’s Tank, where spirituals were very much alive, and Cassius Hill, with its banjo and fiddle music. “See what a community can keep,” he remarked, “if they stay together?” About old-time banjo music today, he says there’s “no use for it”—meaning the square dances and other occasions for such music are gone. “The tube destroyed a lot of things, didn’t it?” he remarks. Radio was the beginning of the end, in his opinion, destroying some of the old-time music. But, he goes on, some people still want to learn it, just because they like it; and he has taught some younger people himself.

Frank got a bachelor’s degree in biology, but because he’s good at math and likes the out-of-doors, he ended up doing civil engineering and surveying for a living. And, in addition to old-time fiddle and banjo, he plays the Highland pipes. Frank and his wife Jane made us welcome in their hilltop home in Walton, in Roan County, West Virginia, Jane’s home county.



DAVID REED

(born April 24, 1953)

David Reed’s home in Port Deposit, Maryland, was way off the track of our two field trips with videographer Yasha Aginsky, so Mike visited him solo, and David doesn’t appear on video.

David’s musical roots reach back to the Blue Ridge Mountains, in Ashe County, North Carolina, where his mother, Ola Belle Campbell (later Reed), grew up playing banjo and guitar. Ola Belle’s father, Arthur Campbell, had moved the family north in search of work during the Depression, eventually settling in northeastern Maryland. Ola Belle married singer Bud Reed; together they performed and ran the well-known New River Ranch

music park in the 1950s and Sunset Park, in Pennsylvania, in later years, and Ola Belle wrote songs that have been taken up by old-time, bluegrass, and country singers. So David grew up in Rising Sun, Maryland, immersed in the sounds of traditional Southern music.

David wasn't inclined to play as a youngster, though he took up trumpet in the fourth grade. Then one night, at age 12, when nobody was home, he picked up his brother's electric guitar and made up a tune. Discovering that he could play led to rock music and eventually to the banjo. He was drawn to the banjo by its sound, lively and pleasant, and he notes that it "perks up a band" and can play rhythm and lead at the same time. David plays both three-finger style and clawhammer, sometimes mixing them as his mother did.

The music David plays is bound up with memories of his mother, who, he says, "had a special way about her," welcoming to all, even "the outcast, people that nobody else wanted." Playing with her at the Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C., in 1969, was "one of the highlights of my life"; playing clawhammer at home today, David feels the comfort of her presence. He thinks she was sometimes taken for granted in her home territory, even "poked fun of," and he speaks appreciatively of Mike's role in getting her known among the folk audiences who gave her standing ovations.

David is a house painter by trade and a minister by calling. He writes songs, sings with his wife, and plays at home and at church events—but he notes that when he plays a banjo piece, "people like that best."



JOE AYERS

(born September 7, 1949)

Joe Ayers is immersed in the mid-19th century: his house in Louisa County in the piedmont area of Virginia (where we visited him), much of his lifestyle, and most of the music he's playing and studying all date from that period. He's working, for instance, with the tunes of Elias Howe's 1848 *Complete Preceptor for the Banjo*, which he believes

to be the first banjo music ever published. Lyrics, he says, were added to existing tunes by a "pre-Tin Pan Alley" cranking them out for minstrel shows

and vaudeville. For Joe, these banjo books are a way to find out about the African people brought here in slavery, worth investigating if we can get past the objectionable language, and in the absence of more direct traces.

Joe attributes his affinity with African American culture to his upbringing in Richmond, in particular to time spent with his grandfather, who was in the building trades and “hung with everybody.” When Joe first heard Blind Lemon Jefferson and Charlie Patton in 1971, he felt he’d always heard their voices, as if coming “out of memory.” Early blues, then, is another of Joe’s windows on the African people who came here. Joe points out that the banjo would have come first to the Caribbean, in what he calls “the first big white power rush: sugar.” Thus the importation of slaves for work in sugar plantations gave the banjo its start in the New World. Joe makes a provocative suggestion about the tunes in the old banjo books that are called jigs—jigs are usually in triple rhythm, but these are in 2/4 time: when played with a “calypso beat” and a little slower than is usual today, then you get sounds “evoking Africa.”

Joe considers himself a musicologist, bringing together his love of music and his interest in history (he studied history in college for five or six years, though without getting a degree). Music, he says, can transport you to other times, bringing history alive. To this end he does public education, presenting at museums and reenactments. And while he’s at it, he encourages people to play music, “because it’s good for you!” The banjo, he says, is approachable, and people are turning to the instrument these days in reaction to the “media creation of markets” in popular music.

For many years Joe also had a family old-time band, with his two daughters and three sons, which played for dances “from Louisiana to New York.” His children grown, he is a soloist again occasionally and is working on a book about mid-19th-century banjo method books.



RHIANNON GIDDENS

(born February 21, 1977)

Rhiannon was a classical music major at Oberlin College when she went to a contra dance, thinking “contra” meant English country dancing “as in Jane Austen novels.” The “dance back door” opened into old-time music, in particular a little later on by way of the Tuesday night contras in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, near where she grew up and where the music was regularly provided by “great old-time bands” rather than the round robin of old-time, Irish, and eclectic bands often used for such dances. Rhiannon started buying old-time CDs and, half African-American herself, delving into the history of African Americans in old-time music, where she found out that “it’s my party, too.”

Then in 2005 Rhiannon attended the Black Banjo Gathering, an assembly of players and scholars organized by Cece Conway at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. There she met fellow North Carolinians Justin Robinson (also included in this collection) and Joe Thompson, an elderly black traditional fiddler much loved and appreciated in the old-time world. She and Justin began frequently visiting Joe, and Rhiannon took up the banjo in earnest—because “Joe won’t play without a banjo player” (Joe has since passed on, in 2012).

Joe was from Mebane, North Carolina, and so were Rhiannon’s mom’s family; Rhiannon says it’s “a travesty” her family didn’t know about him. She’d grown up hearing folk revival music from her parents, who sang it around the house; some bluegrass and old country music from the white side of her family, her dad’s; and blues and jazz from the black side, her mom’s. Now she was learning the old music in the old way, by playing along with Joe as he plays; it’s a rare opportunity these days, she says, and one she “wouldn’t trade for anything.”

Justin and Rhiannon, along with Dom Flemons, went on to form the Carolina Chocolate Drops string band in 2005, bringing the music and its history to new young audiences.

When Rhiannon’s great-aunt on her mother’s side heard the Drops’ first CD, she loved it, saying, “You know, I’m just a hillbilly at heart.” Says Rhiannon: “I wouldn’t have known that!” Looking back, she reflects that her black grandmother and great-aunt were born in a West Virginia coal camp and would, as a matter of course, have heard old country music. New knowledge about her

family and about her own culture as a Southerner, she says, has come from learning the songs and the history and “trying to get into the skin of the music.”

Rhiannon still lives in Greensboro, North Carolina, where she grew up and where we recorded her; she is now married and has a young daughter.



JUSTIN ROBINSON

(born November 14, 1982)

In Justin’s family, classical music prevailed: his mother played cello and sang opera, Justin played violin, and his sister played piano. But growing up in Gastonia, in the Piedmont area of North Carolina, Justin heard banjo music, including bluegrass; those sounds, he says, were “part of me whether I wanted them to be or not.” Moreover, the family faithfully watched

Hee Haw, the country music and humor television show, and his grandmother’s favorite performer was Grandpa Jones. And there was church singing and harmony singing on both sides of his family.

It was after he moved to Chapel Hill to go to the University of North Carolina that Justin began to feel “musically nostalgic” and began playing the violin again. He heard a story on NPR about a black North Carolina fiddle player named Joe Thompson and thought, “It would be really cool if he was still around.” As he began to explore black fiddle and banjo music, in 2005, he heard that Joe would be at the Black Banjo Gathering at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. Justin went to the gathering especially to meet Joe—though, as it turned out, by some “great big confluence of planets aligning, or whatever,” he also met Rhiannon Giddens and Dom Flemons, with whom he would soon form the touring African-American old-time string band the Carolina Chocolate Drops.

Joe Thompson, then 90 years old, had spent his whole life in Meban, North Carolina, just west of Chapel Hill, where he’d been playing for square dances since his youth. Soon Justin, along with Rhiannon, was visiting him every week or two, learning his tunes and “picking up the feel of what it was supposed to sound like.” Justin cites Joe as a great influence in music and in life generally, and he feels that Joe greatly values the visits, too: “He feels like somebody else is carrying on his music.”

Through the Black Banjo Gathering network, Justin sent out an appeal for North Carolina Piedmont music. Old-time fiddler Kerry Blech responded, sending multiple CDs, including copies of field recordings in collections not readily accessible. Justin continued his research, investigating the geography, history, and variations of the tunes he was learning, and eventually met Alan Jabbour, who had collected music in the area in the 1960s. Along the way, Justin added the banjo to his music kit, motivated initially by the wish to learn his grandmother's favorite song, "Old Rattler," which is associated mainly with Grandpa Jones of television's *Hee Haw* and the radio-broadcast *Grand Ole Opry*.

"Everything's connected," mused Justin as he identified trees in the woods surrounding us. "I'm sort of a nativist," he continued; "the stuff that we produce, whether it's food or music or ideas or whatever, they're all good enough. And sometimes much better than, you know, other places." People have a tendency to look outward, he believes, and you need to look outward; but then "you look out so far, and you turn around at some point and say, oh, yeah, but this is going on right at my doorstep."

Since our interview, Justin has left the Chocolate Drops to do graduate work in forestry at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. He finds time for a new musical "adventure": his group Justin Robinson and the Mary Annettes—its musical influences "anything I've ever listened to and liked,"—tours as studies allow and has produced two CDs. Justin's banjo playing can be heard and seen on the DVD.



TRISH KILBY FORE

(born November 27, 1977)

As a youngster growing up in Lansing in Ashe County, North Carolina, Trish listened along with her family to her dad's records and to WBRF-FM, the Galax, Virginia, country/bluegrass/old-time music station, Harold Mitchell's show on Monday nights. Her mother's father played fiddle and guitar but died before she was born. Her dad's parents, however, liked to go listen to the local jam session—though they didn't use that term; they'd say, "We're going to the music."

When, at age 12, Trish hurt her knee playing softball, her orthopedic surgeon suggested she learn an instrument. Hearing Dee-Dee Price play the

banjo at the jam got Trish interested. “It’s something I thought I could do”: she noticed the banjo had four strings to fret, and she had four fretting fingers! Once started, she developed a “strong desire” to play, and she was given a banjo for Christmas.

For a while Trish worked on the banjo by herself, playing along with records. Then she got lessons from Emily Spencer of Whitetop, Virginia, about 12 miles away; the Spencers “were the people you went to,” she says, if you wanted to learn. In the course of about a year of lessons, she continued, “I got so I could pick things up” listening to players. Among the players important to her were Larry Pennington, a bluegrass player at the nearby jam, and Enoch Rutherford, a hard-driving clawhammer player. Her next teacher was Harold B. Hausenfluck, a blind player from Richmond whom she met at the old-time and bluegrass festival in nearby Galax, and with whom she conducted “a conversation and lessons” by cassette exchange.

Trish is married to Kevin Fore, a banjo player himself and a maker of banjos in the style of Kyle Creed, and she works as the assistant director of the Galax-Carroll Regional Library (last seven years).

These days Trish has a group called the Old-Time Pals; fiddler Tim Donnelly is the other regular member, with a rotation of players on other instruments. The Pals play a couple times a month for community dances, festivals, and benefits.

Trish appears in the first chapter of the DVD.

KENTUCKY



GEORGE GIBSON

(born May 14, 1938)

Over several days in June, we visited George Gibson on the farm his father bought in about 1920, along the creek called Little Doubles in Knott County in eastern Kentucky. On each visit, we parked next to the creek—no bridge—and watched while George, from the other side, drove into the water and then upstream to come pick us up.

When George left Kentucky for college and work, he “took the banjo with him,” along with the old style of playing it; he came back often to the home place, maintaining his connection with local old-time banjo players. His work life he describes as “checkered”—it included schoolteaching, corporate work, and running a music store, a bar, and a car business. He is now retired and living in Florida, and still comes back home regularly.

George learned to play the banjo first from an older boy, then from his father. He learned by what he calls “emulation”: observing and listening, then finding a way to make the sounds as one hears them. This is the old, traditional way of learning music in Knott County, he says, and the reason so many variations in style have developed. George notes that, in contrast, most people today learn by “imitation,” copying exactly what a teacher demonstrates. “Emulation” is how a circle of younger players are now learning in turn from George; he’s a magnet for young people interested in traditional local culture and music.

Besides playing, George is a historian and philosopher of eastern Kentucky banjo music, drawing on written sources as well as on his own life experience. He is contributing an essay to Robert Winans’s upcoming book (working title: *The Banjo, Roots and Branches: Recent Research*) and publishes on his Web site, banjohistory.com. George stresses that to write about the banjo “you have to write about the fiddle, dance, and African Americans.” The banjo, he says, came into Kentucky with the early settlers, some of whom had slaves. Both blacks and whites played banjo and fiddle for dances all over Kentucky before the Civil War, he noted, though if no instruments were at hand they “patted,” using their hands for percussion. And dancing, with old-time banjo music, lingered on in

the mountains well into the 20th century, until the upheavals of World War II.

George speaks of World War II as a great divide in local culture. Coal had provided jobs and plentiful opportunities for enterprise in the area. Then in the 1930s, during the Depression, people began leaving to look for work, and during and after the war the good jobs were elsewhere. By the 1950s, says George, half the houses in his area were empty, and the dances and music had come to an end. The banjo survived; but “boys who wanted to play the banjo after WWII...they heard Earl Scruggs on the radio, and that did it”—they learned his bluegrass style rather than the older, indigenous styles. Now, according to George, people in Knott County think of bluegrass as their traditional music, with the earlier songs and styles gone from memory.

George believes, however, that there are enough young people playing it that old-time music will continue; but, he says, “It won’t be a part of the culture as it was 75 to 100 years ago.”



JOHN HAYWOOD

(born November 25, 1977)

John’s earliest memory is of Papaw (his grandfather) taking him to the Old Regular Baptist church in rural Floyd County, Kentucky, where he grew up. At the sound of the powerful, slow, unaccompanied chorus of voices, he started to cry—“it was kinda terrifying, or something!” Papaw took care of John while his parents were at work, and “what [Papaw] did a lot

of was walking around the house singing—those Old Regular Baptist tunes.” Those were “songs old men sing,” John felt; on his own, he listened to what was popular among young folks, and later played in rock bands.

Many influences led John to leave Floyd County for college and city life. Television brought images of “an enticing world,” contributing to his desire to get away from his “hillbilly upbringing.” People told him his talent for drawing would go nowhere at home: “You need to leave.” Papaw, a retired mine worker, didn’t want to see John work in “them ol’ mines” and urged him to get a good education. John got a degree in graphic design at Morehead State University and moved to the Louisville area, where his wife Kelli taught school and John worked for five years in a tattoo shop, making good money.

Then music from back home began to call. A Roscoe Holcomb CD Kelli bought reminded her of Lee Sexton, back home in Letcher County, and Holcomb's Old Regular Baptist songs reminded John of Papaw. A friend gave John a banjo, along with Pete Seeger's instruction book. John began going back often to eastern Kentucky, where he heard the music of Lee Sexton and George Gibson.

George came into John's life at a festival, where he bought some of John's artwork and then stayed to play banjo. Eventually John and Kelli gave up their jobs and moved to George's farm in Knott County, where they began to raise a family and grow a garden. Since then, John has opened a tattooing shop in nearby Whitesburg, where he also sells his artwork and has musical gatherings. Recently, John and George received a folklife apprenticeship grant from the Kentucky Arts Council, John studying George's tunes and the two tracking down early recordings together. John joined us at George's place for recording, and we took a walk up the hill to meet Kelli and their two daughters (now three).

Looking back, John describes his time in the city as "like a wild vacation." He celebrates now what once he might have lamented, that Knott County has no McDonald's and no Walmart: "The true beauty of the place is that we don't have stuff."

Of old-time music, John commented that it's "real communal, there's no ownership of certain things." And, he said, "It's the music I could foresee myself getting old playing," because it's not about "being a star" and doesn't have to be flashy—"it's just about playing music."



MATT KINMAN

(born March 25, 1971)

Matt's father was a cattle hand in southwest Arizona. The family lived "way, way out": the nearest neighbor was 25 miles away, the nearest town 50 miles. As was normal for families in such isolation, they had neither electricity nor running water. While his father's forebears came from "back east," his mother was a Yavapai-Apache Indian, and her grandmother, who died

in the 1970s at age 114, remembered her people being “rounded up like cows” and taken to Fort McDowell, along the Rio Verde in what is now Arizona.

When Matt was 12, the family moved first to Texas and then to South Carolina, to be with his father’s mother. That’s when the family first got indoor plumbing and his mother her first washing machine, gasoline powered, which you kick-started like a motorcycle.

“I’ve played music all my life,” said Matt. On his father’s side is a line of fiddlers going back generations, and a branch of the family in eastern Kentucky, near Morehead, also plays music. His father played many string instruments. According to Matt, “They didn’t distinguish what kind of music they was a-playin’”—it could be country, old-time, or bluegrass. Matt himself left home at 15 “to follow the music.”

Following the music has meant doing a variety of jobs: sawmill work in central Tennessee when he first left home, farm work of all kinds, instrument repair, and a stint in the plumbing trade. Lately Matt has worked mostly in music, playing with various others including Leroy Troy, whom he describes as his best friend, and the Roan Mountain Hilltoppers, whose sound, when he first heard them, evoked the response: “There ain’t no other music like this anywhere!” He has traveled with Old Crow Medicine Show and with them played on the *Grand Ole Opry*. His favorite banjo player, though, is George Gibson, for whom he has great respect as a historian as well, and Matt was among the players assembled at George’s place in Knott County, for our recording session. Matt doesn’t learn music from records; for him, following the music also means traveling to where the music is and learning directly from people he gets to know.

Currently, Matt is working on the pilot for a TV series he conceived of, which will introduce the audience to traditional American arts and crafts and the people practicing them—what he describes as “the TV equivalent of the *Foxfire* books.”



CLIFTON HICKS

(born March 14, 1985)

Clifton, though he grew up in Savannah, Georgia, and in Florida, is one of the circle of young players around George Gibson (see portrait) of Knott County, Kentucky. George's home place in Kentucky is where we met Clifton, and Mike decided to record him. When Clifton was trying as a young teenager to learn banjo, he heard a CD of George's playing and found that George now lived in Florida, not far from Clifton's home. Clifton made contact with him and learned by watching and listening to him. "I have a much more simplified version of what he does," says Clifton.

A couple of years later, the events of 9/11 drove Clifton, then in high school, to try to join the Army. He had to wait until he was 17; by age 18, he was in Iraq. But a few months' experience there turned him wholly against the war, particularly one incident that he describes on the accompanying video: what ensued when he found himself facing a man whose rifle was aimed directly at him. Clifton felt "morally destroyed"—and felt the need for music: "I needed a banjo." He ordered one from a catalog and began playing. His buddies gathered around, drawn to the novelty of live music. One, a Kentuckian, danced to some of the tunes. But the piece that caused them all to "get real quiet" was the song "German War," dating from World War I but timeless in its powerful portrayal of the hell of war.

Clifton's division was finally sent to Germany for a two-month break from combat, and there he continued to play, for Germans as well as for American soldiers. Then the time came to return to Iraq, and while waiting in line to get his rifle back, Clifton realized he could not, would not go back: "I didn't want to be a part of it, because it was wrong." He applied for conscientious objector status, and, after a lengthy investigation, was granted that along with an honorable discharge. More time and effort went into getting the right to receive benefits under the GI Bill. Finally, Clifton headed for western North Carolina, drawn by the scenery and the music and the prospects for higher education, and was accepted at Appalachian State University in Boone with GI Bill funding. He is studying archaeology.

Clifton noted that many of his Army buddies were still suffering the after-effects of their war experiences; as for himself, Clifton said, “There’s been times where I thought I would never be OK.” Music, he said, has made an enormous difference for him, especially “German War.” “I know I’m a lot better off by being able—being willing to sing the songs.”



BRETT RATLIFF

(born August 27, 1978)

Both sides of Brett’s family lived in Van Lear, in Johnson County, Kentucky, a town built in 1909 by Consolidation Coal Company as a model coal camp. His grandfathers and father were miners, his mother an educator who worked in a rehabilitation center. Brett grew up closely connected with his extended family, the community, local history, and the woods, hills, and ridges around Van Lear. He and his friends did “outdoor things”: sports, fishing, hiking, caving, cliff rappelling. “You can climb up the woods and be in another world.” Van Lear was, he says, a wonderful place to grow up.

Brett’s family sang, at home and in church, and he’d heard music all his life. In Brett’s early childhood, his father played guitar, until an automobile accident after a long workday in the mine left him disabled. After graduating from high school, Brett discovered his father’s guitar hidden away in the basement, and his father taught him a few chords. “I started learning that day and didn’t quit.” He began going to a bluegrass jamboree in nearby Paintsville, and playing with bluegrass bands.

Brett spent a year in college in Lexington, then moved back to Johnson County to work and play bluegrass. Then Jesse Wells joined his band on fiddle, just as Jesse was learning Kentucky fiddle tunes from his father. Between bluegrass sets at gigs, Jesse would play old-time tunes on stage, with Brett backing him up on guitar.

Kentucky fiddle and banjo music struck a deep chord in Brett. Together, he and Jesse began an intense exploration of the music; it became for them “a life-long endeavor—to find the music, play it, find out as much as we can about the history of it, but most importantly just to sit and play and play.” The two roomed together in Morehead, Kentucky, where Brett finished his college degree.

It became clear to Brett that for this musical endeavor, the appropriate instrument was the banjo. Early help with eastern Kentucky banjo styles came from Matt Kinman, and Brett's mentor in the music and its history is George Gibson, whose east Kentucky home place is where we recorded Brett.

Brett noted that there is room for only a few to make a living in the arts in eastern Kentucky, an area he described as "economically devastated." Committed to the place and its music, Brett moved to Whitesburg, home of the non-profit arts and education center Appalshop; there he began to piece together a living playing in several bands and teaching music in school, Appalshop's after-school program, and private lessons. And, he said, "I've stripped everything down to basic survival needs," which he noted also helps you live sustainably, closer to nature. He does his own booking. He uses the Internet but for networking finds travel more effective: he meets people "doing amazing things" and brings back ideas from "more progressive areas" to try out at home. He loves the travel, but nothing, he says, gives him the feeling he gets from being among the familiar people and places of eastern Kentucky.

After our interview with him, Brett went to work for Appalshop's Mountain Community radio station, WMMT-FM, and is now its general manager. He still makes music with Jesse Wells whenever they can get together across the miles and, closer to home, with Rich Kirby, playing local gigs and the "education circuit."



JESSE WELLS

(born July 22, 1978)

Music influences in Jesse's life are diverse and include David Grisman's "Dawg" music, which his father Jamie was playing around the time Jesse was born, as well as the classical, jazz, and rock music Jesse heard on the radio. And then there was the old-time music in his family: great-uncle Claude Wells was an excellent fiddler, Jesse's mom plays guitar, and two uncles played fiddle and banjo. Jesse started playing mandolin in childhood, and in elementary school he went all the way to the State Fair in a 4-H music competition, and won. He continued to play mandolin and guitar, in a variety of genres.

But it's Jesse's dad Jamie who was his initial old-time influence (and we recorded them both, at George Gibson's house in Knott County, Kentucky). Jamie had played several instruments and styles but had started concentrating on old-time fiddle in the late 1970s and early '80s, when, he said, "playing old-time fiddle in eastern Kentucky was a pretty lonely activity." He learned mostly from records. Then Jesse, just out of high school, began learning banjo by following the old-time tunes his dad was playing on the fiddle. The two played for little shows around Red Bush, their home community of 40 people in Johnson County; but most of all, they played around home.

Jesse majored in jazz guitar at Morehead State University, all the while increasingly attracted to local old-time and traditional bluegrass music. Right after graduation he was hired by the university to run its Kentucky Center for Traditional Music, where he archives recordings by collectors, documents living traditional musicians, and teaches lessons and classes for what has now become a certified four-year degree program in traditional music. Jesse says his parents made sure he learned music, and he wants to do the same for younger generations; young people, he says, "need to understand there was music before bluegrass."

He also has a Sunday radio show of old-time music, and as a result he gets calls from local people suggesting singers and players whose music needs to be documented. In addition, George Gibson has been a friend and collaborator in the field since 2001. Jesse was teaching fiddle and banjo that summer at the first annual weeklong Cowan Creek Music School in Letcher County, and the school made a field trip to George's house.

When Mike asks Jesse why he leans towards old-time music, Jesse says it's a big part of his family history, he likes the people, and he likes the fact that it's music "for yourself and for your family." Says Jesse: "There's a fine simplicity to old-time music."



JACKIE HELTON

(born November 11, 1943)

“I love a fiddle. I love a five, too. I love all of it.” Jackie sometimes calls the banjo the “five” for “five-string” and sometimes uses the old-timey word “banjer” (a term Mike liked; his license plate was BNJR). He’s a person of thoughtful intelligence and colorful regional speech. Jackie’s grandfather played the five and his father the fiddle. Jackie tried the fiddle but “put

it back on the wall.” When, at age 13, he “picked up the old banjer,” he found that “it was easier played; easier to play a tune, you know, pick it out one string at a time.” These days, since our visit, Jackie is playing more on both fiddle and banjo. He’s been traveling with Jesse Wells to various eastern Kentucky venues, giving workshops at Berea College and at Appalshop and winning prizes in both fiddle and banjo in festivals at Ashton and Morehead.

We visited Jackie at home in Wolfe County, in eastern Kentucky, where he came for work in 1989; but he grew up in neighboring Magoffin County, in an older, self-sufficient way of life that he remembers fondly. In those days the only food his family bought was coffee and sugar: “The rest of it we grewed, you know. We had chickens, eggs, hogs, a cow; we had milk, butter—we had it all. Them was the best times.” Jackie remembers the difficulties, too, of that life, such as having no electricity, building a fire in the cookstove even in August and enduring the heat. “It was hard on my parents, but the days was longer, seemed to me like.”

Jackie’s daddy brought in what money the family needed by working in construction—and by making moonshine. Jackie hesitated for a moment before mentioning the moonshine with the camera rolling, but then described his father’s ingenious method. In winter, when the weather was too cold for fermenting mash, he’d go by night to a nearby sawmill with a big sawdust pile. He’d dig down to where the material was composting and producing heat, and let down two 60-gallon drums. Then he’d fill the drums with mash and cover them over, and in four or five days fermentation was complete. He was “the only man in the country who could make [moonshine] in the wintertime,” and nobody, said Jackie, knew how he did it.

Jackie, for his part, made a living by driving a gravel truck and a school bus and working in a factory. He spoke proudly of having helped build the nearby Mountain Parkway in his truck-driving days. Still, his greatest warmth and humor emerge with memories of those earlier times—when, for instance, you could buy a single banjo string at the country store, whereas now you have to buy a whole set to get just one! “Things has changed—I don’t know for the better or the worse. I believe it’s for the worse. I liked the old way, when we’s a-carryin’ the fiddle around in an old flour sack.”

Jackie appears only on the DVD.

ALABAMA



ROBERT MONTGOMERY

(born October 20, 1983)

We visited Robert Montgomery in Moulton, Alabama, where he was living with his parents at the time. He has since married, and he and his wife Sara now live a couple of miles away with their son Jimmy, born in July of 2012.

Robert took guitar lessons in fifth grade and then realized he could figure out how to play the banjo. And he’d always loved the banjo. From a young age, he’d listened with his family to the *Grand Ole Opry*—Grandpa Jones and Brother Oswald were favorites of his—and to records of Uncle Dave Macon, listening so faithfully that by the time he started teaching himself to play, he already knew a lot of banjo music by heart. His aim wasn’t to get every note of the pieces he’d learned, or even to play in the same key or at the same speed; rather, he wanted to “try to play the instrument to *feel*/like they played it.”

When Robert was about five years old, he saw a video clip of Uncle Dave swinging the banjo while playing. “It put you in a trance,” he told us. Then, at about 12, he was amazed to see Leroy Troy doing the same motions. He worked on these tricks on his own.

Robert graduated from Auburn University in 2006 with a major in mass communications, a minor in history, and an interest in radio. With the era

of the radio DJ passing, though, what he does now is play the banjo. He travels with David Davis & the Warrior River Boys, a bluegrass band, playing three-finger style, singing in trios, and playing one or two old-time numbers on each show. In his view, old-time and bluegrass—“real bluegrass”—are all country music or hillbilly music; Bill Monroe’s music, he remarks, is “not that much different from old-time.”

Robert believes that old-time music is having a resurgence these days, though with different influences affecting it now. Things go in cycles, in his view. Record companies made thousands of “hillbilly” records in the 1920s and ’30s; then interest fell off; then, Robert said to Mike, “I’d say you were part of the first big rebirth of it, when it came back in the ’50s and ’60s.” Today, he notes, people aren’t going to go to a square dance as a whole community; television and other changes have “taken that out of our lives.” (When Robert sang and played recently for a class of eighth graders, out of 30 students only two had ever seen a banjo before—“and this is in the South!”) But there will always be people who like old-time music, he believes, provided they have an opportunity to hear it.

TENNESSEE



LEROY TROY

(born May 23, 1966)

Leroy Troy is a musician and entertainer in a direct line from Uncle Dave Macon, the first star, in the 1920s, of Nashville’s *Grand Ole Opry* country music show. Leroy learned Uncle Dave’s banjo style, including his way of “slinging” the banjo—what Leroy calls “cutting a monkeyshine”—from Cordell Kemp, who had learned from the man himself. Leroy

vividly remembers seeing Cordell for the first time, at age 16: it was at a festival in 1983, and Cordell was singing “Can’t You Hear Jerusalem Moan,” with a crowd around him. Other groups were playing, but, says Leroy, “All my focus went to him.... What else was there to see?!” Thereafter he went regularly to

visit him and learn from him, until Cordell died in 2005 at the age of 96.

We visited Leroy in the “museum” behind his house in Goodlettsville, Tennessee, a small building filled with country music memorabilia. Now with a wife and two children, Leroy has continued to live in the same area both sides of his family came from. His maternal great-granddaddy opened the first large grocery store in Nashville, on First Street—“which is basically this road, right here, that runs all the way to Nashville,” said Leroy—and the store had music on Friday nights on a wagon out front. His mother’s side of the family was full of musicians. In Defeated Creek, Cordell’s hometown southwest of Nashville, Pell’s Tire Store was the “main hangout” and Cordell the “centerpiece.” As for Leroy, in his turn: “I cut my teeth,” he said, at the Tuesday night pickings at Hardison’s Grocery Store in Goodlettsville, when he was about 12. Some of the musicians who stopped in had played the Opry in the 1940s and ’50s, including Roy Acuff and Bill Monroe.

Leroy now makes a living playing music, though he didn’t really plan on that, having kept at it simply because he enjoyed it. His first fee for playing was 20 dollars, at a KOA camp in 1980. He went on to play with various bands and was a regular on *Hee Haw*, the television country music and humor show, in the 1980s. These days, he tours both solo and with the Tennessee Mafia Jug Band and appears regularly on the *Marty Stuart Show* on RFD-TV. He and his wife Kendra have two young children, daughter Liza Jane and son Cash.

Why the banjo? Mike asked him. Leroy said he didn’t know why. Everybody has different likes, he noted: “Why does somebody collect rocks?” Leroy says there are still some jams where old-time music is played, and he believes that younger folks are taking up the music, mentioning Robert Montgomery. Says Leroy: “It’s spreading.”

Glossary of Banjo-Playing Terms

Most of the terms defined here, and used in our song notes, refer to techniques the players use. Our notes, however, can give only a general idea of style, as each player has a distinctive way of playing. You'll discover more by listening and watching. The sounds you hear are also affected by how the banjo is tuned; Mike estimated about 50 tunings are used in old-time banjo playing. One common tuning is represented thus: gDGBD, where the small "g" indicates the "fifth string" (see "Five-string banjo" below).

Note that since all the players included here play right-handed, in this glossary "right hand" is used for the one that picks or strums and "left hand" for the one that notes on the fingerboard.

Bluegrass banjo [style]: the particular three-finger up-picking style pioneered by Earl Scruggs in the mid-to late 1940s. Also known as "Scruggs style."

Brush: striking down on some or all of the four long strings of the banjo, more or less simultaneously, to sound a chord.

Clawhammer: the common name for the down-stroking style ultimately descended from West African lute playing. In its simplest form, the right hand strikes downward on the strings, one string at a time, with the nail of the index (usually) or middle finger, and the thumb plucks the fifth and/or other strings.

Drop thumb: in clawhammer, when the thumb of the right hand sometimes leaves the fifth string to pluck other strings.

Five-string banjo: the banjo typically used in American roots music. It has four long strings, which the player frets, plus the short "fifth string" that serves as a drone (that is, a frequently repeated high note).

Hammer-on: a note produced when one of the fingers of the left hand strikes sharply onto a string.

Index lead: the index finger of the right hand plays the notes of the melody.

Overhand: term used by the eastern Kentucky players we recorded for a regional style of down-stroking.

Pull-off: a note produced by a finger of the left hand releasing a fretted note with a plucking motion.

Stroke style: another regional term, used here by the eastern Kentucky players for a particular variation of down-stroking.

Up-picking: picking the strings upward, in guitar fashion, rather than striking the strings downward as in clawhammer. "Two-finger" up-picking uses the thumb and index finger, "three-finger" the thumb and first two fingers.



DISC 1 **Song Notes:**

*North Carolina, Virginia,
and West Virginia*

1. RILEY BAUGUS – *Sally Ann*

(gCGCD, tuned up to the key of D; Round Peak–style clawhammer)

Riley plays Round Peak–style clawhammer, named for the area in Surry County, North Carolina, where it’s prevalent, and he demonstrates it on the video. He characterizes the style as very “clean”: “There’s not a lot of the brush stroke,” he says, and he brushes on only the first and/or second string. He wears a plastic fingerpick backwards on his first finger to play the melody notes.

“Sally Ann” is part of the Round Peak repertoire of Riley’s mentors Tommy Jarrell and Fred Cockerham. Gus Meade (whose book *Country Music Sources* contains a wealth of detailed information for approximately 14,500 recordings from the 1920s and ’30s) traces the tune back to a 1915 report, with many recordings in the 1920s from North Carolina/Virginia musicians.

2. RILEY BAUGUS – *Pretty Polly*

(gDGBD, tuned up two pitches to the key of A; clawhammer)

Descended from the British broadside “The Cruel Ship’s Carpenter/The Gosport Tragedy,” “Pretty Polly” is only one of many variants of this story of betrayal and murder. Some beautiful banjo/vocal versions can be found on 78rpm records by Dock Boggs, John Hammond, and B. F. Shelton. Riley learned his version from Fred Cockerham, Round Peak–area singer and banjo player. For a Kentucky take on the tune, see George Gibson’s CD *Last Possum Up the Tree*.

3. BRIEN FAIN – *Darlin’ Nellie Gray*

(gDGBD, capoed to the key of A; clawhammer)

Brien characterizes clawhammer as sounding “kinda like a horse trottin’.” He notes with his first finger on the first beat, notes or brushes (usually with his first finger, sometimes adding the second) on the third, and hits the fifth string with his thumb on the fourth beat. Occasionally he drops his thumb off the fifth string onto other strings. Unlike almost all clawhammer players, he strikes the string with the skin on the end of his finger, not the nail. Brien is used to using his fingertips in his work: “Whatever I do—mechanic work, machinist’s work, playing music—I have to feel it in my fingertips.”

Ohio composer Benjamin R. Hanby composed the song “Darling Nellie Gray” in 1856, the lyrics inspired by the plight of a runaway slave. The song was popular in Northern abolitionist circles and then passed into folk tradition and spread to the South; now it’s commonly played as an instrumental. Brien’s daddy played it, and his was the only version Brien knew until hearing Kyle Creed, whose recording of it appears on *Clawhammer Banjo Volume One* (County Records).

4. BRIEN FAIN – *Long Lonesome Road*

(fCFCF, key of F; clawhammer with index lead)

Brien learned this song from “old man Posey Foddrell” when Brien was first starting to play. He and his father, on their way to coon hunting, would stop at Posey’s son Turner’s store, located on Highway 8 on the Virginia/North Carolina border, and sit and eat and drink, waiting for dark. Posey, Turner, and Brien’s father would play “straight old-timey music.” For “Long Lonesome Road,” says Brien, Posey would tune his banjo down to this F tuning: “Folks nowadays play it in D and call it ‘Fall on my Knees.’” When Mike commented on the bluesy sound achieved by pulling on the third string, Brien replied: “[Posey] could pull it a lot better than I could. He could really make it moan.”

5. DEBBIE GRIM YATES, with Brian Grim, fiddle – *Nancy Blevins*

(gCGCD, capoed two frets to the key of D; clawhammer with index lead)

The tune is one of the many Debbie and Brian have long played together for fun and for dancing. Brian’s teacher Albert Hash, born in 1917, said his grandfather recalled dancing to this tune soon after the Civil War; his version is on Rounder Records 0058 *Old Originals, Volume 2* (1978).

6. DEBBIE GRIM YATES – *Billy Wilson*

(gDGBD, capoed to the key of A; clawhammer)

In this solo piece, you can hear why Debbie describes her style as “melodic clawhammer.”

She learned “Billy Wilson” at the Galax Fiddlers Convention from one of the Round Peak players. It’s a tune now in wide circulation, undoubtedly from Uncle Jimmy Thompson’s 1926 Columbia recording by way of “revivalist” fiddlers such as Joel Shimberg.

7. TINA STEFFEY, with Susan Trianosky, guitar – *Cumberland Gap*

(gCGCD, tuned up to the key of D; clawhammer with index or middle finger lead)

“Cumberland Gap” is an old-time music favorite, played by Southern string bands across the region.

8. MARSHA BOWMAN TODD, with Richard Bowman, fiddle

– *Hop Light Ladies*

(gDGBD, key of G; a variation on three-finger bluegrass style)

Marsha often brings to old-time tunes the Scruggs three-finger style, using finger picks, which she learned while playing with a bluegrass band. Unlike in bluegrass, she “[tries] to match what the fiddle is doing.” Here she also uses a two-beat pattern in which the index finger picks upward on beat one and the thumb strikes down on beat two. Along with her particular way of hearing the fiddle sounds, this adaptation makes for a very distinctive style.

Marsha learns her father’s tunes by following his fiddle playing; Richard in turn learned “Hop Light Ladies” from banjo player Cap Ayers at Mabry Mill, Virginia, along the Blue Ridge—he, Richard says, was “good to help all the young ones coming along.” The tune is best known as “Miss McLeod’s Reel”; it was published in a “Mammoth Collection” of fiddle tunes in 1883 in Boston and springs from British tradition.

9. MARSHA BOWMAN TODD, with Richard Bowman, fiddle

– *Sandy River Bells*

(gDGBD, key of G; style as described for track 8)

Richard notes that “everybody at Mabry Mill” played this tune (its title is often spelled “Sandy River Belles”). Like the previous tune, this one is found in the 1883 “Mammoth Collection,” where it is called “New Policeman’s Reel.”

**10. MARSHA BOWMAN TODD, with Richard Bowman,
fiddle – *Richmond***

(gCGCD, tuned up two pitches to the key of D; clawhammer with index-finger lead and no drop thumb, the style Marsha began playing in childhood)

Richard learned “Richmond” from Cabell Hilton, who had spent his working life in West Virginia coal mines and then moved back home to Patrick Springs, Virginia, for retirement. Richard, born in 1953, was 22 or 23 when he learned from Cabell, who was then 75 or 80. Also known as “Richmond Polka” and “Green Mountain Polka,” this tune was recorded by several area bands, including the celebrated Charlie Poole and his North Carolina Ramblers.

**11. MARSHA BOWMAN TODD, with Richard Bowman, fiddle –
*Soldier’s Joy***

(gCGCD, tuned up to the key of D; clawhammer with index lead, no drop thumb)

“Soldier’s Joy,” one of the most-played American old-time fiddle tunes, has its origins in the 1680s Irish air “Logan Waters,” according to Stephen Wade in his 2012 book *The Beautiful Music All Around Us*.

12. JERRY ADAMS – *Sandy River*

(gCGCE, key of C; combined down- and up-picking)

Jerry evolved a personal style that combines down- and up-picking. Here’s how Bob Carlin describes a typical four beats: “Beat 1 is up-picked with the index finger; beat 2 is silent or a hammered-on/pulled-off note; beat 3 is down-brushed with the index; and beat 4 is played with the thumb on the fifth string.” On up-picked notes, Jerry’s finger strikes the string first with the flesh and then the nail, giving a very particular tone. He may also brush back and forth with his index finger.

“Sandy River” is a fiddle tune Jerry learned from Gordon Freeman, a Madison County native. Jerry observed that Gordon “never played the A & B parts the same; I might, too—I don’t count.”

**13. JERRY ADAMS, with Sam Adams, guitar and vocal; Sammy
Adams, banjo – *Country Blues***

(gCGCE, key of C; Jerry is playing in his distinctive style as described above, and young Sammy is playing bluegrass banjo)

Sam says this song “sings about real stuff,” and he likes its chord progressions. He learned it from his dad. The song is closely associated with Dock Boggs,

of southwest Virginia, who learned it around 1914 as “Hustling Gamblers”; he added words and entitled it “Country Blues” for his 1927 recording.

14. PETER GOTT – *Rabbit Song*

(gCGCD, tuned down one step to the key of B; two-finger up-picking, with index lead and with down-stroke brushes using index and middle fingers)

Peter Gott learned many tunes, including this one, from George Landers, who lived down the road from the Gotts and was already elderly when they became his neighbor in the 1960s. Peter plays in George’s unusual style here, which Bob Carlin parses thus: “In the two-beat rhythm, beat 1 is an up-picked note with the index finger, and beat 2 a brush down across the strings with the index and middle finger; or beat 1 an up-picked note and beat 2 a down-stroked note with the thumb.” Peter taps on the head of his banjo as he moves his right hand, a percussive device often found in traditional clawhammer playing.

15. PETER GOTT – *Whistle Blow, Version 1*

(f#DF#AD, key of D; two-finger up-picking with index lead)

16. PETER GOTT – *Whistle Blow, Version 2*

(f#DF#AD, key of D; clawhammer)

This is a member of the widely known “Reuben”/“Train 45” tune family; however, “Folks around here call this ‘Whistle Blow,’” said Peter. His up-picking version comes mostly from his neighbors Jack Shelton and George Landers, while the clawhammer comes from Gaither Carlton of western North Carolina.

17. PETER GOTT – *Cumberland Gap, Version 1*

(possibly f#BEAD, key of E; up-picking)

Cumberland Gap is an old-time music favorite.

18. PETER GOTT – *Cumberland Gap, Version 2*

(gDGBD, tuned down one pitch to the key of F#; two-finger up-picking)

Version 2 comes from Peter’s neighbor George Landers, whose playing of it can be heard on *High Atmosphere* (Rounder Records).

19. PETER GOTT – *Liza Jane*

(gDGBD, key of G; up-picking)

Peter remarked: “Some of the younger folks around here call it ‘Lonesome John.’ It’s about the same tune as ‘Clinch Mountain Backstep.’”

20. FRANK GEORGE – *Sugar Hill*

(gDGBD, key of G; an idiosyncratic clawhammer: Frank’s index and sometimes middle finger move both down and up to catch melody notes)

Frank learned this odd version of “Sugar Hill” from “old man Gilbert Williams”; he was from Pembroke, Virginia, east of Frank’s birthplace of Bluefield, and moved to Bluefield as a young man, for work. When Frank was growing up there, the string players of Bluefield, including Williams and Frank’s grandfather, would get together to play for dancing.

21. FRANK GEORGE – *Liza Jane*

(gCGCD, tuned to the key of B; clawhammer)

Frank moved from one tune to another as they occurred to him in the course of conversation. He says this “Liza Jane” is “the old one,” and that this tuning was much used when he was growing up.

22. DAVID REED – *Preacher and the Bear*

(gDGBD, key of G; picking up and brushing down)

David plays much as his mother Ola Belle played, in a style associated with the part of western North Carolina where she was born: picking up to note, and brushing down.

David learned the song from his mother as well. It’s derived from the popular turn-of-the-20th-century song of the same name. Bob Carlin hears an admixture of “Spanish Fandango,” a tune played in a variety of styles by Southern players, performed by Mike as “American Spanish Fandango” on his *Southern Banjo Sounds* CD.

23. JOE AYERS, with Gabriel Ayers, tambourine – *Old Jawbone*

(gCGBD, key of G; a down-stroking style)

Joe describes his playing here as a stage in his evolving understanding of “banjo style” or “early American [or classic] banjo style,” the African American way of playing that European Americans, using a classical European analytic

approach, codified and published in 19th-century banjo methods. These books are often referred to as “minstrel banjo tutors”; Joe considers this a misnomer that implies they represent the playing of white minstrels, whereas in fact, he says, minstrels built their style on what the books reflect of African American playing. Joe is striking downward on the strings here, but he reserves the term “clawhammer” for a later, Reconstruction-era development of banjo playing.

Joe’s rendition of “Old Jawbone” is based on the version found in Howe’s 1848 *Complete Preceptor for the Banjo*.

24. JOE AYERS – *Jesus Gonna Make Up My Dyin’ Bed*

(gCGBD, key of G; style as described for track 23, with the addition of a slide in his left hand)

Mike particularly asked Joe to play a piece using a slide, because it’s so unusual among banjo players.

This is Joe’s version of Mississippi bluesman Charley Patton’s “Jesus Is a Dying Bed Maker,” recorded in 1929 for Paramount Records.

25. RHIANNON GIDDENS – *Georgia Buck*

(gDGBD, key of G; clawhammer with index lead)

Rhiannon learned this tune by following her mentor Joe Thompson as he played it on the fiddle. She also listened to a recording of Joe’s cousin Odell Thompson on the banjo, and from Bob Carlin learned some licks he had learned from Joe’s brother Nate—“and it’s evolved into its own thing.”

26. RHIANNON GIDDENS – *Cripple Creek*

(gDGBD, key of G; two-finger up-picking)

Rhiannon learned this version of the well-known tune “Cripple Creek” by listening to Etta Baker’s recording *Railroad Bill* (Music Maker Relief Foundation). Etta was a Piedmont North Carolinian of mixed African, European, and Native American heritage, who played both guitar and banjo; she died in 2006 at the age of 93. Mike spent time with Etta and marveled that Rhiannon, who to her regret never got to know Etta, played this so close to Etta’s picking style.





DISC 2 **Song Notes:**

Kentucky, Alabama, and Tennessee

KENTUCKY

1. GEORGE GIBSON – *Wild Bill Jones*

(gDGBD, key of G; two-finger up-picking)

Once we'd set up a chair and microphone on the grass in front of his house, surrounded by greenery and birdsong, George began singing "Wild Bill Jones." He remembers hearing this song not long after he started learning banjo as a boy, played by a member of the musical Amburgey family. George also included it on his June Appal CD *Last Possum Up the Tree*. The locally famous Knott County politician, banjo player, and ballad singer Banjo Bill Cornett (1890–1960)—about whom George has many stories—made a home recording of this piece, which can be heard on the Field Recorders' Collective CD FRC-304.

2. GEORGE GIBSON – *Story of Morgan's March*

(spoken word)

3. GEORGE GIBSON – *Morgan's March*

(gDGBD, key of G; George uses the east-Kentucky term "drop-thumb overhand" for the style he uses here, a particular version of what is widely termed "drop-thumb clawhammer")

Bob Carlin notes that the tune seems to be a member of the "Coal Creek March"/"Spanish Fandango" tune family. "Morgan's March" is also found on George's June Appal CD.

4. GEORGE GIBSON – *Big Stone Gap*

(gDGBD, key of G; *overhand*)

“That song’s from African Americans, I’m quite sure,” commented George. “I think probably other words overtook the melody.” Big Stone Gap is nearby in Virginia; the tune is related to “Police,” played by North Carolina fiddler Tommy Jarrell.

5. JOHN HAYWOOD – *John Henry*

(#DF#AD, key of D; *two-finger up-picking*)

The mighty figure of John Henry and the song celebrating him are widespread in both black and white tradition. John bases his version of the song on the playing of Lee Sexton, of Letcher County, bordering Knott County; Lee in turn said Roscoe Holcomb, of neighboring Perry County, taught it to him. “George [Gibson] plays something real similar,” added John. Holcomb can be heard on *Friends of Old Time Music: The Folk Music Arrival 1961–1965* (Smithsonian Folkways), and Sexton’s version is on June Appal *Whoa Mule Revisited*.

6. MATT KINMAN – *Cold Icy Mountain*

(gDGBD, key of G; *“up-style picking”*)

Matt calls his style “up-style picking,” to differentiate it from the clawhammer he played when starting out on the banjo. He up-picks single notes and brushes down across several strings, uses his thumb on the fifth string, and does pull-offs with his left hand. He worked on learning this style using a saying he learned from east Tennessee banjo player Will Keys (1923–2005): “pull the melody up, drop the rhythm down.”

Matt learned “Cold Icy Mountain” from George Gibson, who told us it’s a Knott County version of a song sung throughout the mountains. According to George, it was “born as a banjo song” during early frontier times, from the experience of early settlers; they would sometimes come west to the area for a season, perhaps to hunt, and weren’t sure they’d come back. Then, in the 1860s, it was “transformed into a Civil War song.”

7. MATT KINMAN – *The Cuckoo*

(gDGBbD; Matt's "up-style picking" as described for track 6)

Matt learned this tune as well from George Gibson but found his own tuning: "I was trying to get to his tuning and came up with this one, and I liked it better; it gives it a more haunting sound." Though Matt plays this as an instrumental, "The Cuckoo" originated from a traditional English song greeting the arrival of summer. An American version was recorded, most notably by eastern Tennessean Clarence Ashley in 1929, as "Coo Coo Bird," and the song became popular during the folk revival of the 1960s.

8. MATT KINMAN – *Morphine*

(gDGBD, key of G; "up-style picking" as described for track 6)

Matt learned "Morphine" from George Gibson and thinks of it as a Civil War song. He particularly relishes the lines "peaches, honey, rye rock and rye/ and I'll love you until the day I die," guessing "that must be everything that he liked in life." "Rye" refers to the whiskey, but, Matt said, "I don't know what a 'rock' is."

Though morphine addiction is associated with the Civil War due to its use then as a medication, George believes the song actually originated earlier, around 1800, when railroads were being built in eastern Kentucky. He's heard it sung only by his Knott County neighbors James Slone and Mel Amburgey, and he included it on his CD *Last Possum Up the Tree*.

9. CLIFTON HICKS – *German War*

(f#DF#AD, tuned down three pitches to the key of B; two-finger up-picking)

Clifton learned "German War" and its history from George Gibson, who recorded it on his CD *Last Possum Up the Tree*. By Clifton's account, the first version was the popular 1830s "Texas Ranger," about a shoot-out between Rangers and Indians, which became the 1870s cowboy song "Southern Texas." Kentucky emigrants who had gone west then brought the song back home, and Kentucky soldiers adapted it to describe their World War I experiences. George learned it from WWI veteran Mel Amburgey.

Musician and documentarian Art Rosenbaum recorded this song as "Texas Rangers" on his 1973 *Kicking Mule* LP and references an eastern Kentucky version collected by John Lomax and published in *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*.

10. BRETT RATLIFF, with Jesse Wells, fiddle – *Lost Hornpipe*

(gCGCD, capoed to the key of D; overhand with index lead)

This duet is an expression of Brett's close musical collaboration with Jesse Wells, begun in 1999. Jesse reports learning "Lost Hornpipe" from the playing of fiddler and folk artist Charley Kinney of Lewis County, in northeastern Kentucky.

11. BRETT RATLIFF – *Fair and Tender Ladies*

(gCGCD, capoed to the key of D; stroke style with index lead)

Brett uses the term "stroke style" for a variant of overhand, used to accompany singing rather than play solo.

Of "Fair and Tender Ladies," he says it's "a pretty common tune," descended from an English ballad. His particular version is inspired by that of Banjo Bill Cornett, the Knott County player active in the 1950s and '60s, whose recording of it is on Field Recorders' Collective CD FRC-304.

12. JESSE WELLS – *Whitesburg*

(gDGBD, tuned down two pitches to the key of F; overhand with index and middle-finger lead)

This is one of the first tunes Jesse learned from his dad's fiddle-playing, when he was just out of high school. His dad learned it from Morgan County fiddler Santford Kelly, who called the tune "Whitesburg of Old Kentucky."

13. JESSE WELLS – *Going Across the Sea*

("Little Birdie tuning," eCGCD, tuned down a half step to the key of B; overhand as on track 12)

Jesse learned "Going Across the Sea" from Travis Wells (no relation), a banjo player from Estil County in east-central Kentucky. Another influence on this version was Melvin Goins, whom Jesse used to hear on the radio playing three-finger bluegrass-style banjo with the Goins Brothers band. The tune is common to south-central Kentucky and middle Tennessee, and two Kentucky players recorded it in the 1920s: Henry L. Bandy, of Allen County, and Dick Burnett, of Wayne County.

ALABAMA AND TENNESSEE

14. ROBERT MONTGOMERY – *Going Across the Sea*

(gCGBD, tuned up to the key of C#; clawhammer)

Robert plays clawhammer, usually playing melody with his second finger but sometimes using his third or first: “I just hit with whatever I can grab it with, mostly.” He brushes down with one or more fingers, and sometimes rakes back up across the strings using his thumb.

This is one of the first songs Robert learned, “in my mind,” as he puts it, at age eight or nine. He listened over and over to a cassette tape of Uncle Dave Macon’s 1925 recording. Then, when he learned to play, he tried to “make it sound like that.”

15. ROBERT MONTGOMERY – *Old Rattler*

(gCGBD, tuned up to the key of C#; clawhammer)

“Here Rattler Here” goes back at least to the 1920s, but Robert’s version comes directly from *Grand Ole Opry* star Grandpa Jones, who “made that one his own,” as Robert put it, adding, “That’s Grandpa’s tune.” Grandpa’s first recording dates to September of 1947, for King Records.

Mike asked Robert the meaning of one term in the lyrics, “muley cow”: it’s a cow without horns.

16. LEROY TROY – *Bully of the Town*

(gCGBD, key of C; clawhammer)

Leroy plays clawhammer, noting the melody with his index finger on the second, third, and fourth strings and with his middle finger on the first string. Sometimes he comes back up with his thumbnail to catch notes on the first string. He also “rakes” back and forth across the strings, going down with his fingers and up with his thumb.

“The Bully Song” is a late-19th-century composition launched into popular culture by vaudeville performer May Irwin’s 1907 Victor recording. For Leroy, 100 years later, “Bully of the Town” is “just an old fiddle tune. My mama said my granddaddy used to, when he shaved in the morning... he’d sing ‘Bully of the Town.’” Leroy probably learned the song at Hardison’s Grocery Store in Goodlettsville, Tennessee, where “[I] cut my teeth” at the Tuesday night picking sessions.

17. LEROY TROY – *Cotton-Eyed Joe*

(gCGBD, key of C; clawhammer)

This song, currently widespread with many verses and variations, pre-dates the Civil War, with reports of its being sung by slaves. Some of Leroy's verses come from his mentor, Cordell Kemp. Mike observed that Leroy plays more than the customary two parts to this tune; Leroy explained that he has consolidated western swing and "eastern" versions.





DVD SONG NOTES

The following are notes on the partial tunes and songs heard in each chapter of the DVD, sometimes in the background of a scene.

Chapter 1: Opening—Mount Airy Fiddler’s Convention, Mount Airy, North Carolina

GRAYSON COUNTY JAM – Sourwood Mountain

(key of A)

Members and friends of the Grayson Highlands Band play this widely known Southern tune/song.

MIKE SEEGER – (Give the) Fiddler a Dram

(gDGBD, key of G; clawhammer with index lead)

This classic old-time song is identified especially with the fiddler Tommy Jarrell, of the Round Peak area in North Carolina. Tommy shared his music and his life with younger musicians—including Mike—for decades, until his death in 1984 at the age of 83.

BRIEN FAIN – Sweet Sunny South

(gDGBD, key of G; clawhammer with index lead)

Episodes in this song’s life are like those of many folk songs: it appeared as sheet music in the 1850s; then in 1918 Cecil Sharp recorded the words from the singing of a Mrs. Cannady in Franklin County, Virginia (next to Brien’s home county); and in the 1920s it was recorded by many Virginia and North Carolina bands. In 2009, it fit Brien perfectly.

TRISH KILBY FORE

Pike County Breakdown

(Rupert Jones/BMG Platinum Songs o/b/o Bill Monroe Music, Inc., BMI-Peer International Corp., BMI)

(gDGBD, key of G; clawhammer)

“Father of Bluegrass” Bill Monroe said he “made” this tune from the old folk song “Sweet Betsy from Pike” while Scruggs was a member of his band, but some contend that Earl himself had some hand in the piece.

Mississippi Sawyer

(gCGCD, tuned up two pitches to the key of D; clawhammer with drop thumb)

This widely known tune was first mentioned in print in 1839, when it appeared in a Virginia collection of fiddle tunes transcribed for piano.

High on a Mountain

(Ola Belle Reed/Midstream Music Publishers, BMI)

(gDGBD, key of G; clawhammer with drop thumb)

Recorded by Ola Belle Reed on *Rising Sun Melodies* (Smithsonian Folkways).

Chapter 2: Brien Fain

Daddy Frank

(gCGCD, capoed up to the key of D; clawhammer with index lead)

Brien says this was “one of my daddy’s old tunes.” More commonly called “Long Tongue Woman,” the song was first mentioned in an 1879 publication and was recorded in the 1920s by, among others, Georgian Riley Puckett and Henry Whitter of Grayson County, Virginia.

My Home’s Across the Blue Ridge Mountains

(Thomas Ashley/Southern Music Publishing Co., Inc, ASCAP)

(gDGBD, tuned one-half step low and capoed up to the key of A; clawhammer with index lead)

Brien loves this song, because when he’s away from home, “I’m bad to get real homesick, and it’s because I miss the mountains, the Blue Ridge Mountains”; singing this song makes him feel “a right smart better.” Reported in the 1909 *Journal of American Folklore*, the song was recorded under various titles starting in 1925, the most famous version being the 1937 recording by the Carter Family of southwest Virginia.

Chapter 3: Peter Gott

Rabbit Song - see page 49

Cumberland Gap, Version 2 - see page 50

Chapter 4: Jerry Adams and the Adams Family

Sandy River – see page 48

Country Blues – see page 49

(Richard Dale Boggs/Stormking Music, Inc., BMI, administered by Figs. D Music, BMI c/o Concord Music Publishing)

Chapter 5: Tina Steffey

Cumberland Gap – see page 47

Chapter 6: Rhoda Kemp with Tina Steffey, guitar, and Susan Trianofsky, string bass

Medley: How Mountain Girls Can Love/Banjo Pickin' Girl

(Carter Stanley/BMG Rights Management (US) LLC o/b/o Trio Music, BMI-Fort Knox Music, BMI)

(gDGBD, tuned up two pitches to the key of A; clawhammer)

Rhoda uses her first finger when she's playing low on the neck but her second when she plays up higher, because she likes the sound better.

Conversation among these three about their pride in being mountain women, and women players, led naturally to this choice of a song medley. "Banjo Pickin' Girl," with some centuries-old lyrics and a melody related to other "banjo songs," was recorded in 1938 by Lily Mae Ledford and the Coon Creek Girls, launching its popularity in the South. "How Mountain Girls Can Love" was written by Carter Stanley and recorded by the Stanley Brothers in 1958.

Chapter 7: Joe Ayers

Old Jawbone – see page 51

Johnny Boker

(gCGBD, key of G; see “Old Jawbone,” page 51, for a description of the style)

Joe describes this piece as a composite from several mid-19th-century banjo methods, notably the *Briggs Banjo Instructor* of 1855.

Jesus Gonna Make Up My Dyin’ Bed – see page 51

Chapter 8: Leroy Troy

New River Train

(gDGBD, key of G; clawhammer)

This song, popular today among old-time players, was sung by the Ward family of Galax, Virginia, in the 1890s and was first recorded in December 1923 by Henry Whitter of Grayson County, Virginia. Leroy learned it from Walter Bailes of the Bailes Brothers, who gave him his first professional job with a band, when he was in his mid-teens.

Bully of the Town – see page 57

Chapter 9: Robert Montgomery

Lonesome Road Blues

(gDGBD, key of G; clawhammer)

Robert chose this much-played old-time tune because it’s suitable for doing banjo “tricks”: it’s in G tuning, and it stays on the C chord for a long time.

Pig Ankle Rag

(Sam McGee/Estate of Sam and Kirk McGee)

(gCGBD; three-finger up-picking with picks, with the lead switching between thumb and index finger)

Country guitar-picker Sam McGee is Robert’s source for this tune. As it happens, McGee recorded it for Mike in 1969-1970, the result issued by Arhoolie Records on *Grand Dad of the Country Guitar Pickers*.

Chapter 10: Frank George

Liza Poor Gal

(gDGBD, key of G; clawhammer)

Frank learned this tune from his grandfather. It was a favorite of the influential eastern Tennessee fiddler Uncle Am Stuart, who recorded it in 1924.

Sourwood Mountain

(gDGBD, tuned down two and a half steps; clawhammer)

This is the first tune Frank learned, from either his grandfather or father, on a banjo made for him by his father.

Chapter 11: Riley Baugus

Pretty Polly – see page 45

Sally Ann – see page 45

Cumberland Gap

(fDGBD, tuned up two pitches to the key of G; clawhammer)

There are myriad recordings of this piece. Riley gives his sources as the “Round Peak Three” (Kyle Creed, Tommy Jarrell, and Fred Cockerham) and Frank Proffit of Watauga County in western North Carolina.

Roustabout

(gCGBD, key of G; clawhammer)

Riley cites Fred Cockerham as his source for this song. It comes from black tradition, as exemplified by Dink Roberts’s version on *Black Banjo Songsters of North Carolina and Virginia* (Smithsonian Folkways). Mike recorded this *song for his Southern Banjo Sounds*; his playing draws on in-depth study of a rendition by Josh Thomas, a black man from near Roanoke, Virginia, recorded by Cliff Endres in 1970.

Chapter 12: Justin Robinson

Black Annie

(gDGBD, tuned up two pitches to the key of A; clawhammer with index lead)

Justin learned this eastern North Carolina Piedmont version of “Black Annie” from his African American mentor Joe Thompson, who said it was a true story. Dink Roberts (see previous note) played it as well. Hobart Smith, a white musician from southwest Virginia, played a quite different version, as an instrumental; his rendition can be heard on *In Sacred Trust* (Smithsonian Folkways).

Liza Jane

(gCGCD, tuned up two pitches to the key of D; two-finger up-picking with index lead)

Justin learned this tune from the playing of fiddler Joseph Aiken, recorded in the 1960s by fiddler Alan Jabbour in northern Durham County, North Carolina. Justin said that Aiken, who was white, “sounded like Joe”—his mentor Joe Thompson.

Old Rattler

(Louis “Grandpa” Jones/BMG Rights Management (US) LLC o/b/o Trio Music, BMI-Fort Knox Music, BMI)

(gDGBD, tuned up to the key of A and chorded in the key of D; clawhammer with index lead)

Justin’s paternal grandmother loved Grandpa Jones, which inspired Justin to learn one of Grandpa’s theme songs, “Old Rattler.” Justin’s version combines Jones’s with that of Amy Michel of the Roan Mountain Hilltoppers, “possibly my favorite banjo player ever.”

Chapter 13: Marsha Bowman Todd and Richard Bowman

Sandy River Bells – see page 47

Soldier’s Joy – see page 48

Chapter 14: Debbie Grim Yates

Cumberland Gap, with Brian Grim, fiddle

(double C tuning, capoed to the key of D; clawhammer) – see page 47

Kitchen Girl

(gDGBD, capoed to the key of A; “melodic” clawhammer, as Debbie calls it, with index lead)

Fiddler Henry Reed of southwest Virginia is the sole known source for “Kitchen Girl,” as recorded by Alan Jabbour in 1966. Jabbour, on fiddle, then recorded the tune in 1967 with the Hollow Rock String Band on *Traditional Dance Tunes* (Kanawha), and from there it entered the repertoire of many old-time musicians.

Nancy Blevins – see page 46

Chapter 15: Rhiannon Giddens

Georgia Buck – see page 51

I’m Gonna Write Me a Letter

(Ola Belle Reed/Happey Valley Music, BMI)

(gCGCD, noted to sound in the key of C minor; clawhammer with index lead)

Rhiannon is a fan of the music of Ola Belle Reed, who grew up in the North Carolina Blue Ridge and whose son David plays on disc 1, track 22.

Chapter 16: George Gibson

Morgan’s March – see page 53

Dad’s Tune

(gCGCD, key of C; overhand with index lead)

George’s father, from whom he learned this tune, was born in 1900 and learned to play around 1905 to 1910.

Shortenin' Bread

(f#DF#AD, key of D; two-finger up-picking with the lead switching between finger and thumb)

George says this was a common tune in eastern Kentucky; he learned it from Monroe Bentley. He cites a statement from the 1925 doctoral dissertation of Dr. Josiah Combs, early folklorist and Knott County native, listing “Shortenin’ Bread” as one of the “banjo airs” that African Americans brought into the mountain region prior to the Civil War. George has researched and written extensively on the contributions of African Americans to traditional old-time music, which he feels have been underestimated, in part because of “the myth that minstrels brought the banjo to the mountains.”

Chapter 17: John Haywood

Rudell's Rocky Top

(gDAAD; up-picking with some brushing down, and a constant plucking with the left hand)

John chuckled as he introduced this retrofitted version of the popular country and bluegrass song from the 1960s, learned from the playing of old-time Knott County banjo player Rudell Thomas. This is “Rudell’s tuning” as well, which John says Thomas used for everything he played.

Station House Blues

(gDGBD; two-finger picking, in waltz time; in background, while John describes his paintings)

John learned this tune from the playing of Virgil Anderson, whose “bluesy” sound attracted him. Anderson was from Wayne County, Kentucky, on the Tennessee line.

Fox Chase

(gDGBD, key of G; up-picking)

An enactment of the sounds of the chase, this piece has as many versions as players. We’ve been told that in an actual rural Southern fox chase, the object isn’t to kill the fox—who routinely gets away—but to sit around with friends in the woods, enjoying liquid refreshment and listening to the dogs. John developed his own expanded story line (not heard here) to use when playing “Fox Chase” for kids.

Chapter 18: Clifton Hicks

Little Birdie

(gCGCC, tuned down three pitches to the key of A; up-picked index note, down brush, thumb)

In Iraq, the gunner on Clifton's tank was from Knott County, where Cliff's mentor George Gibson grew up and where we recorded this piece. The gunner danced to some of Clifton's tunes, and when Mike asked him to play one, Clifton chose "Little Birdie." Clifton learned this tuning from George and the song from Matt Kinman. Early Kentucky singer/banjoists who recorded "Little Birdie" include John Hammond (1925 and 1927, Gennett Records), Pete Steele, and Roscoe Holcomb.

German War – see page 55

Chapter 19: Brett Ratliff

Lost Hornpipe – see page 56

Indian Village

(gCGCD, key of C)

Here Brett strokes up with his index finger, brushes down, uses pull-offs, and strikes the drone string with his thumb. When playing the melody, he uses left-hand "plucking" (pulling-off) for the lead, sometimes emphasizing the melody note by up-picking the string with his index finger.

Brett says he "adapted" this song from Buell Kazee, of Magoffin County, Kentucky, which is about an hour from the Knott County location where we recorded Brett. Kazee recorded the song for Brunswick in 1929 as "The Cowboy Trail."

Fair and Tender Ladies – see page 56

Chapter 20: Jesse Wells

Whitesburg – see page 56

Old Aunt Jenny with Her Nightcap On, with Jamie Wells, fiddle *(gDGBD, key of G; overhand)*

Jesse and his father Jamie learned this from a recording of fiddler Estill Bingham (1899–1990) of Bell County, in southeast Kentucky.

Cuttin’ at the Point, with Jamie Wells, fiddle *(gCGCD, capoed up two frets to the key of D; overhand)*

Jesse learned this tune from his father and says, “It’s one of our favorite square dance tunes.” Jamie picked it up from a 1930s recording of fiddler Charlie Wilson and group (variously called the Hayloft Boys and the Hillbillies), who played for dances in central eastern Kentucky for several decades.

Chapter 21: Jackie Helton

Cripple Creek, with Jesse Wells, fiddle *(G tuning capoed up two frets to the key of A. Jackie refers to his style as “drop thumb”; it could be described as clawhammer with index lead.)*

Jackie played several tunes with Jesse on the fiddle, then proposed this well-known one: “Everybody loves ‘Cripple Creek,’” he said. Mike commented afterwards, “I love the way you catch that high part.” Jackie replied, “I’ve just got my own way, you know—the way I’ve done it all my life; I don’t know if it’s right or wrong, that’s just the way I do it.”

Darlin’ Corey *(f#DF#AD, tuned up one fret to the key of D#; clawhammer)*

As he says on video, this is the first tune Jackie learned on the banjo. It’s a widely known song, with many variations in title, and was recorded by a number of early Kentucky banjo players/singers, including Buell Kazee (1927) and B. F. Shelton (1927).

Chapter 22: Matt Kinman

Cold Icy Mountain – see page 54

Fall on My Knees, with Bill Birchfield, fiddle

(gCGCD, capoed up two frets to the key of D. The playing style is described on page 54, track 6.)

The tune is a Round Peak–area standard.

Chapter 23: Closing credits

Foggy Mountain Top, with Mike Seeger, Alexia Smith, Rhoda Kemp, and others.

(A.P. Carter/Peer International Corp., BMI)

(Mike appears to be tuned gCGBD, tuned up two frets to the key of D, and he's playing three-finger back-up.)

This song was recorded by the Carter Family in 1929 and by the Monroe Brothers in 1936, two groups whose music Mike returned to perennially. It was a favorite of his and a song he and I loved singing together, occasionally onstage but mostly at home in the evening for our own pleasure.

What We Heard from the Players

Mike approached his interviews with a list of questions—and an open mind. Some common themes emerged, with many variations, relating to old-time banjo playing and to old-time music more generally.

How people learn this music

Almost all the players we interviewed said they learned not by being taught but by listening—and watching, where possible: the old, perennial way of learning music. Without written music to read and interpret—a recent development, in the larger scheme of human time—there’s no separation between *what* you play and *how* you play it: you hear a sound, are drawn to it, and want to do something that sounds like that. George Gibson calls this way of learning *emulation* as opposed to *imitation*, which in his view is the way most people learn music today: trying to duplicate what a teacher does.

Learning by emulation means you end by developing your own way of playing, because you can’t help sounding like yourself; your own feelings and sensibility and physical nature are bound to emerge—another point made by many players. Individuality of expression seems to be a commonly held value in this musical culture. “Then I developed my own style” is something we often heard, with many variations.

Riley Baugus notes there are now structured programs for teaching old-time music at school or after school, which “puts it in a box,” but he has faith that kids and young people will eventually find freedom and self-expression in this music. The structure won’t hold them back, he feels, and the programs are a good thing, getting more musicians “out there.” And in fact a number of the younger musicians here teach others, including Brett Ratliff, Jesse Wells, and Debbie Grim Yates.

Connection with old ways and with place

For some players, old-time music is intimately connected with an older way of life that they regard as saner and slower: Jackie Helton, who grew up on a subsistence farm; Brien Fain, of a younger generation but raised in older ways; Debbie Grim Yates and her brother Brian Grim, who keep old traditions alive. Riley Baugus was from childhood interested in “old stuff” and “old people,” and for him, life organized around old-time music is “like doing a research project, but living it.”

For the young Kentucky players recorded here, playing old-time music is inseparable from both the choice of a simpler life and a dedication to their home region. And Justin Robinson called himself a “nativist,” interested in not only the music of his particular locality but its geology, flora, and fauna. Many players, however, while acknowledging the connection with older times, find their satisfaction primarily in the music itself. As Jerry Adams puts it, these days old-time music “is just where you find it.” An example is the weekly jam he hosted for years in his Newport, Tennessee, pharmacy; a world apart from the mountain setting where he grew up and learned to play.

Music and dance

George Gibson, player and historian, gives his deeply informed view on the banjo in Kentucky in earlier times: “The banjo was embedded in the culture as part of the dance.” And old-time “square dancing,” most often in people’s homes and usually danced in a circle, was an important part of social life in much of the rural South. Many players observed that old-style dances are no longer a community staple. Here and there, however, such dances have survived or been revived: Peter Gott helped to bring traditional dance back to life in the mountain community he joined, and a number of musicians recorded here currently play in dance bands, including Tina Steffey, Marsha Bowman, and Debbie Grim Yates.

Banjo tunes were also an accompaniment to the old-time solo dancing commonly called flatfooting, used in both home and social settings. Thus Clifton Hicks’s banjo playing in Iraq prompted a fellow soldier from Kentucky to get up and dance, and in the North Carolina mountains Lee Wallin responded the same way to Peter Gott’s banjo tune.

The African American connection

The banjo’s predecessors were brought to this country by enslaved Africans, and its exact origins are a subject of investigation these days. More hidden yet by the passage of time is the music Africans brought with them. The questions that interest researcher/player Joe Ayers are what the earliest African American string music sounded like and how those sounds evolved, mingling with other traditions, into later American banjo music. In the absence of recordings, he attempts to triangulate those early sounds from such vantage points as minstrel music, 19th-century printed banjo music, present-day African griot music, Caribbean rhythms, and Blind Lemon Jefferson’s guitar style.

In living memory, both George Gibson of Kentucky and Frank George of West Virginia, elders among our players and both white, recall connections with black players—and dancers—in their respective regions. Both noted that African-Americans played for dances for both blacks and whites in earlier times; and an exemplar of such players, fiddler Joe Thompson, became the mentor of Rhiannon Giddens and Justin Robinson, young people identifying as African-American who have rediscovered and claimed old-time music traditions as their own.

Decades younger than George and Frank, Brien Fain spoke of the companionable sharing of work, fun, and music among neighbors black and white in the mountain community where he grew up, in the 1970s and 80s.

Cultural changes: World War II and TV, radio, and records

Rhiannon Giddens observed, and George Gibson elaborated the point, that World War II was a “big demarcation” for the rural South, breaking up communities as many members left to join the war effort, either in the military or in industry. After the war, as several players noted, television began to shape a new, non-local culture, displacing long-standing traditions.

Mike often spoke of the similarly transformative effect of radio and records, beginning in the 1920s. In his earlier documentary forays, in the 1950s and ’60s, he sought to record those who had learned their music mostly apart from those influences. Perhaps ironically, both documentary and commercial recordings from the 1920s and ’30s, as well as archived radio broadcasts of the period, became a resource for musicians of Mike’s and later generations searching for earlier, more traditional sounds. The traditions, and the documenting of them, have been ongoing.

Today, among some of these players at least, it’s television that is perceived as the threat to the memory of older sounds and ways of keeping memory alive.

Bluegrass

Developed from old-time string band music, bluegrass was created for stage performance by Bill Monroe and others around the time of World War II. Earl Scruggs’ brilliant three-finger banjo technique, which he developed from earlier picking styles, became the bluegrass standard and inspired imitators in the South and around the world. Monroe, Scruggs, and other early bluegrass players grew up immersed in old-time music; but the new and exciting music they now played, with its characteristic instrumentation and playing and vocal styles, tended to eclipse the older sounds, characterized by far greater variety.

Some of the players here, George Gibson and Frank George for instance, regret the displacement of older music by bluegrass; some, like Jesse Wells, are specifically focused on keeping alive the awareness that “there was music before bluegrass.” Other players, however, experience primarily the continuity of early-style bluegrass with older styles, embracing a whole continuum (though not the more recent bluegrass sounds): “It’s all old-time mountain music.” And a number of players earn at least a partial living playing with a bluegrass band but also play a clawhammer piece as part of the show and/or keep the old styles alive at home. In an interesting twist of cultural vocabulary, Jackie Helton said of older fiddle and banjo styles in general, including his own old-time clawhammer playing, “As long as it’s bluegrass, I love it.”

Banjo-picking women

Women are perhaps under-represented here, but we do get an idea of the range of styles women are playing and of the different roles music has in their lives. Mike would probably have recorded a couple more women for this project had he lived. In our time together, Mike advocated for the inclusion of women banjo players at festivals, teaching camps, and other events where men are still predominant.

Fun, festivals, friends

A number of these players make at least part of their living in music or have done so in the past; but for all, the primary motivation for playing is the intrinsic satisfaction of it. Old-time music, many said, is good self-entertainment, and one player at least (Joe Ayers) regards it as positively therapeutic. It also brings people together, it’s a way to make friends, and it’s just plain fun. For many, the year is marked by fiddlers conventions and festivals such as the Mount Airy convention in North Carolina (where we recorded) and the Appalachian String Band Festival in Clifftop, West Virginia. These are occasions to visit and play with friends from afar, and they are joyous social and musical events.

Southern mountain old-time music is now played across the country and abroad; in addition, there are related old-time traditions in other regions of this country, immigrant “old-time” traditions, and versions and mixes of these and other musics constantly evolving. My own experience is that there’s a place for everybody in the world of old-time music, whether as listener, beginning player or singer, or old hand; and that the old-time music community is a warm and good-hearted one, ready to welcome the stranger into its midst.

Join the Old-Time Music Party: Resources

Mike Seeger's Web site: mikeseeger.info

The Old Time Herald: a quarterly magazine (oldtimeherald.org, PO Box 61679, Durham, NC, 27715-1679, phone 919-286-2041). The annual festival issue lists events all across the country.

Learning to play: Homespun Tapes (homespun.com) sells instructional DVDs and downloads. Music camps are a wonderful experience of learning and community; many are listed on the "Here and There" page of the *Old Time Herald's* Web site.

Festivals and fiddle contests (banjo and other instruments are included): here you can set up your lawn chair in the stage audience, wander the grounds to hear friends jamming together, or camp out for nearly-24-hour immersion.

Group dancing: contradancelinks.com lists a few old-fashioned Southern-style square dances, with live old-time music, and many contra dances (the New England form of traditional folk dance, currently popular across the country), with a variety of live traditional or newer musics. All dances are taught, newcomers are welcome, and you can go with or without a partner.

Solo old-time Southern flatfoot dancing: Mike Seeger's 1984 documentary *Talking Feet* streams at folkstreams.net and is for sale on DVD on mikeseeger.info and folkways.si.edu.

Learning to dance: Group and solo dancing and dance calling are often taught at music camps.

Produced by Mike Seeger (1933–2009) and Alexia Smith

CD Credits

Recorded by Mike Seeger January 10–21, May 13, and June 3–14, 2009

Initial mix by Bob Carlin

Final mix and mastering by Charlie Pilzer at AirShow Mastering, and Bob Carlin

DVD Credits

DVD directed, filmed, and edited by Yasha Aginsky, assisted by Slava Basovich

Produced by Yasha Aginsky and Mike Seeger, assisted by Alexia Smith

Sound recorded by Mike Seeger and Slava Basovich

Sound mixed by Daniel Olmsted

Image colorized by Gary Coates

DVD Authoring by Henniger Media Services

Notes by Alexia Smith

Song notes by Bob Carlin and Alexia Smith

Cover artwork by Jennifer Cox

Photos by Slava Basovich

Map by John Gilkes

Smithsonian Folkways executive producers: Huib Schippers and John Smith

Production Manager: Mary Monseur

Production assistant: Chloe Joyner and Kate Harrington

Editorial assistance by Carla Borden

Art direction, design, and layout by Jackson Foster, The I.D. Entity®

Smithsonian Folkways is: Madison Bunch, royalty assistant; Cecille Chen, director of business affairs and royalties; Logan Clark, executive assistant; Toby Dodds, director of web and IT; Claudia Foronda, sales, customer relations, and inventory manager; Beshou Gedamu, marketing specialist; Will Griffin, licensing manager; Meredith Holmgren, program manager for education and cultural sustainability; Fred Knittel, marketing specialist; Helen Lindsay, customer service; Mary Monseur, production manager; Jeff Place, curator and senior archivist; Huib Schippers, curator and director; Sayem Sharif, director of financial operations; Ronnie Simpkins, audio specialist; John Smith, associate director; Sandy Wang, web designer and developer; Jonathan Williger, marketing manager; Brian Zimmerman, fulfillment.

Special thanks to Paul Brown, Sonya Cramer, Bob Gates, Gail Gillespie, Phil Jamison, Rich Kirby, Barbara Lachman, Jim Lloyd, Jon Lohman, Gerry Milnes, Mike Rivers, Lucy Shelton, David Smith, Sandra Stuart, and David Winston, and to all others who gave help along the way.

Special thanks also to Bob Carlin for assistance of myriad kinds after Mike's passing.

Sponsor: Rockbridge Friends of Mountain Music and Dance

Video sponsors: the Filmmakers Collaborative, Inc., and the Arhoolie Foundation



Funders: This project has been funded in part by grants from Virginia Humanities, the Kentucky Arts Council, Mike Seeger, and Yasha Aginsky.



Additional funding for the DVD by: Art Works, the National Endowment for the Arts' principal grant program.

Additional supporters:

The Hellman Family Fund

Alexia Smith

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

David Smith & Joan Edwards

Lucy Shelton

Bill & Bobby Malone

The complete original sound files for this project are archived at the Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings is the nonprofit record label of the Smithsonian Institution, the national museum of the United States. Our mission is to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In this way, we continue the legacy of Moses Asch, who founded Folkways Records in 1948. The Smithsonian acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987, and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings has continued the Folkways tradition by supporting the work of traditional artists and expressing a commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding among peoples through the production, documentation, preservation, and dissemination of sound.

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, Folkways, Arhoolie, A.R.C.E., Blue Ridge Institute, Bobby Susser Songs for Children, Collector, Cook, Dyer-Bennet, Fast Folk, Mickey Hart Collection, Monitor, M.O.R.E., Paredon, and UNESCO recordings are all available through:

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings Mail Order

Washington, DC 20560-0520

Phone: (800) 410-9815 or 888-FOLKWAYS (orders only)

Fax: (800) 853-9511 (orders only)

To purchase online, or for further information about Smithsonian Folkways Recordings go to: www.folkways.si.edu. Please send comments and questions to smithsonianfolkways@si.edu.

after playing
show playing licks

address me, not Yasha

Place of birth,
date, where reared

a few early ^{special} memories, music?

music in family, community

early musical experiences

how, why

learned from whom

why the banjo

play other instruments, which

where do they play now

with whom - age, background

present occupation(s)

how OT banjo picking fits in today

Their style

Talk, describe

demonstrate, slowly

origin of song

banjo - their instrument

what other instruments played

JUST AROUND THE BEND

Survival and Revival in
Southern Banjo Sounds

PRODUCED BY MIKE SEEGER (1933–2009) AND ALEXIA SMITH

DISC 1

North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia

Riley Baugus

Brien Fain

Debbie Grim Yates

Tina Steffey

Marsha Bowman Todd

Jerry Adams

Peter Gott

Frank George

David Reed

Joe Ayers

Rhiannon Giddens

DISC 2

Kentucky

George Gibson

John Haywood

Matt Kinman

Clifton Hicks

Brett Ratliff

Jesse Wells

Alabama and Tennessee

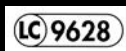
Robert Montgomery

Leroy Troy

Mike Seeger, along with his wife Alexia Smith and filmmaker Yasha Aginsky, trekked through the Appalachian Mountains in 2009 to produce this extraordinary glimpse of the vigor and diversity of the region's old-time banjo artistry. When Seeger passed away later that same year, the project took on the added importance of paying tribute to this renowned musician, folklorist, and documentarian of the people. *Just Around the Bend: Survival and Revival in Southern Banjo Sounds* captures many banjo lineages, styles, and techniques—performed by 19 virtuosic banjo players—in a package of two CDs compiled by Bob Carlin and a DVD by Aginsky. 110 minutes of music in 2 CDs; 80-page book with extensive notes, 110 minute DVD.

SMITHSONIAN
**FOLK
WAYS**
RECORDINGS

www.folkways.si.edu
Smithsonian Folkways Recordings
Washington, DC 20560-0953
SFW CD 40207



 Smithsonian