



STEPHEN WADE  
**BANJO DIARY**

*Lessons from Tradition*



Smithsonian Folkways

Stephen, Doc, and Fleming, Chicago, Ill., June 22, 1980.



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# BANJO DIARY

## *Lessons from Tradition*

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|--|------|---|------|
| 1. COTTON EYED JOE   | 2:57 | 11. CUCKOO BIRD   | 3:43 |
| 2. TRAIN 45  | 2:13 | 12. ALABAMA JUBILEE ( <i>Jack Yellin-George L. Cobb</i> )/<br>DOWN YONDER ( <i>L. Wolfe Gilbert</i> )             | 3:58 |
| 3. ARCADE BLUES  | 3:50 | 13. SANTA ANNA'S RETREAT  | 2:44 |
| 4. UNCLE BUDDY   | 1:49 | 14. TWIN SISTERS  | 2:24 |
| 5. CUCKOO'S NEST/TEMPERANCE REEL/<br>HOP LIGHT LADIES                  | 3:35 | 15. WILD BILL JONES   | 3:47 |
| 6. HOME SWEET HOME<br>( <i>John Howard Payne-Henry Rowley Bishop</i> ) | 2:21 | 16. LITTLE RABBIT/SHEEP SHELL CORN  | 3:35 |
| 7. DON'T LET YOUR DEAL GO DOWN   | 3:45 | 17. BERKELEY MARCH ( <i>Reuben Brooks-Harry Denton</i> )/<br>UNDER THE DOUBLE EAGLE ( <i>Josef Franz Wagner</i> ) | 3:46 |
| 8. OLD COUNTRY STOMP   | 2:25 | 18. HAND IN HAND<br>( <i>Tony Ellis/Merrywang Music, ASCAP</i> )  | 2:54 |
| 9. ROCKY HILL  | 4:33 |   |      |
| 10. LITTLE BETTY ANN   | 2:48 |   |      |

# STEPHEN WADE BANJO DIARY

## *Lessons from Tradition*



In 1948, Fleming Brown, a young Chicago-based banjoist searching for a teacher schooled in a down-home sound, first contacted Doc Hopkins for instruction. Fleming had recently purchased a five-string banjo in a junk shop after finding himself riveted by some new recordings of Virginia multi-instrumentalist and banjoist extraordinaire Hobart Smith. However, Fleming possessed neither the right strings to stretch down his banjo's neck nor ready knowledge of the alternative tunings that rural players like Smith so often employed. Now he sought out Doc Hopkins, who began playing the banjo as a child in eastern Kentucky, then toured for years as a medicine show musician, and later co-founded the Cumberland Ridge Runners band to supplement his solo work as a mountain ballad singer. At the time Fleming telephoned Doc, the veteran showman had entered his 18th year of live country music broadcasting on Chicago's WLS *National Barn Dance*, a job he alternated with competing stints on the WJJD *Supertime Frolic*. Fleming learned of Doc's instrumental skills from Pete Seeger, who had recently passed through town with Henry Wallace's Progressive Party presidential campaign. Seeger recommended that Fleming reach Doc at the radio station.

Doc assented to Fleming's request and suggested he come in around five. In a story the two men continued to tell decades later, Fleming countered with a start-up time of five-thirty, as he didn't get off work until five. "No," Doc corrected him, "five in the morning. That's when I do my show," a 5:30 a.m. wake-up program called *The Smile-A-While Show*. During that initial phone call Doc told Fleming something neither of them ever forgot. "I can't teach you," he said, "but I can show you." Doc summoned in that telling remark not only his own past, but a larger reality about the instrument whose repertory and technique he soon shared with the younger man. Conscious that he had almost no formal schooling, Doc still knew how his songs went. Like so many of his neighbors, he had learned the banjo far outside the academy. Its lore and methods dwelled largely in the informal and the immediate, the aural and the individual. Doc Hopkins had just given Fleming Brown his first lesson from tradition.

*Banjo Diary: Lessons from Tradition* likewise radiates from Doc Hopkins's lived experience. This album explores a few of Doc's and Fleming's lessons, along with those from other players I've either known firsthand or else encountered through recordings. The influence of these musicians, from however long ago, remains evergreen. Their presence roots these efforts. More often than not, I came to them a stranger, arriving on their doorsteps with little forewarning. Repeatedly they responded with a breadth of style, expertise, and musical inheritance—not to mention personal generosity—that defies, like tradition itself, monolithic characterization. In the nearly 50 years I've been playing, first with electric blues guitar in 1964, and on the banjo beginning in 1971, I've benefited from the kind of practical pedagogy that Doc Hopkins offered Fleming Brown. The gifted musicians who appear here—Mike Craver, Russ Hooper, Danny Knicely, James Leva, Zan McLeod—guided by veteran producer Michael Melford, are themselves beneficiaries of knowledge that older players have bequeathed to younger ones. Now as then, individuals craft the cultural vessels of song with the tools of their traditions and the capacities of their talents. Intergenerational learning takes many forms, and not necessarily those conforming to accepted music school practice. Sometimes the deepest subtleties and strongest sensibilities find their most

enduring expression in a fleeting remark. When Doc told Fleming that he couldn't teach him but he could show him, he set my life's course, too. This diary records some days along that path.



In early 1972, I first met banjoist and singer Fleming Brown. My previous awareness of him as an illustrator of Pete Seeger's *How to Play the Five-String Banjo* (a task he undertook as thanks to Seeger for pointing him to Doc Hopkins) did not prepare me for his artistry. One of the earliest urban-bred interpreters of the mountain banjo, Fleming (1926–84) taught at Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music. There, in a small, bare classroom, with a chalkboard and scattered bentwood chairs, without curtains or shutters to absorb the cacophony of 15 students trying to tune their instruments at once, his cowboy boot cracked the floor, and he took us into a personal vision of Appalachian song. His growling baritone rode against the bite of his Paramount banjo, and we all knew we were in the presence of a master. The small metal plate mounted on the inside rim of his instrument, etched with that company's motto, epitomized the force he generated: "Piano-Volume, Harp-Quality Tone."

During those classes, and up in his attic apartment filled with kerosene lamps, 19th-century Indian moccasins, and Civil War rifles, Fleming made his songs sound simultaneously ancient and immediate. He modestly called himself "a conduit," finding bridges between the music's transatlantic antecedents and images like those in *You Have Seen Their Faces*. "It was the 'Elfin Knight,'" he said in reference to that book and what its pictures suggested, "coupled with the grim realities of getting caught in local knife fights" (Wade 1984, 6). When he arranged "Bolakins," an Old World tale of infanticide, for the banjo, he cast its British castle, treacherous wet nurse, and murderous stonemason into an Appalachian darkness.

At such moments Fleming put into effect a lesson he gleaned from Big Bill Broonzy, the great blues guitarist and singer. For several years in the mid-1950s Fleming performed alongside him at local Chicago nightclubs. He found Bill unpredictable in the ways he handled a limited repertory of songs, ever varying them, yet always playing with complete authority. “What made him great were not the notes he played,” Fleming observed, “it was the notes he didn’t play” (*ibid.*). That example stayed with Fleming. When his music flowed easiest, when his songs most overtook him, they possessed the drama that comes from this deliberate restraint. One sensed that still more lay in reserve, that still more surrounded the piece.

During those evenings I spent with Fleming, we sat in the blue light of his color television and the yellow light of his kerosene lamps. He kept an amber glass of bourbon always within reach while his bony fingers called for still another unfiltered cigarette. Often our conversations turned to memorable renditions of traditional songs. Many notable blues and hillbilly performances had appeared on commercial releases made between the 1920s and the first years of World War II. “These old 78 records . . . they’re nothing but scratches,” Fleming mused (*ibid.*, 7). Just the same, he continued, “there’s a great heritage that has been handed to us by the early pioneers of the Southern 78s.”

He felt no differently about the field recordings that comprised the Library of Congress’s published collections. These, too, offered a plethora of great performances. The first banjo piece he ever worked out came from one of them, Justus Begley’s “The Rambling Boy,” and the first song he taught me, “Roll on the Ground,” by Thaddeus Willingham of Gulfport, Mississippi, came from another of these albums. Fleming considered it a priority to learn about this artistry. He told me to listen to all the Library of Congress’s albums and recommended I begin this work at the Chicago Public Library downtown.

There, as I sat by the plate glass windows, crowded rush-hour buses lumbering past, an earlier rural America came within view. The Library of Congress records with their bureaucrat-gray jackets and maroon lettering marked a state of the union, circa 1941. These consciously noncommercial

collections with survey titles like *Songs and Ballads of American History and of the Assassination of Presidents* seemed imbued with the high purpose and solemnity proper to an undertaking of the federal government. That these early editions of the Library's recording series were playable only at 78 rpm, by then a rarity for my generation, only added to their allure. As they came up to speed, I would watch their spinning white words printed on the navy blue labels dissolve like fruit in a blender: "Last-World-Luther-Ways-Meetinghouse-Dalesburg-Callahan-Kentucky-Glory." Even so I could sense poetic power in these titles: "The Last of Callahan," "The Ways of the World," "Glory in the Meetinghouse." The performers' names and their communities—Luther Strong of Dalesburg, Kentucky, and W. E. Claunch of Guntown, Mississippi—rang with native cadences.

Fleming set these vivid qualities in a pedagogical frame. Their locales marked a vital aspect of this music. Not hearing the banjo "in its natural environment," he said dryly, amounted to the difference between "seeing a polar bear in the antarctic" and one confined to the Brookfield Zoo (Wade 1984;2012). Years earlier these same records prompted him to seek out traditional musicians, an experience he termed "a privilege." He recalled his honeymoon, driving with his bride non-stop from Chicago to western North Carolina, where they called on Bascom Lamar Lunsford, who had made a vast number of recordings for the Library's Folk Archive. Later Fleming hosted Frank Proffitt, the source of "Tom Dooley," in his home, and in October 1963 undertook a monumental set of recordings with Hobart Smith, who along with his sister Texas Gladden had appeared on the first of these Library of Congress albums (Wade 2005). Now Fleming directed me to do the same, to "find the people who know how to play this music." While I had closely watched (and dearly admired) such great banjoists as Earl Scruggs, Don Reno, and John Hartford in public performances before I ever met Fleming, by his encouragement and the precedent set by these Library of Congress field recordings, I now began to contact traditional musicians at their homes, hoping to better absorb how this music should be played, set against the backdrop of their lives.





The first old-time banjoist I traveled a long distance to visit was Bookmiller Shannon in Timbo, Arkansas. It seemed wholly consistent with his archaic name and his farmer's overalls that in 1974 he still played the same banjo he had purchased by mail-order from Sears & Roebuck or Montgomery Ward decades earlier. He lived in a tiny house with a potbellied stove, and I remember cheerfully commenting after he played a tune called "Crooked Stovepipe" that we sat right under one there in his kitchen. I'm not sure how easily he took to that observation, but he worked hard to teach me the piece. Then he demonstrated another instrumental, one that he had recorded on a locally produced single and called "Bunker Hill."<sup>1</sup> That evening he showed me something even more profound. Scheduled to play at a nearby cultural center, he invited me to come backstage whenever I got there. I found him, still in his overalls, holding his banjo high up against the wall as he tuned to an early-model pitch machine the center had installed in the dressing room. He took pains to get in perfect tune using the most modern tool available to him. For all the traditions he embodied, Bookmiller Shannon defied my assumptions and kept his aesthetic priorities straight.

Visits with other musicians yielded lessons no less imperishable. On several occasions I went to see Virgil Anderson, who lived outside Monticello, Kentucky, on the Cumberland Plateau. To get to his house, one had to cross the moving waters of Little South Fork either with a high-sprung truck or on foot via a swinging rope bridge he strung there years before. He called it "walking them cable lines." At the bridge's end, in the cement footer, Virgil carved the initials "USA." He did that, he told me with a twinkle, to assure people that no matter how far back they had come, they were still in the United States. His good humor appeared in other ways, too. He called his home "Wildcat Rock City," and there in the middle of the woods, right by his house, he had put up

municipal street signs as if he lived on some city block. No wonder, when he played a tune he called “Five Miles,” a sense of place invested its haunting sound. In his youth, he and others played it at the logging camps where they forested and milled. Virgil spoke of uncontrollable, drunken parties held in shacks out there, where someone once held a gun to his head that misfired. Of that tune he said, “‘Five Miles.’ That’s when you’re five miles outside of town and the law can’t touch you.”

In Jasper, Georgia, George Childers’s neighbors all called him the best banjo player around. He had no idea that day in the summer of 1980 that anyone would come looking for him. Instead, he had spent the afternoon with one of his sons, trying to catch some fish for their supper that evening. Once he got home, after sizing up the strangers standing in his living room, he asked his son to bring in his banjo, which he kept under the bed. It had a clear plastic head, and inside the resonator he had affixed a large, highly visible American eagle decal. He showed us how to play the entire melody of the classic tune “Old Reuben” with just his right hand, never noting the fingerboard with his left.<sup>2</sup> This tall, full-shouldered, square-jawed man with a tight, military brush cut, wearing a sleeveless tee shirt under his overalls, his arms exposed, and his head turned away to one side and banjo to the other, looked like an eagle himself. His fingers plucked up and down like talons. All the while his family beamed with pride.

One final instructive scene, moving beyond the banjo: In 1978 the Library of Congress issued *Afro-American Folk Music from Tate and Panola Counties, Mississippi*, an album that I particularly loved. It included a family band, where the father whistled a tune that others in his community played on a fife, while his children turned the benches and boxes lying about their yard into drums. On the recording they chatter as they get ready to play, everybody just getting in place, and then comes the piece—a music made with nothing but what lay at hand. I thought it simply beautiful. Some years later, on the first of several trips to northern Mississippi, I called on another performer heard on that record: fife player, singer, and bandleader Othar Turner. Admired throughout the region, Othar upheld traditions rooted in colonial militia drills as well as those sourced in turn-of-the-century

blues and reels. With his homemade cane fife, he led three younger drummers, trailed by the rest of us, around his yard. They played a Bo Diddley–like rhythm while Othar took the lead in what some of his neighbors called “jump and kick music.” We marched to a swaying two-steps-forward, one-step-back pattern. I moved close behind him, holding my microphone high in the air. At evening’s end I thanked Othar. “You tell people about me, and I’ll tell people about you,” he replied, “and that’s how we’ll get through this thing.”

Of all these wonderful players I came to know—and there were thankfully many others—the one I first met and became closest to over the years was Fleming’s teacher: singer, guitarist, and banjoist Doc Hopkins. Born in Harlan County, Kentucky, in 1900, Doc’s full first name was Doctor after the mountain belief that the seventh son had healing powers, a gift that he, in fact, possessed. He also had a musical aptitude, manifest since childhood, that ultimately led to his coming to Chicago in 1930 to sing on the air. For over 20 years he performed on live



*With Doc Hopkins, Chicago, Ill., winter 1974.*

radio and made personal appearances throughout the Midwest. Then, after his public career ended, Doc worked as a machinist, finally retiring in 1968. At that time he began his return to what he called “the show business.” We met in 1972, and from then on, until he could play no longer, we became a duo. Doc sang and played guitar, while I accompanied him on the banjo. We spent the last years of his life—he died in 1988—documenting his musical experiences in letters, tapes, phone calls, and visits. Doc shared everything he possibly could of his log cabin beginnings, his medicine show adventures, his music-making at county fairs, his exposure to the blind, itinerant performers who taught him the rudiments of playing, and his radio livelihood. He kept a cassette player by his bedside, so that whenever a memory or a stage bit came to mind, he could add it to the tape.

Long before our time together, Doc took an avid interest in the histories of the folksongs he performed. His studies became so much a part of his personal routine that he made them a regular broadcast feature, creating short segments his radio station called “song stories.” Sometimes Doc would telephone Carl Sandburg, compiler of *The American Songbag*, and ask him for background information on one or another of his numbers. Mostly, Doc built his song stories on his own knowledge and from mail his listeners sent. He recalled a letter he received around 1935 from Curtis Jett, the self-admitted convicted murderer named in the folksong “J. B. Marcum.” Jett complimented Doc on his radio performances and noted that he especially enjoyed this piece, which specifies his role as Marcum’s killer. Now on parole—a Baptist preacher and town marshal—he lived in the same Eastern Kentucky community where Doc’s family came from. Jett mentioned that he knew every one of them and knew where to find them.

Doc also enjoyed how the son of Frank James, brother of the fabled outlaw, contacted him after hearing him sing “Jesse James” (with the same tune as “J. B. Marcum”) on a Kansas City radio station in 1933. He even invited Doc out to the family’s home place in Kearney, Missouri. More than 50 years later, for Christmas, Doc gave me the pictures he took on that visit, with his descriptive notes written on the back of each snapshot. Over all those years Doc

had saved these photographs, cherishing the real-life scenes behind this song of an American Robin Hood, betrayed by one of his intimates.

Moments like these make up my diary. In truth, I keep no journal as such. It exists instead in many parts: correspondence, recordings, snapshots, film footage, occasional writings and longer accounts, clippings, maps, receipts, instruments and artifacts, sheet music and songbooks, posters and handbills. Most of all, it survives in memories. *Banjo Diary: Lessons from Tradition* gathers 18 of these experiences, inscribing them in sound. These entries tell of an education written indelibly in a musician's heart.



*Doc Hopkins visits Jesse James's grave,  
Kearney, Mo., 1933.*

## *Track Notes*

### 1. COTTON EYED JOE

*Stephen Wade, vocal, banjo; Mike Craver, piano; Danny Knicely, harmony vocal, mandolin, upright bass; James Leva, harmony vocal, fiddle; Zan McLeod, guitar, mandolin.*

This famous Southern dance breakdown has become known via several melodies, one of which western swing giant Bob Wills recorded in 1946. Around that time, in New York City, Tom Paley began hearing Wills's song on the radio and worked it out on the five-string banjo, an instrument that Wills did not include in his band or musical arrangements. Tom played it as a solo number, employing his distinctive three-finger, index-lead style executed without picks, and singing verses not wholly gleaned from Wills's record. In December 1985, I visited Tom at his home in London, during which he generously recorded 155 pieces for me, among them his Wills-inspired version of "Cotton Eyed Joe."

For this recording I drew on Tom's model combined with several of Bob Wills's signature elements—focusing on harmonies both instrumental and vocal—that made his music so thoroughly identifiable. As we mixed the track, a line from another Wills song, "Time Changes Everything," written by his lead singer Tommy Duncan in 1940, came to mind. Producer Michael Melford, who worked in years past with members of Wills's band, recalled one of its lyrics: "You can change the name of an old song, rearrange it, and make it swing." Then Mike noted, "That's exactly what Wills did."

## 2. TRAIN 45

*Stephen Wade, banjo; Mike Craver, pump organ; Danny Knicely, bass; Zan McLeod, guitar.*

During the first private lesson I took from Fleming Brown he played me this tune, less than a minute long, and sang but one verse. I never heard him do it again. “That’s a great tuning” was all he said after demonstrating this variation of the banjo standard “Old Reuben.” I don’t know how Fleming came upon this tuning, and it seems possible that he made it up. I suspect its inspiration lay with Hobart Smith, who had previously recorded at Fleming’s home “Wabash Blues.” There Hobart employs a unique A-minor tuning (fifth string to first, eAACD), a setting he reserved for that piece alone. Fleming’s tuning here, in service of essentially the same song, differs only in its fifth-string pitch (gAACD).

Whether this tuning exists in past practice or whether Fleming Brown invented it, it represents a solution based in tradition. Not only do open tunings typically contain some or all of a song’s principal notes—a solution related to the older fretless banjos, largely limited to first-position playing—their ringing overtones intensify a given melody.

In May 1983, recalling a different piece, Fleming Brown shed light on tunings and their creative development. He initially learned the ballad “Little Margaret” from a recording by Bascom Lunsford, who played it in the G modal tuning (gDGCD). Fleming then mentioned how banjoist and singer Buell Kazee performed “Lady Gay,” a comparably somber ballad, in another variant tuning. But neither of these settings suited Fleming’s voice. Working from a double-C tuning that better fit his baritone range, he dropped the fifth string down a tone (from gCDCD to fCDCD). He realized the effect at once: “The particular intervals you get on this are haunting. It makes the whole thing come alive. This was after 20 years of frustration. Not that I was trying to play it every day. But there was a song I liked. I loved the ghost story qualities . . . a classic story. Unrequited love, a revenge from the grave, but it needed a setting. And all of a sudden, one night there it came. I can’t tell you, a thrill goes through you that you think ‘My God, it’s really all worthwhile.’ Something has happened. [Something] almost spiritual has happened” (Wade 1984, 8).

### 3. ARCADE BLUES

*Stephen Wade, vocal, banjo; Mike Craver, harmony vocal, pump organ; Danny Knicely, bass.*

In September 1926 Uncle Dave Macon, the first star of the *Grand Ole Opry*, recorded this folk blues, performing it as a solo banjo song. He made it his own by localizing it to the Nashville Arcade, a nearby mercantile center (still in use), and dedicating it to two of its current tenants: “Mr. Charlie Keys and Mr. Hyde . . . who will play you records on both sides!” (Macon).

One of Uncle Dave’s sources for “Arcade Blues” may have been Leroy “Lasses” White, a black-face vaudevillian who by 1928 began performing on the *Grand Ole Opry*. Long before Uncle Dave recorded the song, however, White copyrighted its prototype in 1912. The following year White published “Nigger Blues” and by 1919 saw it issued on four recordings as well as four piano rolls (see Muir, 35–39). The song continued to proliferate on race and hillbilly recordings, bearing such titles as Ida Cox’s 1924 “Blues Ain’t Nothin’ Else But!” followed by Georgia White’s 1938 remake. Its white vernacular music performances count Jess Young’s “Old Weary Blues” (1929), the Brock Sisters’ “Broadway Blues” (1929), and Milton Brown’s “Texas Hambone Blues” (1936). What musically distinguishes Uncle Dave’s version from these releases, as well as from the original sheet music, is his omission of the characteristic blue note. In effect, Uncle Dave performed a blues in structure but not in sound.



*Uncle Dave Macon with family, ca. 1925.*



In August 1979, I visited with members of Uncle Dave Macon's family, calling on his sons Eston and Dorris, the family of his eldest son, Arch, grandson David Ramsey Macon, and great-grandson Dave Macon IV. During that trip, I also investigated the Nashville Arcade. This building, a handsome two-story shopping center of an earlier age, seemed as haunted then by lost souls and illicit trafficking as it did by the figures appearing in "Arcade Blues" from more than a half-century earlier. The song's juxtaposing currents—its blend of blues and pre-blues, its combination of urban and rural milieus, and its upbeat treatment of forbidden attraction, prostitution, and death—seemed all the more striking in conjunction with some of Uncle Dave's letters I read at that time. Hand-written by the famous showman during his travels, they echoed the creative tension in "Arcade Blues"—words indicative of a complex personal alchemy. Almost always he signed them, "Your loving father, Uncle Dave Macon."

#### 4. UNCLE BUDDY

*Stephen Wade, banjo; Mike Craver, piano; Danny Knicely, mandolin; James Leva, fiddle; Zan McLeod, guitar.*

I learned this tune from Fleming Brown, who earlier found it on a Folkways album featuring Sam and Kirk McGee with Arthur Smith (McGee et al. 1968). The fetching two-finger, thumb-lead banjo solo that Arthur Smith played, and that Fleming described as "deceptively simple," leaves open a lot of interpretative room. On the banjo it offers creative possibilities from right-hand triplets to repeating the melody high up the neck. It also affords opportunities for interplay with the mandolin, in both unison and harmony, as well as with the fiddle. Here Danny Knicely and James Leva bring their own variations to "Uncle Buddy." Perhaps the family tree of "Uncle Buddy" includes "Sandy River Belle," whose low strain it echoes on the banjo, or maybe something more akin to "Sally Johnson," which James seemingly references in his fiddle break. Whatever its lineage, this deceptively simple tune, simultaneously elastic and unique, points to tradition's many branches.

## 5. CUCKOO'S NEST/TEMPERANCE REEL/HOP LIGHT LADIES

*Stephen Wade, banjo; Mike Craver, piano; Danny Knicely, mandolin; James Leva, fiddle; Zan McLeod, guitar.*

An idea expressed by Indiana fiddler John W. “Dick” Summers (1887–1976) threads this medley of Irish tunes, just as his fiddling furnishes their principal musical source. He believed that throughout the music he played, each piece possessed a detailed identity that he termed the “originality of the tune” (quoted in Rosenbaum 1984). He saw it as the fiddler’s obligation to learn however many melodic parts a tune might have and to take no shortcuts in their execution. Similarly, Buddy Thomas, a Kentucky fiddler committed to the older styles, felt the need to “bow the tune out” (quoted in Wilson). The influential radio fiddler Georgia Slim (Robert Rutland) likewise spoke of his mother’s counsel when he first started playing: “Don’t ever detract from a tune, add to it all you want but don’t take away” (quoted in Spielman, 7). These musicians shared in common a view of fiddle tunes as complex, self-contained works.

When I first learned these three tunes, that idea seemed close at hand. It was to musician and collector Art Rosenbaum that Summers voiced his notion of originality. In 1964, Rosenbaum, in collaboration with fellow banjoist Pat Dunford, completed a Folkways album that included Dick Summers playing “Cuckoo’s Nest” (Dunford and Rosenbaum). From that performance Dunford fashioned a solo banjo arrangement that I heard him do in 1976. Meanwhile, Art Rosenbaum had developed a banjo version of “Temperance Reel” that he based on Summers’s fiddling. With similar attention to melodic detail, Art also worked up “Hop Light Ladies.”<sup>3</sup> Over the course of my visits with him between 1975 and 1980, I watched Art frail these tunes on his banjo, absorbed them from him, and tried to find for myself their most complete realization that I could muster in a Southern mountain downpicking style. Nowadays I play them in a three-finger, bluegrass-based style that affords more room for other instruments to hold center stage. Still, to render the fullness of a melody, a lesson Dick Summers shared, remains an ideal, no matter the picking technique or ensemble.

## 6. HOME SWEET HOME

*Stephen Wade, banjo; Mike Craver, pump organ; Russ Hooper, Dobro; James Leva, fiddle; Danny Knicely, bass, mandolin; Zan McLeod, guitar.*

For more than 150 years “Home Sweet Home” has flourished as a banjo showpiece. It also marks the second banjo number ever recorded, appearing on an 1889 Edison cylinder, played by Carrie Cochrane, a schoolteacher from Buffalo, New York. Since then its succession of recordings has never ceased.

Long before the phonograph, however, reports both in England and the United States tell of “Home Sweet Home” played on the banjo. Originally composed as a vocal song in 1823, it quickly became a stage favorite. By the mid-1860s and 1870s skilled banjoists such as Frank Converse, Charles E. Dobson, and Emory Hall created elaborate arrangements of the then-familiar sentimental number, often using tremolo effects that alerted audiences to the instrument’s possibilities while signaling their personal virtuosity. Just as the *London Era* in 1880 cited Emory Hall’s performance of the tune and called him “the Paganini of the banjo,” the *New York Times* in 1959 invoked the great violinist’s name again, this time applying the sobriquet to the preeminent player of that time: Earl Scruggs.<sup>4</sup>

Since 1954, bluegrass banjoists, inspired by Earl Scruggs, began recording “Home Sweet Home.”<sup>5</sup> Some used the mechanical tuners he devised, changing the string’s pitches mechanically, which both modernized the piece and renewed its claim as a banjo classic. But Earl took a consciously older approach than his acolytes. He modeled his version after blind banjoist Mack Woolbright’s 1927 rendition, recording it himself in 1961 with Josh Graves playing Dobro. Fortunately for this album, Russ Hooper, a close friend of Josh Graves, with an enormously rich background of his own in bluegrass (this marks Russ’s 393rd recording), helps us span “Home Sweet Home’s” indefatigable progress from the 19th century to the present day.

## 7. DON'T LET YOUR DEAL GO DOWN

*Stephen Wade, vocal, banjo; Mike Craver, harmony vocal, piano; Russ Hooper, Dobro; Danny Knicely, harmony vocal, bass; James Leva, harmony vocal, fiddle; Zan McLeod, guitar.*

I began formulating our version of this famous song when I remembered an unusual tuning that Fleming Brown had reserved for it alone. Sometime around 1965 he recorded a transplanted Southern banjoist named Uncle Alex Turner who lived on County Line Road near Detroit. Uncle Alex played him a version of “Cripple Creek” in standard G tuning, but had dropped the fifth string from G down to D (dDGBD). The shift completely altered the sound of the tune. With that precedent in mind, and drawn to Fiddlin’ John Carson’s 1927 recording of “Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down,” Fleming invoked Uncle Alex’s model. He reworked the open-C tuning by dropping the fifth string to match the first (eCGCE). The result both suited Fleming’s voice on this number and simulated Fiddlin’ John’s cross-key sonorities. In planning this arrangement I also recalled Earl Scruggs’s 1971 performance of “Nashville Blues” (which he did in an unusual tuning as well). It, too, follows a melody much like what John Carson played, but cast in a minor key. On that recording Earl had his accompanists take solo breaks. I thought that if we combined that kind of interplay and performed this one-part song in a call-and-response format while using Fleming’s tuning, we could bring fresh energies to this string band standard.

## 8. OLD COUNTRY STOMP

*Stephen Wade, vocal, banjo; Mike Craver, pump organ; Danny Knicely, guitar; Zan McLeod, rhumba box.*

The primary inspiration for this performance comes from Henry “Ragtime Texas” Thomas, whose recordings offer beguiling glimpses of black vernacular music before the blues. In June 1928, in the same studio where Uncle Dave Macon made his Chicago recordings, Ragtime Texas waxed “Old

Country Stomp.” He drew a musical portrait of a rural square dance, using his reed panpipes, guitar, and voice. If the tune he plays resembles at points “Cluckin’ Hen,” it also echoes Lead Belly’s “Dig a Hole to Put the Devil In” and Sid Hemphill and Lucius Smith’s “Emmaline, Take Your Time.” All these pieces found usage at dances, and their melodies lend themselves to variation. At an actual dance, music like this would have lasted far longer than the duration of a single 78 rpm side. A solo player or a band might well have sought relief by playing variations as a caller directed the dancers over the course of a reel. Accordingly, I improvised the passages here, essentially extending the song’s rhythmic theme. Our employment of the rhumba box also reflects a living practice. Sid Hemphill and Lucius Smith didn’t limit themselves to panpipe and banjo duets. They played fife and drum at Mississippi hill country picnics. To introduce a related percussive effect here seemed appropriate in this reimagining of an old country stomp.

## 9. ROCKY HILL

*Stephen Wade, vocal, banjo; Mike Craver, pump organ; Danny Knicely, bass.*

“Rocky Hill” was the first truly lyrical banjo song Fleming Brown taught me. “Instead of attacking it,” Fleming advised in 1972, “coax it.” His lesson spoke not only to the breadth of music available in the Southern banjo repertory, but to the need to pay attention to mood. Bearing that counsel in mind, in 1996 I recorded this number as an instrumental duet with Mike Craver playing a vintage Estey pump organ (see Wade 1997). For this rendition, which incorporates the song’s lyrics, we’ve added guitar and bowed bass to our duo, further mining the plaintiveness that Fleming perceived in the song all along.

Fleming learned “Rocky Hill” from Woody Wachtel, a devotee of Kentucky banjoist Rufus Crisp (1889–1956). In 1957, Wachtel, a Long Island Sound psychiatrist, tape-recorded this piece along with 13 other numbers for Chicago-area banjoist Charlie Faurot.<sup>6</sup> Faurot passed a copy of

this material—all of which Wachtel played on his fretless banjo—to Fleming, who subsequently included “Rocky Hill” on his debut LP.<sup>7</sup> By then, Fleming had subtly reshaped the song, subduing its drive. Both Wachtel’s and Fleming’s renditions further differed from Crisp’s 1946 Library of Congress recording, where he performs the piece as an instrumental. However, it seems likely that Crisp provided the verses that Wachtel sang and Fleming adapted. A highly dynamic player, Crisp varied his numbers, sometimes recording songs with their lyrics and sometimes without. One consistent feature of “Rocky Hill,” marking all these interpretations, lies in its unusual tuning of gDGAD. Dropping the second string down a whole tone from the conventional G tuning lends audible poignancy to the song’s romantic plea.



*Fleming Brown at home,  
Chicago, Ill., Dec. 1981.*

## 10. LITTLE BETTY ANN

*Stephen Wade, banjo; Mike Craver, pump organ; Danny Knicely, bass.*

Musician Mike Seeger credited two banjoists for this variant of “Shady Grove.” One was Austin Harmon, recorded near Maryville, Tennessee, in 1939 by Herbert Halpert, and the other Mike Seeger recorded himself: William Bragg (1893–1975), a retired miner from Widen, West Virginia. Mike learned the words from Harmon’s performance, which he spliced to Bragg’s tuning.

The one time I saw Mike perform this song, in 1977, he told an amusing story about this tuning (eFGCD). Following his first visit to William Bragg in 1967, he learned “Little Betty Ann” as Bragg had played it. On a return trip, Mike played it back for him. But Bragg disputed what he heard. He took the banjo and raised Mike’s fifth string from “e” a half-step up to “f.” It turns out that when he originally demonstrated the song, the peg had slipped on Bragg’s banjo, and it simply hadn’t held the higher, tightened pitch. While the corrected note gave the piece a greater musical unity, it also made it sound more conventional. Mike knew that this gain amounted to a loss. May I add in defense of the former tuning, with apologies to John Milton et al., *o felix culpa*, oh happy fault.

Our wordless interpretation here lightly expands on the traditional melody of “Little Betty Ann.” I venture up the neck, sometimes adding harmony notes, just as this arrangement, grounded in the pump organ and bowed bass, expands on the sonorous possibilities inherent in William Bragg’s wonderfully erroneous tuning.

## 11. CUCKOO BIRD

*Stephen Wade, vocal, banjo; Danny Knicely, bass; Zan McLeod, guitar, rhumba box.*

Repeatedly banjo players have found ways to loft “Cuckoo Bird” into musical flight. None of those recorded has surpassed the virtuosic heights that Hobart Smith reached. He learned the song from his mentor, John Greer, who in turn learned it from black banjoist Henry Hays. Hobart swore that all of them played it exactly alike, an awesome scene to imagine. He recorded the piece on several occasions, the last time in October 1963, while he stayed with Fleming Brown. There he often took up Fleming’s Paramount banjo. On the recording of “Cuckoo Bird” he made at Fleming’s home, he used that banjo, the same instrument I play here.

Hobart told Fleming that he “played the banjo for everything that’s in it.” He meant more than just the instrument unleashed. He was referring to the songs themselves, realized in their full-

ness. In “Cuckoo Bird” he moved through its verses of love’s inconstancy and life’s instabilities, and then expanded on them, his banjo providing a collaborative voice. He achieved in this number, one that he considered his “choice piece,” what Fleming saw as the ultimate goal of this art form: “the welding of the instrument to the performer, to the man, to the subject. They all become a unit, and you can’t separate one from the other. It’s a natural extension . . . not a song with banjo accompaniment . . . but . . . a performance, a musical performance” (Wade 1984, 7).

## 12. ALABAMA JUBILEE/DOWN YONDER

*Stephen Wade, banjo; Mike Craver, piano; Danny Knicely, mandolin, bass; Zan McLeod, washboard.*

I learned these two popular rags from two celebrated fiddlers. The first came from Sid Harkreader and the second from Gordon Tanner.

Sid Harkreader (1898–1988), who recorded with Uncle Dave Macon on his earliest records and played on the *Grand Ole Opry* as both sideman and featured act, characterized himself as the first of his generation to become a full-time country musician in Nashville. During an August 1979 visit to his home in a downtown Nashville senior citizens apartment house, I watched Fiddlin’ Sid summon that professionalism. For more than an hour, he stood up and played in a seemingly free association of tunes and instantaneous key changes. Starting with “John Henry,” he sailed through “Alabama Jubilee” (a 1915 blackface show tune) to his signature piece, “Old Joe,” and from “Tip-Toe through the Tulips” to “I’m Looking Over a Four-Leaf Clover.” Sid ended our visit by describing his former banjo-playing partner Oddie McWinders, who later recorded with Clayton McMichen and Jimmie Rodgers. Fiddlin’ Sid recalled McWinders with his “fine banjo.” He played “overtures,” he said. “Went all over the banjo. Prettiest thing you ever heard” (Harkreader). Certainly emblematic of Harkreader’s own versatility, he told how in 1928 McWinders would literally challenge the theater audiences they faced: “‘Name your number,’ [he’d say], and he’d play



it.” That fearlessness captures how country players like Sid Harkreader tackled rags like “Alabama Jubilee.”

A like spirit attends “Down Yonder,” another *Grand Ole Opry* favorite. For years ragtime pianist Del Wood played this hot number on the show, eventually selling some three million copies. Her source was a recording by the Skillet Lickers, the famed old-time string band from north Georgia led by Gid Tanner. In 1934, Tanner’s son, 17-year-old Gordon Tanner, recorded this 1921 stagepiece written by L. Wolfe Gilbert for the band’s final session.

In March 1980, during a visit with Gordon Tanner at his home in Dacula, Georgia, I heard him play “Down Yonder.” We sat in an outbuilding Gordon wryly called “an oblong concern of a chicken coop.” Along its walls he displayed pictures of his family, and pointed out that from his father to his grandson, all of them fiddled. He took pleasure in this continuing family tradition, “doing what I can,” he said, “to keep the name alive.” Here he made both new violins and old music. That evening he ranged through a variety of sources, much as his father and his musical compatriots had done previously: from fiddle tunes to sentimental pieces, from Tin Pan Alley numbers like “Down Yonder” to songs like “Four Night’s Experience” taken from the store of British balladry.

The last time I saw Gordon was in July 1982, one week before he died. I was playing with Doc Hopkins at the National Folk Festival, held that year at Vienna, Virginia. Gordon was performing there, too, with his band, the Junior Skillet Lickers, and he remained warm as ever. “You come back and see us,” he smiled. “Next time we’ll make it half a day, or three-quarters.”

An added word about my fellow players and this performance: Danny Knicely’s mandolin virtuosity carries forward the jubilant mastery that Sid Harkreader and Gordon Tanner achieved with these tunes in another era. Danny grew up in a family of singers and instrumentalists from the Shenandoah Valley. For generations this music has exerted a daily presence for them all, an environment that surely nurtured his remarkable talents. Playwright, singer, and songwriter Mike Craver also grew up

in a Southern home where music occupied a leading role. Here he takes his own sprightly piano turn on “Down Yonder.” Mike’s fellow North Carolinian, Zan McLeod, likewise benefited from a musical family upbringing that includes a grandfather who played the five-string banjo over their town’s local radio station. Zan, a remarkable guitarist and musician, contributes this medley’s whimsical washboard accompaniment. Its precedent here stems from South Carolina banjo pioneer Snuffy Jenkins, who spent years performing as a tent show entertainer. I remember watching him in summer 1981 with his baggy pants (which he dropped with comic effect) as he exchanged his banjo for a washboard deluxe, outfitted with squawking bicycle horns and cowbells—joyous sounds that he brought to “Alabama Jubilee.”

### 13. SANTA ANNA’S RETREAT

*Stephen Wade, banjo; Mike Craver, pump organ; Danny Knicely, mandolin; James Leva, fiddle; Zan McLeod, guitar.*

I learned this British-American march from fiddler and folklorist Alan Jabbour, who collected it in 1966 from his mentor, Henry Reed of Glen Lyn, Virginia. Reed (1884–1968), in turn, credited Quince Dillion, a fifer in the Mexican War, as his source.<sup>8</sup> In a process of direct contact from one musician to the next, “Santa Anna’s Retreat” moves across the generations.

While I’d not previously known this tune when Alan suggested in spring 1998 that we try it together, by then I’d benefited from the example of Alan’s first banjo accompanist and dear friend to us both: Tommy Thompson (1937–2003). In the late 1960s Tommy and Alan played in the Hollow Rock String Band, whose influential repertory largely centered on Alan’s fieldwork with Henry Reed. By the 1980s, when Tommy traveled to Washington, D.C., to perform with the Red Clay Ramblers, the famed group that he led, he often stayed at my home. When I asked him during one of those visits how to play these tunes, he told me not to listen to his banjo parts at all, but to just follow the fiddle. The banjo, he assured me, would take care of itself, highlighting the principal melody and supporting the underlying rhythm. Tommy was right.

Yet a revelation lay in store. Several years later, during the December 1999 concert for Alan's retirement from the Library of Congress, I accompanied him, along with guitarist James Reed, Henry Reed's son. We learned from James that his father, who had also played the banjo, did not downstroke it in the way Tommy and so many of us following his lead had approached this repertory. Instead, James said, his father finger-picked his tunes. Indeed, a photograph of 19-year-old Henry Reed pictures him with a banjo, his right hand plucking the strings. This peek into the past only multiplies the ways that grand old airs like "Santa Anna's Retreat" might still be explored.

## 14. TWIN SISTERS

*Stephen Wade, banjo; Mike Craver, pump organ; Danny Knicely, mandolin.*

This tune comes from Hillsville, Virginia, banjo player Sidna Myers. Veteran field recordist Charlie Faurot, who recorded Sidna and his fiddle-playing brother, Fulton Myers, in 1967, told me that he "never found anybody else who played it" (2012). He added that he had never heard "Twin Sisters" performed in a banjo contest, nor had he been able to "peg it with any others." In the mountain banjo repertory, it stands out as a singular work, essentially a domestic tune whose sole documented source lies with one individual, Sidna Myers.

In the fall of 1976, while performing "Twin Sisters" to a festival audience, banjoist John Cohen (who first recorded Sidna Myers playing it in November 1965) made a surprising suggestion. Instead of clapping along, he urged us to make alternative rhythms to accompany the tune, including jingling the coins in our pockets. A high-pitched ostinato surged through the hall. I've never forgotten the sparseness of that quiet, persistent banjo piece framed by those hundreds of tiny sounds. "Twin Sisters" also occupies a signal place in personal memory, for my wife, Michaelle, first taught me how to clog dance to its rhythms soon after we met. These early impressions contributed to the interpretation offered here: from choice of instruments to alternation of parts and voicings of the tune.

## 15. WILD BILL JONES

*Stephen Wade, vocal, fretless banjo; Mike Craver, pump organ; Danny Knicely, guitar; James Leva, fiddle; Zan McLeod, mandolin.*

The tune we play comes from Doc Hopkins. His rendition, unlike other hillbilly recordings of this well-known song, employs a second part that essentially acts like a chorus. I also drew from Frank Proffitt's recording of "Wild Bill Jones," one which he played on a homemade fretless banjo. Proffitt made extensive use of the instrument's capacity for blues-like slides. The song's closing verse here comes from blind guitarist George Reneau's 1925 release.

In all candor, I wonder if Doc would have enjoyed the way we handle his melody. While he loved the blues and played it masterfully on the guitar, he did not typically integrate blues inflections into his banjo work but preferred a major-chord approach. He had found during his radio years that the Midwest prairie farmer audience he served did not favor the brooding musical predilections of the upland South, which this and other performances of "Wild Bill Jones" convey. Accordingly, Doc avoided music set in minor keys.

Missouri fiddler Charlie Walden (1996, 6) pinpoints this Midwestern taste: "There are very few of the sort of modal tunes heard in the eastern United States and there is very little interest in such music. Even when the melody suggests otherwise, Missouri fiddlers prefer the dominant (V7 chord) over the modal (VII chord) when ending a phrase or tune." Inevitably, regional penchants for acceptable music-making point to larger social histories at work behind those preferences. Doc Hopkins, a rural Kentuckian who spent the greater part of his life in Chicago, moved easily between two worlds, bringing country music to the city and transmitting it out to the countryside again. Along the way he understood his audience and respected their needs.

## 16. LITTLE RABBIT/SHEEP SHELL CORN

*Stephen Wade, banjo; Mike Craver, piano; Danny Knicely, mandolin; James Leva, fiddle; Zan McLeod, guitar.*

Both “Little Rabbit” and “Sheep Shell Corn” have received classic treatments on earlier records. This version of “Little Rabbit” comes from Crockett’s Kentucky Mountaineers, a family band whose 1931 Brunswick release splices “Little Rabbit” with “Rabbit, Where’s Your Mammy.” Reissues of their appealing music have appeared for years, beginning with the 1947 *Mountain Frolic* collection. Fleming Brown purchased that album soon after its release, and from there he learned John “Dad” Crockett’s banjo song “Sugar Hill,” recorded in Chicago in 1929. In the 1940s Doc Hopkins made there a series of radio transcriptions of some 55 dance calls and fiddle tunes with John’s son, fiddler Alan Crockett. Doc much admired Alan’s playing, a career sadly curtailed by his suicide in 1947.

I learned “Little Rabbit” largely from the 1931 recording and from Tom Paley, whose staggered banjo stroke on the tune’s third strain deftly replicates the fiddle’s bowing motion. But I need to credit another individual for providing larger comprehension of this piece. In June 1980, I made a pilgrimage, like so many aspiring musicians, to Toast, North Carolina, to the home of North Carolina fiddler, banjoist, and master teacher Tommy Jarrell. Tommy (1901–85) showed me a closely related tune to “Little Rabbit,” one that he and his father played, called “John Brown’s Dream.” The most important thing to remember about this tune and music in general, he counseled, is to play steadily. Don’t speed up and don’t slow down. “Music,” he said, turning his hand like a revolving spoke, “is a wheel.” By that pulsation, we approach this tune here. Happily, we do so by following one of Tommy’s most accomplished inheritors and interpreters, fiddler and friend James Leva.

“Sheep Shell Corn by the Rattlin’ of His Horn”—its full title—comes from a 1941 Library of Congress recording of Grayson County, Virginia, fiddler Emmett W. Lundy. Lundy (1864–1953) had mastered a great solo fiddling style that he absorbed from Green Leonard, a much older player

who lived near him. Not dissimilar to Doc Hopkins's showing but not teaching the music to Fleming Brown, Lundy said that Leonard "didn't teach them [tunes] to me, but I caught them from him. And in his last days he told me that I was the only one that had tracked him down, and he wanted to learn me some old pieces before he died—he didn't want 'em to be buried—and live after he was done" (quoted in Carter). "Sheep Shell Corn" numbered among those old pieces that lived through Emmett Lundy. Here we try to channel the fullness of Lundy's melodic detail playing triplets both fretted and bowed, trading off registers, and shifting the lead from banjo to fiddle to mandolin. I also hoped that by modulating keys from "Little Rabbit" (cast here in G) to "Sheep Shell Corn" (set in A) we might summon some of the majestic force Lundy brought to this music he caught so well.

## 17. BERKELEY MARCH/UNDER THE DOUBLE EAGLE

*Stephen Wade, banjo; Mike Craver, piano; Danny Knicely, bass; Zan McLeod, guitar.*

These marches—the first written for the banjo, and the second orchestrated for regimental band and concert symphony—reach back to the dawn of recorded sound. They also presage the ascent of ragtime across America.

"Berkeley March," a two-step set in 6/8 time, was composed in about 1892 by the professional banjo team of Reuben Brooks (1861–1906) and Harry Denton (1865–1959).<sup>9</sup> The duo, active as performers, teachers, and musical merchandisers in the 1890s, formed a publishing company that offered sheet-music editions of their arrangements and compositions. While they made no known recordings together, Ruby Brooks recorded a number of banjo pieces on his own that included favorites such as "Stars and Stripes Forever" and "Georgia Camp Meeting." He waxed the "Berkeley March" on the obscure Bettini label probably around 1900.

By then Brooks and Denton's popular march had already shown up on other recordings. The earliest of these appears to be Vess L. Ossman's Columbia-label cylinder first released about 1895, followed by the Washington, D.C., banjo team of Cullen and Collins on Berliner 481 (ca. 1898), and again Ossman on Edison 2601 (made about the same time). This increasing number of "Berkeley March" recordings coincided with ragtime's growing popularity. In that era, no American banjoists, including Brooks and Denton, surpassed Ossman (1868–1923) or his younger counterpart, Fred Van Eps (1878–1960), in recorded productivity. Their output reveals the enormous instrumental mastery they each possessed.

For me, that achievement became palpable in the person of Paul Cadwell (1889–1983). A Presbyterian minister's son from Westfield, New Jersey, who learned to read music before he learned to read English, Cadwell evinced his musical gifts early on. After piano lessons that began at age five, and starting on banjo at ten, Cadwell soon became Fred Van Eps's student. Those lessons took hold, and by fifteen Paul had performed the finale of the "William Tell Overture" in public. While never a full-time musician, Paul played with the Van Eps Trio for the *Dutch Masters Hour* radio broadcast and soloed with the NBC symphony. Throughout his life, he embraced all kinds of music, and found himself as much at home playing Haydn's "Gypsy Rondo" as he took pleasure in arranging fiddle-tune medleys.<sup>10</sup>

When I met Paul in August 1976, he was the oldest man I knew. Nothing seemed more emblematic of his advanced age than the fact that Woodrow Wilson had been his history teacher at Princeton, before ascending to the presidency. I remember, too, at Paul's home, watching him reach into a drawer and with a quiet smile produce a faded telegram he had received during his student years at Harvard Law School. Dated early 1912, and addressed to him as a member of the state militia, it summoned Paul to the famed "Bread and Roses" textile strike then underway. "Cadet Cadwell," it read, "Report to Lawrence, Massachusetts, at once. Bring your own horse."

This weaving of the personal and the historical—a thread that braids Brooks and Denton to Vess L. Ossman to Fred Van Eps to Paul Cadwell—extends to rural Southern banjoists who translated ragtime-era tunes and techniques into their own idiom. Perhaps the most obvious of these connections lies in banjo player and band leader Charlie Poole’s indebtedness to Fred Van Eps for his “Southern Medley” and “Sunset March” (see Poole). *Grand Ole Opry* patriarch Uncle Dave Macon likewise reworked city-based recordings—from “Eli Green’s Cakewalk” to his several laughing songs to his seemingly autobiographical yet pre-existing “They’re After Me.” The list of hillbilly artists drawing from earlier popular music goes on and on (see Cohen).

One of those individuals was Kirk McGee, my source for “Under the Double Eagle.” By the time Kirk played it, the piece had become well established in band shell and parade repertory, along with numerous recorded brass and string renditions. Austrian “March King” Josef Franz Wagner completed the piece in 1902. That year English banjoist Olly Oakley recorded it, and in a few months’ time, John Philip Sousa’s band began to popularize it in the United States via their recordings and personal appearances. Kirk McGee’s performance, one of many Southern adaptations of the march, adds to this discography.

In July 1981, I visited Kirk (1899–1983), best known for having accompanied Uncle Dave Macon and having played with his late older brother, Sam McGee. Sam and the Skillet Lickers’ Riley Puckett were the two earliest players to record solo guitar breaks in country music. By then Kirk was the longest continually performing member of the *Grand Ole Opry*. During our time together Kirk offered a breathtaking range of music: from his father’s Henry Ford contest fiddle tunes to his mother’s Civil War ballads, from singing-school hymns he learned as a youth to demanding arrangements he made up of “St. Louis Blues” and “Dill Pickles Rag,” from standards like “Old Folks at Home” to “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” from songs he heard black section hands do as they laid rails near his childhood home in Franklin, Tennessee, to pieces he learned from itinerant players “just walking around from house to house” (McGee 1981).



Kirk used a chord-melody style. Instead of relying on the banjo's open strings and alternative tunings, he most often employed the tuning used by Ossman and his contemporaries, the highly flexible "standard C" (gCGBD) that gave him facility in all keys. He fitted his melodies around the chords, making use of majors, minors, diminished, and sevenths—a chordal vocabulary more conventional to the piano and guitar of the ragtime era than to the modal intervals in old-time music. The C tuning Kirk preferred includes a lower bass note, allowing him to make tiny bass runs and fills between chord changes. He worked without a capo, simply tightening all the strings a whole tone up or down, preserving the entire fretboard as a playable surface. He explained that his right-hand picking followed his left-hand noting, and urged that "any time you can, put two strings together. Do it like you're making a chord." Then he gave an example, playing "Danny Boy" in multiple positions all along the neck. He drew every voicing he could from the nostalgic melody, connecting each part with passing chords or brief note runs. His eyes sparkling, he looked up from the fingerboard and said, "You just find more and more on it all the time."<sup>11</sup>

That evening, our session complete, I helped him to his car and put his banjo, fiddle, and guitar in the trunk of his new Cadillac. I noticed bemusement in his face as he quietly watched it close,



*With Kirk McGee, Franklin, Tenn.,  
July 9, 1981.*

the lid sliding into place and electronically locking. He chuckled over this amenity of a late-model automobile. For years he had traveled to engagements in a Model T, and he still remembered the farm wagons drawn by mules that his brother Sam, also a blacksmith, had shoed.

Eras met in that moment the trunk snapped shut. Open to modernity and change while mindful of the past, Kirk's quenchless delight in music and its potential—that you just find more and more on it all the time—resonated as we said good-bye. His embrace of so many sources, like Paul Cadwell's capaciousness, tells an ongoing story of American life as it does its music: permeable boundaries, ceaselessly in transit, continually entwined.

## 18. HAND IN HAND

*Stephen Wade, banjo; Mike Craver, pump organ; Zan McLeod, guitar.*

For 20 years, I worked closely with North Carolina-born banjoist, fiddler, and composer Tony Ellis. We met in Ohio at the 1983 National Folk Festival where he played backup banjo for old-time fiddler Lonnie Seymour. Tony used a three-finger accompaniment honed by Earl Scruggs in his duets with fiddler Paul Warren. This hugely attractive style, which years earlier had propelled me to learn the banjo in the first place, drew me to visit with Tony that evening. A member of Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys from 1960 to 1962, Tony played his own arrangement of "Sally Ann," fusing an old-time banjo tuning with Scruggs-style picking.<sup>12</sup> The amalgam absolutely thrilled me. I soon found myself making regular trips to his home, and our collaboration began, tangibly resulting in four albums and a music book.

As Tony made up new tunes, melodies that eventually included the air "Hand in Hand," which he created as a wedding march, I often suggested settings for these pieces, hoping that one or another

might work on a recording. The most notable of these was my thought to frame his banjo with the pump organ. Eventually the musician who brought that idea to life was my treasured colleague Mike Craver, the same keyboardist heard on this album and whose playing sets its essential sound.

Back when Tony and I first met, Fleming Brown's health had already begun its decline. During those final months Fleming heard tapes of Tony and me playing together, a pairing of fiddle and banjo. He warmly approved what we did. At the same time, Tony loved the tapes I brought him of Fleming. In the pain of Fleming's ebbing, I found solace in Tony's flowering. Not surprisingly, the first album I ever produced was Fleming's, and the next was Tony's.

Both these artists, despite their differences of upbringing and expertise, shared an understanding of the music they loved. Each of them sifted from tradition, amplifying its gifts with their own creativity. This banjo diary, bearing witness to their guidance and example, and to others equally in thrall of the wonderfully cantankerous musical instrument that unites us, leaves many more pages still to write.

Stephen Wade  
Washington, D.C.  
February 2012



## Endnotes

1. Bookmiller Shannon's 45 rpm recording featured "Cripple Creek" on one side with "Bunker Hill" on the other. He played both tunes with guitarist Lonnie Avey of Newnata, Arkansas. Shan-Avey Records SA 0012 (n.d.).
2. George Childers's fretted version of this song, which he called "Five Hundred Miles," can be heard on *Folk Visions & Voices: Traditional Music & Song in Northern Georgia, Volume Two*, Ethnic Folkways FE 34162 (1984). See also Rosenbaum, *Folk Visions and Voices*, 160–63 and 173.
3. For "Cuckoo's Nest" see *Pat Dunford*, Puritan Records 5012 (1978); for "Temperance Reel" (called "Teetotaler's Fancy") see Art Rosenbaum, *Five-String Banjo*, Kicking Mule KM 108 (1974); for "Hop Light Ladies" (called "Miss McCloud's Reel") see *Art Rosenbaum and Al Murphy*, Meadowlands MS-2 (1972).
4. The Hall citation appears in Schreyer, *Banjo Entertainers*, 110. For banjo players performing "Home Sweet Home" in England, see Winans and Kaufman, "Minstrel and Classic Banjo" 8, 9, 13. Paganini appears on the back cover of Flatt and Scruggs, *Foggy Mountain Banjo*, Columbia CS 8S 8364 (1961). Rosenberg discusses this reference in his *Bluegrass*, 152.
5. For a wonderful survey of the bluegrass history of "Home Sweet Home" see Dick Spottswood's "Bluegrass Master Class," at [www.BlueGrassCountry.org](http://www.BlueGrassCountry.org), first broadcast July 5, 2009.

6. In our Jan. 30, 2012, telephone conversation, Charlie Faurot noted that he plans to include Woody Wachtel's performance of "Rocky Hill" on a forthcoming banjo anthology for his Old Blue label.

7. "Rocky Hill" appears on *Fleming Brown*, Folk-Legacy FSI-4, originally numbered FSI-1 (1962). Fleming's final recordings (which include "Uncle Buddy") comprise *Little Rosewood Casket and Other Songs of Joy*, Merrywang 1953 (1984).

8. To hear Henry Reed play "Santa Anna's Retreat," see Alan Jabbour's "Fiddle Tunes of the Old Frontier: The Henry Reed Collection" at the Library of Congress's American Memory Web site. Alan has also recorded it with James Reed and Bertram Levy on *A Henry Reed Reunion*, Bertram Levy Music Productions and Alan Jabbour (2002).

9. Banjo scholar Eli Kaufman points out that varying dates for Brooks's birth have surfaced, possibly placing it at 1860 instead of 1861. Email to author, Feb. 19, 2012.

10. See Paul Cadwell obituary in "The Last Chord" column, *Five-Stringer* 151 (Fall 1983): 6.

11. I mention this moment and play several more of Kirk's tunes on my *Dancing Home*, Flying Fish FF 70543 (1990). Kirk also appears in my *Catching the Music*.

12. See also Ted Lundy's 1970 recording of "Mountain Sally Ann." Reissued on *Ted Lundy and the Southern Mountain Boys*, Old Blue Records OB-707 (2011).



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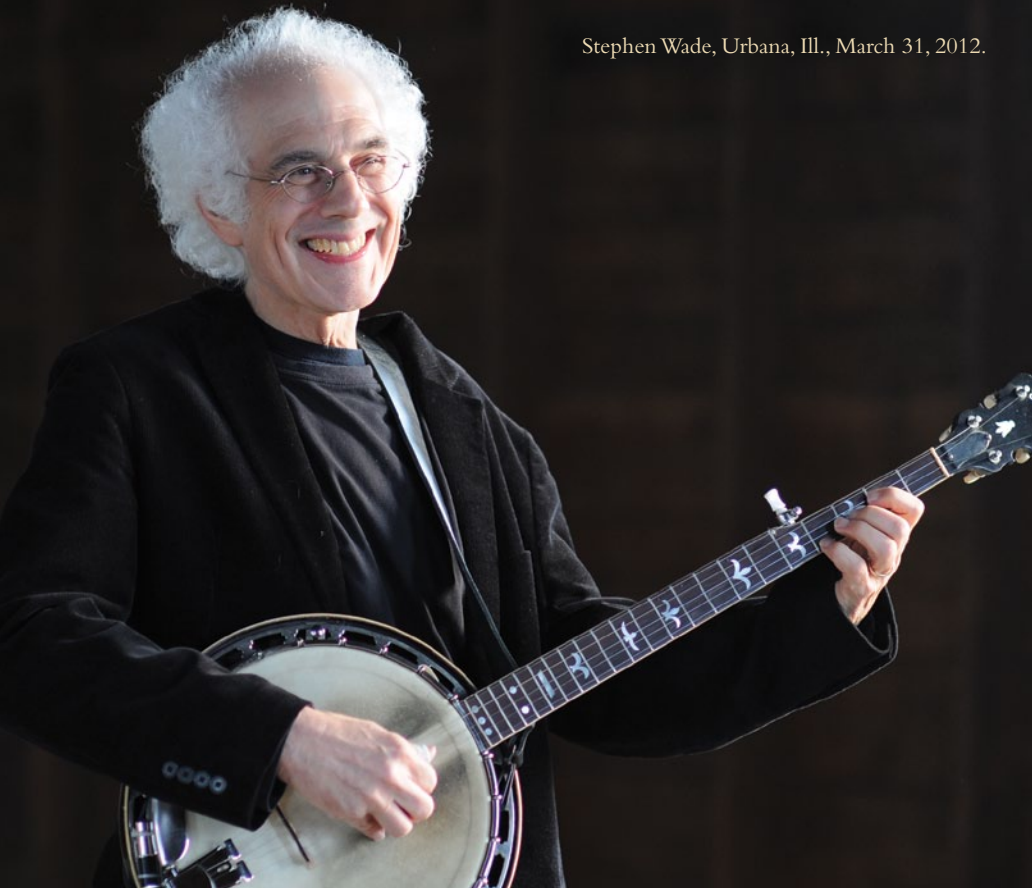
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Stephen Wade, Urbana, Ill., March 31, 2012.



Well Stone this is about all I feel up to  
writing at present so I'll hang up for  
now, and write you what ever I think  
of at another time wishing you  
good health - good business. And a good  
bed to sleep on

Yours continuously  
Doc