



Smithsonian Folkways

The

COUNTRY GENTLEMEN

Going Back to the Blue Ridge Mountains



The
COUNTRY
& GENTLEMEN

SFW CD 40175

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Going Back to the Blue Ridge Mountains

1. Going Back to the Blue Ridge Mountains 2:01
(Alton Delmore / Vidor Publications Inc., BMI)
2. Going to the Races 2:09
(Carter Stanley / Fort Knox Music Inc. – Trio Music Inc., BMI)
3. Azzuro Campana 2:42
(Arr. Eddie Adcock – John Duffey / Zap Publishing Co., BMI)
4. Dark as a Dungeon 5:06
(Merle Travis / Merle's Girls Music, BMI)
5. Copper Kettle 3:00
6. Billy in the Low Ground 2:20
7. I Saw the Light 2:09
(Hank Williams / Sony ATV Acuff-Rose Music, BMI)
8. Tom Dooley # 2 2:55
9. Brown Mountain Light 2:44
(Scott Wiseman / Lynn Music Co., BMI)
10. Electricity 2:31
(Jimmy Murphy / Sony ATV Acuff-Rose Music, BMI)
11. Daybreak in Dixie 2:23
(Bill Napier / Zap Publishing Co., BMI)
12. Mary Dear 3:52
(Arr. John Duffey / Zap Publishing Co., BMI)
13. Sad and Lonesome Day 2:40
(Arr. John Duffey – Pete Kuykendall / Zap Publishing Co., BMI)
14. Cripple Creek 2:50
15. Don't This Road Look Rough and Rocky? 3:17
16. Muleskinner Blues 3:58
(Jimmie Rodgers – George Vaughn / Peer International Corp., BMI)



Modern bluegrass
was born on July 4, 1957.

The COUNTRY GENTLEMEN

Going Back to the Blue Ridge Mountains

Nobody knew it at the time, but when Charlie Waller, John Duffey, and Bill Emerson took the stage together that night for the first time, at the Admiral Grill in Bailey's Crossroads, Virginia, it was immediately apparent that the three men clicked musically. By the end of the evening, they had decided to form a new band.

That Independence Day performance was pure happenstance. The usual attraction at the Admiral Grill was the bluegrass band Buzz Busby and the Bayou Boys, but Busby and several of his band members had been involved in a horrendous car wreck late the night before. "We hit a pole going around 90 miles per hour," recalled Busby, an intense singer and mandolinist from Louisiana who was critically injured in the accident and almost died. He would remain

hospitalized for two months. The band's guitar player (a young man named Eddie Adcock) and the bass player were less seriously injured but were banged up enough to knock the Bayou Boys out of commission.

The Bayou Boys' banjo picker, Bill Emerson, wasn't in the car, so it fell to him to deal with the job at the Grill. His first call was to guitarist Charlie Waller. Having just spent two years working full time as the Bayou Boys' lead singer and another few months with them on a part-time basis, Waller was thoroughly familiar with the band's repertoire. Bass player Larry Lahey was recruited, and, for the last piece of the puzzle, Emerson called John Duffey, a young mandolinist and tenor singer then working with a band in Maryland, Lucky Chatman and the Ozark Mountain Boys.

As Waller remembered that first night, “We just got together and I said, ‘Okay, you play mandolin, I’ll play guitar, and let’s get up and sing.’” That was enough of a plan. Waller was an assured lead singer, with a warm but powerful voice that owed more to his idol Hank Snow than it did to the “high lonesome” tradition. Duffey was even then in a class of his own as a tenor singer. Together, the two made an exciting and highly distinctive vocal team. Plans were launched to form a new band around the Duffey-Waller vocal combination. The group would be called the Country Gentlemen, an urbane name chosen by Duffey to reflect the band’s Washington, D.C. base.

It took the Country Gentlemen three or four years to develop a band “sound,” but once the group got rolling, there was no stopping it. By the early 1960s—when the recordings on this CD were made—the band was already established as one of the leading bluegrass outfits on the fledgling circuit. The Country Gentlemen would finish the decade as the most prominent bluegrass band of the 1960s (and early 1970s as well), influencing countless groups in repertoire, stage performance, instrumentation, audio technology, business practices,

costuming, and more.

As a “training school” for bluegrass musicians, the Country Gentlemen would have to rank among the top three, along with Bill Monroe’s Blue Grass Boys and Doyle Lawson’s Quicksilver. Since Waller, Emerson, and Duffey played their first gig together, numerous superb musicians have joined them and/or followed in their footsteps in the Country Gentlemen. A partial list includes mandolinists Doyle Lawson, Jimmy Gaudreau, and Norman Wright; banjo players Eddie Adcock, James Bailey, Mike Lilly, Keith Little, and Bill Holden; fiddler Ricky Skaggs; dobro master Jerry Douglas; and bass players Tom Gray, Bill Yates, and Ed Ferris.

It would be almost impossible to imagine modern-day bluegrass without the Country Gentlemen. The band was a vital link between the “first generation” musicians of the 1940s and early 1950s and the newgrass and progressive bluegrass musicians of the 1960s and 1970s. The Gents also served a vital role by bridging the cultural gap between the older, rural bluegrass fans and the younger, urban folk music fans. It was the Country Gentlemen who best capitalized upon the inroads into folk music made by Flatt and

Scruggs, and it was the Gents who most consolidated and advanced those gains.

And now, fifty years have gone by since the Country Gentlemen first roamed the earth. Known for such enduring songs as “Bringing Mary Home,” “Two Little Boys,” “Legend of the Rebel Soldier,” “This Morning at Nine,” “Calling My Children Home,” “Come and Sit by the River,” “Fox on the Run,” and dozens more, the band richly deserved its 1996 induction into the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) Hall of Honor. The Country Gentlemen was not only the first band to be inducted (all previous inductees had been individuals) but also the first act from the so-called second generation of bluegrass.

The version of the band that people have come to call the “classic” Country Gentlemen—Charlie Waller, John Duffey, Eddie Adcock, and Tom Gray, the foursome heard on this album—is one of the greatest ensembles in bluegrass history. This album catches the band in its prime.

Back in the summer of 1957, the biggest problem facing Waller, Duffey, and Emerson was finding a bass player who would stick. Larry Lahey left soon after the band was launched. He was replaced by Tom Morgan, who was replaced in turn by Jim Cox. Several other bassists filled the slot in the late 1950s, including Pete Kuykendall (who performed as Pete Roberts), Sonny Johnson, Roy Self, and Stoney Edwards. The Country Gentlemen finally found some stability on the bottom end in 1960 when Tom Gray joined the band.

Gray had been strongly influenced by George Shuffler’s bass playing with the Stanley Brothers, especially the “walking bass” he had played so powerfully on some of the Stanleys’ Mercury recordings of the mid-1950s. Gray found that the style fit well with the Gents’ sound, and he remembers the musical atmosphere as very supportive. “I was lucky when I joined the Country Gentlemen,” he says, “because they were an ideal group to improvise in just as freely as I liked. As a matter of fact, I was encouraged to do more all the time.”

The band’s quest for the “right” banjo player also took some time. Bill Emerson left the band in the fall of 1958. The multi-

talented Pete Kuykendall played banjo with the band for several months until June 1959, when he was briefly replaced by Porter Church, an underappreciated banjo picker who worked with Red Allen, Frank Wakefield, and others during his career.

“We were on the lookout for another banjo player,” Charlie Waller once explained. “We met Eddie Adcock, and he had such an unusual style with a lot of feeling that we asked him if he’d work with us.” Duffey was also enthusiastic about the young Adcock, proclaiming, “When you need a banjo for other uses than breakdowns, then you need someone who has two hands instead of one. Eddie Adcock is more versatile and can do more things with a banjo than anyone within the realm of public notice.”

Adcock was only twenty-one when he joined the Country Gentlemen, but he was already a seasoned veteran and a dazzling player, on both banjo and guitar, and would soon become a sensational baritone singer. Adcock had played with several bands, most notably that of Mac Wiseman, and he was interested in playing with the Gentlemen but had reservations about the Gents’ sound and direction. He wasn’t keen on copying

any other bands, but instead wanted to try to create a new voice within the bluegrass style, both vocally and instrumentally.

“At that point,” Eddie explained in a 1976 interview in *Muleskinner News*, “the Country Gentlemen were extremely affected by [the vocals of] the Osborne Brothers and Red Allen. They weren’t actually doing the Osborne Brothers’ songs, but they were doing a lot of songs like the Osborne Brothers. And pretty soon we realized—I guess John realized before anybody—that I wasn’t happy singing Osborne Brothers-type stuff. I liked it, but not for us.”

As far as material that would set the Gents apart, the band looked to the past for one key to a new sound. “John was the first one in the Library of Congress looking for songs,” says Eddie Adcock. “Our minds were in ‘Knoxville Girl’ and stuff like that—the old traditional stuff that nobody had heard. So we dug it up, out of the Library of Congress.”

Adcock also found Waller and Duffey receptive to his desire for a more adventure-some instrumental sound. “I was interested in doing things a little bit different,” Adcock recalls, “and I was allowed the freedom to do what I wanted to.” Duffey also changed

“You cannot play like somebody else and expect to create anything that’s your own.”



*Crossroads Restaurant, Baileys Crossroads, Virginia, 1960 or 1961.
By Smith's Litho Service, Chevy Chase, Maryland.*

his approach to the mandolin, adopting the bebop jazz technique of playing solos based on a song's chord changes rather than its melody.

"You cannot play like somebody else and expect to create anything that's your own," Duffey explained at the time. "Bill [Monroe] is the finest in his style, and no one can surpass him at it! However, anyone in the business knows that no success or fame can be achieved by copying note for note an already established artist.... There are different ways to play other than the style of Bill Monroe."

Charlie Waller (1935–2004) was born in Texas and spent his youth in Louisiana before moving to the Washington, D.C., area in 1945. Waller began his professional music career three years later, singing with two other thirteen-year-olds in local beer joints. "It was not a nice place for young kids to be in," he remembered, "but they paid us." Charlie made \$3 a night, plus tips, playing the country music hits of the day, with a special emphasis on those by his favorite singer, Hank Snow.

Waller moved to Baltimore in 1954 to play with bluegrass mandolinist Earl Taylor. He was soon splitting his time between that

band and Buzz Busby's Bayou Boys, which he joined full time in 1955. Waller played with Busby for two years, during which time the band moved to Louisiana and then back to Washington. He was working off and on with Busby at the time of the 1957 car crash that led to the formation of the Country Gentlemen. Waller was never in another band. He led the Country Gentlemen until his death in 2004.

It sounds odd to hear from one of the most popular bluegrass singers of the past fifty years, but Waller claimed not to have been much of a bluegrass fan until about ten years into his career with the Gents. "I didn't dig bluegrass in the beginning," he told an interviewer in the early 1970s. "We played a benefit for Carter Stanley, after he passed away [in 1966], at the University of Maryland. I sat out in the crowd and looked at Ralph Stanley on the stage. I just got bumps all over me because of what he was doing, the way he was doing it. That door opened, and that's when I really started digging bluegrass."

John Duffey (1934–1996) was raised in Bethesda, Maryland, one of Washington's nicer suburbs. The son of an opera singer, Duffey was a larger-than-life-character who

richly deserves the honor of being called "The Father of Newgrass." As a founding member of both the Country Gentlemen and the Seldom Scene, two of the most important bands in modern bluegrass history, Duffey was a pioneer of the new, an innovator who changed the music in numerous ways.

Duffey was an awesome singer, among the most distinctive in bluegrass. He had an almost unbelievable versatility as a tenor singer, capable of stripping paint from the walls in full roar, but also capable of a delicacy that was downright ethereal. Duffey ranks up there with Bill Monroe and Ralph Stanley as the archetypal bluegrass tenor singers, and his work with the Gents in the 1960s was arguably his best.

He always seemed a bit defensive about his instrumental prowess, but Duffey was a creative, powerful, and endlessly inventive mandolin player. He influenced many young mandolinists, including David Grisman, Jimmy Gaudreau, and Sam Bush, who has called the Gents' 1963 album *Blue Grass Hootenanny* his "favorite bluegrass record ever." Duffey was also one of the first bluegrass mandolinists, along with Jesse McReynolds and Frank Wakefield, to

try to develop a voice for the instrument that didn't copy Bill Monroe. "I've had lots of criticism about how I play my little mandolin," Duffey wrote in 1967. "Well, it may be good or it may be bad, some like it and some don't. Whatever style you want to call it doesn't matter, but remember, IT'S MINE!"

One of the most instrumentally gifted musicians in bluegrass, Eddie Adcock was born in 1938 and raised in Scottsville, Virginia. Adcock was on his own at a young age and supported himself by boxing semi-professionally, racing cars, and playing music. His first professional job was with Smokey Graves and His Blue Star Boys in 1953. Adcock spent the next five years in a variety of bands, playing with Mac Wiseman, Bill Harrell, Buzz Busby, and (for a few months in 1958) Bill Monroe, before joining the Country Gentlemen.

Adcock brought a lot to the band. He was a superb banjo player whose playing combined "Scruggs style," advanced harmonic ideas he had picked up from his friend Don Reno, and licks he adapted from the electric guitar and pedal steel guitar. He also became, under the tutelage of Pete Kuykendall, a peerless baritone

harmony singer. Finally, Adcock had progressive tastes in material, and he pushed the Gents to record songs by Bob Dylan and other contemporary writers and to experiment with arrangements.

The youngest member of the “classic” band, bass player Tom Gray (born in Chicago in 1941) first met the members of the Country Gentlemen while he was still in high school and catching as many of the band’s gigs as he could. He joined the band on stage a few times, and when Jim Cox left the band in 1960, Gray was asked to become the band’s bassist. He was only nineteen years old, but he had already worked out his own sound.

“The thing that made it good for the walking style I played,” Gray has explained of fitting into the Country Gentlemen, “was that the lead instrument players were singing in the trios, and that left nobody with a lead instrument to play back-up. That left a clear path for me to use the bass as a back-up instrument, playing a bit of counter-melody along with the usual rhythm functions.”

The Country Gentlemen made their recording debut in October 1957, cutting “Going to the Races” and “Heavenward

Bound” for the local Dixie label. That single never made it much past the Washington city limits, but the Gents made a proper debut in December 1957, when the band cut “It’s the Blues,” “Yesterday’s Love,” “Dixie Lookaway,” and “Backwoods Blues” for release by Starday, a Nashville-based label that specialized in bluegrass and older styles of country music.

The band made a number of singles for Starday over the next few years, including “Rolling Stone” (a cover of “Tom Dooley” with new lyrics by Kuykendall), “High Lonesome,” “The Devil’s Own,” “Hey Little Girl,” “The Hills of Home,” “New Freedom Bell,” “Mountaineer’s Fling,” “The Church Back Home,” “Poor Ellen Smith,” “Red Rocking Chair,” “I’ll Never Marry,” and “Copper Kettle.”

By the end of 1959, Duffey was pushing for the Gents to record a full-length album, as he had noticed that folk audiences bought LPs instead of singles. The Starday customers were just the opposite—reluctant to embrace the new LPs and content with buying singles—so Starday passed on the album idea, though it continued to release singles by the band. With Starday’s blessing, Duffey approached his old friend Mike

*“We can get another band for half the price
and a bottle of Old Crow.”*



*Reunion concert, Lisner Auditorium, George Washington University, 1980.
By Carl Fleischbauer.*

Seeger about recording for the Folkways label.

Seeger had recently produced two critically acclaimed bluegrass albums for Folkways (*American Banjo Scruggs Style and Mountain Music Bluegrass Style*), so he was given the green light to produce a Country Gentlemen LP. *Country Songs, Old and New*, released in 1960, was the first of the band's four albums on Folkways. It was followed by *Folk Songs & Bluegrass* (1961, produced by Pete Kuykendall), *The Country Gentlemen: On The Road* (1963), and *Going Back to the Blue Ridge Mountains* (1973).

By the early 1960s, the Country Gentlemen's recordings were available on a number of labels. In an unusual but fairly effective arrangement, the Gents were recording albums for Folkways, which sold primarily to younger buyers on college campuses and in such cities as New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. The Gents were also recording singles for Starday, which sold primarily to older, rural buyers. There were additional quasi-legitimate albums on Zap and Design, as well as an album on Mercury, *Folk Session Inside*, that contained material originally recorded for Starday. It was a discographer's nightmare,

but it helped spread the sound of the Country Gentlemen from coast to coast.

Beginning in 1966, the Country Gentlemen recorded at a steady pace, releasing new albums on a regular basis until 2004. Counting reissues and collections, the band averaged about an album per year. Most were for the Rebel label: *Bringing Mary Home*; *The Traveler*; *Play It Like It Is*; *New Look*; *New Sound*; *One Wide River To Cross*; *Sound Off*; *The Award Winning Country Gentlemen*; *Yesterday & Today, Volumes 1–4*; *Joe's Last Train*; *Calling My Children Home*; *25 Years*; *Return Engagement*; *Let The Light Shine Down*; *New Horizon*; *Souvenirs*; and *Early Rebel Years: 1962–1971*.

The band also made albums for *Sugar Hill* (*Sit Down Young Stranger*; *River Bottom*; *Good As Gold*; *Classic Country Gents Reunion*; *Sugar Hill Collection*), *Vanguard* (*The Country Gentlemen*; *Remembrances & Forecasts*; *Complete Vanguard Recordings*), *Starday*, *Seven Seas*, *Copper Creek*, *Freeland*, and *Pinycastle*.

Two things were true about the musical climate in the late 1950s and early 1960s: folk music was hot, and bluegrass was not. These were lean times for bluegrass—not even Bill Monroe could afford to keep a band together and on the road. It made

perfect sense for the Country Gentlemen to court the folk market, even if the move earned them criticism from some quarters. Duffey answered those critics with his usual blend of bluntness and logic: “Before you scream ‘commercialism,’ remember that everyone in the business, whether it be opera or bluegrass, is trying to make a living. You who scream the loudest have probably never tried to earn a living playing bluegrass music.”

Aside from Flatt and Scruggs, the Country Gentlemen probably benefited more than any other bluegrass band from the folk music revival of the 1950s and early 1960s. Duffey once referred to the Gents as having “tippy-toed into other realms of possibilities,” but the band's entry into the burgeoning folk music scene was both a calculated career move and a pragmatic economic decision.

“If we can't sell our straight bluegrass to bluegrass fans,” explained Duffey in 1967, “then we have got to sell something to somebody else. In 1961, we began venturing into the booming ‘Folk Field.’ Why? It's very simple; we would name our price, and the concert promoter or coffee house owner would say, ‘Great, when can we get you?’

We would name our price to a hillbilly park owner or country promoter, and they would say, ‘We don't pay that kind of money for bluegrass. We can get [another band] for half the price and a bottle of Old Crow.’

“Going into other fields involved some change in material in order to give our audience what they wanted to hear. However, this alteration brought no change in our instruments or singing. It merely brought new material to the field. These slight deviations also made bluegrass palatable to many more people. I think I'm safe in saying that possibly other than Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, we have converted more people to bluegrass than any other group.”

Duffey was probably right about that last point. The band played its first college concert in May 1961, at Oberlin College in Ohio, and this was a good market for the Gents, though not always a comfortable fit. While the band played Carnegie Hall in 1961, it was never invited to perform at the Newport Folk Festival, the ultimate sign of true acceptance by the folkies. This snub always nettled Duffey, who felt that the Newport “gatekeepers” held the band's popularity against it.

That's only partly right. What the guardians of folk purity really held against the Gents was not so much popularity as not being "authentic" enough. The band members weren't old enough, they weren't from the mountains, they had too much fun on stage, and they dressed more like the Brothers Four than the Stanley Brothers. This negative attitude stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the difference between the history of bluegrass music and its tradition. The Country Gentlemen were squarely within the bluegrass tradition, which is one of constant innovation.

The lingering resentment over the folk establishment's treatment of the group was laid bare in Dick Freeland's liner notes to *Bringing Mary Home*, the first Rebel album by the Country Gentlemen. "Although basically they are considered a bluegrass band," wrote Freeland, "the Country Gentlemen have a distinctive progressive style that can be classified only as their own! This particular style of playing is condemned by certain influential people and thus explains their absence at such places as the Newport Folk Festival and lack of their mention in articles pertaining to this type of music."

Though Duffey's complaints were not out of character, his screwball sense of humor and persona were a much better reflection of his approach to life. One important contribution of the early Country Gentlemen that is often overlooked is that the band introduced the concept of "fun" to bluegrass performance. Folklorist Thomas Adler once noted that bluegrass "has always been an uncommonly serious-looking form of 'playing.'" For Bill Monroe, bluegrass was work, as well as a deadly serious form of ritualized competition to establish one's place. For the Gents, and especially John Duffey and Eddie Adcock, bluegrass was about having as much fun as possible while entertaining an audience. They believed that "playing" music should be just that—a form of play.

The Gents didn't bring humor to bluegrass, as rube or hayseed comedy was a mainstay of most bluegrass bands from Monroe's early days into the 1970s. But that comedy was a discrete part of a band's show, often confined to one band member (usually the bass player) and kept carefully separate from the music. The Gents changed that by integrating comedy into their act, naturally and spontaneously, so well that it became part of the band's

... the band introduced the concept of "fun" to bluegrass performance.



Oberlin College, 1963. By Ann Milovsorroff.

identity and image. It didn't matter that many of Charlie's jokes were groaningly bad or that some of the band's shtick was silly or over-the-top. Here was a band that had fun: a new idea in the bluegrass world.

"Through the years," Duffey explained, "it has been the policy for bluegrass musicians to stand upon the stage and look mad at the world or as if they had died the day before. We have found that this is a bad policy. If you look like you are enjoying yourself and put a little 'show' into your performance, you'll be surprised at the amount of new faces you will attract."

The Country Gentlemen had a banner year in 1972. The band dominated the Mule-skinners News Bluegrass Awards, winning the honors for Band of the Year, Best Bluegrass Singer (Waller), Best Vocal Group, Best Song of the Year, and Best Album of the Year. By the time *Going Back to the Blue Ridge Mountains* was released in 1973, however, the group heard on the album was history. Only Charlie Waller remained from the "classic" band. Tom Gray and John Duffey were playing in the Seldom Scene, and Eddie Adcock was with IInd Generation.

Gray left the Gents in 1964, when he returned to his previous job as a cartographer at National Geographic. He was replaced by Ed Ferris. Duffey left in 1969, frustrated by the economics of bluegrass and the band's inability to land a major label recording contract. He decided to stay home and build and repair mandolins.

This wasn't a huge surprise, as Duffey had threatened to retire a year or so earlier, when he wrote in *Bluegrass Unlimited*, "It is appalling to know that one can make a better living sweeping the streets than some well-known groups make playing music. We have no intention of saving up to go on tour, and therefore if it is not worthwhile, I would rather stay home and glue guitars together. Doesn't that make sense?"

Eddie Adcock left the band in 1970 and was replaced by original Gent Bill Emerson. The next year, Adcock formed the band IInd Generation, which also included Jimmy Gaudreau, a young mandolinist from Rhode Island who had replaced Duffey in the Gents. After the dust settled, the line-up of the Country Gentlemen at the time of this album's original release was Charlie Waller, Bill Emerson, mandolinist Doyle Lawson, and bass player Bill Yates.

The band's other 1973 releases included *The Country Gentlemen* (Vanguard) and *Yesterday & Today, Volume 1 and 2* (Rebel).

Considering the band's historical reputation for iconoclasm, most of the songs and tunes on *Going Back to the Blue Ridge Mountains* are from predictable, non-controversial sources. About half came from the recorded repertoire of the leading bluegrass acts of the time: Bill Monroe, the Stanley Brothers, Flatt and Scruggs, and the Osborne Brothers. Several others came from pre-World War II country performers, probably heard on records that Duffey had unearthed on his regular research trips to the Library of Congress.

Going Back to the Blue Ridge Mountains contains sixteen songs and tunes performed by the "classic" Country Gentlemen.

Song Notes

1. Going Back to the Blue Ridge Mountains

“Going Back to the Blue Ridge Mountains” was recorded for King Records in 1946 by the Delmore Brothers, the greatest of all “brother duets.” Written by Alton Delmore (and published under his pseudonym Jim Scott), the song has been performed by many bluegrass and old-time country bands over the years.

2. Going to the Races

“Going to the Races” was the first song recorded by the Country Gentlemen. Carter Stanley wrote the song for the Gents’ debut single, fashioning it from a couple of older songs, mostly “Let Her Go, God Bless Her,” a mid-1930s hit for J.E. Mainer’s Mountaineers. Liking the result and wanting to cut it himself, Stanley rewrote it as “Gonna Paint the Town,” which the Stanley Brothers recorded for Starday in 1958.

3. Azzuro Campana

“Azzuro Campana,” an instrumental usually known as “Blue Bell,” comes from the playing of the great guitarist, singer, and songwriter Merle Travis. A native of western Kentucky, Travis developed an intricate fingerpicking style on the guitar that influenced Chet Atkins, Doc Watson, and millions of other guitarists. Travis recorded this 19th-century tune for Capitol in the late 1940s, one of a series of solo guitar instrumentals collected on the 1960 album *Walkin’ the Strings*. Turned into a banjo showcase by Adcock, the tune is a fine example of his progressive synthesis of Travis picking (applied to the banjo) and ideas from Don Reno’s jazzier playing.

4. Dark as a Dungeon

“Dark as a Dungeon” was an “instant folk song” written and recorded by Merle Travis in 1946. Travis had already scored two chart-topping country hits—“Divorce Me

C.O.D.” and “So Round, So Firm, So Fully Packed”—when Capitol Records executive Cliffie Stone asked Travis to record an album of traditional Kentucky coal-mining folk songs. Travis said that they had all been done, so Stone told him to write some. Always the pragmatist, Travis showed up at the recording studio the next day with “Dark as a Dungeon” and “Sixteen Tons,” the heart of his ensuing Capitol album *Folk Songs of the Hills*.

5. Copper Kettle

“Copper Kettle” came from the singing of Joan Baez, who recorded the moonshining song on her Vanguard album *Joan Baez in Concert* (1962). The song isn’t a traditional folk song, but was instead composed by Alfred F. Beddoe for his 1953 “folk opera,” *Go Lightly, Stranger*. The Gents had high hopes for the song, which they recorded for the band’s final Starday single. The single’s failure to land a major label recording deal for the band rankled Duffey for years.

6. Billy in the Low Ground

“Billy in the Low Ground” is a popular instrumental that was recorded in 1923 by Fiddlin’ John Carson as a fiddle solo and was one of the earliest country records to

be commercially released. It was recorded by several fiddlers in the 1920s, including Leonard Rutherford, Doc Roberts, and Eck Robertson. The tune was old even then. It had been published in an American collection called *Virginia Reels* in 1839 and known in England and Ireland long before that, under such titles as “The Braes of Auchtertyre” and “Fiddler’s Drunk and the Fun’s All Over.” The Osborne Brothers cut a bluegrass version of the tune in 1962 for their album *Bluegrass Instrumentals*, a likely influence on this version by the Gents.

7. I Saw the Light

“I Saw the Light,” the much-loved gospel song, was written by Hank Williams and recorded by him in 1947. Since Bill Monroe recorded it with a quartet arrangement in 1958, countless other bluegrass artists have followed suit, including the Stanley Brothers, Ricky Skaggs, Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver, and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band (with Roy Acuff and Earl Scruggs) on the landmark album *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*.

8. Tom Dooley #2

“Tom Dooley #2” was the Country Gentlemen’s second recording of the Kingston

Trio's massive pop hit, the song that moved the folk revival into the cultural mainstream. Shortly after the Trio's record topped the *Billboard* pop chart in 1958, the Gents answered with "Rolling Stone," a cover version with additional lyrics by Pete Kuykendall. The less-than-reverent "Tom Dooley #2" shows the Gents in a playful mood, poking a little fun at their folkie contemporaries; the routine about the banjo playing on "Tom Dooley" is priceless.

9. Brown Mountain Light

"Brown Mountain Light," written by Scotty Wiseman (of Lulu Belle and Scotty fame), was a hit for both the Gents and the Kingston Trio in the early 1960s. At about the same time, the song was recorded in California by the Hillmen, a young bluegrass band notable mostly in retrospect, as it included future Byrd and Flying Burrito Brother Chris Hillman, future Bluegrass Cardinal Don Parmley, and future country singing star Vern Gosdin. The song recounts a local legend explaining the origin of the mysterious lights seen on Brown Mountain, an actual mountain in western North Carolina. This phenomenon was first noted by Native Americans around 1200 and has baffled scientists to this day.

10. Electricity

"Electricity," a now-classic novelty song that links spirituality with electric current, was written and recorded by Alabama singer Jimmy Murphy for RCA Victor in 1951. Murphy's record wasn't really a hit, but it attained a cult following during the 1950s and 1960s among record collectors and musicians who appreciated Murphy's lead guitar work and the record's proto-rockabilly sound. That following was largely responsible for Murphy resurfacing in 1978 with *Electricity*, a new album on Sugar Hill featuring Ricky Skaggs and Jerry Douglas. Adcock likely brought this song to the band, and it provided Charlie Waller a rare opportunity to demonstrate his prowess as a lead guitar player. Waller's playing reflects not only Murphy's original record but also the flatpicking style of Hank Snow, a vastly underrated guitarist.

11. Daybreak in Dixie

"Daybreak in Dixie," an instrumental romp by Adcock and Duffey, is another number from the repertoire of the Stanley Brothers, who recorded it twice: for Mercury in 1957 (with Carter Stanley listed as writer) and again in 1960 for King (with Ralph Stanley listed). The tune was actually

written by Bill Napier, who played mandolin with the Stanleys for a couple of years in the late 1950s before forming a successful partnership with singer Charlie Moore. Napier was also the first lead guitarist to record with the Stanley Brothers.

12. Mary Dear

"Mary Dear," a sentimental song dating to the World War I years, tells of a soldier's sad farewell to his sweetheart before shipping off to battle. It was recorded by both Charlie Poole and Poole's guitarist Roy Harvey in the late 1920s. The Gents' friend and contemporary Bill Clifton helped popularize "Mary Dear" in the 1950s and early 1960s. Duffey says in the song's introduction that he first heard it on a record by singing cowboy Gene Autry, who recorded it in 1940.

13. Sad and Lonesome Day

"Sad and Lonesome Day" is generally credited to Fiddlin' Arthur Smith, who recorded it as "A Lonesome Day Today" in 1938 with backing from Alton and Rabon Delmore. Red Smiley was one of the first bluegrass singers to perform the song, but the definitive bluegrass recording is by Red Allen. An outstanding singer who had

made an album for Folkways with mandolinist Frank Wakefield, Allen recorded the song twice in the mid-1960s. The first version was released on a 1965 Melodeon album, *The Solid Bluegrass Sound of The Kentuckians*. The version that likely influenced the Country Gentlemen, however, was from two years earlier and featured powerful lead guitar playing by Pete Kuykendall, who also engineered the session. Though this recording wouldn't see the light of day until it appeared on a County album in 1975, it seems logical to assume that Kuykendall would have shared the impressive tape with his buddies in the Gents.

14. Cripple Creek

"Cripple Creek" is another old fiddle tune that has become a popular bluegrass instrumental. The tune was quite common among fiddlers in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, recorded by such solo artists and bands as Crockett's Kentucky Mountaineers, Fiddlin' John Carson, the Light Crust Doughboys, the Kessinger Brothers, Doc Roberts, Fiddlin' Powers & Family, and Gid Tanner and Riley Puckett. The tune is a bluegrass standard, recorded by Bill Monroe, Flatt and Scruggs, the Stanley Brothers, Reno & Harrell, Earl Taylor, and many others.

15. Don't This Road Look Rough and Rocky

"Don't This Road Look Rough and Rocky" entered the bluegrass song bag through a 1954 recording by Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, one of their band's few vocal trios. Flatt and Scruggs are listed as the song's writers, but it had been recorded almost twenty years earlier by the Blue Sky Boys (Bill and Earl Bolick) as "Can't You Hear That Night Bird Singing." According to Bill Bolick, he and a friend "pieced together" the song from fragments of earlier songs.

16. Muleskinner Blues

"Muleskinner Blues" was the first of thirteen "Blue Yodels" written and recorded by Jimmie Rodgers, the first superstar in country music. Rodgers had a tremendous impact upon other musicians before his untimely death in 1933, and he's been even more influential in the years since, inspiring such singers as Ernest Tubbs, Hank Williams, Lefty Frizzell, Rose Maddox, Merle Haggard, and Bill Monroe, who recorded this song in 1940. It was the first song cut by his new band, the Blue Grass Boys, and Monroe was so concerned that the song needed the right driving, bluesy feel that he gave his mandolin to lead singer Clyde

Moody and played guitar on the cut instead. Literally hundreds of bluegrass bands have covered Monroe's arrangement in the ensuing decades.

Like its Folkways predecessor *The Country Gentlemen On The Road, Going Back to the Blue Ridge Mountains* was a "live" album, containing performances by the band recorded in the early 1960s. In the absence of definite information, the provenance of these recordings is something of a mystery. Some of the on-stage banter (including references to the Gents' Starday single "Copper Kettle" and to the Beatles) suggests a 1964 date for several of the performances. Others sound like they come from another venue, recorded probably a year or two earlier.

It's really a shame that Charlie Waller and John Duffey aren't around to celebrate the golden anniversary of the Country Gentlemen. Those two loved a good party, and this milestone definitely warrants a good party. Thankfully, Eddie Adcock and Tom Gray are not only still around, but both are still going strong musically. Adcock currently performs and records in a format he calls "twograss" with his wife and partner Martha Adcock,

after several years of high-level music-making with Josh Graves, Kenny Baker, and Jesse McReynolds in *The Masters*.

Gray has played with several bluegrass groups in recent years, including the Gary Ferguson Band and the Bluegrass Authority. Adcock and Gray will help celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Gents in 2007 with a number of "reunion" concerts featuring mandolinist Jimmy Gaudreau and Charlie Waller's son, Randy Waller, on guitar.

Despite all that the Country Gentlemen accomplished, all the awards and all the hit records, Waller felt that the band was ahead of its time. "We were kind of like the Studebaker automobile," he said. "I thought its styling was very advanced. I thought we were a breakthrough group." Waller was right, about Studebakers and about the Country Gentlemen. It was a breakthrough group in all senses of that phrase.

The Country Gentlemen changed bluegrass in almost every conceivable way. The band was perfectly suited to be prophets of the new. The first few years of the

1960s—the peak years of the "classic" Country Gentlemen—seemed ripe with possibility. The national mood was upbeat, youthful, optimistic, and expansive, a fine time for new beginnings. The Gentlemen fit those years better than any other band in bluegrass. This was the ideal group to introduce and sell bluegrass to an audience that had never lived in a little cabin home on the hill and didn't know a holler from a hornpipe.

That era and its good feelings didn't last, but the music from this young quartet from Washington, D.C., has endured, and will endure as long as bluegrass is played. The Country Gentlemen cast a large shadow over all who followed. Together with the Seldom Scene, Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver, J.D. Crowe & the New South, and New Grass Revival, the Gents took bluegrass from the backwoods to the big city, putting a fresh new spin on the music of Bill Monroe, the Stanley Brothers, and Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs. The Country Gentlemen launched an ongoing revolution in bluegrass, a better-than-perfect legacy for an American band born on the Fourth of July.

Jon Hartley Fox, November 2006

Sources

The Tom Adler quote is from “Is There a Link between Bluegrass Music and Sexuality,” *The Bluegrass Reader*, edited by Thomas Goldsmith, University of Illinois Press, 2004.

The John Duffey quotes are from “So You Don’t Like the Way We Do It (or Damn Your Tape Recorder),” *The Bluegrass Reader*, edited by Thomas Goldsmith, University of Illinois Press, 2004.

The quotes from Charlie Waller, Eddie Adcock, Buzz Busby, and Tom Gray are from “The Classic Country Gentlemen,” www.charliewaller.net.

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