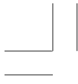
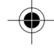
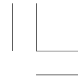
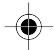
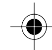
Legends of Old Time Music
featuring
Tommy Jarrell
Clarence Ashely
Roscoe Holcomb
Doc Watson
Sam McGee
Pete Steele
Jean Ritchie
and others

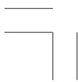
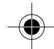
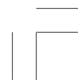
Legends of Old Time Music
by Mark Humphrey

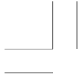
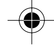
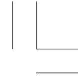
Photo by Dave Gahr

Labels are necessary components of the ideas and experiences we fit into our lives. With labels, we differentiate. Where would marketing be without them? Some labels have the ability to be simultaneously pleasing and/or pejorative, depending on one's point of view. Such a label is 'old time music.' We may interpret it to denote (A) hopelessly outdated music or (B) deeply authentic music. Could it be both, music rooted in pre-video (even pre-radio) rural America and thus heroically anachronistic?

'Old time music' may suggest sounds rooted in pre-mass media Americana, but it is no less a marketing label than is 'urban' (contemporary black music) or 'young country' (post-Garth Nashville pop). It's just an older sales hook. This one can be traced to 1923, when Georgia's Fiddlin' John Carson waxed The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane and The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster's Going to Crow for the OKeh label. Legendary A&R man Ralph Peer deemed Carson's performance "pluperfect awful," but enough rural Americans disagreed to make the record a hit, the first in the history of what's now called country music. (Ever the pragmatist, Carson remarked at his first whiff of success: "I'll have to quit making moonshine and start making records.") Carson's paean

to barnyard fertility rites and bucolic cabins initially appeared in OKeh's popular music catalogue, where it kept uneasy company with slicker stuff. Where to put such downhome keening and sawing? The company which had three years prior pioneered 'race' recording with Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" opted for 'old time music' as a descriptive moniker for records by artists of Carson's ilk, and OKeh's label has prevailed.

But just what was a 1920s commercial record company selling with 'old-time music'? Something not jazz age surely, but what specifically? Clarence Ashley's observations in this video suggest that the record companies, at least from the artists' viewpoint, had a dim understanding of this music, though we sense a general 'grasp of genre' when reviewing vintage 'old time music' recordings today. A few obvious generalizations bear witness to this. Most of the 'old time' musicians were white rural agrarian Southerners. Their singing, by European art music standards, was unschooled (though not necessarily 'artless'). The same might be said of their musicianship, expressed primarily via strings. Their song repertoire could be broadly divided between secular and sacred and further subdivided into categories of traditional, commercial (often of sufficient vintage to have entered oral tradition), and original (often topical and tragic) songs. These general elements are found equally in the commercial 'old time music' recordings of the 1920s and in the performances captured decades later which appear on this video.

'Old time music,' then, is a music rich in cultural continuity. Alan Lomax has written in his essay "Folk Song Style" (American Anthropologist, LXI, No. 6, December 1959) that such music is intent to "give the listener a feeling of security, for it symbolizes the place where he was born, his earliest childhood satisfactions, his religious experience, his pleasure in community doings, his courtship and his work – any or all of these personality-shaping experiences." Such music, drenched deep in its listeners' "personality-shaping experiences," is inherently powerful, and was especially so in a culture, marginally literate and pre-electronic, where it was among the strongest threads of the social fabric. Religious faith and fable (Daniel Prayed) were underscored in song. Socially accepted pleasures (square dancing) were set to brisk rhythms and tunes. Balladic sagas of the bad (John Hardy) and the beautiful (The Four Marys) were more readily re-

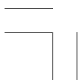
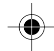
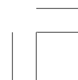
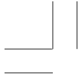
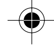
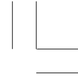




Photo by George Pickow

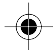
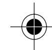
membered (and strikingly heard) when sung. Resonant in meaning and methodology, 'old time music' had been the heartbeat of Anglo-Celtic Southern America for many generations. By the time it became a marketing label which celebrated its own quaintness, its days were numbered. The technology which enables us to savor Fiddlin' John Carson 70 years after his heyday also heralded the demise of the charmed circle of oral tradition and relative isolation which had nurtured old time music since the coming of the South's first Anglo-Celtic settlers.

The notion that this tradition was simultaneously endangered by twentieth century modernity yet preserved in the remote South was dramatized by English folklorist Cecil Sharp's 1916-1918 song-collecting field trip, the fruits of which were published in 1919 as English Folk Songs From the Southern Appalachians. Sharp found American variants of many hoary British ballads with impressive pedigrees. Songs scarcely remembered in their land of origin still held a kind of 'racial memory' spell over Southern descendants of expatriated yeomen. But the ballad tradition was not static: newer songs of outlaws and train wrecks sprang up alongside old ones of knights and ladies. In a rural society where newspapers were rare outside cities and literacy limited, the ballad makers filled the role of dramatist/news anchor. This

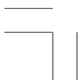
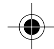
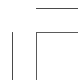
Southern penchant for story songs, often of a morbid bent, remained a striking element of even commercial country music until fairly recently.

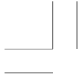
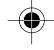
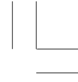
If a half dozen of the performances on this video are of ballads, plenty more illustrate varied instruments and instrumental styles. By far the oldest type of instrument played here is Jean Ritchie's Appalachian dulcimer, though technically this 'mountain dulcimer' is misnamed: true dulcimers are struck with beaters (thus 'hammered dulcimer' is redundant). A plucked zither, the Appalachian dulcimer's basic design is ancient: the legendary Pythagorean Monochord, from whence the rudiments of the diatonic major scale were supposedly derived some 2500 years ago, may have looked similar. The instrument's antiquity belies the fact that it was a relative latecomer to the American South. It didn't come over on the Mayflower or any other ship of British origin. Germans and other Northern Europeans apparently brought such instruments in the 19th century, when they were spread via the Pennsylvania side of the Appalachians into the American South. A newcomer as late as the 1890s, the Appalachian dulcimer's apparently medieval design and penchant for modal tunes disguised the fact that it was, among folk instruments in the South, a new kid on the block.

Though more modern in design and far more difficult to play, the unchallenged favorite instrument for generations of Americans was the fiddle. The first documented fiddle contest in America took place in 1736; for two centuries fiddlers were necessary components of most successful social functions, especially anywhere dancing might occur. Often deemed a mite disreputable, the fiddler was a living repository of tradition who imbued venerable tunes with fresh fingerprints, a characteristic assertion felt variously here in the gloriously unpolished Tommy Jarrell and the more disciplined (but no less spirited) Marion Sumner.

Despite the European background of much of this music and of such instruments as the fiddle, the influence of African-American phrasing and syncopation profoundly affected old time music. (This influence becomes particularly striking when you compare American stringband music to that of Canada, a New World culture which lacked a significant African-American presence.) The banjo is the most obvious legacy of African-Americans in old time music, for the instrument itself is African in origin. It came to white South-

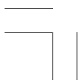
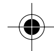
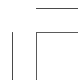




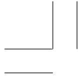
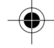
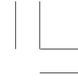




Kirk McGee, Roscoe Holcomb & Eck Robertson, photo by Dave Gahr

erners via the nineteenth century minstrel show, vestiges of which echoed in such performers as Uncle Dave Macon, an early Opry star imitated here by his longtime accompanist, Sam McGee. Compared to the banjo, the guitar was both a latecomer and a folk instrument by commercial fiat. It was in the late nineteenth century that such mail order catalogues as Sears & Roebuck made inexpensive mass-produced guitars widely available, and it was by such prosaic means that the guitar and mandolin entered Appalachia. The emergence of a Doc Watson was unforeseen by the catalogue dispensers.

There is a sketchy background of old time music and the means by which it was made. The social and natural environments which nurtured this music are no less important to understanding it than are matters of instruments and ethnicity, but the interested reader will look elsewhere to learn of them. During the folk music revivals which spanned the late 1950s-70s, much of the extraordinary music recorded by commercial labels in the 1920s was reissued, legendary artists were rediscovered, and previously unheard exponents of the 'old time' tradition were likewise found and brought to perform at folk festivals. It was an exciting epoch which coupled 'living legends' like Clarence Ashley and Tommy Jarrell with younger incarnations of the 'old time' spirit (New Lost City Ramblers, Red Clay Ramblers, etc.). Some fine mu-

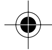




sic was played and a fitting 'last hurrah' was sung to a final generation of musicians who absorbed this music by osmosis as their primary music, a core "personality-shaping experience." By the time men like Roscoe Holcomb were passing from the scene such young rural Kentuckians as Ricky Skaggs were aggressively moving into Nashville's commercial mainstream. Skaggs made it in 1981 (the year of Holcomb's death) with a country-rock version of Lester Flatt's Don't Get Above Your Raising; by then a Kentucky boy's raisin' was more apt to include Led Zeppelin than the 'lassy-makin' tunes' of Clarence Ashley's youth. The heavy metal hillbilly rant of the Kentucky Headhunters soon followed (their first hit was a buckskin-and-downers version of Bill Monroe's Walk Softly on This Heart of Mine), and the 'old time music' embodied in this video receded like dream fragments of ancient ballads saved fast in the memories of a dwindling few tradition keepers.

The Performances

Roscoe Holcomb



The unalloyed pure spirit of old time music never had a stauncher exponent than Roscoe Holcomb. His stewardship of the True Faith came naturally (though not effortlessly); he didn't seek his missionary role but nonetheless embodied it like no other. Given his deep and implacable uniqueness, it comes as little surprise that Eric Clapton once referred to Holcomb as his favorite singer, or that Bob Dylan lauded similar praise on Holcomb's album, "The High Lonesome Sound" (Folkways FA2368). There was something almost super-

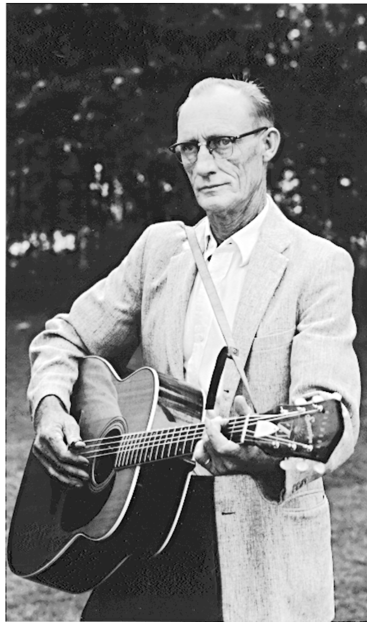
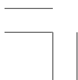
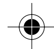
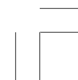
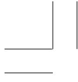
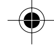
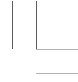
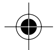
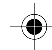


Photo by Dave Gahr

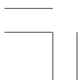
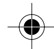
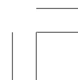




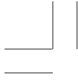
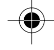
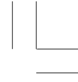
naturally intense about Holcomb's engagement with his material: not only did he move others to tears but on occasion was himself so affected by a performance (like that of Little Bessie on the aforementioned album) that he would enter a days-long seclusion from music-making. It wasn't an activity Holcomb took lightly; given his shamanic wrestling with his music's essence, how could he? 'Soul singer' is a sobriquet that fits Holcomb, for he sang from his tradition's core. Black fiddler Howard Armstrong noted this quality, calling Holcomb's music devoid of decorative artifice, "pure." His discoverer and champion, John Cohen, wrote this elegiac appraisal of Holcomb's hard-lived art: "In his singing some heard the blues, others a medieval chant, as well as the wail of Old Baptist unaccompanied hymns and the long ballad tradition. His banjo and guitar introduced an element in the music which was full of individualistic rhythmic patterns answering more to a continuous pulse than to a big beat...He confirmed our belief that such a profoundly moving musician could grow and exist in America apart from the commercial and art music which surround us. His homemade music and voice conveyed a precise clarity which reached people far beyond his immediate home in eastern Kentucky." (Old Time Music # 36, Summer 1981.)

Daisy, Kentucky, Holcomb's remote mountain homeplace in Perry County, won't be found on many maps. Nearby Hazard, infamous for family feuds and labor violence, is the closest town of note, and it was on a field trip there that John Cohen of the New Lost City Ramblers discovered and first recorded Roscoe Holcomb in 1959. Then 47, Holcomb had lived a hard life (coal mining, lumber milling, construction) typical of the region. No less typical was the strong presence of music in Holcomb's life. Fascinated by the harmonica as a boy, he was given a homemade banjo by a brother-in-law which served him through his teens. Holcomb recalled turning to music as more than a hobby during the grim Depression year of 1932. "Pretty hard times," he recalled. "The year I started learning to play the banjo I learned 400 tunes and could sing practically every one of them..." He teamed with a fiddler to play local dances, a role reprised in the Sumner, Young & Holcomb performances here.

Religious conviction and regular employment both curtailed Holcomb's secular music-making for many years, factors which preserved a style little-changed at the time of his

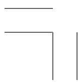
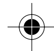
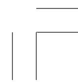




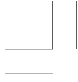
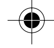
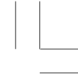




1959 discovery from its Depression-era development. Holcomb's Folkways recordings and subsequent performances at the Newport Folk Festival and similar events caused something of a national stir, though not enough to really alter his fortunes. Despite respiratory ailments (asthma, emphysema, black lung) and a broken back which would have qualified him for disability benefits, Holcomb continued to seek odd jobs as long as he was able. ("All my life I've worked hard," he said. "I don't know what to do when I'm not working.") "Upon meeting him," Cohen wrote, "someone commented that they weren't sure whether he was a very simple man from a great tradition, or a giant among men."

Holcomb's five featured selections here demonstrate the contours of his secular repertoire, which incorporated African-American elements into an Anglo-American framework. Across the Rocky Mountain has been called "Roscoe's most famous composition" by Charles K. Wolfe, though it is a less an original composition than a composite reworking of older balladic material. Holcomb's guitar playing in open G tuning is distinctly banjo-influenced. The banjo is a drum with strings, and Holcomb exploits this fact with offhand mastery as he provides finger percussion on the banjo head while performing Little Birdie. This was the song he opened with on the one occasion this writer saw Holcomb perform; I will never forget the sheer physiological power of that voice for which the "high lonesome sound" description was well coined. Holcomb moved some men to tears; I felt my scalp prickle as if my hair was standing on end!

Graveyard Blues suggests the influence of Jimmie Rodgers' 'blue yodels' in Holcomb's guitar licks and delivery, though the song's source is a 1923 Bessie Smith recording, Graveyard Dream Blues. The song made an impact on white performers in various regions, witnessed by the 1938 recording of it as Graveyard Blues by Bob Dunn's Vagabonds, a Texas-based Western Swing group. African-American folklore is also the source of John Hardy, a "steel-driver, over six feet tall and two hundred pounds of muscle, 'black as the kittle of hell,"' according to John and Alan Lomax's 1947 book, Folk Song U.S.A. Hardy shot a man in a West Virginia gambling dispute and was hung for the crime on January 19, 1894. Despite origins similar to the blues Stagolee, the Lomaxes wrote that John Hardy was "ordinarily sung by white singers in the Southern Appalachians, sung in the same

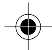




pokerfaced style with a hard-hitting, fast-moving five-string banjo accompaniment."

Holcomb can also be seen performing Poor Wayfaring Stranger on Legends of Traditional Fingerstyle Guitar, Vestapol 13004.

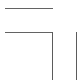
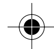
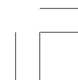
Clarence Ashley

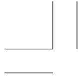
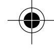
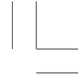
Photo by Dave Gahr



Ralph Rinzler's 1960 discovery of Clarence Ashley was as momentous to 'old timey' aficionados as that of Mississippi John Hurt would be to country blues lovers only a few years later. Like Hurt, Ashley was legendary for his pre-War recordings (1928-1931). As a soloist and in the company of such stringbands as the Carolina Tar Heels and Byrd Moore's Hot Shots, Ashley's early recorded work set a high standard. Songs like The Cuckoo bespoke a man rooted in the deepest soil of the Anglo-American folk song tradition.

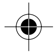
Born in Bristol, Tennessee in 1895, 'Tom' Ashley spent his youth in Shouns, Tennesee, where his grandfather ran a boarding house. Musicians were frequent boarders, and Ashley had two maternal aunts who were singer-banjoists. He was playing banjo by age eight and was on the road with a medicine show by age sixteen. For the next 30 years Ashley's life, despite periods of farming and hauling goods, was primarily that of an itinerant musician, one who performed mostly in Tennessee and North Carolina but who reportedly ranged as far west as Oregon and Washington. "When not

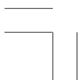
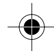
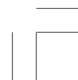




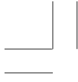
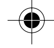
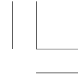
traveling with medicine shows," wrote Rinzler, "he sang in the streets, on the edge of carnivals and outside of the pay station of the mines on payday." The songs he sang included those ancient ones he dubbed "lassey makin' tunes" (The Cuckoo, The House Carpenter) from the habit of singing ballads to pass the time while preparing molasses to ones rooted in minstrelsy (Free Little Bird) to folk songs (Green Back Dollar, Rising Sun Blues) which Ashley subsequently passed to a younger medicine show entertainer, Roy Acuff, and which took on entirely new lives during the folk revival of the 1960s.

Photo by George Pickow



Despite appearances as a comic with Charlie Monroe's band and the Stanley Brothers in the early 1940s, Ashley's style and repertoire were deemed relics even within his own community by the outbreak of World War II. It was the ironic intervention of urban folk enthusiasts, spurred by the inclusion of three vintage Ashley recordings on the influential 1952 Folkways reissue, Anthology of American Folk Music, which rescued Ashley from oblivion. "All I can do and offer you," he told his new audience a mite apologetically, "is the real old-timey, on-back-to-the-horse-and-buggy days...I'm not the greatest musician in the world, just pick a little different in that old-timey way." His onetime accompanist, Doc Watson, has said: "There was only one Clarence Ash-ley...His music had to be himself." Ashley, who died in 1967, left a rich musical legacy which included his much-covered signature song, The Cuckoo (or The Coo Coo Bird, as the title appeared on his 1929 recording). Ashley's 'sawmill' tuning was DCGDG (first to fifth string). Rinzler has noted the song's probable

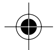
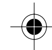




British origins, likewise for Free Little Bird ("Derivative of the nineteenth-century British broadside, Kitty Clyde"). The footage of Ashley, in the company of fiddler Fred Price, guitarists Clint Howard, and Tex Isley was filmed by George Pickow circa 1963 in Morgan County, Kentucky. The interviewer is the late folklorist D.K. Wilgus.

SAM McGEE

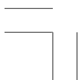
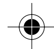
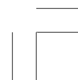
Photo by Dave Gahr

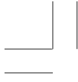
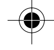
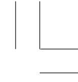



Country music's first notable guitarist was Sam Fleming McGee. He joined the Grand Ole Opry shortly after the program's 1925 birth and lived to perform at the 1974 opening of Opryland. McGee's lifelong proximity to the Nashville mainstream made him an exception to the 'Rip Van Winkle syndrome' which often characterized the repertoire of many old time musicians. Having never stopped performing, McGee never ceased to arrange new material (some as surprising as Nancy Sinatra's These Boots Are Made for Walkin') in his gregariously old timey way.

A fiddler's son with sundry musical siblings and older relations, McGee was born in 1894 in Williamson County, Tennessee. McGee was surrounded by the sounds of fiddles and banjos from boyhood, and once said of his musical clan: "We had more music than anybody in the country. I was raised on string music."

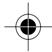
With a talented fiddler in his father, Uncle John McGee, and likewise his younger brother Kirk, Sam took up instruments with which he could 'second' them, the banjo and

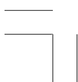
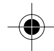
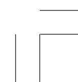
later the guitar. "I liked guitar so much better when I got one," McGee recalled in an interview with Bob Krueger, "I quit playing the banjo..." Though McGee reckoned he was 11 when he first acquired a guitar from a white neighbor named Tom Hood, he also observed, "Black people were about the only people that played guitars then." He heard black railroad workers perform blues and from them absorbed elements which characterized his often-bluesy fingerpicking.

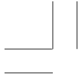
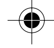
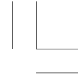
Photo by Dave Gahr



Following his marriage in 1914, McGee worked as a blacksmith and farm-er before a fateful 1925 encounter with "the funniest old man I ever seen in my life"– Uncle Dave Macon – put him in rural show business (he nonetheless continued farming). Impressed by McGee's skill on guitar, Macon invited him to join in his tours of school houses and such events as fiddling contests. At one such contest McGee was praised in a local newspaper for having "produced unheard of music from the guitar...and injected a comedy relief into the program with an infectious smile which won his audience and held them to the close of the program."

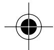
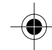
McGee's stint with the flamboyant Macon is memorialized in an ebullient performance here on banjo of Mississippi Sawyer, a tune he knew long before meeting Uncle Dave: Uncle John McGee played it (along with about 300 other tunes) on fiddle. Despite his recollection here of a 20-year association with Macon, the Macon-McGee touring team actually dissolved around 1931, when McGee began performing regularly with brother Kirk and the legendary Fidd-lin' Arthur Smith in the Dixieliners. Mc-Gee was a strong presence in country music of the 1930s-early 1940s, both on the

Opry (as musician and comic) and on the tent show trail with Roy Acuff or Bill Monroe.

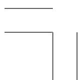
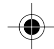
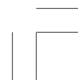
By the 1950s, such old timers as the McGee Brothers were being phased out of Opry broadcasts; Sam was increasingly involved with farming. It was the interest of urban folk enthusiasts which revitalized his career: Mike Seeger recorded a reunited Dixieliners for Folkways in 1957, which led Sam to the folk festival circuit for much of the remainder of his life. If the 78 collectors were eager to hear the first important recorded country fingerstyle guitarist (John Fahey cites McGee as an early hero) pick one of the instrumentals from his legendary 1926 Vocalion session such as Buck Dancer's Choice, McGee was himself no less eager to disprove the 'old dog/new tricks' adage. "Modern songs such as Wheels Sam stylized by deliberately injecting archaisms," writes Charles K. Wolfe (Tennessee Traditional Singers: Tom Ashley, Sam McGee, Bukka White, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1981). "Wheels was normally played by modern guitarists with a sharp, electric pizzicato effect, but Sam played it with a smooth, open flowing sound, full of long, sinewy runs typical of his classic style. By putting the burden of tradition on form rather than content, Sam found an ideal way to survive commercially and yet maintain some artistic integrity." McGee died in 1975 subsequent to a farming accident. He offered an epitaph of sorts in 1973 when he reflected: "I've got plenty of good friends, some good land, got three good sons and good grandchildren; I guess maybe my music helped with some of that."

Sam McGee can also be seen performing on Vestapol Video 13004, Legends of Traditional Fingerstyle Guitar.

Doc Watson, Clint Howard & Fred Price

Discovered as accompanists to Clarence Ashley in 1960, this trio toured with the rediscovered Ashley in 1961 and subsequently without the older man. Fiddler Fred Price was born in 1915 in Ashley's hometown, Shouns, Tennessee, and as an adult worked a farm adjacent to that of his younger musical partner, singer-guitarist Clint Howard. Price, who died in 1987, was a master of fluid, economic bowing as witnessed by his spirited rendition of the G.B. Grayson classic, Lee Highway Blues. This trio shows its familiarity with the foursquare

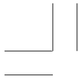
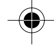
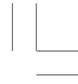
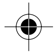
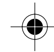




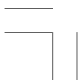
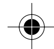
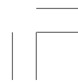
Photo by Dave Gahr

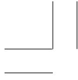
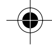
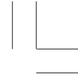
harmony of the shape note hymnal in Daniel Prayed. In 1926, Uncle Dave Macon, accompanied by Sam McGee, had recorded the blueprint for Way Downtown as Late Last Night When My Willie Came Home. Doc is said to have heard Macon perform the song on the Opry but to have learned the verses of his version from a cousin, Dudley Watson. North Carolina's Doc Watson was embarking on a remarkable career when he performed with Price and Howard.

Pete Steele

Pete Steele had spent 18 years as a miner in Kentucky's Harlan County before being recorded for the Library of Congress by Alan and Elizabeth Lomax in the late 1930s. Pay Day at Coal Creek and Coal Creek March were vestiges of turn-of-the-century music commemorating labor strife in the Tennessee coal fields of the 1890s. Writing in The Incompleat Folksinger (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1972), Pete Seeger called Coal Creek March a " famous banjo solo around the turn of the century. It has been superlatively performed by Pete Steele, carpenter, of Hamilton, Ohio. His version is a folk fragment." Seeger recorded a version of it in his celebrated Goofing Off Suite, and the tune became associated with him. "...when someone writes that they like the way I play Coal Creek March," Seeger commented, "I write them and suggest that they listen to a man who really knows how

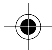
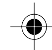




to play it: Pete Steele of Hamilton, Ohio. He recorded it for the Library of Congress over 30 years ago, and I can't imagine it ever being done better by any musician on earth."

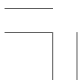
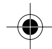
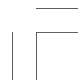
Steele, who recorded an album for Folkways in 1958, is remembered by folklorist Ed Kahn as "one of the most important old time banjo players...Pete Seeger was heavily influenced by him." Steele is joined by his wife Lily in singing Galilee.

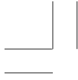
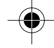
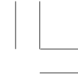
Sumner, Young & Holcomb

Despite the vehement objections of the pious, social dancing has been part of American life since pre-Revolutionary War days. We have come in recent years to separate the repertoire of old time music—the fiddle music especially—from its dance context at peril of wrenching it from its essential reason for being. All the more reason to treasure the glimpse George Pickow's 1960s film footage offers of such music at a traditional square dance.

Given the Anglo-Celtic background of most of the Southerners who cultivated the square dance, it's surprising to learn that the dance form itself has French roots. "The French cotillion, a dance for four couples arranged in a square, evolved into the American square dance," asserts David Reiner and Peter Anick ("Old-Time Fiddling Across America," Fiddler Magazine, Summer 1994). There were also round dances such as the waltz, schottische, and two-step which required a fiddler's skill. The fiddlers themselves were often stereotyped as 'rounders' who would sooner drink than work, but many were actually adherents to the same tenets as the folk who disparaged dancing and the tunes played on "the devil's box." Sam McGee recalled that his fiddling father felt no qualms about accompanying an exhibition 'buck dancer' but drew the line at playing for square dances. If the pious feared such male-female mingling was little more than aerobic foreplay, a more realistic concern was the boozing and brawling that often attended square dances. Many were as genteel as the school house gathering depicted here (schools were popular venues for square dances in the South), but others were not. McGee, who often 'seconded' square dance fiddlers in his youth, recalled many rowdy dances which went from dusk to dawn, and at least one in which the spirited hoofing brought down the floor of a house!

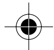




Marion Sumner, who still lives and plays near Whitesburg, Kentucky, demonstrates a sophisticated swing-influenced fiddle style nicely augmented by Martin Young's 'sock' chords. (Roscoe Holcomb seems a mite out of place in such company, but then he had survived some of the Depression as fiddler's 'second.') The dance caller and buck-dancing clown are one in the same, Corbett Grigsby.

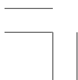
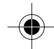
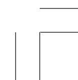
TOMMY JARRELL

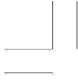
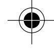
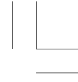
What could be more poetically perfect than a legendary old time musician living in the Blue Ridge Mountains in a community named Mt. Airy? That he was the embodiment of a tradition (some would say its last great one), son of a fiddler in a legendary 1920s stringband (Ben Jarrell of DaCosta Woltz's Southern Broadcasters), and a onetime moonshiner besides, surely heightened the romance. Little wonder so many young city musicians fascinated by old time music and the world it represented made a pilgrimage to Mt. Airy, North Carolina to bask in the earthy music and aura of Tommy Jarrell. "Everyone who visited found their admiration of his artistry augmented by gratitude for his devotion as a teacher and his warmth as a host," wrote Alan Jabbour in Sing Out!

Photo by Dave Gahr



Born in the Round Peak area of Surry County, North Carolina in 1901, Jarrell grew up in a close-knit community where apple peelings, bean stringings, and corn shuckings were still occasions for communal work punctuated by drinking and

music making. Tommy watched his fiddling father "like a hawk" as well as a reprobate uncle, Charley Jarrell, who might show up "high as a buck" with a new tune retrieved from a neighboring county. Beyond the Jarrell family, there were such musical neighbors as a Civil War veteran named Zack Payne, the source of some of Jarrell's oldest fiddle tunes, and legendary claw-hammer style banjoist Charlie Lowe. Music was a constant in Jarrell's family and community life, but his livelihood (from 1925 to 1966) was earned as road grad-er for the North Carolina State Highway Department.

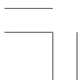
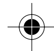
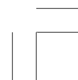
John Henry was a tune Jarrell recalled Uncle Charley bringing home (along with a new fiddle and homemade whiskey) from Allegheny County. "He'd go up on the high part," Jarrell told Ray Alden, "and use a long bow, and then he'd come out on the end of his stick and kind of jiggle it." Here Jarrell plays a variant of the tune on fretless banjo.

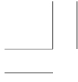
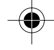
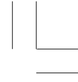
On the County album, Sail Away Ladies, Jarrell offered this detailed memory of Drunken Hiccups: "Right here's a little tune that my Daddy learned from old man Houston Galyen up at Low Gap, North Carolina, I guess before I was born. And he called it the Drunken Hiccups. Well, they play a tune out yonder around Nashville, Tennessee, they call Rye Whiskey. And a lot of folks in this country calls it Jack o' Diamonds. Daddy said that old man Houston said the right name for it was Drunken Hiccups, so here she comes."

John Brown's Dream finds Jarrell in his role of mentor to two celebrated admirers, Alice Gerrard on fiddle and Mike Seeger on banjo. Though never a professional musician, his significance as transmitter of tradition was acknowledged and rewarded in his later years by the appearance of several recordings (most on the Virginia-based County label), a National Heritage Award from the National Endowment for the Arts, and a documentary film, Sprout Wings and Fly. Tommy Jarrell, who likened music to "a big wheel that goes round and round, just as even as can be," died in 1985 in the county of his birth, Surry, North Carolina.

Corbett Grigsby

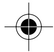
Seen earlier in comic costume and calling the square dances, Grigsby here appears as singer-banjoist with fiddler Sumner and guitarist Young to deliver a terse version of the murder ballad, Pretty Polly. George Pickow, who filmed Grigsby, remembers him as a high school principal from

around Hazard, Kentucky. "He lived there all his life," says Pickow, "played locally at parties and dances."

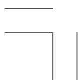
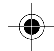
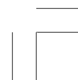
Pretty Polly had been known in Kentucky a long while: singer-banjoist B.F. Shelton recorded a striking version of it for Victor in 1927, 20 years after Katherine Pettit had collected it ("Ballads and Rhymes from Kentucky," Journal of American Folklore). W.K. McNeil (Southern Folk Ballads, August House, Little Rock, 1987) calls Pretty Polly a "condensation of The Gosport Tragedy, or the Perjured Ship's Carpenter, a British broadside that dates back at least to 1750." 35 quatrains long, the parent ballad offered a courtship, seduction, pregnancy, murder, and the haunting of the murderer by the stabbed sweetheart. The Kentucky version, in Hollywood parlance, cuts to the chase. "The narrative focuses primarily on the murder itself," writes McNeil, "which is treated almost casually..." Such grim ballads, of which Tom Dooley and Omie Wise are two kindred American songs inspired by actual murders, discretely censored pregnancies that may have been understood plot elements for audiences a century ago. These songs may have served as 'cautionary tales' for adolescent girls in a society where unwanted pregnancies in a relationship where the man had no 'honorable intentions' did on occasion provoke homicides.

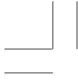
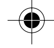
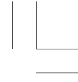


JEAN RITCHIE

Photo by Dave Gahr

The Ritchie family has been a singing clan for generations: Cecil Sharp collected from them in 1917, and they trace

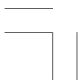
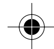
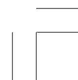
one song (Nottamun Town) to Crockett Ritchie, born around the time of the American Revolution. "Songs functioned for the Ritchies the way Polaroid snapshots do for a modern family," wrote Charles K. Wolfe (Kentucky Country , University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1982). "They were the keys to memories, capsules of family history."

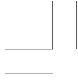
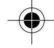
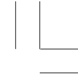
Born in 1922, Jean Ritchie eagerly absorbed her family's musical tradition at the knees of a ballad-singing mother and dulcimer-playing father. After receiving a degree in social work from the University of Kentucky, Jean worked on the lower east side of Manhattan, where she was surprised to find an interest in the music of her eastern Kentucky heritage. She was recorded by the Library of Congress in 1946 and in 1952 was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to explore the roots of her regional tradition in the British Isles. By the time the folk revival boomed in the late 1950s – early 1960s, Ritchie already had several albums to her credit and such books as her family self-portrait, Singing Family of the Cumberlands.

Inspired by her father, Balis Ritchie ("the finest dulcimer player I have ever known"), Ritchie was the single most influential person in reviving interest in the mountain dulcimer. Here she uses it to accompany the plaintive The Cuckoo, of which she says: "The Cuckoo is a song that's been in my family ever since I can remember. My father, mother, and all the old-timers sang it. That particular tune I haven't heard outside our family."

Jean's older sister Edna, a school teacher most of her adult life, joins in singing two songs. "My Pretty Little Miss I learned from my dad, Balis Ritchie," Jean recalls. "He didn't remember where he learned it. It was probably an old song in his family. His songs come from the little community of Clear Creek in Knott County."

The Four Marys, also known as Mary Hamilton, is among the ancient ballads collected by Francis James Child. Some versions tell of 16th century chicanery (including adultery, infanticide, and execution) at the court of Mary Queen of Scots. The historic basis of the ballad, however, is murky: Some collectors believe the 1719 execution of one Mary Hamilton at the court of Russia's Peter the Great somehow got mixed into the Scots saga. "We've sung this song a long time," says Ritchie. "I don't know exactly where it came from, but we've know it at least 50 years. It wasn't one that we inherited down our own lines. Probably some visitor from

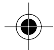




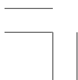
Scotland or England sang it for us in return for us singing for them."

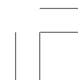
THE WALKER FAMILY

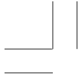
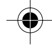
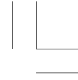
Photo by George Pickow



The unpromisingly-named Nobob, Kentucky (since christened Summer Shade) in Barren County was where folklorist D.K. Wilgus found the Walker Family. George Pickow, who filmed them, recalls: "They had a band that played at all the dances in the area and on local radio stations for years." Folklorist Ed Kahn visited the Walkers with Wilgus, and remembers "a huge family: many, many kids. They played a range of music from old to new, electric to unamplified." The instrumental Bowling Green shows one regional approach to banjo, while Hangman is a version of the widespread ballad Child published as The Maid Freed From the Gallows. Nell Walker performs the winsome Rollie True Love, while the group gospel performance, I'll Be Somewhere Listening, recalls the sacred stylings of the Carter Family.





Roscoe Holcomb

Roscoe Holcomb
1. Across The Rocky Mountain

Clarence Ashley
2. Free Little Bird
3. Interview about early recordings
4. The Cuckoo

Sam McGee
5. Wheels
6. Interview about Uncle Dave Macon
7. Mississippi Sawyer

Doc Watson, Clint Howard & Fred Price
8. Way Downtown
9. Daniel Prayed
10. Lee Highway Blues

Pete Steele
11. Pay Day At Coal Creek
12. Coal Creek March
13. Galilee

Sumner, Young & Holcomb
14. Red Apple Rag

Tommy Jarrell
15. John Henry
16. Drunken Hiccups

Roscoe Holcomb
17. Little Birdie
18. Graveyard Blues
19. Little Grey Mule

Sumner, Young & Holcomb
20. Bile Them Cabbage Down

Corbett Grigsby
21. Pretty Polly

Jean Ritchie
22. The Cuckoo

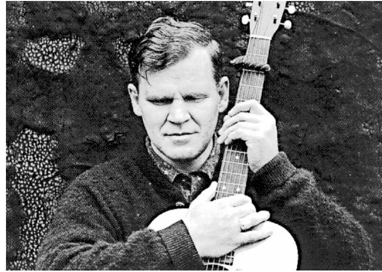
Tommy Jarrell
23. John Brown's Dream

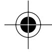
The Walker Family
24. Bowling Green
25. Hangman
26. Rollie True Love
27. I'll Be Somewhere Listening

Roscoe Holcomb
28. John Hardy

Jean & Edna Ritchie
29. My Pretty Little Miss
30. The Four Marys

Sumner, Young & Holcomb
31. Grey Eagle


Doc Watson



Sam & Kirk McGee

Vestapol 13026

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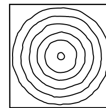
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