

A Publication
of Your
Nashville
Old-Time
String Band
Association

UPCOMING
ASSOCIATION
EVENTS



Thursday
December 2
Slow Jam
6:30 to 8:30 PM
Stratford High
Cafeteria



Thursday
December 9
Regular Jam
6:30 to 8:30 PM
Stratford High
Cafeteria



No
4th-Sunday Jam
will be held
in
December.

Old-Time Times

DECEMBER 2004

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EVENTS

We are not aware of any old-time music events that will take place during the month of December. If you know of one, please send us the information so we can spread the word.

Contact Ed Gregory or Phil Sparks. You can reach Ed at ed@gregorynet.net or 615-650-2341. Phil's contact information is listed at the end of this newsletter.

Hosts Needed for 4th-Sunday Jams

Please E-mail Darlyne Kent to schedule your home for a 2005 4th-Sunday Jam. We still need homes for the following months:

March, June, July, August, October, and November

Some of the summer 4th-Sunday jams may be held in area parks. We tried that last summer, and it was well received.

Darlyne's E-mail address is dkent@davidsonacademy.com.

A Don Masters Update

As many of you know, Don Masters recently spent a few days in Baptist Hospital, having his plumbing system rejuvenated. I visited him there and found him sitting up, cheerful, and alert. He went home on time and even attended this month's 4th-Sunday Jam. He looks great and seems to feel just fine.

Don and Mary Ann asked me to extend their sincere appreciation for your calls, cards, and visits, and especially for the flowers NOTSBA sent them.

~Phil Sparks

Art Stamper Tribute Concert

On Saturday, November 20, Ron Ault, Ed Gregory, and Phil Sparks drove to Morehead, Kentucky, to attend the Art Stamper Tribute Concert. It was a glorious day.

Most importantly, Art, who is suffering from cancer, was there. He was obviously a bit weak, and he had trouble speaking clearly, but he can still play the fiddle, and play the fiddle he did! He put on a concert that featured about 15 of his favorite tunes. He was backed up by Don Grigsby on the mandolin, Jessie Wells on the guitar, and Jimmy McCown on the banjo, all of them excellent musicians. In addition to performing the concert, Art spent several hours jamming and signing autographs.

For those of us who know and love Art, the fact that he was obviously having such a good time was most encouraging.

When we weren't listening to or picking with Art, we were jamming with a host of fine musicians who showed up for the event, several from as far away as Canada.

Three things impressed me about their jamming: First, they tend to repeat tunes eight to ten times whereas we generally repeat them three to five times. Second, they play much faster than we do, averaging 120 to 130 beats per minute. We tend to average 80 to 100 beats per minute. Third, the bluegrass pickers and the old-time pickers there seem to live in perfect harmony. I will never understand the enmity that so often exists between bluegrass and old-time pickers.

Ron, Ed, and I agree that "Art Stamper Day" was one of the finest old-time music events we have experienced, and we hope to be there again next year.

~Phil Sparks

Rebekah Weiler Featured in *Banjo Newsletter*

In the November edition of *Banjo Newsletter*, there is a color picture of Rebekah Weiler and Robert Montgomery.

After Rebekah's name was mentioned in an earlier edition of *BNL*, Patsy, her Mom, wrote the publication and thanked them. What some of you in NOTSBA may not know is that in April 1989, Rebekah was the "cover girl" for the publication. It was a black and white photo showing Rebekah playing her first toy banjo. Her banjo strap was a thick string, and her microphone was a plunger.

The magazine ran a copy of that cover along with the current photograph of Rebekah.

~Patsy Weiler

Traditional Music Festival – Berea, Kentucky

The scenic hills of eastern Kentucky were full of music on October 29 through 31 when the 30th annual Celebration of Traditional Music was held at Berea College in Berea, Kentucky.

Friday evening was kicked off to a great start with a rousing community jam on campus. Everything from bag pipes to dulcimers was in the mix, much to the delight of the standing-room-only crowd.

On Saturday, the festival started with several workshops for banjo, fiddle, square dancing, and shape note singing.

Our own Rebekah Weiler, 2004 Tennessee old-time banjo champion, taught the beginner banjo work-shop. Festival organizers first met Rebekah last year when she did a college visit at Berea. She plays banjo with Delmer Holland and the Blue Creek Ramblers. The Blue Creek Ramblers include Delmer on the fiddle, Leland Holland on rhythm guitar, Dennis Baumgardner on lead guitar, and William Moore on the upright bass.

After lunch, the Blue Creek Ramblers played for the square dance workshop and had a room full of dancers working up a sweat and enjoying the lively fiddle tunes.

The show held later that evening was a fabulous concert. Departing from tradition, the concert was moved from the Phelps-Stokes Auditorium to the Gray Auditorium in the college's new music building. Each segment lasted at least forty-five minutes.

Performers included the Berea College String Band, led by Al White. The well-known young fiddler Jake Krack is a member of that band. Jake is from West Virginia and studied with the late Melvin Wine. A sophomore at Berea College, Jake was recently featured on a PBS special about young musicians.

Also on the bill and hailing from the coal fields of southwest Virginia were Ken Childress and Jim Mullins who played guitars and sang. Fun-loving Earl White danced, played fiddle, and displayed his wonderful

rhythm style. The Blue Creek Ramblers wrapped up the evening with plenty of hard-hitting, foot-stomping, crowd-pleasing tunes. They were joined on stage by five-time national buck dancing champion, Thomas Maupin.

From the moment the group opened the show with "John Henry" to the closing tune of "Lost Indian," the audience was enthralled. Rebekah did the emcee duties for the Ramblers, joined the band in harmony on several songs, and even threw in a few one-liners. She really charmed the crowd!

The band looked like they stepped through time—straight off of a radio barn dance stage from the 1940s. The men were dressed in their overalls and matching blue-plaid shirts. Rebekah wore her hat, printed cotton dress, and lace-up shoes. The group received a standing ovation and sang the old train song "Greenville Trestle" as an encore.

I was so proud to know that Rebekah started her "career" by playing with NOTSBA, and that was only three years ago. What a success story!

Saturday night's concert was played to a more than capacity crowd, with chairs brought in and people sitting on the floor. Following the performance, a lady came up to one of the organizers and said, "Thank goodness there is still a genuine, old-time string band that gets up in their overalls to pick a shindig!"

Sunday morning was a traditional gospel sing held at the nearby Union Church. Childress and Mullins sang several gospel songs in the beautiful old building.

The festival itself was founded by Loyal Jones to "feature strictly old-time traditional music." Jones felt "that the old styles traditional to the mountains are not heard so much any more, so we want to encourage them." Through its thirty years, the Celebration has stuck to Jones's proclaimed purpose with the result that the old styles have been preserved and played for new audiences. Now retired, Jones was in the audience Saturday night and made a point to come by and congratulate Rebekah on the great job she did on stage.

Berea itself is a quaint little town and offers lots of craft and antique shops to visit. The

historic Boone Tavern and Inn is located across the street from Berea College. Inside the Inn is an arts and crafts shop that is small, but full of beautiful works from the area. The majority of the staff at Boone Tavern is made up of Berea College students, which allows the guests to visit with young people from Appalachia and around the world.

While in the area, the Weilers also visited Renfro Valley, and Rebekah was invited to play on the original stage at the Renfro Valley Fiddlers Festival on Sunday. The stage manager heard Rebekah play and stopped her afterwards to learn more about her music.

I think we will continue to hear great things about Rebekah, and we can all say, "I knew her when"

~Darlyne Kent

"Beautiful Star of Bethlehem"

Few people today realize the popular Christmas song "Beautiful Star of Bethlehem" was written by the late R. Fisher Boyce in a Middle Tennessee milk barn in the early part of the 20th century. It would go on to become a seasonal standard performed by a variety of artists, and it would eventually be sung in the White House by The Judds during a nationally televised Bob Hope Christmas special.

Boyce was born in the tiny community of Link, located in southern Rutherford County, in November 1887. The third of six children, Boyce loved music and was singing solo and in quartets by the early 1900s. In the spring of 1910, he married Cora Carlton from the Rockvale community. They would become the parents of 11 children, five of whom lived to be adults. Only one daughter, Willie Ruth Eads, remains alive. Eads remembers singing as a great source of entertainment for their family.

"The neighbors would come in, and we'd all gather around our family piano," Boyce's daughter said. "My sister Nanny Lou (Taylor) would play, and we would sing way into the night."

In 1911, the young couple celebrated their first wedding anniversary and saw Boyce's song "Safe in His Love" published by the A.J. Showalter Company, one of the early pub-

lishers of shape note hymnals. As did many others from across the Southeast, Boyce later traveled to Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, to attend one of the annual music normal schools conducted by the James D. Vaughan Publishing Company, which was founded around 1900. Vaughan was another major publisher of shape note hymnals.

After completing his studies, Boyce went on to teach shape note "singing schools" throughout the area. Rather than using standard music notation, this system assigned a tone on the musical scale to each of the distinctive geometrically shaped note heads. (See Darlyne Kent's article "Old-Time Music—Square Music" in November's *Old-Time Times*.)

In 1940, the Vaughan Company published Boyce's song "Beautiful Star of Bethlehem." The song was printed in the company's songbook, *Beautiful Praise*. Later, the song would be republished in Vaughan's *Favorite Radio Songs*.

Dr. Charles Wolfe, a Middle Tennessee State University English professor and nationally recognized authority on the origins of traditional country and gospel music, said, "Vaughan's *Favorite Radio Songs* would be like a collection of greatest hits today. By the 1940s, radio was an important part of the American landscape and reached a vast audience. Vaughan salesmen would pitch the songs in this book to radio stations and quartets who performed on the stations in an effort to broaden their exposure."

Boyce wrote "Beautiful Star of Bethlehem" while the family was living on a dairy farm in the Plainview community, about two or three miles from what is now the Interstate 24 Buchanan Road Exit. The songwriter's son, the late Franklin Boyce, recalled in a 1996 interview that his dad said he couldn't concentrate in the house because of noise made by the children. He walked across the road to the barn to find the solitude he needed to write.

"My father said the song was inspired by the Lord. Otherwise, how could he, a simple country man, ever write a song about such a

glorious event in world history?" Franklin Boyce asked.

When searching through some old papers, the family found a yellowed article clipped from *The Daily News Journal*, a newspaper in Murfreesboro. It had been written in the early 1960s. A story by Marie Chapman recounts the elder Boyce's recollection of how the song came to be written.

"I got up one Sunday morning to write it down," Boyce recalled. When his train of thought was interrupted by a member of the family who entered the room singing, he moved his pencil and pad to the barn, and there "Beautiful Star of Bethlehem" was put on paper.

"The words and melody got on my mind," Boyce told Chapman, "till I could hardly sleep at night." The humble farmer said he looked upon both the words and tune as gifts from God.

Dean Boyce, Franklin's wife, remembers how her late sister-in-law, Nanny Lou, talked about helping her father put down the music for the song. "I believe," she said, "they worked all morning on the music at the piano, and it rained hard all the time they were working on it."

Nell McKee, a retired educator who lives in the Buchanan area, attended Mt. Carmel Baptist Church where Boyce was a deacon and song leader when the song was written. Now in her 90s, McKee still attends the same church and recalls that Boyce would sing the lead part and his wife would sing the harmony in her clear alto voice.

"Fisher and Cora would sometimes sing the song at church," McKee remembers. "Cora would weep every time they sang together. She was very proud of her husband for writing that song."

Ironically, the family has never received royalties from the song. As was commonplace during that time in history, the legal copyright became the property of the company that published the material. As a rule, the songwriters were paid a one-time fee. To make a living, Boyce taught private voice lessons and worked at a variety of jobs including dairy farming and insurance and nursery sales.

During his later years, Boyce and his wife moved into town where he and a nephew, M. B. Carlton, were partners in the Ideal Fruit Market on West College Street. There, Boyce sold single copies of the song for a small amount of money.

Although he is often overlooked, Boyce is an important part of Tennessee's musical history. Wolfe said, "With the exception of Uncle Dave Macon's music, Boyce's song is the most important musical composition to come out of Rutherford County,"

Wolfe added that he thinks the earliest professional recording of the piece was performed by the John Daniel Quartet on their private Daniel label. Initially, this group had been one of the Vaughan Company's traveling quartets. The job of these traveling musical groups was to perform, for free, the Vaughan songbook compositions in churches throughout the Southeast and beyond so that congregations, once given a sampling of the music, would want to order songbooks.

In Daniel's case, the group became so popular that they soon struck out on their own and, in the 1940s, became one of the hit acts of the Grand Ole Opry. Interestingly, one of the early members of this foursome was West Tennessee native Gordon Stoker, who would go on to become a member of the Jordanares, made famous for their work with Elvis.

The exposure the tune received from appearing in songbooks, combined with its performance on the Opry, propelled Boyce's song to new heights. Bluegrass great Ralph Stanley recorded the song. Later, Emmylou Harris, Ricky Skaggs, the Judds, The Bishops, and others also cut it.

In 1993, the song was sung by Ben Speer and family on the Bill Gaither "Christmas Homecoming Video," and it continues to be performed in Gaither holiday concerts.

More recently, "Beautiful Star of Bethlehem" has been released by bluegrass entertainer Rhonda Vincent and country music's Patty Loveless.

According to family members, music was a part of Boyce's life until his last breath. Shortly before his passing in October 1968, as his family gathered around his bed, Boyce

"raised his arm and started beating out time, like he was leading a song. Daddy was singing 'Meet Me There' just before he died," Eads remembers.

During this holiday season, the saga of a simple man and his music will shine on wherever "Beautiful Star of Bethlehem" is sung.
~Patsy Weiler

A Christmas Carol and a Fiddle Tune

If you have seen a reasonably accurate dramatization of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, you may recall that when the ghost of Christmas past conducts Ebenezer back to Fezziwig's Christmas ball, the scene includes a dance, and the music is provided by a fiddler.

The fiddle tune, which is specifically named by Dickens, is "Sir Roger de Coverly." The sheet music for this tune, along with a more complete history of it, was published in the winter 02-03 edition of *Fiddler Magazine*.

It is in 9-8 time—like Foster's "Beautiful Dreamer," just 3-4 time with one extra "um pa pa" per measure. It has three parts, and it's square.

If you would like to try it out, go to *Fiddler Magazine*, or let me know. I will happily give you a photocopy of the entire article.

~Phil Sparks

The Passing of Birch Bryant

Tall and lanky, usually adorned with a scruffy beard, a ball cap, and a fetching smile that he freely shared with everyone, Birch Bryant was a well-known fixture around the public square in Murfreesboro. Not many days went by that Birch didn't walk the sidewalks that border the county's historic court-house, visiting and waving to anyone who had a few minutes to spare. It didn't matter if you washed windows or were the county executive, Birch counted you as his friend.

Those of us fortunate enough to be touched by his life were shocked and saddened when he died suddenly at home in early November, following heart surgery.

It is probably safe to say that many people who love old-time music and have attended Uncle Dave Macon Days have little idea about

the important role that Birch played in the continued success of this event. For almost half of his 57 years, he was a faithful and effervescent member of the volunteer committee that runs the festival.

In earlier times, when Uncle Dave Days was a one-afternoon banjo contest on the courthouse lawn, Birch was recruited into service by the founder of the festival, the late Jessie Messick, a pharmacist on the square. With a grin as wide as Texas, Birch could be seen picking up trash after the event. That was long before the festival had a big enough budget to hire people for that task.

As the event grew into a nationally recognized three-day old-time music festival, the organizing committee took on the task of selling program ads to raise more operating funds. Different groups would take on the project for a percentage of the sales, but one individual was willing to take it on simply because he wanted to. That person was Birch.

Gloria Wilson, the current festival chairman, remembers that some committee members resisted the idea of giving Birch this task. You see, Birch didn't drive, and he was a mentally challenged adult. Many of us would have considered either of those obstacles a good reason not to give him the job, but Birch became the best public relations representative any festival could have. He told everyone he met about Uncle Dave Macon Days and who the grand marshal would be. More times than not, he ended up with another program ad.

Birch became concerned when the county cut some of their financial support for last summer's festival. He decided to sell enough advertising to make up the difference. With the determination of a mule and the energy of a box full of new puppies, he faithfully pounded the payment and single handedly sold more than \$3000 worth of advertising for the 2004 program.

Birch also loved to play Santa, was a huge Titans fan, and dearly loved his gentle wife, Pat. As hard as you might try, you could never get him to speak a critical word about anyone.

During the visitation at the funeral, plenty of people swapped 'Birch Stories.' One story that made the rounds went back to the days when

the late entertainer Carl Tipton was actively performing on Nashville television and hosting live shows in Murfreesboro. On the day that Flatt and Scruggs drove to Rutherford County to be on stage, unknown to Tipton, Birch met the duo at their bus door and told them he was Carl's manager.

A framed letter from the Tennessee Titans, recognizing Birch at his death, was displayed near his casket. Flowers from a Tennessee senator in Washington, DC, and many local businesses stood nearby. The county executive, a state senator, a city councilman, and a county judge joined with the room full of everyday folks to tell their friend goodbye.

And, somewhere in the mix of memories and mourning, there seemed to be a lesson to us all. Birch, in his simple manner, naturally brought out the best in all of us. He taught us that everyone, when given the opportunity, has something to bring to the table and that we should never stop believing that we can touch the stars.

~Patsy Weiler

CD Review: *Ed Haley, Volume One, Forked Deer and Volume Two, Grey Eagle*

Produced by

John Hartford and Bob Carlin

I'm fairly new to the world of old-time music. Perhaps you are too. Recently, I discovered Ed Haley, quite by accident, and I want to make certain that you know about him.

Mr. Haley was a blind fiddler who lived from 1883 to 1954. He was born in West Virginia, where he learned to play the fiddle, and lived out most of his adult life in eastern Kentucky. He traveled widely, learning several thousand tunes and absorbing the styles of fiddlers from many regions.

Unfortunately, Mr. Haley refused to make records because he was afraid the studios would take advantage of his disability. Still, he made about 100 amateur recordings for his son. Most of these recordings, though preserved, are of extremely poor quality. Of the 100, 64 of the "best" are on this set of 4 CDs, which came out in 1997. They have been cleaned up as well as modern technology

allows, but many of them are still difficult to follow.

They may not qualify as toe-tapping entertainment, but they are a goldmine of original melodies to classic old-time fiddle tunes. I would love to list all 64 tunes, but that would be impractical. The CDs are distributed by Rounder (1131, -32, -33, -34), so you can learn more about them by going to www.rounder.com.

What Is the World's Oldest Old-Time Tune and Song?

Do you have any nominations? If so, send your ideas to Phil Sparks, the editor.

A Penny Learned

According to the *Violin Owner's Manual*, the only effective cleaner for removing rosin buildup from fiddle fingerboards is **alcohol**.

DANGER: Most violin varnishes are alcohol based, so alcohol may severely damage your finish. **DO NOT** use alcohol to remove the rosin buildup on the top of your fiddle.

When I clean my fingerboard, I cover the top of the fiddle with aluminum foil. One piece goes in front of the bridge and under the finger-board and another goes behind the bridge and under the tail piece. I crimp the two pieces together on either side of the bridge, and I scrunch them up against the feet of the bridge. Finally, I crimp the foil over the sides of the fiddle so only the back remains in view.

I dip a cotton ball in a saucer of rubbing alcohol, squeeze it, and shake it so no drops will fall from it or my fingers. Then, holding the fiddle upside down, I rub the cotton ball up and down the fingerboard, between and under the strings. I also follow this procedure to clean the strings. It takes 8 or 10 cotton balls to complete the job. ~Phil Sparks

Please Contribute to Your Newsletter!

If you have information you want to submit, or if you have ideas for improving the newsletter, contact Phil Sparks.

If you are willing to review a CD, contact Phil Sparks. If you don't contact him, he will contact you!

If you have a tidbit on picking, learning tunes, caring for instruments, etc, please submit it for the "A Penny Learned" article.

HELP!!!! If you know about an upcoming old-time music event, don't assume that we already know about it. If it's not posted on our Web site, we need the information desperately. Please help us keep our old-time community informed.

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The **submission deadline** for January's newsletter is Saturday, December 25.