

# Old-Time Times

MAY 2005

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## \*\*\*EVENTS\*\*\*

### Tennessee

#### Old-Time Music Festival

Held in Williston (near Jackson) at the Casey Jones Amphitheater, May 20-21. Their Web site makes no mention of competitions. For more information, call 901-668-1222 or go to [www.geocities.com/Nashville/9158.html](http://www.geocities.com/Nashville/9158.html).

### North Carolina

#### Mocksville Lions Old-Time Fiddler's and Bluegrass Festival

Held in Mocksville at the Clement Grove Arbor/Picnic Grounds. For more information, call Jonathan Wishon at 336-998-8877 or go to [www.mocksvillemions.org/pgs/FiddlerAnnual.htm](http://www.mocksvillemions.org/pgs/FiddlerAnnual.htm).

#### Old-Time Fiddlers and Bluegrass Festival

Held in Union Grove at the Fiddler's Grove Campground. For more information, call Harper Van Hoy at 704-539-4417 or go to [www.fiddlersgrove.com/](http://www.fiddlersgrove.com/).

### West Virginia

#### Vandalia Gathering

Held in Charleston at the Cultural Center and State Capitol Grounds. For more information, call 304-558-0220 or go to [www.wvculture.org/vandalia/](http://www.wvculture.org/vandalia/)

### Florida

#### Florida Folk Festival

Held in White Springs (just south of the Georgia line) at the Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park. For more information, call Jonathan Wishon at 336-998-8877 or go to [www.floridastateparks.org/folkfest/](http://www.floridastateparks.org/folkfest/).

## Hosts Needed for 4<sup>th</sup>-Sunday Jams

Please E-mail Darlyne Kent ([dkent@davidsonacademy.com](mailto:dkent@davidsonacademy.com).) to schedule your home for a 2005 4<sup>th</sup>-Sunday Jam. We still need homes for July, and August. Some of the summer 4<sup>th</sup>-Sunday jams may be held in area parks. We tried that last summer, and it was well received.

### Record Crowd Attends April's 4<sup>th</sup>-Sunday Jam

~1 of 75,000

That's right folks! Over 75,000 people packed in for the April 4th-Sunday Jam in South Pittsburg. Parking was at a premium! The weather was quite chilly, but the hot cornbread served for mid-jam snack break was a welcomed sight!!! Buttermilk rounded out the fare, along with many other options, like Cornbread Pie and Cornbread Salad. Now, those folks brought more food than we could ever have imagined serving at our local 4<sup>th</sup>-Sunday jams!!!! While the Jalapeño Cornbread was superb, I did not see our usual chocolate no-bake cookies, fresh strawberries, broccoli salad, chips and dip, or bean and pasta salads (some of my personal favorites!) - - a little disappointing, but still, much to choose from!

Talk about a Host! Bob Townsend really knows how to throw a jam. It was great to see some of our BUW attendees as well. Seriously, a special thanks goes to Bob Townsend for hosting the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday April Jam in South Pittsburg. He was gracious and welcoming. Bob was in great demand by both old-time folks and bluegrass folks, and true to form, Bob shared his talent and time with both groups. He played several requests that were enjoyed by all. Bob's band also participated in the festival. Again, thanks to Bob for hosting the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in April.

### A Few Interesting Statistics from Breakin' Up Winter, 2005

~Phil Sparks

It seems that this year's Breakin' Up Winter attracted more participants than ever before. Preregistrations numbered 115 and another 68 people registered on-site, giving a total of 183. The totals for the previous years are as follows: 2004-134; 2003-167; 2002-156, and 2001-156 also.

At least 103 people bought meal tickets, and 4 people purchased a T-shirt.

As for the cabins, 23 people applied for one, up from 15 the previous year. About 20 people stayed in the Group Lodge, which was significantly down from previous years.

The evaluations were overwhelmingly positive though most of us agreed that the food could have been much better. One common suggestion was that we offer more slow jams. The beginning pickers loved the ones we had but wanted more.

All in all, BUW '05 was a clear success, especially when we consider that we are far more concerned with good jamming and quality presentations than with the number of folks who attend.

### Dr W.K. "Bill" McNeil Passes Away

~Patsy Weiler

I regret to inform you that Dr. W. K. "Bill" McNeil has passed away.

Dr. McNeil was a faithful friend to everyone in old-time music and helped for years with judging at Uncle Dave Macon Days. Those of us who had the good fortune of knowing him will surely remember his great laugh and deep knowledge of even the tiniest details in old-time music and its artists.

Bill began the Ozark Cultural Resources Center in Mountain View, Arkansas, as a simple one-room library in 1977 and served as the Folk life Director at the Ozark Folk Center in Mountain View.

A memorial service for Dr. McNeil was held Saturday, April 23, in the small auditorium of the Ozark Folk Center. He will be greatly missed.

**Dr W.K. Bill' McNeil: A Tribute**

~Charles Wolfe

I, along with hundreds of others in the fields of folklore, popular culture, country music, and Ozarks culture was shocked and deeply saddened to hear of the passing of Bill McNeil. Bill was one of those founts of wisdom and good humor that we always assumed would be there; he was the one we called up when we got stuck on a song history or needed a date on some obscure cowboy singer's birth; he was always glad to help and was always eager to find out new information and to champion new causes. He was an expert on an amazing number of subjects—not just folk music, but old Hollywood films, forgotten 19th century songwriters, folk tales, ghost stories, discography. His intellectual curiosity seemed boundless; I never went into a book store with him and got out in less than two hours.

Beyond his scholarly records, though, Bill was a kind, affable, and gentle man; Unlike too many of his status and reputation, he had a wonderful, easy-going sense of humor. One of my fondest memories of him was last year at the Uncle Dave Macon festival, where I was judging with Bill and Mike Seeger. It was great to watch these two masters bounce song trivia off each other, and one time I came back to the judging table to find the two of them harmonizing on an old Hoosier Hot Shots song, "I Like Bananas Because They Have No Bones."

There was no pretense about Bill. When you talked to him, you were talking to the real thing. But make no mistake: This was a world-class expert. I feel he was probably the nation's best song historian, bar none. He was also a warm, open, gregarious friend and neighbor whose hearty laugh I can hear echoing still. I shall miss Bill terribly, and his passing leaves a huge void in the study of American culture. When we hear the Carter Family song, "Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?" let us think of Bill McNeil and how much we will miss him, and also of how grateful we are for his time with us.

**Festival Review: The Bear on the Square, Dahlonega, Georgia**

~Don Kent

In the spring of 1997, a bear cub from the Southern Blue Ridge Mountains wandered into the town square of Dahlonega, Georgia, and climbed up a tree to get away from the crowd. Since then, the sleepy but beautiful town of Dahlonega has hosted a festival called "Bear on the Square." This just proves the point that one reason is just as good as any other reason to throw an old-time jam, a big party, and a crafts and music festival.

Saturday morning we found Dahlonega, a beautiful, friendly, and scenic mountain town with tree-lined streets, old buildings, and a picturesque courthouse on the square. The weather was chilly at first but became sunny and warm, and shade was in short supply. Dahlonega is a college town and has a lot of nice restaurants.

Old time music was pretty much the rule with a few "grassers" here and there. Several groups of jammers found a shady spot under trees or around the courthouse. A friendly, appreciative crowd often surrounded us.

A few workshops were offered, covering fiddle, guitar, and a Sunday morning hymn sing. We attended the singing and fiddle workshop featuring Fletcher Bright, Tracy Schwarz, and Bobby Hicks. After dinner there was a Saturday night square dance on the square. After Saturday evening's festivities, several jammers stayed out late in front of the General Store to play the town "clean into Sunday morning."

The drive took about 5 hours one way but was well worth the effort. The scenery along the winding mountain drive (through the Chattahoochee National Forest) is a slow drive, but beautiful.

The Notsba folks enjoyed playing some tunes with both our East Tennessee and our Atlanta old-time buddies.

### **The Black Banjo Gathering Preview Is a Great Success**

~Harry Taylor, Charlotte Folk Society

We had terrific Black Banjo concert here in Charlotte last Wednesday night. (The concert was announced in last month's *Old-Time Times*.)

Tony Thomas, Dom Flemmons, Sule Greg Wilson, Cheick Hamala Dibate, and the Ebony Hillbillies all performed to a packed house. (We began turning people away 10 minutes before the show started!) It was a great night for some wonderful people and a most deserving cause.

### **Nic and Tyler Andal Win at Holladay**

On April 16 at the Old-Time Fiddlers' and Bluegrass Jamboree in Holladay, Nic Andal took first place in the old-time banjo contest while Tyler Andal won second place in old-time banjo and first place in the fiddle contest.

Notsba is fortunate to count these talented young gentlemen among their members.

### **Another Look at Jam Etiquette**

~Dave Cannon

I recently had someone from our group tell me that Irish Jam sessions weren't fun. He told me that it was hard to keep up when folks didn't take turns in selecting tunes. In truth most Irish jams that I have been to tend to have a dominate group. You usually wind up playing their tune list and their medleys. If you go to the Station Inn on a Sunday night for their Bluegrass Jam, you will find a similar situation where a few dominate people will control the music for the evening. I have not been to many old-time jams where this has been an issue though I have been to jams where I didn't know many people and the natural tendency in these situations is for folks to defer to players they know.

Some years ago, it seemed like there was always a dominate fiddle player at most jams, and he mostly picked the tunes. I think this is partly because most folks that I see at festivals and in jams didn't start out with their current list of tunes. Since the fiddle must always

carry the melody and most people can't play what they don't know, it became necessary to depend on the fiddle player for direction.

Since then a couple of things have happened. First, fiddle players have learned a lot more tunes. It has become easier to suggest a tune to fiddle players. Two years ago at Mount Airy, I was playing with two rather well-known fiddle players when they remarked that a fiddle player who knew 100 tunes used to be pretty hot stuff. Now you have to know more than 1,000. This is probably an exaggeration, but it is true that fiddle players are getting better and can play more tunes.

Second, there have been a growing number of beginner players to come along in the last five years or so. There has always been "safety in numbers" for beginners. Musical democracy has been fostered by these folks because they don't have that many tunes. I think that it might also be because it is hard to stand out in a large group when you don't have a lot of confidence in your own musical ability.

When I go to Jams with mixed skilled individuals, I try to let them pick tunes that they want to, or can, play. When it is my turn to pick a tune, I try to pick one that they can play, would be easy to learn, or is something I think they would really like. This is what I have been doing with The Nashville Old-Time String Band Association for twelve years.

Recently I was at a jam outside of Nashville that was attended by some other members of the association. The skill level at this jam was generally pretty bad, but it had folks who loved the music and were trying to learn it. Our folks tended to dominate the tune selection and play medleys that the association usually does at dances. I started seeing that "deer in the headlight" look on many of the people there.

All of us need to watch for those looks from people we are trying to play with. You have to decide if you want to be welcoming to them or if you want to discourage them. With only a few exceptions, I have found that old-time Music players are extremely polite. Often they

are too polite to say that they don't want an individual to play with them. This sentiment is often expressed by saying things like "we are rehearsing for the band contest," or "you know, we just don't get to see each other very often." Sometimes these rebuffs can be much more subtle, like playing tunes that you wouldn't know or understand. For you to be a polite jammer you must be aware of these signs, but you also must be aware if you are unintentionally conveying these signs to others.

Always remember that a lot of good players would much rather play in small groups than large ones. When a player is learning, there is a lot of comfort in playing in large groups. You don't have to worry about making mistakes, and you don't have to worry about standing out. As you become better, you appreciate the "tight sound" of a small group. This does not mean that good players never want to play in large groups. They just don't want to do it all of the time. Most truly good players I know still appreciate the social situation of a large group and the friends they make there.

This is meant to be an expression of my own observations and opinions, but with the festival season fast approaching, I hope they will be considered. If they are, I think you will be a lot less confused and have fewer hard feelings. Remember it never hurts to ask.

#### CD Review:

#### *The Fuzzy Mountain String Band (Continued)*

Rounder CD 11571

~Bob White

I agree with the review of the Fuzzy Mountain String Band CD that appeared in last month's *Old-Time Times*. (I have the albums not the CD.) They're great! I learned quite a few tunes from those albums, and forgot some too, unfortunately.

I would argue these albums are perhaps the best of the 70s revivalist band recordings and better than almost anything that has appeared in the last few years. Note that this band had two (2) banjos and no bass.

My understanding is the Fuzzies were friends and family of the Hollow Rock Band. Alan Jabbour certainly could tell us the whole history. Blanton and Malcolm Owens visited and recorded lots of elder fiddlers. Six or seven years ago at Mt. Airy, I remember meeting and playing a few tunes with Jake Owens, Malcolm Owens' son and Blanton's nephew (also a fine musician). The day after we returned home, we got word that Jake's Uncle Blanton had been killed in a plane crash in Alaska where he had been a bush pilot.

In my early years at Galax, Bill Hicks walked up and gave me, a total stranger, a drink of whiskey about 2 a.m. one cold morning. I was awed as I knew him from his Red Clay Ramblers work. I had the pleasure of playing a few tunes with him a couple of times at Mt. Airy in the last few years. He and his wife Libby live on Ocracoke Island off the North Carolina coast and have written some nice songs.

Bobby Thompson died, I think, in a car wreck. She was the wife of Tommy Thompson with the Hollow Rock and later the Red Clay Ramblers. I had the pleasure of working sound for the Red Clay Ramblers once, and Tommy's story is the saddest to me. A great intellect (PhD of Philosophy), singer, and banjo player, Tommy had Alzheimer's and died several years ago. The picture on the second album is of Tommy and Bobby's house, which was known for monster jams. There are stories of him crawling under the house with makeshift jacks to keep the floor from falling in.

These albums were recorded on home equipment so the fidelity is not the highest, but you can hear the dulcimer clearly, which is unusual. I'm not big on dulcimer, but I like it here.

I was going to list the tunes I still play that are on the albums, but it's almost all of them. I have forgotten Peter Francisco, and I never learned Dusty Miller and a few others. I seem to be one of a few who play "Shooting Creek," which I have always liked.

I guess I should get the CD for convenience, but I'm weary of buying recordings twice.

Besides, the artwork on albums is so much better, and I have trouble even reading the notes, which are often abbreviated.

There are some nice web pages which can be reached from <http://redclayramblers.tripod.com>. They give the history of the Fuzzy Mountain String Band, The Hollow Rock String Band, and The Red Clay Ramblers. They also pay tribute to the late Tommy Thompson.

### **A Penny Learned: What Is a “Modal” Tune?**

~Phil Sparks

A while back, I set out to unravel the mystery of modal tuning. Here, in a nutshell, is what I learned—thanks to lots of nice folks who responded to my questions.

Every scale is technically a modal scale of some kind, be it Ionian, Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Aeolian, or Locrian. (I can actually pronounce a couple of those words.)

For the sake of simplicity, let’s consider the C major scale, the one that represents all the white keys on a piano and goes C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C. This C major scale is in the Ionian mode. Who gives a flip? No one, we just call it the “C major” scale and leave it there.

A tune in C major tends to start on a C note and almost always ends on a C note. It tends to start with a C chord and almost always ends with a C chord, with a few F chords and G chords thrown in between. If you want to play in C minor, you have a black key for the flatted E.

Now suppose you are playing a primitive flute of some sort, something like a penny whistle. If your flute is, for example, in the key of C, it’s like playing a piano with only white keys. Wouldn’t it be boring to play all tunes in C major? Wouldn’t you like to use your flute to play in, say, a minor key from time to time?

Centuries ago, some clever shepherd noticed that if you use your “C” flute but start and end your tune on the A note instead of the C note, the tune takes on a haunting, romantic sound. That shepherd was playing in the “A Aeolian

mode.” We call it “A minor.” Find the sheet music for a tune in A minor and you will notice that the key signature is for C—that is, no sharps or flats.

What if you use the same “C” flute but start and end your tune with the D note? You would be in the Dorian mode. Start and end with the E note and it’s the Phrygian mode, etc, etc.

Turns out that the only modes our folk music seems to care about are the Ionian mode (we call it the “major” scale), the Aeolian mode, (we call it the “natural minor” scale), and the Dorian and Mixolydian modes (we call them both “modal”).

Most of our guitars, banjos, and fiddles, have “standard” tunings designed to make it easy for us to play in major or minor scales (the Ionian or Aeolian modes). No problemo!

Have you ever noticed that “June Apple” has that haunting sound of a minor, but uses only major chords? We like to say that it’s in “A modal” and uses the A and G chords. Actually, it uses the notes in the D major scale but starts and ends with an A note. Because the A note is five notes higher than D, it’s in the Mixolydian mode. The same logic applies to “Kitchen Girl” and “Santa Anna’s Retreat.”

The Dorian mode is harder to pin down, and we don’t use it much. “Cold Frosty Morning,” “Elzic’s Farewell,” and “Cluck Ol’ Hen” are all in the Dorian mode. “Cold Frosty Morning” and “Elzic’s Farewell” chord like they are in natural minor keys while “Cluck Ol’ Hen” uses all major chords, like the Mixolydian does.

What makes them Dorian is the fact that their key signature leads us to expect them to start and end with one note but they start and end with the next higher note. “Elzic’s Farewell,” for example, has the key signature of G but starts and ends with an A note.

Because the Mixolydian and Dorian modes use scales so different from major and minor scales, we often tune our instruments differently to accommodate those scales. Yes, there is even a modal tuning for guitars, used mostly by Irish guitar players.

If you flip through *The Fiddler's Fakebook*, you will notice that the vast majority of tunes in the Mixolydian mode are Irish, and even a vaster majority of tunes in the Dorian mode are Irish. Still, we old-time pickers use the Mixolydian and Dorian modes occasionally, and we just call them "modal" tunes.

Remember this (if you want to):

1. The Mixolydian mode usually starts and almost always ends with the note five notes higher than the key signature would lead you to expect.
2. The Dorian mode usually starts and almost always ends with the note one note higher than the key signature would lead you to expect.

What good is all this information? I honestly do not know. I just thought it was sort of interesting, and I, for one, no longer lie awake at night trying to figure out what makes modal tunes so different.

#### **WANTED: Newsletter Editor**

Friends, I have thoroughly enjoyed editing this newsletter. Through it, I've made some excellent friends and learned a great deal about old-time music. Nevertheless, my year is almost up. Besides, editing this thing is hard work, and it's cutting into my practice time—which, as you well know, I desperately need.

Starting July 1, a new slate of officers will take the helm at Notsba, and one of those new officers will be the newsletter editor.

If you would like to be considered for the job, let Ed, Don, me, or any other member of the board know. I promise to do everything I can to help you turn out your first issue.

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 sub-

mit 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 ([www.nashvilleoldtime.org](http://www.nashvilleoldtime.org)), we need the information desperately. ***Please help us keep our old-time community informed.***

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The *submission deadline* for *June's newsletter* is *Wednesday, May 25*.

**Editor's Note:** The articles in this newsletter are placed according to when they are submitted. The first article I receive is placed at the top, the second goes next, and so on.