

## THE SCOTTSVILLE SQUIRREL BARKERS, FROM THE BLUE GUITAR TO COUNTRY ROCK

In the early 60's the "folk music revival" was having a strong impact on bluegrass music across the country. In 1959 The Stanley Brothers had played the Newport Folk Festival and in 1960 both The Stanleys and The Osborne Brothers performed at Antioch College in Ohio. In 1962 The Stanley Brothers played at Oberlin College and that same year Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs recorded a project entitled *Folksongs of our Land* which included 2 songs written by Woody Guthrie. These were not isolated incidents as many of the established bands as well as some regional groups were taking advantage of the interest in their music among a new generation of urban youth. Many would argue that the music was diminished by these efforts to appeal to the folk music fans, particularly the changes in repertoire, but there was no question that it's popularity was increasing. Bluegrass was attracting new disciples to new venues in new areas of the country.

One of those places was San Diego, California where a group of young men from different backgrounds were gathering to make music. Although the group was an amalgam of musical genres from folk to flamenco, one subgroup was drawn to traditional bluegrass and the individuals in this group were destined to make their mark on the soon to be born genre of country rock. That group, formed in 1962, was the *Scottsville Squirrel Barkers*.

Bernie Leadon, contemporary of the Squirrel Barkers and later founding member of *the Eagles* was living in San Diego at the time and in an e-mail interview described one component of the community which would have readily embraced the sounds of bluegrass and talked about his introduction to the music scene.

".. a bunch of okies and people from the south....came during the dust bowl, like *Grapes Of Wrath*, and some came during and after WW II. They came thru on the way to the Pacific War, came home and moved out west. There were something like 200,000 active duty sailors and marines in S. California in the early 60's, many came from the south and stayed. In the early 60's there was a TV show from L. A., *Cal's Corral*, which we could see in San Diego. Joe and Rose Maphis were on that show and played

around Southern California. ....and then there were all these folkies in the early 60's. That's how I got interested in banjo and guitar. I saw the Squirrel Barkers at a weekend Hootenanny down at a local church hall near where I lived. I think I was 15. Kenny's (Wertz) banjo ripped my head off. I went up to them after the show and found out that they had the *Blue Guitar* and basically I started ditching school and going to the shop every day. Ed and Larry were at the shop every day making banjos, selling instruments and hosting bluegrass, folk and flamenco lessons. ....I shouldn't leave out Yuris Zeltins, the 3<sup>rd</sup> partner of the *Blue Guitar* who was a flamenco player....there was always folk or bluegrass music either being played or flamenco on the sound system. They had a little stage area and on the weekends would have shows so it was a great scene....and plenty of cute girls, can't leave that out."

In his description Bernie references the *Blue Guitar* which was a small music store and repair shop on Midway Drive and ground zero for the young acoustic music scene. In fact this story actually begins a short time before the opening of the *Blue Guitar*. According to Yuris Zeltins, well known flamenco style guitar player and luthier in San Diego the story began at *Frank Emig's Furniture* which had the distinction of importing and selling guitars from Mexico. According to Zeltins many of the local young guitarists and their fellow musicians hung out amid the furniture and gave lessons in Frank's home until Ms. Emig put a stop to the late night sessions and the students and teachers in her kitchen. Out of desperation at losing their unofficial headquarters, he, Ed Douglas and Larry Murray opened the *Blue Guitar* a small storefront with a partial dirt floor where they sold and repaired guitars, sold equipment, gave lessons and even had a small performance stage. Ed Douglas reported that they took all the merchandise home with them at night because of the lack of security. Over the next couple of years the *Blue Guitar* would inhabit 3 different buildings in the Midway Drive area. It was at the first of these that Ed Douglas, Larry Murray, Gary Carr, Chris Hillman and Kenny Wertz began performing traditional bluegrass as a unit and took the name the Scottsville Squirrel Barkers. In addition to the bluegrass contingent the store was the meeting place for many other musicians of various genres. Regulars at the store included Mason Williams who would later write and record the hit song *Classical Gas*, singer-songwriter Hoyt Axton and the *Femme Modernes*, a local all female folk group.

The initial seed for the band was planted when Kenny and Gary met and begun playing as a guitar and banjo folk duet and hanging out at the *Blue Guitar*. Ed and Larry joined in on bass and Dobro and the Scottsville Squirrel Barkers were born with Chris Hillman at age 16 being added a few months later. The name of the group was provided by Ed Douglas who had lived in Kentucky as a young man and who had roots in the community of Scottsville, Kentucky. Ed explained to the young Californians that squirrel barking was a technique used by hunters in Kentucky whereby a rifle shot would be carefully placed beneath the squirrel in the tree bark so that the squirrel would be knocked from the tree and then could be captured without damage to the flesh and therefore more readily consumed.

The Squirrel Barker's quickly became the official house band at the *Blue Guitar* and along with their regular appearances there they began performing at other venues. Although the group lasted only approximately 18 months they performed at Disneyland in Anaheim, Balboa Park in San Diego, a bluegrass festival at the Ice House in Pasadena and numerous other venues in and around San Diego. As with any band worth their salt, the Squirrels needed, or at least wanted, a recording to help with self promotion. According to Kenny Wertz, when they felt that the music was tight they loaded all 5 band members and an upright bass in a 4 door Chevy Corvaire and drove to Los Angeles where they proceeded to call every recording company in the phone book from a pay phone. Their optimism was rewarded when Crown records agreed to listen to their audition tape and then agreed to record them the following week if they would return to L.A. Ed added that he was familiar with the situation at Crown Records and knew that they would record the group in return for the right to distribute and sell the LP.

The group entered the studio and within a period of 4 to 5 hours recorded the 10 traditional songs, just over 18 minutes total, which were to become Crown CLP 5346 entitled *Bluegrass Favorites by the Scottsville Squirrel Barkers*, destined to be sold in grocery store and dime store bins around the country for less than a dollar. As per their usual policy Crown required that all the tunes be in the public domain so as to avoid the messy problem of royalties. The members all agree that their only compensation was a number of copies of the LP to be resold at their public appearances. According to Chris Hillman the records were pressed from inferior vinyl and would quickly begin to disintegrate upon repeated playing. Several members of the group have expressed their belief that the recordings were later speeded up to achieve the breakneck speeds heard on the LP. The LP was released in

1963 as Crown CLP 5346. The stereo version was Crown CST 346. The songs included:

*Shady Grove*  
*Home Sweet Home*  
*Katie Cline*  
*Swamp Root*  
*The Willow Tree*  
*Hand Me Down My Walking Cane*  
*Three Finger Breakdown*  
*Cripple Creek*  
*Crown Junction Breakdown*  
*Reuben's Train*

Sometime later the identical recording was released as Crown CST 444 under the title *Best of Bluegrass Favorites by the Kentucky Mountain Boys*. Although the music is strictly acoustic and traditional the cover shot on this release features a sexy brunette and an electric guitar presumably in hopes of appealing to a different market than the original cover art.

Still later, apparently in an effort to capitalize on the Bonnie and Clyde fad, the recording was again released, with one additional cut of the title tune by unknown musicians, this time as Custom CS 1109 titled *The Ballad of Bonnie and Clyde* by Ray Waters who was, by all reports, a fictional artist. To add to the mystique surrounding this particular release I also have an exact duplicate with the same cover shot, same number, same title and same song list on the cover but on the LP the artist is listed as Ray Waters and His Orchestra and other than the *Ballad of Bonnie and Clyde* the song titles are different and include such chestnuts as *Shine on Harvest Moon*, *In the Good Old Summertime* and *Bill Bailey*.

The recording was released at least one additional time, by Ariola-Eurodisc in the Netherlands and released as *The Best of Bluegrass Favorites by the Kentucky Mountain Boys Featuring Chris Hillman*. There may well be other releases as well.

In more recent years the recording has been released on CD by *Big Beat Records* in London and is readily available on *Amazon.com*. At any time there are copies available on eBay.

The names of some of the members of *The Scottsville Squirrel Barkers* are easily recognizable. As a group they spent less than 2 years together and made little impact outside San Diego but as individuals several of them have gone on to greater heights. In 1963 the group began to disintegrate when Kenny and Gary left to join the Air Force. For the remainder of the band gigs they were replaced by banjoist Bernie Leadon and guitarist Doug Jeffords who are, till this day, referred to as honorary Squirrels by Chris Hillman and considered as members by the others as well. This was the beginning of the period Ed Douglas refers to as “the Exodus” during which all the band members left to seek their fortunes, musical and otherwise, in Los Angeles.

Chris Hillman is probably the best known of the Squirrel Barkers. Growing up on a family ranch in San Diego County, his introduction to folk and bluegrass music was the result of a guitar his mother bought for him in Tijuana, Mexico and the collection of folk music LPs which belonged to his older sister. In an interview he explained how he became an official Squirrel Barker.

“In 1962 I moved up to L.A. with my mom and sister after my dad passed away. .... I turned 18 ...and then returned to San Diego on my motorcycle with my Gibson Mandolin strapped on my back and joined the Squirrel Barkers.”

As the Squirrel Barkers disbanded in 1963 Chris returned to L. A. where he joined the *Golden State Boys* (later dubbed the *Hillman*), a bluegrass band including Don Parmley and Vern and Rex Gosdin. He was soon lured away from this job by producer Jim Dickson who was producing the rock group that was to become the *Byrds*. Next he joined with Gram Parsons to form the *Flying Burrito Brothers* and from there joined Stephen Stills in *Manassas*. Several configurations later he, along with Herb Pedersen, John Jorgenson, Bill Bryson, Jaydee Maness and Steve Duncan formed the *Desert Rose Band* a highly acclaimed west coast country group known for their vocal work and instrumental abilities. Chris has settled in Ventura California and continues to tour and record. In addition to an occasional solo project he regularly records and tours with his long time friend Herb Pedersen as an acoustic duet doing bluegrass tunes and Bakersfield style

country music as well as acoustic renditions of Byrd's and Burrito Brothers material.

Kenny Wertz found himself in San Diego as a small boy when his father's Navy career caused the family to relocate from Maryland. He began exploring folk music and eventually gravitated to the banjo as his main instrument after being given a Flatt and Scruggs LP by a young banjo player whom he met on a bus but who preferred the plectrum style of banjo to the three fingered Scruggs style. Having already met Gary Carr and formed a folk duo, the music led them both to Frank's Furniture and then to the Blue Guitar where they were introduced to the other future members of the Squirrel Barkers. In 1963 Kenny left the band to join the Air Force and upon his discharge moved to L.A. and was promptly recruited for the original line up of the *Country Gazette*, a progressive and innovative bluegrass ensemble led by Oklahoma native, fiddler, Byron Berline. While still active in that group he was drafted by his friend Chris Hillman to replace Bernie Leadon in the *Flying Burrito Brothers*. After fulfilling the bands obligation for a European tour the Burritos disbanded and Kenny re-joined the *Country Gazette* for another 5 years and several LPs before laying aside his musical career in favor of a family and career. He currently resides in Fallbrook, California, where he plays bluegrass as an avocation and works in the medical equipment design field.

Larry Murray played dobro with the group and had settled in San Diego after serving a stint in the military. He was a partner in the *Blue Guitar* and was one of the older members of the group. After his time with the band he also moved to Los Angeles. where he did MC work at the famous *Troubadour* club and founded an influential acoustic group named *Hearts and Flowers* which recorded two LP's. Richie Unterberger who has written extensively on the country-rock genre described the group as "one of the most eclectic 1960's folk-rock groups, as well as being one of the very first to point the way towards country-rock". A later member of *Hearts and Flowers* was none other than Bernie Leadon who seemed to regularly surface anywhere new and original music was being made. Larry has worked as a writer for various television show personalities including the *Smothers Brothers*, *Glen Campbell* and *Johnny Cash* and is currently living in Sherman Oaks California where he continues to write songs and make music. He occasionally returns to San Diego to perform with Ed Douglas in the group *High, Wide and Handsome*.

Bernie Leadon was an “honorary member” of the Squirrel’s according to Chris Hillman because he filled the banjo seat for the remainder of the gigs after Kenny Wertz left for the service. Bernie had been a friend of the band for the entire duration and was inspired to pick banjo after hearing Kenny in a previous ensemble. After the Squirrels Bernie played with *Linda Ronstadt*, *Hearts and Flowers*, the *Dillard and Clark Expedition*, the *Flying Burrito Brothers* and ultimately was a founding member of the *Eagles* a few years later. He currently lives in Nashville and stays busy with various musical projects.

Ed Douglas, now age 77, was the bassist , the oldest member, and the leader of the group, when one was needed. An ex-police officer, Ed continued to operate the *Blue Guitar* for a period before moving to L.A. where he managed and promoted an early country rock style group *Stone Country*. Ed currently lives in San Diego where he owns the *Double Eagle* which is a combination music store and leather shop.and in 2003 he arranged for the Squirrel Barkers to have their first and only reunion at the Adams Avenue Roots Festival in San Diego. He continues to make music today, under the name *High, Wide and Lonesome*, with a group of friends often including several ex-Squirrels

Gary Carr was the guitar player and a native of the San Diego area. He left the group to join the Air Force and after his discharge he moved around the country making music in various locales and configurations. His only known recording was with Geoff Stelling, renowned banjo builder, in the group *Hard Times* in the San Francisco bay area. While still a young man Gary passed away.

Doug Jeffords was a career Naval officer stationed in San Diego who filled the guitar spot with the Squirrel Barkers after Gary Carr left to join the military. Doug finished his career as a “boat driver” with the Navy and retired to Santa Fe New Mexico but does return to San Diego on occasion to perform with Ed in *High, Wide and Lonesome*.

That is the story of the *Scottsville Squirrel Barkers*. It could have ended as thousands of other such bands do, with the members drifting apart and one by one moving into non-musical endeavors. Instead “the Exodus” took five of the seven to Los Angeles where they contributed at various levels to the popular music of the 60’s and 70’s that was to be labeled country rock. The list of bands includes the *Byrds*, the *Flying Burrito Brothers*, the *Eagles*,

*Hearts and Flowers*, the *Stone Ponys*, *Manassas* and *Stone Country*. Two of those five, Hillman and Leadon, have enjoyed long and varied careers and played major roles in the development of country rock.

In my opinion the most amazing aspect of the Squirrel Barkers is that today, 45 years later, the 6 surviving members remain in contact with each other and are subject to gather in various configurations to play music. It is amazing also that Crown CLP 5346, *Bluegrass Favorites*, is available on CD.