

North Georgia Bluegrass 1950 – 2000

Bluegrass Music Symposium

READING COPY: NOT FOR REPRINT OR QUOTATION WITHOUT AUTHOR'S
PERMISSION.

Western Kentucky University

Friday, September 10, 2005
1:30 – 3:10 p.m.

READING COPY: NOT FOR REPRINT OR QUOTATION WITHOUT AUTHOR'S
PERMISSION.

Presented by

Bill Brown, Ed.D.

Dean, School of Education and Social Sciences
Shorter College
Rome, Georgia

Michael Fleming

Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles (Ret.)
Sharpsburg, Georgia

Introduction/Methodology

The North Georgia bluegrass scene is one with a rich and diverse heritage. The roots may be traced back to Fiddlin' John Carson and Moonshine Kate, Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers, Riley Puckett, and James and Martha Carson in addition to Monroe, Flatt and Scruggs, the Stanley Brothers, and Reno and Smiley.

It should be noted at the beginning of this paper that in 1938 Bill Monroe traveled to Atlanta where he advertised for musicians and subsequently hired a young guitarist from North Georgia named Cleo Davis. From this origin Monroe would soon name his group the Blue Grass Boys and begin to create the branch of Hillbilly music which would one day be known as Bluegrass.

How does one capture the essence of such an important component of North Georgia culture? The vision for this research contains four basic expectations. 1) the collection will be digital in nature 2) interviewees will be able to tell their story in their own words 3) a collection of scanned photos with accompanying narrative will provide a timeline of events and 4) the collection will provide information (resources) for professional presentations and articles.

Interviewees were identified using membership in the Georgia or Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame/Hall of Honor as a primary criterion. Technology used in interviews has included a digital minidisk recorder and a lap top computer with scanner. Interviews were transferred to computer where they could – along with scanned photos – be manipulated and added to multimedia presentations.

Photos were scanned at a relatively high resolution (300 dpi) and given an ID including the year of origin, the interviewee's name and a number. For instance, 1952jwatson013.jpg would indicate the photo is from 1952 and contributed by James Watson. 013 would indicate this was photo #13 of a series provided by James.

After the photos were scanned, the interviewee then provided recorded specific information about each of the photos such as identification of who is in the photo, where and when it was taken and additional anecdotes or interesting points. By having the date as the first component of the photo ID, a timeline of photos is easily produced and there are over two hundred scanned photos to this point.

The collection has provided the basis for publications in *Bluegrass Unlimited* and the *SEBA Breakdown*. Presentations have included the International Country Music Conference at Belmont University as well as numerous presentations at Lindsey Wilson College in Columbia, KY and Shorter College in Rome, GA. Papers and photos of the ICMC presentations may be accessed at:
<http://bcbrown.net/bluegrass/chronicles/articles.html>

For the purposes of this symposium presentation, only a few of those who have been interviewed will be highlighted. They are strong representatives of our music and some will be very familiar names. Familiar or not, they have all played key roles and are deserving of the recognition at this, the first Bluegrass Music Symposium.

WALTER BUTLER

In the late 1950's and early 60's there were several practitioners of Bluegrass music in North Georgia but no cohesive "community" existed. The nearest thing to a "Big bang event" seems to have been the picking sessions organized and hosted by Walter Butler at his home in Pine Lake, Georgia. It seems everyone was invited and everyone went. A conversation with anyone in North Georgia interested in Bluegrass during this period gets around to a mention of Walter.

He was born in Lawrenceville Ga. in 1919 and was influenced by the Hillbilly music of the period including Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers, The Blue Sky Boys, Flatt and Scruggs, Reno and Smiley and Jim and Jesse.

The Asheville Folk Festival in North Carolina was where the Ga. community regularly encountered pickers with mutual interests and Walter made many long-term friendships there with performers at all levels from varied locales. It was during a chance conversation with Doyle Lawson in 2003 that we discovered that he was well acquainted with Walter and the Ga. contingent dating from his days with J.D. Crowe and their attendance at the DJ Convention in Nashville.

Walter successfully fronted his own band, the Sun Valley Boys for almost 20 years and regularly appeared on the Dixie Jubilee in Hapeville Ga.

Walter's influence on the N Ga. Bluegrass community was cut short with his death in 1979 at age 60. His contributions live on.

ONIE and J.N. BAXTER

J.N. and Onie Baxter are a husband and wife team from Carrollton Ga. Their attraction to the Bluegrass sound caused them to transition from performing electric Country music to Bluegrass around 1961. The ensemble of musicians they attracted came to be known as the Bluegrass 5 and the group, with changing personnel, continues to regularly play shows and Festivals today. Many of the finest musicians in the area have performed in the group during their more than 40 year history. Their regular attendance at the Asheville Folk festival and the DJ Convention in Nashville put them in contact with the biggest names in Bluegrass and they have jammed and played shows with musicians such as Kenny Baker and Bill Keith.

J.N. and Onie are members of the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame and were among the small group of musicians who organized the first Bluegrass Festival in Georgia, the Cobb County Festival, in 1968. No group has been more influential in the music of area than the Bluegrass 5.

DONNIE LEE

Donnie grew up in Bremen, Georgia but as a result of his fathers Army service he also spent time in Ft. Knox, Kentucky and Trieste, Italy. It was while in Kentucky that Donnie first heard the music of Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys at a live performance in Elizabethton.

Back home in Georgia, Donnie was influenced musically by his mother who sang and toured with the Kansas Ladies Quartet and by her brother who played claw hammer banjo. He also began to seek out musicians in the area who were playing bluegrass music. Among those he found were J.N. and Onie Baxter, Kenneth Hood, Hughie Wylie and Walter Butler. From these acquaintances he was inspired to learn to play the banjo and the bass.

In 1971 Donnie met Joe Partridge and they formed the L & P Express that was to become Bullsboro in 1973. That same year the group sponsored the Bullsboro Bluegrass festival which is believed to be the second such Festival ever held in Georgia. The Festival continued for 10 years.

The band has recorded 2 projects, the first in 1978 titled *BULLSBORO* and the second in 2003 entitled *STILL BULLSBORO AFTER ALL THESE YEARS*.

As a member of the Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame, Donnie is especially proud of the group's accomplishments over their 34 year career which include having played for 2 Governors of Georgia as well as for Presidential candidate Jimmy Carter. They have also performed at the Powers Crossroads Arts and Crafts festival for more than 30 years.

ROBERT “TUT” TAYLOR

Robert “Tut” Taylor is a well-known name in Bluegrass circles. His home and his Bluegrass roots are in Milledgeville Georgia. He was a fan of the bluegrass sound before it was designated as such and heard Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys live in one of the earliest incarnations with Flatt and Scruggs and Chubby Wise. In the 1960’s he met Walter Butler and some of the other players in North Georgia and began attending the sessions at the Butler home thereby becoming a regular member of the budding Bluegrass community. He also attended the Asheville Folk Festival and remembers appearing on the famed radio program “Along About Sundown” hosted by Bascomb Lamar Lunsford.

In 1970 Tut made the decision to move to Nashville Tennessee where he opened a Music Shop with famed luthier Randy Wood. This venture later morphed into GTR which was a Vintage instrument and repair business owned by Tut, Randy Wood and George Gruhn who is now the owner of Gruhn’s Guitars on Lower Broad in Nashville. Tut also put his performing talent to use doing shows with John Hartford, Norman Blake, Vasser Clements and others, He recorded several LP’s on his own and was also featured on the “Aeroplane” Lp which was a John Hartford project featuring Hartford, Clements and Blake.

Tut now lives in Wilkesboro, North Carolina. His son Mark, with Tut’s inspiration and assistance, is the owner of “Crafters of Tennessee”, builders of quality acoustic instruments.

For an online personal document file (pdf) supplement to this paper containing additional and more detailed information about all interviewees, please contact the two authors via email given at the end of this paper.

Future Plans

This research is ongoing. There is a bit of a sense of urgency due to the age of many of the interviewees. Additional musicians identified at this time for inclusion in the research include Curtis Blackwell, Al Osteen, the Everett Brothers, John Farley, and Lance Leroy. In addition to adding interviews, it is hoped that photos of this research project may be used for the production of an exhibition to bring long overdue recognition to many of the North Georgia bluegrass pioneers.

Bill Brown, Ed.D.

Dean, School of Education and Social Sciences
Shorter College
Rome, Georgia
bcbrown@shorter.edu

Michael Fleming

Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles (Ret.)
Sharpsburg, Georgia
[mfleming@numail.org](mailto:m Fleming@numail.org)

READING COPY: NOT FOR REPRINT OR QUOTATION WITHOUT AUTHOR'S
PERMISSION.