*Lagniappe (lăn-yăp´, lăn´ yăp´) n. An extra or unexpected gift or benefit. [Louisiana French]

Country Music in North Carolina: Pickin' in the Old North State

by *Gary R. Boye*

While all Southern states share historical connections in culture and geography, North Carolina is in many ways unique. From the Outer Banks to the industrial Piedmont to the High Country of the west, the state has a unique mix of regions and cultures. Music figures prominently in North Carolina, and its musicians reflect the diversity of the geography. The state's earliest musicians were the Native Americans, especially the Cherokee, whose music has been recorded and studied in some detail. European-American music has flourished since colonial days: in Salem, the Moravian church has sponsored the development of sacred choral and instrumental music for over 200 years. In the early twentieth century a distinct African American blues style originated from the textile mill and tobacco towns of the Piedmont region. Many colleges and universities in the state support an active and varied tradition in classical music and, increasingly, the study of folk, popular, and world musics at the academic level. All of these cultures and artists have made significant contributions, but it may be in the field of country music that North Carolina musicians have achieved their greatest fame.

The association of North Carolina and country music goes back to the earliest days of the style. On January 15, 1925, a string band composed of musicians from northwestern North Carolina and neighboring Virginia gathered at the Okeh studios in New York City. The leader of the band, Al Hopkins of West Jefferson, was asked by the recording agent for the name of his band. "Call the band anything you want," Hopkins replied, "we are nothing but a bunch of hillbillies from North Carolina and Virginia anyway."[1] The self-effacing response suggested the perfect name for the group, and "Al Hopkins and the Hill Billies" became one of the more successful of the early string bands, recording primarily for the Vocalion and Brunswick labels. Among the band's notable achievements was the first known use of the Hawaiian steel guitar in country music, as played by North Carolinian Frank Wilson. The core audience for this music was rural and Southern, although the music enjoyed some national popularity from the inception of commercial recording and radio. Other early string bands used the term "hillbilly," and soon the entire style of music was termed "hillbilly music," both by fans and in record industry publications. The designation was common from the 1920s into the 1930s, when various terms such as "Country and Hill Tunes" or "Country and Western" began to replace it. Like many regional terms, the word hillbilly has a complex and varied set of associations,

ranging from derogatory to boastful, and although officially replaced in trade publications and in most musicians' promotional materials, the term "hillbilly music" is still used by many to refer to country music in general, and especially that of a less commercialized nature.

North Carolina musicians figured prominently in the string bands in the 1920s and 1930s, with the most famous being Charlie Poole from Alamance County. His group, the North Carolina Ramblers, was one of the best and most influential of the period. Other famous early country string bands include the Carolina Tar Heels, led by Wilkes County native Dock Walsh, and J. E. Mainer and His Mountaineers from Weaverville.[2] Modern-day listeners often confuse the string band sound with that of bluegrass, but there are key differences. The true bluegrass style was first popularized by Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys in the mid-1940s, long after the heyday of most of the string bands. In addition, the instruments of the string band — primarily fiddle, banjo, and guitar — have similar roles throughout a song, whether backing up a vocalist, filling in the breaks between verses, or playing instrumentals. Bluegrass music betrays the influences of Western swing and the concept of the jazz solo, where instrumentalists step up to the microphone and play individual improvisations on the melody, taking turns with solos or between verses of a song. Although bluegrass is now associated with musical conservatism, it is important to note that when it originated in the 1940s it was a slick, jazzy alternative to the more folksy sounding string bands and the harder electric sounds of honky-tonk music. It was very much a part of mainstream country music: the term "bluegrass music" was not used until the late 1950s. Bluegrass became, in a sense, "musician's music," featuring loud and high solo singing, often in keys rarely heard in other styles of country music, as well as dizzyingly fast instrumentals. To lend contrast, gospel music was an integral part of the style, and not a concert went by without a set of sacred tunes sung in close three- or four-part harmony with

Photo courtesy of Laurie Nicholson, Appalachian State University.

sparse accompaniment. All of these traits were reflected in the musical personality of Bill Monroe and helped move bluegrass away from its country and string band roots and towards an independent style.

North Carolinians supported both the string bands and, after World War II, an increasing number of bluegrass performers, who frequently toured reliable venues in the Old North State to supplement their incomes. Certainly Nashville, Tennessee, and its famous live show and radio broadcast on WSM, the *Grand Ole Opry*, dominated post-World War II music. And in the 1950s, when the city established major recording facilities, a country music capital was born. However, pay from the *Opry* was meager — the performers were rewarded primarily with prestige and status — and most groups of the period earned the majority of their income from live shows and touring. As the Saturday night show ended, bands were already in the process of packing up their cars, station wagons, or buses, and heading for a six-day road trip. North Carolina was a frequent destination of these tours — not just the major cities of Charlotte, Greensboro, and Raleigh, but also the small towns in the Piedmont and mountain regions. Any town with a school house, a church hall, even a flat bed truck pulled in front of a drive-in movie screen, could offer consistent pay for the hard-working *Opry* musicians.

The *Grand Ole Opry* was the most famous, but certainly not the only, radio show in the early days of country music. Many entertainers found it most profitable to "work" certain regions by moving from one radio station to another every few months, often playing a live early morning radio show at 5 a.m., another radio show at noon for rural families having their mid-day dinner, and then a live evening concert. The radio shows — ranging from fifteen minutes to a full hour — paid little, but offered a chance for the group to advertise local concerts and promote their records. North Carolina radio stations that once featured historic country music shows include WWNC (Asheville), WBBB (Burlington), WBT (Charlotte), WBIG (Greensboro), WHKY (Hickory), WPAQ (Mount Airy), WPTF (Raleigh), and WSIS (Winston Salem). Since most of these shows were broadcast live they are lost to us today, but a few of the more successful performers such as Charlie Monroe (Bill's older brother) and the Blue Sky Boys (the Bolick Brothers from Hickory) were able to make transcription discs of their programs for rebroadcast. These discs look much like a larger LP and are quite rare and valuable today.[3] Groups also made money selling souvenir song books — often termed "song folios" — containing photographs and biographical information about the musicians, as well as lyrics to their songs.

The pinnacle for country musicians working at smaller radio shows was making it on the *Grand Ole Opry*. Broadcast on the high-powered, clear channel WSM, the *Opry* could easily be heard throughout the South every Saturday night; indeed, when the reception was good the station could be heard across much of North America. North Carolina listeners in the mid 1940s thrilled to the banjo playing of native son Earl Scruggs, from Flint Hill near Shelby. From 1946 to 1948, Scruggs and his future partner Lester Flatt played with Bill Monroe as members of a Blue Grass Boys band that gave the name to and virtually defined bluegrass music. Scruggs played in a three-finger (actually, the thumb and two fingers) picking style unique to his region. Where the older style of banjo playing involved brushing the strings with the backs of the finger nails and plucking only with the bare thumb ("frailing"), he developed a fast and powerful plucking style using fingerpicks that combined elements of nineteenth-century parlor banjo and fingerpicking blues guitar of the early twentieth century. He was not the first to play in this style — nor did he ever claim to be —but his work with the Blue Grass Boys and, beginning in 1948, as Lester Flatt, Earl Scruggs, and the Foggy Mountain Boys (Flatt and Scruggs) advanced and popularized the style to the point where it is generally called by his name. "Scruggs-style banjo" quickly became a virtual necessity in bluegrass bands and one of the most defining elements of the music.

It is impossible to overestimate Scruggs's influence on contemporary and modern-day banjoists. There have since been players, who have been faster, fancier, and

even more experimental, but none have equaled the musicianship displayed on hundreds of Flatt and Scruggs's commercial recordings and taped concerts, as well as radio and television shows. While neophytes concentrate on right-hand finger patterns (called "rolls") and blazing tempos, taste and tone are the true watchwords of the Scruggs style. Whether in a state-of-the-art Nashville recording studio or through a small microphone of a reel-to-reel tape machine, the sound of his banjo playing from the 1950s and 1960s is absolutely unmatched. Banjo players were not the only ones influenced by Scruggs's finely wrought solos; the Foggy Mountain Boys' dobroist, Buck "Uncle Josh" Graves, adapted the three-finger style to his instrument and subsequently both guitarists and mandolinists have sought to imitate the sound of the driving, cascading bluegrass banjo. Scruggs himself is also an excellent guitarist and is still going strong today at the age of 79, earning Grammy nominations and Country Music Association awards for recent CDs such as *Earl Scruggs and Friends* and *Will The Circle Be Unbroken, Volume III*.[4] Earlier this year he was honored with a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame for his work in film and television, which includes the movie *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and the long-running and enormously popular television series *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971).[5]

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Another North Carolina musician who shares many musical qualities with Scruggs is Doc Watson. Watson is from and still lives in Deep Gap, high in the mountains near Boone, and has become one of the most respected acoustic guitarists of our time. A discovery of the folk revival of the 1960s, he combines not only the "authentic" folk elements sought by record producers and fans of the time, but a healthy mix of a variety of musical styles including the blues, country, and rockabilly. He is one of the best examples of a true folk musician, not frozen in time "preserving" a dying musical tradition against the onslaught of commercialism, but freely adapting music of all kinds, whether commercial or folk, into his own unique style. At a Doc Watson concert one hears a music ranging from traditional tunes such as "Ground Hog" and "Shady Grove" to country standards from the likes of Jimmie Rodgers. Listeners might even hear his rendition of the Moody Blues' "Nights in White Satin."[6]

Like Scruggs, Watson is at home on the banjo as well as the guitar, although he favors the older frailing style. Many North Carolina musicians play both instruments, going back at least to Elizabeth Cotten of Chapel Hill. Cotten is one of an elite list of African American musicians from the North Carolina Piedmont, who developed a unique fingerpicking blues guitar style, partially influenced by earlier banjo styles. Others include Blind Boy Fuller, Sonny Terry, and Brownie McGhee, all of Durham. All early country musicians were influenced by African American music, especially the blues, and frequently incorporated it into their instrumental and vocal styles. The richness of the blues tradition in North Carolina, as well as the frequent interaction between the races in the textile mill towns of the Piedmont, gave country music from the area a special flavor. Even in the remote mountain towns African American laborers were present on work crews in the logging and railroad industries, and their music was well known and influential. Other influences include the Anglo-American folk ballads and songs originating in Europe that have been passed down for generations. The notion that the Appalachian region was a last bastion of the "true" folk music, untouched by the outside world, has been challenged and all but dismissed in recent years. While it is true that older styles and tunes did survive here longer than elsewhere in the country, the influence of commercial music has been underestimated, as was discovered when songs like the Carter Family's "Wildwood Flower" were traced back to their origins in nineteenth-century sheet music.

This penchant for mixing older folk traditions with the commercial music of the day is amply evident in one of the country's largest and most famous music festivals, Merlefest. The four-day series of concerts every April in Wilkesboro is a tribute to Doc Watson's son Merle, who died in 1987.[7] Like his father, Merle enjoyed many different types of music, from the folk and country music he grew up hearing to African American blues and rock and roll. There are more than a dozen venues for live music at Merlefest; indeed, there is so much good music to be heard that the main problem for the listener is deciding which concert to attend. Many favor the smaller stages over the large central stage, as they are more intimate and the sound is usually better. In any case, the quality of performances is always high and the mixture of musicians from varying backgrounds an exciting and stimulating musical experience. While Merlefest is a mix of commercial and folk entertainment, North Carolina's oldest music festival, The Mountain Dance and Folk Festival held in Asheville, is a more traditional event.[8] Organized by Mars Hill native Bascom Lamar Lunsford in 1928 and held every year since, the festival features musicians and dancers from throughout the Southern Appalachians. Lunsford and other folklorists worked hard to preserve North Carolina's unique musical traditions and much of their work has wound up in archives and special collections throughout the state. The W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection at Appalachian State University in Boone contains books, recordings, and manuscript materials.[9] Highlights of the collection include memorabilia and sheet music from Lulu Belle and Scotty (Myrtle Eleanor Cooper from Boone and Scotty Wiseman from Spruce Pine). The duo were nationally renowned country entertainers and musicians, who gained fame in the 1930s on the *WLS National Barn Dance* from Chicago. Scotty co-authored one of the most famous country tunes of all time, "Mountain Dew," with Lunsford. The Collection also has LPs, tapes, and compact discs of a wide variety of Appalachian and bluegrass entertainers, along with original songbooks and field recordings. Another major repository of country music materials is the Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.[10] The musical core of this collection is the huge archive of the John Edwards Memorial Collection, started by Australian record collector and country music fan John Edwards. The collection has grown to become one of the nation's largest repositories of country, bluegrass, blues, gospel, Cajun, and zydeco musics, with over 82,000 sound recordings in all formats — especially the older 78 r.p.m. phonograph records and radio transcription discs — as well as song folios, sheet music, photographs, and manuscripts.[11]

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Increasingly these materials are being used not only in scholarly research but in academic coursework as well. Several universities within the state now offer credit courses that deal with country music, either as a part of a larger course in popular music or as a course in itself. In the spring semester of 2002, I taught the first History of Country Music course at Appalachian State University, to a large class of nearly 50 undergraduates. While similar courses that survey the history of jazz, rock, and other types of commercial music have become commonplace, relatively little scholarly attention has been accorded country music in an academic setting. Yet this music can be used to illuminate much of the mainstream popular culture of the twentieth century and is especially important to the study of rural and Southern cultures. The course, which includes a large listening component, is relevant to students exploring the wide range of styles available today via commercial recordings, radio, television, and, increasingly, the Internet. Such surveys are especially important at a time when commercial radio, long a key sponsor and supporter of country music, has largely forsaken the roots of the style for more mainstream, commercialized performers. Listeners are better served by public radio shows such as "Back Porch Music" on WUNC (Chapel Hill) or "Goin' Across the Mountain" on

WNCW (Spindale), as well as numerous others that feature traditional, bluegrass, and/or acoustic music.

The radio shows, archives, published research, and academic courses all demonstrate that country music and its history still thrive in North Carolina. The music of an older generation of North Carolinians is more available than ever before and the state is a primary breadbasket for country music, offering both professionals and talented amateurs. Current bands, such as the Red Clay Ramblers of Chapel Hill and the Shady Grove Band, consisting of musicians from Western North Carolina, have taken up the sounds of the old string bands and moved beyond them in adventurous directions. These groups and others display a typical North Carolina penchant for older acoustic instruments—the fiddle, banjo, and guitar—combined with the newer sounds and songwriting skills of more recent commercial music. It is this combination of old and new, folk and commercial, that best represents the North Carolina brand of country music and offers a healthy recipe for future artistic growth. One of the main advantages to musicians working in the state is the lack of a large, centralized music industry as in Nashville, which increasingly threatens to swallow up creative musicians in a corporate and standardized world of Top 40 commercialism. North Carolina has no such cut-throat musical establishment to pay homage to and musicians are allowed to create and develop unique styles that might otherwise be deemed unmarketable. The legacy of Charlie Poole, Earl Scruggs, Doc Watson, and all of the talented musicians from the state, as well as the many country and folk musicians who have found success playing and living here, is just good music played to appreciative audiences.

References

[1] Bill C. Malone, *County Music USA*, revised ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 40. This book—soon to appear in a second edition—is the best one-volume survey of country music from its origins to the 1980s. Other sources for information regarding the music and its performers are *The Country Music Encyclopedia* by Melvin Shestack (New Work: Crowell, 1974) and *Country Music: The Encyclopedia*, by Irwin Stambler and Grelun Landon (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000).

[2] The classic collection of early string band and commercial hillbilly music is Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, now available as a CD box set (Smithsonian/Folkways, 1997). It contains selections by Charlie Poole, as well as the Carolina Tar Heels.

[3] A CD of radio transcriptions by the Blue Sky Boys appears on *Farm & Fun Time Favorites*, vols. 1 and 2 (Copper Creek, 1996). Although these shows were actually taped for WCYB in Bristol, Tennessee, they are good examples of typical 1940s country radio shows at smaller stations in North Carolina.

[4] *Earl Scruggs and Friends* (MCA, 2001) and *Will the Circle Be Unbroken, Vol. III* (Capitol, 2002).

[5] All of the commercial recordings as well as several live concerts of Flatt and Scruggs have been released on three large box sets by Bear Family. The first box set is the best: *Flatt & Scruggs: 1948-1959* (Bear Family, 1992). A less expensive selection of their material is available as *The Essential Flatt & Scruggs: 'Tis Sweet To Be Remembered* (Sony, 1997) and, for the best example of Scruggs's banjo playing, the all-instrumental *Foggy Mountain Banjo* (County Records, 1995).

[6] Of his many CDs, *The Essential Doc Watson* (Vanguard, 1990) and *Doc Watson on Stage (Featuring Merle Watson)* (Vanguard, 1990) are two of the best. A recent recording of music and interview has also been well-received: *Legacy* (High Windy Audio, 2002).

[7] The Merlefest Web site, with complete show schedules and ticket information, is available at: http://www.folkheritage.org/75thannua.htm (Accessed Sept. 29, 2003.)

[8] For more information, see http://www.folkheritage.org/75thannua.htm (Accessed Sept. 29, 2003.)

[9] http://www.library.appstate.edu/appcoll/ (Accessed Sept. 29, 2003.)

[10] http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/sfc1/sabout.html (Accessed Sept. 29, 2003.)

[11] A huge compendium of research related to the Southern Folklife Collection was recently published: Guthrie T. Meade, Jr., *County Music Sources: A Biblio-Discography of Commercially Recorded Traditional Music* (Chapel Hill, NC: Southern Folklife Collection, 2002).