

## JIMMY DRIFTWOOD INTERVIEW — 11 MAY 1970

by James R. Morris

**JRM:** When did you first begin to perform music?

**JD:** Now that depends on what you're talking about performing, you know, in big public or around little school houses and on the front porches and things like that.

**JRM:** I mean, when did you first begin to make music?

**JD:** I don't know how young. Just as young as a kid could learn. One of our most popular people down here is a little boy who's six years old and I know—I know I was singing when I was that old certainly.

**JRM:** When did you first begin to perform for a large public, Jimmy?

**JD:** Well, really, for real public, it would be after my first record was made. Of course, I always ran around to the schools and places like that and did programs, and in about nineteen and thirty-five in Phoenix, Arizona, I was in a contest—I was about to starve to death, and—I guess that's the reason I won—and I got on a radio program. That's really the first—I can remember that we had this durn thing in a high school in Phoenix and there was such a crowd it looked like acres and acres to me. You know, I never seen such a crowd, and I remember looking down—the only time I ever was affected in my life—and seeing that my britches' legs were shaking below my knees. Of course, you've got to remember in high school and all the country schools around, we always made up plays (I had been a school teacher), made up the songs for the plays and all that sort of thing. And that would have been the time I first started teaching school, which would have been when I was sixteen years old.

**JRM:** From whom did you learn songs and instrumental styles?

**JD:** I didn't learn instrumental styles. My father played, of course, and you know how he played. He bar-chorded across on the guitar. And I learned to do that too, but I don't do it exactly like Dad did. They're beginning to talk now of you learning

somebody's style. For instance Bookmiller Shannon—people now are talking about going and tryin' to learn Bookmiller's style of banjo playing. We didn't ever have anything like that. A fellow just got a guitar or a banjo and might go and watch some fella and learn where to place his fingers, but not how to hit the strings. I didn't learn that way. I remember somebody tuned an old fiddle up for me and I can remember very well that I started in learnin' to play "Go Tell Aunt Nancy" or maybe you know'd it as "Go Tell Aunt Rhodie," and I learned how to play just the notes of that thing and I can remember that my mother was just, oh, she was so tired of this after a while, this same thing over and over and over. And I heard her tellin' my daddy, and he said, "What is this he's trying to play?" and I told her what I was tryin' to play, and she said, "That's 'Go tell Aunt Nancy her old gray goose is dead.'" And I remember Dad said, "Well, I wish it'd been Aunt Nancy'd been dead."

You know, and we learned to do this by ourselves pretty well and I think everybody else did. We just listened and then played our own way.

**JRM:** Tell me something about the traditional or folk culture of your area, both in the past and today.

**JD:** Now folk culture, the singing of the songs and the playing and everything that had to go with it, play parties and everything else—of course, when I was a child, that was really all the entertainment, except church, and I think you can just pretty well call church, too, a folk thing, 'cause in the early days, the songs that they sung was the songs that they knew from memory, and it was the same sort of old sermons that had been preached since Jesus Christ was here I guess. And so in the lives of our people when I was a kid it was a good thing because you met at people's homes and you sung, and you played and you visited—I think we ought to remember this word,—you *visited*—and we became closer together, and I think we loved each other. Of course we had fights, you know, but you know how it was back in those days. Two fellas had a fist fight and they shook hands and that was the last of it. They played together that night. We had a period in there when we didn't have so much folk singin' anymore. Now we have revived the same sort of thing we used to do. People again are playing at each other's houses and they are again, I think, getting closer together and they are loving each other more. I think a good example of what this can do is that people come to Mountain View to hear the music, especially for the spring festival. The kids from NY and Chicago and everywhere, they come and they hear that they can camp in my barn. They don't expect me to condescend to speak to them. But when they get here and I meet them, I shake hands with them, I bring them in the house, we give them their dinner; and we soon have them making their own coffee and washing their own dishes in the house or outside the house, and everybody being treated like somebody loved them. At first when they see this, some of them are afraid of it and wonder, "What's this guy fixin'



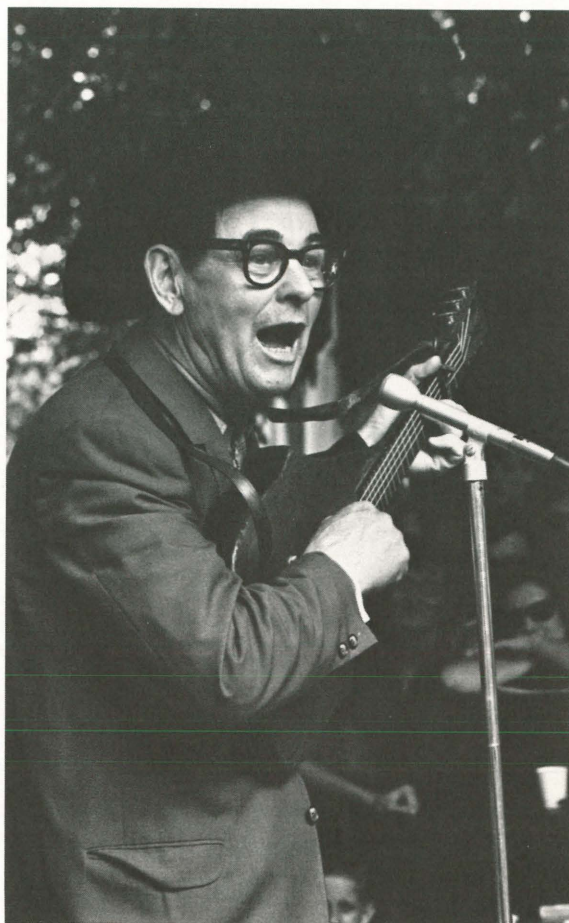
to do to me?" But finally they catch on that this is real and this is good, and we learn something about these kids and I think these kids go back home a little better than they were when they came. Now we're building a culture center, and millions will be comin' in the future, and if our people could all keep this thing that they've got now, being good to each other and being good to the people who come and being friendly and having a good time—just being friendly with people, I think this thing could spread, and I think a lot of the trouble of this world could disappear.

**JRM:** Tell me a little bit about your program in Mountain View.

**JD:** Well, every Friday night of the world we meet at the court house in Mountain View to have a program of folk music. Now we're not meeting to put on a performance. We are actually meeting to—well, we call it practice, the right word I suppose is rehearse, for the festival in the spring. We meet just to practice and if the court house is full, well that's all right. If there's not many people there, that doesn't make any difference. These are just the fiddlers, the guitar players, the banjo players, the mandolin players, the fellas who play the bow, the harmonica, the tunes that they have learned from their fathers. Sometimes our fathers and our mothers and grandfathers did a song that had at one time been a copyrighted song. But we don't know that. We don't know anything about it bein' copyrighted. Now last night, Bob Blair was askin' me to teach him, "It's a Long Way to Tipperary." He thought it was an old folk song because he heard his grandfather sing it and he didn't know it'd ever been copyrighted. His grandfather sung it and as far as he's personally concerned, this is a folk song. And we sing and we play and the people jig dance—this thing that people just jump up and do, you know, on the spur of the moment, if they like the music. It's kind of like the old-time church we had when if a preacher made a statement that thrilled some old lady or some old man, they jumped up and shouted. It's very close akin, the two things are. And of course we also have square dancing, but that's something that people can see anywhere, everywhere, on the TV or anywhere. But the jig dancing and things like that that we do, that you can only see in a place like Mountain View, I think, are the things that's important and that's why people keep comin' to see this sort of thing. The people come to see this music not because it is great music or anything like that, but they tell me because it's . . . these, this is real . . . this is just the people and just the people's music.

**JRM:** How many people in Mountain View actually make music?

**JD:** Oh my. I used to worry a little about when we got the folk culture center, I said to myself, the young folks are not playing and one of these days when we all die off, there will be a monument over there to those people who are gone and that's all you know, and that's bad. But for instance now



*Jimmy Driftwood.  
Smithsonian photo.*

when we have the annual folk festival, we have added a night and that's when the school children put on their own folk program. This year they had close to 200 school kids from all over the country. I was astounded. There was about fifteen British ballads sung during one performance. That's more than we as adults do in one of our performances.

**JRM:** Where did they learn them?

**JD:** They learned them from their grandparents and other people like that. And the interesting thing is that I had been to some of these grandparents and said, "We'd like you to teach us an old song," and they told us they didn't know any songs. But then their grandkids come home singing a song and grandpa starts singing one too. These kids have actually, well, they have mined; they've struck oil where we have hit dry holes. You know what I mean?