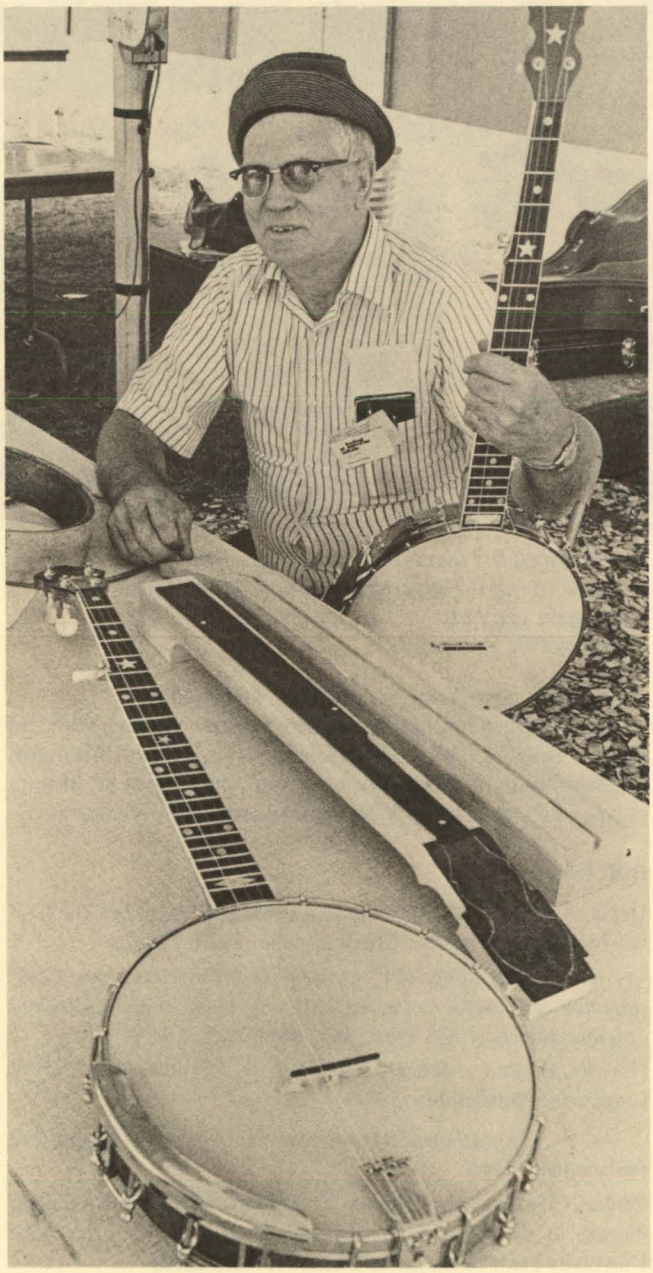
Virginia Folk Culture

Charles L. Perdue



The Commonwealth of Virginia—the "Old Dominion"—was not only the birthplace of several presidents of the United States but also the wellspring of much of American culture. Eight presidents were natives of the Commonwealth and eight states (or parts of states) were formed from the original Virginia territory. After the American Revolution, Virginians by the thousands went forth to settle much of the Southeast, Midwest, and Northwest, carrying their traditions with them.

The folk culture of Virginia is a synthesis of elements taken from the several cultures transplanted to the New World and from native American cultures. When Jamestown was settled by whites in 1607 numerous Indian tribes (with a total population of about 25,000) occupied Virginia. Most Virginia Indians were either pushed west, wiped out by the white man's guns or disease, or absorbed through intermarriage with whites and blacks. A few Indian groups remain in Virginia today, but they have retained very little of their traditional culture. The dominant group of settlers was English; there were also thousands of Germans, French Huguenots, Scots, and Irish settlers. Large numbers of Africans from many tribal groups were brought as slaves to Virginia between 1619 and the early 1800s. Other ethnic groups came later, but in considerably smaller numbers.

It is difficult to say with any precision just what the cultural contribution from any one group was, but it is clear, however, that there was considerable borrowing among local black, red, and white cultures. Today, Virginians may be of European descent and play in a string band which uses African (banjo) and European (fiddle, guitar, mandolin) instruments, and includes both black and white material in its repertoire. They may eat food with Indian, African, and European antecedents and live in a town with an African (Arcola) or European (Culpeper) name or by a river with an Indian (Rappahannock) name. They may even speak English

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Kyle Creed demonstrates both his banjo-playing and his banjo-making in the Virginia area of the 1977 Festival of American Folklife.

with an accent that is African–influenced and use African terms (biddy, jiffy, lollygag, moolah). Whether Virginians are black, white, or red, their culture will be some combination of African, European, and Indian—modified by the particular Virginia variety of the American experience.

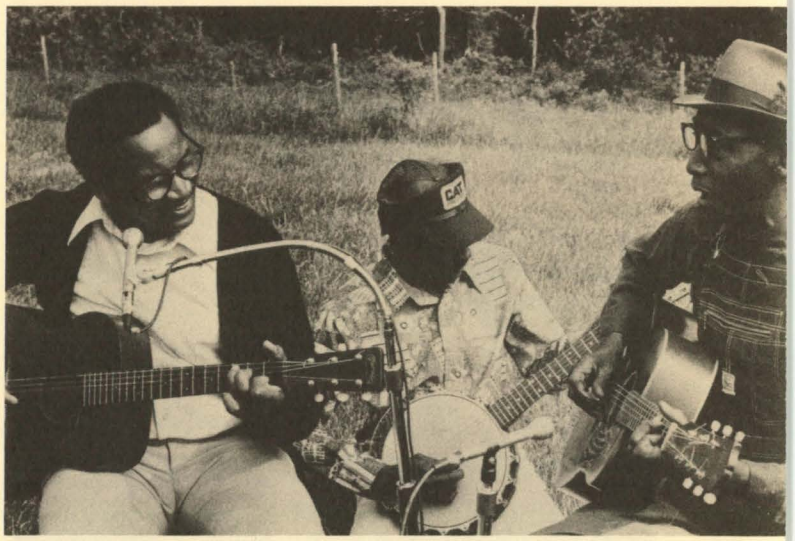
The Virginia component of this Festival can exhibit only a small portion of the range of Virginia folk cultures—primarily black and white and primarily in the area of musical performance and crafts.

Turner and Marvin Foddrell, John Tinsley, and John Jackson play banjoes and guitars in the black secular music tradition, and sing the blues and country songs. They play tunes for flatfoot, buck dances, and square dancing. Most of the music they perform has a long history and development in Virginia, and has extensive traditions in African and European tradition as well as some local influences. One account from an ex-slave refers to an 1857 black band consisting of guitar, banjo, fiddle, and harmonica. The blues seem to be a relative late–comer to Virginia's musical scene, having come from the Mississippi Delta with travelling musicians and phonograph records. Yet, large numbers of Delta slaves originated from Virginia and one wonders whether the roots of the blues may not run deep there when one sees verses like:

Keep yo' eye on de sun,
See how she run,
Don't let her catch you with your work undone,
I'm a trouble, I'm a trouble,
Trouble don' las' always
(*sung by a slave in Buckingham County in about 1860; from* Weevils in the Wheat *by Charles Perdue et al*)

Black religious music is performed by Daniel Womack and by the Gospel Harmonizers. Mr. Womack's music dates from an earlier period of hymn and spiritual signing, and the Gospel Harmonizers sing more recent songs; the musical tradition from which each of them sings dates from about 1770.

Whit Sizemore, Kyle Creed, Albert Hash, Spence Moore, Raymond Melton, and Wayne Henderson represent northern Virginia and southwestern Virginia fiddle, string-band, and singing styles. Kyle Creed, Albert Hash, Raymond Melton, and Wayne Henderson—who are also instrumentmakers—demonstrate their craft skills. Rev. Joe Freeman plays and sings white gospel songs, spiritual, and hymns.



The Foddrell Brothers, blues musicians from Stuart, Va., are featured in the Virginia presentation on the Washington Monument grounds.
(Photo by Pete Hartman)

Other crafts demonstrated are candymaking by Orville and Phyllis Bowers; split–oak basketmaking by Paul Younger; blacksmithing by Phipps Bourne; and the ancient art of ham curing and smoking by Wallace Edwards and his assistants.

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