

Third Annual Friends of the Festival Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert:

Celebrating the Revival of Old-Time Southern Music & Dance



In 1958, Ralph Rinzler joined the Greenbriar Boys as mandolin player and singer. He brought new songs and original arrangements from traditional folk music to their bluegrass repertoire. Left to right: Ralph, Robert (Bob) Yellin, and John Herald. Photo courtesy CFPCS Archive

Ralph Rinzler (1934-1994), founding director of the Festival of American Folklife, worked over the years with a host of gifted musicians and folklorists, doing fieldwork, issuing recordings, and presenting concerts. These people collectively advocated and participated in numerous revivals. The Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert Series pays tribute to Ralph and his work by honoring long-time colleagues and like-minded advocates, and the traditions which they have touched. This year we highlight the revival of Southern old-time and string band music.

Ralph's enthusiasm as a two-year-old for a wind-up phonograph developed into an obsession with music. By age seven, he was listening to the Library of Congress field recordings which stimulated his life's work. As a freshman at Swarthmore, inspired by Pete Seeger, Ralph took up the banjo. For repertoire he turned to Harry Smith's treasury of early commercial recordings, Folkways' 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music* (scheduled for reissue by Smithsonian Folkways this year), where he found the likes of Buell Kazee, Clarence Ashley, the Carter Family, Uncle Dave Macon, and the old-time string bands.

Ralph, however, was no antiquarian. He and Mike Seeger, as companions and mutual mentors, set out to explore the Country Music Parks of Maryland. To Ralph, contemporary musicians whom he heard were every bit as

exciting as those recorded earlier. As Mike and the New Lost City Ramblers commenced playing old-time string band music, Ralph joined the Greenbriar Boys to play old-time music bluegrass style. He catalogued Harry Smith's 1,500 titles for the New York City Public Library, and then, at the Union Grove Fiddlers Convention, by a stroke of luck, Ralph met Clarence (Tom) Ashley. Encouraged, Ralph set out to find more musicians from the earlier era, to record, manage, and — joining forces with John Cohen and Israel Young in the Friends of Old-Time Music — to present them in concerts and at festivals. Ashley, Doc Watson, and Bill Monroe were among those whose careers were changed by Ralph's advocacy.

Soon, fieldwork for the Newport Folk Festival set Ralph roaming the country to find little-known musicians and musical genres in their community settings. It was his aim to celebrate the cultural diversity and genius of a nation — in music, art, and craft — and thereby to inspire new generations, both in their home communities and, in the case of music, in their contributions to the growing American Folk Music Revival. Central to his personal aesthetic was an appreciation of the virtuosos and stylists of the strings: old-time players of banjo, fiddle, mandolin, and guitar.

In 1967, the Smithsonian hired Ralph to help conceptualize and direct the first Festival of American Folklife. The ensuing Festivals presented extraordinary

This concert has been made possible with support from the Friends of the Festival, Bob Dylan, The Ruth Mott Fund, Homespun Tapes, County Records, the Woody Guthrie Foundation, Sugar Hill Records, Kate Rinzler, and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

Third Annual Friends of the Festival Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert

old-time banjo, guitar, and fiddle soloists, balladeers, and vintage string bands. An exemplary sampling from early Festivals includes bands such as Wade Ward and the Buck Mountain Band, Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys, and Kyle Creed, Roscoe Russell, and Otis Burris from Virginia; the McGee Brothers and Sid Harkreader from Tennessee; a “fiddlers convention” emceed by Guthrie Meade; Doc and Merle Watson with Clint Howard and Fred Price, and the Wiley and Zeke Morris Band from North Carolina; and Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys from Kentucky, as well as Bill playing with

his brothers Birch and Charlie. Mike Seeger and John Cohen acted as masters of ceremonies, and, in 1970, the New Lost City Ramblers with Mike, John, and Tracy Schwarz performed. Along with the string bands came cloggers, square dance callers, and dance parties.

Among the string bands at the 1969 Festival were the brothers J.E. and Wade Mainer from North Carolina, playing with Steve Ledford. This year we offer special recognition to Wade Mainer and his wife Julia on the occasion of Wade’s ninetieth birthday.

—Kate Rinzler

This year’s concert traces the development of the revival, the new life, of Southern traditional music over the past forty years and of the community of musicians and dancers that has developed with it.

Until early in this century, old-time Southern music was the music of everyday, mostly rural, working people, made by and for a local community. Such homemade music consisted of a great variety of songs, ranging from ancient English ballads to newer compositions springing from the American experience. Instrumental music was played on fiddle, banjo, dulcimer, jew’s harp, and later on guitar and other mainly string instruments by both Blacks and Whites, men and women. It was constantly evolving, though at a slow, person-to-person pace. Paid performance was rare.

By the 1930s, media marketism was finishing off the job of mortally wounding home-based Southern traditional music, a process started by industrialization, urbanization, and the consequent move to a dollar economy. The older repertoire and styles were quickly disappearing, and Southern self-entertainment was subsiding or becoming influenced by distant commercial interests. Early attempts at cultural preservation — mostly by urban middle-class musicians and scholars — included “folk song” performances in popular or concert music styles; books of folk songs by Carl



The Carolina Tar Heels (left to right, Clarence [Tom] Ashley, Doc Walsh, Gwen Foster), ca. 1930. Ashley can be heard on The Original Folkways Recordings, 1960–1962, a reissue of Folkways records from 1961 and 1963 (Old Time Music at Clarence Ashley’s), produced and

annotated by Ralph Rinzler, and also on the Anthology of American Folk Music, to be reissued as a 6-CD boxed set by Smithsonian Folkways this year.

Photo courtesy CFPCS Archive

Sandburg and John and Alan Lomax; festivals such as Bascom Lamar Lunsford’s Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville, North Carolina; and a variety of programs during the Roosevelt administration.

In a sense the revival started with the Almanac Singers in New York in 1941. Their inspiring political songs and performance energy helped make them and their music attractive within urban left-wing circles. In the context of this year’s concert they were significant because they often sang songs and played music in informal, tradition-based styles, sometimes with members such as Woody Guthrie and Lead Belly, themselves

recently urbanized from Southern traditional communities.

Following are essays by three musicians active during successive periods of this renewal or revival process: Bess Hawes, a member of the Almanac Singers in the early 1940s; Mike Seeger, a member of the New Lost City Ramblers, who were most active in the sixties; and Brad Leftwich, who participated in the more recent fiddle and string music revival starting in the seventies. All three of us, speaking for ourselves and of our different times, find qualities of great value in this body of music in today’s world.

—Mike Seeger