

# Crusaders for Old-Time Music

*Mike Seeger*

**A**lthough my parents raised me in the suburbs less than ten miles from the National Mall in Washington, D.C., they reared me on Southern traditional music. I still remember the joy, as a child, of singing with them and listening to wondrous field recordings made by the pioneer collectors of the thirties, especially John and Alan Lomax, and, in my teens, learning to play the banjo — sometimes playing for twelve hours a day. I never questioned the value of the music and the close-by people who valued it: my parents, my brother Pete, the Lomaxes, and most of all the musicians and singers who made it, many of whom I later met and became friends with. I've come to have great respect for those long gone who created, used, and shaped this valuable heritage. So I emulate them all: I want to sing and play and collect with an eye toward seeing this music continue and adapt and stay fresh.

I was also reared with a perhaps unrealistic contempt for the domination of American musical life by media commercialism. The most unrealistic thing about my playing early American rural music may be that I've been doing it for a living for over thirty-five years. I remain noncommercial musically as well as in the marketplace.

When the New Lost City Ramblers (NLCR) started in 1958, John Cohen, Tom Paley, and I were all aware of the previous plateaus of the "revival," from the Almanacs to the Weavers and the then very recent (1958) success of the Kingston Trio. We were also aware of the situation of old-time Southern music in the South: those who played it were old, many others were musically inactive, and the young were playing bluegrass, various other forms of commercial country music, or rockabilly. Enjoyable as those other styles

were and still are to me, the older repertoire and variety of sounds are for me much richer in every way and inspire further exploration and individual expression.

Our initial intent was to just play the music we liked, the music we heard on Library of Congress field recordings and on commercial 78 rpm discs recorded in the late twenties and early thirties. Something about that body of music resonated in us, and we wanted to be true to those traditions. We wanted to avoid the urban political issues which seemed to overshadow the music, instead to let the fun, the irony, the stories — what we perceived as the best of the traditional songs and sounds — speak for themselves, and certainly to allow the rural working class, sometimes newly urbanized, to voice its own social and political concerns through their songs.

This was a new idea then, and we got people's attention. We tried to evolve a program that would present the music we loved with respect, to audiences totally unfamiliar with it or biased against it. We wanted to share our urban advantage with our mentors, so we actively promoted the idea of presenting traditional musicians everywhere we went. We developed a mission. Younger musicians were attracted to our music, our presentation, and advocacy. Some of them played informally, and others eventually became professional rock 'n' roll or bluegrass musicians. Our efforts were part of the "folk song revival" of the early sixties, but our music never fit into that world. Musical and political blacklists helped to assure our noncommerciality.

In the late sixties it seemed that our revival had been killed by rock 'n' roll, but it had merely become less visible. A true revival, a renewal, was to burst forth in the seventies with a younger generation of musicians, largely inspired by the Highwoods String Band. Their music was more casual and social than ours, more based on rhythmic fiddle tunes than a representative repertoire of Southern rural music. House parties and events such as the Brandywine Mountain Music Convention and Galax Fiddlers Convention became focal points for gatherings of musicians to party, visit, and make music. Furthermore, Southerners — encouraged by this new musical energy — began regaining some of their regional heritage, which was already being crowded out by radio and TV.

Now, in the late nineties, there are probably a few thousand people nationwide playing traditional Southern music, and it often occupies a place in their lives similar to the one the music used to hold when it was mostly rural. The music remains, as it nearly always has been, noncom-



mercial. We musicians are not subsistence farmers any more, though; we're computer programmers, carpenters, teachers, and health-care workers. In these affluent and unsettled times we have the luxury, the responsibility, of choice — of lifestyle, of music, of community, of livelihood. That is a big difference now.

This musical community has made its choices and will certainly be playing and evolving this music for a long time to come. We've helped the music make the jump into the modern world, where it will survive and thrive.

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## Coming of Age

Brad Leftwich

Two circumstances drew me to old-time music and influenced the directions my interests have taken: in contrast to the stereotypical Northern urban revivalist, I grew up in Oklahoma; and there is in fact a tradition of Appalachian music in my family, who moved west from Virginia shortly after the turn of the century. Although I'm interested in my heritage, it's not very typical (whose is?), and I don't put much stock in it musically. I've always believed musicians should be judged by their mastery of the idiom, not by geography or lineage. Many of the modern masters of the old-time genre have been drawn to the music of the rural South across cultural, ethnic, even national boundaries.

Speaking as someone with a deep personal connection to this rare, beautiful music, I believe the revival's most important legacy is in bringing it to wider audiences. The old-time culture where it was shaped may be fading, but the music has attracted talented musicians who have ushered it into the present as a living tradition.

My generation came to this music in the late sixties and seventies through a variety of doors. Some of us, including me, were pursuing family or regional traditions; others found old-time music through the wider folk music scene.



Some were bluegrass fans who became interested in the roots of their music; others were folklore students who learned about it in college; yet others were record collectors who discovered it on old discs. A few simply had out-of-the-blue conversion experiences upon hearing bands such as the New Lost City Ramblers or Highwoods in concert.

*The Freight Hoppers are one of the tightest and most driving old-time string bands of the younger generation and are reaching a wide audience these days. They record for Rounder. Photo by Fredrick Park*

The sixties and seventies were a time of idealism, and for many people traditional music and dance seemed a perfect fit with the values that inspired the "back to the land" movement. Regardless of politics, I believe most of us saw the traditional arts as embodying timeless, lasting values — an antidote to the commercial, disposable culture of the mainstream. Besides, playing music and dancing were a lot of fun. People soon discovered those activities were a great way to socialize, and scenes that began with only a few core