

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.

Mike Seeger, who makes his home in Rockbridge County, Virginia, has devoted his life to singing and playing Southern traditional mountain music on a variety of instruments and to producing documentaries and concert presentations of traditional musicians, singers, and dancers. His recordings are primarily on Rounder and Smithsonian Folkways.

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

Third Annual Friends of the Festival Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert

people often snowballed into full-size communities.

A remarkable thing about old-time music in the early seventies was its ubiquity. The time just seemed to be ripe. Around the country, people were learning to play and dance; hosting house parties and jam sessions; establishing performing bands and clogging teams; and organizing community dances and festivals. Local scenes sprang up like mushrooms. In college I was amazed to meet others who shared my supposedly obscure interest. At Southern fiddlers conventions and in the homes of older musicians I visited, I ran into people from such far-flung communities as Lexington, Virginia; Ithaca, New York; Bloomington, Indiana; and Berkeley, California.

The scene has matured in the years since. The activity and energy of the seventies made available resources that have helped broaden and deepen our understanding of old-time music and dance. The decade brought to light many of the last old-timers, who had learned to play before the music was influenced by the radio and recording industries. Recordings of old-time music became plentiful and accessible. Many of the festivals and dances founded in that period are still going strong at their twenty-fifth anniversaries. Several performers of my generation have developed skills to rival the best old-timers and are masters in their own right. My peers are now well established in middle-age, and music and dance hold an integrated place in our lives. And as the years slip by, we discover that we are

becoming the older generation, looked up to by those who just now are getting involved.

Although we come from diverse backgrounds, the old-time music scene with its festivals and conventions, camps, dances, parties, personalities, performers, record labels, tape-swapping networks, and so forth has given us a great common ground for sharing our love of American traditional music.

Brad Leftwich has been playing banjo and fiddle and singing for more than twenty-five years. He has performed solo and with the Plank Road Stringband, Leftwich & Higginbotham, and the Humdingers; won the fiddle contest at the Appalachian String Band Music Festival in Clifftop, West Virginia; and is noted for his ability to teach traditional music.

Suggested Reading

Lornell, Kip. 1992. *Introducing American Folk Music*. Madison: Brown & Benchmark.

Old-time Herald, the quarterly magazine for the old-time music community. 1812 House Ave., Durham, NC 27707.

Wolfe, Charles K. 1977. *Tennessee Strings: The Story of Country Music in Tennessee*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Suggested Listening

Anthology of American Folk Music (6-CD boxed set). Smithsonian Folkways SFW 40089.

Available in August 1997.

Old-time Music on the Air, Vol. 1. Rounder 0331.

Suggested Viewing

Cohen, John. *That High Lonesome Sound*, a video compilation of three films on Roscoe Holcomb, Sara and Maybelle Carter, and Dillard Chandler and others. Shanachie Video.

Seeger, Mike. *Talking Feet*, a video/book documentary of solo Southern dance (flatfoot, buck, hoedown, and tap). Flower Films 1150. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.