

## Black Appalachian Music in the Mountains and Beyond

PAMELA E. FOSTER

When *Life* magazine in its September 1994 special collector's edition on the roots of country music paid tribute to the "100 most important" contributors to country music, it said of Ray Charles that "Charles took back what his people had given." Indeed, people of African descent in the late 1600s gave the South and later Appalachia the banjo, and that instrument, along with the fiddle and the guitar, steel guitar, and other instruments, gave the world country music. The African descendants fashioned the instrument after one often called a banjar, which they and their ancestors had played in various West African countries.

Black Appalachians played the banjo at home and at parties, and musicologists and historians describe their musical styles as reels, jigs, two-steps, and other traditional (now called "country") musical forms of the region. Pictures, photographs, and literature, including "A Banjo Song" and "The Corn-stalk Fiddle" by famed poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar, depict the omnipresence of the banjo and fiddle in black life through the 1800s.

In the early 1900s black people, particularly railroad construction workers, introduced the guitar to the Appalachian Mountains. They were influential directly or indirectly in teaching their musical styles to other artists who helped popularize the music to the world. For instance, the Stewart Brothers taught Sam and Kirk McGee, Lesley Riddle taught the Carter Family, unnamed black household and railroad workers taught Jimmie Rodgers, Arnold Shultz taught Bill Monroe, and Rufe "Tee-Tot" Payne taught Hank Williams.

Dr. Dana Baldwin helped continue black people's Appalachian musical heritage by hosting an annual fiddling and banjo contest in Martinsville, Virginia, from about 1928 to 1954. "Black people would look forward to the fiddlers' convention every year," Virginia fiddler Leonard Bowles says in an essay accompanying the 1978 recording *Virginia Traditions: Non-blues Secular Black Music*. "They had harp players, piano players, the best buck timing, straight fiddle, and the best banjo." DeFord Bailey brought the region's harp sounds—that is, mouth

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Songster Nat Reese has spent his life playing music in the coal fields of West Virginia. Photo by Michael Keller, courtesy *Goldenseal Magazine*

harp—to the world by serving as a member of the Grand Ole Opry from 1926 to 1941. And many other black artists have gone on to perform and write music spawned from that of black Appalachians.

Among the many who have had important impacts on country music are performers such as Charley Pride, Stoney Edwards, O.B. McClinton, and Linda Martell, who made successful recording careers in country music; singing cowboy Herb Jeffries; Henry Glover, the songwriter, producer, and King Records executive; Huddie Ledbetter (Lead Belly), Otis Blackwell, and Alice Randall, who wrote songs that have become country hits or standards; and a number of R-and-B or soul artists such as Brook Benton, Ivory Joe Hunter, Dobie Gray, and Otis Williams, who followed Charles's lead by recording country albums.

Banjo playing, fiddle playing, yodeling, and other forms of traditional Appalachian musical expression have waned among black Americans who associate the music with the poverty and racism from which they want to escape, but the tradition does continue. Among those keeping it alive are Mike Johnson, a Virginian who has won traditional music contests and yodeling contests around the country; McDonald Craig, who has been yodeling and playing traditional guitar since the 1940s; Cynthia Mae Talley, a rising Nashville songstress; and Tebey, an upstart Canadian artist looking for Nashville stardom beginning with his traditional country single "We Shook Hands (Man to Man)," which debuted in January 2003 on the *Billboard* country singles chart. ■