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**Traditional Appalachian Music in Southeastern Ohio**  
**By**  
**Rich Greenlee**

There are many definitions of traditional music that can be debated endlessly by scholars, but for me, traditional music is homemade music and is mostly played on acoustic instruments. It is participatory music that is played at kitchen parties, on the back porch and in the churches. It is largely part of an oral tradition where seasoned musicians pass down tunes and songs, but sometimes there are new songs and tunes created by younger musicians that sound like they are old. Often traditional musicians do not read music and play by ear.

Tunes and songs are taught to younger musicians who then often put their stamp on these tunes. Over time there are some slight variations in the presentation of the tunes or songs, but the foundation of the music remains the same. This synergism of young and old keeps the music grounded in its roots, but also results in a dynamic music that is ever changing and continually evolving. These songs tell the stories and life conditions of many of our Appalachian ancestors who worked in the mines, mills and on the farms. They wrote songs about leaving the old country and coming to the new. They sing of having loved and lost. They honored their families, the home place, their religious beliefs and their communities in their songs.

Like many young people, my interest in music started out by listening to rock and roll that I heard on the radio. I wanted to be cool and play the drums in a rock band. So I taught myself to play the drums, but I never played in a rock band. There was more money to be had by playing country music here in southeastern Ohio so I played drums in a very traditional country band. The band leaders spent much of their time asking (or should I say telling me) to play more quietly so I would not drown out the rest of the band. I eagerly awaited my opportunity at each gig to take the towel off of my snare drum so I could play the tune *Wipe Out*. During these years, my father and I had an ongoing battle switching the radio station in his pick up truck back and forth between the country and rock radio stations. Little did he know that years later after he had passed away that I would come back to his music.

After leaving high school and serving in the Army, I took a music appreciation course at the University of Maryland. It was here that I came to appreciate traditional

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music. In this class we studied old fiddle tunes and folk songs and I learned to play a bit of guitar and autoharp. I heard Bryan Bowers sing and play autoharp at a festival in Washington, DC and I was hooked forever. I would go to the *Birchmere* to listen to Irish, folk and bluegrass bands. I went to every folk festival I could find. Traditional music became my passion. I went on to purchase and learn to play a mandolin, guitar, hammered dulcimer, and Appalachian dulcimer in that order. Later on I learned to play clawhammer banjo and concertina. My most recent acquisition is a ukulele that was prompted by a woman from the New Straitsville History Group, who brought one in for me to see that had been her sister's. Of course there was a story with it and then I knew I had to have one. That is how it all starts.

Since the mid-1970's, I have been traveling back in time to learn more about the music, the instruments and the players of Celtic, old-time, bluegrass and early country music. I have found that traditional Appalachian music is multicultural in nature and has been influenced by people from all over the world. It began with the Irish and Scots bringing their fiddles and playing their ancient dance tunes in the isolated Appalachian communities. Later, Appalachians learned to build and play banjos that were brought here by African slaves. Subsequently, fiddle and banjo duos were born. In the late 1800's and early 1900's the Italian mandolin, the Spanish guitar and even the Hawaiian ukulele found its way into the hills of Appalachia, often via mail order catalogs. In addition, other people built and played the Appalachian dulcimer and the hammered dulcimer was popular as a "transportable" piano. From this conglomeration of string instruments came the string band tradition. String bands played dance tunes, waltzes, and some songs. Eventually, Bill Monroe combined fiddle tunes with the songs of old, added a touch of the blues that he learned from African American musicians and created a whole new genre of music called bluegrass. Brother duets were once a popular part of early country music, but the string bands and brother duets were later replaced in popularity by the more electrified and "modern" country western music.

Athens and the southeastern Ohio region offer a wealth of traditional musical experiences. You can hear the sounds of old-time banjo picking and fiddle playing at the Hockhocking Folk Festival held each year on the Hocking College campus. My favorite band at this year's festival was the Carolina Chocolate Drops, a group of young African American musicians who are keeping the Black String band tradition alive. The Ohio State Fiddle Contest takes place at Stuart's Opera House each year in Nelsonville, Ohio. A wide assortment of professional old-timey, bluegrass, folk musicians and country artists perform at the Opera House on a regular basis throughout the year. This is a beautiful venue in which to listen to traditional music in southeastern Ohio. Throughout the summer there are regular blues music performances on the Ohio River in Pomeroy and outdoor bluegrass music festivals throughout the area. Old-time country and bluegrass music are also played at the *River's Edge* in Monroe County where you can eat homemade pie and listen to some fine local bands from Ohio and West Virginia. There is also the *Pennyroyal Opera House* located in Belmont County, where many fine bluegrass bands perform. And let's not forget the *Jamboree in the Hills* that celebrates the best of country music for four days in July and the multitude of local performers who play music and sing in our local taverns and at our community festivals.

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I play music and sing songs nearly every day because I have to. For me, playing traditional music cures what ails me. The curative power of music brings happiness and joy, peace and tranquility. The driving rhythms of the bum-ditty-bum of the clawhammer banjo makes you want to get up and dance. Sawmill minor tuning has a haunting sound that takes one back to another time and place. The distinctive sounds of the mandolin chop in a bluegrass band and its clear high tones provide a rich texture to the tunes. These instruments, when combined with the rhythm of the guitar and the beat of the bass, provide us with the basic ingredients for most of this music.

And while I love the sounds of the instruments in traditional music it is the songs that move me the most. Many of which are steeped in the tradition of the old English ballads and the newer songs created by old-timey, bluegrass and country singer-songwriters. These songs often tell the stories of who we are and the challenges we have faced as a people in the hills of Appalachia. The best songs tell a story that causes me to lose myself in the emotions of the music.

Over the years, I have experienced many magical moments through this music. Listening to Sam Bush, an amazing entertainer and skilled mandolin player, at Stuart's Opera House was a special night that both my wife and I enjoyed. Playing clawhammer banjo with Jerry Rockwell, a master of the Appalachian Dulcimer at the Community and Campus Days was a great experience. Playing banjo with Don Dudding before a dinner celebrating the Appalachian Writing Project was a wonderful spontaneous event. Often these are the best moments.

Listening to *Rattle Trap* play uplifting old timey tunes at the Ohio University Outreach EXPO was an enjoyable time. And recently I had the opportunity to hear the beautiful harmonies of the Lonnie Welch Family as they sang at the Beech Grove Church's, One-Hundredth Homecoming Celebration. This was a special moment that captured the essence of what traditional music is all about. In this case, one family enjoying each others company through music and singing the songs of their faith. Family bands were once a core feature of traditional music and the Welch Family is working to keep this tradition alive.

I have had the honor of playing at many special places and events. I can still hear the voices of dozens of people singing *Which Side Are You On?* at the Chesterhill Union Hall. I've enjoyed leading sing alongs of old Irish and Scottish songs at the Celtic Festival in New Straitsville (and I might add listening to the Boys of the Hock' playing fine Irish traditional music). I vividly recall singing old coal mining and union songs at the Hickory Creek Nursing Home when one senior citizen told me the story of growing up in a coal camp, playing banjo and then no longer being able to play because of severe arthritis in her hands. At the end of the last song that evening, another member of the group, thrust her fist up into the air and yelled, "Let's organize!" As I left the home that day I wasn't quite sure that these inspired residents might not just go out and do it.

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I especially enjoy writing songs for special occasions. Years ago I wrote a song called *Pickin' Walnuts* that honors my mother's courageous spirit during hard economic times. I once wrote a song about King, a dog that attended school everyday at the elementary school in New Straitsville in the 60's. Recently, I had the opportunity to write a song about the Tecumseh Theater in Shawnee, Ohio, and share it with potential funders in hopes of obtaining financial support for the long-term restoration efforts of Sunday Creek Associates. I played the song while sitting on an old wooden chair on the dusty stage in the empty hall which waits for the work to begin. I do hope it happens. It is a beautiful music hall that deserves to live on and not die under a wrecking ball like so many others.

And then there are the quiet moments of reflection, playing the tune *Soldier's Joy* on an open-back banjo on my back porch, picking *Old Joe Clark* on my mandolin in the stairwell at Morton Hall after a long day at the office, or standing in the middle of an old country church up on Sykes Ridge in Monroe County singing acapella, *Beautiful Life*. I love the way the words of the song resonate throughout the building, out the windows and across the valley. This is traditional music at its finest.

Finally, Jack Wright has recently completed a superb compilation of classic coal mining songs. These songs remind me of my father who worked in the mines for many years. These songs speak to me and tell the stories of the challenges miners and their families faced then and today in this dangerous work.

I hope you have discovered something in this essay that peaks your curiosity and motivates you to explore this musical tradition further. We are fortunate to have dedicated volunteers such as Pete Hart and Ivan and Deanna Tribe who host the shows *D28 +5* and *Hornpipe and Fugue* on *WOUB* radio, so we can listen to and learn more about bluegrass and country music every Sunday afternoon. And when you get the chance, get out in the community and listen to some live music at a local venue or festival. Still, better yet, you may be inspired to go out and buy yourself an instrument and make your own music. Maybe we will get together sometime and jam. This is the essence of traditional music. Enjoy.