A photograph of Stephen Wade, an older man with white curly hair and glasses, smiling while playing a banjo. He is wearing a dark suit jacket, a light blue shirt, and a patterned tie. The background is a brick wall with bare vines and a lantern.

STEPHEN WADE
ACROSS THE AMERIKEE



Smithsonian Folkways

STEPHEN WADE

ACROSS THE AMERIKEE: SHOWPIECES FROM COAL CAMP TO CATTLE TRAIL

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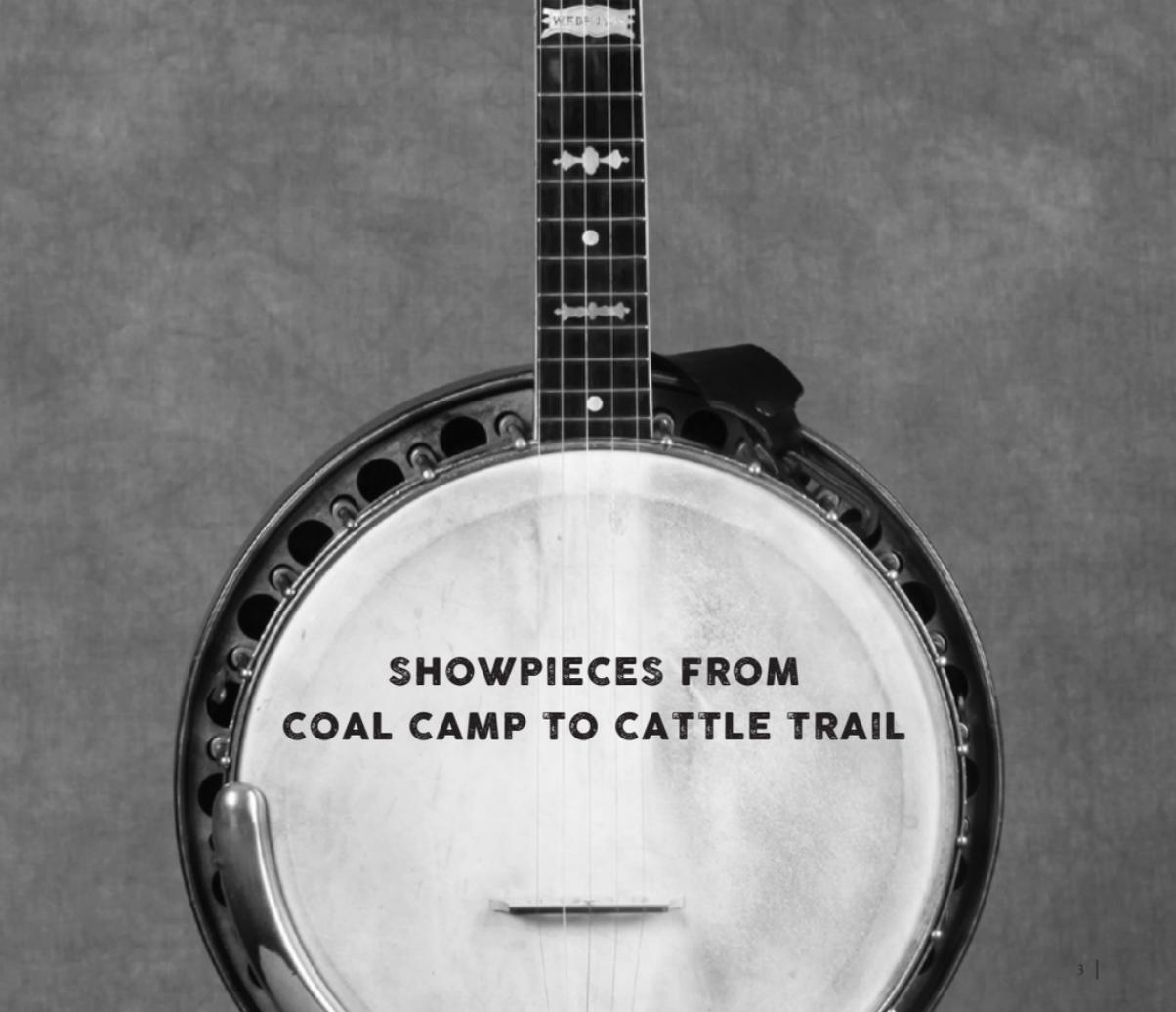
1 WILD HORSE	1:31	12 GOODBYE, OLD PAINT	4:17
2 COME ON BUDDIE, DON'T YOU WANT TO GO	2:40	13 TOM PALEY'S JOHN HENRY	2:01
3 CHESLEY CHANCEY'S CUMBERLAND GAP	2:03	14 TROUBLE AT THE COAL CREEK MINES	5:20
4 SWING AND TURN, JUBILEE	3:57	15 GRAY EAGLE	2:19
5 FLY AROUND MY PRETTY LITTLE MISS	1:50	16 LOST JOHN	2:22
6 DIAMOND JOE	3:34	17 SHORTENIN' BREAD	1:53
7 PUNCHEON CAMPS	0:57	18 RENO FACTORY / BROWN SKIN BLUES	3:55
8 HARD HEAD HARDY (Stephen Wade-Jack Conroy/Merrywang Music, ASCAP)	4:50	19 SOURWOOD MOUNTAIN	4:02
9 KC WHISTLE	2:38	20 IN THE PINES	4:04
10 WILLIE MOORE	3:56	21 CHERRY BLOSSOM WALTZ (Tony Ellis/Merrywang Music, ASCAP)	2:08
11 UNCLE DAVE'S FANDANGO	2:07		

* For Tom Paley



STEPHEN WADE ACROSS THE AMERIKEE

Popular history traces the launching of the *Grand Ole Opry*, the nation's longest running radio show, to a November 1925 broadcast of solo fiddler Uncle Jimmy Thompson (1854–1931). Although several notable barn dance musicians had already transmitted over Nashville's airwaves, it was this 71-year-old, white-bearded, whiskey-relishing, rural Tennessean who captured the public's affection and set the program's course.¹ Uncle Jimmy embodied what George D. Hay, the show's creator, later called "the homespun voice of America speaking to the homespun heart of America" (Wolfe 1999: 265). The fiddler's archaic locutions and cracker barrel wit perfectly fit the required role. He also commanded a large repertory of traditional dance tunes and popular airs, enabling him to play for hours.



**SHOWPIECES FROM
COAL CAMP TO CATTLE TRAIL**

During his early broadcasts, Uncle Jimmy relished this opportunity, reportedly scoffing, “Why shucks, a man don’t get warmed up in an hour. I won an eight-day fiddling contest down at Dallas, and here’s my blue ribbon to prove it” (Wolfe 1997:37). Audiences took to his charms, and his appeal, reflected in the telegrams the station received from throughout the nation, proved critical in the establishment of the *Opry*. And Uncle Jimmy, embracing the new medium of radio, filled the air with “Old Betsy,” his beloved fiddle, sending out her sounds, as he said, “across the Amerikee.”

Uncle Jimmy Thompson’s irrepressible individualism speaks to themes that animate this album—from the personality he invested in his performances, to the expressive power that propelled his spirited renditions to a national audience. In my own work, I look to personal mentors and recorded exemplars, who, like Jimmy Thompson, made artistic choices with comparable vivacity. The eldest of these performers grew up in the closing decades of the 19th century while others matured during the first years of the 20th. Together, they experienced an industrializing America in the burgeoning of coal camps and the closing of cattle trails, the end of reading by firelight and the beginning of the bright lights of electricity.

For them, the phonograph and radio formed a means to express as well as document their music. These singers and players pursued their artistry when the United States still maintained a legally segregated society and where more than half its population still resided in rural areas. Notwithstanding, Americans interconnected time and again, and citizen-musicians overcame divides of race and region in the commerce of their lives as well as their arts.

Admittedly, a complexity of decisions, accidents, serendipities, and social forces dictated who became recorded and who found airtime. Through it all, these musicians left behind works that attest to the cultural sharing and cultural distinctiveness of American life. Their voices, like Uncle Jimmy’s, bursting with a gumption and spunk that resounds even now, inspire this album.

Across the Amerikee: Showpieces from Coal Camp to Cattle Trail differs from my previous albums in being an entirely solo endeavor. On those earlier ventures, and for nearly every track, I performed with other players. Pump organ, bowed bass, mandolin, fiddle, guitar, Dobro, uilleann pipes, wooden flute, washboard, tin whistle, kalimba, piano, accordion, harmonica, jug, pennywhistle, feet, and voice all made appearances on those releases, each varying from one selection to the next. Title by title, I asked myself: what might belong to these songs and tunes, either musically or historically?

In contrast, over the years, I performed largely by myself, a good deal of that time spent doing the one-man theater pieces *Banjo Dancing* and *On the Way Home*. In place of gesture, lighting, stage props, and dance—tools of a lone performer—I used an array of sounds in these recordings to create new contexts for the music. Library research, as well as personal contact with traditional sources, furnished answers to questions about arrangements. Even in the most spontaneous of the recordings we made—unforeseen combinations arising between musicians in the studio—historical precedents played a shaping role. My first album, *Dancing Home* (Flying Fish Records, FF 70543, 1990), stemming from the two stage shows, resituated tunes drawn from those programs into arrangements that benefitted as much from archival inspiration as personal invention. This method guided the albums that followed. So, on *Dancing in the Parlor* (County Records, CO-CD 2721, 1997), I explored the banjo in a number of playing styles and cast in a variety of settings. These ranged from leading a jug band to accompanying a single vocalist. Throughout *Banjo Diary: Lessons from Tradition* (SFW CD 40208, 2012), I leaned on a core of musicians to create fresh renderings of traditional material. As its title suggests, it centered on experiences I'd had with older players.

Now comes this solitary effort. Once again, the task required creative handling of inherited materials. Its challenges reside in what qualities a soloist might bring to a piece to justify its inclusion and, secondly, how this gathering of interpretations might yield a satisfying listening experience. Recording

for *Across the Amerikee* began in late December 2014 and ended in January 2016. This work, which took place intermittently, occurred during a time when I made numerous appearances centered around my book, *The Beautiful Music All Around Us: Field Recordings and the American Experience*. All the songs and tunes included here appeared sometime or another over the course of those performances.

Throughout the making of *Across the Amerikee* I played either banjo or guitar, coupled with vocals and occasional dance. We worked live in a studio, without auto-tuning and overdubs, although exceptions to the latter arise in “Hard Head Hardy” when I blow a wooden train whistle and clang an iron pipe to represent its bell. Otherwise, *Across the Amerikee* steers by an old-fashioned route, a method followed since the advent of recorded sound.

The songs, tunes, and stories comprising *Across the Amerikee* fit within the category of “solo and display music,” a scholarly pairing applied to performances largely made for listening, rather than, for example, working or dancing. Solo and display music spans descriptive numbers that imitate life sounds, such as fox chases and steam locomotives, to bravura instrumentals that highlight a player’s skill. Their foremost stylists hold in common what historian and broadcaster Dick Spottswood describes as “superb musicianship . . . making virtuosity its own reward” (1978:2). By this light, Uncle Jimmy Thompson and his fiddling counterparts featured during the *Opry*’s early years recast their reels into showpieces. They shifted their primary emphasis from accompanying the needs of dancers to providing a concertizing experience for radio listeners.

In December 1980, I witnessed this artistry during a *Grand Ole Opry* broadcast. That night at Opryland, I sat with an on-stage audience, squeezed into what felt more like a jury box than a bleachers

section. The show proceeded in segments, each underwritten by a different sponsor. At one commercial break, staffers hurriedly uncapped a line of soft drinks for us to brandish and imbibe. Thus, with soda in hand, I watched Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys perform “Uncle Pen.” In this autobiographical classic, Monroe recalls fiddle tunes played by Pendleton Vandiver, his revered kinsman and childhood mentor. The song took a transcendent turn when fiddler Kenny Baker launched into his solo. Though the break lasted only seconds, Baker’s music seemingly poured without end from his violin. His churning tones, as if siphoned from some distant oceanic chamber, lapped over the audience, into the darkness of the hall and back again, enveloping us all in currents of reverberant sound. Indeed Kenny Baker, Bill Monroe, and their bandmates—masters, every one—brimmed that night with music made for music’s sake.

This memory spurs another. The year before, I stood on the Ryman Auditorium’s stage, the fabled mother church of WSM’s *Grand Ole Opry*. I had come there that afternoon with musician John Hartford. As his houseguest, I spent that week with him on what I called “an archaeological expedition into the life of Uncle Dave Macon.” Now the two of us found ourselves essentially alone in that landmark, our visit committed to retracing the great showman’s steps. Early on, Uncle Dave (1870–1952) became the *Opry*’s first star, having eclipsed Uncle Jimmy Thompson’s prior ascendancy. The enormous body of work that Uncle Dave left behind on his recordings and the vitality he brought to his broadcasts radiate the soloist’s art. From these boards, he plied his mastery and originality.

The Ryman at that time was a largely abandoned and still unrenovated space. As I stood center stage, I not only pictured Uncle Dave holding his listeners’ attention, but felt myself in contact with the entire house. John Hartford called it “the fastest room” he had ever known. By that, he meant its seemingly instantaneous capacity for a performer to visually encompass the whole of the audience, and from that same vantage point, to verbally reach each listener present. I tapped out a few dance steps and called out a few verses. The Ryman’s acoustic properties, no less than its sight lines, demonstrated how effectively this venerable tabernacle operated as a live performance environment.

Radio airchecks from the Ryman confirm that immediacy. The whoops and howls that greeted Uncle Dave's banjo performances resounded second only to the postwar appearances of Earl Scruggs playing with Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys. There, Earl wields his five-string with abandon, his unrestrained virtuosity coupled with youthful ardor. The audience roars after his every lead, their familiarity with the music mixed with joyous surprise at its execution. In pioneering style, Earl Scruggs showed how a single individual can inspire a tradition, let alone uplift a hall.

Such moments provide windows on display music, suggesting its peaks and its challenges. The great vernacular musicians named here, like their fellow practitioners on the *Opry* and points beyond, showed themselves to be individualists as well as inheritors. They molded materials they received, however antiquated or oft-repeated, and in this renewal, made these pieces their own. Fortunately, they shared their achievement, whether preserved on paper or etched into acetate, sent into the atmosphere by radio signal or demonstrated by personal example.

With my own age advancing toward Uncle Jimmy Thompson's when he sat before the microphone that late November evening in Nashville long ago, I know this much: creative routes that he and his counterparts so boldly charted map my own pilgrim's progress, however haltingly, across the Amerikee.

¹ I'm indebted to independent scholar and discographer Chris Smith for alerting me to Tony Russell's recent research on Uncle Jimmy Thompson, which places his year of birth later than previous accounts have reported. See Tony Russell, "Uncle Jimmy Thompson," in *The Knoxville Sessions 1929-1930*, edited by Ted Olson and Tony Russell (Holste-Oldendorf, Germany: Bear Family Productions, 2016), pp. 92-93, in a four-CD boxed set (Bear Family BCD 16097) of the same name. The phrase "across the Amerikee," while sometimes recalled as "across the American," comes from Charles Wolfe's interviews with Katherine Womack, Thompson's daughter-in-law. See Wolfe 1997:35-36. See also Amerikee's phonetic construction and traditional usage cited in the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (vol. 1, p. 56), as well as its appearance in the Scottish folksong "The Plains of Amerikee."

TRACK NOTES

1 WILD HORSE

(banjo, FDGCD)

From “Pigtown Fling” to “Stony Point,” from “Buck Creek Girl” to “Old Dad,” from “Unfortunate Dog” to “Kelton’s Reel,” the title “Wild Horse” appears among the profusion of names that identify this well-known American fiddle tune. In November 1987, during a visit I made to his home, Kentucky musician Clyde Davenport tried to settle the matter once and for all: “Some called it ‘Rock Creek,’ some called it ‘Buck Creek,’ but the right name for it is ‘Stony Point.’” However one might designate this piece, it accommodates as many interpretations as it does titles.

This tune is known from a variety of players discussed in the pages of *The Beautiful Music* (Wade 2012). Fiddler Bill Stepp, featured in the opening chapter, often played with neighboring banjoist Walter Williams, and in 1937 they recorded “Wild Horse” at galloping velocity. Cowboy fiddler Jess Morris, subject of the book’s final chapter, likewise recorded it during the same 1942 session when he performed “Goodbye, Old Paint.” He played it with fervid rasp, interchangeably calling it both “Unfortunate Dog”

and “Stony Point.” My study of Ora Dell Graham’s 1940 “Shortenin’ Bread” brought me into contact with “Stony Point’s” tangents and amalgams. Echoes of it appear in “Old Dad” from Dan Emmett’s 1844 banjo songster, and in Bascom Lunsford’s 1929 imprint of “Wild Horse,” which he parenthetically titled “Short’nin’ Bread.”

“Wild Horse” on this track is in an F tuning, using a two-finger, index-lead. Clyde Davenport, for one, frailed it in a closely related F tuning. Clawhammer versions published in the mid-1970s by Miles Krassen and Art Rosenbaum in their manuals used the one adopted here. The tune shifts between major and minor tonalities, coupled with tiny rhythmic changes available within its three parts.

2 COME ON BUDDIE, DON'T YOU WANT TO GO

(vocal and banjo, gCGBD, capo two)

“Now, that’s resonance!” So wrote folklorist and editor Judy McCulloh, responding to an email during my April 2014 stay at the former Edwards Hotel in Jackson, Mississippi. When I arrived at this 12-story, Beaux Arts building built in 1923, now converted into a Hilton Garden Inn, I soon learned that the Mississippi Sheiks, Freeny’s Barn Dance Band, Robert Wilkins, and Uncle Dave Macon had all recorded there. Resonance indeed!

Dave Macon’s ten-song, December 17, 1930, session for Okeh Records featured Uncle Dave on banjo and vocals, with Sam McGee seconding him on banjo-guitar. It yielded several of his most well-known recordings, but until 1979, four performances from that day’s work had never been issued—or, for that matter, even located. Instead, these one-sided test pressings resided undetected for nearly a half-century in the hatbox where Uncle Dave had stored them. Shortly after their rediscovery, I held

them myself, gingerly taking them from that same round box, still safeguarded under the family's roof. In 1980, these treasures formed the centerpiece for Uncle Dave Macon's Grammy-nominated album in the traditional music category.

One of the discs bore the title "Come On Buddie, Don't You Want To Go." The song blends earthly antics with gospel commonplaces. It operates as a homiletic, a preacherly mode Uncle Dave often employed on recordings and in personal appearances. The format allowed him to draw from both sacred and secular traditions that he teamed with lyrics of his own. In this piece, he joins the allure of Budweiser with the admonishments of the Bible. Its warnings to the faithful resound in sermons and songs still heard in present-day church services: "You can't get to heaven with a sweetheart and a wife."

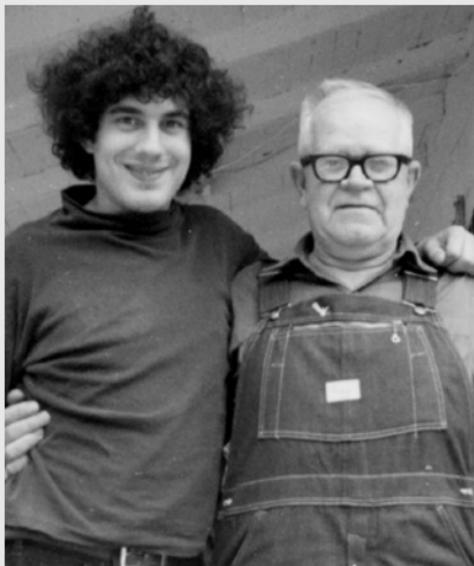
To play "Come On Buddie," I moved between what Uncle Dave called "old-time banjo rapping" and three-finger picking. Across both techniques, he sustained a distinctive rhythmic drive. His right-hand timing seems almost asymmetrical, as if hinged from an off-center fulcrum, that impels his pieces forward. Moving between the two playing styles keeps that feel in mind, suggesting the instrumental interplay between Uncle Dave and Sam McGee as they surged and receded between verses, verses themselves pivoting between everyday joy and eternal reward.

3 CHESLEY CHANCEY'S CUMBERLAND GAP

(banjo, fCFCD)

During talks on *The Beautiful Music*, I sometimes touched on change in folksong by demonstrating three versions of “Cumberland Gap.” Like a cutaway of geologic strata, each reveals different pressures in its formation. I begin by playing Earl Scruggs’s bluegrass showpiece and end with Hobart Smith’s old-time tour de force, a rapid-fire number, set in a traditional tuning named after the piece itself. Between them, I play a version learned from Chesley Chancey (1913–1980) of Cherry Log, Georgia.

Chesley picked “Cumberland Gap” in this F tuning with a two-finger style. His performance straddled elements that marked both Scruggs’s and Smith’s renditions. On one hand, his banjo and his technique reflected modern developments—he played a Gibson resonator with fingerpicks. Yet unlike many of his contemporaries, he knowingly rendered the piece in an archaic tuning with an old-fashioned right-hand technique. It allowed him a delicacy and definition that set it apart. During our visit, which took place two weeks before he died, Chesley spoke of the banjo as a self-sufficient instrument, one uniquely capable of holding an audience’s interest. With “Cumberland Gap,” he proved his point.



With Chesley Chancey, Cherry Log, Ga., June 1980.

4 SWING AND TURN, JUBILEE

(vocal and banjo, gDGAD, dropped a whole tone)

This song comes from Jean Ritchie by way of Art Rosenbaum, who played it for me during a 1970s visit at his home. Jean likened the song to the Virginia reel, and attributed it to her family, who had sung it unaccompanied during play parties: “The verses we sing are pretty well set, as we sang just the number to get us through one turn of the game (circle for as many as will, but our living rooms would hold just about six or seven couples)” (Ritchie 2001).



Soda factory workers, Mathieson Alkali Works, Saltville, Va., ca. 1910.

The sound and sense of “Swing and Turn” recalls another song that I play in the same tuning: “Rocky Hill.” In *The Beautiful Music* concerts, either piece could represent the kind of courtship song that singer Texas Gladden (subject of chapter nine) and her companions enjoyed in their youth. From age 14 until her elopement three years later, Texas (1895–1966) worked on an assembly line at the chemical plant that dominated her hometown, Saltville, Virginia. Alongside her fellow factory girls, she packed boxes of Eagle Thistle brand bicarbonate of soda. To get through the day in that era before radio became widespread, they entertained themselves by singing. Texas came home, she said, with a new song every night. She remembered wistfully the songs richest in romance, building, she said, a “perfect mental picture” of their characters and scenes. The affectionate way she spoke about these numbers, and the youthful dreams they expressed, seem at one with both “Swing and Turn” and “Rocky Hill.”

I've found my own mental pictures by focusing on the lyrics in "Swing and Turn." Here I use a two-finger thumb lead, replicating the melody midway up the neck to create variation. This method, set to a deliberative pace, helps shift the piece from the liveliness of dance into a more romantic reverie.

5 FLY AROUND MY PRETTY LITTLE MISS

(banjo, gCGCE)

"Fly Around My Pretty Little Miss" has long held a steady musical course. From one performance to another, its core melody has shown little change. Most differences between individual versions appear in the high strain, but this portion doesn't define the melody so much as fill it out. Yet for all this uniformity, the song's extensive recorded history spans an enormous range of textures.

Even the few sources I heard when I first learned the piece displayed great variety: Aunt Samantha Bumgarner's banjo solo that she punctuated with dance calls, Glen Smith's and Wade Ward's spritely take on "Western Country," Hobart Smith's joyful piano instrumental, and the string-band version formulated by the New Lost City Ramblers.

During the earliest of *The Beautiful Music* concerts, I performed the tune with pianist Mike Craver in a medley of Hobart Smith's piano works. Hobart played this instrument, under-recorded in old-time music, with animation. He picked out melody with his right hand, but reserved his left to hit drone notes, rather than blocking out chords. In our duets, I contributed harmonies and pedal points, set against the keyboard's melody.

In the context of a solo recording, however, different opportunities and needs arise. To achieve a

self-sufficient instrumental, the tune is framed within a three-finger pattern, varied internally by frailing. It travels through a couple of registers, contrasting low notes with higher ones. An unplanned moment takes it up the neck, and a delayed kind of movement, a right-hand glide, fits several notes into a single strike, like a fiddle's double stop. Set against the contrasting tones, in that moment where the high notes seemed to flutter, it's as if two instruments are seemingly sounding at once.

6 **DIAMOND JOE**

(vocal, guitar in drop-D tuning)

State prisoner Charlie Butler gained a reputation at Mississippi's Parchman Penitentiary for the way he sang "Diamond Joe." One need only hear his fellow inmate spurring him on during his 1937 recording. "Talk it, man," the unnamed enthusiast opines (Wade 2012, 310). After another verse, he focuses on the song itself, saying, "Sing, 'Joe,' boy." Still later, he urges Charlie once again to "talk it." His unprompted pronouncements make sense. Charlie's rich baritone, his fluidity across head and chest tones, and his ease in making timbral changes reveal his



Inmates with tracking dogs. Parchman, Miss., early 20th century.

vocal skill, to say nothing of the pathos he communicates with the lyrics. In this harsh environment Charlie Butler indeed spoke to his fellow convicts through the medium of “Diamond Joe.”

Although I made up the guitar part here, I recognize that the task of performing “Diamond Joe,” of finding one’s way within it, applies throughout this music, no matter what song or tune one might undertake. At bottom, interpreters depend upon their conversancy, their ease, their closeness with a given piece. Shortly before Fleming Brown died, he addressed this perennial challenge: “Songs,” he said, “need to be attached like the way you tell a story. It’s something you have to live with. You have got to do it by yourself, and you’ve got to get it ‘til the words fit your face” (Brown 1984). Surely the Parchman inmate who spoke between Charlie’s verses considered that matter settled and resolved: “Talk it, man. Talk it.”

7 PUNCHEON CAMPS

(banjo, gCGCD)

I learned this tune in the mid-1980s from Clyde Davenport at his home in Monticello, Kentucky. When I asked him what its title signified, he named two Kentucky communities, one near Cumberland Falls, and the other Williamsburg. Both have close ties to the lumber industry. Historical accounts mention, in Grainger County, Tennessee, the town of Puncheon Camp, itself devoted to production of this rugged wood planking.

For others, the roughhewn boards summon memories of old-time dances. When Jean Ritchie performed with Doc Watson in New York City in 1963, she mentioned in connection with another song the

uneven puncheon floors found in Kentucky's cabins and meeting halls. Over the course of an evening's dance, a call would go out to spread "sugar on the floor." That became a sign for dancers to "clog around in it and slicken the floor up," recoating the surface with sugar, cornmeal, or salt ("Sugar on the Floor," Ritchie 1963).

Here I approach "Puncheon Camps" not as a dance number, but as a banjo solo. Clyde Davenport spent the better part of a morning watching me sort it out. We sat in his front room, and he played it repeatedly as I stumbled along, confounded by its uneven measures. The words of Kentucky fiddler Buddy Thomas come to mind when he described "Kitty Puss," a close musical kin of Clyde's piece: "That tune's got some of the quickest, silliest changes in it of any one tune ever I heard" (Wilson and Meade 1976). Once past that point, however, "Puncheon Camps" becomes a showpiece all its own.

8 **HARD HEAD HARDY**

(voice, banjo, whistle, bell)

In June 1985, the author Jack Conroy (1898–1990) and I began writing a tall tale. By then 87 years old, his eyes failing and his broad frame suffering from the encroachments of diabetes, he kindly took on this added task. It turned out to be the last published work that bears his name.

While sifting through manuscripts of the Federal Writers' Project, housed in Washington, DC, I came upon a somewhat arid piece called "The Pioneer Pessimist." Submitted in 1936 by George W. Whitehead, a member of the Nebraska state unit, it had this note appended to its typewritten text: "This anecdote was related to the writer approximately 40 years ago by a farmer in the rural districts of Clark County whose name is not recalled. It was never heard by him before or since and has not been



With Jack Conroy, Moberly, Mo., March 1980.

a chance for his continual grouching and grumbling. Jack's additions led to my own, and as well as the music, I contributed a number of the one-liners, refined Hard Head and Gabe's dialogue, inserted the train sounds for the crescendo, and reworked Jack's punch line.

I think Jack drew the story's title from a tale called "Hardy Hardhead," published years earlier by the folklorist Richard Chase. Gabe likely came from Paul Bunyan's big blue ox. Jack knew that kind of material, apart from just remembering the oral culture of his upbringing. I don't think at this stage of his life, however, he consciously appropriated these names. They simply surfaced in his mind.

In the same way a tune circulates through generations and across communities, "Hard Head Hardy" bears a traditional provenance. But just as a gifted instrumentalist can revive and transform a tired musical workhorse, a writer of great literary skill can give new power and new energy to a steam-age anecdote. I'm talking about you, Jack. Thank you. In fact, thank you forever.

seen in print. It is offered for what it may be worth" (Wade 1991:122).

When I showed the story to Jack, he remembered having heard it in his own Missouri youth. I asked him if he felt he could enliven it, and within two weeks, he had done just that. Principal characters now had names—Hard Head Hardy and his son Gabe—and a vague locality became a community called Dewdrop. Only Jack could have turned a nondescript farm into "a shirrtail full of wormy corn." Each stage in the anecdote offered an opportunity for commentary, and in Hard Head's case,

KC WHISTLE

(guitar, open-E tuning)

“KC Whistle” comes from traditional musician Hobart Smith (1897–1965). During his October 1963 concert at Chicago’s Old Town School of Folk Music, he drew the evening’s greatest applause after playing this powerhouse. He called the tune by various titles, sometimes “KC Blues,” other times “KC Whistle.” It was also the last piece he recorded that week for Fleming Brown, who, during their taping, notated it as “KC Moan.” No matter its chosen name, it summons a steam whistle’s blow and suggests a locomotive’s power.

The showpiece proved popular among musicians of Hobart’s generation. Robert Wilkins with his “Prodigal Son” and Roy Acuff with his “Steamboat Whistle Blues,” are two examples of traditional and transitional artists who adapted its format and applied it to other subjects. Hobart himself cited players, black and white, around his hometown of Saltville, Virginia, who performed the tune and employed its pattern.

“KC Whistle” and its like are blues adaptations of an older piece called “Spanish Fandango.” With its open-chord tuning, loosely defined melody, and one-finger chord changes, this beginner’s exercise, first published in 1838, has given rise to countless reworkings. Players learned and vernacular have found its motif both easy to play and open to advanced treatment. In my concerts, Hobart’s tune figures alongside other “Spanish Fandango” versions, such as Kirk McGee’s “Snowdrop,” Pete Steele’s “Coal Creek March,” and his “Last Payday at Coal Creek,” as well as his own reading of “Spanish Fandango.” All these works reveal a balance, as Ruth Crawford Seeger noted about her own efforts to transcribe folk performance, a common possession, to which many have made individual contribution. “KC Whistle,” an ode to movement, calls out to this unstoppable creativity.

WILLIE MOORE

(vocal and banjo, gDGBD)

“He could cut up a lot, but when he settled down to play, buddy, he could play” (Davenport to Wade, Nov. 11, 1987). So reminisced musician Clyde Davenport as he spoke of Dick Burnett (1883–1977), a celebrated recording artist from Monticello, Kentucky. In November 1927, with his fiddling partner, Leonard Rutherford, he recorded “Willie Moore’s” sorrowful tale of suicide and regret. The duo performed this American-originated ballad by joining Burnett’s reportorial singing and pulsating banjo to Rutherford’s delicate bowing. I play it here in a two-finger banjo style akin to Burnett’s, but I shift between a thumb and index lead and add a new high part up the neck.

Burnett learned the words to “Willie Moore,” he reported, from a printed ballad, though he likely drew the tune from elsewhere. A blind man, he learned by ear. His wife and companions read him texts that he memorized, just as he dictated his own songs to them for imprints he later sold at his appearances. When he recorded “Willie Moore,” its tune circulated in Kentucky, attached to songs of similar mood and message.

One example of this tune migration comes from the playing of Justus Begley, the singing sheriff from Perry County, Kentucky (see chapter 10 in *Beautiful Music*). Begley applied the melody to his vigorous, banjo-accompanied rendition of “Lady Margaret and Sweet William” (Child 74), a centuries-old supernatural tale of the restless dead. In turn, Jean Ritchie recorded the ballad, citing Begley as her source, on a 1961 record (published on Folkways). Two years later, she recorded a live album (also on Folkways) in New York City with Doc Watson. For one of its tracks, Doc, sitting beside her, sang to his own banjo and harmonica accompaniment the Burnett and Rutherford version of “Willie Moore.”

Likewise, using the same melody, native Kentuckian Elizabeth Hurt Kincaid taught a version of

“The Brown Girl and Fair Eleanor” (Child 73) to her son, Bradley Kincaid. He, in turn, became an early country music radio star, nationally known as “The Kentucky Mountain Boy.” In the mid-1930s, while working at a Boston station, he passed along this saga of dashed hope and matrimonial killing to Louis Marshall Jones, a younger musician. Grandpa Jones, as he soon became known, recorded it with his banjo and harmonica. The tune was identical to the one that Burnett used for “Willie Moore.”

For now, Clyde Davenport, Dick Burnett’s closest living acolyte, has the last word. During one of our visits, Clyde characterized another song that Burnett and Rutherford had recorded, but what he said about it could equally apply to “Willie Moore”: “The tune, it was right,” Clyde warmly noted. Then he got emphatic. “He didn’t leave nothing out. It was right.”

11 **UNCLE DAVE’S FANDANGO**

(banjo, gCGCE)

“Now good people, I’m going to try to play you a pretty little instrumental piece and sing you a beautiful sentimental song.” With these words, Uncle Dave Macon introduced his 1925 recording of “Station Will Be Changed After A While.” For the title piece, he sang a black gospel song, but he played the introductory “Spanish Fandango” as an unnamed instrumental. In my rendition, I have added a low strain to expand his prefatory waltz into a stand-alone instrumental.

“Spanish Fandango” has filled many roles over the years, from light parlor entertainment to vessel for social commentary. Uncle Dave grew up with a body of popular favorites, and he drew on them at home, in personal appearances, and on recordings. The year after he made “Station Will Be Changed

After A While,” he again used the “Fandango” for “Uncle Dave’s Beloved Solo.” In that solo, however, the piece served another purpose. He punctuated it now with a section of harmonics, saying that “soldier boys” should listen “for that lonesome bugle call.” These entwined motifs—this tune and those calls—surfaced in traditional numbers commemorating the martial strife that took place at Coal Creek, Tennessee. Time and again the “Spanish Fandango” formed a template for the “Coal Creek March” and allied works. Its appealing simplicity, ever adaptable and accommodating, ensured its ongoing life.

12 GOODBYE, OLD PAINT

(vocal and guitar)

I based this arrangement on Jess Morris’s 1942 Library of Congress recording, during which he played the fiddle while he sang. Jess (1878–1953) organized the melody into several parts that I approximate here on the guitar.

Jess became known throughout his Texas territory for the distinctive way he handled “Goodbye, Old Paint.” He could justly claim he had crafted something all his own. Jess first heard “Old Paint” in childhood, sung to him by a former slave who worked as a cattle drover on his father’s ranch. Then, as a young man, Jess set it to the fiddle, creating his arrangement while living in a dugout on the Texas plains. He performed it at contests, with accompaniment most often provided by Mexican musicians. In his later years, it became his homage to the trails of the Old West and the cattle pastures of the plains. He connected it to memories he kept of his colleagues who worked beside him at the XIT, formerly the world’s largest fenced-in ranch. By then, his training as a classical musician had allowed him to write out the song in notation—a portion of which made its way to Tex Ritter and thence to the ear of the nation.

His melody even makes an appearance in an Aaron Copland score.

During a recent visit I had with Jess's grandnephew, David "Rooster" Morris, a working cowboy himself, we explored "Old Paint's" lyrics. I asked Rooster how he viewed the line "my pony won't stand." That verse describes, he said, "a fractious horse," impatient and unwilling to stop (Morris to Wade, Dec. 7, 2015). He further thought that this behavior suggests that the cowboy "didn't spend enough time trying to get the horse gentled." Rooster's impressions reveal some of the energies present in "Goodbye, Old Paint": its vow of fidelity tempered by restlessness, and circumstances governed by itinerancy. Jess Morris's song, like its encompassing history, ties together diffuse strands of American life.

13 **TOM PALEY'S JOHN HENRY**

(banjo, gCGCE, and step dancing)

Tom Paley, aged 88 at this writing, continues to pursue traditional music as he has done throughout his life, with skill and originality. His precision musicianship, evidenced by his playing method and his arrangements, has long gathered admirers throughout America and abroad. Nowadays, he receives acclaim from a new generation, which champions him for his rich past, including contact with Lead Belly and Woody Guthrie (whom he formerly accompanied), along with his influence on popular musicians Ry Cooder, Bob Dylan, and Jerry Garcia. His current collaborations with his son, Ben, a gifted fiddler, cement that cross-generational embrace.

This tune, which I've called "Tom Paley's 'John Henry,'" offers another tribute to his creativity. He first recorded it in 1962, a banjo track lasting all of a minute and 20 seconds. He played it in a self-described "three-finger up-picking style," followed by frailing (Paley to Wade, April 6, 2016). An unusual

timing runs through the number, set up by his indexed fingering, that he transfers to his downpicking in the piece's second half. Tom's "John Henry" exhibits a melodic clarity that runs throughout his work.

Tom credits Uncle Dave Macon's playing, Wade Mainer's two-finger ensemble approach, and B. F. Shelton's solos among his foremost banjo influences. He has also listened to more modern three-finger, index-led practitioners like Snuffy Jenkins. There too, however, differences arise. Bluegrass simply does not figure in Tom's patterns or his timing. Like his approach to the guitar, he absorbed earlier models without imitating them.

Recently, Tom described this process: "You take an influence and try to do it your own way, drawing on what you learned from others" (Paley to Wade, April 6, 2016). Elsewhere, he has said, "to keep it in the old style but not be limited . . . not to produce note-perfect imitations, but play with individual freedom. That's always been my way of going at it" (Deneslow 2012).

I heed Tom's rendition while adding seated step dancing and playing the piece longer and inevitably differently. I dedicate not only this tune, but *Across the Amerikee* to Tom Paley. His capacity to turn the recorded sources he has heard into showpieces of his own, that individual freedom he has found, sets an enviable standard. In dedicating this album to him, I add my voice to those who have also known this wonderful man and have likewise cherished his musical gifts and unmistakable style. Just to note:



Tom Paley, Bethesda, Md., February 2016.

Tom appears twice in my book: first, in the discussion of Lead Belly in the “Rock Island Line” chapter, and later, in the chapter on Pete Steele. Though he would never make any such claim for himself, he takes his rightful place alongside these remarkable figures.

TROUBLE AT THE COAL CREEK MINES

(vocal and banjo, gDGBD, tuning lowered to F)

Doc Hopkins (1900–1988) first heard “Trouble at the Coal Creek Mines” as a boy in rural Kentucky. The song’s title refers to the extended strife that broke out between the free miners and state militia in Coal Creek, Tennessee, on Bastille Day in 1891. But the two performances that Doc recalled—those given by Dick Burnett and by the medicine-show team of banjoists Bailey Briscoe and Frank Lewis—bore no commentary on labor relations, nor any mention of convict leasing, where prisoners labored for private entities at no compensation. Instead, these players offered a program piece—a miniature musical comedy. Virtuoso effects characteristic of ragtime banjo and the multipart structure of popular marches were refashioned into these artifacts of country entertainment. The song’s blend of music, speech, sound effects, and physical humor extends comic traditions long associated with the banjo and its role in popular entertainment.

S. S. Stewart’s “Church Bell Chimes” (1885) and Frank B. Converse’s “Imitation of the Bell Chimes, Hand Organ and Bag-Pipes” (1871) both required physically moving the banjo with simultaneous playing: from pendulum swinging to hand cranking. (I’m indebted to early-banjo historian Joel Hooks for sharing this music.) Even earlier, the “Sangalli Dance,” a so-called “trick tune” of the sort

reprised by Uncle Dave Macon in his live appearances during the 1940s, “starts showing up and in [news]papers in the early 1850s and becomes old-fashioned by the 1880s” (Hooks to Wade, May 31, 2016).

Doc Hopkins witnessed similar showmanship when he watched Bailey Briscoe and Frank Lewis waltz with their banjos as they sang “Home Sweet Home.” As a nine-year-old aspiring musician drawn to Dick Burnett’s “cut-ups” and Briscoe and Lewis’s dramatics, he soon found that the impression they left with “Trouble at the Coal Creek Mines” matched his own experiences as a youthful showman. By 1919, Doc had begun performing in the same Kentucky medicine show, paid, he warmly mentioned, “20 dollars a week and all expenses, including cigarette money.” He observed how audiences enjoyed the talking banjo song about the coal miners and the troops.

Doc spent years trying to teach me this grand musical confection. Old-time three-finger style, frailing, and up-picking all figure in the piece. Even when advancing age prevented Doc from playing the banjo, he’d puff out his cheeks to simulate the song’s tuba and trumpet parts. I added the brief passages of “Leather Britches” and the surrounding train tones, but otherwise my interpretation reflects Doc’s approach. When he recorded it in 1965 for an LP, his finger slipped during the miner’s reply to the soldiers’ bugle call. He chuckled about not being “a very good bugler that time.” Recognizing a good ad-lib when he heard one, Doc made his affectionate flub part of the showpiece from that point on. And so have I.

GRAY EAGLE

(banjo, gDGBD)

One of the musicians standing behind this album is banjoist Marion Underwood (1881–1935). On April 27, 1927, the day after he recorded “Gray Eagle” with Taylor’s Kentucky Boys, a racially integrated studio ensemble hailing from the central part of the state, he recorded one of the most remarkable solo display pieces in all of old-time banjo: his version of the “Coal Creek March.” According to Dick Burnett (discussed earlier in 10, “Willie Moore,” and 14, “Trouble at the Coal Creek Mines”), both he and Underwood learned the piece from watching medicine-show banjoist Frank Lewis.

Underwood had a signature style. One of the passages that Doc Hopkins played in his “Coal Creek” piece, in fact, echoes Underwood’s sound. The phrase resembles a call to arms, its fanfare appearing just before the final sung verse. Underwood brought this same assertiveness and clarity to his ensemble playing.

For most of his 1927 Gennett recording session, Underwood seconded Jim Booker, the band’s African American fiddler. They began with “Gray Eagle” and went on to play “Forked Deet,” “Soldier’s Joy,” and a version of “Buffalo Gals” they called “Maxwell Girl.” Booker and Underwood worked in what discographer, fiddler, and music historian Guthrie Meade described as a “hand-in-glove . . . close proximity” approach (Meade 1980:2). Dick Burnett, too, in his duets with fiddler Leonard Rutherford, favored this disciplined style: “We played every tune, every note right together,” Burnett remembered (Wolfe 1975:3). “It’s all in the time, y’see.”

Marion Underwood did not, however, craft a display piece when he recorded “Gray Eagle” with Jim Booker. He played instead a backup notable for its spare, punctuated choices in an otherwise familiar tune. Despite its secondary role in that pairing, it offers a compelling statement of the melody. Here, I play “Gray Eagle” in two styles while going up the fingerboard, shifting between the two-finger method that Underwood used, and then frailing. I alternate these techniques and voicings for a new look at an old tune and a tribute to a great banjoist.

LOST JOHN

(minstrel-era fretless banjo, gDGBD, tuning lowered to B-flat)

“Lost John,” a product of antebellum black folk expression, has taken many shapes and gone many routes: from instrumental showpiece to vaudeville sheet music to prison worksong to country recording to rockabilly remake. Across its variety of forms, it carries a theme of flight. A trickster hero outwits the master, an escaped slave confounds his captors by wearing a shoe with two heels, a railroad tramp climbs aboard a fast-moving train, a solo harmonica imitates a chase with its twists and turns. I drew from these precedents to play the piece, reacting to the verses with improvised passages on the banjo. The song’s drive lends itself to this kind of interpretative freedom.

So does the instrument I’m playing here. My teacher, Fleming Brown, gave me this mid-19th-century fretless banjo that he found in a used furniture store in Kenosha, Wisconsin. He purchased it in the early 1960s, along with its original wooden case, for the princely sum of \$25.00. The maker had hand-carved its neck, which, viewed on its side, resembles a piece of furniture as substantial as a table leg. The fingerboard sports maple marquetry inlay that includes a tiny banjo in its design, and the pot is made of brass sheathed in silver plating.

Most recently I’ve performed “Lost John”—a musical showpiece on this physical showpiece—to represent the first person mentioned in my book, a sidewalk showman called Casey Jones. This endearing, Chicago-based street-corner performer received his nickname after the folksong of the same name, which he played on a diatonic accordion. Born in Texas five years after the Civil War, he lived to age 104. Apart from the indelible impression he made on me—I saw him a number of times in my youth—he embodied by all accounts the fleet-footed spirit of “Lost John.” Over the 60 years he performed on

Chicago's streets, Casey repeatedly charmed his listeners and, as court records show, he outwitted his circumstances. As nimble before judges as he was around street cops, he won his own freedom of movement throughout the city. In the words of another folk verse, contemporary with "Lost John" and in keeping with its spirit, he "made a way out of no way."

17 **SHORTENIN' BREAD**

(vocal, banjo, gDGCD, tuning lowered to E, and step dancing)

In October 1940, 12-year-old schoolgirl Ora Dell Graham recorded three game songs in the auditorium of her segregated school in Drew, Mississippi. One of them was "Shortenin' Bread," which she led in a call-and-response with her classmates. Her melody, unlike the pop hit or string-band versions, bore a modal, rather than a major-scale quality. She captured a blues tonality in her singing, shaping the words with characteristic scoops and quavers.

My version, which I began doing during book appearances, stems entirely from her rendition. I translated her tune onto the banjo, and during performances asked the audience to sing back on the chorus. On stage or alone in the recording studio, I introduced some alternative accents and phrases to vary the piece, along with intermittent percussive dance.

Despite a tragically short life and the mere seconds her voice appears on sound recordings, Ora Dell had much to give. In her singing, she found a way to tie together the personal with the historical. When asked how she learned, she unabashedly replied that she didn't. In the poetic transactions of the schoolyard, she absorbed a song until it became her own. Her instruction: "just go on singing it" (Wade 2012:83).

RENO FACTORY / BROWN SKIN BLUES

(vocal, guitar, dancing)

For this medley, I draw from two Virginia Blue Ridge folk musicians, one black and the other white. “Reno Factory” comes from a 1977 recording of Marvin Foddrell, and “Brown Skin Blues” comes from a performance of Hobart Smith’s, recorded in 1963. These numbers share the same key, and both players associated percussive dance with this kind of rural showpiece music.

Marvin Foddrell (1924–1986) and his younger brother, Turner, who also played guitar, learned “Reno Factory” from their father, Posey Foddrell. The elder Foddrell, born in the late 19th century, played banjo, guitar, organ, piano, and mandolin. Although the Foddrells numbered among the few blacks living in Stuart, Virginia, their minority status did not prevent them from playing with white musicians throughout the region. At the time of Marvin’s 1977 recording, Turner was performing weekly in a local bluegrass band as its sole black member. They grew up with what they termed “old-time country music” and considered “Reno Factory” part of that older regional tradition.

Indeed, “Reno Factory” appears in the repertoires of nearby white musicians that have included Fields Ward of Galax, Virginia, and Tommy Jarrell of Mt. Airy, North Carolina. While these players called the number “Riley and Spencer” and the like, the Foddrells’ title possibly carries an additional local meaning. Historian Elijah Wald, writing in a 2012 list-serve, drew attention to the once-common practice of calling a tobacco-processing plant, which typically employed seven or eight persons, a factory. He also identified a late-19th century novel about North Carolina that mentions a tobacco factory owned by a Mr. Raynor. In addition, a community called Raynor Town lies outside Raleigh, and Raynor-brand seed remains a continuing presence in the North Carolina tobacco industry.

Hobart Smith attributed “Brown Skin Blues” to Blind Lemon, an itinerant black performer that he and other family members heard in their youth. Hobart’s closest playing partner, his cousin John Galliher, however, differed in remembering their older friend Bob “Shad” Campbell as their source for this piece. Campbell, a white albino musician taken with black music, had taught Hobart some racially shared songs that included his most famous number, “Railroad Bill” (which the Foddrells also played). Whatever their source, both Smith and Galliher eagerly pursued the music. Galliher remarked, “We’d foller the music” (Wade 2012:250). “We’d hunt up everybody we could find.”

Even though “Reno Factory” and “Brown Skin Blues” emerged during the height of the Jim Crow era, they reveal another reality, one that both Hobart and his cousin, like the Foddrells, experienced. “Race was an issue and acknowledged, but was less important than interpersonal relationships and the music that so often crossed these perceived racial boundaries,” recalls folklorist and ethnomusicologist Kip Lornell, who recorded Marvin Foddrell and his family (Lornell to Wade, Apr. 4, 2016). “These were not revolutionary acts, but merely ones that underscored a love of music that often transcended the legal racial barriers.”

19 SOURWOOD MOUNTAIN

(vocal and fretless banjo, gDGBD, tuning lowered to E-flat)

Over the years, Doc Hopkins told a whimsical story about “Sourwood Mountain.” Throughout his travels, he inquired about the mountain, seeking that blissful place where, the song promises, all the pretty girls live. Wherever he stopped, locals would point him to some rise, inevitably set farther down the road. Doc noted that he never quite got there. To the end, Sourwood Mountain and its comely residents always lived the next one over.

That elusiveness conveys a sense of possibility, just as this song offers a similar openness. The nature of its melody, combined with its floating verses, readily allows for variation, both melodically and textually. Here, I draw on experiences of playing it with Doc—we did the song at nearly every show I remember—along with the tune as I learned it from Fleming Brown.

But I am indebted most of all to Frank Proffitt, best known as the source for the hit “Tom Dooley.” In April 1962, he stayed in Chicago as Fleming Brown’s houseguest. Though Fleming made no tapes of the legendary musician during that visit, he never forgot their times together. He likened Proffitt’s homemade banjo to an ax handle. Then he characterized Proffitt’s musical style: “He played a deceptively simple banjo. Highly syncopated. Again, you didn’t quite know what was going to happen where. It was surprising. He had a very melodious voice, a lovely, low, deep, melodious voice, and he used this Spartan banjo around it. Tying it, weaving it. Some of the things he did will always be classics” (Wade 1984:7).



Frank Proffitt with Fleming Brown, Chicago, Ill., April 1962.

Fleming intended the word *classics* here not in a canonical sense of sanctioned works, but to denote a great performance. He described a classic as something uniquely appealing, which coupled unpredictability with a directness that invited repeated listening. Other artists, he recognized, might find still another, equally classic way of expressing the same piece. In this music, open to so many interpretations, possibilities abound. Therein lies the joyful search for “Sourwood Mountain.”

IN THE PINES

(vocal and banjo, f#DF#AD)

I cannot identify any one source for this version of “In the Pines,” yet many come to mind, starting with the earliest commercial recording: Dock Walsh’s 1926 voice and banjo solo for Columbia. Walsh alternated his singing with sharply defined arpeggios that turn this pre-blues lament into a personal showpiece. I’m sure his taut picking style influenced the high part I’ve added here. But whichever musical influences I’ve absorbed in learning the song, I can pinpoint its verses. They come from one place: a 1970 doctoral dissertation written by the late Judith McCulloh, folklorist and editor.

Judy’s *“In the Pines”: The Melodic-Textual Identity of an American Lyric Folksong Cluster* takes this widely performed song that emerged in the Reconstruction era and analyzes its structure both verbally and musically. In her study of 160 versions documented between 1917 and 1969, she reckoned with the nature of instrumentally accompanied lyrical song. Early in the dissertation, she calls on what scholar D. K. Wilgus termed the “banjo ballad.” This type of song, which he subsequently renamed the “blues ballad,” tells a story without an explicit narrative. “The narrative coherence of the song,” Wilgus and his collaborator, Eleanor Long, later wrote, “is provided by community knowledge of the events” (Wilgus 1985:446). This concept recognizes the role that listeners play, as well as what musicians provide in reaching a common understanding.

Judy embraced this perspective. “My feeling,” she observed, “is that a person steeped in the tradition being studied can make valid subjective judgments about the identity of tunes, and that another person with similar background and familiarity with the tradition will make substantially the same judgments” (McCulloh 1970:78). She trusted the folk as witnesses to their arts, without devaluing folklorists in their

methods. No matter the source, Judy worked from the evidence, and let those realities guide her study: “I have tried to let the data suggest its own best organization” (ibid., 96).

In later years, Judy called this seeker’s approach the “God’s truth” school of inquiry, that she contrasted with the “Hocus Pocus” school. Experience dictates the former, while the latter selects data to suit one’s hypothesis. She did not invent these terms, but by this lens she pursued her scholarship and gauged so many manuscripts she appraised as an editor.

The last time I ever saw Judy, I had gone to Urbana, Illinois, to give a university lecture based on *The Beautiful Music*, a book that Judy edited. A day or two later, at a local tavern a few blocks from her home, I sang “In the Pines.” Across the darkness, from the stage to her table, we looked at one another during the song. By then, illness raged throughout her lithe frame. Our eyes met with sadness as well as acceptance: “The best of friends must part sometime, why not you and I.” That, too, is the God’s truth.

CHERRY BLOSSOM WALTZ

(banjo, gCGCD)

This album's coda, written by Tony Ellis and which I play on a banjo that once belonged to him, has accompanied many ceremonial beginnings. Over the years, both of us have received notes from individuals who repeatedly chose this tender, three-part piece for their wedding march. For myself, it has lately served as an encore for concerts on *The Beautiful Music*.

Elsewhere, I've written how Tony Ellis's music marks a convergence—of double-C tuning yoked to Earl Scruggs's technique. This format has allowed Tony to compose melodies redolent of the older airs, hymns, and lullabies he has favored throughout his life. His resonator banjo, coupled with this tuning, free their sustained notes to ring out, while his Scruggs-style picking make these pieces attractive to play.

Nowadays, the most publicly prominent banjoist in the United States is Steve Martin. He credits Tony Ellis for reintroducing him to double-C tuning. Lately, in collaborations with songwriter Edie Brickell, Steve transmits his pieces—largely written in this key—to her via iPhone. She, in turn, writes lyrics to these melodies. Old elements find new alloys. So it goes, across the Amerikee.

Many threads tie the players discussed in these notes to one another. Fleming Brown knew Doc Hopkins, who knew Dick Burnett, who knew Clyde Davenport. Jean Ritchie knew Fleming Brown and Tom Paley, and all of them benefitted from Justus Begley's recordings. Doc Hopkins knew Bradley Kincaid, whom he succeeded at WLS in Chicago. Fleming Brown, who learned from Doc at that same radio station, knew Hobart Smith, whose recordings inspired him to play from the very start.

There are still more beginnings. Kip Lornell, who recorded Marvin Foddrell and "Reno Factory," observes how his own daughters and their contemporaries view hip-hop as an inheritance for them all. It has gone from a black music tradition into mainstream America to a style that spans the globe. This process, Kip notes, parallels the musical interchange of the rural South that he documented in his fieldwork. What might seem anachronistic—the music on this album and the people behind it, who quietly defied racial categories and cultural divides of their time—represents a transfer not only old, but utterly modern.

I write these notes in July 2016. One hundred years ago, Randolph Bourne, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, described the United States, roiling that summer with fears of immigration while debates waged over the national essence: "America is coming to be, not a nationality but a transnationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors." His words are only more fitting now, a century later.

The solo music-making explored on this album forms but one story within a ceaselessly transnational America. Uncle Jimmy Thompson gleefully recognized the capacity of his era's new media when he played his fiddle before the microphone. He made no secret of wanting others to catch his tunes. His experience is reflected in Dick Burnett's. While playing at the Bonnie Blue Coal Camp in Virginia, Burnett was approached by a merchant who put him in contact with the label that would eventually record him. Today, millions have heard "Man of Constant Sorrow," a song he never recorded, but passed

on to others to do so themselves. Doesn't this same urge to share, to tell, apply to Jack Conroy, who grew up at Monkey Nest, a tiny coal camp in south-central Missouri? That crucible led to his body of work, he once told me, which ran to more than a million words. Such stories, sounds, and transmissions thread our nation. Jess Morris passionately rendered into showpieces the adventures and vistas of his youth. Late in his life, he sent this music to the Fort Worth newspaper as his past was disappearing. "It's 'Custer's last stand' with me," he told them (Wade 2012:340). From coal camp to cattle trail, in all these arts, and in each of these lives, people found the means within themselves to reach out beyond their homes and across the Amerikee.

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The talents of three souls helped make this project tangible. One is Michael Melford, who served as the record's producer. He has produced more than 200 albums (including my own *Banjo Diary: Lessons from Tradition* and John Hartford's celebrated solo LP, *Mark Twang*) and he brought his seasoned judgment here, listening, sifting, and appraising the sessions, song by song. Mike also took the longer view, placing himself in the listener's chair and helping me to better see this as an audio product. Meanwhile, the only individual apart from myself present during the sessions was engineer Jim Robeson. A veteran in many ways, he steered our efforts with surpassing expertise. Jim's knowledge as a musician and his technical skill, his encouragement and care, his commitment and patience inhabit these tracks. Finally, singing teacher Barbara Ryan brought her effervescent warmth to the mysteries and mechanisms of voice. I could not have ventured this album without her training. Though the project has ended, I continue to study with Barbara, a joyful task indeed.

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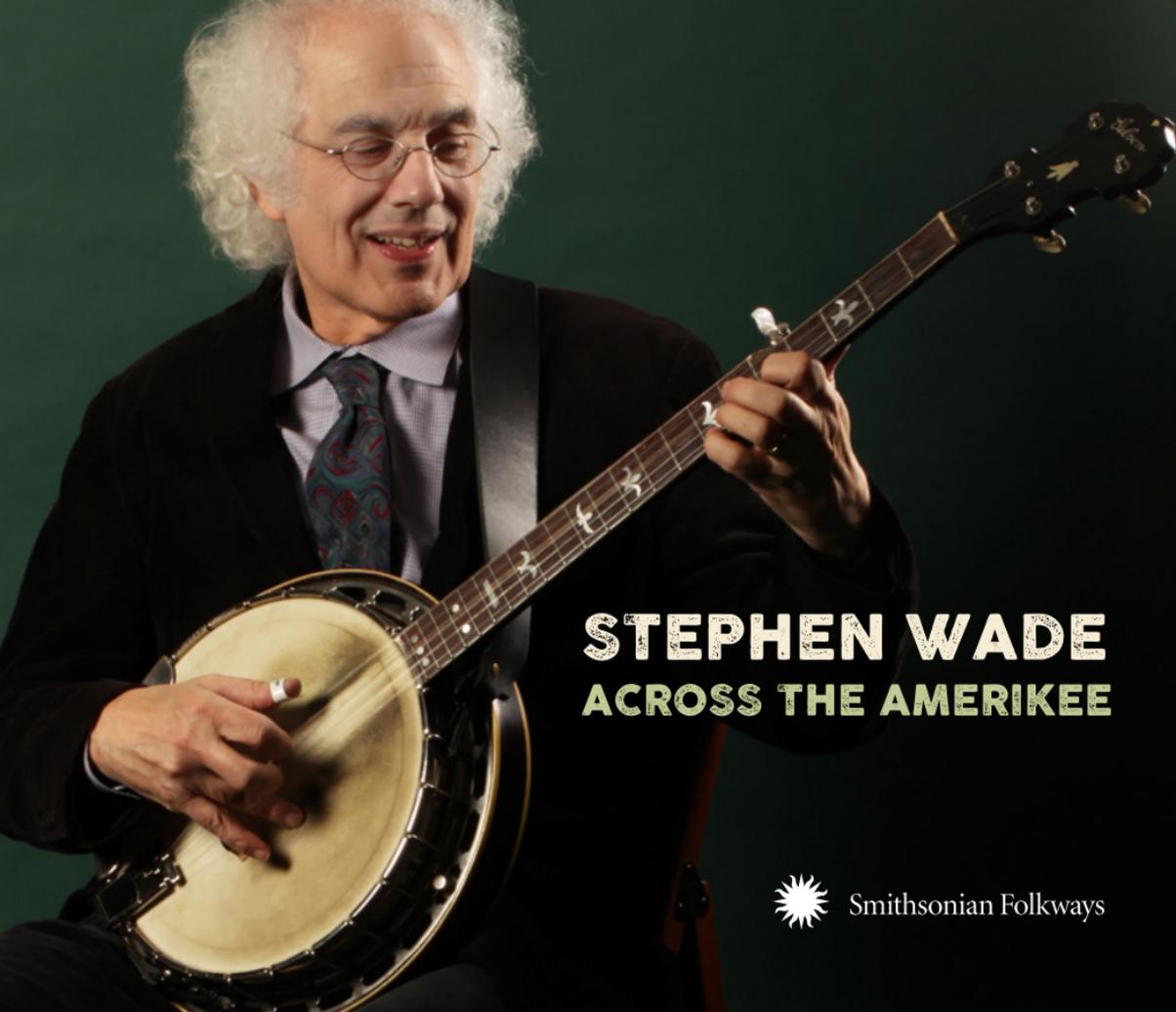
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STEPHEN WADE
ACROSS THE AMERIKEE



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