

**CURTIS BLACKWELL
NORTH GEORGIA BLUEGRASS PIONEERS**

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Abstract: The North Georgia area has a rich history of traditional and bluegrass music. Closely related to the country music of early twentieth century Atlanta, it might be argued that the early country heritage simply moved to the rural areas as Nashville became the center for Country music. It seems only natural that these rural communities embraced bluegrass music in the 1950s and 1960s because of the close relationship of that music to an earlier heritage and history. Curtis Blackwell and Tut Taylor have agreed to share experiences about this bluegrass movement of the second half of the twentieth century and its relation to the rich cultural history of the previous fifty years. These perspectives will be made more vivid through a multi media presentation.

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Introduction/Methodology

The North Georgia bluegrass scene is one with a rich and diverse heritage. The roots may be traced back to Fiddlin' John Carson and Moonshine Kate, Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers, Riley Puckett, and James and Martha Carson in addition to Monroe, Flatt and Scruggs, the Stanley Brothers, and Reno and Smiley.

It should be noted at the beginning of this paper that in 1938 Bill Monroe traveled to Atlanta where he advertised for musicians and subsequently hired a young guitarist from North Georgia named Cleo Davis. From this origin Monroe would soon name his group the Blue Grass Boys and begin to create the branch of Hillbilly music which would one day be known as Bluegrass.

How does one capture the essence of such an important component of North Georgia culture? The vision for this research contained four basic expectations. 1) the collection would be digital in nature 2) interviewees would be able to tell their story in their own words 3) a collection of scanned photos with accompanying narrative would provide a timeline of events and 4) the collection would provide information (resources) for professional presentations and articles.

Interviewees were identified using membership in the Georgia or Atlanta Country Music Hall of Fame/Hall of Honor as a primary criterion. Technology used in interviews has included a digital minidisk recorder and a lap top computer with scanner. Interviews were transferred to computer where they could – along with scanned photos – be manipulated and added to multimedia presentations.

Photos were scanned at a relatively high resolution (300 dpi) and given an ID including the year of origin, the interviewee's name and a number. For instance, *1952jwatson013.jpg* would indicate the photo is from 1952 and contributed by James Watson. 013 would indicate this was photo #13 of a series provided by James.

After the photos were scanned, the interviewee then provided recorded specific information about each of the photos such as identification of who is in the photo, where and when it was taken and additional anecdotes or interesting points. By having the date as the first component of the photo ID, a timeline of photos is easily produced and there are over two hundred scanned photos to this point.

The collection has provided the basis for publications in *Bluegrass Unlimited* and the *SEBA Breakdown*. Presentations have included the Bluegrass Music Symposium held in the fall of 2005 at Western Kentucky University and the International Country Music Conference at Belmont University as well as numerous presentations at Lindsey Wilson College in Columbia, KY and Shorter College in Rome, GA.

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As with some of North Georgia's other Bluegrass pioneers Curtis Blackwell wasn't born and raised in North Georgia but just over the border in South Carolina. His rise to bluegrass prominence did, however, take place in the area around Toccoa, Ga. and many of his subsequent performances took place at festivals and events in North Georgia.

From the earliest days of bluegrass festivals Curtis Blackwell and the Dixie Bluegrass Boys were staples at major festivals in North Georgia and surrounding states. Unlike some of North Georgia Pioneers the Dixie Bluegrass Boys were able to take their music to a much larger geographic area and Curtis himself was recruited and served a stint as a Bluegrass Boy with Mr. Bill Monroe, the originator of the music.

Currently living just a few miles from the Georgia border in Otto, N.C. Curtis marks his initial interest in music to his earliest remembrances of family jam sessions at reunions at his uncle's house. He remembers cousins, brothers and uncles breaking out the acoustic instruments for their own entertainment. While his father didn't play an instrument he did routinely tune the family radio to the music of Flatt and Scruggs each day at breakfast.

Curtis relates two events in his growth which began him on the road to performing music as an avocation. He began singing in public as part of the Burton Trio at an early age and was recruited to play bass fiddle with a local gospel group headed by Mr. J.W. Hardwick. He was recruited, taught the rudiments of the instrument and performed on his first show with the group all on the same day.

In 1957 Curtis formed his first bluegrass group, the Sunshine Melody Boys with his brother Haskell on bass and they were fortunate to be asked to perform on radio station WNEG in Toccoa, Ga. Two short years later in 1960, the group consisted of Curtis, now age 17, on guitar, Haskell on bass and Junior Crowe on banjo. This trio entered and won a talent contest sponsored by Pet Milk and radio station WLET in Toccoa, Ga. and was awarded the prize of an appearance on the Pet Milk portion of the Grand Ole Opry. The three young men traveled to Nashville and backed by legendary fiddler Tommy Jackson and bassist Lightning Chance, performed "How Mountain Girls Can Love" at the Ryman Auditorium. Fortunately a photo and tape recording exist of this brief but monumental performance. As a result of the Opry appearance the group performed regularly in their local area until 1965.

In 1965 Curtis was attending an ongoing jam session at Cousin's Grocery near Walhalla, S.C. when he was approached by a young banjo player named Al Osteen. This alliance soon led to the formation of the original Dixie Bluegrass Boys later that year. The group consisted of Curtis on guitar, Al Osteen on banjo, Sam Cobb on bass and Larry Jefferson on mandolin. Within their first year they were joined by well known fiddler Randall Collins. This line up was managed by Louis Osteen, the brother of Al, and immediately began getting work at some of the major festivals on the East Coast. In 1967 they played the Berryville Festival in Virginia and according to Curtis they "stole the show" and from there the bookings grew and for approximately three years the group maintained a full schedule of shows across the eastern U.S.

The year 1968 brought one of the most memorable events in Curtis' career. Louis Osteen had set up a meeting for him with Bill Monroe backstage at the Opry. Del McCoury was filling the guitar spot temporarily and Monroe was looking for a replacement. Curtis was introduced to Mr. Monroe backstage and Monroe asked Curtis to sing a song for him. Curtis sang "Dark Hollow" and impressed Bill enough that he was hired on the spot and left with the band on the bus right from the Ryman Auditorium. Curtis remember that he had nothing with him but his guitar and was on the road three weeks before he had an opportunity to return home to his wife and children. A few days later Bill called Curtis to inform him of a recording session in Nashville and Curtis,

thinking of his family, advised Monroe he was leaving the band. Some time later Monroe showed Curtis an LP recorded at that session and pointed out that the cover photo of the group did not include a guitarist because Curtis had quit.

Back on the road with the Dixie Bluegrass Boys Curtis fondly remembers playing the Marietta Bluegrass Festival in Marietta, GA as well as many other venues in North Georgia with other pioneers such as Walter Butler, J. N. and Onie Baxter and Murray Freeman.

Curtis' recording history began in 1959 when he was recruited to travel to Cincinnati, Ohio to Wayne Raney's recording studio to play bass with the bluegrass showman Charlie Moore. In 1965 the Dixie Bluegrass Boys recorded for the first time at a recording "studio" set up by Roy Fowler under an awning at Roy's home and the recording was accomplished in spite of a constant rain storm. The result was a 45 RPM record. Another 45 RPM recording was done under the supervision of Carlton Haney in Virginia. Two later LP's were released on the Atteiram label in Marietta, GA.

The most memorable recording done by the group was at Columbia University in New York City and was produced by Pete Kykendall for County records. The funds needed to make the trip to New York were provided by a local undertaker who organized fund raisers for the purpose.

Curtis Blackwell has had a long and distinguished career in bluegrass and the music continues today. The current line-up (as of spring 2009) of the Dixie Bluegrass Boys consist of Curtis, Charles Wood on banjo, Chuck Nation on fiddle, Sam Cobb on bass and Vic Blackwell on mandolin. Each member is an exceptional musician but banjoist Charles Wood is especially renowned for having won numerous National banjo championship's and for having appeared on Late Night with David Letterman as a guest of comedian-actor Steve Martin and in the company of Earl Scruggs, Tony Trischka and Pete Wernick, all well known banjoists.

Today the Dixie Bluegrass Boys are more selective about their bookings and stay busy playing festivals and private jobs at venues in North Georgia and North Carolina. Occasionally, the original Dixie Bluegrass Boys will reunite for a special show such as the Hiawassee Mountain Fair in Hiawassee, GA.

Future Plans

After nine years, this research is winding down. It has been a labor of love to bring recognition to several very deserving musicians, and as a sidelight has recorded a bit of Georgia history of roots music. That is very fitting and proper. It is the hope of the researchers that future generations will find this collection and archive as interesting and fulfilling as the researchers did in bringing it to fruition.

References

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Bill Brown is a life-long educator both as a secondary science teacher and in higher education working with teacher preparation. He is presently at Young Harris College in Young Harris, Georgia serving as Professor of Education and Director of Teacher Preparation. In addition, he has been involved in bluegrass music as a fan and hobbyist most of his life and for the past ten years or so has been associated with Mike Fleming in researching and archiving information on North Georgia bluegrass music.

Mike Fleming is retired from the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles. He was a founding member of the International Bluegrass Music Association and was a member of the bluegrass band Brush Fire for twenty seven years. He has written for *Bluegrass Unlimited* and the *Breakdown*, the newsletter of the Southeastern Bluegrass Association. He has worked with long time friend Bill Brown for many years researching and publishing articles on the North Georgia Bluegrass community and its Pioneers as well as related topics.