

**ROBERT A. "TUT" TAYLOR  
NORTH GEORGIA BLUEGRASS PIONEER**

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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. Robert A. "Tut" Taylor has 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. This perspectives will be made more vivid through a multi media presentation.

## **ROBERT A. "TUT" TAYLOR NORTH GEORGIA BLUEGRASS PIONEER**

### **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, *1958tuttaylor012.jpg* would indicate the photo is from 1958 and contributed by Tut Taylor. 012 would indicate this was photo #12 of a series provided by Tut.

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, Shorter College in Rome, GA, and now Young Harris College in Young Harris, GA.

### **ROBERT "TUT" TAYLOR, NORTH GEORGIA BLUEGRASS PIONEER**

Robert A. "Tut" Taylor was born near Milledgeville, GA on the Oconee River in Baldwin County, Georgia. His dad played banjo a bit and he made sure Tut had plenty of instruments around in his "growing-up" years. His first instrument was a Stella banjo-

mandolin and James and Martha Carson's performances on WSB in Atlanta provided one of his first major musical influences.

Tut first met Bill Monroe in the late forties in Macon, GA when Earl Scruggs and Chubby Wise were playing with Monroe. However, the first music for him to perform was strictly country where he played lap steel and mandolin.

This was during WWII. His early country influences included Roy Hall, Eddie Arnold, Pee Wee King, Roy Acuff, and Mainer's Mountaineers. Tut enjoyed listening to the Grand Ole Opry on Saturday nights and in particular, enjoyed the early string bands.

While living in Milledgeville, Tut met Walter Butler in the late fifties, or early sixties and was a regular at Walter's home near Stone Mountain, Georgia for the bluegrass gatherings. He also began going to to Ashville, North Carolina along with other musicians from Georgia and remembers performing along with J.N. and Onie Baxter, Don and Ron Norman, Howard McGuire, and Hughie Wylie on Bascomb Lamar Lunsford's "Along About Sundown" radio and auditorium shows. "Sometimes we got to play and sometimes we didn't..." Tut recalls.

Tut and the Georgia musicians were well-known in Galax, Virginia and Union Grove, North Carolina as well. Walter Butler's Home provided a gathering place for Georgia bluegrass pickers and Tut was a regular until his move to Nashville around 1970.

While living in Milledgeville, Tut would go to Atlanta to visit with friends such as Ron and Don Norman. During this time they made a visit to a Dr. Griffith and the Griffith School of Music on Bonaventure Avenue where Dr. Griffith, along with his wife and one or two sisters, ran a school of music. When he died, there were several instruments and assorted memorabilia available and being the businessman that he is, Tut bought several items such as Gibson catalogues (*Sounding Board Salesman*), and a roll-top desk.

The first instrument Tut bought from Dr. Griffith's sister was an F-5 mandolin. After that transaction, according to Tut, she also mentioned that "I've got another mandolin up stairs....She comes down with an A model mandolin with a long neck and she sold it to me"...

Dr. Griffith had ordered his sister an F-5 without the point so that it would not stick into her leg while she was teaching.

One night later on at a jam session at the Normans, Tut recounts, "somebody said this is not an F-5, it's an A-5!" Upon further inspection, Tut found that the "F" on the signed Loar label had been modified to an "A".

During some difficult times later on Tut sold the A-5 but after twenty seven years was able to have access to it again for a short time during which his son Mark took all the measurements of the original and even X-rayed. That mandolin has now been reproduced by Crafters of Tennessee as the *Prodigal 5*.

In 1970 Tut made the decision to move to Nashville Tennessee where he opened a Music Shop with famed luthier Randy Wood. This venture later morphed into GTR which was a Vintage instrument and repair business owned by Tut, Randy Wood and George Gruhn who is now the owner of Gruhn's Guitars on Lower Broad in Nashville. Tut also put his performing talent to use doing shows with John Hartford, Norman Blake, Vasser Clements and others, He recorded several LP's on his own and was also featured on the "Aereo-Plain" Lp (1971) which was a John Hartford project featuring Hartford, Clements, and Blake.

In addition, Tut purchased the Grammer Guitar plant in the early seventies. This later proved to be a casualty of the economy during the mid-seventies and Tut moved to East Tennessee in the early eighties to pursue business, crafts, and musical interests and then to Wilkesboro, North Carolina in 2003. His son Mark Taylor owns 'Crafters of Tennessee' and there are in addition to fine banjos, guitars, and mandolins, a line of custom resophonic guitars built under Tut's supervision.

Tut's friends in music read like a Who's Who ranging from Roy Acuff (where he played mandolin in Acuff's band on the last night of the Opry at the Ryman) to John Hartford to Norman Blake to Porter Wagoner. He has participated in recordings of great critical acclaim such as "Aereo-Plain" with John Hartford, Vasser Clements, and Norman Blake, won a Grammy for "The Great Dobro Sessions"

and in addition has won International Bluegrass Music Association awards for Recorded Event of the Year and Instrumental Recording of the Year.

Today, he lives with wife Lee in Wilkesboro, North Carolina where he remains active in many musical endeavors and involved in Merlefest. Still, after all these years and so many musical accomplishments, he has a simple philosophy – "Just pick it, and keep on picking it."

### **Future Plans**

After ten 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.