

STEP

**DAVID
MENCONI**

.....

**THE
STORY
OF
NORTH
CAROLINA
POPULAR
MUSIC**

IT UP

& GO

STEP IT UP AND GO



STEP IT UP AND GO

The Story of
North Carolina
Popular Music, from
Blind Boy Fuller
and Doc Watson to
Nina Simone and
Superchunk

David Menconi

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS CHAPEL HILL

*Published with the assistance of
the BLYTHE FAMILY FUND of the
University of North Carolina Press.*

© 2020 David Menconi
All rights reserved
Designed by Richard Hendel
Set in Chaparral and Bunday Sans types
by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.
Manufactured in the United States of America

The University of North Carolina Press has been
a member of the Green Press Initiative since 2003.

Jacket photographs (clockwise from top): Superchunk at Tremont Music Hall in Charlotte, N.C., June 26, 1999 (photo by Daniel Coston); Nina Simone, October 1969 (photo by Jack Robinson, The Jack Robinson Archive); Blind Boy Fuller (pictorialpress.com); and Doc Watson in Clayton, N.C., February 2003 (*News & Observer* photo by Robert Willett).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Menconi, David, author.

Title: Step it up and go : the story of North Carolina popular music, from Blind Boy Fuller and Doc Watson to Nina Simone and Superchunk / David Menconi.

Description: Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 2020. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020011784 | ISBN 9781469659350 (cloth : alk. paper) |

ISBN 9781469659367 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Popular music—North Carolina—History and criticism. | Musicians—North Carolina.

Classification: LCC ML3477.7.N85 M45 2020 | DDC 781.6409/756—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020011784>

Here's to the

Land of the Longleaf Pine—

and to Martha, my love



Contents

Prologue: March 1991 / 1

Minstrel of the Appalachians: Bascom Lamar Lunsford / 4

1 Linthead Pop: Charlie Poole, the Father of Mill-Town Rock
(and the First Rock Star) / 10

“Orange Blossom Special”: Ervin T. Rouse / 19

2 Step It Up and Go: Blind Boy Fuller, Durham, and the Piedmont Blues / 26

Keeping the Blues Alive: Music Maker Relief Foundation / 29

The First Ladies of Piedmont Blues: Elizabeth Cotten and Etta Baker / 34

The Gospel Truth: Mitchell’s Christian Singers / 42

3 Through the Airwaves: Arthur Smith in Charlotte / 45

Mountain Man: Wade Mainer / 50

On Tape: Reflection Sound Studios / 55

4 Rocket Man: Earl Scruggs and the Birth of Bluegrass / 60

The Innovators: George Shuffler and Bobby Hicks / 63

Sidemen to the Stars: Steep Canyon Rangers and Chatham County Line / 72

5 From Gospel to Rhythm and Blues: The “5” Royales and the
Rise of a New African American Sound / 76

“Freeek’n You”: Jodeci / 79

“Hold My Mule”: Shirley Caesar / 88

Kinston Calling: Maceo Parker / 90

“Rough Side of the Mountain”: The Reverend F. C. Barnes / 93

6 The American Folk Revival Comes to North Carolina: Doc Watson / 94

Carrying It Forward: David Holt / 98

“The Coo Coo Bird”: Clarence “Tom” Ashley / 104

The Spark: Tift Merritt / 109

7 Breaking Color Lines at the Beach: The Embers and Beach Music / 111

Dominoes to Drifters: Clyde McPhatter and Ben E. King / 113

The Pioneer: Jimmy Cavallo / 122

8 The Eight-Track Era of Rock and Roll:

Nantucket's Long Way to the Top / 128

Brothers of the Road: Sidewinder, Cry of Love / 131

"Deliverance": Corrosion of Conformity / 136

Power Ballads: FireHouse / 141

9 Combo Corner: Mitch Easter's Winston-Salem / 143

Your Sorry Ever After: The Connells / 144

Time Capsule: Greetings from Comboland, Volumes 1-3 / 154

"Shape Up, Firm Up, Tone Up": The Cosmopolitans / 157

10 Chapel Hill: The "Next Seattle" Era / 160

The New Frontier: WXYC and alt.music.chapel-hill / 162

The University of North Carolina's Hollywood Outpost:

Peyton Reed, Dave Burris / 172

"Carolina in My Mind": James Taylor / 178

11 How to Make It in the Music Business without Really Trying:

Colonial, Sugar Hill, and Merge Records / 182

"Yep Roc Heresy": Yep Roc Records / 188

"Tobacco Road": John D. Loudermilk / 191

12 Y'alternative: The Rise of Americana / 200

"God Almighty, It's a Good Feeling: Lowriding as Experience" —

Excerpt of Mike Taylor's 2009 University of North Carolina

Thesis / 210

Electronic Music as Campfire Folk: Sylvan Esso / 214

13 Salvation Songs: The Avett Brothers / 216

Greenville Calling: Valient Thorr, Future Islands / 222

"Such Jubilee": Mandolin Orange / 228

14 Songs of Immigrants and Emigrants:

From Nina Simone to the Kruger Brothers / 231

Jazz Men: Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane / 235

"Rumble": Link Wray / 238

Asheville Calling: Robert Moog / 242

Genius: Rhiannon Giddens / 244

"Mademoiselle Mabry": Betty Davis / 247

"Take the 'A' Train": Billy Strayhorn / 248

15 Hip-Hop Goes to College: 9th Wonder and Little Brother / 252

"The Choice Is Yours": Black Sheep / 254

"Raise Up": Petey Pablo / 263

Dreamville: J. Cole / 264

16 Famous on Television: Scotty McCreery, Clay Aiken, Fantasia Barrino,
and *American Idol* / 269

Freakonomics: Stephen Dubner, John Darnielle / 277

Epilogue: September 2013 / 284

Acknowledgments / 287

Readings / 289

Selected Discography / 293

Index / 297

This page intentionally left blank

Figures

Alice Gerrard in the kitchen of her Durham home in 2015 / 3

Bascom Lamar Lunsford at the North Carolina State Fair in Raleigh in 1965 / 5

Bronze statue of Etta Baker outside Morganton's Municipal Auditorium / 6

Charlie Poole with his trusty banjo in the mid-1920s / 14

Charlie Poole and his North Carolina Ramblers in their hit-making prime / 21

Blind Boy Fuller / 32

Portrait of Elizabeth "Libba" Cotten / 35

Durham blues elder John Dee Holeman in April 2017 / 38

J. B. Long with his young daughter in Kinston, ca. the early 1930s / 41

"Bull City Blues" historical marker in Durham / 44

Arthur Smith on the set of *The Arthur Smith Show* with Andy Griffith / 47

Wade Mainer at the WBBO microphone, ca. 1950 / 51

The original 1955 MGM Records issue of Arthur Smith's "Feudin' Banjos" / 57

Promotional photo of Flatt & Scruggs taken at New York City's Carnegie Hall / 68

IBMA Hall of Fame fiddler Bobby Hicks in Marshall, North Carolina, in 2014 / 71

Chatham County Line at World of Bluegrass in Raleigh in 2014 / 73

Steep Canyon Rangers onstage at Cat's Cradle's fiftieth-anniversary celebration, January 2020 / 73

Five Royales Drive in Winston-Salem / 82

Early promotional shot of the "5" Royales / 85

Shirley Caesar at her Mt. Calvary Word of Faith Church in Raleigh in 2017 / 89

Maceo Parker in Kinston, North Carolina, in 2016 / 91

Doc Watson in Clayton, North Carolina, in February 2003 / 96

Statue of Doc Watson in Boone, North Carolina / 101

Clarence "Tom" Ashley, ca. 1929 / 105

Doc Watson needleprint by Caitlin Cary / 106

Promotional photo of the Embers, ca. the mid-1970s / 116

Unidentified shag dancers at the beach in Nags Head, North Carolina, August 1948 / 118

Craig Woolard and Jackie Gore at the Embers' 2014 induction into the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame / 125

Nantucket onstage in the early 1980s / 135

Nantucket, the eponymous 1978 debut album, in eight-track-tape format / 139

Let's Active promotional photo from 1984 / 148

The dB's, ca. the early 1980s / 153

The original three-volume cassettes of the *Greetings from Comboland* compilation / 155

Early 1995-vintage promotional photo of the Squirrel Nut Zippers / 167

Squirrel Nut Zippers onstage at Cat's Cradle in June 1996 / 170

Promotional photo of Ben Folds from 1998 / 174

James Taylor onstage in 1971 / 179

Mid-1990s promotional photo of Superchunk / 184

Laura Ballance onstage with Superchunk at the Hopscotch Music Festival, September 2011 / 194

Barry Poss at his desk in 1986 / 197

Promotional photo of the Backsliders around the time of their 1997 debut studio album / 203

Michael "M.C." Taylor of Hiss Golden Messenger onstage at Charlotte's Neighborhood Theatre, February 2017 / 211

Sylvan Esso in 2018 in their house-in-the-woods studio / 215

Seth Avett playing a guitar solo at Raleigh's PNC Arena, December 31, 2017 / 219

Seth and Scott Avett at work on their 2007 album, *Emotionalism* / 224

Mandolin Orange onstage at Raleigh's PNC Arena in 2017 / 229

Nina Simone's childhood home in Tryon, North Carolina, February 2018 / 233

Artist Zenos Frudakis's sculpture of Nina Simone at the keyboard / 241

Rhiannon Giddens onstage at the North Carolina Museum of Art in 2017 / 245

The Kruger Brothers in their recording studio in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina, in 2014 / 250

Little Brother's Patrick "9th Wonder" Douthit and Phonte Coleman in 2001 / 260

J. Cole onstage at the inaugural Dreamville Festival, April 6, 2019, at Raleigh's Dorothea Dix Park / 265

Marlana "Rhapsody" Evans performs at the 2017 Art of Cool Festival in Durham / 267

American Idol star Scotty McCreery riding the motorcade at his May 14, 2011, homecoming celebration in Garner, North Carolina / 272

Chris Daughtry onstage in 2014 / 281

Raleigh's Fayetteville Street during the 2013 World of Bluegrass festival / 285

STEP IT UP AND GO



Prologue March 1991

Before I moved to North Carolina, I knew next to nothing of the state's music history. I'd heard of Doc Watson and Earl Scruggs, and I'd heard some of the North Carolina-based acts on college radio and the underground-rock couch circuit that extended to Texas and Colorado, my previous states. But beyond Doc, Earl, Let's Active, the dB's, Superchunk, and a handful of others, I was the blankest of slates.

It turns out I had no idea what I was missing out on.

That began to change one spring morning a few months after my arrival, with a visit to Alice Gerrard's house. At the time, Gerrard was editor of the *Old-Time Herald*, a magazine chronicling venerable folk music of the southeastern United States. Gerrard wasn't just the editor, she was also something of an old-time legend herself—formerly one-half of Hazel & Alice, a pioneering folk duo that had been particularly inspirational to younger generations of women artists starting in the 1970s.

I'd been hired as the new music critic for the *Raleigh News & Observer*, and I had an assignment to do a "Tar Heel of the Week" interview profile of Gerrard. So I drove over to her home near Durham's Maplewood Cemetery, nestled between the Duke University campus to the west and the city's then-decaying downtown to the east. I found it comfortably cluttered with instruments, books, and a large dog curled up on a rug, the faint smell of that morning's bacon still in the air in the kitchen. Twenty-four years later in 2015, when Gerrard was nominated for a Grammy Award at the improbable age of eighty, I would return to her house for another interview, and it looked like the only thing to have changed in the interim was that she had a different dog.

Gerrard was a wonderful interview subject and gracious host. But what I remember most about that first visit was her blowing my mind when she pulled out a well-worn vinyl copy of the *Anthology of American Folk Music*. A six-record compilation of Depression-era recordings, *Anthology* dated back to 1952, compiled by the legendary and eccentric musicologist Harry Smith (who would die later in 1991). When the folk

revival swept college campuses in the 1950s and '60s, *Anthology* was the spark that lit the fuse, serving as sacred-text repertoire for Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and other acolytes. That much I knew.

But I'd never even seen a copy before, let alone heard it. This was years before *Anthology* would be reissued on compact disc with much fanfare, in parallel with the oracular music critic Greil Marcus's 1997 book *Invisible Republic*—where Marcus put forth the novel thesis that the songs on *Anthology* mapped out a mythical universe called “the Old, Weird America.” In 1991, *Anthology* was still obscure and hard to find. Gerrard's copy looked as if it had been handed around a lot over the previous four decades.

“A friend had this,” Gerrard told me, putting disc 5 onto her turntable and dropping the needle with a crackle. Track 1 was “The Coo Coo Bird,” a recording that dated back to 1929. The music sounded nervous, jittery, and old as the hills, a banjo rambling along like a stream rushing downhill, seeming to double back on itself. Over that backdrop, Clarence “Tom” Ashley drawled his tale, sounding like a mysterious and ghostly apparition.

Gonna build me
A log cabin
On a mountain so high

That morning was bright and sunny outside, but it suddenly felt like a thick mountain fog was rolling into Gerrard's living room. The verses seemed like a string of non sequiturs about far-away places, card-game tricks, robbery, a bird taking flight. And that banjo . . .

“It may sound strange to your ears,” Gerrard said as Ashley's banjo rolled along, “but that banjo is just an incredibly beautiful, mournful sound to me. I loved it as soon as I heard it. I really like the old mournful songs. When you play them, you can put more into them. There's not much between the tune and what you're feeling inside.”

She was right about that: it *did* sound strange, and not just because of the “sawmill” or “lassie-making” (as in molasses) tuning that Ashley used. It sounded not just old but ancient, from a long-vanished era. I would later learn that “The Coo Coo Bird” came to America from England and had been around for lifetimes before Ashley got to it. A decade after I first heard it, Dylan would quote “Coo Coo” in his apocalyptic song “High Water,” released the day the twin towers of New York City's World Trade Center fell on September 11, 2001.



*Alice Gerrard in the kitchen of her Durham home in 2015.
News & Observer photo by Juli Leonard.*

lation of all was not time, but place: this particular version of “The Coo Coo Bird” came from surprisingly close by.

“Did you know Clarence Ashley was from North Carolina?” Gerrard asked.

I had to admit I did not. I’d never even heard the man’s name before that day.

“Yeah,” she said, “he also played in an old-time band called the Carolina Tar Heels. Died in Winston about twenty-five years ago.”

The record continued playing as we talked, and “The Coo Coo Bird” faded out to the next song, “East Virginia,” by the Kentucky-born hill-billy singer Buell Kazee. The opening couplet caught my ear — “Oh, when I left old East Virginia / North Carolina did I roam” — and I pointed out the reference. Gerrard nodded as she laughed knowingly.

“Oh, North Carolina’s all over *Anthology*,” she said. “Bascom Lamar

Minstrel of the Appalachians Bascom Lamar Lunsford

When the *Anthology of American Folk Music* emerged in 1952, it had two songs by Asheville native Bascom Lamar Lunsford: 1928's rather surreal "I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground" (on which he also expressed the wish to be "a lizard in the spring"), and 1929's religious meditation "Dry Bones."

Anthology compiler Harry Smith's liner notes identified Lunsford as the "Minstrel of the Appalachians," and he was something of a Renaissance mountain man—lawyer, folklorist, and well-dressed bon vivant, in addition to being a crackerjack banjo player. By the time of *Anthology*, Lunsford's Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville had been around for twenty-four years, long enough to become an institution. Nearly a century later, it remains America's longest-running folk festival.

Lunsford also left behind "Good Old Mountain Dew," a 1928 song about moonshine that went on to become very possibly North Carolina's most-heard song after it was turned into a commercial jingle for soda:

They call it the good ol' Mountain Dew
Them's that refuse it are few
If you hush up your mug
I'll fill up your jug
With good ol' Mountain Dew.

Lunsford passed away in 1973 at age ninety-one.

Lunsford, the Bently Boys—and Charlie Poole, you know him? That's something you should hear."

Somewhere in the course of that conversation, a door opened. So I went through it. One way or another, I've been chasing after the history of North Carolina's popular music ever since.

★ A few months later, in the summer of 1991, I found myself in Morganton, a seen-better-days mill town several hours west of Durham. I had come to the small but well-kept bungalow of Etta Baker, one of the all-time great Piedmont blues guitarists, to interview her about the prestigious NEA National Heritage Fellowship she'd just won. But before we could talk, I had to wait for Baker to stop working long enough to sit



Prologue

*Bascom Lamar Lunsford at the North Carolina State Fair in Raleigh in 1965.
News & Observer photo, courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives.*

still. Whether tending her garden (where she grew enough food to feed a small town) or climbing a ladder onto the roof to fix a leak, she was a perpetual motion machine.

At the time, Baker was seventy-eight years old and almost two decades into her career as a full-time professional musician. She had spent the better part of her adulthood doing factory work while raising nine kids (mostly as a single parent after her husband's death in a 1967 car wreck). Baker finally paused from her domestic rounds, laughing brightly when I noted her energetic gumption. Some years later, I came to learn that one of Baker's hobbies was driving very, very fast down Interstate 40, sometimes over a hundred miles an hour.

Leading me inside, Baker sauntered into her parlor, sat down with her acoustic guitar and played old-time blues as pure and true as any I'd ever heard, each note hanging in the air like humidity. Whether it was work or virtuoso guitar, she did everything with a nonchalant economy of motion that was amazing to behold. But it was no big deal to Baker herself, who had been playing like this for strangers coming around for years—Dylan and Baez supposedly among them, legend has it, way back when they'd been the first couple of the American folk revival.

Baker started another tune.

"Oh you've got me hooked for you, baby / That's why you sling your weight around . . ."

It sounded like a song I should know, but Baker played and sang it



This bronze statue of Etta Baker, by the sculptor Thomas Jay Warren, has stood outside Morganton's Municipal Auditorium since 2017. Photo by David Menconi.

with such an idiosyncratic sense of time that I was stumped. So I asked: What was that one?

“‘But on the Other Hand Baby,’” Baker said. “Ray Charles, he’s a small man but sure does have a big ego”—and she cackled again.

I stayed and listened for hours.

★ In a 1900 speech, Charlotte author Mary Oates Spratt Van Landingham (a mover and shaker in the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution) called North Carolina “a vale of humility between two mountains of conceit”—those mountains being the Old North State’s adjacent neighbors, Virginia and South Carolina. Modesty becomes us here in North Carolina, and that outlook extends to our music. Indeed, music itself is the star here, as embodied by modestly inclined musicians like Alice Gerrard and Etta Baker. Even for non-natives (and Gerrard was born in Seattle), the music of North Carolina is a homing beacon they didn’t even realize was there until they had the same experience I did: coming here and immediately connecting with it as home.

“Music is what drew me to this place and made it home for me,” native Californian Mike “M.C.” Taylor of Hiss Golden Messenger declared onstage in Raleigh one night in 2018. The occasion was a show commemorating the *Oxford American* magazine’s just-published southern music issue, focused on North Carolina. Taylor’s sentiment resonated for just about everyone in attendance. Music is North Carolina’s tuning fork—not tobacco, basketball, NASCAR, or even barbecue—because it’s not just in the air here, but also the soul.

“It’s like the state motto, ‘To be rather than to seem,’” European immigrant guitarist Uwe Kruger told me in 2011. “The music is like that for real. You drive around North Carolina and see people playing on their porch. You don’t see that anywhere else nowadays. The whole state is kind of like that image of Ireland where the whole pub starts singing. Music is not a spectator sport here.”

In seeming contrast to the increasingly wealthy professional class in cities like Charlotte and Raleigh, North Carolina has always had a prevailing streak of underdog working-class populism. Tar Heels (a Civil War-vintage nickname inspired by the stubbornness of the state’s Confederate soldiers) are a pragmatic lot, which you’d expect of a state with that *Esse quam videri* motto. Whether it’s performers onstage or people running recording studios and record labels behind the scenes, North Carolina is a place more of doers than dreamers. The state has only rarely been home to the biggest stars on the charts, and yet the contributions

of North Carolina artists are deeply embedded in the DNA of some of the most important strands in American popular music. That is the story at the center of this book.

From blues to bluegrass to soul, jazz, rock, hip-hop, and beyond, you can liken the state's role in popular music to that of the essential, boundlessly determined role player who contributes the one last missing ingredient to a championship team—and insists on doing it no matter what. When I asked Winston-Salem-born pop-star pianist Ben Folds what growing up in North Carolina gave him that he would not have had elsewhere, he answered without hesitation.

"A fierce sense of artistic independence," Folds told me in 2019. "A lot of the country grows up feeling like someone else has to take their art to validate it with that stamp of approval. But what I saw growing up was my heroes just taking things into their own hands, like Mitch Easter. Whether or not he was 'making it' nationally, I had no way of knowing. I just saw him opening a studio, producing people, making records without asking for anyone's approval. I feel really lucky to have grown up in North Carolina seeing that."

Folds watched Mitch Easter working in a makeshift studio in the garage of his parents' home in Winston-Salem, which is where he made some of his important records in the 1980s (including early landmarks by R.E.M., who spent a good deal of formative time traveling between their Athens, Georgia, home base and the friendly confines of clubs in Chapel Hill and Raleigh). Easter is far from the only North Carolinian to succeed by utilizing whatever was at hand. His fellow Winston native Patrick "9th Wonder" Douthit started out in similarly humble settings, producing hip-hop records in college dorm rooms. The aforementioned Folds employed an unconventional guitar-free piano-trio lineup at the height of 1990s grunge, and scored a platinum album. Chapel Hill's Squirrel Nut Zippers went that one better, going platinum with retro-jazz. Decades earlier, guitarist Arthur Smith pioneered the new frontier of syndicated television in the 1950s, building an entertainment empire based in Charlotte. After Tryon native Nina Simone's plan to become a classical pianist was derailed, she reinvented herself as one of the twentieth century's most distinctive song stylists. The underground-rock label Merge Records' first "office" was the corner of a Chapel Hill bedroom, from which it grew all the way to the top of the charts. Bluegrass banjo player Earl Scruggs and "5" Royales R & B guitarist Lowman Pauling pioneered instrumental techniques in the 1940s that were so fundamental, they remain building blocks for younger players to this day. And the rock

band Nantucket arose in the 1970s with a story that only could have happened in North Carolina, originating in the R & B style known as beach music—another distinctive regional phenomenon, and one rooted in the history of the Jim Crow South.

Running through the stories of all these artists, styles, and eras is a similar sense of determined, workmanlike focus, as well as enduring, ingenious artistry. It's not universal, but most of the great North Carolina artists I've encountered don't take themselves nearly as seriously as the rest of the world does. Some of the state's most notable musicians have been non-professionals who held down day jobs and still kept that mindset even after turning professional. Possibly the most renowned player who ever came out of North Carolina was Deep Gap native Arthel "Doc" Watson, whose blindness since infancy never slowed him down much. An astonishing flat-picking guitar virtuoso with magic hands, Watson toured the world and won every honor and award there was to win, before dying in 2012 at age eighty-nine. And yet he still retained the humble soul of a sideman. Had Watson been sighted, it's entirely possible that few people outside of his immediate family would have ever even heard him play.

"Music has always been just a way for Doc to provide for his family," Watson's longtime accompanist Jack Lawrence told me in 2003. "He really likes being home, and if he'd been sighted, I think he'd be a carpenter or mechanic so he could be home more. Ask Doc how he wants to be remembered, and guitar-playing really doesn't enter into it. He'd rather be remembered just as the good ol' boy down the road."

Watson is gone, but his music remains, and that road is still there. Let's go down it a ways.

1 **Linthead Pop** Charlie Poole, the Father of Mill-Town Rock (and the First Rock Star)

In the years before he started the folk and bluegrass label Sugar Hill Records in 1978, Barry Poss was a graduate student at Durham's Duke University, and also an enthusiastic record collector. A native of Canada, Poss was especially fond of old-time hillbilly and blues records. So he spent many an afternoon traveling the back roads from Tarboro to Mount Airy, seeking old 78 rpm records from furniture and antique stores or old radio stations. He'd even knock on random doors and ask whoever answered if they had any old records they wanted to sell.

"There was one thing I could always count on," Poss told me in 2005. "If I told them I was looking for 'something like Charlie Poole,' they would always have a story to tell: 'Oh yeah, he slept here in this house.' Or, 'We used to get together and drink.' Or, 'My daughter used to date him.' I'm not kidding you, this was the 1970s, more than forty years since he'd died. And it was as though the guy were still alive."

More decades have passed since Poss heard those old stories, but the late great Charlie Poole still stands as one of the great characters of North Carolina music. His songs are still played today and the lingering power of his memory is all the more remarkable, given that no film footage or even interviews exist—just a handful of black-and-white photos to go with music and memories handed down through the generations.

Charlie Poole came from working-class stock and seemed destined to follow the rest of his family into the textile mills. That's where he started out as a "linthead," slang for southern white millworker, before using his banjo to escape. Like a lot of early folk and country musicians, Poole cultivated a slickly urbane image in posed photographs, wearing sharp suits. And he played a style of banjo usually heard in big cities rather than the country. Onstage and off, Poole's outsized personality starred

in an act that owed as much to big-city vaudeville as the southern folk vernacular. And he came along at a key crossroads moment of transition.

In the 1920s, various threads of black and white music—Scottish and Irish fiddle tunes, ragtime, minstrel songs, shape-note sacred hymns, sea shanties, African American field hollers, jazz, blues, Tin Pan Alley, and Victorian pop—were beginning to coalesce into what eventually became country and bluegrass. A nascent music industry was growing up, too, shifting from selling sheet music to recordings, which became an engine of mass culture. Mass production also put musical instruments into the hands of more people than ever before.

**Charlie Poole,
the Father of
Mill-Town Rock**

A rural-to-urban transformation was stirring as industrialization took hold, in North Carolina along with the rest of the country. Railroad expansion created an economically feasible network to ship goods to far-away places, and textile mills sprang up along rivers and rail lines, turning small villages into larger towns. Thanks to the North Carolina Piedmont's proximity to cotton fields and abundant supply of cheap labor, the region overtook New England as the nation's leading textile producer by the early 1920s.

Cotton-millworker-turned-recording-artist Charlie Poole would be a manifestation of all of this. He made his first recordings in 1925, the first year that record sales surpassed sheet-music sales. And the music Poole played with his North Carolina Ramblers sounded very much like an embryonic version of bluegrass, with up-tempo fiddling laid atop clattery-yet-precise rhythms on banjo and guitar. Functionally illiterate, Poole seldom wrote songs himself and mostly appropriated what he heard. But he put enough of a stamp on his repertoire to where most every tune he played would henceforth be known as a "Charlie Poole Song." He set much of the repertoire that Bill Monroe, the Stanley Brothers, and other bluegrass elders played in decades to come, and it's still that way today. Go to a fiddler's convention and call for "Don't Let Your Deal Go Down Blues," "Leaving Home," or some other Poole tune, and any picker worth their salt will fire it right up. If Bill Monroe is the father of bluegrass, Charlie Poole is at the very least its drunk great-uncle.

Poole's Roaring Twenties heyday was brief and, like that era's good times, would end with the Great Depression. But before he died short of his fortieth birthday from one alcohol binge too many, Poole was a swashbuckling, larger-than-life raconteur who could out-play, out-drink, and out-ramble just about any other man on earth. Decades before Elvis, Poole carried himself like a rock star—especially in contrast to better-known peers like the Mississippi-born Jimmie Rodgers, the "Sing-

ing Brakeman” who emerged in Poole’s wake as “The Father of Country Music.”

“Charlie Poole hit a level in music where you can imagine he might have become Jerry Lee Lewis to Jimmie Rodgers’s Elvis,” Rodgers biographer Barry Mazor told me in 2017. “Or the Stones to his Beatles—the harder, tougher version. But it just was not in Poole’s nature to settle down enough for that to happen.”

★ Charles Cleveland Poole was born on March 22, 1892, although accounts vary as to exactly where (Statesville is the birthplace listed on his 1917 draft registration card). It was a large family with somewhere between nine and thirteen children, depending on whose account you’re reading, and Charlie’s mother died when he was very young.

By the time Charlie was eight years old, his family had moved to the Alamance County town of Haw River to work in its textile mills. It was a hard life with few amenities, although many mill owners were enlightened enough to provide musical instruments and instruction to employees and their families. That contributed to a thriving mill-town culture of string bands, playing folk tunes and popular songs of the day.

It’s difficult to imagine where anyone found the time or energy for music, given the work week of five twelve-hour weekdays and a half-day on Saturday. It was difficult, dirty labor, after which workers went home to spartan living conditions in the factory-owned row houses. For all that, the mills at least represented a steady paycheck for impoverished residents in a state that had been devastated by the Civil War. A textile boom was underway across North Carolina at the dawn of the twentieth century, with the construction of mills to turn cotton grown in surrounding fields into fabric and yarn. In the Rockingham County town of Spray, Poole’s hometown for the last decade of his life, five new mills opened between 1895 and 1903.

This was long before 1938’s U.S. Fair Labor Standards Act, which prohibited children under age fourteen from most industrial labor. So Charlie began mill work at around age nine as a spinning-room “doffer”—the person responsible for loading empty spindles into the machinery and replacing them once they were full of spun yarn. By most accounts, he was a high-spirited and mischievous young man, given to pranks and fisticuffs. Poole’s juvenile exploits included hijacking a streetcar with his brothers, and a teenage hand injury that would have implications for his musical future.

12 On an inebriated dare, Poole bet that he could catch a baseball bare-

handed no matter how hard it was thrown. But he closed his fingers too quickly, coming away with several shattered right fingers that healed with a permanent inward curl. It was a position that naturally lent itself to a right-handed up-picking style, and Poole played three-finger rolls rather than the “clawhammer” or “frailing” style of down-stroke, two-finger strumming that predominated at the time. Poole learned the basics of banjo from Daner Johnson (his second cousin) as well as the recordings of ragtime hitmaker Fred Van Eps. For a small-town boy from North Carolina, Poole displayed an unusually polished musical sophistication.

**Charlie Poole,
the Father of
Mill-Town Rock**

Poole’s chosen instrument, the banjo, was an African import originally brought to America by slaves, although it did not take long to cross racial lines. Banjo became a primary instrument on the minstrel and medicine-show circuits. By the time Poole was learning it, the banjo was also becoming more prominent in polite parlor society and orchestral ensembles in the larger cities.

Like most of his era’s banjo players, Poole tended to keep time and let the fiddle do the soloing. It would take the ascension of Boiling Springs native Earl Scruggs and the birth of bluegrass in the 1940s to establish banjo as a true lead instrument. But the secret sauce Poole brought to music wasn’t instrumental fireworks so much as showmanship, both as a singer and a standup comic with between-song banter as a variety of fictional characters. He was also a peerless dancer.

“Fred Astaire himself could not have held a candle to Charlie Poole,” his friend and sometime playing partner Ted Prillaman told Poole’s nephew and biographer Kinney Rorrer. Onstage, the acrobatic Poole would buck-dance and soft-shoe, leaping over chairs like a frog to land on his hands and dance around on his palms with feet in the air as his bandmates played on. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Rorrer recounted this in a talk for the historical society of Poole’s long-ago Virginia stomping grounds of Floyd County. That inspired a light-bulb moment for at least one audience member.

“This fellow came up afterward to tell me about his mother from Shooting Creek, Virginia,” Rorrer told me in 2017. “She was in the nursing home with dementia, talking wildly, and she’d talk about going to a dance— ‘and he came in drunk and started dancing on his hands.’ We decided that had to be Charlie who she had seen like that. He was around Shooting Creek enough to record a song called that, and that’s what he’d do onstage. I was glad to help him realize his mother wasn’t out of her mind.”

Still, the most notable aspect of Poole in performance was his singing. At a time when many string bands were largely instrumental, singing in



Charlie Poole with his trusty banjo in the mid-1920s, photographed in his longtime hometown of Spray, North Carolina. Photo courtesy of Kinney Rorrer.

unison if at all, Poole was a genuine solo front man and star — enough of a vocal presence for his voice to be dominant. As accomplished as Poole and his North Carolina Ramblers were instrumentally, the music on their recordings isn't what lingers afterward. What you remember most of all is the commanding, force-of-nature personality of Poole's carny-barker voice.

"Listening to Charlie Poole through the wall of time, you can tell he was just a rounder," banjo player Joe Newberry told me in 2017. "A guy who'd go off on a bender, make a bunch of money, and then go drink it all up again. And again and again and again."

**Charlie Poole,
the Father of
Mill-Town Rock**

★ In 1912 Poole was twenty years old and living near Greensboro, facing a lifetime of mill-work drudgery. So he skipped out on work in favor of his banjo every chance he got. Poole had begun playing as a child, making his first banjo himself from a gourd. When he scraped together enough money to buy one, it cost \$1.50 (equivalent to about \$40 today). The one thing Poole was diligent about was music, and he came to be the life of every party. Poole would roam far and wide in search of that next party, too, disappearing for weeks or even months at a time. His favored destinations tended to be points north from Spray — Virginia on up to the coal-mining country of West Virginia and Pennsylvania, and even as far away as Montana and Canada.

Poole did, however, stay home long enough to get married for the first time in 1912, exchanging vows with seventeen-year-old Maude Gibson. The couple moved in with her mill-working family in Haw River, and not much more than nine months later, Charlie's one and only known child was born: James Clay Poole, later known as "Charlie Jr." The fact that Charlie Sr. was in Canada when Maude gave birth to James that December did not sit well, and their relations were stormy.

The last straw for Maude came with her ill-fated attempt to settle Charlie down by demanding they move with her parents to Danville, Virginia, and take mill jobs there. After initially agreeing, Poole didn't show up at the Greensboro train station at the appointed time. Maude discovered her husband in the local jail's drunk tank and initiated divorce proceedings soon afterward. Some years later, she all but spit when asked about her ex-husband's rambling ways.

"Ramble!" she declared. "He couldn't be still! He loved to go. You couldn't have a conversation with him. He was gone! Bet he never stayed over a month in any town in his life."

Whether married or single, Poole never stopped rambling and bounced

from one mill job to another between extended sojourns into the great beyond. He heard a lot of music during his travels, developing an extensive repertoire of folk songs, show tunes, hymns, jokes, stunts, stories, riffs, and routines cadged from fellow travelers, carnival barkers, minstrel troupes, and assorted miscreants at revival meetings, brothels, circus tents, vaudeville programs, and medicine shows. Relying on a memory that his associates characterized as remarkable, Poole filtered all of it through his quick and active mind—combining songs, changing titles and words, radically altering arrangements and tempos.

Poole listened to records when he could, too, by the likes of Al “The World’s Greatest Entertainer” Jolson, ragtime blues singer Blind Blake, and the banjo-playing “Dixie Dewdrop” Uncle Dave Macon. One song that entered his repertoire was an old number of uncertain provenance called “The Deal,” taught to Poole by his fellow millworker Tyler Meeks—who had reputedly learned it years earlier from an African American guitar player by the name of Charlie Blackstock. In Poole’s hands, “The Deal” became “Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down Blues,” and it quickly emerged as his best showstopper.

Poole never owned a car or learned to drive, and for the most part lived the life of a vagabond hobo on his rambles. He’d set out on foot, always with his banjo and maybe with another musician or two. Sometimes they’d hop a freight train or thumb a ride from a passing vehicle, or knock on doors until they found a farmer willing to put them up and dip into his liquor stash in exchange for a little manual labor—or better yet, some live entertainment.

During his travels through West Virginia in 1918, Poole met up with a fiddler from Franklin County, Virginia, named Posey Rorer—great-uncle to Kinney Rorrer (they are related by blood despite the different surname spellings). Posey Rorer became Poole’s running mate and partner in music, crime, and whatever else came along—like bootlegging moonshine, which they did while caring for Rorer’s flu-stricken family during the 1918 epidemic. Brewing moonshine involved a lot of sitting around tending to the still and waiting for fluids to condense, time that Poole and Rorer put to good use by honing their fiddle-and-banjo act. Once they got paid, Poole used \$132 of his earnings to upgrade his banjo to a brand-new Orpheum No. 3 Special.

Rorer and Poole both had sisters working in the mill town of Spray, near the Virginia line. The men moved there in 1920, and in short order became brothers-in-law as well as bandmates when Poole married Rorer’s sister Lou Emma that December (this also made Poole great-uncle by

marriage to Kinney Rorer). While it wasn't easy for the long-suffering Lou Emma, Poole's second marriage lasted, and Spray would remain as much of a hometown as he ever had, given how often he was off rambling elsewhere.

Sometimes those adventures turned dangerous, like the night Poole and Rorer were playing at a bootleg joint when the cops showed up intending to arrest everyone. Refusing to go quietly, Poole turned his banjo into a weapon and cracked it over one officer's head. Another cop pulled a gun and it went off close enough to Poole's mouth to bloody his lips and chip his teeth.

Poole fled the premises but eventually turned himself in and was fined \$100, a huge sum on a 1920s millworker's salary. Lou Emma paid it.

**Charlie Poole,
the Father of
Mill-Town Rock**

★ Adding guitarist Norman Woodlieff (later replaced by Roy Harvey), Poole and Rorer christened themselves the North Carolina Ramblers and quickly rose through the ranks of the region's string bands. They made their mark at parties, dances, and contests in Spray and beyond, playing everywhere from dance halls to street corners. By the mid-1920s, their reputation was such that they began entertaining thoughts of quitting the mills and going pro. But breaking out to that level would require a new-fangled approach: making a record.

Recordings first appeared in the late nineteenth century and came into their own as a medium in the years after World War I, when the introduction of electrical recording with microphones yielded much greater fidelity. White "hillbilly" and black "race" records grew in popularity through the 1920s, especially after Georgia-born Fiddlin' John Carson recorded a fiddle tune called "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" in Atlanta in 1923—arguably the first country record. Released on Okeh Records, "Log Cabin" sold enough to establish that there was an actual market for this kind of music. Record companies took notice and began looking for other southern folk artists to record. A number of North Carolina musicians got the chance to record, including Ernest Thompson, Connie Sides, "Minstrel of the Appalachians" Bascom Lamar Lunsford—and Charlie Poole.

Poole being Poole, he decided to go to the recording industry rather than wait for it to come to him. And he turned his exit from millwork into the stuff of legend, with a scene that sounds like a forerunner to Johnny Paycheck's wage-slave kiss-off "Take This Job and Shove It." It was the summer of 1925 and the North Carolina Ramblers trio of Poole, Rorer, and Woodlieff had resolved to quit. So they went to the mill in

Charlie Poole,
the Father of
Mill-Town Rock

Spray to collect their final paychecks and brought along their instruments. Work on the line ceased for a few minutes as coworkers gathered to listen to the Ramblers belt out that old statement-of-purpose favorite “Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down Blues.”

Now I’ve been all around this whole wide world
Down to Memphis, Tennessee
Any old place I hang my hat
Looks like home to me . . .

“Goodbye, boys,” Poole hollered at the end. “We’re gone!”

Next stop, New York City. Poole and his mates took the train to Passaic, New Jersey, and stayed with a friend, taking temporary factory jobs while plotting their next move. They’d come north with no appointments or contacts, just their own moxie and an address for Columbia Records across the Hudson River in New York. One day, Poole walked into the label’s office and asked for an audition persuasively enough to be granted one. He returned a few days later with his bandmates to play for recording manager Frank Walker, and “Deal” sealed the deal. It would be one of four songs the Ramblers recorded for Columbia on July 27, 1925.

“When Charlie Poole got his draft card in 1917, he’d signed it with an ‘X,’” Rorrer said. “Eight years later, he still can’t read a stop sign, and he’s got a very thick North Carolina accent. And yet he goes off to New York, marches into Columbia Records uninvited, on his own initiative, asks for an audition and gets one. That was a very gutsy thing to do.”

The Ramblers had become an expert performing unit, battle-tested in all sorts of environments. But the recording studio was a very different, nerve-wracking experience, so much so that Poole declared afterward that he’d never record sober again (a vow he made good on, by all accounts). And yet that first session proved to be very profitable.

Along with “Deal,” they recorded “The Girl I Left in Sunny Tennessee,” “I’m the Man That Rode the Mule ’Round the World” and “Can I Sleep in Your Barn Tonight, Mister”—all first-rate, but “Deal” proved to be Poole’s ace in the hole. Released on Columbia’s Old Familiar Tunes series in September 1925 (with “Barn” on the B-side), “Deal” was a gigantic hit that sold more than 100,000 copies at a time when selling 20,000 qualified as a big hit. Considering that there were only about 600,000 record players in the entire southern United States at that time, many of them reserved for strictly sacred music, it was a staggering number of records to sell.

Poole’s follow-up consisted of that session’s other two songs, “Sunny

“Orange Blossom Special” Ervin T. Rouse

Go to any bluegrass festival and, along with Charlie Poole songs, it’s a given you’ll hear “Orange Blossom Special” at some point. A 1938 fiddle tune about a legendary passenger train, “Special” was written by Ervin T. Rouse, a Craven County–born trick fiddler (for many years, Bill Monroe/Flatt & Scruggs fiddler Chubby Wise maintained that he’d cowritten it, but that claim has been debunked). With its flashy double-time riff mimicking the rhythm of a train hurtling down the track, it’s the definitive vehicle for showing off—bluegrass fiddle’s equivalent of the banjo tune “Foggy Mountain Breakdown.”

“Special” has been recorded hundreds of times over the years, by everybody from Johnny Cash (who put it on the pop charts in 1965) to the 1970s jazz-rock fusion band Seatrain. And while its royalties put a sizable fortune in Rouse’s pocket, he opted to live like a hobo in a Florida Everglades shack until his passing in 1981 at age sixty-four.

“I have no idea why he’d live like he did,” his second cousin Preston Rouse told me in 2008. “Marty Stuart tells a story about Ervin pulling out a royalty check for \$25,000 that he’d never cashed. Evidently, he did not need the money. He just didn’t have the thing you would need to take advantage of this song.”

**Charlie Poole,
the Father of
Mill-Town Rock**

Tennessee” backed with “Mule,” and it was another hit with sales of 65,000 copies. In the music industry’s nascent days, long before radio stations regularly broadcast recorded music, the only real promotion these records received were newspaper ads and word of mouth across America’s textile belt.

“The business of how to promote records was in its infancy, and record companies used to look on radio with great suspicion,” said Jimmie Rodgers biographer Barry Mazor, who also chronicled the beginnings of the record and publishing industries in his 2014 book *Ralph Peer and the Makings of Popular Roots Music*. “There was this idea that if people heard something on the radio for free, they’d never buy it. So they were sold in places like furniture stores, barber shops, and pool halls. Pullman porters would bring records like that down South from New York, too.”

★ Once “Deal” proved there was gold in them there hillbillies, record-company talent scouts were soon scouring the South in search of the next hillbilly hit. One person who came down from New York was the aforementioned Ralph Peer, who already had bona fides in the field—he had recorded Fiddlin’ John Carson’s “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane” two years before Poole’s “Deal.” Eventually Peer’s travels on behalf of RCA Victor Records took him to Bristol, a town straddling the Tennessee-Virginia state line, where he hit the jackpot. Peer was the first to record both the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers at 1927’s fabled “Bristol Sessions,” widely acknowledged as the birth of modern country music.

Meanwhile, Poole spent the year after “Deal” hit biding his time. He and his bandmates had earned a flat fee of just \$25 each for their first Columbia session. But with Frank Walker sending one pleading telegram after another, Poole had leverage and got a higher fee of \$75 per song plus royalties of 1.5 cents per record sold. That was enough to lure Poole and the Ramblers back up to New York for a fall 1926 session that yielded more hits, most notably “White House Blues.”

An old newsreel-type song about the 1901 assassination of President William McKinley, “White House Blues” had been around for decades. Poole gave it an oddly jovial delivery, which may have been the whis-key talking. However people took “White House Blues,” 76,000 of them bought copies.

Over the course of his career, Poole cut more than eighty songs, mostly defiant hell-raisers like “If I Lose, I Don’t Care” and “If the River Was Whiskey,” interspersed with the occasional sentimental parlor ballad like “Mother’s Last Farewell Kiss.” In roughly two years, he sold nearly 500,000 total records to become one of the biggest acts in the business. Columbia Records’ 1927 catalog included a picture and caption calling Poole “unquestionably the best known banjo picker and singer in the Carolinas.”

Poole’s success made him a hero back home in Spray, where that year’s city directory listed his occupation as “professional musician and recording artist.” A long line of string bands across the Piedmont’s textile belt followed in his wake—Piedmont Log Rollers, Leaksville String Band, Carolina Buddies, and Blue Ridge Highballers, among others—some of them paying Poole the sincerest form of flattery by doing their own versions of his hits.

But the music wasn’t all just good-time party songs. As they were comprised of working-class factory laborers, these textile-town string bands



Charlie Poole and his North Carolina Ramblers in their hit-making prime, photographed in 1927 in Beckley, West Virginia. From left: Posey Rorer, Poole (seated), and Roy Harvey. Photo courtesy of Kinney Rorrer.

also documented the harshness of mill life. One of this period's most enduring songs was "Mill Mother's Lament," best-known for folk icon Pete Seeger's 1957 version. "Mill Mother's Lament" originated three decades earlier than that, written in the late 1920s by Ella May Wiggins—a single mother, ballad singer, labor organizer and spinner at American Mill No. 1 in Bessemer, near Gastonia.

"Mill Mother's Lament" told of having "not a cent to spend for clothing" after buying groceries, and the song urged workers to organize. Wiggins was often called to perform it at union rallies and meetings, but her prominence made Wiggins a target when she was caught up in the bloody 1929 strike at Gastonia's Loray Mill.

Wiggins was pregnant with what would have been her tenth child when she was shot and killed on her way to a union rally, martyred at age twenty-nine. Wiggins was subsequently dubbed "Poet Laureate" of the Gastonia strike, with this legend on her grave in Bessemer City Memorial Cemetery: "She was killed carrying the torch of social justice. September 14, 1929."

★ By 1927, Poole had broader horizons than folk music on his mind. He was trying to move in more of a mass-appeal direction by playing pop songs with the Charlie Poole Orchestra, an expanded lineup featuring multiple fiddles and even piano. It was the height of the Jazz Age, and Poole wanted in on the action. Longing to make himself the next Al Jolson, Poole watched the movie *The Jazz Singer* over and over.

Unfortunately for Poole, Columbia's Frank Walker was only interested in repeating what had worked before: the "Old Familiar Tunes." Walker was known to upbraid any fiddler uppity enough to call his instrument a violin, and with Poole's more adventurous recordings not selling, Walker kept sending him back to the old-time well. Stymied by his contract to Columbia, Poole resorted to recording on the sly for other labels under pseudonyms—as the Highlanders for Paramount and Allegheny Highlanders for Brunswick. This was some of the most glorious music Poole ever recorded, with songs like the Highlanders' "Flop Eared Mule" and "Lynchburg Town" giving a veritable blueprint for bluegrass down to one of Poole's rare banjo solos.

"Twin fiddles and Poole taking fast banjo breaks was as close to bluegrass as anybody was getting in the late 1920s," record collector Marshall Wyatt told me in 2017. "You can hear those solos, and make the leap in your mind to where it was gonna go."

22 None of them sold, however, and by 1928, the traditionally inclined

Posey Rorer had had enough. Rorer was no more enamored of Poole's pop ambitions than Frank Walker and quit in a dispute over royalties. And even though they were brothers-in-law who lived across the street from each other in Spray, Poole and Rorer never spoke again.

Poole continued his rambles with replacement Ramblers, but things became dire with the onset of the Great Depression. The stock market crashed in the fall of 1929, and record sales followed suit. Finances were tight enough that Poole even pawned his banjo, doing his final September 1930 recording session with a borrowed instrument—and Poole being Poole, he pawned the one he borrowed, too. His final release, “Milwaukee Blues,” would sell just 878 copies even though it was one of his best-ever recordings. Columbia canceled his contract at the beginning of 1931, leaving a crushed Poole going back to work in the mills he had seemingly escaped.

But a would-be lifeline appeared that February when a movie company wrote with an offer for Poole to come to Hollywood and appear in a film. They even sent train tickets.

Poole's response to the good news from Hollywood was to embark on an epic, months-long celebratory drinking binge he would not survive. Already in poor health from a lifetime of carousing, Poole had a fatal heart attack on the front porch of his sister's house in Spray. It was May 21, 1931, and he had turned thirty-nine just two months earlier.

★ As with Rembrandt and Mozart, in death, Poole's art was not even an afterthought. His death certificate identified Poole as a millworker rather than a musician, and he was buried in an unmarked grave, seemingly destined to be forgotten as traces of his time on earth disappeared. The house Poole shared with Lou Emma on Flynn Street in Spray was torn down long ago, the lot remaining vacant at the time of this writing. Even the town of Spray disappeared, at least by that name. In 1967, the three adjacent mill villages Spray, Draper, and Leaksville were combined into a newly incorporated town called Eden.

In terms of music's “official” history, Poole has gotten short shrift from the country-music establishment. Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family were among the first artists inducted when the Country Music Hall of Fame opened in 1961, but the hall has not seen fit to honor Poole as of the time of this writing. In 2005, I called the Country Music Association's press department to ask about the likelihood of Poole being inducted someday. I got a bemused, one-word response: “Who?”

On the festival circuit, however, Poole has had a vibrant musical

Charlie Poole,
the Father of
Mill-Town Rock

Charlie Poole,
the Father of
Mill-Town Rock

afterlife, with influence extending well beyond bluegrass. You can draw a straight line from Poole to Bob Wills's Texas swing a decade later and Hank Williams's hard-living country songs a decade after that. Years went by and people kept telling the stories and playing Charlie Poole songs, especially after the *Anthology of American Folk Music* canonized "White House Blues" in 1952. Bluegrass had just been born and Poole's songs were standards.

Even the hippies liked those Charlie Poole songs. In the 1970s, when Grateful Dead guitarist Jerry Garcia put together an all-star bluegrass band, he named it Old & In the Way after a Poole tune. From the Carolina Chocolate Drops to John Mellencamp, a wide range of artists continued playing Poole songs into the twenty-first century. And when he won a Nobel Prize in 2017, Bob Dylan quoted Poole's "You Ain't Talkin' To Me." Dylan actually got the lyrics wrong, but Poole himself probably would not have minded.

Over time, a few physical manifestations of Poole's legacy have crept into existence. Some thirty-five years after Poole's death, in 1966, an old-time music fan from Northern Ireland raised enough money to pay for gravestones for Poole and Posey Rorer. In 1991 the state erected a Charlie Poole historical marker nearby. A fair quantity of his music has come back into print, too.

But perhaps the most unexpectedly wonderful act of homage came from an unlikely kindred spirit of Poole's, blue-blooded folksinger Loudon Wainwright III. Also North Carolina-born but hyper-literate and urbane, Wainwright grew up as scion of one of the giants of American journalism, *Life* magazine columnist Loudon Wainwright Jr. He went into music and became a confessional singer-songwriter of lacerating wit, earning a lone brush with the pop charts from the 1972 novelty hit "Dead Skunk." But Wainwright's stock in trade has always been laugh-to-keep-from-crying songs about the travails of himself and his family. And in 2010, Wainwright won the best-folk-album Grammy Award for *High Wide & Handsome: The Charlie Poole Project*, a tribute record combining covers of Poole's best-known tunes with newly written songs meant to evoke a sense of the man.

"There are a lot of connections between he and I," Wainwright told me in 2017. "I'm a big fan of what he did and I've led a rambling life myself, running around with a guitar to sing for people and having fun doing it. Sometimes a little too much fun, you know? I can relate to Charlie. He wasn't a writer, but he sang the popular songs of the day—drinking

songs, novelty songs, serious songs about mothers. That's kind of my beat, too, the same waterfront I cover."

High Wide & Handsome was less a recitation of Poole's songs than a conjuring of the spirit and mythology of a life well-rambled. The album's best moments found Wainwright and his collaborator Dick Connette putting themselves in Poole's world. His long-suffering widow Lou Emma gets her due in the mournful, shell-shocked "The Man in the Moon" (modeled on the Poole song "I Once Loved a Sailor") with a heartbreakingly deadpan vocal by Wainwright's former sister-in-law Maggie Roche. On the funny, sunny side, "Way Up in NYC" recounts Poole's adventurous 1925 trip to New York to record "Deal."

Charlie Poole,
the Father of
Mill-Town Rock

They paid us for four numbers, greenback dollars cash in hand
More than a week's wage in the mill, twenty-five a man
Third class was all we could afford on the train back home to Spray
But we stayed drunk inside that car for two nights and one day
Back home from New York City we were heroes back in Spray
So guilty and hung over there was not a lot to say
It got a little awkward, talking to the wives
'Cause we couldn't tell 'em how we had the best time of our lives

Wainwright made his kinship with Poole most overt on the "High Wide & Handsome" title track, which bookends the album as first and last song. The opening version is Wainwright as Poole the swashbuckler, with banjo plunking and bravado spouting. But Wainwright did the end version as himself, accompanied by guitar rather than banjo, connecting with the wistful darkness of a man like Poole.

Can't quit what will kill me, so why even bother?
I love this hard livin,' so why even try?
I'll be high wide and handsome when I kick the bucket
I'll be high wide and handsome on the day that I die.

It's a lovely closing of the circle, as funny as it is sad. Just like Charlie Poole—who, in a way, remains very much with us.

2

Step It Up and Go

Blind Boy Fuller, Durham, and the Piedmont Blues

On Rigsbee Avenue, not far from the old Durham Athletic Park immortalized in the 1988 love letter to minor-league baseball, *Bull Durham*, you'll find an unlikely artifact of the city's musical history. It's part of an ancient brick wall, the last surviving remnant of a long-gone building—still bearing the painted name “LIBERTY WHS No. 2” at the top, “LIBERTY CAFÉ/ENTER HERE” down below—preserved as decorative façade for Liberty Warehouse, an upscale apartment complex “where Durham's soulful history and cultural future converge.”

The original Liberty Warehouse had fallen into a sad state of decay by the time it was torn down in 2014. But in its 1930s prime, Liberty and other tobacco warehouses in Durham served as busking performance venues for some of that era's most acclaimed blues musicians. In fact, four of the most important blues artists of all time called Durham home back then. There was South Carolina native Gary Davis (variously known by the prefixes “Blind,” “Rev.” or “Brother”), the Jimi Hendrix of Piedmont blues and a freakishly talented guitarist whose acolytes came to include countless younger white players during the 1950s folk revival; Sonny & Brownie, harmonica master Saunders “Sonny Terry” Terrell and singer-guitarist Walter Brown “Brownie” McGhee, a duo whose partnership as folk-festival fixtures would outlive their friendship by many years; and the man the whole scene revolved around, Fulton Allen—better-known as Blind Boy Fuller.

It was a community with depth beyond that core four, including washboardist George “Bull City Red” Washington, singer-guitarist Thomas Burt, and the Trice Brothers, Willie and Richard. From Rocky Mount, harmonica player “Peg Leg Sam” Jackson was around quite a bit. And right down the road in Chapel Hill was Floyd Council (later, with South

Carolina's Pink Anderson, the half-namesake of English rock band Pink Floyd), plus Elizabeth Cotten of "Freight Train" fame. Still, the key quartet of Fuller, Davis, Terry, and McGhee stands as the Mount Rushmore of Durham blues' glory days.

Even if you've not heard any of them, references to them were all over popular music for generations. Everybody from the Grateful Dead to Peter, Paul & Mary covered Davis songs, while Ry Cooder, Bob Dylan, and Jefferson Airplane's Jorma Kaukonen are just a few of the many guitar players to show his influence. English rock bands were especially enamored of Fuller. Led Zeppelin rewrote Fuller's "I Want Some of Your Pie" into 1975's "Custard Pie," while the Rolling Stones titled a 1970 live album after his song "Get Your Ya Yas Out." And closer to home, an early 1990s folk-rock group at Winston-Salem's School of the Arts named itself after a Sonny & Brownie song—"Jump, Little Children."

Guitar rather than banjo was the primary instrument, but Piedmont blues had a lot in common with Charlie Poole's hits of the 1920s. Both came out of emerging working-class industrial scenes, black tobacco to white textiles, with similar sounds, spirits, and vibes. And it was a two-way street, with early country and blues both borrowing quite a bit from the other. Or as latter-day bluesman (and Gary Davis understudy) Roy Book Binder put it onstage at MerleFest in 2017: "Back in the 1920s and '30s, about the only difference between blues and country music was the color of the guy behind the guitar."

Poole's proto-bluegrass and Fuller's Piedmont blues both clattered along at an up-tempo pace as spirited, good-time party music heavily influenced by ragtime. Both styles drew from the same well of material, too: old folk and pop songs that were there in the air to be repurposed. Poole used to come around Durham seeking songs to record, so it's hardly surprising that his first and biggest hit in 1925 had been called "Don't Let Your Deal Go Down *Blues*"—a song that came to him via an African American bluesman. And as a bookend, one of Poole's final recordings from 1930 was the old W. C. Handy song "Hesitating Blues," retitled "If the River Was Whiskey." Gary Davis used to play that one, too, and it was later recorded by everybody from Janis Joplin to the Texas swing band Asleep at the Wheel.

But for all of Piedmont blues' lingering influence, Durham's city fathers have seemed indifferent at best to their own blues history. University of North Carolina folklorist Glenn Hinson recounted a 2001 conversation with a member of Durham's Historic Preservation Society who revealed a shocking lack of knowledge about it.

Blind Boy Fuller,
Durham, and the
Piedmont Blues

“He knew absolutely nothing about blues in the city,” Hinson said. “He thought, no surprise, that the blues were all in Mississippi. There’s a sense of surprise when I tell people about the rich legacy of Durham. ‘*What rich legacy?*’ they’ll ask, and I’ll tell them about Blind Boy Fuller or Rev. Gary Davis. And then it’s, ‘Who are they?’

“I get this all the time,” Hinson concluded with a weary sigh.

★ That hapless historian was simply following the established narrative of twentieth-century American music, in which all blues came from the Mississippi Delta after Robert Johnson met the devil down at the cross-roads late one night. It’s a powerful myth, even though the reality is a bit more complicated. A mixture of field hollers, folk tunes, and spirituals synthesized by African American slaves and their descendants, blues started out as music sung by people trying to make the crushing hardship of their workday a little less oppressive. The music also followed the fortunes of blacks in the United States. By the time the post-Civil War industrial revolution was taking hold in the early decades of the twentieth century, the blues were migrating north as part of the greater diaspora of African Americans leaving the South seeking factory jobs. In Chicago, the music went electric, and rock ’n’ roll was not far behind.

All of which is true, as far as it goes, which isn’t far enough. For one thing, it overlooks North Carolina as an important blues hub—especially Durham, which became a hotbed of acoustic Piedmont blues for many of the same practical reasons that drew former sharecroppers to Northern cities in search of greater economic opportunity. Plenty of African Americans found similar opportunities in Durham, which was still just a village of fewer than 100 people at the close of the Civil War. But its population had grown to more than 50,000 by the time Charlie Poole died in 1931.

Where Poole’s old stomping grounds up near the Virginia line was textile country, Durham was one of the nation’s foremost tobacco towns, which would play a huge role in the city’s blues prominence. The big players in town included industrialist James B. “Buck” Duke’s American Tobacco Company, known for “Duke of Durham” cigarettes; and W. T. Blackwell & Co., whose brand of Bull Durham Tobacco became enough of a marker that Durham was dubbed the “Bull City.”

Durham’s tobacco factories employed enough African Americans to create a sizable black working class, with a stable economy in which workers could make \$12 to \$15 per week—multiples more than they could make sharecropping. Tobacco helped Durham weather the economic up-

Keeping the Blues Alive Music Maker Relief Foundation

Piedmont blues has had few ambassadors as enthusiastic as Connecticut native Tim Duffy, who came to the University of North Carolina in 1987 to study folklore. While investigating the bustling Greensboro/Winston-Salem blues scene, he connected with Robert “Nyles” Jones—better known as medicine-show legend Guitar Gabriel. They formed Music Maker Relief Foundation in 1994 because every musician Duffy met seemed to be broke.

Music Maker kept going after Gabriel’s 1996 death, producing records and shows. The organization also gives money to impoverished artists who need it, mostly grants to older African American musicians. Etta Baker, George Higgs, and Joe Thompson were a few of the North Carolina artists whose final years were a little more comfortable thanks to Music Maker relief.

“Not many of these characters are famous, but that does not mean they’re any less important than the ones you’ve heard of,” Duffy told me in 2018. “America’s best export has always been our music, invented by people whose identities were stripped as they came off the ship.”

**Blind Boy Fuller,
Durham, and the
Piedmont Blues**

heavals of the 1930s far better than much of America because demand for cigarettes, it seemed, wasn’t just recession-proof but Depression-proof.

By the end of the 1930s, more than 12,000 people lived and worked in Durham’s predominantly black Hayti district, many of them running their own small businesses. Larger African American institutions dotted the local horizon, too, including the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company (one of black America’s earliest great companies, started by a former slave in 1898), Mechanics and Farmers Bank, the *Carolina Times* newspaper, and North Carolina College for Negroes—later North Carolina Central University.

And yet none of this should be taken to mean that Durham was an enlightened racial paradise. Durham celebrated its African American mercantile class with slogans like “Chicago of the South” and “City of Opportunity,” but segregation still divided the Bull City along lines of race and class as rigidly as it did in Memphis or Birmingham. Glenn Hinson interviewed black elders in the 1990s who remembered marchers from the Ku Klux Klan being regular participants in Duke University’s annual home-

coming parade down Durham's Main Street sixty years earlier. And when the struggle for civil rights came to Durham in the 1950s and 1960s, desegregation proved to be as wrenching and ultimately irreconcilable there as in the rest of the South.

But for all that, in the 1920s and 1930s, Durham still had an African American working class getting by well enough to have money for entertainment, which local musicians would provide in and around the warehouses, cafes, barbershops, porches, house parties, fish fries, and pig pickin's. The scene was particularly bustling during harvest time, when farmers would bring their tobacco leaves into town and sell them at auction. Newly flush with cash to spend, they'd hit Durham's shopping district in a celebratory mood. So busking blues musicians would set up shop in and around the warehouses, put out a hat, start to play, and hope to draw a crowd. It worked well enough for Durham's reputation to grow among the songster set.

"If you called yourself 'playing the blues,'" declared Sam "Peg Leg Sam" Jackson, "then you had to come to Durham because that's where the music really was."

Even during its golden age, from the 1920s to the early 1940s, Durham blues was never "respectable" enough to warrant coverage in mainstream black media like the *Carolina Times*. Like bootleg liquor, the music was grassroots and mostly underground—primarily played by and for working-class blacks and the white farmers who showed up during the harvest months. Durham's tobacco-warehouse scene was one of the rare places during the era of segregation where white musicians could regularly listen to and openly interact with their African American peers. One such white musician was Sam Pridgen, better-known by his performing name, Starvin' Sam, and he was particularly enamored of Gary Davis's guitar-playing.

"Starvin' Sam used to talk about going to the warehouses and 'following Blind Gary like a puppy dog,'" said Hinson. "He sought Gary Davis out so he could watch the chords he made, which he translated into his playing. He became one of the local masters of jazz chording, which he attributed to Blind Gary: 'I never knew anyone who could make chords like Gary.' So that was translated across racial and musical lines when he played with swing-influenced string bands like the Tobacco Tags and the Swingbillies."

Worth noting: the Swingbillies' lineup also featured "Charlie Poole Jr."—James Poole, Charlie's son, also known as "Dunk." They regularly played live on Raleigh radio station WPTF, with a repertoire of the

more sophisticated popular music the elder Poole wanted to play toward the end of his career.

★ Among Durham's Big Four blues players, three were blind: Fuller, Davis, and Terry. And while Brownie McGhee was sighted, he grew up with polio until he could have a corrective operation as an adult. This high incidence of blindness and disability among blues musicians was hardly coincidental. Career opportunities were scarce during the Great Depression, scarcer still for African Americans and almost nonexistent for those who could not see. But music was one way to earn a living that did not require sight, for whites as well as blacks (see: Doc Watson).

Blind Boy Fuller,
Durham, and the
Piedmont Blues

Lack of sight was what pushed Blind Boy Fuller into music. He was born Fulton Allen sometime between 1904 and 1909 in Wadesboro, southeast of Charlotte near the South Carolina border, one of ten children in a modestly musical family. He started losing his sight toward the end of his teenage years; varying accounts cite a range of possible causes, including untreated eye infections and gonorrheal conjunctivitis. Whatever the reason, by 1928 he was completely blind and in desperate need of a way to make a living—and with a wife to support, Cora Mae Martin. Physical labor was no longer an option, so Allen turned to music and eventually became Blind Boy Fuller.

Fuller's musical self-education began with studying recordings and figuring out how to play them, especially those of the Florida bluesman Blind Blake. But Fuller would learn even more about the craft after moving to Durham around 1929 and connecting with another local bluesman, South Carolina native Blind Gary Davis, who became his teacher and mentor.

"Before Blind Boy Fuller met Gary Davis, he played only in open tunings," blues musician Scott Ainslie told me in 2017. "Fuller learned most of his guitar-playing from Gary Davis, and you can hear it. Gary was the one who taught Fuller all the fancy ragtime stuff he'd have his hits with later."

Fuller and Davis were both geniuses, but in very different ways. Fuller's gift was synthesizing and processing, pulling together different sounds across a wide range of musical styles into a crowd-pleasing package—with easily relatable subject matter about toil, trouble, and the occasional good time. Davis, meanwhile, was a once-in-a-lifetime guitar virtuoso who ultimately proved to be far more influential among other musicians than the broader public.

In style as well as substance, the two men were a study in contrasts.

*Blind Boy Fuller
(Fulton Allen), the
biggest fish in Durham's
blues pond during the 1930s.
John Edwards Memorial
Foundation Records in the
Southern Folklife Collection
at Wilson Special Collections
Library, University of North
Carolina at Chapel Hill.*



Fuller was a sharp dresser and didn't cover his unseeing eyes, while the more rumpled Davis dressed conservatively and generally wore sunglasses in public. When it came to guitar, Davis was pretty much the best anybody had ever heard — “the playingest man I ever saw, he could make a piano of a guitar. . . . While you were playing one chord, Gary would play five,” his contemporary Willie Trice said. And while Fuller was a more-than-solid player, he was no match for Davis as a guitarist. But Fuller was a much more accessible vocalist, singing in an amiable drawl that was far more appealing than Davis's rough, raw rasp. And where Fuller had a flair for off-color double entendres (as evidenced by salty numbers like “Rattlesnakin' Daddy” and “What's That Smells Like Fish?”), Davis was more inclined to forego worldly matters in favor of the gospel, which became his focus after he was ordained as a Baptist minister and became “Rev. Gary Davis.”

Davis and Fuller both stood out in a scene that did not lack for star power in its day. It's astounding to ponder the jam sessions that must have happened on a regular basis in Durham around the tobacco warehouses for the price of pocket change. And for the first half of the 1930s, Durham blues was transient and of the moment, essentially an ongoing series of live performances wherever a crowd might be gathered. The money that Fuller and Davis made from music supplemented the monthly blind-disability payments they received from the local welfare department. And because the city required them to get "official" written permission to busk on the streets, they had to play elaborate cat-and-mouse games and be cagey about how much they were making so as not to jeopardize their \$23-a-month disability stipends.

"The social workers would always try to find out if Davis and Fuller were making money playing music," historian Bill Phillips told me in 2019. "I used to be a social worker, too, looked up the records and there'd be conversations like, 'No no no, I don't make anything from it.' 'But I know you're on the corner playing music and people pay you for that!'"

All this became somewhat more complicated when Fuller began making records in 1935, which was inconvenient for him but a great gain for history and his place in it. One big reason why Fuller is the best-remembered of Durham's great bluesmen is that he left behind an usually large discography that sold well enough to stay in print through the years. For that, we have an unlikely figure to thank.

"In a lot of ways, the thirties in Durham was a golden age," latter-day blues musician Bullfrog Willard McGhee (Nathan Phillips) told me in 2017. "And we were lucky that J. B. Long happened to be running the Dollar Store there, and recorded so much of it."

★ James Baxter Long might be the least-likely music magnate imaginable, a white merchant in the dry-goods trade. Born on Christmas Day 1903 in Hickory, 150 miles west of Durham, he grew up in a family of farmers. But J. B. went into the retail business instead and did quite well. By his late twenties, Long was running the United Dollar Store in the Down East town of Kinston, where he discovered that ambient music kept customers lingering in his store. So Long played records, and enough people asked about buying them that he started carrying phonograph records, too. He functioned as a proto-record-store clerk, fielding requests for this or that song based on a few recited lines or a hummed hook. Long got to be pretty good at "Name That Tune," and it kept him in touch with popular tastes.

The First Ladies of Piedmont Blues

Elizabeth Cotten and Etta Baker

In the pantheon of Piedmont blues guitarists, two women stand especially tall: Etta Baker and Elizabeth “Libba” Cotten. And while each was a late bloomer in terms of their respective careers, both women were playing guitar almost before they could walk.

Born in Caldwell County in 1913, Baker learned guitar from her father, mostly playing at family gatherings while raising nine children and working in a textile mill. Folksinger Paul Clayton heard Baker play in Blowing Rock while on vacation and recorded her for the 1956 compilation album *Instrumental Music of the Southern Appalachians*, on which her versions of “Railroad Bill” and “One-Dime Blues” came to be regarded as definitive. If you could keep up with her rapid fingerpicking, you were said to be “one-diming it.”

“I came upon that record in the sixties,” Taj Mahal told me in 2006. “It didn’t have any pictures, so I had no idea who she was until I got to meet her years later. But man, that chord in ‘Railroad Bill,’ that was just the chord. It just cut right through me.”

Baker became a much-beloved regular on the festival circuit and eventually became a professional musician at age sixty, earning numerous awards and plaudits the final third of her life. She passed away in 2006 at age ninety-three. Since 2017, a bronze statue of Baker has stood outside Municipal Auditorium in her hometown of Morganton.

Cotten was born in 1893 in an area that eventually became Carrboro, where she wrote one of the Piedmont blues canon’s most enduring songs before she was even a teenager: “Freight Train,” based on the nearby passing trains she heard while growing up. She was left-handed and learned to play on right-handed guitars, upside down with thumb and fingers reversed, which made for a unique sound and approach to chords.

But family life intervened, and Cotten went decades without playing much music at all, until she was working in the household of the folk enthusiast Seeger family in Washington, D.C., in the 1950s. The story goes that she took a guitar off the wall, declared she hadn’t played since she was a teenager and performed “Freight Train”—causing a sensation in the Seeger home, and then the world at large.

When the folk revival hit, Cotten had a long career playing festivals and won a Grammy Award at the age of ninety-one. Joan Baez, Jerry Garcia, and her fellow North Carolina native Doc Watson are just a few of the many artists to cover “Freight Train” over the years. She died at age ninety-four in 1987.



Portrait of Elizabeth "Libba" Cotten, painted by Zen Frisbee guitarist Laird Dixon in 1993 on a wall of Cat's Cradle nightclub in Carrboro. Photo by Daniel Coston.

In 1934, people started asking for records about a recent calamity dubbed the "Lumberton Wreck." There had been a fatal collision at a railroad crossing over in Lumberton, when a train struck and killed a truck-full of tobacco farmers—perfect fodder for a topical disaster song like "Wreck of the Old 97," the enduringly popular 1924 song about a legendary 1903 train wreck near Danville, Virginia. But when Long contacted his main supplier the American Record Corporation to ask if they had any records about the Lumberton Wreck, they didn't. They suggested Long go ahead and make one himself.

Being an enterprising sort, Long hired a newspaper reporter to co-write a fairly graphic song about the "tangled bodies all along the railroad track." Then he held an audition in the form of a talent contest, although it was two talent contests, one black and one white. The gospel group Mitchell's Christian Singers won the black contest and went on

to a long and successful recording career of their own. And the Cauley Family won the white contest and recorded “Lumberton Wreck,” with keening fiddle in imitation of a train whistle. It sold well enough for Long to keep making records.

A year later, a promotion took Long to Durham to manage a larger United Dollar Store in Durham, and he brought along his freelance talent-scouting and recording operation. Long’s timing turned out to be perfect. Durham blues was at its fullest flowering, and the music drew Long out to the busking scene at the tobacco warehouses. Having an eye for talent, he soon picked up on Fulton Allen and Gary Davis as Durham’s leading lights, and they struck up an agreement to make records.

In July 1935, Long loaded his young daughter, Allen, Davis, and washboardist George Washington into a car and headed up to New York for a studio session. That era of recording was direct to acetate disc, with a strict time limit per side. And since Allen and Davis couldn’t see the red light in the studio that signaled when it was time to wrap up a song, Long and Washington had to stand next to them and give the signal by touching their arms.

Despite the awkward logistics, Allen took to recording as naturally as a duck to water. His initial session went splendidly, yielding up “Rag, Mama, Rag,” “Evil Hearted Woman,” and other classics of Piedmont blues. When it came time to press up records, however, legend has it that Long didn’t think “Fulton Allen” was catchy enough and came up with the name “Blind Boy Fuller,” as well as “Bull City Red” for Washington (worth noting: the origin of Fuller’s famous performing name is a matter of dispute, with some of his long-ago contemporaries claiming he had the “Blind Boy” sobriquet well before meeting Long).

Davis backed up Fuller on guitar on a few songs at that first 1935 session and also recorded some material of his own. But his records weren’t nearly as successful as Fuller’s, and things never really clicked between Davis and Long. Part of it came down to repertoire—Davis wanted to sing gospel, not blues, popularity be damned—and part of it was that Davis seemed convinced that Long was cheating him. Davis had enough bad feelings about it that he would not record again until the 1950s, long after he had moved away from Durham.

By contrast, Long and Fuller would have a fruitful partnership even though money remained an ongoing and contentious sticking point. Over the next five years, Long organized sessions in which Fuller recorded 130 songs, generally in batches of a dozen for a fee of \$200 per batch. And because they called on Fuller’s circle to serve as support players, these

records also serve as time-capsule documents of Durham's music beyond just Fuller.

Fuller made a lot of successful records, which Long sold by the ton out of his store. The Fuller recording that proved to be the most enduring was 1940's "Step It Up and Go," which sold a reported half-million copies. It's the "Johnny B. Goode" of Piedmont blues, the chestnut just about everybody knows. Scott Ainslie tells of traveling around North Carolina in search of old blues survivors in the 1980s and using that song to literally open doors.

Blind Boy Fuller,
Durham, and the
Piedmont Blues

"I'd be at a gas station in some town in the middle of nowhere, pull out my guitar and play 'Step It Up and Go,' and doors would start opening 100 yards away," Ainslie told me in 2017. "Soon there'd be twenty or thirty people standing around listening. And when I found any of the old guys who still played, always one of the first two or three songs they played would be something by Blind Boy Fuller—usually 'Step It Up and Go.' That one just hit so deep in the psyche of people."

Bob Dylan and Earl Scruggs are among the many artists to have recorded "Step It Up and Go," which continues to echo across the Piedmont well into the twenty-first century. At his eighty-eighth birthday party in April 2017, latter-day Durham bluesman John Dee Holeman (pretty much the last still-active Piedmont blues player with firsthand memories of Durham's 1930s glory days, albeit from childhood) fired it up and got a crowd of friends and family dancing, same as always.

Front door shut, back one too.

The blind pulled down, whatcha gonna do?

Ya gotta step it up and go—yeah go.

Well I can't stand pat, swear ya gotta step it up and go.

One voice in the crowd was heard among the dancers, Holeman's female companion, Joan: "*Don't tell me he didn't step it up and go!*"

★ Mistrust came easily to Fuller and Davis, who both worried they would be robbed because of their blindness. Davis carried a knife for protection, but Fuller went him one better by carrying a handgun. By many accounts, Fuller was not shy about breaking out his piece to make his point.

"If Fuller got mad at you," Willie Trice said of Fuller's reputation for brandishing firearms, "you better stand still and not say a word."

This took a particularly unfortunate turn in 1938, when Fuller was arrested for shooting his wife Cora Mae in the leg. It was most likely an



Durham blues elder John Dee Holeman, shown at his eighty-eighth birthday party in April 2017—a country fish-fry where he kept things moving. Photo by David Menconi.

accident, and she recovered quickly, but Cora Mae's uncle still took out an arrest warrant that landed Fuller in jail. Cora Mae refused to testify, meaning there were no witnesses, so the charges were dropped. But the incident still left marks, good as well as bad. On the positive side, it inspired one of Fuller's best autobiographical songs, "Big House Bound." With Sonny Terry's wailing harmonica as punctuation, Fuller never sounded more forlorn:

I never will forget the day they transferred me to the county jail
I had shot the woman I love
Ain't got no one to come go my bail.

Fuller's time in jail was also responsible for a big missed opportunity when John Hammond came to town. A record-business legend who helped integrate Benny Goodman's band, discovered Billie Holiday, and later worked with Bob Dylan (derided early on as "Hammond's Folly"), Bruce Springsteen, and many others, Hammond was organizing a December 1938 concert at New York's Carnegie Hall. "From Spirituals to Swing" was to be a showcase of African American music with Count Basie, Big Joe Turner, and many others. Hammond had come to Durham seeking to add Fuller to the bill.

Unfortunately, he arrived when Fuller was still behind bars. But as soon as Hammond heard Sonny Terry's harmonica playing, he decided Terry would be a more-than adequate substitute. Accompanied by Bull City Red on washboard at the Carnegie Hall show, Terry made enough of an impression to be elevated beyond the status of Blind Boy Fuller's sidekick.

Fuller wasn't the only legendary bluesman to miss out on "From Spirituals to Swing." Hammond also wanted Robert Johnson, whose 1936–37 recordings would prove to be enormously influential on rock guitarists. But the Mississippi Delta bluesman died in August 1938, reputedly poisoned by a jealous husband. In tribute, Hammond played some of Johnson's records on a phonograph set up on the Carnegie Hall stage.

★ Once out of jail, Fuller resumed recording with Sonny Terry, Bull City Red, and others from his Durham circle. But his health, which was never the best, due in part to excessive drinking, was failing as the 1930s ended. Perhaps sensing that the end was coming, he turned more and more toward gospel in his later sessions—an even dozen of the final thirty songs he recorded. By the beginning of 1941, it was clear that Fuller didn't have much time left. Willie Trice's brother Richard recalled paying him a visit on February 12, 1941.

"He heard my footsteps and knew it was me," Trice told me in 1998. "'Come here and shake Blind Boy's hand,' he told me. I didn't know what was wrong, but I knew it was something bad because he told me things I'd never heard him say before. 'If I get up,' he said, 'I'll never put my name to another blues.'"

Fuller didn't get up and died the next day of kidney failure, among other ailments. He was buried in an unmarked grave in Grove Hill Cemetery (which is now an empty field along Fayetteville Street, south of Durham's Hayti district), although his residence at 904 Massey Avenue still stands at the time of this writing. And maybe it was coincidence, but

Fuller's death marked the end point of Durham's glory days for that generation of blues.

Having lost his biggest act, J. B. Long made a few half-hearted attempts to carry on with Brownie McGhee standing in for Fuller. McGhee recorded "The Death of Blind Boy Fuller," and Long made a series of records with him billed as "Blind Boy Fuller No. 2" (a stunt Savoy Records later tried by calling Richard Trice "Little Boy Fuller" in 1946). None of them were particularly successful, but it was a sign of the times. Just as the Great Depression upended the record business in Charlie Poole's time, another major disruption was looming in the early 1940s: World War II. As the U.S. economy moved to a wartime footing, record production slowed to a fraction of its former level, and Long gave up on the music business.

Meanwhile, all three of Durham's "Big Four" survivors left North Carolina. Davis married and moved to New York in 1944, where he made his living busking his "holy blues" on the streets and giving guitar lessons. The folk revival was good to Davis, especially after Peter, Paul & Mary covered his "Samson and Delilah" (retitled after the "If I Had My Way" chorus) on their chart-topping 1962 debut album. Davis became a regular on the folk-festival circuit and was on the bill at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival where Dylan went electric. He died in 1972 at age seventy-six, among the most influential bluesmen in the pantheon.

As for Sonny & Brownie, their partnership became one of the most enduring in blues. It began with some out-of-town performances Terry had in 1942, with McGhee coming along as road manager. McGhee brought his guitar and played, too, and they kept it going. They left Durham for good soon afterward, vowing never to return, and it took a 1974 concert in Chapel Hill to bring them back.

The interplay of vocal harmonies with McGhee's guitar and Terry's wailing harp made for a magical combination—one that would outlast their friendship. For reasons that have never been officially explained (a popular but unconfirmed theory is that one quit drinking while the other didn't), things soured between them. But they drew bigger crowds together than apart, so Sonny & Brownie kept playing together pretty much up until Terry died in 1986. Chapel Hill native Mel Melton was living in Austin and went to see them every chance he could, in part to get harmonica pointers from Terry.

"I was intrigued with that whooping and wailing thing he did," Melton told me in 2017. "He showed me techniques for it, but I had to give up on it and conclude he was the only guy who was able to do it. First time I



J. B. Long with his young daughter at the Dollar Store in Kinston ca. the early 1930s—a few years before he got into the record business with Blind Boy Fuller. Photo courtesy of Jeff Yarbrough, Jill Mathieu, and the family of J. B. Long.

The Gospel Truth Mitchell's Christian Singers

Sonny Terry wasn't the only North Carolina act J. B. Long connected to John Hammond for his 1938 Carnegie Hall "From Spirituals to Swing" show. The other was Mitchell's Christian Singers, winner of Long's "Lumberton Wreck" contest in Kinston a few years previous. As African Americans, Mitchell's Christian Singers (a gospel quartet named for their manager, Willie Mitchell) wasn't the act that got to record "Lumberton Wreck." But they had a more notable recording career than the Cauley Family, releasing scores of songs between 1934 and 1940.

Biographical details are scarce about the members of Mitchell's Christian Singers, who held down working-class jobs during the week while singing on Sundays. And while music never became a fulltime career, their catalog still stands as one of the definitive recorded artifacts of this era's southern gospel jubilee. Songs like "Go Where I Send Thee" and "Somewhere in Heaven (You'll Find Me)" capture a moment of musical evolution between field hollers, sacred hymns, revival songs, and blues on the way to R & B and soul.

saw them, he and Brownie seemed to be getting along great. But by the next time, something happened. Nobody ever said what happened, but they were not on good terms, and they'd sit at opposite ends of the stage, occasionally taking little potshots at each other."

McGhee lived a decade longer after Terry's death. In his later years before passing in 1996, McGhee lived in California, where one of his regular visitors was Nathan Phillips, a young West Virginia native who later wound up in North Carolina playing Piedmont blues under the name Bullfrog Willard McGhee (in tribute to Brownie). But back then, he mostly just listened to McGhee tell stories. He heard enough to compare notes with other blues disciples.

"Dave Van Ronk once told me a story about one of Brownie's hard-luck-times songs, 'Sportin' Life Blues,'" Phillips told me in 2017. "Van Ronk learned it as a teenager but didn't feel like he had the experience to do it justice. Then he was forty and in the green room of some festival, and Sonny & Brownie walk in while he's playing it. 'I know that one,' Brownie said and Van Ronk said, 'Ya should.' Brownie asked if Van Ronk

was gonna play it onstage and he said, ‘I started learning it when I was seventeen but I’m not sure I’ve got the mileage for it even now. What do you think?’ And Brownie says to him, ‘Hell, Dave, I don’t care what you do. I was fifteen when I wrote that one.’”

★ After getting out of music, J. B. Long went into politics and served as mayor of Elon, as well as five terms on the Alamance County Board of Commissioners. When he died in 1975, the Burlington newspaper’s obituary noted Long’s Moose Lodge membership and that he was a deacon and Sunday school teacher at Elon Community Church. Asked about Long’s greatest accomplishments, one of his peers on the county board cited the fact that he “fought real hard for a realistic evaluation of property values.” Astonishingly, Long’s obituary did not even mention his musical past with Fuller and other Durham blues titans. But that wasn’t entirely surprising, given events in Durham at the time.

“Urban renewal means negro removal,” the great African American writer James Baldwin said in a 1963 television interview—and that pattern held in Durham, where urban renewal was not kind to the city’s blues and African American history. Much of the Hayti district was leveled in the 1960s to make way for the Durham Freeway, and the old players began to die off. Willie Trice and Floyd Council both passed away in 1976, the latter buried in an unmarked grave in Sanford’s White Oak A.M.E. Zion Church graveyard. Willie Trice’s brother Richard was the last of Blind Boy Fuller’s circle to go, dying at age eighty-two in 2000.

A few keepers of Durham’s blues flame did emerge, most notably John Dee Holeman. And early in the twenty-first century, the city finally got interested in acknowledging its own blues history with the occasional bus-stop mural or plaque. In 2001, Durham erected a marker near Blind Boy Fuller’s grave. That same year, the state dedicated a “Bull City Blues” historical marker that namechecked Fuller and Davis among the “African American musicians whose work defined a distinctive regional style.” Fittingly, the state marker was placed on Fayetteville Street near the former site of a barbecue stand where Fuller and Davis used to busk for tobacco workers passing by on the way home from their factory jobs.

At the 2001 state marker dedication, the guest of honor was one of the few people who could claim to have known Blind Boy Fuller: Howard Allen, his son, who had been just four years old when his father died sixty years earlier. Asked if he remembered anything about his father, Allen laughed in a way that conveyed he’d been asked that a lot over the years. Whether he really remembered or not, he had a ready answer.

Blind Boy Fuller,
Durham, and the
Piedmont Blues

**Blind Boy Fuller,
Durham, and the
Piedmont Blues**



Erected in 2001, this "Bull City Blues" historical marker stands at the corner of Fayetteville and Simmons streets, right outside Durham's Stanford L. Warren Library. Photo by David Menconi.

"He was a nice guy," Allen said. "Not hard to get along with, until I did something I shouldn't have."

So all these years later, what would Blind Boy Fuller have thought about his name being on an official state marker? Allen laughed again, almost a giggle.

"Oh," he said, "he'd be grateful, glad, and overjoyed."

3

Through the Airwaves

Arthur Smith in Charlotte

In the long-ago days before the internet or cable television, nobody had 100 channels on their TV dial. For some years in Charlotte, in fact, there was only one: CBS station WBTV, Channel 3, which began its broadcast days on the dot of seven o'clock each weekday morning with a solemnly intoned announcement—"This is channel 3, WBTV in Charlotte, North Carolina—the metropolis of the two Carolinas, the spearhead of a new South"—followed by the image of a windup alarm clock ringing. Then a nearby rotary-dial phone would ring, picked up by a man in a suit.

"Who's calling, please?" asked announcer Jim Patterson. "Carolina calling? Put 'em on!"

Then you'd see guitarist Arthur Smith, host and star of the morning variety show *Carolina Calling*. Neatly attired with slicked-back hair and necktie, and looking perkier than anybody had a right to be at that hour, Smith would lead his aptly named band the Crackerjacks through the show's upbeat theme song—"Well it's good morning, neighbors, gonna greet you with a smile!"—followed by folksy monologues about news, weather, and what-not delivered in Smith's amiable drawl.

"Well it's exactly three minutes thirty seconds after seven in the morning. The temperature is forty-seven degrees, the outlook for today is fair and warm. It should get up to a high of about sixty-seven. No rain in sight and that's good 'cause we've had plenty recently . . ."

Then they'd play more music, often backing up Johnny Cash or some other visiting guest, because pretty much every big country act would do cameo spots on *Carolina Calling* when their tours brought them through greater Charlotte. The Crackerjacks played advertising jingles between songs, too, for Tube Rose snuff, Red & White grocery stores, and other local sponsors. And various Crackerjack band members would do comedic skits as recurrent characters—"Radio Twins," "Counselors of the Airwaves," or "Brother Ralph and Cousin Phud," starring Arthur's

brother Ralph and the deep-voiced Tommy Faile as the Carolinas' answer to Laurel and Hardy. The humor was homespun, non-edgy, and family-friendly.

"How do you spell Mississippi?"

"The river or the state?"

Smith took center stage at the end of every show to do a sign-off betraying not the slightest trace of cynicism or irony: "Until next time, same time, same station, goodbye, good luck, good health, and God bless you every one." And that's pretty much how Arthur Smith's show went for three decades, from the early 1950s to the early 1980s. From the vantage point of our high-definition Technicolor age, it's easy to lose sight of just how groundbreaking this quaint little black-and-white time capsule turned out to be. But Smith was a visionary pioneer.

"I think Arthur has never really gotten his due for being such an innovator," said Don Dixon, who grew up watching *Carolina Calling* before going on to an acclaimed career as a record producer for R.E.M. and others. "Early on, he realized he could syndicate his local TV show, at a time when that was just not being done. TV was still new, and he was way ahead of everyone else."

Between Ricky Nelson, Elvis Presley, the Beatles, *American Bandstand*, and *Saturday Night Live*, television would prove to be one of the most important breakout avenues for popular music in the second half of the twentieth century. But Arthur Smith not only got there first, he had a longer run than almost anyone else. Years before *Hee Haw*, it was Smith who blazed the trail of using syndicated television to reach living rooms all over America. And after going national, *Carolina Calling* and its weekly prime-time counterpart *The Arthur Smith Show* (which aired in ninety markets at its peak) would become the basis of a grassroots multimedia empire.

Not bad for a millworker's son from Clinton, South Carolina.

★ A superb guitarist, Smith played with effortless aplomb that made everything look easy. He was also an underrated composer who wrote "Acres of Diamonds," "I Saw a Man," and other gospel standards of the sort you'd typically hear sung in Christian megachurches during 1970s-vintage televised sermons. Smith recorded and released the first version of the song "Red Headed Stranger" in 1954, more than two decades before Willie Nelson made that song the title-track centerpiece of his 1975 progressive-country breakthrough. And Smith composed a couple of major cultural signposts of his own with two instrumentals,



Arthur Smith (left) on the set of The Arthur Smith Show with one of his many big-name guests, Andy Griffith. Photo courtesy of Clay Smith.

“Feudin’ Banjos” (although you probably known that one as “Dueling Banjos,” from the 1972 movie *Deliverance*) and “Guitar Boogie,” still one of the top-selling country instrumentals of all time.

For all that, Smith’s real genius was behind the scenes as one of the shrewdest businessmen in the history of country music. And a large part of that turned out to be location. Even after he became a big fish, Smith stayed in the small pond of Charlotte, because it was the perfect place for Arthur Smith Enterprises to flourish and grow.

As the twentieth century opened, Charlotte had almost 8,000 residents and was on its way to becoming the largest city in the Carolinas. Strategically located about halfway between Atlanta and Washington, D.C., Charlotte and its surrounding region were caught up in the same rural-to-urban transformation happening with textile mills in Spray and tobacco factories in Durham. Twenty miles west of Charlotte, Gastonia was one of the Piedmont’s busiest textile towns during the 1920s and ’30s, with the same bustling string-band culture as Charlie Poole’s hometown of Spray. Many of Gastonia’s musicians gravitated toward Charlotte, seeking wider audiences. In the years before Nashville grew into

America's "Music City," Charlotte was one of several cities that might have become America's country-music capital—in large part due to WBT's radio predecessor, WBT-AM.

"In the '20s and '30s, there were a handful of clear-channel radio stations broadcasting live country music," Frye Gaillard, author of the 1978 book *Watermelon Wine: The Spirit of Country Music*, told me in 1998. "There was WSL in Chicago, WSM in Nashville, WSB in Atlanta. These stations all became magnets for talent. When country music first became a commercial enterprise, rather than just folk music of the Appalachian Mountains, it was through radio. WBT in Charlotte was one of these stations, with the Carter Family. But somehow, the critical mass of the country music industry eventually came together in Nashville rather than these other places."

WBT had humble origins, starting as a home-broadcast amateur station in 1920 with a receiver operating out of a chicken coop. It officially went on the air at 1110-AM as one of Charlotte's earliest commercial radio stations two years later, broadcasting at a modest 100 watts. In 1925, local Buick dealer C. C. Coddington bought WBT and made "Watch Buicks Travel" the station's catch-phrase—which lingered even after Coddington sold it to the then-fledgling CBS Network in 1929. By the early 1930s, WBT was broadcasting at a robust 50,000 watts, a signal strong enough to be heard all over the Southeast and even further after dark (from "Maine to Miami," the boast went).

With record sales plummeting to almost nothing in the 1930s after the Great Depression hit, radio filled the void for music listening. People would tune in stations like WBT or Raleigh's WPTF-AM to hear music. And since widespread broadcasting of records wouldn't become commonplace until after World War II, what they heard was mostly broadcasts of musicians playing live under the auspices of some commercial sponsorship. For a brief couple of years in the 1930s, one of the biggest live-performance shows in the Southeast was *Crazy Barn Dance* on WBT and WPTF.

The program's main sponsor was Crazy Water Crystals, a brand of mineral-spirit laxative that came from Texas, allegedly with profound healing properties. Crazy Water Crystals were shipped all over the country in refrigerated railroad cars painted bright yellow, serving as prime advertising for both product and radio show. The crystals sold well enough in rural areas to become a Depression-era fad, so the accompanying *Crazy Barn Dance* show was designed to appeal to country folks who liked their hillbilly music.

WBT offered up a steady diet of live country music with the Monroe Brothers (Bill and Charlie, before they split up and Bill went off to form his Blue Grass Boys), the Briarhoppers, Tobacco Tags, Carolina Tar Heels, Mainer's Mountaineers, and the Carter Family, among others. The Briarhoppers ultimately became one of the longest-running bands in all of country music, replacing members as they died off (and then replacing replacements as *they* died off) to continue into the present day.

But not so Crazy Water Crystals, which ran afoul of the U.S. government's Food and Drug Administration over the extravagant claims the product's advertisements made for its health benefits. Under scrutiny, the company began to fail in the late 1930s and the *Crazy Barn Dance* radio show went down with it.

After the record industry began to recover in the latter half of the 1930s, Charlotte had a few years as one of the South's major recording centers. RCA Victor maintained studio space in the warehouse of the Southern Radio Corporation (its regional distributor for record players, records, and radios) and the Hotel Charlotte, with the legendary Ralph Peer often overseeing sessions. Bill and Charlie Monroe made their first recordings in Charlotte in 1936, and old-time legend Uncle Dave Macon as well as the Peer-discovered Carter Family were among the other significant acts to record there.

But by the early 1940s, *Crazy Barn Dance* was gone and so was RCA Victor's studios. WSM's *The Grand Ole Opry* had begun broadcasting nationally on the NBC Radio network, which elevated Nashville's national presence enough for the emerging country music industry to begin to coalesce there. Charlotte had seemingly missed its moment to be a major music-industry center.

Then Arthur Smith came to town.

★ In 1960, the national magazine *Look* ran a story about Arthur Smith under the very fitting headline "The Sincere Hillbilly." Although he was born on April Fool's Day 1921, there was never anything remotely foolish or two-faced about the very genteel Smith. He spent his childhood in Clinton and Kershaw, South Carolina, son of a mill-working family—although they were about as far from the wild-man mill-working rambler Charlie Poole as you could get. Family patriarch Clayton Seymour Smith worked as a loom-fixer in the Spring Mills cotton mill, where he also directed the company-sponsored brass band.

After Clayton taught his son how to play trumpet, Arthur joined the band at age eleven. And that was the only instrument he ever learned

Mountain Man Wade Mainer

During the *Crazy Barn Dance* era, one of Charlotte station WBT's on-air regulars was J. E. Mainer's Mountaineers. J. E.'s younger brother Wade ultimately proved more influential with his own group, Sons of the Mountain-eers. Like Charlie Poole, Wade Mainer was a banjo player who helped nudge old-time toward bluegrass, picking in a two-finger style that was another step toward the three-finger Scruggs style that came to define bluegrass.

Eventually Mainer gave up the life of a full-time musician to work for General Motors, for the most practical of reasons: the money was better. But he continued playing on the side, mentoring younger generations. Ralph Stanley, Doc Watson, and Bill Monroe himself cited him as an influence.

He also remained a delightfully irascible fount of words-to-live-by wisdom, such as this pearl he bestowed on David Holt: "Don't tell other people your problems. Half don't want to hear about it, and the other half are glad you have 'em."

"Wade lived to 104," Holt told me in 2016, "so I guess that worked out for him."

Mainer passed away in 2011.

from someone else. Everything else, he figured out how to play on his own, and quickly. Smith family lore is that the precocious young man was giving music lessons while still a child. He also wrote his very first song at age thirteen ("Foolish Baby," which he later recorded under a different title) and made his first recordings for RCA while still a teenager.

Growing up, Arthur worked in the mills, too, but it was always clear that music would be his career path. He was not yet old enough to drive when he formed the Arthur Smith Quartet with his brothers and took up his first steady radio gig on station WSPA in Spartanburg, South Carolina. That might have put a crimp in most people's schoolwork, but Smith was an expert multitasker as well as model citizen: valedictorian and president of his high school class and a football star, with scholarship offers from Wofford College and the Citadel, plus a Congressional appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy. All of which he turned down. As Smith explained when I interviewed him in 1998, he didn't see how college would do anything but hold him up.



Arthur Smith
in Charlotte

*Wade Mainer at the WBBO microphone in Forest City, North Carolina, ca. 1950.
Photographer unknown; photo courtesy of Marshall Wyatt.*

“I always knew what I was gonna do and didn’t figure college would help me be a successful country musician,” he said. “Other guys would get ahead of me if I went away for four years. So I was out of high school on Friday, and in Spartanburg working on the following Monday. My wife says, ‘You and I never were children.’ We were planning to marry in the tenth grade and got married at nineteen.”

Still, Smith struggled early on to find an audience, possibly because he started out playing Dixieland jazz—not the easiest sell in the Carolinas at that time. But in 1940, the Arthur Smith Quartet changed their name to the Carolina Crackerjacks (a word they picked out of Webster’s dictionary after noting the definition: “a thing of highest excellence”) and their musical direction from jazz to country. Even after going country, however, Smith still played electric guitar with the tones and feel of a jazzman. That trumpet he started out playing remained in his musical makeup, and his love of New Orleans trumpeter Louis Armstrong and gypsy-jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt always showed in his playing.

Switching to country paid off, and WBT station manager Charles Crutchfield lured Smith to the big city of Charlotte in the early 1940s. He brought the Crackerjacks with him, and they played on the air three

times a day, while Smith played in other bands including the Briarhoppers on the side. Then World War II intervened. Smith's bandmate brothers Sonny and Ralph both joined the Army while Arthur joined the Navy, getting a spot in the Navy Band. Stationed in Washington, D.C., Smith played all over town, and word got out about this young man from down South who knew jazz chords and could pick fast as lightning. Soon Smith was moonlighting as a session player for a recording operation similar to what J. B. Long had with Blind Boy Fuller in Durham a decade earlier.

"These Jewish boys had a drugstore and were also running a label, Super Disc," Smith said. "They loved the way I played guitar and got me in for some sessions with Lionel Hampton, Duke Ellington, people like that. One night in 1945, they had me in with a country group. You'd do four songs in three hours, so we did the four songs and Irving Field—who later owned Madison Square Garden—asked if anybody had something they wanted to record. I said I did, and I told the bass player and the drummer the chords. Now the most you could put on a 78 rpm was three minutes twenty seconds. We got into the song, I got to feelin' it and so did they. Irving was yelling at us through the window to cut it off, and I did a slow takeout. We all realized halfway through that this had to be a hit. Irving came out, looking all sweaty, and said, 'You about scared me to death. Two more seconds and we'd have lost the whole thing.'"

The record they almost lost would prove to be Smith's breakthrough. "Guitar Boogie" was a twelve-bar instrumental that harkened back to the previous decade's boogie-woogie fad, not too far removed in tempo and vibe from the old Piedmont blues number "Step It Up and Go." It was the sort of riffing you heard a lot from piano players—walking bass played with the left hand, melodic figures with the right. Smith had the bright idea to transpose it from piano to guitar, and he played it with a feel that owed at least as much to jazz as to country.

Smith's pharmacy friends began selling "Guitar Boogie" out of their drugstore in 1945 and couldn't keep up with demand. After the record got wider distribution, "Guitar Boogie" took off and sold millions, reaching number 1 on multiple charts to become an indelible part of the American popular-music vocabulary.

"'Guitar Boogie' was pretty much the first thing all rock 'n' roll kids learned to play," said Don Dixon, bassist in various bands including Arrogance, humming the song's walking bassline—two bars of an E-major triad followed by one bar of an A-major triad, then E, B7 and E again. "It was my first bassline, for sure, the first one I ever learned. How iconic is that?"

One of those bass players who learned “Guitar Boogie” was Paul McCartney. When he played Raleigh’s Carter-Finley Stadium in 1990, McCartney gave an onstage shout-out to Smith and told the audience, “I treasure my copy of ‘Guitar Boogie.’” Also in 1990, *Guitar World* magazine named it the top country-guitar instrumental of all time. As recently as 2015, it was still turning up as soundtrack to a Google Fiber television commercial.

By the time Smith’s Navy hitch concluded with the end of World War II, he was a made man. And that status yielded up a nickname: Arthur “Guitar Boogie” Smith.

★ Ordinarily, this is the point where you’d expect someone like Smith to seek greener pastures and larger fortunes in New York or Los Angeles, or at least Nashville. Instead, he decided he could do just as well and maybe even better back home. So Smith returned to Charlotte, the Briarhoppers, and WBT while cutting country records for MGM. At MGM, Smith was label mates with Bob Wills—the king of Western swing, a fiddle player who combined country, jazz, and jump blues into sharp big-band music that packed dance halls across Texas.

“For a few years, Bob Wills and I used to own the charts,” Smith said. “Then we were both in New York, in Frank Walker’s office at MGM, and he said he had a tape of someone from the *Louisiana Hayride* and wondered what we thought. It was Hank Williams’s ‘Lovesick Blues.’ Wills said, ‘That guy can’t keep time.’ But I said, ‘I think he’s got a real commercial voice and you should sign him.’ Well, within a year, Hank Williams was all over the place and no one was buying Bob Wills or Arthur Smith records anymore.”

Of note, that MGM executive was the same Frank Walker who had signed Charlie Poole to Columbia Records in 1925—and made him keep recording old-time hillbilly music, when the music he wanted to play was a lot closer to Wills’s sophisticated Western swing. As for Smith, he wasn’t too concerned about Hank Williams passing him by because he had bigger fish to fry as the 1940s drew to a close. WBT was expanding into the new medium of television with WBTB, and Smith was making plans to expand with it.

WBTB went on the air in 1949 as the first TV station in the Carolinas, and just the thirteenth nationwide. Smith was one of the station’s early stars, especially once he started the variety shows, but it made for a grueling workload. Getting *Carolina Calling* on the air at 7:00 A.M. every day involved arising at 4:30, playing the show and going right into daily

meetings and rehearsals as soon as it ended at 8:00. There was the next day's show to prepare for, plus *The Arthur Smith* show every Thursday evening, plus he was still doing his *Top of the Morning* syndicated radio show (which had the same sponsor for its entire thirty-year history, Bost Bread).

But it was time and effort well-spent, because it turned Smith into a huge regional star. A 1955 *Charlotte Observer* story admiringly noted that Smith "can draw more folks out of the hills, dales and villages of the Carolinas than anybody except perhaps Ike Eisenhower." That stature turned *The Arthur Smith Show* and *Carolina Calling* into must-plays for a wide swath of country stars, too. Johnny Cash, Glen Campbell, Loretta Lynn, Andy Griffith, Chet Atkins, Earl Scruggs, Roy Orbison, and Elvis Presley all did guest spots. So did Bob Hope, the Ferrante & Teicher piano duo, Rev. Billy Graham, and even Richard Nixon—who was the aforementioned Eisenhower's vice president in 1954 when he showed up to play "Home on the Range" on piano "and did pretty well," according to Smith. The variety format gave spotlight time to Smith's cohorts and regulars, some of whom became decent-sized stars in their own right—vocalist Tommy Faile, gospel singer George Beverly Shea, and Winston-Salem native George Hamilton IV among them.

"Arthur Smith had *the* important show in the '50s," Joe Wilson, who went on to a career as executive director of the National Council for the Traditional Arts, told me in 1998. "I lived on the edge of Tennessee, between Boone and Mountain City, and everybody watched Arthur Smith. You could miss anything, but not that. He had maybe the best banjo player in the world, Don Reno, and his brother Ralph could do as good a bull-in-the-china-shop version of Laurel and Hardy as anybody. The other Smith brother Sonny was a great player, too. And Tommy Faile, a glorious singer—he could've been the biggest singer in Nashville if he'd ever left Charlotte. But something about Charlotte held those lads."

Of course, one thing keeping the crew in Charlotte was that Arthur Smith Enterprises helped make the city a prosperous place to be. Along with his syndicated TV shows (and production of similar radio and TV shows for Johnny Cash, Chet Atkins, and others), Smith's empire came to include record labels specializing in gospel and bluegrass, a song-publishing company to administer the hundreds of songs he wrote, hardware stores, grocers, and even the world's largest fishing tournament.

Smith didn't just figure out syndication and diversification but vertical integration, controlling the means of production. Arthur Smith Studio began in 1957 as the final piece of his music-production puzzle—first

On Tape Reflection Sound Studios

Arthur Smith Studios had already been running for more than a decade in 1969, when Wayne Jernigan gave up on Nashville and moved to his then-wife's hometown of Charlotte to open Reflection Sound Studios. It would have a forty-five-year run as recording site for everybody from Whitney Houston to local beach bands.

Led Zeppelin's Robert Plant, Eagles guitarist Joe Walsh, "Queen of Hip-Hop Soul" Mary J. Blige, platinum Fayetteville rapper J. Cole, crossover gospel star Kirk Franklin, and North Carolina R & B stars Fantasia, Anthony Hamilton, and Calvin Richardson all recorded at Reflection. R.E.M.'s first two albums, Kenny Loggins's vocals on the 1980 *Caddy Shack* hit "I'm Alright" and countless commercial voice-overs also came out of Reflection.

Eventually, however, changing tides in the recording industry doomed it. After the advent of Pro Tools made studio-grade recording possible at home, destination studios across America began closing in droves early in the twenty-first century. A few remain in North Carolina, including Manifold in Pittsboro and Asheville's Echo Mountain.

But not Reflection, which closed in 2014. The last session's client was a South Carolina beach band, Dip Ferrell & the Truetones, overseen by Don Dixon, coproducer of those R.E.M. albums. The entire block where Reflection stood was torn down to make way for an upscale 240-unit apartment building, the Gibson—named after the guitar brand. Yet at the time of this writing, there is no marker or plaque about Reflection's past on the building itself.

Arthur Smith
in Charlotte

in his garage before a proper facility on Monroe Road opened in 1964. Smith made his own records there and also rented it out to the likes of Statler Brothers, Flatt & Scruggs, and Johnny Cash. But the studio's most historically momentous session began with a wee-small-hours phone call early one morning in 1965, not long before Smith had to get up to do that day's *Carolina Calling* show.

"James Brown called me one morning at 4 A.M.," Smith recalled. "I had no idea how he got my number. 'Mr. Smith,' he said, 'I ain't had nothin' for about three years now and some people said I should talk to you.' I told James we had a nice studio and he should do a date, so I booked him

for when there was some time. I knew this wouldn't be one of those four-songs-in-three-hours things because he'd be messing around, trying to come up with something. But it worked out."

As it happened, Arthur Smith Studio was where Brown recorded his funk landmark "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag," which did indeed turn out to be a whole new thing. Featuring every instrument wound tight in percussive vamping "on the one," "Brand New Bag" put Brown on the mainstream map when it was released in July 1965. It was the breakthrough where Brown turned soul into funk, not to mention his first top-ten pop hit and Grammy winner.

To Smith, however, it was just another day at the office.

"Arthur's like a homegrown, music-makin' machine," George Hamilton V, who used to watch his country-star father George IV tape shows with Smith, told me in 1998. "I know this sounds like living in yesteryear, but there's a big void where shows like that used to be. It was a classy show, a country version of Lawrence Welk. He's quite an inspiration. When I think about him, I wonder how he had the balls and the guts to get all this stuff going. I guess he just never heard anybody say it can't be done because he's done everything. I've never known anybody you couldn't say *something* bad about—but I'd have to think real hard on him."

★ One day in late 1972, Smith got a call from his old friend Wayne "Skeeter" Haas, a former Crackerjacks bandmate who had gone on to work at a radio station. Skeeter was calling with disturbing news: "I'm listening to 'Feudin' Banjos,'" he told Smith. "But they don't call it that, and it ain't got your name on it."

Soon after that, everybody else in America was also hearing "Dueling Banjos," an instrumental by New York folk-revival veterans Eric Weissberg and Steve Mandell—on movie screens as well as the radio because the song was a key part of the southern rural-noir horror film *Deliverance*. Directed by John Boorman and based on James Dickey's 1970 novel about an ill-fated whitewater-rafting trip, *Deliverance* starred Burt Reynolds and Jon Voight. But one of the most memorable things about the movie was "Dueling Banjos," played onscreen by actors Billy Redden and Ronny Cox as the redneck locals danced and the visiting city slickers looked on, bemused. With Redden as a musically gifted savant seemingly incapable of normal human interaction, "Dueling Banjos" came across as caricature. It set a tone of off-kilter, uneasy menace that the rest of the film more than lived up to.



The original 1955 MGM Records issue of Arthur Smith's "Feudin' Banjos"—later purloined as "Dueling Banjos" in the 1972 movie Deliverance, to the eventual regret of the filmmakers. Photo courtesy of Marshall Wyatt.

Deliverance was a career-making hit for Burt Reynolds, establishing him as one of Hollywood's most bankable leading men. It also turned "Dueling Banjos" into a cultural signpost, with the song's call-to-arms five-note riff lingering as instantly recognizable sonic shorthand for scary backwoods situations. "Dueling Banjos" sounded like it had to be an old folk song from the mountains, a tune that had been around long enough to be in the public domain and therefore fair game to adapt, cover and claim as one's own—a music-business practice that had been going on since A. P. Carter's time, when he would affix his name to old songs he heard played out in the country. Everyone involved with *Deliverance* thought "Banjos" was theirs for the taking.

Except it wasn't.

Arthur Smith had written this song nearly two decades earlier, with a different title. It was an in-the-studio concoction Smith came up with and hashed out with Don Reno, five-string banjo player for the Crackerjacks (and also Smith's instrumental foil on the original 1945 recording of "Guitar Boogie"). "You just follow me," Smith told Reno as he picked up a tenor banjo, and they traded the riff back and forth. Smith threw in a little "Yankee Doodle Dandy," too, and "Feudin' Banjos" was born. Smith's original 1955 version was a solid success, and "Feudin' Banjos" became

even more popular when the bluegrass band the Dillards played it on an episode of *The Andy Griffith Show* in 1963.

“After that, about seven or eight country groups recorded it and claimed it was theirs,” Smith told me in 1998. He was sitting at his desk at Arthur Smith Enterprises, carefully trimming his nails with a pocket-knife as he spoke. “But there hadn’t been enough money involved to pay a lawyer until Warner Bros. did that.”

Smith patiently bided his time, waiting to see just how big a hit the song and film would be before making his move, which turned out to be shrewd. *Deliverance* was one of 1972’s top-grossing movies, and in early 1973 “Dueling Banjos” was climbing *Billboard*’s pop-singles chart on the way up to its eventual peak at number 2. When Smith started calling Warner, the entertainment company behind *Deliverance*, he discovered that they were not in a hurry to return his phone calls. Smith finally reached a studio representative and explained the situation, only to be told he did not have enough time or money to take on a company as big as Warner.

“Sir,” Smith replied, “I do have the time, and I believe I can get the money.”

Warner grievously underestimated Smith’s determination, which proved to be an expensive mistake. But it took a copyright-infringement lawsuit and two years of legal wrangling for Smith to get his due—a settlement of \$200,000, after the studio tried to lowball him with an initial offer of \$15,000; future royalties on sales and airplay; and credit on the soundtrack album (but not in the credits of the movie, which the straitlaced, deeply religious Smith found offensive). A number of awards the song won were also transferred to Smith, a Grammy Award among them. But the real prize was establishing the song’s copyright once and for all. Compared to the flood of royalties “Dueling Banjos” went on to generate for Smith over the years, that initial \$200,000 settlement was just a drop in the bucket.

“Cost me \$125,000 in lawyers’ fees before we got to court, but it was worth it,” Smith told me, slipping into a broad grin. “A good copyright is really worth something. I’ve always said I’d rather have ten good copyrights than the Empire State Building. I get a nice check every ninety days.”

★ Arthur Smith would continue cashing those nice checks every ninety days for another four decades, during which time he remained the grand old man of local music history in Charlotte—even after his daily grind

finally started winding down in the early 1980s. His brother Ralph's death from cancer in 1982 was a blow and hastened Arthur's departure from a regular television schedule. He concentrated on running his sportfishing tournament (the largest of its kind in the world, according to *Sports Illustrated* magazine in 1984), Arthur Smith Studio, and publishing catalog. But he finally gave up the studio, too, selling it in the mid-1980s to Tim Eaton, who renamed it Studio East. It finally closed down for good in 2018.

Arthur Smith
in Charlotte

When I interviewed Smith in 1998, he was seventy-seven years old and had recently earned a gold record for having a song on a hit gospel album by the country singer Ricky Van Shelton. That year found Smith taking a victory lap upon winning a North Carolina Folk Heritage Award from the state arts council. He was still doing the occasional TV show and seemed pretty sanguine about his place in the world—if also a little bemused about the music business.

“From the length of time I’ve been in the business,” he said, “I know just about everybody who’s done anything up until about twenty-four months ago. And I don’t know nobody now.”

What mattered, however, was that Arthur Smith stayed as busy as he wanted to and still played guitar just as beautifully as ever. When he finally died in 2014, he had just turned ninety-three years old two days earlier. Among the survivors he left behind was Dorothy, his wife of seventy-two years. At the funeral, the Avett Brothers—another big act who chose to stick around greater Charlotte even after hitting it big—sang “Amazing Grace.”

4

Rocket Man Earl Scruggs and the Birth of Bluegrass

The first time I ever went to a *Grand Ole Opry* show was in April of 2002. And aside from the glitzier surroundings of Nashville's Opryland complex—the show's primary home since 1974, after three decades at the Ryman Auditorium downtown—it felt like a trip back in time. True, then-rising hitmaker Darryl Worley was there to plug his new single “I Miss My Friend,” which had just started climbing the country charts (where it would hit number 1 that fall). But Little Jimmy Dickens was there, all four feet eleven inches of him, representing the old guard's novelty-song side. And during the commercial breaks, the live audience at Opryland Auditorium heard the same old-fashioned spots for Odom's Tennessee Pride country sausage and Martha White flour that radio listeners across the country did, as they tuned in “The Show That Made Country Music Famous.”

Just another Saturday night at the Opry, except for one memory. Also on the bill that night was the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, who had just released *Will the Circle Be Unbroken, Volume III*—the third edition of their landmark series going all the way back to 1972. And sitting in with them that night was a key elder contributor to all three volumes, Earl Scruggs, who still picked as fine a banjo as ever at age seventy-eight. John McEuen, the Dirt Band's banjo player and a musician with a keen sense of history, appeared to be almost beside himself with eagerness as he and Scruggs traded solos, almost to the point of jumping up and down. And he burst into a spontaneous little jig at the end of the first song because, while he and Scruggs had played together many times, they'd never done it *here*.

“John is excited because he finally got to play at the Grand Ole Opry with Earl Scruggs,” Dirt Band front man Jeff Hanna explained as McEuen gyrated, and the crowd laughed and roared in approval. From my vantage point toward the back of the room, I couldn't tell if the bespectacled Scruggs cracked a smile. But probably not. Near as I could tell, he

just stood by impassively, waiting on the next tune. That was just another Saturday night at the Opry for Earl Scruggs, too, who had a lot of experience with people fussing over him.

Either before or since, nobody has played the banjo better than Scruggs, who not only perfected a style of fingerpicking but did it so well it came to be known as “Scruggs style.” Rapid three-finger roll patterns like Scruggs’s “Foggy Mountain Roll” or his “Forward/Backward Roll” are the very foundation of bluegrass, as embedded in the style as power chords in heavy metal or pedal steel in country music. Like Chuck Berry and 1950s rock ‘n’ roll guitar, it’s impossible to imagine bluegrass without banjo the way Scruggs played it.

“Earl was so far ahead of his time that I don’t know if he’s fully appreciated, even now,” banjo-playing historian Jim Mills told me in 2017, five years after Scruggs’s death. “I would equate it to living in the time of Bach or Beethoven—did their peers fully appreciate how influential they would still be however many hundreds of years later? We’re blessed to have lived in the time of Earl Scruggs. If the world stands 100 more years, I think he’ll be appreciated even more.”

★ Earl Eugene Scruggs came by his retiring modesty honestly. Born to humble circumstances on January 6, 1924, in Boiling Springs, he was the youngest of five children born to George and Lula Scruggs. A working family of farmers, they grew cotton, corn, potatoes, and wheat. And when they weren’t growing staples, music was the Scruggs clan’s main occupation. Father George played a little banjo and fiddle while mom played pump organ at church, and the kids would play around with whatever instruments were around the house.

Earl never got to play with his father, who died from lung cancer at the age of fifty-two, when Earl was just four years old. But that was right around the time when young Earl began plunking around on that banjo himself—although he would go far, far beyond the pluck-strum-pluck of his father’s old-time clawhammer frailing. Even though Scruggs would revolutionize three-finger banjo picking, it wasn’t something he invented out of whole cloth.

Early in the twentieth century, banjo-playing was evolving beyond the old clawhammer strumming that prevailed on the minstrel circuit to more sophisticated styles of fingerpicking. By the time of Charlie Poole’s roaring-twenties heyday, picking with three fingers (thumb, index, and middle fingers) had become a regional idiosyncrasy that prevailed across the Carolinas but few other places. Adding the middle finger opened up

worlds of expanded melodic possibilities, and it's the path Earl followed. By the time he was learning to play during childhood, Earl had a circle of relatives and acquaintances to learn the basics from, including oldest brother Junie, distant relative Smith Hammett, and a blind banjoist named Mack Woolbright.

But perhaps the biggest influence of all on banjo players across the Southeast was DeWitt "Snuffy" Jenkins—who played in a three-finger style, and did it on the radio. The Jenkins String Band was a regular on various programs on Charlotte's WBT during the 1930s, the Saturday-night *Crazy Barn Dance* among them, which Earl heard at an impressionable age. He wasn't the only one listening, either.

"WBT covered South Carolina and a big portion of North Carolina into Virginia," said Jim Mills. "Ralph Stanley is another who said Snuffy Jenkins was the first he heard of three-finger style banjo on the radio. Rudy Lyle and Don Reno, they all said that Snuffy really had it going on in the 1930s, when he was serious about it before turning into more of a clown later on."

Earl was a fast learner, and he was playing well enough to start showing up on the radio himself at a young age. The young prodigy's first public performance came at age six with his brothers on WSPA in Spartanburg, South Carolina—the same station that Arthur Smith had started out on before going to WBT. And where many musicians can labor for a lifetime without ever shaping a recognizable style, Earl found his three-finger banjo voice at the ripe old age of ten. The story goes that Earl and his brother Horace quarreled one day and their mother banished each to separate parts of the house. Earl had a banjo in his hands, as usual, idly playing an old song called "Reuben" without thinking about it, when he suddenly realized he was picking with three fingers. He wasn't fumbling around, either, but really picking, and smoothly.

"I've got it!" Earl declared, and he spent the following week practicing nothing but "Reuben" over and over to get it down perfectly. His older brother and banjo mentor Junie was coming home to visit, and Earl wanted to show off his new technique. So he was waiting out on the porch, three-finger picking "Reuben," when Junie came up the walk, up the steps and onto the porch. The way Earl used to tell it, Junie got all the way to the door of the house before he finally turned and acknowledged his brother's presence with a question: "Is that all you know?"

★ Given Scruggs's taciturn nature, it's actually a bit surprising that banjo turned out to be his calling. Banjo has deep roots in the comedy of

The Innovators George Shuffler and Bobby Hicks

Among the many North Carolina bluegrass players who have made a mark as side musicians, these two International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) Hall of Famers stand out for their innovations.

Valdese native George Shuffler spent two decades with the Stanley Brothers in the early days of bluegrass. As George Harrison to Ralph and Carter's John Lennon and Paul McCartney, Shuffler played a little of everything, but mostly guitar. Due to tight finances, the ensemble was frequently just the trio of Shuffler plus the two Stanleys. That left a lot of sonic space for the guitar to fill, which Shuffler did by crosspicking.

Crosspicking is to bluegrass what the shave-and-a-haircut-two-bits Bo Diddley beat is to rock 'n' roll. It involves elements of Merle Travis-style picking with Mother Maybelle Carter's "Carter Scratch," enabling the player to produce rhythm and melody elements simultaneously.

"There's not a bluegrass player out there who hasn't had some of George's influence on his playing," Asheville banjo player Laura Boosinger told me in 2007. "He invented a style of guitar people have been emulating for fifty years."

As for Newton-born fiddler Bobby Hicks, he spent four years with Bill Monroe, followed by stints with Porter Wagoner, Mel Tillis, Ricky Skaggs, and others—a resume that got him into IBMA's Hall of Fame in 2017. But it was in "Miss Idaho" country singer Judy Lynn's band that he thought to beef up his sound by adding a fifth string to his fiddle in 1963.

"I did it with a pocketknife," Hicks told me in 2014. "Put another hole in the peg head and added a string, and if I'd messed up I would've been in deep trouble because that was the only fiddle I had. But that helped get the double-stop harmonies I became known for."

Shuffler lived to age eighty-eight and passed away in 2014, three years after making the IBMA Hall of Fame. And at the time of this writing, eighty-six-year-old Hicks still leads a weekly bluegrass jam every Thursday night at Zuma Coffee in the Madison County town of Marshall.

medicine shows and vaudeville revues, and for most of the first half of the twentieth century it was mostly a comedic prop for hillbilly clowns like Uncle Dave Macon and Louis Marshall “Grandpa” Jones (and, much later, wild-and-crazy-guy comedian Steve Martin—although Martin later became a serious player in his own right). And despite being an early adapter of three-finger banjo playing, Charlie Poole was less a banjo player than an entertainer who played a banjo.

Scruggs, however, was no comedian or even much of a talker.

“I loved Earl, but he didn’t talk much,” folk icon Joan Baez told me in 2017. “When I’d see him, his wife Louise did it all for him. And while she did, he’d get out a guitar and play ‘Wildwood Flower,’ because that song is what I sang with him. I loved to watch his hands fly.”

Those who knew Scruggs speak admiringly about his artistry, generosity, and kindness. But he’s not remembered as much of a humorist. He seemed to regard music as too serious for jokes, playing with a stoic cool where all the flash was in music, not mannerisms.

All the same, Scruggs’s no-nonsense deadpan could be quite droll. In 1971, when a young John McEuen asked him to suggest a fiddle player for the Dirt Band’s first *Circle* album, Scruggs recommended hillbilly-jazz fiddler Vassar Clements. Not being familiar with Clements, McEuen asked if he’d be able to cover the range of styles required, to which Scruggs would only say: “He’ll do.” Clements was one of the world’s foremost fiddle virtuosos, and once McEuen heard him he seriously questioned whether or not his Dirt Band would be able to keep up. Then there was the session for McEuen’s 1991 solo album *String Wizards*, when he and Scruggs recorded a song called “Carolina Traveler.”

“I frailed, Earl picked, and Roy Huskey played bass,” McEuen recalled in 2017. “We finished one take and I asked Earl if we should do it again. ‘I don’t reckon why,’ Earl said, and I said, ‘Maybe we could do it better.’ And Earl said, ‘Well, what was wrong with that one?’”

By the time he was an adult, Scruggs seldom if ever played a wrong note, thanks to a lifetime of study, work, and practice. He spent his teenage years diligently practicing while obsessively tuning in *The Grand Ole Opry* or Snuffy Jenkins on WBT on his family’s battery-powered Sears Roebuck radio. He’d also play whatever records came his way on the Victrola, with the Carter Family and Durham bluesman Blind Boy Fuller emerging as particular favorites. Perhaps the latter accounts for the occasional blue notes Scruggs would bend into his banjo solos. Years later, with the Earl Scruggs Revue, he would record Fuller’s “Step It Up and Go.”

But music had to take a back seat when America entered World War II

a month before Earl turned eighteen. With the family farm struggling, Earl turned to mill work and took a job at Lily Mills in 1942. He earned forty cents an hour making threads for parachute cloth, a grind he kept up for three years. Earl kept playing banjo every chance he got, too, and the war's end in 1945 meant he could return to music fulltime.

Soon after, the twenty-one-year-old Scruggs found himself in Knoxville, Tennessee, with "Lost John" Miller's Allied Kentuckians. They played shows and also a regular Saturday morning gig on Nashville's WSM, and the fleet-fingered young man wowed everyone who heard him. A friend from back home, fiddler Jim Shumate, began whispering in Scruggs's ear about greener pastures for a player of his caliber. But Scruggs was content with the \$50 weekly salary he earned from Miller, far more than he was taking home from the mill. That all changed at the beginning of December 1945, when Miller abruptly decided he didn't want to tour anymore. Scruggs was suddenly unemployed.

Fortunately, it just so happened that the man Jim Shumate fiddled for was in need of a banjo player: Bill Monroe.

★ While Bill Monroe had been leading a band called the Blue Grass Boys since 1938, at that point the music was not yet known as bluegrass. But Bill had been moving his music in that direction for more than a decade, starting with his time rambling around the Southeast with older brother Charlie. Natives of Kentucky, Bill and Charlie had moved to Indiana in 1929 to work at an oil refinery before starting a band with their brother Birch Monroe, playing around the Chicago area. Eventually Charlie and Bill split off as a duo and came south, scoring success with radio gigs in cities across the Carolinas, including WPTF in Raleigh. They also recorded extensively for Victor's Bluebird label, mostly in Charlotte, scoring a major gospel hit with 1936's "What Would You Give in Exchange for Your Soul?"

In addition to playing a scorching mandolin, Bill was particularly adept at the high tenor vocal part, which he made sound lonesome and yearning. Good as they sounded together, however, Charlie and Bill's relationship was famously stormy, ranging from incessant bickering to full-on physical violence. The brothers' partnership came to its final end in the summer of 1938, just as they were about to leave Raleigh.

"They had hit all the venues within driving distance of Raleigh, and it was time to move on to greener pastures," historian and record collector Marshall Wyatt told me in 2017. "Charlie told Bill he had a gig lined up at WNOX in Knoxville, leaving at eight the next morning. 'If you're here

by then, I'll know we're a team and we'll head for Knoxville,' he told Bill. But Bill never showed up and that was the end of the Monroe Brothers."

After going solo, Bill put together his Blue Grass Boys and they were *Grand Ole Opry* regulars by 1939. Things continued percolating along for Monroe pretty well during the war years and the music was definitely a big step beyond old-time string bands, but something was still missing. Monroe played mandolin so fast that Blue Grass Boys guitarist Lester Flatt had to come up with his trademark syncopated "G run" riff to keep up, which he did well enough. Blue Grass Boys banjo player Dave "Stringbean" Akeman, however, could not. A protégé of Uncle Dave Macon, Akeman played in the old style and was mostly kept around for comic relief (not surprisingly, he would go on to be a popular cast member of the country variety show *Hee Haw* up until he and his wife were murdered in a grisly home-invasion robbery in 1973). When Akeman decided to leave Monroe in late 1945 to form a comedy duo with vaudeville entertainer Lew Childre, Flatt was of a mind that they didn't need another banjo player at all—until, that is, he heard Earl Scruggs.

Scruggs played a couple of auditions for Monroe in Nashville the first week of December 1945, including one backstage at the Ryman Auditorium with an unimpressed Uncle Dave Macon among those looking on (Macon reportedly responded that while Scruggs played a good banjo, he wasn't "a damn bit funny"). But Scruggs's playing was unique enough for everyone else to encircle until he "felt like an animal in a cage." Flatt reportedly advised Monroe to get Scruggs in the band "whatever it costs," but it didn't actually cost that much—just the same \$60 monthly salary as the other Blue Grass Boys. Scruggs was happy to be pulling down \$10 more per month than he'd made with John Miller.

Few dates make as specific a dividing line as December 8, 1945, which marked Scruggs's onstage debut at that evening's *Grand Ole Opry* broadcast from the Ryman. It remains among the most momentous nights in the *Opry*'s storied history, because Scruggs's impact was immediate and massive from the very first solo he played. Few people outside the Carolinas had heard anything like this before, and it seemed impossible that just one person could play such a rush of so many notes so fast, each perfectly timed. Compared to how most old-style banjo players plunked along with thumb and index finger, Scruggs's banjo-playing was a rocket that soared fast enough to shatter the sound barrier.

"I was with the Skaggs band for fifteen years, and after shows when people would come up to the table, we'd ask any old-timer who looked old enough if they'd ever seen Monroe's Blue Grass Boys with Lester and

Earl,” said Jim Mills. “I’ve met about five who had, and they all talked about it like it was seeing the Beatles. Just a dream band and a well-oiled machine.”

Scruggs’s banjo proved to be the final missing piece to that well-oiled machine, and his addition created bluegrass as we know it. While that Saturday night at the Opry anointed Monroe as the “Father of Bluegrass,” there’s no denying how important Scruggs’s contribution to the style was. Before long, announcers were introducing the group as “Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys with Earl Scruggs and his fancy banjo—the boy who makes the banjo talk.”

“Prior to Earl, banjo-playing was frailing like Grandpa Jones or plucking like Stringbean,” said McEuen. “But there was no solid direction for it. Fiddle had been hard to hear, too, until ‘Orange Blossom Special’ put it out front. There weren’t a lot of leads for guitar, but what Monroe did on mandolin was exciting. Then Earl walks up to the mike with his banjo, and you can suddenly hear all those notes to the back wall. He was able to make banjo the standout instrument.”

★ At age twenty-one, the shy and reserved Scruggs found himself thrust into a bright spotlight as one of the most famous musicians in country music—the banjo player everybody wanted to hear, and also to play like. Demand for Monroe’s Blue Grass Boys and Earl’s fancy banjo was such that they lived a grueling existence, on the road more or less constantly. They’d travel the country stuffed into a 1941 Chevy limo and go days without so much as taking off their shoes, cleaning up in gas-station restrooms along the way. Before gigs, they’d sometimes loosen up by throwing a baseball around.

While Scruggs technically resided in Nashville for the twenty-seven months he spent in Monroe’s employ, about the only time he was ever home was on Saturdays for each week’s *Grand Ole Opry* broadcast. The other six days of the week, he lived a rambling life that would have suited Charlie Poole just fine. But it wore on the homebody Scruggs, although he did manage to find time for the important things. One *Opry* Saturday night in 1946, Scruggs caught the eye of a pretty young woman on the front row of the Ryman. He and Anna “Louise” Certain met that night, took to courting, and would marry in the spring of 1948, staying together until the end of their days.

But first, Scruggs slogged through the Blue Grass Boys’ all-consuming grind through 1946 and ’47. About the only time Monroe’s boys weren’t onstage or in the car was when they were recording. Scruggs played on



Promotional photo of Flatt & Scruggs taken at their December 8, 1962, performance at New York City's Carnegie Hall. From left: Earl Scruggs, Jake Tullock, Paul Warren, and Lester Flatt. John Edwards Memorial Foundation Records in the Southern Folklife Collection at Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

more than two dozen recordings with Monroe, including “Blue Moon of Kentucky” and “Heavy Traffic Ahead”—classics and landmarks all, still heard at bluegrass festivals to this day because every player worth their fingerpicks knows them. Scruggs was making his mark, and yet the work was taking its toll. By February of 1948, he decided he’d had enough and gave notice, declaring he was going back home to North Carolina to marry Louise and return to his old job at Lily Mills. Monroe did not take kindly to the news and refused to speak to him, beyond predicting that “Earl Scruggs” was a name that would never be heard from again.

68 Thanks to Lester Flatt, that turned out not to be the case. Flatt quit

Monroe's band not long after Scruggs departed, but he had a plan that didn't involve day labor. Flatt contacted Scruggs with a proposition: forget about millwork, which he said neither of them would be happy with, and start another band instead. Scruggs was sincere about wanting off the merry-go-round, and he had grave apprehensions about jumping back on so soon. But his old bandmate was insistent, and Scruggs finally gave in.

Thus was born Lester Flatt & Earl Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys—a name from a well-worn Carter Family song, “The Old Foggy Mountain Top.” But most everyone shortened the name from the start, and they were widely known as Flatt & Scruggs. The coleaders seemed like an odd match. Flatt was ten years older and cut from more conservative cloth than the easygoing, open-minded Scruggs. But Flatt's earthy croon and Scruggs's fleet-fingered banjo runs were as perfect a match in their own band as they'd been behind Monroe. And if Monroe was unhappy about two of his key sidemen quitting the Blue Grass Boys, he became downright furious a few years later when Flatt & Scruggs joined the *Grand Ole Opry*. It wasn't long before Monroe's old sidemen eclipsed his own star.

★ Scruggs had upgraded his banjo more than once over the years, but he acquired his ultimate instrument in early 1949. It was an old Gibson Granada Mastertone in serious need of repair, but Scruggs was interested because of its prior owners: two of his biggest influences, Snuffy Jenkins and Fisher Hendley. Jenkins had bought it from a pawnshop many years earlier, and it was pretty banged up by the time Don Reno acquired it. After getting the banjo from Reno, Scruggs had it repaired, and it's the one he played for the rest of his career, including on the recording of what might be the most famous song in the bluegrass canon.

Say the word “bluegrass” to a casual listener, and “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” is probably the tune they'll think of. A dazzlingly fast instrumental, full of breakneck trick licks, “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” is to bluegrass what the Rolling Stones' “(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction” is to sixties classic rock—the ultimate genre exercise not just for one individual artist but an entire style of music. “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” bears some similarity to a Bill Monroe song from late in Scruggs's tenure with the Blue Grass Boys, “Bluegrass Breakdown” (which Monroe and Scruggs each claimed to have written). But “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” has a slightly different chord sequence and Scruggs's banjo substituted for Monroe's mandolin as lead instrument. It was the first full-

length banjo showcase Scruggs wrote on his own, and Flatt & Scruggs recorded it for the first time in December 1949 in Cincinnati. It's two minutes forty-nine seconds of absolute magic dancing across the mountain sky, with Scruggs playing banjo fast enough to leave a vapor trail.

Released in early 1950 on Mercury Records, "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" became a bluegrass perennial almost overnight. It's been just about as ubiquitous as Arthur Smith's "Feudin' / Dueling Banjos" over the years, also thanks in part to Hollywood's silver screen. Seventeen years after its first release, Flatt & Scruggs's original version of "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" turned up in 1967's *Bonnie and Clyde*, director Arthur Penn's graphically violent ode to the Depression-era outlaw couple that starred Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway. As selected by Beatty (who produced as well as starred), "Breakdown" served as soundtrack music to the film's car-chase scenes, coming to signify fast-moving vehicles as indelibly as "Dueling Banjos" does outback danger. *Bonnie and Clyde* got "Breakdown" back into circulation and even onto the charts. It became the rare bluegrass song to cross over to *Billboard*'s pop chart, reaching number 55.

Even so, "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" wouldn't be their biggest hit. The late-1950s folk revival sweeping college campuses gave a lot of older acts a second wind, including Flatt & Scruggs. Scruggs appeared at the 1959 Newport Folk Festival (where *New York Times* critic Robert Shelton wrote that he "bears about the same relationship to the banjo that Paganini does to the violin"), and the whole band played the Ash Grove, one of the leading folk-club nightspots in Los Angeles. The Ash Grove was where TV producer Paul Henning saw Flatt & Scruggs in 1961 and decided they were just the act to record the theme song for a new series he was working on.

When Henning's *The Beverly Hillbillies* debuted in the fall of 1962, the show opened with Flatt & Scruggs's performance of "The Ballad of Jed Clampett," with country singer Jerry Scoggins handling the lead vocal — "Come and listen to a story 'bout a man named Jed / Poor mountain-er barely kept his family fed" — which caught on immediately as a single and went rocketing up the charts. Seventeen years to the day after Earl Scruggs debuted with Monroe at the Grand Ole Opry, he was playing New York City's Carnegie Hall with Flatt & Scruggs as "Jed Clampett" became the first bluegrass song to hit number 1 on the country charts. *The Beverly Hillbillies* was a silly show that traded in ridiculous stereotypes, but Scruggs's banjo rang true: "Jed Clampett" would serve as an entry point for countless young musicians into bluegrass, including Bela Fleck.



IBMA Hall of Fame fiddler Bobby Hicks leading one of his weekly bluegrass jams in Marshall, North Carolina, in 2014. News & Observer photo by Chuck Liddy.

“Earl Scruggs was the primary driver, the sound that shook me up,” Fleck told me in 2017. “And it was hearing *The Beverly Hillbillies*. I was not from North Carolina, I was a kid in New York City, and he just shook me up. I just had to learn everything I could about banjo and bluegrass. Earl really was my original banjo inspiration.”

★ In 1955 Lester and Earl followed Arthur Smith into the world of syndicated country-music television with *Flatt & Scruggs Grand Ole Opry Show*, completing a radio-television-movie trifecta that confirmed them as the biggest act in bluegrass. But the group’s coleaders took to success very differently. Scruggs had always been a musical omnivore with influences across the musical spectrum, well beyond bluegrass. Many of his best-known banjo runs included bent blue notes, and he was inter-

Sidemen to the Stars Steep Canyon Rangers and Chatham County Line

Two of North Carolina's rising twenty-first-century bluegrass bands both got started on campus. Steep Canyon Rangers formed in 1998 at UNC-Chapel Hill, choosing their name from a brand of beer (Steep Canyon Stout) while driving to their first gig.

"Somebody actually taped that first show," banjo player Graham Sharp told me in 2013. "We were playing 'Foggy Mountain Breakdown,' and on the tape you can hear someone yelling the chords out to the rest of the band. That's how green we were. We knew maybe six songs, and barely knew those."

But it didn't take long for the Rangers to improve, and they were solid enough to win IBMA's "Emerging Artist" Award in 2006—the year they hooked up with banjo-playing comedian Steve Martin. Serving as backup band and onstage comedic foil landed them in venues ranging from the Hollywood Bowl to the White House. And the first Grammy the Rangers won, for the 2012 album *Nobody Knows You*, was theirs alone.

Chatham County Line got together at N.C. State in Raleigh, as a mid-1990s spinoff from country singer Tift Merritt's backup band. They quickly rose through the regional ranks to become a top live draw, in part because front man Dave Wilson is a rocker at heart who writes the closest thing bluegrass has to pop songs. They were even more successful overseas, earning platinum records in Norway backing up Norwegian roots-music star Jonas Fjeld. They have also served as occasional backup band for Steve Martin as well as Judy Collins.

ested in exploring a broader range of sounds and styles. So he pushed to record more contemporary material on 1960s-vintage albums like *Nashville Airplane* and *Changin' Times*, covering the likes of Donovan, Dylan, Tim Hardin, and Bobbie Gentry. The results were mixed, especially when Flatt crooned his way through Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone." Playing Posey Rorer to Scruggs's Charlie Poole, Flatt was not comfortable with modernizing and wanted to stick with what had been working—those staunchly traditional Old Familiar Tunes. Scruggs was bored with the well-worn classic bluegrass canon, so their breakup was inevitable.

72 "It seemed like (Lester) was restricted to just what he liked," Scruggs



Chatham County Line, one of North Carolina's new upstart bluegrass bands, at World of Bluegrass in Raleigh in 2014. From left: John Teer, Dave Wilson, Greg Readling, and Chandler Holt. News & Observer photo by Scott Sharpe.



Steep Canyon Rangers onstage in January 2020 at Cat's Cradle nightclub's fiftieth-anniversary celebration. From left: Nicky Sanders, Barrett Smith, Graham Sharp, Woody Platt, and Mike Guggino. Photo by David Menconi.

told *News & Observer* correspondent Jack Bernhardt in 2004. “That’s fine, if he liked that. But I just had a broader range of stuff I wanted to do with the banjo, so the only way I could do it, well, he went his way and I went my way with the Revue.”

After twenty-one years together, they parted ways in 1969, and Lester Flatt was no happier about the split than Bill Monroe had been in 1948. The two men did not speak for a decade, only reconciling shortly before Flatt’s death in 1979. When the International Bluegrass Music Association started up a Hall of Fame in 1991, its first three inductees were Scruggs, Flatt, and Bill Monroe—the big three, together again at last.

In the meantime, Scruggs indulged his newfound freedom to feel his oats, culturally and even politically as well as musically. He formed the Earl Scruggs Revue with his sons, grew his hair out, began using a banjo strap stamped with peace symbols and even played at 1969’s Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam in Washington, D.C. You can ask the Dixie Chicks about how receptive the country-music audience tends to be about left-leaning political commentary, but Scruggs came through it remarkably unscathed.

As the 1970s dawned, the Earl Scruggs Revue was recording songs by the likes of then-current stars Leon Russell and ex-Monkee Michael Nesmith. Seeing this, John McEuen figured it was time to make his move. The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band banjo player had been waiting for this moment since 1964 and a hot August *Grand Ole Opry* Saturday night when he was nineteen years old and watching through the Ryman’s back window as Flatt & Scruggs brought out Mother Maybelle Carter to perform “Wildwood Flower.”

Someday, McEuen vowed to himself, *I’m gonna record with those people.*

“Someday” turned out to be the summer of 1971. Scruggs was the first old-guard player to sign onto the Dirt Band’s *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, an intergenerational super-session that would endure as an Americana landmark, dusting off his signature tunes “Flint Hill Special” and “Earl’s Breakdown” for the album. And while Scruggs didn’t actually play on the album-opening cover of Hylo Brown’s 1955 chestnut “Grand Ole Opry Song,” the “King of Bluegrass” Jimmy Martin ad-libbed his name into the lyrics:

Turn on all your radios I know that you will wait
Hear Little Jimmy Dickens sing “Take an Old Cold Tater and Wait”
There’ll be guitars and fiddles, Earl Scruggs and his banjo too
Bill Monroe singing out them ole Kentucky blues

McEuen paid tribute to Scruggs in his own idiosyncratic way, commencing “Grand Ole Opry Song” with a banjo flub and a muttered aside: “Earl never did do that.”

“It was,” McEuen allowed forty-six years later, “a bold decision to start with a mistake.”

★ Health problems, many the result of lingering injuries from a 1955 automobile accident and a 1975 plane crash, eventually slowed Scruggs’s roll in the 1980s. But even after retiring from full-time touring, Scruggs remained a formidable musician who could still make sparks fly. In early 2002, a few months before I saw Scruggs’s *Opry* star turn with the Dirt Band, he won his fourth and final Grammy Award for an updated 2001 recording of “Foggy Mountain Breakdown.”

Earl Scruggs
and the Birth
of Bluegrass

Although he lived in Nashville for most of his adult life, Scruggs never forgot his roots in his native state of North Carolina. In December of 2002, he went back to his old stomping grounds to record a hot live album in Winston-Salem. *The Three Pickers* starred Scruggs, Ricky Skaggs, and Doc Watson. Of course, a highlight was Scruggs and Watson’s fellow Tar Heel Charlie Poole’s “Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down Blues.”

North Carolina is also where the museum honoring his legacy came together in the old courthouse in Shelby, not far from his childhood home in Flint Hill. Among many priceless artifacts on display at the Earl Scruggs Center is the “ah-ha moment” banjo from Scruggs’s childhood—the very one he used to figure out “Scruggs Style” three-finger banjo-picking at age ten.

Alas, the museum’s namesake did not live long enough to see the Scruggs Center open in 2014. He died on March 28, 2012, at age eighty-eight. And somewhere on planet Earth at this moment, a banjo player is trying to figure out “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” and marveling: how’d he do that?

5

From Gospel to Rhythm and Blues The “5” Royales and the Rise of a New African American Sound

In a car, it takes mere seconds to traverse the length of Winston-Salem’s Five Royales Drive from end to end. Situated a mile north of the city’s downtown arts district, it’s a quiet street in a quiet town, spanning a single block between Trade Street to the west and a dead-end cul-de-sac to the east. About a dozen modest single-family homes line the street in states ranging from well-kept to shabby disrepair. In fact, the only notable thing about Five Royales Drive is the name, which is one of the few public symbols of what should be among Winston-Salem’s proudest claims to fame: it was home to one of the greatest R & B vocal groups of the early rock era, an ensemble that arguably invented soul music years before many of their more celebrated peers.

During the Royales’ 1950s heyday, it would have been difficult to imagine the group falling into obscurity. They were right up there on the R & B charts alongside “Brother” Ray Charles and “Soul Brother Number One” James Brown, headlining the likes of Harlem’s Apollo Theater with songs, riffs, and moves that Brown, Charles, the Temptations, Steve Cropper, and seemingly every British blues-rock guitarist of the sixties picked up on. But nowadays, few people in their old hometown seem to know who the “5” Royales were, even on this randomly selected street that the city named after them in 1991.

On a cloudy and unseasonably cool June day in 2017, I took an informal survey up and down Five Royales Drive. A young man answered the first door I knocked on and stared blankly when asked if he knew anything about his street’s namesake. “Nah, man,” he said, closing the door, and it was mostly the same story at neighboring houses. Down at the

cul-de-sac end of the street, however, an older black gentleman trimming hedges in his yard nodded at my query. “They were a group that sang back in the fifties, right?” he asked, a cigarette dangling from his lips. “They were like that movie, *The Five Heartbeats*, and they lived in the area. That’s all I know.”

None of the group members themselves actually lived on what became Five Royales Drive some four decades after their heyday. But the late Lowman “Pete” Pauling, guitarist and bandleader for the Royales, had lived just a few miles east. He shared a modest bungalow on Rich Avenue in the Andrew Heights neighborhood with his wife Ellise, muse and subject of “Dedicated to the One I Love,” a song Lowman wrote in 1957 on the back of an envelope. Their only child, Lowman Darryl Pauling, who was a teenager when his father died in 1973, still lived in the house at the time of this writing, maintaining it as an unofficial “5” Royales museum. Award certificates, plaques, and old album covers line the walls, and placed on the fireplace mantle is a statuette commemorating the Royales’ 2015 induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. In 2019, the Forsyth County Historical Resource Commission finally acknowledged the Royales’ influence by erecting a plaque outside the house.

The Pauling house stands across the street from what used to be Atkins High School, which would have gospel shows in its auditorium with the Soul Stirrers, the Five Blind Boys of Alabama, and other acts on the circuit. They’d all stop by while in town, as would Brown, Charles, Stevie Wonder, and Sam Cooke. Darryl said he met them all as they passed through the den on their way down to the basement, where the action was.

“This was the epicenter, where they wrote and practiced and partied,” Darryl Pauling told me on that same June 2017 day, leaning on a couch in the basement. “There was an organ, guitar over there, drums over here—and me, at the top of the stairs, trying to listen and not get caught. But they would not let me come watch, and my dad never ever let me see him drinking. I remember when they’d leave on tour, their station wagon would pull into the driveway and crowds would suddenly come running up. All girls, mostly.”

He paused to laugh softly before continuing.

“If these walls could talk . . .”

★ Just as the Mississippi Delta gets all the credit for the blues, the prevailing narrative of soul music is a creation myth casting Ray Charles as the one who invented it pretty much all by his lonesome. And it’s true enough that Charles hit a new peak by turning sacred gospel into secu-

lar soul, a new style that translated religious rapture into much earthier feelings. He did that in 1954 by tarting up the Southern Tones’ “It Must Be Jesus” into a randy song called “I Got a Woman.” Changing that song’s subject matter from uppercase Him to lowercase her scandalized the church, but it caused a pop-music sensation. “I Got a Woman” became Charles’s first-ever number 1 R & B hit, and it was later covered by Elvis, the Beatles, and even Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee.

Nevertheless, Charles was neither the first nor the only artist making this gospel-to-secular crossover move. The “5” Royales beat him to it by a couple of years, and it’s not like they were laboring in obscurity. The Royales notched seven top-ten singles on the R & B charts during the 1950s and the first two both went all the way to number 1 in 1953 (a year before “I Got a Woman”) with just as much gospel style as Charles or anyone else.

No matter the style or subject, evangelical fervor came naturally to the Royales. Their story begins with the aforementioned Lowman “Pete” Pauling, who was born in 1926 in South Carolina and grew up in West Virginia listening to music programs on the radio, *The Grand Ole Opry* among them. He took up guitar as a child, his first instrument being one he made out of a cigar box at age ten, landing in Winston-Salem as a teenager with his older brother Curtis—who joined up with the first iteration of a local gospel ensemble known variously as the Price Four, Price Singers, and Price Sisters. Its initial lineup consisted of Curtis alongside three sisters, and different friends and relatives entered and left the fold over the next few years. By the late 1930s, it had evolved into a new group called Royal Sons and that’s when Lowman, his younger brother Clarence, and their second cousin Windsor King all came aboard.

World War II scrambled things up a good bit, as various members came and went due to military obligations. One was John Tanner, an intense, raw-voiced tenor singer and natural front man, whose initial run in the group was cut short when the Army drafted him. After Tanner’s military hitch ended with the war, he came back to the Royal Sons, eventually emerging as the quintet’s primary vocalist. Lowman Pauling was in the captain’s chair as guitarist, primary songwriter, and overall ring-leader. They gained a reputation on the Southeastern church and revival circuit, even performing at Nashville’s fabled Ryman Auditorium a few years after Earl Scruggs had joined Bill Monroe’s Blue Grass Boys for that seismic birth-of-bluegrass *Grand Ole Opry* star turn.

The Royal Sons performed on the radio, too, and they had a regular program for a time on Winston-Salem’s WSJS-AM. In 1950, WSJS engi-

“Freek’n You” Jodeci

Like Charlie Poole, the four young men in Jodeci sought their fortune in New York. Leaving Charlotte, they drove to the offices of Uptown Records and refused to leave until someone would listen to their demo tape. They came away with a contract and were just starting to break on the charts the one time I interviewed Cedric “K-Ci” Hailey in 1992—who acknowledged that their deeply religious families were less than thrilled with Jodeci straying from gospel.

“Someday I’m sure we’ll all go back to gospel because that’s where our roots are,” Hailey told me. “We’re happy doing what we’re doing now, but gospel is where we belong. Until then, we just thank God for letting us do this.”

Tension between sacred and secular is a time-honored pop-music tradition, but Jodeci took it to extravagant lengths during their heyday. The group’s two sets of brothers grew up singing in churches around Charlotte, and their spin on hip-hop soul was churching it up with gospel feeling. Whether pleading for sin or salvation, they had the same urgency.

That made them one of the biggest groups of the early 1990s, and they lived the high life, romantically linked to some of the most famous women in music: Madonna, Mary J. Blige, TLC’s Tionne “T-Boz” Watkins. Blige was one of their opening acts when Jodeci headlined at Chapel Hill’s Smith Center in 1995. And during the hit “Freek’n You,” Hailey had a question for the audience as the band vamped behind him:

All night long . . . Til the break of dawn . . .
Who . . . wants . . . this?!

With Blige looking on from side-stage, arms crossed and stock-still, Hailey grabbed his crotch to roars from the largely female crowd.

Jodeci didn’t last much beyond that, scattering to solo projects by the late nineties—none as successful as the mother group. Still, their influence would linger for decades on artists like the Canadian rapper Drake, one of many acts to drop Jodeci quotes and samples into his music.

neer Bob Woodward recorded some Royal Sons demos and sent them off to Apollo Records, a New York-based label then riding high with gospel icon Mahalia Jackson. That got the group making records as Royal Sons Quintet, starting with 1951’s stately “Bedside of a Neighbor.”

While the Royal Sons Quintet’s early gospel sides were more than solid, their sales weren’t exactly setting the world on fire. Apollo’s contract with the group stipulated that they could record and release both kinds of music, sacred *and* profane. So with the label’s encouragement, they decided to give the secular side of the fence a try.

Across America in the years after World War II, the musical tides were running in that direction. Kansas City shouter Big Joe Turner, Nebraska-born Wynonie Harris, and New York City transplants Billy Ward and His Dominoes (fronted by Durham native Clyde McPhatter, a future Rock and Roll Hall of Famer who later sang with the Drifters) were all working various combinations of rhythm & blues, jazz, jump blues, and gospel into different musical tapestries. And some of them, like the Dominoes’ bawdy 1951 hit “Sixty Minute Man,” were suggestive enough to make a deacon blush.

But the Royal Sons had a few things that set them apart, most notably an exuberance of spirit that transposed perfectly to secular romantic declarations. “Restrained” was just never one of their settings; and with John Tanner on the mike, their vocal pleas were always urgent and 100 percent convincing. Then there was Lowman Pauling, a showman who played his guitar slung low all the way down to his knees for comedic effect. In addition to being a first-rate guitarist, Lowman was a world-class and self-proclaimed “Goof Ball” (title of one of their later singles, from 1962) with a mind both sharp and hilariously dirty. It wouldn’t take long for Pauling, Tanner, and company to start raising eyebrows.

Shortening their name to the Royals, the group made a stylish recorded secular bow in 1951 with “Too Much of a Little Bit”—which was, in a fitting bit of symbolism, their first to be released as a newfangled seven-inch 45 rpm single, a format that soon replaced the old twelve-inch 78 rpm record as industry standard. Perhaps “Too Much of a Little Bit” was just a little bit too tame, because when the Royals finally hit pay dirt it was with a weirdly explicit song called “Baby Don’t Do It.” In terms of oddity, “Baby Don’t Do It” had a chorus for the ages: “If you leave me, pretty baby, I’ll have bread without no meat,” sung by John Tanner as a desperately pleading lament while Jimmy Moore, Obadiah Carter, and Otto Jeffries handled the call-and-response backup.

80 Rechristened the “5” Royales to differentiate themselves from another

group called the Royals (a Detroit combo that later became Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, of “Work With Me Annie” fame), they released “Baby Don’t Do It” at the end of 1952 and hit number 1 on *Billboard’s* R & B chart in February 1953. A second number 1 hit followed that June, “Help Me Somebody.”

The “5” Royales era was officially on.

The “5” Royales
and the Rise of
a New African
American Sound

★ Almost forty years after that first rush of success, I sat down with three of the surviving “5” Royales from their glory-days lineup to talk about the old times. We met at Jimmy Moore’s modest house in Winston-Salem and the Tanner brothers, John and Eugene, were both there, too. This was the summer of 1992, a couple of years before a wave of reissues would bring their catalog back into print, so the only “5” Royales music in circulation was a handful of songs scattered here and there on a few multiartist compilations. Moore had a couple of the old “5” Royales albums spread out on a coffee table, right next to a small sculpture of hands clasped together in prayer. It seemed symbolic of their past and present because most all of the individual Royales, Moore included, had returned to the church after the group dissolved in the 1960s.

At that time, however, the group’s bawdy past had suddenly become a subject of wider interest. Much of this was due to the efforts of a couple of “5” Royales fans in the area, Taylor Doggett and Tom McCullough, who had tracked down the surviving members and researched their history. McCullough and Doggett helped set a few belated honors in motion, including the dedication of Five Royales Drive in Winston-Salem the year before and a much-deserved heritage award from the state arts council. The latter came with actual cash money, something the Royales had not received for their music in many long years. That seemed to make them a little more willing to revisit memories they hadn’t thought about in quite some time.

“We’d be walkin’ into a joint, and Otto [Jeffries] our manager would have all these briefcases,” recalled John Tanner, who took the lead in conversation just as he once had onstage. “People would stand back and say, ‘Oh, they’re some business guys. Look at all the briefcases they’re carrying.’ Then we’d go back in the dressing room and he’d have five or six fifths of liquor, in the briefcase. Canadian Club, Grand Dad, Ancient Age. When we started out, Canadian Club was our drink—’cause it was *mild*, you know. But you know, it was fun then. We were havin’ a good time. We *thought* we were havin’ a good time.”

John Tanner was the most vocally religious of the four, often launch-



Five Royales Drive in Winston-Salem, one of the city's few markers of what should be a major point of civic pride. Photo by David Menconi.

ing into philosophical mini-sermons as fervid as his singing manner from forty years earlier. He was, Tanner quipped, “a fool for Christ” who considered his musical past to be a childish thing he’d grown beyond.

But whatever mixed feelings they had about their prime period, the Royales really were a tremendous amount of fun—especially when they would let their freak flag fly on songs like 1952’s “Laundromat Blues,” which might be their ultimate gospel-flavored-raunch artifact. With his bandmates squealing suggestively on the background call and response (“Ooh! Ooh! Whadda machine!”), John Tanner testified about his lady love’s abilities in a way that made it clear “Laundromat Blues” wasn’t really about coin-operated washing machines:

Just bring your dirty clothes, bring all your dirty duds
Don’t worry ’bout no soap, her machine is full of suds
Just relax and take it easy while her machine goes round and round
If you want to see smooth action, it will cost you thirty cents a
pound.

Though it was never any kind of hit, “Laundromat Blues” made enough of a down-and-dirty impression to eventually wind up enshrined on *Risque Rhythm*, a 1991 compilation of dirty 1950s-era R & B songs. Between “Laundromat Blues,” “Monkey Hips and Rice,” and “Right Around the Corner” (in which Tanner enthusiastically boasted he could get “home” to his

girlfriend's house in "fifteen different ways!"), the Royales were exceptionally skilled at putting the blue into rhythm and blues.

Not that they would cop to their real lives being anything like the songs they sang back then.

"Sure, we drank and shot craps—but we was pure fellas," John Tanner said, laughing, a twinkle in his eye.

"Nice fellas," Moore agreed, and they all shared a private laugh.

**The "5" Royales
and the Rise of
a New African
American Sound**

★ The "5" Royales had a lot of lighthearted fun times onstage, like the night in Durham when they donned pink suits and filled in for Ray Charles's missing female backup singers the Raelettes. And all those years later, memories of their late bandmate Lowman Pauling's shenanigans and oddball songwriting inspirations still convulsed them with laughter. The Royales were at a diner once in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1954 when they overheard somebody come in and jokingly place an order for "monkey hips and rice." While the rest of the band just laughed, Pauling got to work and turned that into a song.

"Lowman could think of some of the terriblest things," John Tanner said. "But they were all true: 'The faster you go, the quicker you get to the end,' that was one. And he'd turn preacher's sayings into songs, like 'Help Me Somebody.'"

But not all their memories of the road were quite so rose-colored. As black men traveling in the segregated South, the Royales had to deal with the American apartheid that was Jim Crow, with venues, audiences, radio stations, restaurants, motels, and more divided by color lines not to be crossed. They also endured more than their share of run-ins with racist law-enforcement authorities.

It was their misfortune to be staying overnight in Savannah, Georgia, on a night when reports came in about a black man robbing a local jewelry store. So the cops dragged them all out of bed at 4 A.M., and Moore and John Tanner had to stand in a police lineup—along with Little Richard, the stylish Georgia-born "Tutti Frutti" hitmaker, who was staying at the same motel. The Royales were in the clear that time, but not the night they got arrested for shooting dice and gambling backstage in Raleigh before a show.

"Couldn't believe it," John Tanner said. "We went all over the country gambling, but back home was where we got busted. It's funny now, but that was a terrible feeling."

Then there was the time they unwittingly wandered onto the scene of one of the fiercest battles of the civil rights era: May 3, 1963, the day that

police turned firehoses and attack dogs on African American protesters in Birmingham, Alabama. It was the Royales’ misfortune to be passing through Birmingham that day on tour, and they got caught up in the wave of arrests. They were released with no charges filed, eventually, but the police detained them long enough that they missed their next show and performance fee. Otto Jeffries had to pawn a ring for enough gas money to get down the road.

What made it even more frustrating was the fact that live shows were pretty much their sole source of income. Like the vast majority of performers back then, but especially African American artists, the Royales were never paid anywhere near what they should have been earning from their record sales. When the subject of money came up during the interview, they all laughed ruefully, the bitterness still keen.

“Royalties, what’s that?” Jimmy Moore asked rhetorically, kicking off a long round of complaints about crooked record labels and businessmen. All the Royales knew was that, despite hearing their records on the radio and seeing them on the sales charts, just about the only money coming their way was what they made on the road.

“We had fame, but no fortune,” Moore concluded sadly.

Even principal songwriter Lowman Pauling, who should have been making handsome sums of publishing royalties for airplay and sales of the hits he wrote, never made much money and died a pauper. In 2017, I asked Lowman’s son Darryl about money, and he laughed the same way the other Royales had twenty-five years earlier.

Darryl told me that when his father died in 1973, his mother received some confusing paperwork she didn’t understand, but she signed it and sent it back. Years went by with no money received, and then more years of Pauling’s widow and son trying to untangle what had happened. More than a decade after Pauling’s death, Ellise Pauling finally received a royalty check for sales of her late husband’s work. It was for \$6.

“I hate to say it,” Darryl said, “but in the Jim Crow South, black people got the shaft.”

★ As one of the top R & B bands of the 1950s, the “5” Royales had a good run through that decade and into the early sixties. But they’re largely forgotten today because they never crossed over from the black R & B charts to the white pop Hot 100. Where R & B peers like James Brown, Ray Charles, the Drifters, and the Platters all had significant pop hits, the Royales made it onto the pop charts just twice, and only as high as



Early promotional shot of the "5" Royales. From the bottom: Lowman Pauling Jr., John Tanner (right), Obadiah Carter (left), Jimmy Moore, and Otto Jeffries. J. Taylor Doggett collection in the Southern Folklife Collection at Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

a modest number 66 for “Think” in 1957. But even though the Royales never quite made it to the promised land of crossover dreams, some of their most avid fans were other musicians, who were more than happy to pick up and run with what the Royales put down.

Along with covering a number of Royales songs over the years and even producing a late-career Royales session with his Famous Flames as backup band, James Brown modeled much of his early-period stage act after the Royales. When Brown recorded his in-concert *Live at the Apollo* album at the famed Harlem theater in 1962, a radically recast version of the Royales’ “Think” was in the set. Otis Williams, the baritone voice of heritage Motown act the Temptations, always acknowledged his group’s significant debt to the Royales. And while the Royales’ 1958 song “Tell the Truth” was not a hit for them, it was still recorded by top acts including Ike & Tina Turner, Otis Redding, and (at the same 1959 session that yielded up “What’d I Say,” his pop breakthrough) Brother Ray Charles himself.

Still, no one owed a bigger debt to the “5” Royales than Steve Cropper, a guitarist from Memphis who especially admired Lowman Pauling’s guitar work. Cropper became a Pauling acolyte as a teenager, when he was underage and snuck into a nightclub to see a late-fifties Royales show. Cropper was so taken with Pauling’s onstage manner that he went home afterward and turned a couple of belts into a guitar strap so he could wear the instrument down low around his knees when he played, the way Pauling did.

More crucially, Cropper also adapted Pauling’s guitar style and arrangements as a model for his own band the Royal Spades—named in tribute to the Royales. A few years later, Cropper was guitarist in Booker T. & the MG’s, cutting instrumental hits like 1962’s “Green Onions” while doing in-studio backup for Otis Redding, Sam & Dave, and other leading Stax Records soul acts. A lifetime later, Cropper made Pauling’s influence explicit with a 2011 tribute album, *Dedicated—A Salute to the “5” Royales*.

“He was one guitar player doing it all,” Cropper told me that year. “He was able to play both rhythm to back up the singer and fills as a soloist, back and forth. He’d play a lot of what we call shuffles, then when he felt like getting a lick, it would take him a second to reach down and then get back to it. So that separation between rhythm and lead was something that got my attention. Almost all Booker T & the MG’s songs have me either doubling the bass or defining the rhythm pattern, with a solo in the middle. That little fast thing I did in ‘Green Onions’ is very identifiable as Lowman. I kinda designed my own playing to stay out of the way

of the vocal and never step on it. That’s something I pride myself on, and it became a Stax style.”

As it happened, Cropper saw his first “5” Royales show at just the right time because, early on, guitar was not a particularly prominent instrument in their arrangements. But starting with 1957’s “Tears of Joy,” Pauling suddenly turned up the volume on his guitar for reasons that have never been conclusively explained (his son Darryl theorized that he did that to “take it back to gospel”). Pauling’s guitar heroics playing call-and-response with the singers gave the Royales another voice for emphasis, counterpoint, and emotional commentary, which they put to good use.

“Tears of Joy” was their first top-ten R & B hit in three years, followed by “Think” later in 1957. The latter was a watershed, with Pauling’s jagged bluesy guitar lines stabbing between the group’s handclaps and insistent chants of “*Think!*” It’s a virtual blueprint for soul music’s next decade, especially the Stax variant that Cropper played on: impassioned vocals straight out of church with blue-toned guitar circling around, floating like a butterfly and stinging like a bee.

In his 1989 book *The Heart of Rock & Soul: The 1001 Greatest Singles Ever Made*, critic Dave Marsh called the “5” Royales “the first genuinely modern rock band,” singling out 1958’s “The Slummer the Slum.” That song’s cadence and icicle guitar tones sound awfully close to both the British blues-rock and psychedelic rock that became popular in the mid-1960s, with lyrics that even ventured into surreal social commentary:

Now don’t try to figure out where I come from
I could be a smart guy from Wall Street
I could be the Purple People Eater’s son

The “5” Royales would leave their biggest footprint of all with “Dedicated to the One I Love,” written and recorded in 1957. An enduringly popular song, it’s the one Royales song that almost everyone seems to know (if only for the Kellogg’s Special K commercials that turned it into an advertising jingle in the 1980s). “Dedicated” has an improbable history that starts with another song, 1955’s “I Don’t Want You to Go” by the Casanovas, a group featuring Pauling’s former Royal Sons bandmate William Samuels. The story goes that Obadiah Carter, who was Pauling’s frequent partner in onstage comic antics, proposed that they rework “I Don’t Want You to Go” into a different song.

What happened next depends on who you talk to. Whoever did what, a song emerged with a similar tune but different title, lyrics, and instrumental bridge. To Carter’s everlasting irritation, “Dedicated to the One

“Hold My Mule” Shirley Caesar

Durham native Shirley Caesar is a bona fide gospel legend, owner of a dozen Grammy Awards at the time of this writing. She has stayed on the church side of the gospel-soul divide, releasing scores of albums while tending to her flock at Raleigh’s Mt. Calvary Word of Faith Church.

But she had one of the unlikeliest viral crossover hits in recent memory at age seventy-eight. It involved a 1988 video of one of her longtime on-stage set pieces “Hold My Mule,” a parable about an enthusiastic believer named “Shoutin’ John.” This particular video showed Caesar reciting a list of down-home culinary blessings: *Look! I got beans, greens, potatoes, tomatoes, hams, rams, hog, dog, turkeys, chicken, you name it!*

Fast forward twenty-eight years to the fall of 2016, when some enterprising soul turned that into “Grandma Thanksgiving Rap Song: ‘Beans Greens Potatoes Tomatoes,’” a video that racked up millions of online views and landed Caesar on network television. Its popularity begat the “U Name It Challenge,” where rapper Snoop Dogg, R & B star Chris Brown, and countless others did remixed versions. Aside from the occasional explicit version, Caesar was thrilled with the attention.

“Oh, I was excited about that,” she told me in 2017. “Here I am singing about beans, greens, potatoes, tomatoes—and it goes everywhere! It’s the Lord’s doing at this time in my life, a brand new beginning and I’m grateful.”

I Love” was credited to Pauling and producer Ralph Bass, but not him. And that proved to be significant because “Dedicated” wound up being the Royales’ big crossover hit—but years later and not for them, which seems fitting given their hard-luck history.

The Royales’ magnificent 1957 original featured an incandescent lead vocal by John Tanner’s younger brother Eugene, paired with a spiraling Lowman Pauling guitar riff that hovered above the voices like a halo. Despite its odd and somewhat halting pace, there’s such passion in voice and music that “Dedicated” still stands as quite possibly the “5” Royales’ finest on-record moment. So of course it didn’t do much in its original incarnation.

But then came a couple of covers, starting with the New Jersey female quartet the Shirelles in 1959. The Shirelles’ version was actually some-



*Shirley Caesar at her Mt. Calvary Word of Faith Church in Raleigh in 2017.
News & Observer photo by Chuck Liddy.*

thing of a dud at first, until the following year's "Will You Love Me Tomorrow" hit number 1. In that song's wake, "Dedicated" was revived in 1961 and rocketed up to number 3 on the pop charts, a huge hit. Six years later, the California folk-rock quartet the Mamas & the Papas went that one better with a glossy version of "Dedicated" that made it to number 2 for three weeks in the spring of 1967—only held out of the top spot by the Turtles' "Happy Together."

★ As to why the "5" Royales never crossed over themselves, a lot of it came down to the fact that they were ahead of their time—and pioneers catch all the arrows, as we know. By the time the general public caught up, the Royales themselves were getting a little long in the tooth, during an era when youth was seemingly everything. Robert Ray, who would go on to a career in academia at the University of Florida while leading the acclaimed underground-rock band Vulgar Boatmen, remembered seeing the Royales playing a show at a girls' school in Memphis while he was growing up.

Kinston Calling Maceo Parker

Greater Kinston, North Carolina, was James Brown’s secret weapon during his 1965 “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag” period, in that it yielded up some of his most important support players: bandleader Nathaniel “Nat” Jones, trumpet player Dick Knight, and the Parker brothers—drummer Melvin and the saxophonist Brown would urge on with the cry, “Maceo, blow your horn!”

Born in 1943, Maceo Parker would go on to a substantial career of his own, eventually emerging as a front man with a singing voice uncannily similar to Ray Charles. But Parker made his most lasting mark as sideman saxophonist, with Minneapolis funk legend Prince as well as Brown. Parker also played a key role in another great pillar of funk, North Carolina native George Clinton’s Parliament-Funkadelic All-Stars.

Born in 1941 in a Kannapolis outhouse, legend has it, Clinton was the oldest of nine kids. The family moved north soon afterward, settling in Plainfield, New Jersey. Young George started out singing doo wop before pursuing far weirder aspirations, eventually building a multifaceted funk collective. He would enter stages via spaceship to convey a surreal gospel of funk: Free your ass and your mind will follow.

But wherever P-Funk traveled, Parker always came home to Kinston.

“You can only have one place where you’re born, home, and I have roots there,” Parker told me in 2008. “It’s a feeling of belonging. Some people lose that and go someplace else. Not me.”

Parker’s Brown bandmate Dick Knight also played behind Otis Redding. He and another Brown alumnus, drummer Sam “The Man” Lathan, eventually wound up playing in the long-running Wilson R & B band the Monitors. Formed in 1957 by schoolteacher Bill Myers, the Monitors included a pre-fame Roberta Flack among its former alumni.

“This would have been around 1960,” Ray told me in 2017. “And one thing that struck me is that they seemed . . . *old*. They *were* old then, at least to us—in their mid-thirties.”

That was right around the time Lowman Pauling was writing a song called “I’m a Cool Teenager,” which was misguided pandering, because most of the Royales’ oeuvre was decidedly not kids’ stuff—starting with



Maceo Parker in Kinston, North Carolina, in 2016, the year he won a North Carolina Heritage Award. News & Observer photo by Juli Leonard.

“Dedicated” and the hard-won declaration of knowledge it builds up to: “Life can never be / Exactly like we want it to be.” Then there’s the 1959 song that could practically be the “5” Royales’ statement of purpose, “I Know It’s Hard but It’s Fair,” a very mature lament about being in love with the wrong girl.

Beyond age and subject matter, the Royales’ egalitarian nature was also unusual for its time. Where Hank Ballard & the Midnighters, Clyde McPhatter and the Drifters and other similarly styled R & B groups had a designated front man, the Royales performed and presented as a band of equals—a holdover from their church-choir origins.

“The way the group was structured wasn’t ‘*me* and the guys’ but ‘*me with the guys*,’” critic and historian Ed Ward told me in 2011. “There was interaction between foreground and background, which wasn’t just accompaniment. Their virtuosity wasn’t about hitting hard notes, but slick

timing and beautiful phrasing. This made it harder for them to cross over, and they remained obscure except in the South.”

By the early 1960s, things were growing dire for the Royales. Leaving Apollo Records for the seemingly greener pastures of Cincinnati-based King Records (longtime recording home of James Brown) had not improved their fortunes, and they had no hits to speak of after the late fifties. With crowds dwindling, the Royales’ lineup began to turn into a revolving door, especially after a string of dates was canceled in late 1963 following President John F. Kennedy’s assassination. Not long after that, John Tanner and Jimmy Moore both quit.

Even though Pauling drafted replacements and kept a version of the Royales going for years, their glory days were over. By the time they finally dissolved later in the 1960s, Lowman’s star was overshadowed by his brother and ex-Royal Sons bandmate Clarence—who shortened his last name to Paul, moved to Detroit, caught on at Motown Records, and helped launch Little Stevie Wonder’s career as his mentor and producer. After a stint touring as Sam & Dave’s guitarist, Lowman was working as night watchman at a synagogue in New York City when he died on December 26, 1973—his wife Ellise’s birthday. He was just forty-seven years old, and the *Winston-Salem Journal*’s obituary misspelled his first name as “Lawman.” Adding insult to injury, his first gravestone in Winston’s Evergreen Cemetery listed the wrong date of death (it was subsequently corrected).

The other Royales went back home to Winston and returned to blue-collar jobs of their own, driving buses or working at dry-cleaning businesses. It was, they all admitted, quite a comedown.

“It was hard,” John Tanner said, “going from making \$100 a night on the road to getting by on \$65 a week.”

In 1992, the two Tanner brothers and Jimmy Moore reunited after a fashion when they performed at their North Carolina Heritage Award ceremony in Raleigh. It was just gospel, of course, none of the old “5” Royales hits. But they still sounded incredible. Despite talk of further reunions, that would be the last time they sang together in public.

It would take more than two decades after that for the “5” Royales to make it into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. But by the time the Royales were finally inducted in 2015, they were all long gone. Otto Jeffries had died two years after Pauling, in 1975, followed by Obadiah Carter and Eugene Tanner. John Tanner succumbed to bone cancer in 2005 and Jimmy Moore, the last Royale standing, died in 2008.

92 Perhaps the pithiest summary of their lives and career came from

"Rough Side of the Mountain" The Reverend F. C. Barnes

The Reverend F. C. Barnes founded his Red Budd Holy Church in 1959 in a converted juke joint in the vicinity of Castalia, North Carolina. A singing church, Red Budd was successful, and in the civil rights era that made it a target. It was destroyed in a 1963 bombing, leveled by dynamite, the perpetrators never found. But Barnes was undeterred. He moved a half-hour east and reopened Red Budd in a new space in Rocky Mount, hanging the one thing not destroyed in the bomb blast on a wall as a reminder: a chair.

A master of the classic call-and-response singing and preaching, Barnes had a stern bearing and presence reminiscent of the actor Ossie Davis. And he'd bring the thunder, too, preaching in a deep, rumbling voice that betrayed not one glimmer of doubt about God's ability to fix anything.

Barnes's best-known song was "Rough Side of the Mountain," a spiritual that sounded as if it must have been carved out of the side of a cliff in the early days of Reconstruction. But it was a song he wrote in 1982, based on a prayer he'd made while driving through bad weather. Improbably, it earned him a gold record.

"I tell people when we're off somewhere singing, 'Well, I sing like I look,'" Barnes told me in 2000. "They say, 'How's that?' And I say, 'Old-timey.' That's about all I can do. I'm a little too slow for that newer stuff."

Barnes lived long and prospered before he died at age eighty-two in 2011. Among his many survivors was his son, Luther Barnes, also a major star on the gospel circuit.

Robert Christgau, self-proclaimed "Dean of American Rock Critics." Writing in 1994, the year Carter and Eugene Tanner both died, Christgau concluded a review of the "5" Royales anthology *Monkey Hips and Rice* this way: "They were sincere. They were dirty. They were smart. They were stoopid. They were great artists. They ended up working nine-to-five and going to church on Sundays."

6

The American Folk Revival Comes to North Carolina Doc Watson

Most of the time, when people play music, it's just sounds that they sing or play. It might be bad and it might be good, maybe even great. But for most mortals, music begins and then it ends, ceasing to exist as soon as the echoes fade out. Then there are a special few like Doc Watson, whose very presence always seemed to conjure music up as a presence. Listening to him flatpick on the guitar, the notes would feel like a living, breathing entity he did not play so much as summon forth. And if that sounds like an awful lot of mystical mumbo jumbo to lay on an old country guitar player, that can only mean you never got to hear the man up close and personal.

Among treasured musical memories of my career, one that left an indelible impression was the afternoon I got to hang around Doc's preshow sound check in Clayton, North Carolina, a few weeks before he turned eighty years old. It was Valentine's Day 2003 in a modestly plush theater, and just another gig on the long and winding road of Doc's legendary career. But even just messing around backstage, Doc was mesmerizing to listen to in a way that made you reconsider your own senses. Blind almost from birth, Doc had seemingly developed an entire set of extra senses, all of them connected in some ways to hearing. Sounds he made as well as heard were the primary way he related to the world, and it sort of felt like the entire universe was his instrument—not just the acoustic guitar he held in his lap.

Sitting in a metal folding chair and leaning slightly forward as he picked, eyes closed and brow furrowed, Doc moved his lips even though no sound came out of his mouth. It looked as if he was speaking the notes as he played them on the guitar. He had huge hands, big enough to make the guitar seem almost like a toy, but they moved with swift, flawless

grace across the strings, hitting every note dead-on. Those who knew Doc best told me he'd lost a step in his seventies, but I don't think I ever heard even the hint of a mistake out of him.

Tom Waits, the great late-night raconteur, once described Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards as someone that "music likes to be around." Doc evoked a similar feeling. It seemed as if he was channeling the music from elsewhere, drawing it from a river that only his unseeing eyes could locate. So Doc sat on the bank plucking songs from the current, some of them unexpected choices for an icon of Appalachian folk—the blue-eyed-soul standard "Unchained Melody," Big Joe Turner's jump-blues classic "Shake, Rattle and Roll," even the Moody Blues' 1967 orchestra-rock landmark "Nights in White Satin." I would not have been a bit surprised if he had busted out the latest single from Shakira or Dave Matthews Band.

Doc Watson

"I've enjoyed picking a lot of things besides old-time music," he said.

After a while, Doc moved from the backstage green room to the stage out front, where he was joined by accompanist David Holt to run through a few of the tunes they were going to play at that night's show. By the end of the sound check, they were playing the blues—"Railroad Bill," a Piedmont blues I'd first heard played by Doc's fellow North Carolina guitarist Etta Baker, about a high-rolling outlaw who rides the rails and "lights his cigar with a \$10 bill." Then it was ride, ride, ride to the outro, as Doc's fingers got to flying fast as a runaway train with some lightning-fast flat-picking runs.

"He's in rare form tonight," Holt murmured afterward, shaking his head.

"Naw," Doc demurred, ever modest. "I just need the practice."

After sound check, there was one more order of business to take care of. The Grammy Awards were coming up, and while they would not be attending, Watson and Holt did have a nomination for 2002's *Legacy*, a three-disc retrospective of Doc's life and career. *Legacy* would indeed win the best-folk-album Grammy nine days later, although they didn't know it yet. But wanting to be prepared, just in case, Holt had brought along a couple of Grammy statues he'd won himself a few years earlier to use as photographic props.

"What are you talking about Grammy pictures for, David?" Doc asked. "We ain't won yet."

"Yeah," Holt said, "but if we do win, I want to have pictures ready."

So they held the Grammys and posed for a photographer as Holt pleaded with Doc to look appropriately thrilled ("A big ol' smile, Doc,



Doc Watson in Clayton, North Carolina, in February 2003, shortly before he turned eighty years old. News & Observer photo by Robert Willett.

c'mon, act like we won!"). But Doc had already lost interest in pictures he couldn't see. Holding his Grammy up to his ear, he lightly tapped on its gold-plated sound horn with the nail of his index finger.

"David," he said as he turned toward Holt and tapped it again, "that's in the key of B. Hear that?"

★ Some years ago, North Carolina banjo player Joe Newberry was on a picking visit to the Virginia home of guitarist Wayne Henderson, one of the world's foremost luthiers. Henderson asked if he could guess who caned the chair he was sitting in, and Newberry had to admit he had no

idea. So he turned the chair over to read the underside: “Hand-caned by Arthel Watson.”

“I guess that was something he’d learned to do at the School for the Blind,” Newberry told me in 2003. “Not surprisingly, it was meticulously and beautifully done. And I thought, ‘Now this is a talented, can-do man.’ Whatever he had chosen to do with his life, I have no doubt that he would have been the very best at it.”

Doc Watson

The man the world came to know as simply “Doc” was born Arthel Lane Watson on March 3, 1923, the sixth of nine children born to General Dixon (his father’s given name, unrelated to military service) and Annie Green Watson. The Watson clan lived in the Watauga County town of Deep Gap, a wide spot in the road about ten miles east of the college town of Boone. Music would someday take Arthel to every corner of the world, but he lived in Deep Gap his whole life.

During his years growing up, they all lived in a three-bedroom cabin—the parents in one bedroom, three daughters in the second, and six sons in the third. Sixty years later, when Doc’s mother Annie was in her late eighties, she would still be living in that same cabin.

Rather than migrate to textile-factory towns, as Charlie Poole’s family had done several decades earlier, the Watsons stayed on their farm through thick and thin. Arthel’s father General farmed crops, cut wood, and worked on WPA projects during the Great Depression.

A cornea infection, possibly from contaminated silver nitrate solution, took Arthel’s sight as an infant, leaving him blind before his first birthday. But one of many remarkable things about Watson is how unfazed he always was about his own sightlessness. He never wore dark glasses and rarely used a cane, and he generally seemed to regard blindness as less of a disability than a challenge to overcome, one he mastered through hard work and sheer determination. Among friends and family, stories are legion about things Doc said and did over the years—like constructing an out-building on his Deep Gap homestead completely by himself, cutting every piece of wood and hammering every nail; giving accurate and precise driving directions to his handlers while on the road; and uncannily understanding and even somehow describing things he’d never seen.

“Doc always amazed me,” MerleFest director Ted Hagaman told me in 2017. “There was one time I went to his house and he caught me off-guard by saying, ‘You’re late.’ I looked at my watch and sure enough, I was three minutes late. ‘How does he know this?’ I thought to myself. I still don’t know, but he did.”

Carrying It Forward David Holt

Born in 1946 in Texas and raised in California, David Holt's North Carolina family roots and musicological bent led him to Asheville, where he moved in 1973. Another young folkie captivated by *Anthology*, Holt began seeking out the old-time masters after Ralph Stanley advised him to start going to fiddle conventions in North Carolina and Virginia.

"David would go into the backwoods, find these old guys and learn," Mickey Gamble, founder of the Arden-based label Crossroads Music, told me in 2016. "Every weekend, he and his wife would have a big gathering of young musicians with a few older guys, an old-time picking thing. After dinner, there'd be forty people sitting in a big circle, playing and learning. David's very much a planner, and he and his wife mapped out how to get there. It started with learning to play everything, and he did."

Holt connected with Wade Mainer, Etta Baker, Tommy Jarrell, Doc Watson, and many others, compiling an impressive collection of photographs and recordings. He was Watson's regular sideman for more than a decade and appeared on television and radio programs including *Hee Haw*, *Grand Ole Opry*, and his own *State of Music*. And eventually, he evolved from apprentice to mentor, grooming younger musicians like the Western North Carolina picker Josh Goforth to carry the music forward.

"It's what I always expected and hoped for, that someone like Josh would come along," Holt told me in 2016. "He's super-talented and can absorb some of the things I have to offer and make them his own. The great thing about Josh is his relatives are people I learned from in my twenties, before he was born. So he never met them. This is a way of paying that back and taking it full-circle, mentoring this young mountain guy who's become a world-class musician."

The Kentucky-born folksinger Jean Ritchie once said that everybody called Arthel by his famous nickname "Doc" because "he's smarter than everybody else," but that was not an opinion Watson himself subscribed to. Even though he may have played guitar better than almost anyone else ever had, Doc did not care for other people making a fuss over him. When we met in 2003, I made the mistake of saying it was an honor to meet him, and he almost bristled. "Well," he shot back, "I'm just people,

just like you.” That same year, Doc’s daughter Nancy also told me a story about a backstage well-wisher who had recently congratulated Doc on becoming a great-grandfather.

“Naw,” he drawled in his mountain deadpan. “I’m just average.”

Admirable though it was, Doc’s humility did have its downside, in that he would often hang back and defer to others who were showing off—and there was never a time when he wasn’t the best guitar player in the room. But it’s not like his musical legacy suffered from his modesty.

Doc Watson

“Doc may have been known for hot licks, and deservedly so, but that was never what he was about,” Barry Poss, who released more than a dozen Doc Watson albums on his label Sugar Hill Records, told me in 2019. “He was never pretentious, never had a need to impress anyone, and even when he’d lay back in the presence of other hot guitar players, in the end it was his superb taste and impeccable execution that everyone remembered. Listening to Doc is still like walking into a library of American music—old-time, folk, swing, blues, pop standards, country gospel—he played it all and made it his own.”

★ The Watson clan’s time in North Carolina went all the way back to the late 1700s, when an immigrant named Tom Watson came to America from Scotland and chose to settle in a place with a look and feel similar to the Scottish countryside he’d left behind: the beautifully hardscrabble Appalachian Mountains in the northwestern corner of North Carolina, up near Virginia and Tennessee. The music the Watsons brought over from the old country survived into the lore of young Arthel’s day, and he grew up hearing tall tales and folk ballads from the old country. And because the Watsons were a religious as well as musical family, singing songs out of the *Christian Harmony* songbook was a nightly ritual. No matter the weather, rain or shine or snow, every Sunday the family walked the three-and-a-half miles to Mount Paran Free Will Baptist Church, where General led the church choir.

Given his sightlessness, it’s not surprising that Arthel was drawn to music even more strongly than the rest of his family. Since sound was how he made his way in the world, he spent much of his early childhood banging on household items and trying to make music with whatever was at hand. Stringing a wire to the granary door, he found that it yielded a perfect C if he pulled on it just right. His pitch, like his timing, was always perfect.

At age five, Arthel got his first real instrument for a Christmas present, a harmonica. He wore it out so fast that a new harmonica be-

came an annual Christmas gift for him every year after that. Other early musical milestones included the family's acquisition of a radio, which introduced him to *The Grand Ole Opry*, and the windup gramophone that General earned for a week of work at a sawmill owned by a relative. That came with about three-score records by the likes of Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter Family, Merle Travis, and Uncle Dave Macon, which he wore out almost as fast as his harmonica. By age ten, Arthel was playing a home-made banjo his father had built for him.

His tenth year was also when Arthel was sent away to the North Carolina School for the Blind in Raleigh (later the school for Robbinsville-born country star Ronnie Milsap), where he spent three unhappy years. But school wasn't all bad, and he learned more there than how to cane chairs. Arthel's musical horizons broadened when he heard classical and jazz, and the School for the Blind is where he met Paul Montgomery—a classmate who went on to a career as a respected jazz pianist, and also children's-television host as the beloved "Uncle Paul" on Raleigh television station WRAL. The two became lifelong friends, especially after Montgomery showed him how to play the basic G, C, and D chords on guitar.

One morning when Arthel was back home in Deep Gap on school vacation, he was fooling around with a guitar that one of his brothers had borrowed from a neighbor. General heard his son playing it and issued a challenge: learn to play and sing a tune by the time he returned from work, and they'd go into town and buy him a guitar that weekend. By the time General arrived home that evening, Arthel was able to play the Carter Family's "When the Roses Bloom in Dixieland," and he had his first guitar of his own—a Stella flat-top they bought for \$12. Years later, Doc still seemed to feel a little sheepish about it, as if he'd somehow cheated.

"When my daddy made that bet, he did not know that I had a little bit of a head start," he told me in 2003. "Paul Montgomery, he'd already shown me my first chords on the guitar at school."

Having his own instrument at school lifted Arthel's spirits a bit, but he was still having a hard time at the hands of some teachers who did not approve of him playing "hillbilly" music. After he had the audacity to play a song called "I Like Mountain Music" at the school talent show, there was an altercation with a disapproving teacher. Arthel dropped out and refused to go back. So General put thirteen-year-old Arthel to work doing chores on the farm, and he was soon almost as skilled at crosscut saw as he was at playing guitar or caning chairs. But just like Blind Boy



Sculptor Alexander Hallmark made this statue of Doc Watson, "Just one of the People," which was dedicated on a bench in Boone, North Carolina, in 2011, a year before Watson's death. Photo by Daniel Coston.

Fuller and Rev. Gary Davis, music seemed to be the young man's most likely career prospect. That was why General had made him a banjo in the first place.

Arthel practiced on his guitar relentlessly, starting with Mother Maybelle's "Carter scratch" style of thumb-lead guitar before branching out into fingerpicking. But he truly blossomed when he started using a straight pick, soon becoming one of the fastest, cleanest flat-picking guitarists around. His first performance gigs were busking for change in the streets of Boone, where future National Council for the Traditional Arts executive director Joe Wilson first heard him play in front of a barber-shop on King Street when they were both young teenagers.

"I'd been picking green beans, which every kid did summers," Wilson told me in 2003. "End of the day, I had fifty cents and I had to save a quar-

ter for the ride home. I listened to him on the street for a long time, gave him a quarter, listened a long while longer, got to feeling guilty and gave him my other quarter. I had to hitchhike home, but it was worth it. He was something.”

Doc Watson

Word of this blind flat-picking prodigy’s dazzling skills spread, and within a few years Arthel had enough of a reputation to rate gigs playing live on the radio. One was in 1941 for Hickory station WHKY, broadcasting from a furniture store down the road in Lenoir. The story goes that the stage announcer didn’t think “Arthel” was a suitably catchy stage name. So he asked for suggestions from the live audience that had gathered and somebody yelled out, “Call him Doc!”

It stuck. For the rest of his life, Arthel would henceforth be known as Doc.

★ After reaching adulthood, Doc made his way as best he could as a professional musician, augmenting the government’s monthly aid-to-the-blind disability check with money he earned tuning pianos and playing whatever shows he could. At age twenty-three, he married fifteen-year-old Rosa Lee Carlton, daughter of the great old-time fiddler Gaither Carlton, and two children followed within a few years. With a family to support, Doc decided he could do better with an electric guitar and traded in his acoustic for a Gibson Les Paul. He joined a dance band, Jack Williams and the Country Gentlemen, playing Western swing as well as the likes of “Blue Suede Shoes” and “Tutti Frutti.” Joe Wilson remembered seeing Doc in the Country Gentlemen, sporting a “Woody Woodpecker” sticker on his Les Paul guitar.

“On top of everything else, Doc was also about the best rockabilly guitarist I’d ever seen,” Wilson said. “Doc’s career has been driven by practicality. He’s a working musician, and like all working musicians he does what people are willing to pay for. Never forget that he’s a blind man earning a living, God bless him.”

Doc spent seven years in the Country Gentlemen, from 1953 to 1960. His lightning-fast guitar leads made him a crowd favorite, especially when he’d play fiddle tunes transposed to guitar—which was rather ironic, since he’d tried to learn fiddle while growing up before giving the instrument up because, he said, “I sounded like a hungry pig.” But since the band didn’t have a regular fiddler, Doc figured out how to play the fiddle parts on guitar, which was more complicated than it sounds. Doc wasn’t the first guitarist to do this; Grady Martin and Hank Garland had done something similar a decade earlier while backing up country singer

Red Foley. But Doc elevated it to a level of virtuosity that would eventually catch the ear of a whole generation of acoustic pickers.

This put Doc well beyond the old folk songs he'd heard while growing up, many of which he didn't even remember how to play anymore. And yet even as Doc modernized with the changing times, American popular music was going backwards. A folk revival swept the nation's college campuses in the late 1950s, especially after three young Californians calling themselves the Kingston Trio topped the charts in 1958 with a squeaky clean version of "Tom Dooley," an old folk song that dated back almost to the Civil War. Suddenly there was a big national audience for long-ago folk songs, and interest in whatever old-time musicians might still be out there. Harry Smith's 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music* compilation wasn't just a collection of songs, it was a guidebook.

Doc Watson

A generation of enthusiastic young amateur folklorists from Northeastern universities fanned out across the American South in search of the old-timers. One of them was Ralph Rinzler, mandolin player in a band called the Greenbriar Boys (whose members also included Eric Weissberg, of "Dueling Banjos" fame). In 1960 at the fiddlers convention in Union Grove, Rinzler and Eugene Earle met Clarence "Tom" Ashley, the old-time banjo balladeer whose 1928 recording of "The Coo Coo Bird" on *Anthology* had captivated so many. Rinzler arranged a recording session, and Ashley showed up accompanied by a band including Doc with his electric guitar, to Rinzler's initial disappointment.

But that disappointment turned to astonishment when Rinzler heard Doc play banjo and sing "Tom Dooley" the way he'd heard it while growing up—especially after Doc told him that his great-grandmother had known the real-life Tom Dula and Laura Foster, who were two-thirds of an ill-fated love triangle that ended with her murder and his death by hanging in 1868. After Rinzler heard Doc flat-pick on acoustic guitar, the deal was sealed. Doc had serious doubts that people really were interested in those old mountain songs, but he took Rinzler's advice and recast himself as a traditionalist troubadour playing old folk songs (which he had to go back and relearn all over again). With an ability to make old songs sound new and new ones sound old, a warp-speed flat-picking style, and a flair for droll between-song witticisms, Doc was an immediate sensation.

In the early 1960s, Doc accompanied Ashley to New York to play folk clubs in Greenwich Village, then out to Los Angeles to play the Ash Grove (the same club where Flatt & Scruggs were discovered around the same time for *The Beverly Hillbillies*). Doc's own solo shows followed, with star-

“The Coo Coo Bird” Clarence “Tom” Ashley

Clarence “Tom” Ashley was also another folk-revival rediscovery, and it took some convincing for him to believe anyone else really was interested in old folk songs or his banjo-playing. His skepticism is not surprising because Ashley was nobody’s fool.

He grew up in his grandparents’ boarding house, learning songs and tales from travelers passing through. His grandfather gave the high-spirited young man the nickname “Tommy Tiddy Waddy,” from whence came his stage name combined with his mother’s maiden name (he was born Clarence Earl McCurry).

Ashley rambled all over the Southeastern medicine-show circuit while recording with the Carolina Tar Heels and the Blue Ridge Entertainers. But the Great Depression and World War II made music a part-time profession, even while sharing stages with the likes of Roy Acuff, the Stanley Brothers, and Charlie Monroe. Then came 1952’s *Anthology of American Folk Music*, with two Ashley songs, which prompted his rediscovery. He had a solid run on the festival circuit, even if he seemed a bit bemused by it all.

“Now there’s nothing fancy about my banjo-picking, nothing fancy about my singing,” he announced at the start of a 1963 show in New York (re-released on the 2016 album *Live and In Person Greenwich Village 1963*). “It’s just the way like our foreparents used to do when I was a boy, that’s the way I learned it.”

Ashley died of cancer at age seventy-one in 1967.

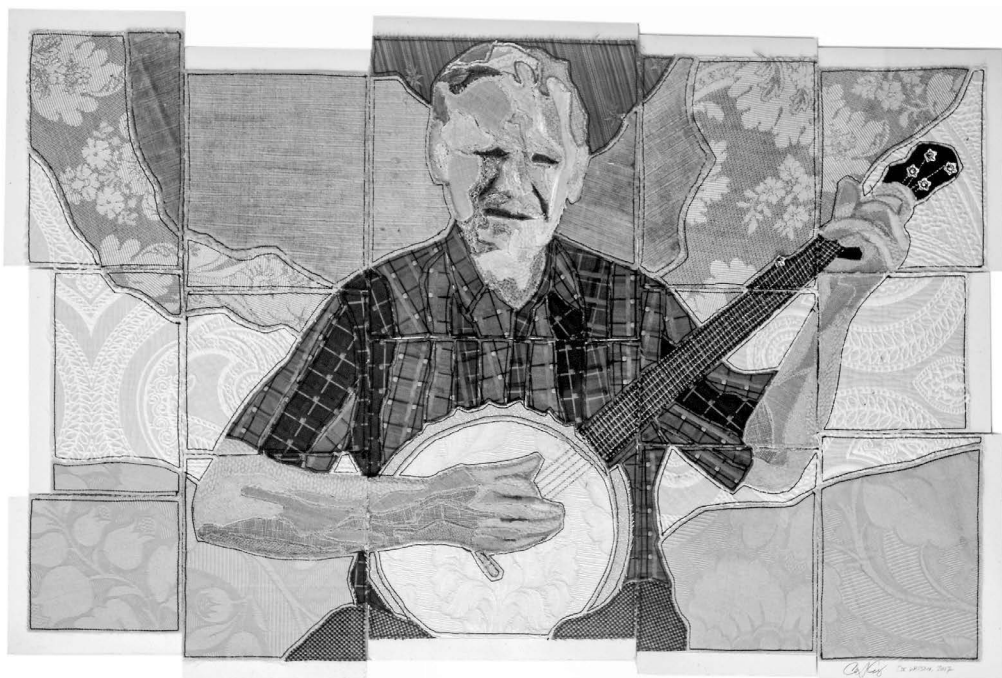
making engagements at Gerdes Folk City in Greenwich Village, the Newport Folk Festival, and even Carnegie Hall. In 1963, the year Doc turned forty, playing music was bringing in enough money that he was able to give up his aid-to-the-blind disability money from the government. Never was anyone happier about paying income taxes for the first time.

“He told me,” said Joe Wilson, “that that was one of the finest feelings he ever had.”

★ As much pride as Doc felt in providing for his family, he was also a natural homebody who found the road a wearying place to be. It was a lonely life of long bus rides, solitary time in motel rooms, and being led



Clarence "Tom" Ashley, ca. 1929. Photographer unknown; photo courtesy of Marshall Wyatt.



Doc Watson needleprint, fashioned out of upholstery fabric samples by artist/musician Caitlin Cary (caitlincary.com) in 2017. Photo by Scott Sharpe.

around by strangers. But things took a turn in 1964, when Doc came home from the road to discover that Rosa Lee had taught their oldest child how to play guitar. Then fifteen, Eddy Merle Watson was named after two of Doc's favorite country artists, Eddy Arnold and Merle Travis. He was a quick study, too, picking up guitar almost as fast as his father had. Merle's first time accompanying Doc onstage came when he'd been playing all of three months. Just five months later, Doc and Merle recorded *Doc Watson & Son*, the first of their twenty albums together. Doc being Doc, he used to insist that Merle was the better guitar player—which wasn't true, of course, but Merle was a superb player in his own right and the best accompanist Doc ever had.

"Merle was a great, great musician, and he didn't care about showmanship or being the star," David Holt said in 2003. "He was content to let his father handle that part of the song, but he was right in there with Doc. The quality of music they made when they really locked in, complimenting what the other did, was really amazing. It was like hearing sisters sing, their voices really locked together."

Merle's joining the act gave Doc a traveling companion and made touring far less lonely and more tolerable. Over the next decade and a half,

Doc and Merle would log more than 4 million miles on the road together, playing almost every state in the United States, along with Mexico, Canada, Africa, Japan, and most of Europe. They won three Grammy Awards, too, becoming one of the most beloved acts on the folk-festival circuit even as different currents of popular music swirled around them. In the early 1960s, Beatlemania and the “British Invasion” swept aside most of the folk revival; but by the end of that decade, another back-to-basics musical movement was taking shape with rock bands like the Byrds and Flying Burrito Brothers playing a rocked-up country music that eventually came to be known as Americana.

Having never been puritanical in his tastes, Doc fit right in. He was a key player on *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band’s 1972 old-time-meets-new-time album, alongside Earl Scruggs, Mother Maybelle Carter, and other country and roots forerunners. It proved to be a career-making record for Doc and broke him through to another new generation all over again. His recording of “Tennessee Stud” became the definitive version, especially when the studio microphones captured him drawling “That’s a horse’s foot in the gravel, man, that ain’t a train.” The Gallagher G-50 guitar Doc played on *Circle* is on display in the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville.

Doc and Merle had a lot of good years together on the road, but touring took a toll on Merle. Wanting to stay home more often, Merle hired Jack Lawrence as fill-in accompanist for some dates starting in 1983. Late one night in October 1985, Merle was working in his basement workshop cutting wood, when the bandsaw blade caught in a knot that splintered, embedding a chunk of hardwood in his upper left arm. It was after midnight and there was a lot of blood. Merle went seeking aid, riding to a neighbor’s house on a tractor. His neighbors helped him remove the splinter and bandaged his arm. After drinking some wine for the pain, Merle started back home on the tractor. He never made it.

Going down a steep hill, the tractor’s brakes locked up and it careened over an embankment, toppling down directly on top of Merle and crushing him to death. Merle was already a grandfather, but only thirty-six years old. His family was devastated.

“You know, all us hillbillies have a hard time dealing with death,” Joe Wilson said in 2003. “We were never able to afford a headshrink, so we have to sing about it and talk about it in morbid ways. But the great facts of life that all people have to deal with, we probably deal with as positively as anybody. The Watsons have kept Merle’s demise in front of them and dealt with it very openly, which I think is healthy. His mother has

dealt with it as she could. She still grieves. Doc still grieves in his own way.”

Doc Watson

Part of Doc’s grieving took the form of music, of course. Following Merle’s death, Doc customized the lyrics to the old spiritual “I Am a Pilgrim” in ways that made it almost uncomfortably close to the bone. This version appeared on the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band’s *Will the Circle Be Unbroken, Volume III*, and when I saw Doc play it in 2003 (accompanied by Merle’s son Richard on guitar), he sang, “I’ve got a father, a mother, a son and a brother and a sister gone to that other shore / And I’m determined to go and see them up there and live with them forevermore.”

“Yeah, Richard,” he said afterward as the crowd applauded, “I get the blues sometime.”

★ In the dark days following Merle’s death, Doc was so bereft that he considered quitting music altogether. But the night before the funeral, the story goes, Merle appeared to Doc in a dream and urged him to keep going. So he did, with a revolving cast of onstage accompanists including David Holt and Jack Lawrence in addition to grandson Richard. Still, there always seemed to be a sadness about him from that point on. A 1987 *People* magazine spread found Doc talking about his weariness of the touring life and contemplating retirement.

But then something happened that seemed to revive Doc’s interest in music again: a 1988 benefit show, the Merle Watson Memorial Festival, to fund a “garden of the senses” memorial on the campus of Wilkesboro Community College. Earl Scruggs, Chet Atkins, Grandpa Jones, and dozens of other friends and peers joined Doc onstage, and the show was a rousing success that funded a lovely memorial to Merle’s memory.

“The last piece of the garden we put in place was a brick wall with a life-size portrait of Doc and Merle sculpted into the brick,” original festival cofounder Frederick “B” W. Townes told me in 2017. “I brought Doc down before the public saw it and he put his hands on the wall—he sees by touching. I didn’t tell him what he was looking at, but he knew right off what it was. Tears came to his eyes. Mine, too.”

That first festival drew about 4,000 people, a figure larger than the town of Wilkesboro’s population. But that was nothing compared to what happened in subsequent years. Eventually rebranded as just MerleFest, it quickly blossomed into an annual event and one of the country’s most important music festivals, drawing crowds of 80,000 the last weekend of every April. And just about every folk, bluegrass, old-time, country,

The Spark Tift Merritt

MerleFest has always been a showcase for new-artist breakthroughs, including Catherine “Tift” Merritt—who was twenty-five years old and still making her way into the Raleigh/Durham/Chapel Hill music scene when she won the festival’s prestigious Chris Austin Songwriting Contest in 2000. With a bell-clear voice and blue-toned rhythmic leanings, she hit a sweet spot between angelic Emmylou Harris and earthy Bonnie Raitt. She went on to a solid recording career, highlighted by a best-country-album Grammy nomination for 2004’s *Tambourine*.

Beyond music, Merritt also emerged as a multimedia renaissance woman—photographer, prose writer, and radio host of *The Spark*, where she talked to fellow artists about the creative process. Around the time her radio show began in 2008, I interviewed Merritt in New York City, where she was living (before moving back to Raleigh shortly before her daughter was born in 2016). She wanted to talk at the Museum of Modern Art, in front of a painting by the idiosyncratic American artist Cy Twombly. She chose *The Italians*, a graffiti-scrawled canvas that required close study to absorb.

“This is the man, the reason why I started the radio show,” Merritt told me. “This is what a lot of his paintings are like. Sometimes there’s a word or a piece of a phrase on this huge canvas. It’s like he’s writing a letter. I love how the words and the paint interact, so passionate and emotional.”

Doc Watson

and Americana act of consequence has played it over the years. What the Grand Ole Opry is to country music, MerleFest is to folk and bluegrass.

“Doc was always listening,” Peter Rowan, one of a handful of musicians who at the time of this writing have played every MerleFest, told me in 2017. “Whatever you did up there, you knew Doc was listening and you wanted to pay homage to the tradition and the aura he represented. Everybody loved Doc and held him in wonder, like an oracle.”

With MerleFest giving Doc a renewed sense of purpose, he seemed to catch a second wind. He would serve as the festival’s guiding light and master of ceremonies for the rest of his life. Over his last three decades, Doc won just about every state and national award there was to win, too, along with the enduring admiration of his peers. In 2011, a life-

sized statue of Doc sitting and playing guitar was installed on a bench in Boone, around where Joe Wilson had first seen him busking more than seventy years earlier.

Doc Watson

When news came of Doc's death at age eighty-nine in May of 2012, admirers covered that statue with flowers. Fittingly, Doc's final performance had been at MerleFest the month before, and he was finally slowing down just a bit. But even playing at a trot rather than a sprint, his every note still rang just as true as ever. After Doc wound down and stopped, his widow Rosa Lee passed away less than six months later, followed by their grandson Richard in 2015. But MerleFest survives, as does the memory of Doc.

"Lots of people came along later and learned his style, maybe even got more adept at it," said Joe Wilson after Doc's death. "But those amazing hot licks don't get at the essence of Doc. He was an old-time musician, never anything else, even though he could play everything else, too. He was beyond label."

7

Breaking Color Lines at the Beach The Embers and Beach Music

As far as outdoors in August in North Carolina goes, this 2017 gig wasn't the worst scorcher the Embers had ever endured in six decades of gigging. Still, with the late-afternoon-turning-to-evening sun beating down out of a hazy sky, temperatures on the stage and out in the crowded plaza of Raleigh's Midtown North Hills shopping center registered somewhere between uncomfortable and unbearable. But the band played on, seemingly unfazed even as they sweated through the matching stage outfits that made them look like a bowling team: two-tone slip-on loafers and white polyester slacks, topped by red shirts emblazoned with logos for "The Embers" on one shoulder, Lexington's Hayes Jewelers ("The King of Diamonds") on the other.

Out front on lead vocals was saxophonist Craig Woolard, the group's primary singer for the better part of two decades. But Woolard was still a relative newcomer compared to seventy-seven-year-old drummer Bobby Tomlinson, the group's sole remaining original member. Tomlinson always kept things moving in all ways—playing the drums, running the business, and even driving the bus—which he did for pretty much the entirety of the Embers' first sixty years, missing only three out of an estimated 15,000 gigs at the time of this show. Even getting a cancerous growth removed from the side of his nose a day earlier didn't keep him from his appointed time-keeping rounds on this hot August night; he played with bandages covering the wound.

"*Ladies and gentlemen,*" Woolard announced, "it's hot enough to be at the beach! So why don't we play some beach music?"

Tomlinson cued up a rolling shuffle, unadorned 4/4 time and nothing fancy, as the Embers' horn section started up. And Woolard began to sing an old song by the Philadelphia pop-soul group the Tymes, although

it was not one of their biggest hits like “So Much in Love” or “Wonderful! Wonderful!” (which both cracked *Billboard*’s pop top-ten in 1963). Instead, it was a song that only reached number 91 on the pop chart and not much higher than that on the soul chart, either. In the parallel universe of beach music, however, “Ms. Grace” is the Tymes song that resonates the way “Twist and Shout” does in old-time rock ’n’ roll or Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5 in classical: as the essence. It’s the most golden of golden oldies.

Ooh ooh ooh Miss Grace
Satin and perfume and lace
The minute I saw your face
I knew that I loved you!

Sweat soaking through Woolard’s shirt and dotting his forehead did not prevent him from selling the song, one hand on the microphone and another reaching for the sky as he sang. Down on the dancefloor in front of the stage, meanwhile, about twenty couples whirled about, some with more grace than others. Beach is music of tradition and familiarity above all else, for its audiences as well as the bands that play it. And what the audience does to beach music is shag, which you might call a dance craze, except most dance crazes don’t last for seventy years.

The official state dance of both Carolinas, North *and* South, shagging takes many forms. It involves a wide range of moves, most of them based on a six-count step. While the pros and experts can shag at a breakneck pace with elaborate, athletic choreography, most amateur dancers shag at the tempo of a leisurely, easy-going lope with moves you can do one-handed—the better to hold a drink in your other hand. It’s a relaxing style of music and dance, steeped in the temporal romance of vacations, parties, and summer loves.

“If you’re wondering where the party is,” Woolard said a few songs later, “wonder no more! It’s right here at North Hills and all you gotta do is dial 634-5789 to ask!”

That was the introduction to “634-5789 (Soulsville, U.S.A.),” still a beach-music standard more than half a century after Wilson Pickett put it on the R & B charts. Over the course of a ninety-minute set, the Embers also covered chestnuts by the Spinners and Lou Rawls, plus the obligatory “Sixty Minute Man”—the 1951 classic by the “5” Royales’ old contemporaries Billy Ward and the Dominoes, and arguably the number-one beach song of all time. But a lot of the setlist consisted of songs that didn’t seem like R & B fare, starting with the 1972 soft-rock standard

Dominoes to Drifters Clyde McPhatter and Ben E. King

Billy Ward and the Dominoes' 1951 hit "Sixty Minute Man" is beach music's all-time top song and one of the earliest rock 'n' roll records, with an optimal 132 beats-per-minute shag tempo and nakedly carnal lyrics. But it was also an outlier for its makers, given the starring vocal role of bass singer Bill Brown. Most of the Dominoes' 1950–53 recordings spotlighted Durham native Clyde McPhatter, whose velvet-smooth tenor was the sweetest R & B voice this side of Sam Cooke.

Born a preacher's son in Hayti in 1932, McPhatter grew up singing in the church choir. After World War II, the family moved north to Teaneck, New Jersey. Clyde was still a teenager when he won amateur night at Harlem's Apollo Theater, and Billy Ward—a Juilliard-trained virtuoso pianist—recruited him into his new R & B group. Movie-star handsome with charisma to burn, McPhatter quickly emerged as the star of the show.

McPhatter chafed at earning sideman's wages when he was front man, billed as "Clyde Ward" to pass him off as Ward's younger brother, and he left in 1953 (replaced by another legend in the making, Jackie Wilson). He soon wound up as singer in a new group, the Drifters, registering signpost hits including "Money Honey" and "Such a Night"—perfect doo-wop nuggets of that era. He went solo and had a good run, but the hits quit coming in the early 1960s. McPhatter eventually succumbed to years of alcohol and suffered a fatal heart attack in June 1972, five months shy of turning forty.

The Drifters continued on and reemerged in 1959 with another North Carolinian as front man, Henderson-born Ben E. King, who had a more plain-spoken voice than McPhatter's golden tenor. He gave just the right urgency to Drifters pop classics like "There Goes My Baby," "Save the Last Dance for Me" and "This Magic Moment." King had even bigger hits as a solo act with "Stand by Me" (later the title and theme song to a 1986 movie starring River Phoenix) and "Spanish Harlem." King lived until age seventy-six and died in 2015.

McPhatter was among the first acts inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1987, followed a year later by the Drifters. As a measure of their influence in beach music, the two late-1960s *Beach Beat* compilation albums had a combined total of five songs by the Drifters, McPhatter, and King.

“Brandy (You’re a Fine Girl)” and extending into contemporary twenty-first-century hits by the likes of Bruno Mars, Ed Sheeran, and Justin Timberlake.

No matter the vintage, however, what every song in the set shared was Optimal Shag Tempo (OST), generally somewhere between 110 and 130 beats per minute. That also went for the Embers’ own magnum opus, “I Love Beach Music,” which was one of the few originals they played on this night. A 114-beats-per-minute beach song about beach music, “I Love Beach Music” plays like a beach roadmap (it quotes from both “Sixty Minute Man” and “Ms. Grace”). It has appeared in the coda position at the end of pretty much every Embers live set ever since original front man Jackie Gore wrote it in 1979. And as they danced the shag to it, the crowd sang along, same as always.

I love beach music
Always have and I always will
There ain’t no other kind of music in the world
That gives me quite the thrill.

★ Shortly after I arrived in North Carolina in 1991, I was talking to my editor at the paper when she said something about “beach music.” It was the first time I’d heard the phrase, which I found puzzling. And so I responded with a variant of the same question a half-century’s worth of clueless transplants have asked.

“‘Beach music’? Is that like the Beach Boys?”

My editor laughed, emphatically shook her head no and then became the first (but far from last) person to bestow that most southern of put-downs upon me: “Oh, bless your heart.” Truly, that conversation was a gateway to all things North Carolina in more ways than one.

As I came to learn, beach music is a curious regional tradition seemingly frozen in time. Where most music is created by musicians who play it, the early incarnation of beach music was defined and curated by deejays, jukebox operators, and the shag dancers who asked for it in nightclubs. Beach isn’t actually a specific style so much as a catch-all label for a tradition that’s as much about lifestyle as music. Ask any beach-music fan to define it and answers might range from old R & B groups like Hank Ballard and the Midnighters to latter-day cover bands like the Embers, or just dance music paced at that ideal shag-tempo heartbeat in 4/4 time. It’s a big tent that also has room for the likes of Texas roadhouse-blues singer Delbert McClinton, twenty-first-century electro-soul duo Gnarl

Barkley, and even the occasional old Piedmont blues tune like Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee's shuffling "Gonna Move Across the River."

However you define it, a lot of beach music's appeal is tied up in nostalgic memories. So lots of classic soul makes the cut: Motown pop and Stax-Volt soul, along with the early forerunners of R & B—the stuff that was cleaner than blues but grittier than pop. Scan the listings in *The Beach Music & Shag All Time Top 200*, the essential 2010 catalog of the canon as laid out by beach deejay Fessa' John Hook and Christopher Biehler, and you'll see the Drifters, O'Jays, Al Green, Temptations, Four Tops, Platters, and other familiar names. But just as barbecue enthusiasts value the small out-of-the-way 'cue shacks that only they know about, the heart and soul of the beach music pantheon lies in its more obscure songs and artists.

Beach originally came into being as an undercover phenomenon, a private club where people passed along whispers of favorite bands, B-sides, and juke joints like secret handshakes. So a journeyman like New Orleans singer/pianist Willie Tee can be a revered elder in beach music despite never having climbed higher than number 97 on *Billboard's* pop singles chart (for 1965's "Teasin' You"). Beach is a subset of soul where the Clovers are as important as James Brown. And the Embers, a band that has never had a national hit on the mainstream pop charts, is among the biggest in the field.

"Nowadays, the people who gravitate toward beach music like it because most of the lyrics are uplifting and happy," Embers keyboardist Andy Swindell told me in 2017. "It's kind of a culture for older folks who used to love to go to bars when they were younger. It's not threatening."

Early on, however, beach music was anything but non-threatening. And in contrast to the working-class origins of early blues, country, and bluegrass, it came about from middle-class lifestyles and mores. Carrying as it did the intoxicating scent of forbidden interracial fruit, beach music was what suburban white kids had to sneak off to hear across the tracks or listen to on the sly late at night, on a transistor radio under the covers. A by-product of the era of lingering Jim Crow segregation, beach music came about at a time when racial barriers throughout the South were strictly enforced and took considerable moxie to cross.

It started with a confluence of circumstances, events, and trends that began to reach critical mass as World War II drew to a close. Between wartime shellac shortages and the 1942–44 "Petrillo Ban" (in which striking American Federation of Musicians members refused to record, over royalty disputes), records were still relatively hard to come by at the end



Promotional photo of the Embers, ca. the mid-1970s. From left: Jackie Gore, Buck Keener, Big John Thompson (seated), Durwood Martin (standing behind him), Bobby Tomlinson, and Johnny Hopkins. Photo courtesy of Fessa' John Hook.

of the war. There was music on the radio, but it was primarily live performances and hillbilly bands. If records were what you wanted to hear, especially “race records,” one of the few ways to do so was to feed coins into jukeboxes in nightclubs.

This was especially true outside the big cities, like the resort areas along the Carolina coastline. For middle-class white kids with an adventurous streak, the cool thing to do on family vacations at the beach was to sneak out to listen to jukebox music at clubs in the African American

parts of town, where you could hear the raw, protean likes of Big Joe Turner, Louis Jordan, and Wynonie Harris. That period's nascent R & B acts were a lot livelier than the jukebox selections in the white joints, which were still stuck in squaresville with orchestras led by Glenn Miller, Harry James, or Les Brown. Back in 1945, the music-industry trade magazine *Billboard* declared, "Swing is dead; bands are out and vocalists are in" — the white clubs were firmly stuck in the past.

Legend has it that the first crack to appear in this wall of jukebox segregation came in 1946 with the opening of Tijuana Inn, a small nightclub in the coastal resort town of Carolina Beach that was to beach music as New York City's CBGB is to punk rock. Tijuana Inn's proprietor was a former merchant marine named Jim Hannah, and he took the venue's name at the suggestion of one Malcom Ray "Chicken" Hicks, a local dancer of legendary renown (a reputation that eventually landed him in the Beach Shaggers Hall of Fame). Hicks's apparent inspiration for the name was that he had just returned from a visit to Mexico.

Hannah contracted with the Bostic Music Company from nearby Wilmington to stock the jukebox at Tijuana Inn. And the salient detail was that he and Hicks asked Bostic to bring them the same records by black artists they'd heard playing at jump joints over in Seabreeze — the "colored" beach resort in the area.

"Tijuana Inn was just this nothing little hole in the wall," Rev. Billy Wirtz (William Wirths) told me in 2017. "But they were the first white-owned place to have the bright idea of putting black records on the jukebox, and people went nuts. That's really where the whole thing started."

★ While the Tijuana Inn proved to be short-lived, it lasted long enough for other white clubs to follow suit. As the 1940s progressed and R & B came into sharper focus as the future of American popular music, black records continued infiltrating white jukeboxes up and down the North and South Carolina coastline. The music and dancing spread inland to places like the Bladen County town of White Lake, too, as well as larger dance pavilions in Myrtle Beach, Wrightsville Beach, and other coastal towns. With R & B established as what the hipper kids wanted to hear, shagging became the dance of choice.

Some accounts date the origins of shag dancing as early as the 1920s, when a young man about town in Wilmington named Lewis Philip Hall claimed to have invented shagging as a partner-dance variation of the general swing style. The "Carolina shag" was related to the Charleston, Lindy Hop, jitterbug, and other popular dances of the jazz age. But shag-

**The Embers and
Beach Music**



*Unidentified shag dancers at the beach in Nags Head, North Carolina, August 1948.
Photo from the Conservation and Development Photo File, North Carolina State Archives.*

ging truly emerged as a distinctive style unto itself in the 1940s as part of the beach-music subculture, when young whites incorporated moves they'd copped during their late-night reconnaissance adventures to the black clubs.

"Beach music really began as dance culture," Fessa' John Hook told me in 2017. "It started with some white kids down at the beach with the urge to dance in a somewhat different way, a lot of which they picked up from black folks they'd rub up against here and there. It was new to

white people. Very often they'd find the perfect songs to shag to when they flipped over the big national hits."

Along with optimal shag tempo, what a lot of the early popular beach songs had in common was overt, unapologetic sexuality. In stark contrast to Perry Como, Dinah Shore, and the rest of the white-bread pop mainstream, the ribald Nebraska-born blues shouter Wynonie Harris would wink, nod, and leer suggestively while singing about his "Lolly Pop Mama" in 1948. To anyone paying the least bit of attention, it was obvious that, no, that one was not about candy. For those who loved the music, the dirty-blues aspect only added to its forbidden-fruit appeal.

"'Beach' became a code word for forbidden black culture in the form of this music you'd hear at the beach," said Wirths. "There were white kids coming down, mingling with all these drifters and beach bums who never settled down after the war, and the music was part of it."

In 1949, the same year that *Billboard* changed the name of its black-music chart from "race" to "R & B," Granville Henry "Stick" McGhee— younger brother of Brownie McGhee from Durham's blues scene a decade earlier— cut a record that would stand as one of beach music's early signposts. "Drinkin' Wine, Spo-Dee-O-Dee" was a jump-blues ode to good times "down in New Orleans," and it was jaunty as well as more than a little silly. But "Wine" was also irresistibly memorable from the very first listen, and it was perfect for bopping along to show off one's shag moves. McGhee had first recorded "Drinkin' Wine" for another label, but this 1949 version was an early breakthrough for Atlantic Records, which would eventually grow into one of the great American record companies and repository of much of the beach-music R & B canon.

With 1950 in sight, records were finally beginning to be heard beyond jukeboxes, as broadcast radio took hold as a medium for recorded music rather than live performances. One of the most important stations was Nashville's WLAC-AM, whose place in beach music is roughly analogous to the role of WSM's *Grand Ole Opry* in country music. Deejay Gene Nobles was at the WLAC studio microphone late nights for his *Blues, Boogie & Barrelhouse* show, spinning the hottest new R & B records and sending them out far and wide over 50,000 watts of clear-channel power.

The music was targeted at African American audiences, but white kids were tuning in, too. Two of them in North Carolina were Bobby Tomlinson and Jackie Gore, who met in 1955 at Raleigh's Hugh Morson Junior High School. A year later, after Tomlinson turned sixteen and got his license to drive, he and Gore would cruise around late at night listening to

WLAC play the Drifters and Hank Ballard, talking about the music and dreaming about putting together a band of their own.

In 1958, they finally did.

★ This beach-music ecosystem of clubs, jukeboxes, and dance pavilions ebbed and flowed over its first decade. Establishments came and went, some lasting not much longer than a season, and some clubs took the next step up from jukeboxes by bringing in many of the R & B artists behind the big beach hits for live performances. Then in 1954, the beach infrastructure suffered what could have been a knockout punch from the ocean itself. Hurricane Hazel came ashore right at the border between North and South Carolina with 150-mile-per-hour winds and a storm surge as high as eighteen feet in some places. But the region's musical culture had become embedded enough for rebuilding to happen pretty quickly, especially in the beach-music epicenter of Myrtle Beach.

"The Greeks owned all the restaurants in North Myrtle and could not have cared less about 'white' or 'Negro' artists, so long as people played it," said Wirths. "Beach music gave a whole bunch of black artists careers and continued livelihoods long past when they'd fallen off the radar. Willie Tee, O. C. Smith, even the "5" Royals—their tickets had all been punched long ago in terms of the black commercial circuit. But this was a new audience, and it revived them."

Beach music's white teenage audience was growing up, graduating from high school, and going off to college, where adult approval was not as much of an issue. So beach fans took the music inland with them and college-town dance clubs like Columbia, South Carolina's Big Apple sprang up. A collegiate live circuit emerged for R & B acts playing fraternity parties (like the one immortalized in the 1978 comedy *Animal House*, with the fictional R & B band Otis Day and the Knights), sorority mixers, and other on-campus functions. This collegiate chitlin circuit extended beyond the South and all across the nation, of course. But in the Carolinas, it was focused on the beach-music subset of R & B.

"By the early 1960s at Chapel Hill and Duke and State and Clemson and University of South Carolina, there'd be eight or ten bands on-campus every Friday and Saturday night during football season," said Fessa' John Hook.

Do the math and it was obvious: there was demand for far more live bands playing beach music than could be supplied by aging R & B acts on the road. So in the late 1950s and early '60s, there came a wave of primarily white beach bands that started up in the Carolinas. A few

would achieve mainstream chart success, most notably South Carolina's Swingin' Medallions with 1966's "Double Shot (Of My Baby's Love)" and Wilson's the O'Kaysions with the 1968 hit "Girl Watcher." But most of them—Jetty Jumpers, Catalinas, Tassels, and Band of Oz as well as the Embers—would stay big fish in beach music's comparatively small pond.

They all kept busy live schedules and most of them recorded, too. Arthur Smith Studio over in Charlotte was one of the major centers for beach-music record-making. And since they were already playing R & B, appealing to the beach audience by focusing on songs with the shag tempo just made sense.

"I came along at a time when country music was all you heard about," Tomlinson told me in 2017. "But when I was a kid in Goldsboro and Raleigh, we'd be listening to WLAC, and that's what we liked—James Brown, Jackie Wilson, 'Lawdy Miss Clawdy.' R & B was what we were drawn to and what we started playing, and eventually people started referring to it as beach music. Not too many other white groups were doing that. Most of them were doing rockabilly like Elvis, who I didn't much care for. Heck of a singer and I respected what he did, I just didn't care for the style."

The auditorium at Hugh Morson Junior High was equipped with a piano as well as a set of drums, so Tomlinson and Gore would go in after school to play, with Jackie's brother joining in on washtub bass. When they got up the gumption to start playing in public, they were in the tenth grade, and their first gig was a Saturday morning show at the Village Theatre in Raleigh's Cameron Village shopping center. Tomlinson's recollection was that payment to get in was ten Pepsi bottle caps. Early names for the ensemble included the "Satellites" (inspired by Russian's 1957 launch of Sputnik) and the "5 J's." But eventually they decided they needed something a bit classier and settled on the Embers, after the name of a record company in New York.

Embers keyboardist Blair Ellison was a year older than his bandmates and already a member of Kappa Sigma at N.C. State—which gave the group an in on the fraternity circuit. Along with rehearsing in the basement of the Sig house on Clark Avenue near campus, the Embers played pretty much every Kappa Sigma chapter on the East Coast. And even though segregation still prevailed in the South, this early incarnation of the group was actually integrated. Saxophonist Doug Harris was older than his bandmates and also African American, which meant that getting him into the band and its shows took something of a sales job.

"I couldn't believe how good Doug sounded the first time he played

The Pioneer Jimmy Cavallo

While the Embers were among North Carolina's first white beach bands to form, they weren't *the* first. Jimmy Cavallo, a saxophonist from Syracuse, New York, beat them to it by more than a decade. Serving in the Navy during World War II brought Cavallo to North Carolina, where he'd go listen to bands and records on the R & B side of the tracks. After the war, he stuck around, formed the Jimmy Cavallo Quartet, and toured the budding beach-music club circuit for a few years.

"He'd play Carolina Beach and North Myrtle, three or four different clubs," beach deejay and historian Fessa' John Hook told me in 2017. "And following him to every show was about seventy-five young kids, most of whom ended up in the Shaggers Hall of Fame decades later."

Cavallo achieved another notable landmark after he appeared in deejay Alan Freed's 1956 movie *Rock, Rock, Rock*. When the movie opened that December, the Jimmy Cavallo Quartet became the first white rock act to play Harlem's fabled Apollo Theater.

As late as 2016, Cavallo was still playing the occasional performance, including his eighty-ninth birthday party.

with us," Tomlinson said. "Like guys I heard on records. The other guys said, 'We can't hire him, he's black!' This was 1958, remember. When black artists played Memorial Auditorium, I'd have to sit in the balcony while the blacks danced on the lower level. Anyway, when they said we couldn't hire him, I said, 'Yeah, but he's real light!' So he was in the band. A year later, we had a gig in New Bern and I got a call: 'Somebody told me you had a n-word in the band.' 'No sir,' I said, 'he's Puerto Rican.' We played that night and nobody said a word."

★ When they weren't out working the collegiate circuit, the Embers did their apprenticeship at a South Raleigh nightclub that had country music most nights, where they often served as opening act and house backing band for whatever R & B acts were touring through town—Big Joe Turner, the Drifters, Clarence "Frogman" Henry, Clyde McPhatter. Some of the acts they backed up needed more help than others. In 1961, a Pittsburgh doo-wop group called the Marcells arrived with a number 1 hit

single, “Blue Moon.” But that was pretty much the only song they knew, according to Tomlinson, so the Embers had to work up a set’s worth of songs to fill out the show.

“That’s how we got our chops,” Tomlinson said, and it was baptism by fire. The group had grown into a solid headliner itself by the mid-1960s, center of a budding business empire that included an Embers nightclub in downtown Raleigh (followed several years later by a second Embers club down at Atlantic Beach). Their following made the Embers a popular opening act for promoters bringing big-name acts to town, which scored them one especially memorable booking: opening for the Rolling Stones at N.C. State’s Reynolds Coliseum.

It was November 1965 and the Embers were pretty much kings of the Carolinas. But the Stones’ empire was much bigger, and they arrived in Raleigh riding high on their first U.S. number 1 hits, “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction” and “Get Off of My Cloud.” Nevertheless, there were those who said the Embers outplayed the Stones that night, including the *News & Observer* reviewer who wrote that the hometown act’s opening set “surpassed anything England’s native sons attempted.” Given how the Stones had behaved toward them backstage before the show, Jackie Gore found some vindication in that.

“We turned the crowd on,” Gore told me fifty years later. “Got three standing ovations and by the time we finished, all the Rolling Stones were standing backstage, watching. *Then* they wanted to meet us, after we stole the show.”

Tomlinson also pronounced himself unimpressed with England’s newest hit-makers, which was a disappointment. The Stones were R & B fans, too, so Tomlinson figured they could at least talk records. But when the show’s promoter tried to introduce Tomlinson to Mick Jagger, the Stones front man refused to shake hands. “I can’t believe I’m paying this guy twelve grand,” the promoter muttered, shaking his head.

“Who was I to Jagger, just some guy in a little group opening for him,” Tomlinson told me in 2015, shortly before the Stones were to return to Raleigh to play N.C. State’s Carter-Finley Stadium. “They were already famous, though not like now. It probably bothered me for thirty minutes, but I got paid, too. Probably \$150. All these years later, I’m still in Raleigh driving the band’s bus and they’ll probably fly in on a Learjet.”

★ Someone else who appeared onstage at Reynolds that night in 1965 was emcee Ed Weiss, better-known by his on-air name Charlie Brown, one of the most important deejays in the beach-music universe. Nick-

named after the Coasters' 1959 hit, Brown picked up his first radio experience as a high school student in Norfolk, Virginia, before going off to the University of North Carolina. Weiss arrived in Chapel Hill in 1959, during beach music's early inland-invasion phrase, and his first exposure to shagging was seeing classmates in his dorm "dancing and holding the doorknob," as he told me in 2015. But he quickly realized that beach music was basically the same R & B he'd been playing on the radio.

After graduating in 1963, Brown got a job at Charlotte R & B station WGIB and then moved on to Raleigh's WKIX-AM in early 1964—arriving with perfect timing, just as "Beatlemania" was taking hold in the wake of their historic breakthrough on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Brown became one of WKIX's "Men of Music" deejays, with R & B as his specialty. His reputation quickly spread among fans as well as performers like "General" Norman Johnson, front man of heritage beach bands the Showmen and the Chairmen of the Board.

"General Johnson said in an interview once that leaving Norfolk with the Showmen in the mid-sixties and heading south, you'd hear nothing on the radio but 'How Much Is That Doggie in the Window,'" Weiss said. "Until you got close enough to Raleigh to hear Charlie Brown playing R & B on WKIX."

Like most of his fellow deejays, Brown worked plenty of side-hustles off the air, emceeding concerts and high-school sock hops across WKIX's listening area. In the late 1960s, Brown approached Atlantic Records with another extracurricular proposition. He'd been talking with Barrie Bergman of the Durham-based Record Bar chain about the early R & B beach-music hits, which were important and revered—but hard to find, many of them not on full-length albums at all. So Brown proposed that Atlantic release a compilation album of beach-music standards. Atlantic executive Jerry Wexler, noting that the Carolinas were a strong sales pocket for vintage R & B among whites as well as blacks, commissioned Weiss to curate two compilations, titled *Beach Beat*.

Released in 1967, *Volume One* had a lot of the landmark beach-music hits from Atlantic's vaults, starting with Stick McGhee's "Drinkin' Wine, Spo-Dee-O-Dee" and including multiple songs by the Coasters, Clyde McPhatter, and Willie Tee. Tee would also appear on 1968's follow-up *Volume Two* with that minor pop hit of his, "Teasin' You," alongside Ben E. King, Barbara Lewis, and other golden-oldie shag favorites. Finally, beach music was as caught-up with the times as it would ever be, its essential catalog finally available on the industry-standard format. There was even



Craig Woolard (left) and Jackie Gore onstage together at the Embers' 2014 induction into the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame. Photo by Daniel Coston.

an overseas equivalent emerging around this time, so-called “Northern Soul” in England, with much of the same music.

Still, as the 1970s dawned, beach music’s popularity went into a slide that looked as if it might be fatal. Many of the old R & B bands were either gone or fading away, while the newer soul generation had moved on to harder-edged funk that was worlds away from the shag paradigm. While Marvin Gaye, the O’Jays, and Curtis Mayfield’s Impressions were all heritage beach acts, “Back Stabbers,” “Superfly,” and “Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)” just didn’t fit the beach format.

“Beach music just about died in the seventies,” said John Hook. “That was as close as it ever came, and there were some lean years for everybody. But disco brought back touch-dancing in the late seventies, just

as a lot of people who'd been shagging at the beach from the forties to the sixties became empty-nesters. They started going back to the beach again, bumping into old friends again and doing the dance where they could."

★ Along with bringing the dancers back, the disco-fueled resurgence of beach music reemphasized the scene's roots on the dance floor, where beach had originally begun three decades earlier. Increasingly, the beach-music audience consisted of more stand-up dancers than sit-down listeners, especially when groups like the Society of Stranders formed and began having conventions and gatherings in the early 1980s. The rising tide also lifted the fortunes of the beach bands wily enough to focus on the dancers, often with beach-music songs about the pleasures of beach music—the Fantastic Shakers' "Myrtle Beach Days," the Catalinas' "Summertime's Calling Me" and, of course, the Embers' "I Love Beach Music." The latter became even more popular after Budweiser used it in a beer spot, leading to a profitable longtime sponsorship.

"Bobby Tomlinson's never had a cigarette or a beer in his life," noted Andy Swindell, "but he'd hold a can and smile during the Budweiser days."

While numerous members shuffled through the lineup during the 1980s and into the '90s, original Embers cofounders Tomlinson and Gore remained the constants for more than thirty-five years. Then it all came crashing down in 1994. For years, tensions had been building between Gore and the rest of the band, especially Craig Woolard. It all came to an ugly head under the worst possible circumstances, onstage in the middle of a performance—a dispute that began with a heated exchange leading to a brawl in which Gore hit Woolard upside the head with his guitar just as the rest of the band fired up the "I Love Beach Music" introductory fanfare to end the gig. Just like that, the show was over, and so was Gore's tenure as a member of the Embers.

But it didn't change things all that much. Gore went on to form Jackie Gore Family & Friends and the Legends of Beach, sometimes with other Embers alumni in the band. The Embers themselves continued on, too, with members coming and going. After leaving to go solo in the early 2000s, Woolard was back onboard as full-time front man by the time the Embers were inducted into the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame in 2014. At the ceremony, the hatchet was buried long enough for Gore to sing onstage with the Embers for the first time in two decades.

Even after the Embers' lineup turned over completely, they kept right on going, busy as ever. Tomlinson finally gave up the drummer's chair

after sixty years, when a knee replacement forced him into retirement from performing in 2018 at age seventy-nine. So he yielded to a replacement drummer and stuck to managing the band's business affairs. But that was always his real gift, knowing how to give the people what they wanted.

"I'm an average drummer, I know that," Tomlinson told me at that August 2017 gig. "But I also know that people dance on the two and the four, not all these fancy fills and rolls and stuff. If the rhythm section puts that down, well, you can dance to it and it's pleasing to the ear."

Sounds like beach music.

**The Embers and
Beach Music**

8

The Eight-Track Era of Rock and Roll

Nantucket's Long Way to the Top

It wasn't 1978 anymore, but it might as well have been. The crowd at the Ray Price Capital City Bikefest was large, loud, and leather-clad, listening to Nantucket lead singer Larry Uzzell holding forth on the center-stage mike, same as he did during the era of bellbottom jeans and fifty-cent-a-gallon gas. The setting was downtown Raleigh's Fayetteville Street main drag for the festival, an annual celebration of all things two-wheeled that drew throngs of motorcycle enthusiasts every September to see, be seen, show off their bikes, and maybe raise fists and yell along with a band or two from days gone by. This warm fall evening in 2017 found Nantucket—a rock band's rock band of the kind that thrived during the eight-track-tape era—in Saturday night's headliner slot. They took the stage to an appropriately enthusiastic introduction by the master of ceremonies.

"Are you ready?! These guys put rock 'n' roll on the map in Raleigh, North Carolina, your hometown heroes: NANTUCKET!"

The crowd of several thousand roared and drummer Jason Patterson threw out a warm-up rimshot as his bandmates sauntered onstage. As always for the better part of half a century, shaman-savant guitarist Tommy Redd was stationed stage-left, cowboy hat pulled down low over his twinkling eyes, and grinning broadly as he played chucka-chucka-chucka rhythm guitar. Redd mostly stayed toward the back during the show, only rarely going to the microphone himself (and usually just to chip in harmonies). But make no mistake: no matter the rest of the lineup, Redd has always been the beating heart of Nantucket.

tucket's longtime keyboardist and saxophonist, who has come and gone a couple of times over the years since first joining Nantucket in 1973. But he came back for good in the late 1990s, eventually bringing along his son Andy (twenty-seven years old on this night) as flashy lead guitarist. And in the middle of it all, center stage as always, was Uzzell in a red Nantucket T-shirt, jeans, and fedora. During Nantucket's way-back-when glory days, no hat would've covered Uzzell's rock-star coif, and that shirt would have come off at some point. But even if the abs weren't what they used to be, Uzzell still preened with a showman's instincts. The crowd had scarcely caught its breath from Nantucket's entrance when the band offered its first money shot of the night with song number two in the setlist.

"We'd like to do one for you now, this is the title cut from our third album," Uzzell said, and a ripple went through the fans who knew. Redd began to play an insistent E-A-D-G-B-E guitar riff, nothing fancy but steady as a metronome. In contrast to most of the songs Nantucket played on this night, this wasn't one that Redd wrote himself. It was an old AC/DC song that first appeared on the Australian band's 1975 album *T.N.T.*, recorded by Nantucket as the title track to their make-or-break third and final album for Epic Records in 1980.

Nantucket had originally cut "It's a Long Way to the Top (If You Wanna Rock 'n' Roll)" as a tribute to the late Bon Scott, yowly voiced front man for AC/DC, who had gone out Charlie Poole-style like a rock star—choking on his own vomit at the end of a night of heavy drinking, dead at age thirty-three. Nantucket would play it every night on the road that year, opening for AC/DC's *Back in Black* tour, and pretty much every show since, too.

Thirty-seven years later, Nantucket's front man was more than twice as old as Bon Scott had been when he died. Uzzell shook his fist as he sang, and the crowd sang along with him.

Ridin' down the highway
Goin' to a show
Stop in all the byways
Playin' rock and roll
Gettin' robbed
Gettin' stoned
Gettin' beat up
Broken boned
Gettin' had

Gettin' took
I tell you folks, it's harder than it looks

It's a long way to the top
If you wanna rock 'n' roll

Especially if you never quite made it all the way to the summit.

**Nantucket's Long
Way to the Top**

★ Nantucket's history makes for a quintessential North Carolina story, mostly because they never could have come from anywhere else. Their roots go back to the late 1960s, when beach music was starting to lose its grip on Eastern North Carolina as the genre began its predisco slide into near-oblivion. But young people were still putting bands together Down East, and there were still plenty of places to play on the shag dance-club circuit. So a lot of that era's new groups were beach bands, including one called Stax of Gold—an ensemble that formed in the military-base town of Jacksonville in early 1969, a year after Atlantic Records released its second *Beach Beat* volume.

Stax of Gold grew out of a couple of other bands in the area—the Carousels and Sound of Time—and the lineup was pretty fluid with members coming and going. But the nucleus that stuck was guitarists Tommy Redd and Mark Downing with the Uzzell brothers, Larry and Mike, on trumpet and keyboards. Stax of Gold played pretty much the standard beach repertoire of Motown hits with R & B oldies as well as horn-rock numbers by the likes of Blood, Sweat & Tears, plus the occasional garage-rock screamer.

“Back then we were playing ‘Louie Louie,’ ‘Gloria,’ and all the other songs everybody else played,” Redd told me in 2017. “That Temptations album with Diana Ross, *TCB*, where they're in green outfits with four mikes on one stand, we used to do that. And Electric Flag, Chicago—we played fourteen of Chicago's songs at one time. Then Woodstock happened.”

Redd and his Stax of Gold bandmates didn't make it up to New York State for the legendary 1969 rock festival. But Woodstock was a sign of the times, causing ripples that carried far and wide enough to reverberate all the way down to Onslow County, North Carolina. With a sea change afoot, Stax of Gold rode the currents in new directions. The band's repertoire of covers moved away from straight R & B and more in the direction of Joe Cocker and the blues-based rock beginning to take hold in another Jacksonville further South—down in Florida, where both the Allman Brothers Band and Lynyrd Skynyrd formed.

Brothers of the Road Sidewinder, Cry of Love

Sidewinder was one of Nantucket's brothers-in-arms bands, a cover band billing itself as "The East Coast's Premiere Rock & Roll Powerhouse." Their peak came during the 1983–84 first season of the new CBS game show *Star Search*, a solid run all the way to the semifinals. But that's where they lost to eventual winner Sawyer Brown, a Florida country band that went on to earn three gold records.

Two Sidewinder alumni, guitarist Audley Freed and bassist Robert Kearns, joined forces with late-period Nantucket drummer Jason Patterson and vocalist Kelly Holland to form Cry of Love in the early 1990s. Cry of Love's mainstream radio-ready rock probably would have been gigantic had they formed at any time other than the alternative-rock era. Despite swimming upstream, Cry of Love's 1993 debut album *Brother* spawned multiple rock-radio hits and sold into six figures.

After Cry of Love disbanded in 1997, Freed went on to become an in-demand sideman with the Black Crowes, the Dixie Chicks, and Sheryl Crow. Kearns played a stint in Lynyrd Skynyrd, while Patterson still plays with Nantucket. And Holland succumbed to years of self-abuse in 2014, dying at age fifty-two of complications from an abdominal infection.

That same year also saw the death of one of Sidewinder's longest-running members, onstage master of ceremonies Michael "Bono" Buono. He contracted AIDS in the late 1990s but lived until 2014 before dying of cancer at age fifty-eight.

Redd was starting to write his own original songs, with the result that more and more straight-up rock 'n' roll was creeping into the set-list. There were fewer horns, more guitars, and an evolving onstage look, away from the beach-band matching suits and toward rock-star finery. A few years down the road, the name Stax of Gold no longer seemed to fit the band's music or image. A name change was in order and (to their eventual regret) they decided to crowd-source it.

Onstage at a bar in Jacksonville one night, playing for a well-oiled crowd of military service members out for a night on the town, Stax of Gold put their name change to a public vote. The way Mike Uzzell remembered it, there were three submissions that they considered: "Tumble-

weed Connection,” title of a Western-themed 1970 album by Elton John; “Nantucket Sleighride,” after a 1971 song and album title by one of the bands that played Woodstock, Mountain; and “Satan’s Symphony.”

“This was about 1972, and Satan’s Symphony would not have gone over too good,” Mike Uzzell told me in 2017. “Anyway, we went with Nantucket Sleighride—but nobody ever said that, they’d just say ‘Nantucket.’ So Nantucket Sleighride became just Nantucket.”

Then and now, it seemed like a peculiar name for a North Carolina band residing 800 miles south of its namesake island off the coast of Massachusetts. Nantucket was a name they chose on a lark without much thought beyond how it might look on a nightclub marquee. But once they got beyond the club circuit, Nantucket would spend the rest of the 1970s and ’80s explaining that, no, they weren’t part of some wave of New England rock bands.

“We’d been together ten years before Boston ever played a note, but everywhere we went there was this idea that we were another Northeast-named band that Epic Records had put together,” Redd said. “We’d go to radio stations and get this vibe where they’d look at us funny. Critics gave us hell, too, called us ‘macho hippie jackoffs.’”

Sitting in a Hardee’s restaurant in Knightdale as he spoke, Redd paused to sigh.

“Maybe we’d have done better if we’d called ourselves the Macho Hippie Jackoffs,” he said with a shrug and a smile.

★ Thus did Nantucket complete its transition to full-bore rock ‘n’ roll band, a phase that would continue for the rest of its history. And yet, even as rockers, Nantucket never completely stopped being a beach band, either. For all the rock-star trappings of screaming guitars, long hair, leather, and onstage moves that made the young girls swoon, Nantucket still had a horn section, played the occasional soul cover, and had a lot more overall pop sense than most of their rock-band contemporaries. They may have looked like Stillwater, the fictional 1970s-vintage Every-band from Cameron Crowe’s 2000 movie *Almost Famous*, but Nantucket’s vibe and sound actually landed closer to the Doobie Brothers’ soulful pop than the harder rock of Aerosmith.

A couple of early 1970s lineup changes would make the band even funkier, although they came about from dire circumstances. In the spring of 1972, drummer Ronnie Harris died in a grisly car accident when he collided with a school bus on a foggy morning. After the shock wore off, the band’s first attempt to find a replacement went poorly, ending when the

candidate was arrested at a gig by military police—apparently, he had neglected to mention he'd gone AWOL.

That was when Nantucket turned their attention to a drummer they'd had their eye on for a while, Kenny Soule. A music student at East Carolina University, Soule had been getting most of his extra-curricular education playing the regional club circuit with a band called Brass Park. Still, that band wasn't too serious, and Soule was wondering what he'd do that summer when he got word that Mike Uzzell was looking for him.

"Mike had a '66 copper-colored Chrysler pulling an old horse trailer with 'Nantucket Sleighride' painted on the side," Soule told me in 2017. "He kind of ran things back then. And at first, I told them I'd join for the summer and go back to school in the fall."

As it happened, Soule never made it back to East Carolina, either that fall or later. He was still playing drums in Nantucket a year later when some long-simmering problems with saxophonist Jimmy Cox finally came to a head. Cox had been a helicopter pilot in Vietnam who was having adjustment problems back home, and his reliability was slipping enough that Nantucket finally dismissed him. So Soule convinced his old East Carolina classmate Eddie Blair to come aboard. Blair had known the group since their Stax of Gold days, even sitting in on saxophone a time or two when they'd played parties at his Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity house at ECU. Schooled in funk and jazz as well as rock and highly skilled on both keyboards and saxophone, Blair was a natural fit.

Lineup in place and all hands committed to making Nantucket a full-time proposition, the band hit the club circuit hard. While their direction as a rock band was set, those old beach-band chops proved useful. A lot of their gigs involved the same thing the Embers came up playing, serving as backup bands for R & B acts ranging from the New Orleans girl group the Dixie Cups (of "Iko Iko" and "Chapel of Love" fame) to the Tennessee-born "King of Beach Music" Clifford Curry. Nantucket's time together forged them into a tight unit with a world of in-jokes, starting with the nicknames everyone acquired over the years. There was "the Late Larry Uzzell," due to his chronic inability to be on time. Kenny Soule and Eddie Blair were "Lynx" and "Blair Bear," respectively. And Tommy Redd, a hairy dude's hairy dude, was "Chimp."

★ Playing as much as they did, Nantucket didn't take long to run up enough miles to finish off Mike Uzzell's old Chrysler for good. But the band was earning enough to upgrade to a touring van, plus a better on-stage light show for the bigger gigs their new booking agent was getting

them. Well, not quite all of them. As Nantucket discovered, their agent was booking the group at up to three different clubs per night, taking the deposit money and then canceling every night's extra shows at the last minute (which the band only found out about when they started hearing radio ads for the phantom shows while on the road). Fortunately, Nantucket moved from clubs up to bigger venues quickly enough to escape most of the consequences of that chicanery.

By 1974, times were good, and Nantucket seemed to be on its way, up until an event that almost ended the band for good. Early spring of that year found them working hard on a run of dates through the Carolinas, culminating with an exhausting post-show drive in a heavy rainstorm down to Charleston, South Carolina. The show there was to be another beach-type gig for a party crowd of cadets from the Citadel, backing up Jackie Wilson—Clyde McPhatter's replacement in Billy Ward's Dominoes and a legendary hit-maker, still a big draw even though he was a few years past his signature 1967 hit "(Your Love Keeps Lifting Me) Higher and Higher." But Wilson didn't show up that night. Nantucket soldiered on and played anyway, closing as well as opening the show in the face of an openly hostile crowd.

"We were all so tired we were seeing double, and we barely escaped getting our asses kicked by angry liquored-up cadets whose night was ruined because Jackie Wilson never showed up," Soule said.

Even after the show came to a merciful end, Nantucket's problems that night were only beginning. Every hotel in Charleston was sold out, no vacancies; their van was just about out of gas; and, thanks to a nationwide fuel shortage, there was no gas to be had anywhere in the area. So they dispatched a roadie with a siphon hose to the parking lot, where he was able to steal just enough gas from other cars for the band to get out of town. The plan was to head for Wilmington, three and a half hours up the road, and stay with friends there.

As the van lumbered north on U.S. Route 17 late that night, everyone in the van except for the driver fell into an exhausted slumber. Then the driver fell asleep, too. Over the years, band honor has kept Nantucket's members from publicly identifying who fell asleep at the wheel (I couldn't get anyone to say), especially because the results were catastrophic.

The van ran into a concrete bridge abutment, and the impact totaled the vehicle and just about everyone inside it, too. Blair and Mike Uzzell sustained the most serious injuries, broken backs. Soule came away with a fractured jaw and seriously injured legs, and just about everyone else



Nantucket onstage in the early 1980s. Tommy Redd is in the foreground and Larry Uzzell holds the tambourine. Photo by Chris Seward.

got banged up pretty badly, too. But they all survived and eventually recovered, although the accident took Nantucket off the road and out of action for months while everyone convalesced.

“During that time, everyone took stock of what we had,” said Soule. “And when we got back together, we did the thing where everybody circled up and put a hand in: ‘*We are gonna get a record deal.*’ What we’d been through really helped us focus.”

★ As Nantucket resumed working the live-circuit grind, wider markets beyond their Southeastern stronghold beckoned. But to get to them, they needed the same thing banjo-playing textile worker Charlie Poole

"Deliverance" Corrosion of Conformity

In the early 1980s, Corrosion of Conformity ruled Raleigh's bustling punk scene with scathing metallic hardcore. Equal parts Black Sabbath and Black Flag, they were a big influence on Metallica, a San Francisco band that added its own brand of heaviness and took it to the top of the charts.

COC would also brush up against the mainstream in the 1990s, when guitarist Pepper Keenan emerged as front man. With studio work from Cry of Love producer John Custer, parts of COC's 1994 album *Deliverance* would have sounded right at home on a ZZ Top record. *Deliverance* was COC's first album to crack the charts. And even though it only peaked at number 155, it never stopped selling on compact discs, downloads, and streams. It took twenty-two years, but *Deliverance* cracked the 500,000-copy mark to earn a gold record.

The band members themselves, however, were unimpressed.

"We're thinking of having a little ceremony where we spray-paint a thrift-store record gold," COC bassist Mike Dean told me in 2016. "Sure, it's a worthy thing to achieve. But it's taken long enough. We were convinced it would do this right away because we thought that record was really good."

had needed a half-century earlier: a record deal. And by Nantucket's mid-1970s era, the record industry was all grown up compared to its infancy during Poole's day. Following the twin tumults of the Great Depression and World War II, the record business came of age as a glamour profession in America's postwar economy. Generations of teenagers with disposable income to spend on music fueled one rocket boost after another from the 1950s through the 1970s, from Elvis to the Beatles to Woodstock and beyond.

Beginning in the early 1950s, the old 78 rpm records gave way to the seven-inch 45 rpm as vinyl format of choice for singles, which remained a valuable currency. But as the 1960s wore on, singles became primarily the means to an end. Once the Beatles established the long-playing album as artistic statement, that became the industry's commercial benchmark, too. The main reason to put out a single was in hopes it would get enough radio airplay to become a hit and move people to buy the more expensive full-length album that it came from.

Albums were where the real money was—and it was real money, too, on an almost unimaginable scale. At the dawn of the rock era in 1954, total U.S. record sales were about \$200 million a year. By 1959, with album sales on the rise and accounting for an increasing share of the market, that figure had tripled to \$600 million. And in the early 1970s, after albums began to be sold on tapes as well as discs, annual U.S. music sales surpassed \$1 billion for the first time. The trajectory was such that, for a time, it looked as if there were no upper limits to the music industry's growth potential.

With all this money coming in, record labels had sizable budgets for things like talent-scouting junkets. So Nantucket's management decided to bring the industry down for the ultimate A & R junket, setting up a series of showcases in West Palm Beach, Florida, and inviting every record-company talent scout in New York to come down. Their timing could not have been more perfect. It was early 1977, a winter of historic brutality; enough snow fell in the Northeastern United States for parts of New York and Pennsylvania to be declared disaster areas. It didn't take much lobbying to entice a sizable chunk of the major-label record industry to flee the snow and come check out Nantucket at the beach in Florida.

The strategy worked like a charm. All the roadwork had sharpened Nantucket into a precise, efficient performing band, and they delivered onstage for the teeming label masses. A bidding war broke out with multiple labels making offers and when the dust settled, the winning suitor was Columbia imprint Epic Records, home to everybody from the Clash to Michael Jackson. The man who did the deal was Lennie Petze, an Epic executive with a growing reputation for having the golden touch. He had already signed Boston and would go on to add Cyndi Lauper, Sade, and 'Til Tuesday to the Epic roster during the 1980s.

"What we really noticed was the material," Petze told me in 2017. "They had a great writer in Tommy Redd, and where so many other bands were doing covers and a few originals, they had two or three sets of originals. You're always looking for the true artist who provides his own material, and I remember saying I heard a few of their songs live that I felt could be hits if recorded properly. So yeah, we took a shot."

★ The best shot they had wound up being "Heartbreaker," the opening song and first single on the 1978 debut album *Nantucket*. Just under four minutes of overdrive exuberance, with an earworm hook and verge-of-frantic vocal harmonies energetic enough for a pep rally, "Heartbreaker" held nothing back.

Heartbreaker, you mean misery-maker
Miss Evil, you know you done me wrong!

Nantucket's Long
Way to the Top

But it's not like there was much mellowness to be had anywhere on *Nantucket*. More than four decades on, it's an album that stands as a perfect microcosm of 1970s-vintage mainstream rock in look as well as sound. From the period arrangements to the almost campy cover art of a denim-clad lobster in high-heel clogs stalking a blonde woman sunbathing beside a lighthouse (lobsters would serve as visual motif for multiple album covers), *Nantucket* still conjures up a Carter-era ambience of bongos, black lights, and Budweisers. Teenagers across the Old North State snapped it up.

"That first album came out when I was going into the ninth grade, and it was the eight-track that everybody just had to get," recalled Nantucket fan Jamie Massey in 2017. "I played the hell out of it for years. That was the days of Camaros and Trans-Ams and Jensen Triaxial speakers. A great time to be alive in North Carolina."

With Epic's marketing money behind them, Nantucket ventured into big arenas for the first time, mostly as opening act for seemingly every rock act in the free world—some on their way up, some on their way down. Between 1978 and 1980, Nantucket would share bills with Styx, Journey, Boston, AC/DC, Foreigner, Yes, Ted Nugent, Cheap Trick, Heart, the Doobie Brothers and, to their regret, Kiss.

"Our first-ever arena gig was at Charlotte Coliseum before the first album came out, opening for Kiss," said Kenny Soule. "And that was boot camp because the Kiss Army was *not* interested in us at all. '*Fuck you, get off the stage!*' It was rough, but we won over a few people. Maybe."

Actually, that was an unusual reception for Nantucket in North Carolina, where the band assumed local-hero status as older-brother figures for a generation raised on 1970s-vintage mainstream rock. Dave Rose, a Down East native of Washington, North Carolina, who later went on to manage acts that included pop pianist Bruce Hornsby, remembers the first two albums he ever bought at age eleven with his own money were *Nantucket* and *Boston*—"and those two records were my entire world in 1978, both the same status to me." And John Custer, who grew up in Cary before going on to a career as a Grammy-nominated record producer, regarded Nantucket as an inspirational example to aspire to.

"I remember being at a party, seeing their records, and my jaw dropping," Custer told me in 2017. "They were real albums on a real record label with real artwork and all that—and from here! It made you think



Nantucket, the eponymous 1978 debut album, in period-appropriate eight-track-tape format. Photo by Scott Sharpe.

that things were possible, when somebody like that gets out there. Hardly anybody from here had ever done that.”

But even if the teenagers drag-racing muscle cars down at Carolina Beach understood, the music industry never really got Nantucket. Coming and going, it would be the band’s unfortunate fate to be just enough out of step to fall through the cracks. The month that Epic Records released *Nantucket*, April 1978, disco was at its peak with the *Saturday Night Fever* movie soundtrack in the midst of a six-month stay at number 1 on the charts. Later that year, the band Boston’s highly anticipated second album *Don’t Look Back* was released and shot straight to number 1, quickly becoming Epic’s major rock-band promotional priority.

As for Nantucket, they were a pop band trapped in no man’s land because they did not fit any of the obvious niches. They really weren’t either a heavy-metal or southern rock band, even though they kind of looked like they might be—and their rock-star finery certainly didn’t fit in with the burgeoning new-wave movement taking hold in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

"I remember doing an interview in New York where we were told we had to think about 'making a change,' which I wasn't understanding," Mike Uzzell told me in 2013. "And it was the hair, turquoise, mother of pearl, and the rest of the rock-star stuff: 'You need to get rid of all that.' What she was telling us was that the era of the Ramones and the Cars was coming. The Cars had opened for us in D.C. not long before that."

Kenny Soule remembered also getting "The Talk" from Epic's product manager: "Suddenly they wanted everybody to have skinny ties and look like Elvis Costello." And while "Heartbreaker" would have some success across the Southeast and isolated pockets elsewhere in the country ("It was song of the year in Eugene, Oregon," Soule noted with a laugh), it never caught on at enough radio stations to make *Billboard's* Hot 100 pop chart. The *Nantucket* album didn't crack the *Billboard* 200 album sales chart, either, even though the band toured relentlessly.

"Looking back at that first album, it just seemed like there was an opportunity for them to be bigger than other acts I remember from that time," said Epic's Lennie Petze. "I always felt strongly about them as personalities—they had the look, girls loved 'em. If a couple things had gone differently, they could've been huge. First time I heard 'Heartbreaker,' I told my wife, 'I would bet the house on this song.' Eight months later, she said, 'You know, we'd be living on the street now.' Well . . . yeah. I felt like it was a hit, but sometimes things don't happen when you think they will."

Tommy Redd had a more succinct summary.

"Everything that anybody who made \$80 billion did, we did, too," he said. "We just never made the \$80 billion. But we'd probably be dead if we had."

★ Two years and two albums later, changes were afoot. Nantucket's second album hadn't yielded up a hit, either, and rising tensions within the band led to Mike Uzzell departing under less-than-amicable circumstances. He was replaced by bassist Pee Wee Watson, who played on 1980's *Long Way to the Top*. That album's AC/DC title-track cover helped land Nantucket a coveted opening-act slot for a stretch of the legendary Australian metal band's 1980–81 *Back in Black* tour across America. And while the tour went well, ultimately *Long Way* didn't get Nantucket any closer to the top, either. Soule and Watson had already begun playing in another band by then, the power-trio PKM. When Epic dropped Nantucket after the band's run with AC/DC ended, that made their decision to quit that much easier.

Power Ballads FireHouse

In the early 1990s, when the record industry was seeking “the Next Seattle” and scouring Chapel Hill in search of the next alternative hit-maker, North Carolina’s most popular rock was actually over in Charlotte: FireHouse, a well-coifed, glam-leaning pop-metal quartet that had a way with a power ballad. “When I Look into Your Eyes,” “Love of a Lifetime,” and “I Live My Life For You” were among their hits, earning FireHouse a double-platinum and gold album between 1990 and 1992.

Then came the alternative-is-the-new-mainstream revolution ushered in by Nirvana, which pushed the FireHouses, Slaughters, and Warrants of the world off the charts. But FireHouse remained very successful overseas, especially in Japan. At the time of this writing, three-quarters of FireHouse’s original lineup remains together and the band maintains an active touring schedule.

Regrouping with a new rhythm section, Nantucket kept going and got another big-league record deal with RCA—label of David Bowie and the late Elvis Presley, no less. RCA released 1983’s *No Direction Home* album, on which Nantucket belatedly toned down the rock-god wardrobe accessories and even added a few keyboard flourishes hinting at new-wave modernity. But *No Direction Home* sold no better than the Epic albums, which also went for 1985’s independently released *V*. As the 1980s wore on, similarly styled pop-rock bands like the Outfield and Mister Mister blew up on radio while Nantucket continued slogging away in progressively smaller venues. That breakthrough hit would never come.

“They could’ve been the Outfield or Night Ranger, one of those pop-metal bands with a beautiful guy or two upfront,” longtime *Winston-Salem Journal* music critic Ed Bumgardner told me in 2017. “They had the whole thing. They knew how to write correct hooks and sing-along choruses. I do not know why it did not happen, because they sure looked poised.”

Nantucket finally ground to a halt and broke up in 1990, but the split didn’t last long. Just a year later, the band’s key glory-days lineup reunited with the long-estranged Mike Uzzell back in the fold to make a greatest-hits live album. And while there have been some comings and

goings and periods of inactivity since then (including Mike Uzzell's departure, again, in 2013), an incarnation of Nantucket with a quorum of original members is still out there playing at the time of this writing.

In 2012, Nantucket was inducted into the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame. And that same year, as proof that you can take the band out of the beach but not the beach out of the band, Nantucket returned to their Stax of Gold roots with *You Need a Ride to Raleigh*—an album's worth of sunny beach-music tunes with odes to "Shaggin' Shoes" and "Hillbillies at the Beach."

At that Capital City Bikefest show five years later, they were still playing a rocked-up live version of the *Ride to Raleigh* title track, which Larry Uzzell introduced as "a song about a love affair gone wrong down at the beach." Singing as a guy whose wandering eye leaves him stranded at the beach with a kiss-off note written in the sand, Uzzell does the only sensible thing: finds the nearest watering hole and gets a drink.

"Gimmie some o' that sax," Uzzell said, just like on the record, nodding to Eddie Blair, who launched into an extended saxophone solo. And for a few minutes, Nantucket went back even further in time—not just to 1978 but 1973, when they were turning into a rock band and the road ahead was full of promise.

The end of that road wouldn't be the top. All the same, it was a pretty good ride.

9

Combo Corner

Mitch Easter's Winston-Salem

Long ago and far away during my college undergraduate days, a late-spring night in 1983 found me stumbling through a listless first date in Austin, Texas. Particulars are hazy all these years later, except for one moment of surpassing clarity. We were in the car driving down the Guadalupe Street “drag” past the University of Texas campus when the radio began to play side one of a new album called *Murmur*. I’d never heard of the artist, a band with the mysterious name R.E.M. But once the first song “Radio Free Europe” kicked in, I went into something like a trance. Chiming guitars, driving pulse, kitchen-sink percussive effects, and a singer who seemed to be mumbling in tongues—it felt impossibly exotic yet strangely familiar, which doesn’t even come close to evoking just what a revelatory lightning bolt this was for me.

Heading south past Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard felt like crossing a before-to-after dividing line, and I suddenly became a man with a mission. So I concocted a clumsy excuse to end the date early (she was less than broken up, as I recall) and went home by way of the Sound Warehouse that stayed open late. I bought a copy of *Murmur*—new rather than used, an extravagance on my college-student budget, but this simply could not wait—took it home, and spent the rest of the night listening to it on headphones over and over, again and again and again. *Murmur* became the album against which all others in my cosmos were measured, and I played side one at least a couple times a day for years.

Hungry for more information in those pre-internet days, I spent untold hours studying the album’s enigmatic cover shot and trying to figure out what that was (shriveled kudzu, it turned out) and the credits inside. R.E.M.’s members were identified by first name only on the

Your Sorry Ever After The Connells

One of the many bands to come through Mitch Easter's Drive-In Studio was Raleigh's Connells, who bore the influence of R.E.M.'s moody jingle-jangle. They went on to make many fine records, none better than 1987's Easter-produced *Boylan Heights*. They scaled the charts in the 1990s, too—not in America, but overseas with "'74-'75."

A pensive and regret-infused ballad from the Connells' 1993 album *Ring* (produced by Lou Giordano, who also oversaw later hits by the Goo Goo Dolls), "'74-'75" never charted in the United States. But it reached the top-ten in eleven different countries in Europe, including number 1 in Sweden and Norway.

Key to the song's success was director Mark Pellington's evocative, mysterious video. And even though songwriter Mike Connell picked the numbers of the title because they sang well, the years they symbolized became the video's high-concept centerpiece. Using yearbook photos, Pellington contrasted then-and-now images of sixteen people from the class of 1975 at Raleigh's Broughton High School (alma mater of two Connells members, before the band formed at UNC). The video perfectly fit the song's bitter-sweet feel.

I was the one who let you know
I was your sorry ever after
Seventy-four, seventy-five . . .

The "'74-'75" video became something of a public art project in Europe, with fans substituting their own pictures. In that spirit, I was part of a 2015 *News & Observer* story and video where we updated "'74-'75" for the forty-year anniversary of Broughton's class of 1975, with new portraits taken of the video cast. It's the project I'm proudest of from all my time at the paper.

sleeve ("Bill, Michael, Peter, Mike") and credited by last name only on the record label ("All songs Berry, Buck, Mills, Stipe"), which left me trying to piece together guesses at their full names: Michael Buck? Peter Mills? But the credits did identify "Mitch Easter, Don Dixon" for producing and engineering *Murmur* at "Reflection Charlotte, NC." And even though R.E.M. was from Athens, Georgia, rather than North Carolina, I

believe this counts as the first time I was ever consciously aware of music that had come from my future home state.

Fast-forward two decades to December 2002 and a cold winter's day I spent lurking around Fidelitorium, *Murmur* coproducer Mitch Easter's recording studio near Winston-Salem. I was there to work on a profile of Easter, and we were talking as he puttered around the control room. And then he pointed out a tape recorder that was . . .

. . . the very first device he had used to record R.E.M. all those years earlier.

A shiver went through me, and it was like a movie scene where everything in the frame goes dark except for an object lit by a halo of light. It was an ordinary-looking 3M brand sixteen-track analog recorder that was still working in 2002 and remains fully functional at the time of this writing—enough that Easter still gets requests from bands who want to use the R.E.M. machine. It seems I'm not the only one who had a "Road to Damascus" turning point over *Murmur*, so of course I told Easter my story. He listened with the polite patience of someone long-accustomed to enduring similar fanboy testimonials.

"When someone cares and really wants to go for the rock-and-roll tape legacy vibe, that machine is the one to use," he said. "Everything at my studio when I was 'famous' was done on it. I got it from a studio in Atlanta and the engineer was sorry to let it go even though he knew time had passed it by and nobody was doing sixteen-track anymore. I remember telling him I'd never sell it and thinking, 'I'm only saying that because I'm twenty-three years old, but I'll try to live up to that.' And I have. It kind of represents me getting into this business, my first real machine. Just to have one was something I'd dreamed of forever, and I've used the hell out of it. But what makes it super-fucking-legit is it's the machine that 'Chevy Van' by Sammy Johns was done on. When I went down to see it, they put on a master tape to show it off, and that was the song. So I had to buy it.

"If nothing else," he concluded with a shrug, "it's an icon of my existence."

★ In the years before the Interstate Highway System's I-40 brought the rest of America within easy reach in 1958, Winston-Salem was an off-the-beaten-path town. Church-going has always been a major recreational pastime there, going back to Salem's eighteenth-century roots as a Moravian settlement and continuing into the present day. With more than 54 percent of its population claiming a church affiliation, according

Mitch Easter's
Winston-Salem

to BestPlaces.net, Winston is reputed to be North Carolina's "most religious city."

Not that it's entirely sin-free, of course. Winston was an even bigger tobacco town than Durham in the early twentieth century, and the place where Blind Boy Fuller began his warehouse-busking career in the 1920s before landing in the Bull City. Along with cigarettes and the "5" Royals, some of Winston's better-known exports include the poet Maya Angelou, country singer George Hamilton IV, basketball legend Earl "The Pearl" Monroe (who starred at Winston-Salem State before winning an NBA title with the New York Knicks) and NASCAR driver Richard Childress.

Even in isolation as a place where you had to make your own fun, however, Winston-Salem was never an uncultured backwater. It's always been a very diverse town where "millionaires and mill rats live side by side," as native son Ben Folds put it in his group Ben Folds Five's 1994 single "Jackson Cannery." Between the presence of the North Carolina School of the Arts and philanthropy from those millionaires, Winston was always artier than most municipalities of comparable size.

During the 1960s, Winston's musician population included an unusually sophisticated young generation of students on the track from Brunson Elementary to Wiley Junior High to R. J. Reynolds High School. One of the main hangout spots for the big kids was "Combo Corner," right by the front door of Reynolds High School, where aspiring teenage musicians would gather to bum smokes, compare notes, make connections, and form bands. But where their peers farther east were forming beach bands like Stax of Gold, the Winston kids' bands were more likely to bear the influence of progressive rock, psychedelia, and the sixties "British Invasion" wave led by the Beatles. Mostly that came down to what they heard in the air.

"The radio 'Good Guy' deejays at WAIR and WTOB would play a lot of Beatles, but also everything else," musician Peter Holsapple told me in 2017. "There were always bands in Winston-Salem, a rich scene long before any of us started doing anything. Combos like the Teenbeats, the Five Satans. I remember being a kid in about 1965 and going to Saturday-morning kiddie shows of local bands doing Yardbirds covers followed by a movie. Before long, we started thinking we could be up there on that stage doing it ourselves."

Similar ideas had been buzzing around adolescent minds all over America since February 1964, when "Beatlemania" erupted after John, Paul, George, and Ringo played *The Ed Sullivan Show* with hordes of screaming girls looking on. Overnight, being in a band became just about

the coolest thing to aspire to. Popular stylistic touchstones included the Move, the Kinks, MC5 and even *The Monkees*—the mid-sixties Screen Gems/NBC comedy series starring the band of the same name. When the Monkees themselves played at Winston's Memorial Coliseum in December 1966, twelve-year-old Mitch Easter was there.

"It was the first rock show I ever went to," Easter told me in 2017. "And after I got home, my parents were watching the news when the band showed up in the studio, crashed the news, and did the weather. It was amazing they had the energy and wherewithal to do that."

Mitch Easter's
Winston-Salem

The Monkees would return to North Carolina the following summer to play Charlotte and Greensboro, with an oddly mismatched opening act: Jimi Hendrix, the pyrotechnic guitarist who was a star in England but still not well-known in America right after his headlining debut at the June 1967 Monterey Pop Festival. The Monkees' audiences had no idea what to make of Hendrix's high-volume guitar, and he lasted just a half-dozen dates before dropping off the tour.

★ Easter's thirteenth birthday in 1967 found him pulling double duty on guitar, in the Wiley Junior High's stage band as well as his own combo, an instrumental surf band with the somewhat regrettable name the Loyal Opposition ("Didn't know that was what the Republican Party was called back then," he drily noted). Easter already had a virtuosic reputation among his peers—"Even then, Mitch knew more chords than anybody else," Holsapple said—and even his elders, most notably Sam Moss. Two years older and infinitely wiser, Moss was, in Holsapple's estimation, "the finest guitar player ever to walk the streets of Winston-Salem, our Michael Bloomfield." Easter recalled being invited to jam with Moss for the first time as a turning point.

"I was thirteen and he was fifteen, a big gap for that age," Easter said. "But it was even bigger because he seemed like he was thirty-five, with a demeanor like he'd already been on the chitlin circuit. So seasoned and knowledgeable and just *good*. Right then I decided, 'That's it. This is my new life.'"

Moss would serve as inspirational mentor to generations of Winston musicians, including much of the Combo Corner crowd (Chris Stamey among them). But he never seemed to take himself as seriously as everyone else did. Easter recalled reacting with horror when Moss told him he saw music as little more than a hobby, protesting, "You can't say that, you're too good, you *have* to be famous!" Moss eventually took his own life in 2007, at age fifty-four.



*Let's Active promotional photo from 1984, the last year of the original trio.
From left: Sara Romweber, Mitch Easter, and Faye Hunter.*

The Loyal Opposition didn't last long before Easter went on to the next in a long line of Winston rock combos that ebbed, flowed, and came and went over the years. From the late 1960s through the '70s and beyond, various combinations of Easter, Stamey, and Holsapple played with other Combo Corner regulars (including Robin Borthwick, a rare female drummer) in a series of bands in Winston, Chapel Hill and eventually New York City: Sacred Irony, Imperturbable Teutonic Gryphon, Wazoo, Rittenhouse Square, Ice, Soup, Little Diesel, Big Dipper, H-Bombs, Secret Service, Sneakers, the dB's, and more. None of these bands would ever have been mistaken for Nantucket.

"All the Winston-Salem bands were more like one big collective," Holsapple said. "We did feel like we had a mission, trying to open the minds of people who were just listening to Marshall Tucker or Allman Brothers. Maybe we could get them to like Mott the Hoople, too. But it was great

fun. We had our fifty fans who went everywhere we were, smoked all our pot and drank all our beer.”

If all these bands were “underground” or “alternative” it was mostly by default because the big-time music industry, as seen on TV, seemed so remote from Winston-Salem. The city had no rock clubs to speak of, so local bands made do with shows in church basements, coffeehouses, school gyms, recreation centers, parks, and whatever other spot might have them. Careerist ambitions were unfathomable, because the moon seemed more within reach than playing in sports arenas. There was, however, one notable exception: Arrogance.

Arrogance formed at UNC–Chapel Hill in 1969. But three-quarters of the original members were Winston natives and they came back to play often enough to be part of the local-band scene. They always had all the audacity a name like Arrogance suggests, too. Original lead guitarist Michael Greer had them doing stunts like playing *Black Sabbath*, the eponymous 1970 debut album by the English heavy-metal band, song for song and note for note, months before it was released in America (they’d learned the material from an import copy). Even after developing more of a folksy pop-rock sound, Arrogance’s ambitions remained oversized.

“From the beginning, we wanted to create a band that made up its own songs, got a record deal and became huge,” Arrogance bassist Don Dixon told me in 2017. “There was never anything casual about it. It was always, ‘Okay, we’re gonna take over and be the next big thing.’”

★ A native of Lancaster, South Carolina, Dixon was already a seasoned recording pro by his early twenties, having worked on a wide array of country, beach, jazz, and rock sessions at Reflection Sound and Arthur Smith Studios in Charlotte (he was also house bassist at Raleigh’s Frog and Nightgown jazz club). Easter and Stamey both had inclinations toward the mad science of recording, too. Friends since second grade, they were both technically savvy—“the guys who knew how to run the film projector and the tape player,” recalled their elementary-school classmate Sarah Shoaf in 2017—and they came into possession of reel-to-reel recorders at around the same time. So they began taping pretty much every sound they could, from radar noises to Jerry Goldsmith’s 1964 theme song to the spy series *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* off the television set in the Easters’ living room.

“People bought tape recorders back then and presented them as ‘something for the family,’ and I really don’t know why,” Easter said. “But my dad came home one Christmas with one and I was thrilled. I

had reels and reels of stuff recorded off the radio and TV. It seemed like a marvel."

They also spent endless hours using trial and error to try and duplicate sounds they heard on the day's popular recordings. And once they started playing in bands, recording themselves followed, as did daydreams about being heard beyond their makeshift studio lair in the Easter household's basement. Their first outlet was the late-night alternative-music show *Deaconlight* on WFDD ("Wake Forest Demon Deacons," the school mascot), 88.5-FM, the student-run radio station at Wake Forest University.

"Mitch called me up one night before I knew him and sounded almost like a little kid," said DD Thornton, who deejayed at WFDD for a number of years. "I have some songs on reel-to-reel tape," he said. "If I gave them to you, would you play them?"

Yes, as it turned out. Easter and Stamey would drop off tapes at WFDD for years and sometimes get the thrill of hearing themselves on the radio. Beyond that modest platform, New York beckoned tantalizingly. Easter's father Ken worked as an accountant for Western Electric/AT&T in New York, where he kept a Greenwich Village apartment that became Combo Corner's de facto northern satellite office. Easter and Stamey would go up to visit and schedule appointments at record labels.

But their quirky underground pop was too idiosyncratic for mass-appeal tastes. They came away with a string of rejection letters like this priceless 1973 specimen from an executive at RCA Records (which I found in a stack of similar communiques in a coffee-table drawer in Easter's studio in 2002): "I found the tape to be mostly garbled and many of the songs you pegged 'Radio' are really nothing of the kind."

Easter remembered making the rounds in the early 1970s and going around to most of New York's record companies "to play them our horrible tape." Their most memorable experience was at Roulette Records, the label run by the notorious Morris Levy. A mobbed-up impresario of the old school, Levy did not have the most generous reputation. He had run King Records when the "5" Royals recorded there in the 1950s, which was not a happy experience. "Yeah, he was a money man—for himself," snarled John Tanner at the mention of Levy's name in 1992. Levy had died in 1990, before he could begin serving a prison sentence for an extortion conviction.

"All the label offices were very groovy and tripped-out," Easter said. "Until we went to Roulette Records and it was suddenly still 1958. Black-and-white-checked linoleum, fluorescent lights, steel desks. A real time warp. We might have even been playing our tape for Morris Levy himself.

Whoever it was listened to us for maybe ten seconds and said, ‘Naw, that ain’t a hit. *Here’s a hit.*’ And he put on Tommy James and the Shondells. He was right, too.”

★ Coming up empty in New York did nothing to quell Easter or Stamey’s musical ambitions, and they both took their instruments and recording gear along to college. Following one unhappy semester at the University of Illinois, Easter transferred to UNC–Chapel Hill—where Stamey was already a rising star under the tutelage of Roger Hannay, a renowned composer who had studied with Aaron Copland. Future Arrogance lead guitarist Rod Abernethy was in one of Hannay’s UNC classes alongside Stamey in 1974.

Mitch Easter’s
Winston-Salem

“I remember taking twentieth-century theory of composition with Chris, and his composition was to play on his bass guitar until grabbing a pair of wire-snips and cutting a string,” remembered Abernethy in 2004. “The class was speechless, but Dr. Hannay loved it. Chris was the star of the class after that.”

Between classes, Chapel Hill became Combo Corner East, bustling with new bands. Stamey and Duke student Robert Keely (another Winston-Salemite) started up the Pedestrians, who eventually became Sneakers. Sneakers were a significant footnote of the embryonic American rock underground, especially with the addition of Easter to the lineup, even though most of their attempts at live performance were train wrecks. But Stamey was more interested in making records anyway—especially after mail-ordering a copy of “Little Johnny Jewel,” a signpost independent single by the seminal New York City new-wave band Television.

Using “Little Johnny Jewel” as blueprint, Stamey pulled together a marathon one-day Sneakers recording session in early 1976 with Don Dixon producing. The band had shortened, tightened and brightened six songs down to their essence, and they pressed the recording onto a seven-inch record with the playing speed slowed from the standard 45 down to 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ revolutions per minute. Clocking in at just over fifteen minutes, *Sneakers* came out on Stamey’s own Carnivorous Records, with label copy reading “Distr. by Accident” because they had no means of getting it into stores. But thanks to favorable reviews in *New York Rocker* and *Trouser Press* magazines (which was how word about new underground music got around in those days), *Sneakers* somehow sold several thousand copies by mail order.

Though recorded in makeshift circumstances at Cat’s Cradle nightclub and various apartments, *Sneakers* sounded surprisingly professional

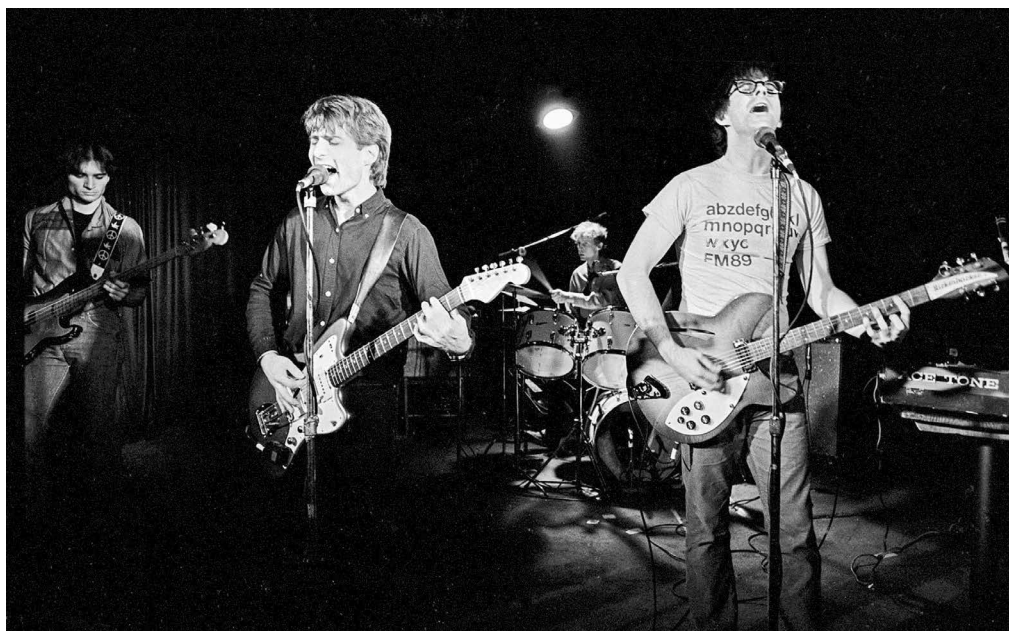
thanks to Dixon, Easter, and Stamey's ingenuity at low-tech recording. Its songs show ample charm and promise, the sound of smart and earnest young people whose abilities haven't quite caught up with their ambitions. While they've mostly been classified as "new-wave power pop" over the years, Sneakers had more intricate arrangements and ideas than most of that genre. They sound like the missing link in an evolutionary continuum between the Kinks in the 1960s and Memphis cult-pop band Big Star in the early 1970s to 1980s-vintage inheritors like R.E.M. and the Replacements from Minneapolis.

By the time Sneakers made their 1978 follow-up *In The Red*, Stamey was living in New York and already becoming a *Zelig*-like figure in the city's underground music scene. He seemed to be everywhere, playing and recording with personal idols including Big Star's Alex Chilton and Television guitarist Richard Lloyd. Stamey kept his label going, too, shortening the name from Carnivorous to Car Records; the most notable record he released was "I Am the Cosmos" by Chilton's former Big Star bandmate Chris Bell, a raw and shockingly beautiful seven-inch that instantly attained cult-classic status.

Combo Corner gravitated northward to New York when a collection of Winston-Salem transplants formed Chris Stamey & the dB's (the name a joking nod to Steve Cropper's Memphis instrumental soul band Booker T & the MG's). They'd become just the dB's by the time Peter Holsapple came up to join, and they had hooks and jittery nervous energy rivaling R.E.M.

Easter was also briefly caught up in New York's gravitational pull in the late 1970s, moving up to the city with the intention of opening a recording studio. But it proved to be an ill-fated venture. Stymied by frustrating dealings with building inspectors and landlords, Easter gave up and went home—literally, to his parents' house in Winston-Salem. He turned the garage into a makeshift studio and moved in all of his gear during the summer of 1980, including that 3M sixteen-track recorder, putting out the word that the Drive-In was available at highly affordable rates. A generation of college-radio upstarts soon came running, turning the Drive-In into the Sun Studios of its era.

★ Spring of 1978 found Jefferson Holt adrift in Chapel Hill. Scion of a prominent family (his mother, Bertha Holt, was a longtime representative in the North Carolina General Assembly), he was taking night classes at UNC while battling depression in various unhealthy ways. But music was his one solace, and it became a turning point at the Apple Chill



The dB's, ca. the early 1980s. From left: Gene Holder, Chris Stamey, Will Rigby, and Peter Holsapple. Photo by Chris Seward.

Festival that April. Wandering down the Franklin Street main drag, Holt came face to face with Mitch Easter for the first time, playing with Peter Holsapple in the post-Sneakers/pre-dB's band H-Bombs.

"Peter had on this ripped T-shirt that said 'PUNK,' and I remember their posters were all very obviously based on 'punk rock' with the rough-looking cut and paste," Holt told me in 2017. "But then they played Badfinger's 'Baby Blue,' and I was blown away. It was like walking through the desert for forty days and forty nights and finding water—like being told, 'You're not alone.' They were just so good."

Soon after that, Holt went to work at Schoolkids Records in Chapel Hill and got to know the H-Bombs along with other bands and club owners in town, knowledge he put to use booking shows as Dasht Hopes Productions. An underground-rock network was emerging in college towns across America with the 1980s coming on, and one of its stops was the Station in Carrboro (a converted train station, not far from where a young Elizabeth Cotten had grown up). This collegiate circuit's mecca was Athens, Georgia, a town that the B-52's had put on the map with their underground hit "Rock Lobster." Any Athens band would be a guaranteed draw in Chapel Hill. So when Holt got the chance to book the Athens quartet Pylon for a weekend at the Station, it seemed like a can't-miss proposition.

Time Capsule *Greetings from Comboland, Volumes 1–3*

One of the better documents of mid-1980s alternative-rock Tarheelia is this three-cassette compilation, assembled by the critic Godfrey Cheshire III of the Raleigh-based independent weekly *Spectator* in 1985. All these years later, *Greetings from Comboland* is a great little snapshot of the time when scruffy college-town bands playing catchy guitar-pop was the spirit of the age.

Comboland's selections range from the arty party-rock of Charlotte's Fetchin' Bones to the gliding classic rock of Winston-Salem's the Right Profile, sprinkled with familiar names from elsewhere in the story—Chapel Hill's Southern Culture on the Skids, Mitch Easter, and various members of Arrogance among them. Copies of these tapes are, alas, incredibly rare and hard to find.

Or it did, until Pylon canceled. So did their replacement, the Method Actors. In desperation, Holt got in touch with another Athens group recommended by a friend—a new band called R.E.M., who had never played outside Georgia before. They played the Station in July 1980, and it proved to be seismic.

"Competition among bands was fierce back then," Holt said. "When R.E.M. played the Station that first time, it split everybody right down the middle. Half the crowd, especially other musicians, were saying, 'That guy can only play three chords.' The other half acted like they'd seen the second coming. I was in that second group, obviously."

Later that year, Holt said, he found himself called upon to help a drug-dealer friend launder a large sum of cash, which they did by moving to Athens and opening a record store. But the store soon folded, leaving Holt at loose ends. So he went on tour as R.E.M.'s roadie, a role that evolved into manager in the spring of 1981. R.E.M. had continued to split crowds down the middle, leading Don Dixon to joke that they were "despised by all the right people." But their audience was still growing, in numbers as well as fervor. It was time to start making records. After an initial attempt at a conventional professional studio in Atlanta went poorly, Holt called Holsapple for advice.

"Go to Mitch's," Holsapple told him.



Mitch Easter's
Winston-Salem

The original three-volume cassettes of Godfrey Cheshire III's Greetings from Comboland compilation. Photo by Scott Sharpe.

That brought R.E.M. to Winston-Salem and the homey confines of Easter's Drive-In, a studio so small that sessions often spilled out into the driveway (providing both wide-open ambience and natural sound effects). Easter's parents, Ken and Lib, were enthusiastic about having the studio in their home, supplying a steady stream of snacks and encouragement; it was not uncommon to hear Lib blasting the likes of Deep Purple while doing household chores. It was a low-key atmosphere that suited R.E.M. perfectly for their earliest recordings, the 1981 "Radio Free Europe" single and 1982's mini-album *Chronic Town*. Two decades later, R.E.M. bassist Mike Mills fondly recalled the Easters' family dogs running around the studio and making themselves a part of the sessions.

But the Drive-In's biggest draw of all was Easter — "the master of cool," in Mills's words, a studio wizard who could get the sound you wanted, cheap. All those endless hours of experimental recording with Stamey as kids had given Easter a unique garage-producer expertise you couldn't find at modern, far more expensive studios. Easter was so good, in fact,

that bands he worked with frequently couldn't live up to his recordings of them. Josh Grier, a music-industry lawyer who ran the Record Bar retail chain's label Dolphin Records in the 1980s, said he and his peers used to joke about what he called "Mitch's demo-tape monsters."

"He'd make these moderately talented bands sound like the next Cheap Trick," Grier told me in 2003. "He's always had a huge vocabulary of musical signatures. You could tell him you wanted the guitar sound from 'Daydream Believer' and he could tell you how to get it: the right guitar, tuning, and amplifier in the right place, and there it was. A lot of the bands he was working with, that's the only vocabulary they had: 'I heard this.' He could interpret that and put it on a record. To a large extent, that's his true talent—finding groups in a very raw state and pulling out what they have."

★ While R.E.M. didn't need any tricks to be special, Easter still proved to be the ideal sonic caretaker for the ambient jitters of their early years. Easter served as R.E.M.'s coproducer through 1984, contributing eccentric and just-right touches as needed. Mills said the oddball percussive flourishes on 1983's *Murmur* track "Moral Kiosk" came from Easter banging a chair leg with a piece of metal, creating an almost call-and-response effect with singer Michael Stipe's semi-intelligible vocals. With their breakneck tempos and aura of mystery, R.E.M. sounded like kids who'd grown up on punk rock trying to play folk-rock—and getting it just wrong enough to be perfectly, absolutely right.

Once I.R.S. Records signed R.E.M. and insisted they start using a "real" studio, the band moved eighty miles down the road to Reflection Studios in Charlotte. Don Dixon, who had done enough sessions at Reflection to know the place inside and out, signed on as Easter's coproducer for *Murmur* and 1984's *Reckoning*—albums that established R.E.M. as toast of the American underground. R.E.M. would go on to much bigger hits and chart-topping glory in the 1990s, when they were perfectly poised to take advantage of tailwinds from alternative rock's brief period as the mainstream of popular music. But for a left-of-the-dial generation that came of age with college radio in the 1980s, it was R.E.M.'s North Carolina records with Easter and Dixon that remained mysterious talismans of an era. Kurt Cobain, iconic front man of Seattle grunge superstars Nirvana, was among those listening.

R.E.M. made Easter's reputation as a producer, and names both familiar and obscure beat a path to the Drive-In: Suzanne Vega, Marshall Crenshaw, Bongos, Windbreakers, Beat Rodeo, Pavement, Game Theory,

"Shape Up, Firm Up, Tone Up" The Cosmopolitans

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Jamie Sims and Nel Johnson were a familiar sight on New York City nightclub stages as the Cosmopolitans, "New Wave Pom Pom Girls Gone Go-Go." They would accompany the dB's or Fleshtones with dance routines based on Picasso paintings, *A Chorus Line*, or other unlikely whimsicalities. The embryonic Cosmopolitans started in the mid-1970s, when Sims and Johnson were at UNC, and moved north in 1977 as "a *Saturday Night Live* version of a dance company," Sims told me in 2009.

Sims majored in composition at UNC and was also writing songs along the lines of the B-52's oeuvre. There was "Wild Moose Party," an ode to Sims's twenty-two-pound cat Moose, and "(How To Keep Your) Husband Happy"—based on an old exercise record by 1950s-era "Queen of Televised Fitness" Debbie Drake: "Shape up, firm up, tone up, with Debbie!"

These songs and others were recorded in 1980 at the Drive-In Studio, with contributions from various members of Let's Active and even Mitch Easter's mother Lib (credited with "party crowd vocals"). And the Cosmopolitans actually picked up some airplay on New York's big FM rock station WNEW, but that's as far as it went. Sims came down with Epstein-Barr virus in 1982 and the group disbanded. Johnson moved back to her native Wilmington and started singing in a blues band. Sims eventually relocated to Richmond, Virginia, where she composes classical music.

The Cosmopolitans were last heard from in 2009, when they played a one-off reunion show at Cat's Cradle in Carrboro.

the Connells, and more. Between production projects, Easter also found time for the most significant band he ever played in himself. During sessions for what became R.E.M.'s *Chronic Town* EP in the fall of 1981, they were on dinner break at the local K&W Cafeteria when it came up that R.E.M. had a show coming up in Atlanta. They offered Easter the opening-act slot and he said sure, putting together a trio with his girlfriend Faye Hunter on bass and a teenage drummer Jefferson Holt knew from Carrboro, Sara Romweber (older sister of Dexter Romweber, of Flat Duo Jets fame).

They dubbed the project Let's Active, after a garbled Japanese-to-English translation, a flight of fancy they would come to regret. The

show went well, and that name stuck as they continued on. Eventually Let's Active signed to I.R.S., the same label as R.E.M., releasing three albums and an EP of art-pop long on the musical substance and verities of Combo Corner—ambitious arrangements and impeccable guitar-playing, wrapped in songs so tuneful it was easy to miss the dark, moody lyrical undercurrents. Not that Easter seemed to take it all that seriously. Writing with tongue firmly in cheek in his 1984 record-company biography, Easter described the Let's Active sound as, “Essentially neo-post quasi but not particularly. Diatonic, with chromaticism. Kinda free kinda wow. Hell, we don't know.”

Despite never breaking beyond college radio, Let's Active was much-beloved and had a good run, cracking the lower half of *Billboard's* album-sales chart with three of its records. But the group had a tumultuous existence, too. Easter grew frustrated at being typecast as “the jingle-jangle guy” as both producer and artist, and being in a band with his girlfriend proved fraught. He and Hunter broke up, and the lineup turned over completely, eventually becoming Easter and a revolving cast. The Let's Active records that Easter continued making were all first-rate, but he lamented the end of the original trio (years later, Hunter committed suicide in 2013, while Romweber died from brain cancer in 2019).

By the end of the 1980s, Easter had had enough. Following a dispiriting show near Washington, D.C., where Let's Active played a party “for the children of important people at this exclusive high school,” he dissolved the band in 1990 and retreated back to his studio. Eventually he tired of the Drive-In's cramped quarters and built the musical palace of his dreams—Fidelitorium Recording Studio, a Xanadu-like music paradise that opened behind his house in Kernersville in 2000.

Fidelitorium served as archive for Easter's own career (the R.E.M. gold records for *Murmur* and *Reckoning* hang on a wall in an upstairs room), showroom for a fantastic array of instruments and destination studio of the sort that Led Zeppelin might have used in their glory days. An analogue place in a digital world, Fidelitorium was decidedly, proudly out-of-step with the modern world.

“As a joke, I was recently telling some of my more philosophical rock-recording buddies, ‘You've become Delta bluesmen,’” Easter told me in 2002. “It's true. Playing rock, you're in a historical niche now.”

That became no less true in the years following. But Easter has managed to keep Fidelitorium going for two decades at the time of this writing, even as such studios have become anachronisms. He has ventured out to play himself somewhat intermittently over the past three decades,

releasing a few records with then-wife Shalini Chatterjee and a solo album of his own in 2007. But for the most part, Easter has been largely content to stay in his studio and let the world come to him.

“Mitch has a controlled environment with his studio, which is the exact opposite way a lot of producers work,” Grier said. “He’s a pretty sane guy, and being a big-time record producer involves dealing with a lot of insanity—living in hotels and spending twelve hours a day in someone else’s studio. It seems like he found balance in his life by staying home. I’ll hear from people in the industry asking whatever happened to him and think to myself, ‘He figured out a way to live his life and run his studio without having to deal with you fucking assholes.’ More power to him for pulling it off.”

Mitch Easter's
Winston-Salem

One day in December 2017, I dialed Easter’s phone number intending to leave a message. To my surprise, however, he answered the call himself, even though he was busy, because he’s always busy. Mojo like his might never be in fashion, but it’s always in demand.

“We’re laying down some epic jams today,” he told me in his amiable drawl. “Can I call you back?”

10

Chapel Hill

The “Next Seattle” Era

When it comes to televised pop-music signposts, there’s February 9, 1964—the Beatles on *Ed Sullivan*—and everything else. But January 11, 1992, still marks an era all its own, when Seattle grunge trio Nirvana played *Saturday Night Live* to confirm their sudden and unexpected status as “world’s biggest band.” Just a few months earlier, Nirvana had been playing club-sized venues like Cat’s Cradle in Chapel Hill, yet here they were displacing Michael Jackson from the top of the *Billboard* charts. Nirvana’s three members seemed as bewildered by all of this as anyone else, so they closed their *SNL* star turn by trashing their instruments. And as Kurt Cobain shoved his guitar neck into an amplifier, feedback rang out as the opening salvo of . . . well, something.

Watching on TV from Chapel Hill, Tom Maxwell—drummer in the local band What Peggy Wants—concluded it signified “the death of grunge,” as he told me in 2014. But the music industry had other ideas, realizing there might be some money in music once deemed too unkempt for the masses. Nirvana themselves understood this well enough to have adorned the cover of their breakthrough album *Nevermind* with a picture of a baby in a pool chasing a dollar bill on a fishhook. Nirvana’s success kicked off the Great Alternative Rock Goldrush, a pendulum swing away from the previous year, when lighter-than-air pop like Milli Vanilli, Wilson Phillips, and Vanilla Ice had dominated the airwaves. The underground was already bubbling into the mainstream in the spring of 1991, when *Out of Time* became R.E.M.’s first number 1 album. Then came that summer’s Lollapalooza tour of big outdoor amphitheaters starring Jane’s Addiction, Nine Inch Nails, and other rising alternative bands.

What put it all the way over the top, however, was *Nevermind*, which exploded that fall and turned 1991 into *The Year Punk Broke*—title of a well-timed documentary about the band Sonic Youth, elder statesmen of the American rock underground. *Nevermind*’s calling card was “Smells

Like *Teen Spirit*,” a perfect storm of churning guitars and mysterious epigrams (“Our little group has always been and always will until the end,” “Here we are now, entertain us”) with an instantly iconic video showing a high school pep rally turning into a teenage riot. Whether intended as such or not, “*Teen Spirit*” sounded like a manifesto. Shortly after the video hit MTV, label talent scouts fanned out across America seeking that elusive indie-rock Eldorado: “The Next Seattle.” Having produced Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, and Alice in Chains, in addition to Nirvana, Seattle was a grunge paradise and alternative rock’s ultimate proto-boomtown.

One place the industry’s gaze came to rest was Chapel Hill, a thriving outpost on America’s underground-rock circuit—often mentioned in the same breath as Athens or Austin, with a bustling under-the-radar music scene. Some months after Nirvana’s *SNL* coronation, Sonic Youth bestowed their blessings with the 1992 song “Chapel Hill.” The band had passed through Chapel Hill as Neil Young’s opening act the previous year, when the local papers were full of stories about the mysterious February 21, 1991, murder of progressive-leaning Internationalist Books owner Robert Sheldon (a crime that remains unsolved to this day). Sonic Youth wrote a song about it, dotted with local signifiers: “Jesse H” (firebrand conservative Republican senator Jesse Helms) and a pit of Durham hardcore kids getting “the Cradle rocking” at an all-ages show. “Chapel Hill” seemed like a fitting theme song for the time and place.

As the southwest corner of North Carolina’s Triangle region with Raleigh and Durham, Chapel Hill had about 40,000 residents in the early 1990s. It also had a wave of community-minded young bands that would have made perfectly simpatico opening acts for Sonic Youth or Nirvana. Superchunk, Polvo, Archers of Loaf, Metal Flake Mother, and Zen Frisbee weren’t exactly punk and didn’t sound much like each other, but they all played loud and fast, heavy on roaring overdrive guitars. The words were hard to hear, let alone understand, but it was exhilarating to let adrenaline take over and get swept away by a song like Superchunk’s 1990 seven-inch single “Slack Motherfucker”—a wage-slave anthem that vowed, “I’m working, but I’m not working for you!”

The idea of somebody’s time being more valuable than money seemed as quaintly old-fashioned as bands passing up an opportunity to sign on the major-label dotted line. But that would become *de rigueur* in Chapel Hill, where most of the locals seemed content playing for their friends, recording in improvised neighborhood studios like the “Yellow House,” and staying out of the machinations of the big-time record business. The Chapel Hill scene seemed like a long, long way from the top of the pops—

The New Frontier WXYC and alt.music.chapel-hill

From the perspective of modern life in the twenty-first century, when people spend as much time online as they do interacting with the physical world, it’s odd to recall that it was not always thus. Amazon, Facebook, Google, Twitter, and the rest of the World Wide Web did not always exist, or just spontaneously come to be—and North Carolina was ahead of that technological curve.

The very first radio station to simulcast over the internet was the University of North Carolina’s student-run WXYC in November 1994, set up by David McConville and Michael Shoffner via UNC’s online archive Sunsight (now ibiblio.org). In those pre-broadband days, when most internet access was via slow dial-up connections, the fidelity was somewhere between marginal and atrocious. But being online enabled WXYC’s programming to be heard beyond the confines of its low-watt left-of-the-dial 89.3 FM frequency.

By then, alt.music.chapel-hill was already in full bloom as a flourishing digital gathering spot. A Usenet discussion group largely populated by local musicians, fans, and WXYC deejays, alt.music.chapel-hill had no pictures or videos, just prose—generally arguments about the worthiness of various bands and records in Chapel Hill and beyond.

Along with specialty sites like America Online’s No Depression Folder (launched in 1994) and Triangle-based Guitartown (formed in 1999), alt.music.chapel-hill was essentially online social media of the pre-Facebook era.

until Nirvana came along and suddenly gave the mainstream a hard left turn and brought it to the outskirts of town.

Once that happened, just like Seattle and Athens, Chapel Hill would also have breakout acts that sold millions of albums. Two of them, in fact.

Pretty much the last two anybody would have predicted.

★ Over the twenty-eight years I covered music for the *News & Observer*, Cat’s Cradle nightclub was something like an indie-rock town commons. More than just a place to see live music, it was a gathering spot to catch up on what was going on. And whether in Carrboro (its home since 1993)

or Chapel Hill before that, it's always been a historical repository, too. One of the Carrboro incarnation's most prominent interior features is a mural painted by Zen Frisbee/Shark Quest guitarist Laird Dixon, of Elizabeth "Libba" Cotten—legendary Carrboro-born blueswoman and author of "Freight Train," a Piedmont blues classic she wrote about the passing trains she'd heard in the early years of the twentieth century.

That's fitting on multiple levels. As a college town, Chapel Hill's population is constantly turning over and a lot of its most notable musicians have been people passing through. Rocky Mount native Kay Kyser came to town in the 1920s to attend the University of North Carolina, where he was a cheerleader and conducted the student orchestra before going on to become the "Ol' Professor of Swing" with his big band (he eventually came back to Chapel Hill to retire). In the 1930s, thanks in part to Blind Boy Fuller's sidekick Floyd Council, Chapel Hill was a prominent satellite to the blues scene in neighboring Durham. In the 1960s, Doug Clark and the Hot Nuts emerged as one of the East Coast's top party bands on the same frat-house R & B circuit as the beach-music bands. And before becoming "Sweet Baby James" as the top 1970s confessional singer-songwriter, James Taylor spent a stretch of his childhood growing up in Chapel Hill.

In the early 1970s, around the same time Winston-Salem's "Combo Corner" graduates were coming over to UNC, folk music prevailed with the idiosyncratic old-time string band the Red Clay Ramblers (whose name riffed on Charlie Poole's North Carolina Ramblers) and singer-songwriter Mike Cross. The dawn of the 1980s brought the Pressure Boys, a hopped-up teenage new-wave band that recorded with both Don Dixon and Mitch Easter; a generation of area bands bearing the stamp of R.E.M.'s jingle-jangle influence, most prominently the Connells from neighboring Raleigh; and a burgeoning hardcore scene led by another Raleigh band, the enormously influential Corrosion of Conformity.

One face in the crowd at a lot of COC shows back then was Mac McCaughan, a young man from Durham, who started playing in punk bands of his own in high school. He was twenty in 1987 and playing in a trio called Wwax, a group with more melodic tendencies than most punk bands. When it came time to record, Wwax didn't settle for just putting out a conventional seven-inch single. Instead, Wwax's Wayne Taylor organized a box-set compilation of five local bands. *Evil I Do Not to Nod I Live* on Palindrome Productions (get it?) featured songs by blackgirls, Egg Egg, Slushpuppies, and Angels of Epistemology, as well as Wwax. They pressed up and assembled 1,000 copies using Ampex tape boxes,

which just happened to be the perfect shape and size to hold five seven-inch singles plus whatever found art they added to each copy.

Several years later, McCaughan cajoled his girlfriend and fellow punk enthusiast Laura Ballance into taking up bass so they could start playing together in a series of bands, including one dubbed Chunk (in honor of their first drummer Chuck Garrison's name being misprinted as "Chunk" in the Chapel Hill phone book). Chunk immediately stood out as one of the most accessible of all the young loud rock bands starting up. They didn't write just riffs but hooks, as catchy as they were pulverizing, played so fast they made crowds jump straight up and down. McCaughan sang in a yearning yelp, with a lyrical flair for statement-of-purpose anthems like 1990's "Cool" ("There's nothing new / And we're cooler than you / And you know it's true") and 1989's "My Noise": "It's my life, it is my voice / It is stupid, it is my noise."

In deference to a New York percussion group that beat them to the name Chunk, they added the prefix "Super" at the suggestion of McCaughan's mother. An ambitious touring regimen and the epic 1990 single "Slack Motherfucker" spread Superchunk's name beyond Chapel Hill enough to earn an out-of-town record deal as one of the first acts signed to the hip New York City imprint Matador, which released their first full-length album in 1990. Polvo, Archers of Loaf, and other key Chapel Hill bands were also up and running by the early 1990s, and it was a bustling if compact scene. The bands were putting out singles and tapes on an array of labels—Jettison, Moist/Baited Breath, Superchunk's own Merge—and playing to small crowds, often just for each other, townies as well as students. Some years later, Ben Folds would crack that the much-vaunted Chapel Hill scene consisted of "forty delusional scenesters who don't even know they're the scenesters."

Then Nirvana broke through and suddenly it wasn't just record companies coming to town looking for the Next Big Thing. A remarkable several-year run of high-profile media coverage began in 1992 with the likes of *Time*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *U.S. News & World Report*, the *New York Times*, and *Billboard* sending correspondents to report on Chapel Hill's "Next Seattle" potential, and they left bearing soundbites. Details magazine described Chapel Hill as "Seattle on Prozac" in a 1993 dispatch—"part metal, part Saturday-morning-cartoon cuteness."

But *Spin* magazine had the most memorably absurd description in a 1992 feature. Headlined "Robbing the Cradle," the story closed by recounting an interaction between *Spin* writer Daniel Fidler, Polvo gui-

tarist Ash Bowie, and an unnamed local about the mythical “Chapel Hill Sound.”

“A groggy passerby offers his take. ‘You really want to know the Chapel Hill Sound?’ He draws close. ‘It’s this,’ he says, and opens a beer can in my face. Cheers.”

While this sounds apocryphal, multiple eyewitnesses confirm it happened and identify the speaker as Marc Sloop, then a twenty-one-year-old UNC dropout, WXYC deejay, and local superfan/beer enthusiast.

“I honestly don’t remember, but it sure sounds like something I would have said,” Sloop told me in 2018. “It was probably a can of Olympia. You could get a twelve-pack absurdly cheap back then.”

★ For all the light, heat, and hype, none of that era’s Chapel Hill young-rock bands ever broke through to anything like Nirvana-sized mainstream success, or even the lower rungs of the charts. But that didn’t seem to bother the locals, who just went right on playing. And the summer of 1993 brought the planets together in a particularly wonderful alignment centered around the fragments of one of those bands, the sadly short-lived Metal Flake Mother.

Before melting down over the usual reasons, Metal Flake Mother made one amazing album, 1991’s *Beyond the Java Sea*—which still sounds like the missing link between the Pixies and Tom Waits, equal parts anthemic, atmospheric, and noirish. The breakup left drummer Jimbo Mathus at loose ends. Between shifts at Pyewacket (the restaurant where he met his wife, fellow employee Katharine Whalen), Mathus defaulted back to the blues, folk, and bluegrass he’d played while growing up in Mississippi. Whalen took up banjo, although she didn’t play Scruggs or even Charlie Poole-style, but the percussive strumming found in jazz groups.

The couple began hosting a series of potluck picking parties at their home in nearby Efland, inviting friends to bring instruments. Two early attendees were Metal Flake Mother’s old sound man, saxophonist Ken Mosher, and his coworker Chris Phillips, who played drums in several punk-leaning bands. Stacy Guess, a Miles Davis acolyte who had played in Pressure Boys, joined in on trumpet. And Don Raleigh, who Mathus met when his former band opened Metal Flake Mother’s last-ever show, was the bassist.

They played hot jazz, Dixieland-style, of the sort you might have heard in a Depression-era French Quarter speakeasy, jittery and punk-rock fast

The “Next
Seattle” Era

because that’s how they played everything. It came out ragged but right, with the added bonus that Whalen turned out to be an astonishing singer with a voice recalling Billie Holiday. The whole thing was so much fun, they decided to venture out for a public performance—less a show than an art-project recital. Calling themselves Squirrel Nut Zippers, the name of an old-time chewy caramel candy, they dressed up in vintage thrift-store finery and played downstairs at Henry’s Bistro in Chapel Hill. They had a few originals, plus covers by the likes of Holiday and Gid Tanner’s Skillet Lickers. But they went over so well they didn’t have enough songs when people kept applauding at the end. Lane Wurster, art director for the local label Mammoth Records (and brother of Superchunk drummer Jon Wurster), was there.

“Most of the crowd was all these freaks who worked at local restaurants, townies who’d more likely go to a puppet show than a rock show,” Wurster told me in 2018. “And it was like the most fun, spirited party ever, so different from anything else going on. When Katharine opened her mouth, everybody just lost their shit: *I can’t believe she’s singing like that!* Everybody was looking at each other: *Is this really happening?* We’d seen all these guys playing in punk bands and it was incredibly cool to see this other side.”

Squirrel Nut Zippers quickly became the hippest party band in town (Chris Stamey was one of many locals to hire them, for his wedding reception in September 1993). And even though they played old-timey music, the Zippers were still an indie-rock band at heart and made their recorded debut in the most Chapel Hill way possible: with a Merge seven-inch, recorded at the Yellow House.

By the time Merge released *Roasted Right* in May 1994, another alternative-rock refugee had joined the Zippers’ ranks—Tom Maxwell, who added the last bit of special sauce. A native of Burnsville, Maxwell had come to Chapel Hill a decade earlier as a UNC student. And even though he’d most recently been playing glam-rock drums in What Peggy Wants, Maxwell had an abiding affection for Cotton Club bandleader Cab Calloway, Harlem stride pianist Fats Waller, and obscure calypso tunes by the likes of Lord Executor.

Maxwell’s addition soon pushed the Zippers to critical mass as the ultimate North Carolina band of modern times, an energetic and historically savvy mix of old and new. The triple threat of Mathus’s wise-guy carney bluesman (“All my real heroes worked in medicine shows, from Charley Patton to Charlie Poole,” he told me in 2018), Maxwell’s eclectic tendencies, and Whalen’s Billie-Holiday-meets-Betty-Boop voice—



Early 1995-vintage promotional photo of the Squirrel Nut Zippers. From left: Ken Mosher, Jimbo Mathus, Chris Phillips, Katharine Whalen, Tom Maxwell, Don Raleigh, and Stacy Guess. Photo by Roger Manley (who went on to become director of N.C. State University's Gregg Museum).

all rendered with love and sincerity, in a way that let everyone in on the joke—was absolute magic. It was just about impossible not to be charmed by Squirrel Nut Zippers.

★ The first time I ever heard Ben Folds in-person came after a show I actually missed. It was a hot summer night in 1994 at the Brewery, Raleigh's main nightclub, and I walked in just as Folds was in the midst of an animated postshow argument with someone over the introductory piano riff to the old Bob Seger chestnut "Old Time Rock and Roll" (soundtrack to Tom Cruise's lip-sync dance scene in 1983's *Risky Business*). There was disagreement over just how that went, so Folds hopped onstage, sat down at his piano and blasted out that riff . . . *perfectly*, every nuance, hiccup, and sonic blemish reproduced so precisely you'd have sworn you were listening to Seger's 1978 recorded version. It was a neat party trick. Then Folds and his bandmates, drummer Darren Jessee and

bassist Robert Sledge, rolled the piano on its side, took the legs off, and half-rolled, half-carried it out.

One of Ben Folds Five’s many jokes was that they weren’t a quintet but a trio. Unruly and sarcastic, they called their style “punk rock for sissies” with reference points less retro than the Zippers—seventies pop-rock like Randy Newman or Elton John. But they were still just as out of step with whatever the 1990s-vintage “Chapel Hill Sound” was. They all came from points west of the Triangle, each logging time in heavier, metal-leaning bands in Winston-Salem, Greensboro, and Charlotte. Sledge came from a combo called Lex Luthor and one of his bandmates was Sully Emma, later the lead singer in platinum-selling Boston metal band Godsmack. Sledge’s next band, Toxic Popsicle, shared a bill with Folds’s band Majosha, and that’s how they met.

Folds had grown up a startling musical prodigy in Winston-Salem, learning the craft early on from John “Chick” Shelton at Wiley Magnet Middle School (the same music teacher who had taught much of the “Combo Corner” generation a decade earlier) and focusing on piano after his carpenter father took one as barter payment for a job. During his time at Reynolds High School, Folds became a virtuoso multi-instrumentalist, so much so that choosing any one thing to focus on was difficult. So he spent a few years knocking around Miami, Nashville, and New York studying percussion at the Frost School of Music, playing sessions, even acting. He got serious about writing songs after signing a publishing deal and turning thoughts toward recording. Right about when the Zippers launched in late 1993, Folds came home to North Carolina to put a band together, moving to Chapel Hill because that’s where the action was.

“We’re all super-fast studies and Ben did not want to waste any time,” Sledge told me in 2018. “He and I got a house at the end of ’93, moved there in January, found Darren in February, and had our first show in March. Everything happened very fast. But it’s not like we got on the high-luck lane of the highway, which was not even available. We just did the super-hard work. Ben had a bunch of good songs, Darren and I could play pretty much anything, and we could throw a set together fast.”

A typical Ben Folds Five performance involved the pianist spending a lot of time airborne, either kicking out the piano stool or standing on top of the instrument to hold forth and conduct the crowd. His playing was always impeccable, of course, replete with flashy flourishes and pianistic quotes from the likes of George Gershwin or Vincent Guaraldi while tossing out one killer, seemingly effortless pop hook after another—in

service of barbed lyrics about ex-girlfriends, uppity peers, and other annoyances.

Even after signing with the New York-based independent label Caroline Records, however, their vaudeville grunge seemed like a commercial longshot. At a time when loud guitars ruled the airwaves, Ben Folds Five's instrumentation didn't include guitars at all because Sledge's fuzz-bass thunder made them superfluous. The first time I interviewed Folds, in the summer of 1995, he already considered Squirrel Nut Zippers to be kindred spirits despite their stylistic differences.

The "Next
Seattle" Era

"I really identify with Squirrel Nut Zippers taking the freedom of 'Fuck you, this'll never sell but so what' music and applying it to something more likable," Folds told me. "We have the same attitude, having grown up playing punk-funk indie-rock. The Zippers play old-style music, but you smell a rat. We're not exactly doing Tin Pan Alley, we're like a punk band trying to play Tin Pan Alley songs. There's a lot of Carole King in there. But before, people who covered Carole King would do it laid-back—not full-tilt, like us. We try to apply this wild abandon to sophisticated music. If this record came out during the seventies, it would seem wrong. You'd have to have heard Nirvana before it made sense."

★ Squirrel Nut Zippers and Ben Folds Five released their respective full-length debut albums in 1995. Both bands even recorded at the same area studio, Wave Castle in Hillsborough, working on the fly and on the cheap. Folds had attempted to make a slick record elsewhere with a "name" producer, Dave "Stiff" Johnson of G. Love and Special Sauce fame, but everyone hated the results so much they scrapped it for a live recording overseen by Cat's Cradle soundman Caleb Southern (producer of Zen Frisbee, Archers of Loaf, and other bands from Chapel Hill's hipster young-rock crowd). It took all of three days to knock out the twelve songs on *Ben Folds Five*, an ADHD masterpiece rocked-up enough to leave listeners breathless.

After signing to the local label Mammoth Records, the Zippers spent a comparatively leisurely ten days at Wave Castle to make *The Inevitable Squirrel Nut Zippers* with Brian Paulson, whose production resume included Superchunk, Slint, and Uncle Tupelo. Loose-limbed and just a little ragged, *Inevitable* was a perfect sonic palate-cleanser for the alternative-rock age (and also dynamite late-night house-party music).

Both albums sold into the low five figures, comparable to Superchunk or Archers of Loaf's sales figures at the time. And this was where the real work began, as each band spent prolonged stretches of 1995–96 on

The "Next
Seattle" Era



Squirrel Nut Zippers onstage at Cat's Cradle in Carrboro, North Carolina, June 1996. From left: Don Raleigh, Jimbo Mathus, and Katharine Whalen. News & Observer photo by Andrea Bruce.

the road winning over one small crowd at a time. Gradually, their stages started getting bigger, including most of the late-night TV shows from Letterman and Leno on down. The Zippers would play *A Prairie Home Companion*, the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, and the Sundance Film Festival. Along with opening for seemingly every pop hitmaker on their way up (or down), Folds played Japan as well as the alternative-rock Lollapalooza tour, criss-crossing America in a customized Hertz Penske box truck with its cargo area divided into storage space and a living area.

"Not legal at all, of course," Sledge said. "We did one epic three-month tour where we were not home once, which is not normal. Bands will talk about being 'on the road for three years,' which usually means four weeks on and then a week or two off. I'm here to tell you, we lived in a submarine for three months, and it got really weird. Everybody forgets you when you're gone that long—families, friends, girlfriends. Most of the time was spent in touring vehicles, turning the dial and navigating the submarine."

It was grueling but also forged both bands into formidable performing ensembles more than sharp enough to transcend whatever gimmicks

were involved. With their respective audiences growing, each record label had some actual commercial expectations for their second albums. Mammoth was hoping to sell 50,000 Zippers records while Sony, which had snapped up Ben Folds Five from Caroline, had even loftier hopes.

But there were unforeseen consequences, too.

"I was working at the Flying Burrito when the Zippers broke," Whalen told me in 2006. "And I remember I did not want to give up my good Friday and Saturday shifts. That was hard. I really had to think about it. 'Well,' I thought, 'Okay. I hope this works.'"

The "Next
Seattle" Era

★ For album number two, the Zippers went to New Orleans to record with producer Mike Napolitano at Daniel Lanois's Kingsway Studio in the French Quarter, and it could not have gone better. They came away with *Hot*, an album that found the Zippers tightened up significantly from *Inevitable* and also occasionally wandering into darkness. Exhibit A was a seemingly innocuous little song called "Put a Lid on It," a looping horn-riff shuffle with a playful Katharine Whalen vocal. But the song was about their former bandmate Stacy Guess's heroin habit, which forced him out of the Zippers before *Hot* was recorded. Years later, Maxwell told me that writing "Lid" had been his response to discovering Guess's addiction.

"Put a lid down on it and everything'll be all right . . ."

"I had no strategy for how to deal with it," Maxwell said. "I did have this idea that the Zippers meant enough to Stacy that if that was taken away, it would be sufficiently motivating for him to give up heroin. I laugh at my own naivete now because vultures were always circling when we were on the road. You know, the pot dealers always found me and Kenny [Mosher], too. I couldn't talk to Stacy about it and don't know what I would have said if I had except that I was angry at him, and scared."

The Zippers launched *Hot* in June 1996 with a raucous dance party of a show that was more circus than concert, with everyone at Cat's Cradle that night dressed to the nines. The band entered through the sold-out crowd, like a New Orleans second-line parade, and there was even an on-stage tap-dance solo by local teenage dance prodigy Michelle Dorrance (who later went on to become a 2015 MacArthur Foundation "Genius Grant" winner).

All seven Zippers played and sang magnificently that night, Whalen most of all. She had grown into a very compelling onstage presence, with a gift for looking sultry, sassy, and bored all at once while evoking the ghosts of Billie Holiday and cabaret jazz singer Blossom Dearie. But Maxwell had his moments, too, especially on a swinging calypso tune he'd

The University of North Carolina’s Hollywood Outpost Peyton Reed, David Burris

Even while making videos for bands in Chapel Hill, Raleigh native Peyton Reed was a proud movie nerd. His 1994 video for Superchunk’s “Driveway to Driveway” was a retro-styled homage to 1940’s *The Philadelphia Story*, with members of Squirrel Nut Zippers and other local bands among the cameo extras making it a perfect indie-rock time capsule.

Reed went on to become a top-flight director with his first film, 2000’s cheerleader movie *Bring It On*, which starred a then-unknown Kirsten Dunst and debuted at number 1 at the box office. Between *Yes Man* and his Marvel Comics *Ant-Man* installments, Reed’s movies have grossed more than \$1 billion.

Other Chapel Hill music veterans to surface in Hollywood were original Connells drummer John Schultz, director of movies including *Bandwagon* and *Like Mike* with his old Connells bandmate Doug MacMillan in cameo roles; and Sex Police bassist Norwood Cheek, who directed the Squirrel Nut Zippers’ hit video “Hell.” Cheek has appeared in everything from Reed’s *Ant-Man* and *the Wasp* to a Volkswagen Jetta commercial.

David Burris, from North Carolina bands including the Veldt and Jolene, had a long run as executive producer of the CBS competition show *Survivor*. He was at the helm for the 2010 season, “Survivor: Nicaragua,” when the runner-up was Asheville native Chase Rice—a former UNC football player who went on to a solid run of hits on the country singles charts.

Burris also directed 2015’s *The World Made Straight*, a coming-of-age thriller starring Noah Wyle and Steve Earle. It was filmed in Buncombe County with a soundtrack from Burris’s North Carolina mates: blues singer Algia Mae Hinton, freak-folk trio Megafaun, Ben Folds Five drummer Darren Jessee’s Hotel Lights, and the Connells among them.

written called “Hell.” Lit a garish red, Maxwell spelled out what awaited in the afterlife — “the D and the A and the M and the N and the A and the T-I-O-N!” — and the crowd whooped and hollered. It felt like an improbable high point for a band with such humble beginnings.

The following spring, even bigger doings were afoot, all because of that song “Hell.” Even before it was released as a single, “Hell” was getting

the occasional spin beyond college and public-radio stations. Then Los Angeles' KROQ-FM, a powerful bellwether for other commercial stations across the country, added "Hell" to its regular rotation and it exploded.

Up to this point, no Chapel Hill band had ever cracked the *Billboard* 200 album-sales chart. Somehow, unbelievably, the Zippers were the first Chapel Hill album to do it with *Hot*, debuting at a modest number 196 in February 1997. Then once MTV started playing the "Hell" video (which had been filmed in a single day at Cat's Cradle), *Hot* took off like a rocket and eventually peaked at number 27.

"At this point, it truly has become such a carnival ride that it's fairly easy to deal with," Maxwell told me in April of 1997. "We just don't take any of it seriously at all. How can we? As far as believing the hype, that's not been a problem. But the surreal quality to a lot of this has been deliriously fun. Not a week ago, I was backstage in Toronto trading off-color jokes with (*Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* host) Robin Leach. It was . . . weird."

Even weirder, the Zippers weren't the only Chapel Hill band climbing the charts that spring. Ben Folds Five was right behind them with *Whatever and Ever Amen*, released the same month that *Hot* hit the charts. *Whatever* was full of gloriously catchy, exuberantly snotty punchlines like "Song for the Dumped" (with the immortal chorus, "Give me my money back, you bitch") and "Battle of Who Could Care Less." But it also had a mysteriously downcast song that didn't seem to fit the rest of the album, a lovely and somber ballad called "Brick."

With "Brick" due to be released as a single, Folds was uneasy at the prospect of it being his breakthrough hit—and not just because it was an out-of-character ballad. Eventually, Folds would admit that "Brick" was an autobiographical account of his high school girlfriend's abortion. In April of 1997, however, he was still gamely trying to deflect questions about it.

"I felt funny about putting ('Brick') on the album at all, and now it's definitely gonna be a single," he told me. "I don't know how I feel about that because it means there will be even more questions and you wonder at what point yours or someone else's bad personal experiences need to be exploited. But you have to write what you know. Beyond that, I tried to treat it responsibly so it wasn't a shock-value thing. It could've been a lot heavier, but I didn't want to do that."

"God, all this beat-around-the-bush talk is just making it worse," he concluded. "Gimme two-three years, when I'm more of an old hand at this, and I'll have a stock answer ready."

The “Next
Seattle” Era



Promotional photo of Ben Folds from 1998, the year Ben Folds Five went platinum.

★ If Chapel Hill’s “Next Seattle” hype had seemed ludicrously overblown, watching Squirrel Nut Zippers and Ben Folds Five ascend the charts felt truly bizarre. But each album cracked million-selling platinum territory, leading to even larger stages. The Zippers began 1997 playing President Clinton’s second inauguration with LL Cool J and Usher, and they rang in 1998 on “Dick Clark’s Rockin’ New Year’s Eve.” A few weeks after that, “Put a Lid on It”—the song Maxwell had written because he couldn’t talk about Stacy Guess’s heroin addiction—appeared in a Pentium chip commercial that aired during Super Bowl XXXII. To cap it all off, “Hell” even turned up in sample form in a hip-hop song, Los Angeles-based Latino group Funkdoobiest’s single “Papi Chulo.”

act (not counting James Taylor) to play *Saturday Night Live*, six years almost to the day after Nirvana's 1992 *SNL* breakthrough. Unfortunately, Folds and company put on what may have been their worst performance ever, a shaky and off-key version of "Brick." Ten months later, Folds was still mad at himself over it.

"We were terrible," he told me in November 1998. "I was so pissed. We'd slayed 10,000 performances before that, but it sure didn't look like it on TV. Afterward I was beat. I was in such a bad psychological state that I left the country the next morning and stayed away for a month. I had to talk myself off the ledge. The weird thing was, I sucked on that show, and we left feeling like we'd been a failure. Then I came back to the U.S. and we had a charting album and sold 40,000 records the week after *Saturday Night Live*. 'Well,' I thought, 'I guess that's what it's all about.'"

That pretty much set the tone for 1998, the year the merry-go-round stopped being fun even as the money kept rolling in. Both bands quickly became cautionary examples of being careful what you wish for, because "success" was likely to be just as fraught as the Chapel Hill bands turning down record deals suspected. "Brick" was a hit but also an outlier in Ben Folds Five's mostly raucous catalog, and playing for audiences who only knew that song came to be a drag. The typecasting cut both ways, too. "All we want to do is bring heavy back into rock 'n' roll," Jonathan Davis of the rising California metal band Korn told *Spin* magazine in 1998. "Because goddamned Ben Folds Five sucks"—an assessment that was hard to take, given Folds and company's own metal-band past.

As for the Zippers, they were dismayed when the Walt Disney Company bought Mammoth Records for a reported \$25 million, with the Zippers themselves in the role of unwilling blue-chip asset for "The Mouse." Even worse was the rise of a short-lived "swing revival" of zoot-suited West Coast bands like Big Bad Voodoo Daddy, which the Zippers were lumped into simply because they played retro music and wore vintage clothes.

That was irritating, but genuine tragedy struck with the death of their former Zippers bandmate Stacy Guess. He had first tried heroin because of his admiration for Miles Davis, and it instantly became an addiction he couldn't shake. Calling it an "inner fascism," Guess tried to quit repeatedly, including after he left the Zippers. He was just thirty-three years old when he succumbed to a lethal overdose in March 1998, leaving family and friends bereft.

"What I want everyone to know is how hard he tried to get off drugs," Guess's mother Betty King told me. "He had us take him to our place in

the mountains and leave him there so he couldn't get drugs. He even had us chain him up so he couldn't leave. The week before he died, he had his girlfriend take away the car keys. He and I had so many talks about it, and he just could not explain why he kept going back."

★ The Zippers followed up *Hot* with 1998's *Perennial Favorites*, and its first video perfectly summed up just how jaded they'd become. The arrangement of "Suits Are Picking Up the Bill" was a jaunty Dixieland strut, but Jimbo Mathus's sneering vocal and lyrics called out the parasites and hangers-on attracted by success. Filmed at Chapel Hill's Carolina Inn, the video featured Tom Maxwell's old What Peggy Wants bandmate John Ensslin as a waiter serving them. But the feast abruptly changed course as a cage suddenly fell over the band, with the Zippers' faces appearing as entrees on the menu.

With an assist from their pet-monkey sidekick (played by Marcell, a white-headed capuchin monkey famous for appearing in the NBC sitcom *Friends*), the Zippers escaped and fled. For a coda, Ben Folds himself walked in at the end of the video to ask the head waiter, "Excuse me. Can I still be served?"

Perennial Favorites wasn't an outright bomb, and it actually debuted higher on the charts than *Hot* ever reached. But it had no legs, sold a fraction of its predecessor, and pleased no one, least of all the suits at Disney. Much of it felt forced and cranky, especially "Trou Macacq," another calypso tune—except this one had primal screams. The album closed on an exhausted note, with a Mathus-penned song called "It's Over."

"Just when you think the party's starting, it's over, it's over, it's over, it's over, it's over . . ."

As 1999 began, the Zippers were seeing more action in courtrooms than on the charts. A former manager sued for breach of contract, and Southern Style Nuts' purchase of the Squirrel Brand candy company was prelude to a copyright infringement lawsuit over the Zippers' name. Both suits were eventually settled, but the ongoing legal hassles hastened the departure of two members: Tom Maxwell, writer of the Zippers' most popular songs, and cofounder Ken Mosher.

"When our lawsuits started outnumbering our gold records," Mosher told me in 1999, "that's how I knew we'd made it."

Drafting replacements, the remaining Zippers hung in there long enough to make one more album, 2000's *Bedlam Ballroom*. But their moment was gone and it barely dented the charts. They quietly disbanded in 2001 with no fanfare, scattering to assorted side projects.

Alas, the Zippers’ afterlife would not be tranquil as they descended into a virtual hell of litigation, bad vibes, wrecked friendships, and divorces. Chief among the latter, cofounders Mathus and Whalen split up not long after the band did.

Hostilities crested with legal action brought by Maxwell and Mosher over management fees and unpaid royalties, and they won a six-figure settlement from their former bandmates in arbitration in 2003. In part to pay off the settlement, the rest of the Zippers regrouped in 2007 to do a series of tours—which was awkward, given that Mathus and Whalen had been divorced for years at that point. But that was nothing compared to the intensity of bad feelings between Maxwell/Mosher on one side and the rest of the Zippers on the other. A genuine reunion of the Zippers’ glory-days lineup will probably never happen, a tragic conclusion for an ensemble that began with such spirit and love.

Nevertheless, the Zippers do live on after a fashion. Mathus enlisted a lineup of players from New Orleans and declared “It’s not a reunion, it’s a revival,” releasing the first new Zippers album in nearly two decades in 2018. At the time of this writing, Mathus is the last original member left in the touring version of Squirrel Nut Zippers.

★ Ben Folds Five came to a more amicable ending. With the whole world watching after “Brick,” the band responded with a hugely ambitious quasi-concept album about growing up, 1999’s *The Unauthorized Biography of Reinhold Messner*—named after a pseudonym Darren Jessee and friends had used on fake IDs while growing up in Charlotte. They didn’t even realize it was the actual name of a famous Italian mountain climber, the first to ascend Mount Everest without oxygen in 1978. *Messner* was a mountain, too, structured as a long suite of songs with repeating musical themes. Returning the favor from Folds’s cameo in the Zippers’ “Suits” video, Ken Mosher and Tom Maxwell played horns on the first *Messner* single, “Army.” The video featured a pep rally turning into a moshpit, playing like a nerdier high school marching-band version of “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” It seemed like a perfect would-be anthem for radio, except . . .

“‘Army’ had no chorus,” Robert Sledge said with a resigned laugh in 2018. “And you don’t get a song on the radio without a chorus. You just don’t.”

“Army” was the first major setback Ben Folds Five ever encountered, flopping dismally at radio in the spring of 1999. The album followed suit, selling less than one-quarter of *Whatever*. The band was working harder than ever, but with more doubts and less payoff. In the fall of 2000, when

“Carolina in My Mind” James Taylor

Although he was born in Boston in 1948, James Taylor’s earliest childhood memories were in Chapel Hill. When James was just three years old, his father, Isaac Taylor, moved the family down to take a job at the University of North Carolina’s medical school (where he eventually became dean).

James spent much of his childhood playing around Morgan Creek, and he was making music at a precocious age. Neighbors remember him turning pieces of garden hose into flutes as a child before taking up cello at age ten and guitar at twelve. While he was back and forth between North Carolina and Massachusetts during high school, James was in Chapel Hill long enough to play rhythm guitar in the Corsayers, his older brother Alex’s garage band.

“We still joke about our ‘ear for talent,’” Corsayers lead guitarist Steve Oakley told me in 2003. “We relegated James to backup because we didn’t think he was good enough to sing lead.”

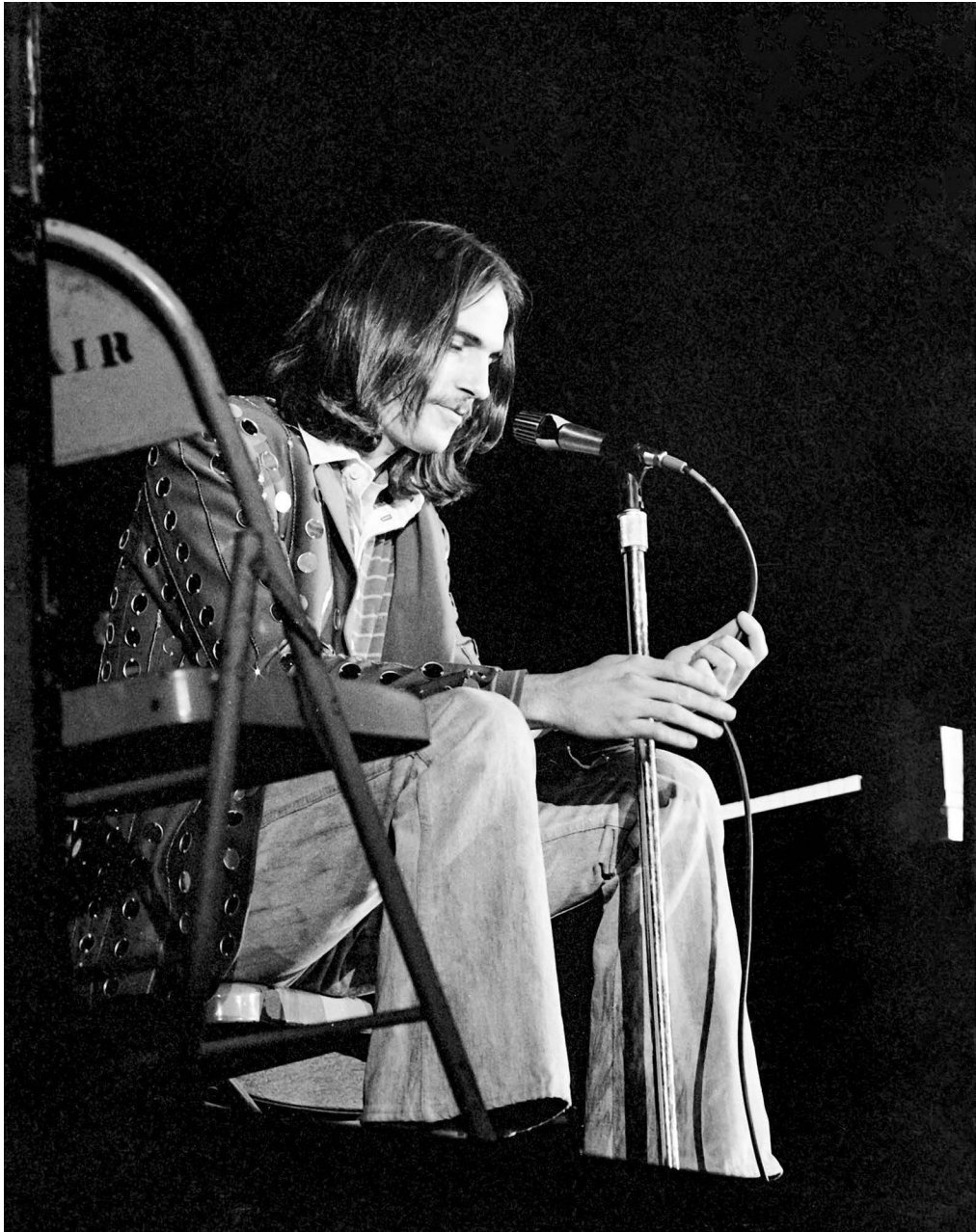
James also performed at Chapel Hill High School’s 1965 Junior Follies Variety Show, lending guitar accompaniment to a number of ballad singers. But as future Red Clay Ramblers pianist Bland Simpson recalled, Taylor himself was the big hit of the show when he appeared onstage in a bedsheet toga to recite Lord Buckley’s beat-era version of a verse from Shakespeare: “Hipsters, flipsters, and finger-poppin’ daddies, knock me your lobes. I come here to lay Caesar out, not to hip. You. To. Him!”

“Collapsed the house,” Simpson noted.

Taylor departed Chapel Hill not long after that, although following his star led him through a dark several-year odyssey of depression, heroin addiction, and psychiatric hospitals. When he emerged, Taylor’s personal travails served as backdrop for his troubadour career. He became one of world’s the most popular confessional singer-songwriters, with a cult-of-personality following that hung on every word of nakedly emotional classics like “Fire and Rain.” Despite a relaxed vocal style and impeccable guitar-pop arrangements, the pathos was undeniable.

Taylor has acknowledged his North Carolina roots in a number of songs, scoring hits with covers of the Drifters’ beach-music classic “Up on the Roof” and the Greensboro R & B sibling duo Inez & Charlie Foxx’s “Mockingbird” (a top-five hit with his then-wife Carly Simon in 1974). Another of his North Carolina songs is 1991’s “Copperline,” cowritten with novelist Reynolds Price, which recalled Taylor’s childhood days in Chapel Hill.

But his most overt love letter to the Old North State remains “Carolina in My Mind,” a lovely and bittersweet remembrance of his former stomping grounds that Taylor wrote in a bout of homesickness. The 1976 version of “Carolina in My Mind” stands as North Carolina’s unofficial state anthem.



James Taylor onstage at the mike in 1971, the year he became a superstar and was on the cover of Time magazine. News & Observer photo, courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives.

it came time to think about the next record, Ben Folds Five decided to break up instead.

"I have all kinds of ways of explaining it that make no sense to anybody outside the three of us," Folds told me in 2008. "The simplest way would be to say that if someone knows you as Captain Kirk, they have a hard time understanding why you don't walk around being Captain Kirk all day. It took over, thirty-six hours a day, and we were entwined financially, logistically, everything. We were having to pedal this machine that was a lot more money-driven in the nineties, and we couldn't stop the treadmill. I don't think any of us slept more than three hours a night for four years straight."

All three members continued playing, but Folds would have the highest-profile solo career. As his pace of hits slowed with the passage of time, he seemed less like a one-time pop star than a quirky high school band teacher—performing with symphony orchestras, recording with college a cappella groups, serving as celebrity judge on NBC's singing-competition show *The Sing-Off*, playing shows with setlists determined by song requests people threw onstage via paper airplanes. At a 2012 concert with the North Carolina Symphony in Raleigh, he coached the audience to sing along on his song "Not the Same" and one guy in the crowd was so off-pitch that Folds made up a song on the spot called "Lonely Douche Bag." From the piano, Folds improvised lyrics about a drunk singing "louder and sharper than everyone else" to feed a desperate need for attention, while also arranging the symphony's different sections on the fly ("First violins, gimme a G"). The cherry on top of the whole thing was the backup choir's harmony singing: "*Lonely douche baaaaaag*." No, he's never lost that streak of smart-aleck conservatory virtuosity.

Ben Folds Five has regrouped a few times over the years and even stayed together long enough to make another album in 2012. But their best reunion show was the very first one, September 2008 at UNC's Memorial Hall in Chapel Hill. It was the trio's first time onstage together since the 2000 breakup, and it drew a packed-to-the-rafters house filled with many of their old Chapel Hill peers from back in the day. And when they started in on "Army"—a cartoonish, cynical take on indie-rock life that somehow comes out heartfelt in spite of itself—the air itself felt electric.

Grew a mustache and a mullet, got a job at Chick-Fil-A
Citing artistic differences the band broke up in May
And in June reformed without me, and they got a different name
I nuked another grandma's apple pie and hung my head in shame.

And at the crescendo—when Folds and Sledge and Jessee fell silent long enough to let the crowd scream unaccompanied, *God please spare me more rejection*—it kind of felt like two decades of collective memories exploded and blew a hole in the sky.

“You really want to know the Chapel Hill Sound? It’s this.”

It was, ultimately, another perfect Chapel Hill moment: you just had to be there.

The “Next
Seattle” Era

11

How to Make It in the Music Business without Really Trying

Colonial, Sugar Hill, and
Merge Records

For a brief moment on February 13, 2011, the very apex of the commercial music industry came to rest on little Merge Records. That evening, the Grammy Awards were presented at the Staples Center in Los Angeles with a worldwide television audience in the millions. And at the end of the show, neither Eminem, Katy Perry, or the Ladies Gaga or Antebellum won the album-of-the-year grand prize. In a shocking upset for the ages, the Grammy went to Montreal alternative-rock band Arcade Fire for *The Suburbs*, an album released by Merge—a small independent label steeped in the do-it-yourself verities of Chapel Hill’s 1990s underground.

Seeking reaction afterward, I called Laura Ballance, the Merge co-founder whose bedroom had served as the label’s first headquarters. Turned out she not only hadn’t been there for this one-time-only moment of glory in person, she wasn’t even watching it on TV. In a move that was entirely in-character, she was at home in North Carolina asleep because she had to get up early the next morning.

“It’s just not my scene,” Ballance told me in a tone conveying a shrug. “If I’d wanted to make my life extra-complicated, I could have gone to the Grammys. But no, I had the perfect excuse not to go. So I didn’t.”

Winning the music industry’s most coveted high-profile award was a long way from Merge’s humble beginnings two decades earlier, back when it didn’t even have the wherewithal to release full-length albums. But that Grammy didn’t change much about how Merge operated. It remained a lean operation with around a dozen employees, a fraction of

the Interscopes and Columbias of the world, mostly putting out left-of-center records a little too scruffy for the mainstream. To this day, if you go to Merge's office building on Main Street in downtown Durham, you won't find a Grammy-laden display case.

"Nah, we'd have to order that, and pay for it," Ballance scoffed. "And I don't even know what we'd do with it. Where *would* we put a Grammy? In the bathroom, I think. That's where things like that always go. Everybody I know who has a gold record keeps it in the bathroom."

Colonial,
Sugar Hill, and
Merge Records

★ While Superchunk never had its big mainstream-chart commercial breakthrough as a band, Ballance and Merge cofounder Mac McCaughan did as record-label entrepreneurs. They reached their pinnacle of success during a period of profound existential crisis for the record industry, when pretty much every large label's sales and profits were in free-fall.

That was in marked contrast to the summer of 1989, when Merge started up as the record business was in the midst of a decades-long boom period that seemed as if it would go on forever. The good times went all the way back to the end of World War II, when the U.S. economy shifted from a wartime to consumer footing and pent-up demand erupted. Times were good and people had money to spend on Sinatra in the 1940s, Elvis in the '50s, and the Beatles in the '60s.

Things got a little iffier in the 1970s, when the overall economy soured just as disco dance music went from boom to backlash to bust. But twin pillars of salvation arrived, one after the other, with 1981's debut of the MTV cable network followed by the 1982 introduction of compact discs. The next step beyond analog vinyl records, digital CDs were touted as providing perfect sound forever. They didn't deliver on either promise, but listeners still ponied up to replace their vinyl albums with shiny new, more expensive CDs by the millions. The new format was outselling vinyl by 1988 and cassettes four years later, quickly becoming the industry standard. With MTV videos extending the sales cycle of hit albums from months to years, the record business blew up as never before. Suddenly, "going platinum" — selling a million copies of an album — wasn't enough. Going *multi-platinum* was the new benchmark, especially after Michael Jackson's 1982 album *Thriller* sold 40 million copies worldwide.

As dollars rolled in by the billions, record companies looked like a license to print money. Corporate America took notice and began snapping up labels and their catalogs for astronomical sums as the go-go 1980s turned into the 1990s. The Japanese electronics firm Sony paid \$2 billion to buy the CBS Records group (including Columbia and Epic)



Mid-1990s promotional photo of Superchunk, when they were the biggest band on Merge Records. From left: Jon Wurster, Mac McCaughan, Jim Wilbur, and Laura Ballance. Photo by Claire Ashby.

in 1988. Warner Communications, which had earlier rolled up Atlantic, Elektra, and other labels, merged with Time Inc. in 1989 to form an \$18 billion multimedia mega-corporation — then merged again a decade later with the internet service provider AOL. And another Japanese electronics corporation, Matsushita, bought MCA Entertainment for \$6.5 billion in 1990; it became Universal before being sold to the whiskey company Seagram's, eventually merging with PolyGram to become the biggest music company the world had ever seen.

These corporate behemoths accounted for the vast majority of music bought and sold worldwide. A rung down were a handful of sizable independent labels that did enough business to be tied into the major-label distribution pipeline, like A&M-affiliated I.R.S. Records, R.E.M.'s first label. Next came true independents of varying sizes, many of them catering to specific niches — Rounder for folk, SST for punk, County for bluegrass and Ripete, JCP, and others for beach.

Below that was The Great Unsigned, a veritable ocean of bands going it alone as DIY acts, some by choice. But for the vast majority of artists with little chance of being signed, it was by necessity. So bands put out their own music on “record labels” that weren't much more than names stamped on tapes, seven-inch singles, or CDs, selling them at shows or on consignment at their local independent record store. And that was pretty much how Merge started out, formed by two members of Superchunk to put out records by themselves and their friends while operating on a tiny sliver of the scale of the big labels.

“Our first successes were Superchunk singles that sold enough for us to keep putting things out,” Ballance said in 2018. “We'd have \$600 and turn that into \$1,000, and it just went right back into Merge.”

★ In the decades before the big mega-corporations took over, the record business was a lot more decentralized. Just about every U.S. town of any size had at least one small record label, and they were usually run by colorful wildcatters like Orville B. Campbell, Chapel Hill's first record mogul. A 1942 graduate of the University of North Carolina, Campbell had been editor-in-chief of the *Daily Tar Heel* student newspaper, going on to become publisher of the *Chapel Hill Weekly*. Anyone who knew Campbell and tried to imitate his manner of speaking came out sounding like Jimmy Stewart's George Bailey character in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Campbell also wrote songs, and his first composition of note was a little number called “All the Way Choo Choo,” a 1949 big-band tune about UNC's star halfback Charlie “Choo Choo” Justice — who was enough of a

football star to finish second in the Heisman Trophy voting two years running (he was also best man at Campbell's wedding). Recorded by Johnny Long and His Orchestra, "All the Way Choo Choo" sold well enough to get Campbell into the music business running a label of his own: Colonial Records. A key early Campbell co-write was "Way Up in North Carolina," a fun boogie-woogie number recorded by the Belltones in 1951.

"Way up in North Carolina, up in North Carolina, that's as far north as I want to be . . ."

Colonial would launch a few artists and records upward to bigger labels, and it was variously distributed by ABC-Paramount, London, and other major labels. But it was never a huge operation and mostly released 45-rpm singles, usually recorded on the cheap using studios on the UNC campus.

Colonial mainly traded in quirky novelties like Hall of Fame pitcher Dizzy Dean, whose Country Cousins recorded "Wabash Cannon Ball" for the label in 1954. Rockabilly star Billy "Crash" Craddock recorded for Colonial early in his career, and the label was also instrumental in establishing the careers of songwriter John D. Loudermilk and country singer George Hamilton IV. That happened with the very first song Loudermilk ever wrote, "A Rose and a Baby Ruth," which Campbell cajoled Hamilton into recording in 1956. Hamilton didn't care for the song and Loudermilk reputedly hated Hamilton's version, so nobody was happy—until, of course, it turned into a big hit, hitting number 6 on the pop charts.

"Orville told my dad once, 'Son, you can't write and you can't sing but you sure are persistent, and I want you on my label,'" George Hamilton V told me in 2018. "Not in a bad way, he just told you how he felt. Orville was Orville, a very special person—not 'weird,' but just so cool. He could see things, just one of those people with an idea of how things could fit together even when they were unlikely."

Colonial's most enduring success didn't actually involve music, but a spoken-word comedy monologue by Campbell's fellow UNC graduate Andy Griffith. "What It Was, Was Football" spun a tale of a backwoods country boy seeing his first football game, narrated by Griffith in a deadpan drawl. Masterfully paced, it sounded like something Mark Twain might have written a century earlier. Colonial released "Football" in 1953 as B-side to Griffith's rural interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet*, and it became his breakthrough hit once deejays started flipping the record over. Colonial sold 50,000 copies before selling Griffith's contract to the major label Capitol, which took it into the top-ten of the national charts with sales of another 800,000 copies.

Griffith went on to a solid run as an actor on Broadway as well as the 1957 movie *A Face in the Crowd*. Then in 1960 he began his career-defining role on *The Andy Griffith Show*, playing the widowed Sheriff Andy in Mayberry (a fictional North Carolina town modeled on Griffith's native Mount Airy). The show's cast of small-town characters included Griffith's deputy Barney Fife, the auto mechanic Gomer Pyle, Floyd the Barber—and what may or may not have been a reference to his old Colonial Records boss Mr. Campbell, town drunk Otis Campbell.

Colonial,
Sugar Hill, and
Merge Records

★ Colonial would continue putting out the occasional record up until Campbell's death in 1989, but the label was semi-dormant by the time Barry Poss arrived in Durham in 1968. A native of Canada, Poss came to town as a graduate student, a James B. Duke Fellow in sociology at Duke University. He'd find an unusual outlet for his academic inclinations, one that was not on the Duke campus.

"There were two camps of people in school," Poss told me in 1995. "Those who could not figure out what they were doing here and just marking time until they could go home to California, and those of us who were intrigued at the sense of place there is here, almost like New Orleans."

Exploring his new home state led Poss to the annual fiddlers convention at Union Grove a few hours to the west. Poss picked a little himself in a group called Fuzzy Mountain String Band, although he knew he wasn't enough of a player to make it as a full-time musician. But the music was captivating, and so the hook was set. Avuncular, self-deprecating, and unpretentious, Poss turned out to be a natural record impresario. He would tell people he had the perfect music-business background: no formal training in either music or business, but he'd once taught a class called Sociology of Deviant Behavior.

Poss found his way into the business in 1975, when the Virginia-based bluegrass label County Records was advertising a staff position for a graphic artist. While Poss knew almost nothing about graphic design, he loved the records County was putting out and sent them a letter to that effect. Impressed by his enthusiasm, County hired Poss as production coordinator. Poss turned down a full-time teaching position to take the job, but he did bring some academic aspects of folklore to the record business.

"I did a lot of work with older people in the mountains," Poss said. "What really fascinated me were their kids, people like Ricky Skaggs, who had grown up in this world of traditional music but were also young

“Yep Roc Heresy” Yep Roc Records

After the dust settled from various shakeups, the Triangle’s twenty-first century record-company landscape came to be dominated by Merge and one other label: Yep Roc Records, which actually won a Grammy Award years before Merge did (Jim Lauderdale’s 2007 album *The Bluegrass Diaries* took that genre’s best-album prize in 2008).

Yep Roc’s roots go back to the early 1990s and a Boston-based alternative band called the Vouts. Putting out their own music got Glenn Dicker and Tor Hansen into the record business, and a few years later they both wound up in Chapel Hill running a music-distribution company called Red-Eye. In 1997, they also started Yep Roc Records (named for the 1951 song “Yep Roc Heresy” by Detroit-born jive-talking jazz singer Slim Gaillard) to release compilations of acts the company was distributing.

Original headquarters was Hansen’s home, which they quickly outgrew along with spaces in Graham and Haw River before settling in Hillsborough in 2013. Yep Roc has become an Americana stronghold with Lauderdale, Dave Alvin, X’s John Doe, Mandolin Orange, Alejandro Escovedo, Tift Merritt, Chatham County Line, and Amy Helm among its roster acts. It also puts the occasional record on the charts, with New York pop-rock band Fountains of Wayne’s *Sky Full of Holes* reaching number 37 on the *Billboard* 200 in 2011.

enough to be influenced by contemporary music. That exposed me to the idea that led to Sugar Hill, exploring the tension those two things.”

Seeking to make his own mark, Poss named his label Sugar Hill Records after one of his favorite old fiddle tunes. It was 1978 and the chart-topping *Saturday Night Fever* disco soundtrack was selling by the tens of millions. Sugar Hill started out a lot closer to selling by the tens. Its first office was Poss’s apartment on Green Street in Durham, a few miles north of where Blind Boy Fuller had lived forty years prior. Trying to hide the fact that Sugar Hill was a one-man operation, Poss would change his voice over the phone for callers. And he gave his first release, *One Way Track* by the trio Boone Creek, an artificially higher serial number than 001—SUG-3701.

Still, Sugar Hill was no part-time hobby. The label’s focus from the start was full-length albums, not singles, with packaging and design su-

perior to most of its competitors. Sugar Hill fast became a top-notch boutique label in the Americana world of bluegrass, folk, and country, with a roster that came to include acts both young and old—rising acts like Hot Rize and Boone Creek alongside Doc Watson, Country Gentlemen, and other venerable stars. If it was a niche label, that niche could be quite sizable, especially in the case of Boone Creek's Ricky Skaggs.

A Kentucky native who sang in an angelic tenor while playing a devilishly hot mandolin, Skaggs had impeccable bona fides, including stints in Country Gentlemen and J. D. Crowe's New South. His solo career eclipsed them all when Sugar Hill sold 100,000 copies of Skaggs's 1979 album *Sweet Temptation*, a huge figure for a small label selling through regional distributors. That brought major-label interest from Epic Records, which partnered with Sugar Hill on three gold-selling Ricky Skaggs albums.

The label's cut of Skaggs's sales gave Sugar Hill the means to grow, but Poss kept overhead low enough for the bottom line to work out for artists selling only a few thousand copies. From the 1970s to the '90s, Sugar Hill was a haven for acts near and far, ranging from Deep Gap native Watson and Chapel Hill string band Red Clay Ramblers to the mystic school of Texas singer-songwriters, Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark among them.

Sugar Hill won a dozen Grammy Awards along the way, too, and also caught a few lightning strikes, one of which arrived by mail in 1993. Jim Mills, a banjo player recently retired from Doyle Lawson's Quicksilver, was working as Sugar Hill's shipping manager and informal A & R gatekeeper—sorting through the mountains of unsolicited demo tapes that people chasing record deals sent to the label, most of them comically bad. But one day, Mills burst in on Poss insisting he listen to something immediately. Though Poss was skeptical when he saw the accompanying picture of a cherubic little boy, he played the tape—and promptly had his mind blown.

"We sat in the office, transfixed," Poss told me in 2017. "This was no kid, he was already a fully formed musician. It was Chris Thile."

After signing Thile at age twelve, Sugar Hill had a great run with his band Nickel Creek, earning one gold and one platinum record as well as a Grammy Award. Thile scaled even higher heights as a solo act, including a 2012 MacArthur "Genius Grant" fellowship and another Grammy with his conservatory-bluegrass group Punch Brothers. Eventually he took over from Garrison Keillor as host of the public-radio show *A Prairie Home Companion* (renamed *Live from Here*).

★ Through the 1980s, small record labels came and went in Chapel Hill and Durham, ranging from artist-owned DIY operations to professional companies that seemed more ambitious and entrepreneurial. The Durham-based retail chain Record Bar tried expanding into making as well as selling albums with Dolphin Records. Dave Robert, then-owner of Chapel Hill's venerable Cat's Cradle nightclub, ran a label on the side called Moonlight Records. And local producer Steve Gronback ran TGS Records as well as TGS Studio.

The most notable was another label that, like Sugar Hill, was started by a Duke graduate student. In the 1980s, a Duke MBA candidate named Jay Faires was working for Black Park Records, the label started by Raleigh rock band the Connells. He wrote a record-company business plan as his MBA thesis and then put it into action, raising \$400,000 from investors and going into business as Mammoth Records in Carrboro in 1988.

While the "Mammoth" name was initially a tongue-in-cheek joke, Faires had large ambitions beyond the music business, including Hollywood. So he always aimed high in search of a national profile. Mammoth was in the local scene but not of it, with more national than local acts on the roster. The first band Mammoth signed was the Sidewinders, a desert-rock band from Arizona, more than 2,000 miles away. That paid off almost immediately when the major label RCA Records bought the band's contract and their first album made the lower reaches of the *Billboard* 200.

"A lot of investors have what they call 'stupid money' to throw away every year," Faires told me in 1991. "If they have \$100,000 to invest, they'll put maybe 20 percent into something high-risk. I guess I got some people's stupid money."

Just as Ricky Skaggs served as Sugar Hill's early franchise act, Mammoth had a hot property at the dawn of the 1990s with Blake Babies, an alternative-rock trio from Boston led by the vulnerably charismatic Juliana Hatfield. In the early days of the music industry's search-for-the-next-Nirvana fervor, Faires leveraged Hatfield's potential into a joint venture deal with Atlantic Records, which bought a stake in Mammoth and made Faires an Atlantic vice president. It was 1992 and Mammoth was now playing in the majors.

Hatfield never quite broke all the way through, but other Mammoth acts picked up the slack. Frente!, a folksy pop band from Australia, had a surprising hit single in 1994 with a winsome acoustic cover of "Bizarre Love Triangle," New Order's 1986 dance-club standard. Mammoth's first million-selling platinum album came in 1996 with the Virginia rock band

"Tobacco Road" John D. Loudermilk

"A Rose and a Baby Ruth" would not be the last hit that Durham native John D. Loudermilk wrote for George Hamilton IV—or even the biggest. Hamilton went all the way to number 1 on the country charts with another Loudermilk composition, 1963's "Abilene," the commercial summit of his career.

A cousin of Ira and Charlie Loudermilk (better known as the country brother duo Louvin Brothers), John moved to Nashville to try his hand at recording. He released a few modestly successful records of his own, cracking the U.S. top-fifty with 1961's "Language of Love." But Loudermilk's legacy would be the songs he wrote for other acts, and his songs were covered by a staggering range of artists: Johnny Cash, Eddie Cochran, Everly Brothers, Nancy Sinatra, James Brown, and even '90s shock-rocker Marilyn Manson.

"Tobacco Road" was Loudermilk's signature, a garage-rock classic recorded more than 200 times by everybody from jazz singer Lou Rawls to Van Halen front man David Lee Roth. The 1966 version by New York's Blues Magoos stands above the rest, with a hopped-up proto-punk arrangement that got it onto the 1972 garage-rock compilation *Nuggets* (which was to the 1970s punk generation as *Anthology of American Folk Music* was to the 1950s folk revival).

Loudermilk's other most notable composition was "Indian Reservation (The Lament of the Cherokee Nation)," a number 1 hit for Paul Revere & the Raiders in 1971. Loudermilk was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1976. He was eighty-two years old when he died in 2016.

Seven Mary Three's *American Standard*, followed by Squirrel Nut Zippers' *Hot* a year later.

And yet Mammoth ultimately became a cautionary tale about how life in the majors can be rough. Despite the hits, the Mammoth-Atlantic partnership didn't live up to either party's financial expectations and tensions were running high behind the scenes. So Mammoth split from Atlantic in 1997, which turned out to be a good time to be entertaining offers. The Zippers were blowing up and on their way to platinum, thanks to the "Hell" single, making Mammoth a hot property. After the bids were in, the Walt Disney Company paid a reported \$25 million for

Mammoth in the summer of 1997 under the apparent assumption that the hits would keep on coming. That would prove not to be the case, with catastrophic consequences.

But with Disney money in the bank and a new Zippers album set to come out, Mammoth went on a spending spree, signing more acts and hiring more staff. Then that Zippers album, 1998's *Perennial Favorites*, sold less than half of its platinum predecessor, kicking off a string of sales disappointments. Disney didn't wait long before pulling the plug, shutting down Mammoth's Carrboro offices in 2000, laying off most of the staff and moving the rest of the operation up to New York City. Mammoth dwindled down over the years and was gone completely by 2006.

Sugar Hill had a similar fate, also at the hands of out-of-town corporate owners. Poss had sold the label to Welk Music Group in 1998 in a deal that kept him in charge, and that worked well for close to a decade. Dolly Parton, the iconic country legend, alighted at Sugar Hill to release three top-selling bluegrass albums between 1999 and 2002, which was also during Nickel Creek's peak.

Then Parton finished her bluegrass phase and went elsewhere to go back to country-pop. Nickel Creek went on hiatus. Poss went into semi-retirement as "chairman emeritus." And things slowed way, way down. In 2007, Welk closed Sugar Hill's Durham office, let the local staff go and began running the label out of Nashville. Eight years later, Welk sold the Sugar Hill catalog to Concord Music Group, which merged what was left of the label with Rounder Records.

★ Even before those warning signs, McCaughan and Ballance already knew they should not sell out with either their band or their label. After some early lineup changes, Superchunk's longtime quartet of McCaughan, Ballance, guitarist Jim Wilbur, and drummer Jon Wurster was in place by 1991. And in 1993, when Superchunk finished out their three-album deal with Matador Records and became free agents at the apex of the alternative-is-the-new-mainstream era, they could have named their price at pretty much any label on earth.

Instead, they took a leap of faith in themselves, declining all offers and going back to Merge. Short-term, it seemed like a self-limiting choice. Superchunk's 1994 Merge album *Foolish* sold 30,000 copies in its initial run, a solid figure for a small independent but a fraction of what it might have reached on a bigger label. McCaughan and Ballance, however, were playing the long game. *Foolish* eventually reached 65,000 copies sold with the band making dollars rather than pennies per unit sold. And owning

their own music lock, stock, and barrel allowed Superchunk to crank out five full-length albums in seven years—far more than any major would have been willing to release.

“I’m certainly not unhappy with the choices we’ve made,” McCaughan told me in 2004, on the occasion of Merge’s fifteen-year anniversary. “Going to a major just complicates your life terribly. I don’t know why anyone would decide to make their life more stressful. If you go down that path, you have to start doing things like hiring a manager. A lot of bands on majors just spend so much time worrying. Having a big machine on your side, you’d think it would make it so you could just worry about the music. But it rarely seems to happen that way.”

Merge’s name, which came from interstate-highway entrance-ramp signs, always fit the operation—implying caution, and the balancing act between art and commerce. Not that they were actually thinking about any of that at the time.

“We just thought it was a cool name,” Ballance said in 2018.

In the early days, the summer of 1989 brought MRG001, a cassette tape by McCaughan’s pre-Superchunk band Bricks. Merge began putting out seven-inch singles that fall, convening record-assembly parties for each one. Drawn by the promise of free beer, friends would come over to insert discs into sleeves. Superchunk’s deal with Matador also allowed them to self-release singles on the side, which they went right on doing alongside Merge releases by Angels of Epistemology, Erectus Monotone, Polvo, Finger, and other local stars, plus the occasional out-of-town act they met on the road.

None of these singles were big sellers, but overhead was low and each did just enough business to make the next release possible. Then once Superchunk came back to Merge full-time in 1994, the medium became full-length albums. Superchunk sold enough albums to turn Merge into a sustainable business, especially after contracting with the Chicago independent distributor Touch and Go to get the label’s records into more stores. More sales meant more work than they could handle themselves, which meant hiring full-time employees. Merge became too big to operate out of anyone’s house, so they moved into a Carrboro office right across the street from Mammoth. Lunchtime, the staffs would play pickup basketball games together.

While Merge’s trajectory was steadily upward, there was the occasional awkward phase. One came early on, when McCaughan and Ballance split as a couple in 1993. There were whispers about Superchunk’s status as an indie-rock equivalent of Fleetwood Mac, and *Foolish* sounded



Laura Ballance onstage with Superchunk at the Hopscotch Music Festival in Raleigh, North Carolina, September 2011. Photo by Bryan Regan.

suspiciously like a breakup album (something the principals strenuously denied before eventually admitting). But Superchunk and Merge both survived because, despite their romantic incompatibility, McCaughan and Ballance were perfectly matched as business partners—her caution serving as counterweight to his ambitions. Not for nothing did they title Merge’s 2009 label history *Our Noise: The Story of Merge Records, the Indie Label That Got Big and Stayed Small*.

“The good thing about Merge is we don’t take the stupid chances that a lot of other labels our size have taken,” Merge employee Stacy Philpott told me in 2004. “We’ve always done things so that even our relative failures don’t hurt too bad. The Laura side of the equation is pretty sensible, and why we’ve been around so long. Mac is all excitement and vision, ‘Let’s do this!’ Laura is more practical and cautious. She’s the one who makes sure the details are tended to.”

★ As the 1990s wore on, a funny thing happened: Merge outgrew Superchunk, to the point that the label’s founding flagship act came to be just another band on the roster. Meanwhile, business was booming. By 2001, Merge was prosperous enough to buy a \$250,000 office building in downtown Durham as its new headquarters, and Ballance was already more inclined to stay there tending to business instead of touring. After 2001’s *Here’s to Shutting Up* album, Superchunk went on an undeclared hiatus that would last for nearly a decade.

“For me, Merge growing very conveniently pushed Superchunk to the side as I was becoming very road-weary,” Ballance told me in 2009. “By the late nineties, it was clear that Merge would continue beyond Superchunk. We had bands selling more than us, and it was demanding more and more time.”

Increasingly, too, Merge’s focus went well beyond the local scene, with out-of-town acts making up more and more of the roster. Merge’s first band to surpass Superchunk had been Neutral Milk Hotel, an eccentric psychedelic-folk ensemble led by Louisiana native Jeff Mangum. Their 1998 album *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea* became Merge’s first to crack the 100,000 mark in sales.

But Merge’s ethos remained as no-nonsense and working-class populist as ever, and its owners’ status as peers to their artists served them well. Merge became a safe haven for artists McCaughan and Ballance had met, played with, or admired over the years, including British punk legends Buzzcocks and a long string of major-label castoffs—Spoon, Teenage Fanclub, and Bob Mould among them. Mark Eitzel wound up on

Merge after a half-dozen albums for the major label Warner Bros., after McCaughan was “there in the front row” the very first time he played in Chapel Hill years earlier.

“They’re really responsive and smart,” Eitzel told me in 2004, speaking of Merge. “When you’re on a major, you have to deal with a lot of people who don’t give a shit if you live or die, and a lot of indie labels are just kinda snotty, I’ve found. Merge isn’t.”

That artist-friendly reputation attracted the Montreal-based rock band Arcade Fire, which became Merge’s first act to make the *Billboard* 200 chart in early 2005. Six months later, Spoon (a Texas band that came to Merge after a disastrous stint on the major label Elektra) became the label’s first to make the top half of that chart, number 44 with the album *Gimme Fiction*. Arcade Fire was responsible for the next milestone, *Billboard*’s top-ten. *Neon Bible* debuted at number 2 in March 2007 with 92,000 copies sold, right behind a posthumous album by the late rapper Notorious B.I.G. Merge publicist Christina Rentz won the office pool, with a guess of 90,000 copies.

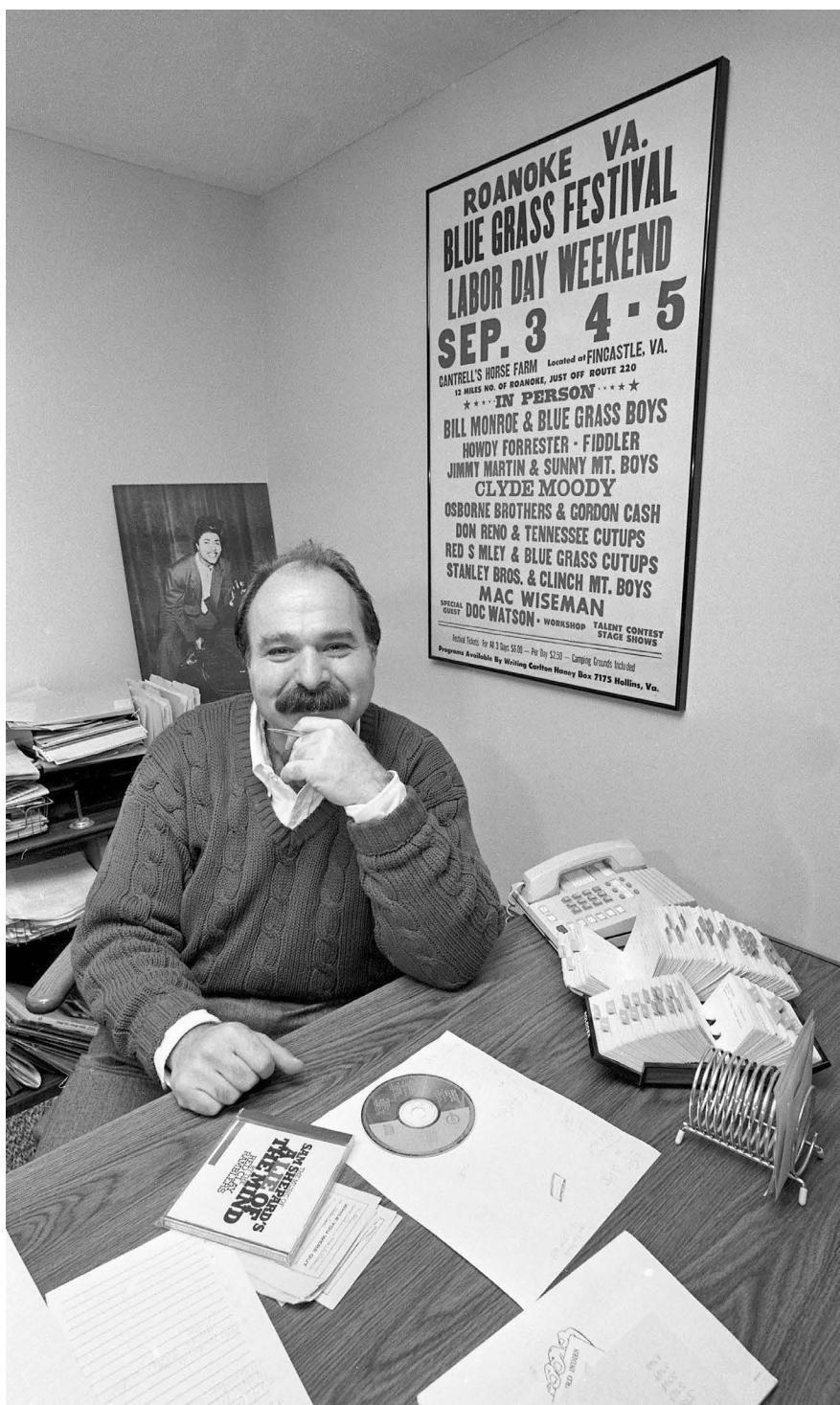
Three years later, Arcade Fire went all the way to the top as *The Suburbs* sold 156,000 copies its first week to debut at number 1 in August 2010. That was a long, long way from stuffing a few hundred singles into sleeves twenty years earlier. But Ballance greeted the news with a shrug.

“For me, it’s sort of akin to sports—this need to be the winner, number one,” she told me. “Sure, I think it’s great. But I also feel a certain distance from it. There was betting within the office, and I didn’t participate at all. It won’t and it can’t change anything. Nothing is different, and it’s all the same. It bums people out that I’m such a stick in the mud. Oh well.”

Chart-topping bona fides made it seem likely that Arcade Fire would also win Merge’s first-ever Grammy Award in 2011, and they did. But it played out in the most unexpected way imaginable. Of Arcade Fire’s three nominations that year, their best shot looked to be either best alternative album or rock performance—both of which, however, went to the Ohio guitar-drums duo the Black Keys.

That left the one category where they seemed to have very little chance, album of the year, up against Lady Gaga, Eminem, and other multi-platinum heavy-hitters. Perhaps that accounted for presenter Barbra Streisand’s apparent confusion when she opened the envelope to announce the winner.

“And the Grammy goes to,” she said, with an awkward and uncertain pause, “. . . *The S-s-suburbs* . . . Arcade Fire!”



Barry Poss, shown at his desk in 1986, ran Sugar Hill Records in Durham for nearly three decades. News & Observer photo, courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives.

"It kind of felt like the world tilting a little bit," Rentz, who was at the ceremony, told me the next day. "When Barbra Streisand stuttered out their name, we just screamed at the top of our lungs. We were up on the second level, and everybody around us was leaving. They had no idea who we were or the band was. We were completely stunned."

At the party afterward, Rentz said, Arcade Fire's Richard Parry was walking around yelling, "We robbed a bank!"

★ Merge sold a lot of Arcade Fire records in the wake of that Grammy win, enough to get "official" certified gold-record plaques if they wanted them (they didn't). And over time, Merge's equilibrium eventually settled back to a more modest sense of normal. Arcade Fire and Spoon, its two biggest acts, finished out their Merge contracts and went to bigger labels elsewhere. Memories lingered, however.

"Just want to give a shout-out to everybody at Merge," Arcade Fire front man Win Butler said onstage at Raleigh's Red Hat Amphitheater during a July 2018 show. "We're proud to be part of the family, and we wouldn't have gotten anywhere without them. I'm pretty sure this next one was on the very first CD-R we sent them." The song "Old Flame" followed, and it was quite good.

Meanwhile, Merge resumed trying to groom its next generation of hit-makers while dealing with the same challenges as the rest of the music industry. The transition from physical discs to digital downloads to online streaming had made music a precarious business.

"One thing about a label like ours, we're not huge but we put out a lot of records every year," McCaughan told me in 2018. "And whether we're planning to sell a couple thousand or 20,000 or a lot more, they require the same amount of work. We're not working less to sell fewer records."

Merge came full circle when Superchunk resumed recording in 2010 and belatedly hit the top half of the *Billboard* 200 themselves. Within a few years, Superchunk was back to being, once again, just about the biggest band on Merge. McCaughan and Ballance laughed it off as a symptom of the music industry's withered state.

"Well, we're not getting smaller in spite of the rest of the music business shrinking," Ballance told me in 2011. "But for a Superchunk record to make it to number 85 on *Billboard* is mostly a reflection of the pathetic nature of the music industry right now. Back in the industry's heyday, it wouldn't even have been a blip on the charts."

With all four members well into middle age, Superchunk's second act was more of a part-time project, fit in around everyone's schedules with

other responsibilities, including families. Ballance developed an acute case of the hearing disorder hyperacusis and bowed out of touring in 2013 (although she continued to play on the records). And in 2018, Superchunk put out a sarcastically titled punk-rock tone poem to the age of President Donald Trump: *What a Time to Be Alive*, the band's most overtly political album ever.

An April night in 2018 found Superchunk onstage in full cry at a packed Cat's Cradle, playing for an audience of fans who had mostly been there since the beginning. And while "Cloud of Hate," "Erasure," and other agitprop songs from the new album drew enthusiastic cheers, it was the songs from olden days that still resonated most of all.

"Driveway to driiiivewaaaaay," the crowd howled along with McCaughan on one of those bitter breakup songs from *Foolish*. Drummer Jon Wurster motored along as fast as ever, guitarist Jim Wilbur cracked bad between-song jokes, and McCaughan sang in his ageless forever-young yelp. Between songs, he urged the audience to support that vanishing music-scene bastion, the local independent record store. Same as it ever was.

"There's honestly no place I'd rather be on a Friday night than playing at the Cat's Cradle in Carrboro, North Carolina," McCaughan said during the encore. "Here's a recommendation, though it may seem self-serving: see as many bands as you can, in as many clubs as you can."

Then they fired up "Slack Motherfucker," MRGoo7, the still-definitive Superchunk seven-inch from twenty-eight years earlier. The biggest roar of the night went up from the crowd, an echo of those long-ago "Next Seattle" days. Somehow, all these years later, band and label and audience were all still standing.

I'm working, but I'm not working for you
Slack motherfucker!

Alternating between pogoing and flailing his guitar with Pete Townshend-style windmills, McCaughan went into kinetic overdrive. And it wasn't just the kids who were all right.

Colonial,
Sugar Hill, and
Merge Records

12

Y'alternative

The Rise of Americana

When I moved to Raleigh in 1991, it was a midsized city that still felt like a small town. Its confluence of state government, universities, high-tech research and mild climate seemed a lot like my college-era hometown of Austin, Texas, but a couple of decades behind Austin as far as growth. Raleigh was still enough of a farm town for the local TV stations to run commercials for seed companies like Wyatt-Quarles (locally owned by the family of record collector Marshall Wyatt) and DeKalb. Depending on your perspective, the city's central core was either funky and charming, or run-down and shabby. Jacksonville native Ryan Adams, who was still a teenager when he moved to Raleigh around the same time I did, took the latter viewpoint on one of his earliest songs for a new band he formed called Whiskeytown, 1994's "Bastards I Used to Know":

This old city where I live is poor and dirty
Work I do, it barely pays the bills

Nevertheless, the early 1990s were also when Raleigh began to stir into the bigger city it quickly became. North Carolina's mill and tobacco towns were dying as those industries moved overseas, but Research Triangle Park tech firms were hiring fast as part of a nationwide dot-com boom. Local growth that had been steady for decades exploded, with Raleigh's population shooting up by 70 percent from 1990 to 2004—accompanied by the inevitable dislocation and gentrification. Old-timers lamented the passing of Raleigh's small-town feel as developers tore down one cherished local landmark after another to build new skyscrapers and condos.

The Great Recession of 2008 slowed things down in Raleigh for a few years. But wrecking balls were back to swinging again not long after that, remaking the central city. And 2013 brought the end of one of Raleigh's most beloved watering holes: Sadlack's Heroes, home bar for generations of drifters, musicians, and myriad other characters. It stood for forty

years on Hillsborough Street in the shadow of North Carolina State University's Memorial Belltower. The aforementioned Whiskeytown first formed there as a group of employees and N.C. State graduate students, as did 6 String Drag, How Town, Tonebenders, and other twang-inclined bands that helped make Raleigh an alternative-country Shangri-la for a few heady years in the mid-to-late 1990s.

For all that, however, Sadlack's was always a month-by-month proposition that produced more in the way of good vibes than money. Inevitably, developers bought the block that Sadlack's occupied, with plans to build a fancy hotel there. The club's last waltz was New Year's Eve, December 31, 2013, with the Backsliders providing last rites. They were a fitting choice—grizzled veterans who had ruled Raleigh during the city's alternative-country heyday, and still one of the most blazing bar bands in America.

At 10:15 that night, early in their closing set, the Backsliders fired up a song called "Throwing Rocks at the Moon." History records the precise time because Molly Flynn—pediatric social worker at a local hospital, club-going regular, and very possibly the world's most avid Backsliders fan—made the same social-media post on Facebook that she always did whenever she heard the Backsliders play that one: "Best song ever."

For the four minutes or so that it lasted, it was, too. Title track to a 1997 album that should have launched the Backsliders at least beyond the need for day-jobs, "Throwing Rocks at the Moon" is equal parts rage, regret, killer hook, and rocked-up fury. As sung by Chip Robinson, the Backsliders' charming never-do-well front man, the lyrics make a defiant promise: you're gonna miss me, baby.

In 1997, "Throwing Rocks at the Moon" felt bracing and full of promise, marker of an era that seemed wild with possibility. Sixteen years later, as the clock ticked down toward the end of Raleigh's alternative-country home base, it felt like the sadly poignant end to a disappearing place and time.

Maybe in the middle of the night, she'll think about me
Something won't hit her quite right, and it won't let her be
Darkness comes swimmin' all around her, sleep never follows too soon
I'll be standing out in my front yard, throwin' rocks at the moon

Standing on the back patio of Sadlack's among its denizens—the freaks, geeks, straights, hippies, professors, and hangers-on—while contemplating the ghosts of all the bands that had come and gone over the years conjured up an overwhelming sense of wistfulness.

So when I got home that night, I went in the back yard and threw a rock at the moon.

★ In the vernacular of American popular music, “alternative country” has gone by many names over the years—progressive country, cosmic cowboy, cowpunk, insurgent country, twangcore, and, lately, the catch-all default Americana. Whatever the label, it’s a mongrel style that in large part comes from rock kids playing their version of country music. Though it’s rarely at the top of the pops, it never completely goes away, either. Because it doesn’t burn out, there’s always another generation coming of age and looking for a more authentic, emotionally direct means of musical expression.

As he often did, Bob Dylan led the way. After going electric and turning folk into folk-rock in the mid-1960s, Dylan went to Nashville to record a series of landmark albums in Music City: *Blonde on Blonde*, *John Wesley Harding*, and *Nashville Skyline*. In his wake, a California branch emerged with the Byrds, Flying Burrito Brothers, and (before they moved to Texas) Asleep at the Wheel introducing long hair and hippie attitudes to old-school country music. Eventually, the Eagles, Jackson Browne, and Fleetwood Mac would slick it up enough to top the charts.

A continent away, a scruffier North Carolina variant was taking root with the Red Clay Ramblers, who formed in Chapel Hill in 1972 with a name paying homage to the late great Charlie Poole’s backup band and rambling ways. Like their namesake, the Ramblers landed somewhere between old-time and bluegrass—but with some updated idiosyncrasies that Poole might have pursued himself, had he lived long enough. Charter member Fiddlin’ Bill Hicks used to describe the Ramblers as “a band that might have existed in 1930, but didn’t,” if a band from that era also had piano, drums, and the occasional bouzouki alongside the fiddles and banjos. David Akins, a Winston-Salem native who came to Chapel Hill to attend the University of North Carolina during the “Combo Corner” era, saw some of the earliest Ramblers shows.

“I’d grown up with bluegrass and country and did not care for it,” Akins told me in 2018. “But the Ramblers had a different twist on it. They were smart, cool, funny, playing these original songs—but they could’ve been from the Civil War.”

Playing everything from vaudeville to confessional singer-songwriter ballads, the Ramblers always carried themselves with a tongue-in-cheek theatrical streak. From Chapel Hill’s coffeehouses, the Ramblers would tour the world and wind up on Broadway and even movie screens, be-



Promotional photo of the Backsliders around the time of their 1997 debut studio album. From left: Danny Kurtz, Brad Rice, Chip Robinson, Steve Howell, and Jeff Dennis. Photo by Bill Bernstein.

coming a regular go-to collaborative choice for playwright Sam Shepard, Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion*, and even the USO (which sent them on a series of popular tours through the Middle East in the 1980s). The Ramblers' lineup has turned over multiple times, including the loss of banjo-playing giant Tommy Thompson, who was forced into retirement by early-onset Alzheimer's before his eventual death in 2003 at age sixty-five. But at the time of this writing, a version of the Ramblers is still out playing and making worlds, eras, and sensibilities collide.

The Ramblers were well-established by the early 1980s when another unlikely Chapel Hill institution started up, Southern Culture on the Skids. Like the B-52's out of Athens, the Skids followed a junk-culture visual aesthetic of beehive hairdos and thrift-store chic. But their take on it was less spaced-out than blue-collar, drawing from drive-in slasher flicks, dirt-track racing, fried chicken, and other trailer-park staples. Main man Rick Miller called the Skids "high-cholesterol toe-sucking geek rock," and they've always damn near conjured up smells as well as sounds.

For all their low-concept humor, however, the Skids were never a joke—Miller's monster surf-rock guitar saw to that. And shortly before Squirrel Nut Zippers and Ben Folds Five scaled the charts, the Skids were somehow Chapel Hill's most nationally successful act. For a year or two in the mid-1990s, it was impossible to turn on a television without hearing "Voodoo Cadillac" or some other Skids song in a commercial, soundtrack, or newscast bumper music. Despite never making the charts, their 1995 album *Dirt Track Date* sold a quarter-million copies and set the Skids up as local elders. Having superseded and outlasted multiple generations of peers, the Skids are likewise still going strong at the time of this writing.

★ Red Clay Ramblers and Southern Culture on the Skids always seemed like distinct worlds unto themselves, separate from and impervious to larger trends that came and went. Nevertheless, they both set a precedent for generations of Triangle musicians that began to turn toward country music.

Possibly due to the Ramblers' influence, Arrogance evolved over time from harder rock to something closer to folk-rock (Arrogance bassist Don Dixon would later become the Ramblers' regular producer, too). Fabulous Knobs, a Rolling Stones-style bar band, turned into a trio called the Woods while originating roots-rock songs that later became substantial hits for Georgia Satellites and Dan Baird, "Battleship Chains" and "I Love You Period." Dexter Romweber's Flat Duo Jets played a strange interstel-

lar hybrid version of rockabilly, perfecting the guitar-drums duo format that White Stripes later took to the top of the charts. And Hege V—led by George Hamilton V, singing son of Colonial Records hit-maker George Hamilton IV—made one knockout brilliant album, 1987’s Mitch Easter-produced *House of Tears*.

Similar rumblings were afoot in alternative-scene towns all over the country, with Beat Farmers, Rank & File, Long Ryders, X, Blasters, Green on Red, Jason & the Scorchers, and more working variations on country music by way of rock ’n’ roll or even punk. Of course, with Milli Vanilli and hair-metal bands like Mötley Crüe dominating the charts and MTV, this was all well under the mainstream radar and largely confined to nightclubs and college radio. Most of these bands had run their course by the time Nirvana ushered in alternative as the new mainstream in the early 1990s, which is when Uncle Tupelo started the cycle all over again.

Iconic mostly in retrospect, Uncle Tupelo came from the St. Louis suburb of Belleville, Illinois, and hit upon a near-perfect country-punk synthesis that came out as stoic, monochromatic fatalism—just in time to miss their moment by breaking up in 1994. They gave a horribly strained farewell tour that spring, and it boiled over in Carrboro, where coleaders Jay Farrar and Jeff Tweedy had a now-legendary postshow fight in the parking lot of Cat’s Cradle nightclub. Despite the bad vibes, Uncle Tupelo crystalized a moment that reached critical mass all over America with yet another wave of like-minded roots-rock bands—Old 97s, Bottle Rockets, Derailers, eighties holdovers the Jayhawks, and more.

Another generation of rockers around Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill decided it was time to get back to the country right around then, too. Already a rock band, the Backsliders took a hard turn toward honkytonk by adding pedal-steel guitar. After his punk band Patty Duke Syndrome dissolved in a wave of acrimony, Ryan Adams emerged leading Whiskeytown with a debut single declaring, “So I started this damn country band / ‘Cause punk rock was too hard to sing.” Kenny Roby, who moved to Raleigh from his native South Carolina around the same time as Adams, put in a few years with the punk band Lubricators before starting up a horn-driven country-soul band called 6 String Drag. And John Howie Jr., journeyman drummer in a series of underground rock bands (one of which was opening act for a prefame 1990 Nirvana show in Chapel Hill), stepped up to the microphone himself as baritone-voiced front man of the hardcore honkytonk band Two Dollar Pistols—playing the sort of music he’d seen on *Hee Haw* and heard around the house while growing up.

“Me playing rock came from not wanting to share my parents’ tastes,” Howie told me in 2018. “But then I was in rock bands with some people who were into Johnny Cash. Peers from punk backgrounds who were into that kind of music opened a door. It took country away from being ‘my dad’s music.’”

★ Something was obviously in the air on January 28, 1995, when an epic triple-bill of the Backsliders, 6 String Drag, and Whiskeytown played Raleigh’s Brewery nightclub and turned it into a Bakersfield-style honky-tonk for the evening. At the end of the night, Kenny Roby joined the Backsliders onstage during their encore to sing the old Buck Owens standard “Close Up the Honky Tonks” that seemed like everything this budding alternative-country could be—reverential and rocked-up, as young in spirit as it was old in outlook, and really cool to boot. Proto-hat act Alan Jackson was number 1 on the country charts that week with “Gone Country,” a silly prefab song ridiculing carpetbagging poseurs. But it seemed like the joke was on him. Compared to Jackson and the other arena-country hat acts the Nashville assembly line was churning out through the 1990s, alternative-country felt like a breath of smoke-filled honky-tonk air.

On a good night, and there were a lot of good nights back then, you could imagine actually hearing some of the local heroes on commercial radio beyond the Triangle. Precocious and charismatic, Whiskeytown’s Adams wrote so many songs so fast, he was almost impossible to keep up with. 6 String Drag turned pretty much every show into church, with Roby and coleader Rob Keller’s vocal harmonies bringing the brothers Louvin or Stanley to mind. And the Backsliders could throw down with any live band on earth, bar none.

The record industry was still riding high, still in search of that “next Nirvana,” and it seemed possible that a twangy band from a town like Raleigh might well be the next big thing. North Carolina’s crop of upstart bands was as good as any in the country, which made for a very exciting couple of years. By the fall of 1995, there was even a magazine dedicated specifically to this style of music, covering the new bands, as well as Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, and other still-vibrant elders. Based in Seattle, *No Depression* was named after Uncle Tupelo’s 1990 debut album, which included a cover of the 1936 Carter Family song “No Depression in Heaven.” The name was also a nod to an early internet music-message board, America Online’s old No Depression Folder. Defining its universe

as “Alternative Country (Whatever That Is),” *No Depression* aimed to be comprehensive—and it anointed North Carolina as a hot spot early on.

Writing in the spring of 1996, *No Depression* coeditor Peter Blackstock called North Carolina this emerging style’s “home base . . . a geographic region that seems unusually rich in alternative country acts, in terms of both quantity and quality, (with) the most promising young bands from which this fountainhead of musical excitement is presently springing forth.” Blackstock concluded that it was almost enough to make him wish he lived in North Carolina because, “There’s something special going on down there.”

Four years later, in the fall of 2000, Blackstock did indeed move from Seattle to Durham. He would live in North Carolina off and on for more than a decade.

★ Maybe it was because Raleigh’s country-rock bands were scruffier than Chapel Hill’s indie-rock kids, more straight-ahead with fewer quirky edges or oddball storylines. Whatever the reasons, the Triangle’s mid-1990s alternative-country boom did not generate a national media blitz on the scale of what had descended on Chapel Hill a few years earlier. But the music industry still beat a path to town, and most of the scene’s major players wound up with major-label deals. A few went on to make spectacular albums with prominent, big-name producers—6 String Drag with agit-country-rocker Steve Earle doing the honors, and the Backsliders with Dwight Yoakam guitarist Pete Anderson—but it went for naught. Like most of Chapel Hill’s young rock bands of the early 1990s, none of the alternative-country bands broke through commercially, even as a building boom took hold across the Triangle, threatening to price every musician and artist out of Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill.

Although nobody was getting rich, that didn’t seem to stop anyone. Tift Merritt came along a few years later in the 1990s, adding more of a literary flair. American Aquarium, named after a phrase in a Wilco song on their 2002 album *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, emerged several years later as inheritors of the Raleigh blue-collar alternative-country tradition. And some of the mid-nineties twangcore bands turned out to have remarkable staying power. Two decades later, versions of the Backsliders and 6 String Drag remained in existence, while John Howie has stayed busy in multiple bands. One of them was a return to the drummer’s chair for a stint in one of North Carolina’s hottest new honky-tonk bands, Sarah Shook and the Disarmers.

Even in a genre filled with as many contradictions as alternative-country, Shook still stood out—a bisexual, vegan, single mother honky-tonk singer as tough as any punk. Before coming to North Carolina, Shook grew up in New York State as daughter in a Fundamentalist Christian household where any music other than classical or Christian was forbidden. Shook had to discover secular music on the sly as a teenager, and she started getting into punk bands after her family moved to the town of Garner, south of Raleigh. A brief marriage and divorce left Shook a young single mother, and she got by bartending at the subterranean Chapel Hill nightspot the Cave in between gigs of her own. Punk eventually gave way to country music, but she found commonality in couplets like, “God never makes mistakes / He just makes fuck-ups.” Holding forth at the microphone, Shook sang with a switchblade sneer of a voice, as androgynous as punk elder Patti Smith, projecting both menace and a fatalistic willingness to go wherever bad decisions might lead. Musically, that fearlessness ought to serve her well.

Ryan Adams was North Carolina’s one 1990s-vintage alternative-country act who hit it semi-big, although his breakthrough did not come with Whiskeytown or while he lived in Raleigh. Whiskeytown proved to be too volatile for the long haul and its lineup quickly turned into a revolving door, primarily due to Adams’s antics. Despite making a couple of brilliant albums with Whiskeytown, Adams earned as much attention for brash misbehavior as the songs he rapidly dashed off on a steady stream of bar napkins. After burning most of his local bridges, Adams was living in New York City by the time Whiskeytown officially dissolved in 2000. But that just turned out to be the opening act of his career. Adams went on to a solid run as a solo act with multiple top-ten albums and Grammy nominations, playing to sold-out halls all over the world.

Curiously, however, Adams has chosen to do all of that from afar, fully cutting ties with his native state. Several years into his solo career, Adams stopped performing in North Carolina at all, even as his tours took him to every adjoining state. For reasons he has declined to explain, Adams has not played anywhere in North Carolina since a strangely tense 2005 show in his former hometown of Raleigh. It was not unlike watching someone having a nervous breakdown, which may not have been far off from the truth given that he very publicly sobered up a year later.

“We hope to see you again very soon,” Adams said onstage at the end of that night. But he would not return, maintaining a puzzling self-imposed exile. Some years later, a concert promoter told me about trying to book Adams for a show in his old stomping grounds. But Adams’s

management rebuffed the invitation, while acknowledging that he had purposely stayed away. The reason?

“Ryan has moved on from that chapter in his life, but North Carolina has not.”

Well, then, fair enough—especially since Adams’s career came to a screeching halt in 2019 after accusations of inappropriate sexual behavior with multiple women caused most of the industry to cut ties with him.

The Rise of
Americana

★ A continent away, Mike “M.C.” Taylor was trying to figure out his own path around the same time that Ryan Adams was onstage in Raleigh for the last time. A skateboard kid from Irvine, California, Taylor had grown up on hip-hop and hardcore punk before going off to UC Santa Barbara. After college, he landed in a series of bands including an alternative-country group called the Court & Spark that had some success in the late 1990s. But the initial promise fizzled out and things weren’t going well by 2005. With the Court & Spark’s end in sight, Taylor was pondering his next move, still unsure what form it might take. But he knew what to call it: Hiss Golden Messenger.

“That came from a very foggy, unformed part of my brain,” Taylor told me in 2018. “I knew I’d be starting something else and I didn’t want to go through the fake democracy most bands exist in. So it would be just one person, me, calling all the shots. And that combination of words pushed some buttons for me. There’s something almost biblical about the ‘Golden Messenger’ part, and ‘Hiss’ can mean a bunch of different things—a snake, or an old tape recorder. It was just a combination of words that seemed like they worked together and wanted to be together. It felt like a name I’d be okay living with for the foreseeable future.”

Taylor had never made anything like a living at music, although it was without question his life’s work. Even so, Hiss Golden Messenger had more of a sense of purpose than he’d ever displayed before, despite its nebulous lineup. Hiss Golden Messenger was pretty much whatever and whoever Taylor needed it to be at any given time. Sometimes it was a ten-piece band onstage, horn section blazing, and sometimes it was just a duo of Taylor and one of his regular bandmates. And sometimes, it was just Taylor himself, alone. One of the first times I ever saw him play was solo at the South by Southwest music festival in Texas in March 2013, and he was spitting mad about North Carolina’s then-new Republican governor and legislative super-majority, and some of the regressive bills they were passing.

Enticed by North Carolina’s musical traditions, Taylor came to Chapel

“God Almighty, It’s a Good Feeling: Lowriding as Experience” Excerpt of Mike Taylor’s 2009 University of North Carolina Thesis

Following the dissolution of Lowriding Times, Ruben decided to establish his own club in his hometown of Burlington. “I heard in that old movie, ‘If you build it, they will come,’” he remembers. “I had a ‘67 convertible Impala, and I started hanging around at the car washes, restaurants, and taco stands, and people were coming and asking questions.” Over the next several months, Ruben attracted a core group of lowriders, and established the informal headquarters of the club in his own town. Through a democratic balloting process, the name “Lowalty” was chosen for its nod towards the concept of loyalty, a core value within the group. The club, under Ruben’s leadership, places a premium on respect, loyalty, family community, and hard work, and demands a dedication to the art of lowriding from its members.

Hill in 2007 as a graduate student in the University of North Carolina’s folklore department. He arrived with a thesis project already in mind but abandoned it upon discovering something else that moved him more: a thriving, primarily Latino subculture centered around customized “lowrider” vehicles over in nearby Alamance County. Immersing himself, Taylor wrote a 2009 UNC thesis with the remarkable and self-explanatory title “God Almighty, It’s a Good Feeling: Lowriding as Experience.” With chapter headings reminiscent of song titles (“On Memory,” “Peace & Devotion,” “On Pride,” “And So”), it reads more like a work of journalism than academia, and that’s a compliment.

“Mike had heard stories about how lowriders represented a defiant gesture using tools of the ‘master class,’ as it were, to customize an alternative identity,” UNC professor Glenn Hinson, Taylor’s main adviser, told me in 2018. “But the drivers themselves never talked about ‘protest’ or ‘identity declaration,’ just the experience of what being in the car felt like. Mike realized the heart of the story was about that experience, how to capture and learn from it. So that’s what he wrote about, and it was extraordinary. He was not interested in all the details of history so much as conveying this deeper world of what it felt like.”



Michael "M.C." Taylor of Hiss Golden Messenger onstage at Charlotte's Neighborhood Theatre, February 2017. Photo by Daniel Coston.

Taylor went on to conduct Hiss Golden Messenger as well as the rest of his life by a similar ethos—focusing less on categorization, backstory, or grandiose thematic abstraction than capturing small moments and bringing them to life. And he's done this so openly, with such crystalline precision, that the grander historical themes have pretty much taken care of themselves. He's a plain-spoken Tom Joad-style everyman, and just about every song he writes is in the first person, walking a fine line between vulnerability and strength. It takes a certain nervy flair to not just call an album *Hallelujah Anyhow*, but to pull off that sentiment with declarations like, "I've never been afraid of darkness, it's just a different kind of light."

In 2016, after taking the leap of faith to leave the world of day-jobs behind and find a way to support his family playing music full-time, Taylor wrote a song called "Heart Like a Levee." Grappling with self-doubt and

guilt, he wondered if the sacrifices his calling demanded of his family were worth it, and he questioned himself call-and-response style—with Tift Merritt among the chorus singers answering back:

Sing me a river (sing me a river)
Aw, go easy on me, I'm not doing too well
Do you hate me, honey (hate me, honey)
As much as I hate myself?

When I asked Taylor at the time if he really hated himself, he laughed at first. But he quickly turned serious.

“That’s a line my kids have asked me about,” he told me. “I tell them it’s not a permanent feeling, but we all have feelings you have to recognize even if they’re passing. Thinking about the times I’ve climbed into the van to go on tour, that’s very hard and I feel guilty because it seems selfish. Culturally we’ve been told that the things you love and the things you have to do are mutually exclusive, and it’s a tricky balance. As the one making the art, it’s obviously easier for me to see the value in it. But that’s hard to quantify for anyone else. In that moment when I’m leaving my family behind, it’s hard for words like, ‘I want my kids to see me doing art because that’s important and I want them to be creative’ to truly carry any weight.”

★ Taylor truly came into his own with Hiss Golden Messenger’s 2013 album *Haw*. Named for a river that starts near Mitch Easter’s Fidelitorium studio in Kernersville and flows through Charlie Poole’s old textile-belt stomping grounds toward Taylor’s Durham hometown, *Haw* showed off more of a rhythmic pulse than anything Taylor had ever done before. And as for themes, it’s sort of the down-river inverse of Poole’s rambling ways—an album rooted in place buoyed by the conviction that the universe will eventually come to you if you stand your ground. Gospel-styled but not overtly religious, *Haw* sounds like the product of real, hard-won wisdom.

Maybe it was just coincidental timing, but that was also when Hiss Golden Messenger blossomed into a constellation of interconnected families, friends, artists, groups, and Americana-leaning goodness, all centered around Durham. Among the first to enter this orbit were a couple of musicians who had moved down from Wisconsin some years earlier with a band called DeYarmond Edison. For all its fine qualities, DeYarmond Edison’s myriad internal strains became evident after the band broke up and front man Justin Vernon retreated back up to the

frigid reaches of Wisconsin and eventual Grammy-winning, chart-topping stardom as Bon Iver. The other three members—drummer Joe Westerlund and the Cook brothers, Brad and Phil—stayed together as Megafaun, a shaggy and wonderful freak-folk trio capable of heartbreakingly beautiful folk-rock balladry as well as surpassingly strange electronic flip-outs (often within the same song).

Phil Cook played on *Haw* as Megafaun was winding down, and he and his brother Brad became among Taylor's most reliable regular collaborators. A whole wave of related acts sprang up, too, including bands led by Hiss guitarist William Tyler and Ryan Gustafson's Dead Tongues. Westerlund became first-call drummer for a range of bands, punks-gone-country Mount Moriah and the coolly subdued Mandolin Orange among them. Another Megafaun alumnus, Nick Sanborn, emerged with vocalist Amelia Meath in the Grammy-nominated folksy electronic duo Sylvan Esso. And everybody seemed to play on everybody else's records. The sprawl came to include Ben Folds Five's Darren Jessee as well as Matt McCaughan, brother of Superchunk's Mac McCaughan. It was no surprise, of course, that Hiss Golden Messenger wound up recording for Merge.

Various combinations from this circle also played on records by acts as varied as rapper/slam poet Shirlette Ammons and 1970s folk legend Alice Gerrard, of Hazel & Alice fame. All of which is to say that, if you went to see any of these acts play live, there was just no telling who all might turn up onstage. It was a bit like the circus, not come to town but come to stay.

"The attitude is that bands share members and also a mentality where the stage is open and you're welcome on that stage," Phil Cook told me in 2018. "We're all part of each other's art and experiences, which only strengthens everyone's ties. It's a community that transcends cities, identified mostly as people in the same boat. We all took a leap of faith to do this thing and it binds us all together no matter where we are."

While this has never been a formal "collective" with leaders, appointed or implied, Hiss Golden Messenger is somewhere near the center of the scene as mothership from which people come and go. Taylor has emerged as a sort of godfather, with a golden touch. The Alice Gerrard album he produced, 2014's *Follow the Music*, earned Gerrard her first-ever Grammy nomination at age eighty. He's also kept busy working on prestige projects with the likes of Amy Helm (daughter of Levon Helm, iconic voice of the Band) and Duke Performances at Duke University. Cook, who first met Taylor right around the time both men were becoming parents for the first time, is among those who look to him as a mentor.

Electronic Music as Campfire Folk Sylvan Esso

As Sylvan Esso, the husband-and-wife duo of Amelia Meath and Nick Sanborn make something like folktronica, folk music rendered with the tools of electronic music. Meath has a soothing, sing-song lullaby voice that evokes the feeling of campfire sing-alongs beneath the stars, and Sanborn's quirky arrangements employ touches like the repeated skipping sound of a defective compact disc as a rhythm track.

Their collaboration began soon after Meath and Sanborn met in Milwaukee, when their respective folk bands shared a bill. Playing bass in Mega-faun brought Sanborn to Durham in 2012, and Meath joined him there a year later after a long stretch as backup vocalist for Canadian indie-pop singer Feist. They cribbed the name Sylvan Esso from the computer game *Sword & Sorcery*, the small singing character that signifies to players that they're on the right track.

Sylvan Esso clicked right away, cracking the top-forty of the *Billboard* 200 with their first two albums and picking up a best-electronic-album Grammy nomination for 2017's *What Now*. And Meath emerged as an irrepressible onstage presence around greater Raleigh-Durham, singing with countless local ensembles and appearing to channel every sense and emotion through the act of singing. One of her best ongoing side gigs is with Molly Sarle and Alexandra Sauser-Monnig as Mountain Man, a quietly subdued folk trio that suggests what Sylvan Esso might sound like if stripped bare to downtempo acoustic.

"Parenthood just puts you in this new space that cracks you wide open, makes the world so much bigger and smaller at the same time," Cook told me. "I heard Mike's music and felt a depth from his journey. I've learned so much from him about how to be a dad, stand up for what you believe in, run a band, and honor and serve people while playing at the same time. Mike does it all so gracefully—writes so frankly about marriage and love while speaking full wide open. There's so much courage in the way he puts himself out there so vulnerably. And under that, it's music that swings."

Ask Taylor himself about this, however, and he's liable to laugh it off. It's not that he doesn't take his art seriously, because he does. But like



Sylvan Esso, the duo of Amelia Meath and Nick Sanborn, in 2018 in their house-in-the-woods studio near Durham. News & Observer photo by Casey Toth.

those lowriders he wrote his UNC thesis about, he's happy to just take the ride while leaving the what-it-all-means explanations to others.

"It's working out pretty good," he told me in 2018. "Yeah, there are still days where I ask myself, 'What have I done, and *why*?' But mostly I feel really fortunate to be able to make music with friends for a living. I'm just trying to keep the trajectory uphill. It can be hard to tell if it's up or down. But it's moving, and I think it's going up, if my compass is working properly."

13

Salvation Songs

The Avett Brothers

The first time I ever witnessed the Avett Brothers live, I couldn't really see or even hear very much of them, because even way back in 2004, it was an experience the small clubs they were playing could not contain. This was at Kings, which at that time served as downtown Raleigh's alternative-music epicenter. And even though the Avetts were still a few years away from mainstream stardom, they had already built a rabid fan base with a fervor verging on religious fanaticism. Kings was so mobbed that night with a crowd so fervid, I never got a good look at Bob Crawford, or Scott or Seth Avett, on the club's low stage. I was only aware of them as a feral, howling presence on the other side of a wall of sweaty humanity.

Gushed one superfan when he saw my notebook, "Aren't these guys *amazing*?!" All I could do was smile and nod. With the crowd screaming along on every song, I couldn't quite get a fix on the Avetts themselves—even though they were the ones with microphones and they were screaming, too. Crawford played upright bass, and the only drum was the solitary kick drum Scott wielded as he pounded on his banjo. It felt like folk music rendered in punk tones, or perhaps punk rock played on folk instruments. The set included wild-eyed sea shanties, murder ballads and songs about pretty girls, all cranked to eleven, and the energized echo of their dedicated fans overwhelmed every other sense. That actually turned out to be a pretty good introduction to the powerful spell the Avetts could cast onstage, even if it also meant it would take me a while to realize just how good they were. Fortunately, there was time to catch up.

That show came at a crossroads period for the Avett Brothers. They had been at it for a couple of years and their trajectory was clearly upward, with crowds growing in both numbers and enthusiasm. But for all their hard work, it's not like anybody was making a living out of it, least of all Dolph Ramseur.

A former country-club tennis pro and local venture capitalist in the Avetts' hometown of Concord, Ramseur had music-industry ambitions. He had tried to finagle a job working for Barry Poss at Sugar Hill Records, but that went nowhere. Ramseur was still looking for a way in when he went to an Avett Brothers show in 2002, and he came home trying to explain what he'd seen to his wife, getting no closer than, "They had that thing." He quickly signed on as their manager, although there was no actual "signing" involved; he and the Avetts settled on a handshake agreement, no contract—a deal that continues to this day. It might be one of the most unusual arrangements for any big-time act in the entire music industry. Asked about it in 2013, Ramseur was sheepish but philosophical.

"I decided to get into the music business to have fun and be friends with the people I work with," he told me. "I don't want a piece of paper to get in the way of that. Is that the smartest legal advice? Probably not. But life is short and I just want to work hard and do great things for the folks I'm working with. My mom always said a contract is only as good as the person signing it."

Ramseur went all-in, serving as the Avetts' one-man business operation as well as number-one fan. He booked the shows, put out the records, and functioned as advocate, mediator, and roadie, all while hoofing it as a furniture-mover to pay his own bills. Scott and Seth worked on the side, too, as carpet cleaners, until they quit in 2003 to make the band a full-time proposition.

By the spring of 2004, however, Scott Avett decided it was time for something to change. Not quite twenty-eight years old, Scott had an art degree from East Carolina University and was an accomplished painter (he would go on to paint album covers on the side, including the portrait on singer-songwriter Brandi Carlile's Grammy-winning 2018 album *By the Way, I Forgive You*). He was mulling graduate school to make visual art his career. But MerleFest, Doc Watson's annual festival in honor of his late son Merle, was coming up the last weekend of April, and playing there was a long-held dream for the Avetts.

"Scott delivered an ultimatum," Ramseur recalled. "He said, 'Get us on MerleFest and I won't go to art school.' He was set to go to the University of Florida. I finally got the call that they were on MerleFest—for free. But Scott hadn't said anything about us getting paid. So we played MerleFest for free."

Free or not, however, they didn't settle for playing a single performance. Instead, they played seven times on various stages throughout

the weekend, by all accounts killing it every single time. In the festival's wake, the Avett Brothers were the talk of MerleFest that year. No money, just love. Good thing there was more than enough of that love to go around.

★ I caught up with the Avetts in Portsmouth on a sultry July afternoon in 2018, during a summer run of outdoor amphitheater dates across the country. The ever-faithful Ramseur was still there, keeping track of all the details. Unlike that first MerleFest, however, their pay rate had improved significantly, and they were earning well into six figures per performance.

"The ticket count as of yesterday was, I think, about 6,138," he said during afternoon sound check.

"About 6,138?" I repeated, and Ramseur just smiled. By the time the Avetts' set began that evening, the venue was at its full capacity of 6,500 people.

The Avetts' onstage assemblage had also grown from the original core trio of Scott, Seth, and Crawford to seven musicians total. There was Joe Kwon, a member since 2007, adding elegant cello stylings and dervish-like performance flair. Complimenting Kwon's cello was Australian-born fiddler Tania Elizabeth, formerly of Canadian jam band (and onetime Sugar Hill recording act) the Duhks. Scott and Seth's big sister Bonnie had signed on the previous year as keyboardist. And while Scott still had his battered old kick drum out front, he mostly used it as the occasional prop because former Dashboard Confessional drummer Mike Marsh was the main time-keeper.

Scott moved between instruments more than most of the band, from kick drum to banjo to guitar. And he'd occasionally sit at an electric keyboard mounted in the shell of an old upright piano covered with photo-booth pictures of crew members plus years and years of Sharpie-scrawled graffiti—chord changes, snatches of lyrics, doodles. He called it his "wooden notebook," on hand and available whenever inspiration struck onstage.

After the full band finished the sound check, everybody left the stage except for Scott and Seth. Wearing shorts, T-shirts, and sunglasses in the afternoon heat, they stood on either side of a single microphone, aimlessly strumming acoustic guitars. What came out was somewhere between song-pull and improvisational comedy, from cheesed-up overemoting on a crooning cover of the Eagles chestnut "Peaceful Easy Feeling" to making up gag songs about various members of their road crew.



Seth Avett playing a guitar solo out on the floor of Raleigh's PNC Arena on December 31, 2017. The song was "Kickdrum Heart." Photo by David Menconi.

When the pair began a song directed toward longtime soundman Justin Glanville (son of the former NFL football coach Jerry Glanville), he briefly cut off their microphones in response.

"This is normal," Crawford said with a laugh, watching from the wings with Ramseur.

Shortly before showtime, the brothers retreated to their tour bus and each went into their respective preshow rituals. Older brother Scott tended to that night's setlist while Seth sat at a small electric keyboard working on his latest hobby—reconnecting with the classical music he'd grown up playing.

Asked about those seven shows the Avetts played at their first Merle-

Fest, and how hard they'd worked on the way up, he nodded at the memory.

"We were hungry," Seth said. "'Yes' was the answer, always. We did not need to be asked to play. We learned early on not to wait for an invitation. Some of that still makes me cringe a little, the murkiness of those nights. Whenever younger kids ask for advice on how to, God forbid, 'make it,' I'm just bewildered. No idea how you'd do it now and I didn't really know then, either. Things worked out. But it seems so implausible."

"We so badly wanted to make our identity known," Scott said. "To build this house. To get in there and make people know us, whether they liked us or not. I'm not saying that was always great, or even a good idea. There were plenty of times when we made terrible decisions. But our dysfunctions and mishaps and failures had a lot to do with where we wound up."

They both laughed, somewhat ruefully.

"A lot of what we did back then, we shot ourselves in the foot," Seth said. "But that's what our journey looked like. We would never accept that someone else knew the path for us better than we did."

★ That same year I saw my first Avett Brothers show, they put out their third album, *Mignonette*, on Dolph's Ramseur Records (a label that is to the Avetts as Merge Records is to Superchunk). *Mignonette* was earnest and somewhat grasping, leaving an impression of loose-limbed elbows and knees as Scott and Seth careened from song to song. Toward the end of the track list, however, came "Salvation Song," a stately grace note pointing the way toward their future. It's a song they'd still be regularly playing onstage more than a decade later, often stripped down to the original Scott-Seth-Bob core trio—plus sister Bonnie, father Jim, and whatever other relative might be on hand—gathered around a single microphone, gospel-style.

We came for salvation

We came for family

We came for all that's good, that's how we'll walk away.

Family is the great subject the Avetts always come back to—not in a self-loathing or dysfunctional way like Loudon Wainwright III, but focused on love and mercy and matters of the heart, rendered with disarming frankness. Another older song with staying power is their 2008 ballad "Murder in the City," often performed solo by Scott, with one of the most poignant verses about parenthood that anyone has ever composed. After wondering to himself "which brother is better, which one

our parents love the most,” the song’s narrator summons up the courage to actually put that question to his father. And the answer:

“He said, ‘I love you and I’m proud of you both / In so many different ways.’”

“I laughed the first time I heard that, because it’s something every child feels,” Jim Avett told me in 2011. “You love kids as much as they need. Not equally, just however much is necessary. Some need more than others. My kids think more of me than they probably should, because I didn’t do anything any daddy wouldn’t do for his kids.”

The Avett Brothers

★ Jim Avett made his living as a welder in the construction business, meaning he had to go wherever the work was to support his growing family. They lived in boom patches all over America, as far away as Alaska and also a stretch in Wyoming (where Scott was born in 1976). The family wound up back in North Carolina by the time Seth was born in 1980 and settled in Concord, a onetime mill town that is now home to Charlotte Motor Speedway.

Dad played music, so his kids did, too, generally country and gospel songs around the house. But the household record collection also included the likes of Bob Dylan, Three Dog Night, and John Denver—rock and pop were always part of the picture. Hall & Oates and Van Halen fired young Scott’s imagination, with the latter’s 1982 album *Diver Down* registering as “a big atomic boom” in his world.

In the early 1990s, both brothers fell under the spell of Seattle grunge as it crested the mainstream. When Nirvana played *Saturday Night Live* in 1992, Scott and Seth stayed up late to watch and recorded it on VHS tape. They would watch it over and over, static and all, drawn to the biggest and loudest voice of that moment.

But Nirvana’s formative influence would be superseded when Seth met Doc Watson a few years later. Jim Avett had an invitation from a mutual acquaintance to go visit Doc, who lived a couple of hours away in Deep Gap. Jim opted instead to send his teenage son, who had started playing guitar not long before. Sitting in Doc’s living room and experiencing his virtuosity up close was a mind-blowing and horizon-expanding experience for someone who had been listening to nothing but Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and Soundgarden—bringing home that great, important music didn’t always come from far-away places.

“It was a whole new concept, that we had so much so nearby,” Seth remembered in 2018. “Not attainable, but closer. When I was thirteen, Seattle was like another planet. But Doc felt like a neighbor who just

Greenville Calling Valient Thorr, Future Islands

In Greenville during college, Scott Avett was part of a local-music ecosystem including Lo Fi Conspiracy, the Kick Ass, and Art Lord & the Self-Portraits. It was a fluid community, with members coming and going from band to band and show to show. Eventually, Valient Thorr and Future Islands emerged alongside Avett Brothers.

"All those bands were involved and Avett Brothers bled into that as well, moving the gear, setting up, and playing a lot of shows together," Scott told me in 2018. "With those guys in Greenville was where we made all our early mistakes, big ones. We still make huge ones, but the mistakes back then were messy. That's where I first learned about life and how to be onstage, playing for people who were not forgiving: 'What've you got, how can you get my attention?' Herbie and I experienced that together, in real time."

That was Herbie Abernathy, who became "Valient Himself," front man of the high-concept metal band Valient Thorr. Their shtick was that they were aliens marooned on earth, which they decided to save with metallic MC5-style punk, and they were true road dogs for a decade. Abernathy also had a regular gig with the Avetts on their annual North Carolina New Year's Eve shows, appearing as Father Time to count down to midnight.

Future Islands' Samuel Herring is just as compelling a front man as Abernathy, but more along the lines of David Byrne. A spinoff of Art Lord & the Self-Portraits, Future Islands formed in Greenville before relocating to Baltimore. Their main draw has always been Herring's emotive yowl and on-stage moves. A kinetic 2014 star turn on the *Late Show with David Letterman* helped pull that year's album *Singles* into the top-forty of the *Billboard* 200.

Valient Thorr and Future Islands teamed up with the Avett Brothers in November 2018 to play a storm-relief benefit show in Greenville after the catastrophic floods of that year's Hurricane Florence.

happened to be this virtuoso and folk hero. He didn't need a band or even electricity. He was so North Carolina—the feeling of the foothills and mountains and cadence of how people speak. He married the commonplace and the extraordinary. I had always looked toward things that were culturally far away as special. Through Doc, I began to see the great bounty that's always been in the state. Then we figured out that Blind

Boy Fuller used to live two hours away, and Charlie Poole was from right up the road.”

Through their teenage years and into Scott’s time away at East Carolina, the brothers played music together in a shifting series of bands under different names—Sharp Thing (named for a childhood game they’d play to pass the time during backseat car rides, trying to make each other bleed) and the Long Haired Bottlenecks among them. In Greenville, Scott also immersed himself in that area’s music and visual arts, playing in metal-leaning bands including Kuttphatt and Level. Finally in 1999, Seth’s band Margo merged with Scott’s band NEMO, a loud and abrasive group that still had room for the Avetts’ brotherly harmonies.

Those harmonies could be hard to hear within NEMO’s electric roar, of course, but their voices were front and center when the Avetts would play acoustic shows as NEMO Back Porch Music Project. And something clicked with the acoustic version of NEMO, for band and audience alike. Whether their instruments were plugged in or acoustic, Scott and Seth never really quit screaming or carrying on like punks. To this day, they both still pogo up and down onstage, not unlike Superchunk.

Bob Crawford entered the picture around the time NEMO was turning into the Avett Brothers in the spring of 2001. A New Jersey native, he’d grown up listening to Bruce Springsteen and playing punk rock while earning a radio/TV degree at Stockton College in Galloway Township. Crawford’s tastes had evolved toward folk and bluegrass by the time he came south in search of work, and he fell in with Scott and Seth to become the first non-Avett Avett Brother. Soon the trio was working the in-state circuit and trying to build an audience, sometimes literally one fan at a time.

“We started playing the circuit from Charlotte to the Cave in Chapel Hill, Chico’s in Greenville, Sadlack’s in Raleigh,” Crawford remembered in 2018. “There was one Sunday morning at Sadlack’s where a woman was giving haircuts and the ‘crowd’ was one guy heckling us—‘You suck.’ Yeah, that was our circuit, and we’d do it about monthly. When you don’t know what you’re doing, you just make everything louder, and we did that a lot. But even back in the day, playing for the bartender, the bartender would be dancing. We’d be out of tune, breaking strings, and I’d think, ‘I can’t believe people are listening to this.’ Then I’d look at people’s faces and there was this . . . evangelical thing going on. That made you believe there was something else to it. The magic of music, sure, but also the genuine nature of these guys. The movement, physicality, passion. All of that and more.”



From left: Seth and Scott Avett at work in Echo Mountain Studios on their 2007 album, *Emotionalism*. Photo by Daniel Coston.

★ Even in those years when details like tuning were best-guess approximations and they got by mostly on enthusiasm, the Avetts always had an underlying seriousness at their core. But that did not truly come into focus until 2007's *Emotionalism*, their first great record. *Emotionalism* would be their final full-length album to come out on the Ramseur label, which they were quickly outgrowing, and also their first to make the *Billboard* charts—at number 134, a modest chart peak but still an impressive feat for Dolph's one-man label operation.

Emotionalism was the Avetts' first unabashed pop record, showing off melodic and harmonic flourishes reminiscent of the Beatles (a resemblance they acknowledged onstage by riffing on "I Want to Hold Your Hand" in the outro of "Die Die Die"). *Emotionalism* was also the first time the Avetts worked with outside producers, one of them Bill Reynolds from their fellow North Carolina alternative-folk travelers the Blue Rags. And it was the first to feature cellist Joe Kwon, whose elegantly textured playing and whipsaw onstage presence were such a perfect fit that he quickly rose from sideman to full-time bandmate.

Emotionalism also clearly defined the yin-yang of the Avetts' dual front men. As big brother, Scott is the natural leader, more demonstrative off-

stage as well as on. His voice tends toward a more conversational lower register, and he doesn't play banjo so much as wield it (or beat the be-jesus out of it). Scott is also the one who usually winds up climbing or standing on top of things in the heat of the performing moment.

Seth is sky to Scott's earth, singing in a higher and more angelic vocal tone given to poetic flights of fancy. If "Murder in the City" is the definitive plainspoken Scott song, for Seth it's "The Ballad of Love and Hate"—a surreal series of exchanges between abstract emotions that the Nirvana fan concludes with a line worthy of Kurt Cobain: "I'm yours and that's it. Whatever." Where Scott's general songwriting approach tends to be improvisational in search of capturing a moment, Seth is usually more measured and deliberate. And younger deferring to older is a long-established pattern. For much of the Avetts' history, Seth thought of himself as more sideman than equal partner.

"Scott and I have had similar arcs as far as believing we could be something and then becoming it," Seth said in 2018. "It took me years to consider myself a showman, and it took years for Scott to consider himself a musician. It never occurred to me I could be, you know, an entertainer until we were well into it. But at some point, there was crossover into me becoming an entertainer and Scott becoming a musician, too. A lot of practice is what it took."

A year later, the Avett Brothers went *Emotionalism* one better on the charts with *The Second Gleam*, an eight-song mini-album that debuted at number 82 on *Billboard* in July 2008. But for all the success of their do-it-yourself approach, the Avetts had reached a point where the next level was beyond the reach of Ramseur Records. And that's when Rick Rubin entered the picture.

Less than a decade past its turn-of-the-millennium peak with teen pop, when top acts like NSYNC were selling a million albums a week, the major-label record business had shrunk to a pale shadow of its glory days. But in spite of the industry's uncertain future, Frederick Jay "Rick" Rubin was one of the few executives who seemed worth gambling on.

Rubin's career began with him running Def Jam Records out of his Weinstein Hall dormitory room at New York University in the 1980s. From hip-hop acts like Beastie Boys and Run-D.M.C., he went on to produce hits for everybody from Adele to ZZ Top, also overseeing late-career comebacks for the likes of Johnny Cash and even Neil Diamond.

In 2007, Rubin was at his peak. He was running Charlie Poole's old label Columbia Records, had just won the producer-of-the-year Grammy and was even on *Time* magazine's list of "100 Most Influential People in

the World.” That’s when a friend turned him on to *Emotionalism*, which made enough of an impression for Rubin to arrange a meeting.

“People are disarmed and melt in their presence,” Rubin told me in 2018. “They are so real, so sincere. It’s unusual to find in a culture so cynical. The goodness emanates from them.”

The Avett Brothers

★ After signing to Rubin’s Columbia subsidiary American Recordings, the Avett Brothers made their most ambitious statement yet—the ultimate merger of Seth’s deliberation and Scott’s in-the-moment release, with lush pop arrangements, and more piano than banjo. Titled *I and Love and You*, the album conveyed a sense of pausing to take stock of the years they’d spent on the grind. Its thirteen tracks retained echoes of the ramshackle old days, with unexpected acceleration into up-tempo instrumental breaks and cathartic howling. Seth’s wordless, wild-eyed screams on “And It Spread” sounded right out of that first Avett Brothers club show I’d seen five years earlier.

But for the most part, they dialed the histrionics way, way down to where they felt more like temporary release points to highlight the difficulty of maintaining control elsewhere. Contrast between darkness and light is a recurrent theme throughout *I and Love and You*, starting with the packaging. The album’s cover is a stark, dark oil painting by Scott, *Julianne in Vain*, showing a middle-aged woman—her lined face lit up as she looked over her shoulder, posed alongside a skull. Inside the cover were three more Scott paintings, similarly dark portraits of him and Bob and Seth, plus a “Mission Statement” (penned by Seth) explaining the album’s title as “the watermark of humanity . . . a proclamation completely and perfectly new each time it is offered.”

Variations on that *I and Love and You* proclamation, and the world’s seeming unwillingness to hear it, dominate throughout the album. Multiple songs reference darkness even as the Avetts attempt to light it up, but it remains a presence that never goes away. Even the charming love song “January Wedding” finds Seth confiding, “I hope that I don’t sound too insane when I say / There is darkness all around us.” A song later, Scott’s “Head Full of Doubt/Road Full of Promise” answers back: “There’s a darkness upon me that’s flooded in light . . . And I’m frightened by those that don’t see it.” The only advice he can offer is, “Decide what to be and go be it.”

Most of the songs feature one brother or the other as lead vocalist, with the other joining in solidarity between verses as two-man Greek chorus. And the album felt like an attempt to meet the world on its own

terms, fully aware they were courting sell-out accusations. “Slight Figure of Speech” addressed this directly, likening the art of creation to cutting one’s “chest wide open” and wondering, “Is it art like I was hoping now?”

Fittingly, the literal heart of *I and Love and You* falls right in the middle of the track list, an understated little song with the prosaic title “Laundry Room.” A series of vignettes, “Laundry Room” sounds like the fever-dream rush of falling hard for someone with stolen moments, wishes on stars, and Scott dashing off love songs the way most people make mix-tapes. But the songs, and maybe the love, are doomed: “Tonight I’ll burn the lyrics / ‘Cause every chorus was your name.”

As Scott sings “Laundry Room,” Seth’s voice hovers faintly overhead, like an angel or ghost echoing different lines. Including this one: “I am a breathing time machine.”

While the Avett Brothers would go on to have higher-charting albums (and also to be subject and stars of *May It Last*, a 2017 big-screen documentary directed by Judd Apatow), *I and Love and You* still stands as the record that made them stars. It reached number 16 on the *Billboard* charts in the fall of 2009, earning them their first gold record. Along with *Emotionalism*, its songs would become the longtime core of the Avetts’ regular setlist as they headlined Bonnaroo, New Orleans Jazz Fest, Coachella, and most of the other big music festivals. While they’ve never had the big breakthrough hit single, the Avetts discovered the same secret the California psychedelic-rock band the Grateful Dead stumbled upon in the 1960s: success is longer-lasting if it’s based on what happens on the stage rather than on the radio.

“We’re not in the music business, we’re in the Avett Brothers business,” Dolph Ramseur told me in 2013. “I work hard, but it’s not even work. I’m so fortunate to work in music, even though I get whipped up at times and complain some. But I’ve got nothing to complain about.”

★ It’s actually easy to imagine a parallel-universe version of the Avett Brothers story in which they *did* blow up to gargantuan proportions, given the rise of their contemporaries Mumford & Sons. Mumford hailed from London and their debut album, *Sigh No More*, came out in the fall of 2009, one week after *I and Love and You*. The music bore more than passing resemblance to the Avetts — rocked-up folk music played on acoustic instrumentation, heavy on the rolling banjos and anguished, epic story-songs.

Mumford’s style was similar enough that, when Joe Kwon met them during their initial rise, they jokingly called themselves an Avett Brothers

“Such Jubilee” Mandolin Orange

When Avett Brothers played their traditional North Carolina New Year’s Eve show at Raleigh’s PNC Arena in 2017, one of the opening acts was Mandolin Orange. And that was notable as one of the last times that Mandolin Orange would be somebody else’s opening act.

Mandolin Orange is a case study in the virtue of whispering to draw people in. The husband-and-wife duo of mandolinist Andrew Marlin and violinist Emily Frantz makes records that give the vibe of the two of them sitting and strumming on a porch, singing to each other at a low murmur. The subdued sonics make for a casual sense of intimacy, underscored by their plainspoken voices. Marlin’s devotional songs sound as if they were all intended for an audience of one.

And yet that audience has grown exponentially. The year after that Avetts show, Mandolin Orange was selling out ever-bigger theaters and amphitheaters, leading to a 2019 debut at the Grand Ole Opry. Their upward trajectory continued with 2019’s *Tides of a Teardrop* album, which made the lower rungs of the *Billboard* 200.

A bright future.

tribute act. In any event, they were easy to lump together. At the 2011 Grammy Awards telecast, the one where Arcade Fire and Merge Records won album of the year, the Avetts and Mumford teamed up to play behind Bob Dylan on the great bard’s 1965 blues-rock classic “Maggie’s Farm.”

Similarities of style and spirit aside, however, Mumford & Sons quickly surpassed the Avetts on the commercial side. Goosed by the U.S. top-forty hit “The Cave,” *Sigh No More* sold 7 million copies worldwide. Mumford’s second album, *Babel*, debuted at number 1 in 2012 and went on to win the best-album Grammy a year later.

All of which seemed to bother the Avetts themselves not at all.

“For us, having a hit like that would have been unhealthy and we probably would have imploded on ourselves,” Scott Avett told me in 2014. “We were doing some shows with John Mayer once and he told us, ‘I hope you one day have a hit and it ruins your life. Isn’t that what everybody wants?’ And it was funny, but true. So Seth and I would like to express



Mandolin Orange onstage at Raleigh's PNC Arena, opening for the Avett Brothers' New Year's Eve 2017 show. From left: Emily Frantz and Andrew Marlin. News & Observer photo by Scott Sharpe.

our gratitude to the world that we have *not* had a number 1 single. That has allowed us the freedom to make music and art as we want to, without life changing too drastically at any given time.”

The Avett Brothers were inducted into the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame in 2016 and Ramseur followed them in two years later, part of the class of 2018 alongside Blind Boy Fuller, Mitch Easter, and Patrick “9th Wonder” Douthit. And even while traveling the world, the Avetts have continued coming home to play Doc Watson’s MerleFest on a semi-regular basis—but as main-stage headliners rather than unpaid upstarts. They’ve also had a running tradition of playing somewhere in North Carolina every New Year’s Eve, generally a packed arena. Like their fellow North Carolinian Arthur Smith (whose 2014 funeral they sang at), the Avetts never left home after hitting the big time. At last report, they were still helping their dad with the hay during harvest season

most years. And as their audience has grown, they've hung onto most of the early die-hard fans, too.

"They've kind of become the soundtrack of my life," superfan Tim Mossberger, who runs the Avett Brothers archive AsMyLifeTurnsToASong.com, told me in 2018. "They're not for everybody until a certain point in your life, maybe when you're losing somebody or falling in love or going through something else. They're easily relatable depending on where you are in your own life. And I think the fact that they're still in North Carolina helps with songs and life, to have a home to go to that's a place they've always known. North Carolina really supported them at the beginning. I remember talking to the guy who booked them the first time they went to Ohio and they drew seven people, when they were drawing 300 a night in North Carolina. They've never forgotten that."

Neither have they forgotten or completely outgrown the old scuffling days. They'll still jump up and down, or start climbing things if the occasion seems to demand it. Onstage in Raleigh during New Year's Eve 2017, Seth tinkered with his electric guitar and quipped, "All this tuning is just for show." Then he ventured off the stage and onto the floor of the arena, shredding all the way.

"Sometimes I miss the intensity of the early days," Bob Crawford told me in 2018. "I'll see clips from back then where we're just *jamming*. Did I move like that? Really? I spent a lot of years watching them to see what they'd do next and try to guess, zig and zag when they did."

"But here's what the old days were really like. One time we were in Augusta, Georgia, and playing the next night in Charleston. We get in the van, start driving and forty miles down the road I realize I'd left my suit at the hotel. I was so scared it was another ten miles before I spoke up. 'Um, Scott . . . I left my suit in the closet at the hotel.' He's super-pissed, not saying a word, just glaring. We drove all the way back, got to the front door and he finally looked at me. 'Bob,' he said, 'when you get your suit, can you grab mine, too?'

"It was the greatest thing that ever happened in my life."

14

Songs of Immigrants and Emigrants

From Nina Simone to
the Kruger Brothers

It wasn't much to look at, 30 East Livingstone Street in Tryon—a modest three-room cabin, tin roof peeling back in spots, unpainted wooden clapboards showing signs of weather and wear. The surrounding neighborhood was one that a hopeful real-estate agent might have called “transitional,” even though it was unclear which direction that transition was going. Other houses nearby ranged from well-kept to falling apart, the latter looking as if they were returning to earth as trees and underbrush swallowed them up.

Set on a rise about a mile east of this tourist town's Trade Street main drag, 30 East Livingstone probably looked about the same as it did in 1933, the year that Eunice Kathleen Waymon was born here as the sixth of eight children in a preacher's family. She would go on to become Nina Simone, “High Priestess of Soul” and one of the great voices of twentieth-century American music. But before that, she grew up in this house during the Great Depression and World War II, without electricity or indoor plumbing. It's where she first began playing piano, not long after learning to walk.

In early 2018, the only visible marker of that history was a small white oval plaque on the front of the house that read, “EUNICE WAYMON BIRTHPLACE.” On a chilly weekday morning that February, Crys Armbrust was showing me around while puttering about, tending to the property as he'd done for years.

“We've had cyclonic winds around here, a lot of things have come loose,” Armbrust said in his drawling smoker's rasp, carefully picking up slender fragments of boards from the dirt yard. Then he looked up and

handed me a small piece of wood. “Don’t tell anybody I gave you that,” he said with a wink.

A retired university professor, Armbrust made preserving the memory of Simone’s long-ago time in the town of her birth his life’s work. He spearheaded the drive to get an elegantly stylized Simone sculpture erected in a park on Trade Street in 2010. And his lobbying brought attention to Tryon’s place in Simone’s history, even though she moved away as a teenager, seldom returned, and rarely acknowledged her time in North Carolina as anything but difficult. Not everyone in Tryon was thrilled at the prospect of the town becoming best-known as the birthplace of such an expatriate.

“Who worth their salt is not controversial?” Armbrust asked rhetorically.

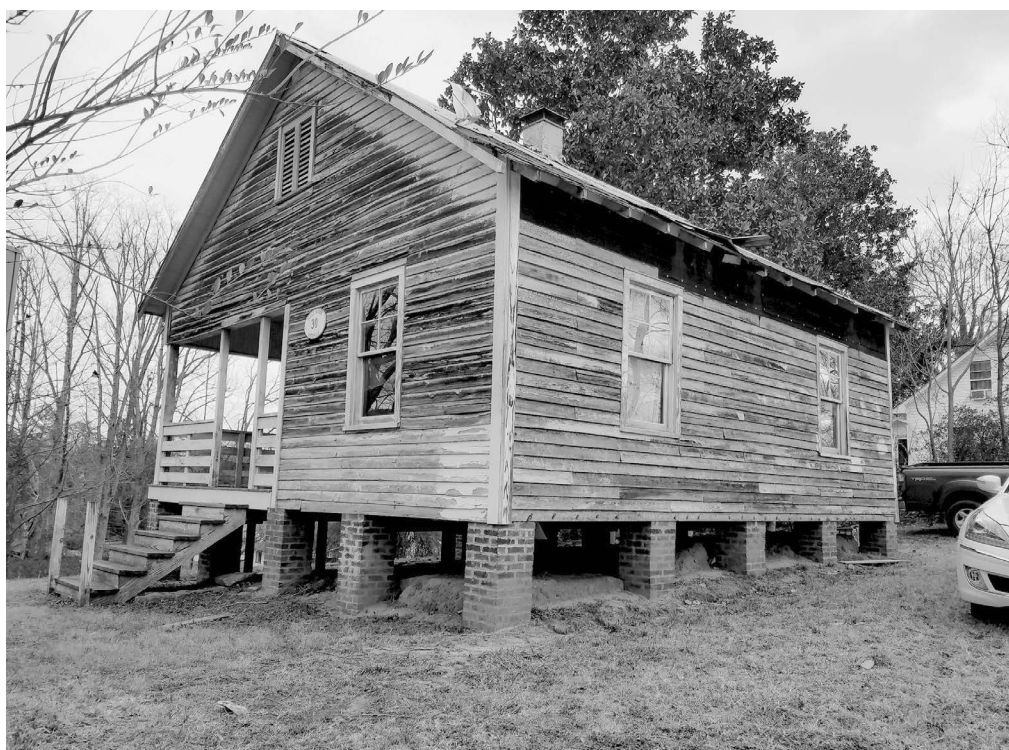
Like the rest of North Carolina, this town of 1,600 about 90 miles west of Charlotte has always fancied itself a welcoming and open-minded oasis—“The Friendliest Town in the South,” as the motto puts it. Tryon was a resort getaway in the early twentieth century, frequented by glamorous celebrities like novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald. A green plaque on the outside wall of Missildine’s Drugstore describes its lunch counter as a “social center where the famous gathered,” quoting a verse that Fitzgerald (probably under the influence) penned about the place in 1937:

Dear Missildine
A dive we’ll ne’r forget.
The taste of its banana splits
Is on our tonsils yet.

When it became known that young Eunice Waymon was a child-prodigy pianist of great promise, many of Tryon’s citizens, white as well as black, contributed to a fund to further her musical education. That started with lessons from her first piano teacher, Muriel “Miss Mazzy” Mazzanovich.

“We are now on the route Nina used to walk to piano lessons, starting when she was six years old,” Armbrust told me as we drove away from 30 East Livingstone, pointing out landmarks—the church where Simone first displayed her musical talent, a stone wall that served as backdrop for a famous childhood photo of her. The walk that the six-year-old prodigy made to Miss Mazzy’s house stretched 1.6 miles. Not surprisingly, she crossed the railroad tracks to get there.

Tryon had other reminders of lines not to be crossed. At Simone’s first public recital, her proud parents took seats in the front row—and were



Nina Simone's childhood home in Tryon, North Carolina, February 2018.

Photo by David Menconi.

asked to give them up to white attendees. It was 1944, the Jim Crow era in full effect, and eleven-year-old Eunice defiantly refused to play until her parents were allowed back on the front row where they belonged. A lifetime of similar insults stoked a fire in her that would erupt on songs like 1964's "Mississippi Goddam," born of sorrow and rage over the 1963 Birmingham, Alabama, church bombing. And of course, the Waymon family's Tryon house serves as another reminder. It looks like a place one would choose to flee at the first available opportunity.

At his own home in Tryon, Armbrust maintained an impressive Nina Simone archive—vintage photos of her at different ages, recordings, business contracts. Framed on a wall was the original copy of a 1960 essay about Simone written by the great African American poet Langston Hughes, who also cowrote her 1967 song "Backlash Blues."

But Armbrust's most unusual and prized Simone artifact was something given to him by Lisa Kelly, her daughter. It stemmed from a request he had made a decade earlier for a bit of Simone's ashes, to go into the heart of the Simone sculpture that was taking shape.

"Next time I saw Lisa, she pulled out a package and put it in my hand.

I opened it up and there was . . . Nina,” Armbrust said, his voice quavering with emotion at the memory. “I could not speak. Overwhelmed. It was pretty amazing.”

He kept the ashes in a small vial about the size of a salt shaker.

★ Director Quentin Tarantino’s 2012 revenge fantasy *Django Unchained* opens with a bounty hunter (drolly played by German actor Christoph Waltz in a dapper star turn that would win him an Academy Award) setting free a group of African American slaves in the wilderness of pre-Civil War Texas. Tossing them the keys to their chains, he spells out their options. Either they can go back to their old life of grueling subservience on the plantation, or kill their white overseer, bury his body and “make your way to a more enlightened area of this country. . . . Oh, and on the off chance there are any astronomy aficionados amongst you, the North Star is that one. Tata.”

This northbound underground railroad was the beginning of a wave of migration before, during, and after the Civil War, in which African Americans followed the North Star to seek better lives beyond the plantation and then the segregated Jim Crow South. Eunice Waymon was part of that diaspora, moving to New York City to study classical piano at the renowned Juilliard School—bankrolled by the Eunice Waymon Fund back home in Tryon.

Waymon was just one of many North Carolina-born artists to flee, and you could stock a pretty good music Hall of Fame with nothing but African American expatriates from the Old North State. That’s especially the case with jazz, starting with Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, and Max Roach. Funk master George Clinton was born in Kannapolis and left in childhood. Durham native Clyde McPhatter and Henderson-born Ben E. King, both future Drifters, separately left North Carolina for the greater New York area as children in the 1940s. And after Blind Boy Fuller died in 1941, his Durham blues peers Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, and Rev. Gary Davis all decamped to the North.

Once there, of course, they all discovered that the North was hardly Valhalla when it came to racial enlightenment, despite the stereotype of racism as a predominantly southern phenomenon in America. But as Patterson Hood explained it in the Drive-By Truckers’ 2000 meditation “The Three Great Alabama Icons”: “Ya know, racism is a worldwide problem and has been since the beginning of recorded history, and it ain’t just white and black. But thanks to George Wallace, it’s always a little more convenient to play it with a southern accent.”

Jazz Men Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane

Thelonious Monk played piano in supremely idiosyncratic fashion while also penning some of the best-known compositions in the jazz songbook. That was but one of many contradictions he balanced. Born in 1917 in Rocky Mount, Thelonious Sphere Monk was not yet five years old when his mother took him to New York after his parents split. But even in exile, the South's spirituals and blues remained enduring influences, which he combined with a wide and unlikely array of styles. Paul Jeffrey, who played saxophone with him from 1970 to 1976, recalled a time when a piano was brought into the ailing Monk's hospital room.

"Everybody wondered what he'd play since he hadn't in over a month," Jeffrey told me in 2007. "And he sat down and played Rachmaninov's Prelude in C-Sharp Minor. Floored everybody. I'd never heard him do classical before, and I never heard him do it other than that one time. He knew the classical repertoire but never played it."

"Round Midnight," "Straight, No Chaser," and "Rhythm-A-Ning" are just a few of Monk's many landmark compositions, which have been influential well beyond jazz. Randy Newman, Steely Dan's Donald Fagen, and NRBQ's Terry Adams are among the rock musicians to bear his stamp. In 1982, Monk died of a stroke at age sixty-four in the home of his longtime patron, Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter.

Like Monk, John Coltrane blazed a trail that's difficult for lesser mortals to follow, which doesn't stop anyone from trying. Born in 1926 in Hamlet, Coltrane grew up in High Point and moved north to Philadelphia as a teenager, becoming a full-time musician after a Navy hitch at the end of World War II. His most widely heard work remains the 1959 Miles Davis landmark *Kind of Blue*, an improvisational tone poem on which Coltrane's saxophone served as foil. Coltrane and Monk were also bandmates, briefly, in 1957.

But Coltrane made his most lasting mark as a bandleader himself. As with Earl Scruggs's "Scruggs-style" banjo in bluegrass, Coltrane's effect on jazz saxophone was so transformative that there came to be "Coltrane changes"—chord progressions that are damnably difficult for lesser mortals to play. His ultimate sonic mountain was 1959's "Giant Steps," which has a daunting sonic architecture so unconventional that it's among the most challenging compositions in all of jazz to play (see video essayist Estelle Caswell's superlative 2018 video "The most feared song in jazz, explained" for more).

Coltrane was only forty years old when he died of liver cancer in 1967.

Even in leaving the segregated South, however, African Americans didn't leave their influences behind. For North Carolinians who were part of that great northward African American migration of the twentieth century, the biggest one was church music.

"In context, a black person in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s could leave the South and never leave the South," saxophonist Branford Marsalis told me in 2018. "Move to New York or Philly, and it's a neighborhood comprised of the same people you left. Monk, Coltrane, and Nina Simone, what they all have in common is the effect the Pentecostal church had on their playing. Nina Simone could have been a great classical player, but she was also a great church player and brought that sensibility. Monk's whole thing was church. And all these jazz writers in New York who called Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* 'a quantum leap like nothing anybody's ever heard' were secular, atheist, or Jewish. If they'd been Baptist, in the South, they'd have heard that shit growing up in church."

Marsalis, of course, is someone whose geographic odyssey went in the opposite direction. A New Orleans native and scion of one of the Crescent City's most prominent musical families—son of pianist Ellis, older brother of Pulitzer-winning trumpeter Wynton—Branford lived the glamorous life for a lot of years, including stints backing up the pop star Sting and serving as bandleader for *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* in New York. Eventually tiring of the big city, Marsalis retreated south to Blind Boy Fuller's old hometown of Durham in 2002, taking up residence in a nice house with a basement recording studio and good golf courses nearby.

In North Carolina, Marsalis became a familiar site on local stages, sitting in with everyone from rock jam-bands like the Allman Brothers and Grateful Dead to the classical-bluegrass trio the Kruger Brothers. He even recorded with the dB's power-pop brain trust of Peter Holsapple and Chris Stamey. And once he was here, Marsalis also discovered what the Avett Brothers knew all along: not only can you have a flourishing commercial career as a professional musician with a North Carolina base, but living your onstage life a bit off the beaten path is good for the soul. Being able to play golf year-round didn't hurt, either.

"I love it here," Marsalis told me a few years into his North Carolina residency. "I go to the mall, to the store—nothing. It's great. Nobody knows who I am here! In New York, I'd get 'looks.' And I think it affects your kids. They get invited to parties because people like your last name. That's less likely to happen down here. I just love the bucolia, the forests.

I'm completely satisfied with my life here. I could stay here a long, long time."

Fifteen years later, Marsalis was still living in Durham, touring the world and playing with everyone he could, by all appearances settled in for the long haul.

★ Eunice Waymon's becoming a popular-music icon happened more or less by accident, and out of necessity. As noted by Marsalis, she could have been a great classical pianist, and that was her intended career path when she went to Juilliard. Graduate studies at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute was to be the next step, leading up to a career as a concert pianist performing Bach and Beethoven with orchestras. When she auditioned at Curtis in 1951, however, she did not get in—for reasons of race, she was convinced.

"I never really got over that jolt of racism at the time," Simone said in an interview in Liz Garbus's Oscar-nominated 2015 documentary *What Happened, Miss Simone?*

Her original plan derailed, Waymon was running out of money and needed to earn a living. So she turned to what she knew best, music, and began playing nightclubs in Atlantic City, an hour down the road from Philadelphia. It proved to be transformative, leading her away from classical as well as gospel, and it also quite literally turned her into Nina Simone. Knowing that her deeply religious mother would not approve of her playing sinful secular music in bars, she adopted her famous performing name as a combination of the Spanish word for "little one" plus the first name of the glamorous French actress Simone Signoret. Thus was born Nina Simone, High Priestess of Soul.

As for the music itself, that was no stretch at all. Along with gospel and classical, she'd been playing secular music on the sly as far back as her childhood days. James Payne, a friend of the family in Tryon, used to hear her venture beyond gospel on the Waymon household's piano—with her father's encouragement, no less.

"Her mother was a minister, so she didn't like that jazz," Payne told me in 2018, when he was ninety years old. "But Nina's dad *did* like it. So she'd get on the piano and jazz it up when her mom was gone, then cut that off when she came back. She was very, very talented. Temperamental, too, you know. She wrote a song her mom really did not like, that 'Mississippi [Goddam]' song."

Another effect of Simone's move from concert halls to nightclubs

From Nina
Simone to the
Kruger Brothers

“Rumble” Link Wray

One long-ago night in Fredericksburg, Virginia, the story goes, Dunn native Link Wray was asked mid-show to play a slowish dance song called “a stroll.” He said he didn’t know any, but his brother/drummer Doug Wray started playing a deliberate backbeat. Link joined in with some riffing, mostly A-A-B, the crowd went nuts and his signature hit “Rumble” (originally titled “Oddball”) was born. Released in 1958, “Rumble” reached number 16 on the charts and has never gone away since, serving as sonic shorthand for hoodlum menace in countless movies including *Pulp Fiction*, *Desperado*, and *Independence Day*.

Wray learned guitar in North Carolina from an African American circus guitarist known as Hambone, who showed him the ropes while passing through. But most of Wray’s memories of his native state were not happy; he was three-quarters Shawnee Indian and once told an interviewer that life in Dunn had been “one big hell.” Wray’s family became part of North Carolina’s outbound exodus, moving to Virginia during his teenage years. But he still retained enough fondness for his birthplace to write a 1971 ode to his wonder-years stomping grounds, “Black River Swamp” (which he felt “calling me back to my childhood”).

Despite losing a lung to tuberculosis during the war, Wray had a long journeyman career and was just about the last word in low-brow cool, with a dirty guitar tone that would be inspirational to following generations. Rick Miller of Chapel Hill’s Southern Culture on the Skids remembered opening a show for him and closing with one of Wray’s songs, “Turnpike USA.”

“I look over and Link’s on the side of the stage in his black leather, fist pumping,” Miller told me in 2013. “That was cool, one of my all-time heroes watching me play one of his songs and digging it. Then he comes up afterward, grabs me and says, ‘That last song was awesome! Was it one of yours?’ ‘Link,’ I said, ‘that’s one of *yours*!’ ‘Fuck me, it shoulda been a hit!’”

Wray lived a life of exile the last two decades of his life, in Denmark with fourth wife Olive. He died at age seventy-six in 2005.

was that she was expected to sing, even though she didn't want to. Despite Simone's own reluctance, that voice of hers proved to be a wonder. Deep, sonorous, and powerful, it's an androgynous voice both earthy and unrooted, not confined to any one time, place, or style. Calling herself a "folksinger," Simone very comfortably covered jazz, blues, soul, pop songs, and showtunes, connecting deeply with whatever she set her voice to. Her smoky voice is not for everyone, but there is no mistaking the raw emotion behind it.

From *Nina Simone to the Kruger Brothers*

"She's not technically a 'great' singer," Mark Anthony Neal, an African American studies professor at Duke University, told me in 2018. "She's more of an acquired taste, like [Bob] Dylan. The first time anybody hears her, very few people go, 'I like that' right away. I have a colleague who once said she sounds like someone's killing her cat. But despite the fact that she doesn't have a 'pure' voice, there's just so much emotion there. I think that's why people are still drawn to her, the way she resonates."

★ In terms of overall record sales, Simone's recording career was only modestly successful, which made for a difficult career track. Her versatility worked against her, because the music industry never could figure out exactly where to pigeonhole her. And for an artist whose music, beauty, and defiance were all supremely unconventional, this was frustrating. Simone would never have record sales that matched her considerable influence on artists ranging from John Lennon (who claimed that the Beatles partly modeled their 1965 hit "Michelle" on Simone's then-current version of the 1956 Screamin' Jay Hawkins classic "I Put a Spell on You") to Alicia Keys.

But Simone's most lasting legacy would be as voice of the civil rights era. That began in 1963 with two of the era's most infamous atrocities: the assassination of NAACP activist Medgar Evers (shot dead in his driveway in Jackson, Mississippi), and the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing that killed four young girls in Birmingham, Alabama. Both drove Simone to righteous fury, and what poured out of her was "Mississippi Goddam," which she called a "show tune but the show hasn't been written for it yet." Initially recorded live at Carnegie Hall, "Mississippi Goddam" first appeared on 1964's *Nina Simone in Concert*. And while the arrangement barrels along at an upbeat, almost jaunty pace, Simone's chorus howl of "Mississippi Goddddaaaaaamn" was pure bile. The song directed ire at everyone, especially those preaching moderation. Simone's response was a warning that more change was needed, not less.

Oh but this whole country is full of lies
You're all gonna die and die like flies
I don't trust you anymore
You keep on saying, "Go slow!"
But that's just the trouble ("Do it slow")

From Nina
Simone to the
Kruger Brothers

Widely banned thanks to the title, "Mississippi Goddam" never made the charts as a single. But that didn't keep it from becoming an anthem of the civil rights movement, widely sung and heard; it's a song that has lingered well beyond many of the other hits of its day. Simone was just getting started. In 1966, "Four Women" put a contemporary face on slavery's legacy by sketching out a quartet of African American female prototypes, including one ("Peaches") angry and strong enough to sound like Simone herself. Covers of "The Times They Are A-Changin'" and other Bob Dylan songs followed, as well as her own co-write "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black." But she also exuded exhausted despair on songs like "Backlash Blues."

You give me second-class houses and second-class schools
Do you think all colored folks are just second-class fools?

All was not well behind the scenes, either. As is well-documented in the *What Happened, Miss Simone?* documentary, Simone battled bipolar disorder and domestic abuse at the hands of her husband-manager, Andrew Stroud. Finally, the last straw was the April 1968 assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

"Dr. King's murder has left me so numb I don't know where I'm at, really," Simone said onstage in Westbury, New York, three days after his murder in the preamble to a rendition of "Mississippi Goddam" that sounded like opening a vein. "The king of love is dead . . . I ain't 'bout to be nonviolent, honey, noooo"—punctuated with a chillingly mirthless laugh.

Simone left America behind in 1970, moving first to Liberia and then France, where she spent the rest of her life in exile from America except for the occasional U.S. tour. The last time Simone came back to her old hometown of Tryon was in 2001, for her mother's funeral. On her own deathbed two years later, wracked by the cancer that would end her life at age seventy, Simone asked her daughter to make sure she would not be forgotten.

She needn't have worried. Already a touchstone for hip-hop acts like Arrested Development and Lauryn Hill, she became truly iconic in the years following her death—covered, sampled, and idolized by Alicia



Artist Zenos Frudakis's sculpture of Nina Simone at the keyboard. It was dedicated in Tryon, North Carolina, in 2010. Photo by David Menconi.

Keys, Mary J. Blige, Jay-Z, Common, and many more. Greensboro native Rhiannon Giddens made Simone's 1962 song "Tomorrow Is My Turn" the title track of her first solo album in 2015. And in "Nina," kickoff track to her 2019 album *Eve*, Snow Hill-born rapper Marlana "Rapsody" Evans invoked both Simone and her fellow North Carolina native Roberta Flack.

I am Nina and Roberta
The one that you love
But you ain't heard of

It took a while, but Tryon eventually caught up, too. Simone's birth home was still standing in 2005, two years after her death, when local

Asheville Calling Robert Moog

Asheville is mostly known for folk and bluegrass, but it's also home to Moog synthesizers. New York native Robert Moog considered Asheville his "spiritual home" and moved there in 1978, residing there the last twenty-seven years of his life. More than a decade past his death, Moog's factory in downtown Asheville was still employing eighty people and turning out 40,000 instruments a year.

A lifelong gearhead, Moog started making electronic instruments in childhood, eventually inventing the Moog analog synthesizer in the 1960s—heard prominently on recordings by Emerson Lake & Palmer, the Beatles, Stevie Wonder, and many others. Alas, Moog was a better inventor than businessman and lost control of his company in the 1970s. But he was back as head of Moog Music in 2002. One thing he never lost was the affection of musician clients, like San Francisco electronic composer Patrick Gleeson.

"Bob had a way of making you feel like what you were doing was really good and really important, and he loved you for it," Gleeson said onstage at the 2019 Moogfest. "For a musician when you're coming up, it brings tears to your eyes."

Moog died of brain cancer in 2005 at age seventy-one.

businessman Kevin "Kipp" McIntyre bought the house with the intention of turning it into a museum. When he couldn't bring the project to fruition, the house went back on the market in 2016. Painter Adam Pendleton led a group of four African American artists from New York who teamed up to buy it sight unseen in 2017, with Grammy-winning pianist John Legend among the musicians who also signed on to the effort to preserve the house.

"I can't tell you what an incredible moment it was to pull into Tryon, drive up the hill and see it sitting there," Pendleton told me in 2018, when the National Trust for Historic Preservation designated the house a National Treasure. "It was quite special. It feels like it's from another era, but it connects the past to the present."

That same year, Simone was finally voted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame—posthumously, like the "5" Royales. Mary J. Blige made the induc-

tion speech, noting both Simone's vulnerability as well as her strength: "It was often the lack of confidence in herself that people could relate to."

In the eyes of Simone's daughter Lisa Kelly, the fact that it took so long after her mother's death for Simone to make it in took a lot of the luster off the honor.

"I've always felt like my mother was not honored properly while she was alive," Kelly told me on the eve of the induction. "She died fifteen years ago, so it's hard to get excited after so long. But the fact that people are honoring her now, uplifting her name and her journey and what she stood for, better late than never."

Like mother, like daughter.

From *Nina Simone to the Kruger Brothers*

★ As the twentieth century wore on, North Carolina's economy faced a number of challenges when two of its longtime manufacturing pillars crumbled, tobacco and textiles. As U.S. cigarette consumption declined, tobacco was no longer king. And in town after town across the North Carolina Piedmont's textile belt, the mills shut down, their operations relocated overseas in search of cheaper foreign labor. Once-prosperous textile and tobacco towns withered, and wide swaths of the state drifted into a downward spiral that continued into the twenty-first century.

Greensboro singer-songwriter Laurelyn Dossett evoked the hopelessness of it all with her 2004 song "Leaving Eden," set in Charlie Poole's old textile-belt hometown after its local Pillowtex plant closed. Rhiannon Giddens's Carolina Chocolate Drops covered it as title track of their 2012 Grammy-nominated album:

No work for the working man, just one more empty mill
Hard times in Rockingham, hard times harder still
The crows are in the kitchen, the wolves at the door
Our father's land of Eden is paradise no more

Despite similar scenes playing out all over the state, North Carolina also became one of America's fastest-growing states as part of a selectively robust boom across the Sunbelt. The growth of high-tech industries in North Carolina's larger cities superseded the rural and small-town declines, as the state's population more than doubled from around 4.5 million in the early 1960s to more than 10 million by 2015.

Along with high-end transplants like Branford Marsalis, a significant number of newcomers were blue-collar immigrants from Latin America in search of better jobs and wages, which they found in abundance as

Genius Rhiannon Giddens

Like Nina Simone, Greensboro native Rhiannon Giddens was also born on February 21 and had classical aspirations; but she, too, wound up becoming a folksinger instead. The child of biracial parents, she grew up hearing country and blues before setting her sights on opera, excelling at Oberlin Conservatory. And yet she found the on-campus contra dances more satisfying, so she returned home to North Carolina and her musical roots in 2000, studying banjo and fiddle.

At Appalachian State University's 2005 Black Banjo Gathering, Giddens met Dom Flemons and Justin Robinson, and the trio became Carolina Chocolate Drops. Settling in Durham, they apprenticed with legendary old-time fiddler Joe Thompson in nearby Mebane and learned fast. The Drops put two albums on the pop charts and won the traditional-folk-album Grammy for 2010's *Genuine Negro Jig*.

Giddens scaled even higher heights as a solo act, winning the 2016 Steve Martin Prize for Excellence in Banjo & Bluegrass (also won by Jens Kruger in 2013) and a 2017 MacArthur Foundation "Genius Grant" Fellowship worth \$625,000. She's as much of a scholar as a musician, championing "the countless legions of unknown, unnamed black musicians who are an inextricable part of American music," as she put it onstage at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium during the 2019 Americana Music Association Awards.

A lot of that history is painful. Veterans Day 2018 found Giddens in Wilmington doing a program about the 1898 Wilmington massacre, in which white mobs set upon the town's African American district in a spree of killing, pillaging, and burning. At the city's 1898 memorial, Giddens stood before a crowd of about 100 at sunset to read a partial list of victims.

"John Brown. George Henry Davis. John Dow. George Gregory. John Gregory. Samuel Gregory."

Her voice caught a bit, perhaps at the realization that some of these names must be children.

"... George Miller. Alfred White. Charles Williams ..."

By the time she was finished, complete darkness had descended.

"... Daniel Wright. Unknown. Unknown ..."

Here her voice began to break as Giddens choked back sobs.

"... Unknown. Unknown."

Then she bowed her head and led the crowd in humming "Amazing Grace."

At the time of this writing, Giddens was working on a musical about the Wilmington 1898 massacre.



Rhiannon Giddens onstage at the North Carolina Museum of Art in 2017, the year she won a MacArthur Foundation "Genius Grant" Award. News & Observer photo by Scott Sharpe.

part of a construction boom that remade cities like Raleigh. North Carolina had one of America's fastest-growing Latino populations during the 1990s, increasing by 394 percent in the decade before the year 2000 according to the Pew Hispanic Center. In the early years of the twenty-first century, Raleigh's 2,000-capacity hall the Ritz changed its name to Disco Rodeo and its format to touring *norteno* acts like Los Tigres del Norte and El Tri. Similarly named clubs opened in Winston-Salem and Charlotte, turning all three cities into major tour stops for Spanish-speaking acts.

North Carolina's Latino influx included musicians, too, like the members of Rey Norteño ("Norteno King"), a group comprised of Mexican immigrants. Rey Norteño had a major regional hit with 2006's "Raleigh

North Carolina,” an immigrant’s waltz of the sort that usually pays tribute to the homeland left behind. But this song’s twist was that it pledged love to the group’s adopted city, which they were missing while on tour.

“Raleigh, Carolina del Norte, te llevo en mi corazon . . .”

But maybe the most enduring immigrant’s love letter to North Carolina came via Switzerland, by way of Wilkesboro—site of MerleFest, the annual festival that the Kruger Brothers played for the first time in 1997. Meeting MerleFest founder Doc Watson was an awe-inspiring experience for Jens and Uwe Kruger, who had begun to forge an unusual fusion of bluegrass and classical music. And after they moved to Wilkesboro themselves, Uwe set that feeling to song with “Carolina in the Fall,” a near-perfect evocation of what it’s like to come to a place for the first time and discover that it feels more like home than home ever did. That’s what North Carolina came to be for the Kruger Brothers, inspiration as well as home.

Now for thirty years I’ve played the songs that Doc has taught to me
And the things that he had sung about I never thought I’d see
In the hills of Carolina, folks have opened up the door
And for the first time in my life, I’m not a stranger anymore.

★ Soon after Uwe Kruger was born in Germany in 1961, the family moved to Switzerland, where his brother Jens was born in 1962. Between their father’s record collection and American Forces Network radio, Uwe and Jens heard a lot of American music while growing up, and they took to it. But when it came to playing it themselves as teenagers, their biggest early influence was John B. McCarthy, a U.S. military veteran of the Vietnam War who had moved to Switzerland to teach English.

“He’d been a Washington Square folksinger in the fifties, knew Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie,” Jens told me in 2018. “He’d use old folk songs to teach English to students, even gave us tapes he’d made of the Weavers and Woody Guthrie and Doc. I was nine or ten years old. Uwe and I were already playing guitar and banjo by then.”

Both Krugers connected deeply with American culture and mythology, reading Mark Twain and seeing every Hollywood movie they could. But their biggest passion of all was American folk music, in part because it did not really sound all that exotic or even different to their ears—more like unexpectedly familiar.

“American folk music from the South is very much influenced by church music, and a lot of the songs have structures similar to German

“Mademoiselle Mabry” Betty Davis

Born Betty Mabry in Durham in 1945, Betty Davis is best-known as muse to her then-husband Miles Davis in the 1960s. Their marriage was brief but lasted long enough for her to serve as cover model for his 1968 album *Filles de Kilimanjaro* (which included a song called “Mademoiselle Mabry”)—and also to introduce Miles to the music of Jimi Hendrix, Sly and the Family Stone, and other rock and funk influences at a key point in his evolution.

Davis was a fine recording artist in her own right, too. She blazed a trail in the early 1970s with a series of pre-disco funk masterpieces featuring A-list players from the Family Stone, Tower of Power, Santana, and Pointer Sisters. But Davis herself was the unquestioned mastermind with a jagged, switchblade rasp of a voice unlike any other in funk.

Unfortunately, the likes of “If I’m in Luck I Might Get Picked Up” proved too bluntly sexual for the U.S. mainstream. But her albums *Betty Davis*, *They Say I’m Different*, and *Nasty Gal* remain underground cult favorites; Ice Cube, Ludacris, and Lenny Kravitz are among the many artists who have used samples of Davis songs.

From Nina
Simone to the
Kruger Brothers

folk music,” Jens said. “Lutheran music, folk songs, they’re a lot alike. And to me, the banjo is the idea of being somewhere else. Music in the South leaves room for imagination and always has.”

In the early 1980s, Jens came to America for the first time and sought out Earl Scruggs’s old employer Bill Monroe, who still cast a long shadow as the father of bluegrass. They played together at Monroe’s Bean Blossom Festival, and even though he was not yet twenty years old, Jens made enough of an impression for Monroe to ask about his long-range musical ambitions. But when Jens said he wanted to play bluegrass, Monroe was not encouraging.

“That’s not a good idea,” Jens said Monroe told him. “You’re not from Kentucky or even America.”

“But I play bluegrass,” Jens protested.

“Well, that sounds like Earl Scruggs or Don Reno,” Monroe replied. “There’s one little part of it that sounds like you. That’s you whether you like it or not. You’re talented and have a lot of music in you, so go home, write your own music and give that to people. That’s all you’ve got.”

“Take the ‘A’ Train” Billy Strayhorn

Although he was born in Ohio in 1915 and grew up in Pittsburgh, Billy Strayhorn spent enough time with his grandparents in the Orange County town of Hillsborough for it to be his second home. Biographer David Hajdu goes so far as to call Hillsborough “spiritually . . . his first (home).” Strayhorn was just twenty-three years old when he met up with the legendary band-leader Duke Ellington, who was impressed enough to hire the young man as lyricist.

Over the next three decades, Strayhorn would be Ellington’s most important long-term collaborator as arranger and cowriter on hundreds of compositions that dot the Great American Songbook—“Lush Life” and “Take the ‘A’ Train” among them. Strayhorn was not yet fifty-two years old when he died from esophageal cancer in 1967.

If that wasn’t what Jens wanted to hear, it might have been what he needed. Retreating home to Switzerland, he and his brother began homing in on an unusual fusion of styles that owed as much to classical conservatories as bluegrass picking circles. Jens and Uwe played banjo and guitar, but they would eventually be accompanied by string quartets, symphonies, and violins, rather than fiddles, mandolins, or Dobro. Taking Monroe’s advice to heart, Jens matured into an idiosyncratic virtuoso capable of seemingly conjuring up a whole orchestra’s worth of effects on just five strings. And in 2013, he’d become the first musician born outside America to win the Steve Martin Prize for Excellence in Banjo & Bluegrass (a \$50,000 prize endowed by the banjo-playing comedian).

In 1995, the Kruger Brothers expanded to a trio with the addition of Joel Landsberg—a native New Yorker who, like the Avett Brothers’ Bob Crawford, serves as the Krugers’ Yankee brother-from-another-mother bassist. That first MerleFest invite in 1997 put them on the map in America and they went back and forth between Switzerland and the U.S. festival circuit for a number of years before moving to Wilkesboro in 2003.

“They were given ‘exceptional ability’ green cards, which usually only go to top-level scientists,” Landsberg said. “It’s very unusual for artists.

It took a lot. Ricky Skaggs, Alison Krauss, and Doc all wrote letters of support.”

Watson proved to be as supportive in person as on paper. He became just the mentor the Krugers had always been looking for, a kindred spirit whose work and spirit they were determined to carry on.

“We’d back up Doc and talk to him about folk music, and he learned it for the same reasons we did,” Jens said. “‘Playing “Shady Grove” is magic,’ he’d say. ‘Takes me to another place. Clarence Ashley would sing it and I’d dream away.’ It’s not music to find reality, but to make one.”

From *Nina Simone to the Kruger Brothers*

★ Jens Kruger can play as fast as anyone else, when speed is called for, but that’s not what makes him special. Countless banjo players still try to keep up with Earl Scruggs, who remains the gold standard for thunderous, lightning-fast banjo runs. By contrast, Kruger takes more of a wandering, almost leisurely track, adding atmospheric Baroque flourishes and the sort of neck taps more commonly seen in jazz or heavy-metal rock guitar, up and down the neck. All part of making the banjo his own.

“Every culture has some sort of drum with strings,” Jens said. “Africa, the Middle East, the Far East. The banjo itself has roots in Africa and you find banjos all over—Irish music, in Sicily, even in Turkey, they have an instrument that looks exactly like a banjo. But the way it’s played in the South has a certain sound, mixing African roots with native American and European forms. It’s an amazing mixture, very rich and versatile.”

Uwe serves as the Kruger Brothers’ literal voice, the plainspoken lead singer of “Carolina in the Fall,” “Round and Round,” and other vocal originals. Like their mentor Doc, they cover Dylan’s “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right,” plus the occasional spiritual (a righteous “People Get Ready” is in their repertoire) and wild-card contemporary pop tune like Sting’s “Fields of Gold.”

Nevertheless, it’s Jens’s banjo and instrumental compositions that are at the heart of the Kruger Brothers’ self-proclaimed “New Carolina Music.” Onstage, Jens projects the urbane demeanor of a celebrity chef holding court at the head of a crowded table, positively beaming. And when he’s deep into a solo, he’ll sometimes grimace and murmur silently the same way Doc used to while playing guitar. It’s probably safe to say they both draw from the same river.

“We’ve never been folkloristic about it,” said Uwe. “The vein we’re in takes those traditions and tries to add something new. We have to be honest with ourselves about it, figure out what we can do.”

“Otherwise,” Jens said, “you’re locked into a factory job.”



*The Kruger Brothers in their recording studio in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina, in 2014.
From left: Uwe Kruger, Jens Kruger, and Joel Landsberg. Promotional photo by Uwe Kruger.*

Jens's compositional specialty has come to be commissioned works about mountainous terrain, 2017's *Roan Mountain Suite* and 2013's *Spirit of the Rockies* among them. But his best such work remains the Kruger Brothers' 2011 breakthrough *Appalachian Concerto*, a three-movement chamber piece with no words that nevertheless conjures up a deep sense of place. It's steeped in the discoveries that new arrivals make of North Carolina natural wonders like Grandfather Mountain, inspiration for the second-movement piece "As Far as the Eye Can See." Doc gets a nod with the album-opening "Morning at Deep Gap," which comes into focus like a mountain sunrise, and Jens looks back at their roots with "Gone, But Not Forgotten." By the closing notes of "The New Country," all is peace, harmony, and assimilation.

From Nina
Simone to the
Kruger Brothers

"I wanted to do something about immigration," Jens told me shortly after the album's release in 2011. "Almost everybody in this country is here because of immigration, whether by free will or not. That idea of immigration was intriguing, and also the way you can disappear into the vastness of Appalachia—especially coming from overcrowded European cities. As immigrants, we take pride in America. Not in a political sense, but the idea of America."

15

**Hip-Hop Goes to
College** 9th Wonder
and Little Brother

The average college class can take a while to get started after the bell rings, and Duke University's spring 2017 "History of Hip-Hop" class was no exception. Most days, it began with some informal chatter about current events, whether it was the latest Duke Blue Devils basketball game or a new piece of music that caught someone's ear. One afternoon late that semester, the thing everybody was talking about was *Damn*, the just-released album by Compton, California, rapper Kendrick Lamar. Most of the students judged it to be a masterpiece, an opinion the rest of the world came to share; a year later, *Damn* would win the Pulitzer Prize for music, hip-hop's first.

Patrick Douthit, teacher of the class, let them talk about *Damn* for a while. Then he dropped a tantalizing detail.

"I have something to tell y'all about that album," said Douthit, a producer/deejay better-known by his professional name 9th Wonder. "I worked on the last track, 'Duckworth.'"

A collective *Whoa* rippled across the room. Wonder already had credits on big-time, Grammy-winning, platinum-selling albums by the likes of Beyoncé, Mary J. Blige, Jay-Z, and Erykah Badu. Even so, *Damn* was clearly such an important, event-album landmark that it boosted Wonder to the very peak of influence in the music industry.

The students pressed Wonder for details about his contribution to "Duckworth," which he coproduced. But this was not the kind of production that involved recording live instruments in a studio, or even recording tape. As a producer, Wonder's stock in trade was beats, backing tracks composed of song samples taken off records and then manipulated and stitched together digitally into something new. Wonder told the class

about emailing beats, tracks, and edits back and forth with Lamar's team as the project came together—all of it top-secret, of course.

Wonder was not 100 percent sure his work would even make the cut until shortly before the album was released. But once *Damn* emerged, there it was on the album's final track, a song pairing Lamar's vocal with Wonder-blended samples from an array of unlikely and obscure sources: Charlotte rapper Shawn May, old-school disco group Fatback Band, and the Australian neo-soul group Hiatus Kaiyote among them. At one time, Wonder thought he might have multiple songs on the album. But all his samples wound up on "Duckworth."

9th Wonder and
Little Brother

"During the semester of our class, that was when he was working on 'Duckworth' and we had no clue about it," one of Wonder's students, senior Jason Fotso, told me. "But once that dropped, he could tell us the story of how that came to fruition. It was so cool to get that historical perspective from somebody embedded in the industry."

In a lot of ways, "Duckworth" stands as *Damn*'s most important track, closing the album out with a real-life autobiographical tale that sounds like a movie treatment. Originally titled "Life Is Like a Box of Chicken," the song tells the story of the rapper's father Ducky (short for the family's real last name, Duckworth), who worked at a Kentucky Fried Chicken. Ducky used to curry favor with some literal tough customers by slipping them free food when he could, which paid off when he survived an armed robbery by one of those toughs—Anthony "Top Dawg" Tiffith, who would go on to sign Lamar to his Top Dawg Entertainment label years later.

They didn't kill him, in fact it looked like they're the last to survive
Pay attention, that one decision changed both they lives . . .
Whoever thought the greatest rapper would be from coincidence?
Because if Anthony killed Ducky, Top Dawg could be servin' life
While I grew up without a father and die in a gunfight.

It made perfect sense that Wonder's contribution to one of the most important hip-hop albums of the early twenty-first century would involve personal history leading to something much, much larger.

★ In the spring of 1992, North Carolina briefly entered wider hip-hop consciousness thanks to a verse from "Scenario," the first single from Queens rap troupe A Tribe Called Quest to make the pop charts. It was a shout-out to "North Cackalacka" as marker for the rest of the South, from whence migrated many of the African American families up North:

“The Choice Is Yours” Black Sheep

North Carolina’s earliest commercial hip-hop breakthrough was the duo of Andres “Dres” Titus and deejay William “Mr. Long” McLean, who first met in the mid-1980s as teenagers growing up in Sanford. Eventually they became Black Sheep and moved up to Queens, falling in with the “Native Tongues” crew—consciousness-raising acts like De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, Queen Latifah, and Jungle Brothers. And they actually sold more records than most of the rest of that orbit, thanks to 1991’s “The Choice Is Yours.”

A diabolically catchy single that still turns up in commercial spots with its tagline chorus, “You can get with this or you can get with that,” “Choice” cracked the pop top-forty. Sales of Black Sheep’s *A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing* album topped 900,000 copies, but their success was short-lived. A follow-up album tanked when Black Sheep’s label was dissolved in a corporate merger, and they split up in the mid-1990s. They have since reunited periodically.

East Coast stomping, ripping and romping
New York, North Cackalacka and Compton
Checka, checka, check it out

Like Mississippi, Chicago and the blues, hip-hop’s “officially” sanctioned creation-myth narrative involves New York, Los Angeles, and little else besides the rivalry between those two centers of power. That gives short shrift to places like Midway, a modest North Carolina town of a few thousand souls. Patrick Denard Douthit was born in 1975 in the “5” Royales’ old home-town, Winston-Salem, but down the road in Midway was where he grew up.

The Douthits were a church-going family, which meant singing in the choir. Music was in the air at the family’s home the rest of the week, too, thanks to Patrick’s big brother Charles’s record collection. While growing up, young Patrick heard a lot of R & B classics by the likes of Curtis Mayfield, Earth Wind & Fire, Commodores, and Bobby Womack. He started noodling around on the piano himself as a kindergartner and went on to play in every school ensemble and chorus there was.

“I’d always wanted to do music in middle school and high school,” he told me in his amiable drawl in 2017. “I started out playing clarinet and

was in band and orchestra, playing seven or eight different instruments by eighth grade. I was all-county and all-state orchestra, too.”

Beyond North Carolina, music was changing as disco evolved into hip-hop in New York City nightclubs, where early rappers like Afrika Bambaataa would freestyle as deejays spun records. While there is some dispute as to what should count as the “first” rap recording, there’s no question about which one introduced the style to the masses: 1979’s “Rapper’s Delight,” a high-cholesterol truffle credited to a fictional in-the-studio ensemble called Sugarhill Gang. “Rapper’s Delight” recreated the backing arrangement to Chic’s number 1 hit “Good Times” (with Durham native Chip Shearin replicating Bernard Edwards’s bass groove in the studio) while the rappers threw down verses, most of them nonsensical.

9th Wonder and
Little Brother

I said a hip hop
The hippie to the hippie
To the hip hip hop
And you don’t stop

Patrick Douthit turned five years old the month “Rapper’s Delight” cracked *Billboard*’s pop top-forty, January 1980. Douthit would come of age during a golden age of hip-hop, the late 1980s and early ’90s, when the style grew beyond its origins as nightclub party music to encompass themes of black empowerment and consciousness—“Black America’s CNN,” in the words of Public Enemy’s Chuck D. The rap landscape ranged from Public Enemy’s black-pride militance to the mind-expanding consciousness of New York’s “Native Tongues” acts including Tribe and De La Soul, with the nihilistic gangsta-rap rage of Los Angeles’s N.W.A. somewhere in between. The music tended to be a sonic pastiche of samples lifted and assembled from unlikely sources, the more obscure the better. And like his fellow Winston-Salem native Mitch Easter, Douthit grew up hearing a wide range of music and learned to duplicate the sounds on a variety of instruments—the perfect skill set for a studio auteur.

All the same, a career in music was little more than a hazy daydream when Douthit left Midway at age eighteen to attend Durham’s historically black North Carolina Central University. Hip-hop was something you heard on the radio or in a Spike Lee movie soundtrack, or saw on *Yo! MTV Raps*. But not long after arriving at Central in the fall of 1993, Douthit discovered that hip-hop didn’t just live in the big cities or on MTV, but on college campuses in places like North Carolina—and not just because so many national touring acts played multiple dates around the state, making it one of the key stops on the East Coast. The Triangle

had a bustling community of local hip-hop acts just as vibrant as the “Next Seattle” alternative-rock wave cresting in Chapel Hill, although there was very little crossover among either acts or audiences. And just as the University of North Carolina’s WXYC was central for Chapel Hill’s underground rock bands, a local college radio station would prove to be ground zero for local hip-hop.

That was North Carolina State’s WKNC in Raleigh, 88.1-FM, where Bradford Thompson had a late-night hip-hop show under the deejay name “D’ranged & Damaged” at the beginning of the 1990s. One of Thompson’s roommates was Al’terik Wardrick, a Shaw University student from Newark, New Jersey, better-known by his stage name Mr. Funke. Wardrick/Funke was in Lords of the Underground, a rap trio with a name referencing the nineteenth-century northbound underground railroad of African Americans fleeing slavery. Their style was rapid-fire, mile-a-minute boasting and it played well on-campus. After the Lords hooked up with a manager who happened to be a cousin of Marley Marl (producer of LL Cool J, Big Daddy Kane, and other hit-makers of the period), Marl produced the Lords’ 1993 debut album *Here Come the Lords*, a major chart success.

Here Come the Lords cracked the top half of the *Billboard* 200 and was all over the radio, with a few singles even crossing over to the pop Hot 100. Taking his classes at Central over in Durham, Douthit saw the “Here Come the Lords” video—filmed in Raleigh on the Shaw campus, no less—and took notice.

“It was hard for me to fathom that rappers were from here,” he said. “New York or LA was the place to be and hip-hop was in this fantasy place off to the side. It almost didn’t even seem real, like a thing you could touch. I never even thought rappers could come from here, and my awareness of it was kind of gradual. I was really not aware of how close by it was until I got into it myself.”

★ Not to be outdone, Bradford Thompson also had a group of his own with friends who would come hang out at the WKNC studio during his show, often bringing along their homemade recordings to play. Two of his regulars were Torrin “Spin 4th” McBynum and Tyrone “Jingle Bel” Burris, who were studying communications at St. Augustine College in Raleigh. Those three teamed up with Bobby “DJ Assassin” Lyons to form Yaggfu Front, a name that stood for “You Are Gonna Get Fucked Up (If You) Front.” But their music was a lot funnier and more light-hearted than such a name implies, long on collegiate humor and powered by

samples cribbed from obscure soundtracks, goofy novelty records, old-school jazz, and even children's records and cartoon sound effects.

Despite their North Carolina origins, Lords of the Underground actually sounded a lot more like New Jersey, where they recorded *Here Come the Lords* at Marl's studio. On the other hand, Yaggfu Front could not have come from anywhere but a Triangle college campus. When they scored a major-label deal and made a full-length album in 1994, they called it *Action Packed Adventure* and opened it with a "Coming Attractions"-style audio trailer.

9th Wonder and
Little Brother

Skits and songs about the dangers of credit-card debt and blowing up the chemistry lab made the album equal parts undergraduate radio play and low-budget movie score. And it was very much a product of Eastern North Carolina right down to the hometown shout-outs to "Raleighwood, K-Town, Fayetteenam" (Raleigh, Kinston, Fayetteville). Inside the compact disc cover, the album's credits were superimposed over a roadmap of the Triangle. While Yaggfu Front never followed Lords of the Underground onto the charts, the fact that they got a major-label shot with Mercury Records showed the Triangle's other aspiring hip-hop artists that you didn't necessarily have to leave town to get your music heard.

Douthit became a father in 1995 and transferred from Central to N.C. State to be closer to his son's mother. Being in Raleigh brought him into the WKNC orbit, where he learned digital sampling using the program FruityLoops (later FL Studio) from some of the other deejays there. By 1998, he was back at Central and trying to bear down on earning that history degree. But he was bearing down on music, too, under the name 9th Wonder—not just the eighth wonder of the world, but the ninth. Wonder became part of a collective of area rappers and deejays dubbed the Organization and eventually Justus League.

Within Justus League, Wonder fell in with two vocalists, Virginia native Thomas "Rapper Big Pooh" Jones and Phonte Coleman, who had come to Central to play football but also turned out to be a first-rate battle rapper who could sing in a beautiful falsetto, too. The trio cut a song in 2001, "Speed," on which the plainspoken Coleman lamented the "treadmill lifestyle" grind of "sharecropping in the paper chase"—a historically black university sentiment if ever there was one.

Calling themselves Little Brother, the trio staked a claim to the mantle of inheritors of hip-hop's golden age. Wonder, Pooh, and Coleman kept writing and recording tracks whenever and wherever they could, using makeshift studios in apartments and dorm rooms. Finishing the first

Little Brother album took two years, but *The Listening* proved to be well worth the wait.

Released in February 2003 on the California-based independent label ABB Records (an acronym for Always Bigger and Better), it was an instant hit with the hip-hop backpack set as well as critics. I remember a night that spring when Little Brother performed at Kings in Raleigh, with their Justus League colleague Cesar Comanche as onstage master of ceremonies crowing about a rave review of *The Listening* that had just appeared in *The Source*, the hip-hop magazine that was pretty much the bible of the scene and reviewed albums on a scale of one to five microphones.

“Four Mics in *The Source*,” Comanche hollered over and over onstage that night. “*Four Mics!*”

But if things were going great for producer-deejay 9th Wonder, they hadn’t been going nearly as well for history major Patrick Douthit. Burned out on school, he opted to drop out of Central in 2001, while the Little Brother album was still a work-in-progress.

“I just felt like maybe school was not it, not for me,” he said. “Not to say I was dumb or anything, but it just wasn’t working. It was a leap of faith. I figured there had to be something else out there instead of just getting a job. I’ve always thought that education and knowledge is great, to be smart and aware, and graduating from college could get you a job. But would that give me happiness? So I was battling myself.”

After dropping out, Douthit went to work for the United Parcel Service call center over in High Point. But Wonder wasn’t completely off-campus, either. Friday nights found him coming back over to Durham to play beats on the air on yet another local college station, Duke University’s WXDU.

★ Hearing *The Listening* still feels like tuning in one of those late-night hip-hop shows on WKNC or WXDU. Except it’s on a fictional radio station called “WJLR,” which the album’s station-identification skit touted as “Justus League Radio—*Bam! The Future of Hip Hop Music!*” Lots of guests drop by throughout the album, with various Justus League cohorts turning up in cameo roles on deejay bits, call-in requests, and between-song commercial spots. It’s an album that conjures up quite a world between the headphones, sprawling and fully realized with eighteen tracks over an hour-plus running time. And that world was very much out of step with the top of the charts, then dominated by the gangsta bling of Curtis “50 Cent” Jackson—a New York rapper best-known for having survived nine shootings.

By contrast, Little Brother's more modest outlook evoked college coffeehouses and the neighborhood barbershop. And if their subject matter was just as hard as 50 Cent's, it was in a far less glamorous way. Songs on *The Listening* addressed social climbers and hangers-on, jealousy, infidelity, pride, prejudice, and guilt over kids stuck on the business end of single parenthood. Real life, and it made much of being "real hip-hop" in stark contrast to the minstrel show at the top of the charts. They laid it all out on the album-concluding title track.

This is a message for our people chasing Benjamins
With real rhymes and skills they believing in
Keeping them bad tapes rolling like Michelin
It don't matter 'cause niggas ain't listening.

Thanks to a lifetime of crate-digging, Wonder had just the sonic vocabulary to throw it all into stark relief with meticulously crafted arrangements that sounded both up-to-the-minute and historically savvy. You really needed headphones to pick up on all the auditory minutiae, lyrical as well as musical. A single song, "So Fabulous," worked in aural references to and quotes from Big Daddy Kane, Public Enemy, Rakim, LL Cool J, Slick Rick, Doug E. Fresh, and Digable Planets, among others. Wonder also went far beyond the standard hip-hop playbook for sounds, adding samples from some truly unexpected sources—seventies soft-rock duo the Carpenters, English progressive-rock band the Moody Blues, polyglot electronic-pop band Stereolab, even the bluegrass ensemble Tony Rice Unit.

Although it never made the *Billboard* 200, *The Listening* was an underground word-of-mouth sensation, eventually selling more than 60,000 copies. It also picked up rave reviews far and wide, especially for Wonder's arrangements, establishing his reputation as one of the best rising old-school sonic architects in the game.

With *The Listening* as calling card, Wonder was in-demand for freelance one-off studio projects beyond the Justus League. He started pretty much at the top, too, with New York rap legend and hip-hop royalty Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter. Wonder coproduced Jay-Z's 2003 track "Threat," concocting a beat out of samples from R & B singers R. Kelly and Luther Vandross, which also earned him a cowriting credit.

"Threat" appeared on 2003's *The Black Album*, which went triple-platinum in America with more than 3 million in sales. Wonder's card was officially punched. The Jay-Z connection helped get Wonder in the door with Destiny's Child, the videogenic R & B pop-star trio from Hous-



Little Brother's Patrick "9th Wonder" Douthit (seated) and Phonte Coleman, shown in 2001. News & Observer photo by John Rottet.

ton led by Jay-Z's future wife Beyoncé Knowles. Wonder handled production for three tracks on the group's 2004 swan song *Destiny Fulfilled* and it, too, went triple-platinum.

Other high-profile acts came calling—"Queen of Hip-Hop Soul" Mary J. Blige, De La Soul, Canadian rapper Drake, Texas-born R & B chanteuse Erykah Badu—all while Wonder was also still producing his crew back home. It got to be so much that he eventually had to bow out of touring with Little Brother and become a studio-only member while Coleman and Pooh took a touring deejay on the road.

"I have to make beats for us, Justus League, other people," Wonder told me in 2005. "It's a hustle. I'm always on the go."

9th Wonder and
Little Brother

★ Between underground buzz for *The Listening* and Wonder's extracurricular production work, Little Brother became a hot property and moved up to the major label Atlantic Records, which put them on the charts with 2005's *The Minstrel Show*. The week it debuted at a respectable number 56 on the *Billboard* 200, I met Wonder for an interview at the place of his choosing: a Quizno's sandwich shop, just about a mile up Hillsborough Street from WKNC's studio on the N.C. State campus. Even though he had platinum-record plaques coming for Destiny's Child and Jay-Z, Wonder seemed mostly unchanged by his newfound star status, still prowling the same local landscape as always.

"You know, we recorded *The Listening* right around the corner from here, Cesar Comanche's apartment over in Mission Valley," he said over a sensible salad. "And I used to work at the smoothie place down the street, right next to Record Exchange. The guy who owns that place came up to me at CMJ a few weeks back and said, 'I can't believe you used to work right next door, and here we're having a midnight sale for your album. Sold eighty CDs, too.'"

The Minstrel Show was a no-nonsense, pull-no-punches album that flew in the face of gangster tropes. Where *The Listening* played out as a "WJLR" radio show, *Minstrel* was structured as a *Saturday Night Live*-style TV variety show on the fictional "UBN: U Black Niggas Network." The album's most accessible song was actually a joke, a creepin' ballad called "Cheatin'" that perfectly parodied the controversial R & B seduction singer R. Kelly (who was already embroiled in legal troubles over allegations of sexual misconduct with underage girls).

Otherwise, the rest of the album consisted of deeply personal snapshots of black middle-class life, most of it in stark contrast to the flashier stuff at the top of the charts. "All for You," identified by Phonte Coleman

as his favorite song on *Minstrel*, was a searing confessional about the sins of a father being visited upon a son who can't help repeating the same mistakes.

Pissed off with your children feeling the same pain
So Pop, how could I blame 'cause you couldn't maintain
I did the same thing

Just in case anybody missed the point about the deliberately provocative title, the album's credits began with an essay about the nineteenth-century origins of black-faced minstrels as degrading caricatures—connecting the dots to the present day.

"To be blunt, there are many avenues available for black folks wishing to live fulfilling lives in this country, but still precious few (*cough* rap and sports) that get the Good House Negro Keeping seal of approval from the massa media. And boy it seems like the road to riches in the music biz is much easier for those whose subject matter mostly includes pimping, selling crack, strip clubs, and materialism. Sure, all those things exist, but is that ALL there is to talk about? ALL there is to us?"

"It's the dumbification of America," Wonder sighed. "We need something for the rap generation. We want what our parents gave us, musical freedom. We made this record and sure, we want fifteen-year-olds to like it. But they really won't be able to relate to it. It's more for people in college or past college, living real lives. I don't want us to be 'before our time.' This is for the thirty-year-old who bought [Nas's] *Illmatic* eleven years ago, who loves hip-hop and started listening to it in middle school."

If Wonder wanted to broaden his impact, it seemed like going off to New York or Los Angeles and opening a studio there would be the obvious move. What, I asked, was keeping him here in his home state?

"Just North Carolina, man," he said. "I don't fit the mold of hip-hop producer, honestly. I like traditions. You go to the State Fair every year, do this, that. The cost of living's not bad, it's a great place to raise kids and I've got three of 'em. Things you see all the time in New York, you don't see down here. I love it here. So I go to New York, do my stuff, and come home."

★ One of Little Brother's ongoing themes was the struggle between realness versus popularity, and it was not a dilemma they ever really reconciled. Coleman groused on the *Minstrel* track "Beautiful Morning" about the dead end of being a critics' favorite with "more press than Soundscans," which felt like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Not surprisingly, it came

“Raise Up” Petey Pablo

In 2001, Greenville native Moses “Petey Pablo” Barrett III gave North Carolina something it never had before: a hip-hop anthem. Produced by Virginia-based tastemaker Timbaland, “Raise Up” was a Dirty South roll-call that namechecked various prison towns across North Carolina, urging listeners to take their shirt off and “spin it like a helicopter.” Pablo knew about prison life firsthand and from a young age; the same year Patrick Douthit started at NC Central, Pablo began serving a five-year sentence for armed robbery.

“Raise Up” reached number 25 on the Hot 100 and kicked off a solid chart run for Pablo, including a top-ten single (2003’s very bawdy dirty-rap “Freek-a-Leek”) and two gold albums. But Pablo would have a troubled career, in which he could not sustain that initial success. A long association with former Tupac manager Suge Knight would come to nothing, and in 2010 Pablo was arrested at Raleigh-Durham International Airport trying to bring a gun onto a plane. That landed him back in prison for another twenty-six months.

Through it all, however, “Raise Up” never left the airwaves. The Carolina Hurricanes hockey team even adopted it as their goal song for the 2018–19 season, played to mark home-team scores, and it must have been a good-luck charm. That season was the first time the Hurricanes made the playoffs in a decade, and they advanced to the NHL’s Eastern Conference Finals.

to pass. While it sold a respectable 110,000 copies (nearly double what *The Listening* had moved), *The Minstrel Show* did not have that breakthrough single to take the group to the masses, which insured that Little Brother’s stay in the majors would be abbreviated. They were off Atlantic and back on the independent label ABB for their next album, 2007’s *Getback*.

By then, Little Brother was already fracturing. Phonte Coleman was spending more time with his electronic cool-soul side project, the Foreign Exchange, which would earn him a Grammy nomination in 2009. And Wonder was out of the group and well into his next chapter: going back to school, but as professor rather than student. Just because he never got his degree in history didn’t mean he couldn’t teach it.

Wonder started teaching in the fall of 2006 at his old school, North Carolina Central, with a class called “Hip-Hop in Context, 1973–1997” —

Dreamville J. Cole

Rapper J. Cole hasn't just built a career in North Carolina, but an empire with Dreamville—a label, management company, charitable foundation, festival and overall state of mind. Born in Germany to interracial parents in 1985, Jermaine Cole grew up in the military-base town of Fayetteville and came back to North Carolina after college in New York. And while Cole has not gotten that much critical respect from the industry—despite numerous nominations, he didn't win his first Grammy until 2020—the kids who listen to and buy his music understand. Starting in 2011, when Cole entered the major-label ranks, all five of his studio albums have reached number 1 on the *Billboard* 200.

Cole has taken high-profile political stands, standing with protestors in Ferguson, Missouri, after the 2014 Michael Brown shooting and also with football quarterback Colin Kaepernick's take-a-knee movement. At the time of this writing, Cole's crowning achievement was his Dreamville Festival. Some 40,000 people turned out at Dorothea Dix Park near downtown Raleigh on April 6, 2019, for the inaugural festival, headlined by Cole and featuring Rapsody among other peers.

an era bookended by when Marvin Gaye released “Let’s Get It On” and the year of the still-unsolved murder of Christopher “Biggie Smalls” Wallace, the rapper better-known as Notorious B.I.G. Around four-dozen students signed up that first year, attracted by Professor Wonder’s reputation. It helped that his coteacher was Christopher “Play” Martin, from the New York hip-hop duo Kid ’n Play. Kurtis Blow, a legendary rap forefather who had one of the genre’s earliest hits with 1980’s “The Breaks,” was among the guest speakers they brought in. Wonder had ambitions to build what he called a “Hip-Hop Initiative” at Central, which mystified some of his fellow teachers.

“It’s funny, the interactions you have on campus,” Wonder told me at the time. “Awkward, sometimes. I’ll go to somebody else’s office and tell them I’m on the faculty, and they’ll do a double-take: ‘No you’re not.’ ‘Um, yes I am.’ Since this is the South, guess I should be wearing the suit and tie.”



J. Cole onstage in front of 40,000 people at the inaugural Dreamville Festival, April 6, 2019, at Raleigh's Dorothea Dix Park. News & Observer photo by Scott Sharpe.

Wonder's initial run at Central wasn't entirely successful, and his initiative was shut down after a few years (although he later returned to teaching there). Nevertheless, academia agreed with Wonder, and he expanded his teaching and research to other campuses including Duke, University of Pennsylvania, and even Harvard (which would be the subject of a 2014 documentary film, *The Hip-Hop Fellow*) and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. When the Kennedy Center started up a Hip Hop Culture Council in 2018, Wonder was among the first artists appointed to it. Not bad for someone who still did not have a college degree.

"It's to the point where, if I get a PhD in anything, it will be the first of its kind," Wonder said in 2017. "No, I never did get the degree. I'm what

you'd call a professor at practice. So I'm kinda building the curriculum as I go along."

"He really is a naturally gifted teacher, which you see in the classroom as well as in the studio," his Duke coteacher, professor Mark Anthony Neal, told me in 2017. "When you talk to Patrick, he'll tell you his plan was always to become a history teacher. Then hip-hop happened. So he's still a history teacher, just in a different context. His teaching is grounded in historical aspects of the subject, which he's been an active participant in for twenty years. That's pretty unique."

Wonder stayed just as busy off-campus, building enough of a music-business resume to make it into the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame in 2019, inducted the same year as his fellow Winston-Salem native producer Mitch Easter. Wonder continued producing records, delivering that old-soul sound—for Jill Scott, Chris Brown, Ludacris, Raekwon from Wu-Tang Clan, his old Little Brother and Justus League mates—while running a label, Jamla Records. He even put out solo albums of his own, including 2011's *The Wonder Years*, featuring a wide array of guest rappers.

One of the guests on *The Wonder Years* was Kendrick Lamar, an underground-mixtape star on the verge of exploding into mainstream prominence; he had reached out to Wonder the year before with a tweet, saying he'd be honored if they worked together. They kept in touch and worked together again on "Complexion (A Zulu Love)," an exploration of skin-tone-based stereotypes on Lamar's wildly inventive 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Putting an exclamation point on "Complexion" was its incendiary closing verse by Wonder's protégée Marlana "Rapsody" Evans, whose powerful voice belied her five-foot-three-inch stature.

If you don't see you beautiful in your complexion
It ain't complex to put it in context
Yeah, baby, I'm conscious, ain't no contest
If you like it, I love it, all your earthtones be blessed.

★ Just as Little Brother inherited the consciousness-rap tradition of earlier hip-hop generations, Rapsody seems like the perfect flame-keeper to carry that legacy forward. Born in 1983, she had a personal history similar to Wonder's, growing up in the small Eastern North Carolina town of Snow Hill. She came to the Triangle for college in 2000, expecting to find the same 1990s hip-hop paradise her older sisters had experienced. But the earlier era's rap nightspots like Plum Crazy had closed, and it was a fallow period. The nadir for Rapsody came during her first



*Marlane "Rapsody" Evans performs at the 2017 Art of Cool Festival in Durham.
News & Observer photo by Scott Sharpe.*

year at N.C. State, when the musical entertainment for homecoming was a country band.

Determined to help make a new scene (or at least her own fun), Rapsody joined up with a group of State classmates in the hip-hop group Kooley High, which was where Wonder first saw her in 2005. "There's your star, the one who's gonna be big," he told the band. She was still a little rough around the edges, but also willing to work and work hard. Even Graves's disease, an autoimmune thyroid disorder Rapsody was diagnosed with in 2009, couldn't stop her.

Wonder signed Rapsody to Jamla and they started putting out independent releases, building enough of a reputation for artists beyond the Triangle to take notice. She also appeared on *The Wonder Years*—sharing a track with the mystical R & B songstress Erykah Badu, no less—and Lamar's "Complexion" was her national coming-out party. It earned Rap-

sody her first Grammy nomination, a share of Lamar's album-of-the-year nod for *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

Then she got two more nominations for her own 2017 album, *Laila's Wisdom*, named in honor of Rapsody's grandmother. When nominations were announced, one of the many congratulatory notes that came her way was from Jay-Z, whose Roc Nation label had released *Laila's Wisdom*. It was a forward of the first email he'd ever sent her some years earlier, to which he'd added: "From this email to a Grammy nomination, congratulations. This is what it's all about." While Rapsody did not win either of her nominations, it was probably poetic that the winner of both was Kendrick Lamar.

For all its acclaim, *Laila's Wisdom* did not set the charts on fire, climbing no higher than number 102 on the *Billboard* 200. It certainly pulled no punches about the difficulties Rapsody faced within the music business, confronting a deeply misogynistic industry as (a) a woman in an overwhelmingly male field, and (b) a woman who didn't look like Beyoncé. Feeling judged in all the wrong ways was deeply, deeply frustrating.

"You know you're not 'ugly,' but to be a woman in hip-hop is to get caught up in this idea of what other people put on a pedestal as 'beautiful,'" she told me in 2017. "You've gotta look a certain way, flat stomach, skin tone, long hair. And it seems like some people like other music that's not as good, but based on looks. It has an effect, people being so caught up in a man-made push of this fake idea of beautiful."

She even called one song on *Laila's Wisdom* "Black & Ugly."

I remember when y'all used to call me ugly
Isn't it ironic now they all just wanna love me?
So concerned with my weight, I'm more chunky than I am chubby
Confidence of a porn star the day I cut the horns off

"Yeah, I went through a period where it really affected how I looked at things," she said. "People put the way you look so far at the top and see music before they hear it. I'm not changing the way I look. So how do I break through? Just make dope music, I think."

16

Famous on Television

Scotty McCreery, Clay Aiken, Fantasia Barrino, and *American Idol*

Getting large crowds of people to travel hundreds of miles in North Carolina usually takes some combination of barbecue, basketball, and NASCAR auto racing. But on May 14, 2011, thousands from all over the state descended on Garner to celebrate that modest Raleigh suburb's super-clean-cut version of Woodstock: "Homecoming Day" for the local entrant in that season of *American Idol*, the wildly popular television singing competition. The man of the hour was Scotty McCreery, a skinny seventeen-year-old with an incongruously deep voice, who had until recently been working as grocery bagger at the local Lowes Foods. But on that Saturday, he came back home as one of three *Idol* finalists still standing after nearly four months of competition.

McCreery rose through the *American Idol* ranks singing both kinds of music, country *and* western, crooning straightforward songs about romance and good times, and his hometown absolutely loved him for it. Estimates of that day's crowd size at Garner's Lake Benson Park ranged from 10,000 to 30,000 for "Scotty McCreery Day" and it was a lot more than just locals, too. Much of the crowd had come from a long, long way away, many of them bearing homemade signs.

"Scotty McHotty"

"I (heart) Scotty"

"Scotty bag my groceries"

"Who needs sweet tea when you have Scot-tea?"

I was part of the *News & Observer* crew covering that day's rally, and my main task was to gather "color" in the form of quotes and soundbites

from people stationed along the parade route into the park. There were a lot of people like Joann Morgan, who had brought her thirteen-year-old granddaughter all the way from Currituck County 200 miles away, rising before dawn to make the trek to Garner. They had come prepared with a sign declaring, *Scotty is Shawboro's Idol*. Yes, they said, they were dedicated Scotty fans who dutifully tuned in *American Idol* every week and then burned up the phone lines afterward to vote as many times as they could.

"I got calluses on my thumb from voting for him last week," said sixty-six-year-old Joann. "But he seems like such a nice young man, I can't let him down."

"I did 200 votes in thirty minutes. But Granny voted all two hours," said her granddaughter Mary Kate with admiration.

Similar scenes had been playing out in living rooms all across the state that spring, from Murphy to Manteo, contributing to a groundswell of "Scottymania." And ground zero for the fervor was his hometown, where McCreery had been a pitcher for the school baseball team before rocketing to overnight fame singing on *American Idol*.

Two nights before the rally was another gathering at the Garner High School gymnasium, which was packed with friends, family, and faithful to watch the televised results and pull for McCreery to make the coveted top-three and its accompanying homecoming celebration. Lady Gaga, the pop star and future Oscar winner known for flamboyant onstage attire and manner (such as playing a piano while it was on fire), served as that week's guest judge to coach the final four *Idol* contestants and give performance tips.

"Make love to that microphone," she urged Scotty on the big-screen TV set up in the gym. "You've got to get right in the center of that hot dog."

The strait-laced McCreery took it all in stride, allowing himself a raised eyebrow and quipping that he might have to kiss the cross he kept on a necklace. But in the gym in Garner that night, a group of McCreery's friends from the baseball team expressed their displeasure. When Gaga appeared onscreen, they stood up en masse, crossed their arms and pointedly turned around. Puzzled, I asked an older gentleman who was laughing at the scene what it meant.

"*They turnin' their backs on the Gaga!*" the man crowed, delighted.

A few minutes later, when *American Idol* master of ceremonies Ryan Seacrest announced the results and it became official that Scotty had advanced to the next round, a deafening roar went up and lasted nearly a minute. They probably heard it all the way out in Currituck County.

★ Watching Scotty's rise from his home turf felt similar to what it was like following the Carolina Hurricanes' 2006 playoff run to the Stanley Cup, equal parts civic pride and can-this-be-happening bewilderment. His advancement to the final three set in motion a frantic scramble for the town of Garner to arrange a hero's welcome, with a park, stage, backup band, security, and all the other details of accommodating a large crowd. I staked out a spot at the start of the parade route to await the motorcade, and it arrived with a police and firetruck escort at full blare.

Scotty McCreery,
Clay Aiken,
Fantasia Barrino,
and *American Idol*

The convoy included a few pickup trucks filled with McCreery's "Blue Crew" friends from Garner High School, plus another truck bearing a *Grandmas for Scotty* sign and rocking chairs in the back. And bringing up the rear was Scotty himself perched in the back seat of a bright yellow convertible. As soon as he came into view, a cascading wave of young female shrieks moved through the crowd, multiplying as they spread outward and upward.

For his part, McCreery looked like the same wide-eyed young man who had auditioned for *American Idol* a few months earlier, showing up in flip-flops. He sang songs by Josh Turner and Randy Travis, and his voice and look were incongruous enough to inspire a memorable declaration from that season's new celebrity judge, Aerosmith front man Steven Tyler: "Well hellfire, save matches, fuck a duck and see what hatches" (with the tasteful censor's bleep for broadcast, of course).

"It ain't nothin' I ain't heard in high school," Scotty drawled. And now here he was at the unlikely other end of the journey.

Taking in the scene as Scotty's motorcade passed slowly by, I fell in right behind his car on a whim and followed along on foot as I took notes—a tremendously ill-advised thing to do. *American Idol* network Fox was in charge of all aspects of this event, stage-managing every last move for the cameras, and entering the parade route was strictly verboten. But even though I was breaking all kinds of rules, somehow nobody stopped me. Never underestimate the power of a notebook when you want to appear as if you belong somewhere.

It was the perfect view to take in the scene of Scotty waving and blowing kisses to the howling crowd professing its love. I wondered what it must feel like to be the subject of this kind of adoration before being even old enough to vote in something besides a singing competition. The people holding signs and yelling, meanwhile, looked puzzled as I walked past, probably wondering if I was part of the show.

Eleven days later, 122.4 million people called in to vote during the show's final night of competition. When all the votes were counted,



American Idol star Scotty McCreery riding the motorcade at his May 14, 2011, homecoming celebration at Lake Benson Park in Garner, North Carolina.
News & Observer photo by Scott Sharpe.

Scotty McCreery had won the whole thing to become 2011's American Idol.

★ In 1999, the record business was near its apex. It was the height of the compact-disc era, a time when so many acts were selling so many albums that mere gold certification for 500,000 copies sold, platinum for a million, and even multi-platinum no longer seemed sufficient to certify the industry's highest levels of sales success. Another benchmark was needed for the Shania Twains, Whitney Houstons, and Michael Jacksons of the world, so the Recording Industry Association of America created a new threshold marker: Diamond, for albums that cracked 10 million in sales.

Over time, this came to seem like hubris because it happened just before the end of the music industry's golden age of easy money. If the 1980s

had heralded a period of corporate record-label consolidation, the 1990s were the era when the harvest came in. So all those corporate mega-labels made hay in the sunshine, and the weather was sunny. Buoyed by a rising economy and a consumer base accustomed to paying more for compact discs than they had for vinyl records or tapes, the music industry's sales and profits skyrocketed. Huge multi-platinum blockbusters become so commonplace that a dismissive phrase was coined for albums that fell short of expectations by selling "only" a million copies: "Platinum turkey."

Scotty McCreery,
Clay Aiken,
Fantasia Barrino,
and *American Idol*

Mainstream tastes changed during the 1990s in the wake of Kurt Cobain's demise, when alternative rock's commercial potency faded in favor of hip-hop and polished prefab teen-pop by the likes of Backstreet Boys, Britney Spears, and NSYNC. Commercially, at least, it didn't seem to matter because sales at the top end remained strong no matter the style. The high-water mark came in March of 2000, when NSYNC's *No Strings Attached* sold a staggering 2.4 million copies the week it came out — more than double the previous single-week record of 1.1 million set by the Backstreet Boys just a year earlier. *No Strings Attached* would go on to become one of NSYNC's two diamond-certified albums, eventually selling 14 million copies.

Nobody knew it at the time, but that was the beginning of the end. The dot-com bubble burst that same month, March of 2000, vaporizing numerous internet startups as the larger U.S. economy began to falter. But one tech firm that survived was Napster, a rogue online service that had come into existence in 1999 and enabled listeners to practice piracy by finding, downloading, and sharing music without paying for it. The effects weren't immediately felt, and the U.S. record industry's total revenue for the year 2000 came to more than \$21 billion. That record will probably stand forever, because a long slide began the following year.

Record companies had stopped commercially releasing singles by then, in an attempt to force listeners to cough up \$15 to buy entire albums rather than individual songs. But Napster was a way around this. The industry's initial reaction to file-sharing was to attempt to ignore it and then to sue people who were illegally trading music online, resulting in a predictable public-relations disaster. When the record business, finally, belatedly got its act together enough to offer music for sale digitally through the iTunes Store in 2003, the listening audience's cherry-picking ways were set and listeners were far more likely to buy a song or two than entire bundled albums of tracks. Phone ringtones of songs and online streaming emerged later and did chip in some revenue. But with

Spotify paying as little as \$0.006 per song stream, the bottom line came to a fraction of what artists and labels had been making before.

By 2015, total record-industry revenue had shriveled to less than \$7 billion, one third of its peak from fifteen years earlier. This was a panicky period for the business because its reliably time-tested model was broken, and nothing seemed to work (and it was hardly coincidence that this was also when the no-frills North Carolina independent label Merge Records would have its greatest success). Artists, formats, and strategies that had been proven, dependable hit-makers for decades were instead dying on the vine. Record stores had already been struggling from Napster, and the online mega-retailer Amazon shrank their margins even smaller. Chains closed in droves, from the nationwide Tower Records chain to North Carolina's Record Exchange.

In the industry's darkest days, however, there was one thing that *did* work: *American Idol*, a singing-competition show that went on the air in 2002 as an Americanized version of the similarly styled U.K. show *Pop Idol*. It quickly became a launchpad for stardom and a dream come true for the record industry, in that it shortened the star-making process from years down to the length of a television season. Instead of the expensive, uncertain, and labor-intensive process of bands slugging it out for years in clubs, *Idol* efficiently groomed a fresh crop of new stars each season and parachuted its winners straight into the top of the charts. After he won *Idol*, Scotty McCreery's first album debuted at number 1 on the *Billboard* 200—less than seven months after his first appearance on the show.

"This show is doing something that record companies have dropped billions of dollars into, artist development," Raleigh producer Dick Hodgin told me in 2006, when *Idol* was at its peak of influence. "These people don't need to be 'developed.' Literally millions of people have voted, and they're already stars. It takes one short season to do what record companies used to take years to do, develop and break an artist. They're turning out bona fide stars where the public goes out and buys the record."

★ Beyond getting to the top, however, staying there was another matter entirely. A fast rise is almost always followed by an even faster fall, and few *Idol* acts were able to sustain success beyond that first television-fueled burst. The show's format was basically a karaoke contest with contestants usually singing a verse and chorus of some well-known song, which generally made for better television-watching than music-listening.

Most quarters of the music industry did not take *Idol* seriously, including the National Association of Recording Arts and Sciences, the organization that gives out Grammy Awards. Aside from a few scattered *Idol* Grammys here and there, only season-four winner Carrie Underwood went on to be a major Grammy player, winning seven through 2020.

Radio was less than receptive to most *Idol* alumni, too. When Scotty McCreery emerged as an odds-on favorite to win during his *Idol* run in the spring of 2011, an online trade publication called radio-info.com ran a column with the headline, “‘American Idol’ Finalists Could Get a Chilly Reception at Country Radio.” The story anonymously quoted a number of country-station programmers who were remarkably negative about everyone in that year’s finalist class, but especially McCreery:

“If Scotty McCreery gets signed, I’m gonna need to change my phone number.”

“I’m calling in sick the day they bring Scotty by on radio tour.”

“Scotty hasn’t demonstrated that he can be anything but creepy.”

Despite the lack of critical respect or staying power, the fact remained that *Idol* was moving a steady stream of guaranteed new stars through the pipeline at a time when the record industry was desperate for something, anything to drum up business. Every season, thousands of hopefuls tried out for *American Idol* in open auditions across the country, hoping to earn a “Golden Ticket” to the show’s Hollywood round. Celebrity judges set the field for prime time before viewers got to weigh in, determining winners by telephone voting.

American Idol was a hit on television right from the start, too, the country’s top-rated program for a number of years. At the show’s peak, more than 30 million people were tuning in to watch every week and many voted, some multiple times—and they even bought the music. Just like the 1950s sitcom *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* launched the teenage Rick Nelson to stardom in the 1950s when he’d play his latest single on the show, *American Idol* produced stars who could generate sales levels that record labels still longed for. Oklahoma-born Underwood, who went on to become one of country music’s biggest twenty-first-century stars after winning *Idol* in 2005, was top of the heap. Native Texan pop singer Kelly Clarkson, the winner of 2002’s debut *Idol* season, wasn’t far behind.

But no state owned the *American Idol* franchise like North Carolina. During the show’s initial fifteen-season run on Fox (before it restarted on ABC in 2018 after a one-year hiatus), North Carolina was the only state to produce three winners. In addition to 2011 champion McCreery,

Scotty McCreery,
Clay Aiken,
Fantasia Barrino,
and *American Idol*

High Point R & B singer Fantasia Barrino won in 2004, and raspy-voiced Asheville rock singer Caleb Johnson won in 2014. The only other state to register multiple winners was Alabama, with two.

True, North Carolina's population was growing rapidly between 2002 and 2016, but not fast enough to explain how a state with just 3 percent of the total U.S. population could produce 20 percent of the nation's *American Idol* winners. That's a rate nearly seven times higher than expected, and the probability of it happening was 0.91 percent, according to a number of statisticians I polled about it in 2016. Richard L. Smith, director of the University of North Carolina's Statistical and Applied Mathematical Sciences Institute, also performed a further "likelihood ratio test" to calculate whether or not this result was "inconsistent with random." He reported that there was a "p-value" true-significance level of about 0.045, or one chance in 22 — an admittedly small chance, but not necessarily not random, in the parlance of statisticians.

"In practical terms, I would say that the results do not demonstrate that the distribution of winners is not random over the whole population," Smith told me. "North Carolina has certainly done very well in the competition."

As to what all this means, I've asked countless people in and out of *American Idol* as well as the greater music industry why they thought North Carolina seemed to have the market cornered. A few offered nebulous theories about church choirs, or chamber-of-commerce bromides — "I'd like to think the main reason is that North Carolina has a lot of talented folks coming out," the diplomatic and ever-polite McCreery told me in 2016 — but the bottom line, then and now, is that nobody has any idea.

★ Whatever the reason, North Carolina's *American Idol* domination was such that it extended beyond the winner's circle, to also-rans who triumphed over the long haul. During the 2016 season, the *Wall Street Journal* totaled up sales figures, and five of the eleven all-time top-selling *Idol* alumni were from North Carolina. Three of those five did not win their season: 2006 top-ten finalists Chris Daughtry and Kellie Pickler; and 2003's second-place finisher Clay Aiken, who has had as strange an odyssey as anybody who's ever been on the show.

The double-platinum debut album of season-one winner Kelly Clarkson immediately established *Idol* as a pop-star hit-maker just in time for 2003's second season. And that year's most intriguing contestant was Aiken, a twenty-four-year-old Raleigh native with the elfin demeanor

Freakonomics Stephen Dubner, John Darnielle

Like the performers who emerged from *American Idol*, Stephen Dubner also had a transformative star-making event—but his came from a book, not a television show. Native New Yorker Dubner was keyboardist and coleader of the Right Profile, a 1980s-vintage alternative-pop band that formed at Appalachian State University. The group signed to the major label Arista in 1986, but the deal quickly went south and the band ultimately disintegrated without ever releasing a record.

Dubner went back to school in New York and was well into a journalism career when he met Steven Levitt, a University of Chicago economist. They teamed up to cowrite 2005's *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, a book with a decidedly quirky world view. Various chapters dealt with the link between legalized abortion and crime rates, communication similarities between realtors and Ku Klux Klansmen, and the economics of drug-dealing. Written in breezy prose, the book was a runaway best-seller that became a brand encompassing a sequel book, 2010 documentary film, consulting group and *Freakonomics Radio* podcast hosted by Dubner. He's been successful enough to have discovered the downside of fame.

"The *Freakonomics* film was not huge, but big enough to where recognition was coming heavier," Dubner told me in 2018. "My first thought was, 'Man, am I glad I stopped playing music.' I like being the observer rather than observed. I'm not 'famous' on any real level, probably now for my voice from *Freakonomics Radio*. I've learned to be less obnoxious about being recognized. In a perfect world, I'd be faceless and anonymous. When I was a kid, my imaginary super-power was always being invisible."

The Right Profile's drummer was Jon Wurster, who went on to a long side-career of his own as a comedy writer while playing in bands including Superchunk and Mountain Goats—whose front man, John Darnielle, has become a best-selling novelist. A California native, Darnielle came to the Triangle as trailing spouse when his wife got a job at UNC. In addition to Mountain Goats albums, Darnielle has published a series of novels full of the same sort of damaged people inhabiting his songs.

Scotty McCreery,
Clay Aiken,
Fantasia Barrino,
and *American Idol*

of a mischievous camp counselor. Like Scotty McCreery, Aiken had impeccably wholesome bona fides, including church membership and work with special-needs children.

Aiken also had a theatrical singing style that lent itself well to show tunes and played well on television, although it only got him as far as a close second to season-two winner Ruben Studdard, a churchy R & B singer from Birmingham, Alabama. But Aiken would go on to a far more successful recording career, with six albums that collectively sold more than 5 million copies—good for fourth all-time among *Idol* alumni and close to double Studdard's sales figures. And even though he did not win, Aiken was still the first *Idol* act to land a coveted *Saturday Night Live* performance spot, in 2004.

As was typical for *Idol* releases, Aiken's albums sounded as if they were made by committee, slick and prefab, which his extraordinarily rabid fan base could not have cared less about. Hometown civic pride trumped anything like artistic merit, and I can tell you from personal experience that Aiken's "Claymate" fans had zero tolerance for discouraging words in print. I probably received more angry communications in response to Clay Aiken reviews than all other artists put together during my twenty-eight-year career at the *News & Observer*. A sampling of soundbites from the many, many voicemails received in response to a less-than-enthusiastic review of Aiken's 2006 album *A Thousand Different Ways*:

"You really have no idea what you're talking about. . . . Hope you have a horrible day."

"You may need to get a new job because I don't think you're a good music critic at all. And I don't believe that you're away from your desk, you're just refusing to answer your phone because you wrote such a terrible article. So have a really crappy day."

"I wanted to congratulate you on living in North America. I think you should probably return to a Middle Eastern country because this is a freedom where people can listen to the types of music they want to hear. Plus I don't know why anyone from North Carolina would advertise so harshly about a native son. Seems to me maybe you're mean-spirited. Let's have a good word about one of our former young men."

After Aiken's recording career ran its course, he remained a celebrity and made headlines when he came out as gay around the same time he became a father in 2008 (through in vitro fertilization with Jaymes Foster, sister of noted music producer David Foster). Later, Aiken got to

know future president Donald Trump during the 2012 season of NBC's *The Celebrity Apprentice*, where he finished (of course) second to Arsenio Hall. He also made an unsuccessful run for Congress in 2014 against conservative Republican incumbent Renee Ellmers, an experience that did not leave Aiken with much respect for his opponent.

"She's a bitch, she's an idiot, and I think her self-esteem is under the floor," Aiken said of Ellmers in an unusually candid 2015 interview with shock-jock radio deejay Howard Stern.

A subsequent documentary about Aiken's political campaign for Congress was titled, naturally, *The Runner-Up*.

Scotty McCreery,
Clay Aiken,
Fantasia Barrino,
and *American Idol*

★ A year after Aiken's silver-medal finish, North Carolina reached the *American Idol* winner's circle for the first time with 2004 champion Fantasia Barrino. A big-voiced nineteen-year-old from the textile-and-furniture town of High Point (the "Home Furnishings Capital of the World" and "North Carolina's International City"), Barrino was a cousin of the Hailey brothers from 1990s R & B stars Jodeci. Barrino had an inspiring and hard-scrabble backstory as a struggling single parent, plus a booming R & B voice that could put across contemporary R & B with hip-hop touches as well as Great American Songbook classics like George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* show-stopper "Summertime" — a song that became Barrino's signature when she performed it twice on *Idol* that year, including the season finale.

She won going away, shortened her professional name to just Fantasia, and was an instant success as a recording act. Fantasia would have almost as good a run on the charts as Clay Aiken, selling 3.5 million total albums to come in fifth on the *Idol* sales list.

Still, her time in the spotlight proved to be difficult. Fantasia published a memoir in 2005, *Life Is Not a Fairy Tale*, in which she revealed that she was functionally illiterate and ruffled some local feathers by calling her hometown "Land of the Dead." That resulted in angry denizens of High Point lobbying to get rid of the signs the town had erected in her honor, and the city complied.

North Carolina did not factor into the 2005 season, won by Carrie Underwood. But the state's peak came a year later, the 2006 season, which was the show's high point, too. The 30 million viewers tuning in every week gave *Idol* the top spot in the rankings. And even though another Alabaman won, Birmingham-born hambone Taylor Hicks, North Carolina had three of 2006's top eight finalists: Albemarle's Kellie Pickler, Rockingham's Bucky Covington, and Chris Daughtry from McLeansville.

A refugee from his family's auto-body shop, where Bucky and his drummer/twin brother Rocky both worked, Covington was something like the 2006 season's unofficial mascot. He had ample aw-shucks country-boy charm, and it was not an act—he'd never even flown on a plane before he went to Hollywood for *American Idol*. And while no one seemed to take him too seriously as a legitimate threat to win that season, everybody loved Bucky enough for him to slide into the final eight before bowing out. A year later, when Covington made a return visit to the *Idol* set as a guest mentor, the show's tart-tongued British "mean judge" Simon Cowell took Bucky aside to tell him, "I actually missed you."

"Ain't that some shit?" Covington told me with a laugh in the spring of 2007, when his first album was coming out. Produced by Mark Miller of Sawyer Brown—the band that knocked North Carolina party band Sidewinder out of the *Star Search* semifinals in 1984 on its way to winning that season—*Bucky Covington* was solid mainstream country with at least one song that pulled at the heartstrings (the teen-tragedy ballad "I'll Walk," a top-ten country single). The album debuted at number 1 on the country charts, but Covington's post-*Idol* career was derailed when his record label folded.

Kellie Pickler, a brassy young blonde from the Stanly County town of Albemarle who came in sixth that year, showed more staying power. She parlayed her time on the show into a solid recording career with 2 million albums sold, eleventh on the list of *Idol* best-sellers. But music was only part of Pickler's brand. She earned further game-show bona fides by winning the 2013 season of ABC's *Dancing with the Stars*, followed by the reality-show series *I Love Kellie Pickler* on Country Music Television—with her long-suffering husband, Kyle Jacobs, in the role of foil to various harebrained schemes. The show's vibe was equal parts *I Love Lucy* and *Green Acres*, like the episode where Pickler decided they should raise chickens at their house in Nashville.

"That didn't last long," she told me in 2016 with a laugh. "Especially after the dog caught one of them."

Overall, however, 2006's true winner and biggest star turned out to be Chris Daughtry, who began the year working at a Greensboro Honda dealership where they had out a donation box to help fund his *Idol* audition travel expenses. Once he made the field, Daughtry quickly emerged as that season's anointed frontrunner—a rocker with a singing voice that was versatile if you were generous, generic if you weren't. But Daughtry sounded like he'd fit right into Godsmack, Fuel, Nickelback, and the rest of that era's rock-radio hit parade. The *Idol* judges loved Daughtry for



Chris Daughtry onstage in Raleigh in 2014. Even though the McLeansville native didn't win the 2006 season of American Idol, he was one of the biggest stars the show produced. News & Observer photo by Scott Sharpe.

what they called his “recording voice,” honed from years slogging away in bands around the hometown, most recently one called Absent Element.

Daughtry looked like the obvious winner and his victory seemed so inevitable that his failure to advance beyond the top four still rates as one of the biggest surprises in *Idol* history. But it didn't take long for the situation to right itself. Even though Taylor Hicks's drunk-uncle-at-a-wedding shtick carried him to the *American Idol* championship that year, Daughtry lapped him on the charts and outsold the winner by more than a ten-to-one margin. Daughtry's 9 million albums sold rank him third

all-time among *Idol* alumni, and also make him the show's top-selling nonwinner.

About the only bad vibes for Daughtry came from a round of legal unpleasantness with his former bandmates in Absent Element. After Daughtry reached the multi-platinum stratosphere with his first album, they sued him over violations of their partnership agreement with regards to material when he went solo. The case was settled in 2015, the terms confidential, and neither the plaintiffs or their attorney would comment. Asked about the lawsuit a few months after the settlement, Daughtry called it "kind of a sore subject I'd prefer not to talk about."

That aside, he came away from his *Idol* experience with nothing but fond memories.

"It helped me break away from being stuck behind a guitar, reliant on having a band behind me," Daughtry told me in 2018. "It helped me break free of my comfort zone by making me perform, which was all new to me. Having always hidden behind a guitar, being forced to look at a camera and perform was a challenge, in a good way."

★ After North Carolina's big 2006 season, *Idol* began to wane in popularity and influence over the next few years. Ratings as well as sales declined over time, and the success of the show's winners was no longer a sure thing. Asheville's Caleb Johnson became North Carolina's third winner in 2014, but his *Idol*-sponsored album *Testify* sold a meager 26,000 copies and landed him right back where he started before the show. A year later, 2015 winner Nick Fradiani did even worse, selling just 5,000 copies of his album *Hurricane*. The bloom was officially off the *Idol* rose.

In fact, pretty much the final lasting star of any magnitude that the show produced was Scotty McCreery. His career did not come without some rough spots, but he managed to show a surprising amount of resilience beyond that first flash in 2011. Seven years after winning *Idol*, McCreery seemed to have finally grown into that deep voice that seemed like a teenage novelty when he was doing Josh Turner covers.

On a cold February morning in 2018, I met with McCreery to do an interview just as he had a new album coming out. A loyal N.C. State fan, he set it up to meet at Jimmy V's, the downtown Raleigh restaurant named after the late Wolfpack basketball coach Jim Valvano. He was in a pretty good mood that day, having just gotten word that he'd earned his first-ever number 1 country-radio single with "Five More Minutes," an emotional song he'd cowritten about his late grandfather. That felt

like sweet vindication after all those ugly anonymous radio-programmer comments back in 2011.

“I had to pay some dues, and rightly so,” he said. “I’m cool with that. I’m glad they made me work for it and didn’t just hand it to me. Early on, I found a lot of the radio gatekeepers to be intimidating. Nowadays we’re friends.”

A lot had happened in those seven years, including a few years enrolled at N.C. State before he abandoned college to commit to music full-time. McCreery had also gotten engaged to longtime girlfriend Gabi Druhal (they married the following June). And he’d lost one record deal, the one that came with his *Idol* victory, and gotten another.

It was a different, smaller record business than before. McCreery’s first album in 2011 had sold 1.1 million copies in the wake of all his *Idol* exposure. Despite that first number 1 single, however, his 2018 *Seasons Change* album still didn’t crack 100,000 in sales by the end of that year. It even had a second number 1 hit on another, more North Carolina-centric chart—the Beach Music Top 40, as reported by the Association of Carolina Shag Clubs. The song was called “Barefootin’,” and you could imagine it showing up on an Embers setlist.

“I used to see Band of Oz playing down at the beach,” he said. “I even sang with them at Topsail Beach one night. I was in the crowd and one of their daughters brought me up. I think we did their version of ‘Wagon Wheel.’”

Of course, that was a song with the chorus, “And if I die in Raleigh at least I will die free.”

McCreery talked at length that morning about his career, his beloved Wolfpack’s NCAA basketball tournament prospects, his then-upcoming guest appearance on the relaunched version of *American Idol*. Afterward, we shook hands and walked outside toward his car. Asked what he was driving, he nodded toward a Ford F-150 pickup truck parked across the street—the same one he’d won during *Idol* seven years earlier and nicknamed “Loretta” for country icon Loretta Lynn.

“Yep, still got it,” he said with a shrug and a smile. “I’ll drive it ’til the wheels fall off.”

Practical to the end.

Scotty McCreery,
Clay Aiken,
Fantasia Barrino,
and *American Idol*

Epilogue September 2013

In 2012, the International Bluegrass Music Association made an announcement that flew in the face of Nashville's reputation as the center of all things musical. The IBMA declared that it would be moving its annual World of Bluegrass festival from Nashville to Raleigh, which had been courting the bluegrass trade organization's annual shindig for years.

Not surprisingly, Nashville's denizens reacted with mockery. Writing in *The Tennessean*, newspaper columnist Peter Cooper sniffed that Raleigh was "a fine city" whose claims to fame included a 1983 NCAA basketball championship for the hometown N.C. State Wolfpack before concluding, "What does that have to do with bluegrass? Well, nothing at all."

In Raleigh, the local organizing committee laughed that off and did what people in North Carolina have always done: they got to work. And a year later, when World of Bluegrass made its Raleigh debut, it was a huge success right out of the gate. The alternative-slanted Hopscotch Music Festival, which started up in 2010, had already demonstrated Raleigh's downtown grid, nightclub network, and communal enthusiasm was perfect for music festivals. World of Bluegrass took that to a whole new level with more than 140,000 people crowding the downtown streets to hear bluegrass during 2013's inaugural event—many multiples more than ever turned out in Nashville. Within a few years, the festival's crowds were topping 200,000 annually.

Among the local acts to play the festival that first year was Chatham County Line, who got so caught up in the spirit, they set that feeling to song. Debuted on one of the street festival stages, it became World of Bluegrass Raleigh's unofficial theme song by declaring that while bluegrass was "born in Kentucky and moved off to Nashville," it was "Living in Raleigh Now." The accompanying video showed the band stealing portraits of Bill Monroe and Earl Scruggs off a gallery wall, then taking them on a tour of downtown landmarks.



The view looking down Raleigh's Fayetteville Street to the south during the 2013 World of Bluegrass festival. News & Observer photo by Scott Sharpe.

Whatever Nashville or Kentucky's claims of ownership, Raleigh turned out to be the perfect place for World of Bluegrass to blossom into a crowd-sourced festival where the audience was as much a star as any of the performers. While the urban setting was unusual, it was like any other bluegrass festival, in that the music spilled off the stage. But instead of around campfires, the picking circles were happening around hotel lobbies, parking garages, and street corners. Everywhere you went during World of Bluegrass, there was music and people joining in. And what were they all playing? Charlie Poole songs and Scruggs-style banjo, of course.

I have a vivid memory of walking down Raleigh's Fayetteville Street main drag during that 2013 festival and coming upon a young group playing on the sidewalk in front of the old Hudson Belk building with a large throng of listeners in a semicircle. The musicians looked like they weren't much older than teenagers as they played guitars, banjo, fiddle, mandolin, and even an improvised milk-crate drum kit.

Whether it was an actual band or just a pickup jam, the kids could

play, and they were tight as they blazed through that old-time mill-town chestnut “Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down Blues.” A good chunk of the crowd knew the words, too, and they sang along with gusto.

Don’t let your deal go down
Before my last gold dollar is gone

Epilogue

The song still had plenty of life left, close to ninety years after Charlie Poole went up to New York City and turned it into a hit record. And as it happened, this scene took place right across the street from the former site of the old WPTF studios, where the Monroe Brothers were playing in 1938 shortly before Bill Monroe struck out on his own and invented bluegrass seven years later with Earl Scruggs. A long and winding road that, three-quarters of a century later, led all the way right back here.

Whether or not anyone else gathered on that sidewalk was even aware of this history, it was still living proof of North Carolina’s quietly influential place in American music, hiding in plain sight for those who care to look. It’s still ongoing, too. I’ve heard a lot of Charlie Poole songs at every World of Bluegrass festival since that first year, which I’m sure will continue. It’s music in the air as well as the soul—from Blind Boy Fuller to Doc Watson, the Embers to “5” Royales, Nantucket to Nina Simone, Let’s Active to Little Brother, Arthur Smith to Squirrel Nut Zippers to Superchunk. Whether it’s people who stayed, left, or rambled in from elsewhere, those circles never do stop closing.

And so I lingered for a while, to listen and to bear witness, as I’ve done for all these years. Then I smiled to myself, nodded, and moved on.

Acknowledgments

I owe thanks to so many people, places, and things, but especially to the *Raleigh News & Observer*, my professional home from 1991 to 2019. A job covering music brought me here in the first place, and I am so grateful to Suzanne Brown for hiring me and serving as my first (and in many ways best) guide. The earliest work on this book came with stories I wrote for the paper, primarily assigned and edited by Suzanne, who always made me better even if there were times when the process drove both of us kind of nuts. Thanks also to other colleagues I wrote for and worked alongside in the *N&O* newsroom: Mary Cornatzer, Joe Miller, Marcy Smith, Brooke Cain, Martha Quillin, Geoff Edgers, Bruce Siceloff, Chuck Salter, Mary Miller, Debbie Moose, Lisa Pollak, Matt Ehlers, Andrea Weigl, Judy Bolch, Charles Fishman, Felicia Gresette, Craig Jarvis, Deborah Boyette, Adrienne Johnson Martin, David Perkins, Carole Miller, Bob Langford, Bill Morrison, and Jessica Banov among them.

Way back in 2004, Mark Simpson-Vos of the University of North Carolina Press sat down with me for the first time to discuss a book about North Carolina's music history. Sixteen years later, here it is, and I hope it was worth the wait. Thanks for sticking with it, and with me. Thanks also to Jay Mazzocchi, Jessica Newman, Catherine Hodorowicz, Dino Battista, and the rest of the staff at UNC Press.

So many of the people I've talked to and written about over the years have been patient, kind, and generous sharing their knowledge. Special gratitude to Mark Kemp, Bullfrog Willard McGhee, Scott Ainslee, Jens and Uwe Kruger, Tim Duffy, Bill Phillips, Gaile Welker, Arthur Smith, Joe Wilson, Maceo Parker, Michael "M.C." Taylor, Brad Cook and Phil Cook, Chris Boerner, Ben Folds, Robert Sledge, Darren Jessee, Kerry McCarthy, Rod Abernethy, Scott and Seth and Jim Avett, Dolphus Ramseur, Bob Crawford, Dick Hodgins, Tim Sommer, Mitch Easter, John Tanner III and Daryl Pauling, Taylor Doggett, Maceo Parker, Barry Mazar, Brian Turk, Stacy Schorr Chandler, Loudon Wainwright III, David Holt, Frye Gaillard, George Hamilton V, Jim Mills, John McEuen, Laura Boosinger, Bobby Hicks and George Shuffler, Wayne Martin, George Holt, William Lewis and Jamie Katz, Cece Conway, Tift Merritt, Van Alston, Godfrey Cheshire III, Mickey Gamble, Andy Swindell and Bobby Thompson, Rev. Billy C. Wirtz, Tommy Redd, Dave Rose, John Custer, Pee Wee Watson, Mike Dean, DD Thornton, Jefferson Holt, Josh Grier, Mike Connell, Ed Morgan, Dana and Karen Kletter, Tom Maxwell, Katharine Whalen, Jimbo Mathus, Mac (McCaughan) and Laura (Ballance), Jon Wurster, Lane Wurster and Steve Balcom, Jay Faires, John Darnielle, Paul Jones, Bland Simpson, Molly Flynn, David Akins, Crys Armbrust, Branford Marsalis, Mark Anthony Neal, Jaki Shelton Green, Rick Miller, Patrick "9th Wonder" Douthit and Phonte Coleman, Marlana "Rhapsody" Evans, and Alice Gerrard—who probably had no idea what a long road she was starting me down all those years ago.

This is the first book I've ever done that involved visual images beyond the cover,

Acknowledgments

so major appreciation to the following for their help in rounding up photographs and artifacts: Jeff Yarbrough and Jill Mathieu, Chris Stamey, Eddie Blair, James Massey, Clay Smith, Paula Phelps, Randy Noles, Ian Dunn at the North Carolina State Archives, Frank Heath and Laird Dixon, Caitlin Cary, Daniel Coston, Steve Weiss and Aaron Smith at the University of North Carolina's Wilson Library, and most of all Scott Sharpe and the other fine shooters I was privileged to work with over the years at the *N&O*: Juli Leonard, Chris Seward, Julia Wall, Chuck Liddy, Casey Toth, Robert Willett, Ethan Hyman, Harry Lynch, Robert Miller, Roger Winstead, John Rottet, Jason Graves, Travis Long, and the late great Corey Lowenstein among them.

Thanks also to the artists who generously allowed me to use pictures of their work as illustrations: Thomas Jay Warren, Alexander Hallmark, Caitlin Cary, Laird Dixon, and Zenos Frudakis.

I also had a stellar cast of "Spirit Guides," all of whom went above and beyond the call of duty to offer invaluable insight plus fact-checking. For saving me from myself more times than I can count, profound thanks and a hale how-do-you-do to: Kinney Rorrer, Louise Price, Marshall Wyatt, Elizabeth A. Carlson, Glenn Hinson, Tommy Goldsmith, Ed Ward, Eddie Huffman, Parke Puterbaugh, Ed "Charlie Brown" Weiss and Fessa' John Hook, Kenny Soule, Lisa O'Donnell, Peter Holsapple, Ed Bumgardner, Don Dixon, Tim Kirby, Ross Grady, Kirk Ross, Barry Poss, Bev Paul, Stacy Philpott, Peter Blackstock, Tim Mossberger, Julie Macie, Ruth Feldstein, Eric Tullis, Thad Ogburn, and the Kindness Ninja himself, Joe Newberry.

Finally, there is Scott Huler, my Spirit Guide to pretty much everything else; Martha Burns, my love, who showed kindness and patience even when my mind was in faraway places; and family near and far: Aaron, Edward, Claudia, Leigh, Mom, Dad, Jan, Larry, and Terry, and the West Coast Menconis—Andy and Audrey and Cleo. Much love to you all.

Readings

To tell this story, I primarily drew on interviews, reporting, and research I conducted for this book as well as past stories for a wide range of publications—the *Raleigh News & Observer*, *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, *Billboard*, *No Depression*, *salon.com*, *Acoustic Guitar*, and the University of North Carolina’s *Carolina Alumni Review* among them. In addition, the following books were invaluable for reference and background.

- Abdurraqib, Hanif. *Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to A Tribe Called Quest*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019.
- Avett, Scott. *Invisible*. Chicago: Chase Group/Hexton Gallery, 2019.
- Barone, Michael, and Richard E. Cohen. *The Almanac of American Politics*, 2006. Washington, D.C.: National Journal Group, 2005.
- Bastin, Bruce. *Crying for the Carolinas*. London: Studio Vista, 1971.
- . *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995.
- Beasley, Steven. *Kay Kyser: The Ol’ Professor of Swing! American’s Forgotten Superstar*. Los Angeles: Richland Creek Publishing, 2009.
- Berger, Jacob, and Daniel Coston. *There Was a Time: Rock & Roll in the 1960s in Charlotte and North Carolina*. Charlotte, N.C.: Fort Canoga Press, 2014.
- Brownlee, Fambrough L. *Winston-Salem: A Pictorial History*. Norfolk, Va.: Donning Company, 1977.
- Bryan, Sarah, and Beverly Patterson. *African American Music Trails of North Carolina*. Raleigh: North Carolina Arts Council, 2013.
- Carlson, Elizabeth A. *North Carolina String Music Masters: Old-Time and Bluegrass Legends*. Charleston, S.C.: History Press, 2016.
- Castelnero, Gordon, and David L. Russell. *Earl Scruggs: Banjo Icon*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.
- Cook, John, with Mac McCaughan and Laura Ballance. *Our Noise: The Story of Merge Records, the Indie Label That Got Big and Stayed Small*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 2009.
- Coston, Daniel. *North Carolina Musicians*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2013.
- Darnielle, John. *Wolf in White Van*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.
- Davidson, Osha Gray. *The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.
- Dawidoff, Nicholas. *In the Country of Country: A Journey to the Roots of American Music*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.
- DeCurtis, Anthony, James Henke, and Holly George-Warren. *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*. New York: Random House, 1992.

- Doggett, J. Taylor. *The Lead and Part Singing on "5" Royales' Related Recordings Plus New Historical Revelations*. Self-published, 1996.
- . *The "5" Royales, Part II*. Self-published, 1997.
- Duffy, Timothy and Denise. *We Are the Music Makers! Pictures & Stories Preserving the Soul of America's Music*. Oxford, Miss.: Nautilus Publishing, 2014.
- Ferris, William. *Give My Poor Heart Ease: Voices of the Mississippi Blues*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.
- Folds, Ben. *A Dream about Lightning Bugs: A Life of Music and Cheap Lessons*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2019.
- Fussell, Fred C., with Steve Kruger. *Blue Ridge Music Trails of North Carolina: A Guide to Music Sites, Artists, and Traditions of the Mountains and Foothills*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013.
- Gaillard, Frye. *Watermelon Wine: The Spirit of Country Music*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978.
- Goldsmith, Thomas. *Earl Scruggs and Foggy Mountain Breakdown: The Making of an American Classic*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019.
- Graff, Gary, Josh Freedom du Lac, and Jim McFarlin, eds. *MusicHound R & B: The Essential Album Guide*. Detroit: Visible Ink, 1998.
- Guralnick, Peter. *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986.
- Hajdu, David. *Lush Life: A Biography of Billy Strayhorn*. New York: North Point Press, 1996.
- Hook, Fessa' John. *Shagging in the Carolinas*. Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2005.
- . *Carolina Beach Music Encyclopedia*. Charlotte, N.C.: K.M.E. Publishing, 2007.
- Hook, Fessa' John, and Christopher Biehler. *The Beach Music & Shag All Time Top 200*. Winston-Salem, N.C.: K.M.E. & Forevermore Publishing, 2010.
- Huber, Patrick. *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.
- Huler, Scott. *A Delicious Country: Rediscovering the Carolinas along the Route of John Lawson's 1700 Expedition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019.
- Kemp, Mark. *Dixie Lullaby: A Story of Music, Race, and New Beginnings in a New South*. New York: Free Press, 2004.
- Levitt, Steven D., and Stephen J. Dubner. *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*. New York: William Morrow, 2005.
- Marsh, Dave. *The Heart of Rock & Soul: The 1001 Greatest Singles Ever Made*. New York: New American Library, 1989.
- Maxwell, Tom. *Hell: My Life in the Squirrel Nut Zippers*. Charleston, S.C.: Oyster Point Press, 2013.
- Mazor, Barry. *Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2015.
- McCreery, Scotty, with Travis Thrasher. *Go Big or Go Home*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2016.
- Noles, Randy. *Fiddler's Curse: The Untold Story of Ervin T. Rouse, Chubby Wise, Johnny Cash, and the "Orange Blossom Special."* Anaheim Hills, Calif.: Centerstream Publishing, 2007.

- Parker, Maceo. *98% Funky Stuff: My Life in Music*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013.
- Parsons, Penny. *Foggy Mountain Troubadour: The Life and Music of Curly Seckler*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017.
- Powell, William S. *The North Carolina Gazetteer: A Dictionary of Tar Heel Places*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968.
- Rash, Ron. *The World Made Straight*. New York: Picador, 2006.
- Ribowsky, Mark. *Sweet Dreams and Flying Machines: The Life and Music of James Taylor*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2016.
- Romanowski, Patricia, and Holly George-Warren, eds. *The New Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll*. New York: Fireside, 1995.
- Rorrer, Kinney. *Rambling Blues: The Life & Songs of Charlie Poole*. Danville, Va.: McCain Printing, 1982.
- Rose, Dave. *Everything I Know about the Music Business I Learned from My Cousin Rick*. White Plains, N.Y.: Shuman & Goldstein Publishing, 2012.
- Rucker, Leland, ed. *MusicHound Blues: The Essential Album Guide*. Detroit: Visible Ink, 1998.
- Stamey, Chris. *A Spy in the House of Loud: New York Songs and Stories*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018.
- Taylor, Michael C. "God Almighty, It's a Good Feeling: Lowriding as Experience." Master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2009.
- Walsby, Brian. *Manchild: A Celebration of Twenty Years of Doodles*. Brooklyn: Volumeone, 2004.
- Ward, Ed. *The History of Rock & Roll, Volume One: 1920–1963*. New York: Flatiron Books, 2016.
- Ward, Ed, Geoffrey Stokes, and Ken Tucker. *Rock of Ages: The Rolling Stone History of Rock & Roll*. New York: Rolling Stone Press/Summit Books, 1986.
- Whitburn, Joel. *Top Pop Singles, 1955–2002*. Menomonee Falls, Wisc.: Record Research, 2003.
- Wicker, Ann, ed. *Making Notes: Music of the Carolinas*. Charlotte, N.C.: Novello Festival Press, 2008.

Readings

This page intentionally left blank

Selected Discography

This list is by no means exhaustive and is only intended as an introductory icebreaker to get you started on what you should be listening to in conjunction with this book.

Arcade Fire. *The Suburbs*. Merge Records, 2010.

Clarence Ashley. *Live and In Person Greenwich Village 1963*. Light in the Attic Records, 2017.

The Avett Brothers. *I and Love and You*. American/Columbia Recordings, 2009.

The Backsliders. *Throwin' Rocks at the Moon*. Mammoth/Atlantic Records, 1997.

Etta Baker. *One-Dime Blues*. Rounder Records, 1991.

Black Sheep. *A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing*. PolyGram Records, 1991.

Bon Iver. *For Emma, Forever Ago*. Jagjaguwar Records, 2008.

Shirley Caesar. *Shirley Caesar Live . . . He Will Come*. Word/Epic Records, 1995.

Carolina Chocolate Drops. *Genuine Negro Jig*. Nonesuch Records, 2010.

Chatham County Line. *IV*. Yep Roc Records, 2008.

J. Cole. *2014 Forest Hills Drive*. Roc Nation/Columbia Records, 2014.

John Coltrane. *The Heavyweight Champion: The Complete Atlantic Recordings*. Rhino/Atlantic Records, 1995.

The Connells. *Stone Cold Yesterday: Best of the Connells*. Concord Music Group, 2016.

Corrosion of Conformity. *Deliverance*. Sony Music, 1994.

The Cosmopolitans. *Wild Moose Party: New Wave Pom Pom Girls Gone Go-Go, NYC 1980–1981*. Dionysus Records, 2006.

Elizabeth Cotten. *Shake Sugaree*. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2004.

Steve Cropper. *Dedicated: A Salute to the 5 Royales*. 429 Records, 2011.

Cry of Love. *Brother*. Sony Music, 1993.

Chris Daughtry. *Daughtry*. 19/RCA Records, 2006.

Betty Davis. *Betty Davis*. Light in the Attic Records reissue, 2007.

Reverend Gary Davis. *Live at Newport*. Vanguard Records, 2001.

The dB's. *Stands for deciBels/Repercussion*. Collectors' Choice Music, 2001.

Don Dixon. *(If) I'm a Ham, Well You're a Sausage — The Don Dixon Collection*. Restless Records, 1992.

Dossett, Laurelyn. *The Gathering*. Sycamore Road Records, 2011.

The Drifters. *The Very Best of The Drifters*. Rhino/Atlantic Records, 1993.

The Embers. *Feel the Heat*. Embers Records, 1993.

Fantasia. *Free Yourself*. 19/J Records, 2004.

The "5" Royales. *Soul & Swagger: The Complete "5" Royales, 1951–1967*. Rockbeat Records, 2014.

Flat Duo Jets. *Wild Wild Love*. Daniel 13 Records, 2017.

Ben Folds Five. *Whatever and Ever Amen*. 550/Sony Music, 1997.

Blind Boy Fuller. *East Coast Piedmont Style*. Legacy/Columbia Records, 1991.

- Future Islands. *Singles*. 4AD Records, 2014.
- Alice Gerrard. *Follow the Music*. Tompkins Square Records, 2014.
- Guitar Gabriel. *Deep in the South*. Sire Records, 1998.
- Hiss Golden Messenger. *Heart Like a Levee*. Merge Records, 2016.
- John Dee Holeman. *Bull City after Dark*. Silver Spring Records, 1991.
- Jodeci. *Forever My Lady*. Uptown/MCA Records, 1991.
- Kruger Brothers. *Appalachian Concerto*. Double Time Music, 2011.
- Let's Active. *Cypress/Afoot*. International Record Syndicate, 1989.
- Little Brother. *The Listening*. ABB Records, 2002.
- Lords of the Underground. *Here Come the Lords*. Pendulum Records, 1993.
- Mandolin Orange. *Tides of a Teardrop*. Yep Roc Records, 2019.
- Branford Marsalis. *Braggtown*. Marsalis Music, 2006.
- Scotty McCreery. *Seasons Change*. Triple Tigers Records, 2018.
- Brownie McGhee. *The Complete Brownie McGhee*. Legacy/Columbia Records, 1994.
- Megafaun. *Gather, Form & Fly*. Hometapes Records, 2009.
- Tift Merritt. *Tambourine*. Lost Highway Records, 2004.
- Mitchell's Christian Singers. *Volume 1 — 1934–1936*. DOC Records, 1996.
- Thelonious Monk. *The Composer*. CBS Records, 1988.
- Mount Moriah. *How to Dance*. Merge Records, 2016.
- The Mountain Goats. *Goths*. Mammoth Records, 2017.
- Nantucket. *Nantucket*. Epic Records, 1978.
- Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. *Will the Circle Be Unbroken: Music Forms a New Circle*. Capitol Records, 1972.
- Petey Pablo. *Diary of a Sinner: 1st Entry*. Zomba/Jive Records, 2001.
- Maceo Parker. *Roots & Grooves*. Heads Up International, 2008.
- Picasso Trigger. *Fire in the Hole! Alias* Records, 1994.
- Polvo. *Today's Active Lifestyles*. Merge Records, 1993.
- Charlie Poole. *You Ain't Talkin' to Me: Charlie Poole and the Roots of Country Music*. Legacy/Columbia Records, 2005.
- Rhapsody. *Laila's Wisdom*. Jamla/Roc Nation Records, 2017.
- The Red Clay Ramblers. *A Lie of the Mind*. Rykodisc Records, 1986.
- R.E.M. *Murmur*. I.R.S. Records, 1983.
- Earl Scruggs. *The Essential Earl Scruggs*. Legacy/Sony Music, 2004.
- Sarah Shook & the Disarmers. *Years*. Bloodshot Records, 2018.
- Nina Simone. *To Be Free: The Nina Simone Story*. Legacy/RCA Records, 2008.
- 6 String Drag. *High Hat*. E-Squared Records, 1997.
- Arthur Smith. *Arthur "Guitar Boogie" Smith*. Vintage Records, 2015.
- Southern Culture on the Skids. *Dirt Track Date*. DGC Records, 1995.
- Squirrel Nut Zippers. *Hot*. Mammoth Records, 1996.
- Steep Canyon Rangers. *Radio*. Rounder Records, 2015.
- Superchunk. *Foolish*. Merge Records, 1994.
- Sylvan Esso. *Sylvan Esso*. Partisan Records, 2014.
- James Taylor. *Sweet Baby James*. Warner Bros. Records, 1970.
- Valient Thor. *Stranded on Earth*. Venge Records, 2003.
- Various Artists. *Anthology of American Folk Music*. Edited by Harry Smith. Smithsonian Folkways, 1997 reissue.

Various Artists. *Barbecue Any Old Time: Blues from the Pit, 1927–1942*. Old Hat Records, 2011.

Various Artists. *Gastonia Gallop: Cotton Mill Songs & Hillbilly Blues*. Old Hat Records, 2009.

Various Artists. *Going Down to Raleigh: Stringband Music in the North Carolina Piedmont, 1976–1998*. North Carolina Arts Council, 2009.

Various Artists. *In the Pines: Tar Heel Folk Songs & Fiddle Tunes*. Old Hat Records, 2008.

Various Artists. *Music from the Lost Provinces: Old-Time Stringbands from Ashe County, North Carolina & Vicinity, 1927–1931*. Old Hat Records, 1997.

Various Artists. *Sugar Hill Records: A Retrospective*. Sugar Hill Records, 2006.

Loudon Wainwright III. *High Wide & Handsome: The Charlie Poole Project*. 2nd Story Records, 2009.

Billy Ward & His Dominoes. *Sixty Minute Man: The Best of Billy Ward & His Dominoes*. King/Rhino Records, 1993.

Doc Watson and David Holt. *Legacy*. High Windy Audio, 2002.

Whiskeytown. *Strangers Almanac*. Outpost Records, 1997.

Reverend Billy C. Wirtz. *Backslider's Tractor Pull*. Hightone Records, 1990.

Link Wray. *Walkin' with Link*. Legacy/Sony Music, 1992.

Yaggfu Front. "Action Packed Aventure!" *The Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*. Mercury Records, 1994.

Zen Frisbee. *I'm as Mad as Faust*. Flavor-Contra Records, 1994.

**Selected
Discography**

This page intentionally left blank

Index

Page numbers in italics refer to illustrations.

- ABB Records, 258, 263
- Abernathy, Herbie, 222
- Abernethy, Rod, 151
- “Abilene” (George Hamilton IV), 191
- Absent Element (band), 281, 282
- AC/DC, 129, 138, 140
- “Acres of Diamonds” (Arthur Smith), 46
- Action Packed Adventure* (Yaggfu Front), 257
- Acuff, Roy, 104
- Adams, Ryan, 200, 205, 206, 208–9
- Adams, Terry, 235
- Adele (singer), 225
- Aerosmith, 132, 271
- Afrika Bambaataa, 254
- Aiken, Clay, 276, 278–79
- Ainslie, Scott, 31, 37
- Akeman, Dave “Stringbean,” 66, 67
- Akins, David, 202
- Alice in Chains, 161
- Allen, Howard, 43–44
- “All for You” (Little Brother), 261–62
- Allied Kentuckians, 65
- Allman Brothers Band, 130, 236
- “All the Way Choo Choo” (Orville Campbell), 185–86
- Alvin, Dave, 188
- American Aquarium (band), 207
- American Bandstand*, 46
- American Idol*, 269–72, 274–83
- American Standard* (Seven Mary Three), 191
- Ammons, Shirlette, 213
- Anderson, Pete, 207
- Anderson, Pink, 27
- “And It Spread” (Avett Brothers), 226
- Angelou, Maya, 146
- Angels of Epistemology, 163, 193
- Anthology of American Folk Music* (recording), 1–2, 24, 103, 104
- Apollo Records, 80, 92
- Appalachian Concerto* (Kruger Brothers), 251
- Arcade Fire (band), 182, 196, 198, 228
- Archers of Loaf (band), 161, 164, 169
- Armbrust, Chris, 231–32, 233–34
- Armstrong, Louis, 51
- “Army” (Ben Folds Five), 177, 180–81
- Arnold, Eddy, 105
- Arrested Development (band), 240
- Arrogance (band), 52, 149–51, 204
- Arthur Smith Show, The*, 46, 47, 54
- “As Far as the Eye Can See” (Kruger Brothers), 251
- Ashley, Clarence “Tom,” 2–3, 103, 104, 105, 249
- Asleep at the Wheel, 27, 202
- Atkins, Chet, 54, 108
- Atlantic Records, 119, 124, 130, 190, 261
- Avett, Bonnie, 218, 220
- Avett, Jim, 220, 221
- Avett, Scott, 216–26, 219, 224, 228–29
- Avett, Seth, 216–26, 224, 230
- Avett Brothers, 59, 216–30, 236
- Babel* (Mumford & Sons), 228
- “Baby Don’t Do It” (“5” Royales), 81
- “Backlash Blues” (Nina Simone and Langston Hughes), 233, 240
- Backsliders (band), 201, 203, 205–7
- Backstreet Boys, 273
- Badu, Erykah, 252, 261, 267
- Baez, Joan, 2, 5, 34
- Baird, Dan, 204
- Baker, Etta, 4–7, 6, 29, 34, 98
- Baldwin, James, 43
- “Ballad of Jed Clampett, The” (Flatt & Scruggs), 70
- “Ballad of Love and Hate, The” (Avett Brothers), 225

- Ballance, Laura, 164, 182–83, 184, 185, 192, 194, 195, 196, 199
 Ballard, Hank, 81, 91
 Band of Oz, 121
 “Barefootin’” (Scotty McCreery), 283
 Barkley, Gnarl, 114
 Barnes, F. C., 93
 Barnes, Luther, 93
 Barrino, Fantasia, 276, 279
 Basie, Count, 39
 Bass, Ralph, 88
 “Bastards I Used to Know” (Whiskeytown), 200
 “Battle of Who Could Care Less” (Ben Folds Five), 173
 “Battleship Chains” (Georgia Satellites), 204
 Beastie Boys, 225
 Beat Farmers, 205
 Beatles, 46, 78, 124, 136, 146, 160, 183, 224, 239, 242
 Beat Rodeo (band), 156
 Beatty, Warren, 70
 “Beautiful Morning” (Little Brother), 262
Bedlam Ballroom (Squirrel Nut Zippers), 176
 “Bedside of a Neighbor” (Royal Sons Quintet), 80
 Bell, Chris, 152
 Belltones, 186
 Ben Folds Five, 146, 168–71, 173–75, 177, 180–81, 213
 Bently Boys, 4
 Bernhardt, Jack, 74
 Berry, Chuck, 61
Betty Davis (recording), 247
Beverly Hillbillies, The, 70–71
 Beyoncé, 252
Beyond the Java Sea (Metal Flake Mother), 165
 B-52’s, 153
 Big Bad Voodoo Daddy (band), 175
 Big Dipper (band), 148
 Biggie Smalls (Notorious B.I.G.), 196, 264
 “Big House Bound” (Blind Boy Fuller), 38
 Big Star, 152
 Biehler, Christopher, 115
 “Bizarre Love Triangle” (Frente!), 190
Black Album, The (Jay-Z), 259
 “Black & Ugly” (Rhapsody), 268
 Black Crowes, 131
 blackgirls (band), 163
 Black Keys, 196
 Black Park Records, 190
 “Black River Swamp” (Link Wray), 238
 Black Sabbath, 149
 Black Sheep, 254
 Blackstock, Charlie, 16
 Blackstock, Peter, 207
 Blair, Andy, 129
 Blair, Eddie, 128–29, 133, 134, 142
 Blake Babies (band), 190
 Blasters (band), 205
 Blige, Mary J., 55, 79, 241, 242–43, 252, 261
 Blind Blake, 16, 31
Blonde on Blonde (Bob Dylan), 202
 Blow, Kurtis, 264
 Bluebird Records, 65
 Blue Grass Boys, 65, 66
 “Bluegrass Breakdown” (Bill Monroe), 69
Bluegrass Diaries, The (Jim Lauderdale), 188
 “Blue Moon” (Marcel), 123
 “Blue Moon of Kentucky” (Bill Monroe), 68
 Blue Rags (band), 224
 Blue Ridge Entertainers, 104
 Blue Ridge Highballers (string band), 20, 22
 Blues Magoos (band), 191
 Bongos (band), 156
 Bon Iver (band), 213
Bonnie and Clyde (Arthur Penn), 70
 Book Binder, Roy, 27
 Booker T. & the MG’s, 86, 152
 Boone Creek (band), 188, 189
 Boorman, John, 56
 Boosinger, Laura, 63
 Borthwick, Robin, 148
 Boston (band), 138
 Bottle Rockets (band), 205
 Bowie, Ash, 165
 Bowie, David, 141
Boylan Heights (Connells), 144
 “Brandy” (Embers), 114
 Brass Park (band), 133
 “Breaks, The” (Kurtis Blow), 264
 Briarhoppers (band), 49, 52, 53
 “Brick” (Ben Folds Five), 173, 175
 Bricks (band), 193
Brother (Cry of Love), 131
 Brown, Bill, 113

Brown, Chris, 88, 266
 Brown, Hylo, 74
 Brown, James, 55–56, 76, 77, 86, 90, 191
 Brown, Les, 117
 Brown, Michael, 264
 Browne, Jackson, 202
 Brunswick Records, 22
 Bumgardner, Ed, 141
 Buono, Michael “Bono,” 131
 Burris, David, 172
 Burris, Tyrone “Jingle Bel,” 256
 Burt, Thomas, 26
 Butler, Win, 198
 “But on the Other Hand Baby” (Ray Charles, Etta Baker), 7
 Buzzcocks, 195
 Byrds, 107, 202
By the Way, I Forgive You (Brandi Carlile), 217

 Caesar, Shirley, 88, 89
 Calloway, Cab, 166
 Campbell, Glen, 54
 Campbell, Orville B., 185–86, 187
 “Can I Sleep in Your Barn Tonight, Mister?” (Charlie Poole), 18
 Capitol Records, 186
 Carlile, Brandi, 217
 Carlton, Gaither, 102
 Carlton, Rosa Lee, 102, 106, 110
 Carnivorous Records, 151, 152
 Carolina Buddies (string band), 20
Carolina Calling (television program), 45–46, 53–54, 55
 Carolina Chocolate Drops, 24, 243, 244
 Carolina Crackerjacks, 51–52, 56, 57
 “Carolina in the Fall” (Kruger Brothers), 246, 249
 “Carolina on My Mind” (James Taylor), 178
 Carolina Tar Heels (band), 3, 49, 104
 “Carolina Traveler” (John McEuen and Earl Scruggs), 64
 Caroline Records, 169
 Carpenters (singing duo), 259
 Carousels (band), 130
 Cars (band), 140
 Carson, Fiddlin’ John, 17, 20
 Carter, A. P., 57
 Carter, Maybelle, 63, 74, 100, 107
 Carter, Obadiah, 85, 87–88, 92
 Carter Family, 20, 23, 48, 49, 64, 69, 100, 206
 Casanovas, 87
 Cash, Johnny, 19, 45, 54, 55, 191, 206, 225
 Caswell, Estelle, 235
 Catalinas (band), 121, 126
 Cat’s Cradle nightclub, 35, 73, 151, 157, 160, 162, 169, 170, 171, 173, 190, 199, 205
 Cauley Family, 36
 Cavallo, Jimmy, 122
 “Cave, The” (Mumford & Sons), 228
 Certain, Anna “Louise,” 67, 68
Changin’ Times (Flatt & Scruggs), 72
 “Chapel Hill” (Sonic Youth), 161
 “Chapel of Love” (Dixie Cups), 133
 Charles, Ray, 7, 76, 77–78, 83
 Chatham County Line, 72, 73, 188, 284
 Chatterjee, Shalini, 159
 Cheap Trick (band), 138
 “Cheatin’” (Little Brother), 261
 Cheek, Norwood, 172
 Cheshire, Godfrey, III, 154, 155
 Chic (band), 255
 Childre, Lew, 66
 Childress, Richard, 146
 Chilton, Alex, 152
 “Choice Is Yours, The” (Black Sheep), 254
 Christgau, Robert, 93
Chronic Town (R.E.M.), 155, 157
 Chuck D., 255
 Clark, Dick, 174
 Clark, Doug, 163
 Clark, Guy, 189
 Clarkson, Kelly, 275
 Clash (band), 136
 Clayton, Paul, 34
 Clements, Vassar, 64
 Clinton, Bill, 174
 Clinton, George, 234
 “Close Up the Honky Tonks” (Buck Owens), 206
 “Cloud of Hate” (Superchunk), 199
 Clovers, 115
 Coasters, 124
 Cobain, Kurt, 156, 160, 273
 Cochran, Eddie, 191
 Cocker, Joe, 130
 Coddington, C. C., 48
 Cole, J., 55, 264, 265

Index

- Coleman, Phonte, 257, 260, 261–62
 Collins, Judy, 72
 Colonial Records, 186–87, 205
 Coltrane, John, 234, 235, 236
 Columbia Records, 18, 20, 22, 23, 53, 183, 225
 Comanche, Cesar, 258, 261
 Commodores, 254
 Common (rapper), 241
 Como, Perry, 119
 “Complexion (A Zulu Love)” (Kendrick Lamar and Rapsody), 266, 267
 Connells (band), 144, 157, 163, 172, 190
 Connette, Dick, 25
 “Coo Coo Bird, The” (Clarence “Tom” Ashley), 2–3, 103, 104
 Cooder, Ry, 27
 Cook, Brad, 213
 Cook, Phil, 213–14
 Cooke, Sam, 77
 “Cool” (Superchunk), 164
 Cooper, Peter, 284
 Copland, Aaron, 151
 “Copperline” (James Taylor), 178
 Corrosion of Conformity (band), 136, 163
 Corsayers (band), 178
 Cosmopolitans, 157
 Cotten, Elizabeth “Libba,” 27, 34, 35, 163
 Council, Floyd, 26–27, 43, 163
 Country Cousins, 186
 Country Gentlemen, 102, 189
 County Records, 187
 Court & Spark (band), 209
 Covington, Buck, 279–80
 Cowell, Simon, 280
 Cox, Jimmy, 133
 Cox, Ronny, 56
 Craddock, Billy “Crash,” 186
 Crawford, Bob, 216–20, 223, 230
Crazy Barn Dance (radio program), 48–49, 62
 Crenshaw, Marshall, 156
 Cropper, Steve, 76, 86–87
 Cross, Mike, 163
 Crossroads Music, 98
 Crow, Sheryl, 131
 Crowe, J. D., 189
 Crutchfield, Charles, 51
 Cry of Love (band), 131, 136
 Curry, Clifford, 133
 “Custard Pie” (Led Zeppelin), 27
 Custer, John, 136, 138–39

Damn (Kendrick Lamar), 252–53
 Darnielle, John, 277
 Dashboard Confessional (band), 218
 Daughters of the American Revolution, 7
 Daughtry, Chris, 276, 280–82, 281
 Davis, Betty, 247
 Davis, Rev. Gary, 26, 27, 30–33, 36, 37, 40, 101, 234
 Davis, Jonathan, 175
 Davis, Miles, 235, 247
 dB’s (band), 148, 152, 153, 157
 “Dead Skunk” (Loudon Wainwright III), 24
 Dead Tongues (band), 213
 Dean, Dizzy, 186
 Dean, Mike, 136
 “Death of Blind Boy Fuller, The” (Brownie McGhee), 40
Dedicated—A Salute to the “5” Royales (Steve Cropper), 86
 “Dedicated to the One I Love” (“5” Royales), 77, 87–89, 91
 Def Jam Records, 225
 De La Soul, 254, 255, 261
Deliverance (Corrosion of Conformity), 136
Deliverance (film), 56–57
 Dennis, Jeff, 203
 Denver, John, 221
 Derailers (band), 205
 Destiny’s Child (R&B group), 259, 261
 DeYarmond Edison, 212
 Diamond, Neil, 225
 Dicker, Glenn, 188
 Dickens, Little Jimmy, 60
 Dickey, James, 56
 “Die Die Die” (Avett Brothers), 224
 Digable Planets, 259
 Dillards (bluegrass band), 58
Dirt Track Date (Southern Culture on the Skids), 204
Diver Down (Van Halen), 221
 Dixie Chicks, 131
 Dixie Cups, 133
 Dixon, Don, 46, 52, 55, 144, 149, 151–52, 154, 156, 163, 204
 Dixon, Laird, 163

Django Unchained (film), 234
Doc Watson & Son (recording), 105
 Doe, John, 188
 Doggett, Taylor, 81
 Dolphin Records, 156, 190
 Dominoes, 80, 112–13, 134
 Donovan (singer), 72
 “Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down Blues”
 (Charlie Poole), 11, 16, 18, 20, 27, 75, 286
Don’t Look Back (Boston), 139
 “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right” (Kruger
 Brothers), 249
 Doobie Brothers, 132, 138
 Dorrance, Michelle, 171
 Dossett, Laurelyn, 243
 “Double Shot (Of My Baby’s Love)”
 (Swingin’ Medallions), 121
 Douthit, Charles, 254
 Douthit, Patrick “9th Wonder,” 8, 229,
 252–67, 260
 Downing, Mark, 130
 Drake (rapper), 79, 261
 Drake, Debbie, 157
 Dreamville Festival, 264, 265
 Drifters, 80, 91, 113, 115, 122, 178, 234
 “Drinkin’ Wine, Spo-Dee-O-Dee” (Stick
 McGhee), 119, 124
 Drive-By Truckers, 234
 Drive-In Studio, 144, 152, 155–58
 “Driveway to Driveway” (Superchunk), 172
 Drugal, Gabi, 283
 “Dry Bones” (Bascom Lamar Lunsford), 4
 Dubner, Stephen, 277
 “Duckworth” (Kendrick Lamar), 252–53
 Duffy, Tim, 29
 “Dueling Banjos” (“Feudin’ Banjos”; Arthur
 Smith), 47, 56, 57–58, 57
 Duhks (band), 218
 Duke, James B. “Buck,” 28
 Dula, Tom, 103
 Dunaway, Faye, 70
 Dunst, Kirsten, 172
 Dylan, Bob, 37, 39, 72, 221, 228, 240; early
 influences on, 2, 5; electric instruments
 taken up by, 40, 202; Poole’s influence
 on, 24, 27
 Eagles (band), 55, 202, 218
 Earle, Eugene, 103
 Earle, Steve, 172, 207
 “Earl’s Breakdown” (Earl Scruggs), 74
 Earth Wind & Fire, 254
 Easter, Ken, 150, 155
 Easter, Lib, 155, 157
 Easter, Mitch, 8, 144–45, 147–59, 148, 163,
 205, 229, 266
 “East Virginia” (Buell Kazee), 3
 Eaton, Tim, 59
 Edwards, Bernard, 255
 Egg Egg (band), 163
 Eitzel, Mark, 195–96
 Elizabeth, Tania, 218
 Ellington, Duke, 52, 248
 Ellison, Blair, 121
 Ellmers, Renee, 278
 Embers (band), 111–12, 115, 116, 123, 125,
 126–27
 Emerson Lake & Palmer, 242
 Eminem, 196
 Emma, Sully, 168
Emotionalism (Avett Brothers), 224–26
 Ensslin, John, 176
 Epic Records, 129, 132, 137, 139, 183, 189
 “Erasure” (Superchunk), 199
 Erectus Monotone (band), 193
 Escovedo, Alejandro, 188
Eve (Rhapsody), 241
 Everly Brothers, 191
 Evers, Medgar, 239
 “Evil Hearted Woman” (Blind Boy Fuller),
 36
 Fabulous Knobs (band), 204
Face in the Crowd, A (film), 187
 Fagen, Donald, 235
 Faile, Tommy, 46, 54
 Faires, Jay, 190
 Fair Labor Standards Act (1938), 13
 Fantasia (singer), 55
 Fantastic Shakers, 126
 Farrar, Jay, 205
 Fatback Band, 253
 Feist (singer), 214
 Ferrante & Teicher (piano duo), 54
 Fetchin’ Bones (band), 154
 “Feudin’ Banjos” (“Dueling Banjos”; Arthur
 Smith), 47
 Fidler, Daniel, 164

Index

- Field, Irving, 52
 “Fields of Gold” (Kruger Brothers), 249
 50 Cent, 258
Filles de Kilimanjaro (Miles Davis), 247
 Finger (band), 193
 “Fire and Rain” (James Taylor), 178
 FireHouse (band), 141
 Fitzgerald, F. Scott, 232
 Five Blind Boys of Alabama, 77
 “Five More Minutes” (Scotty McCreery), 282
 “5” Royales (Royal Sons), 8, 76–93, 82, 85, 120, 146, 150
 Five Satans, 146
 Fjeld, Jonas, 72
 Flack, Roberta, 90, 241
 Flat Duo Jets, 157, 204–5
 Flatt, Lester, 55, 66, 68–69, 68, 72, 74
 Fleck, Bela, 70–71
 Fleetwood Mac, 202
 Flemons, Dom, 244
 Fleshtones, 157
 “Flint Hill Special” (Earl Scruggs), 74
 “Flop Eared Mule” (Blue Ridge Highlanders), 22
 Flying Burrito Brothers, 107, 202
 Flynn, Molly, 201
 “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” (Flatt & Scruggs), 69–70, 75
 Folds, Ben, 8, 146, 164, 167–70, 173–76, 174, 180–81
 Foley, Red, 103
Follow the Music (Alice Gerrard), 213
Foolish (Superchunk), 192, 193–94, 199
 “Foolish Baby” (Arthur Smith), 50
 Foreigner, 138
 Foster, David, 278
 Foster, Jaymes, 278
 Foster, Laura, 103
 Fotso, Jason, 253
 Fountains of Wayne, 188
 Four Tops, 115
 “Four Women” (Nina Simone), 240
 Foxx, Inez & Charlie, 178
 Fradiani, Nick, 282
 Franklin, Kirk, 55
 Frantz, Emily, 228, 229
Freakonomics (Stephen J. Dubner and Steven Levitt), 277
 Freed, Alan, 122
 Freed, Audley, 131
 “Freeek-a-Leek” (Petey Pablo), 263
 “Freight Train” (Elizabeth “Libba” Cotten), 27, 34, 163
 Frente! (band), 190
 Fresh, Doug E., 259
 Fuller, Blind Boy (Fulton Allen), 26, 32, 100–101, 146, 222–23, 234; Davis and, 31–33, 36, 43; death of, 39–40; early years of, 31; legacy of, 27, 33, 43, 64, 229; legal troubles of, 37–39; Long’s partnership with, 36–37, 52
 Funkdoobiest (band), 174
 Future Islands (band), 222
 Fuzzy Mountain String Band, 187
 Gaillard, Frye, 48
 Gaillard, Slim, 188
 Gamble, Mickey, 109
 Game Theory (band), 156
 Garbus, Liz, 237
 Garcia, Jerry, 24, 34
 Garland, Hank, 102
 Garrison, Chuck, 164
 Gaye, Marvin, 125, 264
 Gentry, Bobbie, 72
Genuine Negro Jig (Carolina Chocolate Drops), 244
 Georgia Satellites (band), 204
 Gerrard, Alice, 1–3, 3, 7, 213
 Gershwin, George, 279
Getback (Little Brother), 263
 “Get Off My Cloud” (Rolling Stones), 123
 “Get Your Ya Yas Out” (Blind Boy Fuller), 27
 “Giant Steps” (Miles Davis), 235
 Gibson, Maude, 15
 Giddens, Rhiannon, 243, 244, 245
Gimme Fiction (Spoon), 196
 Giordano, Lou, 144
 “Girl I Left in Sunny Tennessee, The” (Charlie Poole), 18–19
 “Girl Watcher” (O’Kaysions), 121
 Glanville, Jerry, 219
 Glanville, Justin, 219
 Gleeson, Patrick, 242
 G. Love and Special Sauce (band), 169
 Godsmack (band), 168
 Goforth, Josh, 98

Goldsmith, Jerry, 149
 "Gone, But Not Forgotten" (Kruger Brothers), 251
 "Gonna Move Across the River" (Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee), 115
 Goodman, Benny, 39
 "Good Old Mountain Dew" (Bascom Lamar Lunsford), 4
 "Good Times" (Chic), 255
 Gore, Jackie, 114, 116, 119–20, 121, 123, 125, 126
 "Go Where I Send Thee" (Mitchell's Christian Singers), 42
 Graham, Billy, 54
 Grand Ole Opry, 60, 69; broadcasts from, 49, 64, 66, 67, 71, 74, 78, 98, 99
 "Grand Ole Opry Song" (Hylo Brown), 74–75
 Grateful Dead, 24, 27, 236
 Green, Al, 115
 Greenbriar Boys, 103
 "Green Onions" (Booker T. & the MG's), 86
 Green on Red (band), 205
 Greer, Michael, 149
 Grier, Josh, 155, 159
 Griffith, Andy, 47, 54, 58, 186–87
 Gronback, Steve, 190
 Guess, Stacy, 165, 167, 171, 174, 175–76
 Guggino, Mike, 73
 "Guitar Boogie" (Arthur Smith), 47, 52–53, 57
 Guitar Gabriel (Robert "Nyles" Jones), 29
 Gustafson, Ryan, 213
 Guthrie, Woody, 246

 Haas, Wayne "Skeeter," 56
 Hagaman, Ted, 97
 Hailey, Cedric "K-Ci," 79
 Hajdu, David, 248
 Hall, Arsenio, 279
 Hall, Lewis Philip, 117
 Hall & Oates, 221
Hallelujah Anyhow (Hiss Golden Messenger), 211
 Hambone (guitarist), 238
 Hamilton, Anthony, 55
 Hamilton, George, IV, 54, 56, 146, 186, 191, 205
 Hamilton, George, V, 56, 186, 205

Hammett, Smith, 62
 Hammond, John, 28, 39
 Hampton, Lionel, 52
 Handy, W. C., 27
 Hanna, Jeff, 60
 Hannah, Jim, 117
 Hannay, Roger, 151
 Hansen, Tor, 188
 "Happy Together" (Turtles), 89
 Hardin, Tim, 72
 Harris, Doug, 121–22
 Harris, Ronnie, 132
 Harris, Wynonie, 80, 117, 119
 Harvey, Roy, 17, 21
 Hatfield, Juliana, 190
Haw (Hiss Golden Messenger), 212
 Hawkins, Screamin' Jay, 239
 Hazel & Alice (folk group), 1, 213
 H-Bombs (band), 148, 153
 Heart (band), 138
 "Heartbreaker" (Nantucket), 137–38, 140
 "Heart Like a Levee" (Hiss Golden Messenger), 211–12
Heart of Rock & Soul, The (Dave Marsh), 87
 "Heavy Traffic Ahead" (Bill Monroe), 68
 "Hell" (Squirrel Nut Zippers), 172–73, 191
 Helm, Amy, 188, 213
 Helm, Levon, 213
 Helms, Jesse, 161
 "Help Me Somebody" ("5" Royales), 81, 83
 Henderson, Wayne, 96
 Hendley, Fisher, 69
 Hendrix, Jimi, 147, 247
 Henning, Paul, 70
 Henry, Clarence "Frogman," 122
Here Come the Lords (Lords of the Underground), 256, 257
Here's to Shutting Up (Superchunk), 195
 Herring, Samuel, 222
 "Hesitating Blues" (W. C. Handy), 27
 Hiatus Kaiyote, 253
 Hicks, Bobby, 63, 71
 Hicks, Fiddlin' Bill, 202
 Hicks, Malcolm Ray "Chicken," 117
 Hicks, Taylor, 279
 Higgs, George, 29
 "High Water" (Bob Dylan), 2
High Wide & Handsome (Loudon Wainwright III), 24–25

Index

- Hill, Lauryn, 240
 "Hillbillies at the Beach" (Nantucket), 142
 Hinson, Glenn, 27–28, 29, 30, 210
 Hinton, Algia Mae, 172
Hip-Hop Fellow, The (documentary film), 265
 Hiss Golden Messenger (band), 209–13
 Hodgkin, Dick, 274
 Holder, Gene, 153
 "Hold My Mule" (Shirley Caesar), 88
 Holeman, John Dee, 37, 38, 43
 Holiday, Billie, 39
 Holland, Kelly, 131
 Holsapple, Peter, 146, 147–49, 152–54, 153, 236
 Holt, Bertha, 152
 Holt, Chandler, 73
 Holt, David, 50, 95–96, 98, 106, 108
 Hood, Patterson, 234
 Hook, Fessa' John, 115, 118–19, 120, 122, 125–26
 Holt, Jefferson, 152–54, 157
 Hope, Bob, 54
 Hopkins, Johnny, 116
 Hopscotch Music Festival, 194, 284
 Hornsby, Bruce, 138
Hot (Squirrel Nut Zippers), 171, 173, 191
 Hotel Lights (band), 172
 Hot Nuts (band), 163
 Hot Rize (band), 189
House of Tears (George Hamilton V), 205
 Houston, Whitney, 55
 Howell, Steve, 203
 Howie, John, Jr., 205–6, 207
 "(How to Keep Your) Husband Happy" (Cosmopolitans), 157
 How Town (band), 201
 Hughes, Langston, 233
 Hunter, Faye, 148, 157, 158
Hurricane (Nick Fradiani), 282
 Huskey, Roy, 64

 "I Am a Pilgrim" (Doc Watson), 108
 "I Am the Cosmos" (Chris Bell), 152
I and Love and You (Avett Brothers), 226–27
 "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" (Rolling Stones), 123
 Ice (band), 148
 Ice Cube, 247

 "I Don't Want You to Go" (Casanovas), 87
 "If I Had My Way" (Peter, Paul & Mary), 40
 "If I Lose, I Don't Care" (Charlie Poole), 20
 "If I'm in Luck I Might Get Picked UP" (Betty Davis), 247
 "If the River Was Whiskey" (Charlie Poole), 20, 27
 "I Got a Woman" (Ray Charles), 78
 "Iki Iko" (Dixie Cups), 133
 "I Know It's Hard but It's Fair" ("5" Royales), 91
 "I Live My Life for You" (FireHouse), 141
Illmatic (Nas), 262
 "I'll Walk" (Bucky Covington), 280
 "I Love Beach Music" (Embers), 114, 126
 "I Love You Period" (Georgia Satellites), 204
 "I Miss My Friend" (Darryl Worley), 60
 Imperturbable Teutonic Gryphon (band), 148
 Impressions (band), 125
 "I'm the Man That Rode the Mule 'Round the World" (Charlie Poole), 18–19
 "Indian Reservation" (John Loudermilk), 191
Inevitable Squirrel Nut Zippers, The (recording), 169
Instrumental Music of the Southern Appalachians (compilation recording), 34
In the Aeroplane over the Sea (Neutral Milk Hotel), 195
In the Red (Sneakers), 152
Invisible Republic (Greil Marcus), 2
 "I Once Loved a Sailor" (Charlie Poole), 25
 "I Put a Spell on You" (Screamin' Jay Hawkins), 239
 I.R.S. Records, 158, 185
 "I Saw a Man" (Arthur Smith), 46
 "It Must Be Jesus" (Southern Tones), 78
 "It's a Long Way to the Top (If You Wanna Rock 'n' Roll)" (AC/DC), 129
 "It's Over" (Squirrel Nut Zippers), 176
 "I Want Some of Your Pie" (Blind Boy Fuller), 27
 "I Want to Hold Your Hand" (Beatles), 224
 "I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground" (Basscom Lamar Lunsford), 4

 Jacobs, Kyle, 280
 Jackson, Alan, 206

- Jackson, Mahalia, 80
 Jackson, Michael, 137, 183
 Jackson, Sam "Peg Leg Sam," 26, 30
 "Jackson Cannery" (Ben Folds Five), 146
 Jagger, Mick, 123
 James, Harry, 117
 Jamla Records, 266
 Jane's Addiction (band), 160
 "January Wedding" (Avett Brothers), 226
 Jarrell, Tommy, 98
 Jason & the Scorchers (band), 205
 Jay-Z, 241, 252, 259, 261
Jazz Singer, The, 22
 Jefferson Airplane, 27
 Jeffrey, Paul, 235
 Jeffries, Otto, 81, 84, 85, 92
 Jenkins, DeWitt "Snuffy," 62, 69
 Jennings, Waylon, 206
 Jernigan, Wayne, 55
 Jesse, Darren, 167, 168, 172, 177, 181, 213
 Jetty Jumpers (band), 121
 Jodeci (R&B group), 79, 279
 John, Elton, 132, 168
 Johnson, Caleb, 276, 282
 Johnson, Daner, 13
 Johnson, Dave "Stiff," 169
 Johnson, "General" Norman, 124
 Johnson, Nel, 157
 Johnson, Robert, 28, 39
John Wesley Harding (Bob Dylan), 202
 Jolene (band), 172
 Jolson, Al, 16, 22
 Jones, Louis Marshall "Grandpa," 64, 67, 108
 Jones, Nathaniel "Nat," 90
 Jones, Robert "Nyles" (Guitar Gabriel), 29
 Jones, Thomas "Rapper Big Pooh," 257
 Joplin, Janis, 27
 Jordan, Louis, 117
 Journey (band), 138
 "Jump, Little Children" (Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee), 27
 Jungle Brothers, 254
 Justice, Charlie "Choo Choo," 185–86
 Justus League, 257–59, 261, 266

 Kaepernick, Colin, 264
 Kane, Big Daddy, 256, 259
 Kaukonen, Jorma, 27

 Kazee, Buell, 3
 Kearns, Robert, 131
 Keely, Robert, 151
 Keenan, Pepper, 136
 Keener, Buck, 116
 Keillor, Garrison, 189, 204
 Keller, Rob, 206
 Kelly, Lisa, 233–34, 243
 Kelly, R, 259, 261
 Keys, Alicia, 240–41
 Kick Ass (band), 222
 Kid 'n Play (hip-hop duo), 264
Kind of Blue (Miles Davis), 235
 King, Ben E., 113, 124, 234
 King, Betty, 175–76
 King, Carole, 169
 King, Martin Luther, Jr., 240
 King, Windsor, 78
 King Records, 92, 150
 Kingston Trio, 103
 Kinks (band), 147, 152
 Kiss (band), 138
 Knight, Dick, 90
 Knight, Suge, 263
 Koenigswarter, Pannonica de, 235
 Kooley High (hip-hop group), 267
 Korn (band), 175
 Krauss, Alison, 249
 Kravitz, Lenny, 247
 Kruger, Jens, 244, 246–49, 250, 251
 Kruger, Uwe, 7, 246, 249, 250
 Kruger Brothers, 236, 246–51, 246, 250
 Ku Klux Klan, 29–30
 Kurtz, Danny, 203
 Kuttphatt (band), 223
 Kwon, Joe, 218, 227
 Kyser, Kay, 163

 Lady Gaga, 196, 270
Laila's Wisdom (Rhapsody), 268
 Lamar, Kendrick, 252–53, 266–68
 Landsberg, Joel, 248, 250
 "Language of Love" (John Loudermilk), 191
 Lanois, Daniel, 171
 Lathan, Sam "The Man," 90
 Lauderdale, Jim, 188
 "Laundromat Blues" ("5" Royales), 82
 "Laundry Room" (Avett Brothers), 227
 Lauper, Cyndi, 137

- Lawrence, Jack, 9, 107, 108
 Lawson, Doyle, 189
 Leaksville String Band, 20
 "Leaving Eden" (Dossett), 243
 "Leaving Home" (Charlie Poole), 11
 Led Zeppelin, 27, 55
Legacy (Doc Watson), 95
 Legend, John, 242
 Legends of Beach, 126
 Lennon, John, 239
 Leno, Jay, 170, 236
 Let's Active (band), 157–58, 148
 "Let's Get It On" (Marvin Gaye), 264
 Letterman, David, 170
 Level (band), 223
 Levitt, Steven, 277
 Levy, Morris, 150
 Lewis, Barbara, 124
 Lex Luthor (band), 168
Life Is Not a Fairy Tale (Barrino), 279
Listening, The (Little Brother), 258–59, 261
 Little Brother, 257–59, 261
 Little Diesel (band), 148
 "Little Johnny Jewel" (Television), 151
 "Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane, The"
 (Fiddlin' John Carson), 17, 20
 Little Richard, 83
Live at the Apollo (James Brown), 86
 LL Cool J, 256, 259
 Lloyd, Richard, 152
 Lo Fi Conspiracy, 222
 Loggins, Kenny, 55
 "Lolly Pop Mama" (Wynonie Harris), 119
 "Lonely Douche Bag" (Ben Folds), 180
 Long, J. B., 33, 35–37, 40, 41, 42, 43
 Long, Johnny, 186
 Long Haired Bottlenecks (band), 223
 Long Ryders (band), 205
Long Way to the Top (Nantucket), 140
 Lord, Art, 222
 Lord Executor (calypso singer), 166
 Lords of the Underground, 256–57
 Los Tigres del Norte, 245
 Loudermilk, Charlie, 191
 Loudermilk, Ira, 191
 Loudermilk, John D., 186, 191
 Louvin Brothers, 191, 206
 "Love of a Lifetime" (FireHouse), 141
 "Lovesick Blues" (Hank Williams), 53
Love Supreme, A (John Coltrane), 236
 Loyal Opposition (band), 147–48
 Lubricators (band), 205
 Ludacris, 247, 266
 "Lumberton Wreck" (Cauley Family,
 Mitchell's Christian Singers), 35–36, 42
 Lunsford, Bascom Lamar, 3–4, 5, 17
 "Lush Life" (Duke Ellington and Billy
 Strayhorn), 248
 Lyle, Rudy, 62
 "Lynchburg Town" (Blue Ridge High-
 landers), 22
 Lynn, Judy, 63
 Lynn, Loretta, 54
 Lynryd Skynyrd, 130, 131
 Lyons, Bobby "DJ Assassin," 267

 MacMillan, Doug, 172
 Macon, Uncle Dave, 16, 49, 64, 66, 100
 "Mademoiselle Mabry" (Miles Davis), 247
 Madonna, 79
 "Maggie's Farm" (Bob Dylan), 228
 Mainer, J. E., 50
 Mainer, Wade, 50, 51, 98
 Mainer's Mountaineers (band), 49, 50
 Majosha (band), 168
 Mamas & the Papas, 89
 Mammoth Records, 166, 169, 190–92
 "Man in the Moon, The" (Loudon Wain-
 wright III), 25
 Mandell, Steve, 56
 Mandolin Orange (band), 188, 213, 228, 229
 Mangum, Jeff, 195
 Manson, Marilyn, 191
 Marcells (band), 122
 Marcus, Greil, 2
 Margo (band), 223
 Marl, Marley, 256, 257
 Marlin, Andrew, 228, 229
 Mars, Bruno, 114
 Marsalis, Branford, 236–37, 243
 Marsalis, Ellis, 236
 Marsalis, Wynton, 236
 Marsh, Dave, 87, 218
 Martin, Christopher "Play," 264
 Martin, Cora Mae, 31, 37–38
 Martin, Durwood, 116
 Martin, Grady, 102
 Martin, Jimmy, 74

Martin, Steve, 64, 72
 Massie, Jamie, 138
 Matador Records, 192
 Mathus, Jimbo, 165, 167, 170, 176, 177
 Maxwell, Tom, 160, 166, 167, 171–74, 176–77
 May, Shawn, 253
 Mayer, “Captain Luke,” 42
 Mayer, John, 228
 Mayfield, Curtis, 125, 254
 Mazor, Barry, 12, 19
 Mazzanovich, Muriel, 232
 McBynum, Torrin “Spin 4th,” 256
 McCarthy, John B., 246
 McCartney, Paul, 53
 McCaughan, Mac, 163–64, 183, 184, 192–99
 McCaughan, Matt, 213
 McClinton, Delbert, 114
 McConville, David, 162
 McCreery, Scotty, 269–72, 272, 274–76, 282–83
 McCullough, Tom, 81
 McEuen, John, 60, 64, 74, 75
 MC5, 147
 McGhee, Bullfrog Willard (Nathan Phillips), 33, 42–43
 McGhee, Granville Henry “Stick,” 119, 124
 McGhee, Walter Brown “Brownie,” 26, 27, 31, 40, 42–43, 78, 115, 234
 McIntyre, Kevin “Kipp,” 242
 McKinley, William, 20
 McLean, William “Mr. Long,” 254
 McPhatter, Clyde, 80, 91, 113, 122, 124, 134, 234
 Meath, Amelia, 213, 214, 215
 Meeks, Tyler, 16
 Megafaun (band), 172, 213, 214
 Mellencamp, John, 24
 Melton, Mel, 40, 42
 Mercury Records, 70, 257
 Merge Records, 8, 164, 182–83, 185, 188, 192–96, 198, 213, 228, 274
 MerleFest, 27, 108–10, 217–18, 229, 246, 248
 Merritt, Tift, 72, 109, 188, 207, 212
 Metal Flake Mother (band), 161, 165
 Metallica, 136
 Method Actors (band), 154
 MGM Records, 53, 57
 “Michelle” (Beatles), 239
 Midnighters, 91
Mignonette (Avett Brothers), 220
 Miller, Glenn, 117
 Miller, “Lost John,” 65, 66
 Miller, Mark, 280
 Miller, Rick, 204, 238
 Milli Vanilli (band), 160, 205
 “Mill Mother’s Lament” (Ella May Wiggins), 22
 Mills, Jim, 61, 62, 66–67, 189
 Mills, Mike, 155, 156
 Milsap, Ronnie, 100
 “Milwaukee Blues” (Charlie Poole), 23
Minstrel Show, The (Little Brother), 261–63
 “Mississippi Goddam” (Nina Simone), 233, 239–40
 Mr. Funke (Al’terik Wardrick), 256
 “Ms. Grace” (Tymes), 112
 Mister Mister (band), 141
 Mitchell, Willie, 27
 Mitchell’s Christian Singers, 35–36, 42
 “Mockingbird” (James Taylor), 178
 “Money Honey” (Drifters), 113
 Monitors (R&B band), 90
 Monk, Thelonious, 234, 235, 236
 Monkees, 147
 “Monkey Hips and Rice” (“5” Royales), 82
 Monroe, Bill, 11, 49, 50, 63, 65–69, 74, 247, 286
 Monroe, Charlie, 49, 65–66, 104
 Monroe, Earl “The Pearl,” 146
 Montgomery, Paul, 100
 Moody Blues, 95, 259
 Moog, Robert, 242
 Moonlight Records, 190
 Moore, Jimmy, 81, 83, 85, 92
 “Moral Kiosk” (R.E.M.), 156
 Morgan, Joann, 270
 “Morning at Deep Gap” (Kruger Brothers), 251
 Mosher, Ken, 166, 167, 171, 176–77
 Moss, Sam, 147
 Mossberger, Tim, 230
 “Mother’s Last Farewell Kiss” (Charlie Poole), 20
 Mötley Crüe, 205
 Mould, Bob, 195
 Mountain Goats, 277
 Mountain Man (folk group), 214
 Mount Moriah (band), 213

Index

- Move (band), 147
 Mumford & Sons, 227–28
 “Murder in the City” (Avett Brothers), 220–21, 225
 Murmur (R.E.M.), 143–45, 156, 158
 Music Maker Relief Foundation, 29
 Myers, Bill, 90
 “My Noise” (Superchunk), 164
 “Myrtle Beach Days” (Fantastic Shakers), 126

 Nantucket (Stax of Gold; band), 8–9, 128–42, 135, 139
 Napolitano, Mike, 171
 Napster (online service), 273, 274
 Nas (rapper), 262
 Nashville Airplane (Earl Scruggs), 72
 Nashville Skyline (Bob Dylan), 202
 Nasty Gal (Betty Davis), 247
 National Heritage Fellowship, 4
 Neal, Mark Anthony, 239, 266
 Nelson, Ricky, 46, 275
 Nelson, Willie, 46
 NEMO (band), 223
 Neon Bible (Arcade Fire), 196
 Nesmith, Mike, 74
 Neutral Milk Hotel, 195
 Nevermind (Nirvana), 160–61
 Newberry, Joe, 15, 96–97
 “New Country, The” (Kruger Brothers), 251
 Newman, Randy, 168, 235
 Newport Folk Festival, 40
 New South (band), 189
 Nickel Creek, 189, 192
 “Nights in White Satin” (Moody Blues), 95
 “Nina” (Rhapsody), 241
 Nine Inch Nails, 160
 9th Wonder (Patrick Douthit), 8, 229, 252–67, 260
 Nirvana, 141, 156, 160, 162, 164, 175, 205, 221
 Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, 60, 64, 74, 75, 107, 108
 Nixon, Richard, 54
 Nobles, Gene, 119
 Nobody Knows You (Steep Canyon Rangers), 72
 No Depression (magazine), 206–7
 No Depression (Uncle Tupelo), 206

 “No Depression in Heaven” (Carter Family), 206
 No Direction Home (Nantucket), 141
 North Carolina Ramblers, 11, 17–18, 20, 21
 No Strings Attached (NSYNC), 273
 Notorious B.I.G. (Biggie Smalls), 196, 264
 “Not the Same” (Ben Folds Five), 180
 NSYNC, 225, 273
 Nugent, Ted, 138
 Nuggets (compilation recording), 191
 N.W.A. (rap group), 255

 Oakley, Steve, 178
 O’Jays, 115, 125
 O’Kaysions, 121
 Okeh Records, 17
 Old & In the Way (bluegrass band), 24
 “Old Flame” (Arcade Fire), 198
 “Old Foggy Mountain Top, The” (Carter Family), 69
 Old 97s (band), 205
 “Old Time Rock and Roll” (Bob Seger), 167
 “One-Dime Blues” (Etta Baker), 34
 One Way Track (Boone Creek), 188
 “Orange Blossom Special” (Ervin Rouse), 19, 67
 Orbison, Roy, 54
 Outfield (band), 141
 Out of Time (R.E.M.), 160
 Owens, Buck, 206

 “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag” (James Brown), 56
 “Papi Chulo” (Funkdoobiest), 174
 Paramount Records, 22
 Parker, Maceo, 90, 91
 Parker, Melvin, 90
 Parry, Richard, 198
 Parton, Dolly, 192
 Patterson, Jason, 128, 131
 Patterson, Jim, 45
 Patty Duke Syndrome (band), 205
 Pauling, Clarence, 78, 92
 Pauling, Curtis, 78
 Pauling, Ellise, 77
 Pauling, Lowman Darryl, 77, 83, 85, 87
 Pauling, Lowman “Pete,” 8, 77, 78, 80, 83, 86–88, 90, 92
 Paulson, Brian, 169

Payne, James, 237
 "Peaceful Easy Feeling" (Eagles), 218
 Pearl Jam, 161, 221
 Peer, Ralph, 20, 49
 Pellington, Mark, 144
 Pendleton, Adam, 242
 Penn, Arthur, 70
 "People Get Ready" (Kruger Brothers), 249
Perennial Favorites (Squirrel Nut Zippers),
 176, 192
 Peter, Paul & Mary, 27, 40
 Petey Pablo, 263
 Petze, Lennie, 137, 140
 Phillips, Bill, 33
 Phillips, Chris, 165, 167
 Phillips, Nathan (Bullfrog William
 McGhee), 33, 42
 Philipps, Wilson, 160
 Philpott, Stacy, 195
 Pickler, Kellie, 276, 279, 280
 Piedmont Log Rollers (string band), 20
 Pink Floyd, 27
 Plant, Robert, 55
 Platt, Woody, 73
 Platters, 115
 Pointer Sisters, 247
 Polvo (band), 161, 164, 193
 PolyGram, 185
 Poole, Charlie, 4, 10–23, 14, 21, 31, 64, 202,
 223, 286
 Poole, James Clay (Charlie Jr.), 15, 30
Porgy and Bess (George Gershwin), 279
 Poss, Barry, 10, 99, 187–89, 192, 197, 217
 Presley, Elvis, 46, 54, 78, 141, 183
 Pressure Boys (band), 163, 165
 Price, Reynolds, 178
 Pridgen, Sam "Starvin' Sam," 30
 Prillaman, Ted, 13
 Prince, 90
 Public Enemy, 255, 259
 Punch Brothers, 189
 "Put a Lid on It" (Squirrel Nut Zippers),
 171, 174
 Pylon (band), 153–54

 Queen Latifah, 254

 "Radio Free Europe" (R.E.M.), 143, 155
 Raekwon (rapper), 266
 "Rag, Mama, Rag" (Fuller), 36
 "Railroad Bill" (Baker), 34
 "Raise Up" (Petey Pablo), 263
 Rakim (rapper), 259
 Raleigh, Don, 165, 167, 170
Raleigh News & Observer, 1
Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots
 Music (Barry Mazor), 19
 Ramseur, Dolph, 216–18, 224, 227, 229
 Ramseur Records, 220, 224, 225
 Rank & File (band), 205
 "Rapper's Delight" (Sugarhill Gang), 255
 Rapsody (rapper), 264, 266–68, 267
 "Rattlesnakin' Daddy" (Blind Boy Fuller),
 32
 Rawls, Lou, 112, 191
 Ray, Robert, 89–90
 RCA, 20, 49, 50, 141, 150, 190
 Readling, Greg, 73
Reckoning (R.E.M.), 156, 158
 Red Clay Ramblers, 163, 189, 202, 204
 Redd, Tommy, 128–33, 135, 140
 Redden, Billy, 56
 Redding, Otis, 86, 90
 "Red Headed Stranger" (Arthur Smith), 46
 Reed, Peyton, 172
 Reflection Sound Studios, 55
 Reinhardt, Django, 51
 R.E.M., 8, 46, 55, 143–45, 152, 154–57, 158
 Reno, Don, 54, 57, 62, 69
 Rentz, Christina, 196, 198
 Replacements (band), 152
 Reynolds, Bill, 224
 Reynolds, Burt, 56–57
 Rey Norteño (band), 245–46
 "Rhythm-A-Ning" (Thelonious Monk), 235
 Rice, Brad, 203
 Rice, Chase, 172
 Rice, Tony, 259
 Richards, Keith, 95
 Richardson, Calvin, 55
 Rigby, Will, 153
 "Right Around the Corner" ("5" Royales),
 82
 Right Profile (band), 154, 277
Ring (Connells), 144
 Rinzler, Ralph, 103
Risque Rhythm (compilation recording), 82
 Ritchie, Jean, 98

- Rittenhouse Square (band), 148
 Roach, Max, 234
Roan Mountain Suite (Kruger Brothers), 251
Roasted Right (Squirrel Nut Zippers), 166
 Robert, Dave, 190
 Robinson, Chip, 201, 203
 Robinson, Justin, 244
 Roby, Kenny, 205, 206
 Rodgers, Jimmie, 11–12, 20, 23, 100
 Roche, Maggie, 25
 “Rock Lobster” (B-52’s), 153
 Rolling Stones, 27, 123
 Romweber, Dexter, 157, 204
 Romweber, Sara, 148, 157, 158
 Rorer, Lou Emma, 16–17, 23, 25
 Rorer, Posey, 16, 21, 23, 24
 Rorrer, Kinney, 13, 16–18
 Rose, Dave, 138
 “Rose and a Baby Ruth, A” (George Hamilton IV), 186, 191
 Ross, Diana, 130
 Roth, David Lee, 191
 “Rough Side of the Mountain” (Rev. F. C. Barnes), 93
 Roulette Records, 150
 “Round and Round” (Kruger Brothers), 249
 Rounder Records, 185, 192
 “’Round Midnight” (Monk), 235
 Rouse, Ervin T., 19
 Rouse, Preston, 19
 Rowan, Peter, 109
 Royal Sons (“5” Royales), 8, 76–93, 82, 85, 120, 146, 150
 Royal Spades, 86
 Rubin, Rick, 225–26
 “Rumble” (Link Wray), 238
 Run-D.M.C., 225
 Russell, Leon, 74

 Sacred Irony (band), 148
 Sade (singer), 137
 “Salvation Song” (Avett Brothers), 220
 Sam & Dave, 86, 92
 “Samson and Delilah” (Rev. Gary Davis), 40
 Samuels, William, 87
 Sanborn, Nick, 213, 214, 215
 Sanders, Nicky, 73
 Santana, Carlos, 247
 Sarah Shook and the Disarmers, 207
 Sarle, Molly, 214
Saturday Night Fever (film), 139, 188
Saturday Night Live, 46, 160, 175, 221, 278
 Sauser-Monnig, Alexandra, 214
 “Save the Last Dance for Me” (Drifters), 113
 Savoy Records, 40
 Sawyer Brown (band), 131, 280
 “Scenario” (A Tribe Called Quest), 253–54
 Schultz, John, 172
 Scoggins, Jerry, 70
 Scott, Bon, 128
 Scott, Jill, 266
 Scruggs, Earl, 37, 54, 55, 60, 68, 107, 108, 249, 286; as banjo pioneer, 13; Blue Grass Boys joined by, 66–67, 78; childhood of, 61; commercial success of, 69–71; diligence of, 64; diverse musical tastes of, 71–72; Flatt and, 69, 72, 74; instrumental techniques devised by, 8, 50, 61–62; in Knoxville, 65; later career of, 75
 Scruggs, Horace, 62
 Scruggs, Junie, 62
 Seacrest, Ryan, 270
Seasons Change (Scotty McCreery), 283
 Seatrain (jazz-rock band), 19
Second Gleam, The (Avett Brothers), 225
 Secret Service (band), 148
 Seeger, Pete, 22
 Seger, Bob, 167
 Self-Portraits (band), 222
 Seven Mary Three (band), 191
 “’74–’75” (Connells), 144
 “Shaggin’ Shoes” (Nantucket), 142
 “Shake, Rattle and Roll” (Big Joe Turner), 95
 Sharp, Graham, 72, 73
 Sharp Thing (band), 223
 Shea, George Beverly, 54
 Shearin, Chip, 255
 Sheeran, Ed, 114
 Sheldon, Robert, 161
 Shelton, Robert, 70
 Shepard, Sam, 204
 Shirelles, 88–89
 Shoaf, Sarah, 149
 Shoffner, Michael, 162
 Shore, Dinah, 119
 Showmen (band), 124

Shuffler, George, 63
 Shumate, Jim, 65
 Sides, Connie, 17
 Sidewinder (North Carolina band), 131, 280
 Sidewinders (Arizona band), 190
Sigh No More (Mumford & Sons), 227, 228
 Signoret, Simone, 237
 Simon, Carly, 178
 Simone, Nina, 8, 231–34, 233, 236, 237, 239–43, 241
 Simpson, Bland, 178
 Sims, Jamie, 157
 Sinatra, Nancy, 191
Singles (Future Islands), 222
 6 String Drag (band), 201, 205–8
 “634-5789 (Soulsville, U.S.A.)” (Embers), 112
 “Sixty Minute Man” (Dominoes), 80, 112–13
 Skaggs, Ricky, 63, 75, 187, 189, 249
Sky Full of Holes (Fountains of Wayne), 188
 “Slack Motherfucker” (Superchunk), 161, 164, 199
 Slaughter (band), 141
 Sledge, Robert, 168, 169, 170, 177, 181
 Slick Rick (rapper), 259
 “Slight Figure of Speech” (Avett Brothers), 227
 Slint (band), 169
 Sloop, Marc, 165
 “Slummer the Slum, The” (“5” Royales), 87
 Slushpuppies (band), 163
 Sly and the Family Stone, 247
 “Smells Like Teen Spirit” (Nirvana), 160–61, 177
 Smith, Arthur, 8, 45–47, 47, 49–59, 51, 57, 62, 149, 229
 Smith, Barrett, 73
 Smith, Clayton Seymour, 49
 Smith, Dorothy, 59
 Smith, Harry, 1, 103
 Smith, O. C., 120
 Smith, Ralph, 46, 52, 54, 59
 Smith, Richard L., 276
 Smith, Sonny, 52
 Sneakers (band), 148, 151–52
 Snoop Dogg, 88
 “So Fabulous” (Little Brother), 259
 “Somewhere in Heaven (You’ll Find Me)” (Mitchell’s Christian Singers), 42
 “So Much in Love” (Tymes), 112
 “Song for the Dumped” (Ben Folds Five), 173
 Sonic Youth, 160
 Sons of the Mountaineers (band), 50
 Sony Music, 171
 Soule, Kenny, 133, 134, 140
 Soul Stirrers, 77
 Soundgarden (band), 161, 221
 Sound of Time (band), 130
 Soup (band), 148
 Southern, Caleb, 169
 Southern Culture on the Skids (band), 154, 204
 Southern Tones, 78
 Spears, Britney, 273
 “Speed” (Little Brother), 257
 Spinners, 112
Spirit of the Rockies (Kruger Brothers), 251
 Spoon (band), 195, 196, 198
 “Sportin’ Life Blues” (Brownie McGhee), 42
 Spotify, 274
 Squirrel Nut Zippers, 8, 166–67, 167, 169–77, 170, 191–92
 Stamey, Chris, 147–52, 153, 166, 236
 “Stand by Me” (Ben E. King), 113
 Stanley, Ralph, 50, 62, 98
 Stanley Brothers, 11, 63, 104, 206
 Statler Brothers, 55
 Stax of Gold (Nantucket; band), 8–9, 128–42
 Steep Canyon Rangers, 72, 73
 “Step It Up and Go” (Blind Boy Fuller), 37, 52, 64
 Stereolab (band), 259
 Stern, Howard, 279
 Stipe, Michael, 156
 Strayhorn, Billy, 248
 Streisand, Barbra, 196, 198
 “Straight, No Chaser” (Thelonious Monk), 235
String Wizards (John McEuen), 64
 Stroud, Andrew, 240
 Stuart, Marty, 19
 Studdard, Ruben, 278
 Styx (band), 138
Suburbs, The (Arcade Fire), 182, 196
 “Such a Night” (Drifters), 113
 Sugarhill Gang, 255

- Sugar Hill Records, 10, 99, 188–89, 192, 217
 “Suits Are Picking Up the Bill” (Squirrel Nut Zippers), 176, 177
 “Summertime” (George Gershwin), 279
 “Summertime’s Calling Me” (Catalinas), 126
 Superchunk, 161, 164, 169, 172, 184, 185, 192–94, 198–99, 277
Sweet Temptation (Ricky Skaggs), 189
 Swindell, Andy, 115
 Swingbillies (string band), 30–31
 Swingin’ Medallions (band), 121
 Sylvan Esso (band), 213, 214, 215
- Taj Mahal (musician), 34
 “Take the ‘A’ Train” (Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn), 248
 Tanner, Eugene, 81, 88, 92
 Tanner, John, 78, 80, 81–82, 85, 92, 150
 Tarantino, Quentin, 234
 Tassels (band), 121
 Taylor, Alex, 178
 Taylor, Isaac, 178
 Taylor, James, 163, 178, 179
 Taylor, Mike “M.C.,” 7, 209–15, 211
 Taylor, Wayne, 163
 TCB (Temptations), 130
 “Tears of Joy” (“5” Royales), 87
 “Teasin’ You” (Willie Tee), 115, 124
 Tee, Willie, 115, 120, 124
 Teenage Fanclub (band), 185
 Teenbeats (band), 146
 Teer, John, 73
 Television (band), 151
 “Tell the Truth” (“5” Royales), 86
 Temptations, 76, 86, 115, 130
 “Tennessee Stud” (Doc Watson), 107
 Terrell, Saunders “Sonny Terry,” 26, 27, 31, 38–40, 43, 78, 115, 234
Testify (Caleb Johnson), 282
 TGS Records, 190
 “There Goes My Baby” (Drifters), 113
They Say I’m Different (Betty Davis), 247
 Thile, Chris, 189
 “Think” (“5” Royales), 86
 “This Magic Moment” (Drifters), 113
 Thompson, Bradford, 256
 Thompson, Bug Kim, 116
 Thompson, Ernest, 17
 Thompson, Joe, 29, 244
 Thompson, Tommy, 204
 Thornton, DD, 150
Thousand Different Ways, A (Clay Aiken), 278
 “Threat” (Jay-Z), 259
 Three Dog Night, 221
Three Pickers, The (Earl Scruggs, Ricky Skaggs, and Doc Watson), 75
Thriller (Michael Jackson), 183
 “Throwing Rocks at the Moon” (Backsliders), 201
Tides of a Teardrop (Mandolin Orange), 228
 Tiffith, Anthony “Top Dawg,” 253
 Tillis, Mel, 63
 ’Til Tuesday (band), 137
 Timberlake, Justin, 114
 “Times They Are A-Changin’, The” (Bob Dylan), 240
 Titus, Andre “Dres,” 254
 T.N.T. (AC/DC), 129
 “Tobacco Road” (John Loudermilk), 191
 Tobacco Tags (string band), 30, 49
 “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black” (Nina Simone), 240
 “Tom Dooley” (Kingston Trio), 103
 Tomlinson, Bobby, 111, 116, 119–23, 126–27
 “Tomorrow Is My Turn” (Nina Simone, Rhiannon Giddens), 241
 Tonebenders (band), 201
To Pimp a Butterfly (Kendrick Lamar), 266, 268
 Tower of Power, 247
 Townes, Frederick “B.” W., 108
 Toxic Popsicle (band), 168
 Travis, Merle, 63, 100, 105
 Travis, Randy, 271
 Tri, El (band), 245
 Tribe Called Quest, A, 253–54
 Trice, Richard, 26, 39, 40, 43
 Trice, Willie, 26, 32, 37, 43
 “Trou Macacq” (Squirrel Nut Zippers), 176
 Trump, Donald, 279
 Tullock, Jake, 68
 Turner, Big Joe, 39, 80, 95, 117, 122
 Turner, Ike & Tina, 86
 Turner, Josh, 271
 “Turnpike USA” (Link Wray), 238
 Turtles (band), 89
 Tweedy, Jeff, 205

Two Dollar Pistol (band), 205
 Tyler, Steven, 271
 Tyler, William, 213
 Tymes (pop-soul group), 111–12

Unauthorized Biography of Reinhold Messner, The (Ben Folds Five), 177

Uncle Tupelo (band), 169, 205, 206
 Underwood, Carrie, 275, 279
 “Up on the Roof” (Drifters, James Taylor), 178
 Uzzell, Larry, 128–30, 133, 135, 142
 Uzzell, Mike, 130–34, 140, 141–42

Valient Thorr, 222
 Vandross, Luther, 259
 Van Eps, Fred, 13
 Van Halen, 221
 Vanilla Ice, 160
 Van Landingham, Mary Oates Spratt, 7
 Van Ronk, Dave, 42–43
 Van Shelton, Ricky, 59
 Van Zandt, Townes, 189
 Vega, Suzanne, 156
 Veldt (band), 172
 Vernon, Justin, 212–13
 Voigt, Jon, 56
 “Voodoo Cadillac” (Southern Culture on the Skids), 204
 Vulgar Boatmen, 89

 “Wabash Cannon Ball” (Country Cousins), 186
 Wagoner, Porter, 63
 Wainwright, Loudon, Jr., 24
 Wainwright, Loudon, III, 24–25, 95
 Waits, Tom, 95
 Walker, Frank, 18, 20, 22, 23, 53
 Waller, Fats, 166
 Walsh, Joe, 55
 Ward, Billy, 80, 112–13, 134
 Ward, Ed, 91–92
 Warner Records, 58, 196
 Warrant (band), 141
 Warren, Paul, 68
 Washington, George “Bull City Red,” 26, 36, 39
Watermelon Wine (Frye Gaillard), 48
 Watkins, Tionne “T-Boz,” 79

Watson, Annie Green, 97
 Watson, Arthel “Doc,” 9, 31, 34, 50, 75, 96, 101, 106, 189, 217, 221–22, 249; death of, 110; early years of, 97, 99–100; growing popularity of, 103; MerleFest and, 108–9; modesty of, 95, 98–99; son’s work with, 104–7; virtuosity of, 9, 94–95, 100–101, 102
 Watson, Eddy Merle, 105–8, 217
 Watson, General Dixon, 97, 99–101
 Watson, Nancy, 99
 Watson, Pee Wee, 140
 Watson, Richard, 108, 110
 Watson, Tom, 99
 “Way Up in North Carolina” (Belltones), 186
 “Way Up in NYC” (Loudon Wainwright III), 25
 Wazoo (band), 148
 WBT-AM, 48–49, 53, 62
 WBTW, 45, 53–54
 Weavers (folk group), 246
 Weiss, Ed (“Charlie Brown”), 123–24
 Weissberg, Eric, 56, 103
 Westerlund, Joe, 213
 Wexler, Jerry, 124
 WFDD, 150
 WGIB, 124
 Whalen, Katharine, 165–66, 167, 170, 171, 177
What a Time to Be Alive (Superchunk), 199
 “What’d I Say” (Ray Charles), 86
Whatever and Ever Amen (Ben Folds Five), 173
What Happened, Miss Simone? (documentary film), 237, 240
 “What It Was, Was Football” (Andy Griffith), 186
What Now (Sylvan Esso), 214
 What Peggy Wants (band), 160, 166
 “What’s That Smells Like Fish” (Blind Boy Fuller), 32
 “What Would You Give in Exchange for Your Soul?” (Bill and Charlie Monroe), 65
 “When I Look into Your Eyes” (FireHouse), 141
 “When the Roses Bloom in Dixieland” (Carter Family), 100

Index

- Whiskeytown (band), 200–201, 205–8
 “White House Blues” (Charlie Poole), 20, 24
 White Stripes, 205
 WHKY, 102
 Wiggins, Ella May, 22
 Wilbur, Jim, 184, 192, 199
 Wilco, 207
 “Wild Moose Party” (Cosmopolitans), 157
 Williams, Hank, 24, 53
 Williams, Otis, 86
 Wills, Bob, 24, 53
Will the Circle Be Unbroken (Nitty Gritty
 Dirt Band), 60, 74, 108
 “Will You Love Me Tomorrow” (Shirelles),
 89
 Wilson, Dave, 73
 Wilson, Jackie, 113, 134
 Wilson, Joe, 54, 101, 102, 104, 107, 110
 Windbreakers, 156
 Wirtz, Billy (William Wirths), 117, 120
 Wise, Chubby, 19
 WKIX-AM, 124
 WKNC, 256, 257, 258, 261
 WLAC-AM, 119–21
Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing, A (Black Sheep),
 254
 Womack, Bobby, 254
 Wonder, Stevie, 77, 92, 242
 “Wonderful! Wonderful!” (Tymes), 112
Wonder Years, The (9th Wonder), 266, 267
 Woodlief, Norman, 17–18
 Woods (band), 204
 Woodward, Bob, 80
 Woolard, Craig, 111–12, 125, 126
 Woolbright, Mack, 62
 World War II, 40, 64–65
 World of Bluegrass festival, 284–86
 Worley, Darryl, 60
 WPTF, 30, 48, 65, 286
 WRAL, 100
 Wray, Link, 238
 WSB, 48, 49
 WSJS, 78–79
 WSM, 48, 49, 65, 119
 WSPA, 50, 62
 WTOB, 146
 Wurster, Jon, 166, 184, 192, 199, 277
 Wurster, Lane, 166
 Wu-Tang Clan, 266
 Wwax (band), 163
 WXDU, 258
 WXYC, 162, 256
 Wyatt, Marshall, 22, 65–66, 200
 Wyle, Noah, 172
 X (band), 188, 205
 Yaggfu Front (rap group), 256–57
Yankee Hotel Foxtrot (Wilco), 207
 Yep Roc Records, 188
 Yes (band), 138
 “You Ain’t Talking to Me” (Charlie Poole),
 24
 Young, Neil, 161
 “Your Love Keeps Lifting Me” (Jackie Wil-
 son), 134
You Need a Ride to Raleigh (Nantucket), 142
 Zen Frisbee (band), 161, 169
 ZZ Top, 225