Blues and Bluegrass: Tough Arts of the Underclass

BY JOE WILSON

"People think I stick to this old mountain music because we're a little isolated, but they're wrong. We've had radio and television since they started. I worked in New York after the war; heard a lot of good music. But this music is personal, a gift from my mother and father. When I sing their songs I can hear their voices and almost see their forms."

Stanley Hicks
Appalachian musician

Blues and bluegrass are arts of the underclass that are prospering despite the inattention of New York, Hollywood, Nashville and Washington. Yes, I know it is jarring to speak of an American underclass. We like to pretend that we have only one socio-economic group ("middle") structured like ancient Egypt, with upper and lower parts. This odd egalitarian myopia distorts our artistic perception and confuses understanding of why our popular culture is so strong.

The recent success of blues and bluegrass fascinates because these musical forms are modern branches of an ancient tree of American culture, one that has grafted European and African forms since colonial times. As in other folk arts of the American underclass, blues and bluegrass fuel our popular culture. Concepts that came to North America long ago from Africa and Europe continually jostle, blend and re-blend: minstrelsy, cakewalk, ragtime, jazz, country, rock, rap, hip-hop. Some of these sounds reflect our national experience and our highest and lowest yearnings: cakewalk music grew from a fundraising tool for 19th century country schools; jazz from the background music in New Orleans dance halls and brothels.

The South has been the place where Africa and Europe jostled and blended most. It is an especially interesting place today as Europeans and a stream of Japanese engage in what has been dubbed "cultural tourism." At Ole Miss in 1994 I met a van load of young German tourists, blond, rich in accents, generous with beer, and eager to talk the blues. They'd been trekking the torpid and featureless Delta in a rented mini-van, visiting sites associated with blues master Robert Johnson. Mysteriously poisoned in 1938, the youthful Johnson was laid in an unmarked grave. Any search for artifacts associated with him is invariably fruitless, but still tourists come. One earnest European pleaded, "Tell me how you discover the blues?" in the soul-searching manner of a zealot inquiring after a conversion experience. He told of having his life changed by hearing Hound Dog Taylor in a Chicago blues joint where fist fights were almost as common as third beers. I told about a long walk on the western slope of the Blue Ridge in Tennessee's easternmost county fifty years earlier and meeting a musician wearing horizontal stripes. They listened with rapt attention.

I first heard the blues on a hot June afternoon in 1943. I was five years old and following my Grandma along a gravel road that led past Brushy Mountain Prison Camp Number 3. The inmate barracks were long rows of A-roofed whitewashed frame buildings. The prisoners were all black and most were from five hundred miles to the West in Memphis ("the real capital of Mississippi"), chain gang members who repaired roads and bridges. White guards in porkpie hats

Blues guitarist John Dee Holeman and pianist Quentin “Fris” Holloway. The two men frequently perform together and are both recipients of the North Carolina Folk Heritage Award. (Photo by Cedric N. Chatterley ©1996)

On the Radio

According to the Winter 1996 *Arbitron* ratings, Spanish language/music radio stations placed in the top ten in each of the top three U. S. radio markets (New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago). In Los Angeles, the number one radio station is a Spanish language/music station.* There are now over 300 Spanish language radio stations in the U.S.

In the U.S. alone, according to the International Bluegrass Music Association, more than 900 radio stations feature bluegrass music programs.

The 1995 *Living Blues Directory* lists 456 blues programs on public and commercial radio stations in 44 states and 10 countries (including 41 in Australia and 1 in Macedonia) The 1990 *Broadcasting Yearbook* lists 15 all-blues radio stations in the U.S..**

Old Time Music on the Radio, a project of the Old Time Music Group (which also publishes the *Old Time Herald*), recently published survey results of 156 public, commercial, listener supported, community and college radio stations in the U.S., Canada, Australia and France which broadcast old time Appalachian music as part of their programming.***

The 1990 *Broadcasting Yearbook* lists 6 all-polka radio stations in the U.S. In Wisconsin alone, according to the 1996 *Polka Showcase*, published annually by the Wisconsin Orchestra Leaders Association, there are 59 disc jockeys programming polka music on 23 different radio stations.****

*Source: *Billboard*, April 27, 1996 p. 86.

**Source: *The Broadcasting Yearbook,* (Washington, D.C.: Broadcasting Publictions, Inc., 1991) p. F-72

****OTR Radio Station Survey Results.* Elkins: West Virginia, 1996 n.p.

****Source: Richard March, Wisconsin Arts Board.

and bib overalls with 30-30 caliber lever action carbines in shoulder slings watched from rickety towers perched outside a high barbed wire fence.

Grandma and I were walking from Mom and Dad's little farm on Bulldog Creek to her home above the high falls on Roaring Creek. It was ten dusty miles and we'd walked six before we came to the prison camp. Grandma thought it would be good to rest her young charge and drink some water at the springhouse of the Bryant home across the road from the camp entrance. One of the Bryant children explained stripes to me. Vertical stripes meant they'd be released some day. Horizontal meant they'd be in prison until they died.

A huddle of prisoners had gathered at a twelve inch square opening in the fence. Through it they sold hand tooled leather wallets and belts. A big man with fierce countenance and horizontal stripes was playing a booming Sears and Roebuck guitar and singing with a heartfelt passion that enchanted me. My new friend whispered that he was Booger Bear, lead trusty on the bridge crew. He said he only looked scary, that he was actually very nice. My grandma had to take my hand and pull me away from his intense and euphoric performance.

After that I saw Booger Bear many times. A showman, his powerful hands could bend in half a steel bridge pin. Guitar players visited Booger's bridge crew, seeking instruction in his fluid finger-picked guitar style. There was a lore about him: he'd caught his wife in the arms of another man and strangled both. His songs were the blues classics of the Mississippi Delta: "I Want To Die Easy Lord," "My Dough Roller Is Gone," "Walking Blues," "The Easy Rider" and the oft requested "Wish I Could Bring 'Em Back," a song we believed to be his autobiography. Nickels and dimes earned with his music bought his supply of Prince Albert smoking tobacco, but most went into "Booger's bucket." This container was emptied each December to buy hams for the camp Christmas dinner.

Three years after hearing Booger Bear I discovered bluegrass during its earliest defining moments. Electric power had not yet found its way to our part of the Blue Ridge, but my family had a battery-powered radio and we sat in a warm glow of yellow kerosene light as we listened to the Grand Ole Opry on Saturday nights.

We were present at the radio in 1946 when youthful North Carolina Piedmont banjoist Earl Scruggs joined Bill Monroe's band, the Bluegrass Boys. It seemed that the entire South tuned in during the weeks that followed. Scruggs offered effervescent banjo "breaks," and Monroe's mandolin stuttered and soared while Southern long-bow fiddler Chubby Wise tied ribbons of rich phrases around their sound. An acoustic bass and guitar provided rhythm and the band members were as vocally proficient as instru-

A Few Blues and Bluegrass Musical Facts

The International Bluegrass Music Association, based in Owensboro, Kentucky, has a membership over 2,300.

In the U.S. alone, there are over 140 annual blues festivals. The *Living Blues Directory* lists 37 annual festivals abroad. There are also over 800 clubs throughout the U.S. that book blues music on a regular basis.

For Tennessee's Bicentennial, the Tennessee Arts Commission's Folk Arts Program published a *Folk Music Directory* containing over 300 listings of artists—including blues, bluegrass, country, gospel and sacred music—available for bookings. In Mississippi and Northwest Alabama, there are over 24 active African American Shape Note and Vocal Music Singing Conventions, most of whom meet on a regular basis.*

According to the Census Bureau's 1992 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, the five most popular forms of music included country music, blues/ rhythm and blues, and gospel and hymns. Bluegrass was listed as ninth.**

* "The African American Shape Note & Vocal Music Singing Convention Directory: Mississippi and Areas of Northwest Alabama" *Mississippi Folklife* 27 (1994): 1-44. Special Issue.

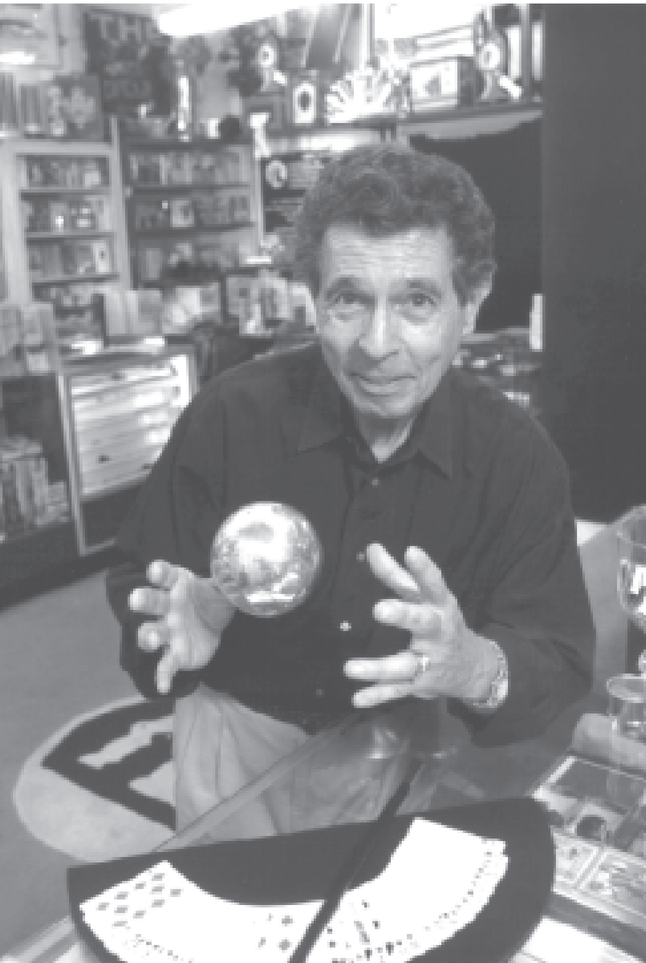
** Nicholas Zill and John Robinson, "Name That Tune," *American Demographics*, August 1994, p.24.

Country Music Foundation

1996 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary for the Nashville-based Country Music Foundation, one of the most popular and significant museums and research centers in the U.S. devoted to the study of American folk and popular music. Nearly 300,000 people a year visit the CMF Hall of Fame and Museum but, as Director Bill Ivey said, "From very early on, the Foundation's board recognized the need for a research center. It was clear that the music required something more than just a Hall of Fame...." The organization now has a full-time staff of 32, a 40,000 square foot facility and a library with 95 percent of all country music recorded before World War II. While CMF takes their archives seriously, they are equally serious about making materials accessible to the public. The Foundation has a publications program and is now at work on an Encyclopedia of Country Music. Their acclaimed series of historic recordings makes available rare and unreleased material by artists such as Hank Williams or Faron Young. Musician and CMF Board Vice-President, Emmylou Harris says, "The Country Music Foundation is so respectful of the music, and its such an entertaining place to visit for anyone who enjoys music. They do their work with a lot of devotion and reverence. It's not just about artifacts and mementos. Its about music."*

*Michael McCall, "The Country Music Foundation," *Schwann Spectrum*, Spring, 1996, pp. 12A-17A.

INFORMAL BLUEGRASS JAM SESSION AT THE 1987 SMITHVILLE FIDDLER'S JAMBOREE. (PHOTO BY ROBERT COGSWELL)



Tony Spina, owner of Tannen's Magic Shop, was inducted into City Lore's People's Hall of Fame in 1995. (Photo by Harvey Wang ©1996)

The People's Hall of Fame: "Ordinary People Doing Extraordinary Things"

Since 1992, five or six of New York City's most extraordinary individuals are honored every year for their creative contributions to the city's folk culture. Hundreds of people crowd into the Great Hall at Cooper Union to attend the annual ceremony for City Lore's People's Hall of Fame awards which celebrate those individuals, to quote City Lore Director Steve Zeitlin, "who live their art and embody tradition in their communities." To publicize the event, placards in city buses and subway cars tell one million New Yorkers the stories about local heroes who contribute to culture in the city's neighborhoods. Most of the honorees perform as part of the program. And, in the future, City Lore plans a multimedia gallery and resource center to highlight the honorees and house exhibits about grassroots culture in New York City. Past People's Hall of Fame honorees include lindy-hop dancer Frankie Manning, klezmer violinist Sid Beckerman, quilter Virgina Hall, Puerto Rican musician and cultural advocate Juan Gutiérrez, and Tony Spina, owner of Tannen's Magic Shop. Nominations are invited from City Lore members and interested individuals and each year's honorees are selected by a committee working closely with City Lore's Board of Directors.

mentally sophisticated. The songs they sang were about leaving home for the factories of the North, lost love, the old home, and religion. They had the lonesome quality of the old Celtic ballads, a rich African-derived harmony, and the insinuating immediacy of a new popular form. No band in the history of American music has spawned as many instant imitators.

Ours was a family of musicians and we knew the ancient Southern string band had arrived at a fork in the road. This was a new music for concerts, not dancing. The fiddle was no longer in charge; other instruments could take the lead. The younger banjoists in our community were instantly at work, trying to learn Scruggs' keep-it-syncopated style, playing even the rests, always a forward rush in the music. First performed for live audiences in country schoolhouses on the Southern backwoods "kerosene circuit," this new sound soon moved north with Southern migrants.

These sounds were of interest to major label recording companies through most of the 50s. When I arrived in Washington, D. C. in 1956, it blared in tough hillbilly bars and on a Virginia radio station advertising used cars and cheap furniture. The station offering blues was just one notch to the right of the bluegrass station on the AM dial. But, by the time I arrived in Nashville to work in the recording business in 1959, interest had waned. The music business anticipates fads, invests early, and gets out. No one in

1987 National Heritage Fellow Genoveva Castellanoz, maker of coronas, Nyssa, Oregon.
(Photo by Jan Boles ©1996)

National Heritage Fellowships

The National Endowment for the Arts awards the National Heritage Fellowships to a baker's dozen of traditional artists every year honoring artistic excellence, authenticity of style, and contributions to the well-being of the traditions they represent and to the cultural life of the nation. Individuals are nominated by a fellow citizen, selected by a national advisory panel of experts in folk and traditional arts, and are reviewed by the National Council for the Arts and the Arts Endowment Chairman. 197 awards have been made from 1982 to 1996 to recipients who include blues musician B.B. King, Navajo basketmaker Mary Holiday Black, Mexican American corona maker Genoveva Castellanoz, Appalachian banjo player and singer Ralph Stanley, and Lao weaver/needle worker and loom builder Mone and Vanxay Saenphimmachak. Bess Hawes, former director of the Folk Arts Program, said in 1988, " ...these Fellowships gather in and celebrate old immigrants and new together, the visual artists and the performing artists, the speakers of many tongues, people who live in our quiet places and people from our teeming cities. The National Heritage Fellowships simply serve as a temporary pause in this unending stream of creative energy, a time when we can reflect on how lucky we are, how great a debt we owe to our traditional artists everywhere."

the business believed that blues or bluegrass had a future.

The industry could hardly have been more wrong. There was a revival of these arts in the 60s among young Yankees protesting the war and their own—shades of Egypt— upper middle class origins. Blues and bluegrass were adopted by a small educated elite in a process that was at least as political as it was musical. But revivals and adoptions are puny processes when compared to True Belief.

During these years, migrants from the Delta made Chicago blues an urban music performed in clubs with dance floors. The music became electric in order to compete in noisy barrooms. There was a corresponding growth in bluegrass, some also in beer joints and clubs, but largely centered on rural festivals. The audiences for these forms are carefully focused. In fact, "audience" is not a word that serves well. Here it is not easy to separate sellers and buyers. Tickets and other products are purchased by persons who are sometimes themselves performers and absolutely certain they own this art.

Over a period of twenty-five years, networks of organized support developed for these art forms. The cliched term "grassroots," is often applied to this support from mom and pop businesses, independent record labels and voluntary associations. There's a welter of statistics which show that small businesses and voluntary groups have engendered growth and stability in these art forms. Eight recording

companies issued most blues recordings in 1960. In 1995 there were 233 companies issuing blues recordings, most of them issuing only blues recordings.[7] This proliferation of small independent record labels renders major recording companies largely irrelevant to new recordings of blues and bluegrass (and, for that matter, other forms of traditional music).

Chicago-based Alligator Records is now the premiere blues label, one that has a world-wide following and sells more blues recordings than any other label. It had its genesis at a concert by blues performer Mississippi Fred McDowell. In the audience was college student Bruce Iglauer who recalls, "It was as if he reached out and grabbed me by the collar, shook me, and spoke directly to me." Iglauer immersed himself in the blues, hosted a blues program on the college radio station and took a job as a shipping clerk for a small Chicago blues label. He used a $2,500 inheritance in 1971 to start Alligator.

The Sugar Hill label specializes in bluegrass and contemporary folk. Located in Durham, North Carolina, it is a 1978 creation of Barry Poss, then a James B. Duke fellow at Duke University. Poss abandoned a budding academic career in mid-thesis to start a shoestring label. Sugar Hill now issues the best-selling bluegrass recordings and is a frequent recipient of record industry awards.

Much of this is obviously a triumph of niche marketing. It reflects the use of cutting edge technology and communication skills to weld new audiences that support and expand the audiences for older folk art forms. But there's a critically important factor not to miss: Iglauer, Poss and other businessmen who created a new wave of successful recording companies in the past twenty-five years were inspired by the artists and art forms, not by business schools. They are as much in thrall of great artistry as any other group of arts leaders.

In 1995, there were 127 local blues societies and 289 local bluegrass societies in the U.S. — almost all created during the preceding 20 years and virtually all volunteer-run organizations.[8] They range in size from a hundred members to thousands. Most have newsletters and sponsor summer festivals and concert series supported by ticket sales. An example is the Washington, D.C. Blues Society which began in 1988 with a meeting of eight fans in a barbershop. A year and a half later it had grown to a thousand dues-paying members.

In 1965, the first bluegrass festival was held in Virginia. In 1996, 516 bluegrass festivals will be held in an amazing array of locations, including five on winter cruise ships.[9] These are in the USA and Canada, but other nations have them as well. The largest outdoor music festival held in the Czech Republic is a bluegrass festival. Today, more than 300 bluegrass bands are active in Tokyo, Japan.

Quilting in America

In an effort to gauge the breadth and depth of interest in quilting, the first in-depth survey of American quilters, *Quilting in America*, sponsored by Quilters Newsletter Magazine and Quilts, Inc. of Texas, was conducted in the summer of 1994.* Two surveys were distributed—the first to a random sampling of 40,000 U.S. households and the second to 2,000 randomly selected known, active quilters from club, magazine subscription and fabric customer lists. Response rates for both surveys exceeded 76% and revealed the following information:

- An estimated 15.5 million quilters over the age of 18 (or 6% of the U.S. population) are involved in quilting in some way. The majority span two generations (35-75) with an average age of 52. 32% are aged 18-34.
- Total annual quilt market expenditures are estimated at $1.554 billion. A core of self-identified active quilters (estimated at 840,000 quilters or 5.4% of all quilters with quilting-related purchases of $400 or more per year) account for nearly 50% of these expenditures.

- The densest concentration of all quilting activity per capita occurs in the middle of the country—upper midwest, plains, south central and mountain states. Perhaps indicating greater affluence, active quilting activity occurs most frequently in the Northeast and the Pacific Coast regions.

- A majority of active quilters prefer traditional quilts and quilt patterns and most combine machine and hand-piecing techniques. A majority of known, active quilters pursue quilting as a leisure pursuit and, surprisingly, 92% of known, active quilters prefer to work alone.

*Source: Jonathan Holstein, "Discovering 'The Dedicated Quilter,'" *The Quilt Journal* (1995), vol. 4, no.1, pp. 14-16. An executive summary of the survey conducted by NFO Research, Inc. and ABACUS Custom Research, Inc. is available from Quilter's Newsletter Magazine.

QUILTER LORRAINE MAHAN, PHILADELPHIA. (PHOTO BY ROLAND FREEMAN ©1996)

What speaks to these audiences? Many audience members seem to share the Iglauer moment: grabbed by the collar, shook, and given a message. The blues are as much religious experience as art form. They enable the sharing of a sublime joy or a whisper from the abyss. Bluegrass seems to speak internationally to working people; one of the finest young contemporary bands is Russian.

The statistics are impressive, but attendance figures, record sales, and audience demographics are not the critical measure of any art form. A far more important measure is concerned with elasticity. Is there room for growth? There seems to be plenty in these forms. Blues and bluegrass continue to evolve, good ideas are welcome. These two modern branches of the old growth Southern string band tree tell us that a secret of longevity is innovation; one keeps the old by keeping it new.

But surely the best kept secret is that ownership enables continuity. Blues and bluegrass are two of the more marginalized American art forms, supported sporadically and often ignored by philanthropic and commercial entities. Yet they are surviving and thriving. This is because they are like other great art forms in having the power to speak to the soul. And these tough arts of the underclass offer up a lesson for everyone:
art is kept in the heart
of believers or not at all.