



JIM GAVENUS PHOTO

Old Crow  
Medicine Show  
at the 2014  
MerleFest

## STRINGBANDOLOGY

FROM AFRICAN-AMERICAN FIELD WORKERS TO THE GRAND OLE OPRY UP TO MERLEFEST, STRING BANDS HAVE BEEN AN IMPORTANT PART OF AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

It's rare that an acoustic-guitar player performs in a vacuum. Sure, classical guitarists can perform entire solo recitals, and singer-songwriters can record and perform their music with no additional accompaniment. But the rich, resonant sound of acoustic guitars becomes exponentially more interesting when you add other instruments: drums, keyboards, electric or pedal-steel guitars . . . or, say, several other purely acoustic instruments.

Enter that most historic of American ensembles: the string band.

Since most acoustic-guitar players also appreciate other acoustic instruments, *Acoustic Guitar* recently added a new department (*Pickin'*) that offers news and reviews of banjos, mandolins, and all manner of other acoustic stringed instruments. With the annual Merlefest coming in late April, AG's editors have decided a special focus on string bands is in order.

So, grab your big ol' dreadnought, strum a few chords or flatpick a few notes—and enjoy this issue's journey through the glorious sounds of bluegrass and string bands.

# MERLEFEST!

**HOW A FAMILY GATHERING FLOWERED INTO ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL STRING-BAND FESTIVALS**

BY MARK SEGAL KEMP

Under a warm Carolina blue sky in spring 1988, a flatbed truck pulled up in a grassy meadow at a community college in the southern Appalachian mountains. The truck's bed would provide the stage for a sold-out music event—more than 1,000 people splayed out on blankets or sitting in lawn chairs brought from home. The event had piqued the interest of an equal mix of young, scraggly, long-haired hippies in tie-dye and jeans, and senior citizens clad in their Sunday-go-to-meeting best.

This event—held in the tiny town of Wilkesboro, North Carolina—would come to be known as MerleFest, a folk and bluegrass showcase named in memory of the late Merle Watson, the guitar-playing son and musical partner of flat-picking guitar legend Doc Watson. The younger Watson had died tragically in a tractor accident three years earlier.

"It was intended to be one time, one show, one night," says original MerleFest executive director B Townes, a horticulture instructor at the community college.

Townes had no idea how popular the festival would be for music fans starved for acoustic sounds rooted in tradition. What began as a way for Townes to raise money to improve the campus gardens—now called the Eddy Merle Watson Memorial Garden for the Senses—today attracts nearly 80,000 people a year to see up to 100 acts play on 14 stages.

With its guitar and songwriting workshops and musical marketplace, MerleFest has become one of the biggest and most influential folk and bluegrass festivals in the world, and a rite of passage for new generations of string bands that have carried acoustic music into the 21st century. Acts ranging from Alison Krauss and Union Station to Nickel Creek, Old Crow Medicine Show, the Carolina Chocolate Drops,



**'I immediately knew that I wanted to be part of that world. I had found where I belong.'**

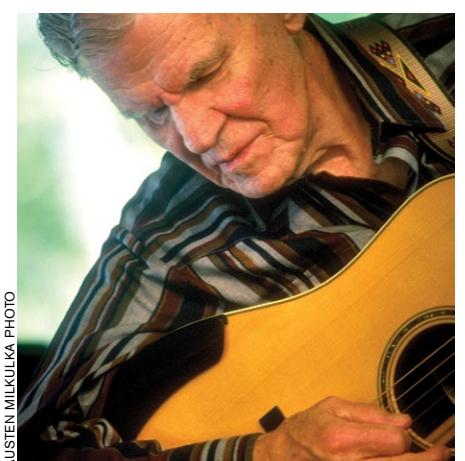
SETH AVETT



"This is a particularly pretty tune I did on an album called *Cold on the Shoulder*," flatpicking guitarist Tony Rice said as he stepped to the microphone that day. "It's called John Hardy Was a Desperate Little Man."

And from there, Rice, fiddler Mark O'Connor, mandolin player Sam Bush, shaggy-haired bassist John Cowan, banjo man Béla Fleck, and Dobro player Jerry Douglas—all in their 20s and 30s and full of youthful zeal—lit into the lilting traditional tune, spraying solos into the warm mountain breeze. **AC**

SARA BRENNAN-HARRELL PHOTO



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**Clockwise from top left**  
Steep Canyon Rangers,  
The Waybacks  
with the T Sisters,  
Justin Robinson  
of Carolina  
Chocolate Drops,  
Steel Wheels,  
Holly Williams,  
Doc Watson



JIM GAVENUS PHOTO



The Happy Hollow String Band plays a 1976 Democratic Party rally on the back of a flatbed truck at Blue Mist Barbecue, in Asheboro, North Carolina. From left to right: Sonia Hughes Michael, Gwen Auman, Sandy Chrisco Hatley, Robin Auman Penninger.

## GOODBYE EARL

HOW 5 TEENAGE GIRLS FROM NORTH CAROLINA HELPED BLAZE TRAILS FOR WOMEN IN BLUEGRASS

BY MARK SEGAL KEMP

In 1975, my friend Buck Parker introduced me to the Auman sisters, two teenage bluegrass musicians who could play rings around most of the guys in our neck of North Carolina. Gwen and Robin, who played mandolin and upright bass, respectively, were members of the all-girl Happy Hollow String Band.

The only other all-girl band I knew of at the time was the Runaways. I was 15. I didn't know much back then.

Today, the emergence of groups such as Della Mae has created a resurgence of chatter about all-female string bands. As if this were something new. The truth is, before Della Mae there was Uncle Earl, and before Uncle Earl, there was that little trio called the Dixie Chicks. And women have played prominent roles in numerous mixed-gender contemporary, old-time folk and string bands, from Rhonda Vincent, who started out in the 1960s as part of her family band the Sally Mountain Show, to later players, including Alison Krauss of Union Station, Sara Watkins of Nickel Creek, and Rhiannon Giddens of the Carolina Chocolate Drops.

Though it's not talked about nearly enough, women have been prominent in folk, country, bluegrass, and old-time string bands from the beginning—much more so than in rock 'n' roll. The whole concept of a lead guitarist was invented by a woman, Maybelle Carter of the Carter Family, who has inspired generations of acoustic guitar players. Sally Ann Forrester became a Bluegrass "Boy" in 1943, when Bill Monroe hired her to put a little accordion into the Appalachian-music genre he created. Hazel Dickens was a powerful voice for mountain women and coal miners when she picked up a guitar and began singing bluegrass and folk protest songs in the mid-'60s. And Cynthia May Carver, better known as Cousin Emmy, wrote one of the more enduring banjo-based string-band tunes, "Ruby, Are You Mad at Your Man?"

And yet, in the 21st century, some people still express surprise when women strap on guitars and banjos and form bands. As if it's a novelty.

For Gwen Auman, that's exactly how she and her fellow members of the Happy Hollow String Band were treated: as a novelty. According to

Auman, the five teens were acutely aware early on that they were making a feminist statement. "We realized we were different, but we wanted to be accepted as musicians and not just labeled as a girl band," Auman says. "I remember that was really important to us—you know, 'Yeah, we're girls, but can you accept us as musicians?'"

When they came together in the early '70s, the Happy Hollow String Band—which also included guitarist Sonia Hughes (now Michael), banjo player Sandy Crisco (now Hatley), and fiddler Karen Joyner (now Pendley)—had few peers to turn to for support. "We started out on the fiddler's convention circuit and there were no women hardly at all," says Auman, who still performs in bands around my hometown of Asheboro, just east of the Wilkesboro site of MerleFest. "There might have been somebody's wife singing in a band, or maybe they'd let a woman play bass, but it was very obvious to us that this was a male-dominated thing."

The Auman sisters were lucky to have a supportive big brother, who had already navigated the bluegrass world. "My older brother, Michael, who was a member of a local bluegrass band,



**Happy Hollow String Band**  
From left to right: Karen Joyner Pendley,  
Michael Auman, Hatley Penninger.

the Bluegrass Gentlemen, not only taught me to play," Gwen Auman remembers, "but he also let me play his heavenly 1969 Martin D-18."

She soon gravitated to the mandolin, purchasing a German-made Hofner and then a local luthier's copy of a Gibson A model. "Many bluegrass players pick F-model Gibsons, but I preferred the look and sound of the A. Still do."

The Aumans' cousin Sonia played an F-series Yamaha, and banjo player Sandy picked a '70s-era Gibson RB-250. These days, Sandy says, "I pick a 1960s Baldwin C model that I bought during college. My middle daughter, Kellie, now picks my Gibson."

One can only hope that Kellie Hatley will join together with the growing number of players in other bands—from those still unknown to members of well-known bands such as Della Mae and the Carolina Chocolate Drops—in continuing to diversify traditional string-band music—just as Hatley's mom and the other teenage girls of Happy Hollow so boldly did in a small Carolina town in the bell-bottom '70s. **AC**

*For more on the role women have played in folk and bluegrass, read Murphy Hicks Henry's Pretty Good for a Girl: Women in Bluegrass (University of Illinois Press), which documents more than 70 overlooked female players.*