

SOFT SPOKEN WALTER MCNEW "BLACK JACK GROVE"

Eighty-one years old and lean as a bean pole, Walter McNew lives with his wife, Elizabeth, in Mount Vernon, Kentucky (Rockcastle County) a mile or so from the famous Renfro Valley music complex which has been a wellspring of American country music since 1939. The proximity is fitting, and Renfro Valley barn dance and gospel music programs have been a source of enjoyment and interest to the McNews for many years. They especially enjoy the fiddlers' gathering held in the old barn there in the fall of each year. On the other hand, Renfro Valley's steady drift in recent years toward commercial country music has not caught Walter McNew in its current. Instead, he is a man who looks back to the best of times when fiddle playing and the old shape-note hymns were expressions of the heart, and music helped ease the dust, the sweat, and the hard edges of life.

Walter will tell you that he ran with a rowdy bunch back when he was a young man, but this is hard to believe since one of the first things you notice in talking with him is his quiet humility and his sincere and kindly demeanor. Even back in the 1930s, Walter's pals in the "Three Cs" (Civilian Conservation Corps) teased him by affectionately nicknaming him "Soft Spoken Walter McNew."

Today, Walter likes nothing better than to drift back in his mind to the days when his life was intertwined with the railroad, when he would walk a few miles on Saturday night to play music with friends at the local grocery or at someone's farmhouse. To him, fiddle tunes are filled with echoes and memories of the old railroad depot. When he

was a boy, Walter often fell asleep to the sound of his father, a telegraph operator and depot agent, playing his fiddle between dispatches while working the graveyard shift late at night.

In 1894, at the age of six, Walter's father, John G. McNew, had come with his family from Scott County, Virginia, settling in the small community of Wildie (pronounced Will'-dee), Kentucky, an area of mixed hill farms and woodlands about fifty miles south of Lexington. John was raised on the family farm there; then in 1910, he married and went to work for the L&N Railroad. Trains came through Wildie regularly, hauling freight, mail, passengers and coal north from the big yards at Corbin on the western edge of the east Kentucky coalfields.

Walter was born in 1912, and it was at Wildie that he attended a one room grade school. There were eventually eight McNew children and from their father they learned to read the seven shaped notes of music. John McNew had inherited a knowledge of the rudiments of music from his own father, and both men taught local singing schools during their respective lifetimes.

John McNew was also an avid oldtime fiddler who played whenever a free moment could be found. Walter recalls his dad talking extensively about a man he called Uncle Garrett Bow who would come and spend nights with him at the depot. The two would keep each other company playing fiddle tunes until all hours. Walter believes that it was from this Uncle Garrett Bow that his dad picked up some of his more unusual tunes— pieces like "Pine Top" and "Blackjack Grove."

With his brothers and sisters, Walter formed a family string band under the encouraging and watchful eye of their

father. The band played occasionally at picnics, fairs and local contests, including a contest at Berea College in 1928.

As a railroad man, John McNew found that he had to move frequently whenever he was “bumped off” his job owing to the whims of the railroad seniority system. In some cases this meant he would be away all week only returning home on weekends. Other times, it meant pulling the kids out of school and moving the family to a new home somewhere else. One of these moves took the McNews to the community of Kirksville in neighboring Madison County.

A few miles west of Richmond in the outer bluegrass region, Kirksville was also home to the man who became Kentucky’s best known fiddler in the late 1920s and early 1930s, “Fiddlin’ Doc” Roberts (b. 1897). Roberts was well known locally as a frequent winner at fiddle contests, and when he began recording for the Gennett Record Company in Indiana in 1927, his fame spread nationwide.

Walter was immediately taken with Doc’s smooth bowing and his intricate, slightly uptown settings of old fiddle tunes. The younger and impressionable McNew was keen on developing his own fiddle playing, and Doc Roberts became his musical hero.

I thought nobody played the fiddle like he did. He had dark hair, you know, and he always kept it slicked back pretty good and usually wore a white shirt. And when he’d get up to play his tune, you know, he’d put that fiddle up under his chin there and he was all business. Doc just seemed to have a way of making it look easy. He’d get so much in there and was so smooth, I thought nobody could beat him.

On one memorable occasion, Walter found himself squaring off against Doc Roberts in a contest. Thinking back on it, he modestly suggests that he had no business being on stage with the great master. But it was a proud moment to cherish— he placed second.

It must have been about 1948 when they had that contest. I don't know who got me into that. But anyway, I agreed. Really, I don't think I even knew that Doc Roberts was going to be there. Had I known, I would have probably said "No." Because I thought nobody could play like Doc, you know. He was tops in my book at that time. It was in the Kirksville High School building there. We played two numbers apiece, I believe. And they called me back and Doc back to play another number. So, that time, you know, Doc Roberts placed first, and me second. Well, I didn't even expect to have to play a second number, you know. As far as I was concerned, Doc had it wrapped up when I walked in and seen him. Second— to me— boy, it was like I was floating on a cloud, you know, I can't believe it. Second to Doc Roberts! I was just thrilled to death. And then after we left, why, somebody come up and tapped me on the shoulder, and I looked around. He said, "Boy, you'll never know how close that was." And I was perfectly satisfied then.

There were other fiddlers that Walter admired as well. Clayton McMichen and Van B. Kidwell were two who were

both frequently engaged in contests in the area. Kidwell was from a little place called Kingston in Madison County, and his fiddling became well known in Kentucky and later in Ohio. Walter feels that he sometimes played too fast and recalls that Kidwell usually placed second to Doc Roberts. Nevertheless, he was a good fiddler and Walter learned "The Cat Came Back" after hearing Van Kidwell play it at a little contest in Dreyfus, Kentucky.

Clayton McMichen was also influential in shaping Walter's music, especially after McMichen's band, the Georgia Wildcats, began broadcasting over WHAS in Louisville in the early 1930s. Walter listened regularly to the Wildcats' programs and was fond of Clayton's versions of oldtime fiddle tunes, but like a lot of people, he was somewhat skeptical of the radio fiddler's later attempts to move into swing and jazz music.

In the mid 1930s, Walter joined the Three Cs and found himself assigned to Camp Carson River to work on construction projects near Fallon, Nevada. His interest in music didn't diminish, however. Instead, he teamed up with some boys from back home and formed a band they called the Kentucky Serenaders. The group became quite popular at local fetes around Fallon, and they were written up in several Nevada and California newspapers. Besides Walter on fiddle, personnel included Roy "Beans" Bussell from Middlesboro on guitar; Claude "Spider" Webb from Irvine playing jug and spoons; and Ellsworth "Wally" McAllister, a West Virginia boy, also on guitar (see photo).

This stint in the Three Cs included a major episode in Walter's musical life. Before going to Nevada, he had entered a local talent contest organized by John Lair. Lair was a Kentuckian then working in broadcasting at WLS

Chicago. He had been given the go-ahead to recruit some Kentucky "hillbilly" musicians to present over the air. Following the talent contest at the elementary school in Mount Vernon, Kentucky, Lair selected Lily May Ledford and several others to return with him to Chicago to try their hand at the then infant business of hillbilly radio. Lair told Walter that if all went well, he would send word back and Walter could come to Chicago to be on WLS with the others. Walter explains what happened:

In the meantime, I went to that Three C camp in Fallon, Nevada. I was out there and a letter came. And it was from Mr. Lair. He'd wrote me and wanted me to be in Chicago on a certain Saturday night. And he wrote a nice long letter, he says, "We think we can use you up here. We want you to play on the Barn Dance." And he said, "Now get you a Pullman, first class, so you can get a nice sleep. I want you to be fresh and ready to go when you get up here." So when I got the letter, I read all that, and the Saturday night had done past, you know, before I got the letter. So I took the letter and I told the captain. I said, "It's too late, I done missed it." He said, "Now, there might still be an opportunity there." He said, "If you want to go, we'll just get you out of the Three Cs right here. Really, that's the only purpose of the Three Cs anyway. If a boy can better himself anywhere, why, that's what we want him to do. We'll send you up there and pay all your expenses." And I said, "Well, I'll just stay here. I don't think I'll go." So that was it. John Lair

took the Coon Creek Girls and the Coon Creek Girls really hit it big— you know the rest of the story on them.

When I asked Walter if he regretted passing up the opportunity to go to Chicago and enter the radio and entertainment world, he said:

Well, really, I don't think so. I never seemed to have too much of a desire to go into that. I guess I just like my Old Kentucky Home!

But it was awhile before Walter was able to settle down for good in Kentucky. When World War II broke out, he was drafted and sent to North Africa where he served in a communications unit facilitating ground to air radio transmissions to assist fighter pilots. After returning home, he married Elizabeth Carter. Elizabeth and her sister, Dicey, ran a small homestyle restaurant in Mount Vernon—that is, until the War and the economy drained their customers and their supplies forcing them to close. Walter's own jobs have been varied, depending on what he could get. For a while he lived and worked in Richmond, Indiana, and he remembers going in the old Gennett Record Company building where his earlier hero, Doc Roberts, had made his classic fiddle records.

In retrospect, Walter wishes he had paid more attention to the fiddle when he was younger and had learned more tunes. His father, though an avid fiddler, was seemingly not motivated to pick up lots of new pieces. Walter thinks of himself in much the same light. Nevertheless, he refines his sensibilities through what he terms an “addiction” to music.

He spends hours alone in a back bedroom playing, and especially tinkering with a cassette player which he uses to make tapes for fun. Ingeniously, he has figured out how to simulate multi-track recording using only his inexpensive cassette players. With this technique, he has been able to record hundreds of shape-note hymns and instrumental pieces, singing duets, trios, and quartets by himself or playing twin fiddles with his own guitar accompaniment.

Although he inherited a core repertory of oldtime fiddle tunes from his father—tunes that for the most part feature rhythmic bowing and double stopped notes, Walter tends to favor a single string approach more characteristic of the style of Fiddlin' Doc Roberts. Walter's left hand technique is very unusual in that he uses his little finger to note both 3rd and 4th note positions. He is at a loss to explain how he arrived at this method, but the end result in his playing is the inclusion of many judiciously placed slides and slurs both up and down.

Walter listens intently to other fiddlers but is not compelled to imitate them, nor has he fallen prey to the "Georgia Shuffle," a bowing pattern which has claimed untold numbers of "victims." He plays with precision, but the music is not lost in technique, and he navigates through each tune with an innate sense of melodic and rhythmic interplay. Thanks to the training supplied by his father, he intuitively understands such things as balance, melodic and rhythmic interest, harmony, texture, and syncopation. The keys of F and Bb don't scare him, and he excels at oldtime waltzes and slow popular songs. And while he never shows off, he can pin an exuberant swing-type ending neatly on the tail of an old warhorse like "Flop Eared Mule."

The recording for this tape was done in the McNews' home during the summer of 1992. Elizabeth's good strong coffee helped get us through the long sessions, and somehow, we all endured together the air-conditionless hours necessary to keep the house quiet. It was my idea to have Walter record unaccompanied; he generally prefers to play with back-up. And though he is quick to point out that age is beginning to take its toll in the form of "squeaky strings and sour notes," his playing still stands up well on its own. Many of his comments and stories have been included on the tape in order to achieve a kind of portrait in sound. Somehow, through Walter's modest assessment of his abilities, his kind words for other people, and his honest enjoyment of good music, we become aware of the enduring continuity between tradition, inspiration, and present day practice.

THE TUNES

Opening the tape is the tune to an old shape-note hymn, **Land of Beulah**, along with Walter's spoken introduction. The title piece, **Blackjack Grove**, came from Walter's father who probably got it (and Pine Top) from a local fiddler known as Uncle Garrett Bow. "Blackjack Grove" has been reported from a few Texas sources, but has not, apparently, been collected elsewhere. **Lost Girl** (in the key of C), **Waynesburg** (also called "Waynesboro"), and **Cluck Old Hen** were generally known in east central Kentucky a few generations back. On the tape, Walter tells about winning an amateur fiddler's contest in Louisville with his rendition of two old favorites, **Flop Eared Mule** and **Old Hen Cackle**. He learned the Schottische in grade school; it's a familiar tune known to fiddle players across the country. **Georgiana**

Moon is a favorite waltz from Clayton McMichen, while **The Cat Came Back** Walter learned from the playing of Van Kidwell. The renowned Fiddlin' Doc Roberts was Walter's source for **All I've Got's Done Gone**, **Martha Campbell**, **Goodnight Waltz** and **Brickyard Joe**, while **Rickett's Hornpipe** and **Billy in the Lowground** are grand old fiddle tunes played all over the U.S. Different versions of **Calahan** have been recorded from a number of fiddlers in the southern mountains, but few recordings are available giving the legend of the hanged fiddler which is often told with the tune. The closing piece on the tape, **The Girl I Left Behind**, is the tune to a haunting old song Walter remembers hearing his father sing late at night.

Steve Green
Berea, Kentucky
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