

Johnson City's Musical Heritage: A Hotbed of Old-Time Musicians

By Bob Cox

For most of this century, the upper East Tennessee region has truly been blessed with a profusion of high-quality old-time musicians. The mere mention of "old-time music" conjures up images of a string band, casually dressed in characteristic mountain attire, playing distinctive deep-south non-amplified toe-tapping dance music on their well-worn and sometimes hand-me-down instruments. This simple phrase evokes such language as "Appalachian style," "authentic," "acoustical," "old fashioned," "grass roots," "hillbilly," "pre-bluegrass" and "rural American."

The late folklorist Alan Lomax, an ethnomusicologist once affiliated with the Library of Congress, painted a much broader picture of the genre, defining it as music rich in "cultural continuity," giving its listeners a feeling of security, symbolizing the places where they were born, and evoking their earliest childhood satisfactions. Indeed, this expansive description denotes more than just instruments and ethnicity; it extends into the more complex social and natural environments that nurtured this important musical style.

Several nearby cities were noteworthy in promulgation of old-time music, the most legendary probably being Mountain City's annual Fiddlers Convention that originated in 1925. Bristol's offerings included WOPI's "Saturday Night Jamboree," WCYB's "Farm and Fun Time," and Ralph Peer's 1927 "Bristol Sessions" for the Victor Talking Machine Company.

Knoxville established its niche with WROL's "The Cas Walker Farm and Home Hour" and WNOX's "Midday Merry-Go-Round" and "Tennessee Barn Dance." Elizabethton's Bonnie Kate Theatre hosted WJHL's "Barrel of Fun"; Kingsport followed suit with WKPT's "Saturday Night Hayride." Throughout the years, Jonesborough, the oldest town in Tennessee, has routinely sponsored music concerts on the square in front of its bravura downtown Court House.

Not content to simply play "second fiddle" to its neighbors, Johnson City has made its own significant contributions to old-time music, producing a hotbed of some of the best musicians in the country. Between 1920 and 1950, several downtown establishments, most of which have been demolished and long forgotten, made a number of offerings to the city's music culture. Their important stories unquestionably merit being remembered and revered by the populace.

In the 1920s, an outdoor event frequently occurred on Saturday nights along the east side of Fountain Square (opposite the railroad tracks). The occurrence was within a few yards of where Henry Johnson, the city's founder, wisely built a dwelling in 1854 in anticipation of the East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad being built through the area. After the merchants closed and locked their stores on Saturday nights, the locals would begin filtering in from miles around to play their music, drawing huge crowds of appreciative spectators. Fitting the mold of modern day jam sessions, these musicians

spanned the talent range from the most experienced celebrities to the least skilled aspirants, all equally welcomed to participate.

In the spring of 1924, the Deluxe Theatre at 148 West Main Street was a beautiful new vaudeville complex with its massive thirty-foot stage, twelve dressing rooms, elaborately decorated balcony, eight guest boxes, and 1250 plush seats. This highly functional building regularly hosted old-time music shows, including “high class” fiddle contests at which the fiddlers sat in a long row across the stage, neatly dressed in surprisingly formal attire, and facing a panel of stern-looking judges along the front row seats.

Contestants would alternately be beckoned to center stage where they would anxiously play a specially selected fiddle tune, and then sit back down and wait, hoping to take home the top prize, and more importantly, the pride that accompanied it. The theatre edifice would later carry such names as the Capital Theatre, the Tennessee Theatre, and finally the Capri Theatre before being razed in 1985.



On October 16, 1928, the Brading-Marshall Lumber Company’s business office at 312 East Main Street became the scene of a myriad of local musicians, each auditioning for a potential record contract with Columbia Records. A slender middle-aged man, with a straggly beard, listened intently as each individual or group played music, in hopes of being invited back that same week for a recording session in their rented temporary makeshift studio.

Frank Buckley Walker, head of Columbia Records’ “hillbilly” recordings’ division, was known by Johnson Citians simply as “Uncle Fuzz”. He acquired his unusual nickname from having always grown a beard before making such audition trips, perhaps believing that he could better relate with the people he was recording. Walker had learned from Ralph Peer of Okeh Records (later switching to Victor Records) that the best way to capture the true inherent nature of these musicians was to record them in their natural environments. Historians would later tag his pioneering efforts as the “Johnson City Sessions.”

During 1929, the management of the Watauga Swimming Pool, located at the corner of West Market Street and Watauga Avenue, learned that they could boost their sales by hiring old-time musicians, giving their customers another reason to patronize their natatorium. The Johnson City Chronicle incorporated a clever advertising promotion by awarding to two lucky subscribers two free tickets, forcing the readership to closely scrutinize the classified ads in order to locate the two small ads containing the names of the winners. This pool would later be known as the Sur Joi and the Carver Pool.

In the 1930s, both the Majestic Theatre at 239 East Main Street and the Sevier Theatre at 117 Spring Street ventured into “big time” vaudeville by occasionally hosting New Year’s Eve celebrations, incorporating a wide variety of local talent. One notable program at the Majestic Theatre featured the grumpy “Old Man Depression of 1932”, yielding at the stroke of midnight to the young and pretty “Miss Prosperity of 1933”, bringing a cheering standing ovation from the audience, who displayed their underlying hope for economic recovery after several years of lingering depression.

In the 1940s, the City Hall building at 200 West Market Street was the site of weekly Saturday night shows, carrying such names as “The Railsplitters’ Jamboree” and “The Smokey Mountain Jamboree”. The city government would open the doors to its main auditorium, allowing performers to play their music on stage, usually to a packed house, and often featuring an unusual diversity of acts, ranging from a song jamboree to a miniature circus.

Johnson City produced numerous other musical venues including the Big Burley Warehouse’s “Barn Dance,” concerts at “Mountain Home’s” Memorial Hall, Rich-R-Tone’s Recording Studio, WETB’s live broadcasts of local entertainers, the annual “Gray’s Station Fair,” and countless others. Johnson Citians can take great pride in the fact that their city has continuously fostered old-time music, with the rewards being a new bumper crop of talented musicians, both young and old, emerging onto the playing field almost daily -- keeping the tradition alive.



Municipal Building: Johnson City