

“All Abo-ooo-oard!”

Ridin’ the Rails with Fiddlin’ Charlie Bowman

By Bob Cox

Few icons in American history have evoked more sentiment than the romantic coal-fired steam locomotive affectionately known as the “Iron Horse.” Between 1829 and the mid 1960s, this magnificent hunk of metal laboriously chugged along our vast countrysides, belching out large plumes of black smoke from its stack, and blowing its unique mournful steam whistle. Indeed, this ancient relic seemed to possess human qualities of frailty and persistence.

Around the end of the 19th century, railroad tracks began appearing all across the southern Appalachian mountains of East Tennessee and neighboring states, bringing with it high expectations of fiscal growth. Three railroads figured prominently in this mountainous region: the Southern Railway (formerly the East Tennessee, Virginia & Georgia Railroad), the ETWNC (the East Tennessee & Western North Carolina Railroad, “Tweetsie”), and the CC&O (Carolina, Clinchfield and Ohio Railroad). The latter rail system eventually spanned 277 miles over the rugged terrain of four mountain ranges, crossing through five states: South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky. The CC&O, home based in Erwin, Tennessee, for years made daily excursions between Spartanburg, South Carolina and Elkhorn City, Kentucky.

While the railroad’s “glory days” may have “ridden off into the sunset”, its legend has been well preserved in a myriad of songs involving high-speed locomotives, brave engineers, colorful outlaws, homesick lovers, runaway trains, vagabond hoboes, political campaigns, funeral processions, and disastrous wrecks. In the late 1920s, the marriage between the railroad and old-time music became a reality when Vernon Dalhart, a pioneer of the early recording industry, sold a million copies of his song, "The Wreck of the Old 97."... (“This is not 38; it is Old 97. You must put her into Spencer on time.”)

The Champion Fiddler of East Tennessee

By the early 1920s, old-time music was flourishing in upper East Tennessee with an abundance of talented string bands. Gray Station, Tennessee, a farm community between Johnson City and Kingsport, produced one such group, Charlie Bowman and His Brothers (Elbert, Walter, and Argil). Charlie was known as “the champion fiddler of East Tennessee,” so named for winning more than two-dozen fiddle contests. His future credentials would include 2001 inductee into the North American Fiddler’s Hall of Fame, recording artist, vaudeville performer, songwriter, and a member of several musical groups, including Al Hopkins and His Buckle Busters (the Hill Billies). Charlie had a talent for generating atypical sounds from his fiddle, ranging from a couple of hound dogs chasing a red fox through the Tennessee hills to a barnyard selection with cacklings from a gobbler and a bantam hen. He could play fifteen standard and several not-so-conventional instruments: brooms, saws, washtubs, thick balloons, a homemade one-string bass, and even an underfed furnace.

Fiddle music and railroads played a major role in Charlie Bowman’s family; both his father, Samuel Bowman, and grandfather, James Bowman, were old-time fiddlers. His father worked as a section hand on the East Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia Railroad just after the Civil War. Once while serving as a brakeman, he almost lost his life while switching cars. As a young man, Charlie regularly assisted his father with odd jobs on the railroad, affording him the opportunity to become acquainted with several area railroad families. His knowledge of and appreciation for this unique and important profession is evidenced in six songs he wrote and performed.

The Railroad Songs of Fiddlin’ Charlie Bowman

In the early 1920s, Charlie wrote perhaps his biggest hit, “The Nine Pound Hammer,” from a tune he had heard from some local black railroad workers. While he is credited for adding the words to the song, it was Al Hopkins who arranged it for a Brunswick Records session with the Hill Billies on May 14,

1927 in New York City.” Charlie’s youngest brother, Elbert, participated in this session, adding the sound of the hammer to the disc by striking the hoop of his banjo with a small metal rod. Charlie Bowman and His Brothers later recorded a companion song, “Roll On Buddy,” on October 16, 1928 for Columbia Records in a makeshift studio in nearby Johnson City. In one verse, Charlie shows his love for Gray Station... “My home is down in Tennessee. My home is down in Tennessee. My home’s in Tennessee. That’s where I long to be. Away down in sunny Tennessee.” In another verse, he mentions his wife: “I’ve got a good woman just the same. I’ve got a good woman just the same. Woman just the same, Fannie Bowman is her name. Got a good woman just the same.”

A scene that played out numerous times in East Tennessee in the early 1920s involved a CC&O steam-driven locomotive traveling north from Erwin into Gray Station. The engineer was the well-known J. Fred Leonard, having the unusual nickname, “Fogless Bill,” with a unique train whistle that readily identified him as the operator of the train. As the trainman maneuvered his bulky engine into the depot, he frequently observed his good friend, Charlie, standing near the station playing his fiddle. It seems the fiddler was taking a music lesson from the engineer. Each time J. Fred sounded his inimitable whistle, Charlie bowed his fiddle in unison, in effect, playing a fiddle and train whistle duet with the legendary train engineer. Charlie soon composed a song, “CC&O No 558”, that was recorded by the Hill Billies for Brunswick Records in New York on May 16, 1927... “You can tell him by his whistle every time that he blows. The musical engineer on the CC&O.”

The railroad was the central theme of yet another composition written by Charlie entitled “Railroad Take Me Back.” Frank Walker of Columbia Records invited Charlie and his two oldest daughters, Jennie and Pauline, known as the Bowman Sisters to their New York studios on October 23, 1929 for a recording session. This was just six days before the stock market crash. These two teenage hillbilly girls, having barely been outside their native mountainous region, were in awe at the enormity of the Big Apple. The song opens with their father imitating a locomotive as it begins to slowly chug away from the depot.

The lyrics tell of a young girl leaving her sweetheart behind, but after boarding the vehicle begs it to take her back to her dejected lover. As she travels farther away, her plea intensifies with... "Railroad, now take me back. And please don't jump the track. I got no time to lose. Oh railroad."

Charlie got an opportunity to display his comedic talent on the humorous song, "Donkey On the Railroad Track," a skit recorded on Vocalion Records on October 23, 1926. Al Hopkins provided the narrative; Charlie imitated the train and the donkey on his fiddle. The account concerns another CC&O Railroad engineer by the name of Jim McCCasey and his flagman, John Sifford. As the train chugs down the track, the trainman observes a stubborn donkey in the distance, sitting on the track, and refusing to move. After several futile blasts of the horn, McCCasey shouts... "I'll throw the fog into the son of a gun, and I will knock you off." The song concludes with the animal getting bumped off the tracks yet "laughing" at John and Jim as Charlie produces the braying sounds on his fiddle. This record illustrates the multipurpose function of the steam whistle -- one minute warning others of its approach at crossings and depots, while the next minute communicating with the flagman using a predefined sequence of short and long horn blasts.

Another Charlie Bowman composition, "Emery's Fast Ride," is reminiscent of "The Wreck of the Old 97," involving Erwin CC&O train engineer, Emery Slagle. According to the lyrics, he was traveling between Erwin and Spartanburg at speeds up to ninety miles an hour. His apprehensive fireman reminded Emery that the train had no wings and could not fly. Slagle's response was... "You shovel in some coal. I'll watch the drivers roll, watch the drivers roll. Stick my head out the window and watch the drivers roll." As the mighty locomotive sped up the mountains at dangerously high speeds, the increasingly nervous fireman concluded that the only way to impede Emery's fast ride was to stop shoveling coal into the firebox. Emery countered again with... "Don't quit shoveling coal, don't stop shoveling coal. I got my head out the window, watch them drivers roll." After the trip's successful conclusion, the relieved fireman, thankful to be alive, praised his engineer with these words...

“An engineer like Emery Slagle is hard to find, is very hard to find, is very hard to find. An engineer like Emery, is very hard to find.”

Charlie’s “My Railroad Shack” deals with a young chap lamenting over the loss of his “good gal” who left him the previous week. He was sitting in his little railroad shack anxiously waiting for her return. Every time he hears the train whistle, he runs up the track hoping to see his sweetheart on board. The cross ties seemed to call out to him with the good news that she would be coming home soon from her residence in Johnson City, Tennessee. The song concludes happily with the young lady returning home on Old Train 47, to the delight of the songster. The concluding words are “And now I’m not worried cause I got my baby back. We’re both settled down once again in our little old railroad shack. No more cross tie walking and now my mind don’t roam. Cause I got my baby back home.”

The Steam Engine Living On in Music

Advent of the diesel engine forced the nostalgic old steam engines into retirement, relegating them to railroad scrap yards to rust away, except for a few restored units operating at theme parks and other tourist attractions. The big engine no longer traverses our vast countryside, but the populace has not forgotten its glorious saga. Today, the old “Iron Horse” lives on through a multiplicity of songs over a diversity of musical genres and artists from Jimmie Rodgers to Boxcar Willie: “Casey Jones,” “Railroad Blues,” “The Engineer’s Dream,” “John Henry,” “Chattanooga Choo Choo,” “Orange Blossom Special,” “Wabash Cannonball,” “I’ve Been Workin’ On the Railroad,” “Paddy on the Railroad,” “The Ballad of Jesse James,” “New River Train,” “Reuben’s Train,” “Bringing in the Georgia Mail,” “Danville Girl,” “Lonesome Whistle,” “The Golden Rocket”, “Fireball Mail,” “Hobo Bill,” “Freight Train Blues,” “Life’s Railway to Heaven,” “Railroad Bill,” and countless others.

Charlie Bowman and other songwriters have done railroad aficionados, both present and future, an immense favor by preserving the train’s glorious legend in song. The mighty extraverted noisy steam engine may have left our

countryside, but not our hearts, our memories, or our music... “I'm going on the mountain, Gonna see my baby, And I ain't coming back, No, I ain't coming back.” “who-eee-ooo-eeeeeeeeeeee- (fading) ooooooooooooooooooo... clickity-clack, clickity-clack, clickity-clack, clickity-clack...”

Bob Cox, a native of Johnson City in upper East Tennessee, grew up knowing his great uncle, Fiddlin' Charlie Bowman, seven of the fiddler's nine brothers and sisters, his first wife Fannie Mae, and eleven of his thirteen children. His grandmother was Charlie's youngest sister. After receiving a chemical engineering degree from the University of Tennessee in 1966, Bob was employed by Eastman Chemical Company for 33 years. Upon retirement five years ago, Bob began an exhaustive effort to document his family's musical history with the objective being to “raise the bar of awareness” of the many contributions his family has made to country music. With the help of family members (some of whom are now deceased) and the research efforts of several old-time music historians (Charles Wolfe, Archie Green, Mike Seeger, Ed Kahn, Dorsey Dixon, Joe Wilson, and others), he accomplished his goal in five years. He was fortunate enough to have tapped into a variety of resources including old family photographs, newspaper articles, obituary notices, family scrapbooks, other published books and articles, as well as numerous taped interviews of family members and friends. He has written a manuscript about his musical family that he hopes will find its way into publication.