Article MT281

Far in the Mountains, volumes 1 to 5

some thoughts, comments and memories

Far in the Mountains, volume 5 is now available on the MT Records **website**, price £12.00.



Mike Yates at an exhibition of Ghanaian art that he curated earlier this year. (Photo Vicky Silver)

I can hardly believe that more than thirty years have passed since I last recorded any songs or instrumental tunes in the Appalachian Mountains of North America. Over the last couple of decades much of my time has been taken up with the art world. I have collected art works for years. I also write and lecture on tribal art and contemporary studio ceramics and, whenever I am asked, curate art exhibitions. Recently, during a lull in such activity, I found time to listen to the Appalachian recordings that had not made their way onto the 4-volume Musical Traditions set of albums *Far in the Mountains*. I was rather surprised to discover just how much good material had been left off the albums, and so I set about putting together *Far in the Mountains - Volume 5*. As I did so, I began to remember just why I had visited Appalachia in the first place. Sometime around 1960 I heard a BBC radio program narrated by the American song collector Alan Lomax, who had recently been visiting the Appalachian Mountains. One recording that Lomax played was of the blind singer Horton Barker. It seemed so poignant when Barker sang the hymn *Amazing Grace*, with its line "I once was blind, but now can see". Somehow I seemed to instinctively know that one day I would make it to that part of America.

I first flew to America in the summer of 1979, stopping off in New York for a few days before travelling down to Virginia by Greyhound bus. New York was special to me because it was there, in the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), that Picasso's great painting *Guernica* was then housed. The Museum opened at 10am, but I had arrived just before 9am and was second in the queue. At ten I bought my ticked and rushed upstairs to the room where this masterpiece of 20th century European, actually *World*, art was exhibited. The painting was displayed on a long wall in a smallish, rectangular-shaped gallery. On the other walls were related paintings which Picasso had made prior to starting work on his major opus. And there were large copies of the photographs that Dora Maar had made when Picasso was working on the painting. It was a truly amazing experience, standing alone in that room for some twenty minutes before anyone else came in. In a way I felt that I had owned *Guernica* for twenty minutes and that, during that short period of time, it had been *my* painting. Later I met up with John Cohen in an Indian restaurant in Greenwich Village. Having told him that I had been to MOMA to see *Guernica*, John said, "Don't tell me. You couldn't get into the room for other people".

Actually, it was John's recent book, *The High and Lonesome Sound - The legacy of Roscoe Holcomb* (Steidl, Germany, 2012), that made me think about writing this piece. Describing how Roscoe Holcomb's singing had affected him, John says:

> *Roscoe's music evoked many musical paths; medieval sounds, avant-garde sounds, Gregorian chants, expressionistic and abstract music. It was both old-time and contemporary, detached and personal, suggesting new images, memories and emotions in my mind.*

I read and reread John's words. 'medieval', 'avant-garde', 'Gregorian', 'expressionistic' and 'abstract' were all words that I found hard to equate with the music that I had heard on John's recordings of Roscoe Holcomb. According to Bob Dylan, Roscoe's music had, "a certain untamed sense of control", that I could understand, and I had always liked Tony Russell's statement that Roscoe looked, "curiously like William Burroughs with a

banjo". But I really struggled to come to terms with many of the words that John used in his description. Alright, John was the grandson of Russian Jewish exiles. He had been brought up in a culture that was very different from my own. He was a graduate of Yale University, a photographer, film-maker, musician and friend of many leading American poets and writers, so, perhaps making a trip to eastern Kentucky did come as something of a shock to John:

> *[Roscoe's] repertoire included ballads, breakdowns, blues and Baptist hymns - the traditional music he'd grown up with. Although I could identify many of these as folksongs, they all sounded fresh and unfamiliar; his East Kentucky sensibility colored* [sic] *everything.*

Something else that John wrote did, however, seem to reflect some of my own thoughts:

> *I never wanted to see [Roscoe Holcomb] as an informant. I had my doubts about the academic practice of gathering data, genealogy and other information framed by folklore study, and I had witnessed Alan Lomax soliciting information from musicians to support his own opinions and agenda. I didn't like it when a collector assumed a position of authority over the informant, and took on the role of investigator. I wanted to know Roscoe as a fellow human being, a music-maker, a companion whom I could stand beside and share new experiences with as we revealed his music to a wider world.*

When I visited the Appalachians I did so in a private capacity. I was not allied to any academic organisation, nor was I collecting on behalf of anyone else. Over the years I had bought and listened to numerous albums of Appalachian field-recordings and had simply wished to hear some of these performers at first hand. Two albums had especially impressed me. These were Rounder Records' 2 album set *Old Originals* (0057 & 0058) which contained recent recordings from Virginia and North Carolina. And, of course, John Cohen's albums *Old Love Songs and Ballads* (Folkways 2309) and *High Atmosphere* (Rounder CD 0028) had also left me wanting to hear more.[1] *Old Love Songs and Ballads* had been recorded in the community of Sodom Laurel in Madison County, NC, an area visited by Cecil Sharp in 1916 and Cohen's singers were descendants of the singers who gave songs and ballads to Sharp.

I first visited Madison County, NC, in 1980 and it was relatively easy to make it to Sodom Laurel. There was a large highway out from Ashville to Marshall. From then on the roads became narrower and the wooded hillsides started to close in on all sides. When, in 1983, I drove to Doug Wallin's farm I managed to snag the car on some rocks as I drove across a small creek. After half an hour I gave up trying to free the vehicle and set off on foot to find Doug and his mother at home. It had been raining for a few days prior to my visit and Doug had decided to delay planting that year's tobacco crop, because the soil was too wet. I had been told that Doug had a temper and could quickly turn against strangers - he had once punched a would-be collector on the jaw - and so I was rather hesitant to approach his home. Doug, as it turned out, said little to begin with, although his mother was more than happy to tell me what she could about Cecil Sharp's visit. After a while Doug said, "Do you know this song?" before starting to sing his version of *The Carlisle Lady*. I had not asked him to sing and was surprised, and delighted, to hear him. Once he had finished we talked about the song and Doug seemed happy to be singing something that had "almost certainly died out in England". "What about this one?" he said, before starting into *A Bed of Primroses*. "Now I may be wrong", he said, "but if memory serves me right, that's a song that Mr Sharp failed to find when he was here." Perhaps it was a test, with Doug wanting to see how I would react to his singing. If so, then I passed, because he not only invited me to stay for lunch but added that if I had "one of those recording machines" then perhaps he would sing some more once we had eaten. After lunch we returned to the stranded car, which we managed to extract from the stream, and I drove Doug back to his home, where we set up the tape recorder.

Did Doug or his singing neighbours sound 'medieval', 'avant-garde', 'Gregorian', 'expressionistic' or 'abstract'? Well, not really. If anything they reminded me of many other singers that I had previously met in England and Scotland, although there were one or two differences in singing styles. One of Cecil Sharp's 1917 observations about the Madison County singers was still valid sixty years later. 'They have one vocal peculiarity, however, which I have never noticed amongst English folk-singers, namely, the habit of dwelling arbitrarily upon certain notes of the melody, generally the weaker accents. This practice, which is almost universal, by disguising the rhythm and breaking up the monotonous regularity of the phrases, produces an effect of improvisation and freedom from rule which is very pleasing'. Another effect that I heard repeatedly among the Sodom Laurel singers was the technique of 'feathering' notes at the end of a line; a technique described by Judith McCulloh as, 'A sudden or forceful raising of the soft palate against the back wall of the throat and/or a sudden closing of the glottis at the very end of a given note, generally accompanied by a rise in pitch'.

The main thing that I did discover about the Sodom Laurel singers was their enthusiasm for their songs and ballads. It reminded me strongly of similar traditions that I had heard within Gypsy and Traveller communities in England and Scotland. As with the Gypsies and Travellers, here was a living tradition, one where singing and music making was an essential part of the community. Everybody knew who the singers and musicians were and everybody seemed to value them.

And I am sure that the same had once applied to other areas of the mountains. Dan Tate of Fancy Gap in Virginia would often talk about all the other singers that had once lived within walking distance to his home. There were certainly plenty of musicians around and ballads such as *The House Carpenter, The Jew's Garden* and *Gypsy Davie* were still being sung when I was there. Dan had known a number of local people who had made recordings in the 1920s and '30s, including Ernest Stoneman, members of the Hill Billies, Norman Edmonds, Alex Dunford and the Sweet Brothers. The recordings that these people made were important, mainly because they highlighted the importance of the music within the community. Several singers that I met had picked up songs from similar recordings - Rob Tate's *The Lawson Family Murder* and Inez Chandler's *Daddy Had a Billy Goat* had both been learnt from 78rpm recordings, and I seem to recall that Doc Watson picked up quite a few songs and tunes from records.[2]

It would be wrong of me to say that I was not delighted to hear so many versions of Child ballads being sung in the mountains. Today, we almost have to hide our interest in the ballads that Professor Child assembled in the late 1800s. Nowadays we are told to study complete repertoires and not to emphasise the importance of one type of song/ballad over another. But I am not an academic and so I can simply say that I love hearing these remarkable pieces still being sung by people who valued them as much as myself. Cecil Sharp, who was a bit of a 'twitcher' when it came to the Child ballads, managed to find examples of 45 such ballads during the 52 weeks that he spent in the mountains between 1916 and 1918. In fact he actually found 367 versions of these 45 ballads. I spent far less time in the mountains, but nevertheless managed to record examples of 11 Child ballads, some in more than one version. One ballad that really knocked me out was Eunice Yeatts MacAlexander's version of the ballad that Child called *Sir Lionel*, though Eunice called it *Wild Hog in the Woods*.

> There is a wild hog in the woods,
> Diddle-o-down, diddle-o-day.

There is a wild hog in the woods,
Diddle-o.
There is a wild hog in the woods,
Kills a man and drinks his blood.
Cam-o-kay, cut him down, kill him if you can.

I wish I could that wild hog see,
And see if he'd take a fight with me.

There he comes through yonders marsh,
He splits his way through oak and ash.

Bangum drew his wooden knife,
To rob that wild hog of his life.

They fought for/four hours of the day,
At length that wild hog stole away.

They followed that wild hog to his den,
And there found the bones of a thousand men.[3]

Eunice, who was from the beautifully named Meadows of Dan in Patrick County, VA, had the ballad from her father. Cecil Sharp collected four versions of this piece, which Professor Child linked to the Medieval romance *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, as well as to various 16th century Scandinavian ballads. It was later suggested to me that Eunice, who apparently did not like to sing in public, had only agreed to sing to me because I had "travelled so far" to see her. But I find this odd, because on one occasion she rang my motel asking me to return as she had remembered some more songs. I doubt if she would have done this had she not been happy to sing to me.

Doug Wallin and his uncle Cas Wallin both had a number of fine ballads in their repertoires. As suggested above, many of Professor Child's ballads are quite ancient, so it was rather surprising to find this verse included in Cas's version of *Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard,* which he called *Lord Daniel* (Child 81).

Little Robert Ford was standing nigh,
He's a-hearing every word was said.
"If I don't die before daylight,
Lord Daniel will hear these words, words,
Lord Daniel will hear these words."[4]

Cas said that he had known the ballad "all my life" and I did wonder whether or not the Robert Ford mentioned in this verse was original - the ballad can be dated back to at least 1630 - or had the name of the man who shot Jessie James in 1882 been added to the ballad at a later date? At the end of this verse Cas added a spoken aside - "He busied hisself, didn't he?" - before singing the next verse. I guess that Robert Ford also "busied hisself" when he shot Jessie James, so maybe this was a later addition. If so, then it was confirmation that the songs and ballads then being sung in parts of Appalachia were indeed part of an active, living tradition.

Dan Tate had a fine version of *The Cruel Sister*, which he called *The Wind and the Rain*. It was a version that ended with the dead girl's hair and bones being used to make a fiddle which, in other versions, then sang out the name of her murderer. This old form of the ballad survived in Scotland with some Traveller singers, though it seems to have died out in England. Dan also had a good version of *The Crabfish*, a song that dated back to the 17th century, if not earlier. Professor Child certainly knew the piece, though he omitted it from his collection, no doubt because the story would have easily offended Victorian sensibility. The thing that struck me about Dan's set was the fact that he used a tune that was also used for the American song *Groundhog*. Was this, I wondered, an original tune for *The Crabfish*? Or had American singers, having lost the British tune, added an American tune to the words? Cecil Sharp was certainly impressed with the Appalachian tunes that he heard, saying, '(The mountaineers) have been so isolated and protected from outside influence that their own music and song have not only been uncorrupted, but also uninfluenced by art music in any way. This is clear enough in the character of the tunes I have collected, nearly all of which are in gapped scales (i.e. scales lacking two or more notes; e.g. the fourth and seventh), which is a more archaic form than that in which they are now being sung in England.'

Did I at any time feel that I had stepped back in time, into an 'olde England'? The answer has to be "no". Just about all the singers and musicians that I met were well aware of what was going on around them in America, although some people were a little confused when it came to present day England. I suspect that the ballad line "He mounted on a lily-white steed" may have led to one or two people asking me if we still rode around on horses in England, and, on one occasion, it was a little disconcerting to be asked whether or not I lived in a castle. I was also surprised when one musician in North Carolina asked me if I had driven to America. It turned out that he had not recognised my hire car's Virginia number plates and so had assumed that they must have been English ones.

One thing that was different from England was the number of instrument players in the mountains. Every settlement seemed to have its own fiddler and the 5-string banjo was still highly popular. In fact many fiddlers could also play the banjo, though not all banjo players could play the fiddle. Like the guitar, both instruments were small and easily portable and dances were being held all over the place when I was there. The fiddle had, originally, been brought to America by early European settlers and much of the repertoire was based on European tunes. On the other hand, the banjo had come to America via the memories of African slaves. It is often said that the 5-string banjo is America's only home-made instrument. This came about with the addition of the fifth string by one Joel Sweeney (1810 - 1860), a black-face minstrel. But, in truth, 5-string banjos predate Sweeney and they are based on West African instruments, such as the *xalam* or *halam,* which have a drone string that is played with the thumb. I sometimes wondered if some of the white fiddle/banjo duet players that I met realised just how integrated they were.

During my 1979 trip I took a number of colour photographs that were later used in the *Far in the Mountains* CDs. Now, thirty-odd years later I find that I cannot remember exactly where some of these pictures were taken. The sleeve photograph to volumes 1 & 2, showing a number of densely wooded ridges, was probably taken somewhere along the Blue Ridge Parkway, while the sleeve photograph to volumes 3 & 4, showing an old farm

building, was taken on the plateau between Fancy Gap and Hillsville, close to Dan Tate's home. But I can no longer remember where the picture used for the sleeve on volume 5 was taken, except that it would have been somewhere in Virginia. I can, however, remember that the cover photograph for the volumes 1 & 2 booklet shows the home of fiddle-player Sherman Wimmer's, who played me a lovely version of *Forked Deer*, which he called *Hounds in the Horn;* and the old building next to an apple tree that is used for the volume 5 booklet cover stood close to Dan Tate's home. A local artist showed me an oil painting that he made of this building. He told me that when the house began to collapse he would use some of the weathered timber to make a frame for his picture.

The *Far in the Mountains* series of recordings was issued simply because I wanted to share the music of these remarkable singers and musicians with others. I was so lucky to have been able to make it to America and to have met up with so many fine people. If, at the end of the day, I was financially out of pocket, then it didn't really matter. It was the singing and the music that mattered, and also, of course, all those generous people who so kindly let me into their lives and homes. They enriched my life. And now, through these recordings, they can continue to enrich the lives of so many others.

Michael Yates
Wiltshire, April, 2013

Notes:

1. *Old Love Songs and Ballads* has now been reissued on Smithsonian-Folkways CD *Dark Holler - Old Love Songs and Ballads* SFW CD 40159. It comes with a DVD copy of John Cohen's moving film portrait of the singer Dillard Chandler, titled *The End of an Old Song*.

2. For more on the importance of early recordings, see Musical Traditions article MT255 *When Cecil Left the Mountains - early recordings of American music*. Recordings that Doc Watson learnt from 78rpm records can be heard on Smithsonian Folkways CD *The Doc Watson Family* CD SF 40012.

3. Eunice Yeatts MacAlexander *Far in the Mountains* Volume 1, track 23.

4. Cas Wallin *Far in the Mountains* Volume 3, track 28.

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