



# A NEW AGE IN BLUEGRASS TELEVISION

by Arthur Menius

The Saturday night audience fills the balcony of Kyle Edward's Stomping Grounds in Maggie Valley, North Carolina for the first time all week. Rows of blue, yellow, and white television lights hung in the rafters seem out of place in the wooden dance hall. Equally intrusive are the cameramen who weave in and out of the crowd pursued by cable handlers who look like tropical snake bearers. Taping of the second thirteen weeks of "Fire on the Mountain" will be completed tonight.

The program, which features both bluegrass and traditional mountain music performers, can be seen Sundays on the Nashville Network. Admission has been free to the taping which began on Tuesday. Each evening two or three headline acts have appeared before cameras. The evening's shooting also includes less well-known local acts, group introductions, promotional spots, and songs from the show's host, David Holt.

Standing on stage in front of an enormous quilted backdrop are Holt, banjo in hand, guitarist Dale McKoy, and bass man Buddy Davis. On cue they launch into "Don't Get Weary," a timely selection at the end of a strenuous five days. The spectators, almost entirely permanent residents of the mountain

resort community and the nearby town of Waynesville, clap along.

"Surely, we didn't get it right on the first take," Holt quips as the applause dies. "I guess we've all learned something about how a TV show is made. I know I have."

Recalling the live early morning television he did during the 1950s, Don Reno flashes his beloved grin and says, "Back then there wasn't no second go at it." Reno relaxes near the side of the stage, greets dozens of fans and relatives, and waits for his turn.

Don started in television on Charlotte's WBT-TV in 1952. Reno and Smiley broadcast every morning on WDBJ in Roanoke, Virginia for twelve years in addition to Wednesday and Saturday night shows on WWSA, Harrisonburg. "We figured it up once that we'd done 150 years of television if we'd only been on once a week." He feels that the Tennessee Cutup's music comes across well on the tube when the program is done properly. "They're doing it right here," he observed. "I can tell when they're doing it right and when they're not."

Reno and his group cut short a California tour to appear on "Fire on the Mountain." Although tired by the long

drive, he added, "I'm glad I could make it... This is kind of my hometown back through here. I was raised about three miles up the river in Clyde."

The location deep in the Great Smoky Mountains figured heavily in the plans of both The Nashville Network and the show's producers, The Linear Group of Asheville and Raleigh, North Carolina. Elmer Alley, who has been with WSM, Inc. since the days of Uncle Dave Macon, now serves as programming director for the Network. According to him, "We chose to put it here in Maggie Valley because you draw something from the environment, the area. You get the people of the area sharing the music. They are very loving and caring people and I think it all adds to the ambience of the show."

Lawson Warren of the Linear Group added that, "Had it not been for all the beautiful, incredible people I met just within twenty minutes of where I used to live, I would not be doing this series for The Nashville Network." Partner Ron Ruehl agreed, "I believe in the people that live here, that grew up here, that have their heritage here."

Wilma Lee Cooper, who appeared with the Clinch Mountain Clan on Friday night, liked the site, too. "Maggie Valley is surrounded by mountains. I was raised up there in the mountains of West Virginia. The music I do, the songs I sing, is just what I learned back there in those mountains and I have never changed over the years." Although she does not like to do television, she expressed appreciation for what it can do for her music: "I think whenever we can get the real traditional music and real bluegrass on television, it's been very helpful to us."

A major thrust of "Fire on the Mountain" has been to include local traditional mountain performers on the same programs with well known bluegrass acts. Ruehl said, "It's the mountain people here who still continue that mountain music style that are very important to me. That's giving these people the recognition that's long been overdue for their traditions; for keeping that tradition alive, and keeping part of America alive. I think it will serve as inspiration to younger musicians to go into the traditional field as opposed to rock music. Hopefully, this will help ensure continuation. I'm just looking to encourage young people... to look at their culture, their heritage, and not live in the past, but have the past live on through them."

Local artists voiced their appreciation for the national exposure. "Until 'Fire on the Mountain' came to this area," said Brian Hunter of the Midnight Plowboys, "we hadn't done any network TV. So it's awfully exciting. I have a lot

of confidence in the ability and native talent we have in this area. I think that it's underexposed and underacknowledged. This will help our bookings nationally and our record sales nationally." Local acts on the program include the Luke Smathers String Band, Tommy Jarrell, the Dutch Cove String Band, Dale McKoy, and the Marc Pruett Band.

Filming of a number of the area's musicians took place on location. These



Merle Watson, T. Michael Coleman and Doc Watson; photo at left also includes host, David Holt



even know that the show exists. Old music is like a germ that infects people. The spirits of those old songs watch out for themselves and they hook certain people. So I know people watching this will get hooked on this kind of music. There will be people converted to this kind of music because of this TV show."

Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver follow Holt, McKoy, and Davis on to the Stomping Ground's stage. By now the generous capacity of the music hall is strained, despite an absence of publicity. The marquee simply reads, "Fire on the

sites ranged from the simple comfort of Bea Smathers' kitchen to the spectacular beauty of the remote mountains of Madison County, North Carolina.

Talent from within fifty miles of Maggie Valley accounts for much of the old-time music presented in the series. "This program really wants to show that those [old-time and bluegrass] are two related musics," commented another Asheville area entertainer, host David Holt, "and to present mountain music and bluegrass music, not just bluegrass. These on-location things are going to be great, because we're going to visit some very old-time folks and see some old ballad singers, some old fiddlers, and old buck dancers. I really respect the producers for putting that part in there."

Holt has traveled to South America on several occasions under the auspices of the State Department. He views "Fire on the Mountain" as another vital part of his mission to spread mountain and old-time music, "Because that's what this kind of music needs right now. It needs a little shot in the arm of media attention. If the people who already are interested in the music, in old-time and bluegrass, tune into the show, you're talking about hundreds of thousands of people nationwide. I think they will be our basis in the beginning, then more people will gradually come into it. Many people don't

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"I hope I don't forget the words," laughs Lawson just before the tape begins to roll. He knows that if they do not perform their selections exactly as in rehearsal that afternoon, the director will interrupt the performance. Barely into "Misery River" action halts. "All right, I blew the words," the bearded mandolin picker admits. "There's a boy out there taking notes and every time I mess up he writes something down. Only the second time I've messed up since

1963, not too bad." The group commences a sparkling version of the song only to have it cut short due to a production crew mistake. Quicksilver slows down, slurring the vocals in imitation of a tape machine winding to a stop. "See, I'm not the only one and I'll never sing that song better. You mess up one more time," Lawson warns the floor manager, "and you won't get any supper." After the rocky start Quicksilver's performance rapidly gains momentum to the delight of the fans.

Doyle Lawson shares some of Holt's

enthusiasm for the potential of the series. "I really appreciate the fact that we were asked to be a part of this because I think it's going to be good for our small industry that we have. I think it will turn a lot of people on to bluegrass and old-time music." Unlike most of the performers, Lawson had the opportunity to watch a segment of the series the previous Sunday while visiting his father in Kingsport, Tennessee. "I think they had Ralph Stanley on it. It's getting there. It will get better as time goes on. They were just making their adjustments."

"Fire on the Mountain" premiered early in March, 1983 when The Nashville Network went on the air. The network's seven million potential viewers formed the largest launch base of any cable service, according to promotions director Donna Sparks. She feels that the series demonstrates the variety of entertainment available on the cable channel. Each Sunday the network repeats the previous week's episode at 1:00 p.m. eastern time, then screens the new segment at 7:30 p.m. and 1:00 a.m.

The original thirteen weeks of the program, which aired through June, featured, in addition to Ralph Stanley, such artists as Jim and Jesse, the Seldom Scene, the Country Gentlemen, John Hartford, Mac Wiseman, Raymond Fair-

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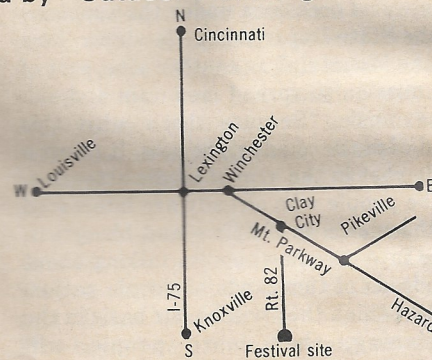
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child, and Foggy Bottom. The Linear Group shot those programs in November with a bare bones budget and a skeleton crew. Buddy Davis, for example, did virtually all the audio work. Production facilities for the second thirteen episodes are much more lavish. Opryland Productions has provided its best remote equipment, sixteen track recording, its top cameramen, and best lighting crew.

"I hope to make the production values match the values of the music," asserted The Nashville Network's Alley. "In other words, not to gimmick it up. To keep it as simple as possible and to be as intimate as we can with the performers."

"I think it's a great thing to get bluegrass on The Nashville Network," commented banjo standout Doug Dillard. "Bluegrass has needed that for a long time. Get it out to the public. It's going to reach a lot of people that probably never heard it."

"By and large better than any TV we've done... I'm impressed," volunteered his guitarist, Ginger Boatwright, when the Doug Dillard Band viewed tapes of their performance.

"It lets you know what's really going on that you normally wouldn't see," added Dillard.

Asked about the Dillards appearances twenty years ago on the Andy Griffith Show as the taciturn Darling Family, Dillard said, "That's Hollywood's conception of hillbilly music. It's always been that way. We've had the guys with the long tall hats and the jugs of moonshine in their hands." Nevertheless, "The Andy Griffith Show did a lot for us. About as much as anything we've done. People still remember it."

A slim John Cowan, bass man for New Grass Revival, which played an extraordinary set on Thursday, wondered whether that (Hollywood's) image of the music, "Might have done more harm than good. It made bluegrass look real backwoods. We're doing the opposite. We're trying to make bluegrass for the modern world we live in."

That history of bluegrass on network television has not jaundiced the Revival's appreciation for "Fire on the Mountain." "TV absolutely can popularize bluegrass," stated banjoist Bela Fleck. "I think it's really good to see bluegrass on television that looks good, not tacky."

That touched on a major goal of the producers. "We've been able, hopefully, to dispel a lot of the stereotypes, the 'Beverly Hillbillies,' the 'Hee Haw' things," suggested The Linear Group's Ruehl. "No bales of hay or moonshine jugs, or half naked women on our stage. It's the music that communicates and talks about the simple life, the simple things, that are in essence who we are."



Bill Harrell & The Virginians L-R Carl Nelson, Larry Stephenson, Bill Harrell, Darrell Sanders & Ed Ferris

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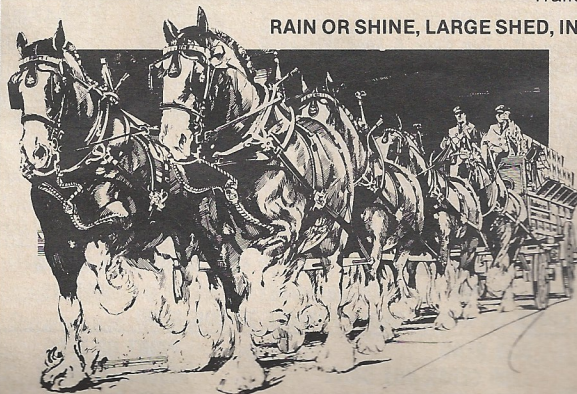
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"Nobody got killed. No car chases. No man having an affair with his sister, his brother's wife," added Linear Group partner Warren. "These people sing about situations that are common to all of us. The show is an attempt to portray bluegrass and mountain music in their simplest forms. It's entertaining. It's fun. It's real. It's American music."

The series demonstrates the ability of cable television to produce programming for a specialized audience. Alley, a 44

when specialized magazines, such as the one you are reading, have replaced many of the giant general interest publications.

"I think people are looking with a lot of nostalgia toward simpler times," said Alley, "and that's why this show is working so well. We're getting a lot of response from upper New York state on this show and from the West Coast. Surprisingly, the most vocal response is in the metropolitan areas, which pleases me very much. Bluegrass is the jazz of country music. It's an element that really has

*The show is an attempt to portray bluegrass and mountain music in their simplest forms.*

year veteran of radio, television, and country music, explained the phenomenon this way: "We had three networks who dictated what we saw and they went for a mass audience, the lowest common denominator. Now, suddenly, you have cable systems with up to 100 different channels. There are weather channels, news channels, health channels, and now a country music channel." Alley feels that this process will parallel the experience of the print medium over the last quarter century,

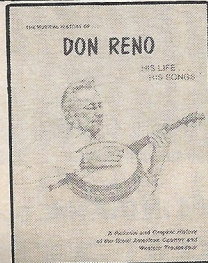
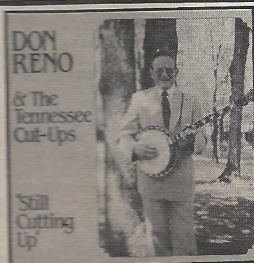
not had a broad, general appeal... but I think it's mainly because people really haven't been exposed to it."

"Yeah, it's amazing, isn't it?" agreed Holt. "I guess it could only happen on cable, but to me that's really exciting. There's been some incredibly good talent on here, some incredibly good picking on there. The other night we had Doc Watson. He did some new stuff and it was just hot."

Other musicians appearing on the second thirteen episodes of "Fire on the Mountain" include such names as Tony Trischka and Skyline, Joe Val and the New England Bluegrass Boys, Bryan Bowers, Larry Sparks and the Lonesome Ramblers, the Lewis Family, Bill Harrell and the Virginians, and the Boys From Indiana. Since the program originates only a few miles from Soco Gap, where San Queen invented team square dancing more than half a century ago, it is appropriate that the series includes appearances by some of the region's best cloggers and buck dancers.

Each half hour segment of the show consists of performances by two or three musical acts. Holt and his group introduce the program and sing one number. One or two featured artists then fill the bulk of the allotted time.

Holt joins Don Reno and the Tennessee Cut-ups on stage as their performance, the last of the week, draws near an end. The host calls for a buck dance and volunteers stream from the audience with apparent spontaneity. They provide the good cross section of the crowd at the Stomping Grounds; some are barely old enough to walk while others probably remember WSM as the new radio station out of Nashville with a barn dance show. The Cut-ups' fiddler strikes up the ancient tune for which the series is named. As the song comes to an end thirteen more weeks of America's bluegrass and mountain music television show are in the can. Don Reno smiles.



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