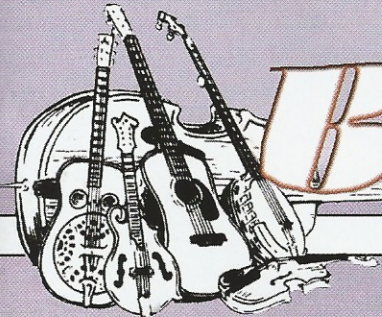


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# BLUEGRASS

APRIL

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2016

## ***David Holt's State of Music***

**Lonesome Trio**

**Ron Block**

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## Putting Bluegrass In Its Place



David Holt and Bruce Molsky

## David Holt's State Of Music Goes National

By Art Menius

Photos courtesy Will & Deni McIntyre

Debuting on PBS stations in April, *David Holt's State Of Music* features the namesake four-time Grammy winner interviewing and playing tunes with modern masters of traditional music in the Southern mountains and their foothills. The new series features Balsam Range and Bryan Sutton prominently. Available to public television stations nationally, the series will expose millions of viewers to today's bluegrass and traditional music, since 2,200,000 watch the average PBS program.

The first season also presents Rhiannon Giddens, the breakout star from Carolina Chocolate Drops and the New Basement Tapes, along with old-time fiddle virtuoso Bruce Molsky, multifaceted musician and ballad singer Josh Goforth, and African-American gospel torch bearers Lena Mae Perry and Wilbur Tharpe who perform as The Branchettes. Screened at the 2015 Bluegrass Film Festival in Raleigh, the original one-hour *David Holt's State Of Music* earned a nomination for best Documentary/Cultural in the Mid-South Regional Emmy Awards.

Holt described the concept. "Our goal is to get people fired up about mountain and bluegrass music. We are eager to broaden the audience. We thought the best way to do this was to present tremendous musicians who are getting ready to 'break through' on a national level. Rhiannon Giddens and Balsam Range are both good examples of that. We also wanted the television audience to hear several songs from each performer or group, all the way through without interruption. On most TV shows, the artist plays about thirty seconds, then the host starts talking over the music. We wanted a show that really featured the music."

Back in March of 1983, Holt helped usher bluegrass to television and into the cable age with *Fire On The Mountain*. Holt introduced the best of bluegrass, along with old-time musicians and ballad singers, in 26 weekly episodes for four years, including one month as The Nashville Network's highest rated program. More than a hundred artists including Bill Monroe, Dry Branch Fire

Squad, New Grass Revival, and the Osborne Brothers, enjoyed nationwide exposure.

On *Fire On The Mountain*, Holt perfected an interview style that welcomes newcomers to the artists and music, while remaining interesting for those who already knew the music. As a veteran musician, Holt can play with featured artists as a peer. The questions are not rehearsed, and the crew has to be ready to capture the spontaneity.

"We wanted the interviews to be insightful," Holt explains. "So that no matter how much you know about the artist, you'll learn something new about them. Being a television host is a very subtle and tricky job. There is no one that can tell you how to do it. You just have to find your own way. Luckily, I have quite a bit of experience after hosting hundreds of television shows and thousands of concerts over the last 37 years. It seems odd to say, but the hardest part is just being yourself when the cameras start rolling."

Over the thirty years since *Fire On The Mountain*, Holt performed regularly with Doc Watson for twenty years, hosted

public radio's traditional jazz series *Riverwalk Jazz* and *Great Railway Journeys* (also on PBS). *David Holt's State Of Music*, however, lets him showcase the music, musicians, and natural beauty of the state that he and wife Ginny Callaway picked for home more than forty years ago.

Ginny recently told the story of how they came from Santa Barbara to Asheville in *WNC Magazine*. "David and I were on track to become elementary school teachers in the fall, but then David saw a different path. By a lucky or unlucky stroke, depending on which side of the five-string you're sitting, David saw the famous Ralph Stanley play an old-time banjo number in the rollicking clawhammer-style. Gobsnacked, David asked Ralph how he could learn to play like that. Ralph finished packing up his banjo, tilted his big cowboy hat back on his head, looked David in the eye and said, 'Go back to the Blue Ridge, son...to Galax, Virginia...or Asheville, North Carolina. Lots of old-time music there.' Done. After our last exam that June, David packed up his stuff and headed to Asheville. I spent the next three months pondering whether to stay in my familiar world without David or follow him to a place as foreign to me as a primordial jungle. My romantic heart won."

Balsam Range banjo player Marc Pruett has known the Holts for most of the years since they moved to North Carolina. "David Holt has given his lifetime toward preserving and promoting the musical heritage of America," Pruett says. "His quest to dig deeper into the culture is wonderfully evident in his new effort, *David Holt's State Of Music*. We should all rally around this good man who so ably uplifts and offers a current introspective vision into those who are creating new music, as well as carrying our musical heritage forward."

Pruett goes back just as far with Will and Deni McIntyre, who produce the series with Holt, for their non-profit Will and Deni McIntyre Foundation. Will plays upright bass and has performed with Holt from time to time for forty years. "I met David in 1975, the year Deni and I got married," Will recalls. "I was playing bass in Marc Pruett's band. Marc, Deni, and I were all students at Western Carolina University. We played a show on campus, and this new guy named David Holt was a really good clawhammer banjo player and



**David Holt (front) with Balsam Range (seated) L-R: Caleb Smith, Darren Nicholson, Tim Surrett, Marc Pruett and Buddy Melton.**

storyteller on the same show. After the show ended, I invited all the musicians to my house for an impromptu party. I was struck by David's intellectual curiosity and his willingness to go out into mountain communities to learn from musicians and other amazing people we have in this region. Our friendship started then.

"A little later, David was playing at the Waynesville Folk Festival and asked me to play bass in the Brand New Old Time String Band with him, John McCutcheon, Bob Jordan, and Lynn Shaw. It was a pretty good group, and we won the band competition. In 1979, when the U.S. State Department wanted David to tour Bolivia, he asked me to join him and Lynn Shaw to form the David Holt Trio. I speak Spanish, so I translated for the group, played guitar, and ran the stage show. After that, we did



**David Holt and Rhiannon Giddens**



**Bryan Sutton and David Holt**

trips for the U.S. State Department to Colombia (three trips), Brazil (three trips), Uruguay, Chile, Venezuela, and others. It was a family affair, because Deni would sing harmony and buck dance with Ginny and David as part of the show.”

*David Holt's State Of Music* distinguishes itself from other televised music programs in style and substance. Shot entirely on location, despite the significantly higher cost, it is not a “stand and play on stage” program. Holt explained how the new series differs from his previous work. “*Fire On The Mountain* was a stage show. *Folkways* went on location to find little-known musicians and craftspeople. *David Holt's State of Music* is looking for a national audience. Our goal is to have guests who will be interesting to folks who are already fans, as well as to those who know nothing about traditional music. It is very important to us that the show be visually beautiful. The music and musicians deserve first-class treatment. Will and Deni shot the show like a film with multiple cameras. They succeeded in making a program worthy of national PBS.”

Viewers will find the performers playing outside. The most breathtaking



David Holt with Deni and Will McIntyre

sequence involves Molsky. A RED Epic camera mounted on a drone captures a stunning sequence of Holt accompanying Molsky's fiddling with the Blue Ridge Mountains towering behind. Using location shoots for the show came naturally to the McIntyres. Will says, “We've been location photographers all our lives, so we're used to improvising and shooting in all kinds of environments. Other production companies are already doing a good

job with so-called ‘stand-and-play’ shows. We wanted *David Holt's State Of Music* to be something different. Let's show them the mountains and coves and churches and front porches and small communities where this music was born.”

Location shoots are more expensive and challenging, but worthwhile. Says Holt, “The show is shot on location, which is tricky when you're trying to record great quality music in each situation. That

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adds all kinds of problems and benefits. It makes the show visually interesting and gives the viewer some context for the music.”

The show also aims to stimulate cultural tourism through the national exposure of North Carolina counties (most are rural and economically distressed) that appear in the series. The series projects, in its first year alone, to stimulate a tourism impact worth nearly \$1,300,000. *The Journal Of Travel Research* describes putting a place on television is the “ultimate product placement.”

The McIntyres created the Hendersonville-based foundation in 2008 in order to use media for education and promotion of other non-profits. “Our documentary, *Saving The Hansen House*, premiered on UNC-TV, and then was distributed nationally by NETA,” Will recalled. “We mentioned to UNC-TV producer Scott Davis that David Holt was a close friend of ours, and that we’d always wanted to do something with him. Scott encouraged the idea, because UNC-TV was still airing reruns of *Folkways*.”

The special debuted on January 29, 2015 with 32,595 households tuned in. “At the time, we all thought we had an hour-long special that would air on UNC-TV,” Will explained. “The chief of programming at UNC-TV, Bryan Sodemann, suggested that we would get more airings if we made the show into thirty-minute episodes in addition to the hour-long. We were able to do that because we had more material in the can. So we ended up with three half-hour segments. And Bryan was right: there are more thirty-minute slots than one-hour slots at public television stations across the country. We signed up for one program on UNC-TV and ended up getting four programs, not only for UNC-TV, but nationwide on PBS.”

Last August, PBS Plus accepted the series for national public television distribution. A month later, UNC-TV broadcast three new half-hour episodes. The series even came to life on the stage of Western Carolina University’s Bardo Fine and Performing Art Center on November 22nd. *David Holt’s State Of Music Live!* featured Holt with Balsam Range from adjacent Haywood County, along with Giddens, Goforth, and The Branchettes. The McIntyres filmed for the concert for a future public television special.

Balsam Range bassist Tim Surret shared what being part of the series meant to them. “It was a huge honor to be involved in the show. We are so proud of the musical heritage of our state. It was even more special because it was filmed where three of us went to college.”

Holt sees the series continuing his forty years of introducing people to music from the Southern mountains and honoring his elders by passing the music on to younger folks. “I want folks to be introduced to some great traditional musicians. I want them to say, ‘I like that and I want to see more.’ Mountain and bluegrass music survives by each new generation loving and nurturing it. It requires new musicians and fans to keep it alive. Television is one of the most powerful ways to keep that interest going. I’d just like to see the music continue to be healthy in the twenty-first century. Josh Goforth and I have been performing at festivals as a duo, and we have already begun to see a rise in attendance and an excitement in the audience as a result of the show. All the other guests on the show have experienced the same thing. I’m proud of the contribution *David Holt’s State Of Music* will make in keeping the

music moving forward. I should also add that the money needed to make a show like this has to be raised. Raising money to cover production costs is a huge job. My hat is off to Will as producer.”

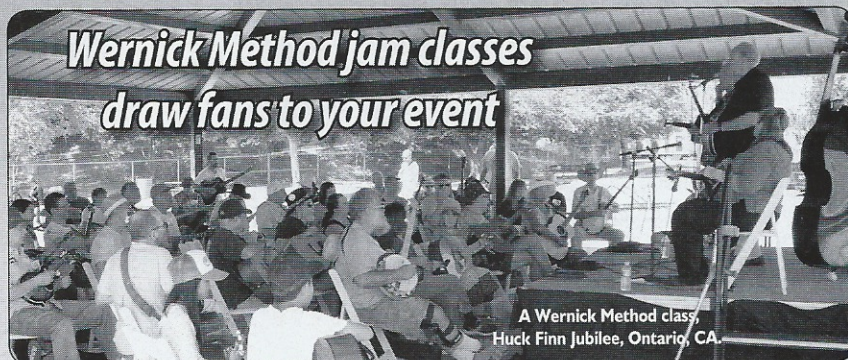
By the end of 2015, the foundation had raised more than \$205,000 from corporate underwriters, grants, and individual donors. Even several weeks before the national launch remained away, the team was moving forward. “We have started shooting season two,” Will says. “We hope to finish the shooting in May and finish post-production in the summer. However, we have to raise enough money to do all this.”

It’s anyone’s guess how many seasons of *David Holt’s State Of Music* will keep bringing bluegrass and roots musicians nationwide. We do know two things. PBS Plus will keep distributing the first season until 2023, and Holt and the McIntyres will insist on the highest production standards.



*Art Menius has written for BU since 1983, two years before he became the first executive director of IBMA. After many years with MerleFest, Folk Alliance, Appalshop and other cultural institutions, he semi-retired to freelance as a writer, fundraiser, and marketer.*

# Festival presenters!



## We asked students:

*Did you attend the festival to take the class?*

- The main reason: **22**
- A main reason: **69**
- Not a reason: **30**
- Heard at the festival: **18**

*From anonymous online student surveys of our most recent 15 festival classes*



*Would the presence of the class be a factor in attending next year?*

- The main reason: **17**
- A main reason: **63**
- A small reason: **25**
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