



Eugenia Snyder

teaching him a few guitar chords. After that he began picking the mandolin. In college to study pedagogy he both got away from bluegrass and depended on music for his living for the only time in his life. "I was in college at the same time this folk boom happened. So being able to play guitar made it very easy to work your way through college by picking folk music." Sometimes he tells audiences that the Kingston Trio are Dry Branch's idols.

Although Ron played a lot of Joan Baez guitar licks while being taught about teaching, he also came under the influence of banjo master Howard Aldridge. "So much so that I decided to take a job close by to where he was because I wanted to hear him pick." Thus Ron settled in the Springfield-Dayton, Ohio area about an hour's drive west of Columbus. He also began playing in a band with Aldridge and the extraordinary Frank Wakefield.

Ron followed that gig with a year picking for his inspiration, Ralph Stanley. Ron's mandolin can be heard on the 1971 album, "Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys Featuring Keith Whitley and Ricky Skaggs" (Jalyn JLP 129). He then spent four years with Lee Allen and the Dew Mountain Boys. Newest Fire Squad member Dave Edmundson describes that outfit as "straight ahead and pure. One of the all time great bands that had rare power in moments."

# DRY BRANCH FIRE SQUAD'S Quest For Lonesome

by Arthur Menius

Since the prehistoric days of 1976 Homo Erectus has lead a hardy tribe from Springfield, Ohio called the Dry Branch Fire Squad into the remote highlands of eastern North America in an instinctive quest for lonesome. Undeterred by civilizing forces, Erectus (or is it Homo?) and his cohorts have become one of the few new groups to achieve major status in the bluegrass field during the last decade.

Homo Erectus' alter ego (when was the last time you read so much Latin in a popular magazine article?) Ron Thomason described the object of their mission in his 1979 booklet, *Lonesome is a Car Up on Blocks*: "Lonesome is to bluegrass music what *blue* is to the blues. It is a word which encompasses feelings, beliefs, and concepts that cannot be readily defined in the usual manner."

Fire chief Thomason learned lonesome at the source, riding at the age of five or six in a '49 Chevy on US 19 through the mountains and valleys of southwest Virginia. Young Ron often accompanied his Army father on the long drives back home to Russell County, Virginia from his duty station in Columbus, Ohio. As soon as possible dad would tune in Bristol's now legendary WCYB.

"And the Stanley Brothers would be on the radio," Ron says of his most vivid childhood memories. "I can even call out some of the songs. 'A Vision of Mother' was one that really affected me. I can still remember the banjo kickoff to 'How Mountain Girls Can Love.' I can't say that at that time I wanted to play that music, but I knew that that music affected me very strongly."

Before too many years went by, Ron had his great-aunt Tootie Hicks Price

While Ron may have had more book learning than the rest of the Dew Mountain Boys, they gave him a post-graduate education in the meaning of bluegrass and the advanced theory of lonesome relativity. "These were exceedingly creative people," Ron recalls, "that didn't give one red cent about playing correctly or in tune, just so it made the hair stand up on their necks. That's what they wanted out of it." Hair standing on your neck or arms is a surefire symptom of lonesome.

Only Thomason remains of the original Dry Branch Fire Squad which came together in Springfield in 1976. Mary Jo Dickman, now rhythm guitarist and high baritone singer, came aboard shortly thereafter as booking agent. She had been converted to bluegrass when she heard Wakefield play. In the following three years Ron sorted through musicians in search of the band he had envisioned.

When Dick Erwin engineered their second album, "Spiritual Songs From





Dick Erwin

that had never, ever played any music in their whole life... Dick comes out with his new bass and started to put it up in the back of the van, and it fell apart. I don't mean the bridge fell down—that bass just self-destructed."

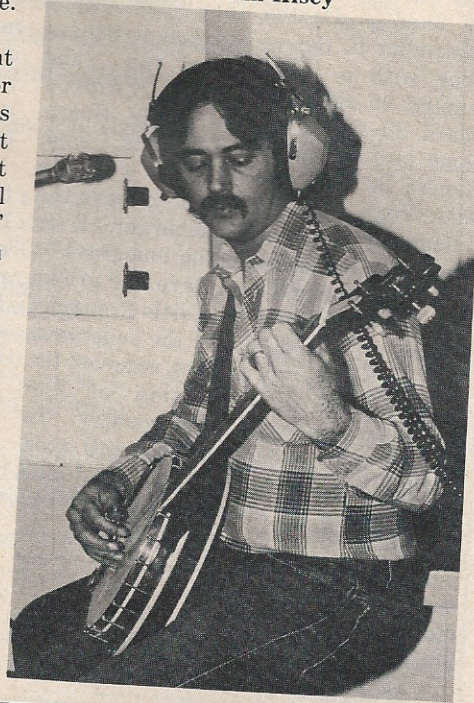
"The world's first collapsable bass," quips Dick, who also handles bass, countertenor, and high baritone parts. "The answer to all the problems of space. You can get it into an area that big."

John Hisey, next of the current members to join in the search for lonesome, had been taking banjo lessons at a store for a few months when he met Aldridge in 1972. "He told me to forget everything I had learned, that it was all wrong. So I had to start all over again." After six years of studying with Aldridge, John met Ron, and his straightforward Scroggs style picking became a part of the Fire Squad.

With the addition of John Lee Baker (Kenny's son) on guitar and tenor vocals, which produced wonderful duets with Ron, the first version of Dry Branch to achieve national notice had evolved. Following Baker's departure the Dry Branch Fire Squad reorganized in January of 1984. Mary Jo became a full-fledged musical member of the band, while they welcomed Dave Edmundson into the band on guitar, fiddle, and mandolin and singing tenor.

Edmundson, who had spent over thirteen years as a cornerstone of the Hotmud Family, credits the banjo picking half of the Osborne Brothers with inspiring his career in bluegrass. "In 1962 I was working at a Burger Chef on Salem Avenue in Dayton, Ohio. My best friend

John Hisey



Eugenia Snyder

Dry Branch," Ron discovered that he could sing all the parts, although he had no experience as a musician. Believing in Dick's untapped abilities, Ron invited him to join the band. His career began rather inauspiciously, according to Ron.

"We went over to pick him up, and he had bought a bass. It wasn't much of a bass, but it was good enough for a person

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in grade school and high school and I had learned to play guitars together and sing Kingston Trio songs. He saw an ad in the paper that a guy was willing to give banjo lessons, and he especially wanted people who didn't have any idea how to play the banjo. So my buddy called him up and got hold of a banjo, and it turned out the guy was Sonny Osborne. Sonny and Bobby lived in Dayton then. The way I remember it, Sonny had just written a book with a new kind of tab... and wanted to see if it worked... After I heard all this from my buddy, Sonny came into the Burger Chef, and I said, 'You're Sonny Osborne, aren't you!' He said, 'Yeah, and don't forget to leave the onions off of that cheeseburger.' Ever since then I was hooked on bluegrass."

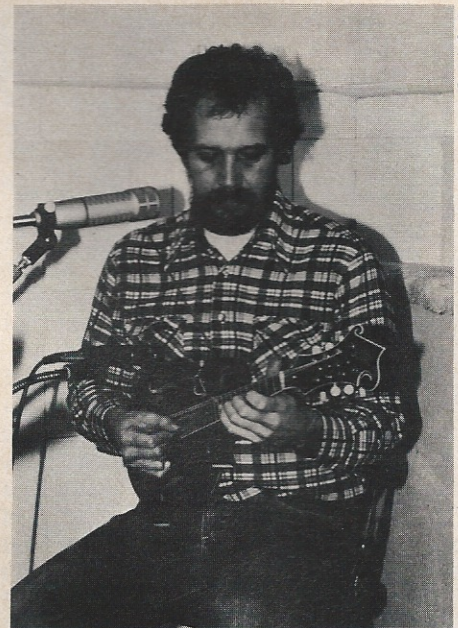
It also helped that Dave had grown up a few blocks from the Little Kentucky section of Dayton, hub of the southwest Ohio area that, Ron asserts, received the second thickest migration of Appalachian refugees in the country. "In that Dayton-Springfield-Cincinnati area you just have to be living on cloud nine not to notice the country and bluegrass music that's just there," Dave says. He pursued his interest in both bluegrass and pop-folk music. "Then the old-time fad started up. I got a fiddle, and that's about the time the Hotmuds got going."

Combining bluegrass, old-time, and

archaic jazz forms the Hotmud Family became one of the midwest's most popular acoustic acts during a career that spanned over thirteen years. By late 1983, Dave continues, "the Hotmud Family had kind of been falling apart at the seams. That is to say, we were still trying to play as good as we possibly could when we got on stage, but the energy and effort that was going into the music was going into a lot of different directions. At that time I heard that the Fire Squad had an opening for somebody who could do more or less what I know how to do, so I applied for the job."

"Actually, I just asked him if he'd take it," Ron corrects. "The Hotmud Family was always one of my favorites, and at times my favorite group... so part of me didn't want to see the Hotmud Family ever quit. Of course, when I found out it was just inevitable, the next best thing was to get part of them in the Dry Branch Fire Squad."

In order to join the Fire Squad Dave had to get a day job, and he accepted a position with the Federal Archives and Records Center in Moraine, Ohio. "All of us work day jobs," Ron says, "and I will even add that we always will. I personally don't want to have a band with any full-time musicians in it. I always thought there was a danger to it, because as soon as you had full-time musicians, you'd be



Eugenia Snyder

Dave Edmundson

liable to play something because you have to or because there's pressure on you to do it to please the crowd. What I think ends up happening then is that you don't please the crowd as much as you would if you didn't do that. There's a lot of good music played by people that are full-time, but it's not traditional enough for me. I like it a little rough.

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**Mary Jo Dickman**

"It has enabled us to play jobs where we feel like we can entertain the people for one thing and consequently get kind of a rapport going, and to not have to play or work real hard to make a certain amount of money, say, to keep the bus going or pay the light bill. The only shows we will play now are just family style shows."

"Having day jobs takes the pressure off, and we can have a good time playing music," Mary Jo adds.

Another advantage is that the band members don't get tired of each other, according to Dick, "cause we don't play that much in the wintertime, so we don't see that much of each other... By the end of the summer we're ready to be away from each other. Sure, it's a great break."

But how much can you play with full-time work? "All we want," Ron answers. "We went to south Asia and played for

**Ron Thomason**



Eugenia Snyder

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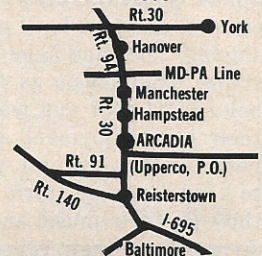
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six weeks over there. Most employers seem pretty responsive, at least ours are, to people who do something else, and we've been able to keep with it."

"Well, everybody's kind of been at their jobs a long time, too. So we do get some time off," Mary Jo says.

"Ron's off in the summertime, so he's not busy," Dick comments. "I've got four weeks of vacation a year."

"I also have four weeks vacation where I work at," says wry, but quiet Hisey, "but through the course of the summer I get sick a lot. I guess it's because of the heat. Therefore, I have to miss some work."

The public work requirement suggests there's much more to the Dry Branch Fire Squad than the music. Despite their major festival draw status, Ron feels, "we're kind of a club band, just like any bluegrass band that plays a local bar on Friday and Saturday nights."

That's a big part of it; the Fire Squad refuses to divorce itself from the ethos of amateur back porch picking and singing. The band believes in preserving string band music as the sound which belongs to poor and working people for their own enjoyment and solace. They perceive that the only way to do that is to keep a certain spirit and feeling alive through their music and attitude. They do not limit their repertoire to certain overplayed standards. Instead, they understand, as do the Johnson Mountain Boys, that young musicians active in the 1980s must create a traditionally-based sound of their own if they want to keep traditional bluegrass flourishing. That they have done by developing a rootsy style of their own that might best be described as aggressively traditional. In the Fire Squad's quest for the lonesome of a 1949 Farm and Fun Time broadcast they draw on the Stanley's mountain bluegrass, Ron's own Clinch River Valley roots, and Hazel Dickens' working class sensibilities.

The Fire Squad also realizes that it is essential for success to have a distinctive, well conceived, and thoroughly rehearsed vocal approach. They put the brunt of their effort on their singing. All five members participate in well arranged duets, trios, and quartets that ache of the mountains and lonesome lost.

"I think our sound is a texture," Ron explains, "in that it has more to do than just with the songs, the harmony, the picking, the singing and the talk. I think it's a kind of unique combination of all those things. We've got a lot of confidence in our singing, and so we know that we're going to sing a certain kind of material real effectively, but we've never really relied just on that. We also know that we're going to be able to put it in a context that makes it even more

palatable than just presenting it effectively. That has to do with everybody's attitude, which is, take our time as we go through our show. I don't think Dry Branch ends up having a very effective sound if you're going to compare us to the sound of the Seldom Scene, but we have a style."

That style and context result from skillfully mixing a serious respect for the music and the people who created it with Ron's tongue-in-cheek humor and, on a third level, his sincere effort to educate audiences about Appalachian music and life. His comic patter tends to dispell myths about rural people by parodying the stereotypes. For example, he often introduces the band members with Latin names for prehistoric humans. Like all good humor it both has a purpose and does not translate well. You can get an idea by reading his satiric stories or by listening to the live "On Tour" album.

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*The Band believes in preserving string band music as the sound which belongs to poor and working people for their own enjoyment and solace.*

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The best way is to see the Fire Squad in person. When you do, take a look at all the smiling faces around you as Ron weaves a series of running jokes throughout his between song spiels.

There will be smiles on stage, too. "We have to enjoy ourselves," Dick says, "and in order for us to enjoy ourselves, we have to entertain them. Therefore, we get a rapport with the audience. It's a lot like people liking you. If you don't like yourself, you can't expect others to."

"If a band can entertain and amuse itself, it can entertain and amuse somebody else," concurs Dave.

"If you give the audience something that's real important to you," Ron resumes, "which we always attempt to do, not always successfully, but we always try to do, they give back something that's real important to them, which a lot of times is just their response and saying they like you."

What's really important to Ron includes more than Appalachian music and

self deprecating humor. "Human beings have as much drive to use that brain as a hound dog does his nose, the lion his claws, or whatever. That makes him unique. So all you have to do is feed the brain. We've got five people together with this fine old-time music, which has probably had the least exposure of any ethnic art form in the world. So having a product like that, just like having anything that's rare, all you have to do is show it off. The treasures of the Pharaohs or bluegrass music, just hold it up for exhibit and say this is it, and this is where it came from, and this is what it means, and that's that.

"You see, I'm a teacher by trade, and I like to educate people in the bluegrass audience. Not that I know any more than they do, because God knows I don't, but some things about what we're doing I might know a lot about, and I've learned a lot from Dave, too. We find that with this growing bluegrass audience, and it's just grown by leaps and bounds in the last three or four years, that a lot of people come into it who have an interest in traditional music, and they want to be educated.

"I think the most thought I give to anything is in how to painlessly educate the audience, and I think about it all year round. I'm relieved of a lot of the duties that most people would probably have to think about by virtue of the fact that other people in the band take care of all the hard part about harmony singing and harmony arrangement. They take care of all that part about where we are, getting lost, finding our way to places, to where I'm at this point of being almost totally irresponsible about things that should be a bandleader's job."

The other group members clearly feel it's worth it to have such a front man. John credits much of their success to "our brilliant emcee, one of the best in bluegrass."

Ron's other essential role is selecting songs, about a third of which are gospel numbers. The Dry Branch relishes the chance to blend their voices on a capella sacred numbers. "We've got a lot of festivals scheduled this summer where we are the gospel show, so it's a fairly important part of our show," Ron says. "If we have a choice of days, we'll usually opt to take the Sunday morning."

"Ron has a knack," Dick points out, "for listening to the old-time songs done in the old-time way that he hears stuff that maybe the rest of us don't, or I don't. That's why he's the one who chooses the material."

"So far in the eight years we've had a band, with the exception of two instrumentals, I have picked all the material," Ron admits while suggesting that Dave's entry into the Fire Squad



will change that to some degree. "Not because I want to be stingy about the job, but it makes it a lot easier for me since I'm fronting the show. The material does become part of the presentation, and it all has to work together. We try to get sort of a continuity, and so in that one aspect every one in the band has different jobs they do. My job's selecting the material.

"Most of the songs that we look for either have to be exceedingly traditional or have that kind of a very traditional taste. We've been fortunate in getting some pretty new songs thrown at us which are pretty high quality and have that flavor or just sound like a real old song. Through the songs I'd like to keep a very traditional type of music going, for people coming to see us to count on seeing that. Everybody in the band with the exception of me is a good harmony singer, so I try to look for songs that can really accentuate those harmonies. We're really a band of singers, so we look for strong vocal numbers.

"As far as picking material goes, I don't think we've ever said, 'Well, here's one the people will like.' We usually think, 'Well, here's one we like to do,' and then we go from there. I can't actually say we've ever left a song behind because people didn't like it. If we like it, we just keep on doing it. A lot of people have come up, and they've learned that. They don't say, 'We really enjoyed that song.' They say, 'You looked like you enjoyed that song.'"

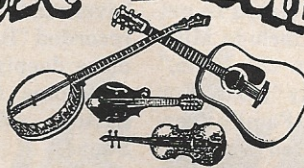
All that provides another key to the Dry Branch Fire Squad's approach—being themselves at all times. "What we really expect of ourselves is to be true to ourselves and to make sure in the final analysis that we haven't let ourselves down," says Ron.

Dick explains how the Fire Squad accomplishes that kind of originality while using mostly non-original material. "Nine times out of ten, we'll have never even heard the song, and Ron'll say, 'Here's some words, and here's a melody line.' So we don't even know what it sounded like by the original artist, and therefore you can't say we stole it. We just do it our way, Dry Branch."

"I don't think we know how to mimic," Mary Jo says. "We just start picking it. If somebody has an idea how it's supposed to go, we listen and start working it out."

The Fire Squad scratched an early 1984 gospel recording session in order to absorb Dave into the band. Instead, they recorded two albums worth of material during the fall of 1984. One record will be all sacred songs, while the other will mix secular and gospel selections. Both include several previously unrecorded tunes. Some are new compositions, "a

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couple came from Dave, and the rest are just from my youth," Ron reports. "I'd sure like to be able to make it sound like they were recorded in the 1940s." Heretofore unwaxed songs slated to get the Dry Branch treatment include Mike Henderson's "New Dust on the Bible," Pete Roy's "Somebody Play 'Dixie' For Me," which the Hotmud Family performed but never committed to vinyl, "Adieu to Cold Weather," and "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone?"

In the meantime Ron's first solo album, "Branching Out" (Gordo 002), appeared during the summer of 1984. Although it contains four short bluegrass

mandolin numbers, most of the record consists of old-time duets sung by Mr. and Mrs. Ron Thomason with Ron playing clawhammer or, as he puts it, "overhand" banjo. Ron reports that he recorded "Branching Out" in order to get more deeply into old-time music and to use some material which for various reasons was unsuitable for the Fire Squad.

The Fire Squad's second live album, "On Tour," appeared on their own Gordo label. Ron confides that they are considering following the same course with these new recordings in order to exercise full artistic control.

Although the Ohio-based outfit has played in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Florida, it performs most frequently at concert halls and festivals in the mid-Atlantic and north-eastern states. "I think with a few exceptions they are more traditionally oriented," Ron says. "There are also, it seems like, a larger number of people there that are trying to get in touch with something a little deeper than just the sound of the music and getting their foot tapping."

Where they may appear the Dry Branch Fire Squad will be nothing other than themselves. They will present a show full of good humor, great singing, and music played with real feeling as

they gig for that something deeper, that spirit of lonesome.

The crass minded may think it futile to pursue a quarry that can be felt but not defined, experienced but never captured, but how can the Dry Branch Fire Squad be spinning its wheels when the car's up on blocks?



Eugenia Snyder

### DRY BRANCH FIRE SQUAD DISCOGRAPHY

- Live at the Cryin' Cowboy—No label (Out of Print)
- Spiritual Songs From Dry Branch—RT-001
- The Dry Branch Fire Squad—RT-002
- Born to be Lonesome—Rounder 0119
- Antiques and Inventions—Rounder 0139
- Fannin' The Flames—Rounder 0163
- On Tour—Gordo 001



<p><b>Bluegrass Three Productions 2nd Annual Bluegrass Festival</b> At Baughman's Beautiful Acres Campground 4 mi. South of Paulding, OH on St. Rt. 127 to 613 and East 4 mi. July 26 - 27 - 28, 1985</p>	
<p>HARBOURTOWN GRASS, FULLHOUSE, LONESOME PINE BOYS, RAY SCALF, NEW LIGHT GOSPEL, L.B. SILER, SCOTT BROTHERS, And MANY MORE!!!</p>	
<p>Children under 10 free. Fri. - \$5.00, Sat. - \$6.00, Sun. - \$5.00 Weekend - \$15.00 At Gate, \$12.00 In Advance</p>	
<p>Paulding Co. Bluegrass Asso. &amp; Northern Bluegrass Assn. \$2.00 off on Weekend Pass ONLY IF DUES ARE PAID UP</p>	
<p>Free Camping - Water &amp; Electric \$5.00 for weekend - All Vendors Welcome</p>	
<p>For Information Contact: Bluegrass Three Productions P.O. Box 103 Latty, Ohio 45855 (419) 399-2789</p>	<p>Coming Festivals October 11, 12, 13, 1985 April 25, 26, 27, 1986 July 25, 26, 27, 1986</p>

### Southeastern Michigan's 7th Annual Old Time Country &

# Bluegrass Festival

JULY 19, 20, 21, 1985

Corner of Seven Mile and Nollar Roads - Whitmore Lake, Michigan  
8 miles North of Ann Arbor, Michigan - 25 miles West of Detroit, Michigan



**Fri., July 19**

Goins Brothers  
Robin Tackett  
Waterloo Boys  
Open Stage

All Bands interested call us



**Sat., July 20**

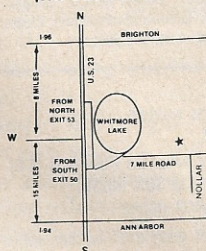
Ralph Stanley & Clinch Mtn. Boys  
Larry Sparks  
Goins Brothers  
Dave Evans  
Wade & Julia Mainer  
Landon Messer  
Vernon McIntyre



**Sun., July 21**

Dave Evans  
Southern Gospel Singers  
Emma Smith  
Wade & Julia Mainer  
Vernon McIntyre

**SHOW GOES ON RAIN OR SNOW  
(no refunds).**



**PARKING LOT PICKING  
UNDER THE STARS**

- Home cooked foods • Beautiful FREE camping, (in the rough), Lots of shade trees • Limited electric sites - 30 amps - \$10.00 3 days • Playground - be sure and bring the kids . . . this is a family festival! 16 and under free with parents • Nice Dance Floor • Clean restrooms, lighted parking lot - security on grounds • All pets must be on leash • No alcohol in concert area, please no drugs.

**For More Information Contact:  
MARVIN RAMSEY**

8705 Nollar Road - Whitmore Lake, MI 48189  
Phone: 313-449-2055 or 313-662-0983

- Sound by North Country Grass
- M.C. - Sherman Funk

#### TICKET INFORMATION

Advance ticket deadline - July 10  
3 Days advance - \$15.00 per weekend  
At Gate - \$20.00 per weekend  
Friday: \$10.00 - Saturday: \$10.00  
Sunday: \$8.00  
Gates Open Thursday 4 p.m.

One of the largest selections of Bluegrass  
& Old Time Music records in the area  
By Old Homestead Records  
Concessions Welcome