

# JEFF PRESLEY AND



# SOUTH CENTRAL BLUEGRASS

A lot of us remain eternally vigilant for the next big thing in bluegrass. We spend half our lives seeking the next hot young traditional band, or the next fantastic female vocalist, or the next path breaking musical genius, or the next advance in capos, or basically the next anything that our bluegrass friends haven't heard about yet.

During late 1989 we discovered a group from southeastern Pennsylvania called South Central Bluegrass through their debut Webco album "We

**Above, L-R: Jeff Presley, Dick Laird, Jon Glik, Tommy Neal and Carroll Swam.**

Can't Return To The Homeplace." By the summer of 1990 the news had spread from the aficionados to the bluegrass community as the album gained airplay on more than 400 radio stations in the USA and Canada.

Although Joe Isaacs' "I Pressed Through the Crowd" received the most

airplay and climbed up to #17 in the *Bluegrass Unlimited* charts, the success of "We Can't Return To The Homeplace" really focused attention on the songwriting team of Jeff and Dean Presley. The 1991 Webco compact disc follow-up, "I Need A Song," featured more Presley compositions and songs from other South Central Bluegrass members.

Jeff and South Central Bluegrass mandolinist Dick Laird picked me up one bright early afternoon at a hotel in

*By Art Menius*

Washington, D.C. We set off on a mission to the world headquarters of Webco Records. I had met them when the band showcased in Owensboro at the IBMA World of Bluegrass in 1990.

Presley had enjoyed stepping into the spotlight there. "That was a big time for us when we showcased at IBMA. I was amazingly calm. I think I was in shock from the first day I arrived. I thought that it went well. We got a lot of favorable comments, booked a couple of jobs, and learned a lot from discussions and the hospitality suites."

We shared our loathing for city driving, even the Sunday morning edition, and tuned in Stained Glass Bluegrass on WAMU. "Ray Davis and Red Shipley really helped us out with 'I Pressed Through The Crowd.' That whole station has done a lot for South Central Bluegrass," Jeff admitted. He kidded me for thinking that Dean, indicated on the writer's credits only as "D." was his brother. D. Presley is dad. It stands for Dean. The H. Presley is Harry. "That's my older brother. R. Presley is my wife, Robin." All appear on the composer credits for South Central Bluegrass releases.

"Dad is the genius behind 90% of the writing," Jeff explained. "He comes up with the material. What he'll do then is show it to me, and kind of give me an idea of how he would like it to sound. Then I pretty much rough out the arrangement to fit our style. Then we sit down and practice and go over and just create it as a band from that point.

"It usually doesn't take long until we get [the song] at least to the point where we feel confident in going out and performing it. Obviously the songs evolve. I won't say 'I Need A Song' started out completely different from the way we recorded it, but I would say it was definitely different from where it was when we first started doing it on shows. It's important to have a time period where you kind of experiment with it.

"On the 'We Can't Return To The Homeplace' project...all the songs pertained to the Presley family. 'We Can't Return To The Homeplace' was written about my mom's homeplace near Tazewell. 'Coal Miner's Gold,' that was written about my grandfather who worked in the mines down there in West Virginia. They're about our fam-

ily experiences and stuff like that. '[Ballad of] Hobie Young' was written about a guy from down there in West Virginia—Jenkins Jones, W. Va. That's where dad's from. That's a true story about him running moonshine down there. He became kind of a folk hero."

The talk about songwriting carried me back a few years to a conversation I had with Carl Sauceman of the Sauceman Brothers at the Kissimmee, Fla., festival. Carl's hits included "Handy Man," now a staple of Lynn Morris Band shows as rendered by Marshall Wilborn, himself a formidable composer.

Extremely affable, Carl allowed that he enjoyed hearing today's groups and really respected their talent. Then the bluegrass star of the early 1950s made a comment I remembered. He felt that many contemporary bluegrass bands didn't perform enough original material. "They're doing a lot of the songs we used to do. In our day the record company *made* you come up with original material if you wanted to record."

South Central Bluegrass has produced 17 original songs out of 23 released, ranking with the originality

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standards of the first generation. Possibly because the Presley family writers combine two generations, the Presley clan create songs that look back on bluegrass tradition and forward to bluegrass evolution. It's a gift that perhaps a dozen bluegrass writers today can match, yet it speaks to the heart and soul of the music.

"In my opinion the songwriting coming out of this ensemble comes awfully close to Pete Goble/Leroy Drumm as far as quality of crafted songs," said Webco's John Emerson. "That's another thing that grabbed our attention."

Bluegrass music can be viewed, in the terms of 1940s country music, as a revolutionary step both forward and backward. Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys absorbed jazz and blues, both directly and indirectly via Jimmie Rodgers, into a brother duet basis strongly influenced by traditional fiddle music. While western swing mixed rural themes and Texas fiddling with big band music, honky tonk electrified for noisy establishments and began dealing with born-to losers slipping around and watching the bubbles in



Dean and Jeff Presley.

their beers. The bluegrass artists of the 1940s, while rapidly breaking new ground musically, tended, in contrast, to sing of "My Cabin In Caroline,"

"Blue Moon Of Kentucky," and "Preachin', Prayin', Singin'." The old days lost but not forgotten, ceremonially resurrected in bluegrass song.

The 1940s were changing times; so are the 1990s. The popularity of the Pete Goble song proves that "Tennessee 1949" does not look too bad in retrospect. It also suggests a particular social need that bluegrass music, and all that goes with it, serve: helping people cope as they plunge forward into an uncertain future. Hey, didn't Earl join the Blue Grass Boys right after Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

The songwriters in bluegrass, therefore, bear a particular burden in keeping bluegrass music healthy. We have cause for celebration whenever other composers appear who can write tunes that keep bluegrass music evolving by writing songs simultaneously new and familiar. Equally important are singers who possess both traditional soul and accessibility to modern ears.

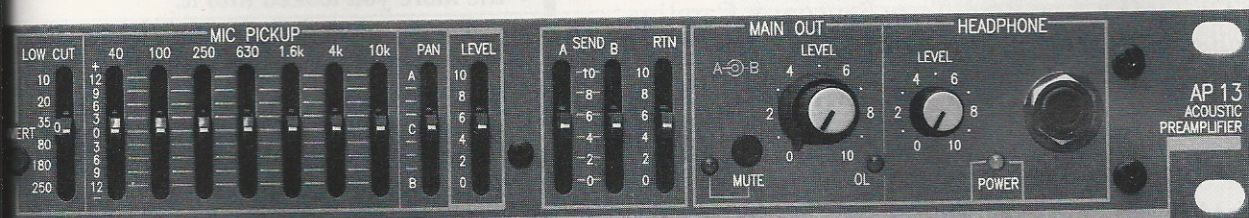
That Jeff Presley has one of those voices, and the Presley team are those kinds of writers is why I was riding in the back seat of Dick Laird's car on the Sunday morning circling the inter-

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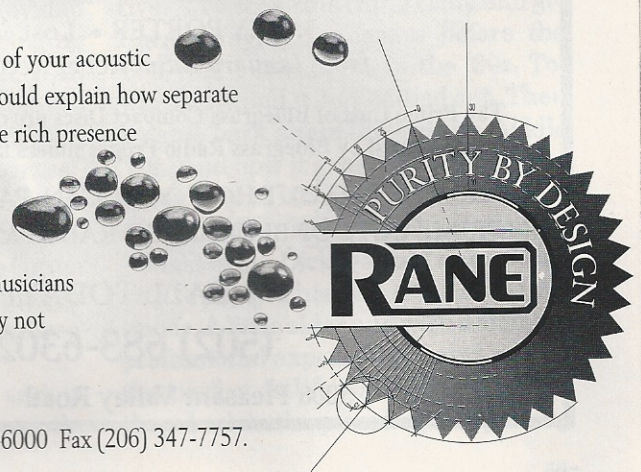


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state arc around the southwest side of DC. We finally arrived intact at the northern Virginia home of John Emerson.

As the coffee flowed and the donut boxes efficiently emptied themselves, Jeff explained that how they had approached Webco late in 1988. South Central Bluegrass had already recorded the album at their own expense at Bias Studios. "Dick [Laird] worked on a couple of Chris Warner albums for Webco, so he knew Bill [Emerson]. We called and they said, 'Yeah, bring it down. We'd like to hear it.' That's the first time I met John [Emerson]".

John recalled his dad's reaction when Bill first heard the tape of Jeff Presley & the South Central Bluegrass. The Emersons met the Presleys shortly after they had acquired Webco from founder Wayne Busbice. "South Central Bluegrass was the second project and really the first I was in on, since on the other one [Patent Pending's "Through the Window"], the deal was already really done.

"They came down, and that day was one of several when I sat down with Wayne Busbice, and I taped everything, just to talk about the record business since I was starting from scratch. That day we went over to dad's house, and Dick and Jeff were there, and dad and Wayne Busbice, and myself. We listened to the tape and the vocals with Jeff's lead were just great! The music was more competent the more you looked into it.

"I remember dad stopped the tape and looked over at Jeff and said, 'Who's singing the lead?'

"And Jeff said, 'That's me.'

"Dad said, 'You wrote these songs? This is original material?' And Jeff elaborated about his dad, Dean Presley, and the family. And dad turned the tape back on. So we made the deal.... 'I Pressed Through The Crowd' jumped on the chart. A good number of the other songs were noticed as far as the playlists. 'Hobie Young' was played a lot, 'Coal Miner's Gold,' 'We Can't Return To The Homeplace.' I listen to that album a lot myself. It's one of my favorite ones."

Jeff believes that Webco has contributed heavily to their success. "John's professionalism as a businessman and record company has brought us along

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so far. His input and his dad's and what Webco has done for us has brought us to the point where we are now."

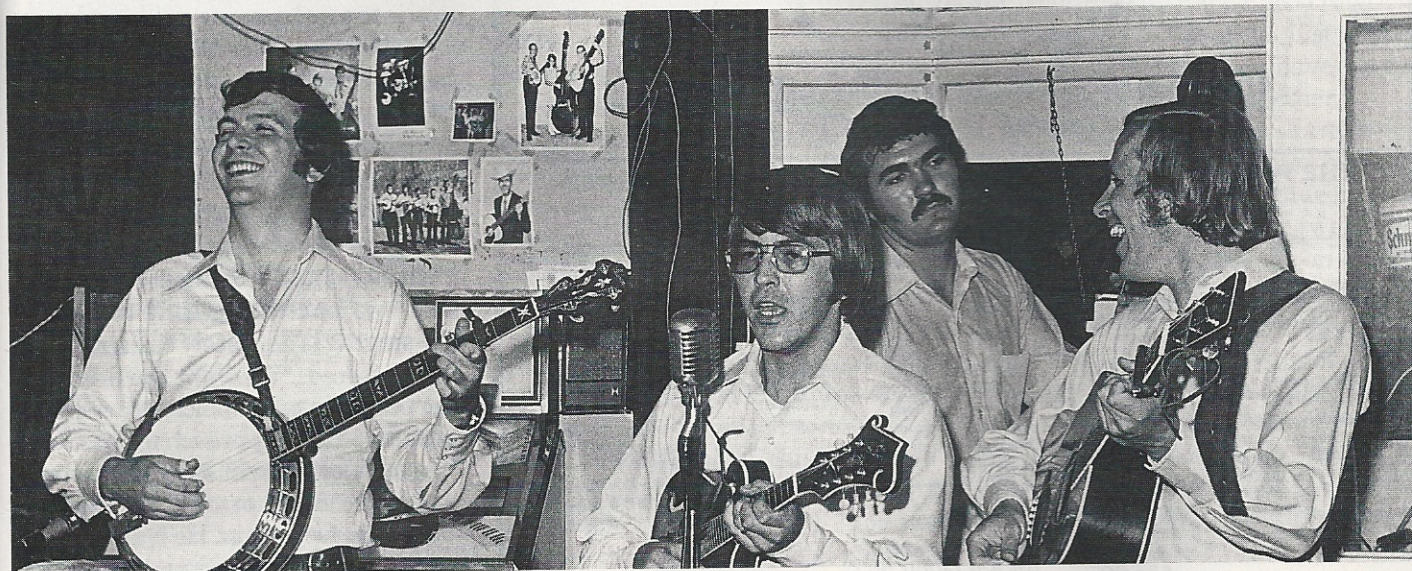
A "top 20" song, showcasing at IBMA, and the compact disc release of "I Need A Song" have carried South Central Bluegrass far beyond Jeff Presley's original aspirations. "If you had told me five years ago that I'd be associated with John and Bill Emerson, that I would have met the people that I've met, and had the extensive airplay that we've had, I would have just laughed at you. It's easy to want more and more and more, but when you honestly look back and see what we have accomplished as South Central Bluegrass, it really is a lot. Starting as a grass roots type of thing, starting

was Jerry and G.C., Del's two brothers. Dad played the banjo and sang. So we got acquainted with the McCoury Family. They were a big inspiration to me. I remember how I'd get so frustrated because Del and the rest of them made it look so easy.

"I told dad that, and he said, 'It just takes practice.' That set me into practicing and playing. The first Martin I ever played was Del's... This would have been back in the late '60s. Dad and I used to do a lot of picking in those days." Highlights of visits to the homeplace in Virginia centered around picking sessions, including one with early Stanley Brothers' fiddler Leslie Keith, at a livestock and flea market in Tazewell.

band began to evolve. According to Jeff, "A big turning point was in the fall of '87 when Dick [Laird] came with the band. Dick really added the spark, the professional attitude, and drive and punch; everything we needed at that time. He played a big part in developing Jeff Presley as far as timing.

"It wasn't long after that time that dad retired from the band. At that point he really focused on writing. Dave Mickley came with us at that time playing banjo. It wasn't long after that that Brad Oviatt came with us as fiddle player. It was with that band that we recorded 'We Can't Return To The Homeplace,' we decided to get real serious. Brad left the band in spring of '88 [joining Beaver Creek].



Keystone, L-R: Larry Smith, Dick Laird, Dick Runkle and Carroll Swam.

from absolute zero and building this thing. The goals that we set then are funny. Then just to record an album was a large goal to attain."

Although South Central Bluegrass started as a hobby, without the benefit of a well-known member or serious professional experience, the bluegrass roots run deep for Jeff and the Presley family. "Dad had a reel-to-reel tape recorder and tapes of Don Reno & Red Smiley, Lester Flatt & Earl Scruggs, Monroe, and Ralph Stanley, who were really the four biggest ones who influenced me. I started when I was about eight. My dad bought me my first guitar then. We started practicing and practicing, and right about that time dad started working with the McCoury Brothers. It was a gospel group, and it

Over the next 15 years Jeff slowly gained confidence in his lead singing. During the '70s he performed with a gospel outfit. Around 1986 his dad, in Jeff's words, "thought it would be fun just for a hobby to put the band together. Ron Rice played bass, my dad was on banjo, myself on guitar singing lead. We had a couple of friends, Walt Crider and Ray Swisher. Walt played mandolin, and Ray played fiddle. That was the first South Central Bluegrass." Rice would remain with the band through the recording of "I Can't Return To The Homeplace," while Crider served for several years as president of the Seven Mountain Bluegrass Association.

As Jeff grew increasingly serious about South Central's prospects, the

[Dobro player] Darren Beachley came with us in mid-summer of '88. We finished the album that fall of '88."

Laird not only brought his talent and experience to South Central Bluegrass, he provided vision and perspective. "I've seen this thing come and go. I was playing bluegrass before the '60s, and I saw it hit in the '60s. Towards the end it sort of died out. Then it came back again toward the middle '70s. And now it's rested for the last so many years. It's not like it had been. And now it's on the way back again."

Most of all, Dick wanted an opportunity to explore his own ideas about the music. A little older and with a lot more professional experience, Laird proved the perfect foil for Jeff Presley. That they had both grown up in picking

families gives them a lot in common. "I started playing guitar when I was six. My dad played mandolin, so I was raised around it also. It was a family-type thing. I had an uncle who played guitar, and my grandfather sawed around on the fiddle. That's how it started out, as a hobby."

Laird began playing in a Saturday square dance band in the New York area during the folk revival of the early 60s. In 1965 an old school buddy, future Jimmy Martin banjoist Chris Warner, phoned him with a gig for a

mandolinist. "I said, 'I don't know, Chris. I have a mandolin, but I'm not a mandolin player.'

"Chris said, 'I've booked it for five guys. Just go along and play some rhythm.' I've been playing mandolin ever since. In 1967 I was one of the original Dixie Pals with Del McCoury. I picked with Del for about a year."

Laird then helped form Keystone with banjoist Larry Smith and current South Central bassman Carroll Swam. That band performed from Virginia to New England until the early 1980s.

Laird, his son Heath, Gary Ferguson, and later on Swam played with Warner in Redwood before Warner returned to the Sunny Mountain Boys in 1986. Laird appears on Warner's two Webco albums from that period. For much of the summer of '86 Laird played bass for Jimmy Martin.

"And then in '87 Chris called and said that Jeff was looking for a mandolinist. I called Jeff, and that was the start. I've been with him ever since. I started playing out when I was 15, so I have 32 years. If I didn't like it by now, I would have figured it out. I've put a lot of myself, a lot of what I've learned over those 30 some odd years, into South Central.

"You go to practice and the satisfaction is to see this thing work, and to see everybody work at it to make it work. Sometimes it seems like a hassle, but a quitter can quit easily. You have to keep striving if you're going to make anything out of it."

Presley and Laird have clear thoughts about South Central Bluegrass, its sound, and their complimentary role in creating it. "I think that our singing is definitely our strength," Jeff asserted. "We want the drive and the punch in our music. Also we want to make a fresh approach to our music. We do a lot of twin stuff and unique melodies. Another real strength is Dick's musicianship. He leads the creativity part of it instrumentally.

"The singing is kind of my end of it. I've tried to make my voice stronger and I think 'I Need A Song' represents that. It was real intimidating going in that studio for the first time. This last project I was much more at ease with my singing."

From Dick's point of view, "We try to stay with as much traditionalism as we can, but we try to interject some things that are a little bit newer. Just to keep it fresh. Flatt & Scruggs did everything Flatt & Scruggs did probably as well as it's ever going to be done. You're never going to be able to recreate Flatt & Scruggs. You're never going to be able to recreate Monroe. You're never going to be able to recreate the Stanleys. We try to do everything as traditionally as we can, but interject other things without being gaudy."

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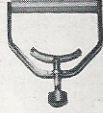
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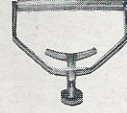
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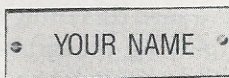
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**Jeff Presley.**

Jeff Presley does all the booking himself. He admitted it was a challenge, despite the South Central's success on the radio. He appreciates those presenters, such as Joe Cornett and Bill Hale, "who really gave us the chance in the beginning. In the future, we're just plugging away. We're hoping that our music precedes us and kind of build on that.

"We're loyal to promoters who work with us and committed to making it work both ways. That's the approach I've taken—win-win situations. I learned that in Owensboro, and we've made great strides in the past couple of years. Evolving the band is one thing, and evolving the booking is completely different."

Laird does not mince words about South Central's one stumbling block in bookings. "We have a lot of trouble with the local band syndrome over the past couple of years even though we've played south and north and east and west. We have records being played nationally, and still you have people say you're a 'local band.' Somebody has to book you someplace else to get rid of that 'local band syndrome. It's a monkey hanging on your back."

Presley feels that the fans can help all talented newer groups to overcome that obstacle. "I think fans need to realize how important they are, especially now that we have the Bluegrass Survey. They have a direct impact on that National Bluegrass Top 30. If they make a phone call or drop a post

card to the radio station and ask for songs, that will have an impact on that top 30. The same things go hand in hand with promoters and festivals. All it takes is a phone call or a letter to say I heard this band. I like what they're doing. How about getting them in here?"

As befits a group that started at the grass roots level, South Central Bluegrass has cultivated a genuine appreciation for the people who love bluegrass music. "One of things I've enjoyed most about playing is meeting the people," Jeff remarked. "You just meet so many nice people at the festivals. It's a thrill to have someone come up to say that they heard you on the radio and really enjoy your material, especially when they buy an album or a tape."

"I've always enjoyed that part of it," agreed Dick. "You meet the same people whether you're picking with Jimmy

Martin or South Central Bluegrass. You meet the same people in Charlotte, Mich., or Dahlonega, Ga., or Gettysburg, Pa. It's like one big family. There's people who would do almost anything for you. That's what's nice about it."

Laird, Swam, and Presley welcomed new members into South Central Bluegrass recently. Veteran banjo player Tom Neal from Hampstead, Md., has recorded with Del McCoury and Cliff Waldron. And since the departure of Patrick White, Jon Glik and Warren Blair have filled in intermittently on fiddle.

"Everybody in the band are good people," Presley explained. "We're all good friends. Even people who have left the band still have a good relationship with us. A lot of it's just friendship. When we play we have a good time. We enjoy being together."

All the band members share in Jeff Presley's commitment to the music, its fans, and South Central Bluegrass. "I would like to go just as far as we can go. That obviously all depends on myself, the commitment I have to the music, and also it has a direct connection to what the fans want...I'd just like to keep recording good music and get out there and play as much as we can. We've had goals we've wanted to achieve, but really we've just let things evolve through our commitment to do the best we can do."



*Art Menius, former Executive Director of IBMA, serves as Manager of the North American Folk Music & Dance Alliance. He and photographer wife Becky Johnson live near Pittsboro, N.C., with their cats Moosehead and Del McPurry.*

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