

First cousins Joe and Odell Thompson spend an all too humid spring afternoon rehearsing the banjo and fiddle music their fathers played. The rhythmic drive of the traditional dance music fills the front room of Odell's farm house in western Orange County north of Mebane, N.C., an aging town off I-85 between Greensboro and Durham. Both Joe's fiddle and Odell's five-string banjo handle rhythmic and melodic chores producing a symbiotic sound square and flatfoot dancers cannot resist.

"We got all that stuff from our daddies," says Odell, who at 79 still works as a small engine mechanic.

"About 90% of it, that's the way I see it. We learned most of it from people, our parents," agrees Joe, 72, who has learned that his grandfather played music and set up regimented practice times for his sons. "They'd play all the time, sometimes until four o'clock in the morning. They stayed gone, but them dudes could play some music."

"That's old stuff originated way back in the seventeens and eighteens," adds Odell. "All of the musicians gone out now but for he and myself and he's got a brother up in Philadelphia . . ."

"A very good banjo player, Nate. It's come from granddaddy to daddy and down to us and we ain't got nobody else to follow us up," Joe says, perched straightbacked with fiddle and bow in hand on the front edge of his chair. He feels only Stephen Wade, whose one-man-show *Banjo Dancing* ran for a decade in Washington, D.C., has absorbed their style. "He says he got more from us than anybody. He says his basis, his roots stuff was founded mostly from us."

Often the case for all sorts of traditional folk artists and craftspeople, that lack of young disciples proves doubly sad for the Thompsons since they represent some of the last practitioners of African-American string band music. The fusion of African rhythmic ideas and the banjo with the European fiddle and dance music created a powerful music played by both races that provides the roots of country, bluegrass and folk music. When the other great American musical stream, the blues, began to sweep through black America in the early 20th century however, the twilight began for the Thompsons' old-time music. Radio, juke boxes, TV and social and musical change would devastate black traditional music even more completely than it did white.

"In the early forties, that's when it commenced to fading away. You

## THE MARROW OF TRADITION



## JOE and ODELL THOMPSON

know when the rock 'n' roll come out, that's what slowed it up," Joe explains.

"Back there when we came out of the service he and I, for twenty years, didn't pick up anything to play because they had juke boxes and piccolos and things. Drop a nickel in the piccolo and you had your music. Push a button, you had your music. We were on the young side back then, so we didn't think about no music," Odell says. "I wish we had kept it up . . . That's how it goes."

When Odell played, he picked blues on the guitar. "I done got tired of the guitar. It give me the blues, you know. When you go to getting the blues all the time, I said, 'That's enough.' If the blues ever get you, the blues is the blues. You can't throw them off, you can't walk them off, you can't talk them off. Since I started playing the banjo, I can play the banjo

and be feeling good, so I just like the banjo the best now."

Joe and Odell's family music may have remained quiet had not Kip Lornell, then a folklore grad student at the University of North Carolina, come across them during the mid-1970s. "I have to give him the credit for what little we do now. He came down through here and talked us into wanting to play. He came through seeking this old-time music, trying to find the people that play that old-time music," says Odell.

Soon other folklorists and musicians, including Stephen Wade and Red Clay Rambler Tommy Thompson, followed, as did calls from folk music presenters. During the 1980s the Thompsons, sometimes accompanied by veteran Durham bluesman John

By Art Menius



Dee Hollman, performed at such high profile events as Merle Watson Memorial Festival in Wilkesboro, N.C., Washington, D.C.'s, Festival Of American Folklife, Washington State's Festival of American Fiddle Tunes, the University of Chicago Folk Festival, the Tennessee Banjo Institute, the National Folk Festival in Lowell, Mass., and Durham's Festival for the Eno. They appeared in the North Carolina Center for Public Television's "Step It Up And Go" documentary and on the debut episode of its *Great American Music Shop* in 1991 with Louisiana

French music superstar Michael Doucet.

New York City's world beat oriented Global Village label released their "Old Time Music From The North Carolina Piedmont" as a cassette tape in 1989. The Thompsons' return to music coincided nicely with a revival of interest in African-American old-time music. Global Village has released two further collections of other black string bands and country singers, while Rounder Records issued a compact disc entitled "Altamont: Black Stringband Music," featuring

1940s field recordings assembled by Bob Carlin. The Thompsons earned a cover story in the *Old-Time Herald* as well as favorable reviews for the tape there and in *Bluegrass Unlimited*.

On that steamy afternoon the cousins' practiced for their performance as 1991 recipients of North Carolina Folk Heritage Awards during a public ceremony at Raleigh's Archives and History Building Auditorium. In 1989 the Folklife Section of the North Carolina Arts Council began honoring those, like the Thompsons, who have kept family traditions vital parts of their lives.

"Both the events previous to this have been very emotional," reports Wayne Martin, a fiddler and folklorist with the N.C. Arts Council's Folklife Section. "These are lifetime achievement awards for those people who have labored, in some cases, for seventy, eighty years, who have become masters. This is the way the state recognizes their accomplishments.

"Joe and Odell are it for African-American string band traditions," Martin continues. "While there are people here and there who still play, Joe and Odell still play with such drive and such force. They still have the ability to play square dances for 300 dancers. Theirs is still really powerful music, which is not something you find elsewhere in this tradition. It's alive with them."

The strength of the Thompsons' sound today derives from learning to play functional dance music with a definite social purpose. By the time Joe was but seven, he and his cousin regularly accompanied their fathers at dances that circulated throughout houses in the community, homes similar to those Joe and Odell occupy today. Hosts would clear a couple of rooms of furniture for dancing and place the musicians in the connecting doorway.

"We used to go around and play for a lot of white folks at times. We'd go to their house and they'd have dances. Put you in the doorway and they'd be dancing in each room. They'd have a time back then, too," Odell remembers. Dance sets would often last a half hour or more. Not that the black musicians were treated as equals, however, even if their white neighbors considered them the best square dance band around. The few contemporary accounts suggest that their status at white dances was closer to servile than celebrity. "The caller would tell you what he wanted and we'd commence playing," explains Joe.

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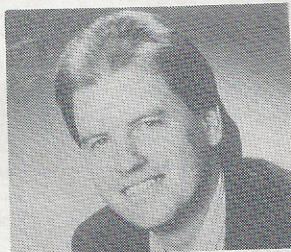
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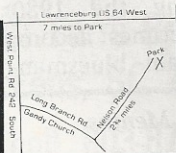
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Even today, the Thompsons encounter occasional resistance in Caucasian square dance circles. "We were in Seattle, Washington, in 1986," Joe says "and they would dance 200 or 300 at a time.

We were supposed to play Wednesday night, but a couple of them were scared to put us out there. We were supposed to come out there Thursday night. Didn't do it. Friday night the man says they got to go. Put me and Dell out there and the Horseflies was helping us. We played the first one and they had a fit. The caller says, 'That's the best we've had tonight!' Man, those people was jumping that high. They didn't want to stop."

The Thompsons recall only a handful of white pickers, mostly neighbors, with whom they played music in the old days. And while they believe their fathers learned music from whites, the same held true for them. "They played for white people. They didn't play with 'em; they played for them," Odell explains. "We all played for them, way back then, a whole lot of times.

"Long about that time, we'd have some guitar players, too," he recalls. "I used to play a guitar back then. We'd play blues as the evening would go along, too. They'd get tired of one thing, we'd get on the guitar and play that for a while." A few blues learned outside their family circle, such as "Careless Love" and "Sittin' On Top Of The World," punctuate their performances and recordings today. Their repertoire also includes songs and tunes such as "Old Joe Clark," "Black-Eyed Daisy" and "John Henry" common to both black and white traditional musicians, a few sacred pieces including "Lights In The Valley" added after their return to playing and rare pieces from their parents' playing found only among Piedmont musicians. The latter include "Donna's Got A Rambling Mind," "Old Corn Liquor" and "Pumpkin Pie."

Like most musicians who learned in the true folk fashion, the Thompsons absorbed tunes and tunings, not music theory, learning to play from the heart not the head. "I don't know what key this is. I don't know A from G," confesses Joe, retired from 38 years at White Furniture in Mebane, but still active as a landscaper. "I notice people who play from notes, all their tunes sound just alike."

Although the Thompsons never attended music school, they made it to Carnegie Hall in November of 1990 as

part of its Masters Of Folk Tradition concert series. "We had been well, well advertised and the place was full," Joe describes it, "balcony and all . . . They talked about us a minute or two before we went in. 'Joe and Odell Thompson from North Carolina, the Piedmont/Chapel Hill area.' That's what I remember they said. Oh, man, they applauded, too. We walked in they were still applauding. That's one time I felt I had to pull myself together. I just went in like I didn't see nobody. I just acted like there wasn't nobody there. We pulled the first tune and that just set the hair all over. We played that 'Black Annie.' We hit it. Whenever you go in on a stage like that, the first thing you do is drop a hot one on 'em. And then you can tell what you're going to do . . . We had a good stage show that night."



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## *Obituary*

**Mr. Walter Odell Thompson** of 3612 Mt. Zion Church Road, Mebane, N. C., departed this life in North Wilkesboro, N. C. on April 28, 1994. He was the son of the late Walter Eugene Thompson and the late Mary Susan I. Crisp Thompson. Mr. Thompson was born in Orange County, North Carolina on August 9, 1911. Mr. Thompson was married to Mrs. Sue Ann Smith Thompson.

Mr. Thompson was a member of the Prince Hall Masonic Lodge and the American Legion. He was a veteran of World War II.

He leaves to cherish his wonderful memories: his wife, Mrs. Sue Ann Thompson of the home; 1 daughter, Mrs. Betty Lou Jeffries of Montclair, N. J.; a foster son, Mr. Samuel Dee Crisp of Newark, Ohio; 4 stepsons, Mr. Frank Walker of Chester, Pa.; Mr. Lacy Crisp of Baltimore, MD, Mr. Galvin Crisp of Fort Dix, N. J., and Mr. James L. Smith of Rowland, N. C.; 4 stepdaughters, Mrs. Bernice Aiken of Baltimore, MD, Mrs. Ossie Ruth Beasley of Greensboro, N. C., Mrs. Mary Kelly of Philadelphia, PA, and Mrs. Shirley Bailey of Seattle, Washington; 1 brother, Mr. Archie Howard Thompson of Mebane; 3 sisters, Mrs. Thelma Mayo of Hillsborough, N. C., Mrs. Mary Mozelle Dickey of Mebane and Mrs. Lillian Mae Jeffries of Chicago, IL; 4 grandchildren, 39 step grandchildren, 4 great grandchildren and 39 step great grandchildren; 5 great-great grandchildren, 21 nieces, 5 nephews, and a host of other relatives and friends.

*Sometimes it's hard to understand  
Why some things have to be;  
But in His wisdom, God has planned  
Beyond our power to see.  
So looking back in tenderness  
Along the paths we've trod  
We cherish the years we had with you  
And leave the rest to God.*

*The Family*

# Order of Service

PROCESSIONAL .....Please Stand

HYMN.....Choir

SCRIPTURE

PRAYER

HYMN.....Choir

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

SELECTIONS .....The Badgett Sisters

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HYMN

RECESSIONAL

COMMITTAL/INTERMENT .....White Level Cemetery  
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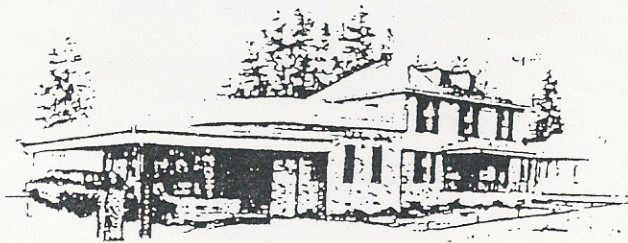
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*Acknowledgement*

The Walter Odell Thompson Family, with sincere appreciation, acknowledges your prayers, love and sympathy which exceed all measures. May God bless each of you.



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