

The marrow of tradition

BY ART MENIUS

It's an all too humid spring afternoon, and cousins Joe and Odell Thompson rehearse the banjo and fiddle music their fathers played. The rhythmic drive of the dance music fills the front room of Odell's farm house in western Orange County north of Mebane. Both Joe's fiddle and Odell's five-string banjo handle rhythmic and melodic chores to produce a symbiotic sound that 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 percent of it, that's they way I see it," agrees Joe, 72. "They'd play all the time, sometimes until 4 o'clock in the morning... Them dudes could play some music."

The Thompsons 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 that provides the roots of country, bluegrass and folk. When the other great American musical stream, the blues, began to sweep through black America in the early 20th century, however, twilight began for the Thompsons' old-time music. Radio, juke boxes, TV and social and musical change devastated black traditional music even more than it did white.

"In the early '40s, that's when it commenced to fading away. You know when the rock 'n' roll come out, that's what slowed it up," Joe explains.

"He and I for 20 years didn't pick up anything to play because they had juke boxes and piccolos and things," Odell says. "Drop a nickel in the piccolo, and you had your music. Push a button, you had your music."

Joe and Odell's family music may have remained quiet had not Kip Lornell, then a UNC folklore grad student, come across them during the mid-1970s. Soon other folklorists and musicians followed, as did calls for folk music presenters. As a result, during the 1980s the Thompsons performed at profile folk music

events throughout the country. They appeared in the UNC Public TV documentary *Step It Up And Go*, and in 1989 world-beat Global Village label released their *Old Time Music From the North Carolina Piedmont* as a cassette tape.

This Thursday, April 25, the cousins' career reaches another milestone when they receive one of this year's N.C. Folk Heritage Awards at Raleigh's Archives and History Building. The Thompsons will perform along with fellow recipients Clay Smathers, a shape-note singer from Canton, and Global Village labelmates the Menhaden Chanteymen of Beaufort. The awards recognize people who've mastered traditional arts and crafts.

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"Joe and Odell are it for African-American string band traditions," says Wayne Martin, fiddler and folklorist with the N.C. Arts Council's Folklife Section. "While there are people here and there who still play, Joe and Odell still play with such drive and such force... It's alive with them."

The strength of the Thompsons' sound derives from learning to play dance music with a definite social purpose. By the time Joe was 7, he and his cousin regularly accompanied their fathers at dances in homes in the community.

"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.

Not that the black musicians were treated as equals, however, even if their white neighbors considered them the best square-dance band around. "The caller would tell you what he wanted, and we'd commence playing," says Joe.

Even today, the Thompsons encounter occasional resistance in white square-dance circles. In Seattle in 1986, for example: "We were supposed to play Wednesday night, but a couple of them were scared to put us out there," Joe says. "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, "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."

When the dancers needed a break from the lengthy sets, Odell and other guitarists would play the blues. 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" and "Black-Eyed Daisy" common to both black and white traditional musicians, a few sacred pieces including "Lights in the Valley," and rare pieces from their parents' playing found only among black or 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. "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 last November as part of its Masters of Folk Tradition concert series. "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." ■

PREVIEW: BETTY CARTER

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