

Finding The Roses Among The Brambles

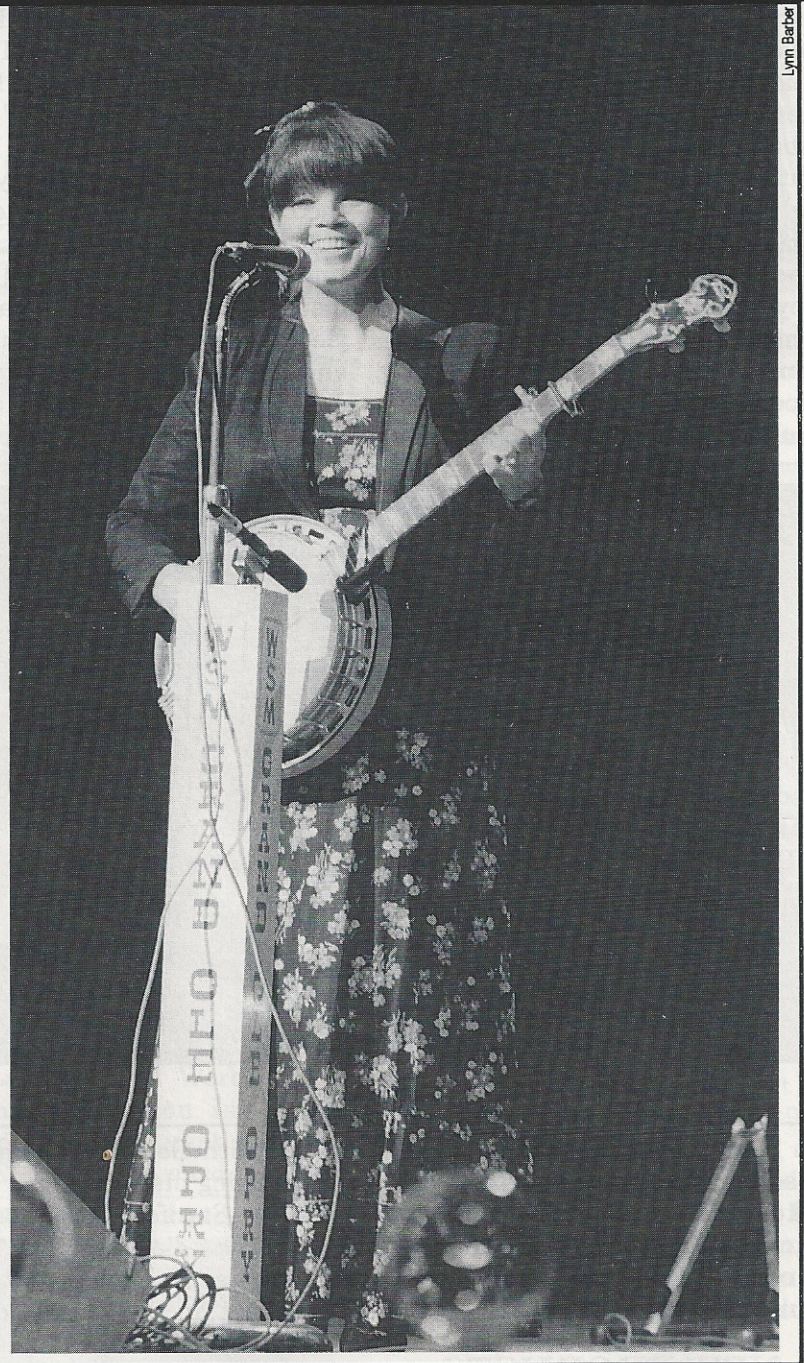
A pair of galvanizing incidents—one involving a song, the other a clown—happened in two western college towns several years and several hundred miles apart. Perhaps random and unrelated, they set forces in motion that lead to the creation of one of the 1990s dominant bluegrass bands, the composition of at least two of the most popular bluegrass songs of the past decade, and eventually, an enduring romance that successfully mixes business and pleasure.

The beginning of the 1980s found lanky Marshall Wilborn living in his home town of Austin, Tex. Drawn to the banjo by the Kingston Trio and to bluegrass by Flatt and Scruggs on the *Beverly Hillbillies*, he was a 5-string player forced to take up bass because that's what his band needed. He did not know that soon he would leave Austin to play with Whetstone Run, Jimmy Martin, and the Johnson Mountain Boys, nor that he would soon meet the woman he would marry and with whom he would found the Lynn Morris Band. Wilborn did know that he loved to sing and remained fascinated by the words to songs and the writers who had made up the lyrics "that are so poignant and paint pictures to me."

"The songs that I liked so much that came from a number of different writers made me think what a wonderful thing it would be to make up songs that had some story to tell," Wilborn says. "Then when I started to play music more and went to some festivals in Texas and Oklahoma, it seemed that so many people were doing the same wonderful old songs that I love over and over again. I didn't feel like I could add anything to those songs that hadn't already been done. I didn't have a lot of tapes and records to draw songs from as far as suggesting material to the band. I don't remember a conscious decision to start writing songs, but all of that contributed to my wanting to write some."

By Art Menius

Then as now Wilborn's songs, which have included the hits "Goodbye To The Blues" for the Johnson Mountain Boys and "Heartstrings" by Alison Krauss and Union Station, came from his life, not from eight hours a day with a guitar, a pot of coffee, and a notepad. "I'm no good at perspirational writing. I keep



THE LYNN MORRIS BAND

thinking that I'm going to change this and be able to tap into learning the craft, but thus far the songs that I feel best about are the ones that were very spontaneous. At various times in my life when I have been preoccupied with one thing or another that I was trying to come to terms with, those are the times that I have been able more easily to come up with songs."

Wilborn wrote songs, and the day arrived when Doyle Lawson had recorded one of Marshall's pieces for "Quicksilver Rides Again" (Sugar Hill SH-3727). "Doyle sent me a tape of their a recording of 'Mountain Girl,' and it just really, really was a thrill. Not only did it sound so good, but it really thrilled me that a great band took my song. There's nothing like the experience of hearing something I wrote done by somebody else." That album appeared in 1982 giving Wilborn his first taste of bluegrass notoriety. "It's the same with Alison [Krauss]. I've been really tickled with their recording of 'Heartstrings.' It got an award for the number one video of the year for independent record labels." Little did he know that the changes would be rapid and that the hardest days and the best lay ahead.

Lynn Morris had grown up in the small town of Lamesa, Tex., a hour from Lubbock and a full day's drive west of Austin. Although hers was not a musical family, a childhood on horseback included a love for the sounds she heard on the radio. "I was a big Johnny Cash fan, a Dolly Parton fan, a Merle Haggard fan, and I loved the Chuck Wagon Gang. There was a lot of good country music on the radio, but no bluegrass at all."

She began playing guitar at age 12 and soon commuted to Lubbock for lessons with Buddy Holly's guitar teacher. "When I was 16, I went off to boarding school for two years in Colorado—in Colorado Springs. I stayed on there for four years of college and was graduated with a degree in art from Colorado College. The late '60s were a pretty exciting time to have been in school. It was an amazing change from West Texas," says Morris.

"That's where I heard bluegrass for the first time: the Twenty String Bluegrass Band, which was the band that Mary Stribling and Charles Sawtelle were in. The banjo player played a lot like Doug Dillard, and I got really fired up about that. I was seriously studying classical guitar from jazz guitarist Johnny Smith, and I was completely eaten up with guitar. But when I heard the banjo everything changed. My sister had an old banjo that she had tried to learn when she was in school, so I brought it back from Texas and took a few lessons and got a start."

In college Lynn became half of a folk duo with David Sullivan that dared to name themselves Dave Seed

would be perfect. What we didn't know, was he was prone to stage fright, and to settle his nerves he got really drunk. We got to the school about an hour late, and the place was in pandemonium! The substitute Ronald found an old bucket of mop water and threw it on the kids. That caused a riot. The principal was shouting, 'Run, run. Get out the back way!' We climbed out a window, and the kiddies were running after us throwing rocks. We jumped in the van and made a getaway like in the movies ... That was our last job for McDonald's; they fired us on the spot.

Obsessed with the 5-string and realizing that rock-throwing children seldom chase bluegrass bands, Morris



City Limits, L-R: Lynn, Pat Rossiter and Mary Stribling

and Lynn Seed. "A college chum of ours in the Theatre Department had a job dressing up in the Ronald McDonald outfit, going down to the hamburger stands entertaining the kids, and he persuaded McDonald's to hire us as well. So we became a 'brother and sister' team and accompanied this Ronald McDonald character on a one minute spot on the local TV station each week. That was my very first [musical] job. They paid us \$10 a session. We had these jobs where we'd go out to entertain the kiddies for an hour—and those paid \$10 apiece, too!

"One day we had a job playing for a school carnival," she recalls. "Our friend who dressed up as Ronald couldn't make the show. We scrounged up someone else we knew at the last minute, a zany guy who we thought

was ready for the serious pursuit of bluegrass. She took her art degree in 1972 and headed for Denver. "I had made friends with Mary Stribling from performances by the Twenty String Bluegrass Band in Colorado Springs," Morris reports. "As soon as I was out of school I moved to Denver, and Mary and I became good friends and started the City Limits Bluegrass Band, which was a bluegrass trio that we had together for six years. The third member of the group was Pat Rossiter. He was a real energetic guitar player. Mary was a great bass player and had a real offbeat, dry sense of humor. We developed quite a good following for six years, '72 to '78. It was a good learning experience."

Biscuit City Records released two albums by the City Limits Bluegrass Band during the mid-1970s: "Hello

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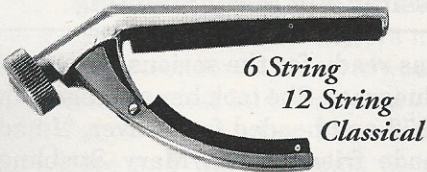
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City Limits" (Biscuit City 1305) and "Live At The Oxford Hotel" (Biscuit City 1309). As odd as it seems now that Lynn Morris has become established as one of bluegrass music's most distinctive vocalists and won SPBGMA's Female Vocalist of the Year (Traditional) in 1993, the *Bluegrass Unlimited* reviews of both LPs had harsh words for the "thin" singing.

Even more ironically, Morris did not consider herself much of singer either at that time. "I didn't know any singers or musicians growing up. It wasn't something I was ever encouraged to do. To me a singer was someone on TV singing the latest pop hit. That's just not me. I could never imagine that I would be a singer someday. I just knew that I really wanted to play guitar and I really wanted to play banjo. I never would have become a singer at all if it weren't for the fact that City Limits only had three members and for three part harmony we all had to sing.

"It was really quite a long time after City Limits before I really became connected with what lead singing is all about. Some voice lessons helped straighten out some bad habits. Everything I've done has been a little late coming on, but if you're not raised with bluegrass as your environment then you kind of start from scratch all over again. There's a lot to unlearn before you get on the right track, and it takes years to catch up. Better late than never, though."

And that, raises a crucial point about the success of Lynn, Marshall, and the Lynn Morris Band. They are the ultimate outsiders who became insiders through intelligence, perseverance, and sheer hard work. Neither Wilborn nor Morris grew up surrounded by bluegrass or with Jimmy Martin as a second cousin. Although the Wilborns would sing together as a family, neither experienced gathering around the community radio to listen to the Grand Ole Opry on Saturday nights, hearing Reno and Smiley at a drive-in movie theatre, or pushing back the furniture for a house party with local musicians keeping the dancers going all night. As a woman from a non-musical family, Lynn experienced a

double, if not triple, dose of outsidersness. Yet none of this has stopped them from signing with Rounder Records and Keith Case & Associates and reaching the top of the bluegrass charts in August 1992, when the Lynn Morris Band's second Rounder CD, "The Bramble & The Rose," achieved number one in *Bluegrass Unlimited's* monthly Top 10 Bluegrass Albums in the National Bluegrass Survey.

A lot of this has happened for Lynn and Marshall because they realize their strengths and run with the winning hand. Twenty years ago banjo picking, not singing, was Morris' strong suit. "I listened when I was first starting out to Earl Scruggs and Doug Dillard. I had a couple of Scruggs records and a couple of Dillards records, but I didn't have anything else. That was it for some time."

Her record library may have been small, but her banjo contest trophy cabinet expanded rapidly. In 1974 Morris won the banjo championship at Winfield and seven years later took the title a second time. That feat stood unmatched for more than a decade until duplicated recently by Tony Furtado.

"Contest playing came real naturally," she says. "I won most of the contests I entered. Band playing posed the real challenge. For one thing, playing while you're singing is just one of the most difficult things. To hold a steady strong roll and sing at the same time is close to impossible. I have to concentrate on my singing and put the banjo playing on automatic pilot. Ron Block turned me on to practicing with cassette tapes of rhythm tracks, and I practice singing and playing along with them. It's a huge, huge help."

With the end of City Limits, Morris joined, as rhythm guitarist and token female, a country band which made two USO tours and gave her an initial taste of band leadership. "For the first tour I was hired just to go along because they had to have a female to do the USO tours. I put together another version of that band and did a second USO tour. Some folks may have heard of Junior Brown who was in that second band...It was a pretty neat combination of rockabilly and traditional, old style country." Little

Smoke also gave Lynn her fill of that style: "Bluegrass has so more much room for individual achievement and expression, at least for me."

Finally Morris got her first opportunity to head east in 1981. "I went to Winston-Salem [North Carolina] and played guitar with the Cherokee Rose band, replacing ["Steel Rails" composer] Louisa Branscomb. For several different reasons, one of which was my father fell and broke his back, I headed home and left the band. But during the three months I was there I was rooming at Craig Smith's house. What an incredible musician he is. That was like going back to school for

currently leads Northwest Territory. In 1985 Chris Jones, a future Lynn Morris Band member, would join the group.

"Pete Wernick, who was of invaluable help in starting the Lynn Morris Band, introduced me to Whetstone Run via the telephone, and I ended up spending four years in that band," Lynn points out.

Fate intervened, however, before she reached State College. "On my way to join that band, I stopped in San Antonio to visit my younger sister. I was invited to a jam session over in Austin. At that jam session at a little club on Sixth Avenue I met

in was Whetstone Run. I was offered the job not sight unseen, but music unplayed, unheard. I just packed up my car and went up there and did it."

Joining a full-time, professional unit brought a genuine change in attitude toward the bass for Wilborn. "It wasn't until I joined Whetstone Run that I started to feel really challenged by the bass. Now I've gotten to where I feel more at home with it than I ever did with the banjo. I'm glad it worked out the way it did. I just love playing the bass.

"We were right in the same town where Penn State is and after awhile in the band I got to feeling that I needed some coaching. So I just called the Music Department and found this fellow who gave me some lessons for a while. He suggested some exercises that helped me strengthen my left hand especially. I did that for about a year."

Marshall, who practices bass first thing every morning at home, rattles off a litany of stand-up and electric players he especially admires including the late Ed Ferris, George Shuffler, Roger Bush, and Jake Tullock, and younger artists Travis Lewis, Mark Schatz, Missy Raines, Nick Forster, Larry Cohen, and Barry Bales. His greatest admiration falls upon the late "Junior Huskey, and Junior's son Roy, who's really prominent now. I don't feel like I play like Junior Huskey or Roy, but I guess more than any others it's their sound and what they played that I liked best. It's that kind of bass playing that makes sense to me, and I'm most excited about. I just try to keep time. That's my first and last priority with my playing and I try to play in tune, too. My first ambition is to be the best timekeeper I humanly can be."

The move East to join Whetstone Run not only improved Wilborn's artistry, it got him noticed in the business as a bassman. As Whetstone Run unraveled during the first half of 1986, a job offer came, followed by a big surprise. As Morris recounts events, "Marshall had a really exciting opportunity, something he was very excited about, and I was excited for him. We had gotten to be friends with Chris Warner. Marshall was offered a job with Jimmy Martin



Whetstone Run, L-R: Chris Jones, Lee Olson, Lynn and Marshall Wilborn

me, because playing the music and discussing the music, and staying up late at night listening to musicians just went on non-stop there. It was that experience definitely that made me want to come back East to play music."

She spent the next year back home in West Texas, but her thoughts remained focused on bluegrass. Every love story has to have its simple twist of fate. Lynn and Marshall's came when she got the opportunity to join the State College, Pa.-based band, Whetstone Run in 1982. At that time the group's members included Lee Olsen, now of the Lynn Morris Band's Nashville booking agency, Keith Case & Associates, and Mike Gorrell, who

Marshall on stage. He was playing bass right behind me.

"Marshall and I hung out for a couple of days and got to be really good friends. We stayed in touch via mail and telephone after I left for Pennsylvania. Marshall decided to come see me after a couple of months. He flew up to Pennsylvania and stayed up there for a week and traveled around with the band. Coincidentally, the bass player in Whetstone Run gave his notice during the week that Marshall was up there. We offered Marshall the job. He moved to Pennsylvania and stayed with the band about 3½ years."

Marshall notes that "The first traveling, touring, working band I played

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through Chris Warner. Marshall played out his notice in Whetstone Run and was working with Jimmy Martin for a couple of months. Marshall and I were getting ready to move to Nashville so that Marshall could travel with Jimmy more easily. We were just a week away from going down there to look for a place to stay, when the Johnson Mountain Boys needed a fill-in bass player. Marshall went to a gig or two with them that weekend, and they offered him a full-time job."

Instead of going to Music City, Morris says, "We looked all around Washington, D.C. for a place to live. Nobody wanted to rent to musicians." Eventually Lynn and Marshall took David McLaughlin's advice and settled in Winchester, Va., where they still make their home. McLaughlin, in fact, sold them their current house during his period as a real estate agent.

Marshall played bass with the Johnson Mountain Boys from June of 1986 through the grueling Asian tour that followed their official "final" gig in Lucketts, Va., on February 20, 1988. After sharing the bass duties with the late Ed Ferris on "Let The Whole World Talk" (Rounder 0225), which includes "Goodbye To The Blues," he played bass and sang on "Requests" (Rounder 0246) and "At The Old Schoolhouse" (Rounder 0260/0261).

Morris, meanwhile, mostly put her musical career in mothballs after Whetstone Run. During 1987 she filled in on banjo with Laurie Lewis and Grant Street. In yet another ironic turn, that put her in a seat occupied at times by both mentor Craig Smith and Tony Furtado.

"I didn't play much during those two years he was with the Johnson Mountain Boys," Lynn acknowledges. "I would go out to the shows to watch Marshall play, and people would invariably come up to me and say, 'How come you're not up there?' How could I even begin to explain?"

A twist of history had provided a female Blue Grass Boy in the early days of bluegrass music when Sally Forrester took her WWII-bound husband's place in Bill Monroe's band. Quickly women in bluegrass music encountered a role that encompassed little more than standing in back of the boys to play the bass.

"These kinds of attitudes towards women change slowly, and there will always be men who prefer not to work with women as equals or as band leaders," explains Morris, the first woman ever elected by the membership to the board of directors of the International Bluegrass Music Association. "In any predominantly male profession, a woman has to earn male approval to get started. I never objected to that, and I naively assumed that if I proved myself worthy enough I'd eventually be accepted in a top group. But after being denied auditions in a few all-male configurations, I began to realize that waiting to join an established all-male group was probably going to cost me my career. So there was a couple of years there where I didn't play very much. It was a difficult time."

Lynn would learn of even more roadblocks for women in our music once she joined the exclusive club of bluegrass band leaders, an outfit that for years accepted only Wilma Lee Cooper into full membership. The steps that lead to the formation of the Lynn Morris Band began even before the Johnson Mountain Boys' final full-time days through the winter of 1987-88.

"Actually before that trip, when the JMB had decided to disband, I think Lynn and I both had it in the backs of our minds to play music together again at some point," says Marshall. "We started talking about getting a band together right after those guys decided to stop touring... Before the JMB had stopped playing, we started getting together with Tom [Adams] doing some picking around the house. Finally we asked Tom if he'd be interested in helping us start a new band. We really started working on songs in January [1988] before the JMB trip to Asia in February and March. As soon as we got back from that Asia trip, we started working on stuff and played a private party that summer, and played at Gettysburg [Pa.] in September, '88. That was the first Lynn Morris Band festival date."

"And the second was the IBMA showcase!" Lynn interjects.

That Owensboro performance, with Sunny Mountain Boy Audie Blaylock on mandolin, gained the young group several gigs and, eventually, a recording contract with Rounder Records.

The Lynn Morris Band, despite months of preparation, had a long way to go as far as defining itself as a band musically and structurally.

"It had been obvious to me for some time that what Marshall and I could do the best didn't fall definitely into the categories of things other bands were doing," explains Lynn. "So there was little, if any, chance that it was going to sound like anybody else. Marshall and Tom and I really loved the old country music—Buck Owens, George Jones—some of the bands in country music that were really great bands. With that kind of influence and a real strong love for traditional bluegrass in common, even though that's not what either Marshall and I really sound like, we started our band with great optimism. But it was unsettling in a way to have no direction to follow. We had no idea what the reaction to the first album we put together would be. Nothing was involved in it more than trying to find out what we could do best."

The Lynn Morris Band (Rounder 0276) may have lacked conscious direction, yet in retrospect the 1990 release demonstrates the great strengths and clear patterns of the unit. Two distinctive lead singers in Morris and Wilborn assured a pleasing variety. The instruments focused on supporting the vocals, not grabbing attention for themselves, and completely unmistakable emotional commitment to each selection.

By now we take the full scale emotional involvement and careful choice of material as hallmarks of the Lynn Morris Band, as that which makes the group stand apart as a major bluegrass force. Those engaging characteristics, however, derive from Lynn and Marshall turning their liabilities into their strengths.

"I feel like there are so few songs that I can sing personally from the heart," says Morris. "I listen to at least a hundred songs that people send before I find one that I can connect to enough emotionally that I want to sing it. It would be so much easier if I could just write them. It's really tough. For one thing so many of the older songs which I would really like to sing are just so at odds with my own personal philosophy and way of life. I just don't like to sing victim songs or songs com-

pletely from the male perspective, especially when it's a male perspective that offers damaging prejudice against women. If a song reflects that I won't sing it. There are wonderful old songs that are signs of the times, and it's not all bad to reflect on the thinking of that time...I just don't want to sing that kind of song.

"What Marshall and I do will probably never be completely in or out of style. I really don't like trendy things. I think we're kind of old school and old fashioned in a lot of ways. To me a song has to have some timeless quality to it. I stay away from political topics. Politics and religions are two things that I have very strong feelings about, but I try not to bring them into the music. There are plenty of other things to sing about. It's true we really don't do much gospel material, although I know that many fans really love the hymns and gospel singing. We've never had a strong four part harmony vocal lineup, so we don't really try to compete with the bands who do.

"It's not everybody who's going to connect with what we do, but hopefully some of the music some of the time will be connecting on some level. It's a real commitment for us not to present music that doesn't have something to say."

The Lynn Morris Band gained assurance that they were presenting the right message when songs off their eponymous debut album surged up the *Bluegrass Unlimited* National Bluegrass Survey of radio airplay. Buck Owens' "My Heart Skips A Beat" and "You'll Get No More Of Me" by Hazel Dickens debuted on the second chart in the June 1990 issue. By September "The Lynn Morris Band" had an astounding five selections among the top 22! During both October and November of 1990 "Skips A Beat," "No More," and Bob McGill's "Come Early Morning" all ranked among the top eight.

Morris projects a matter of fact attitude about her band's success. "There's nothing like being in the business about 20 years to make you appreciate a little success when it happens for the first time...We were asked to perform on the Grand Ole Opry back in October and actually received an encore. I can't tell you how much that meant."

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"But we've had a whole platoon of mandolin players," Marshall confesses. "We kept thinking just next week or next month or any day now, we were going to find the mandolin player. I remember thinking in '88 it would just be a couple of months to find a great mandolin player."

"When you're a brand new band and you don't have any work, it's hard to attract someone of the caliber we wanted," says Morris. "We lined up several excellent part-time mandolin players who learned our mate-

rial. Certain songs would be a little stronger with one or the other. It was not the usual way to do it, but when you don't have the usual way as an option, you just do it some other way."

Morris' career took on yet another aspect when elected to serve on the board of directors of IBMA in 1991. "Being on the board has changed my perception of IBMA and of what a good board member should be. Fortunately there have been some fine examples on the board to learn from...I hadn't realized the tremendous

amount of work that has to be done in an organization like IBMA. It's only possible because of the vision and dedication of the individuals serving on that board and serving the bluegrass industry. We have a lot at stake in seeing the bluegrass industry thrive. I don't have any doubts that everyone on that board wants to keep bluegrass going in a healthy direction. If people could sit in on a board meeting they'd come away with considerable respect for how IBMA is run."

The Lynn Morris Band, meanwhile, pressed on through 1991 with Blaylock, Barry Mitterhoff, and David McLaughlin filling in at different times on mandolin. Credits to the contrary, McLaughlin joined fellow JMB alumni Wilborn and Adams, guest fiddler Stuart Duncan from the Nashville Bluegrass Band, and Morris to record "The Bramble & The Rose" (Rounder 0288), released on January 15, 1992.

Featuring a similarly effective mix of material as the first release, "The Bramble & The Rose" achieved even more spectacular heights on the *Bluegrass Unlimited* survey. The compact disc itself enjoyed nine solid months on the Top Ten Bluegrass Albums chart, spending the month of August 1992 in the number one slot. Two months later the title cut reached the top of the song chart, its high spot of an entire year run in the survey.

Then, as happens more often than not, the other shoe fell. The rejuvenation of the Johnson Mountain Boys enticed Tom Adams to leave the Lynn Morris Band and restricted the ability of McLaughlin to fill in. "I didn't expect the incredible ups and downs in this business," Lynn states in her typical matter-of-fact way. "But that's come to be a pattern and after a while you learn that even the most demoralizing and discouraging situations give way to better times if you just don't give up."

Adams' departure forced Morris herself to replace one of her favorite 5-string players. "I hadn't played banjo full-time in about five years at that point, and it was unbelievably hard to try to get my chops back. Tom Adams is a textbook example of appropriate banjo playing. He taught

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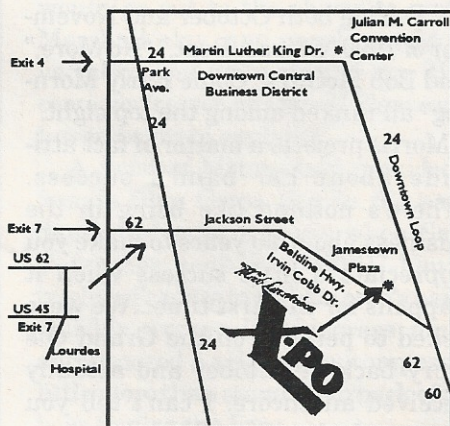
Lewis Family



Bill Grant & Delia Bell

Saturday

12:00 Silver Valley Boys
12:45 Ed Allison & Tenn. Grass
1:30 Bill Grant & Delia Bell
2:15 Bluegrass Cardinals
3:00 Earl Bull & Dusty Valley
3:45 Gillis Brothers
4:30 To Be Announced
5:15 Cloggers
5:30 Supper Break
Saturday Night
6:00 Ed Allison & Tenn. Grass
6:45 Silver Valley Boys
7:30 Earl Bull & Dusty Valley
8:15 Bill Grant & Delia Bell
9:00 Bluegrass Cardinals
9:45 Gillis Brothers
10:30 To Be Announced
11:30 Jam Session On Stage



me so much without ever saying a word about what works and what doesn't. He's always thinking about what's going on with the singing. A lot of what we do is real vocal oriented. We're not a flashy instrumental band. I just try to keep it solid, keep it driving, keep it happening, but not get in the way. I guess my playing is less flashy than it used to be, and that's by conscious effort."

Unlike most players, Lynn switches between Scruggs style and clawhammer banjo depending on the material. "It's difficult to construct a set timewise so things don't lag too much. It's also difficult physically to switch instruments."

The changes, however, went far beyond personnel for Morris. "Whereas I had been a fairly reluctant band leader in the beginning, I had to take charge. At that point I was doing all the road managing, all the booking, about half the lead singing, and starting to try to do all the banjo. It was a pretty heavy load. Doing a day job driving a limousine, too. Marshall was working a day job also."

In equally typical fashion Morris and Wilborn met the challenges head-on and sought resources to facilitate their growth. "The whole thing's been quite a challenge! Actually it's been a challenge unlike anything else, ever," Lynn says. "Musicianship skills are a whole different thing than leadership skills. I think that's what's been the biggest challenge of all. Not to say that music hasn't been enough of a challenge. A band leader has to be a problem solver. No matter what comes up, somebody has to solve it, and it's you. You're working with people who have feelings and to varying degrees need direction or encouragement. With everyone it's different."

"I have sought information from any source I can. The first thing we did was to join the Chamber of Commerce in Winchester and attend their small business forums. I started reading up on management. I read lots and lots of books on that kind of thing. I've taken seminars at our local college. And, of course, I've read Pete Wernick's great book [*How To Make A Band Work*].

"There's no school that teaches you how to be a band leader except, as corny as it sounds, the school of hard knocks. I'm sure I've made every mistake in the book. I certainly have learned that if you don't have the respect of your musicians, you don't have anything at all.

"It helps to realize that virtually all women in positions of management face certain built-in difficulties. For example, the very qualities that are most respected in a male leader are far less appreciated in a woman. Yet



Becky Johnson

The Lynn Morris Band, L-R: Bob Ickes, Lynn, Greg Luck and Marshall Wilborn

the job is the same. It's sort of a double standard that no one can really live up to: being a good woman and a good leader in the same package. Sometimes women overcompensate in their efforts to be taken seriously and it's always a delicate balance between too much and not enough. But it's not nearly the problem it used to be. I've grown in a lot of ways and that is step number one."

Even the delicious irony of having her husband playing bass poses certain problems. "That is step number two...as married individuals we have all sorts of challenges to work out," Lynn notes. "For one thing, Marshall provides the example the other guys look to. How should they react to my direction—they're looking at him. That puts a double burden on him.

It's a blessing for me, but it's probably the ultimate test of a relationship. I don't believe I could do this job, I don't believe this band would have ever existed or could continue to exist without Marshall.

"If you're the manager and the leader, what you do is on review 24 hours a day. And that's tough. But to also have your relationship on review can be especially difficult. We're all together, and you don't have any privacy on the road."

During 1991 the pressures on Lynn of touring, recording, working a day job, booking the band, managing the band, and a thousand and two other tasks built up to an overwhelming level. Signing with Keith Case and Associates and dropping regular non-musical work helped Morris refocus her energies. "In general terms, it has given a life back to me. The challenge of handling a relationship, handling the leadership role and learning the leadership role, and the learning of the music, and every other thing, and then handling on top of that the responsibility of having to call everybody in the world and follow-up and call and call and never let up and be on the road, too. It was killing me. Maybe it wasn't just a coincidence that I ended up having disc surgery and just physically breaking down totally for several months. It forced me to take a rest. Now the agent has the responsibility for making all those phone calls, following up on them and doing the paperwork and all that good stuff.

"Unfortunately, promoters don't always appreciate working with an agency. If they only knew what this agency is saving me in terms of peace of mind and my health, they might be more willing to deal with these agents when they call. The booking agent is the musician's best friend."

For an April and May 1992 tour of Europe, the group expanded to a five piece unit with old friend Chris Jones playing guitar and Tad Marks fiddling. During the winter, however, that line-up also fell apart. By the time festival season came around for 1993, the Lynn Morris Band had added two gifted and experienced young veterans drawn to Nashville from quite varied backgrounds. Play-

inguitar with the Lynn Morris Band, multi-instrumentalist Greg Luck has been a member of the Lost & Found, Bass Mountain Boys, Redwing, and Greg Corbett & the Backwoods Bluegrass. A Pinehurst, N.C., native, he rooms in Nashville with IIIrd Tyme Out's Wayne Benson. Dobroist Rob Ickes distinguished himself on a number of recording projects by bands mostly from the Bay Area of California before relocating to Franklin, Tenn., this past winter.

Lynn had met Ickes when he played with the Weary Hearts in 1987. "When Jesse Brock quit this January, Rob was available to work with us. It worked out fine. Rob's a great guy. He's got the desire for the pursuit of excellence in music and that makes him a joy to work with."

So Morris and Wilborn have resolved the nagging mandolin problem by eschewing the instrument altogether. This has caused certain readjustments for the bassman. "I've always felt like I really lean on the mandolin chop," says Marshall. "Any mandolin player that has a really pronounced, strong chop I really rely on. Rob does that same thing with his rhythm chop on the dobro. He's going for the same function. He has a really wonderful sense of time. He's mentioned that he does that with the mandolin chop in mind. I lean on that rhythm thing he does. It helps what I'm trying to do and relaxes what I'm trying to do. It takes some load off me. Greg's rhythm playing is real good, too.

"While I rely on the mandolin chop, it's the whole, absolutely every instrument and every voice, the whole thing is the rhythm section. When

that's happening, although I love to hear the mandolin chop, I don't have to have it when everybody is on the same wavelength. The better that rhythm business works together, the less you have to think about it. The better it works, the easier every single task in the band is."

Lynn is happy with the new configuration as well. "It's nice that Greg and Rob both are thinking rhythm and work at it with a great attitude."

With Luck and Ickes worked into the Lynn Morris Band, the group is putting a lot of serious effort into their stage presentation and entertainment skills. As always, Lynn and Marshall approach matters seriously with a focus on turning weaknesses into strengths. "Our reputation in bluegrass is still on the line every time we go on stage. One of the things we're trying to do these days is just stand closer and closer together on stage. Instead of straight out front all in an even line, we're trying to work in to more of a semi-circle arrangement and just get as close as we can visually," Morris explains. "When you get on stage, it can be anywhere from one to 100 as far as sound quality. You never know till you get there. Just imagine practicing your instrument in the middle of a football stadium while a game is going on. If you can play with distractions like that and still stay on pitch and on time, you can do it on stage. It's just about that bad sometimes. I'm hoping that working really close together is going to help us in those situations.

"I respect and adore the Lewis Family, but I'll never be Little Roy Lewis. My style of entertaining people has to be different, but there's room for everybody. It's a necessary thing to try to meet your fans somewhere. I stood on stage with City Limits for six years and never said one word out of totally unproductive shyness. Marshall and I have really worked at trying to speak in public. We joined the Toastmasters at one point when we were in State College."

Marshall concurs, "I feel that I've come a lot more to terms with my bass playing than I have to speaking to an audience on stage. Some days I can do it. Other days I just can't."

One would hardly know it from

their easygoing on stage manner today. Together with their penchant for performing one strong song after another, the ability of Lynn and Marshall to present themselves as if just playing and singing for a small circle of good friends distinguishes the Lynn Morris Band.

Once the festival season is done for 1993, the band will return to the studio to cut the long awaited follow-up to "The Bramble & The Rose". "It probably should have happened this winter, but I messed up my voice back in December and really couldn't sing for about four months," Morris admits. "I'll be playing banjo this time. That's going to be a challenge. We're in the process of deciding what we're going to do."

Listeners can be sure that the Lynn Morris Band will again offer a disc full of powerful material that sounds like no one else. In a music as conventional as bluegrass, that's more than enough in and of itself. Then we have the added satisfaction of knowing that we're hearing music lovingly produced by good, substantial people who have overcome almost every possible obstacle—geography, gender, health, nonmusical background, band instability, and much more.

"If I'd even had a clue what would be involved in this venture, I'd have thought twice and might never have started," Morris says. "The challenge has just been extraordinary..., but the rewards have been commensurate with the costs. It's so gratifying when people and other performers tell you they enjoy it."

To have earned the admiration and respect of fans and peers alike, to have performed from coast to coast and in Europe, and to have spent an aggregate of 59 months in the *Bluegrass Unlimited* charts, including hitting the top for both song and album, are no mean feats for a reluctant bass player and someone who started out backing up Ronald McDonald.



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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