



*Photography by
Robert Amberg*

**BERZILLA WALLIN DANCING,
ERNIE FRANKLIN FIDDLEING**

Kentucky. The truck followed the new blacktop to a country store.

"We asked if there was anybody who played music," Holt recalls. "They said, 'Yeah, go see old John up on the hill. He plays banjo and guitar.' So we went up there and there was this guy who lived in a one-room log cabin with his seven kids and seven dogs. The room was completely covered over with rusty old Prince Albert cans that he had opened up and tacked to the wall. We sat around and played music for a couple of hours."

Encounters like this one infected Holt with what he calls the "germ" of old-time music. "I love spending the day with someone, playing music with them, and learning music from them," he says. Realizing that the older generation of mountain artists was fading fast from the scene, Holt tried to collect as many songs as he could during that first summer in the highlands.

In the 15 years since, Holt has created a lively career as folk archivist and entertainer. His progress has paralleled the historical development of mountain music, which has survived by absorbing influences from Afro-Americans, records, and radio into its sound based on ancient British ballads and home-grown religious songs. Like the traditional mountain musicians, Holt has learned directly from older people.

Today, Holt stands at the threshold of realizing a dream. During the past two years, he has begun to use national television as part of his efforts to help preserve the music and crafts of Appalachia.

"Almost any kind of music"

Holt did not grow up dreaming of playing old-time music on television. Born in Gatesville, Texas, he moved

Mountain Musician at the Crossroads

Text by Arthur Menius

During the riot-torn, political-convention summer of 1968, a pickup truck, battered by the long miles from California, carried 21-year-old David Holt, a friend, and a flop-eared hound named Jezebel deep into the hollows and coves near Hazard,

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to California as a teenager. There he played drums for several bands before studying art and biology education at the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California.

During these years, he ran across a 78 rpm record by Carl Sprague, a genuine Texas cowpoke who, in 1927, became the first cowboy singer to record. Holt decided to visit Sprague's home during one of his Texas vacations, and found to his surprise that Sprague was alive and well. "He taught me how to play the harmonica and some old cowboy songs. I got really excited about learning music from the old timers." That excitement sparked Holt's 1968 journey to the southern Appalachians.

After graduation Holt moved to Asheville, North Carolina, with the idea of studying mountain music for a couple of years before launching his teaching career. He moved in with friends and took a job as a sign maker. "I'd go out and play music every night, and work as long as I could in the day practicing the banjo," he remembers.

Holt studied the old clawhammer style of banjo picking in which the first two fingers of the right hand strike downward on the banjo strings while the thumb plays the shorter drone string and sometimes hits a few melody notes. That method virtually disappeared after the 1940s



**MORRIS NORTON WITH HIS
HOMEMADE TUNEBOW**

when Earl Scruggs made popular the demanding three-finger style, which became the hallmark of bluegrass banjo picking.

"There weren't many clawhammer banjo players in western North Carolina in the early '70s," Holt explains, "so I learned most of what I knew from fiddlers. Byard Ray would sit for hours, whole evenings, showing me how to play tunes with his fiddle. I would play them note for note on the banjo. That's how I developed the fiddle-note banjo style that I do."

While Holt had deliberately set out to learn mountain music directly from the mountain people, he was not prepared for the great diversity he encountered. Early folklorists promoted the Southern mountains as a repository of ancient British airs,



BUCK DANCING AT THE BICENTENNIAL FESTIVAL IN DURHAM

VIRGIL CRAVEN WITH HIS HAMMER DULCIMER



and popular accounts reinforced that ethnocentric notion of an isolated frontierspeople, culturally akin to Elizabethan England. The reality, Holt found, was much more complex — and more interesting: “There are musicians in the mountains who will absorb almost any aspect of music, even adding rock to bluegrass. Many people only look at mountain music as fiddle and banjo. They don’t realize that it encompasses almost any kind of music. Any style has been absorbed into the mountains to some degree, the blues, jazz, everything.”

Holt experienced this process firsthand by joining the Luke Smathers String Band in 1973. Formed in 1929, the band performs the popular music of the ’30s on the traditional mountain instruments of guitar, fiddle, banjo, and standup bass. Smathers himself learned swing music from the radio; he and his brother memorized the melodies while a sister copied the words in shorthand.

“The Luke Smathers String Band combines mountain and swing music,” says Holt, “without becoming just another swing band.” Holt plays banjo on their albums [June Appal label JA024 and JA032] and joins them in most of their live appearances, which recently included the 1982 World’s Fair and a Peace Day rally in Asheville.

The Smathers Band, like other musicians that Holt has learned from, fused the music from their local tradition with newer forms and other outside influences, creating new sounds for their own pleasure. Holt sees a parallel process in his own work. “My music is a synthesis of different things I’ve heard, rather than this is just the way someone else played it and so this is the way I’m going to play it. It pulls a lot of things in, I hope, the best of other things.” Holt illustrated this process

on his first solo album, “It Just Suits Me” (June Appal JA038), recorded in 1980.

The Smathers Band is only one of Holt’s encounters contradicting the popular view of the region’s music as an isolated phenomenon. He has learned also from the black musicians in the Appalachians. “D.L. Boyd, who lived in Asheville, was supposed to be a very good fiddler,” Holt explains. “He had influenced a lot of older white musicians in Asheville. He didn’t play in a bluesy style particularly, but like fiddlers do in the mountains, because he played mountain music. He played for a lot of square dances and things like that. He had a lot of unusual tunes that I had never heard of and don’t know anybody that plays now. I had set up an appointment with him one week to go see him and collect some music. The next week I called to make sure it was okay to come over, and his wife said, ‘Honey, he passed away today.’ That really fired me up about collecting. I always think about that when I say, ‘Well, I’ll come back next week.’”

The black influence on the hillbilly music tradition dates back to the introduction of the banjo into the mountains by white soldiers returning from the Civil War. During the war, they learned to make the African-derived instrument from black craftsmen. The influx of black laborers into the mountains in the years following the war brought further opportunities for this cross-fertilization. While black string musicians and their hillbilly music have been eclipsed by the predominance of other musical forms and instruments, they live on through white musicians who learned from their black counterparts. Bill Monroe, for example, learned much from fiddler and guitarist Arnold Shultz.

He later incorporated Shultz's style in his modification of string band music that came to be called bluegrass. Holt has also recorded an 89-year-old white banjo picker named Chauncey Roberts who learned from former slaves. "He would play in the most bizarre three-finger style you ever saw, but it worked. It was very rhythmic. His fingers would switch the strings they'd be hitting. Some wild stuff, but very good."

Holt learned a number of tunes from Asheville blues and ragtime street musician, Walt Phelps, who died in 1982. "He had seen a whole lot, and loved making music and entertaining a crowd. I do a couple of his songs — 'Tickle Britches is My Name,' and 'Come on Down to My House.' He inspired different versions of several songs I already knew.

"There was a lot of interchange. Any of these old white guys in Black Mountain and Asheville will tell you that they would often get together with black musicians and play. There certainly wasn't any racial problem with the music." Holt doesn't believe, however, that the mountain air blew free of prejudice. "When the music came around they shared, and then apparently went their own separate ways."

Holt found perhaps his richest source of mountain music in Sodom Laurel, a hollow in the high mountains of Madison County, North Carolina. Sodom Laurel is home to Byard Ray, the fiddler who taught Holt his clawhammer style, and to a number of ballad singers: Holt, Cas Wallin, and Dellie Norton sing dozens of British ballads, modified through two centuries in the mountains and by their own personal styles. They also sing many ballads of American derivation.



DOUG WALLIN (TOP) AND CHARLES CHANDLER (BOTTOM) FIDDLING

"I've really worked on learning the singing of the old ballad singers," said Holt, "getting all the twists and turns of their kind of music. Then also for years I did shape note singing, Christian harmony singing. You sing at the top of your lungs, and that's the way the ballad singers sing, too."

Holt also tries to absorb some of these singers' non-musical knowl-





DAVID HOLT WITH ZEKE AND WILEY MORRIS, THE WRITERS OF "SALTY DOG BLUES"

edge. "Dellie Norton has been one of my great inspirations. Last year I had some arts council jobs all over South Carolina and she went with me and performed. Here's an 86-year-old woman who's wise about life. She knows how to cure anything with herbs out of the mountains. This was the furthest she'd gone from home. This is a person who's thought a lot, but hasn't traveled far. So to me it was a very easygoing tour and to her it was the most fun she'd ever had. She still talks about that trip."

A Shot in the Arm

When Holt began collecting songs,

practicing his banjo, and singing, he deposited the tunes he gathered with the Library of Congress. Yet, like most of his teachers, he was not a professional musician. He learned the music the same way they had: at the feet of older players.

He was, on the other hand, young, mobile, and an outsider. Area newspapers began to run stories about this youthful Texan so passionately devoted to the music many mountaineers ignored. That attention led Holt to other musicians and eventually to his career as an entertainer. "After about two years of doing this, I started getting asked to perform, so I started working up a

solo program. For the next three years [1972-75], I made my living just performing for conventions and country music barn type things.”

As Holt realized that he could make a profession out of the music he loved, he began to develop versatility as a performer. “To make a living doing this kind of music I had to be widespread. If someone wanted a workshop, I could do a workshop. If someone wanted a dance, I could call a dance. If someone wanted a concert, I could give a concert for kids, adults, or for old people.”

Holt’s big break came in 1975, when he became the director of the newly established Appalachian Music Program at Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, North Carolina. The school wanted him to create an applied music curriculum for mountain music in which students would play and collect songs themselves.

“That sounded great to me, because it gave me a chance to put all that I had been learning into some kind of cohesive form and to get some of the musicians in western North Carolina on campus to teach their instruments and their ballad singing.

“Students and community members would come on campus and learn to play traditional instruments from traditional mountain musicians. I taught classes in the history of country music, storytelling, country dancing, and square dance calling. I had a string band class. The National Endowment for the Arts was very good to us because they liked the program. So we had classes in the fiddle, mandolin, ballad singing, Christian harmony singing, shape note singing, just about anything you could want. Not only did it plow the music back into the community, but it gave those instructors a chance to think about what they knew and how



DAVID HOLT AND JOHN McCUTCHEON HAMBONING

to teach it.”

As part of its community outreach efforts the Appalachian Music Program conducted the Mountain Musicians Concert Series — three years of monthly performances. Holt says, “These people were being paid a lot of respect for their music. I think it changed a lot of people’s minds in this community about the worth of music. Then the program got a lot of the regular community people playing those instruments.”

The security of his position at Warren Wilson also gave Holt the time and freedom to refine his own performances. He decided to add storytelling, perhaps the oldest and most vital of the folk arts, to his repertoire. “I realized that you could say a lot in a story that you couldn’t say in a song,” Holt recalls, and he



DAVID HOLT AND DOC WATSON (TOP); DAVID HOLT AND LUKE SMATHERS (BOTTOM)

BERZILLA WALLIN WITH PHOTO OF HER FAMILY'S BAND



had already learned many a lively tale from the same people who taught him songs.

Invitations to the National Storytelling Festival increased Holt's commitment to the art. In 1981 he recorded and released on his own label a Southern storytelling album, "The Hairy Man and Other Wild Tales" (High Windy DH-1). This collection of uproarious old yarns — both scary and comic — also incorporates a lot of banjo-picking and other vivid sound effects, earning the album the American Library Association's Notable Record Award for 1982.

The stories help pace Holt's live performances, and contribute to the backporch atmosphere he believes is essential to communicating with his audiences: "I'm experimenting with different ways to move an adult audience up and down. I play a lot of different instruments, so I keep the sounds changing. I put in a story to get a different mood."

Holt left the Appalachian Music Program in 1982 and began his television career in earnest with *Folkways*, a public television series in which Holt visited traditional craftspeople of the North Carolina mountains, ranging from toymakers to blacksmiths. "It gave me a chance to take to the field, collecting what I had been doing and putting it on videotape. That's where I learned to do anything on television."

But national attention has come from another show, Nashville Network's *Fire on the Mountain*, produced by the Linear Group of Asheville. Each Sunday, Holt enters thousands of cable-wired homes around the country. Immaculately dressed — to show his respect for the music — and flashing his famous grin, Holt introduces a half-hour program featuring nationally popular

bluegrass acts and local old-time musicians.

"Over a period of time," says Holt, "this is bound to be an incredible documentary of bluegrass and mountain music. Everything else on this country music channel is very uptown, yet we have a show with the most traditional music, but the most hip format and up-to-date kind of awareness. This kind of music needs a little shot in the arm of media attention. It's going to help make young people aware of mountain music. The spirit of these old songs watch out for themselves and they hook certain people. There will be people converted to this kind of music because of this TV show."

Holt hopes his show will inspire performers as well as listeners: "If I could create a wake, like behind a boat, of interest so that young people could make some kind of living playing mountain music, that would be great. This day and age there have to be professional musicians doing this for it to keep its edge."

But success on national television also poses some knotty questions for this zealous performer and archivist. How will the demands of the high-tech studio affect traditional music and performance styles? Can Holt really use this mass media outlet to help preserve the music and continue its evolution? Or will television end up using him to exploit and possibly damage mountain music? "I've been a folk musician in the folk music world up to now," says Holt. "Stepping into *Fire on the Mountain* and the Nashville Network, I've entered the bottom rung of the entertainment industry." □

Arthur Menius lives in Pittsboro, North Carolina, and has contributed articles to several publications.