



Older Musicians Give Character to “Fire on the Mountain”

Arthur Menius

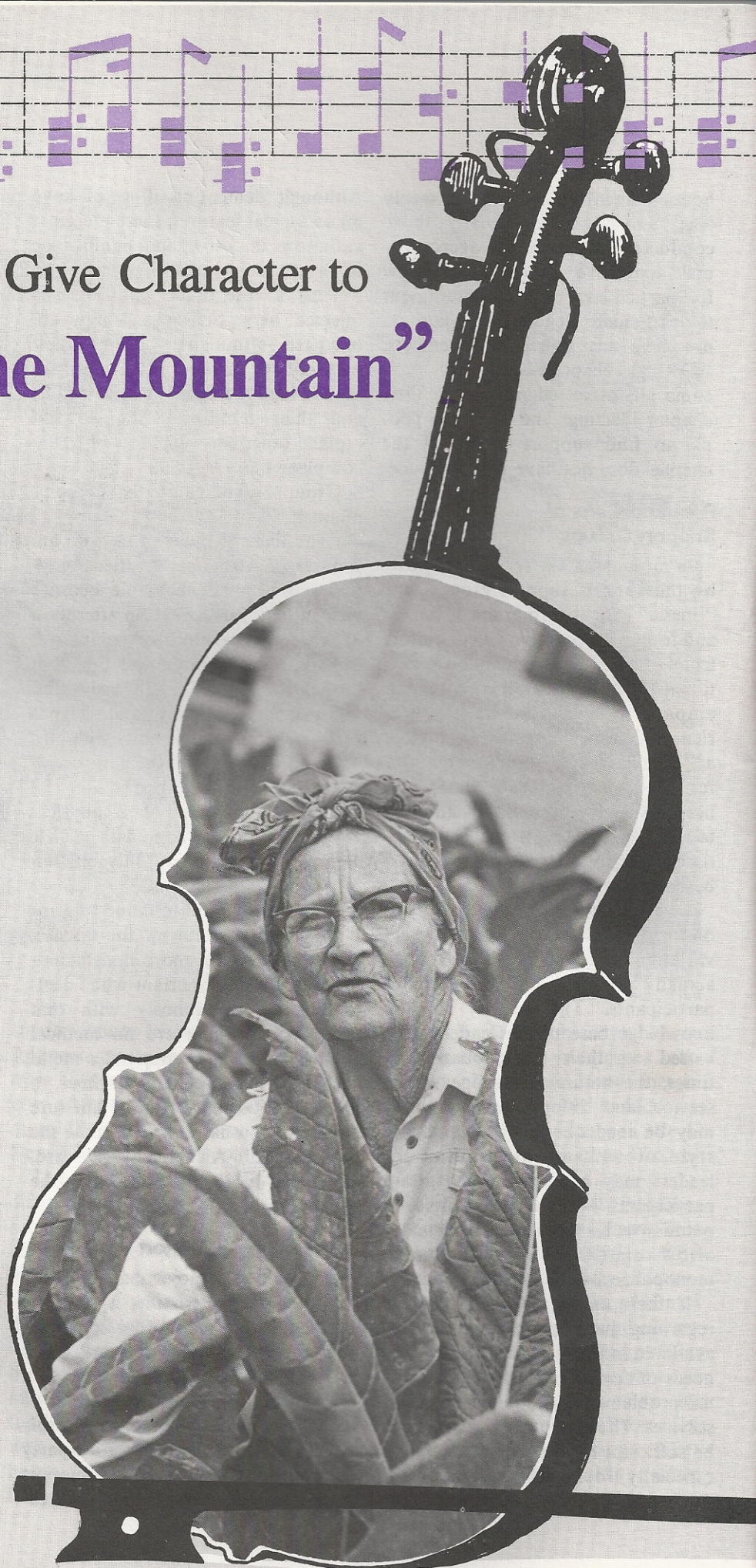
On most bright spring afternoons, the sun splashes its rays across the warm pine paneling of Bea Smathers' kitchen in Canton, a mountain town some 15 miles west of Asheville, North Carolina. On most Sunday afternoons the Luke Smathers String Band gathers in Bea's kitchen for a few hours of relaxed picking and singing.

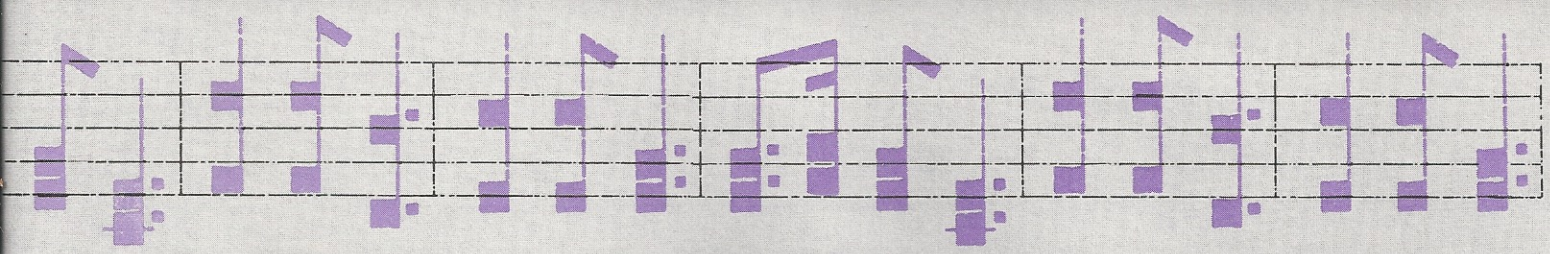
Today is a little different. A thick strip of red cellophane, called Tuffrost, covers the windows while television lights create artificial daylight in Bea's breakfast nook. Microphones dangle from the chandelier. Beside the sink stands a tripod supporting a video camera. The Sunday dinner back home smell of pan baked cornbread fills the room after the audio engineer accidentally turns on the burner beneath the skillet.

Undisturbed by the television invasion, Bea slaps bass, while her husband Luke fiddles. His brother Harold keeps a steady rhythm on guitar, and nephew Charles Gidney adds the lead guitar runs to their rendition of “Dark Town Strutters’ Ball.”

The crew of the Nashville Network's “Fire on the Mountain” series has come to Canton to tape the Luke Smathers’ String Band at home. The cable television program,

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Above, Luke Smathers (on the fiddle and Charles Henson on the guitar. At left, Dellie Norton, used to sing her ballads in the tobacco patch but now sings for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and Fire on the Mountain. Photo: Robert Amberg

produced by the Linear Group of Asheville, attempts to portray bluegrass, new acoustic and old-time country music as it is without frills or gimmicks. In June 1984, some 15 months after its debut, "Fire on the Mountain" became the top-rated show on the Nashville Network, which has a market of nearly 17 million homes.

A vital part of both traditional American music and of "Fire on the Mountain" has been the performances of older musicians who have preserved the styles of their youth and pioneered bluegrass and country music. The senior talent ranges from

major stars such as Roy Acuff, 81, country's biggest star before Hank Williams, and Bill Monroe, 73, whose band created bluegrass music during the 1940's, to talented, but underpublicized artists such as the Smathers, fiddler Tommy Jarrell, 83, and ballad singer Dellie Norton, 86. Although their music, lifestyles, and personalities differ, these people and others like them share an exuberance for music and a love of life that dispel many stereotypes about older Americans.

According to the Linear Group's Ron Reuhl, who supervised the remote tapings of many of these

musicians, recording these people who have kept mountain music alive is a significant part of both "Fire on the Mountain" and his company's efforts to restore the music to the commercial media. "The show is giving these people the recognition that's long been overdue for their traditions, for keeping that tradition alive, and keeping part of America alive. That's very important to me and so is being able to pay these people on a par with the well-known bluegrass acts Hopefully, by giving them some recognition, it will encourage younger people to play this music."

The Smathers brothers would learn the melodies off the radio while their sister jotted down the lyrics in shorthand.

Smathers Band Goes Back to 1929

Harold and Luke belonged to the original Smathers String Band. From 1929 until 1943, they played each Saturday night for dances at the Canton YMCA and broadcast regularly over WWNC, the area's top radio station. Never professionals, the band, then as now, played for pleasure and as an enjoyable way to earn a few dollars. Unlike most mountain string bands, the Smathers outfit specialized in the pop and swing tunes of the day, playing them on the traditional fiddle, bass, guitar and banjo. The brothers would learn the catchy melodies off the radio while their sister jotted down the lyrics in shorthand. Although they continued to play some standard old-time tunes, they amassed a repertoire that included such Tin Pan Alley products as "Darkness on the Delta," "Sweet Georgia Brown," "Dinah" and "Up a Lazy River."

The popular music suited their audiences. "It had a bouncy beat," Luke explains. "We played for dances a lot back then, and the young dancers wanted to fox trot. Round dancing they called it. It went over good with them."

The band broke up when Luke lost two fingers on his right hand, the one that holds the bow. The Luke Smathers String Band reorganized a quarter century later when Luke finally solved his bow problem.

"I have to use sticky tape on there in order to hold it," Luke says. "I had a terrible time trying to learn to control it until I thought about using this carpet tape."

Since its 1968 return to performing, the Luke Smathers String Band



Lily Mae Ledford was an original member of the Coon Creek Girls, the first all female band. The band accompanied the Soco Gap Dance Team when they performed at the White House for FDR. Photo: Robert Amberg



Photo: Robert Amberg

Morris Norton, first cousin to Dellie Norton and Berzilla Wallin, playing the tune-bow in Sodom Laurel, N.C. They all come from a musical family and a community noted for its old-time musicians.

has enjoyed more success than in the early days. The group has appeared at folk festivals, Asheville's celebrated Shindig on the Green, peace rallies, and enjoyed a full week's run at the 1983 World's Fair in Knoxville. There they shared artist's quarters with Don Reno, the legendary bluegrass banjo innovator who listened to the original Smathers outfit while a boy in Clyde, North Carolina. The band has all the work it wants according to Luke. "It's just a hobby for us, but we play a good deal more than back in the old days. We travel more."

The Luke Smathers String Band has also recorded two albums for the June Appal label, which specializes in mountain music of all kinds. "They asked us to make them," says Luke. "I guess John MacCutheon [a leading young old-time musician] was mostly responsible for that He had made a record or two with

the June Appal company up in Whitesburg, Kentucky and told them about us. The records are just exactly like we are here in the kitchen."

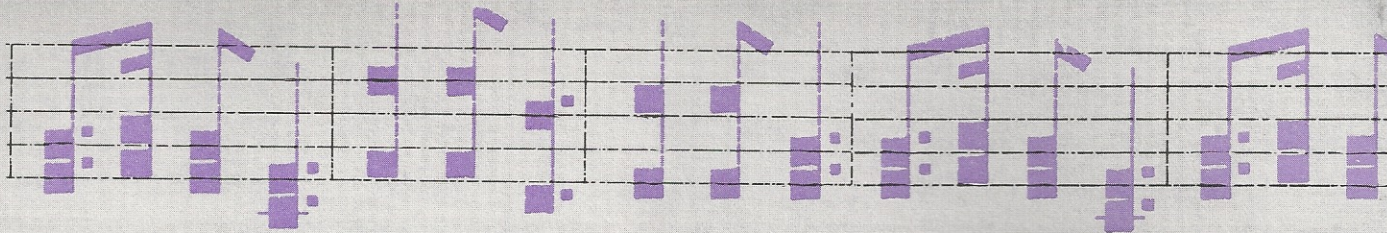
The Wisdom of Tommy Jarrell

Although Tommy Jarrell reserves his kitchen for his succulent fried chicken, his living room is perhaps the world's leading post-graduate institute for the study of old-time music. Young musicians flock to this modest home outside of Mt. Airy, North Carolina in order to learn from and play with the jovial, outspoken fiddler. Unquestionably a lover of attention, Tommy dispenses advice, encouragement, stories, and hospitality with equal generosity. An avuncular character, usually clad in the beige sweater, dark tie, and spectacles that he no doubt wore for many of his over 30 years with the State Department of Transportation, Tommy possesses a bow arm with

matchless rhythm, the essential ingredient of dance-oriented, old-time fiddling.

"To many enthusiasts Tommy Jarrell IS old time music," wrote *Devil's Box* editor Stephen F. Davis in his Fall 1984 issue. "His influence has been widespread and will be felt for years and decades to come."

Tommy initially picked the banjo rather than the fiddle, on which his father, who recorded several records during the 1920s, was quite adept. "I was between seven and eight years old, and we were out there watching the steers out in the cornfield, you know. Had 'em out in the meadow, watchin' 'em to keep 'em out of the corn, and Boggy [a farm hand] had his banjer out there, and he tuned it down the old timey way to play 'Reuben' Boggy played it, and he handed me the banjer. He said, 'Here, Tommy, you can play that.' I recollect it just as well as if it had



been yesterday.”

At age 13, Tommy took up his father’s instrument. He soon acquired the intricately inlaid fiddle that he has played to this day. “I bought it when I was 14 years old. It was a whole lot prettier than it is now. Part of it [the inlay] has come out. I bought it from one on my mother’s first cousins. I gave a hell of a price for it at that time [1915]. You could buy the best fiddle in the country for four or five dollars, and I gave ten dollars for that. I wouldn’t take \$10,000 for it now.”

Tommy’s ever-youthful artistry is based on perhaps the finest right arm and wrist in old-time fiddling. “You can put the same notes in there,” Tommy explains. “The way you handle the fiddle bow makes the difference. If you can’t handle a fiddle bow, you can’t play the fiddle, not my kind of tune. You can play this here orchestra stuff, but if you play the tunes like I play, you’ve got to handle that fiddle bow.

“That’s rolling music. That’s how it’s supposed to go. My daddy said music’s supposed to go like a wheel arollin’. The same thing like one of them tape recorder wheels goes. The same speed all around, steady, not jerks.”

Following over a decade of daily practice since retirement, Tommy still finds room for improvement in his playing. “There ain’t no masters of no damn fiddle. There’ll be music in that thing that ain’t never come out when Gabriel toots his horn,” Tommy insists. “I will admit I can play a few tunes just a little bit better than anybody I’ve ever heard play them.”

The Lineau Group captured Tommy, the subject of the Les Blank film *Sprout Wings and Fly*, on video tape at the rustic barbershop in Toast, a community adjacent to Mt. Airy. That segment remains a very special memory for “Fire on the Mountain” host David Holt. “It got

me re-enthused about the fiddle and his style of banjo playing He’s got a lot of wisdom that comes out in his whole life, from his fiddle playing to the way he can make fried chicken. Just in the things he says, it all fits together. He’s really quite a person. He’s a guru.”

Despite substantial hearing loss and a variety of other ailments, Tommy continues to play a number of folk, bluegrass, and old-time music festivals. He regularly records



albums for County Records, the foremost old-time label. He has no plans to slow down, having already reserved a convention hall for his 100th birthday celebration. “The first of March, two thousand and one I’m going to have a birthday party. We’re going to eat dinner about one o’clock. When we get the tables cleaned up and moved out of the way, we’re going to dance ‘til eleven that night.”

Holt especially enjoys the tapings in the remote rural areas, for the television camera allows millions of viewers to share in his career of collecting music directly from the source deep in the hills. “It’s music in the home; it’s music for the home,” Holt says. “We’re facing the last generation of Americans who grew up before the mass media hit. These people have developed very individualistic styles. They’re the people in their 70’s, 80’s, and 90’s, now. We’ve got to hurry to talk to these people and learn what they know Over a period of time ‘Fire on the Mountain’ is bound to be an incredible documentary of mountain and bluegrass music.”

Dellie Norton, One of A Kind

One of Holt’s favorite people and richest sources is tough, but loveable Dellie Norton. The Lineau Group’s remote crew followed a series of twisting and ever narrower roads to the wiry ballad singer’s home in Sodom Laurel, a collection of weathered buildings spread along a hollow deep in the rugged mountains of Madison County, North Carolina.

Dellie’s utterly personal vocal style, preserved on the Rounder album *High Atmosphere*, involves complex, often exaggerated twists and turns of phrasing, accent, and enunciation. When she massages a syllable far beyond its normal length, the listener gets a sense of personal involvement even though she’s rendering an air popular in Scotland 500 years ago. The ballads sung by Dellie and her neighbors attract much interest from the outside because they demonstrate the British contribution to mountain music. Sodom is one of those inaccessible places where Anglo-Saxon culture has resisted American homogenization.

Dellie remembers pioneer folk song collector Cecil Sharp gathering tunes from her Aunt Zip Rice in 1916. A half century later John Cohen introduced the recording of Sodom balladeers when he taped the singing of Aunt Zip (age 103 at her passing a few years ago), Dellie, and many others for *High Atmosphere*. “They’re still coming,” reports Dellie. “I’ve got them coming from across the waters and everywhere to get me to sing for them.”

In her youth Dellie could memorize a lengthy song on but one hearing. She learned material from her family, friends, travelers, and eventually the radio. “Never wrote nothing down. I can’t get no songs written down. I’d just hear them sing it, and I’d learn it Used to I could just hear a song, and I’d pick it up right there. I knowed a lot more



back then than I do now 'cause I've forgotten so many. I used to could sing all night and not sing the same one twice."

Living in a nearly vertical land where the cows reputedly have shorter legs on one side than the other has required Dellie to exploit every means to scratch out a living. She has, among other things, raised poultry, helped make moonshine, cooked in a rough and rowdy logging camp, gathered chestnuts, dug herbs, especially ginseng, and even worked in a South Carolina cotton

mill for a few months in the early 1900's.

"All I went to school in my life was three months," she says. "I used to hunt, raise a little tobacco, had four or five milk cows. Now I got to where I can't work no more."

In recent years performances at folk festivals and for arts councils have supplemented Dellie's income. "You learn a lot about singing singing for other people. You practice a lot more when you go out to sing."

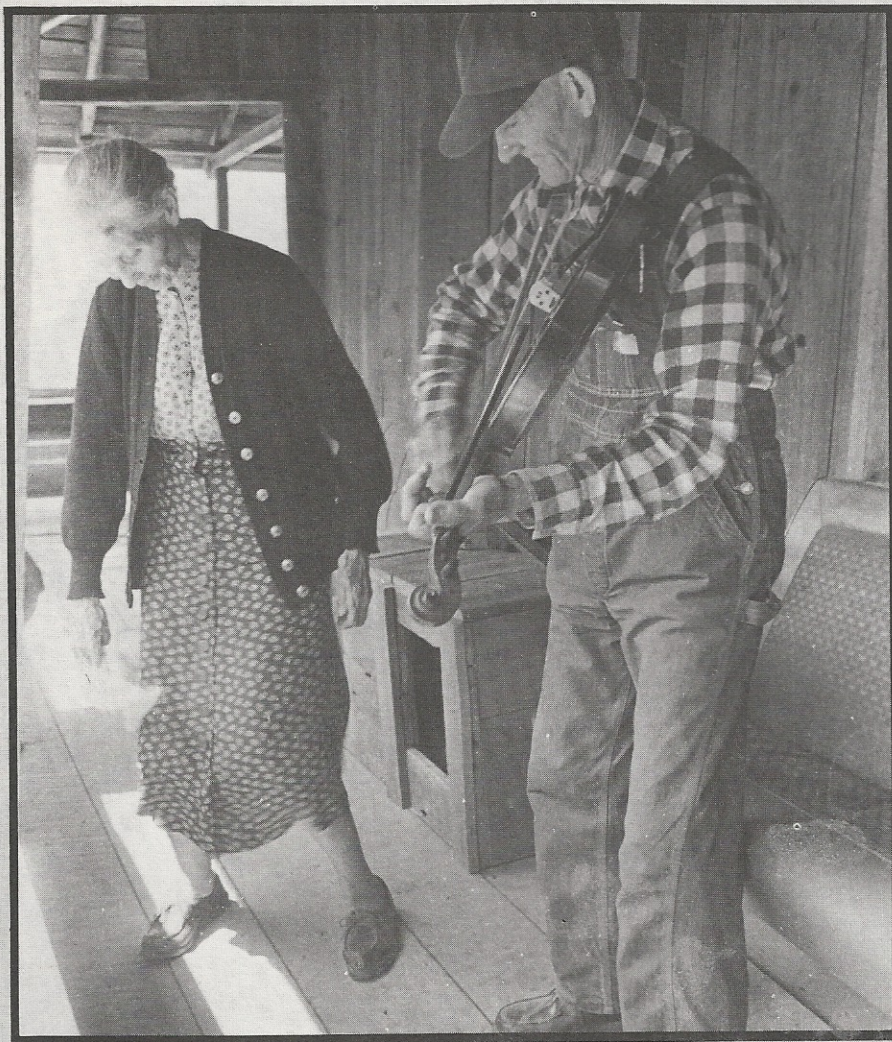
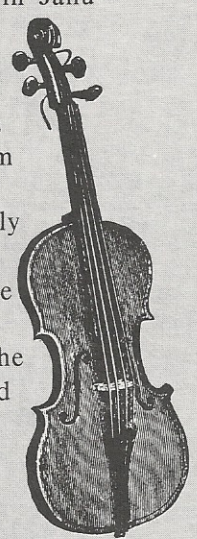
Holt, who has accompanied Dellie on many of those trips to perform-

ances, takes considerable pride in her singing and friendship. "Dellie Norton has been one of my great inspirations. Here's an 86-year-old woman who's very wise about life . . . This is a person who's thought a lot, but hasn't traveled far. I had some arts council jobs all over South Carolina, and she went with me and performed, and this was the farthest she'd gone from home . . . To her it was the most fun she'd had in her life."

"We had Dellie Norton on 'Fire on the Mountain.' You've never seen her on American television before. We claim that as a first," says Linear Group president Lawson Warren. "The remote segments, which present these unique personalities who produced the basis of this music, have provided a lot of color for the show, and I think they're important to the show. We'll continue to do those . . . They're not living in shacks, not *Deliverance* types. They're competent, professional musicians. Before there was rock 'n' roll, there was mountain music. Before there was jazz, there was mountain music. Before there was swing, there was mountain music. It's American."

A similar project will be a part of the Linear Group's next production, "The Liberty Flyer," a nationally syndicated American music radio series, which will premier in January. Beginning with the 14th week, John Hartford, writer of "Gentle on my Mind," will visit pioneers of country music radio from the 1920's 30's and 40's.

These musicians not only add credibility to the programs. They demonstrate to people of all ages that life should be lived to the fullest or one will be cheated of the riches it has to offer.



Berzilla Wallin dancing to Ernie Franklin's fiddle at Ernie's home in Guntertown, N.C. Berzilla is Dellie Norton's sister and is also a ballad singer.

Photo: Robert Amberg