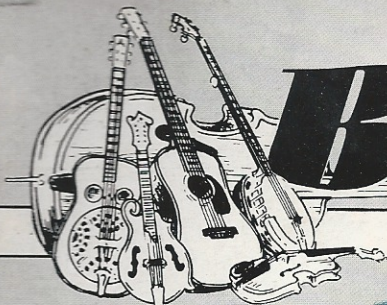


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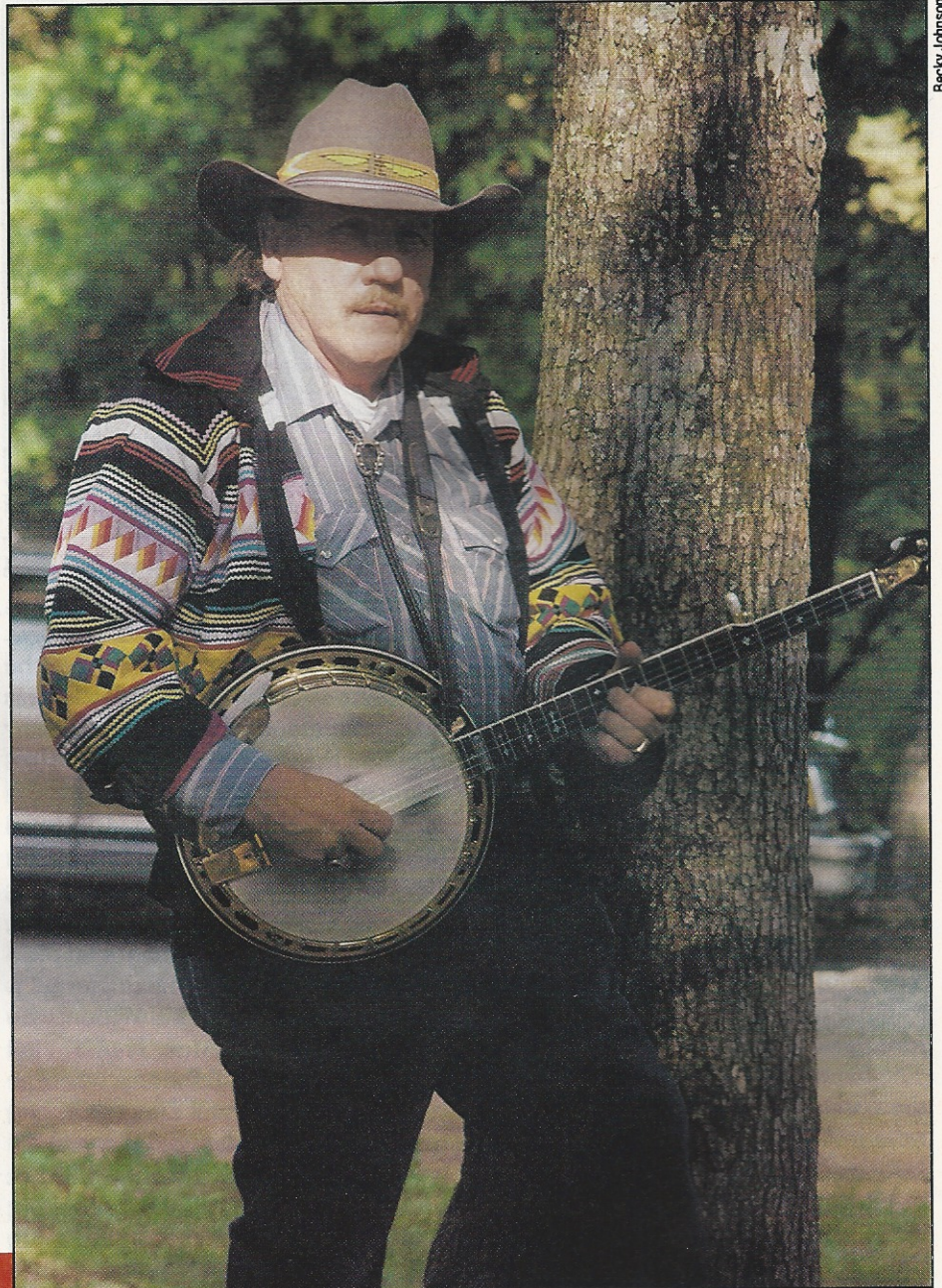
RAYMOND FAIRCHILD
IBMA 1994 WORLD OF BLUEGRASS
DICK KIMMEL

RAYMOND FAIRCHILD

At the age of 55, Raymond Fairchild can both look forward with anticipation and look back with pride. His story remains compelling, recounting a journey from playing for tips by the side of the road to standing among the most popular of bluegrass artists. His penchant for being straightforward ranks among legend. After the breakup of the Crowe Brothers, who had backed him for some 15 years, his smooth recovery as front man of Raymond Fairchild and the Maggie Valley Boys brought the witty, almost whimsical side of his personality to the bluegrass public.

He readily reflects on three career accomplishments that give him the most pride. "First, I got to play the Grand Ole Opry. That's every musician's goal, even if he'll tell you it ain't. I've got to play the Grand Ole Opry various times and can go back and play it when I want to. Another accomplishment was my son picking it up. I have three kids and my youngest picking it up and becoming the guitarist he is. He's one of the greatest in the business. And the third would be the banjo I designed and come out with, the Cox/Fairchild banjo. That's the accomplishment that I guess I'm the most proud of, of anything I've done in the music is designing and having a man like Jimmy Cox make a banjo as fine as the Cox/Fairchild banjo."

Now he enters into a new, more settled phase of his career. He has begun reducing the touring schedule which once carried him from Florida to New York



Becky Johnson

TALKING BLUEGRASS

By Art Menius

and South Carolina to California. In the same town where he busked during the 1960s, Fairchild now headlines the Maggie Valley [N.C.] Opry House. His wife, Shirley, assumed operation of the venue from Josh and Wayne Crowe a few years ago.

"This [1994] is the seventh year. They stayed in it two years and pulled out, and then my wife took it over. It's the Opry House located in the center of Maggie Valley... We run bluegrass and country music shows from the first of May until the last of October, seven nights a week. We've had people in there like the Bluegrass Cardinals, Jimmy Martin, Ralph Stanley, the Lew's Family, Bashful Brother Oswald [Kirby], Chubby Wise, the Jones Brothers, just to name a

few. I can't name them all. We've had some big acts in there.

"This year [1994] I'll be playing the Maggie Valley Opry House 85% of the time, maybe more. The band that works the Opry House with me is not my road band. The band consists of Frank Buchanan, that used to play with Bill Monroe in the early '60s, he's on guitar. Little Rufus Sutton, the oldest original Maggie Valley hillbilly living. Playing guitar and singing tenor. He's a great showman. Then we've got Jim Jarrell. We call him Humphammer. He's on the bass and acts as comedian. Of course, we've got guests who come by almost every night and perform with us. You never know who you'll see at the Opry House."

Fairchild seems overjoyed to be spending the warm weather months at home again. "I've traveled the festival circuit now for about 20, 25 years. I've got a lot of miles on these old bones. I'm very happy. I plan on spending lots more time at the Opry House. I'm cutting down on my festivals...But there are a few festivals I'm obligated to, and I've got to work them."

For the festivals, Fairchild maintains a separate road band. It consists of his son, Zane, on guitar, Shane Crowe, son of Wayne Crowe, on bass, and Bruce Moody, nephew of the late Blue Grass Boy, Clyde Moody, on mandolin. "When this writing comes out, I may have an entirely different group. You never know. But I think Zane will always be with me. At least I hope so. The only place he'll play is on the road. He sits and practices a lot. He's in the process of cutting a guitar album."

After years of taking his music on the road to his fans, Fairchild would like for them to come visit him at the Opry House. He has by no means forgotten them. "I want to thank all my fans that have supported me and continue to support me. I'm grateful to them, but I can't call them all by name because there are thousands of them."

That's no surprise since Fairchild has always made himself readily available to fans, even if it means sitting a hour at the record table just to sell one tape. "The important thing about that is that fans want to buy records from the artists themselves. They don't want to buy records from somebody sitting at the record table they don't know. So I figure

when I'm on a one-, two-, or three-day festival, that's my work. I think my place is at that record table, meeting the fans and talking to them, and autographing a record or tape if they want it. Some stranger sitting out there and you're piled up in some bus asleep, I don't think that's business at all. That's the reason, it's my job, and I think it's my place to do it."

Fairchild can relate to the fan's point of view since he remains himself a fan, steadfastly in love with bluegrass music and its makers. "Getting to meet people like Ralph Stanley, Jimmy Martin, Bill Monroe, the Osborne Brothers, Charlie Waller, Del McCoury, and all them fellers and getting to sit and talk to them, that's like a lifelong dream come true. I used to listen to the radio and listen to fellers like Jimmy Martin and Bill Monroe, and I'd

I sat down and designed the banjo. I worked on it for three years drawing the blueprints on the way I thought a banjo should sound, look, balance, and perform from one end of the neck to the other. And I got it all in one package. And I run into a banjo maker whose the greatest banjo maker in the world. He's Jimmy Cox. He supplies parts for all the banjo companies. He's in Topsham, Me. I ran into him at a festival in Maine, and I showed him my plans.

"He said, 'I'll tell you what. I'll make a hundred of each. I'll make a hundred nickel and a hundred gold. I'll make you two banjos, if you'll help me sell the rest of them.'

"That's exactly the agreement we came to. My banjo's been out a little over a year. Over half the gold ones are already gone, and up towards half the nickel

"And Ralph Stanley is one of the greatest men that's ever been. He'll sit and talk to anybody. I got to meet my idol when I met Don Reno. Long before he died, me and him talked many hours. That's another achievement that money could just not buy."

wonder what they looked like, what size man they was. One day I got to see them in person and got acquainted with them.

"And Ralph Stanley is one of the greatest men that's ever been. He'll sit and talk to anybody. I got to meet my idol when I met Don Reno. Long before he died, me and him talked many hours. That's another achievement that money could just not buy."

Another recent accomplishment for Fairchild comes from his new career as a banjo designer. "I'm playing the Cox/Fairchild banjo. I've had some great banjos in my time, some great Gibsons.

ones are already gone. If a man wants the best banjo in the world, get the Cox/Fairchild banjo."

The highly regarded Cox, who fabricates his own parts except for the tuning gears, according to a August 1987 *Banjo Newsletter* article, has built banjos for Sonny Osborne and Don Stover, among others. The pair also make music together. "He came down, and we cut a twin banjo tape at Country Roads Studios in Marion, N.C. The name of it will be, Raymond Fairchild/Jimmy Cox: "Twin Banjo Jubilee." It's a knockout, buddy. Zane's doing a guitar number on there

called 'Hoss Fly' that will knock your socks off. The only ones we used is me and Jimmy Cox on twin banjos, Zane on guitar, and Shane Crowe on bass. It is a dandy. I'm putting it out myself."

Going into the banjo building business must have seemed an improbable dream during his childhood. Growing up over Soco Gap from Maggie Valley, near Cherokee, N.C., young Fairchild lacked all the instructional aids so common today and the variety of media now enjoyed. Music came from jukeboxes, a radio that worked when it wanted to,

and from family members on his mother's side, the First Nations side. "The music come from my mother's side of the family. My Aunt Martha played banjo left-handed. It was hard to watch somebody play left-handed and pick up anything, but I could listen to the sound and sort of adopt it to my right-hand style. My Uncle France played the French harp, and my mother played the French harp. My Uncle Frank Ballew played the guitar and some on the banjo."

He learned the blues the same way so many white southern musicians grow-

ing up before the turn of this century did. "When I was a kid they used to work colored convicts, prisoners. They worked the roads then, cutting right of ways and cleaning out side ditches. Back then they wore stripes. Some of them went up and down, and of them went all around. The stripes that went around them, that indicated lifetimers. I'd listen to them. I'd slip close enough at dinner time when they'd take a break to listen to them. I was afraid to get too close, but I'd get close enough to where I could hear them hum. They'd hum and sing them blues, and that's exactly where I picked up the blues sound. The blues definitely come from the colored people...when they done something bluesy it would come from the heart. And Jimmie Rodgers was a great influence on that blues-type stuff, too. I've listened to his records since I can remember."

In this environment young Fairchild could absorb many musical influences, but heard no single musician so much that he could copy just one. It set a pattern for life of striving for originality in music. That lesson he has subsequently passed on to many young musicians. "When I started playing music, there was nobody you could learn from. I was raised back in the mountains. We had an old battery radio, and part of the time the battery was dead. I always had a love for the banjo, even though I started out playing guitar. When I heard Don Reno and Earl Scruggs, it flipped my mind. I never did get to hear enough of them to copy them note for note, which in the long run was good. I'd count my style in between Reno and Scruggs. You can call it the Fairchild style. It's a style of its own, just like the Scruggs style and the Reno style. What I do is not copying anybody.

"If you're going down the road and see a kid sitting on the side of the road picking a banjo that don't know but two tunes, don't never pass him by. Listen, because out of those two tunes you might find a note that he's getting that you might have been searching for 10, 15 years."

Fairchild, nonetheless, acknowledges the influences of a number of musicians in developing his own approach to bluegrass music. "Don Reno was never talked about enough. Don Reno was the most underrated musician ever in history. Don Reno was the best banjo picker that me or you will ever see or hear. They'll

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never be nobody, to my way of listening at music, that could do on a banjo what Don Reno did. One of the reasons I think that Don Reno didn't go over as well as Scruggs was Don Reno was anywhere from 25 to 30 years before his time.

"Andy Boorman was a great influence on me. He was also a great influence on Don Reno. Don told me that himself. Andy Boorman is a great banjo picker. He never did use picks, but man he knew that neck one end to the other.

"Earl Scruggs was an influence on any banjo picker who plays three-finger style, right-hand roll. If they do it smooth, they have to credit Earl Scruggs, because there's no man living who could do it like Earl Scruggs with that right hand.

"Bill Monroe's music influenced me. I'm going to tell you, if you want to hear genuine music played note to note perfect, put on a Jimmy Martin record... Jimmy spoke his words so plain, and he was such a true timer on that guitar. There's never been a man that could pick rhythm guitar like Jimmy Martin... Of course, there's the Osborne Brothers. They're great. Their music influenced me a lot. Jimmy Martin, Bill Monroe, Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, the Osborne Brothers, Ralph Stanley, and Charlie Waller was another great entertainer. That just about says it all."

Once his banjo gene became dominant during his late teens, Fairchild started practicing "just every hour that I had free time to do it. When I was a kid we had work to make your living. Had to work on the farm, in the garden, and putting up stuff, but every free hour I got I had that banjo in my hands."

Fairchild, on the other hand, did not try to develop himself as a singer. "I've sung a little bit. I always loved the Stanley Brothers songs. Ralph Stanley, me and him got to singing at festivals, and we just had to put out the tape. Me and Frank Buchanan got out a new tape, 'Smoky Mountain Memories.' I'm singing one song on there with Frank... I don't sing much. I'm not a singer. I never will be. Just on certain occasions. More a curiosity than anything else."

Not desiring to change his style so as to work as a sideman, Fairchild determined to make it his own way. In 1963 or 1964 he cut his first album, "America's Most Authentic Folk Banjo" (Sims LP 115), backed by Roy Acuff's band. His first Rural Rhythm album (RR-146), "King

Of The Smokey Mountain Five Strings Banjo Players," also known as "the 31 tune album," followed a couple of years later.

Fairchild says, however, that he gained little other than critical praise and products to sell from the Rural Rhythm connection despite strong sales. "Rural Rhythm sent me two gold albums from the sale of Rural Rhythm records. They're hanging out in the Opry house. The one with that had 31 tunes on it and the Frosty Mountain Boys' 'Mama Likes Bluegrass' [RR 159 (1967)]. The 31 tune album turned gold first, and it wasn't long before the other one turned gold. I was dumb back then when I signed with Rural Rhythm. I just was getting records to sell. I didn't have no contract. All I got out of it was just gold albums, but that's something to be proud of."

Despite all that, Fairchild's regular gig throughout most of the 1960s remained busking in Maggie Valley. "When I went into the music business full time, I had a wife and a baby. You talk about a rough life. It was a rough life. If it hadn't been for my wife, I could never have stayed in it. She stood by and supported me, and that's the reason I could stay in music. We've seen it rough many, many, many, many times. But she stuck with me, and I finally put the sound together I wanted and people started booking me, and it went from there."

Frank Buchanan, who had sung lead for Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys during 1962, often joined him by the side of the road. Having recorded and performed together sporadically for 30 years, Buchanan and Fairchild now play together regularly at the Maggie Valley Opry House. "Frank Buchanan's singing and picking better than he ever did. He had a bout with arthritis. He's doing real good. To my notion, Frank Buchanan is among the top five best [lead singers] Bill Monroe ever had."

By 1967 he used the band name Raymond Fairchild and the Maggie Valley Boys. Seven years later he was appearing at festivals as far away as the midwest. The pivotal moment came when Raymond Fairchild met the Crowe Brothers. "When I started full-time was in 1975 when the Crowe Brothers come with me. That's when we really hit it full-time. I'd searched for years and years and years. That's why I say don't ever pass a man up that's picking. Me and a



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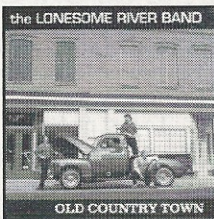
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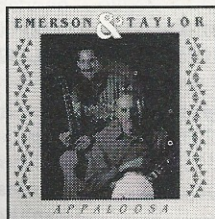
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fiddle player, he's dead now, by the name of Wilford Messer, me and him went down to Wahalla, S.C. It was a little barbecue, and they was having music there. One of the Crowe Brothers was over there, and he was playing bass. He said he was going to go wake up his brother. He and his daddy was there. He went and woke up his brother, that was Wayne. Wayne come and got on the bass. When Josh hit that guitar, I knew right then that was the sound I was looking for for 25 years."

Josh Crowe, who now performs and records for Rounder with David McLaughlin, recalled the moment in a 1984 interview. "I'd seen him a lot of times before at bluegrass festivals and had never got a chance to meet him or pick with him or anything...I played all night long on the bass fiddle, and he never did recognize me until I picked up my guitar...He stopped pickin' and just watched what I was doing."

"I always had the speed," Fairchild recounts. "That's what I was looking for when I found them was someone who could play speed. I knew when I played the first two or three tunes with them that there was the men who could do it."

Scarcely had the Crowe Brothers become the Maggie Valley Boys than they participated in a one day session in Ohio when Fairchild cut four instrumental albums for Rural Rhythm (RR 260, 261, 262, & 263).

The Crowe Brothers eventually added a vocal component to the show. Fairchild recognized this in 1978 with the name change to Raymond Fairchild and the Crowe Brothers. By the early 1980s they had become a top draw throughout the midwest and southeast. During this time they sometimes performed on the Grand Ole Opry as often as every couple of months. They appeared on TV's *Hee Haw!* and *Fire On The Mountain* on cable's The Nashville Network. Fairchild earned the title of Best Banjo Player at the SPBGMA Awards in Nashville five consecutive years, 1987-1991, "and they retired me as the World's Best Banjo Picker."

Eventually, Zane Fairchild brought his guitar to the group. "You know how proud I am of him. When he plays, people say the biggest smile comes across my face they ever saw. There can

be nothing more soothing to your soul than to see your youngest son doing what you've loved to do all your life...I'm also trying to encourage Zane. He's in the process of getting him a record out. I want to see Zane go out on his own, get him a band. Whatever type music he chooses, that's up to him, but I want him to do it."

A thoughtful man with a philosophical bend, Fairchild provides clear advice to those with musically precocious children. "The worst thing you ever done is brag on your own kid. Let somebody else do the bragging. Encourage him. Tell him he's doing good, but don't never sit down and brag on him. If it's your kid, see that he's got good instruments. See that he's got something you can note, something good enough to play on...But don't continually try to shove him down somebody's throat and brag on him. If he's good enough, somebody else will do the bragging."

Fairchild, despite a puckish wit, maintained an on-stage image much like that Ivan M. Tribe so adroitly described for this magazine's October 1974 issue:

"The tall silent banjo player is so quiet that he makes Earl Scruggs seem like one of the Stoneman sisters by comparison. Fairchild on stage is virtually motionless except for his fingers. A lack of fancy stage work to the contrary, the Fairchild arrangement of 'Whoa Mule' literally drove the crowd wild."

When the Crowe Brothers left, Fairchild suddenly found himself emcee and front man for Raymond Fairchild and the Maggie Valley Boys. Not only did he step right up, but he soon was stealing the stage from professional comedians. He found the transition easy, "because I knew all the time if I ever had to do it, I could. Josh Crowe's such a good emcee, and he and his brother Wayne stayed with me for 17 years. It was going so good, I figured if it wasn't broke, not to change it. When it came time where I had to do it, it was no problem. It came just as natural as picking the banjo."

Fairchild assembled a sharp new band with much the same seeming ease. "When the Crowe Brothers quit me they were a powerful force. I had to go out and pick people I thought would fit

my style the best. I already had my son, Zane, on the road all the time, and that was a big help. He already knew my style on rhythm and lead guitar. I just picked people that would fit my style...After the Crowe Boys left me I used Ricky Lee. He stayed with me for three years, and he's a powerful man. I cut back on my festivals in '94 and started devoting more time to my building out in Maggie Valley. I just wasn't playing enough for him to stay, so he quit because I wasn't playing enough festivals to keep him going...There ain't no better man that was ever beside of me than Ricky Lee. When I slowed down I just wasn't working enough on the road for Ricky to stay on. He's got a family, and he's got to feed them. No hard feelings. He's a great friend."

Shane Crowe and mandolinist George Hazlewood, formerly of Carl Story's Rambling Mountaineers, rounded out the band. The group quickly mastered the Fairchild sound, while Lee, a Clinch Mountain Boy from 1970 through 1976, provided a strong new vocal focus. "I handpicked them," Fairchild explained. "There's no problems. My bookings picked up. Surprisingly, they picked up. Promoters never asked me who's with me. As a matter of fact, I told them I changed bands. They say, 'I'm booking Raymond Fairchild. I could care less who's with him.'"

Fairchild's long term good relationships with his musicians stems from his honesty and his realistic expectations for the musicians who work for him. "Number one, you've got to realize that just because a man's working for you, you don't own him. You cannot tell that man: 'Don't do this. Don't do that.' You've got to make it clear to him that when it comes time to go on stage to be there ready and do his 45-minute show. Then after that, you've got no control over that man. You cannot own him. You can't boss him.

"You cannot force them into listening to one style. What you've got to do is say, 'Now, listen boys. We've got a 45-minute show to do. Be there 10 minutes, 15 minutes before time. Here's a schedule of the festival. You know when we go on. And they're always there tuned up.' They do that 45 minutes. They ain't going to hang around no record table. They ain't supposed to. I'm the man that's selling the records. I'm supposed to do that. That's the way I look at it. But when it

comes time for the next set, they're always there. That's all you ask of a musician. You can't own them.

"And you've got to do exactly what you promise a man. If you promise to pay him so much, you've got to do it even if you have to take it out of your pocket, and that's what I've always done."

Fairchild has worked with younger musicians for nearly 20 years and believe they are essential to success. "You've got to have them. But a younger musician thinks different than a man my age. They've got a little different ideas on music. It's hard to get a young musician to sit down and play Raymond Fairchild style music, because they're more interested in other stuff, which is good, but you can't have all old men up on the stage. That's not appealing to the audience. You have got to have so many youngsters in your band before it looks right on a festival or anywhere else."

Teaching younger musicians to play his style proves difficult. "That's hard. They just ain't none of them going to do it 100%, but they will learn enough of it to where you can get by. My style's natural to Zane. Zane and Shane both can do everything I do. Still yet, they can sit around do stuff I can't do. It's not what I call bluegrass, but a trend, a generation gap.

"They ain't enough young folks coming up who can play what I call the straight bluegrass. The McCoury boys can do it. But to tell you the honest truth, they're the only ones I've heard who can do it. Oh, you might find one banjo picker who can do it. You might find a guitar picker out here who can too, but as a band. I don't know of a band who can play what I, a 55-year-old, call the straight Monroe—Jimmy Martin—Osborne Brothers—Ralph Stanley—Country Gentlemen type bluegrass. It's going to be a lost art one day. Because there ain't enough young people learning it."

Fairchild is businessman enough to realize that non-musical forces will influence the future course of bluegrass. "The future of bluegrass music depends on the economy. If the economy stays good, the festivals are going to hold up good. The people that support festivals are working people. They go to work Monday through Friday. If they can keep their jobs and keep good pay, then bluegrass music will be in good shape."

Raymond Fairchild has staked his future in the lovely, verdant valley east of

Soco Gap where the tourists have come summer and fall. Those looking for entertainment will find where Fairchild and his guests hold forth at the Maggie Valley Opry House.



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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