

# A Sparkling Swift Creek



Gwyn Millard

Fran Willis, Tony Butler, Sharon McGhee, Carl McGhee, and Buck Wade

by Arthur Menius

The vocals, that's the hard part. You can buy a better mandolin or banjo, but all you can do is get the best out of the voice God gave you. Even if you can sing like Jimmy Martin, you still need to find strong vocalists, who can also pick, to complement you. Even when you have your band of songbirds assembled, the group has to achieve that special vocal quality and blend that distinguishes a Quicksilver, say, from the outfit that has won the local fiddlers' convention five years running.

The singing, that's what enraptured veteran fiddler Buck Wade when he first heard the Swift Creek Band in the sweltering, fly-infested saloon of a riding stables east of Raleigh, North Carolina during the July of 1982. The group had been performing in public for only five months. Wade says, "I heard this Swift Creek group, cold and amateurish as they could be, and doing the finest work I'd heard in a long time. It made goosebumps come up on my arm. Back in the old days of the Louvin Brothers was the closest I'd ever heard to it. I was very pleased when they asked me to join them, because I'd never heard anything presented quite the way these people presented the vocals."

The Swift Creek sound usually involves guitarist Tony Butler taking the lead, mandolin picker Sharon McGhee singing tenor, and Carl McGhee, the bass player, adding the baritone. The three do switch vocal parts on occasion, while ban-

joman Fran Willis sometimes chimes in on bass. With Wade on fiddle, the band plays modern bluegrass music: traditional instrumental work mixed with innovative vocals. Their carefully selected material ranges from Monroe standards to Willis/C. McGhee originals, with a soul-satisfying dose of gospel.

"We want to stand out in a crowd," says Willis, "but not move so far out that we sever the roots."

Both the sacred songs and the intricate, beautiful vocal arrangements reflect Carl McGhee's background in gospel music. Primarily using trio setups, the McGhees and Butler sometimes layer their harmonies so that they sound as one voice, while on other occasions they separate and support each other in the three bluegrass parts. Like the Bluegrass Album Band, Swift Creek uses three microphones placed closely together so that they can hear each other without the P.A. and execute the sharp looking stage movements of the one mike days. In all things Swift Creek emphasizes teamwork.

Both the singing style and the band itself sort of fell together as if by natural selection. The process began during the late 1970s when Willis bought a banjo to ease a broken heart.

"Fran's the one who actually started the group," Butler points out. "He got a banjo and started to teach me the chords for guitar on it."

"Tony didn't know any bluegrass songs and I only knew a few," Willis adds. "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" was the first one we started picking. I

reckon we picked it twenty times that first night. We started playing together and played in a little backyard bluegrass band for a while."

Badly infected with the bluegrass germ, they spread the fever to Sharon and Carl McGhee, with whom Butler had worked as a high school folk duo. Willis and Butler even brought the Raleigh couple a mandolin and a bass. Originally planning just to play for fun and an occasional pig picking (a Carolina term for a bar-b-que which usually features music), the young group discovered the special affinity of their voices demanded more.

"From the first day we knew that we were going to be different by our vocals," Carl claims. "I stayed after Tony and Fran to come over here after they'd brought me the bass. When Sharon came home from work, she'd get in there and start singing with us. The whole time we've been together the vocals have been what excited us about our band; what really got us turned on."

The foursome eventually adopted the name Swift Creek from the community in which Willis lives just south of Raleigh. "We started out playing here and there," he recalls. "Then Buck came to see us play one night at Harper's Green Acres Saloon."

Wade brought the young outfit just the touch of experience and professionalism it needed. A native of Frostburg, Maryland, he had followed the siren call of country music while still a teenager. During the 1950s he became a staff musician at the WWVA World's Original Jamboree in Wheeling, West Virginia. There he worked with a variety of country and bluegrass acts including Hawkshaw Hawkins, Wilma Lee and Stony Cooper, and Smiley Burnette. By 1961, however, he had grown "thoroughly disgusted" with the music business. He quit for nearly two decades, eventually becoming a real estate agent in Cary, North Carolina. In 1979 his son John, then thirteen, fell under the spell of bluegrass. "I got him a bass, and I showed him what to do with it. That's how I got back into music." Soon Wade found himself part of a teenaged bluegrass band called Cumberland Grass. By the time John and company left him to form the core of Cary's Stony Runn in the fall of 1981, the elder Wade had bluegrass back in his blood. John insisted that his father meet the Swift Creek outfit.

Once Wade joined, Swift Creek began to move fast. The five enthusiastically launched into a nine month period of practicing forty plus hours a week despite holding day jobs. They learned that instrumentally it is the whole that counts most. Working tastefully and within their abilities,

Swift Creek's picking stresses cooperation, showcasing, rather than distracting from, their considerable vocal ability. Only Butler and Wade have the years of experience to shine on their breaks. Willis, however, has developed a notey, melodic banjo style that complements the fiddling well. Carl moves the band along solidly, and Sharon displays good rhythm work and growing confidence on her breaks.

A crucial decision, according to Carl, came early. "We were trying to copy the big name bands, but we fell out of that trap. We can't sound like the Bluegrass Cardinals or Quicksilver; we're not those people. We started concentrating on developing what we have here. I've seen so much improvement since we sat down and talked about it."

"We don't want to copy anybody," Fran adds, "but we did take some serious lessons from the people who have made it." Swift Creek learned to stress the entertainment value of their performance. While always professional in bearing and appearance, on stage the band always lets the audience know that they are having a great time playing the music they love.

Swift Creek made its major festival debut at Bass Mountain in 1982. While being a unknown band with an original sound involves a lot of hardships including poor times and restless audiences, the fivesome are willing to pay their dues. That process involved going into the studio before they really felt ready to in order to have an album out before the 1983 festival season.

While "Smokey Mountain Girl" (Outlet 1039) displays some of the usual first album problems of uncorrected mistakes and a couple of overdone numbers, it certainly outclasses most of the pack. The record excels in energy, excitement, and ambition. Two original songs, the title cut and "The Sunshine of His Love," sparkle, demonstrating the potential of the Swift Creek sound. Recording plans involve another LP of mostly original gospel material.

The Fran Willis/Carl McGhee writing team developed by chance. "Slowly Passing By" was one I wrote a long time ago and threw away," Fran reports. "Somehow or another the paper ended up over here and Carl found it. He messed around with it, rewrote it, and made a song out of it." Since then the group has developed a number of songs they feel are ready for public consumption.

"When Fran writes the lyrics," Carl says, "he gives them to me and I put the music to it. The whole band is responsible for putting the arrangement together. We all get it just like we want it."

While 1982 witnessed the beginning of the band, 1983 served as a year of growth and development for Swift Creek. They produced their first album and sold enough copies, including over the counter sales at local stores, to pay for it. Their gigs improved to such bookings as the Labor Day Camp Springs festival, the State Fair, a pig picking at the Governor's Mansion, and the massive Tobacco Day U.S.A. festivities, where they followed a speech by Ricky Skaggs. 1984 was a year of expansion with dates booked as far away as Ohio.

Swift Creek has reinvested all of their profits into the band. Their

thriftiness allowed them to buy and recondition a full sized bus, which John Maness of the Bass Mountain Boys located for them. It's all part of Swift Creek's dedication and willingness to make the sacrifices that success demands. The members already see results from their efforts.

"We feel we're over the hurdles," Wade says. "We're about a year and a half ahead of where we thought we'd be..."

"But we're about a year and a half or two years behind where we want to be," Carl finishes for him.



# The Picker's Pledge

## Ten Rules For Loyal Bluegrassers

by Sarah F. Majors

1. Forever respect and honor our father of bluegrass, Bill Monroe.
2. Always have a pick with you, for those unexpected pickin' sessions.
3. Attend at least one new bluegrass festival a year.
4. Keep your instrument dusted (even if you can't always practice regularly—it will still look like it!).
5. Write your favorite bluegrass musician a fan letter.
6. Be patient and kind to those just beginning—after all, you were there once yourself.
7. Keep the campgrounds clean at the festivals; help preserve the reputation that bluegrassers care about their surroundings.
8. Always help little old ladies carrying bass fiddles.
9. Enter at least one pickin' contest—or at least think about it.
10. Never fail to express your love and devotion for bluegrass music, then we will always keep it alive and growing.

