

A WORD ABOUT OLD-TIME STRING BAND MUSIC

What is this “string band music” we celebrate at the Georgia String Band Festival and Gordon County Fiddlers’ Convention? It has gone by many names—string band, old-timey, mountain music—but, in general, old-time or string band music was played and recorded before World War II and, especially, the Great Depression era of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Generally, string band music is performed by smaller groups, perhaps one, two, or three performers, lacks the extended, improvised instrumental solos of bluegrass, consists of relatively traditional song structures, and is often not strictly symmetrical in its rhythms. It was the music of the hearth, the home, and farmstead.

Old-time music has extreme local variations, and, commercially, its main means of distribution other than live performance was sales of 78 rpm records through furniture stores, general goods stores, or music stores like Calhoun’s L. Moss Music Company. On a Calhoun Saturday at a fiddlers’ convention, one might find 5,000 folks crowding downtown in their wagons and buggies, craning their necks to listen to old-time fiddlers like Fiddlin’ John Carson, A. A. Gray, or Resaca’s Bill Chitwood. Widely popular in the old-time tradition were Uncle Dave Macon and the Carter Family, while locally we had our own Georgia Yellow Hammers and Andrew and Jim Baxter.

On the other hand, is a child of old-time string band music and the major social, cultural, and technological upheavals in this country. After WW II, a great migration occurred to cities and industrial centers. Radio—and later television—brought new and exciting musical and other ideas to people’s ears. tends to feature larger ensembles with various combinations of vocalists. The songs often have extended instrumental solos, and more complex structures. While old-time tends to pull its material from a local, set tradition, bluegrass performers often play songs from other traditions, including pop music. If old-time is the old man from the mountain, bluegrass is his tamed and domesticated offspring.

—*Joseph Blake Evans*