

CHARLES K. WOLFE

KENTUCKY COUNTRY



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**Folk and Country
Music of Kentucky**

CHARLES K. WOLFE

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Frontispiece: Unidentified musician. *Courtesy University of Louisville Photographic Archives, from Jean Thomas, The Traipsin' Woman, Collection.*

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a few years Weaver was quite well known, touring and recording extensively; he even acted as a “talent scout” for Okeh, much as Dennis Taylor did for Gennett, auditioning performers and bringing them to recording sessions in St. Louis and New York City. Among his early discoveries were the great jazz singer Helen Humes, another Louisville native, who went on to fame with Count Basie and Harry James; Whistler’s Jug Band; and the Kentucky Jubilee Four. For a time Weaver also played in an early string band headed by black fiddler E.L. Coleman. By the end of the 1920s though, he began to slip out of music, and he spent most of the rest of his life working quietly as a chauffeur in Louisville. He died in obscurity in 1960, never having told his story, never having explained where he got his guitar artistry or whom he passed it on to. Today his original recordings are rare collector’s items and his remarkable guitar playing is heard only by a few scholars and enthusiasts.

Even more influential, and about as legendary, was another black instrumentalist from the area named Arnold Shultz. As folklorist Bill Lightfoot has pieced together the early development of the Travis lick, a key figure in the chronology seems to be Shultz, the same musician from whom Bill Monroe and his brothers learned so much as boys. Though he died in 1931, Shultz is still talked about by hundreds of musicians from western Kentucky who knew him, heard him play, or heard of him. Reports of his ability on the guitar and fiddle are legion. Tex Atchison, lead fiddler for the Prairie Ramblers, even credits him with teaching him to play the “long bow” style of “swing fiddle” as opposed to the short “jiggy bow” style Tex had learned from his father. Researchers have found that Shultz was born in Ohio County in 1886 near the Rough River town of Cromwell; his father was an ex-slave and most of the family members played in a string band while Arnold was growing up.

Friends recall that as a young man Arnold possibly played on riverboats, and that he travelled widely in the days before World War I. No one knows what other influences he may have been exposed to during these travels, but probably by 1900 he had evolved a distinct finger-picking style that involved picking out the lead and using the thumb to generate his own rhythm. At one point he was apparently using goose quills for finger picks. He was what the local lingo called a “musicianer,” a musician more noted for his instrumental abilities than his singing, and he often travelled with a man named Walter Taylor, a well-known mandolin player. This is probably the same Walter Taylor who later led a Louisville string band and recorded for Victor and Paramount under the name Taylor’s Weatherbirds. Taylor’s guitarist was John Byrd, a remarkable songster who recorded a version of “Old Timbrook Blues” (a “Molly and Tenbrooks” song) in 1930, suggesting that Taylor’s band shared some elements of white folk music tradition. Shultz routinely played with dozens of white string bands in western Kentucky, including those headed by Bill Monroe’s famous “Uncle Pen” Vandiver, teaching white and black alike new chords and new styles. Forrest Faught, a well-known white band leader from McHenry in the western coal-mining district, for a time performed with Shultz as the lead fiddler of his band. He recalls that occasionally people at dances would come up to him and say, “Hey, you got a colored fiddler. We don’t want that.” Faught would respond, “The reason I’ve got the man is because he’s a good musician. The color doesn’t mean anything. You don’t hear color, you hear music.” Faught later recalled, “Around McHenry, white people would invite Arnold Shultz into their homes. He was very welcome. Big crowds came in to listen to him. It was something unusual.”

Shultz was a familiar figure throughout western and central Kentucky in the 1920s, wandering around with his guitar slung across his back by an old cord, playing a tune for a nickel at coal camps,

railroad depots, courthouse lawns. For much of his life he continued to work during the days loading coal, and perhaps gathering for jam sessions under the coal tipples at night or playing in the rough roadhouses of the area for fifty or seventy-five cents a night. One of his fellow musicians remembers how Shultz looked in those days: “He always wore a big black hat and he’d hang it on the back of the old split-bottom cane chair he sat in.” He would play “an old common flat-top guitar that probably didn’t cost over twenty dollars. It was a large guitar and I’m sure that it had a round sound hole and the old-time pegs that hung down under it.” Other people recall that Shultz’s guitar was “huge,” much bigger than average. He never sought to record, possibly because of an inveterate shyness (he also disliked having his photo taken), possibly because record companies were not receptive to black musicians who played “hillbilly music.” By the mid-1920s, according to most accounts, Shultz was using a straight pick rather than a thumb pick, and playing in a style which some witnesses compared to that of Blind Blake, a black Florida guitarist whose records were widely heard in the 1920s. Shultz died prematurely at age forty-five in 1931, and members of his family repeat a well-known tale that he was poisoned by jealous white musicians. Others, though, tell a more probable story that he died from a stroke while getting on a bus. His death certificate indicates that he died from a “mitral lesion,” an organic heart disease.

About 1920 Shultz had met and impressed a young white man from the area, Kennedy Jones. Jones was from Cleaton, just south of Central City; by 1923-1924 he was adapting some of Shultz’s style to fit his own music, and was playing pop tunes of the day, like “Tuck Me to Sleep in My Old Kentucky Home” in a rhythm-and-melody style that had everyone talking. One of his pupils, Mose Rager, recalled: “He was the first guy I ever saw play with a thumbpick. And so I just went crazy about that kind of pickin’. He’d go way down on the neck, you know, and he could pick a tune out on the guitar and it’d sound like *two* guitars playin’.” Kennedy also showed locals how to make more sophisticated and complicated chords. In the end, though, he decided not to pursue his music and eventually moved to Cincinnati.

By the late 1920s the rolling hills around Muhlenberg County were filled with coal miners experimenting with the new guitar styles. While other parts of Kentucky enjoyed fiddle and banjo contests as an outlet for local amateurs, Muhlenberg County was routinely staging guitar picking contests. Whereas eastern Kentucky musicians stuck to age-old fiddle tunes and ballads, the western Kentucky musicians were more interested in doing their own versions of popular songs of the day: “Yes, Sir, That’s My Baby,” “Five Foot Two,” “Sweet and Lovely,” “House of David Blues.” To be sure, they did them in folk-derived finger-picking styles, but did them nonetheless. Two key men emerged from this “third generation” of choke-style pickers: Ike Everly and Mose Rager. Ike was a second-generation coal miner who lived and worked around Drakesboro and Central City; he and his brothers Charlie and Leonard formed an Everly Brothers string band that won a certain local fame. Then Ike made a fairly successful attempt to go professional: he worked with Charlie Underwood, Walter Cobb, and Melvin Bethel in Chicago in the 1930s, touring with the WLS road show. Walter Cobb recalls that Ike was playing “Cannonball Rag” by this time, and telling him, “You play the five string banjo—why can’t I play it that way on the guitar?” Later Ike teamed with Red Green and performed over WJJD in Chicago, but made only a handful of recordings. By 1952 he was back in Kentucky running a local “Everly Family” radio show that helped his two sons, Phil and Don, get started on their own careers as one of the most popular rock and roll duos of the 1950s.

For the Osborne Brothers, see Bob Artis, *Bluegrass* (New York: Nordon, 1975); and their own comments on the jacket notes to *From Rocky Top to Muddy Bottom*, CMH LP 9008 (1977). The section on newgrass was based on my own research, as well as valuable comments by Neil Rosenberg. Much of the discussion of Mose Rager was based on the research of William Lightfoot ("Mose Rager of Muhlenberg County: 'Hey, c'mon bud, play me a good rag,'" *Adena* 4 [1979] : 3-41), as well as my own interviews with Rager. Material on Ike Everly is from the author's interviews with Walter Cobb of Chicago and Mrs. Ike Everly of Brentwood, Tennessee. Merle Travis has written several autobiographical chapters for the *JEMF Quarterly*, and some of the quotes here were from his notes to the LP *Merle Travis Guitar/Standards*, CMH 9024 (1980). An excellent account of Travis's coal-mining songs is Archie Green, *Only a Miner: Studies in Recorded Coal-Mining Songs* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1972).

Material on Arnold Shultz comes from the author's research and from Keith Lawrence's fine article on Shultz that originally appeared in the Owensboro (Kentucky) *Messenger-Inquirer*, March 2, 1980. Good background on the Louisville jug band scene, as well as on Sylvester Weaver, comes from articles in a "Kentucky Blues" series published in *Living Blues*, nos. 51 and 52 (Summer and Fall 1981), by Paul Garon and Jim O'Neal. A more detailed history is *The Jug Bands of Louisville*, by Fred E. Cox, John Randolph, and John Harris, to be published in 1982 by Storyville Publications in England. Material on Grandpa Jones is from my extensive interviews with Grandpa and Ramona Jones; and the discussion of Stringbean is from my interviews with Robert Akeman and Kirk McGee, and the files at the Country Music Foundation Archive and Media Center.

Chapter 6

Both Loretta Lynn and Tom T. Hall have written autobiographies: Loretta Lynn and George Vecsey, *Coal Miner's Daughter* (New York: Henry Regnery, 1976); and Tom T. Hall, *The Storyteller's Nashville* (New York: Doubleday, 1971). For details about Loretta Lynn's recording career, see Laurence J. Zwisohn, *Loretta Lynn's World of Music* (Los Angeles: John Edwards Memorial Foundation, 1980), JEMF Special Series, no. 13. Useful in gaining an overview of modern country music are Bill C. Malone, *Southern Music, American Music* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1979); Dorothy Horstman, ed., *Sing Your Heart Out, Country Boy* (New York: Dutton, 1975); Pat Carr et al., *The Illustrated History of Country Music* (New York: Doubleday, 1979); and Fred Dellar, Roy Thompson, and Doug Green, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Country Music* (New York: Harmony Books, 1977).

The description of Red Foley's first night at the Opry comes from Chet Atkins with Bill Neely, *Country Gentleman* (New York: Henry Regnery, 1975). Other material is drawn from personal research, interviews, and the files of the Country Music Foundation Archive and Media Center, Nashville, Tennessee.

Selected Discography

Recordings by Single Artists and Groups

- Dick Burnett and Leonard Rutherford. *Ramblin' Reckless Hobo*. Rounder 1004. [Sixteen selections originally recorded in 1926-1931, with illustrated booklet]
- Cliff Carlisle. *Cliff Carlisle*. Vols. 1 and 2. Old Timey 103, 104. [Vintage recordings from the 1930s, including most of his hits]
- J.D. Crowe. *Bluegrass Holiday*. Rebel 1598. [A reissue of Crowe's 1968 debut album with Red Allen, Doyle Lawson, and Bobby Sloane]
- and the New South. *My Home Ain't in the Hall of Fame*. Rounder 0103. [A more recent album typical of Crowe's experimental work]
- Skeeter Davis. *The Best of Skeeter Davis*. RCA LSP-3374
- Red Foley. *The Red Foley Story*. MCA 2-4053. [Twenty-four selections, including most hits]
- Ed Haley. *Parkersburg Landing*. Rounder 1010. [Home recordings done by this legendary fiddler in the 1940s; extensive notes]
- Tom T. Hall. *Greatest Hits*. Mercury SR-61369
- Roscoe Holcomb. *The High Lonesome Sound*. Folkways 2368
- Aunt Molly Jackson. *Aunt Molly Jackson*. Rounder 1002. [Reissues of her 1939 recordings for the Library of Congress]
- Grandpa Jones. *The Grandpa Jones Story*. With Ramona Jones and the Brown's Ferry Four. CMH 9007. [A 2-LP set of Grandpa's most famous recordings, newly re-recorded in stereo]
- Buell Kazee. *Buell Kazee*. June Appal JA 009. [More recent recordings by the banjoist and singer, with an illustrated booklet]
- Bradley Kincaid. *Mountain Ballads and Old Time Songs*. Old Homestead OHCS 107. [Sixteen reissues of Kincaid favorites originally recorded in the 1920s and 1930s, including "Barbara Allen" and "Some Little Bug"]
- Loretta Lynn. *Loretta Lynn's Greatest Hits*. MCA 1.
- Asa Martin and His Cumberland Rangers. *Doctor Ginger Blue*. Rounder 0031. [A fine cross-section of Martin's band in the 1970s, with an extensive booklet of notes]
- Monroe Brothers. *Feast Here Tonight*. RCA-Bluebird AXM2-5510. [Thirty-two selections from the brothers' 1930s recordings]
- Bill Monroe. *The Original Bluegrass Band*. Rounder Special Series 06. [Twelve of Monroe's 1946-1947 Columbia recordings with Flatt and Scruggs, with revealing jacket notes]
- . *The Best of Bill Monroe*. MCA 2-4088. [Twenty selections from Monroe's later work]