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Southern Roots and Branches

Forty Years of the New Lost City Ramblers

by Philip F. Gura

In the early spring of 1999 I drove out of Lexington, Virginia, and halfway up a mountain turned onto the private drive that led to Mike Seeger's home. Soon enough John Cohen arrived from New York and Tracy Schwarz from West Virginia. Over a weekend I taped hours of interviews with the New Lost City Ramblers, one of the premier folk revival groups. The incubator for both bluegrass and country music as we now know it, the Ramblers were the first to take their inspiration and repertoire from the "hillbilly" or old-time music that had been commercially recorded in the South from the late 1920s through the 1930s. I also had access to a significant part of their paper archive, including personal letters and business contracts, and was in contact by email with Tom Paley, one of the Ramblers' original members who now lives in London. What follows is the complex story of a group of northern, urban musicians who made it their life's work to bring rural, southern music onto the national stage and in the process significantly contributed to what became a world-wide movement in "roots" music.



Modern interest in rural music played by white southerners—what we now call “old-time music”—began as part of the Folk revival, a complex, multi-layered cultural movement that nurtured the individual talents who first performed as the New Lost City Ramblers (NLCR) in 1958. Beginning in the 1930s, the study and performance of American folksong had been associated with politics. Many of its proponents across the political spectrum believed that the music contained enduring but forgotten values that could still speak to contemporary social problems. Inspired and encouraged by such pioneering scholars as John and Alan Lomax, Charles Seeger, and others, urban performers like the Almanac Singers and the Weavers in the late 1940s and early 1950s joined Leadbelly, Woody Guthrie, and other traditional musicians to awaken audiences to their commonality with the “folk.” With the House Un-American Activities Committee’s increasing intimidation of the Left, however, politically inspired folksong was forced underground, the people’s songs appropriated by such popular musicians as Harry Belafonte, the Highwaymen, and the Kingston Trio.

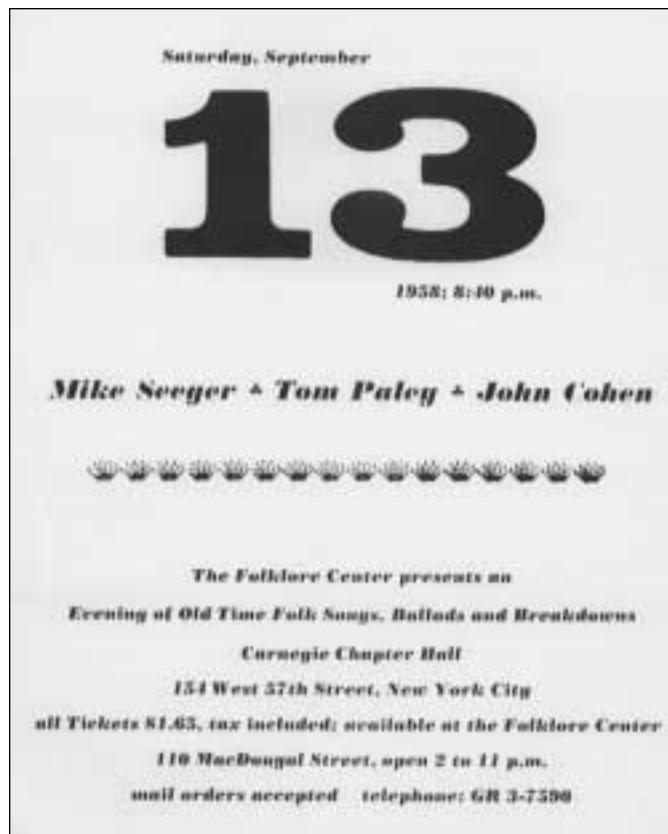
Those who religiously read each issue of *Sing Out!*, a journal devoted to the notion that folksong could promote social change, held their noses at such rank commercialism and sought new venues for their music. One of these venues was Beat culture, whose influence was widespread in American art and music as well



John Cohen (left), Tom Paley (middle), and Mike Seeger (right) played together for the first time in 1958, forming the initial incarnation of the New Lost City Ramblers. Original photograph by Robert Frank; copy reprinted courtesy of John Cohen.

as in literature. Centered in New York City's Greenwich Village and San Francisco's North Beach, but with outposts in many other cities and university communities, the Beats saw through the thin veneer of consumer culture to the emptiness within and shunned a political system that, from their point of view, ignored the nation's social ills. The Beats spoke to many folksingers' own disenchantment with the American way and welcomed them into their coffee-houses and lofts. By the late 1950s, interest in folk music, as much as in jazz, was a trademark of the counterculture.

Before moving to clubs folk music flourished in the open air, nowhere more so than in Washington Square, near New York University and Greenwich Village. Since 1940 this had been the city's meeting place for folksingers, including NLCR's Tom Paley, an admired virtuoso on guitar and banjo. Raised in Queens by politically progressive parents, Paley studied at City College before entering graduate school in mathematics at Yale, where he crossed paths with John Cohen, a freshman fine arts major whom he had previously met in the city. In the early 1950s, Cohen and Paley organized hootenannies in New Haven, while still frequenting the Sunday afternoon sings in Washington Square. By the early 1950s, Paley and a few others began to steer an important segment of these urban musicians away



This 1958 handbill for their September 13, 1958, performance is the earliest concert announcement for the trio who soon would be best known as the New Lost City Ramblers. Courtesy of John Cohen.

from the then popular English ballads and political songs toward country music. The shift was crucial, for it distinguished Paley and Cohen from such proponents of the “art” folksong as Richard Dyer-Bennett and John Jacob Niles, on the one hand, and politically motivated artists like Pete Seeger and the Weavers, on the other.

A few hundred miles south in Baltimore, Mike Seeger, a conscientious objector during the Korean War, was fulfilling his alternative national service as a dishwasher in a tuberculosis hospital. Born in New York City, he was the son of renowned musicologist Charles Seeger and Ruth Crawford Seeger, a modernist composer, educator, and transcriber and arranger of folksongs. With his many siblings, including his half-brother Pete, sister Peggy, an important folk musician in her own right, and sister Penny, who would marry Cohen, Seeger grew up on politics and folk music, and started to play the guitar at eighteen. In the mid-1950s Seeger had no trouble finding music in the Washington/Baltimore area, with its many clubs and country music parks where transplanted southerners who had come to the city for work congregated on weekends.

In April 1958 Cohen, who had met Mike Seeger at Pete Seeger’s home a few years earlier, traveled to Baltimore to visit Paley, who was teaching at the University of Maryland, and to tape his collection of old 78 rpm records of hillbilly music. There, John Dildine, Paley’s friend and host of a folk music program on FM radio, arranged for the three musicians to perform live on his show. It went well, and after returning to New York, Cohen arranged for the group to perform in Izzy Young’s Folklore Concert Series. Moe Asch, the owner of Folkways records, agreed to let the musicians cut a record. The group performed at Carnegie Recital Hall in September 1958 and recorded the next day. Over the next month, as Cohen worked on the design of the album cover, he played around with three words that had stuck in his head: “New,” “City,” and “Lost.” He finally settled on the New Lost City Ramblers as a name for the group: an amalgam of a favorite tune, hillbilly performer J. E. Mainer’s “New Lost Train Blues”; a popular southern band of the 1930s, Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers; and a reference to the urban settings in which the three played “old-timey” music, as they called it on an early album.

Over the next three years, the NLCR became one of the best-known groups in the Folk revival, in large part because of their unusual repertoire, primarily songs and tunes, as they put it, “recorded by commercial companies and the Library of Congress in the southeastern mountains between 1925–1935.” Seeger had grown up listening to this music, and like Paley and Cohen, he welcomed the reissues of such material on LPs that began to appear in the 1940s and 1950s, most famously in Harry Smith’s six-record *Anthology of American Folke Music* (1952). But the original 78 rpms were crucial to the NLCR’s early development.

This music attracted the NLCR for various reasons, not the least for its beauty



J. E. Mainer, who recorded "New Lost Train Blues," with his Mountainers (left) and Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers (below) gave John Cohen the inspiration for the name New Lost City Ramblers. Photograph of J. E. Mainer courtesy of the John Edwards Memorial Collection in the Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill; photograph of Charlie Poole from the Gus Meade Collection, also in UNC's Southern Folklife Collection, reprinted courtesy of Douglas S. Meade.



and sense of immediacy. But given the political tenor of the Folk revival, they were also “very aware,” as Cohen put it, “of the politics” of what they sang. The music’s chief appeal to Cohen, for example, had much to do with his being an artist involved in the Beat movement who felt a nagging dissatisfaction with modern life in general and suburbia in particular. The southern music provided a connection, if only vicarious, to a rural ideal. On these old 78 rpm records, he later recalled, he heard the “voices of people from the rural tradition” confronting the problems of modernization in their own way “and singing about them in their own style.”

The main attraction for Mike Seeger was the music itself and its accessibility. Moreover, it was “a home-made thing,” the expression of “working people” who said things “more directly” than many of the urban folksingers who later commercialized the people’s songs. Although Seeger was raised in comfortable circumstances, early experiences spent among working-class people helped to shape his musical taste. Later, however, when Seeger sang these and other working people’s songs, he never pretended to be one of the folk. Rather, as an urban folksinger he selected “the best of rural song” and through it represented what he perceived “as the lasting important things that people say.”

Old-time country music meant much to the NLCR personally, but they had to educate others to appreciate it. By the late 1950s, for example, such material was usually heard, as Paley put it, only in “the slick, modernized, carefully arranged approach of the Weavers or the Tarriers,” and Paley’s disgust at the predictability and tedium of these songs drew him to Smith’s landmark anthology. The NLCR, in contrast, never merely imitated the original recordings but showed how the music could be revived and redirected for urban audiences. The NLCR “does not offer enervated, literal note-for-note recreations of the originals,” critic Pete Welding wrote in 1961 in *Down Beat* magazine, but rather “are true to the spirit of tradition (in which they have steeped themselves) without becoming slaves.” Paley aptly termed the result “a music of the borderline,” a style that bridged the gap between the past and present. “Although we learn our songs from old records,” Cohen concluded, “we are finding our own voices after all.” In so doing, they gave southern traditional material a new lease among new audiences.

In some quarters, however, there was a backlash against such urban appropriation of southern rural music. As early as 1959 in an article in *Sing Out!*, for example, folklorist Alan Lomax claimed that the “folkniks” didn’t work hard enough at their singing style and thus missed the emotional content—and the implicit politics—of the traditional music they presented. Although Lomax was not speaking specifically about the NLCR, in the same issue he was rebutted by Cohen himself, who claimed that Lomax, recently returned from eight years in England, was out of touch with the American folk scene. The current emphasis in folk-song, Cohen wrote, “is no longer on social reform” but rather “is focused more



Mike Seeger (center) found himself attracted to traditional music because “it was the expression of ‘working people’ who said things ‘more directly’ than many of the urban folksingers who later commercialized the people’s songs.” Original photograph by Robert Frank; copy reprinted courtesy of John Cohen.

on a search for real and human values.” “We are looking within ourselves,” he noted, and not “for someone to lead us.” The NLCR’s sincerity was apparent to music critic Nat Hentoff, who welcomed their amalgam of old and new. “They retain their respect and affection for the traditions,” he wrote in *The Reporter* in 1962, “but also are gradually finding ways to express their own particular skills and interests.”

We also have to recall that as “alive, vigorous, and wholly convincing” as the NLCR’s rendition of southern music was, at first there were very few venues for it. The group’s big break was an invitation to the first Newport Folk Festival in the summer of 1959. In the program notes Billy Faier claimed that the festival would



When the New Lost City Ramblers played in Chicago during their 1960 tour of the Midwest a local critic reported that, “they whomp and fiddle away at songs about the unhappy ’30s and the NRA blue eagle.” The back of this NLCR fan card featuring their own blue eagle reads:

“I AM LOST. Please return me to 1932.”

Courtesy of John Cohen.

provide “what is probably the very first representative picture of American Folk Music ever held on the concert stage,” by which he meant a combination of “the scholars, the city-bred folksingers, and the ‘authentic’ singers.” By all accounts, the NLCR were a big hit, appearing on the same bill with Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, Odetta, Earl Scruggs, and others, and for their unique sound they received a lot of national press attention. The following year they patched together their first tour, playing at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, the University of Chicago, and the Gate of Horn, a popular Chicago music club where, the Sunday *Chicago Tribune* noted, “clad in vests, crumpled shirts, nondescript trousers and unshined shoes they whomp and fiddle away at songs about the unhappy ’30s and the NRA blue eagle.” They continued to the West Coast, where they appeared at the University of California Folk Festival at Berkeley and at Stanford, and spent a week teaching at Idyllwild, an early folk music camp in the hills south of Los Angeles. Most important, they also landed a five-week booking at Ash Grove in Hollywood, a well-known “concert-cabaret house” run by Ed Pearl, who two years earlier had founded the Folk Arts Society in Los Angeles. Enough was happening for them to decide to give up other commitments—Cohen was a free-lance photographer, Paley was teaching college math at Rutgers, and Seeger had work in Washington as a recording technician—to try to bring the old southern sound to audiences all over the country.

They soon discovered, however, that most commercial booking agencies weren’t interested in their kind of act. As a result, they either had to make all their own arrangements or had to educate others to assume the sponsorship and support of such music. The most important such effort was the founding in 1961 of New York’s Friends of Old Time Music (FOTM). To understand the significance

of this organization, recall that in addition to playing old-time music, the NLCR were among the first to bring on stage with them living exemplars of the southern folk tradition, a very significant innovation. Something like this was already occurring at Newport, but through the NLCR's own fieldwork and connections they greatly enlarged urban understanding of the people and culture from which the music came.

Of the group's three members, Seeger had had the most experience in finding such music on the vine, recording, among others, J.C. Sutphin, Louise Foreacre, Snuffy Jenkins, and Smiley Hobbs. The most extraordinary discovery in this period, however, came in 1960 at the Union Grove Fiddlers Convention in North Carolina, which Seeger had urged northern friends to visit. There, Ralph Rinzler found Clarence "Tom" Ashley, a Victor recording artist in the 1920s, and on a later visit the blind musician Arthel ("Doc") Watson. Soon enough Ashley, Watson, fiddler Gaither Carlton, and friends Red Price and Clint Howard were traveling the highways north and west, sometimes sharing bills with the NLCR. By 1964 Seeger had added Dock Boggs to the list.

But the first traditional musician that the NLCR introduced to urban audiences was from closer to home—Seeger's own home, to be exact. On December 23, 1960, Izzy Young put on a concert with the remarkable guitarist Elizabeth Cotten, from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, whom Seeger's mother had employed as a



The New Lost City Ramblers and the Friends of Old Time Music promoted traditional artists such as Kentucky banjoist Roscoe Holcomb and North Carolina singer Elizabeth Cotten. Courtesy of John Cohen.

domestic and whom he had recorded as early as 1952. This event's success instigated the formation of the FOTM. With Rinzler and Cohen as prime movers, the group incorporated and soon brought a remarkable assortment of southern talent to the city. FOTM first showcased the Kentucky singer and banjoist Roscoe Holcomb, whom Cohen had discovered in 1959 on his own collecting trip to the South, and Jean Ritchie, the Greenbriar Boys, and the NLCR. The concert was a success, and subsequently, FOTM featured a wide range of traditional artists. In large measure because of the NLCR's fieldwork and initiative, within a year audiences across the country could hear the kinds of performers of southern rural music that most people thought had vanished with the 1930s.

Showcasing and performing with such musicians raised complex musical and moral issues, and some notes that Cohen made during this period enumerate the "Musical, Moral, and Financial Considerations" of bringing country performers to the city. The "pros" were obvious: the NLCR liked the music, and it represented an important facet of American culture. Moreover, it exposed audiences to "other" musical experiences, the demand for which had grown, particularly on the college circuit in the wake of the NLCR's shows. Bringing traditional performers to the city gave the NLCR a way to return something to them, for the band's experience had shown that the relationship between urban host and country visitor need not be uncomfortable or exploitative. After playing at one festival, for example, Holcomb told Cohen that people there "were as fine as those around my home," something he had not expected. After his rediscovery, Ashley observed even more poignantly, "My life is like a flower, and is now blooming a second time."

The "cons" were various. Some had to do with folk music's association not only with academicians and folklorists but with "folkniks, beatniks, and Washington Square-niks." Other concerns stemmed from the awkwardness that sometimes arose when traditional musicians were presented out of context. Skeptics complained, for example, about artists who did not have a wide enough repertoire or were unsophisticated performers rather than showmen. In 1961, for example, after Cousin Emmy's (Cynthia Mae Carver) appearance in Santa Monica, a friend relayed to Cohen a music critic's complaint that Cousin Emmy "didn't have a corn-cob pipe" and "didn't sing what he thought folksongs were," problems that were "his, not ours," the correspondent concluded. Cohen spoke for the NLCR when he observed that "if the city wants and needs folk music in its souls, then its exchange with country musicians must be a two-way affair." Urban audiences, he continued, "must be willing to understand their way of life and to respect them as people who have something to offer in their way."

Another turning point in the group's early career came in the summer of 1961 when they were invited to play at the Blue Angel, an upscale New York club, and subsequently were reviewed by music critic Robert Shelton in the *New York Times*.



The New Lost City Ramblers found it difficult to earn a living playing as a full-time band, and individual members worked on their own projects in between NLCR gigs. By 1962, Tom Paley (top center) had left the group and eventually moved to Europe. Tracy Schwarz (bottom right) brought his high tenor voice to the group later that year, and the New Lost City Ramblers took the form that would endure into the next millennium. Courtesy of John Cohen.

Although the audience's reaction was mixed—Paley recalls that some of them thought that the NLCR were a comedy act with incidental music—Shelton's favorable mention garnered much national attention, including features in the *Saturday Evening Post* and on television. "The sophisticated confines of the Blue Angel were invaded last week," Shelton began, "by one of the least sophisticated forms of entertainment, old-time country music," as the NLCR "made its debut to an audience that was part quizzical and part enchanted." "Their music has the archaic, quaint but durable quality of an antique," he continued, that "evocatively re-create[s] a far-off time and place." Shelton was pleased that the audience finally warmed to the purposely "rough-hewn quality" of the show, tapping their feet and swizzlesticks "as they got into the rural swing of things." "It appears," he concluded, "that the Ramblers hopefully will broaden the beachhead they've established."

Even with such publicity, though, the beachhead was hard to hold, primarily because despite the fun the NLCR was having with their music, there simply was not enough money to be made from it to support three musicians, one of whom already had a family. When the trio left their day jobs, they had agreed to give the music a year to see if it could support them. By the fall of 1961 they had their answer when they ran into tough times on the West Coast and had to address the group's future.

A series of Seeger Family concerts saved the NLCR financially but did not alleviate the crisis, however, for although Seeger and Cohen still wanted to work full-time at music, Paley, on leave from Rutgers, wanted the group to return to a part-time basis. This problem was not easily resolved, for, as Seeger put it, in addition to economic considerations, there were "personal and musical frictions and differences." When Paley left for Europe in 1962, Seeger and Cohen continued to play music full-time, and thus sought Paley's replacement, even as they understood what a fine musician they had lost. After first considering traditional musician Doc Watson, who graciously declined, they turned to New York City native Tracy Schwarz, whom Mike had known around Baltimore. An ardent NLCR fan and a fine blue grass musician, Schwarz eagerly accepted.

Seeger, Cohen, and Paley still had to resolve legal matters over the use of the NLCR name, but Schwarz fit right in and soon began to make his own mark on the band. He had come to the music in a different way, through an early enjoyment of cowboy songs and commercial country music of the 1940s, and had been playing guitar since he was a boy. While in college in Washington, D.C., during the late 1950s, he had found his way to the same country music parks and festivals, where bluegrass was popular, that Seeger frequented. Encouraging Seeger and Cohen to perform more classic bluegrass, Schwarz also brought a strong, high tenor voice that allowed the group to present more ballad and *a cappella* singing. Within a few years, Schwarz also became deeply immersed in Cajun fiddling, and

it soon became a staple of their shows. By early 1963 the NLCR were on the road again, with an expanded repertoire and the personnel who would stay through the millennium.

BEYOND THE SIXTIES

Within a year, of course, the history of music changed forever as the Beatles and rock music swept the world. “We’ve come to stand out on the American folk scene,” Seeger noted in 1967. “In fact,” he continued, “people consider us to be old timers” because everyone else has “gone over to rock and roll.” But during these same years, the group began to realize how their pioneering work with southern music was bearing new and strange fruit. This thought first struck them in Berkeley in the late 1960s when they realized that what they once had done uniquely was now part of a “mass movement.” “That was a revelation to me,” Seeger recalled of Berkeley’s Colby Street area, where for the first time the NLCR saw a lot of other people playing their kind of music, and playing it socially. “We had provided a lot of tools,” Cohen recalled, and now all sorts of people had taken them up and were using them in new ways to expand the music’s audience.

Among those influenced by NLCR were the Grateful Dead’s Jerry Garcia, who had gotten excited about old-time music when he heard the NLCR at Stanford in 1961, and Ry Cooder, who had taken guitar lessons from Paley when the band played Ash Grove. The larger point is that through the 1960s, the NLCR held a unique place in America’s popular music scene. In stark contrast to the rainbow costume of the psychedelic bands, they still dressed in white shirts and dark vests and trousers, outfits chosen years earlier to represent the finery in which southern country musicians appeared when they came to the city to make 78 rpm records. They were old-fashioned, yet so much so that to those in the know they represented the avant-garde.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, however, personal pressures, particularly those of family and of individual careers, caused each member of the NLCR to redefine his contribution to the group even as his commitment to their central purpose—to increase public awareness of the music that had so long attracted them—remained secure. In Cohen’s case such increased responsibilities meant that instead of touring widely with the NLCR, he often played music in communities around his home in rural New York. In addition, Cohen went south again and collected the material that was issued in 1974 as *High Atmosphere*, music that because of its ageless elegance continues to influence contemporary musicians. He continued filmmaking, winning Guggenheim and Fulbright fellowships and producing a total of fifteen documentaries, and eventually secured a permanent position teaching visual arts at the State University of New York at Purchase.

Around this same time, Seeger moved to York County, Pennsylvania, close to



Although many of their fans in the 1960s adopted psychedelic rainbow colors, the New Lost City Ramblers continued to emulate their southern country heroes by wearing the white shirts, dark vests, and trousers just as the band had done in the late 1950s. Photograph courtesy of John Cohen.

Schwarz, with whom he now played in the Strange Creek Singers. Featuring innovative vocal arrangements, this group also included Alice Gerrard, Hazel Dickens, and banjoist Lamar Grier, later one of Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Boys. Seeger also continued to perform solo as well as to record little-known musicians and was involved in the programming of traditional artists under the auspices of the National Council for the Traditional Arts and the awarding of grants through the National Endowment for the Arts. Schwarz was no less busy, for he was raising a family, farming, and playing in local South Central Pennsylvania bluegrass bands. In addition to his role in the Strange Creek Singers, he recorded several fiddle instruction records for Folkways (including the seminal *Learn to Fiddle Country Style*) and, in the mid-1980s, began to tour widely with Dewey Balfa, a leader in the revival and popularization of Cajun music. Clearly, the NLCR's plates were full, even if the group itself was less in the spotlight than ever before.

Although it is not a topic they enjoy discussing, the NLCR came very close to dissolution in the 1960s, primarily because their varied individual musical interests often conflicted with potential work for the group. In an October 1968 letter to Cohen, Seeger stated the obvious. "All of our needs have been changing constantly over the past 6 years," he wrote, and "I'm sure they will change again." He

also noted that the main problem was basically “economic,” because each member of the group needed other ways to make an income from music even as they understood that, given its name recognition, the NLCR always commanded more money than any of the other groups. “Perhaps the time will come when we’ll be able to function as a growing, operating group,” Seeger concluded, but until then each member would vet the group’s prospective jobs to judge whether the gig was worthwhile for him.

In practice, this meant that over the next two decades they played together infrequently. One high spot in this dry time came in 1978 when they played a twentieth-anniversary concert at Carnegie Hall with special guests Pete Seeger, Elizabeth Cotten, and the Highwoods String Band. Writing in the *Village Voice*, music critic Billy Altman celebrated the success of the occasion, which presented exemplars of the southern folk tradition as well as of the new urban string band movement. “Perhaps there is no greater compliment to pay the NLCR,” he wrote, “than to say that although they started out as young men carrying on a tradition, they have become—and not only by dint of their existence as a band—part of that tradition.”



The New Lost City Ramblers' concerts in Chicago sparked the interest in folk music that brought about the University of Chicago Folk Festival, one of the many lasting effects of NLCR's influence. Courtesy of John Cohen.

The next year they played a concert at the Old Time Fiddle and Mountain Music Festival at Brandywine, Pennsylvania, and then, after the Hudson River Festival in midsummer, at Seeger's and Schwarz's independent suggestions, they began a "rest" that lasted until 1985. That year they reunited to help celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the University of Chicago Folk Festival, which in large measure had been established because of the interest in traditional music generated by their first visit to that city. In an interview with the *Chicago Tribune*, Seeger explained that they were delighted to come out of their "rest" to return to Chicago, where they had played at twelve of the first thirteen festivals. But as to a permanent reunion, he continued, "the group dynamics just won't take it."

In 1995, after a twenty-three-year hiatus, the NLCR returned to the recording studio and issued a compact disc of new material. Here and in two fortieth-anniversary concerts, they demonstrated the same contagious affection for their material that they had when they first began playing. Moreover, the liner notes to the CD indicate their understanding of a new role for themselves as thoughtful historians of their own significance to American culture. In 1978, for example, they had parodied their earlier habit of always trying to educate audiences about their tunes as with straight faces they cited old NLCR albums as the source for some of the music they performed. Two decades later the joke was virtually a fact, for the group had been around so long that they were not regarded as revivalists but as virtually a primary source for what people thought about old-time music as well as for which music they played. Moreover, their reflections on their own early years constitute a virtual history of the revival of old-time music.

THE NLCR'S EXTENDED INFLUENCE

Consider, for example, some of the changes that the NLCR helped to initiate. When they introduced old-time country music to urban audiences in 1958, virtually no one, with the exception of "hillbilly" record collectors, knew or cared about it. Within fifteen years, however, interest in such traditional music had grown until state and federal governments regularly nurtured it. The most striking example of such support was the establishment in 1967 of Rinzler's brain-child, the Smithsonian Festival of American Folk Life, held every summer on the Mall in Washington, D.C. In 1960, for example, he had introduced traditional performers to urban audiences through the FOTM and had also brought folk craftsmen to the Newport Folk Festival, on whose board of directors he sat. Encouraged by Smithsonian director Dillon Ripley, Rinzler built on the successes of these other two ventures and encouraged displays on the Mall of traditional arts from all over the nation. Few remember, however, that the previous year the NLCR had performed on the back steps of the National Museum of American History as part of a Smithsonian-sponsored series, "Music Making—American



Clarence "Tom" Ashley (left) and Artbel "Doc" Watson (right) were among the many southern performers who came to national prominence thanks to the efforts of the New Lost City Ramblers and their friend Ralph Rinzler. Photograph by Daniel Seeger, also held in the Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Style," that essentially was a pilot program for Rinzler's idea. The program was a great success, and the next year saw the first installment of what has become the country's premier showcase for traditional talent. What the NLCR had begun in the early 1960s on their own initiative—bringing rural performers to new audiences—was now federal policy.

In the late 1960s such budding governmental interest in traditional music was further institutionalized in granting agencies, particularly the National Endowment for the Arts, that were charged with preserving and nurturing the country's cultural heritage. Funding was made available to folklorists and musicians to seek out and record hitherto unknown musicians and to introduce them to audiences beyond their home communities. No such money had been forthcoming a decade earlier when Seeger and Cohen had initiated such important work. Seeger recalls, for example, that for his fieldwork for *American Banjo—Three Finger and Scruggs Style*, Moe Asch gave him a hundred dollars, which not only had to get him to the Carolinas but support him for a month while he did his taping. And Cohen had financed his first field trip to Kentucky in 1959 by selling *Life* magazine his

photographs of Beat writers Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and others whom he had known in Greenwich Village.

By the 1970s, however, young folklorists like Blanton Owen and Tom Carter, members of the Durham, North Carolina, Fuzzy Mountain String Band, received federal grants to document fiddle and banjo players of southwest Virginia, a project that resulted in the two-record set *Old Originals*. With folklorist Cece Conway and filmmaker Les Blank, Alice Gerrard received funding to produce a documentary film about the Mt. Airy, North Carolina, fiddler Tommy Jarrell, and, with revivalist musician Andy Cahan, to record octogenarian musicians Luther Davis and Roscoe and Leone Parish. Even Seeger himself finally benefited from such support for a project to document southern flatfoot dance styles. Finally, a whole new category of grants allowed younger musicians and craftspeople to work as apprentices with “masters” of the folk tradition. By the 1980s such funding came as often from state arts agencies as from Washington, and through such support the early vision of the NLCR in expanding the knowledge of, and the audience for, traditional music had borne long-lasting fruit.

Another unforeseen effect of the NLCR’s influence was the return of old-time music to popularity in the South. From the beginning of the revival, city musicians made pilgrimages to the regions in which much of the music originated. As a young boy in 1941, for example, Seeger had first visited the Galax Fiddlers’ Convention with his father, and he returned in 1958 to win its old-time banjo contest. Following the discovery of Ashley and Watson in North Carolina in 1960, more and more revivalists traveled to the area, hoping to find more such musicians.

But beginning in the mid-1970s, something different was happening. Old fiddlers’ contests were revived, and new ones and other old-time music festivals sprang up throughout the South. In a kind of reverse migration, revivalist musicians flocked to these venues and, in some cases, actually moved to the South to be closer to the music’s source. In turn, this attention to the music from outsiders sparked a new interest in it among a younger generation of southerners who began to take pride in what their parents had relinquished under the spell of bluegrass or rock and roll. Traditional old-time musicians now opened their homes not only to transplanted urbanites but to younger local musicians. At the same time, because of the attention lavished on them by the newcomers, older musicians who for decades had played only at home for family and friends became lionized by their communities. Indeed, Jarrell eventually was honored with a National Heritage Award.

Perhaps most significant, the NLCR’s love for and dedication to old-time music virtually engendered a national subculture devoted to it that is documented in Ray Alden’s important recordings, the *Young Fogies*, *The Young Fogies, Vol. II*, and *The American Fogies*. This virtual community of musicians and enthusiasts, many of



The American Fogies collections compiled by Ray Alden and such groups as The Highwoods String Band and The Fuzzy Mountain String Band spurred on the interest in Old Time music fostered by the New Lost City Ramblers. Courtesy of Rounder Records.

whom testify to having been influenced by the NLCR's example, took shape in the 1960s and reached its critical mass in the mid-1970s, following the rise of several younger string bands, most notably the Hollow Rock String Band and the Fuzzy Mountain String Band (both from the Chapel Hill–Durham, North Carolina, area), and the Highwoods String Band (from Ithaca, New York). Through their performances and recordings, these groups and others extended and redirected the revival as they introduced a new generation to southern rural music. "I knew for the first time that the old-time music scene was going somewhere that had nothing to do with the Ramblers," said Cohen about the first album issued by the Fuzzy Mountain Band. "It had its own momentum and started to feed me."

There is an undeniable similarity between what the NLCR had done in the late 1950s in conserving and popularizing southern music and what had occurred three decades earlier when the music was first recorded by the A&R men from Victor, Okeh, and other recording companies. These individuals, who had been



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Courtesy of
John Coben.*

sent to places like Atlanta, Bristol, and Charlotte to find music that would sell, essentially determined what of southern music would be recorded and thus as well a substantial portion of the repertoire of revival groups like the NLCR. Though the motives in each case were certainly different—the NLCR never made a substantial amount of money from their recordings—in both cases outsiders mediated what was presented to outsiders.

In an essay contributed to *Sounds of the South* (1991), folklorist Tom Carter explains how the North Carolina bands began to reconnoiter different, less well-known territory. “What happened in Chapel Hill during the late 1960s and early 1970s,” he observes, must be viewed as “something of a watershed,” a great shift from the “urban north and vocal stylings to the rural south and instrumental music.” The important phrase here is “urban north.” In shunning tunes derived from the early commercial recordings that had been the NLCR’s staple, the Hollow Rock and Fuzzy Mountain bands reshaped the revival by their emphases on

hitherto unknown and unrecorded musicians who were repositories of rare fiddle tunes. In so doing, they implied, as musicologist Burt Feintuch has written in an essay titled “Musical Revivals as Musical Transformation” (1993), “the existence of a purer strain of music” independent of commerce and the mass-mediated marketplace.

In 1958 Cohen had scampered across the George Washington Bridge on his motor scooter to copy rare 78s from Gene Earle’s extensive collection and thus to add them to NLCR’s stock of potential tunes. A decade later, under the spell of Hollow Rock fiddler Alan Jabbour, who had discovered West Virginian Henry Reed and recorded hundreds of his unusual tunes, revivalists in droves combed the hollers of rural America in search of their own mother lodes.

There was, of course, an undeniable romanticism and nostalgia implicit in this search for a rural ideal, for given the ubiquity of radio after the 1930s, by the late 1960s no musician, no matter how rural, could have escaped the influence of commercial music. At an early date the NLCR had recognized this fact and celebrated it in what they understood as the syncretism of old-time country music—Charlie Poole’s potpourri of styles offers the most obvious example. Thus, they particularly welcomed the next important revival group, the Highwoods String Band, who were much more eclectic in their repertoire than the Chapel Hill bands and who, as the NLCR once had, carried the aura of the counterculture.

By the 1970s, however, counterculture did not imply Greenwich Village and the Beats but San Francisco and the Hippies. Some of the personnel in Highwoods, for example, had comprised the Fat City Band, one of the groups around Colby Street in Berkeley that had impressed the NLCR in the 1960s and which Seeger had recorded for his album *Berkeley Farms*. By the early 1970s they had metamorphosed into one of the few bands centered on old-time music that toured nationally, which had always been the NLCR’s ambition. With their humorous lyrics and strong twin-fiddle sound, Highwoods generated a level of excitement about old-time music that had not been felt since the NLCR’s early years. As Cohen put it, “when the Highwoods took off, that carried the music a whole other step forward” because, for both musicians and fans, the music was “an absolute celebration.” Unlike the NLCR, however, they were not primarily celebrating the original musicians or their culture. Rather, the band’s remarkable energy and authenticity originated in an unabashed cultivation of the communal and participatory nature of old-time music that gelled perfectly with the counterculture’s ideals and in their implicit belief that it offered transcendence to those who participated in it. *Everyone* danced when Highwoods played, Cohen recalls, and their unbridled enthusiasm served as the touchstone to a new world of old-time music, with its capitals in such far-flung communities as Seattle, Washington; Bloomington, Indiana; Ithaca, New York; Lexington, Virginia; and Mt. Airy and Asheville, North Carolina.



The New Lost City Ramblers: Tracy Schwarz (left), Mike Seeger (middle), and John Cohen (right).

Their work has saved for future generations a part of southern culture that without them “would exist only through the haze of memory and scratchy 78s.” Courtesy of John Cohen.

We also should consider that before the NLCR’s emergence, most urbanites regarded southern rural music as something that the “folk” played and listened to, and as such it could be viewed only as through a window onto a foreign culture. But when the NLCR looked through that same window, they saw and heard nothing less than America singing to itself. Expressing an idea about musical style that Alan Lomax himself promulgated in the 1950s—that style more than anything else is the hallmark of traditional art—they treated old-time country music as performance rather than as a desiccated body of lyrics or music. Considered in this way, banjo-fiddle duets or the Cajun ensemble were as significant as anything else in the Western musical tradition—as, say, chamber music or opera—and thus as intrinsically worthy of attention. Stunning in its simplicity, this insight marks the NLCR’s radicalism and their claim to uniqueness in American cultural history.

Writing in *The Music Maker* 1967 on the occasion of the NLCR's trip to London, music critic Eric Winter accurately describes how commitment to this aesthetic constitutes the group's "supreme achievement." The NLCR, he wrote, have "carried out a mammoth rescue operation, snatching from the jaws of a juke box society and a swamp of banality some of the finest music in the U.S. tradition." Their promulgation of "old-time country music"—work now entering its fifth decade—has saved for future generations a part of southern culture that, were it not for their efforts, would exist only through the haze of memory and scratchy 78s. And through that act of recovery they have awakened people around the world to the inherent worth of their own folk cultures.

NOTES

A longer version of this essay appeared earlier in two parts in the Old-Time Herald (1999–2000), P.O. Box 51812, Durham, N.C. 27717, email oth@mindspring.com, web site www.mindspring.com/~oth.

Quotations from members of the NLCR come primarily from the following sources: interviews conducted by the author in February 1999 and deposited at the Southern Folklife Collection in the Southern Historical Collection in the library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; liner notes to their albums; and the personal archive, including personal correspondence and many newspaper reviews, of John Cohen dedicated to the group.

New Lost City Ramblers Discography

FOLKWAYS

- New Lost City Ramblers* (1958) FA 2396
- Old Timey Songs for Children* (1950) FC 7064 (10-inch disc)
- Songs from the Depression* (1959) FH 5264
- New Lost City Ramblers, Volume 2* (1959) FA 2397
- New Lost City Ramblers, Volume 3* (1961) FA 2398
- New Lost City Ramblers, Volume 4* (1961) FA 2399
- Tom Paley, John Cohen, and Mike Seeger Sing Songs of the New Lost City Ramblers* (1961) FA 2494
- The New Lost City Ramblers* (1961) EPC 602 (7-inch disc)
- Earth is Earth* (1961) FF 869 (7-inch disc)
- American Moonshine and Prohibition* (1962) FH 5263
- New Lost City Ramblers Volume 5* (1962, released 1963) FA 2399
- Gone to the Country* (1963) FA 2491
- Radio Special #1* (1963) EPC 603 (7-inch disc)
- String Band Instrumentals* (1964) FA 2492
- Rural Delivery Number One* (1965) FA 2496
- Remembrance of Things to Come* (1966) FTS 31035
- Cousin Emmy and the New Lost City Ramblers* (1968) FTS 31015
- Modern Times* (1968) FTS 31027
- On the Great Divide* (1973) FTS 31041

SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS (COMPACT DISCS)

The New Lost City Ramblers: The Early Years, 1958–1962 (1991) SF 40036

The New Lost City Ramblers: Volume Two, 1963–1973, Outstanding in Their Field (1993) SF 40040

There Ain't No Way Out (1997) SF 44098 (Grammy Nominee)

FLYING FISH

20th Anniversary Concert, with Elizabeth Cotten, Highwoods String Band, Pete Seeger,
and The Green Grass Cloggers (1978) 70090

20 Years—Concert Performances (1978) 102 (2-LP set)

VANGUARD

The New Lost City Ramblers & Friends, with Cousin Emmy, Maybelle Carter, Eck Robertson,
Roscoe Holcomb, Dock Boggs, and Sam & Kirk McGee (1963–65, released as CD 1994)

77011-2.