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The Guitar: 'An Orchestra Unto Itself'

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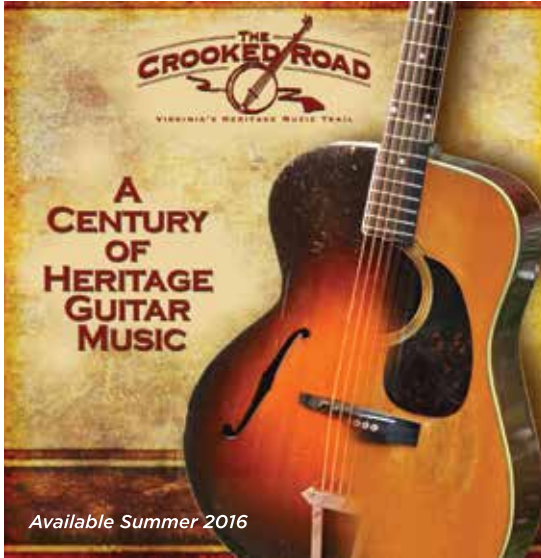
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THE GUITAR: “AN ORCHESTRA UNTO ITSELF”

BY TED OLSON



The guitar, brought by the Spanish to the New World in the seventeenth century, was not common in the Blue Ridge through the dawn of the twentieth century. During his ballad-collecting trips in Appalachia during World War I, English folklorist Cecil Sharp heard many traditional ballads but encountered few guitars. By the mid-1920s, though, as the commercial recording industry began to record musicians from Appalachia, the guitar had become established in the Blue Ridge, and was used in a range of musical settings, whether traditional or popular.

Among the earliest Appalachian musicians to make recordings featuring the guitar were three musicians from the Crooked Road area: Henry Whitter, from Grayson County; Ernest Stoneman, from Carroll County; and the Carter Family's Maybelle Carter, from Scott County. Those three musicians were part of the famous recording sessions for Victor Records in Bristol during the summer of 1927 (though Whitter played harmonica in Bristol), and all three continued to showcase the guitar on many subsequent recordings.

Another influential guitarist who recorded at the Bristol

sessions was Meridian, Mississippi-native Jimmie Rodgers.

The guitar was initially distributed across Appalachia as an item from the Sears-Roebuck and other retail mail-order catalogs. Before the arrival of the guitar to the Crooked Road area, traditional music consisted of a cappella singing, or singing accompanied by the fiddle and the banjo, or instrumental performance on those two instruments. By the 1920s, the guitar had already become nearly as popular as the fiddle and the banjo. Maybelle Carter's approach on the instrument—playing the melody on the bass strings with a thumbpick, in alternation with higher-string strum patterns—was influenced by the African American guitarist Lesley Riddle, who also assisted A.P. Carter on song-collecting trips.

Several other musicians associated with the Crooked Road area have contributed to the development of guitar style through the later decades of the twentieth century and to the prominence of the instrument in American music. A number of talented guitarists from Southwest Virginia—including such black players as Archie Edwards and the Foddrell brothers (Marvin and Turner) and such white players as E.C. Ball and Fields Ward—have advanced the possibilities for the guitar in traditional music. While playing for the Stanley Brothers, George Shuffler introduced a cross-picking guitar technique that has proven influential in bluegrass, while several contemporary bluegrass musicians, including Wyatt Rice and Junior Sisk, make recordings that feature their own sophisticated bluegrass guitar stylings. One contemporary master guitarist in the region—Wayne Henderson—is also a master luthier whose hand-crafted instruments have been praised by guitarists from around the world (most famously by rock guitarist Eric Clapton).

The composer Beethoven referred to the guitar as “an orchestra unto itself” because the instrument could readily be played solo. However, as demonstrated by many musicians from the Crooked Road area, the guitar has also revealed itself as adaptable to a wide range of other musical arrangements, and it is no surprise that today the guitar is probably the most common instrument in Southwest Virginia.

*Ted Olson is the author of *Blue Ridge Folklife*, a study of Blue Ridge culture, and a Grammy Award-nominated music historian.*