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Ted Olson
East Tennessee State University, olson@etsu.edu

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CARROLL BEST: OLD-TIME "FIDDLE-STYLE BANJO" FROM THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS

By Ted Olson

Nick Spitzer

Carroll Best and Danny Johnson at the 1992 Tennessee Banjo Institute

In an interview published in the February 1992 issue of *The Banjo Newsletter* and conducted by bluegrass historian Neil Rosenberg and banjo player and instruction book author Tony Trischka, Carroll Best conveyed the depth of his connections to the instrument he had mastered: "When I was old enough to pick up a banjo I wanted to play." An affinity for the banjo, he claimed, had been passed down within his family. Best's great-grandmother and grandmother both played the instrument in the old-time clawhammer style, and his mother, Bertie Davis Best, "played real good clawhammer," while his father, Hugh Carroll Best, Sr., played the banjo in a three- or four-fingered picking style. Other Best relatives were talented on other instruments: one uncle was a fiddler, and another played the guitar. Many neighbors were also musical, with the fiddle being the instrument most commonly played. Haywood County, North Carolina, where the Bests lived, was "full of tremendous fiddle players," Carroll said, "so I just pursued the fiddle type banjo."

Best began playing the banjo in 1936, at the age of five. His first public performance occurred five years later, in 1941, when he played banjo for a square dance held at Maggie Elementary School. As he related to Rosenberg and Trischka, "I grew up playing dances. My older brother would take me to them. That's how I got to play. . . . Very gradually I got into it. You see, these old fiddlers would play this [dance music] and that was really what I liked, was playing those hornpipes. . . . So I just started playing what the fiddle played." To interpret those fiddle tunes on the banjo, Best developed a right-hand technique that utilized two or three fingers plucking the banjo strings as often as necessary to play as many of the notes of a tune as possible; he ultimately decided that "three [fingers] really beats two." In picking out a lot of individual notes, Best extended the approach of his father, who played in a sparer style ("I don't remember my dad putting all of those notes in there.").

courtesy of Louise Best

Carroll Best in the US Navy.

Growing up on the farm owned by his ancestors since the late 18th century, Carroll Best played the banjo at every opportunity. While his playing was influenced by his father and other family members, as well as by neighbors, Best was well aware of the professional banjo players and fiddlers who made records and performed on radio. According to Joe Wilson, former Executive Director of the National Council for the Traditional Arts, "Carroll loved the music of such older banjoists as Wade Mainer, and of his own contemporary, Earl Scruggs. I can recall a comment Carroll made about Scruggs: 'He put the push into bluegrass, and it is important in his style. I play a fiddle style, trying to get all the notes like a good fiddler.'" Among the fiddlers whose music the future banjo master heard on the radio, Howdy Forrester (who performed with Bill Monroe, Flatt & Scruggs, and Roy Acuff) was particularly inspiring to Best.

After serving in the US Navy from 1950-1954, Best returned to the family farm. At the time, his father was ill from cancer (and would succumb to that disease on Christmas Day 1955). Although Best was the youngest among his siblings, his parents knew he would take good care of the 125-acre farm and the many ongoing tasks of farming (including growing tobacco, raising cattle, and tending a three-acre vegetable garden). A tall man at 6'2" and strong, Best was certainly not afraid of hard work, despite the toll it took on him—he was once severely burned while igniting a brush pile; another time his teeth were broken when a chainsaw he was using to cut a tree bounced back and struck him in the mouth.

According to French Kirkpatrick (a banjo-playing friend of Best's, also from Haywood County), in the early 1950s Carroll played the banjo and the steel guitar with equal enthusiasm, yet was unsure which of the two instruments he should focus upon. It was French's brother, fiddler Billy Kirkpatrick, who assured Best that while he was a good steel guitar player he was a great banjo player. Best heeded this advice.

By the mid-1950s Best was performing his banjo at home and in community gatherings, and his reputation spread outside Haywood County. Soon he was regularly performing at the annual summertime Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville. According to Wilson,

> *Carroll influenced many with his presence at Bascom Lamar Lunsford's festivals. A tight circle of mostly banjo play-*

courtesy of Louise Best

l - r, Billy Kirkpatrick, Carroll Best, Lowell Messer, French Kirkpatrick. Three of the four musicians here were recorded by Joseph Hall in 1959 as the White Oak String Band.

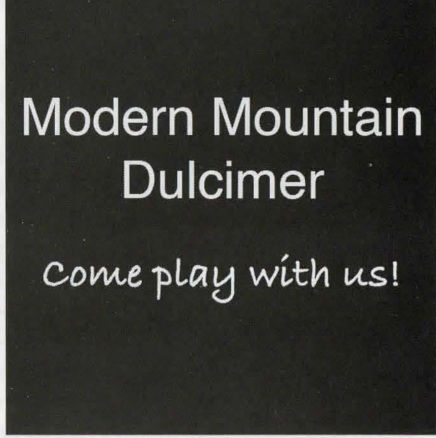
ers formed whenever Carroll took out his instrument. When I started coming to those events in the mid-1950s he was already a celebrated player, and that festival [the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival] was popular with Northern visitors as well as local players. It was considerable exposure for Carroll, who was a mountain farmer.

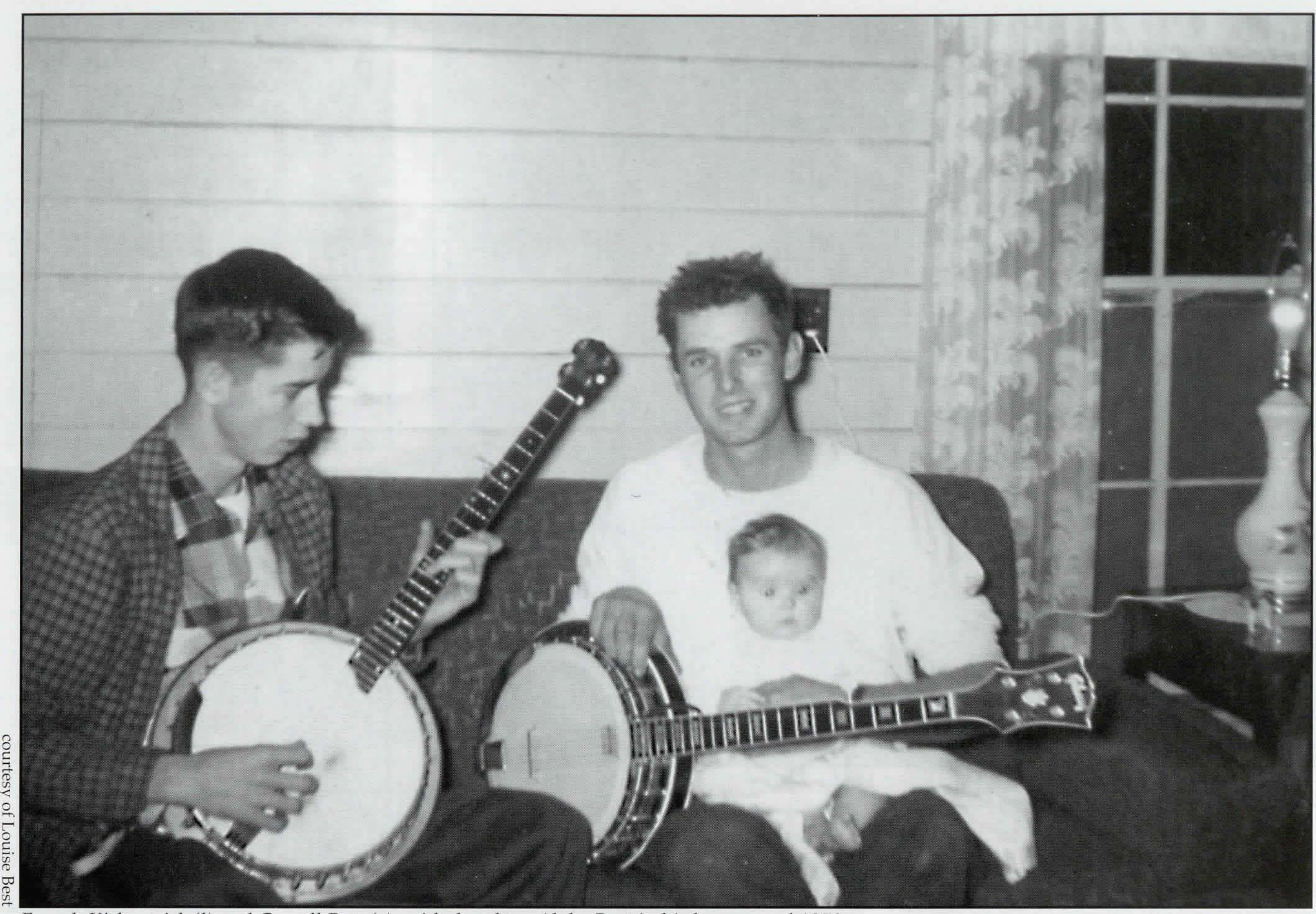
About this time Best received an invitation to join the Asheville-based musicians the Morris Brothers. Wiley and Zeke Morris had been performing as a brother duo in Western North Carolina since the 1930s, and they had worked with a succession of banjo players (including such banjo masters as Mainer, Scruggs, and Don Reno). Best accepted the offer, and appeared with the Morris Brothers in concert and on radio and television. (The Morris Brothers had a regular show broadcast on WLOS-TV.)

In June 1956, Carroll married Louise Presnell, and she moved onto the Best farm. Although she had been a Baptist, the couple would attend his family's home church, the nearby Mount Zion United Methodist Church. Louise and Carroll would eventually have two children: Alpha Rebecca (born 1958) and Hugh Carroll III (born 1960).

Best's mother Bertie disapproved of her son traveling away from home to play music, feeling that his first responsibility was to work the farm. Louise, though, viewed the situation differently: "I never tried to keep him from going to make music. It wouldn't have been Carroll without the banjo." Even so, after about two months with the Morris Brothers, Best decided that he did not want to be separated from his family. Regarding his short stint as a full-time musician in the mid-1950s, Carroll said (in 1993), "I always liked playing a lot, but you had to spend your life riding in a car and I got real tired of that." For the remainder of his life, Best, despite the dangers and drudgeries, preferred working on his farm and in a nearby factory to being a professional musician; he felt that working at and near home allowed him to take care of his family. As his wife put it, "Carroll took his family over being famous."

French Kirkpatrick reflects that, "Carroll felt he didn't need to travel to make music, he could make music at home." And make music at home he did, according to Louise: "Carroll brought a radio or tape recorder into the fields with him, and if he heard a tune he liked, he'd run to the house to figure out how to play it. It seemed like every time Carroll came in the house from outside—even for a glass of water—he'd head straight to the living room to pick the banjo. It was a continual thing." Indeed, Best played the banjo at home nearly every day. ("He was always trying to play the tunes he loved




courtesy of Louise Best

French Kirkpatrick (l) and Carroll Best (r), with daughter Alpha Best in his lap, around 1959.

perfectly," remembers Louise.) Additionally, he would perform regularly with other musicians at their homes and at nearby community events and performance venues, and he would make music with friends on Sunday afternoons after church. Despite the fact that Best was a regular churchgoer, some people did not understand or respect his passion for playing the banjo. As Kirkpatrick recalls, "People sometimes disapproved of our music back then, because string bands were associated with dances. But Carroll used to say, half-kidding of course, 'If I won't be able to get into Heaven because I play the banjo, then maybe I don't want to go there.'"

When recorded by linguist and folklorist Joseph Hall in 1956 and 1959, Best played a Vega Tubaphone five-string banjo that he had bought in California when with the Navy. Kirkpatrick remembers that Best also owned a tenor banjo at this time (likely an old May Bell model), though apparently he was never drawn to playing that type of banjo. Given his affinity for the five-string banjo, Best eventually acquired a Gibson RB-4 model with a resonator. He deemed that that banjo was too loud, and he ultimately bought an open-back Great Lakes 5-string banjo for $500 from Kirkpatrick. (Best sold some calves to raise the money.) The latter banjo became Best's favorite, though he could not bear to part with the other instruments. Banjo great Sonny Osborne (of the bluegrass duo the Osborne Brothers) once tried to purchase the Gibson RB-4, and though Best was no longer playing that banjo he would not sell it.

In about 1965, Best began working for Dayco Corporation, a national manufacturing company that had built a plant in the part of Waynesville, North Carolina, known as West Waynesville. In a 1970 workplace accident, he nearly lost the first and second fingers on his right hand. To increase production, someone in company management had sped up a conveyer belt without warning workers. Best's fingers on his right hand got caught up in the belt, and he immediately engaged the "emergency off" switch with his left hand. Best was rushed to the hospital, whereupon an on-duty doctor, assessing the situation, announced plans to cut off those two fingers. Best overruled the doctor and requested care from a local surgeon, Dr. Heyward Smith, who successfully sewed up the wound on Best's fingers. After recuperating in the hospital for a week, Best went home, and, according to Louise, upon entering the house walked straight to the living room, picked up one of his banjos, and played it, despite excruciating pain. Later, maintaining that he did not want to risk losing his job, Best refused to file a lawsuit against Dayco, whatever the company's responsibility for the accident. Indeed, he often mentioned that he appreciated the flexibility of his employer in granting him leave anytime he wanted to play music. Best remained with Dayco for 25 years.

Throughout these years Best competed in, and often won, banjo competitions at regional music festivals, including Union Grove, Fiddlers Grove, the Asheville Folk Festival, and the Folk Festival of the Smokies. By the 1970s he was playing semi-regularly in a band called the Hornpipers (later renamed the Carroll Best Band), featuring several talented Western North Carolina musicians, including banjo player Zack Allen, fiddler Mack Snoderly, and guitarist Danny Johnson. With this band in 1982, Best recorded his first album, *Pure Mountain Melodys* [sic], which showcased what was by then his fully realized melodic three-finger banjo

style; yet, because it was released on tiny Asheville-based Skyline Records, the album found few listeners.

In 1990, wider recognition for Best's extraordinary abilities on the banjo finally came his way. That year at the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival (at Mars Hill College), he received the Lunsford Award. Also that year Best was invited to be on the faculty of the Tennessee Banjo Institute, a special event held at Cedars of Lebanon State Park in Middle Tennessee. Best's appearance at the TBI (accompanied by his friend, guitarist Danny Johnson) was a revelation to the many banjo enthusiasts in attendance, since many members of the old-time and bluegrass community had never before heard him (or even heard of him). Best's distinctive banjo technique forced discussion about his role in the evolution of the melodic three-finger banjo style. Given the impact he made upon his first appearance at the TBI, Best was asked to return to the same event in 1992. In 1994, he received the North Carolina Folk Heritage Award, an honor bestowed upon him by the North Carolina Arts Council. Also that year, Best was selected to perform (alongside better-known banjo players like Ralph Stanley and J. D. Crowe) on the Masters of the Banjo Tour, sponsored by the National Council for the Traditional Arts.

Other recognition for Best during this period included invitations to appear on radio (the *Grand Ole Opry* and the *Wolf Trap Folk Masters* radio concert series) and on television (*Hee Haw*). In 1993 Best and his band recorded a second album, released on another Western North Carolina-based label, Ivy Creek Recordings; this album incorporated fiddling from longtime friend Tommy Hunter. Yet because of limited distribution, *The Carroll Best Band with Tommy Hunter* failed to serve as the vehicle for Best's breakthrough into the broader music world.

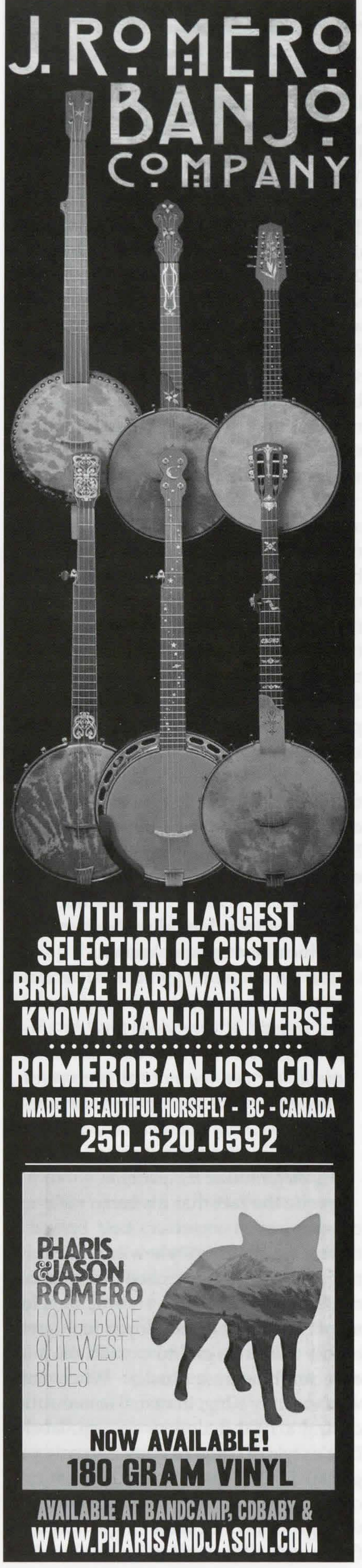
Sadly, the recording that truly showcased Best's exceptional talent was a posthumously released 2001 album produced by Joe Wilson, *Say Old Man, Can You Play the Banjo?* On May 8, 1995, Best was murdered. According to Wilson, "Carroll was a happy man with just one hair shirt he had to wear: his gun-toting quarrelsome brother, Sam Best. Carroll spent much time caring for his jealous brother, and keeping him out of trouble. And it was that brother, Sam Best, who shot Carroll dead in the road."

Carroll was buried near his home in the Best family section of the cemetery located on a hill overlooking Mount Zion United Methodist Church. One local newspaper article about the incident featured a quote from Bob Phillips, the mayor of the nearby town of Canton, in which Phillips said what everyone who knew Best felt—that the banjo master was "[a] real gentleman. He wouldn't harm anybody." In 2014, when reminded about Phillips' words of respect for her husband, Louise said simply, "Everyone loved Carroll."

French Kirkpatrick reflects today, "Carroll was generous—he would share anything he could with other people. He was a purist, a straight person—it showed in his playing, it showed in his character. He never drank, he wouldn't ever get in trouble with anyone, and he always worked hard. He lived the Golden Rule." Kirkpatrick relates that, one winter in the early 1960s when the Kirkpatrick family's house burned down, the first person to show up was Carroll Best, who gave French and his brother Billy money to buy coats. Some years later, French, who owned horses, telephoned Best to buy a small amount of hay from him; Best showed up with a much larger truckload of hay than requested and refused to accept any payment for it.

Kirkpatrick still regrets a missed opportunity involving Best. In about 1994, when coordinating a music performance to be held at Soco Gap (adjacent to the Blue Ridge Parkway on the boundary between Haywood and Jackson Counties), Joe Wilson asked French Kirkpatrick to perform with Best and fiddler Roger Howell. Impressed by what he heard that day, Wilson thought Kirkpatrick should sing a couple of songs on Best's next recording project. Just before the scheduled recordings were to take place, Best had to have dental work, and the session was postponed. That recording session never happened. In recalling the tragedy of Best's death today, Kirkpatrick sighs: "It broke my heart."

Old-time musician David Holt remembers Best as "generous of spirit, gentle and kind-hearted. A wonderful man. I remember thinking after he was shot that of all the people I know Carroll was the least likely to be shot because he was truly such a good man." Tony Trischka adds, "While I had very little contact with Carroll, outside of my trip to the Tennessee Banjo Institute and two other occasions where I spent a short amount of casual time, he did seem like a gentle, kind man. It's literally and figuratively criminal that his life was cut short. People were just starting to find out about him."



"Fiddle Style"

After Best's death, to commemorate a life well lived and a musical journey that was fruitful if not widely recognized, Joe Wilson compiled *Say Old Man, Can You Play the Banjo?*, an album featuring a range of Best's recordings from the 1970s to the early 1990s—some previously released, many unreleased. The 2001 album, on the Copper Creek label, solidified Best's reputation, furthering awareness that Best was a significant and innovative music talent. The album presented the banjo-player as a missing link between old-time and bluegrass, two music genres that are integrally interconnected yet whose connections are not always acknowledged.

Say Old Man also generated debate about Best's role in the evolution of the melodic three-finger banjo style. Some bluegrass fans who heard *Say Old Man* marveled at Best's approach to playing instrumentals—mostly old-time fiddle tunes—on the banjo. While a new 2014 release, *Carroll Best and The White Oak String Band,* illustrates that the banjo player was capable of playing such tunes in a range of banjo styles, the recordings on *Say Old Man*, from the 1970s through the 1990s, suggest that from at least the early 1970s (if not sometime in the 1960s) Best preferred to interpret fiddle tunes utilizing the melodic three-finger banjo style.

Holt describes the style of banjo playing for which Best became known:

> *Carroll's three-finger banjo style was clean, crisp, and musical. He followed the melody of the fiddle tune he was playing, note for note. This means he could not use the normal syncopated three-finger rolls to play the exact notes of the tune. His style was very exacting and precise, and difficult since he didn't rely on formulaic roll patterns.*

Despite the fact that his banjo style was complex, even virtuosic, Best balked at the notion that his style was in any way *progressive* (the term used in bluegrass circles to describe new stylistic developments intentionally employed to modernize the sound of, and to expand the audience for, bluegrass music). When interviewer Andy King, in casual conversation during a 1990 interview session, labeled Best's style of banjo playing as "early progressive," Best quickly and emphatically corrected him, saying "No, no, no. You're wrong. I play . . . three-finger, old-time, fiddle style. I just call it the fiddle style." Best added, as if to diffuse any embarrassment he might have caused King: "They don't know what category to put me in. That's the problem."

In 2014, Trischka related that,

> *When I interviewed him in 1990, Carroll was playing those fiddle tunes in what is generally called the melodic style. He called it "fiddle style." Bill Keith developed his own version of the melodic style and popularized it via appearances and recordings with Bill Monroe in 1963. It's a banjo style based on scales rather than the arpeggiation of chords. Scruggs style falls into the latter category.*
>
> *I originally thought of Carroll as being primarily a fiddle tune player. When I first met him at the Tennessee Banjo Institute in 1990, that was mostly what he was playing (though he did play "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" as well). Listening to the tunes on this new album [Carroll Best and The White Oak String Band], I'm realizing he had a much wider range than I had originally thought. He was also a powerful Scruggs-oriented player, and he could get down with the blues.*

Wilson long knew the full range of Best's repertoire:

> *Carroll always played the traditional tunes of the mountains, such as "Cumberland Gap," "Sally Ann," "Johnson Boys," "Reuben," "Sally Goodin," and many others. He could pull up any of these tunes in a second. Many came to him from his family or close associates, such as the great long-bow fiddler Tommy Hunter. Carroll knew banjo standards from earlier recorded uses of the instrument. But he also remained contemporary, and, if given a moment to get it into his head, he could perform many country and western standards. Like most others, Carroll had a period of intense learning in his younger years, but he never stopped learning.*

Indeed, Best learned to play all the major three-finger banjo styles—Scruggs style, single string style, and melodic style. Even before Scruggs revolutionized banjo style in 1945, there was an alternative to the frailing/clawhammer banjo style—an approach involving up-picking the strings with one, two, or three of the right-hand fingers and then down-picking with the thumb. This latter style was the basic approach to banjo playing associated with Best's father, Hugh Carroll Best, Sr., and also with some other Appalachian banjo players, including Snuffy Jenkins and Will Keys. Jenkins' style had a significant impact on Earl Scruggs.

As exciting and propulsive as it was (and is), Scruggs-style banjo had its limitations, as subsequent banjo players began to realize. Scruggs-style rolls articulated various notes in the chord of a song or tune, but missed some essential notes in a given melody. By the late 1950s and early 1960s several players began experimenting with new approaches to picking the banjo—one that was better suited to playing the lead on instrumentals, including fiddle tunes. One new approach, utilized by Don Reno with memorable results, was single-string style, in which the banjo player literally plucked specific notes of a song's or tune's melody on a single banjo string. For an arguably more exciting rendition of the full range of melodic notes, though, banjo players like Carroll Best began to employ what came to be known as melodic three-finger style.

On the Banjo Hangout website, Joe Larson succinctly described the melodic three-finger style:

> *To get the melody [to sound] exactly like a fiddler might play it you have to break out of rolls and play each melody note, which often are a stream of eighth notes. You could do this single-string style or for a more legato sound, you could plan it in a way that each melody note was played on a different string, allowing them to ring over each other slightly.*

A common narrative in bluegrass circles for many years has held that the melodic three-finger banjo style is traceable back to early-1960s performances by Bill Keith, and the melodic style has sometimes been referred to as "Keith Style." Some banjo fans have asserted that another banjo player, Bobby Thompson, had recorded in a variation of the melodic style in the late 1950s and thus should be credited for having pioneered the approach. Best's recordings on *Say Old Man,* though recorded in the 1970s through the 1990s, challenged such assumptions. For one thing, Best was older—and had been playing banjo longer—than either Keith or Thompson. And in interviews conducted in the early 1990s, Best related that he had met and discussed banjo technique with both Thompson (probably in 1957) and Keith (allegedly sometime in the early 1960s). Yet, since no recordings had been issued featuring Best's playing before the 1970s, those speculating about the origins of the melodic three-finger banjo style had no way of knowing exactly how Best's playing sounded at an earlier stage in his

career. This year's release of *Carroll Best and The White Oak String Band* renders such an assessment possible.

While performing with the Morris Brothers, Best met Thompson, who was then performing as a sideman for bluegrass bandleader Carl Story. This was most likely in 1957. The Morris Brothers and Carl Story had television shows in adjoining time-slots on Asheville-based WLOS-TV, and Best and Thompson talked on several occasions between shows. According to music writer Colin Escott, Story's show on this station began in 1957, and Thompson's involvement in the show probably lasted from that time through the middle months of 1958. French Kirkpatrick recalls that the Carolina Pals [a short-lived Haywood County-based band featuring Best, French and Billy Kirkpatrick, and Sam Setzer] performed on Story's television show, and that "Thompson watched every lick that Carroll played." Within a few weeks after the two banjo players met, Best was no longer a professional musician. Thompson would soon become a prominent musician based in Nashville.

In his album notes to *Carl Story: Bluegrass, Gospel, and Mountain Music, 1942-1959* (a 2011 box set from Bear Family Records), Escott asserts that Thompson made the first commercial recordings of fiddle-style banjo playing when he participated in Story's August 3, 1957, recording session in Nashville for Starday Records. Those sessions yielded four recordings featuring Thompson's banjo, including "Fire on the Banjo," a number modelled on the old-time fiddle tune "Fire on the Mountain," and another instrumental entitled "Banjolina." In the book included in the Story box set, Escott writes,

> *These were almost certainly his [Thompson's] first recordings. . . During his brief stint with Carl Story, Thompson developed the technique of playing fiddle tunes on the banjo. . . Other banjo players soon fell in awe of him; Doug Dillard recorded both "Fire on the Banjo" and "Banjolina." While Earl Scruggs developed melodies out of the right-hand rolls, Thompson developed the technique of playing melodies that spun into rolls, and the birth of that style is right here.*

Thompson has received a large measure of credit for creating three-finger fiddle-style banjo, in part because he was documented playing that style comparatively early (that is, during the August 3, 1957, recording session). Whether or not Thompson learned that style of banjo by observing Best, *Carroll Best and The White Oak String Band* presents opportunities for stylistic analyses of the comparative banjo approaches of the two musicians. Certain conclusions can be drawn with certainty. For one thing, this album features recordings made in the summer of 1956, such as "Lost Indian" and "Cumberland Gap," that document examples of Best playing fiddle-style banjo, one year before Thompson's first-ever recordings.

In 1990, Trischka mentioned to Best that he owned a recording of Thompson playing the B-part of "Flop Eared Mule" in a manner very similar to Best's rendition of that tune as performed at the 1990 Tennessee Banjo Institute; Best responded, "I may have shown Bobby that part, but I'm not sure, really. But I was doing that a long time ago. . . . It would have been the middle '50s." Best also claimed to have demonstrated to Thompson, when the two musicians met in Asheville in 1957, how to play the banjo in the key of D without a capo, which Best by the mid-1940s determined was preferable for performing alongside old-time fiddlers. Before 1957, Thompson had apparently played his banjo primarily in the G position.

Believing that Best was a formative influence on both Thompson and Keith, Wilson asserts that Best shared banjo pointers with both musicians out of respect for their talents. "Carroll recalled Bobby with fondness, and a time when Bill Keith visited. There is a tape that circulated a few years ago of Thompson and Keith performing during those years [in 1964]. It is a jam session, but it leaves no doubt of how this music evolved from Carroll Best."

Wilson is not the only one to speculate about Best's influence on Keith: "There was a local 'rumor,'" offers Holt, "that Best influenced Bill Keith to start playing in a melodic style. I don't know if this is true...but I'd like to know if it is true." While contact between Best and Thompson is easy to confirm, interaction between Best and Keith is harder to gauge. When asked in January 2014, Keith said that he had no memory of such a meeting. Louise Best and French Kirkpatrick, on the other hand, both believe that Keith was brought to the Best house by someone else (according to Kirk Randleman in a posting on the bgrass-l Listserv in 2002, that person was Asheville-based musician George Rice) after Keith had attended a staging of the annual Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville. But Keith has long maintained he had no early exposure to Best or his banjo style.

Shortly after Best's banjo-playing received sudden, wider exposure after his appearance at the 1990 Tennessee Banjo Institute, Keith told Trischka:

> *It shocked me too. It was absolute news to me. It's great. Where was he all my formative years? I didn't see anyone else doing it when I was learning. If I had, I probably would have copied it. I think the technique goes back as far as classic banjo. Remember, I wasn't the one who called it "Keith Style." It vindicates the technique, that people used it that long ago, and will continue to use it in the future.*

In January 2014, when asked if Best might have had some influence on his own banjo style, Keith said:

> *When I finally heard Carroll play live (in 1990, I think), he was using some melodic elements, but that didn't surprise me because it had been almost 30 years after I had recorded tunes in the melodic style with Bill Monroe in March of 1963, and I had recorded a couple of tunes before I went to work with Bill ("Devil's Dream" and "Sailor's Hornpipe," recorded in 1962). And a lot of players were playing in that style by the time I heard Carroll play live. So his playing certainly was not an influence on me.*

Denying having had contact with—or even knowledge of—Best before 1990, Keith asserted in 2014 that he was moved during his formative years to explore melodic three-finger banjo style from a fiddler, not from a fellow banjo player:

> *I can honestly say that I began to explore the melodic style when I heard a lady fiddler from Nova Scotia play "Devil's Dream" in 1960 or 1961, and I was working on "Sailor's Hornpipe" in 1961 while I was in Air Force basic training in Texas. I mailed a postcard to Eric Weissberg on that occasion mentioning "Sailor's Hornpipe," and he still has the card, clearly postmarked December 2, 1961, and I have a copy."*

In recent years a few people on Banjo Hangout—motivated, Keith believes, by their close relationships with Bobby Thompson—advanced a notion that Keith learned how to play the melodic three-finger banjo style from Thompson. Keith refutes such a claim:

> *I first met Bobby Thompson in 1964 in South Carolina, and we sat around and played a few tunes together. He was actively playing in the melodic style. At*

the time he was in the National Guard, and was at home a lot of the time. I'm sure he was able to hear me playing with Bill Monroe on WSM, but of course I was unable to hear what he was up to. But nobody in Nashville remarked to me that I was playing in Bobby's style. I feel that I was an influence on Bobby Thompson during that time. Of course, after I heard him play, I can't deny that he was somewhat of an influence on me after our encounter, especially his recordings with Area Code 615 [a Nashville-based "country rock" supergroup that was active in 1969-1971].

Keith adds,

One fact that emerged during that protracted discussion [on Banjo Hangout] was that Carroll Best worked in the same TV studio where Bobby Thompson worked for a while, so I feel it's likely that Carroll influenced Bobby in playing in that style. So in that sense, Carroll played a role in the evolution of the style by introducing it to Bobby.

Of course, it is impossible to know Thompson's perspective on this debate, because he died in 2005. Around that time, Earl Scruggs said to a newspaper reporter, "I think [Thompson] has done a lot for the banjo. He was the first one to play that style of banjo [melodic three-finger] that I ever heard. And there has never been anyone to top him." With such comments, Scruggs seemed to be positioning Thompson as a more central figure to the melodic style than Keith. During the 1950s Best knew Scruggs' music, of course, but it is unlikely that Scruggs knew Best's music then because Best had not yet released a recording and because the two banjo players did not cross paths. (Their stints with the Morris Brothers were years apart, and Best would not meet Scruggs until the early 1990s.)

Some banjo players have taken a clear position on Best's role in the evolution of the melodic three-finger banjo style. In 2008 Don Borchelt, a banjo player and teacher, wrote on Banjo Hangout:

I was one of a number of pickers beaten by Carroll Best in the banjo contest at the Folk Festival of the Smokies in Gatlinburg around 1970, and I can tell you he was all over the neck in melodic style by that time, anyway. That was a real epiphany for me, and based upon what I heard, I am inclined to believe that he probably was the first person to come up with the style.

Assessing Best's impact on other musicians, Trischka says, "I don't believe that Carroll had much influence on well-known players, though he might have had a regional influence on some pickers." Holt acknowledges the impact of Best on Western North Carolina banjo players, regardless of their preferred styles: "Carroll influenced lots of banjo players by opening up what was possible to play on the instrument. Even though I play clawhammer banjo, I was moved to get more notes of the tune into my playing after hearing Carroll Best."

Bill Keith feels that "Best's music certainly has a place in Appalachian and old-time music, and I'd say he deserves notice in bluegrass music history as a pioneer but not necessarily as a ground-breaker."

Trischka adds,

I feel that Best has been extremely important within Appalachian music, within old-time music, and also within bluegrass music. Though he was not well known outside of his area, the fact that he had developed a profoundly important banjo style in a very short period of time, ten years before Bobby Thompson, is remarkable. For perspective, Carroll told me that he came up with his banjo style in 1945, the same year an unknown Earl Scruggs joined Bill Monroe and set the country music world on fire. If, hypothetically, Carroll had joined Monroe that year instead of Earl, we might all be playing Best style instead of Scruggs style. And how many people create their own completely unique style of music? Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Tony Rice, Bill Monroe. But not many others. Carroll was in very rarified company. Consider the fact that he wasn't influenced by other banjo players. It wasn't an evolutionary development. His style came fully blown from the brow of Zeus, so to speak.

After thinking about the melodic three-finger banjo style for many years (and writing a book discussing the subject, *Melodic Banjo*), Trischka asserts that there is no singular melodic style; rather, there are several distinctive versions. Trischka admits that he did not know about Carroll Best when he wrote his study of the style in 1976, so *Melodic Banjo* did not mention the Haywood County banjo player. Nonetheless, Trischka now maintains that Best is a central figure in that story:

Carroll definitely played a role in the evolution of the melodic three-finger banjo style. There are minor examples of melodic banjo playing dating back to the minstrel banjo era (mid-1800s) and to the classic banjo style (c. 1900). But no one ever developed a full-blown melodic style on the banjo until Carroll came along. Bobby Thompson also independently created a melodic style for himself in the 1950s. Then, of course, Bill Keith put melodics on the map during his tenure with Bill Monroe. He was not influenced to do so by Carroll or Bobby. As they did, he just came up with it.

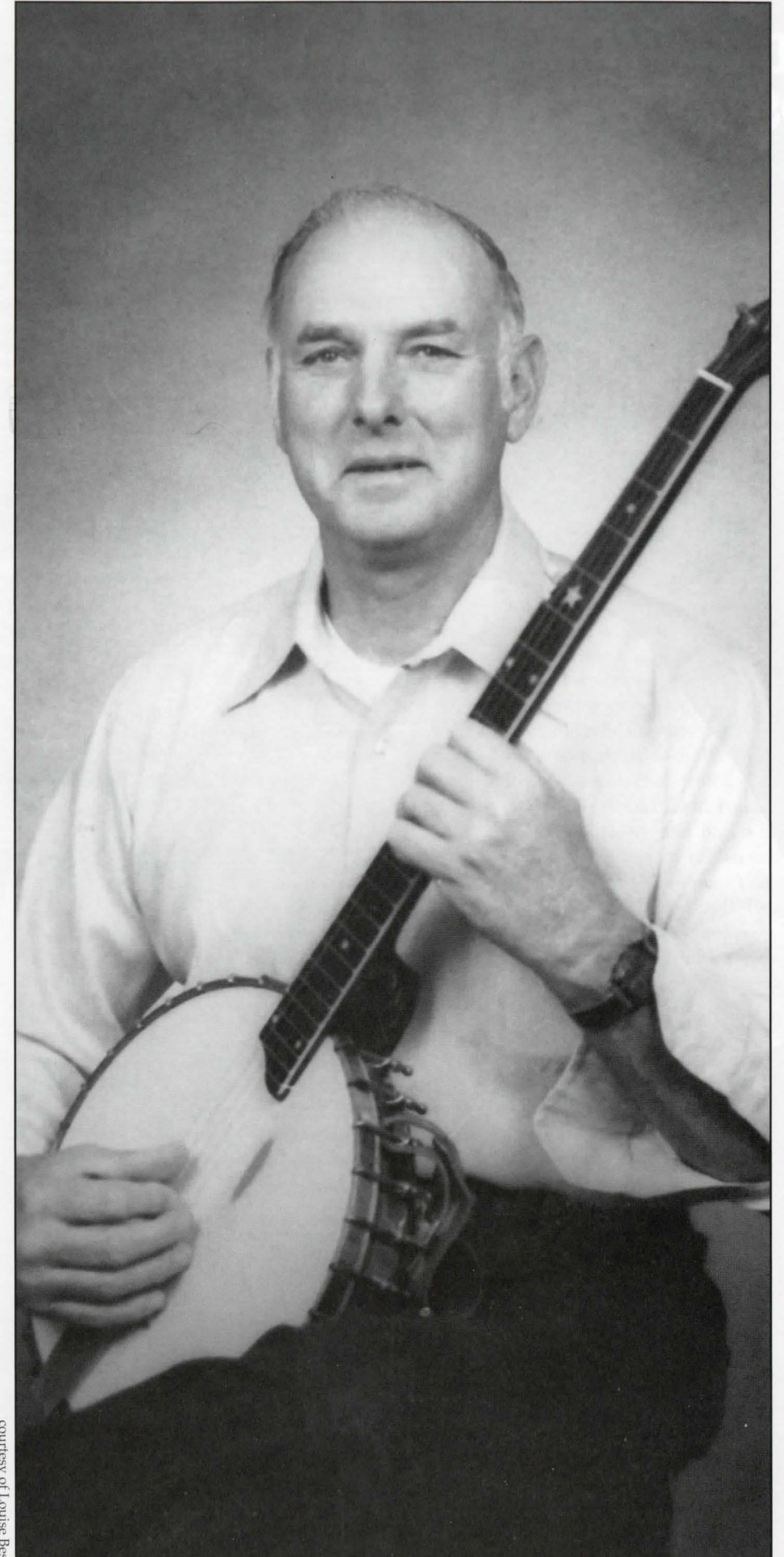
Wilson explains the reasons for the longtime neglect of Best's role in the emergence of the melodic three-finger banjo style:

Of course Carroll Best played a key part in the evolution and spread of this style. The mass audience for such music tends to attribute its invention to those they first heard play it. But those who learned from the style were of a younger generation. They were learners trying their best to make a living from music. No one told them they were supposed to interview Carroll, and tell his story. Even the few academicians who have bothered to document such music have been painfully obtuse and uninformed. When Carroll finally was mentioned, there was an accusatory tone, one not warranted.

Many people, observes Wilson, could not believe that a farmer could also be a true artist and innovator. "Carroll performed near home for most of his life, and he lived in a remote area. He was a farmer, and farmers are taken for granted."

According to Trischka, "Carroll's music is not more widely known because he never toured nationally, and never recorded for a large independent or a major record label." Holt adds, "Carroll wasn't interested in being a traveling professional musician. This is a niche style of music, even for full-time professionals. Notoriety is difficult to come by. Carroll was known to musicians who cared about banjo and traditional fiddle music, but that is a small percentage of the population, even in southern Appalachia. Moreover, Carroll was quiet and retiring and never called attention to himself. He just loved to play music." Wilson agrees: "Carroll loved playing more than talking. Music was for sharing, and he shared all that he knew."

Thompson and Keith may have received most of the credit for the invention of the melodic three-finger banjo style, but, says Wilson, "Carroll had no resentment of the fame that came to them [Thompson and Keith] but not to him. Carroll explained that he was 'too tall to sleep in a car' and be a professional musician. He loved his wife



Carroll Best with the Vega Tubaphone banjo he played for Joseph Hall in 1956 and 1959.

and children, and felt lucky to live near Waynesville in the mountains."

"Carroll played a melodic style, but never claimed to have invented it," Wilson relates. "He attributed it to his family, especially his father. If pressed, this most modest and genial of banjoists would admit that he 'might have had' a role in expanding and enlarging the style. The truth seems to be that he had a pivotal place in causing it to become fully mature and in reaching the nation."

For Wilson, the notion that Best should be granted a more central position in bluegrass music "would amuse Carroll, who for years had to insist to contest judges that he felt his music was old-time, even though he wore three picks and did not frail. He would be proud to be recalled with [old-time banjo players] Frank Proffitt Sr. and Earl Sweet, and by the banjo students who know about them."

French Kirkpatrick insists that his friend and mentor was the originator of the melodic three-finger banjo style. "Carroll Best invented that sound that you hear today, though he'll never get credit for it. The melodic three-finger banjo style—in fact, the whole progressive banjo sound—came from Carroll." Kirkpatrick remains thrilled that he got to play music with the banjo master: "Carroll was the best banjo player on the planet," French says, "and I was privileged to play with him."

After Best's death, his wife Louise gave his banjos to their son Hugh Carroll and their grandson Jared, both of whom have continued the family tradition of playing the banjo. According to Louise, Jared often listens to his grandfather's banjo recordings and learns to play those tunes note-for-note.

Ted Olson has co-produced and contributed notes to several compilations of old-time music, including Carroll Best and The White Oak String Band, Old-Time Smoky Mountain Music, The Folk Box: 50th Anniversary Edition, *and box sets featuring the complete recordings from the Bristol Sessions and the Johnson City Sessions.*

This article is adapted from the album notes to the new CD release Carroll Best and The White Oak String Band: Old-Time Bluegrass from the Great Smoky Mountains, 1956 and 1959. *Released by the nonprofit Great Smoky Mountains Association, this album is available at shop.smokiesinformation.org or via County Sales.*