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‘The Most Important Thing is the Music:’ Ralph Blizard’s Legacy Preserving Traditional  
Appalachian Old-Time Music

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Appalachian Studies

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Appalachian Studies

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by

Emily Dinger

August 2022

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Mr. Roy Andrade, Chair

Dr. Ron Roach

Dr. Jane MacMorran

Keywords: Ralph Blizard, Old-Time Music, Music Revival, Old-Time Music Revival, Northeast  
Tennessee

## ABSTRACT

“The Most Important Thing is the Music:’ Ralph Blizard’s Legacy Preserving Traditional

Appalachian Old-Time Music

by

Emily Dinger

This thesis uses qualitative research methods to elaborate on Ralph Blizard’s legacy in the old-time music community. The aspects of Blizard’s legacy that were examined include his style of fiddling and the actions he took to preserve traditional Appalachian old-time music. This thesis discusses the old-time music revival in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century and Blizard’s role in the revival.

This thesis used documentary research, archival research, and personal interviews. Documentary and archival research took place at the Ralph Blizard Museum in Blountville, Tennessee, and the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University. I conducted personal interviews with Blizard’s musical colleagues and members of his family.

This thesis shows that Blizard’s legacy in old-time music is defined the actions he took to help preserve the sound of traditional Appalachian old-time music just as much as it is defined by his style of fiddling.

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family, to the Blizzard Family, and to the northeast Tennessee old-time music community. Thank you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank the Blizard Family, Mark, David, and Brittney, as well as Ralph's other family members. Thank you for allowing me to interview you during this process. I enjoyed learning about your father and grandfather's music and all that he did and achieved. I hope you will enjoy what I have written and thank you very much. Second, I would like to thank the members of the New Southern Ramblers: Phil Jamison, Gordy Hinnners, Andy Smith, John Lilly, and John Herrmann. I would also like to thank Doug Orr, one of Ralph's colleagues in the old-time music community. I would like to thank Ed Bush, who allowed me to be an intern at the Ralph Blizard Museum in Blountville in the spring of 2021. Thank you to my committee, Mr. Roy Andrade, Dr. Ron Roach, and Dr. Jane MacMorran. Thank you all for your help and feedback along this journey. I would also like to thank Dr. Lee Bidgood for all his help and advice as well. My gratitude goes out to the staff of the Archives of Appalachia at ETSU. Thanks for listening to me talk about my thesis. I would also like to thank Ms. Brittany Haas for helping me with music theory questions. To my friends: Thanks for supporting me and keeping me smiling and laughing along this journey! And finally, thank you to Mom, Dad, Abigail, and Paige. Thank you for encouraging me to persevere and to always chase my dreams. Thank you for supporting me in everything I do.

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## CHAPTER 1. YOU HAVEN'T HEARD OLD-TIME IF YOU HAVEN'T HEARD RALPH

I learned about old-time music thanks to East Tennessee State University's Bluegrass, Old-Time, and Country<sup>1</sup> Music Studies program. I first came to ETSU in the fall of 2016 to learn about bluegrass music. By the end of my undergraduate degree, I met a few musicians who participated in the old-time music part of the program. I was curious about how old-time music differed from bluegrass, so I enrolled in an old-time band and a few old-time fiddle lessons. I learned about the many differences between bluegrass and old-time music and the different techniques involved in playing old-time fiddle. During my time in the old-time music program, what stuck with me the most was how tight knit the old-time community in Johnson City, Tennessee seemed to be. This interest in old-time music, old-time fiddle playing, and its community is what led me to discover the fiddle playing of Ralph Blizard.

I recall the day that I was first introduced to the old-time fiddling style of Ralph Blizard. I started my master's degree in Appalachian Studies at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee, and I was searching for a topic to write about for my master's thesis. I had a meeting with a professor in the Appalachian Studies Department to discuss a potential thesis topic. During that meeting, I mentioned I was interested in researching old-time music and history. The professor asked me if I had heard of Ralph Blizard, and I said no. The professor quickly googled Blizard and pulled up an obituary that NPR had published after Blizard had passed away in 2004. The article consisted of a five-minute audio clip of Noah Adams and old-time fiddle player Paul Brown discussing Blizard, his career, and his fiddle playing. While listening to the article, I learned that Blizard was from eastern Tennessee, and he was known for

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<sup>1</sup> As of the fall of 2021, the program is now called the Bluegrass, Old-Time, and Roots Music Studies program.

his “longbow, stream of consciousness, fiddling.”<sup>2</sup> At the end of the article, Paul Brown stated that, “you haven’t heard old-time music if you haven’t heard Ralph.”<sup>3</sup>

While listening to the NPR article about Blizard, I learned that he had started playing old-time fiddle in the northeast Tennessee region, and he gained national acclaim throughout his career. I was surprised that I had never heard of Blizard’s music during my time in the Bluegrass, Old-Time, and Country Music Studies program. When I left my professor’s office that day, I knew that one of the main goals for this project was to learn about Blizard’s life and musical career so I could share the story of Blizard’s impact on the old-time music world.

Upon beginning my research into his career, one aspect that became apparent about Blizard’s style of playing fiddle was that it was unlike any other old-time fiddler. This style helped Blizard gain recognition on both a national and international level. One striking characteristic of Blizard’s style was that while it earned him recognition, it was also difficult for other fiddle players to imitate. The defining aspect of Blizard’s life and musical career was that he put in a tremendous amount of effort to ensure that the old-time music sound would be preserved for future generations. Through archival research and interviews, this project will focus on Blizard, his style of fiddle playing, and the efforts he took to preserve the sound of traditional old-time music. The project will also discuss the old-time music revival in the United States from the 1980s to the early 2000s, including the different facets of the music revival. By looking at Blizard’s career and how he fits into the old-time revival, this project adds to the broader narrative surrounding old-time music and the musicians within old-time communities.

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<sup>2</sup> Noah Adams and Brown, Paul. “Remembering Fiddle Player Ralph Blizard.” NPR, December 13, 2004. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4225339>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The goal of this project is to demonstrate that Blizard's legacy as an old-time musician is defined by his actions to promote and preserve traditional Appalachian old-time music as much as it is defined by his virtuosic style. Who were the old-time musicians that influenced Blizard in his youth as he grew up in Kingsport, Tennessee? How did he take their styles and make them into something that was uniquely his own? How was Blizard able to influence the younger generation of old-time musicians, even if his style was difficult to imitate? What actions did Blizard take to preserve the old-time sound of traditional Appalachian old-time music? How has Blizard's legacy as an old-time musician lasted to this day, nearly 18 years after he passed away? This examination will contextualize what was taking place in the old-time music community in the last two decades of the twentieth century. It will also add to the discourse about old-time fiddlers from the northeast Tennessee region.

#### *Literature Review*

Old-time music has played a significant role in shaping the identity of the southern Appalachian region. In 1917 Olive Dame Campbell and Cecil Sharp collected ballads from around the region and published them in a book called *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*. In 1927 the Bristol Sessions, which some have called the “Big Bang of Country Music,” were recorded in Bristol, Tennessee/Virginia. While the old-time music tradition has been well documented among scholars such as Jeff Todd Titon and Charles K. Wolfe, the literature surrounding old-time music communities and fiddlers in Appalachia primarily focuses on the states surrounding Tennessee. The literature that has been written about East Tennessee old-time music focuses on musicians that gained fame in the early twentieth century. This focus leaves a gap in the literature surrounding research on East Tennessee fiddlers like Ralph Blizard that gained fame in the latter part of the twentieth century.

*The Old-Time Music Communities and Fiddlers in States Surrounding Tennessee*

When looking at the literature published on old-time music communities in the states surrounding Tennessee, common themes that authors chose to focus on writing about are the festivals and gatherings that take place in the communities or the music that is played there. These works rarely focus on the fiddlers within the community. In the book *Old-Time Kentucky Fiddle Tunes* Jeff Todd Titon researches the three regions of old-time Kentucky fiddling and the fiddlers that played within these regions. The three regions are the South-Central, Northeast, and Southeast areas of Kentucky. Titon chose to focus on the repertoires of these fiddlers by transcribing tunes that were played by Clyde Davenport, John Slayer, and Hiram Stamper. Tunes that Titon transcribed included “Leather Britches,” “Forked Deer,” and “Arkansas Traveler.” Titon transcribed these tunes using standard musical notation, providing the reader with the key, tuning, and information about the performance he was transcribing.

Like Titon, Erynn Marshall (2006) also analyzes and transcribes the traditional old-time music in West Virginia in her book *Music in the Air Somewhere*. Marshall writes small biographies about the fiddlers she features in her books, but she focused on analyzing the repertoires of West Virginia fiddlers. Marshall analyzes the repertoires of fiddlers like Melvin Wine and Lester McCumbers by transcribing the tunes using standard musical notation. The tunes that Marshall chose to transcribe were “Cherry River Line,” and “Redwing.” Marshall also analyzed certain aspects of these tunes, such as structure, tuning, and speed. In an equivalent manner to Titon and Marshall, authors Drew Beisswenger, Roy Andrade, and Scott Prouty (2021) also used standard musical notation to highlight the repertoires of Appalachian fiddlers in the early twentieth century in their book *Appalachian Fiddle Music*. The authors used standard musical notation to transcribe tunes played by Fiddlin’ John Carson from Georgia, Clyde

Davenport from Kentucky, Tommy Jarrell from North Carolina, Fiddlin' Powers from Virginia, and Clarke Kessinger from West Virginia. Titon, Marshall, and Beisswenger's books provide information on the different elements of fiddle tunes that music scholars choose to analyze. This information was helpful in terms of this project by showing me what parts of Blizard's fiddling I would have to analyze when looking at his repertoire. Titon and Marshall, and Beisswenger's books also gave examples on how to transcribe fiddle tunes using standard music notation. While their transcriptions were insightful, this project differs from the writings of Titon, Marshall, and Beisswenger by making a visual representation of Blizard's music that can be understood without prior knowledge of how to read musical notations.

When looking at the literature that focuses on festivals and gatherings in the old-time music community, author Fred Fussell focuses on the festivals, jam sessions, and venues that are in old-time music communities in North Carolina and Virginia in his book *Blue Ridge Music Trails of North Carolina*. Fussell (2013) intended for the book to serve as one of, "the most comprehensive guides to traditional music in western North Carolina."<sup>4</sup> Some of the traditional music gatherings that Fussell focused on include the Mount Airy Bluegrass and Old-Time Fiddlers' Convention, in Surry County, North Carolina, The Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Buncombe County, North Carolina, and the Happy Valley Old-Time Fiddlers' Convention in Yadkin Valley, North Carolina. While there are brief profiles on musicians such as Bobby McMillon and Sheila Kay Adams, Fussell's book primarily focuses on the communities within western North Carolina, as opposed to the musicians within those communities. Fussell (2003) also focuses on the old-time music communities in western North Carolina and Virginia in his book *Blue Ridge Music Trails: Finding a Place in the Circle*. The communities that Fussell

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<sup>4</sup> Fred Fussell. *Blue Ridge Music Trails of North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), xvii.

focused on were chosen based on certain criteria including the fact that, “the selected venues present programs of traditional music and dance that have been handed down in the region over generations, are characteristic of and deeply rooted in communities, or are practiced by recently settled immigrant communities.”<sup>5</sup> Music communities that Fussell discusses includes the Grayson County Fiddlers’ Convention in Grayson County, Virginia, the Old-Time Music and Dance Week at the Swannanoa Gathering, in Buncombe County, North Carolina, and the Old Fiddlers’ Convention in Galax, Virginia. Fussell also discusses the musicians in these communities in small profiles, but the focus of *Blue Ridge Music Trails* is to highlight the communities in the area.

Similarly, Chris Goertzen discusses the community surrounding the Old Fiddlers’ Convention in his article “Galax, Virginia’s ‘Old Fiddlers’ Convention’: The Virtues and Flaws of a Giant Fiddle Contest.” In the article, Goertzen discusses the history of the long-running convention and how the festival has both pros and cons for the surrounding community. Likewise, Joyce H. Cauthen (1989) discusses the old-time music community in Alabama in her book *With Fiddle and Well Rosined Bow*. Cauthen discusses the role of the fiddle in Alabama’s history and the role of fiddlers in celebrations, square dances, and fiddler’s conventions that took place across the state in the 1920s and 1930s. While Fussell, Goertzen, and Cauthen discuss old-time musicians within their literature, they tend to focus on the larger old-time music communities in their prospective states as opposed to the musicians within them. This project differs from the works of Fussell, Goertzen, and Cauthen in the fact that it will provide an in-depth look and analysis of a single figure within the east Tennessee old-time community.

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<sup>5</sup> Fred Fussell. *Blue Ridge Music Trails: Finding a Place in the Circle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2003), xxiv.

### *Old-Time Music Communities and Fiddlers from East Tennessee*

Current literature about old-time music communities and fiddlers from the East Tennessee region focuses on fiddlers that gained fame in the early twentieth century. Charles K. Wolfe discusses these fiddlers in his two books, *Tennessee Strings: The Story of Country Music in Tennessee* and *The Devil's Box: Masters of Southern Fiddling*. In the first chapter of *Tennessee Strings*, Wolfe (1977) briefly discusses the careers of East Tennessee fiddlers such as Uncle Am Stuart, Charlie Bowman, G.B. Grayson, and Dudley Vance. Wolfe also discusses essential events in the East Tennessee old-time music community during the early twentieth century. One of the events discussed was the 1925 Mountain City Fiddler's Convention in Mountain City, Tennessee.

In addition to writing about East Tennessee fiddlers in *Tennessee Strings*, Wolfe (1997) also writes biographies about various fiddlers from across the southern region of the United States in *The Devil's Box: Masters of Southern Fiddling*. A few of the fiddlers discussed include Fiddlin' Cowan Powers, Arthur Smith, and G.B. Grayson. G.B. Grayson is the only fiddler from East Tennessee to be mentioned in *The Devil's Box*. Wolfe's books aided this project by providing an example of what type of information to put into a biography about a fiddle player. His books also show what has already been written about East Tennessee fiddlers.

In addition to Wolfe's books, authors such as Drew Beisswenger, Roy Andrade, Scott Prouty, and Bob Cox also provided me with information on what has been written about fiddlers from the East Tennessee region. As mentioned earlier, Drew Beisswenger, Roy Andrade, and Scott Prouty discussed the careers and repertoires of Appalachian fiddlers in the early twentieth century in their book *Appalachian Fiddle Tunes*. The fiddlers from East Tennessee that are discussed within *Appalachian Fiddle Tunes* include Charlie Bowman, John Dykes, G.B.



Grayson, and J.D. Harris. Along with including their repertoire, Beisswenger, Andrade, and Prouty include a brief biography of the fiddlers. While Wolfe and the authors of *Appalachian Fiddle Tunes* discuss many of the same fiddlers, one of the fiddlers that Wolfe does not mention in his books is John Dykes. The brief biography that Beisswenger, Andrade, and Prouty provided on Dykes was helpful to this project because Dykes' life and his influence on Blizard is discussed in this thesis.

One fiddler that commonly appears in literature written about East Tennessee fiddling is Charlie Bowman. While Bowman is given a brief biography in *Tennessee Strings* and *Appalachian Fiddle Tunes*, author Bob Cox (2007) provides an in-depth look at Bowman's life and career in his book, *Fiddlin' Charlie Bowman: An East Tennessee Old-Time Music Pioneer and His Musical Family*. Within his book, Cox analyzes Bowman's life, musical career, and the impact that he had in the old-time music community in east Tennessee. *Fiddlin' Charlie Bowman* was helpful because Cox provided an example of what information should be included in an in-depth biography of a musician. Cox's book was also helpful to this project because Blizard and his father are mentioned briefly, providing context to how Bowman would influence Blizard in his youth. The literature on the old-time music communities and fiddlers from East Tennessee often contains brief biographies on fiddlers that gained fame in the early part of the twentieth century. While this literature did provide me with a framework for my biography of Ralph Blizard, this project will differ from existing literature on east Tennessee fiddlers since it will provide an in-depth look into the career of a fiddler that gained fame in the latter part of the twentieth century.

### *Ralph Blizzard*

My review of the literature revealed that Blizzard was included in two books. He is mentioned in *Fiddlin' Charlie Bowman: An East Tennessee Old-Time Music Pioneer and His Musical Family* by Bob Cox and in *Wayfaring Stranger: The Musical Voyage from Scotland and Ulster to Appalachia* by Doug Orr and Jean Ritchie. Blizzard is mentioned in *Fiddlin' Charlie Bowman* when Cox discussed how the Blizzard family played music with Charlie Bowman. In *Wayfaring Stranger*, Ralph Blizzard and the New Southern Ramblers are mentioned briefly when Orr and Ritchie refer to the old-time music revival in the later half of the twentieth century. Doug Orr also wrote an article summarizing Blizzard's career in a 1995 issue of *Old-Time Herald Magazine*.

Information on Blizzard's musical career is found in old-time music magazines and newspaper articles. Blizzard is featured in old-time music magazines such as *Old-Time Herald*, *Sing-Out*, and *Fiddler Magazine*. The magazine articles cover Blizzard's early career and achievements after he started playing fiddle again in the 1980s. The newspaper articles that feature Blizzard include details about shows that he played, and details about Blizzard's achievements. This lack of scholarly literature showed that while information about Blizzard has been published in newspaper articles and magazines, there has not been a scholarly analysis of Blizzard's life and career. This thesis aims to expand on the literature surrounding the old-time music communities and fiddlers in East Tennessee.

### *Documenting Old-Time Music History*

One of the common ways that the authors in this literature review chose to document the histories of old-time music communities and fiddlers was through collecting oral history. When looking at literature on oral history, the methods that authors such as Howard L. Sacks, and

Valerie Raleigh Yow used to collect oral history provided a guide to how I conducted my research for this project.

In the book *Catching Stories: A Practical Guide to Oral History*, Howard L. Sacks discusses three different approaches to oral history and the differences between these approaches. The three approaches that Sacks discussed were the documentary approach, the interpretative approach, and the civic approach. According to Sacks, one type of documentary approach to oral history is “salvage folklore. Such projects are defined by a strong motivation to document some phenomenon that is fast disappearing – a dying craft or occupational tradition, or the recollections of aging veterans.”<sup>6</sup> Upon reading Sacks description of the documentary approach to oral history, I decided that for this project, I would use the documentary approach to oral history and salvage folklore to tell Blizzard’s story.

In a comparable manner to Sacks, author Valerie Raleigh Yow discusses various types of oral history projects in her book *Recording Oral Histories: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Yow discusses the techniques for using oral history to research biography. Yow states that a biography, “must be evidence based. The art in biography is the creativity in the search for evidence, the arranging of evidence to present an engrossing narrative of this unique life, and the interpretation of it, but biography is also the presentation of an individual life in its relationship to a wider history.”<sup>7</sup> Yow’s definition of a biography provided a guide to how I conducted my archival research and collected oral history. Throughout this thesis process, I searched for evidence of Blizzard’s musical legacy to create a compelling narrative surrounding his role in the old-time music community in the later part of the twentieth century.

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<sup>6</sup> Donna M. DeBlasio. *Catching Stories: A Practical Guide to Oral History* (Athens: University of Ohio Press, 2009), 17

<sup>7</sup> Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral Histories: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (AltaMira Press: Lanham, 2005), 221.

## *Research Methods*

To fully understand Blizard’s unique style of fiddle playing, his role in the old-time music revival, and to answer the research questions shown above, I engaged in a variety of qualitative research methods. According to the book *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, this study falls under qualitative research methods because I gathered, “multiple forms of data, such as interviews, observations, documents, and audiovisual information.”<sup>8</sup>

Collecting oral histories was one of the main components that made up this project. When gathering oral histories, I used the documentary approach that was defined by Howard L. Sacks.<sup>9</sup> When thinking about who I wanted to interview for this project, I knew that I wanted to talk to people who had been close to Blizard during his life and musical career. In the spring of 2021, I was introduced to numerous people who knew Blizard through an email sent by Ed Bush, the curator of the Ralph Blizard Museum in Blountville, Tennessee. I was able to speak to members of Blizard’s family, as well as former members of The New Southern Ramblers. Before contacting the potential interviewees, I completed an ethics course called the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program. I then submitted a proposal of my study to the ETSU Internal Review Board along with a series of sample questions. Once it was determined that my project did not fall under the IRB’s definition of research involving human subjects, I put together informed consent templates for the interviewees to read and review before the interview. Within the informed consent templates, I informed the interviewees about the project’s goal and what would be required of them during the interviews. I also informed the interviewees

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<sup>8</sup> John W. Creswell. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2018), 181.

<sup>9</sup> Donna M. DeBlasio. *Catching Stories: A Practical Guide to Oral History*, 17.

that they had the opportunity to remain anonymous. They could also donate the transcripts of their interviews to the Archives of Appalachia for preservation. When I contacted the interviewees, I explained to them that the overall goal of my project was to discuss Blizard's style of fiddling and how his music and his actions helped preserve the sound of Traditional Appalachian old-time music.

During the summer and fall of 2021, I conducted interviews with Blizard's family members, colleagues, and former band members. The members of his family that I interviewed included his two sons, David and Mark, and one of his grandchildren, Brittney. Out of Blizard's colleagues in the old-time music community, I interviewed Doug Orr, former president of Warren Wilson College, and Roy Andrade, a former member of the old-time band the Reeltime Travelers. I was also able to interview the members of The New Southern Ramblers: Phil Jamison, Gordy Hinnens, Andy Deaver-Smith, John Herrmann, and John Lilly. I conducted the interviews in a semi-structured format, creating a few questions in advance to help guide the interview. Some of the questions that I planned included:

- 1) How did the interviewee know Blizard? What were their impressions of him?
- 2) What was it like to play with him during jam sessions and in The New Southern Ramblers?
- 3) How were they able to adapt to his improvisational style of fiddle playing?
- 4) What were some of his most significant contributions to the genre of old-time music?

Some of the questions I asked in the interviews were specific to the person I was interviewing. For example, when interviewing Doug Orr, a co-founder of the Swannanoa Gathering, I asked him questions about Blizard's time teaching at the Swannanoa Gathering.

When I interviewed Andy Deaver-Smith, the first bass player for the New Southern Ramblers, I asked her how she could keep up with his style of fiddle playing while she was playing bass.

The COVID-19 pandemic did impact how I conducted my oral history interviews for this project. Recognizing that some of the interviewees may not want to meet in person due to the pandemic, I offered each person I interviewed a chance to meet in person, over the phone, or over Zoom. Throughout the interviewing stage of my project, I could only meet face-to-face with one person in July of 2021. Due to concern about the pandemic, distance from Johnson City, or time constraints, the rest of the interviewees elected to conduct their interviews over phone calls or on Zoom.

Another component that made up this project was archival and documentary research. I conducted this research throughout the spring and summer of 2021 at two separate locations. The first location I conducted research at was the Ralph Blizard Museum in Blountville, Tennessee. The Ralph Blizard Museum is in the historic district of Blountville, in the Anderson Townhouse. In the fall of 2020, I approached Ed Bush, the museum's curator, about the possibility of participating in an internship at the Ralph Blizard Museum. After discussing the responsibilities I would undertake at the museum, Ed agreed for me to participate in an internship that took place over the spring semester, which lasted from January to May of 2021. During my internship at the Ralph Blizard Museum, I was able to help Ed sort through materials that had belonged to Blizard that had been donated to the museum by the family. Materials that I came across included personal documents written by Blizard, the various awards that he had received throughout his career, photos taken during his youth as a fiddler in the 1930s, newspaper articles about Blizard and the New Southern Ramblers, and 753 cassette tapes. The cassette tapes featured recordings that he made of his practice sessions, jam sessions, and shows that he and the New Southern

Ramblers played. This internship at the Ralph Blizard Museum provided me with primary source materials and gave me further insight into who he was as a musician and a person.

The second location where I conducted documentary and archival research was the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University. While at the Archives of Appalachia, I researched the Thomas Sneed Collection, which included a transcript of an interview Sneed conducted with Blizard in January 2002. In this interview, Blizard discussed his childhood growing up in Kingsport, Tennessee, and the early part of his music career in the 1930s. The collection also features a biography written about Blizard by his bandmate John Lilly. These documents aided my understanding of Blizard's early life and the first part of his musical career.

The last component that made up this research project was the analysis of Blizard's repertoire and his style of playing. During the fall of 2021, I created a spreadsheet of the tunes that Blizard recorded commercially across five albums. I was then able to separate the tunes into individual categories and create a graph to see what musicians Blizard drew from to create his commercial repertoire. To analyze his style of playing, I created a visual representation of one of Blizard's signature tunes, "Blizard Train," and a visual representation of the original version of the tune, "Lost Train Blues" by Arthur Smith. Ms. Brittany Haas, the Artist in Residence in the ETSU Bluegrass, Old-Time, and Roots Music Studies program for 2021-2022, helped create the visual representations.

A few terms must be defined before continuing with this paper. In this project, "old-time music" refers to the style of music played in the Appalachian regions of Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia, Georgia, and Kentucky before the commercialization of the music industry and the creation of bluegrass music in 1945. "Old-time" is the music that Blizard grew up around, and it is the music he chose to play throughout his lifetime. "Appalachian

longbow fiddling” is best defined by Blizard. To him, Appalachian longbow fiddling, “just refers to the fact that you theoretically could go from the tip of the bow to the frog, the other end of the bow, with a long series of notes.”<sup>10</sup>

Looking ahead, Chapter Two, “A Brief Biography of Ralph Blizard” provides a brief overview of Blizard’s life and a general summary of his musical career. Chapter Three, “John, Dudley, Charlie, and Arthur” will briefly analyze the life and careers of Arthur Smith, John Dykes, Dudley Vance, and Charlie Bowman, four fiddle players who influenced Blizard in his youth. Chapter Four “He Never Played It the Same Way Once,” will analyze Blizard’s repertoire, style of fiddle playing, and how it built off of the fiddlers from Blizard’s youth to become something unique but hard to replicate in the old-time music community. Chapter Five “The Old-Time Revival of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s” will build off of an article by Tamara Livingston to show how Blizard began the second part of his musical career during an old-time music revival. Finally, Chapter Six, “Ralph’s Blizard’s Role in the Old-Time Revival” discusses the distinct roles that Blizard adopted within the old-time music revival and how these dissimilar roles allowed for Blizard to promote and preserve traditional Appalachian old-time music.

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<sup>10</sup> “National Heritage Award Concert,” (cassette tape, private collection of Ralph Blizard Museum, 2002.)



## CHAPTER 2. A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RALPH BLIZARD

Herbert Ralph Blizzard was born on December 5, 1918, in Kingsport, Tennessee, to Robert Huston Blizzard and Jennie Catherine Willis Blizzard. Blizzard had two older half-brothers, Roy and Aldridge, a younger brother named Carl, and two younger sisters named Joan and Beatrice. Growing up, Blizzard was surrounded by the sound of East Tennessee old-time fiddle playing. In an interview with Thomas Sneed, Blizzard stated that his family owned a 78-record player. The records they owned featured, “John Carson, all the fiddlers that ever was out, most everything that was recorded back at the time by fiddlers you know.”<sup>11</sup> Blizzard’s father, Robert, taught shape note singing in the area and played fiddle. Blizzard recalled that he started playing fiddle by the time he was seven and that when he started, “my Dad evidently wouldn’t let me see his fiddle, wouldn’t let me handle his fiddle. But my mother got it out when he wasn’t around, let me play on it. I knew how to play it before he knew I could play a fiddle.”<sup>12</sup> Blizzard recalled one day, someone had asked his father to play a tune and, “my Dad told them he said well he didn’t know it, my mother said, ‘well let Ralph have it.’ He found out, maybe they tried to trick me into that I don’t know, you know how parents do their kids. I don’t know.”<sup>13</sup> After Blizzard started to play the fiddle, his father tried to teach him how to read music, but after about three to six months of trying to read music Blizzard found that it, “was bothering my originality... To me it was unnatural. It was not authentic, in other words. Traditional old-time music is authentic, and if you maintain the authenticity of it, it is played by ear.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ralph Blizzard interview by Thomas Sneed, January 22, 2002, interview 1, transcript, Box 1, Folder 2, Thomas Sneed Collection 1996-2003, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “Biography written by John Lilly”, undated, Box 1, Folder 4, Thomas Sneed Collection 1996-2003, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University.

Blizard was also surrounded by notable traditional musicians of the era thanks to local jam sessions held in his neighborhood. During his interview with Sneed, Ralph stated that, “I remember sitting, you know, with John Dykes, down there doing jam sessions... I’m quite sure we went down to John Dykes and played quite often, and Charlie Bowman was visiting our family. He visited our home, quite often, fairly often.”<sup>15</sup> Along with John Dykes and Charlie Bowman, other notable musicians at the time who came to the local jam sessions included, “Just about everybody in traditional music in our locality ... Carl McConell, who was in Hiltons, he hitchhiked over. And Doc Addington – He’s Maybelle Carter’s brother. They [Doc and Carl] were quite a duet. And the Carters were over there to those sessions.”<sup>16</sup>

By the time Blizard was around ten or eleven years old, he and two of his friends, Roy Perry and S.G. Clarke, formed The Southern Ramblers. The initial band started with one fiddle and two guitars. They started playing at picnics, gatherings, schoolhouses, on the radio, and at fiddle competitions.<sup>17</sup> Blizard stated that when he and The Southern Ramblers were competing at fiddler’s competitions, they would play tunes such as “Mockingbird,” “Chinese Breakdown,” and “East Tennessee Blues.”<sup>18</sup> Ralph Blizard and the Southern Ramblers got a job performing on various radio stations throughout the East Tennessee area. One of the radio stations was WOPI in Bristol and Kingsport. They performed there from 1932 until 1938. In 1938, WJHL began broadcasting from Kingsport, where Ralph Blizard and the Southern Ramblers performed on the show “The Barrel of Fun.” They performed on WJHL until 1940, when the band moved to WKTP, where they stayed until February 1942.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ralph Blizard interview by Thomas Sneed January 25, 2002, interview 2, transcript, Box 1, Folder 3, Thomas Sneed Collection 1996-2003, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University.

<sup>16</sup> Lilly,” Biography.” Thomas Sneed Collection, Archives of Appalachia.

<sup>17</sup> Sneed,” Ralph Blizard Interview.” Thomas Sneed Collection, Archives of Appalachia.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Blizard acknowledged that during the early part of his career there had been a distinct possibility of making a living out of being a musician but, “where all those things got cut off from going into say, what changed not only our lives as musicians there, changed all the lives of everybody in the whole country, was that World War II come up so that took priority on what you did. Most of the young people went into the service. Some of the musicians did not for one reason or another, but that disrupted the normal progression of what you might have gotten into.”<sup>20</sup> In an interview with Blizard’s son, David Blizard,<sup>21</sup> David stated that his father had served in The United States Navy during WWII, “and from his personal accounts he worked mostly on training in North America. So he trained other naval folks on use of code.”<sup>22</sup> After the war, Blizard joined WKTP’s show “Saturday Night Hayride.” By this time, bluegrass music had started to gain popularity as a music genre thanks to bands like Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys. During an interview with the *Knoxville News Sentinel*, Blizard stated that many local fiddlers turned to bluegrass music because, “that’s where the money was, but by the time bluegrass developed, my influences, style, and personality were already set. So I’ve always stuck with old-time.”<sup>23</sup> While playing at “Saturday Night Hayride” Blizard met his wife Mildred Inez Bowman, and the two married in 1952. By 1955 he put down his fiddle to focus on raising a family and his job at Eastman Kodak in Kingsport, Tennessee. Mark Blizard<sup>24</sup> recalled that when his father put down the fiddle, he stopped playing old-time music altogether. “We saw him get it [the fiddle] out, I can remember a handful of times. But it wasn’t anything serious, it was almost

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> David Blizard is Ralph Blizard’s oldest son. To avoid confusion, he will be referred to as David throughout the paper.

<sup>22</sup> Blizard, David. In discussion with author, July 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Morgan Simmons, “Blountville Fiddler Gets ‘National Heritage’ Honor,” *Knoxville News Sentinel* (Knoxville, TN), Jul. 8, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Mark Blizard is Ralph Blizard’s youngest son. To avoid confusion, he will be referred to as Mark Blizard throughout the paper.

like he was just checking on it. I don't recall any jam sessions ... But from all that I gather, he was fiddling or doing the other. There wasn't much cross over."<sup>25</sup> Blizard stopped playing old-time fiddle until he retired from Eastman Kodak in 1980.

Once he retired, after a 25-year hiatus, Blizard decided to pursue fiddling again. Mark recalled when his father retired and picked the fiddle back up to play old-time music, "He worked on it. He retired and he started spending a good eight hours a day working on re-establishing his fiddle skills. He wouldn't be satisfied if he couldn't play at a certain level. So he wouldn't go out and play the fiddle at first. But that's when he started collecting his tapes and relearning music, he practiced, practiced, practiced."<sup>26</sup> Once Blizard became comfortable with his fiddling playing skills, he began to play in front of others.

In 1982, Blizard went to a music festival at Bays Mountain Park just outside of Kingsport, Tennessee, where he met musicians Phil Jamison and Gordy Hinnners. Phil Jamison stated that, after playing music together, Blizard inquired as to where he could find more musicians who played old-time music, "and we said, 'Well as a matter of fact we're going to the Mount Airy Fiddler's Convention in North Carolina, and you should come.'"<sup>27</sup> Blizard entered the fiddle contest at Mount Airy and won third place. He then formed the New Southern Ramblers with Phil Jamison, Gordy Hinnners, and Andrea "Andy" Deaver-Smith, who were members of the Green Grass Cloggers. After forming the New Southern Ramblers, Blizard went on to win a number of accolades and awards gaining national and international fame due to his unique way of playing fiddle. Blizard's unique way of playing fiddle was classified as "Appalachian Longbow Fiddling." During the 22 years that the New Southern Ramblers played

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<sup>25</sup> Blizard, Mark. In discussion with author, July 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Jamison, Phil. (Member of The New Southern Ramblers), in discussion with author, August 2021.

together, the band saw John Lilly and John Herrmann join the group. Ralph Blizard and the New Southern Ramblers played at festivals and venues across the nation, including The Carter Family Fold, the Library of Congress, the Swannanoa Gathering, The Smithsonian Folklife Festival and MerleFest.

Along with playing at venues across the United States, Blizard was able to bring the sound of Appalachian old-time fiddling abroad to the countries of Scotland and Ireland. He received numerous awards during the second part of his musical career, including awards from fiddler's competitions, the Tennessee Folklife Heritage Award, and the National Heritage Fellowship Award. He was also able to record albums such as *Ralph Blizard Fiddles*, *Blizard Train* in 1989, *Southern Ramble* in 1995, and *Fox Chase* in 2000. A reissue of *Blizard Train* and the album *Blue Highway* was released posthumously in 2005.

Blizard passed away on December 3, 2004. The eulogy for his funeral was written by Doug Orr, one of his colleagues and friends in the old-time music community. Orr summed up the impact and legacy of Blizard's life and musical career by stating, "I reflected that the world would be a better place if we all practiced the lessons of Ralph's life and journey: to always invite others into the circle (whatever national background, race or origin, or level of musicianship); that the artistic soul exists in all of us and can be recaptured and revived if one has the dedication and love of the music; to take risks and make one's self vulnerable so that the music opens the door to a creative life; and, to respect and carry on the traditions of those musicians who come before us."<sup>28</sup>

Like Orr's eulogy states, during his lifetime, Blizard was able to leave a lasting impact on the old-time music genre. To fully understand the ways that Blizard left an impact on the old-

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<sup>28</sup> Orr, Doug. "Eulogy at Ralph Blizard's Memorial Service" (Personal Notes, from Doug Orr.)

time music community, this project looked at the fiddlers that came before Blizzard. These fiddlers were John Dykes, Dudley Vance, Charlie Bowman, and Arthur Smith, and their own styles would later shape Blizzard's unique style of fiddling.

### CHAPTER 3. JOHN, DUDLEY, CHARLIE, AND ARTHUR

Before Blizzard started performing as a young musician in the 1930s and again in the 1980s, a generation of fiddlers that came before him would be a considerable influence, allowing Blizzard to carry on the tradition of Appalachian old-time music. Fiddlers such as John Dykes, Charlie Bowman, and Dudley Vance came from the East Tennessee region where Blizzard started playing fiddle. Arthur Smith, who was from the middle Tennessee region, was one of the most popular fiddlers of the 1930s. To understand how Blizzard was influenced by John Dykes, Dudley Vance, Charlie Bowman, and Arthur Smith, this study had to look at their careers in order to show how their styles of fiddle playing would later influence Blizzard's style.

#### *John Dykes and Dudley Vance*

In the book *Appalachian Fiddle Music*, authors Drew Beisswenger, Roy Andrade, and Scott Prouty analyzed the popular tunes of fiddlers throughout Appalachia. John Dykes was among the 43 fiddlers discussed in the book. The book states that Dykes, born in 1868, was from Kingsport, Tennessee. At 57 he travelled with his band, "Dykes' 'Magic City Trio' ... and a young singer and banjo player named Dock Boggs to record music in New York City."<sup>29</sup> *Appalachian Fiddle Music* discusses Dykes recordings. On the records that Dykes made during his time in New York City, his style of fiddle playing represented "some of the finest examples of breakdown dance fiddling on record."<sup>30</sup> Though little is known about Dykes fiddle influences, it is stated in *Appalachian Fiddle Music* when Dykes was in east Tennessee he entered and won various fiddle contests along with performing at square dances. Winning these fiddle contests would earn him the nickname of 'Fiddlin' Dykes. Some of the tunes that Dykes recorded

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<sup>29</sup> Drew Beisswenger and Roy Andrade, *Appalachian Fiddle Music* (Mel Bay Publications Inc, 2021), 113.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

throughout his career included “Hook and Line,” “Ida Red,” “Red Steer,” and “Tennessee Girls.” Having grown up in Kingsport, Tennessee, Blizard recalled playing music around Dykes as he started his musical career. When looking at what music scholars have to say about Dykes’ music and comparing it to Blizard’s music, the two share some similarities in how they play. In an article titled “Roundtable Discussion of Appalachian Music- Discussing the top ten,” music scholars list their top ten picks of Appalachian music. For one of his choices for a song, Roy Andrade chose Dykes Magic City Trio’s “Ida Red.” When describing Dykes’ fiddle playing, Andrade stated that while Dykes chose to record tunes that were easy to hum and follow along, “the rhythmic layer underneath the melody, courtesy of Dykes’ fiddle bow, is intense, subtle, improvisational, and unstoppable ... and most of his tunes move along at 150 beats per minute.”<sup>31</sup> I will show in chapter four, Blizard’s style of playing is like Dykes’ in the fact that it can be described as improvisational due to his proficiency in long bow fiddling.

Though Dudley Vance was one of the four fiddlers that influenced Blizard’s style of playing, there is little information written about Vance’s life. What can be found on Vance is in Thomas Wolfe’s *Tennessee Strings* and in the liner notes of the LP, *A Fiddler’s Convention in Mountain City, Tennessee: 1924-1930 Recordings*. Within the liner notes for the record, the fiddler’s convention is described as an event that was “watershed in the development of country music.”<sup>32</sup> In May of 1925, the event was held in the auditorium of the high school located in Mountain City, Tennessee. The event featured some of the biggest names in old-time music including Fiddlin’ John Carson, G.B. Grayson, Fiddlin’ Powers (John Carson Powers), and Dudley Vance. Three of the winners of the Mountain City fiddler’s convention included “G.B.

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<sup>31</sup> Roy Andrade, Thomas Burton, et. al. “Roundtable Discussion of Appalachian Music – Discussing the Top 10.” *Appalachian Journal*, 42, no. 3-4, 2015: 154, accessed February 2, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26341079>.

<sup>32</sup> Wilson, Joe. Liner notes for *A Fiddler’s Convention in Mountain City, Tennessee*. County Records County 525, 1972, LP.



Grayson with ‘Cumberland Gap,’ Fiddlin’ Dud Vance with ‘Twinkle Little Star,’ and Charlie Bowman with ‘Sally Anne.’”<sup>33</sup> During his musical career, Vance recorded with a group called Vance’s Tennessee Breakdowners. One of the tunes they were known for was titled “Washington County Fox Chase.” Blizard would later record an original tune called “Fox Chase” that was inspired by Vance’s fiddle playing.

### *Charlie Bowman*

Charlie Bowman was another fiddler from the East Tennessee region that influenced Blizard in the initial stages of his musical career. Originally from Gray’s Station, Tennessee, Bowman was born in 1889. He formed an old-time band with his brothers Elbert, Alfred, Walter, and Argil in the 1920s. They were able to spread the sound of old-time music around east Tennessee thanks to their time playing for the campaign of the Honorable B. Carroll Reece.<sup>34</sup> According to historian Bob Cox, “Mr. Reece particularly favored Charlie and his brothers and beckoned them on numerous occasions to perform for him, thereby establishing a lifelong friendship with the congressman.”<sup>35</sup> Bowman also competed in fiddle contests across Tennessee, Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia. At these contests, he would play tunes such as “East Tennessee Blues” and “Cacklin’ Hen,” winning numerous first and second place awards. Continuously winning these awards seemed to displease the audiences at these competitions so the judges, “were placed where they could hear the fiddlers but not see them. Despite this modification, Charlie continued to win, his distinctive fiddle sound could easily be identified without his being seen.”<sup>36</sup> Bowman also participated in the 1925 Mountain City Fiddlers

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Bob L. Cox, *Fiddlin’ Charlie Bowman: An East Tennessee Old-Time Music Pioneer and His Musical Family* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press), 25.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 24.

Convention, and he played with a band known as the Hill Billies. Bowman performed on WOPI, the same radio station where Ralph Blizard and the Southern Ramblers performed. Bowman ended his career in 1930, two years before Ralph Blizard, Roy Perry, and S.G. Clarke would step up to the microphone. Though Blizard and Bowman never crossed paths at WOPI, Bowman was still able to influence Blizard's style of fiddle playing. Bowman played with well-known fiddlers in the east Tennessee region throughout his career, including Dudley Vance, John Dykes, Cowan Powers, Arthur Smith, Am Stuart, and Robert Houston Blizard. Bob Cox's book on Charlie Bowman states that as a young child, Blizard remembered, "Charlie routinely coming to their house and playing music for hours on the porch with his father. The young lad would listen intently ... Ralph credits Charlie Bowman with influencing his style of old-time longbow fiddling."<sup>37</sup>

#### *Arthur Smith*

The biggest influence on Blizard's style was fiddler Arthur Smith. Born in 1898 in Humphries County, Tennessee, Smith initially started playing fiddle as a child before he went to work for the NC & St. L railroad. While working at the railroad, Smith played part-time on the Grand Ole Opry with his cousin Homer before joining The Dixieliners. During his career, Smith recorded songs such as "Black Berry Blossom," "Pig in a Pen," "House of David Blues," "Lost Train Blues," and "Florida Blues." These songs would later become both bluegrass and old-time music standards. In Charles Wolfe's book *The Devil's Box: Masters of Southern Fiddling*, Wolfe argues that Smith's style of fiddle playing, "sounds, to modern ears, like 'contest fiddling,' whereas none of the other old-time fiddlers remind us of this."<sup>38</sup> When talking to musicians that

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 31.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Wolfe. *The Devil's Box: Masters of Southern Fiddling* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1997), 142.

played with Smith throughout his musical career, Wolfe found that they all stressed, “over and over again that he [Smith] had a good knowledge of his fingerboard and that his accents were clean and sharp.”<sup>39</sup> Wolfe states that the clear way that Smith played the notes on his fiddle, “is one of the benchmarks of modern contest fiddling.”<sup>40</sup> Wolfe also found through talking to Smith’s colleagues that Smith utilized fast tempos and a blues style when playing fiddle.

When looking at the fiddling style of Arthur Smith, Smith’s influence on Blizard is apparent. “Ralph was basically inspired by Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith,” John Herrmann, a former member of the New Southern Ramblers, said. “Most of his repertoire either came from Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith or came from that style ... which incorporated a lot of bluesy-ness and long bowing.”<sup>41</sup>

John Dykes, Dudley Vance, Charlie Bowman, and Arthur Smith were four fiddlers who would influence Blizard’s style of fiddle playing. Even as Blizard went on to create his own style of fiddling, he still drew influence from the men who came before him. This influence would allow him to spread the sound of traditional Appalachian old-time fiddling to audiences throughout the country and the world.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Herrmann, John. (Member of The New Southern Ramblers), in discussion with author, November 2021.

#### CHAPTER 4. HE NEVER PLAYED IT THE SAME WAY ONCE: AN ANALYSIS OF RALPH'S REPERTOIRE

With influences such as Arthur Smith, John Dykes, Dudley Vance, and Charlie Bowman, Blizard was linked to the old-time fiddlers that preceded him in the early twentieth century. Those that knew Blizard describe his style as similar to Arthur Smith. While Blizard's style of playing was like that of his influences, his style of fiddle playing was hard to imitate due to his improvisational skills. This study looked at his commercial repertoire to see how he drew inspiration from those musicians, all while using his improvisational skills to create a style of playing that could not be passed down in the traditional Appalachian old-time music community.

##### *Hell Among the Yearlings, Chittlin Cookin' Time in Cheatham, and Cajun Stomp: The Repertoire of Ralph Blizard*

Over the second half of his career, Blizard recorded four albums with the New Southern Ramblers, and one album with his bandmate John Lilly. Discussed briefly in chapter two, the albums that Blizard recorded throughout his career included *Ralph Blizard Fiddles*, *Blizard Train*, *Southern Ramble*, *Fox Chase*, and *Blue Highway*.

John Lilly, who started playing bass with the New Southern Ramblers in 1984, said that when it came to the repertoire that Blizard and the New Southern Ramblers played, "Phil and Gordy did mostly Delmore Brothers songs. Delmore Brothers were very big at the time of Ralph's first band. And I focused a lot on Jimmie Rodgers at that time, and that was very popular in Ralph's day as well. So Ralph knew most of these tunes we were bringing to the band so it was a really easy fit."<sup>42</sup> When choosing the tunes that would make up the album repertoire, Gordy Hinnens, the banjo player for the New Southern Ramblers, stated that when it came time to pick out the tunes that would be on an album, the whole band would collaborate to choose

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<sup>42</sup> Lilly, John. (Member of The New Southern Ramblers), in discussion with author, October 2021.

tunes. Hinners stated that a set list for the album would be selected from tunes, “that we had been playing and were comfortable playing. There were probably a few times that when we had the idea maybe months before hand that oh, maybe we should record another album and we might, sometimes it would be, oh well let’s play this song again.”<sup>43</sup> When looking at all five of the albums that Blizard had made there are tunes that repeat across the albums, such as “Brand New Beau,” “House of David Blues,” “Florida Blues,” and “Chittlin’ Cookin’ Time in Cheatham.” Hinners stated that the reason there were repeat tunes was because they knew the albums would reach a broad audience and that Ralph played the tunes differently each time.<sup>44</sup>

There are tunes that were originally recorded by the fiddle players of Blizard’s youth on each album. The most popular artist to be featured across the five albums was Blizard’s primary influence, Arthur Smith. Smith’s tunes made up 24% of Ralph’s commercial repertoire. Songs that had originally been recorded by Smith included songs such as “Florida Blues,” “House of David Blues,” “Chittlin’ Cookin’ Time in Cheatham County,” “Pig in a Pen,” “Sugar Tree Stomp” and “Black Berry Blossom.” Two other tunes that were inspired by fiddle players from Blizard’s youth were “Fox Chase” off of the 2000 album titled *Fox Chase* and “New Lost John” off of the 1995 album *Southern Ramble*. When looking at the liner notes for the album *Fox Chase* and the notes for the tune “Fox Chase” it says that the tune was a, “Ralph original inspired by the playing of Dudley Vance, one of the East Tennessee fiddlers he heard while in his youth.”<sup>45</sup> The liner notes for “New Lost John” said that, “Ralph put this tune together from

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<sup>43</sup> Hinners, Gordy. (Member of The New Southern Ramblers), in discussion with author, October 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Blizard, Ralph. *Fox Chase*. The New Southern Ramblers. Yodel-Ay-Hee CD-30, 2000, compact disk. Liner Notes.

memories of tunes from some of the fiddlers that were among his earliest influences- John Dykes, Charlie Bowman, Cowan Powers, and Dudley Vance.”<sup>46</sup>

Traditional fiddle tunes made up 28% of Blizard’s repertoire. “Hell Among the Yearlings” was one traditional fiddle tune that Blizard is well known for playing, and it is featured on the 1989 and 2005 reissue of the album *Blizard Train*. Other traditional tunes that Ralph and the New Southern Ramblers recorded included “Bonaparte’s Retreat,” “Carroll County Blues,” “Lost Indian,” “Turkey in the Straw,” “Katy Hill,” “Hand Me Down My Walking Cane,” and “Paddy on the Turnpike.” Blizard and the New Southern Ramblers also recorded songs by the Delmore Brothers, another group that influenced Blizard in his youth. Songs by the Delmore Brothers made up 8% of Blizard’s repertoire. Three songs recorded by the Delmore Brothers in Ralph’s repertoire included “I’m Going Back to the Blue Ridge Mountains,” “Blow Your Whistle Freight Train,” and “Fugitive’s Lament.” The repertoire on Blizard’s albums also includes songs by old-time and country musicians such as Jimmie Rodgers and Hank Williams. Songs that were recorded by these old-time and country music artists include “Same Old Man,” “Midnight on the Water,” “My Dixie Darling,” and these songs make up 28% of Blizard’s repertoire. Throughout his musical career, Blizard composed tunes for his commercial recordings including “Brand New Beau,” co-written with John Lilly, “Man in the Moon,” a tune Blizard wrote in the 1930s, “New Lost John,” and “Blizard Train.” These original tunes make up 12% of Blizard’s repertoire.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

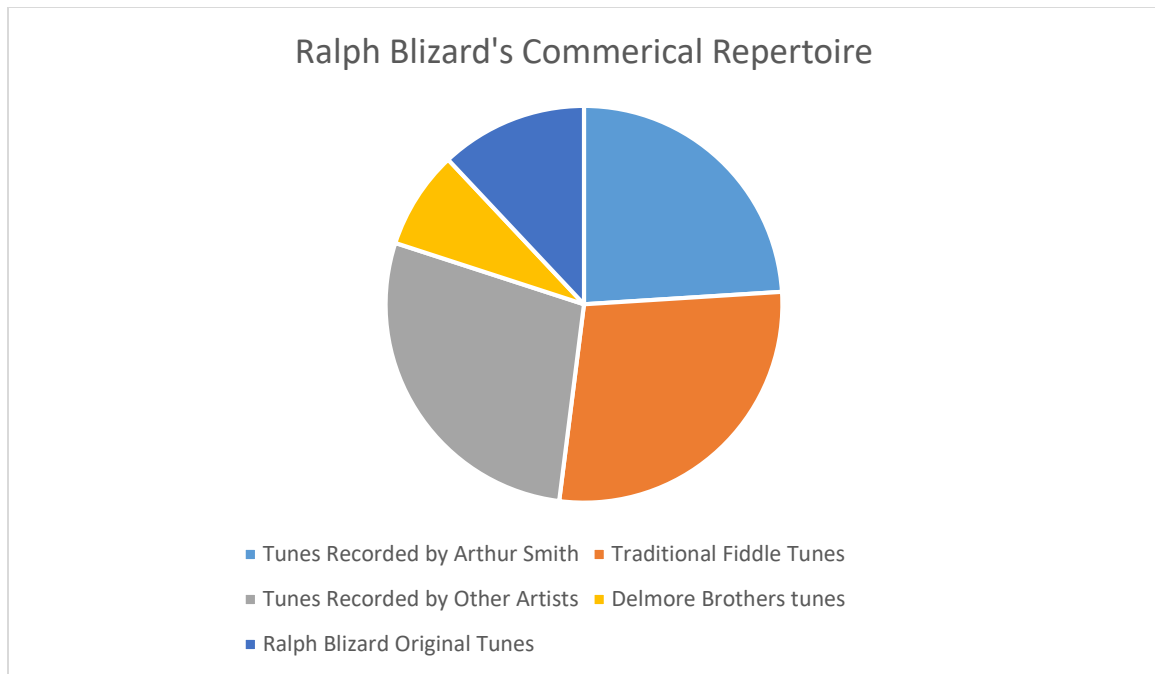


Figure 1. A visual representation of the songs in Blizard’s commercial repertoire

One original tune Blizard wrote showing the growth of his improvisational skills was the tune “Gypsy Stomp.” The liner notes for *Southern Ramble* say, “Ralph played a tune called ‘Cajun Stomp’ with his first band. He remembers gypsy musicians who used to camp near his home in East Tennessee and perhaps they were the inspiration for this one. We think it has a lot more gypsy influence than Cajun.”<sup>47</sup> On the 2005 reissue *Blizard Train*, “Cajun Stomp,” is featured yet again. The main difference between what was recorded on the *Southern Ramble* album and the reissue of *Blizard Train* is that this version of “Cajun Stomp (Gypsy Stomp)” was recorded in the 1930s, at the start of Blizard’s musical career. In the liner notes of the reissue of *Blizard Train* it states that, “Ralph wrote this tune in the 1930s and later changed its name to Gypsy Stomp. This recording was made at one of the Southern Ramblers’ many radio

<sup>47</sup> Blizard, Ralph. *Southern Ramble*. The New Southern Ramblers. Rounder Records CD-0352, 1995, compact disk. Liner Notes.

appearances in the late 1930s. (Ralph-fiddle, Roy Perry-Guitar, S.G. Clark- guitar).”<sup>48</sup> When listening to the two tunes, the development in Blizard’s style of fiddle playing between the first and second part of his career is evident. In the *Blizard Train* version of “Gypsy Stomp,” Blizard plays the tune’s melody without using too much improvisation. He plays with a clear tone, utilizing slides and vibrato. In the *Southern Ramble* version of “Gypsy Stomp,” Blizard’s style has developed to where he uses more improvisational skills. This use of improvisational skills is the key element of Blizard’s style of fiddle playing.

### *He Never Played It the Same Way Once*

Blizard’s style of fiddle playing was commonly referred to as “long bow fiddling.” In the book *Fiddlin’ Charlie Bowman: An East Tennessee Old-Time Music Pioneer and His Family*, author Bob Cox defines the term ‘long bow fiddling’ as a style of fiddle playing where fiddlers do not use the syncopated up and down motions of short bow fiddling but instead, “routinely take the bow from one end to the other before reversing it.”<sup>49</sup> Blizard described his style of fiddle playing in a biography that had been written about him by John Lilly. Blizard describes longbow fiddling as, “You can make more notes with one sweep of the bow. Say, if you’ve got a phrase and you want five notes on it, you can go five notes pretty easy. You want to come back two, or whatever, or if you want to go from the tip end of the bow to the frog end of the bow. This brings in styling. You reverse the direction of the bow at a pretty good clip. In doing so I think it brings in different variations of pressures and lightness on the fiddle bow. In other words, you’re emphasizing some notes louder, some softer ... that creates a style.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Blizard, Ralph. *Blizard Train*. The New Southern Ramblers. June Appal CD-JA0056D, 2005, compact disk. Liner Notes.

<sup>49</sup> Cox, *Fiddlin’ Charlie Bowman: An East Tennessee Old-Time Music Pioneer and his Family*, 32.

<sup>50</sup> Lilly, “Biography.” Thomas Sneed Collection, Archives of Appalachia.



Blizard had best summed up how his style of fiddle playing differed from others in a news article that was published by *The News Sentinel* in 2002. Within the article Blizard stated that his style of fiddle playing was different because, “anybody who plays with me has to be alert cause half the time even I don’t know what I’m going to do.”<sup>51</sup> Blizard also said that his style of playing differed from others because of the way he picked up the melody of a tune. Blizard recalled in the biography written by John Lilly that, “You see, if the melody’s straight down the line, you’re not off it very much. But I go down through-there, and I’m way off of it! And I have to keep going back over it till I come back to it. Therefore, I’ve been way out to the east side of what the melody is before I come to it ... By the time I learn all the melody and then the fill-in notes that go with it, I’m out, incorrect to the left, right and center. That’s one of the things that I think brings me down to the style of fiddling I do- that it’s variable in its approach to the melody.”<sup>52</sup> This variable approach to the melody would eventually lead to a common phrase echoed among the interviewees in this project. This echoed phrase was mentioned whenever interviewees would talk about how Blizard would play a tune. This phrase was that when Blizard would play a tune he “never played the tune the same way once.” According to Roy Andrade, this phrase was coined by Blizard as a play on words with the phrase “never played the tune the same way twice.”<sup>53</sup>

Phil Jamison recalled that when Blizard would play a tune with The New Southern Ramblers, he would start playing the tune pretty straight a number of times, and the band would be something of a safety net while Blizard would sometimes, “go wherever he wanted. Sometimes he’d go off out into the ozone and then come back to where we were. We were

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<sup>51</sup> Morgan Simmons, “Blountville Fiddler Gets ‘National Heritage’ Honor.”

<sup>52</sup> Lilly, “Biography.” Thomas Sneed Collection, Archives of Appalachia.

<sup>53</sup> Andrade, Roy. (Former member of the Reeltime Travelers), in discussion with author, March 2022.

supportive of that, and it was fun. We'd say we'd entered the Blizzard Zone."<sup>54</sup> Each member of The New Southern Ramblers stated that when they played with Blizzard, they had to constantly pay attention as he improvised the tune. John Herrmann would sometimes fill in on bass and banjo when the New Southern Ramblers would have a gig, and he said that on a few tunes Blizzard would sometimes, "go from major to minor, he would add an extra beat or an extra part. He would frequently play the same part again. And then sometimes he would just go off and you wouldn't know exactly where he was relative to the tune, then he'd come back. I don't think he thought about it at all, I think it was completely intuitive."<sup>55</sup>

While it seemed like Blizzard was the only person who was behind the improvisational style he played, he also took inspiration for his style from the people who played with him. Both Gordy Hinnners and John Herrmann asked Blizzard where he got his improvisational ideas. Blizzard responded that he got the ideas for his improvisation from the rest of the band. John Herrmann said while playing music, Blizzard, "would play something that was unexpected, you would try to figure out where he was going, he would hear you stumbling to find what he was doing and play off of what you did. And so there would be kind of a feedback loop of you trying to figure out what he did and then him going to where you went, and then it would go from there."<sup>56</sup> Gordy Hinnners said that the experience was like a dog chasing its own tail, where, "he might hear something that one of us did rhythmically, or maybe something I did melodically and that would trigger something in his own heart and mind that came out in his fiddle. And that was totally unique to me as someone that was trying to listen and follow what Ralph was doing. And so I would start to do whatever it was that he started to do. But tracing it back was almost

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<sup>54</sup> Jamison, Phil. In discussion with author, August 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Herrmann, John. In discussion with author, November 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

impossible.”<sup>57</sup>

Another factor that makes Blizard’s style hard to replicate was that he had a natural talent for noticing other’s style of playing instruments and then replicating that on his fiddle. Roy Andrade, a former member of the old-time band The Reeltime Travelers, recalls playing music with Blizard at his home in Blountville, and how Blizard seemed to notice what he was doing instantly. “He was such a great listener,” Andrade said. “Always just open and eager for musical ideas. If I would do anything out of the ordinary on the banjo, say play a funky note or a funky timing, something out of the ordinary something unusual, he would almost instantaneously appropriate that on the fiddle. It’s as if whatever idea that I’m playing on the banjo hopped off my banjo and landed on his fiddle. It was so fun. It was extraordinary.”<sup>58</sup>

Blizard’s fiddle playing style is something that sets him apart from fiddlers such as Arthur Smith, Charlie Bowman, and those that preceded him. While the repertoire on Blizard’s commercial recordings shows that he learned from the Tennessee fiddlers of his childhood Blizard’s repertoire is not something that can easily pass from student to teacher. “He was so far advanced musically in his style,” Phil Jamison said, “that it was not something he could just pass down to people, and sit with him at a workshop for a week and be able to play that ... Ralph was one of a kind and you can’t do that with his playing.”<sup>59</sup>

One tune that Blizard recorded which highlighted his improvisational style and gave proof to the fact that he “never played the tune the same way once” was a tune that was featured on the album *Blizard Train*. This tune started as Arthur Smith’s “Lost Train Blues,” but eventually became one of Blizard’s most well-known tunes. This fiddle tune that embodied

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<sup>57</sup> Hinnners, Gordy. In discussion with author, October 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Andrade, Roy. In discussion with author, July 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Jamison, Phil. In discussion with author, August 2021.

Blizard's ability to "never play the tune the same way once" was the self-titled tune "Blizard Train."

### *Blizard Train*

The liner notes for the song "Blizard Train" explain that the song came about because, "Ralph took the old tune 'Lost Train Blues' and added so much to it over the years that he retitled it. Hang on y'all!"<sup>60</sup> Andy Deaver-Smith was the bass player for The New Southern Ramblers when the band was recording the *Blizard Train* album. When speaking about the tune, Deaver-Smith said:

That's one of those tunes that has a part in it that he made up that is definitely not Arthur Smith. Arthur Smith doesn't do that... 'Blizard Train' was very improvisational ... If you listen to Blizard Train, it's basically a two-part tune. Every now and then, after he'd play the A and B part several times, he'd do this third part. I can't remember exactly what it goes to, but you immediately have to go to, I think it's an F that you go to. I don't remember the first time we ever heard him do that, it was not on the recording I don't think. But it was like, 'Woah! What was that?'<sup>61</sup>

Gordy Hinners stated that just before the group recorded "Blizard Train" for the first time, Blizard took the tune, which is in the key of G, and added a part to the song that went to an F chord before resolving the tune back in the G chord:

It was so completely unexpected. It wasn't like reworking of the melody, it was like a completely different thing. And it was the next day that we were going to record it, but it was perfect, and it was great. Now that particular phrase, in one way or another would show up almost every time he played 'Blizard Train' after that time, but it wouldn't show up at the same time. It wasn't predictable, oh we're going to play four parts and then that part's going to come up. It might have come up once, it may have come up five times. It just depended on where he was at in the mood.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Blizard, Ralph. *Blizard Train*. The New Southern Ramblers. June Appal CD-JA0056, 1989, cassette tape. Liner Notes.

<sup>61</sup> Smith, Andy. (Member of The New Southern Ramblers), in discussion with the author, October 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Hinners, Gordy. In discussion with author, October 2021.

Hinners said that after a while of playing “Blizard Train” the song went from having four distinct parts that Blizard would play, to eight distinct parts that he could play throughout the tune.

The following visual representations of both songs were created to show how Blizard took Arthur Smith’s version of “Lost Train Blues” and used his improvisational skills to create “Blizard Train”. In each visual representation, every time Smith or Blizard played a new melody in the tune, it was labeled with a different letter. Letters that have a number beside them, such as, A1 and A2, indicate that the two parts have the same melody but end differently. In the visual representations for “Blizard Train,” letters with an apostrophe marking beside them, such as B,’ stand for B prime. This indicates that Blizard is playing the B melody, but there are slight variations between the original B melody and B prime. Letters with two apostrophe marks, such as B’’, stand for B prime two. This indicates that Blizard is still playing the B melody, but there are enough variations to label the melody separately from the original melody and B prime. The TAG indicates the ending of the tune.

“Lost Train Blues” by Arthur Smith

A1 A2 B B C  
D D B B  
A1 A2 B B E  
D D B B  
A1 A2 B B C  
D D B B E  
D D B B  
A1 A2 B B C  
D D B B C  
D D B  
TAG

Figure 2. This visual representation of “Lost Train Blues” shows how Arthur Smith played the tune on the album *Fiddlin’ Arthur Smith & his Trio 1935-1936*.

### Blizard Train (Album Version)

A1 A2 A1 A2  
B B B B  
D D D D  
A1 A2 A1 A2  
B B B B  
C D D D D  
F1 F2 F1 F2  
G G G G  
B' B'' B'' B'' B''  
E D D D D  
A1' A2' A1' A2'  
B' B'' B'' B''  
E F1' F2' F1' F2' F1' F2'  
C D D D D  
G G G' G'  
TAG

Figure 3. This visual representation of “Blizard Train” shows the modifications Ralph made on Arthur Smith’s “Lost Train Blues.”

By creating visual comparisons between Arthur Smith’s “Lost Train Blues” and Blizard’s “Blizard Train” the modifications he made to the tune are easy to see. Where Smith’s recording of “Lost Train Blues” only has five parts, Blizard added two extra parts, G and F. While Smith added variations to the A part of his tune, Blizard added different variations to every part of the tune. To highlight how Blizard played no tune the same way once, a second visual representation was made of a live recording of “Blizard Train” that was recorded in October 1990 in Kingsport, Tennessee.

### Blizard Train (Live Recording)

A1 A2 A1 A2  
B B B B  
C D D D D  
A1' A2' A1' A2'  
B' B' B'' B''  
E D D D D  
G G G G  
B' B' B' B'  
F1 F2 F1 F2

H1 H2 H1 H2  
G' G'' G' G''  
B B B B  
E D D D D  
TAG

Figure 4. This visual representation of a live recording of “Blizard Train” comes from a video that John Lilly posted on YouTube in December 2011.

The visuals for the album recording of “Blizard Train” and the live recording of “Blizard Train” show how Blizard never played the same tune the same way once. While Blizard kept the beginning of the tune the same, he added variations to the A1, A2, and B parts. He changed the order in which the parts of the tune are played, and he added a completely new part of the tune, which was labeled H, in the visual.

Blizard’s commercial repertoire shows that he drew inspiration from the musicians that came before him. Although he drew inspiration from fiddler Arthur Smith, he developed his own musical style that was defined by the fact that he never played a tune the same way once. This inimitable style is why Blizard’s legacy was not through his music. Blizard’s legacy as an old-time musician was through his actions to preserve and promote traditional Appalachian old-time music during the old-time revival of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.

## CHAPTER 5. THE OLD-TIME REVIVAL OF THE 1980s, 1990s, AND 2000s

During the 25 years that Blizard had taken a hiatus from playing fiddle, bluegrass music had become popular thanks to artists such as Bill Monroe, Lester Flatt, and Earl Scruggs. According to Phil Jamison, when Blizard started the second part of his musical career by sticking to old-time fiddle playing, he was something of “a ‘Rip Van Winkle.’ After 25 years he came out wanting to play old-time music again, and now all he could find was bluegrass. He couldn’t find anybody to play old-time music with.”<sup>63</sup> Blizard was able to meet other old-time musicians thanks to festivals that were held throughout the northeast Tennessee and western North Carolina region. Blizard first met Phil Jamison, Gordy Hinnners and Andy Deaver-Smith at the Bays Mountain Music Festival in Kingsport, Tennessee, in 1982.<sup>64</sup> Jamison introduced Blizard to more old-time musicians by inviting him to the Mount Airy Fiddler’s Convention, where Blizard won third place in the fiddler’s competition that year. It was festivals such as Bays Mountain and Mount Airy, and a renewed interest in old-time music among a younger generation that spurred an old-time music revival that lasted throughout the 1980s to the 2000s. Thanks to this old-time music revival Blizard became an ambassador for traditional Appalachian old-time music.

This study looked at the elements involved in music revivals to understand the old-time revival that took place from the 1980s to the 2000s, and Blizard’s ambassadorship during this time. In her 1999 article *Music Revivals: Towards a General Theory*, Tamara Livingston defines musical revivals as a “social movement with the goal of restoring and preserving a musical tradition which is believed to be disappearing or completely regulated to the past.”<sup>65</sup> Throughout

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<sup>63</sup> Jamison, Phil. In discussion with author, August 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Tamara Livingston, “Musical Revivals: Towards a General Theory,” *Ethnomusicology*, 43, no. 1 (1999): 68, accessed December 30, 2021 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/852694>



the 80s, 90s, and 2000s, there was a movement among participants in the old-time music community throughout the United States that aimed towards preserving the sound of old-time music. This movement fits into the six components that Livingston says make up a music revival. Within her article, Livingston stated that the six components that make up a musical revival include:

1. An individual or a small group of “core revivalists”
2. Revival informants and/or original sources (e.g., historical sound recordings)
3. A revivalist ideology and discourse
4. A group of followers which form the basis of a revivalist community
5. Revivalist activities (organizations, festivals, competitions)
6. Non-profit and/or commercial enterprises catering to the revivalist market.<sup>66</sup>

When looking at four of the six components and the events that were taking place within the old-time music community in the 80s, 90s, and 00s, there was a music revival that was taking place as Blizard started the second part of his musical career.

*An Individual or a Small Group of “core revivalists”*

According to Livingston’s article, the individual or the small group of core revivalists is the most important aspect of a music revival. “Core revivalists, whether ‘insiders’ to the tradition or ‘outsiders,’ tend to feel such a strong connection with the revival tradition that they take it upon themselves to ‘rescue’ it from extinction and pass it on to others.”<sup>67</sup> During the old-time music revival from 1980 to the early 2000s a series of core revivalists worked to rescue the sound of old-time music and preserve the sound for future generations. One core revivalist who worked to preserve old-time music during this time was Dr. Richard Blaustein. Blaustein served as the director of ETSU’s Center for Appalachian Studies and Services from 1983-1992. Blaustein also taught fiddle and banjo and helped to form the ETSU Old-Time String Band. In an

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

obituary written for Blaustein in 2020, it's stated that in late 1980s he, "and ETSU Bluegrass alumnus Tim Stafford collaborated on the documentary recording *Down Around Bowmantown – A Portrait of a Musical Community in Northeast Tennessee*, which was placed on the Library of Congress American Folklife Center's Selected List of American Folk Music Recordings."<sup>68</sup> In the liner notes Blaustein observes that, "unlike some other sections of the country, there have been no organized attempts to revive traditional music in this area, mainly because the traditional social institutions which supported the music of the past are still very much alive."<sup>69</sup> *Down Around Bowmantown* contributed to the old-time music revival because Blaustein and Stafford included both source recordings and re-recordings of the same artists years later to show "the continuity of this longstanding tradition of informal music-making, and to also illustrate the great changes which have occurred in the field of sound recording since Clyde Dykes, Gib Broyles, Tom Slagle, and other local musicians down around Bowmantown recorded the original acetate discs between the late 1930s and 1951."<sup>70</sup>

Along with teaching and preserving the sound of old-time music on records, Blaustein also, "helped organize annual programs that feature local country radio stars from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s."<sup>71</sup> Blaustein was also invited to join the Northeast Fiddlers Association in 1966, where he said that he "went on to establish contacts and with founders and charter members of fiddlers' associations across the country, who as a group were in fact uniformly open and generous, and neighborly not only to me but other 'revivalist' old-time music-playing friends

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<sup>68</sup> Jack Tottle. "Dr. Richard Blaustein passes." Bluegrass Today, November 4, 2020. <https://bluegrasstoday.com/dr-richard-blaustein-passes/>

<sup>69</sup> Blaustein, Richard. *Liner Notes for Down Around Bowmantown: A Portrait of a Musical Community in Northeast Tennessee*. Now and Then Records 1001, 1989, LP.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Kip Lornell, "Early Country Music and the Mass Media in Roanoke, Virginia." *American Music*, 5, no. 4 (1987): 403, accessed February 2 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3051449>

I introduce to them.”<sup>72</sup> Along with joining the Northeast Fiddler’s Association, Richard Blaustein was also recommended to be appointed to the Tennessee Folk Culture Curriculum, which pushed to have folklore and folk arts taught in Tennessee schools.

*Revival informants and or original sources*

A musical revival cannot move forward unless it looks back to the historical sound recordings and revival informants that preceded the revival. During the old time-music revival, the old-time musicians in the community looked to the musicians and recordings that came before them to revive the old-time music sound that was prominent as Blizard was starting the second part of his musical career in 1982.

In the book *Wayfaring Strangers: The Musical Voyage from Scotland and Ulster to Appalachia* Fiona Ritchie and Doug Orr briefly discuss examples of how younger musicians in the revival looked to the older musicians that had preceded them. Musicians such as Alan Jabbour and the Hollow Rock String Band looked to fiddlers such as Henry Reed to help expand the old-time fiddle repertoire, and along with Reed, “other old-time fiddlers were also sought out, such as Tommy Jarrell, with his Round Peak style and repertoire; Ralph Blizard and his long-bow technique patterned after Fiddling Arthur Smith; and the Hammons Family of West Virginia.”<sup>73</sup>

Old-time fiddler Tommy Jarrell was born in 1901, and he grew up playing old-time music in Surry County, North Carolina. In an episode of the TV show *Folkways*, host David Holt stated that during the folk revival in the 1960s and 70s, “it’s the intense, bluesy, fiddle driven Surry County sound that’s become synonymous the world around with American old-time

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<sup>72</sup> Richard Blaustein. “Letters,” *Appalachian Journal*, 22, no. 2 (1995): 124, accessed February 2, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40934941>

<sup>73</sup> Doug Orr and Fiona Ritchie. *Wayfaring Strangers: The Musical Voyage from Scotland and Ulster to Appalachia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014):248.

music. So if you're listening to a string band in Tokyo or Oslo, chances are, you're probably listening to the Surry County sound."<sup>74</sup> As the sound of Surry County old-time music spread across the world, old-time musicians were heading to Surry County to learn directly from Tommy Jarrell. Jarrell was able to pass down the tradition of old-time music to musicians such as David Holt, Alice Gerrard, and Mike Seeger. Mike Seeger described Tommy Jarrell as the old-time music central for the East Coast saying that, "He had a strength of his foundation that was unshakeable in his wanting to keep it close to the ground, close to the way he felt that old-time music should be, without bringing in a lot of new stuff. His music was very sophisticated and very subtle, but that doesn't mean it was weak."<sup>75</sup> In 1983 a series of documentaries were made about Jarrell and his Round Peak Style of fiddle playing titled, *Sprout Wings and Fly*, *Julie*, and *My Old Fiddle*. A description of the documentaries was featured in an issue of *Appalachian Journal*. It was stated that Jarrell was, "one of the most influential tradition bearers for a generation of young players that made pilgrimages to the rural south in search of fiddlers and banjo players. Tommy Jarrell opened his door enough times that he had to tack a sign on his house that read 'First two nights free; \$20/ night after that.'"<sup>76</sup>

#### *Revivalist activities*

During the old-time music revival, a series of revivalist activities, such as organizations, festivals, and competitions made it possible for the sound of old-time music to reach the ears of an audience beyond the original old-time community that kept the music alive. In *Wayfaring Stranger*, Orr and Ritchie state that the revival was a, "bountiful time for traditional and roots

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<sup>74</sup> PBS North Carolina, "Folkways: Music of Surry County," YouTube Video, 27:18, June 21, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rbcj-n3QecQ>

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Meredith Doster and Mark Freed et. al. "Appalachian Music Films: From Appalshop to Zwiggoff." *Appalachian Journal*, 42, no. 3-4, 2015: 385, accessed February 2, 2022, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26341093>

music. Fiddle conventions and festivals blossomed throughout Appalachia and the Piedmont, including Fiddler's Grove in Mt. Airy in North Carolina, Galax in Virginia, and Clifftop in West Virginia."<sup>77</sup> One of the fiddler's conventions that gained popularity in the old-time music revival was the Galax Fiddlers Convention in Galax, Virginia. In "Galax, Virginia's 'Old Fiddlers' Convention': The Virtues and Flaws of a Giant Fiddle Contest" Chris Goertzen writes about various aspects of the convention and what draws musicians to the convention. Part of the reason musicians were drawn to festivals like Galax is because it brings the tradition bearers of old-time music and the younger revivalists together. Goertzen claimed in the article that younger musicians at Galax were doing their best to honor the musicians that came before them because they, "believe firmly that they are carrying on those forbearers' traditions quite literally... The new generations are able to invoke both the past and the present in their playing, both at dances and on the contest stage. Their styles thus both honor tradition – which they believe and say they are doing—and serve as a diplomatic bridge between that romanticized past and modern times."<sup>78</sup>

As stated earlier in the chapter, it was at the Bays Mountain music festival that Blizzard met the younger musicians who were helping to revive the old-time music tradition. Through this gathering of older tradition bearers and young revivalists at festivals throughout the 80s, 90s, and 2000s, the old-time music revival began to flourish. While fiddler's conventions such as Galax, which held its first competition in 1935, grew during the old-time music revival, new festivals were formed during this time that allowed for the gathering of older tradition bearers and younger old-time revivalists. The Swannanoa Gathering, held outside of Asheville, North

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<sup>77</sup> Orr and Ritchie. *Wayfaring Strangers: The Musical Voyage from Scotland and Ulster to Appalachia*, 248.

<sup>78</sup> Chris Goertzen. "Galax, Virginia's 'Old Fiddlers' Convention': The Virtues and Flaws of a Giant Fiddle Contest." *The World of Music*, 45, no.1, 2003: 143, accessed 2 February 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41700092>

Carolina, was formed by Doug Orr, the former president of Warren Wilson College, and Jim McGill in 1991. The Gathering is still running to this day, attracting old-time musicians from across the United States and the world, and it consists of an old-time week, a Celtic week, a mandolin and banjo week, a fiddle week, a guitar week, a contemporary folk week, and a traditional song week.<sup>79</sup>

#### *Non-profit or commercial enterprises catering to the revivalist market*

The last component that Livingston said makes up a music revival are the non-profit and commercial enterprises that cater to the revivalist market. From movies centering on old-time music to non-profits aiding in the preservation of the genre, non-profits and commercial enterprises were aimed at the old-time music revival market to help advance the growth and preservation of the old-time music community.

One non-profit organization founded in 2001 was the Traditional Appalachian Music Heritage Association. More commonly known as TAMHA, the association is in Blountville, Tennessee. The association's main mission is to "Preserve, present, and promote only one genre of music – traditional old time, the kind brought over to the southern Appalachian region from Ireland and Scotland."<sup>80</sup> More details about the Traditional Appalachian Music Heritage Association, and Blizard's involvement in the organization, will be provided in the next chapter.

#### *Various Documentaries*

Throughout the old-time revival a series of documentaries highlighted the various old-time musicians and communities throughout the Appalachian region. An issue of *Appalachian Journal* discussed the different documentaries published during the 1980s in an article titled *Appalachian Music Films: From Appalshop to Zwigoff*. Some of the documentaries highlighted

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<sup>79</sup> "The Swannanoa Gathering," Swannanoa Gathering, Warren Wilson College, <https://swangathering.com/>

<sup>80</sup> James D. Bowman, "Why TAMHA Came to Be" (essay, private collection of the Ralph Blizard Museum).

in the article included the documentary *Dreams and Songs of the Noble and Old*. The documentary was filmed between 1978 and 1985 featuring different musicians interspersed with footage of Alan Lomax watching clips in the editing room and commenting on the footage. Footage in the documentary includes shape note singing and, “extensive interviews with Surry County Fiddler Tommy Jarrell and WV/KY singer Nimrod Workman.”<sup>81</sup> Other documentaries featured in the article include *Fiddlers Grove: A Celebration of Old-Time Music* and *Sitting on Top of the World at Fiddlers’ Convention: Union Grove*. Both documentaries feature information on the Union Grove fiddler’s convention. The documentary *Fiddlers Grove*, “includes notable performance clips of mountain fiddlers J.P. Fraley, Ralph Blizzard [sic], Benton Flippen, Mack Snoderly, Ora Watson, Brian Grimm, and banjo players L.W. Lambert and Will Keys.”<sup>82</sup> While the documentaries made during this period may have reached a select audience that already had an interest in old-time music, two movies made in the early 2000s would bring the sound of traditional old-time music to a wider audience.

#### *Cold Mountain Soundtrack*

In 1997, Charles Frazier published the book *Cold Mountain*. *Cold Mountain* tells the story of Inman, a confederate soldier in the Civil War who deserts the war and sets off on an odyssey to return to his love, Ada, who lives in Cold Mountain, North Carolina. In 2003, a book-to-screen adaptation of *Cold Mountain* was made starring Jude Law, Nicole Kidman, and Renee Zellweger. A soundtrack was released along with the movie, featuring the sounds of traditional Appalachian music. The soundtrack was produced by T Bone Burnett, who also helped to produce the *Oh Brother Where Art Thou?* soundtrack. The *Cold Mountain* soundtrack features

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<sup>81</sup> Doster and Freed et. al. “Appalachian Music Films: From Appalshop to Zwiggoft.”

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

traditional songs that are sung and played throughout the Appalachian region such as “Wayfaring Stranger,” “Christmas Time Will Soon be Over,” “Lady Margaret,” and “Ruby with the Eyes That Sparkle” (otherwise known as “Shove the Pig’s Foot Further in The Fire.”) The *Cold Mountain Soundtrack* also features traditional Sacred Harp Singing, with the songs “I’m Going Home,” and “Idumea.” In a roundtable discussion about the *Cold Mountain* movie, Jack Wright states that, “some of the best of the soundtrack was not composed for the movie but garnered from the body of time-tested and proven masterpieces of an earlier rural American culture. The traditional music— both sacred harp and string band— stands out as most effective and appropriate, be it performed on camera by characters or as background.”<sup>83</sup> The traditional music that Wright says is time-tested and proven, is played and sung on this soundtrack by notable old-time musicians such as Dirk Powell, Tim Eirksen, The Reeltime Travelers, and the Liberty Baptist Church Sacred Harp Singers, “the movie’s only non-professional musicians.”<sup>84</sup> Tyler Blethen stated that the music in *Cold Mountain*, “showcases Appalachia’s outstanding musical heritage. The soundtrack, which includes traditional tunes as well as some composed for the film, is stimulating interest in old-time music.”<sup>85</sup>

### *Oh Brother Where Art Thou?*

The soundtrack that accompanies the *Oh Brother Where Art Thou?* movie has had a wide impact on both the bluegrass and old-time music genre since its release 22 years ago. The success of the movie and soundtrack lead to a resurgence in career for musicians like Ralph Stanley. Stanley’s band member, James Allan Shelton, stated that the movie and soundtrack, “exposed his music to a whole new audience, especially younger people. That’s what it takes for

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<sup>83</sup> Edwin T. Arnold and Tyler Blethen, et al. “APPALJ Roundtable Discussion: “Cold Mountain”, the Film,” *Appalachian Journal*, 31, no. 3-4, 2004: 351, accessed February 2, 2022, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40934797>

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.



this music to carry on to future generations.”<sup>86</sup> While the *Oh Brother* soundtrack is known for its tracks featuring bluegrass musicians such as Dan Tyminski, Alison Krauss, and Ralph Stanley, the soundtrack does pay homage to the old-time music that came before bluegrass. A 2020 article with *No Depression* said that T Bone Burnett, the producer for the *Oh Brother* soundtrack, started picking out the songs for the album by, “compiling a deep catalog of what was referred to as ‘old-time music.’ – Appalachian folk songs, gospel numbers, bluegrass traditionals – to be incorporated directly into the script as it was being written.”<sup>87</sup> Songs that the Carter Family originally recorded were re-recorded by artists such as Norman Blake, The Whites, and the Peasall Sisters. These songs included “You Are My Sunshine,” “Keep on the Sunny Side,” and “In the Highways.” Ralph Stanley recorded the song “O Death” in an acapella form that, “hearkened back to his Primitive Baptist Universalists church upbringing in Appalachian Virginia.”<sup>88</sup> A recording of the Stanley Brothers singing “Angel Band” is featured on the album as well. The song can be traced back to Sacred Harp hymnals that are used throughout Appalachia, such as *The Christian Harmony*.<sup>89</sup> Longbow fiddler John Hartford is also featured on the tracks “I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow (Instrumental)” and “Indian War Whoop.”

When looking at four of the six components of an old-time music revival that Tamara Livingston proposed in her article, there was an old-time music revival in the 80s, 90s, and 00s when Blizard was starting the second part of his musical career. This old-time music revival was generated by core revivalists such as Richard Blaustein, original sources such as Tommy Jarrell,

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<sup>86</sup> Lupton, John. "Ralph Stanley: 'mountain soul' brother to O Brother phenomenon." *Sing Out!*, Fall 2002, accessed 2 February 2022 . Gale Academic OneFile

[https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A92083663/AONE?u=tel\\_a\\_etsul&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=cbbc4624](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A92083663/AONE?u=tel_a_etsul&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=cbbc4624).

<sup>87</sup> Will Hodge. “O Brother, Where Aren’t Thou?: The Two Decade Cultural Impact of ‘O Brother, Where Art Thou?’” *No Depression*, December 14 2020. <https://www.nodepression.com/o-brother-where-arent-thou-the-two-decade-cultural-impact-of-o-brother-where-art-thou/>

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> William Walker. *The Christian Harmony Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Miller’s Bible and Publishing House, 1873): 117.

and commercial enterprises catering to the revival market such as the *Oh Brother* and *Cold Mountain* soundtrack. During the second part of Blizard's career, which spanned from 1982 until 2004, he participated in the old-time music revival by adopting distinct types of roles. The roles that Blizard would adopt during the old-time music revival would allow him to establish his legacy as someone whose actions helped preserve and promote the sound of traditional Appalachian old-time music.

## CHAPTER 6. RALPH BLIZARD'S ROLE IN THE OLD-TIME REVIVAL

As Blizard was beginning the second part of his musical career during the old-time revival of the 1980s and 1990s, he was able to promote and preserve traditional Appalachian old-time music through the roles that he took on during this time. In the book *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, Richard Blaustein briefly discusses the roles that are contained within a music revival. Blaustein states in his essay that revivals are made up of three types of people: “tourists, immigrants, and old masters.”<sup>90</sup> Tourists are people within the revival who, “who are occasionally and marginally involved in soaking up an exotic tradition,” immigrants are people within the revival who, “attempt to adopt what they perceive to be the traditional life style of a given culture and who develop apprentice-acolyte relationships with ‘old masters,’” and old masters, who are people within a revival that “have bona fide organic connections with the communal tradition in question.”<sup>91</sup> During the second half of Blizard’s musical career he, along with the members of the New Southern Ramblers, adopted the roles that Blaustein had described in *Transforming Traditions*. The members of the New Southern Ramblers adopted the role of the “immigrants,” learning the traditions of old-time music and forming an “apprentice-acolyte” relationship with Blizard throughout their time as members of his band. Blizard adopted the role of an “old master” because he had connections to the old-time music tradition of northeast Tennessee.

Along with adopting the role of “old master” during the old-time music revival, Blizard was also able to adopt the role of “Revival informant/original source.” Throughout his musical career, Blizard played with some of the biggest fiddlers in the 20s and 30s. When he picked the

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<sup>90</sup> Richard Blaustein, “Rethinking Folk Revivalism: Grass-roots Preservationism and Folk Romanticism,” in *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, ed. Neil V. Rosenberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 258-273.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

fiddle back up in 1980, he felt such a strong connection to old-time music that he spent the second part of his career working to ensure that old-time music would be passed on to the younger generations. It was through Blizard's role as an "old master" and a "revival informant/original source" in the old-time music revival of the 1980s, 90s, and 00s that he was able to pass down the tradition of old-time music through his actions and ambassadorship during this period.

One of the ways that Blizard was able to pass down the tradition of old-time music through his role as an "old master" and "revival informant" was through his ability to teach and share music with the various "tourists" and "immigrants" who came to participate in the old-time community. Blizard was able to teach and share traditional Appalachian old-time music with participants in the community through workshops and shows throughout his career.

### *Swannanoa Gathering*

The Swannanoa Gathering is held each summer on the campus of Warren Wilson College located outside of Asheville, North Carolina, in the Swannanoa Valley. The Swannanoa Gathering has been taking place since 1992, and it consists of workshops surrounding various types of folk music and dance. A glance at the Swannanoa Gathering's website shows that in the summer of 2021 the workshops included, "Fiddle Week, Mando & Banjo Week, Traditional Song Week, Celtic Week, Old-Time Week, Contemporary Folk Week and Guitar Week."<sup>92</sup>

According to Doug Orr, former President of Warren Wilson College, and a friend of Blizard's, when the Gathering started in 1992, it began with different music themes for each week of the gathering. "We had a modest number of theme weeks that first summer," Orr said. "We had a bluegrass week and we had a Scottish week. The second year we made a Celtic week

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<sup>92</sup> "The Swannanoa Gathering," Warren Wilson College, accessed 10 October 2021. <https://swangathering.com/>

to draw in Irish. Then we had contemporary folk, which was singer/songwriter.”<sup>93</sup> Orr said that during that first year, there were only about thirty-five participants over three weeks. There would be workshops throughout the day, lasting about an hour and a half. After lunch, there was a special session where old masters would come and do a one-hour presentation, workshops in the afternoon, and then in the evening, there would be square dances and contras, jam sessions and the old-time week concert.<sup>94</sup> Orr says that this schedule still exists in this format at the Gathering.

When Doug Orr and Jim McGill sat down to plan the Swannanoa Gathering, David Holt was the first person to come to Orr’s mind when he thought of who could teach at the Gathering. Orr then thought of Blizzard. “We knew Ralph, given his uniqueness, and just such a close friend,” Orr said. “Then his band members were in the area. Phil Jamison, Gordy Hinnners, John Lilly. We knew them all quite well, so they all joined the staff. From the very beginning. We knew that would be a core contingent to build an old-time week around. Ralph Blizzard *and* the New Southern Ramblers.”<sup>95</sup> Orr said that Blizzard said yes to a teaching position at the Swannanoa Gathering. “I don’t know that he taught a lot, but he shared a lot. At old-time fiddler’s conventions, as I say, he’d bring people into the circles, he’d say, ‘teach me one,’ he’d teach someone else. So I don’t think he’d done a lot of formal teaching, but he did a lot of sharing.”<sup>96</sup> Many students would attend Blizzard’s classes to be exposed to a master of old-time fiddle playing. Orr said that by learning from Blizzard, students at the Swannanoa Gathering were

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<sup>93</sup> Doug Orr, (retired president of Warren Wilson College), in discussion with author, July 2021.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

exposed to what he calls, “The Ralph Blizard Theology of Fiddling.” The theology was meant to encourage students, “To free you up, to try things, to not be afraid of making mistakes.”<sup>97</sup>

Orr stated that another way Blizard was able to engage students at the Swannanoa Gathering was through his demeanor:

There was nothing pretentious or ego-driven about Ralph at all. He had what I call a very gentle spirit. And I think that went a long way to people feeling comfortable about coming into the circle. Even if they might be a little bit awed with his fiddle style and his genius. His personality just allowed people to come in. He’d strike up a conversation easily, he met people very easily. So all of that entered into the equation. He just had the natural spirit of inviting people not only into his circle of musicianship, but his circle of friendship.<sup>98</sup>

Blizard would mentor and encourage his students by taking as much one-on-one time with them to ensure their success. He was also able to take tunes like “Soldiers Joy” and “Mississippi Sawyer” and teach students a simple stripped-down version of the tune.<sup>99</sup> “As he was teaching a class, he was not going to work in a whole lot of slides blues notes the way he did on the stage. I think his teaching style was a combination of good one-on-one skills, but also making it fun and freeing it up and making it a class that was not at all intimidating. Almost like a jam session in a way,”<sup>100</sup> Orr said.

When describing how Ralph would teach his classes, Phil Jamison summed up the experience by saying:

Spending a week in Ralph’s class was more learning by osmosis. Where you’re not, nobody’s gonna end up learning to play like Ralph but you can learn a whole lot just by hanging with him for the week, and he was incapable of breaking it down bow stroke by bow stroke because it would be different every time... Yeah there were various times when I would be there as a guitar player to back him up and we would slow it way down and he’d play the tune real slow and let people play along. There’d be a lot of Q &A too, and people would say ‘What’d you just do there?’ He would try to do it and we would

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

laugh if he could get it right or wrong. But that was a lot of what his teaching was like. Which when you think about it, that's the way he learned. He didn't learn somebody breaking it down note for note in recordings or tablatures like that.<sup>101</sup>

Looking at the notes that Blizard would keep on his teaching, he made sure his students knew the basics of fiddle playing, while also making sure that they knew to have patience and express themselves while playing fiddle. A section of his notes titled "Eight Potatoes" instructs students to express themselves by doing "Elongated and accented (loud or soft and in between) strokes. Register elongated strokes into your memory- Do various elongations to acquaint yourself with what this does for your training. This is your most important training in learning "Appalachian Mountain Longbow" fiddle style. These strokes must be heart felt, soul felt, inside expression of yourself and entire being."<sup>102</sup> In another section teaching his students about bowing pressure Blizard noted to tell students to, "Try expressing your inner being. There is no set law or pattern for this. This is you – yourself going into these passages and coming out of these phrases. Your own expressive style and feelings will eventually begin to emerge."<sup>103</sup> To encourage students to have patience Blizard advised students learning by ear to, "Be extremely patient in this learning process. Do not become frustrated. You may catch one note out of the 25 to 50. This is ok. Doing everyday practice, you will learn tunes slowly, but all the time improving your ability to learn by ear. Do a tune or two with your practice which you like to play. This is an approach that will eliminate boredom greatly."<sup>104</sup> Though Blizard's style of fiddle playing relied heavily on improvisation to the point where a tune would be played differently every time, he took the time to break down tunes so students at all levels of fiddle

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<sup>101</sup> Jamison, Phil. In discussion with author, August 2021.

<sup>102</sup> Blizard, Ralph. "Ralph Blizard-Fiddle Class-1998," (personal notes, from Doug Orr.)

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

playing could play tunes. “He loved teaching, because he loved people,” Orr said. “So he never tired of it. Never was burned out, had a lot of patience. Loved, just loved, the music.”<sup>105</sup>

In 1996, The Swannanoa Gathering honored Blizard with the Master Music Maker Award, which is “given periodically to certain remarkable master musicians and teachers that we have been privileged to have here as members of our staff.”<sup>106</sup> To this day, Blizard continues to be associated with old-time music at the gathering. Blizard remains featured on the summer concert posters on the Swannanoa Gathering’s website.

### *Scotland*

Blizard helped preserve and promote traditional Appalachian old-time music by playing the music abroad in different countries. One of the countries that Blizard visited in his lifetime was Scotland. This trip was arranged thanks to Doug Orr and his wife Darcy in 1995. “We first invited Ralph to go with his band,” Orr said. “Gordy and Phil and the rest of them had families and couldn’t just uproot and go to Scotland on a moment’s notice. So Darcy and I were his backup band. And friends in Scotland arranged some concerts for us at the Edinburgh Folk Club and the Kilmarnock Folk Club.”<sup>107</sup> Orr said that the inspiration for Blizard’s trip to Scotland was inspired by Orr’s love for Celtic music and its connections to Appalachian music. “It occurred to me as we got to know Ralph and his music that he ought to go back to the source,” Orr said. “They ought to hear his music and how it had been translated across the ocean.”<sup>108</sup> During that trip, Scottish musicians were able to hear how the Scottish music had turned into old-time music thanks to the concerts, workshops, and jam sessions that Blizard held during his visit. During concerts, Blizard, Orr, and his wife Darcy would play tunes such as “Leather Britches,” and

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<sup>105</sup> Doug Orr. In discussion with author, July 2021.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.



“Soldier’s Joy” which are standard tunes that are played in old-time jam sessions.<sup>109</sup> Blizard also taught at a workshop for young classically trained violinists, “who just were stunned by his longbow fiddling style.”<sup>110</sup> At jam sessions, Blizard would play with famous Scottish fiddlers such as Dougie MacLean. Orr wrote about these jam sessions in an article in *The Old-Time Herald* stating, “Dougie McLean and Ralph traded tunes, beginning with the classic ‘Soldiers Joy,’ a fiddle tune that immigrated out of the Scottish Highlands to the Southern Appalachians. With the clear waters of the Tay rushing just outside, the distances between the two historically related lands seemed to close like a river’s confluence.”<sup>111</sup> Orr said that Blizard’s trip to Scotland had a lasting influence on Scottish fiddlers due to their fascination with how old-time music evolved in the United States, “They’re particularly interested in the old-time music because it’s a direct deliration from Scottish to Irish fiddle tunes and ballads. Consequently, Scottish fiddlers like Brian McNeill and Pete Clark have taught in our Swannanoa Gathering and they have sought out Appalachian fiddlers. They all got to know Ralph Blizard, jammed with him, played with him.”<sup>112</sup>

According to Orr, Blizard’s trip to Scotland is still talked about by musicians in Scotland. After his death he was even honored with an obituary in the December 20, 2004, issue of *The Herald* located in Glasgow, Scotland. Orr said of the obituary: “Thanks to our friend Ian Young in Edinburgh, when Ralph died there was a major obituary in the Glasgow Herald Newspaper. There were several other obituaries, but they were farther down the page ... But here’s Ralph, East Tennessee fiddler who got the primary attention with a picture of him.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Orr, Doug, “Blizard-Orr Scotland Playlist June 1995,” (personal notes, from Doug Orr.)

<sup>110</sup> Orr, Doug. In discussion with author, July 2021.

<sup>111</sup> Orr, Doug, “Ralph Blizard: The Long Bow Master,” *The Old-Time Herald*. 1996/97, 55.

<sup>112</sup> Orr, Doug. In discussion with author, July 2021.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

### *Blizard's Influence on Other Musicians*

Another way that Blizard was able to share his music with the “immigrants” who came to the old-time music community was through showing them how to be adaptable with their music in both playing and their repertoire. Gordy Hinnners summarized what he learned from Blizard during his time in the New Southern Ramblers: “What I learned from Ralph, what Ralph gave me, and I can hardly say it without getting emotional ... But what Ralph gave me was a certain type of artistry which allowed me to be very free with my playing. Which seems weird because I was trying to match what Ralph was doing, but in order to do that I had to not have preconceived notions about exactly where the fiddle tune or song might be going.”<sup>114</sup>

Blizard also taught him to be open to going places in a tune that he may not expect to go, and “while it was exciting and startling sometimes it became not frightening. It became ‘Oh! Here we’re going somewhere else, where’s he gonna take me now? I can’t wait to get there!’”<sup>115</sup> John Herrmann stated that Blizard encouraged him to be more interested in Arthur Smith’s style of playing, which was something that he hadn’t been too interested in before playing with the New Southern Ramblers.<sup>116</sup>

One of the most crucial factors about Blizard that allowed for him to promote Appalachian old-time music among “tourists” and “immigrants” alike was through his willingness to invite everyone to play music. “He was so friendly, he would invite everyone that walked by the campsite to join us and play,” Andy Deaver-Smith said. “It was infectious, he was just so generous, you know? Even when I had not been playing with the band for several years, I

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<sup>114</sup> Hinnners, Gordy. In discussion with author, October 2021.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Herrmann, John. In discussion with author, November 2021.

would see him at Mount Airy, and I would go walking by. He'd say, 'There goes my favorite bass player, come play Andy!'"<sup>117</sup>

Phil Jamison said that Blizard was willing to sit down and play with just about anyone. "It didn't matter whether you were some hot shot just coming off of the stage or if you were a young kid with some funky fiddle or banjo or whatever. He was willing to sit down and play with anybody, that's the kind of person he was. He was a true gentleman and so welcoming ... He would give everybody a chance to sit down and play."<sup>118</sup>

### *Awards*

Blizard's improvisational longbow style of fiddling won him various awards from fiddler's conventions throughout the country. Along with these awards Blizard was also recognized with the National Heritage Fellowship Award in 2002. He was also recognized by the Tennessee Arts Commission, which he served from 1987 until 1992, with the Tennessee Folklife Heritage Award in 2003.

According to the Tennessee Arts Commission website, "the Tennessee Folklife Heritage Award has been presented every other year since 2001... the award honors long-term achievements within art forms that are rooted in the traditional or ethnic culture in Tennessee."<sup>119</sup> A video posted by the Tennessee Arts Commission about the award Blizard received stated that "Ralph's longbow method of fiddling and commitment to traditional arts is best demonstrated by his passion to keep this rich musical legacy alive and carried on by future generations. He helps provide educational programming by teaching music to young musicians and conducting

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<sup>117</sup> Smith, Andy. In discussion with the author, October 2021.

<sup>118</sup> Jamison, Phil. In discussion with author, August 2021.

<sup>119</sup> "Tennessee Folklife Heritage Award," Folklife, Tennessee Arts Commission, 5 February 2022, <https://tnfolklife.org/programs/awards/tennessee-folklife-heritage-award/>

workshops throughout the country.”<sup>120</sup> The Folklife Heritage Award from the Tennessee Arts Commission helped to bring recognition to traditional Appalachian old-time music, but it also helped to bring recognition to Blizard’s legacy. A memo was sent to Blizard from the Tennessee Arts Commission a month after the ceremony. On the bottom of Blizard’s memo there was a handwritten note from Rich Boyd, the executive director, and it stated: “Ralph- Finally the TAC gets to give you the credit you’ve always deserved.”<sup>121</sup>

Blizard also received the National Heritage Fellowship Award in 2002. The award, which the National Endowment for the Arts presented, is the country’s highest honor in folk and traditional arts. In an article that the *Johnson City Press* had written, Blizard was quoted saying that receiving the award, “is the greatest honor I have ever received. This is a really exciting time for me.”<sup>122</sup> Dr. Robert Cogswell, the Tennessee Arts Commission director of Folklife was quoted in the article saying that Blizard epitomized the excellence in folk arts and that, “beyond performing, Blizard has also for years been a musical ambassador, advocate, and teacher. This recognition for him is very well deserved and long overdue.”<sup>123</sup> During the award ceremony Representative Bob Clement acknowledged Blizard’s accomplishments saying, “As another US Congressman from Tennessee, I just want to say to Ralph Blizard and his lovely wife that it’s great to have you here. Thank you for all of your accomplishments over the years ... I know you’re a longbow fiddler and that means a lot in Tennessee, it means a lot to the whole country when it comes to our culture and our values.”<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Tennessee Art Commission, “2003 RALPH BLIZZARD,” YouTube Video, 2:37, September 24 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sn7cLHKMsZM>

<sup>121</sup> Rich Boyd, “Video Event,” (letter, private collection of Ralph Blizard Museum, 2003.)

<sup>122</sup> Lesia Paine-Brooks, “Blountville Musician being honored by NEA,” *Johnson City Press* (Johnson City, TN), Jun. 19, 2002.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid

<sup>124</sup> “National Heritage Award Concert,” (cassette tape, private collection of Ralph Blizard Museum, 2002.)

A recording of the award ceremony and concert was aired on NPR. This allowed for Blizard's accomplishments to be recognized and for him to share traditional Appalachian old-time music with listeners across the country. During the concert, Blizard discussed the fiddlers he had played with in his youth, his musical career, and longbow fiddling. When it came to the tunes that Blizard and the New Southern Ramblers played, they chose the Arthur Smith tune "Fiddler's Blues" and Blizard's signature tune "Blizard Train," which he dedicated to his wife Mildred.

Mark Blizard remembered that when his father won the award, the family went to Washington D.C. to see the award ceremony. At that point in his father's musical career, with so many festivals played and awards at contests won, Mark said that, "You were impressed that he was recognized that way, but you weren't surprised that he was recognized."<sup>125</sup>

#### *Participation in organizations*

Mark Blizard said that while his father was playing music and winning accolades, the elder Blizard had one mission: "He was committed to keeping the old-time Appalachian folk music alive and maintaining that heritage. That was one of the reasons he really enjoyed playing with his band, which was younger people. And he really enjoyed playing music for the kids and getting them interested in the music and their heritage."<sup>126</sup> To encourage kids to become interested in their musical heritage, Blizard would play at various schools in Sullivan County, Tennessee. One of Blizard's grandchildren, Brittney Blizard,<sup>127</sup> recalled that when she was in elementary school, "he really tried to push to get string instruments and things like that into schools and have old-time music taught in schools. Have that type of heritage taught in our

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<sup>125</sup> Blizard, Mark. In discussion with author, July 2021.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Brittney Blizard is one of Ralph's grandchildren. To avoid confusion, she will be referred to as Brittney throughout the paper.

school systems, and that was really his goal with things like that. It was just to not lose the knowledge and the technique of old-time music.”<sup>128</sup> A document titled *Preservation of Tennessee History* shows how Blizard tried to be involved with bringing old-time music into the school systems. The document gives recommendations on teaching traditional music, song, and dance in K-12, colleges, and universities. One of the recommendations was to have one music teacher, “trained in the traditional method of playing by ear and best to have had professional experience as a touring artist. This teacher is essential to the preservation of the true authentic traditional music.”<sup>129</sup> It was recommended in the document that Blizard be appointed for the Tennessee Folk Culture Curriculum as the traditional music teacher.

The most significant contribution that Blizard made in his life to the preservation and promotion of traditional Appalachian old-time music through his actions was establishing TAMHA in 2001. Mentioned briefly in chapter 5, the TAMHA is in Blizard’s hometown of Blountville, Tennessee, in the historic Anderson Townhouse. Blizard kept numerous emails, flyers, and personal documents on the organization. On a handwritten note, he declared that the purpose of TAMHA was aimed towards the, “preservation and promotion of traditional Appalachian Music and the heritage of our ancestors.”<sup>130</sup>

Blizard and other members of TAMHA worked hard to ensure that the organization stayed true to its purpose. One project that members of TAMHA worked on involved performances by old-time musicians at four schools in the Blountville, Tennessee area. The project proposed that, “a group of four musicians including Ralph Blizard – fiddle; Martha Scanlan- guitar, Thomas Sneed- mandolin, and a banjo player will perform twice in each school.

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<sup>128</sup> Blizard, Brittney. In discussion with author, August 2021

<sup>129</sup> “Preservation of Tennessee History,” (document, private collection of Ralph Blizard Museum).

<sup>130</sup> Ralph Blizard, “III Purpose of Organization,” (document, private collection of Ralph Blizard Museum).

Their 45-minute performances will include a brief discussion of their instruments and the historical importance of old-time music in the community.”<sup>131</sup> Members of TAMHA were also involved in projects with East Tennessee State University that aimed to promote traditional Appalachian music. TAMHA meeting minutes taken in April 2003 show that ETSU was in the process of organizing the Appalachian Traditional Music Association. Richard Blaustein had felt, “as though this group would be complimentary to TAMHA, and could perhaps even become affiliated with TAMHA in the future.”<sup>132</sup> The group also aimed to document the histories of living old-time musicians in the area. To do so they reached out to graduate students at ETSU who were affiliated with the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services. The graduate students were to be “responsible for audio and video documentation, which will take place at the musicians’ homes. Audiotape and videotape of the project will be presented to the group in Blountville and stored in the CASS archives.”<sup>133</sup>

In his notes about TAMHA, Blizard observed that, “the recognition of the founders of our local musical heritage has not been made known to the people in this region. Fiddlers such as: Charlie Bowman – Gray Station, Dudley Vance- Bluff City Region, John Dykes- Kingsport, and countless other banjo, guitar, singers, harp players, etc.”<sup>134</sup> One of Blizard’s goals while participating in TAMHA was to ensure that the contribution of local musicians would be recognized as a part of preserving the history of old-time music. To reach this goal, members of TAMHA decided to create a museum dedicated to the old-time musicians of the northeast Tennessee region. The museum was going to be created in conjunction with the Sullivan County

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<sup>131</sup> “TAMHA Projects,” (document, private collection of the Ralph Blizard Museum).

<sup>132</sup> David Rotenberry, “TAMHA Meeting Minutes, 4/8/03,” (document, private collection of the Ralph Blizard Museum.)

<sup>133</sup> “TAMHA Projects.”

<sup>134</sup> Blizard, “III Purpose of Association: continued.”

Historical Society. The group envisioned that the museum would house, “original recordings and similar archival materials of both living and deceased traditional musicians.”<sup>135</sup>

The most impactful way Blizard and members of TAMHA were able to continue the tradition of playing Appalachian old-time music was through a jam session that Blizard established at the TAMHA headquarters. The jam sessions took place every Friday night, and it would last from 6:00 p.m. until 10:00 p.m. Brittney, Blizard’s granddaughter, recalled attending some of the jam sessions as a child:

It felt like almost every Friday night we were at, you’d always call it the Old Anderson House, that’s what I would always refer to it as. I always felt like we were at the Old Anderson House at the jam sessions ... It was a lot bigger whenever I was younger, there was a lot more people that would be there, so it was always very packed. Three or four different jamming sessions going on at the same time, but just in the different rooms. Or like I said some people would just sit outside on the porch. Or on the street, but not really the street, but you know there’s like that ledge where you can actually sit and play.<sup>136</sup>

TAMHA minute meetings declared that the weekly jam session was one of the best opportunities for TAMHA, and by extension old-time music, to receive free publicity due to it being local and occurring on a regular schedule. The jam sessions at TAMHA continued after Blizard passed away in 2004. They lasted until the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 when members of TAMHA put a temporary pause on the jam sessions in order to adhere to social distancing requirements that were in place at the time.

#### *The Ralph Blizard Museum*

During his lifetime, Blizard put a tremendous amount of work into ensuring that the sound of traditional Appalachian old-time music would be preserved for future generations. To pay homage to Blizard’s hard work and legacy, a museum was founded in the same location as TAMHA.

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<sup>135</sup> James D. Bowman, “*Why TAMHA Came to Be.*”

<sup>136</sup> Blizard, Brittney. In discussion with author, August 2021.



The Ralph Blizard Museum was established after Blizard's death, officially opening in July 2021. The museum is curated by Ed Bush, a member of the Sullivan County Historical Society. In the museum, visitors can find memorabilia that belonged to Blizard, such as documents pertaining to TAMHA, and photos of Blizard with the original southern Ramblers in the 1930s and the New Southern Ramblers throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The museum is also home to 753 cassette tapes that he recorded of practice sessions and concerts. Awards he had won throughout his career hang on the walls in TAMHA, including the National Heritage Fellowship Award that Blizard had won in Washington D.C. in 2002. The legacy of Blizard's musical career is stored in the museum. Mark stated that he thinks his father would be honored as a performer of old-time music to have a museum dedicated to him because, "he loved to be out on stage and playing music for people and interacting with people. So the performer in him would be really honored by this and be very appreciative. I think he would tell people that, but I think he would also say, the most important thing is the music."<sup>137</sup> David echoed a statement similar to his brother's, saying that the museum is a great testimony to his father's legacy.<sup>138</sup> As much as Blizard should be remembered for the legacy he left on the northeast Tennessee old-time music community, which included his unique style of playing, his friendly demeanor, and willingness to preserve old-time music through his ambassadorship and actions, David said that at the heart of it all, "what he wanted to leave behind was the tradition of the art of Appalachian music. That was the legacy he established, and that's what he wanted to leave behind."<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Blizard, Mark. In discussion with author, July 2021.

<sup>138</sup> Blizard, David. In discussion with author, July 2021.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid

## CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSIONS

When I first heard the music of Ralph Blizard in my professor's office at the start of graduate school, I had no idea where this project was going to lead me. All I had known that day was that I wanted to share the story of Blizard's musical career with others. I wanted to bring attention to the northeast Tennessee old-time music community and one fiddler who gained fame in the latter part of the twentieth century. Throughout the course of this project, I was able to gain a better understanding of Blizard's legacy in the old-time music community thanks to the interviews I did with members of his family, and the colleagues that Blizard had played with throughout his career.

Blizard's musical career can be split into two parts. He began his career in the 1930s when Blizard began playing fiddle around some of the most influential players of the time, including Charlie Bowman and Arthur Smith. The second part of his career began in the early 1980s, after a 25-year hiatus from the genre of old-time music. Blizard's impact on the old-time genre can be split into two parts. Blizard's style of playing drew from the fiddle players he had grown up playing around, but it was so improvisational that it could not be imitated by the young revivalist that played with him. Instead, through his actions and ambassadorship during the old-time revival in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, he was able to pass down the old-time music tradition. I am constantly amazed by the amount of effort that Ralph put into preserving the sound of traditional Appalachian old-time music.

By focusing on Blizard's unique style of fiddling and the distinct roles he adopted during the old-time music revival, this project adds to the literature surrounding Appalachian Studies by expanding on the topic of old-time music in Appalachia especially northeast Tennessee. By writing about Blizard and legacy, I am adding to what has been written about the northeast

Tennessee old-time community, which is focused on events such as the Bristol Sessions and the fiddlers who existed during that time. This project also adds to the discourse surrounding musical revivals by discussing the old-time music revival in the 80s, 90s, and 2000s.

While this project provides a thorough look into Blizard's musical legacy, there are still many topics within this field of study to investigate. One topic that researchers can further investigate is the life of the fiddlers that came before Blizard. I found little information on fiddlers such as John Dykes and Dudley Vance throughout this project. The topic of old-time music could benefit from more information on lesser-known fiddlers from the northeast Tennessee region. Researchers can also research old-time fiddlers like Blizard, who rose to prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century. It is important to add literature to the field of traditional Appalachian old-time music that goes beyond fiddlers that rose to fame in the early twentieth century.

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