Excerpt from ***Barn Danes and Jamborees Across Kentucky***, by J. D. Wilkes (used by permission of the author)

THE JACKSON PURCHASE
The "Snake Oil" Region

The dusty panel van heaves to life with a backfire. A ring of black smoke ascends as the moving parts sprocket like a tinker toy. Soon, the truck is in motion and sputtering down a Depression-era dirt road. In time, it will approach the muddy whistle-stop of Maxon Mill, Kentucky. A wizened old witch doctor sneaks a peek from the earthen doorway of her mud hut. Farther down, the rattletrap rumbles past another old soul who peers through his curtains with sad eyes. The ghastly old gentleman is bedridden from the effects of "rabbit fever" and cannot attend today's festivities—nor anything else for the rest of his life. All the other folks in town will be there though. They wouldn't miss it for the world. It happens every year. Gears grind and wheels spin through the mud of the low-lying Strawberry Festival in Paducah, Kentucky. The lanky driver pulls to a stop and straightens his collar. Before stepping out of the truck amongst the gawkers, he wrings the tin lid from a can of Stein's Burnt Cork, careful not to stain his white cotton–gloved hands.

A drop of spit falls from his lips. A sponge is swept across the surface of the cork and applied about the face and neck. A few broad expressions practiced in the mirror, and he is out on his feet. The sound of silver rattles in his clothing as he ambles through the festivities to just the right spot, and then

down plops his fruit crate. A throng of white folk soon gathers in the kerosene light, and it's time to go. With a jaunty leap, he is atop the

Blackface minstrel shows emerged in the nineteenth century as the first American pop culture craze. Minstrel performers would find a home in the various medicine shows and barn dance broadcasts of the twentieth century. Vague aspects of minstrelsy persist to this day, from Blues Brothers skits to "white rappers." This Calvert City minstrel show took place in the 1950s. *Courtesy Carol Vaughan.*

makeshift wooden stage. Two pairs of spoons emerge from his pockets, and the music begins. A rhythmic metal clack accompanies his song sung loud and proud: "Old Man Mose is dead!"

"I believe. Yes, I believe. Oh, I found out. Yes, I found out...that Old Man Mose is dead!"

In his later years, my grandfather described these characters and elements of this scene of "Spoons the Minstrel." (My imagination filled in the rest.) It was the childhood recollection he repeated daily to anyone who would listen. To me, it was a sad glimpse into a bittersweet time—a loop of memory locked inside an old nostalgic mind.

The Strawberry Festival was a grand occasion for the Jackson Purchase, attracting farmers, merchants and medicine shows to the area. Archived recordings of Paducah fiddler Charlie H. Hall recount stories of another minstrel/medicine show at the festival, one put on by huckster Joe Bass and his two blackface partners, "Bottle Stopper" and "Popcorn." Various copies of patent medicine pamphlets can still be found in antique stores here, like *Granny Metcalfe's Dream Book*, which attempted to interpret the visions of gullible local yokels. Bottles of Podolax, Grove's Tasteless Chill Tonic and other snake oil remedies were common in Jackson Purchase households too. But the greatest legacy of the medicine show is its formula of a "free show with advertisements," which continues today on radio, television and the stage of American opry shows. It is the latter that is the subject of this book.

The "Four Rivers Region"

If you take out a map, you will find "The Purchase" in the western lowlands of the Bluegrass State. It's an area with little to no violent crime to speak of, transfixed as she is on her lazy, rolling rivers. She lies utterly cut off from the rest of the state, almost as an island to herself. The Jackson Purchase is so called because the one-and-only Andrew "Old Hickory" Jackson swindled her away from the Chickasaw Indians years ago. The region's nearest kin is the boot-heel of Missouri and a section of southern Illinois known as Little Egypt—two other

castoffs from their own home states. The Purchase shares the same line of latitude as Damascus, Yokohama and the Rock of Gibraltar, but there are few topographical highlights here. Well, that's not entirely true. The occasional Appalachian foothill can be seen subsiding slantways into the Mississippi River, where it descends out of sight and forever into the earth's deep mantle.

There truly is a whole other vibe to this part of Kentucky. These eight little counties have a deep connection to their life- and job-giving waterways. Indeed, the world's greatest concentration of navigable rivers is right here. The Ohio, the Tennessee, the Cumberland and the Mighty Mississippi all meet smack dab in this heartland of America. Looking at a map of our nation, it is almost unbelievable how Paducah, the crown jewel of the Jackson Purchase, never became the largest city in the USA.

Imagine if America were a living, squishy organism. Surely Paducah would be its main artery, its aorta—or its very heart-pump. Barge traffic would be its hemoglobin and levees its veins. In fact, the Purchase area seems to almost siphon cultural influence from all directions. Blues flows backward from the Mississippi Delta, and mountain music trickles down the Ohio Valley. In this way, the Purchase is constantly replenishing.

Despite its "red-headed stepchild" status in the eyes of the rest of the Commonwealth, there is much to celebrate here. Not only has the area produced such household names as Lily Tomlin and Boots Randolph, but residents also enjoy laying

claim to Alben "The Veep" Barkley, Irvin S. Cobb and (perhaps just as important) Catherine Bach, TV's Daisy Duke! Other musical celebrities include jazz pianist and bandleader Fate Marable, who gave Louis Armstrong his first gig aboard a paddle-wheeler; Mattie Matlock, a Dixieland clarinetist; and songcatcher Mary Wheeler. More on Wheeler to come.

The "Purchase" of Paducah

The Purchase has but one city with a population over twenty-five thousand: Paducah, the aforementioned economic hub of the Four Rivers Region. The only other two locales large enough to constitute a "city" are Mayfield, in Graves County, and Murray, in Calloway County.

Paducah (originally known as Pekin) was once the domain of the fabled Chickasaw Indian leader Chief Paduke (who may or may not have really existed). Legend has it that he lived in a mud yurt at the mouth of Island Creek, a stream that empties directly into the Ohio. This area was hot property for America's river industry, so in 1827, William Clark (yes, of Lewis and Clark fame) presented Paduke with an "official" title deed to the land the chief called home. Chief Paduke respected this arbitrary piece of paper with dire sincerity. Maybe it was the impressive calligraphy, the excellent penmanship or the fancy filigree. Most likely it was because the document was backed by the full force of the U.S. government and its ruthless army of Indian killers. Paduke knew this was an offer he could not refuse, so he moved on. Far be it from

him to cause any trouble. To my knowledge, there is no known curse put upon the area by the Indian chief. No "Mothman," no Sasquatch, no Nessie—just the occasional springtime deluge or summertime drought. In fact, it is fabled that the chief had been contemplating a move to Mississippi anyway. So everybody wins.

Unfortunately, Clark's own account of the naming of the town is much less fanciful. In a letter to his son, he states that Paducah is the name of a tribe: "I expect to go to the mouth of [the] Tennessee the 26th of next month and be absent about two weeks. I have laid out a town there and intend to sell some lots [in] it, the name is Pa-du-cah, once the largest Nation of Indians known in this Country, and now almost forgotten."

Regardless if there really was or wasn't a Chief Paduke, Clark's village soon flourished into a town and from a town to a city. Foundries were formed, a brick factory constructed and a railroad laid. And, as it turns out, Paducah entrepreneurs found themselves equidistantly positioned between Kentucky's coalfields and Illinois' coal-rich "Little Egypt." This muddy little town was suddenly in the geographical bull's-eye of an industrious new America.

Flash-forward to Prohibition times, and the joint really got jumping, what with its speakeasies and brothels. Shore leave for barge workers would bring a seedy sideline to Paducah's river industry. No doubt whorehouse pianos and slide trombones were heard echoing down the brick streets on some nights of the early twentieth century.

The Depression era saw the rise of the "Chitlin' Circuit," a network of speakeasies, hotels and nightclubs that catered to the marginalized African American community. Paducah's Hotel Metropolitan hosted such jazz, blues and R&B artists as Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, B.B. King, Ike and Tina Turner and many more. Today, special events occur there throughout the year, and a music festival is currently in the works. More on the Hotel Metropolitan to come.

The Lyricism of Lore

Just like anywhere else in the state, rural life and folklore have exerted influence on the music of the area. Train rhythms and paddle-wheels inform the time signature of many a folk tune. Guitar licks twang like vocal inflections and may even echo the sounds of barnyard mule brays and chicken clucks. Harmonicas wail like eighteen-wheeler air horns and locomotive whistles. Auctioneers at livestock sales, with their tranceinducing "sound that sells," might well be the original "white rappers." Farm implements chugging along to a noise bed of crickets, tree frogs, owls and loons create a music of their own.

The "White Thang," a sort of mystical panther or "wampus cat," is rumored to "sing like a child" in the woods of western Kentucky. Then there's that odd hum from the rivers, a sort of eerie white noise. Perhaps it's the sound of pressure being released from a tectonic crack deep beneath the Mississippi River, issuing from the chasms of the New Madrid

fault line as pent-up steam, water, sand and coal grind, gush and groan. Music truly can be heard everywhere in the Jackson Purchase.

An Interview with Nathan Blake Lynn

I sat down for an interview with musician and archivist for the McCracken County Library Nathan Blake Lynn, the perfect person to voice the history of the region's music. His firsthand experience playing music in the area blends well with his local interest pursuits. When I asked him what makes the Jackson Purchase special, he paused to take the question seriously.

"Well," he said, "it's the rivers."

Nathan believes the waterways are what have brought the different sounds to the region. It is a place of influx from other lands yet isolation from its own state. To illustrate, he pointed to the thousand-year-old cypress groves that stand flooded in the backwaters of our area. They're almost symbolic of our secluded sector of the Commonwealth.

But who cares what the rest of Kentucky thinks. "Fate Marable, the inventor of riverboat jazz, was raised on South Seventh Street in Paducah," Lynn stated with pride.

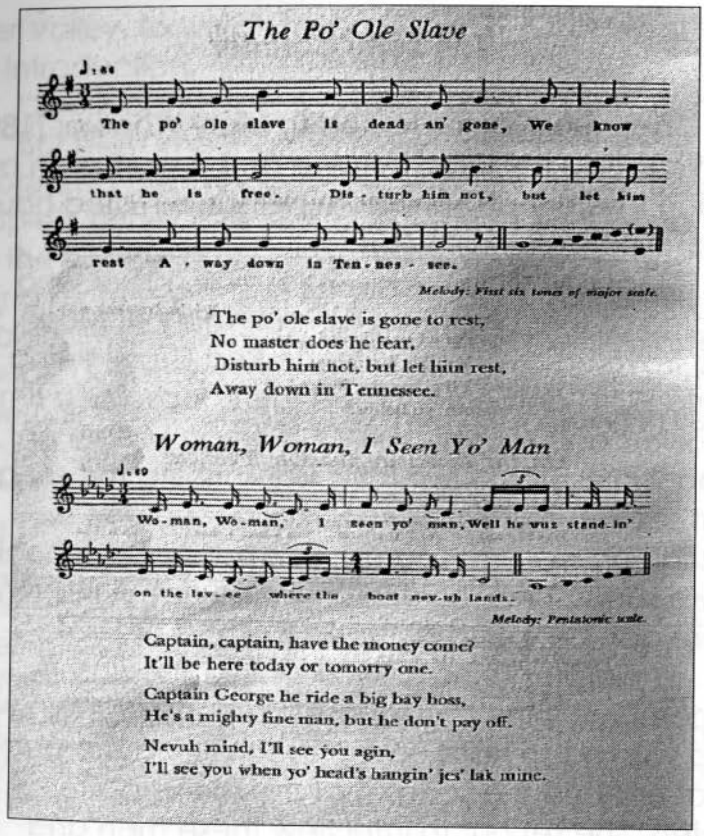
"Then there are the roustabouts that Mary Wheeler recorded." While all other folk art forms have been tagged, catalogued and done to death, *this*, he declared, is the last collection of untapped American folk music.

"And hell, there's no telling what kind of great music that the native [Americans] who lived here once made...before we ran them off."

I asked Nathan about some of his favorite places to hear and play music. He believes the small gatherings, where barbecue is the main food, are the most important and unique—places where "fellowship is shared from hickory bottom chairs on front porches...or around a fire."

Nathan also believes gospel music is an important component of our area's culture. Indeed, it has a major place in the music that we listen to and play today. The shape note "Big Singing" in Benton is the most notable example of pure gospel traditions.

On the flipside, Lynn is keen to point to the small backwater bars around the Purchase: Jimbo's, The Hilltop, the Silver Bullet... "There's just something about Sunday night drunks [drinking] in the river bottoms that brings a welcomed, sad feeling. It seems to define country music very well to me." Lynn and I were both schooled by Kentucky blues act the Buster Morrison Blues Band. They played at the now long-defunct Moss Rose Café on Paducah's brick-lined Second Street. "That's where I had my first real bar gig," admitted Lynn. "Of course, I was underage and playing some pretty awful music, but it was dark and lonely. I liked it."



Sheet music from Mary Wheeler's "Steamboatin' Days," © 1972. *Louisiana State University Press.*

Then the subject turned to Mary Wheeler (1892–1979), Lynn's personal heroine and a woman in our region's history about whom he has devoted hours of research.

"Mary Wheeler was a Paducah native who studied at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. She also traveled overseas with the Red Cross during World War I and entertained the troops. For a time, she lived and taught at the Hindman Settlement School in eastern Kentucky, transcribing the songs of that section of the Appalachian Mountains (see section on Hindman Jams). She published a book of these songs, and more information about her time there can be found at Berea College."

While preparing to work on her thesis, she remembered the roustabout men and women who had worked so hard on the rivers during the packet boat era and the songs that they sang of life on the waters. She set out to interview these men and women who lived along the banks throughout the Jackson Purchase. At the time, there was no available way to electronically record their music, so she made her own field recordings by writing down the words to the songs and then hurrying to her home in downtown Paducah. With the help of her piano, she proceeded to write down the music from memory.

Mary eventually published these songs through the University of Louisiana as *Steamboatin' Days*. She also compiled *Roustabout Songs of the Ohio*

River Valley, to which humorist Irvin S. Cobb wrote the introduction.

"She is admirable for many things," Lynn went on. "But most importantly, to me at least, she recognized the importance of documenting these people's stories. She was also humble enough to visit the homes of black roustabouts and ask them to sing for her. She was an upper-class, classically schooled white woman, and to have the courage to head out on her own and randomly approach these fine folks is amazing to me, [especially] in lieu of the state of race relations at the time."

Mary Wheeler is an important figure to Lynn, who himself is drawn to the music of steamboats. He and I are both veteran musicians of the paddlewheeler circuit; he performed on the *Delta Queen*, and I played on the local excursion boat the *Paducah Jubilee*. As such, Lynn feels strongly that the river friendly Wheeler deserves more credit in the history books than she gets. Maybe this book can help change that.

Back to the Barn

As a historian of the area, Lynn clued me in on a few names of note from Jackson Purchase's history.

'Blind' Joe Mangrum was one of the first *Grand Ole Opry* stars. He was born in Weakley County, Tennessee, but he spent much of his life in western Kentucky. Joe was well acquainted with traditional western Kentucky/Tennessee fiddle tunes, but he enjoyed playing classical music as well.

Legend has it that this is the reason he did not continue to perform on the *Grand Ole Opry*.

There were a number of string bands based out of Paducah around the turn of the nineteenth century. Charlie Hall fiddled at the local medicine shows. Frank Jones String Band was very well respected and played at barbecues, picnics and steamboat excursions. His group featured the wellknown one-eyed, one-legged fiddler Ed Ewens, aka the "King of the Waters." Lynn's short list of area favorites includes the following: "'Rockin' Ray Smith, Whitey 'The Duke of Paducah' Ford, Chris Thile, Stanley Walker and Josh Williams." Local boy and "chicken catcher" Kevin Skinner "done good" when he claimed first place on NBC's *America's Got Talent*, netting himself a Vegas gig and a record contract. Gospel megastar Stephen Curtis Chapman is from Paducah, as is Larry Stuart from the band Restless Heart. Today, live music plays all summer long in Paducah. The "After Dinner" concert series hosts buskers along Broadway when weather permits. Five to six city blocks are coned off, allowing pedestrians to get up close and personal with the singers, shops and tourist traps. Pickers like Lonzo Pennington and Nathan's group Bawn in the Mash are known to play both this event and the popular summertime cook-off "Barbeque on the River." These Paducah fests have come to replace the Strawberry Festival of yore.

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Elsewhere in the Purchase, Fulton, Kentucky, has a banana festival and Marshall County observes the solemn occasion known as Tater Day. There is the Big Singing in Benton, Kentucky, every

year, where southern harmony gospel singers gather to line out the old "shape note" hymns. It is, as Lynn describes, "one of the closest things to American 'monk chanting' you can find."

Kenlake State Park has the Hot August Blues and Barbeque Festival in Aurora, an event where your author had the privilege to witness such old-school blues singers as Junior Wells, Snooky Pryor, Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, "Honeyboy" Edwards and R.L. Burnside, many of whom were veterans of both the Chitlin' Circuit and the medicine show's Kerosene Circuit, Delta blues meets hillbilly music meets R&B meets honky-tonk. Every strain of American musical influence blends together in the land of the redheaded stepchild. Is it any wonder why rock 'n' roll originated in a similar area just south of here in Memphis, Tennessee? Cross-cultural dynamics like these are what make the Jackson Purchase and, in my opinion, the entire South a bastion of music, culture and cuisine—all of which are secretly the envy of the world.

Earl Butler's "You Can Be A Star"

The lonely country road twists and turns through a patch of western Kentucky that strangely looks like a holler from the eastern end of the state. Marshall County's terrain is the hilliest of this westernmost "Jackson Purchase" region.

Blink and you'll miss the rusted, blown-out marquee, overgrown with weeds and missing a few letters. There are only enough characters to guess the name "EArl" and the words "Country Music."

This is where you turn. The gravel path leads past the tattered tarpaulin of an old deer stand. It whips in the wind toward a woodland shack made from corrugated tin and random planks. The foreboding woods that encircle may seem like the domain of hoop snakes and wampus cats, but be not afraid. A friendly wooden Tennessee Walking Horse marks the entrance. And if you listen close, the vague sound of an Ernest Tubb tune pulses from the cracks, inviting you in.

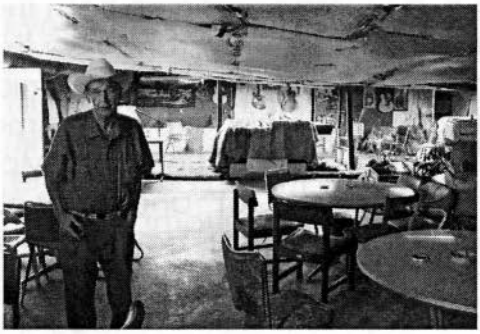
It's as dark as a dungeon inside, and smoke hangs above the tables of chatting wives and fidgety children. A "Wall of Fame" features dog-eared 8x10 glossies of Nashville stars, Polaroids of friends and family, blue ribbons, trophies and a novelty document that serves as a "Certificate of Upgrade to Complete Assh*le."

Two-by-fours hold up the roof, which has started to sag in spots. In fact, certain panels of the ceiling bow as low as five feet. Butler laid the foundation himself, pouring the concrete without the use of any forms. The floor must have dried into place at an angle because there's an off-center "fun house" feel to the whole room. Onstage, the menfolk are seated, playing honkytonk classics in the golden glow of homemade, coffee-can stage lights. The bandstand is bedecked with Hank Williams show bills, vintage tube amplifiers and guitar-shaped decorations. To me, it's like the white man's version of a Mississippi juke joint. Earl Butler leads the group, while regulars like "Hillbilly" Bob Prather accompany. It's been this way for over twentyfive years.

Prather, a veteran musician from the old *Louisiana Hayride* radio show, and his wife, "Granny," will perform their own original material mid-set. He is a wealth of knowledge about the old-time fiddle music of western Kentucky. Tunes like "Mayfield," "Thump the Devil's Eyes Out" and other obscure old gems flow effortlessly from his bow. His grandfather fought in the War Between the States; therefore, many of the oldest American ballads were passed down to him firsthand. Prather's hillbilly and Cajun tunes have even been archived by Berea College, with the help of Layne Hendrickson, another regular at Earl's pickin' party.

When asked about pickin' parties in the days before television, Prather described the scene from his daddy's front porch. Folks would carve jack-o'lanterns for a light source so they could dance in the dark. The pickers set up on the porch as if it were a stage facing outward to the yard, and the people would dance there until dawn.

Unlike today, when the old-time and bluegrass communities have adopted exclusionary policies, anyone back in Prather's day could play in the band. In fact, any warm body that could make a noise with an inanimate object was encouraged to join in. If tapping a mason jar on a table or rhythmically



Earl Butler inside his Olive jamboree building. *Photo by the author.*

sweeping a broom provided the right percussion, it was encouraged. There were no rules yet in folk music. In fact, it was just called *music*. The same spirit survives today on Butler's stage.

I asked Earl about all the famous folks he's played with over his many years in showbiz. He responded with a slow, twangy list: "Carl Butler...Carl Perkins...Hank Junior...Stanley Walker," Butler remembers each name between long pulls from the amber filter of his cigarillo. The shadow cast by a cowboy hat hides his eyes, but a glowing ember illuminates his face with each drag. He is decked out in a powder blue polyester cowboy ensemble— sort of like a piece-meal Manuel suit. A white belt with musical notes strings through the loops. His cowboy boots scuff the uneven concrete floor as he moseys back to the concession stand.

The genre showcased here at Earl's is mostly old rockabilly (common to western Kentucky, due to the influence of the bluesy river culture) and honky-tonk, with material ranging from Johnny Cash to Dwight Yoakam. Anyone is welcome to get up and sing a song once the show is off to a good start

Back by the vintage icebox, Cokes, coffee and candy bars are available for snacks (and maybe even some of Prather's homemade wine...if you're lucky). Dubbed-off cassette tapes and CDs of the music sit in a shoebox. They're three bucks each.

Come 9:00 p.m., the show always ends with Earl's grandkids taking to the stage to sing "Crawdad Hole." Then, one by one, the pickup trucks roll out into the night as the music still echoes in the holler.

Heading east from the Benton town square on KY 408, drive 1.5 miles to Hamlett Church/Olive Rd (1897) and turn right. Drive 1.5 miles down and turn left onto Abraham Road. Earl's place is on the right at the bottom of the hill. Stop in and tell 'em I sent ya. After all, you could be a star!

Clay Campbell's Kentucky Opry

Clay Campbell, the multitalented entrepreneur behind Draffenville's Kentucky Opry, has given his community many things over the years. Big name country entertainers (Marty Stuart and Connie Smith) and top-notch weekly productions are always on the books. Perhaps more importantly, Campbell has long fostered a steady stream of fresh young talent aboard his famous nightly stage. Why, even yours truly played a teen talent contest alongside Campbell and his country comedian sidekick Scottie Henson. Henson is the area's most invaluable banjo mentor. When he's not fetching the eggs out of his chicken coop, he's teaching five-string banjo to youngsters in his cabin, playing

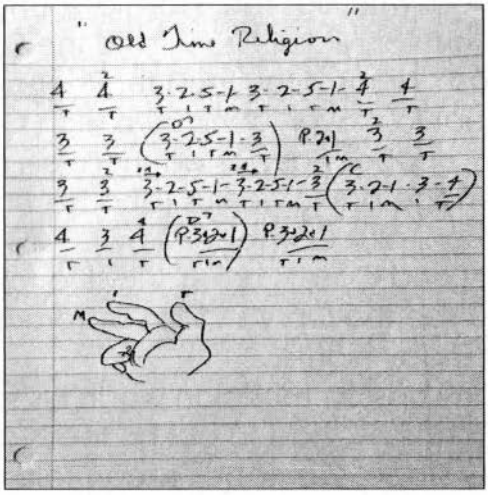
the Opry or starring in the new *Woodshop* television series. As a young picker, Scottie only jammed occasionally with local guitarists Merle Sturgill, Frank Pascal and the fiddlin' preacher "Peg" Basil. They were a string band that played on a WNBS radio jamboree in Murray, Kentucky. But when local fiddler David Myers encouraged Scottie to step out more, Henson was reluctant (after all, he had just taught himself by slowing down a Flatt and Scruggs album and down-tuning his banjo). However, Henson persevered and eventually got to be the professional he is today. In 1960, he met the great Earl Scruggs at a local schoolhouse concert. That's when Scottie received a personal invitation to visit Scruggs at his Madison, Tennessee home—but not before gleaning a few pointers from the banjo master himself.

"He told me 'the easy way is the right way,'" Henson recalls of Scruggs. Scottie has since made a living passing along similar wit and wisdom to new generations of musicians. He has developed his own unique style of tablature (a sort of musical notation) to help teach bluegrass-style banjo. In fact, his musical shorthand is so easy to comprehend that Mel Bay was interested in publishing it. Unfortunately, Mr. Henson recently suffered a neurological episode similar to a stroke, greatly limiting his abilities. But miracle of miracles, the affliction has left his right hand frozen into the perfect "clawhammer" position, thus enabling him to keep his students and continue playing. The Lord works in mysterious ways!

There must be something in the water to produce so much special talent in Marshall

County—musical whiz kids too. From a young Chris Thile (mandolinist for Nickel Creek and the Punch Brothers) to Josh Williams (guitarist for Rhonda Vincent and banjo player for his own High Gear Band), Clay Campbell has hosted them all. New blood like teenage banjo genius (and Henson alum) Aaron Thompson, plus Campbell's own sons, Clayton, Cody and Casey, are starting to take off too. Be sure to see the Opry's "Stars of Tomorrow" showcase on Friday nights.

I, and any upstart musician worth his salt in the Jackson Purchase, had to cut his teeth on the Kentucky Opry stage. Campbell's teen talent contests were for me (and are for others) a great way to "get in the game." It is truly important for young musicians to get that full band experience early on.



Scottie Henson's hand-drawn tablature. *Photo by the author.*

By the way, no, I didn't win the talent contest. My harmonica rendition of "Pride and Joy" (complete with Campbell's bespectacled Buddy Holly impression going on behind my back) just couldn't cut it. The needle on the applause-o-meter barely wiggled. In fact, I believe I was beaten by the aforementioned Josh Williams. Yes, my humble "fist whistle" stood no chance against his lightning-fast, "high gear" banjo. It was like trying to storm the beach of Normandy with a peashooter.

The Opry touts a twelve-member cast of singers, comedians, guest entertainers and musicians ready to provide you a rollicking night of "clean, family entertainment" and a welcome

break from the crude entertainment of our modern times.

The Kentucky Opry, Draffenville. *Photo by the author.*

Clay Campbell's talent shows, monthly bluegrass jams, comedy nights and opry-style concerts with big-name celebrities run constantly and prove that the Jackson Purchase has just as much to offer the country music scene as anywhere else. After all, Clay Campbell's Kentucky Opry has been dubbed the second home to many of the stars of the *Grand Ole Opry*. Not too shabby! Visit www.kyopry.com for directions and details.

Tadpole's Dew Drop Inn

With a name like "Possum Trot, Kentucky," you would hope the town would have a decent hillbilly music scene. Rest assured, that can be found in abundance at Tadpole's Dew Drop Inn.

Larry Madden, aka "Tadpole," has been hosting this show since 1982, making it the longest-running musical shindig in the Jackson Purchase.

The tidy, pre-fab metal building sits in back of his house off Calvert City Road. Every Wednesday night, the gravel lot fills with the cars and trucks of country music fans, pickers and dancers (although dancing is supposedly illegal in Marshall County).

While Tadpole rarely plays (his talent is belied by modesty and selfdeprecating humor), his band is one of the tightest I've ever heard. Emphasizing honky-tonk hits from the '50s through the '70s, these guys know the country music canon like the backs of their hands.

Rows of folding chairs face a wide stage that holds a beat-up barrelhouse piano that's been painted barn red. Colored floodlights bathe the bandstand in a moody ambiance. Framed western scenes and a portrait of Mr. Tadpole himself help pretty up the place.

In the back of the room, there's coffee to drink and tables for the kids to sit at and color with the Crayolas Tadpole has been kind enough to provide. There's always a capacity crowd of mostly folks old enough to remember the halcyon years of classic country music. But more and more, the younger generation is discovering this cultural treasure. This is made evident by young Eddie Dunlap, a master of the steel guitar, who has recorded for Hank Williams III. There is also the occasional young lady or two who will take the stage to belt out the classics. And believe you me, they are every bit as good as the finest talent you can find in Nashville, Tennessee. No "auto-tune" gadgetry required.

Heading east out of Paducah on U.S. 62/Kentucky Dam Road, drive four miles and turn left onto Calvert City Road. It's down on the left. If you're a sucker for souvenirs like I am, be sure to get a Possum Trot, Kentucky T-shirt at the IGA or at the BP "Possum Mart."

Duck Creek RV Park might be the most unlikely place to find a most unlikely jam on the most unlikely instrument. From time to time, an assembly of *psaltery* enthusiasts gathers in the general store to play the instrument made famous by the one and only King David (of the *Bible*, that is). It seems an unlikely backdrop for such heavenly music, what with all the shelves of camping supplies, snacks, tackle and bait. Regardless, you will be transported to an otherworldly realm upon your first listen.

The psaltery, like the bowed dulcimer, is an ancient instrument whose sound has brought peace and comfort to Duck Creek's wheelchair-bound owner, Mike Vessels. After suffering the effects of multiple sclerosis, Vessels was left unable to play his first instrument, the piano. However, he soon discovered a love for the healing sounds of the psaltery. Having mastered the instrument, he plays with his group every so often when the feeling is right. I once had the honor of giving Mike a lesson on harmonica, a very different kind of "harp." In exchange, he showed me how to play the psaltery. It was a nice trade.

Although Mr. Vessels has slowed down since my first visit/harp lesson, the music plays on. He has handed over most of the daily RV park dealings to

manager Karen Brinkman, who keeps the tradition going. Brinkman even demonstrated her skills during my second visit to Duck Creek. It sounded as glorious as ever.

To hear the magic for yourself, and perhaps purchase a psaltery of your own (they sell them in the general store), visit Duck Creek RV Park, Exit 11 on John Puryear Drive in Paducah.

Grand Rivers Community Center

Within the cavernous halls of the Grand Rivers Community Center, couples of all ages two-step and swing to the sounds of Mr. Stanley Walker, the greatest musical living legend in the Jackson Purchase. It's as if all the dancers from neighboring Marshall County (where dancing is against the law) have been set free to go do their thing.

Mr. Walker is famous for having recorded for Sam Phillips's Sun Records in the '50s and '60s (think: the glory days of Elvis Presley, Roy Orbison and Johnny Cash), backing rockabilly legend and Paducah native "Rockin'" Ray Smith. He has also played the *Grand Ole Opry* many, many times, acting as the musical director for Opry member Jean Shepard. What's more, he's even jammed with Jerry Lee Lewis a time or two.

All of these accomplishments have won him an induction into the Rockabilly Hall of Fame, located in Jackson, Tennessee. Another hotshot known to sit in at the center is Howard Walker (no relation), who is an excellent pedal steel player.

Stanley Walker outside his home in Grand Rivers, Kentucky
Photo by the author.

Badget Playhouse Theatre and "Stanley Walker" Day

While in Grand Rivers, be sure to check out the Badgett Playhouse, Patti's restaurant (and petting zoo), the Pelican and all the other great activities Kentucky Lake offers. Just remember, Stanley Walker is just as much a natural treasure as anything else here. See him while you still can. (More on Walker to come...)

The Community Center is located at 155 West Cumberland Avenue, one block west of J.H. O'Bryan and behind First Kentucky Bank. Feel free to call ahead at (270) 362-8976.

This six-thousand-square-foot facility serves as the home of Variety Music, Memories and More, a Branson Missouri–style revue of popular music and

dancing from the 1940s swing era to the Motown movement of the 1960s. Elaborate costumes and dance routines are featured during this tribute to American music. The talent is top notch, rivaling the best from Nashville or even Broadway.

Every year, the Playhouse also honors Grand Rivers' most famous resident, the aforementioned Stanley Walker, with "Stanley Walker Day". The event raises money for the Kosair Hospital in Louisville, Kentucky, and recently celebrated its fifth year. The hospital is a cause very near to Walker's heart, as he was a Kosair patient in 1948. "They saved my life," he said. The seventy-four-year-old guitarist is the hospital's most prominent spokesman. He was recently featured on both its billboard in Louisville and a Paducah area TV commercial.

As the recipient of good karma, Mr. Walker was recently inducted into the Rockabilly Hall of Fame in Jackson, Tennessee. His years as a regular on the *Grand Ole Opry* and at Sun Studios have really paid off, but when I sat down with Walker to talk, I got a lot more information about his life prior to fame.

"I came up through the rough times," Walker explained, citing hard times in the Twin Lakes area. "I played 'between the rivers' at the old schoolhouses. I was young, just a kid playing with some real old-timers. It was Jack Penniger on fiddle and mandolin. Oved Trim was on guitar and did the singin'. Wilburn Walker played the bass fiddle and was the comedian."

Walker takes issue with the notion that eastern Kentucky corners the market on old-time traditions

and hardship: "Buddy, I was in on it. When those old battery radios were sittin' in the windows listenin' to the *Opry*. When there was just gravel roads and no blacktop. When the ferry ran from Kuttawa. I was there!"

Walker described a square dance that was once in Grand Rivers, Kentucky. "Years ago there used to be [one] at the Iron Kettle [in Grand Rivers]. And Jack Green called one in Eddyville on the street in front of the courthouse. I still play there on Founders Day."

As a young man, Stanley and his band had their own show on WCBL, the radio station in Benton, Kentucky. "Boy, we thought we were big stars! We played on WPKY in Princeton, too." Walker also served as the guitarist in the Carl Barber Band, an all-black group in Paducah that performed American standards at the 400 Club, behind the jailhouse.

"[My group] played a street dance in front of the Kentucky State Penitentiary. It was just a little show we put on, playing good ole country music." Years later, Stanley would approach Sun Records recording star "Rockin'" Ray Smith of Melber, Kentucky, at an Illinois "play party." "The show was over, and they were tearing down the gear. But I asked if I could show them how I play." Stanley had developed a unique finger-picking style after studying local guitarist Happy Parrish.

Suffice it to say, Smith was so knocked out by Walker's way of playing that he hired him. The blend of Smith's rock 'n' roll sound with Walker's

finger-picked guitar helped further define the budding new rockabilly genre of the 1950s.

Although Stanley currently suffers from diabetes, it hasn't slowed him down. In addition to his yearly preparations for "Stanley Walker Day", he plays every Friday night at the Grand Rivers Community Center and has done so for the past thirteen years. He'll also be hosting a talk at the

Stanley Walker (far right) on the road with Jean Shepard in 1960. *Stanley Walker collection.*

library regarding his old band mate Ray Smith. It is this association with Smith that has won him the most worldwide notoriety. Bear Family Records, of Germany, re-releases classic American music, much of which is old rockabilly. These remastered CDs have spawned a new generation of fans for a genre that Walker helped create.

"That Bear Records exec told me, 'Stanley, you got fans you don't even know about!' I get mail

from Sweden and all over. And I just about cry when I receive a letter like that."

When I asked him about the state of modern country music, Stanley had a very wise and measured response: "My heart is in pure country music. And it's a shame that Merle Haggard can't get played on the major stations. But it's the young kids' time, and it's their music. We had our kind of country and rock, like Johnny Cash, and now they've got [theirs]."

Walker continued, "But I always wondered why all the sidemen in Nashville didn't get recognized. They've got God-given talent, a family and yet they don't get recognized." He mentioned names like Luther Perkins, Leon Rhodes and James Burton, sidemen eclipsed by their famous front men. However, Walker admits, "I never wanted to sing; I just wanted to back someone up and play licks." There's nothing wrong with that, I say, and it's definitely not a bad way to make a living.

However, after his regularly paying house gig in Paducah dried up, Stanley had to go to work for the road department for a few years, driving trucks, running an end-loader, mowing grass and anything else to pay the bills. Thankfully, he's back onstage and finally receiving the recognition he deserves.

"I'm not a big name," Walker admitted, "but I've had a good career and [it] means a lot to me. They say, 'Stanley, your music will live on long after you're gone.' And it just touches my heart more than you'll ever know." Be sure to call ahead to plan your pilgrimage to see the western Kentucky rockabilly legend. "Stanley Walker Day" occurs

every May, and all proceeds go to a great cause. "Every nickel of it!" Walker promises.

Contact organizers at (888) 362-4223. Take I-24 to KY Exit #31. Go south on 453 toward Grand Rivers (three miles) and then left on Commerce. The theater is at the corner of J.H. O'Bryan Avenue and Commerce.

The Hotel Metropolitan

In my introduction to this chapter, I made mention of Paducah's famed Hotel Metropolitan. While it may not perfectly embody the format of a barn dance or jam, it definitely deserves mention in this work. After all, the place has definitely seen its fair share of jamming.

The hotel, once a stop along the African American touring route known as the Chitlin' Circuit, stands today as a revitalized venue for special events. These events celebrate the blues and R&B of America's black culture, styles that have indisputably influenced the country music of white folks too. One listen to Elvis Presley, Charlie Rich and Jerry Lee Lewis will verify this claim.

Built in 1909 by twenty-four-year-old Maggie M. Steed, the hotel was destined to become a hit. Steed had seen a need for a Paducah-area "colored" hotel. As we all know, dark-skinned people continued to be intensely marginalized in the days following slavery, forbidden even to window-shop at clothing stores. So Maggie got to work, using her husband's name to secure a deal with a lumber company that owned the property.

By 1915, the stately Victorian hotel was so valued as a haven for black travelers that word began to spread around the country. As such, it would soon become the heart of an African American community that extended far beyond humble McCracken County.

After Steed's death in 1924, Edward and Lucille Wright assumed ownership but passed it along four years later to Henry Gause and Mayme Gause Burbridge. These two would oversee the rise of the jazz age from one of the best possible vantage points. Riverboat talent agent Fate Marable, a resident of Paducah, invited many now-famous icons to the area. Musicians like Cab Calloway, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Baby Dodds, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holliday and Louis Armstrong have all stayed at the Met, often jamming into the night. Imagine the sounds that could be heard on a Saturday night during this remarkable era!

During the 1950s, Lester and Olivia Gaines, who managed the hotel, housed members of Negro League baseball teams and the Harlem Globetrotters. But rockers like Ike and Tina Turner, Chuck Berry, Little Richard and Ray Charles still stopped by. Even B.B. King was given to play his trademark guitar "Lucille" on the front porch. The presence of these "creative types" didn't stop Baptist conventioneers from following suit. Athlete Jesse Owen and even Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall famously graced these hallowed halls as well!

When segregation ended in the 1960s, the hotel shifted its focus away from the diminishing

Chitlin' Circuit and became a humble rooming house. It wasn't long after that the hotel fell into decline. Unkempt and abandoned, the place descended into ruin while the "black America" it once represented struggled to integrate into white society.

After a recent push to revive this landmark, the Hotel Metropolitan has slowly become relevant again. Today, it is the backdrop for many special occasions throughout the year. A fish fry is held on the first Friday of every month at 11:00 a.m. Salute(s) to Black Music and Emancipation Celebrations are held there now. Whispers of an annual music festival are also aloft. Consult the Hotel Metropolitan website (www.thehotelmetropolitan.org) or call Betty Dobson at (270) 443-7918 to plan your journey to this haven of history, music and culture.

Visit in person at 724 Jackson Street, Paducah, Kentucky.

About the Author:
J.D. Wilkes as a high-energy singer, songwriter, and performer with groups such as The Legendary Shack Shakers and The Dirt Daubers, the Paducah resident is also a talented illustrator and author.