From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. [music]. The thought of gathering with thousands of people at a music festival right now is pretty unnerving. But it’s something that musicians and fans have done every year for almost 85 years in Galax, Virginia. I’m Sarah McConnell, and today on With Good Reason, the Old Times Fiddler Convention. Later in the show, the sounds and styles of the banjo take us through its curious history. But first, young people are learning to play old time and bluegrass tunes more than ever before. Jon Lohman is director of the Virginia Folklife program at Virginia Humanities. He talks about this next generation of musicians and ways to support professional players in this difficult time. Hey Jon, thanks for talking with me. I know you’ve got a lot going on right now.

Oh it’s a pleasure. It’s a pleasure to talk to you.

You were featured in a relatively new documentary called Fiddlin, and it’s about the Galax Old Time Fiddler Convention in Galax, Virginia. What makes it so special?
Well I’d just say to your listeners, a lot of folks who are not familiar with these...they hear the term “fiddler’s convention,” and I think they get this vision in their mind of, you know, maybe a Hyatt Regency somewhere where there’s tables and fiddles out, or something like this. Think of it as something like part festival, part contest, part campground for a week, part family reunion. It’s almost like a little town gets created for the week and folks spend the week there sleeping in RVs and tents and playing music 24 hours a day. And then there’s contests and every type of instrument and bluegrass and old time music. It’s just an amazing event. And the Galax, which is a small little town in Grayson county, Virginia, right on the North Carolina line in the Blue Ridge mountains, is just about the oldest and the largest fiddler’s convention in the country. And they’re celebrating hopefully their 85th this summer.

Do you think the summer convention will still be on? When is it?

It’s always in the first week of August, so we hope it will. I have to say, under this time of social distancing, it’s hard to find an event that is less about social distancing than a fiddler’s convention, because it’s all about people coming together.

Let’s listen together to a clip from the documentary Fiddlin. This features Karen Carr. She’s an upright bass player who talks about how playing music lifted her out of dark times.

[music]. Being manic depressive or bipolar. The highs are fun, but they leave behind a debris field of death and heartache that the same people cannot imagine. And when you come off the highs, the depression is so deep that I have actually thanked God for not having to take this breath that I just took. I can go onto the next breath. And when I started messing with that damnable guitar, pretty much healed me, I mean from dozens of pills a day to nothing. Being able to appear reasonably sane out in public. That’s a pretty big deal. [music].

That’s a beautiful story. Actually, I know Karen quite well. She plays bass in a wonderful old time string band called the Crooked Road Ramblers. And, you know, you hear that story a lot. Music is a healing force. And this is a community that has—and a region—that has used this music for this purpose for centuries, for generations. And this is a, that part of Virginia, that part of the country was America’s first frontier, and these were hard times for folks. And a city like Galax has experienced a lot of hard times, and continues to. It was a major center for furniture factories. That has experienced a, almost collapse, you could say. And music is what keeps them going. And for a lot of them, it’s what they look forward to all day, that time when they can pick up the banjo or the fiddle or whatever with family and friends. So that story is beautiful and it’s not altogether unique.

It amazes me how the documentary shows how many young people are performing at top levels. There are so many of them. They seem to love it.
Oh, it’s an amazing thing to see. You know, I remember when I started, the big narrative out there was that everybody was so afraid that these types of music—bluegrass, old time, traditional music was going to die out. The kids aren’t into it. But I could tell you I’m really happy to report that nothing could be farther from the truth. And the kids have just gotten better and better and better over the years. It’s astonishing. And a lot of the old timers will tell you that they’ve never seen anything like it, like they see now. It’s just a culture down there where multiple generations down there enjoy spending time with one another. And the musicians are very generous with their time with the young people. They always are. They’re always happy when a kid says, “hey, how do you play that lick?” You know, “how do I do that thing that you just did?” So it’s really a beautiful thing.

00:05:40

Hey kiddie.

How are you doing?

Hey kiddie. [inaudible]

Played Sally Ann already?

No. It was Sally Ann.

[music].

I want to play another clip from Fiddlin. This is a young boy, an incredible guitar player named Presley Barker. William Henderson is famous for his guitars, and he made Presley’s very own guitar, and this is Presley’s mom talking about how much he appreciates it.

I want to check on Presley before I went to bed, and in his bedroom he was asleep on one pillow, and on the other pillow was the Henderson guitar covered up with cover. He said that it didn’t deserve to be on the floor. He just wants to keep it with him at all times, so you could say he’s really attached to the guitar. [laughs].

And Presley’s just one of so many kids at the Fiddler’s Convention who started playing very young. Here are some others.

I was 7 years old when I started playing.

I was 4.
I’m 11 years old, and I’ve been playing for about 8 years, since I was 3 and a half.

[music].

I didn’t have a phone in my hand, but I always had an instrument in my hand, and I feel like that has helped me a lot along the way.

SM Imagine people that generation who can be lured away from phones.

JL Yeah, yeah. I’m sure you’re speaking to parents all over the country that wish they could get an instrument in their kid’s hands instead of a screen. I think we’re waging a separate war in the country right now versus screen with our children, with all this free time. But a really interesting thing that I’ve found is that the kids are actually, they’re actually, a lot of them are really utilizing technology. Kids are, you know, watching musicians that they want to learn from on YouTube. A lot of them are taking lessons on YouTube or Skype or these other ways. They’re recording music and they’re practicing and they’re sharing, you know, with social media. So the technology in these cases is not so much moving them away from the music, but in a lot of cases, it’s bringing them even more to the music.

SM Yeah. And it’s great to hear so many young girls are playing the music.

JL You know, you see Ivy Phillips and you see Kitty Amaro, and you see Ila Wildman, you see these young girls in the film. And that’s been something that’s been wonderful to see is just the, you know, really an increase of girls and women playing the music. Cause bluegrass and old time can be often a genre like many genres, musical genres, that tend to be dominated by men. In fact, Dory Freeman, who’s an incredible songwriter from Virginia, has a quote in the film where she talks about that, you know, if you look at most festivals out there, you know, bluegrass festivals or Americana festivals, they always have the poster where they have the big name at the top and then they go through and you go to the bottom of the page with all the names. She says you can often count on one hand the number of females on those lists. And that’s really changed, I mean girls are winning this thing. In fact, last year the Fiddler’s Convention, Ila Wildman, who I’m proud to say was an apprentice twice in our program, won best all-around performer at the age of, I believe, I believe she was 15 when she did that. So, the girls are taking over. And that’s good to see.

SM It is so fun and reassuring to see this young generation so skilled at embracing the old time music. But these days, because of the coronavirus, I really worry about the professional musicians, the older ones who’ve lost all their work, all their gigs. Oh, well it’s devastating to professional musicians, to those organizations who present them. To the entire industry right now. And I know so many musicians of course that we work with, and within days, their entire season was decimated. Festivals being cancelled, theaters
being cancelled, I mean this is all about people coming out and being together for live performances. So this has been really rough. What a lot of them are doing right now, and it’s pretty amazing to see. So many musicians now are turning to social media and streaming services. Every night, there are many concerts that you could watch folks just from their living room performing. And you can watch and you can donate to the musicians. A lot of them are giving lessons. What we’re doing at the Folklife Program right now, as quickly as we can, is we are reaching out to as many musicians of all types, in Virginia, to get set up. To teach online. And to form right there on our website at virginiafolklife.org, where you can see all these different folks that you could learn music from, and how to connect with them, to help out, well really help out these musicians who have no source of income right now. So we’re gonna provide a directory, we’re gonna showcase different artists, but also what better time than now when we’re all shut in the house to learn that instrument you always wanted to learn? And it’s a form of connection as you know. So that’s what we’re up to, and I encourage people to check us out and to learn an instrument.

00:11:09

SM    Jon, that’s terrific. Give me that link one more time.

JL    It’s virginiafolklife dot O-R-G.

SM    So this documentary called Fiddlin just out since last Fall, how can people watch it?

JL    Well it’s available for streaming on Amazon Prime for those who have that, or Apple TV. You can also order a DVD from the film’s website which is www.fiddlinmovie.com. The film is produced and directed by two sisters from Carol county which is right adjacent to Galax. They grew up there, and they’re not musicians themselves, but like anyone there, they grew up going to the Fiddler’s Conventions and it’s actually their first film and it’s a beautiful film.

SM    Wel, Jon Lohman, thank you so much for talking with me on With Good REason, and I hope you and your family stay safe.

JL    Oh, you too, Sarah, and to everyone out there as well. [music].

SM    Jon Lohman is the Virginia State folklorist and director of the folklife program at Virginia Humanities. The banjo is an instrument that often gets connected with the backwoods of the American South. [music]. But its roots are in western Africa. And its history includes upper-class women picking classical music on it. [music]. My next two guests are going to talk about the banjo’s storied past. Professor Stephen Rockenbach from Virginia State University and Gregg Kimball from the library of Virginia say banjo music like the instrument itself has really transformed over time. And they play a few tunes to make
their point. The famous banjo player Bella Fleck said the banjo is associated with white, southern stereotypes. And yet the instrument came from Africa. Tell me about the very earliest life of the banjo here, Greg.

GK Well, obviously we know that it came from Africa, the basic design idea of the instrument. Basically a skin head over a drum or, in the case of an African banjo, a hollowed out piece of wood.

SM Did enslaved people bring it from Africa or did they just remember it and recreate it here?

GK They remembered it and recreated it. I don’t think there’s much chance that anybody actually brought an instrument with them. They brought the cultural knowledge of the instrument.

SM Stephen, do we even know what those earliest banjos looked like?

SR Those early examples would have been made from gourds, various types of animal skins, and constructed of wood. And so we don’t have a lot of evidence of the actual instruments, but there is a painting that includes one. And that’s a new world painting, and sometimes a common name of it is the Old Plantation, and it’s from South Carolina. And it’s a really interesting painting because not only does it show the banjo with its gourd body as it emerged in the new world, but it shows people dancing, a gentleman with a stick who’s doing a dance. So it’s a dance, it’s a social event, that’s the context of the banjo.

SM What period was that painting?

SR About 1760s, 1770s, that’s the best guess. There’s no exact date.

SM What’s your best guess—what’s the best guess to people what they must have sounded like? Can you sort of illustrate it on your own instrument?

SR Yes, I have a reproduction of what was known as the minstrel style banjo of the 1830s and 40s which would have been sort of the industrial version of those earlier banjos. So what it has in similar is that its fretless and my instrument has nylon, what they call nylon gut strings, to sort of sound like the cat gut strings that would’ve been used in then a synthetic skin head. So what you’re gonna hear is a lower sound and one that has a lot of slides, and the tone is definitively deeper and richer. [music]

00:15:47
So, fairly early on, the banjo was mostly being heard where? It was being heard on plantations in the south?

Predominantly. And that’s where we see some of the first transition or borrowing of the music and the instrument.

Where did minstrel shows begin? And these are white performers imitating Black performers?

Yes, principally in the 1820s and 1830s, it is white performers playing the banjo, the bones, tambourines, fiddle, and other instruments associated with plantation life. And making fun of black southerners. So it’s interesting that even though we know that the minstrel shows were racist parody, it was a very popular style of music. So you could hear a lot of different songs in that style. One example is a song, Darling Nelly Gray, written shortly before the Civil War, by Benjamin Hanby, who was a white minister. He wrote it as an abolitionist song. So, the song itself is talking about a young man who goes to see his sweetheart who is enslaved to realize that she has been sold from Kentucky down the Mississippi River to where he’ll never see her again. Played on the minstrel banjo, this is Darling Nelly Grey.

[Music]. My poor Nelly Gray. They’ve taken you away. I’ll never see my darling anymore. I’m sittin by the river, and weeping all the day. You’re gone from the old Kentucky shore.

Ah, that’s moving.

It is. And I think that understanding that the banjo is used for dance music, sad ballads such as that one, as well as just popular music that people might hear in a tavern. So there’s this minstrel movement that really crystallizes nationally in the 40s and 50s. This music is not just popular in one region. It’s a national music. It’s really the first national musical theater that America invents that isn’t borrowed from Europe. So New York City and Boston and London and all of these places, people are listening to this music. And the banjo evolves as well. And in the 1840s you have the first manufacturing in Baltimore of the banjo as we really probably understand it today.

Was it played by the north and the south soldiers during the Civil War?

Absolutely, in fact there are wonderful photographs of minstrel bands in uniform playing for their units.

Either north or south.

North or south. You know, that’s the irony of Dixie of course is that it was apparently Lincoln’s favorite song. This was a national culture, minstrelsy.
SM You guys don’t want to launch into something from the Civil War, do you?

SR [music]. And that’s Battle Cry of Freedom, which was a song that was written in the north, but there were also southern lyrics to it as well. And I imagine you would’ve heard that played on the banjo quite a bit. And another thing that happens that’s really revolutionary is that the banjo doesn’t just remain a minstrel instrument, but it starts to go out into all this new music that Americans are inventing. So jazz, you have the tenor banjo that’s employed in that. You have ragtime music, you have all of these other forms, and the banjo basically adapts. So all kinds of people are playing the instrument. You have white ladies playing the instrument in parlors, and you have people playing minstrel style, and you have people playing classical banjo. Mark Twain himself has this wonderful quote: “Give me the banjo.” Forget European art music. It becomes the American instrument. One of the things that I think people find a little peculiar about the banjo the way we think about it cause we hear it being played in like bluegrass music is that there was a classical banjo movement.

00:20:53

SM Around when?

SR This is happening roughly in 1890s into the early 20th century is when we start to see that happen. And you see that feeding back into the folk music. We think of folk music here in the people and here’s classical music up here, but they feed on each other. So a good example of this, how classical banjo influences folk music, the reverse of what we might think, is Maryann Underwood. He’s the banjo player for Taylor’s Kentucky Boys. And he plays a wonderful piece called Coal Creek March. This is recorded in 1927 in Richmond, Indiana at the Jannet Studios. [music]. So, you hear that sound?

SM What is that?

GK Well, he’s hitting the head of the banjo like this. You can make a rhythmical pulse out of it. The other thing I love about this piece too is he’s doing these wonderful little quick arpeggio rolls with his fingers across the strings. But I really, and I think Steve would agree with me, this really speaks to the influence of classical banjo.

SR It is, and it takes a lot of skill. This is an instrument that sometimes might be seen as sort of a backwoods instrument, as not refined. And he’s using an amazing level of technique to get a number of different sounds out of one instrument. So, as Greg said, there are a lot of different styles and tunings to play the banjo. So when you start to have recorded music, you hear styles and you pick them up, but there’s not really any dominant one. And the same song can be played using a couple different styles. So claw hammer, which is using usually the index of the middle finger and the thumb in a sweeping down
motion where the thumb catches the 5th string like this, [music]. And then the 3-fingered style [music].

SM  When did we start to see bluegrass?

SR  You start to see bluegrass in the 1940s and 1950s. And it's really more of a style of playing that mixes some of the old time instruments, songs, and styles, with a bit of improvisation with jazz and influence from different western swing. It starts to take on a different sound. You've got Earl Scrubs who popularized what we call the 3-finger scrub style picking. Now, people had been playing with 2 or 3 fingers, but Scrubs added some different techniques to it. I bet you know what this one is. [music].

SM  [laughs]. Beverly Hillbillies.

SM  Yes, exactly. And so that theme song was one of many songs that Scrubs played in that style. And so bluegrass then changes as other players use metal picks on their fingers and a plastic thumb pick. And then use the banjo in ways that it hadn't been played before. Playing hot licks, faster riffs, soloing, and playing further down the neck. And so it's the same instrument in many ways as the one that we know from the 19th century.

GK  But, in other ways, it sounds completely different. And it's played completely different.

SM  So where are we now with the banjo? Is it played by folks doing old time music but not so popular?

GK  I see it all over the popular culture, don't you, Stephen?

00:25:27

SR  Yes, and I think that's what's really interested me as a banjo player and someone who loves the instrument. It continues to transform and it's become very popular not just in old time or bluegrass or country, you see it in pop music, it's used in rock and especially recently different versions of the instrument, hybrids like the banjo body with the neck of a guitar, often called a guitjo or a banjatar, that has been played by a number of popular musicians and performers including Taylor Swift.

GK  I think the other thing about that that's really important that's going on right now is a revival of interest in some of these older banjo styles among African Americans. You have the North Carolina Chocolate Drops who have disbanded but were really an important band in raising the perspective of the banjo and how important and how fundamental African American music is to country music, which is not something we can imagine. And of course Riana Giddins has gone onto a solo career and there's quite a number of young African American performers who are performing on the banjo again,
and also writing songs for the banjo. And so, in some ways, you have a new folk tradition emerging.

SM Well, Stephen and Greg, thank you for sharing your insights on With Good Reason.

GK Our pleasure.

SR Thank you. It was really, really, a lot of fun.

SM Do you have a song you could take us out on.

SR Yes, I think we could do Worried Man Blues, which is a traditional song, and I’m gonna do the 3 finger style, and Greg will do claw hammer. [music].

SM Stephen Rockenbach is professor of history and philosophy at Virginia State University. Greg Kimball is director of public services and outreach at the library of Virginia. With Good Reason listeners, we want to hear from you. What are you doing to cope with the COVID-19 changes? What’s helping you? Record a voice memo on your phone and email to us by Monday morning so we can share. You can find our email address on the website, or email it to wgr@virginiahumanities.org. [music]. Welcome back to With Good Reason from Virginia Humanities. I’m Sarah McConnell. Most of us think of mountain music as a band of musicians with hot fiddle or banjo solos, but there was a far earlier genre, unaccompanied ballad singing, that still persists today. Our next guest is an expert in the roots of traditional American music. Cece Conway is a professor of English at Appalachian State University, and the author of African banjo echoes in Appalachia. Her love of mountain music goes a lot way back. Cece, do you remember how old you were when you heard somebody singing like one of these ballad singers and thought, “I love it”?

CC Really, the first song I learned the words to was not a ballad but the blues with lead belly, singing Irene Goodnight. And he also grew up in northeast Texas not far from where I spent summers. And then I came to North Carolina to college and more or less never left except to visit. In college, I started going to Fiddler’s Conventions. In the summer, there’s one every weekend, still, from the 60s until now.

SM Let’s dive right in, playing Awake Awake, sung by one of your current favorite Appalachian ballad singers, Rick Ward.

CC Yes, the young man wants his sweetheart to ask his father to let him marry her. And she says, “I can’t do it, he’s sleeping with a knife. He’ll kill you.” [music].

00:30:50
I love how raw his voice is, and he just belts it out.

Yes, he’s so into the story because ballads are story songs rather than just lyric emotional expressive songs. So, the young man finally says, “well, I’ll just go away if they won’t let me marry you, to the river, and never come back and bother you again.” And she says, “no, no, stay with me a while, and then I’ll run away with you.”

And what happens in the end?

She does, and this was something new in this country, because in the old word, the parents, there was no place for people to go, so they were more obedient to their parents. But here, they could go away and make a new life for themselves.

So many of these old ballads are very gory. Why is that?

Because they’re about really the fears and the values of the people who sang them. So when the husband comes home and finds his lady in bed with Mattie Groves, he cuts off her head and kicks it against the wall. But then, he lures it gently into the grave.

So what kind of emotions and ways of being are those that are being touted in these ballads?

Well, on the one hand, adultery can cause a problem. Another interpretation of the song is, when you hear the horn blow, get up and go.

[laughs]. So did these ballads that came over from England and Scotland and Ireland, did the lyrics and form of the ballads change after a while in the Appalachian Mountains?

The form didn’t change so much except to grow shorter, and more intense and dramatic.

Had they been long?

Oh yes, they were sometimes 64 verses long, and now maybe they’re a dozen verses long or 8.

And the subjects, would the subjects change?

A lot of the subjects remained the same. Romance, jealousy. They’re called by the people, old love songs.

How early did these singers arrive in America?
They probably came as early as Jamestown in the 1600s. Perhaps more from Scotland than from England, and there was also Irish influence although the history of that is less clear.

Were they singing and settling up and down the colonies or did they immediately head for the hills and go to Appalachia?

A lot of them were moving away from the English who had been colonizing them, and mistreating them, and also a lot of the Scots as well came in during the 1600s and by the 1700s, and then did begin to go south down the Great Wagon Road through Virginia often, and then into the Appalachian settlements. They really have persisted in the 2 main communities that continue to sing ballads today–Beach Mountain was the 1st Appalachian settlement, what's not North Carolina.

So, Rick Ward, who sang Awake Awake for us just now, he comes from a long tradition of ballad singers in his family.

He's kin to the 1st 2 families that settled on Beach Mountain. 1st the Hicks and then the Wards. And the ancestor of the Hicks probably came in through Jamestown, worked on a tobacco farm at the head of the Rappahannock River, he was an indentured servant, he worked off his time, and bought land, and then eventually the family began to trickle southward. When the American revolution came, he didn't want to fight the Tories, and he didn't want to fight the Patriots, and so he skedaddled into Stokes county and then finally across the Blue Ridge into Beach Mountain.

To give examples of a couple more of these ballads, let's turn to the musician and singer, James Leva.

Uh, he's a wonderful fiddle and banjo player and an incredible singer and songwriter. He lives on 88 acres and goes hunting in Virginia near Lexington. And eats a lot of venison, and cooks well. I believe he's once been described as that New Jersey boy who moved to the mountains and went native. Well James sings the House Carpenter. A lover comes to the lady and says he could've married the king's daughter, but he's come back to her instead. She said you should've perhaps married her because I married a nice young carpenter and he's a fine fellow. [music].

Let's hear that. [music]. I heard that there was a period where a lot of experts thought that these British isle ballads had sort of died out, and then, suddenly, people realized that, “No, no, no, this tradition is alive and well in America's Appalachian mountains.”
Yes, and that began as early as when Cecile Sharpe came in the early 1900s. And found ballads that had died out in England here, and was thrilled, and collected a large number then went all through the mountains. But missed Beach mountain. He went near what was Madison is.

And was this the time where the record existed and were these played for a wider audience?

These couldn’t be recorded in the field at this time. He took down the music and his traveling companion, a lady, took down the words for him.

Who was the first to come across these and actually record them?

Alan Lomax, and his father John were some of the early people who recorded these, and he recorded Texas Gladden for example, who sings the 3 Babes, which is a song that James also loves.

Oh, Texas Gladden is a woman.

Yes. She was to people who were interested in these ballads during the years that Lomax was collecting say.

Let’s play her singing Last Night There Were 4 Marys, Today There Will Be Only 3. [music].

Well, she talks about how she took care of the queen, and she bathed her feet, and now the queen has condemned her to have her head cut off.

Why?

The baby has disappeared, that she had, and was it the kings? And is that why she’s gonna be beheaded? But it’s so understated. That’s part of the beauty of these songs. It doesn’t go into the details of the execution. It just has that amazing chorus.

Where did Texas Gladden live?

Well she grew up in Saltville, Virginia early in the 1900s.

Did many mountain women also sing these ballads?

Yes, a lot of women did sing them. It seems that women became more the singers in this country and why that happened is not so clear, but I’ve begun to think that maybe once the fiddle arrived and became popular, the men took an interest in that and began taking
up the fiddle and leaving the ballads to the women who could be holding their babies or string beans, and be singing at the same time. Rick Ward sings The Jovial Hunter, which is an incredible song, partly because some of the oldest versions in the Folger library have the hunter fighting a dragon, whereas in this song, it’s a boar. The wild boar in the woods that kills 10,000 men. And yet the hunter still survives. And he’s a jovial hunter which is perhaps a jovial hunter, yet there’s another surprise in the song because there’s a witch wife. The jovial hunter splits her head in two, but there’s also humor in it, because she says, “What are you doing? You’ve killed my pig!” And she’s mad about that and that’s when he turns on her. [music].

00:43:48

SM Where are we now with this form of singing? Will it last? Can it live?

CC It’s hard to know, but there’s a lot of excitement with it now. For example, there’s a duo called Anna and Elizabeth. Anna is living in New York now and Elizabeth grew up in Virginia. She was singing from a young age, and there were traditional singers in her neighborhood who were influential on her and other people. And actually her mother’s brother is a very good traditional singer in North Carolina.

SM Let’s play something by Anna and Elizabeth now. [music].

00:45:36

CC I do just think it’s valuable to think about how relevant a lot of the hard themes in the ballads are today for us, and how they’re not sentimental. They’re real. They’re about the real challenges people have, whether it’s the young man’s fear that he doesn’t get to marry his sweetheart or it’s her fear or leaving her family but her willingness to follow her beloved at possibly great expense and danger. We all know what it’s like to be in love with somebody and to wonder how that will work out or to face challenges about how it has worked out. Calling them the old love songs is the perfect name even though they don’t necessarily end happily.

SM Why do you love these ballads?

CC Mm, I love the stories. I love the lack of sentimentality but the deep feelings that are suggested by them.

SM Are there any popular music performers that you can think of who’ve been influenced by this very ancient ballad style?

CC Well, there are some sort of aging ones. Um, Joan Baez in the 60s sang many beautiful ballads, Silver Dagger, The Copper Kettle, and others. Her singing style wasn’t so
traditional, and yet there’s something about her personal authenticity that I think survives
well. [music]. Back in the beginning, when a bunch of us were first getting into this music
and being around it, we were drawn to it. And to the people who sang it and who played
the music. And even though politically we may have had different ideas, there was
something still very staunch, deep, about all of the singers we wanted to become close
to.

SM You don’t worry about us losing this style forever?

CC I do worry about that, and every Black banjo player I know has died. However,
miraculously, after the banjo players were dead, along came Rianna Giddens and Dom
and Justin, the fiddle player. And they became the 1st young Black fiddle band in 80
years. And they learned the tradition enough that there is traditionalism there, and they
were able to pass it on to somebody like Hubby Jerkins who’s another Chocolate Drop
now. So, there’s hope. There’s always hope.

SM And that is the group that calls itself the Carolina Chocolate Drops.

CC That’s exactly right, and there was also a group born in the early 1900s called the
Tennessee Chocolate Drops.

SM Cece Conway, thank you for sharing this about the ballads with us on With Good
Reason.

CC You’re welcome. It’s been a pleasure. It’s been fun. [music].

SM Cece Conway is a professor of English at Appalachian State University and the author of
African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia. She’s also a former fellow at Virginia Humanities.
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podcast, go to withgoodreasonradio.org. I’m Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening.
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