

21.03.06 REPLAY Music Matters Hour.wav

SM: Sarah McConnell
AS: Audio Sample
JL: Jon Lohman
SR: Steve Rockenbach
GK: Gregg Kimball
CC: Cece Conway

[00:00:00]

SM This is an encore presentation of an episode that originally aired in April 2020. From Virginia Humanities, this is *With Good Reason*.

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 Time Fiddlers 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, John, thanks for talking with me. I know you've got a lot going on right now.

JL It's a pleasure, it's a pleasure to talk to you.

SM You were featured in a relatively new documentary called *Fiddlin*, and it's about the Galax Old-Time Fiddlers Convention in Galax, Virginia. What makes it so special?

JL Well, I should just say to your listeners, you know, a lot of folks who are not familiar with these, they hear they hear the term "fiddlers 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 kind of like part festival, part contests, part campground for a week, part family reunion. It's almost like a little town gets created for a week and folks spend the week there, sleeping in RVs and tents and playing music 24 hours a day. And then there's contests in every type of instrument in 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 largest fiddler's convention in the country.

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

JL It's 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.

SM 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.

AS [From the documentary "Fiddlin"]

Being manic depressive or bipolar, the highs are fun, but I leave behind a debris field of debt and heartache 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 on to the next breath. You know, and when I start messing with that dang 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.

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, that's - you hear that story a lot. You know, it's - music is - is a healing force, you know? And this is a community that has - and a region that has used music for this purpose for centuries, for generations. And this, is this is you know, that part of Virginia, that part of the country, I mean, really was America's first frontier, you know, and these were these were hard times for folks. And a city like Galax has experienced a lot of hard times and continues to. It was a - 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 - it's what they look forward to all day, you know, is that time when they can pick up the banjo or the fiddle or whatever with family and friends. So that's - that - that story is beautiful and it's not altogether unique.

SM It amazes me how the documentary shows how many young people are performing at top levels. There's so many of them, they seem to love it.

JL 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, that the kids aren't into it. And I could tell you, I'm really happy to report that nothing could be further from the truth. And the kids have just gotten better and better and better over the years. It's astonishing. And - and a lot of the old timers will tell you that that it's never - they've never seen anything like it, like they 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 - how do I do that thing that you just did?" so, it's really a beautiful thing.

AS Hi kiddie, how you doing? What are you going to play?

You played Sally Ann already?

No, little Sallyanne!

[fiddle music plays]

SM I want to play another clip from Fiddlin, this is a young boy, an incredible guitar player named Presley Barcher. Wayne 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.

AS And I went in 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, he - you can see he's really attached to the guitar.

SM And Presley is just one of so many kids at the Fiddlers Convention who started playing very young. Here's some others.

AS I was seven years old when I started playing.

I was four.

I'm 11 years old and I've been playing for about eight years, since I was three and a half.

I didn't have a phone in my hand, but I always have an instrument in my hand. I feel like that has helped me a lot along the way. I have a student now. She's - I think my youngest one is three, and she absolutely loves music. So, it just makes me so happy getting to teach and share my love to others.

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 here, who wish they could get an instrument in their kids' hands instead of a - a screen. I think we're waging a separate war in the country right now versus screens with our children, with all this free time. But really interesting thing that 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 - and they're sharing, you know, with social media so that the technology in these cases is not so much moving them away from the music, but in a lot of cases is 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, it's you see Ivy Phillips and you see Kitty Amaral and you see Aila Wildman, you see these young girls in the film. And that's been something that's been wonderful to see is just, you know, really an increase of girls and women playing the music. Because, you know, bluegrass and old time can be often a genre, like many genres, that are really musical genres that tend to be dominated by men. In fact, Dori 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 - at most festivals out there, you know, bluegrass festivals or Americana festivals. You know, they always have the poster where they have the - the big name on 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 - and that's really changed, I mean, girls are - girls are winning this thing. The fact last year at the Fiddlers Convention, Aila 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 taken over and that's good to see.

SM It is so fun and reassuring to see this young generation so skilled and 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.

JL Oh, well, it's - it's devastating to professional musicians, to those organizations that present them to the entire industry right now. I know so many musicians, of course, that we work with. And, you know, within days, you know, their entire season was decimated, festivals being canceled, theaters being canceled. 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 - 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 - 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 - to get set up, to teach online and to form right there on our website, 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 - it really will help out these musicians who have no source of income right now. So we're going to provide a directory, we're going to showcase different artists, but also what better time, you know, than now while we're all shut in the house to - to learn that instrument you always wanted to learn. And it's a form of connection, as you know. So - so that's what we're up to and I encourage people to - to check us out and to - to learn an instrument.

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

JL It's VirginiaFolklife.org.

SM So this documentary called Fiddlin, just - 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 Carroll 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 fiddlers' conventions and it's actually their first film. And it's a - it's a beautiful film.

SM Well, 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 everyone out there as well.

SM Jon Lohman was the Virginia State folklorist from 2001 to 2020 and the former director of the Virginia Folklife Program at Virginia Humanities.

[00:12:38]

SM The banjo is an instrument that often gets connected with the backwoods of the American South, but its roots are in Western Africa, and its history includes upper class women picking classical music on it. My next two guests are going to talk about the banjo's storied past. Professor Steve 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 Bela 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, Gregg.

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 a - 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 Steven, do we even know what those earliest banjos looked like?

SR Those early examples would have been made from gourds, various type 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.

GK And that's a new world painting, and it's sometimes - the common name of it is "The Old Plantation", and it's from South Carolina, but 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?

GK About 1760s, 1770s. That's the best. Guess there's no exact date.

SM What's your best guess, what are - what are - what's the best guess of people, what they must have sounded like? Can you sort of illustrate it on your own instrument?

GK Yes. I have a reproduction of what was known as the minstrel style banjo of the 1930s and 40s, which would have been the sort of industrial version of those earlier banjos. So what it has in similar is that it's fretless and my instrument has nylon - what they call nylogut strings to sort of sound like the cat gut strings that would have been used, and then a synthetic skin head. So what you're going to hear is a lower sound and one that has a lot of slides and the tone is definitely deeper and richer.

[banjo plays]

SM So fairly early on, the banjo was mostly being heard where? It was being heard on plantations in the south?

SR Predominantly, and that's where we see some of the first transmission or borrowing of the music and the instrument.

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

SR Yes, principally in the 1920s and 1930s. It is white performers playing the banjo, the bones, tambourine, 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 Nellie 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's enslaved, to realize that she's been sold from Kentucky down the Mississippi River to where he'll never see her again. Played on the minstrel banjo, this is Darling Nellie Gray.

AS ["Darling Nellie Gray" by Benjamin Hanby]

*My poor Nellie Grey, they've taken you away,
I'll never see my darling anymore.
I'm sitting by the river and weeping all day,
You're gone from the old Kentucky shore.*

SM That's moving.

SR It is, and I think that understanding that the banjo was used for dance music, sad ballads like that one, as well as just popular music that people might hear in a tavern.

GK So there is this minstrel movement that really crystallizes nationally in the 40s and 50s. This music's 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 in New York City and Boston and London, in 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.

SM Was it played by the North and the South soldiers during the Civil War?

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

SM Either north or south?

GK North or south. You know, that's the Irony of Dixie, of course, is that - you know, 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 ya?

[banjo plays]

SR And that's Battle Cry of Freedom, which was the song that was written in the North, but there were also Southern lyrics to it as well, and I imagine you would have heard that played on the banjo quite a bit.

GK 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 these new music's 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 an instrument. You have white ladies playing the instrument in parlor's 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". You

know, forget your European art music. You know, it becomes the American instrument. One of the things that I think people find a little peculiar about the banjo in the way we think about it, because we hear it's been played in like bluegrass music, is that there was a classical banjo movement.

SM Around when?

GK This is happening roughly 1890 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 morning, 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 you might think - is Marian Underwood. He's the banjo player for Tailer's Kentucky Boys, and he plays a wonderful piece on Coal Creek March. This is recorded in 1927 in Richmond, Indiana, at the Ginette Studios.

[old, grainy tape of banjo plays]

GK Do you hear that sound?

SM What is that?

GK Well, he's hitting the head of the banjo like this (hits banjo) to make a rhythmical pass 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. I really and I think Steven would agree with me, this really speaks to the influence of classical banjo.

SR It is. And it takes a lot of skill. And so this is an instrument that sometimes might be seen as sort of a, you know, 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 in. 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 clawhammer, which is using usually the index or the middle finger and the thumb in a sweeping down motion where the thumb catches the fifth string like this.

[demonstrates]

SR And then the three fingered style.

[demonstrates]

SM When do 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 plane that mixes some of the old-time instruments, songs and styles with a bit of improvisation from jazz and influence from different Western swing. It starts to take on a different sound. You've got Earl Scruggs, who popularized what we call the three finger Scruggs-style picking. Now, people had been playing with two or three fingers, but Scruggs added some different techniques to it. I bet you know what this one is.

[plays song on banjo]

SM [laughs] Beverly Hillbillies.

SR Yes, exactly, and so that theme song was one of many songs that Scruggs 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, but in other ways it sounds completely different and it's played completely differently.

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?

SR Yes. And I think that's what has 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 a banjo body with the neck of a guitar often called a guitjo or a banjitar that has been played by a number of popular musicians and performers, including Taylor Swift.

GK I think the other thing that is really important is going on right now is the 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 - how fundamental African American music is to country music, which is not something that we imagine. And of course, Rhiannon Giddens has gone on to 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 Thank you.

SR It's our pleasure.

GK It's really, really a lot of fun.

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

SR Yes, I think we can do Worried Man Blues, which is a traditional song, and I'm going to do the three-finger style and Gregg will do clawhammer.

[banjo plays]

SM Steven Rockenbach is professor of history and philosophy at Virginia State University. Gregg Kimball is director of public services and outreach at the Library of Virginia. This is With Good Reason, we'll be right back.

[00:28:00]

SM Welcome back to With Good Reason and encore episode that originally aired in April 2020. 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 of 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 long 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 Leadbelly singing "Irene Good Night". 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 fiddlers' 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.

AS ["Awake Awake" by Rick Ward]

*Go love go, and ask your father, if this night, you can be my bride.
If he says no, then return and tell me be the last time ever bother they.
I can't go and I asked my father, for he's on his bed of rest and by his side,
there lies a weapon to kill the one that I love.*

SM I love how raw his voice is, and he just belts it out.

CC 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".

SM And what happens in the end?

CC She does. And this was something new in this country, because in the old world, the parents, like 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.

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

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

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

CC 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.

SM 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?

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

SM Had they been long?

CC Oh yes, they were sometimes 64 verses long and now maybe there are a dozen verses longer or eight.

SM And the subjects - would the subjects change?

CC A lot of the subjects remain the same - romance, jealousy. They're called by the people old love songs.

SM How early did these singers arrive in America?

CC 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.

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

CC 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 on the Great Wagon Road through Virginia often and then into the Appalachian settlements. They really have persisted in the two main communities that continue to sing ballads today, Beech Mountain was the first Appalachian settlement - what's now North Carolina.

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

CC He's kin to the first two families that settled on Beech Mountain, first the Hick's and then the Wards. And the ancestor of the Hick's 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. So he skedaddled into Stokes County and then finally across the Blue Ridge and to Beech Mountain.

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

CC 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 have married the king's daughter, but he's come back to her

instead. She says you should have perhaps married her because I'm married to a nice young carpenter and he's a fine fellow.

SM Let's hear that.

AS ["The House Carpenter" by James Leva]

*Wilmette, Willmette, my old true love.
Willmette, once more cried he.
For I've just returned from the salt, salt sea
and it's all for the sake of thee.
Now I could have married the King's daughter dear,
I'm sure she'd marry me,
but forsaking all her gold,
and it's all for the love of thee.*

*If you could have married the King's daughter dear,
you would better have married she.
For I'm lately wed to house carpenter
and a fine young man is he.*

*If you'll forsake your house carpenter and come along with me.
I'll take you where the grass grows green...*

SM 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, no, no, no, this tradition is alive and well in America's Appalachian Mountains.

CC Yes. And that began as early as when Cecil Sharpe came in the early 1900s and found ballads that had died out in England here and was thrilled and collected a large number of them - went all through the mountains but missed Beech Mountain. He went near what - where Madison is.

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

CC 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.

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

CC 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 Three Babe's, which is the song that James also loves.

SM Oh Texas Gladden is a woman.

CC Yes, she was one of the people who were interested in these ballads during the years that Lomax was collecting them.

SM Let's play her singing "Last Night There Were Four Mary's, Today There Will Be Only Three".

AS ["Last Night There Were Four Mary's, Today There Will Be Only Three" by Texas Gladden]

*Oh, bring to me some red, red wine.
The red as thou can be.
That I drank to the jolly, bold sailor that brought me over the sea.
Oh, tie a napkin over my eyes.
That I may not see to dee
And they'll never tell my father my mother
I died way over the sea.
Last night I watched the old Queen Sea
And carried her to her bed.
And all the reward I received for this
The gallows hard to tread.
Last night, there were four Mary's,
Tonight they'll be but three.
There was Mary Beaton and Mary Seaton
And Mary Carmichael and me.*

CC 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.

SM Why?

CC The baby has disappeared that she had and, was it the Kings? And is that why she's going to 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.

SM When did Texas gladdened live?

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

SM Did many mountain women also sing these ballads?

CC 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 stringing beans and 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, you know, what are you doing? You've killed my pig. And she's mad about that. And that's when he turns on her.

AS ["The Jovial Hunter" by Rick Ward]

*Abe and Bailey had three sons, the youngest was Sinner.
He's gone to the green, was hunting just like a Jovial Hunter.*

*As he walked up the Greenbrier Ridge, Blow your horn, Sinner.
There he met a gay lady, just like a Jovial Hunter.
She said there is wild boar in these woods. Blow your horn, Sinner.
For he has killed my lord and forty men, as you are the Jovial Hunter.
He says, Oh, how am I to know? Blow your horn, Sinner.
Blow your horn northeast, to the West and south, as you are the jovial hunter.
He blowed his horn northeast, west and south. Blow your horn, Sinner.
Flew him into it then just like a jovial hunter.
And as they crossed the White Oak Mountains, blow your horn, Sinner.*

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.

AS ["Troubles" by Anna and Elizabeth]

*See when you haven't got a dime
When your trouble's are so deep
You can't eat nor sleep
See when your troubles are like mine
See when your troubles are like mine*

*And I asked the Captain for a job
He said, "Son what can you do?"
"I can line a track, I can ball the jack"
"I can pick and shovel, too"
"Pick and shovel, too"*

*Oh lordy me and oh lordy my
See when you haven't got a dime
When your trouble's are so deep*

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 that people have, whether it's the young man's fear that he didn't get to marry his sweetheart or it's her fear of leaving her family, but her willingness to follow her beloved and 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 such a perfect name, even though most of them do not necessarily end happily.

SM Why do you love these ballads?

CC Oh 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's some sort of aging ones. 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.

AS ["Silver Dagger" by Joan Baez]

*Don't sing love songs, you'll wake my mother.
She's sleeping here, right by my side.
And in her right hand, a silver dagger.
She says that I can't be alright.
All men are false, says my mother.*

CC Back in the beginning, when a bunch of us were first getting into this - 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 and deep about all of the singers we wanted to become close to.

SM You don't worry about us losing the 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 Rhiannon Giddens and Dom and Justin, the fiddle player, and they became the first 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 Jenkins, 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 1980s 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.

["Cornbread and Butterbeans" by The Carolina Chocolate Drops]

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 Virginia Humanities fellow. This has been an encore presentation of an episode that originally aired in April 2020. Support for With Good Reason is provided by the University of Virginia Health System, pioneering treatments to save lives and preserve brain function for stroke patients, uvahealth.com. With Good Reason is produced by Virginia Humanities, which acknowledges the Monacan nation, the original people of the land and waters of her home in Charlottesville, Virginia. Her production team is Allison Quantz, Matt Darrach, Lauren Francis and Jamal Millner. Maya Nir and Cassie Deering are our interns. For the podcast, go to [with GoodReasonRadio.org](http://withGoodReasonRadio.org). I'm Sara McConnell, thanks for listening.