

DEWITT "SNUFFY" JENKINS OBITUARY

Dewitt "Snuffy" Jenkins, who provided the vital bridge between old time and bluegrass banjo, passed away in Columbia, SC on 30 April 1990 at the age of 82 following a recurrence of colon cancer. The first banjo player to use the southwest North Carolina three finger forward roll on radio in 1934, Jenkins influenced such musicians as Don Reno, Earl Scruggs, Ralph Stanley, Rudy Lyle, and his nephew Hoke Jenkins. His career as a professional entertainer had spanned seven decades.

Reno, who credited Jenkins with sparking his interest in the five string, summarized Jenkins' significance in a quotation appearing in an article by Tony Trischka in the October 1977 Bluegrass Unlimited: "There was other fellas that played with three fingers before Snuffy, but he was the first one who ever put it together. It's like seeing a river winding and you don't know where it's going and then finally you see it straightened out going into the ocean; that's the best way I can explain it. When I heard Snuffy, I could see that he had unwound something and straightened it out to the point where it did have a flowing melody to it and not a bunch of jerks and stops and this, that, and the other thing. He had perfected, as far as I'm concerned, a three-finger roll."

Pete Wernick, the former Country Cooking and Hot Rize banjoist who, with Trischka, co-authored Masters of the 5-String Banjo (New York: Oak Publications, 1988), observed that Jenkins' playing remained strong past his eightieth birthday. "It was impressive seeing a guy his age playing so well. It's pretty clear that he's known as the first person who popularized the three-finger banjo roll style in country music. I don't agree that he invented the Scruggs style, and I don't think he would, either. He recognized that Earl took it another leap. Through all the aspects of what he did as a musician and entertainer he really touched people....His music and personality seemed as one. Tony and I feel that both Snuffy and Bill Monroe set the stage for Scruggs' transition of the banjo in country music. I don't know what would have happened without Snuffy."

Born on 27 October 1908 in Harris, NC, Jenkins' siblings all made music, although, oddly, their parents did not. Jenkins used a basic two finger picking style to play dances and conventions with his fiddling brother Verl until, in 1927, he encountered Rex Brooks and Smith Hammett. Brooks and Hammett, who also directly influenced Scruggs and his older brother Junie, used a thumb-index-middle finger approach, which Charlie Poole had independently discovered some 150 miles to the northeast.

By 1934 he had formed the Jenkins String Band, which performed on the Crazy Water Barn Dance on Charlotte's powerful WBT. At that time he met fiddler

Homer "Pappy" Sherrill, who led the East Hickory String Band. "We just kind of felt real close to each other right then," Sherrill recalls. While Sherrill went from one radio station to the other with the Bill and Earl Bolick, the Blue Sky Boys, and later Wade Mainer and the Morris Brothers, Jenkins went to WSPA in Spartanburg and then to WIS in Columbia, SC with J.E. Mainer's Mountaineers, which included Zeke and Wiley Morris' bother, George.

When the elder Mainer left Columbia, Byron Parker, "the Old Hired Hand" and former emcee for the Monroe Brothers, kept the group together as Byron Parker and His Mountaineers. In the mean time, Sherrill had grown tired of life on the road and left WPTF in Raleigh to return home to Hickory, NC.

"Byron Parker was playing in Columbia, WIS, and they needed a fiddle player since J.E. Mainer had left," Sherrill remembers. "I heard they were playing up at Granite Falls, NC, and my wife and I went to see them there. I put my fiddle in the back of the car. When I walked up on the porch, Byron Parker and Snuffy were there taking tickets."

While Jenkins was happily surprised to see his friend, Parker recalled being impressed by Sherrill's fiddling on the radio. The pair quickly insisted that Sherrill play a few tunes with them. Afterwards, "Byron says, 'We got to have you in Columbia.' He talked me into it at \$5 a night." That began a musical association between Jenkins and Sherrill that would last more than 50 years.

In 1985 Old Homestead Records reissued 16 sides that the group cut for RCA in Atlanta during 1940 as Byron Parker and His Mountaineers: Bluegrass Roots. Although Jenkins and Sherrill considered the material old time country, both the vocal arrangements and Jenkins' flowing banjo work exhibit a great degree of similarity to what would later be known as bluegrass music. When the late "Greasy" Medlin brought his comedic talents to the group, it created a complete entertainment package that toured throughout a 250 mile radius from Columbia into the Tennessee, Georgia, and Virginia, as well as both Carolina's. The band played 8:30 AM and noon shows on WIS and stayed booked, according to Sherrill, six months in advance. Among their listeners were Lyle and future country star Bill Anderson, who credited them with inspiring his interest in becoming an entertainer.

During this time both Reno and Scruggs attended Jenkins' performances and asked him, independently, to show them a thing or two about picking. Jenkins insisted, however, that he never taught them or anyone else. Reno did, on the other hand, audition for the group in 1939 in hopes of spending more time with Jenkins. Although circumstances prevented him joining the Mountaineers, Jenkins did sell Reno a banjo. Reno would later trade the banjo to Scruggs in perhaps the most famous five-string swap of all time.

Following World War II, the band recorded for the Deluxe label as the WIS

Hillbillies. When Parker died in 1948, they changed their name to The Hired Hands in his honor. The next year for Capitol Records the Hired Hands waxed two songs under their own name, backed Tex Ritter on a pair of sides, and backed Jim Eanes, who was making his first two recordings. They included the first version of his perennial favorite, "Baby Blue Eyes." During the past quarter century Snuffy Jenkins, Pappy Sherrill, and the Hired Hands recorded albums for the Folk-Lyric, Arhoolie, Rounder, and Old Homestead labels. John Morthland selected The Crazy Water Barn Dance on Rounder as one of the 750 essential country music recordings in his tome, The Best of Country Music (Garden City: Dolphin Doubleday, 1984). Their most recent LP, Something Special by The Hired Hands with Snuffy Jenkins & Pappy Sherrill, appeared last year on Old Homestead. It features Jenkins picking "The Fox Chase" and "Redwing" on the banjo.

During the 1950s, like so many country entertainers, Jenkins, Sherrill, and Medlin became hosts of an early morning TV show, "Carolina in the Morning" on WIS-TV in Columbia. When Mel Tillis was stationed at the Army base at nearby Fort Jackson, he made his radio debut with the Hired Hands. The band also backed a young Loretta Lynn in her first appearance in the area.

Jenkins, meanwhile, had added guitar and washboard playing to his masterful banjo and comedy. He adopted a trademark pointed cap that went hand in hand with his puckish wit. The folk boom brought him a whole new market during the early 1960's and as the decade ended the group began playing bluegrass festivals. From 1975 through 1988 Jenkins hosted the Snuffy Jenkins Oldtime and Bluegrass Music Festival produced by Ben Humphries at Snuffy Jenkins Music Park near Cliffside, NC.

During the last third of his long, productive life, the honors Jenkins so richly deserved began to come his way. No less a publication than Esquire ran a three page feature about the band. The group performed at Carnegie Hall, off Broadway, and seven times for the Smithsonian Institution. The Hired Hands appeared on The Nashville Network's "Fire on the Mountain" series and on public TV productions "The Last Medicine Show" and "The Charlotte Country Music Story." The International Bluegrass Music Association presented him with its Certificate of Merit for lifetime contributions to the music. In 1988 the South Carolina legislature voted Jenkins the South Carolina Folk Heritage Award. He also received the Carter Stanley Memorial Award and the J.E. Mainer Memorial Award. Jenkins served on the faculty of the Tennessee Banjo Institute in 1988 and until the end looked forward to participating in it again this fall.

More important than picking and comedy to Jenkins and his success as an entertainer was the kind of person he was. His story is not just joking and making music, but the tale of a remarkable 57 year friendship between Jenkins and Sherrill.

"We've been close all those years like brothers," Sherrill says. "We got along so well; two just like one, and our families were the same way. He was one of the greatest fellows--so honest, so good. Wherever he'd go he'd leave a mark with his kindness. He was just an honorable fellow. Our heart was with the old time country music, and our ambition was to give something to others.

"He used to say, 'There isn't nothing I wouldn't do for Pap, and nothing he'd not do for me. We just go around doing nothing.' The last picking Snuffy did was in my den on my 75th birthday, March 23rd. There were about 60 people here. He was too sick to carry his banjo, but, doggone, he showed up and picked."

At Jenkins' request, Sherrill fiddled his two favorite hymns, "Beneath the Lines" and "Whispering Hope," at the funeral on 1 May. Sherrill vows that he and long time Hired Hands Harold Lucas, Randy Lucas, and Frank Hartley will keep the Hired Hands and Jenkins' music going as long as they're able.

Art Menius

Rt. 1, Box 710

Pittsboro, NC 27312

919-542-3997