

A stylized graphic of an acoustic guitar. The body is light blue with a yellow pickguard. The sound hole is a black circle with a white border. The neck is dark blue with two yellow lines. The strings are represented by five vertical yellow lines.

• *Three Nights* •
ON THE
CROOKED ROAD

Photos and Words *by* Dave Seminara



(left) A section of the Crooked Road near Galax; (above) Wade Petty at a Thursday night jam session in Fries, birthplace of Henry Whitter, who is said to be the first person to record a country record on a 78.

Every Friday night, Leo Weddle puts on his favorite pair of bib overalls and his trusty straw hat before making his weekly pilgrimage to the Floyd Country Store for their famous Friday night jamboree.

A variety of health problems has left Weddle with just three teeth, and scratching together the \$5 admission fee each week can be a tribulation, but when he steps through the doors of the century-old-store-cum-old-time-music-venue, he owns the place. The locals who come prepared for a night of raucous flatfooting greet him by name; the backpackers with their Lonely Planet guidebooks ask him to dance; and the hipsters from nearby Virginia Tech ask him to pose for photos.

A band called Roscoe P and Coal Train plays “Tennessee Girl” and the exhilarating tonic of knee-slapping banjo and spine-tingling fiddle feels like a life-affirming escape from the stressful doldrums of the Beltway. Some might say that there is nothing left to discover in an American landscape that seems to grow more homogenous by the day. But on The Crooked Road, Southwest Virginia’s 253-mile heritage music trail, a glorious slice of Americana stubbornly endures in a place defined by its music.

Southwest Virginia has been a musical hotbed for generations, but prior to 2003, the place had no brand. Locals had long referred to a dizzying portion of U.S. Route 58 where it crosses the highest part of the Blue Ridge Mountains as the “Crooked Road.” In 2003, the Crooked Road was officially born as a music tourism destination when Joe Wilson, a retired journalist and native of the area, coined the term to market the area that starts in Rocky

Mount, just southeast of Roanoke, and stretches to the very corner of the state, near the borders with Tennessee and Kentucky.

“The Virginia Department of Transportation didn’t like it,” says Wayne Henderson, a renowned musician and luthier who once kept Eric Clapton waiting nearly a decade for one of his handmade guitars. “But it is a crooked road. The name has really caught on and it is bringing people here from all over.”

My family’s *Crooked Road* trip begins on a Thursday evening at the old Fries Theater in Fries, (pronounced FREEZE) an old mill town that is the birthplace of Henry Whitter, who is said to be the first person to record a country record on a 78.

We step into a half-full room with harsh florescent lighting and rows of folding metal chairs. Fifteen musicians, all senior citizens, sit in a circle and tinker with their instruments while friends and neighbors drink 50-cent cups of coffee and eat \$1.25 hot dogs from the makeshift concession stand in the corner.

The room comes alive moments later, as the band tears into a spirited instrumental ditty that must have been heard all around



the tiny, silent town. We seem to be the only outsiders in the room and are also the youngest patrons in the house by at least 20 years, but the atmosphere is so festive and welcoming that it hardly matters at all.

Most of the musicians in the unnamed group have been playing together for years, and it shows. Their sound is raw but undeniably melodic, and my sons, Leo, 4, and James, 2, can't help but join some of the seniors on the make-shift dance floor.

Near the end of the two-hour set, a woman in a pink polo shirt sings a soulful, melancholy tune called "Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow," and the tale of unrequited love is powerful, solemn, and unforgettable.

*Well, tomorrow was to be
Our wedding day
But oh my god
Where can he be?
He's out a courting with another
And no longer cares for me
So bury me underneath the willow
Under the weeping willow tree
So that he may know
Where I am sleeping
And perhaps he'll weep for me*

"This music is what's kept me going," says Wade Petty, the group's 74-year-old fiddle play-

er from nearby Galax, after the jam. "They say that music is the best medicine you can get, and I believe that. My wife says if she ever thought I was dead, she'd put my fiddle under my chin to see if I could come alive."

Walking into a rec room filled with men in mesh hats and fancy belt-buckles in a humble, out of the way town and hearing musicians who played simply because they loved the music was a revelation, but there are no young people in the room and I want to know if traditional jams like this one will soon die out.

"The music here in the mountains will survive," says Sonny Funk, a 74-year-old banjo player from Fries whose grandma taught him to play more than 60 years ago.

The next day we stroll around the small downtown shopping district in Galax (locals call it GAY-LAX), a town that markets itself with a guitar pick logo that reads: "The Best Pick in Virginia." The town is an old-time music hotbed, which hosts the hugely popular Old Fiddlers Convention each August and is home to the Rex Theater, which hosts an old-time or bluegrass concert every Friday night.

We devour some tasty pulled pork sandwiches at the Galax Smokehouse, and stop by Barr's Fiddle Shop, which was once a barbershop where the Hill Billies, the band that launched what came to be known as hillbilly music, got its start.



(above) Roscoe P. and Coal Train performing at The Floyd Country Store.

CROOKED ROAD PRACTICALITIES

Music Venues

Recommended Hotels

Thursday Night

Fries Theater
316 W. Main St.
Fries; 276-744-2231

Friday Night

Floyd Country Store
206 S. Locust St.
Floyd; 540-745-4563

Saturday Night

Carter Family Fold
A.P. Carter Highway
Hiltons; 276-386-6054

Hampton Inn

205 Cranberry Road,
Galax; 276-238-4605

By the 1950's most were calling the music country and these days, some Appalachians use the term hillbilly to ironically poke fun at how outsiders view natives of the region.

A popular bumper sticker seen on many a guitar case in the region reads, "We will no longer be called hillbilly rednecks, we will henceforth be known as Appalachian-Americans."

After an invigorating hike on the New River Trail, a 57-mile long path that winds along the river of the same name, we pile into the car and head for Floyd, 40 miles northeast of Galax, along one of the least crooked portions of Crooked Road.

The Friday Night Jamboree at the Floyd Country Store has been a local institution for at least a quarter of a century. We turn up nearly an hour before show time and are handed stickers that say "homemade music" after paying the modest \$5 cover charge.

Floyd is that rare country town with a hip vibe that has more than its share of eco-friendly accommodation options, galleries and organic bakeries, restaurants and trendy clothing shops. As show time nears, an eclectic crowd files in, and before we know it, the place, which is sort of an upscale general store/eatery, is packed.

The evening begins with a group called Down Home Gospel, whose frontman asks us to bow our heads and pray. The hour-long set of gospel hymns that follows is well received but there is no dancing until Roscoe P and Coal Train take the stage. Within minutes, the dance floor comes alive, as guys in confederate hats flatfoot alongside WWII vets and Scandanavian backpackers in a room that buzzes with multigenerational energy.

"THIS MUSIC HAS BEEN PART OF OUR SOCIAL FABRIC FOR SO LONG; IT'S JUST A BIG PART OF WHO WE ARE."

Out on the dance floor, 7-year-old Gracie Holmgren tries to teach my sons how to dance, while her dad plays banjo on the waltz, "Annie Laurie."

"Look at my feet," she tells James, while crouching down to take his hands in hers. "Do what I do," she instructs, sort of hop-scotching alternately on her feet in a sort of Mr. Miyagi, "Karate Kid" maneuver.

Gracie tries to make them feel at home, but the boys



are city slickers with no clue how to flatfoot.

After the show, I ask Russ Harbaugh, Roscoe P's fiddle player what he likes about playing at Floyds. "We're making tens of dollars playing for tens of people, but it doesn't matter," says Harbaugh, 57, a heating and A/C repair person and amateur fiddle player. "This music has been part of our social fabric for so long; it's just a big part of who we are."



On our final day on the Crooked Road, we drive west toward tiny Hiltons, the site of The Carter Family Fold, one of the country's legendary country music venues. We take Route 58 west, and with each passing mile, it becomes clear how the road got its name.

Near Mouth of Wilson, we veer off of 58 to visit Wayne Henderson, the famous luthier with the legendary 10-year waiting list for guitars. His home and workshop are in Rugby, a town with dozens of farm animals but just seven people. Henderson is used to greeting visitors in his modest workshop, which was built with funds from a National Heritage Fellowship grant he received from Hillary Clinton at the White House. Several years ago a reporter from The Wall Street Journal started making trips to the workshop to watch Henderson make guitars and the result was the book, "Clapton's Guitar-Watching Wayne Henderson Build the Perfect Instrument."

We are greeted by his daughter, Jane, who recently became her father's apprentice. Wayne tells me that despite the fact that he made a guitar for Eric Clapton, he never got to meet, or even

Places to Eat

Hotel Floyd

120 Wilson St.
Floyd; 540-745-6080

Courtyard Marriott

3169 Linden Drive
Bristol; 276-591-4400

The Galax Smokehouse

101 N. Main St.,
Galax

Oddfellas Cantina

110 N. Locust St.,
Floyd

Wild Flower Bakery & Gallery

24443 Lee Highway,
Abingdon



The Whitewater Bluegrass Company performing at the Carter Family Fold, established in 1979 by Janette Carter. Johnny Cash, who married Janette's niece June, played at the Fold several times, including a show before he died.

speak to the man.

“They say it’s easier to meet the President,” he says. “The author of the book ended up giving it to Clapton’s guitar tech, but I never heard from him. A lot of people have criticized him for that, you know for not sending me a note or anything. But I’ve heard people say that they’ve seen him playing one of my guitars, so I guess he liked it.”

Henderson says that when the local media found out he had an order from Clapton, camera crews showed up to ask what was taking so long. But he refused to move Clapton up in his lengthy queue, since most of his customers are local musicians he jams with. “Everybody waits their turn,” he says. “You can’t rush this.”

Henderson is a product of the Crooked Road, a place where the notion of rushing is practically unheard of and people aren’t necessarily impressed by wealthy or even famous outsiders.

Heading west on Route 58, we pass through blink-and-you’ll-miss-it settlements with clusters of humble homes, many with their laundry drying out front, and some adorned with Confederate flags. The road twists and turns, offering us views of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Near Damascus, we take a break for a short walk on the Creeper Trail, a beloved 34-mile biking and

hiking trail that runs from Abingdon to White-top along the trail of a now defunct rail line.

We stop off at our hotel in Bristol, a town whose main street features a huge neon sign that marks the border between Virginia and Tennessee, then head out to our third and final concert at the Carter Family Fold in Hiltons.

The Fold was established by Janette Carter, in an old tobacco barn in 1979, adjacent to the general store and home where her parents, A.P. and Sara, lived and worked. The Carter Family was a hugely influential folk group, comprised of A.P, Sara and her sister, Maybelle, that produced numerous hits, including “Keep on the Sunny Side” and “Can the Circle Be Unbroken” over a 30-year career that began in 1927. Maybelle’s daughter June married Johnny Cash, who played at the Fold several times, including one of his last shows before he died in 2003.

The Fold is less intimate than the Floyd Country Store but has the same homespun, authentic country vibe. Volunteers help sell tickets (\$7) and run the concession stand, which offers the richest, most delicious homemade coconut cake you’ll find anywhere for just \$1.50 a slice. On this night, the large auditorium is about half full, with a mostly older crowd, some of whom wear blankets on their laps to fight the chill.

A band from nearby Asheville called the Lonesome Cowboy Drifters fills the air with some rousing old time Appalachian music while children, ours included, run wild on the dance floor, as dancers with tap shoes show us what Appalachian clogging is all about.

Mid-way through their set, the band is joined on stage by Tyler Williams, a blind singer and guitarist, and his girlfriend, a fiddle player. Williams’ booming vocals steal the show and I seek him out after the performance. He suffers from a severe form of cerebral palsy, and it took him several minutes to walk the few steps from the stage area to a seat in the front row.

“I just love this music,” says Williams, who is enrolled in the country’s only bluegrass studies program at East Tennessee State University. “There is no better place to be on a Saturday night than right here.” 🌲

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