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The Doyen of Dixie: A Survey of the Banjo Stylings of Uncle Dave Macon

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Appalachian Studies

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Appalachian Studies

by

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ABSTRACT

The Doyen of Dixie: A Survey of the Banjo Stylings of Uncle Dave Macon

by

Corbin Hayslett

David Harrison Macon (1870-1952) is often memorialized for his showmanship rather than his banjo playing. To compartmentalize such a significant American musician yields a wide gap within scholarship about Macon, country music history and the banjo. Macon's banjo playing, documented through over two-hundred and fifty recordings made between the 1920s and 1950s, represents an array of cultures, eras, ethnicities, and styles all preserved in the repertoire of one of the most prolific country musicians of the twentieth century. This study reveals Macon's playing by considering such factors as influences that preceded his professional tenure, identifying elements within his playing from specific stylistic origins, and by technically notating selections from Macon's canon that represent those influences. To understand the instrumental playing of one of early country music's most important figures broadens understanding of banjo influences from the nineteenth century which laid the foundation for the instrument's renaissance in the twentieth century.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION:

UNCLE DAVE MACON AND THE BANJO

“Hello folks, you know I’ve been a’ pickin’ and trying to pick a banjo for forty years or more. I used to just play the imitation, but now I’m a’ going to give you a little of the variations of Casey Jones.”

-Macon introducing “Old Dan Tucker”¹

Growing up in rural Virginia I developed a fascination with the banjo at an early age. For hours I would lay in the floor listening to bootleg cassette tapes of a local old-time and bluegrass music radio program. While riding in my dad’s car, hypnotic chains of banjo notes coming from the hands of Ralph Stanley interspersed with plaintive harmonies engulfed me. The banjo had thrilled me even before that; as a toddler my father would tease me by tickling me with ‘the banjo hand.’ At age 9 I received my first 5-string banjo for Christmas and was immediately whisked away to a world driven by the possibility of imitating sounds from those tapes. Sounds attached to mysterious people with such foreign names as Dock, Roscoe, Hobart and Ola Belle. There were two particular recordings that I absorbed deeply, feeling every note. Dock Boggs’ “Country Blues” and Uncle Dave Macon’s “Old Dan Tucker” were to me, a beginning clawhammer player, shrouded in mystery as to how those processions of sound could be physically accomplished by human hands. Three months into unguided attempts I struck gold at

1. *Old Dan Tucker*, voice and banjo. Uncle Dave Macon, Vocalion 15033, 78 rpm, April 13, 1925.

an old-time music workshop where I met such knowledgeable musicians as Jim Lloyd, Mark Campbell, Alan Jabbour and Mike Seeger. There too I met Jim Costa of Talcott, West Virginia who knew how to capture the sounds exactly of one of the names engraved in my mind, Uncle Dave Macon. By then I could quote verbatim portions of Macon's lyrics and comedic interjections and thanks to Jimmy took my first steps down the path to unraveling the mystery of Macon's ability to draw so many different sounds and rhythms from the banjo. Through over a decade of sharing folk music with anyone willing to listen, Uncle Dave's uniqueness was always a mainstay. As I learned other banjo playing methods ranging from minstrelsy to bluegrass, Macon's playing often stuck out as being a bridge from one style to another. Within my first years of banjo research it became apparent that there are persistent gaps and misunderstandings within much of the existing research about the instrument's chronology.

Specifically, dialog regarding the evolution of playing techniques has often been compartmentalized and oversimplified; the old minstrel, old-time, bluegrass chronology that is often presented in a linearly progressive lens. Scholars and players alike who discuss the history of banjo playing styles often oversimplify it under blanket terms such as 'minstrel' or 'classic.' By discussing banjo history and playing styles only through the most popular settings of the instrument rather than inclusively bringing into account all of styles, genres, regions, cultures and emotions that were translated through the banjo beyond the popular stage of the day. Through my work within Appalachian studies I became aware of oversimplification of rural southern life with lineage tracing back through over one hundred and fifty years of writing. The field of Appalachian Studies has challenged stereotypes of isolation and cultural stagnation that

have prevailed within studies of the region.² These same views of rural southern musicians have survived within banjo dialogue. Scholarship which presents images of isolated players being uninfluenced by any sounds beyond their close community limits understanding regarding the diversity of players influences and technical approaches to the instrument.

Recreational Banjoists

Many banjoists, both urban and rural, through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rendered music from the banjo in whatever manner they pleased. Whether it be older techniques passed on, trending styles that ebbed and flowed or often self-created variations of the two, musicians made music that often would not fit into one category. While historical records more commonly represent banjoists who were professional performers, recreational banjo playing would have been the majority.

Banjo players who made commercial recordings in the 1920s were not necessarily professional musicians. Most often they were recreational players who were presented an opportunity to experience the novelty of hearing themselves on record. Benjamin Frank Shelton from Corbin, Kentucky who in 1927 traveled to Bristol, Virginia and made 4 sides at a field recording session for Victor Records. He was a barber by trade whose recordings preserved unique idiosyncratic two-finger banjo playing of southern Kentucky.³ His intention was likely not to be a professional musician or sell a large amount of records but rather to experience the uniqueness of making a record. Similarly, members of the Shelor and Blackard family of

2. Chad Berry, Phillip J. Obermiller and Shaunna L. Scott, *Studying Appalachian Studies: Making the Path by Walking* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

3. Charles K. Wolfe and Ted Olson, *The Bristol Sessions: Writings About the Big Bang of Country Music* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2005), 49-50.

Meadows of Dan, Patrick County, Virginia traveled to the same satellite recording studio in 1927 and made four sides. The banjo player and patriarch of the family Joe ‘Dad’ Blackard born in 1859, had earlier been documented by the widely renowned ballad collector Cecil Sharp.⁴ Blackard had been a musician and recreational banjo player for over half of a decade prior to his commercial recordings and so too would have not likely considered himself a professional banjoist but rather a banjo player who was given the opportunity to experience the anomaly of making a recording.

Commercially recorded country music of the pre-World War II period captured the largest body of examples of these playing techniques, documenting regional tendencies and personal creativity, but much contemporary banjo discourse does not recognize this. The old misnomer of a stagnant singular style persists. In Karen Linn’s “That Half-Barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture,” she states within chapter four title ‘The Southern White Banjo’ that, “The most common technique among rural southern banjoists was downpicking rather than up-picking...downpicking in the southern tradition is usually called ‘clawhammer’ ‘rapping’ or ‘frailing.’”⁵ The history of how the banjo was played is neither tidy or sectional. With this research I illuminate country banjo playing styles as preserved in the vast repertoire of one prolific performer revealing overlap of both rural and urban banjo influences, interplay between social-ethnic groups, and the persistence of older styles despite aesthetic and technological change.

4. Joe Wilson. *A Guide to the Crooked Road: Virginia’s Heritage Music Trail* (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair Publisher, 2006), 204.

5. Karen Linn, *That Half-Barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 140.

Common Banjo Chronology

For centuries, the banjo has been claimed by Africans, Europeans, Americans and their descendants yielding an incredibly diverse musical history. It was assimilated by whites and blacks alike from urban centers such as New York and Chicago to rural places across America like Warren County Tennessee where David Macon was born and raised⁶. Within nearly every American musical form since the early nineteenth century it has been used and well documented including but not limited to rock, country, blues and jazz, and has been the subject of an extensive canon of writings both creative and scholarly. Analysis of the banjo; its technicalities as well as cultural settings and implications, has focused on specific eras of banjo history. Those periods heavily researched are typically categorized by the popular images most closely associated with it an any given period.

The primary four periods are as follows: 1) The banjo, or rather the mental building plans for the ancestors of our modern banjo, arrived in the Americas via enslaved Africans shipped by the hundreds of thousands across the Atlantic for free labor. Its' documentation in the western hemisphere begins during the mid-sixteenth century as an incredibly diverse African rhythmic accompaniment. Several dozen references to banjo-like instruments from ca. 1660-1820 document its widespread popularity throughout the Caribbean and North America.⁷ 2) Its' initial years of popularity amongst whites came during the 1830s with the rise of a uniquely American

6. Bill C. Malone and Judith McCulloh, eds., *Stars of Country Music: Uncle Dave Macon to Johnny Rodriguez* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 43.

7. Robert Lloyd Webb, *Ring the Banjar!: The Banjo in America from Folklore to Factory* (Anaheim Hills: Centerstream Publications, 1984), 3.

entertainment form; the minstrel show. Following the War of 1812 and the United States' affirming its separation from England, Americans threw off entertainment rooted in British tradition. A new stage show was created mocking the perceived lives enslaved Africans of the southern United States. The banjo, a thing of absolute African origin, was foreign to whites and soon became a pop-culture fascination.⁸ 3) Following the American Civil War minstrel shows declined in popularity as freed African-Americans slowly began to gain societal voice. With mechanization and standardization of banjo construction through the 1860s and 1870s it was being played more commonly like the guitar with arranged and notated music. For over three decades the banjo was reclaimed as a recreational centerpiece for social elites. 4) During the years preceding World War II a rural fusion music was taking shape combining elements of rural harmonies, blues scales and ragtime rhythms forming string band music. The banjo had by then been developed in rural playing as fast and syncopated making it an optimal fit for the rapid and intricate rhythmic sounds. In this musical setting (primarily bluegrass music) the banjo has survived the strongest into the present making it a southern American music icon.

While these specific segments of the banjo's ancestry have been often viewed from scholarly perspectives there are yet gaps within our understanding of the instrument and its musical evolution. The overlap and infusion of these periods has been a continual gray area for banjo dialogue. The most significant segment of 5-string banjo history that has experienced little to no in-depth analysis is the repository of commercially recorded, country banjo players of the pre-World War II era. Within several thousand recordings made between 1923 and 1941 hundreds of 5-string banjo players' approaches to the instrument were documented. These

8. Bob Carlin, *The Birth of the Banjo: Joel Walker Sweeney and Early Minstrelsy* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2007), 6-10.

preserved banjo sounds represent personal creativities formed from many techniques developed prior to mass access of recordings and the standardization of country banjo playing that came in the years following the development of bluegrass. Documentation from the pre-war period disproves assertions of the linear development of the banjo and its playing styles, revealing the complicated web of interchange between ways of playing the instrument and the people who were playing it.

Fluidity of Banjo Players' Styles

Among these were artists from much of the American south and far beyond, both rich and poor, African-American, and white. Their ages ranged from those who witnessed the American Civil War to those in their youth at the time of recording. In addressing the playing techniques of individuals in this era who were rarely professionals, it is difficult to draw substantive conclusions due to the fact that there were often only a few recordings of one person made so assertions can only represent one aspect of that person's musicianship or repertoire; a snapshot rather than the whole. Another consideration when retrospectively examining recordings like these is that a musician's instrumental playing is not stagnant, but is rather fluid; ever-changing through creativity, experimentation, necessity, and an endless flood of external sonic influences. An artist who was recorded may have only recently learned or adapted a portion of their playing before the recording was made.

Conversely, the performer could just as easily have initiated a major change to their playing shortly after a recording was made. To speak definitively about someone's repertoire as a whole it is necessary to survey a large number of recordings over a period long enough to document the change in that repertoire. The nature of many banjoists recording careers during the 20s and 30s does not make this possible. Of the hundreds of 5-string banjoists recorded

during the pre-World War II era whose playing showcased the intermingling of nineteenth and twentieth century banjo styles, David Macon yielded a canon of length and breadth superseding those of his contemporaries.⁹ Uncle Dave Macon's recording career yielded a body of work justifiable for objective study.

Recordings of Macon from the 1920s are uniquely valuable not only for their number but for their timeliness in his life. Macon began dedicating himself to music and banjo playing full time four years prior to his first recordings in 1924 and upon his time of recording he had been playing the banjo for nearly forty years. Thus, in the 1920s, Uncle Dave was recorded while in likely his peak years of banjo proficiency. It is often the case that when old-time or rural music has been documented it involves elderly players who have lost some level of proficiency due to age. Rarely is it possible to survey a broad base of rural instrumental music as played by someone who was not elderly at time of recording. Advanced age became a romanticized image and standard attribute of rural performers or tradition bearers especially during the mid-twentieth century with the advent of the American folk music revival when younger generations began seeking elderly musicians who had either recorded or learned in an era before mass-marketed country music. Even Uncle Dave himself fell into this category becoming the 'grand old man of the grand ole opry' continuing to perform nineteenth century music on the radio into the late 1940s well after country music had changed substantially. Macon's base of recordings came from a time in his life when he would have still been quite technically able and likely experimental in his playing.

9. Tony Russell, *Country Music Records, A Discography: 1921-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 573-578.

Access to Significant Recordings

Although many of the recordings discussed in this thesis were cut nearly a century ago, thanks to the technological connectedness of the twenty-first century most of them are easily accessible. The eminent collection of Macon recordings is the 2004 Bear Family publication “Uncle Dave Macon: Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy,” (the audio source relied upon by the author for Macon’s recordings). With essentially every known (as of 2004) recording of Macon including 248 separate recordings as well as the 1940 Republic Pictures release “Grand Ole Opry.” This set was printed in limited quantities and is comparatively expensive, however it is the essential compilation for the Macon enthusiast. Two separate four compact-disc releases by JSP Records “Uncle Dave Macon: Classic Sides 1924-1938” as well as “Uncle Dave Macon: Volume 2: Classic Cuts 1924-1938” (2004 and 2006 respectively) contain a large amount of Macon’s commercial repertoire of the 1920s and 1930s. These sets are more affordable however the sound fidelity is lacking. These sets exclude Macon’s home recordings and radio broadcasts which document a unique later period of his life. Select sides of Macon’s early and later repertoire are available on compilation projects.

Many of the other musicians discussed in this work can be found on compact discs released through companies such as Schanachie, Old Hat, County, Document, JSP, Rounder, Yazoo and Smithsonian Folkways to name a few. Several particular albums and box sets such as Harry Smith’s timeless collection “Anthology of American Folk Music,” Kinney Rorrer’s “You Ain’t Talkin’ to Me: Charlie Poole and the Roots of Country Music,” County Records’ “Nashville: The Early String Bands Vol. 1,” Old Hat Records’ “Good for What Ails You: Music of the Medicine Shows 1926-1937,” and Yazoo’s “Times Ain’t Like They Used to Be,” eight volume set. Regarding some of the African American musicians and influences discussed in this

study inclusions on the above labels are invaluable. Particularly, Rounder Records' "Altamont: Black Stringband Music from the Library of Congress," contains the combined recordings of Frazier and Patterson as well as Gribble, Lusk and York. Other projects that contain unique glimpses of African American country music include Alan Lomax' "Deep River of Song: Black Appalachia: String Bands, Songsters and Hoedowns," as well as the Document releases "String Bands 1926-1929," and "Black Fiddlers 1929-ca.1970." Thanks to the dedication of numerous individuals and firms that have dedicated many hours to finding and releasing these and other recordings we are able today to easily access such a wealth of American music.

Significant Publications

Uncle Dave Macon has long been recognized as a significant influence within country music and much has been written about him through the past half-century of scholarship. Research on Macon has gradually updated over time with more information being added to the existing dialog. Some of the most significant work has been done by the late Dr. Charles Wolfe. Wolfe's research and interviews with Macon family members and associated musicians cannot be overstated in its significance. Simply put, without the efforts of Dr. Wolfe knowledge of Macon as well as numerous country musicians, much knowledge would have been lost. Within Wolfe's works however there have been some errors. Some of his facts refute themselves through the progression of his writings which culminated in the 2004 Bear Family release of "Uncle Dave Macon: Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy" which he curated. Within his writings of Macon, Wolfe does not discuss his banjo technique and at points oversimplifies Macon as a mediator of banjo traditions characterizing him as more of a showman than instrumentalist.

Wolfe did assert unfoundedly and inaccurately in the 2004, “Encyclopedia of Country Music,” that Macon played in nineteen different banjo styles.¹⁰

This sentiment has been echoed in the majority of the writings about Macon which focus more so on his song repertoire and performance styles. Sources that are immensely informative regarding Macon that ignore his technical playing or his preservation of particular banjo playing styles include the well-researched John Edwards Memorial Foundation publication, “Uncle Dave Macon: A Bio-Discography,” by Ralph Rinzler and Norm Cohen. The effort of these two scholars that culminated in the 1970 JEMF special release were an early bar by which to measure Macon research. The 2016 dissertation by Dr. Eric Hermann is a very detailed discussion of Macon’s roles as cultural transmitter including analyses of his repertoire and performative styles. Hermann is one of the only scholars to attempt a discussion at Macon’s banjo playing styles however within chapter six of his dissertation, he discusses Macon playing clawhammer and three-finger style while asserting that Macon did *not* play in with two-fingers alone.¹¹ Macon played in clawhammer, two-finger, three-finger and strumming styles replete with variations and idiosyncrasies. Applying such sweeping labels to Uncle Dave’s instrumental techniques and not discussing the nuances of variations within those styles is misleading. Michael Doubler, great-grandson of Macon, has provided previously unknown images and family facts in his 2014 “Uncle Dave Macon: A Photo Tribute.” Doubler is at the time in the process of completing a

10. Paul Kingsbury and Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum, *Encyclopedia of Country Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), *EBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 15, 2018), 320.

11. Eric Neil Hermann, “In the Good Old Days of Long Ago”: Echoes of Vaudeville and Minstrelsy in the Music of Uncle Dave Macon” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2016), 187, <https://drum.lib.umd.edu/handle/1903/18595>.

book-length biography of Macon through the University of Illinois press. With a scheduled release date of September 2018, it is sure to be an invaluable resource and comprehensive reference on Macon.

Information utilized in this thesis pertaining to phonograph recordings is drawn largely from Tony Russell's "Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921-1942." This volume is the definitive reference for details of country music recordings of the pre-World War II era. Information within the book is drawn from many interviews, recording ledgers, company files and personal record collections. Crucial details such as personnel, date and location of recordings both released and unissued add much to writing about these musical documents.

Approaches to Banjo Technique

To accurately discuss the connections between nineteenth century banjo styles and how they were integrated by rural banjo players such as Uncle Dave Macon, I provide in depth analysis of specific recordings. This analysis will be expressed through contextual explanation, tablature notation and classical notation. Many of the complexities within Macon's playing and the older styles channeled through his playing are difficult to explain through common tablature and notation methods. Thus, original titles for some technical executions are necessary and provided allowing for discussion and explanation of undefined banjo playing.

To understand how banjo playing is discussed technically one must first understand some of the often-idiosyncratic jargon associated with it. In my time of banjo playing it has become apparent that the kinds of language used to talk about the banjo are very complicated and not standardized. From "alternate-string pull-offs" and "double pull-offs" to "double thumbing" and "drop thumbing" banjo players often define their own execution by what makes sense to them.

Rarely is there consensus as to how portions of banjo playing are discussed and defined, therefore within this project I make effort explain the playing techniques in question as clearly as possible when they appear within the notation. Discussion of and organization of the technical execution utilized by 5-string banjo players is generally done through placing styles into categories associated with the whichever hand is striking the strings over the head of the instrument, rather than noting the strings. Thus, if an artist is playing ‘two-finger’ style, the two fingers in reference are on the hand situated over the head. Commonly the striking hand is called the ‘right’ hand regardless of whether the player in question is dominant with left or right hand. Playing techniques preserved in this early recorded country music period cannot easily be defined by the accepted striking hand lexicon such as ‘clawhammer’ ‘two-finger’ ‘three-finger’ ‘up-picking’ ‘frailing’ etc. because the wide majority of players in this era seem to have had a far more practical, or outside of the box approach to extracting desired music from the banjo by not operating within the limitations of one style’s boundaries but by utilizing non-standard means to achieve desired sounds and often mixing traits of multiple ‘right’ hand techniques. For example, Macon would often brush downward over the strings with the nails of his right hand to fill musical space, accompany his voice, end a phrase or accent lyrics. While this is not a commonly defined piece of music notation, it is denoted in the following notations by

Accurately discussing and asserting what Macon was doing in his banjo playing requires a great deal of close listening. I rely upon the Bear Family Records box set “Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy” which contains nearly all known recordings of Macon. By placing digital files of these recordings into the software Transcribe! Through this technology the user can slow down and pitch correct each piece of music chosen for more attentive listening. Beyond listening time and digital software the most beneficial analysis tool I utilize is experience; the surges of

deep study over the past fourteen years that have built my own personal experience with Uncle Dave Macon's banjo playing. For over a decade I have listened intently to recordings of Macon in the 1920s and 1930s attempting to learn note for note how he made certain sounds. These interpretations I have recorded and performed often while constantly re-learning the same pieces attempting to find the hidden nuances within those three-minute documents.

Chapter Summary

While this study will not attempt to notate, examine, or define the immense range of 5-string banjo players from the pre-World War II era, it will provide new understanding into the legacy of one of the most significant country banjo player of the first half of the twentieth century; David Macon. Uncle Dave's banjo performances captured in the early days of commercial country music serve as an extensive case study of nineteenth century banjo styles' survival into the twentieth century with lasting examples of his techniques and repertoire that span well over two hundred recordings and nearly three decades. To examine these, I have arranged influences and eras of banjo playing as found in Macon's repertoire within three separate chapters: 1) Rural White Influences, 2) Rural African-American Influences, 3) Popular and Professional Influences, 4) Influences *of* Uncle Dave. Through interpreting one the most prolific recorded country banjo players of the early 1900s, I reveal a greater understanding of country music and banjo playing leading in to the early twentieth century.

CHAPTER 2

RURAL WHITE INFLUENCES; FIDDLE TUNES AND BANJO RAPPIN’

“Now folks, that’s what’s called banjo picking. Now I’m going to give you some old-time banjo rappin’. That old familiar tune ‘Gwine Across the Sea’, from away back yander.”

-Macon introducing “Going Across the Sea”¹²

David Harrison Macon’s early life in central Tennessee was in many ways reflective of the shifting cultural and economic trends of that region during Reconstruction. He and his family experienced economic boom and bust residing in both rural and urban settings in reaction to the ebbs and flows of the latter nineteenth century. Born near Smartt Station, Warren County, Tennessee on October 7, 1870, only five years after the tumultuous end of the American Civil War, Macon’s early years were comparatively more stable than those of many of his contemporaries in middle Tennessee.¹³ His father, John Macon, was before the Civil War a prosperous owner of several businesses and a distillery who during the 1850s had prominent landholdings within Warren County as well as near present-day McMinnville.¹⁴ The Macon clan was descended from individuals of status. David was grandnephew to Nathaniel Macon, a Congressman of North Carolina and former Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives, as

12. *Going Across the Sea*, voice and banjo. Uncle Dave Macon Vocalion, 15192, 78 rpm, April 13, 1925.

13. Michael D. Doubler, *Uncle Dave Macon: A Photo Tribute* (Floyd, VA: Macon-Doubler Fellowship, 2014), 1.

14. Wolfe, Charles K. *Uncle Dave Macon: Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy*. (Hambergen: Bear Family Records, 2004),” 4.

well as Colonel John Macon, a commander of renown during the American Revolution.¹⁵ John Macon and his family held prominent status within the region as financially secure local elites.

During the American Civil War John served as an officer, as was common for wealthy citizens, as Captain in Co. D of the 35th Tennessee Infantry Regiment, C.S.A. His military tenure took him through ferocious engagements in Tennessee such as Stone's River, Missionary Ridge, and Shiloh as well battles beyond state lines such as Chickamauga, Atlanta and Vicksburg.¹⁶ The four-year war was waged on Tennessee soil for its duration leaving the state, especially the agrarian portions in middle Tennessee of which Warren County was included, exhausted and unkempt. Loss of life from the conflict was staggering and deeply impactful in closely connected rural communities like those lived in by the Macon family.

It is safe to assume that the war left a palpable effect on the consciousness of the Macon family as well as their close neighbors and friends; commentary on the Civil War along with stories of famous figures survived in David Macon's repertoire seventy years after the war was waged. In the years following the conflict John Macon rebuilt some of his economic status however the financial recession of 1873 eliminated the possibility of success for John's pre-war business endeavors.¹⁷ The Macon family focused on farming their substantial 600 plus-acre land holdings through David's first thirteen years and he spent much of his time doing chores on the farm as well as tending crops. In later life Uncle Dave recalled fondly plowing, sowing and

15. Wolfe, *Skillet*, 8.

16. Wolfe, *Skillet*, 5.

17. Double, *Photo Tribute*, 2.

reaping on the farm as a young man working alongside African-Americans and whites alike.¹⁸ During this period, Macon absorbed many rural music of the region.

Rural White Music of the Tennessee Cumberland Region

Much of Macon's musical repertoire was comprised of pieces with rural lineages. With most his first thirty years spent living on farms in both Warren and Cannon County, David Macon was exposed to many forms of country music; black and white. Warren and Cannon counties are comprised primarily of rolling hills that lie directly to the southwest of the Cumberland plateau of Tennessee. As Charles Wolfe aptly stated, "Few regions in the South are as rich in traditional musical culture as this..."¹⁹ The Cumberland region has long been documented as a fruitful bastion of a wide variety of rural music such as Anglo-American ballad traditions, African-American song, black and white string-bands, and spiritual music.²⁰ Examples of each of these were found within Macon's repertoire and preserved in recordings. Although Macon spent several of his musically formative years living in Nashville, he was representative of country musicians of the day in that the styles and songs which comprised his canon had been assimilated by folk musicians from both rural and urban, and popular and layman sources. During the latter decades of the 1800s when Macon was forming his musical identity he was

18. Uncle Dave Macon, "My Life and Experience Written Especially for Brunswick Topics," Brunswick Topics (Chicago: Brunswick Records, 1928), 10.

19. Charles K. Wolfe, "Old Cumberland Land: The Musical Legacy of the Upper Cumberland," in *Rural Life and Culture in the Upper Cumberland*, ed. Michael E. Birdwell and W. Calvin Dickinson (University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 278.

20. Charles K. Wolfe, *Tennessee Strings: The Story of Country Music in Tennessee*, Tennessee Three Star Books (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 17.

playing things old and new that had largely been filtered through a ‘folk process’ or system of oral transmission of music from a commercial to non-commercial setting. By the time of his professional career (1920s on) these styles had largely fallen from popular culture being replaced by the roots of jazz and swing, and were preserved almost exclusively by country musicians. One rural musical formatting that Macon learned early in life and preserved throughout his career was that of the accompanying the fiddle on banjo.

Of middle Tennessee music traditions contemporary to David Macon, fiddling has been the most visible and documented. Europeans were hunting and trapping in present day middle during the decades preceding the American Revolution and permanent homes of non-natives such as Timothy Demonbreun were becoming commonplace through the 1760s.²¹ Fiddles were the first stringed instruments brought west of the Appalachian Mountains by European settlers and by the time of David Macon’s childhood a century of fiddle styles white, black and Native American had flourished and intertwined in the region. A 1790s account of one middle Tennessee fiddler named ‘Gamble’ details how he was “the most distinguished fiddler in all the district of Mero” (the post 1788 name for the North Carolina court district of the Cumberland frontier which became present day counties including Sumner, Davidson, Canon, Smith etc.)²² “Whenever there was much of an entertainment or considerable dance, the girls would say, ‘O, get Gamble! Do get Gamble! We know he will come.’”²³ Fiddles were up until the 1840s the

21. Albigeance Waldo Putnam, *History of Middle Tennessee; or, Life and Times of General James Robertson* (self-pub., 1859), 465, Google Play Books.

22. Wolfe, *Tennessee Strings*, 18.

23. Putnam, *Middle Tennessee*, 465.

most prevalent string instrument in the nation until being rivaled in popularity by the 5-string banjo of the minstrel craze.²⁴

Regional Fiddle Contemporaries of Macon

Several middle Tennessee fiddlers from the vicinity of Macon's home counties such as W. E. Poplin, Uncle Bunt Stephens and Theron Hale fiddle preserved nineteenth century fiddle styles on 78 records during the 1920s. The most renowned of these middle Tennessee fiddlers documented on shellac was the fascinating and deceptive character James Donald Uncle Jimmy Thompson. Thompson, born in Smith County, Tennessee (two counties north of Macon's long-term home) in 1854 spent much of his later life in LaGuardo, Wilson County.²⁵ He was renowned for fiddling and performing throughout the region and around Nashville including on the fledgling station WSM's early country music programs. His four surviving recordings reveal fiddling styles different from those common during the early twentieth century with more emphasis on melodic structure rather than rhythmic pulse. One piece, 'Lynchburg' which he recorded in Knoxville, Tennessee on April 5, 1930 features Thompson's introductory monologue in which calls the tune a quadrille (a type of social dance very popular during the early and mid-

24. Philip F. Gura and James F. Bollman, *America's Instrument: The Banjo in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 2.

25. Charles K. Wolfe, *The Devil's Box: Masters of Southern Fiddling* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1997), 31. Wolfe's writings on Thompson changed substantially between *The Devil's Box* (1997) and *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* (1999) as more information about Thompson came to light. Much of what is written about Thompson in *The Devil's Box* is written in error and corrected in *A Good-Natured Riot*.

nineteenth century²⁶) which he, “learned on the fourth day of August 1866.”²⁷ Thompson is credited as the first performer on what would later be known as the Grand Ole Opry, a barn-dance style radio show under the direction of George D. Hay (however, other local performers such as Dr. Humphrey Bate had been performing over WSM and similar Nashville stations such as WDAD before George D. Hay was ever employed as announcer by WSM.²⁸) On Saturday, November 28, 1925 Thompson accompanied by his niece Eva Thompson Jones played for an alleged two hours with much praise.

Over the next several weeks Uncle Jimmy performed on multiple Saturday night broadcasts and on December 27 the *Tennessean* newspaper ran a headline reading: “WSM To Feature Old-Time Tunes: ‘Uncles’ Dave Macon and Jimmy Thompson Will Play.”²⁹ Macon, who by December 1925 had been a professional musician for several years and had by then released 32 sides for Vocalion and the Brunswick-Balke-Collender company, was already celebrated around Nashville and one of the most famous country musicians in the nation at that time.³⁰³¹ In the following years, the two ‘old uncles’ were headliners of the show and arguably the two main performers to first bring the WSM barn dance to prominence.

26. Phil Jamison, *Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics: Roots and Branches of Southern Appalachian Dance* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 33-35.

27. *Lynchburg*, incidental talking with fiddle and piano. Uncle Jimmy Thompson, Vocalion 5456, April 5, 1930.

28. Charles K. Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999), 46-47.

29. Wolfe, *Riot*, 70.

30. Russell, *Country Music Records*, 573-574.

31. Malone and McCulloh, *Stars*, 44.

David Macon was certainly aware of and exposed to traditional fiddle styles of the region. Although in later life he did not refer to any specific fiddlers whom he was exposed to early on, he did reflect on witnessing travelling performances such as chautauquas, vaudeville shows and medicine shows which likely included fiddlers. A circa 1903 photograph titled “Readyville String Band”³² shows Macon, banjo in hand alongside other musicians playing cornet, banjo, fiddle, bones, tambourine and harmonica and is early evidence that he was playing with local fiddlers and familiar with regional fiddling.³³ One fiddler whom Macon spent many hours playing informally with prior to his professional career as a musician was Mazy Todd. A resident of Readyville, Todd was a blacksmith and next-door neighbor to Macon. “Many was the night that the two sat in the kitchen and played music into the wee hours.”³⁴ As Dave’s son Dorris reminisced, Mazy, “had a right arm just like a dish rag,” a phrase used in fiddle settings to depicts how limber and agile a fiddler’s bowing was.³⁵

Todd would later record with Uncle Dave and “His Fruit Jar Drinkers” on some of his most memorialized cuts including “Bake That Chicken Pie,” “Hold the Wood-Pile Down,” “Carve that Possum,” “The Grey Cat on the Tennessee Farm,” and “Sail Away Ladies.” Before Macon ever recorded professionally he was touring with the Loew’s Theater Company on vaudeville shows billed with Sidney ‘Fiddlin’ Sid’ Harkreader. Undoubtedly the two of them

32. Wolfe, *Skillet*, 11.

33. Wolfe, *Skillet*, 11.

34. Ralph Rinzler and Norm Cohen, *Uncle Dave Macon: A Bio-Discography* JEMF Special Series, No. 3 (Los Angeles: The John Edwards Memorial Foundation, Inc., 1970), 8.

35. Wolfe, *Skillet*, 29.

often played in live performances fiddle and banjo duets like those they played in Macon's first recordings. Within his premier recording session of July 1924, his last in January 1938 and many in between Macon accompanied multiple fiddlers.³⁶

Clawhammer Style in Macon's Repertoire

Of the numerous examples of Macon's accompaniment on fiddle pieces he commonly plays in a down-stroke clawhammer style. Clawhammer playing is done by striking downward on the strings with the nail side of the right hand's index or middle finger. The nail side of the fingers on the right hand is also used to brush or rake over the strings as a rhythmic accentuation. Typically, a non-descript number of fingers are used for this motion with variations differing by player. The thumb of the right hand is used to both pull off the fifth string as syncopation after the downbeat as well as support the melody by pulling off the other four strings when needed to add to the melody line. Clawhammer right hand technique is a successor of the less structured 'stroke' or 'minstrel' style of right hand playing that was prevalent during the mid-nineteenth century and published alongside finger or 'guitar' style playing in early banjo instructional books such as the 1855 publication "Briggs' Banjo Instructor"³⁷ and James Buckley's 1860 publication "Buckley's New Banjo Method"³⁸. This in turn can be referenced as the direct descendent of certain banjo playing techniques which came directly from Africa. For example, the Akonting, a lute-like chordophone common with the Jola people of Senegal and Gambia, is commonly

36. Russell, *Country Music Records*, 573-578.

37. Thomas F. Briggs, *Briggs' Banjo Instructor*, 1855. Facsimile of the first edition, with an introduction by Joe Ayers, (Bremo Bluff, VA: Tuckahoe Music, 1992).

38. James Buckley, *Buckley's New Banjo Method*, 1860. Facsimile of the first edition, with an introduction by Joe Ayers, (Bremo Bluff, VA: Tuckahoe Music, 1996).

recognized as one of the most likely direct ancestors of what became the American gourd banjo.³⁹ It has for centuries been played with a nearly identical downward striking, right handed style utilizing the thumb for syncopation on the top string as well as added melodic emphasis.

Macon, being adept in a wide array of finger style right hand techniques, often recorded those rather than clawhammer, however in his later years he often reverted to the more rhythmic, less melodic approach. This is documented in Macon's commercial recording career; in his first year of recording, 1924, Uncle Dave cut fourteen sides of which ten and a half were played in various finger picked styles whereas a mere three and a half were played clawhammer.⁴⁰ In Macon's final recording year, 1938, he recorded sixteen sides of which twelve were clawhammer and only four were finger style.⁴¹ With fourteen years between the initial and final recording sessions for Macon, 68-year-old Uncle Dave recorded nearly the inverse ratio of fingerstyle to clawhammer pieces as his 54-year-old self. Even in his one appearance in film the 1940 movie *Grand Ole Opry* Macon (then 70 years old) accompanies Roy Acuff and His Crazy Tennesseans playing clawhammer style on the timeless fiddle tune 'Soldier's Joy.'⁴² Although Macon was not recorded until middle age, we can assume that his pre-recording years of clawhammer playing was more often linked to fiddle accompaniment than solo performance.

39. Greg C. Adams and Shlomo Pestcoe, "The Jola Akonting: Reconnecting the Banjo to Its West African Roots," *Sing Out!* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2007).

40. Russell, *Country Music Records*, 573-574.

41. Russell, *Country Music Records*, 578. It should be noted that several of these cuts such as "Peek-A-Boo" Bluebird 7779, were played in 6/8 time (clawhammer is usually utilized for 2/4 and 4/4-time signatures) so Macon emphasized a downward brush interspersed with melody and syncopation.

42. *Grand Ole Opry*, directed by Frank McDonald (1940; Los Angeles, CA: Bear Family Records, 2004), DVD.

Through notating several examples of this we learn much about his approach to fiddle accompaniment and playing clawhammer style banjo. The first song in question, ‘Love Somebody’ cut on the second day of Macon’s first recording session July 10, 1924, features the fiddling of Sidney Harkreader. Sid was born in Gladeville, Wilson County, Tennessee on February 26, 1898 making him nearly three decades Macon’s junior.⁴³ Harkreader had gained notoriety by the early twenties as a local square dance fiddler and travelling showman with Loew’s Theater circuit and it was through Loew’s that Harkreader met Macon in 1923 beginning a partnership that lasted off-and-on over a decade.⁴⁴ ‘Love Somebody’ as played by Sid was recorded by other artists from the Nashville vicinity including in 1928 on Victor 40099 by the Crook Brothers String Band.⁴⁵

Information on “Love Somebody”

The Crook Brothers band was comprised of fellow middle Tennesseans (primarily from Nashville and its vicinity) and was one of the only stringbands recorded during the 1920s that was not lead by fiddle, rather by two harmonicas playing the melody. The Crook version of “Love Somebody” is remarkably like Sid’s and it is likely that the two performers would have heard the other play it or perhaps played it together as by 1928 both the Crooks and Sid Harkreader and Uncle Dave Macon were routine performers on the WSM Barn Dance (soon to be Grand Ole Opry.) A very similar melody was recorded under the name “Darlin’ Child” by the

43. Walter D. Haden, *Fiddlin’ Sid’s Memoirs: The Autobiography of Sidney J. Harkreader* JEMF Special Series, No. 9 (Los Angeles: The John Edwards Memorial Foundation, Inc., 1976), 11.

44. Malone and McCulloh, *Stars*, 44.

45. Russell, *Country Music Records*, 234.

Blue Ridge Highballers a fiddle-led string band formed around Danville, Virginia.⁴⁶ The tune under this name has survived within piedmont Virginia and North Carolina old-time music.

Macon's banjo is tuned to ADADE on "Love Somebody" (although the recording is pitched one half step above D natural likely to fit Macon's voice) and his playing on the piece is largely in the down stroke clawhammer style. To clarify, this type of banjo playing is done with the 'right' hand (or hand striking the strings over the head) curved in a general 'C' shape so that the index or middle finger is used to strike downward on the strings for the melody, the fingers of the 'right' hand are used for rhythmic brushes downward over the strings and the thumb is used to pull off on the fifth string for melody and syncopation. In the case of this recording and much of Macon's clawhammer playing the thumb is also used for a technique commonly called 'drop-thumb' in which the thumb leaves the fifth string to help sound portions of the melody on the other four strings. He closely follows the melody that Sid fiddles and accentuates the beginnings of many phrases by playing a quick brush over the strings on the 1 count of the measure. As we will see in the following notated fiddle tune accompaniment Macon could play a very melodic style of clawhammer and following the fiddles lead very closely, however when accompanying Sid, he did not. This could be explained by the fact that the two had only been playing together for less than three years and their versions of the tune could have been different or that it was a requisite recording session filler showcasing Harkreader.

46. Russell, *Country Music Records*, 110.

Love Somebody

♩ = 130

Tuning = A# D# A# D F

Banjo

5

10

15

20

24

T

T

T

T

T

Figure 1. “Love Somebody” original by Uncle Dave Macon. Interpreted and written here by Corbin Hayslett. Digital conversion done in Sibelius 7.5 by Diggs DeRusha.

Information on “Hop High Ladies, the Cakes All Dough”

On the May 7, 1927 recording of “Hop High Ladies, the Cakes All Dough” (Vocalion 5154) we see some of the same patterns of Macon’s clawhammer playing as demonstrated from “Love Somebody.” This piece shows Macon in a full string band setting rather than as being the sole accompaniment to fiddle. Fiddling are Kirk McGee (born November 4, 1899 in Franklin, Williamson County, Tennessee) and Mazy Todd (born 1882 near Kittrell, Rutherford County, Tennessee) and on guitar is Sam McGee (born May 1, 1894 in Franklin, Williamson County, Tennessee.) Todd was a neighbor to Uncle Dave and Macon family stories reveal that the two would often visit one another in the evenings and jam together in the Macon’s home for many hours.⁴⁷ Macon’s ability to closely follow Todd’s melody by incorporating complex drop-thumbs and pull-offs as well as to play complimentary counter melodies reveals that the two had likely shared the tune often during their at least ten years of friendship following this recording.

The interaction of Dave’s banjo playing to Mazy’s fiddling on this cut is a rare glimpse into the intimate interplay reached by rural musicians who would share hundreds of hours playing with one another. Macon’s playing not only imitates Todd’s melody but also his rhythmic emphases in parts of the tune such as in the middle section of the second measure below; another sign of the many hours of informal music sharing which brought these two players to a level of mutual anticipation and synchronization in playing fiddle and banjo together. On this recording Macon’s banjo is tuned GDGBD (although the recording pitches it just under one half step above G standard). Like “Love Somebody” Macon’s playing imitates the

47. Wolfe, *Skillet*, 29.

fiddle melody and accents beginnings of phrases with downward brushes on the 1 count of the phrase.

Hop High Ladies, The Cakes All Dough

♩ = 130 Tuning = A E A C# E

Banjo

6

11

16

22

27

A

AA

B

BB

T

H

P

Figure 2. “Hop High Ladies, the Cakes All Dough” original by Uncle Dave Macon.

Interpreted and written here by Corbin Hayslett. Digital conversion done in Sibelius 7.5

by Diggs DeRusha.

Discussion on “Rye Straw”

Eleven years later when Macon made his last commercial recordings for the RCA sub-brand Bluebird he cut his last known track with fiddle. At 1:53 seconds into the record “Johnny Grey” (Bluebird 8379) Macon is joined by an unknown fiddler to play the tune “Rye Straw” for the last 45 seconds of the record. The tune “Rye Straw” has long been common within southern fiddling and can also be found under the titles “Lady’s Fancy” “The Unfortunate Pup” “Old Granny Rattletrap” “Dog Shit in the Rye Straw” and “Joke on the Puppy.” During the 1920s it was recorded by fiddling greats such as Clayton McMichen and Uncle Am Stuart.⁴⁸ Vocalion ledger sheets from July 9, 1924 reveal that Uncle Dave Macon recorded a rejected cut titled “Muskrat Medley; Intro: Rye Strawfields.” It was common practice for Macon to record an introductory tune or ‘hot run on the banjo’ before playing the title song and surely that was his strategy on this cut.

On April 15, 1925 Macon re-recorded “Muskrat Medley” for Vocalion and for about 35 seconds plays an intricate finger-picked version of “Rye Straw.” On “Johnny Grey” Macon not only shows his prowess following the fiddler’s melody but does so modulating from the D for “Johnny Grey” to the key of A for “Rye Straw” while staying tuned to ADAC#E. His playing on this short tune surges from bursts of melodic mimicry like emulating the descending scale at the end of the A part to rhythmic backing of the fiddle at the end of the B part. This piece is likely an instance of Macon knowing his own way of playing the tune (as documented in his previous recording(s) of it) and recruiting a fiddler who was recording for Bluebird on the same session date to play the tune with *him* rather than he with the fiddle.

48. Russell, *Country Music Records*, 1135.

Rye Straw

Fast
♩=146

Tuning = A D A C# E

Traditional

Banjo

Figure 3. “Rye Straw” original by Uncle Dave Macon. Interpreted and written here by Corbin Hayslett. Digital conversion done in Sibelius 7.5 by Diggs DeRusha.

Commentary on Tuning

The tuning Macon utilized within this piece was one he commonly played in throughout his career. Commonly called ‘classic C’ or ‘low bass’ tuning, this pitch configuration is the oldest documented banjo tuning first being seen in the first published book of banjo music “Briggs Banjo Instructor” from 1855.⁴⁹ This tuning was prevalent throughout the minstrel banjo era of the 1840s through the 1860s and persisted as the most commonly published tuning for banjo within classic banjo playing during the latter half of the nineteenth century. When the fifth string was dropped from the banjo during the first decade of the twentieth century it was this tuning (minus the 5th string pitch) that was utilized by plectrum banjoists. Dozens of country banjo players to record during the country music recording craze prior to World War II such as Charlie Poole, Frank Jenkins, Homer Davenport, Ernest Helton, Fisher Hendley and Marion Underwood relied upon this same tuning. It is still found utilized for specific banjo pieces in bluegrass banjo playing such as “Home Sweet Home” and “Farewell Blues” both recorded and popularized in the tuning by Earl Scruggs.

Comments by renowned historians and biographers such as Charles Wolfe who stated that “Uncle Dave never learned how to “change gears” on the banjo, and carried three instruments with him each tuned in a different key,”⁵⁰ have limited understanding of Macon’s true musicality. Beyond the fact that we know he could play in multiple keys while staying in one tuning on the April 15, 1925 recording “Arkansas Traveler” (Vocalion 15192) we in fact have a recording of Macon tuning the banjo. At 1:35 into the track Fiddlin’ Sid and Uncle Dave

49. Briggs, *Banjo Instructor*, 9.

50. Wolfe, *Riot*, 106.

end “Arkansas Traveler” (played fingerstyle in the key of D) to the tune “Grey Eagle” (played clawhammer in the key of A.) Macon retunes his banjo from ADAC#E to AEAC#E to play the latter piece. This is likely one of the only pre-World War II recordings of a banjoist altering the tuning of their instrument. Despite what has been commonly written by the foremost Macon scholars, Uncle Dave was efficient at tuning the banjo and utilized a wide variety of tunings. Macon recorded songs in at least five different tunings and likely knew more that did not make their way onto shellac. He did in fact carry multiple instruments with him for performances which were tuned in different keys. As a banjoist, I can verify that it is in fact difficult to constantly retune a banjo (especially one with friction pegs, rather than geared pegs, like the ones used on some of Macon’s banjos during that era) and it can be efficient to have other instruments pre-tuned to different keys on hand for efficiency.

In fact, on the August 3, 1937 recording “Two-In-One Chewing Gum” (BB B-7234) Macon stays true to the title by opening the recording with his hit “Chewing Gum” and then switches to a different banjo in a separate key to play a satirical rendition of the 1853 hit “Come Dearest the Daylight is Gone.” As a student of minstrelsy and vaudevillian Macon was an expert showman and rather than cause dead air within a set by retuning carried multiple instruments. Macon was not deficient at tuning a banjo, rather efficient at playing banjo in multiple tunings and adept and professional in the ways that he integrated his banjo playing into stage and media productions.

Within Uncle Dave Macon’s span of commercial recordings, fiddle tunes were elemental being preserved as both accompaniment to a lone fiddle, accompaniment in a string band setting and even reworked as banjo solos. During Macon’s musically formative years the fiddle and banjo were becoming the standard instrumental arrangement of the region and being shared

cross-culturally as African Americans and whites intermingled more freely in post-reconstruction years. Commonly the banjo was a rhythm instrument supporting the fiddle's leading melodies. However, as seen in the above notated selections of Macon's fiddle tune accompaniment, the banjo was also used to mimic portions of the melody and support with counter melodies and chordal structures not deliberately expressed by the fiddle. Although the fiddle accompaniment notated above is done in down stroke clawhammer style, Macon also executed fiddle pieces with other forms of rural banjo playing such as up-picking and several varieties of fingerstyle playing. Macon's rural music roots of string band arrangement and fiddle tunes stayed with him throughout his career from vaudeville theater to the silver screen. Although they were not the heart of his repertoire it shows that they still had impact on him and still held their value. This is important because it shows how players like Macon who would also play the banjo in diverse ways that took the fiddle's lead role would still utilize rural-associated styles.

CHAPTER 3

RURAL AFRICAN-AMERICAN INFLUENCES; BROKE LEGGED RHYTHM

“Raised in the south among the colored folks and worked in the fields and toiled with them all the days of my life. I will sing them good old southern songs.”

-Macon Introducing “Run Nigger Run”⁵¹

Beyond widely accounted white folk music within the rural areas of Uncle Dave Macon’s childhood there were also countless flourishing African-American musical communities. Regrettably, documentation of rural musics during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was often about and by whites leaving an information void which limits our understanding of non-white communities’ music. During the early 1920s northern based recording giants realized that an untapped market lay within people beyond urban limits who were largely uninterested in classical and popular music which then dominated the recording industry. As early jazz music was gaining national popularity in the 1910s blues music so too grew in renown. However, recorded blues of this early era was still primarily played in an orchestral arrangement with woodwinds, brass and strings. Blues and jazz of orchestra or ‘big band’ configurations were rarely if ever experienced or attempted by rural individuals for reasons of sheer practicality. Blues and jazz along with their hybrids were often played in rural settings by in smaller lineups on more accessible and portable instruments such as guitars, mandolins, banjos, fiddles, jugs, washboards, kazoos etc.

51. *Run Nigger Run*, voice and banjo. Uncle Dave Macon, Vocalion 15032, April 13, 1925.

It should be noted that these instruments were all used on and common within both country and blues recordings of the same era. Rural life often weakened the walls between white and black racial division largely due to necessity as labor intensive work required equal investment no matter skin color. Dave Macon often recounted working alongside African Americans in the fields of his families' reconstruction-era farm. Music was and had been a common arena for ethnic and cultural overlap for centuries. Countless eighteenth and nineteenth century accounts show that black fiddlers were often preferred accompanists for social and group dances (for both white and black attendees) across the country and black fiddlers and banjoists were often hired as entertainers on boats travelling riverways. The Snowden family of Mount Vernon, Ohio were a musically endowed African-American family, "who sang, danced and played fiddle, banjo, guitar, tambourine, and bones for audiences throughout the region from the 1850s into the first decades of the twentieth century," and who, thanks to special consensus due to their musical adeptness traveled into slave holding areas as freed-people during slavery time.⁵²

Racial Distinction of Commercial Recordings

By the late nineteenth century, rural music had large parts of white and black had interweaved making rural versus urban a stronger musical separation than white versus black. 'Country' music as a labeling term was even from its earliest commercial uses in the 1920s by record companies associated almost exclusively with white performers. African American performers' recordings were marketed under the term 'Race Records' a term which served as an extension of Jim Crowe era southern separation. Music from the country was of course played by

52. Howard L. Sacks and Judith Rose Sacks, *Way Up North in Dixie: A Black Family's Claim to the Confederate Anthem* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), ix.

innumerable people regardless of their skin-tone. 1923 marked a significant year for rural music recording as the first commercially recorded country and rural blues records were cut and released; Fiddlin' John Carson's "Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" backed with "The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster's Going to Crow (Okeh 4890) and Sylvester Weaver's "Guitar Blues" backed with "Guitar Rag" (Okeh 8109).

Genre and race distinctions between musicians were made by record moguls through labels and caricatures to define their targeted consumer group. It was often impossible to distinguish the race of musicians on record as the sounds they produced showed musical fluidity between demographics. Groups marketed as country or race commonly used the same instruments, sang the same lyrics, were from the same towns, and even knew one another. When a consumer set a needle to a 78 record they had no way of knowing what the instrumentalist coming through a wooden cone looked like. Recording companies would sometimes release and market white and black performers on series that didn't match their skin-tone. Several records released as 'country' held the musical magic of African Americans.

White members of the popular string band The Georgia Yellow Hammers were well acquainted with and respected their fellow Gordon county residents, African American father and son Andrew and Jim Baxter, fiddler and guitarist respectively.⁵³ Andrew played fiddle with the rest of the Hammers on the cut "G Rag" (Victor 21195).⁵⁴ The most prolific African American musician released under the title of country musician was Jessamine County,

53. Tony Russell, *Country Music Originals: The Legends and the Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 54.

54. Russell, *Country Music Originals*, 54.

Kentucky fiddler Jim Booker. Booker and his relatives Joe and John were highly respected string musicians throughout Kentucky and were recruited by Dennis Taylor, a talent scout for Starr Piano Company of Richmond, Indiana which produced Gennett Records.⁵⁵ Booker recorded on at least seven sides with such remarkable old-time musicians as Marion Underwood and Fiddlin' Doc Roberts and took part in what was likely the first integrated country music recording session on Tuesday, April 26, 1927 (Gennett 6130).⁵⁶ Roberts told Charles Wolfe in an early 1960s interview that he was heavily influenced by Booker as well as another African-American fiddler of central Kentucky named Owen Walker who was likely a contemporary of the Bookers.⁵⁷ Gennett records drew the line with racial and genre integration with their publicity photo for the group in which rather than allow Booker to pose with his accompanists, Dennis Taylor, a non-musician took his place for the photo.

On occasion, white performers were also listed under the title of race records or were mistaken for African-Americans. The Allen Brothers, a white duo from near Sewanee, Tennessee who achieved a 'jug-band' type sound with guitar, mandolin-banjo and kazoo were initially released on Columbia record company's race series.⁵⁸ Upon discovering that they had been advertised as African-Americans they were enraged. They were fine with usurping the musical expression of African-Americans but did not want to lose their white privilege. Uncle Dave Macon, who was heavily influenced by African American musicians in his community,

55. Russell, *Country Music Originals*, 95.

56. Russell, *Country Music Originals*, 49

57. Richard Lee Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix and Hoagy: Gennett Studios and the Birth of Recorded Jazz* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 158.

58. Russell, *Country Music Originals*, 72-73.

was assumed to be an African American on more than one occasion. Macon's use of banjo techniques rooted in black stage traditions shows how racial lines could be crossed in musical practice. A fan letter sent to WSM Grand Ole Opry before 1928 read, 'Uncle Dave Makins: We certainly did enjoy you over our Radiator last night, and from the way you talk, laugh and sing, you must be one of the most wonderful old negroes in the South.'⁵⁹ The fact that Macon was assumed by some as an African-American can be attributed to different ways individuals would have assumed music to be African-American. Dave Macon undoubtedly had much exposure to rural black music and as Macon biographer Eric Hermann wrote, "The origins of much of Macon's repertoire can be found in African-American folk songs."⁶⁰ Beyond rural exposure, David grew up in an era inundated with caricatured black imagery.

During the post-Civil War era racially charged minstrel shows, which had been the most popular form of American entertainment for over three decades, began to be less accepted within popular culture owing to a then new, albeit unsuccessful wave of racial equality. However, as a 'separate but equal' society was reinforced through the post-reconstruction era a new wave of entertainment, a delineation of pre-war minstrel shows, became massively popular; coon songs. Coon songs were often a strange blend of comedy and romanticism with obvious derogatory strains of infantilism towards African-Americans. Dave Macon grew up in an era of popular entertainment which drew much of its humor, imagery and music from contorted sentimentality of black life in the American south old and new. Thus, Macon preserved much of the repertoire, humor, stage tactics, and dialect from earlier decades of commonly accepted black-stereotype humor. The combined factors of Macon's seemingly healthy interactions respect for African-

59. Macon, *My Life and Experience*, 11.

60. Hermann, *Good Old Days*, 153.

Americans as well as his negative representations of African-Americans through both story and song is a challenging juxtaposition. The revival of traditional country music through commercial recordings of the 1920s was in part encouraged by white interest in opposing African-American music that was becoming internationally popular.

Henry Ford and Race in Early Country Music

For example, the automobile mogul Henry Ford led a somewhat successful campaign through the mid-twenties to re-introduce traditional European dance and fiddling traditions to mainstream popularity as (at least in part) a response to music and dance originating in African-American culture. Ford was undeniably a bigot who through 1920 and 1921 was printing a series in his personally financed magazine entitled “The International Jew: The World’s Foremost Problem.”⁶¹ This sequence of anti-Semitic articles at times focused on jazz music as a moral evil that was overshadowing the traditional European dance and music that Ford sought to reinvigorate. With titles such as “Jewish Jazz Becomes our National Music,” it is evident that Ford was both attacking the African-American musical expression that was gaining popularity hand-over-fist while also conveying his personal convoluted mistrust of Jewish people. While some modern scholars have argued that Ford was not racially biased against African-American’s or *their* music and dance particularly, but was rather merely a ‘bigoted crackpot’ he allowed pieces to be released in his publications which were blatantly anti-African American. As the June 6, 1925 edition of his publication the Dearborn Independent stated, the primary dances which

61. Paul M. Gifford, “Henry Ford’s Dance Revival and Fiddle Contests: Myth and Reality,” *Journal for the Society of American Music* 4, no. 3 (2010): 313.

were degrading American (white) society were introduced from, “abroad,” or the article clarifies, “Africa.”⁶²

This is an obvious reference to dances associated with the jazz craze of the era such as the Charleston and the Black Bottom. Ford gained national publicity through his campaign of combatting African-American art in popular culture of the day through large-scale dances, trained travelling dance instructors, dance instruction books and phonograph records as well as widely promulgated fiddle contests. From these contests, elderly white fiddlers were given opportunities to have their sounds preserved on shellac. Mellie Dunham, a Mainer born in July 1853, was a proficient New England dance fiddler and snowshoe maker who through winning a local fiddle contest and contacting Henry Ford became a poster child for Ford’s campaign and recorded eight sides for Victor records in early 1926.⁶³⁶⁴ Dunham was one of many whose personas were utilized by Ford.

John L. “Bunt” Stephens born in February of 1879 in Bedford County, Tennessee, took second place in a Ford sponsored regional fiddle contest held at Louisville, Kentucky in January of 1926.⁶⁵ While details of the event and the alleged national contest that followed are conflicting (some newspaper accounts of the time state that the event never happened and quote Ford as saying the men in Louisville had, “won enough,” while others claim it did occur and that Bunt was the, “word’s champion old-time fiddler, who won the blue ribbon at the recent contest held

62. Gifford, *Ford*, 312.

63. Wolfe, *Devil’s Box*, 38-39.

64. Russell, *Country Music Recordings*, 326.

65. Wolfe, *Riot*, 95.

by Henry Ford in Detroit...”)⁶⁶ it is apparent that Stephens did receive recognition, publicity and gifts from Ford which included new clothes, dental work, a Lincoln car and a recording session with Columbia records on March 29, 1926 which yielded four released sides.⁶⁷ Stephens national renown also afforded him opportunities to perform on the then fledgling Grand Ole Opry stage with documented performances at the peak of Macon’s fame over the same air waves.

Dunham and Stephens were traditional rural musicians of their respective regions who had the desired trappings which Ford sought to promote as a counter to African-American based music (ironically, two of the sides recorded by Stephens were ‘blues’ selections with shifting scale degrees and melodic patterns commonly associated with early recorded jazz-blues hybrids.) Whether these men consciously realized that they were in some small way included in a web of racially biased presentation of music and culture is unknown and unlikely. For many musicians such as Mellie and Uncle Bunt being able to record and gaining recognition beyond their own communities for a craft that they had invested much time and passion within was an extremely rewarding and novel experience. Similarly, Uncle Dave Macon and his music were likely perceived out of context during the 1920s.

Race Relations and the Repertoire of Uncle Dave Macon

It is obvious that Macon’s repertoire contained elements that reinforced social castes and racial stereotypes through belittling imagery (Pickaninny Lullaby Song) and oversimplified story-lines (Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane) which he learned in an era when art with these

66. “Old Style Dances Win Favor: Grandad Fiddlers all the Rage as Colleges Join Movement to Displace Jazz,” *Radio Digest Illustrated*, Feb. 13, 1926, 5.

67. Wolfe, *Riot*, 94.

elements were accepted within nationally popular arts. It should also be noted that Macon did not perform in black face like many of his contemporaries but rather preferred a ‘Toby’ or white rural rube character. This could likely be because he was reared in a time when black-faced minstrelsy was losing favor and being replaced by coon songs. However, black-face acts were popular both within urban and rural shows from the 1870s through the 1950s. Uncle Dave was on the Grand Ole Opry during the post-World War II years when both an African-American performer, Deford Bailey and white performers in black face, Jamup and Honey, shared the same stage as shown in the famed and widely distributed 1942 Grand Ole Opry cast photo.⁶⁸

Whether Macon understood the oppression that preserving such music well into the twentieth century (Macon’s final broadcast performance took place three weeks before his death on March 22, 1952⁶⁹) enabled is impossible to assert. It is known that Macon had positive interactions with African-Americans throughout his life such as learning from and playing with African-American musicians in his younger years and being a close companion and defender of Deford Bailey in his later career.⁷⁰ Dave Macon, as well as many of his contemporaries who performed racially charged music and comedy, likely perceived these depictions as innocuous. This sentiment was stated well in the 1983 documentary “Free Show Tonight” by a former medicine show performer and her husband who was is shown in the film in the process of demonstrating ‘blacking up’ for the camera. After discussing the process of applying burnt cork she relayed a story of performing a blackface routine for a rural mixed-ethnicity audience.

68. Wolfe, *Skillet*, 156.

69. Wolfe, *Skillet*, 53.

70. David C. Morton, *DeFord Bailey: A Black Star in Early Country Music* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 105-106.

“We were showing (in Kenansville, North Carolina) and it was back in the days when you had to have a chain down the middle of your lot so the white folks could be on one side and the black folks on the other side, and we wanted all our customers to see the show the same. So, one night I said, ‘Bob, let’s put on one of the old blackface acts.’ And so, Bob put the black on and we went up on the platform doing the blackface act and in the middle of the act I said, ‘Bob, Bob!’ and when we looked up, all of the black people were walking off the lot. Bob looked at me and I looked at Bob. That was never done to hurt anybody’s feelings... So, Bob made the remark when he came off stage that night, he says, ‘I’ll never put the cork on again; if it’s hurt anybody’s feelings like that, that’s not what it was intended for so I’ll never do it again.’ And he didn’t he never did put the cork on again in the public and this is the first time, simply because it was part of our past that we loved and enjoyed.”⁷¹

What Macon’s direct feelings were towards performing racially charged materials and preserving images of African-Americans that aided in the suppression of racial equality, we do not know. It is known that Macon himself was in contact with Ford during the mid-twenties and could have possibly been inspired by the publicity given to those around him⁷² to try and grab the tailcoats of the Ford phenomena. In the first seconds of the record “The New Ford Car,” (Vocalion 5261 recorded in Chicago on July 25, 1928) Macon states, “Now good people I’m the

71. Paul Wagner and Steven Zeitlin, *Free Show Tonight*, (Paul Wagner and Steven Zeitlin, 1983), 16 mm film, from Folkstreams 13:15-15:02, <http://www.folkstreams.net/film-detail.php?id=68>.

72. Macon was performing on the WSM Barn Dance, later known as the Grand Ole Opry, during the same time that Bunt Stephens had some guest appearances and Uncle Jimmy Thompson in a widely publicized series of articles challenged Mellie Dunham to a fiddle contest that never materialized.

man that composed the “Dixie Bee Line in that Henry Ford of Mine” and I sent him a record and he sent me a nice compliment; now I’m a gonna send him this one and see what he says.”⁷³ The “Dixie Bee Line” record that Macon referenced was Vocalion 15320 “On the Dixie Bee Line (In that Henry Ford of Mine)” recorded in New York on April 14, 1926.⁷⁴ Within both recordings Uncle Dave interweaves lyrics boasting the prowess of Ford cars. Whether Macon perceived the role that Henry Ford played in attempting to combat non-European music and dance cultures is unknown. Just like Mellie Dunham or Uncle Bunt Stephens, Uncle Dave was likely viewing connecting with Ford from a primarily promotional angle. David Harrison Macon the man and performer was molded by an era in which black people were not allowed the same liberties as white and in which white powers would often go to great lengths to limit black equality such as Henry Ford’s national campaign to rival popular culture of the day developed around African-American art. Uncle Dave at times through his documented career both reinforced and refuted common perceptions of white and black interactions in southern music.

Similarities Between Macon and Nathan Frazier’s Playing

At times, Uncle Dave Macon’s banjo playing shared strong similarities with recordings of the extant glimpses into African-American banjo playing from middle Tennessee. One of the few recorded African-American banjoists of the early twentieth century was Nashville resident and as John Work III described him “Mr. Nathan Frazier, Banjoist de Luxe.”⁷⁵ Although there is

73. *The New Ford Car*, voice with banjo. Uncle Dave Macon, Vocalion, 5261. July 25, 1928.

74. Russell, *Country Music Recordings*, 575.

75. Ted Olson and Anthony P. Cavender, eds., *A Tennessee Folklore Sampler: Selections from the Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin [1935-2009]* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009), 322.

little in print about Frazier, it is known that he was a long-time street performer in Nashville. One Nashville resident and blues musician named Wesley Copeland recalled knowing Frazier and that he was, “a pretty good feller, a pretty straight feller. Ned acted like a monkey all the time. (He’d play the banjo) anywhere . . . on the street, anywhere you stopped him. I know every time I seen him he had that banjo. Wherever he was he had that banjo.”⁷⁶

During 1941 and 1942, to preserve rapidly changing African-American cultures in the south, John Work III and several other Fisk University faculty collaborated with the Library of Congress’ Archive of American Folk Song to record regional traditions before they were lost. In the spring of 1941 John Work III, who was by then a respected folklorist and had published in the previous year had published articles focused on black folk music in both the *Journal of American Folklore* and *The Musical Quarterly*, captured several recordings of Nate Frazier along with fiddler Frank Patterson.⁷⁷ Patterson was born near Walter Hill, Rutherford County, Tennessee shortly before the turn of the twentieth century.⁷⁸ Walter Hill is located roughly fifteen miles from Uncle Dave Macon’s long-time home, Kittrell. Whether Macon and Patterson knew one another is uncertain, however it is possible the two may have heard of one another and possibly have been mutually associated to other musicians.

Work’s recordings of Frazier and Patterson totaled 13 sides in all, three of which were banjo and vocal solos by Frazier and the remaining ten were fiddle-banjo duets. As Patterson’s fiddle outlines the melody of tunes with rhythmic emphasis and reliance on single string

76. Olson and Cavender, *Sampler*, 328.

77. Olson and Cavender, *Sampler*, 328.

78. Olson and Cavender, *Sampler*, 328.

annunciation, Frazier's banjo playing playfully dances around different melodic emphases, rhythmic shifts and volume levels. Within pieces such as "Po Black Sheep" "Leather Britches" and "Old Cow Died" it is apparent that Frazier knows Patterson's melodies and musical choices well and while he can mimic them exactly he chooses to compliment and rearticulate Patterson's phrases. Most of his playing on the 13 sides are done in a down-stroke clawhammer style with heavy drop-thumb and double-thumbing while within pieces such as "Eighth of January" he switches to a finger style for short bursts. As the John Work III biographer Bruce Nemerov conjectured, there was strong "Similarity of style between Ned Frazier and White banjoist Uncle Dave Macon."⁷⁹

To say there are obvious similarities between the playing of Nathan Frazier and David Macon, is an understatement. Stylistically the two share similar choices of phrasing and emphases. One such shared similarity is their use of double-thumbing or repeatedly playing the index finger followed by the thumb in a series of multiple eighth notes. Both Macon and Frazier use this technique on the fifth string and second string commonly. This technique as used on the fifth string can be found both in the first part of Macon's playing on "Love Somebody" (see figure one measures five and seven-eight) and within the first part of Frazier's "Eighth of January." Double-thumbing on the second string or other noting strings can be found throughout the clawhammer work of both. In Macon's recording of "Love Somebody" he routinely double-thumbed the second string at the end of the first part to better mimic the fiddle's melody; Frazier too echoes Patterson's melody with a double-thumb at the end of the first part of "Eighth of January." The similarities between these two fiddle and banjo duets recorded only two decades apart are incredibly vivid. Both Frazier and Macon would commonly accentuate the beginning

79. Olson and Cavender, *Sampler*, 322.

and ends of parts of a song with a loud rake over the strings often connecting the fourth beat of a measure to the one beat of the measure following it. This can be found in figure one “Love Somebody” joining measures three and four. Frazier and Macon both would change from clawhammer to finger style within a piece for different accentuation, something rarely done by other recorded players. It is likely that this is yet another example of middle Tennessee African-American banjo playing that survived in Macon’s hands.

One of the most unique commonalities between these two middle Tennessee banjo masters is their ability to flawlessly transition between clawhammer and finger styles during a tune. On many of Uncle Dave Macon’s recordings multiple right-hand techniques would be used to either start the record with a ‘hot run on the banjo’ as he called it, or more commonly, to shift rhythmic emphasis during a song. So too did Ned Frazier. At multiple times during Patterson and Frazier’s stellar performance of “Texas Traveler,” Nate switches from clawhammer to types of fingerpicking including one section that is executed in a syncopated forward-roll format with the index finger leading the pattern. Frazier also utilizes a thumb-lead technique which floats between using two and three fingers. Both styles are identical to types found in the musical tool bag of Macon. For example, in his 1926 recording of “Rise When the Rooster Crows” Uncle Dave’s right hand dances between two-finger thumb lead playing and syncopated three-finger playing lead by the index finger. Macon’s playing styles bore significant resemblance to other surviving examples of regional African-American banjoists.

Similarities Between Macon and Murph Gribble’s Playing

In September 1946 near Campaign, Warren County, Tennessee, less than twenty miles from Smartt Station where Uncle Dave Macon spent his first thirteen years, some of the most

unique recordings of rural African-Americans string band music were captured.⁸⁰ Folklorist Stu Jamieson along with American square-dance revivalist Margot Mayo and their assistant Freyda Simon, made a series of recordings for the Library of Congress during the summer of 1946 including Mayo's relative and now legendary old-time Kentucky banjo player Rufus Crisp.⁸¹ While visiting Jamieson's great-aunt in Warren County the trio managed to contact and record three local musicians; fiddler John Lusk, banjoist Murph Gribble, and guitarist Albert York. Together, they routinely played for dances in the greater Warren County area and allegedly were, "the best square dance band in five counties."⁸² Beyond being propelled by the rhythmic bowing of Lusk and the relentless down-beat of York the sound created by this band was defined largely by its unique banjo work. Jamieson described how musically 'disorienting' hearing this band was compared to arrangements he was accustomed to. Of Gribble's rollicking finger-style banjo playing Stu Jamieson wrote:

"The fiddle did not always lead the melody but passed it to the banjo like runners passing a baton. Half the time the melody was played by the banjo, the fiddle moaning low rhythmic chords over, and over. Suddenly, at the second part of the tune, the fiddle would leap into an upper octave, with a wild cry, and take over the burden of the tune. The banjo would then play a loose and free polyphonic obbligato around a rudimentary suggestion of the melody, ranging faraway melodically omitting strong downbeats,

80. Chris LH Durman, "African American Old-Time String Band Music: A Selective Discography" (2008), Music Publications and Other Works, http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_musipubs/5798.

81. Robert S. Jamieson, "Gribble, Lusk, and York: Recording a Black Tennessee Stringband." *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin* 53, no. 2 (1987), 47-49.

82. Jamieson *Gribble, Lusk and York*, 48.

dancing a different step rhythmically- and this was the most radical of all for banjo- not hitting all the upbeats and downbeats with sudden startling gaps and hesitations.”⁸³

Jamieson’s descriptions of Gribble’s banjo playing, although somewhat flowery, show the free-form, even sporadic style of accompaniment that Murph expressed. A more poignant description of Gribble’s picking was given by Lusk’s son to Charles Wolfe in a 1989 interview when he described the tumbling banjo sounds as, “broke legged rhythm.”⁸⁴ The same descriptors could easily be applied to the banjo playing of Uncle Dave Macon who on the 1927 recording “Sleepy Lou,” played in the same string band setting as “Hop High Ladies, the Cakes All Dough,” in a similar three-finger style. His tuning is arranged in the same pattern as G natural tuning however, he and the band are pitched one half step up in G#. In the first part of the tune Macon shifts from a simple rhythmic structure relying on chords and roles to a complex, index-lead melodic line loosely conforming to the fiddle’s melody. The second part similarly shifts from chords and roles to complex counter-melodies. Macon’s repertoire is filled with pieces that hold such dichotomies; the African-American inspired work dirge turned string band song “Rock About My Sara Jane.” Within the piece (figure four) his right-hand shifts from flowing streams of triplets (measures two and three of the first part and measures one and two of the B part in particular) to staccato quarter notes (measures three and four of the B part) and to very simple rhythmic support brushes and strums throughout. It is likely that both Macon’s and Gribble’s banjo playing represent a lower-Cumberland style of banjo playing common with African-Americans and whites alike. Circumstance and attentive listening reveal strong ties between the

83. Jamieson, *Gribble, Lusk, and York*, (pg. 48).

84. Cecelia Conway, “Black Banjo Songsters in Appalachia,” *Black Music Research Journal* 23, no. ½ (Spring – Autumn 2003): 161.

banjo music of regional African-Americans and Uncle Dave Macon and it is known that Dave learned some of his playing directly from local blacks.

Living in the rural south during the late nineteenth century, David Macon was often in contact with individuals of color. From what age Macon was initially exposed to and drawn to regional black music we don't know. We do know however that even before he learned to play the banjo young Dave was absorbing the music of many sounds and voices including that of African-Americans. When the Macon family moved to Nashville in December of 1883 the city was growing rapidly as the post-reconstruction economy drawing more and more rural residents into urban centers. Textile productions increased in many cities of the upland south, including Nashville, creating a demand in more raw material for production. With the Cumberland River flowing through the heart of the city river travel continued to be a viable means of travel for both people and goods alike well into the twentieth century.

Many of the labor-intensive jobs necessary for transporting materials and goods by boat was done by African-American males who, to make long hours of strenuous work more bearable would sing. On May 7, 1927 Macon recorded "Rock About My Sara Jane," which is sung from the perspective of an individual working on a river-boat and from the perspective of a Union soldier in the American Civil War. Its text was given mention by Alan Lomax as a unique snapshot of the songs sung by men treated like animals whose work, "Went at a lope; an endless belt of rousters with loads trotting down the gangway into the boat, up the bank to the loading point, and back, again with the mate ready to fall upon the first man who lagged or weakened."⁸⁵ It is likely that Macon, who while in Nashville lived only a few blocks from the Cumberland

85. Alan Lomax, *The Folksongs of North America* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960), 516.

River, learned this song and others from black street singers and entertainers as well as laborers and stevedores on the local docks and river banks.

Rock About My Sara Jane

♩ = 116

A

Tuning = G D G B D

Banjo

Banjo

4

8

11

Figure 4. “Rock About My Sara Jane” original by Uncle Dave Macon. Interpreted and written here by Corbin Hayslett. Digital conversion done in Sibelius 7.5 by Diggs DeRusha.

Macon Learning Directly from African-Americans

Instrumentally it is apparent that Macon shared many stylistic characteristics with chronicled black banjoists of his region. The extent to which he learned banjo playing under the tutelage of African-Americans is not known however from Macon's own accounts it is known he had at least some direct instruction and inspiration from people of color. Some of the musicians who Macon would have listened to and learned from were likely former slaves and folk musicians who held over musical styles antiquated even by Dave's childhood. While a young man living in Readyville with his mother and siblings Macon was friends with a local African-American musician mill worker named Tom Davis. Per stories gathered by Charles Wolfe, Davis was an accomplished banjoist whom Macon learned some of his repertoire and styles from directly including his very first recording and career-long hit, Vocalion 14848 "Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy."⁸⁶ Recorded on July 8, 1924, this song with its repeating phrase 'time, time, time,' sung under the breath for emphasis in a way that emulates repeated lines in a work song and played with a thumb-lead three-finger style with repeating sixteenth notes and melodic sections imitating the voice for effect.

86. Wolfe, *Skillet*, 9.

Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy

♩ = 115

Tuning = B F# B D# F#

The image shows a musical score for the song "Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy" for Banjo. It consists of two systems of music. Each system has a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 115. The tuning is specified as B F# B D# F#. The score features several triplet markings (3) and a dynamic marking (P). The first system starts with a treble clef staff containing a melody with triplet markings and a bass clef staff with fretting numbers (0, 2, 4) and triplet markings. The second system starts with a treble clef staff containing a melody with triplet markings and a bass clef staff with fretting numbers (0, 2, 4) and triplet markings. The score is written for a five-string banjo.

Figure 5. "Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy" original by Uncle Dave Macon. Interpreted and written here by Corbin Hayslett. Digital conversion done in Sibelius 7.5 by Diggs DeRusha.

Lyricaly, the song matches bawdy blues templates of the era with verses referencing evading the law, ‘Blood hounds on my track,’ murder, ‘I’ll put ‘em under the floor,’ and sexualized innuendos, ‘keep her good and drunk and boozy all the time.’ Technically the song reflects a similar pattern as to “Rock About My Sara Jane” with passages surging from successions of triplets (figure four measures two and three) to comparatively simple rhythmic filling brushes (measure thirteen). It should be noted that Macon’s banjo is tuned in the G natural arrangement, however is pitched just flat of B. The key of B is rarely associated with rural music of the pre-World War II era (especially on a banjo). It is very likely that Macon was utilizing a capo, or clamp that allows the user to pitch their instrument higher without retuning.

Uncle Dave Macon was raised in a time and place of common racial intermingling often through labor and musical outlets. Naturally, a large portion of his musical identity was built upon these early interactions with African-Americans. As Macon stated in an interview for a Birmingham newspaper, “I got all my songs from hearing colored folks at their work or when they was restin’ after work.”⁸⁷ His banjo playing, his repertoire, his dialectic and his comedy all were filled with themes of African-American-ness whether of true folk or stage fabricated origins. Ironically, most of Macon’s audiences for decades were in fact whites who were enthralled with what was called ‘country’ music; a term which by its commonly accepted corporate definition could have more accurately been, *white* country music. Macon was also likely influenced heavily by African-American performers or recording artists of the turn of the century.

87. Hermann, *Good Old Days*, 65.

Macon's Connection to Charles A. Asbury

Charles Adam Asbury was an African-American vaudevillian born in Florida roughly thirteen years before Macon and reared primarily in Georgia during the decade of the American Civil War. He went on to have a successful career as a stage performer in productions such as *Porgy* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as well as with vocal quartettes such as the Unique Quartette, the first recorded African-American vocal group.⁸⁸ Perhaps his most rich and until recently most unknown legacy were his 1890s banjo recordings. Within these wax cylinders hold some of the earliest recorded sounds of banjo playing and several potential links to Uncle Dave Macon. Two of the known Asbury sides, "Haul the Woodpile Down" and "New Coon in Town" eventually made their way into Macon's repertoire and were documented on phonograph in 1927 and 1929 respectively.^{89,90} Macon's lyrics bear strong resemblance to Asbury's early recordings and the mold of a boisterous banjoists was filled by Macon nearly three decades after Asbury's pioneering cylinders were cut. Whether Uncle Dave had heard Asbury through 'wax' or in person we will likely never know. However, the possibility does exist that one or the other could have occurred or Macon may have been privy to an Asbury delineator. While living in his parent's hotel in Nashville young Dave heard many banjoists who were likely copying the popular sounds of the 1880s and 1890s. Popular sounds which Asbury was helping to shape. Although the historical record has not left us direct links of names and dates between these two banjo giants born and recorded only decades apart, it is highly likely that either directly or

88. Charles Adam Asbury, *Four Banjo Songs: 1891-1897*, recorded 1891-1897, Archeophone Records / ARCH EPV-0704-181, 2018, 45 rpm.

89. Asbury, *Four Banjo Songs*, rear jacket cover.

90. Russell, *Country Music Records*, 575, 577.

circuitously Asbury influence the repertoire of the nineteenth century banjo's twentieth century mediator.

Macon presented traditional African-American musical styles and banjo playing to a much wider audience that would have actively sought it out or seen its real value. Uncle Dave Macon is an example of the fluidity of music between cultures and the fact that music is colorblind. Even the renowned African-American piedmont blues guitarist and banjoist John Jackson upon being told that Deford Bailey was the only early black star of the Grand Ole Opry inquired, 'what about Uncle Dave Macon?'⁹¹

91. Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Amistad Press, 2004), 49.

CHAPTER 4

URBAN INFLUENCES; PARLOR, STAGE AND SHOW PIECES

“Now good people I’m gonna try to play you a pretty little instrumental piece and sing you a beautiful sentimental song.”

-Macon Introducing “Station Will Be Changed After a While”⁹²

David Harrison Macon was born at a time of intersection between the two eras of the 5-string banjo’s greatest popularity in America; minstrelsy and classic banjo. The period of his childhood and early banjo exposure was marked by the instrument’s transition from accompaniment to articulate, comedy to formality, artisanal to manufactured and barroom to bowery. He watched and learned from antebellum minstrels as well as Victorian competitors while the banjo’s voice was first being captured by musical reproducers. From his recording tenure and his personal recollections, it is apparent that the banjo playing of Uncle Dave Macon was heavily influenced by stylistic tendencies of the era in which Macon first took up the five-string. His repertoire was replete with echoes of minstrel standards of the 1840s and banjo solos of the 1890s and his right hand preserved the sounds of both on shellac during the 1920s. Whether by a ‘pretty little instrumental piece’ or a ‘beautiful sentimental song’ Uncle Dave’s banjo playing was heavily influenced by the parlor and stage banjo of the late nineteenth century.

Misconception of Banjo Isolation

A prevailing misconception within banjo scholarship is that musicians of rural places would have had little to no influence from urban settings. Images of isolation often are used in

⁹². *Station will be Changed After a While*, voice and banjo. Uncle Dave Macon, Vocalion, 15341 April 13, 1925

literature about traditional music as a means by which to prove the antiquity of a song. Even within the cornerstone work “Country Music U.S.A.” Bill Malone writes, “In folk societies, where contacts with outsiders are limited, and where audiences tend to be small and socially ingrown, performance styles change slowly.”⁹³ The field of Appalachian studies helps correct misnomers of isolation through works such as Ron Eller’s “Miners, Millhands and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930.” Within this work, Eller refutes the common theme of cultural insulation pointing out the economic connection to larger urban markets and cultural interchange with urban connoisseurs.⁹⁴ Musicians like Macon and his contemporaries would have easily been exposed to any array of music that was not endemic to their homeplace. By the turn of the twentieth century box cylinder and disc recordings were readily available to the public containing sounds from the hands of top Tin Pan Alley composers and musicians around the globe. Popular music of the day would have easily seeped into the musical minds of country banjoists

Macon’s Piano and Guitar Playing

As a youth in Warren County, Macon was well acquainted with popular music of the period through his sisters. David’s mother, Martha encouraged her children to make music and believed playing the piano was a necessity for them all. Two of Macon’s older sisters, Lou (who later in life was a full-time teacher) and Annie were skilled pianists and likely Dave’s first sources of musical instruction. It is known that Macon was a piano player as his mother insisted that all her children know the instrument and verbal accounts exist of his playing the instrument

⁹³ Bill Malone, “Country Music U.S.A.” (Austin: 2010) University of Texas Press, 20.

⁹⁴ Ron Eller, “Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930.” (Knoxville: 1982) University of Tennessee Press, 6-7.

in churches.⁹⁵ Macon's contemporary Uncle Jimmy Thompson was often accompanied by a pianist so surely there was one in the studio that he could have possibly played and was likely accompanied on. From his first rudiments with piano Macon began trying his hand and song composition. During a 1977 interview conducted by Charles Wolfe, Dave's son Archie recalled that as a child Uncle Dave would "come up with a new song," and get help from his older sister Lou who would, "play the piano and get him started with it."⁹⁶

Honing this skill through the decades before he became a professional musician, Uncle Dave went on to record dozens of original songs with both original melodies and lyrics. Lou would often bring home popular sheet music of the day to share with the family.⁹⁷ These novel 'sentimental songs' focused topically on lost love, antebellum romanticism, elderly mothers, abandoned farms and other images that resonated with an ever-industrializing growing urban population during the post-reconstruction era. Many popular pieces of this vintage such as "Maple on the Hill" "Save My Mother's Picture from the Sale" "Down by the Old Mill Stream" "Coon that had the Razor" "Just Tell them that You Saw Me" and "Watermelon on the Vine," showed up in Macon's recorded repertoire and likely were learned from either reading original sheet music directly or listening to his sisters' renditions. Interestingly, several of these mid-eighteen-hundreds popular songs found a home in Macon's repertoire as satirical pieces mocking

95. Hermann, *Good Old Days*, 27.

96. Archie Macon, interview by Charles K. Wolfe, June 4, 1977, June 4, 1977, cassette tape (no tape no.). Charles Wolfe Collection, Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN.

97. Wolfe, *Skillet*, 7.

the daintiness of sentimental parlor music of the era.⁹⁸ Much of the sheet music being penned in the early Tin Pan Alley era was notated for both piano and guitar chords and the two instruments were often played in a similar fashion. It's only natural then that young David Macon also learned to play the guitar.

In later life Macon recalled that it was on the guitar that he learned his first song, a traditional melody with floating verses called "Greenback" with comedic verses that later made their way into songs Macon recorded.⁹⁹ During the Victorian era the guitar was often a small bodied instrument strung with gut, horsehair or silk and was meant to typically be a rhythmic instrument used for accompanying the voice. It was however in this same era that solo guitar pieces began to gain widespread popularity including three (arguably the three most popular guitar solos of the nineteenth century) that Macon references directly in the June 1929 recording "Uncle Dave's Travels- Part IV (Visit at the Old Maid's House)," "Il Trovatore" "Sebastopol" and "Dew Drop." As these three guitar pieces were all widely popular and published and they are so casually named by Macon, it is likely that he himself played them.

The guitar was usually played with fingers and thumb; sometimes bare and sometimes with 'thimbles' or finger-picks (plectrums, or flat picks, would come to prominence at the turn of

98. Macon made multiple recordings ('Uncle Dave's Travels – Part IV [Visit at the Old Maid's] 'Two-In-One Chewing Gum' and 'Old Maid's Love Song') in which he played and sang the 1853 popular composition 'Come Dearest the Day Light is Gone' with a heavy dose of satire using over-exaggerated annunciations and tongue-rolls. This seems to be his way of acknowledging and caricaturing the formality often associated with popular music of the 1800s.

99. According to Charles Wolfe on page five of "Uncle Dave Macon: Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy," a regional folk text of 'Greenback' which likely held close similarity to what Macon recalled as the first piece of music he learned included a verse which read, 'If I had a scoldin' wife, I tell you what I'd do; run my finger down her throat, gag her with my thumb.' A nearly identical and equally troubling verse ended up in his rollicking recording of 'I'm the Child to Fight' (Brunswick 292) as 'If I had a scolding wife I'd sure to whup her some, run my fingers down her throat, gag her with my thumb.'

the twentieth century) in a rhythmic pattern nearly identical to that of ‘striding bass’ piano playing in the same period. The thumb would act as the left hand on piano, playing bass notes on the down beats, while the fingers (typically the index and middle finger) would simultaneously pinch treble notes on the off-beat like the right hand for piano. This exact style was preserved by Macon in an often-overlooked 1925 recording “The Girl I Left Behind Me” (Vo 15034) which holds the only surviving sounds of Macon playing guitar. Uncle Dave accompanies Sid Harkreader on the colonial era fiddle tune with a bouncing rhythm chord connecting runs. Although there is only one glimpse into Macon’s guitar playing, from it we see that this same playing style was at times applied to his banjo playing, especially on sentimental pieces which he may have first learned out guitar and then easily transferred to banjo such as the April 16, 1926 recording “Just Tell Them That You Saw Me” (Vo 15324). First published by Paul Dresser in 1895, its original sheet music was written for voice and piano in a ‘striding bass’ pattern. On the 1926 version Macon accompanies his voice with a thumb-pinch pattern nearly identical to that of his guitar playing. This thumb-bass, finger-treble pinching pattern showed up in many of Macon’s recordings as a rhythmic filler.

One piece of popular music of the eighteen-hundreds that Macon recorded that also well documented this bouncing piano-influenced rhythm was “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane” recorded July 10, 1924 and originally issued as Vocalion 14864. Just one year prior to Macon’s version, Fiddlin’ John Carson had recorded a solo fiddle and vocal version for the reluctant Okeh Records employee Ralph Peer (of later fame for ‘discovering’ the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers) an event often credited as being the catalyst for the commercial country music industry. Written by Louisville, Kentucky native Will Hays in 1871, it was by the time of Macon’s recording a nationally known song with its now-problematic message of yearning for pre-

emancipation times. In the recording, Macon plays in a three-finger style marked by triplets, quarter-note strums and thumb-finger pinches as described in his guitar playing. Before ever taking up the banjo, David Macon built a musical foundation with piano and guitar which he later transferred directly to the instrument that made him famous.

Initial Urban Influences on Macon

In early 1884 the Macon family moved from their Warren County farm to the state capitol of Nashville and purchased the Broadway House hotel at the corner of Second Avenue and Broadway.¹⁰⁰ The site was a popular base of operations for theater and circus troops passing through the city of 50,000 situated on the banks of Cumberland river by which many travelers made their way to the city. The building had an extra appeal for travelling vaudeville acts as it had, “an unfinished basement (which) offered an ideal, spacious venue for bands and single musicians to rehearse.”¹⁰¹ The basement of Macon’s childhood home would have held a wide array of wonders ranging from magic, acrobatics, orations, comedy, and of course musical performance. Here Macon absorbed the flair for performance which would serve him throughout his adult life.

While living at the Broadway House hotel Macon likely began learning stage presentation including jokes, body language, and songs. Here too Macon was first inspired to take up his lifelong instrument, the five-string banjo. In the fall of 1885 Sam McFlynn’s Circus set up a multi-week show that featured all varieties of Vaudevillian performance ranging from acrobatics, animal handling, comedy, and music. One performer present with McFlynn’s was a seasoned vaudevillian named Joel Davidson. Listed in Nashville City directories in 1884 and

100. Wolfe, *Skillet*, 6.

101. Doubler, *Photo Tribute*, 3.

1886 as a comedian, Davidson had been performing with multiple circus troupes as a clown and by the time of the 1885 exposition was also a renowned banjoist.¹⁰² Fourteen-year-old Dave was awestruck by Davidson's performances interweaving comedy and banjo playing and later confessed that it was Davidson, "who proved to be the spirit that touched the mainspring of the talent," and set in motion Macon's "childhood dreams of stage life"^{103 104} Although little is known about Davidson beyond basic facts and there are no other documentations of his banjo playing it can safely be assumed he utilized a finger-style technique likely with three fingers (in a widely published 1886 image of Macon holding his first banjo – less than two years after seeing Davidson - his right hand is in a distinctively finger-style playing position with his thumb, index and middle fingers on the strings with his ring and pinky fingers resting on the head in front of the bridge).¹⁰⁵

Plucking the banjo with the fingers of the right hand had by the early 1880s become the popular method of playing, largely supplanting 'stroke style' or early variants of clawhammer playing except within rural communities. Macon began his life as a banjo player in the period of the banjo's 'elevation' as Karen Linn described it¹⁰⁶; an era of classical music on banjo, banjo clubs, 'electric' banjos, banjo patents and banjo orchestras. Banjo pieces of this era took a decided shift from being primarily based upon the rhythmic possibilities that had solidified the

102. William L. Slout, *Olympians of the Sawdust Circle: A Biographical Dictionary of the 19th Century American Circus* (San Bernadino: The Borgo Press, 1998), 71.

103. Wolfe, *Skillet*, 6.

104. Macon, *Life and Experience*, 10.

105. Wolfe, *Skillet*, 7.

106. Linn, *Twang*, 5.

banjo's place within American music. The melodic potential of the five-string was explored more during the banjo playing of the latter nineteenth century with many pieces being built upon cascading melodic chains spanning the length of the then fretted fingerboard. Uncle Dave Macon's banjo playing, like that of many of his peers who recorded in the first decade of commercial country music, was heavily influenced by popular banjo of the latter nineteenth century.

Country Banjoists and the Classic Banjo Phenomena

As Macon began his path as a musician the banjo craze was sweeping the nation from coast to coast. Banjo concerts and competitions were being held in theaters and opera halls across the country as the banjo became a symbol of status; a recreational pastime spreading through the ever-growing middle to upper class of the late nineteenth century. With players and builders like Fred Bacon, A. A. Farland, George Dobson, William Cole, A. C. Fairbanks, and S. S. Stewart publishing countless instructional books, banjo journals, banjo articles with titles like 'The Banjo Philosophically: Its Construction. Its Capabilities. Its Evolution. Its place as a Musical Instrument. Its Possibilities and its Future,'" and hundreds of patents banjos became integral within the daily life of multiple class levels.¹⁰⁷ Through competitive mass production, factory made banjos became more affordable and could be mail ordered for as little as one dollar and change. These instruments were often louder and more resilient to weather changes than homemade banjos due to their construction relying more on metal rather than simply wood. With the advent of sound recording in the 1880s and its initial wave of mass consumption during the 1890s, the banjo became a favorite for recording as it had a loud and bright tone which could be

107. S.S. Stewart, *The Banjo Philosophically* (Philadelphia: self-pub., 1886). Internet Archive.

picked up on acoustic recordings far better than more mellow, wooden-bodied instruments. Many prominent banjo performers of the day such as Fred Bacon, A. A. Farland, Vess Ossman, Fred Van Eps, made recordings, initially as a novelty, creating a niche within the early recording industry for banjo solos (often a fusion of classic banjo and ragtime) which continued to sell into the 1920s. While it is unknown whether Macon learned directly from listening to recordings of classic banjoists, evidence does exist that Macon's fellow country banjoists of the 1920s did exactly that.

Born in 1892, Charlie Poole was a North Carolina finger-style banjoist who made numerous recordings during the latter 1920s. His playing combined rhythmic thumb-finger pinch, interspersed with rolls and single-string picking done by alternating the thumb and index finger of the right hand. Poole's fame was won primarily by his lively vocals and tight band configuration with fiddler Posey Rorrer and guitarist Roy Harvey rather than his banjo playing (which was stunted by an alcohol-fueled baseball playing accident as a youth)¹⁰⁸ however, Poole made several solo banjo records that are an interesting testament to the influence of popular classic banjoists on country banjoists. Poole made several recordings of banjo solos including two unissued sides, "Down in Georgia" and "Teasin' Fritz" the latter of which is likely a Poole-stylized cover of Nick Lucas' famous 1923 guitar solo Brunswick 2536 "Teasing the Frets." This chromatic jazz-tinged solo was also copied by another rural banjoist who made a unique document of genre overlap in country banjo playing.

Homer Davenport, a native of the Chattanooga, Tennessee area of whom little is known. He recorded nine sides with the Young brothers, Jess and Alvin of the Sequatchie Valley north

108. Kinney Rorrer, *Rambling Blues: The Life and Songs of Charlie Poole* 5th ed. (Danville: McCain Printing Company Inc., 2005), 18.

of Chattanooga.¹⁰⁹ Of those nine, 6 were issued including “Down in Tennessee Blues” recorded in the summer of 1925.¹¹⁰ This banjo instrumental involves complex roles, brushes and pinches that were rarely documented together in the repertoire of 1920s banjo players beyond Uncle Dave Macon. Sadly, Davenport’s career was cut short by a railroading accident that crushed one of his arms. Had this not occurred his playing could have likely had a strong impact on shaping rural banjo playing through the latter 1920s.¹¹¹ Luckily there are three released banjo solos by Charlie Poole “Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down Medley” “Sunset March” and “Southern Medley,” that also give examples of classic-banjo influenced pieces from the twenties.¹¹²

The latter features guitar accompaniment and cycles through several Stephen Foster compositions and antebellum classics being bookended by “Dixie.” A nearly identically formatted banjo solo with essentially the same progression of songs and key changes was recorded in 1912 by Fred Van Eps on Edison Blue Amberol Cylinder 1532. Despite lacking much of Van Eps technical proficiency and chromatic rolls, Poole’s rendition was assuredly informed by if not copied directly from Van Eps’ arrangement. This recording may have held added significance to Poole as he was a cousin to and possible pupil of the legendary banjoist Daner Johnson. Johnson is an elusive character whom little is known about except for stories of his banjo greatness throughout the southeast and even abroad. According to stories told by Daner’s friends and family he travelled to the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri to compete for a gold-plated banjo. He performed his version of “Little Old Log Cabin

109. Wolfe, *Tennessee Strings*, 49.

110. Russell, *Country Music Recordings*, 978, 296.

111. Wolfe, *Tennessee Strings*, 49.

112. Russell, *Country Music Recordings*, 699-700.

in the Lane” which won him first prize over the then world’s most renowned banjoist, Fred Van Eps who played his famous “Dixie Medley.”¹¹³ Even if Macon did not copy banjo solos directly from period players as some of his counterparts did, he certainly recycled the format into his recordings through his common instrumental interludes and introductions, as well as true full-length banjo solos.

Classic Banjo in Macon’s Repertoire

By the time of Macon’s recording span, the banjo was not as commonly seen with five strings but rather with four, either in the form of a tenor or plectrum banjo as a staple of early jazz groups. From examining the logs of record companies Macon recorded with it is evident that by 1927 the music industry was moving away from banjo solos, or more accurately, solo banjo instrumentals, as being marketable. Log sheets reveal titles such as “Uncle Dave’s Banjo Medley (She’s the Only Girl I Ever Love/Don’t Love Nobody/Sweet Violets/Devil’s Dream)” “Uncle Dave’s Favorite Religious Melodies (Nearer My God to Thee/Sweet Hour of Prayer/Sweet Bye and Bye)” and “Select Banjo Waltz” all of which unissued or known test-pressings to reveal Macon’s arrangements of these instrumentals. Only one record-length solo finger-style instrumental recorded by Macon survived as a testament to his connection to the classic banjo era; “Uncle Dave’s Beloved Solo” (Vo. 15439).

113. Bob Carlin, *String Bands in the North Carolina Piedmont* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2004), 147.

Uncle Dave's Beloved Solo

♩ = 73

A Tuning = G D G B D

7

B

13

18

23

Figure 6. “Uncle Dave’s Beloved Solo” original by Uncle Dave Macon. Interpreted and written here by Corbin Hayslett. Digital conversion done in Sibelius 7.5 by Diggs DeRusha.

Recorded on September 8, 1926, “Uncle Dave’s Beloved Solo” is often considered a masterpiece recording from the era and has been reissued on multiple collections. The recording itself features a wide range of banjo techniques including triplets, several role patterns in both two and three-finger configurations, strummed and pinched chords, as well as harmonics imitating bugle calls, all with the steady pat of Macon’s foot serving as a musical metronome. Rhythmically the piece is free flowing with Macon shifting between $\frac{3}{4}$ and $\frac{4}{4}$ -time signatures with measures that add and drop beats putting the tune into both $\frac{5}{4}$ and $\frac{6}{4}$ -time signatures (figure six measures six and seven.) It shifts through multiple melodies and chromatic patterns largely abandoning its original embedded melody, “Rock of Ages” or any other religious song which may have fallen under the title of ‘beloved solo.’ His banjo is tuned in the G natural progression but pitched just flat of B flat, helping to give the piece its bright ringing quality.

This recording is an accurate example of what banjo solos often were during the height of classic banjo; an expository piece done not necessarily to articulate a single melody but to show the technical proficiency of the player through various melodies and fanciful phrases. The instrumental was likely one of Macon’s show pieces that he utilized throughout his career and he was recorded playing a portion of it “Rock of Ages” at his home in 1950.¹¹⁴ In that recording he presents the sacred melody as he did in the 1926 recording and ends seeming fulfilled by his comment, “That just talks it don’t it?” During the same session done only two years prior to Macon’s death, the aging banjoist plays what is titled “(Banjo Solo)” in which Macon interweaves a few plucked scales with strummed chords overlaid by interjections such as ‘clean gone now’ ‘why was I born to die’ ‘Lord help my time’ ‘lay your mortal body down’ and

114. Wolfe, *Skillet*, 158.

shrieks, before unsuccessfully attempting what was likely some banjo tricks of his younger stage days and closing with the somber admission, ‘I can’t do that no way’.¹¹⁵ Macon shared similar commentary as to the effect of age on his playing in the 1938 recording “They’re After Me” with the line, “I used to pick my banjo, I picked it good and stout. Now I’m only rapping; still broadcasting out.”¹¹⁶ These surviving recordings of Macon’s interpretations popular banjo playing show how his banjo playing directly preserved styles of the popular stage in the latter eighteen-hundreds. Uncle Dave was one of the only documented preservers of the classic banjo era linking popular banjo and guitar pieces of the late eighteen-hundreds well into the twentieth century illuminating popular urban influences of the nineteenth century to country music of the pre-World War II period.

115. Wolfe, *Skillet*, 158.

116. *They’re After Me*, voice and banjo. Uncle Dave Macon, Bluebird 8422, January 24, 1938.

CHAPTER 5

IMPACTS OF UNCLE DAVE; STILL BROADCASTING OUT

“I get fan mail from Canada, almost everywhere; people write and tell me, you’re the very best on the air.”

-Lyrics to Macon’s composition “They’re After Me”¹¹⁷

Uncle Dave Macon’s professional career as a music-maker spanned through three decades of radical change within music distribution and consumption. He was heard on radio from the technology’s inception to its overshadowing by television. His fourteen years of commercial recordings amounted to 177 released sides on ten labels through four companies. Macon was the only star of the initial years of recorded country music to be in a feature length film. The impact of Macon’s performances and banjo playing is largely immeasurable; however, his prolific career did leave behind obvious impact at both commercial and folk levels. Country music historians have overlooked analyses of Macon’s banjo playing and have remembered him primarily as an entertainer; the man who ‘handles a banjo like a monkey handles a peanut,’ as his show posters would say. Authors have at times altogether discredited Macon as a banjoist through statements such as, “Even though he was a fine old-time player, the banjo really served as a prop while Uncle Dave entertained with songs and jokes and trick playing.”¹¹⁸

As a performer, Macon fulfilled a near century old character type; the banjo funny man. Banjoists of the minstrel stage (which was still prevalent in Macon’s time under different

117. *They’re After Me*, voice and banjo. Uncle Dave Macon, Bluebird 8422, January 24, 1938.

118. Karen Linn, “That Half Barbaric Twang,” 140.

monikers) replete with racist caricatures of southern African-Americans were not expected to be merely musically gifted but also to be comedians. The man who is often credited as the first white banjoist and popularizer of the instrument, Joel Walker Sweeney of Appomattox County, Virginia (who died at a young age only ten years prior to Macon's birth) was described around on both sides of the Atlantic as a crack banjo player as well as a showman who "convulses the heavens with laughter,"¹¹⁹ For over a century room on stages throughout the country was made for banjo comedians. During the latter nineteenth century amidst the height of the 'coon song' craze, which directly borrowed theme and imagery from pre-Civil War minstrelsy, the banjo was often found in the hands of comedy based show people, both black and white, in vaudeville, medicine shows, circuses and chautauquas. In his composition "They're After Me" Macon seems to speak autobiographically singing, 'Some people go to college, in order to teach school; but it takes a smart man to play the banjo fool,'¹²⁰ Macon was continuing the wedding of banjo to comedic showmanship in an era when many banjo players were either attempting to embrace the marketable identity of rural rube, such as Amos Binkley of the Binkley Brothers Dixie Clodhoppers or reject stigma altogether for a dapper appearance such as Charlie Poole of the North Carolina Ramblers.

Impact of Macon's Playing in Post-World War II Era

Uncle Dave's success well into the age of country music as big business along with his unwavering popularity on the Grand Ole Opry well after World War II prepared the path for such Macon delineators and banjo comedian character types as Stringbean, Bashful Brother Oswald,

119. Carlin, *Birth*, 26.

120. *They're After Me*, singing and banjo. Uncle Dave Macon, Bluebird 8422, 78 rpm, January 24, 1938.

Old Joe Clark, Grandpa Jones, Cousin Emmy, Roy Clark, Leroy Troy and Mike Snider to name a few. David ‘Stringbean’ Akeman, a long-time star of the Grand Ole Opry and Hee-Haw who learned directly from Uncle Dave Macon, owned and cherished one of Macon’s custom Gibson openback banjos and released a tribute album of Macon’s songs called ‘Stringbean and His Banjo; A Salute to Uncle Dave Macon.’ Beyond having broad influence as an entertainer and preserver of an antiquated performance model, Macon’s handling of the banjo had direct influence on banjoists to proceed him.

During the height of his career and technical abilities in the latter 1920s, Uncle Dave played a wide range of three-finger styles built upon rural folk traditions, both black and white, and urban pop techniques of the late 1800s. The banjo in its five-string variety was around the turn of the twentieth century losing popularity largely to the plectrum (a standard scale length banjo without the fifth string commonly tuned CGBD) and tenor varieties (a shortened scale length banjo without the fifth string commonly tuned in fifths such as members of the Viol family.) Both the plectrum and tenor banjo were played not by striking the strings directly with fingers or hand but rather with a held pick or plectrum. Unlike many five-string banjo styles which emphasized a strong rhythmic cadence, the plectrum and tenor banjo often released a winding stream of melodic progressions. By the 1920s, the combination of chromatic styles of finger picking made popular in the latter nineteenth century with the melodic tangents of the plectrum or tenor banjo in early jazz and ragtime gave many banjo players more inspiration to tease the melody out of the banjo. In fact, of the nearly two hundred country banjo players recorded during pre-World War II era the large majority played the five-string banjo in finger styles with melodic or counter-melodic structures. The variety of these techniques preserved in the 1920s and 1930s is extremely vast however some commonalities can be cited.

Many fingerstyle players before the 1940s played in their own distinct right-hand patterns, would often suggest in piecemeal a song's melodic structure rather than directly emulate an exact melody, and would rely heavily on syncopation. These basic tenants can be traced to the playing style(s) of the post-war era. In the years directly following World War II a fusion music that blended hillbilly, western swing, jazz and blues was refined by mandolinist Bill Monroe. His hiring of banjo player Earl Scruggs (born the same year as Uncle Dave's first commercial recordings) played in a syncopated three-finger style which followed set right hand patterns, danced around melodies and often was built upon a steady stream of eighth notes, brought three-finger banjo playing once more to the forefront of popularity. Although banjoists who were Macon's contemporaries such as Charlie Poole, Frank Jenkins and Dewitt "Snuffy" Jenkins (who made his first recordings in August 1937 at a field recording session in Charlotte, North Carolina where Macon was also recording) are often credited with being direct influences of post-war banjo styles, Uncle Dave Macon's repertoire reveals techniques that became synonymous with post-war banjo playing set to shellac in the infancy of recorded country music.

On his June 1929 recording "Hush Little Baby Don't You Cry," (Vo 5397) which was recorded on the same day and in the same studios as performances by blues greats Hattie Mae Smith and Hudson 'Tampa Red' Whitaker, Macon accompanies himself with a near continuous rolling pattern. His banjo is tuned GDGBD just sharp of G standard. The instrumental which he interjects between the lyrics generally echo the melody and hold traits that would later be foundational elements of post-war, three-finger banjo playing.

Hush Little Baby Don't You Cry

♩ = 118

Tuning = G D G B D

The image displays a musical score for a Banjo instrument. It consists of two systems of music, labeled 'A' and 'B'. Each system includes a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 2/4 time signature. The first system, labeled 'A', spans measures 1 through 5. The second system, labeled 'B', spans measures 6 through 10. The third system, starting at measure 11, continues the piece. The score is written for a five-string Banjo in standard tuning (G D G B D). The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, such as eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The bass staff shows the fretting hand positions with numbers 0-3 and 7. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of the third system.

Figure 7. “Hush Little Baby Don’t You Cry” original by Uncle Dave Macon. Interpreted and written here by Corbin Hayslett. Digital conversion done in Sibelius 7.5 by Diggs DeRusha.

In his instrumental introduction of the song, Macon relies heavily on the rolling pattern of strings 3-2-5-1 played with the finger progression thumb-index-thumb-middle (figure seven measure one.) This same progression was heavily used by Earl Scruggs and his peers and is commonly referred to within post-war five string banjo playing as a ‘mixed’ or ‘square’ role, one of the most prevalent and widely used patterns in bluegrass or Scruggs style playing. At 1:38 into the recording or as shown in variation number one on the above tablature, Macon plays a variation on the ‘mixed’ role which fuses what is commonly called a ‘forward’ role by the progression 2-1-5 played with the fingering pattern index-middle-thumb in a continuous, syncopated arrangement. These same patterns which eventually became staples of post-World War II banjo playing can also be found in other recordings by Uncle Dave.

As a man who had grown up in the era prior to radio and sound recordings, his performance style on records was often far more than just the scheduled song to be cut and would include jokes, stories, rhymes, social commentary and instrumental snippets. On many of his recordings he made between 1926 and 1929 Macon would intro the title piece with a joke and commonly ‘a little hot run on the banjo’ as he described it on Vocalion 15446. One such banjo introduction was preserved on the September 1926 recording “I Don’t Care if I Never Wake Up,” (Vo. 15446). Macon is tuned in the ‘low bass’ tuning of GCGBD with the tonic pitched just sharp of C standard. The nearly forty second ‘hot run’ is not a set piece of music as much as it is an exercise in cycling through several chord progressions and right-hand patterns with overlaying vocal interjections such as “oh my, I’m in love, oh sha’.”

I Don't Care If I Never Wake Up

♩ = 120

Tuning = G C G B D

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Banjo and Piano. The Banjo part is written in 4/4 time with a tempo of 120 beats per minute. The tuning is G C G B D. The score consists of two systems. The first system has two staves: a treble clef staff with a treble clef and a bass clef staff with a bass clef. The second system also has two staves: a treble clef staff with a treble clef and a bass clef staff with a bass clef. The Banjo part is written in a style that uses a treble clef and a bass clef. The Piano part is written in a style that uses a treble clef and a bass clef. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and fingerings.

Figure 8. “I Don't Care If I Never Wake Up” original by Uncle Dave Macon. Interpreted and written here by Corbin Hayslett. Digital conversion done in Sibelius 7.5 by Diggs DeRusha.

Connecting Macon's Playing with Bluegrass Banjo

Uncle Dave's playing on this chromatic intro utilizes multiple patterns foundational to later bluegrass banjo such as the 'forward-backward' role. At the outset of the piece and throughout Macon uses the progression 3-2-1-5-1-2-3 with the fingering order of thumb-index-middle-thumb-middle-index-thumb which is a combination of chromatically ascending and descending a simplified major scale. In variation number one as shown in the tablature above, and at other portions of the picking prelude Uncle Dave utilizes the pattern 5-1-2-5-1-2-3 played with fingering order of thumb-middle-index-thumb-middle-index-thumb. This configuration is in post-war three-finger banjo playing often called a 'backwards role' – the pattern which post-war players such as Ralph Stanley would often rely upon heavily. Both roles used in this 'hot run on the banjo' were also found in Macon's playing of the 1920s-hit song "Wreck of the Old 97."

Although Macon did not record the song by itself or sing any of its lyrics, he did record its melody as an instrumental introduction on two separate occasions. The first of which, was the May 1927 cut of "Backwater Blues" (Vo 5164)¹²¹. On February 17, 1927 blues singer Bessie Smith recorded a song which she composed under the same title but with an entirely different melody and lyrical structure. Macon's recording which does not share any verses with Smith's does have images of flooding waters in Nashville. It is possible that the Brunswick-Balke-Collender Company with which Macon was contracted to record could have requested he write and record a song in response to the flooding of Nashville in December 1926 and the flooding of the Mississippi River which was reaching its height only weeks before Macon made his recording. The second, recording of "Old 97" which Macon recorded was on his June 1929

121. Russell, *Country Music Records*, 576.

recording, “Uncle Dave’s Travels – Part 2 (Around Louisville, Ky.)” (Br 349)¹²². This comedic miniature vaudevillian skit includes several jokes and mock dialogues as well as banjo interludes. His rendition of “Old 97” on the 1929 recording is nearly identical to and uses the same ‘backwards’ and ‘forward-backward’ roles.

Although Earl Scruggs and his contemporary founders of bluegrass banjo such as Don Reno and Ralph Stanley did not directly cite Uncle Dave Macon as an influence on their playing he was no doubt influential in the banjo playing evolution which preceded them and impactful upon individuals who *were* direct influences to the first generation of ‘bluegrass banjo’ players. Macon’s records sold extremely well and were being released into the market for over two decades; some of his recordings were pressed on 45s by Decca and RCA Victor into the mid-1960s.¹²³ Many authors trace the style’s birth insularly to the piedmont of North Carolina (the region in which Scruggs was born) and cite banjoists from that area who recorded in the 1920s as inventors of playing the banjo in rolling patterns. Bluegrass historian Neil V. Rosenberg wrote, “Scruggs had developed his three-finger (thumb, index, middle) picking style from a technique indigenous to Western North Carolina.”¹²⁴

While this argument is a fallacy that is debunked by the banjos history in the late nineteenth century along with the recordings of over one hundred other banjoists from beyond the boundaries of the Old North State who played in finger styles that were predecessors to bluegrass, Carolina banjoists such as Frank Jenkins, Clay Everheart, Buster Carter, Fisher

122. Russell, *Country Music Records*, 577.

123. Wolfe, *Skillet*, 148.

124. Neil V. Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 71.

Hendley, and Charlie Poole, among others, are cited as uniquely responsible for the development of bluegrass banjo.¹²⁵ In his book ‘Rambling Blues: The Life and Songs of Charlie Poole,’ the prolific scholar and banjoist Kinney Rorrer says of Poole, “His three-finger picking style, virtually unique in his own day, was also one of the formative sounds in the development of bluegrass.”¹²⁶ Charlie Poole recorded direct copies of recordings by the extremely popular banjoist of the turn on the twentieth century Fred Van Eps such as his “Dixie Medley” and “Infanta March.” Poole absorbed the banjo playing of the late eighteen-hundreds just as his contemporaries did as well as the amalgamated stylings of Uncle Dave Macon, born over two decades prior to him. In personal discussion with the renowned old-time music performer and scholar Kinney Rorrer on September 9, 2017, he stated that the main records that Charlie Poole (Rorrer’s great-uncle by marriage) purchased, listened to and owned were by two of the most proficient finger-style musicians on their respective instruments; Arthur ‘Blind’ Blake and Uncle Dave Macon. The three-finger banjo playing styles of Uncle Dave Macon during the initial years of recorded country music no doubt had direct and indirect impact on those who recorded professionally after him including Poole. Macon, however, also had great influence on those who spent most of their musical lives away from the spotlight.

Macon’s Widespread Impact

By all accounts Dave Macon was a very personable man who was never a stranger no matter where he went. As Alton Delmore of the Delmore Brothers stated,

125. Carlin, *String Bands*, 17.

126. Rorrer, *Rambling Blues*, 13.

“Now Uncle Dave Macon had people all over the country, school teachers and people in the chambers of commerce in lots of little towns all over the South that knew him personally, before there ever was a radio station in Tennessee or, for that matter, anywhere. Uncle Dave had been playing for tobacco auctioneers, and political rallies, and various other events for years and years. And that is how he got to know them. If he wanted to play a week in a certain part of the country, all he had to do was write someone a letter and they would book him up and he always made good money. One Saturday night Uncle Dave came up to Rabon (Alton’s brother) and me and showed us his fan mail. It was a lot of mail. He always did get his part of the letters, and I would say he was just about leading the rest of country music makers.”¹²⁷

Macon’s personable demeanor likely facilitated his being very successful and widely heard throughout the south. During my years travelling and performing music of Uncle Dave I have rarely encountered an audience in which no one is familiar with Macon. Nearly every community I have lived and worked within in Virginia and Tennessee has its own host of Uncle Dave stories which still circulate in the yarns of the elderly. For example, during the summer of 2016 as an interpretive ranger at Sycamore Shoals State Historic Park in Elizabethton, Tennessee I was speaking with a local traditional musician, amateur folklorist and master gourd-dulcimer maker James Hartsell Garland who recounted to me a very interesting Macon story.

During the early depression years Macon, would often tour with other stars of the Grand Ole Opry such as the Delmore Brothers and African-American harmonica virtuoso Deford

127. Alton Delmore, *The Delmore Brothers: Truth is Stranger Than Publicity* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1977), 107-108.

Bailey. Allegedly, around 1935 Uncle Dave was touring through east Tennessee with only Deford as his companion. Being still in the era of public segregation in portions of the south and widespread unequal treatment of people of color, Deford Bailey surely faced racial discrimination despite being a masterful musician and star of the voice of country music. Per the storyteller, Macon and Bailey performed to a packed house full of enthralled fans in the Elizabethton high school auditorium and tore the house down. When the two sought out the local hotel to stay for the night they requested one room to share as Macon was said to have been very frugal. They were told that Macon was welcome to stay in the nicest room they had, however Deford would have to stay in a building separate from the main hotel. Uncle Dave, who by accounts from his contemporaries, was not a man to lose his temper, angrily informed the clerk that either he would share the nicest room they had with Deford Bailey or he would not be seen in Elizabethton again. This is just one example of how Macon's impact in a community has lasted through oral tradition for over eighty years. His nearly three decades of performance whether live, on record, or on radio also shaped musicians' playing styles.

Macon in the Repertoire of Clyde Davenport

Clyde Davenport, at the time of this writing 96 years old, is widely considered one of the masters of twentieth century old-time music. He began making music in south-central Kentucky just at the cusp of shifting popularity from hillbilly music to western music and learned directly from local and family elders. Clyde 'the glide' as he is often called, also learned from seasoned professionals of the hillbilly music craze such as the smooth-as-silk fiddler Leonard Rutherford who made up half of the duo Burnett and Rutherford.¹²⁸ During the latter years of the folk music revival, Davenport's great skill was first realized by Bob Fulcher, a then seasonal park ranger in

128. Russell, *Country Music Records*, 144.

Fentress County Tennessee who recorded him and others of his local community. Davenport and others were sought out by musicians, country music scholars and ethnomusicologists from abroad to document his unique and nearly forgotten trove of folk music. Amidst the sea of songs and tunes which he had absorbed from multiple generations of music makers was a banjo tune he called “Dave Macon’s John Henry.”

The melody he plays on this piece is based upon Macon’s “Death of John Henry (Steel Driving Man)” which Uncle Dave recorded in April 1926 (Vo 15320). This record, backed with “On the Dixie Bee Line (In That Henry Ford of Mine),” featured spoken introductions about being morally upright and drinking a tall glass of liquor as preludes to intricate fingerstyle banjo playing and two of his most popular pieces. “Death of John Henry” also surfaced in Macon’s repertoire on a ca. 1946 live broadcast of the Grand Ole Opry with his son Dorris Macon along with the McGee Brothers and possibly others accompanying him. Macon was also recorded playing the song in the spring of 1950 in his eightieth year. This song assuredly had broad reach from Macon’s original recording, which is one of the only sources for this rare variant on the age-old man versus machine plotline. Interestingly, in October 1926, only months after the successful release of Uncle Dave’s version, Gennett records of Richmond, Indiana released a side under the same title by Kentucky singer Welby Toomey.¹²⁹ Toomey’s version is decidedly different from Macon’s bearing no similarities in melody or lyric, rather following a more traditional John Henry story and tune. It is likely that the success of Macon’s variant led the competing record company based one state away from Brunswick to issue its own competing version with the knowledge that record buyers shopped by words rather than sounds. In the two

129. Russell, *Country Music Records*, 912.

non-commercial recordings of Uncle Dave performing the piece he plays in a somewhat less demanding down-stroke clawhammer style.

However, in the original 1926 rendition Macon plays in several varieties of complex three finger techniques including triplets, and what are referred to in bluegrass banjo lingo as ‘mixed’ ‘backwards’ and ‘forward-backward’ rolls or specific repeating fingering patterns. On “Death of John Henry” Uncle Dave even executes what is often thought of as being a strictly bluegrass banjo method; taking a melodic break up the neck of the banjo. This method of playing a song’s melody in a higher octave up the banjo’s neck is commonly associated as a format reserved for bluegrass banjo playing, however Macon and others of his era were adept high up the neck as shown in pieces such as Ernest Helton’s “Royal Clog,”¹³⁰ Alvin Conder’s “Greenback Dollar”¹³¹ with the Weems String Band and Macon’s “Death of John Henry.”¹³² In this piece he is tuned and pitched similarly to “Uncle Dave’s Beloved Solo,” tuned to the G natural progression but pitched just flat of B flat helping the listener to hear the ‘ringing’ of John Henry’s hammer.

130. Russell, *Country Music*, 415.

131. Russell, *Country Music*, 942.

132. Russell, *Country Music*, 574.

Death of John Henry

$\text{♩} = 126$
A Tuning = G D G B D

Banjo

Banjo

5

9

13

17

Figure 9. “Death of John Henry” original by Uncle Dave Macon. Interpreted and written here by Corbin Hayslett. Digital conversion done in Sibelius 7.5 by Diggs DeRusha.

In the verse melody as shown in the tablature above, Uncle Dave finger-picks the song's melodic structure an octave above the rest of the song. This unique version of what is considered by many to be the quintessential American folk song spread far beyond Macon's middle Tennessee and affected countless people through their phonographs and radios before being re-recorded by such renowned musicians as Jimmy Martin, John Hartford, Ralph Stanley and Ramblin' Jack Elliot. As Norm Cohen wrote, Macon's recording is significant, "Because it provides an interesting contrast with the more familiar variants, and because it has much to recommend it musically."¹³³

Macon in other Players Repertoires

Dave Macon is most commonly associated with the longstanding live radio program WSM's Grand Ole Opry. However, his influence spread even farther than the airwaves reached. His records sold widely, he broadcast for almost thirty years and he played an inestimable number of live shows throughout the country. Others who were affected by Macon's music and preserved it into the twenty-first century included Cordell Kemp. Cordell, a native of the Defeated Creek Community of Smith County, Tennessee (only one county north of Macon's longtime home) was born in 1909 and saw Uncle Dave Macon's performances through nearly all of Macon's career.¹³⁴ He attended numerous shows and listened to countless radio broadcasts of Uncle Dave's. Cordell was inspired to play the banjo from watching his well-known neighbor and became a proficient banjoist perfecting not only Macon's banjo playing but also his banjo

133. Norm Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 74.

134. Casey Henry, "Cordell Kemp: Local Legend, National Treasure," *Banjo Newsletter* XXX, no. 3 (July 2003), 9-11.

tricks.¹³⁵ Cordell Kemp was documented in the last decades of his life preserving the flair of Macon over fifty years after his last appearance on the Grand Ole Opry.

Macon's influence on banjo players and banjo styles in the twentieth century, while quantitatively beyond our grasp, is evident in the select cases of individuals who happened to be questioned on the matter. Macon's impact from his near three decades of radio broadcast is truly immeasurable. Even one of my musical mentors, Charlie Bradner of Brookneal, Virginia (90 at the time of this writing) shared with me stories of being in awe of the banjo sounds that came through his family radio from Uncle Dave's hands in Nashville inspiring Charlie to begin trying to make those same sounds at age three when he would have to sit on a chair with the banjo's pot in the floor to play it. David Macon's banjo playing was highly influential to and widely emulated by multiple generations of twentieth century banjo players. More importantly, he was a vessel through which banjo playing techniques that had been developed by whites and blacks both urban and rural during an era whose sounds went largely unrecorded. Macon's documented musical career defines clear examples of connections between an earlier America into the

Future Analyses

Although both fiddle and guitar styles recorded in the 1920s and 1930s have been heavily researched and discussed by scholars and musicians alike, banjo of this era has been largely overlooked. While there are only a few select authors, who have attempted to provide examples

135. Henry, *Cordell Kemp*, 9.

of pre-war recorded styles such as Art Rosenbaum¹³⁶ and Mike Seeger¹³⁷, a trove of banjo techniques are waiting to be discovered and discussed. Through works such as Russell's exhaustive "Country Music Records: A Discography 1921-1942" it is possible to survey a large base of known country banjoists and through software such as 'Transcribe' it is possible to slow down digital files of the original shellac records for attuned listening. Just as within this thesis I discuss one player's connections to different regions, cultures, eras and other musicians, the same can be done for any number of banjoists both professional and recreational. This model can be used to begin broadening the pre-war banjo dialog and interlink players and people beyond common confines of stand-alone biographical information. With regards to Macon, his great-grandson Michael Doubler will in late 2018 release his exhaustive biography of Uncle Dave, "Dixie Dewdrop: The Uncle Dave Macon Story," through the University of Illinois Press. Beyond his work, this author intends to create an instructional series containing audio and visual aids to engage banjo players with Macon's technical playing to keep alive the banjo sounds and styles that Macon preserved for future generations. With any historical research a new discovery which could heavily alter current knowledge can occur any time. It is the hope of this researcher that new stories and songs, pictures and posters, recordings and reminisces will be unearthed to help brush away the dust from American music's history to reveal a more balanced and full picture.

136. Art Rosenbaum, *Old-Time Mountain Banjo: An Instruction Method for Playing the Old-Time Five-String Mountain Banjo Based on the Styles of Traditional Banjo-Pickers* (New York: Oak Publications, 1968).

137. Mike Seeger, *Southern Banjo Sounds: Taught by Mike Seeger*. (Woodstock, NY: Homespun Music Instruction, 2006), DVD.

Uncle Dave Macon was a musical time capsule who defied musical and culture change from Reconstruction to the Cold War Era. By purveying banjo sounds of the pre-recorded sound era he did much to prolong the life of largely lost banjo tones. As Dr. Jeff Titon wrote about the banjo, “Culturally and historically, it is a mediator between African and European American cultures.”¹³⁸ It served as a means by which cultural crossover could occur between African-American and Europeans during eras when racial and class division was highly polarized. Similarly, Uncle Dave Macon and his repertoire of banjo styles serve as a mediator. His repertoire is a window through which we today can see a more diverse field of ‘country’ banjo playing during the first decades of the 1900s. Although only he yielded such a diverse recorded legacy it is highly likely that his contemporaries so to may have played in such a wide array of styles. Macon serves as a mediator of banjo styles and sounds that otherwise were largely lost. His career and repertory disseminated rarely documented banjo playing approaches from rural white farmers and black laborers, northern professionals and urban vaudevillians.

Recordings made by Macon surveyed the gauntlet of banjo in roles including fiddle accompaniment, string band backing, vocal support and instrumental solos and show pieces. Through the research as well as musical notation and synopses given in this work, it is evident that Macon’s hands not only shared the influences of his 19th rearing but also affected the twentieth century sounds which followed him. As the eminent country music scholar Tony Russell eloquently wrote, “Like a trove of ancient glass negatives from the dawn of photography, these are priceless documents of a musical past that is almost enveloped in silence.”¹³⁹ From

138. Jeff Todd Titon, “Music, Meditation, Sustainability: A Case Study on the Banjo” (Keynote address, Indiana University and Ohio State University Conference Mediating Culture, Bloomington, IN, March 25, 2011).

139. Russell, *Country Music Originals*, 12.

Macon's mind and the shellac grooves that held his mastery, this wellspring of American musical heritage is preserved in perpetuity.

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Johnson City, Tennessee 2018
- Professional Experience: Graduate Assistant, East Tennessee State University, College of
Arts and Sciences, 2015-2017
Seasonal Interpretive Ranger, Sycamore Shoals State Historic Park
Tennessee State Parks, Elizabethton, Tennessee, 2016-2017
Park Ranger, Sycamore Shoals State Historic Park, Tennessee
State Parks, Elizabethton, Tennessee 2017- Present
- Publications: Hayslett, Corbin (2016). Book review, James Davis, "Music along
the Rapidan: Civil War soldiers, music, and community
during winter quarters, Virginia." Tennessee Library
Association. Vol. 66 No. 4
- Honors and Awards: Orthophonic Joy National Talent Contest, 2014
Appalachian Studies Award, UVA Wise, 2014
- Discography: "Orthophonic Joy: The 1927 Sessions Revisted" Sony Legacy
Recordings, 2015

“On Top of Old Smoky: New Old-Time Smoky Mountain Music”

Great Smoky Mountains Association, 2016

“Big Bend Killing: The Appalachian Ballad Tradition” Great

Smoky Mountains Association, 2017

Significant Performances: “Grand Ole Opry” at the Ryman Auditorium, Accompanying Jesse
McReynolds, December 19, 2015.

“Marty Stuart Late Night Jam” at the Ryman Auditorium,
June 10, 2015.

“Crossing the Cumberlands: Rare and Beautiful Music” Nashville
Performing Arts Center, May 19, 2018.