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Country Road

VIRGINIA'S CROOKED ROAD — HOME TO SPONTANEOUS BLUE GRASS JAMS , THE CARTER FAMILY FOLD AND FURIOUS FIDDLELING — IS APPALACHIA'S MUSICAL LEGACY.



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Flat foot your way through Appalachia along Virginia's Heritage Crooked Road where country music was born and where fiddle-pickers and late night jamborees still provide the soundtrack for summer nights and moonshine days.

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BY CLAY LATIMER —

It's 8 o'clock on a Friday night, and the weekly hoedown is in full swing at the Country General Store in Floyd, a one-stoplight town in southwestern Virginia's Appalachian mountains. On a wooden floor smoothed by generations of feet, a string-bean fella in a feed-store cap is two-stepping to the jaunty beat of a local string band, which could have stepped right out of the 1940s. A few feet away, a young girl with blond curls and shoes with metal taps adds a percussive echo to the old tunes, thumping her heels and toes with dizzying speed. With the next screech of the fiddle, 75-year-old Leo Weddle waltzes into the pack, turning and spinning his partner with a loose-jointed grace. "I learned my dancin' right here on this floor," says Weddle, who's dressed in bib overalls and a tattered mountaineer hat.

Welcome to the Friday Night Jamboree at Floyd's Country General Store, where the hillbilly twang is the real thing, the fiddlers are finger-pickin' good, and the 19th century seems to linger just out of sight, in the world's oldest mountains. The gathering is just one of many on the Crooked Road Music Trail, 253 miles of linked highways and back roads that wind through the mountains and back through the years. The state of Virginia stitched together the route in 2003 to showcase well-known concert venues and musical attractions, turning the Appalachian musical community into not just a scenic destination but a place that takes you back in time.

The Crooked Road begins near the Kentucky line (128 miles from Charleston, WV), in coal country, near the dark hollows that gave birth to the haunting melodies and raw plaintive harmonies of Ralph Stanley and the Carter Family. It winds around to the city of Bristol, where seminal recordings in the 1920s launched country music as an industry. The road meanders to Galax, whose Old Fiddlers Convention draws as many as 40,000 visitors every August. It ends eastward in the rolling hills around the towns of Floyd and Franklin (133 miles from Raleigh), where the deepest roots of mountain music can be traced to the ballads of the first Scottish and Irish settlers. For Bill Smith, the Crooked Road's first executive director, the old songs and sounds seem almost sacramental. "This is the true vine," he says.

In February, I took a 500-mile drive that started with a flight to Raleigh and swept through the scenic heart of the Appalachians. Floyd, a tiny town where music lilts through the Appalachian air is home to some key blue grass notes: County Records, one of the world's largest retailers of old time and bluegrass music, cafés built for spontaneous jam sessions, and storefronts that house fiddling classes for toddlers and teens. "The passion for the music and heritage is all-encompassing," says Conni Mitchell, co-owner of Mitchell Music Company. "I don't think you can separate the music from day-to-day life. Most kids have had an instrument in their hands since they could sit up."

But the best place to be on any given Friday in these parts is the Country General Store, which opened for business more than a century ago. Most days, the white clapboard store is a quiet place, selling overalls and penny candy. At nightfall on Friday, however, visitors stream into the warmly-lit building to stomp their feet to high-spirited picking, chat and maybe buy a couple scoops of old-fashioned ice cream.

"It gives you a sense of home," says Erica Olsen, a local musician. "It's like walking into a big piece of apple pie. There are no wallflowers. Everyone knows the songs and moves." In warm weather, the large crowd spills out the doorways and onto the surrounding streets and into the alleyways. Full of musical spontaneity, pickers form jamming sessions, finding their way into, around and back out of tunes together. Eventually the evening begins to wind down, folks pile into cars and trucks, and Floyd grows calm like the surrounding hills.

The next day, a mild Saturday morning, I part the drapes for a picture-perfect view of the dense forest surrounding the Mountain Rose Inn, a secluded retreat for Crooked Road travelers. Occasionally, the twanging of a

banjo, coming from the front porch, breaks the silence. "The music never stops on the Crooked Road," Smith says. Driving deeper into the Appalachians, I decide to take the scenic Blue Ridge Parkway, a New Deal-era highway project. In pre-Columbian times, big-game hunters lived in these mountains, and later the Chero-kee, Iroquois and Catawba Indians ruled the region. In the 18th century, European settlers from Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England began to pour into the Appalachians, bringing with them instruments and jigs, reels, ballads and hymns. Eventually, American music took hold evolving over time into old-time, bluegrass and country. "A lot of them old people loved these old mountains and their music. And when you're born and raised here, you don't want to leave," says Jack H. Branch, an 86-year-old luthier (instrument maker) who lives near Bristol.

I continue down corkscrew roads into Galax, where you can stroll down Main Street from the old Rex Theater, with its weekly broadcast of live bluegrass, to Tom Barr's Fiddle Ship, where the store's namesake creates gorgeous handcrafted fiddles, banjos and dulcimers. World-class instrument-makers who hand down their craft from generation to generation are common along the Crooked Road. Few are as successful as Branch, a World War II veteran who began building fiddles and other stringed instruments at 54. In his workroom adjacent to his home, Branch has built more than 200 fiddles, violins and basses.

"I'm an old hillbilly. I was born and raised in these mountains. I cure my own meat. I make my own wine. I make my own instruments," he says.

Galax is also legendary as the home of the Old Fiddler's Convention, which every August swells the town's population for a week. The first convention was held in 1935, making it one of the largest and oldest mountain music festivals. With \$20,000 in cash, as well as trophies and ribbons on the line, local, regional and international musicians compete in categories like autoharp, flat dancing and banjo. Veteran festival-goers claim the best time is at night, when fans begin to drift away from the stage to a vast campground to make music of their own until dawn.

Several hours later, I'm winding along the Virginia line toward Bristol, TN, and the nearby hamlet of Hiltons. One sultry summer day, A.P. Carter, his wife Sara and his sister-in-law Maybelle, borrowed a Model A Ford and made the bumpy drive to a makeshift recording studio in Bristol, where they recorded four songs — The Bristol sessions. The Carter Family never became rich, but their raw, plaintive harmonies on songs like "Wildlife Flower," "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," and "Wabash Cannonball" influenced musicians from Woody Guthrie to Bob Dylan to the Rolling Stones. "At his mom's funeral, Mick Jagger sang 'Will the Circle be Unbroken,'" says Rita Forrester, the granddaughter of A.P. and Sarah Carter.

To preserve the music and heritage of country music's founding family, the Carter's second and third generations have been staging concerts since 1974 in a rustic theater called the Carter Family Fold. Every Saturday night, hundreds of roots-music fans drive hundreds of miles through a pocket of America, sometimes coming from as far away as Singapore and Russia.

"We grew up pretty hard and I know my grandparents had it pretty hard. Just trying to keep food on the table was difficult," says Forrester. "There are areas where poverty is still very evident. Once you were made to believe you should leave, but the Crooked Road is helping change that. Now you see kids with pride about where they come from. When I see that it just melts my heart." Inside the rustic theater, the dance floor is a blur of youngsters and grandparents flat footing and clogging dancers who rush onto the floor when the music cranks up. "What happens here on a Saturday night is almost a cultural time capsule," says Brandi Hart, lead singer and co-writer for The Dixie Bee-Liners.

On a spacious stage that resembles a front porch, Forrester sits on a wooden bench next to her slumbering dog. Hanging on the walls are solemn, saintly looking portraits of the original Carter Family. The heady whiff of sour bean soup and cornbread rises to the upper rafters.

"When mama started this she wanted it to be a family place," Forrester says. "She wanted everybody to be out of here by 10 so they could get up and go to church. I followed her plan literally — I promised my mama I would do what she did. We stay focused on acoustic blue grass and old time. We try to keep it very pure — like it was."

From the Carter Family Fold, the Crooked Road pushes north. But before I drive away, I stop at A.P. Carter's original log cabin. Standing next to the front porch, entranced by a black sky, I think what it must have been nearly a century ago in this backwoods crossroads, when A.P., Sarah and Maybelle sang, danced and strummed their homemade fiddles. "This part of the world got passed by on the Crooked Road," Smith says. "You step back in time here."

ALONG THE ROAD

From east to west — check out Appalachia's finest notes.

BLUE RIDGE INSTITUTE

Every October this folklore center presents the Blue Ridge Folklife Festival with three stages of continuous music. www.blueridgeinstitute.org

FLOYD COUNTRY STORE

The Friday Night Jamboree begins with a bluegrass gospel group, and in warm weather folks can be found picking outside. www.floydcountrystore.com

REX THEATER & BLUE RIDGE BACKROADS LIVE

Be part of the audience of WBRF 98.1 FM radio's popular broadcast, featuring bluegrass and old time bands performing on stage. www.rextheatergalax.com

BLUE RIDGE MUSIC CENTER & MUSEUM

The state-of-the-art amphitheater presents performances every Saturday night from May through September and the museum chronicles 400 years of string-band music history in Virginia. www.blueridgemusiccenter.org

THE BIRTHPLACE OF COUNTRY MUSIC ALLIANCE

Displays and music honoring the pioneers of Appalachian music, such as the Carter Family, Jimmie Rodgers and Ernest "Pop" Stoneman. Thursday night Pickin' Porch programs and beginner jams are worth the trek. www.birthplaceofcountrymusicalliance.org

CARTER FAMILY FOLD

The "First Family of Country Music's" tobacco barn was turned into a music center that seats 1,000 people. www.carterfamilyfold.org

COUNTRY CABIN

II Country Cabin II and Appalachian Traditions Village is a popular stage for local musicians and bands performing bluegrass, country and old time music every Saturday night from 8-11pm. www.virginia.org

RALPH STANLEY MUSEUM

The Ralph Stanley Museum & Traditional Mountain Music Center in Dickenson County includes exhibits on Dr. Stanley, the region's musical roots and on popular successors. www.ralphstanleymuseum.com

WHERE TO STAY

Hotels are available in major towns, but two of our favorite places offered real escape. Stonewall Bed and Breakfast (www.stonewallbed.com) in Floyd, with a hike-in Woods cabin (\$70) or View cabin (\$80), and Fiddlers Roost Cabins (www.fiddlersroostcabins.com) in Galax, where \$130 gets you a kitchen, living room and hot tub on the porch. Alternatively try, Miracle Farm Bed and Breakfast Spa & Resort (www.miraclefarmbnb.com) which offers a full vegetarian breakfast with farm-grown ingredients brought to your door; cottages start at \$115 or New River Lodging

(www.newrivertrailcabins.com) which features cabins (with names like Chance for Romance) complete with jacuzzis, fireplaces and gas grills. Rates start at \$130.