

Dix Freeman, born in 1908, is still a slim and vigorous man, and one of the best of the few active old-time banjo players in the Round Peak area of Surry County in North Carolina. He and his wife Charlie Mae live two hundred feet up the hill from the grey-weathered old Freeman family house which dates from the early 1900's. They're surrounded by timber and fields and Little Fish River flowing from Fisher's Peak (3600 feet), that lofty landmark on the nearby border with Virginia. The steep Toe-Nail Gap path winds up over the heights.

The intensity and ubiquity of the traditional music in this Blue Ridge mountain area has often piqued the imagination of listeners, folklorists, music historians, and the musicians themselves. Fiddlers and, later, banjo-players have numbered in the thousands in these several border counties the past two centuries. My own documentation (surely the tip of the iceberg) is of some 700 fiddle and banjo players since the early 1800s.

Dix learned the bulk of his tunes from Charlie Lowe, the near-legendary banjo picker (1878 - 1964) from this area who is still revered for his exceptional skill on the instrument. Yet Dix is quick to point out that his own style on the banjo differs somewhat from Charlie's, though the two "musicianers" shared a common repertory of tunes.

"Step-Back Cindy" is one of those staple tunes that older ("back generation") musicians have played in these hilly counties time out of mind. Charlie Mae loves to hear Dix play it, and she'll always start dancing to "Step-Back" on the kitchen floor as soon as Dix begins playing.

His first banjo was an open-back (no resonator) with a skin head and a finger-board topped with copper. Dix, who pronounces his name "Dick", talks about that banjo on this recording. He was so young at the time of the acquisition of the banjo that he was scared to walk home in the dark from "old man Slater's" house.

On banjo heads: "All the banjos had skin heads in those days. A lot of 'em were groundhog. I had one with a seal-skin one time that played well. Seal was kind of popular at one time on the banjo. Long, long time ago. Calf-hide is pretty heavy for a banjo. When I was a kid, I never heard of a calf-hide on a banjo. It was either a cat-hide, or a seal-skin, or something like this."

There were frequent dances at people's houses in those days. The Freeman house (listen to the dance versions of "Sally Ann" and "Walking in My Sleep" here) had many a frolic in it, and some awesome music was provided for the dancers by the best of their fellow Round Peakers. "We had a dance here one night, and Ben Jarrell played in one room with Jake Norman. I mean it now. Jake was a good banjo picker! Tommy Jarrell and Charlie Lowe played in another. That was a square dance! They knew how to dance. (Ben, 1880-1946; Jake, 1874-1938; Tommy, 1901-1985.)

Dix uses two banjo tunings. For pieces in the key of D, he tunes the strings aDADE; for those in A, he tunes the strings aEAC#E. Kirk and Rich employ two fiddle tunings: for D-tunes ADAE; for those in the key of A, AEAE.

Dix buys, sells, and trades in old music. He keeps several fiddles on hand at all times. He also has a few other instruments. For more information call 910-352-4345.

Lincoln Southern does the calling during the "Sally Ann" dance. Ed Norman, himself a banjo-picker, calls during "Walking in My Sleep." Both men are the Freemans' neighbors. The occasion was a dance during the 1960s at the old Freeman house when dancers from Round Peak, Toe-Nail Gap, & Skull Camp Mountain "hit the floor" to Dix's fiddling and Chester's guitar playing.

Dix's son-in-law, Chester (born in 1942), has old-time music on both sides of his family. About his guitar technique, Chester says, "That lick is something that takes years of doing. Everybody watches me a lot. You pick the lead with your thumb, and play your rhythm with the next two fingers. That's what you do. I use a thumb-pick and two finger-picks." Chester used to play with the Shady Mountain Ramblers (on the Heritage label). Chester has also recorded for County and Flying Fish.

Kirk, born in 1968, spent much time with his friend-mentor Tommy Jarrell, and his playing here reflects much of Tommy's influence on the fiddle. Kirk can be heard with The Old Hollow String Band on the Flyin' Cloud label. He can also deliver a Posey Rorer version of "Forks of Sandy" or a Lonnie Austin treatment of "Sweet Sunny South" at the drop of a hat.

Rich, born 1956, first visited at Tommy Jarrell's house for old-timey tunes in 1976. He met Dix there, and in the years that followed Rich was among the most ardent and regular musical visitors at both men's houses. Rich fiddles "Willie My Darling," "Rockingham Cindy," & "Stillhouse" here, thanks to Bernard Stallings' recordings at the Mt. Airy 1987 Fiddlers' Convention.

Cassettes can be ordered through Chester McMillian, 910-352-4796, or 381 Richards Rd., Mt. Airy, NC 27030.