

# You Can't Keep Good Fiddle Music Down

By Bob Buckingham

Fiddle music in some respects is like a weed. You can tromp it down, starve it, and try to control it, but it will survive. Like the feral plants that inhabit your lawn and gardens, fiddle music adheres to its own rules for survival. There is no great money to be made playing fiddle and while a few make a handsome prize at it, thousands more simply take great pride in just being able to practice the art. There is some consensus among fiddlers, but that too is subject to discussion. One's champion is another's hack. But they all come together under the same tarp at a festival to share tunes.

Once there was a small record label called Davis Unlimited. Started by Stephen F. Davis, who was also instrumental in a now-defunct fiddle magazine called *The Devil's Box*, this label recorded fiddlers. While not a high tech endeavor, it was one that caught fiddlers who would otherwise have gone unnoticed outside of their communities in the history of fiddling. This defunct label has been given new life by folklorist Evan Hatch and the good folks at the Arts Center of Cannon County, Tennessee. They started a new label, Spring Fed Records with SFR-101, *Uncle Dave at Home*. With the release of a CD of old field recordings of Sam and Kirk McGee and a wonderful release by the late fiddler Billy Womack, the label was up and running. It seemed only natural to Hatch and others that the Davis Unlimited label was a good fit with their scope and so the process began.

Spring Fed Records ([www.springfedrecords.com](http://www.springfedrecords.com)) is part of the Arts Center of Cannon County, a private non-profit community arts center located in Woodbury, Tennessee. The arts center annually serves over 40,000 persons through its Playhouse series, concert series, Young at Arts performance series, and classes. In 2002 the Arts Center implemented its Folk and Traditional Arts programming, which focuses on the preservation and documentation of local craft and cultural traditions, as well as production of traditional music CDs. Hatch says, "We work using a model of preservation through production. We've released three factory-pressed CDs and fifteen print-on-demand CDs. The print-on-demand stuff also opens us up to a world of new music projects.

"The Arts Center of Cannon County's (ACCC)'s Executive Director, Donald Fann, became aware of the Davis Unlimited catalog while producing SFR-101, *Uncle Dave at Home*. Later Donald contacted Stephen Davis directly while trying to uncover lost 1970s field recordings of Sam McGee made by Davis and Charles Wolfe. We at Spring Fed Records always try to uncover as much material as possible in the research phase of a CD project and let that pool of material help shape the project. At that time there were no Sam McGee field recordings to be had, but Stephen Davis and Donald discussed the possibility of a Davis Unlimited reissue project. Based on the model put forth by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, Spring Fed Records is offering fifteen of the original Davis Unlimited Catalogue (roughly one third) in

## AcousticMusicCamp.com

August 16-18 2007 in Dallas Texas

A three day camp teaching you how to play Bluegrass and Texas Fiddle, Mandolin, Five-String Banjo, Flatpick Guitar, and Bluegrass Harmony vocals in a fun, supportive environment.

Teachers include:

Jim "Texas Shorty" Chancellor - Fiddle  
Robert Bowlin - Fiddle/Guitar • David Talbot - Banjo,  
Brad Davis - Guitar/Mandolin • Joe Carr - Harmony Vocals,  
Gerald Jones - Banjo/Mandolin

For more info go to: <http://AcousticMusicCamp.com>

custom, print-on-demand CDs. SFR-101 was a reissue of a Davis Unlimited/Tennessee Folklore Society project called *Uncle Dave at Home*. Spring Fed Records' mission is to make available recordings of talented musicians from the Middle Tennessee area, and because Davis Unlimited focused heavily on musicians from the Tennessee Valley, we thought the partnership was a pretty good fit."

Hatch continues, "We've been in constant contact with Stephen Davis throughout the entire process. Davis has been a valuable consultant in all areas of production — sound, content, historical context, inspiration. Robert Cogswell, Tennessee's state folklorist, encouraged the initial meeting with Davis."

When asked if this was a personal endeavor or was sparked by folks wanting to hear some of the older fiddlers of the region, Hatch responded, "It's pretty much a combination of the above. The Spring Fed Records/Davis Unlimited project actually traces its origins to a casual roundtable with Spring Fed Records/traditional music enthusiasts/supporters at the 2003 Uncle Dave Macon Days. Spring Fed Records has had the support of some great music scholars over the years — Charles Wolfe, Roby Cogswell, Bruce Nemerov, Brent Cantrell, Stephen Davis, Paul Wells — all of these people have been invaluable in helping us make decisions and make us aware of local and regional traditional musical currents that might otherwise have never shown up on our radar. For example Roby was instrumental in the production of SFR-102, *Billy Womack in Retrospect*. SFR released what we feel is a great posthumous collection of an immensely talented fiddler of great regional renown. Charles, Roby, Bruce, and Paul all helped us make this CD and we feel it is one of our best. These guys were champions of old time and bluegrass music, and their enthusiasm is contagious. Their expertise helped to ensure subsequent high quality projects. If you build a good foundation, it builds on itself, and it becomes a personal endeavor."

Hatch continues, "Most of the recordings we've released have had ties to Middle Tennessee. Uncle Dave lived in nearby Kittrell, Sam and Kirk in Franklin, Billy Womack from Woodbury. We thought Davis Unlimited a solid choice because although some of the music was created in other states, the label itself was based out of Clarksville, Tennessee. The Davis Unlimited releases we're offering are primarily chosen for their ties to the Middle Tennessee region, and then for highlights from the catalog recommended by



**Fiddle-Pro**

- Quality directional microphone
- Simplest fitting system available
- Quickly adjusts to fit all violins and violas
- Storage case included
- Used & endorsed by the best

Hear Jim Wood use the Fiddle-Pro on his great new CD - recorded live:

Jim and Inge Wood  
*In Concert*  
More at [jimwoodmusic.net](http://jimwoodmusic.net)

Spring Offer  
**US \$299**  
inc. shipping

The **Fiddle-Pro** Violin Microphone

Handmade in the UK by  
Read Instrument Microphones  
E-mail: [info@riml.biz](mailto:info@riml.biz)

Full details on our web site: [www.riml.biz](http://www.riml.biz)

**RIM**

the above unofficial advisory board. Music, as you know, doesn't really work well constrained by state and county borders. For example, Uncle Norman Edmonds has been an influence on fiddlers far outside Virginia, and Frazier Moss is legendary outside Tennessee. "

With growing concerns over the changes in music delivery systems, it is increasingly difficult to know how long the CD will be a viable medium. With more and more downloading and mp3 player usage, recording album projects as a format are becoming threatened. The risk to making a whole older catalog available demands a new approach to the concept of a record label. Hatch expands on this topic saying, "We hope eventually to release the entire catalog. We've been informed by more than a few people that we have glaring oversights in our original fifteen. In addition, because the Davis Unlimited releases are all custom CDs, we hope to be able to release other recordings in a custom CD basis. The custom CDs allow us a greater degree of freedom for releases. We can print things as people order them — this can extend to films as well — and can make it a lot easier to make available obscure and special interest releases. In other words, if we don't have to print 1,000 copies of every release, we can more easily offer a larger number of titles. We're never going to sell 1,000 copies of some releases, but if we sell 100 of them, that's 100 more that might inspire a new generation of musicians and enthusiasts. It goes back to the idea of preservation through production. If we can make these records available to a new generation, then hopefully the recordings will be there for their children and grandchildren."

As has happened in the past, as a label falls to into dormancy, many of the integral parts become lost or damaged. Hatch had this to say about resurrecting Davis Unlimited recordings: "The original masters, to our knowledge, no longer exist. We essentially created new digital masters from the cleanest available LP copies. Bruce Nemerov acted as the audio engineer for the recordings and greatly improved the original sound quality, boosted EQ, and cut back surface noise. It really helps to start with pristine source material. He did a bang-up job and in Stephen Davis' mind, this is the greatest service we did. Musicians should be really happy as well. Liner notes are all original with minor editing — courtesy of me — not a professional editor. Original photographs accompany the notes as well. Nothing new has been added and only the smallest amounts of cuts have been made. There is new cover art that Abby Jones, our in-house designer, made that incorporates the original album art."

Preservation projects take funds. Hatch explains that, "Funding came from the National Endowment for the Arts and Tennessee Arts Commission.... Of course, anybody else is also welcome to donate funds to our cause as well. Grant funds make these seemingly impossible projects possible. And as I said before, the funder's enthusiasm is contagious."

"It is an ongoing entrepreneurial endeavor. We are not going to be doing this unless it at least pays for itself. It's not a noble thing to go into debt for these projects. The parent organization ACCC makes 85 percent of its income from its productions. Fiscal responsibility is important. That being said, you've gotta love this stuff to believe in its success. Hopefully the preservation bent of this project will influence other organizations to do similar projects. We drew inspiration from Folkways, after all. It is a fine endeavor to preserve the arts from which we draw inspiration."

The Billy Womack recording released on Spring Fed is a surprise and delight to this author. Not well-known outside of his home region, Womack was one of those wonderful fiddlers who carried aspects of the old mountain fiddling into the era of the hot bluegrass and radio styles that followed. There is a down home charm to his highly energized fiddling that sizzles. More than a hint of Fiddling Arthur Smith is in his playing and there is evidence of his playing at least some bluegrass. But it is the down home mountain charm of his arrangements that will win over the listener. It is easy to tell that there are many years of great fiddling experience captured on this disc.

The name Spring Fed invokes something that is naturally restoring. Isn't that the essence of fiddle music?

Other fiddlers of interest on this label include J. T. Perkins, W. L. Gregory, Clyde Davenport (mostly on banjo), and Gary Harrison, as well as the great old time banjo picker Omer Forrester.

For more information on Spring Fed Records visit their web site: [www.springfedrecords.com/](http://www.springfedrecords.com/)

*[Bob Buckingham lives in the Dark Corner of South Carolina where he teaches fiddle, banjo, and mandolin, plays with his band The Blue Ridge Rounders, and writes for Fiddler and other fine music magazines.]*

## Recordings

[Please send items for review to our review editor,  
Paul Anastasio, at P.O. Box 30153, Seattle, WA 98113.]

### **Billy Womack, *In Retrospect: Down at the Barbershop*** [Spring Fed Records SFR-102; www.springfedrecords.com]

That there are scores of fiddlers no one outside of their local community has ever heard about should come as no surprise. When you do find one, what a treat divine. Billy Womack was one of those fiddlers. His generation watched fiddling go from a home-based community affair to the entertainment realm of radio and television. Womack's fiddling runs the gamut from slick show fiddling in band settings to some seriously fine solo work recorded by Coble Caperton in Womack's home in 1970. The music ranges from fine duet fiddling with a bluegrass edge to the more personal explorations of a fiddler honing his craft. In either context, Womack produced some fine fiddling that will please fans of old time and bluegrass fiddle.

— Bob Buckingham

### **Frazier Moss, *All Fiddler!*** [Spring Fed Records SFR-DU-33023; www.springfedrecords.com]

Frazier Moss was one of those great fiddlers whose name use to come up in articles in the now-defunct magazine *The Devil's Box* every time he cleaned up at a contest like the Tennessee Valley Fiddler's Convention. This CD is part of the reissue project undertaken by Spring Fed Records of the old Davis Unlimited label. This 1975 recording catches Moss with the throttle full open as he plays a dozen tunes and songs with bluegrass backup. Opening up with "Paddy on the Turnpike" and churning some waves of his own on "Over the Waves," Moss plays through a program of fiddle favorites with a song thrown in for contrast. There are several nice waltzes interspersed to offset the intensity of the breakdowns. Solid fiddling in a style that would probably be called "old school bluegrass" today. Moss was a terrific fiddler who had plenty of skill and more than enough energy in his music.

— Bob Buckingham

### **The Indian Creek Delta Boys** Spring Fed Records SFR-DU-33029; www.springfedrecords.com]

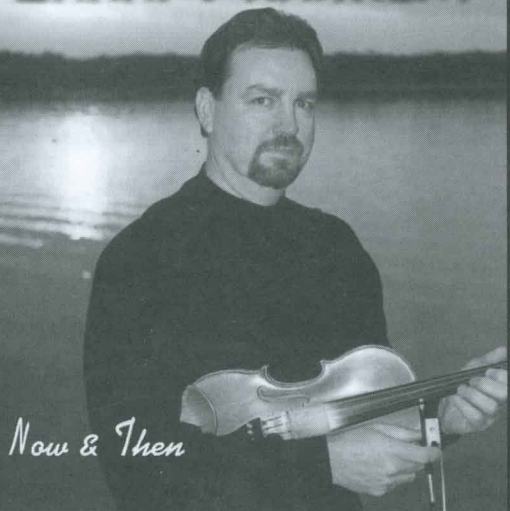
This is a classic old time recording from 1976. The old time revival was starting to really gear up and collecting tunes was a revered pastime. Garry Harrison collected these tunes throughout southern and central Illinois. The band plays the old time tunes with drive, conviction, and authority. That and the fact that these tunes may have passed the test of time makes this an important document of old time music. Many of these tunes made it into the repertoires of many of the old time fiddlers of that generation and can be heard today at festivals and competitions throughout the country. It might be added that Dave Miller does some amazing banjo playing on this recording. Fiddle and banjo tunings are annotated in the liner notes to help with learning the tunes.

— Bob Buckingham

### **Kentucky Wild Horse, *Spirits of the Lonesome Hills*** [Kentucky Wild Horse WH-001; Wild Horse Productions, 1860 Kays branch Road, Owenton, KY 40359; lostjohnharrod@yahoo.com]

This band walks the line between old time and bluegrass, with some fine song-writing thrown in. The fiddler, Paul David Smith,

## LARRY FRANKLIN



"The quality of the original tunes and the exemplary playing on *Now & Then* are ample proof that the Franklin family's reputation for producing great fiddlers is secure for another generation." — Michael John Simmons, *Fiddler Magazine*

Available at:

www.larry-franklin.com or call 1-800-BUY-MY-CD

For mail orders send:

\$16.50 (in the U.S.) / \$20.00 (outside the U.S.) to:  
P.O. Box 120095, Nashville, TN 37212

## Calvin Vollrath



Calvin Vollrath is one of North America's most prolific composers of fiddle tunes, ranging from waltzes, jigs & reels to hoedowns, country shuffles & western swing. With an assortment of 29 CDs reflecting his many styles, this is one fiddler you will want to add to your CD collection.

CD's, Music Books & more  
available online at [www.calvinvollrath.com](http://www.calvinvollrath.com)

Calvin Vollrath Music  
4513 - 45 ave  
St Paul, Alberta  
TOA 3A3  
Canada  
Tel: 780-645-7748

Available for:  
-Live Performances  
-Fiddle Workshops  
-Recording Projects

[www.calvinvollrath.com](http://www.calvinvollrath.com)  
Email: [office@calvinvollrath.com](mailto:office@calvinvollrath.com)

\* Recipient of the Canadian Grand Masters Fiddling Championship 'Lifetime Achievement Award' for his outstanding contribution to Old Time Fiddling.

Aug 2005