



AP wirephoto
Joe Dobbs is right at home if he's playing a fiddle or repairing it.

With a little glue Joe Dobbs keeps Appalachia tunes alive and well

Associated Press Special Correspondent Jules Loh, who travels around the country in search of news feature subjects, is spending this week in West Virginia.

By JULES LOH
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Joe Dobbs works in a disheveled little shop in Huntington where the tart smell of old-fashioned hide glue mingles with the sweet sound of old-fashioned mountain music and the wonder is that any work gets done at all.

"On Saturdays," Dobbs said, "we don't even make any pretense at working. We push everything aside and play."

What Dobbs plays is that ancient music of Appalachia, music brought here by pioneers, handed down by tune from fiddler to fiddler, and somehow kept intact for 200 years.

When he isn't fiddling around, Dobbs and his brother, Dennis, repair the instruments that make those soulful sounds: dulcimers, fiddles, mandolins, banjos, instruments literally as old as the hills.

"I couldn't have made a living 20 years ago," Joe Dobbs said, "but since the recent revival of traditional music, fine old instruments have been coming out of attics by the dozens."

"Somebody will come in with a sack of parts and say, 'This was grandpa's old fiddle and I want to learn to play it.'"

"Take a look at this instrument. It is a fretless banjo. The only other one I ever saw was in a museum. This one came out of an attic in Kenova. It was made before the turn of the century."

The Dobbs brothers' shop is located out on the edge of town in an area dealing in used furniture, second-hand clothes, feed, coal, life's earthy fundamentals, just the right place for a mountain music shop.

People come from miles around to find it. When they do, they are likely to be treated to an impromptu duet, Joe stroking a fiddle, Dennis plucking a banjo. If the customer feels the urge to grab a guitar off the rack and join in, have at it. Let the work go.

"If you get anxious about getting this back," Joe told a man the other day, who had brought in a guitar for repair, "call me up and give me a nudge."

Dobbs is a bouncy man of 45 put together in the shape of a barrel.

When he tucks his fiddle under his chin, under a shaggy brown and gray beard, and cradles it in his big round shoulders and thick arms, the fiddle seems fragile, toy-like.

The music it makes is far from fragile, though.

Lids close over deep blue eyes, warm red wood presses against neck and the music is alive, driving, laughing, wailing. Fellow fiddlers at folk festivals from coast to coast count Dobbs among the best.

He was raised in Mississippi and Louisiana, out in the country. Like most country musicians, Dobbs is both self-effacing and self-taught.

"My father, working the cotton fields, used to whistle tunes like 'Turkey in the Straw' and 'Leather Britches.' I thought he made them up."

"I learned all those tunes. You can imagine my feelings when I discovered, years later, that other people knew them, too."

He traveled the southwest, working at this job and that, playing with amateur groups whenever he could, and learning that it was almost impossible to find someone who could repair a fiddle.

At first he took on repairs as a sideline, mostly as a favor to fellow musicians. It soon became his livelihood, though playing a fiddle, not fixing one, remained his first love.

"When I came here in 1967 and saw these Appalachian mountains, saw where mountain music has come down in its truest form, it was as though I always knew this was where I wanted to be. I believe there are more pickers in these hills than anywhere."

"Now there is one more. One more country fiddler. Say, if you want to hear some real mountain music, drop by Saturday."