

# Fiddler Joe Dobbs tells life story, from swamps to hills

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- [Joe Dobbs](#) picked up the fiddle for the first time at age 10 in the Louisiana swamps.

His grandfather played fiddle, but little Joe had never heard him play.

Now and then, when conditions were ripe, some fiddle music might penetrate deep into the swamplands where his family had carved out a homestead.

"We had radio when there was a battery that wasn't run down," said Dobbs. You might say he has never set that fiddle down.

At age 77, Dobbs still plays in several bands. And he sounds a little surprised but happy that -- bow in hand -- he is having the time of his life right now.

"I'm having the best time I've ever had playing music. I never expected to live this long and have this much fun."

Dobbs tells the story of his life in a new self-published autobiography, "A Country Fiddler." People can pick up the book and experience his playing in person at three free concerts featuring the [1937 Flood](#), a group Dobbs co-founded nearly 40 years ago with David Peyton, Roger Samples and Charlie Bowen.

The Flood, now minus Samples, and also featuring Doug Chaffin, Sam St. Clair, Michelle Walker and Randy Hamilton, perform at 7:30 p.m. July 12 at the Paramount Arts Center's Marquee Room in Ashland, Ky.; at 6:30 p.m. July 13 at The Daily Cup in South Charleston; and at 10 a.m. July 14 at Heritage Station in Huntington.

Dobbs will read excerpts from the book, which begins with his birth in Mississippi and tracks his family's move in 1936 across the river into the Louisiana swamps.

"At that time, they were cutting the virgin timber off that land," said Dobbs in a phone interview from his St. Albans home. "So, my dad bought, like, 40 acres of land in the swamp. It was just like homesteading." They were way back up in there.

"We lived, like, 12 miles back in the swamp from the nearest town of any size," said Dobbs. "I don't think I went to town once a year. We grew everything we needed except coffee, baking powder, black pepper and salt."

"The initial urge to write "A Country Fiddler" was simply to tell his life story to his six children, starting with what life was like when being self-sufficient wasn't a lifestyle choice but the only choice a family had.

"We grew up without electricity, running water. No roads, no automobiles," said Dobbs. There was an open stock law where they lived."

All the farm animals ran wild and they fenced in the field. Everyone had brands and different markings for cattle, hogs and horses," he said. His old-fashioned upbringing was marked by another trait of old-fashioned times after young Joe got his hands on that fiddle.

"It was against my parents' will. They thought the fiddle was evil and I'd go to hell," he said.

But once he picked it up, he was not about to put it down -- he has now been playing for close to seven decades. His parents were mollified as they watched their son earn some regional renown.

"It was all right after they saw me playing on TV in the '50s," Dobbs said.

And since he hasn't ended up there -- and all evidence would seem to indicate hell will not be his final destination -- "I guess God saw me too," he noted.

Dobbs played fiddle on TV in Monroe, La., for Merle Kilgore, who wrote "Ring of Fire." Years later, when he was host of a long-running West Virginia Public Radio show called "Music From the Mountains," Dobbs interviewed Kilgore, who'd gone on to become Hank Williams Jr.'s manager."

He knew Hank when Hank was on the ["Louisiana] Hayride," said Dobbs, a popular show that was a starting point for many country music legends.

Dobbs got himself to West Virginia in 1967. "I was living in Nashville, working for a record distribution company," he recalled. "They sent me up here to sell new accounts." He and his wife soon relocated here for good.

Through the years, Dobbs and his signature snow-white Santa Claus beard have become a fixture on the state's old-time music scene. His fiddling skills and repertoire of tunes range widely, from Celtic and swing, to country and, well ... whatever may be called for.

When people ask what kind of music he plays, "I generally tell them: When I bought the fiddle it had no instructions with it -- and I play whatever I want to," said Dobbs.

As an aspiring player in college, he ran into a staff guitar player on the "Louisiana Hayride" named Brian Ritter. "I told him I wanted to play fiddle on a professional level. He said, 'You should play every kind of music you can -- don't just play what you like. If you learn to play all different kinds of music, it'll make you a better player.' That was the best advice I ever got," he said.

His fiddle is integral to the 1937 Flood's wide-ranging, fun-time mix of classic, sometimes eccentric and offbeat tunes. He also plays a bevy of styles with the band Ritch Collins Three-O, from jazz, blues and country to folk and show tunes.

Dobbs has performed abroad numerous times, including U.S. State Department trips to Africa. "I remember being in Africa, sitting on an airstrip in Niger waiting for someone from the embassy to come pick me up and thinking about where I came from. And that I wouldn't be here if I had not played the fiddle."

Dobbs paused. "Then, I thought: Man! I should have practiced harder."

"A Country Fiddler" is available at Taylor Books, Tamarack, the Culture Center Shop, the Huntington Museum Gift Shop, the Red Caboose Shop in Huntington's Heritage Village and through [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

For more on the 1937 Flood, visit [www.1937flood.com](http://www.1937flood.com).