

## MUSIC & MISCHIEF



Mark Webb/The Herald-Dispatch

Joe Dobbs performs during the Way Back Weekend Concert at Heritage Farm Museum and Village in December of 2010. Dobbs' memoir, "A Country Fiddler," is now available.

### Joe Dobbs' memoir, 'A Country Fiddler,' now available

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You would be hard-pressed to run into anyone that looks like Santa Claus who isn't an absolute storybook character in their own right.

Joe Dobbs is exhibit A.

For area music fans it is like Christmas in July finding out that the sweet-spirited, Santa-bearded fiddler, veteran radio host, and music store owner has inked up his life story in the memoir "A Country Fiddler" (\$14.95/Mid-Atlantic

Highlands, an imprint of Publishers Place).

To promote what is being billed as a "rollicking tale of music-making and mischief," Dobbs and his compadres in The 1937 Flood — the string band he help start nearly 40 years ago with David Peyton, Roger Samples and Charlie Bowen — is on tour this week.

The Flood's Joe Dobbs Book Tour features three consecutive days of gigs flavored with readings and a book-signing. Dobbs and The Flood are

playing at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, July 12, at The Marquee Room at the Paramount Arts Center, 1300 Winchester Ave., Ashland; at 6:30 p.m. Friday, July 13, at The Daily Cup, 246 7th Ave., South Charleston; and at 10 a.m. Saturday, July 14, in Heritage Station, 210 11th St., Huntington. All shows are free and open to the public.

One of West Virginia's better known fiddlers who has racked up a long list of recordings with everyone from the 1937 Flood to fellow fiddler Buddy Griffin and traveled the

world, Dobbs said he was born in Mississippi then raised in the swamps of Louisiana.

Inspired by his sister Lucille Davis' family history and research, and prodded onto the path of recapturing those memories by Patrick Grace's Life Writing Class, Dobbs, who is 78, said he began "A Country Fiddler" just to share his family's story of growing up in the swamp wilds of Louisiana.

"I had the idea for a long

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### Memoir

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time since I grew up in, for want of a better word, a primitive circumstance," Dobbs said. "I wanted my kids who grew up in this century to know about it because I thought it was interesting."

Dobbs, who lived all over the American south and southwest doing everything from fiddling on tourist trains in Colorado and selling radio advertising to working America's last diamond mine, said his growing up taught him not to worry about material things.

"You don't have any fear of being poor because you have lived through it," Dobbs said. "I remember when I went to the funeral of my sister and we were talking about how we were poor but nobody knew it because everyone was poor and the whole area was like that. I think if anything it, for me, eliminated fear. There is a little amount of security in growing up like that."

Dobbs, who wrote the 279-page book story by story, said he had the book written for five years before Grace finally talked Dobbs into publishing his incredible tales of life around the U.S., and traveling abroad as a musician.

Dobbs said one of the reasons he wanted to write about his raising so much was that much of the area he grew up in has changed so much, there truly was nothing to show his kids when he took them back home.

"It was kind of like that John Prine song ... 'Mr. Peabody's

coal train has hauled it away," Dobbs said. "I took them back to my one-room school and it doesn't exist anywhere but in my mind. Since I came out with the book, two of those boys who grew up next to me, contacted me. I hadn't heard from them in 70 years. One of them said it really hit him back there. That's one thing I learned when you start writing a lot of it comes back to you."

Dobbs, who has played with dozens and dozens of high-profile acts from George Jones to Little Jimmy Dickens, didn't put stories about those men in his book.

Dobbs only included stories of the musicians that had a real personal connection with him like Roy Clark, Roger Miller and, of course, Merle Kilgore, the Nashville music legend (writer of such songs as "Ring of Fire") and who was a good friend when they were both in college at Louisiana Tech.

"I just put in the people that I had personal relationships with," Dobbs said. "I don't want to be known for who I played with just how bad or good I played."

Best known here in West Virginia perhaps as the longtime host of the West Virginia Public Radio show "Music From the Mountains," Dobbs shares some of the magic of his days on radio both here in the Mountain State as well as all over the southwest, including New Mexico where music legend Mae Axton (who wrote "Heartbreak Hotel") pulled off of Route 66 to hand Dobbs a new record by her son Hoyt Axton, who would become a songwriting legend.

Dobbs also has rich recollections of moving to West Virginia where he started his long-running music instrument shop, Fret N' Fiddle, and his meeting such folks as the legendary Elmer Byrd.

In the book, Dobbs humorously says that he tells people he is a West Virginian, and that although he wasn't born here he got here as soon as he could.

"I had always lived in the Scots-Irish communities in the Ozarks and in Mississippi and they all trading pocket knives, playing fiddle and making whiskey and the only difference to here was that there was more musicians per capita here than anywhere I have lived," Dobbs said.

That being the case, Dobbs always stands ready to play.

Although he said he probably has another book in him (he included very little about his international travels playing music), he most likely will keep playing as much music as he can with the Flood, and Ritch Collins 3-0, as well as his Civil War fiddling.

"Some kid came in the store and bought a guitar and I told him I've been to Greece and been to England and ridden those double decker buses, and have been up in the pyramids and have seen the whales off the coast of New Zealand and Australia and all because I played the fiddle," Dobbs said. "I always say I don't play that well but it is like playing a sport you have to practice. You can't just put it under your bed. You have to practice it like a sport and if you become acceptable it can open a whole new world for you."