Originally published in *The Old Time Herald* 7:3 (Fall 2000)

Bob Carlin—Capped Crusader for Old-Time Music

By Gail Gillespie

From Swannanoa to Seattle and from Tokyo to London and just about everywhere in between, Bob Carlin is a familiar figure at old-time festivals, conventions and music workshops. In the United States and Canada, as well as internationally, Bob is one of the best known performers, preservers and promoters of Southern traditional music. Though he is a fine guitar player, he is an engaging and skilled performer on the banjo. Adept at all of the many styles of old-time banjo from the minstrel stroke style to piedmont finger-picking, his stock in trade— the banjo playing method that he has introduced to audiences around the world— is the clawhammer technique of southwestern Virginia and northwestern North Carolina.

Over the years he has played with a number of groups: bass with the Millstone Valley Boys in the early 1970s and with the Delaware Water Gap from 1974-1980. In 1980 he played with Dance All Night, which included David Brody on fiddle and Debby McClatchy on guitar and banjo. He played with Bruce Molsky in the late 1980s, and presently plays with Joe Thompson in the Joe Thompson Band, and with John Hartford.

As a traveling ambassador and crusader for traditional Southern banjo music, Bob might be one of a tiny handful of people who could qualify as old-time celebrities. He is equally well known to people who go to festivals to play and participate and to those who go to concerts and music workshops and listen to his recordings. Even after over a decade of marriage, Bob's wife, Rachel Smith is still somewhat bemused by her husband's musical fame. Rachel, who is a potter, exhibits her work at craft shows around the South and Eastern Seaboard states. At one of these events a customer came into her booth carrying a banjo. When Rachel mentioned that her husband played the banjo, the banjo-playing customer told her that he'd recently made a large breakthrough in his banjo playing by listening to recordings of a wonderfully inspiring banjo player named Bob Carlin. In fact, he recommended that if he wanted to really hear some fine banjo playing, her husband should listen to Bob Carlin. Rachel's response was, "Well, yes I'd guess you might say that he already listens to Bob Carlin. He *is* Bob Carlin."

In a world in which many fine musicians remain anonymous, Bob has always cut a more flamboyant figure. While everyone else slogs around summer fiddlers conventions in grubby t-shirts and Walmart hip-waders, Bob can be spotted resplendent in vintage Hawaiian shirts and crisp in high-belted pants, topped by a fine Panama hat. Always, always. . . Bob has a hat. Sometimes it's an old wool felt baseball cap; sometimes a funky cap advertising a bar-b-que joint; and sometimes the hat is a perfect 60-year-old Stetson transported to the festival in its own special hat box. If, to quote the title of one of his earlier recordings, you were to ask him, Where

did you get that hat? you have to be prepared for complicated directions to off-the-beaten path flea markets and junk stores. In addition to the hats and classic clothing, Bob is a collector always looking for all things old-time, from Depression Era furniture, housewares, folk toys and recordings to period musical instruments.

A visitor to Bob and Rachel's Lexington, North Carolina house must first navigate a small maze of home-made whirly gigs. Entering the house through the side porch, the visitor might notice a spectacular popsicle and marble tramp art lamp and then be seated on a split oak double rocker from a rural Tennessee craftsman. Above the mantle in the living room are a set of limber-jacks, the little jointed dancing people that tap out a beat on a flexible board; flanking them is a wall of shelves displaying Rachel's pottery. Toward the back of the house is Bob's music room, only recently freed from the baby-gate that kept Bob and Rachel's young son, Benjamin from being harmed or from doing harm to the teetering stacks of things inside. In this back room are shelved the countless recordings and books, posters of events recent and old, old photographs of local musicians and recording cover-art paintings. The room is a mute record of memorabilia of some 30 years of enthusiastic accumulation as well as of Bob's past and on-going recording and research projects. On top of shelves, above the rows of battered instrument cases and assorted dead or sleeping banjos, hats rest in hat boxes and caps of every hue and logo are stacked one upon the other.

Little needs to be said here about Bob's musical skill. He is a really great banjo player. Never a tentative noodler, he always plays flat out, pedal to the metal, but with considerable sensitivity to detail and style. Though he is not opposed to whimsical experimentation (check out his *Mr. Spaceman* recording), he does tend to keep his forays into new realms separate from his traditional banjo style, which he plays straight and true—without irony. True, he may play Beatles tunes or the theme from the Patty Duke Show ("They're cousins, identical cousins. . .") , but he doesn't mess with Sally Ann. His playing of straight up old-time banjo is striking enough that he not only attracts new listeners and players to the instrument but continues to impress his peers, even those who you'd think might be jaded from years of hearing terrific banjo players. Not too long ago, at a party, Bob was sitting in on banjo in a hot front porch session. As new guests filed by, Bob would greet them and carry on a conversation all the while knocking out the tune on the banjo at a breakneck pace. As one of the participants later observed, Bob's playing while talking was actually better than 99 percent of the banjo players she'd heard at fiddler's conventions who were doing nothing else but concentrating on their chops.

In the last 20 years or so, Bob has played with many of the best known players of his generation, having recorded with Pete Sutherland, Bruce Molsky, Judy Hyman and Jeff Claus, Brad Leftwich, James Bryan, Norman Blake, and many others. Currently Bob's two main personal recording and performing groups are situated at opposite ends of a musical spectrum: the more traditional configuration is the Joe Thompson Band with fiddler Joe Thompson and Clyde and Pam Davis, and the other group, which is aimed at a broader audience is a band centered on banjo legend John Hartford. With

each group, Bob nevertheless remains himself, adjusting his playing style to suit the band's material, playing an old Gibson resonator banjo in the style of Odell Thompson with Joe's band and employing a wider range of techniques and instruments with Hartford.

Aside from his obvious personal devotion to the banjo and to learning the various North Carolina and Virginia styles of playing, what really sets Bob apart from other performers of old-time music has been his extraordinary contributions to the understanding of the banjo within old-time music and of the larger communities that spawned it. Through his field and recording projects, he has made it possible for a whole new generation to enjoy Southern traditional music as played by its proponents.

Since his move to Lexington, North Carolina from Philadelphia some 10 years ago, Bob has been busy recording older living tradition bearers and collecting, preserving and packaging the banjo music buried in the Library of Congress and in field and home recordings. His work in North Carolina has included projects spotlighting musicians like Thomasville musicians Nolan and Dot Johnson, Mebane fiddle and banjo players Joe and Odell Thompson, Hoke County fiddler Smith McInnis, and Sanford-area finger-style banjo player Marvin Gaster. Other notable projects are recordings that he has lovingly compiled and annotated from earlier archival material or old recordings. Early examples of Bob's work of this type are his 1984 recording, *John W. Summers: Indiana Fiddler* for Rounder Records and the 1988 *Library of Congress Banjo Collection*, also on Rounder. Later, about the time of his move to North Carolina, Bob produced and compiled the landmark *Altamont* recording, a collection of amazing cuts made in the 1940s of black old-time musicians in Middle Tennessee and the comprehensive *North Carolina Banjo Collection*, a two CD set which showcased a chronology of banjo players living and dead, black and white. These two CDs are among his finest accomplishments. Through such projects as well as through his Artist in Residency positions in Davidson County and in Virginia, Bob has been a tireless crusader in the preservation and dissemination of information about the banjo. Without his efforts the extraordinary playing of many people of the past and present might otherwise have been forgotten.

A list of Bob's personal recordings, recordings that he has produced and written liner notes for as well as projects he has overseen can be found online at the CarTunes Web site [www.cartunesrecordings.com]. It is good to have a look at this if only to get an appreciation of the staggering number of high quality projects Bob has to his credit. To include everything here would take up too much space, but I have included an edited version highlighting some of the more notable items for those who would like to get some idea of the tremendous breadth and depth of Carlin's work.

Since 1995 Bob has been an active contributing editor to the *Old-Time Herald*. In the last 10 years he has written two well-researched articles ("Music Making in a Railroading Town," May-July 1995; and "Whip the Devil Around the Stump: The Story of

the Helton Brothers," November-January 1989-1990) and provided numerous musical tablatures for the magazine's "Workshop" feature. Somehow or another, though, Bob has never been the sole subject of a feature article in this magazine. It has been my privilege and honor to try and correct this oversight.

The remainder of this article is composed of an edited interview I did with Bob in early 2000. In the course of many of his recording and producing projects, Bob makes frequent visits to the Durham-Chapel Hill area where I live to make use of local recording studios and the resources of the Folklife Collection in Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina. It was during one of these library forays that we had arranged to meet for lunch at one of Bob's favorite Chapel Hill restaurants, Dip's Country Kitchen. Afterwards, we adjourned to my Carrboro house to drink coffee, talk and capture some of his thoughts on tape. My questions and comments are in italics.

What is unusual in your musical career is the way in which you have combined performing your own music with the documentation and recording of the music of an older generation of people who came up in communities in which this music was part of everyday life. How did you make this happen?

I'm the sort of person who swims against the stream. At the time I was first involved with old-time music I was concentrating on doing my own music but I was also doing radio—working part-time in radio—and I was playing out a lot. That was plenty to do! In general, you could say that what I've done in my life has had as much to do with what people were offering me as it did with my directing what I wanted to be doing.

How did you wind up in Lexington, and has that affected what you've been able to do musically?

Oh, yes. Things changed tremendously. While I was still living in Philadelphia (Bob's Philadelphia address was, interestingly enough, Mt. Airy Avenue) I had been applying for several years with the North Carolina Arts Council to receive a Visiting Artist Residency. At the time I thought of it as just another grant to apply for and just one other thing to do to try and make some money. I can remember the first couple of times I applied, I received panel comments on how to change my approach. What the panel said was, "Forget it. This guy sounds like John Hartford! Too much of a popsound!"

I feel differently now, but at the time, I was offended. I thought to myself, "I don't sound anything like John Hartford. I'm serious about this music!" Part of the art of grant writing is to slant it toward what you think they might be likely to offer you. After a couple of rejections, a friend of mine in the Arts Council took me aside and advised me about what to do. He said, "You need to make a serious tape on which you talk about each piece and tell about who you learned it from, what it meant to you." So, rather than send a tape of a performance, where you do what you need to do to give several hundred performances a year, showing the skills you had, I had to do this

whole other type of thing. I had to say, "This is a piece that I learned from (for example) Fred Cockerham. Fred was a brilliant musician I knew back in 1975." So, after I did this, they gave it to me. I thought, "Gee, I got the grant (at Davidson County Community College). How about that? Hey, Rachel, let's move!"

It was officially a one year [grant] but was actually renewable, you could be in the program for four years, up to two years at one institution. Usually, if they'd hire you for a year, they would hire you for two years.

I'd always liked [North Carolina] and my goal was really to live in the South. Plus the radio job in Philadelphia had played itself out several years before and my opportunities there were just running out. So, we ended up in Lexington, because that was where I had to live in order to do that first residency at Davidson County Community College. I did two years there and then the program started to be dismantled by the legislature. They cut the heart out of it and killed it. {Then I did] a half year in Virginia, commuting back and forth to home. After that, I did a half a year at Catawba County Community College down in Hickory. But I had known people before I came down, like Bill Mansfield, who had managed to make a living with these Arts Council Visiting Artist programs. To us poor musicians, these jobs were "real money," with benefits.

So, the little Arts Council jobs enabled you to come to North Carolina, where you wanted to be all along.

Yes, plus it was an amazing opportunity because it gave you time to work on your craft. It helped me to develop publicity materials. Also, during the first residency I had to write grants because my boss suggested I do something different for the next year. She said, "why don't you do something on the music of the area? You have experience doing this. Why don't you write a grant to the humanities council?" So, I ended up writing this major grant. I think it was for $10-$l5,000 or so, I don't know, it was some big amount. So, we got local arts money and college money and humanities money and did this year-long project. It resulted in a publication, *Musical Change in the Western Piedmont*.

Has everything just worked out pretty smoothly for you since then?

Well, everything just came together. One thing led to another was the way it just seemed to go. One of the big failures of my life, though, was because of the fact that I don't seem to have much skill as a songwriter. Once, sometime in the '80s, I wrote and received a grant to write pieces for Indonesian gamelan orchestra and banjo. So, I made recordings of them and everybody hated them. I mean, everybody hated them. Everybody I played it for really didn't like it. I'm just not a songwriter, a composer.

Wow, I never heard about this. What on earth possessed you to try to get such a grant?

Part of it was that I really wanted to go to Asia, to Japan. And part of it was because I

had studied gamelan in college. Well, I did eventually go to Japan, but it was much later and with John Hartford.

Now, that relationship is something I think readers may be interested in. Could you talk a little bit about how your musical relationship with John Hartford came about? I can understand the benefits both ways, but what I can't figure out is how you two crossed paths.

You'd be surprised in how interested John is in old-time fiddle music. That's what he grew up hearing. He came up on the cusp when it was changing to bluegrass. But even back then, a lot of bluegrass bands were an old-time fiddler with a three-finger banjo player. That's what he grew up hearing outside of St. Louis. So, John has a part of him that really loves that type of music. He may define it a little differently than people who listen to Melvin Wine and Tommy Jarrell, but he still comes out of an old-time fiddle tradition. That's a component, but not the whole thing of what he does. He's also a smart guy who's long had an interest in the history of the music and of the banjo.

I don't know exactly when we met, though. I remember going to his house once when I was doing a workshop in Lebanon, Tennessee. Two of the guys that went on with Bobby Fulcher to organize the Tennessee Banjo Institute at Cedars of Lebabon had put on this workshop for me. The next day this guy stopped by—who has since passed away—who was making gourd banjos in Mississippi. He asked me to come with him when he presented one of his gourd banjos to John Hartford. I agreed, and we went out to John's house to give him the banjo. I don't think I knew John before that. That encounter, sometime in the late '80s, I guess, was the first time I really met him. I had also interviewed him on the radio much earlier, but that wasn't really getting to know him. When "Fresh Air"was a local show, I did an interview with him. I'd done some interviews for "Fresh Air" of music people.

John and you like to play Ed Haley tunes and you collaborated on the Ed Haley CD series. Did John take up the fiddle recently?

No, no. He'd played the fiddle since he was a kid. It was his first instrument. He played fiddle before he played banjo. When I play with him, he plays the fiddle and I play the banjo, but when I met him he was more associated with the banjo. His love affair with the violin is actually more recent—since I met him. I used to see him years ago at the Philadelphia Folk Festival and up North in the '70s and '80s when he was on top of it all. My image of him was that he'd run in, do his show, and move on. To tell the truth, I didn't like the show he put on at that time, with the little gizmo on the dancing board. I do know that I didn't like the NC Arts Council Panel comparing me to him. I remember once making a negative comment about [Hartford] to Robin and Linda Williams, accusing him of being crass and commercial. They said I was all wrong, "Oh, no, no. John's not really like that at all. His music really has depth."

Eventually we started seeing each other around. If I was at a place where John was playing, I'd end up getting on stage with him for a few tunes. During that period he was doing either solo shows or playing with his son Jamie on mandolin or sometimes Roy Husky, Jr. was there playing bass. I sat in on a bunch of shows, visited him in Nashville, and saw him at the Tennessee Banjo Institute. Eventually, it became a goal of mine to do a recording with him because, at that time, CDs hadn't been around all that long and Rounder was not doing any old-time music. Any project I brought to them, they wouldn't do. CDs cost enough at that point and it wasn't something they felt comfortable doing. It wasn't established yet. So, in 1988 or 1989, when Bruce Molsky and I did *Take Me As I Am*, which came out on Marimac, Rounder had turned that down. They turned down several other projects at that point, so [playing with John Hartford] was one way to get Rounder's interest.

Our first recording was a fiddle banjo album called *The Fun of Open Discussion*. It was done at his home, just on a DAT machine with a stereo microphone. And before that there was a box set of Civil War music done by Time-Life. That was produced by the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State. I played on that with him on a few things. We did [those albums] and little by little the whole performing business had changed. By the mid-'90s there was no circuit for someone at mylevel—that is, not being a beginner and not being a big star. I'm someone who could probably sell 50 to a couple of hundred seats, but all the little clubs have been taken over by people who are at the next step up, like John Hartford. Most of the circuit I used to do has dried up. There's just a lot more competition for people's dollars and a lot more performers who are "professional." For example, there were 35,000 CDs that came out last year. There's a glut of music! So, there isn't a lot of room for a guy that plays the banjo, sings songs and tells jokes.

John wanted my producing and business skills and besides that, John, in his eccentric genius, wanted to put a band together that would support his fiddle playing. In the '70s he'd had the Aeroplane band, but in the mid-'70s he'd gone solo. It was simpler for him that way and he did that for a while. He started wanting a band and he put together what he has now. He would have a bigger band if he could. I can't really speak for him, but he just saw my banjo playing as adding something to a band made up of guys who were bluegrassers with a very different sense of things. It did take a while for us to be able to speak each other's language and, at first there was a lot of musical clashing. I saw it as an exciting and creative thing and something, to be blunt, that a band with John Hartford was a happening thing commercially. Now, there are periods of time when I am pretty much touring on the bus with him four and five days every week for two months at a time. You can't beat a bus when you're at some muddy festival and you've got a bathroom and a shower and a dry bed to lie down on!

One of the nice things about playing with John—I say one of the nice things because there are lots of nice things—is that you show up, you take the banjo out of its case, you tune it up, you get on stage and away you go. You just follow the leader and it's kind of nice, for a change, that it's his show. But, within that structure, I really just try to

please myself and play good music. John's got an interesting approach. He says we should be so relaxed and so natural on stage that it's almost like it's disarming. He obviously doesn't do this all the time because he—and all of us—have very definite characters that we inhabit for the purpose of performing. There are devices that he uses. For instance, he'll do things that I never would. He'll just get on stage without shaving sometimes. Though he'll always put on his costume of the derby and vest , sometimes he won't shave or he'll just be so relaxed he's just letting it all hang out. I have a very definite attitude when I get on stage. Very early on, I went from wearing jeans and flannel shirt to developing a stage image that had not been adapted by the mass society: a hat, the '40s tie and the distinctive shoes, the glasses that are recognizable and that's still my basic look.

Wearing a certain identifiable look has become the character that I inhabit in order to be on stage. With John, my character has had to evolve in a way that is a support character for his band. I haven't got it totally figured out yet, but it's a support character—the Jewish banjo player, the old-time musician in the band of Southern bluegrass musicians. The four other people (in the Hartford band) come from Southern backgrounds and sometimes there have been times when I have my solo spot that everyone stands behind me and makes fun of me. Laughs. That has definitely happened—maybe because I'm so earnest I'm an easy target. So, there's a certain macho Southern attitude that's in real contrast to the way I was raised. Their stage look is also evolving. John has the derby and riverboat thing going; Chris, our guitar player sometimes looks just like Lester Flatt in the '50s, and Mike went from being a real '40s suit guy to taking up bib overalls. And Larry wears a "going to church"overall outfit which consists of bib overalls and a suit jacket—like the farmer going to church on Sunday. Seriously though, I have been taking some of what John says to heart because I think there's a lot to learn from him. I have been just getting up and being me—not just a performance character— just playing what I love in the best way that I can.

How about the person you are when you play with Joe Thompson and his band?

Well, that's a different character. It's a support character, too, but a different one because I'm the straight man. I'm not the straight man in John's band because there's no room for a straight man. It's all about John. With Joe, it's almost like I'm there to feed him the lines. I'll say, "Joe, your dad used to play this tune, didn't he?"And, he'll say (imitating Joe's voice): "Well, yeah Bob,"and this will launch him into a story. After a while, it's obvious that we already know what we're going to say but Joe needs a little prodding. It's also a nice stage device to have someone interviewing him just to kind of set him up. My job is to shine the light on Joe. It's all about him and not me. I'm trying to get people to honor what he is doing. He has his speeches very well set up and he practices them even at home.

There have been times, though, when I've been up there with Joe and thought to myself, "what the hell am I doing up here?" A white boy who grew up in the Northeast

playing this music? Why am I doing it? I actually considered not doing it a number of times. Clyde, who's also white, at least grew up in the same community that Joe did and it feels more natural for him and Pam to be there. I feel sometimes like maybe it is a little strange. Joe and I have talked about it a lot and I've told him I want to do it for him if he wants me to.

I'd like to interject a little story I don't think I told you. One day I was at Joe's practicing with him and Molly Stouten to play at a little festival in Hillsborough. Joe really wanted Molly to get the banjo a certain way on one of the tunes and he pulled out a tape. He said "now Molly, listen to this because this is just the best banjo playing you'll ever hear."I was expecting maybe it would be Nate, but instead it was an early dub of the Joe Thompson Family Tradition *CD [see review on pg. 41] with you playing the banjo. So, I think he likes your banjo playing just fine!*

Oh really! Well, I'm surprised! He probably doesn't think that way all the time. It was maybe just that moment. So I have always tried to sound as much like Odell as possible. I purposely chose to put just Joe's picture on the cover. Joe wanted it to be "Joe and Nate and 'Dell," but it's really Joe's recording. I really didn't want a full band picture on the cover. It was the same with the Marvin Gaster CD. Even if I was on the recording, these projects are meant to put the spotlight on them.

I'd like to backtrack and get you talking some more about how the Ed Haley recordings happened? Like the Altamont *and* N.C. Banjo Collection *CDs, this is some pretty important stuff and I think people will be interested.*

Well, John Hartford fell in love with Ed Haley's music and decided to eat, breathe, drink anything Ed Haley. So, he went and made friends with anyone who'd ever seen or heard Ed Haley and eventually the family said, "Here are the discs, they're yours. Do whatever you want to with them."At the time, I was Hartford's project director for recordings and I think I sort of insinuated myself into the situation because I saw that there was a recipe for disaster about to happen! It was possible that because these recordings were of such poor quality, when it came out, that they wouldn't be treated in any sort of state-of-the-art way. In fact, someone else had made dubs of them, and when we took them in to master them they really weren't very good. So, we had to go back and re-dub everything! What John essentially said to all of us was "I have a brand name. John Hartford: that's my brand name. You may use this brand name to your advantage any way you want." He wanted very much to see the Ed Haley stuff come out, but he certainly didn't have any knowledge of how to oversee the recording so that it would sound right. So, because I had a relationship with him and because I also had a relationship with Rounder, I got myself in there and eventually ended up supervising the sound. They just assumed I was the project director and just started sending me artwork to look at. And, it's important to emphasize that without John being behind it, first off, Rounder would never have done it and secondly, they wouldn't have done four CDs worth. There was just no way. John managed to get four CDs worth of good music put out that would, for Rounder, probably never make any money.

And, although, at the end of each recording, the sound quality is pretty poor, at least they're there! It was really a trial—it really tried our relationship, and I'll tell you what—the mastering engineer never wants to hear the word Ed Haley again!

And, as it turns out, this audio "rescue work"has become a specialty of yours.

Yes. It's just something that I became interested in. Through working with Mike Casey at the Southern Folklife Collection, I learned about acetate and home discs, 78s and the best ways to transfer sound from them. I've worked on a number of similar projects: the Library of Congress series for Rounder, the *North Carolina Banjo Collection* CDs and that type of thing, where I needed that knowledge. I've learned to do this pretty well, but I have to say that Rich Nevins at Shanachie does about my favorite job of transferring recordings from commercial 78s. Unfortunately he's just too busy to be able to do them for anyone but himself and for County, or we would have gladly used him for the *North Carolina Banjo Collection*.

The other thing that I know you do is teach banjo. Tell me something about your teaching and the music camps you've been to.

For me, teaching is about as much fun as anything. I like being with a focused group of people that really want to learn and really care about what you do and about the banjo. I generally like doing camps and it's one of my favorite things to do. I have, as a visiting artist, done school performances, but I'd really rather teach at camps. I especially like the way they do things at the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes. I like the balance of structure and informality and the fact that you don't have to pre-register and can choose each day what you want to do. It may be too big now, but I think it's still one the best. This year will be my sixth Fiddle Tunes (The Centrum Festival of American Fiddle Tunes in Port Townsend, WA).

I've also been to Augusta, but not by myself. I was there to play with Joe Thompson. And I went to Ashokan as part of Bruce Molsky's band. Generally, I'm better known on the West Coast than the East. I did work at the three Tennessee Banjo Institutes and the last two years at the Maryland Banjo Academy, but I seem to get more teaching work on the West Coast. There's also a new festival, in the upper Midwest started by Gail Heil up on the Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa border. They've added banjo this year and they asked me to come. Geoff Seitz was there, and Bruce Green.

Well, we're about out of time and tape. What are some things you're working on right now?

Right now? Well, I'm producing Cary Fridley's recording, her first recording after leaving the Freight Hoppers. It's less in the string-band style and focuses more on her singing. Jake Owen plays banjo on it, Art Stamper is fiddling, and Larry Perkins, who plays with John Hartford, plays guitar and banjo on it as well as Chris Sharp, playing guitar. The bigger picture is that I'm really interested in producing recordings of

"roots"artists: not just old-time music, but artists who play real music in real time. No overdubbing. Recently, I did a recording with a woman who is a blues, swing musician out of Seattle. So, I'm trying to move more into production. Another thing is that Mike Seeger is doing a series of Homespun Videos to go along with his banjo styles CD and I'm working on the tablatures for that. I'm also just finishing my part of a series called the *Musical Atlas*. Jeff Titon is the editor. It's a layman's guide on where to find ethnic music in the United States and I'm the clean-up man who arranges all the permissions for it. Then, I'm playing a lot with Joe Thompson this year. Because of his CD, there's been an upsurge in interest in his music. He is 81 and you never know how long he'll want to be traveling. I also have a book that came out this spring, called *Southern Exposure*. It's a look at folk music before World War II done entirely in photographs. Richard, my brother, instigated it and he wrote the captions and I chose the photographs. Many are from the Library of Congress, the Farm Security Administration but a lot are photos that I've found over the years. I think it'll be a nice book. I'm getting ready to write a couple of my own, too. One is a look at the banjo in the South — how it went from black to white hands and the minstrel scene, using Joel Sweeney as the main character. Another future project is a book or series presenting the research I've done on music and musicians in the North Carolina Piedmont. I would like to get this information out there. It's time.

I guess I have always just tried to do a lot of things. I've just always been obsessive about being busy, and it took having a kid four years ago to force me to slow down. There's also a push to make a living and to take advantage of opportunities while they are there. Then, of course there is always this more powerful pressure to get it all done before you die or before they die. So many of the real old-time players are getting on in years and I'm aware that there's a very real need to get things down before it's too late.
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Discography

Recordings with Bob Carlin as Producer, Compiler and Annotator, Recording Engineer and/or Artist:
2000: *The Banjo on Folkways: Volume One and Two*. Folkways Fiddle. Washington, DC. (Smithsonian Folkways).
Western North Carolina Fiddle: (Under the Folklife Section/North Carolina Arts Council Grant) NC Arts Council
The Boys from North Carolina: Joe Thompson (under a Folklife Section/NC Arts Council grant) CarTunes Recordings.
Del Rey/*X-Rey Guitar* (Hobemian)
American Fiddle Tunes (Library of Congress)

Afro-American Folk Music from Tate and Panola Counties (Library of Congress)
1999: *Anglo-American Ballads: Volume Two* (Library of Congress)
Negro Work Songs and Calls (Library of Congress)

Joe Thompson/*Family Tradition* (Rounder)
John Hartford/*Good Old Boys* (Rounder)
1998: *North Carolina Banjo Collection* (under a Folklife Section/North Carolina Arts Council Grant)
Ed Haley *Grey Eagle* (Rounder)
John Hartford: *The Speed of the Old Long Bow*
The Hammons Family (Library of Congress)

1997: Ed Haley *Forked Deer* (Rounder)
Rhythm Rats (Marimac Recordings)

Blue Ridge Mountain Holiday (County)

Mr. Spaceman (CarTunes)

1996: Marvin Gaster *Uncle Henry's Favorites* (Under a Folklife Section/North Carolina Arts Council grant)
John Hartford/*Wild Hog in the Red Brush* (Rounder)
1995: *George Pegram* (Rounder)
John Hartford/Bob Carlin *The Fun of Open Discussion* (Rounder)
Clawhammer Banjo-Volume One and Two (Homespun Tapes)

1994: *Nolan and Dot Johnson* (CarTunes)
Minstrel Banjo Style (Rounder)
1991: *The Civil War Music Collector's Edition*. Time-Life Music.
1990: Bob Carlin and Bruce Molsky *Take Me As I Am* (Marimac)
1989: *Altamont* (Rounder)
1988: *Library of Congress Banjo Collection* (Rounder)
1985/96: *Banging and Sawing* (Rounder)
1984: John W. Summers *Indiana Fiddler* (Rounder)
1983: *Where Did You Get that Hat?* (Rounder)
1981: *Fiddle Tunes for Clawhammer Banjo* (Rounder)
1980: *Banjo Gems* (Kicking Mule)
1979: *Southern Clawhammer Banjo* (Kicking Mule)
The Delaware Water Gap *From the Rivers of Babylon* (Kicking Mule)
1977: *Melodic Clawhammer Banjo* (Kicking Mule)
The Delaware Water Gap (Adelphi)

Bob Carlin is the most famous guy in the band, including the leader. He's the first in recent times to really make a drop thumb banjo style fit into a contemporary old-time band style. He understands old-time country music better than most people who come from that in their background, and brings an Eastern sophistication to it that these old country boys sometimes can't quite get their teeth around—certainly a rare combination. He produces our records and gets a freshness out of us that we can't seem to get any other way. He's great on the road, he takes care of everything from visiting with Jim Bollman and seeing instruments we never thought we'd see for real to finding the best sushi restaurants. He's funny, he keeps us laughing all the time; we can argue and yell and come away friends. He's a collector of vintage clothing, and he got Chris Sharp the finest shoes you ever saw. Above all and most important, he's a fine musician and understands time and intonation really well. He's also a good singer and creative with his own work which we try to feature every show, and has a great voice, although he doesn't think so. He's a fine writer and has written many great magazine articles and is currently working on a large tome about Joel Walker Sweeney. Sometimes when he's out on the road with us, he let's us tag along when he goes to do his research. He has a cell phone and we can reach him any time of day or night, which is really neat. In addition to being a fine record producer he really knows about microphones and all the sophisticated electronics that go in to all that. He did a superb job on the Ed Haley reissues in addition to proofreading our liner notes. His only drawback is that he snores real loud, and when he sleeps on the couch at the front of the bus, Chris always tries go to sleep before he does. We all love him and hope he'll stay with us for a long time.
—*John Hartford*