



DOCK BOGGS: HIS FOLKWAYS RECORDINGS, 1963-1968

SFW40108

Reissue of Folkways 2351, 2392, and 3903

Internet version of liner note essay

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"Down a Lonesome Road': Dock Boggs' Life in Music"

Introduction

"Let us now praise famous men." Dock Boggs belongs among them. Most of his life was lived in the obscurity this Biblical passage celebrates. He deserves fame for his efforts to live true to what he believed his God expected of him. Never a conventional life his was also shaped by extraordinary gifts. Among them was an almost instinctive capacity to see and hear the events of his world newly. Dock worked forty-five years in coal mines; only for a short period was he able even to imagine he might make a living as a musician. Like many miners he refused to be a company man, a particularly courageous stance in those days when the coal companies held tyrannical power. He spoke out, resisted, named his own course, and followed it. From the early pre-World War I days he was a believer in union, in the United Mine Workers, quick to educate his fellows in the early 1930s about a company attempt to thwart the creation of UMW local by offering a company union in its stead. "Emmet," Dock told the miner promoting the company union, "that paper you got ain't worth a dime. Anything the company's head of and rules and runs, why it isn't gonna do the men very much good." He survived all the years underground without suffering either injury to his limbs or to his spirit, a feat which bespeaks luck and brilliant skill. He never bowed to the subtle arts or flagrant acts of the powerful who controlled his work world, the communities he lived in, and the political structure.

His music tangibly registers Dock's gift for impressing his own design upon experience, his refusal to accept anything simply as it was given to him. The musical talent was not, I think, like a graft setting apart an otherwise ordinary man. It was, instead, integral to all his ways of being. It was also an achievement both taken from him and renounced. And so his music must have been a haunting and frustrating and puzzling possibility for him during the almost thirty-five years he lived without playing or singing.

Dock Boggs became famous in the conventional sense twice in his life—became known, that is, to a public beyond his home precincts of Wise County, Virginia and Letcher County, Kentucky. In 1927 he recorded eight songs for the Brunswick recording company in New York City and a few years later, four songs for Lonesome Ace in Chicago, a one-man company which went under in 1929, shortly after the recordings were made. Dock's hopes for a recording career went with it. He was initially discovered exactly as most important mountain musicians were. Recording executives, in this case from Brunswick, traveled through the Southern mountains auditioning talent to create recordings for a whole new musical market of country folk and rural migrants to the cities. Their tastes and interests were being discovered and catered to by the new recording industry, and by radio, beginning in the mid-twenties and reaching a peak in the first years of the Depression. The Brunswick people came to Norton, Virginia, to set up at the Hotel, and of some seventy-five musicians who came forward, Dock was one the few banjo players. His distinctive sound apparently caught the talent scouts from his first notes. They needed to hear him play only a few bars of his "Country Blues," a rearrangement of a traditional song entitled "Hustlin' Gamblers," and of "Down South Blues," a song he had adapted to his voice and the banjo from a blues record. His being recorded constitutes an important chapter in the documentation by commercial record companies of the history of the Anglo, African, and ethnic American musical traditions.

This first musical career was short despite Dock's several efforts to record more and to make of music his source livelihood. His second encounter with the world's fame lasted longer, though it did not occur until the 1960s, the last decade of his life. Several of his Brunswick sides enjoyed an underground reputation among students of American country music, a small group at first but one aware of the cultural riches available on early commercial recordings. Charles Seeger, John and Alan Lomax, the painter Thomas Hart Benton, Robert Gordon, and Harry Smith were among the members of a group who kept alive Dock Boggs's music in a cultural world distant from the rural cultures which generated and continued to sustain such music. The folk revival of the 1960s generated new collectors who searched out practitioners of the

vernacular music of White and Black Americans: new musicians never before recorded were brought before the college-age and urban audiences that supported the revival, and many musicians, known only through older recordings or lore, were located and again brought to performance before an audience very different from the rural folk and working-class city dwellers whose music this actually was.

So it was that Dock Boggs's second career began. Three weeks after Mike Seeger located and met Dock in June 1963 at his home in Norton, Virginia, Dock made the first of what would be many festival appearances in the next seven years--at the American Folk Festival in Asheville, North Carolina. These seven years also included three Folkways albums of his music (reissued on SF 40108), far more than had been recorded in the late Twenties, and an album of excerpts from Seeger's interviews with Dock..

This essay draws upon nearly forty hours of interviews with Dock taped by Mike Seeger. The tapes record a range of situations and reflections: Dock's and Mike's first meetings; the first festival appearances and Dock's nervous introductions to his songs, as well as his later, personally and musically more assured, performances; times at his home in Norton, Virginia chatting casually over meals or in cars en route to one or another musical event; reminiscences about his life and the sources for his songs and his style; and several intense, intimate, troubled talks with Mike Seeger, the man Dock came to see as his closest friend after their unexpected meeting in June 1963. Those have been the primary sources for the following chronology and interpretation of Dock Boggs's life and music.

Dock often roughly estimated occurrences and would suggest that a particular event happened "twenty-five years ago," or "twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five, forty years ago." Establishing exact dates or the correct spellings of place and people's names has sometimes eluded me, but I often have been able to do so, either by reconciling material in several interviews or from independent sources. Two such dates: Dock worked his last shift in the coal mines on April 29, 1954. More difficult to verify is the exact date when Dock pawned his banjo to a friend and thus gave up making music. In the 1960s he repeatedly commented that he had not played for twenty-five years and spoke of having just begun to play shortly before Mike Seeger appeared. Twenty-five years before 1963 would have been 1938, but Dock had ceased being an active musician a good while before that year.

The evidence for a specific date is fragmentary, but Dock implies in one statement that he pawned his banjo during a "bank holiday" in the midst of the Depression. He needed cash desperately, he remembered, and none of the banks were open. The bank holiday may well have

been the one of early spring 1933, just before F.D.R.'s inauguration, when virtually every bank in the country had closed to prevent runs on their funds. The economy was so straitened in the Southern mountains by early 1930 that Dock was unable to continue playing for money. People simply had no cash, let alone surplus funds to support buying tickets for dances. Recordings were even a greater luxury. After Dock recorded four sides for the Lonesome Ace Company in late 1929 he was able to sell them locally only a short time. By June 1930 he was forced to return his stock to Lonesome Ace for a credit of \$70, the cost at wholesale of some 140 recordings.

His many references years later to when he gave up playing indicate how slowly his hopes died. It may well not have been until sometime around 1938, the "twenty-five years ago" of 1963, that Dock finally resigned himself to a life in the mines. The banjo, temporarily pawned to a friend in 1933 in expectation that such hard times could not last much longer, would not be his again until retirement. Choosing then to revive his banjo-playing, Dock's only expectation would have been the recovery of memories of a time when he hoped for a different life. How long before Mike Seeger's visit he had retrieved the instrument is not clear. Sometimes he said it had been only a few weeks earlier, at others that he had been practicing for about six months after almost thirty years of not playing. His recovery of his astounding technique and of many of his songs so that he could record and perform immediately after meeting Seeger was, in any case, a remarkable feat. It attests to both will and a superb musical talent. A musician of such quality might conceivably, after so many years, bring back his music with a few months' intensive practice, but I would guess that Dock in fact had labored longer, perhaps from 1956, the second year of his retirement.

Recollection has its own rhythms, times when details and textures flood the mind and times when it seems parched, barely able to mark the simplest chronologies. The mind turns back upon itself differently in response to another's questions than it does to its own seemingly random ruminations. Mike Seeger's questions direct the early interviews, along with his effort to reconstruct a basic outline of Dock's life; as time passed and the relationship between the two men deepened, Dock seemed to return to what most concerned him: the rupture in his musical career and its causes; his religious beliefs and practices, particularly in terms of whether his playing music was sinful, as some of his community insisted; and his anxieties about a return to active music-making. This essay takes its focus from these recurring elements in Dock Bogg's and Mike Seeger's conversations over six years.

Some Patterns and Context

Dock Boggs' life as a coal miner has an historical importance equal not only to his musical achievement but also to that of any of the powerful and famous who so often dominate history textbooks. To explore and to celebrate his role in the common life of his fellow workers and neighbors proposes standards of value which violate those still taught to most Americans in school, enforced at work, and played out in the media. It is only from the materials of lives such as his that we might learn the full dimensions of American history. Incarnated in them are the dilemmas and promises of a democratic society that continues, however falteringly, in a struggle to realize itself. Dock's were the struggles carried on by working-class Americans: to discover and possess a measure of dignity, to earn a living in an economy which denies steady and decent work to most, to hold a marriage together against the strains and humiliations, to leave something of worth in and for those who come after.

Dock worked the mines from the time he was 12 until he was 56, 1910 to 1954. In those forty-four years he and his fellows knew brief periods of prosperity. What requires respect and comprehension is their capacity to sustain themselves in a constantly disrupted economic world. For a while, jobs would be plentiful and the pay good, as in the years just prior to and following World War I, enough so that many were able to unionize, itself a sign of stability and of workers' economic independence. At other times jobs would be scarce, the union destroyed or weakened, the pay barely enough, conditions so bad that in times like the early Depression miners who had work were compelled, in return for starvation wages, to accept near feudal dominance by the coal operators. The second War brought prosperity again for seven to ten years, then a new wave of mechanization threw almost three-quarters of the miners permanently out of the industry. By the time of Dock's retirement he lived in one of the most economically depressed regions in the United States. The young and able-bodied migrated out to find work, the aged and the injured--an especially large group in coal communities--remained, often in terrible poverty and loneliness.

He was a churchgoer in middle age, perhaps originally in deference to his wife Sara. In a local culture serious about Christianity and spiritual experience, men commonly revived religious loyalties at that time in life when earthly consolations seem more elusive and less dependable than those of the Lord. Dock experienced conversion in 1942 and for eight or ten years lived a regenerate life. He was ordained a deacon of his church, supervised the Sunday school at Hemphill, Kentucky where he then lived, and sought generally to live a Christian life of faith and good works: "I lived a pretty straight life for eight or ten years. . . . Attended church regular. And was a worker in the community for the

betterment of living and getting along and to help people." "My mind was more on heavenly things or the Bible. . .or doing something for my fellow man. . .than it is ever been before, you see. I didn't pull away money I had maybe I would have spent for whiskey, why I would give it to someone that needed it worse than I did. Many a time me and John Miller. . . we'd take carloads of stuff to people's houses where maybe the man was down sick and didn't have no wage, wasn't drawing no Social Security, wasn't drawing anything you see. And probably he maybe hadn't worked in the mines in years for to have anything."

Times of blessed assurance come rarely, and there was much in Dock's personal history and in the suffering so abundant around him in the 1950s to undermine assurance. Whiskey had brought relief many times in his life, easing his nervousness about being on stage or recording, relaxing some of the persistent tension of a worklife exposed daily to great and unpredictable danger, and offering recreation and camaraderie in an environment Dock often characterized as savage. It was hard to keep off it. His worklife ended abruptly, not a retirement so much as permanent unemployment, and this must have caused many worries, especially in the first few years when had no pension because he was only 56. He was dependent on Sara and her vegetable garden and whatever savings they had. Had he wanted to work, he could not have. He spoke little about these nine years in his conversations with Mike Seeger. Sometime during them he decided to gamble that he could recover his music and that someone might care to hear him again. Time may well have weighed on him and led him to the music as a way to pass it. The motive was deeper, I suspect: his memories had time to take shape and bring him an acutely felt regret about the course of his life. His Christian faith held, but not his sense of peace. He struggled until his death with depression, puzzled by his own spiritual backsliding, ambitious for his music and its immortality, wondering if his passionate re-engagement with music explained his loss of the felt presence of his God.

His was a history--but for his art--like the histories of most working-class Americans. Struggles and victories were experienced in fragments and uncertainties; material competence was so hard won as to make much else in life luxurious or plainly unimaginable. Owning and keeping some self-respect were precarious acts. Dock once explained that he had stayed a coal miner because "That was the only kind of work I was qualified for and understood and I could get the best jobs they had in the mines. . . . They never cursed me." His pride in his skill was made irrelevant when the mines mechanized; the record he had earned became a matter of indifference in a work world that no longer had need of him. Never having been cursed was what

was left, knowing you had been one of the few to draw a modest line limiting the power of those who would expropriate even a man's self-respect. And there was his music, or at least the memory of a turning in his life that might somehow be repaired, switched, an entrance into a world with different standards of regard and respect.

The usual fate is to live with pain and unhappiness, brief fulfillments, self-doubt, the terrible patternless slipping away of our days in discrete unrelated moments and acts. Outwardly Dock's life passed like most others, though his manifest independence and his refusal to acquiesce to the coal operators mark him as exceptional and as a man who would be so whatever the occupation or class. Through his music he transmuted the everyday into something more beautiful and startling and acute than we are usually able to feel. His music held the daily, marked its depths, and through the harshness and passion intensely present in his voice, gave it shape:

Said all I can say, I've done all I can do

And I can't make a living with you,

Can't make a living with you.

Musical Influences and Social Changes

Speculations about what impels artists rarely do justice either to their art or to the wonderfully perplexing human mystery of it. But it can be valuable to reconstruct the process by which a particular artist acquires the craft basis for his expression. Musical biography of a figure like Dock Boggs has other merits. Not enough is yet understood about the history of American country music, its evolution, or the specific innovations within its traditions which steadily reshaped the music from the late nineteenth century to the present. Many musicians in the vernacular traditions have some distinguishing stylistic signature, but few are consistent innovators or inventors who build upon and extend significantly the expressive range of the music they inherit. Dock was one of these few.

Dock Boggs lived in a place and time of particularly intense and fast change. Youngest of ten children, he was born on February 7, 1898 in West Norton, Virginia, a railroad and mining center not yet a decade old. The motive and shape of economic change in the region were already settled by his birth: industrial capitalism dominated by a single extractive industry in which most owners directly pitted themselves against workers. The few other enterprises in the region were too marginal to complicate or soften the starkness of the conflict in the coal fields. His older siblings could have known a sharply contrasted

way of life. Some were children when the senior Boggses were nearly self-sufficient farmers in the relative isolation of the Southern mountains before the railroads were built to develop the timber and coal in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Before Dock's birth the Southern mountains protected an economy slowly being integrated into a regional market economy. Cash was scarce and people's expectations and relations were relatively steady and sustained. Dock's father bore the brunt of transition from a settled and agrarian life to earning wages and living in a small industrial city. The senior Boggs, born in 1849, moved from farming to blacksmithing and carpentry, two useful skills in a railroad and mining town. The oldest children must have shared some of the shocks of the many changes: the abandonment of three farms, each one successively smaller than the last; accommodation to the rhythms and authority structures of industrial work; the adjustment to urban-like environments and a diversity of peoples, mountaineers from different locales, African Americans from all over the South, as well as European immigrants.

By the time Dock was born the family possessed only the remnants of an agrarian past. Dock's experiences were shaped entirely within the rawness of the new industrial world. The pace of change was fierce. When he went into the mines in 1910 the coal industry was on the verge of one of its periodic surges of expansion. New rail lines were being rapidly built, more coal camps and mines opened up throughout the region, and more African Americans and immigrants came to the region in large numbers to provide the labor. The boom was particularly strong in the border counties of eastern Kentucky and south-western Virginia where Dock lived, and it would not abate until 1921-22 with a minor depression, prelude to the greater one.

Older musical cultures were changing as much as the economic and social structures. Here Dock worked both as a progenitor of change and as a transmitter of older practices. Music was an important part of his family's daily activities. At least three of his older brothers played the banjo and sang: John, the oldest son, Dave, and Roscoe. His sister, Jane, the oldest child, also sang and played the banjo. And Dock recalled his sisters Annie and Laura as memorable singers. His father was also a fine singer. He played no instruments but he "could sing by note," that is, he could read music, an ability to be remarked in any vernacular musical culture because people normally learned and played by ear. Lee Hunsucker, Laura's husband and a Holiness preacher, was also an important musical influence, teaching Dock many of the sacred songs in his repertory.

All of the musical members of the family sang in styles that had persisted for at least several generations and, in some cases, for as long as a century or more. The banjo, their instrument, had been

incorporated into mountain music more recently. Originally an African American instrument, it entered Anglo-American musical worlds through the minstrel show and probably reached the mountains around the time of the Civil War. Modal tunes common to mountain fiddle and ballad music could readily be accompanied by the banjo. Except for Roscoe, all the Boggses played banjo in a style that had been stable for at least a generation. The banjo was frailed in the "knockdown" or "clawhammer" style. Banjo and fiddle combined made a string band of sorts, though solo banjo was the preferred instrument to accompany songs. The oldest songs in Dock's repertory, the ones longest in tradition, he learned from his family: "Pretty Polly," "Poor Ellen Smith," "John Hardy," "Cumberland Gap," "Little Ommie Wise," and others. Some derived from English ballads, others from American broadsides, a few--like "Ruben's Train"--date from the late nineteenth century and would have been new to Dock's much older siblings.

This music belonged to the occasions of an agrarian life. Songs passed the time and could tell amusing and diverting stories. Banjo and fiddle entertained large family and community gatherings like the play parties and dances that followed cornshuckings, bean-stringings, molasses stirrings, house and barn raisings: "maybe they'd have a dance or a bean-stringing, or a gathering where there'd be a bunch of young people . . . there'd be six or eight or ten couples to dance . . . times I remember it commencin' nine or ten o'clock in the night and dancing plum `til after daylight. And maybe not having anything to dance by--just an old banjo. Played three or four old-time banjo players to death nearly, they'd be near plum out for `em to shake their foot by. . . ." Even after the Boggs family settled in Norton, portions of the old life remained available in the rural areas nearby.

Dock played in such communal settings, but during his most musically active years--in the Twenties, a new context for music-making became available. Some musicians could begin to imagine making a livelihood of what had before been simply an integral part of community life. Commercial radio came into being. In its first decade it depended primarily on live broadcasts and, in its need to fill hours of time, open to every kind of performer. Initially independent of radio, though soon increasingly tied to it, was the emerging record industry, equally hungry to discover musicians and musics through which to expand a nascent market. Dock's music could now become a commodity consumed apart from a community of familiars, by an "audience" engaged with "performers" who would, in time, themselves become commodities of a kind. Audience though they might become, many of Dock's listeners, and those who bought his records in the 1920s, continued to share a cultural and occupational world. They were miners, occasionally other industrial workers, and those still trying to

live on the land, though for most of them farming provided only a part-time alternation with wage-paying jobs.

In the 1960s, his appreciators were college students and professionals in towns and cities far from the coalfields. Something called "folk music," had become one of the musics of choice among parts of an urban, professional populace with no roots in any part of the South. He sometimes wondered, pleased though he was that they valued his music, what grounded their interest. This change in his audience represented almost as deep a shift in cultural context and history as the movement to music-making as a profession. For Dock it was also a more disorienting change than the earlier one, demanding and frightening as that may have been. His place as a musician in his own working-class culture had been taken, in his thirty-year absence, by younger musicians whose innovations moved country music beyond where he had taken it. Bluegrass and country-and-western styles, and rock-and-roll, all derived from the same vernacular roots as his, were, by the 1960s the popular idioms among his own people.

Dock's capacity to move across these different settings and groups testifies not only to his having greater musical gifts than his siblings, but also to his having acquired his music in a environment characterized by the interactions of an astounding variety of cultural groups: African Americans from all over the South, Hungarians, Italians, Greeks, Poles, Ukrainians, to name only a few. Each embodied different musical traditions. Added to the mixture was the presence of people from other, formerly isolated, parts of the Southern mountains who brought rich local stylistic traditions, different songs, and alternative verses to familiar ones. A world of bounded and comprehensible sounds had erupted. Some "old-time" mountain musicians found much of these new musics only cacophonous, but every musician, whatever his or her cultural group, could not help picking up something from at least one of the others. The interchanges were not equal in frequency or quality. Mountain musicians exchanged most with those from other parts of the mountains simply because less translation was required. The ear and pulse did not have to be reoriented. African Americans and native-born whites also influenced each other greatly in the new milieu. Non-English speaking immigrants maintained many of their own musical traditions for at least a generation, but they seem never to have much influenced the rapidly evolving musical scene in the Southern mountains. (Whereas in Louisiana and Texas various European ethnic musics intermingled freely with their Anglo- and African American counterparts, eventually to create a distinctive synthesis.)

In the mountains the presence of so many culture groups and sub-groups created a rich and exhilarating musical world. The explosive

combinations of styles, instruments, and new songs that resulted constituted an expressive feast, and one of the great periods of creativity in American musical history arose from it. New social constructions and the coming of a fully industrialized capitalist economy also meant that every mode of expression was being tested and pressed by experience requiring new form and eliciting powerful feeling. Innovation and synthesis were also promoted and accelerated by the needs of commercial radio and records, themselves institutions of the new.

Early in his musical development Dock Boggs was drawn to African American music and to styles and songs brought to his region by white musicians traveling up from Tennessee and from other sections of Virginia and eastern Kentucky. Sound recordings became an additional source. We know that recordings provided at least one of the routes through which the blues reached and moved Dock. They also promoted a more rapid exchange of styles and songs among Anglo-Americans within the region. He learned "Railroad Tramp" from a record, probably from the version made by Ernest Stoneman in 1927, and he knew Riley Puckett's singing only through records. His fascination with African American music most distinguished his music, however, and stimulated his creation of a banjo style which combined elements of African and Anglo-American instrumental styles.

Dock's reminiscences evoke a small boy entranced by music and with an ear already sharp and original enough by the age of nine or ten to seek new sounds beyond the family world.

Two especially magical stories about his early musical experiences involve African American music and musicians and signify his intense attraction. In one he remembers back, perhaps to quite early childhood, to one of his first hearings of "John Henry." "There's a Negro [African American] used to walk from Dorchester to Sutherland, and on weekends he'd take his guitar and be walkin' up the track. . . where I lived. . . I'd get out and follow him. . . his name was Go Lightening. And he was very nice and kind and I'd beg him--I was just a little boy, of course music always thrilled me when I was a boy. Seemed like I just could hear a piece, a sad piece, a lonesome piece, why it'd thrill me from the top of my head to the soles of my feet. And so, I'd walk along after him, I didn't have no nickels and dimes to give him. . . course he picked and he'd take up a collection... but I'd beg him to sit on the end of the ties, and I'd follow him plumb from Needmore. . . to Sutherland a lot of times to get to hear him play two, three, four pieces and I a lot of times heard him play "John Henry" and I learnt it partly, learnt some of the words from him." Other white mountain musicians of this generation tell similar stories about the

first time they heard a black musician; their vivid recollections register how striking the music was.

Dock's other story specifies the primary influence on his banjo style. It probably occurred at about the time Dock started working in the coal mines. Though he was only twelve, the fact of his working full-time would have given him the kind of freedom and the knowledge to "play hooky," as he put it, at night and go from Norton to Dorchester, the mostly black neighboring coal town. Dorchester then had about three thousand residents, just before World War I. Most worked the coke ovens, jobs so dangerous and unpleasant that they often were reserved for black people and immigrants. One night Dock decided to go over to hear an African American string band at a dance. The instrumental combination, familiar now to any bluegrass fan, was then unusual and memorable: a mandolin, banjo, guitar, and fiddle. Dock told this story many times. In each version he portrays himself hovering at the edges of a crowd of African American dancers and listeners, or as hiding outside and overhearing. He most noticed the banjo player: "I heard this fellow play the banjo. . . . and I said to myself--I didn't tell anybody else--I want to learn how to play the banjo kinda like that fellow does. I don't want to play like my sister and my brother. I am gonna learn just how to pick with my fingers. . . . It was several years before I got hold of a [banjo]."

Near this time one of his brothers brought another Dorchester musician to the Boggs' house. Jim White was a blue-eyed black man who played in a brass band. But he also played banjo and picked the tunes note by note, the style Dock was already drawn to, in contrast to the knockdown frailing style used by Jane and John, his two oldest siblings. Dock's rendition of "Turkey in the Straw," itself a tune in African American tradition, followed closely what he remembered of Jim White's playing it.

Even before large numbers of African Americans settled in the coal counties of central Appalachia, black musicians had traveled through parts of the mountains leaving traces of their music in the practice of some mountaineers. Some were peddlers, others exclusively wandering minstrels, some were early railroad workers. Black folk music of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries influenced white country music profoundly. Neither proximity to black musicians nor the coincidence of hearing the music itself, however, explains why some white musicians responded directly to this world of sound and rhythm and others did not. Blacks and whites throughout the South had been exchanging music for at least two centuries so that what had once been distinctively West African or British now represented two intimately related, mutually derived musics. Yet Dock's engagement

with African American music remains exceptional in its intensity and particularity.

Until he got his first banjo Dock played on Roscoe's. Roscoe taught him "Cuba" and was musically and personally closer than John, the much older brother. Roscoe's banjo-playing may have shaped Dock's, since he also favored picking the notes: "Brother Roscoe, he didn't pick the 'knockdown' way but he just picked with one finger and a thumb. . . and some pieces he picked pretty well." Homer Crawford provided the other identifiable formative influence. An itinerant musician and photographer from Tennessee, he taught Dock "Hustlin' Gambler," the basis for "Country Blues." He also showed Dock some more of the D tunings Dock favored. Other musicians were also sources but most came after Dock had established his basic style: Jim Begley who taught him "Scottische Time," and Byrd Moore with whom Dock played on and off for fifteen years and from whom Dock learned parts of his version of "Careless Love." Each had in common a banjo style (though Moore usually played the guitar) that emphasized picking instead of frailing, and thus the melody instead of the harmony.

For Dock his serious playing did not begin until he was married in 1918: "Commenced playin', I played for parties, bean stringin's, first one thing and another where they'd have a party in the country. . . . I was just a` playing for the fun of it. . . ." Sometimes he played alone, at others with a guitarist like Byrd Moore or Gus Underwood, a fellow miner, or Charlie Powers, one of the musicians of The Powers Family. It may also have been during these ten years before he recorded that Dock had a small string band with a father and son named Holland, two fellow miners.

The years from 1918 to 1927 were hard ones. Dock and his wife Sara in the first years of their marriage enjoyed what would turn out to be their greatest economic prosperity. Dock had a contract job in the mines in 1918, an arrangement through which part of a mine was in effect leased to him. He gave it up, however, because Sara wanted to move near her family. Hard times followed, for the Boggsses and for the whole area, when the market for coal became depressed after World War I. They moved several times between southwestern Virginia and eastern Kentucky, wherever there were jobs in coal. Wages got so depressed that Dock couldn't make a living mining and went into bootlegging. Mountain people had for years depended on making liquor to cushion economic depression, but it was also a rough business: "You know I never was bloodthirsty, wanting just to kill somebody. But I come awful near to gettin' killed and killing people myself. But back then you had to be [ready] to stand firm on what you was. If people thought they could walk on you, they'd absolutely do it."

The dangers of bootlegging were, however, only a symptom of the strained social and economic fabric of a region so rapidly developed. Population had increased enormously within a generation through the immigration of people of very different cultures. A subsistence agrarian culture had been replaced by an industrial order. People had to create new social forms to organize their lives and their capacity to do so was at least checked by the persistent boom and bust cycle of the coal industry, forcing them to move again and again in search of work or to endure working conditions of such savagery that few social restraints could hold. Violence filled the Boggs's lives. Dock himself engaged in several gun battles, was ambushed, his life threatened by a local sheriff. He also fought bloody and often drunken battles that left him or his opponents disabled for days. In one he broke a finger so badly that he couldn't load coal for a month.

This violence was not, as some writers would have it, an inexorable element of "mountaineer" character. The conditions for dependably ordered human relations did not exist because of the governing political economy. These were years when the operators uprooted the United Mine Workers wherever they had achieved organization and repressed any attempt at unionization. Men and their families were unprotected. Miners were forced to work long days for low wages. Injury and death were common. The coal owners often openly disregarded the well-being of the miners and this only reinforced other factors subverting people's capacities to maintain order in their own terms. There was too much death. "There's so many of my buddies and my friends that I worked with that are dead, and gone, done dead and gone, so many of them killed in the mines, several that's been shot and killed."

Dock's married life had its own troubles. He and Sara discovered, early in the 1920s, that she could not have children. He drank, played music, bootlegged, and otherwise carried on like a "rambling man," the admiring and damning term used in the region for any musician. Sara strongly objected to some of these activities, the music especially. And Dock did not get along with her family. Matters were tense enough that at one time Dock badly beat one of his brothers-in-law and, at another, he feared being killed by his wife's relatives.

Music played no clear role either in sustaining or enmeshing Dock in these days. His recollections about most of the Twenties rarely focused on it. He continued to play, adding slowly to his stock of songs, perhaps even practicing with some regularity. No evidence exists to indicate that he had any great ambitions for his music. When Dock told and retold the story of his audition for the Brunswick people in 1927, its central element was a tone of surprise and naivete--as though the

whole experience had just "happened" to an untutored country boy accidentally blessed with musical skill.

Talent scouts were just beginning to comb the Southern mountains for prospects, so Dock may well have never thought of making records, though I suspect otherwise. The eight songs he recorded are sung and played with the kind of power only available to a musician deeply involved in his art. Everything we know about Dock's musical life from young boyhood on indicates he was persistently engaged in it and ambitious. He once commented that his brothers and sisters "were limited to just a few pieces, four, five, six maybe ten, twelve pieces is all they could play. And after I got me a banjo of my own I commenced trying to reach out and learn other pieces." In a chaotic decade music may not have proved a stable center for Dock, but it seems to have supported the hope, however inchoate, of escaping the worst of his life while it gave him the means to express some of the exactions and terrible beauties of his daily experience.

Music as a Livelihood

His audition at the Norton Hotel in late 1926 or early 1927 changed Dock's life. Coincidence, not any conscious intention, characterizes Dock's story of how he came to be in Norton that day. An insistent friend told him about the auditions for Brunswick, one who knew Dock well enough to reassure him he could do well. Dock did not have his own banjo with him and had to borrow a cheap one from a local music store. Later in life Dock described the audition as though he was fully aware that it marked a divide: before it he commonly "pitched out money" to "fellows playing music. . . I always liked music and thought they was way ahead of me." "I was just a'playing for the fun of it...." These words hint at the changes in his consciousness once he took the step of auditioning and obtained a recording contract. It meant recognizing his own musical skill and seriousness; it also entailed a shift in his sense of relationship to the people to and for whom he played. Playing "for the fun of it" in response to friends' and neighbors' invitations to dances and other communal activities was very different from making records and playing wherever one could make money. Dock, having successfully auditioned, in effect entered a new cultural situation which separated him from merely local performers and began to define him professionally as an entertainer.

Once the opportunity to record became a reality, Dock seems quickly to have grasped that though it he might make a very different life for himself than he had ever imagined. At stake was not only escaping the coal mines, but, more transformatively, being able to devote himself to what he loved. He soon became intensely ambitious for musical success, aware of his ability and its worth. He refused, for instance, to

make more than eight sides for Brunswick at the first recording sessions in New York in 1927. He thought he was not being paid enough and decided to put the company off until he could demand more money. He was, nonetheless, offered contracts for two additional sessions and the freedom of choosing his own musicians for them. His deferral tells a great deal about Dock's complex sense of himself, of his music, and of his chances for commercial success. The other musicians Brunswick had brought to New York from the Norton area, Hub Mahaffey, a guitar player, Miss Vermillion, an autoharpist, and Old John Dykes, a fiddler, were not asked to make more than a few sides or to return to make more. What enabled him to risk bargaining with Brunswick and the confidence that he would not be dismissed as just another country musician? He had never been to New York City before, or even outside the small part of the Southern mountains where he was born. Only a few months before, at the audition, as he remembered it, he was among the least skilled musicians.

His boldness is more impressive when one knows something of the anxiety and uncertainty Dock felt. He became so tense before auditioning and again before the recording session that he needed whiskey to relax. The tension came, he explained, because he "didn't have hardly enough nerve to try out myself" and "felt like 30 cents of scrip with a hole punched in it." Few things were so worthless, but his metaphor may only apparently explain his tension. He already understood what recording could bring him: "Well I felt this way kindly, I thought that I might get started. . . happen to put out a record that would make a hit, that I might [get] to where I have an opportunity, I might never have to work in the mines no more. . . . I figured. . . I could make it makin' music and I wouldn't have to work in the mines anymore."

Dock had, I think, developed a sense of possibility very different from what his local culture readily made available. His quick and tough mind was also powerfully imaginative. He was a nearly inveterate musical inventor. These gifts included the capacity to grasp new situations and project himself into them. Radio and records were only beginning to offer the bases for commercial success for musicians like Dock. The concept of being a "professional" did not yet have any reality in his cultural territory. Success for musicians like him required more than adaptability; it also involved shrewdness, a musical style with a recognizable personal signature, and an imagination for reaching and even bringing new audiences into being.

The distance Dock began to travel in a few months in 1927 is probably beyond the comprehension of anyone but musicians who, like him, were embarking on this new career. A few markers exist. Before Dock auditioned at the Norton Hotel he had never even seen a microphone,

an instrument as central to the new media of radio and of records as the banjo he picked. The early microphones were crude and neither required nor responded to much craft in their use, but many vernacular musicians could not adapt to them or to the absence of a live audience. The microphone signified the transition from a musical culture of direct and intimate contact between the artist and his community to one built upon amplification, projection, and the continual shaping of an audience one might never directly encounter.

When Dock went to a Norton clothing store before the New York trip and asked its owner to help him dress so he wouldn't look "too country," he registered another dimension of the change and his ability to anticipate its requirements. Dock's awareness of how city folk might regard him could simply have been a gesture of insecurity; it was also at least a sign of some sophistication about the differences between urban and rural cultural practices: "Well I don't know what hardly to think. I was kindly uneasy about making the trip, afraid that I would--well I was so countrified. I'd never been anywhere. Naturally I was kindly uneasy I couldn't act right or couldn't--wouldn't get by hardly." Old John Dykes embarrassed Dock on the train trip and with the Brunswick people by acting the stereotypical country bumpkin. Dock's wish to separate himself from such behavior was not an acknowledgment of the superiority of city ways, but another instance of his openness to change and his capacity to mediate between old and new within himself.

When he returned to Virginia from New York, he went back to the mines. For a short time life on the surface went much as it had for the past decade. The Brunswick records were issued, four in all, with two songs on each. They sold especially well in southwestern Virginia and the near counties of Kentucky. Dock had been in demand as a musician before this time, but the records spread his reputation further and conferred a new status on him among both old and new admirers. More people asked him to play, and he spent many nights playing late. He played by himself or found someone in the audience who could back him on the guitar. His transformation into a full-time musician was not complete. He did not ask for money when he played, although the hat may have been passed on some occasions. "I would have been ashamed to. . . I used to feel, to take money for playing" reflects the persistence of older expectations. Contracts and managers, radio shows and one night stands, and the creation of a band instead of making do with pickup accompanists may all have been on Dock's mind in late 1927, but he had yet to organize his musical activity in these terms.

He was, though, reaching towards making music his livelihood. He began to play schools, a new setting for country musicians, one that

developed after they began making records. People wanted to come out in the evening or on a Saturday afternoon to hear musicians whose records they had heard or who they knew had recorded. Schools provided a setting neither exclusively for kin and neighbors nor yet the fully anonymous public auditorium characteristic of later country music. Dock also began experimenting with gathering a band. He played with guitarist Clintwood Johnson, a friend and fellow coal miner. Shortly after the New York trip Dock played a school date near Gates City, Tennessee with Hub Mahaffey, Old John Dykes, and Miss Vermillion. Discussions of becoming a permanent group collapsed over Dykes's insistence on only a fiddle and banjo duo. Dock, more responsive to the newest developments, wanted the "better sound" possible with a fiddle, banjo, and guitar.

These steps toward becoming a commercial musician accompanied others. He practiced more regularly: "I was more precise in making my notes, I didn't make as many mistakes." Recognizing he needed to expand his repertory he set out, quite self-consciously, to do so. This makes between 1927 and 1929 the probable time when his brother-in-law, Lee Hunsucker, taught Dock so many of his songs. The "Preacher" sang religious songs from the Holiness tradition and from the quite different Old Regular Baptist tradition. Dock learned about a fifth of his repertory from his brother-in-law's sacred songs. Lee also owned a collection of some 300 records and a record player, something Dock did not have until the late 1950s. It seems likely that Dock at this time began deliberately to learn songs off records he had heard at Lee's house.

Like A.P. Carter and E.V. Stoneman, two of the most successful country musicians to make the transition to commercial radio and recording careers, Dock turned to another source to expand his stock of songs. He began to collect "ballets," (or "ballots") lyrics of songs written down on paper. Neighbors and friends offered them to him, sometimes with a tune they could sing or hum, at others with a request that Dock make a tune for them: "Whenever I heard anything I liked, I'd write it down." He didn't take every song he was offered, instead he wanted only songs that "touched my heart." He had, this is to say, by sometime around 1928 an achieved awareness of his own musical personality.

These actions, decisive though they were, did not mean Dock was able to embrace wholeheartedly a professional musician's way of life. His reluctance to take money was not the only sign of allegiance to older cultural practices incompatible with a musical career. Secular music had long been condemned as "the devil's work" by several influential religious sects in the mountains. His own parents belonged to one such sect. Dock always had a tangled conscience about his secular music-

making being sinful. Long before the advent of commercial recordings and radio, especially gifted musicians were suspected of being "rambling men," unreliable, transient, too loose about the conventional forms of family and economic life. The coal mines and railroads had already destabilized many of these by Dock's time. Industrialization also brought new institutions, or expanded old ones, to which musicians were especially exposed: whore-houses, speakeasies, gambling dens, and dance halls provided more dependable income and professional settings for musicians than did schools, restaurants, family gatherings, and other respectable settings. To make a living musicians had to be on the move. Their hours were irregular, drinking the norm, stable family and work lives hard to maintain.

In the months after the New York recording session Dock entered this new life. He continued to work in the mines regularly enough so that he could proudly recollect that "[I] never lost a job over my music or [for] being absent for my music." Music had become, however, his absorbing passion. Sara spoke against its claims and risks, a role she was to take throughout their life. Dock sometimes bitterly resented her resistance but she articulated, I think, not only her own opposition, but also uneasiness Dock in some measure shared. The life was difficult in its irregularities; for someone who cared for the music as much as Dock, performing was exhausting; and while the money could be good, it was undependable. Drinking and brawling were common, and Dock's attraction to both was great enough that Sara worried about his survival. She apparently kept at Dock, for he resolved to quit to silence her. His resolution came in late 1927 or early 1928. It was to be a short retirement, but it anticipated the coerced one that would last until 1963: " My wife she didn't want me to play, didn't want me to record anymore, didn't want me to be out and gone or go to dances, anything like that and I got me really annoyed and decided I'd just quit playing."

They moved to Mayking, Kentucky, Dock seemingly having made up his mind to be a coal miner for good. His ebullience about his own creativity and musical opportunities would not allow foregoing his hopes after such a short trial. His ambitions were not long in finding occasions. Charley Powers, an old friend and an experienced guitarist, came to Mayking to work in the mines. Soon he and Dock were playing together. And as Dock later told it, people soon found where he was and began writing him to ask him to play. The invitations came so frequently and with them, Dock having come to accept money for playing, such an abundance of cash that Dock had to choose between mining and music. He went to the superintendent of the mine at Mayking: "` Henry, we're just going to have to quit, quit one or the other, making music or quit the mines.' I said, ` We're making a lot

more money making music than we make in the mines anyhow.' He says, 'I think you're a damn fool in the first place for even coming back in the mines after you had a start and made records and people do like the way you play.' I said, 'I wouldn't take my head in the mines if I could do that. I don't guess we'll be back anymore.'"

Dock bought a Gibson in 1928, the best banjo made. He also quickly formed a band, "Dock Boggs and His Cumberland Mountain Entertainers." The musicians were all from Dock's home territory: Scott Boatwright on a guitar from Scott County, Virginia; Melvin Robinette, a prize-winning fiddler and like Dock from Wise County, Virginia; and Charley Powers, also a native Virginian, on guitar. Dock's greater reputation because of his recordings made him the headliner. His high hopes and seriousness were evident in the decision to hire a manager--Steve Blair, a young lawyer in Whitesburg, Kentucky, to find bookings and manage the receipts. Crowds came to country theaters, schools, and stores, in significant part because of Dock's reputation as a recording artist. The band did well, often taking in between three and four hundred dollars a week.

The talents of each individual promised a kind of blend out of which successful ensembles can come. Scott Boatwright was an excellent guitar player with a pleasant, smooth-sounding voice; Charley Powers had been performing in a band since his boyhood; and Melvin Robinette was one of the outstanding fiddlers of his day as well as a skillful singer. These gifts combined with Dock's unique sound on the banjo and the raw intensity of his singing ought to have given the band an extensive repertoire and a distinctive style. Everyone in the band was an experienced entertainer, and it is not surprising that people still remember some of the comic routines. Dock and Melvin seem to have been especially inventive in this regard. And Dock did two routines with special appeal to the many coal miners who came to hear the band. He developed a kind of dance imitating coke workers pulling the coke, and another mimicking his own occupation of many years, coal loading. These, too, were audience favorites. The band only stayed together for the first half of 1929. The chief cause seems to have been the differing ambitions of each of the men. Dock and Scott continued playing together for the rest of that year. Charley Powers retired altogether from music and soon left the area. Melvin Robinette soon followed him into retirement.

The flush times were also coming to an end. Dock could not have known how dependent his expansive sense of opportunity was on the now fatal final boom of an inflated economy. The three years, 1927-1929, during which he moved towards a musical career were the most prosperous ones of the decade, even in the coalfields. National companies like Brunswick, RCA Victor, Vocalion, and Okeh competed

for new musicians, customers, and markets. Radio stations came into existence with hours of air time to fill. People like Dock's neighbors had a little surplus to spare for an occasional record or a ticket to an evening of music at the local school. When Dock went to Chicago sometime in the summer of 1929 to record for Lonesome Ace, he reasonably assumed this would be but one of many recording sessions to come. He had been promised more sessions by Brunswick and other companies had expressed interest. In October the collapse came. The effects were gradual for many Americans, but in the Southern mountains the Depression came swiftly and severely. When the two Lonesome Ace records were issued Dock was able to sell about a hundred through the Kentucky coal towns of Neon, Fleming, Hayman, Jackhorn, and Mayking, but within a few months "there wasn't no money to buy, even if they wanted that [music]." "Times got to be so tight that there wasn't any money to borrow expenses for yourself to go anywhere and you couldn't draw no money working. One day a week in the mines you done good to have bread on your table to eat." The Depression had reached all around.

Dock did not immediately resign his ambitions and hopes. Probably late in 1929 he decided to go to Atlanta. The coal mines had no work and someone told him the Atlanta police force was hiring. He also knew that P.C. Brockman, the Okeh talent scout, was headquartered in Atlanta, and the police job may have given him a needed excuse to make what turned out to be the last venture to rescue his musical career. He contacted Brockman and was offered a half hour Saturday night live audition on WSB, Atlanta's country music station and a major station for the whole region. Dock's desperation can be gauged by what happened. He froze before the mike so badly that he could barely force his voice to sound. People who knew him heard the broadcast and were not sure it was his voice or playing.

This disappointment might well have discouraged most people. Dock, however, seems to have persisted in hoping for the continuance of his recording career. He wrote letters to a number of record companies notifying them of his interest in recording. RCA Victor, as perhaps did others, responded with interest and a specific recording time in June 1931. For two weeks Dock tried every avenue to make or borrow the funds to travel to Louisville for the session. No one could spare the money and he had to cancel. Eventually he pawned his banjo.

He may never have fully understood what wrecked his chances. Talking with Mike Seeger he sometimes seemed clear about the impact of the Depression, but at others he implied his musical career stopped because not enough people wanted to hear his music. Sometimes bitterly, sometimes lovingly, he blamed his wife. His metaphors expressed how much he valued what he had lost, as well as how much

he loved Sara: "Whenever my wife turned my damper down, it is either her or my music, why I thought more of her than I did my music. And I didn't give up as much as King George did when I gave up my music. He gave up the throne for Wallis Simpson. I figured I wasn't giving up no more than what had been given up many times." Blaming Sara, whatever the tone, may at least have provided Dock with a sense of control, a feeling that he had chosen to renounce his musical career for love, or out of weariness with domestic wrangles. The implication of marital bitterness might have seemed preferable, even many years later, to a full recognition of the felt impotence and sense of failure that crippled so many men during the Depression.

Some musicians weathered these years. Knowing this, Dock took personal responsibility for his failure to persist, returning in memory again and again to the first years of the Depression in an attempt to understand what he ought to have done. It may simply have been bad luck that kept him from being one of the survivors. Had he made more records before the Crash, had the band stayed intact, or had he, perhaps most importantly of all, established himself on radio, he might have made it. It is also possible that his music was finally too intense ever to meet the requirements of wide popularity imposed by the economic stringencies of the Depression: "I put so much of myself into some pieces that I very nearly broke down emotionally." Only musicians with a more dispassionate address to their music could survive the intensely competitive conditions that followed the Crash. Dock, on the evidence of the Lonesome Ace sides, could perform in such a smoother and more "professional" style, but he may have taken it up unluckily too late.

Revival and Rediscovery

People dream about second chances as a redemption for disappointment and failure. Life never lends itself to exact repetition, and so no one ever experiences such dreams. Dock may have come as close as anyone can. If he ever gave up hope completely during his thirty-five years in exile from his music, he recovered it enough to work seriously on the banjo, at least eighteen months before Mike Seeger came to Norton in June 1963. Without access to the folk revival circuit, Dock could only have played to a small circle. The sounds of country music his neighbors preferred were not his. Dock knew his once innovative music now sounded "old-fashioned." He could not, I think, have known there were audiences hungry for such music elsewhere in the country. Only someone like Mike Seeger could have brought him to these audiences, given him the musical support and the appreciation that probably enabled Dock to perform for them.

Dock found a kind of satisfaction, perhaps even a kind of redemption at moments, in his second musical career. It was a chance to make good some commitments he had thought he might never be able to meet. His expressed wish to be 35 years old again registered the temptation to experience his own musical revival as a second chance, but it also conveyed his realization that he was at a new turn. "Don't care about music as much as I did. If I had, I would have kept it up. I wouldn't lay it down for nothing. I don't think I should have laid it down when I did, I feel I made a mistake. I'm pleased to get a chance even to put them old songs back on. I want to put on all the old songs I've got. I'd love to put them on so that when I'm gone why the young people they can have them in memory of me." Something haunting, less than redemptive, surfaces here. Dock's old capacity to read an audience returned to him, along with his musical facility. The more he played the college and folk festival circuit, the more he emphasized his role as a preservationist, a kind of living museum for an otherwise defunct music. He stressed his playing in an "old" style, "original" tunes other musicians, country and bluegrass stylists perhaps, twisted and got wrong.

He loved singing and performing again. A kind of peace sometimes came with it. But though he became more polished in his introductions, more able to appear relaxed in performance, he never felt free with the folk revival audiences. He sensed his status as an object. Though proud of earning enough money from the music to buy his first new car, other satisfactions eluded him. He probed painfully to locate the sources of his discontent. The friendship with Mike Seeger softened this loneliness. He trusted him in part as a fellow musician, someone who understood the need to make new songs and to be recognized as a living musician instead of one who rehearsed something dying.

There were other stresses: recalling verses he hadn't sung in years, wondering if his fingers would be nimble enough every night to do their intricate picking. There was also Dock's own vital rediscovery of his music. Listening to the records he made in the 1960s is to encounter a music made anew, marvelously unlike the singing and playing of anyone else. At his best he might have been singing to his own soul. Dock may never have been as good as in these last years. Had he such an awareness, it might not have mattered much. A sense of permanent displacement seems to have tormented him. This was not his time or these his people. Joking once about how bad the music in his church was, he added how infrequently he was asked to play there. When he played at colleges near his home, few of his generation came to hear him. In the last years of his life he could not resolve his doubts about the rightness of his making music again,

doubts exacerbated by anonymous letters from his own community rebuking him as a sinner for it. He was drinking again, failing in health, and every time he played perhaps wondering what might have happened had he kept on in 1929 against all the odds, re-figuring his life in each song.

To the end he was extraordinary. He let nothing important rest, thinking about and making new as much as he could of what he felt and heard. He died February 7, 1971. It was his birthday. His music remains.

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