

# ON A WINTER'S DAY

## An Interview with Fiddle Legend Art Stamper

By Sheila Nichols



*Art Stamper*

Art Stamper was born in Knott County, Kentucky, in the mountains near Hindman. He is best known for his fiddle playing ...both Bluegrass and Old Time fiddlin'. He started playing around the age of nine, and by the age of sixteen he had already played with professionals such as Jim McReynolds, Buster Pack and the Sauceman Brothers. In the early 50s he was playing regularly with the Stanley Brothers. By the mid 50s Art had joined the Osborne Brothers and Red Allen.

Art left the stage for a career outside of music only to return in the late 70s to do some recording with the Goins Brothers. He now plays as a guest performer and master fiddler.

Sheila Nichols: Art, the first question I wanted to ask you is who taught you your first tune on the fiddle?

Art Stamper: Me.

SN: Can you remember the tune?

AS: It was one of Roy Acuff's songs. I had a fiddle without a bow and I picked it out with a comb tooth. Sat up on the hill when I was a little boy trying to impress some girl over in the valley.

SN: How old were you at this time?

AS: I was under ten somewhere. I forget now. But I was real young. See, I played the banjo before I played the fiddle. And I had got a fiddle and didn't have a bow and finally I made myself a bow, so us boys would yank some hair from my uncle's horse's tail. Then, we would find a hickory wood stick and burn a hole in each end of the stick with a hot poker. Next, we would

tie in the hair and go up on the ridge to an old pine tree. There we would rosin the hair on the bow with the rosin on the tree. I listened to my dad play the fiddle a lot...of course. I think it was in our bloodline to play music. And back then there was nothing else to do. They had one theater that cost 50 cents to go to the movie and most the time we wouldn't have that. We tried to get out and work for somebody to make a little bit of money, but we'd work and get promised to be paid and the people we worked for couldn't afford to pay us. So, a lot of times we would just have to stay at home, and I think that helped us to take an instrument and learn how to play. And we got where we would take it back to the corn field where we was hoeing the corn and chopping the weeds out of the corn. We'd work out to the end of this rocky bench. A bench is one of the levels up on the hill. It is usually real rich but it's rocky and 'cause all the top soil from the upper layers would run down and land on that.... It grows real good corn. You'd have to borrow dirt from one place to put to another, so, when the corn came out it would be that long... (Art shows the size of the ears with the space between his hands...about a foot long.) It was something else.... So, we would take our fiddles back there and we would work out to one end and back and then we'd drink water. Set in the shade and drink water and play the fiddle...take turns. You could hear the fiddle echo from one side of the hill to the other.

SN: Where were you born?

AS: I was born in a log house in the head of a holler up there in Knott County, Kentucky, about a mile and a half from Hindman. It's Terry Fork of Ball Creek. At the mouth of that Creek we had a one-room schoolhouse, and my second cousin was Mavis Stewart. And she married a Noble. Mavis was my second cousin and she taught me eight years in a one-room schoolhouse. She was an excellent teacher. We just lost her about three or four years ago. And I know she had her hands full because you know how boys are. We were as mean as snakes back in those days anyway. And I told her, I said, maybe she should have killed every one of us and she said, well Art, we wanted to see that everyone learned something. She was really a good teacher.

SN: So you had the outdoor plumbing and all that?

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*Art Stamper and Sam Bush.*

AS: Yeah, in the school and draw our water from a well and drink. Make our cups out of paper.... Make paper cups and drink out of them. I'm kinda proud of my background in a way.

SN: How old were you when you finally left your mountain home?

AS: I left real early. I would go in the summer and play and come back and go to school. So, I left you know. I ended up finishing up my high school in the Army. Yeah..., when I got out I went to the College of Cosmetology. Studied cosmetology and practiced that for years. Course, I am glad I am out of that center! It would make you a nervous wreck. At one time I would get up of a morning and I'd sit and drink some coffee. I'd smoke some cigarettes then. I'd take me a shower and then I'd get these catalogue order books and I'd look at all the fashions and I would look at all the hair styles. That would stimulate my mind and when I went into the salon I was ready for them. I had a talent. And really believe that art...any type of art, is really associated with the other. That is one reason why I chose that profession; because I was good with my hands in the first place because of music, and I would keep my hands in good shape....

SN: Name some of the different bands and performers that you have enjoyed playing with through the years.

AS: To be honest, I've enjoyed playing with all of them. They are all different. Some of them were better than others. But, I didn't go play with and judge how well they played. I think I may have judged how well they may have liked what they were doing. And I think that is what I looked at mainly. If you can make five notes and really enjoy it, that's great, that's better than making 25 notes and not liking it. So,

that is what I base things on is how well you like something. It is not how well you're playing stuff, it's how much you enjoy it.... I think.

SN: What other instruments do you play besides the fiddle?

AS: I play them all a little bit. But, I don't get to practice enough on them. Lately, I've been a playin' old time banjo. I really enjoy that.

SN: What it is about a fiddle that draws you to play it as your main instrument?

AS: Well, back in those days I think a fiddle and a banjo is the only things we could get our hands on. And, of course, my dad played and I just loved the fiddle. When I was about two years old, I don't remember that, but mom said—you see, we cooked on a wood stove back in those days—didn't have electricity in the house. When I went to school I'd always take a kerosene lamp and do my homework and read those Zane Grey westerns. I'd read myself to sleep. I used to read a lot and I did it with a kerosene lamp.

SN: How many tunes do you have in your head?

AS: Probably six or seven hundred tunes and not counting the songs—that's just fiddle tunes. And songs, I don't know how many because I worked for so many different outfits and I recorded with a lot of different people, too. You see, I did the first recording session with the Osborne Brothers for their MGM contract. We did the audition for a contract with them and we got it. Bobby told me that he still had the tape of the audition.

SN: Have you written any songs?

AS: Yeah, but you know I couldn't really name them. I can put songs together easy. It's not hard, but the thing of it is for a guy like me, unlike Bill Monroe, Bill wrote a lot of tunes, but his writing mainly was something he'd pick up from old tunes. He'd piece them together which he did a good job of that. There's no question about it. But, his ideas they come from old fiddlers...Scottish and Irish and Mountain fiddlers...first one thing and then another...and Bill had a fiddle mind and he would take his mandolin and he would play part of this and part of that and he would sit down and put it together which he's got to be commended for at-

tacking that because it takes a lot of time to even do that. Whether or not he wrote everything note-for-note doesn't make any difference. He did a good job putting a lot of good stuff together and, uh, had a lot of mandolin players and fiddle players to follow the songs that he did, you know, so whether he really wrote everything note-for-note it really didn't make any difference. Because he was down there in Nashville where he could really put things together. And he was out front where he could play it for the people and the young musicians would get from what he did because he was in a good position. And they kept following his stuff. And, actually, the young musicians by learning Bill's material helped promote Bill. Absolutely. Because if Bill would have been back where no one could hear what he done.... No one would ever be playing his stuff, you know. But, he was down there at the Opry where everyone could hear him, and that brought a lot of good musicians on. You know, the fact is that people like Monroe and my dad and a lot of these people had to come along, not being able to hear and see what they see today. Those people had more talent than mine, but I think they had more talent than most of the young ones do today. Don't get me wrong. The young kids are smart...they've got it, but, they do have it in front of them. They got all these workshops they can go to, they got the festivals they can go to, and they have the radio. My dad and Bill Monroe and them never had a radio when they was a growing up. They wasn't one. I don't know how they learned to play what they played, but they did it. They had the real talent. I guarantee you they had the talent.

SN: One more question, what musical events do you have lined up for this upcoming year?

AS: All of them. I think I've got.... I'm booked twice at Appleshop. I am playing on May 30th.... I play a square dance there and I go back in June and do a week's of teaching there at town school up there.... It's a school, and last year I was there as a master fiddler. They had Dirk Powell there last year and a bunch of good teachers. And I'll be teaching at Augusta and some workshops and stuff at the Hindman settlement school. And just whatever comes along.