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*The Music of America*

Traditional music and dance "homegrown" in communities across the United States

**AN ACQUISITIONS AND PRESENTATION PROJECT**



# **BENTON FLIPPEN**

## **AND THE SMOKEY VALLEY BOYS**

### **OLD TIME MUSIC FROM NORTH CAROLINA**

**Wednesday  
August 17, 2005  
12 NOON - 1 PM  
Madison Hall**

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Library of Congress  
101 Independence Avenue, SE  
Washington, DC**

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TO THE PUBLIC**



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# BENTON FLIPPEN AND THE SMOKEY VALLEY BOYS

## OLD TIME MUSIC FROM NORTH CAROLINA

Surry County, North Carolina, is a region where rolling piedmont fields give way to the easternmost peaks of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Roads leading north out of Mount Airy, Surry County's largest town, towards nearby Galax, Virginia, link a series of small communities that can claim some of the richest music-making traditions in the Blue Ridge. Round Peak, Pine Ridge, Skull Camp, Low Gap, and Beulah have been home to generations of musicians who evolved a local fiddle and banjo ensemble tradition into a powerful brand of stringband music. It is music that continues to be played at dances, fiddlers' conventions, and fundraising events held in these communities. In addition, old-time music enthusiasts throughout the world now know and acclaim this style. Benton Flippen, Verlen Clifton, Frank Bode, and Paul Brown-the Smokey Valley Boys-are among the most respected of those who carry on this Surry County tradition.

Older musicians in the area recall that music-making was once an informal experience. "When I was growing up," says Verlen Clifton, "I can't remember what you'd call 'bands' around our neighborhood," he recalls. Instead, local musicians would gather in people's homes to play for dances or meet at stores and gas stations for impromptu music sessions. Opportunities to perform outside the community encouraged Verlen, fiddler Benton Flippen, and other neighboring musicians to organize themselves into groups. Fiddlers' conventions, once small local gatherings, became regional events in the 1940s and 50s that invited stringbands to compete for recognition and prize money. Around the same time, radio stations such as WPAQ in Mount Airy began featuring Surry County bands in live performances. By the 1960s, Surry County groups like the Smokey Valley Boys and the Camp Creek Boys had set the standard for creating dance music that retained its old-time roots but captured the energy and power of bluegrass.

Fiddler Benton Flippen, winner of countless blue ribbons and trophies, leads the Smokey Valley Boys. Benton's fiddling style is marked by unusual fingering patterns, effective use of slides and strong rhythmic bowing. He renders old standards with a distinctive flair and has also composed a number of memorable tunes, several of which have entered the repertoires of younger generations of musicians. Sought out by many hoping to emulate his style, Mr. Flippen encourages his students to find their own sound. "You can't just sound like the other man, no matter how hard you try-and you shouldn't," he says. "Each one's got to have his own style. It's all creamed potatoes, just fixed a little different."

Verlen Clifton first started with banjo and guitar but eventually settled on mandolin, which he plays more as a rhythm rather than a lead instrument. Verlen's approach to playing music remains simple in concept, but hard to execute: "Get in really good tune, get good timing, and you've got it two-thirds whipped." When Verlen discovered that audiences liked to hear singing, he adapted traditional songs to a stringband setting and added vocal numbers to the Smokey Valley Boys' performances.

Frank Bode learned to play the guitar and banjo from his wife, Ginger Sykes Bode, and both of her parents. They would show him the chords, and like other musicians from this area, he learned by ear. He plays guitar with the Smokey Valley Boys and is also a fine singer. Frank has performed at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta and at the National Folk Festival as well as at many fiddlers' conventions, hometown oprys, and festivals in western North Carolina and southwestern Virginia.

A lifelong acoustic musician, Paul Brown has spent much of his life learning, collecting and playing music in Surry County. He studied banjo with the great Surry County musician and National Heritage Fellowship recipient, Tommy Jarrell, and plays beautifully in both the clawhammer and two-fingered styles. He has produced and performed on numerous CDs and LPs for the County, Smithsonian Folkways, Heritage, and Rounder labels. He is now a newscaster and reporter working for National Public Radio in Washington D.C. Paul won a National Federation of Community Broadcasters Silver Reel Award for a documentary on music traditions of Surry County and the surrounding region entitled "Breaking Up Christmas: A Blue Ridge Mountain Holiday."

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The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival presentation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Folklife Center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Check out our web site [www.loc.gov/folklife](http://www.loc.gov/folklife)

