

Second Time Around

An old fiddling pro takes the stage—again

BY MATT SIRCELY

After laying his fiddle down for decades, Lee Stripling is enjoying his newfound popularity in Seattle, thousands of miles from the cotton fields of his native Alabama and six decades from his professional fiddling heyday. Stripling, age 85, was very young when his father Charlie and uncle Ira, known as the Stripling Brothers, recorded their first “sides” in the 1920s. The instrumental duo “climbed to the heights of music fame from a beginning as inauspicious as a human mind can imagine,” reported the *Commercial Dispatch* [Columbus, Mississippi] in 1929.

The Depression soon forced Charlie into sharecropping cotton, earning less than a dollar a day, but the popular fiddler doubled his income by playing dances and routinely claiming first prize at regional fiddling contests. “It was hard times,” recalls Stripling, who joined his father on the bandstand at a young age. “It was right in the heart of the Depression, you know, when we first started out. He had to have some help on his income. Have you ever heard the song ‘Eleven-cent cotton and 40-cent meat—how in the world can a poor man eat?’

“I know all about that,” he adds with a laugh, remarking that he never went hungry. “Now, I don’t know how the other people survived hardly.”

Lee learned mandolin at age eight and quickly began accompanying his father at contests and dances with his older brother, Robert, on guitar. “I was so used to going to bed with the chickens, sitting there playing the same old tune for a solid hour, I started nodding. My dad learned to reach over with his fiddle bow and tap me on the head to make me stay with it. Some people said my feet didn’t touch the floor at that time,” he laughs. “Some people said, and I doubt it, that I never missed a beat when I nodded off there.”

Both boys took up the fiddle, soaking up old versions of tunes from a steady stream of such musical visitors as Uncle Plez Carroll, who was born around 1850. The Stripling siblings also honed their “brother-duet”-style singing, and expanded into western swing once radio became accessible.

Lee played semiprofessionally while serving in the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Air Force, but he laid down his bow and moved to Seattle as the country-music market evaporated. “During the war years and for 30 years afterwards, I dropped it because of the lack of popularity,” he explains. “Sometimes, you’d go start to play a fiddle in a

crowd of modern people, and they would bark like a dog or something and make you feel like, ‘I’m not in the right place for this.’”

But in the 1960s, unknown to Stripling, reissues of old Stripling Brothers records began to circulate among old-time music revivalists who studied Charlie’s rich, driving sound and inventive compositions.

When the Seattle old-timey crowd finally discovered Stripling living nearby, he was equally astonished to discover a thriving fiddle-music scene so close to home.

Seattle musician W.B. Reid began paying weekly visits. Stripling remembers, “He said, ‘You’re going to start playing your dad’s tunes, and you’re going to play a little bit every day,’ because I was a little rusty. I did, and that got me going again.”

The 2000 Festival of American Fiddle Tunes, held each summer near Seattle, brought Lee and Robert together professionally for the first time since 1938. Dormant for decades, their intuitive arrangements sprang back to life and their endearing stage banter easily charmed the crowd. The brothers toured Alabama in 2001 and again last year, attending family reunions and producing dances and concerts, including one at the old agricultural school in Stripling’s hometown. “We always pack it out,” he says.

Now Stripling has a band, the Lee Stripling Trio, and he enjoys the Internet chatter about the Stripling Brothers. But when he reads books about Alabama fiddling written by younger generations, he realizes that few people alive today, aside from his brother, can relate to that history in the personal way that he can.

“It’s hard to find a contemporary I can talk to about those days,” he says. □

Filmmaker Jeri Vaughn has collected hundreds of hours of footage of Lee Stripling, from Seattle to Alabama, with support from the US Library of Congress. She anticipates releasing a documentary in April.



NEWFOUND FAME: Seattle fiddler Lee Stripling is back after a 62-year hiatus.