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Final Project
Introduction to Folklore
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For Dr. Jay Anderson

Country music Just sounds better in a barn.

In a former carpet store, produce stand and museum to the Lost River Cave Just inside the Bowling Green city limits on U.S. 31-W, Joe Marshall is realizing a lifelong ambition to play his own style of music where he likes it best.

A fiddle player since the days of World War II, Marshall has played on numerous radio and television shows and toured with some of the greats in old time, country music.

But times have changed for the 59-year-old man whose parents farmed and raised dairy cattle on what is now Eastland Park. The Checkerboard Jamboree and Christmas show he did seven years for WBK0-TV was canceled when the station changed management and WKCT radio opted for more marketable forms of music.

Marshall, undaunted, took matters into his own hands and opened his first music barn in 1981 on Dishman Lane.

"It's still over there," he said. "There, we were in the loft of that old barn. It had the type of thing that I wanted--the atmosphere--that's what I wanted to say.

"As I say, you'd come on into the gear room and up the stairs and into the hay loft. And that's where we were. It would seat about 180 maybe."

He said there was a driveway and plenty of parking space. But the surface was dirt, and Marshall said they could only stay open during the summer.

He'd had the idea all his life.

"Back years ago when I was a child they'd have barn dances. And you know, you hear that term today, barn dances," he said on a Saturday night after his Rovin' Ramblers band opened the 2 1/2 hour show.

//There was the Renfro Valley Barn Dance--that was in a barn. It started in a little red school house up in Mr. Vernon, Ky. It was just kind of a natural thing to do for people to have their parties sometimes in barns--corn huskin's--and there was a lot of games played in barns in those days.

//Country people, boys and girls, you know--we had a lot of fun. Jimmy Dickens wrote a song, 'I Got My Education Out Behind The Barn.' //

Marshall opened his second barn July 17, 1982 at its present location. A self-employed contractor, Marshall remodeled the barn himself.

Pine boards make up the interior, with a red curtain draping the stage. In the back of the room--large enough for about 250 people--Marshall's wife runs a small concession stand, selling coffee, hot chocolate, colas and snacks to an average crowd of about 50.

A wood stove sits off to the right of the stage, and a group of families huddles around it. Most of the audience is in their 30s or older, but several bring their children for the night to sit in chairs Marshall got from the Oakland school.

//One of the first shows I ever played was at the Oakland school. They had a nice little auditorium there with about 300 seats--a little less than 300,// Marshall remembers. //They gave 'em to me. They wanted to use that building for storage and they gave me those seats.//

For \$3, you can hear Marshall, the Ramblers and occasionally other bands perform in the barn, which opens at 8 p.m. each Saturday and winds down sometime around 10:30.

Just before showtime, the band--Wandel Dye, David Dye, Bob Green, Bill Burkeen, Curly Thomas and Marshall--tune up just off the stage.

//I've got four boys here tonight that have been with me 40 years,// Marshall boasted.

Thomas, who acted as emcee because Marshall was recovering from surgery, has been playing with the Ramblers since he was 14 in 1942.

//He wasn't one of our first members, but he was close,// Marshall said.

//But Curly left, and we've been parted for about 25 or 30 years. But they're all coming back, and this is the reason for the barn.//

Wandel Dye joined the group in about 1949, Marshall said. //(He) showed up with an accordin one day at the (WKCT) radio station and wanted to know if he could play a number on the radio. He couldn't play but in one key and that was C-sharp. And most of our boys didn't know how to make a C-sharp on the guitar.

//They learned if they tuned their guitar down half a step--no, up a half--they could play together.//

Like Dye, Marshall said Green just dropped in one day during his freshman year at Western Kentucky University and wanted to play. But he wasn't much good, Marshall recalls.

//I'm telling the truth. He wasn't much good, but none of us were. He played his guitar and only played on the first four strings. But he could still sing a pretty good song. It wasn't long till Bob was a musician.

//His parents were financing his education. But we played enough one- and two-room schoolhouses that we made enough (he looks over at Green), I doubt if your parents sent too much money after that.//

Green nodded in agreement.

Like the informality of the members, the concerts in the barn don't have a strict format, although Marshall said they usually follow a general path.

//We'll just go on. We'll open up with a fiddle tune, and I'll sing one,// he said.

After the first song, Marshall will sometimes make a few announcements. There's no smoking, no drinking and no ballroom dancing. Later, he said, "but if you want to clog solo--see, we have one up there now--come up front and cut a rug."

After the announcements, Marshall will introduce each member of the band for a song. "I never know what they're gonna sing. And when they come to the mike they either tell what they're gonna sing or show us a key on the guitar without saying a word."

Marshall usually opens with "Mountain Dew," but anything could follow. "Sometimes, they'll do a number we've never done before. It doesn't matter. We'll play it anyway. We'll play by ear."

He said none of the musicians can read music. Even if they could, Marshall said he didn't know of any of the old songs being written down anywhere--it's just something you hand down from generation to generation.

"It's just things you pick up and you'll hear a tune and if you like it you'll buy the record and play it a time or two and copy the words off and go from there. A lot of the old fiddle tunes I wouldn't have any idea where you pick them up anyway."

Marshall jokes that he studied music for a while, but not enough to interfere with his fiddlin'. His older sister was taking music lessons under Weldon Heart at the old College High, and Marshall said he would go over her lessons.

"A couple of years later when I started in high school there, I took lessons from Dr. Heart. He said, 'My, you've got a good ear.'"

"Sometimes I'd practice and sometimes I didn't. Maybe the night before I'd grab my fiddle and work on it about 30 minutes."

The music in high school was classical, but the training helped him

learn by ear. //That's the only way I play today. I don't read unless it's necessary to learn a new tune or something.

//Like this week while I was at home (recovering from the hospital), I picked up the fiddle and picked up a new tune and played it for about an hour and I laid it down. And then the next day I picked it up to play and I didn't remember it, // he said.

//So you see, I should have written it down. //

He remembers buying his first fiddle for \$8 and //some odd cents// from Sears Roebuck around 1935. But for the life of him, he can't remember what happened to it--he can recall the history of every other instrument he's owned.

//I wish I still had it. My grandmother opened a bank account for me when I was born. She had put nickles and dimes and quarters in that account and at that age, why she told me I could cash it out if I wanted to.

//And it had gained a dollar or two interest. And there was enough money there that I bought my \$8 and something fiddle from Sears Roebuck. That was in the depression days. //

Today, he believes he has seven fiddles. //I keep about two--well, I gave my boy one, and he keeps it strung up. And there's one other one-- I keep about three strung up. But I never carry but one, the one I'm using now.

//It's a German make fiddle. It's a Klotz. I never heard of that fiddle. But I found out when I got to studying fiddles a little--violins and violin makers--that it's a famous fiddle, a good make of fiddle. //

The run up as high as \$15,000, but Marshall has no plans to sell it. //I got it out of an antique shop. He didn't know what it was and I didn't either when I bought it. //

He has strict definitions about the country music he wants coming

from his fiddle. And no matter what professors might call it, his music is country--not folk.

"What we play is the old fashion style, original type of country music."

Marshall said most so-called country music doesn't live up to that standard, and he won't listen to it on the radio.

"It's what they call crossover--like you get over in the pop field. They do that to sell more records, of course, and they make money doing it. But they have really ruined country music."

For example, he cringes at the thought of his barn being compared to the Grand Ol' Opry in Nashville, Tenn. "They have people like Ronnie Milsap. Well, he's nothing but rock n' roll." Real country music, he said, comes from people like Roy Acuff, Wilma Lee Cooper, Bill Monroe and Grandpa Jones.

The rest simply isn't country music, Marshall said, and that's why his barn and (as an example) Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Festival have caught on so well. "It's the only time you can go hear honest-to-goodness bluegrass music," he said of Monroe's festival. "You have a bluegrass festival and people come from hundreds of miles and stay the weekend. You ever been to one?"

His is also not the kind of music you find where alcohol is served. Marshall said not one of his members would be found in a bar. They used to do it, he said, but he thinks playing in a bar would look like you were promoting the sale of alcohol.

Ironically, there's a liquor store across the road from his barn, under a billboard advertising Jack Daniels whisky.

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There's been some profit, he said, but most of that has gone back into the remodeling effort. It's basically a labor of love. //We're doing it because we enjoy doing it, and there's no place for us to play anymore.

//We're not big, but we have fun. We hope it will grow into something bigger.//

Marshall claims that people have come from miles around to listen to his music--the real test of any musician. //We've had people that drive here from up in Illinois, just in time for the show and listen to the show and turn around and drive back.

//We've had carloads that passed up Nashville several times--would pass up the Opry--to come up and hear us.//