

From the Hills

How Mid-Century Migrants from the Mountains Brought Bluegrass--and More--to Baltimore

By **Geoffrey Himes** | Posted 1/12/2000

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More Destinations

I sold my farm to take my woman where she longed to be.

We left our kin and all our friends back there in Tennessee.

I bought those one-way tickets she had often begged me for,

And they took us to the streets of Baltimore.

--Tompall Glaser and Harlan Howard, "The Streets of Baltimore"

Back in 1966, "The Streets of Baltimore" was one of the biggest hits on country radio. Despite Chet Atkins' string-sweetened countrypolitan arrangement, Bobby Bare's warm baritone made Tompall Glaser and Harlan Howard's lyrics ring true. Like the characters in the song, hundreds of thousands of rural Southerners moved to northern cities in search of work from the 1930s to the '60s--a migration that changed Baltimore forever.

When these Southerners moved, they brought their music with them, and for white Southerners that meant hillbilly music--a catch-all term encompassing the mountain ballads, old-time string bands, bluegrass, and Grand Ole Opry country that Appalachian people scrambled together whenever they pulled a guitar or fiddle out of its case. And it's in that music we can most readily discern how those mountain immigrants remade themselves to fit Baltimore--and remade Baltimore to fit themselves.

Even today, that Southern Appalachian influence is part of what makes Baltimore so different from other stops on the Washington-to-Boston Amtrak line. When people talk about Baltimoreans' earthy frankness, their stubborn nontrendiness, and their willingness to dance at the drop of a hat, they're often referring to lingering hillbilly traits. From meat-and-potatoes diners to John Waters' poor white film characters to the Deer Creek Fiddlers convention, the mountains still affect Baltimore culture.

It's not often remembered today, but in the '50s and '60s, Baltimore was a major center for bluegrass music. A Baltimore band, Earl Taylor and the Stoney Mountain Boys, was the first bluegrass act to ever play Carnegie Hall. It was in Baltimore rowhouses that Hazel Dickens first met Mike Seeger, who co-founded the New Lost City Ramblers, a well-known old-time revival band, and Alice Gerrard, with whom Dickens formed the first major female bluegrass duo. And it was here that Del McCoury first met bluegrass godfather Bill Monroe and got the break that changed his life.

Earl Taylor and Dickens were typical of the thousands who took trains, buses, cars, and trucks from the mountains. For them, the move to Baltimore was seldom an entirely positive or entirely negative experience. On the one hand, the city promised higher incomes and wider experiences than the newcomers had ever enjoyed.

She said the prettiest place on earth is Baltimore at night.

Well, a man feels proud to give his woman what she's longing for.

<"The Streets of Baltimore"

"Coming to Baltimore wasn't easy, but if I hadn't come, I wouldn't have met so many different kinds of people. And if I hadn't had people in Baltimore to drag me along, I never would have become a professional musician," Dickens recalls. "I don't give them credit for my talent, but I give them credit for getting me out in public and showing me the larger world. If I'd stayed in West Virginia, I'd have just gotten married and had a mess of kids. I'd have only sung at home, if at all."

On the other hand, the pressures of industrial work, the loneliness of a city of strangers, and the temptations of the bars often fractured the close families and communities the mountain folk had known back home.

Every night when I came home with every muscle sore,

She would drag me through the streets of Baltimore. . . .

I soon learned she loved those bright lights more than she loved me.

<"The Streets of Baltimore"

I used to sing 'Streets of Baltimore' because I recognized the situation," Dickens recalls. "One of the things folks said about Baltimore was there was a bar on every corner. Most of these people came from counties that were dry, and it was hard to get booze unless you got moonshine or went way out of the way. But when they came to Baltimore, where it was so accessible, the men in particular couldn't resist getting a drink or a lot of drinks, and that caused many fights.

"You'd see a lot of women in the bars, and the men wouldn't like it. I can remember men looking down on women who came into these places. They'd say, 'What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?' We played music in places like that, and it was difficult convincing people that was the only reason I was there--for the sake of the music.

"Sometimes it took a lot of convincing. I was very teeny; I weighed 105 pounds and I got chased around quite a bit. It's like that Kitty Wells song, 'It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels'; there was a double standard."

Dickens not only sang "The Streets of Baltimore," she lived it. Today Dickens is the dignified, 64-year-old matriarch of the city's bluegrass community. She wears her hair up in a curly brown perm, but her eyes still glitter between her high cheekbones with the mischievous irreverence of youth.

She was born in Montcalm, W. Va., one of 11 children, and was just 16 when she quit school and rode the Greyhound bus to Baltimore the first time. By 1954, when she was 19, she was in Baltimore for good and stayed until she moved to Washington, D.C., in 1969.

"We didn't go because Baltimore was so glamorous," she says with a chuckle. "It was a survival thing. In West Virginia, we never had enough clothes or food. When . . . it got harder for my father to keep all of us, I decided I should go. There was nothing there for me. I couldn't afford clothes and I couldn't afford a guitar. There were no options for women except marriage unless you went to the city."

Walt Hensley, the banjo player for Earl Taylor and the Stoney Mountain Boys and the longtime leader of the Dukes of Bluegrass, also lived "The Streets of Baltimore." Born in Grundy, Va., in 1936, Hensley moved to Baltimore in 1956. He was at the center of the Baltimore bluegrass scene until 1991, when he moved up to Lancaster, Pa.

"There wasn't any work down there but the mines, and most people didn't want to work in the mines," Hensley says about his hometown. "You'd breathe in the coal dust and you'd have cave-ins. I never worked in them but I've been in them. You'd hear water dripping through the rock and you'd hear the timber creaking. I had known people who died in them. It was long hours for low pay and very dangerous to boot. I wasn't tempted at all."

For Dickens, the dangers of the mines were very personal. She lost her older brother Thurman and two brothers-in-law to black lung. She describes their fate in a 1972 a cappella song, "Black Lung."

Black lung, black lung, your hands icy cold,
As you reach for my life and you torture my soul.
Cold as that water hole in that dark cave,
Where I spent my life's blood digging my own grave.

"Ten years after I left, I went back and I didn't recognize anything," Hensley says. "The strip mines had taken the tops of the mountains off and the flooding had ruined the farmlands, so there was really nothing to go back to. About half the kids I knew left for the cities. When I got to Baltimore, I met a lot of people from a 20-mile radius of my hometown."

Nonetheless, it wasn't that easy to leave the old world behind. Dickens evokes a typical parting scene in her song "Mama's Hand" (which Lynn Morris took to the top of the bluegrass charts in a 1995 cover). On her 1983 album *By the Sweat of My Brow*, Dickens conjures up that day in 1954 when she hugged her mother one last time before boarding that Greyhound bus.

I said goodbye to that plain little mining town,
With just a few old clothes that had made the rounds.
I knew I was leaving a lot of things that were good,
But I thought I'd make the break while I still could. . . .
It was hard to let go of mama's hand.

"I remember leaving that time," Dickens says. "I remember her being sad, and she said, 'Surely you're not going before supper,' and I said, 'I have to catch my bus.' She would have liked me to stay but she knew there was nothing there for me. She'd seen all her other children go off to work or get married, so she knew she had to let go."

When young people fled the mountains in search of better jobs, they had a choice of destinations. Cincinnati was the most popular, followed closely by Baltimore, Chicago, Washington, Columbus, and Detroit. Most often, the new migrants chose the town where relatives or friends had already landed. That was the case for Dickens, whose older sister Velvie was in Hampden, and for Hensley, whose divorced mother had moved to Dundalk.

When these Appalachian refugees poured into Baltimore in the '40s and '50s, they were not met with welcoming arms; rather, they were usually shunted into bottom-rung industrial jobs and "hillbilly ghettos" in Dundalk, Hampden, Highlandtown, Lower Charles Village, Middle River, and elsewhere.

"I remember me and my brother went to the plant looking for work," Hensley says, referring to the Monarch Rubber Co. factory on Pulaski Highway. "The people up there were talking about the damn hillbillies coming up and taking their jobs. Maybe they didn't know we were hillbillies, maybe they did. Other times people would ask us if we wore shoes down there. They asked if we ever washed.

"It didn't bother me; I was proud of being from the South. Southern people were honest, and if you needed help, they would help you out. At harvest time, people would all go to the neighbor's house and pitch in. You didn't have to lock your doors because everyone was honest. You knew what they felt and what they were thinking. That wasn't always true of the Northerners I met."

"When I first came to Baltimore," Dickens says, "I remember people like me walking up and down the street looking for apartments. I saw one sign that said, NO DOGS OR HILLBILLIES. Once I went to a corner store and asked for some pop, and the boy looked at me like I was crazy. He said sarcastically, 'We got Pop here; where's Mom?' I didn't know what he was talking about until I learned they called them sodas up here. The way you talked, the way you dressed, the way you acted--people could tell you were from the mountains.

"So we ended up in these hillbilly ghettos. As a result, you never got away from your own kind, even though you were in the middle of the city. Even in the factories, you were around the same kind; not many city people worked those jobs.

"I used to sit on my stoop and feel very lonely. I'd watch all these people walking by and I'd wonder where they were going," Dickens says. "I had nowhere to go and no money to spend if I got there. Back home, people would ride by and throw up their hand and wave hello. Here people didn't bother with you if they didn't know you. I wasn't used to that."

Dickens waitressed at first and then landed a factory job at Continental Can on East Biddle Street. She moved from her sister's place in Hampden to an apartment in Lower Charles Village. Hensley got a job at Monarch Rubber and moved to nearby Highlandtown. Those were hard times, and Dickens says no song sums it up better than Buck Owens' 1969 number "No Milk and Honey in Baltimore":

The smell of the Bay, the buildings of gray,
Was more than I'd bargained for.
If I had my way, I'd go home today,
For there's no milk and honey here in Baltimore.

People talked a lot about going back home, Hensley says, but very few of them did. As much as they romanticized the mountains, they weren't willing to return to the danger of the mines, the lack of indoor plumbing, and towns that closed down at 8 o'clock. Instead they kept the spirit of the mountains alive in the music they played in their small Baltimore apartments.

"Music was something you had that was yours, something that didn't cost any money," Dickens explains. "When we began playing around the house with our brothers and sisters, it was the same way we did it back home.

"People would think of something they had heard from their childhood, and if you knew it, they would request it every time. I remember this one couple whose living room we sang in; they'd always want me to sing that Johnny and Jack song, 'What About You,' that goes, 'Every day your memory grows dimmer/ the clouds drift away/ the sun peeks through.' They would cry every time."

The parties brought musicians together, Hensley says, serving as a breeding ground for the developing bluegrass scene: "When I went to work at Monarch, I met a guy from West Virginia named Vernon Underwood who played bluegrass guitar. He invited me to his rowhouse in Fells Point one Saturday night in 1957, and that's where I met Hazel [Dickens] and her brother Arnold. They were easy to get to know because there was nothing phony about them. Hazel's always been the same person since I've known her."

Dickens' other brother, Robert, was a tuberculosis patient at the Mount Wilson State Hospital, north of Pikesville. One of the hospital's orderlies was Mike Seeger--the son of folklorist Charles Seeger and composer Ruth Crawford Seeger and the half brother of folk singer Pete Seeger. With that family background, Mike Seeger's fascination with the homegrown music of Appalachia was perhaps inevitable. When he discovered that Robert Dickens came from a West Virginia music-making family, Seeger was anxious to meet the rest of the clan.

"Robert found out I liked music," Seeger recalls, "and he invited me down to their place in Little Appalachia, down there around Charles and Calvert streets, between 20th and 25th streets. I had never met people like that. These weren't professionals, but working-class men and women who liked to play music for themselves. Music was so much a part of life for them.

"Maybe their vocabulary wasn't large, but the level of communication was high. A lot of Southern people are amateur musicologists. You'd have very intelligent discussions of how Carter Stanley sang and how it was different from Ralph [Stanley]. And then we'd play those songs. I was totally taken with it. It felt like home to me. I became so obsessed with it that I didn't spend enough time sleeping. I'd go into town most weekends and many weeknights."

The mountain musicians' connection with Seeger was a crucial one, for it broke their isolation and introduced them to a broader range of Baltimore and Washington players and listeners. The enthusiasm of those outsiders convinced these hillbilly pickers that maybe they had something the wider world might want to hear. That took them out of the living rooms, into the bars, and eventually into theaters and recording studios.

"Mike was the first person outside our culture to validate our music," Dickens confirms. "He looked on it as an art form, while to us it was just what we did. We never thought anyone else would be interested. We never thought to sit my father down and have him teach us the old songs he knew. We were always more interested in learning the latest Ernest Tubb hit."

Despite common musical interests, Seeger says, the cultural differences between him and his new friends were hard to ignore. "As much as we liked each other, there was definitely a difference between us," he says. "I was naive and very middle-class; I always had a family I could have gone to if things got hard. For them, there was . . . nowhere else to go. They had it

pretty rough down in the country, but to move to this big city and to operate in this place with too many people just because it was a little better was hard too."

Bluegrass parties became a fixture in Baltimore. A mix of folks from the mountains and the city would cram into a narrow rowhouse to play tunes. Lamar Grier, the father of noted bluegrass guitarist David Grier and a top-notch banjo player himself, often drove up from his home in Riverdale for the Baltimore parties.

"If out-of-town bands were in Baltimore, someone would always invite them to a party," Lamar Grier says. "I can remember sitting around, drinking, talking, and picking with the likes of Bill Monroe, Clarence White, and Doc Watson. Sometimes they'd go on till daybreak."

Danny Curtis, a longtime member of Hensley's Dukes of Bluegrass, had grown up in Guilford and graduated from Johns Hopkins University. As a teenager, he too was entranced by the local hillbilly-music scene. "I used to listen to the Grand Ole Opry all Saturday night long, despite my parents' demands that I turn it off," Curtis recalls. "And Bill Monroe was my favorite. But I didn't see a five-string banjo in person until 1952, when Mac Wiseman came to Johnny's Used Cars on 900 E. Fayette St., where the main post office is now.

"Johnny Wilbanks called himself the 'Walking Man's Friend.' He was from Georgia, and he loved bluegrass so much that he sponsored a radio show from his used-car lot. Ray Davis, who's now a DJ for WAMU in Washington, was the disc jockey at Johnny's and he would bring in live acts. One time, I missed my first class at Baltimore Polytechnic High School so I could go down there at 8:30 A.M. and see Charlie Monroe, Bill's brother. It was worth it, because it was the greatest music in the world."

By the late '50s, many musicians were branching out from the parties into bars where they could get paid for their music. One such band, the Pike County Boys, featured Dickens on stand-up bass, Seeger on fiddle, Bob Shanklin on mandolin, Dickie Rittler on banjo, and Bob Baker on guitar. Though the instrumentation was bluegrass, the repertoire leaned heavily on Grand Ole Opry hits.

"You couldn't hold down a job just playing bluegrass all night," Dickens says. "People wanted to hear whatever was on the jukebox, so I had to sing Jean Shepard as well as Mac Wiseman, Wanda Jackson as well as the Stanley Brothers. People in Baltimore wanted to dance, so you had to mix in slow songs like Ray Price's 'Release Me' or Kitty Wells' 'Whose Shoulder Will You Cry On?'"

"The Cozy Inn on West Baltimore Street was the bar everyone remembers," Seeger says. "You had a stage about 6 feet deep and 8 feet wide that three or four people could crowd onto, and a sound system that barely got the sound out there. There were maybe a dozen tables and all those low-down barroom smells of smoke and drink. Occasionally there were fights, but people were usually too old or drunk to fight. People would dance a lot, both flat-foot clogging and couple-dancing."

Even though he was a banjo player, Hensley wound up in a rockabilly band called the Black Mountain Boys because it was the only paying work he could find. He was playing with that band at the Cozy Inn one night when Baltimore's hillbilly hero, mandolinist Earl Taylor, walked in. Taylor, who grew up in the Virginia mountains, had come to Baltimore before moving on to Detroit and hooking up there with bluegrass legend Jimmy Martin.

Taylor had just left Martin in 1958 and was back in Baltimore, looking to form a band of his own. He was so impressed with Hensley that he offered him the banjo slot in his new group. Earl Taylor and the Stoney Mountain Boys--which included Taylor, Hensley, bassist/comedian Vernon "Boatwhistle" McIntyre, and guitarist Charlie Waller (future founder of the Country Gentlemen)--were soon working regularly.

"I had made more money playing rock 'n' roll, but I jumped at the chance to play bluegrass because that was my roots; that was the music I loved," Hensley says. "We played nothing but old-time bluegrass music--Bill Monroe, Stanley Brothers, Jimmy Martin--and we played a lot of the Baltimore clubs: Diener's on West Baltimore Street, the Blue Jay in Fells Point, the KY Bar on South Charles, the Garden of Eden on Eden Street, Nappy's Show Bar on Howard Street.

"The best job we had was at the 79 Club down by the Cross Street Market. We played there seven nights a week during 1959 and '60. It was a typical South Baltimore bar in an old rowhouse. The stage was built into one wall, the bar was on the other wall, and you'd have tables, bar stools, and a tiny dance floor. Even though it was in a rough neighborhood, it was a safe place to go. And we'd attract not just mountain people and beatniks, but also doctors and lawyers."

Seeger was a big fan of the Stoney Mountain Boys and he recommended them to his folklorist pal Alan Lomax, who was organizing Folksong '59, a roots-music concert at New York's Carnegie Hall meant to rival John Hammond's famous Spirituals to Swing show at Carnegie in 1938. Lomax had already booked bluesmen Muddy Waters and Memphis Slim, country-folk singer/songwriter Jimmy Driftwood ("Battle of New Orleans"), and folk revivalists Mike and Pete Seeger. Lomax still needed a bluegrass act, so he booked Mike Seeger's Baltimore buddies.

"Alan came down to the 79 Club and asked us, 'Do you want to play Carnegie Hall?' I had never heard of it. I thought it was just a bigger-than-normal dance hall," Hensley recalls. "I had never drunk whiskey in my life, but when I got to Carnegie Hall and looked through the curtains and saw those decorations and those balconies full way up high, I went backstage and took a little nip to settle my nerves. When we walked out there, we were shaking so much it was like the wind was blowing out there."

"The place was packed," says Curtis Cody, who played fiddle with Taylor, Hensley, McIntyre, and Sam Hutchins that night. "We looked out through the curtains, and that place was buzzing. I said, 'Walt, I don't think they'll like us a bit.' But when it came our turn, he played something on the banjo, and they tore that place up. Everybody liked it. Someone from United Artists heard us, and we went back a few months later and cut a record."

"After the first song, I settled down. But that was scary, really scary. I had never seen a place like that in my life," Hensley says. "You're going from a barroom in South Baltimore to a place where you look up at the lights and it looks like the sky, it's so high. It was like a dream; it's a reward for all the time and effort you put into the music. The next day at the 79 Club, I told the crowd, 'We were in Carnegie Hall last night, and tonight we're back in Baltimore playing the same old dump again.' "

United Artists released Earl Taylor and the Stoney Mountain Boys' *Folk Songs From the Blue Grass* in 1960. The band relocated in 1962 to Cincinnati, where work was more plentiful. There

they signed with Capitol Records, which released the band's *Bluegrass Taylor Made* and Hensley's solo instrumental album, *The Five-String Banjo Today*.

Around the same time, Seeger joined forces with John Cohen and Tom Paley to create the New Lost City Ramblers, which became a well-known old-time string band. They recorded prolifically and rewardingly, and those sides are now available on two Smithsonian/Folkways anthologies: *The Early Years, 1958-1962* and *Volume II, 1967-1973: Out Standing in Their Field*.

Meanwhile, Dickens formed a duo with Alice Gerrard, an Antioch College student who was engaged to Jeremy Foster, a high school friend of Seeger's. The two women first met in Bob Baker's basement in Dundalk, and each was surprised to encounter another woman with such a strong passion for bluegrass.

"Hazel and I had few, if any, women models," Gerrard wrote in the liner notes for the Smithsonian/Folkways anthology *Pioneering Women of Bluegrass*. "[G]enerally, women were the girlfriends or wives of the musicians, or threats to the same. If they played, they were the bass player in an otherwise male band; they might sing one country song per set and were often treated badly. But it was different at the music parties [in Baltimore and Washington], where so many different points of view converged, and an atmosphere of acceptance and encouragement prevailed."

Take all of that sweet talk and give it to some other girl,
Who'd be happy to rock your babies and live in your kind of world.
Because I'm a different kind of woman, got a different set of plans,
You know a ramblin' woman's no good for a home-lovin' man.

<Hazel Dickens, "Ramblin' Woman"

Today--when bluegrass is full of female artists such as Alison Krauss, Claire Lynch, Lynn Morris, and Rhonda Vincent--it's difficult to remember how revolutionary and unprecedented those early Hazel and Alice recordings were. But these women were the first to sing hard-driving, high-lonesome bluegrass in the style of Bill Monroe and Jimmy Martin.

Dickens and Gerrard were backed by Baltimore-Washington pickers such as Billy Baker, Grier, Schwarz, and Seeger; legends such as Chubby Wise; and young unknowns such as David Grisman. By the sheer force of their personalities, however, the two women dominated the proceedings. Hazel and Alice didn't sell a lot of records, but the few they did sell fell into the hands of women like Emmylou Harris and Naomi Judd, who have acknowledged the duo's life-changing impact upon them.

The early '60s were heady days for bluegrass in Baltimore. Earl Taylor was making records, the clubs were thriving, and two nearby outdoor music parks regularly booked national bluegrass acts during the summer. Ola Belle Reed, a noted hillbilly musician in her own right, and her husband, Bud, ran the New River Ranch in Rising Sun, and a little further up the road was Sunset Park in Oxford, Pa.

Del McCoury, now a nationally known bluegrass musician, lived in York County, Pa., during Baltimore's bluegrass heyday and regularly made the short trip south. The North Carolina

native had fallen in love with bluegrass on the radio, and the best place to see it in person was Baltimore.

"Oh my, Earl Taylor and the Stoney Mountain Boys were a great band," says McCoury, who is riding a wave of acclaim for his 1999 album with Steve Earle, *The Mountain*. "Earl [Taylor] didn't want to travel and he didn't do his own material, but when it came to hard-driving rhythm and high-lonesome singing, he was right up there with Monroe and Flatt and Scruggs. I sat in with Earl a few times, but my first regular gig was with Jack Cook, who had come to town to play with Earl and then started his own band.

"We were playing at the Chapel Café in Fells Point one night in 1963, when Bill Monroe walked right in front of us. I could have fallen over right then and there. When we took a break, we found out that Monroe was looking for a banjo player. Jack recommended me, and Monroe offered me the job.

"I told him I wanted a while to think it over and by the time I called him back, he had already hired Bill Keith, who's a much better banjo player than I am. But Monroe said he liked my singing and asked if I would like to sing and play guitar. I've been a guitar player ever since."

"In the '50s and '60s, Baltimore was the bluegrass capital of the world," asserts Jack Hofer, the owner of Dundalk's Sandpiper Inn. "People were pouring into Baltimore from West Virginia and Kentucky because we had the shipyards, the steel mills, the factories, everything. There were so many mountain people around that you'd be talking to somebody, and they'd mention that someone was playing 'hillbilly music' at somebody's house or at a bar.

"There was more bluegrass in Baltimore than back in Kentucky, where I'm from."

In 1964, all this momentum came grinding to a halt, stopped by a quartet of Englishmen. For many Americans, the Beatles were a liberating force that restored roots-derived music to the top of the pop charts. For working hillbilly musicians, though, the Fab Four were a disaster. As Beatlemania swept the land, work for everyone else dried up.

"By the time our albums came out, the Beatles had just hit," says Hensley about his solo disc and the Earl Taylor record. "And they were so hot that Capitol [the Beatles' U.S. label] stopped pressing anyone else's albums. They even had other labels help press up Beatles albums. Suddenly, there was no work anymore. I left Earl and came back to Baltimore in 1966. I landed a job driving a truck, and from that moment on I just worked weekend [music] jobs and kept my day job. I didn't even try to fool with a music career anymore."

At the same time, the hillbilly ghettos started breaking up. All the teenagers who had moved from the mountains to Baltimore in the early '50s were hitting 30 by the mid-60s. They had families and steady jobs and were moving into better neighborhoods. The longer they stayed in Maryland, the less insistent the tug of home became and the less important the old music seemed. Most of their kids were assimilated urbanites with little use for hillbilly music.

"After people got a little bit of money, they would buy a house outside the neighborhood," Dickens says. "They probably felt they got up in the papers a little bit. Maybe they felt they had outgrown the neighborhood, maybe the neighborhood had gotten a little rough for them. If they had a family, they didn't want to raise a family there. Maybe they didn't buy the six-pack every Friday anymore. Coming from the poverty we all did, we equated being somebody with having material things."

By no means did bluegrass die out in Baltimore, however. In the late '60s, WMET-TV (channel 24), featured two weekly bluegrass shows hosted by local bandleaders: *The Marvin Howell Bluegrass Show* and *The Delmar Delaney Show*. Baltimore musicians, including fiddler Jon Glik and bassist Mike Garriss, were featured on Del McCoury's early solo recordings. And Walter Hensley and the Dukes of Bluegrass played every weekend at the Cub Hill Inn on Harford Road and then at Pete's Lounge, just down the road.

Davis continued to broadcast his daily one-hour hillbilly show on WBMD-AM from Johnny's Used Cars after the lot moved to 4801 Harford Road. He also founded his own label, Wango Records, which released albums by the likes of the Stanley Brothers, Clyde Moody, and James King. Considered by many to be the finest singer in bluegrass today, King led Conowingo's Chesapeake Bay Bluegrass Boys from 1982 to '84.

The new-grass movement, which mixed bluegrass with folk, rock, and swing influences, gave the local scene a boost in the late '70s and early '80s with such bands as Windy Ridge, Southland, Bittersweet, the Satyr Hill Band, and Grass on the Rocks. Local promoters Dave Greene and Megan Shook founded the Deer Creek Fiddlers Convention, which has offered string-band competitions in Maryland every summer since 1971, usually at the Carroll County Farm Museum in Westminster.

But it wasn't the same. No longer is bluegrass the music of, by, and for displaced Appalachians in the big city. Now it is a folk form that can be adopted by anyone who enjoys five-string banjo, dobro, fiddle, and stacked harmonies. Some very good music has been made by these urban folkies, but the crucial connection between the music and its original community is lost—largely because the community itself lost its sense of identity.

While it lasted, though, that link made Baltimore a center of hillbilly music quite unlike Washington, the self-proclaimed Bluegrass Capital. "Baltimore was more of a working-class-bar-type place, while Washington was more of an uptown, upscale kind of place," Seeger says. "The people who moved from the South to Washington had different kinds of jobs, white-collar jobs, while those who came to Baltimore still worked with their hands as they had back home.

"We were quite conscious in Baltimore of being a place where the city and the country met. You'd have tough bluegrass bars, where city people were the outsiders. You'd have bohemian parties, where the country people were the outsiders. It was a place where different classes and different cultures were meeting. It was a time of curiosity and discovery and friction and exhilaration."

Dudley Connell, currently the lead singer for the Seldom Scene, remembers when his friend Hazel Dickens brought Rounder Records' Ken Irwin in 1975 to see Connell's then-fledgling band, the Johnson Mountain Boys, at Suzie's Bar in Sykesville.

"That was one of those Baltimore-type bars where people expected to dance," he says. "You'd have to do old George Jones tunes and waltzes. So we started playing, and the first thing we knew everyone was up dancing. Hazel was used to it because she had played in Baltimore for years, but it was new to Ken, who was from Boston. Up there bluegrass is looked at as a concert music. He was surprised but he loved the authenticity. It was like going back in time."

"Baltimore had all those ethnic neighborhoods, so it seemed homier to us. D.C. didn't have that," Dickens recalls. "On the one hand, we felt more comfortable around working people, but on the other hand, those people didn't have much money, and so you couldn't make a living in

Baltimore. And when those hillbillies in Baltimore got old, they hung it up and the old audience wasn't there anymore. In Washington, a lot of the audience were college-educated people who stayed interested in the music."

And yet, the hillbilly legacy lingers on in Baltimore. Perhaps no one personifies that better than Bob Perilla, who works at the Appalachian Bluegrass store in Catonsville and leads the band Bob Perilla and Big Hillbilly Bluegrass. The Ellicott City resident exemplifies the common immigrant pattern in which the first generation holds onto the old ways, the second generation rejects them in an attempt to assimilate, and the third generation rediscovers the neglected culture.

"My grandfather came from Mingo County in Virginia by way of the anthracite belt in Pennsylvania," Perilla says. "He died before I was born, but I know he was a coal miner, boxer, pool-hall owner, and mandolin player. He moved his family to Highlandtown around 1938. My daddy, by contrast, went to medical school on the GI Bill, so hillbilly music was something he wanted to leave far behind.

"So when I got interested in bluegrass, there was a certain amount of adolescent rebellion involved. I thought this music sounded fabulous when I heard it on Ray Davis' radio show. Then, when the Byrds brought out [their 1968 album] *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, the music was not only wonderful, but it was suddenly cool too. And when I found out my grandfather played bluegrass, it made me even more interested. Sometimes these things skip a generation."

If Perilla is right, bluegrass might be a recessive gene in Baltimore's DNA, just waiting for the right circumstances to express itself again. If that's so, the final chapter on hillbilly music in Baltimore--and the people who brought it here--has yet to be written.