

## Uncle Dave Macon Biography

[http://www.cmt.com/artists/az/macon\\_uncle\\_dave/bio.jhtml](http://www.cmt.com/artists/az/macon_uncle_dave/bio.jhtml)

Uncle Dave Macon, beginning his professional musical career after the age of 50, brought musical and performance traditions of the 19th-century South to the radio shows and the recording catalogues of the early country music industry. In 1925, he became one of two charter members of the Grand Ole Opry, then called the WSM Barn Dance. A consummate showman on the banjo and a one-man repository of countless old songs and comic routines, Macon remained a well-loved icon of country music until and beyond his death in 1952.

Born David Harrison Macon in Smartt Station in middle Tennessee's Warren County, he was the son of a Confederate officer who owned a large farm. Macon heard the folk music of the area when he was young, but he was also a product of the urban South: after the family moved to Nashville and began operating a hotel, Macon hobnobbed with traveling vaudeville musicians who performed there. After his father was stabbed near the hotel, Macon left Nashville with the rest of his family. He worked on a farm and later operated a wagon freight line, performing music only at local parties and dances.

Macon's turn toward a musical second career was due partly to the advent of motorized trucks, for his wagon line fell on hard times in the early '20s after a competitor invested in the horseless novelties. In 1923, he struck up a few tunes in a Nashville barbershop with fiddler Sid Harkreader, and an agent from the Loew's theater chain happened to stop in. Soon Macon and Harkreader were touring as far a field as New England, and when George D. Hay began bringing together performers two years later for what would become the Opry, Macon was a natural choice. The tour also brought Macon the first of his many recording dates, held in New York for the Vocalion label in 1924. Macon would record prolifically through the 1930s (and occasionally up to 1950) for various labels, accompanied at different times by Harkreader, the brother duo of Sam & Kirk McGee, [the Delmore Brothers](#), the young [Roy Acuff](#), and other string players including a then-unknown [Bill Monroe](#). For secular material, his backing band took the name of the Fruit Jar Drinkers.

Macon's recordings are richly enjoyable in themselves and are priceless historical documents, both for the large variety of banjo styles they preserve and for the window they afford on American song of the late 19th century. Macon performed musical-comic routines such as the "Uncle Dave's Travels" series, topical songs, often of his own composition ("Governor Al Smith"), playful folk songs ("I'll Tickle Nancy"), gospel with his Dixie Sacred Singers, blackface minstrel songs, unique proto-blues pieces that Macon learned from African-American freight workers ("Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy"), and songs of other types. Yet "the Dixie Dewdrop" was loved most of all for his presence as a live musician, captured not only on the weekly Opry broadcasts (which were broadcast nationally for a time in the 1930s) but also in the 1940 film Grand Ole Opry. Macon delivered what an 1880s southern vaudeville audience would have demanded for its hard-earned dollar: showmanship (he handled the banjo with Harlem Globetrotters-like trick dexterity), humor, political commentary (often of the incorrect variety by modern standards), and unflinching energy.

Macon continued to appear on the Opry almost until his death, gradually taking on the status of a great-hearted living link to country music's origins. He became the tenth member of the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1966, and the revival of old time music that flourished as part of the folk movement focused the attention of younger listeners on his music. Yet Macon remains less well understood, and less present in the musical minds of country listeners, than [Jimmie Rodgers](#) or [the Carter Family](#), even though he was nearly as well-known in his own day. Perhaps that's because he represents an older layer of American music-making than almost any other performer known to country audiences: modern hearers can easily connect with [Rodgers'](#) blues or [the Carters'](#) homespun sentiment, but Macon may require greater effort. Such effort, in any case, is well repaid by an acquaintance with his musical legacy. ~ James Manheim, All Music Guide

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[http://www.pbs.org/americanrootsmusic/pbs\\_arm\\_saa\\_uncledavemacon.html](http://www.pbs.org/americanrootsmusic/pbs_arm_saa_uncledavemacon.html)

## **UNCLE DAVE MACON**

Born in 1870, banjoist and comic Uncle Dave Macon bridged the gap between 19th century vaudeville and 20th century country music. After spending his first 50 years as a farmer and teamster (hauling goods with a mule and cart), Uncle Dave turned his music hobby into a career. He traveled with touring companies, building up an audience with his old-time music and comedy stage show. In 1923 he began working with a fiddler, and the next year he recorded his first material for Okeh; in 1926 he became a cast member of the brand-new Grand Ole Opry. He assembled a group he named the Fruit Jar Drinkers, performing crowd-pleasers like "Take Me Back to My Old Carolina Home," "Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy" and "Chewing Gum." The raconteur and showman continued to play the Grand Ole Opry until three weeks before his death at age 81.

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<http://www.answers.com/topic/uncle-dave-macon>

- **Born:** October 07, 1870, Smart Station, TN
- **Died:** March 22, 1952, Readyville, TN
- **Active:** '20s, '30s, '40s, '50s
- **Genres:** Country
- **Instrument:** Banjo, Vocals
- **Representative Albums:** "Travelin' Down the Road," "Uncle Dave Macon: 1926-1939," "Uncle Dave Macon"
- **Representative Songs:** "Sail Away Ladies," "Way Down the Old Plank Road," "Go Long Mule"

## Biography

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Macon's turn toward a musical second career was due partly to the advent of motorized trucks, for his wagon line fell on hard times in the early '20s after a competitor invested in the horseless novelties. In 1923, he struck up a few tunes in a Nashville barbershop with fiddler [Sid Harkreader](#), and an agent from the Loew's theater chain happened to stop in. Soon Macon and Harkreader were touring as far a field as New England, and when George D. Hay began bringing together performers two years later for what would become the *Opry*, Macon was a natural choice. The tour also brought Macon the first of his many recording dates, held in New York for the *Vocalion* label in 1924. Macon would record prolifically through the 1930s (and occasionally up to 1950) for various labels, accompanied at different times by Harkreader, the brother duo of [Sam & Kirk McGee](#), [the Delmore Brothers](#), the young [Roy Acuff](#), and other string players including a then-unknown [Bill Monroe](#). For secular material, his backing band took the name of the Fruit Jar Drinkers.

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## Uncle Dave Macon

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### Uncle Dave Macon

<b>Birth name</b>	David Harrison Macon
<b>Also known as</b>	"Dixie Dewdrop"
<b>Born</b>	October 7, 1870
<b>Origin</b>	Smartt Station, <a href="#">Tennessee</a> , <a href="#">USA</a>
<b>Died</b>	March 22, 1952 (aged 81)
<b><a href="#">Genre(s)</a></b>	<a href="#">Old time music</a>
<b>Occupation(s)</b>	Vaudeville entertainer
<b><a href="#">Instrument(s)</a></b>	<a href="#">Banjo</a>
<b>Years active</b>	1920s – 1952

### Members

[Country Music Hall of Fame](#)

### Former members

[Grand Ole Opry](#)  
(1925 – 1952)

### Notable instrument(s)

[Banjo](#)

**Uncle Dave Macon** (October 7, 1870 — March 22, 1952)—also known as "The Dixie Dewdrop"—was an [American banjo player](#), [singer](#), [songwriter](#), and [comedian](#). Known for his chin whiskers, plug hat, gold teeth, and gates-ajar collar, he gained regional fame as a [vaudeville](#) performer in the early 1920s before going on to become the first star of the [Grand Ole Opry](#) in the latter half of the decade. Macon's music is considered the ultimate bridge between 19th-century American folk and vaudeville music and the phonograph and radio-based music of the early 20th-century. His polished stage presence and lively personality have made him one of the most enduring figures of early [country music](#).<sup>[1]</sup>

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### *Early life*

**David Harrison Macon** was born in Smartt Station, [Tennessee](#) (about 5 miles south of [McMinnville](#)), the son of [Confederate Captain](#) John Macon and his wife Martha Ramsey. In 1884, when young David was thirteen years old, his family moved to [Nashville, Tennessee](#) to run the Old Broadway Hotel, which they had purchased. The hotel became a center for Macon and his growing musical interests, as it was frequented by artists and troupers traveling along various vaudeville circuits and circus acts.<sup>[1]</sup> In 1885, he learned to play the banjo with the assistance of a circus comedian called Joel Davidson.<sup>[2]</sup> While in Nashville, he attended Hume-Fogg High School.<sup>[1]</sup> A tragedy struck the Macon family when his father was murdered in 1886 outside the hotel.<sup>[3][4]</sup> The hotel was sold and the family quickly moved to Readyville, Tennessee,<sup>[5]</sup> where his mother ran a stagecoach stop. Macon began entertaining the passengers who arrived at the rest stop by playing the banjo from a home made stage.<sup>[1]</sup>

In 1889, Macon married Matilda Richardson and moved to a farm near Kittrell, Tennessee, where they in time raised six sons. Around 1900, Macon opened a freight line between [Murfreesboro](#) and [Woodbury, Tennessee](#). It was called The Macon Midway Mule and Wagon Transportation Company. Often, when Macon was driving along with his mules, hauling freight and produce, he would entertain people by singing and playing the banjo at various stops along the way. In time, his sons became part of the company as they grew up. But the arrival of an automobile-based competitor threatened his mule company, and he was forced to close down in 1920.<sup>[2]</sup>

### *Professional career*

Although Macon had performed as an amateur for years, and was well known for his showmanship, Macon's first professional performance came in 1921 at a schoolhouse in [Morrison, Tennessee](#) as part of a Methodist church benefit show. In 1923, during a performance for the [shriners](#) in [Nashville](#), he was spotted by [Marcus Loew](#) of [Loews Theatres](#) who offered Macon fifteen dollars if he was to perform at a theater in [Alabama](#).<sup>[6][7]</sup> Macon accepted and went to Alabama. After the show he was

confronted by the manager of Loews Theatres in [Birmingham](#) who wanted to hire him to perform in Birmingham. Macon's salary was going to be several hundred dollars a week. This led to many offers from other theaters in the Loew's Vaudeville circuit. Thus, at age fifty, Macon became successful as an entertainer and his popularity increased. As a result a rival vaudeville circuit, the [Keith-Albee-Orpheum Corporation](#), tried to lure him away from the Loew's circuit but to no avail.<sup>[6]</sup>

In 1923 he began a tour in the south-eastern [United States](#) together with fiddler [Sid Harkreader](#) and five other acts. By this time, the distributors of [Vocalion Records](#), the Sterchi Brothers Furniture Company, had begun to notice Macon and they realised his potential as a successful recording artist. On July 8, 1924, Macon and Harkreader cut their first recordings for Vocalion in [New York](#).<sup>[8]</sup> In this first session which was extended over several days they recorded eighteen songs altogether.<sup>[9]</sup> In 1925, Macon and Harkreader added a [buck dancer](#) to their act, "Dancing Bob" Bradford. Their continuing tours for the Loew's circuit included comedy, buck-dancing and old time music.<sup>[8]</sup> In late 1925, Macon met the blacksmith and guitarist [Sam McGee](#) who was to become Macon's regular recording and performance partner.<sup>[10]</sup> On November 6, 1925, Macon and Harkreader performed at the [Ryman Auditorium](#)—the future home of the [Grand Ole Opry](#)— for the benefit of the Nashville police force. The successful show took place only three weeks before WSM Grand Ole Opry was founded.<sup>[11]</sup>

Macon was one of the first performers at the newly founded [WSM](#) radio station. It is not known exactly when he was hired but on December 26, 1925, Macon and fiddler [Uncle Jimmy Thompson](#) appeared together on the WSM Saturday night program. Macon's career at WSM lasted twenty-six years, but because he was constantly touring, he wasn't a regular performer at WSM's Grand Ole Opry.<sup>[12]</sup> In early 1927, Macon formed the Fruit Jar Drinkers, consisting of Macon, Sam McGee, [Kirk McGee](#) and Mazy Todd.<sup>[13]</sup> The Fruit Jar Drinkers recorded for the first time on May 7, 1927.<sup>[14]</sup> Although the group's repertoire mainly consisted of traditional songs and fiddle numbers, they would occasionally record sacred songs and when that occurred, Macon would temporarily alter the group's name to the Dixie Sacred Singers.<sup>[13]</sup>

In December 1930, Macon recorded for [Okeh Records](#) and later in 1934 for [Gennett Records](#). On January 22, 1935, he began recording for [Bluebird Records](#) with the [Delmore Brothers](#) and a few years later in 1938 he recorded with Glenn "Smoky Mountain" Stagner.<sup>[15]</sup> Between 1930 and 1952, Macon was often accompanied by his son Dorris who played the guitar. In 1940 Macon— together with Opry founder [George D. Hay](#), rising Opry star [Roy Acuff](#), and Dorris Macon— received an invitation from [Hollywood](#) to take part in the [Republic Pictures](#) movie *Grand Ole Opry*. The film contains rare footage of Macon performing, including a memorable duet of "Take Me Back to My Carolina Home" with Dorris in which the 69-year old Macon jumps out of his seat and dances throughout the second half of the song. Although Macon toured with [Bill Monroe](#) in the late 1940s, he was neither impressed by the new [bluegrass](#) style nor by the banjo picking of Monroe's bandmate [Earl Scruggs](#).<sup>[16]</sup>

## **Aftermath**

Macon continued to perform until March 1, 1952. He died three weeks later on March 22, 1952 at Rutherford County Hospital in Murfreesboro. His funeral was visited by more than five thousand people and his pallbearers were George D. Hay, Kirk McGee,

Roy Acuff, and Bill Monroe.<sup>[17]</sup> He was inducted posthumously into the [Country Music Hall of Fame](#) in 1966. A monument was erected near Woodbury. His son Dorris and several bandmates (often including Sam and Kirk McGee) made sporadic appearances on the Grand Ole Opry as the Fruit Jar Drinkers until the early 1980s.

Every July the town of Murfreesboro celebrates "Uncle Dave Macon Days." This celebration hosts the national competitions for old time clogging, buckdancing, fiddling, and old time singing. In 2007 they celebrated their 30th year of the festival. It was named in honor of Uncle Dave Macon and his work to keep the tradition of old-time music and dancing alive.

## ***Repertoire and style***

While Uncle Dave Macon recorded over 170 songs between 1924 and 1938, in his day he was most notable for his polished and lively stage presence. Bandmate Kirk McGee later described Macon's personality as a never-ending performance— "All day long, from morning till midnight, it was a show."<sup>[18]</sup> While playing, Macon would often kick and stomp, and shout sporadically, taxing the skills of WSM's early volume-control engineers. His performance style can be discerned to some extent from his early recordings, in which he whoops and hollers amidst relatively aggressive vocal deliveries.<sup>[18]</sup>

Macon played an open-backed Gibson banjo on most of his recordings, and while contemporary musicians didn't consider him a particularly skillful banjo player, modern musicologists have identified no less than 19 picking styles on Macon's recordings.<sup>[1][18]</sup> Macon's favorite tunes included "A Soldier's Joy", "Bully of the Town", [The Arkansas Traveler](#), and "Sail Away, Ladies".<sup>[1][19]</sup> Macon claimed to have learned the song "Rock About My Saro Jane" from black [stevedores](#) working along the [Cumberland River](#) in the 1880s.<sup>[1]</sup> The song "Buddy Won't You Roll Down the Line" was inspired by the [Coal Creek War](#), an East Tennessee labor uprising in the 1890s.<sup>[20]</sup> In the song "From Here to Heaven", Macon describes his days hauling goods between Woodbury and Murfreesboro for his shipping company.<sup>[19]</sup> Macon's favorite [hymn](#) was "How Beautiful Heaven Must Be", which is inscribed on his monument near Woodbury.<sup>[1]</sup>

## ***Albums***

- [Early Recordings \(Uncle Dave Macon\) - County Records](#) (1971)
- [Go Long Mule - County Records](#) (1972)
- The Gayest Old Dude In Town - Folk Variety Records (1973)
- At Home - [Bear Family Records](#) (1976)
- Laugh Your Blues Away - [Rounder Records](#) (1979)
- Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy - Old Homestead Records (1979)
- Country Music Hall of Fame Series - [MCA Records](#) (1992)
- Travelin' Down the Road - County/BMG Records (1995)
- [Uncle Dave Macon \(1963\) \(Folkways\)](#)

- [Country Gospel Song \(1971\)](#) (Folkways)
- [Anthology of American Folk Music \(1997\)](#) (Folkways)

## Notes

1. ^ [a b c d e f g h](#) Wolfe, pp. 320-321.
2. ^ [a b](#) Malone, p. 42.
3. ^ Bogdanov, p. 462.
4. ^ Brunvand, p. 457.
5. ^ Malone, p. 41.
6. ^ [a b](#) Malone, p. 43.
7. ^ Although some sources like Bogdanov, p. 462 and Green, p.80 say that he was discovered by a talent agent of Loews Theatres when he and Harkreader were singing at a barbershop in Nashville.
8. ^ [a b](#) Malone, p. 44.
9. ^ Russell, Pinson, pp. 573.
10. ^ Malone, p. 45.
11. ^ Russell, p. 12.
12. ^ Malone, p. 46.
13. ^ [a b](#) Malone, p. 47.
14. ^ Russell, Pinson, p. 575.
15. ^ Russell, Pinson, p. 578.
16. ^ Malone, p. 49.
17. ^ Malone, p. 50.
18. ^ [a b c](#) Hurst, 94-99.
19. ^ [a b](#) Larkin, 418.
20. ^ Lyle Lofgren, "[Shut Up In the Coal Creek Mine.](#)" Originally published in March 2006 edition of *Inside Bluegrass*. Retrieved: 10 May 2009.

## Bibliography

- Vladimir Bogdanov, Chris Woodstra, Stephen Thomas Erlewine, *All Music Guide to Country: The Definitive Guide to Country Music*, Backbeat Books, 2003
- Jan Harold Brunvand, *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, Taylor & Francis, 1996
- Douglas B. Green, *Classic Country Singers*, Gibbs Smith, 2008
- Jack Hurst, *Nashville's Grand Ole Opry*, H.N. Abrams Books, 1975.

- Colin Larkin (editor), "Uncle Dave Macon", *The Encyclopedia of Popular Music Vol. 5*, Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Bill C. Malone, Judith McCulloh, *Stars of Country Music: Uncle Dave Macon to Johnny Rodriguez*, University of Illinois Press, 1975
- Tony Russell, *Country Music Originals: The Legends and the Lost*, Oxford University Press, 2007
- Tony Russell, Bob Pinson, *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921-1942*, Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum, 2004
- Charles Wolfe, "Uncle Dave Macon", *The Encyclopedia of Country Music: The Ultimate Guide to the Music*, 1998.

## **External links**

- [Allmusic.com](http://Allmusic.com)
- [Pbs.org](http://Pbs.org)
- [Find-A-Grave profile for Uncle Dave Macon](#)
- [Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum](#)
- [Folkways](#) at the [Smithsonian](#)

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## The Top 10 facts about Uncle Dave Macon



1. Uncle Dave Macon was a charter member and the first superstar of the Grand Ole Opry when it began airing on WSM radio in Nashville in 1925. He was one of the most colorful personalities in the history of music. Many banjo players consider him a major influence.

2. Uncle Dave, who was born in Warren County, was well over the age of 50 before he starting playing the banjo professionally. He continued to perform until he died in 1952 at the age of 81 in Readyville. He was inducted posthumously into the County Music Hall of Fame in 1966.



Uncle Dave Macon

3. Uncle Dave was an extremely skilled banjo player. Music historians have identified at least 19 different picking styles on his records. Macon is considered a skilled songwriter, master showman and outrageous comedian. He blended the content of Highland folk songs with the musical stylings of the blues and the energy of vaudeville from Tin Pan Alley.

4. Macon was a master of musical sleight of hand and this showmanship was a staple of his performances. He would flip his banjo in the air in the midst of picking and a singing and catch it without a break in the music. With his banjo planted on the floor, Macon would strum the instrument with his Derby hat while walking around the banjo.

5. Before playing the banjo professionally, Uncle Dave hauled freight by mule and cart from Woodbury to Murfreesboro. Around 1900, there were four grocery stores on the Murfreesboro Public Square. As Macon would make his deliveries he would start singing. He would start plucking on his banjo on the way home when his work was done.

6. Born David Harrison Macon, the charismatic musician introduced himself as "Uncle Dave" to break the ice when he would provide entertainment for school children as he passed by in his freight cart. The name stuck. Grand Ole Opry founder Judge George D. Hay gave Macon the nickname "Dixie Dewdrop".

7. A talent scout booked Uncle Dave to play in Birmingham, Ala, after his first paid gig in 1918. He sought to make money from his music and comedy after automobiles put his freight company out of business.

8. From 1924 through 1938, Uncle Dave recorded more than 180 songs for almost every major label. He also recorded and performed often with flat-top guitarist Sam McGee, his brother Kirk, and Macon's own son Dorris. For a time in the 1930s, Macon worked with the Delmore Brothers as well as with young Roy Acuff and Bill Monroe. Macon was a highlight of the 1940 film Grand Ole Opry, in which he sang and danced around his banjo to "Take Me Back to My Carolina Home."

9. Uncle Dave's father was Confederate Civil War Capt. John Macon. In 1883, the elder Macon purchased the Broadway Hotel in Nashville, which was the unofficial headquarters of southern entertainers and minstrels. This is where Dave Macon is said to have learned much of his performance style. The family moved to Readyville in 1885 after John Macon was stabbed to death near the hotel. Uncle Dave was a witness to the murder.

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10. Uncle Dave was good friends with harmonica player Deford Bailey, the first black man to appear on the Grand Ole Opry. Macon and Bailey played and traveled together in the South when a white man and black couldn't easily travel together due to Jim Crow laws.

11. Macon's log home, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, still stands off the old Woodbury Pike in Kittrell. He is buried nearby in Coleman Cemetery just down the road from Cripple Creek, which was the subject of one of his best-known songs.

Sources: Country Music Hall of Fame, Rutherford County historian Charles Wolf and Evan Hatch, folklorist at the Arts Center of Cannon County.

