Through Music, Short Preserves Local History

by Colleen Birch Maile

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The heart of Appalachia transcends state lines, spilling from the coal country of western Virginia Into Tennessee, Kentucky and west Virginia. It's a place of timeless forests, eternal mountains and the strong traditions of a people wedded to their land.

Here, Ron Short, the 61-year-old champion of the Crooked Road Heritage Music Trail, grew up to the rhythms of an unforgettable landscape. The accomplished musician, teacher, playwright and performer explained that those sights and sounds continue to drive his destiny.

Short was born In Clintwood, Dickinson County, Virginia, the same town that gave the world Ralph Stanley ,best-known beyond country-music circles as the plaintive voice behind the "0 Brother, Where Art Thou?" soundtrack.

Music was always part of life, Short explained in an accent as thick and rich as sorghum molasses. "My father was a coal miner and mountain farmer. You had to be both; never could make enough that we didn't have to grow our own food. Early on as a child, l had a great and close relationship with the land.

"In the rhythm of farm and family life, there was always the rhythm of music. The wind would blow through the hemlock trees; there was the rush of the creek running by. My mother sang as she canned food and did chores. My dad sang as he picked apples or dug postholes. It was as natural to us as the wind in the trees or the water flowing. It was part of the culture."

Much of that culture changed when mine mechanization forced thousands of Appalachians into cities to find work. "We were like the Okies of the Dust Bowl in the old days," Short recalled. As a young teen, he watched his neighbors and extended family members pack up for cities like Baltimore, Dayton, and Cincinnati. Short's parents went to Kingsport, Tennessee, the nearest town with any kind of industry.

There Short learned that the things he'd cherished in the hills of Virginia had no value in his new environment. "Nobody cared about how to raise a garden, how to sing a ballad that Granny taught me, how to kill a chicken and fix it and eat it, how to survive.

In addition to a diminished appreciation for his ancient mountain skills, Short also experienced the loss of strong family ties, "The importance of each other and making our own music with our own songs."

That emotional experience continues to color his life. "I always had loved school, loved education, loved history because it helps me to understand who I am and how I fit into the bigger picture of this country."

"But when I finished high school, my dad said with tears in his eyes, ‘I don't have the money to send you on to school.’ He felt so bad. But nobody had been educated in my family. So I didn't have that expectation in my life really. At most, I wanted to go to school so I could be a welder outside so I didn't have to go down into the mines."

Instead, he went to Vietnam. "That experience in the military gave me a new view of the world and a new sense of politics. And I used the GI Bill to go to school and came to understand again that though institutional education was important, my cultural knowledge was important too."

As a creative writing major he began to invent stories and songs about his own present life and the traditions of his Appalachian home country. His efforts soon found like-minded spirits. For more than 30 years, as part of the Roadside Theater performing troupe, Short has shared the voice of his heritage with the world. Along the way, he has written more than a dozen plays, most recently collaborating with members of other economically poor or working-class segments of society, helping them, too, to find their unique identities.

Three years ago, he was part of the effort to establish The Crooked Road -- a 265-mile car route through Virginia, linking eight sites important to the development of traditional American bluegrass and country music. They include the Blue Ridge Institute in Ferrum, the Country Store in Floyd, the Rex Theater in Galax, the Blue Ridge Music Center on the Blue Ridge Parkway, the Birthplace of Country Music Alliance Museum in Bristol, the Carter Family Folk in Scott County, the Country Cabin in Norton and the Ralph Stanley Museum in Clintwood. Established by an Act of Virginia's General Assembly, its efforts at luring tourists to the birthplace of "Old Timey" music are succeeding in drawing visitors from across the globe.

According to Short, "It is really, really important in terms of putting a frame around the music and culture and environment in a way that tourists from outside the region can see it clearly. But more importantly, it also helps us here to have a clearer sense of who we are. It encourages us to believe that our greatest wealth is our people.

"Our musicians, our artists might be the most important resource that we have, even more important than coal and timber. And that is all still here. The tradition of the Carter Family and the Stanley Brothers is reflected in the people who remain despite the economic changes."

To ensure the music endures through future generations, Short organizes annual week-long Mountain Music Schools. "I was getting worried that there were no young fiddle players around here, except me, and then I realized I'm not young." he joked.

"So, right now there are two schools. One in Cowan Creek, Kentucky; it's now six years old. The other is here in Big Stone Gap at Mountain Empire Community College. It's always in August so we coordinate with the Carter Family Festival in Macey Springs -- that's the Carter Fold."

In addition to receiving a pass to the Festival and submersion in the vibrant music, students participate in Appalachia's heritage. "Many of the things that I grew up with as a child are gone today. There is a whole generation of children who have never not had a computer in their lives, but they've never picked up a banjo or a fiddle and held it in their hands."

The Mountain Music Schools rectify that deficiency. "We offer classes in guitar, fiddle, banjo, mandolin. I teach an advanced class for all those instruments in String Band. From 9 to 3 each day, they learn by aural training -- hearing and doing -- and at the end of the week we have a finale concert with all the students and all the teachers -- more than 50 people playing together." No musician experience is necessary.

"It's the mechanics of training, not the theory. I'm not saying that it's great music, but at the end, we all play together, all of us in time, we finish together too. This is the old way that mountain people always learned and it still works. You know, fiddle is a very difficult instrument to play; it is a lifetime of work. But think how wonderful that is; you have something you can work on forever and you are rewarded each time you take another step and accomplish something. That's the value of music; it's not just being able to play a song after a week but the lifetime of music that lies ahead of you. I expect these children to teach their children and grandchildren. That's how we sustain our culture. That's how we keep our voice," he said.

For more Information about the Crooked Road Music Trail, see www.thecrookedroad.org.

For anyone interested in enrolling in Traditional Music classes, the Mountain Music School, or learning more about the wide range of classes and training available through continuing Education classes at MECC, contact Sue Ella Boatright-Wells at 523-7489 or by email at sboarright@mecc.vccrs.edu.