

## WATERMELON CONNECTION BY RUTH ECKLES



AC Bushnell

# Old-Time Revision

Photography by ALEX MANESS

If you love old-time music, mountain music, roots music, or blue grass — pure, raw, earthy music that conveys the joys and sorrows of being alive — chances are you’ve heard of the Stillhouse Bottom Band. This Chapel Hill group has been together for nearly three years and released two CDs, *Bustin’ It Up* and *Hand Made*, and has made its name as a standard-bearer for a traditional style that nevertheless puts its own stamp on the genre.

One of the driving forces behind the band is fiddler AC Bushnell. Bushnell isn’t your average old-time fiddle player. In fact, his fans have nicknamed him “the Jimi Hendrix of the fiddle” because of his reputation for getting carried away in the heat of the moment, playing up and down the neck of his instrument, improvising as he goes.

Mike Weems, who plays guitar and sings in the band, says, “Most old-time fiddlers stick strictly to the tune. With AC, it’s complete spontaneity; he goes anyway he feels like going. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. He probably has the most unique fiddle style I’ve ever heard; two notes and you know it’s him.” Bandmate Bobb Head (bass/banjo/mandolin) adds, “He definitely respects the old tunes, but he puts his own touch on it.”

Bushnell’s fire and contagious enthusiasm can radiate through a crowd. The Stillhouse Bottom Band is notorious for bringing down the house at their Carrboro ArtsCenter shows. “AC, when he’s playing on stage, will often get right up in your face to connect with you,” says the group’s fourth member, Alan Julich (banjo/bass/vocals).

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“He’s a real positive-energy guy. When we play as a band, his energy becomes contagious. We play music that makes you feel that way.”


It’s not uncommon for Bushnell to go through four or five T-shirts when he’s playing a concert. “When I perform, I try to give everything I’ve got. I’m really giving them love,” Bushnell says of his relationship with audiences. “When they receive it, they send energy back. So it just becomes this kind of energy loop that uplifts everybody. And it’s just plain a whole lot of fun.”

Bushnell spent much of his youth in New York City and came to this area in 1970, when his interest in old-time music deepened and he wanted to be closer to its roots. I recently talked with him about growing up in the ’60s, learning to play in Greenwich Village, and the difference between bluegrass and old-time music.

I was born in Berkeley, California. I lived there when I was young and lived in Mexico when I was 4 years old. My Dad was a cultural anthropologist. He went looking for indigenous people to study and found a village that didn’t throw him out; we lived southwest of Mexico City near a village called San Juan Atzingo. I learned to speak fluent Spanish as a kid and also Matlazinca, the local Indian language which is virtually extinct now. Then when I was about 7, we moved to Poughkeepsie, New York. My Dad had two job offers. One was at Vassar College in upstate New York and the other was at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, which he didn’t take. We moved to New York City when I was 11 years old.

I took violin lessons when I was a kid. In the 1960s they had in New York what they called the folk-music revival. At that time we lived in Greenwich Village across the street from this sandal shop — Alan Block’s Sandals. He was playing the fiddle, and people





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*"I remember Bob Dylan came over one time. He wasn't as big a deal then, but we all knew who he was."*

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were playing the banjo and stuff like that. I'd never heard anything like this before, and I really, really liked it. So I hung around there. They'd always play on Saturday afternoon. Eventually I got my courage up enough to take up the fiddle, but I didn't know anything about it, I had no idea how to do it, I just tried to play along. So I learned just by listening to those guys. That's really how most people learn; you just have to get in there and start doing it. It's like swimming or something. I was about 13 or 14 years old back then.

There were some good, interesting people coming in and out of that store. I remember Bob Dylan came over one time. He wasn't as big a deal then, but we all knew who he was. I thought, "He really keeps a good steady beat." I really liked that about him. Alan Block is still alive, and his daughter Rory Block has become an excellent, well-known blues musician. I've known her since she was 12 years old. She used to play old-time music with us, but then, of course, she got really into blues.

Down there [in Greenwich Village], there were all sorts of alternative things going on. There's a park in New York called Washington Square Park, which is at the foot of 5th Avenue. There's this big ring and people used to sit all around there and play music in clusters. It was this sort of happening scene. There was Bob Dylan and Joan Baez and John Sebastian of The Lovin' Spoonful.

There was sort of a left-wing political thing going on really before the Vietnam war ever kicked up. I think a lot of that came from Pete Seeger and The Weavers and people from the '50s that had gone through the McCarthy Era. When the Beatles happened, with the Rolling Stones, that was a huge thing, too, and a huge thing nationally. It wasn't as big in the Village because there was so much stuff

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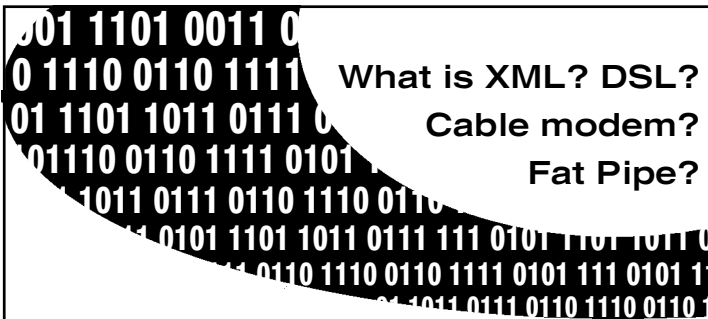
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going on already that it just sort of blended into everything else.

Then there was the Vietnam war. The Vietnam war never made any sense to me. I was a shy kid, but I was also alert and studious. I actually wrote President Kennedy a letter in 1962 saying, "Don't send advisors to Vietnam! It doesn't work! Look what happened to the French!" I got back a polite form letter. I never thought anything much of it, but as it got worse and worse, I didn't feel good about it, because I didn't feel that it made any sense. I didn't think it would block communism or something strategic like that. So I was against the war and I always have been.

The '60s became a very turbulent time. There was a lot of social breaking through norms — "Flower Power" and all these things — but also, just in terms of politics, there was a real upheaval. Things are so peaceful now, compared to what they were then. I mean, when you were in New York, just having lunch or something, there'd be these demonstrations walking by. That doesn't happen now. When there were riots in the black community after Martin Luther King got killed, cities were on fire, people didn't know what was going to happen. It was a very unsettling time. You remember how unsettling it felt after 9/11? Well, it was that kind of feeling. There was a bit of that fear. They're not [quite the same], but fear and paranoia were out there, because nobody knew how anything was going to turn out. There were more and more anti-Vietnam war demonstrations and I definitely went to some of them. The marches got so big, there would be like 500,000 people at a demonstration. There haven't been demonstrations of that size since.

The biggest turning point for me musically was being a shy kind of kid and having enough guts to finally take my violin over to Alan Block's sandal shop and sit in with those guys, who were in their forties and very accom-



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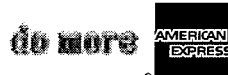
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*“Old-time music in the South is absolutely better. The music [up north] just doesn’t have that same kick.”*

plished musicians, and play with them. They just sort of accepted me and got used to me hanging out there. I mean, this was during business hours; anybody could walk in. It’s like now if you’re at a music festival or something: Who do you just show up and play with? There’s a certain sort of etiquette. You don’t want to push yourself on people, but at the same time, you want to play with them; it’s a little delicate. But they did accept me and they were nice to me. I used to play pretty much every Saturday and I got better. They didn’t really show me stuff and I didn’t ask for pointers, I just sort of learned by playing along. I ordered two records from the Library of Congress. Things were really different then, technologically. Now, if you want to find out about something, you go online. But back then, if you wanted to get this music, you had to write the Li-

brary of Congress and maybe there were a couple of Folkways albums. Other than that, you could get in a car and go south and start looking for it. That was it. Unless you learned it from other people.

Another turning point for me, musically, was moving to the South; it changed and influenced my style of playing. There was a real difference between how they play old-time music in the South and how they play it in the North. A lot of players in the North are more stately and controlled. They are some very good players, [but] to me, old-time music in the South is absolutely better. The music [up north] just doesn’t have that same kick, that punch, that rhythm, and that drive that the music in the South has. So for my money, this is where it is. It’s just the real deal. I love it. I’m much happier as a musician here.

When I first came to the South, I remember I went to the Galax Fiddlers Convention in

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1974. That was when I first heard Tommy Jarrell on the fiddle. Tommy Jarrell is really the greatest; he's one of my biggest influences — and in a way, the purest old-timey fiddle player that I'd ever heard. I'd heard of his name, but I'd never seen a picture of him, I'd never heard him play. And I was walking around at Galax and saw this guy playing with another guy and he was singing "When Sorrows Encompass Me 'Round." I knew from the way he was singing it that he was singing about his own death. I could tell that. I was just blown away. I thought, "Wow, this guy's fabulous." So then I began to want to hear Tommy and got to hear him play a few times. When he got cranked up, it was such a magical thing. He did this thing with his bow when he got going, it was like he defied the laws of gravity. It was like this miraculous floating kind of thing he did.

What's the difference between bluegrass and old-time music? There's no one answer to that. The average person walking around would call what I play and what we do, bluegrass. And a lot of old-time players are offended by people referring to this as bluegrass. Because they know it's not bluegrass. But bluegrass has become just a generic term. Bluegrass really applies to the music that came from the 1930s on and is defined by a lot faster tempo, [Earl] Scruggs-style banjo picking, which is three-fingered and fast and driving. Other styles, which are called frailing, are quieter and considered old-time. So old-time music is really pre-bluegrass.

I call it early bluegrass or roots music. A lot of it is from the '20s; a lot is from the turn of the century; a lot is from the Civil War times and even earlier. It has its roots in people that came over from England and Ireland and Scotland and then got over in the Appalachian Mountains and got stuck up in there. All music develops and evolves and changes, so then it changed into a U.S. style. Originally it was just fiddles



### *AC Bushnell*

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and then maybe guitar; finally the banjo came along, maybe in the mid-1800s. The banjo came from Africa; the slaves brought that over. So a fair amount of old-time music also contains some blues, some Afro-American blues music as well. Old-time music tends to be slower, more melodic, everybody playing at once. With bluegrass, you tend to have more breaks. It tends to be faster, more driving. We play old-time, but we're a little more up-tempo than your average old-time band. We've got a touch of bluegrass in us.

I love the Stillhouse Bottom Band. We've been together about two and a half years. None of us ever knew each other before the band, so we only got together to play music. It wasn't like we were all fast friends or anything. The band really is a collaborative effort. In some ways, I'm a leader in it. It's natural in old-time music for the fiddle player to take a lead role, because the fiddle

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*"We play old-time, but we're a little more up-tempo than your average old-time band. We've got a touch of bluegrass in us."*

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player often sets the tempo. If the guitar player doesn't know the song very well, it's okay, as long as he knows the chords, but if the fiddle player doesn't know the tune, you've got troubles.

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*"You can be in a bad mood and not think it's going to be a great night and suddenly it's all there."*

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*Ruth Eckles is the creator of Watermelon Connection, a bulletin board designed to connect local artists. If you are interested, e-mail her at [eckle002@mc.duke.edu](mailto:eckle002@mc.duke.edu)*

In other ways, our band has four leaders. It's interesting to me, and a really good model for me in other areas of my life, that the band has learned how to talk honestly to each other. That's a major thing to achieve, I think. It's okay to say, "I don't think that works," or, "That banjo just doesn't fit right," or, "I don't think we should have fiddle on this song at all." We just sort of work through things. Everyone has a role in the band and everyone gets a chance to do something that they particularly want to do.

The other thing that I guess my role is — and this is a not-obvious thing, this is from my point of view — I sort of hold the space for [the music] to be wonderful, creative, and joyful. There's a lot of joy in the band and I'm not saying it's all from me, but I have a lot of enthusiasm, and when I get really enthusiastic, people like that. When I get excited, things can really heat up. Sometimes when that happens, there's so much energy put out, it's just tremendous fun for everyone. Audiences seem to like it, too. People always tell me that I'm entertaining to watch play the fiddle. With this band, the sum is greater than the parts. There's something about us, when we get together — we make a certain sound. Every band is unique, and I just happen to really like the way this band sounds.

There's a lot of magical moments in music that can happen. Musicians really live for those times. And you never know when



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that's going to happen. You can think it's going to be a great night and it's OK, but nothing great. Or you can be in a bad mood or something and not think it's going to be a great night and suddenly it's all there for you and it's just wonderful. There's no way to know.

I remember going to a party a year or so ago in Durham. I was sitting out on the porch. It had become nighttime. The porch was thin and long. I was playing some music with some people and was playing a song called "Woodchuck" and I became so enthusiastic and it became so electric that it was almost hard to contain myself or stay on the planet or in my own body. At those moments you feel like you can do everything, and I just get so excited, I have no idea even what to do next! It's so hot! I can't describe it! When that happens, it's like "Whoa!" And I don't know what I did really, and I know I've never done it since, and I know I couldn't do it again in that particular way.

When that happens, it's like a manifestation of ... I don't know what to call it: God or spiritual energy or something. Have you ever read the Carlos Castaneda books? There are sort of two realms of consciousness on earth and one is what they call the Tonal, which is regular everyday life, and the other is the Nagual, which is everything else. Anyway, this is kind of like that Nagual side. I don't know what it is. You could look at it as just getting enthusiastic or carried away. I just happen to remember that night — the breeze, maybe six or seven people out on the porch. There's nothing that would otherwise set that moment apart from any other moment.

It's a feeling of being very passionate and it feels very deep, and at the same time it feels very electric and vibrant all at once. So my prayer is that I play truly — no false notes — that I can truly play as I'm feeling. And that I can truly give what I have to give. •

## What is the Urban Hiker?

*Reprinted from the first issue, October 1999*

**T**he *Urban Hiker* is being created to be a unique chronicle of the times in which it is published. Unique because the life stories that make up the core of the magazine will be narrated by a cross-section of people from a particular community, in their own voices. The *Urban Hiker* is about the spirit of community that comes from learning about your neighbors.

We believe that little by little we have created a society preoccupied with the lives of people who are not real. Somewhere along the way we have lost interest in real people and become preoccupied with make-believe, media-promoted people. The *Urban Hiker* is different. It's about people you know or may not know, who live around you. With the *Urban Hiker*, we are reclaiming the art of storytelling, of passing down the stories of ourselves, our families, and our communities, to our children and friends.

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— Paul J. Stinson & Jill E. Cotter

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