

Locals like Tom Barr, right, generously share with visitors who express even a hint of musical interest.



ROAD TRIP

Virginia's Crooked Road is a journey through America's musical roots

THE LOCALS ALONG The Crooked Road music trail in southwest Virginia like to swap stories about Albert Hash. The name of the late, great fiddle master comes up in conversation when people talk about whittling with a pocketknife, choosing the right materials and, especially, his philosophies on playing music and building the perfect instrument.

Albert Hash was the kind of fellow who knew everyone and influenced musicians from all across the region known as Appalachia. He'd probably approve of The Crooked Road, a heritage trail that strings together the musicians, luthiers and the people who hold their music close.

The Crooked Road is a scattershot of musical stops – large and small – in the hills and valleys of the Blue Ridge Mountains. All along the route, you can drop in on local musicians (contact information is on the website and in the route's free guide). With a phone call or some hastily scribbled directions each musician can help visitors move along the music trail. Stops range from a large museum with all the bells and whistles to the home workshop of a local guitar maker. Musicians along The Crooked Road are eager to share their traditions.

"I started making fiddles in the early 1970s," reminisces Tom Barr, whose going concern is Barr's Fiddle Shop in Galax, a town renowned for its annual Old Fiddlers' Convention. "The first one took me a year. Albert told me to take a piece of wood and 'anything that doesn't look like a fiddle, cut away.' But no one has ever come close to the fiddles Albert made."

Tom has made more than a thousand musical instruments, including fiddles that have found their way into celebrated bands like Asleep at the Wheel. Barr's Fiddle Shop is a riotous collection of traditional stringed instruments – banjos, dulcimers, guitars, mandolins and fiddles from very high end to beginner level – with a massive bowl of loose picks sitting dead centre, as if to suggest "Get picking!"

Many musicians in this part of Appalachia grew up on farms; few of them are wealthy, most of them from big families where you made your own entertainment. If you were lucky, there was a trained player in the surrounding hills who could show you a lick or two – mostly you learned from listening to The Grand Ole Opry, or from watching your grandmother saw off an old jig or reel that she learned from her grandmother.

That's the way it happened for Eddie Bond, a forty-something fiddler of old-time music, multi-instrumentalist and historian. Like Tom Barr, Eddie grew up on the music of Albert Hash and the Whitetop Mountain Band, the tunes that had his grandmother flatfoot clogging on the dance floor.

"Some of my first memories," he says, pulling his fiddle from its case and tuning the strings, "are my uncle Leon and Albert playing for wagon trains, square dances and corn shuckings."

Eddie cherishes the music of his region and childhood. "People grew up playing, never expected to make a living at it. We never heard of lessons. We just picked it up from here, there and everywhere." Today he opens his home to travellers along The Crooked Road who are interested in old-time music.

Not far from Galax, the town of Floyd – with its single traffic light – is an absolutely grassroots, immersive musical experience.

The town attracted a mix of artisans and hippies, fuelling this creative influx with music schools, festivals, small recording studios and the boisterous Floyd Country Store Friday night jamboree. They clear away the chairs, fire up the sound system and the place fills up and spills out onto the main street. Everyone shows up for the inter-generational experience.

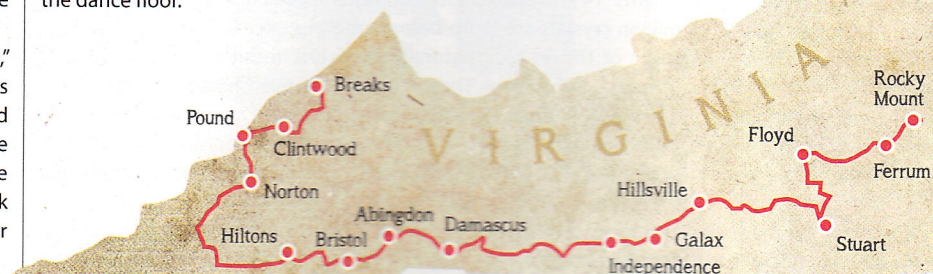
The energy of Floyd was a magnet for Mike Mitchell, who brought his classical violin training to town and set up the Floyd Music School. Dave Fason, another import to Floyd, happily confesses that he was drawn out of urban Roanoke by the music. Dave gigs, teaches and runs Windfall Studios out of his home, welcoming travellers who want the perfect music-themed vacation.

A block over is another Crooked Road major venue, the world's largest archive of bluegrass music at County Sales. It's not glamorous but the concrete warehouse contains a staggering floor-to-ceiling collection of sheet music, vinyl, CDs and books.

Three hours west in Bristol, they'll open the doors to the multimillion-dollar Birthplace of Country Music Museum this summer. In 1927, the first recordings of traditional Appalachian music were captured in Bristol, making it the true birthplace of country music. It's also home to the annual Rhythm & Roots Reunion country music festival and nearby Heartwood, a Crooked Road venue showcasing crafts, live music and local foods.

It's a landscape that vibrates with music. Somewhere Albert Hash is fiddling a tune and smiling his approval.

BY JOSEPHINE MATYAS & CRAIG JONES



PHOTOS: CRAIG JONES