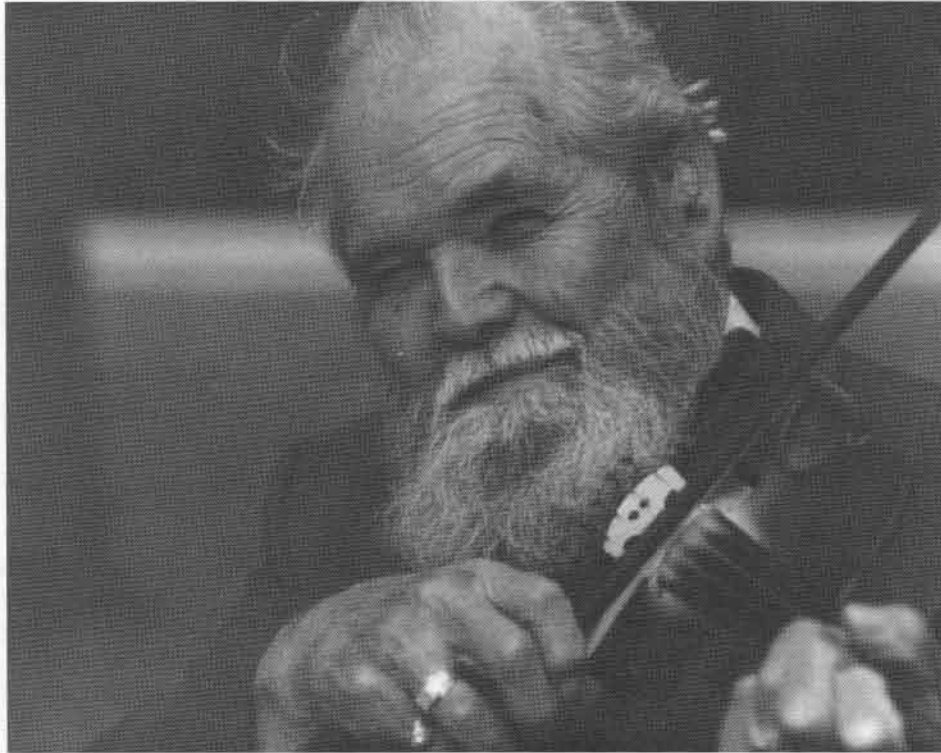


Chubby Wise



Fiddling with Feeling

By Steve Kirtley

I had the privilege of visiting with Chubby Wise during the June 1993 CBA Grass Valley Bluegrass Festival. He's not only a great fiddle player and a living legend, but one of the friendliest guys you could ever hope to meet. Here's our conversation:

Chubby's Formative Years

Steve: Chubby, I think every fiddle player knows that you played with Bill Monroe during most of the 40's. I suppose you've been interviewed a thousand times about that, so I thought I'd ask you about the time before Bill Monroe: how you got started. So, with your permission, where were you born, and when?

Chubby: Well, I was born in Lake City Florida, 1915, so I'll be 78 on my next birthday (October 2, 1993).

S: I understand that you started out playing music about age 6?

C: I was seven years old and I started out on the old clawhammer banjo. My stepdaddy was an old backwoods fiddler and I used to play the old square dances back home with him. Of course, with the banjo I just needed to know three or four chords to play Sallie Goodin. I'll never forget the first money I ever made. We

played a private home, we called them "frolics" back in those days, and I made 37 cents, and I want you to know I went to town on Saturday with that 37 cents. I was the richest guy in that county.

S: That went a little ways back then.

C: That went a *long* ways! I bought a bag of marbles, jacks, some ice cream—I lived it up. I was about seven years old.

S: Did you play with your stepdaddy on a regular basis?

C: Well, not really regularly. He'd take me to play with him once in a while but I didn't really get started playing until I was twelve or thirteen.

S: And then, did you learn other instruments?

C: Well, I got hold of an old flattop guitar, banged around on that a while, and nothing suited me until I learned to play the fiddle. The first tune on the fiddle, I said, "That's my instrument!"

S: Other than your stepdaddy, what other musicians influenced you?

C: Fiddlin' Arthur Smith was one of my all-time heroes, and Curly Fox. Arthur Smith was on the Opry when I was just a teenager, coming up.

S: So you heard him on the radio?

C: I heard him on the old battery set, I sure did, he and Curly Fox. I'd listen at them and I'd take my fiddle and practice a little more. Well, they were just so much inspiration of learning to play the fiddle, let's get it right!

S: Did you also listen to fiddlers on record?

C: I didn't have much of a chance, 'cause I didn't have a phonograph back in them days, just had radio and the fiddlers that I could hear in my county, you know, the fiddlers at home. I'd catch a little from this one and a little from that one, but I did an awful lot of practicing.

S: This was back in the 20s, radio had just gotten started about 1922, and at that time in broadcasting there was a lot of the old-time music, a lot of the old fiddling on the air.

C: That's right!

S: So, you were learning and practicing, what happened next?

C: I guess in the early 30s I won the Florida State Champion Fiddle Contest. After that, I started playing pretty regular, just more or less dance work, square dances. [Note: Chubby was still a teenager at the time.]

S: Now, when you won this state contest, had you been entering a lot of contests?

C: Yes, I'd been entering quite a few. That's the first State contest I'd won. I'd won little county contests. The State contest was a pretty big deal. Yeah, that was the biggest thing going in those days.

S: It must have been quite a boost to your career.

C: Yeah, it kinda boosted it right up. It gave me a lot of confidence.

S: Do you see a difference between the contests of those days and the contests of today, in the way they were judged and the kind of style you could play?

C: Oh yeah! Much, much different.

S: In what way?

C: Back in them days, fiddlers more or less played hoedowns, so the main thing was to play the square dances. And so, they did more or less down-to-earth, real old-timey music back then. It's progressed a long ways.

S: So, when you say they played hoedowns, they played the same melody over and over, no variation?

C: Right, very little.

S: In the 20s and 30s did you see many regional differences in fiddle styles?

C: Not a lot, no, pretty much alike.

Professional Career Begins

S: After the Florida Championship you said you started playing more regularly?

C: In the middle 30s, I went to Jacksonville and started out playing clubs; well I'll tell it right, it was beer joints, for tips. There was no salary involved. I played for tips and the man gave us our lunch the next day, that was our salary.

Then in 1939 the late Ervin Rouse and I got lucky and wrote "Orange Blossom Special" in Jacksonville, Florida. In 1939 or '40 I went to Gainesville, Florida, to the University of Florida radio station, and got my first professional job playing shows with a group called the Jubilee Hillbillies. That was in '39, '40, and '41. I worked

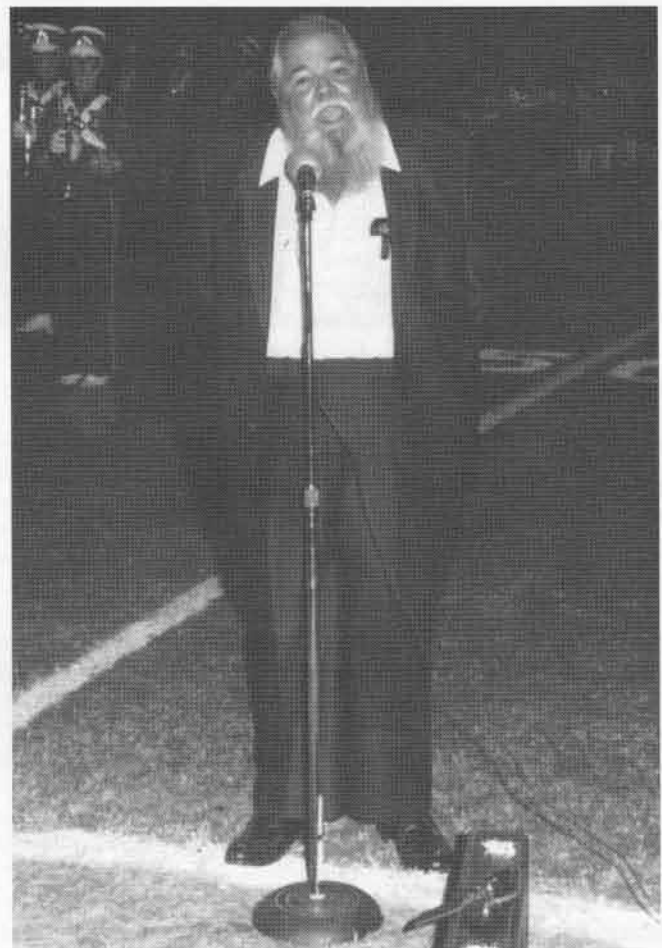


Photo: Paul Roy Studio, Courtesy of Chubby Wise

with those guys all across Florida and South Georgia. We played schools, we played a lot of dance work. Back in those days, if you didn't play a lot of semi-pop stuff you was in trouble. 'Cause if they were dancing and they wanted "Stardust," you had to play "Stardust."

S: When did you get the nickname Chubby?

C: Well, I got that in 1940 when I was with the Jubilee Hillbillies. They hung that on me. My name is Robert Russell Wise, but everyone knows me as Chubby and that's what I like folks to call me.

In 1943, I went to work with Bill Monroe; that was 50 years ago. And, of course, from there out it was the Grand Ole Opry with Bill, Lester Flatt, Earl Scruggs (and Cedric Rainwater). In 1954, I went with Hank Snow and I stayed with him sixteen years. I learned "Movin' On" real good; man, I played "Movin' On."

[Note: Chubby played for Bill Monroe until January 1948, when he left to play with the Radio Ranchmen. He came back to Bill in the fall of 1949, then left in 1950. During 1950 to 1954, he played briefly with the York Brothers, Flatt & Scruggs, and then played clubs in the Washington, D.C., area. Chubby played for Hank Snow from 1954 to 1970, except for an 18-month period in 1963-1965, when he toured with the Stanley Brothers and did some recording session work. Chubby was on all of Bill Monroe's Columbia recordings, which span the 1940s. He also did sessions for Hank Williams and dozens of other major country stars in the 1940s and 50s.]

Chubby's Solo Career

C: After Hank Snow, I went to Texas. I had recorded an album for Stoneway and Mr. Stone, and out of that album, took a 45 of the "Maiden's Prayer." This is unreal, and I'm not bragging, but I'm grateful it happened. It's never happened to me before and probably never again: that thing sold 40,000 copies in four months in the city limits of Houston.

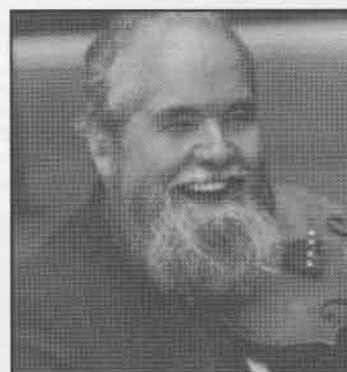
S: Wow, what year was that?

C: That was 1970. Mr. Stone called and said, "Chubby, you better come to Texas — people sure like your fiddle playing!"

S: I guess so!

C: On the strength of that, that's when I started out on my way as a single [act]. At first, in Texas, I played clubs. I worked Gilley's club as an act. I felt like a stick of furniture, I played so many dates there. And then, my first festival date was in Virginia, for Carlton Haney for a bluegrass festival. After that, I told my wife — she was an LPN — I told her, "Now honey, the thing to do is forget about that nursing and go to booking me." And she did, she started booking me and she's been booking me ever since. And I've done nothing but play festivals ever since then.

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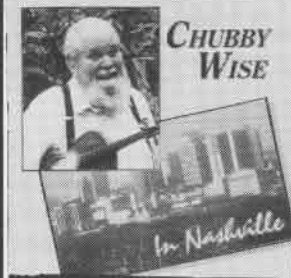
The Chubby Wise Sound

S: You've got a unique fiddle style with so much feeling.

C: Well, Bill Monroe helped me play bluegrass more than anybody else. Many hours Bill and I spent with just a mandolin and a fiddle. And he'd say, "Chubby, I want it this way." He's the man that taught me to play bluegrass. And, my sound is just what I feel in me, I'm the type of guy that plays what I feel. I probably won't play the same chorus twice. These kids here can tell ya (referring to Stoney Lonesome, his backup band at Grass Valley), what I feel, I play.

I know I was cutting a session with Hank Snow one time, and Chet Atkins [was producing]. Hank was cutting an old Jimmy Rodgers album and we was gonna do the old song "Way Out on the Mountain." And Chet said, "Chubby, how 'bout playing it like this?" and showed me what he'd like to hear. And I'll bet we done that ten or fifteen times and I couldn't do what he wanted. And finally Hank went to him and said, "Chet, Chubby just has to play what he feels. Now you let him play what he feels and I think he can get it." The next cut, Chet comes to me and says, "Chubby, I'll tell you what, forget what I said, play it like you feel." The next one was a take.

HOT FIDDLE!

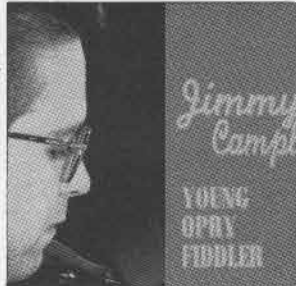


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So, that's what it amounts to, I have to play what I feel. I play from here [motions to his heart], right there. So, that's the only way to explain what I do.

Now, that's how I happened to get lucky and sell that "Maiden's Prayer." At that time, Bob Wills had his stroke and, of course, in Texas and back in that part of the country, he's still king as far as people are concerned. But I did his tune with Chubby Wise feeling, and it caught on. Everybody says, "Chubby Wise, how do you get that tone? How do you do this? How do you do that?" Well, it's what I feel!

S: So, it comes natural. You don't really do it consciously!

C: It comes, natural, it really does.

S: You know, my daughter found your picture around the house last week. She's a little two-year-old, and when she saw your picture she said, "That man is happy." I think that sums up Chubby Wise. If someone at this festival didn't know Chubby Wise, you could tell them, "Go look for the guy with a big smile" and they'd find you!

C: [Laughter.] 



Notes to Florida Blues (at right)

"Florida Blues" (by Arthur Smith) is a good representation of Wise's approach to a medium-slow tempo fiddle tune. He uses lots of slides and very smooth bowing (legato). The slurs shown here are an approximation. You can follow these exactly or make up your own. This piece is easier than it looks.

Florida Blues

By Arthur Smith, as played by Chubby Wise. Transcribed by Jack Tuttle.

$\text{♩} = 85$

The musical score for "Florida Blues" consists of ten staves of guitar notation. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The tempo is marked as quarter note = 85. The notation includes various chords (D, G, A, V) and techniques such as vibrato (V), bends (indicated by a square symbol), and fingerings (indicated by numbers 0, 1, 2, 4). The score is organized into four systems of two staves each. The first system includes chords D, V, and V. The second system includes chords G and V. The third system includes chords D, V, and A. The fourth system includes chords V, D, G, and A. The notation is written in a style typical of guitar tablature, with notes on a five-line staff and various symbols indicating playing techniques.