

# “I WENT CRAZY OVER THE FIDDLE ...”

*Separated by years, musicians bow to the same passion*

BY MARSHA BARBER

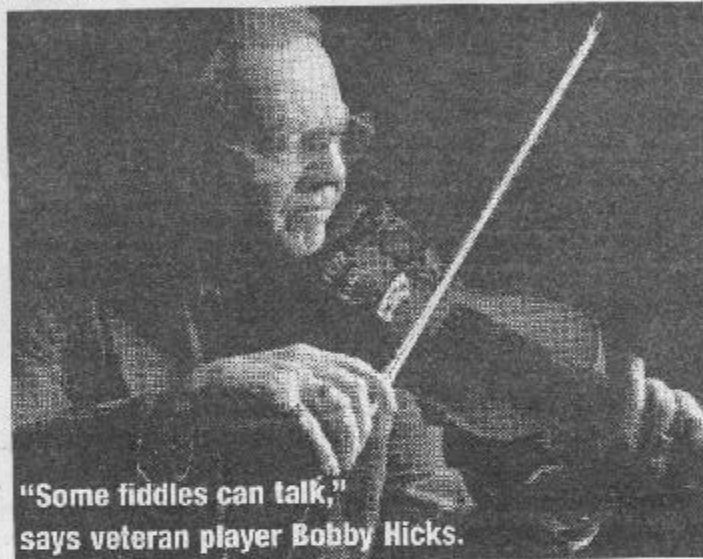
What, exactly, sets the fiddle apart from other old-time-music instruments?

Bobby Hicks is pretty sure he knows. “The fiddle kind of sings and hums the words,” notes the recent Fiddler’s Hall of Fame inductee and Madison County resident. “Some fiddles can talk.”

Indeed. And when four renowned fiddlers take the stage at Black Mountain’s The Watershed on Thursday, Dec. 11, there should be quite a conversation.

The “Masters of the Fiddle” concert — sponsored by Asheville nonprofit the North Carolina Mountain Acoustic Music Association (NCMAMA) — will showcase the talents of Hicks, along with those of Arvil Freeman, Don Lewis and Josh Goforth.

Hicks’ résumé reads like a Who’s Who of bluegrass music. He first picked up the fiddle at age 9, and got his professional start with none other than Bill Monroe (the undisputed Father of Bluegrass) and his Bluegrass Boys. Hicks later toured and recorded with country/bluegrass star Ricky Skaggs for 22 years (snagging three Grammys along the way), and he’s currently on the road with Jesse McReynolds and The Virginia Boys and J.D. Crowe and The New South. In fact, Crowe served as best man when Hicks married this past Aug. 23 — the



“Some fiddles can talk,” says veteran player Bobby Hicks.

same day the new groom was honored with a Lifetime Contributions to Bluegrass Award (given out by the City of Eureka Springs, Ark.).

## Getting all bruised up

I caught up with Bobby Hicks just before a recent jam session held in a small backroom of his wife’s Westgate Shopping Plaza business, The Wild Bird Center; when not on the road, Hicks frequently hosts these musical gatherings, where younger players get the chance to jam with their idols.

On this night, the four-member Hazel Creek band had driven in from Haywood County, while fiddler Gary Mackey had come all the way from Gallatinburg, Tenn. The awe Hicks inspires in his fellow players was evident, particularly in Mackey’s reluctance at first to even *play* his fiddle in the presence of Hicks.

“Oh, go on,” exhorted Hicks. “Get in there and get all bruised up.”

“I’ve been playing variety shows down in Pigeon Forge, [Tenn.], so I’m kind of out of practice with [bluegrass],” apologized Mackey, at which point banjoist Steve Sutton interjected, “Oh, you mean you’ve been making *real* money.”

With the ice then broken, an easy camaraderie soon flowed into the sweet strains of bluegrass standards, driven by the soaring voices of twin fiddles.

## Drafted by Bill Monroe

In his early 20s, Hicks hooked up with Bill Monroe and His Bluegrass Boys; the young fiddler was then a regionally respected upright-bass player.

Music promoter Carlton Haney — the inventor of the bluegrass festival, says Hicks — came through Hicks’ hometown of Greensboro in 1954, booking Monroe’s band for a two-week stint around the area. Haney asked Hicks to play bass with them at those shows. Then, when Monroe’s regular fiddle player, Gordon Terry, was later drafted into the Army, Hicks was given the chance to replace him. Hicks ended up touring and recording with Monroe for a total of

four years, with a two-year hiatus after he, too, was drafted.

“My best memories of that time were of being in Nashville around all the great players,” Hicks recalls. “I had never been nowhere, and I won’t ever forget the times I spent with Dale Porter, the king of fiddle players.” (Porter was known for his showy, multi-layered technique.)

“I asked him one time where he learned to play all those double stops and triple stops,” Hicks remem-

bers. “He told me he listened to all the records that Bob Wills and The Texas Playboys put out, but he didn’t realize that Bob Wills had three fiddles. So he learned to play all that stuff on one fiddle. I hung out with him so much, I got to playing in a similar style.”

In contemplating the resurgence of bluegrass and its growing popularity on the heels of the release of such movies as *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Songcatcher*, Hicks is reminded of an encounter between the then-young “newgrass” maverick Sam Bush and Bill Monroe.

“Sam Bush was backstage at the Opry one night, and Bill walked up to him and said, ‘Sam, what do you call that music you play?’ and Sam said, ‘That’s newgrass, Bill,’ and Bill said, ‘Yeah, I hate that.’”

Hicks laughs uproariously. “But seriously,” he adds, “I think the growing popularity of bluegrass these days has to do with so many young people taking it up again. There are so many young people who are excellent, excellent bluegrass musicians today.”