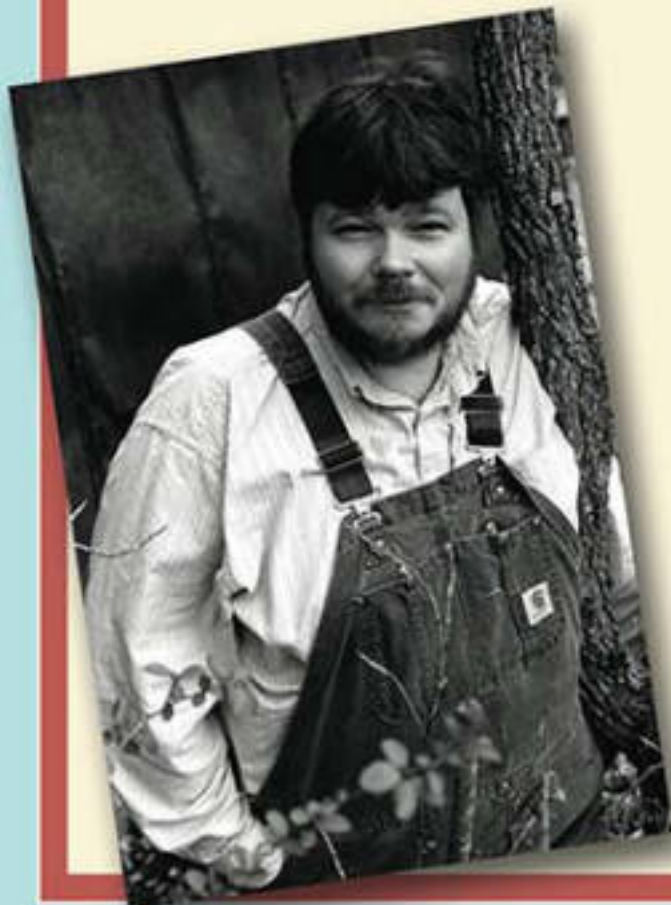


# Pickin' It Up

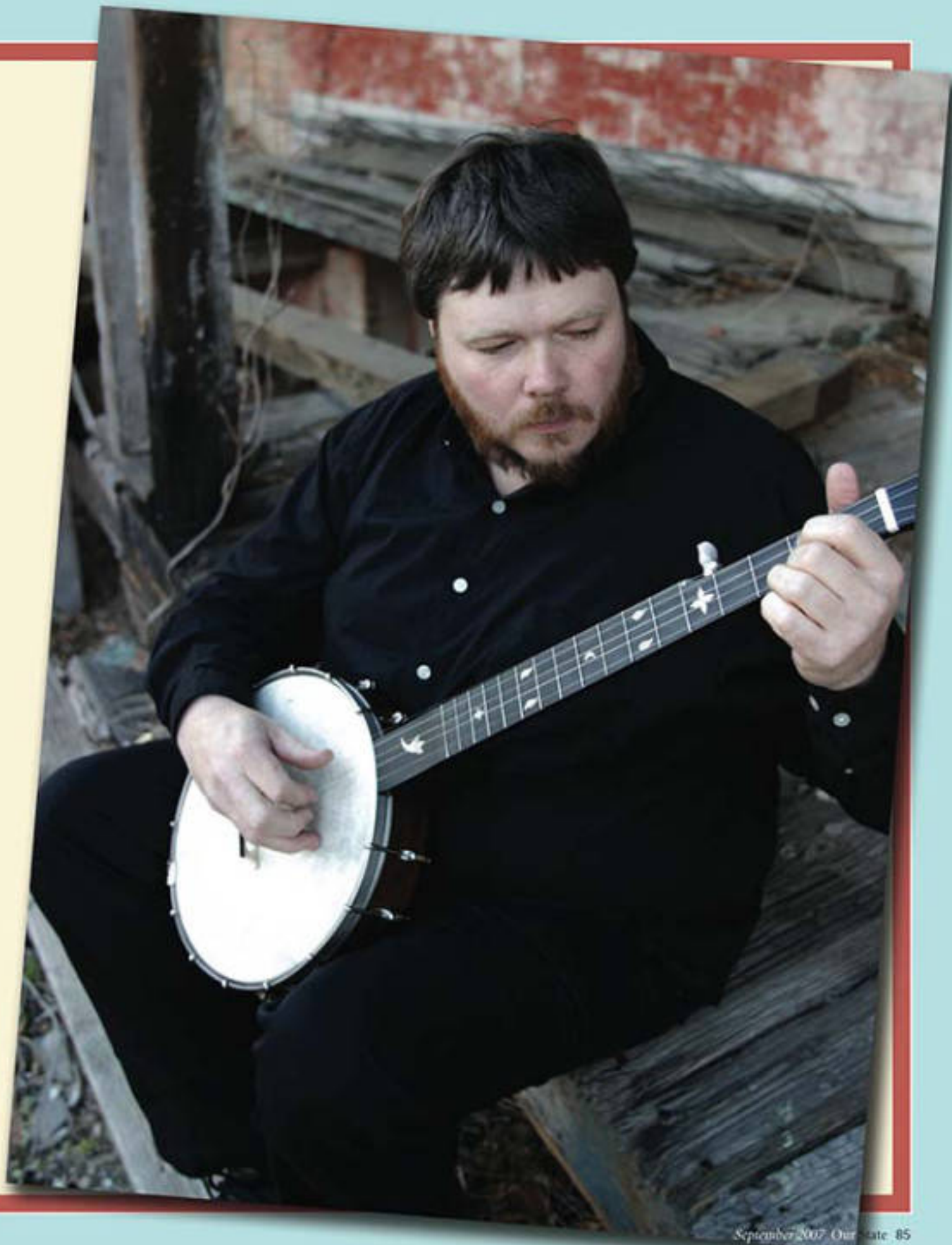


Self-taught banjo  
player (and builder)  
Riley Baugus plucks  
ancient melodies from  
Appalachia and holds  
them up to a new light.

BY LYDIALYLE GIBSON

The twang of the banjo, Riley Baugus says, "takes you back to sometime and someplace that ain't now."

PHOTOGRAPHY (THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE) BY ANGEL SEVOUR





**O**n days when Riley Baugus is at home — which are increasingly rare in the three years since he began playing banjo full time — early afternoons often find him on the front porch with a Diet Mountain Dew and a wildlife guide, watching grackles, redbelly woodpeckers, and tufted titmice flit among the dozen or so bird feeders that dangle like ornaments from his maple trees. There are hummingbird feeders, cylindrical seed feeders, a feeder shaped like a Chinese pagoda, and, off to the side, one Baugus constructed himself out of leftover wood and a length of pipe. It looks like a tiny, chest-high sandbox filled with sunflower seeds and peanut hulls.

"Nothing is junk if you can reuse it," Baugus says. "Around here, I reuse a lot of stuff." Next to his homemade feeder stands a birdbath made from copper tubing and a rusted-out canner lid. Beneath his front window, a frosted blue bowling ball — its holes drilled too close together for Baugus's fingers — perches atop three feet of rebar to decorate a bed of hostas. Around back squats an old 50-gallon tank with a plastic funnel sticking out of the top. "My rainwater collection device," Baugus says, gesturing grandly. "Just hook the garden hose to the spigot, and I can water all my tomatoes."

Baugus lives in Walkertown, a community of more than 4,000 people 10 miles northeast of Winston-Salem — although it feels farther out than that. Just beyond his yard, the street dead-ends into woods, giving way to a dirt road. "I like living simply," he says. "I drive an old pickup truck, and I live in an old trailer. And the older I get, the more I go back to those ways that my family taught me. My grandmother never threw away a Cool Whip bowl. You just don't throw old things away if you think you can use them again."

He's talking about empty planters and pie tins and miscellaneous strips of rope, but he might as well be talking about his music. An old-time vocalist, fiddler, guitarist, and banjo-picker who grew up singing unaccompanied hymns in Alleghany County's narrow mountain churches, Baugus, 41, has made a profession out of plucking ancient melodies from Appalachia's hills and

hollows and holding them up to new light. In the 24 years since he began playing onstage, Baugus has taught and performed at countless music festivals and conventions across the country. He opens frequently for Doc Watson, and tours regularly with North Carolina Piedmont country band Polecat Creek and old-time luminaries Dirk Powell and Tim O'Brien.

In 2003, Baugus performed on the *Cold Mountain* soundtrack and in the ensuing Great High Mountain tour. The album's critical and popular success marked a turning point in his career, he says, nudging him to quit the welding and blacksmithing day job he'd kept since his high school graduation. Last year, Baugus released *Long Steel Rail*, his solo debut with Sugar Hill Records. He's lost count of how many other albums he's played or sung for over the years. "I never wanted to play anything

recorded songs like "Old John Henry," "John Brown's Dream," "Sally Ann," "Lonesome Road Blues," and "Trouble in Mind" — but among his most powerful offerings are those exhumed from obscurity. *Long Steel Rail* contains "What Are They Doing in Heaven," a plangent, mournful gospel ballad Baugus sings with halting plainness. Tucked into the middle of the album, meanwhile, is "Wandering Boy," a haunting a cappella tune Baugus sang as a boy in church. It's taken from the *New Baptist Songbook*, in which "there was no musical notation," he says, "only words."

The congregation and pastor knew the melody by heart.

### The first notes

An only child, Baugus was born and raised in Walkertown's foothills — first in a log cabin and later in a trailer on the land he occupies now — but he



Baugus frequently collaborates with other musicians, like Kari Sickenberger (left) and Laurelyn Dossett of Polecat Creek.

but old-time mountain music," he says. "I always loved that archaic sound, those dirges and dance tunes and slow airs that sounded like they were hundreds of years old."

In Baugus's hands, mountain songs sound every bit as old as they are. A banjo-picker above all else, he plays with unadorned clarity, and his voice arrives like a long echo from somewhere deep and far. Baugus's repertoire includes plenty of traditional mainstays — oft-

and his parents spent almost every weekend 75 miles west in Sparta, right off the Blue Ridge Parkway, with his paternal grandparents and dozens of aunts and uncles and cousins. "My dad would come home from work, and we'd get in the car," Baugus says. "All I knew of Walkertown was from here to the end of the road. Our culture wasn't really the Piedmont; it was the Blue Ridge."

Sunday mornings in Sparta would find



the family at the Regular Baptist Church. Baugus looked forward to the singing more than the preaching, but even the preaching there sounded like singing. "It was that mountain chant," he says. "Almost like auctioneering." The congregation's singing shook the church's clapboard walls with dark, urgent hymns — "Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me," "Wayfaring Stranger," "Precious Memories," "Days Past and Gone" — whose lyrics were full of tempestuous

oceans, midnight stillness, troubled paths, sickness, danger, and death. "And it was fascinating how those voices would simultaneously close off the notes at the end of a line, just draw them off on that up-tone," Baugus says. He replicates that effect in his own singing; even after they're silenced, his notes hang in the air, deepened by the quiet that follows them.

Baugus was 10 years old by the time he got his first instrument: a Chinese

violin from Apple Pawn Shop in Winston-Salem. For a while, he took strings at school, but he says he soon figured out that, "Dvorak's *Slavonic Dances* was not what I wanted to do." He wanted to do what Ralph Stanley, Doc Watson, and Johnny Cash were doing; he wanted to play the songs he'd heard Tommy Jarrell, Roscoe Holcomb, and Kyle Creed perform on the radio. Baugus's father had a huge record collection, and Baugus would spend hours listening to compilations from Rebel Records.

### Striking a chord

Baugus began saving up for a guitar almost as soon as he got the fiddle. Within a year, he'd bought one from a Sears catalog for \$59. When it arrived, he tuned it to his violin and played it most of the night. "I played it until my fingers bled," he says, "but I figured out 'Wild Wood Flower.'" The next day, his fingers were so sore he could hardly uncurl his hand. "I played the guitar anyway. It hurt, but it was all I wanted to do."

After a couple of years — and a few thousand hours spent listening to Dock Boggs's bluesy clawhammer, Fred Cockerham's fretless intensity, and any other banjo records he could get his hands on — a deep and abiding hunger for the banjo took hold of Baugus. "The sound of that instrument rattles your bones," he says.

Lacking the money to buy a banjo, Baugus and his dad decided to make one. They bought a set of strings and a tailpiece and a can of frets. Baugus's father sculpted tuning pegs out of a stick of maple stovewood and nailed on a strip of plastic molding for a rim.

"My dad just laid the board next to the guitar and marked where the frets should be," Baugus says. Then he hacksawed the grooves and glued the frets into place. "That banjo sounded like an electric guitar with no amplifier. But I learned a lot of tunes."

Six months later, he upgraded to a \$99 pawn-shop banjo. Baugus has been a serious banjo builder since 1995, and he was commissioned by *Cold Mountain's* producers to create several instruments for the film. He still cobbles his banjos together out of scrap wood and spare parts, though.

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## Help from a mentor

If the Regular Baptist Church gave Baugus his first music lesson, Tommy Jarrell provided an apprenticeship. In 1982, Baugus made his first pilgrimage to the home of the renowned fiddler and banjoist, located near Mount Airy. He was 16; Jarrell was 81. After that first meeting, Baugus came as often as he could, bringing his banjo or guitar, or both. "He'd play, and the rest of us would try to keep up," Baugus says. "So many times that's how you learn from somebody, just absorb and remember, day after day. You have to jump in and hang on."

Sometimes Jarrell's place would be packed with other musicians — the old man's hospitality was legendary — but on other days, it was just Baugus and his friend Kirk Sutphin, a fiddler he'd played music with since boyhood. (Baugus still performs and records with Sutphin, who lives a few doors down from him in Walkertown.) Mount Airy lies off U.S. Highway 52 heading toward Sparta, and Baugus would almost always stop to see Jarrell after a visit to the mountains. "Kirk and I would go up to Granny's to bring in firewood and mow her yard, and then we'd drop by Tommy's on the way back," he says. With a grin, he adds: "We'd stop by Tommy's on the way up there, of course, but we'd stop by on the way back, too."

When Jarrell died in 1985, Baugus had been performing at music festivals and fiddlers' conventions around North Carolina for nearly two years. At 19, he was already deep into his life's work: salvaging an ancient sound and turning it to a new purpose. "Old-time is a music of working people," he says. "People played it to say, 'We're done working today; we're out of the fields.'"

That tradition goes on — mountain couples still turn out for Friday night dances, and there's no shortage of musicians to entertain them. But old-time music has also become something else, a way to study and share Appalachian culture, a means for reaching back across generations to those who worked the land or rode the rails and then sang about it at night.

"There was a time," Baugus says, "when, if you heard music, people were playing it live. And when you play those

songs now, it's almost like you can feel the spirit of all those people who came together to make mountain music — the English and the Irish and the Scottish, the Africans we got the banjo from, the American Indians with their rhythms and modal melodies, and all those mountain people who came after them — you can feel their hardships and happinesses and sorrows." Like the music, Baugus throws none of that away. ↪

*Lydiatyle Gibson, now living in Illinois, spent much of her childhood on her grandparents' farm in Sampson County.*

## to know more

Riley Baugus's CD, *Long Steel Rail*, is available for purchase from Sugar Hill Records at (800) 996-4455. For links to Baugus's and Sugar Hill Records' websites, go to [www.ourstate.com](http://www.ourstate.com), and click on "This Month's Issue."

William Friday shares a story with one of the children enrolled in the Carol Woods Children's Center.



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