Rich and the Po’ Folk: WHEN THE WHISTLE BLEW

Rich Kirby, fiddle, mandolin, banjo (Golden Vanity)
John Haywood, banjo
Brett Ratliff, guitar
Nate Polly, bass
Vocals: everybody

Recorded and mixed by Jim Price and Alan Maggard at Maggard Sound, Big Stone Gap VA.
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All pieces traditional (P.D.) except as noted

1. Thirty-Inch Coal
(Nate, lead vocals) Mike Paxton wrote this song during his years as a radio DJ in Pikeville, Kentucky in the 1960’s; it was first recorded by Hobo Jack Adkins and describes life in the small mines. At that time, today’s monster coal trucks still lay in the future. “Truck mines” were small operations too marginal to have a rail connection. Such mines hauled out coal in an electric car called a “lizard,” powered by a trailing power cord or “drag cable.” A brattice (“brattish”) is a portable barrier used to direct fresh air to the mine’s working section. Miners put up timber braces to support the roof, and use rock dust to try to keep down explosive (and lung-damaging) coal dust. Kentucky coal seams are horizontal; a mine can extend a long way front to back and side to side, but a miner’s workspace is defined by the height of the coal seam. Thirty inches isn’t much. A miner in low coal spends his day “down on his poor knees” or on his back. (Banjo F#DF#AD)

2. Loving Nancy
(Brett, vocals) This comes from the late Sarah Ogan Gunning of Knox County, Kentucky. Well known in folk and labor circles as a composer of militantly pro-union mining songs, Sarah was also an accomplished ballad singer with an extensive and sometimes surprising repertoire. Folklorist Archie Green writes that she learned this piece from her mother Sarah Elizabeth Lucas Garland. “New Alena” is probably New Orleans, which was under Spanish rule from 1762 to 1803. Sarah’s brother Jim Garland, a fine singer in his own right, said that Kentucky men who rafted logs down the rivers sang this. Green notes the song has several elements seen in other ballads, and says (intriguingly) that the “salmon” verse recalls the magical shape-shifting of “The Two Magicians” (Child #44) and a “Pretty Polly” collected by Helen Creighton in Nova Scotia. (Banjo eDGBD)
3. Betty Baker/Durang’s Hornpipe
Letcher County’s Lee Sexton is well known as a banjo player. He’s also a fiddler, and taught Rich this version of “Betty Baker.” Lee says this is the way “those Campbell boys” played it, though Lee’s neighbor and cousin Manon Campbell played a different tune under the same name.

This unusual version of “Durang’s Hornpipe” comes from Jake Phelps of Todd County, Kentucky, by way of Bruce Greene. Bruce says Phelps likely learned it from a western Kentucky fiddler named Will Segall, born in the 1860’s. The original hornpipe was composed in honor of John Durang (1768-1822) who was America’s first professional dancer as well as “acrobat, actor, mime, rope dancer, and blackface comic.” Durang’s own account of the tune’s origin is worth quoting: “While I was in New York I took lessons on the violin of Mr. Phile, and of Mr. Hoffmaster, a dwarf, a man about 3 foot, large head, hands, and feet, his wife of the same stature. A good musician, he composed the following hornpipe expressly for me, which is become well known in America, for I have since heard it play’d on the other side of the Blue Mountains as well as in the cities” (quoted in Simon J. Bronner, Old Time Music Makers of New York State, 1987). (Banjo f#DF#AD)

4. The L&N Don’t Stop Here Anymore
(Rich, lead vocals) The coal industry is historically a boom-and-bust affair. When demand is up and the mines are running a lot of coal, life is (relatively) easy. Then comes the next bust and things change. Jean
Ritchie wrote this portrait of the images in a mining community during a prolonged slump in the 1960’s, when mines had mechanized, the Mineworkers union was weakening, and many mountain people left their homes to find work in the Midwest. (Banjo aEADE)

5. Station House Blues
(John, lead vocals) This comes from Virgil Anderson, a singer, banjo player and buck dancer from Wayne County, Kentucky, in the Cumberland Plateau country along the Kentucky-Tennessee border. Mr. Anderson was clearly a vivid character. Folklorist Bobby Fulcher writes that he was “the center of attention in any gathering.” He described his upbringing this way: “My daddy tried his best to raise me right. There’s three things he always taught me against, that’s lyin’, drinkin’, and stealin’. Said, never steal no more than you can carry, never drink no more than you can hold, and when it come to lyin’, just tell it a dozen different ways before you lie about it.”

Many of Mr. Anderson’s songs have a strong blues flavor, perhaps from Cuge and Cooney Bertram, an African American family from whom he learned “Station House Blues.” Virgil said that while many people played “by note” (melodically), the Bertrams “played by chord. I picked up a lot of that.” The song indicates that “profiling” is not exactly a recent phenomenon in law enforcement.

Virgil Anderson’s music can be heard on a County LP, On the Tennessee Line, and in the Digital Library of Appalachia. (Banjo gDGBD)

6. Dying to Make a Living
(Rich, vocals) Foddershock is comprised of W.V. Hill and A.K. Mullins of Dickenson County, Virginia, where the Clinchfield Coal Company dominated life for many years. As their song details, miners often pay a high price for a lifetime of work in the mines. Foddershock’s recording is included in the collection Music of Coal (Lonesome Records, 2008). (Banjo dDGAD, fiddle GDAD)
7. **Big Stone Gap**  
(Brett, vocals) The Couch family of Leslie and Harlan Counties in Kentucky knew a vast array of old songs and stories. Jim Couch of Harlan County sang this piece for Kentucky folklorist Leonard Roberts, who notes that it has elements of “Cumberland Gap” and “Crawdad.” The astonishing repertoire of the Couches is printed in Roberts’ *Sang Branch Settlers* (American Folklore Society, 1974) and some of it can be heard online in the Digital Library of Appalachia. (Banjo gDGBD)

8. **Go to Work on Monday One More Time**  
(Nate, lead vocals) Songwriter and organizer Si Kahn wrote this piece around 1970 to tell the story of textile workers in the Carolinas struggling with Brown Lung (byssinosis). It’s an occupational disease of textile workers who breathe cotton fibers in poorly ventilated workspaces. It’s been hard to get mills to improve their ventilation and hard to get compensation to victims—a story very familiar to anyone who has watched coal miners struggle with Black Lung. In 1976 Si assembled a group of musicians to record an LP that would benefit the Brown Lung Association while telling the story of textile workers and their struggles. *Brown Lung Cotton Mill Blues* (June Appal Recordings, 1976) presented a group of older cotton mill songs plus several originals by Si, including this piece. (Banjo f#DF#AD)

9. **Red Fox**  
This tune is one of hundreds played by the late Henry Reed of Glen Lyn, Virginia, and shared with the world by Mr. Reed’s student Alan Jabbour. It comes to us by way of Bill Hicks. Jabbour says it is “an unusual, and so far untraceable, tune.” He notes that the way the tune changes emphasis, with the first part centered on D and the second part on G, is more common in British tradition than in Appalachia, and speculates that the tune may have originally been in a jig (6/8) rhythm and been converted, as so many tunes apparently were, to reel (4/4) time. Anyone with a good explanation of why mountain fiddlers mostly don’t play jigs is invited to contact us. (Banjo gDGBD)

10. **Southern Texas**  
(John, vocals) This song comes to us from John and Brett’s neighbor and mentor George Gibson of Knott County, Kentucky. Art Rosenbaum writes that George is “surely one of the last living Kentuckians to have learned old-time banjo picking and singing from family and local tradition.” George learned “Southern Texas” as a young man from an older neighbor, Gran Hudson. In the 19th century a lot of Kentuckians went out west. Many came back, often bringing music and stories with them. (Banjo dDGAD)
11. **Merriweather/Old Billy Hell/Sandy River Belle**  
Two (or possibly three) Kentucky fiddle tunes. The first two (like so many others) come by way of the fiddler and collector Bruce Greene, who learned “Merriweather” from Jake Phelps of Todd County in western Kentucky. Jeff Titon (*Old Time Kentucky Fiddle Tunes, 2001*) calls this a “rare, appealing, well-constructed tune” similar to Irish reels. “Old Billy Hell” comes from Estill Bingham of Bell County, recorded by collector Bob Butler as well as by Bruce Greene when Mr. Bingham was in his nineties. Bruce says it was the popular name for a local preacher who loved to dwell on fire and brimstone, though the tune itself seems a bit more whimsical than that. “Sandy River Belle” was first recorded by the Shelor Family (under the name “Dad Blackard’s Moonshiners) at Victor’s famous Bristol sessions of 1927. The Shelors were from the Blue Ridge area of Virginia, but the Big Sandy River itself is in Kentucky and West Virginia. (Banjo gDGBD)

12. **The Golden Vanity**  
(Rich, vocals) This song is #286 in the Child collection of British ballads. The earliest version we know of was printed in 1635 and titled “Sir Walter Raleigh Sailing in the Lowlands (Shewing how the famous ship called the Sweet Trinity was taken by a false Gally and how it was again restored by the craft of a little Sea-boy, who sunk the Gally.” The ship goes by many names in different versions, including “The Golden Willow Tree,” “The Merry Golden Tree,” or “The Sweet Kumadee.”

Rich’s verses come from a variety of sources including Jean Ritchie and Bobby McMillon. He learned the tune from Justus Begley, the banjo-picking sheriff of Perry County, Kentucky, recorded by Alan Lomax in 1937. Unfortunately Rich didn’t quite learn it too well before starting to play it, and inadvertently changed both the melody and the key (Begley played it in G). By the time he found his mistake(s) it was too late to go back. (Lead banjo [Rich] aADaDE; second banjo [John] f#DF#AD)
13. **When the Whistle Blew**  
(Nate, vocals) A few years ago Nate worked with people in the Letcher County coal town of Seco to produce a play portraying the community’s history; he says he wrote this song during delays in the rehearsals. Seco was a classic east Kentucky “coal camp,” incorporated in 1915 by South East Coal Company with company houses, a company store, a company-built church, bath house, pony barn, and of course South East Coal Operation #1 (the mine itself). The mine closed in the 1960’s, and the town’s population plummeted. In recent years the community has tried to revive itself through “heritage tourism.” The old company store reopened as a winery/bed and breakfast.

In the 1980’s a group of Seco residents put together a play on the community’s history. One persistent memory people described was the feeling of dread when the mine whistle blew at an odd time—it always meant something bad had happened. (Banjo aEAC#E)

14. **Hook and Line**  
(John, vocals) It seems every Kentucky banjo player has his or her own version of this classic “dance all night” piece. Here’s John’s. “Hook and Line” is a double first cousin of the well-known “Shout Little Lula” and related to a bunch of others including “Roustabout” and “Banjo Sam.” Some of the lyrics appear in songs from the antebellum minstrel era, including Dan Emmett’s “Old Dad” (1844). The “hornet’s nest” appears in Black tradition (Talley, *Negro Folk Rhymes*, 1922). It seems likely to us that this piece is a direct link to the African American origins of the banjo. (Banjo aDADE)