

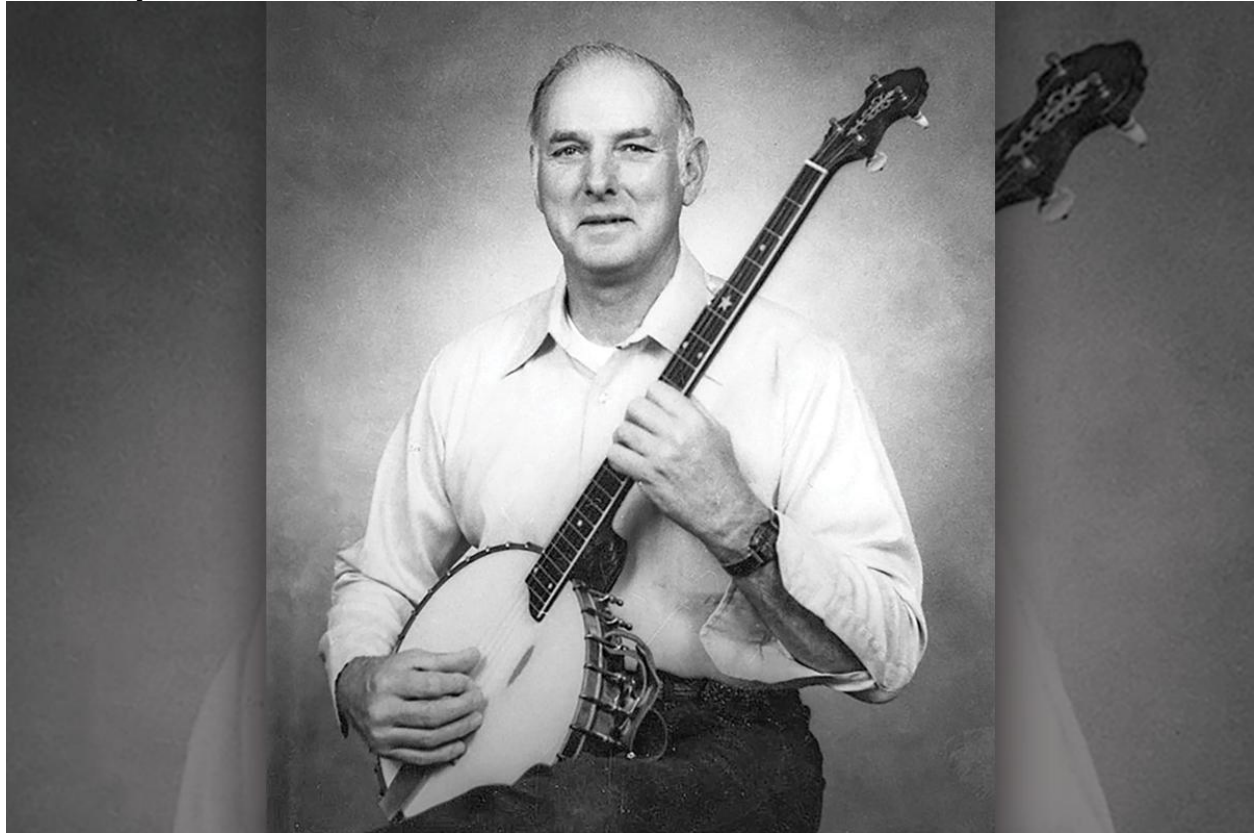
Smoky Mountain **news**

A&E Latest

Lonesome road blues: New album celebrates late Haywood banjo legend

Written by [Garret K. Woodward](#)

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Carroll Best (mid-1980s). Courtesy of Louise Best

In what will amount to an early Christmas present for bluegrass pickers and music lovers across Western North Carolina and beyond, there's a brand-new album from the late Carroll Best.

"What he did with the banjo was above and beyond," said French Kirkpatrick, a Haywood County musician, who was part of The White Oak String Band with Best. "He was, probably without a doubt, the most creative banjo player I was ever in a room with."

Aptly titled, "The Best of Best," these never before released recordings were compiled by Dr. Ted Olson, professor of Appalachian studies at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City. The Grammy-nominated educator and musicologist is well-known for scouring archives at ETSU and the Library of Congress, ultimately bringing to light numerous recordings of legendary Southern Appalachian musicians and groups. Best is the latest project.

Regarded as one of the finest banjo players to ever pick up the instrument, Best, a Haywood County native, was known for his signature “fiddle style,” which was a melodic, syncopated three-finger stroke he evolved and perfected. That specific style of playing allowed Best the capability to perform a wide array of songs by following fiddle tunes note for note.

“Carroll was a gifted, regional banjo player who influenced national musicians. He was among the first, if not the very first banjo player to move three-finger hillbilly ‘pickin’ toward jazz and melodic melodies requiring a sophisticated ear and independent dexterity given only to few,” said Marc Pruett, Grammy Award-winning banjoist of Balsam Range. “He farmed, he worked in the local mill for years, and to those of us lucky enough to have known him, he freely shared his music.”

Throughout his life, Best played all around the Southern Appalachia region, winning banjos competitions, ultimately pushing his reputation as one of the finest pickers further into the industry-at-large. Sadly, on May 8, 1995, Best was murdered by his brother, Sam. Though his life extended 64 years, Carroll’s influence will seemingly live on forever in the hearts of those who continually discover and rediscover his deep catalog of material.

“Carroll Best was the ‘best,’” the late Steve Sutton, the Grammy-nominated banjoist of Whitewater Bluegrass Company, told The Smoky Mountain News in 2014. “We played together under a tree at Merlefest the evening before his death. It was tragic and such a loss in so many ways. [He made] the most beautiful sounds to ever come from a banjo. He showed me just how versatile the instrument could be — he was a one-of-a-kind.”

SMN recently caught up with Olson about the recordings, who Carroll Best was and what his legacy remains.

Smoky Mountain News: How did this project come about?

Ted Olson: I first learned about Carroll Best maybe 35 years ago when his band performed at the Smoky Mountain Folk Festival at Lake Junaluska’s Stuart Auditorium. I was also a performer at the festival that year and I was moved by Carroll’s music. What struck me most was that his band looked like a bluegrass group but sounded like an old-time band.

A major reason was Carroll’s virtuosic “fiddle-style” banjo, which emphasized the melodies of tunes. Much bluegrass music was driven by the lightning-fast rolls of Earl Scruggs-style banjo, essentially arpeggios of chord formations, but Carroll’s approach to playing the banjo, structured around a tune’s melody line, was simultaneously colorful and gentle.

At about this same time, I became aware of other, younger musicians who played an alternative, more melodic style of bluegrass banjo than that modelled by Scruggs. I began to wonder if there might have been a connection between Carroll’s “fiddle-style” and the approaches of the younger banjo players, whose style was often referred to as melodic three-finger banjo.



The White Oak String Band featuring Carroll Best (second from left) and French Kirkpatrick (far right). *Courtesy of Ted Olson*

Later, as a professor at ETSU, I became interested in exploring the oral histories and music recordings made by linguist Joseph Hall in the Great Smoky Mountains. Beginning in the 1930s, Hall made recordings of people in the process of leaving their homes and farms in the Smokies to create the park, and he continued to return to the Smokies to document the cultural life of those same people as they adjusted to life outside the park.

On one of those collecting trips in 1956, Hall recorded a group of friends who were making music together in Haywood County's White Oak community, and the banjo-player in that group was Carroll Best. Hall made more recordings in that same community in 1959.

Hearing those recordings from the 1950s and comparing them to what Carroll had played at the Smoky Mountain Folk Festival, it was obvious that Carroll's banjo technique was fully formed in

the 1950s. This was before anyone else was playing melodic three-finger banjo style. It was obvious that Carroll played a role in pioneering the style.

SMN: What about Best and his music really speaks to you, so much so you felt the need to put this project together?

TO: When I first heard Carroll at that festival, I was impressed with his virtuosity on the banjo, and I wanted to hear more. Somewhere I heard that he had made an album with his band in the early 1980s, but I couldn't find a copy of the album. It had been released on the tiny Western North Carolina label [called] Skyline Records.

One other album by Carroll, on the Ivy Creek label, was released during his lifetime, but that one was likewise difficult to locate. A posthumous album arrived in 1999 from Copper Creek Records, but this influential musician has remained overlooked 30 years after his untimely death in 1995.

The new album from Patuxent Music, "The Best of Best," is an effort to introduce Carroll's music, highlights from the recordings he had made, to a new generation of old-time and bluegrass fans. My sense is that many people will be grateful to know about Carroll's music and his life story. His life may have ended tragically, but he lived his life humbly and heroically. And he was always a proud citizen of Haywood County.

SMN: When you look at and analyze Best's technique and style on the banjo, what are you noticing, hearing, and taking away from what made him so unique with his instrument and approach?

TO: As I studied his life and music, and as I interviewed people close to him, such as his wife Louise, as well as his former bandmate French Kirkpatrick, I concluded that Carroll had inspired the people who were generally credited with popularizing the melodic three-finger banjo style, Bobby Thompson and Bill Keith.

My liner notes for "The Best of Best" attempt to tell the story of how this farmer/laborer/amateur musician in Haywood County mastered a style of banjo-playing that later became associated with better-known musicians. I hope this new album will establish Best not only as a pioneer of the melodic three-finger banjo style, but also as a significant figure in old-time and bluegrass music.



From left, French Kirkpatrick, Carroll Best and Carroll's daughter, Alpha, in the Best family's living room, 1959. *Courtesy of Louise Best*

SMN: With all of your research and interest in Best, what have you ultimately come to realize is his legacy? Where does he stand in the banjo world?

TO: Contemporary banjo great Tony Trischka referred to Carroll as “one of the greatest banjoists who ever lived.” Certainly, Carroll’s “fiddle-style” banjo playing was one-of-a-kind, and surely those who were fortunate enough to hear him play live were impressed by his technique. But, because he did not tour and because his recordings were difficult to find, Carroll’s music was not widely heard during his lifetime.

Now, with the release of this new album, younger banjo players — really, anyone who appreciates a virtuosic musician — can appreciate Carroll’s achievement.

‘The Best of Best’

With a slew of previously unreleased recordings from the late Carroll Best, the brand-new album “The Best of Best” is a celebration of some of the finest bluegrass and mountain music ever created in Western North Carolina and greater Southern Appalachia.

Released by Patuxent Music, the project was supported by research into the Joseph Sargent Hall Collection by Dr. Ted Olson of East Tennessee State University in Johnson City.