

Roni Stoneman

First Lady of Banjo

by Richard Hawkins



There are hard times on mountain people, but they have their music and culture and sad songs and good songs - they pull through because they're perseverance-type people. They're strong. They don't fall by the wayside [...] and I love 'em very very much, and I'm not gonna let an audience down! You don't do that! That's for wussies! (Roni Stoneman, quoted in an interview with Chris Ziegler)

Veronica Loretta 'Roni' Stoneman, of the legendary Stoneman family from the Galax area of Virginia, earned the title of 'First Lady of Banjo' at the age of 17 by playing 'Lonesome road blues' for Mike Seeger to record. The recording was released on the Folkways album *American banjo: tunes and songs in Scruggs style* (1957), which is generally accepted as the first LP of bluegrass music. Artists such as Cousin Emmy, Lily May Ledford, and Molly O'Day had previously recorded banjo-playing in older styles; Roni became the first woman to play 3 finger style pickin' and to go on to record playing Scruggs-style banjo.

Roni recalls growing up without

being aware that there was anyone who didn't make music. She wanted to play the banjo after hearing her grandfather William 'Bill' Frost tell how he had fallen in love as a young barefoot boy with a young girl he saw riding on a waggon and playing banjo in clawhammer style. The waggon train had stopped off in GALAX Virginia on its travels through the mountain trails. Roni's elder brother Calvin Scott 'Scotty' Stoneman (best known as a phenomenal fiddler) taught her to play in the new style of Earl Scruggs and encouraged her with help and good advice - at one time, when she had been barred from winning a Vega banjo in a contest because she was a girl, he entered that same contest a year later and won a "VEGA" banjo for her. The banjo contest was by no means the only instance of gender discrimination that Roni suffered. In a relatively mild example from her teens, another high-school student (now a universally respected banjo-player) refused to admit that she, a girl, could play Scruggs-style banjo.

Though in some respects women performers seem to have had more recognition in the early decades of recorded country music, Roni's moth-

er Hattie (nee Frost), who played fiddle and recorded with her husband many times, including 26 recordings at the Bristol Sessions in 1927, where it was quoted in one newspaper report that Ernest was supported by simply 'a matron' - she was denied the courtesy of being named.

Roni retains a deep affection for her family, and particularly her parents - Ernest V. 'Pop' Stoneman, inventive and generous, and Hattie, with good sense, humour, and a gift for mimicry. Both had strong characters that carried their family through periods of chronic deprivation. They also raised their children (who had exceptional musical talent but were not scholastic: Roni developed her reading ability not from school readers but from John Harrington Cox's *Folk songs of the South* (1925)) in a tradition of being not just musicians but entertainers.

The vicissitudes of the Stonemans both as a family and as a musical group are chronicled in Ivan Tribe's *The Stonemans: an Appalachian family and the music that shaped their lives*. When the group's career was crippled by their manager's failings, its members had to cope as best they could as individuals. Roni, responsi-

ble for her young children and coping with the effects of abusive marriages (chronicled in her own book, *Pressing on: the Roni Stoneman story as told to Ellen Wright*), had to forge a new career for herself. A new TV series, 'Hee Haw', combining comedy and country music, was an ideal vehicle for her talents. Roni joined a bunch of banjo-players ranging from Stringbean and Grandpa Jones to Roy Clark, Buck Trent, and Bobby Thompson. In the Stonemans' own group her sister Donna had featured as the dancer; on 'Hee Haw' it was Roni whose dancing - even with the weight of a Mastertone to support - held the attention. She also blossomed as a comedian and comic actor, creating the character of Ida Lee Nagger, the Ironing Woman. Roni was a cast member for twenty-three years, and has subsequently kept active as a solo performer or fronting a country music band. Since 2008 she has recorded two albums on the Patuxent Records label with her sisters Patsy and Donna.

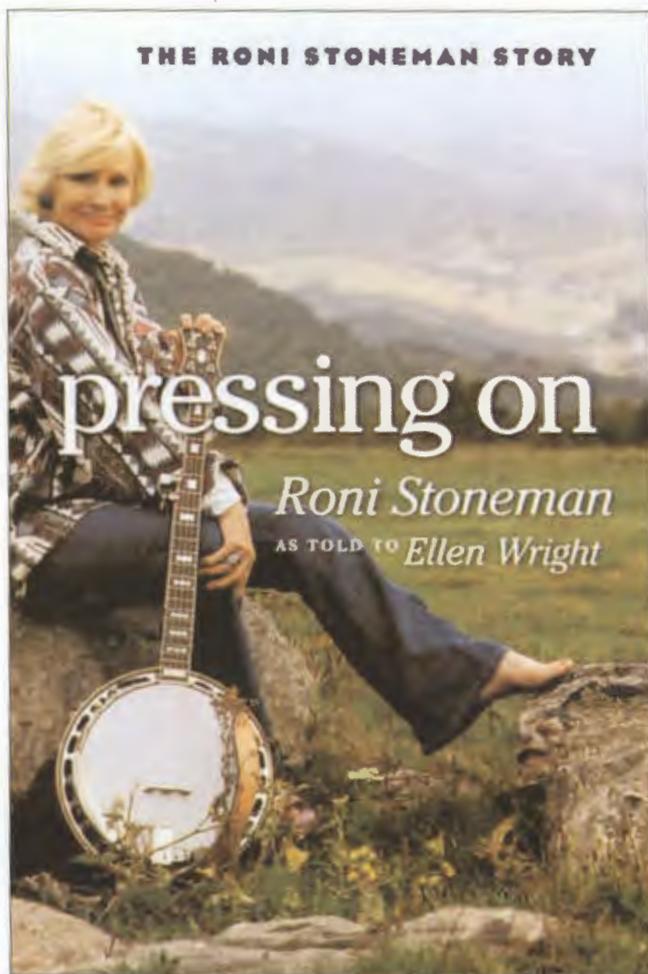
This brief piece is written without the assistance of Ivan Tribe's *Stonemans*, Roni's own *Pressing on*, or Murphy Henry's new *Pretty good for a girl: women in bluegrass*. However, judging by recent experience I doubt whether any publications, however many or large, will do the subject justice. My wife Carol and I have just had the pleasure and privilege of

receiving Roni and her husband Tom in our house for four days, and she may be the most remarkable person either of us has ever met. She is a walking treasure-house of songs and of stories from her family history and from the history of old-time, bluegrass, and country music; her sense of pitch makes an electronic tuner superfluous; she is completely open and ready to talk to anyone; and she is extremely, acutely, and often outrageously funny, as audiences in Dublin and the rest of Ireland can now testify. We look forward to her promised video remake of 'Stand by your man', with Roni singing it in the character of a battered trailer-park wife...

Any attempt to portray such a Protean character is bound to be inadequate; but Chris Ziegler's interview article, 'Roni Stoneman: She is crazy, isn't she?' (<http://larecord.com/interviews/2009/01/26/roni-stoneman->

[she-is-crazy-isnt-she](http://larecord.com/interviews/2009/01/26/roni-stoneman-)) is enjoyable reading, and you should also view the Patuxent Records YouTube video made when the three Stoneman sisters made their first album on the label:

<http://watch?v=3H2PyUk7e4E>.



Roni in Red Room by Arnie and Sharon Loughrin

