



PLAYING THE OLDIES IN THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS

Picking and Singing is a Way of Life in Swain County, NC. The nimble fingers dance down the neck of the five-string banjo like a spider streaking across a hot griddle. As a three-time National Junior Champion banjo picker, 15-year-old Seth Taylor would be welcome on stages across the country. But on Saturday nights, from June through October, you're likely to find him playing hot bluegrass at the Train Depot in Bryson City, North Carolina. For the folks of this close-knit community, music is as much a part of life as the lush, green Smoky Mountains that rise up around them.

It's a Family Affair. "I gave Seth his first guitar lesson when he was just five years old," says Kevin Tuck, founder of Reel Tyme, the house band at Music in the Mountains, Bryson City's weekly musical gathering. "Before long he was so good I had to make him part of the band." Kevin, it turns out, is an excellent recruiter. To fill out the band he got Barron Rogers on mandolin and taught his wife, Diane, to play bass. (She was already an accomplished singer). Another favorite at Music in the Mountains is Kevin's 84-year-old mother, Jessie.

"I play the old tunes, some gospel, and I tell a few jokes," smiles Jessie. "I thoroughly enjoy it." When you listen to Jessie's music, it's easy to trace the roots back to the folk tunes of the British Isles. Scotch-Irish settlers brought their mournful ballads and lively reels to the isolated coves of the Smokies and handed them down from generation to generation. Jessie continues that tradition, recently appearing on stage with her 14-year-old, guitar-playing grandson, Christopher. "When the audience is enjoying themselves I can feel the love and appreciation," she beams.

The Rhythm of the Mountains. Music isn't the only draw for Bryson City visitors. With 87% of Swain County composed of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and protected national forests, the area is a magnet for outdoor enthusiasts. The twisting, churning Nantahala River is the most popular whitewater rafting destination in the Southeast. Birders, hikers and fly fishers are drawn to the trails and rushing streams of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Scenic Fontana Lake, with its 480-foot-high dam, draws sightseers, boaters and determined anglers who cast their lures in hopes of hooking a trophy walleye, muskie or smallmouth bass.

Visitors are also drawn to Bryson City's quaint shops where handmade mountain crafts from the Scotch-Irish and native Cherokee traditions are on display, alongside music CDs produced by talented musicians from around the area.

A Green Tradition. Given the astounding beauty of this mountain enclave, it's not surprising that Swain County folks are dedicated to preserving the natural splendor of their home. Accordingly, efforts are always underway to conserve water, pick up trash, reduce air pollution and recycle. But the town's most noted preservation project involves its music—joyfully preserving their proud musical traditions each week at the Train Depot in Bryson City. For Jessie Tuck, it's a labor of love. "I play any time for nothing," she says. "It means everything to me."

For more information on touring the Smokies, contact the Swain County Chamber of Commerce, 210 Main Street, P.O. Box 509, Bryson City, NC 28713; chamber@greatsmokies.com; or 800-867-9246.