

# The Long Weekend

## Play Me That Mountain Music

By MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN  
Special to The Washington Post

I arrive at the Marathon gas station in Stuart, Va., just above the North Carolina border, to find a man eating beans out of a can and a collection of animal heads peering down at an understocked convenience store. I am at my first stop on the Crooked Road: Virginia's Music Heritage Trail — a 250-mile path of music venues in the Blue Ridge and Appalachian regions of southwestern Virginia — and I don't see anything that resembles the jam session I expected.

But soon, a 70-year-old man named G.C., a third-generation musician from town, brings his guitar over to the picnic table outside the store. Then a fiddle shows up, followed by a banjo. One by one, gray-haired men climb out of pickup trucks with their instruments and amble over to the patio, home of the Thursday night State Line Grocery Jam Session. And by the time I leave, two hours later, I've fallen under the spell of mountain music.

It's not the first time. Last year, I joined a friend for my first bluegrass concerts in Washington and was drawn to the music so suddenly that I had barely learned which instrument was the mandolin before I'd bought one. Now, after six months of lessons and calloused fingers, I am bravely, naively joining the Thursday night crew in a corner of Virginia where it seems that everyone plays a "git-tar" or fiddle, and plays it well.

"There's music everywhere here," says Joe Wilson, one of the architects of the Crooked Road, which was established in 2004 to support tourism and economic development in one of Appalachia's distressed areas. Wilson is a folklorist and the longtime director and current chairman of the National Council for the Traditional Arts. Earlier this month, he received a Living Legend award from the Library of Congress.

"Americans don't know diddly about their music," he says. Traditional American mountain music came about when the African banjo and European fiddle met in Virginia, he explains. "Appalachian music has been the most accepting music — whoever you are and wherever you are, you're welcome to play it. It's the sound; it has a joy to it. It's working-folk music."

It's also infectious. Even though I can't keep up with the State Line crew (I should have practiced a few years longer), I want to sit here all night, next to G.C., singing from his songbook, and the banjo player, simultaneously pickin', smokin' and drinkin' coffee. I am in the company of folks who make good music with less effort than they make simple conversation. For them, it's just another Thursday evening, doing what they do. But for me, it's the beginning of a whirlwind trip exploring 188 miles of the Crooked Road and listening to some mighty fine tunes.

The Crooked Road mostly follows Route 58, the longest roadway in the state; this part of it is a two-lane mountain route that passes idyllic farms, moseying cows, sparkling rivers. The trail covers 10 counties, three cities and 19 towns, including Floyd, Galax, Damascus, Abingdon and Bristol along the North Carolina and Tennessee borders, then Norton and Clintwood bor-



BY CAMERON DAVIDSON

The Friday Night Jamboree at the Floyd Country Store is a popular stop on Virginia's Crooked Road.



BY LARIS KARKLIS — THE WASHINGTON POST

dering Kentucky. In every spot, nearly every day of the week, you're bound to find a concert, a festival, a square dance or a jam. Take it slow, and keep both hands on the wheel. The route looks like an intestine on my GPS device, and, as a local says, "The roads are so curvy, you can almost see your taillights 'round the bends." As I leave the jam Thursday night, after 9, G.C. gives me a stern warning about deer on my hour-long mountain drive to a B&B in Floyd. "They'll jump outta nowhere, right in front of your car," he says. "Be careful."

Friday night in Floyd (home to Floyd County's one stoplight), there's no question that I'm in the right spot for music. I show up early at the Floyd Country Store for the Friday Night Jamboree. The store, celebrating its centennial next year, sells everything from Carhartt overalls to sweet potato biscuit mix and still records sales in a steno notebook. The show is held in the back of the store, but when the weather's nice, pockets of music (and some nights, as many as 1,000 people) spill out onto the street. An hour before the first band, always gospel, I find seats saved, some with tap shoes.

Woody Crenshaw, the store's owner,

welcomes everyone. "We have two gallons of blueberries picked in Floyd County this week, and we're making fresh blueberry milkshakes!" he announces. After gospel hour, another band takes the stage, and flat-foot dancing, which looks a lot like Irish dance, begins. The crowd is largely "down-home folk," old-time regulars who come every week. But there are also Floyd transplants who have moved here recently for the music and the farming, a handful of students from nearby Virginia Tech and visitors from as far away as Denver and Edinburgh, Scotland.

The next morning, one of Miracle Farm Bed and Breakfast's owners brings breakfast to my cottage door, featuring pears, rhubarb, cape gooseberries, tomatoes and eggs, all from the farm. I set off with my beagle and mandolin traveling west on Route 58, stopping at several towns along the way. My radio's tuned to WBRF (98.1 FM), which plays bluegrass and old country: Merle Haggard, the Stanley Brothers, George Jones. The DJ reads an advertisement for a chain-saw company.

The region boasts a high concentration of luthiers, or stringed-instrument makers. So I stop in Galax, home of the

Old Fiddler's Convention, to see one of the best: Jimmy Edmunds. He learned the trade from his dad years ago and recently opened a shop in his wife's garden center. He shows me pieces of guitars in production and one he is making for Kenny Rogers's guitarist. He says he makes about 25 instruments a year and has 100 on order. I tell him where I'm headed, west into the mountains, and he says it's "a few hours and a couple brake pads" away.

That night, I take the Crooked Road past Bristol into the middle of nowhere, otherwise known as Hiltons, Va. It's home to Clinch Mountain and the Carter Family Fold, a large, rustic theater that hosts weekly acoustic-only concerts in the tradition of the original Carter family. At that evening's concert, which is dog-friendly, the concession stand sells dollar sodas and ham biscuits, and folks in the audience trade cowboy boots for dance shoes.

The bluegrass band is terrific, but I'm equally taken by everyone offstage and the friendliness one can encounter in the middle of nowhere. The ticket lady shows me pictures of her dogs, I chat with a few couples I'd seen in Floyd the night before, I get smiles from a little girl dancing with her grandfather, and a volunteer takes time to fill me in, at length, on Carter family history (and lets me sit in a rocking chair that belonged to Johnny Cash, who played his last concert here). Maybe the mountain air is clouding my senses, but I feel as if in no time at all I've been folded into the Crooked Road family.

As I head back to my car and my mandolin, I pass the volunteer. "It was nice talkin' to you," he says. "Now watch out for the deer."

Melanie D.G. Kaplan is a Washington writer.

### Where to Go, What to Know

**DRIVE TIME**  
About  
**11 hours**  
over 3 days



**COST**  
**\$540**



Transportation: \$95  
Lodging: \$370  
Meals: \$75

#### GETTING THERE

The easternmost stop on the Crooked Road, Rocky Mount, Va., is about 270 miles from the Beltway. Take Interstate 66 west to I-81 south. Merge onto US-220 south at Exit 143. Follow 220 to Rocky Mount.

#### WHERE TO STAY

##### Miracle Farm Bed and Breakfast Spa & Resort

179 Ida Rose Lane, Floyd, 540-789-2214

[www.miraclefarmbnb.com](http://www.miraclefarmbnb.com)

Full vegetarian breakfast with farm-grown ingredients brought to your door. Pet-friendly. Cottages with kitchenette start at \$115.

##### New River Lodging

307 Stockyard Rd., Galax, 276-236-4022

[www.newrivertrailcabins.com](http://www.newrivertrailcabins.com)

Adorable cabins (with names like Chance for Romance) stocked with jacuzzis, gas log fireplaces and gas grills. Rates start at \$130 on weekends.

#### WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

##### Over the Moon Gallery & Cafe

227 N. Locust St., Floyd, 540-745-4366

[www.harvestmoonfoods.com/gallery.htm](http://www.harvestmoonfoods.com/gallery.htm)

Wraps and sandwiches from \$7.25. Live music Friday to Sunday.

##### Oddfella's Cantina

110A N. Locust St., Floyd, 540-745-3463

[www.oddfellascantina.com](http://www.oddfellascantina.com)

Local and organic food, including "Appalachian Latino" tortilla wraps starting at \$8. Live music most nights and some days. Reservations suggested on weekends.

##### Stringbean Coffee Shop & Shamrock Tea Room

215 S. Main St., Galax, 276-236-0567

[www.stringbeancoffee.com](http://www.stringbeancoffee.com)

Good coffee and basics for cheap: \$2 hot dog and \$5.60 BLT. Jam sessions Tuesdays at 7 p.m., and live music Saturdays at 8 p.m.

##### Harvest Table Restaurant

Meadowview Town Square, Meadowview, 276-944-5142

[www.meadowviewfarmersguild.com](http://www.meadowviewfarmersguild.com)

Farm to fork at its finest. Lunch entrees start at \$7; dinner \$11.

#### WHAT TO DO

##### State Line Grocery Jam Session

Patrick County, 276-694-6377

Session starts at 7 p.m.

##### Floyd Country Store

206 S. Locust St., Floyd, 540-745-4563

[www.floydcountrystore.com](http://www.floydcountrystore.com)

Friday Night Jamboree features three bands, starting at 6:30 p.m., \$4. Sunday Bluegrass/Mountain Music Jam at 2 p.m., free.

##### Blue Ridge Backroads Show, Live at the Rex Theater

113 E. Grayson St., Galax, 276-238-8130

[www.rextheatergalax.com](http://www.rextheatergalax.com)

Fridays at 8 p.m., broadcast live on WBRF(98.1 FM). Admission is free, but donations are requested.

##### Leaf & String

401 S. Main St., Galax, 276-236-7702

[www.edmondsguitars.com](http://www.edmondsguitars.com), [www.leafandstring.com](http://www.leafandstring.com)

Visit luthier Jimmy Edmunds's workshop and wife Debbie's garden shop. Test instruments, and if you're lucky, catch an impromptu jam in the store.

##### Carter Family Fold

AP Carter Highway, Hiltons, 276-386-6054

[www.carterfamilyfold.org](http://www.carterfamilyfold.org)

Family-oriented acoustic-only music shows (and Appalachian-style dancing) Saturdays at 7:30 p.m.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

[www.crookedroad.org](http://www.crookedroad.org)



#### Wednesday

Escapes is up for some mischief at a Maurice Sendak exhibit in Philadelphia, in Style.

#### Sunday

The Long Weekend aims to finally give Portsmouth, N.H., its due, in Travel.