

Community Hall (Auction Barn)

When Louis Marshall Grandpa Jones comes to Princeton, Dave Henschel's Auction Barn throbs with high energy entertainment that belies the fact of its source. From the moment sixty-eight year old Grandpa strums his gold-plated banjo, the double dairy barn-sized hall is filled-by one little old man.

Grandpa's roots in music go a long way back in the Kentucky hills that bore him. It would seem that playing in small halls in little towns like Princeton is also a return to where he started. Actually Jones got his start in the fairly large city of Akron, and not in any village hall. He began on radio, first in Akron, later in Boston and Chicago, way back in 1929.

Boston might seem to be a strange place for a country musician to play. However it was Boston radio host Bradley Kincaid who christened the twenty-two year old Jones "Grandpa."

Jones says he was touring New England "all the way into Maine," singing the old songs he learned in Kentucky when the name tag he has worn for nearly fifty years was invented. It seems Jones and sidemen were a little slow to approach the radio microphone and Kincaid told him "You're just like an old Grandpa." Listeners to Kincaid's show, who liked Jones' old time tunes called in to ask, "How old is that old fella?" As Grandpa says in his Kentucky drawl, "That give us an idee....We got the mustache and the hat and I've been a Grandpa for fifty years.....You know I'm still not a real one yet."

Over the years he has almost aged into the part. The grey mustache is real now, but many of the wrinkles still come out of the makeup jar.

There are really two Grandpa Jones'. One is the little man with the funny eyeglasses and turned up hat, the wrinkled kneehigh boots and scrunched up face. He's a country clown, a pretend hillbilly who seems to have just rolled down the mountainside into town. He slaps his knees, stomps his feet and sings in upland twang, seemingly purged of all finesse by ample supplies of fermented corn.

The second Grandpa Jones is considered one of the best banjo men to come out of Kentucky, Ohio, or anywhere. He was bringing hill music to audiences at about the same time Bill Monroe called his strumming "bluegrass." Monroe has the reputation of being a stickler for perfection and the authentic sound he puts out proves it. But if Jones ever got out of the Grandpa get-up and sat down to play, Monroe would make room for him on the stage.

Jones has perfected a style of banjo playing called the "drop-thumb" or double thumb, in which the player thumbs the first and second strings and then drops down to the bottom for more. "They also call that rapping or knocking and little girls in college nowadays call it frailing," he says. It appears to come naturally to Jones who acquired the skill not long after he first took up the banjo shortly before World War II.

Grandpa Jones says he's not really a bluegrass player. "That's Bill Monroe's. But if you pick up a banjo, people say you play bluegrass." Definitions aside, both Jones' and Monroe's music share common roots in traditional Kentucky sounds. Jones merely comes from higher up the Appalachian slopes.

"The Muleskinner Blues might be called Monroe's anthem while Jones' *Old Rattler* is the song he can call his own. Both have no designated author. Instead they are part of the anonymous folk vein that both men tap.

In a sense the music that is most readily identified with Jones--*Old Rattler* and a song he wrote called *Eight Miles to Louisville*--are closer to genuine folk tradition than much of what passes for it. "A lot of those girls don't know what they're singing. They learned their folk music from books." Jones was, of course, raised and learned the tunes of his mountain ancestors before big city radio stations sent signals into every glen and hollow.

Those same big city stations were also the destroyers of the kind of isolated rural societies that produced different kinds of music. Everything is standardized and homogenized today, including the country music Jones is a part of.

"What they call country today is a mixture," he says. "Folk, pop, rock—there are no real country radio stations anymore.

Ironically Jones has contributed his ample talent towards that mixture. His career itself has been a measure of country music's growth in popularity and its loss of individuality. From his radio and touring days in Ohio and West Virginia, he went to the National Barn Dance on WLS in Chicago. In the 1950's he joined the regular cast of the Grand Ol' Opry and in the 60's was one of the first cast members of TV's Hee Haw.

Jones spends about two months of every year taping Hee Haw. "The only thing wrong with Hee Haw," he says "is you can't do what you want."

On TV, Jones is much more the comedian and less the musician.

Just as his musical roots go way back into country music tradition, so does his comedy style. There have been many "Paps," "Cousins," "Uncles" and "Daddys" who adopt ridiculous clothes and play the hick right out of the hills. Jones' tiny Grandpa glasses, his cross-eyed squint, his striped pants held up by broad galluses are all part of rich country lore. Jones probably most resembles "Uncle" Dave Macon, whom he once played. Macon was Opry's top star of the 1930's—a star who also combined good humor and good banjo music.

Jones' jokes may be as old as the hills, but, as he says onstage "All these jokes are three hundred years old, but I hope you forgot 'em. "Forgetting them is easy until Grandpa makes the old lines funny again.

He tours a good percentage of the year, often with his wife, Ramona (who plays a good fiddle) and their sons and daughter. They work towns small and large. He comes to Princeton because "of the people".