

# THE BRIARHOPPERS Ride Again

Back in the thirties Charlotte was home base for a riproaring musical group that made itself heard—and loved—from Florida to Virginia. Today the original performers have regrouped and once again audiences are smiling and tapping toes to their good humor and country music.

by Bob Inman

"Do you know what hit is?"

"What is it?"

"Hit's Briarhopper Time!"

It was 1935 and they were the hottest thing in southern radio. Every afternoon at 4:30, just before "The Lone Ranger," they joked and sang and lollygagged through a half hour of musical nonsense. Peruna brought you the Briarhoppers and the Briarhoppers brought you the sweetest sounds this side of hillbilly heaven. They sold a lot of Peruna and put out an awful lot of corn. And the folks loved it.

Now in 1974, like so many relics from the nostalgic past, the Briarhoppers are enjoying a revival. Whitey and Hogan, Hank and Don (with a little

help from Uncle Doug) are making the oldfolks circuit, bringing smiles and recalling distant memories with "Wait 'Til The Sun Shines Nellie," their old theme song.

Their audiences, at places like Charlotte's Methodist Home and Strawn Apartments for the elderly, and Salisbury Veterans Hospital, remember way back when the Briarhoppers were number one in these parts; way back when WBT boomed its five thousand watts up and down the Eastern seaboard and the Briarhoppers became a household word just like FDR and Bull Durham plug tobacco.

Their creator and master of ceremonies was a deep-voiced youngster

named Charlie Crutchfield, just out of the South Carolina flatlands.

(Today, Crutchfield runs the place as President of Jefferson Pilot Broadcasting—which goes to show how far a fellow with a hillbilly background can go.)

String bands were popular radio fare in those days, especially daytime radio. But the Briarhoppers were something extra. In a day when announcers preached to the audience in sonorous tones, hand-cupped-behind-the-ear, Crutchfield and his country pickers let their hair down and winged it. Their informal, corny style caught the listeners' fancy. Arthur Godfrey heard it, and was inspired to use the

The Briarhoppers, circa 1940: Standing, left to right, Fred Kirby, Roy "Whitey" Grant, Claude Casey, Arvel Hogan, Bill Davis. Squatting, Hank Warren. The western attire is typical of string bands of the era. (Photo courtesy Hank Warren).



same successful formula in his spectacular radio career.

(The name for the group came from a rabbit-hunting trip. The dogs weren't doing much work, so "Crutch" and a friend began kicking the bushes to flush out game. As one rabbit hopped out of a briar bush, Crutchfield got his inspiration.)

There are those who contend the sponsor's product had much to do with the show's success. Peruna was an "iron tonic"; but that's like saying an atomic bomb makes a loud noise. Peruna packed a wallop like a South Carolina mule, laced as it was with 30% alcohol. Coming during Prohibition and the Depression, the potent elixir was a welcome relief for whatever ailed you, physical or mental.

(One dear lady, a Christian teetotaler, wrote to tell of the wonderful lift she got from a bottle a day of Peruna. Crutchfield didn't have the heart to tell her.)

Peruna's meteoric popularity can be gauged by the free gift offer announced on the Briarhoppers program. Tear off the box top, mail it in, and you got a picture postcard of *The Last Supper*. It may not sound like much, but the offer brought in 18,000 box tops a week from all over the South—Florida to Virginia. Later, the *Last Supper* gave way to an autographed picture of the Briarhoppers themselves.

The Briarhoppers were actually a series of musical performers in those days, but the 1974 edition is a nucleus of the old bunch. Some, like A.P. and Maybelle Carter, went on to national fame with the Grand Ole Opry. But others stayed and played the role of local musical hero.

Roy "Whitey" Grant and Arvel Hogan moved over from Gastonia in the late 1930's—Whitey on guitar and Hogan on mandolin, singing duets like "Mama I'm Sick" and "Out On The Open Range." Hank Warren played a mean fiddle, wore a red wig and painted-on freckles, and clowned around on the handsaw. Bill Davis thumped the bass, Fred Kirby twanged the guitar, and Don White played a little bit of everything. There were others like romantic singer Homer Christopher, and the child-duet of Billie Burton and Homer Drye.

The radio show had no format.



Charles Crutchfield with an old friend, a bottle of Peruna Iron Tonic, The Briarhoppers' long-time radio sponsor. (Photo: Bob Inman).

Everybody just did whatever came to mind, with gentle guidance from Crutchfield. Irreverence about the sponsor was a by-word. "We don't care whether you drink this stuff, pour it in your car radiator, or use it to unstop your sink," Crutch would say of Peruna.

They had fun with the music, too—thumbing noses at the Japanese during World War II with, "We Didn't Invite 'Em Over But We're Gonna Repay The Call."

There was usually a packed studio audience, a bagful of mail requests (including frequent cards from Kannapolis textile czar Charles Cannon), and the usual list of community announcements such as church suppers and attic sales.

The Briarhoppers Revival of '74 (though it doesn't include Crutchfield) has the same free-wheeling style and many of the old songs.

It came about partly by accident when elderly residents of Edwin Towers asked former Briarhopper Don White to form a band and entertain. White called Hank Warren, who hadn't picked up a fiddle in 20 years. But they brushed off the dust and tuned up the strings and it didn't sound half-bad. Whitey and Hogan also joined the informal group and the Edwin Towers performance was a solid success.

A newspaper column brought the revival to the community's attention

and calls started coming in. With a few additions to the troupe, they decided to remain together, playing solely for the elderly and shut-ins. Fred Kirby goes along when he's not tied up with TV appearances, Bill Davis does an occasional show, and TV newscaster Doug Mayes (a former musician with a Grand Ole Opry band) helps out on bass and guitar.

The Briarhoppers play strictly for non-profit organizations and won't allow admission to be charged. All performances are open to the public. Their compensation comes from the Musician's Trust Fund, set up years ago by the music industry for benefit shows around the country.

A 1974 Briarhoppers concert is loaded with nostalgia and lively with wit.

"Watch him, folks, his fingers never leave the mandolin," calls Hank as Hogan rips through a chorus.

"Look at him, plays more than one string at a time. It don't matter which one, either."

And Whitey, introducing the group: "We know music, but it don't interfere with our playing and singing."

The songs echo a simpler time with basic melodies and from-the-gut lyrics: *I thought I was swinging the world by the tail;*

*I thought I could never be blue;*

*I thought I'd been kissed and I thought I'd been loved;*

*But that was before I met you.*

Don takes a turn on steel guitar, bringing a tear to the eye with a bittersweet rendition of "Whispering Hope."

And Hank unlimbers the fiddle, making it ring with "Orange Blossom Special" and twitter with "Listen To The Mockingbird."

The pace is more leisurely, though, than those hectic days of the late 30's and early 40's when the Briarhoppers would wind up a radio show at 5:00 PM and then drive as far as 150 miles to an on-stage evening performance.

As Whitey Grant says, "We were pretty good friends with the highway patrolmen in all directions."

The personal appearances came as often as six nights a week, most played to standing-room-only crowds. Their popularity was akin to modern-day adulation reserved for rock stars. The

Briarhoppers were also cutting records for such labels as Decca, Sonora, Deluxe and RCA Victor.

It was a lucrative business for its time. But reality started catching up with the Briarhoppers in the early 1940's. The heaviest blow to the radio program was Crutchfield's promotion to acting manager at WBT, which meant he could no longer emcee the show. Other announcers tried it for a year, but it wasn't the same.

The performers themselves were also thinking about settling down, getting something more permanent to do. So in 1946 the Briarhoppers cut their last caper and quietly laid the living legend to rest.

Life has been good to the Briarhoppers since then and the memories are mellow. Only Fred Kirby and Hank Warren stayed with WBT, Kirby still doing his TV kid show and Warren semi-retired as a photographer. Whitey and Hogan, together to the last, work for the U.S. Postal Service, delivering the mail on opposite sides of Charlotte's Independence Boulevard. Don White is a salesman and music teacher at a local music company. Bassman Bill Davis is retired. And "Little" Homer Drye has his own TV show in Raleigh.

But get them to talking about the good old days, and you get an idea of why they once caught the South's fancy. Others might have picked and sung a little better; but nobody else related to everyday folks like the Briarhoppers. In a day when hardship still stalked the land and asphalt roads were the exception, Crutchfield and his crew brought down-to-earth humor and simple, country music right into your living room.

Watch their audiences today and you see knowing smiles flicker across the wrinkled faces. And you can tell the modern-day Briarhoppers have done their job—reviving warm, half-forgotten memories on the backroads of the mind. G



The Briarhoppers, 1974.

(Photo: Brad Stafford)