

The WBT Briarhoppers

By Ray Thigpen



L-R: Fiddlin' "Hank" Warren, Shannon Grayson, Roy "Whitey" Grant, Arval Hogan and Don White

The WBT Briarhoppers are one of the oldest performing groups of bluegrass and hillbilly music still active today. Their career began in 1935 over WBT Radio in Charlotte, North Carolina.

During the Briarhoppers' heyday in radio, I wasn't old enough to see them, but I feel fortunate they have continued to perform, so other generations can enjoy and appreciate this fine group of entertainers.

Today the Briarhoppers open their stage shows with what has become a trademark for over five decades. Whitey will ask, "Do y'all know what 'hit' is?" "Hits' Briarhopper Time!"

Hogan will reply. Then they all join in the theme "Wait Till The Sun Shines Nellie."

Of the five members today, Don White was the first to join the Briarhoppers having done so in 1935, he was one of the original members.

Actually, Don White was born Walden Whytsell, September 25, 1909, near Sutton, West Virginia. It was in the early '30s he adopted the stage name Don White.

It was in 1932 that Don made his debut on radio at Charleston, West Virginia. Two years later he moved to WFBC in Greenville, South Carolina. He first came to Charlotte with the

Blue Ridge Mountaineers for a short stay and returned in early 1935 with the Crazy Bucklebusters. This group was one of many who were sponsored by (Crazy Water Crystals) a patent medicine, that endorsed many of the early string bands on radio.

During the '30s and '40s Charlotte and nearby Rock Hill, South Carolina, were a recording mecca. Many of the Grand Ole Opry groups and a host of others from all over the United States traveled to Charlotte to record.

It was at Charlotte, Don made his recording debut with RCA Victor on June 19, 1936. This session produced Don's velvet smooth version of "Mex-



The Briarhoppers in front of the Wilder Building where WBT studios were located on the 6th floor

icali Rose" along with several duets with Fred Kirby.

In 1939, Don along with Fred Kirby moved to WLW in Cincinnati, Ohio. During his early career Don worked on many different radio stations, most notable was WLS in Chicago where he and his band the WLS Sage Riders had a fifteen-minute daily program and were regulars on the WLS National Barn Dance.

Don came back to Charlotte in the early part of 1942, and once again joined the Briarhoppers. A few months later, Don was asked to fill a vacant spot in the Tennessee Ramblers. The Ramblers had a featured spot on the Briarhopper program, and many of the Briarhoppers were in the Tennessee Ramblers at one time or another.

The Tennessee Ramblers, had been to Hollywood in 1936, where they appeared in a Gene Autry movie. Hollywood beckoned again in 1943, when Don made his movie debut.

"We went out and did a film titled *Swing Your Partner* starring Lula Belle and Scotty. This was also Dale Evans' first movie. Then we were in several westerns with the Durango Kid and Jimmy Wakely," recalls Don.

Before leaving Hollywood the Ramblers worked a seven-day engagement with Roy Rogers at the Warfield theatre. The Sons Of The Pioneers were booked in New York so the Ramblers filled in.

In 1984, Cattle Records released an album titled "Don White—Star Of The WLS Barn Dance." The album

was remastered from old radio transcriptions.

Today Don and his wife of 51 years reside in Matthews, North Carolina, just outside of Charlotte. He plays both acoustic and electric bass with the Briarhopper group that has been re-organized since 1970.

The duet of Whitey and Hogan joined the Briarhoppers in 1941, where they remained until 1955, when what some will call progress forced WBT to drop the program.

Roy "Whitey" Grant, was born April 7, 1916, at Shelby, North Carolina. It was at the age of nine Whitey developed an interest in playing guitar. A short time later with the help of a neighbor, Whitey mastered the instrument.

Orval A. Hogan, was born July 24, 1911, at Robbinsville, North Carolina. Hogan's older brother played guitar along with a neighbor that played fiddle. They had taught Hogan several guitar cords, and though he had never played in public he was progressing well.

Neither of the boys had actually seen a mandolin, but they had heard the instrument on radio and records. Hogan's brother ordered a mandolin for \$3.50 out of a Sears and Roebuck catalog so young Hogan could accompany them playing social functions. "When I finally got that mandolin, I sat up all night practicing by listening to an old Victrola record by the Scottsdale String Band, and before morning I had learned to play 'Chinese Breakdown,'" says Hogan.

Whitey and Hogan first met in 1935, where they worked in a textile mill at Gastonia, North Carolina. They formed the Whitey and Hogan duet and made their radio debut over WSPA Spartanburg, South Carolina, the same year as the Spindle City Boys.

The duet went with WGNC Gastonia, North Carolina, in 1939, where they broadcast from the main street show window of a sponsoring furniture store. Later that year they went to New York to record for Decca records. Whitey and Hogan recorded well over thirty songs during the late '30s and early '40s for Decca then Sonora and Deluxe, such as "An Old Log Cabin For Sale," "There's A Power Greater Than Atomic" and "Turn Your Radio On" were among their best sellers.

By 1941, Whitey and Hogan had generated a strong local following and their Decca records didn't hurt any, but at the same time they relied on their mill job for an income. Mr. Charles

Crutchfield, program director at WBT offered the duet an alternative to mill work. "At the cotton mill Hogan and I made \$7.50 each for a weeks' work. When Mr. Crutchfield offered us \$25.00 a week for the both of us to join the Briarhoppers we thought we were rich," says Whitey.

The two loved being Briarhoppers, but found it wasn't as easy as they thought. The Briarhopper program aired from 4:30 to 5:00 each afternoon. As soon as they signed off the air all the groups would rush across the street and pack musicians and instruments into one car and head for a

show date, which would often be over two hundred miles away and through small winding mountain roads.

Whitey and Hogan both credit Jimmie Rodgers with influencing them most in their music. "I came close several times, but never had the opportunity of meeting Jimmie Rodgers. Although, I did have a nephew who was hitch-hiking to New York when a man in a 1925 "T" Model gave him a ride. The man was Jimmie Rodgers," states Whitey.

Recently, Whitey and Hogan were recognized by the Grand Ole Opry from records kept in the archives of the

Country Music Hall Of Fame as being the oldest performing duet in country music today.

In 1984, Whitey and Hogan performed a three-week concert tour of Europe. Their first tour was so successful they were booked again for the whole month of August in 1986.

Although, she doesn't travel with the group, Hogans' twelve-year-old granddaughter Christen Scott performs with the Briarhoppers at every opportunity. "Christen, started playing mandolin when she was only five and in a short time she had mastered the instrument and was playing on stage with us. She got a banjo for Christmas last year and has played it on stage with us several times," adds Hogan.

Banjoist Shannon Grayson was born September 30, 1916, at Sunshine, North Carolina, where he developed an early interest in music. "When I was six our family had an old pump organ, but I was too short to sit on the stool and reach the pedals, so I would stand and play while pumping with one foot," recalls Shannon.

Before he was ten, Shannon's father bought him a five-string banjo. After mastering the banjo, Shannon took up guitar and mandolin.

He first broke into show business playing guitar and mandolin with Art Mix, brother of famed cowboy star Tom Mix. Shannon made his radio debut in 1937 over WSOC in Charlotte with Bill Carlisle. When World War II broke out, Shannon accompanied Bill to Knoxville where they joined Bill's brother Cliff to once again establish the name of the Carlisle Brothers. It was during this time many of the Carlisle Brothers' RCA recordings were made.

"Cliff had worked, traveled and recorded with Jimmie Rodgers and I would often ask him questions about this legendary performer. The answers to all my questions proved Jimmie Rodgers to be every bit a gentlemen as he was and is still a star," says Grayson.

Shannon joined the Briarhoppers in 1944 where he remained until its closing program in 1955. He then formed his own bluegrass gospel quartet, the Golden Valley Boys. The group recorded for both King and RCA records.

"Fiddlin' Hank" Warren was born in Mount Airy, North Carolina, April 1, 1909. In the early '30s Hank formed his own band, Warren's Four Aces. He later joined the Blue Ridge Mountaineers, and then the Tennessee

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The Briarhoppers and Tennessee Ramblers, (standing) L-R: Don White, Bill Davis, Fred Kirby, Jack Gillette, Clude Casey, Arthur Smith, (kneeling) L-R: Roy Grant, Cecil Campbell, Arval Hogan, Hank Warren

Ramblers. In 1936, Hank went to Hollywood with the Ramblers where they made a movie with Gene Autry titled *Ride Ranger Ride*.

Hank joined the Briarhoppers in 1941, and when television came in Hank became chief photographer with WBT television. Today Hank's one of the select few to be awarded the Lifetime Press Card.

Today everywhere the Briarhoppers appear Hank will lay down the

fiddle and do a number on the hand saw. When he plays "Amazing Grace" the saw sounds like a steel guitar.

The Briarhoppers don't maintain the hectic schedule they once did but still stay busy entertaining audiences as far away as Ohio. They've recorded several albums and have a new gospel album to be released soon.



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