



Don Gibson. Photo by Dennis Carney.



Earl Scruggs. Photo by www.nashvilleportraits.com.



Don Gibson and Earl Scruggs

*Emily Epley, Executive Director,
Destination Cleveland County*

ROOTS MUSIC shares and preserves history. It is a common thread that weaves people together and allows them to connect when they might not otherwise have done so. Cleveland County, NC, a region once rich in textiles, farming and music, now sees textiles and farming drying up, but its musical heritage remains rich. Musicians continue to emerge and impact the region and the world. Two musical legends are being honored in this community, Don Gibson and Earl Scruggs.

Gibson, born April 3, 1928, in Shelby was one of the most influential forces in '50s and '60s country music as a performer and songwriter. In 1950 after growing up on a farm and holding other odd jobs, Gibson headed to Tennessee.

In 1955 Gibson earned his breakthrough with "Sweet Dreams," which he wrote and recorded. In 1957, in a single day, he wrote two other country music classics — "Oh Lonesome Me" and "I Can't Stop Loving You" — which he recorded with producer

Chet Atkins. They abandoned traditional steel guitar and fiddle for a new sound featuring guitars, piano, drummer, upright base, and background singers, which became one of the first examples of what would later be known as the Nashville Sound. "I Can't Stop Loving You" has been recorded over seven hundred times by singers across genres. Gibson wrote three of the most famous songs in country music history and helped define the sound and style of modern country music. "I consider myself a songwriter who sings rather than a singer who writes songs," Gibson said. On November 17, 2003, Gibson died, but his songs have become country classics and continue to provide enjoyment for millions of fans and launch the careers of many singers.

Scruggs, the preeminent ambassador of the banjo, was born to a musical family and raised on a farm in the Flint Hill community. He played banjo and guitar at the age of four. Scruggs's reputation as a musical innovator and his unique "Scruggs-Style" banjo-picking are two of his greatest contributions to music. Scruggs worked at Lily Mill and would sometimes pick with co-workers during breaks. He left to pursue his radio and music and eventually teamed up with Lester Flatt. Though he is known for bluegrass pieces like "The

Ballad of Jed Clampett" and "Foggy Mountain Breakdown," Scruggs and his family have been cautious not to peg him as a "bluegrass" musician. In 1969 Scruggs and sons Gary, Randy, and Steve formed the Earl Scruggs Revue to perform a mix of musical styles. They were applauded around the world as one of the most inventive, respected, and creative bands in history. Scruggs recorded bluegrass as well as pop, rock, and country with artists Johnny Cash, Sting, Don Henley, Grateful Dead, Marvin Gaye, and Elton John. Scruggs, a humble man who has influenced generations of musical artists, said he would "pick for free if he couldn't make a living out of it."

Shelby and Cleveland county citizens will continue to celebrate Gibson and Scruggs through the Don Gibson Theatre (where the MoMS exhibition will be hosted) and the Earl Scruggs Center, both now under construction.



WVSP 90.9 FM, 1973–85

*Sherman Johnson, Radio Host/
Programmer, WARR 1520AM*

As WAFR, the nation's first black public radio station, was signing off the air for its final broadcast,



Walter Norfleet on air at WVSP. WVSP staff photo.

an independent nonprofit organization called Sound and Print United, Inc., applied to the Federal Communications Commission for a broadcast license in 1973.

Valeria Lynch Lee, a true visionary and a native of neighboring Halifax County, along with husband Jim Lee, then an agricultural specialist in Warren County, laid the ground work. With the aid of a handful of local volunteers who made up their board of directors, Sound and Print United was granted a broadcast license and became a public radio station. WVSP 90.9 FM signed on the air in 1976.

The “VSP” stood for “voices serving people.” At that time, public radio stations usually broadcast from and catered to an urban audience, but the vision of Sound and Print United, Inc., was to bring public radio to rural Warren County. A water tower to carry the signal for broadcast was erected on the Lynch family farm. The station had a broadcast range that covered southside Virginia and northeastern North Carolina.

Naysayers claimed the station would not succeed. They believed that gospel and country music would have to be the main focus of WVSP’s format if it expected to survive.

WVSP proved their critics wrong by succeeding in making jazz, blues, and Latino music a part of the norm for its rural listeners. For the first time Warren County and the larger region was able not only to hear the recordings of national artists, but also to attend concerts or witness in-studio interviews by those national artists. And, in fact, most of those artists expressed how their musical roots began in rural areas similar to that of Warren County.

The vision of Sound and Print United was to let the voice of the community be heard through the use of sound, print, and imagery. The activities of the station were chronicled in a periodical called “Dialog” that was distributed throughout the area as another means of outreach to the community. This vision was realized for the twelve years WVSP broadcast from the 90.9 position on the FM dial in Warren County.

Before leaving the airwaves, the efforts of WVSP were documented and displayed at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. This story will be presented as part of the regional roots music heritage exhibited when *New Harmonies* comes to the Warren County Memorial Library in Warrenton, NC.

NEW HARMONIES

Celebrating American Roots Music

2010 Exhibition Tour Schedule

Mount Airy

March 13 – April 24

Mount Airy Museum of Regional History

Warrenton

May 1 – June 12

Warren County Memorial Library

Elizabeth City

June 19 – August 1

Museum of the Albermarle

Goldsboro

August 7 – September 18

Arts Council of Wayne County

Mars Hill

September 25 – November 6

Rural Life Museum at the Liston B.
Ramsey Center for Regional Studies,
Mars Hill College

Shelby

November 13 – December 29

Don Gibson Theatre