

**Foddrell Brothers and Lynn Foddrell**  
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Patrick County, Virginia, based Marvin and Turner Foddrell were born into a musical family near Stuart in the Virginia Piedmont and for the major parts of their lives played regularly only at community gatherings, never professionally. Perhaps no other artists from the region better encapsulated the staggeringly wide-ranging eclecticism that scholars have repeatedly pointed out as characteristic of Appalachian and Piedmont African American musicians.

“Discovered” in the 1970s, the Foddrells became a regular fixture at the annual Blue Ridge Folklife Festival at nearby Ferrum College and were also featured at many other festivals including some in Europe. Developing a cult following among aficionados of fingerstyle guitar and American traditional rural music, the Foddrell Brothers were recorded on two albums by a Dutch label (not much information is available for these likely out-of-print albums) and also appeared alongside more famous traditional musicians on a number of recorded anthologies. Yet, they were never able to crossover to a wider following in the US. Their music, however, deserves wider attention, both for its artistic accomplishment and for what it reveals about African American life in the Piedmont region.

Marvin (1923-198\_) and Turner (1927-1995) were sons of a regionally renowned multi-instrumentalist, Posey Foddrell, who was proficient on fiddle, mandolin, piano, banjo, and guitar and played both with black and integrated groups (Lornell: 11). The family had lived in the Stuart area for several generations and they rarely ventured any significant distance from their home, where Turner ran a grocery store on Highway 8, and where the brothers were “discovered” by a local deejay during one of their impromptu jams (Wald: 28).

When recorded by the Ferrum College for their *Virginia Traditions* anthology, the brothers, performing individually, stuck to an appositely traditional repertoire that they had learned from their father – for instance the songs “Reno Factory” (related to such regional pre-blues/non-blues secular songs as “Riley and Spencer” and “West Virginia”) and “Railroad Bill” (Lornell).

The three occasions on which the Foddrells performed at Berea College, although again in a traditionalist setting, revealed the enormous breadth of their repertoire, all of which they had adapted to their singing and playing styles that although strongly based in the regional tradition of alternate-thumb fingerpicking were assimilative of more contemporary and related styles from non-regional sources.

Among the songs played over the three years at Berea’s Celebration of Traditional Music are many that demonstrate the Foddrells’ integrative skills. These include Piedmont fingerpicking versions of such Tin Pan Alley standards as Haven Gillespie’s “Drifting and Dreaming” and Neil Moret and Richard Whiting’s “She’s Funny that Way”; songs from various country music subgenres including the Carter Family’s “Wildwood Flower,” Jimmie Rodgers’ “[He's In the Jailhouse Now](#),” Fred Rose’s “Low and Lonely,” Ernest Tubbs’s “Walking the Floor Over You,” and Merle Haggard’s “Today I Started Loving You Again,”; Chicago blues including Big Bill Broonzy’s “[Key to the Highway](#)” and “Rising Sun, Shine On”; boogie-woogie such as Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup’s “[Boogie in the Mornin](#)” and Albert Ammons’s “Has Anybody Seen Corrine?”;

and even an interpretation of Jumpin' Gene Simmons' 1964 rockabilly/"swamp rock" hit "[Haunted House](#)."

The assimilative musical traditions of the regions bordering Appalachia are summated on the Foddrells' interpretation of the northwestern Kentucky Travis thumb-picking tradition which was based around the playing of African American guitarist, Arnold Shultz. On their version, the Virginians also bring in a washboard or a similar percussion instrument to invoke the down home sounds of African American string and jug band music which was played in the early decades of the twentieth century in a number of regions in Appalachia, especially close to its boundaries.

Turner's son Lynn joined the brothers on the 1982 and 1983 performances at the Celebration of Traditional Music. After Marvin's death, Turner had continued to perform with Lynn. With Turner succumbing to lung cancer on Jan 31, 1995, the baton was passed onto Lynn who as of 2006, performs with his cousin Doug Turner (etsu.edu). Just as the Foddrells have worn their regional and popular influences on their sleeves, while marshalling them all to the force of their own distinctive style, their influence has in turn been acknowledged by contemporary musicians including the New Roanoke Jug Band, Lightnin' Wells, and Little Toby Walker.

### **Berea College Special Collection and Archives holdings:**

#### *Celebration of Traditional Music recordings:*

##### Audio:

- CTM 1978: The Foddrell Brothers: 16 songs contained of 4 Open Reels (AC-OR-005-089, 099, 100, 114); all have reference copies on audio cassette.
- CTM 1982: The Foddrell Brothers & Lynn Foddrell: 19 songs contained of 6 Open Reels (AC-OR-005-217, 232, 233, 239); all have reference copies on audio cassette.
- CTM 1983: The Foddrell Brothers & Lynn Foddrell: 22 songs contained of 6 Open Reels (AC-OR-005-246, 247, 254, 255, 270, 271); all have reference copies on audio cassette.

##### Video:

- CTM 1978: 9 Songs on VHS: AC-VT-014-004 (CTM 1976, 1978, 1979 Sampler) (overlaps with the audio recordings on parts of 01 AC OR-005-099 and 100)

### **Commercial Discography:**

The Foddrell Brothers are surprisingly underrepresented on commercial recordings given that they have followers among aficionados across the U.S. and parts of Europe. This makes the recordings available at Berea's Special Collections and Archives that much more valuable.

The Foddrell Brothers did have at least two albums released on a European label, although none of their albums is either in print or mentioned on any Internet resource. What is available commercially are six songs recorded individually by Marvin and Turner Foddrell and included on two LPs on Ferrum College's *Virginia Traditions* anthology—*Non-Blues Secular Black Music* (BRI-001) and *Western Piedmont Blues* (BRI-003).

Another song, "Blues Baby," recorded by Turner accompanied by Lynn appears on the Rounder Records Americana compilation *American Fogies Vol. 1* (Rounder CD 379, 1996). They did record some audio cassettes which they sold at their grocery store in Stuart and some of their recordings were reportedly available through the Blue Ridge Institute at Ferrum College.

**References:**

Lornell, Christopher "Kip". Liner notes to *Virginia Traditions: Non-Blues Secular Black Music* (BRI 001). Ferrum, Virginia: Ferrum College.

Wald, Elijah. 1995. "Obituary: Turner Foddrell (1927-1995)" *Sing Out* 40/2. 27-28.

Walker, Toby. "Turner Foddrell" [www.littletobywalker.com/Pages/turnerfoddrell.html](http://www.littletobywalker.com/Pages/turnerfoddrell.html) Accessed on July 19, 2006.

"News and Events: 'Old Folks and New Licks: The Foddrell Pendleton and Shelor Families' Music'." [www.etsu.edu/calendars/calendars\\_events.asp](http://www.etsu.edu/calendars/calendars_events.asp) Accessed on July 19, 2006.

**Selective Annotated Bibliography:**

Pendleton, Robin. 2003. Master's Report "Old Souls and New Licks: The Foddrell, Pendleton, and Shelor Families' Music." MALS Program, East Tennessee State University. In perhaps the only in-depth scholarly work on the Foddrells, Pendleton explores the social interactions and shared repertoires of the black Foddrell and white Shelor and Pendleton families from Patrick County, Virginia.

**Additional Bibliography:**

"Record Review: 'The Original Blues Brothers'." *Cadence* 14/July 1988. 72-73.