

Nathaniel H. (Nat) Reese
By Ajay Kalra
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Nat Reese has been one of the most popular among the African American performers at Berea's Celebration of Traditional Music, performing here in 1990, 1991, and 1998 and returning in fall 2006. Extensive video documentation of his concerts from the festival document how every time he has performed he has managed to hold the attention of sizeable audiences with his wide-ranging music which he intersperses with tales of growing up and eking out a living in the coalfields region of southern West Virginia. The fact that he recounts anecdotes from lives of blacks in the mountains without bitterness and an almost transcendental and unflinching sense of humor definitely account for his popularity as much as his music, which, despite the moniker "bluesman" usually assigned Reese, betrays a wide array of influences.

Reese was born in Salem, VA, in 1924. His entrepreneur father Thomas Reese Sr., hearing of plentiful employment opportunities in coal and railroading industries, moved with his family to West Virginia, first to Itman in 1928 and later to Princeton in 1936. The senior Reese spent 58 years as a Virginian railroad employee and taught Nat the rudiments of the guitar around 1936.

It was Mitchell Gordon, a three year older black multi-instrumentalist trained in reading music who encouraged Reese to learn to play music from a wide variety of genres, especially Tin Pan Alley and swing jazz music which required him to read music and which was the main style of music preferred by the bourgeois whites (the "sididdy," as Reese calls that group) at whose parties Reese often played with his all black groups (Armstrong; Kline).

The West Virginian's abiding love of that music shows through in all aspects of his music—in his continuing repertoire, for example Reese's staples such as Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill's "[September Song](#)" and Billy Higgins (not the Ornette Coleman drummer) and W. Benton Overstreet's "[There'll Be Some Changes Made](#)," in his self compositions such as "[\(It Was\) Just a Dream](#)" and "[Since I Fell for You](#)" which feature complex chord structures inspired by such sheet music standards, and in the way he usually spices up blues with passing chords, rarely playing a three-chord blues.

Starting with the tiple at nine years of age, Reese learned to play a number of instruments including piano, organ, and the harp, although not necessarily in standardized styles. Guitar, however, has remained his primary instrument. Despite jobs as a bartender and a cook, and eight years working in the coal mines, the last of which left him with black lung, the guitar for Reese has been a significant source of not so significant income.

During breaks between songs at his CTM performances, Reese takes time to reminisce about the "good old days (when times were bad)" for black musicians trying to make a living playing every possible venue and music—white or black—to keep their heads above water. What emerges is one specific historical portrait of Appalachian experiences that often remain invisible.

Berea College Special Collection and Archives holdings:

Celebration of Traditional Music recordings:

Audio:

- CTM 1990: 19 song performances contained of 6 Open Reels (AC-OR-005-452, 453, 463, 464 468, and 473); all have reference copies on audio cassette.
- CTM 1991: 26 song performances contained of 7 Open Reels (AC-OR-005-476, 477, 481, 493, 494, 498, and 499); all have reference copies on audio cassette.
- CTM 1998: 13 song performances contained of 7 Open Reels (AC-OR-005-666, 670, 671, 678, and 679); all have reference copies on audio cassette.

Video:

- 1 VHS recording from 1990 (AC-VT-079-006) and 5 from 1991 (AC-VT-109-001 004, 005, 013, 015, and 112-001).

Commercial Recordings:

- *Nat Reese: Blues from Mercer County, West Virginia* (Augusta Heritage Records 005, 1988).
- *Nat Reese: Save a Seat for Me* (Blue Ridge Institute: The Crooked Road Series) (Available from <http://www.thecrookedroad.org/Merchandise.htm>)

References:

Armstrong, Howard. 1988. "Coal Field Blues." Liner Notes to *Nat Reese: Blues from Mercer County, West Virginia*. (Augusta Heritage Records 005). Elkins, West Virginia: Augusta Heritage Records.

Kline, Michael. 1987. "Something to Give: Nat Reese's Early Life and Music." *Goldenseal*. 13/4. 9-18.