

The Carter Family Fold

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by Meghan Holmes

For nearly 50 years, musicians have performed in rural southwestern Virginia at the Carter Family Fold to honor the memory and musical traditions of the Carter Family. What began as a series of small concerts for primarily local people in A.P. Carter's general store has become a weekly event bringing hundreds of people from around the world to hear old-time, country, and bluegrass music on Saturday nights. In keeping with the traditions that her mother Janette Carter established when she founded the Fold, current master of ceremonies Rita Forrester encourages a family-friendly atmosphere with mountain music and dancing.



"Years ago, when my mother's father's health was failing, he said, 'I want my music to live on beyond me, and I think you

might be the child that can do that for me. She said, 'Well, I don't know how easy that will be; I've got three kids.' And he said, 'I had three, and I did it, so you can, too.' Well, she waited until my younger brother graduated high school, and then in '74, she started doing shows in a little store my grandad built in the 40s or 50s," said Rita Forrester.

The Carter Fold grew through word of mouth for the first two years, with concert attendees eventually spilling out of the general store and onto the surrounding land. Janette enlisted her brother's help, and in 1976 they built a building specifically for shows. In 1978, Janette met Howard Klein, music critic, pianist, and Director of Arts of the Rockefeller Foundation. He became one of their biggest supporters and assisted the family in establishing the Carter Family Memorial Music Center, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving old-time, traditional country and mountain music. The family applied for grants, and they turned A.P.'s general store into the museum.



Jimmie Rodgers and The Carters

“He helped mom get started in the new building,” Rita said. “I think he started somewhere between 40 and 60 arts organizations during his life. Even when he was in an assisted living facility with cancer about to pass away, he was still texting me and advising me on what we needed to do.”

Performances at the Fold are almost exclusively acoustic, keeping with the traditions the Carter family helped make famous with their RCA Victor recording sessions in the 1920s and 30s. “We want it to be like the music as my grandparents played it – the mountain music the way they did it. The one exception to that was John [Johnny] Cash. Mother would say, ‘I can’t really help it. He was plugged in the day we met him.’ So, she would allow him to plug in.”

Performances from Cash helped provide much-needed funds to the non-profit over the years, and Rita ranks his last performance at the Fold, shortly after his wife June’s death, as one of the most memorable she’s seen there. “It was rough on us emotionally because he talked about her, but it was also rough work because we had more than 1700 people on the grounds before we started turning people away. The building can hold around 800.”

<https://youtu.be/7DisI6oG1Wk>

People enjoy Appalachian clogging and buck dancing on the floor space reserved for dancing. Like Janette before her, Rita wants concerts to bring together families, “from the grandparents to the babies,” for dancing, music, and food. “There are few places today where you see families all together, and that’s what my grandma and grandpa always wanted,” she said.

Before the music, Forrester prepares the food.

“We always have hot dogs because my mother loved hot dogs

from a local drug store, Bunting's. So, I do homemade chili with the hot dogs, and we have burgers and egg salad, and we used to do cakes and popcorn before COVID, and hopefully, we will bring that back," she said.

Like many musicians and music venues, the Fold has taken a financial hit since the spread of COVID-19. In addition to seeing fewer visitors in general, Rita has decided to close from late November through March to avoid any potential surge in the virus over the winter. "We have been doing fair since guidelines changed, and we reopened, and we will close out the season with Carson Peters. He's played here since he was a child, and we have been watching his career grow." Peters is currently competing on The Voice, with Blake Shelton as his coach, and will perform at the Fold on November 20 with his group Iron Mountain.

Other November performances include Hogslop String Band (the 6th) and The Hillbilly Gypsies (the 13th), both old-time bands. Most performing at the Fold have done so for years. Two groups, the McLain Family Band and the Whitetop Mountain Band, played in A.P.'s store in the mid-70s.

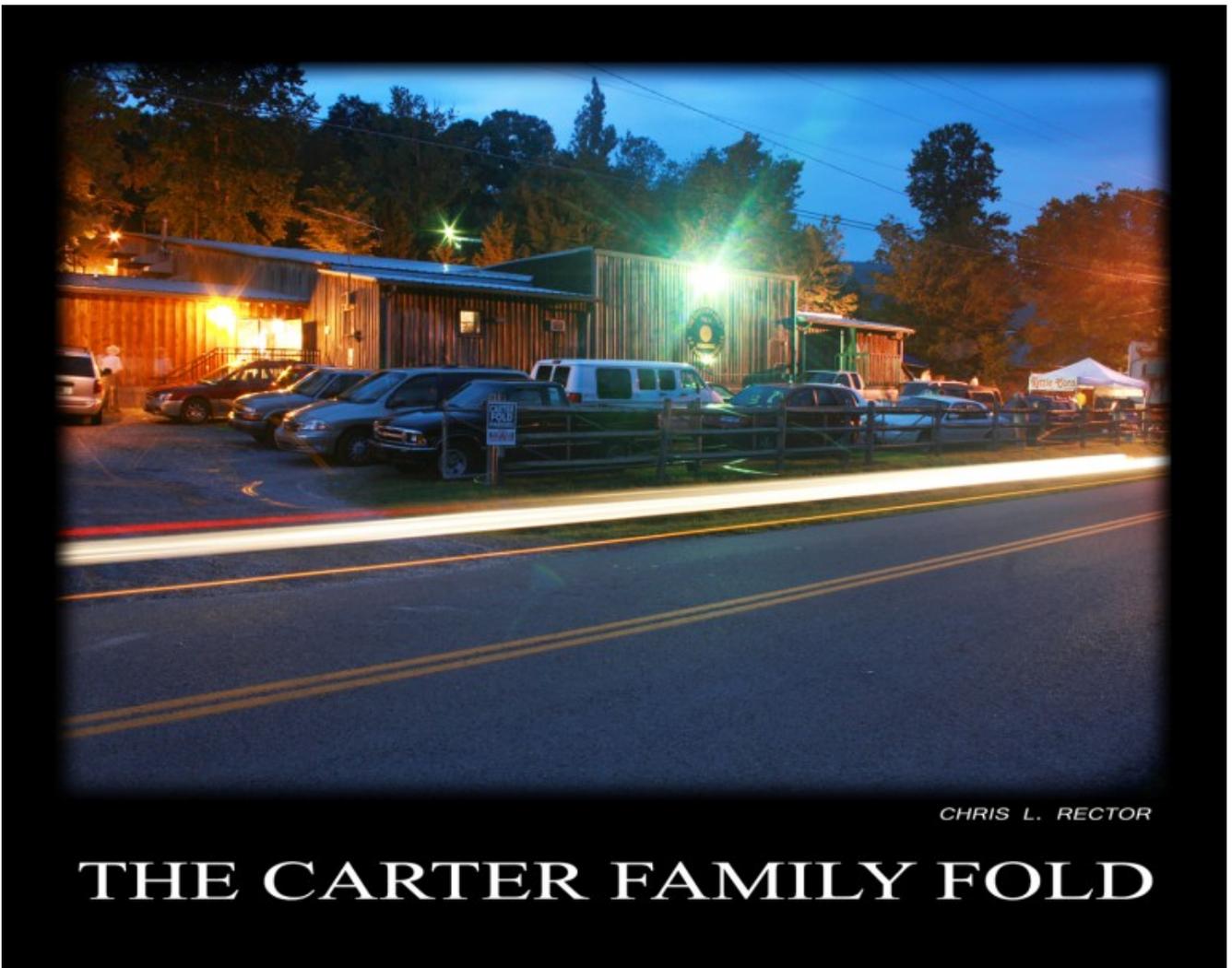


The A. P. Carter cabin: photo courtesy of Chris Rector



Carter Family Museum: photo courtesy of David Burke

"I get real attached to everyone because we have a lot of the same ones come, and the dancers like them. Although, you never know who will show up at the Fold. We have had Marty Stuart, Tom T. Hall, John Paul Jones. I always ask them to come on stage and play a song," she said.



After a winter break, concerts at the Fold will resume on March 5, 2022. Tickets are \$10 for adults and \$2 for children, and no advance tickets are sold.