

Red Fox/Second Hangin'

The New Storytellers

The mountains of Appalachia are rich with the legends and deeds of folk heroes who have gained a unique place in the historical development of the region. No area has a more interesting background than the Cumberland Mountain area between Wise County, Virginia, and Letcher County, Kentucky. One of the last frontiers of this country, in a land rich with natural resources, it was the scene of a struggle that continues today between the natural and simple state of man as represented by the mountain man and the industrial development of this country with all of its institutions and complications.

The struggle between men and the historical view more often than not depends upon whoever wins. The official interpretation of history is directly related to the author's political attitudes, his opportunities and access to the media. What has been left to everyone else, who does not have access to the media, may not be so accessible as a history book or a newspaper account, but the oral accounting of history certainly is more exciting. However, as time has passed, the oral tradition of keeping history alive has been nearly lost to the mechanical process. Storytellers, who once wove truth with fiction, embellished it with a personal touch and delivered it directly to an audience of one or a dozen, have become scarce in an age of electronic entertainment and journalism.

The need for creating folk heroes, men and women with uncanny mental and physical abilities, is found in all societies, primitive and modern, but unless they are created and maintained on a personal level, their image fails to sustain itself. The movies and media of today create and destroy dozens of heroes yearly, supplying new ones to meet the demands of an audience bound by middle class morals, institutions and a society that demands dramatic adaptations for survival, but never quite so dramatic as the heroes' lives as they are recreated by the media.

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There have been attempts to personalize, dramatize and recreate the tradition of orally transmitted history, legends and tales, but most of the attempts have been undertaken by people whose approach is based on intellectual, academic stimuli for the purpose of recording the spoken account before it completely disappears or simply as another exercise in academic diversity. Instead of preserving the tradition, this process often destroys the very quality which it is trying to save.

For the past few years a group of young Appalachians working through the Appalshop, an organization gathering the traditions and culture of Appalachia on film as well as making sensitive statements about Appalachia's culture of today, have been attempting to revitalize the oral tradition with their recreation of "Jack Tales."

The Roadside Theatre is an unusual effort to carry on the art of storytelling. In the past they have drawn their material from the great wealth of stories still carried in the minds of many old people who live in the areas

of southwest Virginia and eastern Kentucky. Living in Whitesburg, Kentucky, they have collected and memorized dozens of tales that were once familiar to most of the residents of that area. It is their latest effort that culminates their search for the roots and the role of the storyteller, a search that has produced a new storyteller, not a copy of the past, regardless of the quality of authentic reproduction, but a new storyteller rooted in the traditions of the past, raised in the present, with a unique ability to combine both elements to produce original art.

Hangin' Red Fox, written and performed by Don Baker and the Roadside Theatre is a blend of written and oral history, fact and fiction, with recollections of both, films and photographs and most importantly, eyeball to eyeball contact with four talented storytellers as they relate the story of "Doc" Taylor, the "Red Fox," an honest-to-God folk hero whose life and time bursts into this modern age with a vitality unimagined possible, through the art of the new storytellers.

—Ron Short

