

Storytelling' at its best by Roadside

By Richard Stayton
Herald theater critic

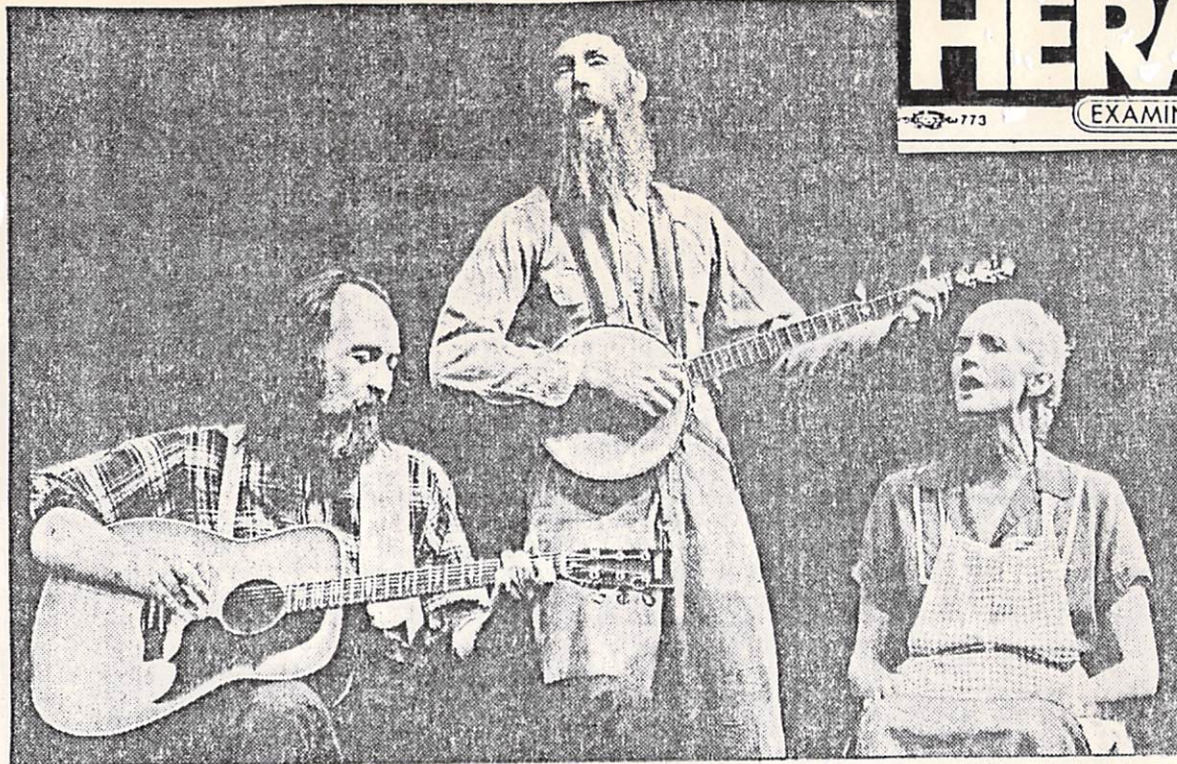
Just when you were about Festival'd out from all them fancy-pants artists, along comes a trio of itinerant hillbillies called the Roadside Theater. These folks ain't foreign or high falutin'. You say "gourmet" and they say rabbit stew and squirrel gravy. But by any big-city tastes, "South of the Mountain" is four-star storytelling.

The Roadside Theater company is based in the Appalachian Mountains of eastern Kentucky and southwestern Virginia. This ensemble champions the cultural heritage of its rural neighbors. Songs and tales about farmers and coal miners, about Ma and Pa meetin' up, about families giving up and leaving the mountain are presented in a style as stark as the hills themselves.

"It's not what you got," they preach, "it's what you're satisfied with."

They craft art out of artlessness. Their props would fit into a car's trunk, with plenty of room left over for a jug of corn whiskey. All they need on the Los Angeles Theater Center stage are two wooden chairs, a stool, a table, plus a few musical instruments — a fiddle, banjo, guitar and harmonica.

For the Festival, Roadside performs "South of the Mountain" by Ron Short. Along with Nancy Jeffrey and Tom Bledsoe, Short describes the history of his kin, how two generations were af-



Anne Knudsen/Herald photographer

All the Roadside Theater, with Ron Short, left, Tom Bledsoe and Nancy Jeffrey, needs is chairs, a stool, a table and a few musical instruments to perform "South of the Mountain," a chronicle of two generations.

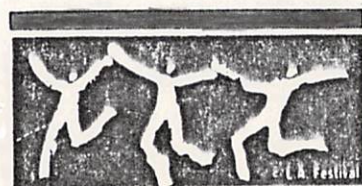
ected by industrialization.

To open "South of the Mountain," all three drape their arms about one another. Facing us, they sing: "You can lose your very soul livin' in cities of gold." It's a message from the heartland to Hollywood, delivered in haunting gospel harmony.

They speak in hillbilly accents that gradually acquire a poetic lyricism. This clan don't go drinking, they went "dränkin'." Distance is "fur off," a man is a "feller," children are "young'uns."

At the close of the first act, Short announces, "We hear that people in California value their leisure time, their free time. You got about 10 minutes."

Such unpretentious remarks camouflage a rigorous craftsman-



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ship. The second act acquires the stark beauty of Walker Evans' photographs in James Agee's Depression-era book, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men." The life of a coal-mining family is pitilessly described, how the strip-mining conglomerates trapped the miners by keeping them in debt to the

company store. Songs sound as if composed by rural Bruce Springsteens: "My heart is running on empty."

The lights are subtly lowered during the second-act stories. Small gestures speak volumes: Short twisting his empty pocket while describing the coal miner's poverty; Bledsoe, portraying the clan's sole remaining farmer, seated silent and isolated, consumed by the gathering darkness.

The Roadside Theater may be geographically from a remote region of America, but spiritually this company exposes what Short calls the "territory of the human heart." It's the perfect company for closing the curtains on the Festival: simple, communal, heart-to-heart and bringing us all back home to our own cultural roots.