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The Pickin’ Parlor: Bringin’ the Front Porch Inside

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THE PICKIN’ PARLOR ~ BRINGIN’ THE FRONT PORCH INSIDE
Until the mid-nineteenth century, the music of the rural south was played exclusively for
the local crowd – family, friends, and neighbors. Other than an occasional traveler, the
audience was limited to those in the immediate area. Tunes were passed down from
generation to generation; lyrics were committed to memory, yet reshaped by each
respective performer. By the 1850’s, the railroad slowly began to change the relative
isolation of communities throughout the South. Itinerate musicians could now travel
much farther, much faster. However, not until the early 1930’s did change become
momentous. Radio stations like WSB in Atlanta and WIS in Columbia began airing
performances by local musicians. Broadcast live, this widely varied, regional music
could now be heard by listeners across the country. The radio became the focal point of
many a family room and musicians now had the ability to influence thousands of people
without traveling down a rutted horse path or a long train ride. While unprecedented, this
change did not replace the most popular place to socialize and play – the front porch.

The “front porch” should be taken metaphorically. While folks certainly played there,
the front porch represents the shade tree, the open shed, the parlor, the church, or the
street corner. The front porch was a place for communal interaction – storytelling, news-
gathering, singing, dancing, and picking. Folks of all skill levels learned to pick, fiddle,
and strum. New tunes were introduced, learned from the radio program aired the day
before or from the cousin visiting from the Blue Ridge. New arrangements were played –
some were rejected, dying a quick death on the spot, while others remain in the fiddler’s
repertoire today.

Folks still meet on front porches throughout the South – traditional music is as fluid and
vibrant today as it was one hundred years ago. From Berkeley County on the coast to
Pickens County in the upstate, a good front porch pickin’ session can always be found.
Bill’s Pickin’ Parlor and Music Shop in West Columbia is no exception. For over twenty
years, on any given Friday evening, over one hundred women and men, young and old,
carpenters and teachers, machinists and dentists, travel from all across the region to jam
with other musicians or simply listen to the music. Much more than simply a place to
strum a guitar or pick a banjo, gathering spots like Bill’s are vibrant continuation of the
front porch tradition – tall tales are spun, business relationships are developed (or
broken), the problems and joys of life are discussed, and most of all, the dynamic nature
of traditional music is celebrated and strengthened.

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