



Old Time Country and Gospel Musician

Mandolin master and singer Bob Lambert was born in 1923 in Mississippi, but is a long-time resident of Washington Parish, Louisiana. Mr. Lambert still performs an early style of country music and gospel that characterized the years before World War II, a transitional style between the old-time string bands and bluegrass music.

As a boy, Mr. Lambert learned his music in church, at social gatherings, and from radio performers. He grew up in the Pentecostal church, where his father was a music director, and where he recalls attending brush arbor church meetings with old-time gospel singing as a boy. He began playing the tambourine for church services at the age of seven and has played the mandolin for more than fifty years. He also plays the guitar.

Mr. Lambert recalls "growing up in the poorest family in the poorest state. Times were hard, you didn't know anything but farming." At night, he and his brother listened to the radio, especially the popular brother duet acts of the time: like the Louvin Brothers, the Callahans, Charlie and Bill Monroe, and the "Blue Sky Boys." These groups usually featured two singers performing sentimental duets in close harmony, accompanied by guitar and mandolin. "Ira Louvin was perhaps my biggest musical influence," Mr. Lambert says.

With his older brother, guitarist and singer Willard Lambert, Bob performed on the radio near their home in the late 1930s and 1940s. In 1940, the two left their home in Mississippi, hitchhiked to New Orleans, and won five dollars in a talent show at Pontchartrain Beach. In the late 1940s and early 1950s he played in several duets with guitar and mandolin on radio and then television.

Making a living as a country musician in the New Orleans area was difficult. Mr. Lambert worked on the docks of the Mississippi River to support himself playing occasional gigs before he gave up performing and became a construction engineer with Boh Brothers Construction Company. For years his mandolin remained untouched in his attic and he played only occasionally among friends using other musician's instructions. Finally, he retrieved his mandolin from the attic, repaired it, and taught his wife, June, to play upright bass. After his retirement, the Lambert family began traveling the festival circuit. When Willard Lambert decided to start singing again, the three began performing together on occasional Sundays at the Baptist Church in Isabel, Louisiana.

In the early 1990s, Bob Lambert began playing with the "Evening Star String Band."

He plays the mandolin in a pre-bluegrass style that has almost disappeared. Of his mandolin playing he says, "Rather than fast-paced blues phrases and fiddler tunes, I play with a lot of tremolo double-stops which follow the melody. This fits in well in old-time gospel and sentimental songs, like the Louvin Brothers and others performed." His music evokes memories of his own upbringing and of the Anglo-American rural southern culture in which he grew up. He has written some songs throughout the years including one titled "City of God."

Bob Lambert can be heard regularly at the Piney Woods Opry in Abita Springs. With his wife June and the "Evening Star String Band," he has performed at the Louisiana Folklife Festival, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, and the Abita Springs Water Festival. In 1994 he received a Louisiana Folklife Apprenticeship grant from the Louisiana Division of the Arts to teach old-time country mandolin playing to Joe Manuel. He received an Artist Fellowship Award in 1995-1996 in recognition of his contributions to traditional Louisiana music. His playing has been documented on "The Country Three," an album produced in 1986 by Pat Flory with support from the Louisiana Division of the Arts.

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