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# The Dallas Banjo Band

*Bobby's dream...*

*Smokey's legacy...*

*Harold's labor of love...*

by John Heiman

Bobby Albright probably won't be remembered for a lot of things. He wasn't one of those "larger than life" characters who you'd find in *Who's Who* and he never served in public office. But, he had a lot of guts and never met a stranger. In the midst of a life outside of the spotlight, however, Bobby Albright did something that no one else had ever done before or since...he founded the *Dallas Banjo Band*.

When Bobby moved to Dallas from Toledo, Ohio, he missed the band he had played in for fifteen years. In fact, he missed it enough to track down Smokey Montgomery (who was already pretty famous, and Bobby, well, wasn't). Through his friend and sometimes teacher, Scott Whitfield, Bobby made contact with Smokey while he was playing with the locally vogue *Levee Singers*. "I want to start a banjo band," Bobby told Smokey, "and I want you to direct it."

Smokey was still playing with the *Light Crust Doughboys* and was in high demand for his playing, with and without them. Citing his busy schedule, he told Bobby he would give him six weeks of Saturdays, but after that he was on his own. Rita, Bobby's wife, told him "I don't think there are many banjo players around here." While she might have been right, there were enough to form the beginnings of a band...especially since Smokey was on the list.

The first rehearsal of the *Dallas Banjo Band* was at the *Sumet-Bernet Recording Studios* owned by Ed Bernet and Smokey Montgomery. Attendees that day were Bobby Albright, John Art, Marla Sporrer, Jack Nelson, Scott Whitfield, Ed Bernet, Jim Baker, and Jerry Ward and, of course, Smokey Montgomery. Most of them stayed with the band until they moved, passed away or were forced to retire for health reasons. From that charter group, John Art and Marla Sporrer are still playing with the band.



The first few rehearsals were mostly “jams” (for non-musicians, that means someone calls out a song to that most of the group knows and everyone just plays along). Occasionally, someone would take a solo for a verse or chorus. The same song might go on for five minutes or more until they had wrung every possible note out of it. Eventually, someone would nod their head, meaning this is where they would stop. Jamming is either the most fun a musician can have - or the least. For the untrained listener, it seemed all the same...“How many ways can you play the same thirty-second song?” It quickly became obvious that if they were going to be a real band they would need some real music.



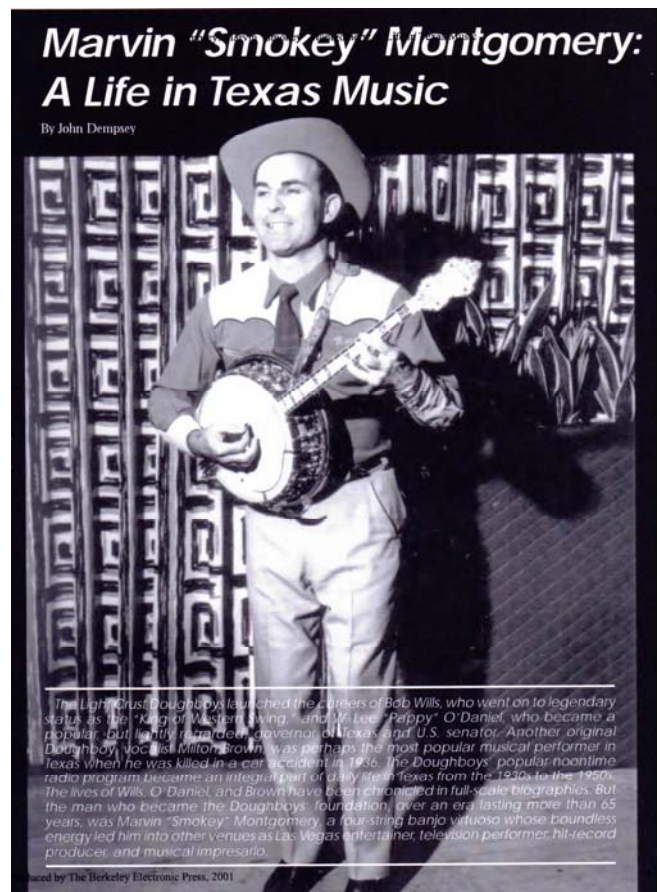
John Art (front, second from right) and the band warming up an outdoor Christmas festival.

John Art, one of the original members of the band moved to Dallas from Buffalo, New York, where he played with the *Buffalo Banjo Band*. “I wasn’t very good,” he recalls, “but I really enjoyed playing the banjo.” As part of his relocation, John brought with him some samples of the musical arrangements used by his former band. The arrangements were divided into sections: “A” for the melody, “B” for a harmony part, “C” for a counter melody, “R” for the rhythm, and a tuba or bass part. Smokey saw these and, in what would be recognized as true “Smokey fashion,” showed up the following week with a half dozen similar arrangements. Smokey’s arrangements turned out to be the difference between the *Dallas Banjo Band* and

other bands. There was just something about them that “clicked” musically...and there were so many of them! Even though most of his arrangements were done by hand with a permanent felt tip pen, the music and different parts flawlessly flowed out of Smokey’s hand like a young Mozart.

Bobby Albright continued to be a driving force for his beloved *Dallas Banjo Band* but it was Smokey who was the center stage draw for the group. His popularity with the *Light Crust Doughboys* was reaching a new generation - while his ability to entertain was as strong as ever. People were drawn to the chance to play with a star...a star who had made recordings with the *Doughboys*, been on television and radio, and appeared in cowboy movies with the likes of Gene Autry, and was now in Dallas... playing with *them*!

Although the banjo had come to be known as “America’s Only Native Instrument” during the Roaring 20s, it had declined in popularity because of the guitar. Having been popular with the dance bands of the 1920s and 30s because of its ability to cut “through” the other instruments, when musical styles changed and the technology to amplify the guitar was born, the banjo faded into the background. Regardless of the long passed trend which pushed the banjo out of the mainstream, the *Dallas Banjo Band* continued to practice for three hours every Saturday morning, getting better and growing in numbers.





One of the band's first breakout performances came at the Mid-America Banjo Enthusiast's (MABE) convention in St. Louis in 1990. The home base of the event was Eureka Springs, Arkansas but every other year they went to another city to spread the joy of the banjo and the music a group of that nature could produce. That year, the band played Smokey's new arrangement of the *William Tell Overture* to a packed house. When Smokey turned to see the applause generated by the performance, he realized he had found his new calling. As Rita Albright later commented, "It bought Smokey a new lease on life."

That life began as Marvin Wetter in 1913 in Rinard, Iowa. At the age of thirteen, Marvin began supporting himself by playing the banjo. He auditioned through a talent show and was hired to play in a Texas traveling "tent show" after high school (doing a brief stint at Iowa State, studying industrial arts in the process). The owners of the tent show decided the name "Wetter" wasn't a marquee grabber and encouraged him to find a more appealing last name. Being a fan of the actor Robert Montgomery, he became Marvin Montgomery.

After a year on the road, sometime over the tent show's Christmas break in Victoria, Texas, he got homesick for Iowa. His money only took him as far north as Dallas. Alone, in the early morning hours in a strange city, he headed toward the *Aldophus Hotel* where he had heard about a morning radio show with live music. He did a quick audition and was hired on the spot - even given a job for a party that night where he met a player from a band named *The Wanderers*. They advanced him enough money to get his instruments out of storage at the bus station.

Marvin stayed with that band for about a year until he began to play the part of "Junior" with Pappy O'Daniel's *Light Crust Doughboys*, representing The Burrus Mill Flour and Elevator Company. It had formerly been known as *Bob Wills and the Light Crust Doughboys* until Wills left to form his own band, *The Texas Playboys*, a couple of years earlier. It was storied that Pappy gave each of his performers stage names, so that when he fired one and brought in another, he didn't have to remember the new names. Then in his early twenties, Montgomery became part the longest-lived Western Swing Band of all time. The *Light Crust Doughboys* continue to perform today, although the players have changed over the years.



As the American effort for World War II geared up in 1942, the band stopped recording and went off the until the war's end. During that time, Montgomery moved to Fort Worth where – putting his industrial arts education to work in the only non-musical job he ever had – he made large caliber shells for the United States Navy. As the manager of the night shift he determined that each machine that produced different sized shells in the plant had its own musical tone and - when all the machines were working properly - they made a chord. He could always tell when one of the machines was down by what note was missing from the chord.

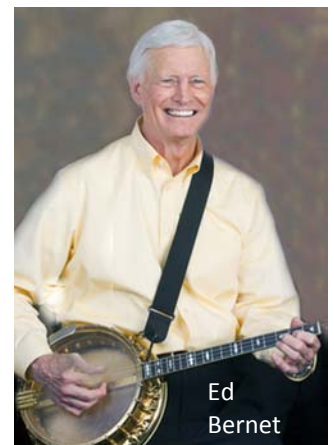
When the war was over in 1945, the Doughboys resumed their radio show and, in 1948, took to the new medium of television as the *Flying X Ranchboys*, becoming Texas' first television band. Due to the sluggish frame rates of early TV cameras, it was hard to capture Marvin "Junior" Montgomery's hands moving up and down the neck of his banjo. "They look like smoke," one broadcaster commented. That was all it took for the name "Smokey" to be born. Marvin Wetter had completed his evolution to **"Smokey" Montgomery** - and the nickname stuck to him like warm butter on a hot biscuit.



Scott Whitfield.

While Hurricane Andrew was churning up a storm in the southeast United States in 1992, the Mid-America Banjo Convention was creating its own storm in a different way in Dallas. Event promoter, Scott Whitfield, remembers, "My friend, Chip Moody, at Channel 5 was committed to doing stories on the banjo convention in Dallas when the Category 5 hurricane was storming the beaches in Florida." A certified "Storm Chaser" himself, Whitfield understood that a storm of that magnitude took precedence over even something as important as banjo music. But a thoughtful Chip Moody said he would "call some friends at CNN" to get some coverage for the convention. True to his word, CNN made announcement after announcement about the *"big banjo convention in Dallas"* with the *Dallas Banjo Band* playing the *Stars & Stripes Forever* being featured in every promo. As Scott fielded call after call about those internationally broadcast television appearances, by Saturday night close to two thousand people were at the Convention Center to be a part of that unforgettable celebration of the classic American instrument. Subsequently, by the end of 1992, there were over fifty members in the band, thanks in part to a natural disaster.

No article about the Dallas Banjo Band would be complete without referencing Ed Bernet's contribution by way of *The Levee Club*. In the decade of the 60's, his club was the place to be in Dallas. Over a million guests passed through the doors of his small Dixieland club during its ten years of existence. Long before opening the popular nightspot, Bernet attended Highland Park High School and Southern Methodist University, where he competed in almost every sport available as well as forming his own musical groups. His specialties were playing the banjo and singing, with his most notorious group at SMU, the *Cell Block 7*, dressing in black and white striped suits while playing Dixieland music for fraternity and sorority parties.

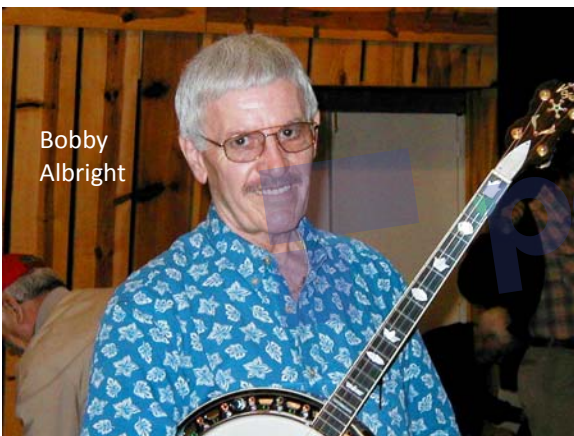


Ed  
Bernet

After pursuing a career in the NFL as a wide receiver for several years (interrupted by a stint in the Force), Ed came home to Dallas to concentrate on residential construction and remodeling (but, music was never far from his side). His group, *The Levee Dixieland Seven*, performed regularly around in Dallas, filling up venues wherever and whenever they performed. When Jack Ruby (yes, THAT Jack Ruby) refused a yearlong contract for his band to play weekends in his downtown Dallas club, Ed decided to find a space of his own and *The Levee Club* was founded in 1961.

While the *Dixieland Seven* were good for the weekends, Ed was left with four other nights to fill. He found some friends (and friends of friends) like Ronnie Dawson (the original “Rockabilly” singer) and the well-known Smokey Montgomery. The new group became known as the *Levee Singers* and performed Monday through Thursday nights. As their phenomenon grew, the group made guest appearances on major television programs such as *The Danny Kaye Show*, *The Jimmy Dean Show* and *The Hollywood Palace* and toured from Dallas to Las Vegas and Reno.

Many of the guests that came through the door of *The Levee Club* were musicians like Bobby Albright, Scott Whitfield, and John Art. Many others came, but these were three that really idolized Smokey and wanted him to help them get better at playing the banjo. “I spent a lot of days at Smokey’s house just trying to learn from him. He played so fast!” John Art said. “I would ask him how he played something a certain way and Smokey would say ‘I don’t know- I never play it the same way twice.’”



Bobby Albright simply loved the banjo. He had been playing music since he was eight years old, beginning with an *Arthur Godfrey* ukulele given to him by his Uncle Harry. His first banjo came in pieces and he had to put it together, giving him a love for the whole instrument. Later, during his time in the Army, Bobby worked as an MP in Germany where, as his wife Rita commented, “He loved people.” After living in Ohio and experiencing the music and social camaraderie associated with being part of the *Cakewalking Jazz Band* in Toledo, Albright moved to Dallas and hoped to recreate a similar musical experience for others.

When Bobby met Smokey Montgomery it was like finding a missing piece of his life. “Bobby really looked up to Smokey,” Rita commented, “He was like another father to him.” Amidst their growing friendship, Bobby asked Smokey to help him accomplish his dream of having a banjo band in Dallas...not a professional show band like the *Levee Singers*, but one that the average Joe could come and join for fun and fellowship while getting better at their hobby. With Smokey’s “six week” commitment - that lasted for the rest of his life - the *Dallas Banjo Band* was born.


By the time of his visits to *The Levee Club*, Scott Whitfield was already a pretty good banjo player. He became a professional at the age of sixteen, playing his talents at *Six Flags over Texas*. The early days of *Six Flags* turned out to be a hotbed for future Dallas talent with many local players tracing their roots back to the family amusement park that offered rides, musical shows, and good times. As a working professional, Scott’s early relationship with Smokey was to accompany him on solo gigs and be the ever-worthy foil of his banter. He could also keep up pretty well with his mentor on duets. When the *Dallas Banjo Band* began to get serious about the long term, Scott was named Assistant Director. “Although he was our star, Smokey always let me direct *Rhapsody in Blue* as the last song of the show. He was very generous to do that.”



Although he himself never played things the same way twice, when it came to the *Dallas Banjo Band*, Smokey did like consistency, making his arrangements as close to a popular recording as possible. He once wrote to John Art, "If someone comes up to the band and said you weren't playing it right, you can honestly reply, 'It's just like the record.'" Jim Baker, who played fiddle for the *Light Crust Doughboys* commented, "People don't realize what a great arranger Smokey was...he could just do stuff on the fly and do it right." Smokey had a folding plywood top installed on his piano so he could fold it down to write the parts, then lift it up to play it on the piano.

Harold Poole joined the *Dallas Banjo Band* about a year after it had started. Although he had never played the banjo, he had played the guitar years ago. Poole, a homebuilder by trade, had recently built a home for *Dallas Banjo Band* member, Bud Dresser. As people usually do when they are excited about something they are doing, Bud invited Harold to join him in his banjo avocation. "I don't know anything about the banjo and I stay pretty busy," Harold recalls telling his excited client. Finally, ostensibly just to end the matter, Harold agreed to come to a Saturday morning rehearsal and, to his surprise, he liked what he heard.

*RUNNIN' WILD*  
PLAY OCTAVE HIGHER IN CHORDS




Smokey Montgomery and Harold Poole.

"I also liked the people," Poole comments. "As I had obviously been bitten by the banjo bug, at the end of the rehearsal, Smokey handed me a tenor banjo to take home and showed me some chords to get started. I quickly found out there was going to be some work involved- the tenor banjo was no guitar. But within a reasonable amount of time, I had most of the basics figured out and figured I could learn the band's thirty song repertoire easily enough. And, when I hit a snag, there were also many willing volunteers to help me learn."

By the late 1990s, Smokey's appearances at rehearsals became less and less. He told people he thought the band was doing pretty good on their own and he was enjoying the resurgence of interest in the *Light Crust Doughboys*. In Smokey's absence, Bobby Albright was there to encourage the group when they needed it and Scott Whitfield took over duties as the musical director. And, always ready to fill in where needed was Ed Bernet. Smokey came when he could and continued to do arrangements for the band, now aided by the computer program *Rhapsody*, which Harold had showed him how to use. "You should have seen his eyes light up when he would play a note on the keyboard and it would pop up on the computer screen," Harold said. "His production increased dramatically."





By listening to what the kids were dancing to, Harold came up with an arrangement of the theme from the immensely popular film *Ghostbusters*. He gave it to Smokey to proofread and make the necessary changes and, within a couple of weeks, it was ready for the band to perform. "The band didn't like it too much because it was so repetitive," Poole comments, "but audiences did, so we kept doing it." At one performance of *Ghostbusters*, Smokey unexpectedly called upon Harold to "count it off" (meaning to set the tempo for the band). "I was terrified, but I did it." Poole remembers, looking back on that moment as his beginning of learning how to direct a band.



As time moved on, the banjo world was changing. Scott Whitfield was getting busier playing in other bands and teaching and Ed Bernet had sold his studio and was spending more time with his family. Smokey was raising the roof with other groups including the *Doughboys*, *The Dallas Hot Five*, and the *Bearkats*. His love for the band was still alive but felt like the "six Saturdays" he had promised Bobby had turned into twelve years and the band was doing well enough on its own.

During that uncertain time, Bobby and Rita Albright led the band all over the United States for performances. At one performance where Smokey and both co-directors were not there, it came upon to Harold Poole to make the show happen - so he did. Smokey was getting even more involved with the *Light Crust Doughboys* playing with orchestras and, at one point, he was gone for six weeks, leaving Harold in charge. When Smokey came back unannounced at the beginning of a show after a long absence, Harold gave him the set list and was expecting him to direct the





show. “No,” Smokey said, “This is your show,” and he sat down with the band and played rhythm. Sadly, Smokey had been diagnosed with leukemia. During his final days in 2001, Smokey called Harold to his bedside and said, “Take care of my band.” He passed away that night. It was truly Harold’s band now.



After playing for Smokey’s funeral held in the Hall of State at the Texas Fairgrounds, the *Dallas Banjo Band* did more than its share in upholding Smokey Montgomery’s legacy. Drawing from a repertoire that had grown to over 300 arrangements (most of them done by Smokey), Harold and the band continue to raise both the musical standards as well as awareness of the band (including finishing in the top 400 out of 70,000 acts on *America’s Got Talent*). With the introduction of new and talented faces to the band such as multi-instrumentalist, Matt Tolentino and trained operatic singer, Tamora Wood, the Dallas Banjo Band’s colorful history began a new chapter...and the band plays on.

Sadly, Bobby Albright left this world in 2008 following a long illness. While he will be remembered for his love of life, music and people, the six simple words on his tombstone - *Founder of the Dallas Banjo Band* – truly tell what was in his heart.

***The Dallas Banjo Band will be the headline performers at the Banjo Rally International Eureka Springs convention to be held from August 29-31, 2019 at the Best Western Inn of the Ozarks in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. See display ad in this issue for further information.***

