

Fox Hunting and *My Blue-Speckled Hound*

I wrote the song, *My Blue-Speckled Hound*, after my book, *The Red Fox and Johnny Valentine's Blue-Speckled Hound*, had been published. At the first Ann Arbor Book Fair in 2004, I was invited to read from the book. At the end of the reading, I sang the song, accompanying it with my five-stringed banjo. The book's artist, John Megahan, played along with me on his fiddle. The book was later read by an old friend, Billy Frye, who grew up in the southern Appalachian Mountains. Billy was for years a colleague in biology at the University of Michigan, where he eventually rose from professor of Biology to be a superb Dean and Vice President. Recently, he retired as Chancellor of Emory University in Atlanta. Billy wrote these comments about the fox book, and about his childhood experiences fox hunting with his father and others in the Appalachians.

"Its a wonderful story, wonderfully told, and I'll confess I couldn't repress a couple of involuntary sobs at the poignant story of the old man and the dog. I am filled with admiration and appreciation, and I hope you are continuing to write stories like this as you also continue with your science.

"I would infer that the men in your community used to fox hunt in something like the same way my dad and his friends did. Every man had at least a couple of fox hounds, and they were the greatest source of entertainment and bragging rights, especially if one was fortunate enough to be able to afford to get one of the purebred breeds. In our area they were Julys and Walkers. Hunting consisted of taking the dogs out to a strategic place on the mountains where the sounds of the hunt could be heard for miles in all directions. There, after dusk, the men would release the dogs and talk idly, usually about fox hunting, while they waited for one of the hounds to raise a fox. Then they were "off" on the chase without moving an inch, as they listened to the baying of the hounds, from which they could identify what ridge or holler they were in, where the fox was leading the dogs, which dog was in front and how close he was upon the fox, what the fox's behavior was in terms of the kind of movement and the tricks he was playing on the dogs, and finally when the dogs ran the fox to ground. Rarely, if ever, was actually catching the fox the objective. The purpose was to compete – who had the "best dog", i.e., the one best able to anticipate the actions of the fox and to stay out in front of the rest of the pack. And, equally, the purpose was to listen to the "music" of the hounds, as my dad called it. This included the music of the night, the crackling of the inevitable fire, and the murmuring of the men as they simultaneously talked and listened for the hounds. When things got exciting, they would stand and walk around, cupping a hand behind one ear, until they got the best possible acoustics. Anyone who broke the silence then was apt to come in for a sharp "Listen!" or "Be quiet! I can't hear the dogs!"

After reading Billy's eloquent description of Appalachian fox hunting, I added the final three verses to the song.

My Blue-Speckled Hound

My blue-speckled hound'll chase the foxes all around,
Chase a fox the night along and keep on singin' me his song.

I could hear Speck bellerin' in the bottom cornfield,
He was follerin' that old fox across the bottom cornfield.

The fox he was a-streakin' just as fast as he could fly,
Old Speck was right behind him you could hear his cry.

The fox he crossed the river on a sycamore log,
And crossin' right behind him was my blue speckled dog.

That fox he's a sneaky chicken thief all right
He sneaks around my chicken house every night.

He'd better be careful where he chooses to roam
Or my blue-speckled hound'll be a-takin' him home.

I could tell the hounds were closin' on the fox's tail,
Then he climbed Old Sutter's cliff and knocked 'em off his trail.

Well, the fox has beat us once again and taken to his den,
So gather up your hounds, boys, we'll catch him out again.

That old fox he's so clever that I love him like a friend,
When the moon is comin' full he'll give the hounds a run again.

Take me out one more time when the nights are clear
To the mountains where the sounds'll carry far and near,

Where the crackles of the fire and the murmurs of the men
And the music of the hounds can lift my soul up once again:

Yes, the crackles of the fire and the murmurs of the men,
And the music of the hounds out on the fox's trail again.
