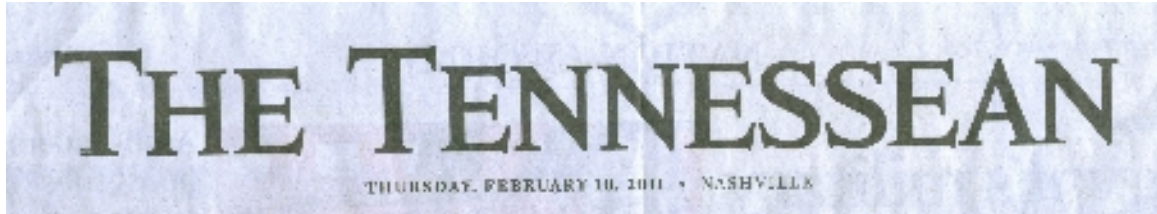


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Interracial duo quietly made history

In 1940s, 'hillbilly music' united Allerton & Alton and the black-and-white duo occupy a special place in country music history.

Posted on [February 9, 2011](#) by [Peter Cooper](#)



Allerton & Alton (Al Hawkes and Alton Meyers) onstage circa 1949.

Portland, Maine, 1947. Two teenagers, one white, one black, rummaged through the record bins at Knight's Used Furniture store.

The two didn't know each other, but they scavenged for the same music: Mostly harmony-rich records of duos from the south. Back then it was frequently called "hillbilly music," and it often arrived in Portland via military personnel who had traveled from southern homes to their Maine station. When recruits were called overseas, they'd often sell their 78 RPM hillbilly records to Knight's for 15 cents apiece, and the store would sell them to kids like Al Hawkes and Alton Myers for 25 cents each.

But there weren't a lot of kids like Hawkes and Myers, searching for the plaintive sounds of the rural south, up in Maine. The fact they were of different races seemed less important than their similar taste in music.

"When I saw Alton, I probably thought, 'Well, he's a little different,'" said Hawkes, now 80. "But we liked the same music, and he told me he was learning guitar. And I said, 'Why don't we try to play some music together?'"

They did, and though the music did not make any charts, it made long-hidden history. Billed as Allerton & Alton, the pairing of Hawkes and Myers constituted what is believed to be the only black-and-white duo ever in country music. After more than 60 years, their live recordings from Maine radio stations are now available, through Germany-based [Bear Family Records](#), on a set called *Black, White and Bluegrass*.

"This is a fascinating piece of American musical history," said John Rumble, senior historian at the [Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum](#). "These guys were standing up there as co-equals, in a duet. Considering the racial climate of the nation then, it really was unusual to have a black man and a white man making music together. It's something far out of the ordinary."

As Rumble is quick to point out, African-Americans have contributed to country music as forerunners, influences and stars. Harmonica player [DeFord Bailey](#) was a prominent performer on the [Grand Ole Opry](#) from 1926 until 1941, when he was dismissed from the show in a decision that held ugly racial overtones: "Like some members of his race and other races, DeFord was lazy," wrote *Opry* founder Judge George D. Hay in his 1946 history of the program.

Bailey is now a Country Music Hall of Famer, as is African-American [Charley Pride](#), who notched top hits from the '60s into the '80s. Today's country radio playlists regularly feature Darius Rucker. And a 1998 Country Music Foundation boxed set — *From Where I Stand: The Black Experience in Country Music* — illuminated country multi-cultural roots and branches.

But the notion of an integrated and equal country duo ... that's something else entirely.

"I never want to say 'never,'" Rumble said. "But I haven't found one, until Allerton & Alton."

Within a year of their furniture store meeting, Hawkes and Myers were playing on the radio as Allerton & Alton, The Cumberland Ridge Runners. Hawkes recalls that public response at the time ranged from accepting to curious to disdainful.

"Back then, we had 8x10 pictures made, because people would write in to the stations and say they'd like a picture," said Hawkes, who now lives in Westbrook, Maine and who owns one of the country's most impressive collections of rare records. "Some of those pictures would get sent back to us, with people saying it must be the wrong picture. They wrote some things on a couple of them, and I'd think, 'Well, those are stupid people.' They probably weren't Mainers."

That's not to say Maine was devoid of racial tension. In Allerton & Alton's regional touring, there were hotels that wouldn't accept Myers. Hawkes would check in, then sneak his duo partner in. But both men knew that New England audiences were more likely to be tolerant than those in the south. The recordings that influenced the pair sprang from rural southern lands where entrenched segregation and Jim Crow edicts would have made an Allerton & Alton performance not just unlikely but unlawful.

Myers might have been fine with singing in private rather than playing in concert and on the radio. As a teenager, he often climbed a pine tree, sat with his guitar and sang. The music, not the audience, was his motivation. Hawkes, though, was so intent to find a

way into the music industry that he built his own amateur radio station with a windmill tower next to his family's farm.

"I think most of that drive came from Al," Myers' brother Don Myers, told interviewer Hank Davis, who wrote the liner notes for *Black, White and Bluegrass*. "I think Alton would have been content to sit on a porch somewhere and sing."

For Hawkes, the porch wasn't an option. In New England, the friends traveled around, offering their spin on material popularized down south by the Monroe Brothers, the Lilly Brothers and other acts. Hawkes' girlfriend, Barbara (they married in the early 1950s), made their stage outfits, and the men would use the radio shows to plug the live gigs, and use the live gigs to plug their radio shows.

They briefly experimented with a trio format, but the guitar/mandolin duo worked best. Myers' booming acoustic guitar provided a rhythmic backdrop for Hawkes' rapid-fire mandolin licks, and the pair's friendly banter emulated the stage chatter of their favorite hillbilly performers.

"Alton was the best rhythm guitar player I ever played with," said Hawkes, who has played with scores of others. "(Alton's brothers told Hank Davis) they thought it was strange that Alton was taken with white people's music, but I don't think Alton thought it was strange. For me, it was a highlight of my life. We just thought it was a great time."

That lasted until 1951, when they both entered the military.

"The Korean war," Hawkes said. "He was drafted into the Army and went to Austria. I was in the Maine National Guard. The Army was still segregated, and Alton heard language and dealt with things he'd never dealt with in Maine. Before that, he didn't smoke or drink, but when he came back he was different. He had a lot of problems after that."

After a few disastrous performances (one in which Myers walked onstage with a bottle of liquor and turned his back to the audience), Allerton & Alton disbanded. Hawkes remained in music as a performer, owner of a recording studio and a record company, promoter and prominent record collector.

Myers played music on occasion, worked as a director of athletic equipment at a Maine college and founded a security company. He married four times and divorced three. Music remained a love, as he collected records, and he and Hawkes came together for a reunion show in 1979. In 2000, Myers died at the age of 67. A local obituary mentioned that he hosted an annual "Bluegrass Field Picking" but did not make note of his role in his unique duo. And until the December release of *Black, White and Bluegrass*, Allerton & Alton seemed a footnote in a book no one was reading.

Now, though, there is an aural document. Bear Family owner Richard Weize, who is based in Germany, had been asking Hawkes for years to allow him the rights to release the Allerton & Alton material, telling Hawkes that the duo was significant.

"I wasn't sure if it was important," Hawkes said. "But I knew that I loved singing with Alton. Maybe we were a novelty act: 'Here comes the black guy with the guitar and the white guy with the mandolin.' But we'd start off playing 'Keep on the Sunny Side' really fast, played like a bat out of hell. And we'd sing together, and it worked."

It worked quietly, and temporarily, years before the Montgomery bus boycotts, the Birmingham bombings and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Back then, up in Maine, a couple of young men emulated their music heroes, leaned into a microphone and spouted melodic prophecy.

“Don’t this road look rough and rocky?” they asked, in harmony. “Don’t that sea look wide and deep?”

**They constitute what is believed to be the only
black-and-white duo ever in country music**

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