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Joe Dobbs

Fiddler Takes Appalachia To Africa

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This time last year, Joe Dobbs never dreamed that his Appalachian fiddle music would be getting reviews in North Africa.

A Wayne County resident, Dobbs traveled with Mary Faith Rhoads of Center Valley, Pa., to seven countries in North Africa recently playing traditional mountain music.

From Tunisia came the report: They are gifted, eager and flexible

performers with whom it was a rewarding experience to spend time."

From Upper Volta: "Rhoads and Dobbs performed four concerts during a three-day visit for one of the most effective programs of Americana ever presented here."

From Niger: "Delightful concert at ambassador's residence well attended by the diplomatic corps, including both Russian and Chinese ambassadors."

From Algeria: "First-rate attrac-

tion that enabled (American consulate) post to make significant statement about little-known aspect of American culture that sick responsive chord within all Algerians who heard Rhoads and Dobbs playing and talking about music in Appalachia."

WHILE the people of North Africa were delighted, Dobbs said he was tickled pink by the reception Appalachian music received there.

"Quite frankly, I was amazed the people liked the music as much as they did," Dobbs said. "There were only two of us. We weren't a band. We were simply two musicians. I played the fiddle and mandolin, and Mary played the hammered dulcimer, the mountain dulcimer, the guitar, the fiddle sticks and the triangle."

The African tour was sponsored by the International Communications Agency, a branch of the U. S. State

Department formerly known as the U. S. Information Agency. The tour began April 12 and ended May 11.

Dobbs, who has been playing the fiddle since he was a child, said U. S. officials told him the reason for the tour "was to prove to these developing nations that Americans are people, too. A lot of the people in North Africa think of America only in terms of computers and technology. We tried to show them that we have a heritage in Appalachia

that we're proud of."

THE TOUR began in the Sudan, continued through Tunisia, Algeria, Niger, Upper Volta, Cameroon and ended in Chad.

All of the countries are French-speaking, Dobbs said. "We were fortunate because Mary speaks fluent French. I think that helped a lot."

Typical of the reports from embassies in the region was the one

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from Ndjamena, Chad, where Dobbs said a revolution threatens the existing government.

According to a review of the Dobbs-Rhoads visit sent to the Paris office of the U. S. State Department, "Rhoads and Dobbs came to Ndjamena at a difficult political moment, and at the very last minute, the vice president of Chad and commander of the gendarmerie called off the evening's concert."

"The program at the police academy went on as scheduled, however, and some 200 cadets and police attentively witnessed their first exposure to America's Appalachia through the slides, words and music of the sensitive Ms. Rhoads and Mr. Dobbs."

"The dynamic duo also did a concert for Peace Corps volunteers and their counterparts. Under the strikingly star-lit Chadian night sky and around a slow burning fire, Rhoads and Dobbs clearly brought home their love of country and music of Appalachia."

"This was the theme of their visit — their attachment to the land and the music of the people they know best. The strong American message of ethnic diversity was presented clearly to Chadians in the midst of their own deep ethnic troubles."

DOBBS SAID he doesn't feel that he and Ms. Rhoads were viewed as "ugly Americans."



International Communications Agency Photo

Joe Dobbs and Mary Faith Rhoads bring mountain music to Niger during African tour. Dobbs fiddles while Ms. Rhoads plays the hammered dulcimer at a lawn concert at the home of Charles A. James, American ambassador to Niger.

"I believe that music, particularly folk music, is a common denominator with all people. The people of North Africa were very kind to us. I think they understood our message and our music. They never argued with us. They never asked us embarrassing questions. If there were any Communists at any of our concerts, they never caused trouble for us," Dobbs said.

The trip couldn't be called a vacation, Dobbs added. "It was hard work. It was a series of one-night stands in a part of the world where

the temperature gets up to 115 degrees in the daytime."

The most impressive audiences were at the colleges and universities where they played, Dobbs said.

"THE YOUNG people are very bright. They're like young college students in America. They're frightened of war and don't want to see war break out anywhere in the world. They were curious about America. They asked a lot of questions about life in this country. They wanted to know what they could do to preserve their own folk music."