

Photos of Rural Community Reveal
Ethereal Appalachia



art6 is proud to feature **Sodom Laurel Album**, a major photographic exhibition from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, the result of a twenty-year photographic project / field study by documentary photographer **Rob Amberg**. The exhibition is a chronicle of the two decades Amberg spent as a member of the rural North Carolina community known colloquially as Sodom Laurel, located in the mountains not far from Asheville, North Carolina. (With films, lectures, music and more).

"When photographer Rob Amberg first met **Dellie Norton** and her adopted son, **Junior**, in 1975, Norton was seventy-six years old and had lived most of her life in the small mountain community of Sodom Laurel, North Carolina, surrounded by close kin, tobacco fields, and the rugged wilderness of the southern Appalachians. **Sodom Laurel Album** traces the growing relationship between Norton and Amberg across the next two decades, years marked by the seasons of raising and harvesting food and tobacco and by the gatherings of family and friends for conversation, storytelling, and music." (quotation courtesy the University of North Carolina Press reviews).



Amberg, a recipient of the 2003 Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award and numerous other honors, sees Sodom from the unique perspective and with the keen eye of an outside observer and documentarian, but also as one assimilated and embedded within [Sodom].

But Amberg has stated that he was never completely accepted by Sodom Laurel because he was an outsider, not native or born into the community. That however did not prevent Amberg from establishing close ties and cultivating relationships with some intriguing characters. Such was the case with Dellie Norton, and Junior, who Amberg said often contemplated the world outside his own insular existence.



Dellie Chandler Norton (1898-1993) was a beloved ballad singer, storyteller, and tobacco farmer. Her songs have been recorded by Alan Lomax and John Cohen. In 1990 she received a North Carolina Folk Heritage Award. It is important to understand that exhibitions and recognition like these point to people and places like Norton and Sodom as the living (and dying) legacy of an authentic and unique Appalachian folk (ballad) tradition that should be preserved, or at the very least, documented for a posterity when no such places exist.

Ultimately, Amberg's **Sodom** is neither a complete Eden nor a shamed South, but a realistic look at a vanishing way of life. This is the South we yearn for, romanticize, and read about in great literature. These are the disappearing places we envision when we read Flannery O'Connor, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Carson McCullers, or Shirley Jackson. These are the porches where we imagine hearin' Doc Watson, Jean Ritchie, and Bill Monroe-----a real **Cold Mountain**, this other-worldly beauty of the Asheville that Thomas Wolfe wrote of, or a **Winesburg, Ohio**, via the singular beauty of Carolina.



Make no mistake, though, contemporary Charlotte or relatively modern Raleigh this isn't. It's the raw, real deal---genuine "mountain folk,". . ."hill people"-----some strange, down-home "holler" from yesteryear, lost in time, wonderfully never to catch up-----Amberg's images are at turns communal, puritanical, naturalistic, and wildly gothic.

The series and **Album** are outstanding, and manage to be both artistic and historically vital. The photographs form their own narrative and need little embellishment (other than Amberg's own excellent commentary). Of particular note is the piece (above left) of the two women working----a simple, timeless image almost ineffably beautiful in its lighting and revelation.

May 7-July 31, Wed.-Sun., 12-4pm, with an **opening reception Friday, May 7**, 7-10pm, as a part of the First Fridays Art Walk. The artist will attend. Please join us. art6 is located at 6 East Broad Street, Richmond, Virginia 23219. TMH



Copies of **Sodom Laurel Album** are available for sale at art6 gallery. For more info visit www.art6.org or phone 804.343.1406. To contact the editor of art6 and **Broad Strokes** for brochure or writing and editorial projects phone Thomas M. Humphrey at WordOutsource at 804.794.7579.

