

# Ed Dodson

## Bluegrass Accountant

*By Marc Barnes  
Photography by Steve Exum*

By day, Edward T. Dodson is a senior vice president/corporate controller for LabCorp, with a plate that's clearly full: LabCorp had annual revenues in 2003 of \$2.9 billion, more than 23,000 employees nationwide and more than 220,000 clients.

But by night and on weekends, he leaves behind the world of investor conferences and Standard & Poor's in favor of lost love and Scruggs and Monroe—setting aside his calculator and strapping on a vintage 1936 Martin D-18 mahogany six-string.

With fellow musicians on banjo, mandolin and bass, Dodson the corporate executive steps up to the microphone—and into his other life as 'Dodson the front man' for Wood & Steel, a Triad-based bluegrass band.

For Dodson, making the transition from being the chief accountant for a company that does clinical diagnostic testing for millions of people nationwide to a bluegrass musician who appears in front of hundreds is a welcome change.

"It's really a beautiful way to relieve stress," Dodson says. "When you're playing, you get in the zone. You're not thinking about business, you're not thinking about your personal life. You're just thinking about the sound you're creating, totally focusing on the music."

Dodson's recent music career has run on a parallel track to his career as an accountant—once he got there. Dodson dreamed of being a rock-and-roll guitarist and actually did something about it by taking extended time off before and during college to pursue a career as a rock-and-roll musician in Atlanta and New York.





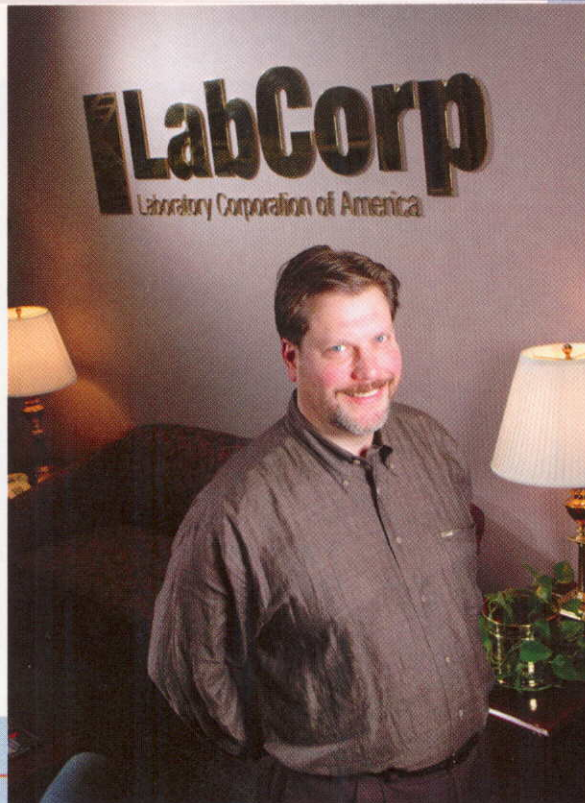


Dodson returned home from the road with a notion to finish his degree—and found his vocation entirely by accident.

"I found that accounting graduates were making more than business graduates," Dodson says with a laugh. "I had no idea what public accounting was, but I did find that I had an aptitude for it. I thought I'd try it."

Dodson would find his way to bluegrass, oddly enough, because he was an accountant.

After graduating from Wake Forest, he took a job with the predecessor firm of the global accounting firm KPMG. It was a two-year international assign-



## statSHEET:

**Company:** LabCorp

**Address:** 358 South Main Street,  
Burlington, NC 27215

**Phone:** 336/584-5171

**Website:** www.LabCorp.com

**Employees:** 23,000

**Clients:** 220,000

**Annual Revenues (2003):** \$2.9 billion

**President:** Thomas P. Mac Mahon

ment to Brussels, Belgium, where the seeds of Wood & Steel would be planted. A co-worker there owned a number of acoustic guitars, lent one to Dodson and awakened in him an interest in acoustic music.

"He really kept me in guitars while I was there and got me back to doodling with them," Dodson says. "When I got back to the States, I swapped my electric guitars for acoustics."

Back home in the Triad, Dodson worked for KPMG and sought out other acoustic musicians. He could recall some of the old songs he had heard at family reunions as a child ... his Dad playing mandolin, others joining in on fiddles and banjos and guitars. He worked on Irish tunes and old country ballads, but his interest gradually shifted over to bluegrass.

"Bluegrass music really started with Bill Monroe in the 40s," Dodson says. "It was Monroe and Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs who took the older music styles—music from the British Isles, blues and country—and incorporated a driving rhythm to it.

To me, it has all the power of rock and roll—just done acoustically."

Around here, interest in bluegrass music has been as perennial as kudzu on a Piedmont roadside ... and a sight more enjoyable. Its popularity was re-energized with the release several years ago of the movie soundtrack to "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" Audiences across America heard the music of Norman Blake, Allison Krauss and Ralph Stanley for the first time—and learned what folks in North Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee have known for decades.

"This is a huge bluegrass community," says Dodson. "Every night of the week within 50-60 miles of Greensboro and Winston-Salem, there's a

picking session. And from April through October, there's a bluegrass festival every single weekend."

That popularity is due in part to the efforts of veteran radio broadcaster Ralph Epperson, whose stations—WPAQ-AM in Mount Airy and WBRF-FM in Galax, VA—broadcast a steady stream of bluegrass and traditional music across the Triad and southwestern Virginia. They've been at it awhile: WPAQ began its popular live bluegrass and traditional music show in 1948 and has been on the air every Saturday ever since.

Traditional musicians Mac Wiseman, Grandpa Jones, Flatt and Scruggs, Mother Maybelle Carter and Little Jimmy Dickens have all broadcast live from WPAQ. And Epperson says the music became popular—and remains that way—because it's both contagious and competitive.

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"Each band tries to be the best," Epperson says.

That's certainly the case with Wood & Steel. These days, the band is made up of Dodson as lead singer and guitarist; Joey Lemons of Walnut Cove on mandolin and vocals; Snuffy Smith of King on banjo and baritone vocals; and

says Dodson. "We love being together and making music together."

Still, Wood & Steel faces some of the same challenges as full-time bands. Dodson says he's heartened by the air-play and local fame that North Carolina bands like the Steep Canyon Rangers, Polecat Creek and the Grass Cats have seen lately—and that he would like to see the same thing happen for his group.

### statSHEET:

**Band:** Wood & Steel

**Members:** Ed Dodson, guitar;  
Joey Lemons, mandolin; Snuffy Smith,  
banjo; Jacque Smith, bass.

**Telephone:** 336/436-4652

**Year established in the Triad:** 1997

**Currently available:** Two compact  
discs: "Just A Cold Pot of Coffee" and  
"Feast Here Tonight"

**Email:** info@woodandsteelband.com

**Website:** www.woodandsteelband.com



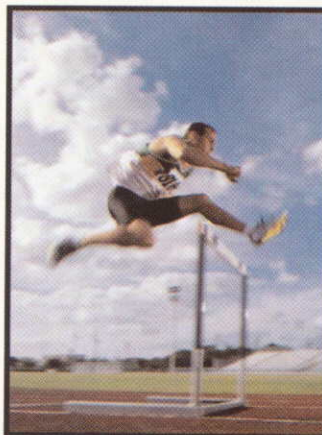
Jacque Smith, Snuffy's wife, on upright bass. Dodson will tell you that the band does well on its instruments, and these days, is working hard on taking their vocal harmonies to the next level.

In a way, the band represents both the past and future of bluegrass: Smith is nationally known as a "set-up man" by doing the adjustments on instruments that ensure the purest possible sound. His clients include bluegrass icons Earl Scruggs, Tony Rice and Ricky Skaggs. Lemons, a 17-year-old junior at South Stokes High School, is on the other end of the age scale, with a cross-picking style and soaring tenor vocals that bluegrass fans would normally associate with a performer many times his age.

On average, the band performs twice a month ... more in the summer and less in the winter. They play often at street festivals, corporate parties and weddings, and can often be seen at such bluegrass mainstays as the Sawbriar Acoustic Stage in Pilot Mountain and at True Bluegrass in Eleazer, between Asheboro and Denton. The band is currently recording a new predominately original cd at a studio in Virginia.

"This band is like a family; I love them like brothers and sisters,"

"We do like to play quality gigs," says Dodson. "But it's not the money; it's the audience. The gigs we like to play are in the bluegrass locations and the festivals, where people come to hear the music, people focus on the music and if you play well, people reward you with applause." ♦♦



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