

## RECORD REVIEWS

Uncle Wade: A Memorial to Wade Ward, Oldtime Banjo Picker 1892-1971  
 With Wade Ward, Granny Porter, Katy Hill, Glen Smith, Fields Ward, and  
 Crockett Ward. Collected and edited by Eric H. Davidson with Jane Rigg.  
 24 selections, vocal and instrumental, mono, seven interview segments.  
 FA 2380, Folkways Records, 701 Seventh Avenue, New York, New York 10036. \$5.95.

Reviewed by Neil V. Rosenberg

Folkways records, moribund for the past five years following the leasing of most of its formidable catalog to Scholastic Books, has recently revived. With founder-owner Moses Asch once again in control of the catalog, the old policy that no Folkways record is ever out of print has been reinstated, and a number of impressive new albums have been issued. This is one of them.

"Uncle Wade" -- Wade Ward, of Galax, Virginia -- was one of the best known old time "clawhammer" banjo pickers. Like many American folk musicians who have become popular outside their home territory, he was "discovered" and recorded for the Library of Congress Archive of American Folk Song in the thirties by Alan Lomax, with Pete Seeger.

As an instrumentalist (he rarely sang) he was a master at his art, a style of banjo playing tailored to fit snugly to the mountain fiddle music. He was also a good fiddler. In the last fifteen years of his life, Wade was visited by young musicians from all over the United States who had learned of him directly or indirectly via Lomax and Seeger. Transcriptions and tablatures of his tunes appeared in the old-timey banjo and fiddle instruction books of Art Rosenbaum and John Burke. Every old-timey urban banjo picker (these days their ranks are legion) worth his salt knows or has attempted at least one of Wade Ward's arrangements of the old tunes -- favorites are "June Apple," "Chilly Winds" and "Sally Ann." Thus, Ward's art survives not only on record and in transcription but, perhaps most importantly, in the performances of a generation of younger musicians.

Folklorists are fortunate indeed that esthetic involvement in Wade Ward's music has stimulated some enthusiasts to learn more than just banjo-picking from him. During the past decade, the producer of this record, Eric H. Davidson, along with several collaborators, has compiled a number of anthologies of the music of Ward and his musical compatriots around Galax in southeastern Virginia. These Folkways recordings constitute a unique study of the musical culture of a small well-defined region. The extensive brochures which accompany each l.p. present ethnographic data dealing with problems of central concern to folklorists. For example, the various uses of the music are described in terms of their relation to musical structure and textual content. Performance style and repertoire are analyzed in terms of culture change and the assimilation and rejection of outside influences. The economy of the region has moved in a generation from small-time farming to local industry and out-migration; Davidson examines the role of the folk musician with regard to these changes.

Unlike the other records in the series, Uncle Wade deals with this musical culture through a portrait of the person behind the music. We read Ward's life history -- including family traditions -- and hear him joking with a fellow musician. Relatives reminisce about him, speaking of his personal

charm and telling of his amusing escapades. As one might expect with field materials, the recordings vary in quality, but generally I found this a very listenable record.

Here, as with his other productions, Davidson tends to throw the word "archaic" around with a bit too much abandon for my tastes. Ethnomusicologists may disagree with the terminology used to describe scales. Folklorists will regret the lack of comparative annotation for the songs and tunes. But these are really very minor points when balanced against the large amount of useful information presented.

There are now enough published records, both "field" and commercial, to justify a monograph on the folk music of the Galax region. In addition to the rich musical traditions which Davidson has documented (see list below), this locality has spawned one of the oldest fiddler's conventions in the South, and a number of important early country music recording artists -- including Ernest V. Stoneman and "The Hillbillies". A number of good contemporary field recordings have been published on l.p. by Alan Lomax, David Freeman and others. In recent years younger local musicians playing in the style of Wade Ward have taken advantage of the tape recorder/regional record pressing plant technology (a parallel to the local printing press as a source of broadside and chapbook materials) and have begun issuing their own records on the "Mountain" label. It may be that this is a region in which folksong revival has in fact revived folksong. In any case, with "Uncle Wade," we see that it has also revived folk music scholarship.

Records cited: Folkways 3811, Traditional Music of Grayson and Carroll Counties, Virginia; Folkways 3831, Ballads and Songs of the Blue Ridge Mountains: Persistence and Change; Folkways 3832, Bluegrass from the Blue Ridge: Country Band Music of Virginia.

Mississippi John Hurt 1928.

9 selections, vocal and instrumental, mono, liner notes by Richard K. Spottswood.

Biograph C10888 (BLP C4): Biograph Records, Box 109, Canaan, New York 12029. \$5.98.

Christ Was Born On Christmas Morn (1927-36).

16 selections, vocal, mono, liner notes by Richard K. Spottswood. Historical HLP 34: also available from Biograph Records. \$5.98.

Reviewed by Michael Taft

Although all of John Hurt's issued sides of 1928 can be found on previous albums, this new Biograph release serves an excellent purpose in bringing together Hurt's songs on one LP. Anyone who has done research on the recorded output of singers can appreciate the problems of searching out some-time obscure anthologies of reissues and the annoyance of juggling a large number of albums in order to listen to a small selection of songs. Certainly, this album answers the needs of the researcher. Not only does it reissue all of Hurt's early recordings (except for seven unissued sides which are lost forever), but the songs have been conveniently arranged in chronological order -- a practice not always followed by blues reissue companies.