

RECORD REVIEWS

SOP'N UP THE GRAVY. The First Battle Ground Fiddlers' Gathering 1973
24 Selections.

Donald Duff, Lawrence Duff, Miles Krassen, Ervie Burge, John McGreevy,
David Molk, Brian Hubbard, Gene Moore, Kevin Henry, Charlie "Jake"
Corns, Barry O'Neill.

Log Cabin 8001. Log Cabin Records, Box 225, Battle Ground, Indiana,
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Reviewed by W.K. McNeil.

Since the "folk song revival" of the late 1950s and early 1960s it has become commonplace for organizations to sponsor "folk festivals." Most of these events are as closely related to tradition as Annette Funicello's singing is to that of the late Kirsten Flagstad. Those who expect little traditional music to appear on albums composed of selections recorded at such festivals are rarely disappointed. Nevertheless, sometimes some wheat is included with the chaff as, for example, in "Sop'n Up The Gravy," a recording of highlights of the First Battle Ground (Indiana) Fiddlers' Gathering. To be sure there are folkniks here who have obtained their repertoire from recordings of other folkniks but there are also some good, and a few excellent, examples of folk music among the twenty-four selections presented. Indeed, in a sense the album presents an accurate picture of the state of traditional music in contemporary Indiana and its neighboring states.

Despite the title, the Battle Ground program is neither a fiddlers' convention nor a "folk" festival. It is more accurately described in the original announcement as an "annual gathering of traditional Indiana fiddlers and other folks" with the latter actually dominating. In fact, the program was never intended to be solely a fiddlers' convention but from the outset was much broader in scope. In the summer of 1973, Clark Dobbs, then program director of the Battle Ground Corporation, conceived the idea of a series of concerts devoted to explicating Midwestern traditional music. What Dobbs envisioned was a program illustrating the many diverse musical strands making up the fabric of folk music in Indiana in 1973. Thus, not only traditional numbers but also popular songs and tunes of the 19th and early 20th centuries would be featured. This "liberal" approach is reflected in the selections given here which range from old-time music of the Southern Appalachians (Sally Goodin) to Irish traditional tunes (Rolling On The Rye Grass) to Canadian ballads (Sault St. Mary's Jail) to 19th century popular music (Turkey In The Straw) to bluegrass (I'm Using My Bible For A Roadmap).

The highlights of the album are the five performances by the Chicago Irish musician John McGreevy who, incidentally, is featured with his friend, flutist Seamus Cooley, on a long awaited Philo album which will

be released in the near future (June of 1975 so I am told). Although none of the other traditional performers presented here are on par with McGreevy, their efforts are, with two exceptions, good but not outstanding. One of the exceptions is the late Charles "Jake" Corns' rendition of "Soppin' Up The Gravy" that is admittedly included only as a tribute and is not representative of Corns' ability prior to the illness that eventually claimed his life. The second exception is Gene Moore who seems to me a Lawrence Welk of the autoharp; his style of playing as well as his selections are musically uninteresting. One of his compositions, "Autoharp Waltz," seems to be derived in part from "Minuet in C" that, according to legend, was written by Marie Antoinette. But even Moore's "Ukelin Waltz" bears listening to since it features the ukelele (ukelele-violin), a rarely recorded instrument which is in the same category as the solophone, dulciana, and other turn-of-the-century hybrid instruments designed for the musically illiterate.

Many of the other performers presented here fall into the category of revivalists from outside the tradition they now embrace. Ervie Burge, however, is an example of an increasingly common phenomenon: the traditional musician who, because of revival contacts, resumes the fiddle playing he once abandoned. From his performances here and at the 1974 Battle Ground program it is evident that the music of Bill Monroe is one of the major forces shaping his current repertoire. Bluegrass also seems to be the first love of the Duff Family since they sound more relaxed with the Reno-Smilely gospel song "I'm Using My Bible For a Roadmap" than with their other three numbers. The only other traditional musician here is Kevin Henry who provides adequate but unexciting performances of two Irish standards: "The Galway Rambler" and "Drowsy Maggie." As for the revival performances, they are good but not exceptional and at least one is mis-titled on the album cover, for Molk and Hubbard's version of "Double File" is definitely not the same as Gaither Carlton's tune of that name.

Here, then, is an album that ranges from the mediocre (Moore) to the good (Burge) to the outstanding (McGreevy) and encompasses many types of traditional music found in the present-day Midwest. In short, it represents the kind of variety, both in styles and abilities, a collector interested in the total range of Midwestern folk music is likely to encounter in the field. Thus it is an album not for those who are only interested in exceptional performances, but for those who prefer to have a representative picture of the quality of folk music in Indiana and its neighboring states in the 1970s. This, and the erudite and pellucid accompanying booklet by Larry McCullough, make it an unusually informative and valuable souvenir for those who attended either of the past two Battle Ground gatherings.