

Old As The Hills: The Story of Bluegrass Music. By Steven D. Price.
Pp. xvi + 110, bibliographic notes, illustrations.
New York: The Viking Press, 1975. \$7.95 cloth.

Reviewed by Thomas Adler

Every once in a while a book comes along which is so thoroughly second-rate that everyone wishes it would be recalled by its publishers. That is the case with Steven D. Price's Old As the Hills. It has earned little more than scorn in the year since its release, and it is undoubtedly destined to sink even lower into disrepute as other, more solid popularizations on the subject of bluegrass are written.

Chiefly underlying this sad state of affairs is the author's failure to adequately balance his personal background with his purpose, his intended audience, and the facts of bluegrass history. Price is not a beginning writer; he has published such works as Teaching Riding at Summer Camps, Panorama of American Horses, The Second-Time-Single Man's Survival Guide, and Take Me Home: The Rise of Country-and-Western Music. One would therefore expect him to come up with a solid reason for writing this book (other than the obvious one of financial gain). Old As the Hills purports to be "an introduction to string-band music," one that is "by no means an exhaustive study." Price suggests that to have written more comprehensively than he did "would have resulted in a Burke's Peerage beyond the interest of all but the most serious students, who probably know already where to find such material." I would suggest that there is a place for good introductions to bluegrass (and other types of string-band music), but that a good introduction must be more than a gloss. What Price did write would have been fine for a long article in, say, Esquire or Holiday, but it is far too superficial to be a book subtitled The Story of Bluegrass Music.

My specific gripes with Old As the Hills are plenty.

First of all, the title perpetuates a popular notion that various folklorists have been trying to quietly debunk for some years. Bluegrass music is not as "old as the hills;" depending on how you count it up, it is somewhere between 30 and 40 years old. Of course, one might say I'm being too literal, and after all it is no secret that bluegrass emerged from a complex blending of many American musical traditions, some of which are quite venerable. The real point is that all of Price's book follows the pattern of the title: it's not 100-percent factually wrong, but it is not quite right either, and the real beginner, who is genuinely in need of a good introduction, gets a hasty survey skewed by simplified history and a monolinear view of musical and cultural change.

Second, the book exhibits an uncritical acceptance and use of demeaning stereotypes and misleading overviews. The worst examples almost leap from the pages:

Women rocked cradles and treadled spinning wheels to slow
ballad rhythms, crooning the modal melodies in high-pitched

voices. After a day's plowing, their menfolk rested fiddles in the crooks of their arms, in the old manner of playing . . . (p. 7).

Or, on the subject of Afro-American music:

Whether picking cotton, chopping wood, or shucking corn, slaves sang to mark their tasks and to make time pass more quickly and easily. Pronounced rhythms marked the fall of hoes or axes, while whoever set the tempo was answered in solo-and-chorus patterns (which would later give rise to the blues form). Individuals let out mournful falsetto yelps, called "hollers," answered in kind by other men working nearby (p. 10).

The serious problems mentioned above are exacerbated by a host of minor ones, including spelling errors (e.g., "Clayton McMitchen," "the McGhee Brothers," "Willy Neefger"), a cloying cuteness (e.g., "The twentieth century came to the Appalachians with the speed of a 'possum crossing a log'"), and a poor or inappropriate selection of photographs (most particularly the frontispiece, repeated on page four, which shows Wade Ward, a fine old-time--not bluegrass--musician who is never mentioned in the text). Footnotes and index are lacking completely, and the long-time bluegrass enthusiast will often--to no avail--wish to know the sources for Price's sometimes-astounding views.

Old As the Hills has some good features, but not many. The best part of it is the use of interview material to flesh out the human dimensions of bluegrass. The final chapter, entitled "Parking Lot Pickers and Other Folks" had a lot of potential. It offered the opportunity to present the aspect of bluegrass that is most significant today (especially for folklorists), yet it emerged as another overly-general account. At the end of that chapter the book is finished, literally and figuratively. Old As the Hills doesn't end, it runs down.

The danger of a book like this is mostly that it may be regarded by some beginning fans--or uncritical folklorists--as being authoritative. It will presumably be purchased by a good many public libraries and well-intentioned aunts and uncles of bluegrass fans. One might hope that possible buyers could follow the excellent example of my young collie puppy: she got at and avidly chewed up several meaty issues of the Journal of American Folklore and other scholarly delicacies, but when she started in on Old As the Hills, she could stomach only a small part of the binding.