8 selections, instrumental and vocal, stereo, liner notes by Hank Deane (producer).
HDS 701. Flying Fish Records, 3320 North Halstead, Chicago, Ill. 60657.

Reviewed by Bill Revill

"Me and Norman and all the rest of them gathered together in Hound's Ear Studio and played music. We are here because of our shared desire to record together. Spontaneous and free!" -Hank Deane

Norman Blake, Vassar Clements and Tut Taylor, the stellar attractions of this album, are all graduates of John Hartford's school of bluegrass, and this reunion tries to show the great versatility of the musicians. Hank Deane, the producer, refers to some of the music as "esoteric bluegrass." Although the musicians are basically bluegrass pickers (with the exception of jazz bassist David Holland), the boys try everything they can touch on, and not all of it comes off successfully.

The bluegrass-oriented material is well done; everyone is in top form, and Vassar Clements has never sounded better. However, when Vassar and Jethro Burns (of Homer and Jethro) wander into jazz, the results are somewhat undecisive. Clements is a virtuoso fiddler, and Jethro plays a nice guitar, but tunes like "'A' Train" just can't stand up to their assault. Not all the jazz-flavored material is bad; "Vassar and Dave" and "Sauerkraut 'n Solar Energy," where Clements teams with Dave Holland, prove that the two have a genuine feel for jazz.

Vassar is clearly the standout in the album, but Norman Blake gets his licks in with a guitar solo, "The Old Brown Case," which shows that while Blake's instrumentals might all sound the same, he can pick a guitar. He also does nice vocals on "McKinley's Blues." Tut Taylor is lost in the crowd, though, and is really only heard on "Oconee" and even then, he is playing mandolin, not dobro.

Despite its faults, it is a good album and will be enjoyed by Vassar Clements fans. It is not, however, as egalitarian as the title and concept implies. Vassar dominates, and it is mostly his album.

A complaint about the notes: there are three mandolin players and two guitarists on the album. The notes don't specify who is playing what when, and a bit of detective work has to be done to figure out the proper credits.