college freshman play in the shower stall at 3:00 a.m. It will be of value for those who want to learn bottleneck guitar (a tabulature is available from the company) and perhaps the record can serve as a bottleneck primer. As a collection of good bottleneck material, though, it fails.

Stefan Grossman's liner notes give a good cursory history of bottleneck guitar and even give instructions in making a bottleneck. Unfortunately, the notes are the most outstanding feature of the album. Although Peter Finger is a good guitarist, this album does not show any degree of imagination, and that is what it so desperately needs.

The Fields of November. Norman Lee Blake.
12 selections, instrumental and vocal.
Flying Fish 004. Flying Fish Records, 3320 N. Halstead, Chicago, Ill. 60657.

Reviewed by Gary Stanton

In the past fifteen years there has been a tremendous proliferation of recording companies. While many of these miniscule labels lack much of the national distribution of the giants, they allow their performers a correspondingly greater say in what gets on the record. In general there is an inverse relationship between the prestige of the label and the variability of the records that label releases. There are at least two types of records, those for the general listener and those for other performers. The general public listens and likes; performers listen and then incorporate the material into their own repertories, when possible.

Norman Blake is a performers' musician. He is in the tradition of great southern guitar pickers. The origins of this tradition are obscured, but certainly in his conception of the guitar parts for fiddle tunes Blake pays homage to Doc Watson and Joe Maphis. If these and other musicians serve as one base for his style, his attack and rhythmic backup is very personal. Guitar is perhaps his first instrument, although on this record he is also heard on fiddle, dobro, and mandolin. In general, his arrangements feature precise, clean noting and crisp release. He also uses to good effect such extra musical devices as string slap, knocking the top, and stops to create powerful rhythmic syncopations.

As a person who has tried to play guitar for several years, I tend to classify Norman Blake as an instrumentalist. This album, along with his first, Norman Blake: Sulphur Springs (Rounder 0012), demonstrates that perhaps his greatest talent is as a songwriter. Not only does he write texts, but he has the ability to write tunes which are tunes, not just technical virtuosities. The songs themselves are rich with Blake's personal history; they are not the formulaic images of the lovesick, cheating hearts, and bar stools. Blake captures the nostalgic sense of loss which must also motivate folklorists to seek the old and rural. All of the songs on this album have been composed by Norman Blake, and the words are included on the back of the album jacket. They appear to have run out of room on the back cover and just left off the final verse of "Southern Railroad Blues."
Bluegrass is not the only commercial country music which has been interesting for folklorists, but for years it stood apart because it used acoustic instruments as opposed to the slick, electrified modern Nashville sound. Norman Blake provides an excellent example of middle ground. His instrumentation is acoustic, but not played in bluegrass style. Charlie Collins provides the bulk of the backup on either fiddle or 2nd guitar. Tut Taylor provides some very clean dobro backup on two cuts, and Nancy Short plays bowed cello on five cuts. Noticeably missing is the strong bass accent, the syncopated "chunk," of bluegrass bands. Instruments are held to a minimum (never more than three on one cut) and the vocal or lead instrument is always foregrounded. Some of the high points of the album come for me in the harmonic interplaying of the guitar and cello on "The Fields of November."

Norman Blake is an important contributor of new material to country music. Several of his pieces have been recorded by bluegrass bands, mainly the New Grass Revival. His music represents a younger generation of southern songsters who are musically sophisticated and yet preserve an identifiable connection with both their immediate predecessors in country music, centered around Nashville, and the older and more diffuse tradition of southern dance tunes.


Reviewed by Jan Rosenberg

Offtimes, listening to recordings that combine traditional and original material can be tedious. The selection of songs may be uneven and the recording levels may not be fitting to the songs. These flaws cause failure in the recording's ability to communicate.

However, Norman Blake's combination of "old and new" is a fine recording of traditional and original material. Blake's musical background is primarily traditional and his songs reflect this. Instrumental selections such as "Widow's Creek" and "Rubagfre" bring out Blake's clean, concise flatpicking style. "Rubagfre," an original work, greets the listener with an interesting arrangement which features Ben Pedigo's banjo in a descending scale, while James Bryan's fiddle and Blake's guitar weave up the scale.

On eight of the seventeen selections, Blake is accompanied by Charlie Collins whose guitar style beautifully complements Blake's.

Many innovative ideas have been put to use in this record. The cello and the viola have taken a new role, lending themselves to the more traditional type of playing. "Cuckoo's Nest" has been divided into three parts, the first consisting of the standard fiddle tune with Blake playing mandolin and Charlie Collins on guitar. The second part consists of the version of "Cuckoo's Nest" that is sung, which Blake plays as a guitar instrumental. The third part incorporates