

Comin' Round the Mountain. With Roy Caudill, Henry Vanoy, The Mills Family, Paul Wiley, Ellis Cowen, Fred McFalls, Ben Bryson. 20 selections, vocal and instrumental, mono, liner notes by Phil and Vivian Williams.

VRLP 302, Voyager Recordings, 424 35th Avenue, Seattle, Washington 98122, 1974.

The Trio From REACH: Memory Lane. By Stan Cole, Stan Guernsey, and Thelma McKibbin, with Phil Williams, Vivian Williams, and Barbara Lamb.

12 selections, vocal and instrumental, stereo.

VRLP 311-S, Voyager Recordings, 424 35th Avenue, Seattle, Washington 98122, 1976.

Reviewed by James P. Leary

Voyager Records' Comin' Round the Mountain captures a cross-section of traditional music played by transplanted southerners (from Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina) in the under-recorded Pacific Northwest. Spurred to migration for economic reasons in the years following World War II, these musicians maintained their heritage privately as well as publicly by playing at home and for "Tarheel" and other state picnics.

Represented and interspersed is the full range of southern traditional music: fiddle and banjo tunes ("Johnson Boys" in two versions, "Comin' Round the Mountain," "Cumberland Gap" in two versions, "Chicken Reel," "Old Coon Dog," "Big Stone Gap"); strictly instrumental renditions of standards usually sung ("Tom Dooley," "John Henry," "Lonesome Road Blues"); murder ballads ("Pretty Polly," "Down in the Willow Garden"); lyric songs ("Where Did You Get Those Pretty Little Shoes," "Some Forty Years Ago," "Eight More Miles to Louisville"); and moralistic and sacred pieces ("The Drunken Driver," "I'll Live in Glory," "Just One Way to the Pearly Gates," "You Gotta Walk that Lonesome Valley"). Singing and instrumental styles vary from Paul Wiley's unaccompanied delivery to the three-part harmony of the Mills Family, from Henry Vanoy's frailed banjo to the bluegrass playing of Fred McFalls and Ben Bryson.

However, producers Phil and Vivian Williams clearly wish to do more than present us with a nice sampler of pleasant, unconnected music. The absence of razzmatazz technical production (material was taped either by the musicians themselves on home recorders or during live concerts), the honest involvement (instead of "artistic" flash) sustaining each performance, and liner notes keying on the lives and travels of people, rather than words and tunes, combine vividly to demonstrate the emotional and imagistic attachments displaced southerners maintain with their physically abandoned homeland.

The juxtaposition of selections in the final quarter of the album powerfully fuses these elements. Ex-North Carolinian Bill Pruett, singing on a Washington stage, musically transports himself to Louisville; here unmistakably is a metaphor for the "sweet sunny South":

I knew someday that I'd come back.
I knew it from the start.
Eight more miles to Louisville,
The hometown of my heart.

Paul Wiley offers the nostalgic "Some Forty Years Ago" done "the way Paul's mother sang this song." Meanwhile Henry Vanoy and Roy Caudill work their way through tunes also found on the record's first side, "Cumberland Gap" and "Johnson Boys." Thus, through music, the faraway is brought near and the past is repeated.

As the title suggests, Down Memory Lane is also an excursion into the past. But there the similarity stops. While the cover of Comin' Round the Mountain depicted an ancient fiddler and banjoist playing in front of a weathered frame shack, this album's face shows us the corner of an immaculate, wall-papered parlor where a polished table holds an Edison roll record player and a western-garbed trio's portrait. The music is correspondingly genteel.

Music by The Trio from REACH (a Seattle organization dedicated to serving Senior Citizens) consists of ragtime pieces ("Swanee River Moon," "Wabash Blues," "Twelfth Street Rag") and waltzes ("Over the Waves"), a generous sampling of pop western songs ("Along the Navajo Trail," "Nighttime in Nevada," "San Antonio Rose," "Twilight on the Trail," "Snow Deer"), and other popular numbers ("Memory Lane," "Sweet Georgia Brown," "Four Leaf Clover").

Stan Cole's engaging, crooning song-style dominates the vocal selections, while Stan Guernsey's impeccable work on tenor banjo, guitar, and fiddle is featured on instrumentals. Thelma McKibbin provides steady accompaniment on piano. All three performers are veteran professional musicians, having worked "on the nightclub circuit," with vaudeville shows, and in dance orchestras. Although strict definitions of folk music might, for various reasons, dismiss their material as popular and outside the folklorists's province, it strikes me that it is functionally the folk music of aged and upwardly mobile residents of the North and West. Hopefully, Down Memory Lane will inspire fieldworkers to record the repertoires of analagous working bands in the little-explored northern and western regions of the country.