RECORD REVIEWS


Reviewed by Bob Blackman

Back in the folk music boom of the early 1960s, major labels like Elektra and Vanguard issued albums not only of genuine folksongs but of singer-songwriters working within a folk-influenced idiom. Composers like Tom Paxton, Phil Ochs, Eric Andersen, and (most successfully) Bob Dylan modelled themselves after Woody Guthrie, borrowed traditional lyric ideas and melodies, and saw their creations enter into a sort of folk tradition of their own among thousands of amateur folksingers. As the folk craze died, the traditional songs were relegated to small esoteric record labels like Folkways and Folk-Legacy, and the singer-songwriters turned to introspective and highly orchestrated albums designed to attract the popular market.

But the band of small folk labels has been growing tremendously in recent years, and they too have started attracting performers who write their own material. Perhaps this is a move to insure greater economic success--Gordon Bok sells far more Folk-Legacy albums than Frank Proffitt, surely--as well as a genuine broadening of aesthetic perspective for these companies. At any rate, several singer-songwriters currently traveling the folk festival/coffeeshouse circuit have recently released records for Philo and Flying Fish.

Bodie Wagner perpetuates the train-hopping-folksinger image that goes back to Woody Guthrie, though his album is more polished than anything Guthrie ever recorded. Wagner apparently knows whereof he sings, judging by his interview on how to "ride the rails" in a recent issue of Sing Out! (volume 24, number 3, July/August 1975). Almost every song is about rambling around the country, by truck or by train, and reveling in the independence that comes with such a life. These standard country music themes are evident from the titles alone: "I Gave My Heart to San Antone," "I've Been on the Road," "One of Those Countless Truck Stops."

Like Guthrie, Wagner relies on fairly simple and straightforward lyrics--lots of empty pockets, pickin' songs, watching the sunset, beer, good friends, and loneliness. These images are pretty unimaginative by now, and lyrically this album rarely rises past the predictable. From an "easy listening" point of view though, Wagner's sensitive vocals and (on the upbeat numbers) infectious choruses make the record fairly successful. Still there are times when the triteness just gets in the way (particularly "America," his childlike "golly-isn't-war-horrible" song).
The accompaniments are handled well by a small group of Philo regulars, most notably Martin Grosswendt on pedal steel and dobro, along with Wagner's own capable guitar and harmonica. Not surprisingly, he yodels too. Bodie Wagner doesn't have the bite of a Woody Guthrie, nor the outrageously distinct persona of his traveling companion U. Utah Phillips. But he writes and sings pleasantly enough, making his first record quite easy to enjoy.

Even better is Mary McCaslin's *Prairie in the Sky*. Her superb singing and guitar work (often with open tunings) do justice to an excellent choice of material. Most of these songs have western motifs, a theme common in McCaslin's music. Yet there are interesting twists throughout, as in Bob Simpson's "Cornerstone Cowboy," about a cowboy-turned-city bum who clings to old memories. "Ghost Riders in the Sky" by Stan Jones gets appropriately eerie treatment via echo chambers and some fine French horn breaks. The charming "Ballad of Weaverville" (co-written by McCaslin and her usual partner Jim Ringer) offers a presumably fictitious place-name legend in song; a gambler named Jim Weaver cleans out a whole town, then offers to bet his entire stake against a single cut of the cards if they'll name the town after him should he win. The song's title gives away the result.

McCaslin's West is not a wholly pleasant one. Unreliable friends and lovers are there and "The Dealers" have filled the sky with smokestacks. The outlaw makes his appearance in the album's one traditional song, "Cole Younger." Yet she can still close the record with Marty Robbins' "My Love"—sounding quite genuine in her affection for the region—and her "Prairie in the Sky" pictures a romantic cowboy's—or cowgirl's—Heaven (ala the sailors' Fiddler's Green).

The only thing this album lacks is more of Jim Ringer's harmony singing; he's only on a few cuts here, and the mix leaves him almost inaudible at that. When performing as a duo, Ringer and McCaslin make some of the best-matched harmonies in folk-country music, but this hasn't been captured on record since Ringer's *Good To Get Home* a few years ago. Other than that, it's hard to complain. The back-up musicians are splendid and McCaslin herself is up to her usual high standard.

Unlike Wagner and McCaslin, John Hartford had released quite a few records for two major commercial labels before making his new one, *Mark Twang*, his first album for Flying Fish, is by far his simplest recording, and it suffers for it. The total effect is much like Hartford's recent solo concerts—his even includes some spoken introductions and self-amused laughter—but without the vital spark of a live appearance.

Hartford's hallmark is a unique sense of humor, evident here on "Don't Leave Your Records in the Sun" (the album's most delightful cut) and "Tryin' To Do Something To Get Your Attention." Both of these employ the bizarre vocal sound effects in which he specializes. He also parodies the Monroe-Flatt bluegrass classic "Little Cabin Home on the Hill," "Dueling Banjos" (here called "Dueling Faces" and played on his own cheeks), and even the Lord's Prayer.

The more serious cuts reflect Hartford's infatuation with riverboats, as does the attractive jacket design. These songs are listenable enough but not really memorable, and the sparse solo accompaniments don't offer much help. Hartford's last few albums (Aeria-Plain and Morning Bugle, both on Warner Bros.) enjoyed some fine ensemble picking by Norman Blake and other sidemen, but *Mark Twang* has only Hartford himself, alternating between fiddle, banjo, and guitar. His playing is competent but unexciting, and the charm of his low-key approach on stage just doesn't survive the transition to vinyl.
So the funny songs raise a smile or two for the first few playings, a seven-minute pseudo-classical fiddle instrumental is truly boring, and most of the other tracks fall somewhere in between. This isn't a terrible album by any means, but it's a disappointment compared with Hartford's better work.

Bill Vanaver and Livia Drapkin have put together the most eclectic album of the bunch, and the one which remains closest to traditional roots. This duo performs a wide range of folk music from Eastern Europe as well as the United States--in concert Vanaver seems to play virtually every stringed instrument known to man--and their record reflects this diversity.

Three of the cuts are original instrumentals by Vanaver: one with a Bulgarian rhythm, another a lively hornpipe, and the last (and perhaps least enjoyable track on the LP) inspired by Greek shadow puppets. Three more songs actually come from Greece (two by native composers, one traditional) and one is from the U.S.S.R. The performers sound reasonably authentic to this unauthoritative ear, and the vocal drones on the traditional Greek selection are particularly effective.

The American numbers cover a lot of ground but center around old-timey influences. A fine Jimmie Rodgers blues, and Aunt Molly Jackson's bitter union song "Hard Times in Coleman's Mines," stand out; there's also an Uncle Dave Macon song, The Monroe Brothers' "Where Is My Sailor Boy," and a nice version of the traditional ballad "Buffalo Skinners."

Landfall II offers much more of Vanaver than Drapkin, who appears on only five of the thirteen tracks. Her main contribution is a rendition of Peggy Seeger's superb feminist song, "I'm Gonna Be an Engineer," but her little-girlish voice fails to capture the strength of the lyrics. England's best female singer, Frankie Armstrong, has popularized the song in this country, and her performance (available on Bay Records 206) has the force and irony that Drapkin's misses.

As usual, Philo's production is excellent. The record's biggest failing is the scantiness of the liner notes, which should have given much more information about the songs and the unusual instruments played on the album. (The latter are frequently misspelled, at that.) Jay Ungar (fiddle, mandolin) and Abby Newton (cello) are among the assisting musicians who produce quite an array of sounds on this good record.

If Prairie in the Sky and Landfall II win the highest praise of this review, some of the credit goes to McCaslin, Vanaver, and Drapkin for not feeling compelled to pad out an entire LP with solely their own compositions. There are so many great songs already in existence--traditional and composed--that it's always nice to see performers taking advantage of that resource.

Buddy Emmons Sings Bob Wills.
10 vocal and 2 instrumental selections featuring Buddy Emmons, vocal and steel guitar; Johnny Gimble and Buddy Spicher, fiddles; Leon Rhodes and Phil Baugh, guitars; Fip Robbins, piano; Larrie Londin, drums and others.
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