
Reviewed by Carol L. Edwards

Concert is an album jacketed in verbal and visual "old-timey" cuteness in the same manner, ostensibly, as the band's music is performed. Although the jacket blurb is ample, the reader in search of discography is forced to wade through an endless bathtub routine and then is expected to swallow a Gnaw Bone teabag factory tale. The group, The Old Hat Band, presents mustachioed melodrama from their medicine show wagon before each musical performance. Yet, lest this trivia prove offensive, we are assured that this "unusually imaginative parody of the entertainment world" is not simply a "cute put-on" but a "vehicle" for their "undiluted" music and that their stage names--Crepidula Crookshank, Dr. Avery P. Snootful, and Ebenezer Flue ("The Fiddling Wonder of Gnaw Bone, Indiana") are "more like alter-egos than aliases." In short, these three musicians engage in antics whose implication is that traditional American music is something performed by country lasses and cowboys from quaint little Indiana towns. In yet another myopic metaphor, the band is characterized as the independent small farmer in opposition to the corporation factory farm; yet their performance pretensions arise from "Jolly Green Giant" mentality. Ellen Bush (banjo), John Burke (fiddle), and Jeff Thorne (guitar), are "just folks" fiddlin' on the street corner where they were discovered by Voyager Recordings.

The cuts, including "Soldier's Joy," "Old Joe Clark," "I'm Going to Tell God How You Treat Me," are classics performed in impeccable, but unfortunately two-dimensional, imitation of what might be termed politely "Country-Western ballad-gospel" style (a style assuredly original to the group). Ellen Bush's thin, nasal posturing lacks the unstrained linearity of a Mother Maybelle Carter. In "Soldier's Joy," with the fiddle bereft of resonant sweetness, tension is sacrificed for tempo. The band is at their best in pieces like "Eight More Miles to Louisville" or "Coming to Us Dead," in which they become so involved in the music that they forget to "perform." In short, the Old Hat Band should abandon their "act" and find their own style.