

RECORD REVIEWS

Round the Heart of Old Galax. Volume 1--Featuring Ernest Stoneman. E.V. Stoneman with Eck Dunford, George Stoneman, Kahle Brewer, Irma Frost, Herbert Sweet, Earl Sweet, Hattie Stoneman, Bolen Frost, and others. 14 selections, vocal and instrumental. Jacket notes by Wayne Martin. County Records 533, P. O. Box 191 Floyd, Virginia 24091, 1981.

Volume 2--Featuring the Ward Family. Crockett Ward, Fields Ward, Sampson Ward, Wade Ward, E.V. Stoneman, Eck Dunford, Perline Ward, and others. 13 selections, vocal and instrumental. Jacket notes by Wayne Martin. County 534, 1981.

Volume 3. The Sweet brothers, J.P. Nestor and Norman Edmunds, Wade Ward, Emmett Lundy, The Pipers Gap Ramblers, E.V. Stoneman, John Rector, and others. 14 selections, vocal and instrumental. Jacket notes by Wayne Martin. County 535, 1981.

Reviewed by Paul L. Tyler

There is no doubt that the town of Galax, Virginia is in "the heart of a region rich in traditional music," as Wayne Martin proclaims in the notes to this three volume series of LPs. The anthology that Martin has put together documents the richness of the musical heritage of Grayson and Carroll Counties in the 1920s and 30s. Yet Martin claims more for the town of Galax: that it is the heart of a strong regional music tradition. The title of the three LPs (each is available separately) testifies to the symbolic power the town of Galax has come to assume in relation to traditional instrumental music, especially string band music, in the Upland South. But Martin only alludes to Galax's special identity: "Rarely has one region produced so many musicians of such high caliber." He does not substantiate this comparative statement, nor does he try to explain why this town should be so honored. Some of the celebrated Galax musicians come from nearby, and perhaps larger, towns such as Hillsville and Independence.

The Galax mystique raises some interesting questions for folklorists and students of popular culture. Why does one place stand out as especially rich in tradition, while other locations nearby are just as rich, but less noted? Patrick County, Virginia and Surrey County, North Carolina have produced good crops of musicians of high caliber, but they are not at the heart of the regional tradition. And whence comes the need to relate all traditional musicians to a regional style? Over the last twenty to thirty years, it has become standard for students and enthusiasts of old-time music to talk about "the Galax sound." Recent research by Tom Carter and Blanton Owen in a twelve county area in the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia and North Carolina suggests that the stylistic picture is more complex, and that the Galax sound might not be as widespread or as monolithic as it once appeared to be.¹ The Galax mystique may prove to be largely an outsider's view of traditional music in the Blue Ridge area of southern Virginia. One factor which has certainly contributed to the special standing of Galax is the long-running Fiddlers Convention held there annually. The Convention, when it was begun in 1934, was not a unique event. The Galax Convention, however, survived through the 1950s, lean years for traditional music, and into the 1960s when it was discovered by urban folksong enthusiasts from the North. Galax became an annual pilgrimage for young musicians, and it was important in sparking the folksong revivals of the 1960s and 70s. Wayne Martin's anthology is a tribute to the special place Galax has in the hearts of the many devotees of traditional music of the Upland South.

Whether or not Galax is the musical capital of the Upland South is really beside the point. The richness of the musical heritage of this area has been well-documented through the years. A proportionately large number of musicians from the area have been recorded: first by commercial recording companies in the 1920s, then by folklorists for the Library of Congress Archives of American Folksong in the 1930s, and more recently by another flood of folklorists--both amateur and professional--and record company AER men representing small, independent labels. Martin's anthology is by no means the only documentation of the music from around Galax, nor is it unique in the time period it

covers. Its value is in filling in some of the gaps for those who want as complete a record as possible and in bringing together in one set a sampling of fine performances by some of the best performers the region produced in the 1920s and 30s.

Volume 1 features a good cross-section of the music recorded commercially in the the 1920s and 30s by Ernest V. "Pop" Stoneman with his family and associates. Stoneman has not been held in high regard by some who value "the Galax Sound," for he was something of an opportunist who carved out a professional career for himself. Yet his repertoire sprang from the diverse streams of tradition found in his home area, and included ballads, sentimental songs, sacred songs, humorous songs, and instrumental music. Many of Stoneman's performances utilized the more or less standard string band alignment of fiddle, guitar, and banjo. Some of the most accomplished instrumentalists from Galax recorded with Stoneman, such as fiddlers Kahle Brewer and Eck Dunford. Stoneman was also one of the few early country musicians to record with a parlour organ, an instrument which has played a large role in many family music traditions in the South.

Volume 2 features the multi-talented Ward family in a sampling of both field recordings for the Library of Congress and commercial recordings. The Wards, in sharp contrast to Stoneman, never regarded themselves as professional musicians. Still, Crockett Ward did take his family band to Winston-Salem, North Carolina to cut some sides for the Okeh company in 1927. Two years later Crockett's sons Fields and Sampson joined with Eck Dunford and Stoneman for a recording trip to the Gennet studios in Richmond, IN. None of these later sides were ever issued, and the earlier recordings by "Crockett Ward and His Boys" do not seem to have been great commercial successes. Thus the reissue of five of these sides here is of some value. The other selections on **Volume 2** are field recordings of ballads by Crockett and his wife Perline; a ballad by Fields; a string band selection by the more or less casual group that Crockett assembled under the name of the Ballard Branch Bogtrotters; and three banjo pieces by Wade Ward, including a rare vocal. In the 1960s, Wade (who was Crockett's brother) gained widespread fame as one of the premier old-time

banjo players of his generation. It is ironic that his fame appears to have been greater among urban enthusiasts than among residents of the Galax area in the 1960s, when bluegrass was becoming more popular than the older string-band style.

Volume 3 presents a wider selection of Galax area musicians. Most of them, such as J.P. Nestor and Norman Edmunds and the Pipers Gap Ramblers, recorded only a few commercial sides and then returned to their normal manner of playing music locally on an amateur basis. Other musicians heard on **Volume 3** were recorded by fieldworkers for the Library of Congress. Two more performances by Wade Ward are included on **Volume 3**, along with performances by fiddlers John Rector and Emmett Lundy. The presence of Lundy is the real strength of this last volume. He was visited by a folklorist in 1941, when he was in his seventies. His style and repertoire provide a link to the legendary nineteenth century Galax fiddler, Green Leonard. Lundy, in turn, was very influential on the succeeding generations of fiddlers, including Eck Dunford and Kahle Brewer (who can be heard on **Volume 1 & 2**). Lundy was also a tremendous influence on Charlie Higgins, a fine fiddler who seems never to have been recorded in his prime. By all rights he should be included in this anthology, but he seems to have slipped away in the gaps between folklorists' visits.

Round the Heart of Old Galax is a healthy sampling of the fine music played in and around Galax, Virginia in the 1920s and 30s. Overall, the material seems to be well selected and arranged. Yet it seems that **Volume 3** might have become the repository for left overs. For example: E.V. Stoneman appears again with the Sweet Brothers, who were not from the Galax area. These performances, and the Wade Ward recordings that would more logically belong on **Volume 2**, could have been replaced with other performances by, say, John Rector or Norman Edmunds, or perhaps by other instrumentalists or singers not yet represented. Martin's notes are adequate, as far as they go. The anthology comes off as an attractively presented, but unbalanced documentation of the rich tradition found in one place, in one time period.

NOTES

1. **Old Originals.** 2 Volumes. Rounder Records 0057-58, 186 Willow Avenue, Somerville, Massachusetts 02144.