

## RECORD REVIEW

**Uncle Dave Macon with the Fruit Jar Drinkers. Go 'Long Mule.** Dave Macon with Sam McGee, Kirk McGee, Mazy Todd, and (on one cut) unknown fiddler. 14 selections, vocal and instrumental. Jacket notes by Bill Knowlton. County Records 545, P.O. Box 191, Floyd, Va., 24091.

Reviewed by Bill Ellis

David Harrison Macon (1870-1952) began playing banjo when he was fifteen, picking up his core repertory and basic style not from rural musicians but from the many professional vaudeville performers that stayed at his father's Nashville hotel. Later moving to a farm near to Murfreesboro, he did contact folk musicians and did add traditional material to his stock, though probably not as much as scholars would like. He turned professional late in life, at fifty, but by the end of 1925, when he first appeared on WSM-Nashville's barn dance program (to become the Grand Ole Opry) he was already a well-travelled vaudevillian with thirty-six recorded sides-- more than any rural band on the early Opry was ever to record. By the end of his recording career in 1938 he would have made over two hundred cuts. His records thus provide us with a detailed picture of one of the popular stage traditions that influenced the creation of the professional rural-directed industry that became country music.

This reissue is the thirteenth LP record to feature Uncle Dave Macon, including two of informal home and off-the-air recordings.<sup>1</sup> One might expect it to fall prey to the law of diminishing returns, but, surprisingly, it competes well with the others for two reasons. First, it includes several sides reissued but which suffered from poor remastering or which have been unavailable for many years. The title cut, for instance, was reissued on RBF RF-51, but with so primitive sound that it was mistaken by the compilers for "Tom and Jerry" (in fact on the flip side). Decca's reissue (DL-4760) was not quite as poor on sound, but was on the market for only a few years and now is a collector's item like the original 78's. County makes seven of these titles available again in far superior sound.

In addition to better remastering, though, County's selection of material brings Macon's real instrumental strengths to the foreground. From the beginning, of course, he was a stage presence as well as a banjo-player, but his last recordings show that his musical abilities unfortunately deteriorated after 1930, even though he continued as a "character" performer on the Opry for more than twenty years.<sup>1</sup> His later playing, an enthusiastic but approximate "rapping", still more unfortunately was the style imitated by his admirers, most notably Grandpa Jones of "Hee-haw". Hence Macon's banjo playing has become associated with crude, careless frailing accompanied by equally crude mugging.

All but two of the selections on this reissue were recorded between 1926 and 1930, when Macon was still in his prime. Only one of these, moreover, shows him "rapping"; the rest present him picking fluently in his<sup>3</sup> preferred style, a classic-banjo derived three-finger roll.<sup>3</sup> Emphasis is also given the sides with Sam McGee-- often with finger-style banjo-guitar-- or with the full band of Sam and Kirk McGee and Rutherford County fiddler Jasper Aaron "Mazy" Todd. In such company Macon extended himself, and this album more consistently than any other shows him a solid, if not virtuoso, three-finger picker. Certainly he was recognized as the preeminent rural-oriented banjo player before the Depression, a fact that makes his oft-quoted criticisms of the young Earl Scruggs less provincial than they often seem.

Although most of the material on this album, in line with Macon's repertory, is popular and vaudeville derived, folklorists still will find several numbers noteworthy. "The Death of John Henry" is a distinctive and well played variant of the ballad, probably black-derived and much closer to versions like Furry Lewis's<sup>4</sup> than to the usual white southeastern ones. The spiritual "When the Train Comes Along" is also probably black-derived,<sup>5</sup> the history of which has been reviewed by Norm Cohen.<sup>5</sup> "Buddy Won't You Roll Down the Line" is another blues-ballad with a complex history, well traced by Archie Green.<sup>6</sup> The full band is heard mainly on minstrel-derived pieces like "Carve that Possum" and the familiar "Hold the Woodpile Down", but the one instrumental reissued here, "Tom and Jerry",

not only shows Macon's ability to use three-finger styles for driving back-up, but also preserves the custom (still found in central Ohio) of dividing a square dance set into "halves" (sometimes three or more!). Macon's way of reworking popular songs into his act is shown in his re-composition of "The Bowery", here titled "I'll Never Go There Anymore". Originally written in 1891 for a female performer, the song becomes a series of male numbskull experiences.

As one of them shows the dupe thrown out of a theatre when he objects to the singing of "New Coon in Town", Macon must have sung this on stage in blackface. Regrettably, few of his other "coon songs" have been reissued in this country. Finally, "When Reubin Comes to Town" (which is not related to "Reuben's Train") is the closest yet to a domestic reissue of one of Macon's banjo solos, unaccountably overlooked by other albums.

For the music, then, County's album is a worthy survey of Macon's strengths. As with their earlier Macon reissue (#521), though, the jacket notes are poor, repeating only a number of well-worn anecdotes about Uncle Dave's eccentricity. Little is said about his musical background-- and that little tends to be condescending-- and nothing at all is said about the songs reissued. Thus one would have to own the Decca reissue to know that the two distinct tunes on "Tom and Jerry" are **not** "Tom" and "Jerry", but rather a local tune called "The New-Cut Road" and "Tom and Jerry", a piece better known in Texas than in the south-east. Similarly, Macon's habit of adding bits of other numbers to the start and finish of his sides is overlooked-- such as the brief fiddle-banjo "Ryestraw" on "Johnny Gray" or the spectacular twin-banjo "Chicken Reel" that concludes "Oh Baby, You Done Me Wrong". Still, for the selections, this and the earlier County reissue remain the two LP's currently available that most thoroughly present Dave Macon as both an entertainer and a musician.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Three on Vetco (101,105, and 108), three on Bear Family (a West German firm, FV-12503,15518, and 15519), two now on County (521 and 545), and one each on Historical

(HLP-8006), RBF (RF-51), Decca (DL-4760; cut-out), Rounder (1028; informal recordings), and Davis Unlimited (TFS-100; informal recordings; cut-out).

2 Macon admitted as much on one of his last recordings: "I used to pick the banjo,/ I picked it good and stout,/ Now I'm only rapping,/ Still broadcasting out." ("They're After Me", Bluebird BB-8422, recorded 1/24/38, reissued on Bear Family 15519).

3 Macon was not the only Opry performer before Scruggs to play this style: Theron Hale, composer of "Hale's Rag", also played three-finger roll, though he recorded only his fiddling. One of his students, Homer Davenport, did record "Maybelle Rag" with the Young Brothers, using three-finger style. The side is reissued by Rounder on **Tennessee Strings** (#1033).

4 On Folkways FS 3823: **Furry Lewis**.

5 **Long Steel Rail** (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), pp. 633-35.

6 **Only A Miner** (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), pp. 195-239.

7 Some have been reissued in West Germany on Bear Family 15518.