

Lester Raymond Flatt. Lester Flatt and the Nashville Grass.
12 selections (and four "remarks"), vocal and instrumental, stereo, liner notes by Lester's manager, Lance LeRoy.
Flying Fish 015. Flying Fish Records, 3320 N. Halstead, Chicago, Ill. 60657.

Reviewed by Bill Revill

Lester Flatt has been playing professionally for nearly forty years, and this album of twelve songs tries to act as a retrospect on his career. Backed by his band the Nashville Grass, Flatt runs over some of the numbers he used to do with Earl and the Foggy Mountain Boys. The performances are credible, the band is in excellent form (especially Marty Stuart on guitar), and Lester is in fine voice.

It is not an outstanding album, except perhaps for the fact that it serves as a review of the career of one of the most important names in bluegrass. Lester Flatt has been around since the beginning of bluegrass, coming into the spotlight in 1944 when he joined Bill Monroe's organization. From 1948 to 1969, Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs were the paramount bluegrass band in the country. Since the breakup, Flatt has retained most of the Foggy Mountain Boys, added a couple of members, and continues to play bluegrass.

The choice of material centers mostly on old Flatt and Scruggs material ("Come Back Darling," "Down the Road," "A Hundred Years from Now," "My Cabin in Caroline," "Foggy Mountain Chimes," etc.) and some other songs of historical interest, e.g., "The Wreck of the Old 97," the first song Flatt learned, and "I'm Gonna Sleep with One Eye Open," a song that was banned from WSM.

The liner notes offer a fairly detailed biography of Lester Flatt, and the history that his manager outlines is invaluable to any bluegrass devotee. Again though, credit should be given to the instrumentalists. The band members are all listed, but it is difficult to tell which guitarist and which mandolin player is doing what.

If not the father of bluegrass, Lester Flatt is at least an uncle or cousin, and this album attests to his durability.

Bottleneck Guitar Solos. Peter Finger.
16 selections, instrumental, stereo, liner notes by Stefan Grossman (producer).
Kicking Mule KM 116. Kicking Mule Record Co., Box 3233, Berkeley, Cal. 94703.

Reviewed by Bill Revill

Kicking Mule records is a small, California-based company, dedicated to producing guitar records. Peter Finger has put together an album of 16 tunes exploring the bottleneck guitar, and proves that he can play the instrument. Competence in playing, however, does not imply a competence in composing, and most of these tunes are redundant and the kind of things you'd expect to hear a

college freshman play in the shower stall at 3:00 a.m. It will be of value for those who want to learn bottleneck guitar (a tabulature is available from the company) and perhaps the record can serve as a bottleneck primer. As a collection of good bottleneck material, though, it fails.

Stefan Grossman's liner notes give a good cursory history of bottleneck guitar and even give instructions in making a bottleneck. Unfortunately, the notes are the most outstanding feature of the album. Although Peter Finger is a good guitarist, this album does not show any degree of imagination, and that is what it so desperately needs.

The Fields of November. Norman Lee Blake.

12 selections, instrumental and vocal.

Flying Fish 004. Flying Fish Records, 3320 N. Halstead, Chicago, Ill. 60657.

Reviewed by Gary Stanton

In the past fifteen years there has been a tremendous proliferation of recording companies. While many of these miniscule labels lack much of the national distribution of the giants, they allow their performers a correspondingly greater say in what gets on the record. In general there is an inverse relationship between the prestige of the label and the variability of the records that label releases. There are at least two types of records, those for the general listener and those for other performers. The general public listens and likes; performers listen and then incorporate the material into their own repertoires, when possible.

Norman Blake is a performers' musician. He is in the tradition of great southern guitar pickers. The origins of this tradition are obscured, but certainly in his conception of the guitar parts for fiddle tunes Blake pays homage to Doc Watson and Joe Maphis. If these and other musicians serve as one base for his style, his attack and rhythmic backup is very personal. Guitar is perhaps his first instrument, although on this record he is also heard on fiddle, dobro, and mandolin. In general, his arrangements feature precise, clean noting and crisp release. He also uses to good effect such extra musical devices as string slap, knocking the top, and stops to create powerful rhythmic syncopations.

As a person who has tried to play guitar for several years, I tend to classify Norman Blake as an instrumentalist. This album, along with his first, Norman Blake: Sulphur Springs (Rounder 0012), demonstrates that perhaps his greatest talent is as a songwriter. Not only does he write texts, but he has the ability to write tunes which are tunes, not just technical virtuositities. The songs themselves are rich with Blake's personal history; they are not the formulaic images of the lovesick, cheating hearts, and bar stools. Blake captures the nostalgic sense of loss which must also motivate folklorists to seek the old and rural. All of the songs on this album have been composed by Norman Blake, and the words are included on the back of the album jacket. They appear to have run out of room on the back cover and just left off the final verse of "Southern Railroad Blues."