

Bottle Hill. Light Our Way Along the Highway.
13 selections, vocal and instrumental, stereo.
Biograph Records, P.O. Box 109, Canaan, N.Y., 12029

Country Cooking with the Fiction Brothers.
12 selections, vocal and instrumental, stereo.
Flying Fish Records, 3320 N. Halsted, Chicago, Ill. 60657

Country Cooking. Out to Lunch.
13 selections, vocal and instrumental, stereo.
Flying Fish Records, 3320 N. Halsted, Chicago, Ill. 60657

Reviewed by Philip Nusbaum

The person uninitiated in to bluegrass music attending his first bluegrass festival is quickly made aware that there's more going on than appears on stage. As a people's music, bluegrass is kept alive by the small groups which gather in parking lots and around campers. These are the settings for the truly hardcore bluegrass action, and where amateur musicians and record collectors hold their summit conferences to once again engage in two hallowed rituals: exchanging gossip about "the stars" and "deciding whether it's bluegrass or not."

Learning about the distinctiveness of bluegrass--what makes it different from other musics--is an important aspect of becoming a bluegrass fan. In order to become a hardcore fan, the novice must learn what the boundaries of the music are well enough to be able to pass on this information. This includes the ability to identify and judge aspects of personal and group music style, and give explanatory information about the stars' conduct and music.

Thus, from the beginning of their interest, bluegrass fans are more style-conscious than the casual music listener. Enjoyment of bluegrass goes beyond which-station-to-put-on-while-washing-the-dishes. It becomes linked to going to festivals, keeping up with trends in the music, and being able to make distinctions within the music.

Recurrent activity which occurs in more-or-less specific contexts--like "talking bluegrass" at festivals--is, of course, a kind of activity suited to folkloristic investigation. If we add to the above that there are heroes and villains (the stars) connected with the activity, that those present in the activity believe they are maintaining a tradition, and that the activity contains the classification and comparison of a corpus of materials, it is easy to understand why folklorists find bluegrass music an engaging phenomenon: the thrust of the interests of the bluegrass community are part and parcel those of folklorists.

Although academics and bluegrass fans share perspectives on the art of bluegrass, we ought to draw a line between the nature and content of the perspective. While the perspective is shared, the content of the perspectives is not. This is not to say that the content focus--say, the type of banjo playing employed by Alan Munde--would be different, depending on whether the conversation is between fans or folklorists. Rather, the course taken by conversationalists as to the level of Alan Munde's playing is entirely contingent upon the conversation and the course it takes, no matter what official designation the talkers may have. And that "meaning" may or may not have a correspondence with Munde's or his band's intent for the music. Thus, a music's status as "newgrass" is contingent upon the situation, and a piece of music can achieve "newgrass" status for different reasons.

All this is to say that I, the reviewer, can do no more in treating a record that some other bluegrass fan or folklorist. I do claim, however, that the review I am about to write will be valuable in that by describing music, it will convey information which

a reader can use as a source to compare with his own judgments. The information will consist of different ways of interpreting and classifying bluegrass music, and as I proceed, I will be operating on a level relevant to being a bluegrass fan and scholar. I hope that my reflections, combined with those of readers, might result in academic instruction about bluegrass that could involve students at this critical level. Students involved in learning to "talk bluegrass" will then not only acquire academic knowledge (quickly forgotten) about this dynamic music style, but will also acquire the beginnings of cultural competence as a member of the bluegrass community.

Since "talking bluegrass" is contingent upon the circumstances of the conversation, I must report the status of the three records I am reviewing vis-a-vis my selection of them for review. These records were selected because I felt, without first hearing them, that they would all be in the category "newgrass." This was predicted on the basis of my knowledge of the personalities and histories of the bands and their personnel. Country Cooking has been known for their off-beat approach to bluegrass. Their previous albums, for example, have featured Andy Statman who switched between mandolin and saxophone. The latter is certainly not a bluegrass instrument. In addition, the designation Fiction Brothers," who play with Country Cooking on this disc, is a pun on the idea of the brother duet, a hallowed tradition in country music. The Dixon Brothers, the Morris Brothers, the Allen Brothers, the Delmore Brothers, the Bolick Brothers, the Lilly Brothers, the Monroe Brothers, the McReynolds Brothers, the Everly Brothers and the Louvin Brothers all really were brothers who sang duets. "Fiction Brothers" implies a style of singing associated with brother teams, but deprives the two men from any actual family ties. In addition, two women appear on the album cover, and while I would never claim that women are not a part of bluegrass, it is unusual to find two women in a non-gospel, non-family bluegrass group. Thus, I was led to the expectation that the album would be far out indeed. Bottle Hill was predicted to be on the outer fringes of bluegrass. Once, while perusing the album jacket and listening to a previous release of theirs, I was struck by the fact that they seemed to represent ethnic groups outside of those from which bluegrass is supposed to spring, and I was amused by their treatment of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," the Judy Garland smash hit of another era. Indeed, I expected an off-beat album from this bunch. In the third case, Country Gazette has always featured "progressive" musicians as part of their band. Indeed, members of the band have had an association with the Hot Burrito Review, and the West Coast country rock scene in general. A previous release of theirs was notable for its use of non-traditional chord changes, putting it in my category of "newgrass."

Obviously anyone could argue over the above subjectivisms. For example, one could claim that information about the musicians is inadmissible evidence in classifying, for isn't music sound the only true test of what kind of music it is? To such a criticism I can only reply that musicians' heritage and track record are sometimes used as a barometer of style in discussions about bluegrass among fans, and even in liner notes and scholarly articles. How many times, for example, is the traditional music of Ralph Stanley noted as arising out of the hills of his childhood? Lest I be accused of arguing with myself, I will continue with more possible interpretations of the three albums. All the albums will be treated as "newgrass" albums. Whether they "really are" is another matter, the point of this being to argue from a perspective in the manner of "talking bluegrass."

The Bottle Hill album is by far the most interesting disc to be reviewed here. The band doggedly slips in and out of stylistic niches, so that one is often aware that this is a bluegrass band solely by the fact that they reach into classic bluegrass style now and again, and by the predominance of bluegrass instruments. Their shifting from style to style (or technique to technique). Their avoidance of a general pattern to their sound, is the chief reason for this album's stature as "newgrass." Their material often differs greatly from the song forms of classic bluegrass. In classic bluegrass, singers sing verses and choruses, and the singing is interspersed with instrumental solos, which are also used to open and close songs. The sung verses and choruses are regular in their structure; they are generally of a set metrical duration. The structure and the melody and chord pattern of the first verse and chorus are the model for those

which follow. Instrumental solos generally follow the pattern set by what is sung, unless a shorter soloing space is required, whereupon the "turnaround" is employed. In addition, there is a distinct lack of alteration of instrumental tone in bluegrass, save for the variations in loudness according to whether an instrument is being used in a solo or backup role. Other notes on classic bluegrass playing might be given, but enough has already been written to come up with a statement on classic bluegrass style: once you establish a pattern, stick with it!

Bottle Hill breaks bluegrass convention in two major ways: they depart from the traditional usage of the instruments, and they break any semblance of new patterns they set up. The very first cut on the album, "Morning Light," foreshadows what is to come. It opens with only the guitar playing, then guitar and bass, and finally the mandolin is added, all playing a riff seemingly unrelated to the theme of the song. Later, the song features not only lead guitar, but backup guitar played on single strings—that is, in the manner of playing lead guitar. The latter is particularly notable, for while lead guitar is now not wildly out of the ordinary in bluegrass, guitar backup consisting of other than open chords and bass runs is still quite unusual. Over and over, Bottle Hill opens numbers with musical sections unrelated to what follows. "Cheese Stollen" opens with a series of chords without any lead playing overlaid, and it is reminiscent of rock playing. (In bluegrass, rhythm sections do not generally gain prominence). This device is repeated later in the piece under a bass solo. A wildly dissonant fiddle break using a Grappelli-esque tone (which also breaks away from the continuous series of tones with no rests used by most bluegrass musicians) is heard. "El Cumanchero" and "Tall Pines" receive fairly standard treatments, save for a section near the end of the latter, where a dissonant and naked guitar-mandolin duet transposes the key up a fourth. "Luxury Liner" opens in a manner reminiscent of some James Brown numbers. We hear bass and drum, with occasional punctuation by a guitar chord and held together by a mandolin lead. The mandolin plays a continuous series of notes, a la classic bluegrass, but emphasizes the off-beat rhythm. The singing begins with this "soul" rhythm underpinning it, is then deserted for a more standard treatment, and finally the off-beat rhythm returns during a solo. The piece continues in this shifting way. "Old Kentucky Home" belies the northern-ness of Bottle Hill. The piece creates a scene of drunkenness, wife beating, kicking mama down the stairs, bird shooting, and gross obesity, in a mood not nostalgic, but which puns on the nostalgic type of song about "the old home" which is rampant in country music. The melody of the chorus is lifted from Stephen Foster's "Old Kentucky Home," while the rest of the piece is not. And they put in their trademark—the dissonant solo—this time featuring electric guitar and bass. The band's propensity for satirizing the God-and-mother syndrome in country music continues in "The Old Neon Dross," which finds the singer lost and stumbling on the steps of a church house and met by a thunderclap and the words "you can be saved if you just come in." The singer staggers in and "sleeps it off" in the 14th pew. A "choir of angels" finishes the song, singing "the light must not go out on that old neon cross" in a manner that seems to lead into the sunset. It's a clever way to end the album, especially since this satire on gospel music occurs at the spot on the album where a straight bluegrass band might place a hymn. In terms of material, there are very few standards on this album. "Hard Hearted" and "Tall Pines" belong in this category, while the other songs seem to be new songs, out of country (though not necessarily bluegrass) tradition, or from the rock and roll repertoire.

I have a lot less to write about Country Gazette. Perhaps another reviewer could find more to write about, but the disc's total effect is a lot smoother than Bottle Hill's. There is less about this disc that grabs one at the lapels, compared with the Bottle Hill release which oozes with new kinds of arrangements. On the other hand, Country Gazette adheres to the more standard bluegrass practice of setting and maintaining a pattern. What is especially striking on their set are the vocal arrangements. Traditionally, bluegrass proceeds with either a solo voice or a duet or trio. Whatever the case, voices come out as razor sharp lines, Bill Monroe's tenor being a case in point. With Country Gazette, backing vocals are given the character of some rock and roll. The backing is somewhat breathy, giving the vocals the quality of the Monkees

or Beatles. Backing is as much "whispered" or "hooted" as it is sung, as the voices obtain the quality of a musical instrument. (The hooted-sung distinction was pointed out to me by Steve Zibelman, a transplanted Philadelphian who lives on the West Coast, who can sing any part of many early rock 'n' roll vocal group numbers.) Indeed, on "Melody for Baby," instrumental breaks are accompanied by "aah" vocalizing on the part of the singers. The total effect of this kind of singing is that it gives a tenor presence, but deprives the sound of the Montee-Stanley overpowering and clear tenor, and gives this disc a "newgrass" feel. Although banjoist Alan Munde does not go in for "blues chromatic" playing to the extent of Bottle Hill's Harry Orlove, his playing features the rounded phrasing of "chromatic" playing. ("Blues chromatic" and "chromatic" are terms introduced by Tom Adler, who is involved in an extended work displaying the formulas banjoists employ.) This approach differs from the older "Scruggs-style" approach to the instrument, and use of the melodic chromatic style also gives Country Gazette's playing a distinctly "newgrass" feel. This is especially the case on the standard "Sunny Side of the Mountain," where we are accustomed to the older style banjo arrangement. Another unusual arrangement occurs in the folkie standard "The Last Thing on my Mind." The tune opens, and all breaks feature, the bass part played on one note with the mandolin strumming an accompaniment which carries the melody as well as the feeling of a drone note, as does the fiddle. Country Gazette does not stray from standard chord progressions to the same extent as Bottle Hill (which seems to drop chords entirely in its more free form moments), but at least one song is notable in that its chord structure "wanders all over the place." "Melody For Baby" progresses I-III-VI-II-V in the verses and VI_m-II_m-IV-VI_m-II_m-IV-II-V in the bridge. It should also be mentioned that Country Gazette managed to sneak steel guitar into some of the songs, which, if nothing else, will annoy the purists.

Country Cooking opens their set with a Jimmy Cliff reggae number, "The Harder They Fall." There is little that meets my ear as overly progressive about this arrangement; however, it does represent a new direction in material for bluegrass. Arrangement-wise, this comes on like a more or less traditional LP, save for the solo voice opening "They Can't Put It Back," which is joined by frailing banjo, and then the full band. Peter Wernick displays the "blues chromatic" approach to banjo from time to time, but sparingly, and it does not deflect from the traditional drive of the disc. The chief departure of the disc consists in the out-front political stance taken by the performers. "They Can't Put It Back" is a graphic description of strip mined land. "Poverty," a rearrangement of a song from the repertoire of Bobby Blue Bland (the bluesman), describes about the problems of scratching out a living. Also in the political vein, "Joe Hill's Will" is an especially poignant musical adaptation of a poem that labor leader Hill wrote while waiting to be executed for a framed murder charge. "Red Clay of Georgia" portrays a Georgia boy in the factories of Detroit, fed up with the high cost of living (i.e., poverty at a higher income) who wants to return home. There are some traces of extra-bluegrass instrumental devices: "Joe Hill's Will" features the appearance of some electronic gismo at its outset, and the song's guitar lead is played through this contraption, whatever it is. The banjo on "White Fences" is also played through it. Country Cooking's treatment of the last song on the album differs from the usual. They do not make an elaborate joke about gospel music, as Bottle Hill does, but substitute for gospel music Don Stover's "Things In Life," a truly inspirational, but not gospel, bluegrass song.

The preceding was just one way to "talk bluegrass" (although the length of it may cause it to be called a "rap" rather than "talking"). The review consisted of extracting various aspects about three records to show how they are "newgrass." I argued that a band's ethnic or sexual makeup, its use of instruments, arrangements, type of material, seriousness of approach, political stance, and use of voices and arrangement of cuts could be responsible for a "newgrass" approach to music. Others could come up with other criteria to use in classifying, or could classify these discs in other ways. For example, the Country Cooking record has been discussed by bluegrass fans I know as "surprisingly standard." I wouldn't claim that my remarks are the end-all about the records, but I strike an argumentative position on them, which is what bluegrass fans do when they "talk bluegrass." The distinctiveness of this review is that it may help

other academics help the uninitiated become truly participating initiates in the bluegrass community by getting them to "talk bluegrass."

I have omitted the hyperbole connected with reviews that answer the question "Is it a good record?" In the event that someone has read this far in the hopes of finding something evaluative, let the following be added.

I find the Bottle Hill album irresistible for its eclecticism. It's not a gimmicky eclecticism, but it's based on solid musical ideas, raucous when the occasion calls for it, and sensitive when that's required. Standards "Hard Hearted" and "Tall Pines" are treated with moderation. "Cheese Stollen" is played with much immoderation, just bursting with "off notes" and "off chords." It's a masterpiece of "newgrass." The Lennon-McCartney number "For No One," the Band's "The Shape I'm In," and Michael Chotiner's "Ain't It Funny, Hank Williams" deserve to be on some all-time hit parade.

The Country Cooking record contains some great, moving bluegrass and just a couple of clinkers. On the plus side are "They Can't Put it Back," and other solid bluegrass numbers "Winter Song," "Red Clay of Georgia," "California Song" and "Joe Hill's Will." The last named song combines a chilling vocal by the Fiction Brothers (set to a melody of their own composition), which emphasizes the harsh political reality of the Joe Hill execution. The clinkers are "Used to Be" and "Things in Life." The former suffers from being sung much too slowly, and the latter is done an injustice by a poorly harmonized duet. It does not approach the Don Stover original by a country mile. The good far outweighs the bad here. The person who appreciates an album of hard driving bluegrass songs, sensitively chosen for the content of the lyrics, will enjoy this one. The quality of the material and the to-the-point approach make this an album with which to stick.

The music of Country Gazette is becoming a very familiar sound. Not only do they put out records as a unit, but the members of the band have been taking turns fronting the others in their own albums. To these ears, then, there is a Country Gazette-overkill factor involved. The chief objection to this set is in the vocals. They just plain sound too much like the Monkees to suit me. Also, the disc's sound is not really clean and distinct. Instrumentally, it's hard to fault this band, and banjoist Alan Munde is often mentioned as part of the bluegrass banjo aristocracy. This Country Gazette release would be a great introduction to bluegrass for a rock fan, and the Gazette's followers will want it. I find it listenable and more than competently done, but not exciting.