

RECORD REVIEWS

Childgrove. Suni McGrath.

7 selections, instrumental and vocal, stereo.

AD 1022. Adelphi Records, P. O. Box 288, Silver Spring, Maryland 20907,
1972. \$5.95.

Travelin' Man. Roy Bookbinder.

12 selections, instrumental and vocal, stereo.

AD 1017. Adelphi Records, P. O. Box 288, Silver Spring, Maryland 20907,
1971. \$5.95.

Hoedown Time. The Pine River Boys.

12 selections, instrumental and vocal, stereo.

Mountain 305. Mountain Records, Rt. 3, Box 321A, Galax, Virginia 24333,
1973. \$4.00.

Reviewed by Lawrence McCullough.

These three albums are included in the same review because they were received by the reviewer at the same time, and because they share a common relationship in that each is superfluous in its respective genre, genres already heavily-saturated with the mediocre and the commonplace as well as the extraordinary. The reasons for this designation will become clear in the course of the review.

The major defects which mar guitarist Suni McGrath's album are:

(1) its paucity of genuinely creative musical expression, (2) its indecisiveness, incoherence, and redundancy, (3) its unexceptional musicianship. These are the major defects; the minor ones will arise later.

Although McGrath claims copyright to four of the album's seven songs, the listener should not be misled into believing that these compositions are either innovative or original, or that they represent anything more than not-so-clever reworkings of a limited repertoire of thematic and structural cliches that have come to exist as stereotypes in this particular idiom. Much of this material appears to be motivated by the desire to present an intimate portrait of the musical personality of the artist via the exploration of new avenues of musical expression. However, the album is afflicted by an all-pervasive sense of confusion regarding musical purpose and further weakened by a haphazardness in technical execution.

McGrath's music defies generic description. It is eclectic and derivative to the extreme of being anonymous and impersonal. The title song, "Childgrove" is preceded by "The Star of County Down," both of which are unremarkable, shallow treatments of traditional material in the manner of Fairport Convention, Pentangle, and numerous other popular groups that dabble in folk music from time to time.

This is followed by a McGrath composition in attempted imitation of the form

and style of classical guitar or lute pieces. Then comes a "rocker" of sorts that is tediously repetitive and barren of melodic interest or individuality. McGrath's reinterpretation of a Rev. Gary Davis song is technically unimpressive and communicates none of the great bluesman's emotional depth or power. The two pieces that conclude side 1 are nebulous songs lacking substance and direction, never really getting started and therefore never going anywhere, although the second piece (not written by McGrath) is much more solid.

Regarding McGrath's instrumental expertise, this album gives no reason why he should be considered worthy of occupying a high rank in the hierarchy of guitar virtuosi of any idiom. In fact, the best musicianship on the album is provided by Jack Denlinger who plays second guitar on the opening selection on side 1 and lead guitar on "The Lion of Judah," a 22-minute piece divided into five sections each consisting of a simple, repetitive chordal or arpeggiated-chord accompaniment by McGrath that serves as a ground for Denlinger's improvisations. Although Denlinger tends to suffer occasionally from a similar bewilderment regarding musical direction, he is much more inspired, daring, and inventive, really letting loose in the later sections. His playing possesses a depth and an excitement that are absent from the rest of the album. If this performance is an accurate indication of his actual ability, then Denlinger is certainly as deserving of a solo album as is McGrath.

For all of the blatantly proselytic and sanctimonious sentiments contained in the liner notes and in the one brief and inconsequential vocal selection by Ellen Matthews, the music is anything but sublime or evocative of mystical thought or revelation. Despite these drastic shortcomings, it would not be at all surprising if this album attracted an avid coterie of one sort or another. Remarkably, this is McGrath's third Adelphi album, indicating that this material sells, and, certainly, it would appeal to Jesus freaks, "gentle" people, and the like.

This album was apparently sent to the Folklore Forum in the hope that it might pass unnoticed as material deserving of intelligent scrutiny and serious attention from an academic audience of folk music devotees. It is to refute this assumption and to sound a general alarm to potential buyers that it is reviewed here at all. Possibly it was believed that the token inclusion of two traditionally-based airs might increase the chances of the album's acceptance as authentic folk music. In the future, albums from this artist might find greater favor with reviewers for magazines such as Circus, Crawdaddy, Rolling Stone, Creem, Popular Music and Society, etc., rather than the Folklore Forum.

Vastly superior is Roy Bookbinder's Adelphi album of country blues songs of the 1920s and '30s. Bookbinder was a pupil of the late Rev. Gary Davis, a renowned Carolina bluesman who spent much of the latter half of his life preaching and singing in New York City, and this album represents Bookbinder's homage to his musical idols and influences as well as his own statement of the blues.

These twelve selections represent ten of the most influential country blues musicians of the pre-World War II era and encompasses the three major stylistic areas of the genre. Bookbinder draws upon the resources of three Mississippians (Bo Carter, Willie Brown, Willie Harris), two Texans (Blind Lemon Jefferson, Little Hat Jones), and five players from the Southeastern U. S., primarily Georgia, the Carolinas, and northern Florida (Blind Willie McTell, Blind Boy Fuller, Pink Anderson, Gary Davis, Blind Blake).

Bookbinder's treatment of this material, however, tends to obscure the stylistic traits which distinguish and identify each artist and region. Perhaps this is inevitable when several diverse musical personalities are rearranged and reinterpreted through one. Bookbinder seems much more well-suited to the East Coast blues style. His singing is light and lacking in emotional depth or intensity; his tour de force is his solid and occasionally superb finger-picking guitar work in the East Coast manner. On the other hand, his bottleneck on Willie Harris's "Never Drive a Stranger from Your Door" is weak in comparison to the dexterity displayed on the rest of the album, particularly Gary Davis's "Cincinnati Flow Rag II" and McTell's classic "Statesboro Blues."

Bookbinder's overall performance style is suave, polished, and, one is tempted to say, rather mechanical. From his musicianship as well as the anecdotal, autobiographical liner notes, it is obvious that he has been around the country blues for a long while, long enough to have paid his musical dues in full. Bookbinder has mastered the technical demands of the country blues, yet he still lacks, particularly in his vocals, the personal touch and depth of feeling which are "really the blues." It was Muddy Waters who commented apropos of white blues musicians that, "You may play the blues as good as me, but you sure can't sing the blues like me"--a statement which seems applicable in this case.

Although Bookbinder must be commended for endeavoring to ensure the continued preservation of a musical tradition that is rapidly diminishing as a result of neglect and rejection from its own culture, the question of superfluity must be confronted: with the massive inundation of the retail record market by numerous reissues of original country blues recordings, how significant or valuable is this first-generation copy? Put another way, if Roy Bookbinder was a personal friend, one would be tempted to buy his record. However, if one was interested in getting intimately acquainted with the country blues and hearing it in its richest, fullest, most vibrant, exciting, and gutsy form, one would be advised to bypass Roy Bookbinder and head straight for the music's source.

Hoedown Time is an offering of twelve venerable selections of old-time mountain music played in an authentic, old-time manner by the Pine River Boys, a group from the Hillsville-Galax area in the southwestern corner of Virginia, a region noted for its wealth of traditional music and its outstanding string bands. The group's instrumentation consists of one fiddle, two banjos, and two guitars. Their compact, cohesive ensemble performance underscores a long experience with Appalachian music as well

as an intimate understanding of each other's playing.

The major failing of this album is that the tunes presented here--Johnnie Is Gone to War/John Henry/Sally Ann/Old Joe Clark/Skip to My Lou/Soldier's Joy/Arkansas Traveler/Banjo-picking Girl/Shake Hands with Mother/Blackeyed Susie/The Man that Rode the Mule around the World/--are so venerable as to be nearly moribund. The Pine River Boys could have given a stamp of individuality to their group identity by performing a few tunes that have not been so extensively-recorded, or by volunteering some local variants or individual settings. The album notes remark that the group often plays at square dances; perhaps this record represents only the portion of their repertoire that is used for these occasions.

On the basis of this record, there is nothing that distinguishes the Pine River Boys from the myriad of other old-time string bands or suggests why they were recorded. The ensemble effort lacks the dynamism and excitement necessary to instill new life into these old tunes, and the individual performances are neither memorable nor particularly interesting stylistically, but rather perfunctory. The singing on the one vocal number, "Shake Hands with Mother," is ragged and phlegmatic. That this music might come off better in a live performance situation, or that these musicians are knowledgeable, competent, and genuine is beyond dispute. It is simply a question, once again, of assessing the significance of the album within the context of its musical tradition.

A person who has never heard any Appalachian string-band music will undoubtedly find this album of interest, but the listener already well-acquainted with the depth and diversity of this idiom will be somewhat bored by the commonplace repertoire and performances. For the scholar whose preoccupation lies with average-quality performances of ordinary tunes by a typical group of musicians representative of the norm in their musical and cultural milieu, this record will be of considerable worth. The student of Appalachian music who is interested primarily in discovering the heights of Appalachian musical expression rather than its plateaus had best look elsewhere, for instance Mountain LP302 June Apple, with Tommy Jarrell, Kyle Creed, and friends.

Like the other two records reviewed in this essay, Hoedown Time seems to have no raison d'etre other than the fact of its will to existence. One gets the impression that these performers (McGrath, Bookbinder, the Pine River Boys) merely wished to put out a record of themselves playing music they enjoy. Certainly there is nothing reprehensible in this, and if these performers have experienced a sense of personal pleasure and fulfillment from making the record, they are to be envied and congratulated. If this is the case, however, it would be dishonest to overlook or make excuses for the obvious limitations that mark each of these albums. It would also be absurd, in the face of these weaknesses, to maintain pretensions as to the extent and value in qualitative terms of their contribution to their respective musical traditions. To borrow a euphemism from another review publication, these three records are "highly recommended for the not-too-critical fan."