

So the funny songs raise a smile or two for the first few playings, a seven-minute pseudo-classical fiddle instrumental is truly boring, and most of the other tracks fall somewhere in between. This isn't a terrible album by any means, but it's a disappointment compared with Hartford's better work.

Bill Vanaver and Livia Drapkin have put together the most eclectic album of the bunch, and the one which remains closest to traditional roots. This duo performs a wide range of folk music from Eastern Europe as well as the United States--in concert Vanaver seems to play virtually every stringed instrument known to man--and their record reflects this diversity.

Three of the cuts are original instrumentals by Vanaver: one with a Bulgarian rhythm, another a lively hornpipe, and the last (and perhaps least enjoyable track on the LP) inspired by Greek shadow puppets. Three more songs actually come from Greece (two by native composers, one traditional) and one is from the U.S.S.R. The performers sound reasonably authentic to this unauthoritative ear, and the vocal drones on the traditional Greek selection are particularly effective.

The American numbers cover a lot of ground but center around old-timey influences. A fine Jimmie Rodgers blues, and Aunt Molly Jackson's bitter union song "Hard Times in Coleman's Mines," stand out; there's also an Uncle Dave Macon song, The Monroe Brothers' "Where Is My Sailor Boy," and a nice version of the traditional ballad "Buffalo Skinners."

Landfall II offers much more of Vanaver than Drapkin, who appears on only five of the thirteen tracks. Her main contribution is a rendition of Peggy Seeger's superb feminist song, "I'm Gonna Be an Engineer," but her little-girlish voice fails to capture the strength of the lyrics. England's best female singer, Frankie Armstrong, has popularized the song in this country, and her performance (available on Bay Records 206) has the force and irony that Drapkin's misses.

As usual, Philo's production is excellent. The record's biggest failing is the scantiness of the liner notes, which should have given much more information about the songs and the unusual instruments played on the album. (The latter are frequently misspelled, at that.) Jay Ungar (fiddle, mandolin) and Abby Newton (cello) are among the assisting musicians who produce quite an array of sounds on this good record.

If Prairie in the Sky and Landfall II win the highest praise of this review, some of the credit goes to McCaslin, Vanaver, and Drapkin for not feeling compelled to pad out an entire LP with solely their own compositions. There are so many great songs already in existence--traditional and composed--that it's always nice to see performers taking advantage of that resource.

Buddy Emmons Sings Bob Wills.

10 vocal and 2 instrumental selections featuring Buddy Emmons, vocal and steel guitar; Johnny Gimble and Buddy Spicher, fiddles; Leon Rhodes and Phil Baugh, guitars; Pig Robbins, piano; Larrie Londin, drums and others.
Flying Fish Records 017, 3320 North Halsted, Chicago, Illinois 60657.

Reviewed by John Helak

Western Swing was a traditional musical form that brought old-time country music, such as that performed by the Carter Family and Dave Macon, to what today can be called "the Nashville sound." Although western swing as popularized by its originator, Bob Wills, sounds very little like what is coming out of Nashville's studios today, it showed that country music could be played with electric instruments and a horn section (emulating the big bands of the thirties and forties) and still be true to its roots.

As a form that links two other forms, it is as hard to think of western swing in "modern" terms as it would be to imagine Maybelle Carter fronting a glitter rock band. This is no doubt a reason why western swing--never more than a regionally popular music--eventually waned, since by its nature it could not keep up with trends without itself changing into something else.

Given this, Buddy Emmons has done an admirable job on this record. He has gathered some well-known Nashville sidemen who are not only known for playing charts, but for swing and jazz as well.

Buddy Emmons is probably the finest and assuredly the most influential pedal steel guitarist ever. His tunings for the instrument are considered "standard." His first solo album, Steel Guitar Jazz, received a four-star rating from Down Beat magazine over a dozen years ago, and he recently recorded the first classical piece played on pedal steel guitar. With such credentials, one might suspect that it would be easy for Emmons to sing on a few tunes and use the major portion of the album as filler for his solo work.

Surprise! The album has a truly excellent balance, and although it is Emmons' album, it is not a steel guitar album. The singing is derived considerably from the swing and big band era--that is, smooth and sophisticated with little inflection. It does not compare well with Tommy Duncan's or Leon Rausch's singing with the old Wills band, their style being less urban and certainly slanted toward the blues. One can say, however, that Emmons' singing is very good when compared to the efforts of other western swing bands of thirty years ago.

Of interest to fans of the pedal steel would be the two instrumentals, "Boot Heel Drag" and "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." Emmons adds an extra verse to each steel solo, but otherwise they are identical to the original arrangements. It might be added that Johnny Gimble played on the original version of "Boot Heel Drag" as well as this one. The epochal quality of the music becomes very evident on "Boot Heel Drag" since the original, recorded some twenty-five years ago, is as up-to-date as this version.

Elsewhere the album is diverse, bringing into play such elements as Dixieland ("Deep In The Heart Of Texas," a tune not really associated with Wills), swing ("Four, Five Times"), bop ("New Road Under My Wheels"), and crooning muzak ("Deep Water").

Wills' band produced three great steel guitarists--Leon McAuliffe, Noel Boggs, and Herb Remington. Of these, Emmons has used tunes usually identified with Boggs and Remington. Perhaps the reason that McAuliffe was omitted is that he was and still is one of the best-known steel men around, while Boggs and Remington are relatively unknown.

Western swing is undergoing a national revival. Aided by such groups as Asleep At The Wheel and the recently disbanded Commander Cody And His Lost Planet Airmen, people are discovering the music that Bob Wills originated in an attempt to bring big city dance music to rural southwest America. Buddy Emmons Sings Bob Wills is certainly an album that would have received Wills' approval. Though it is not a collection of greatest hits, it has the quality of life that Wills' put into his own playing.