

The Musical Glory of Old Bligo. Michael Coleman, fiddle (with piano accompaniment). 12 selections, instrumental, high-fidelity. IAC Records, 1967. \$3.00.

The Heyday of Michael Coleman. Michael Coleman, fiddle (with piano accompaniment). 12 selections, instrumental, high-fidelity. Intrepid Records, 1973. \$4.00.

Reviewed by Lawrence McCullough.

In the past decade or so, the reissue of early, out-of-print recordings of American folk music has become a major enterprise of record companies seeking to satisfy the demand for the older traditional musical styles and performers among a new generation of folk music enthusiasts spawned and nurtured by the Great Folk & Ethnic Revival of the 1950's and '60's. Most of the reissues have been concerned with the early recordings of Afro-American and Anglo-American music (jazz, blues, old-time string band, western swing, etc.). However, there was another musical tradition that was also widely recorded in the early 20th century, a tradition that was not native to North America but was transplanted here in the latter half of the 19th century by the nearly 3 1/4 million emigrants who arrived in the U.S. from Ireland during this period.

The music of the 17th and 18th-century Irish who settled largely in the frontier regions of Colonial and Early Republican America was absorbed into the Anglo-American cultural mainstream and transmuted into another form that provided the foundation of a musical tradition that was derivative yet distinct and eventually completely separate. The musical traditions brought by the Irish of the mid and late-19th century, however, did not merge with any of the musical cultures then present in the U.S. but remained cloistered within the Irish-American communities.

Although traditional Irish music was a creation of the Irish countryside, it did not suffer adversely at first from its abrupt removal to an alien, urban, ghetto environment. On the contrary, it continued to thrive, eventually producing performers who were not only outstanding musicians but important contributors to the development of traditional Irish music in Ireland as well as in America. The advent of the recording industry occurred as the golden era of traditional Irish music in America entered its final phase. Though the recordings of the next twenty-five years (c. 1920-1945) would embrace several excellent exponents of the idiom, there are indications that the generation of Irish musicians which flourished just prior to World War I and the onset of large-scale commercial recording represented the music at the zenith of its American existence. Unfortunately, precious little empirical proof of this assertion has survived, but the collective folk-memory of modern Irish-American musicians contains frequent tragic references to great players who died or

ended their active playing days before their artistry could be captured on either cylinder or disc.

All this is by way of introduction to the music of Irish fiddler Michael Coleman (1891-1945) which has recently been reissued on two LPs. Coleman emigrated from his native Co. Sligo around 1912, living for a short while in Chicago before marrying and settling in New York City in 1917. Details of Coleman's early life are fragmentary and vague, but it is said by contemporaries who knew him that he was recognized as an accomplished fiddle player and step dancer while still in his mid-teens. Certainly, he was in his prime when his first record appeared on the Shannon label in 1920. It is ironic to consider that had Coleman been born a decade or two earlier, he might never have been recorded or known outside his immediate personal or local circle.

Within a short time, Coleman's records were receiving wide currency and great acclaim, particularly in Ireland. Along with several other Co. Sligo fiddlers who had also arrived in the U.S. at the same time as Coleman and had likewise begun recording careers, Coleman represented the style of fiddling that has since become known as the "Sligo style." Although this is a broadly-descriptive generic term for a style which embraces several variants or related sub-styles within its boundaries, it serves to identify a style of fiddling that had been largely restricted up to this time to the area of southern Sligo and, particularly, the district of Millavil.

As with the hillbilly music and black blues of the 1920's and '30's, the recording of Irish music facilitated a wider dissemination and more extensive cross-fertilization of styles and repertoire that were formerly unknown outside a particular locality. Syncretic processes had already taken place to a limited extent before this time, as musicians from different parts of Ireland came to dwell in the Irish-American urban communities. These, however, seem to have involved the exchange and dispersion of repertoire rather than stylistic traits, which were not as easily abandoned or adopted. Although it might be expected that the records of Coleman and his contemporaries would have the greatest effect on younger musicians learning the music rather than on older players firmly rooted in their stylistic ways, the impact on the tradition as a whole was remarkable considering the number and variety of styles that existed at the time. The large contingent of Sligo fiddlers in the U.S. at the time and the extraordinary quantity of their recordings can only partially account for this phenomenon. More than either of these factors, the rapid spread of the Sligo style was due to its utilization and extension of instrumental techniques and stylistic traits that already existed in the idiom but had not been fully developed. The Sligo style as expounded by Coleman and the other Sligo fiddlers of the day presented a synthesis that was novel yet wholly steeped in tradition.

Even if unfamiliar with traditional Irish music, one realizes upon listening to Coleman that this is indeed an artistic performance of the highest degree--traditional music exalted to an unprecedented height. Coleman exhibits masterful control over his instrument and a thorough comprehension of the idiom of Irish dance music. Although his performances are characterized by spontaneity and a remarkable improvisatory capacity, nothing here is the result of chance or accident.

Coleman's tone is clear and resonant, and his touch is light but firm. He never becomes trapped by a tune's rigid metrical structure but weaves in and around it, treating the basic metrical pulse with a subtlety and understatement that imparts fluidity and verve to even the most rhythmically inflexible tunes. Coleman's ornamentation is always crisp and concise, yet the embellishments are not merely rolled out in a monotonous, undifferentiated stream but are chosen with an ear for their meaning and effect within the context of a particular phrase or group of phrases. Overall, Coleman's fiddling is inventive, colorful, and exhilarating.

Many of the selections on these two albums occupy the status of "classics" or "standards" in the Irish fiddling repertoire and also serve as test pieces by which fiddle players aspiring to notoriety are judged. It is indicative of the high regard in which Coleman is still held by modern players that his versions of tunes are often accepted as ultimate and inviolate and are performed with a strong sense of ritualistic dedication that seems intended to placate and preserve the ever-present shade of his memory. The extent and depth of such a singular influence in an aural folk tradition is somewhat unusual, though doubtlessly aided by his records. It is also somewhat ironic when one realizes that it was Coleman's capacity for instantaneous improvisation that distinguished him from other outstanding musicians of his era. From contemporary accounts and reminiscences of old friends, it is exceedingly doubtful if Coleman ever publicly performed or recorded a tune exactly the same way twice, so that the attempts of his imitators to reduce his intensely protean artistry to a lifeless artifact condemned to eternal verbatim repetition are ultimately rendered futile.

Within the structure of a traditional Irish dance tune, improvisation can occur as variation in the basic rhythmic structure of the tune, as embellishment of the principal pitches of the melody, and as variation in the principal pitches of the melodic line itself. Irish folk music scholar Breandan Breathnach states in his discussion of melodic variation that "the ability to vary in this manner is a gift which, when combined with superior powers of execution, makes the supreme player, the virtuoso. It may be added that this is indeed a rare gift."¹ Coleman's expertise in the employment of rhythmic variation and ornamentation have already been mentioned. What particularly astounded his contemporaries and marked him as an important

innovator within his tradition was this seemingly limitless capacity for devising impromptu melodic variations. As these recordings demonstrate, Coleman was able to vary a piece endlessly, and he frequently unleashed his creative energy and powers of personal interpretation upon tunes previously considered simple, dull, "hack" tunes, transforming them into gems of Irish fiddling. It was this ability to fuse innovation, personal expression, and technical virtuosity into one unique, dynamic whole that established Michael Coleman quite literally as a legend in his own lifetime as well as one of the most significant figures in 20th-century traditional Irish music.

Although it is difficult and rather pointless to attempt to select "highlights" of the albums, it would not be amiss to mention that both albums offer ample evidence supporting the commonly-stated opinion that Coleman's tour de force was his reel-playing. There are five reel medleys on the Musical Glory album (The boys at the Lough/The Kerry Reel-The Perthshire Hunt/Dr. Gilbert-The Queen of May/The Kerryman's Daughter-The Bird in the Tree/The Morning Dew-The Woman of the House) and six on the Heyday LP (Fergal O'Gara/Wellington's Reels/The Shaskeen-The Bag of Potatoes/Tom Ward's Downfall-The Reel of Mullinavat/Lord McDonald's Reels /The Blackthorn Stick-The Green Groves of Erin). Reel-playing has become a rite de passage in traditional Irish music. It is one of the chief means by which musicians are evaluated and assigned their relative positions in any particular status hierarchy. Although Coleman performs with equal ease and excellence in other genres of Irish dance music, it is the reel at which he excelled and which elicited the greatest concentration of creative effort. And, it is primarily by his reels that Coleman is remembered today.

There are also three jig and three hornpipe medleys and one schottische medley on the first album, including outstanding performances of "The Grey Goose" (jig) and "The Liverpool" and "O'Neill's" hornpipes. The Heyday features that venerable and exquisitely graceful set dance, "The Blackbird," a hornpipe and a slip jig medley, and three jig selections that include a stirring rendition of "Daugherty's Jig" ("The Trip to Sligo" is the current name) and "Tell Her I Am."

With very few exceptions Coleman was plagued throughout his career by piano accompanists whose abysmal ignorance of the music they attempted to accompany is indicated by their frequent inability or unwillingness to play in the same meter, tempo, and key as the soloist. It is said that Coleman had little interest of freedom of choice in his selection of backup musicians, and, indeed, Coleman's innovativeness and unpredictability did not endear him to his oft-perplexed accompanists. It is to his credit that he never falters no matter how atrocious the accompaniment. In any case, the accompaniment is not too

prominent on these recordings (for some reason it is much more distracting on his ecca records of the late '30's), and one can eventually reduce it to subliminal proportions.

Both albums were produced from tapes made of the original recordings and are in remarkably audible condition, although some of the tracks are a bit fast due to the early practice of recording the material at a speed slightly slower than 78 rpm, thus giving an illusion of nearly super-human speed when played at the regular 78 rpm setting on phonographs. The records date from 1921 to c. 1930--the "heyday" of Irish music recording in the U.S.--and represent Coleman in his prime when he recorded for a series of major labels including Vocalion, Victor, Columbia (Okeh), and Brunswick.

The notes of the albums are of the nature of personal statements or manifestos. The first is undersigned by six individuals and the second by twenty-four members of the Michael Coleman Memorial Society of New York, an organization that includes some of the best Irish musicians in the U.S. The Musical Glory album notes give "A Brief Account of Michael Coleman's Musical Career," with information on recording processes and the instruments used in the recordings. The Heyday notes are more extensive, discussing the sources of some of the tunes as well as providing recording data. Much space is given to refuting several of the more outrageous legends which cling to the figure of Coleman as a musician and which have tended to obfuscate and distort his memory.

The albums were produced independently by Mr. John Maguire, a native of Co. Leitrim and now a resident of New York. Maguire has been a dedicated admirer of Coleman's music for many years and conceived this project as a means of increasing the accessibility of these rare recordings. The disparity in the album prices is due to six years of steady inflation and to the fact that the second record was produced in Ireland. Ordering directly from the producer is considerably less expensive than buying at an Irish imports store. Copies may be obtained by writing:

The Michael Coleman Memorial Society
P.O. Box 3
Jerome Avenue Station
Bronx, New York 10468

These are the first reissues of early recordings of traditional Irish music, and it is perhaps indicative of the current status of this music in this country that it was undertaken and accomplished by a private individual rather than by the companies who originally issued the records. However, since the appearance of The Musical Glory of Old Sligo seven years ago, an anthology album of lesser-known Irish musicians recorded in

America, Ireland, and England has come out on Folkways, and other individuals have announced tentative plans for reissuing more of this material. Though this music will never attain the large audience attracted by other "rediscovered" American folk-musics, it is certainly deserving of a greater share of public attention. As far as serving as an introduction to the traditional music of Ireland, these two albums of Michael Coleman's music may not be representative of all traditional Irish music, but they are certainly representative of some of the finest music that tradition has to offer.

NOTE: 1. Folkmusic and Dances of Ireland. Dublin: Talbot Press, 1971.

Ragtime Piano Originals. 16 piano solos by Mike Bernard, Frank Banta, Jean Raques, and others, compiled and with notes by David A. Jasen, mono. Folkways records MF 23, 701 Seventh Avenue, New York, New York. 10036. 1974. 6.98.

Ragtime Entertainment. 16 instrumental and vocal selections by El Cota, Gene Greene, Conway's Band, Pryor's Band, and others, compiled and with notes by David A. Jasen, mono. MBF records 22. as above. 6.98.

Reviewed by Bill Long.

The word "ragtime" has been applied at one time or another to a bewildering variety of music. The current ragtime revival has centered on the music of Scott Joplin and, to a lesser extent, that of Joplin's colleagues and proteges such as Tom Turpin, James Scott, and Joe Lamb. This music, composed during the first decade or so of the century, was the first music actually called ragtime to attract general public attention. It is often called "classic ragtime" or "St. Louis ragtime."

But there were other kinds of ragtime. In his discography Recorded Ragtime 1897-1958 David Jasen distinguishes eight distinct ragtime styles. The most successful and durable of these styles was "novelty ragtime."

The differences between novelty and classic ragtime styles sprang directly from the motivations of the composers themselves. Joplin's model in his compositions was classical music, though his basic materials were of folk origin. His classical orientation is demonstrated by his attempts to extend the ragtime idiom, most notably in his two operas. Though undoubtedly gratified when one of his compositions became a hit, the classic ragtime writer's fundamental commitment was to write what Joplin called "genuine Negro ragtime." As Joe Lamb said, "I didn't want to make my money on my things. I only wanted to see them published because my dream was to be a great ragtime composer."