Recording Review of Legends of Old-Time Music: Fifty Years of County Records

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In 1979 I spent the first of five consecutive summers working as a camp counselor in the eastern panhandle of West Virginia. That June, to get the camp ready for the arrival of campers, the camp staff cleaned the main lodge; deeming that task to be drudgery, a dozen or so teenagers from Washington, DC, competed for control of the camp’s stereo system, and rock music (The Doors, Led Zeppelin) won out. But when it was my turn at the turntable, I played the only album in the camp’s record collection that featured music native to that place. It was an album by John Ashby, an acclaimed traditional fiddler from Warrenton, Virginia (located a little over an hour away from the camp). Those fiddle tunes sounded like they could have been from an earlier era, but the album jacket revealed that the recordings were relatively recent. Ashby’s fiddling worked its magic on me and did something that all the music on all the other albums played that summer failed to do—it connected me to the history and rhythms of that Appalachian locale. (Unbeknownst to me back in 1979, Ashby had died the month before my discovery of his album. Accordingly, had the fiddler never recorded a commercial album, I never would have heard his music.)

The Ashby album was from County Records, a label that primarily specialized in releasing new recordings that showcased the music of Southern and Central Appalachia. My previous exposure to recorded Appalachian music had been through listening to Folkways albums at the library near my childhood home in Washington, DC. I grew interested in releases from County Records not only because they included new recordings of traditional Appalachian music, but also because they balanced authenticity with commercial viability.
sonic quality. I soon obtained a number of County albums, and my personal pantheon of music heroes thereafter included such old-time masters as Wade Ward, Fred Cockerham, Tommy Jarrell, and Kyle Creed, all heard on County releases. The instigator and shaper of County Records was Dave Freeman, whose love for Appalachian old-time music drew him to the region from his native New York in the mid-1960s. Founding this label in order to release new recordings by aging but still immensely talented traditional musicians, Freeman collaborated with fellow old-time music enthusiasts Charlie Faurot, Rich Nevins, Barry Poss, Bobby Fulcher, and others, and this collective documented late-in-life performances from musicians in the legendary generation that had recorded during the early years of commercial recording (the 1920s). Highlights from the original County albums and previously unreleased recordings from County sessions are featured on Legends of Old-Time Music: Fifty Years of County Records, a boxed set from 2015.

County albums always reflected deep understanding of the aesthetics of old-time music, and Freeman and his team upheld high standards when recording such music, utilizing an approach that resembled the process utilized in the 1920s by commercial record producers like Ralph Peer and Frank Walker. As Rich Nevins wrote in an essay included in Legends of Old-Time Music, the County team did not see themselves primarily as documentarians (though County Records ultimately documented performances from many significant traditional musicians): “[O]ur approach was far more similar to the early commercial company talent scouts who auditioned first to the ‘every musician is important’ folklorists who refused to ever make a value judgement [sic].”

Legends of Old-Time Music features 113 mostly stellar tracks recorded by the County Records collective between 1964 (Wade Ward) and 2000 (Art Stamper). This boxed set not only marks the initial appearance on CD of many recordings previously available solely on LPs, but also the first time that 30 of recordings have ever been issued in any form. The producers of Legends of Old-Time Music—Charlie Faurot, Chris King, and Dave Freeman—did not arrange the selections across four CDs predictably (in chronological order or in terms or groupings by musician or genre); instead, the set is like an exciting mix-tape, and each CD reveals interesting juxtapositions between tracks from different performers and periods. That said, the accompanying booklet provides biographical and session information on each artist presented alphabetically, rendering it a bit of a challenge to listen to the CDs while reading the liner notes.

The notes—featuring an introduction by Kinney Rorrer, annotations by Rorrer and Faurot, and fascinating essays by Freeman, Nevins, Poss, and Fulcher—are very helpful (and Freeman’s essay on “Galax and Mount Airy” is a particularly illuminating analysis of that rich culture area). There are a few omissions in the notes. Frustratingly, no recording dates are provided for some of the sessions. Also, it would have been a nice testament to the contributions of County Records that the set’s producers commissioned a few short essays—or even a few short quotes—from some younger, currently active old-time musicians testifying to the enduring influence of the County recordings. But those are minor quibbles. Showcasing timeless performances from many of the twentieth century’s finest traditional musicians from Appalachia, Legends of Old-Time Music is indisputably of historical significance and should be part of every serious collection of old-time music recordings.

To order: countysales.com

## Knoxville Sessions, 1929 – 1930: The Knoxville Stomp

**Discs:**

**Disc 1**

**Disc 2**
- **Ballard Cross:** The Wabash Cannon Ball / Lorrainna Ballard / Cal Davenport and His Gang: Double Eagle March / Broken Hearted Lover / Little Rosewood Casket / Blue Ridge Mountain Blues / Ballard Cross: Down Where the Swaneke River Flows / Won’t You Waltz Home Sweet Home with Me / Senior Chapel Quartette: In My Savior’s Care / The Great Judgment / Lonesome Road / Way Down Home / Maynard Baird and His Southern Serenaders: Sorry / Just For You / Colonel J. G. Sterchi: To My Friends and Patrons / Cal West: Cal West’s Yodel Blues – Part 1 / Cal West’s Yodel Blues – Part 2 / Smoky Mountain Ramblers: San Antonio / Back to Old Smoky Mountain / Ain’t It Hell / Boys / Down in Tennessee / Perry County Music Makers: I’m Sad and Blue / Maudaline Perry / Got a Buddy I Must See / By the Cottage Door

**Disc 3**

**Disc 4**
- **Ridgel’s Fountain Citizens:** The Bald Headed End of the Broom / The Nick Nack Song / Baby Call Your Dog Off / Gittin’ Upstairs / Louis Bird: It’s Funny What..