Recording Review of Georgia Yellow Hammers & Associates

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Whiskey Will Do / Nothing Goes Hard With Me / Southern Moonlight Entertainers: Then I'll Move to Town / How to Make Love / Leola Manning: The Arcade Building / Satan is Busy in Knoxville / Laying in the Graveyard / The Blues is All Wrong / Bess Pennington: If You Think I'm Not Worthy / Jack and May / Uncle Jimmy Thompson: Lynchburg / Uncle Jimmy's Favorite Fiddling Piece / Etowah Quartet: Walking With My Lord / Back in the Years / Maynard Baird and His Orchestra: Postage Stomp / I Can't Stop Loving You / Alex Hood and His Railroad Boys: L and N Rag / Corbin Slide / Lowe Stokes, Homer Miller, Walt McKinney, Heavy Martin, Roger Williams, and Bill Brown: The Great Hatfield-Mc Coy Feud—Part 1 / The Great Hatfield-Mc Coy Feud—Part 2

With this nothing-less-than-exhaustive collection finishing off the trio of crucial recording sessions in Tennessee—the other two volumes come from Bristol and Johnson City—Knoxville is shown not only as a city of historic and contemporary importance, both musically and otherwise, but it also serves as an example of just how diverse old-time music could get in this still bustling East Tennessee town.

The book, co-written by Professor of Appalachian Studies Ted Olson and early country music scholar Tony Russell, is amazing. Anyone wanting to get an understanding of Knoxville's place in history will get a fantastic overview here. The photographs of the city—from across the Tennessee River, or the heart of Gay Street and Market Square in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—show a thriving, well-swept commercial center. There are also photos of early jazz and string bands, temperance election orchestras, an all-girl banjo group, college ensembles, and recordings artists in their prime and later, scattered throughout its 156 pages. But it also tells the story of the town's post-Civil War rise, its rapid population growth, its brief tenure as state capital, its role in technological innovation, as well as the types of people it attracted. Russell gives a painstaking account of the Knoxville sessions' background. In the late 1920s, with Jack Kapp head of Vocalion's record division, the label began to compete with Victor, Okeh, and Columbia for attention to its "hillbilly" and "race" records. The other labels had set up recording centers all over the South, yet Kapp, with help from Gay Street record stores owners the Sterchi brothers, led the way to digging into the variety of sounds coming from in and around Knoxville. The musicians featured here get well-researched stories as well, which include origins of their material, bios, and other facts that place them in context.

No doubt one thing that sets this collection apart from the sessions in Bristol and Johnson City, other than the fact that the musicians didn't come from as wide an area, is the inclusion of more African American musicians. Thanks to these sessions, fiddler Howard Armstrong and the Tennessee Chocolate Drops, blues better Leola Manning, and the Senior Chapel Quartet found themselves selling records. This collection also contains the only two known sides cut by guitarist Will Bennett. One of them, the oft-recorded "Railroad Bill," has its first commercial documentation by a musician of color, which certainly helps put the story of a black train robber who evaded capture while haunting train yards into proper context. And the contrasts between their tracks and the rest of this set are stark. Howard Armstrong proves, even this early on, to be a virtuoso, driving fiddler capable of mastering any style; Leola Manning, with help from piano and stinging single string guitar accompaniment, attacks her tunes with a drive easily rivaling the better-known Bessie Smith.

Nonetheless, this record is vastly dominated by white folks, some of whom came from elsewhere. Master Georgia fiddler Lowe Stokes cut a number of sides, including playing backup on a four-part skit detailing the Hatfield-McCoy feud. Kentucky banjo player Hayes Shepherd, recording under the alias "The Appalachian Vagabond," recorded the oft-compiled "Hard for to Love," in Knoxville as it turns out. Already-legendary fiddler Uncle Jimmy Thompson dropped by and sailed through a few tunes, "Leather Britches" among them. The mixed-gender Tennessee Ramblers also turned in six sides that range from straight-up Hawaiian to "The Garbage Man," a tune that shares melody with "The Weenie Man," and features some sharp fiddling from Bill Sievers. But the sap here is as thick as the book itself. Sitting through the tracks by the likes of the Southern Moonlight Entertainers, the Gibbs Brothers, Lester McFarland, or a dozen others takes either an unapologetic soft spot for corn, or an iron constitution. Frustratingly, the bulk of this set leans heavily into some serenely lachrymose, antiquated territory. Much of this stuff simply has not aged well. But regardless, it shows East Tennessee musicians flitting at the edges of hardcore early country and more urban pop. Yet from the vantage point of nearly 100 years later, it's clear that Armstrong, Manning, Bennett, the Perry County Musicians, Thompson, and a very few others stand tulip-poplar-tall next to the likes of "Just for You," or "Where the Sweet Magnolias Bloom."

To order: bear-family.com

Georgia Yellow Hammers & Associates

Volume 1:
Fourth of July at a Country Fair
Bill Chitwood & Bud Landress: Pa, Ma and Me / Over the Sea / Hen Cackle / Fourth of July / Whoa Mule / Furniture Man / Jerusalem Mourn / I Got Mine / Howdy Bill / Johnny Get Your Gun / Callhoun Sacred Quartet: Life's Railway to Heaven / The Church in the Wildwood / Phil Reeve & Ernest Moody / Down Where the Water Melon Grows / Georgia Yellow Hammers: Pass Around the Bottle / Going to Ride That Midnight Train / Johnson's Old Grey Mule / Fourth of July at a County Fair / Bill Chitwood & His Georgia Mountainaires: How I Got My Wife / Smiling Watermelon / Preacher Blues / I Had But Fifteen Cents / It Won't Happen Again For Months / Fourth of July at the County Fair

Volume 2:
Bill Wishes He Was Single Again
Georgia Yellow Hammers: Tennessee Coon / All Old Bachelors Are Hard to Please / Mary Don't You Weep / Going to Raise a Rucus Tonight / I'm S-A-V-E-D / The Picture on the Wall / G Rag / My Carolina Girl / Phil Reeve and Ernest Moody: Rock All Our Babies to Sleep / Bees Are Humming Around the Flowers / Sweet Evelina / Turkey Mountain Singers: I Am Bound For the Promised Land / He Loves Me / Bill Chitwood & His Georgia Mountainaires: When Married Folks Are
Out of Cash / Raise Rough House Tonight / Bill Wishes He Was Single Again / Kitty Hill / Uncle Bud Landress with the Georgia Yellow Hammers: Christmas Time at Moonshine Hollow / Candy Pulling at Moonshine Hollow / Georgia Yellow Hammers: Song of the Doodle Bug / The Moonshine Hollow Band / My Eyes Are Growing Dimmer Every Day

Volume 3: Warhorse Game

Georgia Yellow Hammers: The Running Blues / When the Birds Begin Their Singing in the Trees / The Old Rock Jail Behind the Old Iron Gate / Uncle Bud Landress: Coon-Hunting in Moonshine Hollow / Visiting Sal’s House in Moonshine Hollow / Charles Brothers (Philip & Ernest): Oh How I Love Jesus / Looking This Way / North Georgia Quartette: How Beautiful Heaven Must Be / Each Day I’ll Do a Good Deed / I Can, I Do, I Will / Wandering Child Come Home / Georgia Yellow Hammers: Big Ball Over Memphis / Come Over and See Me Sometime / Sale of Simon Slick, Part I / Sale of Simon Slick, Part II / Kiss Me Quick / Black Annie / Warhorse Game / The Deacon’s Calm / Turkey Mountain Singers: Does the Pathway Lead Straight / He Will Never Leave Me / Precious Memories / Keep Marching All the Time

Volume 4: White Lightning

Moody Bible Sacred Harp Singers: Liberty / In That Morning / Dixie Crackers: The Old Bell Cow / North Georgia Four: Bye-Bye Mama / She Was a Lula / Dixie Crackers: Bile Them Cabbage Down / Clyde Evans Band: How I Got My Gal / All Gone Now / Uncle Bud Landress with the Georgia Yellow Hammers: Rubber Dolly Rag / Rip Van Winkle Blues / Uncle Bud Landress: The Daddy Song, Part I / The Daddy Song, Part II / Georgia Yellow Hammers: Childhood Days / No One to Welcome Me Home / White Lightning / Peaches Down in Georgia / Moody Quartet: Kneel at the Cross / I Believe in God / Gordon County Quartet: Walking in the King’s Highway / Beyond the Clouds is Light / Nichols Brothers: She’s Killing Me / Dear Old Tennessee / I’m Lonely Since Mother’s Gone

The Georgia Yellow Hammers, an old-time Appalachian string band from the 1920s, not only recorded some popular 78s (one 1927 release for Victor Records, “The Picture on the Wall” backed with “My Carolina Girl,” sold at least 115,000 copies) but also participated in one of the first racially integrated recording sessions in the history of commercial country music (for a 1927 improvisatory instrumental piece with spoken interjections entitled “G Rag” recorded with African American fiddler Andrew Baxter). Local legends in and near their home base of Gordon County, Georgia, the Georgia Yellow Hammers have for years been overshadowed nationally by another North Georgia string band, the Skillet Lickers. The classic sides by the latter band, showcasing the talents of fiddler Gid Tanner and guitarist Riley Puckett, have certainly merited multiple reissues in digital form. (The County label initiated this trend in 1996 with the release of a 16-track single-CD compilation, followed by two deeper dives into the Skillet Lickers’ recorded oeuvre from UK-based labels—in 2000 by Document Records and in 2012 by JSP Records.) While not possessing the “star” power that infused the music of the Skillet Lickers, the Georgia Yellow Hammers boasted their own unique style and sound, but for years only a portion of the band’s recording legacy had been digitally reissued (on a 2003 compilation CD from the B.A.C.M. [British Archive of Country Music] label). Perhaps now, with Document Records’ 2015 release of the Georgia Yellow Hammers’ complete recordings over four albums (including all the band’s recordings along with many sides from band members’ separate recording sessions), this group of musicians will finally receive its due.

The lineup of the Georgia Yellow Hammers varied during the band’s short lifespan, as evidenced on the four volumes in the Document series. Subtitled Fourth Of July At A Country Fair after a humorous song recorded by the Gordon County musicians three times in different permutations (including by the Georgia Yellow Hammers in Atlanta in February 1927), Volume 1 features 23 recordings made between 1924 and March 1927, and band members during this period were Bud Landress (banjo, lead vocals), Bill Chitwood (fiddle, lead and harmony vocals), Phil Reeve (guitar, harmony vocals), and Elias Meadows (guitar, harmony vocals). Volume 1 includes 10 acoustic-era tracks from 1924, recorded by Chitwood and Landress (as a duo) in a New York City studio for the Brunswick label. That album continues with two February 1927 gospel sides from the Calhoun Sacred Quartet cut in Atlanta for Victor Records; those recordings mark the emergence of Charles E. “Ernest” Moody as a recording artist. Today primarily remembered as a composer of hymns such as “Drifting Too Far From the Shore” and “Kneel at the Cross,” Moody became a key member of the Georgia Yellow Hammers.

By the time of the Georgia Yellow Hammers’ August 1927 sessions for Victor, held in Charlotte, North Carolina, Chitwood and Meadows had moved on to other musical endeavors, and Moody (banjo-ukulele and harmony vocals) and Franklin Clyde Evans (guitar and harmony vocals) had joined Landress and Reeve. Those August 1927 sessions—a highlight of which was the aforementioned “G Rag”—are found on Volume 2 of the Document series. (The album is subtitled Bill Wishes He Was Single Again after an October 1927 side recorded by Bill Chitwood and his own band after he had left the Georgia Yellow Hammers.)

Volume 3 (subtitled Warhorse Game in reference to one of the band’s more exciting 1928 sides) collects 1928 recordings from the Georgia Yellow Hammers for Victor and other recordings made that year for two labels, Victor and Paramount, by various configurations of the Gordon County musicians. The final album in the Document series, Volume 4 (subtitled White Lightning to draw attention to one of the band’s frequent lyrical themes), contains 1929 sides for Victor by the Georgia Yellow Hammers (by this time Chitwood had rejoined the band, while guitarist/vocalist Melvin Dupree had replaced Evans); the album also compiles fascinating side projects from 1929-1931 by Chitwood, Reeve, Landress, and Moody (including a 1930 version of the latter’s hymn “Kneel at the Cross” recorded for Vocalion).

Each of the four albums boasts its own insert booklet presenting detailed discographical information prepared by series compiler Tony Russell, who also contributed authoritative notes based on extensive research into the band’s history. (The notes benefit considerably from Russell’s decades-long archival research as well as from his many interviews with people who retained memories of the lives and musical affiliations of various band members.) Collectively, the four Georgia Yellow Hammers albums from Document Records persuasively introduce these local musicians from a bygone era to old-time music fans around the world in the twenty-first century.

The four volumes in the Georgia Yellow Hammers' collection from Document Records are...
Hammonts feature recordings taken from 78s generously loaned to the project by various collectors. Those recordings, predictably, are uneven in terms of sound quality, but standards are maintained across the series sufficient to allow committed listeners to trace these musicians’ artistic development as well as to follow the rapid technological evolution during “hillbilly” music’s first decade of commercial recording.

In June 2016, Document Records announced that, due to the industry-wide decline in CD sales, the label would discontinue the issuing of CD releases and instead offer its deep catalog of historical recordings as digital downloads. So while the four volumes in this Georgia Yellow Hammers series may become difficult to locate on CD, digital downloads of this series should still be available and will be worth obtaining. But anyone downloading these delightful and varied recordings should insist upon also obtaining downloads of Tony Russell’s notes for the series, as it is difficult to imagine a future listener fully appreciating the Georgia Yellow Hammers’ legacy without learning the contexts for the recordings from Russell’s authoritative curation.

Ted Olson

To order: document-records.com

Field Recorders’ Collective FRC 713
Maggie Hammonts Parker: voice, banjo


The latest release from the Field Recorders' Collective (FRC) is a collection of songs and a few banjo tunes from Maggie (Hammonts) Parker, a member of the celebrated Hammonts family of musicians, storytellers, and backwoodsmen from West Virginia. The seminal 1973 Library of Congress box-set of the music and stories of Maggie and her brothers Burt and Sher- man was a musical and cultural guide for many who were discovering old-time music at the time, and its re-release on CD in 1997 introduced the family to a new generation. The new FRC collection was gleaned from field recordings made by Wayne Howard between 1973 and 1980 at the Hammonts’ home, and contains 20 unreleased recordings of Maggie.

These songs might resonate with the listener the way a fairy tale would — an assortment of colorful characters in a range of predicaments. Little Tom Carter, Joke r Jess, Sam Gay from Indiana, Little Mary, Uncle Ned, Betty Baker, Billy Hughes, and others join swamp angels, mountain maid, bums, rangers, wives, brothers, millers, gamblers, and bumblebees in songs that can range from the eerie and tragic to the light-hearted and funny. In these stories, September has 31 days, wicked bodies are doomed for hell, and some go there on a hell-bound train. Nails turn blue, teeth begin to loosen, and you can trip over mountains.

The collection is nicely balanced between ballads, topical songs, and light-hearted ditties, mostly sung a capella. Some have Old World roots. “Little Miss” follows the story of the 17th-century ballad “The Daemon Lover” (also known as “The House Carpenter”), and “The Maid of the Mountain Brow” is a variant of a mid-19th-century Irish ballad “Maid of the Sweet Brown Howe,” in which a prosperous and carousing young horse owner has his generosity challenged by his love interest. There are also a number of American ballads that Maggie learned from within her family about incidents and characters that were known to her or her ancestors. According to Howard’s account of his time spent with family (OTH, spring 2010), Maggie was uninterested in the overseas origins of the songs she sang. To her, the songs were alive with modern-day relevance, and she would speak about the stories as if she was there. Most of the songs here have a great deal in common with ancient balladry — they are set to modal melodies and engage the imagination without giving away too much. If you don’t pay close attention, you might get lost.

Maggie was an expressive singer and superb storyteller, and though her voice had weakened by the time of these recordings (she was in her seventies), she was able to deliver some very good performances. If one mark of a good singer is the ability to be emotive and convinc­ ing, then Maggie was superb. And its good to remember that “correct” pitch is a relative thing. Maggie didn’t always sing notes that you would find on a piano, but I suspect she sang the notes she intended to sing.

She also plays solo banjo on five of the 27 tracks here. Her gentle and skilled touch on the banjo is lovely, especially on “The Falling of the Leaves,” a tune that is reminiscent of one her brother Burt played called “Singing Birds.” But the focus is on the songs. It is a well thought-out and dense collection that I suspect listeners will need to hear several times to absorb all that is going on.

To order: fieldrecorder.org

The Hellbenders

Bruce Molsky and James Lev: fiddles; David Winston: banjo; Mary Winston: guitar; Dave Grant: bass

Altamont / Train on the Island / Chinquipin / Tight Old Sally Gal / Red Mountain Wine / Betty Baker / She Took it Off / Indian War Whoop / Cider / Baby Waltz / Poor Little Mary (Sittin’ in the Corner) / Bravest Cowboy / Sambo / Whoo Reprise

This is a reissue of a cassette tape (remember those?) from 1990, remixed and remastered by Al Tharp (thanks!). As such, you only get 37 minutes of music— and the energy level is so high, and the speed so fast, that the minutes go by very