

The Banjo NEWSLETTER

Old-Time Way Review, April 2014

Johnson City Recordings, Bear Family CDs

By Timothy Jones

Some recordings are important more than they are listenable. Lower-tech sound quality, by-gone vocal styles, and primitive instrumental playing can make some early releases an acquired taste. "The Johnson City Sessions, 1928-1929: Can You Sing or Play Old-Time Music?" might fit into that category. But among the 100 cuts of the new four-CD boxed set from Bear Family Records are riches and rough-cut gems. It's important to note for readers of this publication that only a quarter of the tracks contain banjo (not counting the occasional mandolin-banjo). Still, in the five hours of music here, to say nothing of the accompanying hardcover book, there is much to inform and interest old-time listeners and banjo players.

The earlier, better-known 1927 Bristol (TN) sessions sponsored by Victor Records helped launch the likes of Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family, and in 2011 those sessions likewise saw release in an acclaimed Bear Family boxed set. Now, with this late-2013 release, the recordings made for Columbia Records in nearby Johnson City in 1928 and 1929 capture another slice of Southern music from the late 1920s.

The title, "Can You Sing or Play Old-Time Music," comes from the lead line in an October 1928 newspaper ad calling area musicians to participate in "an actual try-out for the purpose of making Columbia Records." The ad got wide exposure, and come they did—from neighboring counties and several states around Tennessee. Recordings took place in both 1928 and 1929. The four-color 136-page hardcover book not only tells that story, it also gives fascinating background on the artists and their songs and quirks and sense of humor. Revealing and in some cases previously unreleased photographs complement the artfully laid out book's 136 full-color pages.

This is not to say that what fills the CDs always sounds like we often think of when we speak of "old-time" music. Some of what appears we might instead call early country. One can also hear early roots of bluegrass,

though most suggest that bluegrass emerged as a defined genre with Bill Monroe and Earl Scruggs in the mid-1940s. There is no sign of Kyle Creed in the set (though he built his first banjo as a youngster around the very time these recordings were made). Instrumentation does not always conform to today's typical Appalachian string-band mix; there are several a cappella quartet numbers, for instance, along with the occasional appearance of accordion and plectrum banjo.

But several of the artists and groups will interest old-time banjo enthusiasts. The fourth CD in the package, for instance, includes a set of some of the most influential early recordings of Appalachian music: Clarence Ashley's solo songs. The four songs, captured in the 1929 recording sessions, may qualify as the best known of all the Johnson City takes, particularly Ashley's piercing and modal *The Coo-Coo Bird*. His plaintive voice and distinctive playing ring through the other three of his tracks found here: *Dark Holler Blues*, which he renamed and we now know as *East Virginia Blues* and the murder ballads, *Little Sadie* and *Naomi Wise*, the latter often known as *Omie Wise*. These were for me the highlights of the entire project.

The Coo-Coo Bird, perhaps more than any Appalachian song, is mentioned as the song that got many interested in old-time music in the first place. But the version most have heard comes from folklorist Ralph Rinzler's later recording on the Folkways (now Smithsonian Folkways) release, "Old-Time Music at Clarence Ashley's." That recording of *The Coo-Coo Bird*, accompanied by the flat-picking of the then-obscure Doc Watson, does not mean this older Johnson City version lacks importance. That the Johnson City version traces back decades earlier makes it of historical interest in itself. But as noted in the boxed set's book, "In recent years, several prominent music writer have rhapsodized about the haunting, otherworldly beauty of Ashley's 1929 recording of *The Coo-Coo Bird*." And we learn a bit about the ballad from the notes in the book, how Ashley "claimed to have fashioned [it] out of an Old World ballad his mother Rosie Belle used to sing." In it he incorporated "traveling" (as in interchangeable) stanzas taken from other songs and ballads.

There's more I found fascinating. The Grant Brothers and Their Music (the actual band name) appear with *Tell It to Me*, a song that became an Americana hit of sorts in 2004 when the hipster/old-time Old Crow Medicine Show

recorded an updated version of the song. We likewise hear the brothers' early version of the standby The Johnson Boys.

Another connection is made in the book's excellent notes: The Bentley Boys, a string band popular around Burlington and Greensboro, North Carolina, appear in the set with Down on Penny's Farm, likely an inspiration for Bob Dylan's Hard Times In New York Town and Maggie's Farm. The track's pleasant vocal lilt gets capable accompaniment by banjo and fiddle.

Other points of interest: Two sets (from both years' recording sessions) feature East Tennessee's Roane County Ramblers. They would become Columbia's most financially successful find from the Johnson City sessions, with the band's first record, "Southern #111/Home Town Blues," selling some 12,000 copies alone. And J. E. Mainer would go on to remake the railroad instrumental (with spoken narration) as Number 111 in 1936.

West Virginia's Moatsville String Ticklers also supply two tracks. As the boxed set's book meticulous research recounts, their West Virginia Hills would go on to become one of their state's official songs. After decades of relative obscurity for the group itself, they are receiving new attention with social media sites swapping clues about the identity of the band with the whimsical name.

And the whimsy of that name suggests a final observation: I hear a light-heartedness in some of the selections. There is, for instance, a sense of humor in George Roark's clawhammer-accompanied I Ain't a Bit Drunk, with the punch line, "I'm just from Alabam." Or Charlie Bowman and His Brothers singing Gonna Raise the Ruckus Tonight. (All lyrics are carefully transcribed.)

There is much to explore here, and while most of us are used to more refined playing and singing styles, old-time enthusiasts may well find here more old songs worthy of reviving. With a retail price that reflects the production costs of a full book and CD set, the project may not be for the casual old-time listener. But for the serious listener, there will likely be some discoveries-and an ample supply of interesting reading.