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Book Review: Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers

William Jolliff

George Fox University, wjolliff@georgefox.edu

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SINGING COWBOYS AND MUSICAL MOUNTAINEERS: Southern Culture and the Roots of Country Music

Bill C. Malone

University of Georgia Press

Review by William Jolliff

Bill C. Malone, well-known author of *Country Music, USA*, recently (1993) wrote another book in the field, entitled *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers*. Though on a narrower scope, it is equally compelling and insightful, reflecting a rare blend of scholarship, human insight, and a warm, highly readable style.

His overarching thesis is that before WWI, the dominant images that most Americans had of native white folk musicians of the South were of cowboy singers and Appalachian balladeers. As a result, when commercial interests began to exploit the music of the plain people of the South in the 1920s, these two popular

images, already fixed in the minds of potential consumers, had created specific expectations — expectations that record companies were glad to fulfill. But it is true as well that these familiar images were embraced by image-conscious musicians who were willing, for their best professional interests, to fulfill such romantic expectations.

Chapter One prepares the foundation for Malone's argument by describing "Southern Rural Music in the Nineteenth Century" in relation to its many formative influences. Given the lack of contemporary documentation, Malone avoids the temptation to argue for a single or even dominantly defining musical influence. Instead, he draws a complex but believable sketch of ethnic influences — among them Anglo, Scotch-Irish, German, African — which were themselves multi-faceted. There was balladry, but additional material was born and shaped by many genres (fiddle tunes, fife tunes, brass bands, slave songs, etc.) and for many purposes, both secular and religious. At the quiet center of this storm of influences, Malone simply posits the Southerners' passion for good music — a passion stronger than any concern about origin; a passion too strong, finally, to be mandated or limited by concerns of regional, racial, religious, social, or economic distinctions. His statement about fiddlers seems to apply to southern music as a whole, and to have controlled at least in part the process by which music was formed and passed along: "[W]hen they heard a new and interesting tune, they adopted it..." (p. 40).

Next, Malone focuses on the commercial influences. Common thought may be that a musical tradition largely untainted by commercial interests existed in the South before the advent of electronic media. Malone, however, corrects such thinking in his study of non-electronic but no less commercial influences. Among those described are medicine shows, circuses (which often featured singing clowns), animal and puppet acts, showboat programs, theatrical troops, blackface minstrels, and a variety of traveling entertainers anxious to work through the South — especially during the winter. All of these used popular music, and thus created opportunities for local singers, dancers, and musicians to select new pieces and styles for imitating and adapting. Significantly, Malone notes that while scholars "tended to see the broadsides and other songs of popular origin as decidedly inferior to the more literary Child

ballads," the folk "made no such distinctions" (p. 45). They embraced what they liked, regardless of the sources, and, once in the folk consciousness, the "[s]ongs, dances, and performance styles often assumed wondrous and unexpected forms" (p. 47). But the influence worked both ways. Professional entertainers, realizing the commercial possibilities, were learning "folk" material during their travels. Thus this relationship, Malone asserts, is "about as difficult a problem as [music historians] are likely to encounter" (p. 51). At the end of the 19th Century, this interpenetration of folk and popular cultures reaches a kind of representative pinnacle in the work of Kentuckian William Shakespear [sic] Hays (composer of "Little Log Cabin" and "Molly Darling," among hundreds of others), and the pages Malone spends on Hays are fascinating but brief. Arguably the most widely circulated songwriter of his day, Hays's songs reached hundreds of thousands of people in their original sheet music form. Then many of them — usually anonymously and often significantly changed — entered the folk tradition. There they became known as "old familiar tunes," and in this guise were learned and loved by millions more. They even played an important role in what would become the commercial country music industry of our own century.

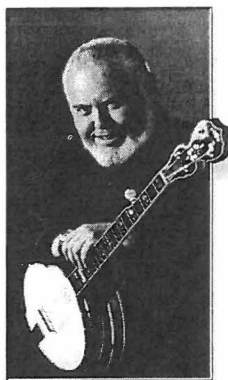
In Chapter Three, "Mountaineers and Cowboys," Malone unpacks the thesis promised in his title. When country music began its commercial development in the 1920s, he argues, images of mountaineers and cowboys already existed in American culture, due at least in part to the work of such folklorists as Cecil Sharp and John A. Lomax. Malone notes that "no one — whether musician, promoter, or fan — could have been unaware of the potent appeal of cowboy and mountaineer images"; and thus began country music's "symbiotic relation with cowboys and mountaineers" detailed in this chapter.

The mountaineer image exerted the strongest initial impact, as evidenced in the broad popularity of such performers as Bradley Kincaid. His material and approach emphasized the ideals nurtured at Berea College — an institution that, then as now, was dedicated to mountain culture and non-sectarian ethical uplift.

As Malone writes, "[Kincaid's] Berea instruction, and the Berea mystique, encouraged him to think of his music as

(Continued on page 32)

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Singing Cowboys

(Continued from page 30)


'mountain music' and of that music as a product of a moral culture" (p. 83). But another linked image, the show business "hillbilly," was coming into commercially useful prominence at the same time. Naturally then, many country entertainers sought an alternative free of the "hillbilly" connotation that had begun to taint popular views of the mountaineer.

The cowboy image, a vision of western life that "drew far more from popular culture and myth—from the generations of dime novels, short-story magazines, cowboy songs, and Hollywood movies" than from reality, supplied such a refuge for performers embarrassed by rustic or hillbilly associations (p. 95). Today, both images remain in music. The rural virtue of the mountaineer persists most notably in bluegrass music where its fans identify with longing for "the hills of home." But the majority of country performers and fans, Malone concludes, "find their spiritual and aesthetic salvation in the West."

Every banjo player who has ever strapped on his or her instrument and heard a resounding "yee-haw" from the back of the tavern or restaurant can identify with the problem early country performers faced—that of the hillbilly image. As pickers and students of banjo literature, we appreciate the long history and the broadening future of the instrument, but popular images are slow to change. So Malone's account of how an earlier group of musicians dealt with similar frustration makes compelling reading. With first-rate scholarship and an engaging style, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers* takes its place alongside the best in current scholarship in the history of country music. Highly recommended.

—5-SQ—William Jolliff

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BANJO ON CD

These recent releases contain a substantial amount of banjo. While appropriate comments have been added, this listing is merely meant to inform and should not be viewed as a detailed review.

- *Banjo Man* (WEB 0151). Skeptical about "material from the vault?" Put that skepticism aside. This Bill Emerson all-instrumental offering maintains surprising continuity from cut 1 through cut 13, representing five different recording sessions from 1985 - 1995. Each tune flows nicely one to the next, despite different personnel and recording studios. As with other Emerson recordings, he provides a nice mix of original tunes ("The Grey Ghost" pays homage to a Civil War veteran), some banjo staples with personal twists ("Flint Hill Special" & "Randy Lynn Rag"), and some banjoized fiddle tunes ("Rawhide" & "Bill Cheatham"). Bluegrass lovers will find a lot to like in this effort. Supporting cast includes the likes of Tony Rice, Jimmy Gaudreau, Rickie Simpkins, Mark Schatz, etc. Pinecastle Records, 5108 S. Orange Ave., Orlando FL 32809. 800-473-7773.

- *Quartet* (Vanguard 79486-2) features Alison Brown's touring band. Band members include John R. Burr on piano, the album's producer Gary West on bass, Rick Reed on drums, with Alison on banjo and acoustic guitar. While this is a studio recording, it represents an effort to present what the band sounds like live. The Quartet has a distinctive sound aside from Alison's other recorded efforts which utilized numerous guest musicians. Alison composed (or co-wrote with other band members) all of the tunes here. Only "Mambo Banjo" appeared on a previous recording. This effort is markedly different than the original, though as equally lively and fun. Most of the cuts have a sense of jazz, along with some new-age-ness. As with many ground-breaking recordings, repeated listening is required to catch all that is contained within these 10 cuts. The banjo is almost always interwoven with what the other musicians (notably the piano) are playing—whether it be exchanging "fours," playing a twin part, or setting a rhythmic groove. See Vanguard ad, page 6 for ordering info.

- *Pete* (LMUS 0032) is Pete Seeger's first studio album in 17 years. The 77 year-old folk master plays his long neck banjo and 12-string guitar on 18 cuts. There's more guitar than banjo, but the banjo is nicely done, especially the blues piece "In The Evening." Pete is in great voice and joined by several musician friends along with complete choral ac-

companiment on many songs. A delightful collection of tunes which well represents the richness of Pete Seeger's contribution to folk music. Living Music Records, P.O. Box 72, Litchfield, CT 06759

- Ray Hesson's *Five Picker* (Old Line Music PRT 002) represents a body of banjo music that is often overlooked—contest pieces. These 16 tunes represent arrangements that have been worked out through many years of practicing for and participating in contests (Ray won a banjo in the Winfield finals in 1994). The primary focus is on the banjo. The nice mix of tunes includes a pretty "Rosemary's Waltz," a couple of chordal workouts ("Back Home Again In Indiana" & "Little Rock Getaway"), and a show-stopping "Orange Blossom Special." Two of the more challenging pieces presented are "Clarinet Polka" and "Limerock" which are good examples of great contest pieces. See ad on page 30 for ordering info.

- Gordon Stone demonstrates tremendous skill as composer, arranger, and performer on his CD *Touch And Go* (ALC 124J). Influences of rock, reggae, funk, jazz, and Latin are present throughout. Stellar musicianship, visionary interpretations, and nice production. Alcazar Productions, P.O. Box 429, S. Main St., Waterbury, VT 05676. 802-244-7845.

- Dick Weissman may be the Kenny G of banjo. On *The Uncommon Thread's American Dreams* CD (FE 1429), he blends beautiful banjo picking with the sounds of classical guitar, soprano saxophone, and flute. The overall effect may be the first New Age recording featuring banjo. Numerous other influences are evident, i.e. jazz, folk, classical, etc. Maybe the term "Cool Banjo" best describes this great effort. Folk Era Records, 705 S. Washington St., Naperville, IL 60540-6654. 708-637-2303.

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