

REVIEW

Steal Aboard

Run of the Mill String Band



Stylograph Records STY44531

Palmer Loux: fiddle; Greg Loux: guitar; Paul Sidlick: banjo, mandolin, guitar; Tom Schaffer: bass

Dixie Banner / Meg Gray / Little Black Dog Come A-Trottin' Down The Road / Little River Stomp-Take Those Lips Away / The Cat Came Back The Very Next Day / Dunbar / Hideaway / The Old Doctor That Fell Into The Well / Deschutes or Lose It / Italian Waltz / Sweet Milk and Peaches / Georgia Stomp / Little Black Mustache / Tom Wagner / Kilby Jail / Big Indian Hornpipe / Possum Hollow / Denver Belle / Widow Haley / Annadeene's Waltz / Rebel Raid

Sometimes, the music on the first recording of the newest, hottest band on the old-time circuit is played so

intensely and with such ferocity that I have to take a hot shower to clean up and calm down after I listen. I'll then go to bed and curl up with another recording, with the requirement that the band be together for at least a decade. At my age, I can appreciate the excellence of well-aged wine, cheese, and music produced by band members in a long-term relationship.

The nucleus of the Run of the Mill String Band coalesced a quarter of a century ago. Palmer, a classically trained violinist who has spent a lifetime assimilating diverse American fiddle traditions, has played in lock-step with guitarist Greg as long as anybody in the Philadelphia area remembers. Her unusually fluid, expressive and technically polished presentation is perfectly complemented by Greg's uncanny sense of rhythmic consistency. Multi-instrumentalist Paul holds down the banjo and mandolin chair with the effortless, unobtrusive virtuosity exhibited by the best sidemen. Past rhythm sections have been augmented with the banjo-ukulele of Margaret Sidlick, but in this incarnation of the band, the bottom end is anchored by Tom Schaffer, who puts out some of the most melodious, in-the-pocket bass playing this reviewer has heard. The overall sound of the ensemble is unusually homogenous, but all lines are clearly discernible due to these long-time musical friends' precision and sensitive interplay. Far from offering "traditional" chamber music, the band generates excitement by presenting a diverse program with convincingly idiomatic

playing born of careful study of the source material.

The material comes from all over the map—Kentucky, Arizona, Georgia, Alabama, and North Carolina. Palmer's versatility is highlighted, for she is able to play with commanding authority on squirrely rags, heart-melting waltzes, and hot dance tunes. Happily, none of the chosen dance tempos exhibit the frantic intensity that a less accomplished musician may inadvertently project. Configurations range from outstanding solo fiddle work on "Big Indian Hornpipe" and a soulful fiddle-banjo duet (a moving rendition of Ed Haley's "Dunbar") to various warmly-voiced full band adaptations of tunes that have become standards among dedicated collectors, but could benefit from greater exposure to the old time music community. Excellent performances include two sumptuously played waltzes. Especially noteworthy is a reading of J.P. Fraley's "Annadeene's Waltz," accompanied by two guitars and bowed bass. This arrangement produces a gentle archaic sound perfectly in keeping with the intended loving tribute. Enjoyable up-tempo numbers include the Stripling Brothers' "Possum Hollow," featuring exciting fiddle and mandolin interplay, and a finger-busting medley of F tunes including one of this author's favorites, "Little River Stomp." In addition to historical sources, Greg and Palmer have sought material from still-active traditional musicians, thus bring more obscure music to larger audiences. Unique to this recording is a tune

from North Carolina banjoist Marvin Gaster with the unusual title of "The Old Doctor That Fell Into The Well." This selection, arranged for the full band, features Paul's percolating fretless banjo against Palmer's energetic fiddling. Though they mostly focus on instrumentals here, the band presents two songs. This reviewer particularly enjoyed Paul's tongue-knotting rendition of Oscar Ford's "Hideaway."

The warmth and clarity of the overall sound is particularly noteworthy. Stereo imaging and equalization

are highly accurate and very little if any artificial reverberation is evident. The sound of the banjo is especially well captured and balanced with the ensemble. The recording engineer's use of simple mic techniques allowed the musicians to play in real-time in a semicircle, a set-up that is most effective with musicians who have long experience playing together. The result is one of the best sounding studio recordings of an old-time string band that this reviewer has heard.

The insert booklet contains artistically composed photographs of the

band, informative program notes, instrument tunings, and full performance credits. The graphic design of the tray labels is outstanding. This recording should be of interest to all members of the old-time music community, and I am happy to give it my strongest recommendation.

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