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## African American Old-Time String Band Music: A Selective Discography

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# SOUND RECORDING REVIEWS

EDITED BY RICK ANDERSON



## AFRICAN AMERICAN OLD-TIME STRING BAND MUSIC: A SELECTIVE DISCOGRAPHY

BY CHRIS DURMAN

Southern old-time string band music, similar to what might be played today for a square dance, represents perhaps the earliest musical collaboration between African American and European American (often Scots-Irish) musicians. Unfortunately, the scarcity of commercial recordings of black old-time string bands and the paucity of performing bands since the 1930s has obscured this part of our musical heritage. This discography will highlight some of the important recordings and scholarship that do exist, and point to some current trends that may revitalize the black old-time string band tradition.

Scots-Irish settlers in the Upland South brought the violin—more commonly called the fiddle in folk music—and many traditional fiddle tunes with them as they immigrated to the United States. African Americans brought an instrument modern players would recognize as the gourd banjo, along with their playing techniques, tunes, songs, and a variety of tuning methods. As Cecelia Conway documents in *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study of Folk Tradition*, when musicians from these ethnic groups met in the Upland South, the elements of old-time string band music came together for the first time.<sup>1</sup> Musicians from both groups entertained audiences by playing music suitable for both listening and dancing. This could be done by a single musician, but playing in groups lightened the musical load for the individual musician, increased the volume of the music for the dancers, and, in many cases, proved to be more fun for all.

In the interest of maintaining a clear focus, this essay deals with African American old-time string band dance music and does not examine groups whose recorded repertoire is primarily blues, ragtime, jazz, or folk song. It will thus leave unexamined whole genres of music that evolved out of the same early collaborations between white and black musicians. Also eliminated are many musicians who would have been

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1. Cecelia Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study of Folk Traditions* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 110–12.

quite capable of playing old-time string band music for a square dance or, as African Americans were once more likely to say, for a “frolic,” but whose music falls outside of the specific stylistic tradition under consideration here. Some of these groups that certainly could be considered African American “string bands,” in the broader sense, include the Mississippi Sheiks, Gus Cannon’s various ensembles, the Cats and the Fiddle, and the Spirits of Rhythm. This limit is obviously artificial since some groups already discussed, such as the ensemble made up of Sid Hemphill, Lucius Smith, Will Head, and Alec Askew, sound less typical of modern old-time string band music than certain tracks by the more blues-influenced Mississippi Sheiks.

An excellent introduction to a wide variety of African American musical styles, including solo banjo and several approaches to the string band, may be found on *Deep River of Song: Black Appalachia* (Rounder 11661-1823-2 [1999]). Jimmie Strothers performs a solo banjo version of the classic tune “Cripple Creek” that he recorded in 1936 while in prison in State Farm, Virginia. This recording also allows listeners to compare two traditional old-time string bands. The first, recorded in Campaign, Tennessee, in 1946 features Murphy Gribble on banjo, John Lusk on fiddle, and Albert York on guitar. The other, recorded in 1942 in Sledge, Mississippi, includes Sid Hemphill on fiddle and vocals, Lucius Smith on banjo, Will Head playing bass drum, and Alec Askew on guitar. What makes this band different, however, is that these musicians also play the traditional African American fife and drum music still performed in the hill country of Northeast Mississippi and represented on this disc by “Devil’s Dream.” Alan Lomax writes of this group that

this area in the hills of Northeast Mississippi has sheltered ante-bellum black musical traditions as nowhere else in the South. Blind Sid Hemphill and his friends are now seen as representing the earliest Afro-American string band styles.<sup>2</sup>

Whether or not this music truly represents the earliest black string bands, these recordings of Hemphill and his group of friends, in which the bass drum adds low bass tones while also supplying a rhythmic element, are certainly unlike the old-time string band music most commonly played today.

Today, “old-time” music is played primarily by white musicians. Perhaps due in part to its flexibility and sheer loudness, the fiddle is the dominant melodic instrument for old-time tunes. The fiddle is accom-

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Lomax, liner notes to *Black Appalachian: String Bands, Songsters, and Hoedowns* (Rounder 11661-1823-2).

panied by a variety of other stringed instruments such as banjo (often played in the “clawhammer” or downstroking style), guitar, mandolin (frequently used to double the melody), and bass. Ukuleles, harmonicas, banjo mandolins, washtub basses, cellos, brass instruments, drums, and a variety of hand-held percussion instruments have all been introduced into white old-time string bands as well, but are not common. The typical instrumental configuration of the white old-time string band of the last century has remained fairly consistent through the years. From early “hillbilly” recording artists such as the Skillet Lickers, to early revivalists like the New Lost City Ramblers, to more contemporary revivalists such as the Freight Hoppers, the typical fiddle/banjo focus (with guitar, bass, and the less-common use of the mandolin) has remained largely the same.

The African American old-time string band tradition allows for a much broader definition of the genre. Solo performers are more likely to play for dancers, as might banjo duos, guitar and fiddle duos, groups comprised of a fiddle and one or more percussionists, or groups comprised of a banjo and one or more percussionists. African American solo performers as well as group members are also more likely to sing than white musicians playing similar dance music and often place more emphasis on the rhythmic elements of the music.<sup>3</sup>

A collection, *Black Banjo Songsters of North Carolina and Virginia* (Smithsonian Folkways SF CD 40079 [1998]), includes many songs and dance tunes played by soloists and duos. Compiled by Cecelia Conway and Scott Odell, it features several of the banjo players profiled in *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia* and includes outstanding liner notes that recap and expand on the research that went into the book.<sup>4</sup> Multiple versions of the same song, performed by various artists, help the listener hear how varied different concurrent versions of the same song can be. Several tracks by banjo soloists Dink Roberts, John Snipes, John Jackson, and Homer Walker showcase divergent banjo styles, while recordings by Joe and Odell Thompson as well as Irvin Cook and Leonard Bowles feature duos. On the recording, Etta Baker, 1991 recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Award, and her older sister, Cora Phillips, perform “Jaybird March,” offering listeners the rare opportunity of hearing African American women playing in this tradition.

The repertoire of many African American old-time string bands is also very broad and frequently includes blues, jazz, ragtime, and folk songs in addition to old-time dance tunes. As Howard Armstrong (also known as

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3. Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia*, 111.

4. *Ibid.*, 1–23.

Louie Bluie), member of the Tennessee Chocolate Drops and of Martin, Bogan, and Armstrong, frequently explained, this broad repertoire allowed these and similar bands to entertain a wide variety of black and white audiences of various ethnicities.<sup>5</sup> Martin, Bogan, and Armstrong began playing together in the late 1920s and recorded several sides in the 1930s, as either the Tennessee Chocolate Drops or Louie Bluie and Ted Bogan, that are now available on *Carl Martin (1930–1936)/ Willie “61” Blackwell (1941)* (Document DOCD-5229 [1994]). Two albums, released in the 1970s and reissued on one compact disc, *Martin, Bogan, and Armstrong/That Old Gang of Mine* (Flying Fish Records FF70003 [1992]), may offer the best glimpse of the breadth of their repertoire. However, two recordings made individually by Carl Martin, *Crow Jane Blues* (Testament Records TCD 6006 [1997]), and Howard Armstrong, *Louie Bluie* (Blue Suit BS-106D [1995]), each include songs that display these artists’ old-time string band roots as well as each man’s version of the old-time string band classic “John Henry.” These recordings also allow the listener to compare Carl Martin’s typically Appalachian “short-bow” violin style with Armstrong’s more classically influenced “long-bow” playing.

In a telephone interview with the author, contemporary multi-instrumentalist Dom Flemons of the Carolina Chocolate Drops (who recorded *Dona Got a Ramblin’ Mind* [Music Maker MMCD #76 (2006)]), and of Sankofa Strings (whose *Colored Aristocracy* [Music Maker MMCD83] was released in 2006), observed with regret that, “most black people don’t know the banjo is their instrument.”<sup>6</sup> It is likewise unfortunate that so few African American bands have been recorded. Waves of new listeners seeking “authentic” music relatively unaffected by commercial interests or wishing to explore the roots of bluegrass, blues, and country music frequently discover the old-time string band music of white ensembles, but have a more difficult time discovering African American old-time string band music. An informal survey of the attendees (both musicians and listeners) at just about any fiddler’s convention held in Appalachia in recent years will reveal few, if any, African Americans. This current situation does not reflect the history of old-time string band music, however, and may not reflect its future if the recordings by African American old-time string band elders such as Joe Thompson (*Family Tradition* [Rounder CD 2161 (1999)]), or revivalists such as the Carolina Chocolate Drops, or the Ebony Hillbillies (*I Thought You Knew* [EH Music EH-CD05 (2007)]) and *Sabrina’s Holiday* (EH Music EH-CD04 (2004)])

5. Marty Pahls, liner notes to Howard Armstrong, *Louie Bluie*, Arhoolie CD 470.

6. Dom Flemons, telephone conversation with author, 6 December 2007.

spark new interest in the contributions African Americans have made to the creation and continuity of old-time string band music.

#### THE CREATION OF A NEW MUSICAL GENRE

The recorded history of African American old-time string bands begins in the early twentieth century, but the origins of the music began much earlier. While many scholars once believed that African American contributions to the performance practices and repertoire of old-time string band music were nonexistent or limited only to inspiring minstrel parody (which, in turn, inspired old-time string bands) excellent scholarship over the past few decades has shown the essential role blacks have played in the creation of the genre. As one result of extensive research into the early documents, travel logs, diaries, and newspaper articles that chronicle early African American folk music, Dena Epstein has disproved the once widespread belief that white minstrels actually created the banjo and, thus, banjo music. In *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War*, Epstein traces the evolution of all genres of African American folk music beginning with the use of African percussion instruments and the “banjar” to encourage dancing as exercise to maintain the health of slaves onboard slave ships.<sup>7</sup> Although the trail of documents mentioning the music played by the slaves is remarkably thin, reflecting the dominant class’s lack of interest in and appreciation for any cultural expression of the slaves, Epstein does find many reports of African Americans playing percussion instruments, banjos, and violins to entertain themselves and, in time, to entertain whites as well. Reports of slaves playing the banjo and percussion instruments in the American colonies begin in the mid-eighteenth century, and there are reports of slaves playing the violin as early as the late seventeenth century.<sup>8</sup>

Although reports of percussion ensembles are relatively plentiful prior to their being banned due to fears concerning their potential use as signals for slave insurrections,<sup>9</sup> definitive accounts of African Americans playing the violin and the banjo *together* in an ensemble appear later than might be expected. Beginning in 1774 there are several reports of these stringed instruments being in proximity to each other, but these early accounts fall short of specifically saying that the instruments were played together. Some scholars (including Epstein) assume that the banjo and the fiddle were probably played together at this time, but others are

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7. Dena Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 9–17.

8. *Ibid.*, 34; 80; 47.

9. *Ibid.*, 47–60.

more cautious in their interpretation of these reports. Conway suggests that “the difficulty of finding a way to tune the instruments in a harmonious fashion for the first time” may be one reason why African American fiddle and banjo ensembles are first specifically documented in 1853, decades after reports of African American banjo and percussion ensembles and violin and percussion ensembles.<sup>10</sup>

While the 1774 mention of a violinist and a banjoist being at the same barbecue near the boundary between Georgia and Florida might describe an earlier African American banjo and fiddle ensemble, the first definitive example of this instrumental grouping is the white minstrel group, the Virginia Minstrels, who played banjo and fiddle (along with bones and tambourine) as early as 1840.<sup>11</sup> Regardless of which race first played banjo and fiddle together, African Americans certainly influenced the sound and repertoire of the early minstrel groups by teaching the first generation of white banjoists how to play. Bill Whitlock, the first banjoist for the Virginia Minstrels, like many other influential early white banjoists, learned from southern African Americans as he traveled with circuses throughout the south.<sup>12</sup> Others, such as the Sweeney brothers, learned from African American banjo players on their family’s Virginia plantation.<sup>13</sup> Two recordings, *The Early Minstrel Show* (New World Records 80338-2 [1998]) and *Minstrel Banjo Style* (Rounder CD 0321 [1994]) offer a glimpse into early minstrelsy by recreating the music using period songbooks. While the musicians on these recordings and most of the songwriters appear to be European Americans, these recordings are well-researched, clearly documenting the source of each tune, including some that appear to incorporate traditional African American lyrics or music.

The unprecedented popularity of minstrelsy undoubtedly helped ensure the success of Southern old-time string band music. Beginning with the Virginia Minstrels’ first public performance in 1843 in New York City, minstrelsy swept across the nation and remained hugely popular for the next fifty or more years. Its popularity contributed to the development of the burlesque show, musical comedy, and vaudeville.<sup>14</sup> Minstrelsy and old-time string band music developed a close relationship beginning in the earliest days of minstrelsy. Conway argues, convincingly, that early minstrels and string band musicians borrowed banjo techniques, tuning

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10. Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia*, 79–80.

11. *Ibid.*, 110–12.

12. *Ibid.*, 104–5.

13. *Ibid.*, 108.

14. Robert Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 30–33. *Ibid.*, 137–55.

methods, some songs, and some tunes from the same source: African American banjoists.<sup>15</sup> Still unclear is whether early minstrels or early string bands worked out the intricacies of tuning the fiddle and banjo in a complementary manner. If African Americans were indeed the first to play the fiddle and the banjo together, minstrels would have borrowed techniques for tuning and playing these instruments together from them as well. Conway compares methods of tuning the banjo among African American, minstrel, and white Appalachian musicians and finds that blacks and white Appalachian musicians share several tuning methods that the minstrels did not use. This leads her to the conclusion that white Appalachian musicians learned these tunings directly from African Americans and not from minstrels.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to incorporating African American tunes into the minstrel repertoire, both the minstrels and the early string bands borrowed heavily from tunes in the Scottish and Irish repertoires.<sup>17</sup> Old-time string bands of both races, in turn, borrowed tunes such as “Dixie’s Land,” “Jordan is a Hard Road to Travel,” and the hugely popular “Old Dan Tucker” from the minstrels. Dena Epstein feels that separating authentic African American folk music from songs written for or adapted from European sources for the minstrel stage is particularly difficult because “slaves quickly took up [minstrel] songs and sang what they learned was expected of them.”<sup>18</sup>

Approximately ten years after the first documented minstrel performance, African Americans became both minstrels and the acknowledged experts on “plantation” materials, including the music of the slaves.<sup>19</sup> As Robert Toll points out in *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*, “Minstrelsy was one of the few opportunities for mobility—geographic, social, and economic—open to nineteenth-century Negroes.”<sup>20</sup> Toll quotes W. C. Handy, himself a minstrel in the 1890s,

the minstrel show at that time was one of the greatest outlets for talented [Negro] musicians and artists . . . All the best [black] talent of that generation came down the same drain. The composers, the singers, the musicians, the speakers, the stage performers—the minstrel show got them all.<sup>21</sup>

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15. Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia*, 194–236. *Ibid.*, 131–38.

16. *Ibid.*, 223–36.

17. Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 159–188; Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia*, 110–12.

18. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals*, 242.

19. Toll, *Blacking Up*, 195–98.

20. *Ibid.*, 223.

21. *Ibid.*, 195.

These African American minstrels added both traditional and new compositions to the music of minstrelsy. For example, one black minstrel songwriter, James A. Bland (1854–1911), composed several hundred songs including “Dem Golden Slippers.” This song is still popular among old-time string musicians and familiar to many as the Golden Grahams cereal jingle.<sup>22</sup>

As minstrelsy declined in popularity in the late 1890s, African American minstrel performers were forced to retire, move into other forms of popular entertainment such as musical theater or vaudeville, or continue performing in traveling minstrel troupes for primarily black audiences. These traveling troupes “laid the foundation for the professional black entertainment circuits that flourished virtually underground in the twentieth century” and further spread black cultural elements including music and dance that had been embedded in the minstrel shows.<sup>23</sup> The waning popularity of minstrelsy coincides with the beginning of the recording industry and with the period during which many of the earliest African American recording artists were learning music and building their diverse repertoires. Early recordings document the ways that geographic diversity and commercial interests were reflected in commercially-released music of the period.

Conway theorizes that African American banjo music developed and spread from two geographic areas, the Mississippi Valley and the Upper South, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While remnants of early folk banjo music still being played in both regions display similarities in tunes or songs and playing styles, regional influences led to divergence: jazz, ragtime, and jug band music developed in the Mississippi Valley while old-time string band music was being standardized in the Upper South. Blues music, although more commonly associated with the Mississippi Valley and the delta, was influential in both areas.<sup>24</sup> When commercial recording companies discovered the marketability of “race” records and sent representatives out into the field, they discovered African American musicians playing a wide range of musical styles; however, few of these recordings feature African American old-time string bands playing dance music.

#### THE RECORDING AGE

As a variety of ethnomusicological field recordings, interviews, and concert appearances of African American old-time string bands prove,

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22. *Ibid.*, 216.

23. *Ibid.*, 273–74.

24. Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia*, 62–3.

this genre of music was and continues to be played throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. The scarcity of commercial recordings, though, leads many to assume that few blacks played old-time string band music even at the dawn of the recording age when there were still many such bands playing for dances. Charles Wolfe offers a major reason why these bands were skipped over by record companies documenting rural southern music in his essay, *Rural Black String Band Music*.

The record companies segregated this music into separate series, one designed for whites, the other for blacks. White rural music included fiddle bands, banjo tunes, sentimental songs, and a few religious pieces; black music series were dominated by country blues, gospel, preachers like Rev. Gates, and a few vaudeville numbers. A black band playing something other than blues did not fit into either stereotype; consequently, few of them were recorded.<sup>25</sup>

Fortunately, several black string bands were recorded at that time, and a few compilation CDs have collected recordings of the period that were originally issued as singles. *String Bands: 1926–1929* (Document Records DOCD-5167 [1994]) includes African American fiddlers playing on two of the earliest integrated recording sessions from 1927. Andrew Baxter joined the white Georgia Yellow Hammers on the ragtime-influenced “G Rag,” and Jim Booker likewise joined a white band called Taylor’s Kentucky Boys for several traditional old-time string band numbers including “Grey Eagle,” “Forked Deer,” “Soldier’s Joy,” and “Maxwell Girl,” which most modern listeners would recognize as “Buffalo Gals.”<sup>26</sup>

Another compilation, *Virginia Traditions: Non-Blues Secular Black Music* (Blue Ridge Institute BRI 001 [1995]) offers several decades (1930s through the 1960s) of rare and diverse African American musical genres. Tracks featuring unaccompanied harmonica players, an a cappella vocalist, and two separate accordion players illustrate the variety of music played in Virginia at this time. While this recording does contain a fiddle and banjo duo—Irvin Cook and Leonard Bowles playing the dance song “Wish to the Lord I’d Never Been Born”—many tracks document the African American tradition of a single musician playing dance repertoire that might otherwise be performed by an ensemble. Solo banjoists include Jimmy Strothers playing “I Used to Work on the Tractor,” “Uncle” Homer Walker playing “Cripple Creek,” “Big Sweet” Lewis Hairston playing “Bile Them Cabbage Down,” and Irvin Cook playing “Old Blue.” Solo guitarists include Clayton Horsley playing “Poor Black Annie” and

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25. Charles Wolfe, “Rural Black String Band Music,” *Black Music Research Journal* 10, no. 1 (1990): 33.

26. Terry Zwigoff, liner notes to *String Bands: 1926–1929*, Document Records DOCD-5167.

John Jackson playing “Medley of Country Dance Tunes.” By the audio standards of most historic recordings, this is a particularly good set.

*From Where I Stand: The Black Experience in Country Music* (Warner Brothers 9 46248-2 [1998]), which focuses on African American contributions to country music throughout the twentieth century, contains several examples of African American old-time string bands on the first of its three discs. In addition to the previously mentioned “G Rag” and “Grey Eagle,” the set features the James Cole String Band playing the old-time string band mainstay “Bill Cheatem” and Peg Leg Howell and Eddie Anthony performing “Turkey Buzzard Blues,” which is more commonly called “Turkey in the Straw” today. This set also features Nathan Frazier on banjo and vocal, and Frank Patterson on fiddle, playing “Eighth of January” and the previously mentioned group of Murphy Gribble, John Lusk, and Albert York performing “Apple Blossom.”

Nathan Frazier and Frank Patterson also appear with Gribble, Lusk, and York on *Altamont: Black Stringband Music from the Library of Congress* (Rounder CD 0238 [1989]). Seven tracks from each of these two groups are included with Frazier and Patterson, recorded in 1942 in Nashville, Tennessee, performing, among others, the well-known tunes “Dan Tucker,” “Bile Them Cabbage Down,” and “Corinne.” Gribble, Lusk, and York, recorded in 1946 and 1949 in Rocky Island, Tennessee, contribute, among others, the lesser-known “Rolling River,” “Pateroller’ll Catch You,” and “Cincinnati” in addition to the title track, “Altamont.”

Two CD releases of recordings made in Louisiana in the late 1950s and early 1960s include James “Butch” Cage on violin and vocals, and Willie B. Thomas on guitar and vocals, playing a wide range of blues, gospel, and a few old-time dance tunes including “Whoa Mule!” and “Dead and Gone” on *Country Negro Jam Session* (Arhoolie CD 372 [1993]) and “Hen Cackle” and “It Ain’t Going to Rain No More” on *Old Time Black Southern String Band Music* (Arhoolie CD 9045 [2006]). The recordings on *Country Negro Jam Session* and, possibly, those on *Old Time Black Southern String Band Music* were made in the home of Butch Cage in Zachary, Louisiana, where he was living and playing primarily for neighbors when discovered by Dr. Harry Oster. In 1960 both men performed at the Newport Folk Festival.<sup>27</sup>

Another artist familiar to the stage of the Newport Folk Festival and to everyone interested in the folk revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Elizabeth Cotten, released her first recording, *Freight Train and Other North Carolina Folk Songs and Tunes* (Smithsonian Folkways SF CD 40009 [1989]), in 1958. Although widely known as an accomplished fingerstyle

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27. Harry Oster, liner notes to *Country Negro Jam Session*, Arhoolie CD372.

guitarist and the composer of “Freight Train,” Cotten is also, as Cecelia Conway points out, “the most famous black banjo player.”<sup>28</sup> On this recording she plays three traditional dance tunes on the banjo, “Here Old Rattler Here,” “Sent for My Fiddle Sent for My Son,” and “Georgia Buck,” in addition to several other dance tunes such as “Going Down the Road Feeling Bad” and “I Don’t Love Nobody” that she plays on the guitar.

The versatility and unpredictability in terms of repertoire, instrumentation, and playing styles of African American string bands (especially in contrast to the stately music of Elizabeth Cotten) is fully displayed on *Blind James Campbell and his Nashville Street Band* (Arhoolie CD 438 [1995]). A band that was playing in the streets of Nashville at the time of this 1963 recording, James Campbell and friends play a very wide range of standards, blues, folk, and at least two old-time string band tunes, “Buffalo Gals” and “Beauford’s Breakdown.” The unusual accompaniment of trumpet and tuba may be heard on many of the songs but not on the two old-time string band tunes that feature fiddle and guitar.

Traditional banjo and fiddle as well as solo banjo renditions of many old-time string band tunes recorded in the mid-1970s can be heard on *Ain’t Gonna Rain No More: Blues and Pre-Blues from Piedmont North Carolina* (Rounder 11661-2016-2 [2006]). Four of the musicians (John Snipes, Dink Roberts, and Joe and Odell Thompson) discussed extensively in *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia* offer selections not included in the previously mentioned *Black Banjo Songsters of North Carolina and Virginia* recording. Like that collection, this one is rare in that most of the tracks are indeed African American old-time string band dance music even though the title rightly characterizes a few of the tracks as blues. The Thompsons are in particularly good form on this recording and contribute five tracks including “Old Joe Clark,” “Rya’s House,” and “Molly Put the Kettle On.” Solo players Wilbert Atwater and Jamie Alston both play traditional dance tunes and early blues on this recording. Two of the lesser known dance tunes played by Atwater include “Can’t Get a Letter from Down the Road” and “Buffalo.”

Very few younger African American musicians took up this tradition in the latter half of the twentieth century and many of the living elder statesmen of the African American string band tradition began to retire or pass away in the 1980s and 1990s. Howard Armstrong and Ted Bogan remained active throughout the 1980s and 1990s, bringing many new listeners to the tradition by starring in and touring to support Terry Zwiggoff’s bio-documentary on Armstrong, *Louie Bluiie*. Joe and Odell

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28. Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia*, 63.

Thompson remained active by performing live and by sharing their knowledge with a younger generation of listeners and musicians. Cecelia Conway's highly-praised 1995 book *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia* brought much attention and interest to the genre. However, even she lamented in the epilogue that the last black banjo player she knew was killed in 1994 when Odell Thompson was hit by a car near Wilkesboro where he was performing at the Merle Watson Memorial Festival.

#### THE FUTURE

Hope for the future of the music rests in the fact that Joe Thompson continues to play and inspire a younger generation of African American musicians to recognize that this music is part of their heritage. In recognition of his lifetime achievements, in 2007, he was awarded the National Heritage Fellowship award, the country's highest honor in the folk and traditional arts. Likewise, hope springs from the apparent success of the 2005 Black Banjo Gathering in Boone, North Carolina, which drew attendees interested in all genres of black banjo music from around the world to Appalachian State University to discuss, listen, and play banjo. One of the few existing African American old-time string bands, the Ebony Hillbillies, attended and performed there, and the members of the Carolina Chocolate Drops met and formed a group there. Since that time, both groups have released new albums and continue to draw new audiences. The Ebony Hillbillies continue to perform on the streets and subways of New York City in addition to scheduling other gigs. The Carolina Chocolate Drops have an extensive tour planned throughout the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom through August 2008. Recognition seems to be building that African American old-time string band musicians have contributed something unique and foundational to the music of the United States.

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

(All selections are compact discs)

- Ain't Gonna Rain No More: Blues and Pre-Blues from Piedmont North Carolina.* Rounder 11661-2016-2, 2006.
- Altamont: Black Stringband Music from the Library of Congress.* Rounder CD 0238, 1989.
- Armstrong, Howard. *Louie Bluie.* Blue Suit BS-106D, 1995.
- Armstrong, Howard. *Louie Bluie: Film Soundtrack Featuring Howard Armstrong.* Arhoolie CD 470, 1998.
- Black Banjo Songsters of North Carolina and Virginia.* Smithsonian Folkways SF CD 40079, 1998.
- Cage, Butch, and Willie B. Thomas. *Old Time Black Southern String Band Music.* Arhoolie CD 9045, 2006.

- Campbell, *Blind James*. *Blind James Campbell and His Nashville Street Band*. Arhoolie CD 438, 1995.
- Carolina Chocolate Drops. *Dona Got a Ramblin' Mind*. Music Maker MMCD #76, 2006.
- Cotton, Elizabeth. *Freight Train and Other North Carolina Folk Songs and Tunes*. Smithsonian Folkways SF CD 40009, 1989.
- Country Negro Jam Session*. Arhoolie CD 372, 1993.
- Deep River of Song: Black Appalachia*. Rounder 11661-1823-2, 1999.
- The Early Minstrel Show*. New World Records 80338-2, 1998.
- From Where I Stand: The Black Experience in Country Music*. Warner Brothers 9 46248-2, 1998.
- Martin, Bogan, and the Armstrongs. *Martin, Bogan, and Armstrong/That Old Gang of Mine*. Flying Fish Records FF70003, 1992.
- Martin, Carl. *Crow Jane Blues*. Testament Records TCD 6006, 1997.
- Martin, Carl and Willie Blackwell. *Carl Martin, 1930–1936/Willie “61” Blackwell (1941): Complete Recorded works in Chronological Order*. Document Records DOCD-5229, 1994.
- Minstrel Banjo Style*. Rounder CD 0321, 1994.
- Sankofa Strings. *Colored Aristocracy*. Music Maker MMCD83, ca. 2006.
- String Bands: 1926–1929*. Document Records DOCD-5167, 1994.
- Thomas, Henry. *Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order: 1927–1929*. Document Records DOCD-5665, 2000.
- Thompson, Joe. *Family Tradition*. Rounder CD 2161, 1999.
- Virginia Traditions: Non-Blues Secular Black Music*. Blue Ridge Institute BRI 001, 1995.

**COLLECTED RECORDINGS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN OLD-TIME  
STRING BANDS AND OTHER GENRES**

- Before the Blues: The Early American Black Music Scene, vol. 1–3*. Yazoo 2015-2017, 1996.
- The Cornshuckers's Frolic: Downhome Music and Entertainment from the American Countryside, vol. 1 and 2*. Yazoo 2045-2046, 1999.

**REPRESENTATIVE RECORDINGS OF ARTISTS  
MENTIONED, BUT NOT INCLUDED**

- Cannon's Jug Stompers. *The Best of Cannon's Jug Stompers*. Yazoo 2060, 2001.
- Cats and the Fiddle. *Killin' Jive: 1939–1940, Complete Recordings, Volume 1*. Dee-jay Jamboree DJ-CD55101, 1999.
- Freight Hoppers. *Where'd You Come From Where'd You Go?* Rounder CD 0403, 1996.
- Mississippi Sheiks. *Stop and Listen*. Yazoo 2006, 1992.

- New Lost City Ramblers. *The Early Years, 1958–1962*. Smithsonian Folkways SF CD 40036, 1991.
- New Lost City Ramblers. *Volume II, 1963–1973: Out Standing in Their Field*. Smithsonian Folkways SF CD40040, 1993.
- Skillet Lickers. *Old-time Fiddle Tunes and Songs from North Georgia*. County CD-3509, 1996.
- Spirits of Rhythm. *1933–1945*. Classics1028, 1998.

#### BRIEFLY NOTED

BY RICK ANDERSON

**Johannes Ockeghem.** Mass sections; Estonian folk chorales. Heinavanker. Alba ABCD 237, 2007.

It is just a bit misleading to present this strange and wonderful disc as an Ockeghem recording, but Ockeghem's works do act as something of a glue holding the program together. Heinavanker is a small ensemble of Estonian singers dedicated to both early church music and the ancient folk chorales of their native country—music that drew much of its melodic content from Gregorian plainchant but gathered both melodic and harmonic accretions and elaborations over the centuries until it became something quite different. Their approach on this recording is to alternate sections from various Ockeghem masses with these traditional spiritual songs, as well as, in one case, intertwining one of those songs directly into a performance of a Gregorian chant. It is a strategy that recalls Noel Cohen's (tragically unrecorded) 1982 version of the *Play of Daniel* with the Boston Camerata, in which the original medieval musical drama was interspersed with traditional American shape-note hymns. The result is music of truly remarkable beauty and spiritual power. The apparent simplicity of the folk hymns is complicated by strangely dotted rhythms that frequently recall those of the Scottish strathspey and by modern harmonized settings that sometimes make them sound like early organum and at others like something from the mid-twentieth century; presented alternately with the Ockeghem selections, they often sound richly sweet next to his more open, vinegary harmonies. Heinavanker's vocal blend is effortless and quite perfect, and their tonal quality is exquisite. This gor-

geous recording cannot be recommended too highly, and will reward any effort required to track it down. (NB. The program on this disc, a studio recording, largely duplicates that on a previous live recording by the same group. Titled *Loomiselaul* [Edition Kloster Maulbronn LC 11277] and released in 2005, the previous disc was released as part of a recorded series of concerts at Maulbronn Monastery in Baden-Württemberg.)

**Johann Sebastian Bach.** Motetten. Hilliard Ensemble. ECM 187, 2007.

**Johann Sebastian Bach.** The Bach Motets. University of Wisconsin–Madison Chamber Choir / Robert Fountain. School of Music, University of Wisconsin–Madison. 2005.

Two recordings of J. S. Bach's motets came to this reviewer's attention in 2007—one newly recorded by the Hilliard Ensemble, the other a collection of older recordings originally issued in 2005 and forwarded for review consideration in 2007 by a representative of the School of Music at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Both are noteworthy, but for very different reasons.

The Wisconsin recording is less a showcase for Bach's motets than it is a tribute to the choral conductor Robert Fountain, who led choirs at that university for twenty-three years before retiring in 1994. The Fountain Legacy Project was initiated to preserve and disseminate recordings of some of the many performances he conducted during that period; for this project, roughly 350 analog tapes (both open-reel and cassette) were digitized and archived

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