



Plowing a Different Field



L-R Bucky Hanks, Andy Carlton, former member Ed Partridge and Brian Hunter

the importance of radio in bluegrass and old-time music to the audience of The Liberty Flyer demonstrates that. So does his choice of a most enjoyable venue. "I'd have to say the Carter Family Fold in Hiltons, Virginia, the site of A.P. Carter's store, is my most favorite place to play. The crowds up there are very knowledgeable, very appreciative. They know when to dance and when to listen.

"That has to be because of the atmosphere. Here's A.P. and Sara's daughter sitting right on stage with you. You can feel the whole history of country music enveloping you. You're very respectful when you're there. It makes you more careful with the music and it makes you appreciate it more. We do so many shows in front of convention audiences that don't care for it; it's just a pleasure to go up there to people who really know their music."

When the Midnight Plowboys have the kind of audience they like, their music takes off. Crouch's fiddling possesses a powerful, soaring drive that

The Midnight Plowboys

by Arthur Menius

Photos by Rob Amberg

On an Indian summer Sunday evening an excited crowd of bluegrass fans and musicians packed Bill Stanley's Barbecue and Bluegrass (see *BU* September 1980) in Asheville, North Carolina for the taping of the first four installments of the Linear Group's new radio show, *The Liberty Flyer*. About midway through the talent laden evening, Asheville's own Midnight Plowboys brought the knowledgeable audience to its feet with a tight, fast-paced performance, highlighted by Paul Crouch's electrifying fiddling.

On a small stairway underneath a sign reading "Please do not stand on the steps by order of the Asheville Fire Department," banjo master Doug Dillard grinned with pleasure.

"You were really tight," he told Crouch, an Asheville fireman, afterwards. "Your group has the timing down. I really like that."

The Midnight Plowboys appreciated playing before an audience that knew its bluegrass. For practical and economic

reasons, the group spends most of its time performing for bluegrass neophytes at conventions and country clubs.

"There's a lot of expenses associated with traveling to bluegrass festivals and the pay is not all that good," explained guitarist and lead singer Brian Hunter. "Our major market is conventions, country clubs, and private parties. We do three or four festivals a year." The outfit, which plays about five nights a week during the warmer months, has headlined, therefore, such prestigious resorts as Pinehurst, North Carolina, the Homestead of Virginia, and the Georgia Sea Islands.

A major goal for the group, according to the affable Hunter, is to begin to appear before more appreciative audiences. He feels that can be achieved only through hard work and experience.

Despite their non-traditional approach to the business of bluegrass, the Midnight Plowboys express a great respect for the knowledge of the music's past. Hunter's convincing explanation of

demands much of the lead instrumental work. Bucky Hanks, a history graduate student (as befits a relative of Abe Lincoln) at Western Carolina University and music instructor at local Asheville music store Pick 'n' Grin, provides clean, tasteful banjo breaks. Miamian Andy Charlton, the only Plowboy not native to the North Carolina mountains, plays a

Paul Crouch



steady Fender bass that keeps the band moving. Hunter's rhythm guitar usually insists on a fast tempo, at times strummed like a mandolin being used for rhythmic effect.

The Midnight Plowboys came together in May 1978 following the breakup of the Hunter Brothers Band which included Hunter, Charlton, and original Plowboy fiddler Ed Partridge. Mike Hunter and Steve Sutton, now of the Marc Pruett Band and formerly members of Jimmy Martin's Sunny Mountain Boys, also belonged to the Hunter Brothers Band. The original Midnight Plowboys consisted of Hunter, Charlton, Hanks, Partridge, and Craig Willoughby on mandolin. When the latter left the group to return to college, they decided to continue as a four piece band.

In the late spring of 1983 Ed Partridge had to leave the outfit when Duke Power Company transferred him out of the area. The Plowboys were overjoyed to secure Crouch as a replacement.

Crouch's voice and fiddle drive the theme song during the opening credits of the Nashville Network's "Fire on the Mountain" series. He built his first fiddle almost half a century ago by putting a bridge on a mandolin. The small boy made a bow from a horse's tail so that he could play "Turkey in the Straw" for his father when the latter came home on the weekend from the CCC camp where he worked. Visibly moved, his father paid twelve dollars for a real fiddle, which Crouch still owns. His big break had seemingly come in 1950 when he signed on with Mac Wiseman. Uncle Sam, however, had different ideas, drafting Crouch. After seeing action during the Korean War, he did not return to music until about 1970. Since then he has belonged to several groups, including the Lincoln County Partners.

The change on fiddle disrupted the Midnight Plowboys' carefully nurtured vocal teamwork. "We wouldn't record our first album ["The Midnight Plowboys" (Skyline 001)] until we'd been together two or three years because we knew it took so long to get a tight three way harmony. A goal we have is to get as tight vocally as we were before Ed left," Hunter said.

Even if not yet up to their own high expectations, Crouch's urgent baritone, Hunter's versatile lead, and Hanks' tenor and lead are authentic mountain voices. They resound with the echoes of the rich musical heritage of the southern highlands. Charlton has been working on

his harmony singing, and also steps to the mike once or twice a night to take the lead on a contemporary number.

Charlton, like so many younger musicians, is a relative newcomer to bluegrass. In Miami he had played in a number of rock 'n' roll bands, primarily during his high school years. In 1973, when he moved to Asheville where he now works as a bartender, he became ex-

posed to traditional music. Soon Charlton was another victim of the bluegrass bug. Hunter calls him, "a solid team member, highly dedicated to the group."

Hunter grew up listening to mountain music, but did not consider playing music himself. His interest grew during the early 1970s while a student at the University of North Carolina. He became



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a regular at the Thursday night performances of Chapel Hill favorites The Bluegrass Experience at the old Cat's Cradle club (now Rhythm Alley). Brother Mike, then beginning his professional musical career, encouraged Hunter to devote himself to playing and singing after the latter was graduated in 1976.

Ironically, Hunter's musical career has recently caused him to return to school part-time to study accounting. "With most of my bands I kind of evolved into the business manager, because I was interested in doing it. Gradually, I went from full-time musician into the management end of the business." Hunter, with his wife Maryjane, operates a booking agency called Mountain Talents. The "client oriented" firm provides almost any sort of musical entertainment from classical to pop for conventions, country clubs, and parties.

The son of a well known local musician, Hanks grew up surrounded by country music. As a teenager he expanded his interests into rock and rhythm and blues, and played in several such bands. Since earning his undergraduate degree, Hanks has explored Irish, bluegrass, and old-time music while preparing for a career as a local historian.

His broad background fits in well with the Midnight Plowboys, who, although primarily bluegrass musicians, pride themselves on the variety of music at their command. "This outfit has a lot of versatility," Crouch pointed out. "It gives me a chance to do different things, not just bluegrass. When you play conventions you almost have to. Brian doesn't even make out the program until he sees what type of audience we've got. Then if we're not making it, we'll change it."

"We don't usually play in strict bluegrass circumstances," Hunter continued, "so we can't do one bluegrass song right after another, especially obscure ones. We don't play for other musicians; we play for the audience. We like the image that we are light and

engaging on stage and that we can take a crowd of non-bluegrass fans, just the general population that we are thrust in front of, and be able to entertain those people."

With such an audience, Hunter said he must "pick things they might know to get them a little sympathetic. We break them in on something like a well-known Flatt and Scruggs tune or a bluegrass version of a John Denver song." He asserted that sincerity is "vital before non-bluegrass crowds, but "the biggest

"Before the night's over we usually do something that about everybody likes."

thing that I can say about my philosophy when I get in front of an audience like that is don't ever quit on them, don't ever let up on your audience."

"Before the night's over we usually do something that about everybody likes," Crouch said.

The Midnight Plowboys, therefore, generally perform tight, professional covers of other people's songs. They rely on proven bluegrass standards such as "Old Salty Dog Blues," "Sweet Little Miss Blue Eyes," "Uncle Pen," and "The Eighth of January." If that music fails to move listeners, the Plowboys can easily provide western swing in the form of a Bob Wills classic or Hanks' "Plowboy Rag." They play grassy interpretations of country material by Hank Williams or Merle Haggard. They turn Haggard's "Old Man From the Mountain" into a fine bluegrass piece, perfectly fitting the song's lyric content. Hanks can even strap on an electric guitar enabling the Plowboys to reach deeply into their bag of tricks for R&B and early rock 'n' roll selections to move the most recalcitrant audiences.

"The Midnight Plowboys" album, which was sold several thousand copies, reflects that diversity. It contains bluegrass, Cajun, country, and traditional mountain music. That wide mixture is intended mostly to convert the uninitiated. Recorded in January 1981, the record undoubtedly forms the entire bluegrass collection in more than a few homes.

Their second long play effort "Dance Music: Square and Clog" (Skyline 007),

shared equally with the Marc Pruett Band, features their quite traditional handling of breakdown tunes such as "Lost Indian." The cohesive body of material allows the listener to appreciate the Midnight Plowboys' craftsmanship and respect for the roots of their music. It also demonstrates their business acumen. Since both the Plowboys and Pruett planned square dance records for early 1982 release, they decided to split one platter, thus saving a good deal of expense. Hunter has found that the album appeals to new listeners who don't like the high, lonesome sound of mountain vocalists, but are moved by their instrumental skills.

A current goal, according to Hunter, is to record a new album with Crouch, who, of course, is not represented on their recordings. Hunter hopes to include several selections by the Asheville area's leading songwriters. He intends for that outing to reflect more of a Sugar Hill-influenced modern country sound.

"There used to be a consensus of opinion," Hunter noted, "that something about bluegrass singers excluded them, inherently, from the radio. People like Ricky Skaggs have proven that not to be the case. He doesn't sing in any different key than he did as a bluegrass singer. Now it's been shown that people can get on the radio singing that key."

The Midnight Plowboys recently received quite a boost from their appearance on the Nashville Network's "Fire on the Mountain" television program, also produced by the Linear Group. Since their segment aired, potential clients throughout the southern, midwestern, and mid-atlantic states have contacted them. That will result in an expansion of the eight state area the group currently works.

The tight professionalism the Midnight Plowboys display on stage distinguishes them from many groups which play bluegrass for similar clientele. Their skill permits them to please a Doug Dillard with their timing or a leisure suited businessman with their song selection and infectious good spirit. The key is in the musicians' mind, Hunter offered. "You can walk out there and make it a drag, or you can walk out there and make it fun. If you can let it be fun, the show goes quicker, and the audience likes it better."

A natural showman like Hunter backed by a steady bassman and two excellent soloists gives the band a very strong lineup. Although they have shunned the acclaim that goes with festival participation, the Midnight Plowboys have introduced thousands to bluegrass and in the process have created a lot of very unlikely fans for the music.



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