

# OPEN EAR



This Open Ear was written by Art Menius.

Traditional music runs through cycles of popularity nearly as much as mainstream forms. New listeners and players rediscover forms that have survived for decades: Cajun music surged into newfound prominence during the late 1980s, while the blues have been hot of late. This *Open Ear* looks at recent releases in bluegrass, African-American gospel and contemporary string-band music—three genres that keep coming back to the forefront.

Once commercial r&b grew out of the gospel quartets, once Sam Cooke went from the Soul Stirrers to pop stardom, gospel quartets seemed headed for oblivion. But 40 years later African-American gospel music finds itself speaking again—and in such unusual venues as arts councils and the Ivory Snow world of bluegrass festivals.

After the major-label chariot of Warner Brothers swung low to pick up the Fairfield Four, the five elderly gentlemen ended up as the opening act for a Lyle Lovett tour. On *Standing in the Safety Zone* (Warner Brothers 9 26945-2) the Fairfield Four amply demonstrate their power-of-God singing style, which slowly builds momentum like the mighty locomotives of black gospel's glory days. Originally active from 1922 until the 1950s and regrouped in 1980, the Four hit like an atom bomb with the almost palpable force of their convictions. It's an experience few forget quickly. (You can experience them live in Raleigh on Saturday, Dec. 5, at Stewart Theatre; call 990-1900.)

The jubilee gospel style has now inspired younger practitioners. Alabama's Birmingham Sunlights, who debut on CD with *For Old Time's Sake* (Flying Fish FF70588), have already toured the United States and Southern Africa. While deeply indebted to gospel traditions, the Sunlights inject plenty of self-expression, original songs and stylistic innovation into their music. A comparison of their "Roll Jordan" with the version by the Fairfield Four shows that the Sunlights have yet to pass the masters in delivering a heavenly impact. But the Sunlights' highly syncopated approach produces plenty of evidence that African-American gospel is a resurgent musical tradition.

*Duffield Station* jolted me back to the '70s. Instead of the latest Clone Mountain Boys sound, this new record by Boston's **Beacon Hill Billies** (East Side Digital ESD 80652), delivers original material arranged with the style and spirit of early '70s progressive bluegrass. Touching bases with folk, Celtic, jazz, and old-time musics, the Beacon Hill Billies return to a time when anything seemed possible in acoustic music, when music could change the world. It did my heart good to listen to instrumentals that cut across artificial lines of genre, mixed with lyrics exploring contemporary themes instead of drowned Knoxville girls. The Hill Billies include Matt Glaser, a pre-eminent progressive bluegrass fiddler of the '70s, while banjo innovator Tony Trischka guests on half the CD's tracks.

## Battleship refrains

Well, it seems the team of Dan Baird and Terry Anderson are about to do it again. Baird and Anderson, you'll recall, were in the Woodpeckers, the precursor group to our fave homeboy band, the Woods. Baird split the 'Peckers to rejoin the Georgia Satellites, taking with him something he borrowed from Anderson: a 2-ton hook that went by the name "Battleship Chains." The rest, as they say, is history.

Hoping that lightning will strike twice, Baird enlisted Anderson to contribute to *Love Songs For The Hearing Impaired*, Baird's debut release just out on the Def American label. Terry wrote or co-wrote five songs for the disc, in particular bringing another well-known Woodwork to Mr. Baird, a most sticky piece of juvenile ear taffy called "I Love You Period."

According to *Radio & Records* magazine, it's sticking indeed. *R&R* tracks the records played on major commercial radio stations across the country. "I Love You Period," which is the first single off Baird's disc, was the most added song to AOR (album-oriented rock) station playlists the week it came out, and is currently the No. 8 most frequently played cut on AOR radio and the song most requested by listeners at AOR stations.

This, on top of Anderson's recently inked publishing deal with mega music publisher BMG, is bittersweet confirmation of what we in these parts have known for years: that if somebody would just put the Woods on the airwaves, the songs'll take care of the rest.

—Farnum Brown

The Beacon Hill Billies came to me at the right moment; that "bluegrass revolution comin' on" sound of 20 years ago had been on my mind ever since I received *Muleskinner Live: Original Television Soundtrack* (Sierra OXCD 6001). *Muleskinner* reinvigorated traditional bluegrass selections with their youthful firepower, altered states of mind, and sheer love for the music. For 19 years since guitarist Clarence White's death, fans have had to make do with *Muleskinner's* one out-of-print Warner Brothers LP. But rumors of a lost 1973 public TV show by the supergroup were confirmed recently with the release of both a half-hour home video and this CD, which contains all the music from that program plus four additional tracks.

Where do all those baby boom city boys encounter bluegrass? Bill Clifton, a Maryland patrician who eschewed a family fortune to pursue a career in hillbilly music, provided one link. Clifton saw bluegrass as a means for reintroducing the old traditional songs, especially material from the Carter Family. He added the Autoharp, played by Mike Seeger, to a bluegrass line-up that supported his clearly enunciated singing style—a sharp contrast to Bill Monroe's high lonesome bluesiness or Carter Stanley's mountain soul. *Bill Clifton: The Early Days, 1957-1958* collects 19 killer examples of Clifton putting this concept in the grooves with help from Seeger and many other stalwarts.

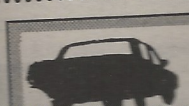
Old-time string band revivalists of the 1960s and 1970s provided a counterpart to the bluegrass progressives: the whatzit band. These



The Red Clay Ramblers, circa 1992

folks, including Chapel Hill's Red Clay Ramblers, approached musical revivalism not by style or place, but by time. They incorporated sounds of the '20s, '30s and '40s into a delightfully diverse approach—so Fats Waller can meet Charlie Poole on an original tune. *Twisted Laurel/Merchant's Lunch* (Flying Fish FF70055) places two breakthrough projects by the almost original Red Clay Ramblers of the 1970s on one totally satisfying CD.

The whatzit tradition lives on with such



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## Not too chicken to rock

The Triangle rock music club scene is constantly evolving. And so has the Chapel Hill restaurant that opened under the name of Chick-It-Out two years ago. Maybe it's not much of a surprise, then, that what started as a carry-out storefront serving only grilled chicken has evolved into a live music club and restaurant: Margaret's Rock & Roll Cafe.

When I spoke to co-owner Jon Noyes about the transformation, Noyes was exhausted after long days and nights of constructing a stage, installing lights, meeting with the fire marshal and building inspectors and calling bands and booking agents.

Noyes' goal is to create a club that is more than a restaurant presenting an occasional band, but less than a showcase rock club. "We want it to be fun," he said. "You know, some good rock 'n' roll and r&b—not too loud, some dancing." In other words, a club that's somewhere between Hardback Cafe and Cat's Cradle.

Basically, Margaret's (at 506 W. Franklin St.) hopes to pick up where the now-defunct La Terraza left off, booking bands with broad enough appeal for the student crowd as well as those old enough to vote the last time a Democrat was sent to the White

House. On opening night last Friday, Margaret's featured Chris Stamey, the former DB who's in the process of relocating back to this area from New York.

Noyes' partner, chef Margaret Lundy, will focus her energy on the dinner menu now that the 85-seat restaurant is no longer open for daily lunch. Dinner will be served from 5 to 10 p.m.; dinner patrons will get a discount on admission prices to see bands, who will start at about 10:30. Late-night breakfast will be served from 2 to 3:30 a.m. after the music shuts down. You may argue about whether the Triangle needs another music club, but I guarantee you from extensive personal research that there is plenty of room for a place that begins serving breakfast when the clubs close.

Margaret's has at least one thing in its favor as it converts to a music club. Inside, on the wall below the giant *papier-maché* pterodactyl, hangs the single best piece of rock 'n' roll memorabilia in the Triangle: a rare autographed poster of XTC that Noyes obtained when the band played Raleigh 10 years ago on their only American tour.

For future bookings at Margaret's, see our weekly "Clubs & Cafes" calendar listings or call 942-4745.

—Jim Desmond

aggregations as Chapel Hill's Chicken Wire Gang and Chicago's Sunshine Skiffle Band. The Sunshine Skiffle Band's new *Beat It, Blow It, Strum It* (Flying Fish FF70589) displays a large, multi-generational ensemble capable of moving from the "Orange Blossom Special"

to "My Blue Heaven" to Tampa Red's salty "Tight Like That" without a care for genre. Many recordings feature a much higher level of musical precision, but few can generate the sheer fun of the Sunshine Skiffle Band. This is art for joy's sake. ■

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