

Reviews

Derek Halsey, Aaron K. Harris, Julie Koehler, Henry Koretzky, Les McIntyre, John Roemer, Walter V. Saunders

MOUNTAIN HEART WIDE OPEN

Skaggs Family Records
6989020162



With a surge of pulsating energy, Mountain Heart's latest CD, "Wide Open," grabs listeners by the lapels and doesn't let go until the final notes of track 12 fade away. This is a band that started strong and has continued to coalesce into a most powerful force. Anchored securely in the traditions of bluegrass, they have added to that foundation layer upon layer of contemporary

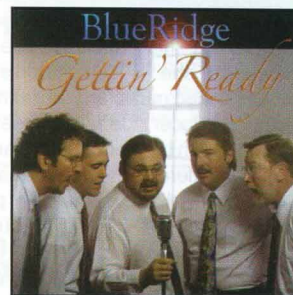
perfection: hard-driving, envelope-pushing instrumental breaks with vocals and harmonies that drill their stories and messages into your core. Here you'll find double-quick fast tunes that will leave you breathless, slow ballads and gospel tunes that might give you something to think about, and a hot Jim VanCleve instrumental ("Deadwood") that leaves nothing but a cloud of dust and fond memories in its wake.

And yet...there's a conundrum within the tracks of this album. Lyrically, the songs are mostly about the usual (and familiar) topics. There's a song about forgetting ("I'm Just Here To Ride The Train"), and a poignant ballad that deals with forgiving others and especially yourself ("Everybody But Me"). There's a tune called "Wide Open" that describes a life lived full-throttle, and a Ronnie Bowman gospel number, "Here I Am." There are a couple of beautiful love songs, "We Are" and "I Remember You," and, of course, a love-gone-wrong song, "God And Everybody." And then there's a quiet little tune called "Miracle," which would have slipped right past me had I not read the lyrics. It's about a

confused man who seems to think that loving two women in different cities is okay as long as he marries them both (for the children's sake, of course). For him, that's the "miracle" of love. To portray this "confused man" as the victim is just plain weird. Bluegrass has certainly come a long way. (Skaggs Family Records, Inc., P.O. Box 2478, Hendersonville, TN 37077, <www.skaggsfamilyrecords.com>.)JK

BLUERIDGE GETTIN' READY

Pinecastle Records
PRC 1150



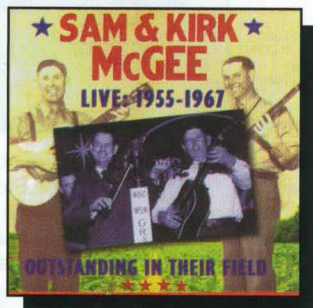
The prospect of reviewing a bluegrass gospel CD can be met with some trepidation, especially if the vocals aren't up to par. After all, good vocals or not, the content of their music suggests that their hearts are in the right place. However, we have all come across a few Barney Fife's in the Mayberry choir, if you know what I'm saying. On the other hand, when you listen to the new album from BlueRidge called "Gettin' Ready," you soon realize that this is a band that works hard on their harmony vocals. Add to that a lineup of musicians known for their instrumental prowess and what you get is good bluegrass gospel done the old-time way.

The members of BlueRidge are well known in the bluegrass world. Alan Bibey is featured on mandolin, Junior Sisk on guitar and lead vocals, Alan Johnson bows the fiddle, Eddie Biggerstaff plays bass and sings high tenor, and Joey Cox plays banjo.

The music on "Gettin' Ready" keeps the bluegrass gospel rolling at an easy pace. There are a couple of upbeat numbers on here, such as "He Will Set Your Fields On Fire" and Bibey's "This Journey I'm On," but for the most part the tempos are relaxed and Sunday morning perfect. The album starts off with a wonderful song by Junior Sisk and Tim Massey called "Don't You Want To Go There." The band plays a song penned by Junior's father, Harry C. Sisk, Sr., called "The Bridge," and both father and son team up to write "Light In The Forest." The group's smooth harmonies are featured on "I'm Getting Ready To Leave This World" and "Lead Me Not." One true highlight of the CD is hearing Sonya Isaacs' voice blend superbly with the band on the beautiful "Won't They Be Surprised." (Pinecastle Records, P.O. Box 753, Columbus, NC 28722, <www.pinecastle.com>.)DH

HIGHLIGHT

SAM & KIRK MCGEE LIVE: 1955-1967 OUTSTANDING IN THEIR FIELD



Spring Fed Records
SFR-103

When I sat down to write this review, my first impulse was to begin with a brief biographical sketch of the McGee Brothers, describing their long career in old-time music. I remember Saturday nights listening to WSM and hearing George D. Hay, the Solemn Old Judge, and later announcers, bring on "Sam and Kirk McGee, from sunny Tennessee." I could have spent the entire allotted space, and then some, getting our younger readers up to speed on the McGee's half-century at the Grand Ole Opry, working first with Uncle Dave Macon's Fruit Jar Drinkers, later with Fiddlin' Arthur Smith's Dixieliners—the hottest string band on the Opry—and even later with the Crook Brothers. But that will have to wait for another time and place.

A couple of good old country boys to the core, Sam (b. 1894) and Kirk (b. 1899) were both masters of multiple stringed instruments. In photos, Sam is usually shown playing guitar, Kirk generally banjo or fiddle. But, in reality, they did a lot of switching around, and both sang. Together and separately, they were an awesome source of traditional music from middle Tennessee.

As artists generally do at live appearances, Sam and Kirk revisit some of their well-known work: Sam's guitar triumph "Buck Dancer's Choice," "Billy In The Low Ground" (Kirk's tribute to their dad, champion fiddler John McGee), and "Milk 'Em In The Morning Blues" (a 1940s hit for Tennessee Ernie Ford). Two of my favorites are "John Henry," where they're joined by Birch Monroe on fiddle, and "Blue Night," a Sam McGee original, both tracks from the 1966 Bean Blossom show (Bill Monroe would record the latter song the following year). All-in-all, 22 superb performances held together with some lively onstage dialogue.

This collection was assembled from tapes made by Mike Seeger and Neil Rosenberg at New River Ranch in Rising Sun, Md. (1955), the Brown County Jamboree in Bean Blossom, Ind., (1966), and at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, Washington, D.C., (1967). There are wonderful notes by the late professor Charles Wolfe, profiling the McGees' career, with background for the numbers heard here (probably some of Wolfe's last such work). What a great CD! I can't say enough good things about it. Highly recommended. (Arts Center of Cannon County, P.O. Box 111, Woodbury, TN 37190, <www.artscenterofcc.com>.)WVS