

# THE OLD-TIME HERALD

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**A SEA OF THINGS TO LEARN:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH BILL HICKS**



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mind." (When the band does the reviewer's work for him, he is grateful.) The usual configuration of the Happy Valley Pals is: Wayne Martin, fiddle; Margaret Martin, guitar; Gail Gillespie, banjo; and Dwight Rogers, bass. They are a two-couple band; Gail and Dwight are a couple, as are Wayne and Margaret. And they make wonderful music together, and have for some time. What's more, it's clear that they are having fun making music, and that is apparent even through the 1s and 0s of the CD.

All four band members are both good singers and good instrumentalists. Good bands start with good fiddling, and Wayne can play tunes from Tennessee, Georgia, and North Carolina (and other locations) with recognizably different and appropriate styles. Dwight Rogers, who can play several instruments well, here plays solid, tasteful bass, as well as ukulele on five tracks. Margaret's backup guitar is excellent; on some tracks she plays simple boom-chuck and on others connects the chords with nice runs. But what makes them distinctive is Gail Gillespie's banjo playing. After many years of living in the Piedmont and listening to (and making friends with) many older finger-style banjo players, Gail has developed a traditional yet innovative three-finger banjo style which blends perfectly into the Happy Valley Pals. Margaret and Gail have clearly spent a lot of time listening to Roy Harvey and Charlie Poole (although the liner notes credit at one point "the guitar runs of John Gillespie.") By the way, "Sally with the Sun-Down Shoes" features Gail on guitar and Margaret on finger-style banjo.

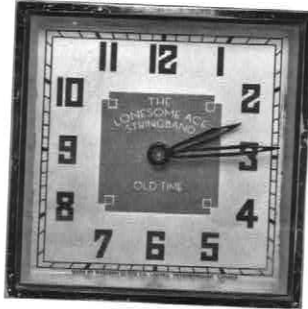
Some personal favorites. Instrumental: "Sally ..." (which sounds like the tune I know as "Jenny Lind Polka"—that which we call a rose ...); "Stone Rag" (with the original timing!); and "Leake County Blues" (Can I convince anyone else that this is where "Logan County Blues" came from?). Singing: channeling the Carter family with "Schoolhouse on the Hill"; "Frankie Silvers" (if you want to learn the backstory of this murder, try Sharyn McComb's true-crime novelization of this 1933 murder); Wade Mainer's "Ramshack Shack"; "and Georgia Wobble Blues" (this band is certainly living a ragtime life). The Happy Valley Pals (and their listeners!) have reason to be grateful to County Records; County 3530 was where I first learned about the Roane County fiddlers, the Happy Valley Pals' source "Alabama Trot" and "Green River Rag." And County's *Nashville: The Earliest Bands* (County 3521 and 3522) are the source recordings for "Salt Lake

City Blues" and "Stone's Rag." As happens in the best of modern old-time music, they have learned from the source, and then made it their own. What more could you want in a CD?

PETE PETERSON

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### The Lonesome Ace Stringband Old-Time



Chris Coole: banjo, vocals; Max Heineman: bass, vocals; John Showman: fiddle, vocals

Hold Your Lying Tongue / Cherry River Line - Gauley Junction / Fox Hunt / Devil On a Stump / Don't Get Trouble In Mind / Skipping In the Mississippi Dew / Femme Indigene / Hills of Mexico / Katy Hill / Green Sleeve / .44 Gun / Waynesboro - Wolf Creek

The Lonesome Ace Stringband plays a highly polished, improvisational old-time that shows them to be the stylistic heirs to old-time bands of the '80s and '90s like the Renegades, Wandering Ramblers, and Wildcats. (In fact, two of the songs on this album, "Hills of Mexico" and ".44 Gun," are credited as being learned from the Renegades and Wandering Ramblers, respectively.) Another strong influence is the musical pipeline that has flowed between West Virginia and Canada—specifically Toronto, Lonesome Ace's home base—for a couple of decades now, thanks to the members of this band, particularly Chris Coole, as well as Erynn Marshall, Anne Hartman, Scott Prouty, and others. The members of Lonesome Ace have spent a great deal of time absorbing the old-time music of West Virginia, and playing at such events as the old-time workshops at the Augusta Heritage Center in Elkins and the String Band Festival at Clifftop, West Virginia. This affinity for West Virginia is clear in the choice of tunes and songs on this CD—which includes Jenes Cottrell's "Cherry River Line," a Hammons version of "Waynesboro," and "Indian Squaw" (a tactfully renamed "Indian Squaw") from Ed Haley. It's also very present in the overall mood of Showman's modal

composition "Hold Your Lying Tongue," which opens the album, and in the sound and title of his "Gauley Junction."


The third influence that I hear most strongly in *Old-Time* is that of bluegrass music, though this is not a bluegrass album. The Toronto old-time music scene features musicians who are highly skilled, and deeply versed, in both styles. There are progressive elements to the band's sound that are somewhat suggestive of bluegrass, including the instruments' tendency to fall back and step forward in the mix—not to the extent of taking breaks, in the bluegrass style, but more in a way that echoes the syncopation of the overall approach. Moreover, John Showman's fiddling is every bit as improvisational as the best bluegrass fiddlers', though his improvisations stay within a largely old-time aesthetic.

It would be hard to overstate what a good fiddler John Showman is. The 2011 Clifftop fiddle contest winner is relentlessly imaginative in his playing, while always tastefully so. His fiddling is very much part of an ensemble sound here, never so showy as to overwhelm the music. What one hears first is an excellent band, and then an exceptional fiddler. While Showman's fiddling is the centerpiece of the band's sound, it is joined by Coole's and Heineman's equal skills on banjo and bass (to my ear the lack of a guitar, while unconventional, makes Lonesome Ace's music strikingly sleek), and all three men's very enjoyable singing. Coole has a gravelly, country singing voice, and Heineman and Showman sing with a more natural and low-key delivery; all are very skillful singers, and their voices complement each other well. Kathleen Law sings lovely harmony with Heineman on one song, "Fox Hunt," and left me wishing that she appeared on more of the album's tracks.

I like each cut on this album, but two are special favorites. "Devil On a Stump," from Art Stamper, is a slippery fiddle tune with tightly contained raucousness, great bowing patterns, and propulsive banjo and bass accompaniment. My other favorite is "Fox Hunt," sung by Heineman and Law. The song is adapted from Bruce Molsky's recording, which he in turn adapted from a field recording of Israel Alston, a worker on the Brevard Place Plantation near Columbia, South Carolina, recorded in 1939 by Charles Seeger. Lonesome Ace makes "Fox Hunt" into a haunting waltz, a real feat given its uneven verses with strange corners and cul-de-sacs ("Old Aunt Kate/

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Aunt, she beat me / And she kicked me / In the temple...). It's not only a beautiful performance, but a fascinating arrangement—which could describe any selection on this excellent album.

SARAH BRYAN

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Dittyville 006

Poor Little Ellen / Camp Chase / One Fond Adieu / Piney Woods / Rocky Point / Convict and the Rose / Daredevil Blues / Jack Rabbit Jump / Maple On the Hill / Turkey Gobbler / Rambling Gambler / The Lohman Waltz

Some of us who love old-time music are content playing tunes and songs found on the old 78s recorded in the '20s and '30s. And there's a lot of music to be

found there. But where did those come from? Somebody composed them, once upon a time. What Erynn and Carl have shown with their CD (and, for that matter, with their lives) is that the old and the new can coexist; that they can create good new tunes and songs which are in the tradition and sound old immediately. They fit like an old glove on a hand. And they are fun to listen to!

There are some old sentimental songs here such as "Maple on the Hill" and "Convict and the Rose." The latter was recorded about ten times by Vernon Dalhart, but the source here was the Blue Sky Boys. I first learned of the song back in the 1960s from Roy Harvey's "The Bluefield Murder," in which, in the last verse, the only song to cheer the murderer's heart as he sits in his cell is "The Convict and the Rose." I didn't hear the song until this century, when we got the Bear Family set of the Blue Sky Boys. If you like sad, sentimental songs about people about to be hanged while still proclaiming their innocence, you'll like this. On the same subject, but a different murder, you'll also like "Poor Little Ellen," about the only version of "Poor Ellen Smith" I have ever heard, via Obay Ramsey, in which the narrator (presumably Peter de Graff) admits the shooting, but claims it as a drunken accident. ("While drinking and a-gambling and loafing around / A ball from my pistol knocked sweet Ellen down.")

Traditional tunes? Three crooked tunes, each crooked in a different way. "Camp Chase" is here; although the tune was said to have been played by Sol Carpenter to gain his freedom from prison camp, this version is from Wilson Douglas, with Douglas' characteristic timing. There is also Burl Hammons' "Piney Woods" and Buddy Thomas' "Turkey Gobbler." All well-played with Carl's tasteful backup guitar and Erynn's prizewinning fiddling.

Erynn's original tunes are so good and sound so traditional that if you didn't read the simple but comprehensive liner notes (be honest), would you have known that "Rocky Point," "Lohman Waltz," and "Daredevil Blues" were new and not traditional tunes? The same can be said for Carl's mandolin tune, "Jack Rabbit Jump" (which would probably sound at least as good on fiddle). In contrast, Carl's song about getting older, "One Fond Adieu," is unmistakably a Carl Jones original.

Joe DeJarnette's recording skills are excellent, and unobtrusive. Similarly, the instrumental chops are there, but they never draw attention to the musicians,

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