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Errata

FA 2337 - Clark Kessinger, *Live at Union Grove*

On the cover art and in the notes the performer Gene Parker's name is misspelled Dene.

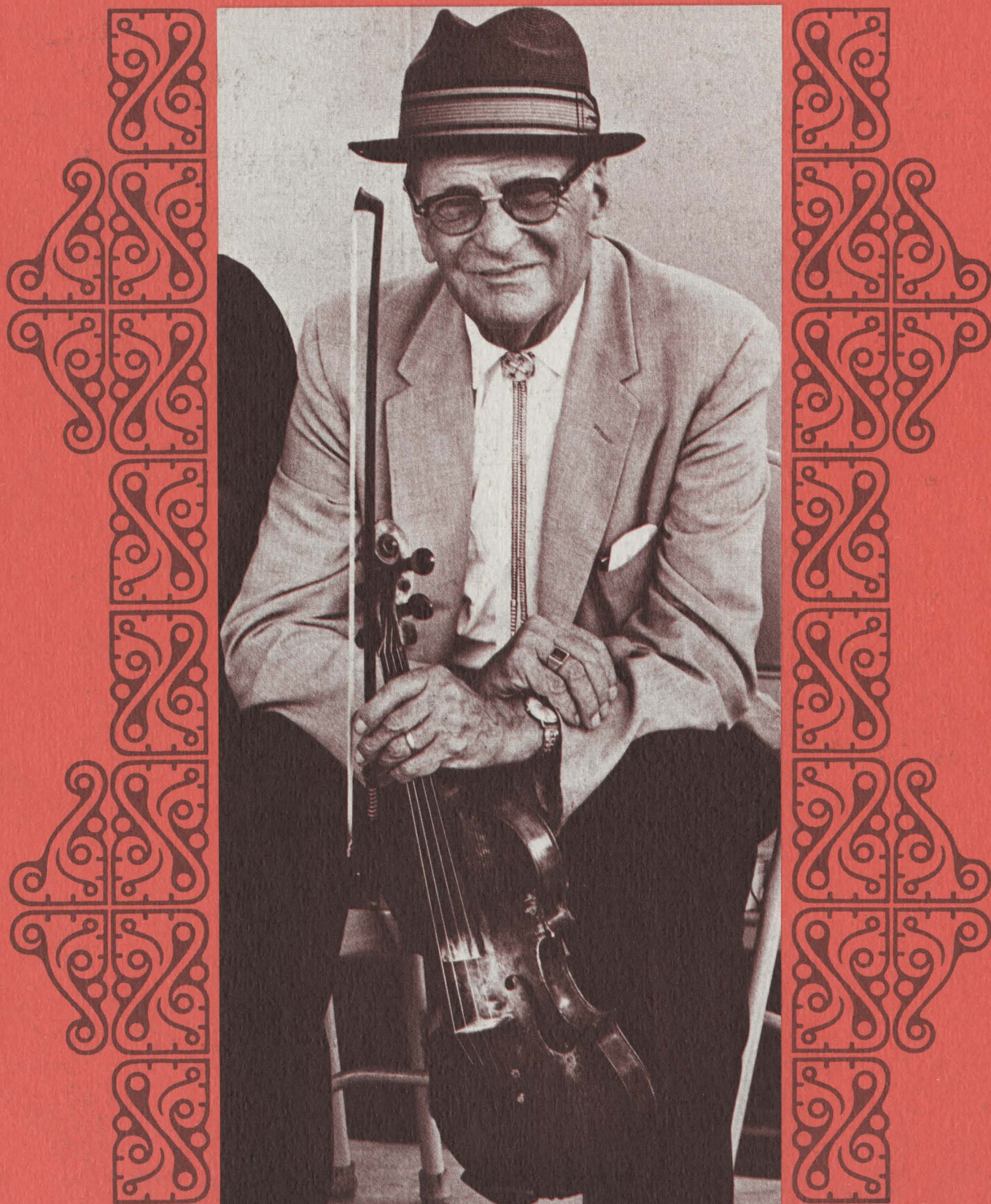


FOLKWAYS RECORDS FA2337

CLARK KESSINGER, FIDDLE

Live at Union Grove

with Gene Meade, guitar and Dene Parker, banjo



FOLKWAYS RECORDS FA2337

SIDE 1

Band 1. Trombone Rag
Band 2. Dill Pickle Rag
Band 3. Rose of My Heart Waltz
Band 4. Round Town Gal
Band 5. Whistle Rufus
Band 6. Sally Goodin
Band 7. Durang's Hornpipe

SIDE 2

Band 1. Arkansas Traveller
Band 2. Old Joe Clark
Band 3. Down Yonder
Band 4. Turkey in the Straw
Band 5. Golden Slippers
Band 6. Billy in the Lowground
Band 7. Poca River Blues

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43 W. 61st ST., N.Y.C., U.S.A.

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Live at Union Grove

with Gene Meade, guitar and Dene Parker, banjo

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

COVER PHOTO BY DAVE GAHR

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FA2337

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LIVE AT UNION GROVE

CLARK KESSINGER

LIVE AT UNION GROVE

If you want to hear great fiddle music all you have to do is to go to one of the many fiddling contests held through the country. However, if you've been to many, you know that the best music is seldom found up on the stage; rather it's out in the field where all the musicians congregate to play for and with one another. In fact, some of the best never bother to get up on the stage; they're more than content to enjoy the casualness that off-stage playing provides. There they aren't confined to a few minutes and one or two songs. They don't have to worry about how the microphones sound and even facing the audience. Out in the field they get right next to each other in a tight circle with people pressing in from all sides to hear and see better. The crowd is noisily enthusiastic—someone is bound to be off to one side flatfooting while others are shouting their requests and approval: "Now that's the way that tune really goes!"

The fiddlers really respond to all this encouragement and as the day gets older the music gets better and better. People wander from one group to another but gradually they gravitate around the best fiddlers. The crowds are thicker and deeper there and it takes longer to work your way into where the listening is best, but the effort is well worth it, especially with a musician like Clark Kessinger. His fiddling has that bite and bounce indicative of great fiddling and the people are quick to sense this.

Playing for an audience always makes a fiddler play better than when he is working before a plain microphone and the intimacy of the closely packed crowds backstage at a fiddlers' contest makes for even more exciting fiddling. Certainly the two-way communication between the fiddler and the audience is part of the cause; like PA feedback, the warm response of the crowd encourages the musician to make even better music which, in turn, is even more widely received.

Clark is no exception and it is for this reason that this record was recorded live at the 1968

Union Grove Fiddlers' Contest. All but two of the tunes were recorded in the field between the gym and the tent in the late afternoon after Clark had been playing for quite a while and was really warmed up. Of the remaining two, "Poca River Blues" was recorded while Clark was on stage competing during the evening contest. The other, "Rose Of My Heart Waltz," had to be recorded in the auditorium where the background noise was not bothersome during the soft passages.

This contest, probably the oldest continuous in the Southeast and certainly one of the best, is held Friday and Saturday of Easter Weekend every year at Union Grove, North Carolina. Attendance runs over 15,000, all fiddle music lovers—the large numbers that press in to hear Clark attest to his popularity and skill.

But they really don't need any such documentation. The numerous prizes he has won, including the title of World's Champion Fiddler at Union Grove, along with his two previous records attest to this. What is perhaps more important to note is that he is possibly a more consummate entertainer than he is a fiddler. It is, indeed, extremely difficult for Clark to separate his fiddler-self from his entertainer-self. Even before the recording mike he played as if there was an entire audience out there. Wherever he plays he puts on a complete show—at some point he'll put out a flatfoot step or two (or three or four), crack a joke, or anything else that he feels will improve his total performance. The last song on the record, "Poca River Blues," was recorded during the night contest and, while the recording itself is not as strong as the others, it does illustrate some of the flavor of Clark's rapport with the audience. One reason that the fiddle is so distant is that Clark is dancing around at the same time he is fiddling. At one point he stops fiddling altogether and cuts up with some flatfooting that any twenty year old would be proud of.

Equally typical is the story with which he introduces "Arkansas Traveler." He uses it to

heighten the crowd's interest in the fine fiddle tune that follows. All of this illustrates Clark's commitment to his audience; as does any entertainer worth his salt, Clark wants the audience to be satisfied—and they certainly are.

The majority of old time fiddlers carefully worked out their arrangement of a particular piece and then faithfully played it that way each time thereafter. (How common it is to hear a fiddler say of another, "He's not playing it right," meaning that the tune isn't being played the way the speaker put the tune together.) In particular the fiddler would play each part only one way; this is the way Clark plays most of the pieces he recorded for Brunswick in the 20's. Indeed this practice, each fiddler taking a tune and making it uniquely his own, may be considered one of the most important characteristics of old time fiddling. But, within the tune, there would be few variations; listen to the way Clark plays "Ragtime Annie" or Jimmy McCarroll plays "Johnson City Rag" on County 507. (The interested listener should be on the lookout for the soon to be released reissue on Kanawha of a number of Clark's records from the 20's.)

Gradually fiddlers began to put more variations into the different parts of a song; thus a fiddler like Eck Robertson will play the two parts of "Sally Goodin" in seven different ways

each. Just as Clark had been one of the leaders in the 20's in working out a tune, so is he one of the best in this new style. His instinctive good taste lets him play one tune a number of different ways each, completely appropriate, while keeping others closer to the older tradition, because they sound best that way.

Clark's sensitivity in this regard is exceptional—as the selections on this record ably illustrate. Clark works out each tune carefully, including the variations; once finished the way he plays it henceforth remains constant. Variation one is followed by variation two and so on. (Compare the extremely similar ways which he plays "Poca River Blues" on this record and on his first record for Kanawha.) With Clark, the finished produce is beautifully constructed and thought out—and remains so.

Now in his 70's, Clark is still as spry and active a fiddler as he was when he first recorded some forty years ago. His recent accomplishments have been well noted in his first two records for Kanawha. Since their release he has appeared at the 1968 University of Chicago Folk Festival (among others) and was given the Burl Ives award by the National Folk Festival Association of Washington, D.C. Clark is backed up on the guitar by Gene Meade (who also worked with him upon the first Kessinger record) and by Gene Parker, who formerly played banjo with Jim Eanes.

—Charles Faurot

Recorded by: Charles Faurot, Union Grove, N.C.
April, 1968