



Clarence Tom Ashley
and Tex Isley Play and Sing
American Folk Music


FOLKWAYS RECORDS
FA 2350

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Tom Ashley & Tex Isley



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FOLKWAYS FA 2350

RETURN TO FOLKWAYS

**CENTER FOR FOLKLIFE PROGRAMS
AND CULTURAL STUDIES
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION**

Great old-time country music by one of the best writers/banjo pickers/singers, Clarence Tom Ashley, age 71, of the legendary Carolina Tar Heels. With Tex Isley on guitar and autoharp.

TOM ASHLEY & TEX ISLEY

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FOLKWAYS FA 2350

CLARENCE ASHLEY and TEX ISLEY



SIDE ONE: Band 1

CAN I SLEEP IN YOUR BARN TONIGHT, MISTER?

This sentimental old hobo romance manages to undermine the same vision of family life for which it pines. The tune is a member of the BRIGHT SHERMAN VALLEY-RED RIVER VALLEY family and the text is certainly the work of some 19th century song-smith. Earlier texts cited by Randolph, seemingly closer to the unknown author's hand, carry excess baggage in the form of a more elaborate narrative and hand-wringing moral, but in the manner of folk song, Ashley's ver-

sion has been pared down to the essentials. As a measure of the song's anonymity, Randolph cites an early hillbilly songbook that credits authorship to "E. V. Body."

Brown III pg. 420, Randolph IV pg. 364

Cf: Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers
CAN I SLEEP IN YOUR BARN TONIGHT, MISTER?
Columbia 15038, 1925

Ernest Stoneman MAY I SLEEP IN YOUR BARN
TONIGHT, MISTER? Okeh 45059

Kid Williams and His Guitar MAY I SLEEP IN
YOUR BARN TONIGHT, MISTER? Perfect 160

May I sleep in your barn tonight, mister?
It's so cold sleeping out on the ground
And the cold north wind is a-whistling
And I have no place to lie down

You may know that I use no tobacco
Neither carry no matches or fire
I will do you no harm, kind mister
May I sleep just tonight in your barn?

You have asked me how long I've been tramping
Or living this kind of a life
I will tell you my story, kind mister
Oh, it runs through my heart like a knife

Three years ago last summer
I will never forget that sad day
When a stranger came out from the city
To the country to stay for his health

Oh, my wife said she'd like to be earning
Was something to add to our home
And she coaxed me until I consented
For the stranger to stop there and board

One evening as I came from my work, sir
Whistling and singing for joy
I's expecting a kindhearted welcome
To receive from my wife and little boy

Nothing did I find but a letter
Placed in the room upon the stand
And the moment my eye fell upon it
I picked it right up in my hand

Oh, the words that was written upon it
Oh, it run through my brain, run me wild
Oh, it read that the stranger and Nellie
Had ran off and taken my child

Oh, we know there's a God up in heaven
I've always been taught to believe
I know he will give to the scoundrel
The death that he ought to receive

SIDE ONE: Band 2

RUDE AND RAMBLING MAN (Laws L 12)

It's impossible not to respond to the appeal of the rambling boy, the man who takes life in both hands, lives it to the full, and dies with no regrets, and this American version of a British broadside ballad has been widely collected, as Laws' references indicate. Tom recorded the song as a member of The Carolina Tar Heels (RUDE AND RAMBLING MAN Victor 40077, 1928) and it remains one of his favorites. The touching reference to his wife, Hettie, indicates Tom's personal identification with the song and makes it completely his own. On the 1928 recording, Tom sang the first line of the fifth stanza, "To Mountain City I paid my way," yet another personal reference, as Mountain City is

the railtown near his farm. Other artists from Tom's region who recorded the song were the Carter Family (THE RAMBLING BOY Bluebird 33-0512, 1941) and Wade Mainer (RAMBLIN' BOY Bluebird 8990, 1941).

When I was a rude and a rambling man
I bought my ticket to London Town
To London City I paid my way
To spend my money in a gambling way

I hadn't been there but a week or so
Till I married me a wife, she troubled me so
To support that girl both nice and gay
She caused me to rob the road highway

I robbed the train I will declare
I robbed it on the public square
On Sunday night I's roving around
When I robbed it of ten thousand pound

Now I am condemned to die
And a many pretty girls for me will cry
All their cries, they can't save me
Or free me from the gallows tree

To London City I paid my way
I got on board and I took my seat
The wheels did roll and the whistle did blow
In about nine days I rolled in home

My mama said she was all alone
My sister said she would weep and moan
My sweetheart sits in down despair
Gold diamond rings and curly hair

Oh, when I die don't bury me at all
Go pickle my bones in alcohol
Place a marble stone on my head and feet
And go tell Hettie I'm just asleep

SIDE ONE: Band 3

WHOA MULE

Another well-known song which Tom has not previously recorded in his long career, but one from which he must have gotten a good deal of mileage entertaining country audiences only too willing to laugh at the antics of a couple attempting to court driving one of the ornery animals. One of the earliest recordings of the song is Riley Puckett's WHOA MULE Columbia 15040, 1924.

(Chorus) Whoa, mule, whoa mule I say
Keep your seat, Miss Liza Jane
Hold right to the sleigh

I went up on the mountain to get me a sack of corn
Raccoon set his dog on me and the possum blowed his
horn

Whoa, whoa mule I holler
Tie a knot in that mule's tail and he'll go through the
collar

Went up on the mountain, give my horn a blow
Thought I heard some pretty girl say, yonder come my
beau

(Chorus)

(Repeat second stanza)

I would not marry a tall slim gal, tell you the reason
why
Her neck's so long and stringy I'm afraid she'd never
die

(Chorus)

I went to kiss my gal last night, I thought I would do it
sneakin'
I missed her mouth and hit her nose and the doggone
thing was leakin'

(Chorus)

A peanut sitting on a railroad track, his heart was all
a-flutter
Around the curve come a passenger train, toot toot --
peanut butter!

(Chorus)

SIDE ONE: Band 4

FADED ROSES

A sentimental song from the gentler era of tears and roses. The song has been passed over by folk song collectors, but was recorded several times by musicians from the area near Ashley's home.

Cf: Clarence Ashley and Gwen Foster FADED ROSES
Vocalion 02666

Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers
BUDDER ROSE Columbia 15138, 1927

Roy Harvey and the North Carolina Ramblers
BUDDER ROSES Brunswick 268

Delmore Brothers BUDDER ROSE Bluebird 7262

Little sweetheart, we have parted
From each other we must go
Many miles we stand apart, dear
In this world of pain and woe

(Chorus) Down among the faded roses
I am nothing but a stem
I have parted from my darling
Never more to meet again

But the treasures of this parting
Will you meet me in that land?
There you say we'll meet together
When the roses bloom again

(Chorus)

But the treasures of this parting
Will there be no coming day
When our hearts unite together
And all sorrows passed away?

(Chorus)

Darling, meet me up in heaven
That's my true and earnest prayer
If you love me here on earth, dear
I am sure you'll love me there

(Chorus)

SIDE ONE: Band 5

SHOUT LITTLE LULU

This bawdy little song is a close relative of the dance tune called HOOK AND LINE. The ease with which HOOK AND LINE can be picked out on the banjo reportedly makes it a favorite beginning piece with country banjo pickers -- though the simple tune can also be expanded into a virtuoso fiddle performance. SHOUT LITTLE LULU was recorded commercially by Tom's one-time musical partner, George Banman Grayson, and Henry Whitter as SHOUT LULA Gennett 6373, and by Samantha Bumgarner as SHOUT LOU Columbia 146-D.

Cf: Dykes Magic City Trio HOOK AND LINE Brunswick
128

Shout little Lulu, shout your best
Your grandmother's gone to rest

Shout Lulu, shout, shout
What in the world you shoutin' about?

Shout little Lulu, shout, shout
What in the world you shoutin' about?

Shout Lou, shout Lou, shout Lou

How many nickels does it take
To see little Lulu's body shake?
It takes a nickel and it takes a dime
To see little Lulu cut her shine

Shout Lou, shout Lou

SIDE ONE: Band 6

THE HOUSE CARPENTER (Child 243)

Tom's 1928 recording of THE HOUSE CARPENTER (Columbia 15444) is perhaps the finest single record he made as a young man. Oddly enough, it seems to have been recorded as the result of a prank Tom played a Columbia A and R man, who didn't know just what he was getting when Ashley offered a "lassy makin'" (i. e. song associated with molasses stir-offs and similar community social events) tune. Many professional old-time entertainers knew a number of very old ballads and lyric songs which they did not offer to recording companies simply because the songs had strong personal or family associations for them, or were too long or thought not entertaining enough for the mass media. Tom Ashley's sense of mischief was thus responsible for one of the rare early recordings of a Child Ballad. Tom's Carolina Tar Heel partner, Dock Walsh, sang a HOUSE CARPENTER version non-modal in character: Cf The Carolina Tar Heels CAN'T YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOUR HEART WAS MINE Victor 40219, 1930.

Well met, well met, said an old true love
Well met, well met, said he
I'm just returning from the salt, salt sea
And it's all for the love of thee

Come in, come in, my old true love
And have a seat by me
It's been three fourths of a long, long year
Since together we have been

Well, I can't come in or I can't sit down
For I haven't but a moment's time
They say you're married to a house carpenter
And your heart can never be mine.

Says, it's I could have married a king's daughter dear
I'm sure she'd have married me
I forsaken her crowns of gold
And it's all for the love of thee

Will you forsaken your house carpenter
And go along with me
I will take you where the grass grows green
On the banks of the deep blue sea

Said, it's she picked up her little babe
And kisses she gave it three
Says, stay right here, my darling little babe
And keep your papa company

Then it's she jumped on the snow white steed
And him on the dapple gray
They rode till they come to the banks of the sea
Three hours before it came day

Hadn't been on the ship but about two weeks
I'm sure it was not three
Till his true love began to weep and to mourn
And she weeped most bitterly

Says, it's are you a-weeping for my silver and my gold
Says, it's are you a-weeping for my store
Are you a-weeping for that house carpenter
Whose face you'll never see anymore

Says, it's I'm not a-weeping for your silver or your gold
Says, it's I'm not a-weeping for your store
I am a-weeping for my darling little babe
Whose face I'll never see anymore

Hadn't been on the ship but about three weeks
I'm sure it was not four
Till they sprung a leak in the bottom of the ship
And they sinken for to rise no more

SIDE ONE: Band 7

I'M THE MAN THAT RODE THE MULE AROUND THE
WORLD

Randolph (III pg. 144) considers this song "evidently an old minstrel piece." Its spirit of humorous braggadocio is not dissimilar to that of many traditional American jokes and tales, and despite its rather literary air, entertainers like Tom Ashley found the song a reliable crowd pleaser in the old days. The song is usually known as I WAS BORN ABOUT TEN THOUSAND YEARS AGO and has been recorded a number of times under varying titles.

Cf: Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers
I'M THE MAN THAT RODE THE MULE
AROUND THE WORLD Columbia 15043, 1925
Fiddlin' John Carson WHEN ABRAHAM AND
ISAAC RUSHED THE CAN OKeh 40181
Dock Walsh EDUCATED MAN Columbia 15057,
1926
The Georgia Organ Grinders FOUR THOUSAND
YEARS AGO Columbia 15445, 1929

I'm a highly educated man
And to put my brain within I have to plan
I've been on earth so long
That I used to sing a song
When Abraham and Isaac rushed the can

(Chorus) I'm the man that rode the mule around the
world
I'm the man that rode the mule around the
world
I rode in Noah's ark just as happy as a lark
I'm the man that rode the mule around the
world

I was there when Noah built that famous ark
And I sneaked in it one night when it was dark
I saw Jonah swallow the whale and I pulled the lion's
tail
And I crossed the land of Canaan on a lark

(Chorus)

I was there when they searched the garden o'er
When they driv Adam and Eve from the door
'Round the bushes I were peeping while the apple they
were eating
I can prove that I'm the guy that eat the core

(Chorus)

SIDE TWO: Band 1

WILD BILL JONES (Laws E 10)

Malcolm Laws includes this song in his index of Native American Balladry, though admitting the history of the song has not been traced. The song is most often associated with a banjo accompaniment, and the instrument has been used in recordings by Eva Davis (Columbia 129, c. 1924-5), Wade Mainer (Bluebird 7249, 1937), Dock Boggs (Folkways 2351, 1964), and Frank Proffitt (Folk-Legacy FSA-1, 1962).

Sharp II pg. 74, Randolph II pg. 105

Well, as I went out for to take a little round
Walked upon old Wild Bill Jones
He was walking and a-talking by my true lover's side
I bid him for to leave her alone

He said my age is twenty-one, too old for to be
controlled
I drew my revolver from my side
I destroyed that poor boy's soul

He turned around and he fell to the ground
He give one dying groan
Then he threw his arms around his true lover's neck
Says, honey, you'll be left alone

One dollar in my pocketbook
And a quarter in my hand
Come on, boys, we will have a little drink
While I've got this money for to spend

You may pass around your little brown jug
And we'll all get on a spree
For today's the last of old Wild Bill Jones
Tomorrow will be the last of me

SIDE TWO: Band 2

THE LITTLE OLD LOG CABIN IN THE LANE

An old popular song written by Will Hays in 1871, LOG CABIN was recorded in 1923 by Fiddlin' John Carson and became the record that began the country music recording business. It was widely recorded and was given some dreadful readings by tenors in the days of 78's and cylinders, as well as heartfelt performances by country people like Tom Ashley, who, though they had no experience with "old Mahssy and Mist'us," still felt a strong sense of loss of and nostalgia for the older forms of southern life.

Cf: Fiddlin' John Carson THE LITTLE OLD LOG CABIN IN THE LANE Okeh 4890, 1923
Riley Puckett LITTLE LOG CABIN IN THE LANE Columbia 15171, 1927
Fiddlin' Powers and Family THE LITTLE OLD LOG CABIN IN THE LANE Victor 19448, 1925
Uncle Dave Macon and Sid Harkreader LITTLE OLD LOG CABIN IN THE LANE Vocalion 14864
Fiddlin' John Carson and Moonshine Kate I'M OLD AND FEEBLE Montgomery Ward 4850
Ernest Stoneman & His Dixie Mountaineers THE LITTLE OLD LOG CABIN IN THE LANE Victor 20235

Oh, I'm getting old and feeble, I can no longer work
My rusty bladed hoe I've laid to rest
Old Mahssy and old Mist'us they are sleeping side by side

While their spirits am a-wandering with the blessed

(Chorus) Oh, the chimney's falling down, the roof is tumbling in
The leak lets in the sunshine and the rain
The only friend I've got now is this good old dog of mine
In that little old log cabin in the lane

Oh, it was such happy times not many years ago
My friends and loved ones gathered 'round the door
They would sing and dance at night while they played the old banjo
But alas they cannot play it any more

(Chorus)

The hinges they have rusted, the door is falling down
The roof lets in the sunshine and the rain
The only friend I've got now is this good old dog of mine
In that little old log cabin in the lane

The paths they have growed up that led us around the hill
The fence have all gone to decay
The streams they have dried up where we used to go to mill
Everything has changed its course another way

(Chorus)

I ain't got long to stay here, what little time I've got
I try to rest contented while I stay
Until the day death calls me to find a better home
Than this little old log cabin in the lane

(Chorus)

SIDE TWO: Band 3

CLUCK OLD HEN

A favorite fiddle or banjo tune from Ashley's part of the country, perhaps having its origin in the old Negro animal song genre. The "b" part of the banjo tune imitates the clucking of the hen. Tom's version is similar to one recorded by his old friend, Al Hopkins, from nearby Watauga County.

Cf: The Buckle Busters CLUCK OLD HEN Brunswick 175

Cluck old hen, cluck and squall
You ain't had an egg since away last fall

My old hen, she won't do
She lays eggs for the railroad crew

Sometimes eight, sometimes ten
All these eggs for the railroad men

My old hen she laid in the loft
Went to eat the egg and I couldn't get her off

Cluck old hen, cluck and sing
You ain't had an egg since away last spring

Old hen cackled, cackled in the lot
The next time she cackled, she cackled in the pot

SIDE TWO: Band 4

FRANKIE SILVERS (Laws E 13)

Frank C. Brown (Brown II pg. 701) publishes a full account of the Frankie Silvers murder case, in which Mrs. Silvers decapitated her sleeping husband in 1831 and became the only white woman ever capitally punished in the state of North Carolina. The first person form of the text has inevitably given rise to the speculation that Frankie composed the song as an eleventh hour confession and variously sold copies at her hanging, sang the song from the gallows, and so forth. Brown's text is a windy fifteen stanzas, the most graphic imagery of which is preserved in Ashley's succinct five verses. Tom recorded the song twice as a young man, with Gwen Foster (FRANKIE SILVERS Vocalion 02647) and with Byrd Moore and His Hot Shots (FRANKIE SILVERS Columbia 15536, 1930).

This awful dark and dismal day
Has swept my glory all away
My sun goes down, my days have passed
And I must leave this world at last

Judge Daniels has my sentence passed
These prison walls I leave at last
Nothing to cheer my drooping head
Until I'm numbered with the dead

That awful ghost I know I'll see
Gnawing his flesh in misery
With flaming eyes I know he'll say
Why did you take my life away

His feeble hands fell gently down
His chattering tongue soon lost its sound
It triply touched me to my heart
To see his soul and body part

It's awful indeed to think of death
In perfect health to lose my breath
But little time to pray to God
Until I try that awful road

SIDE TWO: Band 5

PRISONER'S SONG

This song is of course essentially the same as Vernon Dalhart's famous and much recorded PRISONER'S SONG, written in 1924 by Guy Massey, but Randolph (IV pg. 226) says that "at least a dozen elderly hillfolk assure me that they heard the song in the early 80's," and builds a case for Massey's composition having been based on earlier folk songs. A footnote suggests that the "new jail" originally referred to Newgate Prison in London. The Carter Family recorded a fine version of the song with autoharp and Hawaiian guitar, MEET ME BY THE MOONLIGHT ALONE Victor 23731, 1928.

Cf: Burnett and Rutherford MEET ME IN THE
MOONLIGHT Supertone 9443

Oh, I wish I had someone to love me
Someone that would call me their own
Oh, I wish I had someone to live with
I'm so tired of living alone

Oh, meet me tonight in the moonlight
Oh, meet me tonight all alone
For I have a sad story to tell you
To be told by the moonlight alone

I'll be carried to the new jail tomorrow
Leaving my dear darling my own
And these cold prison walls all around me
And my head on a pillow of stone

If I had the wings of an angel
Over these prison walls I would fly
I would fly to the arms of my darling
And there I'd be willing to die

Oh, meet me tonight, honey, meet me
Oh, meet me tonight all alone
For I have a sad story to tell you
To be told by the moonlight alone

I have a grand ship on the ocean
It's all lined with silver and gold
And before my dear darling shall suffer
I will have that ship anchored and sold

(Repeat third stanza)

SIDE TWO: Band 6

TOM'S TALKING BLUES (Hard Luck Blues)

This favorite talking blues, with the same innocently naughty jokes and tradition of picked guitar accompaniment, has survived throughout the history of commercial hillbilly recordings, from Chris Bouchillon's BORN IN HARD LUCK (Columbia 15151) in 1927 to Buddy Starcher's AFTER I LOST THAT JOB (Starday SEP 158), circa 1960. At least some elements of the piece are much older than Bouchillon's recording. Mance Lipscomb remembers hearing the last-tick-in-the-second joke told by a clown in a rural Texas circus show about 1910.

Ashley's skill as a raconteur undoubtedly made the piece a popular one with his medicine show audiences, but it does not appear on the discography of his recordings of the 20's and 30's. Tom's version is spoken with exquisite timing and eliminates some of the weaker traditional humor ("Young man, what is your butter today?" "Just butter, Ma'am." "Well, the stuff I bought here yesterday was axle grease.") as well as topping off with a stanza and chorus of DON'T LET YOUR DEAL GO DOWN.

Well, folks, I guess it's about time that I was telling you a little about myself. You know, I'm that old hard luck boy. I was borned in hard luck. I was borned in the last month of the year, the last week in the month, the last day in the week, the last hour in the day, the last minute in the hour, the last second in the minute -- just like to have not got here at all. Yes, it all happened upstairs behind the stove. They wasn't nobody at home that day but Aunt Sara. Pa and Ma, they'd went to town with a load of dried fruit. Well, I come out from behind the stove and I went on down the street hunting me a job. Hard luck. Well, I got me a job down there in town in the clothing store. This was men's ready-to-wear garments. Yeah, that's what it was. Oh, I thought I would like that job. One day a good-looking girl come in. She walked right over to me, very first one. She says, "Young man, I would like to see your underwear." "Oh," I said, "pardon me, sister. I don't have on any underwear." "Oh, well, I lost that job -- the boss heard it. Got fired. Hard luck. Well, I went on down the street hunting work. I got me another job down there working in a ladies ready-to-wear store. Oh, I knowed I'd like that job. I was getting along pretty good, I thought. One day a great big good-looking fat gal come in, walked right over to me, says, "Young man, I would like to try on a pair of hose." "Oh," I said, "pardon me, sister, we don't have a dressing room." Well, the boss overheard the conversation. He come walking over and he said, "Now, I can take care of that. All you men clerks go in the back end of the store, let the lady set right down here on this chair and try on a pair of hose. And the very first one of you men that I catch a-peeping, that will be your job." Well, after I got fired from that job

-- hard luck. I just went on down the street singing me a little song, and it sounded kind of like this:

Oh, I've been all around this whole wide world
Been down to Memphis, Tennessee
Oh, it's any old place I hang my hat
Home, sweet home, to me

Oh, it's don't let your deal go down
Honey, don't let your deal go down
Oh, it's don't let your deal go down, little girl
Till your last old dollar is gone

SIDE TWO: Band 7

LITTLE HILLSIDE

Ralph Rinzler writes of LITTLE HILLSIDE: "(This unusual song is one which Tom put together in 1963. He calls it LITTLE HILLSIDE and it is a sort of last confession to his wife asking her forgiveness and understanding for his ways. The tune is pentatonic, banjo tuned to 'sawmill' tuning and the tone is a solemn, dying Baptist one. It has not been recorded elsewhere, needless to say, but it does resemble, at the outset, HICKS' FAREWELL."

Well, the time is swiftly rolling on
When I know that I must die
My body to the dust to return
And there for God and I

There is not so much that I've never done
Now you owe me no pay
You take me to the little hillside
And lower me beneath the clay

You may sing the songs that I used to sing
Talk about the things that I've done
When you take me to the little hillside
Leave me there all alone

Don't place them flowers on my grave
There's little that you can say
When you take me to the little hillside
And lower me beneath the clay

Oh, there is one and a precious one
Why do you treat me cold?
When no one loves you as I do
God in heaven knows

There is one more thought that I'll leave with you
Then I'll be travelling on
Don't shed no tears, don't weep for me
Maybe I was wrong

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ABOUT TOM ASHLEY

"I always try to be as truthful as I know how ... I'm not educated; I'm not an educated man ... A man would start today as I started and took my wife, was married fifty years ago, with my education, and I'd guarantee as much money as there is now he'd starve to death ... he couldn't make it ... I've traveled all my life, one place to another ... If it hadn't been for my good old guitar, we would have starved to death, sure enough ..."

Tom Ashley in conversation, March 1965

It was a fortunate spring day in 1960 when Ralph Rinzler¹ met Tom Clarence Ashley at the Galax Fiddlers Convention. Ashley is one of the rare men who first introduced honest American folk music to the mass media and began, via recordings, bridging the gap between the largely undocumented popular-folk culture and technologically preserved formal culture. Through largely unrecognized by the cultural establishment, the day that Tom Ashley decided to go for broke on music as a means of livelihood was an important one. His career as itinerant entertainer has not been a remunerative one, but the fact that he became a professional musician at all is significant, and his career has been one of widening circles of influence and recognition that came to few of his peers.

As a youth his music was of the family circle only. As a young man he carried his music first to his community and then to his region through social events, then traveling shows and recordings made for southern rural consumption. Finally, in his old age, he has played his music nationally and internationally via the folk festival and LP recording and the instant electric media of radio and TV. And, in the manner of the media, the recordings and broadcasts have changed the nature of his music: once-private Ashley visions such as THE COO COO BIRD and MY HOME'S ACROSS THE BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS have become a part of the American dream.

Tom Ashley has been and is a professional musician, not only from economic motives but (one suspects) from strong personal expressive needs as well. As his above quotes indicate, music has been his artistic medium, his education, his livelihood, and his access to the world beyond the mountains. Thus it is impossible to isolate his role as artist from his role as entertainer. The presence of the listening and appreciative ear is a stimulus to Ashley that the cold recording microphone has never been able to provide; as spirited as are his performances on this album, they are not really comparable to a live reading. I have seen and heard Tom sing many of the songs recorded here before a full house at the Tyrone Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis and in a small living room before a handful of friends, and it would be impossible to say to which audience he res-

ponded with the more magnificent performance. Compared to hearing and seeing him, even the finest recording is at best a pale memory. Tom is not so much a singer as he is a complete experience, as indeed a street corner or medicine show entertainer had to be.

Ashley's presence lends to RUDE AND RAMBLING MAN, for example, a dimension unobtainable in sound. Tilting back in his chair, he cocks his battered old felt hat down over one eye, hooks his thumbs in his suspenders, and produces the very devil of a look in his eye. During the song he will pat out the time on his knees, sway suggestively in his chair, snap his fingers, tap his feet, and perhaps even loop the suspenders out in two-foot arcs. As the song progresses, the instinctive artistry and skillful showmanship create a Pirandellian-like moment when the distinction between the singer and the character blurs and Ashley seems to become a visual representation of the doomed highwayman's attitudes -- a corny burlesque of bravado that is humorous as well as dramatic, a song mime that is somehow right and whole, something too elusive for any mechanical medium to capture. The phonograph record at best preserves a shadow of such a moment, but it is a shadow well worth the savoring.

Tom is now 71, and if he detects in you a sympathetic ear he will enthusiastically tell you about the spot on the hill near home he has picked out for himself, describing it so half-humorously and half-sentimentally you begin to smile until you recall his singing of LITTLE HILLSIDE and realize that the distinction between the man and the performer, the dream and the reality, is fading again as he talks, and that Tom Ashley is himself his most memorable work of art.

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As a result of Ralph Rinzler's meticulous study of Ashley and his career, Tom's life is among the best documented of any of the early folk recording artists. The reader is directed to Rinzler's two LP studies, OLD TIME MUSIC AT CLARENCE ASHLEY'S Volumes I & II (Folkways 2355, 2359) for a complete social and historical background on Ashley and his music

ASHLEY CHRONOLOGY

- 1895 Ashley born September 29, Bristol, Tennessee
- 1911 Ashley leaves home to join medicine show
- 1914 Ashley marries Hettie Osborne
- 1917-18 Ashley is playing with G. B. Grayson, meets Hobart Smith
- 1925 Ashley meets Dock Walsh, Carolina Tar Heels group is formed
- 1930 Peak of recording career with Tar Heels
- 1943 Ashley plays last medicine show circuit, does some work with Charlie Monroe and later Stanley Brothers
- 1960 Meets Ralph Rinzler at Galax
- 1961 First city album released
- 1962 Ashley begins touring northern cities: Chicago Folk Festival, Ash Grove in Los Angeles, New York City
- 1963 Second OLD TIME MUSIC AT CLARENCE ASHLEY'S released
- 1966 Solo album with Tex Isley, proposed tour of Europe

ABOUT TEX ISLEY

Larry "Tex" Isley is from near Spray, North Carolina, an area known for the number of excellent musicians it contributed to the "Golden Age" of country recordings, men such as Posey Rorer, Norman Woodlieff, Lonnie Austin, Walter Smith, and others. Like most fine old-time musicians, Tex hails not only from a musical community but a musical family as well. His father played banjo accompaniment to the fiddle music at country square dances before World War I when the guitar was not yet a common instrument in the area. Tex recalls his father's style of playing as being very close to the way Tom Ashley still picks WHOA MULE, the old-fashioned thumb-and-finger style. The boy Charlie Poole used to come to the dances in the area to hear the elder Isley play the banjo, and when the musicians took a break young Poole would sit down with Isley's instrument and practice the tunes he had heard.

Tex is about a half-generation younger than Ashley and the other men who pioneered commercial hillbilly recordings in the 1920's, and thus was not professionally active during the "Golden Age." By the time he was playing with the great musicians of the Spray area, the Depression had already ended most of their careers and the few recording sessions were reserved for well-known -- usually radio-established -- bands. Tex later did record professionally as a member of the Charlie Monroe band, picking guitar behind Monroe in sessions in 1946 and 1950.

In addition to fine back-up guitar, Isley has a beautiful and distinctive finger-style of playing with which he can both accompany and lead. The latter style was learned from guitar-picking Negro tobacco workers around Spray, and Tex still picks an instrumental he calls BOLL WEEVIL which resembles the early ragtime country blues.

Like Ernest Stoneman and other older autoharp players, Tex plays that instrument held flat in his lap picking the short lengths of strings ahead of the chord bars in the old-fashioned pre-Maybelle Carter manner (though Tom Ashley recalls that when he first saw Mrs. Carter play, long before the days of microphone orientation, she then held her autoharp lap style). The tunes that Tex prefers to play on the autoharp, like DARLING NELLIE GRAY and FADED ROSES, reflect both the era and style of his playing.

Tex now lives in Leaksville, North Carolina, where he works in the local greenhouse. He has worked as Tom Ashley's accompanist and road buddy during Tom's city concerts of the past three years.

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Vocals, banjo accompaniment and second guitar by Thomas C. Ashley
Lead guitar accompaniments and autoharp by Larry "Tex" Isley
Album recorded and edited by Ralph Rinzler
Album notes, song text transcriptions and annotations by Jon Pankake