

Milk 'em in the Evening Blues

OLD TIMERS OF THE GRAND OLE OPRY

THE MCGEE BROTHERS AND ARTHUR SMITH



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1968

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Side I

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| Band 1 | — SINGLE-FOOTING HORSE — Arthur Smith | 1:30 |
| Band 2 | — WIDOW HALEY (Arthur Smith)—Arthur Smith | 1:53 |
| Band 3 | — CHARMING BILL — vocal, Kirk McGee | 2:06 |
| Band 4 | — MILK COW BLUES — McGee Bros.;
vocal, Kirk McGee | 2:32 |
| Band 5 | — MEMPHIS BLUES — Sam, banjo-guitar;
Kirk, 5-string banjo | 1:02 |
| Band 6 | — BOOGIE — as Band 5 | 1:02 |
| Band 7 | — AMOS JOHNSON RAG — Sam McGee,
banjo-guitar | 1:40 |
| Band 8 | — REDWING — as Band 5, with
Arthur Smith, fiddle | 1:59 |
| Band 9 | — UNDER THE DOUBLE EAGLE — as Band 5 | 1:27 |
| Band 10 | — DON'T LET YOUR DEAL GO DOWN —
as Band 5; vocal, Sam McGee | 2:53 |
| Band 11 | — EVENING SHADE (Arthur Smith) —
Arthur Smith, fiddle | 2:02 |
| Band 12 | — PIG AT HOME IN THE PEN —
Arthur Smith, fiddle and vocal | 2:08 |
| Band 13 | — PEACOCK RAG — Arthur Smith, fiddle | 1:53 |

Side II

- | | | |
|---------|---|------|
| Band 1 | — MILK 'EM IN THE EVENING BLUES —
McGee Brothers | 2:39 |
| Band 2 | — LATE LAST NIGHT — Sam, banjo-guitar;
Kirk, 5-string banjo | 2:17 |
| Band 3 | — KEEP A LIGHT IN YOUR WINDOW
TONIGHT — McGee Bros.; Kirk, vocal | 1:54 |
| Band 4 | — UNCLE BUDDY (Arthur Smith) —
Arthur Smith, 5-string banjo | 1:22 |
| Band 5 | — LAFAYETTE — Kirk McGee, fiddle;
Arthur Smith, 5-string banjo | 1:28 |
| Band 6 | — DRUMMER BOY — Sam McGee, guitar | 2:15 |
| Band 7 | — EASY RIDER — Sam McGee, banjo-guitar | 2:30 |
| Band 8 | — CHINESE BREAKDOWN — as Band 2,
with Arthur Smith, fiddle | 2:20 |
| Band 9 | — DANCE ALL NIGHT WITH A BOTTLE
IN YOUR HAND — Arthur Smith | 2:25 |
| Band 10 | — WHISTLING RUFUS — Arthur Smith | 1:26 |
| Band 11 | — SALLY JOHNSON — Arthur Smith | 2:10 |
| Band 12 | — I'VE HAD A BIG TIME TONIGHT
(Arthur Smith) — Arthur Smith | 1:39 |

Sam and Kirk McGee were born and raised in Williamson County, Tennessee, in 1894 and 1899, respectively. Their father was an excellent fiddler and the brothers took up string music as boys, performing with family and friends the social music of the area. About 1925, they began their careers as professional entertainers, joining Uncle Dave Macon in his theatre act and entering the radio and recording fields with him. Arthur Smith, also the son of a fine fiddler and a member of a noted musical family, joined Sam and Kirk about 1930. The three young men formed a band named "The Dixie Diners," which remained active throughout the 1930's.

When Sam first played professionally with Uncle Dave Macon's show in Loew's Temple Theater in Birmingham, Alabama, about 1925, he was billed as "Sawmill Sam." Seated on a prop papier-mache stump in front of a painted canvas backdrop depicting a rural scene, he played ragtime while a vaudevillian named Bob Bradford danced the buck-and-wing. Kirk, still Sam's greatest fan and admirer, emphasizes Sam's great talent as an entertainer apart from his considerable musical ability: "Sam would beat Chet Atkins in any contest anywhere in the world — and Chet's a fine guitar player. All Sam knows is big strings and little, but he can pick. He's a good salesman: he's got a big grin all the time, you know, and he'd just sell himself to the audience. I'm not saying this because he's my brother, but I'd hate to tie in with him on a contest because he'd beat you, whether he was as good or not . . ."

Strangely enough, Arthur and Kirk demonstrate opposite levels of development chronology in their banjo and fiddle playing: Arthur's two-finger banjo style (UNCLE BUDDY) is more archaic than Kirk's syncopated and generally more sophisticated picking; while Kirk's fiddling, less bluesy and less heavily chorded, shows less modern development than Arthur's. Though Kirk regards himself principally as a banjo player, he has explored other instruments both from professional necessity and for his own enjoyment. He is sufficiently adept on the guitar, for example, to play many of Sam's difficult guitar showpieces (such as BUCK DANCER'S CHOICE, FRANKLIN BLUES, and RAILROAD BLUES), and while he will not play Sam's pieces in public, Kirk performed Maybelle Carter's VICTORY RAG on the guitar at the 1966 University of Chicago Folk Music Festival. He also admits to being the mandolin player heard on several Uncle Dave Macon recordings, though "I haven't played one since." For a musician to whom the fiddle is a second instrument, Kirk does very well as a fiddler. He is quite modest about his ability with the instrument, but is aware of the value of his considerable repertoire of old and unusual fiddle tunes. When I interviewed him in 1965, Kirk played for me such tunes as CATCH MY HORSE, FRANK CHEATEM ("BILL CHEATEM's brother"), RAIN CROW, LAFAYETTE, and several other tunes which he has not heard other fiddlers perform. LAFAYETTE, though it refers to the French general, is identified by Kirk as "an old Civil War tune."

The music of the McGee Brothers and Arthur Smith is a synthesis of several important American musical traditions. Although it is firmly based in Southeastern white folk music, the individual genius of the musicians and their unique opportunities to polish and sophisticate their music through cultural contacts denied the nonprofessional or truly "folk" musician has yielded a music of a different order from that usually documented by the folklorist. There are no guitar or banjo players on the Library of Congress recordings made prior to 1940, for example, to whom Sam and Kirk can be compared, and few fiddlers demonstrating the range and type of artistry represented by Arthur's fiddling.

Mass communication, considered in the broad sense of human contact as well as in that of devices or media, seems to be the key to understanding the evolution of the unique music on this album. The railroads and highways carried new musicians and music into Tennessee as surely did the radio broadcast and the phonograph recording, and early in their careers as professional musicians, these media carried the music of the McGees and Smith out beyond the borders of their inherited cultural environment. The role itself of professional musician is a product of the increased capacity for human communication and cultural synthesis that revolutionized America's arts early in this century. It is the synthesis of traditional white folk music with Negro music that seems most obviously to differentiate the form of the music of the McGees from that of the field recordings of the 1930's and the few commercial recordings of the 1920's and 1930's that documented amateur white musicians. Attempting to understand the importance and nature of this influence, I asked Kirk, in 1965, to describe the type of music played by the first Negroes the brothers heard as youths, and whose music had so fascinated them.

Coming from a man as articulate as Kirk, the reply seemed significantly vague: "They didn't play much of anything, just fooled around. You had to take it and make something of it." Kirk's difficulty in defining his early experience with Negro music is understandable; a complex cultural confrontation was occurring, one in which the McGees — literate, school-educated in form and logic, possessed of a musical tradition of narrative texts and discrete Scots-Irish fiddle tune patterns — experienced the music of Negroes who were illiterate, possessed of a cultural fund of floating poetic and linear musical improvisation. A meeting of "eye-oriented" with "ear-oriented" men, as Mr. McLuhan would have it. In re-creating Negro music in terms they could understand, the McGees seem to have imposed their logical musical forms on the rhythmic and melodic content of the Negro music: to "make something of" the Negro music meant to them to solidify the musical ideas of the shifting improvisations into logical, repeatable, discrete patterns, i.e., "pieces" that could be memorized and played exactly the same way in successive performances.

Another interesting possibility of influence that remains to be documented is the relationship between the music of the McGee Brothers and the "tradition" — for lack of a better word — of popular stringed music of the type existing on phonograph recordings prior to 1923, when country men playing country music were first recorded for the commercial record market. One feels, for example, that there is a relationship between Vess Ossman's banjo and guitar performance of ST. LOUIS TICKLE on Victor 16092 (recorded about 1918, well before any country performer had been recruited into the recording industry), and the manner in which Sam McGee still plays the TICKLE as a guitar instrumental. Despite basic differences in feeling between the two performances, there is an undeniable similarity in over-all conception and in the presence of rhythmic figures in Ossman's performance with "McGee Brothers licks" familiar to connoisseurs of Sam and Kirk's playing. Was Ossman's early recording of vaudeville-type string music carried into Tennessee, or was the musical style brought to the country via some intermediary musician or musical experience? Or are Ossman's and Sam's performances different manifestations of some independent current of minstrel or stage-show stringed music? And if so, how is each performance connected to the main current? The existence of such questions indicates our lack of knowledge of the processes of American popular and folk music and our need for additional documentation.

To investigate the above questions, for example, we would need a published recording of Sam's TICKLE, further interviews with Sam (an elusive informant) on his knowledge of the piece, a published recording of Ossman's TICKLE, information on Ossman himself and his music, a bibliography and discography of the TICKLE, and so on. Hopefully, the future will bring to fruition just such musical studies, centered around pivotal musicians such as Sam and Kirk.

The present album contains a broad cross section of the music of the McGees and Smith: performances of relatively standard Southern tunes such as DANCE ALL NIGHT WITH A BOTTLE IN YOUR HAND and SALLY JOHNSON, which they must have played at innumerable dances in their younger years; performances of old and rare material such as UNCLE BUDDY and LAFAYETTE; reprises of many of their successful recordings from the '20's and '30's; and the occasional personal creation such as DRUMMER BOY that stuns one with the realization of the capacity of simple musical forms for artistic individual statement.

Notes by Jon Pankake

Additional information on the songs, texts, and on the session, with recent photographs are available in booklet form. Send \$1.00 to: Folkways Records, 701 7th Ave., New York, N.Y.

Recorded and edited by Mike Seeger

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