

# The Red Clay Rambblers

Bill Hicks / fiddle, guitar  
Al McCanless / fiddle, guitar  
Jim Watson / mandolin, guitar  
Tommy Thompson / banjo, guitar, autoharp  
Mike Craver / piano  
Tom Carter / banjo  
Laurel Urton / washtub bass

with  
Fiddlin' Al McCanless



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1974

MUSIC LP

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FTS 31039      STEREO

# The Red Clay Ramblers

with Fiddlin' Al McCanless

SIDE 1

- 1. Boogerboo
- 2. My Only Sweetheart
- 3. Kissing Is a Crime
- 4. Tell It to Me
- 5. Ducks on the Pond
- 6. Wagon Yard
- 7. Durang's Hornpipe
- 8. Girl Behind the Bar
- 9. Birdie

THE MUSIC

Basic personnel are: Bill Hicks and Al McCanless, fiddles; Tommy Thompson, banjo or guitar; Jim Watson, mandolin or guitar. Mike Craver, piano; Tom Carter, banjo; Laurel Urton, washtub bass, appear as noted below. Al McCanless plays guitar on "Girl Behind the Bar" and "Call to a Foreign Field." Bill Hicks plays second guitar and Tommy Thompson, autoharp, on "Kissing Is a Crime."

SIDE 1.

- 1. BOOGERBOO, both in tune and text (for the most part) comes from a fine old mountain ballad singer and banjo player, Dan Tate, of Fancy Gap, Va., as collected by Cece Conway. Tommy has omitted Dan's third stanza, which appears to have floated over from "The Gypsy Laddie," and inserted in its place top stanzas of a Tennessee version. Cece found this latter version, as sung by Mrs. Samuel Harmon in 1930, in Henry's Folk-Songs of the Southern Highlands. Tommy has not attempted to replicate Dan's banjo style.
- 2. MY ONLY SWEETHEART comes from a recording by Fields Ward and his Buck mountain Band. Jim is singing lead, with Tommy and Bill joining in on the chorus. Al is fiddling the high or harmony part.
- 3. KISSING IS A CRIME comes from the original Carter Family. We learned it from a Columbia-Harmony reissue HL7300, where A.P. Carter is credited as composer. The original was recorded in the late 1930s. Tom, Jim, and Bill do the singing, with Jim on lead guitar.
- 4. TELL IT TO ME is a member of the well-known "Take a Whiff on Me," "Cocaine Blues" song group. It was originally recorded by the Tenneva Ramblers, a 1920s string band who played with Jimmy Rodgers for a while, and whose entire recorded repertoire has recently been reissued by Puritan Records. The Tenneva's used two melody lines, in octaves, on the vocal parts, with a baritone line between them. We have substituted a tenor line (minus one octave) for the lower melody. Tom, Jim, and Bill are singing.
- 5. DUCKS ON THE POND comes from the great mountain fiddler, Henry Reed, who lived at the time of his death in 1968 at Glen Lyn, Va. Alan Jabbour learned the tune from Mr. Reed in 1966, and most of the musicians associated with the "Durham old-time music scene" have been playing it since then. As Mr. Reed learned some of his tunes from a Mexican War fifer. Quince Dillion, this tune may well have been played as far back as the 1830s. No Scots or Irish source has been found to our knowledge.
- 6. WAGON YARD, which presents an important moral for all of us in these troubled times, features Fiddlin' Al's lead singing, with Tom and Jim joining in. The song was originally recorded in the 1920s by Lowe Stokes. Al added the E-minor bridge line after hearing Grandpa Jones do it. Al is fiddling the high harmony while Bill plays the melody.
- 7. DURANG'S HORNPIPE features Al on fiddle, Jim on mandolin, with Tommy on back-up guitar. This version is really our own, though it is based on a version collected ten years ago from John Summers, of Marion, Ind., by Pat Dunford. The tune is in the key of D, and may be found in several versions in both American and Irish sources.
- 8. GIRL BEHIND THE BAR was recorded by the Stanley Brothers in the late 1940s, though the song itself may be older. Jim and Tommy do the singing, with Bill on fiddle, Al on second guitar, and Tom Carter of the Fuzzy Mountain String Band helping us out on banjo. The Stanley Brothers recording has been reissued on Melodeon MLP 7322.
- 9. BIRDIE is from Henry Reed via Alan Jabbour, who will be the first to notice that it has been altered a bit to fit the banjo. Jim backs up Tommy's two-finger style banjo work here.

SIDE 2.

- 1. MILLER'S REEL and WAKE UP SUSAN are both fairly common American fiddle tunes, and at least "Wake Up Susan" has a clear Irish counterpart in "Mason's Apron." Bill learned "Miller's" from Armin Barnett, "Wake Up" from Frank George. Al is playing the hot licks towards the end of the medley. Jim is playing guitar.
- 2. TENNESSEE COON was recorded in the 1920s by another southern string band, the Georgia Yellowhammers. Variants have been recorded by the Skillet Lickers and the N.C. Ramblers, and in the 1960s under the title "Tennessee Coot," by the Greenbrier Boys. Because the lyrics put the black protagonist in such a favorable light, we decided to leave the original title intact. Tommy sings lead, with Bill and Jim on the chorus.
- 3. CALL TO A FOREIGN FIELD comes from Alfred Karns. A hymn about the trials of missionaries, Jim sings the verses, with Tommy and Bill added on the choruses. Bill is doing the fiddling.

SIDE 2

- 1. Miller's Reel and Wake Up Susan
- 2. Tennessee Coon
- 3. Call To A Foreign Field
- 4. Give the Fiddler a Dram
- 5. I Got the Whiskey
- 6. Bolger's Hornpipe
- 7. House of David Blues
- 8. Traveling That Highway Home

4. This version of GIVE THE FIDDLER A DRAM was played by Luther Strong of Hazard, Ky., and was recorded in the field by Alan Lomax of the Library of Congress in 1937. Since that time it has reposed in the archives of the Library, and has never been issued. The tune is in A, and exhibits to a high degree the range of variations employed by Appalachian fiddlers, including dropped and added beats and asymmetric part sequences. Bill's only change from Strong's rendition is a return to the first strain at the end.

- 5. I GOT THE WHISKEY comes from Bo Carter, a great black singer and guitarist who played and recorded around Jackson, Miss., in the late 1920s and 30s, and was last seen, in ill health, in Memphis, in the early 1940s. This piece was reissued on the Yazoo label. Tommy and Jim are singing here with Bill on the fiddle, and the newest member of the Red Clay Ramblers, Mike Craver, on piano.
- 6. BOLGER'S HORNPIPE is a "modern" Irish hornpipe which Jim learned from Al. It appears in a written collection of Irish tunes. Tommy plays guitar here.
- 7. HOUSE OF DAVID BLUES was originally recorded by Fiddlin' Arthur Smith and the McGee Brothers. Tom and Jim are singing, with Al playing high fiddle and Bill a low harmony. Laurel Urton completed the sound we were trying for with her fine washtub-bass work.
- 8. TRAVELING THAT HIGHWAY HOME comes from the great country gospel singer, Molly O'Day, who has recently recorded it on an LP. Jim and Tommy are singing, Al is the lead fiddler. This has always been a good song to end our sets with. Drive, he said, for christ's sake, look out where you're going.

--Bill Hicks

THE BAND

For nearly six years while the Hollow Rock and Fuzzy Mountain string bands flourished, the Durham old-time music scene was dominated by instrumental music. This is the fifth album to come out of that scene, and the first to feature songs as well as instrumentals. Songs are, alas, harder to find in the field than instrumentals these days, and the present album reflects a rather heavy reliance upon the old 78s. The New Lost City Ramblers have done incalculable service to those of us who value the old-time string music. It was the Ramblers, for example who more than anyone else developed the audience which makes the present flood of reissues economically feasible. This could not have been accomplished without the loving attention to detail which characterizes their re-creations of the classic performances. But the Ramblers seem destined to remain unique as a band which can make their brand of creative imitation work. The music we have put together here is, in a modest way, experimental. We have drawn liberally from the whole of the string music tradition, and recently (as with "I Got the Whiskey") from other traditions as well. We have not hesitated to alter instrumentation and harmony, nor to combine originally divergent musical styles when they seemed to work together. Al McCanless has some ten years of bluegrass fiddling experience behind him, while Bill Hicks's fiddling style has developed out of some five years of work with the short-bowed southern highlands fiddle technique--in particular with such fiddlers as Tommy Jarrell and Burl Hammons. By contrast, Jim Watson's approach to the guitar and mandolin is crisp, strong and forthright, and makes no obvious reference to any particular style or period; and Mike Craver has played everything from classical to rock to ragtime. My claw-hammer banjo is derived more from listening to fiddlers than to banjo pickers. None of us has done much to alter his style to give the band any preconceived sound. Rather, we have chosen what is for us the more natural route of combining our various interests, tastes and abilities as we find them. Though our sound has evolved a great deal since we began playing together, this has not been the result of emulating, as a group, other bands, past or present.

We persist in calling ourselves an "old-timey" band. We have avoided musical sounds and ideas which seemed to us alien to our adopted tradition, and left unmolested those songs and tunes which could not withstand the divergent stylistic stresses we put upon them. That so many do seem to survive this sort of handling attests to the essential continuity of the string band tradition and to its persistent vitality. Of course very little of this came about by conscious design. When the Hollow Rock Band broke up in 1968 I had a yen for a band which could use what I had learned on the banjo with what I hoped to learn as a singer. Early in 1973 we began to think about putting together this album. Jim, Bill, Al, and I got together for two recording sessions. We met Mike Craver, who started sitting in with us on piano, which gave us a much fuller sound and the sort of bouyancy we had been looking for. Mike also opened up new possibilities of repertoire, including early-recorded black music, more formally arranged Irish fiddle pieces, and even a little early country and western, which we've only begun to explore. The band keeps rolling along, practicing at least once a week and playing as many jobs as we can while maintaining our various "straight" jobs. We already have more than enough material for a second album.

--Tommy Thompson  
(with some good advice  
from Cece Conway and  
Bill Hicks)

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COVER PHOTO (left) by Chuck Lewis. Taken at Cat's Cradle, Chapel Hill, N.C., April 1974. Left to right: Jim Watson, Tommy Thompson, Mike Craver, Bill Hicks. COVER PHOTO (right) by John Menapace. Taken in Durham, N.C., March 1973. Left to right: Tommy, Al McCanless, Jim, Bill. Tommy's children, Tom Ashley and Jessica, are storming Iwo Jima in the background. COVER DESIGN by Ronald Clyne.