

Old Time North Carolina Mountain Music

with Bill, Billie Ray & David Johnson



DAVID JOHNSON, BILL JOHNSON (seated), BILLIE RAY JOHNSON

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

M
1629.7
N85
J66
O44
1985

MUSIC LP

Old Time North Carolina Mountain Music

WITH BILL, BILLIE RAY & DAVID JOHNSON

SIDE ONE

- | | |
|---|------|
| 1. Knoxville Girl—David Johnson-Vocal | 4:40 |
| 2. Ruben | 2:52 |
| 3. Wreck Of The Old 97—Billie Ray Johnson-Vocal | 3:34 |
| 4. Roll On Buddy | 2:20 |
| 5. Poor Ellen Blowed David Johnson-Vocal | 2:15 |
| 6. Possum Blowed His Horn | 2:48 |
| 7. Banks Of The Ohio—David Johnson-Vocal | 2:35 |

SIDE TWO

- | | |
|---|------|
| 1. Jimmy Sutton | 1:58 |
| 2. Down In The Willow Garden—David Johnson-Vocal | 2:25 |
| 3. Cumberland Gap | 2:25 |
| 4. Going Down The Road Feeling Bad—David & Billie Ray Johnson-Vocal | 2:24 |
| 5. Sugar Babe | 2:00 |
| 6. Pretty Polly—David Johnson-Vocal | 2:40 |
| 7. Sourwood Mountain | 1:50 |

Bill Johnson-Banjo • Billie Ray Johnson-Guitar • David Johnson-Fiddle

Produced by: John R. Craig

Annotated by: John R. Craig and David Johnson

Recorded at: Star Recording Company, Millers Creek, North Carolina

Recording Engineer: Marshall Craven

Photography: Gilbert Blackburn

All the instrumental recordings on this album are "old tunes" according to Bill Johnson. They were old mountain tunes that were handed down to each succeeding generation, and it is not surprising that some changes are evident from group to group and recording to recording. All such tunes as "Ruben," "Roll On Buddy," and "Possum Blowed His Horn" which are found on side one fall into this category. On side two are found "Cumberland Gap," "Sugar Babe," and "Sourwood Mountain" sounding the way you can still hear them today on front porches and at dances in the Western North Carolina Mountains. It is well to note that "Sourwood Mountain" is a special favorite of Bill Johnson's wife.

Of the vocals presented on this album, "Knoxville Girl" has a very old and rich, though tragic, story line. Originally found in English ballads under various titles such as "The Wiltam Miller," and "The Berkshire Tragedy," it tells the story of a young man who kills his sweetheart on the banks of a river. In America, the old ballad is known as "The Oxford Girl," "The Wexford Girl," "The Lexington Girl," as well as "The Knoxville Girl."

"The Wreck Of The Old 97" as sung by Billie Ray Johnson is a composite of a version learned from the early recording by Vernon Dalhart and a later recording by Hank Snow. It is interesting to note that ownership of the song is still unclear since both Dalhart and "Fiddlin'" John Carson both claimed credit for writing it.

"Poor Ellen Smith" is another murder ballad in the style of "Knoxville Girl." The song was reportedly composed by Peter De Graff in August of 1893 while awaiting execution for the murder of Ellen Smith in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Although "Banks Of The Ohio" has never been traced to a specific crime or author, it probably had as its beginnings the events of a specific murder. The first known recording of this tune was in 1927 on the Victor label.

"Down In The Willow Garden," also known as "Rose Connally," is an American murder ballad which may have descended from Irish folklore. It is very graphic in its description of the actual murder in much the same way as "Knoxville Girl." It has been recorded by many artists including Charlie Monroe and Lester Flatt & Earl Scruggs.

"Going Down The Road Feeling Bad" is a well travelled tune with many variations. The song lends itself to many interpretations since each singer has a specific reason for "feelin' bad." The version presented here was heavily influenced by a recording by the Hillbillies featuring The Hopkins Brothers on Vocation Records.

"Pretty Polly," as we know it today, was originally entitled "The Gosport Tragedy." It was in the English town of Gosport that the gruesome murder of "Pretty Polly" took place. The ballad had been collected as early as 1750, and some versions have over two dozen verses. The first known recording was in 1925 by Levi Stanley. David's version resembles those of more contemporary artists such as Pete Seeger and Roger McGuinn.

THREE GENERATIONS OF MOUNTAIN MUSICIANS

Born in the Pleasant Home Community of Wilkes County, North Carolina in 1911 to John and Mary Johnson, Bill Johnson started playing banjo at the early age of eight. His first banjo was built by his father who also taught him to play the old "mountain style" or clawhammer technique.

When asked to comment about his early playing he replied, "Up on Kilby Branch there was a place called Welcome Home where people would come to pick and dance. Most of the tunes I know, includin' them on the record I learned up there. I played banjo with Murph Reavis, Cranor Kilby and Willy McDaniel. Willey was the fiddler. We didn't know no keys like A or G or F, we just played high or low."

Bill later learned to play guitar, and over the years he has built and sold many guitars, banjos, and fiddles. He built the first banjo that his grandson, David, played. Though this is his first recording, he has entertained family and friends for almost sixty-five years.

Married to the former Minnie Pierce, he has one son, Billie Ray Johnson. Billie Ray Johnson was born in Millers Creek, North Carolina, in 1930. At the age of ten, his father bought him his first guitar. Since the guitar had only four strings, it had to be chorded like a mandolin. His parents taught him the three chords that they knew; thus, after learning those chords, he acquired the remaining chords by himself. Listening to records and the radio, he learned new chords as well as different styles of playing.

In 1947, Billie played with "The Foggy River Boys" on the local radio station in North Wilkesboro. He later joined "The Rocky Road Boys" and continued to play on the radio as well as for numerous local dances, parties and contests. Later joining the army, he along with a friend, Pat Patterson, played for his fellow soldiers and at the Officers Clubs.

In 1952 he married Elizabeth Caudill, and they have one son, David Johnson. Billie Ray and son David can be heard on a previous recording for Folkways Records entitled "Bluegrass."

Raised in the mountains of Western North Carolina in 1954, David Johnson began his musical training at the age of four on a guitar given him by his father. Since both his mother and father were guitarists, David didn't have far to go for help in learning to play. His grandfather, Bill Johnson, was also a constant source of help not only with answers to his musical questions but also in the art of building and repairing instruments. David learned this art of instrument building and repair just as his own father had learned from his father, and it is not uncommon yet today to see all three generations working together to build or repair an instrument.

By age ten, David began playing in his father's band "The Country Ramblers" and soon learned to play the banjo and fiddle. He learned the steel guitar so that he could play in a favorite local band led by Marshall Craven and later formed his own band "Dixie Dawn."

David began recording at the age of fifteen, and much of his time is now spent in the studio as a session musician as well as recording his own material.

Other Folkways albums in which David can be heard are FW8779, SCOTTISH & ENGLISH EARLY BALLADS with vocalist Shanna Beth McGee; FTS31094, CLAWHAMMER BANJO, and FTS31056, BLUEGRASS along with his father, Billie Ray Johnson.

What life is like living around this talented family of musicians can best be described in the words of David's mother, Betty Johnson, "I can't ever remember not being around music. I can't even imagine being where people weren't playing. It's always been that way."

© 1985 FOLKWAYS RECORDS & SERVICE CORP.
632 BROADWAY, N.Y.C., 10012 N.Y., U.S.A.