Progressive Bluegrass

5 String Banjo Specialties

Played by
ROGER SPRUNG
and his
PROGRESSIVE BLUEGRASSERS

with
ROGER SPRUNG—five-string banjo
JODY STECHER—mandolin
“SPEEDY” SHEPARD—fiddle
IRV MANNING—bass
LENNY POGAN—rhythm guitar
SAUL BROUDY—mouth harp
DAN ISAACSON—jew’s harp
RUDY GRANT—drums

featuring JON SHOLLE—lead guitar
ROGER SPRUNG in competition at the Galax, Virginia Old Time Fiddler's Convention.

"IN HIS HANDS THE BANJO IS A DYNAMIC INSTRUMENT." This statement has followed Roger wherever he's gone.

THAT BANJO PICKING STYLE which is used by him so effectively, is Roger Sprung's alone. It is the sum total of all the various patterns that he has absorbed and polished over the years. Most banjoists rely on one technique for the major portion of their work and will stay within the confines of the music that shows it to its greatest advantage. Roger has managed to master the many styles and go a step further. That step is the merging and interweaving of one into another. His use of the classical arpeggio style is the most pronounced difference in this obviously different approach. He credits his ideas for this advance to his friend Paul Cadwell, who plays in the "classical" idiom exclusively.

The use of this combined approach to banjo picking opens up many vistas for Roger. He is not bound to any material which is stylized and can move easily from and to any area of music. He can pluck a piece from the Greek such as his beautiful rendition of Misirlou in an earlier album. He can delve into show music as witness "Hello, Dolly" in this album, and of course he reaches readily into the field of jazz since that was, and still is, one of his earliest loves.

If I had given the impression that this is exclusively a banjo album, then I owe the reader an apology. Roger Sprung is a great talent and his imagination strives across many fields. His technique for bringing together an aggregation of fine solo talent and making them perform like a well oiled machine precedes him to the studios. In every album of his "Progressive Bluegrass" Series, Roger has proved again and again that a vital
sound, an exciting new sound, can become more vital and more exciting with each new listening.

This past year an interesting occurrence brought Roger more fully to the eyes of the "Pop Music Market". A close friend of his, John DeRose, was to have played the banjo with the musical aggregation of the late Emil Coleman at the plush Persian Room at the Hotel Plaza in New York City. At this time the star act was literally so, in that it was the inimitable Kay Starr. John, having other commitments, suggested that Roger be his replacement.

Since the 5-string banjo has often been overlooked and underestimated by "Pop" musicians it is not surprising that Roger's virtuosity was met with astonishment and delight by all concerned. Miss Starr had a solo spot written into the act and new eyes and ears were brought to focus on this amazing "new" sound. Incidentally, this was a Persian Room first for the "Bluegrass Banjo."

Should anyone think that our hero burst full blown on the scene let me reiterate that the growth and development of Roger and his style were nurtured over the years by his love for his art.

More and more over the years he has been called upon to do commercials for accounts such as: Falstaff Beer, Hellman's Mayonnaise, L&M, Tarryton, and Winston Cigarettes, Cott Beverages, and so many more different and varied products that we dare not attempt to list them all.

But accolades can become cumbersome and one discovers a tendency to effervesce in the presence of so many of them.

Roger and I have known each other since 1951 and over this period of time, a talent which was well on its way then, has grown and developed and is still moving outward and upward. I'm thrilled by this album and am even more thrilled by the contemplation of the next one. Thanks for reading me.

Lionel Kilberg

THE TUNES

SIDE A

1. YES, SIR, THAT'S MY BABY is an old pop standard that Roger remembers hearing in a movie, being played behind a dancing caterpillar. Roger has used the easy swing of that arrangement as a base for the relaxed, lilting performance heard here. Of particular note is the lead guitar picking of Jon Sholle, and the string ensemble finish.

2. BLACKBERRY BLOSSOM is a traditional fiddle tune that Roger, in his travels to all the important fiddle conventions, has often heard played by Uncle Charlie Higgins at Galax, and by J. Laurel Johnson at Asheville, as well as by full-time country music professionals like Tommy Jackson and Flatt & Scruggs. Roger found it necessary, in playing the melody accurately, to desert to some extent the usual patterns of Scruggs style banjo, in favor of more rigorous single-note work; Roger is one of the very few who have successfully adapted this fiddle tune to banjo.

3. DEEP ELM BLUES goes back at least as far as a 1930's recording by The Shelton Bros; it has recently appeared on Folkways by Red Allen & Frank Wakefield. A good deal trickier melodically than most blues, it features some good blues guitar from Jody Stecher, who switches to guitar (while Sholle plays bass) for number only.

4. FISHER'S HORNPIPE is another fiddle number that is not usually played on the banjo. Roger's adaptation of the old recording by Clayton McMichen features three key changes.

5. DOWN HOME RAG is an old jazz piece that Roger remembers hearing played, in the old nylon-strung classical banjo style by a group composed of Paul Cadwell, Bill Bowen, and Fred Van Esp. In this version, Roger's banjo and Jody's mandolin join for some good close harmony, and the group offers another unusual ending.

6. TURKEY IN THE STRAW is a favorite old fiddle piece which is usually played fast enough to discourage its adaptation to banjo. Roger, however, was able to accomplish this feat, with a minimum sacrifice of speed.

7. LITTLE DRUMMER BOY is the Christmas hit of a few years back. The group starts off here by playing it straight, and then plays it in a kind of bluesy rhythm that doesn't (they hope) violate the spirit of the song.

8. RICKETTS HORNPIPE is another fiddle tune that Roger learned from a recording by Clayton McMichen; this version features some notably clean banjo work, and a good deal of subtle improvisation, which, at the beginning, conceals the melody. There is also a nice blend of banjo and fiddle at the conclusion of the tune.

SIDE B

1. OL' MOLLY HARE was learned from Byard Ray, a Walnut Gap, N.C. fiddler who has been playing it for many years. It was also recorded in the 1920s by Clayton McMichen. This arrangement features an interesting interweaving of the various instruments.

2. SAILOR'S HORNPIPE: Roger has been hearing this tune played on the four-string banjo by New York City's Arnie Feldman for many years. As played here, it features some unusual, syncopated fiddle, and some nice fiddle-and-banjo counterpoint near the end. Roger's version makes an interesting comparison with the one recorded recently by Bill Keith with Bill Monroe.
3. **BUCK'S STUMBLE** was originally written for dobro by the original bluegrass dobro player, Buck Graves. To achieve the slide effects of the dobro, Roger twists five of the six tuning pegs on his banjo (in addition to the four Keith pegs, Roger has installed two tuning pegs of his own design). Dobro playing is often very bluesy, and Roger's arrangement features a strong blues guitar break from Jon Sholle.

4. **FORKED DEER** is another favorite old fiddle tune; some of Roger's ideas for his arrangement came from a recently-reissued old record by Taylor's Kentucky Boys. The shuffle rhythm heard after Roger's second banjo solo reminds one of a prancing deer.

5. **MOSCOW NIGHTS** is the pop jazz-band hit of several seasons ago; Roger found it one of his most requested numbers during his engagement at The Mark Twain Room in the Empire State Building, with Stan Rubin's band. (Photographs of the group recently appeared in Look magazine.) Roger starts by evoking the melancholy atmosphere of the tune, and works subtle changes in mood and tempo, including a bluesy interlude featuring Jon Sholle's guitar.

6. **PADDY WON'T YOU DRINK SOME CIDER** is one of the tunes Roger liked best from the collection of discographer Loy Beaver. Roger's version derives from the Gid Tanner recording of the tune, plus a general appreciation of the mountain band style of Al Hopkins.

7. **HELLO, DOLLY** has swept the country as a pop song. Like "Moscow Nights", it was one of Roger's most requested numbers at the Mark Twain Room.

8. **RAGTIME ANNIE** finds Roger taking the original melody of a traditional fiddle tune, and syncopating it to bring out its relationship to the five-, rather than four-string banjo.

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Although Roger Sprung owns twenty banjos, he makes most of his music with only two, a 1928 Gibson Hearts And Flowers model, that was owned by Bert Gedney, the honorary president of The Five-String Banjo Fraternity, and a 1930 Gibson RB-18. Roger's musical activities have carried him to all the major folk festivals and fiddle conventions, where he has won several top prizes. He has also toured as a member of The Shanty Boys, and is in frequent demand to record commercials. In addition to his many public appearances in places like The Mark Twain Room, Roger has been teaching banjo and guitar for fifteen years; he is proud of the fact that many of the students he has taught have become top professionals.

   **Bill Vernon**

   "THAT'S REAL FINE PICKIN' "

   **Andy Griffith**

Somewhat closer to the mainstream of folk tradition, yet also not bounded by any narrow definitions is Roger Sprung, who has made a highly estimable recording called Progressive Bluegrass and Other Instrumentals. (FA2370).

   Mr. Sprung has been recorded at the top of his form, and in his whirlwind interplay with Mr. Watson achieves some fascinating flights of inspiration.

   .... Roger Sprung has himself an inventive Banjo ....

   _Robert Shelton (NY Times)_

   One of the best banjo pluckers in the country if not in the whole wide world.

   _Kay Starr_

   Skillful Banjo Player

   _Bruce Gourlay (Ashville Citizen)_

   "Sounds awful good to me - Rog"

   _Woody Guthrie_

   plays the banjo as if he invented the instrument.

   _Nick Lapole (Journal Amer.)_

   "Roger Sprung with his crackling banjo, and his string band, are continuing to surprise us with the variety of music they can make their own - from traditional Irish fiddle tunes to Broadway show tunes. Here's to him; long may he crackle!"

   _Pete Seeger_

Bluegrass emerged fifty years after New Orleans' hot music as mountaineers' answer to jazz. It seems to me that Roger Sprung has taken a logical and exciting step of the two traditions by tastefully adding jazz instruments to the bluegrass ensemble and giving bluegrass an exciting city swing. A new sound has emerged. Let's call it "Square-billy," in honor of Washington Square where Dr. Sprung has reigned for many a long year.

   _Alan Lomax_

Sprung possesses the humor and ingenuity that separate the truly creative musician from the feverish technician.

   _Paul Nelson (The Little Sandy Review)_

An amazing man with an amazing talent for music .... a flair for something different ... whose banjo speed and clarity is truly amazing .... a very gifted person.

   _Art Roberts (WLS Chic.)_

   A Delightful Banjoist

   _Robert Salmaggi (Herald Tribune)_

In the hands of Roger Sprung, a five string banjo playing bellwether in the Northeast for a number of years, the instrument takes on virtuoso capacities. Sprung is one of the best musicians in the country and even more important, he is quite probably one of the finest all round banjo players active today.

   _Lawrence Cohn (Sat. Rev.)_
FA 2370 PROGRESSIVE BLUEGRASS Volume One, played by ROGER SPRUNG with "Doc" Watson, Joe Locker, Willie Locker, Ollie Phillips, & Bob Thomas. The Wildgoose Chase; Stars & Stripes Forever; Spinning Wheel; Big Banjo from Broadway; Whistling Rufus; The World is Waiting for the Sunrise; Mack the Knife; Nellie Bly; Malaguena; Smokey Mokes; Greensleeves; Bye Bye Blues. Descriptive notes included.

FA 2371 PROGRESSIVE RAGTIME BLUEGRASS Volume Two, played by ROGER SPRUNG with Jon Sholle; Hank Miller, Larry Dunn, Jody Stecher, Gene Lowinger, Frank Benedetto II, Bob Thompson. Dill Pickle Rag; Shoot the Turkey Buzzard; Misirlou; Chinatown; Puff the Magic Dragon; Tiger Rag; Sweet Georgia Brown; Gie Gordons; Silver Rainbow; Arkansas Traveler; How High the Moon; Georgia Camp Meeting; That's A-Plenty. Descriptive notes included.

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