The Country Gentelmen, Vol. 4:

GOING BACK TO
THE BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS

COVER PHOTO BY PAUL NELSON
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GOING BACK TO THE BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS

Here are vintage performances by one of the most durable groups in bluegrass. For over fifteen years they have been touring, recording and enlivening night spots in Washington, D.C.'s famous Georgetown. In the aftermath of groups like the Kingston Trio, Limeliters and others of that ilk the Gentlemen were among the first to be recognized who came from authentic bluegrass roots. Their repertoire is vast and it includes everything from ancient ballads to current pop, although these live performance recordings come from the 1960's, they contain the same fresh, lively and irreverent approach for which the Gentlemen still are famous.

Going Back to the Blue Ridge Mountains is on the other side of an old Delmore Brothers hit from the 40's. Here the Gentlemen add both speed and spice, making it sound as though it was written as a bluegrass tune. Going to the Races comes from Carter Stanley's "Gonna Paint the Town," and was the first tune ever recorded by the Country Gentlemen back in 1957. Blue Bell is a good example of banjoist Eddie Adcock's sophisticated approach. He's one of the few who can do Travis-picking on the banjo and make it work. Dark As a Dungeon also derives from the fertile imagination of Merle Travis and is nearly as well known today as his other famous coal-mining piece "Sixteen Tons." Billy in the Low Ground and Cripple Creek are among the many old mountain breakdown tunes which have passed into the hands of every bluegrass band. The subtle duel between Duffey's mandolin and Adcock's banjo in Cripple Creek is one of the highlights of this album. Copper Kettle came to the Gentlemen from the singing of Joan Baez, much as she got "Long Black Veil" from them. I Saw the Light was written in the 40's by Hank Williams. Somewhat later Bill Monroe recorded a quartet version that remains a bluegrass perennial. Brown Mountain Light is an original by Scott Wiseman, of Lulu Belle and Scotty. I'm told the light may be frequently observed even today. Electricity was written and first recorded over twenty years ago by the legendary Jimmy Murphy, whole version is a prized collector's item. Charlie Waller duplicates many of Murphy's famous guitar licks and provides not a few of his own. Daybreak in Dixie comes from the mandolin piece of now-retired Bill Napier, who recorded it with the Stanley Brothers. Like Bill Monroe's "Rawhide" it is one of the classical mandolin test pieces which separates the men from the boys.

Mary Dear is one of many old-time songs depicting the tragic human wastes of war. Bill Clifton learned it from an old recording by Charlie Poole and passed it on to the Gentlemen. Fiddlin' Arthur Smith is responsible for Sad and Lonesome Day and first recorded it in 1938. The late Red Smiley is the man who sang it often and planted it firmly in bluegrass tradition. Don't This Road Look Rough and Rocky and Mule Skinner Blues are bluegrass classics. Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs introduced the former in the early 50's and it remained in their songbag until they broke up in 1968. Mule Skinner was first sung by Jimmie Rodgers. Bill Monroe appropriated it in 1939, six years after Rodgers' death, and he has rarely given a performance since without singing it.

Thus the Country Gentlemen are inheritors of a long and beautiful tradition of American music, music that was born and nurtured in the southern mountains and perpetuated by groups like this who have dressed it up and brought it to town.

In 1973 their appeal is as broad and timeless as it was in the 1960's. Their many admirers will welcome the discovery and release of this great "lost" concert. It represents the Gentlemen at their best, which is to say very good indeed.

Notes by Richard Spottswood