



String Time

BILL EMERSON

REVIEWED BY
BOB ALLEN

In the liner notes to this worthy 20-cut reissue on the Patuxent label, illustrious banjo master Alan Munde recalls buying and being bowled over with these recordings back in the early 1960s.

“In these early performances Bill Emerson demonstrates all the things one looks for in a model of superb bluegrass banjo playing,” Munde writes. “His performance is immaculate, with surprising and creative banjo arrangements of many standards and a few originals that have become classics. Emerson’s powerhouse picking is accompanied by a stellar group of supporting musicians.

“Of special note is the atom-splitting mandolin of Frank Wakefield,” adds Munde. “I listened to these recordings with great attention and pleasure as I attempted to learn the tunes, arrangements and subtle mysteries of the bluegrass banjo roll.”

And according to Munde, so did Sam Bush and many others he’s crossed paths with over the years.

These all-instrumental tracks were first released on the Coronet label in 1962 and 1963 under the titles of *Bill Emerson and his Virginia Mountaineers Banjo Pickin’*, *Hot Fiddlin’*, *Country Style*, volumes one and two. On them, Emerson is ably accompanied by an illustrious lineup that includes Wakefield, Red Allen, Tom Morgan, Kenny Haddock, Carl Nelson, Charlie Waller, Bill Harrell and Buzz Busby.

Patuxent’s Tom Mindte remastered these tracks, which were originally recorded at Ben Adelman’s Empire Studio in Washington, D.C.

This music marks the beginning, or near beginning, of Emerson’s storied career during which he went on to play with everyone from The Country Gentleman (the band he cofounded in 1957), Jimmy Martin, and Cliff Waldron to the U.S. Navy band, Tony Rice, his own Sweet Dixie Band and many others.

What’s clear is that at this point, Emerson had already found his “voice” and mastered his chosen instrument. He and his accompanying pickers turn in sparkling, masterful renditions of familiar tunes like “Jesse James,” “Little Maggie,” “Sweet Dixie” and somewhat more obscure old-timey numbers like “Baby Sue (Old Spinning Wheel),” “Fingers on Fire,” “Lightning Banjo” and a ton of others.

Emerson and company really tear it up on a stellar version of “Banjo Harp (Little Darling Pal of Mine)” and the jaunty “Chicken Reel,” the rowdy “Fireball Mail” and the fiery “Hog Wash (Hey Mr. Banjo).”