

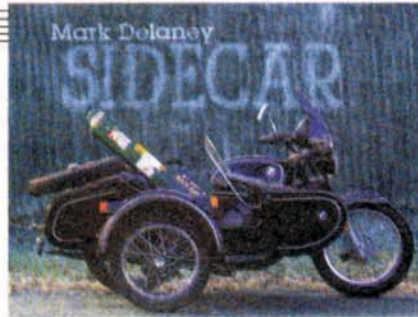
## REVIEW

**Sidecar** by Mark Delaney, Putuxent Records, [www.pxrec.com/](http://www.pxrec.com/)

Reviewed by Wayne Shrubsall

Tired of bluegrass banjo albums that aren't bluegrass, but perhaps emphasize non-bluegrass flights into the unknown? Sure, those recordings are just fine, but if you really enjoy good, traditional bluegrass, maybe you were disappointed by the absence of that sound and style.

How refreshing, then, is this new CD from Mark Delaney, called "Sidecar"! Here you have an album that is not just a solo CD featuring a really extraordinary banjoist with accompanists. Well, it is that, for sure, but it is also a wisely arranged and produced CD that presents the listener with fine instrumentals as



well as good vocals and a repertoire that refuses to be monotonous, with one song or tune sounding very much like the other. (Sometimes that is what satellite bluegrass radio sounds like to me; one day I heard four selections in a row, all in the key of B, all roughly at the same tempo, all with roughly the same banjo intro, all by different groups.)

I met Mark a few summers ago in Prescott, AZ, at a bluegrass festival. He was playing with Randy Waller and the Country Gentlemen, and they put on a show that was just great (especially if

you are a big CG fan like me). We sat and visited between sets one evening, and I really appreciated the ease with which he talked with me about his music. On stage, what was interesting to me was Mark's ability to ornament the playing of Eddie Adcock at times, then of Bill Emerson at times, and then come forth as Mark, a solid and yet innovative picker who could capture my attention with a note, a lick, or a whole break.

Just as that show was great, so is this new CD. It is less a "look-at-me" collection of tunes and more a really fine bluegrass music set. There are 14 songs and tunes on the collection, but no one tune is in the same key as the preceding. Oddly enough, that kind of variety is subtly appealing to listeners. Also, Delaney brings in friends to sing on six of the selections (he joins them on one, Ralph Stanley's *Let Me Walk, Lord, By Your Side*), and on the vocals allows himself to take a back seat (or is it to take the sidecar on the motorcycle?) to their talents. The vocalists include Bryan Deere, Dede Wyland, Tom Mindte, John Miller, Charles Thompson, and Rusty Vint. One of the highlights, vocally, is the duet by Mindte and Wyland, *Fire in My Heart*, a three-chord (I, IV, and V in succession) almost-bluegrass-style vocal. Nonetheless, while Delaney's breaks on the vocals solidly "quote" older banjo ideas such as Scruggs backup on *I'll Go Stepping Too* and *Baby Blue Eyes*, Mark has his own touches that make a fan like me smile, if not burn with envy. ("Why didn't I think of that?")

On the remaining eight instrumental selections, five are original compositions, all worthwhile listening experiences. *Candlewood*, the first tune on the album, introduces the "set" approach to the album by featuring Mark's solid, powerful, and, on this one, really fast and clean playing. His other originals, *Stepaway*, *Birdbath*, *Magneto*, and *Susan's Garden*, start out with a "straight ahead" Scruggs sound, and then, on middle breaks, feature variations on the first break, often featuring Renesque and melodically complex lines here and there. The nifty thing is that all of these ideas work—they are not just "look at me, Ma!" excursions into notarrhea.

Delaney tips his hat to three great early bluegrass players—banjoists Haskell McCormick and Don Stover and mandolinist Jesse McReynolds—when he plays *McCormick String Picnic*, *Black*

*Diamond*, and *Fireball Express*. Again, Delaney nods politely to the two banjoists by playing their tunes the way they would or did, and then varying their breaks with some of his own ideas.

Instrumentally, Delaney features Michael Cleveland on fiddle, doing the wonderful job he always does and more (I like his quoting Byron Berline's sounds on Delaney's *Birdbath*). One other soloist of note is Jesse Brock on mandolin, also driving the musical points home expertly.

Basically, these three men take all the solos, with rhythm provided by Audie Blaylock on guitar and Barry Reid on bass.

If you like bluegrass banjo and bluegrass songs, varied in tempo and in keys, get Mark Delaney's "Sidecar." This is a CD that I will keep and play often, which means it will live in my CD box in my vehicle, where I do much of my bluegrass listening these days. For everyone I play, twenty gather dust somewhere in a pile. "Sidecar" will not suffer that fate.