

NATE LEATH + FRIENDS

Rockville Pike

Patuxent 177

Fiddler Nate Leath's regular gig is with Old School Freight Train, a young Virginia-based band that has gained a substantial following with a sound that starts with bluegrass and doses it liberally with old-time, jazz, blues and whatever else seems to fit. Stepping out here on his own, Leath stays mostly in the old-time vein for 14 tracks that traverse string band classics like "Greasy Coat" and "Wild Bill Jones," to Leath originals like "Rosin On The Gourd" and the title track.

Joining in as part of the cast of "+ Friends" are stalwarts like Mark Schatz (bass and banjo) and Danny Knicely (guitar), both of whom have long been associated with the Footworks dance ensemble operated by Schatz's wife, Eileen Carson, who also makes a cameo appearance. Tom Mindt, a longtime presence in the D.C. area bluegrass scene, produced the disc and contributes a bluesy vocal to "Sittin' On Top Of The World" as well. The most interesting and energetic contributions, however, come from youngsters Sarah Jarosz, a Sugar Hill artist, who plays banjo and does a fine turn on a Gillian Welch/David Rawlings tune, "No One Knows My Name," and 13-year-old fiddler Tatiana Hargreaves. The twin fiddling between Leath and Hargreaves on cuts like the aforementioned "Greasy Coat" and on Hargreaves' own "What Time Is It My Pretty Little Miss?" is enticing and will have you itching to hit the replay button. Also worth repeated listening is a medley of Canadian reels, "Miss McCloud's Reel/The Squirrel Hunters/St. Anne's Reel."

There have always been fiddlers who were adept at both bluegrass and old-time, as well as a variety of other country styles — Kenny Baker and Art Stamper come to mind. It's harder than it looks — or sounds — to move effortlessly between these differing approaches, but Leath proves himself up to the task. — JL