

## Understanding Acoustic Music – the Legacy of Tom Mindte & Patuxent Music

*article and i-phone photos by Frank Matheis – June 2018*



When it comes to understanding the melting pot of regional black blues and white Appalachian music, there is a small record label in Rockville, Maryland, on the outskirts of the Washington, D.C. metropolitan region, that gets it right. Tom Mindte and Patuxent Music is today the most important recording studio and record label for the authentic regional “Piedmont Blues.” The owner/operator, mandolinist and music historian, Tom Mindte, is well known for his recording and production studio specializing in acoustic music. Mindte records and produces blues, bluegrass and old-time music as if there was no difference, precisely because there is no difference. It is acoustic roots music from the mid-Atlantic. Call it traditional American string music.

Tom Mindte just loves music, and not just a little. He lives and breathes it, he plays it, records and produces it, and he collects it, but when you see this collection, somehow the word “record collector” seems inadequate. Call him a super-collector. He operates a spacious, two story recording studio in a non-descript small industrial park, but as soon as you open the door you get fantastically transported back into musical history, in what amounts to a virtual museum or regional roots music. Signed photos of musicians of all genres and pictures of blues artists adorn every square inch of space. When you go upstairs of Patuxent Music, to see Tom’s personal

record collection, jaws will drop. Here he houses an amazing collection of exactly 12,174 78-rpm records and 10,296 LPs. He is not even in it to make money as a trader. He rarely buys-and-sells, but is purely a hardcore collector.



*A memorabilia collection befitting a museum.*

Some great musicians have come and recorded here at Patuxent Music, heavy hitters like jazz guitarist Larry Coryell. He had remastered a live album by the Stanley Brothers. He recorded and produced six albums for fellow mandolinist Frank Wakefield. Currently, his main sellers are bluegrass guitarist Danny Paisley and fiddler Audie Blaylock. His roots blues recordings encompass a virtual who-is-who of the current Washington, D.C. acoustic blues scene: Michael Baytop, Warner Williams, Jay Summerour, Eleanor Ellis, Neil Harpe, Rick Franklin, in various combinations or solo. Talk to any of the local blues musicians and they all love and rave about Tom Mindte. Perhaps it is because of his operational philosophy, “We try to make people feel comfortable, especially musicians who never recorded much before, so that people don’t feel nervous. We make them relaxed so they can play well.”



*Tom Mindte owns 22,472 records, not counting CDs!*

The traditional music of the people living in the Mid-Atlantic region has been interpreted and labeled by writers and folklorists bent of defining delineations. If you start in the Appalachian Mountains and cross the Piedmont region over to the Tidewater on the Atlantic coast, where both people of European and African ancestry played acoustic music, you find lots of labeling: Mountain music, Piedmont Blues, Old-time music, Bluegrass, Country and more. These genre separations were often made along racial lines by music industry people who had a marketing interest in this separation. This artificial segregation defies that actually there was much cross-pollination, mutual influence and commonality among the black and white rural musicians. Even though unequal, their communities were inextricably linked, and the musicians not only listened to each other, but they liked each other's music and shared many similarities. This blending of styles is in itself a tradition in the tristate region of Maryland, Virginia and Washington, DC. (actually, all the way to North Carolina and west toward Tennessee). Musicians have always interchanged, shared and drawn from each other's musical heritage. White players like Doc Boggs, Roscoe Holcomb and Doc Watson were well versed and influenced by the blues players and songsters like Papa Charlie Jackson; and, the black blues players from the Piedmont liberally drew from the popular white country players like Jimmie Rodgers. "Backstage integration" a form of cultural cross-pollination, helped form American roots music, and the resulting melting pot helped define the East Coast folk music to this day. Any good bluegrass string player can play some blues, and any good blues players can dig into the country realm. This is well documented in the history of mid-Atlantic blues, bluegrass and country music history.



*Tom Mindte, the music man!*

As a superb mandolin player, Mindte can sit down with anyone and join into a kindred musical amalgamation. Take the album *Dancing With My Baby*, with bluesman Rick Franklin, a local blues guitarist, songster and storyteller and a mainstay of the Maryland/Virginia/D.C area acoustic blues. Here you had two Washington, D.C. acoustic players, each an excellent instrumentalist, join as a duo to combine their respective string traditions – one from the African American Piedmont blues scene, the other from the thriving Appalachian regional bluegrass realm, and it sounds as one.

Tom Mindte earned a Masters Degree in Electrical Engineering and started recording music in 1984, and opened his studio in 1996. He understands technology, but so do sound engineers in studios all over the United States. Technology is important, but it is just one part of the equation. To produce a truly successful album, you need to record in a studio where the recording engineer and producer fully understands and deeply feels the music you play. The musician and the recording studio/producer actually have to “belong to each other.” That’s a rarity and a feat, not easy to find. But it is a logical. Roots music should be recorded where the tree is planted by people with those same roots. Mississippi Delta blues is best recorded locally in Mississippi where the music originates from, by people who know it, feel it in the hearts and do it the way it should be. The same can be said for any regional roots music, be it Cajun, Zydeco, Breton fiddle music or Hawaiian traditional music. For the music people call bluegrass, Piedmont Blues and old-time mountain music of the mid-Atlantic, that’s in Tom Mindte’s Patuxent studio. Once you understand that acoustic roots music is essentially similar, recording and producing regional

roots artists comes natural to a trained sound engineer and producer like Tom Mindte. He specializes in the regional acoustic music because he understands it, he plays it and he knows



how to record it.

He offers both digital and analog recording equipment, depending on what people want. But, he has a response for people who spend oodles of money on old amps and recording equipment, “String instruments improve with age, but electronic equipment deteriorates. The old guys sounded good despite their equipment, not because of it. You can’t buy your way into sound. The old timers just played more, they had more practice and it was a matter of necessity to survive and make it. Poverty was a great incentive to play well and make it as a musician, whether you were in the cotton fields or the coal mines.”



“We record without over-dubbing because that’s the way old-time musicians like it. We record acoustic music. The African American string bands and bluegrass bands use the same acoustic instruments. Flat top guitars, fiddles, and such, and they are recorded in the same way.”

Like most small studios, Patuxent Music specializes in recording and producing artist who are either up and coming or on a comeback trail people who are well known and still “have

something to say.” When people reach wide ranging fame they usually sign with larger labels in bigger markets. The result is a specialty label, sought after by connoisseurs and aficionados of particular styles of roots music. To use the analogy, if mass market music is like mass market restaurants, this is where you go to find the sought after special local delicacies.

Tom Mindte explains his connection to the regional acoustic blues scene, “I used to listen to Jimmie Rodgers and read that he was heavily influenced by the local Mississippi black musicians and he learned from them. Later, I had an album by Charley Patton and found him amazing. In 1982, I used to play at open mic night at Gallagher’s Pub. That’s where I connected with Rick Franklin, Neil Harpe and Eleanor Ellis, and fully understood how great this music is. Not much later I met Warner Williams at an open mic in Olney, Maryland.”

That’s how it all started. Here are some of the regional albums to check out on this cool label:

Flora Molton – I Want To be Ready to Hear God When He Calls – Patuxent 2014 – CD257

Eleanor Ellis – Comin’ A Time – Patuxent Records 2007 – CD 138

Warner Williams & Jay Summerour – Little Bit a Blues – Patuxent Music 1999 – CD 038

Warner Williams & Jay Summerour – Down ‘N’ Dirty – Patuxent Music 2007 – CD 163

Mike Baytop & Jay Summerour – (same title) – Patuxent Music 2018 – CD 314

Franklin & Baytop – Searching for Frank – Patuxent Music 2007 – CD 156

Rick Franklin & Tom Mindte – Dancing with My Baby – Patuxent Music 2013 – CD 246

Franklin & Harpe – Doin’ the Dozens – Patuxent Music 2007 – no number

Franklin, Harpe and Usilton – Hokum Blues – Patuxent Music 1999 – CD 022

Neil Harpe – Hokum Blues – Hokum Blues 2007 – HB 1002



