

Frank Wakefield *A Tribute to Bill Monroe* The Del McCoury Band *Old Memories: the Songs of Bill Monroe*

Reviewed by Hermon Joyner

The impact of Bill Monroe is enormous; he is, after all, the father of bluegrass. And late in 2011, both Frank Wakefield and Del McCoury did CDs in honor of what would have been Bill Monroe's one hundredth birthday. Both CDs feature either Monroe-written tunes or songs closely associated with him, and both attempt to produce authentic-sounding versions of these songs. Conceptually and in execution, these CDs have a lot in common, but there are some differences.

Frank Wakefield started performing bluegrass in 1950. He credits Bill Monroe as his inspiration for becoming a musician and it was Bill Monroe himself who encouraged him to find his own mandolin sound in the early '60s. Del McCoury was inspired to play bluegrass by Earl Scruggs in the 1950s and got his break when Bill Monroe asked him to join his band in 1963. McCoury played guitar and sang with Monroe for a few years, but it wasn't until the 1990s that his band and career came together and took off.

Of the two CDs, Wakefield's is more specifically Monroe-centric; 14 out of the 16 songs were written by Monroe. On the McCoury disc, seven out of 16 songs were written by Monroe with other songs by Jimmie Rogers and Hank Williams, among others. Wakefield includes some of Monroe's instrumental tunes, while McCoury doesn't; he only does the songs.

In his CD, Frank Wakefield doesn't perform in his usual staccato technique, but tries to capture more of Monroe's own mandolin sound and style. Wakefield comes up with a close approximation of the Monroe sound that especially shines on *Rawhide*. Overall, the arrangements and performances are quite good and the lead vocals, by Audie Blaylock and Tom Ewing, are excellent. There is an open leanness to the CD that accurately captures the flavor of Monroe's recordings.

Del McCoury has one of the best voices in high-and-lonesome bluegrass and he really shines on this CD. Overall, he and his band deliver the better performances in this CD. They are ever-so-slightly more restrained than usual, but they still turn up the heat on these songs. Ronnie McCoury really stands out in this recording. One of the best bluegrass mandolin players working at the moment, Ronnie's playing is effortless and nearly perfect.

Of the two efforts, Wakefield's *a Tribute to Bill Monroe* hews closer to the source material and comes across as a more faithful effort. McCoury's *Old Memories* pops and sizzles with energy and joy and therefore is maybe more fun to listen to; he shows there is still life left in these tunes. For the Monroe enthusiast, both discs are a chance to listen to some of the best Monroe tunes recorded with modern quality and performed with passion and reverence. Bill Monroe might be gone, but it's obvious that his life continues to touch us all.

Frank Wakefield; a Tribute to Bill Monroe, Song List: *When You Are Lonely; Rawhide; That's All Right; Bluegrass Breakdown; A Beautiful Life; Letter From My Darling; Panhandle Country; When the Golden Leaves Begin to Fall; Pike Country Breakdown; Blue Moon of Kentucky; Blue Grass Stomp; Swing Low Sweet Chariot; Close By; Wheel Hoss; On and On; The One I love is Gone*

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Del McCoury; Old Memories; Song List: *Watermelon on the Vine; Live and Let Live; Lonesome Truck Driver's Blues; Brakeman's Blues; Close By; In Despair; Girl in the Blue Velvet Band; John Henry; I'm Blue I'm Lonesome; Used to Be; Alabama Waltz; Lonesome Road Blues; Heavy Traffic Ahead; Train 45 (Heading South); My Rose of Kentucky; Y'all Come*

www.delmcouryband.com; www.amazon.com