

3-1-2013

When I Get My New House Done, Western North Carolina Fiddle Tunes and Songs SFC CD-100 (M Martin)

Chris Goertzen

University of Southern Mississippi, Christopher.Goertzen@usm.edu

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Recommended Citation

Goertzen, C. (2013). When I Get My New House Done, Western North Carolina Fiddle Tunes and Songs SFC CD-100 (M Martin). *Journal of American Folklore*, 126(500), 211-212.

Available at: http://aquila.usm.edu/fac_pubs/7753

Sound Reviews

Marcus Martin: *When I Get My New House Done, Western North Carolina Fiddle Tunes and Songs*, 2007. Produced by Wayne Martin, Beverly Patterson, and Steven Weiss. Biographical and tune notes by Wayne Martin. Notes on collectors and field recordings by Steven Weiss and Wayne Martin. Southern Folklife Collection, CD (1), SFC CD-100.

CHRIS GOERTZEN

University of Southern Mississippi

Marcus Martin (1881–1974) was a marvelous Western North Carolina traditional fiddler with a vigorous and appealing performance technique. *When I Get My New House Done: Western North Carolina Fiddle Tunes and Songs*, a new CD of his music, reflects the collaboration of workers from the North Carolina Folklife Institute and those from the Southern Folklife Collection of the University of North Carolina. The disc's liner notes are excellent, especially the tune annotations, which cite Martin's sources, specify alternative titles, and narrate tune histories. The melodies, all recorded during the 1940s, are delightful and well-chosen, both in terms of their quality and balance within the regional repertoire. The collection could serve a variety of pedagogical purposes.

The twenty-six cuts (nearly an hour of music) fall into four groups, which are based on the individual who made the original field recordings. The first dozen tunes were recorded by Jan Philip Schinhan, a musicologist and musician on the faculty of the University of North Carolina; these include "Daddy Bow-back," "Sally Goodin," "When I Get My New House Done," "Wounded Hoosier," "Gray Eagle," "Sandy River," "Cumberland Gap," "Lady Hamilton," "Snowbird," "Possum Up a Gum Stump," "Cotton-Eyed Joe," and "Polly Put the Kettle On." Alan Lomax and associates recorded the next five: "Calico," "Booth," "Sally Goodin," "Old Joe Clark," and "Cripple Creek." The next

six were collected by educator and western North Carolina specialist Artus Moser: "Jenny Run Away in the Mud in the Night," "Citico," "John Henry" (on which Martin sings and accompanies himself on clawhammer-style banjo), "Cousin Sally Brown," "Boatsman," and "Walking the Water." The last three cuts were collected by Margot Mayo and three other members of the American Square Dance Group of New York City: "Bed of Primroses," "Kiss Me Sweet," and "How the Squire Courted Nancy." Both the latter and "Bed of Primroses" are broadside ballads sung a cappella by Martin.

Martin grew up on a mountain farm and then sampled other occupations as an adult. Like most fiddlers, he treated music as an avocation rather than substantial source of income, and like most, he was broadly based as a musician, singing and also playing harmonica and banjo. He said he learned to fiddle through observation; his father played, and Martin also learned from other fiddlers in nearby counties. He performed on radio, at political conventions, at plenty of fiddle contests, and, especially, for dances. In the liner notes, Martin is quoted as telling Lomax that "fiddle and five-string banjo was the two musical instruments we used in those days" (p. 4). There lies the only real problem with this collection. Due to the artifact orientation of much fieldwork in the mid-twentieth century, collectors almost always recorded *solo* fiddle performances, rather than string bands playing at dances or contests. But typical, high-quality old-time performances reach past what the fiddler does. Tunes are realized on the fiddle, with the banjo, played clawhammer style, delivering the same melody, not quite in unison. (In clawhammer style banjo, a finger beats down percussively in alternation with the thumb, which itself produces melody notes and drones; this performance style descends directly from blackface minstrelsy). The essence of musical expression lies in the flavor of the heterophony, that is, how the banjoist's

idiomatic and personal form of the melody matches and departs from the fiddler's performance. Martin will have fiddled alone sometimes, but in public performance settings, he was probably more often in duos or bands.

When playing for dances but lacking amplification, fiddlers needed to be loud, especially if playing alone. One factor enhancing volume was (and remains) the use of cross-tunings (alternatives to the standard GDAE tuning of the open strings). Martin used many such tunings, favoring common ones still used to lend resonance to the key of A; however, he tuned certain strings down, rather than tuning the others up, so was instead in G. Cross-tunings offer the fiddler a number of advantages. They make playing in a given key easier, facilitate the use of double stops (two pitches played at once), and increase volume through sympathetic resonance. Listening to this CD, the contrast between "Sandy River" (tuned GDGB) and the next track, "Cumberland Gap" (in standard tuning), is so striking that one almost gets the impression that one speaker of the stereo cut out. The disadvantage of cross-tunings is that fewer licks in those tunings seem graceful as compared to those found in the standard tuning. As a result, melodies played in a cross-tuning converge in character, something heard easily in this collection by comparing the tunes cast in any given cross-tuning. Sometimes, the nature of the tuning can overwhelm that of the melody, as when Martin's "Boatman Dance," called "Boatsman" here and surprisingly cast in DDAD, retains only about eight seconds that are recognizable as that ubiquitous tune.

Indeed, most of the tunes in this collection are either very rare, presented in unusual versions, and/or are attached to surprising titles. For instance, his two tunes called "Sally Goodin" contrast with each other vividly. One is an Upper South version, in which I hear a few mild Texas influences (likely via the wide distribution of Texan "Eck" Robertson's recording of 1922). The other, more striking tune, which Wayne Martin explains is elsewhere called "Georgia Horseshoe," nevertheless retains the typical "Sally Goodin" phrase endings. Could it be an intermediate form between the Upper South frolic tune in G and inner sections of the

wildly varied Texas "Sally Goodin" in A? Students might enjoy comparing Martin's two tunes called "Sally Goodin" with a nice Texas version, like one by Benny Thomasson. In fact, if one played Thomasson's music in a class—for example, assigning *Benny Thomasson: "Say Old Man, Can You Play the Fiddle"* (Voyager, VRCD 345)—the "Sally Goodin" relationships could be fruitfully explored, and the licks in Thomasson's "Midnight on the Water," in DDAD, could be compared with gestures in Martin's tunes in DDAD. Add one more CD of Upper South string band music to the mix—perhaps *Blue Ridge Mountain Holiday: The Breaking Up Christmas Story* (County, CO-2722-CD) or *New Ballard's Branch Bogtrotter's: The Galax Way* (Heritage, HRC-116-CD)—and you'll have the basis for a lively class session or two on Southern fiddling.

Folksongs of Illinois #1, 2007. Essay and liner notes by Clark "Bucky" Halker and Nicole Saylor. Illinois Humanities Council, CD (1), IHC07-01.

Folksongs of Illinois #2, 2007. Essay and liner notes by Paul Tyler. Illinois Humanities Council, CD (1), IHC07-02.

SHERRY JOHNSON
York University

The three-volume *Folksongs of Illinois* CD series was produced by the Illinois Humanities Council, the organization explains, in order to view the state's "diverse cultural heritage through the lens of Illinois musicians and songwriters" (<http://www.prairie.org/news/third-volume-groundbreaking-lt-i-gt-folksongs-illinois-lt-i-gt-cd-series-released-illinois-huma>). The first two volumes were released in May 2007 and are addressed in this review; the third volume was released in November 2007. Volume 1 includes an eclectic mix of primarily vocal genres, while Volume 2 offers recordings of diverse styles of fiddling from throughout the state. The tracks, which were taken from archival, home, and field recordings, as well as 78 rpm discs, LPs, contemporary CDs, and new