

RED CLAY RAMBLERS. One of the fundamental aspects of American traditional music is that the tradition itself is one of innovation. In that sense, much more than in the use of acoustic instruments and "old-timey" source material, the Red Clay Ramblers are an American traditional band. Since 1974, each of their albums (as well as their performances) has incorporated new and radical experiments within the general framework of American music. This in itself would make them interesting, but what is even more exciting and musically powerful is the consistent high quality of material, performance, arrangement, and tremendous sense of joy and exuberance present in their work.

The Red Clay Ramblers (With Fiddlin' Al McCantless) (Flying Fish) Their first album, and the one that fits best their usual "old-timey" categorization. Fiddler Bill Hicks plays securely in the fine tradition of mentor Tommy Jarrell, especially on "Durang's Hornpipe," "Ducks on the Pond," and "Miller's Reel," and some of Tommy Thompson's finest banjo playing is on this LP—on "Boogerboo" for instance. Thompson's clawhammer style is distinctive, and on this record one can really hear the traditional underpinnings of the current evolution of his playing.

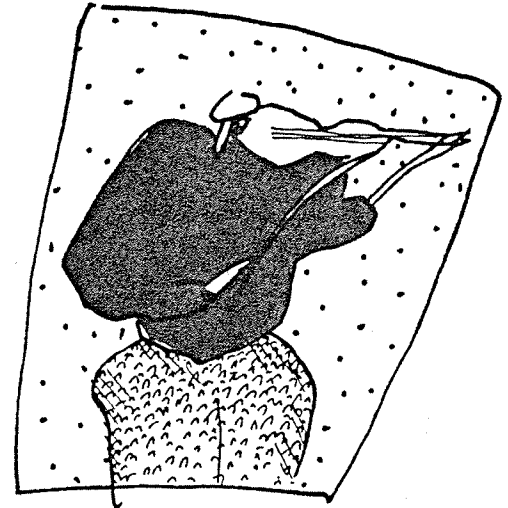
Stolen Love (Flying Fish) In many ways, this album establishes what would become the archetypal Ramblers style—that strange hybrid that sets them apart from so many other acoustic bands. Some fine "straightforward" fiddle tunes (played in the old rousing unison style—fiddle, banjo, and mandolin all playing the tune together!), popular novelty tunes ("She's Been After Man Ever Since"), and a collection of wildly eclectic but surprisingly successful experiments. "Parting Hand," from the Sacred Harp, is sung faithfully from the notation, but gains a new freshness from the fine vocal blend of Craver, Thompson, and Watson. "Wind and Rain" is an excellent blend of sensitive accompaniment and clear, honest vocals, as is the version of the great Childe ballad "Golden Vanity." Mike Craver's first solo effort, "Keep the Homes Fires Burning," is a touching WWI tune that foreshadows his magnificent later solos, and his piano accompaniment on old fiddle tune standards like "Forked Deer" is sensitive enough that we don't even notice he's playing bluegrass piano! My favorite tune on this record is the exuberant "Kingdom Coming (Year of Jubalo)," a song with a familiar tune about the emancipation of the slaves, featuring mandolinist Jim Watson's high clear tenor on top of the joyful harmonies.

Twisted Laurel (Flying Fish) Recorded in 1976, this album represents a real breakthrough for the group, coalescing the innovations and experiments of the previous two into an ensemble style which clearly expresses the band's unique hybrid vision. Partly this is due to the addition of bassist/trumpeter/pennywhistler Jack Herrick, who allows the band to stretch out further into jazz, blues, and other genres. Mike Craver comes into his own on this album, with two exquisitely crafted versions of rather obscure Carter Family tunes—"Will You Miss Me" and "Fifty Miles of Elbow Room." On the former, Craver accompanies

himself on solo guitar, and the latter seems to be a particularly evocative expression of the American view of heaven. The album still has a strong traditional basis ("When Bacon Was Scarce," "Rockingham Cindy") with Hicks improving all the time as a fiddler. But the real innovations occur in the new arrangements of tunes like "Mississippi Delta Blues" and "Beale Street Blues." Vocally and instrumentally these cuts are an important adventure in American music—in the fine tradition of eclectic fusions by people like Ry Cooder, Bob Wills, Anthony Braxton, and so many others. The "hit" of this album is the infectious "The Ace," a hilarious and well-performed saga of unrequited love replete with trumpets and kazoo chorus, and one of the most memorable hooks I've heard ("You're a hot dog ain't you now?/You're the bulldog's big bow-wow"). *Twisted Laurel* is important in its fabrication of an elegant basic mold (maybe even formula)—a couple of fiddle tunes, a few Craver tunes, some jazz/blues, and some Thompson originals.

Merchant's Lunch (Flying Fish) Kind of a "sequel" to *Twisted Laurel* and every bit as interesting. The title cut is in the spirit of "The Ace," with Herrick's trumpet sounding like an entire horn section at times. Craver's solo, an old jazz tune called "Melanchony," is appealing, but it's difficult to top his previous efforts. The highlights of this LP are the traditional tunes (a new version of "Forked Deer" and some astounding up-tempo triple instrument playing on "Rabbit in the Pea Patch," "Kildare's Fancy," and others), and the emergence of Jim Watson on tunes like "Milwaukee Blues," both as a vocal standout and as one of the most intelligent mandolin soloists around. Another treat on this record is the strange *a cappella* arrangement of the old Stanley Bros. chestnut "Daniel Prayed." In this, the Craver/Watson/Thompson (tenor/lead/baritone) vocal trio shines, with Craver singing somewhere in the stratosphere, but in melodic unison with the bass. It sounds like a strange mix between bluegrass, gospel, and medieval organum, and presages some of their later vocal experiments (like the Carter Family album, or the tune "Hard Times").

Chuckin' the Frizz (Flying Fish) Having heard the Ramblers several times in performance, this album seems to me to be an important one in understanding their music. It's rough and jubilant, and captures the original intent of the band—live string band music, in a way that the polish of the previous albums does not. There are some superb performances. The two Mike Craver tunes (the second written by Thompson), "Thoroughly African Man" and "Baby Grand," are two joyous and clever tributes to American music. The latter is a sketch of Fats Waller in the Brooklyn jail, setting up housekeeping with a millionaire who buys him a baby grand. "African Man" is about a genetically misplaced white man: "My name is Wayne/ I sell records at Zayre/I'm just another corny accordion player. . . My heart's in Capetown ridin' range/ My butt's in Boston, makin' change." Hicks' wonderfully appropriate "Play 'Rocky Top' (Or I'll Punch Your Lights Out)" should become the bluegrass band unofficial theme song. The rest of the album is equally effective: "Cabin Home" features what is perhaps Watson's finest solo playing, and the Ramblers' version of Bill Boyd's classic "Wahoo, Wahoo" is certainly the definitive revival of that tune. A must.



Debbie McClatchy with the Red Clay Ramblers (Innisfree/Green Linnet, 70 Turner Hill Rd., New Canaan, CT 06840) The Ramblers backing one of the finest singers on the folk circuit today. It's more McClatchy's album than the Ramblers, but nonetheless it is a wonderful collection of original and little known folk material (mostly Irish or Californian (!)). Craver and Hicks co-wrote the only tune on this record that gets any airplay—another novelty tune—"You Were Only F-bleep-ing, While I was Making Love." The LP was recorded around the time that the Ramblers were in NYC co-starring in the off-Broadway show *Diamond Studs*—which I was fortunate enough to see, but a record I've been unable to locate.

Hard Times (Flying Fish) Their newest and, with certain notable exceptions, my least favorite. Clay Buckner, on fiddle and some lead vocals, has been added to the group, although Bill Hicks is still listed as a guest artist. Buckner is a fine fiddler and singer, with a "rougher" sound and style than Hicks. He does a nice job on the humorous "Chicken" (from Uncle Dave Macon), and also on "Fiddler's Dram." A new version of "Wind and Rain," a nice old jazz tune called "Chesapeake Bay," a cover of the old Homer and Jethro "I Crept into the Crypt," and a sparsely accompanied Sacred Harp tune ("Long Time Traveling") are the more interesting tunes on the record. Sadly, I find the Thompson and Craver tunes the weakest, although Craver deserves considerable credit for the experimental nature of tunes like "Matinee Idol" and "Three Guys," a fantasy about Byron, Shelley, and Goethe. The version of Stephen Foster's little known "Hard Times" is one of the most moving performances of any kind I've ever heard. The harmonies (Craver, Watson, Thompson), instrumental solos (Hicks' trumpet, fiddle, pennywhistle) and overall arrangement are more than superb—they turn a little known but surprisingly elegant Foster tune into a nearly mystical musical statement. Musicologists and academics involved in the current Foster revival should pay some attention to this cut for a more faithful and sensitive performance of Foster's work would be difficult to imagine.

Meeting in the Air—Songs of the Carter Family (Flying Fish) Mike Craver, Tommy Thompson, Jim Watson of the Ramblers. Simply put, this is one of the most beautiful and listenable albums I own. These trio versions of Carter Family tunes are sensitive, interesting, and faithful to the original mood. The accompaniments—on guitars, tenor guitars, banjo, and autoharp—are in the Carter Family style, but quite intricate and innovative at the same time. Each song, and most of them are relatively obscure tunes, should become a kind of definitive recording. Craver's solo version of "Are You Tired Of Me My Darling" can bring tears to your eyes, and "Meeting in the Air" and "I Ain't Gonna Work Tomorrow" are among the finest trio singing they've done. This album is a treasure—a historical and musical document of the highest order.—Larry Polansky