

"S" OP. Sept. - Oct. 1983

SPLIT by Rich Noll

One day four years ago while cruising through Southern PA on a record hunting excursion, I happened upon a large junky place called the Mason-Dixon Flea Market. Scrambling over mounds of just about everything, I finally found the records way in the back. The records were like everything else, in piles. Well, this one LP made me do a double-take. It was *Jungle Rot* by George Brigman on Solid Records from Baltimore. The cover featured three young long-haired guys posing in what once passed as a house. The only one in focus, George, I assumed, stood there with a cigarette dangling from his mouth, his arms folded, looking rather defiant as if saying "I dare you to buy this!" Looking at the song titles—"Jungle Rot," "Don't Bother Me," "DMT," "Schoolgirl," etc., I thought it would be well worth my 50¢.

When I got home and listened to it, I was stunned. Here was a drugged-out mixture of blues, boogie, raunch, and garage band rock'n roll like I had never heard. I looked again at the back cover—"Baltimore, MD 1975"! God, I thought, this guy's great! The songs all seemed to be quite unusual hybrids—sort of like the Stooges-meet-John Mayall. The garage flavor stemmed from the rather poor quality recording—everything was drowned in echo. Still, this Brigman guy was obviously quite a guitar player and songwriter. These tunes really stuck in my head. Checking around Baltimore record shops, I could find nothing out about Brigman or Solid Records. Finally, one day at a convention, I ran into a guy who said he had a great 45 on Solid by a band called Split which featured George Brigman. Not long after that I did get a chance to hear the "Blowin Smoke" 45 and again was enthralled by the raunchy mixture of blues and ballsy rock with screaming fuzz guitar and lowdown, dirty vocals. "Shit! Where is this guy now," I wondered. After exhausting all possible avenues of search, I was finally successful in contacting Split's leader, George Brigman, through his publishing company.

What was George up to? Nothing. He told the story of being ripped off by the people who did his album and how he didn't have a band anymore since the recent death of his bass player and close friend, Mitch Mitchell, which really had him down and out. So he was kind of lying low and not doing much of anything musically, but he did play me songs that he recorded before Mitch's death, and they were light-years beyond the primitive, basement sound of his *Jungle Rot* LP. I heard piercingly loud walls of distortion, jagged guitar lines, staggered beats, and instrumentals that screamed "PSYCHEDELIC!" yet at the same time retained a funky air that was missing from the "blow your mind" school of psychedelia. The blues influence was ever-present along with an outrageous disdain for musical convention. It was not a big surprise to hear that George's favorite artists were Captain Beefheart and T.S. McPhee—it shows. As much as I liked George's earlier songs, the new material really seemed to hit home. From quiet, airy songs to ones with over-the-top screaming guitar feedback, the moods created by the band were as diverse as they were exciting. I knew that there was definitely an audience out there for Split's music, so I helped George release a cassette as George Brigman & Split called *I Can Hear the Ants Dancin'* which features some of the songs I heard that day at George's house. Response from both the U.S. and overseas has been good so far, and buoyed by the renewed interest in his music, George has gotten himself back into the swing of things. An album is currently in the works, and a Split song will be on Bona Fide Records' upcoming *Train to Disaster* compilation. *I Can Hear the Ants Dancin'* is available from Solid Records, 10101 Woodlake Drive, Apt. #M, Cockeysville, MD 21030 for \$6.

THE STANLEY BROTHERS

The early music of the Stanley Bros. is among the most beautiful and interesting in all of American traditional music—and presents a fascinating alternative to the more modern, urban conception of bluegrass. The Stanley Bros. primarily played mountain music in a new style, influenced greatly by the innovations of Bill Monroe, but still mountain music. In the earliest recordings, one can still hear Ralph Stanley playing clawhammer banjo rather than the three-fingered Scruggs style that soon became the bluegrass "sound." In this transitional period, perhaps more so than in the early music of Bill Monroe and Jim and Jesse McReynolds, the fusion of Appalachian traditional styles and repertoire with the new urban ensemble tradition is quite clear. This music is a unique glimpse at a wonderful period of innovation in American music.

The Stanley Brothers, Their Original Recordings (Melodeon MLP 7322, a reissue of the original Rich-R-Tone recordings) is the album to listen to. It was their first set of recordings as a band, made around 1946 when not even the Bluegrass Boys had firmly established their particular musical style (which eventually depended in large part on the playing of the young Earl Scruggs). On this album are examples of the wide range of influences and traditions that the Stanley Bros. incorporated so wonderfully. "Little Maggie," perhaps their signature tune, is much closer to mountain music than it is to bluegrass, with its mixolydian harmonies, ringing clawhammer banjo, and haunting fiddle style. That tune has always fascinated me in another respect—containing some of the strangest and most beautiful poetic imagery that I know of in Appalachian music, with verses like:

*Well yonder stands Little Maggie,
A' sitting on the banks of the sea,
With a forty-four around her,
And a banjo on her knee*

Another standout of these recordings is their version of the Bill Monroe classic "Molly and Tenbrooks," actually recorded before the Bluegrass Boys. On this tune, Ralph Stanley has changed to a banjo style much closer to the Scruggs' roll (though not as close as some writers have said), and Carter Stanley's lead singing also shows the influence of Monroe and even Lester Flatt. The remainder of the album is a mixture of gospel songs, honky-tonk numbers, and one or two that might be called bluegrass. What makes this particular record so interesting is that it straddles the transition period so nicely, and contains an almost incredible divergence of playing styles.

For a good listen to the later Stanley Bros., after the style had coalesced a bit more, try to locate *The Stanley Bros. and the Clinch Mountain Boys* (King 615), which has the original versions of several of their later classics, like "How Mountain Girls Can Love," "Clinch Mountain Backstep," and "The Memory of Your Smile." Ralph Stanley is still alive, performing and recording strongly, and any of his recent records are pearls. You might try County Sales (Box 191, Floyd, VA 24091) or Down Home (10341 San Pablo Ave., El Cerrito, CA 94530) if you have trouble finding any of his recordings.—Larry Polansky