

Reid-banjo-mandolin, jawbone; Carol Widder: cello, piano.

Smokey Mokes (Cake Walk and Two Step/Eureka Clog Dance (Primrose and Wests Clog)/Joe Murphy's Jig/Wait for the Wagon/Waggon Jig/Takes the Cake Walk Around/Grey Eagle/St. Louis Tickle (Rag Time Two-Step)/Under the Double Eagle (March)/Old Dan Tucker/Fred Wilsons Clog/Maria Mazurka/All Night Reel/Trouble Begins/Dill Pickles.

Part of the fascinating transformation of the African gourd banjo into a mainstream musical instrument was its elevation into a component of light classical performance ensembles. Between the years immediately following the Civil War and the turn of the century, the banjo became a well-loved parlor instrument, and many communities and colleges boasted banjo societies. In these clubs, elegantly dressed upper-class young men and women performed on a variety of sizes of banjo-like instruments. Wearing swallow-tailed suits, well-groomed groups of serious-faced musicians posed with five string banjos, banjo-mandolins, cello banjos, mandolins, and guitars for group photographs that can still be found in university photo archives. The common labels parlor and classical banjo are not quite accurate, however, since the music wasn't necessarily played in a parlor nor was it actually classical in the sense that we use the word today. Even though, as Karen Linn points out in her history of the banjo in popular culture (*That Half-Barbaric Twang*), some turn-of-the-century banjoists did indeed play selections from Mendelssohn or Chopin, most of the material that banjo orchestras and clubs played came from the wide realm of popular music of the day. As the sheet music of the day shows, banjo clubs performed elaborate arrangements of many forms of popular music: marches, rags, waltzes, schottisches, two-steps, jigs, mazurkas, reels, as well as highly arranged minstrel pieces.

Showcasing virtuoso classical banjoist Clarke Buehling, this recording is a delightful introduction to a largely forgotten world of late 19th-century banjo ensemble music. The pieces, which are arranged with great care, represent many popular American and European dance types and even a well-known minstrel tune by Daniel Emmett ("Old Dan Tucker"). Unlike wildly irregular, improvised southern old-time banjo music, these tunes are formally arranged precision extravaganzas. These selections are masterpieces with quite complex structures made up of many parts, varying rhythms and dramatic transitional bridges that link different musical passages. As the brief but informative liner notes indicate, the music played here comes from a variety of sources published in the later years of the 19th century. Some, such as "Wait for the Wagon," "Grey Eagle," and "Maria Mazurka" are from the pages of popular banjo instructional books such as *Briggs Banjo Instructor*, *The Banjoists Budget*, *Buckleys Guide for the Banjo*, and collections by H. C. Blackmar, S.S. Stewart, and

Frank C. Converse. "Under the Double Eagle" is a march composed by Josef Franz Wagner (1856-1908), the Double Eagle being the symbol of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The raggy "Dill Pickles" was penned by multi-instrumentalist Charles Leslie Johnson who played with a Kansas City mandolin club around the turn of the century.

Throughout the recording Buehling makes use of a variety of banjos of different sizes and shapes and Doug Reid joins him on banjo-mandolin on the cakewalk "Smokey Mokes," "Eureka Clog Dance," and the march, "Under the Double Eagle." Carol Widder's cello provides a satisfying foundation on "Smokey Mokes," "Wait for the Wagon" and "Under the Double Eagle." Also heard are a trumpet (Joe Murpheys Jig/Water Street Reel and Grey Eagle), bones and jawbone (Wait for the Wagon, Old Dan Tucker and All Night Reel/Trouble Begins). Jim Lansford, who is also a terrific old-time fiddler, provides appropriate violin accompaniment on many of the selections.

This is joyous, infectious music that is just about impossible to dislike. The musicianship is outstanding—clearly the result of a life-long fascination with a particular era and genre of music—and the recording quality is crisp. Though it speaks to us today, there is an archaic feel to this music that vividly evokes a particularly vigorous period in American history. In fact, I kept having the feeling that this is the sort of accurate rendition of period music that we do not hear enough of in films that purport to depict nineteenth century public performances and dances. As Buehling notes on his description of "All Night Reel," imagine a sailors' dance hall in a sub-basement of Water Street. Highly recommended.

GAIL GILLESPIE

To order: Skirtlifters, PO Box 744, Fayetteville AR 72702-0744; 501-442-5368

The Skirtlifters
Wait for the Wagon
Skirtlifters CD 1998

Clarke Buehling-5-string banjos, bones, tambourine, vocals; Jim Lansford-violin, mandolin; Kelly Mulholla-guitar; Allan Gibson-C trumpet; Doug

"Dirty Linen"

The Skirtlifters *Wait for the Wagon* (Skirtlifters SL1998 (1996)) There's not a piece on this album written after the late-1800s. This is, for the most part, parlor banjo music, which accounts for the formality of it all — a little disconcerting if, say, you're a Skillet Lickers fan. Nonetheless, there's a lovely crinolene delicacy to it all, a labor of love in unearthing these pieces. And there's no question that all the Skirtlifters can play. Not dry, not academic, it's a little 5" plastic time machine. (CN)

THE BANJO 47-3

England 1998

READING BANJO FESTIVAL
JULY 25th, READING UNIVERSITY
by Chris Davics

Clarke Buehling, who had just arrived from the USA, gave us a fascinating performance of ancient banjo music on an original Bohee smooth arm instrument (possibly a Weaver?). His whole demeanour and rather plaintive singing voice seemed strangely appropriate. Clarke has engaging stage presence, deftly playing through several well-known pieces on his nice old Farland banjo, a type not often encountered on these shores.