

Fly Through the Country. The New Grass Revival, with Sam Bush, Courtney Johnson, Curtis Burch, and John Cowan.
10 selections, vocal and instrumental, stereo.
Flying Fish 016. Flying Fish Records, 3320 N. Halstead, Chicago, Ill. 60657.

Reviewed by James P. Leary

While it is the custom of scholars and critics to erect definitional fences around musical expression, performers often have other ideas. Armed mostly with the traditional acoustic instruments of a bluegrass band, the New Grass Revival sets down 10 tracks which frequently blend Bill Monroe with rock 'n' roll. Unlike previous endeavors in this direction--usually marked by "folk singer" wails, bad song selection, and crass, incongruous playing--this album suggests that its makers both understand and enjoy the idioms from which they draw.

Frequently departing from "high lonesome" vocals toward singing that ranges from country rock to rhythm and blues, the New Grassers simultaneously maintain bluegrass concepts of 2- and 3-part harmony; similarly, strident bluegrass rhythms and standard riffing often serve as jumping-off points for the extended experimental interplay of lead instruments driven by fluid rock bass runs. The thematic content and verse structure of songs also neatly manage a synthesis of true rural expression and bucolic hippy visions.

More specifically: the album contains one straight-ahead bluegrass number ("This Heart of Mine") just to show they've got their chops down, and two bluegrass standards transformed by savage Otis Redding interpretations ("Good Woman's Love") and rock 'n' roll rhythmic variation ("Doin' My Time"). "Skippin' in the Mississippi Dew" is a tightly arranged piece interjecting Sam Bush's dual-tracked fiddling of "Mississippi Sawyer" between silly lyrics by John Hartford.

There is an obligatory mythic train song ("All Night Train"), a sad lament about red eyes in smoke, unrequited love, lonesome fantasies, and drink ("The Dancer"), and a celebration of brief romantic love which was good 'til it burnt out ("Glory"). "When She Made Laughter Easy," dominated by the dobro and a rippling piano, is a pretty country-rocker stylistically reminiscent of southern California songster Jackson Browne. Browne's "These Days," which was first recorded by the Velvet Underground's vacuum-cleaner voiced chanteuse Nico, here appears in a more natural musical habitat.

The album's tour-de-force is the title song "Fly Through the Country." Penned by Jim Webb (is this the same Jim Webb noted for "Wichita Lineman," "By the Time I Get to Phoenix," "MacArthur Park," and the memorable "I Have Been Seeking P.F. Sloan?"), the tune features an eerie slide mandolin complementing John Cowan's inspired expression of a desire to actually "fly through the country" via some unnamed power. Like the rest of the album, it is a mixture of solid instrumentation, witty eclecticism, and raw excitement.