

**Americana Concert:** Alan Jabbour & Stephen Wade at the Library of Congress (Patuxent CD-308)

Review by Ken Perlman

The great Appalachian-style fiddler Alan Jabbour passed away in January 2017, leaving behind a tremendous musical legacy. The tunes he collected in the mid-1960s from Henry Reed (1884-1968) and other roots fiddlers—engagingly performed by his group, the Hollow Rock String Band and also by such “spin-off” groups from the Chapel Hill, NC area as the Fuzzy Mountain String Band and the Red Clay Ramblers—essentially launched the old-time music revival. He brought the music of the Hammons Family of Pocahontas County, WV to the attention of the world, and served for 23 years as director of the Folklife Division of the Library of Congress. Along the way he released perhaps a half dozen full-length audio projects that prominently featured his own playing—two LPs with the Hollow Rock String Band (one on Kanawha Records, the other on Rounder), an LP with banjoist Tommy Thompson called “*Sandy’s Fancy*,” and three CDs: “*A Henry Reed Reunion*” with Bertram Levy on banjo and James Reed on guitar, “*Southern Summits*” with banjoist Ken Perlman (hey, that’s me!!), and “*You Can’t Beat the Classics*” with me on banjo and Jim Watson on guitar.

Americana Concert was recorded live at an event sponsored by the Library of

## *Santa Anna’s Retreat*

Congress (LOC) at Coolidge Auditorium in 1998 as the concluding offering in a series of live concerts devoted to the violin. Alan was joined throughout by gifted clawhammer banjoist Stephen Wade, who—following Alan’s passing—determined to bring this project to the light of day and managed to accomplish the task in just under a year. In fact, copies were available for sale at the Legacy event held in Alan’s honor at the LOC on the first anniversary of his death.

The recording doesn’t cover new ground in terms of Alan’s recorded repertoire. Nearly every tune on the playlist appears on one or more of the recordings listed above. This said, you can hear Alan’s exquisite fiddling quite a bit more clearly on this project than you can on his first few LPs, and there are at least a few cases—such as *Stony Point*, *Santa Anna’s Retreat* and *Isom Waltz*—where the versions here are the best ones he ever recorded. Alan’s performances are further enhanced by Wade’s strong, innovative—and often enchanting—banjo playing, which graces 11 of the 15 musical offerings (Stephen plays guitar accompaniment on two cuts, and Alan also offers two fiddle solos).

Stephen’s musical relationship with Alan got underway in 1983, and his banjo playing in effect serves as a bridge between Alan’s early musical period—when he often worked with banjoist Tommy Thompson—and the period after 2000 when his most frequent banjo collaborator was the writer of this column. Stephen had moved to Washington DC in 1981 from his native Chicago in order to perform the one-man show he developed called *Banjo Dancing*,

which was originally booked at Arena Stage for three weeks but would run there for a decade. He was already familiar with the early Hollow Rock recordings, and was so impressed by “*Sandy’s Fancy*” that he went out and learned just about every tune on the album. He encountered Alan around DC and was soon regularly invited to the latter’s home for social evenings and picking sessions. By the mid-80s the two of them had worked up a repertory and began performing together around Washington at concerts and other events, many of which were sponsored either by the LOC and other government agencies or by politicians such as former senators Patrick Leahy of Vermont and Robert Byrd of Virginia. They also appeared together in two television documentaries, including one written by Stephen called “*Catching the Music*.”

Although Stephen’s initial plan was to emulate his good friend Tommy Thompson’s accompaniment style, he soon got re-directed. Essentially, what Tommy told him was, “Don’t watch me, just pay attention to the fiddler.” Stephen began to find his own way and discovered that Alan was not only comfortable with his musical instincts but was also highly encouraging of his penchant for invention and experimentation. Alan’s attitude on this is quoted by Stephen in the booklet that accompanies the project: “the fiddle feeds the banjo... [allowing] the banjo to fill the creative spaces” (as an aside, I can report that Alan pretty much expressed the same sentiments to me on several occasions, especially in the early going when I wasn’t quite sure how he felt about my melodic approach).

The highly varied approach to banjo

“seconding” that Stephen ultimately developed is vividly represented on this CD. There is no particular formula, but several distinct strategies can be discerned. Among them are note-for-note melody (or near-melody), playing counter-melody or close harmony, taking the melody or harmony part up an octave (often by barring partially across the twelfth fret), and using different chord “voicings” (shapes) and partial chords to vary the harmonic atmosphere.

As Stephen puts it, he never fully planned any given performance, but would draw from his bag of tricks, exploring as the atmosphere of the tune dictated and often “inventing” as the tune progressed. The banjo converges with the fiddle and then departs to go its own direction, recedes and shifts as it creates different textures.

One particularly important aspect of this project is that Alan’s often fascinating introductory remarks for each tune are preserved here for posterity. Alan was a highly knowledgeable folklorist and engaging story teller, and he usually offered thought-provoking observations on the music and the culture that produced them. In the introduction to *Shootin’ Creek*, for example, in addition to telling us where the creek is and that it once featured prominently in the local moonshining industry, he offers the following analysis:

“This is one of a number of tunes that commemorate creeks and rivers in the Upper South, and after I had learned 15 or 20 of them I thought, “Wow, what’s going on here?...”

[I realized] this was their network that connected them to the world, [that] they saw the world as a network of creeks and rivers and they related everything to them. So what more appropriate than to name fiddle tunes for them.”

Stephen made the very wise decision to put each verbal intro on a separate track from the music that follows. This way, if the mood strikes you (or if you’ve learned all the blurbs by heart) you can listen just to the music simply by pressing or clicking on the track-advance button.

To sum up, *Americana Concert* is an excellent project preserving the work of two great musicians, and deserves a place in the collection of every old-time music, fiddling, and banjo enthusiast. Kudos to Stephen Wade for taking the time and energy to save this historic performance from oblivion.

Accompanying this review is a tab for Stephen’s note-for-note version of the haunting *Santa Anna’s Retreat*, a tune that Alan collected from Henry Reed, who in turn learned it from Quince Dillion, a local fiddler who was old enough to have served as a fifer in the US Army during in the Mexican War (1846-48). Dillion had told Reed that the tune was played as a retreat march by Mexican troops under the command of Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna (1794-1876). In his recorded remarks, Alan expresses skepticism of this claim because the tune is ultimately of Irish provenance; he later learned, however, that there was indeed a contingent of Irish emigres at the time in the Mexican Army. So perhaps...

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*Editor’s note:* Some other recordings by Stephen Wade include *Across the Amerikee* (Smithsonian Folkways, 2017), *Banjo Diary* (S/F, 2012), *Dancing in the Parlor* (County, 1997), and *Dancing Home* (Flying Fish, 1990). His most recent book is *The Beautiful Music All Around Us: Field Recordings and the American Experience* (U. of Ill. Press).