

The Stonemans: Patsy, Donna, and Roni



Patuxent CD 183

Patsy Stoneman, autoharp, jaw harp, vocals; Donna Stoneman, mandolin, vocals; Roni Stoneman, banjo, vocals; Nate Grower, fiddle; Jeremy Stephens, guitar; Stu Geisbert, bass; Merl Johnson, second fiddle; Tom Mindte, vocals.

Sinking of the Titanic / Remember the Poor Tramp Has To Live / Scotty's Bow / The Birds are Returning / Ruby / House of the Lord / Tell My Mother I Will Meet Her / I Forgot More than You'll Ever Know / This Little Light of Mine / Shackles and Chains / Barney McCoy / I Feel Like Traveling On / Prayers and Pinto Beans.

As most of you know, Ernest V. ("Pop") Stoneman (1893 - 1968) was one of the most influential of the pioneer old-time music recording artists. He recorded over 250 sides from 1924-1934, both solo and with other musicians from the Galax area. When the Great Depression ruined the 78 rpm record market, he moved his growing family to Maryland, outside Washington, DC, where he worked as a carpenter. Along the way, he formed a family band that, by 1947, had grown to 13 children plus parents Ernest and Hattie. During the second Golden Age of the 1960s, the band became the Stonemans, slimmed down to four or five members who played music that bridged old-time, bluegrass, and country-Western, featuring spectacularly flashy instrumentals by Scotty on fiddle, Donna on mandolin, and Roni on banjo. Singing was always a big part of the act, however, and Pop came along on the shows, sat on stage with his autoharp, and sang a song or two from his 1920s repertoire on each set.

Patsy (now in her eighties) and Donna and Roni (in their seventies) are the only three members of the Stoneman band who are still alive, but I'm happy to report that this 2008 CD shows they're still in good voice and showing no signs of arthritis. Many of the songs follow the bluegrass tradition of featuring solos on mandolin, banjo, or fiddle. Appropriately, the most flashy bluegrass solos are also on the album's only instrumental,

"Scotty's Bow," a tribute to Scotty Stoneman composed by Donna.

Five of the songs are covers of Pop Stoneman songs. His singing style was straightforward and, well, earnest. Patsy performs them pretty much the way he did them, such as on "The Sinking of the Titanic," the first song Ernest recorded. Pop certainly would have appreciated the addition of trio voices in the chorus. I'm glad that Patsy revived "Barney McCoy," one of my favorite Ernest Stoneman/Eck Dunford songs. The only Pop Stoneman song that doesn't closely follow the original is "The Poor Tramp Has To Live," which Roni sings with a touch of Nashville influence. That influence works very well, though, when she sings "Ruby," "Shackles and Chains," and "I Forgot More Than You'll Ever Know" in a duet with Donna.

Donna's religious background is represented by her singing "House of the Lord" (her own composition), as well as on "I Feel Like Traveling On" and a rousing tent-revival rendition of "This Little Light of Mine," which also gains a fine rhythm from Patsy's jaw harp playing.

The album ends with Patsy's autobiographical composition about life as a Stoneman, "Prayers and Pinto Beans." It's only a brief summary of the whole story, however, which is presented more fully in Ivan Tribe's *The Stonemans: An Appalachian Family and the Music That Shaped Their Lives*. (University of Illinois Press, 1993). Pop, who did such a fine job of instilling music into his family, would not be surprised by this new CD. He would certainly approve, as do I.

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