

Reviews

Tatiana Hargreaves Started Off to Ramble



Patuxent CD 186

Tatiana Hargreaves, fiddle, banjo, vocals; Alex Hargreaves, fiddle, mandolin; Sarah Jarosz, mandolin, banjo, vocals; Danny Knicely, guitar; Bruce Molsky, fiddle, banjo, guitar; Mark Schatz, bass

Raleigh and Spencer - Dusty Miller / Grub Springs / Say Darling Say / Pretty Saro / Walk Along John to Kansas / She Left Me Standing on the Mountain / The Demon's Lament - Sugar Babe / Shaking Down the Acorns / Lord Ellie / Waverly / Ginseng Sullivan / Margaret Randolph's Waltz / Married Man's Blues / Foreign Lander / Rocky Pallet

It was a dark and stormy night—there wasn't any other kind at Clifftop 2009—and about 500 people were crammed into the hot, sticky, big room at the Chestnut Lodge to hear the fiddle and banjo finals. At the end of the evening, Clifftop had its youngest first-place fiddle winner ever, and only the second woman champion: Tatiana Hargreaves, whose debut CD is reviewed here. So even before hearing this album, I knew she was a great contest fiddler.

There is a big difference between contest fiddling and good Appalachian or Midwest fiddling. She can do both. This CD features mostly the latter; there are tunes from as far west as Arizona (Ken Kartchner's "Walk Along John to Kansas"), as far east as Toast, North Carolina (Tommy Jarrell's "Raleigh and Spencer"), and south to Mississippi (John Alexander Brown's "Dusty Miller" and John Hatcher's "Grub Springs"), with a stop in the Ozarks (Art Galbraith's "Waverly"), and lots of points in between, including her own head—there's a haunting slow air which she titled "The Daemon's Lament." Of all these, my personal favorite was Kartchner's deceptively simple tune, played in cross-A tuning with a deep low A (as you can get when you play a five-string fiddle) in a hard-driving way.

What I had not expected was the strength of Tatiana's singing. Her clear, unaffected voice reminded me strongly of Price Goodson, who was 12 when he recorded those few sides with DaCosta Woltz's Southern Broadcasters. She can sing a sad song, such as "Pretty Saro," tell a story, as with Norman Blake's composition "Ginseng Sullivan," and blend with Sarah Jarosz for two-part harmony in "Married Man's Blues" and "Standing on the Mountain," or with Sarah and Emma Beaton for trios "Lord Ellie" and "Sugar Babe."

She assembled some excellent musicians to play with her, including Bruce Molsky (fiddle, banjo, guitar), Danny Knicely (guitar), Mark Schatz (bass), Sarah Jarosz (mandolin and banjo), Emma Beaton (cello), and Alex Hargreaves (fiddle). Not everybody plays on all cuts: "Grub Springs" is a fine fiddle-banjo duet with Bruce, and "Pretty Saro" is just Tatiana and Mark Schatz on bowed bass.

Malcolm Gladwell believes that it takes a minimum of ten thousand hours to get really good at anything. Tatiana started at age four, taking Suzuki violin lessons from her mother, and quickly learned to pick up fiddle tunes by ear. Her family obviously had a pretty good collection of CDs from revival bands (for example, her "Pretty Saro" was very close to Big Hoedown's version, as she states in the liner notes), and sent her to fiddle camps, where she made such friends as Brittany Haas and Bruce Molsky. Bruce in particular has encouraged her to listen to more source recordings.

The closer she gets to a source recording, the more I enjoy her playing. Edden Hammons' "Shaking Down the Acorns" was turned into a two-fiddle duet with her brother Alex. Hammons' West Virginia bowing was completely lost in a jiggle-bow style which just didn't work for me. Similarly, the Skillet Lickers' "Rocky Pallet" didn't even follow their chords in the B part (did I really cite Riley Puckett as a source for the "right chords?"), and the rhythm and pulse of the C part were changed for the worse. In contrast, tunes such as "Grub Springs," "Waverly," and the already-mentioned "Walk Along John to Kansas" seemed much closer in feeling, melody, and bowing to the originals. The liner notes were frustrating at times; sometimes she gives her source and other times she simply says, as for "Sugar Babe," "The song is one that I have been singing and playing with Emma and Sarah for a while. I am glad we have finally

recorded it together." What would be helpful would be a source. It took some days of Deep Thought before I was able to identify the first time I heard the melody—on a 50-year-old Elektra LP by Erik Darling, who called it "Swannanoa Tunnel." Source, or common ancestor?

I suspect that over the next five or six years, as she listens to more and more of the old 78s and original recordings and integrates older fiddlers' playing style into hers, that her own style (styles?) will change. It will be a great deal of fun to hear this happening. In the meantime, if you want to argue with me, you're going to have to buy a copy of this CD and listen to it.

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