THE STANLEY BROTHERS

The early music of the Stanley Bros. is among the most beautiful and interesting in all of American traditional music—and presents a fascinating alternative to the more modern, urban conception of bluegrass. The Stanley Bros. primarily played mountain music in a new style, influenced greatly by the innovations of Bill Monroe, but still mountain music. In the earliest recordings, one can still hear Ralph Stanley playing clawhammer banjo rather than the three-fingered Scruggs style that soon became the bluegrass "sound." In this transitional period, perhaps more so than in the early music of Bill Monroe and Jim and Jesse McReynolds, the fusion of Appalachian traditional styles and repertoire with the new urban ensemble tradition is quite clear. This music is a unique glimpse at a wonderful period of innovation in American music.

_The Stanley Brothers, Their Original Recordings_ (Melodeon MLP 7322, a reissue of the original Rich-R-Tone recordings) is the album to listen to. It was their first set of recordings as a band, made around 1946 when not even the Bluegrass Boys had firmly established their particular musical style (which eventually depended in large part on the playing of the young Earl Scruggs). On this album are examples of the wide range of influences and traditions that the Stanley Bros. incorporated so wonderfully. "Little Maggie," perhaps their signature tune, is much closer to mountain music than it is to bluegrass, with its mixolydian harmonies, ringing clawhammer banjo, and haunting fiddle style. That tune has always fascinated me in another respect—containing some of the strangest and most beautiful poetic imagery that I know of in Appalachian music, with verses like:

_Well yonder stands Little Maggie,_
_A sitting on the banks of the sea,_
_With a forty-four around her,_
_And a banjo on her knee_

Another standout of these recordings is their version of the Bill Monroe classic "Molly and Tenbrooks," actually recorded before the Bluegrass Boys. On this tune, Ralph Stanley has changed to a banjo style much closer to the Scruggs' roll (though not as close as some writers have said), and Carter Stanley's lead singing also shows the influence of Monroe and even Lester Flatt. The remainder of the album is a mixture of gospel songs, honky-tonk numbers, and one or two that might be called bluegrass. What makes this particular record so interesting is that it straddles the transition period so nicely, and contains an almost incredible divergence of playing styles.

For a good listen to the later Stanley Bros., after the style had coalesced a bit more, try to locate _The Stanley Bros. and the Clinch Mountain Boys_ (King 615), which has the original versions of several of their later classics, like "How Mountain Girls Can Love," "Clinch Mountain Backstep," and "The Memory of Your Smile." Ralph Stanley is still alive, performing and recording strongly, and any of his recent records are pearls. You might try Country Sales (Box 191, Floyd, VA 24091) or Down Home (10341 San Pablo Ave., El Cerrito, CA 94530) if you have trouble finding any of his recordings.—Larry Polansky

SPLIT by Rich Noll

One day four years ago while cruising through Southern PA on a record hunting excursion, I happened upon a large junky place called the Mason-Dixon Flea Market. Scrambling over mounds of just about everything, I finally found the records way in the back. The records were like everything else, in piles. Well, this one LP made me do a double-take. It was _Jungle Rot_ by George Brigman on Solid Records from Baltimore. The cover featured three young long-haired guys posing in what once passed as a house. The only one in focus, George, I assumed, stood there with a cigarette dangling from his mouth, his arms folded, looking rather defiant as if saying "I dare you to buy this!" Looking at the song titles—"Jungle Rot," "Don’t Bother Me," "DMT," "Schoolgirl," etc., I thought it would be well worth my 50c.

When I got home and listened to it, I was stunned. Here was a drugged out mixture of blues, boogie, raunch, and garage band rock’n roll like I had never heard. I looked again at the back cover—"Baltimore, MD 1975!" God, I thought, this guy’s great! The songs all seemed to be quite unusual hybrids—sort of like the Stooges-meet-John Mayall. The garage flavor stemmed from the rather poor quality recording—everything was drowned in echo. Still, this Brigman guy was obviously quite a guitar player and songwriter. These tunes really stuck in my head.

Checking around Baltimore record shops, I could find nothing out about Brigman or Solid Records. Finally, one day at a convention, I ran into a guy who said he had a great 45 on Solid by a band called Split which featured George Brigman. Not long after that I did get a chance to hear the "Blowin Smoke" 45 and again was enthralled by the raunchy mixture of blues and ballys rock with screaming fuzz guitar and lowdown, dirty vocals. "Shit! Where is this guy now?" I wondered. After exhausting all possible avenues of search, I was finally successful in contacting Split’s leader, George Brigman, through his publishing company.

What was George up to? Nothing. He told me about the feeling of being ripped off by the people who did his album and how he didn’t have a band anymore since the recent death of his bass player and close friend, Mitch Mitchell, which really had him down and out. So he was kind of laying low and not doing much of anything musically, but he did play me songs that he recorded before Mitch’s death, and they were light-years beyond the primitive, basement sound of his _Jungle Rot_ LP. I heard piercingly loud walls of distortion, jagged guitar lines, staggered beats, and instruments that screamed "PSYCHEDELIC!" yet at the same time retained a funky air that was missing from the "blow your mind" school of psychedelia. The blues influence was ever-present along with an outrageous disdain for musical convention. It was not a big surprise to hear that George's favorite artists were Captain Beefheart and T.S. McPhee—it shows. As much as I liked George’s earlier songs, the new material really seemed to hit home. From quiet, airy songs to ones with over-the-top screaming guitar feedback, the moods created by the band were as diverse as they were exciting. I knew that there was definitely an audience out there for Split’s music, so I helped George release a cassette as George Brigman & Split called _I Can Hear the Ants Dancin’_ which features some of the songs I heard that day at George’s house. Response from both the U.S. and overseas has been good so far, and buoyed by the renewed interest in his music, George has gotten himself back into the swing of things. An album is currently in the works, and a Split song will be on Bona Fide Records’ upcoming _Train to Disaster_ compilation. _I Can Hear the Ants Dancin’_ is available from Solid Records, 1001 Woodlake Drive, Apt. #M, Cockeysville, MD 21030 for $6.
GARY SCHMIDT
by Larry Polansky

Gary Schmidt is a young composer, playwright; pianist, painter, and country-western songwriter living in Winter Haven, Florida. His works in each of those areas, and taken together as a whole, show a startling degree of inventiveness and a tremendous individuality of artistic expression. As a pianist and composer, he has toured the country with the now defunct New Kanon New Music Ensemble, a group of five musicians/composers who performed American avant-garde music exclusively, but in the last few years Schmidt has been quietly composing and performing occasionally in Central Florida, far from the main "centers" of professional activity (read: hustle) in the United States. This physical isolation has seemed to heighten what is to me the primary strength of his music—a quietness and elegance of form and style which draws deeply from personal experience and belief, and little or not at all from current trend and artistic fashion.

As a "serious" composer, his works tend to be for small chamber ensemble or for piano solo. Two of the most interesting were part of the repertoire of the New Kanon Ensemble—Endings: To Mark and the Monk By the Sea (for flute, contrabass, piano or harp, and guitar); and Piano Variations (on five haiku by this author). Endings... is a long, extremely quiet and lyrical work which reflects Schmidt's profound interest in the visual arts (the Mark in the title is Rothko). It consists almost entirely of aborted, half-finished melodies, and establishes its own very unique contrapuntal, timbral, and harmonic language. The piano variations, which have been performed only by Schmidt (they're quite difficult), are not easily described, for stylistically they have little in common with any music I've heard. Suffice it to say that they are moving, intricate, and deserving of frequent performance and study. Two other chamber works, Four Hesse Songs (piano, flute, violin, two sopranos, and three percussion), and Interpretations of Hesse Poems (alto, alto fl., harp, guitar, viola, violin and percussion) have been performed at the U. of Illinois, but nowhere else—and both of these works not only exhibit Schmidt's prodigious compositional "chops" but also a tremendous instinct for unusual phrasing and orchestration. In these earlier pieces, one hears a definite reference to the works of Morton Feldman, not so much in sonority, but in formal relationships to what might be called visual archetypes. In the last few years, his compositions have in fact been mostly large abstract canvases to be interpreted improvisationally.

Schmidt has also been active in other arts besides composition. As a pianist, first for the American Chamber Players and later for New Kanon, he has given first and important performances of many American works. His musical comedy A Little Getting Used To, about, appropriately enough, a young piano player trying to reconcile his life and work with a straight-laced family and community, has been produced once, and he is the author of several other plays. He is a prolific painter—his works tend to be large windowshades or canvases, although he prefers to keep these private (unless they are for musical performance). But besides his chamber music, the aspect of his work that interests me most is his country music. His songs, like his classical music, are sui generis, and have the intelligence and humor one finds in the works of people like Bob McDill, Guy Clark, and a very few others. One of the most beautiful is a tune called "Deserts of Steel," a haunting ballad about the changing face of America—

"Our fathers' dreams, of wide open spaces,
Were all traded in, for life behind the wheel,
They burned out all traces, of the wild country places,
And turned oceans of grain, into deserts of steel."

At present, recordings and scores are only available from me (c/o Center for Contemporary Music, Mills College, Oakland, CA 94613) or from Schmidt himself (Casa Chica del Soto, 1812 17 St. NW, Winter Haven, FL 33880).
SACRED HARP SINGING
by Larry Polansky

The shape note tradition, having grown directly from the singing school movement and the revolutionary polyphonic music of early American composers like William Billings and Daniel Read, is as much an art tradition as it is a folk movement. Until recently, it was commonly thought that the "psalmody" of composers like Billings, with its complete disregard for the "rules" of European art music, was a primitive attempt at a sophisticated ideal. However, Billings' music, as well as shape note, does not seek to imitate these European models—rather Billings and his contemporaries invented a uniquely American style with some very important musical characteristics. Harmonically, the music of the psalmists and of the Sacred Harpists breaks all the rules about parallel motion, functionality, modulation, etc. What the music does deal with is the integrity of the melodic line—in each of the voice parts. There is little thought given to the vertical "movement," though the pure consonances (fourth, fifth and octave) are most frequent, giving the music its characteristically resonant and straightforward sonority. In Sacred Harp singing, each line of the (usually) four parts has its own independent melody. It's interesting to look at the shape note tune "New Britain" (from the Southern Harmony), which is more commonly known under the title "Amazing Grace." Sung in the original shape note version, with the "tune" in the alto, it is markedly different than the song which gained so much popularity with the folk revival. The soprano, tenor, and even the bass have completely different, though equally important, tunes—all combining to a total sound that expresses a far different musical and social philosophy than that of the European homophonic tradition. Shape note singing is perhaps the musical expression of democracy—everybody gets the tune, though each a different one, and the resultant is the "common good." It is easy to see how later American Carl Ruggles could so strongly adopt his own musical credo of "The strength of the line."

Not only does everybody get the tune in Sacred Harp, but anybody can sing any of the parts at any octave. Amazingly, they all work! In theory class, you'd be told that this was simple "invertible counterpoint," but that's missing the point. What it does is accommodate both range and taste. If you happen to be a big guy with a low voice, but you want to sing the soprano part, it's fine to sing it in your own octave, and in fact some of the most wonderful sounds in the music come from these kinds of alterations.

Much of the Sacred Harp is of a compositional complexity not usually associated with "folk music," tunes like "Rose of Sharon" and other adaptations of the older fuguing pieces. In these more extended works, one can hear a very advanced polyphonic and contrapuntal language, but one that is surprisingly easy to sing. This seems to me to be one of the more appealing aspects of shape note music—that even the most compositionally developed works remain facile for both trained singers and amateurs. Also, since any part is available, the less proficient singers can simply pick an easy part and sing it in their own range! The Sacred Harp is a community art tradition, a setting where children and adults may learn and sing extremely beautiful music in a non-competitive, highly enjoyable, even spiritually uplifting context—and in this way it parallels many of the more avant-garde developments in American music in the last 30 years—like free improvisation, much of rock, and even the recent interest in the gamelan musics of Indonesia. Shape note is an unique indigenous musical, educational, and social heritage.

SELECTED REFERENCES
Readings
Jackson, George Pullen; White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands; Dover, 1965. Jackson's work is one of the first and still most authoritative about the Sacred Harp. The early recordings that he made in the 1930s are among the first and most important.

Hamm, Charles; Music in the New World; Norton, 1983. This new work has an excellent chapter about shape note, as well as a wealth of background information.

McKay, David and Richard Crawford; William Billings of Boston; Princeton U. Press, 1975. This is THE book on Billings, and provides a good background for understanding the classical underpinnings of shape note. (Also, it's one of the most enjoyable books you'll ever read).

Walker, William; The Southern Harmony; (ed. by Glenn Wilcox); Pro Music Americana, 1966. This is the modern edition of the book that's been around since the 1830s, and has had many incarnations. It's still in use as the shape note tune book in many of the regional meetings. Everybody should have one.

Recordings
Fasola Singing; ASCH Mankind Series; AHM 415 (Try through Folkways, 43 W61 St., NYC 10023). Field recording from Mississippi, good introduction.

White Spirituals from The Sacred Harp; New World Records, #245 has the wonderful "I'm A Long Time Travelin," and #255 is an album of Billings, Read, Swan, et. al.)

No amount of reading or recorded listening could ever replace the experience of attending a Sacred Harp or other shape note meeting, and I recommend this highly—certainly it has been one of the most fantastic and inspiring events in my musical experience!