

***Roots Music: An American Journey, 2001.* Compilation
produced by Louisa Hufstader. Rounder Records, CDs (4)
11661-0501-2. Notes by Louisa Hufstader and Scott Billington**

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[See table of contents](#)

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Roots Music: An American Journey, 2001. Compilation produced by Louisa Hufstader. Rounder Records, CDs (4) 11661-0501-2. Notes by Louisa Hufstader and Scott Billington.

This four-CD, 68-track compilation of North American roots musics, released in October of 2001, was just one of several noteworthy traditional music products placed into the market around that time. The year before, the Coen brothers' film *O Brother Where Art Thou?* was a moderate box-office success, and more interestingly, the soundtrack to the film also gained considerable attention. So much so that in May of 2000 a special concert of the soundtrack artists was arranged at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, which itself became the subject of a concert film and soundtrack album. To these events we can add the success of Ken Burns' ambitious PBS documentary series *Jazz*, and the highly-touted reissue of Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* as further evidence that while roots musics have never vanished from the marketplace, they seem to have experienced a renewed caché since the late 1990s.

The Rounder collection under review is one of two CD box sets released in the fall of 2001 which attempt an overview of roots musics from an American perspective. The other collection is *American Roots Music*, a four-CD set from Palm Records, which accompanies the four-part PBS documentary of the same name. The intent of the Palm documentary and box set is historical in a conventional sense, and as a result it is based on older recordings. The Rounder collection takes a different approach, and while there are recordings in this set going back to the 1970s, and while some of the included artists have careers stretching back to the 1920s, the bulk of the material is made up of newer recordings, some intended as traditional-style performances, and some frankly contemporary reinterpretations of the older styles. This decision seems to have been partly philosophical, made in an attempt to show how these traditions are still vibrant and relevant to contemporary musicians, and was also doubtless a business decision: all of the artists in the collection are Rounder artists and all the recordings are drawn from the Rounder catalogue. As a result, the set serves double duty as an introduction and overview of North American roots styles, and also as a kind of celebration of the Rounder label itself.

There are few record labels which could presume to assemble a complete roots music overview exclusively from their own catalogues.

In fact, Rounder is perhaps the only one which could make such an attempt. And it says something about the extraordinary depth of the Rounder catalogue that they have done so with admirable, although not complete, success. Rounder was founded in 1970 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, by three folk music fans: Ken Irwin, Bill Nowlin, and Marian Leighton-Levy. The label began as a venue for traditional rural US musics, and there are now over 3000 titles in the catalogue. Early artists included traditionalists like George Pegram and Norman Blake, but Rounder also embraced stylistic diversity, within a loose definition of “roots” from the start. Many of their early projects were financed by the success of George Thorogood and the Destroyers, one of Rounder’s more rock-oriented acts. Rounder has always devoted energy to both documenting traditional styles and developing new artists, some of whom have become quite noteworthy, for example Alison Krauss, Nanci Griffith, and Great Big Sea. They are also involved in some major historical series, including reissues of Lomax recordings and materials from the Library of Congress Archive of Folk Culture, important recordings of traditional Canadian fiddling, and large collections of recordings by Jelly Roll Morton and Leadbelly. In addition, they maintain a 50-volume anthology of world music, which makes available many important early ethnographic field recordings.

In short, by the 1990s Rounder had come to cover a considerable range of material. Besides musics central to the 1960s folk revival that spawned the label - such as blues, bluegrass, and Anglo-American balladry - Rounder is an important source for recordings of cajun, zydeco, conjunto, and polka, among other traditional and neo-traditional styles. One implication of this is that Rounder, along with a small number of other record labels, does not simply reflect “roots music” as a pre-existing set of cultural practices, but in fact plays a large part in constituting the profile and nature of the genre. Rounder can appear to cover the roots territory with impressive thoroughness partly because the dominance of the label in that market has caused the territory to be shaped in part by Rounder’s vision.

The recordings in this collection can be divided into three groups. There are some which would qualify as “historical” in orientation, either because of the performer in question or because of the context of the recording. The second category contains new recordings by younger artists in which the music and performance style deliberately mirror older performing practices. And finally, there are recordings in a more

deliberately contemporary style. Of course, the “traditional” or “contemporary” nature of any particular recording is as much a matter of stated or implicit intent and self-representation on the part of the performer, as much as a stylistic or contextual trait. A strength of this collection is that such factors are not hidden but rather highlighted. The emphasis throughout is on self-aware perpetuation or transformation of tradition, and the tone of the collection pulls away notably from more naive kinds of authenticity claims, not in a heavy-handed or explicit manner, but in terms of track selection, and the juxtaposition of different stances.

The range of recordings in each category is impressive. Recordings in the “historic” category include southern U.S. African-American fiddling (Joe Thompson, active since the 1920s and recorded here on his eightieth birthday); Georgia Sea Islands gospel (Bessie Jones, born in 1902, recorded here in 1973); Chicago blues (Robert Nighthawk and Carey Bell recorded live on the street at the Maxwell Street Market in 1964), Hawaiian music (the Tau Moe Family, who made their first recordings in the 1920s, recorded here when Tau and Rose Moe were both 80); cowboy ballads (Brownie Ford, born in 1904), cajun (the Balfa Brothers, one of the earliest groups to introduce cajun music to a national audience, recorded here in the mid-1960s); zydeco (Boozoo Chavis); and New Orleans piano (Tufts Washington, one of the great New Orleans pianists, born in 1907). Among the contemporary traditionalists, there are representatives of bluegrass (Hazel Dickens and Alice Gerrard, Suzanne Thomas and the Dry Branch Fire Squad, The Johnson Mountain Boys, Alison Krauss), string band (The Freight Hoppers), cowboy songs (Glenn Ohrlin), cajun (D.L. Menard, Chris Ardoin & Double Clutchin’), zydeco (John and Geno Delafosse, Buckwheat Zydeco), Tex-Mex and Mexican conjunto (Santiago Jimenez, Jr., Los Pregoneros del Puerto), New Orleans piano (James Booker), and Puerto Rican plena (Los Pleneros de la 21).

The boundary between “contemporary traditional” and just “contemporary” is of course a porous one, as is the distinction between “historical” and “non-historical,” whatever that would mean. While the terms are useful for making certain distinctions, a strength of the collection is the manner in which it throws them into question. It does so in many ways, for example by presenting newer recordings of older artists. As well, the collection contains a generous sampling of more recent approaches and genres, including contemporary bluegrass and

string band music (Rice, Rice, Hillman & Pederson performing "Friend Of The Devil," and Bela Fleck's contemporary banjo style); alt-country (Ray Wylie Hubbard, the Tarbox Ramblers); deep soul (The Holmes Brothers); a generous sampling of singer-songwriters (Dave Van Ronk, Tish Hinojosa, Slaid Cleaves, Bill Morrissey); East LA Chicano rock (The Blazers); and the influential African-American female a cappella group Sweet Honey In The Rock.

As the selective lists given above show, the scope of the collection is wide. Besides the genres which are represented with several examples, there are a few which appear in the form of single interesting inclusions. A few striking examples are a cappella harmony singing that simultaneously represents the gospel and doo-wop traditions (The Persuasions, here performing the traditional gospel song "Dry Bones"); New Orleans brass band music (The Rebirth Brass Band); rockabilly (Sleepy Labeef); and klezmer (Klezmer Conservatory Band).

The performances are uniformly good, and often superb. The packaging is elegant and reassuring: matte green cardboard box, and cardboard vinyl-record-style CD sleeves. It makes the collection feel and look good, although durability may be an issue in library or classroom applications. The liner notes are informative but not extravagant. Each artist gets a short biography. Occasionally the songs or genres themselves will be briefly discussed, but this is the exception rather than the rule. If you already know the features and history of each genre, and just need a thumbnail sketch of where an artist fits into their tradition, then these notes are very good. But they wouldn't provide much basic information to less experienced listeners. They do succeed, however, in at least naming the relevant geographical, stylistic, and historical contexts for each recording, and so underscore the range of the collection.

We can assume that sequencing such a diverse collection was a difficult task, and the producers have made some interesting decisions. In general, the first two discs contain more traditional material, and the second two discs are heavier on contemporary styles, although these are blended to a degree throughout. The sequencing often traces interesting relationships between the various styles, regions, and historical periods. For example, the first CD begins with fiddle tunes and bluegrass. After five tracks, a bluegrass gospel song serves as a bridge to some more specifically gospel numbers. After this come some Piedmont and Delta blues selections, then some electric slide guitar

blues. The next track, by the Rebirth Brass Band, serves as a refreshing change of direction, and establishes a New Orleans context which leads into mardi gras music. The first CD closes with a selection of Hawaiian music, and two cowboy ballads. This is an example of the pleasant geographical drift sometimes suggested by the sequencing: from the Southeast to the Delta, with a nod to northern urban offshoots of Delta blues, and then on to New Orleans and Texas, with a few interesting diversions along the way. For listeners familiar with the traditions, this kind of sequencing (which persists across the four CDs) can be very engaging and suggestive. For all listeners, it has the benefit of making the discs easy and entertaining to listen through, because of the fine balance struck between cohesion and variety.

As a final note about the contents of the collection, I should point out that there are a number of noteworthy Canadian contributions, even though the word "American" is prominently featured in the compilation's title, and in its basic premise. Some Canadian artists in the anthology include: Joe Cormier, a French-Acadian fiddler from Cape Breton; The Cash Brothers, a Toronto-based alternative country duo; Peter Cash, also having been the principal songwriter of the Skydiggers; Sarah Harmer, who originally led the Kingston-based Weeping Tile and is now a very successful solo act; and Natalie Macmaster, who became famous in Canada as a Cape Breton fiddler and is now an eclectic Celtic-pop star. For a relatively concise compilation with an American focus, this is a generous sampling of Canadian artists, and it is further evidence of the geographical and stylistic ambitions of the project.

It also raises interesting questions about representation and history-making. Although this anthology is impressive in its scope, it represents only one possible view of an extremely rich and complex territory. By way of criticism, the track selection could be said to be a little heavy on Cajun, bluegrass, and singer-songwriters. The brass band presence could have been expanded slightly, as could the gospel representation, and a wider range of geographical regions for piano players may have been interesting. The complete lack of First People's music is also striking. To a degree, these patterns result from the fact that only Rounder recording artists are included. It is a tribute to Rounder that such a nearly complete overview could be compiled from just one record company, but it is inevitable that there will be gaps.

From an academic and pedagogical point of view, this collection provides some interesting opportunities, although some of these are not entirely consistent with the more superficial stated aims of the compilation. For example, by highlighting the currency of older artists and styles, and by simultaneously asserting that newer developments stand alongside these as equally “roots” in nature, the album presents a complex picture of the creation, perpetuation, and transformation of traditions. It could easily be used to illustrate the complex dynamics of identity politics and authenticities to either an undergraduate or graduate class. However, there is also a degree to which a simpler, monolithic idea of authenticity is lurking in the basic premisses of the collection. “Roots music” is implicitly treated as a single coherent category, a common denominator, even as the diversity of the collection challenges this assumption. Similarly, the inclusion of artists and traditions from Hawaii, Canada, and Mexico draws attention to the plural and changeable nature of “America” as a cultural and geographical locus, and this reading of the material is not altogether discouraged by the liner notes, which almost completely abstain from simplistic or reductionist connotations that would reduce this diverse material into a pseudo-unity. However, despite these admirable traits in the track selection and liner notes, the subtitle of the collection as a whole tells us that this is an “American journey,” in a manner that seems to invite a more monolithic vision. In terms of traditional, stylistically-oriented survey courses, the collection could certainly be used to expose students to a wide range of influential genres, both in their older and more contemporary manifestations. In other words, it can do double duty as an object which questions familiar historical narratives, and one which exemplifies them. And for more casual listeners, the uniformly high quality of the performances and the clever sequencing should lead to a rewarding listening experience and a surprisingly rich introduction to North American vernacular musics.

In short, the marketing and overall presentation of the collection are less subtle and more problematic than the collection itself: a fact which needs to be noted but which doesn’t damage the usefulness of the set in illustrating nuances of history, geography and identity. The album uses and benefits from idea of history and authenticity, but simultaneously situates and relativizes these, not explicitly but simply through the choice of material and juxtaposition of different historical periods, genres and geographical areas. The impression given is of the

coexistence and interaction of diverse historical strata in the present. As a result, the feeling is less of an historical master narrative, and more an exploration of the richness of current roots traditions.

The collection could also provide opportunities to discuss the role of the record label as cultural gatekeeper, and as a key force in the construction of collective identities. Again, this dimension is not hidden but is in fact highlighted in the way the anthology is frankly presented as a collection of recordings from the Rounder catalogue. Clearly, there are other claims being made as well, most notably that Rounder can by itself provide a complete overview of American roots musics, and in fact may be synonymous with these musics. This claim is not as pernicious as it may otherwise have been, because the role of the label in selecting and filtering the material is not hidden. Indeed, it could invite us to consider the degree to which our own sense of the "tradition" has been shaped by a relatively small number of record labels and institutions. Perhaps so little seems to escape the Rounder web because the concept of roots music as a genre has already been so profoundly shaped by the industry of which Rounder is a key part. The last track in the collection is "Ashokan Farewell," a fiddle tune composed in 1982 and which formed the centrepiece of the soundtrack to Ken Burns' *Civil War*. This is a beautiful metaphor for the intertwining to be found between history and the present, tradition and invention, and maybe most interestingly, between industry and the ideas of authenticity it constructs. The tune is indeed a fitting theme for *The Civil War*, and a fitting conclusion for a collection of roots music. It is a tune that evokes powerful feelings of tradition in many listeners. And it is also a new composition not immediately evident as such. It is an example of the reconstruction of tradition in the present, among and between multiple contexts, and in that sense represents the kind of cultural work being done by not only this Rounder anthology, but by many of the recent "roots" projects to which it can be compared.

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