Recordings in Review

by Bill McNeil

THE CELEBRATED RENAISSANCE BAND: Real Live American Music.

Totem Pointe Record TPMI472, 2003. $14.99. CD. Available from Totem Pointe Books Inc/Totem Pointe Music Publishing, P. 0. Box 30776, Columbia, Mo. 65205 or (866) 449-7657 (Toll Free) or books@totempointe.com.

Blues in the Bottle	*Fmnkie and Johnny*
Shady Grove	*Take a Whiff on Me*
The Cuckoo	*Rosin the Bow*
Nine Pound Hammer	*Hold the Woodpile Down*
Asheville Junction	*Old Jimmy Sutton*
Hesitation Blues	*Texan Rangers*
Vibration 2.2	*Can't Feel at Home in This World*

The Celebrated Renaissance Band had its beginnings in the early 1960s when John Mathis, from St. Louis, and Dan William Peek and Jerome Wheeler, both from Versailles, Missouri, decided to try their hand at being professional musicians. Over the years the trio appeared in a variety of bands with various titles, the best known being Finkelstein & Katz, and personnel and gained a following in the Midwest and Northeast due to numerous appearances at fairs, festivals, road houses, college concerts, clubs and coffeehouses. In the mid-1970s they relaxed their schedule but never gave up their interest in music.

This new cd showcases the Celebrated Renaissance Band (hereafter listed as CRB) and a large contingent of performers who had some association with the group over the past forty years.

By dubbing their music "psyhedelic old time music" the band has almost guaranteed that lovers of old-time muse will not particutarly like what they do. Complicating appreciation is the fact that all but three of the cuts were recorded live at Boston University in 1974 and one other was recorded live at a University of Missouri nightspot in 1967. Thus, the listener is treated to such irrelevancies as listening to audience applause and to relevant problems such as sound quality. Thankfully, the audience applause is held to a minimum but sound is another matter. Occasionally, as on "Rosin the Bow" a perfectly good rendition is weakened because the lead singer is virtually inaudible, his vocalizing being buried by the other voices.

On the other hand, some efforts would be improved if the lead was less audible. "Asheville Junction," apparently performed only to give Jerome Wheeler time to replace a broken guitar string, is pitched way too high by the singer, almost as if he intended his performance as a parody. It ruins what is otherwise a very fine song. The CRB's version of the 1887 "Hold the Woodpile Down" is ruined by an overly hammy lead vocal. Finally, the CRB's 1969 "hit" "Vibration 2.2" seems like modern jazz in intent, that is, it is an inside joke played or the performer's, not the audience's, entertainment.

On the positive side there are several worthy cuts, the best being a beautiful version of "Texan Rangers" by Kim Baer, one of the band's newest members. There is also a fine rendition of "Hesitation Blues," "Frankie and Johnny (the Charlie Poole version)," and "Take a Whiff On Me." All the band members are competent musicians and seem to enjoy themselves by displaying a great deal of energy. Generally, though, despite its commendable features this cd seems mainly destined to be a nice souvenir for the CRB's many fans. How well it does outside that circle depends on how broad-minded purchasers are towards efforts to be *avant garde* with old-time music. - *W. K. McNeil*

Above, Peek, left, and Wheeler prepare for a set at D'Agostinos Italian Restaurant in Columbia, Mo. The duo and founding members of The Celebrated Renaissance Band started playing together in the early 1960s. *(Credit: Ed Pfueller photos)*

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