

REVIEW

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BLUEGRASS VIRTUOSOS LET THEIR INSTRUMENTS DO THE SINGING

The Championship Years

Mark O'Connor, Country Music Foundation Records

Rugby Guitar

Wayne Henderson, Flying Fish Records

Mandolin Magic

Evan Marshall, Rounder Records

After dazzling his audiences with three opening tunes at a Strawberry Music Festival outside Yosemite National Park a couple years ago, guitarist Leo Kottke said something to the effect that he knew the audience expected him to say something, that just playing was not sufficient. And that's probably true for even the most ardent fan of any musician who picks up a guitar, mandolin or fiddle. If the picker or fiddler doesn't sing - and some may question whether Kottke does - the person had best at least say hello.

The rules may be different for tapes or compact discs than for live performance. But in any format, an endless run of instrumental music can in time turn into a bluegrass blender for the brain. Therein lies the surprise of three recent recordings - showcases with nary a vocal - for fiddler Mark O'Connor, guitarist Wayne Henderson and mandolin virtuoso **Evan Marshall**.

Strongest of the three are the work of **Marshall** on "Mandolin Magic," a collection of 18 pop songs and classics performed unaccompanied, and selections from 10 years of O'Connor's performances at national fiddling championships in Weiser, Idaho.

The O'Connor recording shows the development of a style that consistently prevents his music from slipping into anything that could be called tiresome. His ability to surprise a listener goes so far beyond the standard fiddler's that it is no wonder he has gone on to remarkable achievements as a soloist and session artist in bluegrass, jazz and rock.

Marshall, whose stylings are less in the bluegrass vein, has the same remarkable gift for extracting sounds from an instrument that sometimes defies credulity. It seems next to impossible at times to imagine that the sound is that of one man playing one mandolin, plucking notes out of gosh-knows-where on his way to mind-boggling versions of Beatles tunes, the theme from "The Godfather" and Hungarian dances.

Henderson does get some help on "Rugby Guitar," which takes its name from Rugby, Va., his home that is noted for its instrument makers and guitarists. Though he's helped by others on guitar, bass, mandolin, banjo and fiddle, it's his playing that shines through on tunes that include a chicken strut number called "Col. Sanders Enters Heaven."

Though his picking is reminiscent in spots of Doc Watson, he uses finger picks only, delivering such standards as "Mockingbird Hill," "Liza Jane" and "I Don't Get Around Much Anymore."

The musical selections on all three recordings are diverse, though the O'Connor collection - due to its contest roots - is geared more to such fiddle standards as "Grey Eagle," "Bill Cheatum" and "Arkansas Traveler."

In excellent liner notes for the O'Connor collection, he refers to the fiddle as his "voice."

With music of the quality on these three recordings, who needs other voices?

- By Dennis Pollock
Bee staff writer