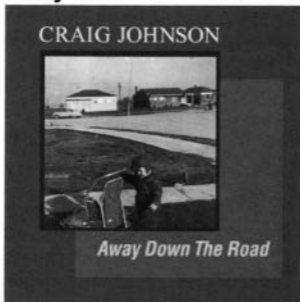


Craig Johnson  
**Away Down the Road**



*5-String Productions 5SP06001*

Muskrat / Rake and Rambling Boy / Sail  
Away, Ladies / Piney Mountains / Six  
Months Ain't Long / Ladies on the Steam-  
boat / Jody / The Vance Song / The  
Little Brown Bull / Cypress Grove / Little  
David / Farewell to West Virginia / Bonnie  
Bess / I'm Going to Georgia / The Rolling  
Mills / New Harmony / Away Down the  
Road / Cairo / Let's Hunt the Horses  
/ Old Paint / Keweenaw Light / Take  
This Hammer

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address contains, at  
one point, the phrase "It is for us, the liv-  
ing, to be dedicated here to the unfinished

work . . ." This, sadly, is an altogether appropriate way to begin a review of Craig Johnson's last CD. Craig left us in December 2009; a tribute to him is in the February-March 2010 *Old-Time Herald*. An even better tribute is the CD that Craig made, giving us over an hour of songs and tunes that he learned or wrote over the years.

This is a solo effort. Craig plays a couple of unaccompanied fiddle tunes (for example, Luther Davis' "Sail Away Ladies"—how many different tunes are out there with that title?—and his own "Farewell to West Virginia") and unaccompanied banjo tunes (Clyde Davenport's "Ladies on the Steamboat" and Edden Hammons' "Let's Hunt the Horses"), but the bulk of the CD is songs with guitar and banjo backup.

Craig had a clear, rich, distinctive tenor voice. Listen to the first cut and hear "Muskrat" (from Virgil Anderson) — is this a children's song, or is it only a children's song on the surface, with deeper interpretations? Riley Puckett is Johnson's source for "Rake and Rambling Boy"—it is a different, more complete story than the one the Carter Family recorded. Another favorite was George Landers' "The Rolling Mills." Here the listener finds the viewpoint switching back and forth between the "drab domestic tragedy" of the protagonist and the "large apocalyptic background" of a town's livelihood disappearing. (Honesty requires admitting that it was the liner notes to the Brandy Snifters' cover of this song that first drew that comparison.)

Speaking of liner notes, Craig wrote excellent liner notes, giving sources, tunings, and background information, all with a little humor mixed in. There's an essay at the start listing some of the people he learned from (including Clyde Davenport, Luther Davis, and Kahle Brewer), and also describing his gratitude to his friends and bandmates.

Another strength of this CD is Craig's original songs. "Piney Mountains" tells, as an unaccompanied ballad, the story of an old logger, told in the first person. The author weaves an incredible amount of background information about logging into the song, and all without the background getting in the way of the story. And all within a metric framework that includes recurring phrases! Other originals include "New Harmony," "Away Down the Road" (another song about a worker's job, this one in Ford's Willow Run plant), and "Keewenaw Light."

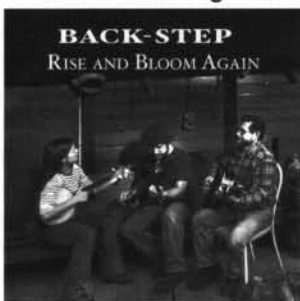
Did I mention blues? Craig included one from Skip James ("Cypress Grove") and one from Spalding and Townsend ("Cairo"), with thumping bass strings on the guitar keeping the rhythm, finger-picking in E. Does it get better than this?

The second best thing we can do to continue Craig Johnson's unfinished work is to cherish those memories of him that we have (which might include buying a copy of this CD); the best thing we can do is to play and sing some more tunes.

PETE PETERSON

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### Back-Step Rise and Bloom Again



BS08001

Nick McMillian, fiddle; Kelley Breiding, banjo and vocals; Chester McMillian, guitar

John Henry / Cider Mill / Forked Deer / Dix Came Through / Backstep Cindy / Fire on the Mountain / Cotton Eyed Joe / Chilly Winds / Breaking up Christmas / Wildwood Flower / Devil's in Roundpeak / Old Reuben / Susannah Gal / John Brown's Dream

Back-Step is a band with a prestigious history, over the years a showcase for the talents of some of North Carolina's great younger-generation musicians, including Greg Hooven, Kirk Sutphin, Bill Mansfield, and founding (and current) member Chester McMillian. Today Back-Step is a family band, featuring Chester's son Nick on fiddle, and Kelley Breiding on banjo. All three live on the old homeplace of Dix Freeman, one of the late luminaries of Round Peak music, who happened to be Nick's grandfather and mentor, and Chester's father-in-law. In its current configuration, Back-Step has won top honors at both Mount Airy and Fiddler's Grove, and continues to be a leading force in contemporary Round Peak music.

Most readers of the *Old-Time Herald* will be well familiar with Chester