

Scruggs commercializes album

by John Dunlap
Staff Writer

He is a short man with greying hair that runs straight back and behind his ears. His wavy hair reaches weakly down to his collar, rather long for a man his age. Wrinkles cut deeply across his forehead when he breaks into a toothy smile. His eyes are tired and deepset yet he still answers questions with a quiet "yes sir".

Earl Scruggs and his sons (The Earl Scruggs Review) were in Chapel Hill this past school year to do a concert in Carmichael Auditorium with Linda Ronstadt. Earl's eyes were heavier than ever as he stepped off the stage and made way for a Linda Ronstadt who was three hours late but insisted on blaming the Carolina basketball team for the delay.

At the time Earl Scruggs was planning his **Anniversary Album—Volume One**, which has just been released recently. Yet he was more interested in talking style than specifics. As tired as he was, he agreed on the spot to talk about himself.

Nearly a half year later, that same talk relates very well to the new album. His description of himself and his music weaves softly into the Anniversary Album and explains a bit of what Earl Scruggs is up to these days.

Yet the latest from Earl Scruggs is strange in that it appears to be more of a commercial venture than anything previously released by this man of incredible ability. To start with, the Columbia people have decided to make an Academy Award sort of production out of the album by gathering a list of present "biggies" to do their thing while Earl does his.

One has to wonder about the choice of people like Dan Fogelberg, Michael



Earl Scruggs

photo by John Dunlap

Murphy, Alvin Lee, the Pointer Sisters, and Loudon Wainwright III, to sing with Earl Scruggs.

Add Joan Baez, Bonnie Bramlet, Johnny Cash, Leonard Cohen, Ramblin Jack Elliott, Doug Kershaw, Loggins and Messina, Roger McGuinn, and Buffy St. Marie and one gets the idea

that he, or she, is listening to an incredibly highly paid choir singing country-rock.

In fact, about four of the ten selections are nothing more than five or six superstars singing rounds and joining in on chorus—which makes for a lot of voices and generally mediocre

music.

As mentioned before, Earl Scruggs said a good many things about his music that apply to the new album. So while the album is reviewed a few of Earl's statements will be reviewed.

"There came a time when I just felt that I had done enough (bluegrass). I had to move on. So I got the group. I changed the style—added a little more spice."

A little more spice is exactly what the first song, Banjo Man, could use. It is written by Jim Messina and sung by Loggins and Messina—which is a simple way of saying that it might as well be on a Loggins and Messina album. But Earl does play some good banjo.

Song four is The Bleaker Street Rag, a fast-paced instrumental that begins to sound like the Earl Scruggs music we all know and love. Billy Joel's piano is especially good as is Earl's banjo.

Bob Dylan's Song To Woody is good. Johnny Cash does a nice bit of singing. In fact, Cash probably does as good a job on the album as anyone, with the obvious exception of Earl Scruggs.

"I had done so much bluegrass that there really wasn't any progress there. It is really like anything in life—you can't stand still. You have to move on. So that is what I had to do."

Scruggs "moved on" too far with "Third Rate Romance", a song totally out of place. A boogie tune featuring The Pointer Sisters, this song just does not work within Scruggs' scope.

Hey Porter does. Written by Johnny Cash and sung by the man in black it is the sort of folksy train song that Cash sings so well and Earl Scruggs can back up so well.

Finally, the song Passing Through is one of the choir-type songs that comes off fairly well. The voices stand out as does the music of Master Earl.

"As far as my change in style and whether or not one can over-electrify, well the answer is you can over-electrify or under-electrify anything. The idea is to keep on trying to find the right combination."

And so we have Earl Scruggs, a friendly quiet sort of man who answers your questions with "yes sir". We have one of the truly fine banjo players of our times. Yet we also have an album over-produced and poor in overall scope.

Finally, we have the hope that Earl and his sons will come up with that right combination and make more albums that feature their own fine talents and not those of too many others.

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