

Stephan Michelson's notes to the LP, *Music From The Hills Of Caldwell County* (Physical Records 12-001) 1972:

The Artists

Caldwell County, North Carolina, contained a number of large plantations, as well as small farms, in the mid-nineteenth century. One plantation owner, Alfred Dula, took a slave "wife" after his white wife died, and by her fathered several children to whom he gave his name and his land, now known colloquially as "Dulatown." There are 75 Dulas in the small (52 page) telephone book, plus Doolies and Dooleys (early records often show two or three different spellings for the same person, sometimes in a single document). The clustering of names in the area suggests that the Dula story is not unique: There are more Coffeys than Dulas, for example. For each name both white and black families, in different residential sections, can be found.

Around 1927, Boone and Sallie Reid returned to their home in Caldwell County after a dozen years of growing tobacco in Virginia. Boone was a prodigious musician, playing banjo, guitar, "French harp" (harmonica), fiddle, and anything else at hand. Boone played, Sallie sang, and two children, Cora and Etta, completed the family band on guitars (though all eight Reid children could play instruments). Though they maintained their family and regional musical traditions, they were a worldly family: they owned a radio and an Edison cylinder machine in the 'twenties. (1)

With few large family chains in the small Caldwell County area, many families have become interrelated in several ways. Cora Reid married Theopolis Lacy Phillips in 1931, moving from Johns River to the "six acres more or less" (says the deed) Theopolis had purchased from Avery Dula in 1930. Theopolis' mother Donnie (nee Moore) had a baby sister, Elizabeth, decades younger than Donnie, hence called "Babe." Babe Moore (therefore Theopolis' aunt) married Fred Reid, who was Boone Reid's brother Joe's son, a cousin of Cora Reid Phillips. However, the families were already connected, as Donnie and Babe Moore's mother Mattie had been a Reid, sister of Boone and Joe.

Etta, the youngest of Boone and Sallie Reid's children, married Lee Baker and moved to Morganton. Lee Baker passed away in 1967, after three years of hopeless paralysis, and shortly after one son was killed in Vietnam. The Bakers had nine children in all, including two sets of twins. At 59, Etta Baker is into her 21st year of work for the Skyland Textile Company. Etta is the only performer on this record who lives on a paved road or has running water in her home; and she is the only one to play an electric instrument. She is hoping to join a rock band and travel when she retires from the mill.

Cora and The (soft "th" long "e") never will retire. Still on their farm in Dulatown, they milk the cow, slop the hogs, draw water from the well, feed the chickens, weed the garden, plant and pick vegetables, repair the dog pen, etc., every day. Their only child, Marie, and varying numbers of grandchildren live with them. The comes from a family as musical as the Reids. (2) His father, Lewis, played several instruments and is remembered for his shuffle dancing. The appears here at 72 years old; Cora, at 65.

Babe and Fred Reid (62 and 69) still live near the Johns River, above Collettsville, in semi-retirement. Fred receives a pension for his years of work for the city of Lenoir, seat of Caldwell County.

The Music

The biographical notes will perhaps explain why the music on this record is not distinctly "black." Indeed, black and white hill music are; generally indistinguishable. The Reid and Phillips families mingled freely with country people of all origins (the Reid ancestry includes Indians). (3)

Etta Baker and Babe Reid play guitar with thumb and one finger ("Travis" picking). Cora Phillips plays with thumb and two fingers, The, with thumb and three fingers. The frails the banjo, but Babe, Fred and Etta pick it, all with one finger. The also does "Carter licks" on the banjo? brushing his index finger back and forth across the strings. As a result, Babe's and Etta's playing relies more on their thumbs than do the others'. Etta's beat is heavier, Cora's treble more delicate, and The's playing is less regular, the least thumb oriented. Unlike most players who rely so much on thumb dexterity, Babe and Etta keep their thumbs stiff and bent away from the hand.

Aside from such details, the basic guitar style is often called "Cotton picking" after Elizabeth Cotton (who actually plays a right-handed guitar left-handed, playing the bass with her fingers, the treble with her thumb). It is "traditional" music from the back hills of Western Carolina and identical, as the participants remember it, to that they heard from their grandparents. There is little improvisation: Compare Babe Reid's two renditions of "One Dime Blues," recorded eight years apart, with Etta's version, recorded over 12 years ago, or Cora's version of "John Henry" with Etta's earlier recording. (4) Yet, as Etta Baker demonstrates, the music is readily adapted to electric guitar, and could easily become the basis for new forms of rock music.

1 Although a few "Negroes" did make cylinders, no distinctively black music was ever recorded in this medium. The Reids were copying white music when they learned songs from their phonograph.

2 For those interested in either family trees or racial mixing, the Phillips family is as interesting as the Dulas. The's father was one of four children of Theopolis Phillips and Katy Bell. (One of the four was also named Theopolis, "Uncle The," who married Bessie Dula and named one of their 11 children Theopolis lacy Phillips, Jr.) Katy was white, and Granddaddy The was 1/4 black on his mother's side. Thus the male lineage of the Phillips family before Granddaddy The is white, just as the male lineage in the Dula family until Alfred's children is white. (Indeed, a white Dula lineage from Alfred and his first wife still lives in Caldwell County.) One of The's brothers "joined the white race" as an attorney and judge in Seattle.

3 Needless to say, this free mingling did and still does follow certain social conventions. When Fred Reid visited with Robert Keller, an 85 year old white banjo and autoharp player, the conversation was familiar, but the address was "Mr. Keller" on the one side, "Fred" on the other, though conceivably the age difference was the determining factor.

4 Etta Baker, Theopolis Phillips and Boone Reid appear on Tradition TLP 1007. Cora Phillips says she, too, was recorded by Tradition, but no cuts by her have been released. Ettas version of "Bully of the Town" and "John Henry" are transcribed by Happy Traum in Finger-Picking Styles for Guitar, Oak Publications. Etta's playing is discussed by Robert Gear in Bottleneck .and Open Guitar Tunings: Method, Daisy Rivers (Cambridge), 1975.

The Recordings

Except for two numbers, the original tapes were made by Delta X in July, 1972, on Sony 770 and Uher 4200 recorders. Ampex tape was used at 7 1/2 ips. EV RE-15 microphones were used with the Sony, Sennheiser dynamics with the Uher. The two 1964 recordings of Babe Reid were made by Gene Rosenthal on a Sony 777, with an EV664 microphone. The tapes were re-mixed

to 15 ips masters at the studios of Adelphi Records in 1974, using Sony, Scully, and miscellaneous EQ and other shaping equipment. Engineering by Delta X and Gene Rosenthal.