

THE FARR BROTHERS by MICHAEL MENDELSON

Family Background

Hugh and Karl Farr were members of a large musical family from central Texas. Although they were the only ones in the family to pursue musical careers, Hugh and Karl were joined by their brother Glen for much of their early musical training and performing experience. Thus, the story of "The Farr Brothers" rightfully includes an accounting of Glen's musical history as well as that of Hugh and Karl.

The Farr brothers were born in small agricultural towns in central Texas shortly after the turn of the century: Hugh in Llano in 1903, Glen in San Saba in 1906, and Karl in Rochelle in 1909. Although this region had been visited by the early Spanish explorers, it was not mapped and there were no permanent (white) settlements until the mid-1800s. From this time until the advent of the 20th century, the region underwent major changes, including mining and oil booms, the arrival of the railroad, and the development of large farming and ranching concerns.

The first town to be established in what is now Llano County was Castell, which was founded in 1847. This was followed in 1855 by Llano, which became the county seat in 1856. As so often happened during the period of western expansion, the native Indian population was driven to the point of hostility, and the period from about 1860 until the Packsaddle Mountain Fight of 1873 was marked by fighting between the white settlers and the Indians. In spite of this, and the basically agricultural character of the county, some industry did develop. Salt works, cotton gins, and flour, grist and lumber mills brought some measure of prosperity, but a boom in iron ore mining in the mid-1800s was the major factor in the county's rapid development. Llano's population grew to nearly 7,000 people, and the town became a railroad terminal and regional distribution center. A decline in the boom in the early 1890s, however, meant a decline in the population, and the county returned to a primarily agricultural way of life. As late as 1950, Llano's population was still less than 3,000, and the county was under 5,500.

Neighboring San Saba County has a similar history. It was officially formed in 1856 and the county seat was established in the town of San Saba the following year. Located on the San Saba River and the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railroads, San Saba became an important shipping point for the agricultural products of the region - cattle, sheep, wool, pecans and cotton. The county was, and remains, however, basically rural and agricultural. The town of San Saba had a population of only about 900 people in 1904, two years before Glen Farr was born, and by 1933 the population had risen to only about 2,200.

McCulloch County, in which Rochelle is found, is located in the geographical center of Texas. Although attempts to establish permanent settlements in the area began as early as the late 1840s, Indian troubles allowed the existence of only a few scattered ranches until the 1870s. By 1876 there were enough permanent settlers in the region to necessitate the formation of local government, and the county seat was established in Brady City that year.

Rochelle was founded in 1890 as a supply point for the ranching areas of eastern McCulloch County. The Fort Worth and Rio Grande Railroad reached the town in 1901, and by 1915 the town had a number of businesses and a population of about 500. The population in 1940 was approximately 515 persons.

Even before the birth of Hugh, Glen and Karl, the Farr family had a reputation for music in their part of central Texas. Tom Farr, a native Texan of Irish and Scottish descent, and his wife Hattie, a full-blooded Cherokee, both played fiddle and guitar. Glen, the middle Farr brother notes:

I don't know whether [my grandparents] were musically inclined or not, [but] everybody else in the family played.

Indeed, as the family grew, each of the Farr children in turn took up music. Hugh, Glen and Karl were the last of seven children to be born, but Glen remembers that all of his sisters were musicians. Lila played guitar and mandolin while Winnie, Belle and Maggie not only played, but also taught guitar and piano. Brother-in-law Larken Williams (Maggie's husband) was a fine singer and fiddler, and composed the tune "Texas Crapshooter" which was to become one of Hugh's best known instrumental pieces. Maggie was also the mother of Texas Rose, who worked with W. Lee O'Daniel in Texas during the 1930s.

Although much of Tom Farr's time was spent raising hogs and tending the pecan bayou that he and his father owned near San Saba, he and his family often played for parties and dances. As in many rural areas, parties were a major form of entertainment, and provided a chance for people to visit and relax. Tom, Hattie and the other family members provided the music not only for square and round dances, but for polkas and schottisches as well. Glen remembers his parents teaching the steps to these old-time dances, and then playing the music that went along with the dance. "Bon Ton Schottische" and the "Heel and Toe Polka," tunes which became part of Hugh's fiddle repertoire, were also specific dances which were taught by Tom and Hattie.

However, dancing was not all that Tom Farr taught at parties. A man of firm convictions with a strong hand to back them up, he was strict with his family and with others. He was occasionally called upon to teach other "lessons" as Hugh recalls:

[Tom and Hattie] were playing at the courthouse in San Saba, Texas, when some guys come in and shot the lights out... and my dad packed up to go home, and they weren't going to let him. So there was the darnedest fistfight you ever saw, and my dad whipped all three of the guys. One of them broke a stool bottom chair over his head, but anyhow, he whipped them all. He met them downtown the next day, took them up, made them pay their fine and his too. And that's all on the records in the courthouse in San Saba, Texas.

Performing was not limited to parties and dances. Glen recalls another story which has been handed down through the family that concerns a different type of musical event:

Before Hugh and I and Karl, any of us were born, in Comanche, Texas, my dad and mother, and my oldest sister [Lila] played in a contest against a Mexican string band and defeated them. This would be just before the turn of the century. [They all played] string instruments. The big difference was, there were fifteen of them, against three; my dad on violin, my mother on guitar, and my sister on mandolin.

After the turn of the century, the way of life in Texas, as in the rest of the United States, began to change rapidly. Tom Farr went into the building trade, becoming a "turn-key" builder. As Glen describes the term:

My dad was a builder, what they called a 'turn-key' builder in those days. He did everything. When he got through with the job, he just handed the key, turned the key over to the man, and they moved in.

Being in the construction trade meant that Tom had to go where the work was. A growing population and the discovery of oil created a need for houses, schools and

businesses. During this period the family was constantly moving, thus accounting for the different birthplaces of the three Farr sons. The advent of World War I prompted yet another move as Tom went to work constructing barracks in San Antonio. After the war, the family continued westward, following the oil boom through New Mexico and Arizona, and finally located in California in 1925.

Hugh Farr

Thomas Hubert (Hugh) Farr was born in Llano, Texas. 6 December 1903. The first son born to Tom and Hattie Farr after four daughters, he became a fiddler virtually by fate. When the doctor announced the birth of a boy, Tom, in disbelief, had to check for himself. Upon confirming the fact, he is reported to have commented, "Ah, here's my fiddler!"

Surrounded by music and musicians, Hugh's talent developed quickly and he soon became part of the family band. By age seven he was playing the guitar, accompanying his father at local dances. It was not long, however, until he decided that the fiddle was to be his main instrument:

We had an old dog of a guitar I was seven years old and my dad and I played for dances. He played fiddle and I played guitar... that guitar almost killed my fingers! I'd be setting there playing, and then around one or two o'clock in the morning, I'd start nodding. Imagine, seven-year old kid, and I'd start nodding. Somebody would come up, poke a silver dollar through the sound hole on the guitar, and by the time I got the damned thing out, I was awake. Anyhow, I told my dad, 'This guitar has got to go . . . I just can't play it, it's killing my fingers.' So I says, 'I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to learn to play the Addle and you can play this dog of a guitar!' He says, 'Good! You learn to play fiddle and I'll doggone sure play guitar.' So, one morning about six o'clock, he had on his carpenter overalls and he's about ready to go to work. So I told him, 'If you let me stay home today from school, I'll practice all day on the fiddle.' Well, when he came home that night, I hadn't been out of the room, and I done exactly what I told him I was goin' to do. Every number he and I played for those country dances, I could play it, and I could play it better than he could. And it just tickled my father... So anyhow, I played fiddle for the dances from then on.

Although this may have been a surprise to his dad, Hugh may not have been quite the beginner he let on, for as Glen remembers:

Here's one thing I have never heard Hugh tell anyone. We lived in Rochelle, Texas where Karl was born. My dad always kept his violin laying in the middle of the bed... I don't know what the occasion, but one day, Hugh picked up that violin. Now he was seven years old when this happened, he picked up that violin for thirty-forty seconds, he stopped and said, 'Do you know what that was?' I told him 'Sure,' I knew what it was. And that was the beginning, the first time he picked up a violin that I know of, and I'm reasonably sure it was the first time, and he played a tune well enough that I could tell what it was. And would you believe, it was just a very few weeks after that, that Hugh was playing for dances.

In any event, it was obvious that Hugh possessed a real talent for the fiddle, and he soon replaced his father as the fiddler in the family.

As with most musicians, there were a number of influences on Hugh's playing. Although he is quick to stress that he has never taken a formal lesson in his life, his family, friends, local musicians, phonograph records and the radio all had their effect. Visiting musicians and shows also had an impact on Hugh's

playing. Glen recalls that the legendary Texas fiddler Matt Brown was a childhood hero of the Farr boys:

During our childhood, [Matt Brown] was the most popular violinist, I guess, anywhere in the country. Everybody who played anything, you know, looked up to Matt Brown. He was a middle-aged man when we were kids... I was introduced to Matt Brown [in Breckenridge, Texas] and I felt that I knew him better than I did, because I had listened to so much of his stuff, you know. In all our growing up, childhood to men, I would say that the most requested number, from friends and people that know Hugh, who know what he can play, was the 'Kelley Waltz.' He [Matt Brown] wrote the 'Kelley Waltz.'

However, Hugh was not content playing only traditional music and he soon became impatient with fiddlers who could play only hoedowns:

You take a real hoedown fiddler Nine times out of ten, that's all he plays, but he'll know a thousand of them. I just couldn't go for that; that got next to me. I got so tired of hoedowns and schottisches and stuff.

In fact, contrary to the romantic image of rural dwellers clinging exclusively to old-fashioned music, when Hugh and his brothers played for dances, they were called upon to provide music for not only the older square dances, polkas and schottisches, but for the more modern one-steps and two-steps as well. Fortunately, to help meet this demand and to satisfy his own desires, Hugh found an inspiration that broadened his concept of music:

I used to have asthma as a kid, couldn't sleep too good, so I'd get up. We had an old battery set, where you put the earphones on... I'd slip out at night, my mother and father would still be asleep, I'd turn on that battery radio and listen to the Kansas City Nighthawks every night. I definitely learned say, three or four tunes. One was 'Clarinet Marmalade,' one was 'Dixieland Jazz Band,' the other was 'Sensation'... I still play them.

The Carleton Coon/Joe Sanders Orchestra, nicknamed the Kansas City Nighthawks, broadcast nightly from the Mueblbach Hotel in Kansas City in the early 1920s. They are generally credited with being the first dance orchestra in the United States to broadcast live on a regular basis. As such, they were immensely popular wherever they could be heard. Although they had no fiddle player and definitely were not country, Hugh quickly picked up the idea of playing jazz and adapted it to his own instrument, the violin. Over the years, Hugh became close friends with a number of fine western swing fiddlers such as Bob Wills, Cecil Brower and Jesse Ashlock, but he continues to credit the Nighthawks as his major inspiration.

Hugh, as the oldest of the Farr brothers, was the first to actively pursue a musical career. Glen recalls what may have been Hugh's first tour:

We moved to Breckenridge, Texas in 1919. It was quite an oil town. You could look up almost any time and see a ten thousand barrel oil well coming in, all through the day. When we were in Breckenridge, Hugh took a tour all through west Texas, New Mexico, Arizona . . . I know they went to Douglas, Nogales, Bisbee, all those places. Two or three of Hugh's friends, the Hitson boys [went with him]. Now there were three Hitson brothers, and they all played stringed instruments. Hugh at the time was about seventeen when they took that tour, and in those days, that was a long way out.

The days from early teens until the family moved to California were spent developing musical skills. Glen recalls the years from 1920-1925 when he, Hugh and Karl performed as The Three Farr Brothers. They played a little bit of everything

- waltzes, schottisches, hoedowns and popular tunes. In addition, each played a variety of instruments:

Karl and I both played guitar and mandolin and ukulele, but along about 1922 or 1923, tenor banjo became very popular, and Karl then began playing tenor banjo. We all switched. We all played drums. Of course Hugh played four or five different instruments [including violin, viola, bass, piano and guitar].

As the family moved throughout the southwest following the construction work, the brothers played for dances in oil boomtowns:

For about two years we were in La Mesa [Texas]. Artesia, New Mexico was an oil boomtown, so we moved to Artesia. My dad always moved where the work was. We moved to Artesia, and then Hugh and Karl and I played in what they called 'dance pavilions.' Hope, New Mexico, and Hagerman, Roswell, Artesia and Atoka, we played in all those little towns. Back in that part of the country, there were two places to play music for a dance, and it was always either a barn, a big red born with a hardwood floor in it... or just a dance pavilion set out under the trees. A big floor, seats all around the outside edge. Those were the places we played at.

Tom Farr continued to follow the construction jobs during this time, and in 1925, the family moved to California. One of Hugh's first jobs was helping with the construction of North Hollywood High School. While working this job, he continued to play music:

Well, like I said, when I finished out at North Hollywood High School, I had on my carpenter overalls, I stopped by a place out on Ventura Boulevard at Encino [Mammy's Shack], just stopped by for some cigarettes or something. I asked the guy if he could use a good fiddle player He said, 'Why don't you go home, clean up, get your fiddle, come back and join in?'

Hugh was hired on the spot, and played at Mammy's Shack for about three years - until the bar burned down one night! The jobs freelancing as a musician whetted Hugh's appetite for playing, and he eventually had to make a decision whether to continue the construction work or play music full time. As Hugh relates the moment of decision:

I used to work in the daytime and play at night. My father was a contractor, and I was working with him one time. I just got through shingling a house, you know, the shingles up in the high part, and I had played the night before until 3:00 or 4:00 o'clock in the morning. My dad didn't drive a car, so I had to get up and drive this old Model T and take him to work. Anyhow, I climbed up on the ladder and got my nail apron on, and I was putting on shingles. The sun come out nice and warm and I began to get sleepy. Well, I didn't do this purposely, but I just laid my head over, and I went to sleep. I woke up rolling off the house! So I went down, pulled off my carpenter overalls, and told my dad, 'You just have to get somebody else who knows how to drive a car, that does a little carpentry work. You got to get a partner, 'cause I'm done, as of right now!' And I climbed up in the back seat and went to sleep.

After the job at Mammy's Shack, both Hugh and Karl joined Len Nash and His Country Boys. Hugh stayed with the group from about 1929-1933, while at the same time joining Karl on the staff at radio station KFOX in Long Beach. Leaving KFOX in 1933, Hugh played for a short time with Jack LeFevre and His Texas Outlaws, and later with Sheriff Loyal Underwood and His Hollywood Range Riders. It was while

with the Range Riders that Hugh made the acquaintance of a young singing group known as the Pioneer Trio:

Every time I'd move from one place to another, here would come Roy Rogers [Leonard Slye], Tim Spencer and Bob Nolan, wanting me to join up with them. They'd come down where we were playing at Warner Brothers Theater in Los Angeles... they were down for every show. I didn't have a chance to hear them because we were too busy.

Finally when we got back to KNX, the station we worked out of, they came in there one night, and I said, 'I'll tell you what I'll do. Stick around here until I get through, and I'll listen to you. If I like you, I'll join up with you. If I don't, forget it.' So I auditioned Roy Rogers, Bob Nolan and Tim Spencer, and they started out with that three-part yodel that Bob wrote, 'Way Out There,' and, honest to God, when they hit that, my hair just stood up. I thought that was the most beautiful thing I ever heard. When they got through I said, 'Count me in boys, count me in!'

Thus, in late 1933 or early 1934, Hugh joined the group that became the original Sons of the Pioneers. He was with the group for twenty-four years. While with the Pioneers, Hugh appeared in many movies and helped provide the music for numerous others, and recorded hundreds of songs for commercial release as well as for radio broadcast. After leaving the Pioneers in 1958, Hugh performed with a number of groups including his own band named the Sons of the Pioneers, the Jimmy Wakely Show, the Country Gentlemen (with Pat Patterson, Kenny Baker and Jimmie Widener), and most recently with a group at the Flying X Chuckwagon in Carlsbad, New Mexico. He currently resides in Wyoming.

KARL FARR

Karl Marx Farr was born 25 April 1909, in Rochelle, Texas. Like all the other Farr children, Karl began playing music at an early age. When he was about seven years old, he started playing the mandolin, which was the smallest instrument available and therefore the one which he was best able to handle. He soon became part of the family band, seconding Hugh and Glen at local dances. As Hugh remembers, it was not always easy to convince people that Karl should be taken seriously:

Karl started playing about seven or eight years old, and he wore knee pants. Everywhere we'd go to play for a dance, they didn't want to pay him full wages because he wore knee pants. But we were the only musicians in the county, and I'd say, 'If you ever get us again to play, brother you'd better pay him, or you'll not get more music from us.

Hugh took Karl's musical education very seriously. Because he already knew how to play guitar, he taught Karl the basics of chording. Later, as the brothers started playing jazz, the two of them would work out arrangements to tunes and go over how they should be improvised. Hugh was definite about what he wanted, and was justifiably proud of Karl's progress:

I used to teach Karl chords on the guitar because I knew guitar first. [When working out arrangements], I had to argue with him. I wouldn't let him work with me unless he played certain chords, and played them right, so he got chord conscious then. Got to be one of the best chord men in the business.

Karl very quickly became an experienced musician, and by age thirteen he was playing drums, tenor banjo and guitar as a member of Chet Miller's Band in the Big Springs, Texas area. Glen remembers another job that Karl had:

Now, after we played in Artesia [New Mexico] for about a year, playing these little jobs all over, a band from Culver City, Frank Sebastian's Cotton Club Orchestra, came into Artesia. Karl went to work with them as their tenor banjo player. [They worked in] a beautiful dance pavilion, set in a bunch of poplar trees, with two flowing artesian wells. Doc Watson was the orchestra leader. This Doc Watson played saxophone.

Karl, of course, played with his brothers at dances and parties throughout the southwest before the family moved to California in 1925. He lived in Encino for a while, and then moved to Weed Patch, just outside Bakersfield. While there, he and Glen worked odd jobs during the day and played music at night. A move back to Los Angeles in late 1928 found Karl, Hugh and Glen again performing as a trio.

In 1929, Hugh and Karl joined Len Nash and His Country Boys in Long Beach. As Hugh remembers the band:

He [Len Nash] had quite a set-up. He had six guys that played fifty-three different instruments. He had them on a clothesline with pulleys. If they wanted a clarinet or a saxophone, they'd reach up and pull it down, play it, turn it loose and it would fly back up... That's the way he ran his orchestra. Now he wasn't doing too well, but Karl and I sat in with him, and he hired us both. He said, 'I'm changing my group completely,' and fired the whole outfit. Got my brother and I and a guy by the name of Ira McCullough [who] played guitar and sang, and played clarinet.

The job with Nash, in turn, landed Hugh, Karl and Ira a job on the staff at radio station KFOX in Long Beach. At KFOX, in addition to his musical duties, Karl took part in a radio minstrel show called "The Buttercream School Kids." As Glen recalls:

Karl was terrific at doing characters. He was really one of the best. You'd make him up like an old man, and he did the best job of talking and walking, and acting like a ninety-year-old man. Now this show I was telling you about, was called 'The Buttercream School Kids,' and it was real popular. This was about 1932. Now Hugh just played, he wasn't part of the act. But McCullough and Karl were both supposed to be colored boys. They had a part in the Buttercream School.

While working at KFOX, Karl was also freelancing in the Long Beach area. In 1934 he left KFOX and joined Jimmie LeFevre and His Saddle Pals, who played regularly at the 9th Street Corral in southeast Los Angeles.

By this time, Hugh had joined up with Bob Nolan, Tim Spencer and Roy Rogers. Although their singing was impressive, there was a need for another instrumentalist in the group, as Hugh relates:

...we got this contract with Standard Transcription Company. Roy, you know, played good guitar sang good, but the singing and playing too... when he'd pick the guitar, he'd go 'Uh, uh, uh' and it showed, you could hear it.

Hugh was quick to suggest that Karl fill the gap, as he was an experienced and talented guitarist. This left Rogers free to concentrate on his singing, and also gave the group an instrumental talent to complement Hugh. Thus, by 1935, the original Sons of the Pioneers group - Roy Rogers, Bob Nolan, Tim Spencer, Hugh Farr and Karl Farr - was complete.

Karl remained with the Pioneers for the rest of his career, a period of about twenty-six years. It was while performing with the group at the Eastern States Exposition in West Springfield, Massachusetts, that he suffered a fatal heart

attack. Thus, Karl's stay with the Sons of the Pioneers ended only with his death on 20 September 1961.

GLEN FARR

Although Glen Farr did not ultimately choose to become a professional musician, as did Hugh and Karl, his younger days were spent intimately involved in the musical lives of his brothers. Born 27 August 1906 in San Saba Texas, Glen Sorelle Farr, the second of the three Farr brothers, became a member of the family band at an early age, playing guitar and mandolin. Like Hugh, he was exposed to a variety of musical influences: family members, friends, phonograph records and the radio. Matt Brown, of course, was one of the strongest influences on him, but he recalls another musician who was later to gain a bit of fame:

One time in Breckenridge, I met Jimmie Rodgers. I was in a pawnshop, [and] the pawnshop always had a lot of musical instruments, you know. So musicians, or would-be musicians, would hang out. I was in there one day and Jimmie Rodgers came in. He picked up one of the guitars, and just sat down on the counter and sang several numbers... all the railroad numbers he did, blues numbers, yodeling numbers. People heard him, started coming in there. That was about 1921-22. This was when he first started, he wasn't popular at all at that time.

Although most of Glen's musical experiences were with the Three Farr Brothers, he, too, performed with other musicians. He was, in fact, the first of the brothers to appear on radio:

In 1924 or '25 [after Hugh and Karl had already moved to California], a fellow named Charlie Hobbs and I were playing on a little radio station in Breckenridge, Texas. Now they had two thirty-minute programs between 6:00 and 7:00 o'clock. It [radio] was strictly in its infancy. We played in a little room . . . and a fellow at the controls. We had the half hour from 6:00 to 6:30, and a fellow by the name of Fletcher Harrison, with Harrison's Texians had 6:30 to 7:00 o'clock.

We did that for three or four months, and they decided they couldn't go on with the two programs. There were no sponsors at all in those days, they were just struggling to perfect radio. So, they had a popularity contest to see which of the two groups got to stay. Fletcher had eleven people in his band, and just Charlie and I on two guitars. We had an awful lot of friends... so he and I won, and we got to stay. The Chamber of Commerce, after that contest, came down and took our pictures and put them up in the Chamber of Commerce. It's a funny thing, even though we won, in a couple of months we were out of a job - the station folded.

Glen continued to play music over the years, but never sought to become a professional musician. Family responsibilities, a wife and small son, prompted him to seek a more stable income, so in 1927, he went to work for the Department of Water and Power. After the brothers were re-united in California, Glen occasionally helped out playing at parties and dances, and even joined Hugh and Karl for some radio work over KELW in Burbank. Glen lives today in North Hollywood, California, and although he is no longer musically active, he maintains a keen interest in music and in the careers of his brothers.

During Hugh's twenty-four years and Karl's twenty-six years with the Sons of the Pioneers, they toured and recorded extensively, appeared in and provided background music for myriad movies, and served as back-up musicians for a variety of entertainers ranging from Spade Cooley and Patsy Montana to Bing Crosby and Perry Como. As accompanists, Hugh and Karl contributed greatly

to the sound and the success of the Pioneers. As soloists they had few equals; they were to western music what Joe Venuti and Eddie Lang were to jazz. It is fortunate that they have left us with these fine examples of their talent.

THE MUSIC

Hugh and Karl's interest in and ability to play popular as well as traditional music has already been commented on, and the performances on this album demonstrate how well they mastered both idioms. In this respect, they reflect musical trends which were already extant in their native Texas. As early as 1922, when Eck Robertson recorded "Sallie Gooden" as a showpiece containing thirteen distinct strains, Texas fiddlers have been taking extreme liberties with traditional music, using the tunes merely as starting points for elaborate melodic embroidery, often improvising new parts during a performance as a jazz player would. The music of Bob Wills, of course, is the prime example of the blending of old and new. By putting a swing beat behind old tunes and adding a dose of earthy Texas enthusiasm to the popular tunes of the day, he combined the best of both worlds and made western swing the most popular music in the west and southwest during the mid-1930s and early 1940s.

Upon hearing the music of Hugh and Karl Farr, it is immediately apparent that they were heavily influenced by the sounds of the swing era. Karl's rhythm guitar work is mainstream swing, characterized by a heavy off-beat, the use of closed or "sock" chords (i.e. the use of no open strings, allowing the left hand to dampen the chord), and the frequent incorporation of a well-defined bass line with these chords. He often uses diminished sevenths as passing chords to construct this bass line, and dominant sevenths, ninths and augmented chords to add harmonic color.

As previously noted, Hugh made Karl very chord conscious. Indeed, Karl had a chordal fluency that is reminiscent of Django Reinhardt, whose recordings were very familiar to him. Karl's right hand technique was weak, however, and as a result, his lead work suffered. While Glen Farr remembers Karl using both up and down strokes, Hugh recalls, and the recordings seem to confirm, that he used only down strokes. Hugh feels that this limitation prevented Karl from becoming a truly great jazz guitarist. Karl could not play really fast single lines, and he often relied on string bending and large interval leaps (usually octaves) in order to add interest. Still, as a rhythm guitarist, Karl had few equals. He possessed a chordal knowledge and sensitivity that was an ideal complement for the vocal stylings of the Sons of the Pioneers and for Hugh's fiddling.

While Karl's guitar playing is somewhat reserved, Hugh's fiddling has all the marks of an extrovert. As he says, he was born a fiddler and worked diligently at his trade. The variety of his traditional, original and popular tunes, and his flair for spontaneous composition are testimony to his talents. His playing is aggressive, more in the style of Joe Venuti than of Django Reinhardt's partner Stephane Grappelli. While Grappelli has an elegant "French" feeling about his playing, Venuti is more earthy, with a dry sense of humour. Hugh mentions that he listened to Venuti frequently, and vice versa, but it is difficult to say what effect they had on each other. As for Grappelli, Hugh mentions that he heard him on record, but did not care much for his use of the higher positions. Hugh prefers to do most of his playing in first position, moving only occasionally to higher positions for effect.

Perhaps the strongest part of Hugh's technique is his bowing. In an often told story, Leopold Stokowski was asked whom he considered to be the greatest natural violinist, and he is reported to have replied that it must really be two people - the left hand of Fritz Kreisler and the right hand of "that fellow who plays with the Sons of the Pioneers." Hugh's clean attack, sweet tone and rapid single bowing are second to none, but his use of special devices such as double and triple shuffle bowing are perhaps the dominant characteristics of his unique style.

Whether playing a high-speed jazz tune or a pretty ballad, he is always in control.

As for his melodic work, Hugh has the instincts of a good jazz player. When playing a popular or jazz tune, he is "playing the changes":

I know the guitar. When they make a certain chord on the guitar, I run that chord down on the fiddle.

He knows what notes are in the specific chord being played, and uses these notes as the basis for his improvisation. As discussed below, it was this ability to improvise that made possible a number of the tunes found on this album.

The material on this album was selected to demonstrate the broad range of Hugh and Karl's talents, and consists of nearly equal proportions of traditional fiddle tunes, pop standards and Farr originals.

The traditional tunes were learned from the usual sources: family, friends, other musicians, and occasionally from the phonograph or radio. "Soldier's Joy" is one of the most widely known fiddle tunes in North America and the British Isles, and dates from the late 18th century. Hugh probably learned it from his father. In the present version, Hugh adds a bit of an old Scottish tune, "My Love She's But A Lassie Yet", which fiddlers in the United States call "Chinkapin," "Too Young To Marry," "Buffalo Nickel," or numerous other titles. Hugh notes that "Tom and Jerry" is an old tune, "over 100 years old." Indeed, it seems to be quite popular, particularly in the southwest where it has become a favorite of contest fiddlers. Hugh mentions that this is the only tune he plays in a "cross-tuning", that is, other than standard violin tuning of GDAE. His fiddle is probably tuned AEAE.

"Ragtime Annie" has also been a long-time favorite of fiddlers throughout North America, and it is probable that Hugh also learned this tune from his father. It is interesting to note that another Texan made recording history with this tune. In 1922, Eck Robertson recorded "Ragtime Annie" along with a number of other fiddle tunes for Victor in New York City, in what is generally accepted as the first commercial recording of a country artist. "Fine Time At Our House," on the other hand, does not seem to be very widespread. A version by Indiana traditional fiddler John Summers was released on a 1964 Folkways album [FS 3809, Fine Times At Our House] and Samuel P. Bayard printed a similar tune by this title, collected in southwestern Pennsylvania, in his book Hill Country Tunes [Philadelphia: The American Folklore Society, 1944].

Of the two waltzes, "Rye Whiskey Waltz" is probably already familiar to many listeners as it is a version of the famous "Rye Whiskey" or "Jack Of Diamonds" melody. This tune is common throughout Anglo-American folk music and "Rye Whiskey" has become popular through recordings by Tex Ritter and other country & western artists. "Old Maderia Waltz", on the other hand, seems to have a known origin, for as Glen recalls:

We [the family] went to play for a dance, a farewell dance for a girl whose name was Devis. Now there was this fellow, kind of a clown, and he did a little singing and a little bit of guitar picking. He came up with this song because it was her farewell party:

*Goodbye, my little Devis,
We hate to see you leave us,
Goodbye, my little Devis,
We hate to see you go.*

The change in title from "Goodbye My Little Devis" to "Old Maderia Waltz" can probably be attributed to an unknown recording executive. The schottisches were learned from Tom and Hattie Fare As Glen remembers:

That's right, they both taught those. Like square dancing, each set is a different type. The schottisches were the same way. The 'Bon Ton Schottische' was quite different from the 'Seaside.' I learned quite a few of those dances when I was a kid, and so did Hugh. I don't think Karl ever did because he was pretty young.

Both Hugh and Karl learned the popular tunes of their day and adapted them to their own style of playing. Some were learned from records and radio, while others were picked up from other musicians. Hugh made a conscientious effort to be up-to-date and to know all the latest tunes:

We played everything that came out. When I first came to Los Angeles, I used to go down to all the publishing companies every week and get all the numbers, and have a piano player play them for me. If I liked them, I learned them. If I didn't, I'd file them in the waste paper basket. At one time you couldn't name a modern tune I couldn't play.

"Bye, Bye Blues," "Lazy River," "Now Or Never" and "'Deed I Do" were among those popular tunes that Hugh and Karl played so well.

Hugh remembers "'Deed I Do" as being "an old pop number like 'Lazy River'." Published in 1926, the music is by Fred Rose and the lyrics are by Walter Hirsch. Rose wrote prolifically over the years and achieved fame on two counts. In the 1940s he moved to Nashville where he wrote a number of hit songs, including many for Hank Williams. This success in songwriting was paralleled by his success as a businessman; together with Roy Acuff, he founded Acuff-Rose Publications, Inc.

"Bye, Bye Blues" was composed by Bert Lown, Chauncey Gray, Fred Hamm and Dave Bennett, and published in 1930. The tune served as the theme song of Bert Lown and His Hotel Biltmore Orchestra. The melody of "Lazy River" was written by the great Hoagy Carmichael, while the lyrics are by Sidney Arodin. Published in 1931, it has remained a pop classic. "Now Or Never" was composed by Peter DeRose (who also wrote "Deep Purple" and "When Your Hair Has Turned To Silver") with lyricist Sam M. Lewis (who is also credited with "Five Foot Two" and "How Ya Gonna Keep 'Em Down On The Farm?").

Perhaps the most interesting tunes on the album are those that the brothers composed themselves. Some were formal compositions, worked out in advance as part of the Pioneers' repertoire, but a surprising number were impromptu arrangements, composed on the spot to fill a gap in a transcription recording and never played again. As Hugh remembers:

I used to write most all our instrumental numbers. Karl would write his guitar numbers but I wrote all of the fiddle numbers that Karl and I played. Now, we had a contract to make a lot of fifteen-minute transcription records. I'd tell Karl, 'Give me a vamp about this fast, and I'll knock off a tune in the key of F.' He'd do that, and I'd make up the tune as we went along. Now all that stuff like 'Pee Wee Stomp' and 'Desert Hokum' were made like that. The producer would say 'give me about a minute and fifteen seconds.' They would have a clock in there with a red light over the top. When the clock started, we started playing, and a minute and fifteen seconds later we would wind it off, as close to that point as we could.

Because many of these on-the-spot compositions were never repeated, Hugh does not have any specific recollection of them. "Skinner's Sock," "Oompah Rag," "Alabama Stomp," "Desert Hokum" and "Whing Ding" all fall into this category. "Bluebird Blues" may be related to another piece by this same title which was recorded by Wendall Hall with the Virginians [Victor 1926], which I have not heard, but the Farr tune is most likely an original.

All of Karl's tunes, on the other hand, seem to have been worked out in advance. Although neither Hugh nor Glen could provide any specifics, evidently Karl arranged his tunes with the rhythm guitarist - Roy Rogers (Standard recordings) or Lloyd Perryman (Orthacoustic recordings) - prior to the recording sessions. "Farr Into The Night" and "Prairie Reverie" are both Karl Farr originals. "Karlen Stomp" may have been written in collaboration with Leonard Slye [Roy Rogers] - "Karl-Len Stomp." Hugh remembers "Main Street" as being a popular tune which came out about 1918, but I have not been able to confirm this.

The final tune on this album, "Texas Crapshooter," has been recorded a number of times by Hugh. A version from the Orthacoustic transcriptions appears on JEMF-102, The Sons of the Pioneers, and the Farr Brothers recorded it under the title "Texas Skiparoo" for RCA Victor in 1946 [RCA Victor 20-2242]. Concerning this tune, Hugh recalls:

My brother-in-law [Larken Williams] wrote most of it, and I took it from there and finished it. The recording company wouldn't let us say 'crapshooter' [at least on the commercial recordings], so they made us call it 'Skiparoo,' 'Texas Skiparoo.'

THE RECORDINGS

The recordings on this album are drawn from three series of radio transcriptions. Soon after the Sons of the Pioneers first commercial recording session for Decca in 1934, Jerry King of KFVB radio in Los Angeles suggested that the group place their entire repertoire on transcriptions for nationwide distribution. Over a period of about six months, from late 1934 to early 1935, the Pioneers recorded 272 selections, including original and traditional songs, and a number of instrumentals for the Standard Radio Transcription Company. Most of the selections on this album are derived from these recordings. During this same period, Hugh and Karl recorded a number of instrumentals for Standard under the name "The Brady Cornhuskers". These recordings were Tim Spencer's idea for spotlighting the talents of Hugh and Karl. Side I, bands 1, 5, and 9, and side II, band 10, are from the Cornhuskers series of recordings. Although there seems to be no accurate information available on the sessions, where there is a rhythm guitar and/or bass present on the Standard recordings (both Sons of the Pioneers and Cornhuskers tracks), these are probably played by Roy Rogers and Bob Nolan, respectively.

The remaining selections on this album are taken from transcriptions made for NBC's Orthacoustic Recording Division in 1940. The Sons of the Pioneers were in Chicago at the time, appearing on the Uncle Ezra program. While there, the group recorded 202 pieces, which were released under the title "Symphonies of the Sage." On these recordings, Lloyd Perryman plays rhythm guitar and Pat plays bass.

For further information on these transcription series, and on other recordings made by Hugh and Karl as members of the Sons of the Pioneers, consult the discography in *Hear My Song*.

Sources

Unpublished Materials

1) An interview/music program with Hugh Farr and friends, hosted by Howard Larman, taped at KPFK radio in Los Angeles, California in September 1976, and broadcast in December 1976.

2) An interview with Hugh Farr conducted by Ken Griffis and Michael Mendelson following the above taping session at KPFK, September 1976.

3) A tape prepared by Hugh Farr with the assistance of Harold and Mavis Selby, in response to a written list of questions from Michael Mendelson, Casper, Wyoming, February 1977.

4) An interview with Glen Farr conducted by Michael Mendelson, North Hollywood, California, May 1977.

5) An interview with Karl Farr, Jr., conducted by Michael Mendelson, Sacramento, California, October 1977.

6) A telephone interview with Glen Farr conducted by Michael Mendelson, February 1978.

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Michael Mendelson
Davis, California, March 1978

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HEAR MY SONG: THE STORY OF THE CELEBRATED SONS OF THE PIONEERS, by Ken Griffis. JEMF Special Series No. 5. A 148-page book containing biographical and discographical information and lists of the songs, song folios and motion pictures of the Sons of the Pioneers.

THE SONS OF THE PIONEERS. JEMF-102. A long-playing phonograph album containing twenty selections issued from radio transcriptions. Includes three instrumentals by Hugh & Karl Farr. With 16-page booklet.