

Gerry Katz, Boston Bluegrass Union

Black, White and Bluegrass - Allerton & Alton, Bear Family Records

I'm pleased to send along the following information on this new CD from Bear Family Records. While the names Allerton and Alton might not ring familiar, **Al Hawkes**, the Allerton of the duo, has a long and storied history in the New England music scene, both as a performer and as a record producer with his label, Event Records. During the 1950's and early 1960's, he recorded a wide range of artists including Lilly Brothers, Dick Curless, Hal Lone Pine, the Bailey Brothers as well as countless others. In 2010, Al was awarded the BBU's Heritage Award. More details on Al

The Event Record releases were some of finest sides of the era, drawing attention to what were for the most part, New England performers, and makes for a wonderful story in and of itself. But there's another wonderful and compelling story that starts and concludes before the Event Records story.

Black, White and Bluegrass - Allerton & Alton released in late 2010 by the venerated German label Bear Family Records, shines the spotlight on a unique musical career of two Maine native sons who defied racial boundaries and conventions of the late 1940's. An oddity in bluegrass music history, the duo of Allerton Hawkes and Alton Myers were an old-fashioned string band hailing not from Appalachia but from Maine, never a hotbed of country-picking, but more importantly, they were an interracial duo at a time and in a genre where such acts were uncommon.

The African American Myers was on guitar while Hawkes played mandolin, the two singing close harmonies on a songbook consisting of folk standards, tunes from Flatt & Scruggs, the Carter Family, Ernest Tubb, and Hank Thompson. Allerton & Alton, their full names chosen for their stage name as it had a stronger ring, didn't play much outside of their region, and they didn't cut singles in a studio, so Al's excavation of these radio sessions and subsequent release on Bear Family is rather remarkable.

Previous to this, Allerton & Alton were talked about but rarely, if ever, heard, so this gives life to their small-scale legend, proving that the duo was quite a capable close harmony unit and pickers. If their backstory wasn't quite so unique, the music itself might not gather much attention: it's merely solid, straight-ahead stuff, notable not for its virtuosity, but rather its warmth, Allerton & Alton sounding like a pair of friends trading licks at home. The duo wound up splitting when they were both drafted into the Korean War, Hawkes pursuing a professional musical career to greater effect than Myers, but the music they made in the '40s stands: it's tied to the time yet stands outside of it, by two unwitting pioneers that wanted nothing more than to carry on a tradition.

The reissue has received extensive press coverage.