

Bogan and Armstrong

By Paul Tyler

Often called "the last black string band," Ted Bogan and Howard Armstrong delight audiences today with their hot and spirited, stirring and humorous performances in a wide range of musical styles. Fifty years ago, they pleased audiences all over the Southeast and Midwest in the same way, when they joined together with Carl Martin in a band called the Tennessee Chocolate Drops or the Four Keys (with bassist Bill Ballinger). Then, as now, they played a little bit of everything—from ragtime and jazz, to blues and country, to pop standards and ethnic songs in several languages—in an effort to please any kind of audience.

Bloomington will be equally pleased when Bogan and Armstrong make a return visit to Bear's Back Room in the opening concert of the Ryder Music Series on September 18 and 19. They last appeared in Bloomington on a double bill with Yank Rachell in 1982.

Howard Armstrong is also the subject of a feature film, *Louie Bluie*, San Francisco filmmaker Terry Zwigoff's critically acclaimed 1985 documentary about Armstrong's life and art. The film's title refers to a nickname under which he once recorded. (In 1932, Armstrong was introduced to a woman at a party who had been expecting to meet Louis Armstrong. "You not Louis Armstrong," she complained. "You just plain old Louie Bluie.") The film will be shown as part of the Ryder Film Series on September 11 and 14 at Bear's Place at 7:30.

Ted Bogan and Howard Armstrong—born in 1910 and 1911 respectively—first met in Knoxville, Tennessee around 1930, when Bogan visited that city as a performer in "Dr. Mines' Medicine Show." At the time, Armstrong was playing mandolin and violin along with guitarist Martin for dances, fish fries, and radio broadcasts on WNOX. Previously, Armstrong and Martin had traveled for a time with a medicine show themselves, and had played with a string band headed by Carl's older brother, Roland Martin, a black old-time fiddler well known in Eastern Tennessee.

Armstrong had joined this band when he was only fourteen or fifteen. Though he had originally taught himself to play mandolin and violin in a blues style, under the tutelage of the elder Martin he learned a

number of old-time fiddle tunes such as "Cacklin' Hen." In fact, the highest compliment he could receive was to have someone say that he sounded "just like old Roland on that fiddle."

After meeting up with Bogan, a new trio was formed that would last over fifty years. Martin, who would later make some solo recordings as a ragtime-style blues guitarist, assumed the role of mandolinist in the group, while Armstrong was featured on the fiddle. Bogan had been finger-picking the guitar in a style he developed after listening to recordings of guitarist Blind Blake and Indianapolis blues pianist Leroy Carr. In the new trio, he began using a flatpick and created his own unique and elaborate style of swing chords.

After several years on the road, the group arrived in Chicago in 1932, where they made some records as the Tennessee Chocolate Drops. Their wide-ranging repertoire and ability to play requests of all kinds made them well suited for the Windy City. They played on the streets and in bars and clubs in all kinds of ethnic neighborhoods. Besides their mix of jazz, blues, and country, they could play Polish polkas, German waltzes, and songs in several languages, featuring the singing of the self-educated Howard Armstrong, who is fluent in seven languages, including Mandarin Chinese.

Family responsibilities and the increasing use of jukeboxes in bars eventually caused the breakup of the band. Ted Bogan and Carl Martin stayed in Chicago, while Armstrong moved to Detroit. They all stayed in touch, and, after a long layoff, Martin, Bogan, and Armstrong were reunited in 1970, when they began to play a busy schedule of folk festivals and college concerts. They have recorded one album for Rounder, *Barnyard Dance*, and two for Flying Fish, *Martin, Bogan & Armstrong* and *That Old Gang of Mine*.

Since Carl Martin's death in 1979, Bogan and Armstrong have continued to be active on the festival circuit, even though both are now in their seventies. They have performed at nearly every major folk festival in the U.S. and Canada. Most recently, they appeared at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife on the Mall in Washington, D.C. as representatives of Tennessee, the featured state for the 1986 festival. □