



BILL MONROE, BERRYVILLE, VIRGINIA, 1965

BY MARSHALL FREEDLAND

## Big Mon

**B**ill Monroe was the founding father of that richly American music called Bluegrass. It was on September 16 and 17, 1946, that Bill brought his band, the Blue Grass Boys, into the Columbia recording studios. They cut ten tunes that created and defined this music.

The recordings featured Monroe's furious mandolin playing — lightning fast, up the neck — and his high tenor singing that broke easily and often into a muscled falsetto.

They featured the monstrous playing of banjoist Earl Scruggs, a machine-gun style of 3-fingered, 5-string banjo-picking that he first recorded with Monroe, and which is named after him: "Scruggs Picking." Earl's banjo-picking was bell-clear, driving, and essential. Your band may have Tony Rice on guitar, Mark O'Connor and Vasser Clements on twin fiddles, Jerry Douglas on a 1932 National-Dobro, Edgar Meyer on bass, and Sam Bush with Frank Wakefield on sequentially-numbered, Lloyd Loar-signed, Gibson F-5 mandolins, ... but without someone pickin' some kind of Scruggs-style banjo, well sir, you just ain't got a bluegrass band.

These 1946 recordings featured the voice and guitar of Lester Flatt, including his “Lester Flatt G-run,” a guitar lick which figures in about every bluegrass song subsequently recorded. Lester’s guitar was urgent and goading. His lead singing varnished the sound of his duets with Monroe; Flatt created the template for smooth bluegrass tenor singing that is still used.

Chubby Wise complemented the band on fiddle, adding a sawing, bluesy sound that fiddlers to this day try to copy. Howard Watts, whose stage name was Cedric Rainwater, played string bass (and sang bass and baritone). He drove the frantic 2-beat instrumentals with passion, and plucked 4-to-the-bar on tunes you’d expect to be 2-beat, irresistibly lifting the band from underneath.

These recordings were a quantum leap past whatever had been done previously in hillbilly music. This seminal band jumped from the tracks fully formed and laid down the law for all bluegrass groups to come: acoustic string instruments flogged to their limits, breakneck tempos, screaming solos, high lonesome harmonies, a galloping rhythm section wheel-hossed by a honking string bass, a dollop of 4-part rural gospel, and many exceeding-the-speed-limit instrumentals. Essential American music.

Bill Monroe crossed over Jordan, as pickers say, on September 9, 1996, at the age of eighty-six. His last performance with the Blue Grass Boys was on March 15, 1996, at the Grand Ole Opry ... the Friday Night Opry. It is not often we witness the passing of a bona fide music genre creator, and it reminds me of how young Bluegrass is, fifty years young almost to the day of Bill’s passing. Bluegrass has progressed since 1946, allowed more influences, and sharpened vocals and instrumental techniques, while still maintaining deep allegiance to the ancient tones recorded in ’46. The course that Bluegrass takes, now that its father is gone, will be interesting to follow.

Besides these considerable music accomplishments, Bill Monroe was known as a man of few words.

I was playing behind Peter Rowan at the 1995 Wintergrass Festival in Tacoma, Washington. Peter had played with Bill Monroe’s Blue Grass Boys in the 1960s, and his duet singing with the master was renowned for being tight as jaws. It was Saturday night; we were on the main stage. Peter was playing guitar and singing with his brothers Lorin and Chris. The incomparable Jerry Douglas was on dobro, and myself, string bass. Peter had just started introducing the second tune of the set when the audience burst into applause. If you’ve seen him perform, you know Pete is a natural storyteller. His introduction to his tune “Panama Red” is a fantasy tale that sets the audience howling every time he tells it. But this particular introduction at this particular moment in time was not *that* spectacular in my opinion.

So I looked around to see why the room might be going nuts, and there was Bill Monroe, leaning on his walking cane, trooping out to join us. Bill was eighty-four at the time, and his face showed those years. But the light inside him burned as hot as any youngster’s.

When Bill arrived at the center stage microphone, he and Peter, who was in his fifties, did a mock pushing match for the mike. With a Zen-placed elbow, Monroe about launched Rowan clean off the stage. When Peter got back to a side mike, he turned to the crowd and said, “That man’s got strong *chi*,” which Bill did.

Then the two sang a tune they’re both identified with, “Walls of Time,” as lonesome a bluegrass song as there is. Bill sang an angel part so high above Peter’s lead, it was ghostly. Finally they rendered a song that Bill wrote called “The Little Girl and the Dreadful Snake.”

There is an old story about Monroe and this song that over the years may have become ... enhanced ... by what is called the “folk process.” The folk process is about the changes that a story or song goes through as it passes orally from one person to another. So like I said, this legend may well have changed over the years, but this is the way I remember it.

[Continued in the book ...]