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## [Behind Alan Jackson's 'Bluegrass Album'](#) <sup>[1]</sup>



# ALAN JACKSON

By Taylor Coughlin

Like a lot of good stories in bluegrass do, this one started at The Ryman.

Country superstar Alan Jackson was at The Mother Church in Nashville filming videos when he was sitting with his longtime guitarist Scott Coney during a break. Sitting on a stool, Jackson started playing a bluegrass guitar lick and asked Coney, "What do you think about this?"

Six weeks later, *The Bluegrass Album* would be recorded, with that song ("Long Hard Road") kicking it all off. But like a lot of good stories in bluegrass, there's more to it than that.

Jackson's chart topping career in country has made him a household name, whether that house worships 650 AM WSM, or doesn't have a country record on its shelves. Under his belt, Jackson has two Grammys, 16 CMA Awards, 17 ACM Awards, is a member of the Grand Ole Opry and the Georgia Music Hall of Fame, and is credited for penning many of his own hits, of which he has 35 Number Ones, according to *Billboard*.

Growing up in rural Newnan, Georgia, Jackson's early musical influences were gospel and country, but he heard bluegrass the way many did: through watching The Dillards on *The Andy Griffith Show* and hearing Flatt & Scruggs at the start of every *Beverly Hillbillies* episode. When he later became a songwriter, he found a hero in the Father of Bluegrass.

"I've always been a fan of Bill Monroe's songwriting," Jackson said. "A lot of songs he wrote were really cool."

While Jackson's country records have always included fiddle, Dobro, and mandolin, he has never made an album that was strictly bluegrass. Since working with Alison Krauss on what

turned out to be more of an acoustic contemporary album than bluegrass, Jackson has toyed with the idea of making a full bluegrass album.

Back to the Ryman, where self-described "bluegrass diehard" Coney sat with Jackson. "I said, 'If you ever want to do a bluegrass album, I would love to play on it,'" Coney said, and the foundation for Jackson's bluegrass album was laid.

Jackson talked to producer and songwriter (and nephew) Adam Wright, and longtime producer Keith Stegall about finally doing the album, and said he wanted to get a band together to make it happen. When Wright told Jackson about Coney's deep love of and experience in bluegrass, everything seemed to fall into place.

"Scott Coney is a bluegrass die-hard at heart and he helped me put the band together for [the album]," Jackson said. "I really wanted the cream of the crop in bluegrass because I wanted to make something that would make bluegrass fans proud."

Coney said it was a dream for him to help put the band together for Jackson's project, and he gives Wright the credit for getting the fire going.

"It was a combination of Adam [Wright] telling Alan, 'You've got a bluegrass guy right under your nose,' and Alan saying, 'Let's get a band together for this album?' and I realized he was very serious about doing a bluegrass album," Coney said, adding, "when [Jackson] gets something on his mind, he's bound and determined to make it happen."

With Coney behind the Band Recruitment Wheel, some of the best musicians in bluegrass (some of whom he had listened to and been a fan of for years growing up in Arkansas) were called up. On the album, there would be Rob Ickes (Dobro), Tim Crouch (fiddle), Tim Dishman (bass), Sammy Shelor (banjo), Adam Steffey (mandolin), Scott Coney (guitar), and Don Rigsby and Ronnie Bowman on harmony vocals.

The recording process reflected a bluegrass jam, which is heard in the energy of the album. "We put everybody in a circle and we just recorded the tracks all live," Jackson said. "I wanted the harmony vocals to be recorded live, and I wanted the album to feel like it was live."

With the leadership of Jackson and Wright in the studio, and the sheer talent on the record, it is not surprising to learn that in a matter of two session days, all the tracks were laid down. Each track took less than three takes, which is rare, but as Coney put it: "When you have the caliber of people [we had], you have the best and it doesn't take long."

Coney said the sessions felt like a living room jam, saying, "We literally had some acoustical foam in between us and we cut that record live like it was a jam. When we got done at the end of the second day, we didn't want it to end and I really think it came across on the record," he said. "There was some really fabulous playing, and people are going to be impressed that Alan brought those songs to the table."

Jackson's transition to bluegrass songwriting for the record is impressive, covering familiar themes and essential traits of bluegrass. Each song brings out a different side of human emotion and channels life experiences. "Blacktop" challenges the nostalgic sentiments of dirt roads often heard in bluegrass and country songs for the convenience of having a more conventional blacktop road:

*"This ain't no song 'bout the good old days, simpler times, or easy ways, or how I long for an old dirt road, a blade of grass or a lighter load. I was glad to see the blacktop when they laid it down in '65. I was glad to see the blacktop, no more dust in my eyes."*

"It seems like I've heard so many songs about 'dirt road this and that,' in the past few years, which plays on nostalgia, and I get it," Jackson explained, "but I just remember growing up with all the dust, dirt, rocks and all, and I didn't like it. [When we got the blacktop,] I got to ride my bicycle up and down the way I liked. [The song] just came out there. It was just my own experience and what I remember some about growing up."

Another highlight on the album is The Dillards' "There Is A Time," that Jackson wanted to cover because he said, "I started thinking about where I first heard bluegrass and I wanted to include The Dillards, and I always loved that song. [Bluegrass] made an impression on me with that song."

Other stand-out songs are heartbreaking ballads "Blue Ridge Mountain Song," and "Blue Side of Heaven," the bluesy "Way Beyond the Blue," and an originally country song by Jackson "Let's Get Back to Me and You." Jackson wrote eight out the 14 tracks on the album.

The closing track is appropriate with Jackson paying homage to Bill Monroe. "I wanted to pay my respects to Mr. Monroe by covering "Blue Moon of Kentucky,"" Jackson said. What's even more special about Jackson closing *The Bluegrass Album* with that song is his shout out to each musician and his producers on the record, solidifying the relationships he made, and declaring the time he cherished while making the record.

"Everyone there was a great player, just great people," Jackson said. "I felt like I wanted to say something at the end of the album. I just felt like thanking everyone."

Coney recalled hearing Don Rigsby talk about working with Jackson and that Rigsby said: "He's always been a cheerleader for traditional music. When he made a bluegrass record his biggest concern was to pay homage to true bluegrass roots. His main concern was to make a bluegrass record where people would respect him."

Sammy Shelor said he truly enjoyed working on the album. "It was a great experience recording with the some of the best musicians and singers in the industry," he said in an email, adding, "Doing the songs I had never heard before and cutting them live was quite a challenge for me, but I am very happy with how it turned out and I know bluegrass fans are going to love this collection."

Jackson said he wanted to do this album for a couple of reasons, but primarily, "I really made this album for me. I wanted to do something that I was proud of, and that the bluegrass world wouldn't be ashamed of," he said. "[Bluegrass] is one of the last traditional American music genres that have stuck to its roots."

Jackson and the recording band previewed the album live at The Station Inn in Nashville on August 27. In addition, Coney hinted at future tour dates: "Alan's goal is: if we do this live, to make sure that every guy on the record is able to play on the live dates," he said. "He wants to reproduce that magic and energy we had in the studio, and for it to be authentic."

Between the ideas for the record hatching at The Ryman, the stories sung on *The Bluegrass Album* and the magic behind the two-day recording session with a heroic cast of characters, there is a lot to tell. But like a lot of good stories, it doesn't sound like this one is over yet.

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