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History of Bluegrass Music [1]

The roots of bluegrass reach back to the music brought to America by immigrants in the early 1600s, including dance music and ballads from Ireland, Scotland and England, as well as African American gospel music and blues. In fact, slaves from Africa brought the design idea for the banjo--an instrument now integral to the bluegrass sound.

As the early Jamestown settlers began to spread out into the Carolinas, Tennessee, Kentucky and the Virginias, they composed new songs about day-to-day life experiences in the new land. Since most of these people lived in rural areas, the songs reflected life on the farm or in the hills and this type of music was called "mountain music" or "country music." The invention of the phonograph and the onset of the radio in the early 1900s brought this old-time music out of the rural Southern mountains to people all over the United States.

Good singing became a more important part of country music. Singing stars like Jimmie Rodgers, family bands like The Carter Family from Virginia and duet teams like the Monroe Brothers from Kentucky contributed greatly to the advancement of traditional country music.

The Monroe Brothers were one of the most popular duet teams of the 1920s and into the 1930s. Charlie played the guitar, Bill played the mandolin and they sang duets in harmony. When the brothers split up as a team in 1938, both went on to form their own bands. Since Bill was a native of Kentucky, the Bluegrass State, he decided to call his band "Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys," and this band sound birthed a new form of country music.

"Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys" first appeared on the Grand Ole Opry in 1939 and soon became one of the most popular touring bands out of Nashville's WSM studios. Bill's new band was different from other traditional country music bands of the time because of its hard driving energy, utilizing traditional acoustic instruments and featuring highly distinctive vocal harmonies. This music incorporated songs and rhythms from old time string band,

gospel, country, blues and jazz. Vocal selections included duet, trio and quartet harmony singing, in addition to Bill's powerful "high lonesome" solo lead singing. After experimenting with various instrumental combinations, Bill settled on mandolin, banjo, fiddle, guitar and bass as the format for his band. The guitar originally came from Spain. The mandolin, as well as the fiddle and acoustic bass (both from the violin family), originally came from Italy. As mentioned before, the banjo originated in Africa.

While many fans of bluegrass music date the genre back to 1939, when Monroe formed his first Blue Grass Boys band, most believe that the classic bluegrass sound jelled in 1945, shortly after Earl Scruggs, a 21-year-old banjo player from North Carolina, joined the band. Scruggs played an innovative three-finger picking style on the banjo that energized enthusiastic audiences, and has since come to be called simply, "Scruggs style" banjo. Equally influential in the classic 1945 line-up of the Blue Grass Boys were Lester Flatt, from Sparta, Tenn. on guitar and lead vocals against Monroe's tenor; Chubby Wise, from Florida, on fiddle; and Howard Watts, also known by his comedian name, "Cedric Rainwater," on acoustic bass.

When first Earl Scruggs, and then Lester Flatt left Monroe's band and eventually formed their own group, The Foggy Mountain Boys, they decided to include the resophonic guitar, or Dobro into their band format. The Dobro is often included in bluegrass band formats today as a result. Burkett H. "Uncle Josh" Graves, from Tellico Plains, Tenn., heard Scruggs' three-finger style of picking in 1949 and adapted it to the then, almost obscure slide bar instrument. With Flatt & Scruggs from 1955-1969, Graves introduced his widely emulated, driving, bluesy style on the Dobro. The Dobro was invented in the United States by the Dopyera Brothers, immigrant musicians/inventors originally from the Slovak Republic. The brand name, "Dobro," comes from DOpyera BROthers.

From 1948-1969, Flatt & Scruggs were a major force in introducing bluegrass music to America through national television, at major universities and coliseums, and at schoolhouse appearances in numerous towns. Scruggs wrote and recorded one of bluegrass music's most famous instrumentals, "Foggy Mountain Breakdown," which was used in the soundtrack for the film, Bonnie & Clyde. In 1969 he established an innovative solo career with his three sons as "The Earl Scruggs Revue." Scruggs still records and performs selected dates in groups that usually include his sons, Randy on guitar and Gary on bass.

After parting with Scruggs in 1969, Lester Flatt continued successfully with his own group, "The Nashville Grass," performing steadily until shortly before his death in 1979.

By the 1950s, people began referring to this style of music as "bluegrass music." Bluegrass bands began forming all over the country and Bill Monroe became the acknowledged "Father of Bluegrass Music.

In the 1960s, the concept of the "bluegrass festival" was first introduced, featuring bands that had seemed to be in competition with each other for a relatively limited audience, on the same bill at weekend festivals across the country. Carlton Haney, from Reidsville, N.C., is credited with envisioning and producing the first weekend-long bluegrass music festival, held at Fincastle, Va. in 1965.

The increased availability of traditional music recordings, nationwide indoor and outdoor

bluegrass festivals and movie, television and commercial soundtracks featuring bluegrass music have aided in bringing this music out of modern day obscurity. Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs & the Foggy Mountain Boys achieved national prominence with tour sponsorship by Martha White Flour and for playing the soundtrack for the previously mentioned film, *Bonnie and Clyde,* as well as on a television show called *The Beverly Hillbillies.* The *Deliverance* movie soundtrack also featured bluegrass music-in particular, "Dueling Banjos," performed by Eric Weissberg on banjo and Steve Mandel on guitar. The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* triple LP set, released in 1972, introduced artists like Earl Scruggs, Doc Watson, Jimmy Martin, Maybelle Carter, Roy Acuff and more to pop music fans--bringing the authentic sounds of bluegrass and traditional country music to new audiences. In 2001, the triple platinum selling soundtrack for the Coen Brothers movie, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* again attracting wider audiences for bluegrass.

Bill Monroe passed away on September 9, 1996, four days before his 85th birthday. In May 1997, Bill Monroe was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame because of the profound influence of his music on the popular music of this country. He is also a member of the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame.

Bluegrass music is now performed and enjoyed around the world. The IBMA alone claims members in all 50 states and 30 countries. In addition to the classic style born in 1945 that is still performed widely, bluegrass bands today reflect influences from a variety of sources including jazz, contemporary country music, Celtic music, rock & roll ("newgrass" or progressive bluegrass), old--time music and Southern gospel music--in addition to lyrics translated to various languages.

For more information on the history of bluegrass music, visit:

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