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Bluegrass Hall of Fame Member Earl Scruggs Passed Away in Nashville March 28

Legendary artist, banjo stylist and member of both the International Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame and the Country Music Hall of Fame Earl Scruggs died of natural causes Wednesday morning, March 28 in Nashville. A memorial service was held Sunday, April 1 at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville. Earl was preceded in death by his wife, Anne Louise Scruggs and their son Steven Earl Scruggs. He leaves two sons Gary Scruggs and Randy Scruggs, five grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests donations be made to the Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum [1] or to the Earl Scruggs Center, [2] which is under construction in Shelby, North Carolina.

?Our hearts go out to the Scruggs family and also to thousands of people in Earl?s extended music family who counted him as a personal musical inspiration and a friend,? said IBMA Interim Executive Director Nancy Cardwell. ?Mr. Scruggs? passing is a great loss to the bluegrass community, as well as to the wider world of music. It?s difficult to think of another single musician who has had more of an impact on American music.?

Scruggs pioneered and popularized the three-finger picking style of playing the banjo, commonly known as ?Scruggs style,? a model and a standard for nearly every musician who has picked up the instrument during the past six and a half decades. Earl rose to national prominence in December 1945 when he stepped onstage at the Ryman Auditorium with what would come to be known as the classic version of Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys. Along with Scruggs and Monroe, the band included Lester Flatt on guitar, Chubby Wise on fiddle and Howard Watts (known as "Cedric Rainwater") on bass. Monroe had formed the Blue Grass Boys in 1939, but the combination of Scruggs? driving, syncopated ?fancy banjo? with Bill's soulful, blues-tinged, up tempo string band music was the spark that lit the powder keg of bluegrass music as we know it today. They were ?rock stars? of the time, judging from reports of their over-the-top enthusiastic audience reception at the Opry and other live performances.

His plaque in the Bluegrass Hall of Fame at the International Bluegrass Music Museum in Owensboro, Kentucky credits Scruggs as ?one of the creators of bluegrass music,? going on to say, ?Earl Scruggs is one of the most important musicians in America. No other instrumentalist has had such a profound impact on bluegrass music nor influenced so many.?

Scruggs achieved great prominence from 1948-1969 fronting Flatt & Scruggs with partner Lester Flatt and Earl?s wife, pioneering music businesswoman Louise Scruggs, handling management. The band was a major force in introducing bluegrass music to America through national television and at major universities and coliseums, in addition to appearances at rural schoolhouses and in small towns. Earl composed and recorded one of bluegrass music's most famous instrumentals, "Foggy Mountain Breakdown," used in the soundtrack for the motion picture production of *Bonnie & Clyde*. Lester and Earl appeared on *The Beverly Hillbillies* television show in 1962, and the theme song they recorded for the program, ?The Ballad of Jed Clampett,? went to #1 on the country music charts.

In 1969 Earl established an innovative solo career with his three sons as The Earl Scruggs Revue, and in more recent years they?ve been billed as Earl Scruggs and Friends. Earl performed with the latter group at the Bill Monroe Centennial Celebration in September 2011 at IBMM in Owensboro, Ky.

Born in Shelby, N.C. January 6, 1924 and raised on a farm near Flint Hill, Earl Eugene Scruggs grew up in a musical family. His father George and four siblings played the banjo, which Earl took up himself at age four after his father passed away in 1928. By age 10, influenced by Maybelle Carter?s guitar style on the radio, Earl was experimenting with using the thumb and two fingers of his right hand to pick the banjo in syncopated, rolling patterns. As a teenager he occasionally went down to Spartanburg to listen to banjo player Don Reno?s unique three-finger picking style at WSPA?s live radio show.

Scruggs left his job as a mill worker in Shelby, N.C. to work with Lost John Miller and his Allied Kentuckians in 1945, out of Knoxville. Fiddler Jim Shumate recommended Scruggs to Bill Monroe and an audition for the Blue Grass Boys took place at the Tulane Hotel in Nashville. After the second or third song, Scruggs said Monroe put his mandolin down and started dancing. Bill didn?t actually tell him he was hired, but he did tell him to be ready to leave with the Blue Grass Boys at 8 a.m. on Monday morning.

Additional accomplishments with Flatt & Scruggs include joining the Grand Ole Opry in 1955 with a sponsorship from Martha White All-Purpose Flour; the debut of the *Flatt & Scruggs* television show the same year (now re-issued on DVD from the Country Music Hall of Fame); recording standards like ?Roll in My Sweet Baby?s Arms,? ?Foggy Mountain Top,? ?Flint Hill Special,? ?Earl?s Breakdown,? ?Foggy Mountain Special? and ?Randy Lynn Rag,? among many others; playing the Newport Folk Festival in 1959; recording a live album at Carnegie Hall in New York City in 1962; and in addition to the *Beverly Hillbillies* gig, recording the theme song for another hit TV show, *Petticoat Junction*.

While performing with Jody Maphis and Vassar Clements and his sons Gary, Randy and Steve in The Earl Scruggs Revue, Earl mixed elements of country rock and folk music into his sound. The band recorded a live album at Vanderbilt University in 1963 and another album with Linda Ronstadt, Arlo Guthrie and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. Louise and Earl Scruggs were instrumental in securing the line-up for the generation-influencing *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*

album by the Dirt Band and friends---the latter which also included people like Maybelle Carter, Roy Acuff and Jimmy Martin.

Scruggs recorded with Tom T. Hall in 1982; he recorded with Rodney Dillard, Ricky Skaggs, Lacy J Dalton and the Flying Burrito Brothers in 1983; Flatt & Scruggs were inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1985; and *Earl Scruggs & Friends* was released in 2001, featuring Earl?s fancy banjo along with Johnny Cash, Elton John, Steve Martin, Billy Bob Thornton, Dwight Yoakam, Sting and more. A single from this album, ?Foggy Mountain Breakdown? won a Grammy and several of the participants appeared with Earl on late night television shows.

In 2003 Scruggs recorded *The Three Pickers: Earl Scruggs, Doc Watson & Ricky Skaggs* for Rounder Records and he got a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. In 2004 he was featured as an artist in residence at a series of musical programs presented at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. Earl played Bonaroo in 2005, and Flatt & Scruggs was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2007. Earl received a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 2008, the same year he released *Earl Scruggs with Family & Friends: The Ultimate Collection Live at the Ryman* on Rounder.

The Country Music Hall of Fame featured an exhibit on both Earl and Louise Scruggs in 2004-2006, and the Earl Scruggs Center is scheduled to open later this year on the square in Shelby, N.C.

In an article for the *Wall Street Journa*l the late Porter Wagoner was quoted as saying, ?I always felt like Earl was to the five-string banjo what Babe Ruth was to baseball. He is the best there ever was and the best there ever will be.? Scruggs was a quiet, rather unassuming man in person who spoke primarily with a powerful right hand anchored firmly on the head of a banjo. Marty Stuart told *The Tennesseean* in a 2000 interview that Scruggs ?was the man who melted walls, and he did it without saying three words.?

It?s interesting to note that while musicians who emulate the classic bluegrass recordings from Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys in the mid-'40s consider themselves ?traditionalists,? Earl Scruggs never saw himself as a preservationist. He was always an innovator, happiest when he was creating something new. IBMA Board of Directors vice-chair Jon Weisberger called Scruggs ?one of the greatest musicians the world has ever known, a man of peace whose brilliance and generosity of spirit can serve as a lesson to us all.? We'll miss him.

Sources: Peter Cooper, *The Tennesseean*; Neil Rosenberg, *Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum?s Encyclopedia of Country Music*; Lance LeRoy, International Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame; Jim Fusilli, *The Wall Street Journal*; Nancy Cardwell, IBMA

Tags:
Earl Scruggs [3]
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