# Success in Bluegrass From Outside the USA

**By Niall Toner**

I was lucky enough to have been introduced to the bluegrass music of Bill Monroe when I was still in my teens in Dublin, the capital city of Ireland, in the late '50s. At such a geographical remove from the hills and hollows of Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina (5,000 miles!) I never dared dream in those early days that I might someday make a worthwhile contribution to bluegrass. Well, maybe I did dream a little.

At one point in the ?70s I got the notion to try my hand at writing some new songs 'in-the-tradition.? In the late ?80s, I had the privilege to open up for Johnny Cash on a string of his Irish Tour Dates, and I was inspired to write a song for Johnny called ?Fallen Angel.? I made a rough demo on a cassette tape, and I gave copies of it to Johnny, his musical director, lead guitarist, bass player, June Carter, and just about everyone else in his troupe. Johnny Cash never did record my song, but I entered ?Fallen Angel? into a small regional song contest in Glinsk, County Mayo, and lo and behold, it took first place. I was awarded a monetary prize, and my song went on to be cut by several other artists. So in terms of songwriting, I got my first signs of mildly commercial/marginally artistic encouragement, and decided to get back at writing.

I attended ASCAP and NSAI and IMRO writing workshops, while studying under patient teachers like Ralph Murphy. I also began traveling to Nashville, getting to write with as many writers as possible, and all the time utilizing my experience with the songs of the masters. The fact that I sang, and played mandolin and guitar meant that I could sit in with other musicians and writers in casual picking sessions, which also lead to several writing partnerships that have endured to this day. Folks like Don Poythress, Jon Robbin, Terri Lynn Weaver, Wendy Buckner, Keith Sewell, Barry and Holly Tashian, and many more, became my teachers, my co-writers and I'm proud to say, my friends.

In 2001, I made a decision to begin performing only my own original material. Within a year, and with a lot of support from my colleagues, Clem O'Brien and Dick Gladney and I became the Niall Toner Band. We had established a whole new reputation as an all-original string band. This, in turn, lead to our three all-original recordings released on the Avalon Records label, ?There's A Better Way,? ?Mood Swing? and ?NTB3.? Our Bill Monroe tribute songs established us firmly on the broader bluegrass scene and lead to bookings at many Festivals in Ireland and further afield. I had also been attending the Annual IBMA conference since it was held in Owensboro and Louisville, and later in Nashville, all the time networking my songs and showcasing at every opportunity.

In 2011, I performed a showcase during IBMA as part of the then Mountain Music Entertainment Group (now Make Welcome Entertainment ) with my European Colleagues, Martino Coppo (Red Wine) and Jimmy Sunnebrandt  (James King Band). The new owners of Pinecastle Records were in the audience for our show. After my set, I was approached by

Lonnie Lassiter, owner of Pinecastle, and he offered to sign me to his label. It felt like overnight success after 50 years! The deal was done, and I was signed to a label in the US that had most of my heroes in its back catalog.

I recorded my debut Pinecastle album, *Onwards and Upwards*, in Nashville at Loud Studios in May 2012 with Keith Sewell as a producer, and a whole host of great players to help out in the studio. We launched officially during IBMA 2013 at Jack's Barbecue on Broadway, and followed our launch with a tour of North Carolina and Tennessee.

Being signed to a great label like Pinecastle is an honor and a privilege, and they are always very encouraging and supportive. However, I am a firm believer in not leaving it all to someone else, so I began to develop a relationship with Air Play Direct that I had established originally in 2011.

Air Play Direct is based in Nashville, and have been in operation for the past eight years under the leadership of Robert and Lynda Weingartz. The way this digital delivery service works is that you make your music available for free to download to over 8,000 radio stations around the world. This does away with the whole business of mailing out CDs and press kits, and the entire operation can be performed at the click of a button.

This, folks, is one of the main secrets of my success in bluegrass/folk/roots music, and all organized from outside the US. Take a look at the evidence yourself by going to AirPlay Direct. In six months, *Onwards and Upwards* album reached number one and is currently 700 downloads ahead of its nearest rival in the Bluegrass/Folk charts. Also as a result, *Onwards and Upwards* is at the number 23 spot in the Roots Music Report download Chart for 2012.

**Tags:**
Niall Toner [1]

---

**Source URL:** https://ibma.org/node/542

**Links:**
[1] https://ibma.org/taxonomy/term/766