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By Taylor Coughlin

"If I'm not always up to something, I might as well give it up!" laughs music legend Ricky Skaggs over the phone. The Kentucky born-and-bred all star is busy, like always, to say the least. In August alone Skaggs will release an autobiography titled *Kentucky Traveler: My Life In Music* as well as an album of live recordings with pop icon and friend, Bruce Hornsby, called *Cluck O! Hen*. Then there are his tour dates, upcoming book tour, and family to keep up with. "Ah, but things are good," he revels.

A week after his sold out show at The Ryman, Skaggs talks candidly about his new book, one that he says has a lot of surprises people didn't know about him and may be curious to learn. From his early childhood memories of learning his first chords on the mandolin at age five, to meeting Bill Monroe, Flatt & Scruggs and Ralph Stanley, Skaggs' new book reads like he is telling the stories over coffee.

"I'll never forget, [Keith Whitley and I] simply had to bail [Ralph Stanley] out of a bad situation once," he dips into his memory, remembering the second time he met Stanley. "His bus broke down, and we were on our way to play a show...Before his set, he sat on a bar stool to hear us play," he says. "The dynamic of how powerful and important that was to my career and what I was trying to do at the time, just growing as a player and a singer, I love talking about."

The tales in *Kentucky Traveler* follow Skaggs to Nashville and through his chart-topping career in country. "It was all a balancing act, trying to bring bluegrass into country and trying to keep my foot in the tradition," he says. It was in 1996, when Bill Monroe passed away that Skaggs decided to re-focus his career. "I had a deep desire to come back to the roots of

bluegrass and spend the rest of my life promoting and playing old music; everything from bluegrass, to old time like The Carter Family, to gospel music," he says.

While Skaggs honors and celebrates traditional bluegrass and old time music, he has also made a name for himself a cross-cultural collaborator, playing with artists not in the bluegrass world: The Bee Gees? Barry Gibb, rocker and producer Jack White, and most recently pop icon Bruce Hornsby. "Playing with those artists allows bluegrass to have a better visibility," he says matter-of-factly.

In his new live album with Hornsby, *Cluck Ol? Hen*, Skaggs explores the boundaries of bluegrass with Hornsby on piano and vocals, playing old Bill Monroe, Ralph Stanley songs, and covering some of Hornsby's hits as well. Songs like "Toy Heart," "Darling Corey," and "The Way It Is," showcase Skaggs' and Hornsby's musical chemistry. While their 2007 studio album allowed them to develop their sound together, Skaggs says the live element allowed for more ideas to be played out, and more creativity to shine through. "Onstage, we could go into a 13-minute version of "White Wheeled Limousine,"" Skaggs says excitedly.

"I already know that a lot of the bluegrass audience isn't going to like it because it has a piano in it, and that's okay, because we will be able to bring this music to a whole different audience that way," he says, adding, "We're given this music as a gift and to make it more popular than when it started. If that could be my role, to invite great songwriters and singers to play this music, I've done my part. To be someone that welcomes visitors to bluegrass is what is in my heart."

In his autobiography, and in his new music, it's apparent: Skaggs remains an original, playing the music, and telling the stories he has in his heart. "When we can be original, we last a lot longer than a being a copy," Skaggs says.

If what he says is true, Ricky Skaggs' music will last for a very long time.

Kentucky Traveler: My Life In Music will be released on August 13 and may be pre-ordered on [Amazon.com](#) [2], [Barnesandnoble.com](#) [3], though the iTunes Store, and [Books A Million](#) [4].

"*Cluck Ol? Hen?* will be released on August 20, and can be pre-ordered at Skaggs Family Records [online](#) [5].

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