

Masters of Bluegrass Lecture 10 – Reno & Smiley

Bill Monroe offered South Carolina banjo player Don Reno a job in 1943, but he chose instead to serve in WWII. When he returned from the war, he was the first musician to replace Earl Scruggs in Monroe's Bluegrass Boys in 1948. Irritated at being compared to Scruggs, Reno consciously strived to develop a unique identifiable banjo style. The Reno style, as it is now known, features his own three-finger "single-string" style that allowed him to play scales and complicated fiddle tunes note-for-note.

By 1951, he formed a duo with guitarist/singer Red Smiley and called their band the Tennessee Cutups. They recorded with King records beginning in 1952. Their first single was *I'm Using My Bible for a Roadmap*, which sold well. They ultimately became one of the most successful bluegrass groups of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Between '52 and '54 they made over 60 records for King including gospel tunes, Reno originals and instrumentals. Their vast repertoire included slow duets such as *Emotions*, honkytonk numbers such as *You're No Longer a Sweetheart of Mine*, jazzy instrumentals including *Washington and Lee Swing* and gospel favorites. The addition of fiddler Mac Magaha gave the band both musical and visual interest. The group had continued success until it broke up in 1964. Smiley died in 1972 at the age of 46 due to complications with diabetes. Reno played with a variety of partners, (notably Bill Harrell) and bands until his death in 1984 at 58.

Reno & Smiley Legacy

This duo added numerous songs to the bluegrass songbook. Smiley's early death limited his influence. Reno's influence as an instrumentalist has been substantial. *Country Boy Rock and Roll* was for many, the introduction of the possibilities of lead guitar in bluegrass. Reno banjo instrumentals including *Double Banjo Blues* and *Follow the Leader* are also popular. As is Scruggs, Reno is considered a major stylist in development of 5-string banjo technique. Modern banjo player Bela Fleck gives credit to Reno for inspiring Fleck's approach to banjo playing which allows free access to all musical ideas. Ricky Skaggs had country hits in the 1990s with *I Wouldn't Change You if I could* and *Don't Cheat in Our Hometown*.