

## Masters of Bluegrass 12 – The Osborne Brothers

Sonny and Bobby, the Osborne Brothers had a long and influential career in country and bluegrass music. Their willingness to push the boundaries of bluegrass with their choices in instrumentation and song material has made them controversial in the bluegrass world. Bluegrass fans would not care except that the brothers are 2 of the most talented musicians in the genre.

Bobby's high, clear tenor voice has long set the standard for bluegrass singers. On songs like *Ruby*, he established himself as one of the great voices in the music. The Osborne Brothers introduced a new vocal trio sound to bluegrass. The traditional trio singing arrangement put the lead singer's voice pitched in the middle between the higher tenor voice and the lower baritone voice. Bill Monroe dealt with this by singing solo lead on the verses and jumping to the tenor part in the trio, having another singer take over the lead at that point.

Bobby, however, would pitch his lead to fit his high voice. Since no one in the group could sing tenor above Bobby's lead, the other 2 voices sang below Bobby to create: lead on top, baritone below that and tenor sung one octave lower than usual below the baritone. The result was a unique sound now referred to as *high lead*. The group recorded many songs that featured this vocal blend and they became known as one of the best trios in bluegrass.

As a mandolin player, Bobby deserves high marks as an innovator. Bluegrass musician Roland White remembers that in the 1950s, Osborne was the first to play the mandolin in a style significantly different than Monroe. As a fiddler too, Bobby's approach featured long strings of fiddle-like, eighth note phrases that presaged modern styles.

Sonny has long been respected as one of the great banjo players. His style remains firmly rooted in the Scruggs tradition spiced with his own touches over the years. In his search for new sounds for the banjo, he introduced a 6 string instrument that used a lower C string extending the banjo's range a whole step.

The Osbornes combined great vocals with superior instrumental skills. So where is the controversy? The Osborne Brothers drift towards the commercial Nashville country sound in the 1960s and 70s was traitorous to lovers of the pure bluegrass sound. The Osbornes experienced more commercial success as they made these changes. They had been using drums on their recordings since 1957. In 1966 they had a hit with *Up This Hill and Down* featuring Sonny's new 6 string banjo. Later that year they added the electric bass. In 1968 they added pedal steel guitar to their records and had a big hit with *Rocky Top*. In 1969, they added electric pickups to their acoustic instruments. This allowed them to be heard well on the country music package shows they worked regularly.

The outraged bluegrass community filled the pages of *Bluegrass Unlimited* magazine with their disapproval. These fans seemed to ignore the fact that bluegrass music had been born on stage with electric microphones. The whole idea of bluegrass band stage choreography had developed to allow the featured singer or instrument to get close to the microphone. The Osbornes simply placed the mic at the source of the sound. The Osbornes' approach seemed to be working. Their next record, *Tennessee Hound Dog* featured their electric instruments and was their biggest hit to date. In 1970, they were voted *best vocal group* by the CMA. In 1971, they released *Georgia Pineywoods* featuring an orchestrated string section.

By 1974, the era of the country package shows had died and the Osbornes returned to an all-acoustic lineup. They continued to perform largely at bluegrass festivals throughout the 1980s and 90s.

#### The Osborne Brothers Legacy

Certainly, their polished skills set a high water mark for all bluegrass groups. Their impressive list of hit records exposed many country fans to quality bluegrass music. Sonny's strong opinions about banjos and banjo playing influenced many through his long-time article in *Banjo Newsletter*.

Ruby (1956)

Once More (1958)

Up This Hill and Down (1965)

Making Plans (1965)

Rocky Top (1967)

Tennessee Hound Dog (1969)

Midnight Flyer (1972)