

Masters of Bluegrass #13 – Folk Music and Second Generation Bluegrass. Parts 1& 2

Americans in the modern era have a fascination with folk music – or at least the idea of folk music. The 1935 newsreel of blues singer Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter and music collector John Lomax gives insight into the public’s interest into “authentic” folk sources. Popular tastes have always fallen on the side of “cleaned-up” folk presentations that have the appearance of being authentic. Therefore, the Lead Belly song “Goodnight Irene” became a national #1 hit in 1950 cleaned up by the urban folk group The Weavers and made into an embarrassing smaltzy anthem.

The “Anthology of American Folk Music” was a very influential six-volume set of recordings of country music released in 1952 featuring recordings from the 1920s and 30s. The album is famous due to its role as a touchstone for the American folk music revival in the 1950s and 1960s. “Anthology” listeners, largely from the urban Northeast, first heard country and blues performers of the 20s and 30s on these albums. By the late 1950s, there was a sizable “folk boom” on college campuses and at folk clubs and concert halls across the nation. In 1957, the clean-cut “Kingston Trio” had a major #1 hit with “Tom Dooley” - an old North Carolina folk song based on the 1866 murder of a woman named Laura Foster in Wilkes County, North Carolina. Also in 1957, The New Lost City Ramblers was formed in NYC. This group of young musicians had a commitment to performing in historically accurate musical styles. Consequently, their performance of “Tom Dooley” was radically different from the “Trio’s” version and not surprisingly, less popular.

Several young folk inspired bluegrass bands formed in the late 1950s. These groups were not from the South and didn’t learn to play bluegrass like the first generation we have studied. They didn’t listen to the Opry on Saturdays or watch bluegrass bands on local TV shows or learn the music from older relatives. They were inspired by recordings of the great 1st generation players. The Greenbriar Boys were from NYC and consisted on John Herald, vocals, guitar, Bob Yellin, banjo and Ralph Rinzler, mandolin. Later versions of the group included mandolin player Frank Wakefield and fiddler Jim Buchanan. They recorded 5 nationally available albums for the folk label Vanguard in the early 1960s. Rinzler was later responsible for bringing Bill Monroe to folk venues throughout the country. They introduced many Northern folk fans to the bluegrass sound.

The Stoneman Family was a notable group consisting of Roni, Donna, Jimmy and Van Stoneman. They were grandchildren of Earnest “Pop” Stoneman, who had recorded his old time music beginning in 1924. He assisted Ralph Peer during the historic “Bristol Sessions” in 1927. The Stoneman Family Band recorded from the late 1950s through the 1960s. Their many television and movie appearances presented an attractive, young and energetic version of bluegrass to the American public. For many Americans, the Stoneman’s appearances on national programs such as Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Hour (1956) and Shindig (1965,) may have been their first exposure to bluegrass music. Champion fiddler Scotty Stoneman was also a member of this family although he seldom appeared as part of the “Stonemans. Roni and Donna may have been the first professional female instrumentalist/singers in the music.

The Kentucky Colonels from Southern California consisted of brothers Roland and Clarence White, banjo player Billy Ray Latham and bass player Roger Bush. They appeared on an early episode of the Andy Griffith Show as a local band recorded by a

talent scout. The televised band had an earlier line up with brothers Roland, Clarence and Eric joined by dobro player Leroy Mack (McNees) and Latham on banjo. The Colonels appeared at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival where Clarence's lead guitar style caused somewhat of a sensation. Guitarist Doc Watson was also at the festival and this summit of two early pioneers of flatpicking lead guitar was memorable for all. Their 1964 instrumental album "Appalachian Swing" features Roland and Clarence trading solos on many traditional tunes. The album is now considered a classic. The Colonel's repertoire reflected their love of Bill Monroe, The Stanley Brothers and other 1st generation bluegrass bands. By the mid 1960s, Clarence began to play electric guitar in the L.A. recording studios and eventually became lead guitarist for the legendary rock group "The Byrds." Roland went on to play guitar with Bill Monroe and mandolin with Lester Flatt. In the early 1970s, Roland and Clarence started playing together again until Clarence's tragic death in 1973. Roland continued his career with Country Gazette, The Nashville Bluegrass Band and The Roland White Band.

Starting in 1963, the Dillards of Missouri were regularly featured on the Andy Griffith Show as the musical Darling family. This hillbilly image was reinforced in their entertaining stage show. Their first two albums on Electra introduced a new generation to good bluegrass music. The first album contained two songs that have since become bluegrass standards, "Dooley" and "Old Home Place." Their third album was an instrumental effort that featured Oklahoma fiddler Byron Berline. The band continued to record in the 1960s and 70s as a influential country rock band presaging groups like the Eagles. Doug began an association with former "Byrd" Gene Clark and recorded two albums as the "Dillard and Clark Expedition." The original Dillards were honored at the 2009 IBMA awards.

Of the urban folk inspired groups, The Country Gentlemen has had the longest lasting impact on mainstream bluegrass music. Formed in 1957, the group featured guitarist/singer Charlie Waller and mandolin player John Duffey. Banjo player Bill Emerson and bassist Larry Lahey rounded out the original group. They played at folk venues including clubs, festivals and college campuses and their early repertoire included many covers of folk songs. After a few early changes, the band settled into a somewhat permanent lineup consisting of Waller, Duffey, Eddie Adcock on banjo, and Tom Gray on bass. Within several years, Duffey, Adcock and Gray had left the band. Charlie Waller assembled the "second generation" of the Country Gentlemen soon after, with Bill Emerson returning on banjo, Doyle Lawson on mandolin, Bill Yates on bass and Ricky Skaggs on fiddle. With a shift to a "bluegrass" record label, the group became a headlining act at bluegrass festivals throughout the 1970s. The group members included a who's-who of 1970s and 80s bluegrass musicians such as Jerry Douglas, Mike Lilly, Wendy Miller and Jimmy Gaudreau. In the band's later years, Charlie Waller served as the group's "focal point and leader" until his death in August 2004.

Country Gentlemen Legacy

The CG introduced songs by contemporary songwriters into bluegrass music. They also introduced songs that became bluegrass standards including *Two Little Boys*, *Down Where the River Bends*, *Amelia Earhart's Last Flight* (written 1939 after Earhart's 1937 disappearance) *Matterhorn*, *City of New Orleans* and especially *Fox on the Run* originally by the group Manfred Mann (1968.) Several important bluegrass careers were started by or continued by the band including Skaggs, Lawson and Douglas.

