

## Masters of Bluegrass - #14 Ricky Skaggs

Ricky Skaggs is a giant in the bluegrass field who has touched all the major movements in the music since the 1960s. At 7 years old, he came to the attention of Flatt and Scruggs and appeared on their TV program. As a teen, he and partner Keith Whitley joined Ralph Stanley's group where they re-created the vocal sound of brothers Ralph and Carter Stanley. As a young man he played with The Country Gentleman before joining the J. D. Crowe and the New South band. He briefly formed his own "newgrass" band before "leaving" bluegrass in the 1980s for a successful commercial country music career. He returned to bluegrass in the late 90s with his supergroup "Kentucky Thunder" and has in many ways, assumed the title of "Mr. Bluegrass" left by Bill Monroe's death.

Ricky was born on July 18, 1954 in Cordell, Kentucky, and was already an accomplished singer and mandolin player by the time he reached his teens. In 1971, he entered the world of professional music with his friend, the late country singer, Keith Whitley, when the two young musicians were invited to join the band of bluegrass patriarch Ralph Stanley. Later in the 1970s, Skaggs joined the successful Country Gentlemen on fiddle.

In 1975, he was a member of J.D. Crowe's band, the New South. Their self-titled album that year was a high point for the decade in bluegrass. Many of the songs have become standards and the album is considered a classic. The combination of Skaggs, Crowe, Tony Rice, Jerry Douglas and Bobby Sloan was a combination of the greatest young bluegrass professionals of the time.

In the 1980s Skaggs had a successful commercial country music career with top 10 hits including "Honey (Open That Door)" · "Uncle Pen" · "Something in My Heart" · "Country Boy" · "You Make Me Feel Like a Man" · "Cajun Moon" · "I've Got a New Heartache" · "Love's Gonna Get You Someday" · "Love Can't Ever Get Better Than This" · "Lovin' Only Me" · and "Let It Be You." His hit recording of "Uncle Pen" brought attention to bluegrass and Monroe was even featured in the video.

Skaggs' 1993 duet recording with guitarist/singer Tony Rice signaled his return to bluegrass and is a high watermark for the music. "Skaggs and Rice" presents the duo in the simple, unadorned style of the best brother duets of the 1930s. The album has been re-mastered for CD and it remains a masterful classic recording of both men.

In the later 1990s, his return to bluegrass continued with a powerful band featuring young, talented players he had likely inspired in the 1970s (if they were even born yet.) The all-star lineup of Kentucky Thunder includes Andy Leftwich (fiddle), Cody Kilby (lead guitar), Mark Fain (bass), Paul Brewster (tenor vocals, rhythm guitar), Ben Helson (baritone vocals, rhythm guitar), and Jim Mills (banjo). The band quickly established itself as one of the premier organizations in bluegrass music.

### Ricky Skaggs' Legacy

Skaggs continues to be the focal point for the music. With the exception of Ralph Stanley, he is the face of bluegrass. He has been on several classic-must have recordings. His mandolin playing which featured a jaunty, swinging, almost humorous approach in his early career, has taken on the more serious mature demeanor of a player who is currently leading the music.