

Masters of Bluegrass #22 The Women

DISCLAIMER - THIS LECTURE IS NOT COMPREHENSIVE!

The story of women in bluegrass is largely unwritten, Maybelle and Sarah Carter were early female country voices but for the first decades, bluegrass was largely a boys club. The early exceptions were Bessie Lee Mauldin and Gloria Belle Flickenger, both bass players for Bill Monroe and Jimmy Martin, respectively.

The 1970s saw an explosion of female bluegrass talent. Banjo players Louisa Branscomb (wrote Steel Rails) and Susie Monick were groundbreakers. Lead singers Ginger Boatwright (Red, White and Bluegrass) and Laurie Lewis hit the scene. It seems fitting that in mid 1970s Berkely, CA. (where there was less sexual stereotyping) the first all female bluegrass band (The Good Ol' Persons) developed. Consisting of fiddler Laurie Lewis and guitarist Kathy Kallick, the band attracted some of the best female musicians and a few honorary males.

Older female bluegrass performers tended to be vocalists as with Wilma Lee Cooper. Wilma Lee & Stoney Cooper and the Clinch Mountain Clan were regulars for ten years on WWVA-AM's rival to the Grand Ole Opry, Wheeling Jamboree, beginning in 1947 before joining the Opry in 1957. Cooper died in 1977 but Wilma Lee stayed on the Opry as a solo star and on occasion recorded an album for a bluegrass record label.

Delia Bell was a singing partner with Bill Grant, promoter of the Hugo. OK bluegrass festival, Bell was largely a local performer until she was "discovered" by country singer Emmy Lou Harris who produced an album on Bell in 1983.

The Whites were an American country music vocal group consisting of lead singer Sharon White (guitar,) her sister Cheryl (bass,) and their father Buck (mandolin.) In the 1980s they scored commercial country hits with songs including "You Put The Blue In Me," "Hangin' Around," "Give Me Back That Old Familiar Feeling," "Pins and Needles," "If It Ain't Love (Let's Leave It Alone)," "Hometown Gossip" and "When the New Wears Off of Our Love." Sharon White has been married to Ricky Skaggs since 1982. Their first album on County featured fiddler Kenny Baker and banjo player Jack Hicks and was released 1972.

In the late 1980s, Laurie Lewis formed "Laurie Lewis and Grant Street". Since then, she has recorded solo and duo albums, usually accompanied by mandolin artist and singer, Tom Rozum. Lewis may be one of the first women to headline their own BG band. Her recording of "Who Will Watch the Home Place?" won the IBMA Song of the Year award in 1994

In 1974, Lynn Morris won the National Banjo Championship, the first female to do so. Assembling her own group, the Lynn Morris Band, in 1988, she began recording for Rounder Records. Over time, her bandmates have included husband Marshall Wilborn, mandolinist Jess Brock, singer/guitarist Chris Jones, mandolinist/banjo player Dick Smith, fiddler Tad Marks, banjo/fiddle player Ron Stewart, mandolinist David McLaughlin, banjoist Tom Adams, and fiddler Stuart Duncan. She won several further bluegrass awards in the 1990s. Her recording of "Mama's Hands" won IBMA Song of the Year in 1996

Kate McKenzie was a favorite guest on Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show from 1981-1999. As lead singer with her bluegrass band, Stoney Lonesome, she recorded six albums, and toured Japan, Europe and North America. As a member of

The Hopeful Gospel Quartet, she recorded two live albums, including one from Carnegie Hall with Chet Atkins. Her first solo album "Let Them Talk" was on the National Bluegrass Charts for ten months, and her 1997 release, "Age of Innocence" was nominated for a Grammy for best bluegrass album.

Kathy Chiavola attended Oberlin College and was trained as an opera singer. She played bass with the Doug Dillard Band. She had a duet with late fiddler Randy Howard.

Other notable female performers are: DeDe Wyland who played with Tony Trischa and Skyline in the 1980s, Alison Brown, who recorded at 12 with Stuart Duncan. She played in 80s with Alison Krause. She started the Compass recording label and still records her own music and a host of others including:

Carol Young, bass with Greencards, Abigail Washington banjo with Uncle Earl, Murphy Henry and daughter Casey Henry of the Murphy Method, Sharon Gilcrest – Tony Rice Peter Rowan Uncle Earl, Dawn Watson – with Alan Munde and Country Gazette, Fiddler Meagan Lynch

Janet Davis

Janet Beasley

Sarah Jarose

Sierra Hull

Bass players Bryn Bright - Tony Rice Peter Rowan, Missy Raines and Molly Mason.

Cello

Nancy Blake

Dobro

Sally Van Meter

BMP compiles an annual women in bluegrass issues.