

Masters of Bluegrass – Lecture #4 String Bands and Brother Duos

When Jimmie Rodgers died in 1933 he had already set the stage for the future nature of country music. Increasingly, the interest in the music would be on individual performers rather than groups, But for the 1930s at least, hillbilly groups such as Gid Tanner's Skillet Lickers and Charlie Poole's North Carolina Ramblers continued to be popular recording acts. It is in the 1930s that we begin to see a split in the history of bluegrass music from country music in general. Another development in this decade was the emergence of western cowboy music made popular in western movies featuring music by Gene Autry, The Sons of the Pioneers and a host of performers in the western style. The style became so popular that when country music promoters stopped using the name "hillbilly," (perhaps due to perceived negative connotations) it adopted the title "Country and Western." Indeed, many older people still refer to this music as "Country and Western" which now sounds antiquated to our ears rather than the more current title, "Country Music."

The string bands of the 1920s and 30s played an ensemble style that is variously called "old time" or mountain music." The bands feature fiddles, guitars, mandolins, banjos and occasionally rarer instruments such as harmonicas and dulcimers. The banjos were played in the older "frailing," "clawhammer" or "drop-thumb" styles. The vocals were not trained and had a unpolished, simple air to them. The un-initiated often find the vocals of the old time string bands to be difficult to enjoy. Interestingly, many modern fans of old time music consider the period from the early 1920s to 1939 to be "the golden age of country music." The most conservative of these people consider the later development of country music (including bluegrass) to be a crass, commercial corruption of the original, pure expression of simple country folk. In my opinion however country music had been changing from the outset. Technologies such as the radio and recording allowed performers to hear one another and change their performances accordingly. On large stage shows such as the Grand Old Opry, performers learned to alter their presentations to please the audience. Performers with traveling medicine show experience, including Uncle Dave Macon, has a head start on this process.