

Masters of Bluegrass – Lecture #5 – Bill Monroe and his Bluegrass Boys 1939-1945

Initially, both Charlie and Bill Monroe hired new singers to try to recreate the sound they had before their breakup in 1938. By 1939, however, Bill had formed “Bill Monroe and his Bluegrass Boys,” a band that featured guitar, fiddle, upright bass and Monroe’s driving mandolin. When the group auditioned for WSM’s “Grand Old Opry” radio program that year, they were recognized as a powerful group that combined stellar musicianship, old time singing, higher keys, faster tempos and comedy into an attractive stage show. In addition, they had added the relatively new sound of gospel quartet singing to their repertoire.

Since Monroe had sung tenor to his brother’s lead, he was not yet developed as a lead singer and hired singers such as Clyde Moody. Recording was severely limited by the war and Monroe only recorded in 1940, 41 and 45 during these years.

During these years Monroe grew in stature as a member of the Grand Old Opry. As a result of the large coverage area of clear channel WSM, they played in Alabama, Kentucky, West Virginia, and the Carolinas. Bill organized a tent show that would set up in every town and he featured other musical acts in addition to his own group. He even organized the band into a baseball team and would challenge local teams to generate publicity.

The 1940 recording sessions included Clyde Moody (guitar,) Tommy Magness, (fiddle and Wilber Wesbrooks (bass.) The session started with Bill’s version of the Jimmie Rodgers song “Muleskinner Blues” with Monroe playing guitar. Clyde Moody sang his popular “Six White Horses, and Monroe sang another solo on “Doghouse Blues.” Magness played a blistering, too-fast-for-dancing version of “Katy Hill” and Monroe recorded Tennessee Blues.” They also recorded a gospel quartet. In 1941, the group, now consisting of Art Wooten, (fiddle) Pete Pyle (guitar and Wesbrook on bass, recorded again. Included on this session was a new fiddle showcase tune written in the mid 1930s by Florida fiddler Chubby Wise. “Orange Blossom Special” was well received as soon as it entered Monroe’s repertoire. Today it is hard not to think of OBS as an overplayed fiddle feature banned at contests but in 1941 it was a new, exciting novelty.

The 1945 session included the addition of the somewhat unusual accordion played by “Sally Ann” Forrester. “Kentucky Waltz” from this session, was an original Monroe solo that became a standard in his repertoire. He re-recorded it several times in his later career. “True Life Blues” was sung in the brother duet style and featured the first banjo solo to appear on a Monroe record. Comedian Stringbean played in the frailing style and was a new addition to the band. “Bluegrass Special” featured all the musicians in the band with their own solo. The practice of featuring instrumentalists would become a common feature of Bluegrass music.

By 1945, Monroe was established hillbilly star. He was a major act on the Grand Old Opry roster. His shows drew fans all over the South. He was a respected bandleader, singer and songwriter. However, if Monroe’s 1945 band had represented the end of his musical development, his music would be remembered as an odd branch of country music seldom studied and never imitated. Everything was about to change the next year.