

Masters of Bluegrass Lecture #6 Bill Monroe's "Bluegrass" Band

In 1946 Bill Monroe was an established hillbilly music star. With the general explosion of hillbilly music after the war, he was poised to enjoy major commercial success. Sometime in late 1944 or early 1945 when he hired a young guitar player/singer named Lester Flatt from Sparta, Tennessee, he was on his way to forming what was arguably his best band ever and the first true bluegrass band.

Flatt's rich baritone was perfect duet partner for Monroe's soaring tenor. Monroe had already hired fiddler Chubby Wise from Florida. Wise had played Western Swing previously, but Monroe worked with him to get the sound he wanted. Monroe's band, from its outset in 1939, had been a fiddle driven band. His recordings of *Katy Hill* and *Orange Blossom Special* show how much he valued it. The higher, non-traditional keys Monroe sang in and the faster tempos required the best fiddlers. Monroe had also hired a comedian on bass named Howard Watts (Cedric Rainwater.)

Stringbean left the band in 1945 and Monroe eventually replaced him with a 21-year old banjo picker from North Carolina. Earl Scruggs played in an exciting three-finger style that had not been heard much outside of North Carolina. While he was not the sole inventor of the style, Scruggs' membership in Monroe's Bluegrass Boys put him in front of the public who thought of him as the originator of the style. Scruggs' sparkling playing turned the heads of musicians and fans alike. Scruggs quickly became a phenomena. Judge Hay, who emceed the Opry would introduce, Monroe's portion of the program saying "Here are Bill and Earl" or even "Here's Earl with his fancy banjo!" Earl's style of playing became a permanent part of the Monroe sound even after Scruggs left the band,

The magical combination of this version of Monroe's band defined bluegrass. Future generations of musicians would study the recordings of this group for the prototypical roles for every instrument in the band. Vocal duets, trios, and quartets were defined by the group. Only the later additions of lead guitar and dobro would change this model of perfect bluegrass music.

When Earl Scruggs gave notice to Bill Monroe in 1948, he was followed quickly by Lester Flatt and bassist Howard Watts. Despite the reasons the players gave for leaving, the truth is that they quickly reformed as Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys. The best explanation of the mass departure is financial. As the only Bluegrass Boy with as high school education, Scruggs was picked by Monroe to keep up with the money paid to Monroe on tour. While Scruggs, and therefore the band, knew that they arrived back in Nashville with a briefcase filled with 5 to 7 thousand dollars, they also were aware that their sideman paychecks were only \$60 per week. The remaining profits rightfully were Monroe's. While not the first or last musicians to quit Monroe's group, he seemed to take this particularly hard and remained angry about it for quite some time. Indeed he didn't publicly appear with Flatt until the 1970s.

With only fiddler Benny Martin remaining, Monroe reformed the Bluegrass Boys with banjo player Don Reno who played in Scruggs style. Monroe had found the *bluegrass* sound.