

Masters of Bluegrass Lecture #7 Flatt and Scruggs

When Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs left Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Boys in 1948, they started a journey that took them and bluegrass music further than they could ever imagine. Until their breakup in 1969, they performed in venues far and wide and for many, became the face and sound of bluegrass music. Shortly after Flatt and Scruggs left Monroe to form their own group, imitators of the Monroe sound, including The Stanley Brothers, Reno and Smiley and others quickly developed. By the early 1950s, there were as many as 10 groups who had adopted the "Monroe sound" as their own.

Flatt and Scruggs with their Foggy Mountain Boys which initially included Jimmy Shoemate, Mac Wiseman and Howard Watts, soon began recording for Mercury records. Just as their recordings with Monroe had done, the Mercury sessions helped define bluegrass music. Indeed, these recordings are still considered essential study for any fan of Bluegrass music. By 1955, they became members of the Grand Old Opry, despite Monroe's efforts to prevent this.

In an attempt to distinguish their sound from that of Monroe, F & S minimized the role of the mandolin in their music. By 1955, they added as new instrumental voice to their band that further separated them from Monroe. Josh "Buck" Graves played a Hawaiian style slide guitar called the "dobro" in a driving three-finger style that owed much to Scruggs' banjo style. On gospel quartets, they replaced the mandolin with Scruggs' guitar picking. Flatt's rich baritone was featured on nearly every recording in contrast to Monroe's strident tenor. In many ways these changes made F & S's brand of bluegrass more palatable to the general public.

With Nashville's Martha White Flour as sponsor, they took their music all over the South, had a regular Nashville based TV show and even played New York's prestigious Carnegie Hall in 1962. That same year the band was featured on the soundtrack to the "Beverly Hillbillies, a tv sitcom that was often the #1 network program during its 9 year run. In addition Lester and Earl were periodically featured as characters on the program giving them massive exposure in living rooms throughout the nation. Their *Foggy Mountain Breakdown* (recorded on Mercury in the early 1950s) was used in the popular 1967 motion picture *Bonnie and Clyde*," further increasing interest in the music, boosting banjo sales and demand for banjo teachers.

Flatt and Scruggs were growing apart musically. Their last 2 albums featured progressive arrangements and song selections largely reflecting Scruggs more eclectic tastes. As a result, the twosome ended their 20-year relationship in 1969. Scruggs formed *The Earl Scruggs Revue*, a rock band featuring his sons and several former band members. Flatt formed the more traditional *Lester Flatt and the Nashville Grass*. Flatt died in 1979 at the age of 64.. Scruggs is now 85.