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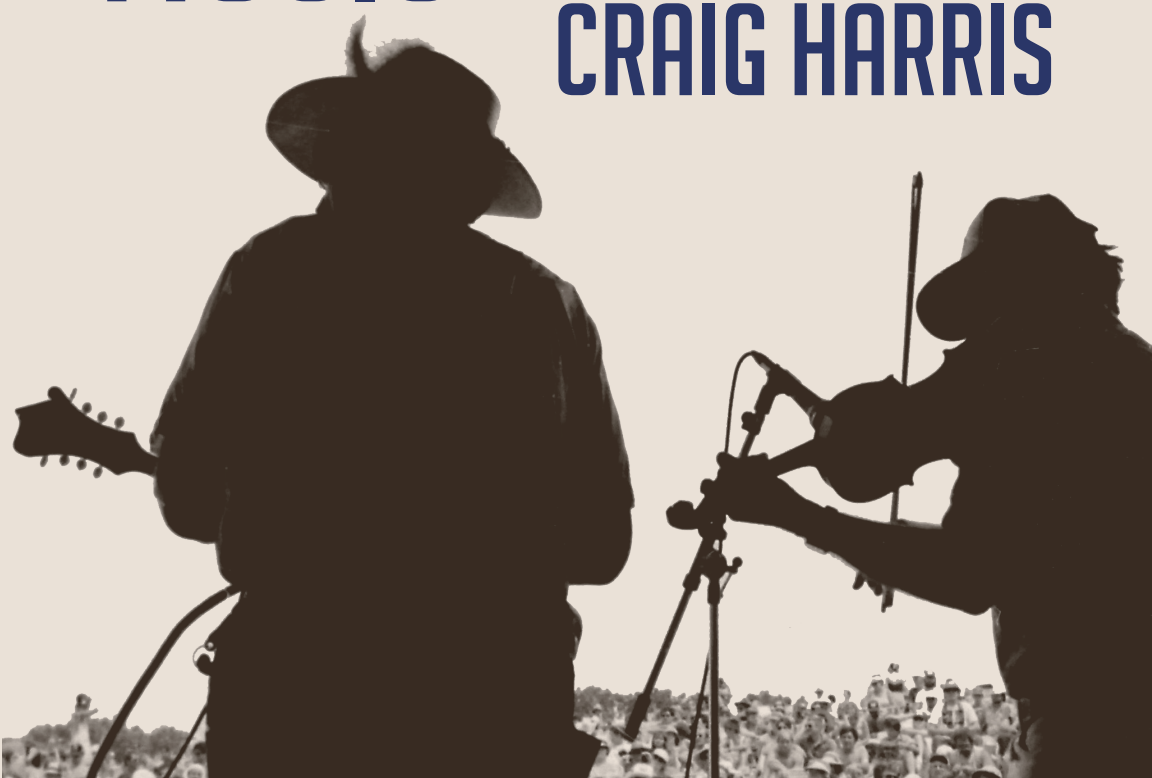
CRAIG HARRIS



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To Petey, Bamboo, Tu, and Marys everywhere,
with appreciation to all who shared their time and memories

Contents

Introduction

"Bluegrass is the music of the people, not just the South. The songs come from all over America; they come from Europe. They tell about people's lives and experiences, their loves, heartbreaks, happiness, joy, mama, daddy, grandma, grandpa, farming, coal mining, moonshining, and prison. Anything people go through, there's a bluegrass song."

Five-time IBMA (International Bluegrass Music Association) "Female Vocalist of the Year" Dale Ann Bradley

"It's a living and breathing art."

Banjo player/Compass Records co-owner/producer Alison Brown

The instrumentation—fiddle, banjo, guitar, and bass—is often the same, but old-time Appalachian music and bluegrass have followed different paths since the 1930s. The "Father of Bluegrass," Bill Monroe, "gave everybody an opportunity to shine, but old-time music has a wall of sound," said banjo player Frank Lee, whose Freight Hoppers sparked an old-time revival in the 1990s. "You take the melody and glorify it. You're not trying to show the world what you could do. You play the melody, play it again, and play it again. It's easier for me. I can zone out into what some people call a trance."

"You play a tune for fifteen or twenty minutes," added fiddler Judy Hyman, of the neo-trad Horse Flies, "letting it build and evolve, not through improvisation but a more subtle movement, related to the pacing that minimalistic music moves."

A variety of traditions converged to create the "old-time" or "old-timey" music of Appalachia. Germans settled in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley in 1730, followed by English Quakers, Scots-Irish, French Huguenots, Welsh, Czechs, and Polish. After the Revolutionary War, thousands of Irish arrived as indentured servants. Ireland's potato famine of the 1840s increased immigration. Once the ancestral home of the Cherokee and

Shawano tribes, 40,409 square miles that would become part of Kentucky opened to settlers in the 1850s, after the Indians were relocated to west of the Mississippi River.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Appalachian women still sang a cappella ballads from the Old World. Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles collected 1,600 versions of 500 ballads and dance tunes in Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee between 1916 and 1918. Nearly all were variants of songs and fiddle tunes collected by Francis James Child in England, Scotland, and Ireland a half-century before. Sharp's rejection of anything other than Anglo-Celtic music, however, prevented him from collecting hundreds of additional songs.

Music and dance intertwined. Reels, jigs, waltzes, and polkas were popular. "You can't separate the music from the dances," said caller/clawhammer banjo player Phil Jamison. "Reels done by early settlers from the British Isles, primarily Scots-Irish, were the foundation for our square dances, but in square dancing, there are elements of French cotillions and quadrilles, as well as Cherokee and African-American influences. The same is true with step dancing or clogging."

The heart of Appalachian music was the fiddle. "Every fiddle player plays the same notes," said Frank Lee, "but the syncopation, because of their bowing, is different. Sometimes we hook up note for note but at other times, I'll play a countermelody."

Italian fiddles replaced hornpipes, tabors, and harps at Scotland's country dances by the sixteenth century. Their portability and ability to solo or play with other musicians made them the instrument of choice in the Americas. Members of the Cherokee tribe played fiddles and danced "English dances" as early as 1809.

With the exception of a white fiddler in Charlottesville, Cecil Sharp noted that only African-Americans sang while playing banjo or fiddle. The *Western Sentinel* referred to "an old-time colored fiddler from near Iredell" in 1908. A year later, the *Statesville Landmark* mentioned an "old-time fiddler of the colored race." The "old-time" appellation spread to mountain music of both races. "Whites and blacks were certainly playing music together for a long time," said Jamison.

Scottish fiddler Niel Gow's short bow saw-stroke provided the cornerstone of old-time fiddling, but other influences were present as well. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, African-Americans were the primary dance fiddlers in New Orleans. Thomas Jefferson's brother frequented Monticello's slave quarters to dance and learn fiddle from slaves. African-Americans flocked to the Appalachian Mountains, in the 1880s, to lay track and drill tunnels for railroads needed by logging and mining companies.

Trains brought new settlers, along with mandolins and guitars. The blending of cultures intensified after the introduction of phonograph records and radio. "Don't tell me old-timers didn't play jigs," said Rhiannon Giddens. "They played songs from vaudeville, minstrel shows, anything they felt like playing."

Playing with African-American banjo players since the 1840s, white fiddlers became aware of syncopation. Banjo players learned to adapt to Western music's established keys and scales. The banjo "was the first instrument in the black community," said Dom Flemons, "something people made at home thinking of African traditions. People got through hard times with song."

Banjos were "definitely an American instrument," added Giddens. "There were banjo-type instruments in Africa (ngoni, kontigo, gimbri, and gurkel) but the culmination of these instruments, the synchronization of African culture, was the banjo in the Caribbean. It made its way to North America."

The first documented white banjo player (and perhaps the first to add a droning fifth string), Joel Sweeney (1810-60), performed at the Broadway Circus, in NY, in April 1839. An African-American circus worker taught Ohio-born Daniel Decatur Emmett (1815-1904), composer of "Dixie," to play banjo. "Every first-generation white banjo player had to learn from a black banjo player," said Giddens, "and perform in blackface."

The banjo's popularity spread. Automated, coin-operated, banjo-playing machines appeared in the 1890s and inspired violinist Louis Stepner's easily played tenor banjo. By the end of the century, formally attired women were playing parlor music in banjo orchestras.

The winner of the first Banjo Championship of the World, at NY's Chickering Hall in 1887, Stamford, CT's Reuben R. Brooks repeated the next two years. Hyde Park, NY-born Sylvester Louis "Vess" Ossman (1868-1923) transformed hundreds of marches, jigs, and ragtime piano tunes into banjo tours de force, influencing succeeding virtuosos, including Somerville, NJ-born Fred Van Eps (1878-1960), Piqua, OH's Harry Reser (1896-1965), and Reading, MA-born Edwin Ellsworth "King of the Banjo" Peabody (1902-70).

(Adam) Manly Reece (1830-64) introduced the banjo to North Carolina's Piedmont before the Civil War. Banjo-playing Appalachian women included his sister, Julia Reece Green (1842-1911), Cynthia May "Cousin Emmy" Carver (1903-80), Lily May Ledford (1917-85), and Lois LaVerne "Molly O'Day" Williamson (1923-87). Dillsboro, NC-born Samantha Biddix "Aunt Samantha" Bumgarner (1878-1960) cut fourteen tracks for Columbia, in April 1924, backed by fiddler Eva Smathers Davis. She would appear at Bascom Lamar Lunsford's Mountain Dance and Folk Festival, in Asheville, from its 1928 inception until 1959.

Early banjo players played in the downward-stroke clawhammer, or frailing, style, but there were numerous approaches to clawhammer playing. A McMinnville, TN-born farmer who plowed his field with a mule, David Harrison "Uncle Dave" Macon (1870-1952) "had a way of twirling his banjo," said Mac Benford, "and juggling it while he played."

On November 6, 1925, Macon and fiddler Sid Harkreader appeared on *An Evening with WSM*, an on-air fundraiser for Nashville's police department. Three days later, the radio station hired George Dewey Hay, an ex-newspaper reporter who had hosted the predecessor to *The National Barn Dance* in Chicago, to host its new *WSM Barn Dance*. Premiering on November 28, the show's name changed after Hay opened its December 27 broadcast by telling listeners, "For the past hour, we have been listening to music taken from Grand Opera. From now on, we will present the 'Grand Ole Opry.'"[1]

Macon would be one of the *Opry*'s top stars for more than a quarter-century, but he clung to the banjo player's traditional comic role. After watching Earl Scruggs' debut with Monroe, he pointed out, "That boy can play the banjo but he ain't one damned bit funny."[2]

In an antecedent of the Scruggs Roll, Moran Lee "Dock" Boggs (1898-1971) picked upwards on the first two strings with his index finger while plucking the other three strings with his thumb. More than three decades separated the two eras of the West Norton, VA-born coal miner's musical career. Tracks between 1927 and 1932 included "Prodigal Son," "Country Blues," "Sugar Baby" (recorded by the Youngbloods as "Sugar Babe"), and "Oh, Death" (covered by David Lindley's fusion-folk band, Kaleidoscope; Ralph Stanley sang it in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*). During the Great Depression, Boggs gave his banjo to a friend and returned to the coalmines. He wouldn't record again until being "rediscovered" by Mike Seeger in 1963. Continuing to record until 1968, he performed until shortly before his death on February 7, 1971, his seventy-third birthday. "It had been my heart's desire to put my old songs on records," he told Curwood Garrett, "so the younger generation could learn them if they wanted to, and I could make a little extra cash as my pension and social security isn't too much."[3]

Hailing from Fannin County, GA, in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Fiddlin' John Carson (1868-1949) was already a seven-time state-champion fiddler when he traveled to Atlanta, in 1923, to record "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane," a nostalgic minstrel tune from 1871, and "The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster's Going to Crow." Missouri-born Ralph Peer (1892-1960), who produced the session for OKeh, called Carson's fiddling and grizzly singing "pluperfect awful," but the disc sold half a million copies and became country music's first hit. Along with Eck Robertson's fiddle tune recordings of the previous year, Carson's success set off an era of old-time

rural music that wouldn't subside until the Great Depression a decade later.

Traveling uninvited to New York in March 1923, Henry Whitter (1892-1941), a Grayson County, VA textile worker who played harmonica and guitar, persuaded the General Phonograph Corporation (owners of OKeh) to audition him. Invited back six months later, he cut nine tracks with fiddler Gilliam Banmon Grayson (1887-1930), including "Lee Highway Blues," "Handsome Molly," and "Little Maggie." Grayson and Whitter's murder ballad, "Tom Dula," helped to ignite the late-fifties folk revival when the Kingston Trio covered it as "Tom Dooley." Grayson and Whitter's "The Wreck of the Old 97," set to Henry Clay Work's "The Ship That Never Returned" (1865), recalled a fatal 1903 mail-train accident near Danville, VA. Covered by Vernon Dalhart (Marion Ty Slaughter), a classically trained singer, it became country music's first million seller (selling more than seven million copies).

Inspired by Grayson and Whitter's success, Ernest Van "Pop" Stoneman (1893-1968) sent a demo tape to Peer, who signed the Monarat, VA-born guitar, autoharp, and harmonica player and songwriter. Stoneman's "The Sinking of the Titanic" (1924) sold over a million copies.

Despite the music's popularity, misinformed outsiders had a scornful view of southeast Appalachia's populace. Envisioning them as "barefoot [with a] long scruffy beard, suspender-clad overalls, shapeless oversized felt hat, a moonshine jug or flask, and long-barreled rifle,"[4] they used derogatory words such as white trash, cracker, redneck, tar heel, swamp rat, and hillbilly to describe them. "A Hill-billie," declared the *NY Journal* in April 1900, "is a free and untrammeled white citizen . . . who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of, dresses as he can, talks as he pleases, drinks whiskey when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him."[5]

"It signified ignorance, backwoods-ness, and stupidity," said Western KY University professor and author (*Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*) Dr. Anthony Harkins.

The stereotype spread through the novels of KY-born John Fox, Jr. (*A Cumberland Vendetta*, 1895; *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come*, 1903; and *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, 1907), and GA-born William Nathaniel Harben (*Abner Daniel*, 1902). It infiltrated films including *The Cub* (1915), *Rainbow Riley* (1926), *The Big Killing* (1928), *Tobacco Road* (1941), the Ma and Pa Kettle series of the 1950s, and Abbott and Costello's *Comin' Round the Mountain* (1951), as well as radio programs such as *The Judy Canova Show* (1943-55) and comic strips. Billy DeBeck's *Barney Google and Snuffy Smith* (originally *Take Barney Google, F'rinstance*) debuted in 1919. Launched fifteen years later, Al Capp's *Li'l Abner* was adapted for film in 1959. The prejudice persisted. "The way hillbillies were portrayed

in movies like *Deliverance* was sad," said Béla Fleck. "*Bonnie and Clyde* was about criminals and murderers. The Beverly Hillbillies appeared foolish but they were smart in their own way. Then you had *Hee Haw*, where they acted stupid and it was supposed to be funny."

"People think traditional people are quaint," added Rodney Dillard. "They don't realize we have values, integrity, and intellectual capacity. Just because we're from the mountains doesn't mean we're chasing our sisters or drinking out of a jug with *XXX* on it."

The deprecation carried over into music on January 15, 1924. At the end of a recording session, Peer asked bandleader Al Hopkins for the group's name. The Watauga County, NC-born pianist responded, "We're nothing but a bunch of hillbillies . . . call us anything." Seizing the opportunity, Peer dubbed the band "Al Hopkins & the Hill Billies." As the educated sons of a former state representative, the Hopkins brothers resisted. "Hillbilly was not only a funny word," Hopkins told Archie Green, "it was a fighting word."[6]

Convincing them of the moniker's commercial potential, Peer persuaded Hopkins and his cohorts to accept not only the name but also the stereotypical garb, dialogue, and exaggerated persona. Their success would inspire similar "hillbilly music" bands such as the Beverly Hill Billies, Gid Tanner & the Skillet Lickers with Riley Puckett and Clayton McMichen, Whitter's Virginia Breakdowners, Carson's Virginia Reelers, and Charlie Poole's North Carolina Ramblers. "Hear, folks, the music of the Hill Billies," proclaimed OKeh in its April 1925 catalogue. "These rollicking melodies will quicken the memory of the tunes of yesterday. The heart beats time to them while the feet move with the desire to cut a lively shine . . . these mountaineers sure have a way of fetching music out of the banjo, fiddle, and guitar that surprises listeners, old and young, into feeling skittish. Theirs is a spirited entertainment and one you will warm to."[7]

Working with Peer and the Victor Talking Machine Company, Stoneman helped to arrange a historic nine-day recording session in Bristol, TN during the summer of 1927. On the first day, Stoneman and his wife, Hattie, recorded in a variety of formats. After a newspaper reported that Stoneman had earned $3,000 in royalties that year, musicians flocked to Bristol. Peer would record seventy-six songs by nineteen acts, including the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers on August 1. Hailing from Scott County, VA, twenty-six miles from Bristol, the Carter Family sang songs of the mountains with authenticity. Alvin Pleasant Delaney "A. P." Carter (1891-1960), traveling with African-American guitarist Lesley Riddle (1905-80), mined the mountains for material. With A. P.'s wife, Sara, singing lead and her cousin Maybelle (Addington) (who married A. P.'s brother Ezra in 1926) singing harmony and playing guitar, the trio

recorded over three hundred songs, including "Wabash Cannonball," "Can the Circle Be Unbroken," "Wildwood Flower," and "Keep On the Sunny Side" before disbanding in 1943.

Continuing to perform with her daughters, Helen, Anita, and Johnny Cash's second wife, Valerie June, until the late 1970s, "Mother" Maybelle set the foundation with her "Carter Lick" guitar picking. Also known as the "Thumb Brush," "Church Lick," and "Carter Scratch," the technique, which she learned from Riddle, combined melody on the bass strings with rhythmic strumming on the treble strings.

Guitar fingerpicking developed slowly in the Appalachian Mountains. One of the earliest examples, and possibly the first blues recording, Sylvester Weaver's "Smoketown Strut" (1924) "demonstrated the basic elements of country fingerpicking with its syncopated bass, clearly articulated melody line in the key of C, and the use of a roll similar to that later popularized by Earl Scruggs and Merle Travis."[8]

A second-generation brakeman who left the railroad after contracting tuberculosis in 1924, Meridian, MS-born James Charles "Jimmie" Rodgers (1897-1933) arrived in Bristol as a member of the Tenneva Ramblers. It's not clear if they split over an argument, or at Peer's direction, but singer/guitarist Rodgers and the band recorded separately. "He was singing blues," Peer explained, "and they were doing old-time fiddle music. Oil and water . . . they don't mix."

Rodgers' solo tracks would be the beginning of modern country music. Recording a few months later in Camden, NJ, he scored his first hit with "Blue Yodel No. 1 (T for Texas)." Selling half a million copies, it propelled him to stardom, further established by live shows and film appearances. Encouraged to write songs by Peer, who had a publishing deal with Victor, Rodgers penned such classics as "In the Jailhouse Now," "Peach Picking Time in Georgia," "Miss the Mississippi and You," and "Blue Yodel No. 8 (Mule Skinner Blues)." As influenced by blues and jazz crooning as by traditional country music, he recorded "Blue Yodel No. 9 (Standin' on the Corner)" with Louis Armstrong (trumpet) and Armstrong's wife, Lillian (piano). A desegregated recording, in 1930, was groundbreaking.

Rodgers' modern approach made old-time music seem antiquated. The economic downturn of the Great Depression added to the music's collapse. Record sales of $75 million in 1929 plummeted to $6 million in 1933.

Overshadowed by Western swing and crooning movie-cowboy balladry, old-time music came close to extinction. Someone needed to inject new spirit into the mountain sounds and transform them from the realm of nostalgia into a new kind of music worthy of respect. That person turned out to be Bill Monroe.

Bill Monroe, 1989

Chapter 1

Blue Moon of Kentucky

William Smith "Bill" Monroe (1911-96) was no hillbilly. Immaculately groomed, the Rosine, KY-born mandolinist/tenor singer and his Blue Grass Boys wore tailor-made suits, ties, and hats. Their music wasn't carefree jamming but masterfully executed virtuosity. "[Monroe] brought dignity to bluegrass," said former IBMA (International Bluegrass Music Association) president and Hot Rize/Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers founding member Pete "Dr. Banjo" Wernick.

Monroe's music was new and exciting. "People didn't want to hear what their grandmothers sang," said Brooklyn-born and San Francisco-based Jody Stecher. "They could hear that for free."

Combining right-hand chops and left-hand melodies, Monroe summoned "some of the most delicate tones, chimes, and special riffs and flourishes"[1] on his mandolin. Bought in a FL barbershop, around 1945, for $150, his 1923 Gibson F-5 (signed by designer Lloyd Loar) would become, according to Vince Gill, "the Holy Grail."[2]

Monroe's "high lonesome" vocals were as striking as his mandolin playing. "It's hard to sing Dad's songs," said James William Monroe (1941-), "unless you have a high voice. He'd go from straight voice to falsetto and take it up again. I've never seen anybody like him."

"Monroe's singing was as powerful as Louis Armstrong's trumpet," added ex-Carolina Chocolate Drop Dom Flemons. "They both played with gusto and used their instrument to push things further."

Inducted into the Country Music (1970), Bluegrass (1971), and Rock & Roll (1997) halls of fame, Monroe fused country and blues more than a decade before Elvis Presley covered "Blue Moon of Kentucky" on his 1954 debut single. "Elvis gave my father credit," said James Monroe. "Jerry Lee Lewis listened to him on the *Grand Ole Opry*. B. B. King and James Brown were fans. Little Richard loved my father's singing."

"Buddy Holly was a fan," added Wernick, "and Paul McCartney recorded 'Blue Moon of Kentucky.' Jerry Garcia loved bluegrass."

"The difference between rock and roll and music before it," said Ron Thomason, the Dry Branch Fire Squad mandolinist/singer who inducted Monroe into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, "is that backbeat—that mandolin chop—that beat that happens when your foot's in the air."

"Monroe took the string-band format—guitar, fiddle, banjo, mandolin, and bass," explained Laurie Lewis, "and created music personal to him out of Appalachian fiddle tunes, church music, rural blues, and everything else he heard. He wrote songs and used the bluegrass idiom to do other people's songs. I like that definition; it fits me."

The youngest of Grundy County, MO-born John Buchanan "J. B." or "Buck" Monroe and the former Melissa Ann Vandiver's six sons and two daughters, Monroe suffered from a severely crossed left eye and poor vision (his eye wasn't straightened until his teens). Eighteen years separated him and oldest brother Harry. He was closest to ten-year-older Birch (named after an uncle), eight-year-older Charles or "Charlie," and three-year-older sister Bertha. The Monroe family had experienced hard times before he was born, but his father had remained determined, cutting trees, hauling timber, operating a mill, and mining for coal. By the time of his youngest son's birth, he owned a 320-acre farm (that would grow to 600 acres), additional property, and various livestock.

With a windup Victrola playing into the night, J. B. buck-and-wing (clog) danced. The youngest of TN-born farmer Joseph M. Vandiver and the former KY-born Manerva Farris's ten children, Melissa was not only a superb backstep dancer but also a proficient fiddle, harmonica, and accordion player and a clear, high-pitched singer. "Melissa was tall and attractive," said Monroe biographer Richard Smith, "with blue eyes, red hair, and freckles. She grew white roses and wore them in her hair from the first buds of spring to the last flowers of fall."[3]

Thirteen-year-old Birch started playing his mother's fiddle in 1914. Charlie and Beatrice followed on guitars. At eight or nine, Bill (or Willie, as the family called him) joined on mandolin. Farmhand Hubert Stringfield (1894-1980) showed him the basics.

Monroe absorbed a wide variety of musical influences. "Rosine is on the Ohio River," explained Don Rigsby, "and people were coming through all the time. There was music that [Monroe] wouldn't have been exposed to otherwise."

The "hollering" yodel of farmhands and railroad workers flavored many of Monroe's recordings. Taught to read shape notes, he sang with the Rosine Methodist Church's youth choir for six months. His poor eyesight made it difficult for him to read music and forced him to give up the choir, but spirituals remained essential to his repertoire.

Melissa's brother, Birch Vandiver, fascinated her youngest son with precise bowing on cello. Another brother, James Pendleton "Uncle Pen" Vandiver (1869-1932), was a country fiddler with "a repertoire of tunes that sank into Bill's aurally trained memory and a sense of rhythm that seeped into his bones."[4]

"He was one of KY's finest old-time fiddlers," Monroe recalled in the liner notes to *Uncle Pen* (1972), "and he had the best shuffle of the bow I've ever seen, and kept the best time. That's one reason people asked him to play for the dances."[5]

"Uncle Pen taught my dad fiddle tunes, waltzes, the ancient tones, and the timing," added James Monroe, "the foundations of the bluegrass music to come."

Immortalized in Monroe's 1950 hit "Uncle Pen," Vandiver lived alone in a hilltop cabin overlooking Rosine. His wife had left him and taken their daughter. Their son died at a young age. Injured when thrown from a mule, Vandiver was unable to walk without crutches. Recognizing his nephew's musical talent, he recruited him to back his fiddling at local dances. "We started . . . at sundown," Monroe told NPR, "and the next morning at daylight, we were still playing music—all night long."[6]

Monroe inherited his father's work ethic. "I was raised in the old pioneer way," he explained in 1984, "and we worked hard. I still like to work. I keep horses on my farm . . . and I love to plow behind those horses. I'm not afraid to work, set a posthole, build a fence. . . . I can work hard in the field, lay right down . . . in the plowed ground, sleep a little bit, and go right ahead and work some more."[7]

By the age of eleven, Monroe was "working rather than going to school," said Danice Woodside. "He ran foxhounds and raised birds for cockfighting . . . he was loading railroad ties and hauling them by wagon to the Rosine train depot."[8]

Arnold Shultz (1886-1931), an African-American guitarist/fiddler who worked in the mines during the day, paid twelve-year-old Monroe five dollars a night to accompany him at square dances. Uncle Pen sometimes fiddled. "[Monroe] got the beat," said Pat Enright of the Nashville Bluegrass Band, "his timing, and to some extent his singing from blacks. He had blues notes in there."

Though he never recorded, Shultz left a lasting legacy. His bandmate Kennedy Jones, student Mose Rager, and Ike Everly, father of the Everly Brothers, spread his "pulling strings" thumbpicking style. "They influenced [Merle] Travis," said Kathy and Don Thomason, "who took the style to the rest of the world along with Chet Atkins."[9]

"[Shultz's] transitions between chords," explained Richard Smith, "were

silky smooth. He also knew how to play in the sliding 'bottleneck' style . . . using a pocketknife to make the notes. The strap holding his guitar was not leather, just an old woven grass rope."[10]

"[There are] runs that I use in a lot of my music," Monroe told *Bluegrass Today*. "I don't say that I make them the same way that he could . . . he was powerful with it . . . he used a pick and could just run from one chord to another the prettiest you've ever heard. There's no guitar picker today that could do that."[11]

Joined by Charlie (1903-75) (vocals/guitar) and Birch (1901-82) (fiddle), Monroe debuted on radio in 1927. Their father's death, a few months later, left the seventeen-year-old an orphan (their mother had passed five years before). Leaving to seek their fortunes, Charlie and Birch briefly stopped in Detroit, where they worked at Briggs Motor Company. Continuing to East Chicago, IN, they secured jobs at the Sinclair Oil Refinery. Bill's sisters maintained the house for a while but left to join Birch and Charlie. Moving in with Uncle William, and then with Uncle Jack Monroe, the teenager found himself in a quandary when an outbreak of measles caused Uncle Jack's house to be quarantined. Uncle Pen invited him to "batch it" at his cabin. "He [did] the cooking for the two of us," Monroe remembered. "We had fatback, sorghum molasses, and hoecakes for breakfast, followed up with black-eyed peas with fatback, and corn bread and sorghum for dinner and supper . . . there were hard times, and money was scarce, but also there were good times. . . . I'd live them again."[12]

James Monroe purchased Uncle Pen's property in 1973 and presented it to his father as a birthday gift. He added a replica cabin in 2013.

Reuniting with Charlie and Birch in 1929, Monroe worked with his brothers at the oil refinery during the day and played music at night. The trio's first break came when *National Barn Dance* square-dance caller Tom Owens hired them as dancers. Returning to their music after two years, they hosted weekly shows for WAE (Hammond, IN) and WJKS (Gary, IN). Graduating to daily fifteen-minute broadcasts on WJKS, they added weekly appearances on the Saturday-night *Crazy Barn Dance* in 1934.

Wearied by the uncertainties of a musical career, Birch opted for millwork. Charlie and Bill continued as a duo. Hooking up with emcee Byron Parker, they transferred to WFBC/Greenville as the Kentucky Colonels. They became the Kentucky Songbirds in January 1936. Rejecting Victor's initial offer, the Monroe Brothers eventually signed with the Camden, NJ-based label. Their February 7, 1936, session yielded "Nine Pound Hammer," "Darling Corey," "Lonesome Valley," and their first hit, "What Would You Give in Exchange for Your Soul." During the next two years, they added twenty more tracks, including "Drifting Too Far from the Shore," "New

River Train," "You've Got to Walk That Lonesome Valley," "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," "Roll in My Sweet Baby's Arms," "Roll On Buddy," and "He Will Set Your Fields on Fire." "Bill's lightning mandolin and Charlie's distinctive guitar, including his signature G-run," said *Bluegrass Unlimited*, "created an aerodynamic sound that set them apart from other brother duos and their taut harmony singing revitalized the old mountain songs and gospel standards that made up their repertoire. Their stepped-up tempos and vocal dynamics foreshadowed the sound of bluegrass."[13]

There were problems, however. "They didn't get along," said Tracy Schwarz. "It's a wonder they were able to play together onstage."

Separating over "differences in artistic direction," in 1939, each brother formed a band of his own. Charlie's Kentucky Pardners would include mandolinists William Eugene "Red" Rector, Ira Louvin, and John Ray "Curly" Seckler. "Uncle Charlie kept to the style of the Monroe Brothers," recalled James Monroe, "but his later recordings added electric lead and steel guitar and he recorded with Hank Williams' Drifting Cowboys in 1950."

Forming the Kentuckians in Little Rock, Bill hosted a show on KARK for three months. Relocating to Atlanta, he placed an ad, in a newspaper, seeking musicians. The initial Blue Grass Boys included a lead vocalist/guitarist from Atlanta (Cleo Davis), a fiddler from Asheville (Art Wooten), and a bass player from Greenville (Amos Garin). "Bill was trying to follow the Monroe Brothers' style," claimed Davis, "with our extreme high harmony and smooth sound."[14]

Questioned about the Blue Grass Boys' name, Monroe told Davis, "I'm from Kentucky, you know, where the blue grass grows."[15]

Columbia Records' British-born producer, Art Satherley, signed Monroe in 1940. Thomas Edison's former secretary, Satherley worked with "race" musicians including Ma Rainey and Blind Lemon Jefferson and country artists such as Roy Acuff, Gene Autry, and Bob Wills. "[I'm] considered the daddy of it all," he boasted. "That's what they call me, the daddy of all recordings country: country black, country white."[16]

Satherley had deep respect for mountain music. "These so-called hillbillies," he said, "are tremendously sensitive people with deep emotions . . . the mountaineer is a realist. His songs deal with loneliness, misery, death, murder."[17]

With its 50,000-watt signal, Nashville's WSM reached most of the US and Canada. Arranging an audition, Monroe and his band impressed station owners and the Attica, IN-born "Solemn Old Judge," George Dewey Hay, host of the Saturday-night *Grand Ole Opry*. The Blue Grass Boys debuted on the show, in October 1939, with Jimmie Rodgers and George

Vaughn (Horton)'s "Mule Skinner Blues (Blue Yodel #8)," the A-side of their first single (paired with Clyde Moody's "Six White Horses"). Moody played mandolin on "Mule Skinner Blues"—Monroe's only recording with someone else on the eight-string (he played guitar). Ten years later, Horton wrote lyrics for Monroe's first Decca single, "New Mule Skinner Blues."

Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys cut their first records for Columbia affiliate Bluebird Records in 1940 and 1941 before an American Federation of Musicians recording ban. Once the ban lifted, in February 1945, they returned to the studio, promoted to Columbia's parent label. For the next half-decade, they would be one of its top artists. "Kentucky Waltz," "Footprints in the Snow," "Will You Be Loving Another Man," "Little Cabin On the Hill," and "Molly and Teabrooks" became classics. "Blue Moon of Kentucky" became the fifteenth state's official bluegrass song in 1988.

The Blue Grass Boys toured constantly. Sharing a tent show with *Opry* comics Tom "Jamup" Woods and "Honey" Wilds in 1942, Monroe launched his own tent show the following year. His musicians were under tremendous pressure. "You don't make a mistake on one of Bill Monroe's shows," said Davis, "especially on the road. . . . You must be nearly perfect. We weren't but we thought we were."[18]

Lake City, FL-born Robert Russell "Chubby" Wise was the only Blue Grass Boy to appear on all of Monroe's tracks on Columbia. "The fiddle bow fit my hand," he pointed out, "a lot better than them plough handles did."[19]

Wise (1915-96) grew up backing his father's fiddle on guitar and banjo. Moving to Jacksonville in 1930, and switching to the fiddle, he drove a cab during the day and played music at night. In 1938, he helped Craven County, NC-born fiddler Ervin Thomas Rouse (1917-81) compose "Orange Blossom Special." Monroe recorded it three years later. It would become one of bluegrass's most covered tunes. "The song belongs to everybody by now, I guess," Rouse said to Mother Maybelle Carter, "but it used to be my best number."[20]

"I gave my half to Ervin," Wise told the Associated Press, "but it didn't hurt my stature any . . . it got me a lot of jobs and, in a sense, a lot of money."[21]

Wise fiddled for Hank Williams, Red Foley, Ernest Tubb, Eddy Arnold, Merle Haggard, Frank "Hylo" Brown, Jimmy Martin, Mac Wiseman, Red Allen, Hazel Dickens & Alice Gerrard, and Larry Sparks. He co-wrote and played on Moody's 1949 million-selling country hit, "Shenandoah Waltz,"

while still employed by Monroe. Joining Hank Snow's Rainbow Ranch Boys in 1954, he accompanied the Canadian country singer for the next fifteen years. Snow produced the first of Wise's nineteen solo albums, *The Tennessee Fiddler* (1961).

As soon as he and clawhammer banjo player David "Stringbean" Akeman became Blue Grass Boys in 1943, Monticello, FL-born Howard Watts (1913-70) changed his name to "C. Cedric Rainwater" (soon dropping the first initial). Over the next five years, Watts' "superb timing, tone and 4/4 walking bass technique led many of his peers to regard him as the best acoustic bass player in the business."[22]

Jackson County, KY-born Akeman (1915-73) dressed in a long, red, checkered nightshirt and jeans (acquired from Little Jimmy Dickens) belted at his knees. As a Blue Grass Boy, he interspersed music with comic skits with bass player Willie Egbert "Cousin Wilbur" Westbrooks.

Sparta, TN-born Lester Raymond Flatt (1914-79) joined the Blue Grass Boys in March 1945. Picking him up at the Nashville bus station, Stringbean took him to play on the *Grand Ole Opry* without rehearsal. Flatt would sing lead on sixteen of Monroe's next nineteen singles and write "My Cabin in Caroline," "Come Back Darling," "Head Over Heels in Love with You," "I'm Gonna Sleep with One Eye Open," "God Loves His Children," and "Cabin on the Hill."

Shaped by singing hymns in church, Flatt's baritone defined bluegrass vocalizing. "Lester had wonderful intonation," said Mac Wiseman, "and he sang on key."

"Lester made a good singer with me," noted Monroe, "pretty fine."[23]

From the age of seven, Flatt played guitar in the "Carter Lick" style, which combined melody on the bass strings with rhythmic strumming on the treble strings. Maybelle Carter learned it from Lesley "Esley" Riddle (1905-80), the African-American guitarist who accompanied her brother-in-law and Carter Family bandmate, A. P. Carter, on song-collecting expeditions.

Debuting on the radio with Charlie Scott's Harmonizers in 1939, Flatt continued to work as a weaver until arthritis forced him to give it up in the early forties. Turning to music full time, he and his wife, Gladys (whom he married in 1934), relocated to Burlington, NC, where he briefly teamed with Moody. Following a stint with Jim Hall and the Crazy Mountaineers in early 1943, he joined Charlie Monroe as a mandolin player and tenor singer. The Kentucky Pardners' daily half-hour radio show (one of the first syndicated) distributed to seven stations via sixteen-inch discs and aired on *Noon Day Jamboree*. This freed them to play two shows a day in a filled-to-capacity 2,000-seat tent. They would record for RCA Victor in 1946,

and Decca four years later, but Flatt, tired of singing backup and playing mandolin, had handed in his resignation and signed on with Charlie's younger brother in March 1945.

With the Blue Grass Boys continuing to evolve, Stringbean's clawhammer banjo picking "just didn't fit," said Flatt. "It would remind you of the old-time lick like Uncle Dave Macon played. It was a fine lick, and I love String, but it would really drag the rhythm down."[24]

Resigning in September 1945, Stringbean formed a comic duo with Lew Childe. Becoming a much-loved regular on *Hee Haw* (1969-71), he met a tragic end when intruders broke into his cabin and murdered him and his wife. Grandpa Jones discovered their bodies. Sam Bush memorialized them with "The Ballad of Stringbean and Estelle," written with Guy Clark and Verlon Thompson.

The arrival of Stringbean's replacement, in December 1945, would be a defining moment for bluegrass and the banjo. "Few players have changed the way we hear an instrument the way Earl Scruggs has," said Steve Martin, "putting him in a category with Miles Davis, Louis Armstrong, Chet Atkins, and Jimi Hendrix. His reach extends not only throughout America but to other countries."[25]

Hailing from Flint Hill, a small community in the heart of the Piedmont, near Shelby, NC, Earl Eugene Scruggs (1924-2012) was the youngest of farmer/bookkeeper George Elam Scruggs and the former Lula Ruppe's three sons and two daughters. They didn't own a radio until Earl was in his teens, but there was no shortage of music. George Scruggs (who died before Earl's eleventh birthday) was a fiddler and mandolin player. Lula played organ. Earl's brothers, Junius Emmett "Junie" and Horace, and sisters, Eula Mae and Ruby, played banjo and guitar. Junie's banjo featured on "Cripple Creek" and a medley of "Sally Goodin'" and "Sally Ann" on the Mike Seeger-produced *American Banjo Scruggs Style* (1956), acknowledged as the first bluegrass album.

Scruggs played clawhammer banjo from the age of four (and fingerpicked guitar). Remembering a "fuss" with his brother when he was ten, he told NPR, "I'd gone into a room by myself. . .. I had the banjo in there. . . . I was . . . pouting and, all of a sudden, I realized I was picking with three fingers. . . . That excited me to no end. I was playing a tune called 'Reuben.' . . . I went running out of the room and there was my brother. . . . I came out saying, 'I got it. I got it. I got it.'"[26]

Scruggs' three-finger roll would reinvent the banjo. "Here's where [the banjo] steps out of the band," said John Hartford, "and . . . becomes the lead instrument."[27]

Scruggs wasn't the first to play banjo with three fingers. Charlie Poole

(1892-1931) recorded in a "rolling" three-finger style in the mid-1920s. "A childhood accident while playing baseball left him with partially deformed fingers on his right hand."[28]

Between 1926 and 1931, Poole's North Carolina Ramblers, with brother-in-law Posey Rorer (fiddle) and Norman Woodlief (guitar), sold millions of records, including "Don't Let Your Deal Go Down," "Hesitation Blues," "If I Lose," and "Sweet Sunny South." "There are jazzy elements in some of Charlie Poole's music," said John Hartford.[29]

The Carolina Tar Heels' Doctor Coble "Doc" or "Dock" Walsh (1901-67) was the "Banjo King of the Carolinas." Monroe covered the Wilkes County, NC-born banjo player's "In the Pines" in 1940. Leadbelly recorded variations as "Where Did You Sleep Last Night" (1944) and "Black Girl." Kurt Cobain covered it with Nirvana on MTV's *Unplugged* and performed it with Courtney Love. Walsh and the Carolina Tar Heels introduced "My Home's Across the Blue Ridge Mountains" in 1929. Also known as "I'm Goin' Back to North Carolina," and collected in 1909, it was recorded by the Carter Family, Frank Proffitt, and Larry Richardson. Doc Watson, Clint Howard, and Fred Price included it on *Old Timey Concert* (1967), recorded at the Seattle Folklore Center.

Visiting his uncle Sidney Ruppe's house, at the age of six, Scruggs met Mack Woolbright (c. 1891-1960), a blind, SC-born banjo player who recorded with guitarist Charles Monroe Parker in the 1920s and penned "The Man Who Wrote 'Home Sweet Home' Never Was a Married Man." Scruggs also met Jesse Smith Hammett (1887-1930), a Cherokee County, SC-born banjo player who devised a three-finger technique after injury impeded his clawhammer playing. He taught the style to DeWitt "Snuffy" Jenkins (1908-90), who joined J. E. Mainer's Mountaineers in 1936. Scruggs heard Jenkins in Rutherford, NC.

There would be no denying Jenkins' impact on Don Wesley Reno (1926-84), the Buffalo, SC-born and Hayward County, NC-raised banjo/guitar player Scruggs replaced in the Morris Brothers in 1939. Scruggs' stint with Zeke and Wiley Morris, however, would be brief. Missing his widowed mother, he submitted his resignation, returned to Flint Hill, and took a job at the Lily Mills textile mill. He would not return to music until hooking up with Lost John Miller's Allied Kentuckians in 1945. He would play with the Knoxville-based group for only three months, but it would be long enough to catch the attention of the Blue Grass Boys' fiddler, Jim Shumate. When Monroe was seeking a replacement for Stringbean, Shumate remembered the twenty-two-year-old banjo player and recommended him. Summoned to an audition, Scruggs proved his mettle with "Sally Goodin'" and "Dear Old Dixie." He got the gig.

Scruggs' banjo would be bluegrass's most distinguishable sound, but Monroe would claim, "If it hadn't been for bluegrass, the five-string banjo would have never made it."[30]

"There wouldn't have been bluegrass," countered Tim Stafford of Blue Highway, "without Earl Scruggs."

"Monroe was the bandleader," explained Lance LeRoy, who managed Flatt after the breakup of Flatt & Scruggs, "and, as a Grand Ole Opry member, provided the forum."[31]

Despite being the father of Melissa Katherine (1936-90) and five-year-younger James (from his first marriage), Monroe kept his musicians constantly on the road. Paid sixty dollars a week, they performed three or four shows daily in the bandleader's tent and spent their mornings playing baseball against local teams (Monroe played shortstop). Touring six days a week, they hustled back to Nashville for the Saturday-night *Grand Ole Opry*. "We played in rain, we played in snow," recalled Scruggs. "We played where the power would go off and we would have to play by lantern light with no sound. We had two bad wrecks but nobody got hurt. . . . It seemed to make Bill stronger and it brought out the deep feeling and love he had for what he was doing."[32]

"[Monroe] wore them out," J. D. Crowe told me. "They weren't making any money. He probably didn't pay them half the time."

Conflicts rose over songwriting credit. Musicians felt slighted when Monroe published tunes under his name despite their input. "Blue Grass Breakdown" (on the flipside of the 1948 "Toy Heart" single) was a case in point. A banjo showcase, it was undeniably Scruggs' tune. The banjo player, understandably irked when Monroe took full credit, "changed the most noticeable chord," said Pete Wernick, "and made a hook out of an arpeggiated E minor chord; it was pretty different for country music of the 1940s."

Renaming it "Foggy Mountain Breakdown," Scruggs recorded it with Flatt and the Foggy Mountain Boys in 1940 and 1948.

Scruggs' decision to leave the Blue Grass Boys was more personal than professional. He was preparing to marry (Anne) Louise Certain, on April 18, 1948, two years after picking her out of the *Grand Ole Opry* audience. Returning to the Lily Mills textile mill, he had no intention to leave again.

Scruggs' departure set off ripples. Within weeks, Flatt and Rainwater left Monroe. Flatt phoned Scruggs, pleading with him to join their new band. Assured they would stay local, the banjo player reluctantly agreed.

Flatt & Scruggs' Foggy Mountain Boys rounded out with Shumate (fiddle), "Curly" Seckler (mandolin), and Molly O'Day's ex-bass player Malcolm "Mac" Wiseman (guitar and vocals). Wiseman would defect

to the Blue Grass Boys within a few months. Benny Sims would replace Shumate in 1948, followed by other fiddlers including Chubby Wise, Art Wooten, Howdy Forrester, and Paul Warren. With alumni including Hylo Brown (bass, guitar), Jim Eanes (guitar), Everett Lilly (mandolin), and Earl Taylor (mandolin/harmonica), Flatt & Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys remained together for twenty-one years.

Monroe refused to speak to his former employees for more than two decades. "Bill had a dressing room at the Ryman," remembered Del McCoury. "You'd come up steps, walk up a hallway, and go into this room. He let Ray Price and Hank Snow in there. I don't remember anybody else. Flatt & Scruggs had to tune up in the hallway. Bill wouldn't let them in his room."

"He didn't like the way they left them," said Monroe's son. "They were pretty close to my father's style of music. He trained them. Earl had the three-finger roll but my father brought him along. Lester was a good singer but Dad instilled in him the drive and timing of bluegrass music. Flatt & Scruggs had the power to come on the *Grand Ole Opry* but my father looked at them as a competitor. They had to come up with a sound that was different so they added a Dobro [resophonic guitar] player [Tellico Plains, TN-born Burkett Howard "Josh" or "Buck" Graves, 1927-2006]."

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Monroe and Flatt reconciled in June 1971. "Josh and I got together," explained James, "and talked about getting Lester to come to Bean Blossom. [The day of the festival], they shook hands and my father said, 'Welcome.' That started their friendship again."

Monroe refused to speak to Scruggs for forty-five years. "When Earl was playing with his boys in the Earl Scruggs Revue," said James Monroe, "we did shows with them in Canada and the East Coast. My father didn't pay attention to Earl using electric instruments but he wouldn't go for it in his band. He wanted to feel respected."

Angered when Columbia signed the Stanley Brothers, in 1950, Monroe left when his contract expired and signed with Decca, remaining for twenty-three years and nine albums (not counting compilations), including his first, *Knee Deep in Bluegrass* (1958). The Blue Grass Boys' sixty-two Decca singles included "Uncle Pen," "Christmas Time's A'Comin'," "Raw Hide," "I'm Workin' On a Building," and the Monroe and Hank Williams-penned "I'm Blue, I'm Lonesome." The mandolinist released another three singles and eleven non-compilation albums, including *Father and Son* (1973) and *Together Again* (1978), with his son. *Bill Monroe* and *James Monroe: Special*

Memories (2008) released posthumously. "I did almost one hundred sides when I was a Blue Grass Boy," James Monroe said. "I played guitar on 'Jerusalem Ridge' and bass on 'Train 45.' I was on 'Blue Night,' 'Walls of Time,' 'Sally Goodin',' and 'Mother's Not Dead (She's Only Sleeping).' We never rehearsed much. We might go through a number once or twice before recording it but never the whole thing. There weren't many retakes. He'd knock it out of the park the first take. He didn't like to overdub; there was no polishing up his music."

The Blue Grass Boys frequently performed at what is now the Bill Monroe Memorial Park and Museum in Bean Blossom, IN. First coming to the fairgrounds as headliner of the Brown County Jamboree in 1951, Monroe bought the property by the end of the year. The eight-day Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival, first held in June 1967, has become the longest-running bluegrass festival in the US. An annual Hall of Fame and Uncle Pen Days Festival launched on the site in September 1974. Hosting festivals in a dozen states, Monroe "kept musicians working," said his son, "but he didn't make much money. Sometimes, he went in the hole. You do a lot to keep your music going."

Playing his F-5 mandolin for the final time, on the *Grand Ole Opry*, on March 15, 1996, Monroe sustained a stroke a month later. "He spent a lot of time on his farm where he had horses and cattle," recalled his son, "but he wanted to go on the road. Everybody tried to get him to slow down; he didn't want to do that. He loved his fans and they loved him."

Returning from Bean Blossom, which he had run in his father's absence, James learned of the mandolinist's passing. "I saw him a week before," he recalled. "When I said, 'Daddy, I've got to go,' he looked away. He didn't want me to leave. That was the last time I saw him."

A memorial service at the Ryman Auditorium drew an overflowing attendance. "Everyone in bluegrass was there," said James, "along with Hank Williams, Jr., and Johnny Cash. Byron Berline came from OK. Fans came from all over the country. Emmylou Harris sang 'Wayfaring Stranger.' Ricky Skaggs and Marty Stuart sang 'Wicked Path of Sin.' Scottish bagpipers played 'Amazing Grace.' The audience followed as my father's casket was wheeled to the hearse. We went to the funeral home and got him ready to take back to Rosine. There was another service at the Methodist church, where he went all his life. The church filled with four or five hundred people and there were more outside. We put speakers outside so everyone could hear."

The Bill Monroe Foundation attempted to purchase Monroe's F-5 from his son for more than a million dollars in 2001 but was unable to come up with the money. Four years later, philanthropist Robert W. "Bob" McLean

bought it and donated it to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. McLean previously donated Mother Maybelle Carter's guitar.

Dozens of musicians followed Flatt and Scruggs as Blue Grass Boys. "I like the friendship of a man," Monroe told Radio McGill, Montreal, "but I don't think that I would've liked to have kept the same musicians for twenty-seven years . . . because his ideas would run out."[33]

He needn't have worried. Blue Grass Boys alumni including Flatt, Scruggs, Clyde Moody, Chubby Wise, Don Reno, Vassar Clements, Mac Wiseman, Jimmy Martin, Carter Stanley, Sonny Osborne, Bobby Hicks, Kenny Baker, Don Stover, Eddie Adcock, Buddy Spicher, Del McCoury, Bill Keith, Peter Rowan, Richard Greene, "Ranger" Doug Green, Byron Berline, and Roland White spread his music further. He taught them well.