

Bill Monroe: Father of Bluegrass Music

Bill Monroe is more famous for inspiring the musical genre of bluegrass than for any of the songs he wrote. Yet his songs soar with the sound of bluegrass.

“God gave him an ability to hear melodies in the wind from some ancient world,” says country star Marty Stuart. “He turned them into songs that the rest of us will cherish forever.”

The youngest of eight children, Monroe was born on September 13, 1911, in Rosine, Kentucky. The boy suffered from a crossed eye, not fixed until his teens, that made him the object of teasing. His poor vision, though, helped him listen better to the folk, gospel, and blues songs around him; both his mother and uncle were talented fiddlers. Brothers Birch and Charlie claimed the family’s fiddle and guitar, leaving Bill with the mandolin — at the time a lowly rhythm instrument.

By his teens, Monroe was earning money playing at dances. In his twenties, he joined Birch and Charlie in Indiana to perform popular hillbilly and folk songs on the radio. After Birch quit, Bill and Charlie continued as a duo, and Bill’s blazing skills brought the mandolin out of the shadows. After the brothers split in 1938, Bill formed his own acoustic band, the Blue Grass Boys, and he borrowed from gospel, blues, folk, pop, and jazz to create his own musical blend. The band’s popularity took off with frequent appearances on the Grand Ole Opry, and the Monroe sound finally gelled in the mid-1940s around high-pitched vocal harmonies, a driving beat, and dazzling solos. An inspiring bandleader, Monroe drew many top musicians to his group, and in these years Earl Scruggs’s innovative banjo picking and Lester Flatt’s rock-solid rhythm guitar playing were essential building blocks of Monroe’s new style.



At first Monroe relied on existing songs for his shows and recordings, but by the late 1940s, he began writing his own songs — though he didn’t give himself much credit. “All that music’s in the air around you all the time,” he once said. “I was just the first one to reach up and pull it out.”

Monroe’s music quickly attracted imitators, and at first, he considered them rivals. But by the 1960s, the sound had acquired a name, “bluegrass” (taken from Monroe’s band), and Monroe was being revered as the man who created it.

In his later years, he was embraced as the “Father of Bluegrass Music.” A member of the Country Music Hall of Fame, he died in 1996 of complications from a stroke.

Sources: *Bluegrass: A History*, by Neil V. Rosenberg; *Can’t You Hear Me Callin’*, by Richard D. Smith; *Encyclopedia of Country Music*; *New York Times*; *Southern Living*

LISTEN:

“Blue Moon of Kentucky”

“Can’t You Hear Me Callin’”

“I’m on My Way Back to the Old Home”

“Memories of Mother and Dad”

“My Little Georgia Rose”

“Uncle Pen”