

VOICES IN THE HALL
RICKY SKAGGS EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PETER COOPER Welcome to Voices in the Hall, presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. Today's guest, Country Music Hall of Fame member Ricky Skaggs.

RICKY SKAGGS His guitar solo doesn't need to be any louder than my mandolin solo. The acoustic instruments, they're playing too. Let's get them up where we can hear 'em.

Bill Monroe puts this instrument on me and gets out of the spotlight, and lets me have light for just a minute. That gave me confidence in myself.

I feel like my left leg and my left foot is still with Mr. Monroe and Ralph and Carter and Flatt & Scruggs, with tradition in my past, but my right foot is in the future of the music.

PETER COOPER It's Voices in the Hall, with Ricky Skaggs.

"Highway 40 Blues" - Ricky Skaggs (Country Gentleman: The Best of Ricky Skaggs / Sony BMG)

PETER COOPER That was "Highway 40 Blues," a song written by Ricky Skaggs' childhood friend, Larry Cordle, from Cordell, Kentucky.

I'm Peter Cooper, of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. This is "Voices in the Hall," and I'm here in the museum's audio lair with Ricky Skaggs. Ricky is, as of October 21, 2018, a member of the Country Music Hall of Fame. That's because he reinvigorated country music, beginning in 1981 by introducing a sound that was idiosyncratic and inventive, but rooted in the traditions of classic bluegrass and honky-tonk country music. Ricky Skaggs, welcome to Voices in the Hall.

RICKY SKAGGS I like the voices in the hall. I like everything about this hall. I love seeing the posters, seeing the people. I brought my daughter-in-law, my brand new daughter-in-law and Luke, my son. They've not even been married a year yet. And she wanted to come to the Hall of Fame and Luke said, "Dad, I don't think I've even gone through it either." They were here in the winter and so we just brought them in. And Sharon and I had more fun than anybody, I think, because we saw so much here that was just so great. This is not a place I get to come a whole lot, so I loved it.

PETER COOPER By Sharon you mean your wife, Sharon White who's tied into so much of this music as well.

RICKY SKAGGS She sure is.

PETER COOPER We think about the mandolins that are on display here at this Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, there's not but a few. And one of them is Ira Louvin's. One of them is Sierra Hull's, young virtuoso that you've worked with, one of them is from a little Ricky Skaggs, your little teardrop mandolin.

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RICKY SKAGGS Yeah, that was on the Flatt & Scruggs show.

PETER COOPER That's right.

RICKY SKAGGS Same one.

PETER COOPER And one of them that is pretty famous, a Gibson F-5 that belong to Bill Monroe.

RICKY SKAGGS Yes, and I got to play that one when I was six-years-old.

PETER COOPER Yes. And you got to play it much later. You were the last person to play that mandolin when it was purchased and donated to this museum. This is a mandolin with incredible history even beyond the guy who played it. The guy who played it's Bill Monroe, the father of bluegrass, and he loved it more than anything in this world.

RICKY SKAGGS He did.

PETER COOPER And at some point someone went after that thing with a fireplace poker. This would be an unusual occurrence in any kind of music expect for bluegrass, probably, maybe not as unusual in bluegrass, but destroyed the thing, put it into 150 pieces of wood. And that was reconstructed at the Gibson factory and put back together and made whole again. And after Mr. Monroe died it was purchased for the museum and we had a donation ceremony. You actually got to hold that thing and play the fool out of it.

RICKY SKAGGS Yeah.

PETER COOPER You're the last person to do that before it went behind glass, what does that instrument mean to you and what was your experience holding it and playing it?

RICKY SKAGGS First time I held it I was six and I had no idea how famous that instrument was. I just thought it was Bill Monroe's mandolin which, I didn't even know what Bill Monroe looked like, I'd never seen a picture of Bill Monroe being six-years-old, being in eastern Kentucky, we didn't get the internet up there, by the way, and iPhone didn't have service up there so I couldn't really... Siri just... She couldn't understand my eastern Kentucky dialect. But we went to see Mr. Monroe, and I had heard of Bill Monroe pretty much all my life in my home with my mom and dad because they loved him. I'm sure that mom and dad knew what he looked like 'cause they came down to the Opry a couple of times before I was even born, they came down. And so they saw him and they'd seen album cover pictures, but I didn't know what he looked like. So that was an important night for me it was kind of like... When he asked me up on stage, 'cause some of the neighbors in the hood had started shouting out "Let little Ricky Skaggs get up and sing a song," and I think Mr. Monroe was ready to put an end to it because at the end of every song he would do, somebody shouted out. So the best way to take care of it

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is to to take care of it. And so he invited me up there, "Little Ricky Skaggs you get on up here." Stage was this tall, it was a little small high school and it's an auditorium there where they played basketball. So he reached just reached down and picked me up, set me on the stage and asked me what I played, and I told him I played the mandolin. Well he kind of just laughed a little and the crowd laughed a little bit 'cause here's Bill Monroe playing mandolin, here's this little kid. So he takes his big F-5, that one right in there that we can see as soon as we walk through this door, and had this boot string around it. I thought he was so bad, man, he had a boot string for a strap, I thought "Man, he is a woodsman." And just wound it around there and set it on me. Well, for a six-year-old bony frame, that was the size of a guitar nearly. It was so much bigger than what my little mandolin, which my dad had bought me a year before. He bought me a half pint size, this was a full gallon or two gallon, you know, Mr. Monroe's. So Bill Monroe backs up, gets out of the way and lets me do "Ruby, Are You Mad at Your Man?" That was my big hit. I had two songs that I knew, that one and "The Pinball Machine" song. And my mom had just shook her finger in my face, said, "don't you sing that pinball song, if you get up there."

PETER COOPER 'Cause it's sinful?

RICKY SKAGGS Well, it's just... I guess she thought it might have been. "Sing something nice like 'Ruby, Are You Mad at Your Man?'" That must have been nicer and I didn't know what she's mad about, but anyway. Here he puts this thing on me and gets out of the spotlight and lets me have the light for just a minute. And sets me off stage, I go back and sit down and I don't see him again for probably 10 years, 'cause I'm working with Ralph 10 years later.

PETER COOPER Ralph Stanley.

RICKY SKAGGS Ralph Stanley. And so I look back at it now and what that night meant to me was, here was a Grand Ole Opry star that was bigger than life, but also bigger than life physically. He was huge, massive man, that was so tender, and so kind, and gentle to a little six-year-old hometown kid. And I think he was even taken by the response. Everybody always talked about him being such a big old strong bull, but there was a tenderness in him. And I got to know him much later in life, but just seeing that a Grand Ole Opry star thought I was good enough to get up and sing and play with the band, that gave me confidence in myself. And so I really started working, I really started practicing more and just kept on going. And I saw him when I was 16, when I was with Ralph and I said, "Mr. Monroe..." I said, "You remember you came to Martha, Kentucky, to the high school there?" "Oh yeah, I believe I came up there one time," and I said, "Well, yeah..." I said, "You let me get up on stage with you," "Is that right?" And I said, "Yes, sir," "How old was you then?" And I said, "Well, I was six-years-old," he said, "No, no, I don't believe I let a six-year-old get on the stage with me," and I said, "Well, you did." I said, "You let me play your mandolin." He said, "I believed you was 12 or 13, wasn't you?" And I said, "Mr. Monroe, I'm 16 now. So it was not that... I mean, we're talking years ago." So he just couldn't kind of get it on his screen, that he'd ever let a kid get up on stage and play his big prized possession. And we always referred to that instrument as Excalibur. He was King Arthur to me, and in my eyes, he was bigger than life. He was majestic. He was just such an icon and I

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didn't even know what that word meant as a kid, but I just knew that he was a star, a superstar's star. And then all the years later I found out how, that his music influenced so many people throughout the years. Yeah, it is rare to see mandolins in here, you see a whole lot more guitars than you do mandolins, but the ones that are in here, I think they're all significant, they all tell a story, which so much of the Hall of Fame does. That's why we exist here, is to tell stories.

“My Sweet Blue Eyed Darlin’” - Bill Monroe, Ricky Skaggs (20th Century Masters: The Best of Bill Monroe / Geffen)

PETER COOPER That was Bill Monroe, featuring our guest Ricky Skaggs, with “My Sweet Blue Eyed Darlin’.”

Ricky, how old were you when you and your friend Keith Whitley went on the road with mountain music legend Ralph Stanley?

RICKY SKAGGS I was 15. Yeah. Leaving home was a tough thing for Mom. And I tell in my book *Kentucky Traveler* about the first trip out. We were going to Reidsville, North Carolina to Carlton Haney's festival down there. Our first trip out, me and Keith was setting up in these bus chairs, and Ralph's wanting us to sing all these songs to him. He said "You boys know 'Little Glass of Wine'?" "Yeah." And so we'd sing it. "Sing 'Mother No Longer Awaits Me at Home,' I bet you don't know that one." You know, "One night while the moon..." You know we started singing it and Ralph's just loving it man. He's driving the bus, and him and Curly Ray are talking. And I notice that we get off a four lane road to a two a lane road. And I said hmm. "Well, sing us another one boys." We'd be singing and I'd see Ralph and Curly talking to each other you know, and just kind of whispering, you know I thought "Well maybe they're talking about us, I don't know." We'd get off a two lane road on to a gravel road. And I thought, "Well heck, what's this? This ain't the way to North Carolina, surely. Get off that gravel road, suddenly we on a dirt road. And we go for half a mile on a dirt road, that big old bus, we just stop and it's dark by now. Curly gets a flashlight, and starts down the woods and I thought, "Why didn't he do that when we was at this gas station a few miles back before we got through here and..." So after awhile, probably 10, 15 minutes... And I didn't ask any questions, I thought, "Well heck." I didn't wanna ask no questions. And so he comes back up on the bus and he's got this mason jar, full of what looks like clear water. It's my first time to ever see moonshine. And he shakes her a little bit and it's got these beads on the top, he said, "Boy she beads up good, Ralph!", and Ralph said, "Yeah, it looks like it's gonna be fine, Ray." And Ralph takes him a swig of it. And Curly takes him a big swig. Well they just set it down the, behind the seat of the bus there, and Ralph kinda backs up and we take off. And I just see this moonshine deal go down right there. It's was funny 'cause when I wrote my book, "Kentucky Traveler", I called Ralph. I said, "Ralph I'm thinking about... I wanna tell that story about my first trip out with you guys. And when we stopped and bought the moonshine, Curly Ray." And I said, "Is it okay to tell that?" And he said, "Yeah!" He said, "Tell it all. That's what I did in mine." He said, "Tell it all." And he said, "If your mom, had of knowed what we did that night and had that moonshine in front of you and Keith she'd have whipped the hide off of us. She'd have beat us to death with something." And I said, "Well she sure would've." And I never told her, 'til years later. That was my first trip out with Ralph.

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“Little Glass of Wine” - Ralph Stanley (My Life & Legacy: The Very Best of Ralph Stanley / Rebel)

PETER COOPER “Little Glass of Wine,” from Ralph Stanley, Ricky Skaggs’ first bandleader. Let’s get back to my talk with Ricky Skaggs. We were thinking about Bluegrass.

Now you have been involved several times at taking the music that you're describing, as a very much a regional kind of bluegrass music. You've been involved a couple times in taking that nationwide and worldwide. And the first of those times came when you joined Emmylou Harris' Hot Band, and made an album called *Roses in the Snow* that Emmy had to fight with her record label just to get out. You were taking her, at the time one of commercial country music's most viable and popular singers, and you were filling her head with this regional music and now she was wanting to record it. It wound up having a happy ending because that became the album that introduced bluegrass to thousands of people and actually made a lot of money. But did you think she was doing the right thing by moving in that direction, or did you think, "Oh no, young Ricky Skaggs is derailing a career here."

RICKY SKAGGS You know I never looked at it, back in those days, I never looked at it as commercial or non-commercial. I hadn't had it explained to me by people that was turning me down two years later. And so, I just knew she loved it, and I knew she wanted to do it, and I knew she was Emmylou Harris. She should be able to do what she wants to. She's had a bunch of hits, she sold a bunch of records for the label, and Brian loved it, her husband at the time and producer. And he thought it was great, but he didn't know anything about it. And he, he said, "Man, I really need you to help me kind of maneuver through this stuff," with Jerry Douglas and Tony Rice and course the White girls, Sharon and Cheryl White, my wife Sharon, they had been singing on some of Emmy's stuff. They sing on the *Blue Kentucky Girl* record which was the record I think right before *Roses in the Snow*. So I didn't feel like that it was going her in anyway. I thought her fans would love it.

PETER COOPER But *Roses in the Snow* really laid the groundwork for what would happen 20 years later with the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* phenomenon. It brought this kind of quality, sensitive, acoustic music to a wider audience. I wanna show folks who are listening a great example from that album, song called "Darkest Hour is Just Before Dawn."

“The Darkest Hour is Just Before Dawn” - Emmylou Harris (Roses in the Snow / Warner Bros.)

PETER COOPER “The Darkest Hour is Just Before Dawn.” That was Emmylou Harris with some fiddle and mandolin playing fellow who was just turning 25. So Ricky Skaggs, who was that kid?

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RICKY SKAGGS That was me. And I was very privileged to get to sing a verse on a commercial country record on a big label. And she really wanted me to do that. So me and Brian come up with a modulation that really worked and kept the musical integrity of it.

PETER COOPER Modulation being where you change the key that the song is being performed in, in the middle of the song. It's kinda like flipping over from the helicopter into an airplane right in the middle of a flight.

RICKY SKAGGS Yeah, and I also remember, doing the fiddle solo on that. When I was playing the solo on that song. I felt a... it was almost like a blanket come over me. I felt... I know what it is now but I didn't really know then, but it was the presence of God, I really believe with all my heart. And I just felt the presence of the Lord just come over me when I was playing that. Because as I was playing I just felt this... something was on me and but it was coming out of me at the same time. It just felt like, it was pouring on and coming out through my hands. And I went in for a playback and I just remember Brian didn't say anything and I didn't say anything. And I was just sitting there and my eyes were teared up like they are just talking about it. Brian just says, "It's really beautiful." And I said, "Yeah, there was really... There was just something in this that's different."

PETER COOPER Yeah. I want to bring up one other thing that I feel like is a really important and sometimes overlooked innovation that you brought in the studio as a producer, which is electric guitars plug into amplifiers and there's volume on those amps and they're much louder than acoustic guitars if you're in a room. And they're both playing at once. You made sure in the studio, on your records, that the acoustic guitar had every bit of the prominence of the electric. Was that difficult to do in that time given that that was not the way records sounded?

RICKY SKAGGS Well, I think it was just a choice. I mean Marshall Morgan was my engineer when I first came to Nashville and did my first records. And he would mix something and then have me come in and listen to it. And I'd say, "Marshall, I want the guitars up." "Well there won't be the room for the vocals." "Yeah, there will. Bring the acoustics up, bring that fiddle solo up." I said "it needs to be the same volume as the steel guitar solo. Ray Flacke, the electric player, his guitar solo doesn't need to be any louder than my mandolin solo on 'Highway 40,' Okay? They all need to be... We're in this together." And people was not mixing records like that back then. If you heard a mandolin or if you hear a fiddle, it was so far in the background, it was like the guy got there late or something. But I just didn't feel like that the steel guitar solo and the electric stuff needed to take prominence. I felt like the acoustic instruments, they're playing too, let's get them up where we can hear 'em.

PETER COOPER Ricky, we'll send you home today playing everybody an example of bringing these worlds together in a hit where the acoustic guitar is hot and loud and there's all kind of energy and all kind of stuff going on, a song called "I'm just a Country Boy at Heart."

RICKY SKAGGS Lord of mercy.

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PETER COOPER Thanks so much for being here with us.

RICKY SKAGGS Thank you, Peter. I appreciate it.

“Country Boy” - Ricky Skaggs (Country Gentleman: The Best of Ricky Skaggs / Sony BMG)

PETER COOPER “Country Boy.” It was a number one hit for Ricky Skaggs, our guest today and a monumental force in Country music. I’m so glad to have been joined here by Ricky, who recently became the 136th member of the Country Music Hall of Fame. There’s plenty more of my interview with Ricky at the website VoicesInTheHall.org and on our social channels, [@VoicesintheHall](https://www.instagram.com/VoicesintheHall). Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to learn about upcoming episodes. This podcast is produced by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum with Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo for BMP Audio, and recorded by Alan Stoker. I’m Peter Cooper, thanks for listening. Come see us at the Museum in downtown Nashville. Hope to see you soon.