



VOICES IN THE HALL: SAM BUSH (PART 1)

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PETER COOPER Welcome to Voices in the Hall, presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. I'm Peter Cooper. Today's guest is a pioneer of New-grass music, Sam Bush.

SAM BUSH When I first started playing, my dad had these fiddle albums. And I loved to listen to them. And then realized that one of the things I liked about them was the sound of the fiddle and the mandolin playing in unison together. And that's when it occurred to me that I was trying on the mandolin to note it like a fiddle player notes. Then I discovered Bluegrass and the great players like Bill Monroe of course.

You can specifically trace Bluegrass music to the origins. That it was started by Bill Monroe after he and his brother had a duet of mandolin and guitar for so many years, the Monroe Brothers. And then when he started his band, we're just fortunate that he was from the state of Kentucky, the Bluegrass State. And that's why they called them The Bluegrass Boys. And lo and behold we got Bluegrass music out of it.

PETER COOPER It's Voices in the Hall, with Sam Bush.

"Callin' Baton Rouge" – New Grass Revival (Best Of / Capitol)

PETER COOPER "Callin' Baton Rouge," by the New Grass Revival. That song was a prime influence on Garth Brooks, who later recorded it. Now, New Grass Revival's founding member, Sam Bush, is a mandolin revolutionary whose virtuosity and broad-minded approach to music has changed a bunch of things for the better. Sam is the Bruce Lee of mandolin, with a right-hand chop that startles and stuns. Sam helped create the bluegrass music extension we now call "Newgrass," which integrates elements of jazz and rock into the music that Bill Monroe fathered back in 1945. It was my pleasure to welcome him to the audio lair at the Museum.

Thank you for being here on Voices in the Hall.

SAM BUSH My pleasure Peter.

PETER COOPER I asked Earl Scruggs once when he realized that he was doing something different on the banjo as he took it from that two finger and claw hammer style to a three finger style that afforded greater technical abilities and rhythmic possibilities. And he said, "Well I was a teenager and I was working at the Lily Thread Mill, and me and this old boy Grady Wilkie would go pick in the back of his car. And the men started gather around at dinner break. And then some of them got excited. One of them got so excited he took his hat off his head and threw it on the ground and stomped on it. That's the first time I knew I was doing something a little different." When's the first time you knew you were doing something different on mandolin?



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SAM BUSH Well I've never had that kind of reaction like Earl got, but then again I'm no Earl Scruggs. On the mandolin, I think it's around the time, I was around 17 years old. Alan Mundy and I were part of a group, well it was a trio. The guitar player's name was Wayne Stewart and Alan and I, we made an instrumental album called *Poor Richard's Almanac*. And that's when it occurred to me that I was trying on the mandolin to note it like a fiddle player notes. And when I first started playing I didn't originally listen to Bill Monroe right when I first started. My dad had these great fiddle albums by Tommy Jackson. And by album I mean five 78s with 10 tunes.

PETER COOPER Tommy Jackson, one of the great country fiddlers.

SAM BUSH King of the Opry fiddlers for me. And the guy that sort of wrote the book on the way you play certain things on the fiddle in country music. So my dad had these fiddle albums and I loved to listen to them. And then realized that one of the things I liked about them was the sound of the fiddle and the mandolin playing in unison together. And I went all those years, didn't know who played the mandolin on those records. Years later was fortunate in Nashville here to play on a recording session with the greatest rhythm guitar player from Nashville, Ray Eddington. And talking to Ray about these Tommy Jackson records, well he played on them! Wow. OK so. "Well, who played the mandolin?" He said, "Well Red Rector did some of them, but Hank Garland played the mandolin." I said, "Really? I didn't know he played the mandolin." And Ray said, "Well he really didn't. He was just such a good musician that Tommy wanted the mandolin to play, and he would teach, Tommy would teach him the tunes right before they recorded him. And he probably never played them again. And then he would play these unison melodies with Tommy."

So I started playing fiddle tunes the way a fiddler would note it. And if you study Bill Monroe's playing in the world of bluegrass, the way he plays a fiddle tune is not maybe the same notes as the fiddle plays. But I started playing like fiddlers note it on the mandolin first. So maybe that was one thing I started doing a little differently. Then I discovered bluegrass and the great players like Bobby Osborne and Jessie McReynolds and Bill Monroe of course. And John Duffy. And Dean Webb.

And then a few years later I realized that when I would take a solo on a bluegrass song, say about now about 19 or 20 years old, that it was all just a run of notes, and I'm not sure if it was leading anywhere. And then realized that I needed to wise up and in terms of bluegrass, you know when playing a solo on a song that my run of 16th to 32nd notes weren't really saying anything. So I had to think about the melody and go back and pay more attention the way Bill Monroe did it and the way John Duffy did it, trying to play the essence of the song better.

PETER COOPER Yeah. You mentioned Hank Garland. Chet Atkins told me once that Hank Garland was the greatest guitar player to ever come through Nashville. And he



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played on all the country records, played on a whole bunch of Elvis stuff. Elvis called him the greatest guitar player in the world. I grew up in his hometown of Spartanburg, South Carolina. And Spartanburg reminds me a lot of the place that you're from, Bowling Green, Kentucky. What was Bowling Green like growing up for you?

SAM BUSH Well let's see. I was born in 1952, so really it was kind of like Bowling Green was struggling to want to be Nashville or something. And.

PETER COOPER About an hour north of Nashville.

SAM BUSH Yeah. It's about an hour north of Nashville. And there would be little country music shows would come to Bowling Green and play at the Bowling Green High School. So my dad started taking me to them. But they were never well attended because in my father's words, "No, people just want to go to Nashville. They'd rather go to the Grand Ole Opry." But I got to see Jim and Jesse at the at the Bowling Green High School auditorium. And it was, one of the greatest thrills of my life was my dad and I were standing in front of the auditorium when all of sudden we see Jim and Jesse's bus pull up.

Now of course I know they were really late. And the door opens and Jesse McReynolds asked my dad, "You know where the back of the place is?" And my dad directed them. We actually hopped on the bus with them and rode around the block. And Jim McReynolds was driving and he cut one turn so much that apparently the fiddle player Jim Brock fell out of the bunk back in the back. So. But we got. So we got to see, meet Jim and Jesse.

PETER COOPER That was one of the great duos in bluegrass.

SAM BUSH One of the greatest ever. And in the tradition of the Louvin Brothers, they carried that on into bluegrass. And so after the show we got to go backstage and I was just dying to hit a chord on Jesse McReynolds mandolin, which it didn't happen. But, because some other guy grabbed the mandolin right out of Jesse's hands and was showing Jesse McReynolds stuff on the mandolin. And the guy didn't seem to be a great mandolin player. Alan Shelton the banjo player in the band, nice nice man. I looked at Alan Shelton. He didn't know me, I just pointed at the guy with the mandolin and I said "Who's that?" And he said "Oh that's Jimmy Martin." So Jimmy Martin had come up to the show and was showing Jesse stuff on the mandolin.

PETER COOPER Jimmy Martin one of the great rhythm guitar players in, Nashville history.

SAM BUSH One of the greatest rhythm guitar players.



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PETER COOPER And also one of the wildest spirits.

SAM BUSH Yeah. So he knew a few licks on the mandolin. He showing them to Jesse.

PETER COOPER Jimmy knew a whole lot about everything.

SAM BUSH But up in Bowling Green Opry performers would come. And Billy Grammer came and played. Whitey Ford, the Duke of Paducah, comedian, came and played. So I did get to see a few country shows. But again Bowling Green was just a small town that was you know up in Kentucky. And we all wanted to come down to Nashville, really.

PETER COOPER And your dad wanted you to come down to Nashville and play with Roy Acuff.

SAM BUSH Well he did. The way that all sort of came about, I'm trying to think how old I would have been, fourteen maybe, when my dad and I first came down one Saturday afternoon to go to the Roy Acuff museum and exhibit. And we did that. And lo and behold, Mr. Acuff's right hand man bashful brother Oswald is taking admission. And he's a friendly guy, and my dad's a very friendly fella and so the two of them got to talking. They hit it off and they were friends the rest of both of them, as long as Oswald lived. They were pals.

But Oswald and my dad would, it could be embarrassing sometimes when he'd brag upon his kid that played the fiddle. So he told Os' I played the fiddle. And Oswald went in the back, brought a fiddle out and said you know "Play one." Of course I was embarrassed, but I played one. And Oswald just picked up the phone, dialed it. We heard him say "Roy, you better get down here. We got a boy that can fiddle." And so within, shoot, half hour Mr. Roy Acuff standing there and I'm totally overwhelmed. And.

PETER COOPER King of country music.

SAM BUSH *The* guy. And you know, I mean I've got my musical heroes. And for my father he was standing there with maybe his largest one, except for possibly Hank Williams. So now we get to go backstage with Roy Acuff you know. And it was really an amazing day. And then later that night Mr. Acuff and the Smokey Mountain Boys were playing on the Ernest Tubb Record Shop after the Opry at midnight. So they brought me over there. And I played a fiddle tune on the Ernest Tubb Record Shop with them.

"Circles Around Me" – Circles Around Me (Sugar Hill)

PETER COOPER "Circles Around Me." Sam Bush's rumination on his life in music, and on the ways, that musical life has impacted him as a person.



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Sam, one man who impacted you as a person was the great Bill Monroe, the father of Bluegrass. And now, Bill Monroe was famously not always happy when people would take what he thought of as his music and take that to a different place. Did he hate you guys in New Grass Revival?

SAM BUSH No he didn't. He didn't hate us. I think he was kind of spooked by us at first. But to, without going too deeply into it, you can check it out in *Revival: the Sam Bush Story* when I tell why. No, but...

PETER COOPER Available on DVD.

SAM BUSH Available. It's available everywhere. No, when we first started, we the New Grass Revival were the offshoot of a band, Bluegrass Alliance. And it was a five piece band. And we'd reached a point, we wanted to fiddle player to leave. And that wasn't going to happen because then we found out he owned the name of the band. So the four of us quit and started New Grass Revival.

Well our fiddle player went around telling certain people, and Bill Monroe was one of them, that we were drug dealers and that we were dealing drugs at festivals. And so Bill didn't want any part of that. And would you? But then as the years passed he realized that wasn't true. And then really, he handed me the olive branch first when I, in 1982 I was sick with cancer and I was in the hospital. And we had no money and benefits were popping up here and there. And all of a sudden I heard Lynn, my wife, on the phone and she says, "Well thank you Mr. Monroe. I'll tell him."

And all of a sudden it was...I had a tube down my throat. Couldn't talk, but I said, "Is that Bill Monroe? I want to talk to Bill Monroe." And he got on the phone with me just to say, "I'm sorry you're sick, and I've had that old stuff myself. And I'll do whatever I can to help you." And so there was a benefit not long after that in Nashville. And New Grass Revival, the other members, and John Hartford put on a benefit. And people came to play that I'd never even met before. And Dan Fogelberg played, I never met him. Hadn't even met him before.

And at the end of the, course I wasn't there, but the story goes at the end of the night that John Hartford had said good night everybody. It was at a club called Wind In The Willows here in Nashville. And at the end of the night John said goodnight and all of the sudden the doors burst open and Monroe and all the Blue Grass Boys walked in with their instruments on. Now this was Thanksgiving weekend so they just left their cases in the bus I guess. And he had done two jobs that day already. He'd done a job in the afternoon somewhere and then he played the Opry that night. And they came over and I think he came in and I think he held up like five hundred dollars, goes, "Now who needs this?" And he dropped that in the hat and then he played some.



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So Bill, you know, he came to my aid when I needed him. And it was after that he, in promoting festivals around America, then Bill hired us to play on some after, as the years passed. So really I think it was kind of a misunderstanding. No, he wasn't wild about the music or our long hair and our scruffy looks. And you know we were one of the first bands to quit dressing alike in the world of bluegrass.

PETER COOPER Well there was also the famous bluegrass story that went around. Can you tell us that one that involved Courtney?

SAM BUSH Yes. Yes. Now. And because it's always been comical to me and Courtney, it always was. Martinsville, Virginia, 1976. I just remember it because I had strep throat at the time. But anyhow, we get to the festival and I had been, honestly through fiddle jam sessions at Roy Acuff's dressing room, I got to know Kenny Baker. And I, at age 18, played mandolin on a Kenny Baker record called *Baker's Dozen*. I did play on a couple more after that I think too. So I knew Kenny and used to love Kenny Baker. And so you know we'd get to this festival, it's about one in the afternoon. Courtney and I are standing there and Kenny comes up. "Hey Courtney! We don't have a banjo player today. Would you want to play, play some tunes with Bill?" And Courtney.

Now little did he know he's talking to the one banjo player in life that couldn't care less if he played with Bill Monroe. Me? I'd have played the banjo. If they'd walked up and asked me, I'd have said "What key. Let's do it!" So anyway Courtney is like, "Oh sure. Yeah I'll play. Yeah if you want. Yeah sure."

Well about that time here comes Bill. Here comes Monroe himself walking up. So this all got going cause Kenny put him on the spot in front of us. So Kenny said, "Bill, Courtney's a good banjo man. Let's get him to play with us today." And Bill did the thing where he'd look at you from head to toe and back up to the head. And he just went, "No sir." Now those of you in radio land, Courtney had that Willie Nelson kind of look, long red hair, long beard. And then Kenny said, "Oh come on, Bill!" Now we need a good banjo man. Courtney's good banjo man. Let's get him up there." And Bill, now the second time, said, "No sir, I won't have it." Now Kenny's, "Oh come Bill! We need a good banjo man now!"

And Bill just, I guess he had already said no twice and it's his band. He can do what he wants. And he said no twice. And now he looks at Courtney. He goes "Uh, what is it you call that music you do?" And Courtney was actually, we were both kind of huh? And Courtney kind of went, "Uh, newgrass?" He goes "Yes I hate that." And turned around and walked away. So that was Bill's way to get out of being put on the spot that Kenny put him in. He didn't want that redheaded hippie playing the banjo that day. So yeah that's the true story. It wasn't like he unsolicited just walked up and said this. He was just trying to get out of a spot Kenny put him in.



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PETER COOPER Now New Grass Revival went from the bluegrass world and the festival world to mainstream country and actually achieved some significant commercial success with a band that included Béla Fleck, John Cowan, great Pat Flynn. This was a virtuoso band that found a way to change its sound and be more in line with what was going on on the radio. And I know Garth Brooks for one always talks about New Grass Revival as an immense influence on him and has performed in the studio with you on "Callin' Baton Rouge," one of your big hits.

SAM BUSH Right.

PETER COOPER But what was that time like for you?

SAM BUSH Our version of "Callin' Baton Rouge," and Garth Brooks and I've discussed this. He knew when Capitol heard that we were breaking up and they just basically stopped our promo. And Garth was actually telling them, "That's a top 10 record if you keep pushing it," but it wasn't pushed.

And so now the band had broken up. And I was later working with Garth Brooks in the studio as a sideman, and he was telling me, he's going, "You know what? 'Callin' Baton Rouge' should have been a Number One, should've been a top 10 for you guys. I'm thinking about recording myself. I really think that song could be a success." And I just flippantly said, "Well if you record it, I know some guys that know the song." And a number of months later, get a call from Alan Reynolds saying, "Hey pal. Could you come in and you guys play on 'Callin' Baton Rouge' with Garth? You and Jerry Douglas?"

So we literally just went in there, the New Grass Boys and Jerry, we just, they had already cut the track. We added our instruments to it. And then John and I sang the harmony vocals. And it was so easy it was so much fun because all we had to do was the same parts we did. And that's the way Garth wanted it. And yeah. So we're proud that we weren't crazy. It was a good song and I don't know if Garth had Number One on that or not. I think he did. He did well.

But just recently just the other night I saw him interviewed, saw Garth interviewed on a show, and they're talking about his live shows and the reaction he gets on certain songs. And he says you know "The Dance" always gets one, different ones. You know "Thunder Rolls" gets an amazing reaction for him. But he says, but when they go into "Callin' Baton Rouge," the whole arena just erupts. So that's pretty great.

PETER COOPER Yeah. After New Grass Revival broke up, you wound up joining one of Emmylou Harris' great bands, and that's somebody who's led a number of great bands, but a band that she put together called the Nash Ramblers. Another acoustic group. Made an album at the Ryman Auditorium called *At the Ryman*, at a time when the Ryman was in complete disarray and looked like it was going to be torn down.



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SAM BUSH I thought it was. I was under the understanding the building was condemned.

PETER COOPER Yeah, you couldn't. You couldn't sit under the balcony or in the balcony because they were worried about it being torn down. So instead of 2,100 seats you had, how many people were at those shows you think?

SAM BUSH There weren't over 300. And it was an invitation audience. But of course talking about Emmylou Harris. I was in the band for five years and I've got to say it was just the five years of joy. You know, she is such a generous person, a forgiving person. I learned about musical forgiveness from her after being in a four piece equal band where you just got to have these band meetings every, all the time.

And when I think of her forgiveness, I just mean one of the first weeks I was on the road with her, I missed some kick off so bad that I actually freaked myself out. And so it's an immediate apology as soon as we walk off stage. And I said, "So sorry I missed that kick off," and she went "Big deal, we'll do it again tomorrow. Okay! Big deal! It's okay. I know you didn't mean to do that."

And we'd been on the road about a year and she and I are talking on the phone. She goes "I'd like to cut a live album with the band." I said "Great, man. We're ready. We're rough and ready now." And she said I want to do, you know work up different songs for it." "Great. Work up new songs." And she said, "Maybe with the idea of historical country songs, but not all ones that everyone's heard or you know." And she gave the band input with suggesting songs. But then she told me, she said, "I think I'd like to do it at the Ryman." I said, "Well I've heard, I think the building's condemned." And she went, "All the more reason we got to do it there."

PETER COOPER And to help paint the picture, Nashville's downtown which is now this gleaming place...

SAM BUSH Yeah, this is before the Tennessee Titans.

PETER COOPER Yeah, this is before the transformation. And this is at a time when Nashville's downtown was not a place people wanted to visit unless they were down there to do no good.

SAM BUSH Yeah. It was pretty scuzzy down there.

PETER COOPER And the Ryman was in terrible shape. The Opry had left the Ryman in the 1970s. So I know when I heard this album it was the first time I ever heard of the Ryman Auditorium. And I think it was the beginning of Nashville's comeback.



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SAM BUSH I believe Emmylou Harris is incredibly important to saving the Ryman Auditorium. Maybe that was the moment people realized they can't tear it down. And listening to that CD, that record, the sound of the Ryman is really a part of that sound of that record. You can hear the sound of the room. It's just part of it. I think she saved the room.

"Walls of Time" – Emmylou Harris and the Nash Ramblers at the Ryman (At the Ryman/Nonesuch/WEA)

PETER COOPER That was "Walls of Time," from Emmylou Harris and the Nash Ramblers, recorded live at the Ryman Auditorium. A powerful performance, with Sam Bush on mandolin and on harmony vocals. And that recording helped save that historic Nashville building, the Ryman Auditorium. And Sam, you were part of that.

SAM BUSH Yeah and it was really. That too was a really great moment. A few wonderful moments. We did three nights in a row, and it was videotaped also so it was the first time I'd ever been involved where you, at the end of the night we changed out of the stage clothes, they took them to the cleaners and brought them back to us the next day for continuity, wear the same thing three days in a row. And so Emmy was really into buck dancing at the time. I mean she'd have taps on her boots as we walked through airports because that's the only way she could get her tap boots to the gig.

And so one of the things that I thought would be a unique thing is to ask Bill Monroe if he would come and dance with her because he was a professional dancer at one point I understand as a young man. Well he loved Emmylou. Heck yeah he came to dance with her!

PETER COOPER On the stage of the Ryman Auditorium, the place where Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys created bluegrass music on December 8th of 1945. Bill Monroe and Emmylou Harris danced together 46 years later. Separated by a generation but bound by music that has proven timeless. And Sam Bush was there to play along.

We'll have more colorful stories from Sam on our next episode of Voices in the Hall.

Learn more about Sam Bush at our website, VoicesInTheHall.org. And use the handle @VoicesintheHall to find us and follow us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Voices in the Hall is produced by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in collaboration with Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo of BMP Audio. The show is recorded by Alan Stoker. I'm Peter Cooper. Thanks for listening. We invite you to come visit the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, Tennessee.