

BILL MONROE

FATHER OF BLUEGRASS MUSIC

Bill Monroe is known as the “Father of Bluegrass Music.” Bluegrass comes from almost the same musical roots as country music—stringband dance music, ballads, gospel music, and blues—and often is referred to as a style of country music, rather than a genre all its own. Mr. Monroe, with his high-pitched harmony singing and his lightning-fast mandolin, shaped a new sound in American roots music.

Bill Monroe was born September 13, 1911, near Rosine, a small town in western Kentucky. He was the youngest of eight children. From birth he had a crossed eye that made him the object of teasing. His poor vision meant that he listened carefully to the music around him, and he learned quickly. His eyesight was corrected when he was in his teens.

Mr. Monroe grew up surrounded by music. His mother, Malissa, and his uncle Pendleton “Pen” Vandiver were talented fiddlers, and his brothers Birch and Charlie had already claimed the family’s fiddle and guitar for themselves, leaving Bill with the mandolin, which was considered a lowly rhythm instrument.

By the time he was in his teens, Mr. Monroe was earning money playing music at dances with his Uncle Pen and with local African American guitarist and fiddler Arnold Shultz. “I really have to give him a lot of credit for my playing,” Mr. Monroe said of Shultz, “and, really, I guess, for the roots of bluegrass.” They never made more than five dollars a night, and Bill learned to play guitar when he backed Shultz’s fiddling.

When he reached his twenties, Mr. Monroe joined brothers Birch and Charlie in Indiana to perform popular hillbilly and folk songs on the radio. When Birch quit, Bill and Charlie continued performing and recording as a duo, then they split in 1938. Bill formed his own band,



the Blue Grass Boys, and he borrowed from gospel, blues, folk, pop, and jazz to create his own musical blend.

The musicians that Monroe led in the mid-1940s included skilled and innovative banjo player Earl Scruggs, from North Carolina, and smooth lead singer and guitarist Lester Flatt, from Tennessee. That band was one of the most talented in the history of country music. Audiences at the Grand Ole Opry and throughout the South loved to hear them play, with their vocal harmonies, driving rhythm, and dazzling instrumental solos.

The recordings made by Mr. Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys at the Wrigley Building in Chicago in 1946 and 1947 are regarded by many as the cornerstone of bluegrass music. He wrote many of his songs, especially instrumental tunes played on mandolin and fiddle. “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.”

The cross-eyed boy went on to be elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame, the Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame, and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He died in 1996.

SOURCES

Bill Monroe: the Life and Music of the Blue Grass Man by Tom Ewing; *The Bill Monroe Reader*; *Bluegrass: A History*, by Neil V. Rosenberg; *Can’t You Hear Me Callin’*, by Richard D. Smith; *Encyclopedia of Country Music*; *The Music of Bill Monroe* by Rosenberg, Neil V. and Charles K. Wolfe; *New York Times*; *Southern Living*