

BILL MONROE: FATHER OF BLUEGRASS MUSIC

As the “Father of Bluegrass Music,” Bill Monroe is more famous for inspiring the musical genre of bluegrass than for any one song he wrote. In fact, bluegrass is named for his band. His biographer, Richard D. Smith, considers Monroe so influential to American popular music that Smith calls him not only the Father of Bluegrass Music, but also “an uncle to country music, a first cousin to the folk revival, and a grandfather to rock & roll.”

The youngest of eight children, William Smith Monroe was born on September 13, 1911, in Rosine, Kentucky. As a child, he suffered from crossed eyes, uncorrected until his teens, which made him the object of teasing and meant he spent many lonely hours by himself. His hearing was sharp, though, and he latched on to the folk, gospel, and blues songs in his midst; both his mother and uncle were talented fiddlers. Bill’s older brothers Birch and Charlie claimed the family’s fiddle and guitar, leaving Bill with the mandolin, which was considered a background instrument at the time.

By his teens, Monroe was earning money playing at dances, and by his twenties, he had joined Birch and Charlie in Indiana to perform popular country and folk songs on the radio. After Birch quit, Bill and Charlie continued touring as the Monroe Brothers and began making popular recordings. By then, Bill’s energetic mandolin style had brought the instrument out of the shadows, and his impressive skills were attracting attention.

After the brothers split in 1938, Bill formed his own acoustic band, the Blue Grass Boys, and began merging gospel, blues, and country music influences into his own musical blend. The band’s popularity took off with frequent appearances on the Grand Ole Opry, and Monroe’s sound gelled in the mid-1940s around high-pitched vocal harmonies, breakneck tempos, and dazzling solos. An inspiring bandleader, Monroe drew many



top musicians to his group who helped shaped his music; for example, during the mid-1940s Earl Scruggs’s innovative banjo picking and Lester Flatt’s rock-solid rhythm guitar became essential building blocks of Monroe’s style.

At first, Monroe relied mostly on existing songs for his shows and recordings, but by the late 1940s, he started writing his own material—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.”

Many of his compositions were instrumentals created during jam sessions with various band members. But Monroe also

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LISTEN

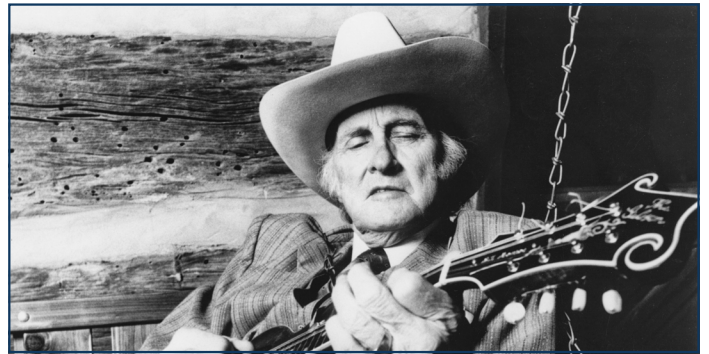
“Blue Moon of Kentucky,” “Can’t You Hear Me Callin’,” “I’m on My Way Back to the Old Home,”
“My Little Georgia Rose,” “Uncle Pen”

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wrote what he called “true songs,” featuring lyrics that were intensely personal and deeply emotional.

Monroe’s music quickly attracted imitators, and many of his own band members recreated the style after they left his group. At first, Monroe was resentful, considering them all rivals. But by the late 1950s, the sound had acquired a name, “bluegrass” (taken, of course, from Monroe’s band), and Monroe was being revered as the man who created it.

In his later years, Monroe was embraced as a living legend at bluegrass festivals that sprang up around the country and the world. A member of the Country Music Hall of Fame, he died in 1996, four days before his eighty-fifth birthday, of complications from a stroke.



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Circle the word “gelled” in the fourth paragraph. Underline the clue words and phrases that help you understand its meaning. Then, define the term in your own words.

2. Explain the essay’s title, “Father of Bluegrass Music.” Cite evidence in the text to support your answer.

3. Richard D. Smith said that Monroe was “an uncle to country music, a first cousin to the folk revival, and a grandfather to rock & roll.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Explain your answer citing evidence from the text.
