



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Bill Monroe Centennial and Why to Get There Early

Pete Wernick

Next month's Monroe Centennial celebration is sure to be a never-before and never-again event: The International Bluegrass Museum has commitments from *every living Bluegrass Hall of Famer* to come to Owensboro, Kentucky for a music gala like no other, Sept. 12-14.

This Monday-Wednesday does not fit my schedule at all, but I cannot miss what's sure to be the last time to gather with this large a gallery of the seminal bluegrass pioneers—Earl Scruggs, Ralph Stanley, Bobby Osborne, Jesse McReynolds, Mac Wiseman, and Doc Watson, all in their 80s, and Curly Seckler, in his 90s—not to mention the likes of J.D. Crowe, Sonny

Osborne, Eddie Adcock, Paul Williams and the rest. Those who still perform will be with their bands. These men mean more to me than words can say. Their music and their efforts made possible my life as a musician, and the community I call home.

I'll bet a lot of you wizened *BNL* readers already know the story of Bill Monroe, but even for you, it's good to have a capsule look at the hundred years that will be celebrated next month.

The Story of Bill

One hundred years ago there was not much pavement in America, no such thing as an old car or a world war. Bill Monroe was born Sept. 13, 1911—the youngest of 8, cross-eyed and a loner, who took up mandolin because it was the only instrument the others weren't playing. Walking the Kentucky hills and doing his plowing, he'd sing in a high intense wail. By age 16 his parents had died and his brothers and sisters left the family home. Bill stayed there alone until he was taken in by his uncle Pen, who happened to be an outstanding fiddler. The two played dances and mixed it up with good musicians.

In 1929 the teenager joined his brothers in the Chicago area, and worked with them playing music, and on a professional dance team. Bill gigged from the 1920s to 1996, his final year. In the 30s Bill and Charlie, the Monroe Brothers, were country's hottest mando/guitar singing duet. In 1939 Bill assembled the first Blue Grass Boys, and was told by the Grand Ole Opry he had a lifetime job. That fiery tenor and mandolin made him one of country's biggest stars... and the Opry job lasted 57 years.

In the mid-40s, the dream Blue Grass Boys came together, Lester Flatt (guitar), Earl Scruggs (banjo), Chubby Wise (fiddle), and Howard Watts (bass) recording 28 tracks that became the Holy Grail of bluegrass. *Blue Grass Breakdown* and *On My Way Back to the Old Home* were exciting hallmarks of a distinct new music, featuring new virtuoso picking

styles on acoustic string instruments and high harmony singing—direct and pure.

Lester and Earl then started their own band, but Bill dug his heels in and cultivated a succession of stellar sidemen who went on to their own influential careers: Don Reno, Mac Wiseman, Jimmy Martin, Carter Stanley, Sonny Osborne, Del McCoury, Peter Rowan, Byron Berline and many more. Bluegrass music's legacy grew, nationally and internationally.

In Monroe's last years, he basked in the title "Father of Bluegrass Music," performing on the Opry and widespread festival locations, always in a sharp suit and big white hat, writing many mandolin tunes, exploring minor keys, and seeing the world from the White House to Japan as an honored representative of American culture, and mentor to many.

Few music figures in history have commanded such influence and respect for over sixty years while on earth, and far beyond. The attitude and presentation of classic core bluegrass, bearing Monroe's indelible stamp, remains home base for all bluegrass. Even if they go into rock or country, many musicians acknowledge a debt to the music that launched virtuoso styles of three-finger banjo picking, flatpicking an acoustic dreadnought guitar or F-style mandolin, fiddle, and Dobro resonophonic guitar. Monroe didn't create the styles, but he created and for over 50 years sternly and lovingly cultivated the seedbed where they flowered. The musical variations built on bluegrass rhythms and techniques are amazingly diverse and fully international.

Why have a column a month early?

Bill would have done it that way.

The one time I got to sing on the same mic as the Father of Bluegrass, I learned something about his timing. *He not only gets there, he gets there early too.*

We were singing *I Saw the Light*, Monroe leading the audience at the end of a show, Hot Rize on stage with the Blue Grass Boys, I think in 1984 on a summer night in Boulder. As I sang I emphasized the beat with my phrasing:

I saw the li- ight, I saw the li- ight...

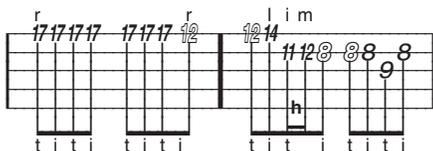
But he was singing ahead of me... That is, he was hitting the words that normally fall on beats *before* the beat, but he also had a way of emphasizing the beat when it did happen, so he leaned on the beginning of the word *before* the beat, and the *middle*

of the word *on* the beat.

I'm pretty sure this must be part of what people mean when they say Monroe's timing was "on the front of" the beat. Monroe got up early, was quick with a retort, and did a lot of things in an aggressive way. A favorite story:

In the 1980s Monroe was gigging in San Francisco, hosted by local heroes the Good Old Persons. As they walked up to a restaurant, a sad sack in the doorway looked up and asked Monroe for a handout. The Father of Bluegrass just said, "Get up! Go to work." (The Good Old Persons later titled one of their hot tunes, *Get Up, Go to Work*.)

What does this have to do with banjo? How about a famous Earl Scruggs lick? This "get there early, and also at the normal time" shows up *twice* in this oft-imitated but rarely duplicated gem:



There it is, on the last note of the first measure, he hits the "destination" note (12th fret), and then hits it *again* on the downbeat. A few notes later he does the



In 1994, backstage at Telluride, I was able to introduce the 82-year old Monroe to the 13-year old Chris Thile. I knew it would be the first, possibly the only time they would get to communicate. Monroe died two years later, but at least they had this overlap, a bridge between music greats of two different centuries (millennia?). Chris was backstage (Nickel Creek had, I think, just competed in the band contest) and I told him to stay by the stage after Monroe's set. Though he'd just finished playing a high-energy hour-plus set at 8750 feet elevation, I as the Forrest Gump of Bluegrass, asked if he would like to hear a very special young mandolin player. He said yes! Chris, who'd taken first at the national contest at Winfield the previous year (age 12), actually didn't play too well. His dad said it was the first time he'd ever seen him nervous.

same, hitting the 8th fret note both before the expected place and *on* that place. I think this is one of Earl's coolest licks of all (Columbia 1954 recording of *Foggy Mt. Special*). Could it be...great minds think alike?? Hmm...they were in a very busy band together for over two years, jammed together in the back of the car, so Earl says.

As people renew their appreciation for Bill Monroe they might turn to YouTube for a treasure trove of samples. You only need a place to start, like a search word, as suggested below. You may want to cancel some appointments, as it gets addictive, you know.

Of all the neat footage I've seen of the

man, my favorites are:

- The closeup soulful rendition of *Body and Soul* seen in the movie *High Lonesome*
- A 6-minute 1982 report from Beanblossom by Kathie Lee (now Gifford) as a fledgling ABC correspondent (search "Beanblossom 1982"). Here is Monroe at 70 in fine form on stage, and dancing with graceful gusto with fans, mandolin in hand. The interview is classic Monroe including the choice one-liner, "There's never been a music that has the drive of bluegrass."

Bill was rightly famous for being sure of himself. Read about it here next month.

Visit Pete and ask questions at DrBanjo.com.