



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Bill Monroe and the Banjo

Pete Wernick

“If it hadn’t been for bluegrass, the five-string banjo would have never made it.”

—Bill Monroe

The powerful musical force known as Bill Monroe turns 100 this month. It’s hard to believe he’s been gone 15 years, though in many ways he’s far from gone. The force of his personality and the power of his musical vision left more than an indelible imprint... it’s in the bones of so many of us bluegrass musicians whenever we pick up an instrument.

It’s hard to imagine how the history of the banjo might have turned out if a farm boy from North Carolina had not landed an opportunity while briefly in Nashville to audition for a famous bandleader with an important slot on one of the most widely-heard weekly broadcasts in the nation. Had Monroe not hired Scruggs in December, 1945, Earl would have headed home in time for his 22nd birthday and spent the next year and maybe the rest of his life working in a thread mill and playing music on the side. That the audition happened—thanks to fiddler Jimmy Shumate—worked out well for Earl, and Bill, and bluegrass music, and you and me, and banjo manufacturers, and millions of other people.

As 1946 went along, Earl got to play *Molly and Tenbrooks*, *White House Blues*, *Little Maggie*, and so many others where he could really shine. A great sound was released into the airwaves. Jaws dropped, banjos came out of cases, finger picks were put on, and three-finger banjo playing was on the music map ever after.

The Blue Grass Boys worked hard and prospered. The extra-territorial Bill took it hard when Earl left and started another band with another former Blue Grass Boy, Lester Flatt. A long and famous feud developed.

But the banjo was in bluegrass to stay. Bill hired Don Reno, then Rudy Lyle, and Ralph Stanley, Sonny Osborne, Eddie Adcock, Don Stover, Tony Ellis, Curtis McPeake, Del McCoury, Bill Keith, Jack Hicks, Bob Black, Butch Robins, Jens

Kruger, Blake Williams, and Vic Jordan—to name just some of the notables.

“Been a big turnover in the way of the banjo picker.” — Monroe)

Bill hadn’t seemed to mind the Opry announcer bringing him on with: “Here’s Bill Monroe and Earl Scruggs with that fancy banjo.” But later on he was never keen on giving Earl any special credit. When asked about his favorite groups or banjo players, he would include Earl, sometimes pretty far down the list, along



Blake Williams and Bill Monroe

with “Stringbeans,” and say “They all made their contribution to bluegrass music.”

I had several chances to interview Monroe, both for live radio and for book research. The last time, when he was 75, it was specifically about the banjo. In 1986 I was working with Tony Trischka on the *Masters of the Five String Banjo* book, and we decided we should interview Monroe about banjo playing—its role in bluegrass and how it should be done. Reading it over now, it’s interesting all over again, and somehow the printed word really captures some of his unique way of talking. What follows is a juicy excerpt. I found it curious and a little amusing that throughout the interview, Monroe was steadfast in referring to the three-finger banjo style used in bluegrass as “Snuffy Jenkins style.” Here’s his Bill’s-eye view of the origination of the 3-finger bluegrass banjo style...

TT: *How did Scruggs come to join you?*

BM: Big Howdy Forrester that plays fiddle with Roy Acuff, he used to fiddle for me. He's the man that got Earl the job. [note: This seems to conflict with the accepted fact that Shumate arranged the audition.] Earl wanted the job, you know, and he was in Nashville. And if he didn't get a job with me, he was going to go back to the cotton mill and go to work there. That's all. Wasn't nothing else left for him.

TT: *Did you know that he was the right thing for bluegrass?*

BM: Well, after I heard Earl Scruggs play, why, I thought he could help us a little bit with his style of banjo and give us the sound of the banjo. That's what I was interested in. Don Reno was the first I ever heard play that kind of playing, you see. He'd come around and tried out for me down in South Carolina. But he had to go in service. That knocked him out of the lineup. So it give Earl the chance to come in. And I've kept the banjo ever since.

The blues, you know, I think that's where the style of banjo pickin' comes from. Of course it's a bit faster nowadays than when they played the old blues.

TT: *Did Scruggs have the blues in his playing?*

BM: He learned that from me, the blues, where he got the blues. He learned all his picking from Snuffy Jenkins. Earl didn't originate it. That all come from Snuffy Jenkins. The man was in the Carolinas when I first went down in that country, before I came to the Grand Ole Opry.

PW: *I've read in Earls' banjo book that he had heard Snuffy playing, but he learned some from other people and that he feels he made up a lot of it himself. Is that something you would disagree with?*

BM: Snuffy was the first man down in that country, and they was all listening to him because he was on the radio and they was not on the radio. And they all had a chance to listen to him, and he had a chance to record, and he got that old, clear ring out of that banjo, man... Now after you know a style, then you can go to work and you can come on up with your thinkin' about it and maybe help it. But if it wasn't for that man up ahead of you, you wouldn't have come.

PW: *In the recordings of Earl with the Blue Grass Boys I hear a change in the playing during the time he was with you.*

BM: His playing changed because I

changed the numbers to give him a chance to play. Numbers like *Molly and Tenbrooks* done Earl Scruggs no tellin' how much good, man.

PW: *Is that a number you weren't playing until he was in the band?*

BM: Oh yeah, we was playin' it. But his way of playin' it was fine, you see. It done a lot for *Molly and Tenbrooks*. That number done a lot for fiddle playin', and a good fiddler done a lot for the number, too. But the numbers that I come with, I knew that they would fit the banjo and it would help the banjo and the banjo would help me. The drive that the bluegrass music had, helped the five-string banjo. But if I'd

have went on back and got the old-time mountain music and played it, the banjo wouldn't never have come out. If it hadn't been for bluegrass, the five-string banjo would have never made it.

Man, that's powerful talk!

As the bluegrass world celebrates 100 Years of Bill, we banjo players can pay special tribute to the man who gave a home to many of our favorite banjo stylists and to the banjo style that will live forever—whatever it's called!

Visit Pete's web sites DrBanjo.com and BluegrassJamming.com