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Bluegrass: A Unique Synthesis of Musical and Extra-musical Concerns

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Varner, Martin

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Bluegrass: A Unique Synthesis of Musical and Extra-musical Concerns

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS  
in Music

by  
Martin Varner

Thesis committee:  
Assistant Professor Stephan Hammel, Chair  
Associate Professor Amy Bauer  
Professor of Teaching John Schneiderman



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## **Abstract of Thesis**

By

Martin Varner

Masters of Arts in Music

University of California, Irvine, 2020

Professor Stephan Hammel, Chair

Bluegrass has simultaneously been recognized as an archaic folk music and a living, popular art form. Although what was to be later named “bluegrass” is played no earlier than 1939, the genre has been associated with archaic and romanticized symbols such as the banjo and fiddle. Bluegrass performers have also been given the responsibility of continuing past American traditions regardless of its lack of temporal connections to past tradition. Yet, if one thinks of bluegrass as a popular music designed for the evolving marketplace, it would seem to be in the bluegrass musician’s best interest to only allude to these romantic symbols when it is economically beneficial. The bluegrass musician then seems to be in a constant negation between historical weight and commercial pressures. The first person to confront this tension and to develop a definitive strategy was Bill Monroe.

Monroe’s extra-musical commercial strategies can be seen as connected to and inspired by the commercial strategies of record and radio industry leaders such as Ralph Peer and George D. Hay. This accounts for wanting to replicate Monroe’s commercial success, but it does not account for why people continue to adhere so strictly to his sound. This dedication to fidelity was inspired by the folk movement of the 1960s which saw folk music as a following of a societal ideal rather than the strict replication of songs. In emphasizing this, and Monroe’s dedication to his own synthesis which they took for timeless American folk music, it became expected of bluegrass musicians to continue his lineage. Instead of bemoaning this aspect, this paper hopes to illuminate how bluegrass, due to its connections with both popular music industries and the folk

movement, should advertise itself as a unique musical genre with a novel extra-musical dimension.

## **Introduction**

Bluegrass has simultaneously been recognized as an archaic folk music and a living, popular art form. Although what was to be later named “bluegrass” is played no earlier than 1939, the genre has been associated with archaic and romanticized symbols such as the banjo and fiddle. Bluegrass performers have also been given the responsibility of continuing past American traditions regardless of its lack of temporal connections to past tradition. Yet, if one thinks of bluegrass as a popular music designed for the evolving marketplace, it would seem to be in the bluegrass musician’s best interest to only allude to these romantic symbols when it is economically beneficial. The bluegrass musician then seems to be in a constant negation between historical weight and commercial pressures. The first person to confront this tension and to develop a definitive strategy was Bill Monroe.

Monroe’s extra-musical commercial strategies can be seen as connected to and inspired by the commercial strategies of record and radio industry leaders such as Ralph Peer and George D. Hay. This accounts for wanting to replicate Monroe’s commercial success, but it does not account for why people continue to adhere so strictly to his sound. This dedication to fidelity was inspired by the folk movement of the 1960s which saw folk music as a following of a societal ideal rather than the strict replication of songs. In emphasizing this, and Monroe’s dedication to his own synthesis which they took for timeless American folk music, it became expected of bluegrass musicians to continue his lineage.

This project will analyze both strands of Monroe’s strategy, commercial and folk, and how the methodologies and strategies of these industries and organizations effected bluegrass’s current status and reputation. The hillbilly record industry, which will be discussed in chapter

one, did not cross paths with Monroe until the 1930s, but had laid the groundwork for bluegrass's future connection to Southern values. The record industry was also responsible for a new copyrighting process that emphasized musical characteristics that would come to resemble Monroe's. In contrast to the ASCAP division of labor songwriting process, A&R men such as Polk Brockman and Ralph Peer created a system where they would receive earnings for the song writing royalties, while giving the musicians one-time performance fees. Musically, in order to sell to their southern, rural clientele, they needed songs that represented old southern values, yet did not rely on traditional songs. If the songs were traditional, they needed to be arranged differently so that they could receive royalties. Similar to how many regard bluegrass today, the music sold by hillbilly records had to either be new and sound old, or be old and sound new. This dichotomy is analyzed through the music of the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, who would symbolize this divide during the heyday of the hillbilly record industry in 1927.

Changing technologies such as the radio, analyzed in chapter two, ushered in new styles and new strategies for cultivating authenticity. While a recording alluding to events such as a barn dance was possible with a phonograph, the radio allowed a nuanced, energetic, and live recreation of events. Instead of selling records, the purpose of these radio programs was to sell advertisements. Two of the most successful radio programs were the National Barn Dance in Chicago, appealing to a more universal rural and urban divide, and the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, which desired to stress southern values and southern artists. Bill Monroe, the mandolinist in his brother duet with guitarist Charlie, was a part of the rising popularity of brother duets during this time. Economically, this could be justified by simply wanting to pay less for performers. Aesthetically, it calls on the audience's desire for euphonious singing. While family acts made the performers relatable to the listeners, individual personal connection was



found to be even more economically beneficial. This ushered in a hillbilly version of the star system. In this advertising system, it was the responsibility of the star to convince the audience that they were a personal friend, and had the same background and values as the listeners. In other words, radio advertisers discovered that the audience, being the ones buying the products, should have input on what should be performed. Bill Monroe not only excelled at being relatable and personable to rural audiences, but became a star on the Grand Ole Opry with his novel sound. This sound would lead the way to Monroe's perfected bluegrass synthesis in 1946. Today, bluegrass has followed this path of audience ownership and agency. Consequently, bluegrass has a reputation of having a fiery yet committed fan base that thinks of the performers as friends rather than professionals.

These first two chapters explain the changing tastes and expectations of the audience, implying the evolutionary nature of bluegrass' musical ancestors, but do not explain how and why bluegrass has attempted to separate itself from the constantly evolving mainstream musical landscape. Chapter three attempts to justify these intentions by investigating the history of the American folk movement. Originally designed to find the European roots of American music, the theory of functionalism allowed American folklorists to perceive American folk music as an important tool for their own American society. Unfortunately, it emphasized the communal purposes of folk music while still subscribing to the European belief that folk music must be obscure and static. While this chapter analyzes this predicament through Leadbelly and their work with the Lomaxes, bluegrass today has built a up a similar reputation. To many, bluegrass is America's folk music, obscure, timeless, and static.

This reputation remains even though the musical ingredients synthesized by Monroe to create bluegrass, which will be discussed in detail in chapter four, all have roots in popular

traditions of the twentieth century. For example, the final ingredient added, the five-string banjo, implements ragtime inspired arpeggiations. Possibly because it combined all these previously successful instrumental styles, bluegrass was initially very popular in the 1940s and gained many listeners and recreators. Yet, like the audience and technological changes that occurred in the 1920s, commercial improvements came with ramifications. With the growing respectability of hillbilly music, partially because of the creation of bluegrass, many past performers who were part of the hillbilly record or radio industry became obsolete. Not only did change occur in the industries, but the 1950s saw the demographics of the original hillbilly audience change. The urban modernization that was feared in the 1920s, leading to the creation of hillbilly music in the first place, had finally occurred to such an extent that it was believed that a rural, southern, hillbilly demographic was too small to have music designed for it. Stubborn both in terms of how his music would sound and who he would perform to, Monroe continued to perform music for less attended, but more committed crowds that fit this bygone hillbilly demographic.

By the 1950s, an opposing strategy appealing to non-hillbilly audiences was implemented to great success by Monroe's former bandmates Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs. Scruggs, the banjo player who had debatably jumpstarted the synthesis in the first place, had transformed Monroe's music into a banjo centered sound which satisfied both consumers and folklorists alike. This ability to entertain both common, fashion-bound audiences, and educated, historically-bound folklorists, had led to immense success in the folk festival circuit and on sponsored radio shows. Chapter five will explain how a Scruggs and banjo centered music of the 1950s changed back to a Monroe-centric music by 1962 with the help of folklorists Mike Seeger and Ralph Rinzler. Rinzler, Monroe's future agent, emphasized a faithfulness not to the music itself, but to the

people it was meant to entertain. Under this guise, it was not the immensely famous and successful Scruggs who was the leader of bluegrass, but the dedicated and stubborn Monroe.

Today, under Monroe's influence, bluegrass musicians remain more dedicated to their origins than other popular music genres. This privileging of the original style has resulted in smaller, but more dedicated audiences that claim an ownership over the musical product. Other musicians, appreciating the Monroe Synthesis but desiring to diversify their audiences, transform the synthesis in ways that differ from the desires of the dedicated fan base. For example, bands that implement extended solos or use electronic instruments are considered suspect to many fans who emphasize bluegrass's traditional aspects. Instead of picking a side in this debate, this paper hopes to illuminate how bluegrass, due to its connections with both popular music industries and the folk movement, should advertise itself as a unique musical genre with a novel extra-musical dimension.

## The Recording Industry 1923-1927: Manufactured Authenticity In Hillbilly Music

Today, bluegrass and country are considered distinct commercial genres, but in 1923 these genres were not seen as cohesive or distinct stylistic labels. While the advertised genres did not exist, the musical and social ingredients of which both consist had been available for countless years. Music such as minstrel songs which implemented both European and African musical techniques exemplify such ingredients.<sup>1</sup> The vast array of musics played by prototypical country and bluegrass musicians were not recognized or differentiated by their musical content, but by where the music was performed. What would soon become “hillbilly” music was predominantly played in southern, rural isolated areas in contrast to northern, urban ones.<sup>2</sup> Despite many of the future hillbilly musicians of the early 1920s living in rural areas outside of the city, the recording industry established phonograph auditions primarily in urban areas. One of these urban areas was Atlanta Georgia, where the first hillbilly recording artist was recorded.

The derogatory label given to the music by A&R men represents how they themselves felt about the music they were producing. “hillbilly” was not only a slang term for an uneducated person, but it also carried ethnic markings alluding to the Scotch and Irish. The first hillbilly recording artist was the Atlanta based Fiddlin’ John Carson who seemed to take pride in both the social and racial aspects of the term. Carson, while playing the “screech of the old negro fiddle,”

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Cantwell is an invaluable resource on this point. He writes, “The African love of cross-rhythm found a home... in off-beat accentuation, which was in the gait of Scots song and was a favorite device of Irish fiddlers; African gapped scales and modalities found an echo in those of the Gaelic tradition; folksingers from both parts of the world delighted, in different ways and in different degrees, in high pitches, a declamatory style, vocal tension and ornament, and improvisation. All these traits reflected the aural universe in which both traditions had grown up and it, it seems reinforced one another, giving rise to a regional folk music whose strange and wonderful trenchancy attracted the attention of popular entertainers such as blackface minstrels whose imitations and caricatures not only threw those traits into still higher relief but introduced them into popular consciousness and ultimately into popular song.” Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound* (Urbana (Ill.): University of Illinois Press, 2003) p 120-21.

<sup>2</sup> Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (University of Chicago Press: Wiley, 1999) p 4.

considered an uneducated form of fiddling, also played on racial tensions to achieve commercial success.<sup>3</sup>

Hillbilly music's first hit arrived with the 1923 Fiddlin' John Carson song "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane."<sup>4</sup> This song, symbolizing much of the future differentiations between country and bluegrass, consists equally of musical and political comfort and discomfort. Musically, the tonic, predominant, and dominant progression in the verse- with a move to the predominant in the chorus- evokes a simpler time. It alludes back to America's first popular music, minstrel songs, such as those written by Stephen Foster that often contain three chords as well. Of course, minstrel songs also represented a racially charged era where white performers would dress in black face and impersonate "lesser" black men to comedic effect.<sup>5</sup> While uncomfortable to today's society, musical similarities to this genteel music would have been a comfort to the rural isolated audience Carson represented. Yet, with the sole musical accompaniment being Carson's fiddle, the meter of the song becomes irregular. Lyrically, while it seems like the listener is supposed to pine for our collective cabin in the lane, the musical accompaniment itself makes the message very individualized. While the message could seem individualized when accounting for the irregular accompaniment, the lyrical content taken individually evokes a nostalgic content. A type of content that would have been greatly appreciated by southern, rural listeners.

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Ward and Patrick Huber, *A & R Pioneers: Architects of American Roots Music on Record* (Nashville: Tennessee, 2018) p 85.

<sup>4</sup> "Little Old Log Cabin In The Lane." Bluegrass Lyrics. Accessed April 6, 2020. <http://www.bluegrasslyrics.com/song/little-old-log-cabin-in-the-lane/>.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Lott makes this point clear when he writes, "Blackface minstrelsy was an established nineteenth-century theatrical practice, principally of the urban North, in which white men caricatured blacks for sport and profit." Eric Lott and Greil Marcus, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) p 1.

One of the great ironies of the hillbilly record industry was that it was an attempt to elicit nostalgia using technology that exemplified the incoming urbanization in the first place. Technological and economic advancements in the early twentieth century, including the spread of record players, were symbolic of America's transition from a country of rural yeoman farmers to one of urban businessmen and engineers. While northerners had been preparing for an industrial transition since the Civil War, the agrarian south still contained many isolated and rural communities especially in the Appalachian Mountains. "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" spoke to these people in a way other popular genres such as jazz and opera never could. Carson, a member of the KKK, was not only pining for better days, but commenting on the worse ones many feared would be ahead. In the second verse when he sings, "And the creeks have all dried up where we used to go to mill/ and things have changed their course another way," one can't help but read into the economic instability and paranoia of what "another way" may symbolize beyond the literal creek. Patrick Huber in his book *Linthead Stomp* notes, "... 'The Little Log Cabin in the Lane' combined both populist and racial commentary to alleviate white fears of industrial expansion, urban growth, and black progress, and thereby to promote Carson's own brand of reactionary populism."<sup>6</sup> From the onset of the country music industry in 1923, reactionary populism has been a selling point. While today America has arrived at a point where a massive pop industry cannot sell itself as evoking racist nostalgia, the "hope for a simpler time" is evoked often in country and bluegrass.

Carson's success in southern regions did not immediately lead to the meteoric rise of country music in northern and non-rural areas. In fact, the national recording and songwriting

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<sup>6</sup> Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014) p 95.

society, The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) banned hillbilly artists from joining, which removed all hope of a true national following. Instead, hillbilly musicians before 1923, and even after Carson's first recordings, would be considered amateurs in the eyes of many industry leaders.

Not only was Carson's music vastly different than music recorded or written by ASCAP-backed artists, but the song creating process was as well. The model ASCAP-backed labels preferred was a division of labor. Publishers had a stable of writers who wrote songs which the publisher then had to get into the hands of performers. If the performance was successful it would result in a mass distribution of the sheet music. The money came from the sales of the sheet music. In contrast, Carson's "Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane," was originally a minstrel song written fifty years previous. This separation between the "writer" and the performer was also different than the Tin Pan Alley model. Without a true song writer separate from the performer, the ASCAP system simply did not work. In addition, the producers earned most of their income from the copyright royalties. Instead, it was up to two A&R men, Polk Brockman and Ralph Peer, to put into place a new system. This system would guarantee their economic security by taking advantage of their uneducated, amateur, hillbilly performers.

Both Brockman and Peer were employees at furniture stores their families owned. Since musical distribution was not nearly as wide as it was today, furniture stores became the logical place to sell phonograph records, record players, and radios. Brockman was successful in selling the record players themselves, but the records he offered did not sell well with his Atlanta clientele. To acquire records that fit his demographics, Brockman bought Okeh records. Peer, invited by Brockman, was in the room when Brockman recorded Fiddlin John Carson who became the first subject of Peer and Brockman's new copyright and songwriting system in 1923.

In their new system A&R men would persuade the predominantly uneducated, amateur performers to take one-time performance fees while the executives would take the song writing credits and royalties. Since many performers did not write the songs, but simply performed songs they had learned, they had no objection to this arrangement. But as previously mentioned, if the songs recorded were either previously copyrighted or part of public domain there was less money to be made for the A&R men. In other words, Peer and Brockman needed to create a new perspective on what song writing was or could be. Songwriting now included the recreation of old songs in a new form, or the rediscovering of old songs that could be sold as new. The two artists that perfected these two opposing attempts at gaining copyright license were Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family. Nolan Porterfield writes, “Pressured to produce material that was new yet somehow authentic to their temperament and traditions, aspiring rural artists such as Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family fell back on two obvious sources: either they dredged up old, half-forgotten relics of the past, or they composed original songs that sounded like the old ones- music that connected with the past and extended tradition.”<sup>7</sup> In addition to giving these A&R men the ability to make money off of this process, old music that sounded new or new music that sounded old also gave the music a certain manufactured authenticity that had great appeal to the southern rural audiences predominantly buying the records. In contrast to true authenticity, this was simply a synthetic commercial strategy meant to represent the desires of the consumer. This same faulty authenticity built on evoking nostalgia in an opposingly contemporary art form is at the heart of bluegrass’s sound and reputation.

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<sup>7</sup> Nolan Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers: The Life and Times of Americas Blue Yodeler* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) p 99.



This groundbreaking authorship idea was allowed to expand due to the musical outputs of Rodgers and the Carter Family. Recorded by Peer one day apart in 1927, it is common to say that 1927, not 1923, is the true birth of country music. In this year, these two seemingly disparate acts became the two avenues for economic success in hillbilly record production, and later the two musical philosophies which would lead to the increasing schism between folk music and country.

The Carter Family, made up of husband A.P., wife Sara and her sister Maybelle, were musicians who discovered old material and recorded it in their own way.<sup>8</sup> Jocelyn Neal writes, “The Carter family embodies the image of homespun, wholesome goodness, ‘regular folks’ who came down from the mountains singing gospel songs and treasured old ballads.”<sup>9</sup> Of course, there was a process to find those old songs and ballads, and this was not done alone. When A.P. would venture to undiscovered areas outside of their Maces Spring, VA home, he would bring African American Lesley Riddle to accompany him. When they arrived, A.P. would focus on archiving the lyrics he learned from the rural performers, and Riddle would transcribe the musical aspects.<sup>10</sup> Robert Cantwell in his book *Bluegrass Breakdown*, believes that these connections to black songsters bring in a romantic dimension to the process. He writes, “To seek out the black bluesmen was usually a literal journey to the nether regions of society... but more significantly, a social descent, which, like the descendants of mythology and folklore, was made on behalf of the special powers conferred by secret knowledge.”<sup>11</sup> After the song collection was over, they would go back home and teach the songs to Sara and Maybelle. On August 1 1927,

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<sup>8</sup> If you want more info on the Carter Family that I do not supply here, I would recommend Sylvie Simmons, “THE CARTER FAMILY: INTO THE VALLEY,” *MOJO*, November 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Jocelyn R. Neal, *The Songs of Jimmie Rodgers: A Legacy in Country Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009) p 8.

<sup>10</sup> John Atkins, “The Carter Family,” in *Stars of Country Music: Uncle Dave Macon to Johnny Rodriguez* (University of Illinois Press, 1975), p 96.

<sup>11</sup> Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown* p 31.

they went to Bristol, TN to record songs that they learned in this way with Peer. To the delight of Peer, they made old songs sound new, and copyrightable. Of course, the copyright would be Peer's while the Carter Family would simply get money for the performance. When considering the Carter Family's lack of business sense, it is not surprising that their recording deals were highly disadvantageous. Patrick Huber in *A & R Pioneers* writes,

“In this madcap scramble for original material roots artists who composed their own songs, or who arranged traditional pieces, or who recast numbers in ways that made them copyrightable, often signed away their own copyright claims. In return, they received what were usually modest onetime payments from the record companies or the publishing affiliates, which because, in legal parlance, ‘proprietor of copyright is a work made for hire.’ Under these conditions, these songwriters were virtual company employees the fruits of their creative labors were owned exclusively by that firm, to be exploited for its own-rather than for the artist's or the songwriter's- benefit, in whatever ways it wished.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite this obviously imbalanced and predatory arrangement, the Carter Family became economically successful and had a major role in country music for two generations. For example, Johnny Cash married Maybelle's daughter, June. But their success did not compare to the opposed, and more commercially profitable strand of Peer's vision personified by Jimmie Rodgers.

Recorded the day before the Carter Family, Jimmie Rodgers was a unique and talented guitarist, songwriter, and singer who changed the trajectory of American music. Instead of personifying the hillbilly folk he wished to entertain, Rodger's identity as the “Singing

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<sup>12</sup> Ward and Huber, *A & R Pioneers* p 94.

Brakeman” added an urban flair to his image and could yodel alluding to the long held European and African American tradition. While his songs were slightly more risqué and modern than those of the Carter Family, they did represent the newly urbanizing southern working-class. While the Carter’s praised steadfastness, Rodgers represented the comfort in the knowledge that one could adapt to their changing surroundings. In *The Devil Sent the Rain* Tom Piazza notes, “Rodgers didn’t represent the expression of a unique personality so much as he did the fluidity of identity.”<sup>13</sup> Porterfield applies this specifically to his musical career when he writes, “Rodgers would take from the emerging ‘hillbilly’ trend whatever suited him or seemed natural, just as he did with other styles and repertoires.”<sup>14</sup> While seemingly dismissive, Rodgers’s ability to adapt his sound and persona to the times was one of his greatest strengths, and one that Peer needed to capitalize on in order to make the new sound old. While Peer did receive monetary success thanks to Rodgers, Jimmie was personable enough to become a star himself. A concurring sentiment by Rodger’s scholars is that, “Once he became famous, the chameleon-like quality only became more expertly managed; the photos were taken by professionals, the smile more practiced, more genial.”<sup>15</sup> Rodgers was a true popular artist, not one propped up and controlled by an A&R man behind the scenes. While an advantage in his contemporary era until his early death to tuberculosis, his transformative qualities led him to be dismissed by many folk scholars. This is because scholars preferred the romantic notions of the Carter Family venturing out to the folk to learn their music in comparison to the less romanticized vision of Rodgers.

Since this project focuses on Bluegrass’s obsessive traditionalism ushered in by Bill Monroe and the folk movement, the dichotomy depicting the Carter family as rural folk and

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<sup>13</sup> Tom Piazza, *Devil Sent the Rain: Music and Writing in Desperate America* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011) p 9.

<sup>14</sup> Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers* p 56.

<sup>15</sup> Piazza, *Devil Sent the Rain* p 6.

Rodgers as urban commercialization must be criticized. After all, the possible origin of bluegrass was Monroe's Grand Ole Opry version of "Mule Skinner Blues," a Jimmie Rodgers hit. Due to its associations with Rodgers, a star who was separated from the purified sounds of the Carter Family, bluegrass should be seen as representing the urban sensibilities that it initially wanted to oppose. While Bill Monroe has been revered for catering his shows to a family friendly, rural audience, Jimmie Rodgers represented the antithesis of these values to many.<sup>16</sup>

While Carson, Rodgers, and the Carter Family all had social and geographic bonafides to be considered hillbilly, many of the most successful hillbilly singers during this era, for example Vernon Dahllart, a trained opera singer turned hillbilly star, were considered "City Billies."<sup>17</sup> City Billies were either from northern states or had urban sensibilities, but were labeled and sold as hillbilly performers. These musicians, with instrumental training, were the true middle ground between the ASCAP industry and the Carter Family. Due to their ability to both satisfy urban and rural audiences, many hillbilly record labels focused on these types of artists along with placing their recording studios in northern states. It is important to note that, "though it runs counter to one of the most enduring myths of absurd early country music's origins and cultural significance, vast numbers of hillbilly recordings were made in northern studios by versatile professional 'citybilly' singers who had few agrarian connections and who, often as a result of formal music training, were able to perform in a wide range of musical styles."<sup>18</sup> This, logically, led to musical styles performed by citybilly performers that contrasted with those of the oldest hillbilly performances. While Fiddlin' John Carson was the first hillbilly recording, the musical

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<sup>16</sup> Richard D Smith, "Bill Monroe: His Best Days on Earth," *Bluegrass Unlimited*, May 1985, p 22.

One example of Rodgers's inappropriate lyrical themes was bragging about his sexual exploits. In T for Texas he sings "If you don't want me baby, mama you sure don't got to stall/ Well I've had more pretty women than a passenger train can haul."

<sup>17</sup> Tony Russell, *Country Music Originals: The Legends and the Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) p 15.

<sup>18</sup> Ward and Huber, *A & R Pioneers* p 51.

style was unique in several ways compared to the more conventional acts such as the Skillet Lickers. Minus the standup bass, the instrumental makeup of the Skillet Lickers consisted of the same standard instruments as bluegrass today. The band consisted of: Gid Turner on fiddle, Riley Puckett on guitar and banjo, Calyton McMichen on fiddle, and Ted Hawkins on mandolin. This “string band” lineup was much more common in the earliest hillbilly recordings, but fell out of favor in the 1930s. The recording of the Skillet Lickers’s “Soldier’s Joy” was meant to replicate the experience of a barn dance to cement its authenticity. This was accomplished by having minimal vocal accompaniment, and extra musical introductions to the songs. In these recordings, the melody is predominantly carried by the fiddle with verses quickly sung only to transition back into the instrumental section. When contrasting this style of hillbilly music with what came in 1927 with the likes of Rodgers and the Carter Family, it is clear that vocals had taken center stage at the sake of a dance-based string band.

Bluegrass, derived from the instrumental components of early hillbilly string band music, is also characterized as a vocal music that has made many citybilly hits part of its own canon. An example of this is Dahllart’s hit, “The Prisoner’s Song.” The original’s restrained and clear guitar and string accompaniment represented the urban compromise to what could be seen as the “authentic” hillbilly of the Carters or Jimmie Rodgers two years later. Ironically, “The Prisoner Song” is a bluegrass standard now reimagined with a faster tempo and instrumentation similar to that of the Skillet Lickers.

While popular opinions on hillbilly music may have changed from 1923-1927, authenticity was still a selling point. Instead of a positive definition of authenticity such as one that could have defined the Carter Family or Fiddlin’ John Carson, Peer created a negative definition that was built on selective exclusions. This exclusion was the same as the one Peer

used as his economic basis: songs must be old or sound old. While lacking common ground with ASCAP, hillbilly record producers and performers alike saw their economic rival in the 1920s as jazz. This was because of both commercial competition and racial tensions. Huber writes that Carson, "... considered the fiddle music and the old ballads he performed to be a much-needed alternative to the influential jazz music of the 1920s and 30s, whose enormously popular sounds reflected the expanding African American influence on Popular music."<sup>19</sup> This racial purity exemplified by the pseudo-musical one created a built-in consumer base represented by social and geographic concerns in contrast to musical taste. Hillbilly performers did not mind limiting and purifying their commercial releases. Along with the satisfaction of following one's superiors, there was also the notion that economic success of "authentic" hillbilly music meant it was the type of music people wanted to buy. Huber writes, "While many played music in private as well as in public purely for fun, for professional and semiprofessional roots musicians, popularity success, sometimes even just shelter and a good square meal, always depended on being carefully attuned to shifting audience preferences."<sup>20</sup> These same distinctions of audience preference, the musician's economic necessity, and even the racial purity to a certain extent, reemerge with full force in bluegrass, a music that has been on the commercially defensive since shortly after its origin.

Regardless of where or how it was made, the hillbilly recording industry invented by Polk Brockman and Ralph Peer found a way to sell authenticity. In contrast to their northern urban counterparts, the music that was being recorded was, at the very least, meant to evoke nostalgia. This nostalgia could even be evoked visually because, "catalogues... presented the

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<sup>19</sup> Huber, *Linthead Stomp* p 99.

<sup>20</sup> Ward and Huber, *A & R Pioneers* p 158.

fiddle, stringband, and gospel music, heard on interwar hillbilly discs as authentic folk expressions of white southerners, miraculously unsullied by craved commercial forces or contaminated by foreign, nonwhite influences. This music was promoted as a cherished musical repository of old-fashioned Anglo-Saxon Protestant values and racial integrity at a time when both seemed threatened.”<sup>21</sup> This pining for a way of life, that could still be remembered by many of that contemporary era, led to unwarranted authenticity. While this authenticity can be marked by lyrical content or who sung the song, it can also be musical accompaniment or simply how the songs are arranged or sung. When recording both Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family one day apart in 1927, Peer heard two artists who could make the new sound old and the old sound new. Not only would this lead to more money coming into his pocket, but if these records evoked the right emotions to the right kind of demographic, it could lead to such a vast amount of money that even the performers could have their portion. For the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, their vast success led this to be a satisfactory business model, a business model that would be at the forefront of bluegrass’s initial commercial success and eventual decline. While Rodgers, the Carter Family, and later bluegrass took advantage of a manufactured authenticity to sell records, many performers were still economically disadvantaged in the production system Brockman and Peer put in place. If they were to make a living playing music, they would need to go beyond being personable to a record executive or two, but instead had to be personable to an entire locale. The best way to do this was to become a radio star.

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<sup>21</sup> Ward and Huber, *A & R Pioneers* p 236-7.

## Chapter 2: The Radio and the Authenticity of Immediacy 1922-1939

While the phonograph industry was an example of early twentieth century technology's ability to connect urban and rural communities, issues with the product itself diminished the connections that could be made. Not only could a minimal amount of music be placed on a record, but the records would erode quickly. To solve this, many rural consumers would buy multiple copies of the same song. In addition, the recording did not contain any nuance similar to what one could experience in a live performance. For a group like the Skillet Lickers to truthfully capture the energy and joy of a live barn dance, it would need variety both in the extramusical conversations and in the musical product. While supposedly equating to a live performance, a phonographic record was instead a static product that had no effect of immediacy. The radio, an invention that specialized in the immediacy of information and the intimacy built into that, seemed to be the solution. This technological breakthrough again led to commercial products designed for southern rural listeners. These products would include barn dance inspired variety shows such as those of the National Barn Dance on WLS in Chicago, and the Grand Ole Opry on WSM in Nashville. Musically, it would include new hillbilly music sub-genres such as brother duets. One such brother duet was the Monroe Brothers, a duet designed for this new immediate performance style in part due to the euphonic harmonies as well as the harmonious family image.<sup>22</sup> One member of this brother duet was Bill Monroe, who after taking

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Cantwell takes a practical approach as to why brother duets replaced the string bands common in the 1920s. While records may have eroded over time, the original sound product was able to capture more than the radio was able to. Cantwell believes that brother duets, "... communicated to the airwaves only what the receiving set could be relied upon to reproduce with perfect accuracy: simple melodic lines and parallel harmonies in thirds or fifths, high-pitched but effortless singing, a steady unaccented rolling rhythm." Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown* p 49.

Yet, Vincent J. Roscigno points out that improvements in microphone technology allowed a more clear and soothing vocal product. At this point, "musicians no longer needed to project as much as before and could incorporate more subtle nuances into their vocals. The rougher sounds of Charlie Poole, for instance, were replaced by the smoother vocals of the Monroe Brothers." Vincent J. Roscigno and William F. Danaher, *The Voice of Southern Labor Radio, Music, and Textile Strikes, 1929-1934* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) p 49.



off on his own in part due to the brother duet falling out of favor by the late 1930s, soon became one of the leading members of Grand Ole Opry by creating a new form of authentic hillbilly music.

Similar to the origins of the record industry, a monetary rivalry with ASCAP cultivated the ground for these radio shows to grow. While the hillbilly record industry was still dwarfed by the size of ASCAP, ASCAP still saw the need to minimize the economic threat that hillbilly music could potentially become. To do this, many critics and businessmen would write bad reviews about hillbilly music specifically, and spread negative information about the people who performed and listened to it. While explicit or implicit exclusions did diminish the national economic potential of hillbilly music, it made the music cheap to broadcast for radio DJs.<sup>23</sup> Again, the opposing intentions between the producers and consumers of Tin Pan Alley, and the producers and consumers of hillbilly music, resulted in an economic boom for the latter.

Cheap production was the economic justification to produce barn dances on a larger scale. One of the most successful of these, the National Barn Dance in Chicago, epitomizes how the authenticity of the product is not dictated by musical similarities, but by cultural ones. Similar to how the term hillbilly was used in the record industry, “the term itself was much more ambivalent, connotating... rootedness, identity and distinctiveness from the metropolis’s masses.”<sup>24</sup> Assuming the rootedness of many of its listeners, the National Barn Dance, implied by the name itself, had the desire to evoke a nation-wide nostalgia by alluding to a commonly recognized social event not too far distanced from the contemporary era. To further the

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With these opposing causes in mind, I think it is best to focus on the fact that the brother duet was a soothing vocal medium meant to instill comfort both musically, but also socially by emphasizing the family unit.

<sup>23</sup> Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: the Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008) pp 5-6.

<sup>24</sup> Chad Berry, *The Hayloft Gang: the Story of the National Barn Dance* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2008) p 7.

legitimacy of these events, the music played, “highlighted ‘the old familiar calls of the barn dance fiddler’ and relied on the appeal of pleasurable experiences and nostalgic memories associated with a real barn dance, a widespread institution of communal sociability that many commentators of the time feared was passing from the scene.”<sup>25</sup> While first relying on authentic string band music similar to that of the Skillet Lickers, the changes in popular taste and medium resulted in a changes that made such groups irrelevant. This dismissal was due to the fact that, “WLS discovered that the old familiar music that worked best on the radio was music better sited for the more intimate domestic spaces of the parlor or kitchen. Not the public hall. Old-time fiddling and its associated dance forms belonged primarily to what folklorists have called ‘public’ or ‘assembly’ traditions. Domestic traditions on the other hand, included the customary contexts for the singing of traditional folk songs for family music making.”<sup>26</sup> Family music making, specifically the brother duet, became a profitable musical style on WLS and other radio barn dances. Perhaps the most famous and talented of these brother duet acts was Bill and Charlie Monroe.

After moving up north from his Rosine, Kentucky home in 1929 to work with his brother Birch, Charlie Monroe had earned enough money to convince Bill to work at Sinclair Oil with them in Whiting Indiana. It was around this time that a man named Tom Owens saw Bill and Charlie playing mandolin and guitar respectively, and approached them about auditioning for the National Barn Dance. While not becoming regulars on that specific program, their audition led to a job in Gary, Indiana at WJKS.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to how many biographers have presented Bill

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Tyler, “Thee Rise of Rural Rhythm,” in *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance* (University of Illinois Press, 2008), p 33.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid 33.

<sup>27</sup> For more biographical information on Bill Monroe, Richard D. Smith’s *Cant You Hear me Callin’: The Life of Bill Monroe* is an invaluable source. Richard D. Smith, *Cant You Hear Me Callin: the Life of Bill Monroe, Father of Bluegrass* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001) pp 32-35.

Monroe today, Monroe was not separate or impervious to the industry changes around him. While bluegrass is lauded by many as the modernization of the hillbilly string band, it is not recognized that the supposed creator of the genre performed music that helped its demise. In addition, brother duet music was seen as a concession to popular demands that were slowly moving away from a specifically southern rural way of life, and moving towards an idealized nostalgic one regardless of geographic or economic origin.<sup>28</sup> In addition to success on the radio, the Monroe Brothers became a recording phenomenon as well. One of their best selling singles, “What would you Give In Exchange for your Soul” was an example of the growing trend of “answer songs,” songs that were such commercial successes that A&R men desired their artists to write sequels or responses to the original songs. The Monroe brothers recorded 3 more versions of the songs to satisfy their label bosses.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, earning appearance fees from studio time was important since, like the record industry, radio performers were given unfair contracts. Instead of earning a majority of their income from the radio or record appearances alone, “It was up to musicians to establish on air popularity, then parlay it into concert appearances where the real money was.”<sup>30</sup> With the help of the technological immediacy that a radio could provide, it became the only tool to establish an on air personal relationship with the local listeners who would then financially support the performer by going to a live show. In addition to local radio shows implementing this relationship, national barn dances such as the one on WLS were, “erasing the social distance

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Cantwell gives a back-handed definition of brother duets in the quotation, “It was a music so elegantly simple that its simplicity and purity, its rigorous leveling of auditory textures, of dissonance of almost any kind, can scarcely have been arrived at except by conscious contrivance.” Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown* p 49.

<sup>29</sup> Brian Ward and Patrick Huber, *A & R Pioneers* pp 140-41.

The Monroe Brothers Complete RCA Victor Bluebird Recordings, Vol. 3. Recorded March 22, 2011. Soundmark, 2011, Streaming Audio.

[https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/be%7Crecorded\\_cd%7Ccli\\_upc\\_809157806523](https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/be%7Crecorded_cd%7Ccli_upc_809157806523).

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *Cant You Hear Me Callin* p 35.

between the performer and the audience, a separation that characterized the assembly tradition they turned pop singers into friends who had come to the house to visit.”<sup>31</sup> To be successful, radio broadcasters and performers had to establish a certain authenticity, similar to but more intimate than the one created by a recording artist, that made it believable that this type of person would drop by your house, and that you would want them there in the first place. This necessity to convince the listener of the performer’s authentic rural charm changed the power dynamic from one where the A&R man dictated what others wanted to hear, to one where the listeners decided who they wanted to hear.

This ownership of the musical product due to a supposed personal relationship with the performer becomes one of the most recognizable, yet problematic characteristics of bluegrass. Chris Pandolfi, banjoist for the Infamous Stringdusters, a band that has a vanishing relationship with bluegrass fans because of their artistic evolutions outside of the genre, believes that, “the ‘bluegrass’ world has a small and fiercely loyal base... This is a curse and a blessing, while we get to enjoy one of the great oral music traditions, growing and changing faster than ever before, the fans also take increased ownership over the music. Firm opinions about what is or isn’t ‘bluegrass’ have literally come to define the core traditional community. It’s an omnipresent topic. Stuffy opinions breed an atmosphere of exclusivity and often negativity. And with the huge gray area between fans and professionals, these attitudes persuade the business community as well as the fan base.”<sup>32</sup> For radio programs, there was not only an impetus to extend that gray area between the performer and the listener, but to privilege the listener’s ownership above the performer themselves. This pride in ownership and belief that the musical products should be

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<sup>31</sup> Paul Tyler, “Thee Rise of Rural Rhythm,” in *The Hayloft Gang* p 33.

<sup>32</sup> Chris Pandolfi, “Bluegrass?,” chris pandolfi, April 22, 2011, <http://chrispandolfi.com/?p=567>)

dictated by the dedicated fan's and consumer's desires is one reason why bluegrass bands consider explorations outside bluegrass traditionalism as risky, or even worse, immoral.

The WLS National Barn Dance's Chicago location separated it from the "true" southern authenticity that had been established by the hillbilly record industry. While many performers such as the Monroe Brothers did have southern origins, the emphasis that the Barn Dance explicitly pointed towards was simply one between urban and rural. The goal of the Barn Dance was to present, "a rural voice to the whole country, reminding urban and rural listeners alike that farmers still existed and were an important part of the national imaginary."<sup>33</sup> This goal of spiritually coalescing the whole country through their appreciation of rural workers also had a musical component. While brother duets were a prominent genre on the radio, "the barn dance had from its outset, a 'broader musical perspective' than just hillbilly shows. By presenting southern, rural, and traditional music in conjunction with old-fashioned sentimental and popular songs-what had become, in effect, the 'folksongs' of the urban north- the Barn Dance seemed to reconstitute the rural music as a popular national form, while at the same time effacing under its influence the bourgeois quality of the old popular songs and bestowing upon them a faintly rustic or bucolic character."<sup>34</sup> Although a majority of hillbilly music was recognized as originating in the south, the National Barn Dance wanted to transcend that into simply a rural and urban divide and diminish the importance of southern origins. In contrast, George D Hay and Edward Craig of WSM Nashville wanted to establish the South's agency in hillbilly music.

Edward Craig was the son of a successful businessman who bought an insurance company called National Sick and Accident Association in 1901. In 1923, he persuaded his

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<sup>33</sup> Susan Smulyan, "Early Broadcasting and Radio Audiences," in *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance* (University of Illinois Press, 2008), p 127.

<sup>34</sup> Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown* pp 44-45.

father to purchase a radio station whose content would be centered on “musical programs,” “Insurance Talks,” and “Publicity Helps.”<sup>35</sup> At the same time, George D. Hay who played the “Old Solemn Judge” on the WLS barn dance, wanted to host a new barn dance that would be true to its southern origins. He believed that having truly authentic southern performers would lead to economic success.<sup>36</sup> Of course, the authenticity of the Grand Ole Opry was both hollow and unreachable. Instead, the authenticity that was derived from the show was built with contradictions similar the Peer and Brockman. While it does appear that Hay wanted music of the common man to be respected and even academicized, much of the authenticity that Hay wanted to be analyzed and appreciated was artificial. The issue was that he had, “grown concerned that the Opry performers who came in each week dressed as if for church on Sunday, didn’t look the way they sounded. The pickers and fiddlers, many of whom were craftsmen and laborers from the city, saw radio as a formal affair, and the lush studio surroundings only reinforced the notion... But Hay took a notion that an ‘authentic’ hillbilly music show ought to feature musicians who looked like authentic hillbillies.”<sup>37</sup> If the goal of the radio industry was to sell advertisements, and the goal of the musicians was to earn a personal rapport with the listener so they would go to live shows, creating these personas that reflected hillbilly virtues would seem to be a good thing. But like the idea of authenticity in the record industry, this was a cynical attempt to gain advertisement profits at the expense of the musicians who believed professionalism was paramount to their success. This is especially prevalent in bluegrass where

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<sup>35</sup> For More biographical information on Edward Craig I recommend *Air Castle of the South: WSM and the Making of Music City* by Craig Havighurst. Craig Havighurst, *Air Castle of the South: WSM and the Making of Music City* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013) pp 7-12.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid p 25.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid 74.

avoiding unpleasant hillbilly stereotypes became important due to Monroe's own philosophy and persona.

Prioritizing an individual image became another commercial trend that would influence the hillbilly radio industry, Bill Monroe, and bluegrass itself. If the top priority of the radio industry was to sell products to their listeners by creating immediate personal bonds between them and the performer, having a duet or group was not as economically viable as simply having one leader that the listener could identify with. This realization ushered in the star system that is still at the forefront of the popular music industry today.<sup>38</sup> Of course star systems had been in place for prima donnas and piano virtuosos previously, but what made this star system unique was that these performers would establish personas that were relatable to their southern rural listeners on the Grand Ole Opry. This star system was based on fitting a pre-conceived image, not creating a new one. Two opposing personas that represented these pre-conceived images were Uncle Dave Macon and Bill Monroe.

Uncle Dave Macon was the epitome of Hay's vision for what a hillbilly performer should be. His origin story, involving his mule and wagon business being wiped out by the auto industry, symbolize both a man content in simple agrarian practices and one who is a victim of a world that will not allow him anymore.<sup>39</sup> Musically, his diverse repertoire built off of minstrel, tin pan alley, ballad, and vaudeville material exemplified that musical authenticity was less of a priority than a convincing performative and personal legitimacy. His performances are still

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<sup>38</sup> Susan Smulyan writes, "The National Barn Dance worked hard to address the white middle class that broadcasters had early identified as a target. The interpolated advertisements and the use of stars to sell themselves as products provided a commodified (but soon familiar) approach to middle-class listeners. In addition, the program's emphasis on family, with the performers presented as surrogate members of the listeners' families (as shown in listener letters), added to the middle-class tone of the National Barn Dance." Susan Smulyan, "Early Broadcasting and Radio Audiences," in *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance* (University of Illinois Press, 2008), p. 125

<sup>39</sup> Ibid 25.

considered exemplary for this style of music in this specific context. Live performances of “Take me back to my Carolina home” show both a man with countless nicknames and a confident yet jovial disposition. The strums on different parts of the banjo for predominantly performative and humorous purposes successfully present him as a visceral performer and musician. Musically, it has many similarities in both content and accompaniment to Fiddlin John Carson’s “Little Old Log Cabin In the Lane” with its individualized meter and nostalgic lyrics. The individual presentation, the use of old repertoire under a new comedic star system guise, and the appropriation of new repertoire for a specific audience desiring southern authenticity, are all aspects of Macon that made him a radio star that was personable with fans.

As brother duets began to diminish in quality, the relationship of Bill and Charlie diminished as well. After years on the road traveling from one local radio show to another, the tensions simply became too great, and both admitted it would be the best business decision to go their separate ways.<sup>40</sup> Initially, it seemed to only be a good business move for Charlie, who was predominantly singing lead to Monroe’s tenor. Since Charlie was singing the melody in their recordings, it would stand to reason that he would become the more successful of the two. It was the news of Charlie’s audition for the Grand Ole Opry that pushed Monroe to get his new band The Bluegrass Boys out to Nashville as well.

One of the songs Bill auditioned with was the Jimmie Rodgers hit “Mule Skinner Blues,” except now in a completely novel and energetic style featuring the mandolin, banjo and other instruments that were originally part of string band groups. The performance was groundbreaking not only due to the persona or image that Bill created, but because it was

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<sup>40</sup> Smith, *Cant You Hear Me Callin* pp 45-46.



hillbilly music the way it was supposed to be played.<sup>41</sup> The music also had a great deal of virtuosity including the high lead parts of Monroe, the fast tempo, and the improvised instrumental solos. To some, including Robert Cantwell, it was clear that, “Monroe’s new music, with its high pitches, speedy tempos, and athletic instrumental breaks, its eclectic use of traditional gospel, sentimental, and blues songs, must have seemed somehow to epitomize hillbilly music, almost to the point of parody- as if preservation of the old rural music for some reason demanded, in 1939, that it be grasped more firmly and pursued more aggressively than it had been...”<sup>42</sup> Given the origins of “Mule Skinner Blues” and the unique, family friendly image desired by Hay of the performers, it is surprising that this repertoire no matter how well it was played was given such enthusiasm.

Even less likely was Hay’s acceptance of Monroe’s opposing image of hillbilly and performance practice. While performers like Macon were so satisfied with their situations they were willing to change depending on what listeners or radio executives wanted to be seen and heard, Monroe represented southern dignity and identity. Instead of being presented with the negative stereotypes that Hay enforced on many of his performers, The Bluegrass Boys were dressed like the Kentuckians they knew. They wore riding bands and high-top riding boots along with suits and white shirts. While still representing their specific locale, they also looked professional and less “authentically hillbilly” than many other performers. The seriousness of the clothing was appropriate for the how serious Monroe took his music. No longer did he think of himself as the second star of a brother duet in a long line of brother duets, he now thought of himself as a groundbreaking composer of a new music that took the country’s hillbilly listening

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<sup>41</sup> Hay believed that Monroe had “just given us a sample of folk music as she should be sung and played” Smith, *Cant You Hear Me Callin* p 60.

<sup>42</sup> Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown* p 7.

audience by storm. Its instrumental features and musical form not only evoked the great aural tradition of the past, but it took instrumental aspects of jazz with a high octane rhythm section and heightened improvisation. Hay realized that, paradoxically, this newly invented art form with its appeals to aural traditions and a rural southern way of life could help establish hillbilly music as an academicized folk music.

In order to accomplish this, people like George Hay needed to be “bold enough to claim country as an American birthright, a potent indigenous voice of the people, as well as a viable commercial market.”<sup>43</sup> The greatest example of this, although occurring a few years after Monroe first performed at the Grand Ole Opry, was WSM’s transcribed program about the history of country music. This project, given to and aired by the BBC, relies on many of the same romantic notions that revivalists evoked twenty years later. It told the story of British Isle folk songs making their way to the new world and the American south where they were synthesized with musical techniques from African Americans. While focusing on the performers, it conveniently leaves out industry influences, and the artificial aspects of the music that made it commercially viable. In a seemingly paradoxical appeal to many of today’s standards, Hay and others believed highlighting the historical connections, and not the innate originality of the music, was the best way to sell the product. But of course, this was only the case because the music itself was based on original and contemporary concerns. Much like bluegrass, the traditionalism of the music becomes murky once one realizes what the musical repertoire and stylistic components are. Monroe’s initial contribution to hillbilly music was to change the instrumental lineup, texture, and arrangement to align closer to jazz music than to the string band

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<sup>43</sup> Havighurst, *Air Castle of the South* p 158.

or brother duet music of the past. Monroe's music, while personifying southern culture and using antiquated instruments, was actually a modern reaction to the musical landscape around him.

While Bill was a long-time contributor to the opry due to his unique, energizing, and professionalized music, his national success was not comparable to the great early stars such as Uncle Dave Macon and Roy Acuff. Unlike those two larger than life figures, "Monroe was never a candidate for such full-time corporate sponsorship. Although a compelling stage figure, he was a pathetic pitchman. Not only was he aloof, he had only the vaguest conception of how commercials are done."<sup>44</sup> If Bill was ever going to become a larger than life country star, he would need his own personal traits such as stubbornness, pride, and integrity to be the hallmark of prestige and economic success. While Monroe did not find that opportunity until twenty years later, he did find it thanks to Ralph Rinzler, Mike Seeger, and the urban folk revival.

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<sup>44</sup> Smith, *Cant You Hear Me Callin* p 127.

### **Chapter Three: The Folk Movement and Academicizing Authenticity 1870-1933**

Before examining Bill Monroe's relationship to the urban folk revival, one must understand how the goals and methodologies of folk archivers and academics have changed since the first attempts at retrieving, researching, and promoting American folk music. These transformations, beginning in nineteenth century Europe, moving across the Atlantic in the early twentieth century, and eventually concluding with a star system similar to that of the radio or the record industry, reflect what Monroe wanted out of the folk revival and what the folk revival saw in Monroe.

Before America was recognized as the historic musical landscape it came to be in the twentieth century, notions of who the folk were and what folk music was were being negotiated in Europe. For example the Scottish were seen as a "folk" people, and their music defined by its instrumentation, rhythm, and melodies, was seen as a folk music. While musical distinctions were recognized, what made this music folk was how they learned it and where it came from. Words such as "tradition," emphasizing its oral proliferation, and "obscurity," highlighting its unknown origins, became the hallmarks of folk music. This had unintentional results for the American folk movement. The notion of tradition was problematic because it, "steered focus inherently onto fixity- and expanded beyond performers to what they represented as cultural capital, which inherently brought in outside arbitration. Though the acceptance of variants and evolving tune or ballad families suggests that some change was tolerated within tradition, the most striking and consistent feature of definitions of traditional transmission and folk music in general is the implication that the fixity operates on a higher level than change: variance is

bounded within tradition.”<sup>45</sup> Under the assumption that all artistic decisions and changes are based on an overarching form or idea, one could also believe that this overarching form or idea could come from one person. But in a “great man theory,” in contrast to a societal tradition, that form or creation becomes even more unstable and idiosyncratic. Relying on this narrative of artistic creation also has the potential to belittle and undermine any innovation in the art as a whole, either by neglecting that it is part of the original vision, or by recognizing that it is merely a part of the larger tradition and not novel at all. In bluegrass, it will be argued that Monroe became this unstable, idiosyncratic figure who consumed all disparate variance that had any semblance to his own creation.

While questions of traditionalism focused on the actual creations of the academicized folk, issues of obscurity focused on who these people were. Regardless, highlighting obscurity was advantageous for A&R men, radio executives, and folk archivists alike because, “obscurity meant no accusations of ‘impurity’ could be proven at the point of origin, and vagueness prevented contradictory explanations; all that was needed to balance such vagueness was a suitable attention to proving authenticity by stylistic idiom, showing that the music was indeed ‘traditional’- ‘natural to’ its country of origin and mystified past.”<sup>46</sup> Radio and record executives alike would portray contradictory images of these songs and their performers. In the radio industry, southern images and characters were useful for selling advertisements, yet much effort was spent emphasizing the performers’ urban connection as well. In the record industry, the contradictory goals of being old while sounding new or vice versa were a vague depiction of what the products really were. Regarding bluegrass, Robert Cantwell realizes that the origin of

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<sup>45</sup> Matthew Gelbart, *Invention of "Folk Music" and "Art Music": Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner* (New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism) (Cambridge University Press, 2007) p 169.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid* p 188.

bluegrass can be, “narratives that lead from social isolation to contact, from pure musical styles to compounds, from music made outside the commercial market to music that is deeply integrated into it.”<sup>47</sup> In contrast, the earliest folklorists interested in American folk music, Francis Child and Cecil Sharp, desired the music they discovered to be derived from a specific place.

Similar to the sentiments of hillbilly consumers, Europeans including Francis Child believed that pure folk societies were dwindling. Whether literary or musical culture, literacy seemed to be making its way into these periphery cultures which tarnished notions of the folk as oral-tradition-bound and separate from everyday civilized life. In order to preserve folk culture, archivists such as Francis Child would travel and transcribe the native products.<sup>48</sup> He would call these obscure British folk songs “Child ballads.” Of course, the songs he found were already “damaged” due to outside influences, which resulted in Child taking the authority upon himself to transcribe the songs in a way that would confirm his own stereotypes about the people he was studying. The purpose of these transcriptions was not for entertainment, since he believed that lower and middle classes would degrade the artistic product, but it was instead to preserve the musical styles of these cultures by putting it into the hands of other intellectuals who could theorize and historicize it.

While not its own separate country, northern intellectuals found a similar interest in the American south during the 1870s. Probably inspired by the recent disappearance of confederate citizens, geography, and infrastructure, northern Americans began to have a romantic vision of a obscure and less-developed place. While this resulted in a boom for the literature industry more

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<sup>47</sup> Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown* p 7.

<sup>48</sup> For more information about the origins of the European folk archival movement I would recommend the first chapter of *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* by Benjamin Filene. His later chapters were also extremely valuable for the later eras of folk music that will be explored. Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008)

than the musical one, minstrel music exemplified that this interest had positive economic ramifications in music as well. While this phenomenon was predominantly centered on northern upper-class patrons, it seems logical for these same notions to create a deeper connection and interest in middle and lower class southern consumers fifty years later. In those fifty years, the land would have only become more obscure and romanticized.

Not specifically interested in Appalachian music itself, many archivists including Cecil Sharp, another Englishman, were in fact searching for Child ballads that may have found their way to America through years of immigration and cultural growth. Since Child's work, the purpose of these transcriptions changed. Not only should they be preserved for all to recognize, but they should be practiced by all who desired to perform them. While Child's books were academic products, Sharp put his book *English Folk Songs* onto the market in 1916. In fact, he took a massive step in promoting performer agency by condoning and even recommending harmonic accompaniment to these seemingly archaic and single vocal lines. Alas, Sharp could not avoid placing anachronistic and primitive stereotypes on the music and the people making it. Despite many forward thinking ideas, "Sharp did not believe that the commoners themselves were up to the task of creating the national music. Rather, they were to be commended for having preserved the raw materials out of which trained composers would create the new music."<sup>49</sup> Only moderately less distrusting than Child, Sharp believed that while lower classes would not destroy the noble music of the folk, they would not be able to make any use of it either. It was up to the intellectual and artistic elite to transform these building blocks into something that was truly representative of the people. By mourning the distance that was growing between refined and uncultivated society, both Child and Sharp were simply making

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid p 22.

this divide more explicit. Despite geographic or artistic similarities, it seems like Child and Sharp believed cultivated and educated artists made use of artistic products to improve society, while “lesser” cultures created them half hazard and incidentally.

American folklorists of the 1920s perceived the hillbilly record and radio industries similar to how Child and Sharp feared middle- or lower-class degradation of noble folk products. From a folklorist’s perspective, the radio industry seemed to be less about any kind of music than it was about the performances practices attributed to it. The similarities between Uncle Dave Macon, a jovial hillbilly performing vaudeville and minstrel covers, and Bill Monroe, a stern and stubborn farmer who created a new instrumentation and texture, were deemed to be minimal and only applied for artificial and commercial purposes. Similar issues hindered the record industry. Contradictory commercial obligations led to a decentralized style that was predominantly defined by what it was not. Claims of authenticity by exclusion of northern performers and sensibilities had also proven to be false.

While these may have been musical reasons for folk archivists to separate themselves from the radio and record industry, there were also political and economic concerns that placed these groups at opposing ends. American folklorists, some of the first vocal left-wing figures in twentieth century America, opposed the conservative values of hillbilly performers, consumers, and executives. In addition, the unjust labor practices of both the record and radio industry antagonized folklorists. Even performers who may have been given minimal wages for their labor were given wages nonetheless and considered separate from true folk musicians. Unfortunately, during, “the 1920s and 1930s, upper-class folk preservationists distinguished hillbilly from folk music not so much by instrumentation or formal structure as by the fact that the former was performed for money while the latter was presented as a philanthropic exercise in



cultural uplift.”<sup>50</sup> While today one can recognize the economic tension between the performers and the executives as exemplifying the economic hardship of the worker, folklorists recognized the merit of these performers thanks to a cross disciplinary breakthrough of another kind.

Functionalism, originated by British anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, transformed folklore methodology. Today, the theory seems very basic, but when analyzing folklore projects from before the 1920s, one can tell the massive change that occurred. Functionalism, “postulated that all cultural forms in a given society- from superstitions to rituals to economic exchange- existed because they served the functions in that society.”<sup>51</sup> This simple idea allowed folklorists to recognize that music recorded by the hillbilly industry and performed by hillbilly performers were homages to their older way of life, similar to how festivals, memorials, or even artistic products can mean those things in other societies and cultures. Because of this, “middle-class rural and cultural reformers became interested in the folk music upon which hillbilly was partially based because they viewed it as ‘real American music,’ an expression of the Anglo Saxon values that had built the nation and that the preservationists themselves also represented.”<sup>52</sup> The hillbilly performers not only started to control their own destiny, but were considered the symbolic protectors of a way of life that was part of the American identity.

This change in approach led to new leaders of the folk movement. Two of these new figureheads were John and Alan Lomax. Ironic due to their new sympathy for the hillbilly performer, the practices of these folklorists are comparable to the likes of Ralph Peer and Polk Brockman. Not only were folklorists such as the Lomaxes, and record executives such as Peer,

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<sup>50</sup> Pecknold, *The Selling Sound* p 2.

<sup>51</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk* p 137.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid* p 28.

often after similar talent, but what they did with that talent became very similar.<sup>53</sup> In contrast to the folklorists such as Child and Sharp before them, “the Lomaxes began to promote not just the songs they gathered but the singers who sang them. In doing so they produced a web of criteria for determining what a ‘true’ folk singer looked and sounded like and a set of assumptions about the importance of *being* a ‘true’ folk singer. In short, they created a ‘cult of authenticity’ a thicket of expectations and validations that American roots musicians and their audiences have been negotiating ever since.”<sup>54</sup> By emphasizing performers over the product, yet without ever rejecting Child’s theory that traditional music has a fixity beyond the variance, the Lomaxes inadvertently legitimized the right of individual musicians to personify and direct entire folk genres and cultural properties. Before moving further, it is important to note that in contrast to A&R and radio executives, folklorists such as the Lomaxes, “sought out roots musicians to record in order to preserve folksongs and idioms that they feared were disappearing amidst the rapid pace of social, economic, cultural, technological change then engulfing America, not least as represented by the growth of the commercial recording industry and the mounting sales of phonography and records in the nation’s small towns and heartlands.”<sup>55</sup> While hillbilly records have been our focus, the greatest example of the Lomax methodology and it’s results is the treatment and commercial experience of Leadbelly.

Unlike A&R men, John and Alan Lomax would set out on expeditions to find the musicians they wanted to record. Instead of waiting in a hotel room and having the musicians

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<sup>53</sup> Patrick Huber writes, “Several important folklorists and song collectors, among them... John and Alan Lomax, were also hot on the heels of similar, sometimes the same talent.” Ward and Huber, *A & R Pioneers* p 13.

<sup>54</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk* p 49.

<sup>55</sup> The quote goes on to say that “...John Lomax explicitly invoked the mass popularity of hillbilly and race music when trying to secure funds from the Library of Congress’s Archive of American Folk Song for his folk music recording projects. The success of hillbilly and race records, he argued, confirmed the centrality of rural musical idioms to American culture and therefore the pressing need to chronicle and preserve them.” Ward and Huber, *A & R Pioneers* p 13.

come to them, the Lomaxes went to such venues as prisons, which is where they found Huddie Ledbetter or “Lead Belly” in 1933. Already in prison for eleven years, the Lomaxes romanticized his separation from the outside world, similar to an undiscovered society. While equally groundbreaking for performing material separated from the English connected Child songbook, Leadbelly was also the rare musician who was known as much for his own persona as for his music. Like the radio stations that the folk movement had initially opposed, the Lomaxes had implemented a star system based on an individual’s authenticity and disposition. While possibly diminishing the influence of record and radio executives it could be argued that, “The Lomaxes were the first to use ‘actual folk’ to promote a coherent vision of America’s folk music heritage. To promote their canon they relied not on a popular interpreter of folk songs but on exemplars from the folk culture itself. They enlisted the full array of mass media- newspapers, movie newsreels, concerts, and records- to transform rural folk musicians into celebrities. In effect they spread their vision of American music by integrating folk into mass culture.”<sup>56</sup> Also similar to the A&R men and the radio executives, the Lomaxes controlled the repertoire and image of Leadbelly resulting in an increasing tension that led to the end of his career.

In promoting Leadbelly after his release from prison in 1934, the Lomaxes relied on contradictory selling points of authenticity and exoticism, or, traditionalism and obscurity. Leadbelly, playing music that was part of a long lineage of blues and folk musicians before him, was seen as the epitome of this long lost and uncelebrated style. Simultaneously, despite his release from prison at this time, Leadbelly was advertised as a dangerous criminal. In fact, Leadbelly was required to perform in his prison clothes to cement this image. His repertoire,

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<sup>56</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk* p 57. All other information contained in this paragraph can also be attributed to Filene’s chapter where this quote is located.

despite much of it being learned by radio or record recordings, was limited to songs without clear commercial lineages. In addition, the Lomaxes, still subscribing to some of Child's unfounded theories, thought of folk music as a static entity that would not change with popular demands. While "southerners" could be seen as a society that fit under the functional lens, a commercial community did not change for that commercial community's improvement, but instead due to external factors like wealth and greed. With a limited repertoire unable to be adjusted for modern sensibilities, the musical quality itself diminished as well.

This being Leadbelly's first experience with the popular music industry, it would stand to reason that he could not withstand these inherent contradictions in order to make a long-lasting career.<sup>57</sup> What archivists and promoters like the Lomaxes needed were performers that seemed to align with the requirements of the radio and record industries. Borrowing strategies from A&R men, they began searching out music that sounded old and static, but somehow was able to connect to popular audiences in the marketplace. While Leadbelly's music was exclusively old and static, his presentation was clearly also from a bygone era. Borrowing from the radio industry, folklorists needed musicians that personified the American imagination which they were attempting to revive. In addition, they needed these performers to be flexible in their appearance, yet still authentic in their image. Due to changing currents in these respective industries during the 1940s and 50s, which we will analyze through the lens of Bill Monroe,

"The urban folk revival of the late 1950s and 1960s pointed to possibilities for new relationships between commercialism and high culture. Commercial recordings by country artists like the Carter Family, Uncle Dave Macon, and even more recent stars like

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<sup>57</sup> I do not want to undermine the obvious racial tensions and difficulties that Leadbelly experienced. Clearly images of his criminal past had links to racial tensions of the day. Career setbacks could also be attributed to the practical concerns that were apparent during the Jim Crow era.

Flatt and Scruggs were suddenly transformed from ‘cheap tunes based on ancient Broadway hits,’ as the preservationist Annabel Morris Buchanan had scornfully labeled hillbilly music in her day, into iconoclastic statements of folk culture. This alchemy was accomplished, not as it had been in the past, through concealment or ignorance of the music’s commercial origins, but simply, as Robert Cantwell has written as ‘a matter of imaginative and material making.’ The Folkniks demonstrated that they could make commercial products the basis of a rejection of mass and consumer culture simply by appropriating those products for their own purposes and creating through their own performances a new authenticity for the music.”<sup>58</sup>

This “alchemy,” similar to the commercial epiphanies of the radio or record industries, was built on exclusion. Only this time, instead of rejecting a certain urban locale or philosophy, the rejection came against the whole popular music system itself. Folk music became a commercialism based on anti-commercialism. It took the disposed products that the industry no longer had use for, and saved them from an impersonal and non-ceremonial exit from the popular music arena. When Bill Monroe was dwindling in popularity during the 1950s due to the overpowering factors of a changing consumer demographic and transforming industry, the folk movement was there to save him and his music. And when the folk movement needed a figure who personified folk sensibilities and performed music that could easily be deemed authentic, they found that figure in Bill Monroe.

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<sup>58</sup> Pecknold, *The Selling Sound* p 190.

## Chapter 4: The Monroe Synthesis and the Death of the Hillbilly 1939-1957

Monroe's Grand Ole Opry premiere in 1939 was the birth of Monroe's initial synthesis, but not the birth of what listeners know as bluegrass today. The musical origin of bluegrass was in 1946 at Columbia records due to a new instrumental ingredient. This new ingredient, the banjo, allowed bluegrass to reach new musical heights in terms of timbre, rhythm, and harmony. In addition to certain musical properties, the banjo was authentically southern, antique, and dismissed in other commercial genres of the day. Ironically, the banjo was also a part of string bands, a genre of music left obsolete by the rise of brother duets like the Monroe Brothers. In contrast to the four string banjo which had become associated with jazz, the five string was seen as having a long history in both popular and folk musical traditions.<sup>59</sup> With this last ingredient, the instrumentation of bluegrass including a guitar, mandolin, banjo, fiddle, and bass was complete. While the instrumentation was cemented, what made the 1946 recordings especially groundbreaking was the synthesis of past instrumental techniques that contributed to a new texture and energy. Yet, being a synthesis, none of the individual contributions either comprised by Monroe nor his Bluegrass Boys were completely novel or separate from commercial influences. Bluegrass, instead of differentiating itself strictly musically, defined itself in contrast to the rapidly changing music industry around them. While Monroe was synthesizing a new sound, the record and radio industries had recognized a shift in the economic demographics of those who used to be a part of the hillbilly demographic. After thirty years of advertisements implying the death of the romanticized Appalachian south, the rise of the Nashville Sound in the country music industry seemed to prove that this transformation had finally occurred. Yet, as one

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<sup>59</sup> For more information about both the four string and five string varieties of the banjos I would recommend *That Half Barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture* by Karen Linn. Karen Linn, *That Half-Barbaric Twang: the Banjo in American Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994)

could tell by bluegrass's initial success and its eventual revitalization during the urban folk revival, this was not the case. Instead, the hillbilly audience, once a catered to demographic that was given ownership of the musical materials and its performers, became more resolute, defensive, and stubborn. Bluegrass, committing to acoustic timbres, sentimental and moralistic song themes, and performed by those who resembled the original hillbilly demographic, became the music of this anti-commercial protest.

The instrumental styles that were synthesized in bluegrass, while not exclusively "legitimate" folk styles, are derived from instrumental techniques that predate the industry transformation of the 1950s. The guitar style of Lester Flatt is predominantly inspired by Maybell Carter who, "developed the rhythmic style they call the 'Carter Scratch', picking out the melody on the bass string with the thumb and brushing the chords on the high strings."<sup>60</sup> In the 1946 Columbia recordings there are no guitar solos similar to those of Maybelle, but the guitar becomes an important rhythmic instrument since it either picks a melodic note or strums the chord on each beat of a 4/4 bar. In addition, it becomes part of a multi-textured call and response dynamic when it plays a "G-run" at the end of vocal line. Unlike the guitar work of Jimmie Rodgers and others, the meter Flatt plays throughout these tracks is regular and straightforward.

While the fiddle's role in the national imagination faded after the rise of brother duets, its function did not waver. Similar to how it had been played in European folk and classical traditions, the fiddle was predominantly a melodic or harmonic instrument made for accompaniment or solos.<sup>61</sup> During the late 1930s, when the string band had lost popular appeal,

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<sup>60</sup> Sylvie Simmons, "THE CARTER FAMILY: INTO THE VALLEY," MOJO, November 2002

<sup>61</sup> For more information about the history of the fiddle in America, and the influences it took from European styles, I would recommend Sharoun Poulson Graf's dissertation titled *Traditionalization at the National Oldtime Fiddlers' Contest: Politics, Power, and Authenticity* from Michigan State University

the fiddle found a home in western swing with the likes of Bob Wills. What made western swing so novel was its fusion of both hillbilly images, instrumentation, and jazz improvisational styles. Similar to jazz, the fiddle's role in bluegrass was to be a part of a solo section. These solos, conforming to the standards of bluegrass, would be limited to a verse or chorus. Yet, since the fiddle's "strum" is quiet and impractical to chord unlike a guitar, the fiddle is predominantly soloing quietly or adding harmonic accompaniment to the voice during the verse and chorus.

Ironically, the fiddle was Bill Monroe's favorite instrument. Unfortunately, his older brother Birch had already stated his claim to playing the instrument in the family band, so Bill had to adapt to something else. One possible explanation for his decision to play the mandolin was that it had the same harmonic set up as the fiddle, containing four different strings each a fifth apart. While there are clear differences in timbre, Bill realized that many fiddle techniques could be used on the mandolin. This included arpeggiation, tremolo, and the "shuffle" rhythm, which rotates between quarter notes and two eighth notes to create a forward momentum. The fiddle techniques, and their mandolin counterparts were, "seen at the time to be modern, even cosmopolitan. Long bow strokes, bluesey inflection, and double stops were the result of stylistic diffusion, both from Western Swing fiddle traditions, and from idiosyncratic influences on Monroe..."<sup>62</sup> Along with a melodic role, the mandolin accentuated the offbeat by playing a "chop" of the chord on those two beats.

The greatest musical change from 1939-1946 was the transformation of the banjo. Bill Monroe's first banjo player, David 'Stringbean' Akeman, was less of a banjoist and more of a performer in the vaudeville or minstrel tradition. While it has been claimed that Monroe's Opry

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<sup>62</sup> King, Johnathan Tobias. "Implications of Contemporary Bluegrass Music Performance at and around a New York City Jam Session" PhD diss. Columbia University, 2015.



performances were much more serious than other hillbilly performers, Stringbean was the exception to this rule. While a semblance of minstrel comedy was considered authentic for a radio show, it was not as desirable for a record. Accentuating the tension was the fact that the other band members were frustrated by Akeman's frailing rhythm, which halted the rhythmic momentum the rest of the group was pushing towards. Not only did the Bluegrass Boys need a new banjo player, but they needed a new banjo style.

When Monroe heard Earl Scruggs play the banjo he hired him immediately.<sup>63</sup> While Akeman played in a frail style similar to the Carter Scratch, Scruggs was a practitioner of the modern banjo playing style which included the use of three picks on the right hand to arpeggiate chords. This arpeggiation style can be linked to banjo ragtime. Cantwell makes the justified claim that, "The Scruggs roll, with its groups of three and one and two, is *identical* to the basic ragtime phrase Joplin employed, in double time."<sup>64</sup> By using groups of three instead of two like the frail style, it led bluegrass away from the world of rhythm and into the world of meter. Before this breakthrough, "Monroe's string band, with its hoedown fiddle, clawhammer banjo, jazz guitar, and hillbilly mandolin, was... congested with accents and with the rhythms those accents redundantly enforced; with its unbroken and continuous stream of notes sharply voiced in bright, acid tones, the banjo roll broke up this congestion, bringing about a kind of rhythmic division of labor in which several strata of rhythm, were distributed among the instruments- metronomic line to the bass, pulse to the guitar, offbeat to the mandolin or banjo vamp, subdivided rhythm to the banjo roll- while fiddle, mandolin, and banjo alternatively carried improvised melodic lines rhythmically as flexible as any jazz horn player's."<sup>65</sup> This instrumental

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<sup>63</sup> If you want more information on Scruggs's professional history or the audition process for Monroe, I would recommend Neil Rosenberg's *Bluegrass a History* pp 70-71

<sup>64</sup> Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown* p 105.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid* 100.

formula, synthesizing such disparate and seemingly opposing styles such as jazz, ragime, and hillbilly, exemplifies the complicated history of bluegrass.

This complicated synthesis is especially precarious because definitions of the music, even by its creator, are predominantly exclusionary and negative. In fact, bluegrass enthusiasts and professionals have continued to establish the belief that, “bluegrass is more than just an assembly of several acoustic instruments... it is a feeling, a distinctive sound that is really hard to describe. Although our individual definitions of bluegrass may differ, most of us can readily distinguish bluegrass from country or other forms of music.”<sup>66</sup> Bluegrass, like the folk music of Europe hundreds of years previous, is recognized by obscurity and exclusion. In addition to having origins in folklore, the strategy to differentiate bluegrass in extramusical, yet undefined fashions is a defense mechanism inspired by the massive transformations that took place in the recording and radio industries in the 1950s.

The decision of radio programs like WSM to academicize and legitimize hillbilly music and musicians had adverse effects on those same musicians. With increased legitimacy came higher standards for musicianship and professionalization. New recording technologies, similar to what occurred during the late 1920s to usher in the end of hillbilly string bands, had caused many traditional musicians to be left out. One example is Uncle Dave Macon, whose excessive movements caused technological mishaps and damaged cuts. This professionalization also effected how the music would be recorded and produced. In this era, “a new level of professionalization and rationalization characterized the country music industry in both musical and managerial terms. The country recording industry steadily consolidated financially,

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<sup>66</sup> Michael R Drudge, “Commercialism: Does Bluegrass Need It?,” *Bluegrass Unlimited*, March 1987, p 65.

organizationally, and creatively, in cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and especially Nashville. This trend accelerated the demise of field-recording expeditions to other regional musical centers, which had been such a conspicuous feature of prewar A&R efforts in American music. Together, their developments seriously curtailed opportunities, for amateur or semi-professional singers, musicians, and songwriters to make an impression in an industry that was increasingly policed by a powerful country music establishment concentrated in a few major cities and above all, in Nashville.”<sup>67</sup> At the same time that the most talented and professional performers were able to rise up the musical ranks, the original listeners of hillbilly music had achieved the same ascension on a much larger scale. The commercial philosophy gaining credence at this time was that, “country music appealed to a more sophisticated audience, not because it had attracted new listeners, but because its traditional listeners had achieved the economic success they sought in their new communities.”<sup>68</sup> The supposedly improved economic standing led to a completely transformed recording methodology and advertisement strategy. Now recognizing the derogatory history of “hillbilly,” the music was soon labeled country. Country, now considered a musical form and not simply a veiled advertisement strategy, could even possess sub genres like the previously discussed western swing and bluegrass. However, this utopian economic belief that the lower, unrefined hillbilly could simply assimilate into modern urban life, caused contention both within the upper classes folklorists, who saw this as an attempt to remove all Appalachian authenticity from a soulless commercial industry, and the “unassimilated” rural southern class, who had not yet reached bourgeois status.<sup>69</sup> Bill Monroe

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<sup>67</sup> Ward and Huber, *A & R Pioneers* p 296.

<sup>68</sup> Pecknold, *The Selling Sound* p 135.

<sup>69</sup> Diane Pecknold believes that this phenomenon also has a dark underbelly. Since the assimilation into urban society was now considered possible and demystified it came to be that, “Even when he was outwardly successful, the new hillbilly was a savage underneath, lurking behind a mask of suburban respectability and technological sophistication.” *The Selling Sound* pp 100-101.

continued to make hillbilly music “the way it should be played” because of his Appalachian counterparts, but incidentally became the hero of the affluent folklorists as well.

Initially part of the country music umbrella in the late 1940s, bluegrass performers including Bill Monroe achieved economic success. This could be exemplified by the fact that the Bluegrass Boy tours would be accompanied by baseball players that made up the Bill Monroe baseball team.<sup>70</sup> Shows would usually involve an initial match with a local team before setting up a stage to perform. While not called “bluegrass” at this time, the musical hallmarks had been cemented by both musical reputation and audience receptibility. In fact, the appetite for bluegrass became so great that other bands began to replicate what Monroe was doing.<sup>71</sup>

One of these acts turned out to be comprised of the guitarist and banjoist on the groundbreaking Columbia recordings, Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs. Partially due to the virtuosity of Scruggs, and the historical weight the banjo carried in contrast to the mandolin, Flatt & Scruggs earned more folk and commercial notoriety than Monroe during the 1950s. This caused a rift which only partially healed after Flatt and Monroe played together in 1976. While originally sticking close to the Monroe formula, they changed their sound and image to appeal to middle class audiences. Not only was Monroe disappointed about their business decisions, he was furious that they were his economic competitors. The success of Flatt & Scruggs can be exemplified by the fact that they earned their own show on WSM sponsored by Martha White Flour, something Monroe could never accomplish. Not only had Scruggs’s banjo outshined

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<sup>70</sup> For more information on this interesting subject I recommend Neil Rosenberg’s *Bluegrass: A History* p 59.

<sup>71</sup> Neil Rosenberg’s *Bluegrass* goes into great depth about early imitations of Monroe’s sound, especially the Stanley Brothers. P 85.

Monroe's mandolin, but Flatt's personality outshined Monroe's stubborn disposition when it came to selling radio advertisements.

From Monroe's perspective, television appearances and sponsored radio shows were examples of Flatt & Scruggs appealing to middle class listeners and at the sake of their hillbilly counterparts. Making the issue worse was Monroe's belief that he was not getting the credit he deserved for creating this type of music that had become so easily accessible to middle class audiences. While historic recognition was one of Monroe's desires, the biggest issue Monroe took with Flatt & Scruggs was that they were an economic threat. Monroe saw this as an individual problem, but in hindsight one can recognize that Monroe and Flatt & Scruggs represented the intentions of the radio and record industry that were beginning to lean towards the middle class, and away from the original rural lower class demographic.

Having a personal connection to his own synthesis, Monroe was unwilling to adjust his musical products to the new musical terrain. Luckily, the vocal minority of the "unrefined" hillbilly was a stable and committed demographic. Instead of masking or adjusting the musical product to a general audiences' tastes, it is considered a necessity for the bluegrass musician to adjust to the rigid audience expectations of a small, but committed, following. This is not only due to the antagonistic reactions of those who do not have their expectations met, but also because this has been part of the social contract between bluegrass performer and audience that originated in the early hillbilly radio industry. If this social contract was not established, old time music would have perished. In fact Cantwell makes the case that, "old time music could not have survived *as* music, and did *not* survive, except as Monroe's music or some variation of it..."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown* p76.

This realization of potential death has had an exceptional influence on bluegrass' listeners, practitioners, and scholars when it comes to their opinion of country music. While originally containing many of the same musical components and being placed under the same "hillbilly" umbrella, the country music industry's conscious decision to cater to middle class consumers, and to differentiate the performers of country from their hillbilly predecessors, is something that committed bluegrass performers could not forgive. In some comments, the country music industry is seen as the offender who, "takes the pure strains of bluegrass and blends and sweetens them until they become the musical equivalent of captain crunch."<sup>73</sup> In other statements bluegrass music was seen as, "a refuge for fans who regretted the growing pop dilution of country music or for those who longed to identify with a style that assumed rooted in a simpler and more organic society. The music itself... had not yet firmly assumed the name 'bluegrass' as an identifying label. Most fans and musicians in the fifties, in fact, tended to call the music 'hillbilly.'<sup>74</sup> The second quotation, from the perspective of Mike Seeger, shows that bluegrass could take a proactive approach in saving itself. In order to do this, it had to remain resolute against the dilutions occurring in other genres, and it had to claim its roots within the Appalachian rural lower classes it was meant to entertain. By the early 1960s, Flatt & Scruggs, now immensely wealthy and recognized just as much for their contributions to Hollywood as Appalachia, could no longer be seen as the figure heads of this traditional and authentic music.<sup>75</sup> Again, both Bill Monroe and the folk movement found their goals and their philosophies in sync, culminating in the legitimization and fabricated authenticity of bluegrass.

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<sup>73</sup> Morris, Edward. "Benny Martin Profile." *Bluegrass Unlimited*, January 1984.

<sup>74</sup> Bill C. Malone, *Music from the True Vine: Mike Seeger's Life and Musical Journey* (Chapel Hill: Univ Of North Carolina Pr, 2014) p 58.

<sup>75</sup> Flatt & Scruggs were the composers and performers of the *Beverly Hillbillies* theme song "The Ballad of Jed Clampett."

## Chapter 5: Monroe Meets the Folk Movement 1957-1963

The way folklorists and consumers defined bluegrass informed their opinions on both Monroe and Scruggs. Before the revitalization of Monroe in the early 1960s, “there were two ways of looking at the same kind of music- as a special kind of country music and as a special kind of folk music,” with the former assessment holding more weight for both folklorists and average consumers.<sup>76</sup> Flatt & Scruggs personified this point of view because they were popular musicians in the country music radio industry while simultaneously alluding to America’s musical roots. This allusion to hillbilly music of the past was predominantly due to Scruggs’s banjo work, although his style was more closely related to a ragtime style than a hillbilly one. Regardless, the banjo, already associated with antiquity, now represented bluegrass commercially. With continual links between the banjo and historical authenticity, folklorists became suspicious and skeptical of music that did not accentuate these characteristics. Ironically, one of these musicians disregarded for not fitting the Scruggs mold was Monroe himself. Since Monroe’s music only used the banjo in a supporting role rather than the main instrumental feature, it was not seen as neither a viable commercial nor folkloric product. Since the music of Flatt & Scruggs heavily relied on Monroe’s synthesis, and its main difference was predominantly in the instrument it featured, any claim that Monroe’s music being simultaneously un-folk and obsolete seemed to be connected to how listeners assessed bluegrass in the first place.<sup>77</sup> The late 50s and 60s saw changes in folkloric methodology that privileged bluegrass’s folk-like

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<sup>76</sup> Neil Vs. Rosenberg. *Bluegrass: a History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

<sup>77</sup> While differing views of what the music was and should be had great influence on Monroe’s career, attempts at resolving this oversight had occurred in the mid 1950s, but were unsuccessful. Rinzier recalls that Lomax attempted to hire Monroe in 1955, but Monroe declined because he was skeptical of Lomax’s radical politics. While this can be seen as Monroe purposely distancing himself from popularity and recognition, it actually accentuates the claim that Monroe’s connection to his dedicated, conservative audience was stronger than his desires for more widespread, but less dedicated fandom. Ibid. p 151.

characteristics, benefitting Monroe. With this transformation, bluegrass began to be defined not by the music itself, but by extra-musical factors. Similar to the radio industry's transformation in the 1930s that ushered in the Monroe Brothers, or the growing desire for respectable hillbilly music in 1939 leading to Monroe & the Bluegrass Boys, Monroe benefited from the changing philosophies of the folk movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s led by Ralph Rinzler and Mike Seeger.

While Flatt and Scruggs's rise in popularity and recognition can be attributed to their music, their success was equally due to the business strategies of Earl's wife Louise Scruggs. While not the one to originate the term "bluegrass," she was behind the proliferation of the term in the folk movement. She merged advertisements that placed Flatt & Scruggs as both a commercial product on the radio, and as a continuation of American folk music. Commercial success was achieved by Louise's decision to have Flatt & Scruggs join a booking agency already consisting of Joan Baez and Pete Seeger.<sup>78</sup> More interesting and ground-breaking was Louise's strategy for folkloric recognition where, "she wove quotes from reviews and articles along with descriptions of prestigious (and sophisticated) places and publications into portraits of Flatt and Scruggs which stressed their artistry, authenticity, and universal appeal."<sup>79</sup> By releasing songbooks, albums, including one of Carter Family covers, and other glowing publication materials, Louise was responsible for Flatt and Scruggs's initial extra-musical legitimacy and commercial success.

Combining commercial success with folk prestige, Flatt & Scruggs began to garner universal appeal by playing north-eastern folk festivals. These festivals would hire a mix of

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid p 166.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid p. 168.



broadly popular pseudo-folk bands like the Kingston Trio, there to satisfy the economic realities, and lesser known “authentic” folk acts including bluegrass bands. While Louise’s business sense helped Flatt & Scruggs satisfy both economic factors and audience preference, folklorists found discovering lesser known authentic artists more rewarding because they were seen as disregarding these same economic factors. This new authenticity was not based on what they played, but instead focused on why and how they played it.

While this methodological change was solidified during this time, its initial beginnings go back to the work of the Lomaxes, who found authenticity equally linked to musical products and personal identity. During the years of this transformation:

“The folk revival spawned endless debates over exactly what constituted folk music, who should play it, and how it should be played. It was this last question that became a central concern for those musicians who would care to be known as the ‘purist’... camp of the movement. These were the city players who were simply mesmerized by the sounds of traditional music and the exotic cultures and bygone eras those sounds evoked. City musicians... felt transformed when they first heard the shuffle of an old-timey fiddle, the brush of a frailing banjo, the rolling arpeggios of a bluesey, fingerpicked guitar, the reckless abandonment of a mountain string-band breakdown, and the high language wail of a backwoods balladeer or a bluegrass vocal duet.”<sup>80</sup>

By emphasizing process over product, and by associating a music whose earliest possible birth was 1939 with African-American and Irish musical traditions, bluegrass became both a contemporary product and one steeped in nostalgia and authenticity. While Flatt & Scruggs were

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<sup>80</sup> Ray Allen, *Gone to the Country The New Lost City Ramblers and the Folk Music Revival* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010 pp 4-5.

also seen as a contemporary product with antiquated elements, the authenticity that they represented was based on the musical product, and not about the musical process. To be a champion of the folk, and recognized as an authentic folk phenomenon, one had to represent the folk physically, musically, and verbally. While Louise Scruggs thought this could be accomplished by selling picture books or becoming radio and television stars, Monroe simultaneously represented the folk and satisfied folklorists by personifying values such as steadfastness, dedication, and respect in his music and interviews.

Although changing philosophies in the folk movement are often credited to Pete Seeger, changes in the perceptions of bluegrass and old time are more closely linked to his brother Mike Seeger. In Mike's view, "authenticity never meant the literal recreation of an old-time performers' style or sound. Instead, it suggested a faithfulness to the music culture that produced the songs, and it permitted individual faithfulness to the musical culture that produced the songs, and it permitted individual creativity within those traditional bounds."<sup>81</sup> Bluegrass, at this point still known as "hillbilly," was able to achieve a faithfulness to this music culture in countless ways. In terms of lyrics, it is clear that, "well before the folk revival began, bluegrass musicians were already reviving vintage country and folk material, and were singing songs about the old country church, the old homeplace, and mom and dad."<sup>82</sup> In addition to lyrical connections and the instrumental ones analyzed in chapter 4, Mike Seeger and other folklorists, "linked [bluegrass] to country music's oldest-most-enduring myth, that of Appalachian origins."<sup>83</sup>

Although Mike Seeger's old time and bluegrass group the New Lost City Ramblers did not fit

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<sup>81</sup> Bill C. Malone, *Music from the True Vine: Mike Seeger's Life and Musical Journey* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ Of North Carolina Pr, 2014) p 118.

<sup>82</sup> Bill C. Malone, *Don't Get above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class* (Urbana Univ. of Ill. Press, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006) p 82.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid* p 82.

Appalachian origins, their faithfulness to the music and its practitioners from that region gave their music a functionalist purpose and justification. In Seeger's point of view, to inspire the folk, one had to become and respect the folk.<sup>84</sup> Exemplified by his own performances, authentic folk music was now not only based on what you played, but why you played it.

Ralph Rinzler, playing mandolin in his own bluegrass band the Greenbriar Boys during the same period, found that Seeger's new philosophy of folk authenticity reflected the works and opinions of Bill Monroe rather than Earl Scruggs. Being a mandolin player himself, he had studied Monroe's music and found that he had been the creator and champion of this musical growing musical genre. Although his perspective may have aligned with Monroe, Monroe's initial reaction to Rinzler exemplifies the tensions that Monroe had with the liberal and Scruggs-centered folk movement. When requested for an interview by Rinzler, Monroe responded, "If you want to know about bluegrass music, ask Louise Scruggs."<sup>85</sup> After continuous requests from both Rinzler and Monroe's friends, Monroe finally agreed to an interview that would appear in the January 1962 issue of *Sing Out*, a Pete Seeger founded magazine designed to promote folk music and educate folk consumers. This publication, illuminating Monroe's place in the newly labeled "bluegrass" music and folk music as a whole, gave both Monroe and bluegrass new prestige.

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<sup>84</sup> It is interesting to point out that Mike's father Charles came to similar conclusions about the purpose of the American composer with a much more cynical lens. He writes, "If, therefore, a composer is going to sing the American people anything new, if he is going to celebrate his awareness with them, if he is going to teach them that their undoubtedly limited musical tastes and capacities, crippled as they have been by a century of savage industrialism and sophisticated snobbing, can develop to a higher level, he must first get on a common ground with them, learn their musical lingo, work with it, and show he can do for them something they want to have done and cannot do by themselves or without his help." Charles Seeger and Ann Marie Pescatello, *Studies in Musicology II, 1929-1979* (Berkeley, CA, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>85</sup> Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: a History* p 182.

Monroe's professional past attributed to the success of the Monroe and Rinzler partnership. In contrast to hillbilly artists of the earlier eras, Monroe had been a successful figure in the country star system, and had experience both in interviews and in presenting a profitable and personable image. His confident and knowledgeable convinced Rinzler that Monroe had an immense knowledge and connection to tradition. Rinzler was amazed that Monroe, "had consciously created it and could relate exactly where he had gotten each sound, like a painter who knows exactly what colors he has used from his palette. Rinzler began to see that this enigmatic man did little that he had not very deliberately decided upon."<sup>86</sup> While the decisions could be considered deliberate, Monroe's enigmatic side espoused cryptic and romantic origins. Coincidentally, these origins coincided with the origins given to folk music by folklorists like James Child and Cecil Sharp. Emphasizing the mystical, "For Monroe, 'old' is simply a metaphor for the quality of mystery, majesty, or simplicity no strictly original work- if there is such a thing- can achieve, such can we encounter in traditional English ballads and Irish Reels."<sup>87</sup> These connections continue to be emphasized by Irish music scholars who believe that, "Monroe's original compositions employ much of the mythical framework that is found in the old Scottish or Irish ballads- an infectious melody, simple lyrics, well-structured narrative form, magical vaguely supernatural events, and universal emotions. Much of his language is drenched in stark religious symbolism. His lyrics are preoccupied with death and couched in formal, almost archaic language that occasionally employs modal scales."<sup>88</sup> Not only did Monroe's notion of bluegrass allude to past musical styles, but the themes of the music itself alluded to a romantic and distant time and place.

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<sup>86</sup> Smith, *Cant You Hear Me Callin* p 171.

<sup>87</sup> Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown* p 34.

<sup>88</sup> June Skinner Sawyers, *The Complete Guide to Celtic Music: from the Highland Bagpipe and Riverdance to U2 and Enya* (London: Aurum Press, 2000) pp 213-214.

Rinzler's true interest with Monroe laid not only in his intelligent and sincere delivery, but in his integrity and dedication to his music. Throughout Rinzler's writings about Monroe, many of which could be considered publicity since Monroe hired Rinzler as his agent, the image of Monroe familiar to bluegrass fans today comes into view. Rinzler states that, "For almost thirty years, Bill Monroe's music stood as the only communication of his complex creative philosophy. His musical gospel was powerful enough to establish a new genre in country music and to attract thousands of disciplines like many charismatic but laconic artists, he was surrounded by a public unable to penetrate the body of legend which had grown up as a result of his silence."<sup>89</sup> This silence is critical. Unlike country stars who adapted to trends like the chameleon-like Jimmie Rodgers, or contemporary country music stars of who emphasized unsavory themes, Monroe was seen as the cure to the popular music industry's ills precisely because he bucked popular trends. Rinzler sets the stage for the battle between country and folk music, and foreshadows Monroe as a heroic figure, when he writes, "the corny, slick sounds of much of today's pop country music reflect, to a larger degree, the tastes and values of urban A&R men who seek to exploit individuals, and the industry of commercial records the production of country music stars and hits is as industrialized as franchised food and auto sales. A man capable of hewing close to his divergent musical philosophy against the seemingly overwhelming pressures of the industry needed to be a powerful musician. But beyond this, he could not have survived without conviction, charisma, sensitivity to a broad range of song types, and a willingness to forego a potential increase in earnings for adherence in his own values. He had to be *thrown*."<sup>90</sup> While Monroe presented all of these characteristics before he was

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<sup>89</sup> Bill C. Malone, Judith McCulloh, and Ralph Rinzler, *Stars of Country Music: Uncle Dave Macon to Johnny Rodriguez* (New York, NY, NY: Da Capo Press, 1991) p 202.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid* 218.

championed by Rinzler, his recognition by the folk movement drastically changed how he thought about himself and bluegrass music. While it was previously a tool to earn a steady income, it soon became his own personal, philosophical property. In this transition, bluegrass, like other folk music, was transformed into a static and strictly enforced musical tradition. This would be similar to the theories of James Child and past folklorists, except now the tradition was not enforced by a distant village and its citizens, but by a man full of conviction that preached authentic southern values. Emphasizing these values was how Monroe attempted to turn a dynamic form of music that was rising in popularity without him into a music that could only adapt to popular trends with his approval.

In order to persuade others to follow this extra-musical philosophy, Monroe needed to differentiate himself from Earl Scruggs and his banjo style as a whole. This was accomplished by championing a new banjo player, Bill Keith, whose playing more closely aligned with Appalachian fiddle styles than with Scruggs's ragtime approach. Monroe believed this to be truer to the bluegrass sound since this new banjo style would be more connected to mandolin and fiddle techniques. By emphasizing a banjo style separated from Scruggs, "Monroe placed himself at the center of a documented process, and Flatt and Scruggs were seen as part of Bill Monroe's master plan, with Keith advancing bluegrass banjo further along lines suggested by Monroe."<sup>91</sup> With the discovery of Keith, Monroe's enterprise was now a comprehensive story which could be told with Scruggs as a footnote, and not as an incremental part of the music itself besides the timbre. By emphasizing strictly the timbre, he is only speaking of the instrument itself, and not the musician playing it. Not only was this a transformation of the musical ingredients, but it also exemplified the way Monroe would dictate bluegrass's trajectory for years

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<sup>91</sup> Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: a History* p 185.

to come. It was not enough to play the music using the certain instruments and musical materials, one now had to adhere to strict legislation about how the instruments should be played. In practical terms, he was able to instill these standards with a constantly changing group of Bluegrass Boys, who would then proliferate these standards into their own bands, continuing a cycle of tradition and authenticity to a modern and synthesized artform.

## **Conclusion: Ramifications and Assessment of Current Stasis of Bluegrass**

Differing assessments of the purpose and history of bluegrass have caused tensions and economic hardships for contemporary bluegrass performers. Musicians attached to the fixity of the tradition are bound to a stricter canon, appreciated by a small, but committed fan base. Performers who have treated the bluegrass synthesis as a building block that can be changed for audience preferences end up having larger fan bases, but are excluded from the traditionalists. Although they play the same instruments and know the same canon as the traditionalists, the traditionalists believe that these performers never understood the spirit or purpose of the music to begin with. This results in the musicians abandoning the bluegrass label completely.<sup>92</sup>

Ironically, the spirit that the traditionalists praise and attempt to implement was one constructed by commercial means and cemented by commercial performers. Additionally, this philosophy that traditionalists believe has always been at the heart of bluegrass and Bill Monroe's vision is based on extra-musical factors and not musical ones. On top of that, the extra musical factors had not originated in 1939 or 1946, but had been part of the commercial record and radio enterprises as well as the American folk movement dating back to the 1920s and the early nineteenth century respectively. While these three separate industries and organizations seem to be disparate in their goals and methodologies, they all have in common the fact that they were impacted, and did impact, the father of bluegrass music Bill Monroe.

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<sup>92</sup> Chris Pandolfi explains the mindset of many of these "progressive" musicians. "As you grow in size, a huge part of the game is educating promoters in the world you want to be a part of, putting your truest and best foot forward to get on the right shows, the shows that will grow your band. If they've never heard of you, do you want them to think you are a bluegrass band? Not if you want to portray the image of a rising act capable of playing huge rooms to huge crowds, because right now that's just not what bluegrass is. Not what it wants to be. Bluegrass is pure musical integrity..." Chris Pandolfi, "Bluegrass?,"



Despite Monroe's implementation of these previously successful strategies, bluegrass never raised itself into the realm of popular culture to the extent that country music has. In fact, even during the 1950s, many groups such as the Osborne Brothers and even Flatt & Scruggs electrified their music in order to reach into the more lucrative country market. Bands that did not use electronic instruments such as the Seldom Scene in the 1960s appease to a wider range of listeners by covering music outside the bluegrass canon, including rock and pop-folk music. Yet, the desire to replicate, and the popularity of, Monroe's synthesis never fully disappeared. In fact, by the 1980s, a neo-traditional movement exemplified by the Johnson Mountain Boys and Hot Rize, named after the product Flatt & Scruggs sold on their radio show, had taken center stage. The original bluegrass synthesis's ability to survive, and then increase in popularity, in the 1980s can be attributed to the timelessness of its sound, but also exemplifies the notion that there was, and always will be, an immense pressure for bluegrass to return to its origins.

This continuous desire can be explained by romantic notions. Perhaps electronic instruments, unsavory song themes, or simply a lack of a guiding figure, diminished the sound of the music. Perhaps, similar to the sentiments of the folk movement, bluegrass is supposed to be played in a certain way because it has served a function designed for the good of communities. Its stasis is not due to a lack of artistic ability of its performers, but due to a recognition of its function. For many, bluegrass is a special kind of music because they have memories hearing it on the radio and playing it with family members. The case can even be made that bluegrass festivals are a community connected by a strict canon limited to the music's early years. With that perspective, the music is simply a tool for building a community out of people with similar aesthetic and social lineages.

Bluegrass's urge to return to its roots can also be explained by theories that connect the traditional to the commercial. This can be exemplified by the 1980s seeing a return to the music of the 1940s because the performers themselves grew up listening to it and wanting to replicate it. I find this theory to be much more beneficial and truthful to bluegrass because it requires a combination of both popular and folk music philosophies. Pertaining to the folk, the music still emphasizes fidelity and tradition. Similar to how Monroe's mandolin style was inspired by past fiddle styles, bluegrass musicians today hope to recreate bluegrass they heard from their childhoods. As generations change, the musicians most commonly imitated will change. Today, most bluegrass musicians grew up listening to the extended canon post-1946, and not the original stricter one. Not only resulting in a more diverse repertoire, this has stimulated current bluegrass artists today to stay faithful to musicians of the past in different ways. One of these ways, similar to Monroe in the 1940s, is to synthesize aspects of one's musical past that they enjoyed. Groups like the Infamous Stringdusters have not changed their sound due to a lack of knowledge of what has come before, but because they knew what came before was a reaction to what had come before that. In addition to recognizing artistic intentions, changing technologies and demographics must be recognized in traditional art forms similar to how they are bound into popular ones. If leaders of the radio industry, record industry, and the folk movement have attempted to separate these notions of folk and commercial music either for popular gain or academic prestige, it is the duty of bluegrass audiences, enthusiasts, performers, and academics to attempt to combine these notions into a truly alive, yet historically-weighted, musical genre.

Throughout this project, I hoped to explain that bluegrass is unique specifically because of these missteps of industry and academia. Without a commercial background, a folk-based authenticity to wrestle with, and a man who could confidently represent these contradictions with

pride like Bill Monroe, the music would not have the unique heritage and reputation it has today. Nonetheless, for the music to continue to evolve, and be a viable profession for performers in the future, it must be an art form that continues to enter and transform within the global market place. Although this must be the case, lets hope that, similar to the folk movement of the 1960s, this market-place can appreciate bluegrass's anti-commercial and historical roots.

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