

Country and Blue Grass

Introductory Essay

“Hearing History in Bluegrass's High, Lonesome Sound,” by Rachel Rubin, Professor of American Studies at the University of Massachusetts

Bluegrass is generally considered a sub-genre of country music that developed in the second half of the 20th century. Although for purposes of radio airplay bluegrass songs were programmed on country music stations beginning in the late 1940s, bluegrass as a musical form did not develop directly out of the generation of recorded commercial country music that preceded it. Rather, the two forms share the same roots in the traditional music of the Appalachian region and the Irish and Scottish ballads that informed it.

The description commonly offered of bluegrass that distinguishes it from mainstream country music is its “high lonesome sound.” This phrase was coined in 1963 by New Lost City Ramblers co-founder John Cohen, who used it to name a short film he made about Kentucky mountain music. The “high lonesome sound” quickly became a familiar catch-phrase for bluegrass music's emotionally intense, soaring-to-the-point-of-audible-strain vocal style, a style that often gives even happy songs an undercurrent of bleakness.

Musician Bill Monroe, considered the “father of bluegrass,” used to claim that he would practice a song by singing it as high as he could—and then go on stage and sing it a half-step higher. Monroe's boast seems to indicate that part of the bluegrass aesthetic is an underlying anxiety that you might not make it to that “high, lonesome sound”—and a combination of pride and relief when you do.

Some fifty years after the phrase was coined, “high lonesome” continues to capture the essence of bluegrass. The description communicates an essential truth about the music beyond concrete characterizations of its roots in Appalachian string band music, its most usual instrumentation (banjo, guitar, stand-up bass, fiddle, mandolin), or its most familiar repertoire.

A set of seeming contradictions has defined bluegrass from its beginning—so much so that it made perfect sense to dub as “lonesome” a musical style often used for dance parties. The biggest of these contradictions comes from the term “country” being applied to a kind of music that is in fact historically urban. In its most important early decades (the 1920s to 1940s), country music told the story of urbanization, and the genre's relationship to rural living was more a musical epitaph for a way of life increasingly being left behind as both black and white Southerners fled the rural South for the promise of good jobs in the city.

An equally important contradiction is the conventional wisdom that country music, including bluegrass, is a strictly white European-based form. While it is true that racism within the music industry artificially segregated music by white performers from music by black performers, the music itself reveals a strong tradition of cultural exchange. In bluegrass this exchange is visible in the centrality of the banjo, with its African roots, and in the influence of black musical forms such as blues and ragtime. Monroe, for instance, often cited as a central influence on his music a black musician named Arnold Schulz, with whom he played dances when he was young. The exchange of cultural forms can also be heard in shared songs, especially gospel songs, as well as common idioms, subject matter, and humor.

Perhaps the most interesting contradiction in our perception of bluegrass is that between old and new. Bluegrass is a relatively late development in country music, dating to a post-World War II boom in the recording industry more than two decades after commercial country music was first recorded. Yet practitioners of the genre have deliberately strived to come across as “old time” musicians. By the 1970s people were referring to “traditional bluegrass,” but this “tradition” does not stretch back very far in time.

From a historian's perspective, this characteristic of bluegrass as a new form that endeavored to sound old raises fascinating questions about what the music was trying to accomplish, culturally. Pete Seeger's description of bluegrass as "folk music on overdrive," points to additional contradictions inherent in the bluegrass idiom -- between the valuation of extraordinary instrumental virtuosity and the presentation of players as "just folks," and between a popular conception of the music as simple, "front-porch" playing and the reality that the music has always been played by professionals.

Professionalism and a sense of individual artistry, coupled with the story of rural to urban migration, figures in bluegrass's most important origin stories. Mandolin player Bill Monroe is universally credited with inventing the form, and the term "bluegrass" is taken from the name of his band, The Bluegrass Boys. Monroe formed the band after leaving his rural hometown of Rosine, Kentucky for Indiana, where he worked in an oil refinery. Monroe's band member Earl Scruggs is generally acknowledged as the inventor of bluegrass's signature syncopated, three-fingered style of banjo playing. Scruggs did so after leaving his rural birthplace in Shelby, North Carolina, to work in a nearby textile mill. In bluegrass' early decades, musicians like Monroe and Scruggs often migrated twice. Having left the countryside for factory jobs, they then moved to cities with record labels and radio stations as their careers took off.

Beginning in the mid-1960s the outdoor multi-day bluegrass festival grew in significance until it became the most important way bluegrass is disseminated. The festivals are three- or four-day gatherings in which a dozen or more bands travel to perform and sell recordings. Participants camp out nearby or on-site. Amateur musicians in the audience bring instruments and take part in after-hours jam sessions in which featured performers may join.

For performers, festivals are hard work, involving extensive traveling, long days, multiple sets, and exposure to weather. Even if a band performs at many festivals a year, it can be hard to make a living. Some musicians, such as Ricky Scaggs, Alison Krauss, and Keith Whitley, have successfully crossed over to more profitable "mainstream country" music, while some mainstream country musicians, such as Dolly Parton and Martina McBride, make bluegrass albums while keeping most of their output in mainstream country recordings.

The development of bluegrass music tells the story of movement, mixing and mindset: movement away from the rural South; mixing as urban life brought groups of people in contact with each other for the first time; and a new mindset as former Southerners grappled in their music with changes they faced in life around values, family and work.

It is no accident that bluegrass is full of songs about leaving. The leaving is sometimes literal, in songs about trains and taking to the road, such as Ralph Stanley's signature "Rank Strangers." But sometimes the leaving happens in death, as in the Johnson Mountain Boys' "Weathered Gray Stone." And in some bluegrass songs, leaving occurs through the end of a love affair—whether the break-up results from geographic separation or betrayal.

Along with songs about leaving, bluegrass is full of songs about work. Whether that work takes place in mines ("Dream of a Miner's Child"), on farms ("Thirty Years of Farming"), or in mills and factories ("Cotton Mill Man"), bluegrass and country performers have often acted as a vanguard, helping their audiences understand the workplace changes they face in an age of modernization and automation. In this way, bluegrass has functioned as a kind of popular historical record—a high, lonesome one—and today, it can be revelatory to ask why.