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Publisher: [Eric Olsen](#)

REVIEW

Music DVD Review: Bill Monroe - *Bill Monroe: Father Of Bluegrass Music*

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Published July 03, 2008



I joked in a previous review that my grandfather rarely listened to any music released after 1949, except for a couple of aberrations along the way such as the *Elvis Christmas Album*. That may have been an over exaggeration as he did follow county music. In my grandfather's musical cathedral Jimmie Rodgers was a god and Bill Monroe was the infallible pope.

Not many people can say they fathered a genre of music. There is little debate, however, that Bill Monroe fathered bluegrass music and was its leading practitioner and advocate during his sixty year career. He formed his first group in 1929 and began his recording career with the RCA label in 1936. He formed a backing band called the Blue Grass Boys in 1939 from which a whole new style of country music would take its name.

Bill Monroe was one of the best mandolin players to ever walk this earth. By 1945 his group included banjo player Earl Scruggs, guitarist Lester Flatts, fiddler Chubby Wise, and stand up bassist Howard Watts and bluegrass as we know it was born. Bluegrass groups are primarily string oriented with an accordion thrown in here and there. The music is instrumental and vocal in about equal amounts. While country music has continued to become slicker and more pop oriented, bluegrass has retained a more primitive feel. This takes nothing away from the virtuosity of the musicians which is uniformly outstanding. Today it remains tremendously popular in certain parts of our country.

Bill Monroe: Father Of Bluegrass Music is a 90 minute DVD that traces the career of Monroe and thus the history of bluegrass music itself. The DVD combines extensive interviews with Bill Monroe with rare archival footage. He passed away in 1996 and so there is a vast amount of latter day interview material available. Even in the twilight of his career, Monroe remained a master of the mandolin and his technical playing is truly amazing. The concert footage of his early groups is historic. Chubby Wise, who also passed away in 1996, is another wonderful link to the past with his easygoing commentary. Ricky Skaggs closes the circle as a modern day proponent of bluegrass.

Other interesting highlights include one of the last interviews with Roy Acuff before his death, a young Dolly Parton singing with Monroe and there is even a connection to Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead. Performances by Emmylou Harris, The Osborne Brothers, and John Hartford also grace this DVD.

Bill Monroe would be elected to the Country Music Hall Of Fame in 1970, The Songwriters Hall Of Fame in 1971, and The Rock 'N' Roll Hall Of Fame in 1997 as an early influence. *Bill Monroe: Father Of Bluegrass Music* is an interesting and historical look at an under appreciated musical icon.

I have been collecting vinyl records for over forty years and my collection is approaching 50,000 records. My wife Susan and children, Stacey and Amy, have learned to humor my passion. I am now settled in beautiful Whispering Pines, North Carolina where I read, listen to music, and live off the fat of the land.

Comments

