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Futura MouzPad [Hardware]

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Bill Monroe: Father of Bluegrass Music

Score: **80%**
Rating: **Not Rated**
Publisher: **MVD Entertainment Group**
Region: **A**
Media: **DVD/1**
Running Time: **90 Min.**
Genre: **Documentary/Live Performance/Family**
Audio: **Dolby Digital**
Subtitles: **None**

Features:

Bonus Interview and Performance Footage

Music documentaries about a band or individual generally fall into one of two categories. Either we are watching a glorified concert video with lots of focus on performance or we're watching a mix of performance and behind-the-scenes footage with a focus on discovering the musician as a person. The perspective of the filmmaker tends to color the balance between on-stage and off-stage focus; is the musical personality of interest to us, or is it more about the music? In Bill Monroe's case, we have complete familiarity with the distinctive music he made, so the filmmaker's perspective appears to be that we need to understand the chronology and the legacy of Monroe, in addition to his impact on the larger musical community. This results in a limited amount of extended concert footage, and an especially narrow sample of video showing Monroe in different stages of life. **Bill Monroe: Father of Bluegrass Music** is ideal viewing for someone already familiar with the musical styles and performances of Monroe, that wants to learn more about the man's background and the growth of this musical form through the decades.

The lack of early footage likely stems from the fact that Monroe's early days playing tent shows and hopping from town to town preceded video technology by a few decades. The picture that is painted during the film through interviews is that Monroe had humble roots as a musician, playing and dancing with family and friends in rural Kentucky. His first musical engagement was as a dancer, part of a show where he was drafted along with several others to play music when his talents were discovered. Monroe split from this show and went on to form countless bands during his career. He eventually joined the Grand Ole Opry, where we see some of the first extended video footage of him performing; by this time in his career, he was more than middle-aged, so all we have to account for Monroe's early years are accounts from other musicians.

Bill Monroe: Father of Bluegrass Music is more than anything else about talking heads. Monroe spends a great deal of time on-screen talking and playing music. The people influenced by him directly as members of his touring groups take time on camera to tell stories about their experience learning from Monroe, and people indirectly influenced by him as fellow musicians also appear to sing his praises. Luminaries such as Emmylou Harris, Jerry Garcia, and Ricky Scaggs make up the latter group. Less famous, but well known to fans of bluegrass music, are the long-term members of Monroe's band. These folks ironically make for some of the weaker moments on film - hearing from someone that spent a year or less playing with Monroe doesn't lend any special depth to understanding the man or his music. The personal interviews with Monroe that are captured on film are amazing, as are the late-night sessions with him around a campfire as he noodles on old tunes and continues to teach the song forms he created almost a century ago. The interviews with Jerry Garcia and Peter Rowan discussing the impact Bluegrass and Bill Monroe had during the 60s are excellent.

What feels missing from the core film is the presence of Monroe on stage across more of his musical life. The footage included is interesting, but too compressed. Two bonus segments on the DVD show Monroe in an extended interview and a performance of "Working on the Building." The latter makes you appreciate the opportunity to watch Monroe work through an



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entire piece with his group rather than just little snippets. The interview-heavy approach to the core film is well done, but would have benefited from more additional bonus material showing Monroe in concert. Other "why can't we see more of this" moments include Monroe singing a bit of "Muleskinner Blues" with Dolly Parton and "Kentucky Waltz" with Emmylou Harris on The Grand Ole Opry. **Bill Monroe: Father of Bluegrass Music** will be appreciated most by long-time fans of Monroe and the talented musicians that surrounded him over the years. Another ideal audience for the film includes fans of country music that want to understand the roots of this style. A more well-rounded homage to Monroe is still needed, especially one that includes more live footage and more music from the modern bands that Monroe influenced heavily.

-Fridtjof, GameVortex Communications AKA Matt Paddock

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