

that the blues sprang from. As Konkel comments: "We aimed to capture the essence of the Delta's blues survivors and show why the blues simply had to come from Mississippi." They succeed marvelously. — GvonT

**MATT AND ERICA HINTON, DIRECTORS**  
*Awake My Soul:*  
*The Story of the Sacred Harp*  
Awake 001 (DVD)

Filmmakers Matt and Erica Hinton are Sacred Harp singers from Atlanta, Georgia, and *Awake, My Soul* is their first full-length documentary. The story of *The Sacred Harp*, or "shape note singing" as it is more commonly called, is a long and interesting one. The film traces the lineage of this distinctly American singing style from its first composers through modern-day contributors to the tradition.

From the earliest days of formless New England congregational singing, a new style of musical instruction was devised by singing school teachers. A system of four notes – fa-sol-la-mi – was attached to individual shapes, allowing almost anyone to learn to sing. William Billings was one of the earliest proponents of the style. His compositions were widely dismissed by the more learned composers of the European schools. Nevertheless, this "homespun" style became wildly popular and eventually migrated to the South. The film also traces the various editions of shape note hymnals which preceded the publishing of *The Sacred Harp* in 1844.

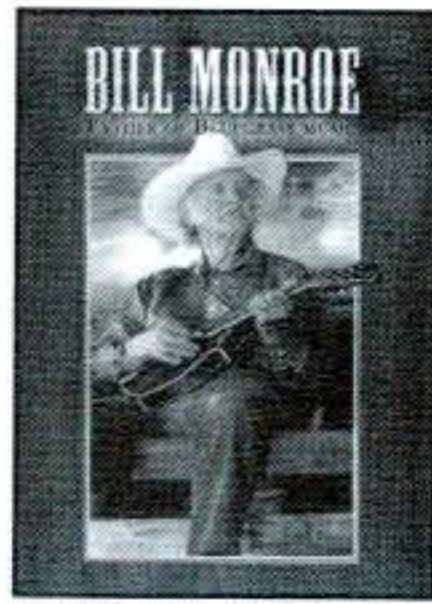
*Awake, My Soul* utilizes a number of "witnesses" as the story unfolds. One of the most knowledgeable and charming speakers is Raymond Hamerick from Macon, Georgia. Now in his nineties, he has sung the shapes since the 1930s, and has even authored new pieces published in this ever-evolving collection. Another witness is Hugh McGraw, who spearheaded the Sacred Harp revival during the early 1960s. He brings some fascinating insight into the popularity of the style.

Above all, what is most wonderful about this film is the music and the sheer joy and enthusiasm of the participants at various conventions in Alabama in 2005. It is stirring to listen to this marvelous music but, when you see the faces and watch the random rhythmic movements of the singers, these glorious harmonies come to life.

The film concludes with a remembrance of the various singers who regularly attended the convention and who have recently passed. It is in these final scenes that the familial relationship between singers is confirmed. It is an extremely emotional moment.

*Awake, My Soul* is a wonderful introduction to the magic which is *The Sacred Harp*.

If this is your first experience with the style, you will be forever changed. If you are already aware of the power of this music, you will still fully enjoy this film as your feelings become indisputable. — TD



**VARIOUS**

*Bill Monroe: Father of Bluegrass Music*  
MVD Visual 4577 (DVD)

This is the belated DVD release of the 1993 Bill Monroe documentary Steve Gebhardt cobbled together from interview footage with Bill Monroe and others, both Blue Grass Boys alumni and friends and colleagues. Some interviews are vintage, some shot specially for this film. And here vintage means back to the very beginnings.

As the opening credits roll, Bill ambles out onto the porch, takes out his fabled mandolin, sits down and starts to play. On-beat cut to Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys in concert continuing the song. With that we are off on a compelling 90-minute ride.

Gephardt uses the gimmick of editing several performances of the same song into a continuous whole several times. It is always exhilarating and explosive. It also underlines the timelessness of the music.

Over a dozen Monroe alumni appear, from fiddlers Carl Story and the effervescent Chubby Wise to Kenny Baker and Bobby Hicks to banjo whiz Bill Keith, Del McCoury, Peter Rowan, Bill's son, James Monroe, and more. Ricky Skaggs and John Hartford are each caught conversing and playing duo with Monroe in some of the best stuff in the film. Marty Stuart and Emmylou Harris (also shown dancing with Bill Monroe on stage) also offer intimate talk.

One flaw, and it is an annoying one. Whenever an interview is shown with music added underneath, the music is too loud, making it hard either to understand the speaker or to follow the music.

That aside, *Father of Bluegrass Music* is riveting viewing. It makes you feel you know the man up close and personal, even if only a little. The film also goes deeply into how and why bluegrass works both via roots and technique. Naturally, lots of great

picking at a variety of locations and dates is on display, too.

Truly a warm, intimate and memorable tribute to a man who, as the film asserts, personally birthed a form of music and became its gold standard. — MT

**THE HOLY MODAL ROUNDERS**  
*Bound to Lose*  
Carnavalesque Films 3 (DVD)

The Holy Modal Rounders are and have always been the definition of sui generis. They are always their own thing, whatever the alignment of personnel and sound to these 45 years since the Rounders first appeared in 1963. Then it was the duo of Steve Weber and Peter Stampfel doing rickety old songs like they'd never been done before, as well as bizarre new ones like they'd never be done again. Nearly nobody got it, but those who did became rabid fans with a forever relationship to Holy Modal Rounders music.

Directed by Sam Douglass and Paul Lovelace, *Bound to Lose* is a documentary that digs into the Rounders legend and phenomena from the beginning just about up to the present. Yes phenomena, the plural. Different times found different Rounders phenomena.

There's a wealth of performance footage here from throughout their history. The interviews are remarkably candid and forthcoming. Stampfel, the default historian of the two, shares most graciously. Weber, the terminal eccentric, also appears, not so much talking to the camera as captured in life-in-progress candid moments. Band members from over the years, like Sam Shepherd and Robin Remaily among others, tell Rounders stories, as do Ed Sanders and Tuli Kupferberg of the Fugs (which Stampfel and Weber were part of for awhile). John Sebastian, Peter Tork, Wavy Gravy, Yo La Tengo's Ira Kaplan, Robert Christgau, Dave Van Ronk and others. Dennis Hopper is one of the others. He tells how the Rounders' "Bird Song" found its way into *Easy Rider*, which Hopper starred in and directed. This scene is especially valuable as most who know the Rounders only know them from hearing this song in *Easy Rider*.

Like the Rounders' music, *Bound to Lose* is a wild and wooly ride through lots of vintage craziness. Tons of fun, too. Strongly recommended.

As if the 87-minute doc wasn't enough, there are also 73 minutes of extras: more interviews and performances. Talk about generous!

Those folks who only know "Bird Song" have no clue about the big picture. Hell, even