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Bill Monroe and his music live on in 'Father of Bluegrass'

BY PETER COOPER • STAFF WRITER • SEPTEMBER 30, 2008

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Ricky Skaggs watched it again the other night.

He put the *Bill Monroe: Father of Bluegrass Music* DVD into a player, and he sat down and saw the footage of Monroe playing mandolin by the light and warmth of a campfire, the footage of Monroe tenderly holding a baby chick on the farm, and Monroe seeking to explain the inspirations behind the creation of the bluegrass sound that has colored so much of American music.

Skaggs just sat and watched, and cried.

"Ricky told me it was like being with Bill again," said Larry Nager, who co-produced and wrote the video that was first a VHS release and has been reissued on DVD.

"Ultimately, that's the value. This shows Monroe in his later years, but when he was still creating and doing everything he'd always done. This was 1990 and 1991. And so watching it now is a chance to spend time with him."

In 1945, Monroe put together a band that included Howard Watts, Chubby Wise, Lester Flatt and a hyper-speed banjo player named Earl Scruggs. That group created and solidified the sound now known as bluegrass, and bluegrass became integral and influential to music well beyond Nashville. Early in Elvis Presley's career, he recorded Monroe's "Blue Moon of Kentucky." And the *Father of Bluegrass Music* film features a clip of the Beatles' Paul McCartney singing the same song and a conversation with Grateful Dead leader Jerry Garcia.

"If you get into the music at all, you find out that Bill Monroe is the guy who created the music . . . the guy who set the formula," Garcia says in the documentary.

This week, Nashville plays host to the annual International Bluegrass Music Association conference that draws, exclusively, musicians, industry professionals and fans who are devoted to the music named after Monroe's Blue Grass Boys band. Some of those conference-goers will head to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum at 1:30 p.m. on Wednesday for a viewing of *Father of Bluegrass* and a panel discussion that will feature Nager, Skaggs, Del McCoury and Douglas "Ranger Doug" Green.

Those who attend will see a film filled with people and things that are now gone, Monroe, Garcia, Roy Acuff, John Hartford and Del McCoury's dark hair (it is now a shiny silver) among them. They'll see Monroe and acolyte Ricky Skaggs around the long-cold campfire, and hear stories of Monroe's musicianship, humor and will.

"He wanted this to get made," Nager said. "I think he saw it in some way as his last testament."

Monroe died in 1996, and he was adamant about performing for as long as he was physically capable.



(Tennessean file)

PLAY VIDEO ▶



Clip from a documentary DVD of Bill Monroe's life featuring him playing a tune with Ricky Skaggs.

IF YOU GO

What: Film screening and panel discussion regarding Bill Monroe: Father of Bluegrass, with documentary writer and co-producer Larry Nager, Ricky Skaggs, Del McCoury and Douglas "Ranger Doug" Green
When: 1:30 p.m. Wednesday
Where: Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, 222 Fifth Ave. S., 416-2001
Admission: Included with museum admission (\$17.95, \$16.15 ages 55 and older, \$9.95 ages 6-17, free ages 5-under) or with museum membership or International Bluegrass Music Association conference badge.

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"I remember after we'd done the film, that Bill played the Ryman in 1994 or '95, with Alison Krauss opening for him," Nager said. "I hadn't seen him in a while, and I went backstage and I was shocked. He seemed so much older, and almost shrunken. It was like he wasn't really Bill Monroe. But then, some people helped him to the stage and put a mandolin on him, supporting both sides of him. As he got closer to the microphone, though, he got taller and straighter, and that chin moved up into the air. It was like someone behind him was working a bicycle pump, inflating him. By the time he got to the microphone, he'd grown a few feet. It seemed like the music was what was keeping him alive."

Funny thing, really, that it's still that way. Bill Monroe and bluegrass bestowed unto each other a powerful gift: life eternal.

Reach Peter Cooper at 615-259-8220 or pcooper@tennessean.com.

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