

Project: bluegrass exhibit labels
Originator: Katie Edwards and bluegrass team
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[... TITLE PANEL ...]

“Turn the Radio On”: Carolina Bluegrass

[... PRIMARY LABEL: intro panel: general ...]

[80 words]

Bluegrass music is often connected with Kentucky’s Bill Monroe, who is considered the father of bluegrass. While Monroe certainly popularized the genre during the 1940s, musicians in North Carolina helped to both create *and* define it. Our state’s hotbed of traditional string bands and musicians in the 1930s included names like Snuffy Jenkins, the Morris Brothers, J. E. Mainer and his Crazy Mountaineers, and the Tobacco Tags—all helped establish and refine the musical sound we’ve come to call bluegrass.

[... SECONDARY LABEL: intro panel: music and bluegrass ...]

The Early Roots of Bluegrass

[81 words, part]

As settlers from England, Scotland, and Ireland moved west into the Mountain and Piedmont regions of North Carolina, they brought with them the sacred music and spiritual songs that had

been passed down to them. Before long, they were also creating music with lyrics that described their everyday lives. By the 1920s musicians like Charlie Poole, Fiddlin' Bill Hensley, and Samantha Bumgarner were performing such music at local dances and festivals, spreading the popularity of their music to friends and families.

[88 words, part]

Even as it became more popular, much of this early “mountain music” continued to focus on religion. Slowly, other lyrics evolved to include themes related to family and home and then more serious and mournful topics, like heartbreak and death and change. These—often sad and slow—ballads carried a more somber tone that led to music from the area being known as “that high lonesome sound.” Eventually, the tempo picked up and bands formed with players who used stringed instruments they knew well: guitars, fiddles, and banjos.

[68 words, part]

This newer sound was often called “hillbilly music” since it featured lyrics about the life of mountain people and was played to local mountain audiences. Family acts, including the Monroe Brothers began to popularize the “country” style to a wider audience as they performed throughout the south. When mandolin player Bill Monroe added the banjo-playing talent of Earl Scruggs in 1945, though, the bluegrass sound was finally born.

[80 words, part]

That so-called original bluegrass band included Monroe and Scruggs, guitarist Lester Flatt, fiddler Chubby Wise, and bassist Howard Watts, who often performed under the name “Cedric

Rainwater.” Together, these talented musicians refined all the elements that would come to characterize the genre: breakneck tempos; sophisticated vocal harmonies; and impressive solos, or “breaks,” on the mandolin, banjo, and fiddle. As luck would have it, bluegrass was ready to go mainstream just as North Carolina radio was entering homes across the state.

[. . . SECONDARY LABEL: intro panel: radio . . .]

The Importance of the Radio

[163 words, total]

Throughout the 1920s, most radio stations had small audiences and broadcast with relatively low power. But, by the mid-1930s, radio sets were becoming more affordable and the medium was emerging as a dominant form of entertainment. Radio introduced North Carolinians to outside music such as blues and jazz and the hits of Tin Pan Alley. Likewise, radio helped spread North Carolina’s bluegrass sound to outside audiences.

That audience grew to include parts of the entire eastern United States in 1933, when WBT in Charlotte became a prestigious 50,000-watt Clear-Channel station. This power enabled the station to broadcast its musical productions “from Maine to Miami” on a clear night and signaled North Carolina’s entry to radio’s Golden Age.

During this time, the 1930s and 1940s, radio provided free entertainment for entire families and offered widespread exposure for musicians and regional products. Regionally produced shows like *Dixie Jamboree*, *Carolina Hayride*, and *Crazy Water Barn Dance*, each sponsored by

products such as Man-O-Ree laxatives, Peruna Tonic, and Crazy Water Crystals, to name a few, helped spread bluegrass and create its place in history.

[... ??? GRAPHIC/IMAGE LABEL ???]

Early Radio Stations in North Carolina:

Charlotte	WBT (1922)
Raleigh	WPTF (1924)
Greensboro	WBIG (1925)
Asheville	WWNC (1927)
Gastonia	WGNC (1939)
Hickory	WHKY (1940)
Mount Airy	WPAQ (1948)

[... instrument and bio panels ...]

[... PRIMARY LABEL: title ...]

The Instruments of Carolina Bluegrass

[... SECONDARY LABEL ...]

FIDDLE

[51 words]

Scots-Irish and German settlers who migrated west into the piedmont of North Carolina carried with them a stringed instrument that was cupped under the chin and played with a bow. This

instrument was called the fiddle. Fiddlers were important people in a community, often providing music for dances and special events.

[. . . TERTIARY LABEL: bio label . . .]

Pappy Sherrill

[98 words]

Homer Lee Sherrill was born in Sherrills Ford, Catawba County, in 1915, and began playing a fiddle at the age of 7. He first played in a radio session at WRBU in Gastonia when he was 13. In 1934, Sherrill performed on WBT's *Crazy Water Barn Dance* in Charlotte, and he eventually joined the Blue Sky Boys at WWNC in Asheville. Sherrill also performed with the Smiling Rangers at Raleigh's WPTF and, in 1939, he joined the WIS Hillbillies in Columbia, South Carolina, where he met long-time musical partner Snuffy Jenkins. He acquired his nickname, "Pappy," shortly thereafter.

[. . . TERTIARY LABEL: bio label . . .]

Jim Shumate

[98 words]

Shumate was a 20-year-old fiddler out of Hickory, Catawba County, playing with the Blue Ridge Boys, when Bill Monroe heard him on the radio in 1943. Monroe promptly asked him to join his Blue Grass Boys as a replacement for Tennessean Howdy Forrester, who had been drafted by the navy into World War II. During that time Shumate also convinced banjo player Earl Scruggs to audition for Monroe's band. After several years on the *Grand Ole Opry*, Shumate returned to

Hickory and joined Scruggs and Lester Flatt in the Foggy Mountain Boys. He continues to fiddle in Hickory.

[... SECONDARY LABEL ...]

BANJO

[68 words]

African slaves brought memories of the banjo from their homelands to North Carolina. While the banjo is, therefore, associated with African American traditional music, its use spread to mountain music, folk music, and old-time music, as well as bluegrass. At least part of its original popularity in white society is based on its use in minstrel shows and comedy sketches. The banjo is a “picked,” or plucked, instrument.

[... TERTIARY LABEL: bio label ...]

Snuffy Jenkins

[100 words]

Dewitt Jenkins was born in 1908 in Rutherford County. Originally an old-time and traditional musician, and comedian, he inspired many musicians, including Earl Scruggs, with his three-finger “roll” style of playing banjo that was key to the foundation of bluegrass. In 1934 Jenkins first appeared on the *Crazy Water Barn Dance*, a program produced at radio station WBT in Charlotte. Later, as part of the WIS Hillbillies, Jenkins earned the nickname “Snuffy” because he wiped his nose with a sleeve during one of his comedy routines. The Snuffy Jenkins Festival in Forest City annually celebrates bluegrass music and its legacy.

[. . . TERTIARY LABEL: bio label . . .]

Earl Scruggs

[98 words, without quotation]

Earl Scruggs is undoubtedly one of the most influential banjo players of all time. He was born in Shelby, Cleveland County, in 1924, and joined Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys at the age of 22. Scruggs stayed with the band until 1948, when he left to form the Foggy Mountain Boys with Lester Flatt. Scruggs performed until his death in 2012. He is most famous for popularizing the three-finger style of banjo picking (which many people now refer to as Scruggs style) he picked up from Snuffy Jenkins and for helping to define the bluegrass genre.

[. . . FOCUS QUOTE . . .]

[. . . if the following quotation is set off as a blockquote, delete the opening and closing quotation marks and convert the single quotation marks to double . . .]

“Bluegrass music really came to life, I think, when Earl Scruggs joined Bill Monroe. I thought, ‘Lord Almighty, I didn’t know nobody could play the banjo like that.’”

[. . . set off as an attribution line:]—Doc Watson

[. . . SECONDARY LABEL . . .]

GUITAR

[84 words]

The fiddle and the banjo were well established as the prominent instruments in mountain and old-time music. But guitars gained popularity in mountain areas during the 1920s because they were relatively simple to care for and easy to play—to get started, players just needed to know a few chords. With additional creativity and lots of experimentation, this strummed instrument

could provide a harmonizing background noise that blended easily with the two main instruments. Guitars eventually became essential to the bluegrass sound, as well.

[. . . TERTIARY LABEL: bio label . . .]

George Shuffler

[92 words]

Shuffler was born in Valdese, Burke County, on April 15, 1925. Unlike many budding Tar Heel musicians of the time, Shuffler was introduced to music through shape-note singing. Basically self-taught, he first played guitar using the “Carter,” or scratch, style used by “Mother” Maybelle Carter. He later developed his own style—which came to be called cross-picking—which helped fill in the silence when no fiddle or mandolin players were playing. His innovation of cross-picking helped transform the guitar from a background, backup instrument in the bluegrass genre to a lead instrument.

[. . . SECONDARY LABEL . . .]

MANDOLIN

[105 words]

The mandolin was initially popular in the United States as a parlor instrument used in the north by the urban middle class who had leisure time and money for novelty amusements. Mandolins first gained favor in the south during the late 1800s (as a similar class rose from the ravages of the Civil War) and early 1900s, as mandolin musicians became parts of vaudeville acts and mandolin orchestras became common in schools and colleges. The popularity of this strummed

instrument skyrocketed in the 1930s when radio enabled listeners to hear the mandolin played in a wide range of “brother acts,” including the popular Monroe Brothers.

[. . . TERTIARY LABEL: bio label . . .]

Bill Monroe

[86 words]

Bill Monroe and his brother Charlie, who played fiddle and guitar, left their native Kentucky in the 1930s and performed throughout the South as the Monroe Brothers. During this time, Bill experimented with new sounds on the mandolin: quick, hard-driving solos, a variety of chords and “chops,” and different rhythms. In 1939 Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys first appeared on the *Grand Ole Opry*, which aired on Nashville’s WSM radio station. The group quickly became one of the most popular bands of the time.

[. . . SECONDARY LABEL . . .]

BASS

[83 words]

The bass fiddle, also called the upright bass or stand-up bass, is now a standard instrument in bluegrass bands. Its use became necessary as music entered the radio studio, where the clapping and foot tapping of a crowd was not present to “keep the beat.” In bluegrass music, the instrument is almost always plucked, though some bassists use the “slap” style, which is done by pulling a string and releasing it to hit the fingerboard or by hitting the strings against the fingerboard.

[. . . TERTIARY LABEL: bio label . . .]

Jody Rainwater

[129 words]

Charles Edward Johnson was born in 1920. He grew up near Mount Airy, Surry County, where he occasionally played bass with his older brother, who played guitar, as Chuck and Slim, the Johnson Brothers. A break came in 1936 when they auditioned for a new Highpoint radio station, WMFR, and were hired to host a regular Thursday morning program. Later, after helping to form the Blue Ridge Mountain Boys and playing on station WTOB in Winston-Salem, Charles became known as “Little Jody” and served as comedic emcee during shows, as well as the warm-up comedian. When he joined the Foggy Mountain Boys, with Earl Scruggs and Lester Flatt, he played Cedric Rainwater’s comedic partner. During that run, Flatt suggested Little Jody adopt the Rainwater name and the name stuck.

[. . . credit/acknowledgment line . . .]

Special thanks to Jim Mills and Tony Williamson for their assistance with *“Turn the Radio On”*: *Carolina Bluegrass*.

[. . . SECONDARY LABEL . . .]

We Need Your Help!

[85 words]

During 2014 and 2015, in connection with the International Bluegrass Music Association's annual convention and World of Bluegrass festival in Raleigh, the North Carolina Museum of History will be expanding its bluegrass exhibits and striving to improve its collection of bluegrass artifacts. Doing so will better enable us to preserve and present the history of bluegrass music in North Carolina. If you would like to make a donation of any kind, please talk with the information desk or contact the Museum of History at 919-807-7900.