

CLASSIC ARTICLE FROM THE FOG ARCHIVES

What is Bluegrass Music?

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What is bluegrass music? Opinions vary some, but here is one. It is produced by musical instruments that are strung and acoustic, and singing. To have an authentic bluegrass sound you must have a five-stringed banjo, played “Scruggs” style. The style is played using picks attached to the thumb and first two fingers producing a rhythmic “roll.” The other one or two fingers rest lightly on the banjo head to provide a reference point for a smooth rhythm. The Scruggs style is named for Earl Scruggs who began playing with Bill Monroe in 1945. Bill Monroe, referred to as the “Father of Bluegrass,” had been developing bluegrass music for several years, but it was the style of Earl Scruggs that pretty much solidified the sound known today as bluegrass. The music was called bluegrass because Bill Monroe came from Kentucky, the Bluegrass State. Earl later teamed up with Lester Flatt (also playing for Bill Monroe at the time) to form the Flatt and Scruggs band that went on to spread the bluegrass sound far and wide (you may have seen them on *The Beverly Hillbillies*). Other notable pioneers in the bluegrass banjo sound were Ralph Stanley, Raymond Fairchild (both still playing), and Don Reno. Most bluegrass bands evolved when a person played for a year or more with a well-established band and learned the business, and then left the group to start their own band. Several bands were formed by brothers, some having spent some formative years with other bands.

Other bluegrass acoustic instruments normally used are: guitar, fiddle, mandolin (which Bill Monroe played), resonophonic guitar (Dobro), and bass (acoustic preferred but electric allowed for convenience). Not many bands have all of the instruments, but you need at least four: banjo, guitar, bass, and one of the others. The guitar is not strummed; rather it is picked alternately from a single bass string to the three treble strings, with some bass runs leading from one chord to the next. Most guitarists do not play the melody (flat pick) on breaks; some can’t, and others don’t because it is rare that a guitar can be heard over the other instruments. On stage, microphones help the guitar to be heard.

Once the instruments are in place, you need some vocals. Most people playing the instruments also sing, if not lead, joining on the choruses with harmony. Most bluegrass music is learned and played by ear. Not much music is readily available in written form to local groups who play for their own enjoyment. It is learned by listening to the recorded versions. Not many groups use music stands on stage, and it is even more rare in impromptu get-togethers (jams). There are plenty of books around with the words to the songs, but the music is not included so a person must have access to the recordings, or to others who sing or play, to learn how a song goes. It is helpful sometimes to have help with the words to a song available when you are first learning it, or if it is particularly difficult.

The format of a bluegrass song is normally as follows:

- One person kicks off the song with an instrumental intro, typically banjo or fiddle;
- The lead singer sings a verse and a chorus (others join in on the chorus with harmony);
- Second instrumental person plays a “break” (a rendition of the verse or chorus melody);
- Lead singer sings another verse and chorus (as above);
- Another instrumental break (sometimes two instruments will split a break);
- And so on, until the end of the song, typically with a vocal repeat of the chorus.

Some songs are instrumentals only, where each person takes a turn playing the melody. A typical bluegrass show or jam is about 75% vocals and 25% instrumentals. While each person is taking a break on the song, other persons are playing rhythm backup, using chord progressions from the “key” of the song. The backup is very important, and must be done tastefully so as not to overwhelm or distract the person doing the lead, either vocally or instrumentally.

In a typical bluegrass jam, several people (6 - 10 or more) gather around and take turns selecting a song for the group, choosing the key (from 8 normally used), and leading the song. Most in the group will know the song and join in on the choruses, and take breaks. Others not knowing the song initially can play along by ear most of the time, when chord progressions are not complicated, and can pick up a song usually after hearing a couple of vocals and instrumental breaks. A picker should know the chord progressions, called the “circle of fifths,” which describes the relation of one chord to the other in a song key (A through G). Most guitar and banjo players use a CAPO to shift the playing position of a particular song key, to make the chord formations easier to play.