

# “Foggy Mountain Breakdown”—Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs (1949)

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Essay by Brian Bader



*Flatt and Scruggs*



*“Bonnie & Clyde” (1967)*

It may be difficult to pinpoint exactly what made Earl Scruggs the finest bluegrass banjo player who ever lived. He began playing the banjo when he was just four years old, and mastered the instrument at a young age. He continued his virtuoso banjo work into the 21st century, along the way performing and recording with the greatest practitioners of the musical genre and accumulating a legacy of classic bluegrass music. With his rapidly and impeccably picked three-finger “Scruggs style” banjo, Scruggs probably influenced every bluegrass banjo picker who has followed in his wake.

Of the many recordings made by Scruggs, with and without his longtime partner Lester Flatt, none might be more quickly recognized from the opening banjo notes by Scruggs than the fast tempo instrumental “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” first recorded by Flatt and Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys in 1949. The piece embodies the technical prowess demanded of bluegrass musicians with a sound and a feel representative of hillbilly, country, and bluegrass music at their best. Scruggs was a pioneer in the birth of bluegrass; if Bill Monroe is the father of bluegrass, Scruggs, it is said, did as much as any musician to help develop its sound. He branched off into other musical areas in the 1960s, but never compromised his playing with his musical ventures into folk and rock-oriented styles.

Earl Eugene Scruggs was born on January 6, 1924, near Shelby, North Carolina, the youngest child in a farming family who all played music. His father died when Scruggs was only four years old, a heartache for the young boy. In his youth Scruggs learned and played banjo both as an emotional outlet for his loss and for his own enjoyment. Most notable was his mastering of a three-finger picking style that utilized thumb, index finger, and middle finger, with picks, the ring finger and pinky of the right hand resting on the banjo head. The style predated Scruggs--banjo great Snuffy Jenkins being an earlier proponent--but Scruggs, in his own words, adapted to it “a syncopated roll that was quite different.” Scruggs recalled that his epiphany came while playing the tune “Reuben”

when he excitedly realized that he was using three fingers to pick; for a week afterwards that was all he played.

Prior to World War II, Scruggs continued in various semi-professional groups playing on local radio programs. Like others in the textile manufacturing regions of North Carolina, he found wartime employment, in his case at Lily Mills, a thread mill in Shelby, but, at home, he continued to hone his banjo skills. In the late summer of 1945, now determined to make music his career, Scruggs joined the band of “Lost John” Miller in Tennessee. Before year’s end, his big break came when he successfully auditioned for Bill Monroe’s Blue Grass Boys. Already a band member of Monroe’s was guitarist/singer Lester Flatt, with whom Scruggs would partner for a quarter century.

Lester Raymond Flatt was born June 19, 1914, near Sparta, Tennessee, and like Scruggs had early exposure to music traditions. He worked in silk mills and played music with various groups, doing radio broadcasts and live performances as a lead vocalist and rhythm guitar player. At one point in his early career, he sang tenor, a duty he did not enjoy, and played the mandolin with Charlie Monroe’s Kentucky Pardners.

Flatt eventually left that outfit and joined Charlie’s brother Bill as a Bluegrass Boy on guitar and also singing lead with his rich, instantly recognizable voice, a future trademark sound of his collaboration with Scruggs. His guitar technique, though hardly on par with Scruggs’s banjo wizardry, used picks on thumb and index finger to provide a solid rhythmic foundation to the music.

Scruggs’s instrumental prowess on the banjo helped make the Bluegrass Boys the model for future bluegrass bands. The instrumentation of mandolin, fiddle, banjo, guitar, and stand-up bass combined with virtuoso musicianship, breakneck song tempos, and ethereal vocal harmonies to define traditional bluegrass as it still remains today. Among the tunes recorded by Scruggs with Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys were the waltz-time “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” later recorded by Elvis Presley, and a fast-paced instrumental entitled “Blue Grass Breakdown.”

In 1948, Flatt and Scruggs left Monroe and formed their own band, the Foggy Mountain Boys. The band’s name came from the title of a popular song, “Foggy Mountain Top,” recorded by the early country music greats the Carter Family. There are various reasons given for boys’s split from Monroe. Monroe was a complex man. As a result of the split, he and the two former Blue Grass Boys were not on speaking terms for the next two decades.

Flatt and Scruggs found radio work and signed a recording contract with Mercury Records. Their “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” was recorded for Mercury on December 11, 1949, at E.T. Herzog Studio, in Cincinnati, Ohio. The three-chord, sixteen-bar instrumental, reminiscent of “Bluegrass Breakdown,” starts relentlessly fast and does not let up. It clocks in about two and three-quarters minutes and features not only deft banjo picking but four verses of fiddle solo by Benny Sims. Flatt played guitar and Howard Watts was on stand-up bass. Mandolinist Curly Seckler is also credited on the December

11 recording session.

The instrumental was released in March 1950 on Mercury 6247 along with the song “No Mother or Dad.” It was a propitious beginning-of-the-decade record, for the 1950s were to witness Flatt and Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys’s ascent to stardom.

The band left Mercury and signed with Columbia Records and cut their first recordings on that label in November 1950. Radio show performances continued, and by mid-decade, Flatt and Scruggs had their own television show sponsored by Martha White Flour Mills. Around this same time, their popularity netted them a place in the Grand Ole Opry, a spot that had, up until that time, eluded them, in part, Scruggs later claimed, due to the influence of Bill Monroe.

The first instrumental Flatt and Scruggs recorded for Columbia was another “breakdown,” this one titled “Earl’s Breakdown.” This piece featured more splendid banjo picking and introduced another musical innovation by Scruggs: tuning peg adjustment made during the tune. An evolution of this was a device developed by Scruggs called the “Scruggs pegs” which can be heard on another “Foggy Mountain” title from August 1953 called “Foggy Mountain Chimes.”

The advent of rock and roll music spelled trouble and even doom for many country music acts in the later 1950s. But not Flatt and Scruggs. Their careers flourished, in large measure because of their sound. “The Fabulous Sound of Lester Flatt & Earl Scruggs,” which was the title of a 1964 record, transcended but did not betray bluegrass and country music boundaries. Invoking their boundless musical abilities, they thrived commercially and saw many releases rank high in the country music charts. In 1959, Foggy Mountain Boy Buck “Uncle Josh” Graves, who did as much for popularizing the dobro in bluegrass as Scruggs did for the banjo, was featured on the blues-tinged instrumental “Foggy Mountain Rock,” a nod to popular American musical trends at this time. (In 1954, there had been yet *another* “Foggy Mountain” instrumental, “Foggy Mountain Special,” featuring solo guitar work by Lester Flatt and including a verse of his well-known “Flatt run” repeated several times. By Flatt and Scruggs standards, the guitar break is a considerably subdued example of their instrumental prowess!)

The 1960s saw yet more commercial success for the band, with live recordings from Carnegie Hall (1962) and Vanderbilt University in Nashville (1963). The burgeoning folk music scene brought greater awareness of American country and blues musicians to younger and diverse audiences. Flatt and Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys capitalized on the folk movement by playing to college students and other new fans across the country. The year 1962 also saw the premiere of the popular television comedy program “The Beverly Hillbillies.” The show ran for nine years on CBS. “The Ballad of Jed Clampett,” recorded by Flatt and Scruggs (sung by Jerry Scoggins in the opening and closing TV show credits) was a number one country music hit for the duo. They also made several cameo appearances on the show as old friends of the Clampetts; the two sang, picked, and joked along with “Jed and all his kin.”

In 1967, there was another breakthrough with the use of “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” in the motion picture “Bonnie and Clyde,” starring Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway as the legendary bank robbers. Not surprisingly, the up-tempo tune lends itself very well to and figures prominently in the movie’s car chase scenes. The violence-ridden movie generated more than a little controversy but was a box office hit and brought Scruggs’s banjo virtuosity to the attention of moviegoers all around the world. The song also netted Flatt and Scruggs a well-deserved Grammy Award.

Then, two years later, Flatt and Scruggs called it quits. Times were changing musically and Scruggs, feeling artistically constricted, insisted that their sound needed to evolve as well. Flatt wanted to stick to his traditional roots.

The last Flatt and Scuggs Columbia recordings included a Bob Dylan number and other contemporary compositions. They were dutifully sung by Flatt but he was not happy with this turn of events and later lamented: “Columbia has got Bob Dylan, why did they want me?” Upon separation, legal agreement forbade the use of the name The Foggy Mountain Boys by either party. So, Flatt continued performing in the bluegrass vein with the Nashville Grass and Scruggs formed the Earl Scruggs Revue whose members included two of his sons Randy and Gary.

Two inseparable names, akin to other twentieth-century popular musical partnerships such as Rodgers and Hammerstein and Lennon and McCartney, had parted. Both played on into their final years with unabated professionalism. Flatt died relatively young, on May 11, 1979, but not before Scruggs met his old partner one final time in meeting facilitated by Flatt’s young guitarist, Marty Stuart. There was talk of a reunion. Both men were co-inductees into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1985. Scruggs continued performing for another quarter century and in 2001 won a Grammy for a rousing rendition of “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” featuring an all-star musical line up. In 2011, Randy, Gary, and Earl toured nationally with a top-notch country band. At shows throughout the United States, Scruggs put a lifetime of picking into “Foggy Mountain Breakdown,” always the last song in the band’s set list. On March 28, 2012, Earl Scruggs passed away in Nashville.

A couple of sayings attributed to Uncle Dave Macon long ago poked fun and maybe more at Earl Scruggs. Uncle Dave, perhaps begrudgingly impressed by Scruggs when he first heard him on the five-string banjo, is alleged to have called into question his sense of humor (“That boy can play the banjo, but he ain’t one damned bit funny”) and his singing ability (“I’ll bet he can’t sing worth a damn.”). In fact, Scruggs’s pleasant baritone voice harmonizes nicely, along with the other Foggy Mountain Boys, on numerous Flatt and Scruggs compositions. There actually can be seen a serious or deadpan demeanor to his face in the many vintage video clips of the Foggy Mountain Boys in performance but just as often a confident smile is evident. Most importantly, on solo banjo breaks, accompanying his partner Flatt’s vocals, or backing another instrumentalist, Scruggs’s fingers effortlessly and faultlessly play just the right amount of perfectly selected notes, sometime a flourish, sometimes understated, but never losing the melody when called for, even if embellished with the rolls, pull-offs, hammer-ons, bends, and a dozen other banjo

picking techniques perfected by the master of the five-string banjo.

Dave Macon, like Stringbean Akeman, predecessor of Scruggs in Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys, was a clawhammer style banjoist from the vaudeville era when the banjoists played, told jokes, and sang. Stand-up bassist E.P. "Cousin Jake" Tullock, and Josh Graves, both superlative players in their own rights, as was required in a band with the likes of Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, supplied plenty of humor for the Foggy Mountain Boys. Whatever shortcomings there may have been in the eyes of Dave Macon, real or otherwise, Scruggs more than made up for in musicianship and in other ways as well. The business acumen of his wife Louise, the band's manager from the very start, was as much a part of the Foggy Mountain Boys's career as the voice and songwriting skills of Flatt and the banjo playing of Scruggs.

And always, above even the country genteelism of Scruggs and his long-time music partner Flatt, was the chemistry of the various line-ups of Lester and Earl and the Foggy Mountain Boys that never failed to produce the highest quality musical entertainment. And embodying this sound is the banjo instrumental that started it all, "Foggy Mountain Breakdown."

*Brian Bader is a sound recording cataloger for the Library of Congress. He is a long-time fan of bluegrass, blues and other traditional American musical genres.*