

“Blue Moon of Kentucky”—Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys (1947)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Cary O'Dell, with Matt Barton



Bill Monroe



Original label

Bill Monroe is one in a very exclusive coterie of American artists. Like Martha Graham and, arguably, D.W. Griffith, what he created during his lifetime would go on to become an entire genre of art, a language, a vocabulary in which hundreds of other artists would create in its wake. Monroe’s synthesis of primarily English, Irish, Welsh and Scot folk song traditions, as filtered through a distinctly American immigrant and, specifically, Appalachian experience, would come to be known as “bluegrass.” And Bill Monroe, rightfully, would become known as its founding father.

Though he would go on to author and interpret hundreds of songs during a career which endured from 1927 until his death in 1996, his 1947 self-penned “Blue Moon of Kentucky” is perhaps the song he is most associated with. It was named to the National Recording Registry in 2002.

Bill Monroe was born on September 13, 1911, the youngest of eight children, on a farm just outside of Rosine, Kentucky. All his family members were musical. Two older brothers played guitar and fiddle. At the age of 10, Bill took up the mandolin. With the later addition of the banjo, these four instruments would form the core sound of bluegrass music.

In his teens, Monroe began to accompany his uncle, Pendleton Vandiver, when he played his fiddle at area square dances. Later, Monroe would immortalize Vandiver in his classic composition “Uncle Pen.”

Monroe, whose formal education ended with the 5th grade, formed his first true band with his two brothers, Birch (on fiddle) and Charlie (on guitar), in 1929 while living in Indiana and working at an oil refinery. (Earlier, around 1927, back in Kentucky, he and his brothers had played some local events also as a trio.) The group played (and danced, the boys were all good dancers) in shows in and around northern Indiana and on local radio.

During this time, Bill Monroe was slowly refining his sound. His music at this point was inspired by the “traditional” music he had absorbed during his youth and by the jazz and blues stylings of local African-American guitarist and fiddler Arnold Shultz, who had previously introduced Monroe to the blues. Later, jazz, as a performance style, would be further incorporated into Monroe’s playing due to the Monroe Family’s next move to Chicago.

The Windy City was, at the time, a hot spot for “country” music, mainly because of WLS radio’s weekly “Barn Dance” program. In the northern city, Monroe and company would expand their repertoire even more and would soon be offered their own radio show over KFNF in

Shenandoah, Iowa. Not long after, however, the Monroes lost a member when brother Birch decided to leave the group; Charlie and Bill decided to carry on as a duo.

The remaining two Monroes toured and made broadcasts in the Midwest and South through 1934 and 1935 and made their first recordings for the Bluebird label, a subsidiary of RCA Victor, in early 1936 in Charlotte, North Carolina. They recorded a range of sacred and secular pieces at this session, including fast numbers like “Nine Pound Hammer Is Too Heavy” and “New River Train” that showed off Bill’s blazing mandolin runs, as well as “What Would You Give?,” a haunting hymn in waltz time that became a major hit in the South. In a little under two years, the Monroe Brothers would record and release sixty performances on Bluebird, a varied and innovative legacy of music that would be celebrated even if neither brother never made another recording.

The Monroe Brothers disbanded in 1938 with Charlie going on to form his own band just as his brother would shortly do as well. Bill Monroe empanelled a group he dubbed the Blue Grass Boys (named in honor of his Kentucky home) in late 1938. The Blue Grass Boys included Cleo Davis, Art Wooten, and Amos Garren. They made their debut on the Grand Ole Opry in late 1939. Later additions to Monroe’s crew included Clyde Moody, David “Stringbean” Akeman, and Howard Watts. By 1946, the band consisted of Chubby Wise on fiddle, Cedric Rainwater on bass, Earl Scruggs on banjo and Lester Flatt on guitar. It is this mid- to late-1940s grouping--the players on “Blue Moon”--that truly codified the bluegrass sound.

The music that has come to be known as “bluegrass” draws its name from Monroe’s band. For it was within this tight-knit group that Monroe began to truly meld his assortment of styles and influences into something so startlingly original. Bluegrass was acoustic but driving, hallmarked with fast rhythms played primarily on violin (fiddle), guitar, mandolin and banjo. It lent itself to jazz-like improvisations and harmonies sung in high pitches. Monroe himself would go on to describe it as “Scottish bagpipes and ole-time fiddlin’. It’s Methodist and Holiness and Baptist. It’s blues and jazz, and it has a high lonesome sound.”

Throughout his history fronting the Blue Grass Boys, Monroe had many popular hits. They included “Wicked Path of Sin,” “Little Cabin Home on the Hill” and “Molly and Tenbrooks.” But his 1947 “Blue Moon of Kentucky” would become his best known song.

“Blue Moon,” one of Monroe’s autobiographical (or “true songs”), is a waltz. And even if later treatments by other artists speed it up and rock it out, Monroe’s version remains slow and plaintive. Like the Carter Family’s “Wildwood Flower,” “Blue Moon” is a song of heartbreak. In the story of the song, someone has been cheated on and then abandoned. The hanging moon outside absent-mindedly reflects the mood of the one left behind. But, in the blue moon’s indifferent, ongoing glow, there is also a hint of hope, a suggestion that both parties in this sad tale will, too, endure: “Blue moon of Kentucky, keep on shining/Shine on the one that’s gone and left me blue.”

Obviously, in writing the tune, Monroe returned to the state of his youth—Kentucky—for inspiration. He also turned to a unique astronomical phenomenon. In the rare times that a full moon appears twice in the same month, the second is always called the “blue moon.” This unusual occurrence gave birth to the phrase “once in a blue moon” and has long inspired poets and songwriters including Lorenzo Hart and Richard Rodgers who wrote “Blue Moon” in 1934 and country songsmiths Patrick Alger and Eugene Levine who wrote “Once in a Very Blue Moon” circa 1984, a song that has since been sung by the likes of Nanci Griffith, Lyle Lovett and Dolly Parton.

Monroe said about the writing of his signature tune:

Back in those days, it seems every trip we made was from Kentucky to Florida, driving back and forth. I always thought about Kentucky, and I wanted to write a song about the moon we could always see over it. The best way to do this was to bring a girl into the song. I wanted words to this because most of my songs were instrumentals. “Kentucky Waltz” had come earlier and I knew I could write both words and music, so I wrote it in the car on the way home from one of those Florida trips.

Though “Blue Moon of Kentucky” became well known to bluegrass and country music lovers in its initial Monroe version, it would become known the world over thanks, mainly, to Elvis Presley. Presley--rock’s soon to be crowned king--recorded “Blue Moon” in 1954, as the B-side of his single “That’s Alright, Mama” during part of his legendary Sun Records sessions. With the assistance of Bill Black and Scotty Moore in the studio, Elvis transformed “Blue Moon” from a bluegrass ballad into a rockabilly rabble rouser. The Presley version was a regional hit for the singer and it became a famous and popular addition to his repertoire. Later, Monroe would amp up and fast track his delivery of the song to match Presley’s.

In any type of treatment, “Blue Moon of Kentucky” would go on to become a standard. Along with Elvis and Bill Monroe, others who have recorded it include Patsy Cline, LeAnn Rimes, Paul McCartney, Boxcar Willie and Ray Charles. And it is certainly a staple of every bluegrass band in the world, whether they are playing the Opry or the local county fair.

Bill Monroe would go on to write and record such other seminal bluegrass tunes as “Big Mon” and “Get Up John” and to be a major influence to a generation of musicians including every viable, modern Bluegrass artist, early rockers like Carl Perkins, Chuck Berry, and the aforementioned Elvis; folk artists like Bob Dylan and the Byrds; and such major country music figures as Emmylou Harris, Ricky Skaggs, Marty Stuart and Alison Kraus.

Monroe was accepted as a legend long before his death in 1996 at the age of 85. He has been inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame, the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame and into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as an “early influence.”

For someone who founded an entire genre of music and affected everything that came after it, it’s difficult to reduce that type of pioneer’s impact and influence to just one song. But, if that does have to be done for Mr. Monroe, then “Blue Moon of Kentucky”--with its heartfelt mandolin and searing vocals--is certainly as good a place as any to start.

Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).