

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

Added to the National Registry: 2004

Essay by Thomas Goldsmith (guest post)*



Flatt and Scruggs



Original label

"Foggy Mountain Breakdown," recorded Dec. 11, 1949, Cincinnati, Ohio, released March 15, 1950 as Mercury 6247. Composer: Earl Eugene Scruggs (Jan. 6, 1924-March 12, 2012)

History records the weather in Cincinnati, Ohio on Dec. 11, 1949 as rainy, but warmer than usual. When bluegrass banjo player Earl Scruggs arrived at downtown's Herzog Studio, he likely had to use his time-tested method of getting the banjo's hide head, or top surface, up to proper tension. That meant holding his elaborate Gibson Grenada near a light bulb to evaporate the excess humidity that could deaden his trademark, crackling tone.

North Carolinian Scruggs, 25, had spent the previous four years mostly on the road, touring first with Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys, then, since the spring of 1948, as co-leader of the spinoff band called Lester Flatt & Earl Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys.

Those two groups were not only the first two bands to play what is now called bluegrass music, but also among the all-time best to master the lightning-fast, high-pitched sound. And Earl Scruggs' unprecedented banjo virtuosity was key to both.

The Flint Hill, NC, prodigy had already burned his brand into what had been old-time string band music with the riveting three-finger picking style he had assembled. His quicksilver tempo and melodic invention brought new life to the African-derived banjo at a time when its popularity had been waning. One of the recordings the band was to cut to disc that day, "Foggy Mountain Breakdown," would go a long way toward branding the impact of bluegrass music, of the five-string banjo, and of Scruggs himself.

The quintet of Scruggs, vocalist-guitarist Flatt, fiddler Benny Sims, mandolin player Curly Seckler, and bassist Howard Watts recorded other tunes that day, but nothing else leaped from the speakers like "Foggy Mountain Breakdown." Beginning with a staccato chord from the banjo, the tune sprang into life at a breakneck tempo rarely attempted in bluegrass or elsewhere, with Scruggs pouring out 16th-note rolls in a 16-bar chord pattern repeated 13 times during the

roughly two-minute, 40-second recording.

Scruggs' tune, the first credited to him as a writer, uses only three chords, G, Em and D, but contains several variations. In addition to what might be called the "head," or recurring motif in jazz, two other variations are played in higher positions on the banjo's neck. It was pointed out to Scruggs later that yet another strain was an unconscious quote of the patriotic tune "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean."

The other soloist on the track is fiddler Benny Sims, whose long-bowed double-stops break up Scruggs' lead breaks twice during the recording. Even then, the banjo pulsates clearly in the background, serving as a kind of ostinato to the fiddler's sustained notes.

Seckler's mandolin provides the trademark backbeat "chop" associated with bluegrass, while Watts keeps a steady 4/4 on the bass. Flatt punctuates the driving tune with a bass figure that came to be known as the "Lester Flatt G-run." And in a musical oddity that marked the dying days of older tonalities in modern string bands, Flatt often plays an E major chord, creating a weird dys-tonality with the banjo's confident E minor. In later years, Scruggs said that he had tried to get Flatt to play a consistent E minor during "Foggy Mountain Breakdown," only to become used to the unusual sound and even partial to it.

"Foggy Mountain Breakdown" didn't appear on the Billboard Country & Western chart after its release in March 1950, but it gained immediate popularity with fans. For banjo players who were just learning Scruggs' banjo style, it became a mountain-top performance, with complex parts for the left and right hands that took infinite practice to master.

In the early 1950s, Flatt and Scruggs continued to rise through the ranks of country music, as their style was still called then. By 1955, they had earned a coveted spot on the Grand Ole Opry radio show, which broadcast weekly country music shows from Nashville to more than half the nation. Gradually, the name "bluegrass" was used to refer to the music of Monroe, Flatt and Scruggs and a growing host of similar acts.

In 1963, Flatt and Scruggs provided the banjo-driven signature of the hit CBS series "The Beverly Hillbillies." For "Foggy Mountain Breakdown," the big leap forward came with its inclusion as a recurring theme in the acclaimed 1967 film "Bonnie & Clyde," a tale of mindless, Depression-era violence. Unusually for a bluegrass instrumental, the tune hit the lower reaches of the pop-music charts and won a Best Country Performance Grammy for Flatt & Scruggs in 1969.

The tune has earned a reputation for creating an instant fascination with Scruggs-style banjo for generations of pickers. Award-winning five-string master Jim Mills first heard the original recording of "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" when he was four or five. He said in a 2014 interview, "I didn't know guitar from a banjo or anything else. But when I heard it, it just absolutely captivated me--it still does to this day."

When Scruggs recorded the tune with an all-star lineup that included comic Steve Martin and rocker Leon Russell in 2002, it won another Grammy, a rare instance of a performer's winning

music's top honor twice for the same tune.

In addition to helping Scruggs earn a number of prestigious awards, "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" has been recorded myriad times by other artists and was recognized in Broadcast Music Inc. as a "Millionaire" tune--having enjoyed more than one million public performances.

Scruggs, who died in 2012, continued to play the tune at every show through a long career with Flatt & Scruggs, with the Earl Scruggs Revue along with his musical sons, and as a soloist and bandleader.

"It's amazing, when a song catches on like that," Scruggs said near the end of his life. "We play it now, and young people that wasn't even born know it. It just gets into their skin or something, into their minds, or whatever.

"Oh, yeah, we always do that."

Thomas Goldsmith, a journalist and musician in Raleigh, N.C., is the author of "The Bluegrass Reader" (University of Illinois, 2004) and the forthcoming "Ballad of 'Foggy Mountain Breakdown.'"

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.