

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

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Richard D. Smith (guest post)*



Bill Monroe

Illuminating a major juncture in American popular music history--the crossroads of country music and rock 'n' roll--is the “Blue Moon of Kentucky.”

Originally composed as a lonesome but lovely waltz by Bill Monroe (1911-1996)--the innovative Rosine, Kentucky-born singer/bandleader/mandolinist who became a pillar of the Grand Ole Opry, was a major figure in the Folk Music Revival and is renowned as “The Father of Bluegrass”--it was later covered by the young Elvis Presley during his first commercial recording sessions.

Indeed, it is musically and culturally significant that Presley's first single consisted of his crooning and insinuating version of Delta blues singer/guitarist Arthur Crudup's “That's All Right” on one side and a rollicking rockabilly arrangement (in 4/4 time) of Monroe's waltz on the other. The roots of rock in African American music are well known, but the parallel influence of white country music deserves greater understanding. The story of “Blue Moon of Kentucky” provides this.

Bill Monroe's earliest-known performance of “Blue Moon of Kentucky” was on the Grand Ole Opry on August 25, 1945. Monroe recorded it during his first session for Columbia Records (having previously been on RCA Victor Bluebirds) on September 16, 1946.

The session was historic, both for its material and Monroe's sidemen in the Blue Grass Boys. Participating in their first recordings with Monroe were superb lead vocalist/guitarist/songwriter Lester Flatt and the brilliant and seminal three-finger-style banjo picker Earl Scruggs. (They left

Monroe in 1948 to form their own hugely successful and influential bluegrass-style band, Lester Flatt, Earl Scruggs & the Foggy Mountain Boys.)

Monroe later claimed that his motivation in penning “Blue Moon of Kentucky” came during drives back and forth from tours of Florida. “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 ... so I wrote it in the car on the way home from one of those Florida trips” [Rosenberg/Wolfe, p. 58].

And there was indeed a full moon at the end of March 1945, during a time when Bill Monroe & His Blue Grass Boys were driving up from a series of Florida shows [Ewing p. 129]. But was the girl strictly a poetical invention?

First, let’s consider the song itself. The power and artistic success of “Blue Moon of Kentucky” is very much due to its stately simplicity, especially as characterized by its A part. The first transition from the tonic (key or “first” chord) to the subdominant (fourth chord), clearly signaled by an anticipating first-seventh chord between them, starts on the compound phrase “of Kentucky, keep on,” leading to “shining,” the final word in the line.

After a return to the tonic, the progression to the dominant (fifth chord) with its inherent tension (before resolving back again to the tonic) comes directly on the lyric “and left me blue.” All of this is emphasized, subtly but insistently, by Bill Monroe’s precise mandolin arpeggios and rhythm strums, setting an impeccable timing for the entire band.

At the start of the B part, the progression from the tonic into the subdominant comes on the words, “It was on a moonlit night.” Especially as delivered by Bill’s indomitable high tenor, the phrase creates an anxious interest in what was revealed by the shining--and whispering--moon.

The moon’s anthropomorphizing (can it be implored to influence the lost love?) makes the distant celestial object an equal character in the drama with the singer, eclipsed by a rival, and his (or her) beloved, now as distant as any planet.

The song’s final section is a reprise of the A part, sorrowfully and inexorably resolving to the tonic with the words “and proved untrue.”

These final three words link “Blue Moon of Kentucky” to an old belief, one of which not even Bill Monroe--who was entranced by what he called “ancient tones” and things that “go a way on back in time”--was aware.

In the infrequent event of two full moons coming within the same month, the second is known as a “blue moon” (giving rise to the old saying “once in a blue moon,” that is, very rarely). Of course, the second full moon does not have a bluish hue. The “blue” probably arose from the Old English word “belewe”--“to betray”--and the ancient fear that unusual astronomical events

heralded unhappiness and even disaster (with that word originally meaning “evil star”) [Smith, pp. 80-81].

The theme of unfaithfulness hangs over the composition like a “betraying moon.” The full moons viewed by Monroe during late night drives influenced its creation. But the composing, public performances and eventual recording of “Blue Moon of Kentucky” came at a period of upheaval--indeed, of a particularly painful waxing and waning--of Monroe’s drama-laden relationship with Bessie Lee Mauldin, his longtime lover, frequent inspiration and (in the late 1950s and early ‘60s) even his bass player. During this time, Bessie Lee had returned to a rival, Nelson Gann, a Tennessee Highway Patrol Officer. On September 4, 1945, they had married--a scant nine days after Monroe’s first Opry performance of the new song.

Thus, “Blue Moon of Kentucky” is likely among what Monroe obliquely called his “true songs,” further supporting this writer’s contention that Bill Monroe is country music’s first great autobiographical singer/songwriter. (Bill wrote about his tribulations in more earnest than the earlier but admirably light-hearted Jimmy Rodgers, and he preceded Hank Williams.)

So how did the “Blue Moon of Kentucky” come to shine much more happily in July 1954 upon the young Elvis Presley? That extraordinarily talented son of Tupelo, Mississippi, had just been signed by Sam Philips to his Sun Records label in Memphis, Tennessee. Then, Presley (on acoustic guitar and vocals), backed by Scotty Moore (electric guitar) and Bill Black (upright acoustic bass), set about recording their first single. Soon, necessity became the mother--or, more accurately, the muse--of invention.

The July 5, 1954 session that produced their cover of Arthur Crudup’s “That’s All Right” (deemed a good bet for the 45 rpm record’s featured “A-Side”) went smoothly. A homespun genius as a recording engineer, Philips helped matters with his innovative “slapback” recording effect, in which the music signal was sent through a second tape machine, giving a simple but effective phased echo. It proved decisive in creating a fuller, more commanding sound for the drum-less and inexperienced trio [Guralnick, p. 103].

But finding a strong, or even passable, B-side number proved painfully problematic. Guitarist Moore later recalled that the group spent multiple fruitless sessions trying to come up with an acceptable selection [Guralnick, pp. 102-103].

Perhaps in keeping with that era’s tradition of country bass players portraying wacky disrupters during comedy routines, Bill Black started joking around--and soon helped make American popular music history.

Said Moore: “We all of us knew we needed something...and things seemed hopeless after a while. Bill is the one who came up with ‘Blue Moon of Kentucky’...We're taking a little break and he starts beating on the bass and singing ‘Blue Moon of Kentucky,’ mocking Bill Monroe,

singing the high falsetto voice. Elvis joins in with him, starts playing and singing along with him” [Burke & Griffin, p. 20].

Meanwhile, in the control room, Sam Philips rolled tape.

“That’s fine now!,” Philips soon exulted, his enthusiasm preserved at the end of an early take. “Hell, that’s different. That’s a pop song now, nearly about” [Guralnick, p. 103].

Unbeknownst to Presley and company, another young performer was already performing an up tempo 4/4 version of “Blue Moon of Kentucky” at his shows: Carl Perkins, another early rockabilly star and composer of Elvis’s later hit “Blue Suede Shoes.” When Perkins and Presley finally met, they immediately hit it off: especially because their first topic of conversation was their mutual love of “Mr. Bill Monroe” [cited in Rumble, p. 60]. Quite simply, they were called “rockabillyies” because their music was part rock and part country (“hillbilly”). And Bill Monroe was by far their favorite hillbilly singer.

The simplicity and solidity of Monroe’s original waltz provided the solid platform for its reinvention as a rocking number. Immediately, the “Blue Moon of Kentucky” B-side of Presley’s first single rivaled the “That’s All Right” A-side in radio listener popularity, especially in the South.

Jack Clement (who went on to work at Sun Records en route to a highly successful career as a rock and country singer/songwriter/producer) knew immediately that “it was just what I’d been wanting to hear. It was real. I loved the simplicity of it, and so did everybody I know who heard it ... All it took was one play” [Guralnick, p. 105].

Of course, the song’s composer was among those first listeners. He quickly came to the same conclusion. Bluegrass icon Ralph Stanley later declared that Monroe “was probably one of the first who realized that what Elvis was doing wasn’t no fad. He knew it was something new, something real” [Stanley p. 180].

At the time, the Stanley Brothers (banjo picker/tenor singer Ralph and older sibling Carter, a guitarist/lead singer) had been the first professional performers to pattern their sound directly upon Monroe’s. The night before the Stanleys were to have a session in Nashville for Mercury Records, Bill took Carter over to the WSM Radio studios, where he used a turntable to play Presley’s “Blue Moon of Kentucky.”

Carter and some others present laughed, finding the rockabilly treatment amusing. Sternly--and without a word--Monroe replayed it. The group fell silent, while Bill’s message sank in [Stanley, p. 181]. “You better do that record tomorrow if you want to sell some records,” he bluntly told Carter. “I’m going to do it next Saturday” [Guralnick, pp. 121-122].

Bill saw it as a win-win situation. He and the Stanleys would have strong-selling versions of the new “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” and he, as songwriter, would collect additional royalties.

“He figured Elvis and the rock ‘n’ rollers were good for business, and that would be good for everybody,” Ralph later observed. “He was wrong” [Stanley, p. 181].

Very wrong indeed. In a crushing irony, Elvis Presley and the other rockabillys who venerated Monroe and his fellows were about to sideswipe country music into a deep ditch as their rock ‘n’ roll juggernaut swept up much of the nation’s youth audiences.

But Bill Monroe, soon to receive supercharged songwriting royalties (“Some powerful checks,” he later recalled, “Powerful.”) [Rosenberg/Wolf, p. 96], saw only smooth roads ahead. On the afternoon of September 4, 1954, he and his sidemen were in the studio of another future country and popular music legend, producer Owen Bradley. For Monroe (now recording for Decca Records), the session was as unusual as it was historic. Despite a standard three-hour slot which usually yielded three or four sides, only Bill’s new version of “Blue Moon of Kentucky” was cut; Monroe recorded it without a banjo but used triple-harmony fiddles; and although he opened in the familiar waltz time, after one round, he shifted into a lively 4/4 tempo--echoing the new Presley hit.

The inevitable first meeting of Monroe and Presley took place backstage at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, when Presley, Black and Moore guested on the October 2nd Grand Ole Opry. It proved a low-key evening. Bill apparently took a quiet liking to the sincere young Elvis, who apologized for “taking liberties” with Monroe’s song. “If it helps your career,” Bill graciously replied, “I’m for it one-hundred percent” [Smith, pp. ix-x]. And although Presley’s recording was electrifying radio listeners, his stage performance underwhelmed the Ryman audience, which responded with painfully polite applause.

But “Blue Moon of Kentucky” did indeed help Elvis Presley’s career. And it continued to shine upon Bill Monroe’s. He was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame (1970), the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame (1971), the inaugural cadre of the International Bluegrass Music Association Hall of Fame (1991), the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in the “Early Influences” category (1997), and was selected for a National Heritage Fellowship (1982), the nation’s highest folk culture award--all real and positive proofs of his extraordinary influence across musical genres.

Bill even performed his signature song in live performance with a symphony orchestra in Washington, DC, on October 4, 1995, on the occasion of having been awarded the National Medal of the Arts by President Bill Clinton.

Monroe’s own final setting came on September 9, 1996, just four days shy of his 85th birthday. But “Blue Moon of Kentucky” has continued to honor and define him.

In 2003, his original version was added to the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress. And a rainbow of performers have covered it. Not only Del McCoury, Ricky Skaggs,

Vince Gill and a host of bluegrassers (for whom it's now a repertoire requirement), but performers as diverse as Patsy Cline, Ray Charles, George Jones & Melba Montgomery, John Fogerty, LeAnn Rimes, Alan Jackson, the Kentucky Headhunters, Boxcar Willie, the Tornadoes (famed for their 1962 rock hit "Telstar"), and lesbian punk-rocker Susan Surfstone.

And perhaps the most notable cover came during a May 13, 1991 broadcast of "MTV Unplugged." Paul McCartney performed "Blue Moon of Kentucky," a song he almost certainly first heard as recorded by Elvis Presley, one of his idols. But in an immense compliment to the song's composer, the former Beatle opened with a plaintive, waltzing $\frac{3}{4}$ time treatment, then cut into a rousing $\frac{4}{4}$ rhythm – just like Bill Monroe.

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

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