

Neil V. Rosenberg, Bluegrass: A History. Urbana and Chicago University of Illinois Press, 1985. xii + 450 pp., illustrated. ISBN 0 252 00265-2 (hardcover)

Jazz emerged as a recognizable form early in the century and received its name in 1916, thereby defining itself as a genre which partook of, but grew steadily separate from, other popular musics. Bluegrass developed in the early forties and received its name around 1955, also separating itself as a definable genre from the rest of the world of country music. Critics, fans and scholars began producing book-length treatises on jazz in the late thirties, roughly forty years following its inception; Neil Rosenberg's definitive history of the bluegrass movement also appears at the forty year mark. Jazz and bluegrass offer many other parallels, despite obvious differences in form, content and approach, but each required a comparable period of time for growth, development, change and diversification before histories could be created.

Professor Rosenberg is an ideal author for this history. His background includes academic study, work as a semi-professional musician, and he has written many articles on bluegrass as well as a small book on the discography, music, life and times of Bill Monroe.

Monroe also stands at center stage in this work, as he does in bluegrass. The story of bluegrass before 1950 is largely the story of Bill Monroe, the youngest of a large western Kentucky family, who entered music professionally with two brothers in the early '30s and developed a new ensemble music on his own after 1938. He named his band the Blue Grass Boys when coming to the Grand Ole Opry in 1939, an institution which has remained his performing base to the present. It is no exaggeration to call Bill Monroe the inventor of bluegrass; the revolutionary techniques he developed on the mandolin, the new sounds his bands have brought to country music, and the repertory of music he has created and developed since 1939 richly entitle him to the claim. Even Earl Scruggs, whose three-finger banjo rolls were as revolutionary as Monroe's innovations, matured as a musician with Monroe's discipline. Scruggs and Lester Flatt were part of the groundbreaking edition of the Blue Grass Boys who were widely heard over radio and on records from 1945 to 1948. They created music which found broad appeal amongst returning servicemen, rural families and migrants who had abandoned small southern farms and towns for opportunities in the industrial north. Eventually, Bill Monroe's audiences also included college students, urban folk revivalists, and followers from diverse walks of life around the globe.

Not long after the first Monroe records with Flatt and Scruggs began to appear in 1946, other musicians perceived the value of the band's approach and began to emulate them. By 1950, several other bands had emerged in the Monroe image, especially

the popular group Flatt and Scruggs formed after leaving Monroe early in 1948. Even though they, the Stanley Brothers, the Sauceman Brothers, and the Lonesome Pine Fiddlers all had their own distinctive styles, each group, and the countless others who followed in their wake, all created their music within the confines of the Monroe model.

Though Bill Monroe first viewed others' imitations with some justifiable alarm, he eventually was persuaded that there was at least an implicit homage being paid him in the process. Rosenberg details in exhaustive and entertaining variety the rise (and occasional fall) of the proliferation of Monroe-styled groups in the fifties and beyond, intertwining their stories with the role bluegrass played on radio, records, television, in film and festivals from the early years to the present. Rosenberg also includes discussions of the benefits and drawbacks of the cross-cultural appeal bluegrass enjoys, the growth of bluegrass-related publications and the many post-Monroe stylistic changes younger musicians have introduced. Neil Rosenberg hasn't written the first historical treatment of bluegrass, but the quality of his prose and the depth of his treatment mark Bluegrass: A History as the best by far. Appended are generous amounts of photos both old and recent, a good bibliography and discography. It is an essential history of a major American musical idiom.

The book is part of the University of Illinois Press's "Music in American Life" series, which also includes a companion volume, Bluegrass Breakdown by Robert Cantwell (1984) that explores the socio-psychological roots of bluegrass and its symbolic references to broad elements of American cultural life.

Richard Spottswood