

sumably his own edition of the work which incorporates some cuts, reworkings, and harmonic alterations. While admittedly in the tradition of his time, this practice seems regrettable today, and mars an otherwise impressive recording.

The Romanze of Schumann suits the pianist perfectly; his rubati breathe without exaggeration. One would certainly like to hear more of his recordings of this composer. The Weber Perpetuum Mobile and Tausig's arrangement of Invitation to the Dance are, predictably, technically spectacular. But in the latter it is the pianist's elegance and style that are the most memorable. The work is presented as a wonderful dance, not an excuse for technical bombast. One should also mention the charm the artist brings to Beethoven's little rondo.

The Debussy and Ravel works certainly profit from Moiseiwitsch's technique and ear for color, though artistically he seems more at home in the nineteenth century. There are a few disappointments, such as the *Barcarolle*, which seems rather fast and uninflected, with an opaque tonal quality that is most unusual for this performer. Most surprisingly, Mendelssohn's delightful E Minor Scherzo is not under very good technical control. But these are minor complaints when compared with the overall quality of the collection.

APR provides their usual high level of documentation, featuring recording dates, original catalog and matrix numbers, and a most informative appreciation by Bryan Crimp. The transfer work is excellent. There is some surface noise, but fortunately the excessive filtering that has deadened the sound of so many historic recordings appears not to have been applied.

Also available from APR is Crimp's *Benno Moiseiwitsch: An HMV Discography*. This is a predictably exhaustive piece of research, though one wonders why the few items Moiseiwitsch made for American Decca at the end of his life were not included, as this would have made the discography complete. However, the main function of the book is to whet one's appetite for more releases from this wonderful musician's recorded legacy. Schumann's *Fantasiestucke*, Op. 12 and *Kinderszenen* seem especially enticing. *Reviewed by Walter Pate*

Blue Grass 1950-1958.

Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys.

Bear Family BCD 15423 (4 CDs, original mono, except final 4 cuts in stereo). Accompanying booklet includes discography, notes, photos.

This reviewer's comments have appeared earlier in these pages concerning the central role played by Bill Monroe in the creation, development, and maturing of bluegrass music over the past half century (*ARSC Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 2-3, pp. 110-111). As far back as the mid-1930s, while still part of a duet with his older brother Charlie, Bill sensed that it was important to keep tradition alive and healthy in country music, while at the same time projecting excitement and novelty to attract younger audiences. The Monroe Brothers' versions of the old songs were enhanced (if you like) by tuning their instruments higher to raise the pitch of their voices and by increasing tempos to the point that old folk songs commanded renewed attention because of the Monroes' playing and singing virtuosity; these characteristics, in turn, have remained central to Bill's music and to bluegrass as a whole.

Bill Monroe, the youngest of seven, was forced to take up the mandolin because it was the only instrument in the family collection that no one else wanted to play. He taught himself and soon began to learn fiddle tunes from his uncle *Pendleton*

Vandiver, as well as from a talented black musician named Arnold Shultz, and from other musicians near his western Kentucky home. No one before Monroe had ever played complex fiddle tunes on the mandolin or had ever thought that it could rival the fiddle as a solo instrument in a string band.

By the time the first of Monroe's many Blue Grass Boys bands appeared on WSM's Grand Ol' Opry in Nashville in October 1939, much of the formula for the music later named bluegrass was in place. The band featured high harmony singing in the Monroe Brothers' style, alternating leads between fiddle and mandolin and the addition of the plucked string bass—an idea first borrowed from jazz by the Prairie Ramblers whose music Bill and Charlie first heard as resident square dancers on the WLS National Barn Dance in Chicago during 1932. As dancers, they appreciated the rhythmic boost the bass offered, providing a "hotter" sound without necessarily turning country music into jazz.

The last instrument added to the Blue Grass Boys on a permanent basis was the five-string banjo which had long been a rhythmic mainstay of older fiddle bands throughout the south. After Monroe experimented with several banjo players, Earl Scruggs joined him in 1945 and soon developed as revolutionary a technique on his instrument as Monroe had brought to the mandolin.¹ Both Monroe and Scruggs rapidly spawned disciples because of the popularity of Monroe's music on weekly Opry broadcasts and a successful series of Columbia releases. By the late 1940s, a number of young Monroe-styled bands were in place.

One of the best, a group formed by Carter and Ralph Stanley, had signed with Columbia records in 1949. Monroe had yet to discover that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery and left the label because he did not want to compete with a band whose sound he thought resembled his own. This move brought him to Decca and the period covered by this CD collection.

Banjo player Rudy Lyle (perhaps the best Monroe has ever had, except for Earl Scruggs) was on the final Columbia records in 1949 and remained through early 1954, adding a distinctive sound to most of the pieces in the first half of this collection. Some of Lyle's later replacements include Sonny Osborne, Joe Drumright, Joe Stuart and Don Stover. Other talents gracing these records include guitarist/lead singers Jimmy Martin and Edd Mayfield, and fiddlers Vassar Clements, Gordon Terry, Charlie Cline, Bobby Hicks and Kenny Baker.

All of the 109 pieces Bill Monroe made for Decca between February 1950 and December 1958² are included in this admirable package, the first to document a bluegrass performer's work so thoroughly and over such a length of time. No alternate takes survive; Decca's policy dictated their disposal once final versions were selected for release. Fortunately for posterity, this practice did not extend to titles passed over for initial release, so everything made during the entire nine years is here.

Monroe's election in 1970 to the new Country Music Association's Hall of Fame formalized the tribute his fans had bestowed on him years earlier as the father of bluegrass. If he had not invented the idiom (as Jelly Roll Morton had earlier claimed—not entirely without justification—to have done for jazz), the award acknowledged that he certainly was the primary and primal force in its creation and development. The music even acquired its name from Monroe's Blue Grass Boys in the mid-1950s. By then it was an established genre with its own set of rules, many of which did not conform to country music norms of the time. The most obvious difference was the retention of acoustic instruments associated with music of earlier times and, implicitly, the unwelcome image of rural dwellers as ignorant rustics. Around the same

time, the Nashville music industry was successfully initiating a movement to replace "hill-billy" with "country and western" as the generic name for the music as a whole. This industry included aggressive song publishing houses, state-of-the-art recording studios, talented musical sidemen who could turn out a patented sound for every big-selling singer, and a number of ancillary businesses whose fortunes were wed to the success of the music on the widest possible level.

To the bottom-line types, Bill Monroe and people like him were viewed as embarrassing anachronisms, not as a vital force creating a forceful new music based on elements of tradition they saw no need to reject. These conditions meant that Monroe's own fortunes were at an ebb in the fifties. Though Decca regularly renewed his contract, the personnel in his bands changed often, since playing bluegrass meant a hard life of travel, less than ideal playing conditions, and little money. Still, the force of his music continued to attract quality performers. The consistently high level of what was captured in the studios belies difficulties he was having keeping things going in a world where his fans were intense but few and within a music industry that was at best indifferent to his art.

His association with Decca survived the company's purchase by MCA and continues to this day, a rare partnership of over 40 years standing. His creative powers have yet to waver, even as he approaches his 80th birthday in 1991. The music here represents a particularly high standard, due in part to the musicians with whom Monroe surrounded himself and, in larger part, to his ability to create memorable songs ("Uncle Pen," "No one but my darlin'," "My little Georgia rose"), instrumentals ("Roanoke," "Pike County breakdown," "Get up, John") and hymns ("Boat of love," "A voice from on high," "Lord, protect my soul"). Such works have passed into the general repertoire, forming as much a part of his living legacy as are these recordings of them.

The compact disc has arrived, for better or worse. Without the medium, it is doubtful that a project which collects this much music, organizes it chronologically, presents it on four little pieces of metal, and endows it with all the sound quality of the original master tapes could ever have been conceived, let alone brought off so well. The four CDs are packaged side by side in an attractive 12x12-inch box (it stores better with 33s than it does with other CDs!) with a useful 65-page booklet containing discographic details and a great deal of background data on the songs and these recordings of them, prepared by Monroe experts Neil Rosenberg and Charles K. Wolfe.

Ideally, a record reviewer spends at least a little time talking about individual selections, discussing their merits—or lack of the same—along with the whos, whats, and whys. But there is not the space and time required to do justice to the almost uniformly high level of musical accomplishment in this collection. Monroe's followers will already be familiar with most of what is included; for others, it represents a rare opportunity to be introduced to the work of a master musician whose accomplishments will surely be reckoned one day as the equal of any other figure in this century. *Reviewed by Dick Spottswood*

NOTES:

- ¹ One further instrument, the dobro guitar, became a staple in many groups after being introduced by Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs' band in 1954. But Monroe never adopted it and many others have followed his example.
- ² February 1990 marked 40 years with Decca and its successor, MCA Records.