

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

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Essay by Ricky Skaggs (guest post)*



Ricky Skaggs (right) with Bill Monroe

Bill Monroe was truly the Father of Bluegrass Music. He brought a brand-new sound to country music, joining the Grand Ole Opry in 1939. Back then, he was mostly doing cover songs, many by his hero, Jimmy Rogers. Bill’s music had a drive, it was cutting edge, catching the ears of young musicians who were out there listening. Carl Perkins said, “Me and the Memphis boys didn’t much like the crooners, but we all loved Bill Monroe.”

In the mid-‘40’s, Bill started writing his own songs. In 1947, Bill recorded “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” his most famous, most requested, and most covered song of his 60-year long career. The simplicity of the lyrics and his heartfelt delivery connected with radio listeners like nothing he had ever written before. The success of that song introduced his music to a whole new audience, to people that were not necessarily listening to the Grand Ole Opry. Over 185 artists, including Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, and Paul McCartney have recorded the song. Elvis’s rockabilly version became his first breakthrough hit, getting more airplay than the record’s “A” side, “That’s All Right Mama.”

Bluegrass music took a hard hit on radio with the newly found sounds of rock and roll, but Bill Monroe was way too creative to let that slow him or his music down. In September of 1954, two months after Elvis had released his version, Bill and The Blue Grass Boys went into the studio and recorded a new version of the song, starting out with his traditional 3/4 time on the first verse and chorus, the band coming to a slight pause, then having those triple fiddles that he was famous for kick in to a 4/4 tempo even faster than the Elvis Presley version, and, of course, Mr. Monroe singing his heart out all the way to the finish line. It was kind of like Elvis and Bill Monroe honoring each other. To me, that’s way cool.

Bill Monroe’s music has endured because it’s good, it’s pure, and it’s from the heart. John Fogerty, who also recorded his version of “Blue Moon of Kentucky” on a tribute to Bill Monroe album called “Big Mon,” said to me, “all of us rockers loved Bill Monroe’s music because he has that ‘lean in thing,’” and I knew what he meant by that, as Bill would lean into the music, whether he was singing or taking a mandolin solo. It’s an attitude, a feeling.

The song, “Blue Moon of Kentucky” will be recorded and performed live until the end of time.

Ricky Skaggs is a country and bluegrass musician. He is a member of Grand Ole Opry and a multiple Grammy Award-winner.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.