

Hillbilly Music and the Roots of Bluegrass Guitar

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The guitar is an instrument that seems to need defending in bluegrass, as Bill Monroe once did by affirming its central importance to the music's ensemble sound. "It don't only take the fiddle or the banjo," Monroe pointed out; "the guitar man, he's got to learn too. It's a style. A guitar means as much in a bluegrass band as anything else."¹ Indeed, the instrumental character of bluegrass has traditionally been defined by its original lead instruments, the fiddle, banjo, and mandolin, the last of which Monroe's modesty may have prevented him from including in his comment. Yet even before the guitar began to emerge as a full-fledged lead instrument in the 1960s, its ubiquity in early bluegrass music bespeaks the essential role it played. And just as bluegrass evolved from the hillbilly music of the 1920s and 1930s, itself multifarious in style and repertory, so too did the essential elements of bluegrass guitar.

One of the guitar's primary functions in hillbilly music was to provide simple, unobtrusive accompaniment to singing by means of open-position chords and rudimentary bass motion. Jimmie Rodgers, whose guitar skills were scarcely polished or sophisticated, nevertheless exerted a tremendous influence with the understated effectiveness of his self-accompaniment. His "Blue Yodel #12," recorded just a week before his death in May 1933, demonstrates all of the essential elements of his style (which are sufficiently clear-cut and audible as to make a transcription of little immediate benefit): an introductory guitar solo with bluesy chromaticism; chordal accompaniment with integrated bass motion, typically alternating the root and fifth of the chord, in a boom-chuck pattern; scalar bass runs from the fifth degree up to the tonic just after a return to the tonic chord, reinforcing its structural weight; fills occurring in the characteristic

¹Bill Monroe with James Rooney, *Bossman: Bill Monroe and Muddy Waters* (New York: Dial Press, 1971).

locations of the twelve-bar blues form (between vocal phrases, i.e., the third and fourth bars of each four-bar segment); and syncopated strumming between vocal phrases to generate rhythmic interest and prepare a change in harmony.

Recorded Example No. 1
Jimmie Rodgers, "Blue Yodel #12"
Jimmie Rodgers, guitar
Recorded 1933

The visibility that Rodgers's superstardom gave the guitar probably accounts for more of his influence on guitar styles than the particular appeal of his guitar playing. Aside from an occasional and generally clumsy introduction or instrumental break, his solo music draws relatively little attention to the guitar. (His introduction of the Hawaiian guitar is, of course, a separate issue.)

By contrast, Rodgers's fellow Ralph Peer discovery Maybelle Carter thrust the guitar into the musical spotlight as more than mere accompaniment. Maybelle's justifiably famous "Carter scratch" combined melodic activity on the bass strings with animated strumming patterns, giving The Carter Family's music much of its vitality. Often, Maybelle's guitar is on equal footing with Sara Carter's lead vocals, as in their 1929 recording of "Jimmie Brown the Newsboy." Here, guitar and voice take turns with the melody, and while Maybelle does simplify her bass lines during Sara's verses, alternating root and fifth or simply repeating the root of each chord, her guitar renditions of the melody occasionally spill over into the accompaniment. Example 1 of the handout shows the song's third verse, which returns at the end as a refrain. Bracketed sections illustrate the rough alignment of the voice and the bass accompaniment, where Maybelle has ingeniously interwoven the melody. In the penultimate measure of the example, Maybelle's employment of the dominant-to-tonic scalar ascent in the bass serves both to emphasize the final return to the tonic chord and to mirror the vocal line.

Recorded Example No. 2
The Carter Family, "Jimmie Brown the Newsboy"
Maybelle Carter, guitar
Recorded 1929

Another important role of the guitar in hillbilly music, particularly as it relates to early bluegrass, was to accompany fiddle tunes in hillbilly string bands. In this context, with chordal accompaniment provided by the banjo, as many as three fiddles thickening the texture, and rare participation by a string bass, guitar players devised a wide variety of bass patterns and intricate runs to provide a low-range counterpoint to the vigorous melodies. Perhaps the most ingenious of these string-band guitarists was Riley Puckett of The Skillet Lickers, who has been cited as an influence by early Blue Grass Boy guitarists Cleo Davis and Mac Wiseman, as well as by such flatpicking luminaries as Doc Watson and Norman Blake.²

In his pioneering study of The Skillet Lickers' style and repertory, Norm Cohen observed that "[Puckett's] back-up was essentially single note work, always clear and easily heard [though not so easily transcribed], and non-chordal in structure. . . . The most distinguishing feature of his playing is that he often did not return to the tonic note at the beginning of each measure."³ As we can see in Example 2, Cohen was putting it mildly. As an accompaniment to the well-known fiddle tune "Cripple Creek," Puckett employs what I call the *circle pattern*, a four-note configuration in the bass line that moves from the first to the third scale degree, then leaps up to the sixth before dropping to the fifth, thus preparing a strong return to tonic. It is a common pattern, certainly not invented by Puckett, but one which he used extensively in duple meter breakdowns of this type. Remarkably, Puckett begins this pattern on the upbeat, one beat late

²Wayne Erbsen, "Cleo Davis: The Original Bluegrass Boy," *Bluegrass Unlimited* (February 1982); Mac Wiseman with Paul Wells, "From Grass Roots to Bluegrass: Some Personal Reminiscences," liner notes to CMH Records CD-9041 (1990); Dan Miller, "Doc Watson: Flatpicking Legend," *Flatpicking Guitar Magazine* 2 (September–October 1998); Norman Blake with Scott Nygaard, "Rural Roots: The Gospel According to Norman Blake," *Acoustic Guitar* 82 (October 1999).

³Norman Cohen, "The Skillet Lickers: A Study of a Hillbilly String and Its Repertoire," *The Journal of American Folklore* 78 (July–September 1965): 239.

relative to the fiddle melody, to wonderfully disorienting effect. When he begins his ascending bass run in measure 6, the listener hopes, as fiddlers Clayton McMichen and Lowe Stokes probably did, that Puckett will use the opportunity to regain the correct orientation. After a concluding eighth-note flourish in measure 9, Puckett once again lands on tonic on the upbeat, this time one beat *early* relative to the fiddlers' new phrase. There immediately begins another walking ascent, followed by seven rapid-fire iterations of the eighth-note figure, landing him once again on the upbeat in measure 16. One more bass ascent and eighth-note flourish finally put him on the downbeat in measure 19, but he is now a full measure late relative to the melody, which has just moved into its double-stop-infused B section.

Recorded Example No. 3
The Skillet Lickers, "Cripple Creek"
Riley Puckett, guitar
Recorded 1929

It is little wonder that fiddlers complained of Puckett's accompaniment, which seems deliberately calculated to destabilize the metrical and melodic structure. It should be pointed out that Puckett was only slightly more considerate as an accompanist to his own singing. He begins the first verse of "Cripple Creek" with his voice and guitar correctly on the downbeat—demonstrating that he knew exactly what he was doing—but he quickly modifies the four-note circle pattern to three, omitting the fifth scale degree and once again putting the tonic on the upbeat in a hemiola effect (a three-beat pattern superimposed on duple meter). Puckett's guitar work, in short, is decidedly melodic but designed to offer a complex and tension-filled counterpoint to the primary melody. When he did join in with the tune itself, as at the end of "Cripple Creek," we can hear his sensitivity to the melody's phrasing and fiddle-style articulation, important considerations for bluegrass flatpickers decades later.

Recorded Example No. 4
The Skillet Lickers, "Cripple Creek"
Riley Puckett, guitar
Recorded 1929

Among the brother duets that came to prominence in the 1930s, the guitar work of The Delmore Brothers stands out not only because of Alton's use of the tenor guitar in place of the more typical mandolin, but because of Alton's intricate guitar accompaniment. In the Delmores' music, we find many of the characteristic elements of bluegrass guitar styles already in place in the mid 1930s, some of which are traceable to the influence of Jimmie Rodgers. Blues-inflected guitar introductions are common in the Delmores' arrangements, as in their well-known "The Nashville Blues." Transcribed in Example 3, this introduction's syncopated opening bars, repeated use of the D \flat –D \sharp blue-note figure, undulating motion from the highest string down to the lowest, and final ascent in a bluegrass-style "B run" (played like a C run, but tuned down a half step) would not be out of place in a modern bluegrass performance.

Recorded Example No. 5
The Delmore Brothers, "The Nashville Blues"
Alton Delmore, guitar
Recorded 1936

In the ensuing vocal verses, Alton's accompaniment consists chiefly of one-five alternating bass, simple bass runs, and a shuffling chordal rhythm. Like Rodgers, Delmore heightens rhythmic interest with syncopated strumming between vocal phrases, particularly at the end of a verse's first phrase, when the seventh is added to the tonic chord on the way to the subdominant. During his brother's tenor guitar solo, Alton also incorporates fills—bluegrass-style B runs, significantly—in locations characteristic of the twelve-bar blues form (Example 4 on the handout). His bass line becomes somewhat more active during the solo as well, coalescing with bluegrass-style runs to create an intricate polyphony with the tenor guitar (a sound that fascinated Doc Watson, who used this song as the opening cut on his solo debut album of 1964).

Recorded Example No. 6
The Delmore Brothers, "The Nashville Blues"
Alton Delmore, guitar
Recorded 1936

The guitar work of Charlie Monroe in the music of the Monroe Brothers is, in many ways, typical of the hillbilly guitar styles we have encountered. Yet over the course of the duet's short career one can trace the evolution of his style toward what would eventually become bluegrass guitar. Charlie's role in up-tempo numbers was analogous to Puckett's in *The Skillet Lickers*: to provide a bass counterpoint to Bill's increasingly fiddle-influenced mandolin lead. In the Monroe Brothers' 1936 recording of "Long Journey Home"—its opening shown in Example 5—Charlie uses the four-note circle pattern employed by Puckett and other hillbilly guitarists. Like Puckett, Charlie enters late, displacing the pattern by one full bar in this case, but situating the tonic firmly on the downbeat. Through a quick one-five alternation in measure 4, he manages to align the circle pattern with the start of the melody's second phrase in measure 5, but a 3–4–5 ascent in measures 8–9, more typical of motion to the dominant harmony, gets Charlie into trouble at the beginning of the third phrase, where he places the tonic on the upbeat of measure 9. He regains his orientation by using the 3–4–5 ascent again in measures 12–13, where the motion is in fact to the dominant. It is noteworthy that Charlie's accompaniment does not feature the characteristic "G run" of bluegrass, although Bill plays a version of it to articulate the end of his lead in measure 15.

Recorded Example No. 7
The Monroe Brothers, "Long Journey Home"
Charlie Monroe, guitar
Recorded 1936

In "Katy Cline," recorded one year later in 1937, Charlie once again employs the circle pattern, but with more metrical regularity and increasingly frequent connecting runs (and Charlie's characteristic rushing of the tempo). His bass line, a portion of which appears in Example 6, provides a solid, more consistent foundation, as a result drawing less attention to itself despite its slight increase in activity. The focus has shifted even more to Bill's mandolin, and the guitar is called upon throughout the song to punctuate vocal and mandolin phrases with "A runs," one of which Bill and Charlie play simultaneously at the end of the example.

Recorded Example No. 8
The Monroe Brothers, "Katy Cline"
Charlie Monroe, guitar
Recorded 1937

When Bill Monroe formed his Blue Grass Boys in 1938, the ensemble context naturally dictated changes in the roles of each instrument. The guitar began to relinquish its bass function, particularly after bassist Amos Garen joined the band, and with it its limited melodic role. One crucial vestige of the guitar's legacy as a melodic instrument was the G run that Charlie Monroe had been using in the Monroe Brothers' music, and which Bill considered so essential to the duet's overall sound that he took it upon himself to teach it to Charlie's replacement, the original Blue Grass Boy guitarist, Cleo Davis.⁴ By the time of the Blue Grass Boys' first recordings in October 1940, the guitar had become a kind of harmonic and rhythmic engine driving the sound of the band.

Nowhere is this more evident than in their performance of Jimmie Rodgers's "Mule Skinner Blues" from that first Bluebird session of 1940. As is well-known, Bill Monroe played guitar on this seminal track, as he routinely did when singing lead in the band's early days. The famous opening, shown in Example 7, is another bluesy solo guitar introduction in the Rodgers tradition, but with syncopations, blue-note inflections, and a concluding G run that seem to owe a debt to Alton Delmore, among others. Following the G run, Monroe settles into a steady, aggressive accompaniment that features static bass notes and a syncopated eighth-note strumming pattern concentrated on the middle strings of the guitar, so as not intrude upon the vocals or lead instruments.

⁴Wayne Erbsen, "Cleo Davis: The Original Bluegrass Boy," *Bluegrass Unlimited* (February 1982). Davis recalled that "Charlie Monroe used to have a run that he'd do in G, and Bill taught me how to make it. As the weeks went by, it seemed like Bill and I kept picking up speed until we were playing faster and faster. . . . In order to stay up with Bill, I used the old Charlie Monroe G run until it got to a point where I could no longer make it and keep up with Bill Monroe. So with the help of Bill I modified the old Charlie Monroe G run. I made it into what is now known as the 'famous Lester Flatt G run.' I not only could make it in G, but also in the keys of C, D and even in A."

Recorded Example No. 9
The Blue Grass Boys, "Mule Skinner Blues"
Bill Monroe, guitar
Recorded 1940

It is, in a word, a *driving* guitar part, fundamental to the new ensemble sound that Monroe himself so characterized.

[T]he beat in my music—bluegrass music—started when I ran across "Mule Skinner Blues" and started playing that. We don't do it the way Jimmie Rodgers sung it. It's speeded up, and we moved it up to fit the fiddle and we have that straight time to it, driving time.⁵

As Monroe and his sidemen continued to refine the sound of the Blue Grass Boys over the succeeding years, the role of the guitar continued to evolve. Clyde Moody's guitar work in the early 1940s consisted chiefly of a hard-driving, often bluesy strumming that filled in the texture between the string bass and increasingly active lead instruments. Limited in its single-note activity, Moody's guitar was largely stripped of any melodic function that may have been its legacy from hillbilly music, with the notable exception of the punctuating G runs that were becoming more regular. Monroe's swing-influenced recordings with Tex Willis from 1945 are anomalous. In songs such as "Footprints in the Snow" we hear Willis performing a "chop" function on the upbeats, using choked chord voicings with fewer open strings, and leaving G run punctuations to the mandolin and fiddle.

When Lester Flatt joined the Blue Grass Boys in 1946, he helped to solidify the sound of the new bluegrass idiom not only with his lead vocals, but also with his guitar playing. The addition of Earl Scruggs's three-finger banjo style naturally affected every part of the ensemble, including Flatt's guitar. In "It's Mighty Dark to Travel," recorded in October 1947, Flatt's guitar is driving the band rhythmically much like Bill Monroe had done in "Mule Skinner Blues" seven years earlier. But here the guitar's function is even more refined and stylized. The banjo,

⁵Bill Monroe with James Rooney, *Bossmen: Bill Monroe and Muddy Waters* (New York: Dial Press), 33.

mandolin, and fiddle are noticeably busier in their accompaniment to the vocalists, and the guitar, along with the bass, is reduced to the essential role of holding the richly polyphonic texture together. We don't *hear* the guitar so much as *feel* it, and one senses that without the rhythmic and harmonic foundation it provides the entire enterprise might simply collapse.

Recorded Example No. 10
The Blue Grass Boys, "It's Mighty Dark to Travel"
Lester Flatt, guitar
Recorded 1947

What we *do* hear from the guitar, of course, are the G runs, quickly becoming clichéd as they occur at almost every phrase juncture. It may be a natural tendency for a singer-guitarist like Flatt to place such punctuation between his own vocal phrases, as Mac Wiseman, Jimmy Martin, and others who followed Flatt in this role in the Blue Grass Boys continued to do. But in hard-driving up-tempo numbers like this one, the G runs also serve as a musical riding crop, whipping the band up into its carefully controlled frenzy.

While the melodic and metrical inventiveness we hear from hillbilly guitar players does seem to have been suppressed as bluegrass music was forming, this is not meant to suggest that the guitar's role was necessarily limited to hard strumming and G runs. Indeed, it was Flatt, more than any other early bluegrass guitarist, who recaptured some of the rhythmic and contrapuntal ingenuity of hillbilly styles, refining it to suit the new music. Take, for instance, the Blue Grass Boys' 1947 recording of "My Rose of Old Kentucky," the opening of which is shown in Example 9. The moderate tempo and relaxed feel of the song allow Flatt to devise deceptively complex lines which move in the ensemble's middle range, between the lead instruments and voice, and the half notes of Howard Watts's string bass. Flatt's runs and shuffling lines have roots in the bass lines of hillbilly guitar, but are more varied, syncopated, and chromatic. B runs are not used to propel the music, as in "Mighty Dark to Travel," but are fully integrated into this mid-bass line, along with similar runs on non-tonic chords. What's more, we can see and hear

that Flatt's linear contribution to the ensemble polyphony is enhanced by similarly varied and syncopated chordal work.

Recorded Example No. 10
The Blue Grass Boys, "My Rose of Old Kentucky"
Lester Flatt, guitar
Recorded 1947

I have attempted to offer here today a necessarily rough outline of what is, in reality, a complex and multifaceted picture. Among the relevant issues still waiting to be explored are the guitar-mandolin accompaniment to quartet singing in early bluegrass, the influence of Western swing on bluegrass guitar styles, Charlie Monroe's melodic work on Monroe Brother renditions of Carter Family songs like "Weeping Willow Tree" and "Old Gospel Ship," Earl Scruggs's use of Travis-style fingerpicking on some of the early Flatt & Scruggs recordings (including the Carters' "Jimmie Brown the Newsboy"), and the early flatpicking of Don Reno, Bill Napier, and others. I hope, however, that my remarks have shed some light on the guitar's crucial, but largely neglected, role in the formation of bluegrass. "A guitar means as much in a bluegrass band as anything else," Bill Monroe insisted, and certainly he would know.

Hillbilly Music and the Roots of Bluegrass Guitar

Transcriptions by G. Reish

Voice

Guitar (tuned down one whole step)

7

Example 1. The Carter Family, "Jimmie Brown the Newsboy" (Third verse)

Maybelle Carter, guitar

Recorded November 1929

Brackets show alignment of vocal and guitar melody

Fiddle

Guitar

7

13

19

Example 2. The Skillet Lickers, "Cripple Creek" (Opening)

Riley Puckett, guitar

Recorded October 1929

Brackets show phrase structure of fiddle melody

Guitar (tuned down one half step)

Example 3. The Delmore Brothers, “The Nashville Blues” (Introduction)

Alton Delmore, guitar
Recorded February 1936

| | | | | | | | | | |
|-------|--|-----------------|--|-----------------|--|----------------|--|----------------|--|
| | | B | | B | | B ⁷ | | B ⁷ | |
| B run | | | | | | | | | |
| | | E | | E | | B | | B | |
| | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | B run | | | |
| | | F ^{#7} | | F ^{#7} | | B | | B | |
| | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | B run | | | |

Example 4. The Delmore Brothers, “The Nashville Blues” (First tenor guitar solo)

Recorded February 1936
B runs as fills in 12-bar blues form

Mandolin

Guitar

Example 5. The Monroe Brothers, "My Long Journey Home" (Opening)

Charlie Monroe, guitar

Recorded February 1936

Brackets show phrase structure of mandolin melody

Mandolin

Guitar

Example 6. The Monroe Brothers, "Katy Cline" (First Instrumental Break)

Charlie Monroe, guitar

Recorded February 1937

Brackets show phrase structure of mandolin melody
Arrow shows alignment of mandolin and guitar "A run"

Guitar

Example 7. Bill Monroe & his Blue Grass Boys, "Mule Skinner Blues"

(Introduction)

Bill Monroe, guitar

Recorded October 1940

Guitar
(Capo IV)

Example 9. Bill Monroe & his Blue Grass Boys, "My Rose of Old Kentucky"

(Introduction and First Verse)

Lester Flatt, guitar

Recorded October 1947