

BLUEGRASS MUSIC

◆ FIRST, THE INSTRUMENTS...

Flatten the tortoiseshell back on that old mandolin for a more pungent sound. Put a fifth drone string on the West African banjo for a more rhythmic drive. Get the gut strings off that Spanish guitar and replace them with steel ones for more zing. Line up a fiddle, an acoustic bass, and if you are so inclined, one of those reworked Hawaiian lap steel guitars made by the Dobro Brothers. You're ready.

◆ NEXT, THE MUSICAL TRADITION...

Into your pot, throw in lots of Scots-Irish fiddle melodies, white Protestant church hymns and harmonies (make sure one is a sharp-and-high tenor line), some blues, and some raw folk songs about lost loves, leaving home, murders, railroads, and disasters of all kinds. Now stir all this for a century or more and see if any musical geniuses show up.

◆ THEN, THE GENIUSES...

Show up they did... around 1946. Their band was called "The Bluegrass Boys" in honor of Kentucky, home state of their leader Bill Monroe. Earl Scruggs was on the banjo. Listen and you'll hear him creating the sound we now associate with the instrument. The licks and bass runs of Lester Flatt still define what we expect to hear from a rhythm guitar. Chubby Wise's fiddle playing is brilliant. But the band's leader, Bill Monroe, towers above them all. A visionary with an original approach to the mandolin and a sharp tenor voice, he heard and shaped the Bluegrass sound to unremitting clarity. Listen to some of his creations such as "Blue Moon of Kentucky,"

"Muleskinner Blues," or "Footprints in the Snow," and you'll hear a made-in-America music as unique as the blues or jazz.

—Richard Duane, of the
"I'll Be Right Home Honey"
Bluegrass band



Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys, 1983. (Courtesy Ohio County Park, Hartford, KY)