

Styles & Genres



American Music: Bluegrass 1

What Is Bluegrass Music?

BLUEGRASS MUSIC started with a Kentuckian mandolinist named Bill Monroe who, in 1939, founded a band called **The Blue Grass Boys** with a mind to creating his own style of music. It was Monroe's dynamism, popularity and knack of surrounding himself with the best country musicians of the day which have kept his name amongst the most important in bluegrass circles today.

There are many shades of bluegrass, from the Monroesque mode to the jazz-influenced sounds of "newgrass". It can be difficult to define what bluegrass music is, but there are perhaps ten basic characteristics:



❶ All strands of bluegrass ultimately derive from the music of Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys

❷ It is an ensemble music; you need a band to play bluegrass. Bands usually have four, five or six members.

❸ It is a string music. Harmonicas and drums are rarely found in bluegrass bands; horns and piano never.

❹ Basic instruments are 5-string banjo, fiddle, mandolin, six string guitar, and bass. Sometimes dobro.

❺ Banjo is sometimes the primary instrument with fiddle and/or mandolin in supporting roles.

❻ The offbeat is emphasized (unlike blues, rock & jazz, where the downbeat is usually emphasized).

❼ Bluegrass instrumentalists will typically "anticipate" or surge slightly ahead of the beat

to give the music extra energy, but not in such a way that the tempo keeps speeding up.

❽ Vocalists typically perform songs in keys that cause them to sing in higher registers. For male vocalists, this means that the tenor range is typical for singing bluegrass.



❾ With the exception of occasional electric bass, the instruments are generally not "electrified": that is, they are not solid-body or semiacoustic instruments with pickups or built-in microphones.

❿ Bluegrass has a definite starting point and is therefore not a traditional music. But it draws heavily and directly on two major musical traditions: the British-American tradition (e.g. Scots-Irish dance tunes and English ballads), plus the African-American tradition (the blues and jazz).

Long Journey Home (Bill Monroe)

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B *The Old Spinning Wheel* (traditional)

Musical score for "The Old Spinning Wheel" in G major, 4/4 time. The score consists of four systems, each with a treble clef staff and a guitar TAB staff. Chords are indicated above the treble staff: D, Em, A, and Bm. The TAB staff shows fret numbers for both hands (T and B). The piece concludes with a double bar line.

Old Joe Clark 3 (traditional)

Musical score for "Old Joe Clark 3" in G major, 4/4 time. The score consists of four systems, each with a treble clef staff and a guitar TAB staff. Chords are indicated above the treble staff: A, E, and G. The TAB staff shows fret numbers for both hands (T and B). The piece concludes with a double bar line.

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