

# "Fire on the Mountain"

by [Dix Bruce](#)

It's often been said that bluegrass music is folk music. It's not. It was created, invented or synthesized - whatever word works best for you - in mid- to late 1940s by Bill Monroe, who is truly the father of the form. He certainly had a great deal of help from the musicians he hired to be in his band, Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs most notable among them. Those early band members defined the role each of their instruments still plays in what is now recognized as the classic bluegrass quintet: mandolin, guitar, banjo, fiddle, string bass and vocals.

While bluegrass is not folk music, it undeniably has its roots firmly planted in American traditional music. It's got elements of jazz, blues, gospel, and probably most importantly, old time music. Bluegrass themes, repertoire, arrangements, melodies, instrumentation and sound owe a great debt to the music that percolated out of the eastern and southern mountain regions.

Fiddle tunes comprise one of the most important elements. A large part of any bluegrass band's show has always been old time fiddle tunes, of which there are thousands. Many of the newer composed bluegrass instrumentals are in turn based on traditional fiddle tunes. So, if you're going to play bluegrass, you better know a bunch of fiddle tunes!

Below is an old time version of "Fire on the Mountain," a fiddle tune played by bluegrass bands all over the world, including Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys. I transcribed it for a Mel Bay book/CD entitled "String Band Classics." Mel Bay published two book/CD sets: one for mandolin, one for guitar. Both include standards notation, tablature, chords and lyrics.

"Fire on the Mountain" was recorded by The Highwoods String Band, one of the most important revival old time bands of the 1970s. The Highwoods' instrumental sound was heavily fiddle-based and I adapted the fiddle parts to mandolin.

Bluegrassers tend to play "Fire on the Mountain," and most other fiddle tunes for that matter, faster than the old timers. That may be because old time music is more associated with dancing than is bluegrass. My suggestion is to learn to play "Fire on the Mountain" slowly and solidly at first, and then gradually increase the speed.

It's typical in old time bands for the melody to be played by several instruments at the same time. For example, there might be two fiddles plus a banjo all sawing and plucking away in unison or near unison. The melody is usually repeated several times with slight variations.

Bluegrassers would tend to feature only one instrument soloing at a time while the rest of the band backed that soloist up. You'd also find more melodic variation in a bluegrass setting. Old time players also improvise as they repeat a melody, they just tend to do it more subtly. I found these slight variations, sometimes only a note or two, quite interesting and transcribed many for the "String Band Classics" books.

"Fire on the Mountain" is an interesting tune structurally. It starts out in the key of A, then modulates to the key of D. Finally, at the end of the form, there's a two bar "tag" in the key of A. The tag can be a sticky point if you forget about it and plunge back to the top of the form. It's a challenge but you'll find "Fire on the Mountain" to be a lot of fun to play.

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# Fire on the Mountain

Key of A

4 5 | 0 2 0 5 4 0 4 5 | 0 2 5 0 2 0 4 5 | 0 2 0 5 4 2 0 4 | 2 0 2 4 0 2 4 5

0 2 0 5 4 0 4 5 | 0 2 5 0 2 0 4 5 | 0 2 0 5 4 2 0 4 | 2 0 2 4 0 4 5 | 2 0 2 4 0 6

Key of D

0 2 0 5 4 0 4 5 | 0 2 0 5 4 0 4 5 | 0 2 0 5 4 2 0 4 | 2 0 6 2 0 4 5

0 2 0 5 4 0 4 5 | 0 2 0 5 4 0 4 5 | 0 2 0 5 4 2 0 4 | 2 0 6 2 0 7

Tag key of A

7 2 0 5 4 2 0 4 | 2 0 6 2 0