

## Approaching Bluegrass

by Dix Bruce

I would be hard pressed to nail down on paper (or on computer!) the essence of bluegrass mandolin. It's a river that's deep and wide, encompassing much stylistic territory and technique. But there is a certain sound that's bluegrass and like no other.

To learn more about that bluegrass sound, we need to go to the source: Bill Monroe. Not only did Bill invent bluegrass mandolin, he invented the style of music we know as "bluegrass" in the mid- to late- 1940s. There was no bluegrass music before Monroe. Bluegrass is the music of Bill Monroe, pure and simple. Of course, it has grown from its inception and branched out to embrace a whole range of great artists and sub-styles. But Bill Monroe is the well from which it all springs.

Does that mean that we should only play the songs Bill played in the keys he played them in and try to copy his style on the mandolin? I hope not. How boring! And, how could one improve on what he did? He played Bill Monroe perfectly. But, we can study his music and learn about bluegrass and the mandolin. Where we take it from there is up to us.

What existed before Bill created the classic five piece bluegrass band: vocals with mandolin, fiddle, banjo, guitar, and string bass? A rich palette of country and mountain styles of music, many of which, along with the blues, Bill combined to give birth to his sound. Thus, there are elements of many musical styles in bluegrass, just like rock and roll combines elements of country, blues, and jazz.

Bill Monroe was schooled in traditional folk and mountain music. He and his brother, guitarist Charlie Monroe, performed and recorded as the Monroe Brothers in the mid- and late-1930s. Much of their material has since become part of the bluegrass repertoire and we can hear the unmistakable roots of bluegrass in their recordings.

With Charlie, Bill developed a rapid-fire, fast, loud, and aggressive approach to playing the mandolin. After Bill, the mandolin was no longer a polite and demure parlor instrument. Bill's playing continued to grow and change over the years and the style he developed with his brother naturally morphed into what we recognize as his bluegrass mandolin style.

If you listen to Bill's mandolin playing on recordings of the Monroe Brothers, one of the first things you'll notice is a blizzard of notes in and around the melody. Students often ask how one moves from a basic statement of melody to this more advanced multi-note approach. Let's look at a basic melody, a song that the Monroe Brothers recorded and one that's now a bluegrass classic, "Roll in My Sweet Baby's Arms," and take it through the process of adding

extra notes around the basic melody.

The basic melody, tablature, and lyrics to "Roll in My Sweet Baby's Arms" are below. As you play through it, notice that the melody is mostly quarter, half and whole notes. It sounds OK, but it doesn't have much drive and very little of that "bluegrass" mandolin sound.

**G**

Roll in my sweet ba - by's arms,  
Ain't gon - na work on the rail - road,

**D7**

Roll in my sweet ba - by's - arms,  
Ain't gon - na work on the farm, Just

**G C**

lay a round that shack 'til that mail train gets back, Then I'll

**D7 G**

roll in my sweet ba - by's arms.

In the excerpt below I've added notes and rendered the same melody with eighth notes. To play it you have to use a strict up and down picking pattern detailed in the first measure with down and up arrows. It's fairly easy to convert a simple melody in this way. You simply get the pick moving and play the notes as before, maintaining the shape of the melody, but with all eighth notes.

The image shows two musical excerpts for mandolin. The first excerpt is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of four measures of eighth-note music. The first measure includes a 'Pick direction' row with arrows: down, up, down, up, down, up, down, up. Below the staff is a tablature row with fret numbers: 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2, 2 2 2 2, 5 5 0 0, 2 2 5 5 5 5 5 5, 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5. The second excerpt is in D major (two sharps) and 4/4 time, starting at measure 5. It also consists of four measures of eighth-note music. The tablature row shows: 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5, 2 2 2 2 2 0, 5 5, 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0, 0 0 0 0 2 2 4 4.

To my ear, this version is getting closer to that elusive "bluegrass" sound. It's hot and aggressive and you can still hear the melody. Unfortunately it's a little on the repetitive side.

In the final version below I changed many of the repetitive notes and substituted neighboring notes and licks. For example in measure 1, the first note is a Bb instead of a B. You'll do it again in measure 5. In measure 2 I added a little melodic lick. I continued these kind of substitutions throughout the solo to make it more interesting melodically. Each of the ideas are just things that occurred to me as I played though the melody. I've listened to a lot of bluegrass mandolin and Bill Monroe specifically, so many of the changes and additions will have flavors of that music. As you listen to and study music in more depth you'll find that gradually bits and pieces of what you like best will make their way into your playing.

# Roll in My Sweet Baby's Arms

Musical notation for measures 1-4. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The notation includes a treble clef and a guitar tablature (TAB) below it. The first measure has a '1 1' fingering. The second measure has a '3 3' fingering. The tablature shows fret numbers for each string.

Musical notation for measures 5-8. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The notation includes a treble clef and a guitar tablature (TAB) below it. Measure 5 is marked with a '5' and a 'D7' chord. The tablature shows fret numbers for each string.

Musical notation for measures 9-12. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The notation includes a treble clef and a guitar tablature (TAB) below it. Measure 9 is marked with a '9' and a 'G' chord. Measure 10 is marked with a 'C' chord. The tablature shows fret numbers for each string.

Musical notation for measures 13-16. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The notation includes a treble clef and a guitar tablature (TAB) below it. Measure 13 is marked with a '13' and a 'D7' chord. Measure 14 is marked with a 'G' chord. The tablature shows fret numbers for each string.

This rendition of "Roll in My Sweet Baby's Arms" is kind of an early bluegrass mandolin solo loosely in the style of Bill Monroe as he played with Charlie. If you listen to their recording of the song, you'll find Bill's actual solos are quite different. Rounder Records is currently re-releasing all the recordings of the Monroe Brothers on CD. "Roll in My Sweet Baby's Arms" is on "Monroe Brothers: Just a Song of Old Kentucky." (Rounder 82161-1074-2). Bear Family has also included all the Monroe Brothers material in their impressive 6-CD, generous booklet, box set "Bill Monroe 1936-1949." (BCD 16399).

Try adapting other melodies by using the same process we applied to "Roll in My Sweet Baby's Arms." It will be helpful if you listen to Monroe's playing, especially the early solos, and get that sound in your head. I have included some similar tunes and solos in my "First Lessons: Mandolin" and "Great Mandolin Pickin' Tunes" book and CD sets from Mel Bay. Watch for more in my "Getting into Bluegrass Mandolin" project.

Dix Bruce has written forty books, CDs and videos for Mel Bay Publications. His latest two mandolin book/CD sets are "Great Mandolin Pickin' Tunes" and "First Lessons Mandolin." He edited David Grisman's "Mandolin World News" from 1978 to 1984. Dix records and tours with guitarist Jim Nunally. Their latest CD, "Brothers at Heart," is a collection of traditional and new music performed in the classic "brother duet" vocal and instrumental style. All are available on Dix's website:[www.musixnow.com](http://www.musixnow.com)