

Thomas Goldsmith, ed. *The Bluegrass Reader*.
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In a world of increasingly uncertain American identity, it is hardly surprising that an interest in bluegrass music, so tied to notions of white America, should be enjoying a revival. Editor Thomas Goldsmith's *The Bluegrass Reader* is the latest addition to a small canon of historical literature that is beginning to coalesce in this environment. Rather than aim for historical definitiveness, as was the case with Tom Ewing's *Bill Monroe Reader* (2000), Goldsmith widens his scope to include many forms of documentation including promotional materials, record and CD liner notes, interviews, academic articles, newspaper and magazine articles, program notes, speech transcripts—even a record review parody. The result is a subjective, impressionistic collage of material that breaks little new theoretical ground, but assembles a great deal of essential historical information, representing many facets of the bluegrass universe. For this effort, Goldsmith was recently awarded the International Bluegrass Music Association's 2004 award for Print Media Personality of the Year.

The Bluegrass Reader is divided into three large sections: "The Big Bang: 1939–59," "The Reseeding of Bluegrass: 1960–79," and "Another Roots Revival: 1980–2000." As is belied by these subheadings, the editor conceives of bluegrass history as two large revivals of an initial creative impulse. I will describe the contents of each of these parts below, in a necessarily awkward list, and then return to treat the book as a whole. Part 1, "The Big Bang," chronicles that initial creative impulse on which the rest of bluegrass history supposedly depends. It begins with eight musical portraits—Bill Monroe, Flatt and Scruggs, the Stanley Brothers, Don Reno, Jimmy Martin, Mac Wiseman, the Osborne Brothers, and Jim and Jesse McReynolds—cobbled together from varying sources: biography, personal reminiscence, interview.¹ After these initial portraits, L. Mayne Smith's classic 1965 essay from the *Journal of American Folklore* appears, marking a strange transition from hagiography to academic abstraction. Soon follows an etymological study of the word "bluegrass" from folklorist and bluegrass scholar Neil V. Rosenberg, followed by the Folkways liner notes to *Mountain Music Bluegrass Style* (FA 2318) penned by Mike Seeger, son of the noted musicologist Charles Seeger.

Between celebrity biography and academic analysis, there are two pieces

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that add some cultural perspective. One is Joe Wilson's description of WYCB in Bristol, TN as a representative study of radio's significance in the proliferation of bluegrass. The other is Mike Seeger's "Late News Report from Sunset Park, West Grove, Penn. Five-String Banjo Picking Contest." This piece is particularly interesting because it offers such details as the contest's background and rules, as well as complete lists of contestants and songs. (Notable participants included Washington Square folk-era pickers Mike Seeger, Eric Weissberg, and Roger Sprung.) Part 1 concludes with Alan Lomax's famous *Esquire* article referring to bluegrass as "folk music in overdrive" (131). Lomax's affectionate but oversimplified history exemplifies the presence that bluegrass was gaining in the mainstream media by 1959.

Part 2, "The Reseeding of Bluegrass," concerns the "recontextualization" of bluegrass in the 1960s and 1970s, beginning with another portrait of Monroe. This article for *Sing Out!* magazine, however, was deliberately designed by folk-revival polymath Ralph Rinzler to lionize Monroe rather than banjoist Earl Scruggs, who had been getting a lot of media attention. This explicitly "revisionist" approach makes it a good opener for the "reseeding" chapter. After a brief regional digression (a nostalgic memoir of the bluegrass scene in Dayton, Ohio) and a portrait of singer-songwriter Hazel Dickens, three ethnographic depictions of bluegrass clubs in the early 1960s give a fascinating range of responses to the new "urban bluegrass." The first two concern the Boston club the Hillbilly Ranch; one by an enthusiastic audience member, noted blues historian Samuel Charters, the other by an unconvinced southern musician, Michael Medford. The last, by Hunter S. Thompson, is a cynical reading of citified bluegrass as grotesque minstrelsy. The three pieces reveal a wealth of ethnographic data in a few short pages, and are very useful to compare.

Another flurry of portraits follows, including the Country Gentlemen, the Kentucky Colonels (featuring the Whites), Monroe fiddler Kenny Baker, unsung hero Larry Sparks, "newgrasser" Sam Bush, Ralph Stanley, Vassar Clements, and the star-studded Bluegrass Alliance, as well as Carlton Haney and Dave Freeman. These last two are a significant addition to Goldsmith's gallery, because they are known less for their musicianship and more for their entrepreneurship. Carlton Haney founded what is generally known as the "first bluegrass festival" in 1965 (though he had been promoting Bill Monroe since 1957), while Dave Freeman founded the bluegrass label County Records. The inclusion of these two portraits will be valuable to those interested in the understudied institutional history of bluegrass, and will, I hope, inspire them to seek other sources like it.

Neil Rosenberg has discussed the commercial aspects of bluegrass music at length in his book *Bluegrass: A History* (1985), and he does so with

more subtlety in two pieces in the *Reader*. The first, a 1990 record review, explores the relationship between bluegrass and rock 'n' roll, acknowledging the many similarities despite rhetorical differences. The second, an etymology of "bluegrass," examines the term's varied usages by musicians, promoters, critics, and fans. In so doing, Rosenberg demonstrates how the creation of a new musical genre is linked to both regional practices and mainstream commodification; he also reveals that musicians and fans alike unconsciously elide these distinctions through their use of a single generic label.

Two essays featuring the band Old and in the Way (of which hippie icon Jerry Garcia was a member) demonstrate what Goldsmith calls the appeal of bluegrass to the "counterculture." Personal testimonies from Vassar Clements, David Grisman, and Peter Rowan (from the Old and in the Way liner notes) and from John Duffey (from Washington D.C.'s path-breaking Seldom Scene) reveal much about traditionalist rhetoric in the later 1960s. The Old and in the Way liner notes were written in 1997 and aim to give an "honest" sheen to the tale of the "hippiegrass" band "trying to play this music 'right'" (218). Duffey's piece, in contrast, is an inflammatory polemic regarding the limitations of "traditionalism." Both work to demonstrate how discussions of authenticity can be powerfully manipulated by artists and fans.

An early piece by Robert Cantwell, author of *Bluegrass Breakdown* ([1984] 2003), describes in rich and colorful prose Bill Monroe's 1971 personal bluegrass festival at Bean Blossom, IN.² Another telling festival portrait is given by Connie Walker, wife of bluegrass bassist Ebo Walker. In this parodic autobiographical piece, she describes a bluegrass-playing husband dragging his family to a festival, only to abandon them to pick tunes all night with his "alternate family." "Since daddy was up picking until half an hour ago," she writes, "he can't be coaxed out of his sleeping bag to help you light the stove (or go out to borrow the kerosene you forgot), or manage the young 'uns as you turn eggs with one hand and fight off flies with the other" (191). She suggests forming her own alternative family, the "Bluegrass Widows' Association."

Part 2 closes with two examinations of emergent instrumental styles: bluegrass banjo and bluegrass mandolin. This pairing is enlightening, situating these different instrumental styles within larger tradition of players and lineages of influence. The banjo essay, for instance, explores the various subgenres of bluegrass banjo playing through a historical first-person anecdote: the meeting of innovators Bill Keith and Bobby Thompson.

Part 3, "Another Roots Revival," is again portrait-heavy, profiling Hot Rize, the all-star Bluegrass Album Band, mainstays Doyle Lawson and Quick-

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silver, the Johnson Mountain Boys, Peter Rowan, Dobro® virtuoso Jerry Douglas, the Nashville Bluegrass Band, Alison Krauss, Dale Ann Bradley, Jimmy Martin, John Hartford, Ricky Skaggs, Del McCoury, and Ralph Stanley.³ Part 3 also includes an essay demonstrating the bluegrass community's pathological fascination with Bill Monroe, who died in 1992. His portrait in part 3 occurs in the form of the eulogy, "First Christmas Without Bill."

On the more anthropological side, scholar Thomas Adler contributes a perceptive piece linking bluegrass to other realms of human relationships, both sexual and familial; it should definitely be read against Walker's "Bluegrass Widows' Association." Furthermore, a handful of essays concerning "Women in Bluegrass" indicate that the leading roles played by female performers in terms of showmanship and record sales have not gone unnoticed, though their success flies in the face of so-called traditionalism. Murphy Henry's keynote address at the 1998 International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) annual trade show is a spirited call to arms, condemning the limited recognition of, and opportunities available to, its female members (298). Her speech is directly rejoined by the next essay by respected IBMA leader Pete Wernick, "Bones to Pick" (305), which provides counterexamples to Henry's complaints. The placement of this well-intentioned attempt to justify the IBMA's institutional behavior gives the unfortunate impression that Henry's feminist frustration is effectively "contained" by the bluegrass tradition.

Goldsmith artfully allows for the last profiles to close the book on the notoriously familiar themes of perseverance (Del McCoury), frustration and sin (Jimmy Martin), redemption (Ricky Skaggs), death (John Hartford), and immortality (Ralph Stanley). Sounds like a bluegrass album to me.

As is surely clear by this point, the organization of the book as a whole is historical, by topic. The editor's introduction gives a basic framework of bluegrass history, one that works well enough to situate the subsequent material. It acknowledges many of the well-known tropes in bluegrass—debates over the definition of bluegrass, the role of Bill Monroe and his disciples, the significance of bluegrass festivals, the importance of beats and hippies, the influence of rock music, the acceptability of popularity—and it puts the anthologized pieces in historical perspective. The introduction would certainly be helpful (even necessary) to the bluegrass novice, but its organization is problematic: the author divides his history into three twenty-year phases in an over-determined and unnecessary fashion. For instance, the last item in part 1 is Mike Seeger's above-mentioned description of a

banjo contest, in which big-name folk revivalists participated. This piece would seem more natural in part 2, in which bluegrass is ostensibly repositioned in a cross-cultural milieu. And the first item in part 3 (“Another Roots Revival: 1980–2000”) actually was printed in early 1979! The organization is not consistent with either the specified dates or overarching concepts.

Though the topics are generally arranged chronologically, the articles themselves are not, which sometimes results in unexpected juxtapositions: for instance, a 2000 record review from the contemporary magazine *No Depression* is bracketed by a 1959 description of a banjo contest by Mike Seeger on one side, and a 1975 portrait of Don Reno and Red Smiley on the other. Despite the slightly schizophrenic feeling this induces, it can work to foreground the stylistic differences between the pieces. Rather than be lulled into the rhythms of 1950s style promotional hyperbole by reading six consecutive press releases, the reader is jarred into realizing that the change in rhetoric is as significant as the change in musical history.

Still, I would have preferred a simple chronological organization by publication, rather than an attempt at creating a quasi-historical narrative. Goldsmith’s organizational scheme is indicative of the fact that *The Bluegrass Reader* seems directed toward the serious fan who wants a broad range of material, but who doesn’t question the genre’s accepted history. On the other hand, to the editor’s great credit, the affable introductory sections to each piece give clear and helpful context, without being so specific as to predetermine the reader’s response.

The book’s heavy emphasis on biography, like its organizational scheme, is both a strength and weakness. The bluegrass world is well known for its veneration of its royalty, and the *Reader*’s characterizations are often quite detailed. The portraits come from such varied sources—musicians, critics, academics, reviewers, friends, fans—that the thoughtful reader can glean as much information from the authors’ own styles of writing, as from the historical and biographical facts cited. Untangling the role of each piece’s author requires close attention; such an exercise could be a very rewarding classroom or seminar experience.

This emphasis on celebrity tends to de-emphasize the ethnographic material, so when such data appears, it is quite welcome. Examples include the descriptions of bluegrass festivals, which, though they do contain their fair share of celebrity-gawking, also show a view *from* the stage, back at the complicated audience constituency. As noted above, the three short characterizations of bluegrass clubs in the early sixties also reveal the period’s contradictory attitude towards this music. The essays containing descriptions of Jerry Garcia’s experimentation with bluegrass, for instance, emphasize the

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positive aspects of the new stylistic hybridity, while Tennessee native Michael Medford's notes from a Boston bluegrass bar reveal the tensions and criticisms that can emerge. It's a fascinating anthropological picture of music mediating cultural difference from a musician's point of view. Another surprising yet effective selection is Charles Wolfe's group of record review parodies from 1978. Like his straightforward characterization of the Rebel Records label (also reprinted in the *Reader*), Wolfe's parodies certainly demonstrate the kind of discographical knowledge that many bluegrass musicians and fans possess or desire. His well-crafted humor reveals the obsessions of bluegrass fans as clearly as the most well documented historical take.

A personal quibble: a reader is by definition selective, and as the preface clearly notes, not everyone will agree on the inclusion of each article. I was surprised, however, that Goldsmith did not include any material concerning the "folk" guitarist Doc Watson. Watson appears only parenthetically, through acknowledgments of his influence on Clarence White, Dan Crary, and Ricky Skaggs, among others. An account of his seduction away from the electric guitar by Ralph Rinzler is an important historical moment that would have revealed much about the aesthetics of the 1960s folk revival. The incident is briefly described in the introduction to Rinzler's piece on Bill Monroe, which states that Rinzler "brought Doc Watson out of the North Carolina mountains." As Goldsmith himself notes, "Old habits die hard, and one of the hardest to shake is the tendency to assign bluegrass to the Appalachian hills and hollers. Though understandable, it's inaccurate" (126). By reinforcing the conventional wisdom that Watson was an isolated rural treasure discovered by Rinzler, this brief reference to Watson (and the omission of the actual story) again works to reinforce the overly simple underlying structure implied by the three section headings.

Goldsmith also reinforces the so-called conventional wisdom through his selection of the anthology's final portraits of Del McCoury and Ralph Stanley. McCoury, though adventurous enough to play with funk bassist and bandleader Bootsy Collins, is described as attempting to protect the "pure" bluegrass community from the foul language of alternative rocker Steve Earle, with whom he had collaborated musically. This anecdote, commonly discussed among festival-goers, works to oversimplify the bluegrass festival community as uniformly reactive and insular.

In the last segment of the *Reader*, Ricky Skaggs (discussing Ralph Stanley's recent deification, following the success of the film *O, Brother Where Art Thou*), is quoted as saying that Stanley has become "like an old African . . . a world-music person" (327). This is a comment of great significance on many levels, and is clearly worth including in such an anthology. However,

the “purifying” rhetorical move of introducing bluegrass musicians into the pantheon of “world music” is extremely complicated and necessitates a rebuttal. Skaggs’ ostensibly centrifugal comment would be an intriguing, centripetal place to end a different version of *The Bluegrass Reader*, but certainly not one that reinforces the genre’s generally accepted, “canonical” history.

Such problems, however, should not obscure the book’s worth as a useful mixture of the well-known and the obscure. The inclusion of perspectives that were not necessarily as coherent or consistent might have made the book unwieldy or frustrating— what: no discussions of race or class? — but it also would have helped capture the history of a music that is rife with contradictions and complications. (That said, my version of *The Bluegrass Reader* would contain most, if not all of the pieces included by Goldsmith; to have omitted any of the portraits would have elicited complaints from the serious fans to whom this book is directed, just as I grumpily noted the omission of Doc Watson.) Given the space limitations of a reader like this, Goldsmith has assembled a highly readable collection that occasionally surprises, but more often generates nods of recognition. I recommend it highly for guided use in an undergraduate class, or deeper meta-analysis in a graduate seminar. And certainly for summer festival reading.

Notes

1. The Bill Monroe section is an excerpt from Jim Rooney’s book *Bossmen* (1971).
2. Presumably the piece discusses the 1971 festival—Goldsmith doesn’t make this clear in his commentary.
3. The Martin portrait is reprinted from Tom Piazza’s infamous *New Yorker* piece, which he later turned into a book, *True Adventures with the King of Bluegrass* (1999).

References

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