

The  
**C** **SPECIAL**  
**CONSENSUS**  
Acoustic Bluegrass Music



The  
**T**raditional **A**merican **M**usic  
Program

An overview of Bluegrass Music  
Presented by

**The Special Consensus**

# The Traditional American Music Program

## I. Origins of Traditional Country Music

The people who arrived in Jamestown from England in the early 1600's brought with them the instruments and ballads of the times. Songs written from poems of the earliest Greek poets to songs of the gypsies who arrived in Great Britain at the end of the fifteenth century comprised the music these people brought to the new land. People were also arriving from Scotland and Ireland, bringing their instruments and ballads with similar roots that included Celtic mythology in the lyrics. Professional "ballad makers" flourished in Great Britain from about 1550 to the end of the nineteenth century; these songwriters wrote songs usually based on current news and sold them to publishers of song books distributed in the local towns. This street balladry, considered to be the roots of traditional American music, was the "pop" music of these times and its center shifted from Great Britain to America at the end of the nineteenth century as more people emigrated to the new land. The early Jamestown settlers gradually began to spread out into the Carolinas, Tennessee, Kentucky and throughout the Virginias. As these people became more settled in their new land, new songs and tunes (a tune is a song without words) about the new homeland were composed and passed down through the years within families as well as between families and friends living within the same region. Most of these songs were stories about day-to-day life and death experiences and they were usually passed along by singing them at family gatherings, church functions and gatherings of friends; these songs and melodies were rarely written down. Since most of these people lived in the mountains and hills outside the cities, the songs reflected life on the farm or in the hills and this type of music was called "mountain music" or "country music."

Traditional county music and string band music flourished in rural areas and began to gain more popularity in southern settlements and cities by the 1800's. The invention of the phonograph plus the onset of radio in the early 1900's brought music of all kinds, including traditional county music, to people all over the United States. Many radio stations were broadcasting live as well as recorded country music, and by the 1920's the Saturday evening airings of the "National Barn Dance" from WLS in Chicago and the "Grand Ole Opry" from WSM in Nashville were the major showcase stations for country musicians. Good singing was becoming a more important part of country music and family bands like the Carter family as well as singing "stars" like Jimmie Rodgers contributed greatly to the advancement of traditional country music throughout the 1920's and into the 1930's. The singing male duet teams gained popularity in the 1930's primarily because of their harmony singing (if two people sing together and they both sing the same melody notes, they are singing in unison; if one of them sings the melody of the song while the other blends his or her voice by singing higher or lower, then they are singing in harmony).

One of the most popular duet teams of the 1920's and 1930's was the Monroe Brothers, Charlie and Bill. Born and raised in western Kentucky, they both learned to play and sing at an early age. Charlie played the guitar and sang the melody of the song (most of the time) while Bill played the mandolin and sang higher (called the tenor part) in harmony with Charlie. The Monroe brothers were quite popular in the midwest during the early 1930's and were extremely successful in the Carolinas by 1936 as both a performing and recording act. In 1938, they were at the height of their popularity, but personality differences were so great that the decision was made to split up the team. Both Charlie and Bill went on to form their own groups. Bill's new band was more than just another traditional band; it was the birth of a new form of country music.

## II. Bluegrass Music

Bill Monroe's new four-piece band was different from the other traditional country music bands of the time because of its hard driving and powerful sound, utilizing traditional acoustic instruments and featuring highly distinctive vocal harmonies. This music incorporated songs and rhythms from string band, gospel, work songs and "shouts" of black laborers, country and blues music repertoires. Since Bill was a native of Kentucky, the Bluegrass State, he decided to call his band "Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys." They first appeared on the "Grand Ole Opry" in 1939 and soon became one of the most popular touring bands out of Nashville's WSM studios.

Despite this success, Bill wasn't completely satisfied with the sound of his band and he continued to experiment with different combinations of instruments. In 1942, Bill added a banjo player to the band which already included guitar, fiddle and bass in addition to Bill on mandolin. This became the instrumental combination that Bill would keep as the format for his band. In 1945, his inclusion of Lester Flatt playing guitar and singing both lead and harmony, plus Earl Scruggs with

his phenomenal driving three-finger banjo style, helped skyrocket the Blue Grass Boys to even greater national popularity and this became recognized as the classic bluegrass sound. They sang traditional songs and original songs written by Bill in beautiful two, three and four part harmony (the four parts are the melody or lead, the high part or tenor, a third part lower than the lead called the baritone part and the lowest bass part). The Blue Grass Boy's weekly appearances on the "Grand Ole Opry" and their traveling road show were breaking attendance records across the United States. In addition, Bill Monroe's radio broadcasts were bringing his music into the living rooms of country music fans everywhere.

By 1950 country music in Nashville began moving away from the traditional rural sound to a smoother, more "commercial" electrified sound which seemed to put country life down as too simple, too uncomfortable, too "basic." This new modern country sound was clearly separate from the old traditional sound and both record companies as well as radio stations began shifting their emphasis toward the new sound with the hope of appealing to a more diverse audience of listeners. Bill Monroe kept his traditional acoustic sound and although the size of his audience was not as great as it had been when radio stations were fully supporting his music, most country people felt that this was the only real country music still being played. People of the mountains had taken Monroe's music as their own and in the early 1950's they began to refer to this style as "bluegrass music" and Bill Monroe became the acknowledged "Father of Bluegrass Music." Bluegrass bands were forming in rural and mountain regions, especially in the Virginias, the Carolinas, Kentucky and Tennessee.

Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs left Bill Monroe's "Blue Grass Boys" to form their own band in 1948. They eventually included the resophonic guitar or Dobro into their band format and consequently many bluegrass bands today include the dobro. From 1948-1969, Flatt and Scruggs were a major force in introducing bluegrass music to America through appearances on national television shows, at major universities and coliseums, and at schoolhouses across the country. They popularized the bluegrass sound when they recorded the Scruggs instrumental "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" for the soundtrack of the feature film "Bonnie and Clyde" and by playing on the soundtrack for "The Beverly Hillbillies" television series.

Although the new commercial country music has received most of the recording industry and radio support since the 1950's (and is much more financially rewarding to it's performers), bluegrass music has managed to survive and grow in popularity as more professional bluegrass bands travel across the country and around the world performing this unique American music in concert hall and festival settings. The concept of the "bluegrass festival" was first introduced in the 1960's; bands that seemed to be in competition with each other for a relatively limited audience were featured performing on the same bill at weekend festivals across the country. These events began to attract large crowds from both rural and urban areas, which has helped to increase the music's audience and to showcase bluegrass as a respectable family style of entertainment. The increased availability of traditional music recordings, nationwide indoor and outdoor bluegrass festivals and movie, television and commercial soundtracks featuring bluegrass music has also aided in bringing bluegrass music out of modern day obscurity.

Today bluegrass music enjoys international popularity with literally hundreds of performing and recording bluegrass bands throughout the United States and abroad. Countless bluegrass festivals are held across the country each year. Bluegrass music has been featured in movie soundtracks ("Bonnie and Clyde," "Deliverance" and "O Brother, Where Art Thou"), on television shows ("The Beverly Hillbillies," "The Dukes of Hazard" and "Petticoat Junction") and in radio and television commercials everywhere. The triple platinum selling soundtrack for the Coen Brothers movie "O Brother, Where Art Thou" won the Grammy Award for best album in 2002, a monumental milestone for acoustic music.

Bill Monroe passed away on September 9, 1996 (four days before his 85th birthday), and was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in May, 1997 because of the profound influence of his music on the popular music of this country.

The International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) formed to preserve and promote the growth of bluegrass music around the world. An annual Trade Show and Fan Fest event is held in Louisville, Kentucky to bring together bluegrass artists, promoters and fans from around the world.

### **III. The Bluegrass Instruments**

Of all the instruments used in bluegrass music, the *Guitar* is probably the most commonly recognized. The six string acoustic guitar, which is said to have originated in Spain, has been a primary instrument in many types of music for centuries and is used as both a lead and rhythm instrument in bluegrass music. The guitar's sound is produced by striking the strings with a small plastic chip known as a "flat pick."

The eight string *Mandolin* and four string *Violin* both date back to medieval times. The mandolin was originally constructed out of wood in the shape of a gourd, but the late nineteenth century version flattened out the back, much like the back of the guitar, for better tone and increased volume (hence it is often referred to as the "flat back" mandolin). As with the guitar, the mandolin is played with a flat pick.

The *violin* has essentially maintained its original shape and is played with a bow which utilizes animal hair (from horses' tails) stretched tightly across a long stick. The bow is drawn across the strings of the instrument in order to produce its sound. The violin and fiddle are one and the same instrument, but bluegrass and country fiddlers play the instrument with a very different feel and technique from that of classical and jazz violinists.

The large *String Bass* looks like a huge violin and is actually the largest member of the violin family. Most basses have four strings, although there are five string basses as well. Like the violin, the bass can be played with a bow, although in bluegrass music it is almost always played by striking the strings with bare fingers.

The *Five String Banjo* is actually a descendant of a three string instrument (one string was shorter and higher in pitch than the other two) brought to this country from Africa in the eighteenth century. The fifth (bass) string was added in the mid-1800's. The most prominent use of the five string banjo today is in bluegrass and country music. Bluegrass banjo is played in a "three finger style" in which metal "finger picks" are placed directly on the index and middle fingers and a plastic pick is placed on the thumb. The modern four string banjo does not have the shorter string and is used primarily in Dixieland Jazz music.

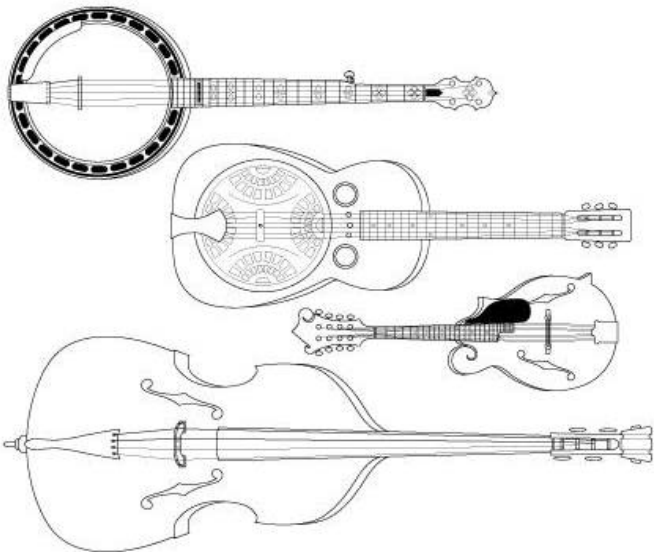
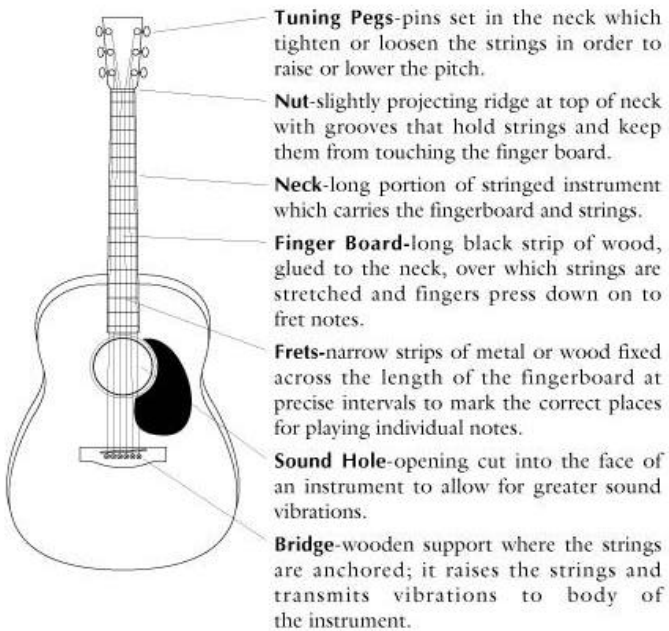
The *Dobro* or *Resophonic Guitar* is a very close cousin to the six string steel guitar that has been widely used in traditional Hawaiian music. Like its Hawaiian cousin, the Dobro is played horizontally with its strings face up utilizing a steel bar for fretting the notes and finger picks for striking the strings. However, the instrument's current design adds a metal "resonator" to the wooden body for increased volume and sharper tone.

All of the instruments discussed are called acoustic instruments because they are played without amplifiers or any other means of electronic sound reinforcement. They produce sound in and of themselves.

## Words to Know

# The SPECIAL CONSENSUS

### Know Your Bluegrass Music Instruments



1. **Country Music:** In the early 1600's, early settlers spread to the Carolinas, Tennessee and Kentucky; stories reflecting daily life were put into songs and tunes, then passed along at social gatherings. Since most of these people lived in rural mountain areas, this music was called "mountain" or "country" music.
2. **Bluegrass Music:** An outgrowth of country music. This new form began with Bill Monroe, who was from Kentucky, the bluegrass state. His band, which he called the "Blue Grass Boys," became the foundation for a new musical form known as bluegrass music. They first appeared on the Grand Ole Opry in 1939. By 1945, his band included Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, who later launched their own band, The Foggy Mountain Boys, and contributed a great deal toward popularizing the music.

#### The Bluegrass Instruments

3. **Guitar:** Six strings with fretted neck; shaped somewhat like a violin but has flat top and back with rounded sides. In the 20th century it was popular in country and folk music; plucked with a flat pick.
4. **Banjo:** Five strings for bluegrass and country, four strings for Dixieland jazz; long fretted neck with skin or plastic stretched across the top; played by plucking with fingers or with picks.
5. **Mandolin:** Eight strings (arranged in pairs), fretted neck with flat back and curved sides; plucked with a flat pick.
6. **String Bass:** Largest and lowest sounding member of violin family; shape similar to the violin; usually played with a bow but is plucked with the fingers in bluegrass music.

**Dobro:** Six strings; Also known as the resonophonic guitar; predecessor to modern steel guitar; played with instrument laying flat (strings facing up); a steel bar is used to fret the strings which are plucked with finger picks.

8. **Fiddle:** Same as violin; smallest and highest sounding member of stringed instrument family; played with a bow; bluegrass "fiddlers" play with a different "feel" and "technique" from classical violinists; however, both take years of practice to master.

**Form:** All elements that distinguish music from noise.

9. **Rhythm:** Beat or pulse of the music; using 2/4, 3/4, etc.
10. **Tempo:** Rate or speed of the music; slow, fast, etc.
11. **Pitch:** Names of the various tones in the musical scale; octave=c, d, e, f, g, a, b, c.
12. **Melody:** Arrangement of notes to produce a leading song or tune.
13. **Unison:** Singing or playing identical tones at the same time.
14. **Harmony:** Voices or instruments performing different, melodically pleasing tones at the same time; can be higher or lower than the melody.

#### Other Terms:

15. **Acoustic Instruments:** Played without amplifiers or other means of electrification; can produce their own sound.
16. **Bluegrass Festivals:** Began in the 1960's to feature several bands together at weekend gatherings.
17. **Pluck:** To cause an instrument to sound by striking or picking its strings
18. **Pick:** Also called a plectrum or flat pick; made of hard material such as plastic or metal; used to pluck the strings

# Resource Materials

## Periodicals

Bluegrass Now  
POBox 2020  
Rolla, MO 65402  
(573) 341-7335, (800) 736-0125  
Bgn@fidnet.com www.bluegrassnow.com

Bluegrass Unlimited  
POBox 771  
Warrenton, VA 20188-0771  
(540) 349-8181, (800) 258-7427  
Info@bluegrassmusic.com www.bluegrassmusic.com

Banjo Newsletter  
POBox 3418  
Annapolis, MD 21403-0418  
(800) 759-7425  
Bnl@annap.infi.net

International Bluegrass  
1620 Frederica Street  
Owensboro, KY 42301  
(270) 684-9025, (888) GET-IBMA

iBluegrass  
www.ibluegrass.com

## Books

Artis, Bob. Bluegrass. Hawthorn Books, Inc.

Bufwack, Mary A. and Oermann, Robert K. Finding Her Voice: The Saga of Women In Country Music. Crown Publishers

Cantwell, Robert. Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound. University of Illinois Press

Kochman, Marilyn. The Big Book of Bluegrass. Morrow

Rooney, Jim. Bossmen: Bill Monroe and Muddy Waters. Da Capo Press

Rosenberg, Neil V. Bluegrass: A History. University of Illinois Press

Smith, Richard D. Bluegrass: An Informal Guide. a capella books

Smith, Richard D. Can't You Hear Me Callin'-The Life of Bill Monroe, Father of Bluegrass. Little, Brown and Company

Tosches, Nick. Country: The Biggest Music in America. Stein and Day

Wolfe, Charles. A Good Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry. Vanderbilt University Press/Country Music Foundation Press

## Videos

Bill Monroe, Father of Bluegrass OC-10013

High Lonesome. The Story of Bluegrass Music SHAN-604

Ralph Stanley by Herb E. Smith Appalshop Film & Video (800) 545-7467

# The Traditional American Music Program

The **Traditional American Music (TAM) Program** is a narrated concert presented by **The Special Consensus** to introduce students, teachers and parents to bluegrass music, an American-born form of traditional music. This thirty- to forty-five minute presentation includes music performance interspersed with an explanation of how this form of music originated, how each instrument used in a bluegrass band is constructed and played and its role in the band, and how bluegrass vocal harmonies are constructed. The TAM presentation can be adapted for audiences of all ages, from primary grades through college student audiences to general community audiences of all ages. A study guide that includes the program content is offered to teachers in advance of the presentation. In-depth workshops on the history of bluegrass music, each bluegrass instrument and harmony singing are available for half-day and full-day residency programs.

## General Program Outline

- **Introduction: Performance of a traditional bluegrass song**
- **Brief discussion of the roots of traditional American music;  
Performance of an Irish tune**
- **Discussion of the music of early settlers in America, including the origins of traditional country music  
and the development of bluegrass music by Bill Monroe; Performance of a Bill Monroe song**
- **Presentation of each instrument used in the band, including demonstration of bluegrass music rhythm;  
Performance of a bluegrass instrumental**
- **Explanation and demonstration of harmony singing;  
Performance of a traditional gospel quartet**
- **Question and answer segment**
- **Performance of a traditional bluegrass song**