

An Overview of Bluegrass



Origins

There's really no way to pinpoint the origin of any type of music, but traditional southern traditions bled into the origins of bluegrass. It's takes parts of previously existing genres such as the blues and jazz. The nuanced rhythm and emphasis on off beats reflects this. Moreover, while not usually talked about, African American musical tradition is linked to bluegrass in this way, despite bluegrass being a white-dominated music genre. The painting "The Banjo Lesson" depicts the use of the banjo, bluegrass' main instrument, long before when bluegrass is said to have developed.



"The Banjo Lesson" by Henry
Ossawa Tanner (1893)

Origins Pt 2

Unlike other music genres, bluegrass is said to trace back to a specific group. Bill Monroe and The Blue Grass Boys, who debuted in 1945, played in familiar style known today. The folk tradition of storytelling through music, use of ensemble, and high energy help characterize it. The banjo is played in “Scruggs style”, named after the Blue Grass Boys banjo player, Earl Scruggs. The sound was tighter and more uptempo than other acoustic bands



Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys

Style



The style of bluegrass defines the off beats and has a high nasally twang to its vocals with little vibrato and a heavy emphasis on head voice and falsetto. The vocals are sometimes written with three or four parts with tight harmonies. There's short melodic runs, and while not made for dancing, it can be danced to. One instrument leads, others provide backup to the melody, and a sharp, accented rhythm to underline the song with unique stresses.

The Instruments



Banjo-usually the lead instrument, heavy runs and works with slower tempo songs.



Mandolin- used for up tempo songs, a quieter instrument that keeps rhythm and works as a backup to the banjo.

The Instruments



Guitar-the middle pitch, balances the higher instruments and gives rhythm



Fiddle-provides a counter or lead melody with riffs and dynamic interest.



Bass- the main one that keeps rhythm. Provides a steady beat while offering subtle variety



Connection to Appalachia

Bluegrass is often called “hillbilly music”. It’s connected to a heavily stigmatized group of people. It’s regional connection gives it its identity, but it also makes the musicians that play it to potentially forgo their regional identity as an Appalachian in favor of another identity. What makes a style of music and what makes something connected to a region or race can mean many things. Overall, the style of Bluegrass originated in this region, and thus feels like an integral part of their culture to many locals.



Example



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