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Why America's old-time music keeps making new fans

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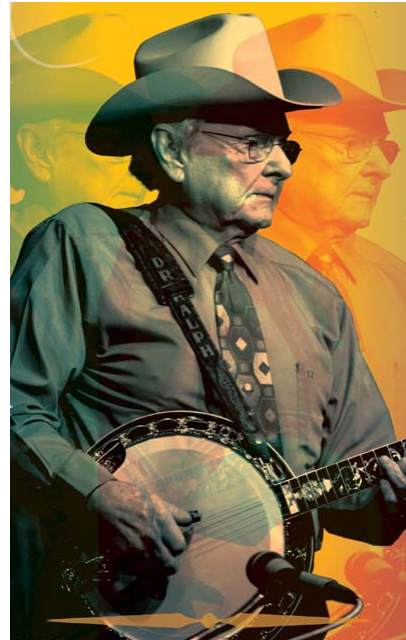
The scene must have been compelling: A 4-year-old boy asking a 78-year-old man to sing a special song for him.

The boy's name we don't know.

But the man was bluegrass icon Ralph Stanley.

And the song was "O Death," a bone-chilling Stanley staple that gained mainstream popularity after Stanley sang it in "O Brother, Where Art Thou?," a hit movie in 2000. The film gave a major boost to mountain and bluegrass music - the soundtrack has sold more than 7 million copies - and landed the banjo player in the national spotlight.

"I got a lot broader audience, you know, younger people and a lot of people who'd never heard it before," Stanley said in a telephone interview from his home in the far southwest corner of



Ralph Stanley (Getty)

Virginia. "(It) never had a chance before. Big radio stations won't play this old-time music. So I think public radio and public television through 'O Brother' did a lot to make this music more popular."

How popular? Stanley and His Clinch Mountain Boys perform Tuesday night at the Boulder Theater, where they will hold court in a college town known for granola and yogurt, not grits and red-eye gravy.

Virtually every culture has produced some sort of acoustic string music. Nick Forster, ex-guitarist for the legendary Hot Rize bluegrass band, only half-jokingly suggests that over the millennia this music has worked its way into our DNA.

But the genre known as bluegrass belongs to America. Invented out of whole cloth in the mid-1930s by a Kentucky mandolin player and bandleader named Bill

IF YOU GO

Ralph Stanley and His Clinch Mountain Boys

BLUEGRASS|

Boulder Theater, 2032 14th St.,
Boulder;

7:30 p.m. Tuesday | \$21.50- \$28.50
| 303-786-7030 or
bouldertheater.com

Monroe, the music, steeped in the Scots-Irish tradition of the Southern Appalachians, emphasizes high harmonies and instrumental virtuosity. So complex and driving is bluegrass that it is nicknamed "hillbilly jazz," a nod to another national vernacular triumph.

Bluegrass and its antecedents in traditional mountain ballads are embraced by a tightknit community of fans and musicians. And the music is enjoying the sort of renaissance folk music enjoyed in the late 1950s.

This has left musical observers marveling.

A few short years ago Stanley wasn't even on the radar screen, particularly for young people, said Ivan Tribe, a professor of history at the University of Rio Grande in Ohio.

"But I don't think they say that anymore," said Tribe, who has written extensively on American roots music. "Of course, nothing impresses the young like when you suddenly become an icon."

Newly minted icon or not, Stanley brings with him a part of American music history every time he walks onstage.

He and his late brother, Carter, started entertaining in 1946 as the Stanley Brothers. They and their band, the Clinch Mountain Boys, were arguably the first group to follow Monroe's lead and play bluegrass. The new music took its name from Monroe's band, The Blue Grass Boys, whose original lineup included future titans Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs.

For the genre's musicians, the instrumental lineup is as fixed as a string quartet's. A full bluegrass band features a banjo, guitar, mandolin, bass and fiddle. The singing is always at a keening, elevated pitch - the vaunted "high-lonesome sound."

Monroe's new style of music was based on the earliest form of country music, the string band, which features the same instruments but is driven mostly by the fiddle. String-band music owes much to Scots-Irish fiddle tunes but became a separate style with the addition of the banjo, an African instrument.

"Hillbilly string-band music that was starting in the '20s and went through the '30s was a very popular genre of music around the country," said professor [Daniel Margolies](#) of Virginia Wesleyan College.

Monroe and his bluegrass disciples became a hit on one of the nation's most popular radio shows, WSM'S "The Grand Ole Opry." People stood by the roadside to watch Monroe and his band drive by.

But bluegrass started a slow steady slide in the mid-'50s when rockabilly heralded the coming of rock 'n' roll. "That sort of killed everyone's career or made it very difficult," Margolies said. "They all kind of went to ground for a while." By the early '60s, Monroe would drive from Nashville to New Jersey to play a gig for \$200.

But bluegrass never has been in danger of disappearing. It has a core of unshakable fans and players who see its low-profile periods as a blessing that keeps the music pure.

"Certainly there are economic opportunities within the music, but it's not an industry that is driven by what I'd call a corporate culture that is trying to make sure next quarter's stock dividend and price is up," said Dan Hays, executive director of the International Bluegrass

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Music Association.

Two of its lifelines have been its accessibility to new musicians and its sense of community. "The price of admission (for players) is not that steep," Forster said. "You can get in just by having an instrument, knowing a few chords and learning some words. But once you get in, there is enough there to keep you focused for a long time."

Hays added: "Bluegrass is endearing to people who really want to interact with music or be a part of it as opposed to just passively enjoying it."

Bluegrass started a resurgence in the 1960s thanks to the invention of multiday bluegrass festivals. Hundreds of such events now take place annually across the country. Their value in the expansion of the music's core fan base is unrivaled.

Bluegrass also has sporadically sprung back into mainstream culture through being highlighted in movies, television shows and breakthrough albums.

Bluegrass historians cite the 1967 film "Bonnie and Clyde" and 1972's "Deliverance." "The Beverly Hillbillies" theme song was played by Flatt and Scruggs, and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" assembled two generations of musicians and gave the music hip cachet.

The IBMA's Hays said interest in bluegrass has been on a steady incline since the early 1990s, driven by an influx of new, high-quality talent arriving on the scene, such as Alison Krauss and the Del McCoury Band.

Radio research shows that from 1996 to 2005 the number of radio stations airing some bluegrass increased from about 700 to 850.

That doesn't include the bluegrass broadcast nationally by the XM and Sirius satellite radio networks.

"Then you have artists like Ralph Stanley who is doing as many dates as he wants to every year," Hays said.

So when Stanley takes the stage Tuesday, 60 years into his career, he'll find his old-time music still draws new generations of fans.

THE LEGACY AND WHO'S UPHOLDING IT

American roots music surrounds us. You just have to listen. Here is a look at some musical pairings - one classic artist and one contemporary - that illustrate how music gets passed down through the generations just like an old guitar.

Hank Williams-Dwight Yoakam: Williams is the grandfather of almost every country singer that came after him. But Yoakam is the favorite grandchild thanks to his vocal gymnastics and his simple but memorable lyrics about lost love.

Listen to: Williams' "The Ultimate Collection" (original recordings remastered) and "dwightyoakamacoustic.net."

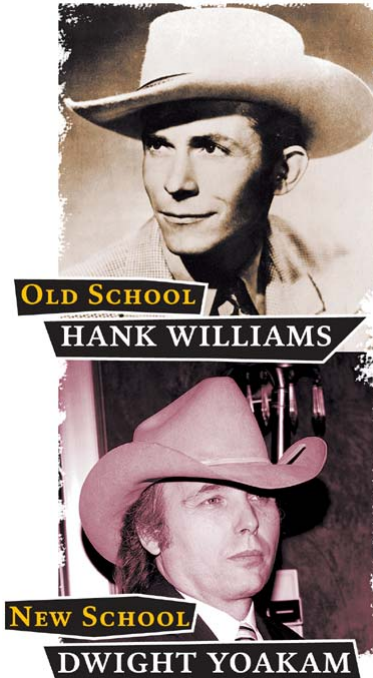
The Carter Sisters-Dixie Chicks: Too many people miss the roots music that permeates the Chicks' offerings and dismiss them as Nashville country. Their reliance on the banjo, fiddle and tight harmonies show they were hatched from the original country chicks.

Listen to: The Carters' "Southern Songbook" and the Chicks' "Home."

Earl Scruggs-Bela Fleck: Scruggs moved the five-string banjo from the old-timey "frailing" style to the groundbreaking three-finger roll. Fleck, like mandolinist David Grisman, took a traditional bluegrass instrument into the sonic stratosphere.

Listen to: Scruggs' "Foggy Mountain Banjo" and Fleck's "Greatest Hits of the 20th Century."

Maybelle Carter-Emmylou Harris: Emmylou has displayed the same courage as Maybelle in overcoming setbacks and staking out a career path with a guitar and a signature voice. And like fine wine, each grew better with age.



Listen to: "Carter Sisters and Mother Maybelle With Chet Atkins" and Harris' "Red Dirt Girl."

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