

A definition of Bluegrass music

For a couple of days I have tried to come to a sort of analysis, conclusion and definition of *bluegrass*.

It was rather time consuming but I now realize I will not come to a satisfying end when I continue this way. The problem is, I wrote a lot about the numerous characteristics of bluegrass but examining them they turned out not to be specific enough. Most typicalities and stereotypes characterize other genres as easy. And for instance wearing *stetson hats* or *weaving* may be rather general in bluegrass performances but on their own merit they don't define bluegrass music.

Then there is the way Tristan Scrogings on his blog tried to solve the problem by piling up a lot of questions concerning bluegrass related topics and questions which releases him from a lot of research and analyzing. But it does not lead to an appropriate definition that easy.

Next I tried to peel off like an onion the superficial features that together build up the bluegrass image to get to the pit of it. (An onion doesn't have a pit.) Based at the articles I wrote before, I think I found something, but it is rather thin a kernel so it hardly can explain how bluegrass would be the result of it, nor will it be very convincing to a lot of musicians who might still stick to the opinion the fifth string just is a drone. Since however the résumés I wrote are very short and leave out all the examples and quotes they will not be very clarifying too. So may be I have to rewrite my articles in English in a concise form, which will take quite a while. I hope I can do this coming spring.

For now in this discussion it also is better to leave out the reception of the audiences because the differences here are too big and individual. The Czech for instance in the opening periods (the late sixties) built their preference for bluegrass mainly on a romantic, if not politic, feel, escaping in raw nature acting like cowboys and Indians, trying to feel free of communism, I suppose.

For the moment I will reveal a little bit more of the things I tried to pin down (the pit) assuming the conclusions of the résumés being accepted without further explanation.

Bluegrass is instrumental ensemble music that is executed by at least three determined instruments (five string banjo, guitar, mandolin / fiddle) up till about six (double bass, dobro) at an average of five, that accompanies characteristic singing which exists of two or three usually male voices of the musicians themselves in close harmony using complex chords, of which the second and third voices unlike in the classical conception, are above the lead instead of under it. The resulting high pitch is qualified as the High Lonesome Sound.

So when is accepted that

- *the fifth string of the banjo is a percussion string (for the most important part) and*
- *it introduces the backbone of banjo playing by internally Claves Like Rhythms, especially emphasized in Scruggs banjo picking*
- *which guarantees for steadiness and speed and invites for syncopation*

historically the adding of the Scruggs banjo to the original stringband forced, or at least encouraged, the other instruments, especially the mandolin and guitar, to join in with these CLR and to incorporate systems of playing that equalled (specially in speed), imitated

(cross-picking) and cooperated together with the banjo. A rather rhythmic and strict up en down picking of mandolin and guitar with a flat pick was the solution to come to a style that is interweaved by banjo-like rhythmic accents and syncopations at the up-tempo speed of the banjo. The rhythmic subtlety of the CLR warded off other strong rhythmic instruments like drums and stimulated the continuation of using acoustic instruments that produce in alternation rhythmic replacement of drums by playing chops on the after beat.

Like in every genre close to this kernel lies the use instruments of specific made because musicians prefer the sound of their examples. So banjo players love Gibson banjo's, Gypsy jazz guitar players use Selmer guitars while bluegrassians usually like the Martin sound. Playability might be a factor. On the stage a bowl mandolin is not as easy to play at speed as a flat one. Though the actual sound of an F-shape may satisfy more, that lies in the field of taste again.

In the other common bluegrass instruments you may also find aspects of CLR, like slapping on the bass, shuffles on the fiddle and the dobro using banjo three finger picking.

There exist a lot more other features that come strongly with bluegrass - stereotypical endings like shave and a haircut or endings executed in a capella harmonies - developed as habits and personal choices of artists, but

the essence and beginnings of the style lies in the percussion of the fifth string, the CLR of the banjo and its implications: steadiness, speed and syncopation.

“Thahming” Butch Robbins says.

This is as far as I could come. May be this is enough to open up the possibility of checking other features you encounter in bluegrass whether they are crucial for bluegrass or secondary characteristics. (Since Gillian Welsh got popular girls on bluegrass stages seem to dress in rather wide skirts above short cowboy boots? Do they because it's bluegrass? Or is it just fashion?)

There is one more interesting point I want to make here. From the moment the CLR of Scruggs picking urges the other instruments to adapt to it, it is possible to leave out the banjo and still produce bluegrass (Tony Rice) Thus it also is acceptable to qualify as bluegrass the use of down picking banjo because it has CLR in it, though less explicite. This substitutes more or less the break between Oldtime and bluegrass that was invented by the Folk revival for a more continuous development of stringband music.