

## **Academia: Mandolin and Bluegrass**

Mandolins have a long history and much early music was written for them. In the first half of the 20th century, they enjoyed a period of great popularity in Europe and the Americas as an easier approach to playing string music. Many professional and amateur mandolin groups and orchestras were formed to play light classical string repertory. Just as this practice was falling into disuse, the mandolin found a new niche in American country, old-time music, bluegrass and folk music. More recently, the Baroque and Classical mandolin repertory and styles have benefited from the raised awareness of and interest in early music. Tremolo and finger picking methods are used while playing a mandolin.

The mandolin's popularity in the United States was spurred by the success of a group of touring young European musicians known as the Spanish Students, or in Spanish, the *Estudiantes Españoles*. The group debuted in the U. S. on January 2, 1880 in New York City. Ironically, this ensemble did not play mandolins but rather *bandurrías*, which are also small, double-strung instruments resembling the mandolin. The success of the *Figaro Spanish Students* spawned several groups who imitated their musical style and colorful costumes. In many cases, the players in these new musical ensembles were Italian-born Americans who had brought mandolins from their native land. Thus, the Spanish Student imitators did primarily play mandolins and helped to generate enormous public interest in an instrument that previously was relatively unknown in the United States.

Mandolins were a fad instrument from the turn of the century to the mid-twenties. Instruments were marketed by teacher-dealers, much as the title character in the popular musical *The Music Man*. Often these teacher-dealers would conduct mandolin orchestras: groups of 4-50 musicians who would play various mandolin family instruments together. The instrument was primarily used in an ensemble setting well into the 1930s, although the fad died out at the beginning of the 1930s; the famous Lloyd Loar Master Model from Gibson (1923) was designed to boost the flagging interest in mandolin ensembles, with little success. The true destiny of the "Loar" as the defining instrument of bluegrass music didn't appear until Bill Monroe purchased F5 S/N 73987 in a Florida barbershop in 1943 and popularized it as his main instrument.

The mandolin orchestras never completely went away, however. In fact, along with all the other musical forms the mandolin is involved with, the mandolin ensemble (groups usually arranged like the string section of a modern symphony orchestra, with first mandolins, second mandolins, mandolas, mandocellos, mando-basses and guitars and sometimes supplemented by other instruments) continues to grow in popularity. Since the mid-nineties, several public-school mandolin-based guitar programs have blossomed around the country, including *Fretworks Mandolin and Guitar Orchestra*, the first of its kind. The national organization that represents these groups is the *Classical Mandolin Society of America*.

Single mandolins were first used in southern string band music in the 1930s, most notably by brother duets such as the sedate Blue Sky Boys (Bill and Earl Bolick) and the more hard-driving Monroe Brothers (Bill and Charlie Monroe). However, the mandolin's modern popularity in country music can be directly traced to one man: Bill Monroe, the father of bluegrass music. After the Monroe Brothers broke up in 1939, Bill Monroe formed his own group, after a brief time, called the Blue Grass Boys, and completed the transition of mandolin styles from a "parlor" sound typical of brother duets to the modern "bluegrass" style. He joined the Grand Ole Opry in 1939 and its powerful clear-channel broadcast signal on WSM-AM spread his style throughout the South, directly inspiring many musicians to take up the mandolin. Monroe famously played Gibson F5 mandolin, signed and dated July 9, 1923, by Lloyd Loar, chief acoustic engineer at Gibson. The F5 has since become the most imitated tonally and aesthetically by modern builders. Monroe's style involved playing lead melodies in the style of a fiddler, and also a percussive chording sound referred to as "the chop" for the sound that is made by the quickly struck and muted strings. He also perfected a sparse, percussive blues style, especially up the neck in keys that had not been used much in country music, notably B and E. He emphasized a powerful, syncopated right hand at the expense of left-hand virtuosity. Monroe's most influential follower of the second generation is Frank Wakefield and nowadays Mike Compton of the Nashville Bluegrass Band and David Long, who often tour as a duet.

The other major original bluegrass stylists, both emerging in the early 1950s and

active still are generally acknowledged to be Jesse McReynolds (of Jim and Jesse) who invented a syncopated banjo-roll style of cross-picking and Bobby Osborne of the Osborne Brothers, who is a master of clarity and sparkling single-note runs. Highly-respected and influential modern bluegrass players include Herschel Sizemore and Doyle Lawson and the multi-genre Sam Bush who is equally at home with old-time fiddle tunes, rock, reggae and jazz. Ronnie McCoury of the Del McCoury Band has won numerous awards for his Monroe-influenced playing. The late John Duffey of the original Country Gentlemen and later the Seldom Scene did much to popularize the bluegrass mandolin among folk and urban audiences, especially on the east coast and in the Washington, DC area.

Jethro Burns, best known as half of the comedy duo Homer and Jethro, was also the first important jazz mandolinist. Tiny Moore popularized the mandolin in Western swing music. He initially played an 8-string Gibson but switched after 1952 to a 5-string solid-body electric instrument built by Paul Bigsby. Modern virtuosos David Grisman, Sam Bush and Mike Marshall, among others, have worked since the early 1970s to demonstrate the mandolin's versatility for all styles of music. Chris Thile of California is the best-known of the younger generation of players; the band Nickel Creek features his virtuoso playing in its blend of traditional and pop styles.