

July 3, 1994-----

NASHVILLE, TN.----- A banner of Confederate resolution, Bill Monroe limped onstage. The occasion was a milestone: the Flag Day reopening of the historic Ryman Auditorium here. What made it poignant was that the 82-year-old Father of Bluegrass had spent the previous weekend in a hospital, suffering from dehydration and nasty aftereffects of hip surgery.

The Ryman spotlight found Monroe, and he took to it like a yellow rose in the morning sun. These have been trying times for the American patriarch; this was an essential performance.

Monroe fractured his hip in March, and the following month, family debts forced him to put his 250-acre homestead, seven miles from Opryland, on the auction block. Gaylord Entertainment, the owner of the Grand Ole Opry, stepped in and bought the property for \$300,000 with the stipulation that Monroe could live in the century-old cabin for the remainder of his life.

Monroe's 75-minute set was soaked in redemption. He yodeled his way through traditionals such as "Wayfaring Stranger," "Crying Holy Unto the Lord" and "I Saw the Light." The Nashville Banner called the concert "one of the most stirring musical events presented here in some time."

The audience spanned generations, with country stars such as Skaggs and Grandpa Jones making the pilgrimage to see Monroe and opener Alison Krauss.

Indeed, every Monroe concert takes on a historic texture. There is no other traditional American music form where you can still watch the artist who created the genre.

"Bill can hobble up there, or you can roll him out there, but it's like he turns that switch on and plays," Skaggs said. "But I could tell he's really hurting. In the way he was chopping the mandolin rhythm, he was just a little bit behind. There's a lot of pain."

Hours before his performance, Monroe reminisced in a backstage interview. He wore a sparkling red, white and blue flag pin in his lapel. Monroe's dark blue tie was sent to him by a fan in Oklahoma. Down the middle of the tie, inscribed in looping white cursive script, were the words Father of Bluegrass.

Monroe spent a few minutes answering each question before coming to a sudden, almost rhythmic stop. A mental veil fell across his face. His piercing blue eyes

wandered in another time. when the subject switched to music, he perked up, proud to tell a visitor that he's employed between 600 and 700 Blue Grass Boys over the years. Early members included Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, Vassar Clements and David "Stringbean" Akeman, who went on to enjoy "Hee Haw" fame. Rowan, whose best-known composition is "Panama Red," began his career in 1965 as guitarist and lead singer with the Blue Grass Boys.

"I always had a high voice," Monroe said, explaining his role as a bandleader. "I started singing in B natural and B flat, where a lot of musicians had never played in B natural. I think bluegrass gave them a chance to learn how to do that. I wanted all of them to learn that right, play it for me the way I wanted it to be played."

Skaggs, who will turn 40 later this month, is practically an honorary Blue Grass Boy. In 1984, his version of Monroe's "Uncle Pen" became the first bluegrass song recorded by a solo artist to hit No. 1 on the Billboard country charts. At a Monroe concert in 1959 in Martha, Ky., young Ricky was invited onstage to perform. He played "Ruby" on Monroe's mandolin and received an ovation.

Skaggs recalled, "His strap - an old bootstring is all it was - was wound around the curl part of the mandolin. He took it off his

shoulder and gave it to me. I can't remember fear or intimidation. I just saw my hero. There weren't a whole lot of men playing mandolin in the '20s and '30s. Especially a big, stocky man like Bill Monroe. It was sort of a feminine instrument. But him singing that high tenor and the picking really made bluegrass.

"You could do such a family tree on Bill Monroe. He influenced Buddy Holly, and of course, Elvis Presley's first hit was (Monroe's) 'Blue Moon of Kentucky.' His roots are amazing."

Monroe was born on a farm in Rosine, Ky. Like most rural families, the Monroes had a musical household. His mother played accordion, fiddle and harmonica; her brother Pendleton Vandiver (immortalized in "Uncle Pen") played fiddle, and his brothers played guitar and fiddle. Mandolin was the only instrument left for Monroe.

He picked the mandolin with the verve of a guitarist, blending that driving style with free-flowing fiddle movements he learned from Uncle Pen (best exemplified by "Blue Grass Breakdown") and the rural blues of Kentucky guitarist Arnold Schultz, whom Monroe backed as a youth. "He'd come around our old homeplace when I was real young," Monroe recalled. "He'd cart around his guitar, and I'd love to hear him play it."

That's how bluegrass was born.

The beauty of the music is the way that it celebrates a time-honored rural ethic. Thoughts are piercingly simple. In 1945's "Rocky Road Blues," Monroe pointed out,

"The road is rocky, but it won't be rocky long."

As Monroe grew older, he added subtle gospel elements to bluegrass. "I did the Methodist, Baptist holiness thing while being raised in Kentucky," Monroe said. "I loved gospel singing. I wanted to put a touch of gospel singing in bluegrass music." (For further listening, check out Monroe's 1991 all-gospel MCA recording `Cryin' Holy Unto the Lord,' featuring guest appearances by Skaggs, Mac Wiseman and Ralph Stanley.)

Monroe also had a tight connection to the Chicago area in his early years. In the 1920s, older brother Birch Monroe, a fiddle player, and Charlie, a guitarist, had settled in Whiting. Bill migrated north by 1932. They all moved to East Chicago, where they performed as the Monroe Brothers trio, sponsored by Crazy Water Crystals. During the day, Monroe loaded and washed barrels at the Sinclair Oil refinery in East Chicago. During the weekends, the brothers would appear on Gary radio stations or square-dance to old-timey Kentucky music at "The WLS Barn Dance" radio show.

In October, 1939, Monroe debuted at the Grand Ole Opry, which was in the Ryman back then, by delivering a revved-up cover of Jimmie Rodgers' "New Mule Skinner Blues." The country blues standard remains a staple of Monroe's set. Monroe believes that his cover earned him the first encore in Opry history.

Monroe's favorite Opry cast members over the years are an eclectic bunch. "I liked Roy Acuff, (hoedown string bands) Fruit Jar (Drinkers) and the Gully Jumpers," Monroe said. "And DeFord Bailey was a fine harmonica player. He was a black man, you know. He was a wonderful man. A lot of times, he worked for me out on the road. He knew how to play old-time blues."

Nevertheless, Bailey was fired from the Opry in 1941, allegedly for not learning more songs. He spent the last 40 years of his life running a Nashville shoeshine stand. In 1983, a year after Bailey's death, a monument was unveiled at his gravesite in Greenwood Cemetery here. Opry harmonica player Herman Crook and Monroe performed at the ceremony.

The mournful "Wayfaring Stranger" was the final song of Monroe's set at the Ryman. Clearly frail and tired, he was still able to reach back for one of his classic vocal tricks, riding up and down on words, emphasizing some more than others. Monroe cried, "Goin' UP to see my Father . . . goin' UP to see my Savior. . . ." He created haunting vocal breaks and bends that paralleled his fiddle playing. He received a standing ovation.

"I don't know if you felt any wind in the air," Skaggs said of Monroe's Ryman show. "But when he did `Wayfaring Stranger,' it was like heaven came down. There was something so spiritual, it was scary. I was on the side of the stage, but Sharon (White, his wife) was in the audience, and she said it was all she could do to stop

from bawling. There was such a tremendous heart cry coming out of him. This is the truth. He is a poor wayfarin' stranger, just travelin' through.

"Only a few more years here, and he's going home."