HOMEGROWN MUSIC

Discovering Bluegrass

Stephanie P. Ledgin

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FOREWORD BY RICKY SKAGGS

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For Dad, Norm Ledgin, journalist and author,
who has always been my inspiration.

And for Bill Vernon, who possessed an immeasurable knowledge
of bluegrass from which he could spin words onto paper with unmatched
elegance and who is probably reviewing an "angel band" concert led by
Bill Monroe and joined by John Hartford, Merle Watson,
Roy M. Huskey "Jr." Ed Ferris, Raymond K. McLain, and others.
Their friendships with me will remain special treasures.

In loving memory of Staff Sergeant Frank T. Carvill, of Carlstadt,
New Jersey, killed in action in Iraq, June 4, 2004.
God bless you, Frank, dear friend.

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Contents

A photo essay appears following page 78.

Foreword

I first met Stephanie Ledgin nearly twenty-five years ago. But I probably had already met her, at least via the printed page, long before that without actually realizing it.

She came into bluegrass, as she puts it, by the back door, when she was hired on at *Pickin'* magazine in 1975 as one of its editors. She was not "born into the music," and she wasn't even all that familiar with it at the time. However, she fell in love with it and stayed with it all these years as a professional writer and photographer, working for numerous publications. Along the way, she became so involved in the music that she produced two successful bluegrass series in New York City and managed the career of an Italian flatpicking guitarist. Imagine that! Bluegrass in Italy! That says a lot for Stephanie's dedication—and it says a lot about bluegrass.

Bluegrass music moves people and embraces them. It comes from the heart of America yet shares its soul with fans around the world. It is symbolic of our heritage and all things American. Bluegrass is as refreshing as it is exciting. From its top-notch musicians to its excellent songs, what a great music bluegrass is to pass along to our children and to our friends.

Homegrown Music: Discovering Bluegrass is the first introductory book about America's homespun music that speaks the language of the twenty-first century. It tells you where bluegrass has been, where it is now, and where it is heading as we move along the technology highway. Well written and lively, *Homegrown Music* offers something for everyone, listeners and pickers, young and old alike. This book is an ideal "Bluegrass 101."

Get ready to explore some wonderful down-home music. When you finish reading *Homegrown Music: Discovering Bluegrass*, I am sure you will agree and understand why "Bluegrass Rules."

Ricky Skaggs
April 2004

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Preface

In July 1975, I was a bluegrass newbie; that is to say, I was a relative newcomer to bluegrass music. I was a year out of college and about to accept my first full-time professional position. I had answered an ad that read, in part: "Writer/editor wanted: knowledge of bluegrass and old-time country music preferred."

I had a confident handle on my journalism skills; on the other hand, the fact that it involved the sound of fiddles, banjos, and a lively beat was about all I knew of the music mentioned in the ad. Nevertheless, with a pipe-dream desire to combine writing with some kind of music as a profession, I called to arrange an interview. I remember very well hearing music while on hold, waiting for Roger Siminoff to pick up. After some requisite prior work experience questions, Roger asked if I knew anything about bluegrass. I responded that, if it was what I had just listened to, I had heard a taste of it as a child and teenager living in southwestern Louisiana and in Kansas City, Missouri, as well as the occasional tune from any number of current folk, pop, and folk-rock groups.

By week's end I found myself engaged in a two-hour interview and tour of the offices at *Pickin', The Magazine of Bluegrass and Old Time Country Music* in Cedar Knolls, New Jersey. About ninety minutes into it, we walked past a poster with a dobro pictured, and I vaguely remember commenting on the instrument. Roger seemed pleasantly surprised to find I actually knew what a dobro was; to this day, true or not, I conjure up that moment as a defining one. I went home knowing in my heart I had the job, and, sure enough, within hours the phone rang with a job offer to become assistant editor of *Pickin'*.

Now that is not the end of this story. Remember, I was not intimately knowledgeable about bluegrass and all its finer points when I came on board

the *Pickin'* staff. It had only previously touched me through peripheral happenstance.

So, what was this bluegrass newbie to do, having now to deal daily with unfamiliar and confusingly similar band names and associating the correct sidemen with the appropriate group leader? There were "Blue Grass Boys" and "Blue Sky Boys," "Clinch Mountain Boys" and a "Clinch Mountain Clan," "Lonesome Ramblers" and "Midnight Ramblers," "Nashville Grass" and "Red, White and Blue (grass)," "The Virginians" and "The Virginia Boys."

And, of course, there was the music itself. All those groups sounded alike to my virginal bluegrass ears! I had to get to know the music, its performers, the instruments, the various activities associated with it. It would be an entire year before I was "permitted" to solo representing the magazine in public at any major music function.

I stayed with *Pickin'* a little over two years, but I could not walk away from the music. In fact, I ran toward it and moved to Nashville for awhile, where a whole other world opened up to me with expanded opportunities to know more about and appreciate bluegrass. However, let me stop here with this semi-autobiographical excerpt and turn to you, today's bluegrass newbie.

The point remains, I was once a newcomer to bluegrass music; therefore, it is from that perspective that I am passing along my thoughts on exploring the very wide world of bluegrass in the twenty-first century. Perhaps you are a baby boomer whose bluegrass appetite first was whetted long ago when you heard "Dueling Banjos." Maybe you find yourself humming the theme from *The Beverly Hillbillies* after watching reruns on cable. More likely, you are one of the millions of people, young and old, who, since its release in late 2000, latched on to the music from the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and started buying bluegrass and traditional music CDs in record numbers.

What is it about this American-made music that grabbed hold of me—and now you—and will not let go? I am pleased to present this forum, this book, to share with you my enthusiasm for and my knowledge of bluegrass.

Catch the excitement of where to listen to live bluegrass or find out how you can learn to pick like your favorite musician. From insight into the music's past, present, and future to its family-friendly appeal to its intercontinental attraction, *Homegrown Music: Discovering Bluegrass* will be your introductory, hands-on primer to a potential lifetime appreciation of this emotionally charged music.

Scores of in-depth bluegrass histories, biographies, and academic essays exist, some of which have been invaluable to my learning process as well as to my research for this guide. Audio-visual materials abound, from instruction to performance to documentary. In addition, the Internet has created a virtually endless outlet for exploring and sharing bluegrass. "Where to from

Here: Suggested Resources," found at the back of this book, provides numerous pathways to guide you as you enter your next semester of bluegrass.

Homegrown Music: Discovering Bluegrass is based on historical facts, prevailing notions, and on my observations of nearly thirty years as a journalist working primarily in bluegrass and folk music. I am neither a folklorist nor a performing musician (beyond my living room), and, therefore, I am able to provide a novel view of bluegrass. Because I came into the music as a newcomer, I arrived with no preconceived notions of what bluegrass is, should be, or is not, a controversy that rages even in these times, as you will read in the first chapter. The approach you will find within these pages matches my own open-mindedness to bluegrass as well as to digressive and blended forms; in that regard, the book is subjective. As you will learn, it was a sense of exploration, an expansion of musical styles, an *open-mindedness* that led to the birth of bluegrass as a genre.

Listen, learn, enjoy, participate, preserve. It is homegrown music, right in your own backyard. Discover bluegrass.

Stephanie P. Ledgin
June 2004

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Acknowledgments

It would take another entire book to list the hundreds of musicians, fans, writers, and behind-the-scenes people I have met since 1975 who have all contributed in ways large and small to the undertaking of this manuscript. Suffice it to say, no writer is an island, to borrow from a saying.

Most would-be authors write a book and then scramble to find a publisher. I was, in fact, in the midst of doing just that, except it was not *this* book. An email came to me unexpectedly in September 2002 asking whether I would be interested in writing a book about bluegrass. For that query, my sincerest gratitude goes to Nancy Cardwell, special projects coordinator for the International Bluegrass Music Association, who passed along my name, among those of other writers, when asked by an inquiring editor. Nancy, I am flattered that you thought of me and profoundly grateful for this opportunity that you directed my way.

Thank you, Eric Levy, my editor, who, as a bluegrass newbie himself, conceived the idea for this book, approached me with that aforementioned email, then enthusiastically supported my outlined proposal for this book from day one. You had unwavering faith in my ability to get the job done during times when I had my own doubts due to life's misadventures throwing me unexpected curve balls and kittens.

To Roger Siminoff, who hired me all those years ago at *Pickin'*, thanks for the job; I certainly never imagined bluegrass would become my life's work. Our summer 2003 reunion chat meant a great deal to me and lighted my way during the course of producing this manuscript.

Hand-in-hand at *Pickin'*, Don Kissil, my editor-in-chief, kept me straight on all those Blue Grass Boys and Clinch Mountain Clan-type names. Moreover, his incredible love for the music spilled over into my heart. Thanks, Don.

Thanks to Ricky Skaggs for lending his support to this project, and to Lori Kampa, director of publicity and radio promotions at Skaggs Family Records, for facilitating. There is no arguing that bluegrass rules whenever Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder take to any stage.

My heartfelt, worldwide appreciation is extended to the multitude of bluegrass artists, other professional colleagues, friends, and family members who gave personal interviews and provided invaluable insight, information, and assistance; this book is for and about all of you.

Special thanks to Walter O'Brien, for giving me that now rare Kentucky Colonels album in 1975; to Bill Kammerzell for computer support beyond the call of duty; to Terri Horak and Martha Trachtenberg for the hand-holding chats; and to Bob Garufy and his staff at House of Equations for final prepress preparation of *Homegrown Music.*

A huge thank you for the outstanding, loving care shown by the professional and support staffs at Red Bank Veterinary Hospital and Park Veterinary Clinic during our family's cat cancer and feral cat crises that occurred during the writing of this book.

I am grateful to my parents, Barbara and Norman, for instilling in me a passion for music and writing. I feel very fortunate to have been exposed to and influenced in life by a diverse musical roster that included such names as Paul Robeson; Pete Seeger; Woody Guthrie; Harry Belafonte; Edith Piaf; Judy Garland; Scott Joplin; George M. Cohan; Peter, Paul and Mary; and the Beatles; as well as Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, and Mozart.

Finally, I could not be more appreciative and thankful for the love, support, and companionship of my husband, Ted Toskos. Your patience and understanding were extraordinary; I could not have completed this book without you. Thanks for getting up at 5:00 A.M. for an entire summer to take care of Maybelle, Guthrie, Emmylou, Mama Cass, Dolly, Patsy, Fiddle, and Banjo. Thank you for marrying me twice. Σ'αγαπώ.

Introduction: O Bluegrass, Where Art Thou?

Bluegrass music. More a fabric of our lives than we consciously realize. For those of us who are baby boomers or older, we probably first heard instrumental music, often found in bluegrass repertoires, accompanying some of the zany goings-on in childhood cartoons—traditional fiddle tunes like "The Arkansas Traveler," "Sailor's Hornpipe," or "Ragtime Annie." And isn't that "Turkey in the Straw" the neighborhood ice cream man plays incessantly as he makes his daily rounds during the hot summer months? Moreover, who in the five-to-fifty crowd isn't in awe of Kermit the Frog's banjo playing?

Movies and television have brought bluegrass and much of its traditional roots to the forefront on any number of occasions in the last thirty to forty years. Fast and furiously driven by its banjo lead, "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" instantly brings to the mind's eye that daring duo Bonnie and Clyde as they made their bank heist getaways in the movie. From the film *Deliverance*, who wouldn't be able to name that tune, that is, "Dueling Banjos," no matter what instruments are battling?

The Dillards, a real-life bluegrass band, portrayed the hillbilly Darling Family sons on *The Andy Griffith Show*. Andy himself picked guitar and sang a traditional song or two in a handful of episodes. *Hee Haw*, which had a twenty-year run and lives on in cable rerun syndication, as well as the short-lived *Smothers Brothers*, *Glen Campbell*, and *John Denver* television variety shows all provided varying degrees of exposure for bluegrass over the decades.

In the nineties, viewers of PBS programming became familiar with "Ashokan Farewell," the recurring theme for Ken Burns's epic *The Civil War*, which featured authentic music from that era in addition to that contemporarily composed waltz tune written "in the tradition."

Internet company Yahoo! yodels its way unmistakably into our marketing minds, accompanied by equally ear-piercing banjo. Folgers Coffee and Cingular Wireless each have featured bluegrass music and musicians in commercials in recent years. In another TV ad, although we do not hear the sound from the instrument, a banjo-playing Frankenstein character touts the benefits of taking Osteo-BioFlex while playing banjo for an audience of children, demonstrating apparently that his fingers are no longer stiff.

Fast-forward to February 2002, the televised 44th Annual Grammy Awards, the honors given out within the recording industry. Surprising to artists of every ilk, let alone to those involved in the winning project, the music from the offbeat Coen Brothers' film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* walked off with five awards, plus a sixth for a related project. The event marked the first time that nonmainstream music was recognized by the general music industry on such a scale, including capturing Album of the Year, a coveted mainstream category in which not even Nashville-produced albums had ever prevailed. This followed acknowledgment in November 2001 by Music City itself when the same top honor went to the soundtrack at the annual Country Music Association awards, Nashville thereby giving its stamp of approval to bluegrass music.

Sales of the movie's soundtrack were astonishing even by then. It charted at number six on the *Billboard* 2002 year-end chart, and a year later, by December 2003, retail sales had surpassed six-and-a-half million units.

A leading authority on the behavior of the American consumer, Simmons Market Research Bureau, in its 2003 household survey of more than 20,000 U.S. homes, found that eight million adults (over the age of eighteen) had purchased at least one bluegrass recorded product in the preceding twelve months. This was an increase of twenty-five percent over the previous year's survey figures. It was a whopping double the four million adult bluegrass consumers accounted for in its 2000 household survey.

To place a bit more perspective on its growth as well as the music industry's subsequent reaction, consider this: The venerable Grammy Awards, a function of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, did not even recognize bluegrass with its own category until 1988. Then, with the aforementioned February 2002 awards, bluegrass not only took home six trophies from one project and its offshoot, three of those nods were in nonbluegrass, noncountry slots. In fact, bluegrass and its artists took home ten awards that night in a range of areas, from roots music to mainstream, including the Producer of the Year, Nonclassical title.

Not long after, in July of that year, *Billboard* magazine acknowledged the music when it added an album chart dedicated to bluegrass; until then, only the occasional bluegrass-country crossover release had made it onto the country album chart.

Since that time, bluegrass has remained steadfastly in the public eye—and has gathered ground. And that is what is rather extraordinary. Why is blue-

grass seemingly popping up everywhere and more frequently? What is it about bluegrass that has grabbed—and held—our attention as we tumble forward into the twenty-first century?

One could point to the renewed sense of patriotism that has blanketed the United States of late, a desire for Americanism and all things Americana. Such ideology perhaps refreshes our minds and rekindles memories, beckoning a return to a less complex, more heartfelt lifestyle—"a simple life," as Ricky Skaggs sings about on his Grammy-winning number.

Advances in communication and technology, particularly the explosion of Internet use, have certainly contributed to the dissemination of bluegrass, not just throughout the United States but also across oceans in such unlikely settings as Japan, Israel, Brazil, and the Czech Republic. Such innovations also present a more hands-on accessibility to the methods for learning how to play bluegrass instruments. In addition, expeditious, efficient, and cost-effective avenues for publicity have assisted in promoting bluegrass-related events, thereby ostensibly expanding its audience base.

The vehicle that propelled bluegrass into the limelight as we entered the twenty-first century, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, can be referenced as an inherent major factor, too. Joel and Ethan Coen, along with music producer T Bone Burnett, brilliantly wove together a tale with carefully chosen songs. The music was, in fact, central to the plot. Although not all bluegrass and not all authentic period pieces, the numbers were representative and well placed within the context. Primarily well-known bluegrass and country artists, notably Emmylou Harris and Alison Krauss, performed them.

This judicious selection and placement of roots music within the movie drew attention to the music with an exceptional immediacy. The music comprised a catalog of compositions that, when taken as a whole, had an impact like a shot heard around the world. It wasn't just the lead song ("I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow") that stirred reaction; each number held significance to its scene.

During the fall of 2000, Mercury Records' marketing folks targeted the bluegrass and country music press with advance copies of the soundtrack, getting a buzz going in those arenas ahead of its December 5 release date and that of the movie's, December 22. Bluegrass, with what could be described as its "open underground" following, and country music, with its savvy rock-and-roll sensibility, embraced it, and talked about it—big-time. In fact, more printed words about the CD appeared than comparable radio airplay, since the music was the bane of, if not banned by, major market stations.

This all being said, what sealed the deal for its success was the pure and simple fact that the music itself was—and is—outstanding. The music is captivating, not canned. It commands attention with its verve and originality. Its practitioners are believers, its aficionados fiercely loyal.

What does all this indicate? That by the time there was this increased awareness and popularity surrounding the *O Brother* music, whether we knew

it or not, bluegrass already was embedded in popular culture. Only now, there were more global means (e.g., the Internet) for greater exposure. Moreover, there were media endorsements of bluegrass.

Discussion about the film's soundtrack that appeared in such time-honored establishments as the *New York Times*, as early as November 2000, affirmed that it was okay to listen to and *like* a techno-deficient, stripped down, bare-bones style of music. The cat was out of the bag. Bluegrass wasn't "just" hillbilly music. It was hip.

We discovered bluegrass has warmth, depth, and panache. Its songs are emotional, its players highly skilled. Bluegrass has a history and reflects America's roots. Bluegrass was not only rescued from the vaults and vindicated, it was validated.

Bluegrass, the music, was born in America. However, just as we are a nation of immigrants, so is bluegrass infused with influences from lands beyond our borders. We all have a family tree. Bluegrass, too, has its many origins and offshoots, or "roots and branches," a term often used in this context.

Rather than unravel and separate these twines, perhaps it can serve bluegrass better to examine their commonalities. By appreciating the similarities in the array of music that encompasses the bluegrass catalog, we can understand its significance in American music. In so doing, we can extend its reach and perpetuate the future of bluegrass while always being mindful of its past.

1

Homegrown Music: What Is Bluegrass?

Fiddles and banjos, high-speed instrumental duels, three- and four-part harmonies rendered a cappella that send shivers up your spine—American music that can quicken your pulse or melt your heart with emotion. More pervasive and present in our everyday lives than it has ever been, bluegrass is all around us. From children's cartoons to car commercials, on the small screen and the big screen, bluegrass has been a colorful thread in American music since its infancy in the 1930s.

What is this homegrown music that has captured worldwide attention, this word *bluegrass* that newscasters are no longer avoiding and that television programs and movies are working into scripts? Is it new? Is it old? Where did it come from, has it been around long, and why do we seem to be hearing so much of it lately?

Academic or textbook definitions provided by folklorists and historians tend to agree in concept. Bluegrass is considered an outgrowth of early country, grounded in string band music and derived from Southern rural—both white and black—folk traditions. Its principal identifying features lie in its vocals, all-acoustic instrumentation,[1] and instrumental virtuosity. Repertoire plays a large role in its characteristics; it also has changed the face of bluegrass, which will be discussed from a number of perspectives in later chapters.

Although often referred to as "folk" music, historically, bluegrass does not qualify, primarily because it is a modern-day form whose genesis can be pinpointed. Looking at a simplified meaning, as viewed in academia, bluegrass does not meet the criteria of folk music in that it is not "anonymously composed music usually learned through oral tradition" nor has it remained

[1]An acoustic instrument is one whose sound is not electrically enhanced or modified. In performance, however, acoustic instruments may be *amplified* via a sound reinforcement system to make them audible.