As the “Father of Bluegrass,” Bill Monroe is more famous for inspiring a musical genre than for any particular song he wrote.

His biographer Richard D. Smith considers Monroe so influential to American popular music that Smith calls him not only the Father of Bluegrass, but also “an uncle to country music, a first cousin to the folk revival, and a grandfather to rock & roll.”

The youngest of eight children, Monroe was born on September 13, 1911, in Rosine, Kentucky. He suffered from a crossed eye, uncorrected until his teens, that made him the object of teasing, and he spent many lonely hours by himself. His poor vision, though, sharpened his hearing, and he latched on to the folk, gospel, and blues songs in his midst; both his mother and uncle were talented fiddlers. Brothers Birch and Charlie claimed the family’s fiddle and guitar, leaving Bill with the mandolin — at the time a lowly background instrument.

By his teens, Monroe was earning money playing at dances, and by his twenties, he joined Birch and Charlie in Indiana to perform popular hillbilly and folk songs on the radio. After Birch quit, Bill and Charlie continued touring as the Monroe Brothers. By then Bill’s aggressive mandolin style had brought the instrument out of the shadows, and his blazing skills were attracting attention. After the brothers split in 1938, Bill formed his own acoustic band, the Blue Grass Boys, and began merging gospel, blues, folk, pop, and jazz influences into his own unique musical blend. The band’s popularity took off with frequent appearances on the Grand Ole Opry, and the Monroe sound gelled in the mid-1940s around high-pitched vocal harmonies, breakneck tempos, and dazzling solos. An inspiring bandleader, Monroe drew many top musicians to his group, and in the mid-1940s Earl Scruggs’s innovative banjo picking and Lester Flatt’s rock-solid rhythm guitar became essential building blocks of Monroe’s new style.

At first Monroe relied on existing songs for his shows and recordings, but by the late 1940s, he started writing his own material — though he didn’t give himself much credit. “All that music’s in the air around you all the time,” he once said. “I was just the first one to reach up and pull it out.”

Many compositions were instrumentals worked out in jam sessions with his rotating band roster. But Monroe also wrote what he called “true songs” featuring lyrics that were intensely personal and deeply emotional.

Monroe’s music quickly attracted imitators; many of his own band members recreated the style after they left his group. At first, Monroe was resentful, considering them all rivals. But by the 1960s folk revival, the sound had acquired a name, “bluegrass” (taken from Monroe’s band), and Monroe was being revered as the man who created it.

In his later years, he was embraced as a living legend at bluegrass festivals. A member of the Country Music Hall of Fame, he died in 1996, four days before his eighty-fifth birthday, of complications from a stroke.


LISTEN:
“Blue Moon of Kentucky”
“Can’t You Hear Me Callin’”
“I’m on My Way Back to the Old Home”
“Memories of Mother and Dad”
“My Little Georgia Rose”
“Uncle Pen”

READ:
Bluegrass: A History, by Neil V. Rosenberg (University of Illinois Press, 1993): This history tells the story of bluegrass and places Monroe at the center of its beginnings.

Can’t You Hear Me Callin’: The Life of Bill Monroe, Father of Bluegrass, by Richard D. Smith (Warner Books, 2000): This well-researched biography takes readers through the evolution of Monroe’s bluegrass sound and also traces his colorful personal life.