

The Big Bang of Bluegrass

By Peter Feldmann

Peter Feldmann is an excellent bluegrass vocalist, mandolinist, and producer of records and concerts, who has been centered in Santa Barbara, California for over forty years.

As Peter states on his website

<http://www.bluegrasswest.com/ideas/bigbang_2005.htm>, this slightly tongue-in-cheek essay is the text for a "talk given . . . at the first International Bluegrass Symposium, University of Western Kentucky, Bowling Green, KY, in September, 2005." Actually, it was a full-bore Power Point presentation accompanied by twenty-two "slides," and you won't have to read very far to recognize that Peter knew what he was talking about. Like all the other attendees I was fascinated by the provocative analogy between the origins of the universe and the origins of bluegrass music, but his account offers much more than that. Peter plans to upload the slides to his website soon, so I warmly recommend that you visit Bluegrass West. – Mayne

Theoretical physicists use the term "Big Bang" to describe the process of the creation of the universe.

We cannot really picture such an event, but I can show you a recently-declassified photograph which shows the first quarter of a millionth of a second of an early nuclear test in the desert near Alamogordo, New Mexico. [slide two] The nascent fireball, some eight meters across, is just beginning to vaporize the metal tower that housed it. Notice its irregularity. It is not a perfect sphere as we might expect, but already shows differing textures and surfaces. I'll get back to that point later.

My talk today is about beginnings, the beginnings of a music we know and love, and the application of different viewpoints to its history. [slide three] In a short film by Raye and Charles Eames: "Powers Of Ten," a wonderful exposition of the concepts of space and time, it is suggested that one can often achieve a better understanding of a subject by examining it at differing levels of scale -- by stepping back to look at it from a distant viewpoint and alternatively, by coming up very close to examine it in minute detail. I have found it worthwhile to apply certain scientific paradigms, borrowed from the fields of physics, biology, and mathematics, to use as filters for fresh glimpses or views of the music, and perhaps, new ways to better understand our own reactions to bluegrass.

Theoretical physicists maintain that our universe began with a "big bang", a monumental explosion which released all matter, space, and time in an ever-growing and expanding body we now call the universe. I find it quite appropriate to apply the Big Bang concept to bluegrass music, since before our "Big Bang", there was no such music, at least anywhere in our known universe. The "Big Bang I am referring to is, of course, the split-up of a musical group billed as The Monroe Brothers, [slide four] formed in 1932 and who broke up in early-1938. The 1930s were a great time for brother acts, mostly duets, and mostly featuring close harmony singing with guitars or guitar and mandolin. These duos tended to supplant the larger string bands from the 1920s – traveling was easier, and there were less ways that gig money had to be split up during those hard depression days.

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There were the "great ABCDs" of the brother acts: The Allens, The Bolicks, The Callahans, and the Delmores (I should include the Dixons), all fine duets, with a great range of musicality and singing styles. Perhaps the smoothest-sounding, vocally, were Bill and Earl Bolick, "The Blue Sky Boys," with harmony arrangements like sorghum molasses dripping from a gourd spoon. Instrumentally, the Allen Brothers were the most raucous, while the Callahans and the Delmores were pushing the virtuoso flatpick style with lots of verve. But there was something new and special about the sound of Bill and Charlie Monroe. Many have mentioned the blazing speed they brought to the music – to me the most distinguishing aspect of their sound was the drive they gave to the songs, a feeling of ever-leaning-forward, while still keeping one's balance -- like a runner approaching a finish-line tape. Despite their speed and drive, their songs never sounded rushed -- there was that ever-present element of control which resulted in such a polished performance. Record log sheets from the Victor company confirm this aspect, and show that they were able to cut ten "sides" or songs in the space of half a day, all apparently, on the first take. To anyone familiar with the recording regimen pertaining today, this fact alone would be considered astounding.

Bill and Charlie's approach can best be glimpsed by listening to a sample song, "I'm Rollin' On," which they apparently learned from the Prairie Ramblers, [slide six] a dynamic performing group on WLS's "National Barn Dance", broadcasting out of Chicago in the 30s. Compare this to Bill and Charlie's version, recorded five years later. [slide seven]

So, we have our proto-universe: Charlie Monroe singing lead and playing his thumbpick-driven, booming guitar runs against the plaintive tenor and pulsing, mandolin melody lines of his younger brother, Bill. Their unique sound attracted thousands of radio listeners, filled school and church auditoriums with hundreds of fans, and despite the ravages of the depression, sold hundreds of thousands of records on the familiar buff Bluebird label and via Montgomery Ward's mail order discs.

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Then it happened. The gravitational forces serving to contain that creative drive in the proto-universe were simply too weak to keep it together, and yhe Monroe Brothers as a performing unit were no more, but bluegrass music was about to emerge and expand out into the universe.

The conditions immediately following the Monroe Brothers' Big Bang are worthy of a quick survey here. When physicists speak of the state of matter following the Big Bang, they mention slight irregularities in the original, expanding mass that led to the eventual formation of galactic clusters, as well as relatively empty areas, rather than a uniform distribution of matter throughout the available space. (Remember the photo of the atomic fireball at the start of my talk.) The tendency of Bill and Charlie was at first to follow their original momentum and form two units almost identical to the original group. Bill searched for a guitar player / lead singer, while Charlie wanted a mandolin player and tenor singer. Note that neither brother considered joining an already-established band as a sideman - they were both determined to be band leaders, having no interest in having a "boss". Following our cosmological

framework, we can consider both Bill and Charlie as centers of mass, which soon attracted other performers, falling, so to speak, into their gravitational fields.

At this point, it becomes useful to borrow a concept from the field of evolution biology to use as an additional overlay in considering what happened next. It is a long-held concept that on the young planet Earth, there developed an assortment of amino acids and other building-block molecules through the interaction of solar radiation, lightning strikes, and other forces acting on the primordial soil, cooling rocks, warm seas, and the young, methane-filled atmosphere. This has been referred to as the famous "Cosmic Soup" from which early, relatively simple strands of RNA and DNA could form, given proper conditions. [slide nine] In the mid and late 1930s, we can see an emerging "Cosmic Soup" of professional country musicians throughout the "High South" (The Carolinas, Virginia, W. Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee). These young performers, vitalized by the energy they received from the new media of radio and records, and facilitated by the growing availability of easy travel via the automobile and improved highways, formed a growing, eager pool of talent from which band leaders could draw competent musical help. By the time of the Monroe's breakup, the "High South" contained quite a soup pot of singers and pickers that had moved into the professional entertainer camp -- and the new electronic media, radio especially, made them well aware of each other.

Charlie Monroe's first choice of sideman, Zeke Morris -- from Old Fort, North Carolina was especially fascinating. [slide ten] Zeke had already recorded for the Victor company with his brother Wiley, and perhaps Victor's A&R man, Eli Oberstein, suggested the young mandolin player and singer to Charlie. Charlie brought Zeke Morris and tenor vocalist Bill Calhoun to a temporary Victor recording studio in Rock Hill, South Carolina in late September of 1938. This has sometimes been called the "mystery session", as several of the titles cut that day sounded so eerily similar to the Monroe Brothers' records. This mystery session caused great confusion among Monroe Brothers fans, and even led to rumors that Bill had actually stopped by Rock Hill to play on the sessions. Certainly it demonstrates the appeal of Bill and Charlie's musicianship, as very obviously, Zeke Morris had gotten Bill's mandolin "licks" down just about perfectly ... he'd certainly been listening to Bill's playing. So by 1938, Bill Monroe was already seen as someone to lead the way as an innovative musician.

Victor's act of releasing the songs as by "Monroe's Boys" did not help mitigate the confusion -- it lasted and was reinforced 26 years later when an Lp reissue on Victor's budget Camden label mixed Monroe Brothers' songs with Monroe's Boys' tracks, and billed several of Charlie's cuts as by "The Monroe Brothers". [slide eleven] The liner notes claimed the recordings were by Bill and Charlie Monroe. Bill was credited by liner writer Roy Horton (incorrectly) as playing a "tater bug" mandolin, while Charlie was given (incorrectly) a "houn' dog" guitar. (This cavalier attitude of the major record labels towards musical history and basic facts makes album liner scholarship almost as hazardous as agent 007's job description.)

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The elder brother Charlie went on to build a successful career as a band leader with an array of fine talent from our cosmic soup pot, to be shared in some cases with his brother Bill. Charlie's good looks and outgoing personality made him a natural as a band leader and pitchman -- a perfect fit for the musical work of the time, of radio programs and schoolhouse concerts. Charlie's outgoing personality also made him

suitable as a band front man, while his business sense led him to initiate his own brand of laxative products, "Man-O-Ree," which sold by boxcar loads.

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We turn our attention now to the younger brother Bill, brimming with musical ideas but at the same time shy almost to the point of being a recluse -- brought on in part by his problems with being cross-eyed, with a chip on his shoulder against being bossed by his big brother, but with a passion to make music that no one else had ever made before.

Moving through the high south and setting up camp in a trailer, Bill went from one town to the next in search of a radio station in need of a band. Radio work didn't pay much in cash, but instead provided energy in the form of publicity for their live appearances (and song book sales) for the artists on their rosters. Finding that tastes had again swung from brother duets to larger ensembles, Bill advertised in local papers for musicians -- at first looking for Charlie Monroe doubles, a fiddle player, and a bass player -- even hiring someone who played jug. Stage dress was important for the live shows, and Bill kept to the formula of Kentucky planters outfits: Stetson hats, shirts and ties, boots and Jodhpur riding pants, that had worked for the Monroe Brothers.

Bill had one handicap that his brother Charlie didn't -- his shyness and general inward nature, due in large part to his vision difficulties. This made fronting a band a real problem -- enough so that he at first relegated this task to his guitar player, at least in part. Searching for a way out of this difficulty, Bill also found comics [slide fourteen] (at first, bass players), even working in blackface, [slide fifteen] to help break the ice and give the live shows the same drive as his recordings. It was in looking for comic characters that Bill may have considered a banjo player. The banjo comic concept had long been around, at least since minstrel show days, and one of the most loved entertainers on the ubiquitous Grand Ol' Opry was Uncle Dave Macon. Akeman claimed to be an Uncle Dave protégé, though it is unclear to me what type of relationship they actually maintained. The picture is complicated by the fact that "String" was also a semipro baseball player, [slide sixteen] and Monroe was constantly looking for players to fill out the two baseball teams he maintained in the 1940s. Bill also approached Wade Mainer [slide seventeen] as a potential banjo player but Wade, four years Bill's senior and recently split from his brother J.E.'s band, was, like Bill, not interested in being a sideman and wanted to stay with his group the "Sons Of The Mountaineers".

Mainer's home grounds, the Carolinas, was a real boiling pot in our Cosmic Soup of musicians -- and as mentioned earlier, everyone seemed to know everyone else in this area -- at least via recorded and broadcast performances. I've briefly mentioned Zeke Morris, who with his brother Wiley had already established themselves as Victor recording artists. J.E. and Wade Mainer also made records for Victor, and when Wade split from his elder brother, he was replaced in J.E.'s band by another Carolina banjo picker, Snuffy Jenkins -- one of the reputed banjo teachers for the youngster Earl Scruggs. (Perhaps instead of a cosmic soup, we need to speak of a thick porridge, as the plot thickens. . . .)

[slide eighteen] At any rate, Bill engaged Akeman as his banjo player/comic/baseball pitcher. And here we have another mystery: what manner of banjo-picking did

"String" play on his recordings with Bill? A two-finger thumb-lead banjo style, more similar to Wade Mainer's index-lead playing (though not nearly as smooth) that seems to stumble through the solos on early Blue Grass Boy recordings – completely different than any of his subsequent solo banjo recordings – all done in downpicking or "clawhammer" style. Was this banjo style Bill's suggestion, in trying to fit the banjo into the role of a bluegrass instrument?

Let's go back now to our Big Bang model, and take a step back to view the two entities resulting from our exploding universe: Charlie Monroe's "Kentucky Partners" and Bill Monroe's "Blue Grass Boys" (both band names evoking their home state as a reference). As the two bands developed, they diverged in their musical style, even though sharing some elements in common. While Charlie kept a mandolin player, he also added fiddle and bass, and even a banjo player (as a comic). But the orbit of his band was swayed towards the more mainstream country sound of the time, especially with the addition of electric guitarist Tex Isley. Bill added both fiddle and bass to his guitar-playing band member and eventually, banjo, as mentioned above. Then, perhaps with an eye toward the success of the cowboy-western bands of the time, he tried adding an accordion to his sound. It's my conjecture that the fullness of the accordion's chords clashed with Bill's sparse approach to the music. It was more to Bill's taste that a chord be suggested by two or three notes, rather than be rounded out by adding 6th, 7th, or other intervals. The Blue Grass Boys moved more and more into their own separate orbit, eschewing the electric instruments and drums that began to drive the dance-band oriented groups of the day, and developing the beginnings of the bluegrass style, which took ideas from old time fiddle tunes, jazz, and the blues to forge its own strong musical alloys.

So we're now at a point where the musical universe is expanding, and Bill's bluegrass nucleus is beginning to make gravitational waves which in turn will influence musicians and listeners, first locally, then throughout cosmic space. It is not within the scope of this treatise to look too far from the origins of the big bang, but before closing, let us examine these early days using one more principle or "filter" from the laws and theories of physics, namely Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. [slide nineteen] Rather than looking at the universe from a huge scale, galactic clusters, etc., this viewpoint goes to the other extreme: the world of quantum mechanics, the world dealing with infinitely small bits of matter, the world of atomic particles. Heisenberg postulated that, in such a small world, an observer can never be certain that an electron is in one particular orbit around a nucleus, or whether it is in another such orbit. Furthermore, he determined that there are places where orbits cannot exist: one has to look closer, or further from a nucleus to find a probability of encountering such an electron. Indeed, as we continue to slice time itself into ever-smaller units, we begin to encounter quanta of time, i.e., areas where time *is* and areas where time *is not*. To us, of course, time seems to flow in only one direction. Yet in the world of quantum mechanics, there is no particular reason to expect that time cannot flow backwards or forwards interchangeably. Thus, physicists can look at matter, energy, and the universe from differing aspects, even to the point of conjuring up parallel universes which could exist right next to us, even though we cannot see or experience them.

Looking at a musical group, the smallest quantum we can view is the individual musician, with his instrument. Having half a fiddle in a band is simply an impossible situation – at least in this universe. But let's use this filter to examine the seemingly-unending argument about bluegrass music and banjos. Did the music exist as

bluegrass before Monroe hired Earl Scruggs? Did "Scruggs-style" banjo define the sound?

[Slide twenty]

No one can know what was in Bill Monroe's head in the 1940s concerning the bluegrass sound. We know he was stubborn, we know he was reclusive, we know he was secretive about his music. We also know he liked to experiment, and considered himself as "a sort of inventor, like Henry Ford-1.". So here we have Bill Monroe, rummaging around in this cosmic soup of musicians like an inventor in a junkyard, picking up scraps of material or musical ideas here and there, trying to fit it together, to make something "original" from it. As we have seen, Bill approached Wade Mainer, and did hire David Akeman, thus adding a banjo to his band. But the results were not that encouraging from a musical point of view. In fact, when Bill was approached to audition Earl Scruggs, his guitarist and lead singer of the time, Lester Flatt, remarked that, "As far as I was concerned, he could just leave it in the case." [slide twenty-one]

Of course, Earl's playing integrated the banjo into the bluegrass sound so well that, forever afterward, Monroe featured the instrument in his band. But let's go backwards just a moment and reverse time re. the banjo. By the early 1940s, the banjo was a dying instrument. Yes, it had been featured prominently as a solo and string band instrument in the 1920s and before. Loosing it's constraining fifth string (which prohibited urban-style modulations and key changes), it had even escaped into urban music in jazz and dance orchestras, mainly as a rhythm instrument. But the advent of electric guitars in the 1930s, with their added volume and sustain, quickly spelled the end of the banjo in that role. Electric guitars also helped force the banjo out of mainstream country music, even as the lap and pedal steel guitars later ended the dominance of the fiddle in those groups.

Looking at the situation from this viewpoint, there was little space left, even for a virtuoso three finger style banjo picker, to ply his trade. Could Earl have worked with Hank Williams or Patsy Cline? Could he have crossed over into urban music and played with Glenn Miller . . . the Dorsey Brothers . . . Bing Crosby? Had Monroe not created his new musical launching platform with his high-intensity, all-acoustic band, Earl would probably have done what many other banjo players since then have done, switch to the electric pedal steel guitar in a mainstream country band, along with electric guitars and drums. In fact, Earl is now working with a drummer in his public appearances.

So yes, the banjo is a defining sound in bluegrass, but without bluegrass, there would be no place for the banjo in the musical universe as we know it today. [slide twenty-two]

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