In which we traveled to the music-mecca Nashville, Tennessee. After our time in rural Young Harris, GA, the skyline of downtown Nashville, visible from our hotel, was almost startling. We had a few hours to kill before meeting up with our next visitee, so we walked into downtown. Accompanied by photographer and friend Mark Olenick, we strolled on the sidewalk soaking up the sights, sounds, and smells of the busy metropolis. On our left, we passed the offices of The Tennessean, the publication for which Wofford alum Peter Cooper works. In front of the building stood an eight-foot high electric guitar. After some novelty photos, we continued on to do some window shopping as musicians were warming up in the bars which line the streets. We saw more giant guitars on almost every corner. Various organizations and businesses sponsor these monuments in celebration of the Music City’s roots in country music.

We met Peter Cooper back at our hotel at 7:00. He led us to a famous Nashville eatery called Nashvilles. After dinner, we drove to the Station Inn, one of the most famous bluegrass venues in Nashville. Unfortunately, we were there on an off night, so the bar was not very full. Nonetheless, we were treated to a great bluegrass show. The band, consisting of banjo, stand-up bass, steel guitar, fiddle, and two guitars, played for a couple of hours and even took a few requests from our group.

Throughout the evening, we were entertained with Peter Cooper’s tales of Wofford and bad impersonations of John Lane.
Alvin “Little Pink” Anderson, son of the most important blues musician in Spartanburg history, meets me on a Sunday afternoon in the parking lot of The Beacon drive-in restaurant on Reidville Road in Spartanburg. Two weeks after his release from a Greenville prison, Anderson is glad to be a free man and pleased to answer questions about his life as the son and sidekick of Pink Anderson. We drive to Alvin’s girlfriend’s apartment for the interview, and I present Anderson with a compact disk called *The Blues of Pink Anderson: Ballad and Folksinger, Volume 3.*

The disk, recorded in Spartanburg in 1961, thirteen years before Pink’s death, contains liner notes in which Pink is called “one of the greatest in Piedmont-style guitar-picking songsters, an inspiration to the British art-rock band Pink Floyd and to such folk-blues troubadours as Roy Book Binder and Paul Geremia.” The photograph on the cover depicts Pink, then sixty years of age, sitting on the steps of his Forest Street home with his smiling, suspenders-clad, six-year-old, Alvin. Alvin has never seen the photograph before, though he remembers precisely the situation and time of day that it was taken. We put the disk on the stereo and the memories return in a flood.

In 1961, when Alvin was six years old, his mother died. “When my mama died, I was crying. He [Pink] said, ‘I can’t stop you from crying, and I know you’re gonna miss your mama, but you still got me.’ When he said that, he proved it. He was mother and father to me from 1961 to 1974. He was everything to me. I can remember hearing him praying; he would ask to be able to take care of me, and to live long enough to see me get grown.”

Samuel Charters came to Spartanburg to record Pink Anderson later in 1961, and Alvin was there for those sessions. The boy also tagged along with Pink on gigs in and out of Spartanburg. “He’d play up at Franklin Wilkie’s store. He used to set up in front of the store with his guitar and his records. I’d get my little guitar and my little hat, and I’d try to play. Mostly I’d collect money. Even today, a lot of older people from that time remember my face. My name has never been Alvin in Spartanburg; it’s always been Little Pink.

“When I’d play with my old man on the street, the people would give me quarters and dimes and nickels. So my pockets were fatter than any kid’s in town. He made me accustomed to guns and money. Both of them will get you in trouble, and he thought if you were used to them as a child that you’d know how to handle them when you got older. I’d walk around the house with real pistols strapped on my side, or play ‘Cowboys and Indians’ with real guns.”

Alvin also became well acquainted with the non-musical addendums to Pink’s income. “He sold white lighting, and for every quarter shot of liquor I sold, I kept the quarter. Fifty-cent shots and up, he’d keep. He kept the liquor buried beneath the ground, and he had a dog, named Dad that would lay on top of the ground where the liquor was. Back then, the young boys would come along and steal the bootleggers’ liquor. They came up on that dog one night, pushed the dog off the stash, dug it up, covered the hole back up, and put the dog back over the hole! The sorry dog never even barked; he wouldn’t do nothing but eat, but my daddy was crazy about that dog. He used to tell me, ‘That’s all you do, too, and I’m crazy about you.’

The dynamics of the relationship between Pink and Alvin are difficult to grasp for people separated by years and social station from the carnival life. No parenting guides would condone allowing a six-year-old to walk the neighborhood with real pistols strapped to his waist, using a small child to sell bootleg liquor, or even taking a child Alvin’s age on the road with the medicine show. Alvin’s later problems with the law might seem traceable to those formative years, though he protests that “he didn’t raise me to do those crazy things I did. I wasn’t raised to want to go out and fight and do all this other crazy stuff; I was raised to play music. I was raised walking the streets with a black Stella guitar in my hand.”

There were advantages to being Pink Anderson’s son that extended beyond the easy acquisition of quarters and dimes. Unlike most of Spartanburg’s black citizens, Pink’s reputation as a musician allowed him access to all parts of town and discouraged overt (read: violent) racism towards Alvin. “When people started talking about segregation and racism, I was lost,” says Alvin. “I couldn’t associate segregation because I never had to
Alvin was almost ten years old when his father suffered a stroke that severely hampered his ability to play music. The stroke, which hit Anderson some months after playing a “legitimate” gig at Clemson University with Bobby Tate, was extremely serious. “The doctors said he would never play again,” says Alvin, yet Pink eventually regained about ninety percent of his skill.

“After the stroke, he stopped trying to play as much in front of crowds, but he still played at home.”

“When I first started to play on my own,” says Alvin, “I was uncomfortable playing his [Pink’s] style of music. I’ve always loved it, but I wasn’t comfortable playing it. I played electric blues, and I used to think that the guitar was just good to get a few extra dollars and a woman. He told me, ‘One day, you gonna pick up that guitar and you gonna take it serious. That guitar will feed you when nothing else will.’ You know, if I had it to do over again there’s a lot of things I would do different.”

With Pink primarily bound to his house because of health problems, Alvin got, as he put it, “wilder and wilder.” Alvin’s musical stature around town was growing, but so was his penchant for trouble. In the early 1970s, Alvin was sentenced to a fifteen-year jail term at the same time that his father was reclaiming his guitar skills that had been depleted by the stroke.

Alvin Anderson remembers that Pink made $3,200 on the Northern tour, and Book Binder confirms that figure. “We were pretty tickled when we sent him home with that pile,” Book Binder says. “The next time I came down, he had two refrigerators, a new gun, a guitar, and beer and wine in the refrigerator.”

“Little Pink” strikes a pose on his porch, the same as his daddy decades earlier.
Senior Laura Vaughn was immediately enamored with the lanky Peter-Frampton-meets-Johnny-Cash upon his 7:30 arrival at Nashville's classiest Comfort Inn. He wore a black sports coat over a grey button-down shirt, untucked, top button unbuttoned—with cowboy boots like two stallions the color of night. Laura immediately sought Hallie for advice on horses.

After a brief ride in the van, the group sat at two tables at Noshville in Nashville as Laura checked out and photographed the pickle bar. “I've never seen a pickle bar so in-Noshable as in Nashville.”

Jason: Laura, how many pickle bars have you seen in your life?
Laura: Actually, none.
Jason: So, really, it's the most noshable pickle bar you've ever seen.

Peter Cooper told us the story of his life, which included amateur and semi-professional musicianship and his development of a writing career made possible by Wofford College professor John Lane's bout with the flu. John sent Peter to cover a concert in Asheville. He told us of his brief stint in professional heckling, culminating in a riveting account of the climax of his career as a basketball fan at Wofford College when the coach of Newberry's team threw a cup of water in his face after Peter said, “win or lose: no matter what is the outcome of this game, you're still going to wake up in Newberry!”

Some of Peter's early instruction in writing came at Wofford in Professor Lane's English 200 class. Mr. Cooper recounted Professor Lane's difficulty in inspiring enthusiasm for the great classic Oedipus Rex who "married his own mama and got so mad that he poked his own eyes out!" (Can you imagine?)

After Lewis and Jason D. ordered two Cokes, two milkshakes, thirteen pickles, a main course, an after-dinner cognac, souvenir t-shirts and a happy ending, saying, “Charge it to the grant!” we headed to the local used record/CD/comic book/vintage porn/sock and underwear store and canoe rental. Standing on the street, we plotted how to get the undergrads into the local Station Inn for a night of gambling with destiny to the strains of bluegrass music. The ensemble of seven was made up of middle-agers shod in white orthopedic shoes and boasting Nashville tourist t-shirts. Resident bluegrass expert, Wilson, explained to the novices what their opinions of the group would be: “Despite the often unpleasant nasal tones of their voices, the instrumentation was both adept and original. Their solos were spontaneous and not canned.” His analysis was lost on the rest of the group, for they had never heard cans make any noise at all. Leland was still pondering why his request for “Phantom of the Opera” had been rejected.

The night ended in shock and disappointment as Jason was unable to sneak out with the three-thousand dollar bass without being seen. At that point, one of Lewis's friends showed up, evacuated the lawless group, all of whom were disappointed with the knowledge that the press—our own Peter Cooper—had already left the building.

Peter Cooper, we salute you. And Laura salutes your black stallion cowboy boots.
I don’t usually do this kind of work,” Brenda, a biologist I know, said when she left a message on my phone. “But I found a dead possum that you might like and threw it in the refrigerator for you.” When I told Brenda and others that I was going to make a banjo and needed an animal hide, they got carried away. A neighbor stopped me on the way to the post office with directions to a dead squirrel on the side of the road, and a friend delivered news of his latest decomposing find to me as I sat at a crowded lunch table. Pretty soon people in three counties were pulling off the road and tossing carcasses in the back of their cars—for Harvey. “Every time I see roadkill,” my friend John told me, “I think of you.”

When the dogs brought a mangled groundhog to my porch, I knew that it was time to put an end to the scavenger hunt and asked Dick Aunspaugh—an artist with an abiding love for Native American lore—to help me make a rawhide top for my homemade banjo. He suggested deer.

Dick picked the hide up at a local slaughterhouse and when I arrived was already fleshing out the inside with a tool, fat and goo falling away as he scraped toward himself. “You have to bring the tool straight toward you,” he said, handing the blade to me. “Go too far this way or that,” he added, moving his hand like a loose rudder, “and the skin will tear.” My gestures were timid—I probably would have thrown up if I had thought about what I was doing—and when I reached the teat of the doe and scraped right over it I did wince and get a little queasy.

Later we stretched the skin across a rack and leaned it against a teepee made from oak trunks. It was a beautiful fall day—windy with a bright blue sky, the mountains around us choked with autumnal colors and the lawn littered with yellows and reds. “It should dry in a few hours out here,” Dick said while giving the hide one more scraping, the juice from the skin running off the blade into the grass.

It wasn’t until the next day, though, that we got to work again, and by this time the hide had turned light brown, streaking here and there with dark colors. “Blood,” Dick said—some apparently remains in the blue-white skin even after repeated scrapings. We turned the rack over and began to shave the fur away from the top with another blade, this one set to cut at a right angle with the hide. “This is the dry-scraping method,” Dick said, “the one used by Indians in tribes all across America.”

As I scraped away, trying to see in a banjo in all this, Dick pointed to a hole in the shoulder of the hide. “See? The hunter must have been in a tree stand, up above.” A bullet like that would make a mess of an animal’s insides, I thought watching Dick trace the trajectory of the bullet across the skin. “Look,” he said, holding up the opposite edge, exposing a hole the size of a fist ripped into tough flesh. “It blew out here.”

* * *

A banjo is more like a wonder of nature than a musical instrument, in the same league as panther, lightning bolt, and tornado. Like a mountain, it has no will of its own and succumbs to no one. Like a creek, it makes the same noise over and over and never repeats itself. Like the wind, it changes what it finds and leaves nothing behind. It does only what it does and that is always too much. Cussedly limited, it follows the path of most resistance, creating music from the sparks.

It is hysterical. Those who hear only happiness in its jangle—and see blank-faced minstrels or hillbillies or bewhiskered beatniks when they hear the name—mistake its hysteria for happiness. It asks ears to bear all that fingers can do, and when the fingers stop and the banjo is safely back in its case, what it has done rings on in the ears, the limping and thumping of its clawhammer beat nestling deep in the body and, in due time, becoming one with the lub-dub and whoosh of restless and ailing hearts.

Next to writing, the banjo is the hardest skill I have ever learned. For twenty-five years a banjo that my father bought for me when I was a boy had leaned unused against the wall in my closet, a mystery; a be-devilment. Most of the problem was a lack of time—I was busy earning a living and raising a family and the banjo was low on the list of things to do. The rest of the problem was that thelicks—the motions of the right hand—did not come naturally to me, probably because I play the guitar.

The basic pick on the guitar is down and up—down with the thumb and up with the fingers. With the banjo, the clawhammer stroke is all down—a bit like shaking water off the fingers—and, probably toughest of all for the guitarist who leads with the thumb, the banjo player leads with the nail of the index finger, picking out melodies, the thumb, coming down last in the sequence, an afterthought.

Those years of playing the guitar had ruined me in another way. Unlike the guitar, the highest string on the banjo is set beside the lowest, so when I picked the instrument up it seemed upside down, no matter how I held it, and when I played—or tried to play—I felt as if I were doing a headstand. Oddly, walking while playing seemed to help, especially if I side-shuffled to the left in a vain attempt to move the instrument where the fingers would not go, but that was a little too comic, me playing the same chord over and over and walking out the back door and across the yard, ending up somewhere near the trash cans and smiling apologetically to neighbors driving by. So, time after time, I put the damn thing away in disgust.

While the banjo sat, propped against the wall and ignored behind the pantlegs in my closet, I would still listen enviously to banjo music and hear the controlled stumbling of its rhythms in my head. A few times—I remember this distinctly—I dreamed the
fingering, over and over all night, doing it perfectly in sleep, and upon waking, drawn irresistibly to the back of my closet, yanked the cursed thing out of its spot, tuned the old strings, and, in broad daylight, tried again. Each time, after these dreams, I almost had it, my tongue crawling out of the corner of my mouth as I tried to get the fingers to do my will, but sooner or later, I began to lean to the left and, after a few bars, had a funny feeling that if I kept on like this my head would fall off.

There is really no other sound like the clawhammer, and for this I guess we should be grateful. It is called clawhammer because the hand is curved and fingers extended in a way similar to a hammerhead, the name suggesting a brittle, constricted movement. To me, the hand looks more like a scampering rabbit, an undulation with a kink in it. The kink is the first downstroke, the nail of the forefinger hitting the string, the hare leaping over fallen trees while other notes scamper along ignominiously behind, all hindquarters and scurrying legs. To learn how to play I would slow the stroke to an agonizing tortoise crawl, methodically going through the motions. Imagine sex that is all foreplay, the rhythm of the bodies never catching up with the breathing of the lovers. It was frustrating.

Then one day it clicked. I have to admit I had been practicing with the usual ludicrous results but success came, as it often does, when I stopped trying. I was sitting in my office after a day of teaching, grading papers in silence, when I looked up and knew I could do it. Something snapped—some old guitar string of mind—and the clawhammer, even many of its variations, was suddenly available to me, and I could play it standing stock still. Even now, after years of successfully keeping my head on as I play, I am so happy it is hard to repress a smile.

As a boy I recall going along with Dad to the woods to get the timber for banjo-making. He selected a tree by its appearance and by sounding...biting a tree with a hammer or axe broad-sided, to tell by sound if it's straight gained.

—Frank Proffitt

It wasn't long after I got the hang of playing the banjo that I decided to make one. I went into the woods behind my house and considered the possibility: a banjo cut from a tree by my favorite creek. I even banged on a few trunks with a hammer, the clang echoing off the hills around me. "I can't describe it in words," Frank Proffitt once said, "but I see inside the tree by the sound of hitting it." Well, I couldn't see a thing. No matter how many times I banged on a trunk, the bark remained inscrutable. Soon I gave up. I had never felled a tree before, and visions of being pinned under an enormous poplar kept me from trying.

My next plan was to go to a lumber mill, but after visiting three mills in North Carolina, I gave up on that idea too. These places were doing big jobs—with eighteen-wheelers hauling out flats of hardwood lumber for furniture makers. No one had time for a lone banjo. "I'd have to stop these jobs and reset the saw to give you a finished piece," the manager of the third mill told me. "We can't do that until dinner." He spat on the gravel parking lot, and we both looked together in silence at the grey tree line and a sky as dull and colorless as galvanized metal. Things were looking glum, and he could sense, I guess, my disappointment. Behind us the saw never stopped grinding. "Hell," he added at last, looking around to be sure no one could hear. "They sell the stuff at Lowe's."

So I collected the poplar for my authentic banjo by sounding the wood at the discount hardware store. I stood for an hour or more at the display eyeing the long boards for the neck and checking the grain on the wide boards that would make up the body. I bought other supplies there—stain, brass screws, and drill bits—saving the best for last. I had read that most homemade banjos had a six-inch skin head because the skin had to be fitted over a standard piece of stovepipe. Sure enough, stovepipe—in many lengths—could be found in the wood-burner section of the hardware store, all of it with six-inch diameters. After a day of gathering supplies, I had all that I needed and headed home, over the mountain, a banjo—or most of it at least—clattering unshaped and un-built in the trunk of my car.

My earliest memory was of waking up on a wintry morning and hearing my father picking...in a slow mournful way.

—Frank Proffitt

The patron saint of the mountain banjo is Frank Proffitt. There are, of course, several contenders for the position, since the mountains from Georgia to West Virginia have produced many great traditional banjo players—Buell Kazee, Bascom Lunsford, Clarence Ashley, Samantha Bumgardner, and Hedy West to name a few—but Proffitt, who played the songs on the banjo he made, sang with such simplicity and directness, such dignity, that it broke your heart. It saints can come bearing wood, hide, and catgut, than Proffitt was one.

He was born and raised in Beech Mountain, NC, an area that was once rich in songs and music making. His life was isolated. His father, Wiley Proffitt, never saw a city until he was middle-aged. Frank didn't either, until he was fourteen and, with friends, hiked to Mountain City, Tennessee. It was, by and large, a life insulated from the modern American experience. "I reckon you might call me a loner," Proffitt once admitted. Sometimes he would spend an entire day in the cabin near his house that served as a workshop and retreat. "I like people, you understand, but I look forward to coming here to the old house where I make the banjos...It gives me time to think."

It was in the cabin, while he was working, that the lyrics of songs, carried in his memory on the voices of his father and others like Noah Proffitt, would come to him, hundreds and hundreds of tunes, most of which can be traced back to ancient English ballads. Others, such as "Tom Dooley," grew out of local legends and lore. Some of his earliest memories included sitting on the hearth by the fire listening to the adults in his family tell tales and sing. Most of what he knew about music he learned from them, especially his father, a man Proffitt described as "always busy but never hurryng."

Frank Warner, singer and song collector, brought Proffitt's music to the larger world. Together he and the mountain singer went to the folk festival at the University of Chicago. There Proffitt heard bluegrass pickers using a flashy Scruggs picking style,
and he had to resist the temptation to change the way he played. "I'd be myself," he thought, "and if they liked it fine. If they didn't, well, I would just come one back here to the mountains and forget the whole thing." Sandy Paton, who recorded Proffitt's songs, once asked him what he thought of Scrugg's picking. "I'd like to be able to do it," Proffitt said, "and then not do it."

What he did do—it was his holy calling—was remain faithful to the tradition of singing and banjo playing he inherited. "I know I'm not much, musically speaking," he said once. "I do what I am able, trying to keep to the original as handed me from other days." By being himself and nothing more, Proffitt claimed his inheritance, taking his place in a lineage that bound him to "other days"—a heritage that carried him back, as certainly as the genes in his blood, to the first song, a continuous, evolving tradition passed from the lips of one person to the ears of another, the songs, as old as the human race, arriving as naturally as the color of eyes and hair.

---

Kenneth Clark, in his book and television series Civilization, cites a culture's art as the most "trustworthy book" to record its existence and history, more so than written records of events. In Bernini's sculptures, I think, there is an idea of the grandeur and optimism of the Catholic Reformation. In Mozart's symphonies, we can see the empirical brilliance of the Enlightenment. What do we look to for a picture of the American South? What records can we boast? The saga of the South has been recorded in words, in paint, but most notably, and originally, perhaps, in song, perhaps in bluegrass music.

Start with the Mason Dixon line. Extend it west from the Atlantic, taking in Virginia, West Virginia, but head South once you reach Ohio, follow that river down to wrap the line around Kentucky (the Bluegrass state, of course) and take it just west of the Mississippi. Then slide the rest of the way down the delta to the Gulf Coast. Here is one of many cradles of civilization, framed by rivers and coasts, with the arch of Appalachia to add some backbone. If you wished, you could break this down into smaller cradles—the rolling Piedmont regions on either side of the mountains, the Atlantic coastal plain, the Gulf Coast. But this is the area that for most purposes we, like most Americans, will refer to as The South. It's a region unified by a culture that is made up of dozens of subcultures from each sub-region within. The culture in this region is one that has been historically obstinate and almost incestuous in its determination to stay close to the past, but it is changing and growing faster than we observe. The South is letting in the world, and it's exporting itself out in return. If we want to look at the dynamic growth and change of that culture, we can look at bluegrass music, an original creation of the region that is both firmly grounded in tradition and radically new.

There is a widely prevalent and incorrect belief that bluegrass music is the traditional old-time music of the Southern Appalachians. This probably is rooted in a coincidence of timing more than anything. The popularity of radio was just hitting its peak in the late nineteen thirties when bluegrass music was in its early developmental stages. Old-time and country music were just starting to reach the airwaves, and to someone unfamiliar with the sounds, bluegrass was just one more old timer that found its way to the airwaves. While bluegrass music certainly pulls heavily from localized musical traditions, its present state is due to the musical determination of a few individuals who pulled all those different influences together around one sound that was flavored and changed by the.
Ideals of one man—Bill Monroe.

William Monroe was born in 1911 in Rosine, Kentucky. Rosine was important for Monroe's early musical development, and subsequently the invention of bluegrass music. Rosine is located in the Piedmont region of central Kentucky, in close proximity to the Appalachian stringband culture and the bluesy Mississippi. Mary Katherine Aldin, who compiled Monroe's recordings for the Decca label, notes the influence of Monroe's home life in Rosine on his development: "In the family band which his parents encouraged the children to form, many of his older brothers and sisters played instruments and sang; as the youngest and smallest, by the time he was old enough to learn music, only the mandolin was left." Monroe's first recordings on the radio with his brother Charlie stand as a milestone—the introduction of the mandolin, an instrument brought to the United States by Mediterranean immigrants, as a key instrument in hillbilly music.

Aldin also notes the influence of two key musicians in Monroe's childhood years, Pendleton Vandiver and Arnold Schultz. Vandiver, known as "Uncle Pen" to Bill, was an old time fiddler who played traditional dance tunes on the fiddle—songs from England, Scotland, and Ireland that found their way to the Appalachians in the waves of Scotch Irish immigrants and flourished there in the isolation. Vandiver's influence had several effects. First of all, it brought the fiddle, and its melodic potential, to Monroe's attention, and one or more fiddles would always be featured in Monroe's later bands. Also, the rapid tempos of the reels and dances, and the steady beat necessary for dancing, made an impression on Monroe, especially in his own mandolin playing. This exposure also had a remarkable influence on Monroe's ideas of tonalities.

Arnold Schultz, a neighbor of the Monroes, also proved to be an important contributor to the father of bluegrass. Schultz was a piedmont bluesman who played guitar, and Bill quickly recognized how different his style of playing was from all the white guitar players he knew. The blues would become an important part of Monroe's music, particularly from a structural standpoint. The simple three or four chord progressions of the blues would become the basis for most of Monroe's song writing and adaptation. Where Monroe really struck out on new ground, however, was where he combined the modal tones of the mountains with the simple progressions of the blues.

By laying the modal melodies over the major chord progressions, Monroe and those influenced by his music set about making a new sound, one that combined the simple joy of the major scale with the mournful tone of a minor key. This combination became the basis of all of Monroe's later work and is still a quintessential part of modern bluegrass.

There was one final powerful influence from Bill's early life: the Methodist Church. The Monroes were a Christian family, and Bill was exposed to southern gospel music at an early age. While blues and mountain fiddling may have been the primary elements of the instrumental and structural side of Bill's music, the vocal flavor, says Neil Rosenberg, came straight from Protestantism. The high, drawn out vocal melodies of gospel were perfect for Monroe's soaring tenor. But the gospel harmony was the most distinctive influence. On choruses to songs, or in some cases on all the verses, two to four part harmonies pulled all the members of the band together, stacking the harmony notes one on top of the other over the melody note. These three genres form the major strains that Monroe wove into bluegrass music.

However, the simple presence of these influences is not what made the sound so distinct. Monroe's recording of "Get Down on Your Knees and Pray" features all these genres—modal tonalities, gospel harmony and content, a distinct minor blues flavor—but it is not immediately recognizable as bluegrass so much as it is a bluesy gospel song, or a religious blues. Compare this to "New Mule Skinner Blues." In addition to the content of the lyrics, these songs have much in common in vocal style, tonalities, and structure. What is
missing from “Get Down on Your Knees and Pray” that is striking in “New Muleskinner Blues” is Monroe’s characteristic drive, the pull of his mandolin chopping the music forward.

If the mandolin was new to rural music, Monroe’s sound was new to the mandolin. Although he played with remarkable virtuosity and even delicacy at times, what made Monroe different from other players was the driving sound he pulled from the instrument, making use of its double strings for spectacular down beats. In rhythm, particularly, he stood out, bringing the pick down on the strings in a heavy, muted “chop” on the offbeat, playing opposite the bass on the down beats. This driving chop allowed Monroe to hold a band together when playing at the rapid tempos he chose to play at. With these fast tempos came improvisations. Unlike in most traditional rural music forms, Monroe and his side men did not just repeat the melody with their instruments, but they improvised and changed as they played, like jazz musicians. As one instrument took the melody, the others reverted to backing, then a verse, then a solo, and so on.

As distinctive as this sound was, it was the only sound Monroe wanted. He had broken from his brothers after spectacular fights over musical differences in which Monroe refused to compromise. Set on pursuing music his own way, Monroe formed his own band, “The Bluegrass Boys,” named for his home state and later the name of the genre of music he created almost single handedly. Aldin notes that Monroe was a strict professional as far as music was concerned and had little trouble attracting musicians to fill openings in his band. However, once they were there, turnover was a different story: “He was a tough task master who expected much, paid little, and tolerated little deviation from his musical straight and narrow, but once you had served time in his band, you were a professional,” wrote Aldin of Monroe’s band policies.

Rather than backfire and kill the bluegrass music in its developmental stages, Monroe’s acerbic management style actually ended up propagating the music in a way he never could have achieved through simply influencing other musicians through his recordings. The best and brightest of the acoustic musicians in the Southeast came and went in his band. Musicians who entered were pushed to expertise on their instruments, given the indelible stamp of Monroe’s drive and then left in rage at Monroe’s stinginess and stubbornness. And then those musicians would continue to play music in their own bands that they formed, causing the genre to spread and grow in popularity. And for all Monroe’s stubbornness, the influence worked both ways. Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, in turn, became enamored with the bluegrass style and spread its popularity with their own bands, as they performed in such Hollywood appearances as “The Beverly Hillbillies” and on the sound track of the highly successful 1967 film “Bonnie and Clyde.”

By the fifties, when Monroe started recording regularly for the Decca label, the essential bluegrass song had been established, as can be seen in the 1950 recording of “New Muleskinner Blues.” This would be the major strain of bluegrass music for years to come, even into the present day. Bluegrass music had been push and pull between past, present, and future, much like the culture of the South as a whole. From the nineteen sixties onward, there has been a distinct “New Grass Movement,” a body of musicians who bring influences of rock and jazz and other styles into bluegrass as a way of modernizing it. Some musicians continue to pioneer new influences, while others remain steadfastly true to the past. Blue Highway, a bluegrass group considered by many to be one of the more forward thinking, progressive bluegrass bands, still slips into traditional modes on such recordings as “Man of Constant Sorrow.”

I myself, an amateur bluegrass musician, had the opportunity to play with one of Bill Monroe’s old sidemen, the fiddler Bobby Hicks (who also recorded on the “Bluegrass Albums” with Rice and Crowe). It was at a jam session at a local Baptist church in Pumpkinstone, South Carolina, one that I had attended several times before. I played my chords and runs the way Lester Flatt would have done it, the way Bill Monroe would have wanted it, along with three other guitarists eager to share the honor. In fact, we had a little too much of just about every instrument, as everyone cramped into a side room in the little church community building to share in the event.

Bobby Hicks looks like you’d expect a bluegrass fiddler to look: tall, sun tanned, sturdy built, a little bit of a paunch hanging over his large belt buckle, thinning hair that’s still dark, and sharp eyes that smile out of the crags and wrinkles of his face. He wore faded blue jeans and a plaid work shirt, tucked in with the sleeves rolled up. He played standing up the whole time, we all did, running through the classic fiddle numbers like “Cotton-Eye Joe” and “Sharecropper’s Son.” Then he switched to a slow song, a country song called “Faded Love.” As he played the slow melody, he played his own harmonies on the fiddle, a soaring tenor line above the melody he was playing. As I marveled at this virtuosic touch, I noticed something different about his fiddle—it had five strings instead of the usual four.

Hicks’ fiddle is a perfect example of the changes that have occurred, or can occur, in bluegrass music and in Southern culture as a whole. Innovation doesn’t have to be destruction of tradition—it can be a complement. The high harmonies on Hicks’s augmented fiddle were as distinctively bluegrass as anything Bill Monroe ever recorded, a throwback to the high harmonies Monroe’s vocalists sang together and the twin fiddle sound he loved. The change to Bobby’s fiddle only enhanced his ability to play music of all kinds. The same thing can happen in the South. We don’t always have to choose between innovation and tradition; they’re just two sides of the cultural coin. A tradition, whether it’s bluegrass music or cornbread, is nothing but an innovation that has grown old and been accepted. Bluegrass musicians will probably continue to look forward, but they won’t forget the past either.