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BOOK REVIEWS

Bill Monroe: The Life and Music of the Blue Grass Man

By Tom Ewing. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018.

Dixie Dewdrop: The Uncle Dave Macon Story

By Michael D. Doubler. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018.

The Blue Sky Boys

By Dick Spottswood. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018.

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Country music history has become a hot topic, thanks to *Country Music: A Film by Ken Burns*, the documentary filmmaker's latest project, which aired in September 2019 on PBS. The contents of this series continue to be debated by fans, critics, and scholars, and it seems everyone has an opinion about what should and should not be included. As Mr. Burns comments, "[P]eople will quibble and say, 'Why didn't you do this person, and if you did that person, why didn't you do that song?' And these are exactly the kind of conversations you want to have. But we're storytellers. We're not reading the telephone book. We're not an encyclopedia."[1] Despite the work's run-time of sixteen and a half hours, omissions and slights are inevitable.

Beyond issues of inclusion and exclusion, the documentary relies on the work of historian Bill C. Malone, author of the first (and now classic) *Country Music USA*, and follows Malone's claim that country music is southern music.[2] This southern thesis has been refuted and challenged many times over, as the scholarship of country music has grown immensely since the original publication of Malone's text in 1968.[3] Diverse work abounds in the field, some of which addresses Malone's omissions and moves beyond the standard narratives that are reinforced in the documentary. If a documentary film cannot be exhaustive in its coverage and methodology, then scholarship and research can always strive towards that goal. Indeed, *Country Music: A Film by Ken Burns* is an invitation to consider the vast and varied scholarship that better addresses the broad, diverse history of country music.

The texts discussed in this review examine the lives of individual country musicians and the contributions their careers have made to the genre, adding detail and dimension to those mentioned in Ken Burns's documentary, while also illuminating the experiences of lesser-known artists who have made important contributions to its history. While these works employ a positivistic methodology, it should be noted that recent trends in country music scholarship have moved away from such approaches, focusing instead on counternarratives and questions related to race, class, and gender.[4]

[1]Chris Willman, "Ken Burns on 'Country Music' and Why Merle, Hank, Dwight, Loretta and Lil Nas X Matter," *Variety*, September 15, 2019, https://variety.com/2019/music/news/ken-burns-interview-country-music-1203336019/.

[2]The most recent re-print is Bill C. Malone and Tracey E. W. Laird, *Country Music USA*, 50th Anniversary Edition (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018).

[3]See, for example, Patrick Huber, "The 'Southernness' of Country Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 31–53.

[4]This work includes, Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Kris McCusker and Diane Pecknold, eds., *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New*

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Nevertheless, each of these texts will benefit future scholars as reference works and points of departure. Fans and enthusiasts will also be pleased by the level of detail and exhaustive research evident in each work. Although this scholarship focuses on the lives and music of white men, primarily from the South, their examination of these artists' experiences, backgrounds, careers, and music offer a more nuanced understanding of country music, and provide insight into the early broadcasting, recording, and business practices of the emerging music industry.

A great deal has been written about the "Father of Bluegrass," Bill Monroe, covering his music, role in the genre of bluegrass, musical festivals, and even his personal life. Author Tom Ewing is a former Blue Grass Boy, who served as Monroe's last guitarist, music journalist, and editor of *The Bill Monroe Reader*.[5] In his new book, *Bill Monroe: The Life and Music of the Blue Grass Man*, Ewing seeks to fill any gaps and correct previous scholarship (and legend). Less has been written about David Harrison Macon, better known as Uncle Dave Macon, who is the subject of another new book. His contributions as a performer, recording artist, and contributor to the Grand Ole Opry have been well-documented. Michael D. Doubler, a historian and great-grandson of Uncle Dave, offers the first complete biography of him with *Dixie Dewdrop: The Uncle Dave Macon Story*. Finally, even less has been written about the Blue Sky Boys, a brother duo from North Carolina. Bill and Earl Bolick did not achieve the fame and notoriety of Monroe and Macon, but their careers overlapped with these artists in the 1930s and 1940s. As I discuss below, in *The Blue Sky Boys*, musicologist and historian Dick Spottswood uses the words of Bill Bolick to recount the duo's career and simultaneously add new insight to the story of country music.

Dixie Dewdrop: The Uncle Dave Macon Story presents the life of the "Grand Ole Man of the Grand Ole Opry," positioning Macon's career within the histories of the broadcast and recording industries. This biography pulls heavily from the Dr. Charles K. Wolfe Collection at Middle Tennessee State University's Center for Popular Music and is extensively supplemented by interviews conducted by the author, as well as family archives, memorabilia, and personal reminiscences that might otherwise have been unavailable to researchers. Biographies written by family members can pose unique challenges, and often result in bias, defensiveness, or tendencies toward hagiography. However, Doubler delivers a balanced account of the early Opry star, candidly recounting Macon's struggles with depression and alcoholism and detailing instances when he had to be institutionalized at the West Tennessee Hospital for the Insane. Throughout the work, the author seeks to accurately position Macon within the history and development of country music and acknowledge his unique contributions. Doubler states, "With his longevity, renowned performing style, and unique personality, Uncle Dave was a shaper of the developing commercial country music tradition. If Jimmie Rodgers is the 'Father of Country Music,' Uncle Dave Macon should be considered the 'Grandfather of Country Music'" (219). This work further includes appendices detailing the Macon family tree, along with twenty-three pages of photographs and memorabilia.

Dixie Dewdrop proceeds chronologically beginning with Macon's forebears and his early life. His childhood was spent in downtown Nashville, where his family ran a hotel. His father's untimely death foreshadowed Macon's future tragedy and the loss of his loved ones. The family eventually moved to property east of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, where the Macon family remained until the artist's death. By all accounts, Dave Macon was a strong, hard worker, and a canny businessman. His freight company, the Macon Midway Mule & Mitchell Wagon Transportation Company, was successful and prosperous, supporting his growing family with seven sons. Notably, he was reticent to embrace motorized vehicles, and as Doubler notes, he never learned to drive and ultimately closed his freight business in 1920 rather than adopt delivery trucks, stating, "Boys, you can keep your trucks; just give me my banjo!" (61).

The following chapters trace Uncle Dave's transition from an amateur musician to professional entertainer, recording artist, and Opry star, including details of Macon's adoption of his iconic

Essays in Gender and Country Music (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016); Diane Pecknold, ed., *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

[5]Tom Ewing, ed., *The Bill Monroe Reader* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

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sartorial style featuring a dark, three-piece suit, gold pocket watch, and black, angled plug hat. Early in his career, he honed his performing skills, including all manner of stage antics, banjo twirling, and jokes, in addition to developing a repertoire of old-time, comedy, minstrel, and religious songs. For someone averse to technological advancements, Macon seemed to understand radio's importance for the future of his musical career and embraced the medium. By mid-1926, he was a regular on the Opry.

In the Opry's first twelve years, Uncle Dave Macon was undoubtedly "its main star and premier vocalist," due to his recordings and well-established performing career (182). Even as the show evolved throughout the 1940s—with its turn toward western styles and new electric instruments, the ascendency of Roy Acuff, and the arrival of Bill Monroe—Macon's popularity persisted. As detailed in chapter 6, on Saturday, March 1, 1952, he played the Opry as usual, but had to be carried off the stage following his performance. His failing health had caught up with him and surgeons discovered an advanced malignant tumor in his abdomen. Uncle Dave Macon passed away on March 22, 1952 at the Rutherford Hospital in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

Dixie Dewdrop concludes with a chapter titled "The Macon Music Legacy." Here Doubler notes numerous monuments, historical markers, and public displays, along with the many reissues of the star's recordings, including a comprehensive Bear Family Records boxset from 2004. Also of note, the author recounts the work of Pete and Mike Seeger in promoting Uncle Dave's music while also introducing him to a new generation of listeners. Doubler further writes that the Uncle Dave Macon Days festival held every summer in Murfreesboro is "the most significant and enduring tribute to Uncle Dave's music and legacy" (216).

Doubler is not a musician nor a musicologist, and the music itself does not receive serious attention—although he does provide a thorough account of his great-grandfather's recording sessions and the musicians involved. The author notes Uncle Dave's proclivity for collecting tunes and songs, acknowledging that Macon learned "Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy"—one of his greatest hits—as early as 1891 from a friend, Tom Davis, who was a Black millhand. *Dixie Dewdrop* also describes Macon's friendship with the Black musician, Deford Bailey, though it is clear that Macon was a man of his time, as evidenced in his use of racially-offensive words in his songs, as well as Doubler's descriptions of his patronizing interactions with his Black "help" around the homestead.

Born to humble beginnings and with basically no formal musical training, Uncle Dave Macon became a legendary superstar on the early Grand Ole Opry, was a successful and prolific recording artist, and a highly sought-after touring act. Considering that he began his professional music career after the age of fifty, these achievements are noteworthy, and the fact that he kept it up for over two decades is remarkable. This book supplements scholarship surrounding the Grand Ole Opry and its early stars and will be welcome for fans as well as for those interested in the early workings of the radio and music industries.

Readers may recognize features of Uncle Dave Macon's career mirrored in that of *The Blue Sky Boys*, including the great deal of time they spent on the road, performing and recording with various musicians, and regularly appearing on live radio. Both of the Bolicks also worked "day jobs," but unlike Macon they worked after retiring from music in the 1950s. The similarities end here, since the Blue Sky Boys (brothers Bill and Earl Bolick) were never superstars, despite recording extensively, being active for over two decades (in the 1930s and 1940s), and gaining a loyal fanbase throughout the South. Finally, their sweet vocal harmonies had lasting influences on brotherly and duet-style singing.

According to author Dick Spottswood, his book project began at the request of the Bolick family. Spottswood discovered that Bill Bolick had "provided numerous spoken interviews and written accounts of his music, life, and career [over the years] and he was unsparing in his appraisals of all aspects of the Blue Sky Boys story and the country music world of the 1930s and 1940s" (xv). The result is the story of the duo told primarily from the perspective of Bill and supplemented by the author. This narrative occupies a brief 122 pages in thirteen short chapters presented chronologically, and it parallels the many changes to the country music industry and radio landscape. The remaining two-thirds of the book contains two substantial appendices. The first is a nearly exhaustive annotated list of every song recorded by the Blue Sky Boys, which includes commentary from Bill Bolick and/or

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Spottswood, as well as lyrics, images of sheet music covers, the origins of the recording, and more. The second appendix features a complete discography, including broadcast and audition transcriptions from Bill's personal collection. Photos and memorabilia are also included throughout.

The Bolicks were a middle-class family, living in the mid-sized, progressive mill town of Hickory, North Carolina. Bill, who played mandolin and sang tenor harmony, and Earl who played guitar and sang lead, started performing as teenagers, playing and singing music from church (particularly their father's favorite hymns), as well as songs learned from friends and neighbors. They received regular exposure to Saturday night barn dance radio shows and their early career demonstrates the precarious nature of the music industry. Radio was lucrative when a sponsor was involved, but more importantly, it provided an advertising opportunity to announce personal appearances and concerts, and sell sheet music and songbooks. One notable concern for the Bolocks was that of transportation: several opportunities slipped away due to their lack of a reliable car. Later in their career, the brothers also fell victim to new business models in the music industry and the shifting tastes in country music.

As Spottswood details, the Bolicks performed on WGST in Atlanta, Georgia, and soon had an opportunity to record with RCA Victor and Bluebird producer Eli Oberstein, one-time assistant to Ralph Peer. The session was in Charlotte, North Carolina, in June 1936 and, at the producer's request, they adopted their stage name after the Blue Ridge Mountains and the region's "Land of the Blue Sky" moniker. Following a lost sponsorship and brief hiatus, they returned to WGST in 1938 with friend Richard "Red" Hicks, honing their trio singing skills and establishing the comedic portion of their show.

Following a lucrative stint on the 5000-watt CBS affiliate, WPTF in Raleigh, North Carolina, that began in 1939, Red Hicks retired from music and left the Blue Sky Boys in October 1940. Bill and Earl were drafted to the military in 1941. Returning from war in 1945, the Blue Sky Boys struggled to reclaim their success and loyal following. As the author notes, "Their singing sounded relatively old-fashioned as country music evolved in the postwar years" (74). Changing tastes paired with poor business decisions thus plagued the Blue Sky Boys post-war success. Bill notes, "We never had any success with Victor after World War II, for the simple reason that they wanted us to add all kinds of instruments, rhythm guitar, and this and that. I said if you do that you are taking away the sound of our music and I refused" (95). As a result, the Blue Sky Boys broke up in 1951.

The book's final chapter describes the Bolicks's reunion recordings on Starday records in 1963, which includes a hymn collection that duplicates the sound of their 1940s recordings, and a second LP that incorporates "all kinds of instruments," such as steel guitar and drums.[6] The following year saw the return of the Blue Sky Boys performing for folk audiences, and they recorded an additional album for Capitol Records in 1965. They reappeared in 1974, performed a final reunion concert in 1975, and recorded for Rounder Records in 1976.

This book presents a thoughtful telling of the story of the Blue Sky Boys from the perspective of Bill Bolick. Considering the material that the author had at his disposal, this is likely all that will ever be known about the duo. However, the reliance on Bill's words feels a bit uneven at times; it is notable that Earl's voice is absent. The alternation between Bill's and the author's voices loosens the narrative somewhat, although hearing Bolick's perspective is invaluable. Fans of the Blue Sky Boys have long waited for this comprehensive work, and the exhaustive appendices will be of interest to collectors and enthusiasts for years to come.

In returning to a more famous figure, Tom Ewing's thoroughly researched *Bill Monroe: The Life and Music of the Blue Grass Man* "is not necessarily a biography. It is, more accurately, a chronicle…" (vii). Ewing's chronicle provides a detailed, chronological synopsis which he claims was inspired by Richard D. Smith's *Can't You Hear Me Calling: The Life of Bill Monroe, Father of Bluegrass* (2000), of which Ewing "didn't feel was adequate" (viii).[7] Ewing's book is therefore based upon interviews

[6]For more detailed discussion of Starday releases, see Nate Gibson, *The Starday Story: The House That Country Music Built* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011).

[7]Richard D. Smith, *Can't You Hear Me Calling: The Life of Bill Monroe, Father of Bluegrass* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2000).

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with sixty-eight former Blue Grass Boys, stories from local newspapers, and nearly fifteen years of research, including the author's move to Ohio County, Kentucky (where Monroe was born and raised), to gain access to locals who shared even more information and memories. The author begins with a Prologue discussing Monroe's ancestors and the early lives of his parents. Chapter 1 addresses the years 1892–1919 and subsequent chapters cover one decade each, concluding with 1990–96 (chapter 9). Several black-and-white photos are included along with an appendix featuring all of the Blue Grass Boys and extensive notes that supplement each chapter.

Throughout the book, Ewing maintains "Bill's firm conviction that bluegrass began in 1939, prior to his Opry debut," and, of course, situates the genre prior to Monroe's 1945 addition of Earl Scruggs and his three-fingerstyle picking to his band. The author acknowledges that "the classic bluegrass band" was assembled in 1946–47, featuring Monroe on mandolin, Scruggs on banjo, Lester Flatt on guitar, Howard Watts on bass, and Chubby Wise on fiddle. Ewing also notes the times that their songs were re-recorded, saying that it was not until the summer of 1978 that the first album devoted exclusively to these recordings was released. Indeed, all twelve selections on *Bill Monroe with Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs: "The Original Bluegrass Band"* were available on other albums from the 1960s, yet it was the 1978 album that put them all in one place.[8] Ewing writes that Monroe would not have approved of the album title nor the notes written by Neil Rosenberg that described the beginning of bluegrass as 1945.

The book's early chapters will likely be of greatest interest to bluegrass fans and Monroe enthusiasts, as Ewing provides clear accounts of his early life as part of a musical family, along with his music education via family members, church friends, and local musicians. The author emphasizes the importance of Monroe's mother Malissa in his musical upbringing, noting "Although her praises as a musical influence have been generally unsung, it's clear that Malissa was the first and, arguably, most important one in Bill's life" (10). Monroe's relationship with African American fiddler and guitarist Arnold Schultz is also highlighted here, and Ewing details Schultz's life and performances. Young Monroe was already known for his steady rhythmic playing abilities and was invited to play guitar at an all-night dance with Schultz (on fiddle) in 1925. Interestingly, Ewing notes that a version of "bluegrass" instrumentation may have been used to play dance parties in 1926 that featured young Monroe on mandolin, Schultz on guitar, Uncle Pen on fiddle, and a family friend, Clarence Wilson, on banjo.

The importance of James Pendleton Vandiver, or "Uncle Pen," in Bill Monroe's life is well documented and immortalized in the Monroe "true" song and autobiographical hit by the same name. When Monroe's mother Malissa had passed in 1921, and his father J. B. died of pneumonia in 1928, he moved in with Uncle Pen. The two were regulars playing for dances and parties, and Monroe, who was no stranger to manual labor and hard work, dedicated himself to learning and memorizing Uncle Pen's fiddle tunes to play on the mandolin—all the while establishing his own unique style.

In addition to detailing the numerous changes in his band's personnel, the author recounts every (likely) performance and recording session that Bill Monroe took part in, including Grand Ole Opry tent shows and baseball games. He also details the development and growth of the multi-day bluegrass festival throughout the 1950s and 1960s, along with the contributions of Ralph Rinzler and Carlton Haney to promoting the genre. Ewing further provides background information about how songs were composed, noting that Monroe frequently claimed credit for any song he helped to write, and at times, any that were created by a Blue Grass Boy.

Ewing does not shy away from the darker side of Bill Monroe, including his difficult nature, the interpersonal rifts and feuds, and, of course, the women he dated, who were often much younger than him. As with the rest of the book, this information is presented in an encyclopedic manner with little to no interpretation nor commentary, which presents it in a way that might seem to excuse Monroe's actions. Indeed, many of the feuds were later reconciled in his older age, during onstage reunions at Carlton Haney's festivals as part of "The Blue Grass Music Story." Ewing addresses Monroe's women in his final chapter titled "Epilogue," noting that "those relationships helped Bill

[8] *Bill Monroe with Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs: "The Original Bluegrass Band,"* Rounder Special Series—06, 1978, LP.

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continue to feel young and vital throughout the years we knew him, and they inspired some great love songs" (469).

To the uninitiated, the book's unadorned writing style, assiduous attention to detail, and long length might be off-putting. However, in clarifying previously unsubstantiated claims about Monroe, this text offers a useful supplement to the scholarly literature on bluegrass and its "Father" figure. Tom Ewing's "chronicle" is therefore likely to become the primary reference work for anyone interested in these topics.

Bluegrass continues to intrigue music scholars, as was evidenced at the 2019 meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology in Bloomington, Indiana, during a roundtable discussion, titled "Brown County Breakdown: Bluegrass Scholarship and Practice for the 21st Century." With a small group of practitioners and senior and junior scholars present, including the chair Lee Bidgood, issues of research, methodology, and curricula in bluegrass were addressed, and it was noted that each generation had its own concerns when it came to these topics. Although some established scholars and historians have been more concerned with documenting and archiving, it was apparent from this conversation that newer scholars have a greater interest in questioning standard narratives, exploring the role and contributions of marginalized communities, and theorizing the genre's standards. These observations resonate with the discussion of the texts reviewed here, and with the future direction of country music scholarship, more broadly. These books are definitive works that will serve as references and invite future scholarship. Taken together, *Bill Monroe: The Life and Music of the Blue Grass Man*, *Dixie Dewdrop: The Uncle Dave Macon Story*, and *The Blue Sky Boys* provide a clearer and richer picture of the development of the country music industry and the establishment of musical and performance practice that endures to present day.

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Rethinking Reich

Edited by Sumanth Gopinath and Pwyll ap Siôn. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

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The portrait of Steve Reich that emerges from *Rethinking Reich* is filled with intentional points of convergence and tension, confirmations and contradictions, and balanced treatments of the so-called minimalist composer that provide the expertly curated volume with its hermeneutical richness and musicological value. The fourteen authors included—some whose professional and personal relationships to Reich have been career defining—demonstrate their willingness to raise timely (and sometimes uncomfortable) questions about the broader cultural and musical contexts for some of his most beloved works. They describe Reich in equal measures as a radical and a traditionalist, identifying his approach to composition as conservative and progressive, and his relationship to non-western culture as both respectful and exploitative. As the editors note in their introduction, these internal debates were a core aim of the volume: to resist the temptation to reduce Reich or his works to "single, simple meanings," or to analyze them "in uniform and wholly consistent ways" (7). Such critical treatment required the authors to contend with Reich's own self-curated discourse, which Sumanth Gopinath and Pwyll ap Siôn openly admit can "obfuscate more complex realities and contentious ideologies

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