

KEYS TO THE HIGHWAY

by ROGER GOODMAN

How did you get started playing music? Some of us learned in school, some took lessons and some were self-taught. I did all of the above. Let me explain.

When I entered junior high school my mother said, "You will take a musical instrument in school." I thought about what instrument I wanted to play. I had held a guitar once but I didn't think there would be much call for that in band or orchestra. Finally, after a lot of consideration, I decided that I would play the piccolo. I was intrigued by the idea of an instrument that I could carry in my pocket. On my first day in junior high orchestra class, the teacher asked, "What instrument do you play?" I sheepishly admitted that I didn't play anything yet. Then, with a little more bravado, I said, "But I want to play the piccolo!" She said, "We have plenty of piccolo players but not enough violinists. You now play the violin." So the die was cast – I was a violinist.

I didn't really understand my new toy but found myself totally fascinated. I still remember how magical it was drawing the bow over the strings for the first time and feeling the violin vibrate through my body. At the same time it felt like a black box filled with music, but the music was all locked up inside. I was determined to unlock those secrets and get at the music.

Unfortunately, I found that the music as taught in the schools didn't move me ahead as I had hoped. I found that the delivery of musical information in the schools



Adventures in Music Theory



was much like what I experienced in my math classes. There was no "big-picture" or overall framework that should have been presented at the beginning. Without this framework there is only an endless collection of unrelated details. The result can be a feeling of being overwhelmed, shutting down the learning process and eventually producing a music or math-phobic dropout. If, on

the other hand, a good framework is presented up front, each new piece of information will fit into place and help clarify the subject.

Although I had problems with my musical education, my interest in music remained. On my own, I learned music theory a piece at a time. I extrapolated some patterns and was continually amazed to see them pop up again and again. The patterns helped me to visualize melodies, chords and chord progressions. I began to feel in control rather than lost. Everything started to fit.

I stopped playing the violin after I left junior high. I did, however, begin playing folk music on the guitar near the end of high school. I fell in with a group of bluegrass musicians and began to flat pick melody and bass runs as well as learn new chords and sing. I was at a bluegrass jam at someone's home in the San Fernando Valley and saw a fiddle sitting unattended on the sofa. I thought, "I should still be able to play that." I picked it up putting bow to string and was surprised to find that I had forgotten everything. I had become so accustomed to the frets on the guitar that I felt lost on the violin's fretless fingerboard.

At this point I played the guitar, banjo and mouth-harp but found myself totally distracted by the fiddle. It was so much more complex, demanding and rich than other instruments. It captured my undivided attention when I played it and really transported my mind to a different place. For the first time, I understood how some of my friends who had played such impressive bluegrass guitar were so willing to put it aside just to play rather mediocre if not grating tunes on the fiddle.

So now I was playing the fiddle again but this time it was fun and it felt like my instrument. Even though the fiddle isn't really a chording instrument, what I had learned about chord structures and chord progressions was a tremendous help. Knowing how to play several different instruments helped me to see that specific rules and methods were really special cases of the more general rules of music. Turning the method around, I found that I could pick up an instrument that I had never seen before and play some tunes or chords in just a few minutes.

Why hadn't anyone told me this before? Learning would have been much faster and certainly much easier. Well now I get a chance to share what I learned with you. In several installments I will write about what I consider to be the key to the musical highway. It will unlock the door to the world of music and, hopefully, open an exciting musical journey for each of you.

WHAT IS BLUEGRASS?

by ELIZABETH BURKETT

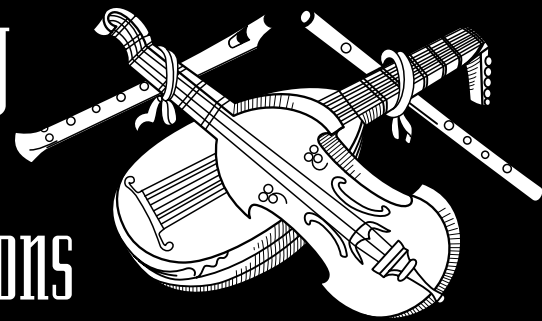
Bluegrass is a style of acoustic music that originated in the 1940s when Bill Monroe, Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs combined elements of country/western, gospel and blues music with the British, Irish, and Scottish music of their Appalachian mountain heritage. It is played most commonly on the mandolin, fiddle, five-string banjo, six-string guitar, and upright bass, but the resonator guitar ("Dobro"), harmonica, and electric bass are also found in bluegrass. Percussion is not generally used, with the insistent rhythm being a result of the interplay of the stringed instruments. Bluegrass music is often called "that high lonesome sound" but it includes a wide range of lively instrumentals, sweet ballads in three-part harmony, soulful a cappella gospel quartets and up-tempo love songs.

The unique, driving sound of the original Blue Grass Boys was built upon by many musicians, including the Stanley Brothers, Reno & Smiley, Jim & Jesse, and Jimmy Martin. Bluegrass blossomed with artists like the Osborne Brothers, the Dillardards, the Seldom Scene, the New Grass Revival, and Hot Rize. Today bluegrass is popular worldwide, and its stars include Ricky Skaggs, Alison Krauss & Union Station, the Del McCoury Band, Laurie Lewis, the Lonesome River Band, Blue Highway, and the Nashville Bluegrass Band.

Bluegrass is very inclusive music, with friendly and informal jam sessions springing up around almost every event. It's a great way to learn to play an instrument and sing, for kids and adults alike. Almost all bluegrass events have a family atmosphere, and performers and listeners are equally welcome. We hope to see you soon at a bluegrass event in Southern California!

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