

The Loneliness of a White Man, Or, the American Mountain Music of Bill Monroe

Known as the Father of Bluegrass, Bill Monroe (1911 - 1996) is the author of about fifty songs. He wrote most of them in the period of his greatest fame, between 1942 and 1960; the last dozen of his songs were written after a certain break from song-writing, when he was eighty or more. He himself claimed that he wrote instrumentals daily from the age of twenty to eighty-five. If he did not record the instrumentals, then they have been lost, because Monroe did not use notation. Unlike his instrumentals, most of his songs were recorded. Some of these songs can be traced with some difficulties, because Monroe gave them to other performers when he did not sing them with his band.

As to the lyrics (which we are especially interested in because of the colloquy theme this year), Monroe was very close to the topics which he encountered by the age of seventeen, when he left his home in Kentucky. Before the age of 14, he still had not seen any town. As an adult he experienced all kinds of environments and saw various jobs, but these are not reflected in his lyrics. His favourite images are the rolling hills of the southern highlands, religious settlers at Sunday worships, orphaned children, Sunday night dances in the open air, modest Victorian relationships between men and women, and broken hearts. As a professional musician and author, Monroe further developed these topics. His scope was extended mostly in his experience from journeys across specific landscapes of American mountains and the Southern states.¹⁾

Monroe's lyrics fully reflect topics typical for Victorian culture (through the youth of his parents, uncle, and grand-parents): the superior position of man, the unity of family, meticulousness, hard work, keeping moral values, and puritanism. In Monroe's lyrics, these topics are natural; the author does not have to express them directly as they are a

1) A complete analysis of all texts can be found in the dissertation work of Irena Přibyllová: *Pisňové texty Billa Monroea* (Bill Monroe and his Lyrics). Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého, 2003, 320 pp.

natural part of a story or event. Monroe's world is idyllic and romantic, calm and slow, with a noble and ancient language. In respect to the form, Monroe's lyrics are very close to broadside ballads.

Within the given topics, the archaic Southern language, the ballad structure and romantic approach, Monroe expresses a very unique perception of the world. His lyrics provide rich nourishment to the senses of the listener. The sense of hearing is satisfied with the choice of words with onomatopoeic syllables; the sense of sight finds parallels in all that is bright and shining in Monroe's lyrics; the sense of touch profits from softness; the sense of taste, from sweetness (although Monroe never depicts food). Only the sense of smell is missing in the lyrics. Furthermore, Monroe works with a rich supply of opening phrases which work with the images of a place, movement, and time; Monroe's supply of verbs concerning movement is also greater than is standard. To increase dynamics, Monroe uses antonyms within one phrase. He uses personification to animate things which do not move. All this in one song makes Monroe (whose formal education ended when he was ten or eleven) a master of liveliness, plasticity and multi- dimensionality. Additionally, Monroe is a master of brevity and concision as well. Through movement, his sensual world opens up to the listener in a mere two lines, in an opening phrase, or a chorus. Some texts originated through the co-operation of Monroe and his band members, but a textual analysis will always help us recognize Monroe's actual input.

The High Lonesome Sound

The mood and future style of Monroe's songs augurs his "Rocky Road Blues", recorded in 1945. There are three stanzas in the song, developing a classical topic of lost love. The textual scheme corresponds with the blues in that it is AAB (the first line is repeated in the second line; the third line rhymes with the first two). Moreover, Monroe added a refrain (also AAB), which does not exist in the blues. His gong starts with the refrain:

Lord, the road is rocky, bul it won 't be rocky long, Lord, Lord
Now the road is rocky, bul it won 't be rocky long
Another man has got my woman and gone

As for the motif, the text of "Rocky Road Blues" reflects Monroe's experience of the mountains. Classical blues cannot refer to the mountains, plainly because there are no rocky roads in the Deep South. In the conclusion of the song, Monroe says: "I'm not so lonesome; just don't want to be alone". The reference to loneliness provides the text with a sad and melancholy tone, which is very typical for the blues. Although he never composed other blues in lyrics, Monroe included this tone in many of his songs. Sadness and loneliness, including the deep- felt emotions in the voice, which cannot be transferred to words, is a distinguishing mark of Monroe' s style. This is one of the reasons why bluegrass music has been called "a white man's blues". When discussing the typical features of bluegrass music in English, the phrase "that high lonesome sound" has often been used. *Lonesome* connotes sadness, loneliness, melancholy, sorrow and (sweet) desire; *high* refers to the pitch of the sound. Some scholars even include a geographical position as well: the hills and mountains, or the Appalachian Mountains in a broader sense. *Sound* reflects the sound characteristics of the genre, as well as an absence of writing (that is, a link to the oral tradition of literature).

Today we take it for granted that a white man speaks about his song as the blues. It was not so easy in Monroe's time and region (the 1930s and 40s, southern states of the USA). Although the whites and blacks lived alongside each other, they were divided racially. The segregation ended officially in the mid-1950s. When African Americans performed in front of a white audience, they entered through a special door (the back door) and were separated in transport, lodging and dining as well.² The blues did not begin to gain more respect until the late 1950s, when - among other things - African American artists were coming back from successful European tours. Monroe kept the common white man's stereotypes; nevertheless, he retained no borders in the music. While still living in Rosine, Kentucky, he used to meet and play with black guitar player Arnold Schultz, whose influence he later acknowledged. Later on

2 In the 1940s and 50s, folklorist John Lomax had an African American songster Leadbelly as a living example of his research; after Leadbelly's death some publisher hesitated in giving Leadbelly credits for his songs. See Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell: *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994, p. 257.

while with the Blue Grass Boys, he added to their repertoire a period hit from the black charts called "Sitting on the Top of the World", as well as several black gospels.

Monroe's personal touch is distinct even in the music part of his "Rocky Road Blues". Unlike classical blues, his song has instrumental breaks and is fast paced, barely recognizable as blues upon first listening. It would more readily be linked with rockabilly or early rock'n'roll. "Rocky Road Blues" was recorded for the first time in 1945, ten years before the triumphant debut of Elvis Presley. Listening to the "Rocky Road Blues", we can understand why Elvis Presley and Carl Perkins said they loved Monroe so much; it is clear why Presley chose Monroe's "Blue Moon of Kentucky" as the B side for his first single recording.

Blue Moon of Kentucky

The most frequent theme of Monroe's songs (and instrumentals too) is landscape; nevertheless, Monroe's songs are not primarily about landscape; [American] states, mountains, forests and rivers form a natural setting for his love songs. Monroe's home state, Kentucky, is the most frequently mentioned state. It is interesting to learn that Monroe composed songs about Kentucky when he already lived outside of the state and travelled a lot. The famous "Blue Moon of Kentucky" (recorded in 1946) originated somewhere on a journey from Florida to Kentucky. Many years later, Monroe said to writer Dorothy Horstman: "I always thought about Kentucky, and I wanted to write gong about the moon we could always see over it. The best way to do this was to bring a girl into the song."³⁾

*Blue Moon of Kentucky, keep on shining,
Shine on the one that's gone and proved untrue,
Blue Moon of Kentucky, keep on shining,
Shine on the one that's gone and left me blue.*

A simple and sentimental song, it was originally recorded in 3/4 dance tempo, and has been rerecorded many times. Its popularity

3) Dorothy Horstman. *Sing Out Your Heart, Country Boy*. Nashville: VU, 1989, p. 159.

spanned more than 40 years. In 1988 when Monroe was still alive and well, it replaced Stephen Foster's "My Old Kentucky Home" as the official song of the Bluegrass State - Kentucky.⁴⁾

From today's point of view, it seems absurd that musicians of 1970s Czechoslovakia faced problems translating the song from English into Czech. Is the moon of Kentucky really of a blue colour, or is it just sad? Nobody had been to Kentucky, so nobody knew. The Czech country music band Rangers came with their rendition of Elvis Presley's fast version of the gong⁵⁾. The first line of their Czech lyrics went: "There is a blue colour moon shining over my house." The author of this paper was interested in the issue of colour too and the question was answered during her first visit overseas: the full moon in Kentucky was a beautiful and large orange moon, so Monroe's song is about sorrow.

The Blue Ridge Mountains

In his songs, Monroe frequently mentions the Blue Ridge Mountains, a central part of the Appalachian Mountains. A romantic love story takes place in the mountains beneath a lonely pine tree:

*Meet me out the Blue Ridge Mountains
Underneath the lonesome pine (...)
I'm going back to North Carolina
Where the mountain tops are blue*

In Monroe's song "Georgia Rose", the pines are tall instead of lonely (as above): "Way down in the Blue Ridge Mountains/Way down where the tall pines grow/Lives my sweetheart of the mountains (...)". Monroe named one of his instrumentals "Tall Timber", another one "Blue Ridge Mountain Blues", and in another one he referred to "The Old Mountaineer". In Monroe's repertoire, there were songs taken from other

4) Mark A. Humprey. *The Essential Bill Monroe and His Blue Grass Boys 1945-1949*. (CD booklet). Sony Music Entertainment Inc., 52478, 1992, p. 21.

5) In song credits, music is given as traditional. Czech lyrics by Milan Dufek. Panton 01 0286 mono, 1971.

sources which also documented his love for the mountains, such as "Tall Pines", "In the Pines", "Pinewood Valley", "Legend of the Blue Ridge Mountains", and "Foggy Mountain Top".

Sometimes Monroe just named the place in the title of the song, while the melody explained the rest. On other occasions he depicted the atmosphere of the place in his lyrics. The familiar native landscape is animated in his song "I'm on My Way to the Old Home".⁶⁾ The setting is the hills of Kentucky; the road takes us to the mountain top, to a lonely house:

*I'm on my way back to the old home
The road winds up on the hill
But there's no light in the window
That shined long ago where I lived*

Through memories we get back to the idyllic landscape of childhood. It is a silent evening; a little boy sits with his father in front of the house, and dogs are barking in the distance:

*Back in the days of my childhood
In the evening when everything was still
I used to sit and listen to the foxhounds
With my dad in the old Kentucky hills*

Monroe himself lived through the hard life of a mountain man. He cut timber and toiled the earth. Through his songs, he created a sentimental and romantic image of such a life. He does not criticise, nor does he depict violence. Death is present in his lyrics, quite often tragic death, although as a natural part of life: like when parents of little children die, or when there is an accident in the woods.

The Loneliness of a White Man

In his career as a music star, Monroe did not avoid the life of the mountain man either. His permanent home was a log cabin in the vicinity

6) Recorded on February 2, 1950.

of Nashville, Tennessee; he owned land and cattle there. He was selective about his friends; he even involved his Blue Grass Boys in the farm work when necessary. Eddie Adcock, Monroe's banjo player in the late 1950s, remembers the time⁷⁾: "He's pretty much a lone ranger. If you were farmer you could get to know Bill. Or logger or anything, any hard working man would be able to get to know Bill back in those days. But entertainers did not get to know Bill as easily, [...] only a few entertainer friends. And they were hard working people too. Bill was able to identify with people who worked hard: lot easier than he got identified with people who made music. Even though sometimes were both people the same. But I mean I'm talking about physical toil; he liked people who could lay brick, hoal logs, cut hay, shut weed, pick graves, whatever. Somebody who could work, physically work. His place was was a farm. Horses, cows, chickens, goats, bulls, lots damned snakes; yes, he did not raise those [smile]; cattle, horses, working horses. His money crop was tobacco; he sold tobacco."

Bill Monroe, 'Father of Bluegrass Music, has become a creator of a music style known all over the world. His popularity extended beyond the borders of the USA for the first time in the 1940s. Music experts first started to appreciate his contribution in their reviews at the end of the 1950s. In 1970 Monroe was inaugurated into the Country Music Hall of Fame by the newly established Country Music Foundation. In the 1980s Monroe's collected work was published in CD box sets for the first time; typically outside of the USA.⁸⁾ Monroe's romantic and sentimental images of mountain life can be understood not only by English speakers, but by people from Finland, Japan, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria too. As we have tried to prove, despite the seeming simplicity of Monroe's texts, they are in fact very rich in many respect.

7) From a personal interview with the author, Nashville, May 11, 1994.

8) German label Bear Family Records.



*Bill Monroe on stage the Grand Ole Opry, 1994.
Photo by Irena Příbylová.*



*The front porch of Bill Monroe's home in Tennessee, 1995.
Photo by Irena Příbylová.*