THE SECRET OF BILL MONROE'S SONG LYRICS

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American mandolinist, singer, and composer William Smith Monroe (1911–1996) lived through most of the 20th century. He is known in the music world as Bill Monroe, the "Father of Bluegrass",[1] the founder of a musical style that combines elements of rural American and popular music and draws on the folk music traditions of the English-speaking population. In bluegrass music, Monroe ingeniously combined what were then the separately produced instrumental and vocal components of rural music.

When one says, "Monroe compositions," the speaker usually includes all the repertoire that Monroe had in the Blue Grass Boys. However, Monroe was not always the author. Most often he was a performer, who gave the adopted composition its typical and unique form; often he was the author of the melody and only in the next sequence was he the author of the lyrics. The identification of Monroe as a lyricist is made difficult by the number of pseudonyms, he used to claim copyright. In searching for his authorial style as a writer of song lyrics, I went through hundreds of recordings, both commercial (from my own collection) and field recordings.[2] As far as songbooks are concerned, there are apparently only two short official songbooks with Monroe's repertoire.[3] Selected songs

1. I focused on the life and work of Bill Monroe at a colloquium in Náměšť nad Oslavou in 2011. See Přibylová, Irena. 2011. Can't You Hear Me Callin'? or, The Vision Which Started in Rosine, KY. In *Od folkloru k world music. Cesty za vizí*, edited by Irena Přibylová and Lucie Uhlíková. Náměšť nad Oslavou: Městské kulturní středisko. 94–104. Available from: <https://www.folkoveprazdniny.cz/kolokvium-2011>. Basic research on the topic was made possible by Fulbright Grant No. 33717 in 1993–1994. I have been involved in bluegrass music research on repeated visits to the U.S. I also was a member of the International Bluegrass Music Association then.
2. Field recordings are physically available at the Archives of Traditional Music, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA.
3. Songs from Monroe's repertoire for the Grand Ole Opry radio show were published as *Bill Monroe's WSM Grand Ole Opry Songs*, and issued in two nearly identical

can also be found in various mandolin instruction books.[4] These days, in the age of the Internet, we find Monroe's unauthorized texts mostly on Japanese and German web fan sites.

Although Bill Monroe was a composer all his life, he wrote most of his songs in the 1940s and 1950s. From the song's creation and its commercial release, there was often a gap of several years. In my research, I worked with the first commercially available recording of the song[5]. As a result, I analysed recordings of all sixty-one lyrics attributed to Monroe or his pseudonym, and thirty-two other lyrics, for which Monroe was the copyright holder but not the author[6] (cf. Pribylová 2002). More than a half of Monroe's original compositions are secular songs (of forty-three examined texts); the remainder of the sample is composed of religious (sacred) songs.

The themes of the songs

The authors of the music instruction books, of the comments to the discography, or of book-length reminiscences of Monroe's life usually focus on when and under what circumstances the song was written or recorded. One of the few scholars to have also analysed Monroe's songs is Robert Cantwell. His book *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound* has gone through several editions (1984, 1992, 2002). In the chapter on the process of creation and the musical landscape of bluegrass (Cantwell: 1992: 226–248), the author explores song writing from

volumes, distinguished as *Folio No. 1* (1947) and *Folio No. 2* (1953) (New York: Peer International), the other being *Bill Monroe's Country Bluegrass Songs* (1950). There the new Bill Monroe Music Inc. collaborated on the publication with the established publisher Hill and Range Songs, Inc. In both cases, the songbooks also include several songs by writers other than Monroe.

4. Mandolin schools with examples of Monroe's repertoire have been published since the 1970s, such as Jack Tottle, 1975*, Bluegrass Mandolin* (Music Sales America/Oak Publications). The manual has been published in several reprints.
5. References to the original recording dates (MDY or DMY) in my text come from Humphrey 1992; Rosenberg 1974; Rosenberg–Wolfe 1989, 1991; Wolfe–Rosenberg 1994. References to the year only correspond to a CD release.
6. Proofreading of the lyrics—as to the authenticity of what was heard—was kindly done by Tom Ewing (*1949), Monroe's singer, guitar player, and later biographer. I am greatly indebted to him.

both textual and melodic perspectives. He focuses on ballads and folk songs, and pieces from the repertoire of various performers, including Monroe. He characterizes the songs from Monroe's repertoire as "Monroe songs," even when Monroe is not always the only author of the analysed piece. Cantwell sees the core of Monroe's repertoire as "folk songs, songs of love and betrayal, laments over death, disillusionment or loss, nostalgic or sentimental songs that might perhaps be called idyllic, gospel songs, and folk original instrumental pieces" (Cantwell 1992: 232).[7]

The book *The American South: Portrait of a Culture* (Rubin 1991) offers a full scope of topics that belong to the South of the USA. We are familiar with them from the many country music and bluegrass songs. Although Monroe was intimately familiar with them, he did not focus on them as a lyricist: southern food, southern politics, blacks,[8] and Native Americans were generally absent. We do, however, find Monroe's instrumental pieces thematized in this way, and his borrowings from African American cultural heritage. Monroe the lyricist was not interested in the great history of the region, nor does he describe how Southerners liked to spend their leisure time (hunting bear or catfish); he did not mention the fighting cocks he himself kept, although in "I'm On My Way to the Old Home" (3 February 1950), he does sing about foxhounds. His lyrics betray no fascination with cars. He does not write about other people in the country music business. He omits themes from literature. He does not write about tobacco, alcohol, the city, factories, or technology. He does not write about violence or crime, never popularizing any such ballads even in his adopted repertoire. His strict Southern religious upbringing did not allow him to approach controversial topics like crime, alcohol, sex, or politics.

7. Historian Charles Wolfe analysed Monroe's repertoire from 1950–1958 on the Decca label. Autobiographical songs and traditional gospels each made up a quarter of the recordings, with original instrumental, traditional or old-time music, covers, original gospel and heart or country songs completing the whole (Rosenberg–Wolfe 1989: 23).
8. The first edition of the book was published in 1980. African Americans are called *Blacks* or *Black folk* here. The 1991 edition retains this usage.

More so than his followers, Monroe's point is that bluegrass music is pure (innocent) entertainment for the whole family.

Cecilia Tichi, former director of the American Studies Program at Vanderbilt University, explores the themes she finds in the work of the American people in her book *High Lonesome* (Tichi 1994). She starts from the premise that country equals nation. In addition to other arts, she also comments on the lyrics of country music songs. Monroe is very close to several typically American themes mentioned in her book: home, journey, wandering, and loneliness.

Monroe did not start writing his own lyrics until he was in his thirties. They include references to the images of his childhood—the rolling southern highlands, farm work, family, pious settlers visiting church on Sunday, orphaned children, Saturday outdoor dances, chaste Victorian relationships between men and women, and heartbreak. Later he included references to travels across the United States. Although Monroe experienced non-rural settings and jobs—as a young man he worked for an oil company in an industrial area—he did not mirror/mention this in his lyrics.

Sometime in 1978 or 1979, when banjo player Butch Robins worked for Monroe, the following event occurred. One night about four in the morning, the two were awake on their tour bus. Robins was softly playing his banjo; Monroe was playing solitaire. Monroe mentioned a song of his, and Robins asked how he had come to write it. Monroe looked at Robins through his thick-lensed glasses. "I never wrote a tune in my life," he said. "What do you mean by that?" asked Robins surprised. "Those tunes are all in the air," Monroe replied. "I just happened to be the first one to pick them out." (Smith 2001: 234)

Language and form

Monroe's world is idyllic, romantic, quiet, and slow. It speaks an archaic language. In Monroe's texts, we find English expressions common to the American South or the Appalachian region, as defined by Michael Montgomery (1992: 37–39). The most striking feature of the texts is archaicity: the *a*-prefixing (of Southern British origin). Monroe's choice of less frequent (older) words and his

inspiration from the language of the Bible and Scottish ballads, passed on in Monroe's family, are also notable. The frequent use of alliteration contributes to the old-style character of the text. In his sound recordings, heavy regional dialect is avoided by Monroe. As a singer, he retains only traces of the usual Southern accent, in keeping with the phonetic features of American South speaking style. We do not encounter the extremes (swallowing endings, accent at the expense of intelligibility), which are the norm in recordings from the 1980s and 1990s by, for example, native Nashville banjoist Leroy Troy or Ron Thomas of the Virginia bluegrass group Dry Branch Fire Squad. However, one exception could be mentioned when a sound engineer from another region of the US had trouble understanding Monroe's accent.[9]

Formally, Monroe's secular and sacred texts are closest to the British ballads of chapbooks, as presented by Brunvand in *The Study of American Folklore* (Brunvand 1986: 259–261). Individual stanzas are most often four lines long and use alternating rhyme (A, B, A, B). In Monroe, we also find interrupted rhymes (A, B, C, B), or grouped rhymes (AABB). While the length of individual lines may be irregular, the music always remains regular. A refrain usually completes the quatrain. The repetition that is typical of ballads, as well as dramatic shifts and dialogue work, can also be found in Monroe's lyrics.

Emotions

For Brunvand, the most typical feature of the English ballad is its impersonal approach. This does not apply for Monroe's compositions, which use the opposite means: he works with emotions, emphasizing personal experiences and an individual approach. In this he becomes, in my view, the pre-eminent romantic. Compare Robert Spiller in *The Cycle of American Literature*:

9. "I can't understand a word he says!" is what was heard to be said by the sound engineer who had substituted for an absent colleague during some 1950 recording sessions. He recorded one song for an hour and a half, and was still not satisfied. The producer then advised him to focus on the overall sound of the band and not worry about the soloist's accent (Rosenberg–Wolfe 1989: 14).

"The essence of romanticism is the ability to wonder and to reflect. In searching the meaning of the known, the human spirit reaches for the unknown; in trying to understand the present, it looks to the past and to the future. Faith and hope lead to a positive romanticism, fear and doubt to a negative; but when both reason and authority have failed, man has a further refuge in the larger emotions which are always his." (Spiller 1967: 22) This is typical of Monroe.

Monroe's affection for the romantic atmosphere was probably unconsciously acquired from the environment in which he grew up, from the written and oral literature available to him through popular reading, ballads and church hymns. No conscious copying of the themes, language or artistic methods of the 19th century is to be found in his work. The following excerpt (from the novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) was most likely completely unknown to him[10], mainly due to his family's poor economic and social circumstances. Mark Twain wrote Huck's story in a realistic style, but at the same time poked fun at the previous romantic period, which paid homage to ghosts and mystery: "Then I sat down in a chair by the window and tried to think of something cheerful, but it warn't no use. I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars was shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heared an owl, away off, who-whooing about somebody who was dead, and a whippowill[11] and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me." (Twain 1994: 13)

The spirit of Romantic literature (despite Twain) persisted in popular folk reading and songs, and as is evident, similar word choices later became a common part of Monroe's lyric vocabulary. Some of the key words of the text (underlined above) can be found in several

10. Monroe came from a poor mountain family, the youngest of eight children, and worked in the fields from the age of ten, leaving school at twelve to work for a living. Already squinting as a child, he had eye problems all his life, thus preferred the spoken word to the printed word. From conversations with his musicians, I know that when Monroe read anything on the road, it was advertising in newspapers targeted at farmers.
11. *Whippoorwill*, in standard English, a nocturnal bird whose cry is believed to predict misfortune, especially in the American South (Peprník 1982: 555).

Monroe songs, such as "Blue Moon of Kentucky"/16 September 1946/, "The Bluest Man in Town" /1987/, "The First Whippoorwill" /6 July 1951/, "I'm on My Way to the Old Home" /3 February 1950/, "Sitting Alone in the Moonlight" /19 January 1954/, "In the Pines" /18 July 1952/, and "Walls of Time" /14 November 1968/.

Sensory perception

Within the given themes, Southern language, balladic structure, and romantic approach, Monroe had a very distinctive perception of the world. His lyrics richly saturate the listener's senses. Monroe's choice of words with soundscapes has a positive effect on the ear; for example, the 'r', 'l', 'n' and the connecting 'o' in several forms in a single line—"lord", "road", "rocky", "won't", "long" ("Rocky Road Blues" /13 January 1945/). In Monroe's lyrics, the sense of sight makes things shiny and bright; the sense of touch makes things soft; and taste makes things sweet (although it is never about food). The "sweetness and light" of Romanticism, which poet Matthew Arnold[12] worked his way to by studying the Greek philosophers, eventually appeared from "out of the air" in the work of Bill Monroe, who experienced a one-room rural schoolhouse. Of the senses used in his lyrics, only the sense of smell is omitted.

Monroe also makes use of an abundant diversity of introductory phrases evoking ideas of place and movement: twenty-five of the texts examined have adverbs like "away", "down", "up along", "far away", "down below", or a proverbial determination of place and time, such as "Up along the Ohio River"; "Cross the plains and the dessert/down the sunset trail"; "The home above so far away"; "Somewhere down the line"; "Back in the days of my childhood". Monroe uses a diversity of verbs to express movement. Instead of the common "go/went", we also hear "travel", "ramble", "roam", "run", "guide", "head", "return", "cross", "stray", "haunt", "linger", "stroll", "journey", "leave", "walk", waltz", "drift", "vanish", "flow", "part", "hang around", "pull out", "roll by", "get down", "gather around", "wind up", and "go back".

12. Matthew Arnold (1822–1888), English poet, essayist and cultural critic.

Monroe's description of time has no precise definition; it is more like a brushstroke, a smudge, a wave. We learn the time of day or season only roughly, often through indirect descriptions. It is as if Monroe were answering our question When did it happen? with ancient riddle: "When the golden leaves begin to fall…"; "This morning along about daybreak…"; "On a moonlit night…"; "Late in the evening about sundown..." Using personification, Monroe brings inanimate still objects to life. By combining these devices in one song, he evokes an idea of amazing vividness, plasticity, and multi-dimensionality (see "Uncle Pen" /15 October 1951/ or "Walls of Time "/14 November 1968/). Monroe also achieves dynamism[13] using opposites in a single phrase (sunshine–snow, young–old, scream–sigh, Satan–God and more).

Monroe's sensually rich world in motion revolves mostly around love, whether spiritual or secular. Here too, Monroe shows himself to be a master of word choice, imaginative and non-repetitive. For example, instead of just the ordinary term "girl" or "baby" (which Monroe never uses in his lyrics to address an adult woman), he calls his song heroines "darlin', darlin' girl, little darlin', little angel, dear, sweetheart, beauty, maiden, precious one, my sweet memory, my sweet blue-eyed darling, dear and sweet as honey, my sweetheart of the mountains, the sweetest thing in the world, my rose of Kentucky, my Georgia girl, my Louisiana love." Monroe's lyrics about worldly love are usually in a romantic vein—the hero thinks of the girl, pledges himself to her in childhood, trusts her words, and promises to love her till old age, death or beyond the grave. The twist comes when the hero leaves and then returns. Suddenly, the sweet and lovely girl is either a victim or a traitor—and another man is to blame.

As a lyricist, Monroe is a master of breakups. In the sample I examined, there were twenty-four songs about heartbreak, without Monroe ever repeating himself. He works with emotions, the senses, colours, time, seasons of the year, and the backdrops of rural and mountain life. As a narrator, he puts himself at the center of the action. Usually a passive hero, things happen to him, without him causing

13. Monroe also worked with vocal dynamics on stage; for example, he liked to deliver the traditional song "Wayfaring Stranger" almost in whisper.

them. Here are a few short excerpts: "You've gone and you've found another […] your love's grown cold" ("All about Daybreak", October 28 1947); "The one that's gone and proved untrue […] gone and left me blue" ("Blue Moon of Kentucky", September 16 1946); "I was the boy that was lucky/but it all ended too soon" ("Kentucky Waltz", February 13 1945); "Memories of you, sweet heart, still haunt me/ every time I hear your name, I almost cry […] we let other people tear us apart" ("Memories of You", February 3 1950); and "You don't love me anymore, my darling/I'm just a 'used to be' to you" ("Used to Be", September 16 1955).

Literary scholar Doug Green, also a member of the western-swing group Riders in the Sky, sees a connection between specific themes and musical genres: "Bluegrass sings of broken hearts and the western-swing of the vast plains of the West."[14] Monroe's inventive descriptions of an otherwise stereotypical situation could inspire would-be bluegrass songwriters or revive the status of the bluegrass love song in the public eye.

Austerity

When we see Monroe's texts on paper or screen, we must confirm that their author is a master of concision. He can capture the essential in very few words—usually in the first two lines of a verse or chorus. For example, the phrase "Sitting alone in the moonlight / Thinking of the days gone by"[15] (19 January 1954) offers the very essence of Romanticism. His stories full of emotion, movement, sensory sensations, dynamism, drama, and a lively atmosphere use archaic and noble language and they are embodied in a mere eight lines of verse and four lines of chorus. This austerity also has a reason and practical significance. For one thing, the lyrics are easier to remember. Due to an eye defect, Monroe would learn the songs by heart in church as a youngster. The lyrics also conform to the melodic structure of traditional bluegrass and allow for appropriate instrumental breaks. While many members of the Blue Grass Boys recall how the "boss"—as he was nicknamed—

14. Personal interview with Green on September 12, 1995, in Nashville, TN.
15. The first part of the line serves as the song's title.

taught them a new song by endlessly playing a melody or phrase over and over (Rooney 1991), Tom Ewing also states that Monroe wrote his lyrics down[16]. However, he was probably not interested in collecting his own lyrics, just as he was reportedly not interested in collecting the specific music albums he made.

Originality and ownership

Monroe's repertoire with the Blue Grass Boys includes hundreds of songs, both his originals and covers. Occasionally, he bought the copyright of a new song and settled disputes with the original writers in court. He adapted some old songs by forgotten writers and worked with them as if they were his own. In the case of some other songs, he merely sketched out two lines and a chorus, and let his band members finish them; nevertheless, one can tell through language analysis which were written by them and which by him. Monroe's "school" had about two hundred direct students between 1938 and 1996, that is, the alternating members of his band the Blue Grass Boys. Many of them described their apprenticeship with Monroe in magazine articles, and after Monroe's death, in books[17]. Without a "boss," or "teacher", "mentor," or "master," the apprentices would most probably not have evolved musically to such an extent. It was also Monroe who determined which of the hundreds of possible songs would be played at the end of each concert, inspired by the request of the audience.

Compliance with copyright when recording songs and publishing lyrics is not only important but also complex. It is more than just about money. Another possible explanation for the lack of an authorized songbook of Monroe's work came to me during a lecture at a country music conference at Mississippi State University in 1994. One of the speakers—Cecilia Tichi[18]—spoke

16. E-mail communication with Ewing on January 30, 2004.
17. Monroe's life is given a detailed and well researched account by his last guitarist, Tom Ewing. He corrected journalistic errors in *The Bill Monroe Reader* (2000). It was followed by his excellent volume, *Bill Monroe: The Life and Music of the Blue Grass Man* (2018).
18. Tichi, Cecilia. *The High Cost of Country.* Paper presented at the 11th International Country Music Conference, Mississippi State University, Meridian, Mississippi, USA, April 26, 1994, plus subsequent discussion.

about the copyright troubles she had to go through before publishing her book *High Lonesome* (1994). The individual chapters of her book are illustrated with selected phrases and sentences of country music lyrics, but rarely entire stanzas, never entire songs. The author paid [in then-current prices] about $9,000 for the lyrics included in the book. For example, the prestigious Nashville publisher Acuff-Rose charged $40 per word, including *the* and *and*. By contrast, singer Emmylou Harris (* 1947) provided the copyright for free. According to Tichi, publishers have no spreadsheets and set the prices of lyrics as they see fit. Literary theorist and historian Don Cusic, editor of a collection of lyrics by singer and guitarist Hank Williams (1923–1953), added to the interesting debate. Cusic said that he has a lawyer represent him in copyright negotiations. They do not wait for a price from the publisher; instead, they themselves offer a flat rate of $50 per lyric up front. If the text is listed in the chapter header, they pay more.

Conclusion

In the United States, bluegrass is said to be uplifting music. In the Czech lands, modern folk music performers sometimes look down on bluegrass musicians, calling them *pidlikáči* in jargon, emphasizing their extra fast fingers on the fingerboard. At bluegrass jam sessions in many countries around the world where bluegrass has spread[19], participants automatically sing the original lyrics in English. Apart from rarely caring who wrote the lyrics, they rarely pay more than cursory attention to the words; the lyrics are usually rhythmic enough, rhyming, simple on first hearing, and have a catchy chorus. As has been shown in this text, it is worth paying attention to the lyrics. Bill Monroe imprinted his vision of bluegrass not only in the music, but in the words as well. Ironically, his lyrics have so far been an under-appreciated and undiscovered secret of bluegrass music.

19. Cf. Bidgood, Lee – Přibylová, Irena. 2022. Bluegrass: Popular Folk Music Globalized from the Bottom Up. In (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Global Popular Music*, edited by Simone Kruger. Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/34725/chapter-abstract/378225665?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=false>.

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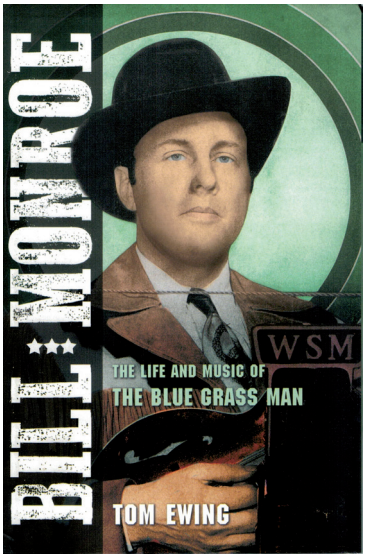
Summary

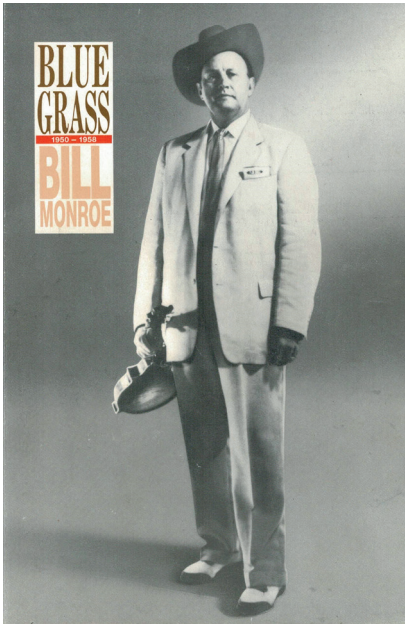
The paper focuses on a less explored area of bluegrass music: the song lyrics of Bill Monroe, the founder of the genre. There are several reasons why a comprehensive authorized Bill Monroe songbook has not been published. Although the main one might be copyright money, the author suggests that Monroe as a lyrics writer has been relatively unrecognized and less appreciated by the public than is deserved. In analysing his song lyrics, the author deals with his topics, language, form, the use of emotions, and text austerity. She stresses that Monroe's song lyrics are rich in the vocabulary and of sensory imagery. In her opinion, the high quality of Bill Monroe's lyrics has so far been one of the best kept secrets of bluegrass music.

Key words: Bluegrass music; Bill Monroe; textual analysis; song lyrics.

Příloha / Appendix:



Obálka životopisu Billa Monroe autora Toma Ewinga (2018) / Book cover of a biography of Bill Monroe by Tom Ewing (2018)



Brožovaná příloha sady alb z produkce Bear Family Records (1989) / Paperback supplement to a set of albums produced by Bear Family Records (1989)

Bill Monroe na festivalu Mezinárodní bluegrassové asociace v Owensboru, KY. Foto Irena Přibylová 1989 / Bill Monroe at the International Bluegrass Music Association festival, Owensboro, KY. Photo by Irena Přibylová 1989

Irena Přibylová v rozhovoru s Billem Monroem na festivalu Bean Blossom, IN (1994) / Irena Přibylová in conversation with Bill Monroe at the Bean Blossom Festival, IN (1994)