

Industrial Strength Bluegrass

Kentucky Muscle and Ohio Steel

Steven Estep



(photo by Bill Nowlin, used with permission of University of Illinois Press)

Even at its commercial inception in the 1920s, country music was already nostalgic, promising sounds and themes familiar from decades before while simultaneously modifying or drifting from the tradition it claimed (see Wayne Daniel's *Pickin' on Peachtree: A History of Country Music in Atlanta, Georgia*). When families from Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky moved north for factory jobs, a young branch of country music—bluegrass, as it would eventually be called—likewise reminded them of the homes and kin they had left behind. A “little log cabin on a hill” might have looked prettier behind the veil of nostalgia than it did in real life, but it was still home for the briarhoppers.

That's what Ohioans called the folks from Appalachia who came looking for jobs in the first several decades of the last century. J.D. Vance's book *Hillbilly Elegy* explained a lot about the Appalachian workers' culture that I never understood, and about social discrimination from Ohio natives. The term was shortened to “briars,” and I heard it a lot while growing up near Dayton, Ohio, in the late 70s and early 80s. By then it was used more with affection than derision, at least in my experience, as southern transplants had long ago claimed the label for their own. (Even if it still rubbed a few people the wrong way, I never heard it said with the hateful overtones that other denigrating terms carried.)

Bluegrass was a source of identity and comfort to these strangers in a strange land, but its style was transformed from a rural to an urban one, just as the people were. In southwestern Ohio, bluegrass became louder and faster, gaining an emphasis on instrumental precision that mirrored the machinery of factories

and the noise of busy streets. “Folk music with overdrive,” Alan Lomax called it. The lyrics and vocal phrasing looked to the quiet mountains and farms, and the driving, steely banjo countered them with the sounds of a new reality.

Industrial Strength Bluegrass collects 11 essays from scholars and performers, starting with a chapter on the migrations that changed country music like the ones that changed blues. Bobby Osborne of the Osborne Brothers remembers his performing journey that started in tents and pubs and took him to places like New York University and the Grand Ole Opry. The book doesn't fail to describe the driving force that radio was, either. Bobby's interview is conducted by Joe Mullins, a fine bandleader and radio stalwart in Ohio's Miami Valley and the son of Paul “Moon” Mullins, an influential announcer on WPFB in Middletown, Ohio. There are other larger-than-life characters, from sketchy or frighteningly enthusiastic record label owners to Lily Isaacs, a German-born Jewish folk singer from The Bronx who became the matriarch of The Isaacs Family, a powerhouse group in bluegrass and Southern gospel.

The companion CD kicks off with Joe Mullins and the Radio Ramblers' cover of Dwight Yoakam's “Readin', Writin', Route 23,” which ties together the threads of hopefulness, homesickness, and disappointment that the

migrants felt daily. Rhonda Vincent and Caleb Daugherty issue a sobering and sentimental call for one more trip back to Kentucky in “Family Reunion.” Going back home on the weekend was a hillbilly ritual for decades. U.S. Route 23, Route 25, and later Interstate 75 carried thousands of transplanted families back to the farms and “hollers.” My dad called Cincinnati on Friday nights “The Kentucky 500.” Larry Cordle contributes a Tom T. Hall song commissioned by Armco (now AK Steel), “The Rolling Mills of Middletown”; I keep marveling at the wordplay in the title while I'm chilled by the tragic ending. The end of the album finds a laborer more than ready to head back to Harlan, Kentucky, the day after he retires.

Other songs are classics of Ohio bluegrass, originally recorded by people like Ralph Stanley and the Stanley Brothers, Jim and Jesse, Brown's Ferry Four, and Flatt & Scruggs; stars like Vince Gill, Lee Ann Womack, and the Oak Ridge Boys join equally talented musicians with local ties. “Barefoot Nellie” is a standout with its whirling twin fiddles, and “Mountain Strings” is a tribute to the unique mandolin work of Frank Wakefield. Both book and album are excellent guides to Ohio's influence on both world-famous and little-known musicians in bluegrass, folk, and country; they also remind us of the humanity of an oft-scorned group of people. The book also recommends several dozen original recordings, and I compiled a playlist at <https://open.qobuz.com/playlist/6391211> with many of them. **tas**