

DVD

## A Back-Porch Style, With One Fierce Banjo

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ON one of their television performances in 1961 the bluegrass guitarist and singer Lester Flatt introduced his partner, the banjoist Earl Scruggs, with the line “He kind of likes to show off anyway, pickin’ the hot stuff.”

Scruggs didn’t waste time bantering back. He immediately began showing off, launching into a fiery-fingered version of “Georgia Buck.”

The exchange was typical of the two men, who were instrumental in introducing bluegrass music to a wide audience, and it’s featured on recent releases from the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum and Shanachie Entertainment: two DVDs, “The Best of the Flatt and Scruggs TV Show,” each comprising two episodes of the 30-minute “Flatt & Scruggs Grand Ole Opry Show.” The discs are an overdue reminder of the important role the duo played in building a national audience for this American music.

Bluegrass, first popularized in the 1930s and ’40s by Flatt & Scruggs’s mentor, Bill Monroe, has always appealed to musicians because its fast and dexterous finger work demands concentration from its practitioners. Scruggs pioneered a three-fingered technique that is now a mainstay of the music, known as Scruggs-style picking.

While Flatt did the singing and most of the talking, Scruggs preferred to let his playing speak, as the pair and their band, the Foggy Mountain Boys, worked their way through tunes that were almost always fast paced, whether freshly composed or derived from the traditional Scots-Irish folk songs popular in their native southern Appalachia.

The episodes featured on the DVDs, three from 1961 and one from 1962, are well

chosen, with classic tunes and a guest appearance by Maybelle Carter, known affectionately as Mother Maybelle, a member of the fabled country group the Carter Family. Another regular guest, Hylo Brown, displays his impressive falsetto with a two-part “John Henry.” Other standouts include Mother Maybelle’s version of “Wildwood Flower” and the instrumental “Liberty Dance” on autoharp, and the Foggy Mountain Boys’ take on the haunting “Jimmie Brown the Newsboy” and bluegrass standards like “Durham’s Bull” and “Shortnin’ Bread.”

The production has a relaxed, back-porch feel. The set is simple, cigarette packs are visible in shirt pockets, and the commercials include recipes.

Song dedications are quickly read from the back of an envelope, the cornball jokes are mercifully brief, and at one point Flatt tells any potential promoters in the audience that the band has several open dates on a coming tour, providing the address to write for terms. But the nonmusical segments go quickly; it’s as if the pace of the picking has insinuated itself into the entire show. The musicians swiftly dispense with the talking to get back to the fun stuff.

Typically each show features two tunes, a commercial and then two more songs before Flatt introduces what he called a “sacred” tune. Then there is another ad, more picking and singing, and another hymn before the final two songs. Often a guest provides one or two tunes per segment.

Scruggs mostly works with the five-string banjo, though sometimes he switches to guitar. Flatt was an excellent guitarist, but is better known for his nasal, classic-country singing and for being the quick-with-a-laugh voice of the pair.

The show, produced in Nashville, was featured on stations through the Southeast from 1955 until 1969. Tapes of the show were believed destroyed until they were discovered in a home garage in 1989.

In the late 1950s, when popular music began expanding in styles and audience thanks to

long-playing albums and television, Flatt & Scruggs, partners since the mid-1940s, were poised to take advantage. They soon became favorites of the college-based folk revival of the early 1960s.

By the fall of 1962 the pair and their band were enough of a fixture that CBS enlisted them to provide theme music for the network television comedy “The Beverly Hillbillies.” The exposure brought national fame, and in 1967 their “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” was used in the movie “Bonnie and Clyde.” “Breakdown” had long been the group’s signature, and the Hall of Fame release wisely includes a noteworthy version from the August 1961 episode.

The fiddler Paul Warren’s bow makes his fiddle sing before Josh Graves counters with a dobro solo. But it is Scruggs who drives the tune, flying fingers demonstrating just why three-finger picking is still called Scruggs-style. And why Flatt & Scruggs are synonymous with this distinctive Appalachian art form. **CHRIS WOHLWEND**