

Newsweek

## Texas Tea and Better-Baked Biscuits

**The 'Flatt & Scruggs Grand Ole Opry' television show, once thought lost forever, resurfaces on DVD in all its hot-pickin', down-home glory this week.**

### **WEB EXCLUSIVE COMMENTARY**

**By Brian Braiker**

March 28, 2007 - One day in 1989 while cleaning out the garage at his Tyne Boulevard home in Nashville, Willis Graham uncovered the holy grail of country music: 24 episodes of the "Flatt & Scruggs Grand Ole Opry" television show. The significance of the cache wasn't lost on Graham, a retired advertising executive who had worked with the show's sponsor. Until that bout of spring cleaning, the received wisdom was that the Flatt & Scruggs shows had all been erased or taped over, that no copies of its 1955-69 run survived. This week, nearly 20 years after Willis donated the films to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, fans will finally have the opportunity to see some of them on DVD with the release of "The Best of Flatt & Scruggs TV Show," volumes one and two.

And what a treat it is. Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, backed by the Foggy Mountain Boys, led what was surely one of the two or three greatest bluegrass bands of all time. And they were at the height of their powers during their 14-year TV run, which was taped and syndicated throughout the Southeast. This footage captures the band at the cusp of huge crossover to international fame: in 1962 they would strike gold (black gold, that is) with "The Ballad of Jed Clampett," the theme song to "The Beverly Hillbillies," and headline at Carnegie Hall. Scruggs's tricky picking on "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" was featured on the soundtrack of the 1967 movie "Bonnie and Clyde." And the band's appearances at the Newport Folk Festival in 1959, '60 and '66 became legendary among urban hepcats in search of a more "authentic" form of traditional music.

But while Flatt & Scruggs did rely heavily on traditional, even old-timey tunes, these two DVDs (two episodes are included on each—the Country Music Hall of Fame plans on ultimately releasing 10 discs) remind us that they were nothing if not progressive to the core. Scruggs, a former teenage banjo prodigy, had developed his own style of thumb and two-finger picking that enabled him to play with astonishing speed, variety and clarity. Look no

further than his signature instrumental "Earl's Breakdown" included in a February 1962 episode: Scruggs stares deadpan into the camera, smirking ever so slightly, as his fingers blaze up and down the fretboard of his banjo. Anyone hoping that a little video footage might provide a glimmer of insight into just how he coaxed so many notes out of his instrument so quickly will be disappointed. The man is inscrutable, his fingers a blur—pausing only briefly to shift tuning midsong. Maddeningly, he makes it look so easy. (New York Times music critic Robert Shelton once called him the "Paganini of the five-string banjo.") Scruggs is followed by firebrand fiddler Paul Warren, the most animated musician of the bunch, and then by Josh Graves, who was just as much a revelation on the Dobro. The performance is so electrifying that Lester Flatt is compelled to ask at the end of the song "Earl did something go wrong with your banjo, there? He got mad at it ... gave it a workin' over!"

As the bandleader, Flatt is all mellow charm. He picks the set lists—sacred numbers, originals, fiddle tunes and traditional reels—and sings lead vocals with a soulful, honey-dipped tenor out of the right side of his mouth. Flatt plugs new recordings and reminds viewers to get in touch with the band if they're touring in the region. With cornpone "comedy" routines and the occasional off-camera holler, the sessions, taped in a mock country storefront, have a warm, down-home feel to them—even when the band breaks for one of its deliciously kitschy commercials for the show's sponsor, Martha White baking products, shot in an adjacent test kitchen and usually followed by a jingle sung by the band ("Now you bake better biscuits, cakes and pies/ 'Cause Martha White's self-rising flour, the one all-purpose flour/ Martha White's self-rising flour's got 'Hot Rize'").

If the on-air product placement seems a bit outdated—a throwback to the previous decade's "Texaco Star Theater"—it's easy to forgive. "Even the Grand Ole Opry when it started in 1927 was anachronistic," says Jay Orr of the Country Music Hall of Fame. "It played on an audience for nostalgia and the good old-time ways of traditional music. That's always been a calling card of country music. But within that framework, Flatt and Scruggs were actually quite progressive." In the early '60s, after all, rock and roll and R&B were ascendant: "Stand By Me" was a hit in 1961 and in 1962 (the year "The Ballad of Jed Clampett" was on the charts) both "Love Me Do" and Bob Dylan's eponymous LP were released. A bluegrass group that resonated so strongly with the public couldn't have been a mere novelty act. "This band was at the top of its powers and these shows come at a time when they've coalesced," says Orr. Not even Bill Monroe, for whom both Flatt and Scruggs played as he was inventing the bluegrass sound in the 1940s, could keep up, says Orr: steady sponsorship and a weekly TV gig kept the Foggy Mountain Boys together, tight and on top.

The proof is on these DVDs. Just like the show itself, there are no flashy special features. Interviews or biographical information would have made nice bonuses. But we'll happily take what we can get. Highlights include a gorgeous a cappella four-part harmony rendition of the spiritual "Precious Memories," a guest appearance by Maybelle Carter warbling "Wildwood Flower," covers of "Georgia Buck" and "Jimmie Brown the Newsboy" featuring Scruggs on lead guitar and regular banjo-and-fiddle duets that round out the show when the band is left with a minute or two to spare. There's certainly nothing like it on the tube today. The closest thing imaginable, and this is a huge stretch, would be if a country act with large crossover appeal like the Dixie Chicks or Lucinda Williams were given a weekly show on which they simply played music for 30 prime-time minutes.

Scruggs, 82 now and frail, looks back fondly on the show and is glad to see it resurface. "It brings back some good memories of those days," he writes in an e-mail to NEWSWEEK. "It was fun working with guest artists on the show such as Mother Maybelle Carter of the Original Carter Family. I was a big fan of Maybelle's guitar playing and singing when I was growing up ... I really enjoyed playing the fiddle & banjo duets with Paul Warren." Lucky for us, now we can enjoy them, too. Even though we still can't figure out how they hell they did it.