

## Now You Bake Right: Flatt & Scruggs on Regional Television

Television played a key role in bringing Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs and their music to millions of homes in the South and throughout the nation in the 1950s and 1960s—first with the regionally popular, Martha White-sponsored *Flatt & Scruggs Grand Ole Opry* show; then with special appearances on folk-themed programs such as CBS-TV's "Spring Festival of Music—Folk Sound U.S.A." or ABC-TV's *Hootenanny*; and, finally, with theme music and regular cameo appearances on the CBS sitcom *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Their recording of the show's theme, "The Ballad of Jed Clampett," was a #1 country hit for the band.

Where touring required the investment of weeks and months to get Flatt & Scruggs in front of large numbers of people, TV could deliver a massive audience in an instant. "I liked TV," Earl Scruggs has said. "I really did. You'd get tired of the travel sometimes, but I liked TV because it was so on-the-spot effective."

The band's Martha White-sponsored TV programs began in 1955 and continued until 1969, when Flatt and Scruggs ended their partnership to take separate musical paths. The performances on this DVD and the others in this series come from two-inch videotape transferred to film, shot during the fertile period of the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Flatt & Scruggs had become favorites of folk music enthusiasts, and some of the band's single releases were registering on *Billboard's* country chart.

FLATT & SCRUGGS

The story of Flatt & Scruggs is familiar to their many fans: Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs met in December 1945, when banjo picker Scruggs, a country boy from North Carolina who had worked in a textile mill before taking up music full-time, joined Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys, a unit that included, at the time, rhythm guitarist and singer Flatt, a country boy from Tennessee and a former textile mill worker himself. In 1946, Scruggs and Flatt made their recording debut with Monroe in a lineup that also included bassist Cedric Rainwater (real name Howard Watts) and fiddler Chubby Wise—the Blue Grass Boys unit that would come to be regarded as *the* seminal bluegrass band.

In early 1948, Flatt and Scruggs left Monroe's band, and—although apparently not their original plan—within a few weeks formed a band of their own, the Foggy Mountain Boys, while working at radio station WDVA in Danville, Virginia. By fall, they were recording for Mercury Records.

#### MARTHA WHITE

The band's relationship with Martha White Mills began in 1953, when Flatt & Scruggs worked out of Knoxville, Tennessee. By that time they were recording for Columbia Records, and their stature in the world of country music had grown considerably. Martha White representative Efford Burke, whose territory included the eastern part of Middle Tennessee, attended one of their shows and urged company president Cohen Williams to hire the band to appear on a daily, fifteen-minute, early morning radio show sponsored by Martha White on WSM. They moved to Nashville and started doing the Martha White show in June 1953. For a while, their association with

Martha White and WSM did not include appearances on the Martha White-sponsored segment of WSM's Grand Ole Opry, but that would change.

In May 1954, after just eleven months in Nashville, the band relocated to Crewe, Virginia, some fifty miles southwest of Richmond, where they played live on radio station WSVS. While in Virginia, Flatt & Scruggs wisely maintained their Martha White affiliation by recording the morning radio shows and shipping them back to Nashville for broadcast on WSM. Also in Virginia, the band made appearances on the Saturday night *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, which aired over Richmond radio station WRVA.

Their tenure in Crewe lasted only a matter of months, however. As 1955 began, Flatt & Scruggs had returned to Nashville, where they still were morning regulars on WSM radio, and in January the group started appearing at 6 p.m. Saturdays on a thirty-minute television show, also sponsored by Martha White, and carried by WSM-TV. Scruggs recalled that Cohen Williams had some doubt about whether the downhome music and comedy of Flatt & Scruggs would translate well to television. "His philosophy was, about thirteen weeks and we would be dead," Scruggs recalled. But he respectfully disagreed with Williams. "I said, 'We've been playing "Cripple Creek" and "Sally Goodin"' and these old tunes since I was a kid, and people haven't gotten tired of it. They like the music. If we handle ourselves well, I think it's going to work.'" And work it did. The television appearances expanded Flatt & Scruggs's following, generating significant mail from viewers—mail that Martha White's Cohen Williams used to persuade WSM station manager Jack DeWitt that Flatt & Scruggs should be allowed to be part of Martha White's half-hour portion of the Grand Ole Opry, and they soon became regulars on the show.

During those same years of the mid-1950s, rock & roll began to challenge country music—especially traditional country music featuring fiddles and banjos—for primacy in the affections of southern audiences. In 1954 and 1955, Elvis Presley’s music was marketed as country, and Presley appeared regularly on the country-oriented *Louisiana Hayride*, out of Shreveport, Louisiana. Artists such as Hank Snow, Ernest Tubb, and Bill Monroe were competing for record sales and concert tickets with younger entertainers who played rock & roll.

Flatt & Scruggs’s fortunes, however, suffered little with the advent of rock & roll. Martha White—and Earl Scruggs’s banjo—saw to that. Many a young country musician was more excited to hear Flatt & Scruggs and their music than to hear Elvis. “My brother bought a Flatt & Scruggs record in 1950, and I played it over and over,” recalled bluegrass great Del McCoury. “That banjo—I’d never heard anything like it. It was rock & roll before there was rock & roll. So that’s what I set out to play. By the time Elvis got popular, I was already a banjo picker. I couldn’t understand what the girls were so fired up about. I probably wasn’t looking for the right thing.” The girls may have been squealing for Elvis, but McCoury, and many another male music-enthusiast, found himself drawn to Flatt & Scruggs.

Martha White Mills helped Flatt & Scruggs expand their television reach beyond Nashville, creating a circuit that encompassed six cities: Nashville and Jackson in Tennessee; Atlanta and Columbus in Georgia; Florence, South Carolina; and Huntington, West Virginia. In the days before the widespread use of videotape, the band played each of the shows live, logging 2,500 miles a week over an extended route that took them out of Nashville and back again in time for the Grand Ole Opry on Saturday night. “We’d go

to Columbus, Georgia, on Monday; Atlanta Tuesday; Florence, South Carolina, Wednesday; Huntington, West Virginia, Thursday; and Friday was Jackson, Tennessee,” Scruggs explained. Usually, the shows were scheduled around suppertime. “Hopefully, people would be out of the fields—we thought about mainly rural people, who watched our program. That’s what Cohen was thinking about, too, because they made biscuits and cornbread instead of light bread.” Following TV appearances, Flatt & Scruggs often played a concert somewhere in the surrounding area before moving on to the next TV market.

In April 1960, WSM-TV reported that the half-hour TV show, now titled *Flatt & Scruggs Grand Ole Opry*, was #1 in the area for its 6 p.m. time slot. When August rolled around, Martha White Mills announced a new co-sponsorship for the shows with Pet Milk. Under the new arrangement, the shows aired in eight cities: Nashville, Bristol, Chattanooga, and Knoxville in Tennessee; Florence, Alabama; Greenville, South Carolina; Huntington, West Virginia; and Roanoke, Virginia. The Pet Milk co-sponsorship lasted only a short time, however, when marketers decided that the audiences for the two products didn’t necessarily coincide.

Scruggs appreciated television’s power to expose the band to new audiences. “With radio, sometimes you had to build up a listening audience,” he said. “If you were on every day with a regular program, you’d have a good audience. But, boy, with TV, they not only heard you, but they *saw* you, too. So you had a double-barrel shot at it.”

Lester and Earl made the most of their double-barrel shot. The band at the time these films were made included mandolinist and tenor singer Curly Seckler, who first joined the Foggy Mountain Boys in 1949 and stayed with them, with two interruptions,

until March 1962; bassist and high baritone vocalist English P. “Cousin Jake” Tullock, who first joined in 1953 and, with only short hiatuses, continued until the group disbanded (he passed away in 1988); fiddler and bass vocalist Paul Warren, who joined in 1954 and stayed until the band’s dissolution (he died in 1978); and Buck “Uncle Josh” Graves, who added his innovative Dobro in 1955 and also remained until the band’s end, save for a brief interruption (he died in 2006). When Seckler left the band, Kentuckian Hylo Brown began appearing in the shows as a solo vocalist, high tenor singer, and guitarist. The earliest show among those preserved, dated July 30, 1956, has Charles Elza (“Kentucky Slim”) on bass.

## THE SHOWS

Each *Flatt & Scruggs Grand Ole Opry* show contained reliably popular programming elements that followed a loose formula from week to week. Though not always presented in the same order, the parts, however arranged, would have been familiar to regular viewers. “Basically, each member did whatever he wanted to do,” Scruggs remembered, “as long as it fit in with the rest of the show.”

Grand Ole Opry and WSM radio announcer T. Tommy Cutrer (or Judd Collins on the earliest of the shows in the museum’s collection) would begin the program with voice-over banners for sponsors Martha White Mills and, during the months of co-sponsorship, the Pet Milk Company, while the band played the show’s instrumental theme. Then Cutrer would introduce Flatt, often with a corny nickname (“the old tater-eater” in one show) and a little good-natured needling designed to coax Flatt out of his normal facial expression, which could strike viewers as stern. “He liked to put Lester on

with a little chuckle, a little grin,” Earl explained. Cutrer usually succeeded, and Flatt, smiling, would rib the announcer right back.

Flatt and the band never let much time pass before launching into an uptempo tune of some kind—one week, perhaps, a banjo / fiddle duet such as “Shortnin’ Bread” by Scruggs and Paul Warren; the next, a romp through “Salty Dog Blues”; followed on the next show, maybe, by a fiddle tune from Warren such as “Katy Hill,” “Orange Blossom Special,” or “Cacklin’ Hen.”

Next on the program might come a soulful vocal from Lester, on a number such as “Jimmie Brown the Newsboy” or “Crying My Heart Out over You.” These would be of his choosing. “Lester mainly made out the program,” Scruggs confirmed. “I felt like the lead singer should feel at home when he went on the program, rather than do something he had a question about, just to please somebody.”

Typically, the first spot for Martha White products followed at this point, with smooth-talking Cutrer and a kitchen demonstration hostess—Alice Jarman chief among them—ready to review a recipe for Martha White delectables such as jelly roll, date nut loaf, dessert biscuits, pastry shells, or pizza pie. “Alice knew the shortcuts to make the food look good for TV,” Scruggs recalled. Cutrer would then invite viewers—whom he addressed directly as “Lady”—to write in for recipes to P.O. Box 58 in Nashville, the all-purpose box for the show’s viewer mail. Coming out of the Martha White break, of course, Lester and Earl and the band would launch into the popular “Martha White Theme,” sung with lyrics appropriate to the particular product just advertised—flour, corn meal, or cake mix.

In between the show's two Martha White ads, things could go in one of several directions. Usually, another vocal number would follow, often featuring Lester in the lead. Then Paul, Josh, or Earl, in some combination, might do an instrumental number. Almost always, Uncle Josh—introduced by Lester with a bluesy guitar figure—would read viewer dedications during this segment, mentioning by name fans and friends who had written to the band in care of the show, or who had encountered the band on the road. A sacred number—featuring the Foggy Mountain Quartet harmonies of Earl, Lester, Curly, and Paul, and sometimes Cousin Jake, too—followed the dedications.

Another Martha White ad typically came after the sacred number—T. Tommy pitching hard and winding up with his patented “Goodness gracious, it’s good,” before switching back to the band for a reprise of the “Martha White Theme.”

At some time during the next segment, Graves and Tullock—Uncle Josh and Cousin Jake—would do a downhome comedy bit, Josh playing the straight man to Jake’s rube. “They had been working together since they were kids in Knoxville,” Earl said. “I tell you the truth, I don’t know how they came up with some of the routines they had, but they had some good routines, I thought.” After their short bit, Jake and Josh often would do a whimsical number such as “Down, Down, Down,” “The Crawdad Song,” “They’re Gonna Put a Monkey on the Moon,” or “Baby, You’ve Got to Quit That Noise.”

After a solo spot from one of the band members—Curly singing Hank Locklin’s “Please Help Me, I’m Falling,” perhaps, or Paul fiddling “Durham’s Bull”—the Foggy Mountain Quartet returned for another sacred number, often with Earl accompanying the ensemble on lead and rhythm guitar instead of banjo.

For the short period that Pet Milk co-sponsored the Flatt & Scruggs show with Martha White, the company's ads usually would fall into a third advertising slot—the last in the show, in which Cutrer would describe a culinary use for Pet Evaporated Milk, which marketers had him tout as having “twice the country cream in every drop.”

The shows would wind down with another vocal number—again, usually from Lester—and a fiddle tune played in duet by Warren and Scruggs that could be made to fit whatever length of time remained in the show. Flatt would offer some closing remarks as Cutrer wandered back onto the set to banter with Lester and close the show with another announcement about the show's sponsorship.

From time to time, Flatt & Scruggs might welcome a special guest to the show. Earl recalled that Grandpa Jones made a popular addition when he appeared, and in the run of shows preserved at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum and featured in this series, guests included Stringbean (David Akeman), who does “Hillbilly Fever” and “Eleven Cent Cotton”; Earl's eight-year-old son, Randy Lynn Scruggs, who plays autoharp in his lap in several appearances; and Mother Maybelle Carter, who picks “Wildwood Flower” on guitar and “The Liberty Dance” on autoharp. Of special interest is a show from early 1962, in which seven-year-old Ricky Skaggs plays “Foggy Mountain Special” on his mandolin and comes back later in the show to play and sing “Ruby.”

The Flatt & Scruggs repertoire, as represented on the preserved films, ranged broadly enough that repetition from week to week was not a problem. Certain songs did emerge as favorites, however. “Cabin on the Hill,” a chart hit in 1959 and the band's most successful release before “The Ballad of Jed Clampett,” appears frequently.

Scruggs's showpiece "Cumberland Gap" also gets repeated performances. "Go Home," their chart hit from 1961, is a popular selection, as are "I Ain't Gonna Work Tomorrow" (recorded in 1961) and the sentimental "The Homestead on the Farm" ("I Wonder How the Old Folks Are at Home.")

Like any good businessman, Flatt routinely used airtime to advance the band's priorities. Not infrequently, he would announce that Flatt & Scruggs had dates available for bookings on an upcoming swing through North Carolina, say. "People from community organizations like the PTA, Boy Scouts, firemen, who wanted to raise money, they would get in touch with us," Scruggs recalled. Even more often, Flatt would plug the band's latest songbook, the camera in close-up while a disembodied hand flipped through the book's pages, Lester promising that there were "twenty-five or thirty pictures, and some of 'em are suitable for framing." Viewers sent their orders to P.O. Box 58, and the songbooks sold well—sometimes as many as a thousand a week when they were newly available, Scruggs remembered. When sales fell off, the band put another book into production.

At some point—no one remembers just when—the band stopped moving from city to city to do the shows live, and instead taped a month's worth of shows in a single day at the WSM-TV studios in Nashville. They would record two shows in the morning, take a break, and continue with two shows in the evening. The films preserved by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum and excerpted for presentation here appear to have been shot on two-inch videotape and transferred to film for distribution to affiliate TV stations. Sometime in 1962, the backdrop changes from a mock general store, with country hams hanging in the window, to that of a crudely drawn log cabin interior. An

issue of *Music Reporter*, dated November 10, 1962, states that the show was being produced in Chattanooga at that time. Scruggs remembered that Flatt & Scruggs filmed the show in Chattanooga for a period, though he didn't recall just when or why the band filmed there instead of at WSM-TV.

Just after the performances on these films, Flatt & Scruggs saw their fame spread nationwide through exposure on *The Beverly Hillbillies*, which began airing in the fall of 1962 with “The Ballad of Jed Clampett” as its theme song. The band made their historic appearance at Carnegie Hall—captured in a live recording—on December 8, 1962. In 1967, the hit film *Bonnie & Clyde* used “Foggy Mountain Breakdown” in its score, further adding to Flatt & Scruggs’s national profile. But it was these Martha White television shows that began the groundswell of national interest in the group. As Grand Ole Opry announcer Eddie Stubbs has pointed out, it’s one thing to hear the band’s recordings; it’s quite another to see them in action. These shows illustrate the band’s greatness as a well-oiled performing unit, playing at the peak of their powers. The group disbanded in 1969, and Flatt passed away on May 11, 1979, at sixty-four. “Those were good years,” Scruggs said of the era captured on these shows. “Basically, we had a good time with each other.” The camaraderie comes through on the small screen, and now the performances can be experienced again. “I’m glad to see them come out if they will be enjoyed a lot,” Scruggs stated. “Well, there’s nothing like that on the air now, I don’t reckon.”

— Jay Orr

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This series is dedicated to the memory of our friend Louise Scruggs, who set a high standard for accuracy in research, and who continues to be an inspiration to us all.