

RICKY SKAGGS

by Tamela Meredith Partridge
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Bluegrass singer and songwriter, Ricky Skaggs, musically invites the listener to drift back to a place where the grass is not only greener - it's new and blue.

"New grass (modern bluegrass music) is simply old grass done with respect," Skaggs says. "But it's also played with a new attitude, voices, sounds and recording techniques that are cool, commercial and very much for today."

Skaggs and his Kentucky Thunder band will perform at The Little Nashville Opry on Saturday, November 15th, at 6 p.m. & 9:30 p.m. The current Kentucky Thunder band member roster includes: Andy Leftwich (fiddle), Paul Brewster (tenor vocals, rhythm guitar), Mark Fain (bass), Jim Mills (banjo), Cody Kilby (lead guitar) and Darrin Vincent (baritone vocals, rhythm guitar).

"My band, Kentucky Thunder, is a great group," Skaggs says. "Their abilities to play so well every night make me want to step up to the plate and knock it out of the park every time."

Skaggs, a Cordell, Kentucky native, began singing in church by age three and playing the mandolin at five.

"I've always looked upon playing an instrument as it being another voice," Skaggs says. "It's a God-given gift I can speak with -- and never say a word."

Skaggs first performed professionally at six years old when Bill Monroe, The Father of Bluegrass, came to his town to entertain. Monroe was a couple of songs into the concert when the crowd started yelling out Skaggs name. Monroe finished the song, looked out into the crowd and said, "Wherever you are, Ricky, you better get up here. Sounds like the folks want to hear you play."



Jumping off his dad's lap, little Ricky Skaggs ran to the front of the auditorium. Bill Monroe reached down and pulled the child prodigy on stage, slipped his own mandolin strap over Skaggs shoulder and invited him to play a song.

"I started picking a bluegrass hit called Ruby," says Skaggs in a recent article he wrote for Guidepost magazine. "The crowd went wild, clapping and hollering for their hometown kid.....Folks would bring up that day for years afterward. 'You're the young fellow who played Bill Monroe's mandolin,' someone would inevitably say at a church social or fair where I was playing. I'd nod my head and feel a sense of pride. Not cocky pride, but the good kind. The kind that comes when you're doing what you believe God wants you to be doing. And God wanted me to play bluegrass."

The incident marked the beginning of a close and lifelong friendship between Skaggs and his musical mentor, Bill Monroe.

At 17, Skaggs entered the world of professional music with his friend, late country singer, Keith Whitley, when the two accomplished young musicians were asked to join the band of legendary bluegrass artist, Ralph Stanley.

Skaggs continued honing his bluegrass skills while singing and playing in the bands of The Country Gentlemen, Boone Creek, J.D. Crowe, and Emmylou Harris.

"Every night we appreciate and honor the music of Bill Monroe, Flatt & Scruggs, The Stanley Brothers, etc., by playing the songs they've done," Skaggs says. "Only we do them a bit differently, because we don't have their same background. We don't know what it's like to grow up during the Depression when the Stock Market crashed. But we do know about the Persian Gulf War, the situation with Iraq and other things that even Bill Monroe never had to face. Today is a different time in life, and our music reflects that."

Skaggs launched a solo country career in 1980 and dominated the charts throughout the decade with such No.#1 singles as, "Crying My Heart Out Over You," "Cajun Moon" and "Lovin' Only Me."

"Music is a heavenly and spiritual language," Skaggs says. "It translates thoughts, emotions and is able to reach out and touch our spirit. Sometimes people won't listen to what you have to say, but they'll listen to what you're singing or playing."

In the 90's, country music began leaning back towards a pop-oriented sound, leaving Skaggs special blend of country and bluegrass struggling for radio airplay. As a result, Skaggs made the career-altering decision to return to his bluegrass roots full-time.

When Bill Monroe passed away in '96, Skaggs and other bluegrass artists inherited the honor of carrying on Monroe's traditional torch to those seeking its illumination.

Skaggs rekindled the bluegrass flame by establishing his own label in '97 -- Skaggs Family Records and its sister label, Ceili Music -- which garnered five consecutive Grammy nominated bluegrass albums including, "Bluegrass Rules!," "Ancient Tones," "Soldier of the Cross," "Big Mon: The Songs of Bill Monroe," and "History of the Future."

"We're not writing songs about little cabin homes on the hills anymore," says Skaggs, who is fondly referred to within the music industry as The Ambassador of Modern Bluegrass. "We're writing about things that are new and fresh -- songs that really talk about this century and the new millennium."

Skaggs current album, "Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder: Live at the Charleston Music Hall," is a 24-song bluegrass collection of such old classics as "Black-Eyed Susan" and "Why Did You Wander" and new favorites including "A Simple Life" and "Goin' To The Ceili."

"Bluegrass music is so out-of-the-box and bigger than life," Skaggs says. "It's not safe, it's not prim and proper. It's got this 'lean in' attitude to it, so live albums are tough to do. You've got to have a little roughness around the edges -- and I'm such a perfectionist that I really want the music to be as good as it can be. 'Vinyl is final,' they used to say, and the same is true for a CD, too!"

Sometimes in life, things come full circle. And for Ricky Skaggs, the road has brought him back to where it all began -- bluegrass music.

"If my life were put to lyric and song," Skaggs says, "it would speak of my love for family, God and playing music that reflects what's in my heart."