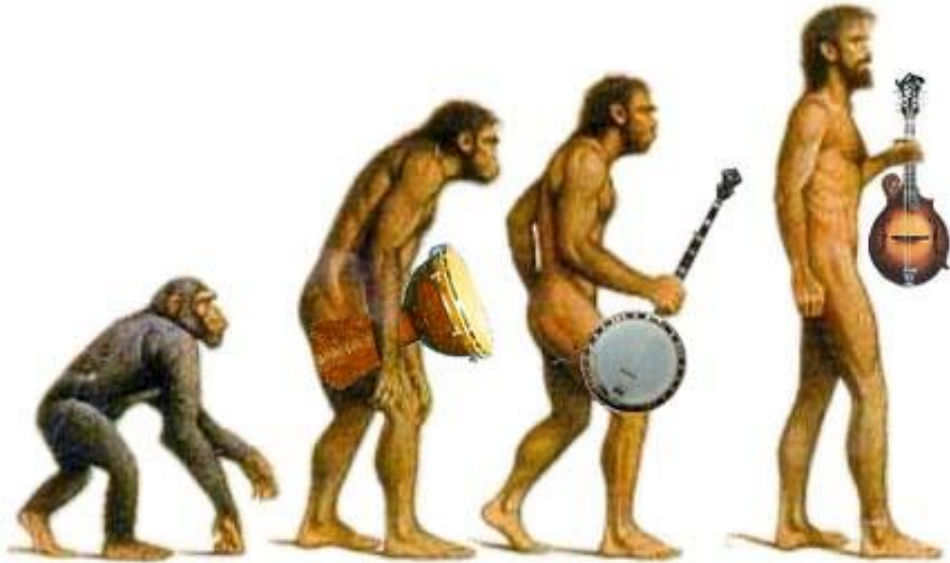


A Brief History of the Mandolin ...

The instrument of the new millennium!



Mandolin History

Mandolins evolved from the lute family in Italy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the deep bowled mandolin produced particularly in Naples became a common in the nineteenth century. The original instrument was the mandore which evolved in the fourteenth century from the lute. As time passed and the instrument spread around Europe, it took on many names and various structural characteristics.

The first mention of modern steel-strung mandolins is found in literature regarding popular Italian players who traveled through Europe teaching and giving concerts. One such player was the composer G. B. Gervasio who traveled widely between 1750 and 1810. These early mandolins were called Neapolitan mandolins, because of their origin from Naples. They are distinguished by an almond-shaped body with a bowled back which is constructed from curved strips of wood along its length.

The twentieth century saw the rise in popularity of the mandolin for Celtic, bluegrass, jazz, and classical styles. Much of the development of the mandolin from Neapolitan bowl-back to the carved, flat-back style popular today is attributable to Orville Gibson, founder of the Gibson Company.

Mandolins first attained major popularity in the US in the mid-twenties. Instruments were often sold to students by teacher-dealers. Often these teacher-dealers would conduct mandolin orchestras: groups of 4-50 musicians who would play various mandolin family instruments together. One musician and director who made his start with a mandolin orchestra was pioneer African-American composer James Reese Europe.

The mandolin was primarily used in this type of ensemble or orchestral setting well into the 1930s, although its popularity began to fade at the beginning of the 1930s. A new style of mandolin, the famous Lloyd Loar Master Model from Gibson was designed and introduced in 1923 to boost the flagging interest in mandolin ensembles, but with little success. The "Loar" did however, attain near legendary status as the defining instrument of bluegrass music when Bill Monroe purchased one in a Florida barbershop in 1943 and popularized it as his main instrument.

The Mandolin in Bluegrass

The mandolin's modern popularity in Bluegrass and country music can be directly traced to one man: Bill Monroe, the father of bluegrass music. He joined the Grand Ole Opry in 1939 and the Opry's powerful clear-channel broadcast signal on WSM-AM spread his style throughout the South, directly inspiring many musicians to take up the mandolin. Monroe famously played a Gibson F-5 mandolin, signed and dated July 9, 1923, by Lloyd Loar, chief acoustic engineer at Gibson. The F-5 has since become the most imitated tonally and aesthetically by modern mandolin builders.

Monroe's style involved playing lead melodies in the style of a fiddler, and also a percussive chording sound referred to as "the chop" for the sound made by the quickly struck and muted strings. He also perfected a sparse, percussive blues style, especially up the neck in keys which had not been used much in country music, notably the keys of B and E.

Monroe's modern day followers of the "Monroe style" of mandolin playing include Frank Wakefield and more recently Mike Compton of the Nashville Bluegrass Band and David Long, who often tour as a duet.

Other major original bluegrass stylists who emerged in the early 1950s and are for the most part active still, are generally acknowledged to be Jesse McReynolds who invented a syncopated banjo-roll style called crosspicking and Bobby Osborne of the Osborne Brothers, who is a master of clarity and sparkling single-note runs.

Highly-respected and influential modern bluegrass players include Herschel Sizemore, Doyle Lawson, and the multi-genre Sam Bush, who is equally at home with old-time fiddle tunes, rock, reggae, and jazz. Ronnie McCoury of the Del McCoury Band has won numerous awards for his Monroe-influenced playing. The late John Duffey of the original Country Gentlemen and later the Seldom Scene did much to popularize the bluegrass mandolin among folk and urban audiences, especially on the east coast and in the Washington, D.C. area.

Bluegrass and Beyond - The Mandolin in Other Styles of Music

Jethro Burns, best known as half of the comedy duo Homer and Jethro, was also the first important jazz mandolinist. Tiny Moore of the Texas Playboys developed an electric five-string mandolin and helped popularize the instrument in Western Swing music. Modern players David Grisman, Sam Bush, Chris Thile and Mike Marshall, among others, have worked since the early 1970s to demonstrate the mandolin's versatility for virtually all styles of music.

In Classical music, Beethoven composed mandolin music and enjoyed playing the mandolin. Vivaldi composed two well-known mandolin concerti. 20th century classical composers have also used the mandolin as their instrument of choice. Amongst these are: Schonberg, Webern, Stravinsky and Zappa.

The mandolin has been used occasionally in rock music. Levon Helm of The Band occasionally moved from his drum kit to play mandolin. Ian Anderson of Jethro Tull played mandolin on their second album and also occasionally on later releases. Rod Stewart's 1971 #1 hit "Maggie May" features a significant mandolin riff in its motif. David Grisman played mandolin on two Grateful Dead songs on the American Beauty album, "Friend of the Devil" and "Ripple," which became instant favorites among amateur pickers at jam sessions and campground gatherings. John Paul Jones and Jimmy Page both played mandolin on a few Led Zeppelin songs. Some rock musicians today use mandolins, typically single-stringed electric models rather than double-stringed acoustic mandolins. One example is Tim Brennan of the Irish-American punk rock band Dropkick Murphys. The 1991 R.E.M. hit "Losing My Religion" was driven by a few simple mandolin licks played by guitarist Peter Buck, who also played the mandolin in nearly a dozen other songs. Jack White of The White Stripes played mandolin for the film Cold Mountain, and plays mandolin on the song "Little Ghost" on the White Stripes album Get Behind Me Satan. David Immerglück of the Counting Crows is also known to feature the mandolin in many of his recordings. Pop punk band Green Day has used a mandolin in several occasions, especially on their 2000 album, Warning. Boyd Tinsley, violin player of the Dave Matthews Band has been using an electric mandolin since 2005.

Mandolin has also been used in blues music, most notably by Yank Rachell, Johnny Young, Carl Martin, and Gerry Hundt. It saw some use in jug band music, since that craze began as the mandolin fad was waning, and there were plenty of instruments available at relatively low cost. Very rarely mandolins are played with bottlenecks or slides. Sam Bush plays with a slide, mostly on a four string mandolin.

Members of the Mandolin Family

The mandolin is the soprano member of the mandolin family, as the violin is the soprano member of the violin family. Other members of the mandolin family are:



The Mandola, which is tuned to a fifth below the mandolin, in the same relationship as that of the viola to the violin. It is normally tuned like a viola: C-G-D-A.

The Octave Mandolin, which is tuned an octave below the mandolin.

The Mando-Cello, which is classically tuned to an octave plus a fifth below the mandolin, in the same relationship as that of the cello to the violin: C-G-D-A.

The Mando-Bass, has 4 single strings, rather than double courses, and is tuned like a double

bass. These were made by the Gibson Company in the early twentieth century, but have never been very common. Most mandolin orchestras preferred to use the ordinary double bass, rather than a specialized mandolin family instrument.

The piccolo or sopranino mandolin, is a rare member of the family, tuned one fourth above the mandolin; the same relation as that of the piccolo or violin to the violin and viola.

Suggested Listening:

Bill Monroe

Bill Monroe is one of the most seminal figures in the popularization of mandolin in bluegrass and folk music. Frequently considered the Godfather of Bluegrass, Monroe's mandolin picking has inspired pretty much everyone who's come since, and his songs are frequently covered to this day.

Chris Thile

Chris Thile started his career as a young child playing with the prodigious contemporary bluegrass troupe Nickel Creek, all the while releasing the occasional solo record on the side. After 20 years together, though, the trio split and Thile spun off to form the genre-defying all-star band Punch Brothers, who have since become a darling of fans and critics alike.

David Grisman

David Grisman is perhaps one of bluegrass music's most inventive and innovative mandolin players—a distinction he could share with Thile. With a deep appreciation and command for jazz mandolin, Grisman has played with the Grateful Dead, Peter Rowan, Tony Rice, Mike Marshall, and a number of other notable musicians.

Doyle Lawson

Doyle Lawson started his career in the '70s with the Country Gentlemen before forming Quicksilver at the end of that decade. Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver have become one of the most influential bands in modern bluegrass and gospel music, which is due as much to the exceptional rotating door of personnel as it is to Lawson's mandolin picking prowess.

Mike Marshall

Mike Marshall is one of the foremost mandolin players in the world, and he started his career playing alongside Grisman in the David Grisman Quintet. In addition to playing with Grisman, he's also collaborated with Joshua Bell, Bela Fleck, Darol Anger, and many other highly respected contemporary and progressive folk and bluegrass players.

Peter Ostroushko

Peter Ostroushko started his career performing on A Prairie Home Companion in the 1970s, but has since lent his incredible mandolin (and fiddle) skills to songs by Emmylou Harris, Bob Dylan, Willie Nelson, and numerous others.

Ricky Skaggs

Ricky Skaggs started his career playing with Bill Monroe before joining Ralph Stanley's Clinch Mountain Boys. He also played for Emmylou Harris and J.D. Crowe and the New South before starting his own band Kentucky Thunder. Since their debut in 1997, Kentucky Thunder have become one of the most respected bands in contemporary bluegrass.

Ronnie McCoury

Ronnie McCoury is probably best known for lending his tight mandolin picking skills to his father's Del McCoury Band, although he's also appeared on several other artists' recordings and has been known to play as a duo with his brother Rob (guitar). Ronnie was also named IBMA Mandolin Player of the Year for eight years in a row (1993-2000).

Sam Bush

Sam Bush is another frequent recipient of the IBMA's Mandolin Player of the Year honor (1990-92, 2007). Founder of the highly respected band New Grass Revival, Bush has been one of the most successful and influential mandolin and fiddle players in modern bluegrass and what's become known as newgrass. In addition

to the New Grass Revival, Bush also has played with Bela Fleck, Jerry Douglas, Edgar Meyer, and a number of other great bluegrass and folk pickers.

Jesse McReynolds

Jesse McReynolds is a mandolin stylist known for his musical wizardry, songwriting, singing and arranging. He performed for many years as a half of the award-winning brother duo, Jim & Jesse until Jim's death in 2002. McReynolds has been a member of the Grand Ole Opry member for more than 42 years and has performed throughout Europe and Africa, as well as in the U.S. Multiple Grammy nominee and winner. He is a co-winner of the IBMA Instrumental Recording, "Mandolin Extravaganza" and was nominated in 2005 for IBMA Instrumental Recording of the Year for his stellar collection of mostly original songs, "Bending the Rules." Currently celebrating his 60th Anniversary in music!

Other Folks to Listen To (Bluegrass):

John Reischman	Frank Wakefield
Adam Steffey	Jacob do Bandolim
Sierra Hull	John Duffey
Sarah Jarosz	Roland White
Barry Mitterhoff	Tim O'Brien
Matt Flinner	Jethro Burns
Joe Walsh	Paul McCartney
Emery Lester	U. Srinivas of Shakti
Hamilton DeHolanda	Marty Stuart
Andy Statman	

Classical Mandolin Players to Listen to:

Avi Avitel	Carlo Aonzo
Chris Thile	Joseph Brent & Alon Sariel
Caterina Lichtenberg	Marilynn Mair
Modern Mandolin Quartet	Mike Marshall

Additional Mandolin Info:

A nice collection of links to various web sites containing a wealth of information on the mandolin can be found at ... <http://www.dmoz.org//Arts/Music/Instruments/Stringed/Mandolin//>