

East Tennessee State University

Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University

ETSU Faculty Works

Faculty Works

Spring 2016

Old Time and Bluegrass: Two Main Strains of Music Along The Crooked Road

Ted Olson

East Tennessee State University, olson@etsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.etsu.edu/etsu-works>



Part of the [Appalachian Studies Commons](#), and the [Music Commons](#)

Citation Information

Olson, Ted. 2016. Old Time and Bluegrass: Two Main Strains of Music Along The Crooked Road. *The Crooked Road's Mountains of Music Homecoming: The Official Homecoming Guide*. 63.

<http://mtnsoufmusic.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/MOMH-ProgramGuide-FINAL-rev.pdf>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Works at Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETSU Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact digilib@etsu.edu.

Old Time and Bluegrass: Two Main Strains of Music Along The Crooked Road

Copyright Statement

This document was published with permission from the publisher. It was originally published in the *The Crooked Road's Mountains of Music Homecoming: The Official Homecoming Guide*.

OLD TIME AND BLUEGRASS: TWO MAIN STRAINS OF MUSIC ALONG THE CROOKED ROAD

BY TED OLSON



Courtesy of Virginia Tourism Corporation (virginia.org)

Visitors to the Crooked Road and the Mountains of Music Homecoming will hear both old time and bluegrass music, though the difference between the two is sometimes unclear. Old time music in the Crooked Road area includes such genres of music as folk songs and ballads; fiddle and banjo tunes; traditional and early commercial sacred songs; blues; and popular songs by known songwriters recorded before World War II and disseminated via 78 rpm records and the radio and eventually entering oral tradition. Old time music was created from the blending of music from several cultures: traditional ballads, lyric songs, and sacred songs from English, Scottish, and Scots-Irish sources; blues, blues ballads, spirituals, and banjo tunes from African American tradition; the fiddle and mandolin of Italian origin; the guitar of Spanish origin; and the autoharp and harmonica and fretted dulcimer of German origin.

Evolving out of old time music, bluegrass is a more modern style of music in terms of structure, delivery, and repertoire.

The classic bluegrass sound emerged with the 1945 introduction of Earl Scruggs's three-finger banjo picking to mandolinist Bill Monroe's innovative band the Blue Grass Boys. Monroe's western Kentucky cultural heritage was heavily influenced by the Appalachian region, and his musical impact was felt throughout Appalachia. By the late 1940s, Monroe's group was inspiring other country string bands, including such groups from the Crooked Road area as the Stanley Brothers and Jim & Jesse. Bluegrass is an ensemble music that emphasizes instrumental virtuosity and emotive vocals.

The typical bluegrass band features such acoustic instruments as the mandolin, fiddle, five-string banjo, acoustic guitar, upright acoustic bass, and dobro (resonator guitar), with the instruments alternating lead parts while the bass and the remaining instruments provide a rhythmic background. Bluegrass harmony singing was derived from the harmony duo and gospel traditions of Appalachia, and the tonal character influenced by the modal vocalizations in traditional Appalachian balladry. The standard bluegrass repertoire includes fiddle and banjo tunes; folk and folk-like commercial songs; and gospel music. A typical bluegrass song consists of several verses sung by the lead singer, each of which is followed by a chorus in two-, three-, or four-part harmony. The verse-chorus pairings are interspersed with instrumental interludes, each one showcasing one or more of the lead instruments.

Ted Olson is the author of [Blue Ridge Folklife](#), a study of Blue Ridge culture, and a Grammy Award-nominated music historian.