

2. The Receptive Processes of American Popular Music in Japan: A Brief History of Two Bluegrass Bands in the Tokai Area, a Concert with a Lecture

(1) Introduction

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On the afternoon of Sunday November 4, from 15:10 to 17:40, at the students' dining hall of the C Building in the Nagoya campus of Nanzan University, our center sponsored a special event on the popular culture of the United States as entitled above. The audience, as many as some one hundred, enjoyed listening to the high-level performances with a highly informative lecture and had a rare opportunity to widen and deepen their understandings of how Japanese local people came to accept American popular culture. I had long been wondering about holding this kind of cultural event even before returning to the old position as director of the Center for American Studies this last April.

Most Japanese people probably think of jazz, blues, Hawaiian, country, folk, rock-'n-roll, and so on when they hear the phrase "American music" because Japanese popular music industries mainly tend to feature those genres. Some decades ago, however, there was a small and short-lived boom of another American popular music which had not been a mainstream genre even in the United States. A number of bluegrass bands flourished all over Japan from the late 1960s through the early 1980s. Why did they get interested in a not-very-major genre of music with rather local and old acoustic sounds in the age of electric guitars? A lecture conducted between the musical performances provided a clue to the answer.

Bluegrass music had long been fostered among the so-called hillbillies in the Appalachian Mountains before the 1920s, and then developed into a commercial musical category in the 1930s and the 1940s in the urban areas of the upper Southern States, such as Kentucky and Tennessee. In the 1950s and the 1960s, music industries in the United States promoted bluegrass into a new mainstream genre following the urbanization and migration of Southern people to the Northern big cities. Those "Urban Southerners" began to feel the necessity for a way to identify themselves for the first time in their lives. Their "traditional" culture, including bluegrass music, played a critical role in the process of establishing their identities in the process of urbanization and migration.

In the 1960s and the early 1970s, not only British and American rock and folk bands like *The Beatles*, Peter, Paul, and Mary, and others, but also *The Country*

Gentlemen and other well-known American bluegrass bands paid visits to Japan and attracted young Japanese audiences. Numerous college-student bluegrass bands were formed all over Japan, including the two guest bands at this event, *The Circle* and *All That Grass*.

According to their self-made webpage profile, *The Circle*, named after “Will the Circle Unbroken,” a world-wide popular song at that time, was established in 1973 after they won an amateur music contest in Mie Prefecture.¹ The original band of *All That Grass* was formed in 1980 and then in 1982 changed its name to resemble “All That Jazz,” a famous cinema at that time. Two years later the present membership was completed. They have since played mainly at local live concerts in the Nagoya area and held various workshops for bluegrass music devotees.²

Selection of the two bands was not only based on their high-level skills and the evaluation of their long-time and honest endeavor but also the apparently two different ways they illustrate how Japanese groups accept foreign cultures, including American popular music, that is through assimilation and acculturation. The two bands are representative performers of the above-mentioned two ways respectively. *All That Grass* has been pursuing original bluegrass music which attracted all the members when they were young college students. On the other hand, although they began by trying as much as possible to copy original American bands, *The Circle* soon concentrated their main efforts on modifying a different culture into a more acceptable one to the local Japanese people by translating, for instance, the lyrics of the songs into Japanese language.

We also invited Mr. KAMEDA Hiroshi as the speaker of a lecture on this theme. He is a non-academic researcher, who himself performs as an amateur bluegrass mandolin picker. He has been a coordinator of numerous local concerts and bluegrass workshops. A group of three members of the Bluegrass Circle of Nagoya University, established by Mr. KAMEDA in 2005, also kindly joined in his presentation as the photo at the following page show.

The tunes performed by *All That Grass* were as follows:

1. Bluegrass Breakdown
2. Little Girl of Mine Tennessee
3. Willie Roy
4. Orange Blossom Special
5. Kentucky Waltz
6. If I Should Wander Back Tonight
7. Maiden’s Prayer
8. Why Did You Wander

¹ <http://homepage2.nifty.com/bunki/sub1-1profile.html>

² <http://homepage1.nifty.com/allthatgrass/>

9. Valley Of Peace
10. Roll In My Sweet Baby's Arms

The tunes played and sung by *The Circle* were as follows:

1. ユーオールカム (C) You All Come
2. 私を待つ人がいる (G) There's Someone Awaiting For Me
3. 今宵恋に泣く (D) I'm Thinking Tonight Of My Blue Eyes
4. 思い出のグリーングラス (G) Green, Green Grass of Home
5. わらぶきの屋根 (E) My Old Cottage Home
6. 柳の木の下に (G) Bury Me Under The Weeping Willow
7. 陽気に行こう (E) Keep On The Sunny Side
8. この想い (A) Last Thing On My Mind

Between the performances above by the two bands, Mr. KAMEDA Hiroshi, a city hall officer of Kasugai, Aichi Prefecture, a founder of the Bluegrass Circle of Nagoya University, a bluegrass-mandolin player, gave a lecture, a translated version of which appears on the following pages. At the closing of this event, all the performers, joined by the audience, played and sang in English a favorite tune, "Country Road" by John Denver.

[PHOTOS]

1. All That Grass

NONOYAMA Tokuharu (guitar), YASUDA Hiroshi (banjo)
INABA Masatoshi (mandolin), MOMIYAMA Hiroyuki (fiddle)
MATSUI Daizo (bass), KASUGA Masaki (dobro)



2. Guest lecturer: KAMEDA Hiroshi, with the three members of the Bluegrass Circle of Nagoya University



3. The Circle

ENOMOTO Chiyoko (vocal), KATO Norimoto (banjo)

MURABAYASHI Mamoru (guitar), SHINDO Shinichiro (mandolin)

NAKAMURA Kazuhisa (bass)



3. All the cast with KAWASHIMA Masaki, Director of the Center for American Studies, Nanzan University, sang “Country Road” with the audience.



(2) Lecture: A Brief History of Bluegrass in the U.S. and Japan

KAMEDA Hiroshi

Introduction

This article discusses the formation within the United States of bluegrass music, a genre that developed and was passed down in Appalachia. It then examines, along with the development and maturization, of bluegrass music, its transmission to and spread in Japan.

Bluegrass music is based in traditional music passed down by Scotch-Irish settlers (immigrants from what is today the Ulster area of Northern Ireland and Scotland) in the Appalachian region of the Eastern United States, now the so-called “South”. It emerged as an acoustical music genre in 1945 with the addition of banjo player Earl Scruggs to Bill Monroe and His Blue Grass Boys. In performances the guitar, flat mandolin, fiddle, five-string banjo, Dobro (resonator guitar), and wood bass are the main instruments used. Unlike country music, which introduced electric instruments as a way to develop its commercial success, bass bluegrass remains attached to acoustic instruments except for the bass. Many tunes have a characteristic fast tempo with instrumental solos at

intervals. Instrumental pieces are common. It can be said bluegrass is a form of country music but with its own distinctive instruments, rhythms, and musical construction.

Appalachia before the Emergence of Bluegrass

Appalachia is a large region bounded by the states of Pennsylvania and New York in the north and the states of Mississippi and Alabama in the south, but the Appalachian region treated in this article centers mostly on the states of North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky. In the settlement of North America immigration into Southern Appalachia was relatively late. It was an isolated, closed area surrounded by steep mountains. There in the eighteenth century the culture of the English, Scottish, Scotch-Irish, and Irish people who immigrated was firmly embedded. The music, especially its songs, was based in a strong oral tradition. The residents lived in an inhospitable environment in tiny makeshift cabins on hilltops, represented today in the long-sung standard tune, "Little Cabin Home on the Hill." Poverty was endemic. The main industries were corn cultivation, bourbon production, coal mining, and so on. Over time as urbanization and industrialization progressed many people left their homes in Appalachia in search of work

History of Popular American Music

Here I will discuss the popularity of early nineteenth century "minstrel shows" as one precursor of bluegrass music. In the 1830s, minstrel shows, in which white performers who colored their faces and hands black with soot, would perform dances and songs played with musical instruments and sung in southern accents mimicking blacks, became popular. Minstrel performances were basically solo performances until 1843, after which, beginning with the Virginia Minstrels, musical instruments such as the mandolin, fiddle, and banjo were utilized. The banjo, which figures prominently in bluegrass, was a West African instrument introduced to North America via the slave trade and perfected as a modern instrument by minstrel show performers. After the Civil War, which began in 1861, the banjo became widespread in the Appalachian region.

Many musical compositions in minstrel shows were about immigrants' places of origin in Europe. For example, the famous "Oklahoma mixer," a dance tune widely used even in Japan, was a song that originated in England. At the latest, it was a song performed in minstrel shows in the 1830s, and depending on the tradition was called "Old Zip Coon," "Turkey in the Straw," and so on. Moreover, it can be heard in the pioneering 1928 Disney film "Steamship Willy." Of course, there was no sound recording equipment during the era of the minstrel shows, so their music became widespread through sheet music and music training manuals.

Furthermore, to digress, the banjo was first played in performance in Japan in

March 1854, as part of a minstrel show held when Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry held a diplomatic exchange with *bakufu* representatives aboard his vessel during his second visit to Yokohama. The banjo was played in accompaniment with the tambourine, guitar, and flute. Perry's objective was the conclusion of a Japan-United States treaty of amity and commerce.

Musical Precursors Before the Formation of Bluegrass

Stephen Collins Foster (1826–1864), called the father of American music, specialized in composing minstrel songs. “Oh, Susanna”, composed in 1848, and “My Old Kentucky Home”, composed in 1853, and others remain among his many works. Overlapping the Gold Rush era, while Foster's works circulated widely in mass society, he himself was not successful commercially.

It was many years later in the early twentieth century, when, with the developing of recording technology, the commercial potential of records was realized: country music's first commercial recording was done in 1923. Jimmy Rodgers (1897–1933), who has been called the “father of country music”, had an enormous influence on country-bluegrass fusion. Born in Mississippi, he was active as a singer while also working as a railroad laborer. He debuted in 1927 when he participated in a record audition in Tennessee organized by record producer Ralph Peer. Famous for his song “Blue Yodel”, he left 111 recorded songs between 1927 and his early death at the age of 36 in 1933. To the traditional southern “hillbilly” singing style he added distinctive black laborers’ “blues” and Swiss yodeling. These later had an important influence not only on country and bluegrass but rock, folk, and popular music as well.

The Carter Family was another representative group that greatly influenced country and folk music. The group was made up of the Virginia-born couple A.P. Carter and Sara Carter, and their daughter, Maybelle Carter. They had a singing style that combined traditional songs and gospel music with guitar, autoharp and a characteristic chorus. They also debuted in 1927 at a recording audition organized by Ralph Peer. The songs they composed and recorded remain standards today. With the widespread consumption of records and radio and the emergence of popular groups, from the 1930s country music was recognized as America's national culture.

Bill Monroe and His Blue Grass Boys

William Smith Monroe (1911–1996), born the youngest of eight children in a Kentucky farm family, is the most important figure in bluegrass music. He pursued his musical activities while working at an Indiana oil refinery. As the Monroe Brothers duo with his brother he built up his musical experience through radio performances, etc. from 1934–1936. In 1936 he signed a contract with a record company. In addition to his own compositions many of the songs he performed were covers of Jimmy Rodgers tunes and traditional music. The

influence of gospel music and black blues can be seen in his music.

After the breakup of the Monroe Brothers, he formed Bill Monroe and His Blue Grass Boys. Modern bluegrass was completed with the addition of banjo player Earl Scruggs in 1945. Earl perfected the characteristic style of picking the five-string banjo with three fingers of the right hand.

Although Monroe cannot be said to have been commercially successful, his band was rediscovered and reappraised during the folk music revival of the 1960s, and they shifted their performances to folk festivals. At the same time they organized bluegrass festivals, outdoor overnight concerts. Through festivals in Roanoke, Virginia in 1965 and Bean Blossom, Indiana in 1967 they increased not only the number of spectators but followers as well. More than 150 members joined and left the Blue Grass Boys. Those who left carried on the style and formed new bands, spreading the musical style as they pursued different paths.

Flatt and Scruggs

Earl Scruggs and guitarist and vocalist Lester Flatt left the Blue Grass Boys together and founded the Foggy Mountain Boys in 1948. They became widely known through their television show, sponsored by the Martha White Flour Company, and became a commercial success. The use of their music in the movie *Bonnie and Clyde* and the television series *The Beverly Hillbillies* heightened their popularity.

Many of their pieces were covers and arrangements of traditional and Carter Family songs. Lester's guitar style was strongly influenced by the Carter Family. Conversely, Scruggs' banjo playing, which gave the band its distinctive sound, has influenced many banjo performers' technique down to the present. Flatt and Scruggs performed together until the mid-1960s, and then pursued separate musical careers.

During that time radio DJs in America in the late 1950s began to call this style of music "bluegrass" without necessarily meaning the music of the Blue Grass Boys. "Blue Grass" is the name of a grass native to Kentucky and is the state's nickname as well.

Dawn and Heyday of Bluegrass in Japan

Bluegrass music came to Japan mostly after World War II. Japanese musicians who specialized in performances on American bases appeared, and musical activity and communication around the bases flourished. In the entertainment world influences from westerns in Hollywood movies and Broadway musicals, and in the 1950s the Sunday Western Carnival and Three Rockabilly Boys, demonstrated the popularity of American country culture.

In this milieu, it is said that Japanese bluegrass bands first emerged in the 1950s. The Ozaki Brothers, who are still active, formed at that time. It can be said that this was most "modern" American musical import of the period. At the

same time, in the 1950s bluegrass fan clubs became popular especially among high school and university students. Information sources included LPs, radio (FEN), and fan magazines. Japanese who participated in authentic bluegrass festivals also appeared.

From the last half of the 1960s, bluegrass performers' activities centered on university students, who took up the responsibilities of a new era. New clubs like the "Amerika Minyou Kenkyuukai" and the "Buruugurasu Doukoukai", etc. were formed. Music stores and television stations sponsored contests, activities and objectives diversified, and the number of performers increased.

In 1967 the Bluegrass 45 (Buruugurasu 45) was born, based at the Kobe coffee shop Lost City (Rosuto Shitei). The members mostly came from universities where bluegrass was flourishing. Live performances, aimed mainly at American audiences, were almost a daily occurrence. The band came to the attention of the representatives of an American record company at the 1970 Osaka International Exposition, and they performed at major bluegrass festivals in the United States. They toured the festivals, selling out the records they had made. This experience brought about a mass of information about bluegrass in Japan. In 1973, June Apple, the first fan magazine devoted to bluegrass, was established. Also, BOM Service (Bluegrass and Old Time Music), a company that aimed to turn bluegrass and old time music into a business, was started by the Watanabe brothers, Bluegrass 45 members.

In the last half of the 1960s popular American bands also came frequently to Japan. As a result of the heightened popularity of bluegrass, and active promotion, many of these groups were well-known. For example, Flatt and Scruggs' Foggy Mountain Boys gave a concert in March 1967 which was televised by NHK. In the 1970s, beginning with Bill Monroe and His Bluegrass Boys, JD Crowe, Jim and Jesse, the Country Gentlemen, and other musicians too numerous to mention performed in Japan.

I also need to mention that, at the same time, Japanese musical instrument manufacturers were producing bluegrass instruments. Many were produced under license from American manufacturers and exported. It may be said that this was a period in which the meaning of the universalization of musical instruments changed dramatically. Today they are manufactured in South Korea and China instead of Japan.

Bluegrass Festivals in Japan

Japanese participants in American bluegrass festivals wanted to organize similar festivals in Japan, which efforts resulted in the organization of the Takarazuka Bluegrass Festival in 1972, the Gifu Bluegrass Festival in 1975, and others. Early events resembled fan retreats, but gradually succeeded in increasing participant numbers, and there were efforts to hold festivals across the country. These festivals continue to be held to the present. Today, from spring to fall over

twenty bluegrass festivals are held nationwide from Hokkaido to Kyushu.

On Folksongs and Bluegrass

At about that time there were experiments with holding outdoor concerts. National folk jamborees were held in Nakatsugawa City, Gifu Prefecture, three times between 1969 and 1971. Yoshida Takuro, Kamayatsu Hiroshi, The Five Red Balloons (Itsutsu no Akai Fusen), Takada Wataru, and others who later became commercially successful performed, and at its peak more than 10,000 people attended. It is significant that in Japan large-scale music festivals were held even before the famous Woodstock festival was held in 1970.

At first, many folk songs were “message” compositions linked to student movement opposition to the Vietnam War, the 1970 renewal of the Japan-U.S. security treaty, and establishment institutions. Musically, they were strongly influenced by American folk and had a band style centered on guitar and banjo. Many lyrics were Japanese translations of English originals. Among them were compositions that caught the attention of record companies, and by degrees shifted to commercial orientations.

Attempts to Render “Bluegrass” into Japanese

In 1971, folk singer Takaishi Tomoya, who had stopped working for awhile after his 1968 hit, “Jukensei Buruusu,” formed Takaishi Tomoya and the Natasha Seven (Takaishi Tomoya to Za Nataasha Sebun) together with Shirota Junji and Sakate Shogo. They sold records produced by a major label, were played on the radio, and were popular with young people. I should note that this group disseminated its banjo-centered music through fan magazines and music manuals, thereby gaining fans. They also tried to appeal to Japanese audiences by replacing English lyrics with Japanese (as had been done with various other commercial music genres in their early days). These efforts had the effect of increasing players and listeners especially among high school and university students, and many of them are still bluegrass aficionados. Their success in gaining recognition of bluegrass among the members of their own generation is a major achievement. Besides this group, a number of hit songs in the bluegrass style, such as “Hashire Kotaro” (1970 by the student group Salty Dog, “Hanayome” (1971) by Hashida Hitonori and Climax, and others were born. In Japan many of these were classified as “folk song” groups.

However, with the end of the folk boom in the 1980s these bluegrass-style groups disappeared from the television stage and were replaced by electric and pop bands and synthesized music.

Japanese Bluegrass from the 1980s

University clubs that had once been proudly flourishing disappeared or changed direction in the 1980s. Clubs dwindled as they lost members or their

members' musical tastes changed (for example under its old name the Amerika Minyou Kenkyuukai turned to performing pop music). Fan magazines, which had served valuable roles as information tools, almost completely disappeared in the 1980s, too. Today, *Moonshiner* (*Muunshainaa*), published monthly by BOM, remains the sole magazine devoted to bluegrass music.

Other clubs retained their character: the clubs at Kobe University, Tohoku University, Hokkaido University, and Rakunou Gakuen University are examples. These clubs continued to perform what could be called orthodox bluegrass, remained organizationally stable, and were important sites for attracting and keeping new musicians.

Many musicians with experience of the heyday of bluegrass and folk music in the 1970s even now continue these musical traditions. Many of the organizers of Japan's festivals from that decade still organize them regularly. Although bluegrass lovers are not many in number, and the mainstream media do not pay attention to them, ardent fans and a strong community network still exist.

I would like to introduce here the activities of one contemporary professional musician related to bluegrass in Japan. Kunimoto Takeharu, well-known as a *roukyoku* artist and *shamisen* musician, is also a bluegrass mandolin aficionado and performer. In 2003, he received a Japanese government scholarship to study at East Tennessee State University (ETSU) for one year. After that, together with ETSU members he formed a band called Kunimoto Takeharu and the Last Frontier and released a CD titled "Appalachian Shamisen." Kunimoto himself played the shamisen in the band, and in 2005 toured Japan.

To digress a bit, according to one theory, the instrument born in Egypt in which strings were affixed to a drum, travelled west via Africa to the United States as the "banjo"; it travelled east across the Silk Road via China and Okinawa to Japan as the "*shamisen*". That these two instruments should meet after travelling in opposite directions around the world is an historical happenstance.

Viewed from a commercial perspective, Japan's bluegrass music cannot be said to have been successful. With the exception of a few banjo and mandolin players, it is difficult to make a living at it. Unfortunately, Japan is not a place that can support professional bluegrass performers. But devoted amateur aficionados remain. Players and fans can still enjoy interacting at venues such as live houses and bluegrass festivals across the country.

Bluegrass in Contemporary America

The International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) was founded in the United States in 1985 to support, promote, and development musicians' activities. The soundtrack for the 2000 motion picture "O Brother, Where Art Thou?", set in the American south of the 1930s, won an Academy Award for best album in 2002. This was a signal achievement for the bluegrass music industry, which had

hitherto not received mainstream attention. Along with this revivalist trend acoustical music was reevaluated, and groups with their roots in the bluegrass community, such as the Dixie Chicks and Alison Krauss, appeared and had a major commercial impact on the country music market. Bluegrass musicians have also begun to interact with classical and ethnic music musicians and to explore new ways to create music. For example, Yo-yo Ma, the famous cellist, and mandolist Chris Thile, a highly talented young artist, have performed together with bluegrass musical groups. In a sense, this interaction with classical music demonstrates the maturity of bluegrass music.

Nowadays, records and CDs are being replaced with transmission technologies (such as Youtube and the internet) with the immediate potential to expand around the world, including Japan. This may be an omen that an American music form that originated in Appalachia will experience new technical changes.

Conclusion

This article first examined the development of Appalachian and country music in the United States. It introduced the music that originated with minstrel shows, Jimmy Rodgers, the Carter Family, and others who influenced bluegrass musicians. It then examined the birth of Bill Monroe and His Bluegrass Boys and, with the addition in 1945 of banjo player Earl Scruggs, the completion of the bluegrass music style. The article then described the circumstances in which it was introduced to Japan. The rise in the popularity of bluegrass music accompanied the birth of Japan-United States communication, which reached its height around 1975. Bluegrass music festivals and concerts were held all around the country. Musicians appeared who performed bluegrass music in Japanese, which acquired a regular following in society, and sold records produced by major labels.

These groups were associated with “folk music” and were popular with young audiences. Through this, musicians who came to know true bluegrass sung in English appeared. After this, however, along with changes in the music world in the 1980s, bluegrass-style bands in Japan quickly disappeared from the commercial music scene. Now, with the exception of a core of aficionados and university clubs, it is far removed from the mainstream music scene.

In the contemporary United States, accompanying a trend toward revival, a boom in acoustic music is visible. In this trend, there are hidden possibilities to create new kinds of music by connecting this rustic music born in Appalachia with classical music and traditional music from different countries.

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