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## BLUEGRASS GENERATIONS: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### INTRODUCTION

Bluegrass music, in more than sixty years since becoming a definable genre, has attracted hundreds of performers who have reached a level of proficiency and popularity to become nationally distributed recording artists. The word “generation” has long been used in publications such as *Bluegrass Unlimited* and album liner notes to loosely categorize these musicians and their evolving styles. However, as yet the descriptions have lacked precision and collective data on the generations have not been systematically analyzed.

In 2005, Fred Bartenstein and his collaborators, Mary Jo Leet and Ed Renner, collected basic biographical information on 680 professional musicians whose recordings have been nationally distributed and for whom sufficient data could be found. This paper is a summary and analysis of research originally presented at the Bluegrass Music Symposium at Western Kentucky University on September 9, 2005.

The author proposes for use by future writers and researchers a classification of five generations, along with an additional generation of artists who preceded and influenced them. Each generation has distinct characteristics and has played a unique artistic role in the unfolding of the bluegrass form. This paper summarizes other interesting patterns emerging from the data, including changes over time in the choice of instruments, booms and busts in the supply of

professional bluegrass musicians, growing participation of women, the role of Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys and Doyle Lawson's Quicksilver as training grounds, and trends in band leadership.

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## METHODOLOGY

The term “bluegrass” wasn’t used to describe a musical genre until approximately 1955. It is highly unlikely that during the 1940s and early 1950s either artists or audiences made a categorical distinction between what we today call “bluegrass” and other “hot” acoustic string band contemporaries. For the purposes of this research project, artists whose biographical data were included were those who

1. played—or sang accompanied by any combination of—the following string instruments: fiddle (violin), acoustic guitar, banjo, mandolin, Dobro/resonator guitar, and acoustic or electric bass
2. were professionally compensated for their live and recorded performances
3. performed in styles that could be recognized within the (considerably lengthened) shadows of artists whose music was first categorized as bluegrass
4. contributed before 1955 to a common repertoire that has since been played by bluegrass musicians, or after 1955—when the term “bluegrass” came into common

use—would have been considered to be bluegrass musicians by the genre's other artists, knowledgeable producers, wholesalers, retailers and devotees of the genre, and

5. made recordings which were distributed nationally.

A coding sheet was used to record the following data (and documentation of its source) for each eligible artist:

1. Name (last, first, "nickname")
2. Birth year
3. Death year
4. Birth state
5. Gender
6. Year of first commercial recording
7. Year of last commercial recording
8. Primary instrument
9. Primary vocal part
10. Ever a member of Bill Monroe & the Blue Grass Boys?
11. Ever a bandleader?
12. Primary recording genre other than bluegrass

Coders made a few educated guesses about some of this information. When sources disagreed about a fact, the author made a judgment call. Unless reasonably credible data could be readily obtained on a minimum of four data points: name, birth year, birth state, and year of first recording, the individual was dropped from the study.

All information compiled by this study is available on the Internet, where it has since been slightly updated at [www.fredbartenstein.com/bluegen.html](http://www.fredbartenstein.com/bluegen.html). Two large notebooks

containing all the coding sheets and notation of a source for each element of data are in the library at the International Bluegrass Music Museum in Owensboro, Kentucky.

The 680 data records included in the study represent a significant proportion of an unknown total number of artists, which undoubtedly exceeds 1,000 but probably does not exceed 2,000 individuals. Because the analysis of generations one through four rests on a large number of cases, further data would be unlikely to significantly change those conclusions. Much more tentative are the findings concerning generation five, musicians who are still in the early to middle stages of their recording careers. When the study was conducted, data could be found for only 17 members of that generation.

Potential sources of error include the following:

1. Incorrect information. Numerous errors were found in source documents that were not, for the most part, prepared for scholarly purposes nor carefully edited. Coding mistakes and suppositions, where data was missing or conflicting, could have caused other errors.
2. Incomplete information. Some fairly well-known artists were not included because too many of their data points were unavailable in the cited sources. The sources' selection criteria is perhaps biased toward older artists (as their data has had more time to filter into the media), American artists, and by the compilers' stylistic or geographic preferences
3. Interpretation. The single greatest imposition of the author's judgment was the classification of 680 artists into six generations. Others may reach different conclusions on this and other interpretations suggested in this paper. The complete data set is readily available to both researchers and casual readers on the Internet.

## SCHOLARLY CONCEPTIONS OF GENERATIONS

A succinct explanation of the concept of generational cohort appears in a research highlight published by The Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College:

The term “generation” refers to a group of people who are approximately the same age.

Key societal experiences (such as economic circumstances, historical events, and dominant cultural values) have the potential to affect the many ways that a majority of the members of these groups view the world and find meaning in their experiences.

Generations are typically defined by birth cohorts, thus making the connection to age obvious. One straightforward way to make the distinctions between age groups and generations is to consider whether people from different generations have similar or different experiences when they were all the same age.

(*Pitt-Catsouphes, Matz-Costa and Besen*, p. 2)

Important conceptual work on generational cohorts done by Auguste Comte (1923), José Ortega y Gasset (1923), Karl Mannheim (1928), and Julián Marías (1967) underlies the comprehensive and influential book *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* by William Strauss and Neil Howe (1991). Strauss and Howe suggest that a human generation is roughly 22 years, but could vary by a few years in either direction depending on social conditions (p. 84).

## PREVIOUS CONCEPTIONS OF GENERATIONS IN BLUEGRASS

Over the years, a few ideas about generations have emerged and become prominent in bluegrass literature and common conversation.

1. “First generation” is commonly used to describe anyone who played professionally or recorded before 1955.

2. “Second generation” is used to connote departure from convention and expansion of bluegrass into non-southern and urban markets. For example, “second generation” is used to describe the Country Gentlemen (Washington, DC, 1958-2004), the Greenbriar Boys (New York, NY, 1959-1968), and the Dillards (Los Angeles, CA, 1962-2012).
3. “Third generation” is often used to describe talented, then-young musicians who emerged in the 1970s, including Tony Rice, Ricky Skaggs, and Marty Stuart.

These concepts were never codified or sharply defined. They are based more on a musician’s historical era or performance style than his or her generational cohort. They miss important nuances and are inadequate as tools for understanding how bluegrass developed as a distinctive genre and how it evolved. They are also fixed in historical time, not addressing emerging subsequent generations. Finally, they are insufficient to construct a model that is analytical and perhaps even predictive.

#### A PROPOSED GENERATIONAL SCHEME FOR BLUEGRASS

Analysis began by placing all 680 records in ascending order by birth year and initially organizing them according to Strauss and Howe’s generational cohorts. The author’s knowledge of bluegrass music’s evolving history and style caused him to modify the starting and ending years of certain generations. Listed in Table A are the caption name and span of birth years chosen for six distinct generational classifications, followed by Strauss and Howe’s caption name and span.

<i>Bartenstein</i>	<i>Strauss and Howe</i>
0. Ancestors, 1868-1900	Lost, 1883-1900
1. Pioneers, 1901-1924	G.I., 1901-1924
2. Builders, 1925-1941	Silent, 1925-1942

3. Innovators, 1942-1962	Boom, 1943-1960
4. Conservators, 1963-1976	Thirteenth, 1961-1981
5. Explorers, 1977-1992	Millennial, 1982-2003

Table A

The Explorers generation will doubtless extend to additional years, since its youngest member was only 12 years old when the study was conducted in 2005.

#### GENERATION 0: THE ANCESTORS (Born 1868-1900)

To gain some perspective on patterns affecting early bluegrass musicians, it is useful to consider a cohort of 30 artists whose careers preceded, but had an influence on, the development of bluegrass. Although the Ancestors' birth dates span almost two generations, only Fiddlin' John Carson's and Uncle Dave Macon's predate 1883. Included in this generation are early recording ensembles such as the Skillet Lickers and the North Carolina Ramblers; elder members of the Carter Family and Mainer's Mountaineers; and individual artists such as Jimmie Rodgers, Fiddlin' Arthur Smith, and Bradley Kincaid.

Common life experiences of the Ancestors included the introduction of electricity, the automobile, and indoor plumbing. Phonograph recordings and live radio performances of country music were also novelties this generation introduced. Most learned their musical skills in community contexts. All were born in the South (27 percent in Virginia, 17 percent in Tennessee, 13 percent in Georgia, and 10 percent each in Kentucky and North Carolina). Because centralization of the country music industry had yet to occur during their most active years, most of the Ancestors remained in the general region of their birth.

While none played or sang in styles that would later be recognized as bluegrass, they played instruments later used in bluegrass (37 percent fiddle, 30 percent guitar, 17 percent banjo,

3 percent Dobro/resonator guitar). They also recorded a significant share of the instrumental and vocal numbers that remain in the bluegrass repertoire.

Unlike later generations, none of the Ancestors' 30 members chose the mandolin and bass as primary instruments, and most were older at the age of their first recording—a median of 33 years old in median year 1927—than the 25 years median age at first recording of the next five generations combined. This discrepancy may be because recording technology was still emerging in their early performing years. Several of the Ancestors (most notably Ernest V. and Hattie Stoneman) had children who became professional bluegrass musicians.

A number of the Ancestors generation spent much of their adult lives as full-time professional musicians. Their collective artistic role was to preserve and update nineteenth-century music—including country dance music, Victorian parlor songs, ballads, and elements of both African-American and ersatz African-American minstrel show music.

A listener is struck by the conservative musical approaches and worldview reflected in the repertoire of the Ancestors (Jimmie Rodgers and Clayton McMichen are notable exceptions). Although highly influential in contemporary American popular music and culture, the Jazz Age—which spanned from the 1920s to the Great Depression—appears not to have interested most of this cohort. The Ancestors and their record companies preferred to present music that would have been familiar to their parents and grandparents.

#### GENERATION 1: THE PIONEERS (Born 1901-1924)

Establishing conceptual boundaries for including or excluding musicians born between 1901 and 1924 was difficult. Since what is generally considered the first complete bluegrass band did not record until the very youngest of the Pioneers turned 21 in 1945, most of the Pioneers performed in styles that pre-dated bluegrass, at least in the early stages of their careers.

For the sake of rich analysis, the study included people born during those years who played bluegrass music at some point during their career as well as those who didn't but could be said to have influenced later bluegrass music, and any other string musician whose then-contemporary audiences might have linked with the type of music played by Bill Monroe, the Stanley Brothers, and/or Flatt and Scruggs.

All the members of this cohort would have recognized each other, and been recognized by their audiences, as stylistic relatives, playing music known as "country," "hillbilly," "mountain," or "string music," on instruments commonly found in a bluegrass ensemble. Many prominent bluegrass musicians played in bands with the non-bluegrass "near relatives" included among the Pioneers.

The Pioneers grew up fully aware of radio and phonograph records and their power to build the careers of professional entertainers. They were the first generation to draw upon recorded sources for their repertoires and for learning instrumental and vocal skills. It is no wonder that they synthesized the wide range of styles and virtuoso techniques to which they had access, or that they held themselves to high standards of performance.

Like their business contemporaries during the war and postwar years, the Pioneers were highly innovative and entrepreneurial, applying new technologies and communication channels to build mass audiences their forebears could not have imagined. Although World War II interrupted many of their musical careers, the war also exposed them to musicians from other parts of the United States and to music from other parts of the world.

The collective artistic role of the Pioneer generation was to create distinctive and evolutionary styles from the rich American strains—white and black, folk and composed—that they grew up hearing. These new styles within country and traditional mountain music—

branches from the tree if you will—heavily influenced later practitioners and audiences. From the perspective of this study, the most significant of these branches was bluegrass itself, appearing relatively late in the life of the generation.

Other branches of country music initiated by the Pioneers include the following:

1. Brother Duets: Blue Sky Boys, Callahan Brothers, Carlisle Brothers, Delmore Brothers, Homer & Jethro, Karl & Harty, Lilly Brothers, Lonzo & Oscar, Mac and Bob, Monroe Brothers, Morris Brothers
2. Mountain String/Vocal Ensembles: Roy Acuff's Crazy Tennesseans and Smokey Mountain Boys, the Coon Creek Girls, Wilma Lee & Stoney Cooper & the Clinch Mountain Clan, Roy Hall & his Blue Ridge Entertainers, Johnnie & Jack and the Tennessee Mountain Boys, the Hired Hands, Grandpa Jones & Ramona, Mainer's Mountaineers, Charlie Monroe & the Kentucky Partners
3. Religious/Sentimental Ensembles: Bailes Brothers, Brown's Ferry Four, Shannon Grayson, Lulu Belle and Scotty, Masters Family, Molly O'Day
4. Western Swing: Prairie Ramblers, Bob Wills.

All the musicians in the prototypical bluegrass band (Bill Monroe, Lester Flatt, Earl Scruggs, Howard Watts, and Chubby Wise) were members of the Pioneer generation, as were those in prior versions of the Blue Grass Boys (David Akeman, Howard and Wilene "Sally" Forrester, Clyde Moody, Pete Pyle, Carl Story, Wilbur Wesbrooks, and Art Wooten). Seventeen (14 percent) of the members of this generational cohort spent time as members of Monroe's band.

Viewing Bill Monroe within the context of his generation, the Pioneers, it is easy to understand why he tended to view his style as proprietary and his emulators as copiers or

poachers. The emergence of bluegrass as a genre was to be the project of the next generation, the Builders.

A number of the Pioneers were transitional figures who played a variety of styles in their youth; however, they were later viewed as elders of the bluegrass genre as it evolved in the fifties, sixties, and seventies. Among these were Charlie and Danny Bailey, Claude Boone, Hylo Brown, Alex Campbell and Ola Belle Reed, Ezra and Curly Ray Cline, Jim Eanes, Leslie Keith, Pee Wee Lambert, Pop Lewis, Vernon “Boatwhistle” McIntyre, Carl Sauceman, Curly Seckler, Jim Shumate, Benny Sims, Red Smiley, Toby Stroud, Jake Tullock, Paul Warren, Doc Watson, and Johnnie Whisnant. Indeed, Bill Monroe himself enjoyed a notable career with a brother duet (The Monroe Brothers) prior to his role in initiating the bluegrass genre.

The mandolin and bass first emerged in the Pioneer generation as primary instruments of choice, by 15 and 9 percent respectively. The Dobro/resonator guitar became somewhat more prominent (6 percent) among the already popular guitar (33 percent), fiddle (19 percent) and banjo (11 percent). The Pioneers’ median first recording was made in 1946, at the median age of 27. Most members of this generation are now deceased; the youngest were 80 years old when the study was conducted in 2005.

Birth states of the Pioneers cluster in the Appalachian region: North Carolina (30 percent), Kentucky (19 percent), Tennessee (19 percent), and West Virginia (13 percent). One of the biggest mysteries that emerged from the study is the relative dearth of Virginians among the Pioneers (3 percent); they are much more prominently represented in all other generations. Perhaps war and postwar industrial occupations in Virginia competed more persuasively for talented young people. Perhaps the cultural stigma against country music operated more strongly in Virginia’s schools and prominent radio stations than elsewhere in the South during this era.

## GENERATION 2: THE BUILDERS (Born 1925-1941)

Bluegrass acquired its name as a style in the mid-1950s, though it had been established a decade earlier. The Builders were the first generation to define themselves and become popularly known as bluegrass musicians. Thus it makes sense to pay particularly close attention to a group of 200 artists who were between 3 and 22 years old in 1945, the year Earl Scruggs joined Bill Monroe, Lester Flatt, Chubby Wise, and Howard Watts to complete the classic edition of the Blue Grass Boys. Because bluegrass took its name in the mid-1950s, when many of these artists were recording, it was conceptually easier to include and exclude members of the Builder cohort than it was to classify the Pioneers. The study eliminated those who wouldn't have considered themselves "bluegrass musicians" or who audiences would have been extremely unlikely to consider "bluegrass musicians." This classification rule produced a few anomalies at the border between Pioneers and Builders (e.g., including as a Pioneer Ira Louvin, born in 1924, but excluding as a Builder his brother and musical partner Charlie Louvin, born in 1927).

Members of the Builder generation, 63 to 80 years old in 2005, are now less active as performing musicians and a number are deceased. They comprised 69 percent of the 36 Bluegrass Hall of Fame members as of 2005. The Builders' collective artistic function was to explore and flesh out dimensions of the new style. They recorded much of the classic repertoire and established core techniques on all the bluegrass instruments and vocal configurations. Examples of the second-generation builders of what is known today as standard bluegrass include the following musicians:

1. Bands (classic versions): Clinch Mountain Boys, Country Gentlemen, Seldom Scene, Sunny Mountain Boys, Tennessee Cut-ups
2. Guitar: Norman Blake, Dan Crary, Jimmy Martin, Bill Napier, Charlie Waller

3. Banjo: Eddie Adcock, J.D. Crowe, Bill Keith, Sonny Osborne, Don Reno
4. Fiddle: Kenny Baker, Vassar Clements, Bobby Hicks, Benny Martin, Scotty Stoneman
5. Mandolin: Buzz Busby, John Duffey, Jesse McReynolds, Red Rector, Frank Wakefield
6. Bass: Jack Cooke, Tom Gray, John Palmer, George Shuffler, Bill Yates
7. Dobro/Resonator Guitar: Mike Auldrige, Josh Graves
8. Lead Vocals: Jimmy Martin, Del McCoury, Carter Stanley, Mac Wiseman
9. Tenor Vocals: Hazel Dickens, Bobby Osborne, Jim McReynolds, Ralph Stanley, Paul Williams
10. Baritone Vocals: Eddie Adcock, J.D. Crowe, Curly Lambert, Don McHan, Sonny Osborne
11. Bass Vocals: Ed Ferris, John Palmer, George Shuffler, Tater Tate, Gordon Terry.  
Eighty-three percent of members of the Builder generation were born in the southern—mostly Appalachian—states (18 percent Virginia, 14 percent North Carolina, 13 percent Kentucky, 10 percent Tennessee, 6 percent each Alabama and West Virginia). They lived in an era of vast migration from rural to urban areas and from the South to the North; large numbers of this generation experienced such migrations as children or as young adults. Although most were too young to fight in World War II, a number of them served in the Korean conflict.

In their formative years, this generation experienced bluegrass as a part of the genre and industry of country music. The youngest members had already established their musical tastes before Elvis Presley, rock 'n' roll, and the (later) British invasion swamped most other forms of

popular music, beginning in 1955. The Builders began their musical careers during artistically rich but financially trying years for bluegrass.

Musicians who were at the median age of 25 in 1959 made the median first recordings in this generation. Few achieved much financial success, and many worked in careers other than music, even while they were being widely recognized for their bluegrass artistry. Bill Monroe cast a wide shadow over the Builders; 23 percent of them spent part of their careers as members of his band. Those who recorded in other genres made primarily country, folk, and gospel records. (Indeed, artists such as the Osborne Brothers and Jim & Jesse achieved their greatest commercial success as country performers.) Late in their careers, the Builders were the generation to initiate and first benefit from burgeoning bluegrass festivals.

#### GENERATION 3: THE INNOVATORS (Born 1942-1962)

Not surprisingly, the baby boom generation accounts for the largest cohort (246 members) in the study. By the time the oldest of this generation reached adulthood in the early 1960s, members of the Pioneer and Builder generations had already occupied key niches in the bluegrass genre. The Innovators grew up in an era of rock 'n' roll and postwar prosperity when bluegrass was beginning to emerge from a decade of decline, thanks in part to the popularity of television's *Beverly Hillbillies* and movies such as *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Deliverance*. They were better-educated and exposed to more career options (musical and non-musical) than their parents or grandparents had been. Many were second or third-generation members of families who had migrated to urban areas, and few considered agriculture a viable career choice. Their first recordings were made in the median year 1978, at the median musician age of 25. In 2005, the Innovators ranged in age from 42 to 63, still active but at mature stages in their careers.

Perhaps the largest single influence on the Innovators generation was the folk music boom that swept America between the late 1950s and the mid-1970s. Interest in acoustic and traditional musical forms, including bluegrass, made large numbers of string instruments available in places where they weren't formerly common. In addition, folk music created new audiences and countless performance opportunities in community, school, and college settings. Cultural conflicts surrounding the Vietnam War and youth lifestyles made the occupation of itinerant musician attractive to young people from white and blue-collar classes who previously might not have resisted family opposition to such a choice.

The collective artistic role of the Innovators was to challenge existing conventions and to synthesize bluegrass with music of other genres—especially folk, rock, jazz, blues, and world music. Many members of the generation had careers in several genres, some leaving bluegrass for good, some coming back to it, and some (such as Peter Rowan, David Grisman, and Béla Fleck) balancing bluegrass and non-bluegrass activities.

There was a push-and-pull dimension to the generation's eclecticism. To the extent that previous generations solidly held the most visible and lucrative roles in bluegrass, the Innovators were pushed to explore and flourish at the edges. Because the Innovators feared stagnation and decline if bluegrass failed to appeal to new audiences (a lesson that the Builders had learned), they actively sought to pull bluegrass in new directions.

A number of the Innovators, however, (including Audie Blaylock, Roy Lee Centers, David Davis, and Dave Evans) were completely traditional in their approach, and would have fit well with previous generations. Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys remained active until 1996, but only five percent of the Innovators apprenticed in that band.

Examples of pathbreaking Innovators include the following performers:

1. Groups: IIInd Generation, Bluegrass Cardinals, the Dillards, Lonesome River Band, New Grass Revival
2. Guitarists: David Grier, Jim Hurst, Tony Rice, Larry Sparks, Tim Stafford
3. Banjo Players: Jimmy Arnold, Béla Fleck, Alan Munde, Sammy Shelor, Tony Trischka
4. Fiddlers: Byron Berline, Glen Duncan, Richard Greene, Mark O'Connor, Rickie Simpkins
5. Mandolin Players: Sam Bush, Jimmy Gaudreau, David Grisman, Doyle Lawson, Dempsey Young
6. Bassists: T. Michael Coleman, Roy Huskey, Jr., Todd Phillips, Missy Raines, Mark Schatz
7. Dobro/Resonator Guitar Players: Jerry Douglas, Phil Leadbetter
8. Vocalists: Ronnie Bowman, John Cowan, Laurie Lewis, Claire Lynch, Peter Rowan.

Of all the bluegrass generations, the Innovators had the most widespread geographic origins. Only 56% were from the South. Eighteen percent were born in the Midwest, 13% in the Northeast, and 10% in the West. States contributing the most members were Virginia (15%); North Carolina (11%); Ohio (9%); Kentucky and Tennessee (each 8%); California (7%); and New York, New Jersey and Connecticut (combined, 10%). Four percent were born outside the United States. At 12 percent, women were represented in significantly higher proportions than they had been in any of the three previous generations.

The mix of primary instruments in the Innovators generation was fairly typical, except that fiddlers represented only 8 percent, compared to an average of 14 percent across all generations—17 percent in the preceding (Builders) generation and 16 percent in the succeeding

(Conservators) generation. This may be attributed to the lack of role-model fiddlers in some of the most influential acts at the time Innovators were choosing an instrument (e.g., Country Gentlemen, Dillards, Greenbriar Boys, Osborne Brothers).

#### GENERATION 4: THE CONSERVATORS (Born 1963-1976)

Strauss and Howe (p. 63) assert that a new generation assumes a different character and role from that of its predecessor; signs of this difference are indicators that a new generation is emerging. By the time the oldest members of bluegrass music's fourth generation entered adolescence in the mid-1970s, bluegrass festivals were already established as the primary venue, and the genre had emerged in the consciousness of musicians and audiences as separate from its previous close identification with country and folk music. Record labels specializing in bluegrass were becoming dominant for new releases; the best-known major labels had dropped most of their bluegrass artists. Most of the classic repertoire had gone out of print as cassettes and then CDs replaced the familiar vinyl long-playing album.

All these factors, plus the inevitable aging and dying of the patriarchs (and perhaps a national cultural shift toward conservatism and fundamentalism) worked together to create a hunger for the classic bluegrass sounds of the 1940s and 1950s and a sense that if core techniques of the Pioneers and Builders were to survive, they needed to be passed to younger musicians.

Alison Brown, Sammy Shelor, Scott Vestal and Rhonda Vincent, all born in 1962, were among the last of the Innovators. Replacing them—beginning in 1963 and 1964 with Russell Moore, Alan Bibey, Mike Bub, and Stuart Duncan—were the Conservators, a small (69 members) and short (13 years) generation that played a unique function in the evolution of bluegrass music. These artists preserved and technically perfected classic instrumental and vocal

styles, performing them for a large and loyal audience of fans who had already gained their appreciation for bluegrass music in earlier eras. Conservators who performed these roles with notable skill include the following examples:

1. Groups (majority of the members): Blue Highway, Blue Ridge, Del McCoury Band, Quicksilver, IIIrd Tyme Out
2. Guitarists: Jeff Autry, Clay Jones, Russell Moore, Wyatt Rice, Kenny Smith
3. Banjo Players: Steve Dilling, Rob McCoury, Jim Mills, Joe Mullins, Don Wayne Reno
4. Fiddlers: Jason Carter, Stuart Duncan, Aubrey Haynie, Ronnie Stewart
5. Mandolin Players: Alan Bibey, Shawn Lane, Ronnie McCoury, John Rigsby, Adam Steffey
6. Bassists: Mike Anglin, Barry Bales, Mike Bub, Bob Dick
7. Dobro/Resonator Guitar Players: Rob Ickes
8. Vocalists: Suzanne Cox, Jamie Dailey, Alison Krauss, Russell Moore, Valerie Smith, Dan Tyminski.

Most of the Conservators think of themselves as bluegrass musicians. Only a handful have crossed genres or achieved their greatest success outside bluegrass (Alison Krauss and the members of her Union Station ensemble are notable exceptions, with huge sales and visibility both in and outside the genre). Twenty percent are women, more than in any earlier generation.

Conservators learned their musical trade in a variety of ways. Three percent apprenticed with the Blue Grass Boys, nine percent apprenticed with Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver (a group that has emerged as the new “school of bluegrass”), and a number have attended higher education programs specializing in bluegrass, including those at East Tennessee State University

and South Plains College in Texas. Quite a few come from families where parents or older siblings are bluegrass musicians; the author counts 12 (17 percent) from his personal knowledge—there are likely more. As of 2005, members of this cohort were 28 to 42 years old.

The Conservators started recording in the median year of 1991 at the median age of 23. Sixty-two percent were born in the South; 18 percent in the Midwest; 9 percent each were from the Northeast and the West. States contributing the largest numbers of members were California (20 percent), North Carolina (14 percent), Tennessee (12 percent), Indiana (10 percent), Kentucky and Virginia (9 percent each), and Georgia (6 percent).

As might be expected from a generation captioned “the Conservators,” individuals chose instruments much as did earlier generations, although slightly fewer chose guitar (at 20 percent, 9 percent below the all-generation average) and banjo (at 32 percent, 9 percent above the general figure). Since the guitar category includes both lead and rhythm players, it is possible that this generation is unusually drawn to the technical challenge of lead instruments and less interested in rhythm guitar.

If one were to hypothesize the future direction of bluegrass from the Conservators, it would appear that the genre was evolving, like chamber music, into an ever-more technically proficient but somewhat stagnant form. But that hypothesis would not account for the trend-shifting roles of emerging generations, or the unique character of the Explorers.

#### GENERATION 5: THE EXPLORERS (Born 1977-1992)

Although bluegrass music’s fifth generation had barely had time to produce a cohort of nationally distributed recording musicians, much less get their pertinent biographical data into published sources, by the time of the 2005 study, the temptation to find the character and role of the emerging generation is too great to ignore. The sample of 17 artists is too small and too

heavily weighted toward child prodigies to support the confident conclusions reached about earlier generations, but some generalizations are possible.

Our sample of Explorers made their first recording in the median year of 1998 (only seven years after that of the Conservators), at the median age of 18. Their choice of primary instruments somewhat echoes the patterns of their great-great grandparents, the Ancestors (see Table B).

<i>Instrument</i>	<i>Explorers</i>	<i>Ancestors</i>
Guitar	29%	30%
Banjo	6%	17%
Fiddle	41%	37%
Mandolin	18%	0%
Bass	6%	0%
Dobro/Resonator Guitar	0%	3%

Table B

It is tempting to hypothesize that the Explorers echo the Ancestors in other ways. Both were the first musical generation to come of age in a new century. Some evidence exists showing that the Explorers are absorbing, synthesizing, and reinterpreting styles and repertoire of the twentieth century—once startlingly novel—that must all seem to them rooted in the past. These styles include Scott Joplin’s ragtime, Clayton McMichen’s fiddling, Bill Monroe’s mandolin instrumentals, and Béla Fleck’s banjo inventions.

Both generations pioneered the use of new technology. For the Ancestors it was radio and the phonograph. For the Explorers it is mp3 file-sharing, YouTube, and MySpace. As the

Ancestors learned music in community contexts, a surprising number of the Explorers (at least 59 percent, by the author's count) grew up in families with other bluegrass musicians.

Who are these artists?

1. Groups: The Chapmans, Nickel Creek
2. Guitarists: John Chapman, Ralph Stanley II, Brandon Rickman, Sean Watkins, Josh Williams
3. Banjo Players: Ryan Holladay
4. Fiddlers: Michael Cleveland, David Crow, Andy Leftwich, Sara Watkins, Gabe Witcher
5. Mandolin Players: Jeremy Chapman, Chris Thile
6. Bassists: Jason Chapman
7. Vocalists: Bethany Dick, Brandon Rickman, Ralph Stanley II, Josh Williams

For the first time, more were born outside the South (59 percent) than in the South (41 percent). Prominent states of origin include California (24 percent), and Colorado and Tennessee (both 18 percent). Twenty-four percent are women, more than in any previous generation. As of 2005, the Explorers were between 12 and 28 years old.

Like the Innovators, a number of the Explorers (notably members of Nickel Creek, Andy Leftwich, Ralph Stanley II, and Gabe Witcher) resist genre boundaries and have created recordings that echo many influences and seek to establish a personal voice. Were it not for the staunch traditionalists in the Explorer generation (e.g., Michael Cleveland) or the strong commitment their elder siblings and parents the Conservators made to the bluegrass form and label, one could wonder whether the genre's boundary might loosen or even dissipate in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## OBSERVATIONS ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

The succession of generations should not be considered an evolutionary process leading to improvement or perfection of bluegrass as an artistic form. While creative people tend to be aware of and build upon what has gone before, there are other forces at work. These include changing public tastes, which affect the demand for certain types and styles of music; artists' desire for an individual and personal expression different from what has gone before; competition between emerging talent and from other artistic genres and occupational pursuits; and cyclical, repetitive patterns such as economic expansion/contraction and artistic conservation/innovation.

There appears to be a cycle that alternates between conservation of earlier musical material (albeit newly interpreted) and innovation of new music. Not every individual in a musical generation mirrors the trend of his or her generation, but trends are quite apparent when viewing large cohorts of musicians.

0. Ancestors (*Conservation*)
1. Pioneers (*Innovation*)
2. Builders (*Conservation*)
3. Innovators (*Innovation*)
4. Conservators (*Conservation*)
5. Explorers (*Innovation*)

Such a pattern suggests that long-standing tensions between bluegrass traditionalists and progressives could be reinterpreted as a generational debate. Welcomed and resisted change might better be described as a natural pattern of renewal than as a black-or-white dualism.

In all the generations, musicians' interest in bluegrass appears to arise in adolescence, followed by a decade or so of apprenticeship and a recording career that stretches in the musicians' age from the twenties into at least the fifties. The study found the median first recording was made at age 25 and median last recording at 53. The median length of a completed recording career—of those 267 musicians who had died or retired by 2005—is 24 years. And the first recording has come at earlier ages in each successive generation—Ancestors: 33, Pioneers: 27, Builders and Innovators: 25, Conservators: 23, and Explorers: 18 (but members and data about the last two generations are still being generated, so their median ages are very likely to rise).

The Ancestors, Builders and Conservators often brought repertoire from other genres (notably American and British Isles fiddle tunes, American banjo tunes, American and British Isles ballads and folk songs, Victorian parlor music, minstrel show songs and tunes, old-time string bands, brother duets and other small vocal ensembles, blues and rhythm and blues, country music, gospel music, and jazz and pop music) and rearranged it in bluegrass styles. The Pioneers, Innovators and Explorers often took bluegrass techniques to other genres of music (notably country music, gospel music, modern folk music, rock and roll, and classical music).

## CHOICE OF INSTRUMENTS

The study coded only a primary instrument for its 680 artists, though many are famous for their mastery of multiple instruments. Nevertheless, it is interesting to examine the frequency of primary instrument choice across the generations (see Table C):

<i>Instrument</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>Ancestors</i>	<i>Pioneers</i>	<i>Builders</i>	<i>Innovators</i>	<i>Conservators</i>	<i>Explorers</i>
Guitar	29%	30%	35%	27%	31%	20%	29%
Banjo	23%	17%	11%	26%	28%	32%	6%

Fiddle	15%	37%	19%	17%	8%	16%	41%
Mandolin	14%	0%	15%	15%	15%	13%	18%
Bass	12%	0%	9%	11%	16%	13%	6%
Dobro/ Res. Gtr.	3%	3%	6%	2%	2%	2%	0%

Table C

What can we make of these patterns? First, let us note but not place much weight on the radical shifts in instrument choice among the tiny sample of 17 Explorers. The mandolin and the bass did not appear at all among the 30 Ancestors; the other four bluegrass instruments have occurred across all six generations. Once the mandolin was established among the Pioneers, its frequency ranged between 13 and 15 percent in the next three generations. Likewise, after its introduction among the Pioneers, 11 and 16 percent of members of the next three generations chose the bass. The Dobro/resonator guitar was a less popular but equally stable choice of between two and six percent of the Ancestors and the first four bluegrass generations. Top instrument choice was the fiddle among Ancestors (37 percent) and Explorers (41 percent); the guitar among Pioneers (35 percent), Builders (27 percent), and Innovators (31 percent); and the banjo among Conservators (32 percent). One of the most striking observations was the growth in banjo players among generations two, three, and four, and the low frequency of fiddlers among the Innovators—at 8 percent, half the rate of the preceding and following generations.

#### WHAT BROUGHT MUSICIANS INTO BLUEGRASS?

The 650 professional recording artists documented in the first five generations of bluegrass (Ancestors excluded) represent a rich data set for deducing what factors might have attracted individuals to the field and what factors may have dampened its growth at certain

periods of time. Many people form attachments to a musical style and a particular instrument around the onset of adolescence. Dividing the years 1932-1981 into ten five-year spans, we find “peak” periods when more than 60 of the study’s individuals turned 12 (underlined) and “trough” periods when fewer than 60 individuals turned 12 (See Table D).

<i># turned 12</i>	<i>5-year period</i>	<i>Contemporary musical phenomena</i>
40	1932-1936	Cowboy music, Movie musicals
54	1937-1941	Brother duets, Big Bands/Swing
<u>61</u>	<u>1942-1946</u>	<u>First and classic editions of the Blue Grass Boys</u>
<u>70</u>	<u>1947-1951</u>	<u>Bluegrass music's "Golden Era"</u>
41	1952-1956	Elvis Presley, Rockabilly
57	1957-1961	Elvis Presley, Doo-Wop
59	1962-1966	Beatles, Folk boom
<u>69</u>	<u>1967-1971</u>	<u>"Bonnie &amp; Clyde," early bluegrass festivals</u>
49	1972-1976	Heavy Metal
33	1977-1981	Disco

Table D

#### WHAT INFLUENCED CHOICE OF INSTRUMENTS?

Looking for patterns in choice of instrument, the study found a striking grouping among banjo players. In the four years from 1936 to 1939, 28 banjo players were born. They comprise 18 percent of all 157 banjo players in the 680-musician database. Banjo players represented an astounding 53 percent of all the study’s 54 musicians born during those four years, more than double the overall 23 percent of banjoists found in the entire database. These performers included some of the most popular and influential banjo players in the history of bluegrass,

including Eddie Adcock, J.D. Crowe, Doug Dillard, Ben Eldridge, Bill Emerson, Walter Hensley, Bill Keith, Sonny Osborne, Allen Shelton, Roni Stoneman, Bobby Thompson, and Eric Weissberg.

What might explain this four-year boom in banjo players? Between 1948 and 1953, nine to 17 years after they were born, these individuals were in their peak years for choosing and learning an instrument. This is exactly when Earl Scruggs released his first seven recordings of banjo instrumentals in the three-finger style.

A similar concentration was found among 22 mandolin players who were 9 to 15 years old when Bill Monroe's first recordings with the Blue Grass Boys were released in 1940-1941 (22 percent of all 102 mandolin players in the database), including Buzz Busby, John Duffey, Curley Lambert, Jesse McReynolds, Bobby Osborne, Red Rector, Ralph Rinzler, Herschel Sizemore, Donna Stoneman, Earl Taylor, Buck White, Jimmy Williams, Paul Williams, Vern Williams, and Wayne Yates.

A third but less concentrated pattern was identified among the 71 guitar players (34 percent of all 206 guitar players in the database) who were 15 or younger in the decade 1960-1969 when bluegrass lead guitar first came into prominence (rock 'n' roll lead guitar styles were also blossoming during this decade). These included Russ Barenberg, Curtis Burch, Vince Gill, Jim Hurst, Steve Kaufman, Jack Lawrence, Scott Nygaard, Tony Rice, Charles Sawtelle, James Alan Shelton, Larry Sparks, Tim Stafford, Jody Stecher, Merle Watson, and Clarence White.

#### SUPPLY OF AND DEMAND FOR PROFESSIONAL BLUEGRASS MUSICIANS

As the market for bluegrass undergoes periodic expansions, opportunities are created for new musicians to enter the profession. Conversely, in periods of contraction, it is reasonable to assume that lower sales of recordings and an existing supply of established artists reduce the

demand for new recording musicians. These patterns can be demonstrated by dividing the first recording dates of 573 artists (84 percent of the database; the others first recorded before 1945, after 1994, or the date cannot be ascertained) into five-year periods that can be characterized as recording “booms” and “busts” (See Table E).

<i>5-year period</i>	<i>Boom or Bust</i>	<i>Number of artists making their first recording</i>
1945-1949	<i>BOOM</i>	66
1950-1954	<i>BOOM</i>	64
1955-1959	<i>BUST</i>	36
1960-1964	<i>BOOM</i>	72
1965-1969	<i>BUST</i>	50
1970-1974	<i>BOOM</i>	68
1975-1979	<i>BOOM</i>	66
1980-1984	<i>BUST</i>	48
1985-1989	<i>BUST</i>	34
1990-1994	<i>BOOM</i>	69

Table E

In “boom” five-year periods for bluegrass, not less than 64 musicians began their recording careers. In “bust” five-year periods, not more than 50 artists started recording.

#### PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

Men have always outnumbered women among the five generations of professional recording bluegrass artists and the Ancestor generation which preceded them. However, women have participated in all the generations and their share has consistently increased in the last three, especially among lead instrumentalists. The percentage of women among all musicians and

among all performers on each primary instrument is described in Table F (the Explorers' sample size is too small for the proportions to be meaningful). None of the 75 women included in the study were Dobro/resonator guitarists, so that instrument is eliminated in the table.

<i>Women in..</i>	<i>Among all musicians</i>	<i>Guitar</i>	<i>Banjo</i>	<i>Fiddle</i>	<i>Mandolin</i>	<i>Bass</i>
All Generations	11%	14%	7%	10%	8%	8%
0. Ancestors	7%	10%	0%	9%	0%	0%
1. Pioneers	10%	16%	15%	0%	0%	0%
2. Builders	7%	8%	2%	0%	6%	10%
3. Innovators	12%	19%	9%	11%	8%	8%
4. Conservators	20%	14%	9%	36%	22%	22%
5. Explorers	24%	0%	0%	39%	33%	0%

Table F

#### THE BLUE GRASS BOYS AND QUICKSILVER AS TRAINING GROUNDS

Across six decades, from the 1940s through the 1990s, Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys were active. The number and percentage of musicians from the various generations who played professionally with Bill Monroe were as described in Table G.

<i>Generation</i>	<i>Played with Bill Monroe</i>
All Generations	76 (11%)
0. Ancestors	0 ( 0%)
1. Pioneers	16 (14%)
2. Builders	46 (23%)
3. Innovators	12 ( 5%)
4. Conservators	2 ( 3%)

5. Explorers	0 ( 0%)
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Table G

Doyle Lawson's Quicksilver is playing a similar role in later generations; five percent of the Innovators and nine percent of the Conservators have played in his band.

#### BAND LEADERSHIP

Continuing the exploration of stages in a professional career, data on whether the individual had ever led a professional band is analyzed. The number and percentage of band leaders by generation is as shown in Table H.

<i>Generation</i>	<i>Led a band</i>
All Generations	229 (34%)
0. Ancestors	18 (55%)
1. Pioneers	43 (34%)
2. Builders	81 (40%)
3. Innovators	76 (32%)
4. Conservators	8 (12%)
5. Explorers	3 (19%)

Table H

There are three explanations for the declining rate of band leadership (and, by deduction, band formation). First, the Builder generation established prominent and long-standing bluegrass organizations against which it was difficult for new bands to form and compete, particularly in periods of industry contraction. Second, it is common for bluegrass musicians to serve a period of apprenticeship before leading a band; one would therefore expect leaders to continue to emerge from the Conservator and Explorer generations. Third, a pattern of no-leader

“democracies” began to emerge in the late 1950s (notably the Country Gentlemen and the Greenbriar Boys), continuing and increasing in subsequent decades.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

It would be valuable to continue and expand the sample and cohort analysis of nationally distributed professional recording bluegrass musicians, particularly among the Explorers and subsequent generations. Will patterns identified in this study hold, especially the apparent alternation of conservation and innovation, expanding participation of women, and broadening geographic origins?

It would be interesting to compare these findings with parallel populations of amateur and regional bluegrass musicians, bluegrass musicians outside the United States, other genres of music, and other occupational groups in and apart from the arts. If one could identify which occupations attract those leaving professional bluegrass careers, that might suggest weaknesses of the bluegrass career (such as constant travel, boom and bust cycles, and low wages), as well as suggest a dynamic model of movement between professions as conditions change.

Many of the hypotheses in this study could be tested (and additional ideas for multi-generational analysis developed) through individual interviews with musicians, former musicians, and surviving friends and relatives of deceased musicians.

Expanding use of the Internet will not only create a vehicle for preserving and disseminating existing data (such as this study), but will also ease the task of future researchers seeking to gather large amounts of information on bluegrass musicians. This information is currently scattered among articles in print publications, which are poorly indexed and difficult to aggregate. On the other hand, digital distribution of music is rapidly making obsolete the

distinctions of “nationally distributed recordings” and “professional musicians” that underlie this study.

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