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Bluegrass: A History (review)

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twentieth centuries reflected changing paradigms in European thought, which in turn affected the tradition itself.

This unsurpassed classic explores a profound folk creation. Anyone interested in folklore and religion, or in medicine and belief, will want to read it.

Bluegrass: A History, 20th anniversary ed. By Neil V. Rosenberg. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005. Pp. xvi + 454, preface to the 20th anniversary ed., acknowledgments, bibliography, discography, aural history, interviews, index, song title index, 40 photographs.)

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Within the span of slightly more than a year, the University of Illinois Press in the 1980s published what arguably remain the two most substantial scholarly works on bluegrass music. Robert Cantwell's *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound* appeared in 1984. Neil Rosenberg's *Bluegrass: A History* followed in 1985. In 2003, the press issued a reprint edition of *Bluegrass Breakdown* with a new preface by Cantwell. Now, Rosenberg's *Bluegrass: A History* is available in a twentieth-anniversary edition that, likewise, consists of a reprinting of the original text with a new preface by the author. Several fine surveys of bluegrass intended for general audiences, as well as noteworthy monographs and anthologies devoted to bluegrass-related topics, have appeared since Rosenberg's and Cantwell's volumes were originally published (or, in a few cases, predated them). Nonetheless, *Bluegrass: A History* and *Bluegrass Breakdown* remain the most significant comprehensive scholarly examinations of their subject. Given the chronological proximity of the two books, it seems fitting to approach Rosenberg's by way of brief comparison with Cantwell's.

Cantwell characterizes bluegrass as a mimetic representation of vernacular musical traditions that flourished in the rural South prior to that region's socioeconomic transfor-

mation in the early to mid-twentieth century. He credits bluegrass patriarch Bill Monroe with reformulating those largely participatory, aurally transmitted traditions into a largely performative, media-transmitted idiom, thus translating the ethos of "the old Southern sound" for audiences whose milieu increasingly differed from that in which Monroe's musical development occurred. *Bluegrass Breakdown* imaginatively identifies antecedents of bluegrass aesthetics in several centuries' worth of the histories of expressive culture originating from three continents, but it does not emphasize hard historical data regarding the music and musicians themselves.

In contrast, Rosenberg's *Bluegrass: A History* certainly does. Indeed, the large number of citations to it at the September 2005 Bluegrass Music Symposium at Western Kentucky University, where Rosenberg himself was the keynote speaker, indicates its historiographic preeminence. One might initially be tempted to interpret the straightforwardly factual orientation and the comparatively austere prose of Rosenberg's monograph as a mild disparagement of such lofty sentiments as those expressed in *Bluegrass Breakdown*. However, those who were privileged to hear Rosenberg's keynote speech know that nothing could be more uncharacteristic of him. *Bluegrass: A History* reads as the work of an epistemologically rigorous scholar who has sought out the most reliable documentary evidence and has applied Occam's razor to it in order to isolate the most proximate causes of the phenomena he studies. Having arrived at the most direct explanations, Rosenberg articulates them in an uncomplicated style intended to be both accessible to a general audience and acceptable to scholars in multiple disciplines.

Though Rosenberg is an accomplished folklorist and musician, *Bluegrass: A History* is not primarily a work of either folklore or musicology. Rather, it belongs principally to the field of history, treating bluegrass as a component of American popular culture. Rosenberg attributes the emergence of bluegrass to decisions made by Monroe and others on the basis of a combination of personal preferences and financial considerations. Some scholars interpret the

music of even the earliest incarnations of Monroe's band, the Blue Grass Boys, as stylistically distinct from contemporaneous country music idioms, finding that it introduced certain sonic innovations even as it sonically signified its adherence to an ethos associated with a waning socioeconomic milieu. Rosenberg, on the other hand, argues that the music of Monroe and others who are retrospectively identified as first-generation bluegrass musicians did not differ substantially from that of most of their country music peers. According to Rosenberg, bluegrass did not evolve from a style into a distinct genre until rock and roll made its overwhelming incursion into the musical marketplace, prompting many country performers to adopt some of the latter's definitive features. Only then did aficionados who rejected such commercially motivated adaptations identify the stylistically more conservative music of Monroe's Blue Grass Boys, and that of others who emulated them, as a discrete idiom. Rosenberg substantiates his contention by tracing the etymology of the term "bluegrass," noting that it did not designate a specific genre until the late 1950s.

Through chronological and thematic organization, Rosenberg weaves a remarkably cohesive, lucid, and judiciously proportioned historical narrative extending into the early 1980s. He addresses, in copious detail, such topics as bluegrass's relationships with the Nashville-based country music industry and the 1960s folk revival; radio programming, recording companies, and television and film soundtracks; bluegrass festivals; instructional, documentary, and scholarly publications; and the evolutions of particular performers' and bands' musical styles. Rosenberg rightly links the development of the country music industry, which facilitated the emergence of bluegrass, with the economically motivated migration of rural southerners to more populated locations both within and beyond the South. However, his correlation of the evolution of bluegrass music and its infrastructure with the transformation of the socioeconomic structure of rural America is not as thorough as it might have been, had books about the latter subject, by such historians as Jack Temple Kirby, appeared before his own. Rosenberg offers an insightful

conceptualization of bluegrass music's "system of status," its "market levels," and the relationships between them; his theoretical paradigm seems equally applicable to other American musical idioms. Folklorists might wish, however, that he had related more of the findings of the ethnographic research on which he based this model and had examined in greater depth the complex symbiosis that persists between the vernacular and media-transmitted domains of bluegrass. In fact, he does so in "Big Fish, Small Pond: Country Musicians and Their Markets," an article published in *Media Sense: The Folklore-Popular Culture Continuum* (Popular Press, 1986), a volume edited by Peter Narváez and Martin Laba.

Not surprisingly, a central theme of *Bluegrass: A History* is the relationship between conservation and innovation within the bluegrass music tradition. Rosenberg's treatment of this subject, insightful in many respects, is questionable in others. He seems at times to conflate two potential motivations for stylistic change on the part of musicians: the musicians' own artistic satisfaction and the prospect of commercial gain. Of course, these motivations are not mutually exclusive; a musician might pursue both concurrently, as Earl Scruggs arguably did during the late 1960s and 1970s. However, they are far from synonymous, and one can imagine instances in which the pursuit of artistic satisfaction and that of financial gain would be at cross purposes. In the 1980s, both Tony Rice and Ricky Skaggs ventured into idioms that are related to but distinct from conventional bluegrass. Rosenberg suggests that they did so, at least in part, in order to tap into other musical markets while retaining the allegiance of their bluegrass fan base, thus maximizing their commercial potential. Although both musicians might well have made their decisions with unswerving artistic integrity, Skaggs chose to branch into an idiom that is no more structurally and technically complex than conventional bluegrass and is vastly more profitable—mainstream country—while Rice chose to involve himself in one that is more structurally and technically complex than conventional bluegrass and is not appreciably more profitable—"spacegrass." To equate the rationales

behind their respective courses of action seems fallacious.

Rosenberg's occasional conflation of two distinct kinds of divergence from bluegrass convention bespeaks a characteristic of *Bluegrass: A History* that might or might not be considered a shortcoming, depending on one's purposes in reading it. Throughout, Rosenberg subordinates his discussion of bluegrass as sonic art to his discussion of the music as an artifact of cultural history. Though he does discuss aspects of the evolution of bluegrass musical style, he focuses principally on those developments that have been most immediately perceptible to listeners (e.g., innovations in instrumentation) and those that have had definite social implications or a pronounced commercial impact. These are not necessarily the developments that would seem most significant from a musician's or music theorist's perspective, and although Rosenberg's observations are generally accurate, he does not formulate them in precise analytical terms. Consequently, the conclusions that he draws from sonic evidence occasionally seem somewhat misguided, and those who seek a comprehensive history of the composition and performance of bluegrass music will not find it here.

Nevertheless, those who seek an exemplary comprehensive history of bluegrass music as a component of American popular culture should turn to this book, as have numerous readers over the past twenty years. Rather than revising the original text to bring it up to date, Rosenberg adds a preface succinctly enumerating major occurrences in bluegrass history since *Bluegrass: A History* was originally published, much as Cantwell does in the 2003 edition of *Bluegrass Breakdown*. The decision not to revise the text of either book to give proportional consideration to recent developments (as the most recent editions of two of Bill Malone's books on southern vernacular music do) might seem a missed opportunity. However, Rosenberg correctly observes that "describing the many changes in the world of bluegrass since 1985 would take another book of the same size" (p. ix), and his preface does identify many of the most consequential developments of the intervening years, reflecting

his sound historical judgment. (Some might take issue, for various reasons, with the degree of attention that both Rosenberg and Cantwell devote to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, but that is a small matter.)

Bluegrass: A History is a superb treatment of its subject. One could, however, envision a history of bluegrass, equal in scope to Rosenberg's, that would integrate a comprehensive account of the evolution of bluegrass as sonic art with a careful examination of the structural transformation of the socioeconomic milieu from which the music emerged, incorporating the findings of substantial ethnographic research—a tall order, to say the least. Nonetheless, judging from the encouragement to extend the boundaries of bluegrass scholarship that Rosenberg has generously offered to others, both at the Bluegrass Music Symposium and in his new preface to this book, it seems that he would welcome such a development, as would scores of other "believers in bluegrass."

A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America. By James E. McWilliams. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. Pp. 387, 22 illustrations, notes, bibliography, index.)

Eating Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Food. Ed. Tobias Döring, Markus Heide, and Susanne Mühleisen. American Studies Monograph Series, Vol. 106. (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2003. Pp. 284, acknowledgments, notes on contributors, index.)

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These two books have something in common: they are written from the viewpoint of American history/American studies and they are not written by or for folklorists. James E. McWilliams (author of *A Revolution in Eating*) is a historian, and the contributors to *Eating Culture* come from anthropology, sociology, English literature, and American studies. All but one, Sidney W. Mintz, are European. Both books offer an interesting perspective on Amer-