



BRIGHT STAR

MUSICAL

PRODUCTION NUMBER 238

2022
SEASON

Feb. 25 —THROUGH— Apr. 09

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"... it has a high lonesome sound."

—Bill Monroe

B*right Star* is a unique musical: instead of classic Broadway tunes, or rock and pop music, it's full of what musical trailblazer Bill Monroe called the "high lonesome sound" of Appalachian Bluegrass.

Bluegrass is a distinctly American musical form, with a style and a history all its own. Variouslly described as a part of folk music, country music, or "hillbilly" music, it grew out of sounds that Scottish and Irish immigrants brought with them to the Appalachians in the 18th century, including Scottish, Irish and English ballads dating from the 16th Century and "reels" which accompanied traditional dances. Just as the music evolved into a unique American form, so did those traditional dances. Clogging was often found wherever bluegrass was being played and was itself an American blend of Irish step dance, square dancing and African rhythms that would later develop into tap dance.

While this music developed through America's history, it was the success of Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys in the 1940s that gave the music a name, put it on the radio, and defined it as a musical genre to listen to nationwide. Monroe was known

as "The Father of Bluegrass" and established what would become the iconic instrumental lineup: acoustic instruments of all sorts, including the fiddle, five-string banjo, guitar, mandolin, string bass, resonator guitar (called a Dobro) and sometimes harmonica. The instrumentation itself shows the blending of cultures that produced this music: the Italian fiddle was one of the first instruments to be brought across the ocean by European settlers, the banjo was brought over by enslaved Africans as traditional instruments like the kora, akonting, and ubaw-akwala, and the Dobro was invented in America by a Slovakian immigrant to the United States.

Bluegrass is also influenced by blues and jazz in its structure, especially the way individual instruments will take the melody one at a time and improvise around that basic theme. The vocals prominently feature two, three, four, or even five-part harmonies, often with a dissonance in the highest part -- it's that high, clear vocal line which gives bluegrass its distinctive "high lonesome sound"

Alison Krauss, The Punch Brothers, Gillian Welch, Vince Gill, and Old Crow Medicine Show are among the popular modern acts making music in the bluegrass tradition.



"Father of Bluegrass" Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys in 1940

Bluegrass experienced a huge revival with the 2000 release of the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* by Joel and Ethan Cohen transplanting *The Odyssey* to Depression-era America with a soundtrack mixing bluegrass, folk, Americana and other traditional music. The album was a runaway hit, topping the *Billboard* 200 chart (as well as the country and soundtrack charts) and sold millions of copies. The album even spawned its own concert tour featuring many of the artists involved, which produced a film of its own: *Down from the Mountain*, a combination of concert footage and behind-the-scenes looks at the events leading up to the tour.

So how does bluegrass end up in musical written by Hollywood actor Steve Martin?

While many know Martin from his standup career, *Saturday Night Live* appearances, or films ranging from *The Jerk* to *Roxanne* to *The Three Amigos*, his love of the banjo began when he was 17 years old and played bluegrass records at 16 rpm on his record player to teach himself the songs. Banjo was a big part of his early standup act, and he often played on his comedy albums - including filling the B-Side on *The Steve Martin Brothers* entirely with live bluegrass performances.

Having moved to Asheville, he began to play with the North Carolina bluegrass band Steep Canyon Rangers in 2009 and collaborating with Edie Brickell (of the band The New Bohemians) in 2013, creating the Grammy-winning *Love Has Come for You* and beginning a relationship that would eventually lead to 2016's *Bright Star*. While *Bright Star* looks backward in time, Martin invests in the future of bluegrass to this day by sponsoring The Steve Martin Prize for Excellence in Banjo and Bluegrass with a \$50,000 cash prize and an opportunity to play with Martin on national television as recognition for extraordinary contributions to the form.

"... the music I believe rivals any class of a specialized genre of music," says Martin. "It can be very sophisticated and emotional. It has a very rich history and can feature great storytelling. But it's a genre that's underrepresented in the wider culture."

—HCTO Guest Dramaturg Mark Fossen, MFA

Looking for even more interesting facts?

We don't want to spoil the story, but after you've experienced *Bright Star*, [check out our article about the true story that inspired the musical](#).



Actor, comedian, playwright, and banjo enthusiast Steve Martin early in his career