

INDUSTRIAL STRENGTH BLUEGRASS

SOUTHWESTERN OHIO'S MUSICAL LEGACY



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1. Readin', Rightin', Route 23 3:36

Joe Mullins & the Radio Ramblers

(Dwight Yoakam/Figs. D Music, Inc. o/b/o Coal Dust Music West, BMI)

2. 20/20 Vision 2:46

Dan Tyminski

(Joe Allison-Milton Estes/Golden West Melodies, Inc., BMI)

3. Suzanne 2:48

Mo Pitney and Merle Monroe

(Harley Allen)

4. From Life's Other Side 5:35

Lee Ann Womack

(Dave Evans/Weldee Music Company, BMI)

5. Larry Sparks Medley – Dark Hollow / A Face in the Crowd / These Old Blues 5:20

Josh Williams, Bradley Walker, and Russell Moore

(Dark Hollow (Bill Browning/Fort Knox Music, BMI-Trio Music Co., BMI) / A Face in the Crowd (Dean St. Clair-Henry H. Smith/Markyle Music, BMI) / These Old Blues (Larry Sparks/Jaymore Music, BMI))

6. When He Blessed My Soul 3:03

Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver

(Cleavant Derricks/Bridge Building Music, BMI-The Derricks Legacy, BMI)

7. The Rolling Mills of Middletown 3:56

Larry Cordle

(Tom T. Hall/Sony/ATV Acuff-Rose Music, BMI)

8. Family Reunion 3:26

Rhonda Vincent and Caleb Daugherty

(Aubrey Holt-Harley Gabbard/Fort Knox Music, BMI-Trio Music Co., BMI)

9. Mountain Strings 3:42

Sierra Hull

(Frank Wakefield-Red Allen/Fort Knox Music, BMI-Trio Music Co., BMI)

10. Stone Walls and Steel Bars 2:25

Ronnie Bowman, Don Rigsby, and Kenny Smith

(Roy Marcum-Ray Pennington/Fort Knox Music, BMI-Trio Music Co., BMI)

11. Are You Missing Me 2:49

Dailey & Vincent

(Ira Louvin-Charlie Louvin/Sony/ATV Acuff-Rose Music, BMI)

12. Once More 2:53

The Grascals

(Dusty Owens/Sony/ATV Acuff-Rose Music, BMI)

13. Barefoot Nellie 2:31

Jim Lauderdale and High Fidelity

(Jim Davis-Don Reno/Fort Knox Music, BMI-Trio Music Co., BMI)

14. Garden Tomb 2:47

The Isaacs and The Oak Ridge Boys

(Joe Isaacs/BMG Platinum Songs o/b/o Isaacs Family Publishing, BMI)

15. Baby Blue Eyes 3:21

Vince Gill

(Jim Eanes/Atlantic Music Corp., BMI)

16. We'll Head Back to Harlan 2:27

Bobby Osborne

(Aubrey Holt/Tulipland Publishing, BMI)



Blast Furnace workers, American Rolling Mill Company
(Armco), 1925. Courtesy of Middletown Historical Society

PRODUCER'S NOTE

JOE MULLINS

For a guy who wanted to be included in everything we love about bluegrass music, I am so fortunate to have grown up in the middle of bluegrass history. Because of my heritage, I have always been passionate about pushing quality music from my neighborhood out to the rest of the world. While I am a native of the Miami Valley of southwestern Ohio, my family tree grows right out of the hillsides of eastern Kentucky. When I was a youngster, our family was one of those that left our residence in Ohio to go "home" any weekend my dad wasn't working as a bluegrass fiddler, broadcaster, emcee, or concert promoter. My dad (from Menifee County, Kentucky) and mom (from Lawrence County, Kentucky) migrated to Ohio in 1964. However, 20 years later, my parents still referred to Kentucky as "home." I grew up near the factories that employed thousands of people just like my parents, and alongside hundreds of second- and third-generation Appalachian transplants.

Therefore, much of the music included in this recording is very personal for me, and I was fortunate to bring together legendary performers and many of today's top artists to give each song the right "feel." I think each performance recorded has a lot of special energy because all the musicians and artists were just GLAD to be making music after learning how to be quarantined for weeks and months! Three songs on the album were recorded before March 2020. The other 13 were recorded in the summer of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a major challenge for each participant, and I am extremely grateful for the patience and precautions of everyone who assisted.

Special thanks to the many engineers and technicians who helped record this collection. At least 15 different recording engineers assisted in helping capture audio from musicians and vocalists. Paul Harrigill, Ben Isaacs, and Mark Capps were the central figures in keeping all the audio files in order, and they also kept me encouraged. My son, Daniel Mullins, helped from start to finish in our efforts to combine just the right songs and talent to produce the strongest results. His passion for presenting historic music to today's audience is unmatched.

I'm grateful to Miami University for providing the funding leadership, Fred Bartenstein and Curt

Ellison for facilitating the academic foundation, and Smithsonian Folkways for the opportunity to present and preserve an extraordinary sampling of bluegrass songs that paint the picture of southwestern Ohio's bluegrass heritage.

As a kid growing up around Middletown, Ohio, I was fascinated with the blue flame always burning from the tall smokestack of Armco Steel. It could be seen from all around town. Hopefully, the bluegrass music created nearby and within a 50-mile radius of that flame will remain just as hot and bright for future generations—Industrial Strength!



(L-R) Paul Mullins holding baby Daniel Mullins, Bill Monroe, and Joe Mullins. Photo courtesy of Joe Mullins.

INTRODUCTION

FRED BARTENSTEIN

For the millions who have read the book or seen the movie *Hillbilly Elegy*, *Industrial Strength Bluegrass* will flesh out another side of Appalachian migrant life in southwestern Ohio. From the late 1940s to the late 1980s, this region was to bluegrass what Nashville is to country music, New Orleans is to jazz, or Chicago is to the blues. It was here that rural and urban influences first merged to solidify a vital musical form that continues to thrill audiences worldwide.

During their bluegrass heyday, Cincinnati, Dayton, and the cities and towns in between were an unparalleled epicenter of artistry, creativity, and both recording and broadcast production. In the 21st century, southwestern Ohio remains one of the largest and most vibrant markets on earth for bluegrass.

National editorial correspondent Tom Teepen (1935–2017) spent decades in the region, where he was an enthusiastic and eloquent follower of the local bluegrass scene. His introduction to a 1989 reunion concert of the most prominent early musicians, excerpted here, was unforgettable:

They came down off the mountainsides and up out of hollows of Appalachia, and they caught us city kids by surprise. Far more than a few jumped down from the Greyhounds and Trailways, anxious, into an alien cityscape, with an old Silvertone mandolin or guitar from the Sears and Roebuck catalogue among their belongings. [They were] drawn by rumors

of top-dollar jobs at Frigidaire, Chrysler Airtemp, and NCR, and by the siren song of radio stations that seemed to promise stardom.

At first a music of stoops and porches, played around linoleum-top kitchen tables, bluegrass soon enough slipped out of the house to begin a long honky-tonk career. It was a shifting, restless scene in the 1950s and '60s, with a band here one night and gone the next. Few made a good living at their musical work, and many didn't make any kind of living from it at all. Yet, incredibly, they made art.

Off and on through what were their most formative years, Sonny and Bobby Osborne drove cabs in Dayton, but on weekend nights at Ruby's White Sands, there they were, Sonny's virtuoso banjo flat tearing up ground his elders had only scuffed and Bobby's new "Rube-e-e-e-e" keening through the smoke like a cry across a distant valley.

Over the years together, we [became] a family—musicians, hangers-on, audiences, bookers, and DJs. The family took a daring risk and grew dramatically in 1960 when the Osborne Brothers played the first bluegrass concert on a college campus, at Antioch, a bold step beyond the Appalachian circles to which the music and its people had until then largely been confined.

As in any family there were rivalries, sulks, even anger now and again. But when we felt challenged by outsiders, we pulled together for one another. The [region's] extraordinary collection of musical talents combined, broke up, and recombined in shifting patterns, perfecting old ways, creating new. It was a period of extraordinary invention and

excitement, a once-in-a-lifetime intersection of opportunity and ability, and the words and the music went forth, honed and bright into a nation that had little notion of where they had come from—and no idea what great good fun it had all been.

Industrial Strength Bluegrass captures the intensity and many facets of this musical legacy. The recording is a companion to a book of the same name, released in 2021 by the University of Illinois Press. In that volume, knowledgeable scholars, journalists, and musical artists chronicle southwestern Ohio's bluegrass musicians, radio broadcasters, recording studios, record labels, and performance venues, along with the music's contributions to religious activities, community development, and public education. Whether you start with the recording or the book, you will enjoy them equally and gain a new appreciation for a deep well of American artistry that is only now coming to be understood for its importance.

Fred Bartenstein
Yellow Springs, Ohio

TRACK NOTES

DANIEL MULLINS

I. READIN', RIGHTIN', ROUTE 23 — Joe Mullins & the Radio Ramblers

Joe Mullins, banjo, lead and harmony vocals; Adam McIntosh, guitar, lead and harmony vocals; Mike Terry, mandolin, harmony vocals; Jason Barie, fiddle; Randy Barnes, bass; Jerry Douglas, resonophonic guitar; Phil Paul, percussion

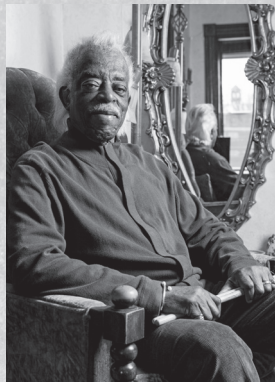
If not for the Miami Valley of Ohio being filled with "homesick hillbillies," bluegrass would never have developed a foothold in southwestern Ohio. Period. The story of bluegrass in the Cincinnati-Dayton region starts with pickup trucks and station wagons, piled high with simple belongings, leaving the hills and hollers of Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia and headed for Ohio. The Appalachian migration saw southerners leaving the farms and coal mines for steady factory jobs in northern cities. Because this is the story of southwestern Ohio bluegrass, there is no better place to start than at the beginning.

Joe Mullins, a second-generation transplant to the region, knows firsthand the story behind one of the less-familiar Dwight Yoakam songs, "Readin', Rightin', Route 23." (Yoakam himself was born in Pikeville, Kentucky, but raised in Columbus, Ohio; those cities are connected by US 23. Many of the

southwestern Ohio Appalachians also came up US 25, “the Dixie Highway,” superseded today by I-75.) Joe’s parents moved to Ohio shortly before Joe was born in the mid-1960s, so his father, Paul “Moon” Mullins, could work at WPFB radio in Middletown. Joe was one of the kids loaded in the car, pulling “up in a holler ‘bout 2 a.m.” to see his grandparents on the weekend. This was a way of life for many, who left family and home to provide for themselves and their posterity by working and living in a strange land. We are so grateful that they brought their music with them, creating a breeding ground for bluegrass music in the second half of the 20th century.

Joe Mullins & the Radio Ramblers are joined by fellow Ohioans Jerry Douglas and Philip Paul. Douglas is the most celebrated Dobro player on the planet; his family migrated to Ohio (Warren, to be exact) after leaving the mountains of West Virginia. Jerry Douglas has since taken the resonophonic guitar to new heights, working with J. D. Crowe & the New South, the Country Gentlemen, the Whites, Alison Krauss & Union Station, the Earls of Leicester, and more, as well as appearing on recordings by Ray Charles, Garth Brooks, Mumford & Sons, John Fogerty, and countless others.

Just as white southerners migrated to southwestern Ohio to find work, Black southerners did as well, and both cultures found a musical home in the Miami Valley. Philip Paul is a Harlem native who moved to southern Ohio in the 1950s to play drums in the burgeoning music



Philip Paul. Photo © LuAnne Demeo.



Route 23. Photo © Timothy
Brian McKee.

scene of Cincinnati, Ohio/Newport, Kentucky. His knowledge of jazz, blues, calypso, and more made him a natural choice when Syd Nathan of King Records decided to form a house band of studio musicians for his recording label. "He [Syd Nathan] didn't have any racism at all. I never met a man like that," says Philip Paul. "He had all types of people working for him." In addition to playing shows with jazz artists like Dizzy Gillespie and Tiny Bradshaw, Philip Paul played drums on such classic records as the original version of "The Twist" by Hank Ballard & the Midnighters, "Please Come for Christmas" by Charles Brown, "Fever" by Little Willie John, the majority of Freddie King's classic records, and many others. Philip Paul also contributed drums to records by white artists such as Grandpa Jones, the Stanley Brothers, and Cowboy Copas (including "Alabam"). While it would catch some white artists off guard to work with a black musician, their shared passion for music quickly shattered any prejudices. "After we got to playing and get a good groove, they forgot about that stuff," says the groundbreaking drummer. Cincinnati became a hotbed of jazz, blues, country, and bluegrass, and Philip Paul was a part of all of it during his time at King Records, 1951–1965. He received an Ohio Heritage Fellowship award in 2009 and played drums on this recording a few days before his 95th birthday.

The song "Readin', 'Rightin', Route 23" was mentioned in the first chapter of *Hillbilly Elegy*, a #1 *New York Times* bestseller written by Middletown native J. D. Vance and adapted for a Netflix movie. A third-generation Appalachian transplant, Vance's memoirs provided the nation with an inside look

at urban Appalachian migrant communities in southwestern Ohio. This new bluegrass version from another Middletown native and son of Kentucky transplants properly sets the stage for a look at the region's musical legacy.

2. 20/20 VISION — Dan Tyminski

Dan Tyminski, guitar, lead vocal; Ben Isaacs, bass; Sierra Hull, mandolin; Lincoln Hensley, banjo; Glen Duncan, fiddles; Joe Mullins, harmony vocal; Don Rigsby, harmony vocal

This bluegrass classic was originally recorded by Bluegrass Music Hall of Famers Jimmy Martin and the Osborne Brothers. The Osbornes had moved to the Dayton area as boys, when their family migrated north from Hyden, Kentucky, to find factory work. Bobby's music career began as a teenager in 1949 when he sang "Ruby, Are You Mad?" on the airwaves of WPFB in Middletown. Later he moved to Bluefield, West Virginia, with banjo man Larry Richardson to join the Lonesome Pine Fiddlers, a Hall of Fame bluegrass band. In 1951 Jimmy Martin left Bill Monroe & His Blue Grass Boys and joined the Lonesome Pine Fiddlers as well. Martin



(L-R) Sonny Osborne, Bobby Osborne, and Jimmy Martin. Courtesy of Richard Weize...and more bears.

and Osborne soon left the band to form their own partnership. That year they recorded four sides for Cincinnati's King Records—the first bluegrass recorded for the label. The partnership was short-lived, as Bobby Osborne was drafted into the Marines in 1951 and sent to serve his country in the Korean War.

In the meantime, Sonny Osborne had become enthralled with the banjo after seeing Bobby's bandmate Larry Richardson play the instrument. By June of 1950 he too was performing at WPFB in Middletown. Bobby's former partner Jimmy Martin relocated to southwestern Ohio shortly after Bobby left for Korea. During the summer of 1952, Jimmy Martin rejoined Bill Monroe's band and took Sonny Osborne with him. Just 14, Sonny was the youngest Blue Grass Boy of all time. Soon thereafter Sonny cut numerous solo records for the Gateway family of labels out of Cincinnati.

Once Bobby returned from the war in 1953, the musical partnership between him and Sonny officially began. They performed in Dayton and later Knoxville. In the summer of 1954 they joined forces with Jimmy Martin in Dayton (he was living in the area working at a bar in Hamilton, Ohio) before the three future Hall of Famers took their show to Detroit. The relationship was volatile, and they only recorded six sides for RCA before dissolving the partnership. But those recordings were terrific and heralded the three artists' success. The most celebrated of the Martin-Osborne collaborations is "20/20 Vision" (recorded the same year by Gene Autry) and performed here by Dan Tyminski.

3. SUZANNE — Mo Pitney and Merle Monroe

Mo Pitney, lead vocal; Tim Raybon, harmony vocal; Daniel Grindstaff, banjo, harmony vocal; Mike Bub, bass; Jason Carter, fiddle; David Harvey, mandolin; Kenny Smith, guitar



Mike Lilly and Harley Allen. Courtesy of the Mac McDivitt Collection.

The Allen family is practically synonymous with Dayton bluegrass. Red Allen developed a reputation as a hard-core bluegrass singer after cutting his teeth with the Osborne Brothers and later starting Red Allen & the Kentuckians. Red's sons Ronnie, Neal, Greg, and Harley carried on the family tradition, forming the Allen Brothers in the 1970s. Harley Allen later moved to Nashville, establishing himself as one of country music's premier songwriters, writing hits for Alan Jackson ("Everything I Love," "Between the Devil and Me"), Blake Shelton ("The Baby"), Ricky Skaggs ("A Simple Life," "Spread a Little Love Around"), John Michael Montgomery ("The Little Girl"), Joe Nichols ("If Nobody Believed In You"), Linda Ronstadt ("High

Sierra"), and more. Harley Allen passed away from lung cancer in 2011, at age 55.

Before writing hits for Music Row, Harley penned "Suzanne," now a jam session standard in bluegrass circles. Harley originally recorded the song with the Allen Brothers in 1982 and later in 1985 with Dayton banjo man Mike Lilly. Lilly's career included stints with Larry Sparks & the Lonesome Ramblers and the Country Gentlemen, before his wonderful Smithsonian Folkways recordings with the short-lived Harley Allen & Mike Lilly Band. Mike Lilly passed away of cancer in 2020, at the age of 69.

Mo Pitney is one of many country singer-songwriters who points to Harley Allen as a key influence. Mo, like Harley Allen, also came to Nashville after playing bluegrass for many years in the Midwest with

his family. He is joined by Merle Monroe, a rising bluegrass band which combines a passion for both bluegrass and country music. Tim Raybon and Daniel Grindstaff make up the core of the band, with Grindstaff saluting Mike Lilly on the banjo and Raybon providing sky-high harmony on the chorus that echoes Harley Allen's distinctive tenor vocals.

4. FROM LIFE'S OTHER SIDE — Lee Ann Womack

Lee Ann Womack, vocal; Mike Bub, bass; Jason Carter, fiddle; Jason Barie, mandolin and harmony fiddles; Kenny Smith, guitar

Dave Evans was a soulful bluegrass singer and banjo player from Portsmouth, Ohio, who first rose to prominence working in the Miami Valley with Larry Sparks & the Lonesome Ramblers and the Boys From Indiana. He would later embark on a solo career, starting Dave Evans & River Bend in the late 1970s. He recorded a pair of albums for Vetco Records in Cincinnati before releasing 10 albums for Rebel Records over the course of 25 years. Some folks are known to "wear their heart on their sleeve"; Dave wore his heart in every note he sang, especially on his timeless hits "Highway 52," "99 Years (Is Almost For Life)," and "Be Proud of the Gray in Your Hair." Evans's emotional vocal style was an influence on singers as diverse as



Dave Evans. Photo © Anthony Benson, courtesy of Rebel Records.

James King and Chris Stapleton. After a hard life and an influential career, Evans passed away in 2017 at the age of 66.

Dave Evans wrote and recorded "From Life's Other Side" for his debut album in 1979. The song's lonesome nature is perfectly captured by one of country music's most heartfelt singers of the past few decades, Lee Ann Womack.

5. LARRY SPARKS MEDLEY: DARK HOLLOW/A FACE IN THE CROWD/THESE OLD BLUES

— **Josh Williams, Bradley Walker, and Russell Moore**

Josh Williams, guitar, lead and harmony vocals; Bradley Walker, lead and harmony vocals; Russell Moore, lead and harmony vocals; Mike Bub, bass; Jason Carter, fiddle; David Harvey, mandolin; Kenny Smith, guitar; Joe Mullins, banjo

Sometimes called "the youngest of the old timers," Larry Sparks is a beloved member of the Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame. Larry was a second-generation Appalachian migrant and teenage guitar picker from Lebanon, Ohio, when he went to work with the Stanley Brothers. "Paul 'Moon' Mullins had known Ralph and Carter," said Sparks in a 2012 interview with *Bluegrass Unlimited*. "They came through Dayton, Ohio, from time to time. Well, they came through one time and needed a guitar player. Paul told them about me. Carter asked me to come out and play."

Following the passing of Carter Stanley in 1966, Sparks was given the tall task of filling Carter's role of lead singer and guitarist in the newly formed Ralph Stanley & the Clinch Mountain Boys. It was



Larry Sparks at Bill Munroe and Ralph Stanley's First Annual Old-Time West Virginia Bluegrass Festival, Stumptown, West Virginia, August 1974. Photo © Carl Fleischhauer.

also the same year that he bought his iconic 1954 Martin D-28 at the Ken-Mill Café in Cincinnati. With its sprawling, weathered black pickguard, it is one of the most recognizable instruments in bluegrass history. "It looks different," said Sparks to *Bluegrass Unlimited* in 2019. "That's identity. Had it when I worked with Ralph Stanley. It's been on all the records and every show I've ever played. It's been through some hard knocks, but it's hanging in there." Just like his guitar, Sparks would carve out his own identity in bluegrass.

In 1969 Larry started his own band. Larry Sparks & the Lonesome Ramblers have entertained bluegrass fans for over 50 years. Its ranks have included Ohio natives Dave Evans, Mike Lilly, Wendy Miller, and David Harvey (who plays mandolin on this medley), and it has also served as an early proving ground for household names in bluegrass circles such as Joe Isaacs, Stuart Duncan, Scott Vestal, and Glen Duncan.

Sparks's bluesy guitar style and powerful vocal delivery have endeared him to generations of bluegrass fans. He puts his heart and soul into every note. To celebrate Larry's influence on both bluegrass guitar and lead singing, two IBMA Guitar Players of the Year (Josh Williams and Kenny Smith) and

two IBMA Male Vocalists of the Year (Bradley Walker and Russell Moore) collaborate to present a medley of songs from the Larry Sparks catalog.

"Dark Hollow," written by Bill Browning, is one of the first songs Larry Sparks performed with Ralph Stanley. The song's ties to the Miami Valley go back even further. Jimmie Skinner was a country and bluegrass artist who migrated to Hamilton, Ohio, from Berea, Kentucky, as a teenager. He wrote such well-known standards as "Doin' My Time," "Will You Be Satisfied That Way," "Let's Say Goodbye Like We Said Hello," "Don't Give Your Heart to a Rambler," and "He Died a Rounder at 21," and founded the Jimmie Skinner Music Center in Cincinnati, one of the first mail-order music stores to focus primarily on country and bluegrass music. His store enjoyed a long promotional partnership with WCKY of Covington, Kentucky, and he even hosted a live radio show from the store.

Jimmie Skinner took "Dark Hollow" to #7 on *Billboard's* country charts in 1959. Larry Sparks revived it a decade later with Ralph Stanley & the Clinch Mountain Boys on the album *Hills of Home* for Cincinnati's King Records. He then cut it twice with the Lonesome Ramblers for his *Ramblin' Bluegrass* (Starday Records, 1972) and *Footsteps of Tradition* (King Bluegrass, 1974) albums. Josh Williams of Rhonda Vincent & the Rage sings the song here.

Larry Sparks has more signature songs than practically any other bluegrass artist of his generation. Classics like "Tennessee 1949," "Blue Virginia Blues," "You Ain't Lived," "Kentucky Girl," "John Deere Tractor," and "You Could Have Called" are immediately recognizable as Larry Sparks staples. Standing above them all, though, is his first major hit: "A Face in the Crowd." Forty-five years after first releasing it on the 1975 King Bluegrass album *Sparklin' Bluegrass*, Sparks rarely performs a show without singing

this song. Bradley Walker is a beloved voice in bluegrass, gospel, and country music circles. Named IBMA Male Vocalist of the Year in 2008, Walker delivers a heartfelt rendition for this recording.

Larry Sparks's songwriting is often overshadowed by his immense contributions as a vocalist and guitar player, but he has written a number of bluegrass gems, including "These Old Blues." He recorded the song three times with the Lonesome Ramblers: on *Bluegrass Old & New* (1972), *The Lonesome Sounds of Larry Sparks & the Lonesome Ramblers* (1974), and *Live in Concert* (1985), all on the Old Homestead label. A score of other bluegrass bands have also recorded the classic. The IBMA's most-awarded male vocalist, Russell Moore, sings lead on this version, showcasing Sparks's influence on his own vocal style.

6. WHEN HE BLESSED MY SOUL — Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver

Doyle Lawson, guitar, lead vocal; Jerry Cole, tenor vocal; Eli Johnston, baritone vocal; Matt Flake, bass vocal

Even before bluegrass was recognized as a genre, radio played an important role in helping roots music establish a foothold in southwestern Ohio. After going on the air in 1922, WLW in Cincinnati became a broadcasting juggernaut, the only American radio station to ever broadcast at 500,000 watts (1934–1939). During this time, "The Nation's Station" made a monumental impact on country and roots music. *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* and the *Boone County Jamboree* (later known as the *Midwestern Hayride*), originally broadcast on WLW, made "hillbilly" music available not only to Miami Valley residents but to



"When He Blessed My Soul," 78-rpm King record, 1946.

listeners from New York to Florida.

By 1939, when WLW's signal was scaled back to 50,000 watts, these rural entertainment programs had already gained enormous popularity. WLW became a premier landing spot for "hillbilly" entertainers, earning the moniker "Cradle of the Stars." This high concentration of talent was a driving force behind the early success of King Records. Syd Nathan formed the Cincinnati-based record company and partnered with Alton Delmore of the Delmore Brothers to recruit WLW talent, giving the new label a direct line to some of the biggest "hillbilly" radio stars of the day.

These WLW stars included Grandpa Jones, Merle Travis, and the aforementioned Delmore Brothers (Alton and his brother, Rabon). Although the four future Country Music Hall of Famers all had their own acts, they joined together to form country music's first gospel quartet. The popularity of their on-air performances inspired this group, who named themselves the "Brown's Ferry Four," to record 45 songs for King Records. The records played a foundational role in making gospel quartet music a beloved country music tradition.

The music of the Brown's Ferry Four had a major impact on Bluegrass Hall of Fame member Doyle Lawson, who grew up in East Tennessee. "My dad sang a cappella gospel music in a quartet, and his

favorite groups were the Chuck Wagon Gang, the Masters Family, and the Brown's Ferry Four," says Lawson. "He bought more of the Brown's Ferry Four recordings than any of the other groups." With his award-winning band Quicksilver, Doyle Lawson has recorded many songs originally performed by the Brown's Ferry Four, including "There's a Light Guiding Me," "The Arm of God," "I'm a Weary Pilgrim," and "When the Good Lord Cares." Gospel quartet singing has been a focal point throughout the 40-plus-year history of Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver. That tradition continues with their rendition of the Brown's Ferry Four's "When He Blessed My Soul" for *Industrial Strength Bluegrass*. The song was written by African American pastor and prolific composer, Cleavant Derricks (1909–1977).

7. THE ROLLING MILLS OF MIDDLETOWN — Larry Cordle

Larry Cordle, lead vocal; Ben Isaacs, bass; Sierra Hull, mandolin; Josh Williams, guitar; Lincoln Hensley, banjo; Glen Duncan, fiddle; Josh Swift, resophonic guitar

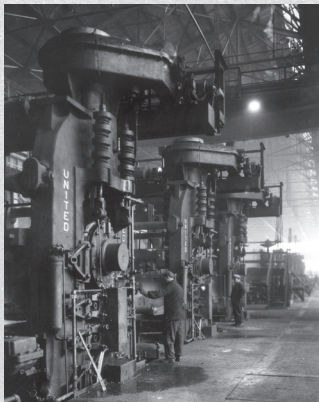
The mills and factories of southwestern Ohio offered an enticing opportunity for many in Appalachia to escape poverty and provide for their families. One of the largest employers in the Miami Valley during the last half of the 20th century was the American Rolling Mill Company (Armco, now known as AK Steel) in Middletown, home of its original headquarters and its first production facility for flat-rolled carbon, stainless and electrical steel. Armco specifically targeted the migrant community in their hiring, making Middletown a popular landing spot for many former Kentuckians.

Middletown was also the home of WPFB, which served as a "taste of home" on the radio dial for

many homesick hillbillies. The station rose to popularity in the 1950s, featuring live performances on Saturday night and a cast that included Jimmy Martin, J. D. Crowe, Bobby Osborne, Jim & Jesse, and more. By the mid-1960s they had hired Paul "Moon" Mullins as an on-air personality. Moon's homespun style of broadcasting comforted migrants, who often felt alienated in northern communities. While the station's call letters came from station founder Paul F. Braden's initials, the station and Moon's ability to connect with Appalachian migrants would eventually result in WPFB affectionately being referred to

as "We Play For Briars." "Briars," short for "briarhoppers," a slang term used to reference Kentuckians, became a badge of honor for transplants. For decades, Mullins's programs were a primary outlet for bluegrass, gospel, and hardcore country music on airwaves across the region. Devoted listeners enjoyed the Stanley Brothers and the Country Gentlemen alongside Dolly Parton and Merle Haggard.

Paul Mullins also had a career as a bluegrass fiddler. He played a short stint with the Stanley Brothers, was an integral part of the Boys From Indiana during their formative years in the 1970s, and founded the Traditional Grass in the early 1980s with his son, Joe Mullins, and Miami Valley native Mark Rader. Paul also played fiddle



Middletown works of Armco Steel Corporation, 1942.
Courtesy of Middletown Historical Society.

on bluegrass records with Charlie Moore & Bill Napier, Earl Taylor & Jim McCall, Larry Sparks, Jimmy Martin, and more. Before moving to Ohio, Mullins had a popular band in eastern Kentucky known as the Bluegrass Playboys, who made the original recording of the bluegrass standard "Katie Daley." That band's occasional bass player was Tom T. Hall, now a member of both the Country and Bluegrass Music Halls of Fame.

Years later, in the early 1970s, Tom T. Hall visited the Mullins household. One of Nashville's premier songwriters, he had been commissioned by Armco to write a song about its Middletown works. Although the company wasn't pleased by the dark story told in "The Rolling Mills of Middletown," it was the B-side of the Hall classic, "Old Dogs, Children, and Watermelon Wine," and appeared on the album bearing Hall's moniker, *The Storyteller* (Mercury Records, 1972). Another one of Music City's top songwriters, Larry Cordle, leads a bluegrass rendition of Tom T.'s classic song of cheating, (possible) retribution, and Middletown's steelworkers.

8. FAMILY REUNION — Rhonda Vincent and Caleb Daugherty

Rhonda Vincent, lead and harmony vocals; Caleb Daugherty, lead and harmony vocals; Mike Terry, harmony vocal; Darrin Vincent, bass, sock rhythm guitar; Shawn Richardson, guitar; Corrina Rose Logston, fiddle; Jeremy Stephens, mandolin; Brent Burke, resophonic guitar

The bars and honky-tonks of Dayton and Cincinnati were a fertile training ground for scores of bluegrass musicians. The Osborne Brothers, Red Allen, Frank Wakefield, Earl Taylor, Jim McCall, and many others



Harley Gabbard, Hubert Cox, Jerry and Aubrey Holt in the 1960s. Courtesy of Tom Feller.

paid their dues playing hole-in-the-wall clubs during the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. Two young men from just across the state line were frequent members of bands during this era and avid listeners of WPFB. After playing and singing for factory workers in unassuming bars throughout the Miami Valley, Aubrey Holt and his uncle, Harley Gabbard, later helped to found the popular bluegrass band the "Boys From Indiana."

In 1957 they wrote and recorded "Family Reunion" as the Logan & Laurel County Boys for Cincinnati's Excellent Records. Later that year

Bluegrass Hall of Fame member Carl Story would record the song for Mercury Records with his band the Rambling Mountaineers, and it became an enduring standard. Aubrey Holt continued as one of bluegrass music's leading composers, penning songs like "Atlanta Is Burning," "Sad Wind Sighs," "We Missed You in Church Last Sunday," and "It Won't Work This Time."

Recent Grand Ole Opry inductee Rhonda Vincent, "the Queen of Bluegrass," delivers a soulful rendition of this gospel classic. She is joined by one of the brightest young voices in bluegrass, Caleb Daugherty, a Hoosier who credits his early near-neighbors, the Boys From Indiana, among his varied influences.

9. MOUNTAIN STRINGS — Sierra Hull

Sierra Hull, mandolin; Ben Isaacs, bass; Kristen Scott Benson, banjo; Glen Duncan, fiddle; Josh Williams, guitar; Phil Paul, percussion

The unique ideas of southwestern Ohio's mandolin players mightily impacted bluegrass music. Daytonians Bobby Osborne, Dorsey Harvey, and David Harvey (Dorsey's son) built on the work of Bill Monroe, but with more single-note passages. Jesse McReynolds introduced his signature crosspicking style while appearing on Middletown radio. But none of these masters approached the instrument with the ferocity or eccentricity of Frank Wakefield. A Tennessee migrant to Dayton, Frank was 15 years old when he got his start with Red Allen and quickly developed a reputation as a creative mandolin player. "New Camptown Races" and "Catnip" are among his most recognizable compositions.

Red Allen & Frank Wakefield recorded Frank's original tune, "Mountain Strings," for Starday Records in 1961, with help from Don Reno and Chubby Wise. Frank's performance was full of attitude and a rockabilly approach to the instrument. One of today's mandolin superstars, Sierra Hull (the first female to win IBMA's Mandolin Player of the Year), harnesses a similar rock 'n' roll swagger as she transforms this overlooked gem. Joining in are Josh Williams, Glen Duncan, Ben Isaacs, and Kristin Scott Benson (this is the first time that leading bluegrass ladies Sierra Hull and Kristin Scott Benson have recorded together). Legendary King Records drummer Phil Paul provides some groovin' snare.



(left) Howard Aldridge, Frank Wakefield, and Frank James at Dick's Café, Springfield, Ohio. Photo © Lucille Poling. Courtesy of Brian Aldridge/ Dan Millhon Private Collection.
 (right) Red Allen and Frank Wakefield, 1961. Photo © Leon Kagarise / Joe Lee.

10. STONE WALLS AND STEEL BARS — Ronnie Bowman, Don Rigsby, and Kenny Smith

Ronnie Bowman, lead vocal; Don Rigsby, harmony vocal; Kenny Smith, guitar, harmony vocal; Mike Bub, bass; Jason Carter, fiddle; David Harvey, mandolin; Joe Mullins, banjo



Ralph Stanley, George Shuffler, Carter Stanley, 1964 .
Photo © John Byrne Cooke.

The Stanley Brothers were already bluegrass royalty by the time they moved to King Records and first recorded for Syd Nathan in Cincinnati during the fall of 1958. Ralph and Carter Stanley primarily recorded for King until Carter's death in 1966. Classics such as "Love Me, Darling, Just Tonight," "The Memory of Your Smile," "How Mountain Girls Can Love," "Think of What You've Done," and others were first recorded by the Stanley Brothers during this era, and would later be revered as bedrocks of the bluegrass canon.

Recorded in Cincinnati on August 14, 1963, "Stone Walls and Steel Bars" was one of the Stanley Brothers' most popular recordings for King. The song was written and produced by Ray Pennington, who worked as an in-house record producer and de facto house songwriter for Syd Nathan. "We always saw him right there in the studio," said Ralph

Stanley in *The King Records: 1961-1965* boxed set. "We'd get 'em [the songs] right there and work 'em up and do 'em. We went in to King studios a many of a time and not knowing a thing we was gonna do . . . learn 'em and cut 'em right there." In addition to "Stone Walls and Steel Bars," Pennington wrote "Don't Cheat in Our Hometown" and other favorites in the Stanley catalog. Pennington passed away in 2020 during a house fire at his home in Hendersonville, Tennessee.

This new version of the classic Stanley song features Ronnie Bowman, Don Rigsby, and Kenny Smith of the Band of Ruhks (one of Ralph Stanley's final recordings was a cameo appearance on the Band of Ruhks' debut album). With Bowman and Rigsby saluting Carter and Ralph's vocal work, Smith pays homage to guitarist George Shuffler, known as "the third Stanley Brother" and a fellow member of the Bluegrass Hall of Fame.

II. ARE YOU MISSING ME — Dailey & Vincent

Darrin Vincent, bass, lead vocal; Jamie Dailey, harmony vocal; Shawn Richardson, guitar; Corrina Rose Logston, fiddle; Joe Mullins, banjo; Jeremy Stephens, mandolin; Phil Paul, percussion

In the early 1950s, Jim and Jesse McReynolds were a part of the on-air entertainment at Middletown's *WPFB Jamboree* for about a year. Still going by "the McReynolds Brothers" or "Jesse and James," they joined a colorful cast of characters that included Shorty Hobbs, Little Eller, Fairley Holden, and "Old Joe" Clark (who brought Jim and Jesse to Middletown). During their time at the station, the brothers recorded a few demo tapes in the WPFB studios. "The engineer put it direct to disc," remembers Jesse

McReynolds. "We had two or three songs we put down." These demo tapes, which included "I'll Always Be Waiting for You" and "Are You Missing Me," were used in their audition for Capitol Records.

"Our first record was 'Are You Missing Me,'" recalls Jesse. "[Fairley] Holden had given us that song. Charlie Louvin wrote it and pitched it to Fairley. He never did anything with it and gave it to us, so we recorded it first." While the McReynolds Brothers were working at WPFB, they were tuned in to Jimmie Skinner's radio show

and heard that Ken Nelson from Capitol Records was at Jimmie's music shop in Cincinnati. Jim and Jesse McReynolds headed straight there and played their demo tapes from the WPFB studio for Nelson. He said he would set up a recording session for the brothers for Capitol. "I thought he was just putting us on," said Jesse. "He called us the next day. It was on a Sunday, and he said he had the session set. This was 1952. From there, that's where Jim & Jesse started." It was Ken Nelson's idea to shorten the future Bluegrass Hall of Famers' name from "the McReynolds Brothers" to "Jim & Jesse."



The Barrelhead Gang at WPFB, Middletown, early 1950s; (L-R) Jim and Jesse McReynolds, Little Eller, Smokey Ward, Larry Roll, and Fairley Holden. Courtesy of Middletown Historical Society Collection.

Jim & Jesse became one of the most legendary brother duo acts in bluegrass history, and members of the Grand Ole Opry on their way to the Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame. One of today's Opry brother-style acts ("brothers from different mothers"), Dailey & Vincent, re-recorded "Are You Missing Me" for this project, honoring Jim & Jesse's connection to the Miami Valley. Jeremy Stephens plays Jesse McReynolds's signature crosspicking mandolin style, which was first heard widely on their original version of the song for Capitol Records in 1952. Jim & Jesse would re-record "Are You Missing Me" for Epic Records in 1962, bringing in drums for a more country-flavored feel, as was common on many of their recordings during that time. Phil Paul contributes snare drum here as a salute to the classic Jim & Jesse sound.

12. ONCE MORE — The Grascals

John Bryan, guitar, lead vocal; Chris Davis, guitar, harmony vocals; Terry Smith, bass, harmony vocals; Adam Haynes, fiddle; Danny Roberts, mandolin; Kristin Scott Benson, banjo; Tony Creasman, percussion

In the fall of 1957 the Osborne Brothers needed a hit. Bobby Osborne, Sonny Osborne, and Red Allen had already recorded twice for MGM Records in Nashville. Their relationship with MGM began the previous year after Miami Valley disc jockey Tommy Sutton turned some MGM executives on to the talented Daytonians. Folks loved their double-banjo version of "Ruby, Are You Mad?" from their first session. The song's success had helped get them hired on WWVA's *Wheeling Jamboree*, but the group was still looking for a song that could break into the country charts.

On the four-hour trip back to Dayton after a performance at the *Jamboree*, Bobby, Sonny, and Red began trying to work up an arrangement of "Once More," a song written by Dusty Owens, a fellow member of the *Jamboree*. After struggling with a traditional trio, they experimented with Bobby singing the melody in his naturally high range with two parts below him. This arrangement allowed Bobby to comfortably lead both the verses and chorus, and was an important catalyst for the Osborne Brothers' breakthrough. It was also their greatest stylistic contribution to later bluegrass and country music harmonies.

"Once More" was the first release to feature the band's new "high lead" vocal style. MGM initially pushed back on recording this slower song, believing that bluegrass needed to be up-tempo to sell, but finally acceded. "Once More" became the band's first charting single, shooting up to #13 on the *Billboard* country & western chart, the highest-ranking single in their early career. The Osborne Brothers and Red Allen were named "Most Promising Group" of 1958 in *Cash Box* magazine's poll of country disc jockeys. This was the first of many accolades over the ensuing decades, including Grand Ole Opry membership in 1964, CMA Vocal Group



Bobby Osborne, Red Allen, Sonny Osborne in the late 1950s. Courtesy of Bobby Osborne.



Johnny Dacus, Bobby Osborne, Sonny Osborne, and Red Allen. Courtesy of Bobby Osborne.

of the Year in 1971, and induction into the Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame in 1994.

The Grascals' connection to the Osborne Brothers is easy to trace. Bass player Terry Smith worked alongside Bobby and Sonny for 14 years, and the Grascals' music has had a decidedly Osborne influence since the group's inception in the early years of this century. Terry Smith, John Bryan, and Chris Davis make up the band's trio in 2020, singing "Once More" in the classic high-lead arrangement. Davis is a native of Fairborn, Ohio, a second-generation bluegrass professional (his father, Danny Davis, played with Ralph Stanley & the Clinch Mountain Boys). The Grascals' Kristin Scott Benson unashamedly points to Sonny Osborne as one of her banjo heroes and that shows on this recording, as does Danny Roberts's faithful interpretation of Bobby's mandolin work on the original disc.

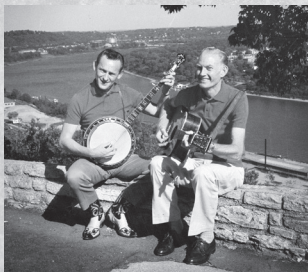
13. BAREFOOT NELLIE — Jim Lauderdale and High Fidelity

Jim Lauderdale, lead vocal; Jeremy Stephens, guitar, harmony banjo, harmony vocals; Corrina Rose Logston, fiddle, harmony vocals; Kurt Stephenson, banjo, harmony vocals; Daniel Amick, mandolin, harmony vocals; Vicki Vaughn, bass; Jason Barie, harmony fiddle

The duo of Reno & Smiley was among the most creative of bluegrass music's first generation. The combination of Red Smiley's smooth voice and Don Reno's wizardry on banjo and guitar made them a mighty force in the 1950s and early '60s. Nearly all of their recordings were for Cincinnati's King Records. They began their relationship with label head Syd Nathan in Cincinnati during March of 1951, when they recorded for him as members of Tommy Magness & the Tennessee Buddies. Ten months later,



Don Reno, Syd Nathan, Carlton Haney, and Red Smiley learning about Ohio buckeyes in Cincinnati. Courtesy of Gusto Records Inc.



Don Reno and Red Smiley above the Ohio River in Cincinnati, c. 1962. Courtesy of Gusto Records Inc.

at Nathan's urging, Reno & Smiley formed their legendary partnership and were signed to King, where they recorded extensively until 1963, 217 sides in all, including such bluegrass classics as "I'm Using My Bible for a Road Map," "I'm the Talk of the Town," "Country Boy Rock 'n' Roll," "I Know You're Married," "I Wouldn't Change You If I Could," and "Love, Please Come Home."

The band's stage performances were lively, fun, and featured a lot of comedy, as was common in this era. "Barefoot Nellie" was the first of 20 numbers recorded on November 8, 1954. The song marked a couple of firsts for the duo. The band used twin fiddles on the recording, making them among the first handful of bluegrass artists to do so. It was also Reno & Smiley's first novelty song.

"Barefoot Nellie," written by Don Reno, gets a lively treatment from Jim Lauderdale and the band High Fidelity. Lauderdale is one of Nashville's most colorful and quirky singer-songwriters, making him a natural fit for this fun tune. High Fidelity is one of today's top new traditional bluegrass bands; their passion for the music of Reno

& Smiley is evident on stage and on record. Re-creating the twin fiddles are High Fidelity's Corrina Rose Logston and Jason Barie of Joe Mullins & the Radio Ramblers. For an added twist, this recording features a twin banjo finale as well, played by Kurt Stephenson and Jeremy Stephens, both masters of the Reno style.

14. GARDEN TOMB — The Isaacs and The Oak Ridge Boys

Sonya Isaacs Yearly, mandolin, lead and harmony vocals; Joe Isaacs, lead and harmony vocals; Becky Isaacs Bowman, guitar, harmony vocals; Lily Isaacs, harmony vocals; Ben Isaacs, bass; Duane Allen, vocals; Joe Bonsall, vocals; William Lee Golden, vocals; Richard Sterban, vocals; Jason Carter, fiddle; Josh Swift, resophonic guitar; Joe Mullins, banjo

The origins of the Isaacs family's music ministry could be described as either unlikely or preordained. Originally from Big Hill, Kentucky, Joe Isaacs was the youngest of 17 children. His older siblings, like many local folks, moved to southwestern Ohio to find factory work. Joe came to the area for music. He played and sang with various Dayton bar bands before joining up with Frank Wakefield. Frank had played mandolin with the Greenbriar Boys, based in New York City, and kept the group's name after John Herald and Bob Yellen left in 1966.

While playing in New York for stretches at a time, Joe met a talented young Jewish woman, a singer named Lily Fishman. Her parents were Holocaust survivors, and she had been born in Germany following World War II before her family emigrated. She grew up in the Bronx, had classical theater



Joe Isaacs and the Sacred Bluegrass, 1982. Courtesy of Fred Bartenstein Private Collection.

training, and even recorded in a folk duo for Columbia Records. In other words, she was the polar opposite of Joe Isaacs. She and Joe were married in 1970, after Joe moved back to Ohio to join Larry Sparks's band.

The couple was living in the Miami Valley when Joe's brother died the next year in a car accident. The funeral brought Joe and Lily to a small country church, where Lily came to accept Jesus and Joe re-dedicated his life to the Lord. Out of the ashes of this family tragedy, Joe and Lily devoted their musical passions to bluegrass gospel. They formed Joe Isaacs & the Calvary Mountain Boys, later Joe Isaacs & Sacred Bluegrass. Their music ministry had a strong regional impact. Releasing many

albums on area record labels, they even landed a television program in Hamilton, Ohio.

By 1988 their three children, Ben, Becky, and Sonya, were consistently performing with the group, so they changed its name to the Isaacs. All three of the second generation were triple threats: Ben, Becky, and Sonya could all sing, pick, and write. Their sweet sibling harmony wowed both bluegrass and southern gospel audiences. Another important strength of the group was Joe's original compositions, like "He Never Failed Me," "Ye Men of Galilee," and "I Pressed Through the Crowd." By the 1990s the Isaacs began recording for well-distributed gospel labels Morning Star and Horizon. In 1992 the family

moved from Ohio to Tennessee, to be closer to the heart of the national gospel audience.

Joe left the band in 1999, following his and Lily's divorce. The Isaacs continued reaching new heights. In 2001 they joined Bill Gaither's Homecoming Tour. This exposure cemented their status as leaders in southern gospel, and there were several Dove awards and multiple Grammy nominations to prove it. The family members also became go-to harmony vocalists for Nashville recording sessions, appearing on albums by Vince Gill, Dolly Parton, Merle Haggard, Reba McEntire, Josh Turner, and numerous others. The Isaacs were inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame in 2020.

The Isaacs' musical journey began in Morrow, Ohio, so for *Industrial Strength Bluegrass* it was only appropriate to have the award-winning family dust off an early favorite written by Joe, "Garden Tomb." To make it even more special, Joe was able to join his children on the sessions, along with the Oak Ridge Boys, Country Music Hall of Fame members returning to their gospel roots to make this recording truly historic.

15. BABY BLUE EYES — Vince Gill

Vince Gill, vocal; Mike Bub, bass; Jason Carter, fiddle; Jason Barie, mandolin; Kenny Smith, guitar; Joe Mullins, banjo; Jerry Douglas, resophonic guitar

Before Nashville became known as "Music City," Cincinnati had a legitimate claim to the title. Many early country stars recorded in the Queen City, initially because of the city's WLW radio and its "Cradle of the Stars." Many classic recordings heard the world over were captured in the second-floor studio of the

E.T. Herzog Recording Company on Race Street. In 1948, Hank Williams made his first recordings there, including "Lovesick Blues," returning in 1949 to record more classics like "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry."

Also in 1948, guitarist/singer Lester Flatt and banjo virtuoso Earl Scruggs left Bill Monroe & His Blue Grass Boys. Forming the Foggy Mountain Boys, Lester and Earl made 12 of their earliest recordings at Cincinnati's Herzog Studios in 1949 and 1950. These sides included some of Flatt & Scruggs's enduring hits: "Down the Road," "I'll Never Shed Another Tear," "My Little Girl in Tennessee," "So Happy I'll Be," and the band's signature instrumental, "Foggy Mountain Breakdown."

The first song Flatt & Scruggs recorded in Cincinnati was "Baby Blue Eyes," written by former Foggy Mountain Boy Jim Eanes. The song highlighted Lester Flatt's effortless vocal style, unquestionably rural but with a crooning honesty that set him apart from other "hillbilly" singers of the day. Lester's singing was part of the reason Flatt & Scruggs were eventually able to gain mass appeal outside of typical country and bluegrass markets. Earl Scruggs's groundbreaking banjo licks made—and some say defined—bluegrass history.

Vince Gill is, like Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, a member of the Country Music Hall of Fame. From humble beginnings in bluegrass music, Gill achieved country superstardom in the 1980s and beyond. He has always celebrated his bluegrass roots, and turns in a powerful vocal performance on this Flatt & Scruggs classic. He is joined on the recording by Buckeye native Jerry Douglas, who plays Dobro with Alison Krauss & Union Station and leads the award-winning Earls of Leicester. The Earls' faithful re-creation of the Flatt & Scruggs sound has successfully re-introduced it to a 21st-century audience.



Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs in the late 1940s. Courtesy of Richard Weize...and more bears.

16. WE'LL HEAD BACK TO HARLAN — Bobby Osborne

Bobby Osborne, lead vocal; Amanda Smith, harmony vocal; Randy Barnes, bass; Mike Terry, mandolin; Adam McIntosh, guitar; Joe Mullins, banjo; Jason Barie, fiddles; Jerry Douglas, resonophonic guitar

We began our journey through southwestern Ohio's bluegrass history by heading from the hills to the factories. We conclude with a trip from the factories back to the hills.

For many southern migrants, the sense of displacement they felt in the industrial North was never overcome. Whatever their economic gains, they often felt like exiles, longing to return to the fields and mountains of their homeland, especially as soon as they could retire from their factory jobs. Such is the theme of Aubrey Holt's "We'll Head Back to Harlan," recorded in Cincinnati by the Boys From Indiana for their 1988 album, *Guide This Silver Eagle* (Old Heritage Records). The song tells of a man who has paid his dues at a northern factory and is looking forward to retiring to his homeland of Kentucky.

The song is sung by Bluegrass Music Hall of Famer Bobby Osborne, whose family migrated not from Harlan, but from 34 miles away in Hyden in order to find good-paying factory jobs in Ohio. Southwestern Ohio's musical legacy was born because of everyday folks like Robert and Daisy Osborne (Bobby and Sonny's parents), who left a home they knew and people they loved to find a better way of life for themselves and their posterity. Like the character in the song, Bobby regularly returns to his hometown to teach at the Kentucky School of Bluegrass and Traditional Music in Hyden.



Robert and Daisy Osborne.
Courtesy of Bobby Osborne.

Acknowledgments

This recording is part of the Southwestern Ohio Bluegrass Music Heritage Project, an initiative underwritten by Appalachian Studies at Miami University Regionals. The project's other partners include the Smith Library of Regional History, Greene County Public Library, and the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County.

A team of scholars, artists, musicians, and archivists determined to tell the regional and national story of bluegrass music in southwestern Ohio during its formative years. The resulting project has featured: a live concert of regional music with Joe Mullins & the Radio Ramblers and Bobby Osborne; an online encyclopedia (swohiobluegrass.com); a multi-panel traveling pictorial display; a permanent archival collection at the Smith Library of Regional History; and a lecture series which grew into *Industrial Strength Bluegrass: Southwestern Ohio's Musical Legacy*, an anthology of essays by experts in bluegrass and related fields. Edited by Fred Bartenstein and Curtis W. Ellison and published by the University of Illinois Press in 2021, the book shares a title with this Smithsonian Folkways recording.

Joe Mullins has been an essential contributor at every step of the bluegrass heritage project, and is entirely responsible for conceptualizing this recording and bringing it to fruition. It showcases important bluegrass songs associated with southwestern Ohio performed by contemporary artists, and is intended to amplify both the scope and influence of the bluegrass heritage project. At Miami University, where Howard Epstein pioneered a bluegrass artist series beginning in 1979, Ellen Paxton and Matthew Smith, with Scott Berry and Perry Richardson, provided crucial support.

Generous donors made this recording possible with thoughtful grants and personal contributions. They include the Appalachian Community Development Association, Mr. Ernst J. Bever, the Middletown Community Foundation, the Ohio Arts Council, and the W. E. Smith Family Charitable Trust. We are deeply grateful for their notable commitment to the region's bluegrass music heritage.



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Suzanne: Mark Capps, engineer, Ben's Den Studio, Hendersonville, TN; additional recording by Jim Price, Hat Creek Recording Company, Jonesborough, TN

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Annotated by Joe Mullins, Fred Bartenstein, and Daniel Mullins
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back cover booklet and inside digipak: Sheet mill workers, American Rolling Mill Company, c. 1915; all courtesy of Middletown Historical Society
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Related book available from University of Illinois Press: *Industrial Strength Bluegrass: Southwestern Ohio's Musical Legacy*, ISBN978-0-252-08560-4, press.uiillinois.edu.

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During the middle decades of the 20th century, the factories of southwestern Ohio drew hundreds of thousands of migrants from Appalachia, including innumerable musicians. *Industrial Strength Bluegrass* celebrates the music that these migrants made and loved, and explores a pivotal moment in the history of bluegrass and country music at large. Produced by beloved performer and radio personality Joe Mullins, the collection features many modern legends like Lee Ann Womack, Mo Pitney, and Vince Gill, plus a stellar lineup of bluegrass stalwarts including Rhonda Vincent, Bobby Osborne, and Mullins himself, taking on tunes that have echoed across Ohio for decades. This group of some of the biggest names in bluegrass today pays tribute to the jubilant highs and lonesome lows of life amongst the factories and warehouses, reflecting the region's rich culture and resilient people.

Produced by Joe Mullins

1. Readin', Rightin', Route 23

Joe Mullins & the Radio Ramblers

2. 20/20 Vision

Dan Tyminski

3. Suzanne

Mo Pitney and Merle Monroe

4. From Life's Other Side

Lee Ann Womack

5. Larry Sparks Medley – Dark Hollow

/ A Face in the Crowd

/ These Old Blues

Josh Williams, Bradley Walker, and

Russell Moore

6. When He Blessed My Soul

Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver

7. The Rolling Mills of Middletown

Larry Cordle

8. Family Reunion

Rhonda Vincent and Caleb Daugherty

9. Mountain Strings

Sierra Hull

10. Stone Walls and Steel Bars

Ronnie Bowman, Don Rigsby, and

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