

RENO-STYLE WORKSHOP

Reno Roots Part 3—The Decision

Jason Skinner

In 1943 a monumental event took place that would not only change Don Reno's life but the evolution of the 5-string banjo, and bluegrass music forever. It was May 17, 1943 that Don Reno decided to turn down an offer from Bill Monroe to join the Bluegrass Boys, so that he could join the US Army instead. At the time, Don's decision probably didn't seem like such a big deal, but looking back it was one of the most important occurrences in bluegrass

history.

Why was this event so important? Because his decision affected everything that was to follow. When Don turned down the job as the first three-finger style banjo player for Bill Monroe, the job went to none other than Earl Scruggs in 1945. With the addition of this "new" style of banjo playing, the Bluegrass Boys exploded in popularity. This band would set the standard for every bluegrass band

that followed. And Earl Scruggs set the standard for bluegrass banjo playing on those historic Columbia recordings. This was also the band in which Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs first became acquainted and would later form the most popular bluegrass band in history. To say this was an historic time is an understatement.

So the question is, "What if Don took the job instead of joining the army?" Well it's hard to say because it would have affected so many things, especially musical associations. The most obviously affected would have been the associations between Flatt and Scruggs and Reno and Smiley. These legendary bands may not have existed if Don took the job with Monroe. In fact we may have even have ended up with Flatt and Reno instead of Flatt and Scruggs! And what would have happened to all those great sidemen like

Bluegrass Stomp

Key of D. G tuning: gDGBD. By Bill Monroe
Arr. by Jason Skinner, tab with Ian Perry

First Break

Second Break (D)

D Third Break: D

John Palmer, Mack Magaha, Josh Graves, and Paul Warren? It really is mind boggling when you think of all the people it could have affected.

Not only did Don's decision affect the futures of countless musicians but it also



Joel Price, Benny Martin, Bill Monroe, Don Reno, circa 1948

affected bluegrass banjo as we know it. If Don would have been in those historic Columbia recordings instead of Earl, we might be referring to Reno style as the standard for bluegrass banjo. But would it be the same Reno style that we know today? Probably not. Let me explain. The "new" way of banjo playing Scruggs introduced to the world through The Bluegrass Boys wasn't really entirely "new." In fact by the early 40's Don and Earl were actually playing very similar styles. And their styles were derived from other three finger pickers from rural North and South Carolina. Most notably is the South Carolina native, Snuffy Jenkins. Earl and Don were both greatly influenced by Snuffy. Don has even credited Snuffy as the man that showed him the forward roll. Anyway, while the Bluegrass Boys were making musical history Don was fighting for his life in Burma as a member of the US Army's famous "Merrill's Marauders." After being wounded in battle, Don returned home and began playing music again. To his surprise, when he started playing banjo again folks began telling him he played like Earl Scruggs. This did

not sit well with Reno. Don knew that to make it in the music business you had to have something different from everyone else. And the style that he was playing before he joined the Army had now been popularized by Earl and was now referred to as "Scruggs style." So in an effort to distinguish himself from Scruggs, Don got busy developing a style that would set him apart from all others. Thus was born "Reno Style."

So ironically it was Earl Scruggs's success that prompted Don Reno to create "Reno style." But if it had not been for Don's decision to join the Army instead of joining Monroe, Earl might not have had that success. So without Don we might not have Earl and without Earl we might not have Don—as we know them today, that is. Of course Don and Earl were both so good that they would have been successful no matter what, but it was Don's decision that set the path that they ended up on. I believe it was meant to be. It really is amazing when you think about all the things that Don's decision affected and it's fun to imagine what could have been. But I am glad things turned out the way that they did. I can't imagine bluegrass music without Reno and Smiley or Flatt and Scruggs. Thank God we had them both!

Don did eventually get his chance to join Bill Monroe in 1948. And the story about Don joining the Bluegrass Boys is legendary. When Don heard Earl had left the band, Don immediately left for Nashville only to find that Bill had already left for Taylorsville, NC. Undeterred, Don turned right around and headed for Taylorsville. When Don arrived, the Bluegrass Boys were already on stage playing. Don just walked in, un-cased his banjo and went right on stage without invitation. Talk about guts!! Don stayed with Monroe for about a year and a half. And although his time was relatively short as a Bluegrass Boy, I believe Monroe influenced Don quite a bit. I can hear a lot of Monroe in Don's playing. And in this month's tab you'll see what I mean.

So in honor of Don's time as a Bluegrass Boy I have picked the Monroe classic, *Bluegrass Stomp* for this month's tune. This is also the perfect tune to represent the birth of Reno style because it uses so many of Don's unique techniques. And it's one of Don's favorite types of tunes, a boogie tune. We will be playing in the key of D with no capo. Most of the first break is single string and is almost a note for note copy of Bill's mandolin work. In the second break we will be using double stops. You'll notice at the beginning of this break that the 1st string is fretted but it is not hit. This is to keep the 1st string from ringing. Remember to brush the strings with your thumb and mute the bridge slightly with your palm. In the third break we will be using Don's famous "double roll." This is the same technique that Don uses in many other tunes such as *Double Banjo Blues* and *When You and I Were Young Maggie*. It's just a really fast forward roll. So give this classic a try the next time you are jamming at a festival with hot mandolin picker! They'll love it! Until next time keep picking Reno!

If you have any questions or comments please e-mail me through my website at www.renopicker.com