



Jennings Chestnut

Interviewed by Michelle Ross

1. Early exposure to bluegrass... (03:40)

J. Chestnut: This was also, right about the time, that, bluegrass music as we know it was-was in its formative stages. In 1946, Bill Monroe, who was, uh, in later years, considered the father of bluegrass music, um, he was a musician and he tried all kinds of combinations: all the instruments in songs and tempos and rhythms and timings. And, he was also-he also played on the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee.

So in 1946, he ended up with a combination of musicians, that being Bill Monroe, one man Chubby Wise on violin, uh Cedric Rainwater on bass, upright bass fiddle, Lester Flatt on guitar and Earl Scruggs on banjo. And that is considered to be the classic bluegrass music band, because bluegrass, as an identifiable style of music didn't really exist. It was hill music, or hillbilly or...It was a faction of country music-

M. Ross: -Old-timey-country.

J. Chestnut: Yeah, uh, but Bill being from Kentucky, and somebody else is from Kentucky as I understand...<Ross laughs> Bill being from Kentucky, he was from Rosine, Kentucky...and even at that time, it was not called bluegrass music...in 1946. But the music was electric. It was-It was uh, stimulating. It was-was so different because-

M. Ross: -You liked it-

J. Chestnut: -it was a five string banjo, played in the three finger style. Nobody had heard music like that before. So the combination of musicians-the combina-

M. Ross: -So you were-at that age appreciated that difference.

J. Chestnut: Well-

M. Ross: -I mean you-you could-

J. Chestnut: -They had the Hank-I loved Hank Williams.

M. Ross: Mmmm.

J. Chestnut: One of the greatest song writers there ever was and profound. I mean, he'd write a song between day-between show days. You know? But I like that, but, the music that came off the fiddle and a mandolin with the banjo sitting right there doing that happy sound and bright sound or bright tones.

M. Ross: Um hum.

J. Chestnut: Um, but that was about the time, and I would have been about five-four or five years old when that first happened, even though we didn't call it bluegrass

M. Ross: Hm.

J. Chestnut: But by the early fifties-in 1948 Lester and Earl left Bill and formed the first spinoff band of their own from Bill Monroe's music and it featured a five string banjo and a guitar and a fiddle and all this other stuff so...Then it became to be called bluegrass music, for whatever reasons historically. So, that's about the time all of these elements were working way off out yonder, I was standing at the door of these beer joints hollering boiled peanuts and the juke box is back there and the bubbles, red and the green goin' all around in a circle and they would let me stand at the door and holler, "[Harper] boiled peanuts <M. Ross laughs>. And the music would be playin'-

M. Ross: -Oh.

J. Chestnut: -Hank Williams. I mean he was profound. How can I melt her...how can I free your doubtful mind and melt your cold cold heart.

M. Ross: Aww.

J. Chestnut: That's profound if you think about it.

M. Ross: It is. <She laughs>

J. Chestnut: So I like that, but I really love the stuff like-Lester Earl was probably doin' stuff and Bill Monroe was doin' stuff back then. Uh, "Sparkling Brown Eyes", there was a country version of it...the Wilburn Brothers. There was a bluegrass version of it, Lester and Earl...and I just oriented towards the bluegrass side of it.