Scruggs style

"I don't believe in standing still" — Earl Scruggs, 1974

By RICK WARNER
Staff Writer

Earl Scruggs, the only legendary banjo player in the universe who does an uptempo version of "Lady Madonna," still subscribes to the rubber-band theory of music.

He's 56 now and can pick "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" as well as he did when he wrote it back in 1948, the year he and singer Lester Flatt split from Bill Monroe and started the bluegrass revolution. Fact is, if Scruggs played nothing but "Foggy Mountain" and a couple other of his standards, no bluegrass fan in his right mind would complain.

But that's not the Scruggs style. He believes every musician, bluegrass or otherwise, should continually stretch his musical horizons like a rubber band, testing his artistic limits and challenging his audience to keep pace.

"The most important thing to me (in music) is versatility," he said in a telephone interview from his home in Madison, Tenn., a Nashville suburb, last week.

"I like to have the freedom to try new things, go in new directions. I think it's important to keep your music fresh and exciting. If I just played the songs people identify me with over and over again and didn't experiment a little, I'd die of boredom."

It's a philosophy Scruggs lives by. Since 1969, when he parted company with Flatt and the Foggy Mountain Boys, the Cleveland County native has been pushing himself into areas previously uncharted by bluegrass artists. Inspired by sons Randy, Gary and Steve, his partners in the Earl Scruggs Revue, he has dabbled in Dylan, borrowed from the Beatles and even added some blues and jazz to his repertoire.

"I try to keep an open mind," he said. "I'm not deep into new wave or anything, but I like to keep up to date. As long as it sounds good, I like it."

Age may have altered Scruggs' sound, but it hasn't slowed him down. The Revue's 14th album, "Country Comfort," is scheduled for release later this month. The title cut, a cover of the Elton John-Bernie Taupin song, is already out as a single.

The group is also in the middle of a heavy summer schedule of live performances. Last month, they played an outdoor festival in Milwaukee, a folk revival in New Hampshire and a college concert at Stanford University. Saturday, the Revue will appear at the eighth annual Bluegrass and Folk Festival at the Dixie Campground Park near Angier.

The event, which runs Friday through next Sunday, will also feature Bill Monroe, Doc Watson and Mike Cross. But Scruggs, usually the unobtrusive type, should be the center of attention. Saturday has been designated "Earl Scruggs Day," and a special tribute is planned to honor "his contribution to American music and the five-string banjo."

"We stay busy," said Scruggs, who's been playing banjo since age 4. "We've got a few more festivals, including one in Chicago, and then we've got a bunch of college concerts. I really enjoy working the colleges. I find the audiences are very alert and knowledgeable about our music. It seems younger people have really taken an interest in the history of country music."

Country music is as much a part of Earl Scruggs as the three-fingered picking style he pioneered in the '40s with Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Boys. He hasn't forsaken it; rather he's grown with it, refined it and extended its possibilities. Like Dolly Parton and Willie Nelson, two performers he admires, Scruggs reached a point where he no longer felt comfortable being tagged strictly as a "country" musician.

"I still love country music," he said. "As a matter of fact, I think it's better than it's ever been. There's more variety today. In the old days, you would never hear an electric guitar or drums on a country song. Now, as long as it sounds good, it doesn't matter what instruments you use.

"Country music is more popular than ever. I saw recently where country music is now second in sales, ahead of pop. It wasn't that long ago that you couldn't hear country music outside of the South."

The Revue itself is a musical grab bag, mixing traditional with modern, bluegrass with blues, electric with acoustic. The personnel has changed slightly over the years — Charlie Daniels was an early, part-time member — but not the eclectic style.

Scruggs credits the group's unusual flavor to the influence of his "boys" — Gary, 31, an accomplished singer, bass and harmonica player; Randy, 26, who plays slide guitar, acoustic guitar and fiddle; and Steve, 21, a contributor on rhythm guitar, keyboards and saxophone. They are joined in the current Revue by drummer Taylor Rhodes.

"They're quite versatile," Scruggs said. "Randy and Steve have a studio in Nashville, and they do quite a bit of session work. Really, they're the ones who keep me fresh. They keep up with (the musical scene) much more than I do. I've leaned on them the last seven or eight years for ideas."

It was Scruggs' idea to split from Flatt and thus end the most successful partnership in bluegrass history. As leaders of the Foggy Mountain Boys, they bucked

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the rising tide of rock 'n' roll and established bluegrass as a truly national sound, bringing it to such unlikely places as Harvard College, Pumpkin, Iowa, and Carnegie Hall.

They broke other barriers, too. "The Ballad of Jed Clampett," a tune they recorded as a television theme for "The Beverly Hillbillies," became the first bluegrass song ever to top the country charts.

But by 1969, Scruggs had had enough.

"I wanted to branch out into new types of music," he explained. "I'd been playing straight bluegrass all those years and I wanted to do something else. Lester wanted to stay with the old sound. So we decided to go our own ways."

Scruggs maintained the separation was "friendly and amicable," but his fans were skeptical. Last year, when Scruggs visited Flatt in a Nashville hospital shortly before he died, there were reports that the two had not spoken to each other in 10 years. Not so, says Scruggs.

"It was all a misunderstanding between Lester, me and the press," he said. "We even made an album together after we split. It was just that we both had separate careers. We didn't see each other very much, but that's not unusual in Nashville. The way groups travel, you can go four or five years without seeing some people."

Newspaper accounts at the time said the old partners discussed the possibility of a reunion concert, but Scruggs said it never got to the planning stage.

"We talked about it in the hospital," he said, "but I think we both knew it wasn't going to happen. Lester was a very sick man and we were more concerned about his health than anything else. Mostly we talked about the old times and all the places we'd been together."

Scruggs has had his own physical problems over the years, the result of a near-fatal automobile wreck in 1955 and the crash of his single-engine plane in 1975. His hips were so severely damaged in the car accident that they've been replaced with metal parts.

Professionally, though, he's as sound as ever. Fans who weren't born when he first played the Grand Ole Opry in 1945 have learned to appreciate the man who was once called the "Paganini of the banjo."

As Scruggs' fame has grown through the years, so has the popularity of the banjo.

"There's a tremendously large number of good banjo players today," he said. "And they're all over the world, not only in the United States but in places like Japan and Czechoslovakia.

"More and more people are playing every year. If you want to get a banjo from Gibson, it takes six months."

The banjo boom is part of a bluegrass explosion that Scruggs could never have envisioned in 1945. Back then, bluegrass was a poor child of a musical family known as country-western. Today it's a thriving musical form which draws hundreds of thousands of people to festivals throughout the country.

Though he's been recording and touring for 35 years, Scruggs says many of his new fans were introduced to his music through television and movies.

"It's amazing how many kids have seen 'The Beverly Hillbillies.' I'd say that and 'Bonnie and Clyde' (which used 'Foggy Mountain Breakdown' as its theme) have given me more exposure than anything else."

For Scruggs, coming back to North Carolina is touching base with his roots. He grew up in the tiny community of Flint Hill near Shelby, played on a Gastonia radio station at 15 and spent part of 1952 in Raleigh under contract to WPTF.

"We usually play North Carolina two or three times a year," he said, "and I try to visit as often as possible. I still have brothers and sisters who live near Shelby. I live in Tennessee, but I still have a very warm feeling for North Carolina."

And what's to come for Earl Scruggs?

"I plan to keep picking," he said. "I enjoy playing with my boys and I want to keep trying new things. I've got no complaints. Music's been very good to me."

Not to mention the other way around.