

## Old Time Bluegrass

He had the most highly-sophisticated reel-to-reel sound tape system, having purchased the components available to him on the mid-century market, one at a time, with dollars he would tuck away over time. He displayed the tape machine, the sound synthesizer, the speakers enhancing the sound, all in the wooden shelving he built and installed at chest level into the wall of his den. It was an awesome set up.

From that system came an incredible array of music genres. Classic symphonies, his favorite being Vivaldi even with the talented monk's checkered private life, swing, pop, rock, country, folk, soul, rhythm and blues, bluegrass, choirs, solo artists, gospel, movie themes, the list never ending. My favorite was waking up to the theme song from "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," with the dramatic swells and the deep-throated chorus of clipped grunts. That song was a great start to my day.

His tapes, he created, recording each album from his hi-fi turntable onto the tapes. Some of his tapes were long-running compilations of all the genres contained in his vast library. Other tapes were albums of his truly rave fave artists, like Bob Dylan, Ella Fitzgerald, Bach, Doris Day (for his wife), Joni Mitchell, the Stones, Flatt and Scruggs, Vivaldi, and on and on. I learned more about music from the white noise of those tapes than I did in any music appreciation class.

But when a Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs song came around on the tape, I would hear him merely hum at first, that hum becoming a quiet singalong sharing of the lyrics, until that third of the song, when he would sorta giggle before belting out the remainder. Mountain Dew comes to mind. He had determined he couldn't sing, but you wouldn't know that by listening to him.

I found myself at the Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame & Museum in Owensboro, Kentucky, between the riverfront overlooking the Ohio River and West Second Street, the main drag of downtown. In town for a weekend running race, I made the time to visit the Museum, taking the self-guided tour, listening to snippets of the sounds and the voices of Bluegrass over the decades while viewing the photos and the attire of Bluegrass's artists over the decades.

The tour starts and ends at the picking place, which is just off of the admissions area, the picking place as every instrument used in Bluegrass on the wall with the bass

fiddles standing guard on each end of the picking wall showing off the fiddles, the mandolins, banjos, bass, guitars, the dobro, the resonator guitars, the ukuleles, and the acoustic bass. I was encouraged to take any instrument from the wall and play for as long as I wanted. I passed, taking my tour instead.

Some time later, having completed my tour, I noticed I was at the picking wall, smiling while gazing at the mandolin. The week prior, at Wednesday-night trivia, our group of ever-changing team names missed on the question of how many strings are on a mandolin. We went with four. We were sorta, kinda, not really correct. The mandolin has four sets of two strings across the neck. I took the mandolin from the wall and sat down, wanting to ask the museum employee to take my photo. I hadn't noticed the older man with a walking cane staring at me.

I said hello, acknowledging his presence. Responding back to me kindly, he inquired as to whether I knew how to play and whether I was waiting for the start of the picking session about to start. I laughed, telling him I was once a brass player, emphasis on once, long ago, with the trumpet and the saxophone. He simply nodded, asking would I lend him the mandolin in my hands. Though I had to be on the road home, I did as he asked.

Handling the mandolin with a practiced grace, and without looking up, he asked me what I knew about Bluegrass. I told him whatever I knew I had learned growing up from the reel to reel tapes. I offered that my dad liked Bluegrass, especially Flatt and Scruggs. He looked up at me, smiling. He had the graceful smile of a gentleman with an older man's facial features, the wrinkles in his skin from too many decades lived turning into crinkles, the eyes now twinkling.

"For a spell, I played with Les and Earl, back in the day," he said.

Responding with a "wow," I returned the smile. Just how unexpected could be a moment meeting someone who played professionally, living that life for however long, and being good enough in his ability to be at that level. He fiddled with the strings, stopping quickly. "There is a sting missing," he offered. I looked down and noticed the same thing, the bottom string didn't have its friend.

"Never mind," he said. "I'll tune this thing and show you how it sounds." Despite my inner turmoil to get out of town, I merely nodded, watching as he tuned each of the

strings. Tuning finally done to his specifications, he looked at me, asking if there was a Flatt and Scruggs tune I'd like to hear. I offered the one I knew by heart in my head, having heard it so many times at home. "Foggy Bottom Breakdown?" It was more of a question than a request. He gave me a slight grin just before he turned that mandolin into a roaring sound engine.

He was old. He stood old. He stooped. He was just slightly unsteady in his stance from using worn out hips knees in support. His hands were old, his fingers slightly curled as is appropriate for a man of his age. But when he commenced to playing that mandolin, his practiced fingers became some 60 years younger, pushing the fast pace required of the song, each of the seven strings being used to their full potential, even on a throwaway instrument.

Playing the entire song, rote from his memory of having practiced, played, and performed that song for so long, the song danced off the mandolin, nary a mistake in moving rapidly up and down the neck, the frets changing just as fast. At one point in the playing, I could hear the urgent dash to anywhere in song's frenetic pace, which probably explains why it was the theme song for the movie "Boonie and Clyde." Just as fast he started, he finished with the same flare and speed. You would not have known the mandolin was taking the banjo's place.

Profusely thanking him, shaking his hand, apologizing for not being able to stay longer, I noticed that in just those two minutes of playing, a crowd from out of nowhere had emerged. Clapping to his performance, they asked him for another as I was taking my exit. He called out, "your dad would love our picking." I offered back to him that he would have enjoyed the moment. I smiled for a long part of my drive back home.

My dad was a computer programmer before there were such positions. He also loved music. He blended the two into his reel to reel ensemble. The older gentleman loved Bluegrass music and playing the stringed instruments. He blended the two into an ability to enjoy both, entertaining more listeners than he ever knew. Their talents were organically created within each of them, to the pleasure of all who came within earshot of their respective sounds.

I don't have many talents, but I have a few. My talent is not from my five-decade career. I can tell a story if others are interested in listening. Not many people are so

inclined. Story listening takes up time away from social media. Listening is an activity requiring practice, concentration, and focus. Story listening is a lost art.

Now at age 65, I am a slow racer. I find no talent in that. While others my age may still run, they no longer run fast. Those with whom I ran weekly and raced every so often are now unable to run or race. Their memories are not of slowing down from the speed demons they were in their younger selves. My memories are replete with the stages of slowing in my own running. Fast in my teens, faster in my 20's and 30's, slower but stronger in my 40's, leading into slower 50's and now slower still in my 60's.

I'm now that guy in the mid-pack of a race, working my way over, getting out of the way of the eventual race winner who got a late start, he running at sub-5:00 pace to catch the leaders, passing me at the 2-mile mark of the race. This race was a final tune up for him on his path to this year's Boston Marathon. That's his talent for all to see. He glides past all of us, shoes seeming to barely graze the street's surface, each stride gobbling up ground like farm equipment mowing down harvested crops. Smooth in stride, graceful in balance, head held firm, eyes set far ahead. Yeah, he has talent.

As for me, I grind my way through the race, holding firm in my pace for the first half before turning into a vicious north wind blowing at 20 miles an hour into my face, pushing down my pace. I grind through this mile, holding firm in my limited stride, gracefully maintaining, holding pace with the runner just ahead and nearest to me. I grind to the beginning of each mile into that wind, pushing to the middle of that mile, ending each mile closer to yet another runner. I grind each mile in kind, knowing the last mile awaits, the cruelest of all the miles raced, into that stiff north wind with no protection from homes, buildings, or trees. 10 runners pass me in the second half of the race. I pass the same number. We all slow down together. I am the exact middle of all the finishers.

I'm a grinder. I ground my way through my education to be merely in the intellectual neighborhood of my classmates. I ground my way into a successful career, making certain I was not the cause of any mistake. I have grinded my path through parenthood and marriage, wanting to not squander either. I am now, finally, a good listener, forcing myself to listen. Tomorrow, recovered from the race, I will run, thinking I am fast when I am not. I now know my talent.