



Bluegrass Generation: A Memoir. By Neil Rosenberg. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018. 273 pp. ISBN 9780252083396.

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Bluegrass Generation joins a long list of publications from folklorist Neil Rosenberg, of which his best known is perhaps his *Bluegrass: A History*, a book that was reissued in 2005, twenty years after it first appeared.¹ In the decades following its original publication, other scholars have written about various sociocultural and industry-related aspects of bluegrass but Rosenberg's historical monograph remains an invaluable resource for information on the genre's early development.²

The present memoir can function as a natural companion to *Bluegrass: A History*. Readers will still absorb a great deal of historical information about the genre (particularly pertaining to the 1960s), but with the added benefit of Rosenberg's eyewitness accounts.

In terms of scope, *Bluegrass Generation* covers the author's youth and undergraduate years in various locales, his time as a budding bluegrass musician, his research activities, and later his experiences at Bill Monroe's Bean Blossom Jamboree. The latter was a country music park in Bean Blossom, Indiana, in which a weekly series of performances took place. After two years of performing regularly at the Jamboree, Rosenberg was engaged as a manager of the event during the summer of 1963.

1. Neil Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History* (1985; rev. ed., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

2. See, for example, Mark Finch, "Bill Monroe, Bluegrass Music, and the Politics of Authorship," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter*, ed. Katherine Williams and Justin A. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 43-54; Robert Cantwell, "Believing in Bluegrass," in *The Bluegrass Reader*, ed. Thomas Goldsmith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 202-211; and Mark Fenster, "Alison Krauss and the Contemporary-Traditional Conflict in Modern Bluegrass," in *All That Glitters: Country Music in America*, ed. George H. Lewis (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), 317-328.



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Many music scholars are accustomed to sifting through musician biographies written for the general populace. Thus to some, it may be an unusual experience to read an autobiographical memoir composed with an historian's eye for detail and fieldworker's penchant for collecting and record-keeping. While many writers of memoirs may draw from old letters, Rosenberg uses them extensively to build a chronological history of where he was at key points in time, sometimes week by week. Life's little moments are presented in painstaking detail, and even when Rosenberg discusses his teenage years, the tone is one of careful documentation rather than rebellion or teenage angst.

We learn about the friends he jammed with, the spaces in which he performed, the music stores he frequented, and the albums he acquired. We also get to know in which year each album entered his life, and how it shaped his bluegrass activities. An instrument buff, Rosenberg also pays special homage to his gear. We learn, for example, about the broken Gibson mandolin which he turned over to John Duffey (of The Country Gentlemen) to repair, and, later, about the flathead Gibson banjo which lacked the prewar style neck he pined for.³

As the memoir progresses from Rosenberg's early research studies and creative collaborations to his time at the Bean Blossom Jamboree, we come to understand his triple identity as a performer, academic, and arts administrator—and at various points we see some of these identities coalesce.

For example, he provides a recollection of early performances at Bean Blossom where he shared the stage with musicians Shorty and Juanita Shehan. At the time, much was made of his identity as a student: "Shorty often mentioned that I was a graduate student at IU...Although most of the other people who worked at the Jamboree also had occupations other than music, they were never identified on stage as plumbers, salespersons, factory workers, shop owners, or truck drivers." (p. 28) Being the only Indiana University student, and especially a student in folklore (a term Rosenberg says was unfamiliar to the Bean Blossom audience), made him a curiosity. He was able to get around this through his knowledge of sports: "I'd been raised in a sporting family...Being able to chat about sports with people at Bean Blossom was much easier than talking about my interests in music as a folklorist. That helped me fit in." (p. 28)

As his network expanded, Rosenberg used his contacts from Bean Blossom to complement his academic endeavours. For example, he tells of how his association with mandolinist Jesse Fender led him to meet many local fiddle makers and thus helped him to develop a research question on local fiddle-making traditions. Rosenberg's navigation of his contrasting identities

3. The Country Gentlemen was a US bluegrass band that was active from the late 1950s through the early 2000s.

may thus resonate with scholars interested in the tension between “insider” and “outsider” status that often presents itself in ethnography.⁴

However, researchers from other areas of music scholarship will also find useful material in this memoir. Rosenberg’s tenure at the Brown County Jamboree coincided with the 1960s North American folk revival. The author recounts his interactions with Ralph Rinzler, and the growing acceptance of bluegrass into the campus folk music scene and broader folk festival circuit.⁵ This gradual shift was not without tension, as scholars of the folk revival can appreciate (see, for example, pp. 134-35).

The audience for this book, then, need not be limited to bluegrass scholars and enthusiasts. Students of ethnomusicology may find it invaluable as an informal guidebook for ethnography. Readers who are dual musician-scholars or arts administrator-scholars will appreciate the synergy between Rosenberg’s research, creative and industry activities. And of course, Rosenberg’s personal recollections are a source of ethnographic material in their own right and may benefit researchers of other areas who have an interest in North American music or the 1960s in general.

4. See, for example, James Kippen, “Working With the Masters,” in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, 2nd ed., ed. Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 125-40.

5. Ralph Rinzler was a musician, folklorist, promoter, and co-founder of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. He was best known for his contributions to the North American folk revival.