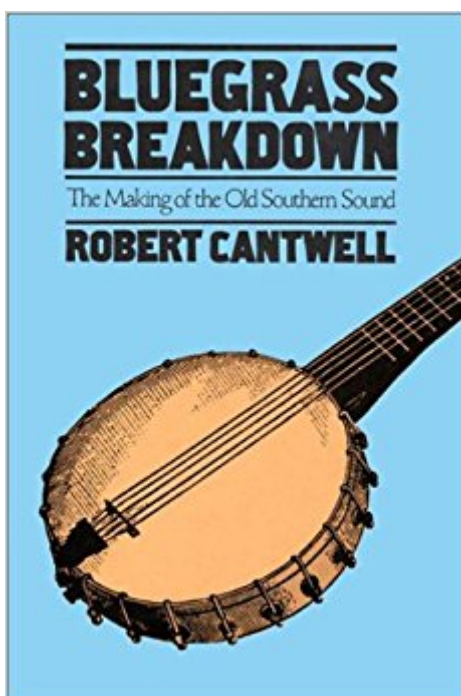


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Bluegrass Breakdown: THE MAKING OF THE OLD SOUTHERN SOUND (Music In American Life)



Synopsis

Winner of the ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award *Bluegrass Breakdown* is an expansive foray into the makings of bluegrass. More than any other book of its kind, it gets to the roots of a uniquely American music that is deeply linked to working-class ideals and romanticism. Robert Cantwell engages the historical background, commercial origins, internal workings, and cultural and social significance of popular, old-time music to provide a unique musicological and sociological perspective. Well versed in the history of the tradition and equally as interested in those who listen to the music as in those who create it, Cantwell links bluegrass to its hillbilly roots in Appalachia and shows how the music was transformed by African American folk traditions, the influence of jazz, ragtime, blues, and country music, and the growth of radio and recording technology.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Bluegrass Breakdown is a seminal work in its field.... Robert Cantwell has had the foresight, the initiative, and the intellectual creativity to create a model for explaining a major force in southern and, indeed, American culture." "A thoroughly researched and often brilliant attempt to place bluegrass music into a historical, as well as musicological, cultural, and imaginative context. Bluegrass Breakdown is, without a doubt, the most thought-provoking work on bluegrass--and its father, Bill Monroe--I have ever read."

Robert Cantwell has taught at Kenyon College, the University of Iowa, Georgetown University, and the University of North Carolina. *Bluegrass Breakdown* is his first book, and it won the ASCAP–Deems Taylor Award and the Ambassador of Honor Book Award.

Kind of a dry thesis, full of opinion...though lacking any photos.

If you study American traditional musics of any kind, if you play bluegrass, if you want to know what country music is, or if you are concerned with what African American or Southern music is, this is the book you have to own. I am still in the middle of reading this book, but every chapter on its own makes me wish I had read, reread, and studied this book the day it came out, not a decade or two later. This is an essential book for serious knowledge of music in America, not just Bluegrass. Frankly, I have been negatively impressed by many of the books on Bluegrass which seem to focus on stories of artists, rather than analysis of the music. Cantwell provides one of the best studies of any form of folk or popular music written so far either on a popular or scholarly basis. What he explains here about the nature of African based and African American music and its difference from European and European American music here alone is worth the price. Like much serious work, the book has passages that are hard to understand if you are not familiar with music. Yet, if you read his analysis of how bluegrass has evolved as an African-based music, you can understand the dynamics of producing a hot, working bluegrass band and arranging the music. You can understand why Monroe and Scruggs created magic that millions of people have followed since they got together in the mid 1940s. There is one exception I would take with Cantwell. He based his knowledge of banjo history on what was known when he wrote the book. He had the assistance of my friend and colleague Bob Winans who then believed most of the transmission of banjo playing to Southern and mountain white folk came through the white minstrel shows. Subsequent research, especially the work of Cece Conway, has shown that transmission to Southern white players came from Black banjo players themselves, much more than the minstrels, something that everyone today including Bob Winans agrees with. This accentuates the general thesis that Cantwell puts forward, how ingredients of African American music styles are essential to contributing to Bluegrass. Certainly in the banjo music, Scruggs who largely learned from and grew up listening to banjoists who played the classic banjo style, added in the thumbing of the original African American drop thumb clawhammer to classic picking and created the roles that Cantwell shows are essential to Bluegrass syncopation. Given that the Carolina Piedmont where Earl grew up was one of the last strongholds of Black folk banjo playing, this kind of transmission is clear. That

is not to say as some well intentioned but miss informed folks might say that Scruggs stole a Black style. What is more important as Cantwell explains, is the overall atmosphere that Bluegrass arose in where Black influenced music in the forms of Ragtime, Jazz, and Blues was in the air of music makers across the country, particularly in the areas in the South where Bluegrass was born. In this regard, Cantwell well-researched and clear examples of the mixtures of music that define not only Bluegrass but the entire process of American music's confrontations between European and African music. As a writer and a teacher of writing, I am really impressed with Cantwell's prose. The opening chapter which is a portrait of MR. MONROE and band mates like Kenny Baker at a DC concert 30 years ago is one of the best portraits of Big Mon I have read. Again those used to personal biographies and fan fair stuff as music history rather than serious studies may find this more serious reading than they are used to. But to understand important and complicated things, you need real answers. This Cantwell provides in abundance.

I get the impression from several of the reviews I've read here that the posters frown on the academic study of bluegrass. This book certainly isn't for everyone. No book HAS to please an audience, nor does every book HAVE to be interesting from cover to cover. Cantwell does have a tendency to ramble at some points, but the information contained in this book is still worth the read. Bluegrass Breakdown is a book for those interested in bluegrass from an ethnomusicological standpoint. Cantwell advances interesting theories regarding the African contribution to bluegrass to how bluegrass is identifiable through its use of the characteristic "high lonesome wail". Cantwell's goal here is clearly to explore cultural attributes and effects of bluegrass, and this is something I believe he does well. If you're looking for a book that's an easy to read, tail-wagging history of bluegrass, go for Cantwell's colleague Neil Rosenberg. Cantwell isn't your man. Cantwell's writing is purely academic, again a style of writing that isn't for everyone. I don't believe Cantwell goes out of his way to discuss his bluegrass performance merits or intellect here. I found Cantwell's inquiries mostly unbiased and thorough, including those dealing with Bill Monroe. I don't believe Cantwell went out of his way to point out Monroe's 'hypocrisies' on any level, rather he constructed his writing to portray Monroe as a paradox, a 'mystery' man who's very hard to explain in the space of a few pages. For all his interesting theories, Cantwell loses a star for stereotyping. His description of "Appalachian folk" at the Grand Ole Opry as "plain", "overweight" and "lacking in proper dental hygiene" (the book was published in '86) is annoying. This may be a part of Cantwell's research experience, however it's a cheap shot at a blanket statement about an entire culture of people. I thought good researchers were trained to avoid this kind of writing. Other than that, this book is

something definitely worth the read ... particularly if you're up for the challenge.

If you hate the dense, sometimes rambling, style of critical theorists, pass up on this. But, if you do enjoy bluegrass, as well as crit lit, this book is an enjoyable analysis of the style. Cantwell can write long, winding paragraphs, but he knows his subject. His analysis parses the style deep into its African roots, while at the same time giving the reader some thorough critical background into old-timey Southern rural music and African-American styles. The negatives from other reviewers are right on, but I happen to like Cantwell's style and have found this book to be an invaluable reference to bluegrass, and a source of inspiration on how to view, not to mention listen to what has been described as "folk music on overdrive."

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