
KENTUCKY TRAVELER

My Life in Music

RICKY SKAGGS

With
EDDIE DEAN

itbooks

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FIRST EDITION

Designed by Sunil Manchikanti

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Skaggs, Ricky.

Kentucky traveler : my life in music / Ricky Skaggs with Eddie Dean. —
First edition.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-06-191733-2 (hardcover)—ISBN 978-0-06-191734-9 (pbk.) 1.
Skaggs, Ricky. 2. Bluegrass musicians—United States—Biography. I. Dean,
Eddie, 1964- II. Title.

ML420.S5866A3 2013

782.421642092—dc23

[B]

2013013572

ISBN 978-0-06-191733-2

13 14 15 16 ov/RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*This book is dedicated
to my mother, Dorothy Skaggs,
my father, Hobert Skaggs,
and my musical father, Bill Monroe.*

They taught me how to pick and sing and honor God.

Prologue

Martha, Kentucky: Summer 1960

*Then Samuel took the horn of oil and
anointed him in the midst of his brethren.*

—First Book of Samuel, Chapter 16, Verse 13

Somehow we heard that Bill Monroe was coming through eastern Kentucky. In those days, musicians advertised shows with handbills stuck to electric poles, posters in grocery-store windows, and promos on local radio stations, but word still traveled fastest by mouth. And word got around Lawrence County that the great Bill Monroe and His Blue Grass Boys were going to play a show at the high school in Martha, just up the road.

Martha was a little town a few miles toward the county line between Blaine and Sandy Hook, Kentucky, not far from where we lived in a hollow called Brushy Creek, near Cordell. It was named after my eighth-great-grandmother, Martha Cothron Skaggs, a Cherokee from Wilkes County, North Carolina. She married my eighth-great-grandfather, old Peter Skaggs, in 1788, in Fincastle, Virginia. They moved to Floyd County, Kentucky, in 1802 and then to the head of Blaine Creek in Lawrence County in 1812. Peter Skaggs was a Baptist preacher. There's an old cave near there that my dad used to play in when he was a kid, and it was called Peter Cave. The way the story's come down is that Peter and Martha were considered the elders in that area; they had a lot of kids and did a lot for the community. A cave is one thing, but it took some doing to have a town named after you, especially with Martha being of Indian blood and married to a white settler from Virginia, so she must have been quite a woman to receive such an honor.

Cordell was even smaller than Martha, but it didn't matter how

small your hometown was or how far out in the sticks you lived, because back then, everybody in our corner of the world knew who Bill Monroe was. He was a big star on the Grand Ole Opry, broadcast on WSM radio every Saturday night from Nashville. Mom and Dad loved his music, and I did, too. I'd never seen a picture of him, so I didn't know what he looked like. All I knew was that he sung real high and he played mandolin, just like me. I was so excited to hear how he'd sound singing "Blue Moon of Kentucky" in person. I was six years old and this was my first live country-music show. Heck, I'd never been anywhere more exciting than the county fair in Louisa.

The weeks dragged on until the big night finally came. We all packed into Dad's Ford Fairlane 500—Mom, Dad, my brother, my sister, and me—and made the drive on Route 32 into Martha, passing the little general store run by Gar Ferguson and pulling up to the ol' stone high school. We joined the crowd milling around outside and waiting for the band. It started getting close to sunset, and I was wondering if Mr. Monroe had decided not to show up after all.

Then up went a shout, "There he comes!" and an old Cadillac eased into the gravel parking lot. It was a big black stretch limousine, not like any car you'd see in Lawrence County. There was a wooden box on top with stenciled letters: "BILL MONROE AND HIS BLUE GRASS BOYS." The Cadillac was fancy all right, but it was dusty from so many hard miles spent on the back roads that had brought the band here to our town. This was before there were many interstate highways, before a lot of things we take for granted now.

The Blue Grass Boys climbed out of the dirty limo first, and I could hardly believe my eyes. They looked as if they'd just stepped right out of the dry cleaners. No wrinkles on their suits, not a speck of road dust. How they managed it, I'll never know. There weren't any motels or rest stops for miles around. I was amazed at how great they looked after so much hard traveling. I thought that was so cool!

Next, a back door of the Caddy swung open and I could see the tip of a blond beehive hairdo poke out. Come to find out, the bass man for the Blue Grass Boys was really a girl! Not a girl, actually, but

a woman older than my mom. She swung her legs out and found a spot on the gravel to plant her high heels, and she slowly stepped out of the limo, careful not to mess up her stage dress. Then she walked 'round back and got her bass fiddle out of the trunk.

Finally, a man got out of the other side and stood straight as an arrow, looking over the crowd. I knew right off it was Mr. Monroe. You could tell he was the bandleader and boss man. He was dressed real sharp in his suit and hat, and he was carrying his mandolin case. The crowd rushed at him, and he didn't move an inch, just let 'em come and gather round. He was head and hands above everybody else, as big as an oak tree. Imagine it! The Father of Bluegrass right here in little Martha!

I didn't know that Mr. Monroe was in lean times then, just trying to survive by barnstorming the country for fifty cents a head at schoolhouses and fire halls and theaters—wherever he could draw a crowd when he wasn't on duty at the Opry. I didn't know rock and roll had nearly put him out of business. I didn't know that the woman in the fancy dress was Bessie Lee Mauldin, and that she was not only Mr. Monroe's bass player, she was his girlfriend, too.

There was a whole lot I didn't know back then. I was just a pup, and I was awestruck. There were three other Blue Grass Boys: a banjo man, a guitar player, and a fiddler riding in the front seats. They were dressed to the nines, same as Mr. Monroe. The sound system was in the box on the limo roof—two speakers and a couple of microphones, along with the instruments. They loaded all the gear into the building, and in no time they were set up and ready to go.

Out in the parking lot, I watched Mr. Monroe tip his hat and say his howdies to fans as he tried to make his way through the crowd. Finally, he got to the school door and ducked inside. Everybody piled in after him. We quickly found seats on the folding metal chairs set up on the gym floor. The place was packed with a few hundred people.

What a show! The band was louder and better than any record or radio broadcast. You could feel the force of the music in your chest. Dad and Mom were loving it, and so was I. The crowd was going

crazy. After about thirty minutes, some neighbors from our neck of the woods started shouting out, “Let little Ricky Skaggs get up and sing!”

Now, these people, they’d seen me pick and sing around Cordell—at our church, at Butler’s grocery store, and on the front steps of the bank. I’d got a little pawnshop mandolin as a present from my dad, and I’d been playing for about a year. Wherever I could, I’d go out and play, mostly with Dad and his guitar. We had us our own little duet, and sometimes, especially on Sundays at church, Mom sang with us, too.

The crowd was hollering for me to do my thing on stage, in the middle of the Bill Monroe show. They wanted to brag on Hobert and Dorothy’s boy, and they got carried away. Mr. Monroe didn’t pay ’em any mind, ignoring all the commotion. But that was like throwing gasoline on a fire, ’cause mountain people can be stubborn. They weren’t gonna give up, and they kept at it hollering, “Let little Ricky sing one!”

Finally Mr. Monroe got tired of hearing it. He stepped up to the microphone and said, “Where is this little Ricky Skaggs? Where’s he at? Get him on up here!”

Well, now it was plain to see that he meant business, and I surely wasn’t gonna chicken out and let everybody down. But I was a little nervous, so Dad got up to walk me down the aisle to the stage. Just before I got out of earshot, Mama said, “Now, Ricky, don’t you sing that pinball song!”

“Pinball Machine” was a novelty hit by Lonnie Irving in the summer of 1960, a song about a truck driver who loses all his money playing pinball. My mom knew how much I loved it, and she also knew that Mr. Bill Monroe wouldn’t want that tune played anywhere near his stage. She was always looking after me.

Well, when I reached the edge of the stage, I just froze. When Mr. Monroe looked down to see a little towheaded boy, he wasn’t amused. I think he was expecting a teenager. And here I was, looking up at this mountain of a man. On stage, he was even bigger than he looked in the parking lot.

The stage was only a few feet above the gym floor, so Mr. Monroe just stooped over and grabbed me by the arm and pulled me up like a sack of feed. He stood me right next to him. He towered beside me, but I tried to stand up straight like he was.

“What do you play, boy?” he barked into the mic.

“I play the mandolin!”

Well, he just laughed and said, “You do?”

Slowly, he took his great big F-5 Lloyd Loar Gibson mandolin off his shoulder, carefully wrapping the old leather bootstrap around the curl of the instrument’s body until it fit me just right, and then he hung it on my shoulders. It was the first time I’d ever seen a mandolin that big, much less held one. My pawnshop mandolin was a pint-sized model. This mandolin of Mr. Monroe’s seemed as big as a guitar. I had to think about where to put my fingers on it.

“What do you want to sing, boy?” he said.

“‘Ruby!’”

I was so excited I sort of yelled it out. The song just popped into my head. The Osborne Brothers’ “Ruby, Are You Mad at Your Man?” was a huge bluegrass hit at the time. The band knew it well. Bessie Lee and the rest of the Blue Grass Boys were smiling, kinda amused at my choice. The lyrics were pretty salty for a six-year-old to be singing on stage. I know Mom must have been mortified! To me, though, it was just a catchy tune I heard on the radio, so I’d learned it and played it around the house.

Somehow, I found E and started chunking rhythm on that big ol’ mandolin. The band joined in, and we were in the right key. I didn’t know much about musical notes and keys back then—I just copied the way Bobby Osborne had done it on the record. I sung my verses, the banjo player took a solo, and I sung the rest of the verses. We rode it till the end.

The crowd was cheering us on as Mr. Monroe stood off to the side, his big arms folded against his barrel chest. I thought I saw him grinning, but I couldn’t be sure.

When the song was over, everybody in the place let us know we’d pulled it off. Thinking back on it now, our rendition of “Ruby” was

probably just average, but I was the hometown kid, so the crowd was with me all the way. Maybe a little too much. Mr. Monroe came right over, took the mandolin off me, and slung it back on his shoulder. He grabbed me by the arm just like before and set me back down off the stage.

He didn't say a word. He just kicked into his most famous tune, "Mule Skinner Blues." That was his first big hit, the song he'd been featuring on the Opry since 1939, and the Blue Grass Boys really tore it up. I think it was Mr. Monroe's way of reminding the crowd who they'd paid to see that evening.

There wasn't much more to it. I went back to my folks and sat down, and we watched the rest of the show. Afterward, people came up and said, "Son, you done a good job." It felt good to hear that, but I knew they were just being neighborly and nice. We didn't go backstage and meet Mr. Monroe that night. I kinda wished we had, 'cause it turned out I didn't see him again for another ten years.

It was fun to share the stage with the Father of Bluegrass, and I enjoyed the applause. As much as I had played and sung in church, people there didn't roar and shout and clap for you. At our Free Will Baptist church that would have been irreverent. So the crowd response that night in Martha felt good ringing in my ears, but what I enjoyed most was playing with a real band. It was the first time I'd ever played with a bunch of musicians instead of just my dad. I liked the big, loud sound of the full band with a bass player, banjo player, fiddler, and a guitar player, too—all the instruments blending together into something powerful. I loved feeling part of that.

That night in Martha was the biggest thing that had ever happened to me up till then, and I sure was glad it did. Mostly, though, I was just glad I didn't mess up. It was late by the time we piled into Dad's Ford and headed back to Brushy Creek. All the excitement had just worn me plumb out. I slept the whole way home.

KENTUCKY TRAVELER

Chapter 1

ROOTS OF MY RAISING

*Lay down, boys, and take a little nap,
fourteen miles to Cumberland Gap.
Cumberland Gap, Cumberland Gap,
way down yonder in Cumberland Gap*

—“Cumberland Gap,” Appalachian folk song

I was young when I left my home back in the mountains, but the mountains never left me. It don't matter how many years I've been gone or how many miles I've traveled. Where I come from is who I am, head to toe. It's there in the way I sing and the way I talk and the way I pray. Country as a stick!

I grew up in the hills of eastern Kentucky in a hollow called Brushy Creek. My mom and my dad were spiritual people, and we went to a little Free Will Baptist church where I grew up hearing gospel music and old-time preaching. Real fire-and-brimstone stuff, where they preached so loud you grew up thinking the Lord must surely be hard of hearing.

We were a community of mountain folks who didn't have much. But we worked hard and cared for family and neighbors. We all cried together and we all laughed together and we all sang together. We all hurt together when there was a tragedy. We all pulled together, 'cause about all we really had *was* each other.

Mom and Dad raised me to be proud of my mountain roots and who I am. Everything I do in my life today reflects on how I was brought up by Hobert and Dorothy Skaggs. They instilled beliefs and values that took root early on, and stayed strong enough to help me through rough times. I've had a few.

My folks knew that a little mountain pride went a long way. They warned me not to get too full of myself. They taught me to be thankful for what I had and where I came from. "Son," they told me, "always be humble and stay down to earth."

Now, when I was a young musician seeing the world for the first time, I was as headstrong as they come. There was a time in my life when you couldn't have paid me enough to stay in the hills where I was born and raised. I'm older now, and I hope a lot wiser. I can tell you now that I wouldn't take all the money in the world to be from anyplace else.

When I was coming up in the business, the only way to get a record deal was to go to Nashville. It was a dream I'd had since I was a little boy and first heard the country stars on the Grand Ole Opry. I used to go to sleep on my Papaw Skaggs's lap listening to the Opry on an old tube radio in his Ford pickup. To get a clear signal, we'd pull the truck away from the house where all the electric lines were hooked up and park down by the barn. He'd turn on the radio and work the knob to pick up the Opry broadcast on WSM. The radio frequency out of Nashville would come and go up in those mountains, so you had to sit there real quiet and wait for the music to break through the static. And then we'd hear Roy Acuff and Bill Monroe and it was the greatest sound in the world.

There came a time when I had to leave home and go to Nashville and try to make my boyhood dream come true. I wanted to carry Kentucky music out of Kentucky, take it out into the world, and deposit it wherever I could. These hills poured music into me from the time I was a child, and I've tried to honor that tradition. I'm a carrier of this music. It's in my DNA.

Well, I went to Nashville and had a good run in country music, and I was lucky enough to live out my dreams. By the mid-'90s,

though, I was over forty years old and the hits were starting to dry up. In 1996, my father, Hobert, and my musical father, Bill Monroe, both passed away. I prayed about what I should do next. It just seemed right in my heart to go back to the old foundation stones of bluegrass, which is what my country career had been built on. I felt a calling to revisit my musical roots again.

So I went back to the bluegrass I was raised on, the sound that had inspired me to become a musician in the first place. I decided I wanted to play the music I learned as a kid in the mountains, whether I made a good living or not. You know you're doing the right thing when there's peace in your heart, and I couldn't find that in country music anymore.

My old boss Ralph Stanley made a prediction to an interviewer years ago, when I was having all those number-one records and touring with a tractor-trailer and two buses. "Ricky's making a name for himself, but you just wait a while," he said. "I think he'll come back to bluegrass music."

Ralph knew something about me that I didn't know myself. It makes me think of the Scripture from Proverbs where it says, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and even when he is old, he will not depart from it." If you pour the foundation into a person and point them to the right path, they may stray from that in their younger years, but they'll return to it when they mature. That happened to me with bluegrass.

For me, going back to bluegrass and mountain music was like giving water to a thirsty man. That traditional Appalachian music is part of the wide rolling river of American roots music. No matter how many years pass, or how the place itself changes, that music is a constant flow of fresh water from a deep mountain spring. There are different creeks and tributaries; some flow into the old-time current, and some flow into more commercial waters. But there's something about that pure mountain stream that still connects us to the old. It's our musical heritage, and it keeps me nourished. I needed to take a drink of that fresh water straight from the source.

* * *

For thirty years now I've lived not far outside Nashville, a long way from Brushy Creek. Somehow, I was able to find a house on a hill north of town, where the land is mostly flat. I found my own little mountain right here in the middle of Tennessee. They call it Cherry Hill, after the man who first built up here. It's nowhere near as high as the mountains you'd find in eastern Kentucky, but it's got fifteen acres of elbow room and an awesome view for miles around. We've got nice neighbors, too, and it feels like home.

There's always a breeze blowing up here, so the wind chimes on the front porch go all the time. It's real peaceful.

A few years ago, I was driving around not far from my house, and I ended up in a beautiful wooded area called Mansker's Fort. It's the site of the first permanent pioneer settlement in this area. It's got a reconstructed fort and some old log buildings from those days, back when Nashville was called French Lick.

I was out looking around, and I came upon a sign, one of those historical markers you pass by and never think about stopping to check out. Well, this time I did, and would you believe that the sign tells all about my family and what they did here more than two centuries ago? Come to find out, some of my ancestors were out this way a long time before I was. It reads:

Henry Skaggs, his brothers, Charles and Richard, and Joseph Drake and a group of other long hunters were the first Anglo-Saxons to explore this area. They made their campsite at Mansker's Lick, opening the doorway for the future settlement of Goodlettsville and Middle Tennessee.

Henry, Charles, and Richard Skaggs were the older brothers of my eighth-great-grandfather Peter Skaggs. Reading those words, I felt proud, and humbled, too. My forefathers were already here hundreds of years before I ever made it out this way to Music City.

My ancestors came out of old Virginia and migrated into the

area that later became Kentucky. They were nosing around in these mountains in the 1760s, even before Daniel Boone. They were explorers, and they were instrumental in blazing the trail through the Cumberland Gap and into the eastern part of Kentucky. They had a route they traveled on called Skaggs Trace, and it was used as much, if not more, than the Wilderness Trail.

Neither is around today, but they were two of the main routes that started as hunting trails and backwoods horse paths and were traveled by pioneers settling the early American frontier. The Wilderness Trail was better known, and it went from Cumberland Gap up north through Somerset to Boonesborough. But Skaggs Trace also became an important route for pioneer families making their way with wagons and supplies into Kentucky, and it went up through Harrodsburg and turned west toward the falls at Louisville by the Ohio River.

My ancestors belonged to a group of sharpshooting explorers called long hunters, and they went on expeditions in bands of twenty or thirty men, sometimes for as long as two years, hunting, mapmaking, and charting the waterways and the tributaries. Back then, Kentucky was Indian country, and the long hunters went to places no white men had been before. They traveled light, with just their long rifles and the buckskin they were wearing. They kept on the move and hunted whatever they needed to eat.

From what I've researched on the long hunters, I know they suffered a lot of hardship. They had to leave their families behind in Virginia, and they never knew when they'd be home. Henry Skaggs was gone so long that his wife thought he'd been killed, and so she took another husband. Then Henry came back and ran the fellow off. He and his wife went on to raise a family together. Now, ain't that something? Come on, Henry!

Henry Skaggs was probably the most famous of the Skaggs brothers who came into this territory, and he left a long line of descendants where my family comes from. Eight generations back, there were some who fought at the Battle of Kings Mountain, one of the

decisive battles of the American Revolution. John Skaggs, who was Henry's brother, was wounded there. The Skaggses have an amazing family lineage in Kentucky and throughout the Appalachian region. When you have ancestors who gave their blood for America and for freedom, it's very humbling to think about the sacrifices they made. Nobody ever loved liberty more than those hardy mountaineers. They're always among the first to serve in every war we've had, and we owe them a debt of gratitude.

This frontier heritage of exploring and rambling is something I've always connected with, even when I was a boy. I was always drawn to the long rifle and coonskin caps and stories about Daniel Boone. My favorite gun, an old flintlock rifle I've got back at the house, belonged to a man named Lance Skaggs. It had been in his family for years.

Lance ran a store up around Keaton, Kentucky, which is over in Johnson County, where my great-grandfather Cornelius Skaggs and my grandfather John M. Skaggs were born. The old store caught fire many years ago and burned the wood stock off the gun, but the barrel was still good. A friend of Dad's, Mort Mullins, got his hands on the barrel somehow, and that's how it came to me.

One night when I was fourteen years old, we were up at Mort's house playing music and talking about guns and hunting tales and family stories. I told him I loved old flintlock rifles like Daniel Boone had on TV. Mort said, "Son, your ancestors was in this country before Daniel Boone was." Well, hearing that just blew me away. He left the room and came back with a rusty old gun barrel in his hand.

"Here, take this home with you," he told me. "It's an old gun barrel from the Skaggs clan. Don't know how old it is, but it's a lot older than me and your dad put together. It will make you a good gun that will last you all your life."

I kept that barrel safe and in storage, and along about thirty-five years later, I found the right man for the job of restoring it. Robert Eisenhower, from around Boone, North Carolina, is an antique gun refurbisher, and he got a wood stock for my rifle and returned it to its original long-hunter style. Ever since I got it back from him, it's been

my favorite flintlock. He said the barrel dates back to the mid to late 1700s. That's about the time Henry Skaggs and his brothers crossed into the mountains of southeastern Kentucky from Virginia.

I didn't know until later on that Henry Skaggs had hunted with Daniel Boone. I've got it chronicled in lots of history books, how the whole thing went down, and I'm still studying it and learning about it.

Brushy Creek, where my family comes from, is a hollow that gets its name from the stream that empties into Blaine Creek, which really oughta be called Blaine River, given its size. To be designated a river, a waterway has to be at least one hundred miles long, and when they measured Blaine, it turned out to be ninety-nine miles and some spare change, so that's why it's called a creek.

We lived up a dirt road, up the holler in the woods about five miles from the main highway. Your average holler might be ten miles long. Brushy is longer than most, and if you go all the way to the head of the holler, you go clear over into the next county.

My dad, Hobert, was born in Relief, Kentucky, in Morgan County. His father, John M. Skaggs, moved the family to Brushy when my dad was a teenager. There was better farmland there than what they had before. They lived on about seventy acres, with a big white clapboard country house and a great big front porch, and fields to grow corn and other crops. It was a step up in the world.

Dad and his younger brother Okel were brought up hunting and fishing and farming. Being Kentucky boys, they were singing and playing music together early on. Dad sang lead and played guitar, and Okel sang tenor and played mandolin. This was the brother-duet style made popular by Charlie and Bill Monroe.

They favored the brother-harmony songs that were all the rage back then: "Blues Stay Away from Me" by the Delmore Brothers, and Monroe Brothers records like "What Is a Home Without Love." They performed at pie suppers and house parties and local events and get-togethers, any chance they got to make music. They were pals and musical partners, too.

Dad and Okel were the new kids on the creek, but they quickly got to know the neighbors. The Thompson family lived up the holler a ways, and some of the Thompson brothers played fiddle and guitar. Dad and Okel would walk the mile or so up the creek to the Thompson house to play music and have a good time. The Thompson boys had a kid sister by the name of Dorothy May. She had brown hair and blue eyes and a sweet smile. She was a beautiful mountain girl, and Dad was knocked out the first time he saw her. He also liked that she could sing as good as she looked.

Both Skaggs brothers got drafted for service in World War II. Dad failed his Army entry because he'd had rheumatic fever as a child and it had left spots on his lungs. But Okel passed with flying colors. He was strong and enterprising, a fine example of a young mountain boy fresh off the farm. He entered the service June 17, 1942 and shipped overseas to the Pacific Theater when things were really heating up. His regiment was part of the huge landing operation on the island of Guam in August 1944. They came under heavy fire when they hit the beach. Okel had a buddy who caught a bullet. He ran to get him out of harm's way, and he got killed trying to save him. His bravery earned him a Purple Heart. He was twenty years old.

Dad was devastated. He'd lost his best friend. I don't think he ever got over it. He made a vow to himself that if he ever had a son who showed any musical ability, he was going to get him a mandolin and teach him how to play it and sing tenor with him. Then they could play all the old songs he loved to sing with Okel.

Though my dad lost his singing partner when Okel died, he didn't let his grief kill his love for music, and he played whenever he could. Around about 1947, Dad was working for a while at the Holston Army Ammunition Plant down in Kingsport, a town in east Tennessee. He found out Bill Monroe was coming through Kingsport with a new outfit that had just about tore the roof off the Opry. There were a couple of new Blue Grass Boys: Lester Flatt, who sang lead, and Earl Scruggs, who played a banjo that sounded like a tommy gun.

Well, Dad paid a quarter to get in, and he later said it was the most incredible show he'd ever seen in his whole life, before or since. For years afterward, whenever he talked about that night, his eyes would light up. I'd give anything to have been there with him. What my dad got to see was the classic lineup of the Blue Grass Boys. Once they got to playing, they turned the stage into a battlefield. It was a competition between Bill and Earl, trying to outdo each other on their instruments. With Bill and Lester nailing those great duets, I'm sure Dad was wishing his brother Okel could have been there to hear it. I asked Dad one time if he'd gotten his money's worth at that show. He said, "Son, I'd a-paid a dollar to a-seen them!"

Let me tell you about a bunch of young bucks in their prime. They had a one-microphone setup. They didn't need nothing else. The whole band worked around the mic as smooth as silk. They stepped in and out to take solos and hit the harmonies and never broke stride or missed a note. And then Chubby Wise would wedge his two hundred fifty pounds through the scrum to play a fiddle breakdown, with Bill behind him chopping his mandolin, Howard Watts in back slapping on that big bass, and Lester and Earl blazing away, making the impossible seem easy as pie.

I knew another guy who saw the Blue Grass Boys that same year. He was a farm boy in Turkey Scratch, Arkansas, and his name was Levon Helm. When I saw him at a festival a few years before he passed away, Levon told me the show had changed his life. He got as excited as a kid just talking about that night, same way my dad used to get. "Monroe had put together the dream band, and they really tattooed my brain for good," he said. "I loved the mandolin and the fiddle and the bass and Earl's banjo—I loved everything about that show. When I got home, I knew right then I wanted to play music for the rest of my life."

Levon meant it, too. He died in 2012, playing his music right up till the end, same way that I hope to do. In his late sixties, he went back to his roots and cut bluegrass and traditional country albums

full of Stanley Brothers songs and old-time hymns. It was a few years after he'd whipped cancer, and he had a resurgence of popularity, bringing a new generation of fans into the fold with his singing and drumming and mandolin picking. I believe certain things happen for a reason, and the last time I saw Levon I told him the Lord wasn't done with him yet. He busted out in a big grin and said, "Son, I believe you're right!"

After his stint at the ammunition factory, Dad left Kingsport and came back to Brushy Creek. There wasn't much work around, but he found jobs welding, which is what his uncles Calvin and Homer did. Lawrence County has never been a major coal-mining region, but the area has huge underground reserves of natural gas; the natural-gas pipes were everywhere, and they needed fitters and welders.

There was something else, too, that drew Dad back home to the holler. The Thompson sister Dorothy May was there, and he'd been thinking a lot about her. When he wasn't welding, he started hanging out at the Thompson place. Sometimes he brought his guitar and played music with the Thompson brothers. Most of the time, though, he was just there to see Dorothy May. It wasn't long before they got pretty serious about each other.

Dad and Mom were married on July 1, 1947, and moved into a little one-bedroom house on Brushy Creek. My sister Linda was born the next year, so now Dad had a wife and baby girl to support. Work was hard to find in eastern Kentucky at that time. He heard about a job opening at a large farm in Urbana, Ohio, just north of Springfield. The great thing was, the job paid a steady salary and provided housing for the family. Dad liked the work and the owner of the farm so much that he stayed there for a couple of years. My brother Garold was born there in 1950.

With a growing family and the Kentucky hills calling, Dad moved back to Brushy Creek and built a house. That was the house we called the homeplace. That's where the family lived in 1954, when I was born, in 1959, when my brother Gary came along. No matter where Dad's work would take us, we always had the homeplace to

go back to. That was a comforting thought for Dad and, as the years went by, for all of us.

When I was born, I was a handful from the first breath I ever took. Leastways that's how my mom remembered it. I was born on July 18, 1954, at Riverview Hospital in Louisa, Kentucky, the closest sizable town to our holler and the county seat of Lawrence. They said that when the doctor slapped my butt, I squalled out so loud the doctor told my mom, "Well, you've got a healthy boy, and he's got a healthy set of lungs. He's either gonna be a preacher or a singer." Mom replied right quick, "Well, I want both!" My given name is Rickie Lee Skaggs. Rickie wasn't a nickname for Richard or anything like that. I wasn't named for a relative or a friend of the family or even a real person. Strange as it may sound, I was actually named after Ricky Ricardo.

The thing was, my folks didn't know what to call me at first. My grandfather knew they were having trouble coming up with a name. In the early '50s, *I Love Lucy* was the biggest show going on TV, and Ricky Ricardo, played by Desi Arnaz, was about the most famous man in America. You had Lucille Ball hollering "Ricky! Ricky!" at Desi every episode, and the name was very popular, even way out in Brushy Creek, where most people like us didn't even have television sets yet. So one day my grandfather said, "Why don't you name him Ricky?" and Dad and Mom were sold. I was named Rickie Lee Skaggs. On my birth certificate it says R-I-C-K-I-E because that's what looked right to my dad and mom. One thing's for sure. The doctor sure was right about the singing, and the signs came early. Right from the start, I was a little different from my sister and brothers.

My mother didn't play an instrument, but she was a great, natural-born singer, probably the first singing voice I ever heard. She had an old mountain voice, pure and powerful. You'd never guess such a big voice could come from such a small woman. She sang all the time, tunes she wrote herself, gospel songs, and whatever country hits she

heard on the radio. Before she knew it, she had herself a little singing partner, and that was me.

Mama would sing while she did her chores around the house, and I'd be off at the other end of the house playing with my toys. She was all the time singing in the kitchen while she was cooking, and she'd hear me singing harmony along with her. I took my dad's part when I sang with her. I guess it was because I'd heard them sing together so often that I knew how to fit just right with mom's voice.

This was early on, around the time I was three years old. Being so young, I didn't know it was called harmony and that the part I was singing was called tenor and that it was a third above the lead and so forth. But it must have sunk into me deep, 'cause that's the only singing lessons I ever had!