

# Vinyl Ventures: My 50 Years at Rounder Records

*Vinyl Ventures: My Fifty Years at Rounder Records*

by Bill Nowlin

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Review by Richelle Putnam

In *Vinyl Ventures: My Fifty Years at Rounder Records* by Bill Nowlin, the author pours his history/memoir foundation by recalling how “...record retail was expanding in the 1960s, as the ‘baby boom’ generation entered its teenage years.”

Nowlin’s history/memoir immediately fills his readers in on the musical environment and the record labels within that environment. He reminds his readers who paved the early musical roads, including Elvis, Chuck Berry, the folk revival of the early ‘60s with Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, and the British mid-‘60s invasion of the Beatles and Rolling Stones. However, the main story begins in 1970, when Nowlin, Marian Leighton Levy, and Ken Irwin founded Rounder Records. The company’s first two records were 0001 and 0002 ...respectively.

Nowlin gives readers a personal Rounder Records tour, from its 1971 incorporation to the COVID-19 years and the company’s 50-year celebration in October 2020, a rare feat in marriage and business.

“We were relentless in our determination to save money any way we could. Around the time we started, underground newspapers were printing lists of phone company credit cards from major institutions. You’d just select one from a corporation involved in waging war on Vietnam, give the operator a card number, and your call was placed as long as the number was

still valid. ...The new method would be when Ken would call person-to-person, and the operator would ask for Buzz Busby or somebody, and I would say he's not here, and I'd hear Ken blurt out, 'The records will be shipped in the morning' as we hung up." (Nowlin, p.32)

The Rounder Records' team occupies the 1970s, building the company through radio, recordings, mail orders, and the Library of Congress. However, its construction during perilous protest times is bold and downright risky.

*Mountain Moving Day* (Rounder 4001) tackles the Women's Liberation Movement. *Come All You Coal Miners* (featuring Hazel Dickens, Sarah Gunning, Jim Garland, George Tucker, and Nimrod Workman) brings to light the toils of the everyday coal miner in a dark, heartless workplace. The importance of *Mountain Moving Day* and its theme resurfaces in 2005 when Rounder re-releases the record under *Papa, Don't Lay that Shit On Me* and in the 2006 release *Harlan County U.S.A.: Songs of the Coal Miner's Struggle*. Undoubtedly, Rounder Records became the rebel record label aiding the rebels and their causes, and the masses loved it.

But more than a rebel, Rounder Records was a legend jumpstart for artists like Bela Fleck, Tony Rice, Alison Krauss, and bands like J. D. Crowe and the New South, and George Thorogood and Destroyers, who was—shall we say—Bad to the Bone. Nowlin shares these stories like an ecstatic father bragging on his many talented children.

It's no easy task leaving the 1970s with Rounder Records, especially without mentioning Rounder's 1979 unionization story. Readers will enjoy discovering the '80s with Thorogood and his Destroyers doing 50 states in 50 dates and welcoming Alison Krauss to the label, and the '90s, celebrating the 20th anniversary of Rounder Records.

The road from the 1960s until 2020 and the stories along the

Rounder Records route will be no arduous trek because Nowlin assuages nothing in what he fearlessly and candidly writes. Perhaps, Alison Krauss explains her record label best in this excerpt of her interview with music historian Barry Mazor: "Rounder is about tending to the whole career of a musician. ...they have that love for music and for traditional music for what it is. ..." (Nowlin, p. 279)

Nowlin makes it clear that from its meager beginning, Rounder Records had a mission, and from that mission, the founders never faltered. More than profit from the music was the preservation of the music. That's a legacy few attain because few businesses think and plan beyond profit.

On April 14, 2010, the press release headlines read: **CONCORD MUSIC GROUP ACQUIRES CELEBRATED AMERICAN ROOTS LABEL ROUNDER RECORDS**. From there, Nowlin takes readers through more changes, including new leadership, the company's move to Nashville, and the celebration (or non-celebration due to the COVID-19 pandemic) of Rounder's 50th anniversary.

So often, big conglomerates obliterate the organic, homegrown attraction and ideals of the smaller entities they take over. That's not so with Rounder, and Nowlin analyzes that much better than this reviewer: "...Rounder Records—the little folk label from Cambridge—seemed to remain very much respected by the powers-that-be at Concord. Whatever else we did, we seem to have built a legacy out of love for the music, one that endured and spoke to something in the hearts of people in the business." (Nowlin, p. 272)

When you choose *Vinyl Ventures: My Fifty Years at Rounder Records* by Bill Nowlin, you will learn much about the music industry and the people who make it or break it. You'll also grow as a person, realizing that music is more than unassuming enjoyment and entertainment. It's the complexity and analysis of societies, the language of diversity, and the history and heritage of cultures around the globe.

## **Reviewer's Notes:**

*Having entered teen years in 1966, this reviewer remembers ripping the cellophane off the latest purchase, sliding the record from its cover carefully, and making sure fingerprints didn't smudge the shiny, black vinyl. The record spun on a turntable until scratches and smudges from age became one with the rhythmic beat.*

*Nowlin's money-saving story conjured memories from my teen years. After visiting my dad, who lived 100 miles away, I'd make a person-to-person call to his number and ask to speak to our designated code-name to let Dad know I had arrived safely home. When he said, "He's not here," we hung up the phone, him knowing I'd made it home safely and us both having accomplished the mission.*

## **The 21st Century Craze of Vinyl Records:**

**Over 500,000 copies Adele's newest album are being pressed on vinyl. Taylor Swift is re-releasing her album "Red" on vinyl and other top-selling artists like Ed Sheeran and Coldplay are going vinyl as well. Because vinyl factories can't meet the demand, there is a massive delay in vinyl releases. In 2020, for the first time since 1986, vinyl record sales topped CD sales, and in the first six months of 2021, vinyl record sales were 108 percent higher than the same period in 2020. Plus, large department stores like Target, Walmart, Amazon, and others are cashing in on vinyl sales. Why? In a CNBC interview, Billy Fields, the resident vinyl expert at Warner Music Group, says, "Vinyl is eternally cool."**

**Here are a few "vinyl" gifts (some autographed) from the reviewer's friends and family. You can't do this with streaming. And you certainly can't decorate the walls with plastic CD covers. Well, you can—but it won't be near as cool.**



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- HOW WILL I EXPLAIN ABOUT YOU
- FOGGY RIVER
- CARELESS LOVE
- I'M SO LONESOME I COULD CRY
- BAKER'S BREAKDOWN
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*Bill Monroe*  
*Bill Monroe*

# BLUEGRASS SPECIAL

## BILL MONROE and his Blue Grass Boys



Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys  
Country (Monroe)  
Bill Monroe  
and his  
Blue Grass Boys  
DL 4382

### Side One

1. BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAIN BLUES
2. COLUMBUS STOCKADE BLUES
3. THERE WAS NOTHING WE COULD DO
4. I WAS LEFT ON THE STREET
5. CHEAP LOVE AFFAIR

Bill Monroe  
Chuck Cannon  
Bill Monroe-Kenny Baker  
Chuck Cannon-Bill Monroe

### Side Two

1. HOW WILL I EXPLAIN ABOUT YOU
2. FOGGY RIVER
3. CARELESS LOVE
4. I COULD CRY
5. BAKER'S BREAKDOWN
6. WHEN THE BIRDS ARE IN THE WOODS

Bill Monroe  
Bill Monroe-Kenny Baker  
Aided by-passive fiddle

It's difficult to find agreement about things musical, but about bluegrass music there's complete accord: Bill Monroe is its king. Folklorists, musicologists and millions of record collectors testify to this fact.

Monroe, more than any other personality, developed and popularized this musical art form, which is recognized as one of the freshest and most significant elements of American music.

Recognition came early to Monroe in the country field. He had already organized a group in the 1930's; by 1939 he joined "Grand Ole Opry" on WSM, Nashville, and by the mid-forties he had crystallized, and become synonymous with, bluegrass. In the years following, bluegrass, with its distinctive string sound, became a major facet of the burgeoning country music field. And today, with the nation's pop music more country-and-folk-oriented than ever before, bluegrass has achieved its broadest acceptance.

The performances on this album mirror the bluegrass genre at its best. Monroe's mandolin work is brilliant; his high tenor vocal style is distinctive and his range of material is varied. Ever present is the authentic, true hill sound.

Monroe's inclusion of several blues in this package, such as "Blue Ridge Mountain Blues" and "Columbus Stockade Blues," is a happy circumstance; for the blues tradition is powerful in the country field and every great country artist has been a master of that musical form. Other titles, such as "Cheap Love Affair" and "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," the latter tune associated with the late Hank Williams, are reminiscent of what has come to be called the traditional country style. "Careless Love," sung in many versions by numerous folk artists, and "Baker's Breakdown" are further illustrations of Monroe's wide range of material.



I SAW THE LIGHT - BILL MONROE AND HIS BLUE GRASS BOYS  
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BLUEGRASS RAMBLES - BILL MONROE  
DL 4382



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