



Best of The Flatt and Scruggs TV Show  
Volumes 1 & 2  
Country Music Foundation Inc.

Before Hullabaloo, before Hootenany, there was the Grand Ole Opry, America's first national country music show. Of course the Opry garnered a slew of radio imitators, and when television came along folks attempted to graft the same format to this new media. One of these first attempts was the Flatt and Scruggs Grand Ole Opry TV Show. With only one advertiser – the Martha White Flour Company, Flatt and Scruggs had plenty of time to play music while pitching biscuits, cakes, and pies made with Martha White's special "Hot Rize" ingredient. Almost fifty years later these shows still deliver a boatload of tasty surprises.

Broadcast from 1955 until 1969, copies of the Flatt and Scruggs Grand Ole Opry shows had all but disappeared until 1989, when 24 intact shows were found by advertising executive Bill Graham and donated to the Country Hall of Fame Museum. Then 12 more episodes were unearthed and also given to the museum. Each of these two DVD volumes features two shows. Volume 1 has August 1961 and February 1962 while Volume 2 has July 1961 and August 1961 (I have to assume the August shows are from different weeks as they have different material on them). The museum has plans to issue two more volumes in late 2007.

Both discs have simple menus that give you the option of playing the entire disc or choosing which program you want to watch. Each show has its own sub-menu so you can choose a particular song (or commercial interlude) or watch the entire program from beginning to end. Neither disc has any additional features. All the

shows have a similar format; an introduction by radio announcer T. Tommy Cutrer, several songs, a Martha White “demonstration” segment, more songs, another demonstration, then another song or two before the final credits. Each show has several “spotlight” segments. Earl Scruggs plays finger-picked guitar for at least one song, dobro virtuoso Josh Graves gets one solo number, Fiddler Paul Warren does a fiddle tune, the entire band performs a gospel vocal quartet, and bass player E.P. “Cousin Jake” Tullock and “Uncle” Josh Graves do their comedy section consisting of a bad old joke.

Picture quality is pretty decent. The original black and white shows were done on early two-inch videotape and then transferred to film for TV distribution. Although you’ll see an occasional glitch or stutter, by and large the tapes survived in excellent shape. These film copies also have surprisingly good monophonic sound (although at times slightly out of synch with the picture) with only moderate roll off on the top and bottom ends of the frequency spectrum. You can hear some tape hiss, but it never gets distracting. The studio had two cameras and most of the camera work and editing consists of cutting between the two. One camera supplies medium length shots while the other delivers some nice close-ups of the players’ fingers. Although the resolution isn’t good enough to pick up actual notes and licks, you do get a reasonable view of Earl Scruggs’ and Josh Graves’ right hand techniques.

Vintage instrument aficionados will appreciate the opportunity to see Earl Scruggs’ Gibson five-string banjo and Lester Flatt’s Martin dreadnaught guitar in action. Mandolin players will notice that Curley Seckler played a Gibson F-4 oval hole mandolin instead of an f-hole F-5 like Bill Monroe. He also takes no mandolin solos. The most interesting instrument on the show is undoubtedly the guitar Earl Scruggs used for fingerpicking. This Martin dreadnaught featured a pickguard that covered 2/3 of its

entire faceplate, shielding everything in front of the bridge in protective tortoise shell plastic. But the oddest thing about this Martin is the trussrod cover on the headstock. Martin guitars of this vintage didn't have adjustable trussrods, so this guitar certainly didn't need a cover on the headstock to protect a nonexistent adjustment screw! Gibson envy perhaps?

Any bluegrass fan with more than a passing interest in vintage bluegrass performances will want a copy of these DVDs. While not quite as satisfying as a trip in a time machine back to the WSM's Nashville, TN, TV studios, these discs still deliver a clear picture of Flatt and Scruggs during their most musically influential period.

--Steven Stone