

The Blue Sky Boys--Bill and Earl Bolick

Who Were the Blue Sky Boys?



Earl and Bill Bolick (pictured here in 1964, left to right), brothers born in Hickory, NC in 1917 and 1919, respectively, became the Blue Sky Boys when their producer at their first recording session on June 16, 1936, convinced them not to use their real names. The name "Blue Sky Boys" was coined by taking "Blue" from the Blue Ridge Mountains near their home and "Sky" from the city where they first began their radio career (Asheville, NC), which was known as the land of the sky. (Photo from *The Blue Sky Boys*, 1964 album cover courtesy of John Williams Memorial Collection, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

Their Music

- Bill Bolick, the eldest brother, learned to play the old 5-string banjo and the guitar, as well as the mandolin. He would later abandon the first two instruments, sticking with the mandolin.
- Earl Bolick was taught a few chords on the guitar by his brother Bill, but he eventually developed a style quite different from that of his brother.
- The very first song they cut in their first recording session on June 16, 1936 was called "I'm Just Here to Get My Baby Out of Jail." Nineteen-year-old Bill and seventeen-year-old Earl played guitar and mandolin, respectively, on this song and the other nine (all duets) they recorded at that session.
- The brothers developed a vast repertoire of "old time," mountain, folk, and religious songs, some of which were hundreds of years old. They preferred to perform them in the manner and with the instrumentation with which they had been written.
- After a few years of performing, both Bill and Earl were drafted and served in World War II. After

their discharges in 1945, they discovered that the "Old Time" tunes they loved to play were no longer as popular as before the war. The trend was toward the use of electrified instruments and string bass added for extra rythm.

■ When the Blue Sky Boys added violin and bass for the recording of "Kentucky," their greatest hit, they worried that modern material had crept into and would in a sense desecrate their repertoire.

■ After a growing dissatisfaction with the pressure to record modern material, the Blue Sky Boys retired from professional entertaining in February 1951.

■ In the early 1960s, a renewed interest in folk and "old-time" music was developing, and in 1965, the Blue Sky Boys cut an album for Capitol Records during the UCLA Folk Festival. Most of the songs the brothers recorded at that time were 300-500 years old.

Their Influence

A few of the modern singers who pay tribute to the Blue Sky Boys include:

■ Bill Monroe;

■ Ricky Skaggs;

■ Emmylou Harris;

■ The Louvin Brothers; and

■ The O'Kanes.

Southern Folklife Collection Holdings

■ Some 21 photos;

■ 22 LPs of their recordings;

■ 1 CD recording; and

■ A variety of discographies.

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