

Mandolin

Presented by the Boston Bluegrass Festival

- **Belongs to the String Family**
- **A lead and rhythm instrument in Bluegrass**
- **Percussive “chop” playing the off-beat**
- **Tuned just like a fiddle but has 8-strings**

The mandolin entered the mainstream of popular American culture during the first substantial immigration from eastern and southern Europe. This time was a period of prosperity and vulgarity, when things exotic and foreign dominated popular taste. The mandolin was in vogue in the 1850s, when it shared the parlor with zithers, mandolas, ukuleles, and other novelties designed to amuse the increasingly leisured middle class. By 1897, the Mandolin was the rage of the new century. In 1905, breaking radically away from the traditional bowl-back mandolin (disparagingly referred to as ‘taterbugs’), Gibson Instrument Company introduced the flat-back A-4, a revolutionary instrument for its time. Then in 1922, Gibson, under the influence of their new acoustic engineer Lloyd Allayre Loar, refurbished their entire line of mandolins. Perhaps Loar’s finest achievement, at least for devotees of bluegrass music, was his F-5 series. These mandolins are in great demand today. There were approximately one hundred seventy F-5s signed and dated by Lloyd Loar himself and are routinely sold for well over a million dollars.

In old-time country music, the mandolin was often only an accompanying instrument. All that changed with the emergence of Bill Monroe and the Monroe Brothers. Bill played fiery cascades of rapid-fire notes that brought a power and urgency to the music that simply had not been there before. Monroe fused the influences of his two childhood mentors, Uncle Pen Vandiver and Arnold Schultz. Uncle Pen played the fiddle, and had a rich repertoire of songs and melodies that Monroe was to draw from throughout his career. His fiddle-playing techniques became an intricate part of Monroe’s style of mandolin playing. Arnold Schultz was a black country blues player who Monroe would see whenever he came through Rosine, Kentucky. Through his influence, Monroe spiced his playing with blue notes and blues’ licks. The fusion of these influences created a unique and unmistakable style: Bluegrass, which put the mandolin securely at center stage.



Bill Monroe, father of bluegrass music and his Lloyd Loar F5 Mandolin.



Unidentified mandolinist plays a signed Lloyd Loar F-5 mandolin.