

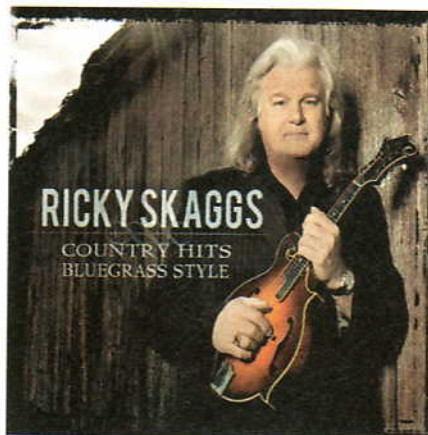
# LOOKING BACK BUT MOVING FORWARD

**Ricky Skaggs** releases an album of favorites and looks back on a long career that is anything but over.

story by  
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To say that Ricky Skaggs is as admired by his fellow artists as he is by fans is not a stretch. "When you are young, you can be completely blown away by how good someone is and how pure someone is," Vince Gill says when asked about the music of his longtime friend Ricky Skaggs. "I'm still blown away by Ricky. He is as pure as it gets. On occasion there are some people that are undeniably better than other people. Ricky is clearly one of those rare people."



Need proof? Listen to Ricky's July 19 release, *Country Hits Bluegrass Style*, which offers a sonically refurbished taste of his extensive catalog. The 14-song album features many of Ricky's country hits done with a bluegrass turn, including "Heartbroke," "Honey (Open That Door)," "Cajun Moon," "Highway 40 Blues" and "Crying My Heart Out Over You," among others. For years fans have asked Ricky to revisit his mainstream country hits. When he set about doing so for this album, he decided to give the songs the bluegrass flavor that has been a mainstay of his sound for years now. "We really just wanted to mix it up a bit," says Ricky of why this album has bluegrass versions of his country hits—the way he plays them on tour these days. "I wanted to show that they can be done that way. It's a nice mix because I love both country and bluegrass. Knowing we didn't have a steel guitar or piano and had to leave room for a mandolin or a fiddle made it interesting."

Fans can also hear the updated versions of those songs when Ricky and his band Kentucky Thunder play their Treasure Chest Tour dates this summer and fall.

To begin to understand Ricky's legendary status, though, it's necessary to rewind about 50 years. Ricky will do just that in his upcoming autobiography, due in early 2012 from publisher Harper Collins.

When telling his story, Ricky's enthusiastic voice sparkles. He tells of how his father, Hobert Skaggs, presented 5-year-old Ricky with a mandolin to encourage the boy's love of music. Hobert's faith was well placed. Ricky quickly learned to play and did so at home, church, the store or just anywhere he found himself. He developed such a local following that his fans hooted, hollered and pleaded with bluegrass great Bill Monroe to let Ricky play with him at a Martha, Ky., show.

"Now that I'm an artist, I know that [Bill] probably felt 'enough is enough,' so he called me up," says Ricky. "He didn't know how little I was. I didn't have an instrument to play so he took off his F5 Gibson mandolin—to me it was the size of a guitar because I was such a little guy—to let me play. I remember all those [camera] flashes going off while I was there and onstage . . . that was a bedrock moment for me."

And the first of many to come, including one less than 10 years later when Ricky and his dad traveled to "an old beer joint" called Jim & Faye's in Fort Gay, W.Va., to hear bluegrass legend Ralph Stanley play.

"My dad should have gotten credit for the phrase 'don't leave home without it,'" jokes Ricky, recalling that Ralph's bus broke down on the way to the show and the bar owner asked 16-year-old Ricky and the rest of the band to fill in. "We were playing and Ralph came in and saw me and Keith Whitley, Keith's brother and my dad onstage playing songs. He pulled up a bar stool and listened. No one bothered him while he sat there. He was just quiet, watching. That was a big stepping stone for us. Ralph kind of adopted us then." Not too long afterward, Ricky and Keith were asked to join Ralph's Clinch Mountain Boys band.

With the support of his dad and others, Ricky soon went on to forge his own sound and a high-energy, widely admired style that he would hone while playing with J.D. Crowe & the New South, Boone Creek and Emmylou Harris' Hot Band.



(Clockwise from left) Ricky Skaggs on the Grand Ole Opry in the 1980s with his father, Hobert, who gave Ricky his deep love of music; Ricky (third from right) on the Grand Ole Opry's 57th birthday show in 1982, along with Bill Monroe and Ralph Stanley; Ricky with his current band, Kentucky Thunder



## RICKY SKAGGS CONTINUED

It seemed like a natural progression when Ricky's major-label debut, 1981's *Waitin' for the Sun to Shine*, reached the No. 2 spot in early 1982.

From there, Ricky's career hit all the high points: 24 singles that reached *Billboard's* Top 20—including 11 No. 1s—and an array of awards and honors, including a total of 14 Grammys to date.

Arguably best of all, guitar great Chet Atkins credited Ricky with "single-handedly" saving country music.

While Ricky built his career, he also built his family. As he and his wife, Sharon, approach their 30th year together, he says that the ups and downs of family life with four children inspired him to select his

version of Harry Chapin's 1974 hit "Cat's in the Cradle" as the iTunes bonus track for his latest album.

"I remember hearing that in the 1970s and thought it was a great song, but I didn't have kids then," says Ricky, adding that by the time he recorded it in the '90s the tables had turned. "My son was 15 then and he and I were butting heads," Ricky recalls. "It was like I heard that song for the first time. I knew I had to record that song."

The song has resonated with fans. "I told the audience the other night, 'I'm relevant!'" jokes Ricky. "We have had more e-mails [come] into the office and more requests [for that song] than I think we've ever had, or had in a long time. That song never ceases to touch

the busy moms and dads."

Ricky's still a busy dad, of course. Besides touring behind last year's album, *Mosaic*, his latest release of country-turned-bluegrass tunes and writing a book, he also has the holiday album *Skaggs Family Christmas Volume II* set for release this year and will tour with the Skaggs Family Band in support of it.

"I've got a lot to do and a lot of memories to go through," he says in reference to finishing his autobiography, delayed in part because of his own hectic schedule, which recently included high-profile gigs with the Boston Pops. "I'm trying to be very truthful and accurate. I want it to be real and honest but funny too."

Just like the man himself. **CW**