

# BLUE MOON OVER KENTUCKY

AN ORCHESTRAL CELEBRATION OF THE MUSIC OF BILL MONROE

CONCEIVED AND PERFORMED BY  
MANDOLINIST BUTCH BALDASSARI  
WITH THE OWENSBORO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Acclaimed Nashville-based mandolinist Butch Baldassari will be the featured soloist October 26, 2002, as the Owensboro Symphony Orchestra offers the premiere performance of “Blue Moon Over Kentucky,” the new orchestral project he has conceived and produced based on the instrumental music of legendary American icon Bill Monroe.

In development since 1999, the five-movement work both chronicles and pays tribute to the life and music of Monroe and his uncle, Pendleton “Uncle Pen” Vandiver.

To everyone’s knowledge, this is the first time Bill Monroe’s music has been performed by a solo mandolinist with a symphony orchestra, according to Baldassari.

“ ‘Blue Moon Over Kentucky’ is based on the tremendous body of instrumental work Bill Monroe created in his lifetime,” Baldassari said in describing his concept for the music. “I’ve always thought the genius and richness of these tunes would be a great foundation for an orchestral piece. Many of the melodic lines, ‘licks’ and ornaments found in Monroe’s music are similar to motifs in classical music, and I’ve always wondered how his music would be interpreted in an orchestral setting.”

Owensboro Symphony Conductor Nicholas Palmer had been searching for a way to celebrate and honor the musical traditions of the region when he heard about Baldassari’s idea from Dan Hays, executive director of the International Bluegrass Music

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Association (IBMA). Hays put symphony officials in touch with Baldassari, and Symphony Executive Director M. Wade Kelley contacted the mandolinist about the possibility of performing the work with the Owensboro Symphony. Maestro Palmer visited Baldassari in Nashville to learn more about the project and during that meeting, decided on the October date for the world premiere.

“Bluegrass is the one style of music that actually originated close to Owensboro,” Palmer said. “It shares many things with the orchestral music we perform, and in this particular setting, with mandolin solo and orchestra, the music really comes alive in an energy-charged way. Our audience will find much that is already familiar in Bill Monroe’s music and will delight in the virtuosity of Butch Baldassari. This is one concert we really look forward to!”

The work has evolved over time, Baldassari says.

“Over the last several years as I’ve been working on this idea, a number of people have approached me about performing ‘Blue Moon Over Kentucky,’ but it was only recently that I was able to develop the concept in a way that I felt did Mr. Monroe and his music justice. How fitting that we would be offering the world premiere in Owensboro, Kentucky, where there is such a deep appreciation for and understanding of this music,” Baldassari said.

Baldassari does not call himself the composer of the work. He prefers to call himself the creator of the concept and the leader of the unusual project. In creating the music, he called on the arranging talents of several noted Nashville musicians:

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multi-instrumentalist John Mock, conductor and arranger Don Hart and violinist Andrea Zonn.

“I had the melodies chosen and the sequencing of the music worked out. Then John, Andrea and Don collaborated with me on with the arrangements and scoring for the orchestra,” Baldassari said. “They brought a combination of wonderful classical and traditional colors to the music, and we’ve worked together to honor the music in every way.”

As the project was developed, Baldassari paid a call on Bill Monroe’s son James to enlist his support for the concept. “I didn’t want to do anything the Monroe family did not approve of,” Baldassari said. “I explained the idea and walked James through the music I’d selected from his father’s repertoire. He was enthusiastic about the project and the chance to hear Bill Monroe’s music played in this new setting.

“I really like what Butch has done,” James Monroe said. “It’s really great. My father wrote a lot of wonderful music, and what Butch has done with it will take it to new audiences and help more people hear it.”

Baldassari, known widely for his mastery of the mandolin in classical, chamber music and bluegrass settings, has employed five movements to explore a number of Monroe’s instrumental works.

Movement one, “Ancient Tones,” calls on Monroe’s “Scotch Bagpipe” and references Uncle Pen’s repertoire of 19<sup>th</sup> –Century fiddle tunes as it sets the stage and tone for the remainder of the work. In this first movement, Baldassari envisions a

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dreamscape in which Monroe hears the music of the past (“Jenny Lind”) and begins to hear the sounds he will create in years to come. The solo mandolin introduces “My Father’s Footsteps,” and the winds and strings pick up phrases from “Goin’ Up Caney” and strains of “The Dead March.” As the movement ends, the musical influences are introduced as the past, present and future meld.

The second movement, which Baldassari calls “Arnold Schultz’ Blues,” is named after one of Monroe’s early influences, a Black guitar and fiddle player who infused his own music with the imprint of the Blues. This movement draws on Monroe’s days playing with Schultz and explores the fusion of Blues and country sounds. Five keys are introduced in the movement’s tunes: “Watson Blues,” “Bluegrass Special,” “Honky Tonk Swing,” “Bluegrass Stomp” and “Bluegrass Part I.” Monroe lived through the era of the “Big Bands” and was, undoubtedly, influenced by the tunes he heard them play. Baldassari will improvise sections of the movement as he uses a contemporary “Big Band” sound to underscore some of Monroe’s more bluesy rhythms.

“From Scotland to Rosine,” the third movement, references Monroe’s Scottish heritage and some of his most productive years. Listeners familiar with Monroe’s music will hear strains of “Scotland” (which starts the movement), “Jerusalem Ridge” and “Cheyenne” in this portion of the work. This hoedown-like movement features tumbling, rhythmic interplay between the string section and the mandolin.

Many believe the 1980s resulted in the creation of Bill Monroe’s most sophisticated and intricate instrumental music. This waltz-like movement, which

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references this period of his life, is called “My Last Days on Earth” and features Baldassari playing a radically retuned mandolin (scordatura). According to Baldassari, this movement is an emotional interlude that hints at Monroe’s mortality and foresees his immortality as a musician.

The bright, up-tempo fifth movement, “Monroe’s Hornpipes,” brings past and future together in a no-holds-barred celebration of the music. “Roanoke,” “Big Mon,” and “Monroe’s Hornpipe” are among the tunes included here. With the members of the orchestra romping toward the finish, Monroe’s “Rawhide,” which Baldassari calls the “Mount Everest” of mandolin tunes, pushes the work toward its festive and joyous conclusion.

“It’s an amazing legacy he’s left us,” Baldassari says. “Bill Monroe’s music will be played and enjoyed by bluegrass musicians for generations to come. I think bluegrass fans and those who may be less familiar with his music will enjoy the orchestral interpretation of Monroe’s genius.”

A native of Scranton, Pa., Butch Baldassari was first introduced to the mandolin at the Philadelphia Folk Festival in 1972, where he saw Andy Statman with David Bromberg and African-American mandolinist Howard “Louie Blueie” Armstrong. He was so inspired by their playing that he resolved to learn to play the mandolin. He began studying immediately, experimenting with the mandolin's unique sound and delving more deeply into the history of the instrument.

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In 1985, Baldassari became a member of Weary Hearts, a critically acclaimed bluegrass band, winners of the Society for the Preservation of Bluegrass Music in America (SPBGMA) 1989 Best Bluegrass Band Award.

After attending the Classical Mandolin Society of America convention in November 1990, and intrigued by the existence of mandolin orchestras in America at the turn of the century, he returned to Nashville (where he had moved in 1989) and founded the Nashville Mandolin Ensemble in June 1991, recruiting some of Nashville's best and most talented string players. The ensemble, composed of mandola, mandocello, guitar and bass, in addition to mandolins, is among the city's most unusual and sought-after entertainment acts.

"We surprise our audiences every time we play," Baldassari laughs. "People just revel in the sound of all these marvelous instruments and in the tremendous variety of music we perform. Our repertoire includes Bill Monroe's Bluegrass, as well as the music of O'Carolan and Vivaldi."

Baldassari has appeared on "A Prairie Home Companion," "CBS This Morning," CNN and "Riders in the Sky Radio Theatre."

Not just a performer and bandleader, Baldassari is widely respected as a teacher, currently serving as Adjunct Associate Professor of Mandolin at Vanderbilt University's renowned Blair School of Music. His instructional videos, books and tapes are among the most widely used by aspiring mandolin players, and his workshops at festivals including Telluride, Rocky Grass Bluegrass Academy, Winterhawk and Grass Valley are standing-room-only sessions. His annual appearances at the Classical Mandolin Society are among the event's most popular.

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With his own successful record label, SoundArt Recordings, Baldassari has broadened both his reach to new audiences and his influence on the music. The SoundArt Recordings catalog includes recordings in bluegrass, acoustic and traditional mandolin orchestra music. SoundArt also offers instructional and performance videos.

SoundArt releases have earned critical acclaim and tremendous respect in the bluegrass and acoustic music communities. Music columnist Tony Matrianni describes SoundArt as “a wonderful record label with painstaking care given to recording.”

Additional information on Butch Baldassari, SoundArt Recordings, the Nashville Mandolin Ensemble and the Nashville Mandolin Trio can be obtained on the internet by accessing [www.soundartrecordings.com](http://www.soundartrecordings.com).

Booking contact: Art Fegan Entertainment, [www.artfeganentertainment.com](http://www.artfeganentertainment.com) / [artfegan@bellsouth.net](mailto:artfegan@bellsouth.net).

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