

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH RICKY SKAGGS

SUBJECT: MY FIFTY YEARS IN MUSIC

MODERATOR: ANGELA GREILING KEANE, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

LOCATION: HOLEMAN LOUNGE, WASHINGTON, D.C.

TIME: 1:00 P.M. EDT

DATE: THURSDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2013

(C) COPYRIGHT 2008, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB, 529 14<sup>TH</sup> STREET, WASHINGTON, DC - 20045, USA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. ANY REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION IS EXPRESSLY PROHIBITED.

UNAUTHORIZED REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION CONSTITUTES A MISAPPROPRIATION UNDER APPLICABLE UNFAIR COMPETITION LAW, AND THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB RESERVES THE RIGHT TO PURSUE ALL REMEDIES AVAILABLE TO IT IN RESPECT TO SUCH MISAPPROPRIATION.

FOR INFORMATION ON BECOMING A MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB, PLEASE CALL 202-662-7505.

**ANGELA GREILING KEANE:** (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club. My name is Angela Greiling Keane. I'm a reporter for Bloomberg News and the 106<sup>th</sup> president of the National Press Club. We are the world's leading professional organization for journalists committed to our profession's future through our programming with events such as this while fostering a free press worldwide. For more information about the National Press Club, please visit our website at [www.press.org](http://www.press.org). To donate to programs offered to the public through our National Press Club Journalism Institute, please visit [press.org/institute](http://press.org/institute).

On behalf of our members worldwide, I would like to welcome our speaker today as well as those of you in the audience. Our head table includes guests of our speaker as well as working journalists who are Club members. If you hear applause in the audience, I'd also note that members of the general public are also attending, so it's not necessarily evidence of a lack of journalistic objectivity.

I'd also like to welcome our C-SPAN and Public Radio audiences. You can follow the action today on Twitter today using the hashtag NPCLunch. After our guest's speech concludes, we'll have a question and answer period. I will ask as many questions as time permits. Now it's time to introduce our head table. I would ask each of you to stand briefly as your name is announced.

From your right, Alan Bjerga, Bloomberg News, agriculture policy reporter and a former National Press Club president; Eleanor Clift, political reporter for *The Daily Beast*; Theresa Warner, a freelance journalist and a former National Press Club president;

Sharon White Skaggs, Ricky Skaggs' wife and a musician in her own right; Alison Fitzgerald, finance and investigative reporter at the Center for Public Integrity and chairwoman of the National Press Club Speakers Committee.

Skipping over our speaker for just a moment, Eric Meltzer, very briefly, news system specialist at the Associated Press; Andy Leftwitch, a member of Kentucky Thunder; and John Hurley, president of the Confederate Memorial Association and a past Commander of the National Press Club American Legion Post. (Applause)

"I'm as country as cornbread, I don't think I could go pop if I had a mouthful of firecrackers." Those are the words of our guest today; bluegrass and country legend, Ricky Skaggs. (Applause) He said them to *People* magazine. A native of Cordell, Kentucky, Mr. Skaggs has had a 50 year plus music career. He started singing at church and was playing the mandolin on stage by the time he was five. Mr. Skaggs was taking the stage at an age when most youngsters are learning to read.

He plays the mandolin, guitar, fiddle, and he writes. He played until 1972 and took a brief retirement as a boiler repairman here in Washington for a power company. Then, he returned, fortunately to music, as a member of the bluegrass band Country Gentlemen in 1973 playing fiddle and singing high tenor. In addition to his own solo work, Mr. Skaggs has worked as a producer and songwriter and he's developed new bluegrass groups including Daybreak, Old School Freight Train, and Blue Moon Rising.

In 2004, he was inducted into the Kentucky Music Hall of Fame. A winner of 14 Grammy Awards, Mr. Skaggs has also been a member of the Grand Ole Opry since 1982. In his book *Country Music USA*, author Bill C. Malone wrote, "Skaggs is blessed with the clearest and most expressive tenor voice that has been heard in country music since Ira Louvin and his instrumental virtuosity is breathtaking."

Skaggs, his band mates and the Skaggs family label racked up several awards in quick succession. With Kentucky Thunder, he's won eight Grammys including the 2003 Grammy for the best country performance by a duo or group with vocal for "A Simple Life," the 2004 Grammy for best bluegrass album for "Brand New Strings," the 2006 Grammy for best bluegrass album for the original compositions album instrumental, and the 2008 Grammy for the best bluegrass album for honoring the fathers of bluegrass.

So what is the secret of Mr. Skaggs' success? He told the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* that the bands he puts together have musicians who are more skilled than he is. In August, he published his memoir, *Kentucky Traveler: My Life in Music*. Please join me now in giving a warm National Press Club welcome to bluegrass star Ricky Skaggs. (Applause)

**MR. SKAGGS:** Thank you. It's really great to be here. Can I just say that I love the cupcake additions, the bluegrass cupcakes? I didn't see a banjo. Did anyone get a banjo cupcake? Oh you did? Okay. Saw a mandolin, fiddle, guitar, so there was a banjo. There's the little banjo, all right great. I'm really honored to be here. Never dreamed my

life would be so full of great things. There comes a banjo cupcake. God bless you, brother. All right, now we have the whole band over there. We'd need a cake for the bass fiddle.

But my life has been full. I was starting out at five years old playing the mandolin and getting to meet Bill Monroe when I was six, played on the Flatt and Scruggs TV show when I was seven. You can actually go on YouTube and see, if you type in Ricky Skaggs and Flatt and Scruggs, there I am at seven years old with a vacation Bible school haircut and you can see me singing as high as a dog whistle.

But it's been great. Got to work with Ralph Stanley when I was 15 and Keith Whitley and I met, started touring with Ralph. Actually, meeting Ralph Stanley was kind of one of those defining moments. We went to see Ralph, Keith and I did, and my dad took us there because we were too young to drive and we were too young to get into the beer joint that Ralph was going to be in. And you notice I called it beer joint and not club, okay? We didn't have clubs in eastern Kentucky and West Virginia, it was beer joints. And anyway, we got there and got a phone call. Ralph's bus had broke down and he called the club owner, beer joint owner, and said, "Hey, I'm going to be 30, 40 minutes late getting there. And just want to let you know."

So the manager of the place came up and asked us if we brought our instruments with us. And, of course, my dad should have gotten a little residual on "don't leave home without it" that American Express uses, because that's the way he believed about instruments. He always wanted to put the instruments in the car in the trunk just in case we might get asked to play. So don't leave home without it really rang true that night as we went out and got our instruments and got up on stage and started singing.

And Keith and I had really only met probably a couple, two or three months before that, and we'd sing every weekend after we met. And the only songs we knew were Stanley Brothers songs, and they were the old Stanley Brothers songs back from the late '40s, early '50s. And so we're up there playing and singing and the crowd's just kind of setting there looking at these two young boys kind of wondering where's the real talent, where's the real show.

So Ralph comes walking in and I would hope that he would walk to his dressing room back there, but no, he didn't. He set right down and started looking at us and it was just like, "Please don't look at us. You should be back there." But that night led to a lifelong relationship and friendship with Ralph Stanley. And he asked us to come-- asked us actually to play on his break, they played about an hour and they asked if we'd get back up again and play some more. So, anyway, that just started a great friendship and relationship and of course my life with Bill Monroe was-- met him at six years old and I got to play on stage with him and was close friends with him up until his passing in 1996.

So lot of great history that I've had in this music and a lot of great impartation. My heart has always been to learn from the elders. Now that I am an elder, I love being able to teach young kids this music because I think it's really important that people carry

on the traditions of the mountains. There's something really cool about the mountains. I know we don't get a lot of good press sometimes, but there's something very, very stable and very cool about growing up poor, having to work for a living, having to work to get something to eat. You know, honest day's work for an honest, good home cooked meal by your mama. And there's just something really good; faith, family, great faith values in the mountains.

I'm so thankful. I guess I could have probably been born anywhere, but God had a reason for me to be born in Lawrence County, Kentucky. And my dad always wanted to make sure that I got around these old time fiddlers and old musicians. He wanted me to meet these people and know who they were so that I could kind of glean from them musically. And so I did, a bunch of old guys-- and of course they're all in my book. I talk about them and honor them very much. So it's been a great way to train me up and now I get a chance to pour into other young people.

And I don't just talk to them about music, I talk to them about the condition of their heart because the heart is what drives the soul and what drives your mind and what drives your intentions. If your heart's clean and your heart's pure, then you're good for good works and to help people and to love. So that's what I try to tell them about because there's a lot of things in the world that would pull them away from that and a lot of things that would say, "That's just old fashioned, that's not relevant anymore," you know? But it is relevant. Truth, faith and love is always relevant in every generation. We were just talking about that and it's-- (Applause) It's a great thing.

And I've come to find out, now that I'm 59, well, I'll be 60, you know, truth just doesn't change. It really doesn't. Truth is truth for every generation. And you know, people don't want to always believe it and sometimes truth is hard to swallow. A guy did a song says, "Your pride's not hard to swallow once you've chewed it long enough." (Laughter) But truth is sometimes hard to face, but it's good for us.

But I've had a great life and I'm so thankful to have gotten to do the things that I've done. This book, *Kentucky Traveler*, really stretched me a lot. My wife, Miss Sharon, will attest to that. I got stretched pretty good. I thought for a while that Harper Collins was going to keep the book and release me, but they were very sympathetic and very nice and gave me more time to get finished so I was glad to get it all done.

But not only am I here for this today, but really what brought us to town was the event we're going to be doing tomorrow night at the Strathmore. You can go to [Strathmore.org](http://Strathmore.org) and find out all about this Wounded Warriors gala that we're doing tomorrow night and it's raising money for Wounded Warriors, which is a wonderful, wonderful thing to do and we're just honored and glad that they asked us. Dr. Wahby is here, thank you so much for being here today, and also Maureen McGovern is here. You're going to be there tomorrow, aren't you? I remember that beautiful song, "There's got to be a morning after." Yeah, that's a great song you did and so it's really great to get to meet you in the flesh, in person.

And people from the VA are here today, thank you so much for being here. Also, my wife, I just want to mention here again, Miss Sharon, is the blessing of my life. We've been married 32 years, so you can tell we're not country music artists, been married to the same woman 32 years. (Applause) And also, Andy Leftwitch, my fiddle player that's been with me. I pulled him pretty green, I think he was-- was you just out of high school when you came with me? Dang, boy. But he's been all over the world with us. He married my niece, so he married up. Yes, he did. (Laughter) But she did, too. She got her a fine man, but it's really an honor and a thrill to be here, thank you.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** Thank you. We have a lot of questions and we are also going to leave some time for you to play at the end.

**MR. SKAGGS:** Well, okay. (Applause) All right then.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** But those of you who are here in the audience, you can see there's a couple of instruments sitting behind us, so we are in for a treat afterwards. Just a reminder, if you do have questions, feel free to write those on the cards on the table and pass them up here. You mention that you're in town for the Wounded Warrior gala tomorrow night. What motivates you to support U.S. troops? Do you have any personal story that gives you a reason to have that as a cause?

**MR. SKAGGS:** Well, we used to do a lot more things for the USO, for our troops than what we get to do nowadays, a little harder to get over there and get back and we actually don't get asked to do as many because there's a lot more of the younger country guys that go over there now than us. But we still have a lot of fans, a lot of friends, a lot of people that love bluegrass and love our music from years ago.

But it's just a good thing to serve those that serve us, you know? The greatest among you is he who serves, that's what the Lord said. So it just seems to be the right thing to do, to serve and to do good for others. They have given their lives, limbs, families many times, to serve our country and that's the least thing we could do. Not just the best thing we could do, but it's the least that we could do.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** We mentioned all the Grammys you've gotten, it was a long list. Are there any high honors that elude you that you still aspire to?

**MR. SKAGGS:** Dad of the Year. (Laughter)

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** Hopefully, the kids are listening.

**MR. SKAGGS:** I hope so. Kids, it's getting close to Christmas. You know, entertainer of the year of CMA was a big, big deal. That was a big thing for me and that was in 1985. I just did two nights in Nashville at the new expansion of the Hall of Fame. We have a beautiful country music Hall of Fame, you've got to come see it now. It's more beautiful than never. The Omni Hotel just built a huge hotel there and we have now the new Music City Center and it goes right into the Country Music Hall of Fame. So they

have a new concert hall called the CMA music hall, it's like an 800 seat auditorium and we were asked to be the first artist, the first concert, in the room, in the new room. So, I wrote a declaration proclamation for that new building and spoke it. You know, you can speak something and pray something with your eyes open. I mean, it's just, you know, you don't have to-- so that's kind of what I was doing. They asked me to be part of that fundraiser called Working on a Building. And I thought, well gosh, if you're going to ask me to do that, then I'm going to dedicate this daggone thing to the right place. And so I did, I took my chances there.

But I guess maybe Country Music Hall of Fame would be a nice thing to win one of these days. So who knows? I don't know. Awards and that kind of thing, they're really nice to have, but they're really not necessary for me to be satisfied anymore. I'm so satisfied, and really more excited about playing music than I've ever been in my life. And me and Miss Sharon, we in 1986, we won country duo of the year, or '87 I guess it was, for "Love Can't Ever Get Better Than This." We did a duet and so it's taken us all these years, but now that I have Skaggs Family Records, which is a wonderful thing-- it's good to have your own record label, your own studio-- but we're doing a duet project now that I'm so excited about and can't wait to get it finished. We've recorded five songs so far, so that's a wonderful thing. I'm so thankful to have her in my life. She's been such a strong woman of faith and a friend that I've really needed. So, love singing with her and singing about her and singing to her and we're going to get that done here pretty soon.

But, you know, it's almost like awards and those kinds of things. Like I said, they're nice to have and I've had 14 Grammys and those are nice to-- actually, I gave one of my Grammys to Mr. Monroe because he'd never won one before and so he and I did an instrumental together called "Wheel Hoss," it was a song that he wrote. So when I got the Grammy in the mail, the first thing I did was I called up Mr. Monroe and said, "Hey, can I come and see you? I've got something I want to give you." "All right there, boy. Just come on over."

I get over there and I give him this Grammy. And he said, "What is that right there?" I said, "Mr. Bill, it's a Grammy award." "What is that now?" I said, "Well, there's an organization--" and I had to explain the whole thing to him. And here's a man that started his own genre of music, bluegrass. I mean, come on. And yet, he had never been honored for that yet. So anyway, I gave him that Grammy and he held it up real high like he really won something and I said, "Well, we did this together." Anyway, so I only have 13 in my possession. I know where the other one is. (Applause)

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** We do have a good number of questions about Bill Monroe. The audience is eager to hear more about how your first encounter with him shaped your career and a little bit more about what he was like?

**MR. SKAGGS:** Well, I loved him, I loved his singing and playing. My dad and mom really loved him a lot. They loved hearing him on the Grand Ole Opry. So when I started playing mandolin, the only mandolin player I knew was Bill Monroe. So I would listen to him on the Grand Ole Opry with mom and dad and I would hear his records on the radio. Back in those days, in the days when I was growing up, they would play on country radio stations, they played Ray Price, they played George Jones, they played Buck Owens, they played Patsy Cline and they'd play Bill Monroe, they'd play Flatt and Scruggs and the Stanley Brothers all on the same station. It wasn't like okay, this is country music over here and this is bluegrass over there. I don't know what alien brain child came up with the fact of trying to split this music. I mean, it's all country music, you know?

So anyway, so I got a great education just listening to country radio. But I got to go meet Mr. Monroe when I was six. I'd been playing at church and playing at Butler's Grocery Store there in Blaine, Kentucky and so we heard he was coming to a little town, Martha, Kentucky, and the little high school there. So we went to see him and so I'm sitting there, he plays about 30 minutes. And all of a sudden some of the neighbors in the hood, "Let little Ricky Skaggs get up there and sing one." And I was like, God, I wanted to slide under my chair, you know? And so he did another few songs and thinking the guy would go away. And no, he hollered out again. So finally, Mr. Monroe said, "Well, get that little Ricky Skaggs up here. Where's he at?" And he had no idea how little Ricky Skaggs was. He had no idea he was just calling a six year old on the stage.

So the stage was about this tall off the floor, it was a little gymnasium and he just reaches down and grabs me by the arm and pulls me up on the stage. That's why one of my arms is longer than the other. But he barked into the mic and said, "What do you play there, boy?" And I said, "I play the mandolin." So he pulls off his big Gibson F5 mandolin, which is like a guitar for my little bony frame and puts it on me and wraps the strap around where it'll fit me and I can hold it and everything. And sang a song, I sang a song called "Ruby, Are You Mad at Your Man?" That's a great six year old's song to be singing. I could never figure out what she was mad at, you know? I just never knew that.

But anyway, the band knew it and we went into it. But, you know, I think that night was another defining moment kind of thing. There have been a lot of those in my life but just seeing the passion that he had for his music and seeing-- you know, here he was a big star, he was a big Grand Ole Opry star and started a whole genre of music himself and yet, he took five minutes out of his show to step out of the spotlight and let some little unheard of kid completely unknown just up there to play and sing for a minute.

And we didn't talk afterwards. I didn't go back and say, "Hey, thanks for that." I didn't see him for another almost ten years when I joined Ralph Stanley's band. I was 15 and so I ran into him one night and I said, "You remember playing in Martha, Kentucky, and you letting a little boy up on stage with you?" "Yeah, I believe I remember that." And I said, "Well, that's me." And he said, "How old is you now?" I said, "Well, I was six years old." He said, "No, I believe you was 12 or 13, wasn't you?" And I said, "No,

sir. I mean, that would have been like two years ago, if I was 12 or 13.” I don't think he could believe that he let a six year old get up on stage with him.

But Bill Monroe was one of the funniest men I've ever been around in my whole life. He didn't think he was a bit funny, but he was hilarious. He grew up in the Depression, born in 1911 and I mean, he just had some of the funniest sayings in the whole world. We wrote a song about it on one of my most recent albums called “Music to My Ears.” There's a song that me and Gordon Kennedy wrote about an incident with Bill. He was really, really hungry one night late, they were out on the road. And it wasn't like it is now where you can find places that stay open 24/7, you know? So, he woke up and he was ready to eat a tennis shoe. I mean, he was so hungry, he would eat anything.

And they couldn't find anything. So the banjo player in the band had drove up from south Georgia or somewhere and his grandmother had put some old country ham biscuits in a bag for him. And so by now, these biscuits are a day old, okay? Let's just be real. And so he told Mr. Monroe, he said, “Mr. Bill, I've got some old country ham biscuits back here in my bunk and you're welcome--” he said, “They're about a day old.” He said, “Boy, bring me them biscuits up here. You know you can't hurt ham.”

So we had to write a song called “You Can't Hurt Ham.” “You can hurt tater salad and it'll hurt you back. Get a hold of milk too old and throw things out of whack. And you can hurt a chicken, salmonella will mess you up. No one can hurt you like someone you love. There's a culinary promise that's known throughout the land, no frigerate, no expire date, you know you can't hurt ham.” (Applause) Great stories of Mr. Monroe. There's many of them in the book, so yeah.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** You mentioned how music of similar genres used to be played more on the same station. Now I can go to a bluegrass station, I can go to a country station, I can go to rock, I can go to pop, whatever. I can go on Pandora and I can make a Ricky Skaggs station. What do you think about that? Is that a good thing or a bad thing for the popularity of a genre like bluegrass with a differentiation like that?

**MR. SKAGGS:** I think it's good. I mean, I think it was-- the alternative, which was all these formats on one station back in the day, I think that was good, too, because I won a transistor radio when I was about five or six years old at a little talent contest. I beat some little girl that was a baton twirler and so I got the transistor radio this time. Normally, I would get beat by the baton twirler, but this time I slammed her.

So anyway, brought this transistor radio home and I was so exited about it because I was hearing music that I'd never heard before in my life. You know, just being from eastern Kentucky and having television there, really we only got one station. Well, we got two channels. One had snow on it, the other one actually had a picture. But we could get NBC and that's where Flatt and Scruggs was on, and Porter Wagoner had a show on there. But for the most part, that transistor radio took me to WOWO Fort Wayne, Indiana and I was listening to rock and roll and I was hearing WLAC in Nashville. I didn't know that there was another station in Nashville besides WSN. But



they had a bunch of good stations in Nashville. I was hearing black gospel, I was just hearing early rock and roll, the Beatles. My sister was so crazy about the Beatles. I remember my grandpa could get channel-- he could get CBS. So we walked across the snowy tundra between my house and my grandpa's house. We had this big field and we had to walk across there and go to watch the Beatles that night. My sister just had to see them on the Ed Sullivan show.

And we get over there and my sister just jumps right in front of the TV and she's pulling her hair out just like the girls at the Ed Sullivan theater. You've seen the pictures now, and anyway, they were just screaming and my sister was screaming and I looked at dad and I said, "They're pretty good, ain't they Dad?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "They ain't as good as Stanley Brothers, are they?" He said, "Nope." (Laughter) Anyway, but I think I liked the fact that you can find bluegrass almost anywhere now, you know? I wish people would pay for it, you know? Free downloads is-- it's just like me going up and getting in your back pocket and stealing some money out of it and your even knowing about it but you can't do anything about it. It's kind of a bad situation and many times songwriters are the last guys to ever really get paid. But that's the world we live in. It don't mean we like it, but it's not fair.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** The music industry, much like the news industry, has found itself in the situation where people expect the product for free. Do you see a way to solve that problem with music?

**MR. SKAGGS:** No. You know, people expect-- you know, our country for the last few years, has -- I've seen it going in a direction where people expect free stuff. They expect to get something for free. And if you raise generations to expect it, then you've already let the cat out of the bag. How you going to put it back in, how are you going to make people pay for something that they were getting for free? They'll figure out another way.

You know, just the things of little league baseball is another example that I see where everybody gets a trophy. You know, you get a trophy for losing. We used to get trophies for winning and we were glad because we worked hard. And now you get a trophy for losing, so why does anybody want to win when you can get a trophy for losing? So I don't know how that changes. It's just our society, we're just so politically correct that we don't want to hurt anybody's feelings, we want to make things so nice and so good for everybody and it's weird. It's really strange. Like I said, I'm 59 and I've seen so many changes in the last 20 years in my life I never, ever thought I would see.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** What do you see as the future of bluegrass? Are you attracting younger fans?

**MR. SKAGGS:** Yes. Lot of younger fans coming along to the music and they're playing it great. They're so good at what they do. You know, when I was growing up, I used to take either a 78 and slow it down to 45 and I could learn every note that they played. Because when you'd slow it down, it would go down a whole octave. And so I

would learn all the licks, you know? So I learned that. Nowadays, with CDs, or MP3s, you can't slow them down. You have to learn it real time. So I think that's what causes these kids to just fly when they play. Right over there's a flyer. He's amazing. They didn't slow something down to learn it like us old guys.

But I see a lot of excitement for the music. But, you know, as kids grow, they really need fathers. They need elders, they need teachers. You know, there's a great scripture that says, "You have many, many instructors, but you have so few fathers." And I think if we've ever needed fathers, we need them now more than ever because they carry so much wisdom. I believe that our nation is going to get to a place maybe in not too many years from now, where old farmers, old elders, people that know how to plant and farm and harvest and grannies that know how to can and how to quilt and how to make-- how to rob bees and have honey and how to raise a garden, those are going to be some of the most honored people in the community because they have wisdom to know how to do these things.

These young kids, they don't know come here from siccum about how to do anything like that. Oh, come here from siccum? Okay, that's a dichotomy [?], sorry. Anyway, sorry about that. That's an old saying. But anyway, I think that we really, with all the young ones, and you folks in here are not real young, so I think we're all kind of in the same boat here. But, you know, one of the greatest things you could do is find some young people that you really see some talent in, someone that cares about what they do, and come alongside them and teach them the things you know. Because they really don't know as much as they think they do. But you do. And you can teach them and they can teach you because we don't know everything we need to know. I've learned a lot from this young guy right here, and young players in my band.

I used to be the youngest guy in the band, dang, but now I'm the oldest by far in the band. But I love the fact that we have an opportunity that we can still teach young people and I think it's important. Because like I said, they may act like they don't really want to know anything. But truly in their heart they're dying to know and they're dying to have fathers in their life and elders and people that can really champion them and encourage them. Because they don't get a lot of encouragement at home many times, and lot of young kids are coming out of single parent families and so where they haven't had a good solid father in their life.

So we have a great opportunity to do that, so I'm hoping that we can think that that's a good thing, because it is.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** You wrote that you surround yourself with musicians that are more talented than you are. It sounds like they're mostly younger now. Of all the people you've had playing behind you, who would you say is the most talented?

**MR. SKAGGS:** Well, honestly, I've had some really great musicians that have been in my band. Andy Leftwitch here is one of the most talented that I know of. He is an incredible fiddle player, but he's a brilliant mandolin player as well, one of the best I

think in bluegrass. Now, he doesn't play the style that I play, but I don't play the style he plays. And I hear what he plays and I try to learn some of the licks, but he's off and gone to another part of the neck by the time I figure out where he started from. And so he's been a great talent in my band.

There's a young-- I've had some really good acoustic guitar players, a guy named Brian Sutton came to my band when we first kind of transitioned out of country music into bluegrass in 1997 and started Skaggs Family Records. I came back to bluegrass right after Mr. Monroe passed away because I really felt like-- lot of people thought I came back to bluegrass to take Bill Monroe's place. That was not it, I would never be that stupid, try to take somebody-- you could never take Bill Monroe's place. You get a Bill Monroe once in a hundred years, so to try to take his place-- but I came back to just try to give some leadership and to give my name and whatever I could do to help bluegrass grow even more after his passing.

And so I've had some really, really good players, Brian Sutton was one, a guitar player that came in. Cody Kilby is another great guitar player that's in my band now, he's still with me. There's a young kid that's playing with me right now named Justin Moses that I think is just one of the most talented young men-- me and Andy was talking about him the other day and we were saying I don't think we know any musician that plays all the instruments as well per instrument as Justin does. He is an incredible banjo player, but he's an incredible mandolin player. He's an incredible dobro player and sings like a bird and plays fiddle and guitar. He plays everything, so he's just-- I just think there's a lot of youth growing up that's going to amaze us with music.

And I think here we talk about elders and all that, but I do believe that there's some youthfulness coming with music that's going to astonish the nations. I think music is one of the things that we'll be able to touch the nations with and bring a gift, bring something really wholesome to the nations. I feel like that art is going to be one of the ways that we get in and out kind of covertly into the arts communities of maybe of the Middle East or even Europe. But I just think music is going to play a huge role in the next 15, 20 years as well.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** You've had a lot of great collaborations including, of course, with Mr. Monroe. Who is out there, either present that you can actually collaborate with, or in the past that you can collaborate with in your imagination that you have not had a chance to yet?

**MR. SKAGGS:** Well, Bruce Hornsby and I have recently-- this is our second record. We did a record in a studio called "Skaggs Hornsby." I think it's 2009, I think that came out. And we went out and toured that for a couple of years off and on. And we started recording a bunch of the live shows and went through them after the tour was over and just really found that we had a treasure trove of incredible live performances of these songs. So anyway, we mixed that record and put it out, it's current now. It's my newest thing and his newest thing called "Cluck Old Hen." Ain't too many people writing songs about chickens anymore, I found out. But I think there should be, though.

Anyway, Barry Gibb has become a great friend of mine. I've known him now for probably the last four or five years. He and I have talked. I had him on the Grand Ole Opry first, his first time to be on the Grand Ole Opry and it was just an amazing time, it was about a year and a half ago. And then he recently came back and did the Opry again and he and I-- I was trying to find something that we could do that would be different than the first time that he came. So I asked him about it, he said, "I don't know about that." So we were still trying to figure out what to do and Sharon just said, "Well, why don't you think about "Staying Alive?" Yeah! A bluegrass version of "Staying Alive." You can see it on YouTube. If you're there, go and check it out.

But I think we're going to-- we're eventually going to try to get in the studio and do some stuff. And Peter Frampton and I have just recently become pretty good friends and he made his Opry debut last Saturday night in Nashville. And he came out and we did-- it's like a blend of bluegrass into his world. He sent me an email yesterday just thanking me for having him at the Opry. But he said, "I just love the way that you hear music and you blend the genres together because," he said, "that's how I believe in music. Because music is music, period, you know?" We play in the places that we are. We don't have to change.

If I went and played with-- if I had have ever played with Ravi Shankar, I would have just played bluegrass. I mean, I would have listened to what he was playing and I would have just played bluegrass mandolin around what he's playing on his sitar. So I think the music works and especially when you try to be who you are in your heart, be honest to that.

But I really do want to do some stuff with Peter and I certainly want to do some stuff with Barry. I just did a, me and Gordon Kennedy, did a record a few years ago called "Mosaic," it's a gospel record, it's absolutely gorgeous and right after that, we did a thing for women's cancer research and they were having Nashville artists do a Paul McCartney song. So we did "Listen What the Man Says," bluegrass, and it's pretty cool. And that all on a record, but I'll be putting it on a bluegrass record here some time soon.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** Well, we have a lot more questions, but we also only have an hour. So let's bring Andy up, hear some music, and if there's time afterwards, we'll throw you some more questions.

**MR. SKAGGS:** All right, sounds good to me. All right, Andy, get down here, boy. You'll have to ask me about this mandolin when we talk again. There's is an incredible story about this. Every time I tune, I always think about my old dad looking down from heaven saying, "Lord, help that boy." Because my dad was a very patient man normally. He was the kind of a guy who would sit around a groundhog hole-- do they have groundhogs up here? He would sit around a groundhog hole for hours waiting for him to stick his head out so he could pop him with a .22 for getting into his tomato patch. But he wouldn't give me five minutes to tune.

\_\_: [INAUDIBLE]

**MR. SKAGGS:** It's fine with me, brother. Personal videos, I think they're all personal nowadays. All right. Well, we thought we'd bring you a little southern culture up here. Is that all right? (Applause)

[music]

**MR. SKAGGS:** Yeah! (Applause)

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** [INAUDIBLE]

**MR. SKAGGS:** Well, I don't have to.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** Yeah, can we hear some more?

**MR. SKAGGS:** You want to hear one more? (Applause) Okay. This is what happened to my hair a while ago. Thank you very much. [singing] No, sorry. I loved Johnny Cash. He was a great friend. He and Miss June once took me and Miss Sharon, we loved going over there to their house and spending time with them. They were a precious couple that loved God and loved our country, our nation and we loved being with them.

Well, I guess it was last year, was it James Taylor that was here? Yeah. And he's an old buddy, we did a record together back a few years ago and it's a Christmas song. So I thought I would do that, James was here last year. Called "A New Star Shining."

[music]

**MR. SKAGGS:** Thank you.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** Thank you.

**MR. SKAGGS:** You're welcome. Thank you, all. We certainly want to mention our show tomorrow night for the Wounded Warriors gala at the Strathmore.org, you can go there and find out. There's a few tickets left. Should be a lot of tickets left, but I'm glad there are just a few. So, get those last few, okay? Because this is going to be a good thing.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** Thank you. We have time for a couple more questions.

**MR. SKAGGS:** All right, then.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** You've mentioned your faith a few times. Tell us, why is your faith important to your work, especially as a songwriter. How does it influence?

**MR. SKAGGS:** Well, God is the giver of all gifts and they're good gifts. Music is a good gift. So, for a long time, I thought that God was mad at me or something, you know. When I was little, a lot of the churches that I went to when I was young, I heard a lot of the wrath of God, I didn't hear so much about the love of God. God is full of love but he's also righteous and he is sovereign and his ways, he sticks to those and his word can never be changed.

So I've come to find out that God really, really loves me a lot and I really, really love him a lot. And so now that we've got that settled, all the planets and stars are all aligned now for my life. But, no really, faith is just something that it's like when you put Coca-Cola into water, there's no way of getting it out. You know, he comes to live in our hearts when we accept Christ Jesus. So to me, that's the creativity. I think that God is the greatest songwriter ever, I think he's the best musician ever, I think he's the best of everything. And I think learning to walk with him and talk with him, pray with him, listen to him, that's just where life is.

I have found that and there's no changing that. It's just like once you get that, it's like-- you get his DNA because the Bible talks about being born again, told Nicodemus that he had to be born again. And it's like you exchange your old life for his real life, his new life. And so, it's just the greatest life ever and I trust it. I don't understand it all, I'll never understand it all. But what I do understand changed my life so much. So, you don't have to know a whole lot to fall in love with Jesus. Just know that he loves you and he died for you, he gave his life for you.

So that helps me to live every day and let that be a great day and look forward to the next day when I get up and can do the same thing.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** We have a couple of cloggers in our audience.

**MR. SKAGGS:** A couple of cloggers. Well, that's nice.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** You had cloggers perform on your song "Shady Grove." They want to know how did that come to be?

**MR. SKAGGS:** Oh, well my bass player at the time, Mark Fain, was married to a clogger that clogged at the Grand Ole Opry, Jessica Fain. And great dancer and so we just thought that "Shady Grove," just the temple of "Shady Grove," just really sounded like a fine song to dance on. So we had them come in the studio and we put them on a big old sheet of plywood and miced it and then had them dance it two or three different times with them in their headphones before they could dance to the music and dance to what they just put on tape so it sounded like a whole bunch of folks. But, we love good dancing and Miss Sharon is also a mighty fine clogger, too. Her dad, Mr. Buck White, there's pictures on the internet of him at the artist in residence at the Hall of Fame and he and Bruce Hornsby played the piano together, they played "Alabama Jubilee." And after Buck got done playing, he got up and started dancing. We come from a long line of--

well, Miss Sharon's family, anyway, dances. I never learned how because I was always playing the fiddle.

\_\_\_: Excuses, excuses.

**MR. SKAGGS:** Excuses. (Laughter) I don't think so.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** We are, unfortunately, almost out of time now. But, before we wrap up I want to remind our guests of our upcoming speakers. On January 7<sup>th</sup>, we have General Ray Odierno, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff. On January 9<sup>th</sup>, General Frank J. Grass, the Chief of the National Guard; and on January 10<sup>th</sup>, Joe Boardman, Chairman and CEO of Amtrak.

Secondly, I would like to present you with our traditional National Press Club coffee mug, just like James Taylor has.

**MR. SKAGGS:** Oh, wow. Thank you so much.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** Thank you.

**MR. SKAGGS:** And I love the color.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** Good.

**MR. SKAGGS:** Blue is one of my favorite colors, blue and gold.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** Wonderful. Well, thank you so much for being here today. How about a round of applause? (Applause)

**MR. SKAGGS:** Thank you, thank you so much.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** I'd also like to thank our National Press Club staff including our Journalism Institute and Broadcast Center for helping organize today's event. And here's a reminder, you can find more information about the National Press Club including a transcript, and most importantly here, a video of today's events online at [www.press.org](http://www.press.org). Thank you, we are adjourned.

**MR. SKAGGS:** Thank you.

**MS. GREILING KEANE:** Thank you. (Applause)

END

