

DISCOVER BLUEGRASS: Exploring American Roots Music

Unit 3: Early Bluegrass - Win Your Winners, Lose Your Losers!

In the film we learned about Bill Monroe, who is known as the Father of Bluegrass Music. What the video did not show were the details in his life that made a major difference in the goals he set and the way he conducted himself. So it is with all people: personal factors, small and large, positive and negative, can influence our future. This lesson helps learners discover the pertinent details in their lives, their “winners and losers,” to help them map out a positive path for themselves.

Typical standards addressed:

Biography
Human development
Characterization
Dealing with disabilities

Things you will need:

Equipment and materials for written communication

Procedure:

After viewing the Early Bluegrass part of the film, ask learners to relate what they remember about the Father of Bluegrass. What did he look like? What were some things he did? What did people say about him? What stories were told about him?

After collecting this info verbally or on the blackboard, pose the critical issue: “What you’ve mentioned are the obvious things, the kinds of things historians always mention. But when you really examine anyone’s life closely, you find there are early experiences and factors that may seem small but have profound, long-term impact on their behavior.”

For instance in the case of Bill Monroe, did you know that:

- He was born on the 13th day of September.
- He was the eighth of eight children.
- He was born with congenital esotropia, often insensitively called “crossed eyes.”
- Because of his disability other kids, including his brothers, picked on him mercilessly. He became so shy and self-conscious that when visitors came to their farm, he hid in the barn.
- Because of the look of his eyes, even adults thought he was “not quite right.”
- He desperately wanted to play music with the rest of his family. The fiddle was his instrument of choice, but he had to settle for the mandolin because it was the only instrument left after all the other siblings made their choices. They even told him to remove some strings so his mandolin wouldn’t make so much “noise.”
- His parents died when he was a young teenager, and he went to live with his mother’s brother, Pendleton “Uncle Pen” Vandiver.

But, on the positive side:

- His family, especially his mother, was very musical, instilling a deep love of music in all the children.
- He was tall and brawny. Hard farm work made him physically strong, a tireless worker.
- His guardian, Uncle Pen, was a popular, skillful fiddler—someone who recognized young Bill’s gifts

and needs and someone who Bill, in turn, trusted and admired.

- Perhaps because of his poor vision, he was an acute listener, a person who could listen to a tune and repeat every note he heard.
- He had the good fortune to meet Arnold Shultz, a popular African-American musician in the region who readily shared musical techniques and traditions with him.
- He had an in-born sense of rhythm and timing.
- He had a clever imagination and a way with words and images, and a talent for turning his feelings into songs that touched other people's hearts.

To the learners: It's said that to attain success and happiness in life, you need to "win your winners, and lose your losers." People who win discover their talents, unique opportunities and other personal resources as early as possible so they can use them to shape their route through life. Losers try to become what they are not well suited to be or make the same mistakes over and over again because they don't acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses.

Despite his disability and cruel childhood, Bill Monroe was very successful in life. A map of his life would show him navigating through life's obstacles by learning from past experience to capitalize on his strengths and set good goals.

For the lesson, each student will first make and discuss an inventory of their winners and losers. Because it may be difficult for some learners to acknowledge problems or shortcomings, the teacher should treat all reports with sensitivity and confidentiality. Let the learner take this exercise to a comfortable depth.

Learners will develop one or more of the following:

1. A Life Map – a chart or map that shows where you will be, when and what you'll be doing, from now to the end of the road. Think of winners and losers graphically or artistically as perhaps peaks and valleys, smooth sailing, ruts in the road or other visual devices that depict what we encounter as we journey through life.

2. Autobiographical Sketch – a writing assignment that captures your life as you foresee it, describing how you have made the most of your talents and resources and have minimized what you perceive as negative factors.

3. Winner/Loser Chart – Create a grid that lists your personal winners and losers, and corresponding to each, the plans or strategies you might use to win your winners and lose your losers.

Additional Lesson Ideas:

Use this same approach to analyze the lives of other famous people. For instance, what were Helen Keller, Albert Einstein or Martin Luther King's winners and losers, and how did they deal with them?

Similarly, have learners consider individuals who have never been able to get beyond their early shortcomings, e.g., the children of bad parents who become bad parents themselves or the bright but lazy child who becomes a frustrated, disillusioned adult. Look for examples from social studies, literature and popular sources such as television shows.

Discuss how sometimes, as in the case of Bill Monroe, the pain of negative experiences can actually generate great motivation for success.

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www.bluegrassfoundation.org