



H I G H L O N E S O M E B E L O W S E A L E V E L

**Faces and Stories of Bluegrass Music
in the Netherlands**



FOREWORD

How often is it that we can get an inside view of the musical subculture of an entire nation?

The Netherlands early on embraced folk music, blues, bluegrass, and other musical forms with roots in the southern United States. Drawing on earlier work for her master's thesis, vocalist and bassist Loes van Schaijk traveled the country, interviewing musicians far and wide, accompanied by photographer Marieke Odekerken. Reading Loes's articles and seeing Marieke's images capturing rare intimate moments is like being a fly on the wall of the Dutch bluegrass and roots music scene.

As a musician, Loes navigates the interviews from a thoughtful perspective, distilling them to a fine point so that anybody who picks up the book and reads a random page can be informed and entertained. In quotes from seasoned performers as well as younger ones—soloists, duos, trios, whole bands—I felt they all enjoyed sharing their stories and passions with a young musician deeply interested in this music, its history and its people, in her country.

Along the way we meet instrument builders, promoters, cowboys and wild men, women songwriters, children growing up in musical families, a saw player, and a guy who stretched painting canvas over a wooden salad bowl with rabbit-hide glue to make a banjo...fittingly in Rembrandt's homeland steeped in world-changing art.

I often hear people describing to Loes the effect of bluegrass (and related music) in their lives saying, "It felt like coming home." In the Netherlands as well as the US and other countries and in both urban and rural populations, I've heard and experienced the same emotion. Something about bluegrass...it evokes feelings of home and family.

A thread is captured within one of the pieces: "...Love of tradition in the music they listen to, combined with a desire to bend the rules of those traditions in the music they make." This inclusive appreciation of the two sides seems to be a theme on the scene. Other qualities I've felt from the stories: eclecticism, sarcasm and wry humor, expressiveness, straightforwardness, sensitivity, passion, creativity, and rugged individualism.

Most of these certainly bring to mind Bill Monroe, the half-Dutch bluegrass founder, Kentucky mandolin player and high tenor singer who spawned the entire genre, whose mother's Americanized last name Vandiver is familiar in the Netherlands as Van der Veere, meaning from the small island city of Veere in the province of Zeeland. Aware and proud of bluegrass's international appeal and its influence on other musical forms, Bill would surely have treasured this book and remembered many friends he met during his tours of the Netherlands.

Sandy Rothman
Berkeley, California
February 2015



Listen to music and/or find more information by scanning
the pictures in this book with the Layar app

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Bluegrass: A style of acoustic music named after the sound developed by Bill Monroe and his band the Blue Grass Boys in the southeastern United States in the 1940s. The style, with roots in pre-industrial traditional music from the British Isles and strong African American influences, distinguishes itself by the combination of stringed instruments (typically five-string banjo, mandolin, fiddle, dreadnought guitar, resonator guitar, and upright bass), hard-driving rhythms, virtuoso solos, harmony vocals, and “high lonesome” singing.

Originally the specific sound of one band, it grew into a style when other artists started to imitate and further develop the sound. It is closely related to other styles of American roots music like Appalachian oldtime and string band music, traditional country music, jug band and skiffle. It spread all over the world and eventually reached the Netherlands near the end of the 1950s. Movies and influential pop groups have caused short moments of popularity, but for the most part, lovers of bluegrass in the Netherlands from the '50s until the present have lived “under the radar.”

Narrative identity: Describing who you are by telling your life story.
This book contains fifty-six stories about bluegrass in the Netherlands.
Or actually, fifty-seven—because I'm about to tell you mine.

I was an odd one, as a child. There weren't that many other children in the southeastern Dutch province of Limburg where I grew up in the '80s and '90s who were outspoken fans of American culture. Whenever I felt lonely or out of place, I would attribute it to the fact that I should have been born in Pineville, North Carolina, where my parents had lived for two years with my older brother. My mother—a workaholic—was bored out of her wits sitting at home without a work permit. To keep herself busy, she had done everything from volunteering at my brother's kindergarten to learning to play the five-string banjo. That banjo, the instruction book *Earl Scruggs and the Five-String Banjo*, cassette tapes filled with country music my mother recorded off the radio, and my brother's old toys and Dr. Seuss books were the crown jewels of our home in my opinion.

Idolizing my older brother, the way little sisters do, I followed his lead in music—keyboard first, then piano, then guitar. While doing the dishes, my mother and I sang harmonies to any melody we heard on the radio. Then, my dream came true: I got to do a high school year in North Carolina! It was a year totally devoid of bluegrass, as I lived on the Outer Banks, in the midst of surfers, emos, and Christians, who each had their own music. It was a year of ups and downs. When I came back, I still hadn't found that “home” I always thought would be on the other side of the Atlantic.

It wasn't until 2004 that I made a friend who was into country music. Though I still had a soft spot for country, by that time I was looking for something with a bit more edge, more power. Somebody she knew told us that bluegrass might be the type of music we were looking for. So we took a train, another train, and a bus to a village in the middle of the country. When we walked into the community center where the European World of Bluegrass Festival (or: EWOB) took place, we saw people with acoustic instruments in every corner of the building, singing songs like: “*I was born in East Virginia / North Caroliiiina I did roam....*” I was dumbfounded. At the end of the weekend, I felt like I had gained a family...and a home.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

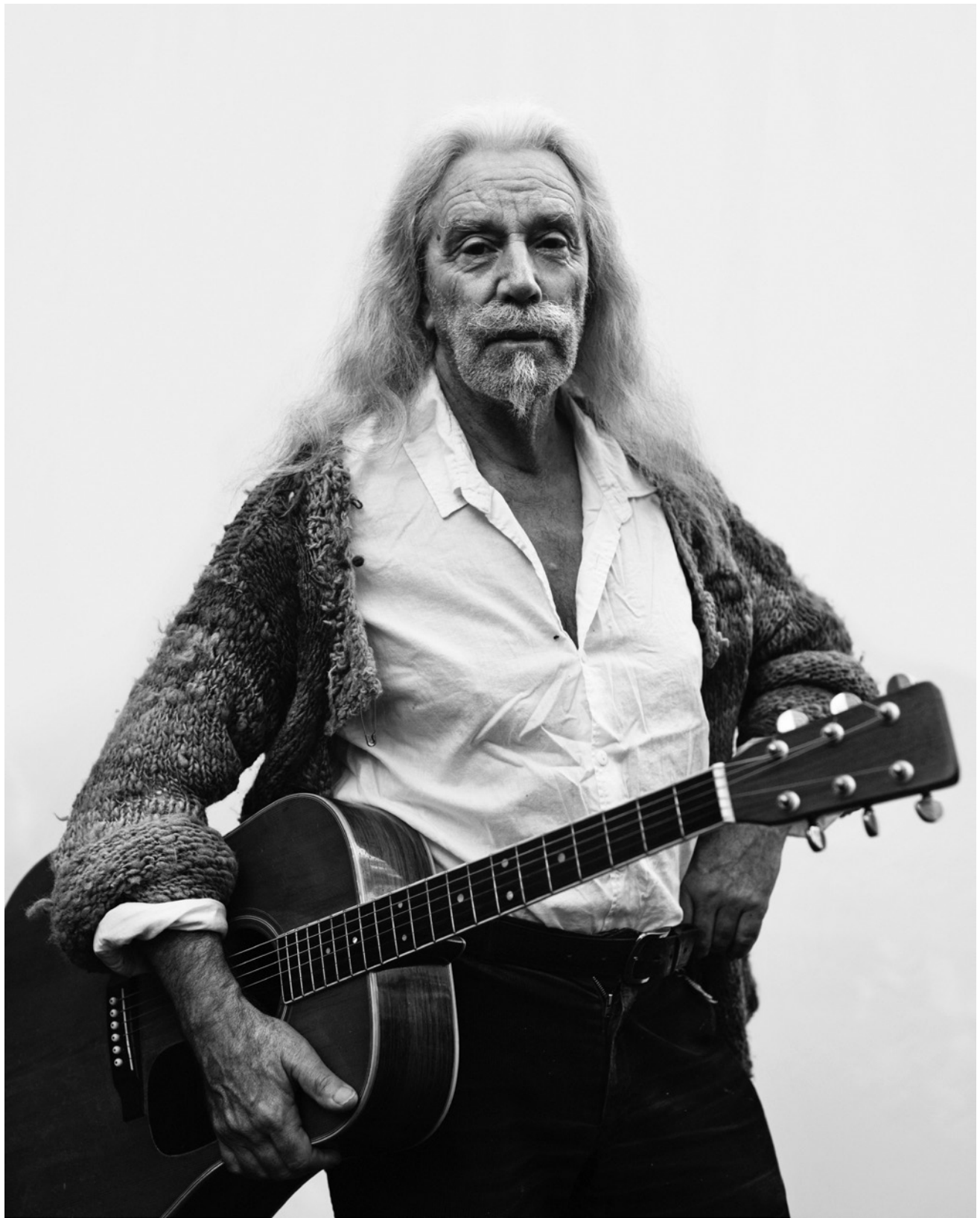
At the EWOB, I met a group of experienced Slovak bluegrass musicians who were looking for a singer. In an adventure that lasted three years, I got to know the style from an international perspective. For my master's thesis Arts & Culture, I chose to investigate whether bluegrass in the Netherlands was in some way related to the cultural phenomenon of americanization. As I had to base my research largely on interviews and surveys, I got to know many bluegrass lovers in a short time. To my surprise, most of them said they loved the music first and foremost, and though an understanding of historical context was important to them, they said they would have felt the same regardless of where it came from—be it the United States, Africa, or the North Pole. When asked about a bluegrass lifestyle, most of them showed a similar nonchalance. Though you will see a few people wear cowboy hats to a bluegrass event, a large part of the crowd looks completely neutral, almost as if they're not affiliated with a certain scene at all. But there is a lot going on underneath the surface, if you give it your eyes and ears.

As I traveled to all the corners of the country to interview people I had never met before, being welcomed into their homes and treated to lunch as if we were old friends, the thought often crossed my mind that I wanted to share the existence of these people with the world. Because pictures say more than a thousand words, I contacted the best portrait photographer I knew: Marieke Odekerken. When I told her about my idea to turn my dull thesis material into an accessible and artsy book, it spoke to her right away. She had heard of bluegrass; looking back now, as this project is coming to a close, Marieke realizes her bluegrass playlist on Spotify included a song by the Dutch group Four Wheel Drive! However, she never knew how to go about getting more acquainted with the style. She learned to play violin, but quit taking lessons because her teacher only offered classical repertoire and technique. "If somebody could have taught me how to play bluegrass or folk, I'm sure I would have continued playing," she said. The past half year, I visited two bluegrass jam sessions with Marieke. The first time, she sat in the middle of a jam circle on a washing machine in a laundry room, and kept on listening until three o'clock in the morning. The second time, she had brought her violin. A musician gave her some pointers, and a bit later she was playing and singing "Blue Moon of Kentucky" in the session.

Marieke and I visited over ninety people in thirty different places over a period of six months. All the pictures were taken outdoors in natural daylight against a simple white backdrop, showing the people as they are, with zero to minimal direction in the way of costume or posture. The stories in this book are not only the life stories of individuals, but also snippets of a larger history. Of all the documents carefully stored in private archives, we chose to print one here: a letter to Henk Abrahams from Bill Clifton, who would be the first American bluegrass artist to perform in the Netherlands a few years after the letter was written in 1962. The letter illustrates how people went about finding information about a foreign culture in the days before you could just type your enquiry into Google. It also mentions the Dutch Stickbuddy Club, the first club in the Netherlands devoted to country music, and its printed bulletin *Hillbilly Hayride*. The stories accompanying the portraits are full of details like these, told roughly in chronological order. They can be read from front to back, or one at a time by randomly flipping through the pages. For those of you who are unfamiliar with bluegrass jargon or Dutch culture, a glossary of terms is included in the back. Each picture can be scanned using the Layar-app on a smartphone, which will refer you to more information about and music by the portrayed person(s) on the Internet.

It was not my intention to offer a complete, encyclopaedic history of bluegrass music in the Netherlands. Instead, this book is an impression of how colorful nearly a hundred different characters can come across in black and white, because of their passion for an obscure style of music. In a perfect world, every single person in the Dutch bluegrass family would have been portrayed or at least given credit in this book. In the real world, at least it's a start.

Loes van Schaijk
Rotterdam, the Netherlands
March 2015



When I arranged a meeting with Cornelis le Mair (“Cees” for friends), he had just been visited by the crews of two different television shows. Not only is Cornelis an extraordinary artist who paints in the style of the Old Masters, his whole appearance makes you think you just shook hands with Rembrandt. His farmhouse in Eindhoven is an artwork in itself, filled to the brim with musical instruments, paintings, tapestries, decorated tiles, thousands of art and science books, and exotic objects. It almost feels like a crime to make a black-and-white picture of this man in front of a white screen. But while we are enjoying our fairytale surroundings, we are here to talk about a different subject: music.

After junior high, Cornelis had a job in a jacquard weaving workshop. That’s where he met Thijs Gijsbers, an eccentric man with a talent for art and music. “He had a great sense of humor, a bit cynical, but also a bit out of touch with reality,” Cornelis says. “He was an uneducated genius. He couldn’t read a newspaper, but he read sheet music. He could play any instrument he set his eyes on. He loved classical music and all kinds of folk, but he hated everything about modern times. It got him depressed. In the 1980s, he moved to Friesland to live in seclusion. One day his body was found at the bottom of a lake. I wonder if I could have saved him. I used to cheer him up by telling him he shouldn’t get himself so worked up about all that nonsense. I am just as disgusted with modern times as he was, but it’s our world and we have to live in it, whether we like it or not. And actually, I don’t believe things were better at any other time in history.”

As a young boy in the 1950s, Cornelis wanted to learn to play the guitar. The standard procedure was to join a ballroom orchestra, even though Cornelis detested playing tangos and waltzes for a dancing crowd. It was Thijs who introduced him to bluegrass music and to Cas Mulder. “The three of us played together for a while in a band called the Smokey Saloon Fiddlers, but that didn’t really work. Bluegrass is a very demanding style of music, and most of the band members just didn’t have the skills required.” At the time that Thijs and Cas formed a new group called the Dutch Bluegrass Boys, Cornelis had already moved to Antwerp to study at the Royal Academy of Art. The city had a buzzing music scene with characters like Derroll Adams around. But it wasn’t bluegrass that everybody was playing there—it was jug band music.

“I like jugband music, because it is more accessible than bluegrass. The whole mood surrounding it is less strict. I don’t see the added value of learning to play exactly like Earl Scruggs. The joy of making music is what matters to me most.”

When Cornelis moved back to the Netherlands, he started his own jug band with his friend Piet Hein de Vos and a few others: the Party Stompers, later changed to the Washboard String Band. Piet Hein had been Cornelis’s “companion in the battle against music” for forty years when he passed away in 2013. “What can I say—he was living hard. Heavy drinking, drugs, you name it. That will catch up with you sooner or later.” It shows that Cornelis has taken better care of his health; from the looks of him, I never would have guessed that he just turned seventy. “I was a bit of an outcast in the folk scene. I was the only one in Café De Muze in Antwerp who didn’t drink or smoke. But I saw people around me who, slowly but surely, keeled over and landed in the gutter. I told myself that if I didn’t want that kind of future, I would have to steer clear of that stuff.”

To honor the memory of Piet Hein, Cornelis is working on a CD with sixteen songs from their repertoire. In a friend’s studio, he has recorded all instruments himself layer by layer: guitar, banjo, harmonica, washboard, tambourine, mandolin, and vocals. He plays me a few rough mixes of this work in progress. When “Midnight Special” comes on, he remarks: “That’s rhythm & blues, the beginning of jazz. I love beginnings. As things develop, they get watered down and become less authentic. The 1960s were a great time to be young: everybody was starting something, everybody was experimenting. Different styles peacefully co-existed. Even if I didn’t care for what they were doing—I didn’t like rock & roll, the Beatles, or modern art—the search in itself was sincere.”



“When I moved out here, I got known as being some kind of Carter family specialist—all because of that stupid thumbpick!” Shelly O’Day, lead singer of the Oldtime Stringband, never got any comments about playing bluegrass with a thumbpick instead of a flatpick before she came to the Netherlands. “If the guys would get on my case about it, my standard thing to say was: ‘Look at the Carter Family, they use a thumbpick too!’ More and more, whenever in a session someone would say: ‘Let’s do a Carter family song!’ they’d all look at me. So I started doing a lot more Carter, and Carter is seen as old-time. When they were looking for old-time musicians for a documentary about cow painter Ruud Spil, my name came up.” The project was such a success that it got a bit out of hand; the Oldtime Stringband was born.

Though the name the Oldtime Stringband suggests the repertoire is limited to one genre, the band actually plays a mix of old-time, bluegrass, rockabilly, country, and Western swing. Shelly feels that the bluegrass and old-time scenes are more strictly separated in Europe than in the US. “It’s all the same family, but with different instruments and different rules. In bluegrass jams, especially in Europe, there are a lot of rules. Somebody nods at you to give you a solo, and you’re just smoking, doing your best to impress everybody, and then the next guy does the same, and the next guy. I prefer the mellowness of the old-time scene, where people really listen to what you’re doing and try to harmonize to it, like they do with the twin fiddles. It reminds me of the way we used to make music in our living rooms back home. Making music is very much a community activity to me, a way to be creative together.”

In Shelly’s opinion, bluegrass or any kind of improvisational music is about finding your own voice. “With that voice, you can talk to each other. That’s what I’m always looking for at jam sessions: somebody who’s not just flexing their muscles, but somebody who’s willing to have a conversation with me.”

Like her mother and grandmother before her, Shelly O’Day was raised in Tulare, California, not far from Bakersfield, where country music took root after the Dust Bowl migration. When she was growing up, there were only two radio stations: Mexican and country. She hated it as a teenager, because there was no other choice. “I remember my brother would put the radio way up on the rooftop and tune in on San Francisco. I heard the Police, and it blew my mind.”

In Shelly’s family, as in many other families from the Tulare area, it was a custom to sing songs like “Keep on the Sunny Side” and “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” together in the pizza parlor before and after eating. “A lot of Americans think bluegrass and old-time is something for ‘the folks,’ ‘the good old boys.’ When my mom would have bluegrass jams every month in her living room, I was just so embarrassed at all these people coming in with banjos... horrible!”

After high school, Shelly traveled the world for a year and took a particular interest in the Netherlands. When she finished her university studies, she went back to the Netherlands, found a job and met the love of her life. They got married and Shelly, who speaks Dutch fluently, now works as a primary school teacher in Amsterdam. She had been living in the Netherlands for seven years before she discovered there were people here who knew what bluegrass was. “My husband and I went to this EWOB thing in Voorthuizen, where we saw people from the Czech Republic singing ‘Kentucky Waltz.’ I could not believe it!” When she played in California with the Oldtime Stringband his summer, she became very aware of the impact they made on American audiences. “People thought: ‘Here are these Europeans, who are so cultured and have such a rich history, and they’re playing our music.... Wow, it must be worth something, then!’”

To all the women out there who would like to join bluegrass jams, but are a bit hesitant to step into this “man’s world,” take this advice from Shelly:

“You don’t have to be cute, but you’ve got to have balls.”

Learn one song, tell them right away what key it is in, and don’t sing too pretty. When you’ve got that many banjos, you’ve got to throw it in your nose and just get it out there. When you’re singing in an outdoor session you have to use a lot of consonants, like a chop. You need to use rhythm to carry it, to keep the group together.”



In 2001, a stroke abruptly ended Frans van Trier's career as a banjo player. "I was rehearsing with a band the day before. It's strange to realize that it's been thirteen years already," Frans says. His left hand is partially paralyzed, making it impossible to contract and relax the muscles of his fretting hand at the speed required for bluegrass. There's nothing wrong with his memory, though, or with his sense of humor. All three Van Trier brothers have a specific, slightly penetrating vocal quality that demands your attention—but funnily enough, Frans is the only one who speaks with a bit of an Amsterdam accent. With a hint of pride, they say that when the three of them were together, nobody could get a word in edgewise. When Frans and his younger brother Theo were in seminary, the teacher would scold them for disrupting class with the "conversations" they had just by having their eyes meet. One look at the intense gaze of Frans's cat Babbel, and you can tell he fits right in.

"Ad was the oldest and the wisest of us," Frans says. "He went to the American Library at the Museumplein to find information about bluegrass. He managed to dig up Pete Seeger's instructional book. He never used it, but I did. I had an old tenor banjo and made it into a five-string so I could practice. I just drove a nail into the neck at the fifth fret and added a tuner and a string; it wasn't pretty, but it sufficed. I practiced for hours while my mother was doing the housekeeping. Eventually, I bought a Framus, and I owned three or four banjos before I finally bought my Fender."

Thon Fikkerman of Folkclub '65 was a major help in their discovery of bluegrass music, Frans says. Not only because he had a large record collection, but because he introduced them to people like Theo Lissenberg, who shared Frans's determination of solving the puzzle that the right-hand picking patterns of the Scruggs-style rolls were to them. They joined forces in their practice sessions until they figured out how to play the rolls. "That was before we got our hands on Scruggs's book, which confirmed that what we were doing was correct." In a similar vein, it took the boys five years to discover the title of a bluegrass instrumental they had heard on the radio: "We had played the tune for years without knowing what it was called. Then the movie *Bonnie & Clyde* came out, and we got a hold of the soundtrack. Turns out the tune was called 'Foggy Mountain Breakdown.'"

In the '70s, the best places to go for bluegrass music in Amsterdam were folk clubs: Folkclub '65, 't Cloppertjen, Folk Fairport, 't Geveltje, and Boddy's Music Inn. After his first group the Smokey Mountain Rangers had disbanded, Frans combined his military service with a job as a bartender at Folk Fairport, where he permanently kept his banjo behind the bar. At Folk Fairport, he met and played with people like Steve Winwood, Herman Erbé, and Ben Brouwers. Frans regularly performed with Ben Brouwers until Brouwers moved to the other side of the country. Brouwers's album *Engine Driver* is the only official recording of Frans's banjo playing. After his service, he wanted to become a musician full-time, but in order to get basic health insurance he worked at Hotel Wiechmann as a cleaner one day a week for minimum wage. Frans was perfectly content with this deal, not in the least because the hotel often had touring musicians as guests, and Frans could hear them play while he was working.

From the 1980s until the 2000s, Frans played in the bluegrass band Clotted Cream with his brother Theo, though there were some pauses due to changes in personnel. It was never easy to find others to play with.

"Some people were so used to playing on their own that it was hard for them to play in a band,"

Frans says. "Ben Brouwers would slow down in the tricky guitar parts, or speed up whenever that was convenient lyric-wise. When you're playing solo, that's no big deal, but when you're playing in a bluegrass band, you have to keep a steady beat. Bruno van Hoek had the same problem in the beginning. But we spent a lot of time on it, and eventually he got it."

When my own band was hired to perform at Ad van Trier's fortieth wedding anniversary party, I asked Frans what he thought of our music. "It's nice," he said, "though it really lacks a banjo. I'd help you out if I could."



Michiel “Giel” Hekkens is a freelance videographer who has devoted his free time to the banjo for over forty years. He has played with the Ramshackle Stringband, the Bluegrass Clodhoppers, Holland-America Line, the Pickniks, and the Clover Bluegrass Boys. This portrait not only captures Giel and his banjo, but also the man who built it: Charles Sips.

It all started in the '70s, when Giel heard the banjo for the first time on the radio program *Strictly Country Style*.

“‘We Hekkenses have no musical talent,’ my father used to say, so I did a lot of nagging before my parents agreed to give me a banjo for my eighteenth birthday instead of the traditional driving lessons.”

The first live bluegrass concert he saw was Bill Clifton accompanied by the Dutch group the Bluegrass Clodhoppers. “That was incredible. Actually seeing the way they were picking and doing their harmony vocals.... Imagine my luck, that I would wind up playing in that very group some years down the line!”

In the '80s and '90s, enthusiasts like Rienk Janssen, Hans van Dam, AG and Kate, Cor Sanne, Dennis Schut, and Fred Reiffers brought American bluegrass artists over to the Netherlands as part of a European tour. A local band like the Bluegrass Clodhoppers would be hired to accompany them. This was how Giel got the experience of backing up Jim Eanes for a big radio show. “Jim Eanes was a very kind man and an experienced musician. We learned his songs by listening to his records and doing just one rehearsal with him. On the day of the concert we had some time to spare, so he asked me to accompany him to the shopping mall, since I was about his son’s age and he was used to going shopping with his son. So we went to the Van Haren (a Dutch shoe store), him wearing a jacket with fringes and a big hat, to look for cowboy boots.... People had their noses pressed against the shop window, it was such a sight!”

Giel has a banjo marked with an ‘S’: the signature of Dutch banjo builder Charles Sips. In life, Sips was well-known and loved in the Netherlands and abroad. At Sips’s cremation service, the auditorium was packed. Tom Stuip and Dick Wenting played two duets on banjos built by Sips. But since then, he has been almost completely forgotten. Almost.

Charles Sips was an employee of the silver factory Van Kempen & Begeer in Voorschoten. In 1928 he saw and heard a performance by the legendary American orchestra of Paul Whiteman in the Kurhaus in Scheveningen. When he saw the banjos in that orchestra, he was hooked. He wanted to play one himself, but he had cardiac problems and the doctor said that playing the banjo would excite him too much. So he started to build banjos in his free time instead. These were mostly tenor banjos that are played with a plectrum, commonly used in 1920s jazz. Sips’s knowledge of metalworking came in handy; with the exception of the tuning pegs, he made all the metal parts (hooks, brackets, tailpieces) himself. He used parts of old furniture and collected old bass bars from pianos that were traded in to be demolished. The way he carefully selected his material and combined parts made each instrument he built unique.

“My own Sips banjo has the headstock of a Gibson RB-00, but doesn’t resemble that model in any other way,” Giel says. “The resonator was made from the seat of a bar stool. The back of the resonator is concave, which makes it comfortable to carry for someone who has been called ‘The Oliver Hardy of the banjo’ by a certain country-radio disc jockey,” he laughs. “Another special thing about it is the fact that it has a metal rim instead of a wooden one and no tone ring. The alloy was cast at the silver factory; Sips called it ‘bell metal.’ The reason I’m so attached to this banjo is that it’s equally suited for bluegrass fingerpicking and for old-time frailing.”

“His finish was often a bit sloppy,” Tom Stuip says about Sips. “I once saw a man near tears when Sips had broken the binding of his 1925 Paramount after refretting it. Whenever I needed work done on one of my banjos, I’d stand next to him so I’d be able to intervene if necessary. He’d drink coffee all day long, so he didn’t have such a steady hand. But he did have a heart of gold and was always ready to oblige. I still miss him.”



As Marieke and I drove up to the ADM grounds in Amsterdam to meet the Bucket Boyz, it was as if we had crossed the Atlantic and stepped into a bayou. Beyond the gates was a squatter's paradise where hundreds of people had (semi-) permanently set up camp. "A playground for adults," they call it. Under the stage names of Ed, Ted, and Zed, the three men who make up the Bucket Boyz use music to express their worldviews.

After Ted offers us a cup of tea on the front porch of the wooden house he built, he leaves us to go back to the workshop, where he is welding a furnace. "We believe in contributionism," he says. "The community we have here is built around the fact that people take only what they need, and give back what they can. Music is one of the things we contribute." He was trained to be a visual arts teacher, but the role of teachers in traditional society bothered him. "A teacher teaches tricks, but a master transfers a part of himself. When we play on the streets, I tell people to chase their dreams, like we do every day. That's the teacher in me talking."

Ed and Zed are brothers who grew up in Martin, Tennessee. "A tiny place with more churches than houses," Zed says. "We associated country music with conservatism and Christianity." Ed: "Our mother is Dutch, so we were like: 'Fuck that, the world is bigger than this dump.' We knew a couple of hippies on the other side of the state in the Appalachian Mountains who played Irish folk and bluegrass in a way that we could stomach, but we were mostly into punk and metal. Looking back now, I think we absorbed some bluegrass without even knowing it."

That romantic image of people making music on their front porches? That's real. We sang gospel songs at campfires and 'Rocky Top' at sports events without thinking twice about it, the way everybody knows 'Happy Birthday' here."

When Ed was sixteen and Zed was twelve, the family moved to Amsterdam. They met Ted in the alternative scene and started the punk group Zibabu with Ed on guitar, Ted on bass, and Zed on drums. When Ed got a banjo from his parents as a birthday present, they came up with the idea to play acoustically so they could go busking. Ted made a bass out of a jerrycan and a broomstick, Zed used chopsticks to play rhythm on the jerrycan, and Ed played the banjo. "It worked perfectly, because you can create so much power with a banjo and three voices," Zed says. "Our music isn't really bluegrass—we call it Blue Trash."

Ed says his lyrics are inspired by old union songs and protest singers like Pete Seeger. "And don't underestimate the power of boredom. I wrote a lot of songs in Tennessee, where I worked hard and got utterly bored in my free time. Yes, there was beautiful nature and plenty of space, but nothing to do for kids my age, really. Skateboarding in public areas was illegal. So we started doing stupid things to entertain ourselves, like sledding down the roof and landing on a trampoline. And I wrote songs to express myself."

Not only the lyrics, but also the sheer energy the Bucket Boyz put out when they are playing is a way for them to contribute to political and social activism.

"We've played in places where people had chained themselves to trees in protest,"

Ed says. "The environment is one of our major concerns, so we want to support those people. If you're chained to a tree for hours, you get tired. Our music helps them stay on their feet." Zed adds: "We raise our voice against authority, against the state. People sometimes see that as negative, but that's a misconception. We scream and we act crazy because it works on the street. You get people's attention—it makes them laugh and it makes them listen to what we're actually trying to get across: a message of hope and solidarity."

The DIY-approach gives them total freedom, Zed says. "Our songs are registered as Creative Commons, so anybody is free to share them as long as they don't use them to make a profit. Most of our instruments are basically made out of trash, so they're easy to replace. If we're busking and the police come, Ted and I can stall them while Ed runs off with the banjo and the drum pedal. We just came back from a trip to Brazil by sailboat, and we never had to worry about the instruments being damaged, lost, or stolen." Ed and Zed raise their bottles of beer as they propose a toast: "To the bluegrass!"



“You can’t make a book about bluegrass music in the Netherlands with only Dutch people in it,” Lody van Vlodrop wrote me in an email. “For one, because bluegrass has been an international affair from the start, with bands touring Europe and people who lived just over the nation’s borders regularly visiting events in the Netherlands. But mostly because failing to include a portrait of Jan Michielsen’s mug would make your book worthless.”

Granted—though Jan Michielsen lives in Belgium, it’s actually closer to home than some places we’ve been within the Netherlands. And the man does have a photogenic face. He is also a man who enjoys an in-depth talk about the intricacies of bluegrass music, though he says we should take some of his strong opinions with a grain of salt. “I still think bluegrass is the most beautiful music in the world, but I can’t help looking at it with a slightly ironic stance,” he says. “What else can you do if you see the kitschy way some artists dress up, with their panama hats and their tweed jackets under the hot stage lights? Or performers who go through their presentation routine exactly as rehearsed, regardless of what is happening in the room in front of them? There’s plenty to laugh about in bluegrass, that’s for sure.”

Though there are some contemporary artists he can appreciate, Jan says he has a strong preference for classic bluegrass. “I don’t mind things like drums; even Jimmy Martin always had drums in the background. But my problem with modern bluegrass is that everything is pushed over the top. The vocals are extremely high, the banjo is extremely forceful.... To be honest, I can’t listen to that stuff. I think classic bluegrass is more dynamic. I probably feel that way because that’s how the music was played when I first heard it, so I feel tied to that style more than to anything that came after.”

Jan first heard bluegrass in the show *Het Vrije Westen* (The Free West) on Belgian national radio when he was fifteen years old. Though the sound of the banjo appealed to him right away, he chose to play mandolin. At The Skalden folk club in Hoogstraten, he occasionally performed acoustic covers of pop songs.

“One day in 1971, the owner of the club rang our doorbell. He told me: ‘You have to come to the club right away and bring your instruments!’

So I grabbed my things and followed him. There was Jef van Gool with his brother and a Dutchman who was living in

Turnhout, Rob Labots. It was the second performance of their group Smoketown Strut. We played all afternoon and from then on, I was a member of the band.” The group had started out with a diverse repertoire, but Jef and Jan wanted to specialize in bluegrass music, with the Kentucky Colonels among their main examples. Band members with the same ambitions and abilities were hard to come by. “We had to learn everything as we went along. Singing bluegrass harmonies was a huge problem in the beginning. And I won’t beat around the bush: musicians who couldn’t or didn’t want to take the time to learn the basics of the bluegrass style usually didn’t last long.”

Of all the different formations that made up Smoketown Strut from 1971 until halfway through the ’90s, there hardly has been a lineup that did not include a Dutchman: Rob Labots, Pieter Groenveld, Lody and Paul van Vlodrop, Niek Dekker, Johan Lammers, Nout Grupstra, and Bern Wortelboer were all regular members at one time. In 2000, Jan was asked to join the group Four Wheel Drive, which was originally founded by Paul van Vlodrop but has gradually shifted to a completely different lineup: three Germans, a Dutchman, and a Belgian. If they would walk into a bar, it’d sound like the start of a joke. “All those musicians played with Smoketown Strut either as regular members or stand-ins,” Jan says. “In the first half of the ’80s, there were three bands that you’d see at pretty much any serious bluegrass festival: Smoketown Strut from Belgium, the Country Ramblers from the Netherlands, and Hard Times from Germany. Those bands had quite some overlap in their repertoire. Sure, it’s hard to schedule regular rehearsals if you live so far apart, but we’ve already punched our hours into the rehearsing clock plenty before we got into Four Wheel Drive. We know the songs, we know the formula—it just works. I always thought Four Wheel Drive was a great band, more dynamically and rhythmically refined than Smoketown Strut was. It’s fantastic to be a part of it now, simply fantastic.”



When he played cowboys and Indians as a child, Bart always rooted for the Indians. Needless to say, he was not at all pleased that his parents tuned the car radio to *Strictly Country Style* every Saturday night after visiting his grandparents. “Turn off that awful cowboy music!” he’d plead with them—to no avail.

To make matters worse, country and bluegrass somehow got under his skin. When he was about twenty years old, he had his mind set on learning to play mouth harp like Charlie McCoy and went to the Dutch Bluegrass Convention in the Vredenburg concert hall in Utrecht. “I came for the mouth harp but found the banjo. Bands like Relaxation and Groundspeed sounded magnificent. I loved the vocal harmonies, the jazzy approach of interchanging sung verses with solo breaks for each instrument, and the way the musicians fit together like cogs in a machine without a drummer chopping everything to bits. What they did on the banjo looked so complicated and mysterious, I just had to try it for myself.

When I came home, I tuned my guitar to G-B-D-B-G-D so it sounded like a banjo—only with a drone two octaves lower than the fifth string of a banjo.

Whenever other guitarists or banjo pickers heard me play, they were like: ‘Ex-cuse me?’” A wide grin appears on Bart’s face as he says: “Do you know what was really funny about that festival? In this very serious atmosphere, among all the dedicated bluegrass lovers, there were two rebellious boys clowning around up in the back row. Years later, when I was in a band with them, I found out those boys were Arnold and Aart.”

About a year after Bart got an actual banjo, he checked the classifieds for people to play with. He met a Scottish guitarist who pushed him to get out on the streets and perform, even though he felt like he wasn’t ready, and to sing harmony. He also played the banjo in a successful rockabilly band. “We did some innovative crossovers. The combination of rockabilly and banjo might sound normal now, but it sure wasn’t back then.” Out busking, Bart met Arnold and Aart. They instantly clicked and started the Hillbilly Boogiemen. Most people now know them as the Blue Grass Boogiemen.

“Actually, the word hillbilly is very deceptive, especially if you talk about bluegrass,” Bart says. “That makes

it sound easy, like any dumb guy in dungarees can pick up a guitar and make that music. But you really have to practice if you want to get it right. Most of the people who play this music are clever, dedicated, and passionate. I think musicians in general, but especially buskers, have a special place in the margins of society. They see the value of life in a different light than people who work 9-to-5 jobs. They know life isn’t about making money, or about left-wing or right-wing political standpoints, but about fostering a passion. A passion, like making music, or juggling, or sports, is a way to extend your self. It’s the only way to find real happiness.”

Being a professional musician is no 9-to-5 job, but it does mean having to bring your passion to the stage time and again, even if you do not feel like it. How to muster up the energy? That’s a no-brainer to Bart. “The music itself, the interaction with your fellow band members and the interaction with the audience provide you with that energy, easily. And we play at such a ridiculous speed that I always have to laugh at myself when the thought flashes through my mind: ‘What the hell am I doing?’”

The fire that Bart brings to the stage is also present when he gets started on politics. After I joke about his rants on the social media, we get into a serious conversation about his convictions. “I used to see myself as right-wing—I studied economics and really believed in the free market system. But I’ve changed my perspective these last years. I think there is no left or right anymore, just an upper layer and a bottom layer in society, depressing as that might sound. And if there is anything I’m missing in bluegrass music, it’s a political message. The kind that can be found in the music of Iron Maiden or Bob Marley. Bluegrass is usually about love or death, which is fine, but it never goes beyond the personal feelings of individuals. I would like to write songs with a message, but I can’t—and I don’t think the Blue Grass Boogiemen will ever do that. But it is something that is lacking in bluegrass. It would be great to see that gap filled.”



Though the general public in the Netherlands mostly knows her as the balladeer with the gritty voice who sang in Dutch at the 1998 National Song Contest, Frédérique Spigt—who is also an actress and visual artist—has a long track record in musical styles ranging from rock & roll and blues to chansons and tango. The 2012 album *Land* was the product of her long-cherished dream to go into country music. As a child, she always wanted to be a cowboy, she says: “I watched series like *Bonanza* and *Rawhide* and walked the streets with my cap gun.”

Frédérique rarely does a project without guitarist and songwriter Jan van der Meij, whom she met in the rock scene and has worked with for over twenty years. “Oh, the things I put him through! I switch musical styles all the time, and he always has to adapt. I remember how at one point I made him do so much fingerpicking that he got tendinitis—he walked around with his arm in a brace, poor guy.... He wasn’t very excited about my idea to go into country music. But with age comes mildness, and now he loves it. And in my opinion, the songs he writes are always the treasures of the album.” Frédérique didn’t want to put Jan through the torture of learning to play banjo and mandolin for *Land*, so she hired Janos Koolen, “a brilliant guitar player and a very sweet guy.” She found a fiddler and upright bass player in Joost van Es. “To me, Joost is the godfather of bluegrass in the Netherlands,” Frédérique says. “Most of what I know about bluegrass, I learned from Janos and Joost.”

The collaboration with Janos and Joost was such a success that Frédérique hired them again for her next theater tour and CD *The Medicine Show*. The four musicians Janos, Joost, Frédérique, and Jan stand front-stage in one line. Frédérique says that of all the shows she has done, this one was the most enjoyable.

“There was a lot of mutual respect and we had a good time together. This music is partly responsible for that. It’s just an endless adventure that gets you sky-high, like being on a different planet!”

Frédérique first heard bluegrass on a Steve Earle record. She also loves Dolly Parton’s bluegrass album *The Grass Is Blue*. “That first song ‘Traveling Prayer’ drives me wild! Dolly’s a unique character, and with Dan Tyminski, Jerry Douglas, and all those other big bluegrass boys behind her, it’s a real tour de force. Playing bluegrass takes a lot of skill—which I don’t possess.” In all her modesty—comparing her guitar and mandolin skills to that of

a garden rake or bar stool—she does play many different instruments, which she uses mostly in the songwriting process. “Usually, I give the musicians the freedom to do their own thing, but sometimes I have a certain melody in my head I’d like them to play, so I’ll make a demo recording of it. I also want to learn to play instruments because it helps me understand how the style works. Once I do, I stop listening to the music of others, because I don’t want to copy anything. I want to experiment and approach the music from a different angle which is really my own.”

Frédérique says the most bluegrass song she has written might be “Blueberry Wine.” “A bluegrass purist might not approve, but I think it has a similar energy. I don’t know what possessed me to write about a rodeo bull, but the lyrics just came to my mind one night when I couldn’t sleep. *I’m gonna ride the bucking bull to beat the clock
The best beast from the rodeo stock
3.50 seconds, average buck of time
I got one thing on my mind:
Stay atop Blueberry Wine.* When Joost plays his fiddle solo, you can really hear that beast go wild....”

Frédérique loves it when music paints a picture. “Country songs to me are like short movies, stories of people’s lives. With metaphors you can say something delicate without it being extremely personal. The English language is well-suited for that. When I was singing chansons in Dutch, the lyrics were always so close to me, so direct and heavy. Most of the country songs I’ve written are figments of my imagination. In bluegrass especially, tragic lyrics are often set to very upbeat music, making them sound even more poignant. I have a feeling that someday I will return to rock & roll, where I started. But I’m telling you, country and bluegrass music has given me a feeling of release, and honestly, I have no intention of changing direction anytime soon.”

Glossary & Index

This basic glossary and index is intended for quick reference so readers who are unfamiliar with Dutch or American culture or music jargon can better understand the interviews. However, the terms and names mentioned in the glossary deserve much more elaborate and nuanced explanations than can be given here. If you are really interested, please consult academic literature or reference works on the subject.

People and bands portrayed in this book are mentioned IN CAPS without a definition. Dates of birth and death—if known—are given in parentheses.

Recommended reading on music in general (styles, instruments, people):

Larkin, Colin. *The Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 3rd ed. London [etc]: Muze UK & Macmillan, 1998.

Sadie, Stanley John, George Grove, and John Tyrell. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed. New York & London: Grove & Macmillan, 2001.

Recommended reading on bluegrass (US history, instruments, people):

Goldsmith, Thomas, ed. *The Bluegrass Reader*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

Rosenberg, Neil V. *Bluegrass: A History*, revised paperback edition. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005.

Recommended reading on the history of the Netherlands:

Besamusca, Emmeline, and Jaap Verheul. *Discovering the Dutch: On Culture and Society of the Netherlands*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010.

Krabbendam, Hans, Cornelis A. van Minnen, and Giles Scott-Smith. *Four Centuries of Dutch-American Relations, 1609-2009*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009.

ABRAHAMS, HENK – 11, 21

Adams, Derroll (1925-2000) – 9, 13

American folk singer and banjo player, settled in Antwerp in 1970 after traveling Europe.

ADM – 87

Amsterdamse Doe-het-zelf Maatschappij (Amsterdam DIY Society). Originally a shipyard named Amsterdamsche Droogdok Maatschappij (Amsterdam Dry Dock Corporation) from 1877-1985. After the company went bankrupt, the area was squatted.

AFN – 7, 11, 21

American Forces Network. World-wide radio (1942) and television (1964) broadcast network aimed at all American officials stationed overseas and US Navy ships at sea.

AG AND KATE – 19, 37, 43, 81

Ahrend, Heiko (1969) – 79

German country and bluegrass singer and musician (mainly guitar, fiddle).

Ahrend, Hendrik (1963) – 49

German country and bluegrass singer and musician (mainly mandolin).

AGENANT, WILLEM (1944) – 17, 21

Alabama Country Boys – 79

Dutch country and bluegrass trio (1981-2008) consisting of Marinus Snippe (nephew of Ron and Marinus Snippe), Gerard Fuhler, and Albert Stam.

Americana – 75, 77, 93

Term used for all kinds of roots-oriented contemporary music that incorporate elements of music that came into being on the North American continent.

Americanization – 77

The process of cultural change caused by appropriation of American

cultural elements by social groups in countries outside the USA.

A-model – 67, 71

Also called “A-style.” Carved-top mandolin with a pear-shaped body and a more basic design than the F-model.

Annual Picking Party – 83, 107

Annual invitation-only jam session event in Leiden, the Netherlands.

Appalachia – 65, 87, 103

The Appalachians or Appalachian Mountains extend along the southeastern United States and Canada from Alabama into Newfoundland. The term “Appalachia” is used to signify the southern part of the mountain range where European immigrants (mainly Scots-Irish and Germans) settled since the 18th century in isolated communities.

Appalachian Swing – 67

Dutch bluegrass band from the 1970s, named after a Kentucky Colonels album.

Aukes, Antoon – 49

Dutch bluegrass musician, musicologist, and music educator.

Auldrige, Mike (1938-2012) – 95

American bluegrass fusion musician (resonator guitar) who played with the Seldom Scene.

Autoharp – 13, 15, 47

Actually not a harp, but a stringed instrument with the possibility to form chords at the touch of a button. Used in old-time music, popularized by the Carter Family.

Babes in the Grass – 47, 51

Dutch “femininicana” trio.

Bad Livers, the – 91

Eclectic Americana band from the USA, active in the 1990s, fronted by Danny Barnes.

COLOPHON

Photographer

Marieke Odekerken (1991) is a professional photographer who graduated from the Willem de Kooning Academy in 2012. Marieke also works by assignment for companies and magazines and is image editor for *Gers!* magazine. In her free time, she plays guitar and sings in the acoustic trio Way Beyond.



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Joost van Es

Cultural scholar Loes van Schaijk and photographer Marieke Odekerken have portrayed a very specific genre of music, which came into being in the USA in the 1940s and found its way to the Netherlands about ten years later: bluegrass. Over a period of six months, Loes and Marieke have visited people who have somehow been captivated by this style of acoustic music which distinguishes itself by the combination of stringed instruments, hard driving rhythms, virtuoso solos, harmony vocals, and "high lonesome" singing.

The pictures and interviews feature musicians, bookers, and builders; amateurs and professionals; pioneers and rookies; wallflowers, hillbillies, and hardrockers; traditionalists, purists, and cross-over artists. Apart from their shared love of bluegrass music, the only thing these people have in common is their opinion that they don't need to have anything in common. The book is a report of human individuality: nearly a hundred colorful characters in black and white.

