Bill Monroe's spirit is alive and well at music festival he began 50 years ago

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Bluegrass musician Bill Monroe passed away 20 years ago, but his spirit is alive and well at the Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival that's named after him. In its 50th year, the summer event in Brown County takes place over one week and is the oldest continually running bluegrass festival in the world.

Monroe himself had a quirky reputation. The festival is, in many ways, a reflection of his personality as much as it is a reflection of his music.

According to friends and fans, for example, Monroe didn't like people drinking at his shows. To this day, festival-goers still can't purchase beer on festival grounds.

“He used to call it slop,” said Liz Jenson, a fan who has come to the festival more than 10 times since 1971. “Why are you drinking that slop?” she said he’d ask people in the crowd.

The Carmel native and her friends, who all met Monroe multiple times, would usually hide their beers if they’d see him passing by. She said she got to know him quite well.

“Just hanging out with Bill and his other band members — such nice people,” she said. “They would always say, ‘If you ever come to Nashville, you call us.’ Bluegrass people are just like that.”

Despite his friendliness, Monroe was not much of a conversationalist, according to Jenson.

“He’d sit there and you’d tell him stuff and he’d go, ‘yup, yup, yessir.’ He was a character.”

Tucked away among the towering green trees of Bean Blossom, the festival grounds have camping areas, music workshops and art and food vendors. More than 50 artists are filling the lineup this year, from Ralph Stanley II to the Boxcars.

“It’s American music at its best,” said Chet Rasala, a first-time festival attendee who came down from Chicago Heights, Illinois, with his partner, Donna Thompson. “Recordings, CDs, tapes, records — do not do it justice. You have to see it live and see how talented these musicians are.”

Growing up, Rasala and his brother, who has attended the festival in past years, listened to Bill Monroe’s music with their dad.

“We first heard about this 30 or 40 years ago. Bill Monroe was the king of bluegrass music, and my father was a big fan of his,” Rasala said, adding that it’s always been on his bucket list to attend.

In its 50 years, the festival has changed a lot. Jenson, who drove from Wyoming to attend the festival for the whole week, described it as “much more primitive” 45 years ago.

“There were only outhouses, no flush toilets, no hookups for the campers, there was water available way up front,” she said. “You could walk up front and get a jug of water. The sound system wasn’t all that sophisticated ... but it was fun.”

Jenson’s favorite thing about the festival?
“Mostly, I like that it’s still going, because I heard at one time after Bill died they were going to build a subdivision here,” she said.

Though the amenities and some of the faces have changed, the week of banjo, fiddle and mandolin twangling has forged on through the years.

“And, of course,” she added, “it’s nice to have a flush toilet.”

About the festival

The Bill Monroe Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival runs through Saturday. More information can be found at [www.beanblossom.us](http://www.beanblossom.us).

**If you go**

**WHAT:** The Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival.

**WHERE:** Bill Monroe Music Park and Campground in Bean Blossom, 5 miles north of Nashville on Ind. 135.

**HOW MUCH:** General admission $30 today, $35 each day Friday and Saturday. Call for details on multi-day passes and camping.

**MORE:** See [www.beanblossom.us](http://www.beanblossom.us) or call 800-414-4677.

Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times

Don Croft jams while Chandler Thomasson listens in a camping area during the 50th Anniversary Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival in Brown County.
Patrick Fitzsimons jams on a mandolin in a camping area during the 50th Anniversary Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival.

The Little Roy and Lizzy Show performs on the main stage earlier this week during the 50th Anniversary Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival in Brown County.
Danny Bureau performs with the Little Roy and Lizzy Show on the main stage during the 50th Anniversary Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival.

"Mr. Bones," sits in a chair in the camping area during the 50th Anniversary Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival.
Dry Branch Fire Squad performs during the 50th Anniversary Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival.

The Little Roy and Lizzy Show performs on the main stage during the 50th Anniversary Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival.
A bottle of Bill Monroe hot sauce sits on a table during the 50th Anniversary Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival.

An early 1950s truck called, "Sally-Jo," is parked during the 50th Anniversary Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival.