

Recipient of the 2009 Governor's Awards for the Arts

Artist of the Year – Del McCoury

For fifty years, Del's music has defined authenticity for hard core bluegrass fans as well as a growing number of fans only vaguely familiar with the genre. Born in York County, PA seventy years ago, Del McCoury was bitten hard by the bluegrass bug when he heard Earl Scruggs' banjo in the early 50s and became a banjo picker himself. He got his first taste of the limelight when he joined Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys in early 1963; the Father of Bluegrass moved McCoury from the banjo to guitar, made him his lead singer, and gave him a lifetime's worth of bluegrass tutelage in the course of little more than a year. But rather than parlay his gig with the master into a full-time career of his own, he returned to Pennsylvania in the mid-60s to provide steady support for his new and growing family.

Within a few years, McCoury had settled into work in the logging industry-and formed his own band, the Dixie Pals. For the next decade and a half, he piloted the group through a part-time career built mostly around weekend appearances at bluegrass festivals and recordings. And while there were the inevitable struggles, McCoury was building a songbook filled with classics and a growing number of original songs like "High On A Mountain," "Are You Teasing Me," "Dark Hollow," "Bluest Man In Town," "Rain And Snow," "Good Man Like Me," "Rain Please Go Away" and more.

The first big sign of change came in 1981, when McCoury's 14 year old son, Ronnie, joined the Dixie Pals as their mandolin player. Banjo playing younger brother Rob came on board five years later, and by the end of the decade, the three McCourys were ready to make a move to Nashville. Armed with a new Rounder Records association – and a newly named Del McCoury Band – Del McCoury's career soared. Del himself got the ball rolling early in the decade with three consecutive Male Vocalist of the Year awards from the prestigious International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA), and in 1994 the quintet began an astonishing streak of top Entertainer of the Year honors that would net them 9 trophies in an 11 year stretch.

The 90s propelled the Del McCoury Band to the top of the bluegrass world and also gave birth to a more startling phenomenon: the emergence of the group onto the larger musical scene as a unique torchbearer for the entire sweep of bluegrass and its history. The group appeared on prime time television and began an ongoing series of visits to popular late night TV talk shows, toured rock clubs and college campuses, and found itself welcome at country and even jazz-oriented music festivals and venues.

A half-century of music making has been filled with ongoing triumphs. McCoury earned membership in the cast of the legendary Grand Ole Opry in 2003 and the Band earned their first Best Bluegrass Album Grammy award two years later. The Del McCoury Band made multiple appearances at the spectacular Bonnaroo Music Festival and launched an impressively popular annual New Year's Eve show at the Ryman Auditorium, where Del first appeared on the Opry with Bill Monroe some 46 years ago. Perhaps most importantly, McCoury took control of his own music by creating the McCoury Music label, home to a select set of releases by the Del McCoury Band, country icon Merle Haggard and more.

There's no doubt that the retrospective box set *Celebrating 50 Years of Del McCoury*, released in 2009, is just that – a life's work – but it's no swan song. As far as that goes, Del's already said it himself, and said it best; he may be 70, but as he sings in one of his own songs, co-written with country hit writer (and second generation bluegrass) Harley Allen, "Don't ever let it be said darling, that what I do don't bring me joy /I'm a guitar-picking, bluegrass-singing, never grow up boy."

Excerpted from www.delmccouryband.com