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Bluegrass Discography [Review]

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Bluegrass Discography

Charlie Pennell

<http://www.ibiblio.org/hillwilliam/BGdiscography/>

The Bluegrass Discography, also known as the Discography of Bluegrass Sound Recordings, is a web index of bluegrass recordings and discographies. The Bluegrass Discography is maintained by Charley Pennell, a library cataloger at North Carolina State University. Pennell initially based the site's LP index on John Boothroyd's print discography *Bluegrass LP Issues, 1957-1990* (Briar Hill, Vic.: J.L. Boothroyd, 1990); he also consulted a long span of recording reviews published in *Bluegrass Review*, *The Country Sales Newsletter*, and *The Old Time Herald*. The Bluegrass Discography is part of the ibiblio system; ibiblio, which bills itself as "the public's library and digital archive," is a free, online collection of collections that features content covering a wide range of topics: history, music, literature, religion, science, and politics. The system has been hosted since its inception in 1992 at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill; it is maintained by the University's School of Journalism and Mass Communication and School of Information and Library Science. According to the site's footer text, the Discography has been live since March 24, 1996.

To date the Bluegrass Discography indexes over 23,000 albums, nearly 10,000 of which are CDs and 7,700 are LPs. The most represented labels are Rounder, Rebel, Old Homestead, and Sugar Hill, and, unsurprisingly, the artists who appear most frequently in the database include the Stanley Brothers, Flatt and Scruggs (and their Foggy Mountain Boys), and Bill Monroe. The depth and breadth of coverage in the database is impressive. The earliest indexed recordings are of the Monroe Brothers on some Bluebird 78s released in 1936. Newer performers are covered appropriately, as well; most studio albums of the Grascals, the Peasall Sisters, and the Infamous Stringdusters are indexed.

A basic search box takes up most of the prime real estate on the site's home page, with a whole herd of glorious yet un-hyperlinked album cover images located just below. The simple search offers options to search by album title, song title, artist, or label. The advanced search expands on those fields to include keyword, format, and the release number, year, and location. A persistent keyword search box is present in the site's header.

The search engine is a little finicky about punctuation. For instance, when searching for the 2012 album title *Pa's Fiddle*, I had to enter the apostrophe to return any results. It does seem to accept limiters to some degree, as a search for "river band" in the Performer field returned 38 results including albums by The Big River Band and the Lonesome River Band, but the same search without quotations yielded 46 results that included the aforementioned groups plus the ensembles Red River Bluegrass Band and River City Bluegrass Band.

On a search results screen, brief records are displayed at the album level and include information such as label, format, country, release number, release date, and album cover when it is available (which seems to be the case for about half the albums in the database). Clicking into each record shows more detailed information about each song, including title, duration, recording date and place, and the instruments played by each performer. Performer names and labels are generally hyperlinked to facilitate browsing those fields. It is not clear what the default sort is for search

results, but one may sort by album title, band name, release date, label, or release number. The search results screen also features a helpful list of facets that allow the user to narrow the search using a field that was not searched at the onset (i.e., if one searched for a particular label, the facets would show a “top hit” listing of bands, release dates [by decade], and formats). One may also browse the Discography by format, then alphabetically by label, performer, or album title.

Pennell conscientiously acknowledges this website and his efforts do not exist in a bubble. He gives a kind hat-tip to many colleagues and friends who have contributed to the site over the years. He links out to related resources, including other online discographical projects that have general coverage or focus on particular labels, artists, groups, or geographical regions. Pennell also lists sites from which one may purchase current or out-of-print bluegrass recordings, and he provides an alphabetical list of record labels and their contact information (when available). Overall, the Bluegrass Discography is easy to navigate, its scope is comprehensive within the genre, and its information is reasonably current.

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