

Episode Title: Del McCoury's Bluegrass Adventures

Episode Summary:

In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, talks with legendary Bluegrass musician, Del McCoury, about his early days playing with Bill Monroe, the return of Delfest, and digging through boxes of demos to create his latest album, *Almost Proud*.

Episode Transcript:

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound - plays for 9 seconds before Sid's voice comes in)

Voice over from Sid Evans: Welcome to a special Summer Tour edition of Biscuits and Jam from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of Southern Living Magazine. On today's episode, I'm talking to the legendary bluegrass musician Del McCoury. Del's illustrious career began in 1963 when the Father of Bluegrass, Bill Monroe, asked him to join his band, and the rest is history. Almost 60 years later, Del is still playing shows, releasing albums, and performing with everyone from Vince Gill to Billy Strings. Today, we'll talk about the return of Delfest, his latest album, *Almost Proud*, his hope for the future of Bluegrass, and much, much more.

Biscuits & Jam theme music ends

Sid Evans: Del McCoury, welcome to Biscuits & Jam.

Del McCoury: Thank you, glad to be here, yeah.

Sid Evans: Well Del, where am I reaching you right now?

Del McCoury: Hendersonville, Tennessee, which is just about, 20-minutes north of Nashville,

Sid Evans: Well, I wanna ask you about growing up, I know you grew up in a musical family, what did your mother teach you about music?

Del McCoury: Well, you know, she actually never taught me anything, by the time I came along, you know, she's pretty busy, she had three kids before me, (laughs), and she actually didn't play much. now she did play piano in church, if she got a minute in the evening, you know, she might play the harmonica and she played guitar enough to, uh, show my oldest brother the chords

Sid Evans: So it did kinda start with your mom in a way?

Del McCoury: It actually did, because when I was about nine, my oldest brother showed me the chords on a guitar... I actually learned more from him than anybody, you know? And I was really not into it that much, until... he started buying records.

Sid Evans: What were some of the first songs that he taught you?

Del McCoury: Most Of the songs he was singing were from the Grand Ole Opry, like Ernest Tubb, Roy Acuff, and Bill Monroe because we had a radio-

Sid Evans: Sure.

Del McCoury: And listened to the Grand Ole Opry every Saturday night, you know?

Sid Evans: So, Del, you were playing with Bill Monroe at a pretty young age, and, I think, you were only on the road with him for a year or two,

Del McCoury: Yeah, just a year exactly. from February '63 to February '64, (laughs).

Sid Evans: What did you take away from that experience? I mean, at your age, that must've made an awfully big impression on you, to be traveling around and performing with a bluegrass legend like that?

Del McCoury: Yes, I guess, I learned more from his example, he never would teach you anything, I just kinda just watch him and... I had to sing with him. I had to sing lead for him, I was a banjo player until that point, (laughs), and he said, "I need a guitar player and a, and a lead singer," and I thought, "Oh no, what, does he want me to do this?" I went completely from one, ~~an~~ instrument and singing to another, because before I went with him, I was a tenor singer, and I sang, all parts with bands I had been in, I knew parts, singing parts, I don't know, for some reason, I'd just pick them out but I wasn't interested in singing, I was more interested in banjo, because I'd heard Earl Scruggs when I was 11-years old, and man, I said, "That's it, right there like what- whatever that guy's doing," (laughs), this 11, this 11-year old kid thinks he's gonna do that, you know, (laughs)? Which I did it for about 10 years, so the first date I played with it was in New York City, on banjo, but he still didn't have a lead singer, and he wanted a lead singer more than a banjo player, (laughs). So, he put me on guitar, and singing lead, and it was a challenge, and I was up for it, you know, (laughs)?

Sid Evans: You sure were well I wanna ask you about your voice, because you have this incredibly distinctive voice, was that something that other folks in your family had, I mean, did your brother have a voice like that, or your mom?

Del McCoury: Yes, now I can remember my dad singing in church, just standing – beside him when I was just a kid, and I can remember his voice. He had, he had a good voice, but like I said, he was not interested in playing or singing, it's just that he could sing good, but my mother was the main influence. She had a good voice, really, she was like a mountain singer, because she was from the mountains of western North Carolina there, she'd sing songs like Barbara Allen-

Sid Evans: Mm.

Del McCoury: ... all 16 verses of it, (laughs). She knew all of those old those old ballads, she knew them and could sing them

Sid Evans: Yeah. So, Del, your mom had six kids to take care of, is that right?

Del McCoury: That's right, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sid Evans: So, she must've been doing some cooking at some point, or maybe it was your dad who was doing the cooking, but somebody had to be?

Del McCoury: (laughs), she did all the cooking, man, (laughs). It seemed like she'd cook one meal and then wash the dishes and it wasn't no time she'd start the next one, you know, (laughs)? Plus- plus, I guess, she was putting diapers on kids, and washing their faces and all this, you know, how that goes, (laughs)?

Sid Evans: What were some of your favorite things that she made?

Del McCoury: She made the best cornbread, and- soup beans, we'd call them, "Soup beans," it was pinto beans, and green beans 'cause she had a garden. a lot of times we'd eat cornbread and milk, and, I never could drink buttermilk, but she was on a farm, she had a churn, and I'd help her do that. I think half of my sisters and brothers liked buttermilk, the others wouldn't touch it, and I was the one that wouldn't touch it. I liked what they called, "Sweet milk," which is just regular milk from the cow, you know, (laughs)?

Sid Evans: Wow, now you just go pick it all, pick it up at the store.

Del McCoury: That's right, just go to the, go- go to Kroger and there it is, (laughs). Somebody in that store must've milked that cow, I don't know who it was, (laughs)

Sid Evans: Well, Del, so you worked for a sawmill, I believe, and then a logging company, after you got married, and I'm wondering if some of those years of hard work helped you in your songwriting?

Del McCoury: You know, it probably did, and- and although I don't, class myself as a true songwriter, (laughs), when I think of a songwriter, I think of a guy that gets up at this morning, he gets up and he think, he's got this song in his head and he writes it down, when I first started recording records, I had to look for songs, sometimes I'd have enough for almost to do a record with, and I'd have to, I'd think, "I gotta write something," so that's how I'd write. I was forced to. I'm just forced into writing, and sometimes I'd have an idea, and sometimes I wouldn't, I'd just sit down and write something down on a piece of paper, you know, and get started that way, but before... We grew up on a farm and worked hard, you know, and Bill Monroe wanted you to work hard. He was the type of guy, he was that kinda guy, when you got on stage, he just wanted you to work hard.-he didn't say, "Now do this like this," or, "Sing this like that," or, "Play this guitar run here," he never told me anything about that, but I found out that I could play with the man, that's what I was afraid of, he was the father of this music, and it, (laughs), and it kinda worried me, you know, "I wonder of I can play with him, or sing with him," but both of those things worked out great. I could sing great with him, and play with him, I drove bus for him while I was working. he never had a bus until sometime in 1963, and he found out I had drove a dump truck, and he told me, "I wanna buy a bus," because a lot of the Opry acts by then were getting buses-

Sid Evans: Yeah.

Del McCoury: So, he called me up one time and said, ``I want you to go with me to look at a bus." Well, we went to Johnny Wright and Kitty Wells... They had two buses. He said... Now, we just came back from

L.A. in that bus, the old bus, but we bought this new bus, and we gotta get rid of the old bus, so, Bill bought it, and I was the guy who was gonna drive it, (laughs).

Sid Evans: So, you are a bluegrass legend, and, you've inspired so many bluegrass musicians along the way, and you've really been a champion of this music for such a longtime, and you've kept it relevant, and I'm just wondering how you would define bluegrass music to someone who really doesn't know it, or understand it?

Del McCoury: Boy, I guess, I could say, "It is hard to define," although, back when Bill was with all those other acts like Roy Acuff and Ernest Tubb. and I think, what separated Bill and this music from other music was he was a great tenor singer, and he could yodel. He learned his yodeling from Jimmy Rogers, because he recorded a lot of those early numbers... and I think, by accident... I know he was trying new things in the beginning, he had an accordion player in the band at one time. He recorded with an electric guitar at one time, he hired a guy named Lester Flatt who was a lead singer from here in Sparta, Tennessee, and, uh, they had a banjo player who played their own time way, who like dropped them, or two-finger, you know, and- so this guy named Earl Scruggs visited the Opry one time, and he was back there playing, and told Lester, said, "There's a, banjo player, it's in my dressing room, I want you to listen to him, and I want you to see what you think about him," because he put a lot of faith in, and he wasn't interested in another banjo guy," you know, (laughs), but he went anyway, and when he heard Earl play, Earl played something like, Sally Good'n there, I don't know what it was, and when he got halfway through that tune, Lester turned to Bill and said, "Hire him," (laughs), he'd never heard nothing like this, (laughs). Of course, nobody else had either, (laughs). And then of course he had a fiddle player. He hired this fiddle player from Florida, his name was Chubby Wise, and Chubby played in Dixieland bands. He didn't know a thing about bluegrass., but he came up here and somehow he got a job with Bill Monroe and Chubby told me one time, he said, "Bill Monroe taught me how to play songs on my fiddle." He said, "Now, you're the only instrument that can sustain a note like a voice can in this music that we play," and he said, "You can play every note I sing," and Chubby thought, "Well, that's not possible," but he proved him right, he was the first bluegrass fiddler, Chubby Wise from Florida.

Sid Evans: Wow.

Del McCoury: And Earl Scruggs banjo player from North Carolina, and Lester Flatt was a lead singer from Tennessee, and of course, Bill from Kentucky, so they were from all different parts of the country, but they could come together and- it's just classic stuff,

Sid Evans: Yeah, we're still listening to it today.

Del McCoury: Right.

Sid Evans: Well Del, I wanna ask you about your new album, called, "Almost Proud," which, is just wonderful, and I love how the title track starts out with this guy looking back on his life, and some of the mistakes that he made, tell me about that, and what was it about that song, that really resonated with you, and made you wanna name the album after it?

Del McCoury: Well, thanks for the compliment. Eric Gibson wrote that Eric said, "Man, I gotta write a song for that record. I gotta have a song on that record," (laughs). So he wrote that, and, it just so happened I did like the song, so we put it on there, and, when you do a record myself, I'm not thinking of

a title for the record, it's just the furthest thing from my mind, I'm just working on songs, and before I got the thing done, you know, my manager said, we want to call that, "Almost Proud," and I said, "Why?" "Well, I don't know?" He said, "Yeah, that just fits you," (laughs). So that's kind of the way it came about, the title, and- it was a good song, I can relate to it, it's from the country,

Sid Evans: Yeah, (laughs). Well, you also wrote a couple of songs on this album, and,

Del McCoury: Yeah.

Sid Evans: ... there's one called, "Running Wild," that is a great song that disappeared for a longtime after it was written, and then it was kinda rediscovered, can you tell me how that song kind of resurfaced-

Del McCoury: Well-

Sid Evans: ... and found its way on the album?

Del McCoury: I'll go back a little further than that Sid. When the pandemic hit, I was playing the Grand Ole Opry on a Tuesday night, March 9th, 2020, well, they were talking that night about, "This is getting bad," well, they found out the next day everything was gone man, (laughs). And the band just had to sit around and do nothing, so I thought, I- I had this box... people send me demos all year, and there's a lot of songwriters in this town, you know? So they'll send demos and I just been on the road and I don't have time to listen to them, so I- I thought, "Well, I could take a box of records out and just see what songs in there," there's a lot of songs man. I found about 26 songs in this batch that I would be willing to record if I had to, so, er, my grandson, and my son, they said, "Well, look dad, we could get you a tape machine, it'll be easy to operate, and we got plenty of good mics here, just plug one of them in," and they set it all up for me, and all I had to do was push a button. If I got a song, in the key I like, and the tempo and all like that, I could put it on there, I put these 26 songs on the tape, and the way it was, we used to do a lot of pre-production when I'd do an album,, since these boys have a band, they're on the road, they're a lot busier now, and I don't wanna waste their time a lot of the time, so I finally decided what I'll do is I'll just, like I said, I get the song to where I can sing it, where it suits me good and all like that, we'll just go in the studio, and let them learn whatever it is they need to learn there, right there in the studio, So, it takes a little more time to do a record, but it's easier on them, because we, I don't have to have rehearsals with them, you know,

Sid Evans: Well, it sure came out great, it's a wonderful record, and it's so fun, and, I love the energy of that song in particular, that, "Running Wild," it just comes out, with a-... guitar and, it's just great.

Del's song, "Running Wild" comes in and we hear the following at full volume then fades out:

You're running wild, you're running wild/

You made me sad for a little while/

But listen, babe, the time will come/

For me to say, unfaithful one/

Del McCoury: Thank you man. Well, you know and another thing. while this process is going on, I was inspired to write a couple, and I think I wrote those two, that one and, I forget the other one's title now, the other one that I wrote but- but I got two on there that I did write from the batch,

Sid Evans: Oh, they're just great. Well I- I sure am glad it found its way onto this record.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- fade in/fade out)

Sid Evans Voice Over: I'll be back with more from the great Del McCoury after the break.

(AD BREAK)

(Instrumental music break of biscuits and jam theme)

Sid Voice Over: Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, and today I'm talking with Del McCoury.

Sid Evans: Well Del, I wanna ask you about your festival, "DelFest," which I think you've had to cancel the last couple of years, because of the pandemic, and, uh, you got the festival coming back- what does it mean to have you- to have that back on the calendar?

Del McCoury: Well you know it means a lot to me because I'm always looking forward to that, like you said, "We missed two years," the first year was canceled completely, I mean, that was it, and then the next year we decided, "Well, we might have it in May," Well, my manager, he keeps up with everything, and he's the idea guy, and all, like that's why I've done all these recordings with all these, different people, He comes up, he'll say, "now I want you to record with this band. They're interesting, they want you to do this." Well, I'd say, "I can't sing with those guys," (laughs). "It don't matter, go ahead and try it." Well, um, like- like I said, "I'm always up for a challenge," you know, so. So anyway, he had it set that we would do the second year, well time got closer and closer and then they said, "Ah, we can't do that in May, let's move it to September." So, we moved it up to September, because it's getting better, and getting better, and then just before September, it started getting bad and bad again, you know, (laughs)

Sid Evans: Oh yeah.

Del McCoury: So what we did for all the folks in that community, which they are kind of disheartened too, just like I am, because they depend on us being there now, because of the hotels, motels and restaurants, they do really good when we do our festival, so we thought, "We've gotta do something, for the local folks," so we went up there in September on a day that I was up in PA somewhere, and Virginia, I think I was playing two days up there, and we set a date where we could go to Cumberland, and that's right in the middle of that community, and they got a park there, and we did a free show for all of the people there, because we felt sorry for them. And anyway, that's what we did there. When it started getting bad, and we knew we couldn't have a festival in September, we thought we'd just do that, and that's what we did last September, and then, well, it's looking good now, I don't know how long it's gonna last, (laughs)

Sid Evans: (laughs). You better knock on something.

Del McCoury: Yeah, I got it right here, (laughs).

Sid Evans: (laughs). Well, you know, Del, you've played so many festivals over the years. I mean, everything from Jazz Fest to Bonnaroo, what kind of reception do you get when you are bringing this old-time bluegrass music to such a young audience?

Del McCoury: Well, you know, we play with other young bands, and that's what I can never figure out my own self, you know, I just can't figure that out, (laughs), but, (laughs), but we played at Bonnaroo... now I gotta- give Ronnie credit for that, because, it wasn't my manager's idea, or my booking agent, at the time of the first Bonnaroo, you know, and Ronnie said, "Dad, we gotta play there," and I said, "Ron, what is it," (laughs)? I never heard of such a thing, you know, (laughs)? He said, "That's gonna be big." So he told our manager, "Look Stan, we've gotta play at Bonnaroo." we flew home from California, and it was gonna be here and then play it that Sunday. I don't know how they ever booked it, but they did, they booked it, (laughs). And- and so, the news was "If you don't go early, you're not even gonna get in the place," because I-24 is blocked up with traffic. This is Friday, you know, (laughs), I can, Saturday, Thursday, Friday and, (laughs), so Sunday morning man we get up real early after flying from California home, and we get in this bus, and go down there and nothing, not even a soul around nowhere, you'll just turn right off of that interstate, and go there to Holiday Inn and register... you had to do that, and what it was everybody was already there. We didn't have to worry about traffic, (laughs) because we played at the, we played the last day, And we were in a tent, I remember that, and we start to play, and people start gathering around, and God after a while I mean, they were everywhere, and they were requesting songs, it was so loud that they would put the name of a song, write it on something and hold it up for me to do, you know, a song that I had recorded, and I- and it kind of surprised me, (laughs), you know, but, you know, before this Phish recorded one of my songs and we went up and we played their big festival up there, (laughs), and there's 70,000 people there, you know, 77,000 actually, I got- I remember that now, and we had done, played with a lot of the Jam Bands out in Colorado, you know, and -

Sid Evans: Yeah.

Del McCoury: I mean, played dates with them, and so a lot of the younger folks got to know us through all these young bands, and so, (laughs), but it's still a surprise, you know, (laughs)? And they love those old songs that I did, recorded.

Sid Evans: Well, I know you met Jerry Garcia back in the day, so it's all kinda coming back around, (laughs)?

Del McCoury: Yeah, I- I guess, it is, you know, when I was with Bill, Monroe that is, we played as place called Ashgrove in Hollywood, We played it two weeks one time, and a- a week another time, so Jerry told me, he said, "You know I was there, I watched those shows," and he said, " I- I would've like to have been a bluegrass boy, but I was bashful and I was just- just ashamed to come up and talk to Bill Monroe," and I said, "Boy, I wish you had, because our banjo player quit right in the middle of our, of our- (laughs), and flew back to Boston," (laughs), and here we are in California with no banjo player, you know, and Bill Monroe asked me, he said, "Uh, uh, do you know anybody we can get out here," and I said, "Uh, uh, no, I don't know nobody," (laughs). And so if- if- if we'd have knew about Garcia, there you go we woulda had a banjo player right instantly, you see, (laughs)?

Sid Evans: You sure would've, things would've worked out differently for everybody,

Del McCoury: (laughs) it would have, I'm telling you.

Sid Evans: (laughs). Well, Del, I just got one more question for you, what are some of your hopes for bluegrass music when you look to the future?

Del McCoury: Well, you know I think it's in good hands, I really do, it's a lot better... you know when I started in music, it was kind of like a local music, of course, Bill Monroe was big, and Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs but the popularity just wasn't there, you know? Like, well rock 'n roll, man all the kids in high school... when I was in high school, that's a longtime, (laughs), ago, but they all were listening to Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and all like that, but I'd already heard Earl Scruggs and man I was ruined for life, (laughs). Me and a lot of other guys like J. D. Crowe and Sonny Osborne and, (laughs) when we heard Earl Scruggs, that was it, you know, just, I don't know, it just clicked, but, these days there's been things happen, you know, like that movie and, several things that have, raised the music up, and made it more popular, and, you know, a lot of the country, there's bits, a lot of big country singer stars that's got their training in bluegrass, when they were young, and it's such a great art form, I think. It's not easy to play. you know, bluegrass instruments, you don't have much to sustain, you gotta be working them buddy, you gotta get work at, right out of them, with those instruments, and of course the singing, you know, is, there's a lot of trio singing, duet singing in bluegrass where usually other genres of music, it's just got the lead singers upfront, and you might hear somebody way back there singing a part, but you don't know what he's doing, you know (laughs)? And it's just, it's a different sound for folks.

Sid Evans: Well, I know you recorded something with, Billy Strings and he's a real talented young artist coming along and-

Del McCoury: He really, yeah, he is. You know, I'll tell you what, I've been playing, y-you know David Grisman

Sid Evans: Sure.

Del McCoury: Okay, we call him, "The Dawg," you know, me and The Dawg, (laughs), we played the City Winery and my booking agent said, "I got another act that's just like you guys, it's a guitar and a singer, and a mandolin player and a singer," and he said that, "I wanna get him to open for you guys," and so that's the first time I heard him, and he had a partner there, just the two of them, and I thought, "Boy, this kid," I didn't get to hear him, I really didn't get to hear him in Chicago, but we played another date in Cleveland at a place... I forget the name of it, and they were opening there too, so I got a little chance where I could go somewhere and kinda see him and hear him a little bit, where nobody'd see me, because you get distracted in the audience, you know, (laughs), and so, (laughs), I went and listened, watched and I thought "That kid's an entertainer," he could do it all, you know, he could sing, he could play the guitar, he could lead the guitar," and he entertained the people, you know, (laughs). And, of course his partner was a lot older than him, and he just wasn't the musician that- Billy was, (laughs)? And, so I told my booking agent, and he came well, what- what happened then, Billy Strings come to my festival, and I've got two grandsons that play guitars, and they're just young, they're in their early 20s, and, my one grandson, he's told me one evening there, I said, "You know what, I stayed up all night last night." He said, "I was up when the sun come up." He said, "Me and, that Billy Strings and Evan were all

playing guitars all night long, (laughs), until the sun came up here," and I said, "You mean, 'Billy Strings,' is here?" He said, "Oh yeah, we played all night with him," (laughs). "Just jamming," you know? And so my manager got to hearing and he took him on and, "God, then the rest is history," not my manager, my booking agent. I mean, tho- that guy's just, he's on fire now, (laughs).

Sid Evans: Well, bluegrass is in good hands for a lot of reasons.

Del McCoury: It is. It, and it's on account of a lot of the good musicians, there's always good musicians, you know, that come along, a lot of times, what makes a good musician is just they get with a professional band when they're young, and real early, because they get set in their ways, if they get up to say 30, so, they get set in their own ways, the timing and all that is messed up a lot of times, but if they get, er, an- and that's- that's the way Billy, his dad played guitar and he- he learned to play under his dad, and his dad's a great guitar player. Billy's dad is, and anyway, but if they get with a- a good band when they're young, they'll, uh, develop real quick. Man, they learn so fast, you know, (laughs).

Sid Evans: Well, you have inspired a lot of them, and, Del McCoury, thanks so much for being on Biscuits & Jam.

Del McCoury: Hey, I like it, and I love Biscuits & Jam too, (laughs). I was gonna tell you, my mom, my mom made them biscuits, her whole cakes, she'd make- she'd squeeze them biscuits out, you know, and put them in there, and then if she had a bunch leftover (laughs), she'd just make a big pattern and put it in the frying pan and put it in the oven, (laughs), call it a whole cake, (laughs), and she always made homemade jam... your apple butter, oh Lord we could go on and on, couldn't we, (laughs)?

Sid Evans: Well, I love that, it's been a privilege talking to you Del, thanks so much.

Del McCoury: Same here Sid, (laughs).

Voice Over from Sid Evans: Thanks for listening to my conversation with Del McCoury. You can check out Del McCoury Band's latest album, *Almost Proud*, wherever you get music, and you can visit DelMcCouryBand.com for summer tour dates, social media and more. Be sure to follow Biscuits & Jam on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you listen. And we'd love your feedback. If you could rate this podcast and leave us a review we'd really appreciate it. You can also find us online at southernliving.com/biscuitsandjam Make sure to come back here next Tuesday for my conversation with the Mississippi vocal trio, Chapel Hart.