







# Fire on His Tongue

How Billy Strings found his own voice within the flatpicking tradition

BY E.E. BRADMAN

“I was sitting in a therapy session, and I realized how much the guitar has saved my life and kept me out of trouble,” says Billy Strings. “It’s always been my coping mechanism and my survival strategy.”

It’s barely a month after his 29th birthday, and Strings, who grew up William Apostol in Muir, Michigan (population: 613), is getting ready to play two sold-out shows at the 2,500-capacity Fillmore Philadelphia. The day before, he’d made headlines by handing out 200 guitars at his old primary school, Twin Rivers Elementary, and as he reminisced about being on the playground with the parents of today’s students, Strings remembered the hard times, too.

“I’ve been through some shit, but no matter how bad it was, the music was always good. It distracted me from whatever was going on,” he says. “So, yeah, it really meant a lot to me to get back to my community and hook those kids up. It’s one of the coolest things I’ve ever done.”

Strings’s intimate knowledge of substance abuse, poverty, and small-town ennui are key parts of his story, as is the fact that his dad, the masterful guitarist Terry Barber, imbued him with a deep love for bluegrass. At 14, Strings left Muir for Traverse City, three hours north, where he spent four years playing traditional bluegrass with mandolinist Don Julin. He was also beginning to absorb other influences, a fact readily apparent on the *Billy Strings* EP, released a year after he’d moved to Nashville in 2015. *Turmoil & Tinfoil* followed in 2017, and his current touring band (bassist Royal Masat, Billy Failing on banjo, and mandolinist Jarrod Walker) is the core of *Home*, which won a Grammy, one of many honors bestowed on Strings in 2019. His latest album, the uplifting *Renewal* (2021), has been met with rapturous acclaim.

“My childhood has been central to my entire life—I just was looking in the rearview mirror instead of through the windshield,” Strings says. “That’s what *Renewal* is about. I’ve been sifting through my childhood trauma in therapy for the last few years, and I feel like I’m at a point where I’m rounding the

corner. It's a new chance at life without being stuck in the past."

A big chunk of that healing happens onstage, which is also the best place to experience the full range of Billy's dazzling gifts. At the Fillmore Philly, the band delivers catchy originals and blazing takes on classics by the Stanley Brothers, John Prine, Bad Livers, Gordon Lightfoot, Jimmy Driftwood, Ralph Stanley, the Hill Billies, and Honey & Sassafras; a fistful of Grateful Dead chestnuts and hat-tips to Nirvana's "All Apologies" and Jimi Hendrix's "Third Stone from the Sun" round out the evening.

The next night is more old school: Flatt & Scruggs, Tony Rice, the Dillards, Johnny Horton, more Stanley Brothers, John Hartford, Jimmy Cliff's "Sitting in Limbo," and future Billy Strings classics like "Red Daisy." The harmonies are magical; the playing is on fire. And when the quartet dips into jam-band territory, the distortion channel on Strings' Orange Rockerverb 50 combo and his bountiful pedalboard help him blur the line between acoustic and electric. He navigates his Grace Design BiX DI, Boss DC-2W Waza Craft Dimension C chorus, Jam Pedals WaterFall chorus/vibrato, MXR Tremolo, Electro-Harmonix Pitchfork pitch-shifter, Strymon Lex Rotary, Source Audio Nemesis delay, Electro-Harmonix Micro POG, TC Electronic Ditto looper, and Chase Bliss Wombtone phaser as expertly as he rocks his two signature Thompsons, kept on point by Petersen strobe tuners.

Strings is having so much fun that it's easy to see why he does 200 shows a year. "My job is to distract people for about two hours each night from all the bullshit they're going through," he says. "I try to spread some positivity. I'm a temporary relief balm that you can put in your ears and clear your head before you go back to real life."

**When the pandemic hit, did you miss touring or were you happy for a breather?**

A little bit of both. It was a welcome break, but we were just starting to get some traction, and the rug got pulled right out from under us. It was kind of scary. I didn't know if I was going to have to get a day job.

**Now that you're back on the road, do you find that people are more appreciative than ever?**

For sure. And we're happy to be playing, so it's coming from both sides.

**Let's talk about the band, which is such a crucial part of the Billy Strings experience.**

Billy Failing's been with me the longest. He's super chill, keeps to himself, shows up, and does a killer job. I met Royal at a Phish concert, and he joined in 2016 or 2017. He's an

incredible player, and it blows me away how he can read my mind onstage. And Jarrod is the one who keeps us true to old-school bluegrass, so it's fun to see him stretching out and playing long, improvised sections.

**The band does a great job of walking the line between old-school and modern.**

As much as we get into progressive stuff, the coolest shit is still Bill Monroe, Doc Watson, Flatt & Scruggs, Jimmy Martin, Larry Sparks, J.D. Crowe—all that stuff. It just doesn't get any better.

**I read an interview where you made a connection between old-time and current music and tattoos.**

Well, in traditional bluegrass, you don't stray too far from the melody or play all over it. Old-school tattoos are kinda similar: There's more black shading, and big, thick, bold lines. You

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**—BILLY STRINGS**

just want to slam that melody right in there so that like a bold tattoo, it will hold up for a long time, just like Bill Monroe's music has.

**How do you feel about putting your stamp on the classics?**

I might take a song that I learned way back when and do my own thing with it, but sometimes I try to imitate the original artist a little bit more. I guess it just depends on what it is.

**Do the bluegrass police get on your case?**

I don't know if they have my number *[laughter]*. I mean, people call me a bluegrass artist, but when it really comes down to it, there's more to it than that. I play a lot of bluegrass, but I play a lot of other stuff, too.

**Do you ever sit down to specifically write bluegrass songs?**

I'm so hard-pressed to write a song that I can't be picky about what genre it is. When a song

comes, I don't care if it's a polka—I'm going to sit there and write that sucker, you know? I can't have an inspiration for a song and then be like, "OK, how do I make this bluegrass?" I was raised on bluegrass, and I love to talk about Bill Monroe and Doc Watson with the best of 'em, but when I'm just creating my music, I'm not trying to pigeonhole myself into being some neo-Appalachian mannequin.

**When did you realize you weren't strictly an old-time bluegrass artist?**

When I was in middle school, I wanted to play music with people my age; I'd only hung out with my dad's old bluegrass buddies. I played heavy metal for a little bit and then I got sick of it—my bands kept breaking up, and drugs and bullshit got in the way. I came back to bluegrass as a real purist, because I had cut my teeth on Flatt & Scruggs and Bill Monroe and Doc and Merle. When I started my career as Billy Strings, I was about 18. I wore a vest, I had slicked-back pomade hair, and I was trying to dress up like an old bluegrass guy from the '40s. I was trying to be somebody I was not.

**What changed?**

Hearing bands like String Cheese Incident, Greensky Bluegrass, the Infamous Stringdusters, Leftover Salmon, Railroad Earth, Yonder Mountain String Band, and Jeff Austin. It was like, "Oh my God, I can play bluegrass but I don't have to pretend I'm some old coal miner. I can just be myself!" First, I got rid of the tie, then I undid a few top buttons, and then the vest was gone. I started wearing jeans with a nice button-up shirt, and eventually, my hair started getting longer, and I was just like, "OK, I'm wearing a T-shirt on stage."

**It's obvious you've put in your 10,000 hours living and learning bluegrass. Do you practice or warm up before shows?**

I like to pick up my guitar before the show and run through major scales up and down the neck. That's a good warm-up for me. I'm always hoping that if I warm up without digging in too hard, I can keep that going on stage.

**You play hard, man!**

I know! Like, too hard, really. I can't help it. I feel like I'm getting a little bit better. Bryan Sutton's my hero, and I never see him going overboard or playing too soft, either. I use the same pick he does, the BlueChip TP48.

**What is it about that pick that works for you?**

I like a triangle pick, but I don't want a big Dorito. I want a small, concise precision triangle. The TP45 is a bit too thin and the TP50 is a





little too thick; the 48 is perfect. And I like them because I can't wear a BlueChip out—I played on one pick for over nine months before it started getting round. Shout-out to [BlueChip owner] Matt Goins!

**I read somewhere that you love your D'Addarios because they don't break when you really dig in.**

I was playing coated strings, and I'd break a G string three times in one set. And no, it wasn't my saddle. Right after I signed with D'Addario, the XS strings came out, and I was back with coated strings that last a long time and sound good. On my old Martin, I only use the D'Addario Phosphor Bronze mediums, the regular old uncoated ones, and they sound amazing.

**Is it true you don't have a guitar tech?**

I do not.

**Why not?**

We don't really have any room on the bus. I mean, we just got a monitor engineer two weeks ago! [Laughs]

**Tell me about your signature Thompson and your Martin D-28.**

I have two Brazilian rosewood dreadnought Thompsons onstage with me at all times. I have a K&K soundhole magnetic pickup, and then I have a transducer pickup under the bridge plate, and I switch between the two. For the clean, straight-up bluegrass signal, I use the K&K transducer on the bridge, but when I use an amp, I turn on the magnetic pickup—it's more like an electric guitar pickup and it doesn't feed back like the transducer will. For my pick gain, I got the bridge pickup down there, and when I want to wail, I can go up on the neck pickup and have that electric tone.

**It's nice to have choices.**

I have a little Shure Beta microphone inside the guitar, too, which goes to my in-ears and to front of house. I'm wireless, so the packs supply that Shure with phantom power. The other wireless signal goes to my Grace DI—I can play electric stuff, acoustic stuff, jump up and down, and do whatever I want with that guitar. It's amazing.

**Are both Thompsons wired the same way?**

Exactly the same. If I break a string, I can grab the other one, and they're set up similarly, so it doesn't feel so awkward to switch.

**What in-ears are you using?**

Jerry Harvey Audio Roxannes. I've been with Jerry for a while now, and he's another very kind dude, a homie and a badass.



### What's the story with your D-28?

I met a guitar collector at Newport Folk Festival, real nerdy like me, who said that if I ever got a chance to play a 1945 D-28, I should check it out. He put it in my head that I'd like a '45 D-28 because I don't like a big, fat 1-3/4-inch neck, like they made in the '30s, and I don't like it when they got too skinny in the '50s. I like that in-between, a nice 1-11/16 nut, but with some girth on the back end of the neck.

When I saw a late 1944 D-28 at Gruhn Guitars online, I went down, hung out with George [Gruhn], and played it. It blew my mind. I've heard that wartime D-28s can be hit or miss, and this one was definitely not a miss. It's in amazing condition, and it's got this beautiful checking all over the top. I don't know if I'll ever need another acoustic guitar. It's the holy grail, and I cannot believe I own it.

### Did you put a pickup in it?

I'm not putting a pickup or anything in this guitar. On *Jimmy Kimmel*, we all played right into microphones, and that's what this guitar is for—the studio, and when I'm sitting around pickin'. It's a cannon! Every note is loud and clear, up and down the neck. I might put a K&K pickup in it someday, but I'm certainly not going to do all the bullshit I've done to my other guitars. This is what they talk about when they talk about Martin guitars. I'm in love!

### The story about your dad's D-93 [a special-edition dreadnought that Martin produced for its 160th anniversary —ed.] is pretty special, too.

When I was a little kid learning how to play, my dad told me, "Son, when I die, this is going to be your guitar someday."

### Wow.

It was the family jewel. Years later, things got tough, and the only thing we had worth any money was that guitar, which his dad had bought for him. I didn't want my dad to sell it, but he needed to provide for the family.

When I got into bluegrass again, I was looking for a Martin. I was on this unofficial Martin forum and there it was—it was his guitar! I knew every single picking mark and scratch. I wrote to the seller, Joe Singleton, and asked him not to sell this guitar to anybody but me. I told him it was my dad's guitar and that I needed it back in the family.

### Did he believe you?

He wasn't sure if I was just a kid who was telling him a story, and he had people on eBay ready to pay cash for it right then. I told him I could have his money in three months, and he



ALDEN BONECUTTER

was like, "Are you kidding me?" It would've been over right then, but his wife stepped in and told him to give me a chance. I did everything I could do to come up with \$700 a month for three months in a row, and Joe sent the guitar back to me.

### How did it feel to have it in your hands again?

I went to my dad's house and put it on the kitchen table, and he thought it was a prank. That guitar had been gone for eight years! He opened the case an inch, shut it, and then sat down. He could hardly breathe; he said it felt like his mother was back from the grave. And then he picked it up and played "John Deere Tractor" by Larry Sparks. Me, my mom, and my brother were just standing there holding each other, all four of us crying tears of joy because the guitar had made it back into the family. I got

to meet Joe a couple years later and thank him for selling it back to me.

### The video of the Traverse City duo show you did with your dad in 2020 is killer. Can you imagine doing a whole album with him?

I could see myself doing a bluegrass record with him of the old-school stuff that I grew up on, the music of my childhood. I could also see doing something with bigger artists and people in different genres. I want to do stuff with great musicians from Mali, and I'd love to learn more about choro music from Brazil. I want to keep playing with my heroes. I could see a lot of stuff happening, but I'm trying to not force it, to just let karma do its thing. Who knows—I gave all those kids guitars yesterday, and maybe I'll get a call from Cardi B and she'll want to do a song with me and Emmylou Harris!

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