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## Bill Keith Collection

Digital

1960-2013

1 box (0.25 linear foot)

Call no.: MS 1037



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A stylistic innovator and influential performer on the five string banjo, Bill Keith is credited with transforming the instrument from a largely percussive role into a one where it carried the melody. A native of Boston and 1961 graduate of Amherst College, Keith cut his teeth as a performer in New England clubs during the hey day of the folk revival, often partnering with his college roommate Jim Rooney, and he spent the better part of the decade as a member of two high profile acts: Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Boys, with whom he played for eight critical month in 1963, and the Jim Kweskin Jug Band. Adding the pedal steel guitar to his repertoire, Keith performed on stage and in studio with a stylistically and generationally diverse range of acts including Ian and Sylvia, Judy Collins, Richie Havens, Loudon Wainwright, and the Bee Gees. Keith continued performing nearly to the time of his death by cancer in October 2015.

This small collection of photographs and ephemera documents the musical career of bluegrass legend Bill Keith, including early images playing in coffee houses and at Newport Folk Festival and images of Keith with musical collaborators throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The collection includes a series of photographs and ephemera taken during the 50th anniversary Jug Band Reunion tour of Japan in 2013.

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## Background on Bill Keith

A stylistic innovator and influential performer on the five string banjo, Bill Keith is credited with transforming the instrument from a largely percussive role into a one where it carried the melody. Born December 20, 1939, Keith grew up in the Boston suburbs playing the plastic ukulele and piano, learning to read music in the process. His musical direction, however, took a sharp turn after he began listening to country and bluegrass music on radio broadcasts from the south.

Going down to a local music store, Keith purchased began taking Dixieland on a four string banjo until the summer 1957, shortly before entering Amherst College, when he heard a five string being played. Immediately, he recognized that this would be his instrument. Using the Pete Seeger instructional book, he taught himself a three-finger style, but began expanding his technique by listening intently to Earl Scruggs, Don Reno, and others and reconstructing their approach, even recording a tablature for Scruggs. Building off from his studies of Scruggs, Keith reimagined the banjo as an instrument capable of carrying the melody usually taken up by the fiddle, playing in a note-for-note rolling style that became his signature.

Meanwhile, Keith and his roommate, guitarist and singer Jim Rooney, began to perform locally in small clubs, on radio shows, and local television, moving to Boston after graduation to immerse themselves in the burgeoning folk revival scene. In December 1962, Keith was introduced to Scruggs after a concert and took the occasion to show him the tablature he had been working on. Although Scruggs did not read music, he was impressed and verified that Keith's transcriptions were mostly accurate, leading the two to collaborate on a new instruction book, *Earl Scruggs and the Five String Banjo*, using the Keith tablature.

Another turn in Keith's career soon followed. In 1963, the "father of bluegrass," Bill Monroe, heard Keith playing backstage at the Grand Ole Opry and invited him to become part of his Blue Grass Boys band. Although Keith remained with Monroe only eight months, his reputation as a banjo player grew rapidly. He contributed to the technical side of the music as well, devising a new tuning peg for the banjo with another Amherst alumnus, Dan Bump, that enabled players to change pitch accurately even at high speeds. He marketed the tuner, known as the Keith Tuner, through the Beacon Banjo Company, a company he created in January 1964, selling more than 30,000 units over the next several decades.

After leaving Monroe, Keith joined the Jim Kweskin Jug Band for four years and expanded his instrumental range by adding the pedal steel guitar in the late 1960s. On stage and in studio he performed with a stylistically and generationally diverse range of acts over the next two decades, from Ian and Sylvia to Judy Collins, Richie Havens, Loudon Wainwright, and the Bee Gees. He was part of a short-lived bluegrass supergroup, Muleskinner, in 1973, that included Peter Rowan (guitar and signer), David Grisman (mandolin), Richard Greene (fiddle), and former Byrds guitarist Clarence White. In all, Keith performed on nearly twenty albums, beginning with *Bluegrass Livin' on the Mountain*, with Jim Rooney in 1963 (Prestige Folklore). He continued to perform nearly to the time of his death by cancer on October 23, 2015.



Jim Rooney, tuning his guitar, and Bill Keith at the Newport Folk Festival, 1965

## Scope of collection

This small collection of photographs and ephemera documents the musical career of bluegrass legend Bill Keith, including early images playing in coffee houses and at Newport Folk Festival and images of Keith with musical collaborators throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The collection includes a series of photographs and ephemera taken during the 50th anniversary Jug Band Reunion tour of Japan in 2013.

## Inventory

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Fincastle 50th anniversary celebration (International Bluegrass Music Museum)

2015

Box 1: 1

Japan tour: Beacon Banjo: Keith Banjo Tuners advertisement [in Japanese]

2007

Box 1: 2

Japan tour: Itoh, Ashura Benimaru caricatures of Bill Keith

2013

Box 1: 4

Japan tour: Hamamatsu Museum of Musical Instruments Lecture concert no. 144: Bill Keith fliers [in Japanese]

2013

Box 1: 3

Japan tour: Moon Shiner no. 30.5 and 30.6

2013

Box 1: 5

Japan tour photograph album, by Y. Kitamura

2013

Box 1: 6

Japan tour: Yokosuka: Grassroots Music Workshop: Bill Keith workshop advertisement [in Japanese]

2013

Box 1: 7

Jim Kweskin Jug Band 50th anniversary reunion tour

Box 1: 8

Photographs

1960-1997

Bill Keith and Odetta seated at a table, UMass Amherst (photo by Arthur Michel)

1960

Box 1: 9

Jim Rooney (guitar) and Bill Keith (banjo) performing on WWLP-TV, Springfield, Mass.

1960

Box 1: 9

Jim Rooney (guitar), Fritz Richmond (bass), and Bill Keith (banjo), performing at the Whiting Milk Cerebral Palsy Square Dance (photo by Atlantic Photo Service)

1962

Box 1: 9

Roy Acuff, Bill Monroe (mandolin), and Bill Keith (banjo) performing at the Grand Ol' Opry

1963

Box 1: 9

Bill Monroe (mandolin), Joe Stuart, Bill Keith, and Del McCourty (guitar) in recording studio

1963

Box 1: 9

Bill Keith, Jim Rooney, and Bill Monroe seated at a table, Hillbilly Ranch, Boston

1964

Box 1: 10

Jim Rooney, tuning a guitar, and Bill Keith (banjo) at the Newport Folk Festival

1965

Box 1: 10

Bill Keith playing pedal steel guitar

ca.1970

Box 1: 10

Breakfast in France, l. to r.: Unidentified, Pierre Bensusan, Jim Rooney, unidentified, Bill Keith

1973

Box 1: 10

Jim Rooney (with guitar) and Bill Keith (banjo): portrait with instruments (photo by Jim McGuire)  
1974

Box 1: 10

Earl Scruggs, Steven Bruton, and Bill Keith (photo by H. Stine)

ca.1975

Box 1: 11

Olivier [illeg.], Christian Seguret, Jim Collier, and Bill Keith in performance, France

1977

Box 1: 11

Bill Keith, Peter Rowan, and Jim Rooney (l. to r.)

1980

Box 1: 11

David Grisman (mandolin) and Bill Keith (banjo)

ca.1985

Box 1: 11

David Grisman, Bill Keith, Jim Rooney, Del McCourty, Doug [illeg.]. International Bluegrass Music Awards, Owensboro, Ky.

1985

Box 1: 11

Bill Monroe (with mandolin) and Bill Keith (photo by R. J. Kelly)

ca.1985

Box 1: 11

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## Administrative information

### Access

The collection is open for research.

### Provenance

Acquired from through Tom Curren, July 2018.

### Digitized content

The photographs in this collection have been digitized and may be viewed online through SCUA' online digital repository, Credo.

### Processing Information

Processed by I. Eliot Wentworth, July 2018.

### Languages:

English, Japanese

### Copyright and Use (More information )

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## Search terms

### Subjects

Bluegrass musicians--Photographs

Folk musicians--Photographs

Jug Band

Kweskin, Jim

Monroe, Bill, 1911-1996

Muldaur, Geoff

Muldaur, Maria

Rooney, Jim, 1938-

### Contributors

Keith, Bill, 1939-2017 [main entry]

### Genres and formats

Photographs

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Folk music



Special Collections & University Archives  
University Libraries : UMass Amherst  
154 Hicks Way : Amherst, Mass. 01003-9275  
Ph. 413-545-7282 (545-SCUA)



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