

String Time – Bill Emerson

Posted on August 14, 2024 (<https://bluegrasstoday.com/string-time-bill-emerson/>) By Braeden Paul (<https://Bluegrasstoday.Com/Author/Braedenpaul/>)



Bill Emerson's impact on the five string banjo cannot be overstated. A member of the Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame, Emerson's playing has been an integral part of many legendary recordings, and in turn has inspired countless banjoists. Three of those influential recordings were solo efforts released on the Coronet label in the 1960s. *String Time* ([https://geo.music.apple.com/us/album/string-time/1757218396?](https://geo.music.apple.com/us/album/string-time/1757218396?itsct=music_box_link&itscg=30200&ls=1&app=music)

[itsct=music_box_link&itscg=30200&ls=1&app=music](https://geo.music.apple.com/us/album/string-time/1757218396?itsct=music_box_link&itscg=30200&ls=1&app=music)) on Patuxent Music (<http://www.pxrec.com>) is the first time any of these recordings, made between 1962 and 1963, have been reissued on CD and digital platforms.

Most of the twenty tunes feature the same configuration of backing musicians. Alongside Bill, the core group includes Red Allen on guitar, Frank Wakefield on mandolin, and Tom Morgan on bass. The opening track, *Old Joe Clark*, is a spot on example of both Emerson and Wakefield bringing their stylistic touches to a tried and true standard.

Baby Sue (Old Spinning Wheel) is one of several tunes that were recorded under a different name in order to avoid

copyright issues. Played at a slightly faster tempo than one would typically expect, Emerson really does this piece justice with his rendition.

The title track, *String Time*, is actually an early recording of *Theme Time*, which would go on to be commonly associated with the music of Jimmy Martin & The Sunny Mountain Boys, with whom Emerson played when these recordings were made. Although Bill wouldn't record the tune with Martin until a few years later in 1965, it's really clear from this performance that this classic was an already well defined piece.

Weepin' Willow (Bury Me Beneath the Willow) is the first of several tracks on this reissue to feature Kenny Haddock on dobro. A pioneering musician within the Baltimore bluegrass scene, this tune really captures Haddock's capabilities on the resophonic instrument.

Lightnin' Banjo is a reprise of *Lonesome Road Blues*, which was featured earlier in the collection. This particular version is played in a different key, and in a more frantic tempo, than the former rendition. It's truly riveting. *Runnin' Wild (Cumberland Gap)* is the perfect follow up track as it's played with that same intensity and vigor.

Sweet Dixie was a tune that became not only a signature showpiece for Emerson, but would also serve as the name of the band he would eventually form. Like *String Time (Theme Time)*, it's clear that this tune already had all the elements that banjo players would be learning for generations to come.

Push and Shove (Back Up and Push) is the only track that features Carl Nelson on fiddle. Known for his work as a longtime member of Bill Harrell and the Virginians, Nelson's fiddling on this tune is stellar, and complements the playing of Emerson and the other musicians remarkably.

Speaking of Bill Harrell, *Rainbow Blues (Fireball Mail)* includes him on rhythm guitar along with Buzz Busby on mandolin. Busby's performance here is the perfect contrast to what Frank Wakefield brought to these recordings.

Charlie Waller is featured playing guitar on both *Hogwash (Hey Mr. Banjo)* and *Fingers On Fire (John Henry)*. Waller has been regarded so highly for his signature singing voice that his stellar rhythm and lead guitar playing is often overlooked. The reissue of these two tracks will hopefully rectify that.

String Time is an important reissue. These recordings have been a source of inspiration for numerous five string players such as John Hickman, Jens Kruger, and Alan Munde, who wrote the liner notes for this project. These recordings brilliantly capture why Bill Emerson is on the Mount Rushmore of bluegrass banjoists for so many people.