

REVIEWS

KIP LORNELL AND TOM MINDTE

BUZZ BUSBY: FATHER OF WASHINGTON, DC, BLUEGRASS

REVIEWED BY GARY REID

Buzz Busby is deep catalog bluegrass. He's a name that you hear of from time to time, often spoken in reverent tones from "those who know." But, unless you're a die-hard collector or have access to someone who is, you're unlikely to know more than a few recycled hits such as "Me and the Jukebox" or "Lost" that appear on various artists' "Best Of" collections. And, you might even have heard stories about Buzz's numerous scrapes with the criminal justice system. Sadly, because Buzz died more than 20 years ago and because his catalog of music is difficult to find today for casual listeners, the true breadth of his life and musical genius is largely unknown.

For the last several years, two Washington, DC, area fans of Buzz's music have been working to afford Busby the credit he's due. They are Kip Lornell, Professor Emeritus of Music History and Culture at George Washington University, and Tom Mindte, a musician/performer who also doubles as the head of Patuxent Music.

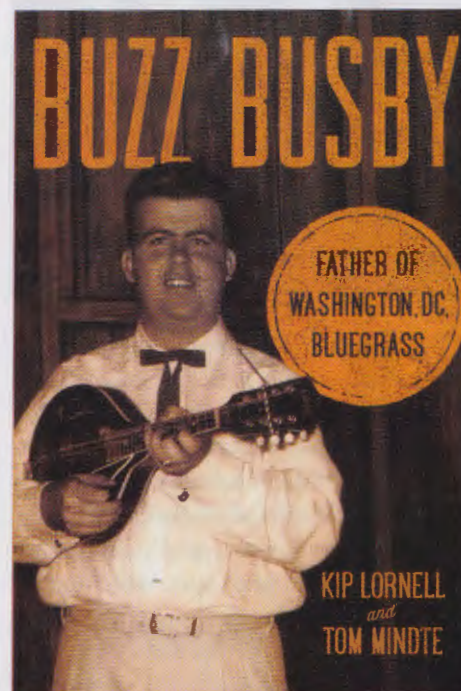
In their just-released book on Busby, the duo traced his ascent from meager beginnings in rural Louisiana to his relocation to Washington, DC, where he found employment with the FBI while simultaneously pursuing a college education. Neither endeavor survived the pull of music!

Lornell and Mindte ably recount Busby's gift as a musician, and how he possessed a soaring tenor vocal that the authors

favorably compared to Bill Monroe and Ira Louvin, and his mandolin playing was nothing short of phenomenal.

Buzz hit his zenith in 1954/'55 when he co-fronted the *Hayloft Hoedown*, a daily live country music television program that aired in Washington, DC. Busby and his bandmates – guitarist/vocalist Pete Pike, banjo player Don Stover, and fiddler John Hall – became instant celebrities and put bluegrass on the map in the Nation's Capital. The program ended after six months, but it served as an inspirational blueprint for aspiring bluegrass musicians in the area. Buzz's most tangible legacy is a series of recordings that he made for the Starday label in the mid- and late 1950s.

Possessed of an addictive personality, Buzz was his own worst enemy. Bouts of alcoholism and abuse of prescription drugs created many lost opportunities for him. The authors pulled no punches in dealing with his best and his worst. But they told his story in a compelling, easy-to-read manner that glides along from one chapter to the next. Their work is well-researched and makes use of numerous interviews by family members and musicians who worked with him. Something that I found particularly interesting was the fact that, later in life, Buzz dictated sixty hours' worth of his life story, much of which worked its way as direct quotes into the manuscript. The book also contains a discography that details Buzz's entire recorded output.



My own connection to Buzz stretches back over 50 years, when, as a bluegrass newbie, I became aware of him and his music. For years, my only exposures to that music were two homemade cassette tapes of his classic 1950s recordings that I obtained from friends. As a fledgling Johnson Mountain Boy, my bandmates and I backed Buzz on some personal appearances and even participated in an ill-fated recording session. It was, to say the least, an experience. Shortly after Buzz's passing in 2003, I had the honor of producing a CD reissue of his entire Starday output – 19 tracks in all. Still, like many, I knew only snippets of Buzz's story. Kudos to Kip Lornell and Tom Mindte for bringing understanding and appreciation of Buzz and his music, for me and hopefully for many others, too.