

# Tom Isenhour

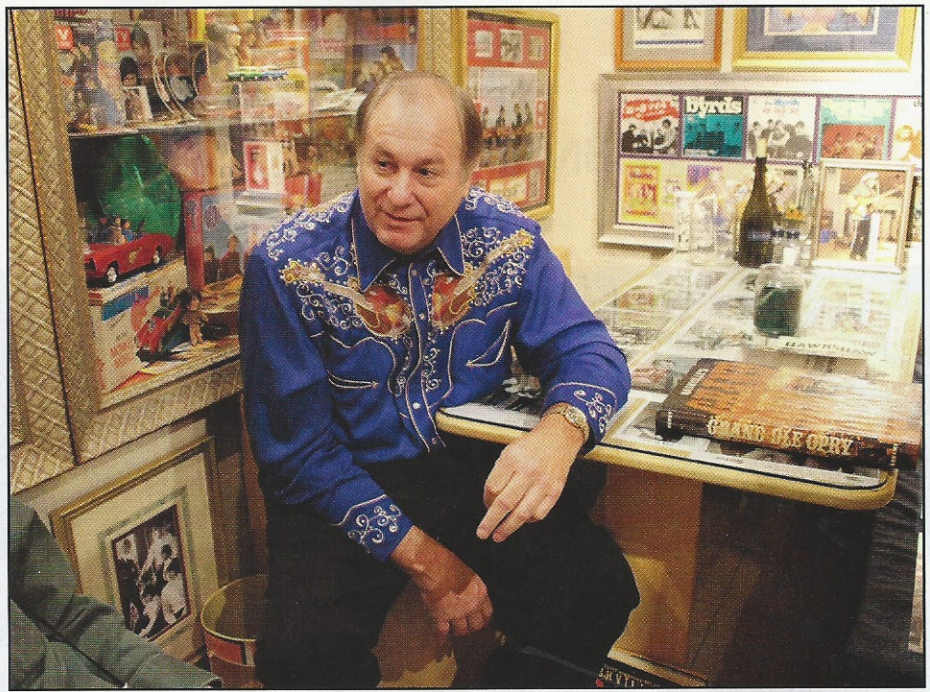
## From Toy Collecting To Scruggs And Monroe In Wax

By Art Menius  
Photos by Becky Johnson

Fifty years ago, I'd sit with my uncle Dewdrop watching golf on TV in Salisbury, N.C. I remained sadly unaware of the picking happening and the astonishing music collections growing just across the street and two doors down. The fun I could have had down at the Isenhour household. Also, I probably could have saved myself a lot of money seeing the symptoms of collecting-mania firsthand, before I caught it. As it was, visiting the wonders of Tom Isenhour's remarkable private museum would wait until Becky Johnson and I arrived just before Thanksgiving last.

Sort of like 78-collector Joe Bussard's famed basement, no description of the visual impact of actually visiting the Isenhour museum, also known as the Blue Rock Café, will suffice. You can see that his greatest love is for the musical items, and that while bluegrass (especially Scruggs and Monroe) gets the most attention, Isenhour has put together an astounding collection of music-related items from the mid-twentieth century.

It starts on the main floor, beside the kitchen. We knew we had stepped through the looking glass with the first sight being life-sized statues of Monroe (who looks more like golfer great Jack Nicklaus), Flatt & Scruggs, and Hawkshaw Hawkins that he had rescued from a failed Nashville wax museum. The museum went bankrupt in the 1990s when Music Circle lost its luster and visitors. The discouraged owner put everything in the basement, where thieves and vandals had their way. "The only instrument they didn't take was Earl's Vega banjo," Tom recalled. "I found out from Louise and Earl that this is his banjo. They had donated it to the museum because they didn't want him holding a Harmony. In Monroe's hand, they had put a Harmony A-model. I still got it. In Lester's hands, they put a Fender Malibu. It was just a prop. Earl or Louise didn't



Wax statues rescued from a failed Nashville wax museum

want that to happen to him, so they donated a banjo. I had a deal made at MerleFest with Earl to swap it for a Mastertone, but then Louise died, and we didn't pursue it."

For Tom Isenhour, the collecting compulsion started with board games, then toys associated with TV shows, both enabled by the spacious basement in his parents' home. He came by the habit genetically from his mother. "I can remember when I was four years old, my mother opening a pack of chewing gum, giving me the gum, and keeping the card. She was trading Elvis cards with ladies in the neighborhood."

Tom's older brother, Bob, played music, and it also came naturally to young

Tom. "How my brother got started was the folk stuff," Isenhour says. "The Muddy Creek Ramblers with Al McCanless and Buck Peacock. They played the high school here in talent shows and the churches. The YMCA would have the hootenannies where you'd pay one dollar, and they'd always have one big act, like Odetta one time. The folk thing and bluegrass was a fine line then. *The Beverly Hillbillies* are how my brother got into bluegrass. He heard Earl's banjo, and it just warped his mind. 'I am going to learn to play banjo like that.' That's how I got started; he wanted me to back him up. We started to go see Flatt & Scruggs live immediately after that."





Learning about and playing bluegrass music became a shared passion for the brothers. “It didn’t take me long to get to mandolin, but my brother wanted me to back him up on guitar. We knew some guys who were in a bluegrass band who told us, ‘You need to go to Union Grove and Cool Spring. That’s how you learn from other pickers.’ Back then, Mooresville and Star would kick things off in March, and you could find a fiddlers’ convention every weekend in North Carolina or Virginia until November. We were at Union Grove when the Greenbriar Boys were still coming. The New York City Ramblers had just won and came back and regained their title. We’d walk from here [2.7 miles] out to radio station WSDP on Thursday night at 7 p.m. to be there for live bluegrass with the Carolina Home Boys. We’d sit in the studio—we had to be quiet—and watch their hands.”

They would also watch the hands of pickers on television. Living where an antenna could pull in signals from the Charlotte, Greensboro, and Roanoke markets, the young musicians could see shows with Flatt & Scruggs, Reno & Smiley, the Stonemans, and Arthur Smith with David Deese on banjo. By sixth grade,

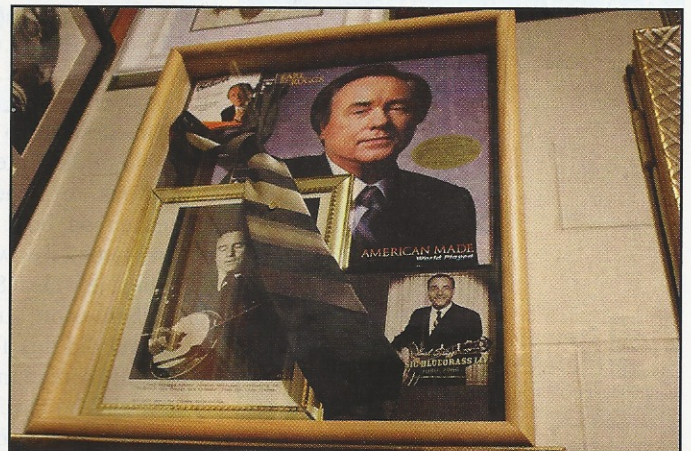


Tom had his own band. Frank Buchanan, freshly back home following his early 1960s stint with Monroe, was one of Tom’s bluegrass mentors. Although he’s belonged to some two dozen bands, Isenhour never played for a living. Tony Rice once recommended Garland Shuping and Tom to Lonnie Pearce after one of its

mass exoduses from the Bluegrass Alliance. Tom says he “liked to eat too much” to join. So Jack Lawrence and Garland ended up going to Louisville.

On the way with Bob to a Flatt & Scruggs appearance, Tom, then in his early teens, decided to tear a poster for the show off of a telephone pole. For reasons he no longer recalls, he took the poster to Lester and Earl and got them to autograph it. Keep in mind that less than twenty years after Scruggs’ debut on the *Grand Ole Opry*, collecting bluegrass items was a young concept. From that simple start, however, one of the great private collections of music memorabilia grew.

Today, the four wax figures enjoy a commanding view of the upper level. Only they have a chance to have sufficient time to take in the depth and breadth of the assembled items. The Byrds (including a contract during Gram Parsons’ brief time in the band), Flying Burrito Brothers, Buffalo Springfield, Beatles, Poco, Monkees, and Elvis Presley fill the room with autographed posters, rejected album covers, record sleeves, toys, lunchboxes, contracts, letters, and more. Just one example is the letter Capitol Records sent to reviewers and DJs asking for the return





of the infamous and now highly sought after 1965 "butcher cover" of *Yesterday And Today* by The Beatles.

Perhaps most impressive is that Tom has gone far beyond the popular music-collecting categories like records, photos, instruments, and show posters, although he has thousands of these. He has Bill Monroe's suits from the last five decades of his career with photos and record covers for which Monroe wore them displayed nearby. "The Monroe suits, I tried to get a representative one for each decade. He would buy them off the

rack. He would wear the same suit and then wear different ties and different hats."

Near a mandolin case that Tut Taylor built for Monroe in 1963, visitors can see tickets for both Fincastle bluegrass festivals under a precious photo of young Tom with Monroe. A few steps away is the contract The Dillards signed to be The Darlin' Family on *The Andy Griffith Show*. "I'd got that pretty cheap in an auction of the estate of the union man. Right place at the right time, just like a lot of this."

Tom proudly led Becky and me through the collection, upstairs and down, pointing out items and commenting on them in nearly a stream-of-consciousness manner as we walked. He has a story behind every instrument, poster, record. Gesturing to two impressive cabinets, "All this stuff in here is somehow related to Monroe in some way, either the old EPs or the photographs. Those Blue Grass Boys belt buckles are for Rudy Lyle and Frank Buchanan. Those are kind of special. When Frank Buchanan died, only one Blue Grass Boy came to the funeral. After Monroe died, they split it up between a tag sale in the Hall Of Fame and auction that was really tied to eBay. I ended getting this on eBay—his money satchel.

"This is Dave Apollon's 1937 Gibson mandolin that is this picture on the back of the album cover. I do still play it. I got it from Jeff Foxhall who got it from the guy who got it from Apollon. He gave me the card that Apollon signed when he sold it. Gibson gave it to him as an endorsement and he sold it for \$250. The strings I got from Earl in 1966. I got him to autograph them. He did, thinking I was a banjo player."

A magazine ad evokes a bit of history that now seems unbelievable. Tom noted, "In 1923 when the F-5 first came out, Gibson put an ad in a magazine. You clip that coupon and mail it to Gibson, and they'll send you a brand new F-5 to try out for 15 days. If you don't like it, you send the mandolin back. We're talking about the most expensive mandolin they made."

The descent to the basement, where the bulk of the collection resides, is made dangerous by the many distractions displayed on both walls. I learned that when I tumbled down them. "To show you how big New Deal String Band was, when that album came out, *Billboard* picked up on it and did this four-page spread. That was really something to see in *Billboard*."

At the bottom, where I landed, the Monroe items continue with a full-page ad

in *Cashbox* for a Monroe 78 recording ("Lonesome Truck Drivers Blues"/"Rotation Blues") and photos Tom took of Bill and then had autographed, including the last photo of his Loar before it was vandalized. "I'm obsessed with Monroe here, almost like a shrine. I'd hand Bill albums to sign, five or six at a time. He looked at this Japanese one. He'd look at it and pull the record out and flip it over and look at the back. I said, 'Bill, is there something wrong.' He said, 'I never got paid for this.'"

Isenhour points to a nearby case. "Monroe sheet music, when you go outside of 'Blue Moon Of Kentucky' and 'Kentucky Waltz' is rare. Here's 'Uncle Pen,' 'Shine Hallelujah Shine,' 'The Black Sheep Returned To The Fold,' 'Highway Of Sorrow,' and 'When Golden Leaves Begin To Fall.' Somebody took these and had Bill and the whole band autograph them. So Monroe signs it first and then he goes to the bass player, and she writes 'plus Bessie Lee'...Jim Martin, Joel Price, Pete Pyle, Gordon Terry. This was on eBay a long while ago. I was bidding against someone heavy. It turned out to be Tom Ewing."

Tom's wonders fill multiple rooms in the capacious basement, through a garage for his classic car collecting and a music memorabilia-filled room that contains a vintage, operating soda fountain with the dinette booths that go with it. "When I was ten or eleven, I would sit in this recreation room on the hearth and make a broomstick microphone and sing the 'Salty Dog Blues' to nobody with the guitar." Eventually, we reached the end of the room holding the countless display items, not the inventory, of TV memorabilia that Tom deals for a living.

All in all, it's overwhelming even for someone like me who has passed thousands of records and books through his system. No wonder TV shows, newspapers, and magazines have featured various aspects of Isenhour's holdings. Four hours have passed in what seemed like 30 minutes. Yet it felt like we have done a rapid walk-through just touching on the highlights, probably because that was exactly what we had done. Someday soon, we'll be back for a closer look, but the exploration would have been so much more manageable had I started fifty years ago.



Art Menius has been contributing to Bluegrass Unlimited since 1983. He was the first executive director of IBMA.

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