

The California Bluegrass Association is a non-profit dedicated to the furtherance of Bluegrass, Old-time, and gospel

californiabluegrass.net

June Breakdown Intro

This issue takes a look at the rich world of California luthiers from north to south, amateur to pro, from risk-takers to the more traditional. Many thanks as always to Phoebe Leigh-Suelflow for her great interviews.

Events and festivals are finally opening up! Check out their progress on the CBA website. The Events page offers a bold new way of presenting California jams and events along with a maplink to their locations; you can even upload your own events!

Speaking of which, we encourage luthiers, bands, and teachers to register using the upload feature on the website's Resources page.

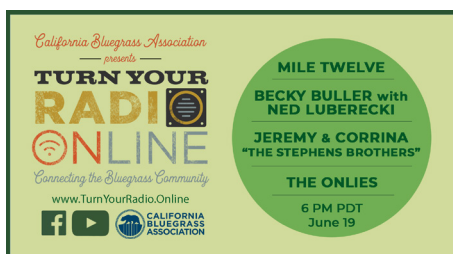
Chairman's Report



Pete Ludé
CBA Board Chair

Summer is finally here! This is the time I would usually be tracking down the camping gear, practicing a few new jamming tunes, and getting ready to head to Grass Valley. Darn. Not this year. But CBA is planning to make up for the pandemic pause with a batch of fun in-person music gatherings starting this Fall. These will begin with our famous **Fall Campout** in Lodi this October, the first-ever **South State 48** jam in Carlsbad, and the **Great 48** in Bakersfield in January. Check out our new website for all the details: www.CaliforniaBluegrass.org

In the meantime, I hope you've been enjoying Turn Your Radio OnLine – CBA's virtual concert series featuring some inspiring Bluegrass and Old-time music. We've received enthusiastic feedback about the engaging music – coming to you via livestream on Facebook and YouTube. The final webcast is June 19 at 6:00pm PDT. Don't miss it!



Even more importantly – as you're reading this, you only have a few more days to **buy raffle tickets** to win a phenomenal Santa Cruz Guitar Company Tony Rice "Custom

Dreadnaught" or a Taylor AD17 Grand Pacific Model guitar. Stop what you're doing and **go to www.TurnYourRadioOnline.com right now**. Be sure to stop by our online Silent Auction as well and bid on some enticing merchandise. The Auction and Raffle both wrap up on June 19, so you have no time to waste! All proceeds go to support CBA's mission to preserve Bluegrass and Old-time music and to support the bands that perform at our events.

Also – you have just a few days to register for the **2021 CBA Online Music Camp**, which is being held virtually on June 12. Camp Directors Peter Langston and Tina Webster have assembled a fantastic set of instructors this year. Information at www.CBAmusiccamp.com. The workshop fee is only \$25 per class – with world-renowned instructors that will keep you inspired.

In short, the COVID conditions will soon allow for in-person music events, and we're all looking forward to seeing each other again. Until then, CBA is providing lots of opportunities to get together virtually and to raise funds to keep CBA vibrant for years to come. We're glad you are part of it!

If you forgot to renew your membership, please consider doing so right now. It's easy to do at www.CaliforniaBluegrass.org.

Seeking Breakdowns!

The Bluegrass Breakdown is the virtual archive of CBA history. We are close to assembling a complete digitized collection of Bluegrass Breakdowns - from the initial April 1975 issue to the present - via the home page of the new website. Check it out!

In order to complete our work, we ask all you pack rats out there to check your attics and garages for these

missing issues:

- 2014: months 3/4/5
- 2011: months 2 & 3
- 2009: months 1/3/4/5/12
- 2008: months 4 - 12
- 2006: month 5
- 2002: months 2/4/5/7/9
- 1998: month 9
- 1997: month 8
- 1985 - 1995: all months

contact: editor@californiabluegrass.net

CBA SUMMER MUSIC CAMP ONLINE WORKSHOPS JUNE 12, 2021

Take a life-changing workshop in guitar, banjo, mandolin, singing, or fiddle with a world-class instructor in the comfort of your own home!



Online "Zoom" workshops:

Banjo with **Alison Brown**, Singing with **Alice Gerrard**, Mandolin with **Sharon Gilchrist**, Fiddle with **Kimber Ludiker**, Guitar with **Jim Nunally**, Mandolin with **John Reischman**, Banjo with **Tony Trischka**, and Guitar with **Jack Tuttle**

<https://cbamusiccamp.com> for details

Great news from the Fundraising Committee



Lani Way
CBA Board

I am delighted to announce that the CBA was awarded a grant of \$15,000 from the California Relief for Art and Culture Program. We are grateful that our work as a nonprofit arts organization is recognized for its vital contribution in the State of California.

Last February, Governor Newsom signed a comprehensive package providing urgent relief for small businesses of which \$50 million was earmarked for non-profit cultural institutions. We have a new appreciation of the advocacy done by CalNonprofits, amongst other associations, who relentlessly lobbied the State for funding.

The long-term growth and stability of the CBA is dependent on raising funds outside the immediate Bluegrass community. The Covid shutdown forced us to accelerate our fundraising activities, and we are thrilled by our early success. If you have skills or an interest in **helping with grants or other fundraising activities**, please contact Laniway@californiabluegrass.net.

(re)JOIN CBA

<https://www.cbaweb.org/About/Join>

So Cal Report



Danny "Hootenanny" Clark
Regional Rep - Orange Co

"I got a gig and we're not streaming!" That sentence, that I yelled over the phone in exuberance, is the best way to succinctly summarize the current SoCal situation. The last few weeks have thankfully been a whirlwind of planning for future in-person musical events. My social calendar is starting to fill with invitations to gigs, informal outdoor jams, local shows, and even a music-centered block party. It appears (at least for now) that in-person events are back.

For the last few months, a dedicated crew of CBA members have been laying the groundwork for a hotel jamming event in SoCal. We are not ready to make an official announcement yet, but we do strongly suggest you pencil in the first weekend of November 2021. Speaking of future events, do not forget to tune into the CBA livestream of Turn Your Radio OnLine which will take place June 19. I will be watching along with all my music pals.



Fall Campout!!



Deb Livermore
CBA Board



I know, it's Summer, but what comes next is so exciting: FALL!!!! And with Fall comes the time we get together in Lodi for the Fall Campout!!! After a mandated two-year hiatus, we feel it's time to put the Fall Campout back on the calendar! It is scheduled for October 11 - 17, 2021!!!! So put it on your calendar now!

The Lodi Grape Festival Grounds is where the action happens. It is centrally located in Northern California and has proven to be very popular with pickers and grinners alike who have attended the campouts there in the past.

We are hoping to make this event a little bit bigger than in the past because it has been so long since we have gotten together in person. More news on that as we get closer!

As always, we are looking for Volunteers to help with this event.

Deblivermore@californiablugrass.net



Bill Norman shows Paul Shelasky the finer points of fret making



Carruthers "Dimpled Fiddle"

Youth Bluegrass App



Kimber Ludiker
Youth Academy Director

Darby Brandli and Kimber Ludiker have kept busy developing content and activities for our young people during these long months. Darby (Coordinator of the CBA Youth Program) and Kimber (Director of the Youth Academy) have added additional labels to their résumés.

After producing Jam-a-Thon (the 50-hour live stream now nominated for the IBMA Event of the Year), they are working on an Online Academy platform and have a Youth Bluegrass App about to launch. The working title for this is **Bluegrass Camp!** (previously known as Barnyard Bluegrass). Contracts are being signed and coding is being updated. Darby and Kimber think they have found the perfect platform for the Academy, which will have a portal from the Youth section of the brand new website.

There will be announcements when content is available. Darby and Kimber have been quietly scheming, and have big plans for ongoing education for young people. Stay tuned.



Brandon Godman: inspired at work



Maegan's nouveau Gibson L3

Paul Shelasky. It's hard to think of a seminal California Bluegrass band didn't perform with. He can play all Bluegrass instruments well and the fiddle exceptionally well, though the clarinet has eluded him. Play any Bluegrass fiddle lick, and Paul will tell you its origin and lineage in detail.



His father, a Julliard-trained classical violinist (and amateur violin maker) encouraged his son's early efforts to play music and provided Paul with his first instruments: the guitar at age 14 and fiddle at 18. He was,

however, considerably less encouraging when Paul dropped out of college to play Bluegrass. "My decision to leave after my third year to play Bluegrass music professionally went over," as Paul says, "Like a pregnant pole vaulter." Paul went on to compete against Mark O'Connor at Weiser, won a couple of California State Fiddle and Guitar Flatpicking Championships, was awarded a CBA Honorary Lifetime Membership in 2004, and played with the likes of David Grisman and Tony Rice. But nothing compared to 5 years at Disneyland, *cont'd on page 2*

California Luthiers



As the fires roared through the Sonoma County redwoods, **Maegen Wells**, packed up her stash of tonewood and guitars and fled. The humidity was plunging towards zero. She heard a loud crack: the top of an unfinished guitar had split apart. That was in 2019. By then she had been making guitars for twelve years, and this was just another teaching experience. “Wood is alive: it takes on and gives off water; even wood seasoned for years can’t resist precipitous changes of humidity.”

Maegen has had a love affair with guitars since she was a little girl growing up in Michigan, but unlike many performers, she traded the stage for the workbench. In 2006 she enrolled in the Galloup School of Lutherie to learn the art of flat top guitar making. All went according to plan until she was required to make a hand-carved archtop guitar. After graduation, she moved to Healdsburg to apprentice with the legendary archtop maker Tom Ribbecke (“my one, true mentor”), and got out the chisels and planes.

“My job is to make guitars that inspire their owners to play. But the owners must understand that owning one of my guitars is only the very first chapter in the guitar’s life. The way the first owner plays shapes the instrument’s tone and life for succeeding generations. It’s a big responsibility!”

Now, at age 33, Maegen has achieved a reputation that many guitar makers take decades to claim. Her custom guitars are played by some of the big names in the business, cost \$10,000, and only 6 -8 are made each year. Want to get on the waiting list? Put October 3, 2023 – her Belgian Malinois dog’s birthday - on your calendar.

Her dog’s name? “Lutherie,” of course.

Paul Shelasky

cont’d from back page

where he alternated daily between the Thunder Mountain Boys and the zoot-suited 1930s jazz Rhythm Brothers!

What’s less known is that Paul had begun amassing enough wood as a teenager to

make 25 guitars and 25 violins. But it was not until 1993, while playing at Disneyland, that he glued together 3 pieces of maple from his stash into a guitar back and several other pieces onto the sides. There it lay, aging well, until the pandemic. With no gigs to play, Paul contacted his pal Bill Norman. Bill is a fine guitarist and an experienced amateur guitar maker; plus, he has a well-equipped workshop in Paul’s hometown of Novato. Under Bill’s tutelage, Paul has attached a top and a neck. Now he’s working on the fretting, which he is finding something of a challenge.

During his daytime job (it’s the rare Bluegrass musician who doesn’t have one) as a violin dealer, Paul has had the opportunity to hang out with skilled violin makers and restorers. He’s seen it all: from hobby fiddles to fabled 18th Century Cremona violins. Naturally, Paul had to give it a go. A couple of partially finished violins he has been working on for years await the completion of the guitar.

After that, who knows? Perhaps he will work on his “skyrocketing” comedy routine, regarding which Paul modestly states “I’ve already been compared to Stephen Colbert. I was doing comedy at the Willowbrook Ale House, and a lady came up and told me ‘You know, Paul, compared to Stephen Colbert you really suck.’” Lutherie, too, awaits; after all, he still has enough wood for 24 guitars and 23 violins.

Andrew Carruthers

started his career studying air pollution at Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory, but quickly decided that wasn’t his true calling in life. He had built a guitar after college and loved doing it, so he decided to try his hand at violin making. He enrolled in the Welsh School of Violin Making and after graduation he joined the famed Chicago violin firm Bein and Fushi, perfecting his skill as a restorer. On the side, he made fiddles and violins.

For the past 25 years he has built and restored violins, violas, and cellos in his Santa Rosa shop, and has achieved an international following. Andy has learned from studying and working on the most celebrated instruments ever made. Following the tradition of most violin makers, Andy’s instruments are based on Guarneri and Stradavari models. But hundreds of violins later, Andy was hungry for something new, and the pandemic gave him the opportunity.

He began making experimental violins, including one made with all-Sonoma County materials from glue to redwood. “I wanted to find a way to make a new violin that was

visually interesting, but not fake. My father was a sculptor. A sculptor will often make a feature of the carving tool marks, but in traditional violin making you smooth over the early tooling. I decided to make the toolmarks a feature. My Dimpled Viola looks to the audience like an old, brown, German instrument. But as you get closer it gets more interesting! The gouge marks give it a natural look, almost reptilian. And I gave it a bronze patina, just as my father did when he was sculpting bronzes.



When I posted pictures of the experimental violins and violas, people naturally asked: ‘Yes, but how is the sound?’ I responded, “It sounds just fine!” And they do! These fiddles feature established Chladni patterns, a technique that all violin makers use to adjust the symmetry of the violin and tune the resonances of the instrument. In short, they are traditional in tone, but highly irregular in appearance. “My experimental violins are fun to have in the shop, but I’m not sure how to sell them, or if I even want to. I probably won’t be selling many of these to classical players.” Maybe to a heavy metal fiddler?

Kathy Wingert got her first guitar in the ninth grade, and she fell in love. Early on, she thought “if I’m really going to do what I want to do, it has to involve guitars.” But she knew it wasn’t going to be as a performer. She went to the library in her home town, Torrance, and found a book on guitar making. A few years later, she walked into the World of Strings in Long Beach “with guitar half made and thumbs still attached, which is good.” She apprenticed there for five years.

In 2001 she got up the nerve to go out on her own, gave notice, and went full-time into guitar building. At her first festival, she sold everything off the table. That was the beginning of Kathy Wingert Guitars.

What does she want in an instrument? “I go for as dark a tone as I can get, without it being muddy. I want a warm, dark tone that has articulation and balance. Not bass-heavy, but not bright or brilliant.” She compares the guitar to Ella Fitzgerald. “Ella had a warm dark luscious voice, and you don’t notice how high she is singing until you try to sing along with her. My guitars don’t get in the way of the human voice – most of us sing bright, and the guitars are a little on the dark side. They complement the singer.”



Lately she has been making harp guitars. A harp guitar has additional unstopped, resonant strings that can be individually plucked. They are loud! When amplification came in,

they disappeared, but now they are making a comeback. “For some people an instrument with extra strings is a draw. It gives the musician and composer more options,” she notes.”

What does she herself play? The Grand Concert Model E, a six-string of Dreadnaught length but with a narrower body: “it’s easy to get your arms around. It’s the guitar I never could find. So I built it myself.”

Gary Vessel says that his bad violin playing is what led him to become an instrument maker. “Deep down I knew that I wasn’t going to be Isaac Stern, and fortunately I knew that in advance.” Despite his protestations, he currently plays mandolin in two fine bands – the Bluegrass Red Dog Ash band and the Americana California Zephyr Americana band.

His desire to build instruments took him to the Violin Making School of America and to travel around the world, where he was able to learn from and work with some of the best builders and experts in the field. “Fortunately I knew enough to pay attention.” He was also able to handle and study some of the rarest instruments in the world. In Germany he purchased a lifetime supply of European tonewoods – beautiful spruce and maple that he uses in his craft.

He opened Vessel Mandolins and Violins in Modesto in 1991, and his instruments have won acclaim: David Grisman purchased one of his mandolins.



“The most challenging thing is to always get better. Study the old instruments to know where your new instrument needs fixing: some minute detail that you want to change on your next one. Always be critical so that you can learn something. You need to be your toughest critic. But it’s fun. That’s why I get out of bed.”

“I play music with the people who buy my instruments. You become friends with them. I don’t know of another business like this; my clients are my friends. I go to a festival and we hang out. It’s like a family reunion – I get to see the instruments again. I can’t imagine another field that affects people so deeply. People spend a lifetime to find their instrument, and when they select your instrument, it’s like no other feeling. It’s wonderful.”

Gary has advice for those of us wanting to buy an instrument: “Look at instruments you can never afford, so you know what they’re supposed to sound like. You will understand why people kill themselves to own them. Once you know what these things should feel like you can buy something that you can afford because it may remind you of that feeling. That feeling stays with you forever.”

Greg Deering took up the banjo when he was 13. He couldn’t afford the banjo he really wanted – a Vega Pete Seeger Long Neck, which cost \$400 at the time – on his paper boy salary. So he built his own!

Years later, in 1975, Greg and his wife Janet, started Deering Banjos in San Diego County. Today Greg and Janet, along with their daughter Jamie and a staff of 40, produce the Deering, Vega, Tenbrooks, and Goodtime banjo brands in the same Spring Valley location where they began.



Greg says his motivation is “to make a banjo that is a good banjo that I could have afforded back when I was 13 years old.” They build about 35 basic models, many of them with custom features such as inlaid names on the peghead. Or different color stains. Or different woods

The Deerings decided awhile back that the banjo world needed more colors. Like so many of the custom features they have come up with, they first had to figure out how to do it. Powder coating the metal parts is more environmentally clean than plating, but it involves sandblasting, a job Janet did during the early years of production, while she was perfecting the powder coating process. She has since turned this work over to a production team member, but it is an indication of the importance the Deerings place on family innovation and work.

The Deerings are long-time supporters of the CBA. Their Deering tent can’t be missed at the Father’s Day Festival, where Greg likes to set up a chair and spend the days setting up banjos for anyone who strolls by. Banjos

have the reputation of being hard to keep tuned, he notes, which is usually because the bridge is in the wrong place. The banjo’s bridge gets knocked around. He says: “Put the bridge in the right place and fix it when it gets out of whack.” Stop by the Deering tent at the 2022 FDF and Greg will show you. how!

Brandon Godman. The

tattoo on his arm is a fiddle bow; a dedication to his mentor who told him, “The left hand is the tune, but the right hand is the song. It’s where your heart goes in and your soul comes unraveled.” The tattoo is a representation of his commitment to his passion: all things fiddle.

Brandon, 31 years old and a Kentucky native, started playing the fiddle at age 10. He recalls his teachers were veteran instrument collectors and players. He soon realized he was as interested in the instruments themselves as he was in playing them. By age 17 he was on the road, performing with Dale Ann Bradley and Doyle Lawson, among others.

When he later moved to Nashville, he found work in the violin trade. He was offered a job at The Violin Shop, where he honed his repair skills, customer relations, and instrument identification. Eventually, he became a partner with owner Fred Carpenter.

In 2016 he left Nashville and moved to San Francisco to further his education in the violin trade through wholesale dealing. During this time, he cultivated his vision for a boutique violin shop dedicated to the specific needs of fiddlers. By the end of 2018, The Fiddle Mercantile had materialized in a workshop in San Francisco’s Mission neighborhood, with a dedicated online presence connecting the specialty shop with the larger, world-wide fiddle community. It has become the crossroads of his two passions: fiddles and playing them.



Brandon is happy to be in San Francisco. He’s continually inspired by the California outdoors and loves the music scene – he is now Laurie Lewis’ fiddler. His vision is to create a community of fiddlers by expanding his outreach with jam sessions, workshops, and open houses. Brandon has given back generously to the world of fiddles. He has served on the board of directors for both the CBA and Bluegrass Pride and is currently on the board of the Violin Society of America.