



Chuck Poling

Bluegrass Confidential - By Chuck Poling

Peter Thompson

"We trace our stories through the time

*This song's yours and this one's mine
No one thing can recall a moment
Quite like a song from the radio."*

- Kathy Kallick, "Radio"/Matters
Of the Heart [Sugar Hill]

Every week Bay Area listeners tune into 91.7 FM or log on to kalw.org to catch Bluegrass Signal, San Francisco's longest running bluegrass radio show. Since 1995, Peter Thompson has been behind the mic in the former auto shop of Woodrow Wilson High School, now the palatial studios of KALW where Peter holds court from 6:30 to 8 pm each Saturday. Playing a mixture of traditional and contemporary bluegrass with frequent in-studio performances, Bluegrass Signal harkens back to the days when radio was the chief means of spreading the bluegrass gospel.



Peter Thompson spins his favorite band.

It takes a lot of dedication to commit to producing and hosting a show every week with only the occasional break [via a pre-recorded show] for over 12 years and a lot of inspiration to keep the program fresh and compelling. Fortunately for bluegrass fans, Peter's passion for the music is matched by his desire to share his extensive knowledge and to provide listeners with a lively mix of entertainment and information in classic bluegrass style. His calendar covers just about every gig, jam session and festival in the Bay Area and beyond, and his

interviews with local bluegrass figures are always fun and enlightening.

Peter's long journey down the bluegrass road began in his hometown of Flint, Michigan. His early musical experiences were influenced by his father who played saxophone and clarinet in swing bands, as well oboe in an orchestra, and his mother, who listened to Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra and other pop vocalists of the day. "Alas, she had a tin ear, which did little to dampen her enthusiasm for listening and singing," said Peter. "I inherited the ear and propensity to good taste from my mom, but, unfortunately, none of my dad's talents. All that went to my sister. We made a comic sight in church: my mom and I singing lustily, albeit horribly out of tune, while my dad [who refused to share a hymnal with me and suggested that everyone would be happier if I just mouthed the words] and sister might as well have been leading the choir."

As a teenager he was into the sound of Motown and other R&B acts that were sprouting up like weeds in the early '60s. After acquiring his own radio - pretransistor, he points out - he would follow the time-honored tradition of hiding it under the covers after lights out.

"I did this mostly to listen to Van Patrick call the Tiger games," Peter recalled, "but sometimes the signal would drift or I'd get bored, and I discovered the wonders of radio from other regions. One of the stations I heard on those late-night excursions was WWVA [from Wheeling, West Virginia], with what I remember as an eclectic mix of music I found strange and exotic. That was my first exposure to real blues - and to bluegrass."

Peter's path to bluegrass enlightenment had begun, but it wasn't until he came out to the Bay Area for college that he experienced his full revelation. He'd been soaking up a lot of the '60s, skipping class at Stanford to head to the Fillmore and the Avalon Ballroom to see Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and other blues masters, and then became hip to the burgeoning local rock scene featuring bands like the Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead. A frequent companion on these outings introduced Peter to the mysterious sounds of Flatt and

Scruggs and the Stanley Brothers.

"Maybe it was because Carter and Ralph's singing. Carter's songs were as exciting and soulful and powerful as all the blues and rock and roll that was my passion," said Peter. "The connection was immediate. That harmony, like Muddy's slide guitar, was somehow familiar and alien at the same time, and the melody and lyrics had an attraction comparable to that of Garcia and Hunter's [of the Dead] songs. It helped that I could sort of play along, and, like blues, proved that acoustic music - even country music - need not be wimpy or polite."

His eclectic tastes in music are reflected in the themes he picks for his weekly show and in the individual songs he chooses to play. Past shows have focused on previews of upcoming festivals, birthdays of bluegrass notables, new releases, European bluegrass bands, holidays and even a horse-themed event to celebrate the Kentucky Derby. Mixed in with the hardest of hardcore bluegrass, you'll occasionally hear a honky-tonk classic or a dazzling swing tune.

Besides recorded music, he sometimes features readings from books about bluegrass music and plays recorded interviews with legends of the music. And it's always a treat when he has a live band in the old auto shop, both for the performers and for the folks out there in radio land. Peter creates a very relaxed atmosphere in the studio that comes across the airwaves as he banters with the musicians and sets them up for their next song. There isn't much dead air on Bluegrass Signal.

His radio career began in Vancouver, British Columbia, where he had moved after college and became music director of a small community radio station. His met others who shared his passion for bluegrass and soon had a regular show tuned to a high lonesome frequency. One night on the air Peter was bemoaning the fact that there were no festivals in B.C. when a listener phoned in to ask,

"Why don't you put on a bluegrass concert here if you're so interested?"

Peter replied, "Why don't you? I'm doing a radio show."

To which the listener replied, "Maybe we could work together."

Out of such casual exchanges, great things can emerge [just ask CBA Chairman Emeritus Carl Pagter].

"We met in a few days, started a weekly jam session with a few others who had also attended the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop," he recalled, "announced it on the radio show, encountered still others from our planet, and formed a bluegrass society. Six weeks later, we got a call from the head of the Vancouver Folk Music Festival, asking us if we wanted to co-sponsor a concert with Bill Monroe and

the Blue Grass Boys. Well, duh.

"The place was packed for two shows. The band's first trio set everyone's hair on fire, the entire night was inspired and inspiring, I got to MC and interview Bill for the radio show - and was thoroughly hooked on those sides of bluegrass as well.

"We presented as many of the first generation musicians as we could - Bill, Ralph, Jim and Jesse, Sonny and Bobby - along with hot bands of the day like the Nashville Bluegrass Band, the Bluegrass Cardinals, Hot Rize, Seldom Scene, Newgrass Revival and, eventually, many of the bands from the Bay Area. All were phenomenal, especially Ralph Stanley [with the impossibly-young Charlie Sizemore and the impossible-to-believe Curly Ray Cline] getting to the heart of the matter; the Vern Williams Band, the Good Ol' Persons, with their astonishing incorporation of several styles and the best new songs I'd heard in years; and Hot Rize, who not only gave their entertaining show but also gave me the opportunity to interview Pete Wernick. He told me that he was still doing a radio show because it gave you the excuse to interview whomever you liked; this turned out to be prescient."

Taking Wernick's advice to heart, Peter honed his interviewing skills on some of his favorite bluegrass musicians, including a singer and songwriter named Kathy Kallick. Apparently that interview went over pretty well, because they followed up by getting married in 1994 and are now parents of a middle-school age daughter who hates bluegrass.

Peter returned to the Bay Area in 1993 and lucked into a radio slot on KCSM's Sunday bluegrass show. He went on from there to fill in for Ray Edlund, Tom Diamant and Mary Tilson on KPFA until he launched Bluegrass Signal in October of 1995. And it wasn't long before bluegrass fans were tuning in every Saturday to not only hear the music, but also to get up to date on events, listen to interviews and more.

"When I first starting doing radio shows in the Bay Area, people told me they were ... a bit ... different," said Peter. "In Canada, I'd worked for CBC Radio for years, was a big fan of their approach, and had produced many documentaries for them. I'd also done countless jazz shows, and appreciated the jazz tradition of giving lots of information about the musicians and recordings. And my community radio roots meant that I took seriously my role as an advocate for local musicians and provider of as much information as possible about bluegrass events in the area.

"All this - packaged interviews, naming all the singers and players, providing an extensive on-air calendar - was, indeed, not the norm around here but has been

well-accepted. I give thanks for this but do have a couple regrets: that I no longer find the time to do more than an occasional documentary, and that I haven't been able to institute semi-regular live broadcasts of bluegrass concerts. And I'm nearly done in by trying to maintain the extensive calendar of events - but that's a sign of the strength of the Bay Area's bluegrass scene."

Peter's blend of music, in-depth information and live performances/interviews is now reaching audiences beyond the range of KALW's broadcast signal. Since 2003 Bluegrass Signal has been part of the rotation on bluegrass-country.org, one of the most popular online bluegrass stations in the world. Along with other top DJs like Ray Davis, Katy Daley, Eddie Stubbs, and Dave Higgs, Peter can be heard from Madrid to Mumbai to Milpitas.

Nearer to home, Peter serves on the board of the Redwood Bluegrass Associates, whose concert series in Mountain View presents the finest local bands and outstanding out-of-town acts in an intimate and friendly setting. Like many DJs, Peter also doubles as an MC and his avuncular manner translates well to the live stage as he casually banters, provides information and introduces the acts with an obvious affection for the music and the musicians.

As a longtime contributor to the vibrant bluegrass community, Peter confesses to sometimes being mystified by the music's enduring enthusiasm in an urban, Pacific Coast setting. But he credits the diversity of influences (jazz, rock, folk, etc.), the prominence of outstanding female artists like Laurie Lewis, Kathy Kallick and the Stairwell Sisters and the spirit of experimentation that is ingrained into California culture as factors in the music's expanding popularity. He does have concerns, though, that the growing exposure of bluegrass globally has had negative effects locally.

"I do worry about some aspects of our relatively rosy scene," he lamented. "The bluegrass around here can become pretty diluted. Many seem far too interested in the 'Next Big Thing' from elsewhere rather than acknowledging the masters among us. We're not producing nearly as many great singers as hot pickers and all our glorious events struggle to find and maintain an audience."

Concerned perhaps, but not discouraged, as Peter continues to play a big part in keeping bluegrassers everywhere entertained and informed. Each week he shares the "possibilities and delights of radio" with a faithful audience who tune in for the music and for an honest-to-God live radio show, with a genial and knowledgeable host at the controls, sending out his Bluegrass Signal.