



# BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

Preserving and growing bluegrass, old-time, gospel, and traditional music in California since 1974



July  
2025

## THE BLUEGRASS LIFE OF RAY EDLUND

by Jon Hartley Fox for the Bluegrass Breakdown. Photos courtesy of Ray Edlund.

Throughout the half-century of the California Bluegrass Association's existence, dozens of individuals have made important contributions to the organization. Some were musicians, some were board members, some were festival volunteers, and some were all those things at the same

time. During this 50th anniversary year, the *Bluegrass Breakdown* has been spotlighting some of the people who made the CBA what it is.

The focus this time is on Ray Edlund, a long-time bluegrass disc jockey and the second president of the CBA. Ray was a 1997 recipient of the CBA's honorary lifetime member award, which was established to honor "California musicians and significant volunteers who have had a major impact."

Ray Edlund was born in San Diego towards the end of World War II. His father was a career Navy man, so his family moved "all around the planet" in his childhood. A six-year stay in New Orleans provided him some stability, and the family was in Atlanta in time for Ray to finish high school.

Nobody in Ray's family was musical, and he describes himself today as a "horrible musician." He was a folk

music fan, however, and listened to records by the Kingston Trio and Joan Baez, and their contemporaries. His introduction to traditional music came during this time—on a fishing trip in 1960 to the Chattahoochie National Forest in the North Georgia hills.

"I was hitchhiking, and I had gotten a late start and wasn't going to make it to my fishing spot," he says. "I was walking down a dirt road, and dusk was approaching. There was a farmer plowing his field with a mule. I asked him if I could pitch a tent in this grove of trees on his property. He not only said yes, but insisted I join him and his family for dinner.

"After a great country dinner, I got up to go, and my host told me to stick around. Some neighbors were coming over to play music. It was two guitars and a fiddle, and as they started up, I almost cringed. Scratchy

*cont'd on page 12 →*



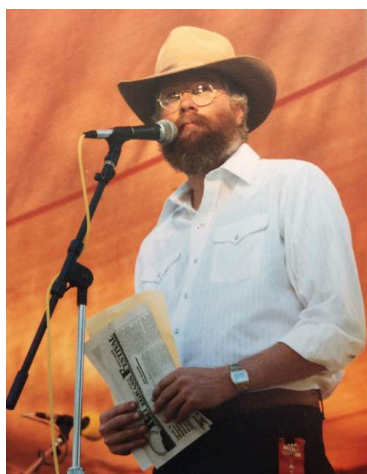
## DIRECTOR'S WELCOME

### HIGHLIGHT OF THE YEAR

by Pete Ludé, CBA Executive Director

I'm writing this from the closing day of our 50th anniversary Father's Day Bluegrass Festival in Grass Valley—and what a wonderful event it was! It's been a long time since I've seen so many happy people together, connected by community and enjoyment of the music we love. The lineup was outstanding again this year. I heard many comments praising all the bands, but especially from new fans of the Canote Brothers, The Gibson Brothers, the Travelin' McCourys and the Alum Ridge Boys & Ashlee. AJ Lee & Blue Summit, a band born right here at this very festival 10 years ago, captivated the audience. The Good Ol' Persons reunion played to a large base of fans from across their 50 years. Vern's Stage was packed

*cont'd on page 2 →*



Ray Edlund as MC at an early Grass Valley festival.

## GOLDEN OLD-TIME CAMPOUT THREE DAYS OF OLD-TIME JAMMING!

by Karen Celia Heil, CBA Old-Time Music Director

Mark your calendars! CBA's Golden Old Time Campout will be upon us in the blink of an eye! This beloved event will run from noon on Thursday, August 21, to 6:00 p.m. Sunday, August 24.

We are so lucky to be returning to our best venue ever, Camp Russian

River in Guerneville, only 80 miles from the Bay and 10 miles as the crow flies from where the Russian River meets the Pacific Ocean. Conceptually this geography will bring us that ideal not-too-hot, not-too-cold weather, with comfortable evenings by the river and amongst the redwoods.

As we did last year, we have reserved the entire campground and all its nooks and crannies for your camping and jamming enjoyment. Do note the new later, and much more relaxing, end time Sunday evening! Peruse the map whilst buying tickets—it helps us plan if you do buy tickets in advance—to see that we have given names

to the varied camp sectors, or neighborhoods, so you can tell your friends where to find you. And with Guerneville just a walk or short drive over the bridge away, us campers are freed up to be undecided and impulsive about meal plans, expeditions, and supply acquisitions. All this for the prioritizing of playing music together!



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## BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

July 2025 – Learning Bluegrass

The Bluegrass Breakdown is the monthly publication of the California Bluegrass Association, keeping CBA members and the world of bluegrass up-to-date with coverage of CBA events, musicians, promotions, and volunteer opportunities since April 1975. Each issue is published as both a printed and a digital newsletter and distributed to more than 7,500 readers around the world.

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## WELCOME MESSAGE

*cont'd from front page*

with attendees discovering new bands. We also had a memorable showcase from the Black Banjo Reclamation Project, performing to a standing-room-only audience at the Pioneer Stage. The attendance was higher than ever, but not too crowded, and the weather was perfect in the stunning pine forest of the Nevada County Fairgrounds.

Given that our first Father's Day Festival was back in 1976, we have a lot of collective history to share. To celebrate, we invited more than a dozen artists who were part of our first few festivals to perform on stage along with 30 featured bands; a fitting tribute to the many talented, passionate folks that made CBA happen in the first place. Our team also presented the "50th Anniversary Pavilion" featuring 50 years of FDF T-shirts, posters, photos, newspaper articles, and film screenings. Thanks to Ted Kuster, Aaron Zorndorf, Mark Hogan, and Deb Livermore for presenting this treasured memorabilia. Theresa Gooding and Katie Snow also produced our first silent auction. Add to this the hugely popular free workshops organized by Marty Varner,

square dances, youth activities, great food vendors, arts and crafts, a packed Luthier's Pavilion, a model railroad museum, our Sunday morning Father's Day party for the kids featuring our new CBA mascot bear "G-Run" and much more—no wonder we're super excited and exhausted at the same time.

This sort of event would be impossible without our dozens of tireless and dedicated volunteer team leaders, hundreds of volunteer staff, sponsors, and you—our community of CBA members. California is fortunate to have such passionate and talented bluegrass and old-time fans, and this very successful Father's Day Festival serves as a highlight from bringing so many people together, young and old, who appreciate playing and enjoying music together.

If you attended the festival, we'd appreciate your feedback—negative and positive—so we can continue the tradition. And don't forget, we have many more events that you can enjoy, including the Golden Old Time Campout in August, the Fall Campout in October, South State 48 in November, and Great 48 in Bakersfield in January. I hope to see you at one of these get-togethers.



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Campers from across California and beyond gathered the tall pines at the Nevada County Fairgrounds for four days of music, fellowship, and fun, lead by CBA Camp Director Adam Roszkiewicz.

We are blessed with world-class instructors, energetic volunteers, and wonderful pickers of all generations eager to advance their musical skills and make new friends in the spirit of the CBA community. Join in the fun with us next year!



Photos by Alan Bond - Top-to-bottom, left-to-right: A break from fiddling. Instructor old-time dance band Reeb Willms (guitar), Geff Crawford (fiddle), and Masha Crawford (banjo) helps keep the legs lifting for caller Robin Fischer. Camp instructors Brandon Godman (fiddle) and Patrick Sauber (banjo) inspiring listeners during the instructor concert. Campers soaking up the sun. Summer dresses and ponytails for the square dance. Reeb Willms, standing left, gives students a country guitar toolkit during a workshop session. Jacob Jolliff and his mandolin students for the week. Banjo picking in the shade. Kathleen Rushing (in the red ball cap, seated, upper-left) leading FunGrass, as she's done as a volunteer since 2009. Her dedication and hard work was awarded with an honorary lifetime membership to CBA at this year's Father's Day Festival.



# SUPERGRASS

## CBA'S WINTER BLUEGRASS EXPERIMENT

by the Bluegrass Breakdown

The idea was pretty straightforward: CBA would use its hard-won festival organizing chops to produce a mid-winter event in Southern California as a good-time remedy for bluegrass seasonal affective disorder.

In the July 2005 *Bluegrass Breakdown*, co-directors Craig Wilson and Hal Johnson pitched the fledgling event launching that winter: "It's in early February—right smack-dab in the middle of winter when most of us dyed-in-the-wool bluegrassers are suffering from serious withdrawal," they wrote. They also hoped to strengthen ties with Southern California's five active bluegrass associations: "Wouldn't it be grand to pull our resources together ... and have a great bluegrass celebration?"

Buried in their pitch was the fact that SuperGrass would be held the same weekend as the 2006 Super Bowl. But with the CBA fresh off winning the International Bluegrass Music Association's 2004 event of the year nod for the Father's Day Festival, optimism was high. Craig and Hal believed top-tier bands would be available at a discount in the winter off-season, and the post-*O Brother* bluegrass boom made it seem like a good time to try something bold.

CBA President Darby Brandli devoted her February 2006 *Breakdown* column to the inaugural event: "... most of the bands were booked within the first

collective breath, and what a lineup it is: Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver, Blue Highway, Nashville Bluegrass Band, Marty Raybon, Cherryholmes, Due West, Lost & Found, the Wilders, Sawtooth Mountain Boys, and California favorites Donner Mountain and Brother's Barton."

Organizers also launched LoarFest West, a show-and-tell for Lloyd Loar mandolins, featuring a panel called "The Lore of the Loar" and a concert by a supergroup ensemble: Mike Compton, Mike Marshall, John Reischman, Tom Rozum, and Tony Williamson. Gibson donated a high-end mandolin for auction, and excitement for the event grew.

Kids on Bluegrass alumni visited local Bakersfield schools, and KOB performed on the SuperGrass main stage. A suite at the Holiday Inn served as CBA's jam room, hosted by teen ambassador Angelica Grimm. "Angelica was the perfect candidate," Darby wrote. "She has the stamina to jam all day and all night."

LeRoy McNees reported on the first-year event: "They pulled out all stops ... first class all the way. The convention center was just pulsating with excitement, enthusiasm and entertainment." Sharon Elliott gushed in the April 2006 *Breakdown*: "Super festival, super hotel, super service, super jamming ... SUPER LoarFest Ensemble, super performers, and SUPER KIDS ON BLUEGRASS."

Superlatives aside, concerns about the event's sustainability started brewing between the first and second events. "There hadn't been a lot of oversight from the board," said Lisa Burns, then CBA vice president for development and sponsorships. "Hal's day job was turning businesses around, so we didn't think we needed to monitor it very closely."

But when the event budget was presented to the board, warning bells were going off for Lisa. "I did some back-of-the-napkin math, and said, 'If I'm being generous, we're going to lose \$45,000, but I think we're going to lose \$65,000.'" She was promptly made controller, and on with the show.

Hotel rooms for year two were sold out by January. The star-studded lineup featured J.D. Crowe & the New South, The Isaacs, The Grascals, and Michael Cleveland & Flamekeeper, to name a few. Siminoff promoted the second LoarFest in the *Breakdown*: "A landmark event ... great luminaries cementing today's history in luthiery."

Laurie Lewis, who performed at the second SuperGrass with her band The Right Hands, recalled: "I was leery of such a huge festival in Bakersfield, but I was thrilled as a musician and a concertgoer. I remember singing at the top of my lungs in the bar with Julay Brooks and Richard Brandenburg."

Still, the numbers didn't add up. "All the talent was booked. We saw the iceberg, but couldn't turn the ship around," Lisa said. The event lost about \$25,000 the first year, and around \$65,000 in year two. Combined with a rare loss on the 2007 Father's Day Festival, the CBA was suddenly in real financial trouble.

"We went to the membership and said, 'We messed up.' We lost \$100,000 that year," Lisa said. "We were considering lines of credit to cover bills. We asked the membership to donate, and raised about \$45,000."

The board still needed to fill the rest of the gap. One solution: Vern's Beer & Wine Garden at Grass Valley. "That was a huge win," Lisa said. "Everyone loves Vern's, and we make about \$20,000 there each year."

Another silver lining of SuperGrass was the CBA's Great 48 Jam weekend in Bakersfield, born in 2008. With no need for a full concert lineup, the CBA delivered what SuperGrass aspired to—community and nonstop music in the dead of winter. "You have all your hometown pals with nothing to do but play music," Laurie said. "And so that's what you do—you just go and make a joyous noise."

And CBA took away an important lesson for future events, Lisa said: "Get the budget before you send the contracts out!"

**SUPERGRASS**  
California's Big Uptown  
**Indoor Bluegrass Festival!**  
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Blue Highway • Nashville Bluegrass  
Band • Marty Raybon  
Cherryholmes • Lost &  
Found • Donner Mountain  
Richard Green w/Bros. Barton • Due West  
The Wilders • Sawtooth Mountain Boys  
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Poster from the 2006 SuperGrass festival.



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# BREAKDOWN COLUMNS

## EXPERTS' FIELD NOTES FROM 50 YEARS OF BLUEGRASS COMMUNITY

by the Bluegrass Breakdown

What do you get when you mix a half-century of bluegrass know-how on a dizzying variety of topics and a pinch of unsolicited opinion? You get a treasure trove of columns—50 years' worth of hot takes, hard-won wisdom, and campfire-tested tips from the best minds in bluegrass. Whether you were wondering how to deep-fry a turkey in a festival parking lot without singeing your eyebrows, or pondering the tonal mysteries of 1920s mandolins, odds are somebody's written about it in the *Breakdown*. From luthiers to lead singers, banjo geeks to biscuit bakers, these columnists brought heart, humor, and the occasional rant to every topic under the bluegrass sun. Grab your folding chair and a plate of something smoked, as we're diving into five decades of advice from the folks who've lived the music.

In the CBA's early days, the *Breakdown* served as a guide to getting out and enjoying live music and jamming. There was a regular **Field Guide to Western Bands** to help members learn who the bands were playing around the state, listing their contact information and regular gigs. **Turn Your Radio On** listed radio shows of interest to the growing CBA crowd. There was even a column on learning to learn: "One of the most frequent questions I get asked is, 'How long will it take before I can play? I mean, you know, to where it sounds like music!' Whew! To answer that is just about impossible; so I try to avoid saying anything specific about the time span," Walt Richards wrote in 1979 for the San Diego Bluegrass Club, which was reprinted in an early *Breakdown*. The **Where to Go** column featured venues and festivals where bluegrass fans could enjoy live music and connect in person.

One writer of the *Where to Go* series was none other than Laurie Lewis, who penned profiles including the infamous Paul's Saloon,

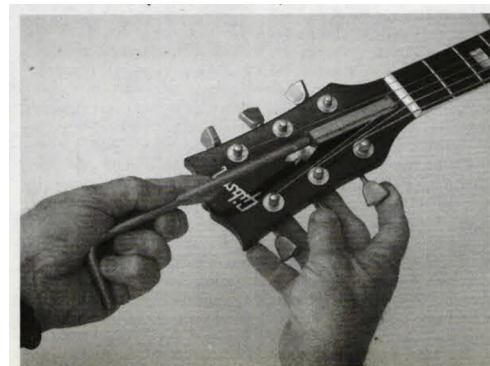
Rosebud's Ice Cream and Tavern—where High Country had a regular gig starting the summer of 1978—and Red Vest Pizza. Not only focused on the listening experience, Laurie combined the insight of a performing musician with her great wit: "The Rosebuds' sound system, which was generously loaned by Frank Wheeler of Fairfield, has six microphone inputs and a monitor speaker. The club only has three good-quality microphones and stands, on loan from Bill White, so bands wishing more should bring their own. There is also a fan to cool the performers on the sultry summer nights, so 'every band is guaranteed at least one fan nightly,'" Laurie wrote.



Illustration from a 1979 Bluegrass Breakdown.

Regular reviews of newly released bluegrass, old-time, and gospel recordings also featured in the early *Breakdowns*. Sue Shelasky was one of the first reviewers, but for the last quarter-century, Brenda Hough has been dishing out takes on bluegrass that's just come hot off the press. The Northern California Bluegrass Society called her "the dean of West Coast recorded bluegrass music journalists." From hometown favorites like Kathy Kallick to bands from back East, Brenda has helped many readers discover their next favorite band. With the reformatting of the *Bluegrass Breakdown* following the pandemic, all the regular columns are a thing of the past, but Brenda's still writing reviews that appear on the CBA website.

Bluegrass fans with a hankering to learn about what it takes to build an instrument could get expert advice from one of the world's foremost experts on instrument building, in the form of Roger Siminoff's **Luthier's Corner** from 2004 until his retirement in 2021. This monthly column provided insights into the construction and acoustics of stringed instruments,



The main feature of my vertebrae truss rod design is that the rod could be removed from the neck and the links could be moved around to control the location and direction of the bending force.

From Roger Siminoff's *Luthier's Corner* column, 2006.

especially mandolins, and was a valuable resource for luthiers and enthusiasts alike.

Another knowledge base that can be as puzzling as any is studio recording. Joe Weed's **Studio Insider** provided a peek at what it takes to make great recordings. As a fiddler, recording artist, writer, and producer whose productions have been used by Ken Burns, PBS, NPR, the Martin Guitar Company, and at Arlington National Cemetery, Joe knows a thing or two about music production. He composed music for film scores at The Lincoln Museum, the National Steinbeck Center, and many others. His column explored the tools and techniques, philosophies, and perspectives that make for excellent fidelity and compelling listening.

Another lesser recognized skill set of the bluegrass aficionado is campground cooking. This is not a minor concern for people spending a week living in a tent with nothing but a camp stove and a cooler for sustenance. Luckily for us, **JD's Bluegrass Kitchen** ran for several years in the *Breakdown*, featuring JD Rhynes' favorite



An illustration from JD's *Bluegrass Kitchen* column.

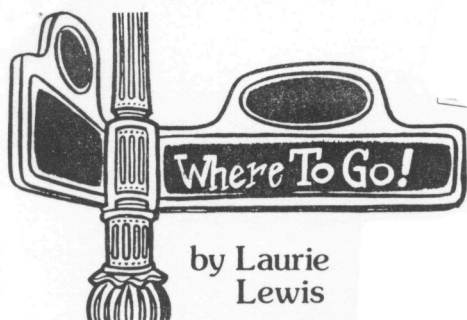


Illustration from a 1979 Bluegrass Breakdown.



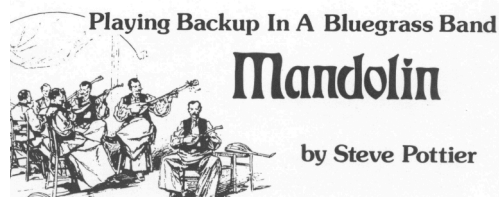
camp recipes, along with a heaping helping of his tall tales and humor. This column was so popular that JD, along with help from Ted Kuster and others, compiled a book of JD's favorite recipes under the same name as the column. JD retired in around 2012, and the column became **Meet Me in the Kitchen**, written by Eileen Kleinschmidt.

Of course, there were many articles and columns devoted to the learning of bluegrass music itself. *Breakdown* readers found tabs and notation for tunes, lyrics to songs, and tips on technique. Elena Corey's **Music Matters** column was a regular look at the theory around musical qualities important to bluegrass, and her column was like having a voice of a seasoned music teacher lead the way through the daunting task of perfecting one's musicianship. Her expertise was widely recognized, and her articles also appeared in *Bluegrass Unlimited*.



Elena Corey (left) and Mildred Roberts (right) in 2002.  
Photo by Howard Gold.

"The breathtaking beauty of voice-leading lines resembles the visual impact of a well designed orchard. In many nut tree orchards, each individual tree seems to be in a direct line with other trees, from several different angles. As the viewer looks straight at the trees, one row is seen, and as the trees are viewed diagonally another aspect is visible," Elena wrote as an introduction to the concept of voice-leading. "In common repertoire, 'Mr.Engineer,' 'Midnight Moonlight,' and 'Midnight Flyer' are examples of prime candidates for voice-leading phrasing, and many country and 12-bar blues standards offer small segments of their tunes for such phrasing. Small segments are plenty—if you started arranging total songs with voice leading lines, you might resemble a poor imitation of Bach's Two-Part Inventions."



One series of articles on bluegrass performance technique that has stood the test of time is **Steve Pottier's series** in 1979 on how to play bluegrass backup on various instruments.

Instead of offering opinions on the various ways bluegrass backup can be approached on different instruments, he asked the experts.



Alan Munde and Steve Pottier, 2005. CBA file photo.

"The reason I wear my guitar so low is ... I can play for long periods of time at top speed without getting tired. I'm now so comfortable and used to it that I cannot play rhythm with a standard length strap," shared David Dickey, longtime guitarist for Lost Highway. "I'll sometimes use different intervals on the runs, for example, using a Bb instead of an A when I play in the key of G. I don't think you should be afraid to experiment. Trust your ears. Basically, I try to fill up the holes where nothing is happening to make something different. This gives you a constantly changing strum," shared none other than Tony Rice.

"Sensitivity, patience, restraint, responsiveness, flexibility, qualities which, I'm sorry to say, don't always seem to be associated with banjo playing these days. But a good musician will exercise all of these in relating to other musicians," said Rick Shubb. "Much of playing backup has to do with exploring contrasts in texture. It's important to not get tangled up with the lead,

so any time you sense that happening, avoid melody notes, but mainly try to emphasize the rhythmical differences between instruments (including the voice)," he added.

"As far as emphasizing certain beats, I follow the cue of the guitar player and the band sound in general," shared Laurie Lewis on approaching backup on the bass. "Sometimes, I'll accent the offbeat with a slap, especially on a mandolin break when the offbeat is weaker. I tend to use fewer runs during vocals than on instrumental breaks—like on the old Flatt & Scruggs records where the bass plays a straight 1 and 3 beat on the vocals and a walking bass through the breaks. I generally don't like to play a walking bass through a whole break—I could start interfering with the lead in that case," she continued.

On mandolin, Butch Waller told Steve: "Open chords sound good on some stuff, although I usually use closed chords for their rhythmic effect and because there is more control over the amount of sustain. Damping the chords quickly gives a kind of snare drum effect, and letting them ring gives another kind of effect."



To read through 50 years of bluegrass wisdom, check out these columns and more in the *Bluegrass Breakdown* archives!



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The Alum Ridge Boys and Ashlee. Photo by Robin Frenette.



Laurie Lewis (left) and Kathy Kallick (right). Photo by David Cupp.

## ON THE STAGE

Some 30 featured acts, plus dozens of beloved legacy performers from across 50 years of CBA events, appeared on three stages over four days. As is our tradition, the lineup included some of today's most popular national acts, like Junior Sisk and the Travelin' McCoury's, to our California Showcase bands, including Hey Lonesome!, Charlie Torch, and Blue Birds on a Wire, perhaps the first band to play with a classical harp!



Crying Uncle Bluegrass. Photo by David Cupp.



Junior Sisk (left) and Heather Berry Mabe. Photo by David Cupp.



Legacy act High Country performs on Pioneer Stage. Photo by Kelli Breeton-Fairall.



The Main Stage under tall pine trees. Photo by Jason Dilg.

## AROUND THE FEST

The activities at the festival don't stop at the stage! The weather was postcard perfect, and old and new friends got together at formal and impromptu jams across the festival grounds. We offered 35 workshops on everything from singing to instruments to bluegrass history. The Luthier's Pavilion was a hub of activity for musicians looking for instruments, supplies and repairs. All around the festival was a joyful community!



CBA volunteer Jeremiah Johnston juggles. Photo by David Cupp.



Square dancers enjoy a cool Saturday evening. Photo by Gina Dilg.





Gallery of shirt designs, every year since 1977! Photo by Gina Dilg.



Annie Staninec and former Bluegrass Cardinal Dennis Fetchet have a tune. Photo by Danny "Hootenanny" Clark.



Showing off the oldest festival shirt! Photo by David Cupp.



Old photos and great memories. Photo by Jason Dilg.



Good 'Ol Persons reunion on the Main Stage. Photo by Jason Dilg.

For 50 years, CBA has built a close-knit bluegrass community by reaching out to and connecting bluegrass fans; promoting local bluegrass concerts and providing bands with performance opportunities at our festivals and member house concerts; and hosting jams and jamming events across the state. Our success shows as the CBA has grown from its humble beginnings into the largest bluegrass membership association in the world. FDF celebrated our 50th with amazing legacy performances and carefully curated memorabilia exhibits.



Bluegrass photos and ephemera on display. Photo by Gina Dilg.



Face painting is part of the KidFest fun. Photo by Bob Free.



A Youth Academy band led by Nick Weitzenfeld. Photo by Gina Dilg.

## LITTLE FUN

Kids have a special place in our community, and the festival had lots of chances to drop in, hang out, and enjoy the thrill of playing music—and even performing in front of cheering crowds! KidGrass brought together families and children to explore music and art with face painting and making sun-dyed T-shirts, while the Youth Academy gave kids time and tips to improve their musicianship. Kids on Bluegrass prepped young musicians to step into the spotlight with performances on the Main Stage. This year was our first youth open mic and ice cream social in addition to our youth jams!



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# A LIFE IN HIGH FIDELITY

## THE LEGACY OF GEORGE RELLES

by the Bluegrass Breakdown

When George Relles first stepped behind a mixing console, he wasn't planning a career in sound engineering. A banjo player since age 10 and a graduate student in biology, he was simply tired of terrible sound at live events. "I just thought, why can't it sound like the records?" he recalled. "Nobody seemed to know how to mix acoustic music."

That question would drive one of the most respected live sound careers in the acoustic and classical music worlds. From his nearly 40-year tenure at the California Bluegrass Association's Father's Day Festival in Grass Valley to touring with Pavarotti, Relles and his uncompromising ear built a set the bar in California, and across the Northwest, for sound production with clarity and fidelity.

### A SOUND BORN OF NECESSITY

In the mid-1970s in Eugene, Oregon, Relles organized a bluegrass festival sponsored by Blitz-Weinhard Brewery. Rather than paying bands a flat fee, he proposed something novel: everyone would split the gate equally.

"That first festival was a success," Relles said. "And that's when I started my sound company—though I didn't know it at the time."

The frustration he'd experienced on the road with Mason Williams—playing acoustic music in cavernous symphony halls with muddy, garbled sound—became the fire beneath a new obsession. He wanted to learn how to make music sound the way it should: natural, intimate, and alive.

### GRASS VALLEY CALLING

By the early '80s, word had spread about Relles' ears—and his results. Many early CBA members felt the first CBA festivals suffered from poor sound, and pressure mounted to bring Relles in. In 1983, they did. He remained at the helm of the sound booth at the Father's Day Festival until 2022. "I did it mostly for love," he said. "But eventually, the cost and scheduling conflicts became too much. It was hard to walk away."

Those decades left a mark. Relles' meticulous mixes, and his crew's stage management, was the gold-standard at outdoor festivals. He and his longtime monitor engineer, Pam Meyer, developed a system so efficient they could switch bands on stage in five minutes. Each mic, each EQ preset, was dialed in for the instrument it would receive.

"We had five vocal and five instrument mics, and a process. By the time a band got through the first eight bars, I usually had a passable mix. And by the end of the first song, it was locked."

### AN EAR FOR THE INVISIBLE

For Relles, mixing acoustic music isn't just technical—it's spiritual. He speaks of signal-to-noise ratios, phase coherency, and the stridency of a fiddle's 3k Hz peak with the same reverence a luthier might reserve for old-growth spruce. "The best sound doesn't sound amplified. It just sounds like the music," he said.

That philosophy drove every decision, from using Schoeps mics for orchestral work to investing in Meyer Sound's cutting-edge Panther line array system. He was one of the first to adopt their phase-coherent speakers, captivated by the way they revealed sonic detail. "Meyer speakers behave beautifully. They don't lie. That's why I've been a dealer for 30 years."

His orchestral technique, honed while mixing Mason Williams with full symphonies, combines a modified Decca Tree for stereo imaging with zone miking and strategically placed spot mics. Most of what a microphone picks up in an orchestra doesn't come from directly in front of it, and that can easily lead to distortion, Relles explained. To avoid that, he uses microphones that maintain clarity even when "off-axis." "That's the secret," he said.

### FROM BANJO TO PAVAROTTI

Relles' career has taken him from the Oregon Bach Festival and the Britt Music & Arts Festival to designing permanent systems for theaters in Eugene, Portland, Spokane, and beyond. He's mixed everything from *Star Wars* symphonic scores to arena shows with Pavarotti. "Touring with Pavarotti was wild. I wasn't the main engineer, but I learned so much. You realize how important your tools and your ears are when you're in a new space every night." Still, it's acoustic music that holds his heart.

"Too many engineers don't understand acoustic music. They come from rock and think louder is better. They don't hear the nuance. And a lot of bands just give up and go to pickups and D.I.s. But I still believe in a great condenser mic and good gain structure."

Relles also stresses the importance of listening. "Train your ear. Sit in front of a Steinway piano and listen to the harmonics. Learn to hear when feedback is starting before it happens. I can usually hear it just starting to hang, to bloom. That's experience."

### A LEGACY IN THE MIX

Now 75, Relles continues to mix 50 shows a year at the Britt festival, including symphonies, pop acts, and major headliners. He also mixes the



George Relles on sound in 2000. Photo by Stan Dye.

Spokane Symphony's Labor Day concert for 14,000 people in an outdoor park.

"People ask how long I'll keep doing this," he said. "I just say, 'Until I can't.'"

Though he's stepped away from Grass Valley, the fingerprint he left on the CBA's flagship event remains. The expectations he set—for transparency, warmth, and balance—still resonate on the main stage.

For all the high-end gear and complex systems, Relles returns to the fundamentals: good mics, good ears, and the right intention. "You've got to care about what it sounds like. And you've got to know what it's supposed to sound like."

George Relles is one of two CBA partners recognized at this Father's Day Festival for helping to make our summer events in Grass Valley a top-shelf experience. Next month we'll celebrate Summer Music Camp's caterer for 22 years, Steven Shabry and Blue Sun Café.



George Relles running sound at 2022 Father's Day Festival. Photo by Bob Free.

fiddle, out-of-tune guitars, rough singing. It sure wasn't the Kingston Trio.

"One of the old boys pulled out a jar of white lightning moonshine. It was crystal clear like water. I'd never seen, or tasted, anything like it. I took a drink, and I was like, 'Oh, my god.' The jar went around the circle a few more times, and I suddenly realized that this music is great and it's a lot of fun, too. It just settled with me."

At the end of the evening, the older men told Ray about the music they liked—Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter Family, the Stanley Brothers, and more. With those recommendations in hand, Ray returned to Atlanta and found a record store that carried bluegrass. It was an old-style record store, with listening booths where customers could listen to records before buying them. Ray took full advantage of that policy, listening to most of the bluegrass records the store had.

"There wasn't much bluegrass in Georgia at the time," he remembers. "Tut Taylor had a band up in Milledgeville, and the Lewis Family was down in Savannah, but that was about it at that time. I used to take the train—the *Nancy Hanks* passenger train—almost every weekend from Atlanta to Savannah to watch the Lewis Family film their weekly television series. That was pretty fun."

A high point of Ray's young life was hitchhiking to Bristol, Virginia, to see the Stanley Brothers at a local club. "It was my first exposure to the real thing," he says. "One of the songs they played was 'Pig in a Pen,' and I just fell in love with that song." So much so that Ray would later use the song as the title and theme song of his long-running radio program.

After graduating from Georgia Tech with a degree in civil engineering, Ray landed an engineering job with the state of California and headed west. He settled in Berkeley and quickly discovered the

*"... In addition to spinning records, Ray's favorite part of the program was hosting musicians who played live on his show. It's probably safe to say that most of the bluegrass and old-time pickers in Northern California played live on Pig in a Pen at one time or another."*

Freight & Salvage coffeehouse in Berkeley and Paul's Saloon in San Francisco, the two major venues for live bluegrass in the Bay Area.

"I was in heaven, you know," he laughs. "My favorite kind of music and lots of wonderful bands. There was just bluegrass all around, all the time. I'd found my people."

Now a full-fledged bluegrass fanatic, Ray was disappointed that he couldn't find any bluegrass on the radio. He knew of Cuz'n Al Knoth's program on KTAO in Los Gatos but was unable to pick up the station in Berkeley. So, one day in the summer of 1974, he wrote a letter to KPFA, the local community public radio station—and the oldest listener-supported radio station in the country—and said he thought the station should add a bluegrass program to its schedule. It would fit in with their other programming, and there would be a ready-made audience for it, Ray reckoned.

"It was a complete shot in the dark," he recalls, "but the station wrote me back and said they agreed with my suggestion, but that nobody at the station knew anything about bluegrass. They asked if I would come in and get it started. They said they'd put me with an engineer, and I could go on the air. I only had about 50 bluegrass records then, but thought, 'What the heck?' The next thing you know, I'm a bluegrass DJ doing a regular show on KPFA."

Ray called the show *Pig in a Pen* (also his theme song); its debut was in June 1974, and it would run for 48 years with Ray at the helm until 2021, when he passed the show to Allegra Thompson. The

program originally aired on Friday afternoons, but found its long-time home on Saturday afternoons, alternating weeks with Tom Diamant's *Panhandle Country* program. In addition to spinning records, Ray's favorite part of the program was hosting musicians who played live on his show. It's probably safe to say that most of the bluegrass and old-time pickers in Northern California played live on *Pig in a Pen* at one time or another.

"His radio show was so eclectic that all kinds of music would fit in," says singer, guitarist and bandleader Kathy Kallick, who met Ray in 1975. "It wasn't just bluegrass. It was Irish and old time and folk, all related kinds of acoustic music. He was a very open-minded, and open-eared, guy. And just the biggest enthusiast and supporter."

"If he didn't have live music lined up for the show, he would just throw a bunch of albums in a bag and go down to the radio station and play whatever struck his fancy at the moment. And anytime I had a new record, I could go on his show and play it and talk about it and promote it."

To honor Ray for his many years of service after he retired from KPFA in December 2021, the Freight & Salvage presented a star-studded "Ray Fest" six months later. The event was held at the Freight and included performances by Laurie Lewis and Kathy Kallick, High Country, Thompsonia, the Road Oilers, High Water Line, and North Country Blue.

A few months after Ray started his radio program, he received a phone call from a man named Jack Sadler, who told him about a new organization



Ray interviews Jim and Jesse McReynolds at a CBA fundraiser.



Ray, left, in the KPFA studio with Michael Drayton and John Pedersen in 1975.



that was forming to support bluegrass and bluegrass musicians. Sadler asked him if he might be interested in being part of it, and when Ray said he was, he was invited to a planning meeting.

"I went to a meeting at Carl Pagter's house in Lafayette," Ray says, "and there were six or seven people there, none of whom I'd met before. There was Carl, Jack Sadler, Jay Quesenberry, Steve deHaas and a couple of others I can't remember. I was asked if I would be on the board of directors of the new organization, and I agreed. If I remember right, the new board members then elected Steve deHaas to be the first president of the California Bluegrass Association."

The debut issue of the *Bluegrass Breakdown*, which came out in April 1975, listed the first board of directors as such: deHaas, Sadler, Quesenberry, Carol Masters, Bob Scoville, Al Knoth, Keith Little, and Mick Seeber. Carl Pagter was not on the board because a job transfer had taken him to Washington, D.C., shortly after the CBA was launched.

Ray held a leadership role in the CBA for several years in the 1970s and 80s, serving as president and on the board of directors. Tiring of what he vaguely—and diplomatically—calls "politics," he decided to step down from that role and concentrate his volunteer efforts on the CBA's annual Father's Day Festival, where he's been stage announcer, stage manager, talent coordinator, and other jobs, as needed.

Well-known to Northern California bluegrassers through his emcee work at festivals throughout the region, he emceed at the first Grass Valley festival in 1976, and he's emceed at almost all of

them since. He's also emceed at several other festivals, including Mid-Summer, Wolf Mountain, Sonoma County and Black Point.

Ray left the Bay Area in 1978 and moved to Mendocino County, where he worked as a supervisor in the county's transportation department. He lives on the coast between Gualala and Point Arena and can see the ocean from his front deck. Despite the distance, Ray continued to do his radio show after the move—a round trip from home to station of 230 miles, roughly 2 1/2 hours each way.

Ray Edlund has worn many hats during his time with the CBA, but what he has been most consistently is an avid supporter and articulate advocate for the music in all its many shapes and forms. He's been a friend to many bluegrass musicians over the years and a stalwart volunteer for whatever was needed.

"I met Ray right when the Good Ol' Persons was starting up," says Kathy Kallick. "When the GOP started, I remember that he became a fan instantly. He was there right from the beginning at all our shows. I can still see him in my mind's eye—a big tall guy with red hair and a big red beard. He was at every show, just the biggest supporter of the band."

"In every way possible that a person can be a supporter of this music without actually playing it, that's what Ray has done. He's taken thousands of photographs—many of which he has shared on Facebook, he's hosted bands on his radio show, he's emceed festivals, he's organized benefits and fundraisers. He's done a bit of everything."



Steve deHaas and Ray Edlund at Grass Valley, 1980.



Ray with a ticket to the first Grass Valley festival.  
Photo by Alan Bond.

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## Bluegrass Archivist Tom Payne

by the Bluegrass Breakdown

A primary source for learning the history of bluegrass are the few archivists documenting the details of our recorded music. To this end, Humboldt County resident Tom Payne has been quietly assembling one of the most detailed personal archives of bluegrass and old-time vinyl in the western United States. His collection, now numbering more than 13,000 records, is the foundation of Tom's dedication to his post-retirement life: cataloging, contributing to online discographies, and preserving a rapidly fading aspect of American roots music—the details that surround the sound.

"I was a failed banjo player," Tom says, "but I still wanted to be part of the music somehow." That longing to stay connected to the music led him down the path of what would become a monumental archival project. It began simply enough—buying a record collection from his friend Brooks Otis, a longtime DJ at Humboldt County's KHSU-FM radio station. "Three-thousand records," Tom recalls. "About half bluegrass. I was in hog heaven."

As he sifted through those LPs, Tom began contributing missing entries to the Bluegrass Discography, a labor-of-love website curated by Charlie Pennell. Frustrated by scanning 12" album covers on a standard home scanner, Tom invested in a 12" x 18" flatbed scanner. Soon he was sending high-res images, track listings, instrumentation, and more to Charlie—often going back

through records he'd already cataloged to meet increasing demands for more detailed data.

But he didn't stop there. Tom discovered Discogs, an online marketplace and music database with a more exhaustive approach to recordings' metadata. "They want to know everything—who produced it, who engineered it, who cut the lacquer," Tom explains. "It's great for collectors, but a rabbit hole for the rest of us." As his records multiplied through acquisitions from collectors like Artie Rose, Phil and Vivian Williams, and eventually Ray Edlund, so did his contributions.

"I didn't intend to be a collector," Tom admits. "I just couldn't let the bluegrass go." He now spends his days inventorying, comparing duplicates, and sorting through obscure pressing differences. "You'd be amazed how often what looks like a duplicate isn't. A different pressing plant, different label art, different dead wax inscriptions—it all tells a story."

It's that eye for detail—and that commitment to accuracy—that makes Tom's work invaluable. Bluegrass and old-time music have always had a DIY ethos, with many recordings released privately or on small labels with limited distribution. Documentation was often an afterthought, if it happened at all. "There are records out there that we don't even know exist," Tom says. "Sometimes I find one, and the liner notes mention it's their fifth album—and I've never heard of any of the others."

Tom's research is helping to fill those gaps. He regularly sends updates to both the Bluegrass Discography and Discogs, and his contributions can be seen in enhanced listings for artists ranging from the obscure to the iconic. "Charlie Pennell is the real authority," Tom says humbly. "I'm just adding what I can."

His work may be quiet and solitary, but it has ripple effects. "Collectors care," Tom says. "And researchers, and DJs, and musicians. This

information matters—not just for buying and selling, but for understanding the history of the music." That history is surprisingly fragile. "So much of it has already been lost," he says. "CDs are disappearing. Digital files don't come with liner notes. We're losing the context."

He's particularly passionate about encouraging musicians to contribute to their own archival presence. "Most don't even know about the Bluegrass Discography," Tom says. "But the artists are the ones who know who played what, when, and where. They're the real historians."

Still, even without widespread help, Tom's enthusiasm hasn't dimmed. "I'm consolidating now," he says. "Going through the Ws and working backward, because it's easier to move things to the right when I make space."

He's also sitting on a treasure trove of duplicates—hundreds of bluegrass records he'd love to see go to good homes. "I'm not looking to ship anything," he says, "but if someone wants to visit Arcata and dig through a few boxes, they're welcome. I can send a list. They're in great shape."

The collector in him may be reluctant to let go, but the discographer in him knows the value is in sharing the information—and the joy. "Ray Edlund always teased me," Tom laughs. "He'd say, 'Who cares about all that pressing info? It's the music!' But then he'd haul a box of Japanese bluegrass records back from Japan. I'd tell him, 'Same music, different issue—you're just like me.'"

Tom may never have mastered the banjo, but in his own way, he's become a virtuoso of vinyl. His work is a reminder that the roots of this music don't just live in the melodies. They live in the jackets, the labels, the liner notes, and the grooves—and in the hands of those who care enough to preserve them.

To inquire about Tom Payne's duplicate bluegrass LPs, email him at [bpicker47@gmail.com](mailto:bpicker47@gmail.com).



Early discography of bluegrass albums by Swedish archivists Urban Haglund and Lillies Ohlsson.



Tom (left) and Australian bluegrass archivist John Boothroyd (right) record hunting in Asheville, N.C..



Charlie Pennell with his IBMA distinguished achievement award for the Bluegrass Discography.



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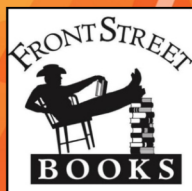
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Above: Nick Weitzenfeld, left, teaching at 2025 CBA Summer Music Camp. Photo by Alan Bond.



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For info, visit  
[californiabluegrass.org/cba-board](http://californiabluegrass.org/cba-board).



## Monthly Trivia Quiz

By Bert Daniel, Breakdown Contributor

In May, we noted that almost all of the top bluegrass bands active 50 years ago are no longer; Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys, Jim & Jesse, the Osborne Brothers, and the Country Gentlemen are all in the past. But there is one big name band from Maryland that is still carrying the banner from the band's founders, only one of whom is still living. We asked you to name the band.

While many responders thought we might be looking for Del McCoury, we had a lot of correct answers; **Richard Brooks**, **Tom Sours**, **Anne Hamilton**, **Don Armstrong**, **Carlo Calabi**, **Steve Kling**, **David Lemon**, **John Gwinner**, **Jon DeLong**, **Wendy Tyner**, **Frank Pearsall**, **Jeremy Loeb**, **David Brown**, **Sharron O'Neill**, **Joel**



Best of the Seldom Scene from 1986 on Rebel Records.

**Sidney, Tracy Saucier**, and **Rick Nagle** all knew the band we were looking for is the Seldom Scene, with 84-year-old Tom Grey as the last founding member with us. In 1996, as a member of The Country Gentlemen, he was inducted into the International Bluegrass Music Hall of Honor.

We consulted random.org to pick the all-important winner, and **Jon DeLong** is the winner of a CBA cap with a built-in headlamp perfect for all-night jamming!

## JULY TRIVIA CHALLENGE

For July, we want you to **name a Winfield-winning national flatpick guitar champion whose catalog of instructional materials exceeds 100 titles.**

Send your answer to:  
[trivia@californiabluegrass.net](mailto:trivia@californiabluegrass.net)  
no later than July 31.

This month's prize is a set of **D'Addario phosphor-bronze guitar strings!**

Only CBA members are eligible to win; if there is more than one correct response, the prize winner will be selected by random drawing. The winner will be announced in the September 2025 issue of the *Bluegrass Breakdown*.