



## 50 YEARS OF GROWING BLUEGRASS COMMUNITY

by Jason Dilg, Bluegrass Breakdown Managing Editor

As a cultural relic, bluegrass music is but one facet of the bewilderingly complex American history of division and inclusion. As an artistic inspiration, our music has been shaped by a glorious tapestry of diverse performers, like Rose Maddox, who first took to the stage at age 11. It's always had folks in the bands and the audiences who might have included themselves in the Pride community if they could have. Mainstream culture recognizes more and more every day the foundational role that the Black community in America—through people like Arnold Shultz and Leslie Riddle—played in the creation of all American roots music, including bluegrass, old time, and gospel. And we all know the power of music to bring joy and connection to people, and to engage the minds of many creative and neurodivergent artists in a perpetual kaleidoscope of musical innovation, fusing innovation and tradition in beautiful and exciting ways.

For the first several years of the CBA, we were just having fun picking and listening. But as our association has

evolved past the sheer novelty of gathering in a dusty field and setting things like personal hygiene and sleep aside for the sheer joy of the music, we've realized that to build a lasting artistic community, we have to actively create the space and time for everyone who shows up to feel welcome.



*Taking part of the Long Beach Bluegrass Festival's instrument petting zoo. Photo by Robin Frenette.*

### YOUTH

We first realized we had some work to do when members in the '80s (almost exclusively women) started seeking ways to make sure our

youngsters were safe and cared for at our shindigs like the Father's Day Festival. Looking at the strength of CBA's portfolio of activities under the umbrella of the Youth Program today, it's hard to imagine a time when CBA didn't put time and energy into making sure young pickers had the chance to learn and grow as musicians, and people, in our midst. But it was the tenacious dedication of folks like Lynn Quinones, Jill Cruvey, Darby Brandli, Frank Solivan Sr., and Kathleen Rushing to overcome indifference, and even opposition, to the idea that it just didn't need to be done.

Readers of our June issue will recall this history, and Lynn's determination to reverse the trend she saw in a fifth-grade classroom of children losing touch with what we might think of as the traditional American songbook: "I wrote on the board every traditional song in the book," Lynn recalled. "They didn't know any of them." So she and Jill began work on a program to connect kids with traditional American music as a

*cont'd on page 6 →*



## DIRECTOR'S WELCOME

### LOTS GOING ON

by Pete Ludé, CBA Executive Director

It's hard to believe that festival season is soon drawing to a close. This has been a wonderful summer for bluegrass fans throughout California, with Parkfield, the new SierraGrass, Susanville Bluegrass, Good Old Fashioned, Summergrass, and—of course, my favorite—CBA's Father's Day Festival in Grass Valley. CBA was also well-represented at the Bluegrass in La Roche festival in France last month. You can read more about this international connection here in this month's issue.

There is still a lot more fun in these waning days of summer. This month, you can choose from the Pickin' in the Pines festival in Flagstaff (not too far from California), the Berkeley Old-time Music Convention, the Frankly Bluegrass Festival in Plymouth, the Huck Finn Jubilee in Southern California, and of course, the huge Hardly Strictly Festival in San Francisco.

*cont'd on page 2 →*

## Join us for the CBA Fall Campout!

### OCTOBER 13-19 AT LODI GRAPE FESTIVAL GROUNDS

by Jimmy Jeffries, CBA Campout Coordinator

End summer the right way with an easy trip to Lodi for the Fall Campout, October 13th through 19th at the Lodi Grape Festival Grounds, 413 E. Lockeford Street. Let me know you'll be there at [JimJeffries@californiabluegrass.net](mailto:JimJeffries@californiabluegrass.net). Get your tickets ahead of time from the CBA's event page to receive a discount!

There is something for everybody at the Fall Campout. Kids have a blast riding bikes around the campground. Beginners have a chance to learn how a jam works from the pros in a welcoming environment. It's a wonderful

time to pick together and catch up with one another. It's a place to make new connections with passionate musicians. It's the place to show off those songs you've been working on all summer—there are so many friendly jams full of fun new songs! It's easy to walk around the campground and join a group at your level or to listen in on a group burning down a classic. Let's close this season together and look forward to the next!

Choosing the date for this year was a dilemma with so many festivals

happening across only so many fall weekends to choose from. This year our Fall Campout is on the same weekend as the Strawberry Festival in Grass Valley, but you don't have to give up seeing Del McCoury Band or Laurie Lewis & The Right Hands; we're starting a few days before Strawberry, so you can stop in on your way up. Join us in Lodi as early as Monday for a solid three days and nights of picking with us—then it's less than a two-hour drive to Grass Valley.

*cont'd on page 3 →*



*Ready for some evening tunes!  
Photo by Alan Bond.*

## BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

September 2025 – Global Connections

*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*

The International Bluegrass Music Association's *World of Bluegrass* starts September 16, for the first time in Chattanooga, Tennessee. This huge event is a wonderful combination of a business conference, trade show, award ceremony, showcase performances, and non-stop jamming. Several California folks are up for awards, and CBA will have a team in attendance. In fact, CBA has been a key part of the international extravaganza for almost 35 years, from when Carl Pagter began hosting a prominent hospitality suite IBMA. You can also learn about this fun history in this issue.

Don't forget to cast your vote for CBA board members. Balloting is now open, and all current members will receive an email with instructions. Winners will be announced next month at the CBA all-member meeting October 18, during the Fall Campout in Lodi. I hope to see you there. Don't forget that the South State 48 jamming event returns to Carlsbad in November, and the Great 48 to Bakersfield in January. Hotel room reservations have just opened for Great 48, so book your room now—before it's sold out. Also

timely: applications for both California Showcase bands and Vern's Stage bands at the 2026 Father's Day Festival are now open. Check out [FathersDayFestival.com](http://FathersDayFestival.com) to learn how your band could apply. In addition, the CBA volunteer team is already planning a full schedule of events in 2026.

California is a big state, and so localized regional activities have been a big part of our community for a long time. In last month's Bluegrass Breakdown, you learned about how our CBA regional program started, and there is still much activity in progress. For example, in July, CBA's Donna Hargis helped co-produce the free one-day Long Beach Bluegrass Festival. Last month, Bruce Sadowick hosted a fun jam at the Sweetwater Music Hall in Marin County before the Della Mae show. And coming up on Sept. 6, CBA regional director Jonathan Bluemel is launching a fun new event—Sierra Jam, in Auburn. Look for details on page 3.

So in summary: there is no darn excuse for you to *not* to enjoy lots of live music and jamming for the remainder of 2025. As you know, music is the perfect elixir for the turbulent times we live in, and that's why CBA is dedicated to do our best to help. 🐻



## CBA BOARD OF DIRECTORS

### ELECTIONS NOW OPEN!

The election for the CBA Board of Directors is now open! Around September 1, all current CBA members should receive an email from "Election Buddy" with instructions on how to electronically cast your ballot for the nine CBA board positions. If you don't find your email, have any questions, or prefer to vote by mail, just contact us at **Ballots@CaliforniaBluegrass.net** or call **844-BLU-GRASS** (844-258-4727). Voting closes on October 18 at noon. Scan the QR code here for information on the CBA Board candidates.







Jamming in the campground at Fall Campout in 2024. Photo by Alan Bond.

## FALL CAMPOUT

cont'd from front page

Prices are the same as last spring: tent/car/dry camping is \$18/night, electric and water RV hookups are \$50/night. We won't have Saturday night concerts, but the Sunday morning gospel jam will surely take place—bring an old family gospel tune and come share it with us before or after you pack up! Dogs are allowed, bikes are allowed, small trailers can dry camp. Prices are per-tent or per-rig.

The stock pots will be back! Make sure you bring your bowl for a serving of Cajun red beans and rice cooked each night and bring your cup for coffee around the clock. A food truck will be there some of the nights and a coffee truck will be around some

of the mornings; more details about these vendors to come.

If you would like more information or you want to volunteer at this event please send me an email at [JimJeffries@californiabluegrass.net](mailto:JimJeffries@californiabluegrass.net) or reach me at 707-696-0521.

Get your discounted  
Fall Campout  
tickets here! ➤



## SOUTH STATE 48 VOL. V

November 6-9, 2025  
Carlsbad-by-the-Sea Hotel  
Tickets on Sale!

**SOUTHSTATE48.COM**

NEW  
EVENT!

California Bluegrass Association presents

# Sierra Jam

BLUEGRASS & OLD TIME

September 6 ★ Noon to 6pm ★ Auburn, California

Bring your acoustic bluegrass and old-time instruments, picking chair, and snacks for this first-time event hosted by CBA Sierra Regional Director Jonathan Bluemel and Grass Valley Stringband's Dave Earl! Suggested donation \$10. Well-behaved dogs allowed on a leash, no alcoholic beverages permitted.



Auburn Regional Park ★ 3770 Richardson Drive



# CBA Celebrates 20 Years of Bluegrass in La Roche

by Michael Luchtan for the Bluegrass Breakdown

The 20th edition of the Bluegrass in La Roche festival, in La Roche-sur-Foron, France, was a truly unforgettable celebration, and not just because of the top-tier international bluegrass bands who graced the festival stages. As Miles Quale of Crying Uncle said, "If I wasn't so loyal to the CBA's Father's Day Festival, La Roche would be my favorite." This sentiment is a testament to the unique atmosphere and community at the festival. For this two-decade anniversary, there was a shared sense of success celebrated with free cake, champagne, and speeches from local government officials. After a string of California bands graced the stage—not just this year but year after year—it was an understandable joke for the MC to suggest that California take the title of "The Bluegrass State" from Kentucky. It's a joke that underscores a serious truth: California has an outsized effect on international bluegrass, and the La Roche festival has become a powerful showcase for it.

For many, California is a place to dream the impossible and, with enough ingenuity, make those dreams a reality. There's more than a nugget of truth in that myth. Far from the bluegrass heartland, California has long been free from the constraints of tradition. It's this distance and this freedom that have allowed its bluegrass scene to flourish with a unique and innovative spirit, producing powerhouses



AJ Lee and Blue Summit on the main stage. Photo by Helen Ludé

like Molly Tuttle, AJ Lee, and the Quale brothers of Crying Uncle.

But the true power of California's bluegrass scene lies in its diversity and diplomacy. As a state that has developed into a rich and varied cultural melting pot since its time as a Spanish territory—California's diversity and outward-looking nature fuel its global impact, as evidenced so strongly at La Roche.

It's inspiring to see Californians actively helping to spread bluegrass internationally. The CBA's thriving Youth Program feeds directly into touring bands, and these traveling artists who perform abroad, in turn, inspire European musicians on the international stage. The presence of these world-class musicians at a festival like La Roche gives local and international groups who visit from as far away as Barcelona, Korea, and Buenos Aires a chance to meet and learn from one another. When they return home after the festival, these

musicians bring the energy of the international bluegrass community with them to continue as catalysts for their own communities.

The 20th anniversary of La Roche was a celebration of incredible accomplishment, shared by everyone from local officials and the team of volunteers to the bluegrass players from across Europe. At its heart, it was a recognition of the tireless work of Christopher Howard-Williams, who, in addition to organizing La Roche, also serves as the international chair of the IBMA. And while his work is a monumental achievement, it's also a testament to a larger global success story. As Helen Foley, the director of CBA's Kids on Bluegrass, told me, California shares in that accomplishment in a very real way. She described the prominent presence of California bands at La Roche as "a clear return on the investment Californians have made in the bluegrass community."

As someone who has benefited from these investments, an aspiring bluegrass musician in Europe whose son attends the Kids on Bluegrass Europe—inspired and assisted by the California Kids on Bluegrass program—I want to celebrate those accomplishments with a heartfelt "thank you" to the people like the late, great Frank Solivan, Sr. (whom I never got the opportunity to meet), Darby Brandli, Kimber Ludiker, and the newest generation of bluegrass masterminds Helen Foley and Helen Ludé who have given so much time, energy, and efforts into spreading bluegrass, into trying to change the world one kid at a time. It's working!

I had the opportunity to talk with Darby Brandli at La Roche. She has been making international connections in bluegrass since hosting members of the Czech band Fragment in her home more than 20 years ago. And it is only natural that the kids from CBA have flourished as young adults building international bridges. "It's hard to say where it's all going and how it works together—but it does!" said Darby. The KOB and Global Connections, Bluegrass Pride, and everything in between, are actively making full use of the awesome power of music to cross cultural barriers. It's just as relevant now in the State of California as ever. 🐻



Darby & Christopher Howard-Williams. Photo courtesy of Christopher H-W.



Jamming on the streets of La Roche-sur-Foron. Photo by Charles Quale.

Michael Luchtan is a musician and scholar raised in the Appalachian foothills of Northeast Georgia, now living in Barcelona, Spain. He has been awarded research grants from prestigious institutes such as Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center in Western North Carolina, Berea College in Kentucky, and East Tennessee State University, where he received a master's degree in Appalachian Studies in 2019. Funded by a grant from the Open University of Catalonia to examine the circulation of embodied knowledge, his comprehensive research on Barcelona's bluegrass scene and its surrounding communities has positioned him as a prominent authority on European bluegrass.



CARLSBAD, CALIFORNIA • NOVEMBER 6-9

# SOUTH STATE 48, VOL. V

by Donna Hargis, CBA Regional Director, Los Angeles and Orange County

South State 48 returns to Carlsbad November 6-9! There are still a few rooms available, so if you have not reserved yours, head over to [SouthState48.com](https://SouthState48.com) now to get one of the coveted spots! As usual, a room reservation is not required to participate in any of the shows, workshops, or 24 hour jamming, but it sure does make it nice!

This year we are excited to bring "Bay Area Special" down from ... guess where? These hot pickers are influenced by classic bluegrass musicians such as J.D. Crowe, Tony Rice, Hazel Dickens, and Alice Gerrard. Come to the Windmill Foodhall Saturday night to hear sweet singing, fiddle tunes, amazing instrument solos, and, most importantly, good music!

Your ears will also be treated to a special showcase by Tyler Grant and Joy Louise! If you don't know Tyler, he is a local-grown (San Diego area) flatpicking champ, recording artist, instructor, and host of the Monday Night Jam-along on YouTube. Joy Louise is our sweet flatpickin' monster who is also a national flatpicking champion. These two will be artists at large and are both excellent teachers who will offer workshops, but catch these two performing in the Windmill to see the combustibility that happens

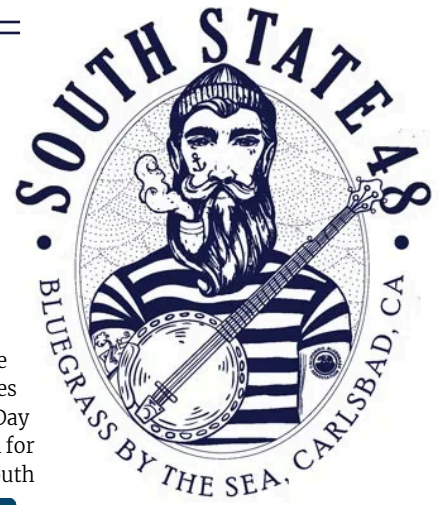
when two guitar loving virtuosos go toe-to-toe!

We are bringing back the very popular band contest that was such a hit last year. If you'd like to enter, visit our website. Anyone has a chance! (Except last year's winner, Hey, Lonesome! Sorry guys.) The contest award is \$300, plus the opportunity to open for Saturday night's show!

The Bluegrass Spectrum's autism program is holding a meeting on Saturday morning in hopes to reach those in the bluegrass community and beyond. This outreach program aims to provide an avenue of support for people in the community who struggle with the effects of autism.

Of course the jamming is a major attraction for many, and you can count on 24 hour jamming starting on Friday and Saturday night in the hotel courtyard. For those who are shy, or just starting out, head over to the Open Jam Tent, where all are welcome. We have curated a variety of jams every hour during daylight, with different leaders and themes throughout the day. These jams are a great opportunity for new folks to get acquainted. Project Barley is returning to pour beer and helping us raise funds, and we will also offer free workshops in the conference

room, all day on Saturday. There will be instrument raffles (including a 1968 Bacon and Day Gretsch five-string banjo), merch for sale, and much more fun at South State 48 - vol V. See you there! 🐻



Jamming in the hotel's courtyard gazebo. Photo by David Cupp.



Whole Hog performs in the 2024 band contest. Photo by Robin Frenette.



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creative outlet and positive social force, and it became the first youth program at our summer festival.

It would take a few years before the program would start to look like FunGrass, or for Frank Solivan Sr. to have the insight that putting kids on the main stage at the Father's Day Festival would transform how CBA—and ultimately the entire bluegrass community around the world—related to young musicians. "This organization would die without kids," proclaimed CBA President Emerita Darby Brandli. Lucky for us, we don't have to wonder if she's right.

## BLUEGRASS PRIDE

The next community the CBA would publicly engage with would be the LGBTQ+ community, nearly a decade ago. It started with Ted Kuster recognizing that CBA could be more active in encouraging different communities of people to be involved in the association. CBA's Matt Lauer, regional director for San Francisco, recently recalled talking with Ted, who floated the idea about putting something together for the S.F. Pride Parade. "I thought that was just a great idea. There are millions of people who watch it online and come to San Francisco and check that out."

And, much like with the youth initiatives, the idea was greeted from the CBA ranks with a mix of indifference, opposition, and a handful of folks who took the opportunity to roll up their sleeves and make something good happen. Ted and Matt were off and running with the idea of a CBA float in the 2017 parade, and reaching out to recruit others. Ted asked Brandon Godman, who had recently moved to S.F. from Nashville, how feasible he thought it would be to get a gay bluegrass band to play on the float. "I said, 'do they have to be out?'"



Back of the CBA Bluegrass Pride Float. Photo by Mike Melnyk.



L-R: Laurie Lewis, Brandon Godman, Tom Rozum, Bill Evans, and Suzy Thompson at S.F. Pride Parade in 2017. Photo by Mike Melnyk.

kind of jokingly, but, to be honest, I didn't think the idea would get very far," Brandon said.

And, there was vocal opposition as well as adamant support. The CBA online message board lit up. Facebook was brimming with opinions, firmly stated, for and against. Letters to the Bluegrass Breakdown editors claimed that putting a float in the Pride Parade was a political statement from an organization that sought to remain outside of the political fray. Others saw it as a way to get the CBA in front of more people, and to build trust with the gay community. "I got up in a board meeting and said that a bluegrass presence in the pride parade does more than say 'we accept you' or 'all are welcome,' it's a pure invite at that point. It's not like we'll just tolerate you; we actually want you here." Brandon said.

By the time the parade rolled around, CBA agreed to sponsor the float and insure the project. The group was wildly successful at raising money for the project. "We started a GoFundMe and raised around \$50k," Brandon recalled. "It was incredible."

The float had a stage and audience area, and musicians including Brandon, Laurie Lewis, Tom Rozum, Bill Evans, Melody Walker, Max Schwartz, Helen Foley, Karen Celia Heil, Scott Gates, and many more, played through a P.A. system on the float. "I remember the distinct moment when we kind of got in the parade grandstand area and we played 'Foggy Mountain Breakdown' and people

went crazy, jumping up and down and clapping in the stands," Brandon said.

In fact, the float was such a hit that the effort, which would go on to become the nationwide Bluegrass Pride organization, was named best contingent of the parade. It was the first time in the 47-year history of the parade that a first-time entrant won the award. "Bluegrass Pride went from a crazy idea to something we knew we had to keep doing, so we kept doing it," Matt Lauer said.

Bluegrass Pride entered floats in the parade for the next couple of years. About the time people were asking what was next from the group, covid hit. The group decided to make a go of it on its own, with Justin Hiltner taking the reins, and the organization is still going strong today.

## WELCOMING THE BLACK COMMUNITY BACK TO BLUEGRASS

One of the deepest divides in the history of roots music is racial. Beginning at the dawn of the recording industry, marketing minds created categories of music to help sell records to listeners. Race records, blues, and jug bands were marketed to Black folks, while country, hillbilly, or old-time music was sold as white music. But the truth is that, although American roots music formed independently of these labels, the wedge driven by the record companies on the heels of the racist minstrelsy practice would divide white and Black music for most of the 20th century.

In an attempt to erode this division, IBMA featured the Black gospel group the Fairfield Four in 1992, opening the door, even if just a bit, for the recognition of Black contributions to country and bluegrass music. It would almost two decades later before the IBMA to created the Arnold Shultz Award, named after the Black fiddler who gave Bill Monroe his first paid gig, and inspired Monroe's bluesy approach to the mandolin.

Here, too, CBA is seeking to grow our community by inviting folks who may not have always felt at home with bluegrass. Starting in 2023, these pages started featuring the stories of more Black roots musicians and their allies, like the Black Banjo



CBA's Instrument Lending Library provided 14 banjos to the summer program at Oakland Public Conservatory of Music. Black Banjo and Fiddle Fellow, Patrice Strahan, teaching artist. Photo by OPC.





Oakland Public Conservatory Summer Music Academy banjo class performance. Photo by OPC.

Reclamation Project's Hannah Myree; Black Opry founder Holly G; Stockton Soul Orchestra founder and Oakland Public Conservatory of Music's Black Banjo and Fiddle Fiddle Fellow Darcy Ford; and performer and ethnomusicologist Jake Blount. This collaboration also led to the first formal partnership between the Black Banjo Reclamation Project and CBA this summer, when Hannah Myree and about 10 Black musicians were invited to experience Father's Day Festival as participants and performers. The experience for the group was largely positive, Myree said, though there were familiar signs of opposition. "We really appreciated each and every person that was able to join us from near and far everywhere from Sacramento to L.A.," Hannah said, and she shared that a neighbor to their group's camp was overheard questioning their participation in the community.

Creating a safe camp or jam space can build up critical mass and comfort—so long as it's framed as community-building, not exclusion. "Music is a great way to enjoy each other's company," said CBA Executive Director Pete Ludé. "Part of CBA's mission, then, is to just return the roots music back to the roots, which means a broad range of people contributed to it. That's what made it so wonderful to start with." In service of that idea, the CBA Lending Library provided the Oakland Public Conservatory of Music with 14 banjos for their summer music camp in June. Pete said CBA is continuing to work with groups like the Black

Banjo Reclamation Project and the OPC in the coming years to make sure Black musicians know the welcome mat is out for them at CBA.

## BLUEGRASS BRIDGE

When a request from an mandolin-playing inmate at Avenal State Prison for bluegrass music at the prison landed in CBA's lap, we were aware of other programs that brought various arts programs to prisons. So why not bluegrass? The Bluegrass Bridge initiative began in the summer of 2021, led by Nate Schwartz and a group of pickers who spent a couple of hours at the prison performing bluegrass songs and discussing key aspects of bluegrass music technique with inmates before handing out six donated instruments. As one of the only programs of its kind in the U.S., the Bluegrass Bridge initiative is collecting valuable data on how to teach bluegrass to underserved populations and how to navigate volunteer coordination in the prison system. The full scope of possibilities for Bluegrass Bridge and similar outreach programs is still unknown, but our experience shows that initiatives like Bluegrass Bridge can facilitate deeply positive experiences for program participants, and that bluegrass music is an effective and potent medium for rehabilitative outreach.

## SPECTRUM BLUEGRASS

In 2024, John Frizzell, a film composer and flat-picker with a recent autism-spectrum diagnosis, approached Darby Brandli and Pete Ludé at the Great 48 Jam with an idea: more openly connecting the bluegrass music and autism communities. Encouraged by CBA's support of the concept, John convened a meeting of more than a dozen people at the 2024 Father's Day Festival to gauge interest, and there he met what would become Spectrum Bluegrass's cofounder Steve Sydney. From there, John organized a band with Joy Louise, Joel Sydney (Steve's son), Max Schwartz, and Jesse Katz to play as Spectrum Bluegrass at Autism Speaks' high-profile concert at L.A.'s Greek Theater in April to help raise awareness of the group.

After a second meeting at FDF this summer, John is building relationships with groups in San Diego

who work with people whose lives are more severely impacted by autism, in hope that they can join in at South State 48 to enjoy the event. Science is learning more and more about the benefits of music for autism, and John sees the potential for Spectrum Bluegrass to serve not merely a conveyor of high-functioning players, but a joyful community where participants with autism who have experienced peer rejection or social exclusion as a result feel welcome, supported, and celebrated. "I want to help people who really have a challenge because of autism," John said.



Check out the NPR piece on Spectrum Bluegrass here >



Spectrum Bluegrass at the 2025 Light Up The Blues concert at the LA Greek Theater. Photo by Robin Frenette.



Bluegrass Bridge at Avenal State Prison in 2021. Photo by Evangeline Barrosse.

Looking back on these efforts to grow our bluegrass community by intentionally including youth, the Pride community, incarcerated populations, Black folks, and people on the autism spectrum in CBA programming, our leadership sees a natural progression at play. At first, new participants from any group new to the CBA scene often arrive feeling guarded, conscious of standing out in an established community of musicians and fans. They also may get some negative attention. "At first they stand out ... but over time, they just become part of the music—they stand shoulder-to-shoulder with everyone else," Pete observed. As jams and workshops bring people together in the broader festival flow, the focus returns to what unites everyone: a shared love of bluegrass. 🐻



# NORCAL'S DJ 'CUZIN' AL' KNOTH TO RECEIVE DISTINGUISHED ACHIEVEMENT AWARD FROM IBMA



Cuzin' Al. Photo courtesy of Matt Knoth.

On Sept. 18 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the International Bluegrass Music Association will present a Distinguished Achievement Award to Alan Arthur "Cuzin' Al" Knoth—an acknowledgment that his half-century on the airwaves built as much bluegrass community as many bands built repertoire. Knoth died in 2023 at age 85.

Al's path was pure California grit and DIY ethos: he started his

by the Bluegrass Breakdown

broadcast radio career in 1970 at the small, but pioneering, KTAO-FM in Los Gatos and, in 1975, landed at the unruly, genre-bending KFAT in Gilroy—where his signal stretched from north of San Francisco to the Sierra Nevada. After KFAT's sale, he kept the bluegrass flame burning on KPIG until retiring in 2016.

IBMA notes in their award announcement that Al's show mixed "traditional bluegrass music, Hawaiian tunes, and humorous recordings," and he didn't stop at spinning records—he "organized concerts, festivals, and banjo contests," helped spark the Santa Cruz Bluegrass Society, and served on the California Bluegrass Association board. But numbers and nouns only go so far; the people he lifted say it best.

"KFAT and KPIG broke all the mainstream media rules with Cuzin' Al leading the charge, and it wouldn't take much search engine time to discover the lasting positive effects of his revolutionary vision and steadfast support," said renowned California banjo player Keith Little.

"Bluegrass music worldwide has been richly blessed by Cuzin' Al's long career in broadcasting." —Keith Little.

"Cuzin' Al was always ready and willing to listen to a new band and spin a new record, giving many of us our first shot at airplay," she said. "It can't have been easy to keep touting such a niche music for so many decades, but he did it." —Laurie Lewis.

"The first San Francisco Bay Area DJ to play bluegrass music on the air, Cuzin' Al was an inspiration to us all," said Tom Diamant, who hosted the *Panhandle Country* radio show on KPFA-FM in Berkeley. "KFAT was one of the most influential radio stations in the nation with their mix of music that would later be called Americana (some say they invented the format) and Cuzin' Al was right there in the middle of it with his Sunday bluegrass show. Several other bluegrass shows started on Bay Area radio in the mid-to late 70's, but Cuzin' Al's was the first, and he influenced us all." —Tom Diamant.

"Al would promote bluegrass for any event, whether or not the radio station would get paid for the advertising or plugs," said Tim Edes. "I know that for a fact, because he advertised and promoted my 18 annual concerts without pause. Al shamelessly pushed for the advancement of our beloved music for no personal reward other than to know he was helping the genre." —Tim Edes.

"Al gave me support, encouragement and best of all exposure to bluegrass music like nobody else could have. For this, I am ever grateful," Steve said. —Steve Hogle.

"Bands traveling to California are by definition very far from home, so having a pivotal person treat you with respect and interest, and airplay and plugs for shows ... that was of high value in the '70s and '80s and the many years since. Al's tenure at KFAT and KPIG really helped grow and establish bluegrass and the bluegrass community on the West Coast." —Pete Wernick.

"We listened and learned and loved and grew in the genre because of the

## CALIFORNIA BLUEGRASS AWARDS AT IBMA: A HISTORY OF INFLUENCE

### TOP RECIPIENTS

ROB ICKES • 22 AWARDS

STUART DUNCAN • 16 AWARDS

ALISON BROWN • 13 AWARDS

MOLLY TUTTLE • 9 AWARDS

LAURIE LEWIS • 8 AWARDS

THE BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN  
DISTINGUISHED ACHIEVEMENT  
AWARD - 2007

FATHER'S DAY BLUEGRASS FESTIVAL  
EVENT OF THE YEAR AWARD - 2004

### PEAK YEARS

6

5

1995

2018





Cuzin' Al's last show on KFAT Radio in 1983. Photo by Dave Neilsen.

music Al played and because of his encyclopedic knowledge of the pickers and singers – old and new. Al worked closely with the CBA and IBMA, and bluegrass in California would not have the strong following that it does without Cuzin' Al's passion, presence and dedication to bringing bluegrass to the public.” —Rachel Bennett.

“Al was generous with his time and knowledge, and passionate about using radio to promote bluegrass to as many people as possible,” —Pete Ludé.

“California bluegrass music would not be the same if Al had not been part of the picture for so many years.” —Jim Ingram.

“The fact is [Cuzin' Al] was one of the most significant radio personalities in bluegrass, and the most recorded DJ in KFAT history.” —Mark Hogan.

IBMA's Distinguished Achievement Award exists for exactly this kind of contribution: the long, patient work of making sure the music gets out there. Cuzin' Al did that with a microphone, a record stack, and a relentless belief that bluegrass belonged to everyone who could hear it. That's why he's being honored in Chattanooga—because for



CALIFORNIA BLUEGRASS ASSOCIATION CONGRATULATES

## 2025 IBMA MUSIC AWARD NOMINEES

**AJ LEE** FEMALE VOCALIST OF THE YEAR

**AJ LEE & BLUE SUMMIT** NEW ARTIST OF THE YEAR

**MOLLY TUTTLE** GUITAR PLAYER OF THE YEAR

**MOLLY TUTTLE & GOLDEN HIGHWAY**

INSTRUMENTAL GROUP OF THE YEAR

**ALISON BROWN** BANJO PLAYER OF THE YEAR

SONG OF THE YEAR COLLABORATIVE RECORDING OF THE YEAR MUSIC VIDEO OF THE YEAR

**STUART DUNCAN** FIDDLE PLAYER OF THE YEAR

**RON BLOCK** BANJO PLAYER OF THE YEAR

**STEVE MARTIN** SONG OF THE YEAR MUSIC VIDEO OF THE YEAR

**TODD PHILLIPS** BASS PLAYER OF THE YEAR

**ROB ICKES** RESOPHONIC GUITAR PLAYER OF THE YEAR

### INDUSTRY AWARD NOMINEES

**HELEN LUDÉ** INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT

**GINA DILG** GRAPHIC DESIGNER OF THE YEAR

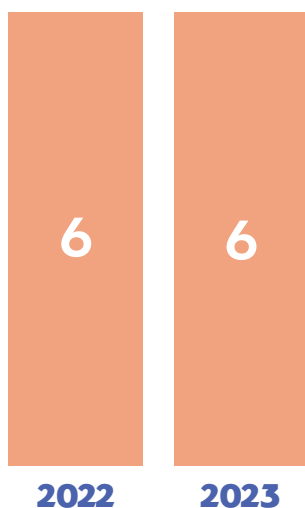
### DISTINGUISHED ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

**“CUZIN' AL” KNOTH**

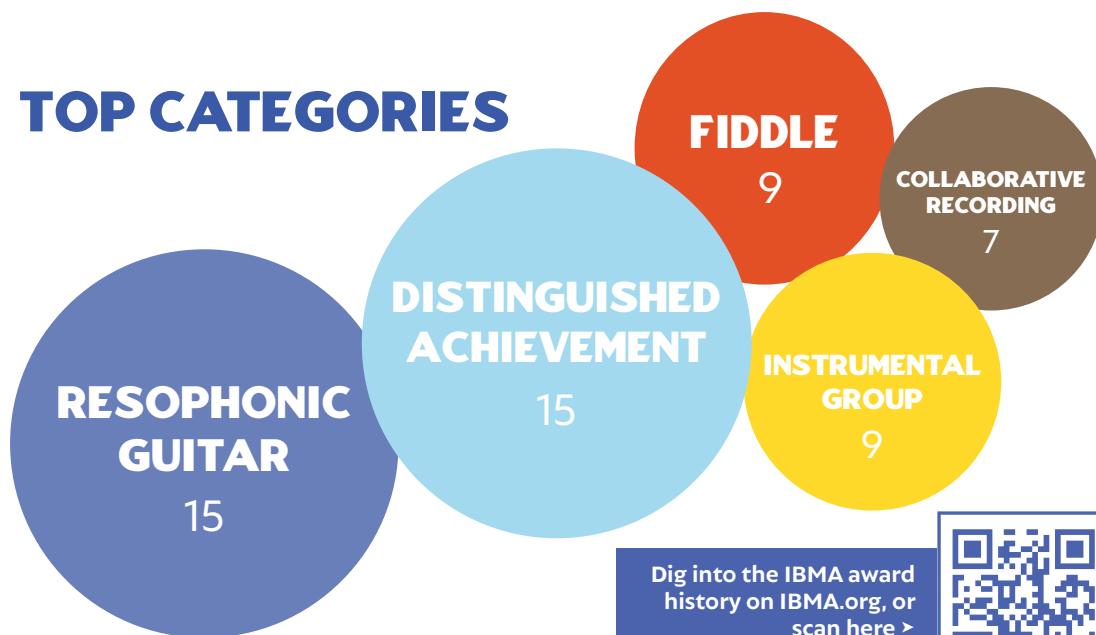
**BLUEGRASS HALL OF FAME**

**BLUEGRASS CARDINALS**

### PEAK YEARS



### TOP CATEGORIES



Dig into the IBMA award history on [IBMA.org](https://www.ibma.org), or scan here >



# A 'SUITE' LEGACY

## CALIFORNIA HOSPITALITY AT THE HEART OF IBMA

by Jason Dilg, Bluegrass Breakdown Managing Editor

**W**hen thousands of bluegrass musicians, fans, and industry pros converge each year at the International Bluegrass Music Association's World of Bluegrass conference, the days are packed with panels, picking, and performances. But for more than two decades, when the sun went down, the real action began somewhere else entirely: in a crowded hotel CBA showcase and hospitality suite.

Starting in 1991 and following the conference as it hopped from Owensboro to Louisville to Nashville to Raleigh, the CBA suite at IBMA was more than just a great party. It was a proving ground for bands, a home base for CBA staff on the road, and a cultural calling card to the rest of the bluegrass world.



View from the CBA suite at IBMA in Nashville in 2006.  
Photo by Pat Calhoun.



Carl Pagter bartends at the CBA suite in 2006.  
Photo by Pat Calhoun.

The story begins with CBA member #1, Carl Pagter. A lawyer by trade and banjo player by passion, Pagter had both the financial means and the deep-rooted conviction to showcase the California community's capacity for serious fun, warm hospitality, and great music. CBA President Emerita Darby Brandli, recalled, "He'd foot the bill for all the suites, and they built them so then they became entertainment suites. But he managed it all."

In 1991, Pagter helped establish the first CBA suite at IBMA's original conference location in Owensboro, Kentucky. The suite quickly gained a reputation for its great bands as showcase acts, bathtubs filled with beer, California wine delivered by Corbin by the van—full, and jams spilling out into the hallways. As Corbin remembered the Owensboro hotel layout, "Owensboro is really cool because you could just walk into the atrium and you could look over and you could see all the different suites ... it was like a beehive back then."

The suite wasn't just a party, though. It was a statement—visible, audible, unforgettable. California bluegrass was vibrant, serious, and worth knowing about. The scene drew musicians and promoters alike.

By 1997, when IBMA moved to the Galt House in Louisville, Kentucky, the suite had become the stuff of legend. Prominent musicians—Art Stamper, Doyle Lawson, the McCourys—would show up for impromptu jams. "Have you been to the CBA suite yet?" was a common refrain in conversations about the dazzling music that filled the hotel.

Volunteer leaders like Darby Brandli and Larry Kuhn—who stepped in as the first formal suites

coordinator after Carl and Corbin Pagter—began to systematize the CBA's effort. Frank Solivan Sr. kept the late-night jams humming. Fundraisers like the CBA instrument raffle helped defray costs. But Carl Pagter remained the soul of the operation well into the Nashville years, where the suites continued to serve as a keystone of the CBA's national presence.

Darby Brandli recalled, "It cemented our reputation that there was a real bluegrass scene, a vibrant bluegrass scene, out in California. The artists wanted to come and play our festivals." She added, "And that's how they met us."

For artists, playing the CBA suite wasn't just another showcase. As Junior Sisk put it, "If you got honored by somebody asking you to come play the CBA suite, you were in ... you were in like Flynn." He added, "It's just a pleasure to get to play their suite. Yeah, you know you would, you'd made it if you made it to the CBA suite. They didn't have no riff-raff or nothing."

Sisk figures he played the suite five times with different bands. He remembers packed rooms full of attentive listeners—"people that come into the CBA suites come in there to hear the music"—and a raft of talent buyers in the back. "There were so many promoters that went to the CBA suite just to know how to book their festival because the best of the best played the CBA suites," he said.

With IBMA's move to Nashville, Tennessee in 2005—and later to Raleigh, North Carolina, beginning in 2013—the CBA suite evolved into a tightly coordinated machine. Lucy Smith, who followed Larry Kuhn and eventually took the reins, said, "I followed Larry Kuhn, yes, and I worked with him one year and



John and Loretta Hettinger hard at work in the CBA suite in 2013. Photo by Lucy Smith.



Pictured L-R: Patrick Sauber, Darby Brandli, and James King in 2005. Photo by Bruno Brandli.



then he retired and I jumped at the chance because ... how fun is that?" Dave Swartz, who joined in Raleigh, remembers the logistics: "We had 35 cases of beer to give away in five nights." The first year in Raleigh, he said, "we only had 8 people on the team," which proved too lean. "So after the first year, I said, I'd love to come back, but we need to expand the team to 10."

Showcases ran like clockwork. Lucy described the nightly routine: "The line was waiting at the door for us, even before the award show was over. We just said 'come in but you have to have to help set up chairs.'" Sets were tight: "They would play 25 minutes, and we'd have to keep it to exactly 25 minutes because we'd have five minutes to turn it over," she said. Dave added, "and no amplification, so it's all just acoustic. The front row was so close that if the guitar player would turn, you could get hit by the guitar."

The team also had to manage crowds. Lucy recalled instituting a late-night rule: "We made it a rule that in order to get into the CBA suite after hours, you had to have an instrument."

Corporate sponsors underscored the California flavor. The 35 cases of beer were provided courtesy of Sierra Nevada. Lucy remembered Northern California cheesemaker Rumiano's contribution: "Rumianos! ... Pat actually called me and said, would you like some cheese? I went, yeah! ... she paid for shipping ... it was amazing."

Angelica Branum—who became active in CBA at an early age as a youth ambassador and Kids on Bluegrass participant—remembers the suite as formative. "I jammed with so many of my heroes in that suite, and it was just mind blowing that it was even happening," she said. "It really gave the CBA a presence at IBMA, which was always the goal: to show people what we do and how hospitable we are, and it definitely worked."

She laid out how the showcases doubled as talent-scouting sessions for CBA's own events, especially the Father's Day Festival: "Every night we had a whole lineup of bands—so, six or seven bands. They'd do short showcases, but they would cram in there." And there was a payoff: "We'd leave one spot open for an IBMA band, and we would all vote on who we thought was the best of that week that we wanted at our festival." As she put it, "We'd all be watching, all week, scouting."



AJ Lee and the Andersons capture the CBA suite audience in 2005. Photo by Steven Elliott.

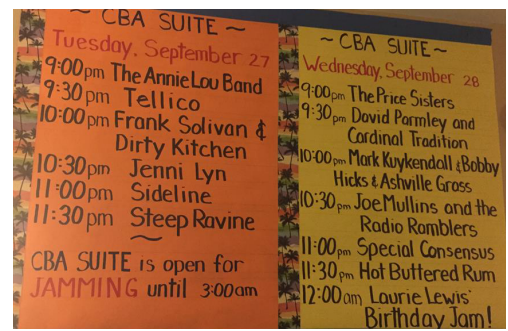
The suite also created practical bridges. "There were lots of people, but Larry Kuhn ran it for many years. And my uncle, Jack Highland, he was on the team for many years," Angelica said. Those volunteer roles helped offset travel costs for youth like her to attend IBMA at all. And the atmosphere was egalitarian: "Number one, because everybody was there. But number two, because it was a chance to get seen by people booking for our festival."

Not every memory was tidy. Angelica laughed about Corbin's "old-time room" down the hall: "That was the wild room ... somebody turned all the lights out, and the bass was like, in the bathtub... Somebody knocked the box of chocolates over, and like, stepped on it ... Corbin's like, 'I'm gonna have to tip my maid like a hundred dollars!'"

Eventually, though, the showcases faded out in Raleigh. Lucy, Dave, Angelica, and Corbin all pointed to a blend of factors: higher hotel costs, IBMA's preference to move official showcases out of suites and into designated performance rooms, and the sheer volunteer load. Corbin observed, "When it went to Raleigh, IBMA didn't want the performances to be going on in the suites as much." Lucy added that "there were some allegations that maybe I made it too big," and Dave remembered locals "that knew we were giving away free beer and wine" trying to push in on weekend nights.

Lani Way, CBA's current IBMA coordinator said the suite was indeed a victim of its own success. "I inherited the suite from Lucy. The first year we found that everyone said the suite was so crowded ... to the point it was probably dangerous. The limit was probably 30, and we had probably had 80 in the room. As we grew, we had more success, and moved it to a ballroom." She also acknowledged the rising costs: "The suite was free to us for the first few

cont'd on page 14 →



2016 Lineup in the CBA Suite. Photo by Steve Ladonga.



Jason Carter, Kimber Ludiker, and Jim Lauderdale in the suite.. Photo by Lucy Smith.



Late night jam in the suite in 2014. Photo by Rick Cornish.

# FRANKLY



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It's time for the

# Berkeley Old Time Music Convention!

by Suzy Thompson, BOTMC Director

Looking for plenty of jamming combined with inspiration, dancing, and instruction? **The 23rd year of the Berkeley Old Time Music Convention, Sept. 17-21**, brings five days of concerts, dances, workshops, and lots of jams (many hosted by performers)—and, of course the BOTMC String Band Contest, which is the centerpiece of the festival—past winners have included Crying Uncle, Birches Bend, and the Squirrelly Stringband.

Bruce Molsky brings his magic to the concert stage once again and will play the square dance. Black old-time music star and Steve Martin Banjo Prize winner Jake Blount will reunite with two of his early mentors, Ithaca's Judy Hyman and Jeff Claus of The Horse Flies. This one-time-only collaboration promises to be spectacular! Arkansas' Ozark Highballers make their Bay Area debut at the convention, with beautiful old-time singing, sizzling fiddling, virtuoso harmonica playing, and three-finger banjo picking. From

Kentucky, Sarah Kate Morgan is a charismatic singer who plays the dulcimer like you've never heard it. Join a dozen scheduled jams—more than ever before—many hosted by BOTMC performers and notable local musicians. New to the schedule: a panel discussion featuring Black old-time musicians Jake Blount as the moderator with Angela Wellman, Darcy Ford-James, and Patrice Strahan, focusing on their mastery of other musical genres and how that has informed their involvement with old-time music. The family dance features Manning Mud Stompers—spectacularly talented teens who learned their musical craft at Manning Music. Wednesday's Cajun dance brings the legendary Cajun musician Jesse Lege direct from Louisiana to team up with local musicians Suzy & Eric Thompson, Karen Celia Heil, Allegra Thompson and Agi Ban (the Aux Cajunals).

Start warming up for the festival Tuesday at the Berkeley Central Library with the open jam from

5:30 to 7:30. The BOTMC starts on Wednesday with a Cajun dance at Ashkenaz, and open jamming in the back room hosted by the Corn Lickers. Thursday there's an afternoon jam, workshops at the Freight & Salvage, and a concert with Bruce Molsky, the Ozark Highballers, and Black Banjo & Fiddle Fellows. Friday brings more jamming, workshops, and a concert with Jake Blount, Judy Hyman, and Jeff Claus, Sarah Kate Morgan, and Suzy Thompson.

Saturday, spend the whole day at the Berkeley Central Library for the string band contest, panel discussion, children's concert, and hosted jam, then move down Shattuck Avenue to The Starry Plough and La Peña, right next door, for the Shred Sesh and a jam hosted by Judy Hyman. The Saturday Night Square Dance Party at Ashkenaz features three bands and two callers, plus a hosted jamming and song session in the back studio.

Sunday, come back to Ashkenaz for the family dance and workshops, then meet up at Ohlone Park for a last chance to visit and jam some more!

Daytime events are FREE; there is a charge for the evening concerts and dances.

Many thanks to Ashkenaz—the convention's fiscal sponsor—and to the many volunteers who make the BOTMC such a great event!

Visit [www.berkeleyoldtimemusic.org](http://www.berkeleyoldtimemusic.org) to find out how YOU can become a BOTMC volunteer, and lots more info—and sign up for the BOTMC email list to get updates on last minute changes. 🐘



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**Mandolin:** Brian McCarty & Maddie Witler – **Ukulele:** Del Rey  
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### JAM CLASSES RETURN

Gail and Mike Thomas will be returning with their very popular Wernick "how to jam" classes. This is a three-hour class and will be offered at four separate times between Thursday and Saturday. Class size is restricted to a maximum of 12 participants per session. Tuition is \$60 for the class

### TAKE THE JAM TRAIN

Jam with your friends riding across the San Joaquin mountains from points North to Bakersfield. We'll post the specific Jam Train routes as soon as they are available. Stay tuned to the Great 48 event page on [CaliforniaBluegrass.org!](https://CaliforniaBluegrass.org)



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## CBA SUITES

cont'd from page 11

years in Raleigh. But by the time I came in, they were no longer free. We had two free days in the ballroom, and we still had to do sound. It was so easy. You could see, you didn't have to stand in line, and the promoters came back but it didn't feel like a suite, not a place that you come to hang out, night or day. So we just did that one year. Then covid hit."

Despite the end of the showcases, the suite's impact still echoes. "There are still people who come up and say, 'Is the CBA doing a suite this year?'" Angelica said. Jason Dilg—who today serves as the Breakdown's managing editor—first found CBA through that suite. "Because of those suites I know what the Bluegrass Breakdown is, I know what CBA is and what it's about; that there's a group in California that loves bluegrass from all over the place and loves putting people together around it," he said.

For decades, the CBA suite was the late-night epicenter of the bluegrass universe when IBMA came to town. California hospitality welcomed the world. It connected generations, launched careers, and reminded



John Reischman, Kathy Kallick and crew in 2004. Photo by George Martin.

everyone that the music matters most when it's shared face-to-face, knee-to-knee, in a room full of laughter, wine and cheese, and an inexhaustible fire for jamming.

As IBMA shifts to Chattanooga, the question naturally arises: could the CBA suite return in some form? Yes! CBA will be hosting a suite Wednesday of the annual conference in Plaza Room C in the Marriott Hotel! 🐻



Jamming in the park. Photo by David Cupp.



View from the band shell. Photo by David Cupp.



Banjo jam! Photo by David Cupp.



Our second annual Long Beach Bluegrass Festival was an incredible music-filled day at the park! Thanks to Live at the Shell for producing the event, which was full of amazing performances, workshops, jamming, food trucks, and an instrument petting zoo. Special thanks to all who came early to set up or stayed late to clean up!



Water Tower performs. Photo by Robin Frenette.



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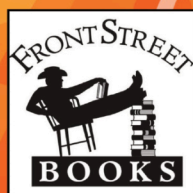
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# BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

Please share questions, suggestions, or story ideas at [breakdown@californiabluegrass.net](mailto:breakdown@californiabluegrass.net)



Sept.  
2025



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Backstage jam at La Roche. Photo by Charles Quale.

## BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

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## Monthly Trivia Quiz

By Bert Daniel, Breakdown Contributor

In July, we asked readers to name a **Winfield-winning national flatpick guitar champion whose catalog of instructional materials exceeds 100 titles**, with an instrumentally-appropriate prize up for grabs.

No less than 15 astute CBA members knew we were talking about the three-time winner of the National Flat-Picking Championship at the Walnut Valley Bluegrass Festival in Winfield, Kansas and legendary guitar instructor **Steve Kaufman**—including Kevin Veenstra, John Erwin, David Brown, John Drake, Carlo Calabi, Joel Sidney, Peter Thompson, Alice Wiseman, Lee Hayashida, Chris Doyle, Cathy Dolan, Jeremy Loeb, Steve Kling, Gary Mansperger, and John Gwinner.

Steve Kling said, "Kind of a layup this time with Steve Kaufman being the only guy with the amount of published output you mention on the planet!" However, the topic of prolific instructional material creators reminded us of the Bay Area's late mandolin and guitar picker Dix Bruce, who created around 60 titles for Mel Bay alone.

We consulted the Oracle of All Things Random, who declared **Carlo Calabi** the winner of a set of D'Addario phosphor-bronze guitar strings!

## SEPTEMBER TRIVIA

For this month, our trivia question comes to us from former CBA board member Larry Phegley, who asks: **"These brothers founded the first Japanese bluegrass band in 1957. Name the band."**

Send your answer to:  
[trivia@californiabluegrass.net](mailto:trivia@californiabluegrass.net)  
no later than September 30.

This month's prize is a rare CBA logo glass pint beer mug—perfect for Oktoberfest libations!

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 November 2025 issue of the *Bluegrass Breakdown*.



Part of the Bluegrass Guitar Solos series by Steve Kaufman.