



# BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

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



January 2026

# CALIFORNIA BLUEGRASS ASSOCIATION 2025 ANNUAL REPORT

## PRESIDENT'S WELCOME

by Theresa Gooding, CBA Board President

Greetings and welcome to the California Bluegrass Association's 2025 annual report.

This year, the CBA reached a remarkable milestone—50 years! Celebrating our golden anniversary invites us to reflect on what has made this organization so incredible: the people who built it, the people who nurture it, and the people who continue to show up with instruments, energy, and heart. We're fortunate to have founding and early members still actively shaping our events, programs, and sense of community alongside our cherished newcomers.

Our 50th Father's Day Festival embodied everything we treasure about this organization. Legacy performers from the earliest days of the CBA stood alongside headliners who began their musical journeys in our youth programs, reminding us that the music truly connects generations and

keeps the circle unbroken. From the Great 48 in January to the South State 48 in November, and all the concerts, campouts, and jams in between, I am grateful for our CBA family that continued to grow and thrive, preserving tradition while demonstrating remarkable creativity and innovation. As always, I encourage you to explore the photo gallery on our website—a visual celebration of the music, memories, and camaraderie that shaped this year.

Thank you to the musicians at the heart of this community, who bring our mission to life through their artistry, generosity, and willingness to share this music—on our stages, in our camps, and in local jams. Thank you to the volunteers who remain the heart and soul of the CBA, for the dedication and joy you bring to every event and program. And thank you to our donors and members: your attendance at events and support of fundraisers are essential for us to meet rising operational costs.

As we look ahead, our priorities remain centered on preserving the traditions that define us while growing and sharing the bluegrass and old-time music that binds us. Strengthening our financial foundation will be a key focus in the coming year.

Thank you for being part of this milestone year. Wishing you a joyful 2026! 🐐



Theresa and Dave Gooding. Photo by Robin Frenette.

## A GIFT THAT GROWS WITH GIVING

by Ted Kuster, CBA Board Chair

I never set out to be a great banjo player. I'll admit I got a little competitive in my earlier years: I was 45 when I picked up this joyful addiction, so I had some catching up to do. I had a mental map of all the banjo players I knew and the date by which I expected to surpass them.

So much for plans.

Eighteen years now into my bluegrass life, after who knows how many hundreds of hours of dedicated study and practice and sweaty performance, I've reached the exalted status of being an ok banjo player. I keep taking lessons and trying out new sounds, but if raw talent has anything to do with it, then I have to figure I've gotten about as good as I'm going to get.

Which is good enough to join just about any jam and know that I'm going to help the rest of the jammers have a good time. Whether it's rank beginners fresh from their first Billy Strings show, or sages who hung out with Vern, I know I can help people have fun with music.

You're that good too. Every time you join a jam, no matter how long you've been at this, you're offering a gift to your fellow pickers and listeners that they need and that they can't get anywhere else.



Ted Kuster. Photo by Alan M. Bond.

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## ANOTHER YEAR ILLED WITH MUSIC

by Pete Ludé, CBA Executive Director

Reflecting on this past year's celebration of CBA's 50th anniversary, it's clear that the bluegrass spirit in our community feels stronger than ever. As detailed in this annual report, our volunteers have had a busy 2025. The highlight was, of course, our Father's Day Bluegrass festival in Grass Valley: this year featured more bands, more attendees, more jams, and more fun! CBA also produced two adult music camps, three lively music campouts, two intensive hotel jams, three regional one-day festivals and several regular concert series, such as the Otter Opry in Monterey. CBA regional directors have organized hundreds of local jams and other local get-togethers throughout the state. We keep in touch through CBA's website, email blasts, expanded social media and, of course, this *Bluegrass Breakdown* newsletter.

New this year is the **Spectrum Bluegrass** project, which connects neurodivergent musicians and allies through jams and meetings at CBA events. This is a new initiative, and program directors John Frizzell and Mel Biesecker are collecting feedback and planning events for 2026. Our youth program blossomed in 2025 with CBA's new **After-school Bluegrass Club** program, led by Michaela Thomas. The ABC brings weekly music instruction to underserved communities. In partnership with non-profit Help's On The Way, ABC launched this spring with one site in Garberville, and is now hosting two weekly classes. This fall, we added a second location in Sebastopol in partnership with The Folk Farm Music School. We hope to raise funds for ABC to launch additional sites throughout the state in 2026.

None of this would be possible without support from nearly 3,000 CBA members, and over 500 volunteers to make it all this happen. Thanks to all of you for keeping California bluegrass and old-time spirit alive for the past 50 years.



## BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

January 2026 - Annual Report

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.

Pete Ludé, CBA Executive Director and Editor in Chief

Jason Dilg, Managing Editor

Gina Dilg, Layout and Art Editor

Susan Bartholomew, Copy Editor

### CBA BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND OFFICERS

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3739 Balboa St. #5090  
San Francisco, CA 94121-2605  
(844) BLU-GRASS (844-258-4727)

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## CHAIR'S WELCOME

cont'd from front page

The miracle of bluegrass music doesn't depend on perfection. It's about showing up for each other, week after week, bearing our little piece of that gift that keeps getting bigger the more of it we give away. It's not something any of us can really do on our own.

That's why, half a century ago, a few visionaries started up the California Bluegrass Association. Having fallen in love with bluegrass, they noticed that the need for it doesn't just stop when any one of us needs a rest. Once you've got the bug, you want to be a super-spreader.

Those founders saw that if we worked together, we could make it so that almost every day of the year,

somebody in California is getting a chance to play some music with friends, or watch some friends play music, or watch some music with friends.

And that's the way it is today. You're reading this because you're part of a community-based arts nonprofit that puts that "working together" idea into practice consistently, year round. This special issue is full of inspiring stories of people who showed up and pitched in, whatever their experience level. They've lent a hand and a voice, and enriched the lives of people around them.

We bluegrass and old-time practitioners don't need to create works of timeless genius—although we do that, sometimes. Our masterpiece is the community we're building together, piece by piece, song by song. Join us! 

## CBA'S ANNUAL MEETING

### NEW BOARD MEMBERS ANNOUNCED

by Pete Ludé, CBA Executive Director

As per a tradition spanning many decades—and frankly, mandated by the organization's bylaws—CBA convenes an "All Member Meeting" once a year, typically in October. For the last few years, this shindig has been held in conjunction with our Fall Campout. To boost attendance at the membership meeting, the organizers cleverly booked a concert immediately after, which is how we drew a large crowd to Jackson Hall at the Lodi Grape Festival Grounds for the meeting on October 18.

This year's gathering included a "State of the CBA" report from Chairman **Ted Kuster** and President **Theresa Gooding**. They covered accomplishments during the past year, finances, and plans for 2026. This was followed by an engaging Q&A session, where members in attendance asked thought-provoking questions about how CBA is doing.

The annual board elections closed earlier that day and so the results, as tabulated by ballot manager **Jim Duber**, were announced. Two of our nine board members—**Ashley Readel** and **Bert Daniel**—retired this year. Per the election results, their replacements were **Joel Keebler**, a returning board member, and **Helen Foley**, who is new to the

board, but a veteran of CBA, having grown up in the Kid's on Bluegrass program. Given that there were nine candidates for the nine board slots, there was little dispute or conflict—everyone was happy and appreciative of the mix of fresh blood and experienced board veterans, representing a wide range of California geography and musical interests.

Another highlight of the annual meeting was revealing the winners of our 2025 fundraising sweepstakes with instrument prizes from the Santa Cruz Guitar Company, Deering Banjos, and The Fiddle Mercantile. The winners are announced by our sweepstakes coordinator, **Andrea Zelones**. It turned out that all winners were California residents, but none were present in Lodi that evening. You can learn about the winners and prizes below—in case you're wondering.

If you were not able to attend October's annual membership meeting, but have questions or suggestions about CBA, please don't be shy! Contact us anytime at [Board@CaliforniaBluegrass.net](mailto:Board@CaliforniaBluegrass.net) or by calling 844-BLU-GRASS (844-258-4727). 

## SWEEPSTAKES WINNERS



This year's guitar prize was a beautiful Santa Cruz Guitar Company D Pre-War Model. The winner was William Tolbert, a Bay-Area resident who has been taking guitar lessons at Gryphon String instruments. He attended the Father's Day Bluegrass Festival for the first time in 2025, where he purchased his sweepstakes ticket. Clearly, this dreadnought has found a fine new home!



The 2025 sweepstakes banjo was a lovely Deering resonator model with custom "CBA 50th Anniversary" engraving. The lucky winner was Kenny Rogers, who lives in Southern California. Kenny tells us he's not related to some other person with that name, but he recently has become a bluegrass fan, after seeing Alison Krauss perform at McCabe's Guitar Shop in Santa Monica.



This year, the Fiddle Mercantile donated a Music City Fiddle "Artist Model" for the sweepstakes. The winner was Lucinda Gutierrez from California's Central Valley. Lucinda entered the sweepstakes on a whim, and was delighted to be the lucky winner. She doesn't yet play fiddle, but is considering this for her 2026 plans.

A big thank you to our sponsors who made this possible: Santa Cruz Guitar Company, Deering Banjo, and the Fiddle Mercantile. Please support these fine folks, who help keep our music alive.

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# THROUGH THE LENS OF CBA'S PHOTOGRAPHERS

by Robin Frenette, CBA Photography Team Lead

Did you know that the CBA has a 50-year living community archive of over 35,000 images to date? This is thanks to the work of our dedicated CBA volunteer photographers, past and present. Here's our crew, and a favorite photo from 2025 from each member of the current team.



*"I love to capture images of bluegrass musicians doing what they love doing, playing music." - David K. Cupp*

Audience shot from the stage at CBA Father's Day Festival.



*"I see my photography as a custodian of collective memory capturing moments that otherwise might be lost." - Bob Free*

Face painting at KidFest.



*Tim Konrad is a veteran concert photographer who's been documenting music festivals for over 40 years in search of capturing the "decisive moment."*

*See the full 2025 CBA gallery, scan below!*



*Kids on Bluegrass on the Main Stage at the CBA Father's Day Festival.*



*Most of the team, and friends, captured backstage at 2025 Father's Day Festival: (seated, L-R) Bob Free, Robin Frenette, David Cupp, Trinity Rose (photographer for AJ Lee & Blue Summit), John Woodworth, John Klein (Casper's Dad), Tim Konrad. Photography team members not shown: Alan Bond and Casper Klein. Photo by Casper Klein, CBA photographer trainee.*



*"I tend towards Environmental Portraits—Taking photos of people doing what they love." - John G. Woodworth*

*Pre-show jam with Della Mae at Sweetwater Music Hall, Mill Valley.*



*"I strive to capture images that reflect the spirit of our music community and preserve its rich history long after I'm gone." - Robin Frenette*

*Broken Compass on stage at Sonoma County Bluegrass Festival.*



*"I look for the moments that tell the story—what I understand and feel as a musician." - Alan M. Bond*

*Instructor Brandon Godman working the mic at CBA Summer Music Camp.*

# CBA MEMBERSHIP

by Debbie Wendt, Vice President, Membership

This was a busy year! Our usual activities include processing mail-in membership payments, sending out member kits to new members, and answering member email inquiries. This involves managing our membership database, including updating member data and removing duplicates. Our other duties include vetting board candidate nominations, putting together the list of eligible CBA member voters, and providing the newsletter team with the monthly snail-mail lists for the *Bluegrass Breakdown*. Around July of this year, we took over delivery of CBA's bi-weekly email blasts that go out on Constant Contact. If you need any information or assistance with your membership or any of the activities mentioned above, just email [membership@californiabluegrass.org](mailto:membership@californiabluegrass.org) and we'll respond to your questions promptly.

## MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS

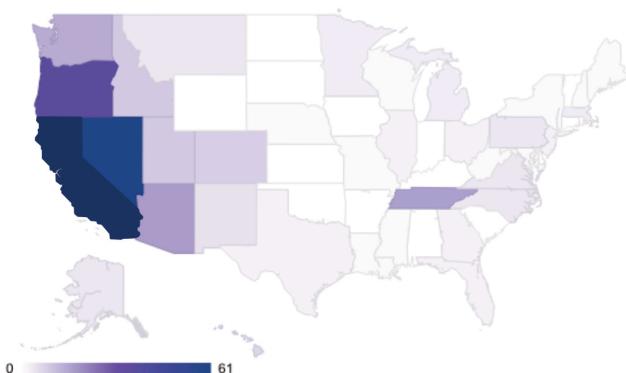
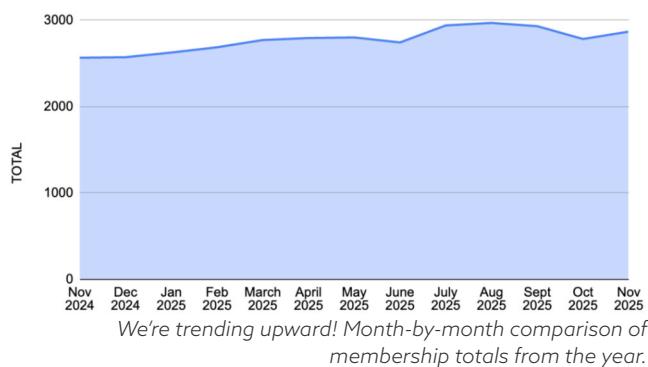
Your CBA membership still includes this award-winning newsletter, the *Bluegrass Breakdown*, and discounts to CBA events, subscription discounts, access to the Kids Instrument Lending Library, eligibility to run for our board of directors, and the most important benefit of all: joining the CBA community and doing your part to preserve and promote bluegrass in California and beyond.

## GOALS

Our main goal, of course, is always to increase our membership. We count on our members to share their positive experiences and help us reach potential new members, recruit our stellar volunteers, and keep the music flowing at hundreds of local jamming events.

In the future, we hope to issue digital membership cards that can be loaded to an Apple or Google wallet. Besides added convenience and reduced paper and postage costs, digital cards will connect to our membership database and update automatically. When you renew your membership, your digital card will renew, too.

## THE BIG PICTURE



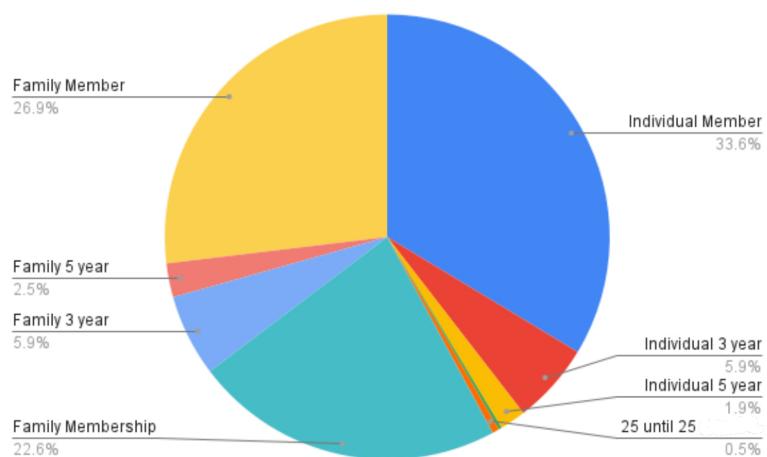
CBA membership heat map. While just over 90 percent of our members live in California, covering nearly 840 unique zip codes, the CBA has a presence across the U.S., with Nevada residents making up the second largest group with 3 percent of our total membership.

## MEMBERSHIP RATE STRUCTURE

Our membership rate structure rolled out in early 2024 remains unchanged. The charts below show the makeup of the memberships based on end of month totals through October 2025. Multi-year individual and family memberships continue to be popular.

RATE DESCRIPTION	COST	\$ DISCOUNT
Individual - 1 year	\$30	
Individual - 3 year	\$80	Save \$10
Individual - 5 years	\$130	Save \$20
25 until 25, flat fee	\$25	Depends on age
Family - 1 year	\$40	
Family - 3 years	\$105	Save \$15
Family - 5 years	\$175	Save \$25

CBA member rate structure since early 2024.



Distribution of CBA membership types, Jan. 2025-Oct. 2025.

## WE'RE HERE FOR YOU!

We personally answer your questions and are happy to take suggestions. The best way to reach us is by email at [membership@californiabluegrass.net](mailto:membership@californiabluegrass.net).

Need to update  
your membership?  
Scan below!



# IBMA REPORT

by Lani Way, CBA IBMA Coordinator

CBA had a strong presence at the first IBMA World of Bluegrass in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Sept. 16–20, 2025, with more than 20 members proudly representing us.

We sponsored the industry awards luncheon, helped produce the IBMA industry and Momentum award luncheons, and sponsored the industry award luncheon. I was a member of the core production team for these sessions. Rebecca Sparks wrangled the distinguished achievement awardees during the industry awards show, where Pete Ludé took to the stage to celebrate CBA's 50th anniversary.

As panelists for sessions at the business conference, Pete Ludé and Theresa Gooding talked about growing organizations, and Helen Ludé discussed cultivating online presence and navigating the music business.

We were also award presenters: Theresa Gooding at the music awards show, and Joselyn Sky at the IBMA Momentum and industry awards luncheons.

IBMA celebrated the achievements of our CBA community. The Bluegrass Cardinals were inducted into the Bluegrass Hall of Fame. Cuzin' Al Knoth received a lifetime Achievement award. Gina Dilg won graphic designer of the year honors. Our 50th anniversary was also celebrated at the gala music awards show.

Our new talent acquisition group members, Mary Kussmaul and Helen Ludé, scouted bands to bring to the FDF, and Otter Opry's Larry Phegley and Jeff O'Neal were on the lookout for national acts for the concert series.

## BLUEGRASS IS FOR EVERYONE

### CBA WELCOME COMMITTEE

by Ted Kuster, CBA Welcome Committee Chair

The California Bluegrass Association celebrates the many-faceted cultural roots of bluegrass and old-time music. We believe everyone benefits from the well-being and continued growth of bluegrass and old-time music in California and beyond.

Our community welcomes and encourages participation and involvement by people of all backgrounds. We strive to open our doors to members, fans, and performers who reflect California itself. We work to create a culture that invites all to participate in our events and in the music we play and perform.

**The Black Banjo Reclamation Project** made its first Father's Day Bluegrass Festival appearance at the 50th anniversary festival in 2025. BBRP an institution based in the Bay Area that is reclaiming the banjo as an important Black cultural artifact. BBRP members gave an unforgettable concert on the Pioneer Stage, and shared their knowledge about the traditional gourd banjos that reflect the heritage of the original stewards and creators of the instrument, which dates back thousands of years.

In 2026, in addition to deepening our relationship with BBRP, the CBA aims to foster frank, open conversations through our welcome committee about the complicated origins and history of the music we love. We'll provide forums to look closely at the role of violence and misogyny in song lyrics, and seek ways to help traumatized people feel secure in our community.



Darcy Ford-James performs with the Black Banjo Reclamation Project. Photo by John G. Woodworth.

Kimber Ludiker, the IBMA Kids on Bluegrass director, expanded the program with CBA KOB alum Izzy Katz's assistance. And more of CBA's upcoming talent joined us, supported by CBA travel grants funded by our Youth Program. Emil Sabel, Joselyn Sky, Niko Quale, and Sophia Sparks participated in the IBMA KOB, and Sophia was selected to be part of the Hazel Dickens tribute with Alice Gerrard and an all-star cast at the music awards show. These youth performances made it clear that bluegrass is in good hands!

KOB alums showcased our Youth Program success. John Gooding performed with The Po' Ramblin' Boys all week, starting at the conference kick-off party. Josh Gooding wrangled CBA kids stars, past and present, for a great one-hour "KOB Grads" show, and AJ Lee & Blue Summit performed on the main stage of the IBMA Bluegrass Live festival.

What a wonderful week to renew friendships, make connections in the greater bluegrass world, hear a broad expanse of music, and enjoy Southern hospitality. We are already making plans for 2026 and are looking for sponsors and volunteers for an even greater CBA presence! 🐾



Kids on Bluegrass pose with Sierra Hull and Justin Moses. Photo by Robin Frenette.

## CALIFORNIA BLUEGRASS ASSOCIATION

### JULIAN FAMILY FIDDLE CAMP



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# YOUTH PROGRAM

Intro by Helen Foley, Vice President, Youth Program



The CBA Youth Program nurtures the next generation of pickers, singers, leaders, and lifelong friends of bluegrass music. As she steps down as VP of Youth, we are grateful to Darby Brandli for her many years of service, and are working to carry her legacy forward.

More kids found their way into the bluegrass world through programs designed to meet them right where they are. KidFest continues to be the perfect starting point for new and curious musicians—full of joy, silliness, and first musical sparks. Our Youth Academy had one of its biggest groups yet. Kids on Bluegrass more than doubled in size at the Father's Day Festival from last year. The dedication and enthusiasm of our newest Youth Ambassador strengthened ties between our programs, festivals, and families. Our new After-school Bluegrass Club is growing, now hosting three groups in Northern California, and the Kids Instrument Lending Library remains one of the most impactful services the CBA offers.

Celebrating our alumni was another highlight of the year, as former CBA kids are touring, recording, teaching, working festivals, and stepping into leadership roles. This year, we gifted CBA jackets to several touring alumni representing CBA around the world. We even had a CBA youth alumni set on the Youth Stage at IBMA in Chattanooga—which reminded all of us what long-term investment in young musicians can do.

Donations to Frank's Fund allowed us to provide scholarships, waive fees, and ensure that no child misses out due to financial barriers—thank you to everyone who contributed—whether an instrument, a dollar, or a word of encouragement.

Together, we're building something lasting, joyful, and truly transformational.

## KIDS INSTRUMENT LENDING LIBRARY

by Sharon Khadder, CBA Kids Instrument Lending Librarian

The CBA Kids Instrument Lending Library has been growing in wonderful ways! We're now supporting both our new After-school Bluegrass Club programs and other youth musicians across the state. This past summer, we loaned 14 banjos to the Oakland Public Conservatory of Music for their youth programs, and we're excited to continue building that partnership.

Thanks to generous donations and community support, we've added many new youth-size guitars, four new quarter and half size basses, and six beautiful Eastman mandolins to our collection. Our volunteers have been busy on the road, picking up and delivering instruments to young players. One grateful parent recently picked up a mandolin for their 11-year-old, who had been wishing for one for four years!

The library now offers student instruments for absolute beginners as well as high-quality options for advanced teens. The CBA Kids Instrument Lending Library is a great way for new families to get connected and feel at home in the CBA community.

If you'd like to donate an instrument, or if you know a young musician who needs one, please reach out to us at [instruments@californiabluegrass.net](mailto:instruments@californiabluegrass.net). We are currently most in need of playable, fractional-sized fiddles.

## YOUTH AMBASSADOR UPDATE

by Joselyn Sky, CBA Youth Ambassador



What a year! My first year as the CBA's youth ambassador has been a dream. Ever since I first attended the Father's Day Festival, I've been a walking advertisement for the CBA, simply because I love this organization and community so much. Now, emboldened by my official title, sometimes I think I might sound like I'm a high-pressure saleswoman, because the moment I meet someone, anyone, I start preaching about the CBA and our events.

A highlight this year was hosting the first-ever Youth Open Mic at the Father's Day Festival, and it was a huge success! I was amazed by the number of talented kids who came to be a part of it. I needed more hands on deck than I anticipated, so thank you to my fabulous friends Lena, Katherine, and Jaydee for jumping in and helping it all run smoothly.

Another project I've been working on is "Bluegrass and Big Dreams." It started as one *Bluegrass Breakdown* article featuring advice from nine professional musicians about building a career in bluegrass. But since there were so many incredible words of wisdom from those interviews that couldn't fit into one article, we've been releasing each full interview once a month on the CBA's website. It's so incredible how much the CBA supports youths in bluegrass, and I'm so glad to be part of it.

## KIDFEST & FUNGRASS

by Kathleen Rushing, CBA KidFest and FunGrass Director

Attendees young and old enjoyed Kidfest during our 50th anniversary CBA Father's Day Festival! Families delighted in making sun-dye T-shirts, key chains, bracelets, fairy bands, face painting, taking a plunge in our wading pool ... and on and on. We had a great turnout of over 22 volunteers who knew how to have fun—we especially enjoyed the teen volunteers, and we certainly appreciated PG&E organizing their wonderful crew to join us for the third year in a row! Each volunteer brings their own wonderful talents to create a joyful atmosphere of fun for the entire family, and we all take home many memories, souvenirs, and new friends!

FunGrass, held during CBA Music Camp leading up to the Father's Day Festival, was great fun too. FunGrass serves the talented and amazing kids who are not yet ready to jump into the camp classes, and so get to hang out with Ruth Duterte and myself, learning songs, making t-shirts, and also share their talents at the camp's final student performance. A big thank you to all who enjoyed being with the kids and we hope to see you again in June 2026!



Crafts galore at KidFest. Photo by David K. Cupp.

# YOUTH PROGRAM

## YOUTH ACADEMY

by Kimber Ludiker, CBA Youth Academy Director

The 2025 Youth Academy was a huge success! We saw the largest turnover of kids since I began directing the program in 2019. We expected to have a very large "graduation" to Kids on Bluegrass in 2025, and I was really worried about selling out the camp, as we have every year since the pandemic. We had received letters of regret and cancellations due to school conflicts, as many schools didn't release for the summer in time for Youth Academy. However, regardless of graduates and school schedules, we did it! We sold out in advance and had a waiting list of eight kids going into the week.

We also had a few other graduations, of sorts, with Izzy Katz becoming a full-fledged instructor this year after being one of our very favorite teaching assistants over the last few years. It's been so much fun watching her progress through the program. Now a student in the bluegrass program at ETSU, she represented the CBA at the International Bluegrass Music Association's Kids on Bluegrass program as a first-year faculty member. She made California proud!

Other California Youth Program graduates excelled at IBMA in Chattanooga this fall. Niko Quale was selected to play on a ticketed festival stage—not many got that opportunity—and was one of the only students in the program who brought an original composition to his band to play. Sophia Sparks, a previous Youth Academy teaching assistant, also represented the CBA in her final year of eligibility in Kids on Bluegrass. She was in the all-star band that performed during the red-carpet award show and a big finale Kids on Bluegrass show on the Youth Stage. She also played with my band Della Mae, Laurie Lewis, and Alice Gerrard on the IBMA award show celebrating the life and legacy of Hazel Dickens.

I've been the Director of the Youth Program for eight years, and during that time I've been so incredibly impressed by the talent that comes out of California. In this year's report I've focused a bit more on how previous Youth Program graduates are excelling now, so you can all see how our goals are being achieved. Darby Brandli and I have focused on mentorship in our time together at Youth Academy, and the kids going through CBA programs are catching national attention. There are more and more kids coming through the program, and we can't wait to watch where they go! They'll graduate and go to Kids on Bluegrass. They'll go on to impress at IBMA. They'll come back to Youth Academy as teaching assistants, then full-fledged teachers. They'll end up on stages wowing audiences like Molly Tuttle and AJ Lee! We have so much to look forward to, and I hope you all continue supporting the program.



Izzy Katz and her group after the Youth Academy performance. Photo by Gina Dilg.

NEW!

## AFTER-SCHOOL BLUEGRASS CLUB

by Michaela Thomas, CBA ABC Program Director

Photos courtesy of Michaela Thomas

CBA's After-school Bluegrass Club launched this spring and was in full swing this fall with three vibrant classes nurturing the next generation of pickers and singers. Two groups in southern Humboldt County in partnership with local nonprofit Help's On The Way and one in western Sonoma County in partnership with The Folk Farm, have been meeting weekly since October. The joy of music is ringing out across Northern California!

In southern Humboldt, guitar teacher Bob Daley and fiddle teacher Kayla Nikles are leading an enthusiastic group of new and returning students learning their bluegrass chords, bowing their first tunes, and discovering the magic of playing together. Their Halloween concert for students and families was a hit—complete with costumes, community, and a joyful jam that brought everyone together. The group closes class each week with a Friday community picking session at the Octagon in Briceland, where kids and adults alike gather to play, sing, and celebrate.

Meanwhile, in western Sonoma County, Michaela Thomas and David Thiessen of The Folk Farm Music School are guiding children from fourth-through-eighth grade through the fundamentals of bluegrass jamming. Students are learning both mandolin and guitar while exploring the art of singing and ensemble playing and are looking forward to having their first concert in December!

The ABC program helps children gain confidence, build friendships, and connect with the rich roots of American music. With every tune, they're not only learning notes and chords, they're learning to listen, collaborate, and carry forward a living musical tradition.



Michaela Thomas and David Thiessen with ABC group in western Sonoma County.



Bob Daley and kids in Humboldt County's ABC program at their Halloween concert.

# YOUTH PROGRAM

## KIDS ON BLUEGRASS

by Helen Foley, Vice President, Youth Program

Kids on Bluegrass had a truly memorable year; after several post-pandemic seasons with smaller groups, this year finally felt like the turning point we've been waiting for. Over the course of two days, 34 young musicians participated—more than double the number from last year—and they brought a buzz to the Father's Day Festival.

Both Friday and Saturday featured strong, confident performances, and the kids handled a mix of nerves, excitement, and genuine pride. Seeing a young musician walk onto the main stage for the first time—figuring out where to stand, remembering what they practiced, and realizing they can actually do it—is something that never gets old.



Kids on Bluegrass at Father's Day Festival 2025. Photo by Robin Frenette.

This year, we continued to focus on connection and confidence-building in addition to performance growth. We shortened practice blocks to ensure kids had the space to explore the festival, jam informally, and simply spend time together. In the space, older kids helped younger ones, little clusters of new bands formed, and friendships formed that will continue long after the festival.

There were plenty of magical moments, too—like when AJ Lee, a former "Kid on Bluegrass" herself, jumped in on a song with one of our performers, giving him a memory, and bragging rights, he'll carry for life.

Our Saturday-night pizza party brought everything full circle—literally. Without any prompting, the kids moved all the chairs into one big circle so they could sit together. They wanted to share jokes, reflect, and celebrate the moment as a group. Hearing them talk about their favorite parts of the weekend—stepping on stage for the first time, meeting new friends, or feeling supported by older players—was a true delight.

Kids on Bluegrass works because of the community the kids build with each other. The music is important, but seeing them support one another, learn to lead, solve problems together, and genuinely enjoy being part of something bigger is a reminder of why this program has endured for decades.

With our biggest group in years and momentum that carried long past the festival, 2025 was a standout season. Special thanks to Jesse Fichman and Gracie Benham for being the most incredible volunteers! Their efforts made the program possible. 



## Get on Board

### NEW THIS YEAR

#### All-Access Wristband

Full event pass is \$20 for members and \$25 for non-members. Pass includes hosted jams, open mic, the Friday night showcase performance, workshops and other activities.

#### Band Scramble

Our humorous take on the "battle of the bands" tradition. Bands are assembled randomly, get a little time to practice, then play two or three songs for an audience. A judging panel awards points for various serious and not-so-serious categories. Special awards may be given if they make things funnier.



#### Raffle for Doc Watson's Lap Steel Guitar

The Kiesel lap steel guitar that belonged to Doc Watson (certified). All-Access wristbands include 1 raffle ticket. Additional tickets are \$5 and are available at the merch table. The drawing will be held at the 7:30 p.m. Saturday night concert.

#### John Jorgenson BG Band

Announcing TWO Saturday concerts (4:30 and 7:30 p.m.) at the Stars Theatre Restaurant. Featuring John Jorgenson, Herb Pedersen, Patrick Sauber, and Mark Fain. Tickets purchased separately.

## January 15-18

### JOHN JORGENSEN BLUEGRASS BAND

GREAT 48 SATURDAY CONCERT



JANUARY 17, 2026 / 4:30 & 7:30PM  
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# BEAR FUND

by Pete Ludé, CBA Executive Director

The CBA's Bluegrass Entertainer Artist Relief Fund is one of the many ways that we give back to the community. Thanks to seed funding from a generous donor, this fund was established to provide interim emergency financial help to music professionals whose needs are the result of



Gary Vessel. Photo by Patrick Campbell.



Help us support musicians through injury or illness

Give to the BEAR Fund

Learn more about the BEAR Fund and donate here



Scan to contribute to the GoFundMe campaign for Gary Vessel →



## BLUEGRASS BRIDGE

by Nate Schwartz, Program Director

Bluegrass Bridge has leftover funding after a slow year—plans for 2026 include at least two visits to Avenal State Prison for bluegrass workshops and instrument donations, and a visit to Mule Creek State Prison to work with aspiring guitarists and find out whether any other inmates there are interested in bluegrass. If so, bluegrass workshops will begin there in 2026.



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

## SPECTRUM BLUEGRASS

by Melanie Biesecker, Spectrum Bluegrass Co-Leader

Founded in 2024, Spectrum Bluegrass has a mission to connect neurodiverse people through bluegrass music. While the group's initial focus has been on those with autism spectrum disorder, the program has a vision to expand and embrace all aspects of neurodiversity. The goal is to ease the challenges and amplify the enjoyment of bluegrass for neurodiverse people by creating an active community where we explore new pathways to express ourselves and connect.

The program hosted a series of inclusive meetings and jams at the Father's Day Bluegrass Festival and South State 48. We compiled feedback from our FDF meeting to create a one-page handout, "Tips for Inclusive Jams," which was first distributed at South State 48. The hope is that anyone can take these tips and incorporate them when hosting, leading, or joining a bluegrass jam.

The South State 48 meeting and jam saw an increase in attendance (adults and children). There were great connections made at this meet-up, attendees were engaged and had good questions, and everyone got a chance to lead a song in the jam. Many of the participants stayed and enjoyed the full day or weekend of South State 48 jamming.

The program received some great PR in 2025, including the star-studded Light Up The Blues event,

an NPR interview on *All Things Considered*, and some fun promotional videos created and shared on social media by Scott Gates of AJ Lee & Blue Summit, as well as Kenny Feinstein of Water Tower.

More good things to come in 2026!



Bluegrass Spectrum's inclusive jam at South State 48. Photo by David K. Cupp.



Spectrum Bluegrass Band at the 2025 Light Up The Blues at L.A.'s Greek Theater. Photo by Robin Frenette.

# CBA EVENTS IN 2025

## GREAT 48 JAM

by Debbie Wendt, Jeff Russinsky, and Sandy DeVera, Great 48 Organizers

As the first CBA event of the year, the Great 48 is a member favorite. First off, if you like to pick or grin but don't care much for camping, this is the event for you. Bakersfield is central enough to attract folks from around the state, and the event even draws pickers from around the country! Easy access from the Amtrak station to the Marriott Hotel gives travelers from the north a head start on the fun, riding in on the "jam train."



Organized jam with Chad Manning. Photo by David K. Cupp

The 2025 Great 48 was well attended and included special offerings such as master classes—fee-based workshops—taught by fan-favorites Scott Gates and Sully Tuttle, as well as free workshops, hosted jams, and the usual Friday program of an open mic, the workshop presenters concert, and Water Tower as the showcase band. There was also a sold-out concert at the legendary Buck Owens' Crystal Palace for the third year in a row, with this year's featured act, AJ Lee & Blue Summit. Several regional bluegrass associations were also in attendance and offered jams and showcase concerts in their suites.

An estimated 600 bluegrass and old-time fans attended, and based on the feedback, most will be back for 2026. As the team began planning for 2026, we realized that it is becoming more and more of a challenge to break even financially for this event, while maintaining our quality workshops and other offerings. With significant

increases in the costs for facilities and insurance, and also considering our mission to support performers and instructors fairly, beginning in 2026 we are asking attendees to purchase an all-access pass wristband. The small fee of \$20 for members and \$25 for non-members covering access to all on-site activities for the duration of the four-day event will help ensure we can continue to offer an exciting, fun-filled, and enriching experience at the Great 48.



Cozy jam at Great 48. Photo by Robin Frenette.

## SOUTH STATE 48, VOL IV

by Donna Hargis, South State 48 Director

South State 48 vol. V took place November 6–9 at the Carlsbad by the Sea Hotel in Carlsbad, and hundreds of pickers and grinners from all over the state had a fantastic time. Although many of the features of this event were already in place from previous years, this year felt extraordinary in many ways.

There were two full days of very well-received workshops, as well as two full days of curated jams at the open jam tent. Project Barley was on hand to pour beer and did better with donations than in previous years. Merch sold well too! The band contest was a hit; although there were fewer contestants than last year, four bands did not feel like too few.



Courtyard jam. Photo by David K. Cupp.

The concert in the food hall was fantastic, with Bay Area Special as the top-notch headliner, Joy Louise and Tyler Grant as a special showcase, and Muddy Mountain West, the band contest winners, as the opener. Getting good sound is always challenging in that room, but we did the best we could. It was crowded! Success!

Some things that were different this year included strategies to address the challenge of getting sponsors. Instead, we called upon our community to donate, and they did not disappoint—the generosity of our bluegrass community is truly amazing! We had two adorable volunteers going around with buckets, and attendees were giving. We also had two instruments to raffle off, and all of this helped to keep SS48 in the black. Next year we will tweak some of our methods, but overall, asking for donations seemed to work very well.

But as usual, it was the jamming that people loved most. The courtyard has never been so crowded with jams, and everyone seemed to have a great time. It has been wonderful to see the return of so many regulars, many of whom have created their own traditions to add to this wonderful party.

If success were to be measured in relationship building, South State 48 is definitely a winner. Participants made new friends, and we fostered continuing relationships. We had a "Grow the Grass" meeting aimed at expanding our

bluegrass community, and this was just the first of what we hope will be a growing group of ambitious volunteers. We also had a Spectrum Bluegrass meeting, and hope to see this new group continue on at this event and others.

It has been a goal of the team to aim for "Better, not Bigger," due to the size constraints of the hotel. Next year, we have the possibility of hosting a concert at the nearby Museum of Making Music.

Although the final numbers are not all in, I believe it is reasonable to accept the hotel's offer of the same number of rooms for next year. We didn't sell out this event instantly, and there were some cancellations, mostly due to illness. We can time the sale of rooms better and, overall, do a much better job promoting SS48 next year.



Muddy Mountain West perform at Windmill Food Hall. Photo by Robin Frenette.

# SPRING & FALL CAMPOUTS

by Ted Kuster, CBA Board Chair and VP Regional Activities

Between 150 and 200 CBA members and friends meet up at the Lodi Grape Festival Grounds for our campouts twice a year. A campout is like a small festival, but with no stage to distract you from round-the-clock picking. CBA has two of them a year, one in the spring and one in the fall.

There's no ticket to buy, just modest camping and RV hookup fees. Honestly, compared with the prices for festival tickets these days, this is a deal that's hard to pass up. And if you help out as a volunteer, you can get a night of camping! Send us a line at [volunteers@californiabluegrass.net](mailto:volunteers@californiabluegrass.net) to sign up.

There's usually a taco truck parked just outside Jackson Hall during dinner hours, and sometimes a coffee truck in the mornings. And there are many decent restaurants a short drive away, not to mention motels and short-term rentals for those who'd rather not rough it.

Turnout is usually highest at the Spring Campout, which coincides with the California State Old Time Fiddle Association's Open Fiddle and Picking Championship. More than one CBA

member over the years has wandered into Jackson Hall, entered the contest on a dare, and had a great time!

The Fall Campout is where the CBA holds its annual membership meeting, announces our annual sweepstakes winners, and puts on a concert Saturday night. But all that aside, the real aim of the campout is to encourage unrestrained picking and singing in the best bluegrass and old-time tradition.

Both the 2025 campouts were produced by Jimmy Jeffries, who introduced a new tradition—a giant cauldron filled with culinary magic; in the spring, a delicious gumbo, and in the fall, a fine rice and beans, with hot dogs on the side. The fare was ladled out to those attendees who could tear themselves away from the picking at dinnertime, in exchange for a small donation. Jimmy kept a tank of hot coffee going during the day, too.

With Jimmy and his young family moving to Nevada in 2026, the Spring and Fall Campouts will be looking for new leadership once again. We

thank Jimmy for his exemplary service, and Deb Livermore for her years of running them before that. We look forward to many more gatherings of old picking friends and new at the Lodi Grape Festival Grounds!



Jam at Spring Campout. Photo by Alan M. Bond.

## SONOMA COUNTY BLUEGRASS & FOLK FEST

by Matt Lauer, SCBFF Artist Coordinator

The 2025 Sonoma County Bluegrass & Folk Festival on Saturday, March 8, 2025 was another amazing display of fine bluegrass and folk music and a smashing success for all involved. The festival took place at the Sonoma Community Cultural Center in Sebastopol and sold out with over 400 members of the CBA community coming together to celebrate bluegrass and folk music.

This year's festival coincided with International Women's Day, and was anchored by Laurie Lewis and Kathy Kallick's "Celebration of 50 years of California Bluegrass." These two legendary artists and the band they pulled together for the festival was one of the best shows of the season. In addition to Laurie and Kathy, Toronto's Lonesome Ace Stringband brought their grit, skill,

and abandon to Americana music, bridging old-time, bluegrass, and folk traditions into a seamless hybrid of original material that pleased the adoring crowd. The return of Broken Compass Bluegrass to the 2025 festival was another highlight, and they blew the doors off with their set. The festival also showcased some of the North Bay's best local acoustic talent, including Late for the Train and Mission Blue, who burned down the stage this year with their sets. Both crews are long time favorites of the California Bluegrass Association and the music community in Northern California.

The 2025 edition also included the Manning Music youth bands and Manning Music Spotlight which was a great display of some of the Bay Area's young musical talent. Then there was Salty Sally, who has risen in the last few years as one of the best young bands of artists in the Bay Area—their set was especially salty.

It was not all about the top-tier, world-class live entertainment on stage. The festival provided huge amounts of jamming, first-rate musical workshops with well-known instructors, and great food and drinks. The event was brought to you by the CBA and was so successful that we are doing it again in 2026! See you on Saturday, March 14, 2026, back in Sebastopol!



Lonesome Ace Stringband. Photo by Alan M. Bond.

## OTTER OPRY

by Larry Phegley, Otter Opry Director

The Otter Opry is a lively bluegrass concert series in Northern California held at the Monterey United Methodist Church, celebrating both tradition and community spirit. The series included 11 shows averaging about 60 attendees at each show, and featured an outstanding lineup of performers, including Grammy Award-winning artists Laurie Lewis and Kathy Kallick, the dynamic Lonesome Ace Stringband, and the acclaimed California Bluegrass Reunion. Each concert offers audiences an intimate, high-quality musical experience, fostering appreciation for bluegrass and acoustic roots music. With its warm atmosphere and exceptional talent, the Otter Opry continues to be a treasured local tradition.



California Bluegrass Reunion at Otter Opry. Photo by Seth Goldsmith.

# 2025 FATHER'S DAY FESTIVAL

by Pete Ludé, CBA Executive Director

Renewing traditions dating back to 1976, thousands of dedicated bluegrass and old-time fans congregated in the scenic Sierra foothills this past June for their favorite event of the year—CBA's Father's Day Bluegrass Festival. 2025 was a particularly special milestone, as it was the 50th anniversary of our first festival at the same location. The setting was lovely as always,

camping amongst the majestic ponderosa pines and verdant meadows of Grass Valley. The weather was perfect, and folks were even more friendly and engaged than usual. Ticket sales were up 16 percent over last year, with new friends and families joining our more seasoned fans. So popular was the festival, in fact, that we regrettably ran out of souvenir T-shirts by midday Saturday. We'll be sure to order more next year!

Over 30 bands provided entertainment on our three stages over the four-day event. Headliners included the Travelin' McCourys, AJ Lee & Blue Summit, and The Gibson Brothers. Other crowd favorites were The Canote Brothers, Junior Sisk Band, Crying Uncle, the Alum Ridge Boys & Ashlee, and—in a nod to our 50th anniversary—a reunion of the Good Ol' Persons. Fun was had beyond the stage at dozens of free workshops, square-dances, curated jams—including an all train song jam at the model railroad museum—in the Luthiers Pavilion, and all-night picking in the campgrounds, of course. The Father's Day celebration for all dads returned on Sunday morning, including face-painting, jugglers, crafts, a photo booth, and our new mascot, "G-Run" the bear.

To celebrate our 50th anniversary, we assembled a unique museum of CBA history featuring hundreds of photos, memorabilia, newspaper articles, and 50-years of festival T-shirts. There was a series of film screenings and an extensive silent auction with items like a rare Stelling banjo,

unique memorabilia, and fun vacation experiences visitors could bid on and win in support of the CBA. The festival included two dozen arts and crafts vendors and seven food concessions, including Joe and Jokie's legendary late-night hotdog stand.

As usual, the CBA Youth Program was front and center. Kids on Bluegrass had double the number of participants this year. The Youth Academy, a four-day music camp, once again sold out. The KidFest for youngsters 6-and-up was particularly popular, as was the Kids Instrument Lending library. We hosted youth jams Friday and Saturday evening, and, new this year, a Youth Open Mic on the Pioneer stage, followed by a pizza party hosted by CBA Youth Ambassador Joselyn Sky. All told, hundreds of kids participated in these activities, assuring a vibrant future for the bluegrass tradition.

The 2025 festival was unique in hosting the Black Banjo Reclamation project, giving Executive Director Hannah Mayree and team an opportunity to participate in the Luthiers Pavilion, present an information booth, host jams, and perform a standing-room-only showcase on Saturday afternoon.

In our post-event survey, 93 percent of respondents said that they liked or loved the overall experience, and nine out of ten said that they plan to return in 2026. We hope to see you June 18-21 in Grass Valley for our 51st Father's Day Festival!



FDF Kickoff Concert. Photo by John G. Woodworth.



Instrument Petting Zoo. Photo by John G. Woodworth.

## CBA OLD-TIME EVENTS

by Karen Celia Heil, Board Member and Old-Time Music Director

Our old-time community continues to thrive under the umbrella of the CBA. As our old-time director, it gives me great pleasure to see our many musical and geographical subsets mingle and intertwine. There is so much happening that brings us together, and we strive to create a welcoming foundation for our youth and up-and-coming players. Our music camps, concerts, jams, campouts, dances and festivals all had old time in the air.

The Julian Family Fiddle Camp rocked SoCal with Sami Braman's stellar teaching and performances. The precious Canote Brothers brought their singular style and musical depth to our Summer Music Camp. We had some raging jamming with Caleb and Reeb pitching in with their tunes and exciting old time energy. Our Summer Music Camp square dance calling program, led by Robin Fischer, is growing and working its magic with new callers and dances sprouting up around the state.

As the camp gave way to the CBA's flagship festival, old-time fun mingled with bluegrass fun, with performances, jams, and the increasingly well-attended dances. The now not-so-secret midnight square dance was a truly magical experience, yet again! A highlight of the festival was the presentation given by the Black Banjo Reclamation Project.

As summer worked its way to August, we gathered—yet again!—at Camp Russian River for the Golden Old Time Campout. Our love affair with

this venue continues, as does the jamming and camping in all its little camp neighborhoods and microclimates, including being in or on the actual river itself. The instantly-accessible amenities of Guerneville make it easy to concentrate on the welcome tasks of playing as much music and being together as possible. We'll do it again next year!

Back into our post-summer home routines, the CBA's work continues by sponsoring old-time performances, dances, and programs. The Feral Friday San Francisco square dance rocks on at the ever-cute Polish Club in the heart of the Mission District. Stay tuned for more local callers and bands happening there on our ongoing second Fridays. In San Francisco, Bernal Hill has its revived old-time jam at the Progressive Grounds on Cortland, and the Andronico's jam has done the same at the Plough and the Stars on Clement. These can be found on our CBA events calendar, along with many more worthy activities our CBA community has to offer!



Golden Old Time Campout jam. Photo by Alan M. Bond.

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# HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE REGIONS

by Ted Kuster, CBA Chairman and Acting Vice President for Regional Activities

This year we did something we've never tried before: to find out just how much bluegrass and old-time jamming happened in California in 2025. The results may surprise you.

Jamming is one of the most important ways people can participate in bluegrass and old-time music, and organizing jams is the main thing regional directors do. What better way to measure our impact as an arts organization dedicated to bluegrass and old-time music than counting up the people we've touched?

We asked each of our regional directors to count the regular public jams that are going in their region, along with the average number of participants, both pickers and listeners. We focused on jams that are open to the public—that is, held at cafes, bars, community centers, and churches—

rather than private jams in people's homes. And we only counted regular, recurring jams, not one-offs or annual events.

These figures don't come from a scientific poll; Pew Research this is not. Instead, we went to the source: our regional directors, who tend to know what's going on in their areas, but can't be everywhere at once. So you should take these totals as rough estimates. We do our best to keep track of these things, but there are probably a good many more public jams going on around California that aren't reflected in our count.

With all that out of the way, let's get to the numbers.

There were about 65 regularly scheduled public bluegrass or old-time jams in California in 2025. About 30 of them were weekly jams, 25 were monthly, and 10 were scheduled twice a month.

CBA's regional directors were involved in organizing 16 of the regular jams we counted. Regional directors play a key role in welcoming people and providing continuity. Their goal is to help grow the bluegrass and old-time scene by welcoming new pickers while also providing fun, stimulating musical opportunities for long-time pickers. Some of the most consistent and satisfying jams around the state are led by CBA regional directors. But it can be tricky—sometimes success is hard to manage.

The average jam appears to draw about a dozen pickers, our survey suggests. New jammers have been showing up at an increasing rate, according to Jon Bluemel, regional director for Region 1, which includes Grass Valley and Nevada City. "Some of these new folks are already good players; they just might have a little bit more experience in another genre," Jon said. "They feel nervous showing up for the first time because they don't know how they're going to be accepted. So I go out of my way to make sure that they feel welcome and talk to them about what we do and what they know, and how to find out about more jams."

Many of the most popular jams feature a wide variety of experience levels. Robert Wheeler, the director for Region 26, covering Eastern L.A. County, pointed to the Saddle Store jam in Norco as an example. "I like that one because it's got a good mix of levels," he said. "You have pickers that know a lot of songs and people who can play their instruments well but you also still have beginners, and it's accessible. There's a different crew of newcomers every week, which changes things up for the regular experienced people."

"Communities are being built with each jam we have, new bands are being formed and individuals are using the jams for all sorts of good musical growth," said Matt Lauer, regional director for San Francisco. "It's a virtuous bluegrass cycle—the San Francisco jammers are particularly good at listening to each other and ensuring that everyone feels welcome."

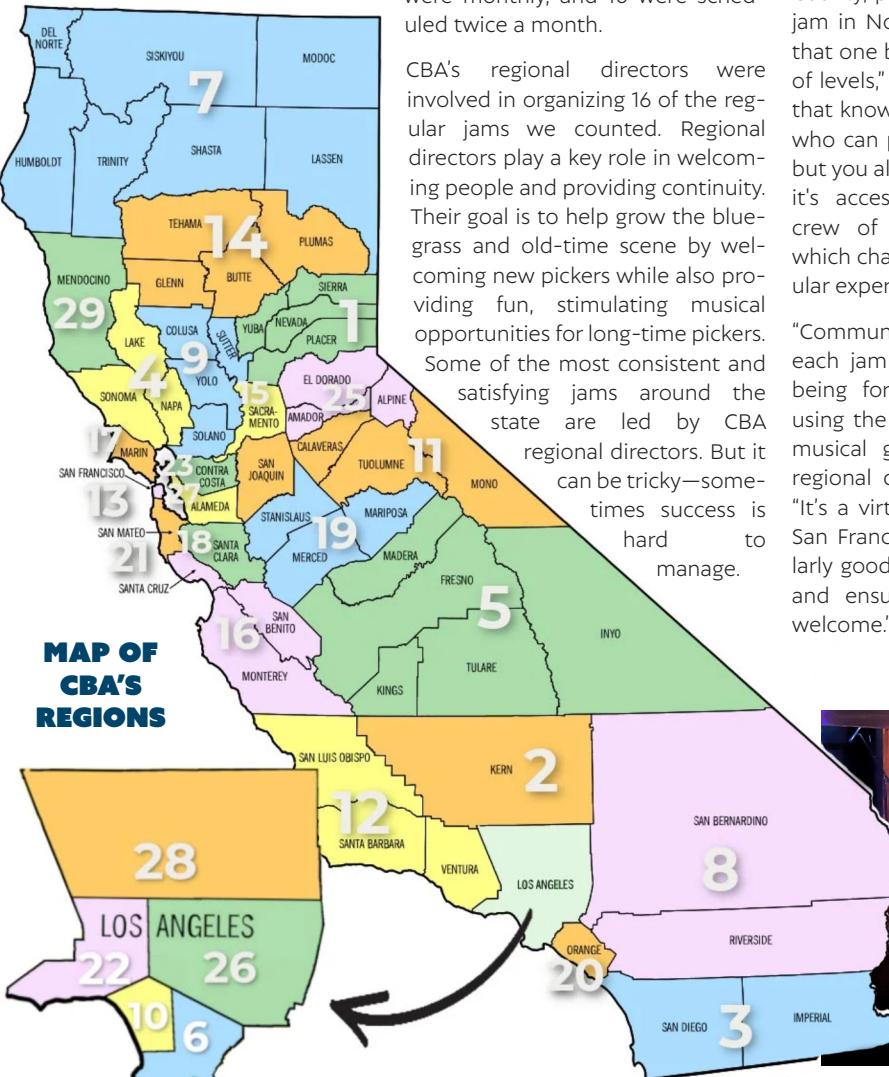
Welcoming the new picker is a special strength of Sammy's Original jam in Lake Forest, said Mike Beaumier, who's the director for Region 20, covering Orange County. Mike attended that jam when he first took up the banjo. "The cool thing about that jam is their motto, which is 'Dare to suck,'" he said.

As a beginning picker, "I got this exposure to really high-quality musicians in a very welcoming and not at all scary environment," said Mike, who quickly became a very competent banjo player. "And I thought that was super important for my development as a musician."

Our survey suggests the average jam gets an average of 22 people just listening, such as people dining at a restaurant that hosts a jam, or visitors to a park where a jam is taking place. How many of those people showed up because of the music and how many just happened to be there would be interesting to know, but it's beyond the data-crunching capabilities of your humble reporter.

Spectators are a big part of the show at the jam at Leisure World, a retirement community in Seal Beach. "All these people in their 70s-and-up come to hear this jam with their husbands and wives, and they have such a good time," said Robert Wheeler. With 30-some people jamming and a lot more listening, "they're making the place good money, because they have huge turnouts on the nights they play—people just eating, and grooving, and singing along to the songs."

"Our jams are attracting a lot of people, many of them just looking to be in community and listen to the



music," said Matt Lauer. "We have seen all ages, all levels, all instruments—including pedal and lap steel, flute, accordion, washboard and harmonica—in addition to all the standard bluegrass instruments."

Every jam has its characteristic repertoire, even though bluegrass tradition puts some guardrails around it. "Our jam at Lawless Brewing is primarily focused around bluegrass vocal songs and fiddle tunes," said Ryan Schindler, who directs Region 22, covering western L.A. County. "However, due to the collective nature of Los Angeles, we can 'grassify' everything from The Beatles to Jimi Hendrix."

Stephanie Garrabant-Sierra, the director for Mendocino County, Region 29, said the jam she runs in Willits has added its own local custom to the traditional way of choosing songs. It's called "songbook roulette," and it involves throwing *The Bluegrass Songbook* in the air and picking a song from the page that lands facing up. "It's hilarious, and it makes sure that we play some different tunes every time," Stephanie said.

Managing large turnouts is a good problem, but it's still a problem. Some of our more successful public jams, with upwards of two dozen pickers, can become cacophonous if not managed carefully. Regional directors reported experimenting with a variety of methods. Robert Wheeler recalled the "old school, smaller circle with like eight people in it, and newbies can form another circle outside that, and the core group of people can rotate in and out." Meanwhile, the Bay Area has seen an increase in jams that precede shows, jams that follow shows, and jams that do both. The hope is that providing multiple forums for picking might lead to smaller, more focused groups of pickers. The jury is out.



Bluegrass concert at Crazy J Ranch. Photo by Robin Frenette.

At any rate, if you add up all the people our informal survey uncovered, you could say that over 24,000 people came to a jam to pick in 2025, and over 38,000 came to listen. Of course, any one person probably attended their favorite regular jam many times during the year, and likely attended some other ones as well. So the actual number of individual pickers is hard to glean from our informal survey. All we can say is, Californians sure do like to pick.

## SOCAL REPORT

by Donna Hargis, Regional Director, Long Beach & North Orange County

Bluegrass is blooming in Southern California with continued jams and events as well as a few new happenings. The Dog Park Jam and Mile Square jam in Long Beach and Fountain Valley continue to thrive and welcome new people to our genre, as both are beginner-friendly jams held in parks on Saturday morning. The Dog Park Jam is at Recreation Park next to the actual dog park, and Mile Square happens at the parking lot nearest Warner and Euclid. Both are at 10:00 a.m.

Project Barley continues to be the home to our monthly jam and open mic that happens on the first Tuesday of each month. This venue has also been good to the bluegrass community and offers opportunities for bands to get paid for playing at their three locations. Project Barley has also been a sponsor of South State 48 for the past four years, pouring beer in the courtyard all weekend and donating all of the proceeds to California Bluegrass Association.

Mark Shutt and Jeff Fleck both have hosted extraordinary shows at their respective properties this year, as they have done for many years. Their venues, Shutt's Fabricators and Crazy J Ranch, respectively, have been wonderful stops for touring

bluegrass bands, and these shows demonstrate what a close knit community we have. All proceeds go straight to the bands thanks to these generous fellas.

The Long Beach Bluegrass Festival had the second annual free festival at the Recreation Park Bandshell. This festival was well attended by pickers and grinners, as well as many new to bluegrass. There were free workshops and jamming, followed by four great bands; Honey Whisky Trio, Muddy Mountain West, Matt Michienzie, and Water Tower. Plans are in the works for next year, so save the date: July 18, 2026.

There is a kids program at Miraleste Intermediate School, where another

teacher (shout out Mr. Ihde!) and I teach seven kids how to play bluegrass—it is the highlight of my week!

The final bit of exciting news is our continuing but growing relationship with The Jug Band Coffee shop in Long Beach. What started as a monthly gig has now evolved into the weekly bluegrass night: There is live music, a jam, or a workshop every Wednesday, thanks to wonderful curating and advertising by Luke Wukmer. I was recently stopped by someone on the street who recognized me from the Jug Band Coffee Shop and declared he now listens to bluegrass! Yay, a convert! And hopefully there are many more.



Jamming at the Long Beach Bluegrass Festival. Photo by David K. Cupp.

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# MUSIC CAMPS

by Adam Roszkiewicz, CBA Music Camps Director

## SUMMER MUSIC CAMP

This year's Summer Music Camp was successful! Attendance was up, exceeding last year's attendance of 241 by 14, for a grand total of 255. The energy and vibes were good, we received positive feedback from the attendees, expanded the program, and increased profit from last year.

Overall, the camp offered 19 intensive classes, 32 workshops, and six hosted jams, with a new vocal harmony class from a duo renowned for their singing. With their teaching assistant, they also demonstrated three-part harmony singing. This was well received and will continue in 2026.

Our volunteers knocked it out of the park again this year, proving once again that an event like SMC wouldn't be possible without their help. Special mention goes to Lindsay Bourne and Jashvina Devadoss for help on the meal line and, of course, this year's volunteer leads: Krishna Feeney at registration, Maggie Sokolik covering administration, and Lucas Caminiti as our roustabout coordinator, working with volunteers who help set up and break down the camp.

Access to the fairground's Foundation Station improved camper check-in, merch sales, refrigeration, and administration. The facility's central location and multipurpose use provides great functionality and streamlines the production of SMC. Additionally, camp arrival was smoother this year thanks to a more streamlined check-in system at the campground entrance.

SMC 2025's success puts us in a good position to expand, add new class offerings, and make improvements to the camper and instructor experience in the future.



Patrick Sauber's banjo class at Summer Music Camp. Photo by Alan M. Bond.

## JULIAN FAMILY FIDDLE CAMP

Enrollment at JFFC was down by two this year from 2024, at 64 registrations. However, the camp operated at a net profit and provided campers a great experience.

Our instructors were fantastic this year: a mix of returning, first-timers, and some who started as JFFC students. We added a new songwriting class with instructor Carolyn Kendrick, which was very well received.

The JFFC depends on the contributions of volunteers to operate. Special mention must be made of Maril Parker, Greg Parker, Lysa Copeland, Scott Copeland, and Chris Elisara—they are truly the bones of this event, and it is largely due to their hard work and dedication that the camp has continued to exist year after year. Special thanks to Tyler Stamets for helping coordinate and running sound for the camp's fundraising concert. And, special acknowledgement needs to go to



Eli West's guitar class at Julian Family Fiddle Camp. Photo by David K. Cupp.

Maril Parker, who secured all the individual financial contributions, pie donations, planning, and hosted the donor thank-you party—and a whole host of other odds and ends. Her help is indispensable.

Following a loss on last year's camp, it was clear going into JFFC 2025 that considerable changes were needed to maintain the camp's viability. We chose three areas to focus on: grant funding, individual donations, and cost cutting.

Understanding how grants are awarded and distributed in San Diego County made a big difference in our balance sheet this year. Tyler Stamets was a great help by advocating for JFFC during the award process. The result was more than four times the amount of grant funding this year over last year.

Individual donations were up this year, as well. We worked closely with Maril Parker, whose relationships within the community led to JFFC's success in this area. We also worked with Maril to plan and host a donor thank-you party.

We also took a serious look at our budget and found some creative ways to reduce spending. For example, this year's director travel costs were about one-third of last year's. We also adopted a more efficient workflow to create our printed materials, such as handbooks, flyers, banners, etc. We also hired fewer instructors this year. Instead of basing our hiring on an optimistic projected number, we took the average attendance over the last three years and hired accordingly. This approach saved more than \$10,000 in operating expenses, which, in addition to increased fundraising, resulted in a net gain for the camp.

Equally important to the camp's bottom line is the camper and instructor experience and the community we work to build around that. After the concert on the last evening of camp, the instructors in the game room were playing Hurricane, a game invented at the camp years ago, and a group of campers were sitting around jamming. Outside, a Cajun jam broke out on the porch. Everyone was hanging out—Instructors and campers, connecting, building community. None of it was planned; it just happened the way it's supposed to, and reflects what we are to accomplish at JFFC. 🐻

Learn more about  
our music camps!  
Scan here →



# 2025 TREASURER'S REPORT

by Phoebe Leigh-Suelflow, CBA Treasurer

Hello again in the New Year ... That means it's time for me to report how we did financially in our fiscal year, which ended September 30, 2025. If you've been to any of our events, you know that we've had a very successful year! You've been to the Campouts, you've had a great time at the Father's Day Festival, and you're ready for the Great 48. I'm sure you've bought some CBA merchandise—a T-shirt, some stickers, a light-up cap, a G-Run bear, and maybe even a sweepstakes ticket or two. Thank you; you've been helping our bottom line! All of those activities show up as revenue on our financial statements. There is another side, of course—the expenses that we incur by putting on all of these activities. Some of them are obvious—we have to rent ballrooms for our hotel jam, buy merchandise to sell, and produce and mail this newsletter. But you won't see other expenses—insurance for those events, permits, keeping up our website, sending you those e-mail blasts, paying our bills, and paying sales tax to the government. All of that contributes to the CBA experience. You can look at our chart below to see our revenues and expenses for the year.

It's been a good year. Our revenues this year have increased at many of our events over our numbers from last year. Prices everywhere have been going up, but we've been able to keep our expenses in line. We're not yet in the black but we are closing the gap. In 2024, our expenses were 130 percent of revenue; in 2025 it was 114 percent. These improvements have been spearheaded by the event organizers and CBA leadership, who have sharpened pencils in contract negotiations, built alternate revenue sources, boosted grant and sponsorship income and reduced costs. Going forward, we

need to further strengthen our fundraising so that income always exceeds expenses. This is our priority for 2026.

Let's get down to the details, starting with our biggest event, the Father's Day Festival. This was our 50th anniversary festival, and we let everyone know about it by expanding our publicity and increasing our exposure on social media. Despite a slight increase in prices, our ticket sales were up substantially over 2024. And thank you for visiting the bars at Vern's Stage and the Honky Tonk beverage service at the festival. Sales were up 40 percent over 2024! We wanted to make our 50th special, so we spent a little more on legacy bands, and 50th anniversary exhibitions and films. Yet we were able to decrease our expenses by 3 percent over 2024, despite the fact that the fairgrounds and many things cost more this year. We did that by selectively purchasing our merchandise inventory, getting rid of the electric-only camping, and working with vendors to decrease the cost of everything from ice to electric carts to porta-potties. We all benefitted. As a result, the ticket prices for the 2026 festival will only show a very slight increase. Compared to other festivals, ours still remains a bargain.

Our popular music camps—the Summer Music Camp and the Julian Family Fiddle Camp—continue to do well financially. Under Adam Roszkiewicz's leadership and a hearty demand for registrations, we increased revenues by 16 percent over 2024, and expenses decreased slightly despite inflationary trends. Bravo, Adam!

We added the one-day Sonoma County Bluegrass and Folk Festival this year, and it was very successful

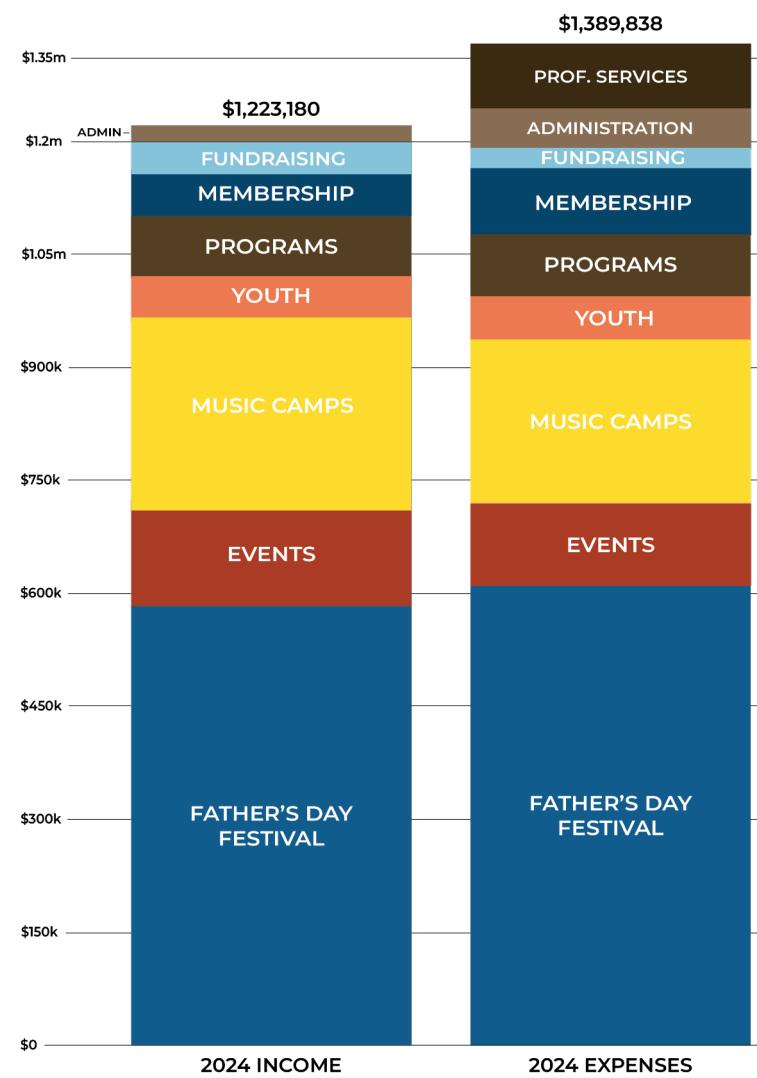
financially, thanks to the organizing team building strong sponsorship support. We're also finding ways of making our other events profitable. This January we will be instituting an all-access pass at the Great 48. For a small price, it provides access to hosted jams, performances, workshops, and other activities. This will help to fund the expenses that the CBA incurs putting on this event.

Administration is our biggest class of expenses outside of Father's Day Festival. This is where you'll find our expenses for insurance, the website, and professional services. In 2024 we set up our accounting and reporting systems, and that required additional expense. In 2025, we are reaping the

benefit of the systems and we have been able to reduce our outlays substantially. Our professional services expenses have decreased by over 28 percent this year.

We will continue to organize events that are fun, but we also need to cover our costs—and we're asking for your help. You can do this in many ways: by planned giving, buying merchandise, entering the sweepstakes, purchasing event tickets and volunteering your time. But also, don't pass by that contributions bucket that you'll find by the door—it helps us keep our events affordable so that everyone can attend them. You are the CBA and your support makes all of these great things possible. 🐾

## 2025 INCOME & EXPENSES



Cash Position as of September 30, 2025			
	RESTRICTED FUNDS	UNRESTRICTED FUNDS	TOTAL
Wells Fargo Accounts	\$0	\$23,851	\$23,851
Youth Fund	\$1,001	\$0	\$1,001
Investment Accounts	\$0	\$162,621	\$162,621
Paypal	\$0	\$279	\$279
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$1,001</b>	<b>\$186,750</b>	<b>\$187,751</b>

# THE CBA VOLUNTEER REPORT

by Phoebe Leigh-Suelflow, Vice President, Volunteers

Hi CBA Volunteers and CBA Soon-to-Volunteers! Everyone fits into one of those categories. You may already be a winner—I mean, volunteer. (Same thing.) Or you may be waiting to get involved and just need that extra nudge. Each year a few more of you cave in. You know it's inevitable—you've seen enough horror films. Scan below to volunteer at Father's Day Festival. Do it right now and get it over with.

You'll be in great company. There were 312 volunteers that worked at the Father's Day Festival last year, for around 3,900 hours—or about 12 hours per person. That doesn't include Screech, BB, and Jersey—as you know, dog hours are longer than human ones—or the PG&E volunteers, who put in many hours as well. Our volunteers are VIPs, every one! We're not just attending a festival; we're putting on the festival! How cool is that?

This year we established festival volunteer all-star awards for

volunteers who have gone above and beyond the call of duty at the Father's Day Festival. This year's winners—Bob Gisler (KidFest/Gates), Karen Lonczak (Catering), Sally Esser (Merchandise) and Tess Deery (Volunteer Central)—were outstanding! If you know of a volunteer who has been amazing, you can nominate them for the award. Or better still, you may be the one who's amazing!

You can find our volunteers everywhere. Name an event—the Great 48, the South State 48, Sonoma, Campouts—we're there. And not just CBA events! Have you been to Parkfield, Lake Havasu, Strawberry, or Summergrass? We're everywhere there is bluegrass!

When you volunteer, you get to know your job, and no one knows it better than you! So we take your suggestions seriously. Here are a few things that you'll notice this year at the 2026 Father's Day Festival:

**More training!** We're revising our check-in and arrival procedures and making it easier for you to handle unusual situations. We'll have more oversight so that you will know who to go to if there are any questions.

**A lot of this training and information will be online.** Access it in your spare time, when you're not volunteering or listening to bluegrass. We'll also have maps and schedules available. We don't want you to miss that workshop because you signed up to work at the wrong time. You need to make informed decisions.

**We're continuing the "Dad Joke Swap" at Gate 4.** Big thank you to the volunteers who started this tradition last year.

**The ice booth will have longer hours for deliveries.**

**The Electric Team is now the Power Team.** They will handle the electricity setup and teardown at the festival. You don't need to be an electrician to join.

**One final word of advice:** don't be afraid to get involved. "I'm not a world-class guitar player who can get up on stage," you say. "And I'm glad that we don't have checkbooks anymore, because I couldn't balance them anyway!" No problem! We love you just the way you are, especially after your first cup of coffee in the morning. Few of us have flashy skills, but if you can plug in an extension cord we want you on our Power Team. Can you

warm up food in the microwave? Our catering crew may have a job for you! Do you like to shop? How about trying out our merchandise booth? Do you like to hang out and practice your guitar? Sign up to work a gate and check wristbands while you're practicing your G-runs. You'll get better fast! Rumor has it that's how Billy Strings got so good!

Do you belong to a service club or a band looking to do things together? If you live nearby, you could all sign up as a group to help load out on Monday after the festival—we'll supply the pizzas. If you have a group of friends you like to jam with, sign up your group to work one of the gates and make a musical event out of it while you're checking wristbands. That's how the Lonesome Highway Band got such a tight sound. Teens, sign up with your friends to work KidFest and get into the festival free!

A final request: sign up for a couple of hours at the Great 48. This year we have exclusive Great 48 volunteer t-shirts, and you will get a free event wristband. 

Volunteer at  
Great 48, Jan. 15-18!  
Scan here →



Father's Day Festival  
Volunteer Sign-up→



## Santa Clara Valley FIDDLERS Association

Join our monthly  
**JAM SESSION!!**

**First Sunday Jam**  
**1:00 - 5:00 pm**

**Hoover Middle School**  
1450 Naglee Ave. • San Jose  
**or San Jose Municipal  
Rose Garden (July-Oct.)**  
**two blocks from Hoover**  
Garden Dr. & Naglee Ave. •  
San Jose

see website for more details



[www.fiddlers.org](http://www.fiddlers.org)



Volunteers show off the new Father's Day Festival bandana. Photo by Tim Konrad.

# 2026 FATHER'S DAY FESTIVAL

by Pete Ludé, CBA Executive Director

The 2026 Father's Day Festival promises to be another memorable event! Although June may seem like a long way away, now is the time to take a few steps to make the most of your experience!

## PLAN AHEAD

First, mark your calendars now for the 51st annual Father's Day Bluegrass Festival, June 18–21, 2026, at the Nevada County Fairgrounds in Grass Valley.

## TICKETS

Pre-sale tickets are now available for CBA members. As a member benefit, these are deeply discounted four-day passes, but to take advantage of the discount you must make your purchase by January 18. After that, the tickets go on sale to the general public, and the CBA member price will go up. Tickets are available online, or by mail.

## RV LOTTERY

New this year: all RV hook-up sites on the fairgrounds will be assigned by a lottery process. This includes full hook-up spaces as well as electric/water only sites. Lottery entries are being accepted now, and will close on February 15, 2026, after which the

winners will be contacted with details on how to confirm a spot. Important: If you're interested in an RV hook-up, submit your lottery entry no later than February 15 by sending your name, email, phone and address to [Festival@CaliforniaBluegrass.net](mailto:Festival@CaliforniaBluegrass.net), or by mail to CBA RV Lottery, 3739 Balboa St, #5090, San Francisco, CA 94121.

## GRASS VALLEY RV RESORT

Once again, we have made special arrangements for additional full hook-up RV spaces at the beautiful Grass Valley RV Resort, just across the street from the Fairgrounds. Discounts for CBA festival attendees are available. To learn more, contact us at [Festival@CaliforniaBluegrass.net](mailto:Festival@CaliforniaBluegrass.net).

Many great bands have already been announced, and we'll be revealing more toward the end of January. We're confident that you will be as excited about the lineup as we are!

You'll find all the information needed at [FathersDayFestival.com](http://FathersDayFestival.com), or call us at 844-BLU-GRASS (844-258-4727).



## 2026 FATHER'S DAY FESTIVAL • CBA MEMBER PRE-SALE TICKET ORDER FORM

\*\*PRE-SALE ORDERS MUST BE POSTMARKED BY JANUARY 18, 2026\*\*

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_  
PHONE: \_\_\_\_\_ E-MAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

TICKET TYPE	ADULT	QTY.	SENIOR (65+)	QTY.	TEEN (13-17)	QTY.	TOTAL
<b>FULL FESTIVAL PASS</b>	\$200		\$180		\$60		
<b>SINGLE DAY</b>	THU. 6/12	\$45	\$45		\$20		
	FRI. 6/13	\$70	\$70		\$30		
	SAT. 6/14	\$80	\$80		\$35		
	SUN. 6/15	\$50	\$50		\$20		
<b>FESTIVAL CAMPING</b> Starting noon 6/11	TENT (or class B van)	QTY.	RV (class A or C)	QTY.			
	Four-Day	Included w/Full Festival Pass		\$125			
	One-Day	\$30/night		\$40/night			
<b>PRE-FESTIVAL CAMPING</b>	Arrive Sat. 6/7	\$100		\$125			
	Arrive Sun. 6/8	\$80		\$100			
	Arrive Mon. 6/9	\$60		\$75			
	Arrive Tues. 6/10	\$30		\$40			

RV hookups are assigned by lottery, applications due by Feb. 15. Email [festival@californiabluegrass.net](mailto:festival@californiabluegrass.net), or send your info to CBA RV Lottery at the address below.

ADD CBA MEMBERSHIP? Become a member or renew membership to purchase festival tickets at pre-sale rate!

(circle one) INDIVIDUAL - 1 year: \$30 • 3 year: \$80 • 5 year: \$130 FAMILY - 1 year: \$40 • 3 year: \$105 • 5 year: \$175

Make check payable to California Bluegrass Association, and mail form and payment to:

QUESTIONS? CALL CBA AT 844-BLU-GRASS (844-258-4727)

CBA Festival  
3739 Balboa St. #5090  
San Francisco, CA 94121-2605

TOTAL  
ENCLOSED:



# BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

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



January  
2026

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BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN  
CALIFORNIA BLUEGRASS ASSOCIATION  
3739 BALBOA STREET, #5090  
SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94121-2605

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SEE YOU JANUARY 15-18!



By Bert Daniel, Breakdown Contributor

For our holiday issue, we asked "who once sent out bogus Christmas cards—allegedly featuring a naked Ray Park wearing a strategically-placed guitar and a cowboy hat tipped so low you couldn't recognize his face, and signed 'Merry Christmas, and Happy New Year! Ray Park.'"

This question didn't draw out many of our trivia buffs; just three intrepid souls took this question on. Of the three, only **John Hettinger** had the right answer: JD Rhynes.

JD shared the whole story about the "Great Bluegrass Joke of 1977" in a column for the CBA website in 2011: "I assured Ray that I pulled that joke on him because I loved him like a brother, and we remained friends for the rest of Ray's life. Ray eventually would laugh along with the rest of us, every time some one would remind him of the Great Bluegrass Joke of 1977, as Vern called it," JD wrote.

John is the winner of this month's prize: a lovely CBA bandana—one of the most versatile prizes imaginable!

## JANUARY TRIVIA

This month, we want to know:  
"What legendary two-finger Appalachian-style banjo picker bought his first banjo from Sears and Roebuck for \$10.86 and never performed publicly—until relatively late in life?"

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

This month's prize is a pair of fine vintage CBA wine classes adorned with the "Banjo Bob" CBA logo in vogue from 2003 to 2019.

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 March 2026 issue of the *Bluegrass Breakdown*.



Vern and Ray at 1989 Father's Day Festival.  
Photo by Kathy Kirkpatrick.