



# BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

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

February 2026



## REMEMBERING CBA CO-FOUNDER

### JACK SADLER

by the Bluegrass Breakdown

**J**ack Sadler, one of the three founders of the California Bluegrass Association and a seminal figure in the beginning of the CBA, passed away Dec. 16, 2025, one day after his 96th birthday.

Born Dec. 15, 1929, Jack's story is that of a teenage cotton picker and lumber mill worker who became a successful dentist, musician, songwriter, recording artist, yodeling champion, bow maker, airplane builder, squadron flyer, and a husband and father of three children, six grandchildren, and two great grandchildren.

"Jack's own story, which he related to me many times over the years," wrote friend and former bandmate Joe Weed, "began in Oklahoma in the Dust Bowl. Eventually, his family fled the poverty and lack of opportunity in Oklahoma, and haltingly motored west to the migrant camps in California. Life was incredibly difficult, everything stacked against them."

Born to sharecroppers, the family lived in Castle, Oklahoma, until 1936, when they drove down Route 66 to Tranquility, about 30 miles west of Fresno, where cotton was a major industry. Jack's father

worked at a cotton gin and Jack, his brother, and his mother picked cotton. When the cotton-picking season was over, he picked peaches in Modesto. Jack did not like the hot and sweaty job that paid almost nothing and felt there must be a better way to make a living.

He graduated from high school in 1947 and, at 18, he struck out on his own and moved to Chester to work at the Collins Pines Lumber Mill.

One memorable day as Jack was leaving a pool hall where mill workers often went after work, he saw the prettiest girl he'd ever seen walking across the street. It was love at first sight. Three weeks later, Jack and Janet Abildgaard eloped and married on June 11, 1950. They were married for over 70 years and had two sons, a daughter, six grandchildren, and two great grandchildren. Janet passed away on June 3, 2022.

Jack and Janet moved to San Francisco where he attended the UCSF School of Dentistry. Jack graduated in 1959, and they moved back to San Jose to start his dental practice.

Jack was surrounded by music from a young age, and during his early

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## DIRECTOR'S WELCOME

### FEBRUARY CELEBRATIONS

by Pete Ludé, CBA Executive Director

Since 1976, our nation has celebrated Black History Month each February. This month was chosen since it coincides with the birthdays of both Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. Rhiannon Giddens was also born this month. Rhiannon is a two-time Grammy Award-winning singer and multi-instrumentalist, MacArthur Fellowship "genius grant" recipient, Pulitzer Prize winner, and founding member of the landmark Black string band the Carolina Chocolate Drops. With that in mind, our theme this month is in celebration of the critical yet under-appreciated influence of Black musicians in bluegrass and old-time music.

In this issue you'll find a fascinating history of Black string bands; a reflection on the Chocolate Drops' pivotal album *Genuine Negro Jig*, its impact, and the release of a new 15th anniversary edition; and a historical perspective on Arnold Shultz, who was recently inducted into the Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame.

*cont'd on page 2 →*

## ARNOLD SHULTZ AND THE OPEN-ENDED ORIGIN STORY OF BLUEGRASS

by the Bluegrass Breakdown

The roar that met Arnold Shultz's name in September didn't come from nostalgia alone. It came from recognition of a musician whose work sits upstream of bluegrass, even if the usual evidence is missing. Shultz was inducted into the Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame, honored at the IBMA Awards in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Most of the time, our musical legends are based on what you can hear of them. You can point to a break, a chop, a drive. You can argue about a take. But Shultz left no known recordings that let us press play and call the case closed. What survives

instead is something older than genre categories: testimony, technique, and the stubborn way a good idea keeps traveling even when the name gets lost.

One vivid cross-section of the people doing that work came in a 2021 conversation presented by the Louisville Folk School and Kentucky Performing Arts—journalist Keith Lawrence, musician-historian Dom Flemons, and Dr. Richard Brown, a Black mandolinist and co-chair of the IBMA Foundation's Arnold Shultz Fund—moderated by music historian and author Michael L.

Jones, later published online as "Arnold Shultz: Godfather of Bluegrass."

Many of today's bluegrass scholars, including Keith Lawrence, can trace their entry point to this story back to a small line in Bill C. Malone's 1968 *Country Music, U.S.A.*: Shultz as a significant influence on Bill Monroe. Lawrence didn't know much about bluegrass at the time. He knew nothing about Shultz.

Lawrence asked a local musician, Wendell Allen, a hopeful question:

*cont'd on page 4 →*



## SPRING CAMPOUT

Pickin' & Singin' with Friends Old & New  
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Together with Annual California State Old Time  
Open Fiddle & Picking Championships

Friday and Saturday in Jackson Hall

Lodi Grape Festival Grounds  
413 E Lockeford Street, Lodi

Scan here for details!



## BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

February 2026 – Black Roots of Bluegrass

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

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## WELCOME MESSAGE

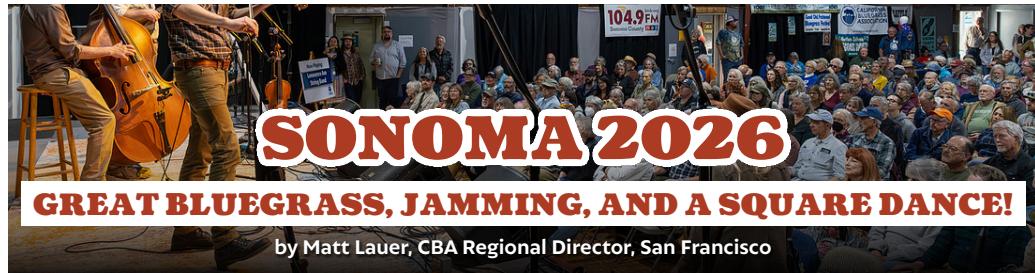
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We haven't forgotten that Valentine's Day is coming up, and to help you celebrate, Jason Dilg has researched the background on old-time music traditions on courtships and community over the years. You'll also find a remembrance of someone very dear to all of us at CBA, Jack Sadler, one of the co-founders of CBA, who passed away in December.

Although summer may seem far away, it's now time to firm up your plans to attend the Father's Day Bluegrass Festival in Grass Valley in June. We've just made some important updates—including a reveal of the next round of featured main-stage acts and premier California Showcase bands. We've also just introduced a new type of festival ticket: the Pinetree Partner Pass. Now you can help financially support your favorite festival while enjoying some perks that elevate your Grass Valley experience. You can learn more about this on page 3.

Registration for our Summer Music Camp has just opened, and in past years many classes have sold out quickly. This camp is held in Grass Valley just prior to the June Father's Day Festival, and many returning attendees tell us that it's the highlight of their musical year. Camp Director Adam "Roscoe" Roszkiewicz has once again found a stellar line-up of world-class instructors to inspire and mentor you, in small classes and a community-focused environment among the towering pine trees. If you haven't attended before, you're in for a treat.

While you have your calendars out, be sure to mark the Sonoma County Bluegrass and Folk Festival on March 14 in Sebastopol, and CBA's Spring Campout in Lodi from April 13-19. Tickets are on-sale now for both events. As always, you can learn more about all of CBA's many events and programs at [CaliforniaBluegrass.org](http://CaliforniaBluegrass.org). Please feel free to contact me at [PeteLude@CaliforniaBluegrass.net](mailto:PeteLude@CaliforniaBluegrass.net), or call our office at 844-BLU-GRASS (844-258-5114). We always appreciate hearing from you.



by Matt Lauer, CBA Regional Director, San Francisco

The 2026 Sonoma County Bluegrass & Folk Festival's tradition of swinging above its weight in fun continues this year with another amazing display of fine bluegrass and folk music March 14 in Sebastopol. Mark your calendars and get ready for a great celebration of community and music in Sonoma County!

Laurie Lewis, a long-time regular at the festival, is teaming up with the one and only Nina Gerber. When these two world-class artists join forces, anything is possible and you know it's going to be an amazing show. This year's festival will include two great nationally touring bands: Five Mile Mountain Road from Franklin County, Virginia—with our own Josh Gooding on mandolin—and the prolific Monroe Crossing all the way from Minnesota. These fine acts are not to be missed! The lineup also includes some of Northern California's best. The Evie Ladin Band and Jesse Appelman's West Coast Stringband Project will be bringing their top-shelf art to the stage; Evie is going to stick around and call our great big square dance, too! We're also thrilled to welcome back the Manning Music Youth Bands and Manning Music Spotlight this year.

All the fun starts at high noon Saturday, March 14, at the Sonoma Community Cultural Center, at 390 Morris St. in Sebastopol. Alongside the top-tier live entertainment, there is ample space for jamming, so bring your instruments and friends. There will be workshops, and great food and drinks available as well, so come join in the fun and community being built in Sonoma County.

## THE 2026 SCBFF LINEUP

**Laurie Lewis and Nina Gerber**

**The Evie Ladin Band**

**Monroe Crossing**

**Five Mile Mountain Road**

**Jesse Appelman's West Coast Stringband Project**

**The Manning School of Music Showcase**

**Son Jarocho Cross Border Super Group**

**A vocal harmony workshop with Michaela Mae and Ryan Harlin**

**A festival-wide SQUARE DANCE with Evie Ladin calling to KC Heil's All-Star Dance Band**

Tickets are \$45, with a \$5 discount for members of the CBA, Socofoso, and the Kiwanis Club, and are available at [californiabluegrass.org](http://californiabluegrass.org) along with all festival details. The SCBFF is brought to you by the California Bluegrass Association, with the help of the Sonoma County Folk Society and the Sebastopol Kiwanis Club. See you there!

**TICKETS AVAILABLE  
SCAN HERE →**



# SNEAK PEEK: FATHER'S DAY FESTIVAL 2026

by the Bluegrass Breakdown

Get ready for another exceptional bluegrass experience at this year's Father's Day Festival! We're thrilled to see another top-shelf lineup showcasing musical masters from California and across the country. Here's a glimpse at just a few of the great acts coming to our stage in June.



SAM GRISMAN PROJECT

The **Sam Grisman Project** is a rotating acoustic collective led by bassist Sam Grisman, built on friendship, deep listening, and a shared love for great American acoustic music. Launched in early 2023, the project carries forward the spirit of "Dawg and Jerry"—the musical kinship of the Bay Area's musical superstars David Grisman and Jerry Garcia—while carving out a voice that's distinctly its own. The inspiration draws from a songbook where bluegrass, folk, country, and jam-era improvisation meet: beloved bluegrass standards and Grisman/Garcia favorites sit naturally beside original material from the members of the ever-evolving ensemble.

Onstage, the Sam Grisman Project favors warmth over flash and conversation over spectacle—tight harmony, nimble picking, and the kind of spontaneous interplay that can only come from musicians who genuinely trust each other. That approach is captured on the band's self-titled debut double album, tracked live with minimal overdubs and featuring a community of celebrated collaborators. Above all, the Sam Grisman Project exists to honor a legacy by living inside it: preserving the tradition, expanding its possibilities, and sharing the joy of this music—one night, one room, one tune at a time.



The **Bluegrass Cardinals** is a prominent bluegrass group that toured and recorded extensively from 1974 to 1997. The band was celebrated for its flawless harmonies, virtuosic playing, and original material. Formed in Southern California by banjoist Don Parmley, his guitarist son David Parmley, and mandolinist Randy Graham, the band debuted with a 15-week gig at Busch Gardens. A self-titled album—one that featured some of the earliest use of a cappella gospel singing in bluegrass—followed soon afterwards. Relocating to Virginia in 1976, the Cardinals released 23 albums over two decades on labels including Rounder, CMH, and Sugar Hill. Their 1991 project, *Families of Tradition*, won the IBMA Recorded Event of the Year award. The group became a proving ground for talents like Larry Stephenson and Dale Perry, and counted prestigious venues like The White House and the Grand Ole Opry among its performance roster. Prior to the formation of the Bluegrass Cardinals, Don Parmley, a Kentucky native, played banjo for *The Beverly Hillbillies* TV show. The band was inducted into the Bluegrass Hall of Fame in 2025.



BROKEN COMPASS BLUEGRASS

**Broken Compass Bluegrass**, from Northern California, is leading the way in the contemporary bluegrass revival appealing to both longtime fans and new listeners alike. Their live performances are characterized by tight harmonies, truly impressive solos, and an undeniable joy that permeates with every note they play. The band's repertoire includes numerous original compositions as well as fresh takes on timeless classics, all delivered with their own distinctive style.

From the moment they take the stage, it's clear that Broken Compass Bluegrass is something different. Their energy is palpable as they weave intricate melodies and harmonize with ease, creating a wall of sound that transports fans to a place where tradition meets innovation. Whether you're a die-hard bluegrass aficionado or just looking for some foot-stomping fun, Broken Compass Bluegrass is sure to leave you spellbound and inspired.



PO' RAMBLIN' BOYS

In 10 years, **The Po' Ramblin' Boys** have covered a lot of miles. Their love of bluegrass has been the fuel for their journey through every corner of America and into the hearts of fans drawn to their hard-charging, true-blue sound. And they've been nominated for a Grammy for best bluegrass album (2019's *Toil, Tears & Trouble*) and for the International Bluegrass Music Association's Entertainer of the Year award. Lately, they've been chasing their dreams in a new configuration. Guitarist John Gooding—an alumnus of the CBA Youth program—and fiddle player Max Silverstein from "the great bluegrass

state of Maine," as the band likes to say during onstage introductions, are the newest additions, both in their 20s. They join Lewandowski on mandolin, Jereme Brown on banjo, and Jasper Lorentzen on bass—relative elders in their 30s. The Po' Ramblin' Boys are known for barreling bluegrass forward, and as they move into their second decade as a band, they're maintaining that momentum. Lewandowski envisions the band's next project as "kicking it back to the beginning and cutting a record that is solid damn 'grass.' And then, of course, they'll take it right back on the road, living what they sing about and sharing it with others, just the way they like it.

## NEW FOR FDF 2026

### PINETREE PARTNER PASS

There's a new way for you to support bluegrass and old-time music while enjoying a premier festival experience during the Father's Day Festival in Grass Valley! A limited number of Pinetree Partner Passes are now available for \$725, providing all the benefits of our adult general admission full-festival passes, plus a set of exclusive enhancements to make your festival experience even more fun and relaxed. Most importantly, you're supporting the bluegrass community—your extra financial contribution allows CBA to keep the general admission ticket pricing affordable for everyone.

#### THE PINETREE PARTNER PASS INCLUDES

- Express festival check-in
- Reserved parking in the Gate 4 main parking lot
- Access to preferred seating in the first few rows at the main stage
- Access to the Pinetree Partner Lounge near the main stage with seating, refreshments, and daily happy hours
- Drink tickets
- Artist meet-and-greet events
- Access to RV hook-up site pass—NO LOTTERY REQUIRED. Separate purchase, very limited supply. First come, first served.
- Option for a reserved camping site, subject to availability
- Golf cart transportation during the festival, subject to availability
- Gift bag: festival shirt, poster, G-Run stuffed bear, and more!

A very limited number of Pinetree Partner Passes are available online now.

To learn more, scan here or contact us at [FESTIVAL@CaliforniaBluegrass.net](mailto:FESTIVAL@CaliforniaBluegrass.net) or call 844-BLU-GRASS (844-258-4727).



## ARNOLD SHULTZ

cont'd from front page

"Is Arnold Shultz still alive?" No. But Allen helped find people who had known him, worked with him, played around him. In early 1980, Lawrence went down and interviewed them.

Lawrence tells of meeting Shultz's cousin Ella, 87 years old in a nursing home—someone who had played with him in the Shultz Family Band back in 1911. Lawrence asked if what they played was blues.

Ella laughed: "No. It was hillbilly ... and I mean hillbilly."

### BEFORE LABELS, THERE WAS MUSIC

Dom Flemons frames Shultz the way a musician-historian should: as part of a musical vocabulary that belonged to a place, then blended outward into later musical products. One documented example is Lesley Riddle, a Black musician who worked and traveled with A.P. Carter and helped shape the Carter Family's repertoire—evidence that exchange happened at the roots, not at the margins.

IBMA's Hall of Fame profile places Shultz in that kind of world: a Black musician from Ohio County, Kentucky, known along river corridors for his instrumental skill—especially on guitar and fiddle—and remembered for influence on Bill Monroe.

### THE BLUE NOTE

Flemons offers a detail that makes Shultz's influence easier to imagine without recordings. In bluegrass, he notes, blue notes don't always come as dramatic guitar bends. Often they appear as trills, runs, and quick turns inside the scale that change the feel.



Ella Shultz Griffin from the March 2, 1980, issue of the Owensboro, Kentucky, Messenger-Inquirer



Arnold Shultz with Bill Monroe's uncle, Pendleton "Uncle Pen" Vandiver. Published from Richard Givens appeared in the December 2020 issue of Bluegrass Unlimited.

Michael L. Jones points to the claim that Shultz may have been the first person some local musicians remembered hearing play lead guitar over a square-dance band or string band. Not just rhythm; lead. Shultz's guitar stepped forward as a voice, not just a timekeeper.

And it connects to another recurring Shultz theme: harmony getting more flexible than the local default. Flemons describes how two or three-chord songs can suddenly feel different when someone starts inserting extra movement—new chords, passing tones, the kind of small changes that make a tune sound like it has more doors than you thought.

There's a concrete version of that idea preserved by the IBMA Foundation: a recollection attributed to Forrest "Boots" Faught, remembering Shultz urging musicians to "throw that A in there" while playing "I'll See You in My Dreams."

That song choice is telling. "I'll See You in My Dreams" is a 1924 standard—exactly the kind of tune that spreads widely and becomes a shared platform for experimentation. A musician who can take a common tune and quietly expand what's "allowed" inside it doesn't need to invent a genre to change the future. He only needs students and witnesses.

Dr. Richard Brown gives the story discipline at the moment it most needs it; he's skeptical of a certain kind of description that can accidentally flatten Shultz into a novelty: "bluesy, exotic, unusual for those parts." But if Shultz played dances, he probably played plenty of straight hoedown fiddle too—because that's what a dance required.

In other words: Shultz's innovation wasn't that he refused the local language. It was that he could speak it fluently—and still add new phrases.

That's a better way to understand Black influence in early country music generally: not as a foreign substance injected into a pure form, but as part of the form's actual formation.

### IN THE BACK ROOM WITH MONROE

If Shultz is a prequel character, Bill Monroe is the star who admits the prequel mattered. Brown recalls sitting with Monroe in 1966 in the back room of Club 47 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, talking music. That setting anchors the story in something you can picture: not a lectern, not a press release—just a conversation where Monroe is relaxed enough to talk about who shaped him.

Monroe spoke about a Black fiddler he used to play with—Arnold Shultz—and Brown recalls something more important than the period language: Monroe's tone. Respect. Monroe, Brown says, made a point of telling him that many of his runs and blues inflections came from Shultz.

In his telling, Monroe didn't merely admire Shultz—he studied him. Shultz gave Monroe early square-dance work—that matters because it puts Shultz in the role of employer and mentor. IBMA's Hall of Fame profile likewise notes that Shultz gave Monroe one of his first paying jobs at square dances.

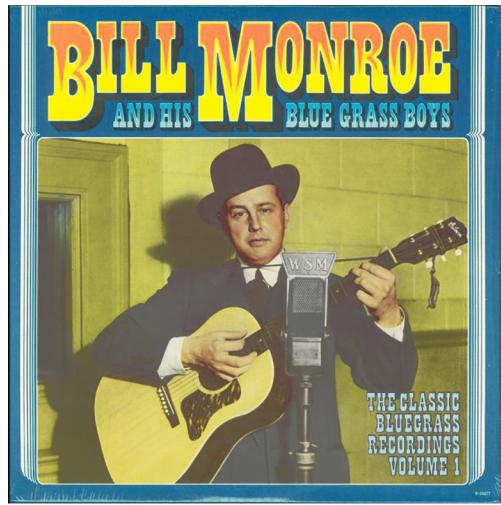
And Brown remembers Monroe describing the detail that makes the whole scene click: Shultz taking a straight pick and playing "pretty runs" while Uncle Pen drove the fiddle, and Monroe listening—trying to save those ideas for later.

If Shultz's sound is missing on tape, this is one way it survives: inside another musician's decisions.

### THE CLUES: WHAT MONROE RECORDED

Brown offers a smart listener's workaround: you may not be able to play a Shultz recording, but you can hear how Monroe's rhythmic concept was already emerging once he got into the studio.

He points listeners to Monroe's early Bluebird/RCA Victor recordings "Mule Skinner Blues" and "Dog House Blues," cut at an Atlanta session on October 7, 1940. Brown hears a push-and-pull that later becomes central to bluegrass drive: the band



Bill Monroe was an accomplished guitar player, and scholars say you may hear Shultz's influence in the recording of "Mule Skinner Blues," which he performed on guitar in his Grand Ole Opry debut in 1939.

leaning forward, the rhythm holding firm, the backbeat getting heavier than old-time accompaniment typically demanded.

If Shultz helped Monroe hear new ways to move inside a tune—to place rhythm, to shape runs, to color notes—then you'd expect to hear Monroe reaching for that energy when it came time to record.

## THE KENTUCKY GUITAR FAMILY TREE

Shultz's influence doesn't stop at Monroe. It spreads into a guitar lineage that, once you notice it, seems to run under half of American roots music like groundwater.

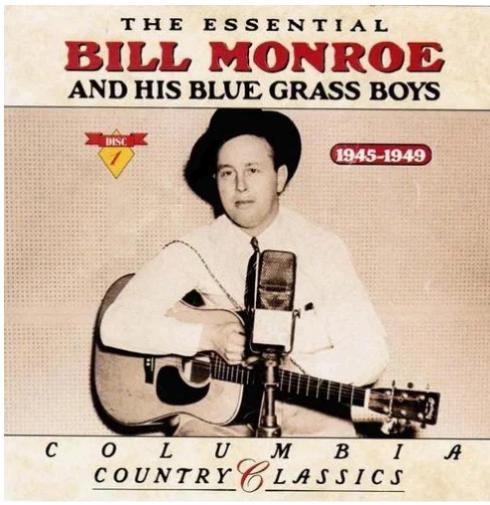
Keith Lawrence describes it as a chain where the modern label "Travis style" doesn't necessarily come straight from Shultz to the world, but flows through a key conduit: Kennedy Jones, a guitarist remembered as a student of Shultz—someone who absorbed his licks and ideas.

From there, the line fans outward. IBMA's Hall of Fame materials connect Shultz's legacy to Kentucky thumbpicking lines involving Kennedy Jones, Ike Everly, Mose Rager, Merle Travis, and Chet Atkins. The Everly family's own history tells a similar story: Shultz taught Kennedy Jones, who passed the style to Ike Everly and Mose Rager, and that tradition flowed down to Merle Travis.

Shultz is not the inventor of thumbpicking, but he is one of the headwaters of a vocabulary that later becomes foundational—transmitted through intermediaries in a local network, then amplified by recordings, radio, and fame.

## A WORKING MUSICIAN'S WORLD

The witnesses Keith Lawrence interviewed didn't describe a one-style specialist. They described someone who played whatever was needed: hillbilly material with family, Dixieland-flavored music with Boots Faught, whatever fit the job. That shape—style as a toolkit—matches how river-corridor musicians often worked in that era, and it helps explain why Shultz could serve as a



transmission point: he wasn't guarding a tradition, he was working inside it.

Some of Lawrence's color is rowdy—tavern walls knocked down, moonshine flowing, Shultz falling asleep "still playing guitar." It's the kind of anecdote you use sparingly and respectfully, as a portrait of the informal dance economy and the stamina it demanded. The final tag in the story says the most: "a great musician."

## THE OPEN-ENDED STORY

Flemons points to a concept tailor-made for Shultz: the open-ended story. Evidence doesn't vanish just because a musician wasn't recorded; it shows up in photographs, instrument details, repertory hints, and the routes musicians likely traveled.

That's why Flemons asks about Louisville's jug-band world and figures like Clifford Hayes. It's also why he thinks in parallel timelines: while Shultz is unrecorded, the mid-1920s recording world was already capturing guitarists who weren't just strumming time. Discographies and session listings document Arthur "Bud" Scott on guitar in notable sessions, including trio recordings with Johnny Dodds in 1927.

Shultz doesn't have to be in every room for his story to widen. The musical ideas he's



Shultz's Dream, a project led by Dom Flemons and produced by PineCone for IBMA in 2022, was partially funded by the IBMA Foundation's Arnold Shultz Fund. Photo courtesy of PineCone.

remembered for—lead lines, bass motion, harmonic color—were part of a broader American conversation. The question becomes beautifully simple: was the music coming to Shultz, was Shultz coming to the music, and where did the roads overlap?

## THE ROAD FROM HERE

By the end of the conversation, the celebration stops sounding like a correction and starts sounding like a charge. Brown articulates the principle at the center of creative originality: nothing "just appears." People look at bluegrass and imagine it sprang fully formed from a few hillbilly geniuses in the hills. Brown says the opposite: art forms take work, and they take communities, and they take branches that evolve into other branches.

Flemons echoes it from lived experience: many musicians—especially musicians of color—enter the string-band and bluegrass world for love of the music. Then they learn the deeper history. And once you see it, you want to advocate and move it forward.

That's where the story turns from tribute to future tense. The Arnold Shultz Fund, created by the IBMA Foundation, exists to increase participation of people of color in bluegrass—an institutional answer to the fact that the music's origins were more integrated than the industry's later story.

And then Brown offers the line that makes Shultz's Hall of Fame induction feel like a beginning, not a capstone. He first encountered Shultz's name in 1963. By 2021, he still felt like we were only reaching the "tip of the iceberg."

In 2025, that iceberg finally has a nameplate in the Hall of Fame. But the real celebration is bigger: a musician without recordings is being heard again—through witnesses, through lineages, through the sound he helped set into motion. And now that bluegrass has formally made room for Arnold Shultz, the challenge is clear enough to keep us honest:

Don't close the story. Go find more of it. 



## The IBMA Foundation

Learn more about Arnold Shultz through the IBMA Foundation, which supports activities increasing the participation of people of color in bluegrass music through the Arnold Shultz fund.

Scan here to learn more →



## JACK SADLER

*cont'd from front page*

years in California he dabbled with guitar and mandolin. At 13, he bought his first fiddle. In 1943, his family moved to Ceres, where he attended high school and joined the marching band, playing primarily the baritone horn—a brass instrument that looks like a small tuba. He also played French horn and trumpet. Jack enjoyed listening to country music on the radio, and Hank Williams was his favorite. He was especially fond of the harmonies sung by bluegrass bands and the Sons of the Pioneers.

The start of Jack's dental practice coincided with the start of the folk music boom of the 1960s, and he was inspired to learn the five-string banjo and fiddle. In the early 1970s, he and Ron White formed the Overlook Mountain Boys, a bluegrass group named after the road he and Janet lived on in Los Gatos. The OMB played at private parties, fiddle contests, other casual events, and festivals including CBA's. They continued to perform until the mid-1990s. The original OMB band included Jack on banjo, Ron White on Dobro, John Lytle on guitar, Dave Carlson on bass, and Arthur Kee on fiddle. When Arthur left the band, Jack Tuttle became the fiddler, followed by Joe Weed on fiddle and mandolin. Other performers at various times included Dale Johnson on mandolin, Tom Baker on mandolin, and Joe Kimbro on mandolin and guitar.

Over several years in the early 1970s, Jack hosted the legendary "Chicken and Pickin'" parties that were the biggest music jams in the area at that

**"Jack enjoyed listening to country music on the radio, and Hank Williams was his favorite. He was especially fond of the harmonies sung by bluegrass bands and the Sons of the Pioneers."**



*Salt Flats Hoedown, 1977. From left: Roscoe Keighly, Jack Sadler, Ray Park, J.D. Rhynes, Keith Little. Photo by Arlis Butler.*

time. Jack once recalled, "I invited all my musical friends and I told them to bring their musical friends, and the first one was ... boy! People all over the place!" The parties got bigger each time, until finally KTAO's Al Knoth announced on-air that after his broadcast slot he was headed to Jack's for chicken and pickin'. That one wasn't just big; it was epic. "The cars were parked all the way ... down to the end of [Overlook Road]. In places I think they parked in some people's driveways, too. And the police came, and the fire department came up, too." It was those parties that Jack, Jake Quesenberry, and Carl Pagter met and discussed the formation of a bluegrass association. Carl, Jake, and Jack would become CBA members No. 1, 2, and 3, respectively, and later were honored with lifetime CBA memberships. In 2008, Jack and Carl were also honored with lifetime achievement awards by the Northern California Bluegrass Society.

Jack was at the very first meeting of the Santa Clara Valley Fiddlers Association at a jam in March 1973, hosted by founder Bill Wein after he had moved to San Jose from Vermont. Bill loved fiddling and he missed his former fiddle club so much that he decided to start one in his new hometown. Jack suggested to Bill that it would be easier to join the California State Old-Time

Fiddlers Association than to start one of his own, but Bill wanted his own independent organization to be run with his own vision. Jack became charter member No. 5.

Jack was also a bow maker, having learned under renowned bow maker Jack English. He applied the same care and skill that he learned as a dentist to making five bows, each with delicate inlaid frogs decorated with abalone and mother of pearl, and with windings of gold and silver.

Jack was also a plane builder and pilot who enjoyed giving rides to friends and family. In 1975, Jack bought a wrecked WWII U.S. Navy Stearman biplane, and spent the next 7 1/2 years rebuilding it. The plane then became a crop duster, and finally became a pile of parts after it crashed.

After 31 years as a successful dentist, Jack retired in 1990 and was able to devote more time to music. In 1993, he and friends Joe Kimbro and Paul King began to work on vocal trios in the Western style of the Sons of the Pioneers. In 1994 they formed Lone Prairie with Jack on harmony vocals and second fiddle, Joe Kimbro on lead guitar, Paul King on rhythm guitar, Ed Neff on lead fiddle, Karen Quick on bass, and Barbara Ann Barnett on accordion. Their first CD, *Desert*



*From left: Steve DeHaas and Jack Sadler presenting lifetime honorary memberships to Ray Park and Vern Williams in 1975. CBA file photo.*



*Lone Prairie: (L-R) Paul King, Jack Sadler, and Joe Kimbro. Photo by Ray Edlund.*



(L-R) Herb Pedersen, Vern Williams, Jack Sadler, Ray Park. Photo by Ray Edlund.

Flower, was recorded in 1996 and named after the love song Jack wrote for Janet. Both the title song and the album were nominated as best of the year by the Western Music Association. Their second CD, *Back on the Dusty Trail*, was recorded in 2007. In 1999, Jack became WMA's yodeling champion by performing "Yodelin' Crazy." Lone Prairie continued to perform through 2010.

In his later years, Jack continued to attend CBA festivals and SCVFA jams, singing harmony and playing second fiddle alongside his long-time friend Arthur Kee. The Overlook Mountain Boys and Lone Prairie had a reunion show in 2014 in San Jose.

Jack's granddaughter Natalie Sadler was the first to share the news of Jack's passing with the CBA. Her cousin, Jack's grandson Will Gemo, wrote, "Jack lived an amazing and inspiring life, showing that no matter what circumstances you are dealt with, you can still live the life you dream of."

Jack will be dearly missed by his family and the CBA community. 

Thanks to Richard Brooks, past-president of the Santa Clara Valley Fiddlers Association, whose 2014 profile of Jack for their newsletter, *The Fiddler's Rag*, was excerpted in the August 2014 *Bluegrass Breakdown* and served as the basis of this tribute.

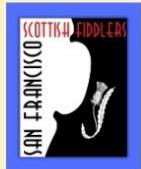


Lone Prairie performing at KPFA. From left: Joe Kimbro, Jack Sadler, and Paul King. Photo by Ray Edlund.

*"Jack lived an amazing and inspiring life, showing that no matter what circumstances you are dealt with, you can still live the life you dream of."*

*- Will Gemo, Jack Sadler's grandson*

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With the emergence of the bands New Dangerfield and Our Native Daughters and the ongoing work by such musicians as Rhiannon Giddens and Dom Flemons, long-overdue attention is being focused on the Black string band tradition in American music. What was once a vibrant subculture in the late 1800s and early 1900s had dwindled almost to the point of extinction by 1940. The reasons for this decline were interconnected and perhaps inevitable, in that no one could have predicted them, and no one could have prevented them.

In the beginning, it was just called music. Not country music. Not blues. Just music. Country fiddlers and banjo players in the south, both Black and white, had a shared music tradition with a large repertoire of songs and tunes that was common to both races. In the days before radio and phonograph records changed everything, this music was the soundtrack of Southern rural life.

Black and white musicians often fished from the same ponds, both literally and figuratively. They also shared ideas and played music together. While segregation was rigidly enforced in many parts of the region, life was a bit looser in rural areas, where the two races lived and worked in closer proximity.

As Tony Russell, a British music historian who has written frequently on the subject, puts it, "In all but the most tightly enclosed communities, there was some degree of [racial] interaction. Moreover, there were always musicians to whom musical values were more important than racist ones, men who would not care if they, as whites, happened to like Black pieces, or vice versa."

Many early country musicians, especially those who recorded in the 1920s like Uncle Dave Macon, Sam and Kirk McGee, Jimmie Rodgers, Riley Puckett, Dock Boggs, Fiddlin' Doc Roberts, and Roscoe Holcomb, readily acknowledged the Black musicians who had influenced them. The story of Bill Monroe and his mentor Arnold Shultz is a well-known instance of this cross-cultural musical interchange.

It's a matter of the historical record that there were many Black string bands playing music in the first few decades of the 20th century, certainly in the hundreds and maybe more. The most popular and influential of the early Black stringbands was the Mississippi Sheiks, best known for its hit "Sitting on Top of the World." Essentially a family band, the Sheiks consisted of the Chatmon brothers Lonnie, Sam, and Armenter—better known as Bo Carter—and Walter Vinson. The Sheiks recorded nearly 70 songs for Okeh, Paramount, and Bluebird



by Jon Hartley Fox  
for the Bluegrass Breakdown

between 1930-35, a large output for a Black string band.

Another popular stringband from the same era, and one of the few that didn't feature the fiddle, consisted of Sleepy John Estes on guitar, Hammie Nixon on harmonica, and Yank Rachell on mandolin. The trio began performing around 1920 in Brownsville, Tennessee, and would work together off and on for the next five decades, culminating in a reunion performance at the Newport Folk Festival in 1964.

A few of the early stringbands were racially integrated. We don't know how prevalent this practice was, but at least a few such outfits managed to record. Two such examples of this

integration are fiddler Andrew Baxter, who recorded with the Georgia Yellow Hammers, and the Booker brothers from Jessamine County, Kentucky, James on fiddle and John on guitar, who recorded for Gennett Records with their white neighbors Doc Roberts, Marion Underwood, and Taylor's Kentucky Boys. The Bookers also recorded on their own for Gennett with their family stringband, the Booker Orchestra.

The first cause of the decline of the Black string bands was simply that the world changed around them. During the first phase of what's called the Great Migration, from 1910-30, more than two million Black men, women and children moved from the rural South to the industrial North; they primarily settled in such big cities as Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Detroit, Baltimore, and New York City.

This was the largest internal migration in the country's history, and it profoundly changed both North and South. It's hard to imagine that this tremendous exodus of Black people didn't include numerous string band musicians and a significant portion of their audience. In terms of sheer numbers, this would have been a serious blow to the Black string band world.

In 1910, almost 9 million Black people lived in the south, about 89 percent of all Black Americans. A loss of two-plus million individuals—or about one out of every four or five people—fundamentally changed the region, depopulating entire communities and radically altering much of the regional music scene.

Big Bill Broonzy is a perfect example of a southern Black musician who went north during the Great Migration. Broonzy was the most popular and widely recorded blues singer and guitarist of the 1930s, but he started out as a string band fiddler as a kid in Arkansas. The band played for both Black and white audiences at dances, fish fries, parties, and other social events, performing such tunes as "Turkey in the Straw," "Over the Waves," "Missouri Waltz," and "Sally Goodin."

When Broonzy migrated to Chicago in the 1920s, he found there was little demand for the kind of music he played back home. The city folks called that music "hillbilly." He adapted to his changed circumstances and hung up his fiddle and began singing and playing guitar.

The fiddle appeared only once on his subsequent records, at a 1935 recording session by an ad hoc group known as the State Street Boys. These records were unlike anything else recorded in Chicago in that period, "the sort of music a country stringband might make after it had spent a few years in the city," in the words of Tony Russell.

Lonnie Johnson, the most influential blues guitarist of the 1920s, was another prominent bluesman who started on the fiddle and played in string bands in his native New Orleans. His career represents another approach to the musical challenges faced by the rural-to-urban migrants. Johnson continued to play fiddle as well as guitar and continued playing with stringbands, albeit in a blues style.

The second cause of the decline of the Black string bands was due to changing policies within the record industry. Thanks to the unexpected success of records by Mamie Smith in 1920 and Fiddlin' John Carson in 1923, record companies found to their surprise that Black people and white Southerners had both the desire and the means to purchase phonograph records. But the companies really had no idea at this point what would sell, so they recorded a little bit of everything.

Within a few years, though, a rough template had emerged. White string bands and guitar-playing singers would reside in the "old-time" series. While in Black music, which the companies consigned to the "race music" series, it was decided that blues was the only form of music that mattered (or sold), or would be recorded going forward.

A note about the term "race records": contrary to popular opinion, the phrase was not a derogatory, euphemistic way for the supposedly racist record companies to label and demean those records made by and for Black people. In fact, the term was meant as a sign of respect, following the lead of the Chicago *Defender* and other leading Black newspapers of the day, who referred to Black Americans collectively as "the Race."

"Once you distinguish [music into a particular series], you divide. Between old-time and 'Race,' there now ran a fence that became a cultural demarcation line. African-American

musicians who could play old-time music—and there were many—were diverted to the 'Race' list, where to survive they might have to become guitar- or piano-playing blues singers. The complex, heterogeneous backstory of vernacular music was suppressed. It was all too diffuse, too racially ambiguous, too tricky to promote and sell." (Tony Russell again, from *Vintage Country*.)

With recording opportunities closed to them, black string band musicians faced a future mostly devoid of professional goals to which they could aspire. The big radio barn-dance programs like the *Grand Ole Opry* in Nashville or the *WWVA Jamboree* in Wheeling had no interest in them, and radio programs featuring Black musicians aimed at a Black audience were still several years in the future. Traveling medicine shows, once a viable performance option for Black musicians, were themselves on the road to extinction.

The final cause of the decline of the Black string bands was the simplest and the most inevitable. Times changed, as did musical tastes within the Black communities, both in the North and in the South. An association with the minstrel shows of the past, and the hateful stereotypes pushed by those shows, led many Black musicians to shun the banjo and fiddle as relics of a tragic past. String band music was viewed as both old-fashioned and country—labels the new arrivals were eager to avoid.

Black string bands did not die out completely, though. In the 1940s, the Library of Congress produced field recordings of such string band musicians as fiddler Son Sims, who played on Muddy Waters' first recordings; Nathan Frazier on banjo and Frank Patterson on fiddle; and Murph Gribble on banjo, John Lusk on fiddle, and Albert York on guitar.

And then there was Martin, Bogan, and Armstrong, who toured in the 1970s as "the last

of the black stringbands." In 1930, Howard Armstrong (fiddle, mandolin) began playing in a trio called the Tennessee Chocolate Drops with his brother Roland and bass player Carl Martin. Mandolinist Ted Bogan replaced Roland Armstrong, and the trio played in Chicago throughout most of the 1930s, including an appearance at the Chicago World Fair in 1933.

The trio broke up in the early 1940s but reunited 30 years later and made a triumphant return, playing the major folk festivals and recording two albums for Flying Fish Records and one for Rounder Records. After Carl Martin's death in 1979, Armstrong and Bogan performed as a duo, appearing at another world's fair, in Knoxville in 1982. Armstrong is the subject of two fascinating documentary films, *Louie Bluie* (1985) and *Sweet Old Song* (2002).

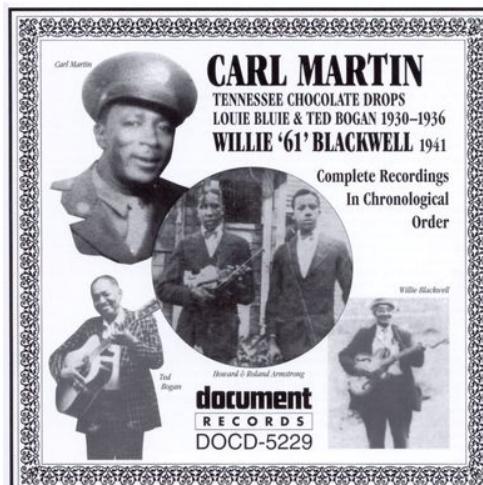
Rhianne Giddens, a co-founder of the Grammy-winning band the Carolina Chocolate Drops, has written and spoken eloquently about the Black string band tradition and legacy. The Chocolate Drops were mentored by Joe Thompson, a fiddler from North Carolina who was one of the last living links to the Black string band tradition.

When they met, says Giddens, she realized she had "joined an enormously long and almost forgotten line of Black dance band musicians who helped create an indigenous American music and dance culture; of barn dances, corn shuckings, plantation balls, and riverboat and house parties.

"The older I get, the more I realize how lucky we were to have Joe Thompson. He was 86 when we started playing with him, and he was delighted to see it being passed on within the Black community ... But, it was significant for him because he was the last one in his family to play that music and to see us pick it up, I think that really made him happy." 🐻



Son Sims (left) and Muddy Waters in the early 1940s. Photo by John Wesley Work III / Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University.

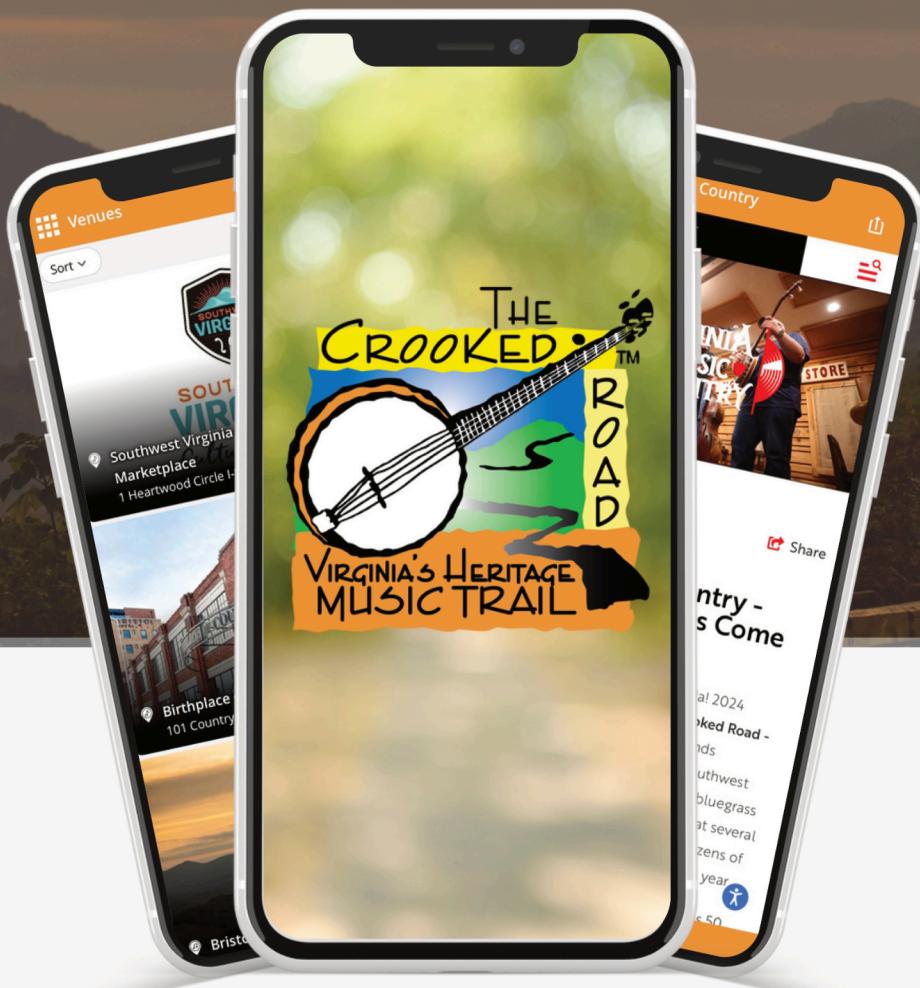


From Knoxville to Chicago: Document's collection of the Tennessee Chocolate Drops.



Odell (left) and Joe Thompson. Photo from the cover art of their album Old Time Music from the North Carolina Piedmont.

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# THE RECORD THAT RECONNECTED A LINEAGE

by the Bluegrass Breakdown

The Carolina Chocolate Drops' newly expanded 15th anniversary edition of *Genuine Negro Jig* returns to a chapter in bluegrass and old-time music that many listeners didn't know had been left unfinished. Released in 2010, this recording helped reassert the central role Black musicians played in the creation of American string band music, earning the band a Grammy while reshaping conversations across bluegrass, folk, and old-time scenes.

The Chocolate Drops' origin story is well told but still worth repeating because it explains why the group mattered. The trio—Rhiannon Giddens, Dom Flemons, and Justin Robinson—found their chemistry crystallizing around 2005, after the Black Banjo Gathering in Boone, North Carolina, where they encountered a community of musicians asking a pointed question: what happens when you take the banjo's Black history seriously, not as a footnote but as a starting point? They sought out Joe Thompson, a master fiddler and one of the last living carriers of the Piedmont Black string-band style.

In that context, *Genuine Negro Jig* didn't simply revive old songs or repackaging archival sounds—it re-centered Black musicianship within American folk and string band traditions that had too often written it out of the picture. At a moment when the banjo was still widely framed as an Appalachian white folk instrument, the album insisted—musically, historically, and joyfully—that this story was incomplete. Its mix of fiddle tunes, jug band numbers, minstrel-era songs recontextualized, and original compositions challenged listeners to hear American roots music as it actually developed: woven from intertwined traditions—and unmistakably Black.

The album reached the Top 10 on Billboard's Folk chart, topped the Bluegrass chart, and won the 2011 Grammy for Best Traditional Folk Album. But its deeper impact unfolded more quietly. For many Black musicians and listeners, *Genuine Negro Jig* offered something rarer than accolades: it was a homecoming—a return to a tradition and lineage they had been taught to believe was not theirs.

The record also refused to flatten history. Songs like "Snowden's Jig" and "Reuben's Train" sit alongside the original "Kissin' and Cussin'," written

and sung by Robinson, whose fiddle work throughout the album carries a rhythmic drive shaped as much by dance as by melody. They weren't presenting a fixed canon; they were showing how tradition moves and evolves—through listening and learning.

That approach became a launchpad.

In the years since *Genuine Negro Jig*, each member of the trio has followed a distinct path, extending the album's implications into new territory. Rhiannon Giddens has become one of the most visible and influential voices in American roots music, blending scholarship and performance across folk, blues, opera, and orchestral work—a trajectory that culminated in a 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Music for the opera *Omar*. Her solo albums and collaborations continue to interrogate whose stories get centered, moving fluently between archival material and contemporary composition.

Dom Flemons, who has often described himself as a musical archaeologist, has leaned into deep historical recovery—traveling, lecturing, recording, and performing with an emphasis on pre-war Black folk, minstrel-era complexity, and early country blues. His work reinforces the idea that preservation is an active, interpretive practice, not a neutral one.

Justin Robinson's post-Chocolate Drops trajectory has widened the lens further. Alongside continued music-making, he has focused on historic foodways, agriculture, and land stewardship, tracing African diasporic influence through ingredients, cooking techniques, and farming practices. Whether discussing fiddle bowing patterns or okra seeds, Robinson emphasizes continuity: culture carried forward through practice.

Seen from this distance, *Genuine Negro Jig* feels less like a high-water mark than a hinge—a point of opening rather than arrival. It opened space for conversations that are now more common—about Black banjo players, Black fiddlers, and Black authorship within old-time and bluegrass—but were far from settled in 2010. The album didn't resolve those conversations; it demanded them.

Fifteen years on, the answer is still unfolding—from concert halls and festival camps to kitchens and gardens where culture is carried forward, and into the hands of players who heard *Genuine Negro Jig* and recognized themselves for the first time. 



L-R: Dom Flemons, Rhiannon Giddens, Joe Thompson, and Justin Robinson. Photo courtesy of Carolina Chocolate Drops.

Listen to and purchase the 15th Anniversary Edition of *Genuine Negro Jig* through Nonesuch Records. Scan here →



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# A MUSICAL VALENTINE

## Courtship, Community, and Music in the Old-Time Tradition

by Jason Dilg, Bluegrass Breakdown Managing Editor

Valentine's Day doesn't usually conjure fiddles, flatfoot dancing, and mountain ballads. But if you look at the traditions that shaped today's old-time and, eventually, bluegrass culture, music was often the vehicle that brought young people together for socializing and courting. Music was more than just entertainment; it helped organize social life. Valentine's Day is as good an excuse as any to peek at that rich history.

Before jukeboxes, smartphones, or even steady access to recorded music, community events built around fiddle tunes and dancing were among the few sanctioned spaces where rural young adults could gather publicly. Richard Duree points out in a piece for Folk Dance Federation of California, South, that dance influenced "social interaction, courtship, and even social control." When those European dance traditions crossed the Atlantic and filtered into Appalachia and the American South, this basic social function came along for the ride.

### ♥-♥-Choreography and Courtship-♥-♥

Anyone who has spent time at an old-time square dance knows the subtle choreography of proximity. When a caller says "swing your partner," "promenade," or "do-si-do," the dance becomes a managed negotiation of closeness.

Modern summaries of square-dance history often highlight European immigrant roots—a framing that can eclipse the documented influence of Black social dance and call-and-response traditions in the American South. More recent work has done a better job of tracing those entangled histories, but the public shorthand still leans heavily on the "brought-from-Europe" story.

With a caller, the fiddler or band suddenly controls not just the tempo, but the social traffic in the room: who ends up next to whom, how long they stay there, and how often they return. In rural communities with few secular gathering places—plenty of churches, general stores, and family farms, but not many dance halls—the community dance did a lot of work at once. It gave people a chance to see their neighbors, let young people meet potential partners under many watchful eyes, and wrapped the whole thing in the protective label of "tradition."

In his field recordings and notes, Alan Lomax paid close attention to the way dances, songs, and play-parties created sanctioned opportunities for young people to mix under community supervision. The fact that these gatherings were

often attended by entire families didn't eliminate the romantic undercurrents; it simply gave them a layer of cultural approval.

### ♥-♥-When The Church Said 'No'-♥-♥

In many Protestant communities, especially under the influence of 19th-century revivals, dancing to instruments was frowned upon or outright banned. That didn't erase the desire to gather; it just forced young people to get creative.

Folklorists describe the play-party as a work-around. Maya Brown wrote in a 2017 article for *Excellence in Performing Arts Research* that the play-party was a social activity "once practiced in rural America amongst Protestants" who wanted to "circumvent the church's strict no dancing rules." Instead of instrumental music, participants sang their own songs while they moved through simple figures. No fiddle, no banjo—just voices and footsteps.

A 2017 Library of Congress folklife article notes that play-party songs were used for "parties or dances often organized by Churches to provide a chaperoned environment for young single adults to socialize." On paper, they were wholesome group activities; in practice, they kept the essential social function of dancing alive.

Play-party repertoires were packed with now-familiar songs. *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture* lists "Skip to My Lou," "Needle's Eye," and others among popular play-party games, noting that such games and the tunes that go with them were widespread, some with centuries-old roots. These songs were catchy, easy to improvise on, and perfect for keeping a group in motion.

Jean Ritchie, the Kentucky folk singer who grew up in a large Appalachian family, remembered play-parties as part of her parents' courting years. In the notes to *Old Mother Hippeltoe: Rural and Urban Children's Songs*, the writer explains that Ritchie "tells of family play-parties at which her parents recalled their courting," and that play-parties developed in a context of "the suppression of dancing to instrumental accompaniment." The connection to courtship is explicit: these weren't just children's games. They were how an earlier generation had learned to flirt within tight moral boundaries.

### 'Skip to My Lou': Flirting in Plain Sight

Take "Skip to My Lou." Today it's often filed mentally as a children's song, but its earlier life was much more about adult and adolescent social play.

An essay on singing games notes that in American traditions, "Skip to My Lou" involves dancers stealing each other's partners, "simulating flirtatious courtship and partner choice" as couples are swapped around the circle. It's playful and competitive, but the game is built around who ends up standing next to whom when the verse ends.

Scholars of the American play-party point out how flexible these songs were. S. J. Sackett notes in "Play-Party Games from Kansas" that B. A. Botkin, a major play-party collector, found 67 distinct variants of "Skip to My Lou" in Oklahoma alone, with 157 verses among them—evidence that performers cared less about fixed words than keeping the game going. New lines could be improvised on the spot, sometimes pointed, sometimes teasing, all of them part of a shared social script.

*cont'd on page 14 →*



Square dancing was a weekly event in 1941 at the migrant farm worker's camp in Visalia. Photo by Arthur Rothstein from the Library of Congress.



## A MUSICAL VALENTINE

cont'd from page 13

It's not hard to see how such games could double as low-risk courtship. You could tease someone you liked in a verse, or watch who chose whom when partners were traded. The community labeled it a game. The participants understood that more was at stake.

### ♥-♥-♥-♥- The Fiddler as Cupid-♥-♥-♥-♥

When instruments were allowed, the fiddler's role could be almost mythic. Fiddle cultures in Britain and Ireland already carried a whiff of magic and mischief by the time they reached North America; tales of fiddlers charming dancers or causing scenes appear on both sides of the Atlantic. S. Foster Damon says in *The History of Square Dancing* that the caller or fiddler effectively "became the creator of the dance," able to vary figures and keep dancers on their toes by changing patterns at will.

That level of control over the room's energy made the fiddler more than just a musician. They directed how long couples stayed together, when the set broke up, and when everyone returned to the collective whirl. In communities where ministers already worried that dancing might lead to sin, it's no surprise the fiddle sometimes drew suspicion.

At the same time, that power made the fiddler a kind of Cupid by proxy. Starting a waltz, calling a circle mixer, or choosing to repeat a figure could either encourage a budding connection or give someone an escape hatch. Music didn't just sit in the background; it actively shaped the little dramas playing out around the floor.

### Slow Waltzes and the Moving Spotlight

Old-time square and contra dances are communal by design, but slower partner dances slipped into many evenings as well. The book *So You Think You Know Dance?* describes how English country dances were transformed into forms like the square dance and the Virginia reel in North America, with newer couple dances layering in over time.

That evolution mattered for courtship. Fast group figures—circles, lines, sets—keep everyone in motion together. Slow waltzes, on the other hand, narrow the focus to a single pair. The community is still present, but now a couple can step into a moving spotlight.

You can still hear the echo of this at modern dances when someone calls out: "Play something slow!" The room knows what that means: the social script is about to shift from collective to personal.

### ♥-Ballads of Love, Not Just Heartbreak-♥

Bluegrass and old-time repertoires are thick with heartbreak, lonesome trains, and tragic endings, and those songs have earned their reputation. But the older European ballad tradition

also includes plenty of courtship songs—some ending well, some not—and early country and gospel-influenced acts like the Carter Family recorded a number of pieces centered on affection, partnership, and longing, not just loss.

Folklorist Barre Toelken once noted that folklore artifacts—whether a fiddle tune or a dance—should be seen as expressions of "culture-based thought and behavior." Love songs and courting songs fit that description neatly. They're not just pretty melodies; they're how communities talk to themselves about what love is supposed to look like, and what might happen when it goes wrong.

In a world where open talk about romance could be constrained by religion and custom, songs and dances gave people a vocabulary. You might not say certain things out loud in daylight, but you could sing them together at night.

### ♥-♥-♥- Music as a Social Contract-♥-♥-♥

Put all of this together and you get a picture of music as a kind of social contract. Dances, play-parties, and house gatherings gave young people spaces to mingle under community supervision. Religious and cultural limits shaped how that could happen, but the basic need—to meet people, form bonds, and occasionally fall in love—never went away.

Fiddles and songs did double duty: they structured the evening and, within that structure, made room for personal choices. Who did you stand next to in the line? Who did you swing a little longer? Who did you walk home with when the last tune faded?

The *Old Mother Hippeloe* notes describing Jean Ritchie's memories of Kentucky play-parties call the rise and fall of the tradition "a dramatic glimpse at the effect of changing cultural

patterns on the traditional repertoire," tracing how developments like the automobile and dance halls eventually displaced the old house-party courting games. The music adapted, but the underlying social need simply moved to new venues.

### ♥- Bluegrass: an Ongoing Love Story -♥

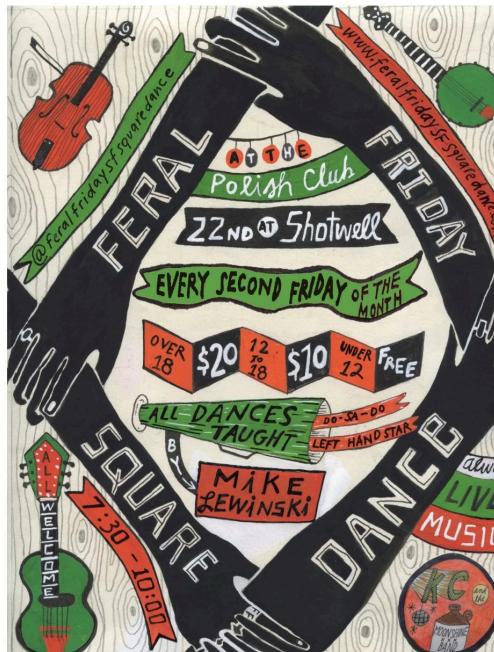
Bluegrass, strictly speaking, is a 20th-century style built from these older materials. But if you stand on a festival hillside at dusk, the lineage is visible. Fiddle tunes drift across a campground. Couples dance in the dust between vendor booths. Teenagers circulate between jams. Soon a caller is coaxing dancers into a big, laughing circle.

In *Friday Night, Saturday Night*, Robert G. Hollands writes that nightlife today is driven less by formal courtship rituals and more by socializing and shared identity. Bluegrass festivals and jams fit that pattern perfectly. People come to be with their crowd, to feel at home in a particular musical world. Some of them also leave with a partner, or a lifelong friend, or a new band.

Seen from that angle, this musical Valentine isn't just a romantic couple two-stepping in the moonlight. It's the whole ecosystem—musicians, dancers, volunteers, kids, elders—circling through tunes that have always doubled as invitations: to dance, to talk, to belong.

Valentine's Day is a convenient hook for this story, but the heart of it beats year-round. Every jam is a little social laboratory. Every dance is a community-sanctioned excuse to get closer. Every festival is a chance, however small, that you'll find yourself in the right place at the right tune with the right person.

The music doesn't guarantee any of that, of course. It just keeps the door open. 🐐



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# BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

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



February  
2026



## BLACK ROOTS OF BLUEGRASS

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(L-R) Hammie Nixon, Yank Rachell, and Sleepy John Estes, Festival of American Folklife, early 1970s.  
Photo by Donald Vance Cox, CC-BY-SA 4.0



JUNE 14-17, 2026

REGISTRATION OPEN NOW!



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

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Five Mile Mountain Road & more!

plus jamming, workshops & square dancing

**MARCH 14**

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TICKETS AT SONOMABLUEGRASSFOLK.COM

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**JOIN US IN SONOMA  
ON MARCH 14**

**TICKETS AVAILABLE, SCAN HERE**



By Bert Daniel, Breakdown Contributor

Our December trivia question asked: **"What fiddle player left one of the most famous bluegrass bands of all time over a dispute about an itinerary for a tour in Japan?"**

Darren Lynch, Danny "Hootenanny" Clark, Steve Hogle, Melinda Caye Russell, and Dennis Vied knew that the fiddler's name we were looking for is Kenny Baker, who departed Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys in 1984. Dennis Vied shared: "My friend Charlie Smith was asked to take his place, but he declined because he couldn't afford to leave his engineering job."

Kenny himself said it was because Monroe refused, over the course of several weeks, the courtesy of giving him an itinerary for an upcoming tour in Japan at a time when Kenny's brother was very sick:

"I walked on stage with Bill in Samson, Alabama. Bill was driving from Alabama to California, so they put him on early for the second show. I did about 10 minutes down the show; nobody mentioned my itinerary. Three weeks before I told Bill: 'Now, Bill, I want you to know this is my notice. I'm not going to Japan with you if you don't give that to me ... I did a couple of fiddle numbers, and people kept wanting me to do

another number. Bill said, 'I'm sure Kenny will do it for you nice people.' I said 'I don't care a damned thing about it' ... and walked off stage."

"So, now Bill didn't speak to me for like 12 years after that."

**Melinda Caye Russell** wins a silicone CBA pint cup—unbreakable and useful for all your beverage needs!

## FEBRUARY TRIVIA

This month, we're sticking to the "fiddlers who played with Bill Monroe" theme:  
**Name the fiddler who toured with Bill Monroe and claims kinship with 85 percent of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.**

Send your answer to:  
[trivia@californiabluegrass.net](mailto:trivia@californiabluegrass.net)  
no later than February 28.

This month's prize is JD Rhynes' collectable cookbook *JD's Bluegrass Kitchen*.

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 April 2026 issue of the *Bluegrass Breakdown*.