



# BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

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



May 2026

## THE TACO JAM HOW A BLUEGRASS JAM BECAME A CALIFORNIA INSTITUTION

By Jason Dilg, Bluegrass Breakdown Managing Editor, and Ted Kuster, CBA Board Chair. Photos courtesy of Tom Lucas.

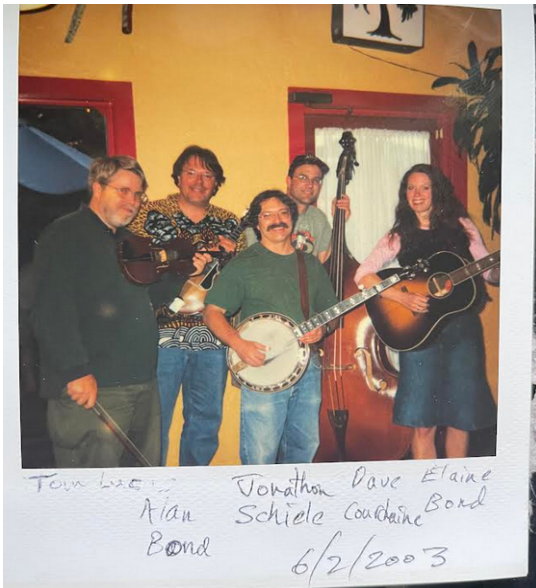
The Taco Jam is a long-running bluegrass jam in Oakland built around a simple premise: one player per core bluegrass instrument, five musicians at a time, gathered in public to play. Banjo, fiddle, and bass-playing jam meister Tom Lucas, working with Baja Taqueria owner Jeff Mogalian, launched the invitational version on November 2, 2002, after an earlier open jam at the restaurant had grown too large to manage. What began

as a local solution to a local problem became a replicable model for organizing high-quality public jams, one that has shaped the bluegrass community in California and beyond for more than two decades. That is the short version. The longer one is even better.

Before there was an invitational Taco Jam, there was an open jam at the Baja Taqueria, started around 1992 by Joe Howton, a friend of Jeff's. By Tom Lucas's account, it was the kind of jam that welcomed anyone who could play bluegrass, "or thought they could." That spirit had its virtues—and consequences. By 2002, the jam sometimes drew around 30 people at once. Tom recalls that players would form spillover jams at the laundromat next door just to break the crowd into workable groups. The restaurant itself was small. Jeff eventually stopped hosting the open jam because it was taking up too much space—this is really where the best part of the Taco Jam story begins.

A few months later, Tom met with Jeff and proposed a different format: an invitational jam limited to five players, one for each bluegrass instrument. Jeff liked the idea immediately. Better still, he gave the players a good incentive to come out. "I'll even give them dinner," Tom remembers him saying.

A public jam is always musical, but it is also logistical. It depends on a venue owner who is willing to host it, players who are willing to commit, and enough structure to keep the whole thing from dissolving into



From left: Tom Lucas, Alan Bond, Jonathan Schiele, Dave Courchaine, and Elaine Bond at the Taco Jam in 2003.

*cont'd on page 4 →*



## DIRECTOR'S WELCOME

### READY TO JAM!

by Pete Ludé, CBA Executive Director

In this month's *Bluegrass Breakdown*, we explore learning to play music and jamming. It's been proven that learning music offers significant cognitive, emotional, and social benefits, including improved brain function—memory, focus, and IQ—reduced stress, increased self-confidence, and enhanced academic performance. Two recent studies have shown that older adults who play musical instruments have healthier brains, suggesting that picking some hot licks could help to protect you from dementia. One study, a collaboration between scientists in Canada and China, looked at the effects of practicing music for decades. The second study, published by MIT, also suggested that musical practice might bolster brain health—even if the individual starts playing in old age.

That makes perfect sense to me. What else could explain the many

*cont'd on page 2 →*

## COMMUNITY MUSIC SCHOOLS

### Learning Music and Building Relationships

by Jason Dilg, Bluegrass Breakdown Managing Editor

At community music schools like Manning Music, the Oakland Public Conservatory's Black Banjo and Fiddle Fellowship, and the Folk Farm Music School, students aren't just learning tunes. They're learning to participate in a musical life.

At the Folk Farm in Sebastopol, a few students arrive early enough to have a few tunes together before class starts. They gather on the porch outside the Sebastopol Community Cultural Center and jam for an hour, off and running before anyone officially begins teaching. Once underway inside, harmony class may lean on accessible metaphors rather than theory. Michaela Thomas, the school's founder, describes teaching harmony by encouraging students to feel the relationship of different notes in their bodies—some as tension, some like ease: "like a waterfall washing over you." Her teaching partner Ryan builds harmony lines with what they playfully call the "Dum Dum Ding

Dong Method," or by imagining chord changes as fence posts with musical lines as the dots to be connected between them.

This all points to something essential about community-based bluegrass music schools. They are not conservatories. They are not weekend camps, either. They are places where the old folk-process ideal—music learned from people, by ear, in the course of ordinary life—gets enough structure to become durable. Students come for skills, of course—but the deeper thing they get is a way into the music community.

At Manning Music in Berkeley, founders Catherine and Chad Manning describe that on-ramp; adult beginners who are curious about jamming but nervous about it do not get told to wait until they are ready by some abstract measure. They work on

*cont'd on page 10 →*

### JULIAN FAMILY FIDDLE CAMP PRESENTS



## WEEKEND CONCERTS

FRIDAY, MAY 8 - 7:30 PM

Tyler Grant, Luke Price, Rachael Price, Nina Weisman, Nat Copeland and more!

SATURDAY, MAY 9 - 7:30 PM

John Reischman, John Mailander, Missy Raines, Carolyn Kendrick, Tray Wellington, and more!

Get more info and buy tickets here →



## BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

May 2026 – Learning and Jamming

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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## FIRST IBMA AWARD SHOW CORRECTION

Orin Friesen of Benton, Kansas—the IBMA's Distinguished Achievement Award winner in 2012 and their Broadcaster of the Year in 1990—reached out to us in response to Adam Roszkiewicz's March *Breakdown* interview with Missy Raines to offer a correction: the first IBMA Awards Show was in 1990, not 1991. Sept. 27, 1990, to be precise.

He would know; Orin produced the first 10 IBMA Awards Shows, along with Dell Davis. He also wrote the scripts for those shows, and was part of the group who put together the group of five women—Alison Krauss on mandolin, Alison Brown on banjo, Lynn Morris on guitar, Andrea

Zonn on fiddle, and Missy Raines on bass—for the first performance on the show. "Let history show that the first performance, EVER, on an IBMA Awards Show, was by a group of women," he wrote.

"Hosts of the first IBMA Awards Show were two guys with strong California connections: John McEuen and Vince Gill," Orin added. "The second musical performance of the night was by another California band (by way of Salem, Missouri), The Dillards."

Thanks, Orin, for reaching out, and for being a *Bluegrass Breakdown* reader!

## WELCOME MESSAGE

*cont'd from front page*

lively, sharp-as-a-whip older folks picking and singing at our campouts and festivals? Music is truly healing, and it's never too late to start.

Festival season is here, so it's a perfect time to brush up your picking skills and get ready for a memorable summer of jamming. To aid this journey, you'll find an article on community music schools, and a listing of upcoming West Coast music camps. Jon Hartley Fox shares a profile of Kimber Ludiker and her dedication to music education. We also share a history of Oakland's Taco Jam and CBA Music Camps Director Adam Roszkiewicz shares a wonderful way to spruce up a tune with new chord voicings. This is a perfect example of the sort of fun and inspiring new techniques and approaches you will learn from attending a music camp or finding just the right instructor.

Speaking of music camps—as you read this, there still might be space available at the **Julian Family Fiddle Camp** in the lovely hills above San

Diego. The camp runs from May 6–10, and you can sign up at [FamilyFiddleCamp.com](http://FamilyFiddleCamp.com). Next month, CBA is hosting our famous **Summer Music Camp**, June 14–17 in Grass Valley. We are lucky to have some of the best instructors from around the U.S. joining us for this four-day opportunity to learn from and play with. This is another unique opportunity to bump up your instrumental skills while having a ton of fun.

If you haven't already done so, now is the time to get your tickets for the **Father's Day Bluegrass Festival** in Grass Valley—see all the details on page 15. And while you're at it, there are two ways to support CBA (and yourself) right now: Check out our online **Silent Auction**, now open, to bid on unique and useful items. And there's still time to enter the sweepstakes to win the Molly Tuttle Martin D-X2E guitar. The drawing is on June 20, and you do not need to be present to win. Information on these activities and more can be found at [CaliforniaBluegrass.org](http://CaliforniaBluegrass.org). 🐾

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**GRASS VALLEY - JUNE 14-17 - REGISTER NOW!**

[CBASUMMERMUSICCAMP.COM](http://CBASUMMERMUSICCAMP.COM)

# 2026 CLOVIS' BLUEGRASS IN THE PARK

by Karana Hattersley-Drayton, Central San Joaquin Regional Director

Enjoy free Friday-night bluegrass from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. (6 to 8 p.m. in September) at 901 Fifth St, Clovis in Liberty Park, just east of Old Town and the Veterans Memorial Building, in front of the Law School. Bring a chair or blanket, a picnic supper, your family and friends and be ready for a good time!

Shows are organized by the Central San Joaquin Chapter of the CBA and are co-sponsored by the CBA and the Clovis Veteran's Memorial Park District. Come early, bring a lawn chair and a picnic dinner! And if you can, bring a few bucks for the bands; they are paid through the generosity of audience tips. *Note that there are no concerts on May 22, June 5th, 13th or 19th.*

## Friday Concert Series, 6:30–8:30 p.m. at Liberty Park, Clovis - Free

May 8	<b>Sycamore Bend</b>	Dan Stein (guitar/vocals), Michael McDonald (mandolin/vocals), Doug Carlton (dobro/vocals), Steve Hall (banjo), Jonathon Hall (bass)
May 15	<b>T-Ranch String Band</b>	Andy Roberts (banjo and vocals), Jared Jespersion (mando/vocals) Hank Lamar (guitar/vocals), Ben Friedrich (bass /vocals)
May 29	<b>Green Bush Spring</b>	(Americana songs and tunes) Terry Barrett (fiddle/mandolin), Larry Cusick (fiddle), Karana Hattersley-Drayton (vocals/keyboard)
June 26	<b>The Kings River Boys</b>	Jack Kinney (banjo), Henry Warde (guitar), Ella Warde (fiddle), Henry Johns (dobro), John Cogdil (bass)
July 3	<b>The Element</b>	Doug Carlton (dobro/harmony vocals), Steve Hal (banjo), Jonathan Hall (bass) Michael McDonald (guitar/vocals) Bob Garcia (mando)
July 10	<b>Silver City</b>	Leta Simons (guitar/vocals), Dan Pollak (bass/vocals), Dave Corina (mandolin), Giorgi Khokhobashvili (fiddle)
July 11	<b>Dirty Cello</b>	Rebecca Roudman (cello/fiddle/vocals), Jason Eckl (guitar), Nick Brown (mandolin), Colin Williams (bass)

## August through September (6 p.m. start)

Aug. 28	<b>Pipe on the Hob</b>	(Celtic) Donn Beedle (fiddle/viola/mandolin), Karana Hattersley-Drayton (vocals/keyboard/bodhran), Carl Johnsen (hammer dulcimer/penny whistle), Kathryn Johnsen (harp/keyboard)
Sept. 4	<b>Uncle Ephus</b>	Ron Zastovnik (mandolin), Jean Kilpatrick (fiddle), Doug Cornelius (vocals/percussion), Steve Barnett (vocals/guitar), Linda Dryden (vocals/autoharp), Barbara LaRae (banjo/dobro/harmonica/guitar/vocals), Edwin Hawke (bass)
Sept. 11	<b>Sugar Pine</b>	Chuck Thrapp (guitar/vocals), Dave Novell (guitar/vocals), Robyn Flory (vocals), Jeff Gurule (banjo/vocals), Ron "Bearrrr" Murray (Ubase/vocals)
Sept. 18	<b>Tall Can Koozi</b>	Adam Johnson (guitar/vocals) Dalisay Johnson (fiddle/vocals), Dan Kehler (bass/vocals)
Sept. 25	<b>Ripe for Pickin'</b>	Donn Beedle (fiddle/viola/mandolin/vocals), Kevin Campbell (vocals/guitar), Pat Kemble (dobro), Tom Naiman (banjo/vocals), John Mooneyham (bass)



Sycamore Bend, in concert May 8.



Silver City, in concert July 10.



The Kings River Boys, in concert June 26.

For more information, follow Clovis Bluegrass in the Park on Facebook →



# FIND YOUR JAM ON THE CBA EVENTS CALENDAR!

Friends, neighbors, pickers, grinners, and all you lonesome souls with a mandolin in the closet—are you looking for a jam to bring out that banjo, rosin up that bow, dust off that guitar, or just sit in the circle and soak up the sound? Then point your



Jam at Sonoma. Photo by Evan Thompson.

wagon straight to the **CBA event calendar**—your handy guide to bluegrass happenings up and down the Golden State. Good times with real live humans making real live music!

Maybe you're new to bluegrass. Maybe you've been picking since the Carter administration. Maybe you just want to find out where the action is any night of the week.

Don't spend half your evening wondering and the other half missing out. Just head to the CBA calendar and see what's happening near you. You might find a weekly jam just down the road with the very circle of players you've been hoping existed all along.

Let me tell you, friends: there are few finer remedies for a long day than a room full of pickers, a steady bass, and somebody counting off "Blue Ridge Cabin Home."

Whether you're ready to take a solo, try your first harmony part, or you just want to pull up a chair and enjoy the music, the CBA calendar is a mighty fine place to find your jam! 🐾

Don't just stay home talking about bluegrass—Go find some! Visit [CaliforniaBluegrass.org/calendar](https://CaliforniaBluegrass.org/calendar).



## TACO JAM

cont'd from front page

confusion. The Taco Jam's format solved several problems at once. It kept the number of musicians manageable. It gave audiences something coherent to hear. It preserved the public, communal setting of a jam while raising the floor on musical consistency. And it gave players a reason to show up and take the date seriously.

The first invitational Taco Jam took place on November 2, 2002. The lineup, as Tom recalls it, was Ray Bierl on fiddle, Tom himself on banjo, David Thom on mandolin, Dave Bamberger on bass, and Steve Pottier on guitar, with Jerry Barush rotating in on various instruments. So the Taco Jam emerged from a real scene with real continuity: players who knew one another, players who had already been showing up, and players who would continue to shape the jam's identity in the years that followed. Tom also names Larry Chung and Dave Courchaine as key figures in those early jams, and both are still associated with it today.

If the Taco Jam had remained only a successful local series, that would still make it a worthy subject—but the jam also became the seedbed for a wider idea. Tom built software to help organize the process, and over time that system, now called "JamBot," grew into a larger platform supporting multiple jams. The Taco Jam was a success, and it became the prototype.

The public face of the system is simple. Jambot.org displays calendars listing upcoming shows for a given jam, along with dates and scheduled players. Behind that simple calendar is an organizing process Tom has refined over many years. A show is typically created about 10 weeks in advance. The admin has a short window to recommend or directly book players. After that, if slots remain open, the bot begins sending exclusive offers. The process is not entirely random; Tom notes that there is a slight bias toward players who respond quickly. Once a slot is booked, that booked player can recommend others. Tom says he prefers human recommendations to automated ones, because people often make better musical choices than the software can.

That preference says a great deal about what the Taco Jam is and is not. It is more than a software project, or a social circle; it sits in the productive middle ground between automated system and human discernment. The software handles the repetitive work, but the music still depends on human ears, human trust, and human memory. Who swings hard. Who sings well. Who listens. Who can hold together a public set with strangers. Who is ready. Who is almost ready.

Ted Kuster wasn't ready. When he was new on the scene and soaking up the workings of jamming culture, he knew he'd need to up his game. "I could see that if you could get on that list, it meant something," Ted recalled.

Tom is clear that the invitational format was not primarily designed for gate-keeping. Still, he acknowledges the side effect: it created a goal for aspiring players, and that's not altogether a bad thing.



From left: Miles Quale, Tom Lucas, Teo Quale, Dave Gooding and John Gooding at the Taco Jam around 2016.

*"The jam also became the seedbed for a wider idea. Tom built software to help organize the process, and over time that system, now called 'JamBot,' grew into a larger platform supporting multiple jams. The Taco Jam was a success, and it became the prototype."*

"A jam like this has to be curated," Ted said. "Somebody has to decide who is ready. Somebody has to be willing to disappoint people."

That is one of the more uncomfortable truths in any music scene, and one reason the Taco Jam is interesting beyond its own history. Bluegrass culture values openness, hospitality, and intergenerational exchange. It also values drive, competence, timing, taste, and the ability to hold your own in tough musical company. Those values can pull against one another. Open jams are welcoming, but musically uneven. Highly selective jams can produce thrilling music, but they risk hardening into private clubs. The Taco Jam's long life suggests that Tom and the players around him found a workable, if imperfect, balance.

That balance has never been only about virtuosity. Tom recalls that when the old open jam at the Baja got too large, he sometimes helped instigate a stronger spillover group next door, pulling some of the better players into the laundromat jam. But he also remembers younger and less experienced players in that orbit, including some who'd make a name for themselves in music, like a young Mitch Polzak. Tom says Polzak has reminded him of that period ever since, including the fact that someone at the laundromat jam gave him a rough reception while Tom tried to help him with chords and make him feel welcome. That story captures both sides of scene culture: the sorting and the mentoring, the winnowing and the generosity.

It's no secret that a jam scene, however friendly, can tend to stratify. "As I got better at this, I was always uncomfortable with the way some stronger players will leave the others behind as soon as they're able," said Ted, who's now the CBA chair. Tom's pragmatic answer: the invitational format actually helps avoid some of the social awkwardness. If there are five players and the invitations are set in advance, there's less on-the-spot jockeying, less uncertainty, less visible sorting. Not everyone gets to play every time, but the framework is clear. And clarity, in this story, turns out to be a form of kindness.

The Taco Jam's importance can also be measured by what followed it. Tom identifies the Java Jam as the first non-Baja jam built on the model. Steve Rosen proposed it, helped with it, and became the admin. Its first outing was May 21, 2014, at the Coffee Cat in Scotts Valley. From there it moved to Lulu Carpenter's in Santa Cruz and later to its current home at Los Gatos Coffee



From left: Evan Childress, Tom Lucas, Steve Adams, Tim Hicks, Jacob Groopman at the Taco Jam around 2007.

Roasting Company, where owner Teri Hope has been, in Tom's telling, notably supportive.

From there the network expanded. Current jams listed in Tom's notes include, in Northern California, the Hop Jam in Half Moon Bay, Java Jam in Los Gatos, Point Jam in Richmond, Taco Jam in Oakland, and Tam Jam in Sausalito; in Montana, Bo Jam in Bozeman and Deadrock Jam in Livingston; and in Nevada, Pub Jam in Reno. Tom also mentions recent interest from California and beyond: Monterey, Fresno, Boston, and even the Czech Republic.

Clearly, the Taco Jam model answered a recognizable need. Many scenes have talented players, willing venue hosts, and a desire for public music-making, but they do not always have an easy way to coordinate dependable, listenable, publicly presented jams. The JamBot system does not create a scene where none exists. What it can do is give a scene a tool for turning scattered goodwill into a regular event.

Still, tools are only part of the picture. The Taco Jam has lasted because of personalities as much as programming. Mogalian gave it a home. Tom supplied the concept, the continuity, and eventually the software. Early players helped establish the standard. Later players kept replenishing the pool. Admins in other towns adapted the model to their own circumstances. And behind all of it is the essential work of listening for new talent, inviting younger players in, and keeping the musical bench from going stale.

Tom says that recruiting remains his main task as an admin. He is especially interested in bringing in younger players. That may be the most revealing detail when it comes to using the Taco Jam model to build the bluegrass community instead of turning it into an impenetrable fortress of musical seniority. After all the technical discussion, all the scheduling logic, all the questions about offers and recommendations and who gets to play, the health of the jam still comes down to ears open in the real world: Go to an event. Hear somebody promising. Tap them on the shoulder. Bring them into the orbit. That is how you steward the scene.

The Taco Jam also endures because it occupies a useful space between performance and participation. It is not exactly a formal show, but it is more publicly coherent than an average open jam. It gives audience members something focused to hear and gives players a chance to meet one another in combinations they might not create on their own. It creates visibility for musicians, connections among pickers, and a recurring place where skill, repertoire, and trust can develop in public.

The Taco Jam is about one Oakland restaurant, but it is also about how bluegrass communities organize themselves. It is about who gets included, who gets better, who helps whom along, and what kinds of structures let traditional music thrive in modern life. It is about volunteers and venue owners, scene elders and ambitious younger players, software and sociology, dinner and timing and the politics of saying yes or no.

Most of all, it is about sustainability. Plenty of jams flare up and disappear. The Taco Jam did the harder thing. It found a form that could last.

More than 20 years after the first invitational night at the Baja, that is still the real achievement. Tom Lucas solved an immediate problem in 2002: too many players, too little space, and not enough structure. In solving it, he and the community around him stumbled onto something larger: a way to preserve the openness and fellowship of bluegrass jamming while making room for intention, continuity, and musical quality. The result is an institution, and institutions in acoustic music are rarer than they look. They do not survive on nostalgia alone; they survive because people keep doing the work. 🐻



You can reach Tom Lucas to find out how to use the Taco Jam bot for your jam at [TacoBot@jambot.org](mailto:TacoBot@jambot.org)

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# KIMBER LUDIKER

PASSING IT ON ONE STUDENT AT A TIME

by Jon Hartley Fox



Kimber Ludiker—IBMA’s Mentor of the Year in 2022—is a busy woman. Not only does she record and tour full-time with her band Della Mae, but she’s also a tireless educator, champion of youth, mentor to many, and a committed advocate for inclusion and diversity. She also directs four bluegrass music camps.

With Della Mae, she has performed in more than 30 countries in all parts of the world under the auspices of the U.S. State Department. Combining performance and educational sessions, the band has worked in such countries as Russia, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Brazil, Peru, Guyana, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan. “We’ve hit all the ‘Stan’ countries but one,” Kimber jokes. “But it’s such a gift to have a music career that’s about more than just getting to the next gig.”

Born in 1985 in Spokane, Washington, Kimber now lives in Maryland, in the Washington, D.C., suburbs. A fifth-generation fiddler, Kimber got her first fiddle at age 2 and entered her first fiddle contest when she was 5. She won numerous titles before retiring from the contest circuit in her early 20s, most notably winning the Grand National Fiddle Championship at the National Oldtime Fiddlers’ Contest in Weiser, Idaho—twice.

“I grew up in a fiddle family,” Kimber told writer Liz Ferrell. “Almost everyone in our family plays. Our holidays are just big jam sessions. So, I was lucky to grow up surrounded by music.”

After attending college at the University of Washington and Eastern Washington University, she went on tour with an Irish band featuring the

lead singer from the celebrated music and dance production *Riverdance*. She then moved to Boston—“because Darol Anger told me to”—and joined that city’s thriving acoustic music scene.

There, Kimber formed Della Mae—the band’s name comes from the song “Big Spike Hammer”—in 2010. “It was a concept first,” she says. “I didn’t see that many women ‘sidemen’ in bluegrass, so I decided to start an all-women band to give a platform for women to be on stage.”

Many celebrated musicians have logged time in Della Mae—named IBMA’s Emerging Artist of the Year in 2013—over the years, including Courtney Hartman (guitar, banjo), Amanda Kowalski (bass), Maddie Witler (mandolin, banjo), Grace van’t Hof (banjo), Shelby Means (bass), Jenni Lyn Gardner (mandolin), and others. The current members of the band are Kimber (fiddle, mandolin), Celia Woodsmith (guitar), Avril Smith (guitar), and Vickie Vaughn (a three-time winner of IBMA’s Bass Player of the Year award).

While there are several bands out there with progressive political ideas and a commitment to social justice, very few of them likely have an actual mission statement, as Della Mae does. The band’s website declares, “We write about women, advocate for women, believe women, and mentor women ... We are 50% queer and 100% supportive. We believe that representation, queer voices, and allyship are important in music. We’re not necessarily typical of traditional music, and we love representing our identities and values in new spaces.”

“There is a very palpable, rewarding feeling that comes from watching the light bulbs go on, watching people get it. That smile that comes across the faces from understanding. It’s a great feeling.”

– Kimber Ludiker

Kimber has recorded several albums and EPs with Della Mae: *I Built this Heart* (2011), *This World Off Can Be* (2013), *Della Mae* (2015), *Butcher Shoppe* (EP, 2018), *Headlight* (2020), *Family Reunion* (2021), and *Magic Accident* (2026). The latest album is produced by Alison Brown and is the band’s debut on her Compass Records label.

In a sense, the scope of Kimber’s current work seems somewhat pre-destined. Both of her parents were champion fiddlers (her father was a five-time Grand National Fiddle Champion; her mother’s titles at Weiser included National Junior, Ladies, Adult, and Senior Champion). Both were educators. Both were committed to youth education. Both ran a fiddle camp at their home when Kimber was little. Check, check, check, and check.

When not touring with Della Mae, “my nose is in spreadsheets,” as Kimber directs four different music camps: IBMA Kids on Bluegrass; Ashokan Bluegrass Camp, in New York; Idaho Bluegrass Camp, in Weiser; and the CBA’s Youth Academy, which takes place in conjunction with the Father’s Day Festival in Grass Valley.

Kimber learned to play the fiddle in what is considered the “traditional” manner—direct instruction from older relatives. But she also grew up enveloped in the music camp environment. Kimber feels that both are valuable methods of learning, but that music camps provide something that private instruction simply can’t.

“Group learning is essential,” she says. “It’s so hard for anyone trying to learn music to do it alone, because bluegrass music is meant to be played with other people. Youth Academy takes someone from the very early stages of playing and gets them ready for Kids on Bluegrass.”

The CBA offers a two-tiered program of music instruction for youth of all experience levels surrounding the Father’s Day Festival: Youth



Photos: (top of page) Kimber leads the charge at Julian Family Fiddle Camp, by David K Cupp; (bottom) Della Mae, photo by Laura Schneider Hoz.

Academy and Kids on Bluegrass. Youth Academy—June 17–20 this year—is a four-day camp for up to 50 students ages 8–16 who play at the beginning or intermediate level. The focus of the academy is on the fundamentals: learning to play an instrument, playing in a band and jam skills.

“It can be overwhelming the first time someone attends Youth Academy,” says Kimber, “so we try really hard to be aware of who might be coming for the first time, and we use a kind of a buddy system. We’ll have older students check in on them so nobody feels left behind or isolated.

“One of the cool things about the youth camp is that it’s so fun watching them make friends who love doing the same thing they love doing. When you’re a kid back at home in your regular school, it can be hard to find your people, but when you go to a fiddle contest or bluegrass camp, you feel like you’ve found your community.”

Kids on Bluegrass—also June 17–20 this year—is open to anyone under 18 with at least intermediate-level skills. Now led by Helen Foley, herself a graduate of the CBA Youth Program, the focus of KOB is on preparing students for performing, concentrating on such subjects as stage presence, working with microphones, creating arrangements, on-stage spacing, and so on. The program consists of two days of practicing (Thursday and Friday), leading up to a Main Stage performance on Friday and a CBA youth all-stars show on Saturday.

“I try to have a young staff at Youth Academy,” says Kimber. “I think that’s very important. A big



Kimber leads a fiddle workshop at the 2025 Berkeley Bluegrass Festival. Photo by Robin Frenette.

part of teaching kids is excitement and enthusiasm. When students age out of KOB at 18, I try to bring them back into Youth Academy to serve as teaching assistants. We’ll teach them how to teach, and they can help pass it on.

“Many of our teachers have gone through the program themselves. We’re very big on mentoring. We’re not just creating musicians. We’re trying to create people who care about sustaining our community.”

Kimber is quick to give credit to Darby Brandli, CBA president emerita and the force behind the CBA Youth Academy, and the late Frank Solivan who started and led Kids on Bluegrass for many years. Both have helped shape countless musicians, many of them now playing music professionally.

“Darby is who brought me into the CBA family, and she’s one of my very best friends in the whole

world,” Kimber says. “I’m really proud to be associated with the California Bluegrass Association because they have been leaders in providing programming for youth. Both Darby and Frank will go down in bluegrass history. Their passion and commitment to educating kids is just beyond comparison.”



Kimber Ludiker and Darby Brandli at 2025 Youth Academy show. Photo by Gina Dilg.

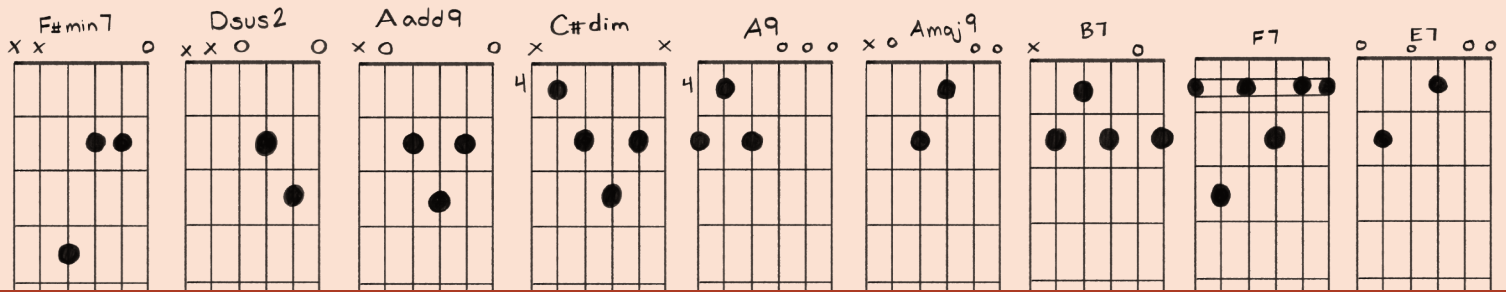
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# SPICING UP BLUEGRASS HARMONY WITH ALTERNATE CHORDS

by Adam Roszkiewicz, CBA Music Camps Director

One of the great things about bluegrass and old-time music is how you can convey such complete and moving musical expression with relatively simple means. Very often, just two or three chords get the job done quite nicely. Sometimes, however, it's fun to add a little extra color by changing the chords—or adding completely new ones. Waltzes are a great opportunity for this; they often have slightly more involved melodies that lend themselves to different harmonies, and their slower tempos give us time to find, and appreciate, these additions.

There are so many different directions we can go in when thinking about “re-harmonizing” a melody. But right off the bat, let's clarify what this even is: Re-harmonizing is the process of changing the chords to a song while keeping the melody the same. This often has genre-specific connotations which often invoke tonal colors of jazz or Western swing. I think maj7, 9th, and diminished chords are particularly pretty, so I used them in this example.

Another thing to mention before we get into the nitty gritty is that the guitar arrangement you see before you is sort of a kitchen sink of things I like to do when I have the opportunity to add extra elements to a chord progression. I wouldn't necessarily do everything laid out here in a single performance of this song—I'd more likely pick and choose a couple ideas and mix it up each time through. That said, I did try to make this hang together as a coherent arrangement so it's not just a grab bag of ideas.

The first choice I had to make was what key to put this song in, which right off the bat is kind of cheating; you don't always get to pick the key unless you're singing it yourself or calling it as a tune. But, since I'm the boss—for this article at least—I picked the key of A major, primarily because of all the fun open strings it offers us on the guitar. Then, as I was thinking about the approach to take, I decided to use as many of these open strings as extensions of the standard chords, like the previously mentioned 7ths and 9ths.

THEORY CORNER! Really quickly, let's talk about what “extensions” are. Most of the time in bluegrass, we play chords that have three different notes in them: the root, 3rd, and 5th notes of the scale the chord is based on. We call these chords “triads.” Sometimes we will play a chord with a number in its name, like a D7. This is a four-note chord that includes the root, 3rd, 5th, and—following the pattern of chord building by skipping every-other note—the 7th. We can keep adding every other note up the scale past the octave, like the 9th, 11th, and 13th. These added notes are the extensions of the chord. About that pesky 7th: when you see a chord that just has a number after it, like the D7 we were just talking about, the 7th has been lowered by one half step (or one fret). When you see a chord like an Amaj7, that chord includes the natural, or unaltered, 7th. Whew!

The reason I'm telling you this is to shed some light on the first three measures of the arrangement. In the first measure I'm playing an Aadd9 chord—most of the notes I'm playing are the root, 3rd, or 5th of an A chord, and I'm adding in the open B string, which is the 9th of the A scale. In the next measure I'm lowering one note, the root (A), by one half step to play the natural 7th (G#). This turns the chord into an Amaj9 chord because it includes the natural 7th and the 9th. Then, in the third measure, I'm lowering that same note by yet another half step to a flat 7th

(G). This turns the chord into an A9. In each instance, the open B string is playing the starring role as the 9th of the chord. Using open strings like this adds a shimmering quality to the sound, as though the guitar is in an open tuning, which I like a lot. As the song goes on, I try to keep using as many open strings as I can to keep that vibey open-tuning sound, which is made easier by all the open strings available on guitar in the key of A.

Here are some other highlights to look out for: in measure 6 I substitute an F# minor 7th chord, or the vi chord (that's a “six minor chord,” for those not fluent in Music Roman) for the A chord—the 1, or the I, or the root, or “tonic,” or “home” chord. I'm swapping in a chord that shares some notes and has a related sound, but gives the harmony a slightly different emotional shade. This kind of substitution is especially handy when the tune would otherwise sit on the home chord for several measures in a row.

Another fun move occurs in measure 7: we go from B7 to F7 to E7. Moving from B7 to F7 is called a “tritone substitution,” as the F note is three whole steps below the B note. This sounds great when moving on to the V chord, and you'll sound *really smart* referring to things as tritone substitutions, but you don't need to memorize the term for this move to enjoy how it works.. The tritone also sounds very heavy metal, if that's your thing.

There is one last little detail that I'd like to point out that happens in measure 14: I play a little walk up from E7 to A, using D/F# and then E/G#. These are called “slash” chords; the note after the slash is the note you play as the lowest note of the chord, in the bass. These are great when you want to vary the sound of a chord *without* adding extensions, and when you want to make walking bass lines. 🐘



Adam Roszkiewicz.

The standard chords are in boxes above our alternate chords. Give it a try! Follow along with a video of Roscoe's arrangement by scanning here →



# Tennessee Waltz

Pee Wee King/arr. Roszkiewicz

Standard: **A**  
Re-harm: Amaj6

Amaj9      **A7** A9      **D** Dsus2      C#dim      **A** A      Amaj9 F#min7

**E7** B7      F7      E7      **A** Aadd9      Amaj9      **A7** A9      **D** D      Dsus2

**A** A      Amaj9      **E7** E7      **A** E7/G# Amaj6      E7      **A** Amaj9      **C#7** C#7/G#      **D** D6/F#

13

**A** A      A/C#      Amaj6 F#min7      **E7** B7      F7      E7      **A** Aadd9

20

Amaj9      **A7** A9      **D** D      Dsus2      **A** A      Amaj9 **E7** E7      **A** Amaj6

26



Catherine Manning, center, leads a jam at Manning Music.  
Photo courtesy of Manning Music.



A class of Manning Music buskers seen in the wild.  
Photo courtesy of Manning Music.

## COMMUNITY MUSIC SCHOOLS

cont'd from front page

fundamentals like tone and intonation—but also start building repertoire right away. “We place a lot of emphasis on listening,” Catherine said. “We encourage students early on to get out and watch concerts, go to festivals, go to a square dance, go to a local jam—even if it’s just to listen.”

And when the time comes, they can step into the studio’s own adult jams, designed to be low-pressure and welcoming. Because many of the jam’s participants are also students, they share a common pool of tunes from the bluegrass repertoire. This helps the experience become less intimidating and more social, and a bridge to the larger scene.

That bridge is one of the clearest things these schools offer. Private lessons can help a player improve, and camps can immerse someone for a long weekend, or maybe a full week. But a community music school can alter what one’s life looks like week-to-week. It gives music a recurring place in a person’s life, and it puts that person in a room with other people who are also trying, listening, missing, improving—coming back.

This collective is foundational. Chad and Catherine draw a distinction between teaching instrumental technique and teaching what they call community music-making. In their telling, technique prepares a student to play an instrument well. Shifting the emphasis to community music-making, students learn to be a “musical citizen”—someone who can walk into a room, listen, respond, and contribute. Listening matters as much as playing.

Bluegrass literacy is not just a matter of licks and repertoire, but also history, etiquette, shared reference points, and the unwritten rules of the jam circle. Restraint becomes a skill. “One of the hardest things to teach—and one of the most important in bluegrass specifically—is knowing when not to play, or how to play less. Community music teaching puts it front and center,” Catherine said.

That kind of literacy is hard to fake because it is social. Manning’s teachers see students grow in the things that group settings naturally force into the open: locking in with other players, backing up tastefully, hearing chord changes, learning when to take a break and when not to, absorbing tunes by osmosis from the waiting room or the next lesson over. One student hears a tune from another room and says, “I want to

learn that one.” A child in the youth bluegrass class notices a classmate forgot to ornament the space between lyrics in a song and says, “I did fills for you!” At that moment, the school is doing more than producing better players. It is teaching students how to hear a gap and help fill it.

The Folk Farm arrives at similar ends, if by somewhat different means. Michaela contrasts the school not only with camps, but with more conventional music instruction. A camp, she says, lasts three days. The Folk Farm goes on. Most students return. Over time, that continuity produces long friendships, musical collaborators, and the confidence that comes from doing the thing repeatedly in public and semi-public settings. Students report milestones that would be easy to underrate if you were only measuring progress by virtuosity: playing an open mic for the first time after wanting to do it for 10 years; singing at a wedding or a funeral; starting a band; going to a jam and knowing it’s not gonna be a train wreck. Those are not small things. In bluegrass music, they may be the main things.

Michaela also emphasizes the speed of group learning. In her experience, students often grow “10 times faster” in a group setting than they do alone. Part of that is musical. Part of it is emotional. She begins each

new class blind copying the class on emails at first, then, a few weeks in, opens the channel and invites people to get in touch with each other to jam outside class if they want to. They do. They meet at each other’s houses. They form porch jams. They become roommates at events like the Great 48. They go to camps for the first time with a buddy. More than simply delivering instruction; the school creates a small society with music at the center.

At the Oakland Public Conservatory of Music, the Black Banjo and Fiddle Fellowship offers another version of what a bluegrass or old-time music school can be. Darcy Ford, a former fellow and now an instructor in the program, notes that the fellowship is still young; it is developing its curriculum, its standards, and its definition of what it means to complete the program. But its purpose is already distinct and powerful: to help create more Black musicians in this music, and to reconnect Black players with a string-band heritage, the Black roots of which have too often been acknowledged only partially.

As a fellow, Darcy learned the difference between simply reciting a piece of music and inheriting a musical tradition. She describes studying fiddle with her first teacher in the fellowship, Earl White, in a way that sometimes



Group class at the Folk Farm.  
Photo courtesy of Folk Farm.



Folk Farm Founder Michaela Thomas with a bass and young pickers.  
Photo courtesy of Manning Music.



Catherine Manning with tiny fiddlers.  
Photo courtesy of Manning Music.

resembled classical training: here is the tune, here is how it goes, now reproduce it accurately. Then came a revelation: When banjo fellow Patrice Strahan suggested they play the tune “Little Liza Jane,” Darcy assumed she needed to find a version and reproduce it faithfully. Patrice upended that assumption by suggesting Darcy listen to different versions, decide which lyrics and feel she liked, and make it her own. “Mind blown,” Darcy said. “I can do that?”

That shift runs through Darcy’s account of the fellowship. Fellows do not come in as novices; they already play—the fellows’ work is not about first contact with an instrument but about context, philosophy, and ownership. Darcy now teaches with a mind on facilitation more than instruction. In one stretch of lessons, she focused on Earl White’s style. Next came Gribble, Lusk, and York, with students listening to old recordings, comparing versions, and transcribing together by ear. “In our classes I want to listen and transcribe together—kind of a group transcription,” Darcy said. “I’m going to play what I heard and the important things that I pulled out ... and then see what they can hear. They are so good, they can pick things up very quickly.”

The point is not simply to download repertoire. It is to develop a relationship to the music—historical, cultural, and personal.

Darcy also describes the fellowship as part of a broader project of cultural repatriation: bringing the music back into Black community life not as an academic footnote, but as something alive. That can mean performance in school assemblies, telling children that the banjo

comes from an African instrument, or playing “Georgia Buck” or “Liza Jane” in a context where the message is plain: this music belongs to you, too. It can mean a future jam centered on Black fiddle players and Black roots music. It can mean students becoming teachers.

Put these three programs side by side and a pattern emerges: None of them defines success narrowly. At Manning Music, success may mean a retiree starting fiddle at 80 and showing up to jams for another decade. It may mean a returning player forming a Bay Area band after retirement. It may mean a child who began on fiddle at age three eventually making it to the Grand Ole Opry on mandolin. At the Folk Farm, it may mean jumping in at an open mic, finding a harmony part, attending a porch jam, or going to a first camp with friends. In the OPC’s Black Banjo and Fiddle Fellowship, it may mean performance, teaching, historical connection, or simply the freedom to decide what kind of musician to become.

That is what a community music school can give you: not just technique, though there is plenty of that; not just repertoire, though there is plenty of that too. It can give you a place to belong before you are “good,” a circle to listen your way into, a body-level understanding of how music feels, a cultural inheritance reclaimed, a set of friends who will meet you on the porch before class, and enough confidence to walk into the next jam carrying something useful.

For people trying to build a musical life rather than merely improve at an instrument, that is no small gift. It is the whole point.



Inaugural Black Banjo and Fiddle fellows from left: Patrice Strahan, Darcy Ford, and Joe Zavaan Johnson. Photo courtesy of Oakland Public Conservatory.

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12 - 1:30 pm: Workshops

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**CBA JULIAN FAMILY FIDDLE CAMP**

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[CALIFORNIABLUEGRASS.ORG](http://CALIFORNIABLUEGRASS.ORG)



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**WEISER, IDAHO**

June 4–7, 2026

Intensive 4-day Bluegrass Music Camp (3 finger or clawhammer banjo, bass, guitar, fiddle, or mandolin) in an intimate setting at the National Old Time Fiddlers' Contest and Festival site with instruction, band in residence, jams, concerts, and more.

[IDAHOBLUEGRASSCAMP.ORG](http://IDAHOBLUEGRASSCAMP.ORG)



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**NEVADA CITY, CALIFORNIA**

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[SIERRAFIDDLECAMP.ORG](http://SIERRAFIDDLECAMP.ORG)



**CBA SUMMER MUSIC CAMP**

**GRASS VALLEY, CALIFORNIA**

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[CALIFORNIABLUEGRASS.ORG](http://CALIFORNIABLUEGRASS.ORG)



**CBA YOUTH ACADEMY**

**GRASS VALLEY, CALIFORNIA**

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**CAMP BLUEGRASS PRIDE**

**ASTORIA, OREGON**

June 21–26, 2026

A week-long immersive, inclusive bluegrass camp on the Oregon coast with instruction, community, and multiple tracks including fiddle, guitar, banjo, voice, mandolin, upright bass, and songwriting.

[BLUEGRASSPRIDE.NET](http://BLUEGRASSPRIDE.NET)



**BIG SUR FIDDLE CAMP**

**BIG SUR, CALIFORNIA**

June 21–28, 2026

Music-immersion camp for string players of varied ages and abilities; the camp teaches a wide range of styles including bluegrass, old-time, Celtic, Cajun, Texas style, gospel, Western swing, classical, and jazz.

[BIGSURFIDDLECAMP.ORG](http://BIGSURFIDDLECAMP.ORG)



**CALIFORNIA COAST MUSIC CAMP**

**LOS GATOS, CALIFORNIA**

July 11–17; July 18–24, 2026

Two separate week-long sessions for acoustic musicians and singers of all levels; broad roots/acoustic program rather than a bluegrass-only camp; classes include old-time singing and applying swing theory.

[MUSICCAMP.ORG](http://MUSICCAMP.ORG)



**SUSANVILLE MUSIC CAMP**

**SUSANVILLE, CALIFORNIA**

June 23–25, 2026

Pre-festival bluegrass instructional camp with classes in guitar, banjo, mandolin, bass, and vocals, held just before the Susanville Bluegrass Festival at the Lassen County Fairgrounds.

[SUSANVILLEBLUEGRASSFESTIVAL.COM](http://SUSANVILLEBLUEGRASSFESTIVAL.COM)



### FIDDLE TUNES

#### PORT TOWNSEND, WASHINGTON

June 28–July 5, 2026

Major week-long immersion camp centered on fiddle traditions from multiple regions and styles, with classes, band labs, tutorials, dances, concerts, and jams; not bluegrass-only, but highly relevant to bluegrass-adjacent players.

[CENTRUM.ORG](http://CENTRUM.ORG)



### PUGET SOUND GUITAR WORKSHOP

#### NEAR BREMERTON, WASHINGTON

July 25–August 21, 2026

Four separate one-week adult acoustic music camps. Not a bluegrass-only program, but 2026 offerings included classes such as Beginning Bluegrass Guitar and Bluegrass Rhythm Class.

[PUGETSOUNDGUITARWORKSHOP.ORG](http://PUGETSOUNDGUITARWORKSHOP.ORG)



### WOTFA FIDDLE CAMP

#### CASHMERE, WASHINGTON

July 27–31, 2026

Week-long camp focused on old-time fiddling and related instruments, with classes in fiddle, guitar, mandolin, bass, and banjo, plus evening workshops and social events.

[FIDDLECAMP.WOTFA.ORG](http://FIDDLECAMP.WOTFA.ORG)



### AMERICAN BANJO CAMP

#### PORT ORCHARD, WASHINGTON

September 10–13, 2026

Long-weekend instructional camp with multiple levels of banjo plus full-time tracks in guitar, mandolin, fiddle, and bass; perhaps the closest Washington match to a pure bluegrass camp.

[AMERICANBANJOCAMP.COM](http://AMERICANBANJOCAMP.COM)



### BLUEGRASS IN THE GORGE

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Four-day / three-night bluegrass instructional retreat with classes and jamming for guitar, banjo, mandolin, fiddle, and bass.

[MENUCHA.ORG/PROGRAMS/BLUEGRASS](http://MENUCHA.ORG/PROGRAMS/BLUEGRASS)



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#### PETALUMA, CALIFORNIA

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# PRE-SHOW JAMS AT SWEETWATER

By Bruce Sadownik, CBA Regional Director, Marin County.  
Photos by John G. Woodworth.

After hosting a table giving CBA a strong presence at more than two-dozen bluegrass and roots concerts since 2022 at the storied Sweetwater Music Hall in Mill Valley, Della Mae's Kimber Ludiker reached out last August out to ask: "Wouldn't it be cool to bring in a bunch of local bluegrass players to have a jam before the Della Mae show next week, and the Dellas will come out and join the jam? Can you make that happen?"

Well—it did happen! We put together a host band, and CBA and Sweetwater promoted the jam through the CBA and Sweetwater social media channels. A great group of pickers turned out, and a large audience filled Sweetwater's patio. The community spirit was at 10, but still somehow went to 11—yes, that's a Spinal Tap reference—when the Dellas appeared after their sound check, instruments in hand, and joined the jam.

Six more great jams have convened—often joined by the headliners—since that first pilot! Mark your calendars for the next one, before the Dan Tyminski Band in July!

Thanks to CBA photographer John G. Woodworth for giving us a feel for the fun!



The inaugural pre-show jam, above, at Sweetwater Music Hall with members of Della Mae in August 2025. Right photo: Della Mae's Kimber Ludiker (left) jams with other fiddlers before the show.



Laurie Lewis (left) and her band The Right Hands appeared in February 2026; Laurie joined the preshow jam with Marlon Dubaniewicz on banjo while fiddler Devorah Sperber listened.



Above, a big welcome jam for Special Consensus's 50th anniversary tour show in January, with openers Yoseff Tucker & the Bow Ties. Pictured left: Greg Cahill, on banjo, plays on a song led by fiddler Louise Franz.



Boston-based Rachel Sumner and her band appeared in March 2026. Above, Rachel (guitar, left) and Traveling Light fiddler Kat Wallace jamming while Tim Weed (banjo) and Jennifer Margalit (far right) sing in harmony.



The Next-Generation Dead Heads concert in March 2026 featured Spencer Krenz, members of Broken Compass Bluegrass, and Dead Set 805. Above, jammers pass it on out on the Sweetwater patio. Pictured right, from left: Dan Norton and Ansel Iisaka taking part in both making, and enjoying, the music.



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Afternoon class at Julian Family Fiddle Camp.  
Photo by David K. Cupp.

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A limited number of Pinetree Partner passes are available. For more information, scan the code below, visit [FathersDayFestival.com](http://FathersDayFestival.com), or give us a call at 844-BLU-GRASS (844-258-4727).

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## Monthly Trivia Quiz

By Bert Daniel, Breakdown Contributor

In March we asked for **the name of the only daughter of a famous big band leader who was among the first people to perform at Paul's Saloon.**

It turns out that our readers have long memories! No less than 21 folks knew we were looking for Ingrid Herman—then Fowler, then Littlefield, then Reese (recollections of her last name(s) varied). Scott Southard, Bob Palasek, Debby McClatchy, Cathy Cannon, Joselyn Sky, Richard Brooks, Suzanne Suwanda, Peter Thompson, Kristin Melling, Jon DeLong, John Erwin, Tom Payne, Mike Howard, Karen Walter, Stan Oberg, Ray Edlund, Bill Amatneek, Sandi Kirouac, Melinda Russell, Bill McClellan, and Carlo Calabi all had the right answer.

Several members recalled her band Styx River Ferry with then-husband Bob Fowler and others convinced Paul Lampert to host bluegrass at what would be ground zero for the Bay Area bluegrass explosion of the 1970s, Paul's Saloon. Karen Walter shared the name of the bar was The Paragon back then. Many also knew that Ingrid went on to be one of the co-founders of Nashville's Station Inn.

Peter Thompson wrote: "The obituary of Ingrid Myrtle Herman (Fowler) (Littlefield) Reese noted

that, 'During the many eulogies, people repeatedly mentioned Reese's laugh, a sound that rang out loud and often whenever she was among friends ... Wherever she went, Reese became loved for her open spirit, her frank words, her ribald humor, and her encouragement of other musicians, many of whom benefited directly from her generosity.'"

The Google Random Number Generator helped us determine that **Karen Walter** is the winner of a coveted, limited-edition CBA 50th anniversary denim jacket!

## MAY TRIVIA

This month, we want to know: **"Who was the first editor of the CBA newsletter, the Bluegrass Breakdown, and for what other important musical organization were they also the editor for?"**

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

This month's prize is an "I'd Rather be Pickin'" CBA License plate frame!

Only CBA members are eligible to win; if there is more than one correct response, the prize winner will be selected at random. The winner will be announced in the July 2026 issue of the *Bluegrass Breakdown*.