



# BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

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



June 2026

## SWEET SALLY KICKS OFF FATHER'S DAY FESTIVAL

by Jason Dilg, Bluegrass Breakdown Managing Editor

A trio of young Bay Area musicians will kick off the main stage shows at Father's Day Festival this June with a reputation as serious players and singers who are already comfortable on festival stages and making music that can move from a bluegrass drive to a jazzy groove without losing a beat.

Though still in their teens, Sweet Sally's sound is a product of years of lessons, camps, school ensembles, youth programs, jams, and festival jams and performances—the sort of musical upbringing that many California bluegrass families know by heart.

Mandolinist Sophia Sparks traces her musical path back to Manning Music in Berkeley, where she started taking lessons with Sharon Gilchrist when she was about 8. "This is where I really think I got my fundamentals and roots, and where it all really began for me," she says.



From left: Lucy Khadder, Clare O'Grady, and Sophia Sparks. Photo courtesy of Sweet Sally.

Through the Manning Music community, Sophia met young players she still plays with today. That same circle helped connect her to the Father's Day Festival, Kids on Bluegrass, the International Bluegrass Music Association's annual convention, and the larger CBA community. "The Father's Day Festival is what I'd consider my first experience with real jamming and just getting to know a whole slew of people in the CBA," Sophia says.

Fiddler Lucy Khadder's list of formative places is a map of Bay Area and California youth music: the CBA Youth Academy, Oaktown Jazz Workshops, the Oakland School for the Arts, Big Sur Fiddle Camp, and Shasta Music Camp. She names Chad Manning, Mads Tolling, and Alex Hargreaves among the teachers and mentors who shaped not only how she plays, but how she thinks about music.

Bassist Clare O'Grady points to Oaktown Jazz Workshops and Oakland School for the Arts as places where all three bandmates learned more than notes. "These programs brought us lots of experience with playing professional gigs and forming our performance etiquette," she says, "as well as helping us work on technical skills and playing many different variations of music."

Before Sweet Sally became a trio, it was Lucy and Sophia, two young players around 12 years old, looking for a band name. They found it in "Sweet Sally Brown," a bluegrass song they knew partly through Tom Rozum's version. Sophia also liked the way the name sat beside other all-women bluegrass bands, including Sister Sadie and Della Mae. The name stuck.

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## DIRECTOR'S WELCOME

### THE BRIGHT FUTURE

by Pete Ludé, CBA Executive Director

For 35 years, engaging our youth—and building the next generation of bluegrass musicians—has been a primary goal of the California Bluegrass Association. What began as a few experimental children's activities back in the early 1990's quickly spawned the **Kids on Bluegrass** stage performance program directed by Frank Solivan Sr., which drew dozens of youngsters at the Father's Day Festival each year. This was soon followed by the annual **Youth Academy**—a mini summer camp held during the festival for 8 to 16-year-olds—to give kids a fun, immersive experience learning bluegrass with masterful instructors. Not long after, the CBA **Kids Instrument Lending Library** launched to make sure everyone had access to a quality instrument to play. Then, the KidFest festival program began engaging kids as young as 6 with music, crafts, and games. Most recently, we have added the **After-School Bluegrass Club**, which brings

*cont'd on page 2 →*

## CBA YOUTH ACADEMY

### YOUNG MENTORS GUIDE THE NEXT GENERATION

by Jason Dilg, Bluegrass Breakdown Managing Editor

Each year during the Father's Day Festival, the CBA Youth Academy helps young musicians advance as players, singers, and jammers. With hands-on instruction, group music-making, and guidance from young, but experienced, mentors, students sharpen their skills while finding friendship, confidence, and a deeper connection to bluegrass. It's where California's next generation of bluegrass musicians comes to learn, grow, and play together.

This marks the program's 13th year, and it is going strong under the expert direction of renowned fiddler—and IBMA's 2022 Mentor of the Year—Kimber Ludiker. When asked what makes the Youth Academy experience special, she's quick to point to the inspiration that the kids take from being able to make music with their friends. "When kids meet other kids who play music, they're more likely to continue doing

it," Kimber said. "They're put into a big group of kids, playing music with their peers, and pushing each other to be better musicians."

The academy is supported by a staff of young instructors who have come through the ranks of the CBA Youth Program themselves. "They've had young mentors, and they, in turn, get to do that for other kids," Kimber said. Kimber's academy instructors know a thing or two about coming to bluegrass at a young age. Silas Jude, a banjo player, first heard bluegrass at the Berkeley farmer's market when he was just 4, and was hooked. Siblings Jayna and Jasper Manning grew up in the Manning Music school community, headed by their parents, Chad and Catherine. Izzy Katz, who is studying education and bluegrass at East Tennessee State University, is the daughter of Jared Katz, who has been teaching bluegrass to students at Cabrillo Elementary in Pacifica for years.

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## BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

June 2026 – Youth Issue

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

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## WELCOME MESSAGE

*cont'd from front page*

weekly music instruction to kids in underserved areas throughout California, with our first program successfully launched in Humboldt county. You can learn more about this inspirational program on page 5.

In this month's Bluegrass Breakdown, we take time to review these activities, profile one of our amazing next-generation youth bands, **Sweet Sally**, and hear from the experts about raising musical children. Why are these youth programs so important? Well, in my view, it's really two things. First, the core bluegrass fan base—that is, most of the folks we see at bluegrass festivals are, shall we say, rather mature. For many of us who have enjoyed this music as part of our lives, we want to make sure it isn't relegated to the annals of history.

Secondly, there are important benefits of exposing kids to music at an early age. Researchers describe how music education brings significant

benefits in cognitive development, improved academic performance, strengthened cognitive skills, improved academic performance, enhanced social skills and regulated emotional expression. Learning music strengthens brain function, increasing memory, attention, and motor skills, while building confidence, perseverance, and discipline. And, in my experience, bluegrass is among the best ways to engage kids to music: it's easy to start, focused on group collaboration, and unlimited in instrumental and vocal inspiration.

Want to see this in person? Just join us for the upcoming Father's Day Bluegrass Festival in Grass Valley later this month. You might also want to provide volunteer or financial support to keep our favorite music alive—it is truly a community effort to help the next generation learn the joys of bluegrass (and all other) music. You can contact our VP of Youth Activities, **Helen Foley**, with your ideas at [Youth@CaliforniaBluegrass.net](mailto:Youth@CaliforniaBluegrass.net).



# Long Beach Bluegrass Festival July 13!

by Donna Hargis, CBA Southern California Regional Director

Mark your calendars for July 13: the third-annual Long Beach Bluegrass Festival is calling your name!

We are beyond excited to welcome **Water Tower** back to the stage as our headliner. They bring the rare blend of being deeply rooted bluegrass, with enough crossover to catch the attention of those new to this music. Joining them is **Dennis Witcher & the Brew**, a true pillar of the bluegrass world. Dennis carries the tradition with ease and heart, and you can feel the history and joy in every note. And keep your eye on **Faultliner**, a group of young, fearless shredders who are already turning heads.

Members from all three bands will come together for a one-of-a-kind old-time all-star set for our very first **square dance**, led by L.A.'s legendary caller Jeremy Horton. No experience is needed, just a

willingness to laugh, move, and maybe spin a stranger or two into a new friend.

The festival is free, family-friendly, and tucked into the shady, breezy comfort of Recreation Park. You'll find tons of jams where all are welcome to watch or join in on the picking, and free workshops, food trucks, and even an instrument petting zoo where folks can get their hands on an instrument—and perhaps catch the bug!

This event is put on by Save the Shell, a non-profit dedicated to restoring and using the historic bandshell of Recreation Park for its intended purpose: building community through live music!

Saturday, July 11th, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Come as you are, stay as long as you like.



Water Tower megajam finale at 2025 Long Beach Bluegrass Festival. Photo by David K. Cupp.

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

## SWEET SALLY

cont'd from front page

"Lucy and I wanted to expand the trio, and our top priority was to find a bassist, so Clare was kind of perfect," Sophia says. She had met Clare through Oaktown Jazz, where Clare was already turning heads as a jazz bass player, even though she had not been playing long. "We kind of got her into the whole bluegrass scene, and she really adds a lot to the group now, not just being a bassist, but also a singer and just overall a really good bandmate."

Clare's role changed the architecture of the band. The fiddle and mandolin had more room to move. The vocals gained low-end harmonies. The arrangements could breathe differently. Clare brings "groove, pocket, and a low-end backbone," Lucy says.

The trio's favorite listening includes bluegrass, jazz, folk, country, singer-songwriter music, and the broader acoustic world. Lucy mentions Hawktail, Crooked Still, Sierra Hull, I'm With Her, Bella White, and Béla Fleck as artists who have shaped the band's thinking about sound and stage presence. Sophia adds Chris Thile, Nickel Creek, The Goat Rodeo Sessions, Béla Fleck's My Bluegrass Heart, and the Flecktones. Her current listening also stretches to Kacey Musgraves, Watchhouse, M.k.gee, John Mayer, Bella White, and Tony Rice. Lucy has had Julian Lage, Mike Barnett, and Punch Brothers on repeat.

At Berklee College of Music, Lucy has also been studying music well beyond a standard bluegrass frame—this spring, two of her ensembles explored compositions by Tony Rice and Pat Metheny. Another class, "Spirituals and Black Folk Traditions," came through Berklee's roots music program. "I think we all love figuring out how to incorporate a variety of influences into our bluegrass roots," she says.

Sophia says jazz opened up that sense of possibility during her freshman year of high school. "I guess you'd find that our arrangements are not standard bluegrass and there are definitely a lot of jazz components within them, such as groove choices and chord progressions," she says. "... we



From left: Sophia Sparks, Lucy Khadder, and Clare O'Grady. Photos courtesy of Sweet Sally.

all appreciate bluegrass being in our roots, it's more interesting to both us—and, I'd say, to our audience—to go beyond bluegrass and incorporate the sounds of other genres such as jazz, folk, singer-songwriter, country, etc."

When writing and arranging, Lucy says the band often starts with a simple form, then adds rhythmic variation, instrumental interplay, or dynamic shifts as the song evolves. Sophia adds that these choices usually come after playing something a few times and noticing what feels best.

On coming up through camps and festivals in the bluegrass community, Lucy says: "Growing up in this music has felt incredibly supportive and fun. We were always just trying to sound like our inspirations while slowly finding our own style and voice along the way, and the music community around us was always very encouraging."

Sophia says the community inspires her musicianship. "If it weren't for the warm, welcoming bluegrass community, I definitely would not be where I am musically at all," she says. "No matter where my music career goes or doesn't go, my heart will always be closest to this type of music."

That community has also given the band a stage to return to. For Sophia, playing Father's Day on the main stage still feels "kind of surreal," partly because she grew up watching some of her favorite artists there. For Lucy, the festival is tied to youth programs, campground jams, and friends she hopes to see again this year. Clare

thinks about the social life of the music—meeting birds of a feather and jamming together.

"One of the most beautiful things about bluegrass as a genre is how social and community-oriented it is," Clare says, "and using our musical skills to get together and make music with others who speak this language is one of the most beautiful and meaningful things to us."

The trio has already heard the "future of bluegrass" talk that often gathers around exciting young bands, and they do not seem especially weighed down by it. Lucy calls it "a healthy kind of pressure." Sophia mostly takes it as a compliment. Clare says her excitement and gratitude are stronger than any pressure.

At Father's Day, Sweet Sally hopes listeners hear both sides of the band: the deep imprint of traditional bluegrass and the pull of new ideas from jazz, folk, and modern acoustic music.

"We want it to feel rooted and familiar while also being genuinely our own thing," Lucy says. 🐘

Sweet Sally performs at FDF at 10 a.m. Thursday on the Main Stage, and at 1:30 p.m. Friday on Pioneer Stage. Read our full interview here →



Molly generously donated a Martin D-X2E Molly Tuttle signature acoustic-electric with a solid spruce top, figured mahogany HPL back and sides, and a 1940s-style neck with 11/16" nut. This fine guitar features scalloped X-bracing, moon-phase inlays, and Martin E1 electronics.

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# LEARNING BLUEGRASS, BUILDING COMMUNITY

## The After-School Bluegrass Club in Southern Humboldt

by Helen Foley, CBA Vice President, Youth Programs

In Southern Humboldt County, students look forward to their Friday afternoons—and not just because they are eager for the weekend. Fridays are when their CBA After-School Bluegrass Club meets, and it is about so much more than just learning an instrument.

These clubs bring young people together to learn, play, and connect through bluegrass music. The Southern Humboldt chapter started in collaboration with Help's On The Way, a local nonprofit dedicated to developing music and arts programs for youth, and has quickly grown from a small program into a meaningful gathering place for students and families across the region. Through this joint effort, the ABC program has become both effective and deeply personal—offering not just instruction, but belonging to participants and families alike.

Each week, students come together to learn the fundamentals of bluegrass and roots music through dedicated group guitar and fiddle lessons. But the heart of the program is not found in scales or chords—it's in the way students learn to listen, respond, and play together.

Bluegrass is conversational music; there is no hiding in a jam circle. You make eye contact, take turns, support each other, and learn when to step forward and when to step back. For young musicians, these are particularly powerful lessons—both in relation to music as well as their overall development, helping them build confidence and communication skills. These are exactly the valuable lessons we are seeing come to life through the ABCs.

Students travel from across the region—including from remote communities like Shelter Cove and Fortuna—to be part of the program. Many families make a full evening of it: sessions end with a shared meal and a jam where students, parents, and local musicians gather. What began as just a class has become an intergenerational connection point for the larger community.

For some students, the impact has been immediate and deeply felt.

Ethan, an 11-year-old who recently moved away from Humboldt, told his parents that what he misses most about his former home is the After-School Bluegrass Club. When he recently returned to visit, reconnecting with the program was his top priority.

For others, the impact has shown up in more subtle but equally meaningful ways. “Initially my child was very shy,” said Paige Finley, whose daughter joined the program this year. “By the third class, she had memorized her chords and gained a new confidence.” Another parent noted that with proper instruction, her daughter “started to understand chord changes and rhythm—

and now plays on her own and is inspired to learn more songs.”

For families in a rural area, the program has also become a rare point of connection. “Community means everything to us,” said Courtney Lindburg, whose daughter has participated in all three sessions of the budding ABC program. “To find more people to connect with through music has been so special for our family.” Another said that even living 30 minutes away, the program has helped them “expand our relationships with some really cool and interesting folks.”

Most recently, the last Friday session of March marked a clear turning point. For the first time, students in the program picked up different instruments during their break and began

jamming together on their own. No instruction. No prompting. Just kids wanting to listen, experiment, and play together. It was a small moment—but a huge indicator of impact.

As Iliria Ballard, co-founder of Help's On the Way along with her husband Jason, said, “That's when you know it's working. It's slow and steady—but they're starting to hear each other, to trust themselves, and to connect through the music.”

This kind of progress depends on consistency. By showing up week after week and creating a stable environment where kids feel safe enough to try, fail, and try again, the ABC program shows what is possible when kids are given the necessary time to grow.

That kind of consistency takes support. Earlier this year, the After-School Bluegrass Club almost ended because of a funding gap. Community support helped keep it alive, raising the necessary funds in just a week, and a recent grant from the McLean Foundation has provided an important boost. However, the reality remains: programs like this require ongoing investment to be sustained and to grow.

To help meet that need, a fundraising concert is scheduled for Thursday, September 10, at Sweetwater Music Hall, with more details to be announced soon. Events like this play a critical role in ensuring that programs like the CBA's ABCs can continue to expand and make a greater difference in the lives of young people.

Giving kids a place to belong, helping them find their voice, literally and figuratively. Teaching them how to listen, collaborate, and be part of something bigger than themselves. That's what the After-School Bluegrass Club offers—and that's why it matters. 🐻



Instructors Gardner Boyd, left, and Bob Daley, right, lead guitar classes at the ABC club in Southern Humboldt. Photos courtesy of Help's On The Way.

# RAISING MUSICAL CHILDREN

by Jon Hartley Fox

June means the Father's Day Festival, and the FDF means, for many families, Kids on Bluegrass. KOB and Youth Academy are the CBA's nationally renowned youth education programs, and with both in the spotlight this month, it seemed an appropriate time to focus on the role played by families in the musical education of children and teens.

Group programs like KOB and Youth Academy are, of course, but two of the many ways kids can learn music today. The widespread availability of private lessons, jam sessions, YouTube tutorials, instructional videos and print media makes it easier than ever to learn how to play music. Or at least get started on the journey.

What follows is a mixed bag of advice about raising musical kids, including pro tips from teachers, observations from parents, thoughts on motivating young musicians and a discussion on the right age to start lessons.

The participants in this roundtable discussion include **Dave Gooding**, **Theresa Behr Gooding**, **Jack Tuttle**, and **Catherine Manning**. Among them, they have raised eight musical kids, an astonishing four of them currently working as professional musicians at the highest level of bluegrass. In addition, Tuttle and Manning are music teachers of long standing who have taught hundreds of young musicians between them.

**Dave Gooding and Theresa Behr Gooding**, residents of Vacaville, have raised three musical sons, two of whom are now working as professional bluegrass musicians. Oldest son Josh splits his time between three bands: the Jason Carter Band, Five Mile Mountain Road, and the Bays Mountain Cut-Ups. Youngest son John plays guitar in the Po' Ramblin Boys, a job he's held since October 2024.

A long-time teacher at Gryphon Music in Palo Alto, **Jack Tuttle** is the father of three musical kids, two of them professional musicians. Molly is one of the brightest stars in today's bluegrass world, with a Grammy and several IBMA awards to her credit. Her younger brother Sullivan is the guitar player in A.J. Lee & Blue Summit.

**Catherine Manning** is the co-owner with her husband **Chad** of Manning Music in Berkeley. She and Chad have raised two musical kids, son Jasper (mandolin) and daughter Jayna (guitar), both of whom play with their father in the band Charlie Torch.



Jasper, left, playing mandolin with Chad on guitar.  
Photo courtesy of Catherine Manning.

**THERESA BEHR GOODING:** "When it comes to raising musical children, there isn't really a formula. The only formula is that each kid is different and unique. What works for one kid might not work with another. You want to pay attention that you're not turning your kids off something they could potentially love. You need to figure out what they're curious about and then give them the opportunity to explore it."

**JACK TUTTLE:** "I didn't have any ambition of raising professional musicians. My only motivation for teaching my kids how to play an instrument was that I wanted to be able to play music with them. I really enjoyed playing with my dad growing up, and I wanted to be able to do the same thing with my kids."

**DAVE GOODING:** "The initial exposure to the music is important. I remember I was going through a Red Allen phase [as a listener] when Josh was about 4. I'd put on a Red Allen record, and he'd just stand there, completely transfixed. I don't think it's an accident that he now has several Red Allen songs in his repertoire."

**JACK:** "Take your kids to shows and, better yet, festivals. Have music playing around the home or in the car as much as possible. If your child is learning to play bluegrass, it's essential that they hear bluegrass as much as possible. Learning music is very similar to learning a language and we learn language much faster when we're immersed in it."

**CATHERINE MANNING:** "Take your kids to see live music. It doesn't have to be an expensive concert. It can be musicians playing at the farmers market or jamming at a festival."

**THERESA:** "I got my kids involved in Kids on Bluegrass early on, not because I had any thought of them being performers or anything like that. They just loved it. The best thing about KOB for my kids was the relationships. It gave them a whole set of friends their own age who shared the passion for the same kind of music they did. It was a community that gave them a sense of belonging."

**JACK:** "It's important that kids don't start too early, before they have enough focus to be able to learn. Some parents start their kids younger, but I personally think 5 is about as young as any kid should start. Molly started guitar at 8, Sully at 7, and Michael started mandolin at 6, and I'd say those were the right ages for them as individuals. I've had 6-year-old fiddle students who had started two years earlier, and they were at about the same place as my beginning fiddle students would be after six weeks. I think they just started too young."

"The most important things when teaching kids are excitement and enthusiasm. I'm a big kid myself, which can help sometimes. I can be loud, which can also help sometimes."

Kimber Ludiker, Director, CBA Youth Academy



Young friends AJ Lee and Molly Tuttle rehearse together. CBA file photo.

**CATHERINE:** “Both of our kids had fiddles in their hands around 1 year old, but they really started fiddling around age 2. They were inspired by our musical community. Jasper switched to mandolin when he was 9, and Jayna dabbled in all of the instruments.”

“The minimum age I usually tell prospective parents is 3 years old. However, I have successfully started many 2-year-olds, and all of them are still playing today as teens or adults. I tell parents there isn’t one ‘correct’ age to start because every child is different. Some are ready at 2, and some aren’t ready until they’re older.”

**JACK:** “The big question is always, ‘How much should they practice?’ This isn’t an exact science here—the parents must exercise judgment and wisdom in the matter. For ages 5 to 7, it could mean as short as a few minutes a day, later 15 minutes a day, and then 30 minutes. This is more dependent on the kid’s maturity than age, though. When my mandolin playing son was 6, he was good for 20 minutes a day, five or six days a week. When my guitar playing son started at 7, I had him play only two to five minutes a day maybe five times a week. Of course, after he learned to get some music out of the guitar he wanted to practice more and more because he was excited about it.”

**THERESA:** “All three of our kids took private lessons with Matt Dudman. Matt was a great teacher for them, because he took special care to make things interesting and fun for them. That way, it doesn’t become something they are burdened by or something they have to do because Mom makes them. Matt really paid close attention to how they felt.”

**JACK:** “Play with your kids if possible. This can be a huge help. It certainly made the difference for my own kids. If you don’t play, make sure to take an interest. Listen to them play, show them off to family and friends. Kids need validation, especially from their parents.”

**CATHERINE:** “We try to encourage [using] the word ‘play’ instead of ‘practice.’ Playing often comes in waves at any age, so relax. It’s okay if your child isn’t practicing as much as you’d like. As long as they continue finding joy in music, they’ll carry it with them for the rest of their lives.”

**JACK:** “The most important person in the whole process—even more important than the teacher—is the parent. The parent has the control to create the environment that makes it all stick and makes it last. Every super-talented student I’ve ever taught had a very involved parent. I only have the student for a half hour once a week, so my input was limited to that lesson. The parent needs to set them up for the passion that’s going to make it all work.”

**CATHERINE:** “I expect parents to be their child’s biggest fan. I send new parents an email titled ‘How Can I Encourage My Child to Fiddle at Home?’ In it, I explain that very few young children will play entirely on their own. They want to play for you. I encourage parents to avoid criticism and instead use supportive phrases like, ‘I enjoy listening to



Exploring new instruments at the 2025 FDF petting zoo. Photo by David K. Cupp.

you.’ Don’t be critical or negative about your child’s musical endeavors or creative self-expression.”

**JACK:** “When my kids started playing, I paid close attention to their mood and I’d delay, shorten, or even cancel their practice when they were too tired or hungry to effectively practice. There were times when after only a couple of minutes I’d grab their instrument and say ‘Okay, that’s enough for now’ when I’d see the frustration build. More important than anything else is to keep frustration to a minimum and keep it as fun as possible. Don’t stress over a bad day or a bad week.”

**CATHERINE:** “[In terms of keeping kids motivated] I would say: attune yourself to your child and discover what motivates them. This answer is different for every child and at every age. Some kids want to play music with you, and we’ve had many parents start learning music so they can play alongside their child. Some younger kids respond well to practice charts or reward systems. Taking teens to festivals can help them find peers to play music with and be inspired by. And most importantly, find a great teacher your child truly connects with.” 🐘

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# THE BASS THAT KEEPS ON GIVING

by Sharon Khadder, CBA Kids Instrument Lending Librarian



Clare O'Grady performs with the CBA bass.



Vickie Vaughn and the CBA bass with Della Mae at FDF in 2022. Photo by Robin Frenette.

There's a bass living in the California Bluegrass Association's Kids Instrument Lending Library that has a few stories to tell.

After starting its journey in 1962, it arrived as a donation many years ago—a generous act by someone who wanted to see it played rather than forgotten. And played, it has been. Over the years, this bass has passed through the hands of a long succession of teenagers who came to bluegrass with curiosity and big dreams. Some of them went on to college music programs and continue to jam. A few are names you might recognize from festival lineups today.

But the instrument's use hasn't been limited to students. This bass has stood on the main stage in Grass Valley, played by seasoned professionals from across the country performing for our Father's Day Festival audience. The kids who check it out of the lending library know this about it. They know they're playing the same instrument that greats like Vickie Vaughn have played, and that knowledge inspires them to practice and to appreciate what they have been given.

Like any instrument that gets serious use, it has needed attention over the years. Skilled luthiers have tuned it, adjusted it, repaired it, and coaxed

it back to its best self from time to time. The remarkable thing about a well-made acoustic instrument is that this kind of care doesn't just restore it—it improves it. The wood settles. The tone deepens. The playability gets better with the years. This bass, after all its years and all its players, plays better today than it ever has.

That's the magic of the Kids Instrument Lending Library: A single donated instrument can ignite a career, connect a child to a musical tradition, and keep giving long after the donation occurs. The instrument becomes the legacy.

We'd love to write more stories like this one—and to do that, we need more instruments. If you have a playable fiddle, banjo, guitar, mandolin, Dobro, or bass gathering dust in a closet or a corner, please consider donating it to the lending library. It doesn't need to be perfect. It just needs to be playable. The next young musician is out there waiting, and your instrument might be the one that changes everything for them.

To learn more or to arrange a donation, please email our lending librarian, Sharon Khadder, at [instruments@californiabluegrass.net](mailto:instruments@californiabluegrass.net).



JUNE 17-20 2026



AGES 8-16 GRASS VALLEY, CA

FIDDLE, GUITAR, MANDOLIN,  
BANJO, BASS & VOCALS!

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## CBA YOUTH ACADEMY

cont'd from front page

They agree that having fun is the most important part of Youth Academy. "If students are enjoying themselves, they're naturally going to stick with the music longer and play more, and that's what really builds lifelong musicians," Jasper said. Still, getting up the nerve to play music in a group setting, and prepare a performance, can be a real challenge for students, and the instructors are there to help. "I'm most excited about helping kids find their confidence and start to feel like they have their own voice in the music," Jayna said.

Research shows that having a connection with a mentor is an important success factor in learning just about anything, and that seems to come naturally to the academy's young instructors. "My favorite part of working at the Youth Academy is developing a connection with the kids and helping them find and explore their passion for bluegrass," Izzy said. "Teaching young children is so inspiring because they are so eager to learn. Their excitement makes me excited, and I have never regretted an hour spent encouraging a love for music in kids," she added.



Jayna Manning on guitar, teaching at 2025 Youth Academy. Photo by Alan M. Bond.

# Kids on Bluegrass:

## AN INSIDE LOOK

by Henry Strid, Kid on Bluegrass

I remember one of the first years I did Kids on Bluegrass: I was on stage, just trying to get settled, when I looked over and noticed [Dirty Kitchen's banjo player] Mike Munford standing off to the side, watching. He had been one of my favorite banjo players for years, and I was terrified. But when we made eye contact, he gave me a big thumbs up, which definitely took a little of the pressure off. Later on I got to jam with him and he was the nicest guy. The Kids on Bluegrass program seems to somehow create this kind of magic quite often. I feel so lucky to get to be a part of it.

The Kids on Bluegrass program really helped me get more comfortable performing and being more confident in myself. Back before my first audition for the program, I was feeling rather nervous about making the cut. As soon as I got there, though, I felt a sense of belonging and that put me right at ease. The kids seemed so different than the people I was used to being around—these musical kids were friendly, loved playing bluegrass music together, and were not glued to their phones. Being surrounded by younger people who were so playful and who had such love for the music was inspiring. I ended up meeting some of my best friends for the first time that day. Later on, we all wandered around the festival grounds until the early hours of the morning, looking for the next great jam. I was having the time of my life!

Kids on Bluegrass focuses on performing, and compared to some of the other programs that I had experienced, this felt like it was actually going to help prepare me to be in a band. We were learning not just how to play, but how to be on stage, work a mic, and how to put together a great show. In other youth programs, it often felt like the goal was just to get a big group of kids to play something on stage so that parents could get some photos. But in Kids on Bluegrass,

everyone was working together to create something meaningful that we could all be proud of.

Getting to be a part of the California bluegrass community, and the Kids on Bluegrass in particular, has had a huge impact on me. I have heard that you become like the people you surround yourself with, and getting to be around all of these people who are working really hard and making it all happen makes me want to work harder and make it happen, too. I remember Frank Solivan once told me something along the lines of "You are not allowed to quit—we need you." He said it kind of half jokingly, but it has really helped me stay motivated, and it has helped me through some tough times in music.

Whenever I get to a California festival, so many folks go out of their way to smile and say hello, and I feel like I'm always getting invited to be a part of things. That extra bit of support and encouragement has made a huge difference, and I'm not sure where I would be in my playing without it. It feels so nice to be a part of a community where I care about so many people and I feel that so many people care about me. It is a bit of a culture shock to transition back to regular life, where people don't seem quite so friendly and engaging. I am so grateful to have all of this positive community, and these events—especially the Father's Day Festival—are the highlights of the year.

If you are someone who is considering being a part of Kids on Bluegrass, or if you are the parent of someone who is, I can't recommend it highly enough. To me it felt like one of the only youth programs where the more I put into it the more I got out of it. It has opened so many doors for me. I encourage you to give it a try—it very well might change your life like it did for me!



Henry plays banjo on the train to Great 48. Photo by Bruce Sadownick.

**Kids On Bluegrass auditions are held Thursday morning of Father's Day Festival. Practices from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. and 1 to 3 p.m. on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday; performances Friday and Saturday evening. Free.**



### KIDS & FUN AT FDF

#### FUNGRASS

For children and siblings not yet ready for intensive classes during Summer Music Camp, June 8-11. Enjoy music, arts and crafts, and fun! Register on the Summer Music Camp registration page. \$189.

#### KIDFEST

For family fun for all ages. Children must be accompanied by an adult. Music, sun-dye shirts, arts and crafts. Drop in 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. at KidFest Corral to the southwest of the main stage, Thursday through Saturday. Free; \$10 for sun-dye shirt materials.



Henry, left, on stage at KOB performance at the 2024 Father's Day Festival. Photo by Robin Frenette.

# Santa Cruz at 50

## Richard Hoover and the Sound He Set Out to Build

by Jason Dilg, Bluegrass Breakdown Managing Editor  
Photos courtesy of Santa Cruz Guitar Company

Richard Hoover remembers a time when a player could pick up a Santa Cruz guitar, love what they heard, and still hesitate to buy it. “Someone could have played a Santa Cruz and thought, wow, this is the best guitar I’ve ever heard,” he said. “But the next thought would be, ‘What would my friends think if I didn’t buy a Martin?’”

When Santa Cruz Guitar Company started in the 1970s, legacy brands defined the landscape; a small California shop to ask players to trust their own ears over inherited brand recognition was a bold proposition. Fast-forwarding to 2026, for Santa Cruz to survive long enough to celebrate 50 years this September says something about persistence. The more interesting story, though, is how Richard and his company helped change the way serious players thought about guitars in the first place.

When Richard talks about the company’s beginnings, he keeps returning to sound. Not volume alone, or projection in the crude sense, but what he calls the “properties of sound”: the balance of the instrument’s frequencies, presence, response, articulation—the subtler qualities that live in a player’s hands and ear. He said Santa Cruz set out to build guitars that had everything a player would want: neck shape, playability, visual character, and a tonal identity tuned to the musician holding it. In Richard’s telling, that way of thinking was unusual enough at the time to feel a bit crazy. “Us paying attention to the sound and being able to do what somebody wanted,” he said, “was really, really a wild idea.”

Richard had long admired the violin world for taking sound quality with almost unforgiving seriousness, and adopted that sensibility at Santa Cruz. “We knew what we were doing,” he said. “Santa Cruz Guitar Company wasn’t the first guitars that I’d made.” He had already been building on his own—including as a co-op with Darol Anger making F5 copies, which ended when Darol got the call to join the David Grisman Quintet. Richard had worked with mentors, and had absorbed an approach that treated tonal control as something builders could pursue deliberately rather than merely hope for. By the time Santa Cruz emerged as a company, he was bringing a developed point of view into a market that had not yet made much room for it.

The early practical reality was much less glamorous. Before the internet, before video demos, before boutique builders could cultivate a following online, Richard recalled handwriting letters and mailing photographs to people who wrote or called asking about the guitars. Advertising in a major guitar



Richard Hoover with the FTC 50th Anniversary Limited Edition, one of SCGC’s earliest explorations beyond the traditional flat-top design.

magazine was out of reach back then—a full-page ad, he said, would have cost about a year’s salary. Fortunately, Roger Siminoff moved from New York to Cupertino in 1979 and started FRETTS Magazine. It gave Santa Cruz editorial attention and a readers’ poll in which, Richard recalled, the company was voted top guitar maker in the world at the time. Suddenly, Santa Cruz had a presence it had not had before. Then came the artist connections that turned this admiration into credibility.

Richard described two breakthrough moments as especially decisive: selling a guitar to Eric Clapton through a small magazine ad, and building for Tony Rice—whose new bandmate in Grisman’s group, Darol Anger, brought to Santa Cruz to visit the shop. The Clapton connection widened the company’s aura. The Tony Rice connection cut even deeper, because it ran straight into the center of bluegrass guitar culture. Tony already owned the 1934 D-28 that at age 9 he saw Clarence White perform on, but for the David Grisman Quintet, that old guitar could sound too “woofy and tubby for what he needed in the jazz phrasings that he was doing.” Richard recalled. “He needed more presence in the mid-range and treble—a more articulate instrument.”

A working musician needing very specific qualities from an instrument, and a builder being ready to answer that need, is the hallmark of Richard’s philosophy. Richard said that once Santa Cruz sold to Eric Clapton and built for Tony Rice, the social equation changed. The old hesitation—what would your friends think if you bought something other than a Martin—began to give way. Now the logic ran in the opposite direction. Here was the inside brand that your heroes knew about. Here was the small

shop whose guitars serious players were already using for serious reasons. Richard described that as the point when Santa Cruz became “okay to buy.”

It also helped clarify what Santa Cruz really was. Richard said that once the first guitar for Tony was out in the world, people in the bluegrass realm began calling and asking for one just like it. He would explain that Santa Cruz was a custom shop, that the guitar made for Tony represented Tony’s own vision of a perfect guitar, and that the company wanted to help each player arrive at his or her own; “Nah, I really want one just like Tony’s, thanks anyway,” was the response. After enough of those conversations, Richard said he began to reconsider. Maybe, he concluded, the deeper lesson was that giving players everything they wanted in one guitar really was the way forward. “Tony really set us off on that track,” he said.

Richard learned from his customers without compromising his philosophy. Santa Cruz kept the custom-shop mindset, but this example sharpened it. The company became known early, Richard said, for doing “the stuff that no one else would do,” paying special attention to each guitar’s wood, bracing, air space, and fine-tuning beyond what factory makers can do. That reputation spread the old-fashioned way—through players, through letters, through talk, through artist relationships, through the sound of the guitars themselves.

From there, the company’s influence broadened beyond its own order book—Santa Cruz helped push larger makers toward designs and ideas they had either neglected or not yet realized players wanted. One of his favorite examples is Martin “copying the

copies of Martin that we did.” He points to Santa Cruz’s Tony Rice model, which drew on prewar herringbone ideas with some modifications at a time when, in his account, Martin was not making anything quite like it. He also points to the smaller-bodied OM-model guitar: Richard remembered a period when, for many players, a dreadnought seemed like the only respectable choice for an adult guitarist, while an OM could still be dismissed as a niche or lesser format. When Santa Cruz leaned into the OM, he said, “it really took off. People were ready for it.”

The mahogany story may be the best example of Richard’s ear leading his business instincts. He described loving a mahogany D-18 early on, then later getting a D-28 with insurance money after the D-18 was stolen, only to realize he never really warmed to the new guitar’s rosewood sound in the same way. As a builder, he came to understand that he simply preferred mahogany. The problem was perception: mahogany carried a stigma. It was associated with plainer, cheaper instruments. Richard knew enough not to build his new brand around that prejudice. He said Santa Cruz’s first 20 guitars were koa, not mahogany, because launching a new company with a new building concept and a wood viewed as inferior would have been too much uphill battle all at once.

And yet Richard kept returning to mahogany because he believed in what it could do. That belief later found one of its clearest expressions in the company’s 29 series, the all-mahogany line introduced in the economic wreckage of 2008. Richard remembered that year bluntly: “the world ended.” Nobody was buying anything. He looked back to the old Martin 17 series for the idea of a simpler all-mahogany guitar, but Santa Cruz’s version had its own logic. The company chose not to make it cheap, only simpler—less ostentatious at a moment when that simplicity felt emotionally and economically right. Richard said the line succeeded and, just as importantly to him, helped inspire other companies to bring out all-mahogany guitars of their own. “That was one of my career goals,” he said, “to have mahogany get the respect it deserves.”

Richard sounds less like a businessman chasing trends than like a player-builder trying to shift the conversation around value, sound, and taste. Even his stories about skepticism from the outside world carry that undertone, as it did when he recalled when the company first set up a display at the National Association of Music Merchant’s annual shindig in the mid-’80s: “I remember the sales guy in the tweed sport coat with leather patches saying, ‘Son, the first thing you gotta know about this business is nobody’s gonna pay no \$500 for a guitar. Or, ‘these guitars aren’t going to last 10 years, you can’t see any glue in there.’”

Santa Cruz Guitar Company will mark 50 years on September 22. Richard said the big concert and party in Santa Cruz are set for September 19. A museum show is also in the works, featuring company history, ephemera from the early days, and the very first instrument Santa Cruz ever made. He sounded especially pleased by the thought of



1929-00 50th Anniversary Limited Edition guitar, one of five celebrating the Santa Cruz 50th Anniversary.

putting that early work in public view. “If you weren’t somewhat embarrassed of your early work,” he said, “that means you hadn’t gone anywhere.” This is more than simple self-deprecation. It holds a builder’s measure of time: progress is visible, and it should be.

The anniversary will also include what Richard called the company’s “greatest hits,” with limited editions built around a few designs he still clearly enjoys talking about: the FTC, the H13, and the 29 series. He described them less as museum pieces than as fond memories with continuing life in them. Richard is willing to look back, but he does not sound trapped there. The company’s history matters to him because it traces a set of ideas that still feel active.

Near the end of the conversation, after a long discussion about wood, variation, cliché, and the way the guitar world tends to turn partial truths into fixed doctrine, Richard arrived at what may be the most revealing thought in the whole interview. “There’s so much folklore,” he said. A few minutes later, reflecting on whether 50 years in has answered the big questions, he pushed back against the notion of mastery as finality. “There’s so much that’s still mysterious.”

The challenge, Richard says, is engineering a guitar strong enough to resist that “self-destructive” pull without deadening the sound; the steel-string guitar as an instrument under constant internal stress. “The string ball-end attaches underneath the bridge plate and literally pulls straight up, then goes across the saddle and pushes down, so the bridge wants to rotate, and push the top end to the sound hole. Likewise, the neck is a fulcrum point at the body joint. The neck wants to bend forward and push the top in, so the top is shortening, just by the nature of the string pull. The back, on the other hand, because of the neck fulcrum, is being stretched, or pulled, and lengthening. All those add up to wrecking your neck angle to the body and, necessitating lowering your saddle, or, eventually, resetting your neck.” Adding mass is not the answer; extra weight inhibits resonance. Instead, he imagines a solution more like modern automobile or airplane design—lighter, stronger, and structurally elegant from every angle. Santa Cruz has made progress through brace shaping and radius work, but Richard says this remains one of the elusive problems he still wants to solve. 🐝

## Join the Santa Cruz 50th Anniversary Celebration

**June 22 Opening Show**

**Kuumba Jazz Center - Santa Cruz**

Kuumbwa Jazz & Santa Cruz MAH Present:  
Santa Cruz Guitar Company – The First 50 Years.  
Doors & Dinner at 6pm.

**June-October Special Exhibit**

**Santa Cruz Museum of Modern Art & History**

Come out to visit an exhibit highlighting 50 years of Santa Cruz Guitar Company’s history and impact.

**Sept. 19 Feature Concert**

**Rio Theatre - Santa Cruz**

Save the date for a larger concert celebrating the SCGC anniversary. Artists to be announced, stay tuned!



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LALOR CONSTRUCTION

# A BIG TURNOUT FOR CBA SPRING CAMPOUT

by Ted Kuster, CBA Board Chair. Photos by Alan M. Bond.

In April, a few hundred Californians from all over the state—plus a scattering of Nevadans, Oregonians and Alaskans—spent a long weekend camped out at the Lodi Grape Festival Grounds picking and catching up with friends old and new.

It's hard to say how many pickers were there, exactly, since tickets are sold by tent or RV site, not by individual. However, this was one of the stronger turnouts for a Spring Campout in memory, with 135 total nights of hookup service for RVs reserved, and almost 340 nights of tent camping. Luckily, the festival grounds offer plenty of extra parking for when people really start piling in on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.

The wind picked up on Wednesday, making it a little tricky to stay in tune. People dashed to put extra stakes in the ground so their E-Z Ups wouldn't fly away, and later in the evening, even after the wind died down, the camps with gas-powered firepits were the most popular jamming spots. Other than that, the weather help up nicely.



Young fiddler Nicole competes in the contest.



Apollo jams on fiddle outside the contest.



Pick-up session under the shared canopy.



Striking a mandolin pose.



Jeff Martin backs up his daughter Eiley in the fiddle contest.



Campsite jamming in perfect weather.

# GOLDEN OLD TIME CAMPOUT RETURNS TO GUERNEVILLE

## AUGUST 20-23

by Karen Celia Heil, GOT Campout Director

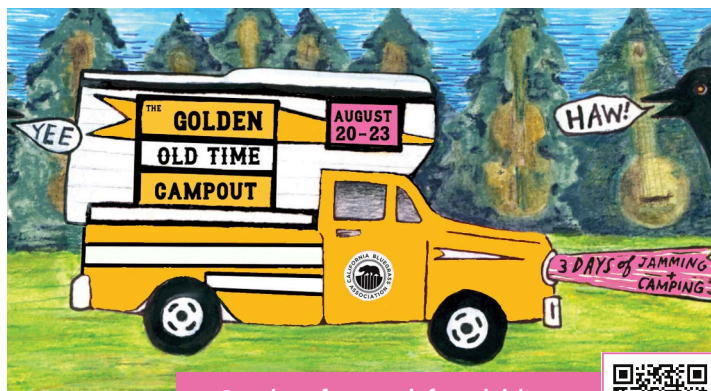
After you attend what promises to be the funnest Father's Day Festival yet and get some well-deserved rest, you will then be craving even more fun, jamming and socializing outdoors with your favorite pals until the wee hours, meeting new people and fun new players, gazing at beautiful views of towering coastal redwoods, taking short walks to town to grab a bite or the night's provisions, contemplating a 13-mile drive to the coast, seeking out some local wineries, playing pee-wee golf amongst the tyrannosaurus rex, giant cement whales and bunnies ...

Hmmm, where might we find such singular fun?

At the **GOLDEN OLD TIME CAMPOUT**, that's where!

We will be back at our favorite venue of them all, Camp Russian River, in Guerneville. It's a doable drive from anywhere in the Bay—just 60 miles from S.F.— and is also well worth it if you decide to come from further away. The gates are open at noon on Thursday, August 20, and we'll frolic until we have to be gone—2 p.m. on Sunday, August 23.

Tickets can be had on the CBA website. The Golden Old Time Campout is under the "events" tab. Once you get to the event's page, a button links to our ticket site. Or, just scan the QR here. There's a lot more information on those pages—including photos—so check it out!



Scan here for more info and tickets to Golden Old Time Campout →



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## YOUTH EDITION

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A Kids on Bluegrass performer at 2025 FDF.  
Photo by Robin Frenette.

**BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN**  
**CALIFORNIA BLUEGRASS ASSOCIATION**  
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## Monthly Trivia Quiz

By Bert Daniel, Breakdown Contributor

In April we invited readers on a trip back to the first Father's Day Festival to remember: "Who designed the first CBA Father's Day Bluegrass Festival Poster?"

This question drew just three responses, and only one was (mostly) correct: "Jack happened to have the first Father's Day festival poster and so we know it was designed by Debbie Cotter," Lori Frost shared. She spelled it "Debby," and would later be known as Debby Cotter Kaspari, the banjo player for the beloved band the All-Girl Boys after being the the artist behind the CBA's first Father's Day Festival poster, 50 years ago this year.

Lori will be ready to illuminate late-night jams with her snazzy lighted CBA jamming hat!

## SUPPORT CBA - BID IN OUR SILENT AUCTION

OPEN NOW - JUNE 20, 6:00 PM

Support the California Bluegrass Association by participating in our Silent Auction! Items include everything from musical instruments and accessories, bluegrass and CBA collectibles, music lessons, event tickets, and experience packages. Check out these items in person at Father's Day Festival in the Tall Pines Pavilion!



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## JUNE TRIVIA

For June, we want to know: "Who played 14 variations in the first recording of a popular fiddle tune supposedly in honor of the namesake's fourteen children?"

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

This month's prize is a set of Helicore fiddle strings from one of our favorite CBA sponsors, D'Addario Strings (or banjo, mandolin, or guitar)!

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 August 2026 issue of the *Bluegrass Breakdown*.