



CBA'S 2026 AWARDS

RECOGNIZING THOSE GOING ABOVE AND BEYOND

by the Bluegrass Breakdown

The tradition of recognizing the outstanding members of our bluegrass community dates back to before the CBA Father's Day Festival. In 1975, we presented the first CBA Honorary Lifetime Member award to Vern Williams and Ray Park. The first Father's Day Festival followed in 1976. By 2014, the presentation of three separate award categories was a formal main-stage festival event. Our 2026 awardees follow in the footsteps of those members of our community celebrated for their extraordinary contributions to bluegrass in California and beyond.

VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR

The CBA Volunteer of the Year award was first given in 2022 to recognize a volunteer for making "a unique/ impactful contribution, contributed special skills to a timely situation, created an ongoing project or upgraded an existing program or event, added a spark that inspired or expanded community involvement, and/or exceeded the expected volunteer role."



BRUCE SADOWNICK

A Dobro player, jam host, and CBA regional director for Marin, Bruce has become one of the association's most active North Bay ambassadors and one of the volunteers working to strengthen CBA's community connections in the

region, leveraging his musical, promotion, and organizing skills to help develop and expand CBA's reach.

Bruce helped establish the first UC Berkeley bluegrass club. He has also represented CBA at Strawberry Music Festival, signing up many new members. He goes above and beyond in his participation in CBA's strategic planning and membership committee work, and has been working with Sweetwater Music Hall in Mill Valley to raise CBA's profile.

In mid-2022, Sweetwater invited the association to staff a branded information table at select bluegrass and bluegrass-adjacent shows. Since then, CBA's has been represented at more than 25 Sweetwater shows, giving the association regular access to the venue's roots-music audience and a consistent place to share information about CBA's mission and programs.

In 2025, that presence expanded to include amazing jamming opportunities: Before a Della Mae show in August, band member Kimber Ludiker contacted Bruce with the idea of bringing local bluegrass players together for a pre-show jam, with members of the band joining in after their sound check. He helped arrange the host band, coordinated promotion through CBA and Sweetwater channels, and brought local players into the event. The jam drew both musicians and listeners to the Sweetwater patio and led the venue to invite CBA to continue hosting pre-show jams in 2026.

cont'd on page 4 →



DIRECTOR'S WELCOME

BANJO IN BLUEGRASS

by Pete Ludé, CBA Executive Director

I'm writing this while frantically packing up for CBA's annual Father's Day Bluegrass Festival in Grass Valley. By the time you're reading it, I've probably met up with many of you among the majestic pines and sweet mountain air of the Sierra Nevada foothills, surrounded by music and joy—something I really needed. The Father's Day Festival is by far the biggest and most exciting event of the year for the CBA community. As you might guess, putting on this event is a huge endeavor, requiring thousands of hours of volunteer time and a group of knowledgeable professionals to create the most engaging, comfortable, and fun experience possible. If you attended the festival, we would love your feedback while it's fresh in your mind—positive or otherwise. Do you have opinions? Please take a minute and email Festival@CaliforniaBluegrass.net.

For this month's *Bluegrass Breakdown*, our theme is the banjo.

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BRUCE CHAMPION *An Amazing Musical Journey*

by Phoebe Leigh-Suelflow, CBA Vice President and Treasurer

"I've always believed that music isn't just something you hear—it's something you feel, something you live, and something you help create." Bruce Champion's electronic journey began long before he could play a note. He writes, "By third grade, I was obsessed with electronics, and I was frustrated that my science books showed only a battery, a switch, and a light bulb as 'electronics.' I wanted more." Growing up in Torrance, there was a Navy surplus depot near his home. At 10, he would walk over and buy electronics by the pound, just to tear them apart and see how they worked. This curiosity laid the foundation for everything that came after.

At 12 he went to his first live concert, and it had a profound influence on his life. "I stood in front of the stage while Dick Dale played 'Misirlou.' The volume, the speed, the energy—it was unlike anything I had ever felt. That moment set the course of my life,

showing me the power of sound and inspiring me to dedicate myself to the craft of bringing music to people."

These were turbulent years. Bruce recalls "I was a kid sitting on school steps when they told us John F. Kennedy was dead. Just like that—1 p.m.—and something in the country cracked. A few years later, I shook hands with Robert F. Kennedy at Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. He had just had dinner and was heading to a debate. For a moment, hope felt real again. Two days later he was gone, too." Bruce and his friends were subject to the draft and he watched as some of them were sent to Vietnam, and some didn't come back. He was given a 4-F classification exempting him from the draft, but he stopped believing in politics. "It felt like every voice that inspired me got silenced."

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Bruce Champion. Photo by Robin Frenette.

BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

July 2026 – More Banjo

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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JUNE ISSUE CORRECTION

LONG BEACH BLUEGRASS FESTIVAL IS JULY 11

The completely free, family-friendly third annual Long Beach Bluegrass Festival runs from noon to 7 p.m. on Saturday, July 11, at the Bandshell at Recreation Park, and features live performances from Water Tower, Dennis Witcher & The Brew, and Faultliner along with beginner-friendly jam circles, an instrument petting zoo, and a square dance at 5:30 p.m. In June, we published the wrong date. We apologize for any confusion this error caused.

Colorfully Creative

REMEMBERING 'TURTLE'

by Phoebe Leigh-Suelflow, CBA Vice President and Treasurer



Paul "Turtle" Royce and a young friend at Father's Day Festival. Photo by Robin Frenette.

Paul Royce, better known around CBA as "Turtle," always set up his Turtle Camp near Gate 5 during the annual Summer Music Camp and Father's Day Festival. But this June was the first without Turtle to decorate our name badges. Turtle died on February 5 at the age of 84. We miss him.

Turtle was an amazing person. No matter what life threw at him, he always made the most of it. At age 9, he fell ill with polio. Then at age 17, he was badly injured when he was hit head-on by two cars that were drag racing. He was hospitalized and told that he would be a quadriplegic for the rest of his life. Eighteen months later, he proved them wrong when he walked out of the hospital. He spent the first years after that traveling around the world—on freighters and on foot, walking to Machu Picchu, on trails in Nepal, and discovering the world.

Along the way, he picked up his nickname from the tribal leader at a Native American sweat lodge. But why not a macho name like lion or wolf? The leader explained that the turtle is one of the strongest totems there is—it supports the world on its back.

When Turtle returned home, he took his new name seriously. He went to school, earned a nursing degree and became a registered nurse. He got into psychiatric nursing, working with patients in Walnut Creek and Yuba City before moving eventually to Paradise. Turtle later explained that when he was 16, he had a vision that he would be fine in life if he took generosity and giving as his path.

He lost everything in the 2018 Camp Fire. He evacuated to the Chico evacuation center, where he caught norovirus. Between the virus and the fire, his lungs were affected and he started needing to use supplemental oxygen. He relocated to Grass Valley. Despite the setbacks, he would get in his wheelchair and travel the four or five blocks to volunteer at the Center for the Arts in Grass Valley. He was also a volunteer at the Miner's Foundry in Nevada City. He caught covid in the second wave and that damaged his lungs further and he needed to be on oxygen all the time. Needing more oxygen cut down on his mobility, but friends would take him on adventures. He was welcome at any show at the Center for the Arts.

Robin Karlstedt, who became Turtle's caregiver in his later years, recalls that music and art were Turtle's two loves. He always called his art "his scribbles" and would frame them and give them away. He loved coloring badges, and many of us have a collection of volunteer badges that he has "scribbled" on over the years.

At every festival or bead store, Turtle would look for little turtles to hand out to kids. Turtle would tell the kids he met that if they had a question or problem to hold the turtle in their hands, take two deep breaths, and then ask the Turtle. He assured them that the Turtle would give them an answer to their questions. He told them to then take that answer to their parents and see how they could solve the problem together.

Robin recalls walking around the bluegrass festival with Turtle and seeing how little kids, teenagers and adults would stop Turtle to tell them their stories of how his gifts had helped them through the years. Parents would tell us how their children kept that turtle right by the bed or under their pillows. Turtle delighted in seeing those kids' faces light up.

Ed LaRue was another friend of Turtle's. The last time he saw Turtle, he gave Ed an obsidian turtle with his flippers folded in prayer. In memorial to his friend, Ed recalls that Dr. Seuss once said, "Don't cry because it is over, smile because it happened." I would say, "Don't cry because Turtle is gone; smile because he was here." 🐢



Turtle decorates name badges at CBA Summer Music Camp. Photo by Alan M. Bond.

WELCOME MESSAGE

cont'd from front page

Being an aspiring banjo player myself, this is an inspiration, and I'm all in. There are several controversial topics regarding the banjo in traditional music: Does the five-string banjo define bluegrass? Does Earl Scruggs deserve as much credit for creating the genre as Bill Monroe, the acknowledged "Father of Bluegrass?" Why all the corny jokes about banjo players?

It was 80 years ago, on September 16, 1946, that Earl Scruggs recorded his breathtaking banjo style for the first time with Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys—and the world hasn't been the same since. At that point, Bill Monroe had already been performing and recording for 10

years in various band configurations. But with the addition of Scruggs' innovative picking—syncopated, driving, percussive—an entirely new genre was invented and bluegrass, as we know it today, was created. Can you think of any other style of popular music that has been so consistent and revered over the decades? In 1946, the Blue Grass Boys, featuring Earl Scruggs, recorded "Toy Heart" and other favorites that I still hear at jams everywhere. From this rock-solid foundation, bluegrass music has captivated fans and inspired musicians to build on the shoulders of these founders.

In this month's issue, you'll enjoy reading about Kristin Scott Benson, an IBMA Banjo Player of the Year (seven times!) and Banjo Ben—someone the kids now call an "influencer"—who has introduced

the banjo to zillions of new recruits through his on-line presence, skills, and charisma as a teacher. Perhaps I'm biased—but clearly, the zing and power of the five string is what breathes energy and life into bluegrass.

Don't forget to plan ahead! CBA's Golden Old-time campout is coming up August 20–23 in Guerneville, on the scenic Russian River in Sonoma County—undoubtedly one of the most beautiful old-time gatherings in the U.S. And starting July 1, you can make hotel room reservations for another event you won't want to miss: South State 48, returning November 5–8 in Carlsbad. Music is a healing force awaiting you. Will you join us?




JULIAN FAMILY FIDDLE CAMP

by Adam Roszkiewicz, CBA Music Camps Director.
Photos by David K. Cupp.

This year's Julian Family Fiddle Camp was a blast! The focus this year was on jamming, so after the instructor introductions on the first night of camp we had a massive instructor-led welcome jam that split up into 4 or 5 separate jams. It was a great way to reconnect with the JFFC community and welcome new attendees.

The crew of instructors was excellent; it was great to see them reconnect and collaborate musically. The Friday and Saturday night concerts, which are open to the public, were some of the best attended of the last few years and featured many amazing performances. Some highlights included soul-stirring songs by Love, Dean (Luke & Rachael Price), mind-bending original compositions by Tray Wellington, and a four-fiddle extravaganza featuring John Mailander, Carolyn Kendrick, Luke Price, and Nat Copeland.

The best part of fiddle camp, however, is the community that surrounds it: the local sponsors who support the JFFC year after year; the volunteers who help plan and fundraise year-round; the local residents who come out to support the concerts; and the campers who put JFFC on their calendars each year. This community creates a space where folks can express themselves, take risks, and lift each other up. It's only for five days, but for the rest of the year we can bring that spirit and mindset to our own communities to enrich them until we meet again next year. 



Jamming on the porch at Julian Family Fiddle Camp.



Tray Wellington teaching at JFFC.



Wild turkeys enjoying the afternoon tunes.



Tyler Grant leads a bluegrass parade in Julian.



The traditional jam on the streets of Julian.

Since that first pilot, CBA-hosted pre-show jams at Sweetwater have drawn members of bands performing at the club to join in, including Special Consensus, Laurie Lewis & The Right Hands, Rachel Sumner & Traveling Light, Dead Winter Carpenters, and others, with another scheduled for the Dan Tyminski Band in July. The result is a practical model for local outreach: a CBA table, a visible connection to live bluegrass, and a low-barrier way for musicians and listeners to enter the community.

BILL AND FAYE DOWNS SUPER VOLUNTEERS

The Bill and Faye Downs Super Volunteer award was first presented in 2000 to recognize the extraordinary volunteerism of Bill and Faye Downs. Since 2012, it has been awarded each year to acknowledge the efforts of those members of the CBA who have made an extraordinary contribution as volunteers over an extended period of time to a proudly volunteer-run organization.



MATT LAUER

Matt “Woody” Lauer has served as the CBA’s regional director for San Francisco since 2023. An active CBA member for over 15 years, he currently serves on the CBA Talent Acquisition Group—the committee that selects performers for the Fathers’ Day Bluegrass Festival—and is a lifetime member. He is also the longest running board member of Bluegrass Pride, which he’s been involved with since it began as a project of the CBA in 2017.

Matt’s work creates ongoing opportunity and community support for so many musicians and fans, and this includes informing over 250 people about goings on in our community with weekly text updates.

Matt began promoting and organizing events, doing “everything, everywhere, all at once,” three months before the pandemic lockdown—and has been at it ever since. He supports weekly bluegrass jams in San Francisco at Blondies, The Hotel Utah, and The Liberties. He produces the Monday-night bluegrass performance series at Blondies, which quickly became an important showcase for local and traveling talent—not to mention helping out at the Riptide and promoting other performances and jams in the area.

If this weren’t enough, Matt produces the annual San Francisco Bluegrass & Old Time Festival in downtown San Francisco at Salesforce Park—a beautiful, verdant, elevated public space. This one-day, two-stage, multi-performance festival has been a community highlight for several years.

Matt’s work helps local businesses build and sustain a vibrant live music scene, yet another reason that Matt was awarded a Mayor’s Certificate of Honor for outstanding community organizing by then-Mayor London Breed.

Always engaging and supportive at every personal encounter, he treats everyone with respect and kindness. Our community is so lucky to have him as a member.



JIM DUBER

Since 2018, Jim has coordinated and produced Vern’s Stage at CBA’s Father’s Day Bluegrass Festival. That role carries significant operational weight: scheduling, volunteer coordination, communication with performers, and ensuring the stage runs smoothly throughout the weekend. He has consistently owned that responsibility with steadiness and follow-through. Vern’s has become a popular and reliably well-run part of the festival experience under his leadership.

In addition to Vern’s Stage, Jim has taken on responsibility for running CBA elections of its board of directors. That is not a highly visible assignment, but it is essential to the health of the organization. Managing nominations, ballots, process integrity, and communication requires organization and care. He has handled this work year after year without issue, providing quiet continuity in an area that simply must work.

Jim serves the CBA community throughout the year. While his length of service may be shorter than some past recipients, the scope of what he has

owned and the reliability with which he has carried it out are significant. He has taken responsibility for defined areas of work and ensured they are handled properly.

HONORARY LIFETIME MEMBERS

The CBA was not even a year old when the Honorary Lifetime Member award was established and awarded to Vern Williams and Ray Park on September 21, 1975 “for outstanding contribution[s] to the Bluegrass community.” It was awarded occasionally until 2002; since then it has been conferred each year on California musicians and significant volunteers who have had a major impact.



TOM SAUBER

Tom Sauber is a Los Angeles native aveteran of traditional music for more than 50 years. Raised in the Los Angeles area, he became involved in old-time and bluegrass music as a teenager in the early 1960s and was part of the developing Southern California roots music scene through the 1960s and 1970s. His early collaborations included Bill Bryson, Darryl Boom, and John Hickman, leading to the formation of the band Corn Bred. Corn Bred performed widely in California, including at the Golden State Country

Bluegrass Festival in San Rafael in 1974, and released the album *It’s Hot* in 1978 on the Sierra Briar label.

Over the decades, Tom has performed and recorded with a wide range of musicians in both old-time and bluegrass traditions. His collaborations have included Earl Collins and Eddie Lowe, as well as Byron Berline, John Hickman, Alan Munde, Dirk Powell, Mark Graham, Brad Leftwich, and Alice Gerrard. He produced and performed on Earl Collins’ recording *That’s Earl* (Sierra Briar, 1975). His trio with Brad Leftwich and Alice Gerrard recorded four albums released by Copper Creek: *Been There Still* (1998), *Holly Ding* (2000), *Die in the Pig Pen Fighting* (2001), and *Carve That Possum* (2005). Other recordings include *One-Eyed Dog* (1993) with Dirk Powell and John Herrmann, *Thought I Heard It Blow* (2001) with Mark Graham, and *Trade Your Headache for a Smile* (2020), which paired archival and more recent recordings.

In addition to his performance work, Tom hosted the radio program *Ballads, Banjos and Bluegrass* on KPFK in Los Angeles from 1974 to 1986. He contributed liner notes to historical releases including *Great Big Yam Potatoes* and *Eck Robertson, Famous Cowboy Fiddler*. He has appeared in the films *Bound for Glory*, *The Long Riders*, and *Geronimo: An American Legend*, and in episodes of *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. He has also performed with musicians in cowboy and Cajun traditions and continues to perform, teach, and host regular jam sessions in Southern California.

In recognizing Tom Sauber as a CBA Honorary Lifetime Member, the CBA honors his role as a bridge between generations, regions, and repertoires; a musician who helped connect California players to elder tradition-bearers from Oklahoma, North Carolina, and beyond; a teacher whose influence can be heard in the next generation; and a community member whose life has been shaped by the simple act of getting close to the music and helping others do the same.

KATHY BARWICK



Kathy Barwick was a musician, teacher, and community builder who passed away in August 2025. Her influence will continue across the California bluegrass community for years to come.

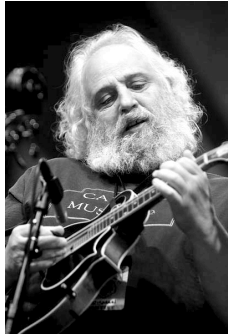
Kathy was one of the most admired and versatile acoustic musicians in Northern California. A Sacramento native who made her home in Grass Valley, she brought rare skill and musical judgment to guitar, Dobro, bass, mandolin, and banjo. Across bluegrass, old-time, Americana, and traditional Irish music, she played with taste, restraint, and a deep understanding of what a song needed.

The first drew wide attention as a founding member of the All Girl Boys, then continued to reach audiences through Nine-8ths Irish, the Mike Justis Band, and a long-running duo with the late mandolinist Pete Siegfried. In each setting, Kathy's musicianship was unmistakable: clean, thoughtful, generous, and rooted in ensemble playing. She had the kind of command that could lift a band without calling attention away from the music itself.

Her teaching was just as important as her performing. Kathy taught thousands of students privately, in group classes, at camps, and through her writing in Flatpicking Guitar Magazine. She was a longtime instructor at the CBA Summer Music Camp, American River Acoustic Music Camp, Puget Sound Guitar Workshop, and other gatherings where players came to learn technique and gain confidence. Former students remember her patience, clarity, encouragement, and ability to open doors into a larger musical life.

Within the CBA world, Kathy was a steady and generous presence on stages, in workshops, and in jams where younger pickers found welcome and seasoned players found a trusted collaborator. Tom Shewmake wrote that Kathy "plugged me in with a vast musical network" and offered encouragement that was "so kind and inspiring." John Green of The Fifth String, who studied banjo with Kathy, wrote, "There is no way I could explain the impact of Kathy on the Northern California Bluegrass community as her accomplishments are tremendous."

Kathy Barwick helped shape the sound, spirit, and shared practice of California bluegrass. Her music, her students, and the friendships she fostered remain part of the CBA's living inheritance.



DAVID GRISMAN

David Grisman is mandolinist, composer, bandleader, producer, and archivist whose life's work changed the sound and reach of American acoustic music, honoring bluegrass traditions while expanding its palette.

Born in Hackensack, New Jersey, and long associated with California, Grisman came to bluegrass through Bill Monroe, Frank Wakefield, Ralph Rinzler, Doc Watson, and the folk revival's deep search for older American sounds. By the time he arrived in the Bay Area in 1969, he had already worked in folk, bluegrass, and exploratory acoustic music. In California, his musical imagination found room to expand.

Grisman's place in bluegrass history would be secure from his part in the early 70s band Old & In the Way alone. The group, with Jerry Garcia, Peter Rowan, Vassar Clements, and John Kahn, brought bluegrass to listeners who might never have reached for a Flatt and Scruggs, or Bill Monroe, record otherwise. The music was joyful, playfully loose, deeply rooted, and durable. It remains one of the great gateway sounds in the history of the form.

Then came the David Grisman Quintet, with Tony Rice, Darol Anger, Todd Phillips, and others helping define a new acoustic language. "Dawg music," the name Garcia gave to Grisman's blend of bluegrass, swing, jazz, Latin, and other influences, widened the field for generations of string players. It gave progressive acoustic musicians a vocabulary built on virtuosity, tone, rhythmic lift, and innovative composition.

At the same time, Grisman has been a devoted steward of tradition. His traditional bluegrass recordings, collaborations with Doc Watson, Del McCoury, Tony Rice, John Hartford, Mike Seeger, and many others, as well as his work through the Acoustic Disc record label have preserved, documented, and celebrated acoustic music with unusual care. Since founding Acoustic Disc, he has built a catalog that treats recordings, instruments, and musical friendships as part of the same living archive.

In 2023, Grisman was inducted into the Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame. His deep California connection and his long influence on the musicians, festivals, jams, teachers, and listeners who make up our community helped expand what California bluegrass could sound like while keeping its roots in clear view.

GOLDEN OLD TIME CAMPOUT

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STROBE TUNERS

BRUCE CHAMPION

cont'd from front page

Bruce didn't keep silent, though. Music in the 60s and 70s was more than entertainment. "It was protest. It was truth. When Barry McGuire sang 'Eve of Destruction,' he was saying what a lot of us were feeling: old enough to kill, not old enough to vote." So Bruce decided that his weapon would be a sound system.

At 15, he saw The Dave Clark Five at the Long Beach Arena and watched Jim Gable run the sound. He found himself lingering behind dance halls, eagerly lending a hand to the bands as they unloaded their equipment. He wanted very much to be a part of the music.

By the age of 18, he was knee-deep in the world of sound engineering, crafting concert sound systems for artists like Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger. But it was a chance encounter with a friend from the YMCA that changed the trajectory of his life forever. Will Geer, the venerable actor and activist, took him under his wing, introducing him to a world beyond the stage. Together, they embarked on a journey of philanthropy and music, organizing benefit concerts to combat Huntington's disease—the illness that had plagued Woody Guthrie's family for generations. Under Will's guidance, Bruce learned the true power of music—its ability to heal, to inspire, to effect change. With each concert, they raised not only funds but spirits, spreading a message of hope and unity to all who would listen.

Bruce's mother died in 2012, leaving him with a newfound sense of purpose. An inheritance allowed him to invest in state-of-the-art recording equipment and carve a new path for himself. This led to the creation of the Truck Mobile Recording Unit and then discovering bluegrass.

Over the years Bruce has recorded over 2,000 bluegrass songs—some from stages and some from musicians jamming beside the truck at campgrounds. Bruce has created a unique library

of bluegrass music. For the first four years, he recorded campers in informal sets. This led to an invitation by Eric Burman, founder of the Good Old Fashioned Bluegrass Festival, to begin recording the main stage. Then he began documenting the festivals, recording such artists as AJ Lee and the Tuttles. Still, many of his recordings continued to be made in campgrounds. Bruce's method is simple: "People come to my camp and play their music, and I record them, giving them their music on CD. I do all this for free, but I do accept donations to cover my costs, mostly fuel for the Truck"

Bruce did this work himself. Now he is working with Eric to establish a teaching program built around the mobile recording studio. Bruce says that "the goal is simple and lasting: to teach the next generation how to properly record live acoustic music, and just as importantly, how to produce and preserve those recordings so they continue to have value." He is facing advanced cancer and wants to make sure this work continues beyond him. Bruce is donating the Truck Mobile Recording Unit to the program and is working to create a small group to carry this forward as he steps away. Frank Finn will teach recording, carrying that knowledge forward, while Eric will teach music production—what to do with the recordings once they are made. Thanks to them, Bruce's work will carry on, and his free recording of bluegrass music will continue.

Bruce is in hospice as of this writing in early June. He says, "I am at peace with my condition. It has been such an honor to record the bluegrass songs we have recorded with the truck. They are all on the internet for free download. I also have about 640 songs on ReverbNation, mostly from the campground recordings.

Scan the links to support the transition of the truck, or enjoy the fruits of Bruce's many years of service to our bluegrass community. May his legacy live for many, many years to come. 🐻



From jams to band performances to interviews, Bruce would record it. Photo by Robin Frenette.




Getting set to record at Father's Day Festival. Photo by Robin Frenette.





Bruce working his magic in the truck at 2025 Father's Day Festival. Photo by Alan M. Bond.



Bruce Champion and The Truck Mobile Recording Unit. Photo by Robin Frenette.

Support Bruce's GoFundMe campaign for The Truck Mobile Recording Unit → 

The Bruce Champion Bluegrass Collection, audio files available on Google Drive → 

The Truck Mobile Recording Unit songs on ReverbNation → 



Banjo Ben Clark.

Ben Clark, better known to many as “Banjo Ben,” didn’t set out to become an internationally-recognized music teacher. He was an accomplished classical pianist when the banjo first got his attention as a sophomore in college. Then, when he was about 18 months into a master’s degree in forensic entomology at Texas A&M, bluegrass interrupted his plans. Ben dropped out of grad school and enrolled in the celebrated bluegrass program at South Plains College in Levelland, Texas, to study banjo with Alan Munde.

From there, he moved to Nashville and made his living playing country music, touring with artists that included Taylor Swift. He became a versatile sideman, developing his chops on mandolin, guitar, and Dobro, too. He started writing songs for a publisher for Sony Music.

YouTube was becoming more familiar to people, and Ben had started putting some music education videos online. “I had a foot in that world, and saw an opportunity to launch an education website, which didn’t exist in bluegrass the way that I was wanting to do. That was around 2011, and that’s what I’ve been doing full-time since,” Ben recalled. Since then, he’s produced more than 900 lessons.



Banjo workshop with Alan Munde at Texas Banjo Cabin Camp, Fall 2025.

‘THE STRUGGLE IS REAL’

BANJO BEN CLARK ON LEARNING BANJO

By Jason Dilg, Bluegrass Breakdown Managing Editor. Photos courtesy of Ben Clark.

We had a chance to catch up with Ben in his studio to find out what insights he’s gained into learning banjo and bluegrass after 15 years of guiding learners through his Banjo Ben web platform and, more recently, his Cabin Camp three-day retreats.

THE STRUGGLE IS REAL

In the Banjo Ben Cabin Camp community, Ben said he appreciates the levels of accomplishment many of his students have reached in other areas of their lives—rocket scientists, airline pilots, doctors, teachers and authors. Many are among the best in their fields.

Which means that at this point, they’re used to mastery, not struggle. “By the time we are adults, it’s been a while since we’ve struggled to learn how to do something that seems fundamental. Now, all of a sudden, we’ve got this instrument, and it’s supposed to be fundamental, it’s supposed to be slow, I’m supposed to be able to learn how to do this, and I can’t make my hand do what I want it to,” he said. “But here’s the good news: You can do it!”

Real gains in learning can come from three days at a camp, but so much progress on the musical path comes from practice over the long run. But how to make the most of this time is often not clear to learners, Ben said.

“Most people really don’t know what it means to practice and spend time with something. Especially if other things have come to you easily, you think you can just kind of sit down and jam around on something, you ought to get better.” he said.

“You’re not gonna get better if you just sit around and play the same thing over and over again, if you don’t work on the little things. If you don’t work on the things that you don’t like,” Ben added.

“We’re all going to have natural barriers to our playing. I remember forever mine was playing bar chords on a guitar. They were hard, and so I just didn’t work on them. Well, that’s not how you get better.

“One of my biggest challenges is to get those analytical types to begin feeling the music. And when they say, well, what am I supposed to play here? I respond by asking them, ‘What do you want to play? What do you want to hear? What would sound good to you?’” To Banjo Ben, being able to find and play a single note that you want to hear is a bigger accomplishment than playing a string of notes that you’ve read off of a tab.

When asked about how he helps learners open up to constructive criticism at camps, Ben said. “I can’t tell you how many times I have people come up the last day and say, oh, I’ve just done that on the third day, and gosh, I wish I could go back a couple days and just try things more. Leave your inhibitions back in your car. Come in here and say, ‘this is who I am,’ and know that you’re not going to get judged by anybody there, we all love you, and let us speak truth to you, and try things when we ask you to try them.”

Ben says he loves seeing people going from playing memorized arrangements to taking on what he called “experiential playing,” and playing with feeling. “A lot of my time is aimed towards pulling them into that pool of feeling. I’m getting them to just begin wading around in it, and being okay with playing simple things that they feel, because it’s just going to grow from there.

“I love pulling left-brain people into right-brain territory to begin feeling and expressing themselves in music.” Ben said. “And once they do, man, watch out, because it’s like they’ve discovered a new superpower, a new love.”

LISTEN TO BUILD VOCABULARY

“Your vocabulary is going to come from what you’ve actually heard,” Ben said. “Sing along with the music, listen to the music.”

Short regular practice beats marathon sessions

“Short bursts of regular practice are more effective than long sessions of rare practice. I advocate for 10 minutes a day, seven days a week, over one hour, one day a week, because what

we're doing as bluegrass banjo players, though you may not think of it this way, is an athletic pursuit," Ben said. "You're using muscles and bones and tendons and coordination and memory to accomplish something that requires motor skills and coordination. Anytime you do anything like that, repetition is the name of the game, right? So, we shouldn't be too surprised if we lay off of something that requires that much coordination and touch for several days, and then we can't do it as well.

"Another thing that goes along with that is keeping a banjo available in as many places as you can. Try not to keep it in a case. Try to keep it out," Ben said.

"If you've got an office and you've got a family room, try to have a banjo on the wall in both. And if you've got kiddos or grandkids, that's perfect, because that's often how they get into it. It's a great excuse to buy more than one banjo. There are a lot of times where I'll just have a few minutes where I want to play, but if it's in the case, I'm not gonna go through the trouble [of getting it out]."

RECORD YOURSELF

"It's so easy to do with technology these days," Ben said. "Record yourself along with the jam tracks and compare. Because it's hard a lot of times whenever you're playing yourself to step outside of that and listen with neutral ears. But if you record yourself and listen back, you're like, oh man, I'm not on. My notes aren't even, or whatever. I'm pausing. That's the big thing. I'm pausing before I go to that next chord because my fingers aren't getting there and my brain's making me stop. I've got all kinds of tricks in my learning track that help you get through that, tricking your brain, because I had to do that as an adult. I had to figure out ways around it."

PRACTICE ACROSS YOUR GLITCHES

"Back in my classical piano days, if there was a place that I stumbled more than once, my teacher wouldn't have me just practice that measure," Ben recalled. "They would have me take that measure, and take the second half of that measure, and practice the second half of that measure into the next measure. And then start the measure before and practice up through that measure. So, if you can imagine, it's like if you have a cut and a tape or whatever, you're not just gonna focus on where the cut is, you're gonna overlap it, you know? People get really good at going past it and starting right before it and going on, and that's how it would break that hiccup. Because if you start messing up in a certain place just a few times in a row, your brain trains to stop there."

TAB—AND TRANSCRIPTIONS—AS TOOLS

There seems to be some controversy about the value of tab in learning music. Ben has a pragmatic approach: "Tab is simply a way to

communicate something from one place to another," he said. "Earl [Scruggs] made a tab book, because he wanted people to know where he put his fingers. So, I think that's where tab helps: tab helps you to accurately see where someone else put their fingers. A good teacher, I think, can use tab in that way, and then pull them off to get them back to their ears."

And, he added, learners can use tab to record their own transcriptions of solos. "I grew probably the most by learning how to transcribe by ear ... sitting down with my instrument and writing it down as I figured it out," Ben said. "That activates a completely different part of your brain than somebody just saying, here's a tab to this record, play it. So I really, really do encourage people to work on transcribing things, and writing their own breaks. You uncover your own problems. You're like, 'well, why isn't my note landing right here at the end of this measure, at the start of this measure?' It's because you've left a beat out. And maybe you were doing that already, you just didn't know it—the tab exposed it."

LEARNING IN COMMUNITY

"Aim to join some kind of community if you can," Ben said. "Get around other people that play music, and be brave when you do that, and just get involved, because ultimately, that's where you're going to learn the most. Even if you're not playing bluegrass, even if you're playing banjo in church, or whatever it is, you're going to have to figure out how to make that instrument work in that environment. You're gonna get better."

JOY FIRST

Ben also talked about letting go of comparing ourselves to our idols when we're trying to size up our level of accomplishment, or what we want to get out of playing itself. "I talk to a lot of adults, they're like, will I ever get this good? And my question is often, what happens if you don't?

Is your joy in this instrument hung solely on you reaching this certain level that you have in your mind? Or, are you having fun right now? Because if you're not having fun right now, if your joy in this instrument is predicated on you reaching this future goal and that alone, that's a dangerous place to be, because you don't know if you can get there. When I moved to Nashville, I had that syndrome: 'Can I be Chris Thile?' ...all these guys that were so great at these instruments. I wanted to be them. And then, eventually, I said, I'll never be them. I don't care if I had 20 hours a day to practice for two decades, I will never get to their level. The question now must become, can I get as good as what I'm able to get, with my level of talent and my amount of time that I'm able to spend on this craft.

"And a lot of adults, unless they're retired, they just don't have the time needed to see the kind of results that maybe they're hoping for. That's okay.

"The question is, are you enjoying it? Are you seeing any progress at all? And be encouraged by that. And then, are you collaborating with other people to create joy in making music?"

Learn more about Ben at banjobenclark.com.



Student showcase at a Cabin Camp.

KRISTIN SCOTT BENSON

HAVING A BIG TIME ON BLUEGRASS BANJO

by Jon Hartley Fox

You'd never know it from talking to her, but Kristin Scott Benson is one of the most celebrated bluegrass musicians of her generation. A long-time member of the Grascals, she's a seven-time winner of the IBMA's Banjo Player of the Year award, a winner of the Steve Martin Award for Excellence in Bluegrass and Banjo, and a member of the Banjo Hall of Fame.

Kristin was born in Union, South Carolina, in the U.S. bicentennial year of 1976. Her father played music for fun, and her maternal grandfather played mandolin and sang tenor vocals in a local bluegrass band, so music was always around as she was growing up. She picked up the mandolin at age 5 but never went very far with it. Ditto with the banjo at age 9. The third time was the charm, and she seriously started playing the banjo when she was 13.

Kristin's portal into the banjo and the world of bluegrass was Scott Vestal, at the time the banjo player in Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver. She saw them at a festival, and was struck both by how young Doyle's band was and by the power and drive of Vestal's playing. She was hooked, and her banjo journey was underway. She joined her first band, a gospel group, at 15.

After graduating from high school, Kristin moved to Nashville to attend Belmont University, where she studied business administration, majoring in marketing with a minor in music business. During her time at Belmont, from which she graduated summa cum laude, she played banjo in the Larry Stephenson Band from 1995–99.

In 2000, she joined Sally Jones and the Sidewinders. She would go on to play with Honi Deaton & Dream and Larry Cordle & Lonesome Standard Time before returning to Larry Stephenson's band for a second stint in 2006. She stayed there until joining the Grascals in 2008.

Kristin had seen the Grascals—twice voted IBMA Entertainer of the Year—several times before joining the band, and she always wondered if the guys in the band were really enjoying themselves on stage as much as they seemed to. “Could that be real,” she asked herself. She



Kristin Scott Benson. Photo by Laci Mack.

found out that, yes, they really are having that much fun.

“I have a tape of the first rehearsal we did after I had joined the band,” she says, “and it sounds like we’re at a party. They are all high-spirited, outgoing, very extroverted guys with lots of stage presence. The band from its inception was built around the idea of ‘let’s go have a big

time.’” The Grascals brought their high-energy style of bluegrass to the FDF in 2009 and 2018, and Kristin taught at the Summer Music Camp in 2018.

Kristin has played on nine albums by the Grascals since she joined the band in 2008. The first was *The Famous Lefty Flynn’s* (Rounder, 2010); the most recent is *20* (Mountain Home, 2024). She has also recorded three solo albums: *Straight Paths* (Pinecastle, 2002), *Second Season* (Pinecastle, 2008) and *Stringworks* (Mountain Home, 2016).

In addition to the Grascals and solo recordings, she has also recorded two albums with her husband Wayne Benson, the long-time mandolinist with IIIrd Tyme Out: *Pick Your Poison* (2023) and *Double Dose* (2026), both on Mountain Home. The couple, married in 2000, had never collaborated on a recording before making *Pick Your Poison*, but the opportunity presented itself in an unexpected way.

“COVID changed a lot of things for musicians,” says Wayne, “and not all of them were bad. I don’t think we would have ever recorded this album if we had just kept moving along normally, but COVID created some opportunities. For us, we thought the chance to record together with the downtime would be a good idea.”

The annual IBMA Awards show was held in Nashville at the storied Ryman Auditorium in 2008, the year Kristin won her first Banjo Player of the Year award. She regarded her nomination as “a total fluke” and had absolutely no thought or expectation of winning. She says she was more shocked than anybody when her name was announced as the winner.

Because their son was so young, Wayne stayed home in Boiling Springs, South Carolina, on childcare duty. Kristin was accompanied to the show by her parents. “I think that what I remember most from the night,” says Kristin, “is how excited my dad was. He was really instrumental in helping me getting started on the banjo, and he was always my biggest fan and supporter. I don’t think there’s any chance

that he wasn't the happiest guy in the room when I won it."

She has now won IBMA's Banjo Player of the Year award seven times, more than any other banjo player; her victories span an amazing three decades: 2008–11, 2019, 2023, and 2025.

Kristin was in Nashville when she found out she'd won the 2018 Steve Martin Prize for Excellence in Bluegrass and Banjo (now known as the Steve Martin Banjo Prize), a prestigious annual award honoring players across genres and styles. Past winners include Noam Pikelny, Scott Vestal, Sammy Shelor, Alan Munde, Rhannon Giddens, Terry Baucom, Danny Barnes, Bill Evans and Eddie Adcock. Kristin was in town for a concert put together by Béla Fleck featuring Kristin, Alison Brown and himself. Béla asked Kristin to stop by his house the next day to talk.

Kristin and Béla were sitting in his basement the next afternoon, when Béla ran upstairs. Then a procession of Noam Pikelny, Alison Brown and her husband Garry West, and Béla and his wife Abigail Washburn came trooping down the stairs with her award. Kristin didn't know what to think. "I had no idea of what was going on," she says. "I was wondering if the banjo illuminati had come for me." Again, she had no inkling the award was on her horizon and was stunned at the honor.

Kristin sees herself not just as a member of the bluegrass community, but also a member of the larger banjo community, which extends far beyond bluegrass. She's now a board member of the Steve Martin prize, so she tries to keep her finger on the pulse and to be aware of young banjo pickers coming onto the scene. "There are so many great young players who I'm really excited about," she says.

"Gibson Davis is a wonderful example of a young bluegrass banjo player who's really upholding the tradition. I'm a big fan of his. There's a young guy named Nikolai Margolis who's doing some really wacky things with the banjo. He's so smart and so creative, and I always keep my eyes on him. There's a kid named Carson Moore who's like a straight-ahead jazz guy. A guy named Max Allard, I just love what he writes. There's a whole crop of these young players, all in their late teens or early 20s, just doing phenomenal things with the instrument."

Kristin endorses Deering banjos and plays a Deering Golden Wreath with a curly maple neck and speed finish neck. She's played it for a couple of years now and absolutely loves it. "It's like a cannon," she says, "and it does exactly what I need it to do—it punctuates and cuts

through a bluegrass band. It isn't mushy, and it doesn't get lost. If you need to function within a full-band context, you've got to have clarity, and this one has it."

"There are times in any job when you get tired of it," Kristin says of being a professional musician. "In this job, it's the traveling, mainly. But I've never picked the banjo up and not wanted to play it. Not one single time. It's such a true friend. I equate it with the most faithful companion, because it never demands anything from you. You can ignore it for a while, and there are no repercussions from that. It's there to give you a lifetime of learning.

"If you play an instrument, in your life you will never conquer it. It's a never-ending companionship. And if you're lucky enough to do it for a living, it creates this entire lifestyle. So, I'm eternally indebted to the instrument."

Turning 50 often presents an opportunity to take stock of one's life, to assess the past and consider the future. When asked about the highlight of her career, Kristin says, "You might think it would be winning the awards or playing some big show or something like that, but I think the thing that's meant the most to me about my career is getting to know the people who made me want to play. Getting to be friends with guys like Sonny Osborne, Bill Emerson, J.D. Crowe and so on, I think that's the most gratifying thing about my whole career. It's impossible for me to verbalize how special that is when you get to meet your banjo heroes and then become friends with them. I think that's the best possible validation you could get as a banjo player. I treasure being part of that community."



Wayne Benson and Kristin Scott Benson. Photo courtesy of Kristin Scott Benson.

Watch Kristin perform "Sunny Side of the Mountain" with The Grascals at the 2018 Father's Day Festival →



Kristin performs with The Grascals on the Grand Ole Opry stage. Photo courtesy of Kristin Scott Benson.

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10 YEARS OF STRUM MACHINE

By the Bluegrass Breakdown. Photos courtesy of Luke Abbott

What started as a side project for Luke Abbott has evolved over a decade into what many players and teachers now consider an indispensable practice tool in learning bluegrass and old-time music: Strum Machine.

BUILDING THE TOOL HE COULDN'T FIND

Luke Abbott grew up in Santa Cruz playing music, and by his 20s he was playing bluegrass gigs regularly and teaching 20–30 lessons a week. The idea to build a backing-track app came from those lessons.

"I knew the importance of practicing at home with rhythm accompaniment, so I would record custom backing tracks for my students," Luke said. "But they couldn't change the key or tempo, couldn't loop a phrase to focus on it, couldn't practice with a new song unless I recorded a new track for them. The existing backing-track generators I found were either hard to use or sounded terrible for bluegrass. Every few months I would search the web to see if someone had built the app I envisioned, but I always came back disappointed. Eventually, I decided to see if I could build it myself."

As it happened, Luke had also been programming since childhood, so he built a simple prototype for his students to use. They loved it, and their playing improved quickly. Inspired by their progress, he focused on developing the prototype into a full-fledged product. The first public version went live later that year, with his first hundred users coming from a single Facebook post. Most of the thousands who have signed up since then found it the old-fashioned way: someone mentioned it at a jam.

At first, Strum Machine only played chords in a simple "boom-chuck" pattern. Over the past 10 years, Luke and Tyler Stegall—a product designer, banjo player, and longtime Strum Machine user who joined Luke three years ago—have built it into a sophisticated and highly-customizable practice companion without sacrificing accessibility.

Today, the app comes with backing tracks for over a thousand songs, and tens of thousands more have been made by the app's users, many of which they have shared with the community

on the Strum Machine forum. Teachers regularly create and share song lists with their students directly.

"In this age of online teaching, you want students to have something engaging to play along with between lessons," said Adam Roszkiewicz, CBA's music camps director. "I also use Strum Machine when I'm learning tunes with unusual phrasing, like 'Maple on the Hill.'"

Strum Machine's backup tracks are customizable in a frankly surprising number of ways, allowing for users to dial in the rhythmic feel of the genre they're learning. This goes way beyond the old-school metronome. "When you're playing with actual instruments, either a recording or in real life, there's so much more information coming into your brain than with a metronome," Luke said. "Chords and strumming give you all this context that makes it easier to fall into the groove, which can really accelerate the learning process, especially early on. Plus it's just more fun to play in a way that feels closer to playing with other people."

Strum Machine's song editor was redesigned in 2025, giving users the power to use multiple time signatures in one tune, "push" specific beats in a measure, and play at least 30 different types of chords—B \flat 7#5/D, anyone? You don't have to know a lot about theory to take advantage of these features, thanks to band presets that include presets like bluegrass, old-time, Celtic, and Western swing. From there, users can dial in the feel of everything from eighth-note swing and the duration of the mandolin chop's sustain to walking bass and automatic bass runs.

"I've seen a huge improvement in my students' overall timing on fiddle tunes as well as bluegrass breaks and solos after a few months of using Strum Machine, and it has boosted their confidence in playing with other people 100 fold," said fiddle instructor and Grammy nominee Megan Lynch Chowning.

THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY UPDATE

The summer 2026 release represents a rethinking of the core playback experience through a set of clear, noticeable improvements. "With an update like this, Tyler and I will spend hours obsessing over details, because we know how

much folks rely on this tool for their daily practice and we care deeply about keeping the app intuitive and easy to use," Luke said.

Highlights of anniversary update include:

Easier access to playback settings—streamlined controls that reveal features that existed but were previously hard to find

Improved mobile player—easier to start, stop, and adjust tempo—even holding the phone in one hand with fingerpicks on

Dark mode—easier on the eyes at night or when glancing at chords at a jam or gig

Metronome option—because some users asked to be able to hear a click track alongside or instead of the instruments

Luke said of this recent update: "After 10 years of talking with users and thinking about how to make Strum Machine better, I think I have a good sense of what the 'final shape' of the product will be. I won't keep endlessly stuffing in new features—I just want to be able to practice with it myself for an hour without having to grab a notepad and jot down ideas for improvement!"

STILL \$5 A MONTH

Strum Machine's fee hasn't budged since 2016: \$5/month or \$49/year. Luke has held the price steady even as the app has grown dramatically in functionality.

"We're not a big company trying to maximize revenue," Luke said. "We're musicians building this for ourselves and our fellow musicians. The thing that brings me the most joy in this work is hearing from users who've found Strum Machine helpful in their practice and in finding more joy in this music."

"This isn't a business I'm looking to sell. It's a community I plan to keep serving for the rest of my life."

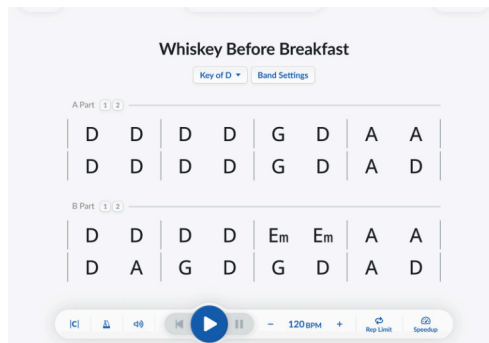
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Sign up for Strum Machine in July, August, or September 2026 and enjoy a 30-day free trial!

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Strum Machine's Luke Abbott ready to play along.



The Strum Machine interface.



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Monthly Trivia Quiz

By Bert Daniel, Breakdown Contributor

Our May 2026 trivia question was a fun two-parter: "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?"

Tom Payne, Steven Cahn, Joel Sidney, and George Martin all knew that not only was Burney Garelick the first editor of this newsletter, but also that she was an editor for the California State Old Time Fiddler's Association. Tom Payne correctly included in his response that the publication she edited for CSOTFA was the *Soundpost*.

Richard Brooks and Charles Benson also noted her later foray into the world of opera, as a reviewer of performances of New York City's Metropolitan Opera.

The trusty Google random number generator helped us pick **George Martin** as the winner of an "I'd Rather be Pickin'" CBA License plate frame!

We also want to set the record of correct respondents to our March 2026 trivia question straight: **Brijet Neff** was among the several respondents who knew Ingrid Herman (Fowler) Littlefield-Reese was the daughter of big band leader Woody Herman. We're sorry for the oversight, Brijet!

JULY TRIVIA

For our July trivia question, another two-parter keeping with our banjo theme for the issue: "Name the CBA lifetime member and his brother who were a team of banjo builders from the greater Sacramento area."

Send your answer to:
trivia@californiabluegrass.net
no later than July 31.

This month's prize is a set of D'Addario banjo strings—or guitar or mandolin, if the winner prefers!

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 September 2026 issue of the *Bluegrass Breakdown*.



Illustration from CBA's first newsletter in 1975.