



BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

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



August
2026



UCLA'S OLD-TIME STRING BAND ENSEMBLE BUILDS A BIGGER CIRCLE

Under old-time performer, instructor, and producer David Bragger, a course rooted in source recordings and regional styles has become a portal into jamming, dancing, listening, and the living Los Angeles old-time community.

by Jason Dilg, Bluegrass Breakdown Managing Editor

In preparation for the 2026 UCLA Spring Festival of World Music at Schoenberg Hall, David Bragger faced a challenging musical puzzle: how do you put roughly 30 old-time players onstage without burying the music beneath a wall of sound?

The performance opened with “Creek’s All Muddy and the Pond’s All Dry,” an old Texas tune associated with fiddler Thomas Jefferson “Duck” Wootan. Fiddles, banjos, guitars, mandolins, cello, bass, and voices came in together. The ensemble shouted its short lines and hooted between verses. From there, the program moved into smaller configurations: a Carter Family song sung by the whole group, an “Arkansas Traveler” including the comic routine that evolved with the tune, and a take on the Scottsdale String Band’s mandolin-centered “Japanese Breakdown” with washboard, bowed cello, flatfooting—and two jugglers flanking the group and throwing batons over everyone.

The festival concert came at the close of his first decade directing the course, and it underscored a question that has shaped his vision of the program: how can an old-time ensemble inside a university give more people a serious point of entry into the music?

When David first took over the program in 2016, he imagined eight could be a workable number of students. Then there were 10 or 12. Students kept coming. “People are begging to get in there,” he said. Once the class grew beyond 20, his vision of the program started to shift. “What’s the purpose of the ensemble?” he asked. “To create the most authentic 1920s string band at UCLA, or to actually educate and inspire and get more people aware of the music through playing it?”

That question has an answer in the music itself. A 30-person old-time band may bring out the nitpickers on the internet, David acknowledged. But it can also

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DIRECTOR'S WELCOME

IT'S HIGH TIME FOR OLD TIME

by Pete Ludé, CBA Executive Director

Many of us are still relishing the afterglow from our flagship annual gathering, CBA's Father's Day Festival. This was a welcome break from day-to-day life to celebrate the joy of being immersed in music with friends in our pop-up community that, in many ways, feels like family.

This year we had another outstanding event—our 51st since CBA was founded back in 1974. CBA's team did a remarkable job of booking over 30 bands filling three stages with non-stop music for the full four days, with something for everyone. We were blessed by wonderful weather and a large contingent of bluegrass music fans, among the friendliest and hospitable folks you'll ever meet. You can relive the highlights from the week here in this month's *Breakdown*.

One of the clear takeaways from this year's festival is that we are

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GOLDEN OLD TIME CAMPOUT: SIMPLY HEAVEN!

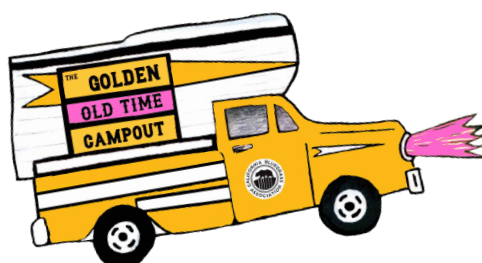
The CBA's Golden Old Time Campout returns to its idyllic home for three days and nights at Camp Russian River, August 20–23. This beloved event offers old-time bliss nestled by the riverside, sheltered from the daily grind, while a few steps from the welcoming restaurants and amenities that await in nearby Guerneville.

With nothing to do but enjoy the warm company of fellow old-time devotees in musical merriment and the delights of dining al fresco, the GOTCO is a divine deliverance from the distractions of the digital domain. No stages, no contests—just food, friends, and folic!

For those adventurous souls seeing stimulation beyond the cloistered confines of camp, both nature and nosh are nearby. You can walk to a refreshing dip in the Russian River from camp, and Armstrong Woods State Reserve is just three miles away. The town of Jenner, where the Russian River meets the coast, is 14 miles west. Guerneville

offers everything from groceries to pizza to Wine Country's finest farm-to-table dining, a mere 15 minutes by foot.

We'll have the whole camp to ourselves again this year, but with this event's growing popularity, you might want to get your tickets now. Our famous old-time truck(er) hats have made it as far as France! 🇫🇷



TICKETS AVAILABLE
NOW! SCAN HERE:



Campsite jam at GOTCO 2025.
Photo by Alan M. Bond.

BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

August 2026 - Old-Time Music

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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Printed in California by
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WELCOME MESSAGE

cont'd from front page

seeing a resurgence of old time in our community. We saw more encampments on Old Time Hill, more open-back banjos lugged around, larger stage crowds during the genre's representative acts like Hard Drive and Bruce Molsky & Darol Anger, and record attendance at our square dances. Later this month, August 20–23, we'll continue the party at CBA's Golden Old-Time Campout in Guerneville. It is one of our most popular events, no doubt because of the stunning beautiful location right on the scenic Russian River—and the outstanding musicians that come to share tunes from the music's vast repertoire.

Our theme for this month's *Bluegrass Breakdown* is, therefore, old time music. You'll learn about Dom Flemons' many contributions to old time and bluegrass from his long path exploring the many-faceted jewels of more than a century of traditional American music. We also feature a story about David Bragger's work spreading old-time music in California and beyond through his string band program at UCLA, and a

profile on Alice Gerrard, among the most influential women for generations of old time and bluegrass musicians.

While the end of the 2026 festival season is on the horizon, there's still a lot of fun to be had. In addition to the **Golden Old Time Campout** this month, CBA will return to the Lodi Grape Festival Grounds October 5–11 for the **Fall Campout**, which includes our **annual all-member meeting** Saturday, October 10. The **South State 48** is back in Carlsbad November 5–8, and hotel rooms are already almost sold out! The **Great 48** is scheduled for Bakersfield January 14–17, with hotel room reservations available for CBA members starting September 1.

Would you like to be more involved with CBA? Nominations for new board members are now open until August 17. You'll find all the information about how you could sign up on our website www.CaliforniaBluegrass.org. Let's work together to keep music alive and kickin'!



RUN FOR CBA'S BOARD OF DIRECTORS

CBA elects new members to our board of directors each year. Interested candidates are invited to submit a petition signed by 10 CBA members by August 15. Results of the election will be announced at the annual membership meeting in October.

APPLY BY AUGUST 15

CaliforniaBluegrass.org/CBA-Board



SAVE THE DATE, GREAT 48

JANUARY 14-17 • BAKERSFIELD

TICKETS ON SALE AT NOON ON SEPTEMBER 1

by Debbie Wendt, Great 48 Co-Director

It may seem like a long time from now—but it's not too early to start planning for 2027. Our favorite way to kick off the new year is at the Great 48 Bluegrass Jam, which is returning to the Bakersfield Marriott hotel Thursday, January 14 through Sunday, January 17, which falls over the MLK weekend. This four-day event is packed with hosted and free-form jams, instructional workshops, open-mic opportunities, and performances.

Room reservations will open on September 1 at noon for CBA members and as current members of other represented bluegrass associations, and September 15 for the general public.

Mark your calendar now—rooms typically sell out quickly! We update the Great 48 website continually, as program details are confirmed, so check back often.

Find the code for the discounted CBA room rate on the CBA website by scanning the QR code.

ALL-ACCESS PASS

The cost for the full event is \$25 for members and \$30 for non-members. This will entitle you to attend ALL the hosted jams, performances, and other activities. This small fee will allow the CBA to continue producing this very popular event. The pass will be available on-line starting September 1, and on-site at the event.

JAM CLASSES RETURN

Gail and Mike Thomas will be returning with their very popular Wernick method Jam Class. This is a three-hour class, and will be offered at three separate times between Thursday and Saturday. Class size is restricted to a maximum of 12 participants per session. Tuition is \$60 for the class, and can be purchased online in advance, or at the event (unless it's sold out).

Plan now to kick off the new year in the most fun way possible—with friends and music. 🐻



Jamming with Chad Manning. Photo by David K. Cupp.



More info on the Great 48 Jam here →

Tunes on the patio. Photo by David K. Cupp.

California Bluegrass Association presents

Sierra Jamm

BLUEGRASS & OLD TIME

September 19 ★ Noon to 6pm ★ Auburn, California

Bring your acoustic bluegrass and old-time instruments, picking chair, and snacks for this second-annual event hosted by CBA Sierra Regional Director Jonathan Bluemel and Grass Valley Stringband's Dave Earl! Suggested donation \$10. Well-behaved dogs allowed on a leash, no alcoholic beverages permitted.

Auburn Regional Park ★ 3770 Richardson Drive



OLD TIME AND NEW ROADS WITH DOM FLEMONS

by Jason Dilg, Bluegrass Breakdown Managing Editor

For Dom Flemons, old-time music has never been a genre limited by a fixed set of rules. It is more of a gathering place: regional styles, commercial records, dance rhythms, gospel harmony, jug-band bounce, Black string-band repertoire, early country, blues, jazz, and the wide range of music that circulated before record-store bins and streaming menus taught listeners to sort it all into separate categories.

That scope is audible in Dom's work as a singer, multi-instrumentalist, bandleader, producer, record collector, and scholar. It is also central to his current project, Dom Flemons & the Traveling Wildfires, a new Black string band whose lineup includes banjoist and guitarist Tray Wellington, bassist and fiddler Brian Farrow, vocalist and percussionist Dante' Pope, and longtime collaborator Sule Greg Wilson. The band draws from Dom's catalog while reaching toward the repertoire he calls "the deep cuts": songs that have remained outside the small circle of standards familiar to the roots-music audience at large.

"I'm all about trying to break out of the five most well-known numbers that everybody's heard and break into some new material," Dom said in a June interview. That search is a through line in his career, and serves as useful context approaching the catalogue of a musician who has spent two decades making the past present as living music.

The Traveling Wildfires arrived after years in which Dom's solo work had broadened in both subject and sound. His 2018 Smithsonian Folkways album *Black Cowboys* brought songs, poetry, history, and musical forms associated with Black life in the West into a cohesive, full-length statement. The 2023 Smithsonian Folkways release *Traveling Wildfire*, produced by Ted Hutt—whose work includes collaborations with The Gaslight Anthem, Flogging Molly, Dropkick Murphys, The Devil Makes Three, Violent Femmes, and Old Crow Medicine Show—leaned more heavily into Dom's own songwriting and used a larger studio production palette. The new band gives him another vehicle: a live ensemble capable of moving from old-time breakdowns to blues, bluegrass, country, and jazz-inflected material with the energy of a working dance band.

Wellington, a major young banjo voice with bluegrass grounding, brings what Dom calls "that extra bit of fire." He hears in Wellington a player who can meet a traditional tune on its own terms, then take a solo into newgrass, rock, Django Reinhardt-inspired phrasing, or more modern bluegrass harmony. Farrow moves between upright bass and fiddle, giving the band a foundation for both driving songs and instrumental sets. Pope brings snare drum, washboard, rhythm bones, harmony singing, and experience in both classical percussion and church music. Wilson, a member of Dom's earlier group Sankofa Strings, adds banjo, percussion, vocals, and a shared history that reaches back two decades.

The combination is deliberate. Dom has long been interested in percussion in roots music, including the washboard and bones heard in early Black string bands, jug bands, and popular dance music. In the Traveling Wildfires, he has room to extend that interest through another player's vocabulary. He also has room to arrange for contrast: fiddle-and-bass features, close harmony, a hard-driving breakdown, a blues number, a song that leaves space for a banjo solo. One current feature has Pope playing



Dom Flemons. Photo by Emily Cummings.

bones and whistling in tribute to Brother Bones, whose recording of "Sweet Georgia Brown" became almost synonymous with the Harlem Globetrotters. Another finds Farrow taking on "Knox County Stomp," associated with the Tennessee Chocolate Drops.

The point is neither novelty nor historical inventory: Dom is building a band that can make this material land when performed live. He describes the Traveling Wildfires as a place for "hard, hard driving solos" and "great singing and great musical repertoire, original as well as traditional fare." That language echoes the musical energy he remembers from the Carolina Chocolate Drops, the group he co-founded with Rhiannon Giddens and Justin Robinson after the 2005 Black Banjo Gathering in Boone, North Carolina.

The Carolina Chocolate Drops remain an important part of Dom's story, though he is quick to place them inside a larger early-2000s old-time revival. He calls that movement "fast old-time"—music played with the pace and intensity of bluegrass, a punk-rock exuberance, and a firm connection to string-band dances. He names groups including the Freight Hoppers, Foghorn Stringband, Highwoods Stringband, and Plank Road String Band as part of the wider environment. The Carolina Chocolate Drops were also shaped by long, direct study with Black fiddler Joe Thompson, whose repertoire and bowing placed the group in a distinct North Carolina tradition.

Dom brought additional colors to that foundation: jug-band music, fife-and-drum traditions, raw guitar rhythms gleaned from early recordings, and a drummer's ear for syncopation. The group could move among instruments, break into duos or trios, then come together with an intentionally large sound. He recalls looking to the New Lost City Ramblers for their ability to revive old recordings in a way that could trigger new musical activity around them. He also admired the flexibility of the 1960s blues band Koerner, Ray & Glover and the force the Kingston Trio could generate on an up-tempo number.

The Carolina Chocolate Drops earned broad recognition, including a Grammy Award, yet Dom's account resists an easy success-story arc. The group's early work grew out of listening, playing for dancers, learning from older musicians, and making choices about repertoire one song at a time.

“We don’t have to be 100% museum piece historically accurate,” he said. “We get to be ourselves, and it gets to be a modern expression.”

That gets close to Dom’s wider philosophy: He embraces scholarship, but he treats it as a discipline that should sharpen the ear rather than close off the possibilities of performance. His undergraduate studies at Northern Arizona University included English, folk music, and ancient literature. After the 2005 Black Banjo Gathering, he moved to North Carolina with an interest in widening the available scholarship on African-American music, particularly string-band music. He collected stories, met musicians, listened deeply, and spent time at Mike Seeger’s home in Lexington, Virginia, talking music and listening to records.

His record collection is a working tool. Dom estimates that he owns about 5,000 titles on vinyl— and is still adding more. He returns repeatedly to the idea that an artist needs a deep reservoir of listening behind the search for an individual sound. “They don’t really teach people that you should be well-versed in everything that you’re trying to get at to be your unique self,” he said. “They just say, ‘find your unique voice.’”

That record-room sensibility also explains why Dom resists a narrow definition of old-time. In the interview, he echoed a formulation offered by Bay Area musician and researcher Suzy Thompson: old-time music can include the sounds that met listeners at the beginning of American commercial recording and radio. The category may take in Southern fiddle-and-banjo music, early country, Cajun music, string bands, early jazz, regional dance music, and other community traditions. It can also describe the aesthetic frame through which later listeners encounter those sounds. The *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack, the first installments of Johnny Cash’s *American Recordings*, and Tom Waits’s rough-hewn late work have all helped shape a generation’s mental picture of old-time or roots music, Dom said.

Such associations can be useful gateways, though they can also leave listeners with an overly tidy image of a much more varied musical world. Dom prefers deeper context: hearing more than one version; learning who recorded a piece, where it circulated, and what other music its players heard. He is interested in the moment before genre labels hardened, when working musicians could play for dances, accompany songs, draw from new popular music, and carry material across racial and regional lines. At the same time, he does not dismiss genres as meaningless. Bluegrass, he said, is “a community that has its own orbit,” with its own history, language, repertoire, and standards of listening.

That balance makes the word “songster” especially important to Dom. He adopted it because he wanted a musical identity broad enough to encompass the full range of his interests. The name gives him latitude to present folk song, country blues, old-time dance music, gospel-inflected harmony, early popular styles, and material that reaches toward rock, funk, or jazz. It also keeps him alert to the obligations that come with that freedom; a songster must know the terrain well enough to hear the difference between homage, adaptation, and mere imitation.

For Dom, this is especially important in conversations about Black influence and participation in bluegrass, old-time, country, and folk music. He is wary of arguments that flatten history into a slogan or rely on a single emblematic figure. Discussing Arnold Shultz, a Kentucky musician credited with teaching some of the essentials of roots music to Bill Monroe and whose playing is known through testimony rather than recordings, Dom described a different approach: investigate the contemporary recorded world around him. Look at Black string bands, jug bands, race records, New Orleans musical practice, and regional players whose work gives listeners concrete sounds with which to compare the stories that become conventional wisdom.

“Instead of making it a thing about pushback,” Dom said, “it’s now just saying, well, listen to this and listen to this.” That is the scholar’s instinct in his work: build a perspective through sound, chronology, repertoire, and close comparison. It is also the bandleader’s instinct. The material has to

communicate to a listener who may have arrived through bluegrass, the blues, social media, a film soundtrack, a dance clip, or simple curiosity.

Dom does not see the ease of contemporary access as a threat to old-time music. He recognizes that learning a tune through YouTube differs from spending years with a source musician, and he speaks with affection about the slower, social learning he experienced with Joe Thompson. Yet he also sees the value of new routes into the music. A viral video of buck dancing may lead someone to seek out the steps, the players, and the communities behind it. A young musician may bypass the usual Tommy Jarrell entry point and become serious about a different regional style or a less familiar body of repertoire. “They’re becoming quite good at specializing in something else, and it’s just as valid as anybody else,” he said.

The same openness guides Dom in the studio. He began as a performer committed to solo recordings with little overdubbing, partly as a safeguard against what he jokingly calls “the folky disease,” which might be understood best as the temptation to dress traditional material in novelty sounds, oversized production, or borrowed genre gestures without enough intention and grounding behind the choice. His later work with producers Joe Henry, Buddy Miller, and Ted Hutt expanded his sense of what a record can do. He learned to use multiple takes and careful editing without losing the feeling of an organic performance. He learned to let an album’s material, setting, and personnel suggest its own sound.

On *Prospect Hill*, Dom explored arrangements that could include gourd banjo, jug, harmonica, saxophone, amplified blues harp, and rhythmic ideas that nodded toward surf instrumentals and other forms outside conventional old-time presentation. *Black Cowboys* drew inspiration from the broad appeal of Marty Robbins’s *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* while seeking a grittier, more historically expansive sound. On *Traveling Wildfire*,

cont’d →

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he and Ted Hutt created rhythmic frameworks for individual songs, including prominent drum beats alongside gourd banjo on “Tough Luck.”

Dom’s production method remains strikingly direct. “I try to come at the material from where it’s at and build from there,” he said. “I treat every song like it’s its own individual project to figure out how do we get the best track out of it.” Thoughtful preproduction helps a song that feels strong on paper from falling flat in the studio; a well-prepared session leaves room for more choices. The lesson is technical, artistic, and humane. A record is built through attention, but it also requires the humility to hear when an initial plan has stopped serving a song.

That approach helps explain why Dom has kept moving across forms without losing his center. He can revive an old song, write a new one in the shape of a Lightnin’ Hopkins shuffle, arrange a Black cowboy project as an extended historical narrative, lead a roots band with modern bluegrass firepower, or pull a forgotten dance piece into a contemporary set. The connective tissue is his belief that American music is a web of living practices, records, people, and places.

A new album is in the works, Dom said, though as of our conversation in June he was not ready to share details. For now, the Traveling Wildfires offer the clearest view of where his thinking is headed—toward a band that can hold history, exuberance, scholarship, improvisation, and social music in the same hand. Dom has spent much of his career making pathways into old material. With the Traveling Wildfires, he is also building new roads out of it. 🌲



Photo by Rory Doyle.

FATHER’S DAY FESTIVAL 2027 VERN’S STAGE OPEN CALL FOR BANDS

By Jim Duber, Vern’s Stage Coordinator

Get your band a spot on a very special stage at CBA’s Father’s Day Festival! The CBA is pleased to announce an open call for bands—from California and beyond—to appear on Vern’s Stage at the 2027 Father’s Day Bluegrass Festival in Grass Valley.

There are a limited number of slots available from Thursday, June 17 through Sunday, June 20. We expect to fill up to 17 openings with sets of 35–45 minutes each. The submission process opens on or about September 1 and will remain open until midnight, November 1, 2026.

This is a juried competition. All submissions will be evaluated by a panel of qualified judges who will determine the final selections.

Please note that Vern’s Stage and California Showcase are two different programs on different stages. They each have their own set of rules for submissions.

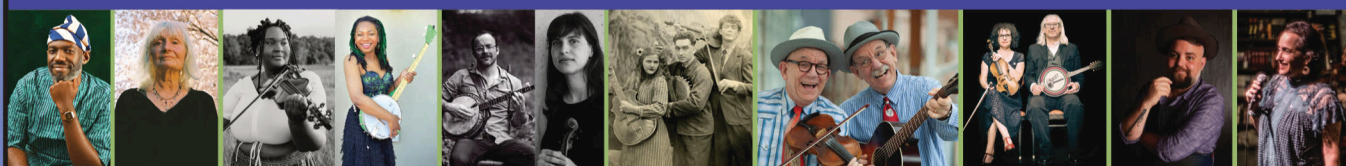


Find more information, submission requirements, and the online application form on the CBA website’s Father’s Day Festival page here:



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MOMENTS FROM ★ 2026 ★ FATHER'S DAY FESTIVAL

Pete Ludé, Festival Director

Each June, thousands of music lovers from around the world gather in Grass Valley for exceptional music, family-focused activities, and a welcoming bluegrass community. The 51st CBA Father's Day Festival's three stages hosted more than 30 bands over four days. Highlights included a 50th-anniversary reunion of the Bluegrass Cardinals; a Saturday-night set by Sam Grisman and a largely California-based band celebrating the repertoire of his father, David Grisman; and a rare California appearance by the Po' Ramblin' Boys, featuring Kids on Bluegrass alum John Gooding. Fellow KOB grads Broken Compass Bluegrass melded youthful vitality with California's bluegrass traditions.

Missy Raines & Allegheny, California Bluegrass Reunion, Hard Drive, Bruce Molsky & Darol Anger, the Price Sisters, Caleb & Reeb and The Cali Cutups, and Bronwyn also delivered memorable performances. After lightning halted Bronwyn's set, she and her band regrouped in the campground for an impromptu acoustic performance before hundreds of delighted fans.

Five California Showcase bands spoke to bluegrass's bright future, while 17 local acts gave Vern's Stage its intimate, club-like atmosphere. The festival's first artist-in-residence, Scott Gates, performed, led workshops, and joined main-stage bands. The Black Banjo Reclamation Project drew a standing-room-only audience for a performance exploring the Black roots of old-time and bluegrass music. Youth programs, workshops, square dances, luthiers, vendors, and hot campground picking rounded out the weekend. Mark your calendar—FDF returns June 17–20, 2027.



Lightning shut down the main stage on Thursday night, so Bronwyn brought her evening set to the campground. Photo by Evan Thompson.



Enjoying an afternoon of music with the family. Photo by Evan Thompson.



Darol Anger and Bruce Molsky. Photo by Evan Thompson.



Mandolin workshop with Rowan McCallister. Photo by Evan Thompson.



Artist-in-Residence Scott Gates. Photo by Mike Oitzman.



The Price Sisters. Photo by David K. Cupp.



Janet Deering. Photo by Evan Thompson.



California Bluegrass Reunion's Sharon Gilchrist. Photo by Robin Frenette.



Saturday square dance. Photo by Alan M. Bond.



The Rounder Circle at Vern's Stage. Photo by Robin Frenette.



Po' Ramblin' Boys with KidFest customized festival shirts. Photo by Robin Frenette.



New to the Bluegrass Hall of Fame: The Bluegrass Cardinals. Photo by Evan Thompson.



Jack Tuttle backstage. Photo by Robin Frenette.



Caleb Klauder ready to dazzle! Photo by Robin Frenette.



Tom Sauber receives Lifetime Membership Award; pictured with son Patrick Sauber. Photo by Robin Frenette.



Deidre Hall performs in the Black Banjo Reclamation Showcase. Photo by Evan Thompson.



Train songs jam at the model railroad exhibit. Photo by David K. Cupp.



Fun at Sunday's Father's Day Fair. Photo by Evan Thompson.

Visit our online photo gallery for lots of photos from the festival! Scan here →



CBA SUMMER MUSIC CAMP

Adam Roskiewicz, Director
Photos by Alan M. Bond

For four days leading up to the big festival, we had about 40 workshop offerings during the week from the likes of Michaela Thomas, Ryan Harlin, Olivier Zyngier, Laurie Lewis, and Jack Tuttle, and a great crew of instructors teaching intensive instrument, ensemble, and dance classes. Some were at camp for the first time, like Matt Flinner, Forrest Marowitz, and Sonya Badigian. On the other side of the coin we had Bill Evans, who was instrumental in the creation of Summer Music Camp 26 years ago! There are so many great things that camp gives us: connection to a special community, opportunities to express ourselves in a safe space, and meaningful shared experiences. But one of the biggest pieces of the puzzle are the instructors, and we are so lucky to have such great ones as part of our bluegrass and old-time communities.



Keith Little's banjo class.



The camp volunteer old-time band warms up for Wednesday concert



Old-time guitar with Sonya Badigian.



Staff concert, L-R: Mike Witcher, Jesse Appelman, Forrest Marowitz, Eli West.



Evening jam with Laurie Lewis.



Final Kids on Bluegrass performance.
Photo by Mike Oitzman.



Helen Foley cheers on KOB participants.
Photo by Robin Frenette.

KIDS ON BLUEGRASS

Helen Foley, Director

More than 30 Kids on Bluegrass took the stage during the FDF for two main stage shows. Over three days, the kids worked on many aspects of stage performance, encouraging one another on and off the stage, and everything else time would allow. One special highlight was the festival's Artist-in-Residence and former Kid on Bluegrass Scott Gates showing up to inspire the group before their first show. Surprise performance sit-ins included The Po' Ramblin' Boys with Kids on Bluegrass alumnus John Gooding on Friday; Saturday was Broken Compass Bluegrass, with KOB alumni Mei Lin Heirendt, Django Ruckrich, and Kyle Ledson. We also surprised the audience at the Youth Academy performance by joining in on their final song. There was pizza, ice cream, and plenty of smiles after our final show. Watching returning kids mentor new participants, seeing confidence grow on stage, and celebrating together afterward made this another memorable year of KOB!



Photo by Robin Frenette.



Photos by Mike Oitzman.



Photo by Robin Frenette.

KIDFEST

Kathleen Rushing & Ruth Duterte, Directors

More than a hundred kids, parents, and grandparents, were running around the Father's Day Festival grounds in brightly colored sun-dye T-shirts in a display of the amazing creativity happening at KidFest—our annual way-fun activity center for families during our big Grass Valley bash! From the tiny-tots to the grand-folks and all ages in between, all ages are welcome. We don't just sun-dye -t-shirts—there is face painting, fun crafts, baseball cap decorating, snake painting—wooden snakes, that is—all within earshot of the amazing music from the main stage! If you didn't make it, find us next year behind the merch tables. It's way too much fun to miss making great memories and handmade souvenirs to take home!



Kids on Bluegrass (in blue) join in the final Youth Academy Performance. Photo by Mike Oitzman.

CBA YOUTH ACADEMY

Kimber Ludiker, Director

CBA Youth Academy teaches musicians 8-16 instrument skills, how to play and jam with others, and how to work on material for performance. This year's staff was full of talented CBA Youth Program graduates and wonderful supporting musicians too numerous to list! We had a private concert and Q&A session from Sweet Sally and a visit from the Price Sisters—several of our bands performed their concert selections for Lauren and Leanna Price, and it was so fun for students to get feedback and advice from one of the festival's headlining bands! Our showcase concert was one of the best we've had yet. Seven different bands performed, and all of our students took the stage for a two-song finale of "Poor Little Bullfrog" and "The Bluebirds Are Singing for Me." Kids on Bluegrass joined us for our final number—it was a great show!



Photo by Evan Thompson.



Photo by Mike Oitzman.



Kimber Ludiker at Youth Academy.
Photo by David K. Cupp.



Photo by Libby Rodenbough.

Alice Gerrard is a true icon of traditional American music. At age 92, she's pretty much done it all. She is or has been: a singer, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist; recording artist and record producer; half of the groundbreaking duo of Hazel and Alice; mentor and role model for several generations of female musicians; member of the IBMA Bluegrass Hall of Fame; founder and editor-in-chief of the *Old-Time Herald* magazine; member of such bands as the Strange Creek Singers, the Harmony Sisters, Piedmont Melody Makers and Tom, Brad & Alice; activist and advocate for what we now call social justice; documentary photographer, and more. She's probably heard it a million times over the years: "You should write a book." And now she has.

Custom Made Woman: A Life in Traditional Music, published last year by the University of North Carolina Press, is part memoir, part photo collection. The book contains nearly 100 black-and-white photographs, many of them never seen before. The majority of the photos were either taken by Alice or feature her as a subject. She says that, in fact, it was the photos that inspired and led to the book. In the process of digitizing her old photos, she decided she wanted to collect them into a book. The result was well worth the wait.

Alice Gerrard was born in 1934 in Seattle. Her mother was from Yakima, Washington, and her father—who would die when Alice was 8—was from Lancashire, England. She grew up in a house filled with singing and music. Her mother remarried after her husband's death, to an artist who taught at UC Berkeley, and the family moved to Alameda County and then Oakland.

Like many people in her generation, she was introduced to traditional American music by the

ALICE GERRARD

CUSTOM MADE WOMAN

by Jon Hartley Fox

Anthology of American Folk Music, a six-record set compiled by collector Harry Smith and issued by Folkways in 1952. This influential set of recordings, which included cuts by country, blues, and gospel musicians, played a huge role in igniting the folk boom of the 1950s.

After graduating from Oakland Technical High School, Alice spent a couple of years at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. It was there she was introduced to the Harry Smith collection, started learning how to play guitar and banjo and met her future husband, Jeremy Foster. She played in a bluegrass band called the Greene County Stump Jumpers and was part of a group of students who presented the Osborne Brothers (from nearby Dayton) at Antioch—generally recognized as the first appearance of a professional bluegrass band on a college campus.

Alice and Jeremy moved to the Washington, D.C., area, where they quickly became part of a thriving music scene of musicians and record collectors that included, among others, Mike Seeger, Pete Kuykendall, Dick Spottswood, and Hazel Dickens. Foster was killed in a car wreck in 1964, leaving Alice with four children under the age of 7.

Alice's best-known musical collaboration was with Hazel Dickens, a powerful singer and songwriter from the coal mining area of Mercer County, West Virginia. Alice met Hazel in 1953 in Baltimore through mutual friend Mike Seeger. Though from two different worlds culturally, Hazel and Alice forged a tight friendship and a musical partnership that lasted until 1976.

It's hard to imagine today just how rare it was to see women on bluegrass stages in the 1960s and early 1970s. They were few and far between, but Hazel and Alice were there, playing clubs and at major festivals, and they helped to break the glass ceiling in bluegrass and old-time country music. There aren't many women playing bluegrass and old-time country music today who don't cite Hazel and Alice as an important influence and role model. The duo's induction into the Bluegrass Hall of Fame in 2017 recognized their importance.

Hazel and Alice recorded four albums during their time together: *Who's That Knocking* (Folkways, 1965), *Hazel & Alice* (Rounder, 1973), *Won't You Come & Sing for Me* (Folkways, 1973), and *Hazel*

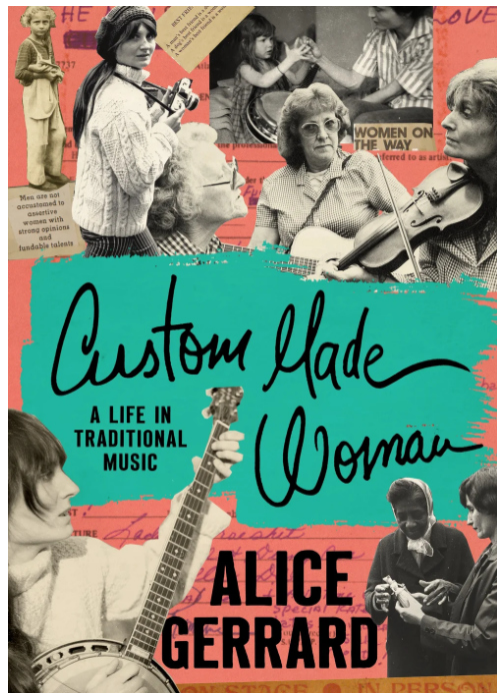
Dickens and Alice Gerrard (Rounder, 1976). *Hazel Dickens & Alice Gerrard – Pioneering Women of Bluegrass*, released by Smithsonian Folkways in 1996, is a compilation of the two Folkways albums. In addition, the 2018 release *Sing Me Back Home: The DC Tapes, 1965–1969* (Free Dirt) comes from Alice's archive and presents a fascinating glimpse behind the scenes as Hazel and Alice developed and refined their distinctive sound.

Alice was a part of many bands during her career, but the most interesting and compelling was the Strange Creek Singers, a powerful, if short lived, group that consisted of Hazel Dickens, Mike Seeger, Tracy Schwarz, Lamar Grier, and Alice. Alice describes the outfit as "a sort of adjunct group alongside Hazel and Alice and the New Lost City Ramblers." The group made only one album, released in 1972 on Arhoolie Records. It's a wonderfully diverse set of music that spans the spectrum of country music, including an *a cappella* Primitive Baptist hymn, songs from the Carter Family and the Blue Sky Boys, an original banjo tune from Grier and Hazel's hard-hitting song "Black Lung."

Among the other bands Alice played and sang with were the Harmony Sisters (Irene Herrmann, Jeanie McLerie and Alice), the Piedmont Melody Makers (Chris Brashear, Jim Watson, Cliff Hale and Alice), the Herald Angels (Gail Justice, Gail Gillespie and Alice), the Back Street Buddies (Matokie Slaughter, Virgie Worrell Richardson and Alice) and Tom, Brad & Alice (with Brad Leftwich and Tom Sauber). Alice also recorded a couple of albums with her then-husband Mike Seeger.

Scattered throughout *Custom Made Woman* are several "sidebars" containing brief personal reminiscences about individual traditional musicians including Bill Monroe, Dock Boggs, Martha Carson, Ola Belle Reed, Elizabeth Cotton, Reverend Pearly Brown, Babe Stovall, and in one sidebar dedicated to Galax musicians, Bertie Mae Dickens, Matokie Slaughter, Enoch Rutherford, Otis Burrell and a few more.

The chapters "A Lifetime in Less Than a Decade" and "Sprout Wings and Fly" discuss Alice's lifelong passion for seeking out older musicians and singers, befriending them, learning from them,



Custom Made Woman, book by Alice Gerrard.

and playing music with them. “Lifetime” covers the years (1980–89) Alice spent living in Galax, Virginia, a historic hotbed of old-time music that still had an active music scene. She moved to Galax shortly after her divorce from Mike Seeger. With fellow newcomers to Southwest Virginia Andy Cahan and Paul Brown, Alice immersed herself in the community and its music.

“I feel that one of the great life gifts I was given was the opportunity to live among some of the greatest traditional musicians of all time,” Alice writes. “Andy Cahan and I spent as much time as possible visiting older musicians, people who could tell us what it was like in the old days, what the music was like, what life was like.”

“Although in their late seventies, eighties, and nineties, many of these musicians continued to play, albeit infrequently and often with a nod to aging memories, fingers that didn’t work so well anymore, and arms that moved more slowly...We looked into local history, tracked down friends and relatives of musicians, and asked questions. They enjoyed having us come around and stir up old memories and music.”

“Sprout Wings” is dedicated to Tommy Jarrell, the legendary fiddler and banjo player who lived in the community of Toast, near Mount Airy, North Carolina, about 20 minutes “down the mountain” from Galax. Jarrell was an affable man and a gracious, hospitable host; many of the young musicians who made pilgrimages to visit Tommy ended up staying a night or two at his house. Alice spent a lot of time with Tommy in the late 1970s, studying with him under the auspices of two apprenticeship grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

In 1987, Alice founded *Old-Time Herald*, a magazine that aimed to do for old-time music what *Bluegrass Unlimited* was doing for bluegrass. The magazine was launched while Alice was living

in Galax, but she moved to Durham, North Carolina, in 1989, reasoning that the much larger city would provide more opportunities and more of an infrastructure. Somewhat amazing for a small, niche magazine, *Old-Time Herald* lasted for more than 35 years, publishing 130-plus issues between 1987 and 2023.

One of the lesser-known parts of Alice’s musical career is the work she did touring and doing shows as part of an innovative cross-cultural experiment called the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project. The SFCRP was the brainchild of a political activist and musician by the name of Ann Romaine and organized by her and Bernice Reagon of the Freedom Singers and later the founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock.

The basic idea was to take traditional Southern musicians, both Black and white, on tour and play shows throughout the region, demonstrating both the richness of Southern traditional music and, more importantly, the common bonds between Black and white strains of that music as

well as the musicians who made it and the communities that supported it.

Hazel and Alice joined the tour in 1967. Other participants over the years included Dock Boggs, Reverend Pearly Brown, Johnny Shines, Roscoe Holcomb, Dewey and Rodney Balfa, Ola Belle Reed, Ralph Stanley, Nimrod Workman, Lily May Ledford, and Hedy West. Generally, there were two tours per year, one each in the “mountain South” and the “deep South.” Five or six musicians went out on each tour.

Custom Made Woman is an informative and enjoyable read and a valuable first-hand look at the life and career of a pioneering traditional musician. Alice Gerrard has lived a lot in her time, and this engaging book covers most of the high points, and some of the not-so-high ones. It’s essential reading for Hazel and Alice fans and highly recommended for all fans and students of traditional American music.



RECOMMENDED LISTENING



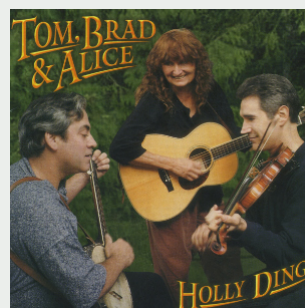
Alice Gerrard, *Sun to Sun*
Sleepy Cat Records 028, 2023

Alice wrote many songs during covid, and worked them up with fiddler Tatiana Hargreaves while they were digitizing Alice’s photos. They started performing these songs with multi-instrumentalist Reed Stutz, and this project was born.



Hazel Dickens & Alice Gerrard
Pioneering Women of Bluegrass: The Definitive Edition
Folkways Recordings, 40252, 2022

This gathering of Alice’s Folkways recordings with Hazel Dickens preserves their radical clarity as women who claimed bluegrass tradition on their own terms.



Tom, Brad & Alice, *Holly Ding*
Copper Creek 0179, 2000

A wonderful variety of old-time repertoire with Alice’s singing in the foreground for much of the recording, including Alice’s own “Love Was the Price.”



The Harmony Sisters
The Early Years
Harmony Sound, 1999

Warm, inventive, and showcasing Alice’s collaborative gifts, the Harmony Sisters—Alice, Jeanie McLerie, and Irene Herrmann—weave friendship and humor into traditional song. Originally two early-’80s LPs reissued as one CD in 1999.



Hazel Dickens & Alice Gerrard
Hazel & Alice
Rounder Records 0027, 1973

This duo helped redraw bluegrass around women’s voices, underscoring partnership, tradition, and honest emotion as the foundation for fearless roots music.



Alice Gerrard & Mike Seeger
Bowling Green 5-String
Productions, 08003, 2008

A collaborative product of Alice and Mike’s relentless musical curiosity and deep traditional knowledge. Three tracks feature the North Carolina old-time legend Tommy Jarrell on fiddle.



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produce a choir of young musicians singing a Carter Family song with the power and communal intensity he associates with shape-note singing.

A RETURN TO THE ENSEMBLE

The class predates David's leadership. It was originally called the Anglo-American Ensemble, with a broader focus that included bluegrass, Irish music, and old-time. David found it in the late 1990s, after graduating from UC Santa Barbara and beginning to learn bluegrass. He spotted a reference to the ensemble on the primitive internet, asked to join despite no longer being a UCLA student, and was welcomed by then-director Amy Wooley, an ethnomusicology PhD student.

In that room, and on subsequent trips with ensemble friends to two of old-time music's most renowned gatherings in Galax, Virginia, and Clifftop, West Virginia, he found the music that would take over his life. The Anglo-American Ensemble gradually leaned further toward old-time during his student years. Later, Tony Seeger directed it, followed by Scott Linford, whose version split attention between bluegrass and old-time.

When Scott left UCLA, he called David and asked whether he wanted to take over the program. David hesitated. He had built a career as a teacher, performer, recording producer and organizer, largely on his own terms. A university position suggested paperwork, committee meetings, and constraints he had never sought. Department faculty persisted, encouraging him to take the role. When he accepted, he asked one question: could he rename the ensemble?

The answer was yes. The UCLA Old-Time String Band Ensemble began under that name in 2016. This fall, David will begin his 11th academic year as its director.

Back on campus where old-time music first opened up to him, David crafted the course around direct listening, regional style, tunes carried from player to player, and sitting beside a musician who can show you how it's done.

A CLASSROOM THAT BEHAVES LIKE A JAM

UCLA lists the ensemble as a course for students with at least some instrumental or vocal experience, while leaving room for truly devoted beginners. "You need to know the instrument," David said. "You do not need to know anything about old-time music."

That can mean five open guitar chords, a bluegrass banjo player curious about clawhammer, a classically trained violinist looking for another musical language, or a singer-songwriter in search of academic credits. David loosened his early rules as the class grew, in part because compelling stories emerged from students who might once have been screened out.



UCLA Old-Time Ensemble Concert. Photo courtesy of David Bragger.

During the fall and winter quarters, the ensemble meets for three hours each week. Bragger teaches tunes and songs across fiddle, banjo, guitar, mandolin, cello, and voice, with help from Susan Platz, his longtime musical collaborator. Susan works with singers and plays fiddle when David needs to move to another instrument. While he is coaching banjo players, a line of fiddlers can absorb a bowing pattern. While singers work a phrase, guitarists can find their way through the chord movement.

"In this endless canon of repertoire and old-time music, there is always stuff that's easier than other things," David said. He chooses accessible source material, then leads students deeper into it. Each class also makes time for a jam. David starts tunes, students listen, and they join when they can. Before he formally teaches a more challenging tune, he may "plant" it in the jam for several weeks, allowing the melody to settle into their ears.

Classical violinists face a unique reset: moving from vibrato, written notation, and cleanly separated bow strokes into open-string drones, bow rocks, and syncopated shuffles. A phrase that sounds like it's based on a complicated double stop may simply be played with the bow catching a nearby string. Hearing what's happening and translating it to the instrument can take patience—and change how students hear rhythm, tone, and texture.

THE SOURCE IS PART OF THE TUNE

David describes old-time as "traditional music of America," a capacious field shaped by African-American and Scotch-Irish traditions, migration, immigrant communities, radio, recordings, regional dance cultures, and individual players. His own tastes favor the Hammons family's West Virginia fiddling; Midwestern repertoires he learned through Mel Durham, including tunes Durham learned from Alonzo Janes; North Carolina banjo, fiddle, and song repertoire; country blues, Cajun and Creole music; indigenous Métis tunes, and jug-band music.

That breadth of what can be included in old-time can overwhelm students. It also undermines any attempt to reduce old-time music to a single region, lineage, or sound. The course may lead from Tommy Jarrell's Round Peak bowing to Carter Family harmony, from a Cajun accordion tune to a song associated with Black string-band and country-blues multi-instrumentalist Howard Armstrong.

David said he avoids presenting old-time as a museum piece, while putting up some guardrails for students who arrive from YouTube with a newly invented banjo style or mashups detached from traditional influence. "Is it up to us to force evolution? I would say no," David said. "It just happens." What's important is to recognize how it happens over time, repeated across generations.

For David, lineage is one valuable part of that process. He learned from Tom Sauber, who learned from Earl Collins; he studied Midwestern material through Mel Durham, whose repertoire included tunes learned from a formerly-enslaved fiddler, Alonzo Janes. Alonzo passed tunes to the Durham family, and Mel carried that material to Southern California. Tradition also gathers dances, family repertoires, commercial records, local scenes, travel, and the decisions of every musician who takes up a tune along the way.

The 2026 concert gave those ideas a public forum. "Creek's All Muddy and the Pond's All Dry" opened the night as a shared jam tune, with a source trail from Wootan's home recording through contemporary performers Howard Rains and Tricia Spencer. "You've Been a Friend to Me," recorded by the Carter Family in 1936, stripped the string-band instrumentation back to massed voices, guitars, and a few mandolins. David wanted a communal singing sound, a texture closer to the intensity of a hymn gathering than a standard stage arrangement. The evening's "Japanese Breakdown" from the Scottdale String Band's 1927 recording is a mandolin-driven tune in the key of C, rather than the more common fiddle-tune treatment of the related "Chinese Breakdown" in D. The source gave the students a point of departure; their own skills gave the performance its final direction.

BEYOND CAMPUS

David's goals never stopped at the classroom door. For much of his time as director, he brought at least one guest musician into the ensemble each quarter—often people passing through Los Angeles to record for his Tiki Parlour record label or nearby events. A visit could include conversation, performance, a tune taught by ear, and a final jam. The pace of these visitors slowed after the pandemic, though David hopes to restore it.

He also pushes students toward the wider old-time world: local jams, the L.A. Old-Time Social, the Santa Barbara Old-Time Fiddlers' Convention and,

for some, festivals farther afield. “It’s getting them to interact with others that play the music,” he said.

The results are showing all the way from Southern California jams to performances at a particularly familiar Northern California bluegrass festival. “Every few years a band will come out of the UCLA class. Often it’s people who never played anything, or maybe a singer-songwriter who didn’t even know what old-time music was,” David said. “They just get obsessed.”

One such group is Gas Station Sushi, which came out of the current ensemble and performed at the L.A. Old-Time Social, a volunteer-built gathering of workshops, jamming, dance, and concerts that began as a backyard party. This year, they helped organize the event and, David said, appear poised to take on more of its stewardship.

Another former student, dancer and choreographer Tula B. Strong, joined the class during COVID, with no instrumental background. Today, she’s also a banjo player and singer whose performances connect Black cultural roots, early blues singing, and contemporary performance. She recently appeared at the L.A. Old-Time Social and, this June, brought the crowd at the CBA’s Father’s Day Bluegrass Festival’s Pioneer Stage to a standing ovation as part of the Black Banjo Reclamation Project showcase.

During the pandemic, the class was only offered online. This arrangement was actually a “blessing

in disguise,” Tula said, because the in-person class schedule had presented scheduling issues for her. Online, she focused on singing songs during the first semester, and started playing the banjo during the second. Instead of preparing for a show at the end of the year, she learned a song each week. But she said some of the biggest lessons that came from her two semesters in the class were from learning the history and the legacy of the music.

“This music is about community,” Tula said. “It is about the people who played this music before us and it’s about continuing these traditions ... It has given me a beautiful humility going into public performances—this understanding that even the people in the audience will oftentimes enjoy this music and play this music, just as well, even better sometimes, than me—and what a joy that is.”

David said he hears from former students even farther afield; class alumni write from Boston, London, and elsewhere to say they have found a jam. One former UCLA student, now back in the United Kingdom, turned up at a local session carrying tunes learned in the ensemble.

Fall enrollment will bring another mix of experienced players, newcomers, and curious musicians from across the university. David will begin again with the same proposition: listen closely, learn the tune, find the source, then make room for more people to join the circle. 🌿



Tula B. Strong performs at 2026 FDF.
Photo by Evan Thompson

Hear David Bragger and Tula B. Strong perform the tune “Alonzo Janes.” The tune passed from Alonzo through Mel Durham to David, who has passed it on Tula.




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OLD-TIME MUSIC

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Monthly Trivia Quiz

By Bert Daniel, Breakdown Contributor

In June we asked: "Who played 14 variations in the first recording of a popular fiddle tune supposedly in honor of the namesake's 14 children?"

Brijet Neff, Paul Shelasky, Steve Cahn, Jon DeLong, Ron Augustinsky, Peter Thompson, and Bob Palasek all knew that we were looking for **Alexander "Eck" Robertson**. Eck recorded "Sallie Gooden" and 14 variations on the tune in 1922 in New York City, along with several other tunes, as part of his and accompanist Henry Gilliland's contract with the Victor Talking Machine Company. These recordings are considered the first recordings of American fiddling, and of what would later become known as country music.

Peter Thompson shared with us Peter Feldman of Santa Barbara's account of Eck telling him about the tune: "Long time ago there was a girl named Sallie, the most beautiful in the land. She had many suitors but couldn't make up her mind which one to marry. So she held a fiddle contest for her hand. Her beau made the tune and played it for her to win the prize."

We consulted our favorite random number generator, and it helped us pick **Ron Augustinsky** as the lucky winner of a set of Helicore fiddle strings—or banjo, mandolin, or guitar strings—from one of our favorite CBA sponsors, D'Addario Strings!

AUGUST TRIVIA

For August, tell us: "What was the nickname of the accordion player for the Eighth Avenue String Band, who was also a Will Rogers 'yodeler of the year?'"

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

This month's prize is a rare, collectible Fathers Day Festival 2026 commemorative T-shirt—in exactly your size!

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 October 2026 issue of the *Bluegrass Breakdown*.

