



CHOOSING YOUR FIRST MANDOLIN

by Joselyn Sky, CBA Youth Ambassador

Man-do-lin (noun): A highly lovable object for which you will happily give up all your free time.

You've seen a mandolin, you've heard a mandolin, and now you need a mandolin. Fair warning: Mandolin Obsession Syndrome side effects include the sudden desire to own more mandolins than any reasonable person could justify. But let's start with just one. So the question is, how do you choose your first true love?

One of the most important things to consider when buying your first mandolin is playability. Some of the lower-end mandolins are not very finger-friendly. Nothing will make you want to put a mandolin down faster than a rough fretboard.

My other piece of advice is to play as many different mandolins as you can. Otherwise, it's almost impossible to know what you like, or don't like.

As you're playing those mandolins, here are some things to take note of...

THE FEEL

How the neck thickness fits in your hand, how easy or hard it is to slide up and down the fretboard, and how much effort it takes to get good tone.

THE SOUND

Listen to the low end and the high end: Do they sound balanced, or are the high strings louder than the low ones? How clearly do the notes sound at the highest frets? How does it respond when you play as hard and loud as you can, and as soft/quiet as you can? Play just one open string and listen to it ring until the sound dies away.

Just test the mandolin's response to everything.

Finally, if you find a mandolin you are considering, have someone else



Joselyn Sky. Photo by Robin Frenette.

play it! Ask them for their honest opinion, and listen to how it sounds from the other side of the instrument.

Something to understand before you start looking for your first mandolin: If you're serious about playing, you're probably going to want to spend a fair amount on your instrument. Regardless of your skill level, age, etc, you want to get a mandolin that inspires you to play more. A cheaper mandolin that doesn't sound good and is rough on your fingers is much

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DIRECTOR'S WELCOME

MANDOLIN

by Pete Ludé, CBA Executive Director

What would bluegrass be without the mandolin? Well, it just wouldn't be bluegrass, would it? Roughly 80 years ago, Bill Monroe stumbled on a used 20-year-old Gibson Lloyd Loar F-5 at a Florida barber shop, fell in love with the sound, and made it front and center in his reformulated Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys. The world of music changed forever. The mandolin is arguably the most expressive, unique, and distinctive sound in the bluegrass ensemble—and I'm saying this as a banjo player, myself.

So what better topic to explore this month than the mandolin? You'll find profiles on mandolinist Jesse Appelman, a look at luthier Bill Griffin's unique twist on the mandolin, and learn about how to select your instrument from CBA Youth Ambassador Joselyn Sky and CBA's favorite expert, Josh Gooding.

Although summer is now drawing to a close, there are still many events that you won't want to miss!

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Photo by Giant Eye Photography.

Q&A with Mandolinist

JESSE APPELMAN

by Dave Berry

Jesse Appelman is an Oakland-based, Palo-Alto native known as a mandolinist, tunesmith, and leader of the West Coast Stringband Project. His musical vocabulary joins bluegrass and new-acoustic music, informed by his deep study of Brazilian choro. He brings to his performances an ear for tone, groove, and space. In this interview on the heels of a busy summer, he reflects on performance highlights, musical influences, and his new solo album, *Where We Go*.

I saw the great set where you played with the Sam Grisman Project at the recent CBA Father's Day Festival. Playing the David Grisman Experience set with Samson, Keith Little, Patrick Sauber, Chad Manning, and Michael Witcher must have been a gas. Tell us how that all came about?

Sam does a great job curating the lineup and repertoire to fit the moment. It was an honor to get the call to play mandolin on this one, with most of the David Grisman Bluegrass Experience band reunited. I have many fond memories of seeing that band over the years, and it was a total blast to play those tunes with those

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MAIL-IN BALLOT



BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

September 2026 - Mandolin Issue

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

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TEEN PHENOM ETTORE BUZZINI JOINS SOUTH STATE 48 LINEUP

Perhaps you were among the lucky fans who caught Ettore Buzzini's California debut at the Great 48 in January. If so, you already understand why the 18-year-old banjo player, guitarist, singer, and songwriter from Mooresville, North Carolina, is attracting attention.

Buzzini's musical story joins two traditions. His Swiss-Italian family introduced him to European classical and sacred music, while his maternal grandfather, whose family comes from East Tennessee, introduced him to bluegrass. At age 6, Buzzini found Flatt & Scruggs' "Shuckin' the Corn" on his grandfather's old iPod and knew immediately that he wanted to play the banjo. He received his first instrument at 9, studied with respected North Carolina picker Bill Rippey, and soon began making a name for himself in youth contests across the Southeast.

At 14, performing as "Eddie Ray" Buzzini, he released his first album *Eddie Ray* on Patuxent Records. In 2024, he won the FreshGrass Banjo Award with a performance that paired the bluegrass standard "Dear Old Dixie" with his original composition "Birth of Eros." At the time of this writing, his second full-length album, *Blue Blue Blue*, was scheduled for release in August.

Buzzini calls his music "trad-scented bluegrass." It is grounded in traditional bluegrass drive and Scruggs-style banjo, but his original work also draws on Romantic classical music, literary storytelling, and the energy of rock. The result respects tradition while giving this young artist room to develop his own voice. His technical ability gets people's attention; his compositions get their curiosity.



For this special South State 48 showcase, Buzzini will travel from North Carolina to perform with Southern California favorites Faultliner. The concert will be presented in an intimate listening-room setting rather than the Foodhall: Every seat will be close, and you'll hear every note. It is a rare opportunity to catch one of bluegrass's fastest-rising young artists alongside a great Southern California bluegrass band—and to hear for yourself why those who saw Buzzini at the Great 48 have been talking about him ever since.

You don't have to be a hotel guest to buy tickets for this show—but as of press time there were still rooms available at Carlsbad by the Sea! Mark your calendar, get a room and reserve your seat!



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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



WELCOME MESSAGE

cont'd from front page

For those in the Bay Area, CBA is hosting an exciting fundraising event on September 10 at Sweetwater Music Hall in Mill Valley. This event is critical to keep our After-school Bluegrass Club (ABC) program alive, bringing weekly music lessons to underserved communities in California. This fundraiser features the David Nelson Band along with Crying Uncle Bluegrass Band and many special guests. If you don't recognize the name, David Nelson was playing bluegrass with Jerry Garcia back in the pre-Grateful Dead days, and he is still bringing his magic to the stage. This is sure to be a memorable event not to be missed, and a great cause to support keeping music education alive. Find more info on pages 10 and 11.

There are many other opportunities to get together, enjoy the community, and pick. Our Fall Campout returns to Lodi on October 5–11. You can reserve your campsite online now. In November, CBA's South State 48 is returning to the Carlsbad by the Sea Hotel (now a Marriott property). There are a few rooms still available; act quickly to reserve yours. Great 48 returns to Bakersfield from January 14–17. Room reservations are available for CBA members, and the event's all-access pass is on sale online. Reserve your room and get this on your calendar now—we have a fantastic jam and community-centric program this year.

If you—or friend or loved one—is in a band, don't forget that applications are now open for Vern's

Stage acts and California Showcase bands at our 2027 Father's Day Festival next June. You can find all the info about requirements, deadlines, and how to apply on our website. And very importantly, our annual elections for CBA board members opened on September 1. Please take a few minutes to vote! If you're a current CBA member, you should have already received an email ballot to complete. You can also fill out and mail the paper ballot on page 15 of this issue. If you have any questions, or need help voting, just call us any time at 844-BLU-GRASS (844-258-4727) or email ballots@CaliforniaBluegrass.net.



CBA'S 2026 FESTIVAL VOLUNTEER ALL-STAR AWARDS

by Phoebe Leigh-Suelflow, Vice President, Volunteers

Last year the CBA Board of Directors instituted the Festival Volunteer All-Star Awards for festival volunteers who have gone above and beyond in the eyes of their team leaders, peer volunteers, or both. This year we recognized five Festival Volunteer All-Stars for their outstanding service. The prize includes a certificate of recognition and a certificate for CBA merchandise. Congratulations to our amazing volunteers for 2026!



STAN ALLEN, RV Guru

Stan Allen has been a CBA volunteer since before we started keeping records back in the Paleolithic era. He has served in many capacities over the years, from assisting at the Grass Valley Street Fair to setting up Electric Only Parking (remember that?). He is currently the man who handles the RV parking, including running the lottery, booking all the spots, and juggling who is going to park where. And not only that—he is the nicest person going... or coming, for that matter, in his cart, ready to give tours of available camping areas or help out an RVer with last-minute questions. But we really need to mention that he is one of the festival's sharpest dressers. He is known for his brightly colored shirts and extreme fashion sense. Stan's wife, Joan, is also a long-time volunteer, who has been helping us at the ice booth.

GEORGIANNE BOISSIER, Gates and Sunday Fair

Georgianne and her husband, Jim, have been volunteering with us since 2023. When I put out the call for volunteers to help with the "Learn A Tune in Five Minutes" project at the Sunday Fair, Georgianne answered the call. Not only did she put together great learning materials, but she took the



initiative to engage with Kala Brand Music's ukuleles about the program, and Kala donated five gorgeous ukuleles for her students to learn on. On Sunday, Georgianne and Jim introduced a number of people to the joy of playing a musical instrument. At the end of the session, the Kala ukuleles were raffled off among those who participated. Not only did her students come away with the confidence that they could learn a musical instrument, but some of them came home with a Kala ukulele to practice on.



RUTH DUTERTE, KidFest

Ruth Duterte and her husband, "Doc," are also long-term CBA volunteers. Ruth has been a collaborator with Kathleen Rushing, who is the director of KidFest, for over eight years. Ruth has been tireless as an innovator, planner, craft items provider, and teacher above and beyond the hours that she puts in at the festival. She enjoys working with the families, and spends much time, effort and even personal funds to provide items for the kids. Ruth is a beloved part of KidFest and we couldn't imagine a festival without her!



JONATHAN GRENIER, Merchandise

It's not often that a volunteer shows up with a thousand hot dogs and sausages. Literally, a thousand! There were bacon-wrapped ones, tiny ones, Dodger Dogs, bratwursts—any

kind of sausage you can think of, and some that we hadn't thought of yet. The purpose of these dogs? Jonathan proposed that we establish the Volunteer Hot Dog Feed. And not only did he supply the dogs, but he showed us all how to cook sausages for several hundred people, which is no mean feat! In addition to his culinary skills, Jonathan has received high marks as our CBA Merchandise Booth coordinator. In addition, he is a talented artist—he designed the shirt for this year's Long Beach Bluegrass Festival.



LAURA SAMBUCETTI, Catering

Food prep isn't just limited to hot dogs. Laura Sambucetti has been in charge of backstage catering for the last three years. She is the person responsible for everything related to food that happens at the Main Stage backstage area and she coordinates and executes the annual CBA VIP Happy Hour. Without her these things would not be possible. She is so well-liked and does an incredible job of paying attention to every detail, always making sure everyone has what they need. She is busy training volunteers and coordinating details with staff throughout the festival.

We are very proud of all of our volunteers—we could not put on the festival without you! Thank you for all of your dedication. I hope you'll be back with us next year!

Become a CBA Volunteer!
Scan here and register to join us in
2027. We would love to have you!



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GOOD TIMES AT JULY'S LONG BEACH BLUEGRASS FESTIVAL

Photos by Robin Frenette



Water Tower joined by ska artist Beebs of Beebs and Her Money Makers.



The festival's first square dance was a big hit!



Trying out instruments at the instrument petting zoo.

The Third Annual Long Beach Bluegrass Festival Saturday, July 11, was another huge success! There was something for everyone, from pickers to jammers to dancers. Jamming for all levels started at 10 a.m. and lasted all day. Some of our favorite musicians held skill-sharing workshops, and performers included Faultliner, Dennis Witcher and the Brew, and Water Tower. The day closed with a huge and very lively square dance called by Jeremy Horton. All this, and an instrument petting zoo and special kids' activities, too!

Scan here for more photos
from the day ➤



Jam tent hosted by Long Beach Dog Park Jam.

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The all-access pass (\$25 for members/ \$30 non-members) covers the entire 4-day event, and includes our full series of workshops: guitar, bass, banjo, fiddle, vocal harmony, and guitar, along with old-time classes and jams.

Our Friday night program includes a band scramble, Annie Stanninec's curated concert, showcase band, and new this year, a beginner-friendly square dance with a live string band!

JAM CLASSES RETURN

These three-hour Wernick Method sessions are offered at three separate times between Thursday and Saturday, January 14-17, 2027. 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).

TAKE THE JAM TRAIN

Jam with your friends riding across the San Joaquin mountains from points North to Bakersfield. We'll post the specific Jam Train routes as soon as they are available. Stay tuned to the Great 48 event page on CaliforniaBluegrass.org!

ROOM RESERVATIONS NOW OPEN FOR CBA MEMBERS



BILL GRIFFIN & THE MANDOLELE

by Jon Hartley Fox

Bill Griffin, a skilled luthier and a well-known California musician active in the styles of bluegrass, Hawaiian, and Americana, fits into a long line of tinkerers, dreamers, and curious instrument builders who look at a musical instrument and ask themselves, “How can I make this better?” In Bill’s case, his quest was to design a mandolin for Hawaiian music and that would be taken seriously by the best Hawaiian musicians. The result was the “mandolele,” a unique mandolin with a sound all its own.

The mandolin came into being sometime in the mid-1700s in Italy. These early mandolins, evolved from such instruments as the gittern and mandore, had a round bowl-shaped back made of strips of wood glued together. This style of mandolin is called “Neapolitan” and is still made today, often called a “tater bug” mandolin because of its body shape.

The next significant development in the tale of the mandolin—for our story, at least—came in the waning years of the 19th century when a visionary luthier named Orville Gibson began making mandolins with a carved top and bottom in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and selling them through the Gibson Mandolin-Guitar Manufacturing Company.

Fast-forward a few decades and move to Fullerton, California, where an inventor and luthier named Leo Fender introduced a four-string, solid-body electric mandolin in the mid-1950s. The instrument, plugged into an amp, was a welcome development for mandolinists who found themselves playing in loud settings. As played by such mandolinists as Tiny Moore, who played an instrument made by Paul Bigsby, another innovative California luthier, the electric mandolin created an exciting new sound for the instrument, one particularly well suited to single-string lead work.

The stage was thus set for Bill Griffin, who invented the mandolele in the 1980s to create a new voice for the mandolin. “I wanted to build a mandolin that had a tone that would work in Hawaiian music [which he had gotten seriously into about that time]. I tried different things. I bought ukuleles and tried tuning them in mandolin tuning, but the bridges would pop off or the necks would bend,” he says. “I finally realized that I would have to build something from the ground up. My thing at that time was ‘if I can’t buy it, build it.’”

A native of Glendale who now lives in the Sacramento area with his wife Pam, Bill was



The Cache Valley Drifters at the Father's Day Festival, 1981. From left: Bill Griffin, David West, Cyrus Clarke, Tom Lee.

exposed to music very early, as his father played piano in a Dixieland band that practiced each week at the Griffin home. Dad also played the ukulele, which Bill started to play at age 5. He added the guitar not too long after that and the mandolin at 19.

Bill’s career as a professional musician began in 1973 when he joined David West and Cyrus Clarke in the Cache Valley Drifters, a Santa Barbara-based band that was quite popular in the 1970s and 80s with a modern, progressive, banjo-less take on bluegrass. The band toured extensively, including an appearance at the CBA Father’s Day Festival in 1981.

The Drifters recorded six albums, the first three on Flying Fish Records: *The Cache Valley Drifters* (1979), *Step Up to Big Pay* (1980), and *Tools of the Trade* (1983). *White Room* (1996), *mightyfine.net* (1999), and *Live in Germany* (2012) were recorded after the band took a hiatus of a few years and were released on the band’s own label, Mighty Fine Records.

Bill had an even more fruitful musical partnership with Kate Wolf, the iconic Northern California singer and songwriter known for such songs as “Across the Great Divide” and “Give Yourself to Love.” Bill met Kate in 1974, when the Drifters were staying in a cabin on the Russian River. Bill had heard locals talking about a musician named Kate Wolf, so he and bandmate David West went to check her out at a gig she was playing with her then-husband, Don Coffin.

He introduced himself, and after a few minutes of talking, Kate asked him if he’d like to play a gig with them—at 7:30 the next morning, playing for a breakfast prior to the opening of the Sonoma County Fair. “Within 12 hours of meeting Kate,” says Bill, “I was playing my first gig with her. We became friends just like that. That started 11 years of working with her.”

The Cache Valley Drifters played on Kate’s second album, *Lines on the Paper*. Bill played on *Give Yourself to Love* and *The Wind Blows Wild*. He had an expanded role serving as producer, arranger, and musician on several of her records, including *Safe at Anchor*, *Close to You*, *Poet’s Heart*, *Gold in California*, and *Weaver of Visions*.

Bill started working as a luthier in 1970 with a job at C. Bruno & Son, then the world’s largest wholesaler of musical instruments. Working under luthier David Simpson, Bill spent the next two years setting up Ventura guitars Bruno had just started importing from Japan. “I learned from a master,” Bill says. “It was a great two years working under his tutelage.”

The “lele” in its name suggests the mandolele is equal parts mandolin and ukulele, but that’s not really the case. “This is a mandolin in every respect,” says Bill. It has four nylon strings instead of eight steel strings. The scale length is that of an F-5 mandolin and the tuning is the same—in fifths. The body shape is similar to an F-5, minus the scroll on the upper bout and one of the points on the lower. It even fits in an F-5 case.

“In a way, the whole thing started with the case,” Bill explains. “I knew that whatever I was going to build had to fit into a standard mandolin case. I didn’t want to have to build cases, too.”

The first iteration of the mandolele came in 1986. “To test the theory,” Bill says, “I bought a Flatiron mandolin and removed four of the machine heads. I tried a hundred different kinds of string combinations until I found something that worked. But it was still acoustic and needed to be played through a microphone.”



Two mandolins built by Bill Griffin. From left: Mandocaster built in 1978, mandolele built in 2008.



From left: Keale and Bill Griffin on tour in Oregon, 2014.

The first real mandolele built by Bill, in 1986, looked like a miniature Gibson Les Paul guitar with nylon strings. When that instrument was stolen in 1988 at an airport in Hawaii, Bill was so upset he decided to quit building. The mandolele was moved to the back burner, where it would languish for the next 20 years. It wasn't until Bill moved to Hawaii in 2006 that he resumed work on his invention.

After the move, Bill started working at Kanile'a Ukulele on the island of Oahu. "I answered an ad in the paper that said 'Ukulele builder wanted.' They were kind of new on the block, but now they're major players, one of the Big Three in the ukulele business," Bill says. "The owners, Joe and Kristen Souza, had just moved into an actual factory from the garage they started in. They were on the cutting edge of things."

Bill was the manager of the factory and a master luthier at Kanile'a. "Once I had their trust, and they realized who they had working for them, I started building mandoleles. This second iteration was much better than the first, because I had been thinking about it for 20 years."

The job at Kanile'a gave Bill access to most of the leading players of Hawaiian music, and he quickly became friends with most of them. That led, inevitably, to playing music with them. Bill has performed or recorded, or both, with several prominent Hawaiian musicians, including Keale, Kawika Kahiapo, LT Smooth, Kenneth Makuakane, Ernie Cruz Sr., Kapala, Patrick Landeza, and Mark Yamanaka. During his time on Oahu, he also played with Paul Sato in a bluegrass/Americana band called the Saloon Pilots.

Bill laughingly says, "I'm likely the only mandolin player to ever play at the Merrie Monarch festival, the world's largest hula festival. It was a huge thing and quite an honor to play there." The Merrie Monarch festival is an annual week-long affair in Hilo that draws thousands of hula dancers and musicians from all over the world.

Bill moved back to California in 2012, settling in the Sacramento area, and set up shop making mandoleles. "One of the inspirations as I was working up to the mandolele," Bill says, "was the Gibson Chet Atkins guitar, a solid body acoustic/electric guitar with nylon strings. I've always loved those. That guitar really impressed me with the tone it had when you plugged it into an amp. It doesn't sound like a regular electric guitar. It's the sound of nylon strings, just louder.

"[The mandolele's] real tone is plugged in. It has a Baggs under-saddle braided ribbon pickup that goes to a MiSi preamp mounted inside the instrument. It doesn't need a battery. I hate batteries. It charges sort of like a cell phone, with 60 seconds of charging the preamp providing 16 hours of playing time."

By Bill's count, there are roughly 30 of his mandoleles out in the world. AJ Lee has one, as does

Tom Shewmake of Cantara Loop. There are two in Australia, one in India, three in Hawaii, a few in California, with the rest spread across the U.S. As far as Bill knows, most of the instruments are not being used for Hawaiian music. "I'd say probably 50% of the people who bought them just liked the idea," he says.

At 74, Bill Griffin continues to balance performing and his luthiery. He currently performs with Slade Rivers in a country/Americana duo known as "Slade and Elky, Those Windburn Brothers." In terms of the mandolele, he has three instruments that he's working on now. His invention was successful, and the mandolele accomplished what he had hoped it would. "The mandolele inspires [people] to play differently," he says, "simply because the tone is not what you'd expect from a mandolin. It's a whole new thing." 🐾



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FIRST MANDOLIN

cont'd from front page

more likely to sit in its case unplayed. Good mandolins that will last you for a while generally start around \$1,000. But before you start complaining, just remember how much you spent on groceries yesterday.

Now, let's take a quick look at a few mandolin brands.

THE LOAR, RECORDING KING, AND IBANEZ

You'll often see beginner mandolin players starting with one of these brands. They each have their own characteristics, but my overall

thoughts on them are pretty similar. If you're looking for a mandolin to keep around the house, and you're not sure how serious you'll get, these are good, budget-friendly, options. That said, if you plan on playing a lot, these instruments were designed to make your bank account happy, and because of that, the tone and playability can be lacking.

KENTUCKY

These mandolins sit in the middle of the beginner to intermediate price/quality range. I definitely recommend playing these before you buy, because I've tried some that were surprisingly good, and some that were, well ... not.

EASTMAN

My first mandolin was an Eastman MD515, and I enjoyed every second of playing it. You won't see many professionals playing these, but they generally offer nice playability and tone for the price. These are some of the best beginner to intermediate mandolins.

NORTHFIELD

My current mandolin is a Northfield Big Mon, and simply put, I'm in love with it. It has excellent playability and tone, with good projection and especially nice resonance in the low-end. Northfields move you out of the "beginner instrument" category, and into the more affordable side of professional-quality tone boxes. While I always recommend playing a mandolin before purchasing, Northfields are known for being very consistent and are a relatively safe choice if you need to order online.

GIBSON, COLLINGS, PAVA, VESSEL, AND HINDE

These are all fantastic mandolins! I'm putting these in the same category because I would say the same thing about these brands. I haven't played many of them, but I liked the ones I tried. They're definitely an investment, but if you find one that you love, these mandolins are gorgeous instruments that will not disappoint.

Aside from buying the mandolin itself, there are a few more things you'll need that are worth nerding out about a little bit:

PICKS

A tiny but highly important object that allows you to play the instrument you just bought. I use a Blue Chip CT 55 and a Blue Chip TAD 50. Other great pick brands include Toneslabs and Token Picks. You don't necessarily need to start with an expensive pick to start playing, but I do recommend finding a pick that is thick enough that it doesn't flex much while you're playing and is a shape that you like. Rounder picks will give you a rounder, softer tone. Pointier picks will give you a sharper tone.

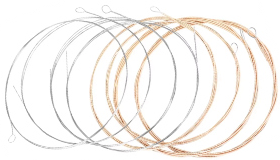


STRINGS

I use D'Addario 11-40 Medium, XS Coated Phosphor Bronze Mandolin Strings. For me, the extra cost of coated strings is 100% worth it. Non-coated strings sound just as good, but they need to be changed more often. There's no set amount of time that one set of strings will last, since



Sierra Hull, left, jams with Joselyn Sky, right, and a Kids on Bluegrass participant at IBMA World of Bluegrass in 2025. Photo by Robin Frenette.



that depends on numerous factors, such as how often you're playing and the chemistry of your skin. In general, coated strings last me a few months, while non-coated last around three weeks.

One thing that must be said: Please do not, under any circumstances, pay a music store to change your strings every time they need replacing. Learning how to change your own strings is just part of owning a mandolin. It can be a little nerve-racking to change your strings for the first time. You can ask a musical friend to show you how, and take a video of their method to refer back to later. Something to be careful of when changing your strings is not to knock the bridge out of place. Mandolins have a floating bridge, which means it's not secured in place by anything except the string tension. One way to avoid the hassle of having to reposition your bridge is to replace the strings one pair at a time, rather than taking all the strings off at once.

CASE

Most mandolins will come with a case. But if you invest in a more expensive mandolin, you may want to upgrade to a case that's a little more bulletproof. I have a Hoffee case, and I'm obsessed with it.



Crossrock also makes great cases that are a little lighter.

TONE-GARD

If you've seen a lot of mandolins, you've probably seen one of these. It's a metal frame that attaches to the back of the mandolin to keep it off your body. This allows for more resonance and can make the mandolin sound a little louder.



A-STYLE AND F-STYLE BODIES OVAL AND F-HOLES

by Josh Gooding

There's a lot of individual variation from mandolin to mandolin, so there will always be exceptions and outliers. That being said, oval hole mandolins tend to have a rounder, softer sound, with a lot of low end and less emphasis on mid-range frequencies. F-hole mandolins usually have a more restrained bottom end and more pronounced mids and highs. F-hole mandolins tend to stand out more in a band context and are often perceived as louder than an oval-hole mandolin.

The difference between A and F-style mandolins is a lot more subtle. I'm certain that the different body shapes contribute to a sonic difference but I couldn't really put my finger on what it is. I think for practical purposes the difference can be treated as mostly aesthetic. I've played many great A-style and F-style mandolins.

I think it's important to get your hands on the instruments and choose the one that feels good to you. It's easy to form an opinion on what you think you want out of a mandolin without playing any. Once you get your hands on a few you might be surprised by what speaks to you.



Josh Gooding plays an A-style Red Diamond mandolin at Sonoma County Bluegrass and Folk Festival. Photo by Evan Thompson.

DAVID NELSON BAND & FRIENDS

With Crying Uncle Bluegrass Band

A Once-in-a-Lifetime Musical Collaboration, Live One Night Only

Feat.

Suzy & Eric Thompson • Paul Knight • Lowell "Banana" Levinger

A BENEFIT FOR THE AFTERSCHOOL BLUEGRASS CLUB PROGRAM

Supporting Children's Music Education Access Across California



September 10, 2026

Sweetwater Music Hall, Mill Valley, CA



PLAY IT FORWARD >>>>>

SWEETWATER HOSTS CBA AFTER-SCHOOL BLUEGRASS CLUB BENEFIT

by Helen Foley, Vice President, CBA Youth Program



Some of the young musicians nurtured by CBA youth programs are returning to the stage Sept. 10 to help open those same doors for the next generation of pickers.

The CBA and Help's On The Way will present David Nelson Band & Friends, with Crying Uncle Bluegrass Band, at Sweetwater Music Hall in Mill Valley. The all-ages concert will benefit CBA's After-School Bluegrass Club Program, which brings subsidised weekly roots-music instruction to underserved young people.

The program currently operates in Southern Humboldt in partnership with Help's On The Way. Funds raised at Sweetwater will support the program's scholarships, instruments, instructors,

and CBA's goal of bringing the program to new communities.

Over the past 50 years, CBA's Youth Program has included more than 1,000 young musicians, and the Sweetwater event offers first-hand look at what this sustained instruction, mentorship, and musical community can make possible. The CBA After-School Bluegrass Club carries that work forward with instruction in guitar, fiddle, singing, and ensemble playing for students in grades four through eight.

David Nelson, a foundational figure in West Coast psychedelic Americana and a longtime collaborator within the extended Grateful Dead musical family, will lead a one-night lineup featuring Suzy and Eric Thompson, Paul Knight, and Lowell "Banana" Levinger.

Opening the show will be Crying Uncle Bluegrass Band, whose members came up through CBA's

Youth Program and have gone on to earn acclaim well beyond California. Fellow youth program alumni Pacific Drive will perform before the concert for a Patron Reception on Sweetwater's patio

There will also be a silent auction and raffle, with 100% of those proceeds benefiting the program. This funding is critical to sustain the program, which nearly shut down in the spring.

General admission tickets are \$79. The \$153 Patron Ticket includes a 5:30-6:45 p.m. reception featuring food and drinks, live music, and a meet-and-greet with the evening's performers. Doors open at 6:30 p.m., and the show runs from 7-10 p.m.

Tickets available at
SweetwaterMusicHall.com
or by scanning here >



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 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.



More information, submission requirements,
and the online application form on the CBA web-
site's Father's Day Festival page here:



guys at my favorite festival with my wife and son in the house.

You all looked like you were having so much fun. What is the key to keeping it light and just enjoying yourself?

It's easy to get distracted by the pressure of a big stage, large audience, and prominent set time, but if I can set those things aside, I'm just picking with my friends, and that's the most fun thing there is, and it's when I play my best.

How long have you known Samson and when did you start playing with his various lineups?

Sam and I both lived in Boston in the late 2000s and got to know each other through house parties and jams. We always enjoyed picking together, and I played my first show with him about two years ago this spring.

You sounded so much like Dawg; one wouldn't know from listening that it wasn't him. How did you come to get that sound and tone so deep into your playing?

Wow, that's a high compliment! David Grisman is a core and formative influence, especially around the many tonal colors and textures he gets out of the mandolin and how the notes land. That said, even in a musical setting like this where the legacy of the Dawg looms large, I am really just trying to play like myself and not emulate anyone because that's how I play my best! When I'm playing well, there's not much conscious thought, and whatever comes out is the product of all my influences, mandolinists and otherwise—Grisman, Monroe, Reischman, David Rawlings, Bill Frisell, Tom Rozum ... the list is long. But sometimes one of those particular ingredients in the stew will pop to the surface, so if some elements of Dawg's sound show up in a musical setting like this, I'll count that as a win.

Tell us about your recent release *Where We Go* and where people can get it?

The seed for the album took root when I taught at the CBA Summer Music Camp two years ago. For the instructor concert, I asked Eli West to play a duet with me, and we decided on an instrumental run-through of "Freight Train." We didn't really rehearse it, just listened deeply and responded to each other, leaving a lot of space and getting pretty abstract without trying to be too clever or losing grip on the melody. A lot of campers and fellow instructors told us it was a highlight of the week. Months later, I finally found a video of it and decided I wanted to make a record leaning into the same priorities as that performance: spontaneity, interaction, spaciousness, groove, melody, and tone.

The album is a collection of six original instrumentals, four vocal cover songs, and, of course, "Freight Train" as a duet with Eli. John Mailander produced the album, and we recorded it mostly live with Eli on guitar, Sami Braman on fiddle, Emily Mann on bass, and a deep cast of friends as guests on



Jesse Appelman. Photo by Giant Eye Photography.

various tracks including AJ Lee, Laurie Lewis & Kathy Kallick, Mike Witcher, Allison de Groot, Caleb Klauder & Reeb Willms and more.

The best way to support the music directly is on Bandcamp, where you can get the CD or a download. It's also on all the streaming platforms.

What is your composition process?

I try to keep the instrument in my hands a lot and let myself play absent-mindedly, maybe while my attention is on a conversation, or my kid, or looking out the window. Ideas tend to pop out of my hands in that situation, and if I hear a little fragment of melody I like, I'll quickly record it into my phone. I assigned one of the buttons on the side of my iPhone to instantly start recording a voice memo; it's really helpful for those ideas that can slip away quickly. If it's feeling good, I'll ride the subconscious train as far as I can, pretending I'm listening to a tune that already exists and imagining how I think it would go. Once I've done that, I usually leave it be for weeks or months. Then I come back to it with fresh ears and shift to the analytical part of the process, taking whatever elements are there and crafting them into a finished piece.

You play other styles of music, specifically choro. Educate us about that style and how it is similar and different from bluegrass.

It's acoustic music centered around strings: guitar, mandolin, and cavaquinho, a Brazilian steel-string ukulele. Like bluegrass, it's structured to be very easy to participate in if you know the tunes; there's a huge jamming culture around it, in living rooms, cafes, and bars, just like bluegrass. And like bluegrass, improvisation in choro is generally closely tied to the melody, unlike jazz improvisation—there's even a very similar spectrum of traditional-to-modern choro. But of course the grooves are very different, the harmonic and melodic language is more similar to ragtime or traditional jazz than to bluegrass and folk music, and it's almost exclusively an instrumental genre.

What is the key to getting great tone out of the mandolin?

You have to have a crystal clear mental conception of the sound you want to hear from the instrument; then, if you're not hearing that, you can play with all the levers—pick location and angle, right-hand mechanism, pick thickness and shape, etc.—and learn how each affects tone. Make sure the pick grip is relaxed (no squeezing!) and don't play so hard that you're bringing fret buzz into the tone.

Tell us about your approach to teaching and how folks can reach out to you?

I teach in-person at Manning Music in Berkeley, and I love working with students of all ages and levels. Everyone's brain and hands work a little differently, and it's fun to figure out what each student needs to break through their barriers on the instrument. Anyone interested in lessons can contact me through my website at jesseappelman.com.

What one thing do you most often see players do that can be easily corrected?

A lot of beginning and intermediate players prioritize speed and licks over groove, time, and taste. The role of the mandolin in bluegrass rhythm sometimes gets oversimplified as "just chop on the backbeat." But there are so many different tones, textures, and feelings you can give a chop, and being able to find the one that will lock in best with the music at any moment is gonna make people want to jam with you and hire you for gigs way more than shredding solos. I also think there's a misconception that there's a binary between being creative versus playing the melody. There's no limit in how creative you can get as an improviser using a simple bluegrass song melody as your source material, and one of my favorite things to teach at camps is breaking this down into a set of specific tools and devices. Finally, a lot of intermediate players seem to focus mostly on learning and soloing over fiddle tunes, but most bluegrass in jams and performance is vocal music and I'd recommend investing 90% of your time in getting good at supporting a song—rhythm, chord voicings, fills and textures, finding

and playing the melody expressively—and 10% on instrumental tunes, not vice versa.

What inspires you musically?

Anything that aligns with my priorities: emotion, deep rhythm, empathy, space and economy, strong melody, subversion of expectations. Some examples are Jody Stecher, Larry Sparks, Laurie Lewis, Bill Frisell, Aretha Franklin, Paul Brady, Joni Mitchell, Thelonious Monk, George Jones ... the list goes on.

You recently made music your full-time profession. How is that going and what have you learned?

The music part is going great! I'm still learning the business ropes: how to balance teaching, booking, social media, promotion, and still find time for family, composing, and learning. As a father of a young child in my mid-40s, I need to be intentional and selective about how much I'm on the road, but I'm lucky to have many peers and mentors setting other examples of what a sustainable life as a musician can look like.

I see you've been playing with Laurie Lewis. That must be fun.

These recent shows were planned as the Laurie Lewis & Kathy Kallick Band, picking up on a run we did last summer with a really fun repertoire drawn from all their years of singing together. Unfortunately, Kathy couldn't make these shows, and we missed her very much, but Laurie put a really fun band together. Laurie and Kathy are both heroes and reference points in California bluegrass, and



Jesse and friends after a full day in the studio. Photo by Emma McCoury.

the music they've made together and separately over their careers figures large in my musical DNA. They understand bluegrass and music in general so deeply, and I always learn things every time I play with them. It's inspiring to see how their music is part of a lineage—the mark of their own mentors and influences like Vern & Ray, Hazel & Alice, and others is always clear even while their own sound is individual and unique. I'm lucky to count Laurie and Kathy both as friends, mentors, and sometimes bosses. They were also kind enough to sing harmonies on a track on my album.

What artists would you love to study, play with, and why?

I'm lucky these days to find myself surrounded on a regular basis by musicians who inspire the heck out of me with their artistic and human qualities, and I couldn't ask for anything more. That said, I would love to sing with Danny Paisley someday.

What artists might we be surprised to see in your playlist?

These days the algorithm feeds me a lot of kids' music. Check out the Okee Dokee Brothers; it's great stuff. 🐻

Listen to *Where We Go* on Jesse Appelman.com or scan here ➤



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BUTCH WALLER'S *THE NINTH OF JULY*

by Jason Dilg, Bluegrass Breakdown Managing Editor



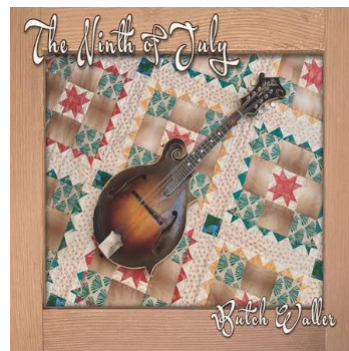
From left: Butch and Bob Waller with High Country at CBA's 50th Anniversary Father's Day Festival in 2025. Photo by Alan M. Bond.

Butch Waller has been a mainstay of traditional bluegrass mandolin in Northern California for more than a half-century. At 82, Butch is known for his driving, Monroe-style mandolin playing and leading High Country since 1968. He released his third solo album *The Ninth of July* earlier this year.

When Butch took to Facebook back in April to announce the album's release, Chris Henry jumped in: "For those that don't know about Butch—he is one of the best bluegrass mandolin pickers on the planet, rooted in Monroe style, but has his own excellent creative style and has led the legendary High Country bluegrass band on the West Coast for many years."

The album was recorded and co-produced by Matt Dudman, who plays guitar and bass on the recording. Butch is joined by "bluegrass veteran buddies" Bob Waller, Tom Bekeny, C.J. Lewandowski, Sandy Rothman, Larry Cohea, Keith Little, Avram Siegel, Victor Skidanenko, Paul Shelasky and Jim Mintun.

A masterclass in traditional bluegrass sound, 11 of the 13 tracks are original compositions. You can get a copy from the High Country website at highcountrybluegrass.com/store.



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Every Kentucky Mandolin is designed to have a playability and feel that is equal to its looks and tone. With a fully carved spruce top, maple back and sides and a rich nitrocellulose lacquer finish, these instruments produce the rich woody tone that is sure to please the most discerning eyes and ears. It's for these reasons that the new Kentucky KM-500 compares in terms of tone and playability to any A-model mandolin available today!



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Music City Fiddles is the instrument line for The Violin Shop, The Fiddle Mercantile's sister shop in Nashville, Tenn. These instruments are hand-selected, set up, and adjusted in the Nashville workshop by our esteemed luthiers to meet our high standards. Many players, beginner to professional, choose these as their primary instrument. The Artist is the highest tier in the Music City Fiddles line.

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The Orchestra Model represents the perfect balance of comfort, projection, and tonal sophistication. Originally designed for players who needed an instrument that could project in ensemble settings, the OM has become a favorite among fingerstyle players and singer-songwriters. With its balanced frequency response and comfortable 14-fret neck, the OM excels at everything from delicate fingerpicking to assertive flatpicking.



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CBA FALL CAMPOUT

Picking, Fun, and a Whole Lot More Lodi Grape Festival Grounds, October 5-11

If you're in a mood for hanging around and picking with old friends and new ones, the Fall Campout is the place for you. And the price is right! There's no ticket to buy, just a modest camping fee of \$15 a night—\$20 if you pay after Oct. 4). That's per campsite, not per person. The RV hookup fee is just \$55 a night—\$60 after the 12th).



Jamming at 2025 Fall Campout.
Photo by Alan M. Bond.

The CBA's annual membership meeting also happens during the Fall Campout—and is a great opportunity to check in on how bluegrass is doing in California. You'll hear straight from the horse's mouth about what the CBA is doing to pursue its mission to preserve and promote bluegrass and old-time music all over our state and beyond.

On Saturday, Oct. 10 at 7 p.m. The Friendly Ghosts—a trio of smoking-hot young Nor Cal pickers—will make their debut at the Lodi Grape Festival Grounds. They'll be followed by the CBA's annual membership get-together, where you'll get to hear the much-anticipated results of the board election that's going on right now (don't forget to vote!). And quiz CBA leaders on any topic at all!

This is all part of the CBA Fall Campout, which is like a small festival crossed with a family reunion, without any stages to distract you from the picking, except for the aforementioned Saturday night set by the Friendly Ghosts in Jackson Hall, and the Wernick Method jam class, back by popular demand!



OCTOBER 5-11, 2026

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**SATURDAY CONCERT
THE FRIENDLY GHOSTS**

**ALL-MEMBER ANNUAL MEETING
SATURDAY, OCTOBER 10**

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SCAN FOR TICKETS



CBA BOARD ELECTIONS: MAIL-IN BALLOT

All current CBA members age 16 and older are eligible to vote for this year's CBA board of directors. If you have already provided your email address, you should have received an email ballot on Sept. 1 with instructions on how to vote. If you didn't receive your ballot and would like to vote online, or have any other questions, contact the CBA elections director at ballots@californiabluegrass.net. Balloting closes at noon on Saturday, October 10, and results will be announced at the annual membership meeting that evening.

If you are a current CBA member, and would rather vote by mail, you may complete this form (one form for each family member 16 years and older).

Name _____

Member # (if known) _____

Email _____

Mail your completed ballot,
postmarked by October 1, to:

CBA Elections
3739 Balboa St. #5090
San Francisco, CA 94121-2605

Update CBA Bylaws per Board
Recommendations Yes ☐ No ☐

You can learn more about these bylaw updates online at californiabluegrass.org/board-candidates, email questions to ballots@californiabluegrass.net or call us at 884-BLU-GRASS (844-258-4727)

Vote for up to nine candidates for one-year terms. You may also vote to abstain, which will help us meet quorum. Candidate statements may be found online at californiabluegrass.org/board-candidates.

Candidates (choose nine)

- ☐ Marc Francis
- ☐ Robin Frenette
- ☐ kAren Celia Heil
- ☐ Ted Kuster
- ☐ Phoebe Leigh-Suelflow
- ☐ Dave Reynolds
- ☐ Tyler Stamets
- ☐ Lani Way
- ☐ Devin Wilcox
- ☐ Andrea Zelones
- ☐ Write in:
- ☐ Abstain

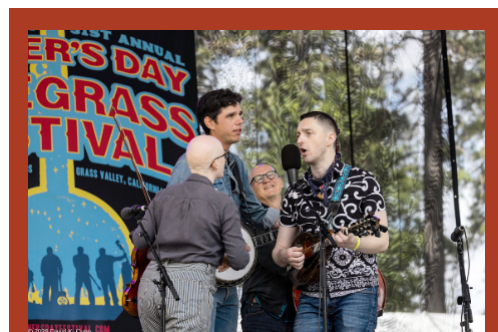


MANDOLIN ISSUE

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Above, from left, Scott Gates and CJ Lewandowski. Photo by Mike Oltzman.



CALLING CALIFORNIA BANDS!

Are you or someone you know in a band that is based in California, not full-time, and hasn't performed on the Father's Day Festival main stage in the past three years?

CBA is taking applications to be a part of the 2027 Father's Day Festival's California Showcase band lineup until Oct. 1.

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Monthly Trivia Quiz

By Bert Daniel, Breakdown Contributor

In July, we asked readers to **name the CBA lifetime member who is part of the brother team of banjo builders from the greater Sacramento Area, and his brother.**

Bruce Edmundson, Steve Cahn, Stan Oberg, Peter Thompson, Ed and Brijet Neff, Joel Sidney, Alice Wiseman, Tom Payne, Carlo Calabi, Ray Edlund, Jim Lappin, Steve Goldfield, Phil Boerner, Sonia Shell, Jon DeLong, Robert Garcia, John Erwin, Roy Barush, and Dave Carlson all were able to name the brothers—but Peter, Ed and Brijet, Joel, Alice, Tom, Carlo, Ray, Phil, and Sonia named Allen as the lifetime member and brother Monte as his collaborator in banjo building—or at least in that order!

Peter Thompson shared in his response that the duo “began making banjos in Pollock Pines (El Dorado County) in 1977 under the name Hendricks Banjos, not retiring from building new banjos until 2023.” He continued, “Allen also has been a teacher (since 1968) and performer (South Loomis Quickstep, California Quickstep). Monte managed the luthier pavilion at the FDF for years and wrote for Bluegrass Breakdown.” He also shared this link for three

relevant vintage articles: allenhendricks.com/articles-2

“They were always more than gracious with their time and clearly loved to explain the nuances (and there are many) in banjo builds and tones.” Dave Carlson added.

Our Breakdown Random Trivia Winning Picker Picker named **Tom Payne** the winner of a set of D’Addario strings.

SEPTEMBER TRIVIA

For September’s mandolin-themed issue, we ask our trivia readers to **name the opera in which a mandolin accompanies the baritone for an aria of seduction in act II.**

Send your answer to:
trivia@californiabluegrass.net
no later than September 30.

This month’s prize is a cool CBA cap—to show off at your next visit to the opera!

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 November 2026 issue of the *Bluegrass Breakdown*.