



BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

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



Oct.
2026

NEW CBA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: HELEN FOLEY

Helen Foley has moved from CBA's vice president of our Youth Program to take on the executive director role as of October 1.

Foley, a 2026 graduate of IBMA's Leadership Bluegrass program, brings a wealth of fundraising and organizing experience to the CBA, most recently as director of marketing & community programming for the Hanna Center, a youth services and advocacy nonprofit in Sonoma County.

"We are delighted that we've been able to snag Helen Foley as our executive director," said Ted Kuster, the CBA board chair. "Helen's deep knowledge of the California bluegrass community, along with her business chops, are exactly the recipe we were looking for to keep building on our string of wins."

Foley, a highly-regarded bluegrass bassist and singer, has been the director of the CBA's world-renowned musical education program for youth "Kids on Bluegrass" since 2019 (a program of which she is herself a graduate), and



Helen Foley. Photo courtesy of Helen Foley.

served for the last year on the CBA board of directors. She graduated with honors from the University of California Santa Barbara in 2020, and now makes her home in Sonoma County.

"Helen's story is really a CBA story," said CBA President Theresa Gooding. "She grew up in our Youth Program and in this music community, and

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FAREWELL BLUES

A FINAL DIRECTOR'S WELCOME FROM PETE

by Pete Ludé, CBA Past Executive Director

The theme for our October issue is focused on the fiddle—sometimes called the "devil's box"—and celebrating Halloween. This is also a very busy time for CBA activities: coming up October 10 at the Fall Campout is our annual membership meeting. There we will share what CBA has been up to over the last year and announce the results of our 2026 directors election—including the adoption of our revised bylaws—and revealing the winners of our fundraising sweepstakes for four great instruments.

Next month the South State 48 returns to Carlsbad, and then in January the Great 48 is back in Bakersfield. The teams have been working very hard to make these events the best ever—you can learn more and purchase tickets by visiting our website californiabluegrass.net.

But what I really wanted to talk about is that this issue marks my last as editor in chief of the *Bluegrass Breakdown*. As of October, I am retiring from my dual roles as CBA executive director as well as Father's Day Festival director. As I

approach my 70th birthday, my priorities are shifting from spreadsheets and insurance forms to making more time to play music. I am more than thrilled that Helen Foley will be taking over as executive director; we've been working on this transition for the past few months, and I intend to be around for as long as necessary to make sure everything goes smoothly. Helen is the perfect candidate to take CBA into the next chapter, and we'll be talking about this during our annual membership meeting on October 10. As always, your input is very welcome.

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Lani Way and Pete Ludé. Photo by Patrick Campbell.

FALL CAMPOUT AT LODI: TRAIN SONGS AND STEAM ENGINES

by Ted Kuster, CBA Board Chair

There's so much fun in store at the Fall Campout, **October 5–11!** By popular demand, Joyce Hennessey is bringing the popular Train Song Jam to the Lodi Grape Festival Grounds on Friday and Saturday afternoon. Joyce has been

organizing these jams at the Father's Day Festival for a couple of years now, to great acclaim.

And if the Train Song Jam has you in the mood for steam power, you're in luck! The National Steamup Symposium, a gathering of model-train enthusiasts whose engines run on real steam, will be right inside the pavilion from Wednesday through Saturday. Check out their very cool steam engines, and then come pick some more train songs!

On Saturday, when you're ready for a short break from picking, pick up

a glass of wine or a soda from the bar and pull up a chair for the CBA annual membership meeting inside Jackson Hall, starting at 6 p.m. The kickoff attraction is the Friendly Ghosts, a trio featuring three of the youngest and hottest pickers in our California bluegrass scene. Stick around for the introduction of our new board, which will have just been elected! (You voted, right?) Plus, you'll hear a quick rundown of what the CBA has been up to the past year, followed by an open Q&A session.

All aboard!



Campout jam. Photo by Alan M. Bond.



The Friendly Ghost's Casper on mandolin. Photo by Alan M. Bond.

It's not too late to join us at Fall Campout! Scan here →



BLUEGRASS BREAKDOWN

October 2026 - Fiddle

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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Onion-style jam at Golden Old Time Campout. Photo by Ed Rudolf.

'We Couldn't Be Happier' with GOTCO!

by Karen Celia Heil, Golden Old-Time Campout Director

A hearty round of applause to our old-time community and the CBA for making the Golden Old Time Campout such a raging success! Folks from all over the greater Bay Area, Northern and Southern California, the Pacific Northwest—even all the way from Virginia—came and mingled with old friends, made new friends, great memories, and played some beautiful music.

In addition to the countless hours of jamming together, many recreational activities were to be enjoyed on the river, in the regional parks, restaurants, food trucks, thrift shop, farmer's market, wineries, miniature golf course, and the nearby coast. We couldn't be happier with our venue, Camp Russian River, being a combination of

redwood tree shade, dappled sunlight, riparian woodland, and lawn covered field. This is car camping at its finest. Some that preferred a less-crusty experience rested at the hotel that happens to be right next door.

Huge thanks to our many volunteers who made the check in process go so smoothly and kept everyone updated on the event's goings on. We already have next year's GOT scheduled, so save the dates, August 26–29, for next year's fun!

For more GOTCO 2026
photos, scan here ➤



Top, from left: Campsite essentials. Afternoon jam under tall trees. Photos by Alan M. Bond.
Bottom, from left: Square dance. Photo by Karen Celia Heil. Twin fiddles. Photo by Ed Rudolf.

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HELEN FOLEY

cont'd from front page

has always found ways to give back to both. In stepping forward to lead CBA, I can't think of a better example of what makes this community so special—generations choosing to stay involved and carry our traditions forward."

The move is prompted by the retirement of Executive Director Pete Ludé, who led the CBA in raising the profile of bluegrass and old-time in California while delivering an unbroken string of popular and profitable events. Ludé has driven a series of new and strengthened programs, including Bluegrass Bridge, which brings music skills to California prison inmates; Spectrum Bluegrass, supporting neurodivergent musicians; the BEAR Fund, which provides financial support for musicians with health issues; After-School Bluegrass Club, bringing onsite music teaching to under-served school communities; and more.

"We couldn't be more grateful to Pete for his visionary leadership over the last few years," said CBA Chair Ted Kuster. "He's done an amazing job of bringing the people and resources together to set the CBA up for our next 50 years of growth and service."

The California Bluegrass Association was founded in 1975 to preserve and promote bluegrass and old-time music in California. Now the largest bluegrass and old-time community in the world by membership, CBA is famous for its annual Father's Day Bluegrass Festival in Grass Valley, and the Great 48-hour Jam in Bakersfield, along with a rich menu of regional and local events. The CBA Youth Program is the model for many such programs around the world. 🐘



*Helen leads Kids on Bluegrass at FDF '26.
Photo by Alan M. Bond.*

WELCOME MESSAGE

cont'd from front page

You can be forgiven if you're not quite sure what the CBA executive director role entails compared to the president or the chair of the board of directors. Basically, reporting to the board of directors, the ED is the CEO of the association, responsible for all operations, including contracts, infrastructure, budgets, strategic goals, fundraising, ensuring every event goes smoothly, programs are meeting goals, and that our members are properly taken care of. The executive director collaborates daily with the CBA president, whose role is the primary interface between CBA and its members, and the board chair, who facilitates priorities, meetings, and decision-making with the board of directors.

THE ROAD TRAVELED

During a transition like this, it's a good time to reflect back on the past few years and the challenges and opportunities we encountered. I first joined CBA back in the early 1980's and was an enthusiastic member while never really participating in CBA management or volunteer activities. That changed seven years ago when I decided to join the board of directors in 2019 to help out. But in retrospect, those seven years feel more like 70. Within two months, the sitting board secretary needed to resign, so I happily took over that role. And just three months later, in March 2020, the "Great Upheaval" began. When covid restrictions hit, we needed to act quickly to wind down the 2020 Father's Day festival, including the mechanics of ticket refunds, contract cancellations, and making sure our booked talent was taken care of. Toward this goal, and with strong support from the board and volunteers, we launched "Turn Your Radio Online," a series of webcasts featuring bands that

had been booked at Father's Day and other local artists, along with mini music lessons, auctions, raffles and giveaways, nostalgic video clips, and more. It was an ambitious experiment but was well received by the CBA community, and allowed us to raise over \$40,000 to pay bands and instructors that were otherwise out of work during the pandemic.

Also, during this period, Lani Way, my wife and CBA board member, began exploring covid funding grants from the federal and state governments. Working tirelessly with Val Cornejo, our treasurer at the time, they assembled detailed financial records and completed applications. This led to CBA being awarded grant funds necessary to get us through the pandemic and to also grow to better meet our mission. These covid grants allowed us to make some long-needed upgrades to our operational infrastructure, including an entirely new website, new membership management system, and overhaul of our accounting system and donation portals. We were able to further grow this publication—the *Bluegrass Breakdown*—bringing news, stories, and information to our members worldwide. We were also able to add new events to our portfolio, such as the Julian Family Fiddle Camp, and launch new year-long programs including Bluegrass Bridge for incarcerated individuals, the BEAR fund for musicians in need, Global Connections to build relationships internationally, and Spectrum Bluegrass to support those on the autism spectrum. These programs were tailored directly to our mission of "preserving and promoting bluegrass, old-time and gospel music." Most recently we've added the After-School Bluegrass Club (ABC) to bring year-round music education to underserved communities throughout the state. Our pilot program in southern Humboldt County is now



Photo by Robin Frenette.

entering its third year of operation. ABC has proven both the positive impact on kids and community enrichment that CBA can accomplish.

In short, CBA has been growing beyond just being a strong community of pickers and fans gathering for concerts and jams throughout the year to also providing outreach to help new people discover bluegrass, and to support artists and instructors. Helen Foley has both the background with CBA and the exquisite skills necessary in nonprofit management to help carry us forward. I enthusiastically look forward to helping support these efforts going forward into 2027 and beyond and hope all of you will be onboard to help as well.

Doing my part in supporting and growing CBA since 2019 has been one of the most rewarding experiences in my life. Thanks to all of you for giving me the opportunity. I look forward to seeing you at upcoming events, but now as an enthusiastic bluegrass fan rather than an administrator.

And in my role as former executive director: I hate to say goodbye, so I'll just say "so long." 🐘

TRIBUTE TO PAT ENRIGHT

Pat Enright was a force in bluegrass for close to 50 years before he died in August. Gifted with a powerful singing voice, he became a bandleader in the Northern California bluegrass scene as it took shape in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He played alongside a veritable who's who of Bay Area stand-outs—including Laurie Lewis, Ed Neff, Sandy Rothman, and Paul Shelasky, to name a few—in bands such as the Tonto Basin Boys, the Phantoms of the Opry, and High & Lonesome, before co-founding the Nashville Bluegrass Band.

PAUL SHELASKY

Pat was very encouraging to me and invited me into Phantoms of the Opry in 1971. I played twin fiddles with the original fiddler, Brantley Kearns, and some lead guitar. Brantley left to go on to a career with David Bromberg, Dwight Yoakam and others. I sang tenor in the trios and so did Robbie Macdonald. Of course, when Laurie Lewis joined the band, she sang tenor—and her duets with Pat were really something to hear. Later in his career, Pat would sing lead on the verses and switch to tenor on the choruses. Pat had an incredible, powerful voice and impeccable taste in choosing songs. Later, he would write some classic songs that are still sung by musicians the world over. He would even lend his fine guitar to back me up in fiddle contests. At one of these, I arrived and was walking towards a large jam session of about 40 people and full of banjos. I was about 50 feet away and all I could hear was Pat's voice! What an incredible singer—I was so fortunate to have been able to play in a band with him. He later went on to conquer Nashville and build an international reputation, but California was lucky to have him for eight years or so.



From left: Paul Shelasky, Laurie Lewis, Gene Tortora, Robbie Macdonald, and Pat Enright on Shell Road in Mill Valley. Photo courtesy of Laurie Lewis by Karen Walter, 1973 or '74.

LAURIE LEWIS

In about 1973, I stumbled onto the bluegrass scene at Paul's Saloon in San Francisco. The first band I saw there was Bob Fowler and Ingrid Herman's farewell show, before they moved to Nashville. The second band I saw there was the amazing Phantoms of the Opry, featuring Joe Zumwalt on mandolin, Robbie Macdonald on banjo, Chuck Wiley on bass, Paul Shelasky on fiddle, and Pat Enright on guitar. I was smitten. I saw them at every opportunity, and started playing fiddle in earnest, taking lessons from Paul. Pat was, for me, the exemplar of great bluegrass singing. I tried my damndest to find that power, tone, and sincerity of delivery in my young girl voice. Sometimes, maybe I did a tiny little bit—I hope.

Sometime in 1974 or so, Chuck Wiley quit the band, and much to my amazement, Pat asked me if I wanted the job. I don't think I had ever even touched a bass, but I said yes. I rented a bass from David Crummev at Amazing Grace Music and

started playing at jam sessions, figuring it out as I went along, and in a very short time had my first gig with the Phantoms. The next six months were incredibly rewarding, and then Pat moved away, following Bob and Ingrid to Nashville. I will never forget the thrill of trying to match his voice on tenor parts, and, especially, singing "Linda Lou" with two above the lead—as he later recorded it with Sharon and Cheryl White and the Dreadful Snakes. There were so many great songs he sang: "Foggy River," "T for Texas," all the wonderful Jimmie Rodgers yodels, "Blue Days, Black Nights," and "Endless Sleep," to name a few. It was a time of real discovery and excitement for me, and Pat was the catalyst for so much of it. After he moved away, we kept in touch sporadically, with letters and postcards, and the occasional phone call. When I went to Nashville I usually tried to make time to see him. In 1989, Pat and I were having Chinese take-out at his home, and were about to sit down and watch the World

Series. The TV was on to pregame stuff, and when we came back out of the kitchen with our plates of kung pao chicken, they were playing a sitcom rerun. Pat giggled and said, "Oh, they probably had an earthquake!" Turns out he was right!

One memorable year at MerleFest, I was walking past one of the small warm-up rooms backstage when a hand reached out and grabbed my arm, pulling me inside. It was Pat, and that tiny room was filled with Nashville Bluegrass Band and the Fairfield Four, all singing "Roll, Jordan, Roll." Every hair on my body stood on end as I stood in the midst of that amazing sound.

I am so grateful for Pat's music in my life, and for his unfounded belief in my ability to play the bass. That started me on a path that opened up all sorts of music worlds for me. He was my friend, a mentor, and a true inspiration.

SANDY ROTHMAN

The late Fred Weisz—a gifted player in the New York City bluegrass scene who could play all the bluegrass instruments, including fiddle, and had played upright bass with the Greenbrier Boys and others—had moved out to the Bay Area in the mid-1970s, not long after I had returned to the area after five years living and learning bluegrass in Ohio. I'd known Fred since the early '60s. He and I were among many pickers who frequented Paul's Saloon in San Francisco, where there was bluegrass seven nights a week—a rotating calendar of bands and weekly jams.

One night at Paul's Fred approached me and asked, "Have you heard this singer Pat Enright?" I certainly had. He was a serious anomaly within the local bluegrass community: a world-class singer-guitarist from the heartland, in this case a small Indiana town, who could sing the bluegrass standards and more with a powerful high range—in short, a sidepicker's dream. I don't know what brought him to the Bay Area originally, but he may have been discharged from the Navy in San Francisco. He had already led the Phantoms of the Opry and played in the Tonto Basin Boys and Rick Shubb's revolving band The Hired Hands, but had moved to Nashville, where he'd had a nightmarish accident stringing a guitar at a job in a music shop and lost an eye. Now he'd come back to the Bay Area and wasn't in a steady band.

Fred said, "We should form a band with this guy." Pat was up for it, and that's how our edition of High & Lonesome came to be. Early High Country banjoist Bruce Nemerov tells me Pat brought the



Harry Yaglijian, Fred Weisz, Pat Enright, Sandy Rothman, and Ed Neff. Photo by Harry Yaglijian.

name with him from a band they'd had during Pat's first Nashville stay. The lineup: Pat as band-leader on guitar and lead vocals; Ed Neff on mandolin and tenor vocals; me on banjo and baritone vocals; Fred on fiddle and bass vocals on gospel songs; and Harry Yaglijian on upright bass. Harry played guitar, mandolin, and piano but was willing to take on the bass-playing position. During 1976 and 1977 we played gigs at Paul's, toured locally, appeared at a festival in Oregon, and had a memorable night at Jambalaya, a well-loved club in Arcata in Northern California. An

audience member somewhere once asked, "Which one's high and which one's lonesome?"

The band sounded good and was well received, but eventually Pat decided to return east—not to his hometown of Huntington, Indiana, but to Nashville again—where, as we know, he met with great success in the Nashville Bluegrass Band and later celebrity singing for the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou*.

Pat's loss is mourned worldwide and deeply felt here in the Bay Area he once called home.

FDF 2027: VERN'S STAGE OPEN CALL FOR BANDS

By Jim Duber, Vern's Stage Coordinator

Hey Pickers—there's still time to apply to get your band a spot on Vern's Stage at CBA's upcoming Father's Day Bluegrass Festival! We are still accepting band submissions for the 2027 CBA Father's Day Bluegrass Festival in Grass Valley. The submission process opened on September 1 and will remain open until midnight, November 1, 2026.

For eligibility requirements, complete instructions and access to our online submission form, please see:

californiabluegrass.org/cbaevent/fathers-day-festival/verns-stage

We look forward to another great year of entertainment on Vern's Stage!



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



Alan Bond and Skedaddle on Vern's Stage. Photo by Evan Thompson.

FROM THE CBA VAULT:

KAY NICHOLS' 2016

IS IT CRAZY TO TAKE UP THE FIDDLE?

"How crazy does a person have to be to decide to learn to play the fiddle?" Kay Nichols, an aspiring fiddler at the time, decided to take this question to fiddlers she knew for a CBA website column 10 years ago. The question is timeless, as the fiddle is considered one of the more difficult bluegrass instruments to master. There are no frets to guide the fingers. Getting the intonation right is a bear. And then there's the matter of the bow. Many think that fiddle takes many years to master, and are hesitant to take it up later in life.

When Kay asked several fiddlers if leaning into this difficulty qualifies one for the looney bin, the responses seemed worth dusting off for those considering making the leap.

Kay herself said: "I started trying to learn because I love the background licks and sweet refrains one hears from the experts." These nuggets of wisdom have been lightly edited from how they originally appeared on the CBA website a decade ago.

JACK KUYKENDALL

"An old-time fiddler who grew up with music and has it in his soul," Kay wrote.

Once one gets started fiddling, and your heart is into it, it will draw you to it. I think there are prerequisites, such as: an ear for tone, control of many shapes of rhythm, and a mind that can absorb melodies and play them in different ways—this is to me what fiddling is. This last part is to me the "crazy" part. If you cannot conform to rules, you might be a fiddler. If you can spend hours working out a song that is changed by you each time you play, you might be a fiddler. Can you take your own worst criticism? You might be a fiddler. Remember, this is a pure art that comes from the heart; not everyone can do this. Know when to say, "it's not for me," or "I can play bass and be happier." I didn't start the fiddle until I was in my 30s, mostly because I could not stand that high screech in my good ear. You can start later, after you develop your ear and music knowledge. As my elder brother, Dave says, "many are called, few are chosen." All along my fiddling years there seems to be a huge decline—the old ones have passed and are not being replaced. This gave me encouragement, as I felt like I was maintaining a receding American art form.

RICK CORNISH

"One can tell he plays from the heart," said Kay.

Ooh, do I have horror stories. I started way, way late—in my 40s, and I knew if I didn't let the fiddle completely take over my life I would never, ever be able to play it. So that's what I did. For three years I literally practiced 5–6 hours a day. I'd get up early and play before going to work; at work I'd sit out on the loading dock and practice; and at night, as soon as dinner was finished, I'd start my main practice and play until bed time. Three years of that. In the mornings when I played I would follow Lynn from room to room as she readied herself for work. "How does this sound?" "Can you hear an improvement?" "What about this song?" It drove her mad; she still complains about it.

Here's far and away the worst moment of that entire experience. I'd been going at it for a couple years when one day at a fiddle lesson, my teacher, a guy name Greg Burger, played a tune he wanted me to learn. Now, Greg had been playing his whole life. He was a great teacher and a great fiddler, yet when he played that new tune it sounded like \$#!%. It absolutely freaked me out. I finally got up the nerve to ask why. "Oh," he said, "you can hear it. Of course you can, you can hear it." "Hear what?" I asked. "Rick, no matter how long you play, no matter how good you get, your emotions will always find their way to your bowing arm, and when that happens, man, you are screwed.

That was the worst news I could have gotten, and boy, oh boy, did he prove to be right.

NICKI CARLISLE

Nicki has played fiddle with many bands over time, including Shingletown Bound. A California state champion fiddler who has been active in the California State Old Time Fiddlers, District 6, she has touched the lives of many players as a teacher.

Learning the fiddle or violin is not a crazy idea if you have the wherewithal to dedicate some time for practice on a regular basis. Get some time in with a teacher to learn the basics and to begin with the correct way of handling the fiddle and, especially, the bow. The next step is committing to practicing one thing for a certain amount of time each day: 10 minutes with a tuner to improve your intonation, and 10 minutes with a metronome to improve your timing, and then 10 minutes on bowing exercises. A retired person will be able to make the time for this practice. Once you find a song to learn, the fingering and the bowing will be more natural as you play. Trying to learn songs without developing some technique will make it all seem hard and a bit crazy.

Playing along with other musicians can be very helpful, even in the very beginning stages of learning. Before you do this, be sure to practice your timing. Start with the basic one-two-three-four [beat] count. Down-bow on one, up-bow on two; and so on. Maybe, if you are feeling daring, try down-up on one, down-up on two, etc. On a fiddle—and mandolin and bass—the first note of the chord and the fifth note are strings next to each other. For example: G and D, D and A, A and

E. Wonderfully easy right? The third tone in each chord may be added later. If you put your finger in the first position on each string you have A and E, E and B and so on again. When you are familiar with this, you will be able to play a complimentary tone to each chord that is being played on the guitar. And thus you will be playing along in a jam!

GEORGE FREDSON

"A retired veteran and school teacher, a great guitar player and singer, and an almost-great fiddler," Kay wrote.

Being associated with the California State Old Time Fiddle Association, District 6, I've been exposed to some really great fiddlers. I'm sure that has helped awaken my passion and desire for playing the fiddle. That, combined with the fact that our group probably has more banjo, guitar, and mandolin players than we do fiddle players these days, and the fiddle players we do have are, for the most part, in their twilight years, I have taken it upon myself to be standing by some day to possibly fill their ranks when they retire their fiddles.

Over time, I've owned a fiddle or two and had them hanging on my wall, but no matter how many fiddles I've owned, none have ever grown frets and been able to play a tune like I'd like them to. I've even loaned them to others, but they have always been returned without having been taught to play a tune. So, this will be my year to put in the time and effort that it takes to be able to qualify as a beginning fiddle player.

There are some things I've already learned: 1) "Practice, practice, practice" is probably the most important thing, but then I do have other things that always seem to get in the way—like sleeping, eating, and so on; 2) When learning a new tune, starting out slowly and then increasing the speed is good in theory, but when you love those tunes played at break-neck speed, they just don't sound good played slow; 3) Playing with other fiddle players has its benefits too, but they are all quick to point out that I don't do anything correctly. Bowing in the wrong direction. Hand position is wrong. Holding the fiddle wrong. Holding the bow wrong. And so on. I figure that if

I can just saw out a tune that sounds like it is supposed to, I will be satisfied.

LESLIE PEACOCK

"I have never heard more beautiful notes than the ones that sing from Leslie's violin," Kay shared.

I would often practice in front of the mirror, just as my teacher instructed me, so I could observe and critique myself. The goal: perfection. Perfect posture, perfect intonation, perfect timing. My Suzuki books included scribbled pages of notes, reminders, and constant corrections. Each practice began with scales and arpeggios, and each practice ended with more goals and more scribbled notes.

I was a violinist. You see, we violinists pride ourselves in our art. We continually seek to execute the great composers' historic symphonies, minuets, and sonatas just as they intended. Performing with ensembles and quartets was a classical art form, rigid with rules and expectations passed down throughout the centuries of classical music performance.

And then, after 15 years of classical training, I moved to Redding, an area saturated with country, bluegrass, and old-time fiddling. I quickly met fellow musicians and was invited to my first jam. It was a sloppy gathering. No one had good posture or came prepared with sheet music. During pauses in between pieces, people would jam on their own or take a swig of beer instead of discussing intonation corrections and hypothesized intentions of the composer. No one took notes. We just played music.

Three years later, I am now capable of slouching while playing, not wincing when I hit an imperfect note, tapping my toe to the beat, and not caring what the composer desired because it's my interpretation. And, boy, is it a blast! I have a way to go, but the fiddle is addictive. It brings with it excitement, friends, stories, festivals, improvisation, laughter ... and beer. My fingers may be that of a violinist, but I think my heart has always been that of a fiddler.

Thanks to Kay for this wonderful contribution to CBA's knowledge base. Now, go practice!



AND FAULTLINER

Get ready for an unforgettable evening of hard-driving bluegrass with Ettore Buzzini, supported by Faultliner Bluegrass Band. The North Carolina banjo savant brings his distinctive "transcendental bluegrass," rooted in traditional Scruggs-style and drawing inspiration from Romantic classical music, literary storytelling, and rock energy to Southern California for a special South State 48 showcase.



This is a ticketed event, held at SS48 on Saturday night. You won't want to miss this amazing performance, reserve your tickets (just \$22) now!

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SOUTH STATE 48 CARLSBAD • NOV. 5-8

Rooms aren't required, but there are a few still available! Check the website for details.

SouthState48.com



Getting in some practice time at Julian Family Fiddle Camp. Photo by David K. Cupp.

BRANDON GODMAN

THE MAN AND THE FIDDLE

by Jon Hartley Fox

Like the poet Walt Whitman once wrote of himself, Brandon Godman contains multitudes. He's a fiddler, luthier, business owner, composer of tunes, past CBA board member, president of the Violin Society of America, a member of Laurie Lewis & The Right Hands, a co-founder of Bluegrass Pride, and an advocate for the LGBTQ+ community. He's a busy man.

Born in 1987, Brandon was raised on a farm that's been in the Godman family since 1858 near the northern Kentucky town of Falmouth, located 40 miles south of Cincinnati. He began playing fiddle at age 10 and was soon playing at jams and square dances around Falmouth. His recording debut came when he was 13 with *A Step in Time*.

The fiddle gave a shy young boy a voice and an identity of his own. "When I came to the fiddle at age 10," Brandon told filmmaker Bria Light, "it became my voice, because I was pretty introverted. I remember going to school and not ever talking. I always hung out with the girls, and I was called 'girly' all the time. When I started to play fiddle, that kind of all went by the wayside. There's a distinct line in my memory of pre-fiddle and post-fiddle, because everything changed."

Brandon's first job with a touring band came at age 17 with Melvin Goins & Windy Mountain. He has since played with Dale Ann Bradley, Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver, David Peterson & 1946, and Karl Shiflett. Outside of bluegrass, he has worked with the Americana/country act The Band Perry and country singer Jon Pardi. While he was living in Nashville, in 2012, he formed a Western swing band, the Music City Doughboys, with his friend Billy McLaran. The band recorded one album, released in 2013.

After high school, Brandon spent two years at Morehead State University, majoring in jazz studies with an emphasis on violin. He went to Nashville the summer after his sophomore year, intending to check out the music scene for a while before returning to school in the fall. He never made it back to Morehead.

Brandon started his career as a luthier while still in high school, working summers doing repairs and maintaining the rental instruments at A Violin Maker's Workshop in Cincinnati. After his move to Nashville, he briefly handled repairs and sales at William's Fine Violins. In 2011, he started working with Fred Carpenter at The Violin Shop, which Fred then owned. Brandon studied with some of the other luthiers working there, refining his repair skills and overall knowledge of the fiddle. He eventually became a partner in The Violin Shop and now owns the business.

Brandon moved to San Francisco in 2016, primarily to expand his experience and knowledge of the fiddle trade. He soon started his own business, The Fiddle Mercantile, located in the Mission District. He describes it as "a violin shop for fiddlers," as opposed to most violin shops, which are oriented to classical and baroque



Brandon at Father's Day Festival.
Photo by John G. Woodworth.



"Half god, half man, all fiddler."
- Laurie Lewis

Photo by Evan Thompson.

players. Among the services the shop offers are, to quote its website, "repairs, restorations, rentals, and a broad selection of specially curated instruments, bows, and accessories for players of all levels and musical backgrounds."

While The Fiddle Mercantile is what Brandon calls a "boutique fiddle shop," The Violin Shop in Nashville, which Brandon purchased in 2022, is a full-service shop providing instrument sales and rentals, repairs, a variety of accessories, violin builders, instrument restoration, and more. It has become the "go to" location for fiddlers and violinists in Nashville.

Brandon is the subject of *The Road Home*, a 23-minute documentary film made by Bria Light as her thesis film at UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. It's a lovely portrait of him that includes scenes of him working at his San Francisco shop, The Fiddle Mercantile; playing the fiddle for his grandparents at their church, Morgan Christian Church; and working up tunes for his album, *I Heard the Morgan Bell*, with a band that includes Laurie Lewis on bass, Patrick Sauber on mandolin, John Gooding on guitar, and Riley Calcagno on banjo.

The film's title references a trip the filmmaker made with Brandon back to Kentucky to visit family and friends. There are some great clips from old home movies including one of young Brandon tearing up "Orange Blossom Special" at a jam and one from a few years later where he plays "Ragtime Annie" on a local television program.

A poignant scene in the film shows Brandon talking about what had to have been one of the hardest moments of his life. "At the end of May 2008," he says "I got hired by one of the real pioneers in the bluegrass trade, one of the top-tier bands in bluegrass. I recorded with them, traveled all over the country and definitely considered [the bandleader] my friend. We were going to have [a band meeting] at midnight on the bus, and I'd gotten word that they'd found out about my being gay."



Brandon and Patrick Sauber at Summer Music Camp. Photo by Alan M. Bond.



Brandon's fiddle class at CBA Summer Music Camp. Photo by Alan M. Bond.

"They sat me down on the bus and said they had found out that I'm gay. The band leader said, 'I'm not allowed to fire you for this, but I'm going to ask you to quit. Also, I don't know how you are with God, but you should get right, because right now, it's not looking real good for you.' So, I had to drive back to Nashville, and I got home around six in the morning. That was a long drive that night."

To his everlasting credit, Brandon has never publicly named the bandleader who sacked him. Even more to his credit, he's moved on from the incident, downplaying it now as "part of the story, but not the whole story." Furthermore, he'd lined up a new gig, with Dale Ann Bradley, within a week of his ouster, and says he wouldn't be where he is today if that hadn't happened.

Brandon has served as the president of the Violin Society of America since July. Founded in 1973, the VSA is an international non-profit trade organization started to promote and preserve the art and science of making, repairing and conserving stringed instruments in the violin family—violins, violas, cellos, and double basses—and bows.

"After serving three terms on the CBA board," Brandon says, "I was invited by the VSA to join its board. As president, I am the voice of the VSA between management and the board. It's basically an oversight role, making sure that the organization is on the right track and following our strategic planning."

Though he admits to being not very disciplined about it, he enjoys the process of composing tunes. "I've always written tunes," Brandon says, "but I didn't get really serious about it until I had the time, which was during covid. I'm really proud of my family heritage in Kentucky. A lot of the stuff I wrote was inspired by stories from home or ideas of home, but then ideas of leaving, too."

"I took part in the Quarantine Challenge put on by Megan Lynch Chowning and Tristan Scroggins.

It was a 30-day challenge where you were to write a tune a day, record it and share it with the group. The core of my album was a tune I wrote during the Quarantine Challenge, 'I Heard the Morgan Bell,' about the church I grew up in."

Some of those tunes ended up on *I Heard the Morgan Bell*, Brandon's solo album from 2024. It's his solo recording debut as an adult (remember *A Step in Time?*), and it's a wonderful, highly enjoyable album filled with Brandon's original tunes. It's a varied collection of fiddle music: there are fiddle solos, banjo-fiddle duets with Patrick Sauber ("Jack's Branch") and Riley Calcagno ("Callensville Ferry"), a fiddle-baritone fiddle duet with Darol Anger ("In A Haze") and a fiddle-piano duet with Sam Reider (one of the versions of the title tune).

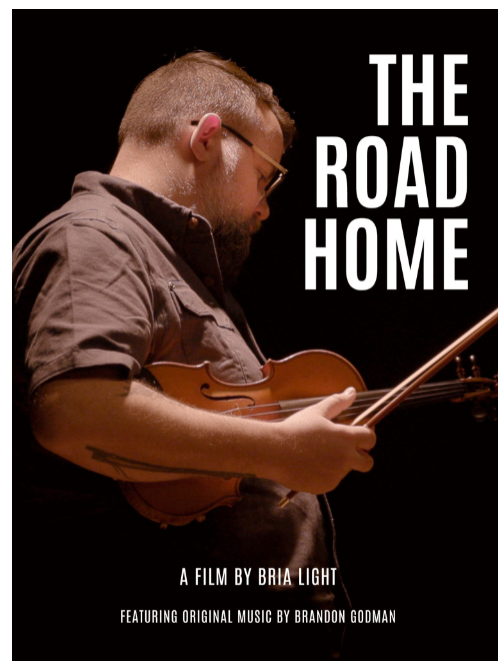
The haunting, atmospheric title tune is presented in three different formats—solo fiddle, full band and a fiddle-piano duet. In addition to those previously mentioned, guests on the album include Hasee Ciaccio, Tristan Scroggins and Joe K. Walsh. *I Heard the Morgan Bell* is available as a CD from Brandon's website, thefiddlemercantile.com, and streaming on Bandcamp.

The idea for Bluegrass Pride came to the fore in 2016. Shortly after he moved to California, Brandon was approached by Ted Kuster who told him that a group of people was interested in creating a bluegrass float for San Francisco's annual Pride Parade. He asked Brandon if he would help with the project. "I thought that was a outlandish idea," Brandon says, "so I said I could get a bluegrass band together."

Originally a side project of the CBA, Bluegrass Pride has as its mission "to recruit, encourage and support LGBTQ+ bluegrassers of all levels, promoting their advancement and acceptance within all areas of the bluegrass music industry and musical community." Ted's "outlandish idea" proved to be a hit: the Bluegrass Pride float was named the "Best of the Best" at SF Pride 2017—bringing home the top prize out of 270 marching contingents.

Brandon Godman has now lived in California for 10 years, and he has no regrets about heading West. "It wasn't until I moved to San Francisco that I quit looking over my shoulder," he says. "Nobody cares who you are around here. You don't have to fit into any mold here in the Bay Area. I love it here. I love the weather; I love the people. I feel like I can be myself."

"I remember my first trip back to Nashville after I had moved out here. Coming back, when I stepped off the plane in San Francisco, I just felt this huge weight coming off me. I thought to myself, 'I'm kind of at rest now.' There's a part of me that's still Kentucky, but San Francisco is home."



Watch Bria Light's documentary on Brandon, *The Road Home*, on *The Bluegrass Situation* >



California Fiddling: A Brief History

by Jason Dilg, Bluegrass Breakdown Managing Editor

With its long stretch of Pacific beaches, the towering Sierra Nevada, well more than 100 Indigenous groups at contact, and a colonial history dominated by Spain instead of France and England, California's cultural heritage has always stood apart from much of the rest of the United States. The same mix of colonial influence and native musicianship created a unique early history of fiddling in the state.

EARLY SPANISH VIOLIN MAKING AND PERFORMANCE

In the West Coast's Spanish missions, Indigenous musicians and craftspeople learned from Franciscan monks how to make and play violins, typically from soft woods like pine, without applying a finish. Not many survive today. By the early 1800s, Indigenous musicians were playing church music on these simple violins at missions throughout what was then the Mexican province of Alta California. The province's former governor, Juan Bautista Alvarado, later recalled that when the previous governor, Pablo Vicente de Solá, arrived in 1815, "the native musicians played on their instruments—violins, flutes, and drums." The same musicians "furnished the music for the dances; and they did it well." Explorer Jedediah Smith's journal, and that of his clerk, Harrison Rogers, note Indigenous fiddlers performed at a wedding at Mission San Gabriel 11 years later.

Polkas, schottisches, mazurkas, waltzes, and two-steps from Europe and Mexico also inspired a distinctive dance tradition just beyond California's present border. By the mid-19th century, the Tohono O'odham people of southern Arizona had transformed them into *waila*, social-dance music originally performed as fiddle-and-guitar pieces.

ANGLO AND SCOTCH-IRISH FIDDLE LINEAGE MOVES WEST

These currents run parallel to the spread and adaptation of Anglo and Scotch-Irish fiddling throughout North America, from the British and French colonial period on. It would be understandable to expect these fiddling traditions arrived in California with the Gold Rush, but there were at least three recorded instances of fiddling in California—with two accompanying dances—before gold was discovered at Sutter's mill in 1848.

In *Two Years Before the Mast*, Richard Henry Dana Jr.—for whom Dana Point is named—described a September 1835 dance aboard the Boston merchant

ship *Alert* in San Pedro Harbor: "the mate came down into the steerage, in fine trim for fun, roused the boys out of the berth," Dana wrote, "turned up the carpenter with his fiddle, sent the steward with lights to put in the between-decks, and set all hands to dancing."

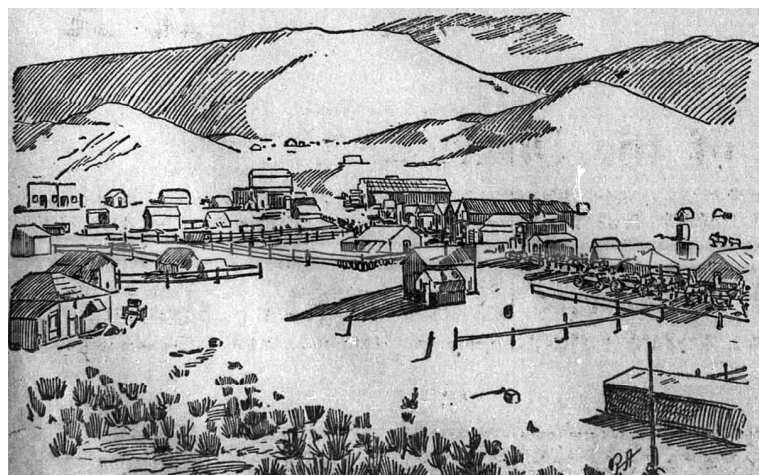
In January 1847 in what is now San Diego County, diarist Henry William Bigler wrote of rested soldiers on the Mormon Battalion's who "sang, fiddled, and danced." In a later autobiography, fellow Mormon Battalion soldier James Stephens Brown wrote that at Warner's Ranch near present-day Warner Springs, "one of the soldiers found a fiddle somehow and struck up the tune of 'Leather Breeches Full of Stitches' or some similar lively air. Some of the men formed a couple of French fours and began dancing in water half to their shoe tops. The colonel caught the sound and inquired what it was. Someone replied, 'Oh nothing, only the boys are dancing and making merry over the prospect of getting a little flour.'"

THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN FIDDLING

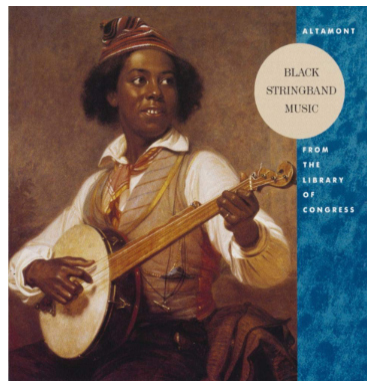
The conventional wisdom is that American fiddling is a direct descendant of Scotch-Irish fiddling, but there are many currents running through American fiddle music into our bluegrass repertoire. By the late 1800s, tunes arriving in California from the East had evolved from their Old World ancestors with a wide variety of American influences, yielding a rich, diverse tradition of fiddling that is now a canon of instrumental music, still evolving, in California and around the world.

Enslaved Africans and their descendants made great contributions to the emerging American musical repertoire, and fiddling is no exception. "Altamont" comes into the fiddle canon through the Black Tennessee string band of fiddler John Lusk, banjo player Murph Gribble, and guitarist Albert York, recorded in 1946. "Apple Blossom," credited to John Lusk, made an especially visible leap into bluegrass right here in California, through the Dillards and Byron Berline's 1965 *Pickin' & Fiddlin'*, recorded at World Pacific Studios in Los Angeles.

Another transmission route of tunes was the fife-and-drum tradition carried by military and militia musicians, including "Squirrel Hunters," "Hell on the Wabash," and "Santa Anna's Retreat," which Henry Reed said he learned from fifer and fiddler Quince Dillion. Play parties also created and adapted repertoire that would be included in the American fiddle book. Perhaps the best-known example is "Goodbye Girls, I'm Going to Boston,"



Drawing of Randsburg from an 1897 newspaper, which extended from Rand Gulch to Fiddler's Gulch, named after the favored evening activity of the miners.



called by Vance Randolph in a 1929 *Journal of American Folklore* a “Kentucky game-song” also known as “We’ll All Go to Boston.”

There are also tunes that came to the American fiddle repertoire from Europe, but not the British Isles. The first native-born American to become known as a dancer, John Durang, wrote that his German violin teacher, known only as “Hoffmaster,” wrote “Durang’s Hornpipe” for Durang’s theatrical hornpipe act in New York around 1785. It passed from professional American theater into the fiddle vernacular.

“Maiden’s Prayer” has an especially colorful history. Polish composer Tekla Bądarzewska published the piece for piano in Warsaw in 1856. Bob Wills recalled learning it from an unnamed Mexican musician in New Mexico, then recast as a fiddle standard in Western swing. The same musician apparently also taught Wills “Spanish Two-Step.”

There likely were other Native American influences on the music that are harder to trace. Musician, field recorder, and folklorist Alan Jabbour noticed that Native American influence may be evident especially in a large swath of tunes from the “Upper South,” which includes parts of Virginia, West Virginia, and Kentucky. These tunes often begin with the high part (or “strain,” literally, part of a tune’s melody that is typically played in the higher register of the instrument) and a melody that proceeds “downward in contour,” with the low part being treated as a kind of “musical appendage.” Jabbour observed in an essay on the Library of Congress website that descending melodies are common in Eastern Woodlands and Plains music. He noted that tunes such as “Kitchen Girl,” “Ducks in the Pond,” and “Forked Deer” may preserve some of that influence alongside European and African elements.

Other connections to Native musicianship or oral attribution include “Whiskey Before Breakfast,” closely associated with Canadian Métis fiddler Andy de Jarlis, who included it in a 1957 collection. Whether he composed, arranged, or popularized an older melody remains unsettled.

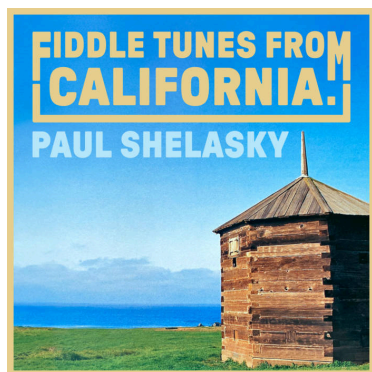
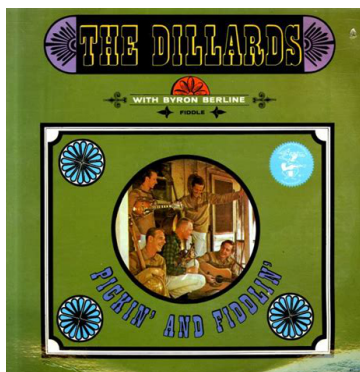


Also, in his 1940 study of Western North Carolina fiddling, David Parker Bennett noted Fiddlin’ Bill Hensley’s attribution of the tune “Georgia Horseshoe” to Junaluska, the Cherokee leader and fiddler.

“Over the Waves” (“Sobre las Olas”), published in 1888, was written by Mexican fiddler and composer Juventino Rosas, who was of Otomí descent. This waltz has traveled around the world, and today its Mexican origin has largely vanished from popular memory.

CALIFORNIA’S TUNESMITHS

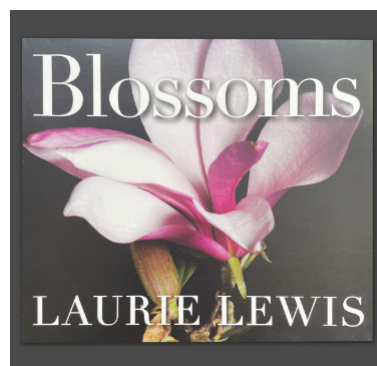
California’s modern fiddlers have continued expanding the American fiddle book. Paul Shelasky’s *Fiddle Tunes from California* alone contains 15 original fiddle tunes including “Cazadero,” which he wrote in the late



’70s on a four-hour drive on his way to a gig in Los Angeles. It’s since been recorded by John Reischman and Chris Thile. San Francisco native Darol Anger’s 1978 tune “Ride the Wild Turkey” came to him as a variation of “Cuckoo’s Nest.” It has since been recorded by Jerry Douglas, Clay Jones, and the Punch Brothers. While not yet widely circulated, “Sophie’s House” is a cajun-flavored fiddle tune by Laurie Lewis, recorded as a duet with Suzy Thompson on Laurie’s 2010 release *Blossoms*.

It’s too early to tell what tunes will become jam favorites from Brandon Godman’s 2024 *I Heard the Morgan Bell*, recorded at Opus Studios in Berkeley, featuring an array of original instrumental fiddle numbers that could be pegged as bluegrass or old-time repertoire. The tunes are backed up by the likes of California favorites Laurie Lewis, Darol Anger, John Gooding, and Patrick Sauber, among others. Brandon may be a native of Kentucky, but he’s called San Francisco home since before this recording.

Indeed, no one knows which tunes will be future standards, but California’s will certainly be in the mix. 🐾



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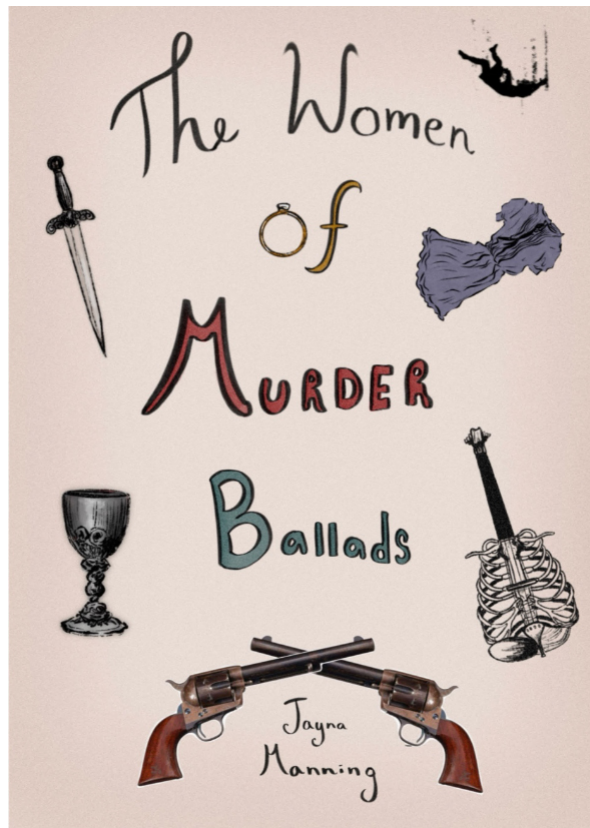
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The Women of Murder Ballads

by Jayna Manning

Murder ballads carry old British and Irish stories alongside accounts of American killings, handed down through generations of singers. In the songs, usually we hear more about the murderer's regrets than the woman he killed. Berkeley-based guitarist and singer Jayna Manning's illustrations turn our attention back to the women—some historical, others known only through song. —Ed.

I created this series during my senior year of high school for a class assignment to make a zine. As soon as I heard the assignment, I immediately thought of murder ballads. I've always loved these songs, and these stories have fascinated me for years. They're beautiful songs, but they also tell stories of real violence that is so common in traditional music that it's easy to stop thinking about the women at the center of them.

I wanted to give those women faces. Rather than leaving them as just characters, I imagined them as real people with lives, personalities, and stories beyond the moment we meet them and lose them in the lyrics. My hope was to encourage people to listen a little differently, to appreciate these songs while also remembering the humanity of the women whose stories they tell.



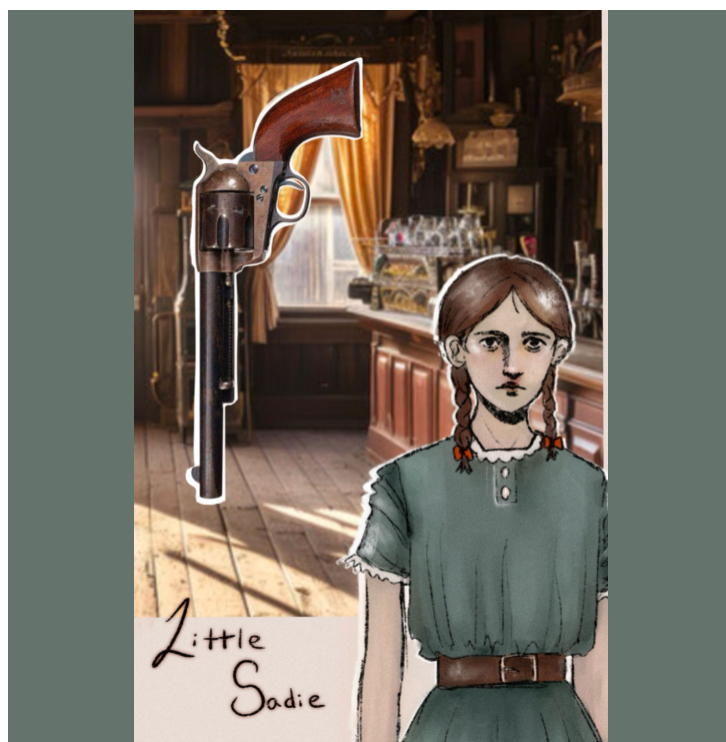
Jayna Manning. Photo by Kenneth Wong.



Omie Wise

*He kissed her and he hugged her, then he turned her around
And pushed her in deep waters where he knew that she would drown.*

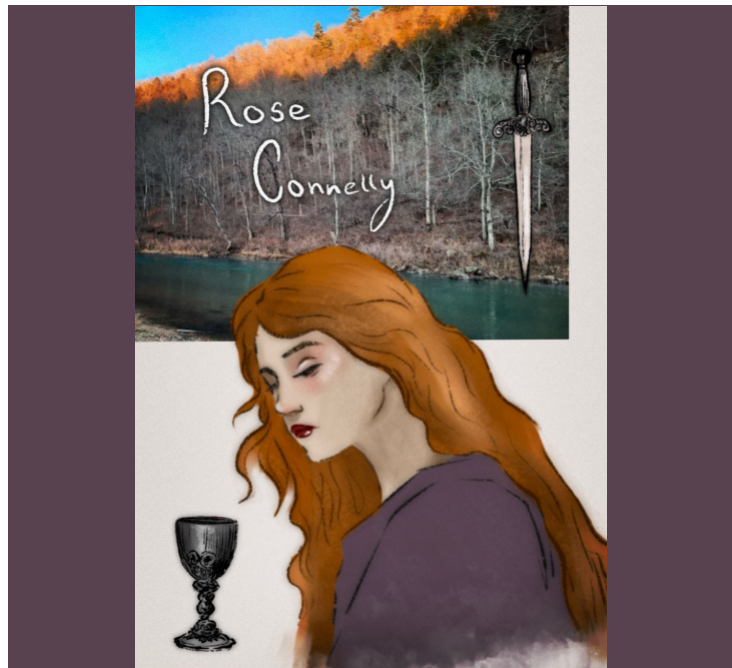
John Lewis promises Omie marriage, then drowns her in the river. The song preserves the story of Naomi Wise, murdered in North Carolina in 1807, though details changed in the telling. In one version, two boys out fishing discover her body.



Little Sadie

*I met Little Sadie and I shot her down.
Went back home, and I got into bed, .44 pistol under my head.*

By the time the murderer thinks to run, his freedom is nearly over. Sadie gets scarcely an introduction; the rest of the song follows the man who killed her. The *Traditional Ballad Index* documents a version from 1922 as "Bad Lee Brown," but identifies no underlying historical event.



Rose Connelly

*I drew my sabre through her, which was a bloody knife,
I threw her in the river, which was a dreadful sight.*

A quiet courtship scene in “Down in the Willow Garden” becomes a confession: Rose’s lover poisons her, stabs her, and throws her into the river. He had trusted his father’s assurance that money would buy his freedom—instead, the gallows await him. Rose never gets a word.



Laurie Foster

*You left her by the roadside, where you begged to be excused.
You left her by the roadside, then you hid her clothes and shoes.*

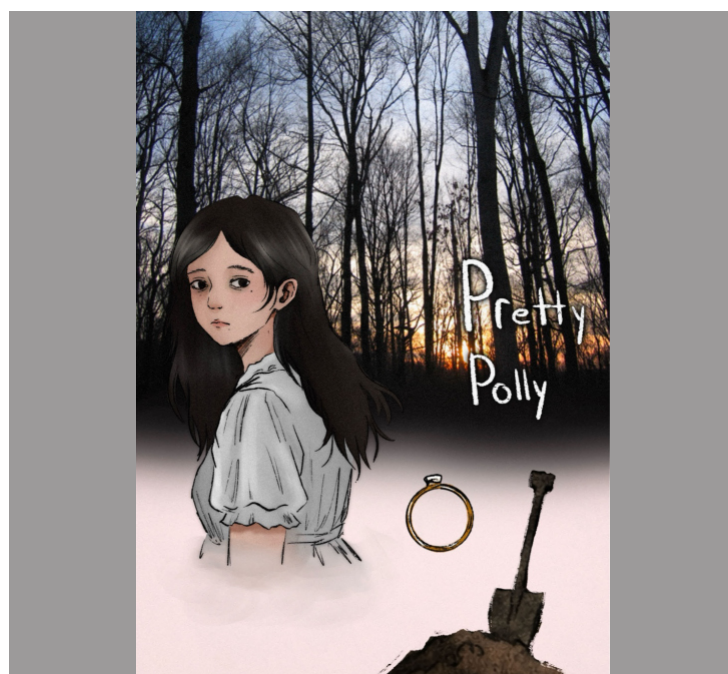
Laura Foster’s murder in North Carolina in 1866 became a song named for the man convicted of killing her, “Tom Dooley.” Tom Dula—“Dooley” in local pronunciation—was hanged in 1868. The ballad follows him toward his execution, pausing to recall the hillside where he concealed evidence of her death.



Oh, the Wind and Rain

*She pushed her in the river to drown. Oh, the wind and rain!
And watched her as she floated down, crying, “oh, the dreadful wind
and rain.”*

Jealous of a suitor’s preference, one sister drowns the other. In this eerie branch of the centuries-old “Two Sisters” ballad, the dead woman’s remains become a fiddle. But the instrument can play only one tune: “The Wind and Rain.”



Pretty Polly

*He stabbed her in the heart and her heart’s blood did flow
And into the grave Pretty Polly did go.*

Polly senses danger as Willie leads her away—in fact, he has already dug her grave. Descended from the British ballad “The Gosport Tragedy,” the familiar American song ends with her murder and burial. Older versions have her ghost return for a reckoning.

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2025 band scramble. Photo by David K. Cupp.



Annie Staninec Presenter's Concert.
Photo by David K. Cupp.



Forest Thurman & Breakline. Photo by Robin Frenette.

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Bangkok's Southeastern Gathering returns October 20–25 at the Public House Bangkok for six days of bluegrass, Irish, and old-time music.

Now in its third edition, the festival grew from a small jam outside a vintage shop at Bangkok's Train Night Market. The event is organised by the Bangkok bluegrass and Irish communities linked by musical roots as Trad Bangkok and gives this music a home in the city. This year's lineup features CBA Father's Day Festival alum Trey Wellington.

Sunny Sachdev, co-organiser of Southeastern Gathering, said: "A tune can move from an Irish session to an Appalachian string band and now to a room in Bangkok, carrying its history while becoming something new."

Find out more at southeasterngathering.com.



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Stephanie Prausnitz at Golden Old Time Campout. Photo by Alan M. Bond.



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EVENT OF THE YEAR**

CONGRATULATIONS TO CALIFORNIA

MUSIC AWARD NOMINEES

RON BLOCK • ALISON BROWN
STUART DUNCAN • ROB ICKES
AJ LEE • STEVE MARTIN • MOLLY TUTTLE

INDUSTRY AWARD NOMINEES

HELEN LUDÉ • PETER THOMPSON

BLUEGRASS HALL OF FAME

GENE LIBBEA - NASHVILLE BLUEGRASS BAND
BYRON BERLINE

CALIFORNIABLUEGRASS.ORG





By Bert Daniel, Breakdown Contributor

In August, we posed this question: **"What was the nickname of the accordion player for the Eighth Avenue String Band, who was also a Will Rogers 'Yodeler of the Year?'"**

Judging from the many enthusiastic responses to this one, maybe it should have read *"beloved accordion player!"* Rick Nagle, Sara Winge, Lynne Herrick, Tom Payne, Tom Sours, Jon DeLong, Bruce Edmundson, Steve Cahn, Dick Triplett, James Larson, Greg Cole, Mike Phelan, Becky Collins,



Eighth Avenue String Band at Father's Day Festival in 1980. CBA file photo.

Mike Howard, Roy Barush, John Drake, and Lucy Smith all responded with Sourdough Slim. Many knew this is the stage name of Rick Crowder; Tom Payne pointed out that he and Robert Armstrong are also founding members of R. Crumb's Cheap Suit Serenaders.

We wound up the CBA P-38 Randomatic Trivia-tron to determine that Roy Barush is the lucky winner of a rare, collectible Fathers Day Festival 2026 commemorative T-shirt!

OCTOBER TRIVIA

This month's trivia question is: **"Although from Georgia, not Arkansas, this fiddler who died a couple of years ago would live up to a classic Norman Blake tune—if you could spot him somewhere between 10 and 20 dollars."**

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

This month's prize is a **pair of collectable CBA wine glasses**—to enjoy with your Chardonnay while practicing old-time fiddle tunes from the *Hamblen Collection*!

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 December 2026 issue of the *Bluegrass Breakdown*.