

BLUEGRASS BEACON

Summer 2018



OLD TIME ISSUE



President's Message AGM April 30, 2018

It has been another good year filled with lots of great music.

Slow Pitch jams on the first Monday and Old Time Music jams on the third Monday continue to be popular, well attended events. Our intermediate jams continue to be a hit thanks to Garry Stevenson with the assistance of Jeremy Freeman, who donated their time to further our music.

We held two concerts over the past fiscal year with the Downtown Mountain Boys in April last year and Chris Jones and the Night Drivers this past January. In addition, we were privileged to host a successful COOP radio fundraiser in October. It was a fun night featuring many of our local Bluegrass Bands and their great musical talent!

For upcoming concerts we are pleased to present on May 14th, Slocan Ramblers with opening act the Stardust String Band and on October 22nd, the Old Growth Quartet from the Seattle area. We are in the process of arranging a CD release party for our own Lonesome Town Painters in September, details to follow.

We held three open stages this year, ably managed by Jamie Proctor, and again showing the incredible talent of our members.

Our summer potluck at Trout Lake was a new venture and a huge success, with plenty of goodies for all to share. I hope to see this continue in the future, thanks to Tim for organizing the event. Also, thanks to Tim we are reviving the Beacon with some interesting articles well worth the read.

We were pleased to award the Bursary this year to Paula Spurr who had a wonderful time in Sorrento at the Nimble Fingers Workshop.

I would like to give a special thank you to John Ludgate for his work organizing Bluegrass Concerts at the Carnegie Centre as well as to all the performers who donated their time.

Many thanks to all the volunteers who manned the door, helped out moving chairs etc. cleaning up after events and generally pitching in. We are all part of the team that keeps this club going! Thank you to Sue Malcolm and Paul Norton for all their help in promoting our events.

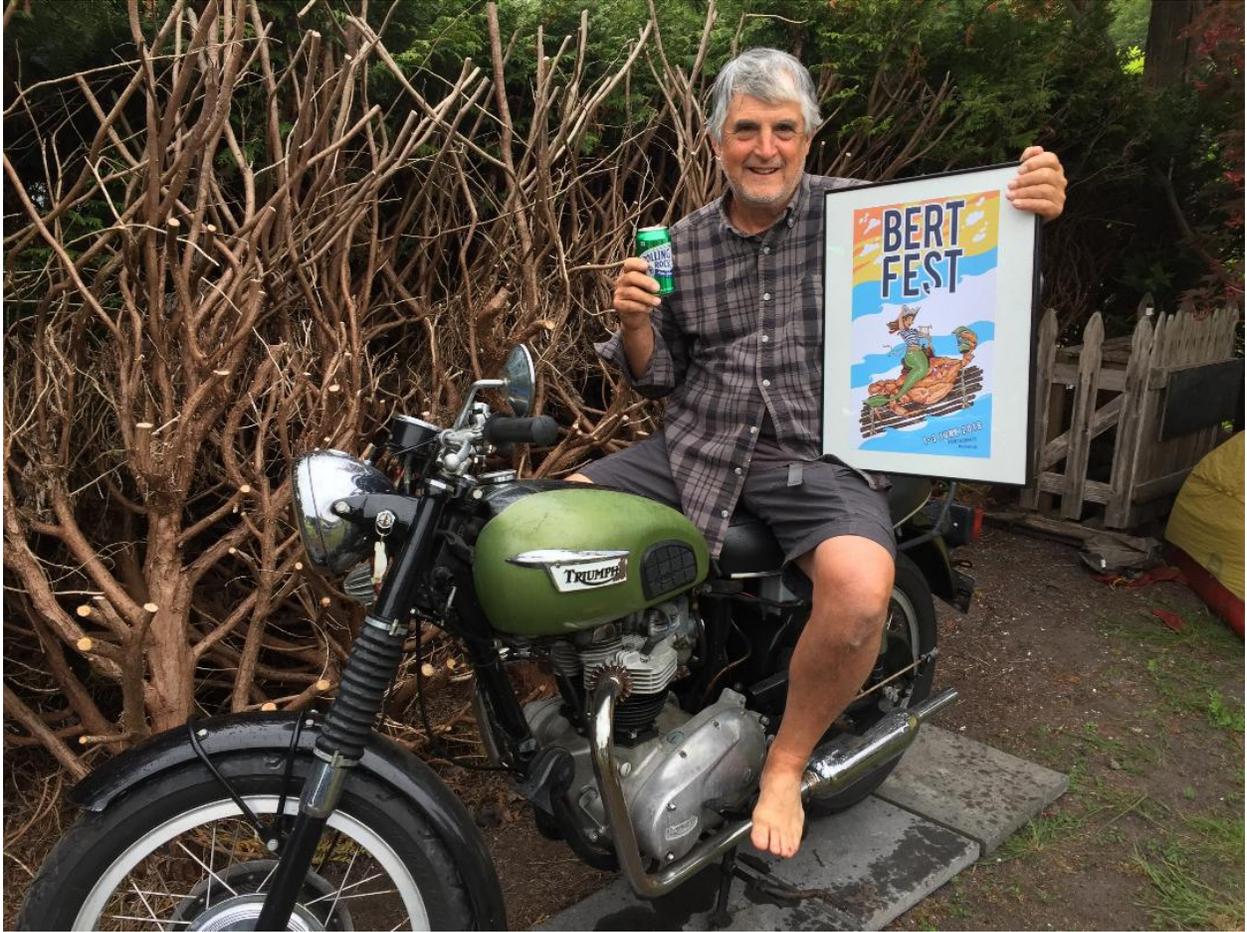
Over the past year all of our Board members have shown a true commitment to this Club. It has been an honour to work with such a great team. Thanks to all of you and to all who have volunteered throughout the year.

Respectfully submitted,
Fran Schiffner

Annual AGM

At the annual AGM Fran Schiffner stepped down as president, leaving the club in great shape. Thanks Fran! With ten board members we are going to need a bigger table for our meetings. Husband Fred has agreed to stay on as booking agent, a job he has been handling with aplomb for years. Fred also did a wonderful job invigilating the election, an equally difficult job. The new board members are as follows: William King- President, Eric Hartman-Vice President, Randy Huber-Secretary, David Zaruba-Treasurer, Tim Bemister, Sarah Clements, Keltie Craig, Greg Green, Sven Hartman and Jamie Proctor- Directors At Large.





BERT FEST 2018

A huge thanks to Bert Clarke for hosting Bert Fest at the family cottage at Point Roberts, June 1st to 3rd. Can't think of a better way to kick off the summer festival season. Lots to eat and drink and crab galore thanks to Adam's traps. Bert, bless his heart, even provided breakfast, and I've got to say Tim's Bits don't come close to Bert's "special recipe" balls. Bert went all out this year, firing up his vintage Triumph and serenading the entire Maple beach community with the beast's mellifluous growl. Sunday morning I ventured down to the beach and witnessed twenty-five eagles hunting for their first meal of the day and I was brought right back to the night before and all those Steve Miller songs that snuck into the jam. See you there next year!

The Lowdown on Old-Time Music. By Alan Mulvenna



What is Old Time Music?

Some folks say Old Time Appalachian Music, which covers a lot of it, but there's tunes played in the genre that aren't Appalachian, and some that aren't even old. But they all have a certain flavour.

The Instruments of Old-Time Music

The Fiddle-

Old Time sometimes refers to Festival or Texas style fiddle music. A lot of the same tunes, but played at supersonic speed, with guitar swing chords, by virtuosi.

Canadian Old Time Fiddle Music. Some of the same tunes, but more notes, not as syncopated or odd, piano backup, played in standard tuning

Before the advent of recorded music, if folks wanted to dance to music, and it seems that many of them surely did want to, the handiest instrument was the fiddle. It was loud, portable, and relatively affordable. In a pinch, a crude fiddle could be made with an axe and a knife.

Often the fiddle is tuned to a non standard tuning, like cross A (AEAE) or high base (ADAE) or D Dad (DDAD) Calico (AEAC#), and lots more.

Why the weird tunings? It makes playing tunes in certain keys easier for sure, but it also gives the fiddle resonance and allows for harmonies and drones that would be hard or impossible to get otherwise

So back to the fiddle tunes. They were mostly dance tunes, designed to work dancers into a frenzy. They needed to have a strong rhythm and to be pretty simple, dancers could recognize

them, and long and repetitious so the dance callers could direct the dancers through the gyrations on the dance floor. They also needed to be varied enough to keep the musicians interested. so the

Many of the fiddle tunes are hundreds of years old. Many originally come from the British Isles and Northern Europe, but lots seem to have been created in North America and to have been influenced by African and Native American musicians. These tunes are not the music of the rich or educated folks. The tunes were not often written down. Most of the musicians and dancers would be illiterate

The Banjo-

And then there is the banjo. Tuned GDGBD to play in G, capoed up to AEAC#E to play in A, retuned to AEADE (mountain minor or “sawmill” tuning to play A modal tunes, retuned GCGBD to play in C (not many fiddle tunes in C, but some) capoed to ADADE to play in D, and lots more

Supposedly for hundreds of years it was mostly fiddles or fiddle-like instruments playing for dancers. In the nineteenth century, banjos that also could be made with an axe, a knife and a ground hog skin, seem to have been added to the mix by African Americans. Some time in the mid to late nineteenth century, affordable guitars became available from mail order houses. Before the guitars came along probably nobody concerned themselves with chords. Apparently the early mail order guitars came with instruction pamphlets with a few major chord patterns, which may account for the lack of minor harmonies in the old time tunes

The banjo plays something approximating the melody, usually a lot simpler than the fiddle part, with some rhythmic accents thrown in.



The Mandolin-

Mandolins try to track the fiddle as much as possible.

The Bass-

If there is a bass it usually plays a good loud boom and a few simple runs.

The Guitar-

The guitar plays boom chuck chords with a strong base boom and maybe simple tasteful strong base runs. Nothing fancy. Sounds easy enough but really good old time guitar players who can energize and propel a jam are rare and much sought after.

Old-Time and Bluegrass-

Bluegrass folks often play a fancy version of the tune learned from a Clarence White or Doc Watson or some other guitar virtuoso. Sometimes that version is pretty different from the basic standard version of the tune played on the fiddle, and as the tune gets passed around the instruments there could be lots of improvisation.

In a Bluegrass jam, the key might change every tune. The instruments are typically in standard tunings. The fiddle and mandolin and base players usually can play in any key, and the guitar and banjo players can capo to the new key as required.

The Characteristics of Old-Time-

Old Time music today is built on a foundation of tunes recorded in the early twentieth century. Some were primitive field recordings of isolated players collected by musicologists. Others were commercial recordings of string bands. Much of the recorded music comes from the Appalachian region in the eastern US, maybe because that area was isolated from newer influences later than other areas. The old music hung on there, just long enough to be recorded before it was swamped by more modern music.

Drones (think bagpipes) and syncopated rhythms (think African drums) are common in the old time tunes, but typically no fancy harmonies. Tunes often have a savage, primitive sound.



An Old-Time Jam-

It goes like this. You need a fiddle for sure, and a guitar and banjo if you can get them. A bass is a luxury, and a mandolin makes a good addition. Banjo ukes sometimes.

Some things to know. An Old Time jam is an Old Time Jam. Don't go thinking you can do a Bluegrass song in B flat. Sometime folks go around the circle picking tunes, but not always. If at least one fiddler can't play the tune strong, best not to pick it, unless maybe the group is work shopping tunes. The key not going to change often, as explained below.

So how is an old Time Jam conducted? Often it is a dictatorship. A grumpy old master fiddler (or an arrogant young hotshot) starts playing tunes. If you are lucky, the fiddle tuning will be stated, which should tell you the key. Sometimes it gets tricky. "we are gonna be playin' A tunes in cross G".

Because of the special tunings, key changes are a pain. When the instruments are retuned, they often take a while to stabilize, so nobody likes to change.

So the alpha fiddler starts playing and everybody else does the best they can to follow. Sometimes the tunes are named, sometimes not/

Fiddlers sometimes get bored, so they start playing crooked tunes with extra beats, missed beats and general weirdness, to keep everybody on their toes.

So where does all this happen? At the Pacific Bluegrass Society, about once a month, at the Old Time Slow Pitch Jam. Other Monday nights, a group often gathers in the Green Room and pounds out tunes.

Further afield in our region are events like East Van Old Time Social in Vancouver, the Centralia Campout at Centralia Washington, Fiddletunes at Port Townsend, Washington Stickerville in Weiser, Idaho. The old time gathering in Portland, Oregon. Similar events



happen all over the US, many in the Appalachian region. Clifftop, in West Virginia is a big one.

The Nimblefingers event every August in Sorrento BC has lots of Old Time music with amazing instructors.

So why would anyone like this music?

There are thousands of tunes, each with own little peculiarity.

Everyone plays the tunes together, so you get way more practice time.

The tunes are droning and repetitious and induce a pleasurable trance like state.

There's often a story behind each tune. Who first recorded it. Who wrote it, who learned it from whom. Some of the stories may be true.

The tunes, when played well, will induce spontaneous toe tapping. (The average two year old child will stomp and bob, right in time, to the amazement of their parents)

The music has an ancient vibe that some of us seem genetically programmed to respond to.

When the music is played well, the whole group is in sync. What are probably inaudible variations to an outside listener, get exchanged back and forth among players in a musical conversation. We are here, we are alive, we are listening, we are responding and we are in tune with some kind of cosmic be



Mulvenna's Miscellany-

The music is often played outdoors, at night, in a tight group gathered around a source of heat (Sadly, seldom a fire these days. A propane heater is the new campfire apparently.)

Motor homes are the new covered wagons.

Liquids are sometimes involved.

Sometimes sleeping in a tent is required.

Endurance can be required. This can go on, day and night, for a week or so. Sometimes it rains.

You can sleep when you're dead.

The best music happens at 3 AM.

Fiddle players often say: "There's a tune I want to play. I can't remember the name of it, or how it goes." So what do they remember? Probably a pleasurable sensation associated with the tune.

A wonderful website: slipperyhill.com

Contains recordings of many, many old time tunes. Old scratchy field recordings. The source material for today's Old Time Music.

Important things to know:

There are many tunes with the same title that are completely different tunes.

There are many tunes with different titles that are really all the same tune.

If the name Jenny is used in a tune, it probably refers to a mule.

The old fiddler in coveralls you meet at a campout probably has PhD in plant genetics.

The young fiddler in coveralls you meet at a campout really is a hobo.

INTERVIEW with Allan Mulvenna



Tell us about your musical upbringing.

When I was a child my brother started taking piano lessons and I could read the text in his beginner music book so I started playing a little bit. Then I was put in piano lessons and that was not successful. I wanted to learn how to play and I couldn't see how you could possibly learn taking those lessons. I began to see the whole musical education system as a filter designed to weed out those who couldn't play in an orchestra. Going through the system makes you a candidate for playing exactly what is on the page for an orchestra. So my early musical education was an abject failure.

When I was eighteen or nineteen I was in university and I was rooming with a friend and another friend was poking through his landlord's garage and he found an old banjo. At that time (early sixties) folk music was coming into vogue and this friend, who played a bit of guitar, got this old Dobson banjo into playing condition and along with Pete Seeger's instruction book, traded me the banjo for a radio which I actually didn't own. A friend had loaned it to me. So I acquired this banjo and a recording called Southern Journeys. It was an old field recording, and included artists like Hobart Smith. When I heard this recording I was astounded because I had never heard anything like it. The banjo music sounded oriental to me. The song "Coo Coo Bird", the way the notes are played and the scale that is used, it just doesn't sound like anything else. I asked myself-where the hell did this come from, and it is so wonderful. I learned how to play a little bit of that stuff.

One of the songs I played was from the Beverly Hillbillies- "Shirl, Shirl, Shirl, come be my darling girl, Stay away from Lester Flatt, he fixes his hair with possum fat." As I said, folk music was in vogue so there were a fair amount of people playing Kingston Trio stuff but when I listened to the original versions of the songs they were playing I considered what the Kingston Trio were doing to be a bit of a travesty. It seemed they were missing that rootsy, funky, visceral thing that made it real. The actual music of the northern Europeans, not the classically trained, but the music that working people had heard and played for hundreds of years. So for a couple of years I was playing a fair bit, but almost in complete isolation. I had Seeger's book, which was really helpful in terms of fundamentals, but there wasn't much to listen to in that style of music. Of the popular folk artists, Ian and Sylvia were fairly authentic and were covering a lot of the tunes, but it was very hard to find original recordings. So you would go to the music stores and every once in a while you would find something by The New Lost City Ramblers, as they were collecting all these tunes, so the versions I heard were usually their versions. They would refer to where they got the song from but you couldn't get the original recordings. I just loved their stuff, as it was exactly what I was interested in. I saw them in performance a couple of times in the States in the early sixties and they were just fantastic. I liked bluegrass as well as it seemed to be an offshoot of old-time but it was limited in its scope, whereas old-time covers such a broad range, jug band music and blues. To me that's all bedrock music that people really dig.

So there was a period back then when I did some playing, and learned to play clawhammer. Then life starts: jobs, family, and for around thirty years playing maybe an hour or two a year. Once in a while you find your instrument stashed behind the couch and say- "I should play a little bit". So you loose ground, you loose all your chops and eventually you get to a point where you can't play at all. Now it's the early two thousands and a friend of mine that I had played with in university, who had been playing a fair amount of mandolin, asked me to bring my banjo to a reunion that was happening back in Kingston. So I end up at his house, and he's been playing quite a bit over the years, and another friend is there playing the guitar, and that kind of got me started again. Now I had to find a place in Vancouver that was playing old-time music. The only thing I would see would be concert announcements for DYAD, an old-time band, as they would be playing around town. I never made it to one of their concerts but I was dimly aware that I wasn't the only person in town interested in old-time music.

I am playing a bit more by this point, as I want to return to Kingston and play with my friend again at another reunion. Then I here John Reischman being interviewed on the CBC, promoting a Jaybirds concert, and some of the music that they are playing is straight up old-time. I go to the concert and there is a table of people at the entrance with a sign saying Pacific Bluegrass and Heritage Society, so I become aware that there are people playing bluegrass and that might be as close as I can get. A year later I figured out where Pacific Bluegrass was and I reported to the Anza, went to a slow pitch jam. It wasn't quite what I was after, but clawhammer banjo wasn't thrown out, and I could play some of the bluegrass stuff. Of course the emphasis is on breaks and the bluegrassy clichés, which is great, but I am after the broader old-time sounds. After several visits to the club I eventually run into a few other people who at least know what I'm talking about. Certainly Tim Higgs, who was part of the folkly old-time scene in New York City in the early sixties, knew much more about it than I did. A few other people are around, like Greg Green (you have to have a fiddle), and soon we have a small collection of fiddlers, and soon there are more people, and the rest just kind of happened.

Tell us about your banjo.

I bought it off the internet from a guy named Donald Zepp (Zepp Country Music). The banjo was made by a guy named Mike Ramsey (Mike Ramsey Open Back Banjos). I'd heard recorded clips of 12 inch pot Mike Ramsey woody banjos (wooden tone ring) and liked the sound. It has a scoop (upper frets are removed) so you can play it up the neck, and get a certain sound. In older banjos typically the bridge would be off to the lower edge of the skin, but bridges have been moving more to the centre of the skin.

What is the connection between old-time and square dancing?

Most of the tunes are dance tunes as that's what people wanted. For instance when my parents had a party, the carpets in the house would be all rolled up, and there would be dancing to records, but fifty years before that it wouldn't be to records, it would be to live musicians. This is the tradition old-time brings back. We recently played a dance (The Heretics) at the Astoria with a caller, who decides the tunes and tempo, and we just play the music. I love playing at dances because people are having such a good time, and we are just assisting in all the fun. It's a wonderful group activity. Everybody has to listen and try to follow the instructions, and everybody is having the same experience, and it's very physical. Exercise is obtained without going to the gym. The dancing is just a part of the contemporary old-time music scene, but most of it is not dancing.

When we think about old-time music certain stereotypes come to mind and I wonder, do you consider yourself a hillbilly?



The Heretics

Genetically I might be. My background is Scotch and Irish, and my mother's people came from Ireland but they didn't seem to be that Irish. The male relatives on Mom's side never had any interest in anything but cars, and music. My grandfather, without formal training, played clarinet in a band during the war. So there seemed to be an interest in cars, motorcycles, music, and I suspect before that, horses. It seemed that they didn't fit in with the rest of society. Then I began to read about more distant relatives; they belonged to the boarder people who lived between Scotland and England, who didn't identify with either sect. They survived by raising, trading and rustling livestock. They were outsiders who were completely unruly. They were difficult to control, as the men were armed and prepared to either defend their sheep and cattle or steal someone else's. This culture went on for hundreds of years and was finally brutally suppressed in the 1500's. A lot of the people were deported, many to Ireland. When I see the habits of my maternal relatives I see lots of connections. Many of the boarder people also ended up in North America. Some were deported as slaves, the white slaves who were sent to North America. They were not indentured servants, they were rounded up and sent to the Caribbean and the continental US. So these hillbillies, these troublesome people ended up in the margins of American society in the bad farming country up in the hills, and it is from these Appalacian mountains that old-time is preserved.

One last question. What advice can you give a young person wanting to get into old-time music?

They should get an instrument. They should listen to the music and then they should start playing it. There is a website called Slippery Hill and it has source recordings for most of the old fiddle tunes. I also think that the bluegrass slow pitch would be an excellent way for people to

start playing with others, as it will get you on to the chords and then you can contribute. That will get you started. Then just keep doing it,- just keep playing. The earlier that you can play with others the better. It's humbling at first, and if you decide that you are going to play the banjo you have to be prepared for a life of humiliation, it just goes with it.



The king of old-time



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