

The Tradition of Kansas City Bluegrass

By Alison Campbell

According to Randy Denney, founding member of the Bluegrass Missourians, five is the magic number when it comes to bluegrass. It's the perfect number of band members and the number of strings you'll find on his favorite instrument, the five-string banjo.

But bluegrass lovers in the Kansas City, Mo., area know four is the number of long-enduring bands responsible for helping create a rich history of regional bluegrass music. The Bluegrass Brigade, the Bluegrass Missourians, the Drifters and Green Side Up have all been performing since the early 1970s. And, with more than 30 years of dedication, these bands have been able to bring their love of bluegrass to countless audiences, both old and young, in the Midwest area.

Although each of the bands has its own past, there are several constants. First and foremost is a love of bluegrass music. According to Tim Stafford, a member of the nationally renowned band Blue Highway, "Throughout the country, bluegrass seems to take on certain characteristics based on the scene at any given time. In the '80s and '90s, several strong groups like these in Missouri forged a regional identity for the music in that area between the Rockies and the Southeast. Some of the strongest musicians and groups came out of this region."

Tim is not alone in his recognition of talent in Missouri. "I grew up at the Missouri bluegrass festivals listening to Green Side Up, the Bluegrass Missourians, the Bluegrass Brigade and the Drifters," says Rhonda Vincent, award-winning bluegrass recording artist. "I have such fond memories of the summer bluegrass festivals, spending every weekend with these bands. They are special friends, and just like family."

As each of these four groups worked out their style and sound, they caught up with each other at various venues in the region, the most common being the bluegrass festival at Silver Dollar City in Branson, Mo. Along with others playing at the time, the histories of these four bands are woven together as a driving force of the bluegrass sound.

The Bluegrass Brigade

When Jack and Mae Burlison founded the Bluegrass Brigade in 1974, they really just wanted to play some good bluegrass music. Mae sang lead, Jack played guitar, Bob Cartmill played fiddle with Andy Brogan on banjo, and Dick Harris completed the line-up on bass. As schedules and needs changed, members of the line-up came and went, including the departure of Andy, Dick and Bob and the addition of Jim McGreevy on banjo and mandolin and Don Montgomery on fiddle. Mae also began to play the upright bass. Each multi-talented member has the ability to join in vocals and to play different instruments.

Members of the Bluegrass Brigade had to fit in their playing with the responsibilities of work and family. Their gigs became a family affair as they all took vacations together to travel the area and play. In addition to being honored to play for Ronald and Nancy Reagan during Santa-Cali-Gon Days in Independence, Mo., they also had the opportunity to visit Austria in 1998 and Ireland in 2000. According to Jack, the bluegrass bands in Ireland have different pronunciation and use less banjo and more drums, but the rhythms are the same. "Bluegrass was founded in America, but the roots

are definitely Celtic,” he says. “Bluegrass is huge in the Czech Republic, but there were also a few bands from Britain and Germany and one from France. It was a very positive experience.”

Bluegrass roots might be Celtic, but the roots of the Bluegrass Brigade are definitely founded in gospel. It’s the mainstay of their style, and the place most of them first learned to sing. When asked about why Missouri is so influential on the American Bluegrass scene, Jack summed it up nicely: “There’s nothing particularly unique about Missouri, but it would be a challenge for any other state to come up with as many bands and events as we have here. There’s a rich heritage with many nationally recognized singers getting their start in Missouri.” The Bluegrass Brigade has received many awards through the years, the most recent being Jim McGreevy’s First Place SPBGMA award for Best Banjo player in 2007.

The Bluegrass Missourians

Much like the Bluegrass Brigade, the Bluegrass Missourians started with several family members in the line up. Randy Denney was the son of formally trained violinist Bill Denney. In addition to violin, Bill played fiddle and guitar, and brought Randy up to love music. In the ‘60s, Randy heard the five-string banjo played live for the first time and he was hooked. In 1971, after taking lessons from Dave Batson of Green Side Up, Randy and Bill formed the Missouri Plowboys with Randy’s wife Caroll as part of the original line-up.

By 1973, the name had changed to the Bluegrass Missourians, and the band was no longer outfitted exclusively in overalls. After Bill passed away in 1975, Ed Sellers joined the band on fiddle. Grant Cochran became the bass player in 1979 while still in high school. Bob White joined as guitar player in 1980 but switched to mandolin when Greg Blake took over as guitarist in 1993. Then, in 2005, 16-year-old Brian McCarty was brought on to play mandolin.

Most of the members of the Bluegrass Missourians had heard the bluegrass sound from records or live performances and were eager to learn to play it — often times on used or hand-me-down instruments. According to Grant Cochran, “We’ve played a lot of different places over the years. Of course, it was exciting getting to open for Bill Monroe on two separate occasions. I remember standing in the cramped little backstage room at that particular theater and listening to Kenny Baker tell stories and play fiddle tunes. We’ve had a lot of fun over the years.”

Tim Stafford remembers, “I often saw the Bluegrass Missourians at Silver Dollar City, sharing a stage with them a few times when I was in the groups ‘The Boys in the Band’ and ‘Dusty Miller.’ The banjo picker with the top hat, who was also a teacher, Randy, and Grant, the bass player, were special folks, and friendly faces when we were a long way from home. Since then, I’ve seen them several times and they’re still just as nice and supportive.” Grant recalls one of those times alternating sets with The Boys in the Band: “Once as we were ending our set with the fiddle tune ‘Jerusalem Ridge’, this large, black cloud came speeding in from the west. We were leaving the stage as The Boys in the Band came up to play. All of a sudden, there was a loud crash of thunder as a nearby tree was struck by lightning. A ball of fire came zipping down this tree, scattering

large shards of wood everywhere. I remember people picking up the wood splinters for souvenirs. Ed has always been hesitant to play 'Jerusalem Ridge' ever since."

Yet in spite of these and other adventures on the road, the Bluegrass Missouriians have among their line-up the recipients of multiple awards. Greg is a five-time winner of the SPBGMA Midwest Guitar Performer of the Year. Ed is a four-time Kansas State Fiddling champion. In 2002, the Bluegrass Missouriians were named the SPBGMA Midwest Band of the Year (Traditional).

The Bluegrass Missouriians have had some recent personnel changes with the departure of Greg Blake and Grant Cochran. Bob White has returned to guitar and Randy's original banjo teacher, Dave Batson, has joined the band on upright bass.

Drifters

Like the other bluegrass bands in the area, the Drifters come from a family with a strong tie to bluegrass music. In fact, Mike, Pat and Rob Collins are descendants of the original Collins Brothers, credited with bringing the genre to the Kansas City area. The Drifters original line-up included brothers Mike and Pat Collins as well as their cousin Gene. The original line-up also included Monty Duke on banjo. Robby Boone joined later—he took over on the banjo when Monty left, about the same time that Ferrel Stowe joined on the dobro. Robby left in 1985 and brother Rob Collins took over on banjo. Shortly after that, Ferrel left. Then, in 1993 Robby re-joined on banjo and Rob switched to guitar.

According to Tim Stafford, "I spent a lot of time at Silver Dollar City in the 1980s and '90s, as well as the SPBGMA contests and other events that have a Missouri focus. I remember the Drifters being a very strong group, the class of the SPBGMA contest back in the early 1980s. I remember thinking I'd never seen such a strong family group at the time, with the Collins brothers as the foundation of the Drifters along with Robby Boone, one of the very finest J.D. Crowe-style banjo players ever."

It's been more than 30 years since the Drifters first performance, but the band is still very-much a family affair. According to Mike, "There's just something magic about the harmony within a family. Rob, Pat and I have always sung together. We grew up understanding the timing."

Mike, Pat, Rob and Robby Boone can still be found at various festivals, although these days it's closer to home. In addition to growing families, the band has had its share of health issues, most notably Pat's on-going battle against cancer. Some of the band members still work full time, including full-time musician Rob, who is also a current member of Green Side Up. According to Mike, "Rob can play anything with strings except the fiddle." While he's the guitar player for the Drifters, he started with the group on banjo and he plays mandolin in Green Side Up.

The Drifter's most notable award is their 1986 first-place win at the SPGBMA International Bluegrass Band Championship in Nashville. They beat out 57 bands for the award after finishing second in 1985. Of course, since they've won the award they are no longer eligible to compete, but they have had the opportunity to make their mark in other categories, including receiving nominations for best song and song writer.

In addition to the influences of their family, the band was also influenced by the Stanley Brothers, Flatt and Scruggs, Reno and Smiley, The Country Gentlemen and Bill Monroe, among others. "We're very traditional," says Mike Collins. "That's where we

got our beginning.” As new generations enter the bluegrass scene, the Drifters are going to be a big influence for those that follow them as well. And, although he wouldn’t push for it, he’d be pleased to see one member of the next generation be his grandson, who was born in 2007. Mike did admit that he showed musical talent at eight-months-old. But whether or not the next generation of Collinses continues the tradition on, the previous Collinses have definitely left a bluegrass legacy in the Midwest.

Green Side Up

As the most enduring of the Kansas City-based bands, Green Side Up enjoys a rich history as well. When asked why a bluegrass group chose such a green name, Larry Ellis, founding member and driving force of the band, responded with one of the oldest jokes in bluegrass history. Like the other band members, Green Side Up musicians work day jobs. One of those jobs included laying sod for a large landowner. These folks had never seen sod—where they were from sod grew from grass seed and rain. So as they were laying the sod, every so often, Larry and the gang would hear their boss call out “Green side up!” to remind them how to lay the grass.

“Really, the original members of the band each offered a suggestion and then the band pulled a name out of a hat. My choice won—and I didn’t cheat,” swears Larry. “The idea is to keep things a little less serious, to loosen up and entertain.”

It’s an idea that has worked for the past 37 years. Green Side Up’s line-up has changed several times throughout the years, but the love of bluegrass and the feeling of family have remained. The original members from 1971 included Jerry Justice (now deceased), Howard Rash, Larry Ellis, Dave Batson and Keith George. As family and health needs arose, different members would need to drop out and new faces joined the band. Of the original members, only Larry remains, still playing the fiddle and singing both lead and harmony vocals. Jim Boling joined the band about five years ago on guitar. Cousins Rob Collins, of The Drifters, and Tammy Jo Collins Fedders, whose fathers were the original Collins brothers, play banjo and upright bass, respectively, and Gary Bagley finishes the group on mandolin. Most of the members sing either lead or harmony vocals as well. As far as heritage, most of the band members were raised on bluegrass, with Larry switching over from country after meeting former Blue Grass Boy, Lonnie Hoppers. Lonnie later joined Green Side Up as their banjo player for a short period in 1972.

According to Rob Collins, “Bluegrass is the purest form of country.” Jim Boling chimes in, “It has stayed pristine. The first generation was the innovators. The stuff they played, they made up with no other pattern to follow. It didn’t become what we consider bluegrass today until about 1945 when Bill Monroe and Flatt and Scruggs were in THE bluegrass band together.”

Green Side Up has certainly taken the bluegrass sound and made it their own. With a love of gospel and a strong dislike of all instruments electric, they use harmony, rhythm and old-fashioned foot tapping to create their brand of bluegrass music. From their sound, you'd never believe that they hadn't been together forever.

Band highlights include when former member Rick George won 1st place in the National Flattop Guitar Contest at Winfield, Kan., in 1974. In 1981, radio station KWTO, Springfield, Mo. sponsored several different contests at Silver Dollar City's Mountain Folks Music Festival. Larry took 1st place out of 19 fiddlers, and Green Side Up was awarded 1st place out of 29 groups in the 'Traditional Gospel Group' contest.

After sharing some of their experiences on the road, Larry finished by comparing bluegrass to spinach. "You either like it or you don't. And like spinach, it's good for you."

Without these four influential bands, bluegrass would probably still have had a presence in Kansas City. But it definitely wouldn't enjoy the same lasting heritage that these band members provided. Together, they have helped build strong loyalty and dedication from their fans and a healthy dose of family involvement and support.

Rhonda Vincent sums it up nicely: "All of these bands have formed the history of bluegrass in Missouri. I still have vinyl of some of the Missouri bands, and it is some of my favorite music." I'm sure the audiences in the area would be quick to agree.