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Bluegrass finds a home at the Nashua Garden

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ENLARGE PHOTO



Staff photos by ED WOZNIAK
 Mike Kenney plays the bass at the Nashua Garden in June.
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Bill Jubett rosens up his bow, puts an ear to the shiny wood instrument tucked under his chin and plucks its strings. Glancing at the three men around him, he asks, "Ready?" and turns to the microphone.

The next thing they know, the 40 or so beer drinkers, cigarette smokers and Red Sox game-watchers gathered at the upstairs bar at the Nashua Garden this warm, midsummer evening find themselves tapping fingers and feet – and wondering why.

Jubett and fellow musicians Andy Sicard, Mike Kenney and Bob Sevigny were offering a brand of music that, when it gets going full steam, makes sitting still nearly impossible.

It's called bluegrass, as common as a humid day along the East Coast and deep South, as appreciated as the beauty of indigenous flower gardens and little fishing villages up in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, but a rare bird, indeed, in the Nashua area.

That's something that Jubett, Sicard, et al., are hoping to change, and so far, so good – thanks in large part to the willingness of the Garden ownership to take a chance and designate every Thursday as acoustic jam night, opening their valuable stage space to, as one ad says, ". . . all players of acoustic instruments, guitars, banjos, fiddles, mandolins, accordions, whatever . . ."

The initiated will notice the message's strong bent toward encouraging bluegrass pickers – the fiddle and banjo are at the very roots of the genre, the guitar is universal and the mandolin, of course, was made a virtual bluegrass must by the one and only Bill Monroe.

Thursday-night crowds ebb and flow, but regulars notice attendance steadily growing.

"It's a great style of music," said co-owner Dan Quinn. "I must admit I didn't know much about it, but now I can see why people enjoy it so much. We're glad to be able to have it here."

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Former Nashua resident Mark Liuzzo picks here and there, and one Thursday joined Sicard and Jubett behind the mikes. Clearly, he's a committed bluegrass devotee and appreciates the friendly, informal nature of playing.

"The (performer's) uniform is what you happen to be wearing," said Liuzzo, now a Salem resident, during a beer break. "The beauty of it is you can jam anywhere, anytime, in any weather

. . . there's no cords to drag, no batteries to die, no chance to get a shock if it rains."

Jubett discovered bluegrass while attending college in West Virginia, he said. "I played guitar a little, I tried rock 'n' roll

. . . but then I had a roommate who played and listened to bluegrass. The first time I heard it, I knew that was what I wanted to play.

"I really like the stories the music tells," Jubett added.

For Sicard, a Tyngsborough, Mass., resident, bluegrass made its way into his blood – and fingers – when he lived in Florida several years ago.

"The music has a great presence down there . . . when I moved back up this way, I wanted to keep playing. This (Thursdays at Nashua Garden) happened, and it's great."

What, when, where?

So what is bluegrass music, when and where did it start, where did the name come from, why is its popularity so regional – and how come the Nashua area is anything but a bluegrass hotbed?

Well, for starters, the Nashua area's entertainment strength lies not in original nor live music, the two factors which embody the very essence of bluegrass. Borne of the spirit of America's earliest settlers, whose improvised ditties told stories of their day-to-day hardscrabble lives, the genre was first tabbed "mountain music," then "country music," reflecting their habitat.

As settlers began to spread into the Carolinas, Tennessee, Kentucky and the Virginias, they composed new songs, trying them out with family and close neighbors on porches and over campfires – a practice that lives on, unchanged, as today's "picking parties."

When radio and recorded music entered the picture, the old-time music flowed out of the rural Southern mountains to people all over the United States. Singing stars such as Jimmie Rodgers, family bands such as the Carter family from Virginia and duet teams such as Bill Monroe and his brother, Charlie, were among those responsible for the genre's nationwide advancement.

Enter 'bluegrass'

The Monroes split and formed their own bands in 1938. Since Bill was a native of Kentucky – the Bluegrass State – he called his Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys. Boasting the cream of the tight-vocals crop, the band birthed the alternately searing and haunting sound that came to be known as "high lonesome," and soon, by the generic "bluegrass."

The Blue Grass Boys first played the hallowed Grand Ole Opry in 1939, starting a fat, healthy new branch of country music that through the years has beckoned the purist and sifted out flavor-of-the-month musicians intent on plugging in, adding nontraditional percussion (drums) and climbing the Top 40 charts.

A compelling consensus of the feelings of bluegrass purists vs. their "sellout" counterparts was put to words and (unplugged) music recently by top songwriter Larry Cordle and his band, Lonesome Standard Time. "Murder on Music Row" tells the tale of how, over time, Nashville's best-dressed, quick-talking agents and promoters have sterilized the life and personality out of country music. (For lyrics, see Page 10.)

Everyone's a youngster

Bluegrass, probably more than any other genre of music, transcends age – a fact that's as popular among the younger pickers as it is among their senior cohorts.

Take Merrimack resident Jerry Jean, for instance – a D-Day veteran, widower, octogenarian and Class A dobro (resonator guitar, played sitting down; developed by the DOpjera BROthers in the 1920s) picker.

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He'll joke about his age: "I play with a lot of younger fellas, some of 'em are too fast for me. . . . I taught myself the dobro so I didn't have to stand up to play."

Born and brought up in Nashua's Crown Hill section, Jean always loved music, he said, and started visiting Keene quite often when, he says, "I met a girl over there."

Ruby Naylor would soon become Mrs. Jerry Jean, and their mutual love of music blossomed. Coming from Nashua, where bluegrass was a type of lawn, not music, Jean found living in Keene much more to his musical liking.

"People over there were a lot more accepting of my kind of music than they were in Nashua," he said. "In Nashua, all they wanted to listen to was Crosby and Sinatra."

The Jeans, for 30 years, ran Noel's Music Store in Keene – and did the regional bluegrass/

LOCAL VENUES

NASHUA GARDEN, 121 Main St., Nashua: Open-mic Bluegrass Jam every Thursday at 9 p.m. Bands and individuals. Any acoustic instrument welcome. Bluegrass, old-time country, traditional music. No cost.
 STAGECOACH INN, Route 119 at Route 40, Groton, Mass: Boston Bluegrass Union picking party, fourth Saturday of the month. 7 p.m.-midnight. Traditional bluegrass. No cost.
 NASHUA SENIOR ACTIVITIES CENTER, 70 Temple St., Nashua: Jerry Jean's The Bluegrass Pickin' Buddies and guests perform. All ages, all levels. No cost.

BLUEGRASS RESOURCES

- www.bbu.org. Boston Bluegrass Union. Comprehensive regional information on events, festivals, education.
- www.bluegrass-museum.org. International Bluegrass Music Museum, Owensboro, Ky.
- www.ibma.org. International Bluegrass Music Association, Nashville, Tenn.
- www.bluegrassworld.com. Bluegrass news, bands, festivals, links, lyrics, magazines, organizations, catalogs, instruments.
- www.bluegrassmusic.com. Bluegrass Unlimited Inc. Various resources.
- www.bluegrassworks.com. Search bands, festivals, concerts, other bluegrass information.

UPCOMING REGIONAL BLUEGRASS FESTIVAL

- Aug. 25-28: 25th annual Blistered Fingers Bluegrass Festival, Silver Spur Riding Club, Sidney, Maine. Hosts: Greg and Sandy Cormier, 263 Trafton Road, Waterville, ME 04901. More information: 1-207-873-6539 or e-mail webmaster@blisteredfingers.com.
- Sept. 1-4: 27th Thomas Point Beach Bluegrass Festival, Thomas Point Beach campground, 29 Meadow Road, Brunswick, ME 04011. More information: www.thomaspointbeach.com, click on "bluegrass"; call 1-207-725-6009 or 1-877-TPB-4321, toll free; or e-mail summer@thomaspointbeach.com.

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From left, Andy Sicard, Kenney, Bill Jubett and Bob Sevigny play bluegrass.

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