



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SAN DIEGO BLUEGRASS SOCIETY

By Dwight Worden

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THE EARLY YEARS

The late 1960s and early 70s were a time of change in America. Students were active, an unpopular war was underway, and many young Americans were breaking with the traditions of their parents. It was the season of long hair and love. The new generation was experimenting with, among other things, music.

Amidst the excitement and turmoil of the times many, both young and old, were searching for authenticity and solid values in music and lifestyles. The folk boom of the 1950's and early 60's had awakened many to the raw authenticity of acoustic, folk, and bluegrass music. It was during this time period that groups like the **Scottsville Squirrel Barkers** were making a bluegrass mark in San Diego. Two local members of that band went on to national rock and roll stardom, Chris Hillman (mandolin) who became a founding member of the Byrds (bass), and Bernie Leadon (guitar) who joined the Eagles (guitar). Kenny Wertz of the "Barkers" (banjo) went on to bluegrass fame in Country Gazette (guitar) and with the Flying Burrito Brothers.

There were jam sessions at the Blue Guitar music store, then located in Old Town (now on Mission Gorge Road). Venues like the Heritage in Mission Beach and the Candy Company brought acts like Vern and Ray, the Dillards, and others to town. "Cactus Jim" Soldi of Valley Music in El Cajon was the first to bring Bill Monroe to town at the Bostonia Ballroom in El Cajon. San Diego State presented Flatt and Scruggs in 1968, and Lou Curtis was beginning his long march of acoustic and roots concerts at San Diego State.

It was in this context that a handful of Bluegrass music lovers came together in 1973 in La Mesa, Ca. at the Straw Hat Pizza Hut on Fletcher Parkway. The goal was to provide a venue for both accomplished and beginning musicians to come together to play, trade licks, and to share and promote Bluegrass.

Rick Kirby and the members of the bluegrass band ***Pacificly Bluegrass***, along with families and friends including the Lou Newell family and Don and Pat Ridgway, were major contributors. They organized meetings and published a



Pacificly Bluegrass in the KSON studio with DJ Wayne Rice, early 1970's.

monthly newsletter. Don later became the banjo player in Pacificly Bluegrass. Rick Kirby became the first president of the new San Diego Bluegrass Club. Dues were \$2 for a lifetime membership.

Over the years, the venue for these early SDBC meetings changed often. If you weren't a member, you'd never know where the meetings were as there was no publicity other than Wayne Rice's *Bluegrass Special* radio show on KSON. Many of these places are long-gone, but at one time or another the club was at Organ Power Pizza (Lemon Grove), Straw Hat Pizza (east end of Parkway Plaza), the marina location, San Carlos Golf Club, and Mrs. T's Pizza (Spring Valley) just to name a few. The club struggled along but managed to keep a consistent membership of 300-350 members. By the 1980's club income came from (by then) \$10 per year membership dues and passing the pitcher for donations at club meetings.

Other events that developed in the early days from the formation of the club included weekend bluegrass festivals and concerts at Big Oak Ranch, and at the Viejas Reservation. (Who can forget the cows mingling with the audience and the wind turning over the stage.) The club also supported Banjo & Fiddle contests in the San Diego County area.



The increasing local interest in bluegrass music was noted by the San Diego Wild Animal Park [now the Safari Park] during this time period which led to weekend concerts and an annual Bluegrass Festival at the park featuring nationally known bluegrass bands from back east. Some believe that ticket sales to bluegrass events at the Wild Animal Park were a major contributor to expansion of the park's outdoor arena now used for all sorts of concerts.

THE MIDDLE YEARS

In 1988 SDBC member Julie Kohler took on the job of newsletter editor. Income barely paid for mailing costs. The club was then at Mrs. T's but soon moved to the food court at The Grove which used to be called "College Grove." Although the acoustics and ambiance inside were pretty challenging, there was lots of jamming space outside, and large numbers of jammers would turn out, as well as bands. Six bands played each meeting, 30-minute sets each. It seemed like a good time to expand the club's monthly exposure, and as Carol McCollum was hosting a (non-club) jam at a restaurant in Chula Vista, Julie asked her about venues in that area.



Carol suggested Shakey's Pizza. Julie put a small notice in the newsletter about a planning meeting, just to see who would show up.

Flyer for jam from the mid-1970s

Clay and Kathy Wolf, Charlie Bayes and his wife, Jerry Meloche, Carol McCollum, and Julie were there. The logistics were worked out, and the store manager said okay. Thus was born the club's second monthly meeting, but the turn out quickly outgrew the venue and the event was moved to the Chula Vista Fuddrucker's, where it remained for nearly 20 years.

In the 1990s Elizabeth Burkett (now Elizabeth Loring) took over the newsletter duties from Julie Kohler and became president of the SDBC. Julie and Elizabeth approached the Fuddrucker's Restaurant in Grossmont Center in La Mesa as a possible replacement for the College Grove Center which was in decline, and soon Tuesday events were under way at Fuddrucker's Grossmont Center. With a brief interlude, the 2nd Tuesday events have continued at this Fuddrucker's ever since.

SDBS PARTNERS WITH THE BLUEGRASS ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA (BASC).

In the 1990s Elizabeth Burkett led the charge to join forces with BASC, the Bluegrass Association of Southern California, a sister organization in the Los Angeles area. For many years following, SDBC and BASC shared a newsletter, The *InTune* Magazine, initially produced by Elizabeth and later by BASC's Claire Wagner, and the two organizations shared a website.



The two groups cooperated in other respects as well. This partnership continued until the late 2000's when SDBS, under the guidance of then SDBS president Dwight Worden, set up its own website and published its own Newsletter, the *Tune Up*. Mike Tatar, Sr. and member Warren Allen had set up an SDBS website in the early 2000's but it was short lived and closed down when the SDBS started sharing a site with BASC. In 2011 The Tune Up went to an all electronic format. SDBS still cooperates with BASC on projects of mutual interest.

SDBC INCORPORATES AND BECOMES SDBS.

In the late 1990s Elizabeth Burkett led the charge to incorporate the San Diego Bluegrass Club as a non-profit organization. The idea was for SDBC to be able to give and receive tax deductible grants and donations, and otherwise to expand its charitable activities. The corporate papers were drafted and filed, with the assistance of volunteer attorney Dwight Worden, and in 1998 the San Diego Bluegrass Club was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation with the name *San Diego Bluegrass Society*. There was a 7-member all-volunteer board of directors, expanded later to 9, running the organization.



Blaise Nauyokas, SDBS member, created the now famous banjo-palm tree SDBS logo

SDBS GOES INDEPENDENT IN THE 2000s

In 2000 Elizabeth Burkett left the San Diego area and Mike Tatar Sr., a veteran banjo player who had moved to the area from Northern California, became president of SDBS and held that position until 2004. During that time period many new board members were recruited to continue SDBS's growth. Some of those included John and Mary Lee Deckard to do the newsletter mailing, Kit Birkett as treasurer, Yvonne Tatar working publicity, and Dwight Worden who brought his volunteer legal skills to help SDBS.

SUMMERGRASS IS BORN

The Julian Banjo and Fiddle Contest has a storied history in San Diego, stretching back to 1973. In the 1970's the event rode the wave of interest in folk and bluegrass, and saw crowds in the thousands attend the fall event. Over the ensuing decades several promoters came and went, and the event experienced significant ups and downs with declining attendance.



The first Summergrass logo created by Gretchen Gagos

Early promoters included Walt Richards of New Expression Music, and in the early 2000's the North County Bluegrass and Folk Club (NCBFC) and SDBS. In 2002 SDBS and NCBFC wished the Julian event well and gave notice that they were leaving to start another festival. The Julian event was thereafter produced for several years by local promoter Melissa Hague and then by Mike Nadolson of Tricopolis Records.

After deciding to start a new festival Corky Shelton, an officer in the NCBFC, suggested the Antique Gas and Steam Engine Museum in Vista might be a great venue. Corky took SDBS and NCBFC representatives on a tour, set up discussions with Museum management, and an agreement was reached to start an August festival on the Museum grounds. Key people in these early decisions included Corky and Debbie Shelton, Sandy and Richard Beesley, Roger and Gretchen Gagos, Jerry and Judy Hass, Dwight Worden, Betty Wheeler, Mike and Yvonne Tatar, and Kit and Mary Birkett among others

The name selected for the festival was: *Summergrass San Diego, Pickin' in Paradise*, later shortened to just *Summergrass*. Corky Shelton, representing NCBFC, and Mike Tatar, Sr., Representing SDBS, served as co-chairs for Summergrass's inaugural year of 2003, aided by the members of the Boards of the NCBFC and SDBS which are 50-50 partners/owners of Summergrass, and by other key volunteers who were not board members like Jerry Hass, who coordinated camping, and Betty Wheeler who started and ran the Summergrass Kids Music Academy in 2004. This iconic Summergrass music camp for kids is still active to this day.



BLUEGRASS FESTIVAL
The current logo created by
SDBS member Blaise
Nauyokas

In 2004 Sandy Beesley (NCBFC) and Dwight Worden (SDBS) co-chaired the Summergrass festival for NCBFC and SDBS. In 2005 and 2006 Dwight served as chair, and from 2007 to the present Mike Tatar Sr. has served as festival chair.

As of this writing (May 2014) Summergrass is now in its 12th year. It has become one of the premier festivals on the west coast. The bands presented at Summergrass are too many to recite, but include: *Blue Highway, the Lonesome River Band, Nashville Bluegrass Band, US Navy Bluegrass Band Country Current, the Grascals, John Reischman and the Jaybirds, Bluegrass Etc.* and many more.

Along with its stellar entertainment SDBS and NCBFC are proud of Summergrass's success in fulfilling its goals of bringing bluegrass music as an American art form to thousands of people in an entertaining and affordable format, and of presenting wonderful instructional music workshops, the kids music camp, and in recent years an adult music camp. Summergrass is an important part of keeping the bluegrass flame alive in San Diego and of passing the traditions to the next generation.

The partnership between SDBS and NCBFC on the one hand, as the parent organizations of the Summergrass festival, and the non-profit Antique Gas and Steam Engine Museum (AGSEM) as the festival venue on the other hand, has been a successful one for all three organizations.

Among other things, in 2004 a bigger stage was built by the AGSEM for festival use. With its nostalgic environment of rural American farms the AGSEM also provides camping sites, delicious food, and numerous displays of historic farm equipment making the Summergrass festival an interesting and educational destination extending beyond the music.

THE PRESENT

Over the years SDBS has continued to expand and grow, adding many new programs. These include:

Instrument Donation Program. SDBS accepts instruments donated to it, and then re-gifts them to worthy programs such as schools, the Balboa Naval Hospital, the Hillcrest Drop in Center for Homeless Children, and other charities.

Instrument Lending Program. SDBS has a limited number of high quality instruments that have been donated to SDBS that it lends to players in need, at no cost. There is a simple one page application. Instruments on hand include guitars, a banjo, and mandolin.

Lending Library. SDBS has a lending library of instructional materials, including DVDs, music books, CDs and the like. These materials are inventoried and available for loan to members for free.

Heritage Fund. SDBS has started a heritage fund to which people can make donations in honor of special loved ones. The funds are then used to further SDBS's non-profit purposes including music programs for children in the name of the loved one. This program is new and still under development.

SDBS Live at the Carlton Oaks. With the recording equipment and expertise of SDBS members Kim Weeks, Richard Burkett, and others, SDBS produced its acclaimed "Live at the Carlton Oaks" CD recorded live at the Carlton Oaks Country Club where the SDBS was



meeting at the time. The CD contains recordings of many of the local bluegrass bands active at the time.

St. Mark's Annual Bluegrass Concert. In the mid 2000's Amos and Emma Radcliffe were members of Saint Mark's United Methodist Church on Clairemont Drive in Clairemont near their home. Through the Radcliffes, SDBS held its first of what was to become an annual concert series at the church.



The Full Deck at the Classic Bluegrass Program at St. Mark's November 2004

This first event was put together by then SDBS president Dwight Worden and was presented in the Grand Ole Opry style, featuring many bands in short performances, hosted by Wayne Rice, DJ of KSON's *Bluegrass Special* radio show. Wayne brought recording equipment and the entire show was re-broadcast live over KSON radio.

The St. Mark's concerts have become a tradition and are held every year in November before Thanksgiving as fund-raising events for the church and SDBS. Each year the event has a theme. Past shows have focused on themes of: song writing, classic bluegrass, bluegrass of the 1950's and 60's, Mayberry RFD, honoring Emma, home, and other topics.

Bluegrass Day at the Fair. In the 1970's and 80's there was a bluegrass day at the fair featuring fiddle contests and related activities that was independent of SDBS. Then, for many years this tradition died until Elizabeth Burkett resurrected it in the late 1990's for a few years before it went dormant again.

Then, under the guidance of SDBS president Dwight Worden and member Lou Ann Preston, it was resurrected in the mid 2000's. Every year since then SDBS, often with the cooperation of NCBFC, has presented Bluegrass Day at the Fair at the Del Mar Fairgrounds.

The Fair provides SDBS with a budget of \$2,000 and makes the beautiful Paddock Stage available. SDBS puts together a variety show typically including a kids performance featuring youngsters demonstrating their bluegrass skills, a band scramble open to all comers, and concerts by prominent bands.



SDBS President Dwight Worden gives awards to band scramble winners John Deckard and Mark Pullin, Bluegrass Day at the Fair 2012

Bluegrass in the Libraries. Beginning in 2010 SDBS partnered with the City and County of San Diego library systems to present a series of concerts in the libraries. Most of the concerts are in county libraries conducted as part of the County Library *Acoustic Showcase* program under the direction of Ross Moore for the County Libraries and Phil Levy for SDBS.

SDBS presents approximately a dozen county library concerts per year and approximately 3 City of San Diego library concerts per year. These concerts bring quality free bluegrass music to the libraries and their patrons in an educational setting.

San Diego Bluegrass Society Live on KSON. Starting about five years ago, SDBS partnered with Wayne Rice, host of KSON's *Bluegrass Special* radio show for the past 37 years, to present bluegrass bands live on KSON.

Once a month, on the Sunday before the 4th Tuesday Featured Band event at the Boll Weevil, the featured band appears live on KSON to be interviewed by Wayne and to perform some of its music. The program is then aired on Wayne's show that night (*Bluegrass Special*, Sunday evenings 10 pm to midnight 97.3 and 92.1 FM), and is available in the KSON archives on-line for 30 days. This program gives local bands a unique opportunity to play on commercial radio, and allows folks to listen in and hear the upcoming featured band.



Prairie Sky in the KSON studio with DJ Wayne Rice

Band Referrals. Since the mid 2000's SDBS has operated a program to match bluegrass bands with private and public entities looking for a bluegrass band for their event. SDBS keeps a list of all qualified active bluegrass bands in the San Diego area (bands must have 50%, or a minimum of 2, members in SDBS) and uses this list to match bands with hiring parties' needs. SDBS member Phil Levy heads a committee (comprised only of people not in a band to avoid conflict of interest) who do the matching and make the referrals. The program assigns roughly a couple of dozen gigs per year in this manner for weddings, parties and other events.

First Sunday Jam Sessions. SDBS sponsors a jam session at a member's home every first Sunday of the month. This program is led by SDBS member Ed Myers.

SDBS MAKES TUESDAY BLUEGRASS NIGHT IN SAN DIEGO

Second Tuesday. As noted above, after finding a home at the Fuddruckers Grossmont Center, second Tuesdays then moved briefly to Shirley's Kitchen (renamed Tyler's Taste of Texas) in La Mesa under the guidance of J.D Loveland and his *Valley Bluegrass Boys* band who hosted the evening. When the restaurant changed hands and eventually closed second Tuesday moved back to Fuddruckers Grossmont Center where it remains today, hosted by SDBS Board member George Noble, Jr. and featuring jamming, pick-up bands, and bluegrass karaoke.



Pick up Band at Fuddruckers 2nd Tuesday



Janet Beazley leads the 3rd Tuesday Slow Jam at the Morse Academy Building

Third Tuesday. Third Tuesdays spent

many years at the Fuddruckers Chula Vista until noise from car clubs became too much and SDBS moved the third Tuesday briefly to a campground in Chula Vista under the guidance of member Tom Gwynn. These gatherings were held outdoors.

Third Tuesdays then moved to Old Time Music (renamed the New Expression Music Store) on University in North Park which had a large performance space in the back to accommodate the gatherings. When the music store moved to a new location on 30th street, third Tuesdays went with it, featuring an open jam downstairs at the new store and a slow jam upstairs.

The open jam was then moved to the private home of SDBS member Jim Blakemore, but the slow jam continued upstairs under the guidance of instructor Janet Beazley. When the music store closed in 2012, the third Tuesday slow jam made its own arrangements with the building owner and remained at the same location in the Morse Academy Building on 30th Street in North Park until relocoating in September 2014 to its current location at the Our Savior Lutheran Church in North Park where its slow jam is now held every 3rd Monday of the month.

Fourth Tuesday. Fourth Tuesdays are Featured Band night for SDBS. The idea is, once a month, to present a band in concert with a good sound system and listening environment.



Old Town Road, Featured Band at the Boll Weevil 4th Tuesday, April 2014

After a stint at the Carlton Oaks Country Club, in the early 2000's fourth Tuesdays moved to Quivera Basin on Mission Bay where catered buffet meals were available, then to Cheesy Pizza in Clairemont, then to the Boll Weevil Restaurant on Miramar Road until the Boll Weevil chain went into bankruptcy, and then to the independently owned Boll Weevil in Clairemont where it continues today.

SPECIAL CONCERTS

In its continuing efforts to bring great bluegrass to San Diego, SDBS has presented many top bands in local concerts. Then SDBS president Elizabeth Burkett presented early *Nickel Creek* in a church concert in the late 1990's. Later, working with the La Paloma Theater in Encinitas, Mike and Vonnice Tatar, with help from other SDBS members, brought *Rhonda Vincent and the Rage* and *Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys* to the La Paloma.

The efforts of these folks also brought *Dan Paisley and the Southern Grass* and *Michael Cleveland and Flamekeeper Featuring Audie Blaylock* to the Carlsbad Theater in Carlsbad, and *Ron Spears and Within Tradition* appeared for SDBS in Poway at the Community Center. *David Parmley and Continental Divide*, also made an appearance for SDBS at one of the annual St. Mark's Church concerts.

Securing and paying for a venue was always a financial struggle for SDBS to put on these concerts, so SDBS kept on the lookout for a better arrangement.

The First Baptist Church of Pacific Beach. First Baptist of Pacific Beach has a pastor who loves bluegrass music and plays a bit of banjo. Pastor Carl Whitlock became a regular attendee at the Sunday sessions at the home of Amos and Emma Radcliffe.

Working with Emma and then SDBS president Mike Tatar, Sr. and SDBS Board member John Deckard (a church member), arrangements were made for the church to make its great venue available for bluegrass concerts for free, so that the donations received can all be paid to the bands.



SDBS presents The James King Band at 1st Baptist 2014

The first concert was held in 2003 presenting *David Parmley and Continental Divide*. This concert was held the weekend that large parts of San Diego were shut down due to the Cedar Creek fire. The band had a difficult time reaching the venue due to highway closings, but they did make it and the concert was a success. SDBS has continued ever since to present great concerts at the church. Other Bands presented at this great venue by SDBS include: *The Krueger Brothers, Special Consensus, James King, Sideline, Eddie and Martha Adcock, Audie Blaylock and Redline, The Chapmans*, and others.

SDBS has also partnered with others to bring great bands to San Diego for special concerts. Carey Driscoll's AcousticMusicSan Diego has presented many great bands in cooperation with SDBS, including: *The Byron Berline Band, John Reischman and the Jaybirds*, and others.

Likewise, the SDBS is a strong supporter of the Bluegrass and Beyond series presented at the Del Mar Powerhouse by the Del Mar Foundation, under the guidance of SDBS member Betty Wheeler. Powerhouse concerts have included: *The Infamous Stringdusters, the Claire Lynch Band, Philips Grier and Flinner, Rob Ickes*, appearing on various dates with *Trey Hensley, Joe Craven*, and *Jim Hurst, the John Jorgenson Quintet, the Desert Rose Band, Laurie Lewis and the Right Hands, The Barefoot Movement, The Gibson Brothers, Frank Solivan and Dirty Kitchen*, and others.

EMMA'S GUT BUCKET BAND TAKES SHAPE

The early days. For more than 30 years, Amos and Emma Radcliffe, with Emma's daughter Dee Dee Hansen, opened their home in Clairemont every Sunday evening for an open bluegrass jam, and every Wednesday night for a night of fiddling. Food and camaraderie were plentiful and the music was stellar. These get togethers exemplified much that is good about bluegrass—friends coming together to share music and good food.

A few years after Amos' death Emma and Dee Dee moved back to Minnesota. SDBS stepped in to keep the tradition



Emma and her Gut Bucket Band in her home circa 2002

of the Sunday night jam sessions going, by starting the First Sunday of the Month jam series mentioned above. This first Sunday series continues under the guidance of SDBS member Ed Myers.

The fiddlers' group from Wednesdays decided to keep that group going too as **Emma's Gut Bucket Band**. Emma had played the gut bucket and Amos played the fiddle with the group and the band was named in Emma's honor.

Emma's Gut Bucket Band moved to the Whitman Elementary School on Appleton in Clairemont under the guidance of Al Grennan and Dave Kelly, and continued meeting on Wednesdays. As the group grew, it got more and more requests for performances at assisted living facilities, community centers, public and private schools, and other non-profit venues. Under the leadership of Dave Kelly, by 2013 the band was playing 50+ gigs a year! Sponsored by the SDBS, the charitable programs of the band are an important part of SDBS activities.

Emma's Gut Bucket Band's performances are free to worthy causes, but it does accept donations. With the donations received the band buys instruments and other music necessities and donates them to worthy causes. The band has donated instruments to the Balboa Naval Hospital for wounded vets returning from the gulf wars, to the Drop in Center for Homeless Children in Hillcrest, to a number of schools and to other needy causes.



Emma's Gut Bucket Band donates instruments to Balboa Naval Hospital

Today, Emma's Gut Bucket Band is as active as ever under the guidance of a steering committee of band members including Larry Edwards (who manages the band's website), Trapper Wyatt, Greg Gross, Dave Kelly, and others. Nancy Brunson, SDBS Board member, serves as the board's liaison to the band.

THE FUTURE

All indications are that the SDBS and bluegrass in San Diego have a great future. There are more than 20 active bluegrass bands in San Diego, there is bluegrass every Tuesday of every month: 1st Tuesday with NCBFC, and 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Tuesdays with SDBS, and a 3rd Monday slow jam with SDBS. There is an SDBS sponsored jam every first Sunday of the month, there is a jam lead by SDBS member Jason Weiss in Encinitas every Thursday called the *Thursday Night Pickers*. Emma's Gut Bucket Band meets every Wednesday and plays out regularly. There are 3 days of Summergrass, a premier bluegrass music festival, every August. There are two bluegrass slow jams every month, one sponsored by SDBS on 3rd Mondays and one independent in Poway.

There are special concerts throughout the year presenting top-notch traveling bands. There is Bluegrass Day at the Fair, the annual St. Mark's Concert, and Bluegrass Brunch at Urban Solace restaurant every Sunday. There are at least two bluegrass camp outs every year, one in Spring and one in the fall.

History will also note that San Diego played a role in launching some of the biggest and most

talented stars in bluegrass today, including Stuart Duncan (fiddle) (now with the Nashville Bluegrass Band, the Goat Rodeo, and session man extraordinaire), John Moore (guitar and mandolin) and Dennis Caplinger (banjo, fiddle, guitar, dobro) of Bluegrass Etc., Alison Brown (banjo) who played with Alison Krauss and Union Station, and now plays with her own quartet and is the co-owner and founder, along with husband Garry West, of Compass Records, a premier bluegrass and acoustic label, and Sean and Sara Watkins along with Chris Thile who formed Nickel Creek. Chris Thile went on to form the Punch Brothers and was the recipient of a MacArthur “genius” grant of \$500,000, and Sara Watkins has been a regular on the Prairie Home Companion show, including sitting in as guest host for Garrison Keiler.

That’s a LOT of bluegrass in little ole San Diego, and SDBS is mighty proud of the role it has played, and continues to play, in fostering these successes.

For more information about SDBS and its programs visit the SDBS website at: www.sandiegobluegrass.org, the Summergrass website at www.summergrass.net and the Emma’s Gut Bucket Band website at: www.larryedwards.com/egbb/index.html.

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