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# Backfilling the Bluegrass Audience: How to foster an interest in bluegrass music in young people (Part 1)

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When Bill Monroe sparked interest in bluegrass music in the early 1940s, he caught the attention of a predominantly middle-age audience. As bluegrass grew through the 1960s and 1970s, so did the median age of the audience. In 1985, when we were growing *Frets Magazine*, we learned that the number of monthly *renewed* subscribers was often greater than the number of new subscribers, an indication that the audience was growing up with the magazine and not through it. More importantly, it showed that there was a void in the development of a younger audience who would backfill the gap caused by the ever-increasing median age of readers. In 2009, a study by Simmons Research for IBMA revealed that 79% of the bluegrass audience was 34 years of age or older, and a quick examination of that report shows that the median age of today?s audience is 48-50 years of age.

If the median age of the bluegrass audience continues to increase, there is a risk that at some point in time the audience will largely disappear. For bluegrass to be successful, it is imperative that we work to drive the median age down by cultivating an interest in our younger audiences and help them grow into our music.

Exposure through family experiences?where parents or other relatives stimulate the children?s interest?does not produce a large enough new audience. We must take a broad-brush approach with a goal of cultivating younger audiences everywhere, and we must ensure that they have the necessary tools and experiences that bring them into the genre.

While there are many ways to achieve this goal, here are four ways to begin with: 1) continue to promote bluegrass music to the young audience immediately at hand, the children at home; 2) promote bluegrass music in schools; 3) promote bluegrass music to collective audiences of children through various organizations such as bluegrass associations and festivals; and 4) fuel the interest and help support those young people who are already showing a desire to be involved in bluegrass.

**Bluegrass in our schools:**

While most people enjoy bluegrass music, it is neither widely adopted nor widely respected to a point where it gets as much attention as other classic music forms taught in schools. Even more important is the fact that most education systems have seen drastic budget cuts resulting in the elimination of many secondary music programs in schools (the school ?band? being a primary program). This means that for bluegrass programs (or any music program) to be successful, it must be supported by staff and faculty in addition to their regular classroom teaching assignments.

One such bluegrass program was fostered by Ken Roddick, an agriculture mechanics teacher

in rural Shandon, California near California?s Central Coast region, in a high school with a total enrollment of about 85 students. The low enrollment provided a good environment for establishing this kind of program, especially in a school where there was no music program available to the students.

An accomplished bass and guitar player, Ken took a guitar to school to practice at lunch thinking that it might be a nice way to break up the day by squeezing in some hobby time. On day two of his lunchtime practice, a couple of kids heard the music and came to listen. The next day, one of the day-two listeners showed up again, this time carrying a guitar case and wanting to know if Ken would show him how to play. Without hesitation, and realizing this might lead to something interesting, Ken taught the student a few chords and got him started.

Within a month, Ken had six regular lunchtime jam members, all prompted by word of mouth and kids just looking for something creative to do. And, as Ken recalls, there was ?no advertising needed and no school curriculum or budget issues to contend with.?

Ken suggests, ?Provide a gathering place and they will gather.? Some students had their own instruments, some instruments were borrowed, and a few teachers donated instruments to the cause. Ken actually had more instruments than pickers for a while. Ken shared, ?We eventually learned the major chords we felt were necessary to make a tune and gained four more students.?

The lunchtime program expanded and also grew to two periods a day in the regular class schedule; one period for high school and one for middle school (unlikely in today?s economy). To further promote the program, Ken fostered occasional after school jams and supported an on-stage performance for the drama department?s production of the *Beverly Hill Billy?s*. Ken says, ?I?m still not sure they ever realized they were playing bluegrass music. They just thought it was COOL.?  Several students went way beyond what Ken could teach, so he purchased some instructional DVD?s through the school library?s grant funds.

Ken sees the educational venue as an environment for capturing the minds of young people and taking advantage of the readily available facilities without violating any rules. The trick is finding faculty or staff who are interested in bluegrass music. Once enlisting their aid, the program is simple.

Ken comments, ?The current economic condition has been responsible for many cut-backs in public education. As usual, music and arts instruction seem to be the first to be cut. Making use of those people within the school district that have some knowledge of bluegrass music and are willing to volunteer their time and knowledge to make it happen seems the only way to get things going in today?s economy, considering the lack of educational funding available.?

Here are some key points that Ken offers for a program in schools:

? Take an instrument to school. Practice at lunch or during a break where kids can listen.

? If you are faculty or staff, locate other school staff (certificated and classified) that play, and invite them to join in.

? Engage the principal and others in the office so they know the activity exists (as well as when and where).

? Invite students who may play or are just beginning to play.

? Begin a regularly scheduled jam immediately after school hours (and be sure to invite students who show interest but do not play).

? Add an instruction schedule or combine instruction with jams.

? Many families of students have instruments not being used that kids could bring to play. Have students ask their parents.

? Ask school staff to lend or donate instruments they have to the school (*not* to the student ? remember, this is a school program).

? If you are a parent outside the school system, attend Parent-Teacher meetings and see if you can find someone within the system who is a bluegrass enthusiast. Share this paper with them and help them start a program.

? Local businesses will often make contributions and donations if a program is viable and well presented.

Then, as the program progresses?

? Add additional after school jams and lessons.

? Start a club through Associated Student Body (ASB) ? a student government organization in schools that is run by students under the supervision of a certified teacher staff member.

? Take students around to perform at other established after school/extended day programs.

? Consider that advanced students might want to offer instruction to other students in this program.

? Bring in local and professional bands to perform. (Many traveling professional bands are willing to stop in and play if they are in the area. Local bluegrass associations and promoters will be aware of their presence or know how to find them.)

? Seek the support of the administrative staff and look for funding through school grants to purchase instructional materials like DVD?s, strings, tuners, capos, etc. The Foundation for Bluegrass Music (organized by IBMA), library grants, local, regional and state bluegrass organizations and arts councils, and local service clubs are good resources. (The Bluegrass Foundation also has a great educational video for grades 3-8, titled *Discover Bluegrass: Exploring American Roots Music* available for just $3.00 plus postage, which includes lesson plans for each of the six units.)

? If the program is successful, encourage the administration to include it as an instructional class period in the regular day schedule.

Nancy Cardwell, IBMA?s Special Project Director, suggests that such programs may be more feasible if the bluegrass club sponsor is also the band director?as is the case with Kim

Samuel at Gallatin County Middle School in Warsaw, Kentucky. Also, for an interesting model where Mariachi music was successfully integrated into the regular course schedule at the high school level in Las Vegas, Nevada, check into Marcia Neel?s success story with the Clark County public schools.

Nancy also makes the following five suggestions:

? Once the bluegrass club is established, check into summer camping trips to a festival-based bluegrass camp in your region. Students will enjoy the opportunity to meet and jam with more musicians their own age, which usually motivates them to learn even more, and creates new friendships.

? Network with the bluegrass community in your area to find support, instruments, educational opportunities and stage time for students when they are ready. Contacts include bluegrass association leaders, radio DJs, luthiers, event producers and music stores that handle acoustic instruments and give lessons.

? Consider an artist-in-residence program for middle school or high school orchestra students who already play string instruments. Find a professional band that can come into the school for two weeks to teach bluegrass instruments to small groups, form student bands, and conclude with a concert for parents and the public where the youth bands play a couple of songs each, followed by a concert by the host band.

? Encourage local classroom and music teachers to utilize the free lesson plans posted on the Bluegrass Foundation and IBMA websites (or they can consider writing a lesson plan themselves for the annual Bluegrass Lesson Plan Competition ? with fabulous prizes!). If your elementary music teacher uses the *Spotlight on Music* textbook series from MacMillan/McGraw Hill, encourage him/her to check out Chapter 5 ?Bluegrass Sounds,? which includes information on the history of the genre, photos of instruments and bands, musical notation for two songs and audio clips.

? Check out Guitars in the Classroom (www.guitarsintheclassroom.org), [1] a California-based national program that puts free guitars into the hands of classroom teachers, with free weekly lessons on how to play them (starting with a simple open chord tuning) and how to use them as a teaching tool in all content areas.

**Bluegrass to other young audiences:**

Getting bluegrass in schools may not be feasible in all locations. According to Wendy Stockton, a director of the Bluegrass Music Society of the (California) Central Coast (BMSCC), ?Today?s social, economic and educational realities urge us to promote bluegrass music to ordinary kids in creative ways that leverage limited resources.?

?Enter the *after school program*. In California, these programs serve hundreds of children in every district. They operate at school sites, have an administrative structure, staff, equipment and facilities in place. Because they occur outside the school day, they do not have to achieve specified academic standards and may add enrichment to kids? lives.?

Wendy has worked with such an after school program in Santa Maria, California. Known as ?ASES? (After School Education and Safety program), the program serves 1,200 children at 18 school sites. A partnership of organizations (School District, City, Boys? and Girls? Club, and YMCA) administers the program. The State of California supports the program with grant funding and defines ?enrichment? as a goal of the program. Moreover, Santa Maria is a community well known for its private philanthropy. Wendy continues:

Our local bluegrass organization?the Bluegrass Music Society of the Central Coast?easily sold the ASES partners on the value of a bluegrass concert for the after school program and convinced several local charities to support the effort with grants. Our real challenge was how to stimulate the kids? interest in bluegrass music on an ongoing basis. We decided to do this by leveraging existing resources.

First, we used some of the grant money to buy copies of IBMA?s *Discover Bluegrass* DVD. This delightful, inexpensive movie features young stars Sierra Hull and Ryan Holladay, and 10-minute sound bytes about bluegrass music development. Administrators at the school sites planned a music theme for the week preceding the concert. They showed *Discover Bluegrass* to all the ASES kids so they would be familiar with the basics of bluegrass. (The school sites retain these DVDs so they are always available as refresher courses.)

Second, we used some more of the grant money to hire a kid-friendly band. We leveraged our resources and dovetailed the date of the kids? concert with the dates of our local bluegrass festival [Parkfield Bluegrass Festival] so that we could afford to bring in Special Consensus, one of the most highly regarded bands, for both the festival and for the kids? program. Special Consensus has an extra allure for children because the band pioneered the introductory bluegrass concert and curriculum materials for children in 1984. The band has performed its ?Traditional American Music Program? hundreds of times for thousands of children since then. We knew the kids would love this band.

Third, the partners made sure that all 1,200 ASES students could attend and remember the concert. The city provided a centralized facility for the concert. Kids walked up to two miles to the facility or rode buses from outlying areas. The extended journey increased anticipation for the concert. As they entered the concert hall, each child received a program naming the band members and their instruments, and describing what they were about to experience.

Fourth, the performers engaged the kids throughout the concert. They encouraged them to clap along with the music, they questioned them often, and they sought the children?s questions. As the children waited in line to exit after the concert, they approached the band members with more questions.

As a thrilled concert observer, Wendy could not tell at the time if the music even reached the children, much less stimulated their interest in bluegrass. Initially she would have described them as a rude audience?until she began to realize that most of these children had never seen a live musical performance and just did not know how to act. Two weeks afterwards, she received hundreds of hand-made thank-you cards and then she knew. In addition to a polite ?thank you,? almost every card said ?thank you for teaching me about bluegrass.?

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