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by Tom Petersen

When Wintergrass moved to the newly-renovated Hyatt in Bellevue, Washington, critics scoffed that bluegrass would never go over in that tony Seattle suburb, home to the high-tech nouveau rich. The culture clash would be insurmountable, they predicted.

Bluegrass fans knew the appeal of the music is universal?but an introduction to the community through a trusted friend would help expand the audience and inform the uninitiated, as well as prepare the town for the invasion of 5,000 pickers. At the suggestion of a library volunteer who is also a bluegrass fan, Wintergrass Director Patrice O'Neill met with Julie Williams, the Community Relations and Marketing Director for the King County Library System. Together they developed an innovative partnership that could serve as a model for other communities.

Local bluegrass acts often find opportunities and audiences through libraries, of course. Civic arts councils and recreation departments in many communities use library meeting spaces for events, and library support groups fund band appearances. KCLS and Wintergrass did these things and ventured boldly into new territories.

Two "educational" appearances by bands were arranged for the Bellevue library branch. Down the Road, featuring Gary and Cathi Davidson with John Tubbs, told the history of bluegrass, playing key songs along the way, at one show. The Downtown Mountain Boys (Terry Enyeart, Tom Moran, Paul Elliott, Don Share and Dave Keenan) previewed their Wintergrass set, showing different styles of bluegrass and explaining each instrument and band dynamics. Meanwhile, the library set up a display in the entry hall with Wintergrass posters, pictures of bands and an array of books, CDs and videos about bluegrass music. These efforts attracted a great many people who had never been exposed to bluegrass before, in particular immigrants from non-Western cultures who were thrilled by what they saw and heard.

The great innovations took place on the KCLS website and online catalogue. The library homepage featured Wintergrass and linked to the festival's site. It also contained a link that would take a viewer to the part of the catalogue with all of the bluegrass books, CDs and videos, so fans (or newbies) could quickly find what they wanted and needed. KCLS has reciprocity agreements with the surrounding library systems, too, so out-of-towners could still check things out while at the festival. Something like this should be within the technical capabilities of any library with a computerized catalog and website.

Wintergrass donated CDs and copies of IBMA's Discover Bluegrass DVD to KCLS, and the library will be adding CDs from artists appearing at Wintergrass to its collection. Selected mp3 tracks will be on the site itself.

The library link exposed Wintergrass to a huge audience that would otherwise never see the sort of music-related websites where the festival usually advertised. Meanwhile, other libraries in the system are begging for bluegrass bands to come to their branches next year, making Wintergrass not just a Bellevue attraction, but a county-wide celebration.

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