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by John McCutcheon

When IBMA board member Tim Stafford asked me to speak to the Artist and Composers Branch at the organization's annual conference I was all too happy to oblige. I started my professional career in the old-time music world, frequently played bluegrass festivals and, more than anything, recognized that the gains we folk musicians had won via unionization could and should be naturally shared with our fellow performers in the bluegrass field.

Local 1000 was chartered about a dozen years ago within the American Federation of Musicians (AFM), the world's largest entertainment union. What is unique about Local 1000 is that it is the only non-geographic local in the AFM. Just as unusual is the fact that it was created to solely serve the needs of those of us who travel for the large part of their work. Finally, the benefits of union membership could be fully enjoyed by people who were not symphony players, recording studio musicians, pit bands or lounge acts. Finally, those of us who played one-night stands, clubs, festivals, community events, etc. could access the AFM's amazing pension plan, get basic health care, find affordable and workable instrument insurance, and have someone to stand up for us not only after trouble happens, but also be an advocate for policies that will help prevent that trouble in the first place.

Tim's initial interest was in health care. Bluegrass musicians are not alone in worrying about being uninsured. Tens of millions of our fellow Americans are in the same boat. People without health insurance live sicker and die younger. They neglect routine checkups and roll the dice every day of their lives that misfortune will not ruin them and their loved ones. We at Local 1000 offer a very basic health plan that, while far from perfect, gives some protection to the traveling musician. We've created a committee that is looking into additional options for people like us that can be offered, albeit at higher costs, to interested members. A full report will be presented in the next six months.

One of the most immediately accessible benefits of Local membership is the AFM Pension Plan. Thanks to the joint experimentation of NYC Local 802 and Local 1000, there is now a Federation-wide contract form, known as the LS-1, that allows a pension contribution on every gig a member performs. Many of our members have incorporated and sign collective bargaining agreements with the Local to further streamline the paperwork. Add up even a few years of contributions, and it can mean a pension of hundreds (or thousands) of dollars per month when a musician "retires" at age 65. It doesn't prevent a performer from gigging further and also allows private retirement options via the Roth IRA.

Beyond the pension and health care, many musicians are finally getting real protection for

their instruments and equipment via the Union's equipment insurance. It covers any instruments and equipment involved in our work (PA's, recording equipment, office equipment, computers, etc.) for any loss, theft or damage anytime, anywhere. Most importantly it covers this equipment at replacement value and is extremely affordable.

Besides these obvious 'pocketbook' issues (there are many more: visit www.local1000.com ^[2]), there are issues of advocacy and solidarity. Members of IBMA know that there are many things that organizations can accomplish that individuals simply cannot or will not tackle. Like the North American Folk Music and Dance Alliance, IBMA is a conglomerate of every facet of its musical field: players, yes, but also promoters, festivals, publications, equipment manufacturers, record companies and more. Local 1000 is the only group within IBMA or the Folk Alliance whose sole charge is the welfare of musicians. Like any democratic organization, it is only as strong as its membership. We have made great strides pushing for changes in the folk music world that are now a normal part of practice in clubs, concert halls and festivals. This was done because musicians realized that making our lives more secure made our folk music community more secure. We believe the same is true in the bluegrass world.

It was wonderful seeing so many old friends at IBMA. What was even more exciting was seeing how many bluegrass musicians felt that the time was right to rethink what the AFM is and is not. Now with a Local that was chartered by and for traveling musicians and run by traveling musicians, many old road warriors are coming back home to the AFM. It's not your father's union. It's ours and it's time to make it everything we've always dreamed it might be.

Local 1000 will be a regular and visible participant in IBMA from now on. We welcome the participation of every bluegrass musician. We welcome the kind of ideas that have fueled some of our most far-fetched accomplishments. And, most of all, we want to welcome all our fellow performers into a future that provides greater dignity and security to our field. Thanks for the hospitality and we'll see you next year in Nashville. In the meantime, I can be reached at president@afm1000.com ^[3].

Info:

Local 1000

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