

THE KATAHDIN VALLEY BOYS: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

By Taylor Smith



The Katahdin Valley Boys: from l.-r., Dan Simons, Jeff Folger, Steve Bixby, Ken Brooks

After nearly three decades on stages across Maine and beyond, the Katahdin Valley Boys are taking their final bows at the St. Albans Town Hall on October 4. I sat down with the four musicians that have been the core of the Katahdin Valley Boys for more than a decade: founding member Jeff Folger; guitarist and vocalist Ken Brooks; bassist Steve Bixby; and mandolin player Dan Simons. They reflected on the band's beginnings, the challenges of being the "new guy" in the group, their favorite road trips, and what it means to bring their long-running KVB journey to a close.

Where it all began for the Katahdin Valley Boys...

Jeff Folger: Right after the ice storm of 1998, Wayne Burt called me and said, "I've been listening to a band. It's in my head. I want to see if we can make it happen." I asked him what the band was called and he said, "I don't know, it hasn't been formed yet."

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GRACE FRENCH: A BLUEGRASS PIONEER

By Rick Lang



Bob and Grace French (photo courtesy of the Music Museum of New England)

Bluegrass music originated, and became popular, in Appalachia and the South in the 1940s and 1950s. However, few people are actually aware of how, and when, bluegrass music became established in our part of the country. Here in New England there were but a handful of folks who got it all started, among the foremost being Bob and Grace French, whose music career started in Massachusetts before they settled in their permanent home in Cambridge, Maine.

Most bluegrass groups back in those days were made up of male musicians and singers. Grace French was an early pioneer, known as one of the first woman to play an important role in a bluegrass band. Her husband, Bob, believed that Grace was actually the very first New England-born-and-bred "lady" bluegrass singer.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the Fall 2026 edition of the Bluegrass Express. We've got a lot of news to share in this issue, with a few notable pieces to enjoy.

The first is a story about the Katahdin Valley Boys, which earlier this year announced that after nearly 30 years of playing bluegrass in Maine and beyond, 2026 would be its final year of performing. KVB guitarist and vocalist Ken Brooks also is wrapping up his professional performing career, which started way back in 1965, and on page 8 we dive into Ken's long musical journey through country and bluegrass.

Maine's bluegrass community lost a bright light in Grace French, who passed away in May at age 95. Grace was a true pioneer, bringing bluegrass to New England with her husband, Bob French, and their many musical adventures. We're grateful for Rick Lang's lovely contribution about Grace's pivotal role in planting the seeds of bluegrass in the northeast.

From a report from the County Festival in Fort Fairfield to a recap of the BMAM Band Contest at the Crooked River Gathering, this issue of the Bluegrass Express has a lot for you to read. So dig in, enjoy, and make sure to mark down the dates of the monthly BMAM jams kicking off in September.

Thanks for your support of BMAM, and keep on pickin'!

Taylor Smith
Editor, The Bluegrass Express



THE KATAHDIN VALLEY BOYS: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Continued from page 1.

Wayne had a mandolin, I had a banjo, and between us we knew a guitar player, Dale Hodgdon, and a bass player, Jim Rasmussen. We got together, started practicing every Saturday, and it just took off from there. Wayne wanted a traditional bluegrass band. We all liked the same music—we were all traditionalists. There wasn't some grand plan. It was really just, "let's play the music we enjoy."

The original lineup stayed together about 10 years. Then there were a few changes, but they never felt like huge disruptions. The people who came in generally wanted to do the same things we wanted to do. They liked traditional music, and they fit naturally into what we were already doing.



Dale Hodgdon, Wayne Burt,
Jeff Folger, Jim Rasmussen.

A decade into the band's tenure, the Katahdin Valley Boys add two new members...

Ken Brooks: I had known the band a long time before I joined. I'd actually worked with them in the studio on their first recording as an advisor and helped some of the members with harmony singing. We already shared a lot of the same musical values, so even before I became a member there was a connection there.

When Dale Hodgdon and [bassist] Terry Spearin left, the band suddenly had some shows on the books and needed people fast. I'd known Jeff and Wayne for years. They called me and we arranged to get together. Kip Yattaw, who was the fiddle player at the time, brought Steve Bixby along. Steve and I played those first gigs with them, and pretty soon we were regular members of the band.

Steve Bixby: I went to an informal gathering, then a rehearsal or two, and was offered the position shortly afterward. Ken and I joined at the same time. Our first gig was New Year's by the Bay in Belfast, going into 2008.

What appealed to me was that traditional material—Monroe, Flatt & Scruggs, Jimmy Martin, the Osborne Brothers. That's the kind of bluegrass that's always spoken to me. When I first sat down and played with them, it was right in my wheelhouse.

One thing that struck me right away was that they asked for my input from the start. It wasn't, "Here's the material, go learn it and come back." They asked, "What songs would you like to do?" That made me feel like a contributor immediately.

Ken Brooks: The band has always wanted everybody involved. If somebody brings a song in, they may lead the arrangement, but everybody gets a voice. We work cooperatively. That's one reason the band has lasted as long as it has.

Continued on page 4.



Dan Simons, Jeff Folger, Steve Bixby, Ken Brooks

GRACE FRENCH

A BLUEGRASS PIONEER

Continued from page 1.

Grace possessed a deep passion and love for the music as well as performing on stage. She was the heart of their bluegrass band, Bob & Grance French and the Rainbow Valley Folks. (The band was known by several other names during their tenure, including the Rainbow Valley Boys & Sweetheart.) A talented vocalist, Grace sang lead as well as harmony with Bob. She was well known for her spontaneous train whistle during songs like the Wabash Cannonball. One of Grace's greatest contributions to the music was educating audiences who had never heard bluegrass music before. With her warmth, charm and smile, Grace endeared the listener to their music.

When Bob and Grace first started playing music out together they performed for country music audiences. They would sing popular country classic songs their fans would request. When they transitioned into a traditional sounding bluegrass band they gradually incorporated bluegrass songs into their sets. Grace would introduce the songs with a little bit of history about the instruments and music. She single-handedly educated their audiences at their shows and won them over.

"It was hard to be a girl in bluegrass back then. There were very few records around in that point in time with female singers on them to listen to."

- Grace French,
in an interview with Rick Lang

"We had to gently condition our audiences to listen to and accept bluegrass music over a period of time," Grace told me some years ago during an interview at the Thomas Point Beach Bluegrass Festival in Brunswick, Maine. "Usually before the show I actually used to explain the history of the music and the instruments to the audience...so it wouldn't be too great a shock to them. New Englanders are a hard nosed bunch and don't readily accept change."



Joe King, Charlie Landry, Babe Yauga, Grace French, Bob French, Ralph Jones (1952). All photos courtesy of the Music Museum of New England.



Live from the Hillbilly Ranch in Boston: Norm DeLaney, Grace French, Bob French, Ralph Jones.



Norm DeLaney, Grace French, Ralph Jones, Bob French (1960)



Bob French, Charlie Patterson, Mac Wiseman, Louis Arsenault, Grace French (1966)

I was fortunate to have met Grace French years ago when I wrote an article about her and Bob for *Bluegrass Unlimited* magazine titled "Pioneers Of Bluegrass Music In New England." I spent hours with Grace and Bob in their camper at Thomas Point Beach learning all about their incredible journey performing country and bluegrass music together.

"The Rainbow Valley Boys & Sweetheart was the first band to hire me to play mandolin. They were real New England people playing bluegrass. Gracie was a positive nurturing force of nature and the band was a great starting point for my career"

- Peter Rowan

Grace and I became good friends through that experience. What I learned from her has had a great impact on my life, and led to an even greater appreciation of the music and its roots. Folks are drawn to bluegrass, not just for the music, but for the friendships that form and bonds that often last for a lifetime. Bluegrass is a community—it is family.

Grace French was one of the most beloved performers in the New England bluegrass scene from its earliest days. She was an inspiration to generations of young girls and women who would go on to perform in bluegrass bands. The light Grace French left behind continues to shine bright!

Grace was properly named—she was a very graceful lady and she was just kind to everyone. And I don't know if I've known a kinder person than Grace. I think that would be a word that pretty much everybody would use to describe Grace French.

- Ken Brooks

Read more about Grace French's Journey on Page 6.

THE KATAHDIN VALLEY BOYS: IN THEIR OWN WORDS *Continued from page 2.*

In 2016, mandolin player Dan Simons joined the Katahdin Valley Boys, rounding out the four-piece roster that's been together ever since...

Dan Simons: I used to read Craigslist a bunch, hunting for instruments or looking for random gigs and occasional jobs. And then I saw a Craigslist ad looking for a mandolin player. It didn't say what the band was or anything, but I responded to the ad.

Jeff Folger: When Dan came in, he told us, "I don't do much singing." Well, Ken started teaching him baritone, and he picked it up fast. Before long he was a really important part of the vocal sound.

Dan Simons: Ken coached me through all of the baritone parts, and it took a while to figure them out because I'd never consistently sung baritone before. It took me a good year or so to really get that baritone part in my ear.

Steve Bixby: One of the joys of the last 10 years has been watching Dan develop. He came in as a really good mandolin player, but over the years he's become exceptionally good. That's honestly been one of the highlights of the journey for me.

Being in a band isn't always easy, but drama hasn't been an issue for the Katahdin Valley Boys...

Ken Brooks: I've been in a lot of bands. There's almost always some kind of drama. Sometimes it's personalities, sometimes it's alcohol, sometimes it's ego. This band never really had that. These guys are like brothers to me. We've had fun together. We make decisions together. We work songs out together. It's probably the most enjoyable four-piece I've ever been part of.

Jeff Folger: The transitions from one member to another were always smooth. I've always told the guys when they come in that if they have to leave, to do it as a gentleman and give us X amount of weeks' notice or play out the season. So that's what we did, and it's worked out very well.

Dan Simons: Jeff is this really steadying presence. The way he set the band is was very democratic—everybody pitched in, and I really like that model he set up.

Steve Bixby: KVB has been one of the easiest bands I've ever been in when it comes to getting along with people.

For nearly 30 years, the Katahdin Valley Boys have been a fixture on festival and theater stages around Maine and New England...



The Katahdin Valley Boys: Dan Simons, Jeff Folger, Steve Bixby, Ken Brooks

Steve Bixby: Being in this band introduced me to so many people across Maine's bluegrass community. It gave me a deeper appreciation for the scene and for all the people who've contributed to it.

Dan Simons: One of the biggest things was that I didn't know how much of a fanbase Ken had. I would get handwritten thank-you notes from Ken and Jane after shows, and they'd write thank-you notes to a lot of their audience members. That's just the way they operate and it was so interesting to see the long-term relationships they had

with so many of the audience members and fans.

Ken Brooks: I don't think there are more loyal fans than bluegrass fans. We've built friendships that lasted for years and years. People have opened their homes to us, shared meals with us, traveled to hear us play. Those relationships mean every bit as much as the music.

In August, the Katahdin Valley Boys played its final festival set at the Blistered Fingers Family Bluegrass Festival in Litchfield.

Jeff Folger: At Blistered Fingers, it was hard to believe how quickly everything had gone by. The summer went by in a flash. Then suddenly you're looking back and realizing nearly three decades have gone by just as quickly. It's been so much fun, right to the last show.

Ken Brooks: I want to quit while I still feel like I can put on a good show. I've seen musicians stay out there too long. I didn't want people saying, "Remember how good they used to be?" We've had a fantastic run. I think this is the right time.

Steve Bixby: The stage show itself was emotional, but it didn't really hit me until Sunday morning.

After helping with the gospel pick-and-sing with Mike Robinson, I was walking back to my camper when the finality of it really sank in. That's when it got me. I'm sure there will be some tender moments at the last performance. But mostly I feel grateful. Being part of the Katahdin Valley Boys has been one of the biggest contributors to my quality of life in Maine. I love living in Maine and the work that I've done here and raising my family here. But playing with this band and all the people that I've met through it has really put it over the top for me.

For nearly 30 years, the Katahdin Valley Boys have carried traditional bluegrass across stages in Maine and beyond. The band's farewell concert takes place on Sunday, Oct. 4, at the St. Albans Town Hall. For more information, contact Ken Brooks at 207-654-2227.

Grace French's Country and Bluegrass Journey

By Stan Keach

Grace Marie Veronica French (née Haley) was born in Boston in 1930 and grew up in Readville (part of the Hyde Park section of Boston), graduating from Hyde Park High School in 1948. She took dancing lessons and was a member of a dance troupe that entertained soldiers during World War II. She worked at a modeling agency, attended Bryant and Stratton Business College, and worked for Liberty Mutual in Boston.

She met her beloved husband, Bob French, on a blind date after one of Grace's best friends had moved to Acton and was dating one of Bob's pals. They were married in 1950 in Acton, and raised four children there.

Bob and Grace started taking guitar lessons at about the same time; soon they were playing country music professionally. Their first gigs were playing with Joe King at the Sudbury Inn from 1952 through 1955. During that period, they went to the Lone Star Ranch in Boston to see Toby Stroudt, who had a five-string banjo player named Ernie Johnson. Bob told Grace, "I'm going to learn to play the banjo!" Grace's response was, "You're crazy!" But Bob got a banjo, and practiced constantly until he got very good at it.

GRACE MARIE VERONICA FRENCH
August 2, 1930 - May 30, 2026

From 1957 until 1964, Bob and Grace played with Clyde and Willa Mae Joy and the Country Folks; Randy Hawkins and the Country Nighthawks; and Uncle John's Country All-Stars, with many live performances and radio shows. In 1964, they formed the Rainbow Valley Boys & Sweetheart. By this time, Bob and Grace had transitioned from country music to bluegrass music.

From about 1967 until the early 1970s, Grace was less active in music, spending much of her time raising their four young children at home. During that time, Bob was playing regularly with Joe Val in the Old Time Bluegrass Singers and then with Joe Val and the New England Bluegrass Boys.

With three of their children grown, Bob and Grace moved to Cambridge, Maine, in 1975 and revived their band as Bob and Grace French and the Rainbow Valley Boys. The classic configuration of that band was Bobby St. Pierre on mandolin, Brian Mason on fiddle, Howie Dearborn on upright bass, and occasionally Charlie Patterson on guitar.

That group was very stable throughout the 1980s, and was one of the most popular bands on the bluegrass festival circuit around New England and eastern New York.

Remembering Brian FitzPatrick

By Shari Elder

Brian FitzPatrick of Montpelier, Vt., passed away on Aug. 1, 2026. In his obituary, his family shares that he would joke that when he was in grade school chorus, the nuns told him to "just move his lips." This did not hinder his love of music.

He was active in the bluegrass community for over 40 years. He served on the boards of the Bluegrass Music Association of Maine and Connecticut Friends of Bluegrass, helped behind the scenes in many ways, and made many cherished friends. I remember him as an avid fan and a supporter of many of the New England festivals.

Brian and Linda would be one of the first through the gate at Thomas Point Beach Bluegrass Festival every year claiming their beloved spot on the banking near the footbridge. Seeing them there was a sign that we were about to get things started, and they would wave from their site as I passed them back and forth throughout the week.

I always enjoyed my visits with them. Brian would share his knowledge of the music and his ideas for band selection. I remember him as an especially big fan of Danny Paisley! He was proud of his collection of t-shirts and programs and would often share some of his vintage collection when I would stop by their camper. He passed his love of the music on to his family and shared his passion with all he met.



Brian will be missed by so many in the bluegrass community. We send our condolences to his wife, Linda; daughter, Rebecca; son, Tim; and all of his family and friends.



Indoor Jam Season is Here!

With festival season over, BMAM's indoor jams offer a great way to keep meeting up with bluegrass friends and fellow pickers throughout the fall, winter and early spring.

BMAM hosts four monthly jams: The Eastern Jam in Brewer, the Southern Jam in Yarmouth, the Farmington Jam, and the Grand Isle Jam.

Eastern Jam

The Eastern Jam takes place at the Old Town Riverside Grange at 1266 North Main St., Brewer. The jam typically runs from 12pm-3pm. It's open to levels of players and features two floors for jamming. Acoustic instruments only, please! Parking is easy and admission is \$5 for BMAM members and \$7 for non-members. For more information, contact Brewster Bassett at 207-404-3111.

EASTERN JAM DATES:

- October 4
- November 1
- December 6
- January 3
- February 7
- March 7
- April 4

Southern Jam

The Southern Jam takes place from 1pm-4pm at the First Parish Congregational Church at 116 Main St., Yarmouth. The venue offers two floors of jamming, with plenty of room for pickers of all abilities. The Sunday afternoon jam often features guided jams with expert pickers such as Melissa Bragdon-Caron and Lincoln Meyers. Ample street parking is available, and the jam offers coffee, snacks, and light refreshments. The cost is \$5 for BMAM members and \$7 for non-members. For more information, reach out to BMAM board member Bill Holden at gil-ea00@maine.rr.com or 207-400-6386.

SOUTHERN JAM DATES:

- October 11
- November 8
- December 6
- January 10
- February 14
- March 14
- April 11

Farmington Jam

The Farmington Jam takes place at the Farmington Community Center at 127 Middle St., Farmington. The jam happens on the fourth Sunday of each month (except in March!), and typically runs from 1pm-4pm. Players of all levels are welcome! For more information, text Stan Keach at 207-485-0298, or email stan-keachbluegrass76@gmail.com.

FARMINGTON JAM DATES:

- September 27
- October 25
- November 22
- December 27
- January 24
- February 28
- March 21
- April 25
- May 23.

Grand Isle Jam

The Grand Isle Jam is the newest BMAM-sponsored jam, created by BMAM member Kathy Bestwick. The jam is scheduled to take place monthly from September through November at the Grand Isle Community Center, 366 Main St., Grand Isle. The jam runs from 12pm-3pm, and is free to attend (though donations are appreciated!) For more information, please reach out to Kathy Bestwick at kathybestwick11@gmail.com.

GRAND ISLE JAM DATES:

- September 27, with guest artists Erica Brown & Matt Shipman
- October 11, with guest artists Blistered Fingers
- November 15, with guest artist Greta Babin

Watch for jam updates on the Bluegrass Music Association of Maine's Facebook and Instagram pages or visit www.mainebluegrass.org.





Fiddlers Three isn't your typical string band. Formed by Melissa Bragdon Caron, Kathy Sommer, and Ellen Carlson, the trio blends bluegrass, swing, country, and Celtic influences, as well as the sweetest sound of all: triple fiddles. I sat down with Melissa to hear more about the band's origins, how it picks its material, and what's coming up for Fiddlers Three.

Taylor Smith: How did Fiddlers Three come together?

Melissa Bragdon Caron: Fiddlers Three is really Ellen Carlson, Kathy Sommer, and myself. The three of us are always the core of the group, but we hire musicians depending on where we're performing. We started talking about putting the band together in 2019, and then in 2020, during the pandemic, we recorded our first album at Acadia Recording Company in Portland with Jason Phelps.

It was an interesting way to start because we couldn't all get together in person. We'd record parts separately and send them back and forth to see what worked. Ellen and Kathy started Fiddleheads Acoustic Jam Camp together 29 years ago and have been playing music together since the 1980s. I got to know Ellen through the New England Fiddle Ensemble, and then I met Kathy through Ellen and Fiddleheads. That's how we all came together.

How do you choose material for the band?

We all throw ideas out there. One of us will say, "This song would be fun to do," and then we talk about it and decide what might be a good fit. All three of us have experience arranging music, so any one of us might work up harmonies or an arrangement.

Kathy is especially good at hearing interesting harmony parts. On tunes like Chuck Berry's "You Never Can Tell," she's the one who came up with those fun fiddle harmonies inspired by the horn parts. She hears all these cool ideas and puts together little fills that really bring the music to life.

How would you describe the Fiddlers Three sound?

We definitely don't stick to one genre. That's a big part of what we're going for because we all enjoy different styles of music. We like to do what fiddles do, and that's a lot more than just fiddle tunes. We're inspired by the horns of Chuck Berry, the swing of Bob Wills, sultry violin, country twang, the energy of a contra dance, and the hard-driving sound of bluegrass. Kathy has a strong swing background, Ellen brings country influences, and I'm rooted more in bluegrass and Celtic music. We really influence each other, and that's what keeps it fun and interesting.

FIDDLERS THREE

By Taylor Smith



Fiddlers Three members Melissa Bragdon Caron, Kathy Sommer and Ellen Carlson. Photo credit: Rebecca Conley.

Do you perform original music?

We do. Kathy wrote "Whatever You Wish," which appears on the album and has a beautiful melody with pizzicato accompaniment. We've also been performing "Gal with the Boots from Colorado," a song written by Ellen Carlson that's become part of our live set.

What have been some highlights for the band?

Recording the album was definitely a highlight. Bringing all those musicians together and hearing the arrangements come to life was really rewarding. We've also enjoyed performing at places like the Yellow Barn in New York, Stage Too! at Ossipee Valley, the Word Barn in New Hampshire, and the Podunk Bluegrass Festival in Connecticut. One of the best things about the band is being able to travel, play for different communities, and spend time together on the road.

What's next for Fiddlers Three?

We're always looking ahead to the next season and trying to get into more festivals. We love playing bluegrass festivals because we have a lot of Bill Monroe, Kenny Baker, and other songs and tunes that audiences enjoy. We're continuing to put together performance weekends around New England and New York, and in March we're going to Arizona for the Desert Bluegrass Association's Desert Bluegrass Festival. Mostly, we're excited to keep playing, keep traveling, and keep sharing this music with audiences.

To learn more about Fiddlers Three and upcoming performances, visit EllenCarlson.com and follow the band through its social media channels.

Ken Brooks: A Lifetime in Bluegrass Comes Full Circle

By Taylor Smith

After more than six decades on stage, Ken Brooks is stepping away from professional performance—a milestone that marks the close of one of Maine's most enduring bluegrass careers. Though many fans know him best from his 17 years with the Katahdin Valley Boys, Ken's musical story stretches far beyond any single band, shaped by a deep love of the traditional bluegrass and country songs he's been performing for so many decades.

Ken first took the stage in 1965, pushing past the early nervousness of playing to an audience on his way to becoming one of New England's respected bluegrass vocalists. "I'm basically an introvert," he says, reflecting on his early years. "I had stage fright something terrible... but other people pushed me to do it."

That push led to a long run as the lead singer for Bluegrass Supply Company, which he fronted from 1988 to 1995. After that group dissolved, he continued as lead vocalist for the Union River Band for several years and played lead guitar with Bob & Grace French and the Rainbow Valley Folks.

Across all these projects, Ken developed a signature approach to singing. "It's always been my goal to sing clearly and have the audience understand the words that I'm singing," he says. "The reason I take on any song is because I like the story. And if I'm going to sing a song, I'm going to sing it so people understand the story." That philosophy shaped not only his solo work but also the vocal sound of every band he joined.

A PARTNER IN MUSIC AND IN LIFE

Ken's partnership with his wife, Jane, has been another defining thread in his musical life. The two began performing together in 2005, after the first 20 years of their marriage had found Jane involved in Ken's music in other ways—sitting shotgun on road trips, helping at the record table and occasionally guesting with his bands.

For Jane, performing with Ken was more than a musical partnership. It gave her a way to step onto a stage despite being an introvert herself. She says Ken's decades of experience made her feel comfortable when she first began performing her own songs with him. Over time, she learned that music offered a different kind of connection—one built on trust among the performers and a genuine exchange with the audience. "A lot of our introvert feelings, we can express ourselves through music," she says.

Jane also describes their partnership onstage as something audiences have particularly embraced. "To actually be a duet couple with your spouse is so special and so unique," she says. The two make a point of dressing up for every show, seeing their stage outfits as a sign of respect for the audience. And Jane says they have received tremendous feedback from people who enjoy seeing a married couple perform together.

Their musical life together hasn't just been as a duo: Ken and Jane have performed with Joe and Nellie Kennedy as Brooks & Kennedy, and with the New Hampshire-based bluegrass gospel group the LeClairs. The pair also were members of Fox Hollow with Charlie Patterson and Connie Ballard, and have played in trios and quartets with Ken's Katahdin Valley Boys bandmate Jeff Folger and Carter Logan of Jerks of Grass fame. And Jane occasionally joined Ken onstage with the Katahdin Valley Boys and Bob and Grace French.

One of Jane's favorite memories came in 2007, when she and Ken performed at the Criterion Theatre in Bar Harbor with Tim Sample and Peter, Paul and Mary's Noel Paul Stookey. Sample had seen Ken perform and invited the couple to be part of the show. "We actually got to do some harmonizing with Noel, and he actually complimented us," Jane says. "That's a highlight for me, for sure."

Continued on page 9.



Ken Brooks: A LIFETIME IN BLUEGRASS COMES FULL CIRCLE

Continued from page 8.

A CAREER TO REMEMBER

Even as he devoted himself to band life, Ken maintained a strong identity as a teacher and mentor. He helped many musicians learn the art of baritone singing over the years, including fellow Katahdin Valley Boys mandolinist Dan Simons. His willingness to share knowledge remains central to his musical philosophy: "Anytime I can share any of that, I'm glad to do it," he says.

Jane says she wants Ken to be remembered for his professionalism and his connection with people. "Ken is Ken always," she says. "He's always the same. He's the real deal. He's genuine." She hopes fans remember not only the songs, but also the distinctive performances, stories, and jokes that made his appearances uniquely his own.

That repertoire is substantial. Ken estimates he has 300 to 350 songs in his repertoire, while Jane suspects the real number is even higher, particularly after the two began bringing folk and rock-and-roll material into their performances. Among her favorites is "Mule Skinner Blues," in part because she loves watching the audience respond to Ken's distinctive take on the classic Bill Monroe number. But her most personal favorite is "Perhaps Love," the John Denver song Ken sang to her on their wedding day.

Both Ken and Jane say they will miss more than the performances as they step away from the spotlight. They'll miss traveling to new venues and communities, and seeing the fans they have met over the years—many of whom have become lifelong friends. Annual gazebo performances around Maine and trips to the County Bluegrass Festival have become part of the couple's rhythm, and some of those once-a-year friendships will be harder to maintain once the touring schedule ends. In addition to the music, these relationships are among the most enduring parts of Ken's decades as a performer. "I don't believe there are more loyal people than bluegrass fans," Ken says.



Ken & Jane Brooks and Katahdin Valley Boys



FAREWELL CONCERT SUNDAY, OCTOBER 4TH, 1-4PM

ST ALBANS TOWN HALL
7 WATER ST, ST ALBANS, MAINE

Door Prizes and Refreshments

General Admission by Donation (suggested minimum \$10)

50 special premium seats by donation are available. To reserve these seats, please mail checks payable to: Ken Brooks, PO Box 62, Athens, ME 04912 or Venmo: @StevenBixby

For more information, call Ken at 207-654-2227



SCENE IN MAINE

BMAM HOSTS THE SECOND ANNUAL BAND CONTEST AT THE CROOKED RIVER GATHERING



Prizes from our generous sponsors!

Over Labor Day weekend, the Bluegrass Music Association of Maine hosted the second annual band contest at the Crooked River Gathering. The six bands competing in this year's event vied for great prizes generously donated by our sponsors, Bourgeois Guitars, D'Addario & Co., and Ear Trumpet Labs. And of course, BMAM made sure to throw a few items into the prize baskets for the three winning bands.

The first-place band was Cumberland Union String Band, a great group of pickers from the Portland area playing a lively mix of bluegrass and old-time tunes. Second-place winners the Tuesday Knights got the crowd hooting and hollering, as did the original tunes of third-place winners Mr. Bill Easy—which joined the contest just an hour before going on stage. The Familiar Strangers Duo, the Maine Coon Cats Band and the Stein Brothers rounded out the contest, with each group delivering a fantastic three-song set. Many thanks to Emma Stein for the great photography!



The Cumberland Union String Band



The Cumberland Union String Band walked away with first-place trophies and a big basket of prizes from our sponsors.



Mr. Bill Easy



The Familiar Strangers Duo

SCENE IN MAINE

Huge thanks to the Crooked River Gathering for including the BMAM Band Contest in the festival lineup, and to the Manic Mountain Boys for warmly sharing their Manic Mountain Stage for the contest. And, of course, thanks to all the bands and fans who came out and cheered them on. See you all next year!



Maine Coon Cats Band



Cumberland Union String Band



The Tuesday Knights



The Tuesday Knights



The Stein Brothers



The Stein Brothers

October 17, 2026

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REPORT FROM COUNTY BLUEGRASS

By Emily G. Adams

The County Bluegrass festival in Fort Fairfield took place over Labor Day weekend, with eight bands delivering more than two-dozen sets over the four-day event.

Traditionally, this festival has attracted a strong audience of Canadian bluegrass fans, though fewer of those fans crossed the border this year and last year. As a result, organizers Stev and Nancy Rogeski are considering shifting to an earlier weekend in August for next year's festival in hopes of warmer weather and to avoid overlapping with other festivals.

An annual fixture at County Bluegrass has been Nick Chandler and Delivered. In fact, Chandler penned "Maria," a cut on the band's recently-released "Look for Me" album, from the band's Presque Isle hotel during a previous County Bluegrass festival. Chandler nearly died from Covid in 2021, lost 10%-15% of his lung capacity and has battled Stage 3A colon cancer. Through it all, the band has had six songs in the Bluegrass Today top 20, including four at number five and one number-one hit, "Follow the Leader." Chandler, Gary Trivette, Jake Burrows and Spencer Atkinson will join other pro musicians for a Q&A at this year's IBMA World of Bluegrass event in October.

Among the bands performing, a standout was Gentlemen's Gambit, a group from Boston's Berklee College of Music. Sam Stage, Arlea Forbes-Prater, Devin Jones, Quinn Eastburn and Micah Philipp alternated original compositions with classics from artists such as Tony Rice, Alison Krauss, Lonesome River Band and Doyle Lawson.



Continued on page 16.

Nick Chandler. Photo credit: John Coakley.

Fiddle Workshop

October 17, 2026
1-3PM

"Austin Scelzo hosts an in person workshop designed to explore his "Roadmap to Bluegrass and Country Fiddle Mastery" - a sequential guide to breaking down the skills necessary to thrive in settings that involve improvisation, harmony, chords, back-up, and rhythm playing on the fiddle. Austin was nominated by the International Bluegrass Music Association as "Mentor of the Year" for his work in Education" Don't miss this great opportunity!

- When: October 17, 2026 - 1:00-3:00 PM
- Maximum seats: 25
- Fee for workshop \$30

Location: Center Theatre, 20 E Main St, Dover-Foxcroft, Maine

*Please note that this is NOT an accessible space. Stairs only.

Sign up and learn more:

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**Bluegrass Music
Association
of Maine**

NEW MEMBERS

David Brown	Clifford McAlpine
Dan Davis	Eric Porter
Jerry Durgin	Marianne See
Scott & Jackie Hamor	Jaci Sieben
Iris LaBrie	Dana Weston
Leslie Leyton	

RENEWED MEMBERS

Emily Adams	Peter & Lucinda McGinn
Paul Anderson	Hideaki Mizuno
George (Tom) Donovan	Raymond Paradis
Kevin Dyer	Martin Pelletier
Shari Elder	Frank Perkins
Gene Groves	Dina & Joe Richards
Denise Hervieux	Troy Richardson & Flora Drury
Franklin & Karen Holcomb	Nanci Stein
Doreen & Frank Kimball	Bill Umbel & Jeanne Hulit
Connie Lundy	
Kiera Luu & Jack Pasternak	
Mac McConathy	

**Thank you for
your support of
Bluegrass Music
in Maine.**

2026 ELECTION CANDIDATES

Each year, the Bluegrass Music Association of Maine holds elections to fill both board seats and officer roles within the organization. As a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit, BMAM relies on its board members and officers to guide the organization as it pursues its commitment to promoting and supporting musicians in Maine that are helping to preserve and grow this important American musical genre, and to provide opportunities for audiences to come together to enjoy this music that we all love.

Again this year, BMAM is holding its elections via electronic ballot. Members received emails in mid September with unique links to cast their votes online. We also are making mail-in ballots available to those who prefer to vote by paper. Voting ends on October 5. Those voting electronically must make their choices by that date, and those voting via mail-in ballot must have their ballots postmarked by that date. We'll announce the election results in October.

Read on for detailed information for each candidate vying for a role as board member or officer. And thank you to each of the candidates for their willingness to volunteer their time and energy to keep BMAM thriving today and in the years to come. And for those who would like to be part of this wonderful organization, please reach out to any current board member or officer. We'd love to tell you more and help you get involved!

STEVE BIXBY

When I first heard Earl Scruggs play "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" in the sound track to the movie "Bonnie and Clyde" I felt that special draw to Bluegrass music. It was in the summer of 1980 when a friend invited me to tag along to the Berkshire Mountain Bluegrass Festival, that defined my starting point into this Bluegrass journey. From that weekend forward I was caught hook, line, and sinker!



I was blessed to see so many first generation artists and live bluegrass music in the clubs, concerts, and BBU functions of those 80's and 90's. Following acts such as Joe Val and Don Stover locally, I was able to feed my desire for more live Bluegrass Music. Summer seasons were filled with attending a greater number of festivals throughout New England.

I revisited playing Bass as I had some experience with an electric Bass guitar in high school and saw that there would be opportunities for me in the Bluegrass jam world. I bought my first upright Bass, (a 1954 Kay M-1 which I still own) and headed out to field pick and try to learn as much as I could.

My playing took on a more serious track when I was asked to join the Lost Wages band in 1997 at the Noppet Hill Bluegrass Festival. It was with Lost Wages that I was very fortunate to get to play many festivals and shows all over the northeast.

It was around 2001 that I relocated full time as a resident of Round Pond, Maine. Here I helped get the King Ro Market Jam started as well as a monthly jam at Lincoln Academy.

My band associations here in Maine have included The Moxie Cove Band, Mountain Emergency, and The Blackfly Boys along with The Bixby Family Band with my wife and daughter. It has truly been my honor and privilege to be the bass player for The Katahdin Valley Boys for the last 16 years.

CHAUNCEY DEVIN

I have loved live music since I was teenager. My dad drove me to my first show when I was 15 and I was hooked. Not just to the music but to the community around it. The thing is, punk music was my first love. Except for Old and in the Way occasionally, I didn't start listening to bluegrass until 2020. When I first attended Thomas Point in 2021, I was hooked again.



The grassroots ethos of bluegrass really speaks to me. How everyone who enjoys bluegrass also contributes to the scene is a great thing. For example how professional musicians will run jams and teach the inexperienced. Everyone seems to be into bluegrass for the love it. I want to help continue bluegrass music and its community, so I am running to be on the BMAM board. I hope to spread the good word of bluegrass and draw people into concerts, festivals and jams. I have grown a lot as a musician because of the great people in the bluegrass scene and I want to give back.

Growing up as a little punk rocker and as a current member of a punk/metal band, I have experience within grassroots music communities. This experience will help me be a contributing and successful board member.

TODD KETCHAM

Todd Ketcham, of Cape Elizabeth, is a candidate for the Board of BMAM. Todd is a lifelong musician and music lover. He has served on the board of BMAM for three years, and has greatly enjoyed the camaraderie of the board and the great work done to support bluegrass in Maine. As a licensed Maine attorney and trained mediator, his vocational skills assist and inform his work on the board. As a bassist, he knows his role of support and understands that clear communication that can help a band and any ensemble play in tune. He lives in Cape Elizabeth with his wife, son, cat and dog.



SHARI ELDER

Shari Elder is an active member of the BMAM Board running for re-election. Shari has worked professionally as a Meeting and Event planner in many capacities. She brings that skill set to the bluegrass community as a festival producer/promoter.



Following 34 years as part of the Thomas Point Beach Bluegrass Festival leadership team, she has now been involved in the creation of the Crooked River Gathering event in Hiram, Maine. In addition to BMAM, Shari is also a member of the Boston Bluegrass Union and the International Bluegrass Music Association. She attends the IBMA World of Bluegrass annually and is a co-producer of the IBMA Bluegrass Music Awards show. In recent years, she has been a Team Lead for Artist Liaisons at DelFest in Cumberland, Md. She coordinated the backstage managers and emcees at the Joe Val Festival in Framingham, Mass., and assists backstage and is an emcee at the Jenny Brook Bluegrass Festival in Tunbridge, Vt., and the Ossipee Valley Music Festival in Hiram. She recently retired as Chair of the Board of Directors at 317 Main Community Music Center in Yarmouth, serving seven years on that board.

On the BMAM board, Shari chairs the Online Presence Committee and was instrumental in organizing the 30th Anniversary Birthday Bash and other efforts to recognize this year's 30th Anniversary. She will be spearheading a Strategic Planning committee in the coming months.

Shari lives in North Yarmouth, Maine, with her husband, Steve.

TOM DONOVAN

Tom Donovan is an enthusiastic supporter of bluegrass music in the state of Maine. A banjo player who grew up in Kentucky, Tom moved to Scarborough, Maine, in 2018 and became part of the bluegrass community, playing at jams and attending festivals.



During the last year, he volunteered to work with BMAM board member Bill Holden and BMAM Webmaster Cyndi Longo to revitalize the calendar of events on BMAM's website, keeping it current so that BMAM members would be aware of all the various bluegrass events within Maine and near its borders. He has assisted with set-up and tear-down of the BMAM booth at festivals and looks forward to expanding his volunteerism as he enters retirement.

During his 28 years in the Army, he has played in bluegrass bands in Kentucky, Georgia, South Korea, Russia, and New York as he moved around the U.S. and the world.

STAN KEACH

I've been playing in professional bluegrass bands for 50 years. My band, the Sandy River Ramblers, has been playing for 43 years straight in Maine — the longest stretch ever for a Maine bluegrass band. As a songwriter, songs I've written or co-written have been recorded by some world-famous bluegrass acts including: Danny Paisley; Special Consensus; James King; Audie Blaylock & Redline; Rock Hearts; Ralph Stanley II.



I've served on the BMAM board for several years. I was editor of BMAM's newsletter for 8 years. I founded the Farmington Bluegrass Jam in 2023, and have been the sole administrator of the jam since its inception.

If elected to another term on the BMAM board, I hope to help all Maine bluegrass bands share their music by posting their video clips on social media; having studied video and social media extensively in recent years, I'm uniquely prepared to help facilitate this effort to modernize BMAM's services to bands and fans.

If you're a BMAM member, you should have received a ballot in a recent email. Please vote. I'd be honored and appreciative if you cast a vote for me. I promise to do my best to serve Maine bluegrass bands and enthusiasts.

KIERA LUU

My name is Kiera Luu. I am a resident of Lamoine, located in the greater Ellsworth/Downeast area. I have been a member of BMAM and my band Stillwater for 3 years. I found BMAM through the Brewer grange jam, where I am a regular attendee.



From the Brewer jam to the festival scene and all the BMAM events in between, the bluegrass community of Maine has given me and countless others a place to find joy, community, and creative expression. I believe bluegrass music is defined by themes like working class struggles, spirituality, and nature, topics that have the unique ability to unite people from all types of backgrounds.

I am eternally grateful for my journey in bluegrass, and I hope to make that gift accessible to more people.

I believe I can help this board through the facets of my personhood; providing a gigging band member, female, young adult perspective to the scene. Additionally, I am in a good position to be a point of contact for events in Central, Downeast, and Northern Maine.

My strengths are graphic design, communications, and volunteer coordination—some skills I have developed as a founding member of Stillwater. I am ready to adapt and learn more, whether elected to the BMAM board or not, and look forward to being involved in BMAM's greater mission for years to come.

KICK-OFF CONCERT IN AROOSTOOK COUNTY By Kathy Bestwick



Dave Adkins and Mountain Soul

On September 6th, Grammy nominee Dave Adkins and Mountain Soul entertained a packed crowd at the Community Center in Grand Isle. Layla Cantafio, the fiddle player from New Brunswick, was a big draw, as folks in the area have been seeing her play since she was 14 years old. It was the first time for most of the crowd to see Dave Adkins, and it was a dynamic show to introduce bluegrass to our area. Everyone was dancing in their seats and enjoyed the show!

The event set the stage for this year's monthly Aroostook County Bluegrass Jam program, starting September 27 and running through May. Different artists will be visiting to jam with us each month. We are excited to have Erica Brown and Matt Shipman as our first guests on September 27. This will be a great homecoming for Erica, whose mother and grandparents hail from Grand Isle.

The concert was supported by the Maine Arts Commission and presented through a collaboration of the Bluegrass Music Association of Maine and the Grand Isle Historic Society.

REPORT FROM COUNTY BLUEGRASS

Continued from page 16.

Rrinaco, an anagram of Corinna Rose Logston Stephens, featured tracks from their 2025 debut album, *Little Songs*, an outlet for her original work. They were joined by Gabriel Dettinger, Daniel Amick, and Kevin Buchanan. She and her husband, Jeremy Stephens, previously played with their hero, Jesse McReynolds, and co-lead national touring act High Fidelity.

The Asheville Mountain Boys (John Duncan, Marshall Brown, Zeb Gambill and Jacob Brewer), whose stage patter is a master class in bluegrass, is now touring internationally, arriving via Montréal and circling back to Japan.

Grass Messengers (Chris Luquette and Christian Apuzzo), accompanied by guest Hilary Hawke on banjo, also brought Will Pavilonis, full-time bass player for The Cody Sisters, who Luquette said learned 35 songs in short order. Pavilonis took it in stride, deftly bowing the bass and tossing the bow into the quiver after each solo.

Fans of Ken and Jane Brooks, whose 2026 farewell tour retires them from concerts, will miss their versions of "Coat of Many Colors," "The Teddy Bear Song," and Ken's yodeling on "Mule Skinner Blues." Jane praised the festival's younger talent, saying bluegrass is in good hands.

Greg and Sandy Cormier brought their Blistered Fingers band while also handling emcee duties. Greg and Chad Cormier ran the festival sound with Randy Marshall.

New Hampshire-based band the LaClaire's played a traditional set—including a great rendition of the traditional number "Gospel Plow"—and hosted the Sunday sing-a-long.

All the bands expressed a deep admiration for one another, enjoyed the cooler weather, appreciated the relaxed atmosphere and rural beauty of the festival grounds, and gave a shout-out to the food served up by the Fort Fairfield ATV club.

Fan of BLUEGRASS?
Check out these shows coming to One Longfellow Square!

9/26
Trey Hensley

10/31
Louise Bichan's All Hallows Eve

10/11
Ethan Setiawan & Finer Ground

11/14
Breakin' Strings

10/16
Howley (of We Banjo 3)

11/18
AJ Lee & Blue Summit

10/18
Jake Blount Band

11/20
Hanneke Cassel Band

Tickets at onelongfellowsquare.com
181 State St. Portland, ME 207-761-1757

Postcards from the Road



Erica Brown & the Bluegrass Connection performing at Festa do Avante in Seixal, Portugal, in September

In September, Erica Brown & the Bluegrass Connection hopped across the Atlantic for a weeklong tour of Portugal. Erica, Matt Shipman, Kris Day, Eli Gilbert and Lincoln Meyers traveled from the Setúbal Peninsula south of Lisbon to the northern city of Porto playing a mix of festival stages, house concerts and workshops. Watch for the winter issue of the Bluegrass Express to hear more about Erica Brown & the Bluegrass Connection's overseas adventures.

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THE BLUEGRASS MUSIC ASSOCIATION OF MAINE IS...

...an organization of people, listeners and players who enjoy Bluegrass music. It was formed in March of 1995 and incorporated on July 8, 1996 as a Maine 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation. The BMAM, governed by a volunteer Board of Directors, welcomes all Bluegrass friends, fans, and pickers to become active members.

Functions of the organization include the following:

- To educate the public about Bluegrass music, in order to foster an appreciation of its history and cultural heritage;
- To further the enjoyment of Bluegrass music through teaching, sharing, and playing;
- To encourage participation in Bluegrass music events;
- To support area workshops, festivals, and concerts;
- To support area musicians and bands that play Bluegrass music;
- To inform members about Maine Bluegrass and related events;
- To cooperate with other organizations to promote Bluegrass and related music;
- To preserve the memories of those who have preceded us in this field of endeavor.

The Bluegrass Express is a quarterly publication of the Bluegrass Music Association of Maine (BMAM). For more information on how you can become involved, contact any committee member.

Please email any news, photos, article information, or anything you find pertaining to bluegrass in Maine to tsmith@maine-bluegrass.com

Copy deadline is the 15th of the month prior to publication date.

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A one year membership includes:
Quarterly Newsletter
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DATE: _____ EVENT: _____

I am a: ___ Fan ___ Musician ___ Band Member

Primary Instrument:: _____

Band Name: _____

Volunteer Opportunities: (check if interested)

☐ S. Jam (Yarmouth) ☐ E. Jam (Brewer)

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