

Bluegrass Experience closes in on 40 years of excellence

By Milburn Gibbs

The *Bluegrass Experience* has a long and colorful history of performing and recording some excellent bluegrass music over the last 40 years. Founded by guitarist Tommy Edwards, bassist Snuffy Smith, and "Fiddlin' Al" McCanless (now in his second affiliation with the band) the three are the surviving original members of the group. The Brothers Don and Paul Beane and Buncombe County native Charles Lee Conard were the other founding members of the soon-to-be award-winning ensemble. Conard left the group to return to the mountains in 1978 and was replaced by Leroy Savage (called "The Father of Newgrass" by mandolin standout Sam Bush) and his spot was later filled by Keith Thomas of Sanford, who stayed with the band for 18 years and still performs frequently with the group.

The Bluegrass Experience played its first gig in March of 1971 and "Fiddlin'

Al" won the first place fiddle prize that evening at the Star, N.C. Fiddlers Convention. They continued to play competitively for another year frequently winning both individual instrument awards as well as band prizes. They gave up competition to begin playing professionally in 1972.

The band was unique in that it was composed of men who were from quite diverse backgrounds. Paul Beane was an insurance professional and his brother Don an expert printer. McCanless was a pharmacist and Conard a finish carpenter. At the time, both Smith (fresh from the U.S. Army where he had been a First Lieutenant) and Edwards taught school. "It was an unusual congregation of members. We had long-hairs and short hairs and everything in between. We looked so different that lots of folks could not understand how we got along. But it was the music. Music brought us together and we developed a great appreciation for each other on many levels. We had much more in common than met the eye," said Edwards.

The band has always been a hard-working ensemble, playing around 150 dates a year over four decades.

Amazingly, there have been only 12 members of the band in 40 years. At one point, singer and guitarist Patsy Conklin became the only female band member. In 1992, when Paul Beane

became ill and could no longer perform, mandolinist Jimmy Cameron (currently playing bass with Grammy winner Ralph Stanley) came to the band. He was replaced a few years by Mike Aldridge from Saxapahaw. Former Bill Monroe banjoist Stan Brown joined the group after Don Beane's passing and provides an integral part of the band's sound. And many fine musicians have substituted with the band over the years, including Brantley Kearnes who played fiddle with Dwight Yoakum, Grammy-Award-winning Doborist Gene Wooten, and superstar fiddler Bobby Hicks, who played with Bill Monroe in the 50's and with Ricky Skaggs in the 80's and 90's. Doc Watson's frequent collaborator, Jack Lawrence, has filled in on guitar and Dewey Brown, (Ralph Stanley's fiddler), banjoist Gary Williamson, his brother Tony and Jerry Stuart, both mandolin masters, have often filled in. Area residents and bassists, LaNelle Davis, Nancy Gottovi and Alice Zincone have all helped out as has former Red Clay Rambler, Jim Watson

"We are just a group of good ole' boys and one good ole' girl who enjoyed making bluegrass music," Tommy explained. "All of us had regular jobs but we loved music so much that we wanted to stay together and be a part of a wonderful group of friends."

The Bluegrass Experience played regularly at the Cat's Cradle in Chapel Hill every Thursday night for nine years from 1972-1981. These gigs introduced the band to many new fans who later hired the band to perform in other venues. "The Cradle exposed us to a ton of Carolina and Duke students as well as a host of

young adults from the Triangle. It was a blast and helped us expand our repertoire. We had to keep coming up with fresh material to keep that crowd entertained so we found songs in country, folk and rock music as well as from more traditional sources. And I started writing new songs that suited our performance style", Edwards said

After winning the World's Championship Bluegrass Band title at a major competition at Union Grove in 1972, the band began receiving numerous offers to play professionally and for the next few years performed extensively throughout the eastern half of the U.S., traveling as far north as Chicago and as far South as Oxford, Mississippi. They represented the U.S. at the Finnish National Folk Festival in 1975, and was one of the headline acts at the 2007 Appalachian and Bluegrass Music Festival in Omagh, Northern Ireland.

The band has recorded four albums, two on vinyl in the 70's and two more recent CDs, both of which are available on line at www.countysales.com and at area retail outlets including Red Gate Music and The General Store Café and several art galleries in Pittsboro as well as the Farmer's Alliance Store, the Raleigh Street Gallery and the NC Arts Incubator Galleries in Siler City.

When asked why he thought the Experience as so successful, Tommy said he believed respecting and appreciating the other members' talent and contributions were the main reasons.

On November 4, 2011, the band will celebrate its 40th Anniversary with a gala concert at the Farrington Village Barn in Pittsboro, hosted by ChathamArts. Get your tickets early as they will go fast. This is not a concert you would want to miss for any reason.

Happy Anniversary, Bluegrass Experience! Those good ole' boys will recreate about the best music in Chatham County that night. This is a musical extravaganza you will not forgive yourself for missing.

Milburn Gibbs is a writer who resides in Siler City.



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