



Bluegrassin'

Volume 27 Issue 1

Jan.—Feb. 2025

The Montana Rockies Bluegrass Association is a non-profit association dedicated to promoting, preserving, and sharing our love of bluegrass music in a spirit of family and friendship.

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Upcoming Bluegrass

January 10: Release the Squirrels, Rocky Mountain Grange Hall, Hamilton. 7-10pm

January 18: Kitchen Dwellers, Wilma Theater, Missoula

January 18: MRBA Winter Jam, Masonic Lodge, 126 East Broadway, Missoula. Jam starts at 2pm, potluck at 6pm

February 15: MRBA Winter Jam, Masonic Lodge, 126 East Broadway, Missoula. Jam starts at 2pm, potluck at 6pm

February 20-23: Wintergrass, Bellevue, WA <https://wintergrass.com/>

Regular Jams & Shows:

Tuesday Jams in Whitefish: North Valley Music School (432 Spokane Ave.) 6-7:30pm (Call to RSVP—[\(406\) 862-8074](tel:4068628074))

Billings: Weekly Jams on Friday Nights: Yellowstone Bluegrass Association, Blue Creek Baptist Church, Billings, 7-9pm?

Montana Oldtime Fiddlers: Third Sunday of the month, Buffalo Hill Terrace, Kalispell, 2:30-4:30pm

Missoula: Bluegrass Night at the Old Post Pub, Mondays, 6-8:30pm

Save the Date:

March 15: MRBA Winter Jam @ Masonic Lodge in Missoula

April 12: MRBA Spring Festival, Victor, MT

Music Quote

(Author Unknown)

“Music is not just a talent to be developed, but a gift to be shared.”

President's Message

It's the start of a new year, and we're looking forward to more pickin' and grinnin' and camping and seeing folks we haven't seen in a while. The MRBA Christmas party was a "hoot" with three separate jams and lots of great food. We were so tickled to see the talented seven-member Jolley family come and sit right in the jams and do lots of pickin' and grinnin.' Their big smiles show how much they love to play bluegrass music. The five youngsters lower the average membership age by quite a lot.

The winter jams will be the third Saturday of each month (January 18, February 15, and March 15, As always, the doors open at 2 pm, and the potluck is at 6 pm.

The MRBA spring festival is Saturday, April 12, again at the Neely Center in Victor. I will be sending out emails shortly to the bands who want to do a 25-minute set at the festival.

At the yearly meeting, the same folks were elected to serve as officers. Yours truly as President, Dallas Olson as Vice President. Board members are Tari Conroy, Jeff Campfield, Kate McMahon, Randy Dollar, and Anne Merrifield.

This year, we're planning to design a brand new MRBA website, with lots of pictures, membership signup online, and a new youth scholarship program designed by Kate. We're hoping to have a donation button on the new website to help with the scholarship program. If you have some cool old MRBA pics to use on the website, please email them to me.

Mike—(Head Pot-Luck Sampler Guy)

EDITOR'S PICK

Looking to improve or refresh your music reading skills? This website has some fun memory tricks.

<https://discover.hubpages.com/entertainment/Marvelous-Musical-Mnemonics>

For example, to remember the notes on the lines in the treble staff, the first letters of the words in the following sentences correspond to the lines of the treble staff from bottom to top, low to high.

Every Good Boy Does Fine

Or

Elvis's Guitar Broke Down Friday

Montana Rockies Bluegrass Association

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Montana Rockies Bluegrass Association

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**MONTANA ROCKIES BLUEGRASS ASSOCIATION
Membership Application**

Date _____ Last Name _____ First Name _____

Mailing Address _____ City _____

State _____ Zip Code _____ Phone # _____

E-mail _____ Individual (\$10.00) _____ Family (\$15.00) _____

Do you want the newsletter delivered electronically? _____ YES _____ NO

Renewal _____

New Member _____

Please mail your application to: MRBA, PO Box 1306, Missoula, MT 59806

MONTANA ROCKIES BLUEGRASS ASSOCIATION – ANNUAL MEETING MINUTES

December 21, 2024, 4:00 p.m., Stevensville United Methodist Church

Board Members Present: Mike Conroy , Tari Conroy, Dallas Olson, Anne Merrifield, Jeff Campfield, Kate McMahon

Board Members Absent: Randy Dollar

Number of Members Attending: 42

The meeting was called to order by President Mike Conroy. The following items were discussed:

1. Update on the Association (Mike).

Mike provided the 2024 jam dates to be held at the Masonic facility in Missoula (January 18, February 15, March 15). The date of the 2024 fundraiser/festival will be on April 12 at the Neely Center in Victor. The probability of moving the site of the annual picnic was discussed. Mike and Kate are researching.

2. Financial Report (Anne).

Anne presented the 2024 financial report (through November 30, 2024), which is in the MRBA files for reference. Income was \$6,923.45, expenses \$6,263.32, for a profit of \$660.13. The checkbook balance is \$10,255.70. The cost of the Hughes Creek/Forrest Flats Picnic was \$660.61, and the Victor Fundraiser/Festival raised \$1,337.38. Note that for the Victor fundraiser, we did not charge admission to MRBA members this year. We have 175 members (holding steady).

3. Merchandise (Anne).

Again due to not having a volunteer to handle merchandise, we will only be carrying bumper stickers in the future. Mike asked the membership what items they would like to add (if a volunteer is found), and the answer was to start with hats and maybe add more later. Marilyn Mitzi Stonehocker expressed interest in the position and will talk with Dallas Olson to see what it entails. She will advise us of her decision. (Mitzi is also interested in writing articles for the newsletter.)

4. Old Business (Mike).

The Future of MRBA: Mike indicated that, while we have 175 members, participation in our events is minimal, which is not good news for our future. He asked the members if they had suggestions on how to improve the situation.

Marc Katz said that perhaps MRBA could consider expanding the bluegrass genre to attract younger pickers to jams. Mike stated the MRBA was an organization that was formed to further traditional bluegrass, and he did not support opening the organization to include things like newgrass, etc.

There was discussion that an offer be made to current members that if they get someone new to sign up, the original MRBA member gets a free membership for one year. Most members attending thought this was a good idea. Kate made a motion to implement the proposal; it was seconded and passed.

5. New Business (Mike).

Many thanks to Kate McMahon for her years of service on the newsletter, and to Anne Merrifield for her work as Secretary-Treasurer.

Youth Scholarships: Kate presented a proposal for a Youth Scholarship Program, with a budget of \$2,000 annually (see pg. 7). Attending members discussed it and thought it was a good idea. Kate has volunteered to administer the program for the first year to see how it progresses (yay, Kate!). Susan McCauley made a motion to implement this program; it was seconded and passed.

MRBA Website: It is dated and uninteresting, and Mike asked for suggestions to improve it. He has a contact who can redo the site for us, and a lot of photos and videos would be needed. Kate suggested adding a way that the site can do online memberships. Susan McCauley thought we might add a button for donations. Carol Gies said she would like to see a link to the above Scholarship Program.

6. Election of Officers (Mike).

All of the existing Board members' terms will be continued for the next year. Therefore, the current slate will be as follows: Mike Conroy, Tari Conroy, Dallas Olson, Jeff Campfield, Kate McMahon, Anne Merrifield, and Randy Dollar.

7. Business completed, Susan McCauley made a motion to adjourn, which was seconded and passed. Proceed to have supper and commence jamming.

Minutes compiled by Anne Merrifield, Secretary/Treasurer



JUST FOR FUN!

Find the following objects in the picture above from the MRBA Annual meeting
(*clock, banjo, water bottle, Christmas wreath, piano, quilt, coat on a chair*)

How many people do you see wearing baseball hats in all the different pictures from the Christmas party?

MRBA Christmas Party Photos



Sharing Music in the Jam Circle



Sharing Music with the Guitar



Sharing Music Before the Potluck



Sharing Music Between Generations



Sharing Music Among Friends



Sharing Music with the Banjo!

ANNOUNCING MRBA Youth Bluegrass Music Scholarships

Montana Rockies Bluegrass Association (MRBA) is pleased to announce an exciting new program! At the 2024 annual meeting, the membership agreed to sponsor a Youth Scholarship program for emerging bluegrass musicians. The purpose of the scholarship is to advance the mission of MRBA:

“The Montana Rockies Bluegrass Association is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting, preserving, and sharing our love of bluegrass music in the spirit of family and friendship.”

The association will initially budget \$2000 for five scholarships (\$400 each). Membership dues will cover the annual costs of the program, but if there is enough interest from young musicians, it was agreed that MRBA would solicit donations to expand the program.

It is anticipated that the online scholarship application form, along with an online MRBA membership form, will be set up by the first quarter of 2025. The scholarship program will be promoted via the MRBA website, Facebook page, and newsletters, as well as sending notices to Montana music schools. Updates on the scholarship program will be published in the next newsletter. Below are the additional details.

What – Scholarship program to promote youth in bluegrass music and encourage more active participation in the organization.

Amount - \$400 per scholarship

Criteria:

- Montana resident (may consider adjoining states if funds allow)
- Age 6-18
- Must have a family membership to MRBA (or join MRBA) to receive scholarship
- One scholarship per family per year
- Must play (or be learning) an acoustic bluegrass instrument (guitar, fiddle, banjo, mandolin, bass, dobro)

Eligible Costs: (Scholarship can be used to reimburse for the following costs)

- Registration fees for music camp or workshop
- Music lessons for bluegrass instrument
- Travel costs to a music camp or workshop (workshop can be part of a festival)

Application & Reimbursement Process

- Fill out on-line application
- Review & approval by MRBA Board
- Submit receipts for reimbursement
- Submit photo from activity with a one paragraph description of what you are learning

A Musical Life Remembered

Interview with Christian Johnson

(by Kate McMahon)

In the 1971 a group of University of Montana students in Missoula, MT, formed Montana's most famous band — the Mission Mountain Wood Band. The band appeared on national television and toured 47 of the lower 48 states. They opened for many of the big acts of the 1970's including Bo Diddley, Jerry Garcia Band, Heart, Pure Prairie League, Jimmy Buffett, the Allman Brothers Band, Ozark Mountain Daredevils, Bonnie Raitt, and the Charlie Daniels Band. They released two studio albums during their heyday.

The original band was comprised of Rob Quist, Steve Riddle, Terry Robinson, Christian Johnson and Greg Reichenberg. In 1981, after the departure of several members, the band was reconfigured as The Montana Band. In 1987, with Terry Robinson as the only remaining original member, tragedy struck when a plane crash killed all the members of the band. In the 90's, surviving members began to reunite for periodic reunion concerts and recording projects.

Christian Johnson now resides in Whitefish, MT, and hosts a weekly bluegrass jam at the North Valley Music School. He agreed to sit down for an interview with the Montana Rockies Bluegrass Association editor to discuss his experiences living the dream as a young musician playing and touring venues from coast to coast.

Early Musical Career

Christian started his musical journey at 12 years old when he was a bass player for a neighborhood band in Oroville, CA. The band mostly played for pizza. His father worked in the timber industry and they moved often between lumber camps. Wherever they lived, he always played in a band, learning how to play guitar, fiddle and mandolin along the way. "I play pretty much anything with strings," said Christian.

He did not have any formal musical training but learned at a young age to play by ear. This involved listening to albums to learn licks and lots and lots of practice. He learned to improvise by listening to blues albums and then trying out what he learned with the bands he played with. He really never learned to read music until he was in his 50's.



In high school, his family moved to Nevada, and Christian was playing in casinos in Carson City. This required an adult to accompany him because he was too young to get in the casinos on his own. In 1969, a friend invited him to Billings to join his band. Three days after graduating high school, on a bet, he hitchhiked up to Billings and ended up moving to Missoula, where he joined the Montana Mission Mountain Band.

Life on the Road

During the mid-70's, the band played over 300 concerts a year! They primarily played for the college circuit in the midwest and southeast. This sometimes involved doing a radio show in the morning to promote the concert, playing at a college kegger in the afternoon, and then driving 100 miles to headline for another college show later that evening. They traveled in a converted 1955 Greyhound scenic cruiser. The bus accumulated about 2 million miles, and breakdowns and maintenance issues were frequent. According to Wikipedia, "...band legend is that they would have traveled to all of the lower 48 states had it not been for a cancelled concert in Maine that was never rebooked." It was an unforgettable experience. As noted by Christian, "It was fun, but touring is a young man's sport." By 1977, Johnson left the band to pursue individual interests, with not as much travel.

Performing vs. Recording

As explained by Johnson, the band was on the road constantly and there was not enough time for them to "... master the craft of studio recording. The standing ovations received at concerts, didn't translate to the studio."

Their first album was titled *In Without Knocking* and included their own compositions such as "Mountain Standard Time." Billboard magazine and others reviewed the album in generally favorable terms but noted the album didn't capture the charisma of the band's live performances.

Elements of Bluegrass

In addition to the country-folk-rock songs, the band added bluegrass to its repertoire. Christian Johnson played guitar, mandolin and fiddle in the band. They had the same agent as Nitty Gritty Dirt Band and Steve Martin. Originally, Steve Martin, wearing the arrow on his head, was the opening act for the Mission Mountain Band. After he shot to fame, the Montana Mission Mountain Band became the opening act for Martin. From time to time, a bluegrass act would share the bill where they were playing.

Because the Mission Mountain Band used electric instruments, (the fiddle, banjo, and guitar were plugged in) the band was not fully accepted by purest bluegrass aficionados, and the band never played the traditional bluegrass festival circuit. If one were to listen to "Mountain Standard Time," however, with its harmonies, upbeat tempo, and mandolin and fiddle breaks, and it would fit right in at any bluegrass gathering.

Post Touring Career

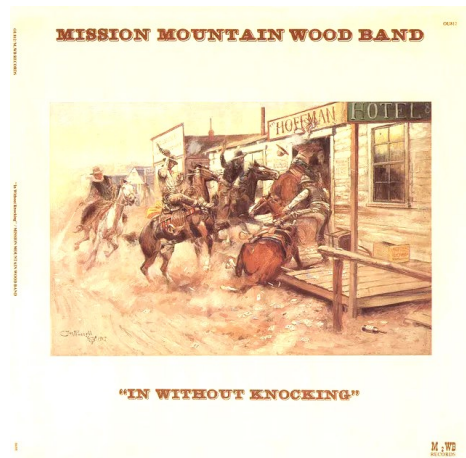
After leaving the Mission Mountain Band, Johnson continued performing in California for awhile before moving permanently to Montana in 1992. In 2008, when the local paper (Daily Interlake) interviewed Johnson, he was playing with five different bands all over the Flathead Valley. Local music lovers are likely to recognize the band names: "Good Wood Trio," "Billy Christian," "Out of the Bluegrass," "Loose Caboose," and the "Christian Johnson Project." As noted in the newspaper article, drawing people into his musical universe is a passion for Johnson. "I love playing with young people. It rejuvenates my interest in music any time I get on stage with young people."

Johnson has also been teaching for the last 17 years and is currently on the faculty at North Valley Music School in Whitefish. Johnson hosts a bluegrass-fiddle jam every Tuesday night at the school, where he welcomes pickers of all ages and abilities. The jams have introduced many newcomers to the bluegrass style of jamming.

In 2003, he attended the Musicians Institute of Technology to become a certified luthier. He also became a certified audio engineer, which he notes helps him with teaching. He might not be doing 300 shows a year any more, but as noted on his faculty profile, he is "Retired from real work ...loving my teaching and every minute I get in my luthier shop."

A Musical Life

From a young age, Christian Johnson has lived a life immersed in music. He is skilled in all aspects of music and readily shares his knowledge through teaching and mentoring young band members. And, as he noted in 2008, sharing goes both ways. "I get to share my knowledge and experience, and I get to learn stuff from them and feel that energy. I love that energy."



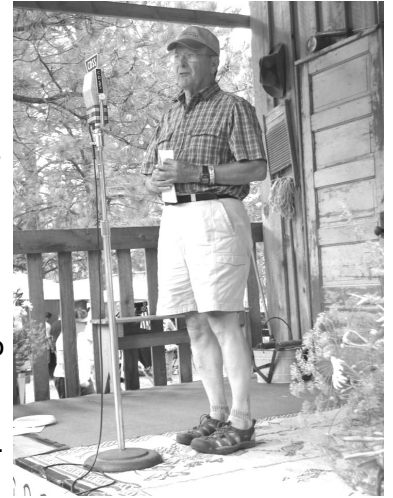
Ben Essary

(by Kate McMahon)

The day before our annual meeting, the Montana Rockies Bluegrass Association (MRBA) received the sad news that Ben Essary had passed away. Ben was dedicated to promoting the joy and tradition of bluegrass music. He served as a former MRBA President, secretary, and newsletter editor. He actually designed the newsletter template that we are still using today. Alongside his wife Pam, Ben was a fixture at MRBA bluegrass events. His dedication was honored in 2013, when he received a specially made plaque at the annual MRBA Christmas party in recognition of his outstanding service on the board.

Ben often took on emcee duties at bluegrass festivals. In 2011, he was interviewed by the Missoulian about the upcoming festival in Stevensville. The article discussed how his memories of bluegrass music dated back to his upbringing in rural Tennessee. Ben was quoted in the article, "Like anything in this day, unless you get young people involved, it won't be around for long. So that's really what the Montanan Rockies Bluegrass Association is all about. The focus is on the performance of the music and enjoying it."

Ben was a warm friend to many and made everyone, young and old, feel welcomed. For many years, Ben and Pam hosted unforgettable after-hours jams following the MRBA Spring Festival in Stevensville. He was a retired Air Force veteran and enjoyed the great outdoors of Montana. He was devoted to friends and family. As Ben told the Missoulian, "So much of the themes of music revolve around family, home, and close relationships. It's familiar themes that are family-friendly and a lot of very pretty music that sounds good. I think that stuff is almost universal."



Rest in peace, Ben. Your music will play on forever in our hearts.

Bluegrass Question of the Month

What are your favorite memories of playing music or singing with your family?



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NORTH VALLEY
MUSIC SCHOOL

Della Mae

(by Kate McMahon)

Kate McMahon with the MRBA newsletter and members of the Della Mae band. The band played last November in Kalispell at the Flathead Community College. Della Mae was the International Bluegrass Music Association "Emerging Artist" in 2013 and has since been nominated for a GRAMMY in the Bluegrass Album category. The band was founded by lead vocalist/guitarist Celia Woodsmith and 2-time Grand National champion fiddle player Kimber Ludiker. Rounding out the current touring lineup are guitarist Avril Smith, and IBMA Bass Player of the Year Vickie Vaughn. They have traveled to over 30 countries spreading their mission as a band to showcase top female musicians, and to improve opportunities for women in music.

Band members hail from all over the country, but they come together to perform at many festivals throughout the year and record new material. Their songlist features traditional songs, such as Nine-Pound Hammer, along with original compositions. The show also included a song to salute bluegrass pioneer Hazel Dickens.

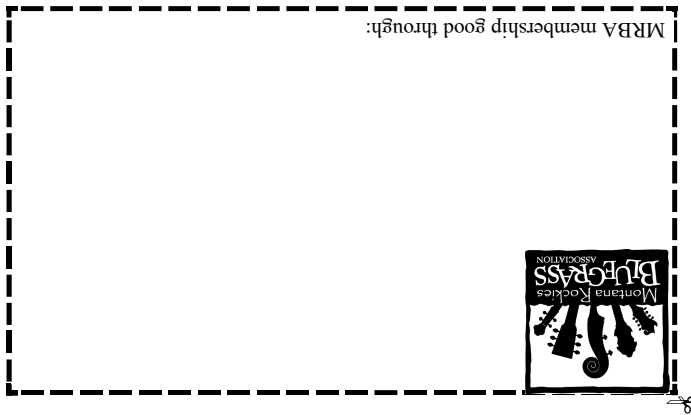
On a frosty November night, it was well worth it to venture out to hear warm vocals and stellar musicianship.

Their albums, posters and more are on their website.

<https://www.dellamae.com/>



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