



DCBU

Newsletter of the D.C. Bluegrass Union

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Nation's Banjo Capital

For most, Washington, DC, conjures images of Greco-Roman monuments, politicians short on integrity, millionaire lobbyists and a clogged beltway.

Think again.



DC is home to the largest and most vibrant community of banjo players in the country. For proof look no further than the *Patuxent Banjo Project*, a two-CD set which will be available this month. Produced by Tom Mindte at Patuxent Music, it features a cadre of out-

standing bluegrass and clawhammer players all with deep ties to the nation's capital.

How is all this possible? It starts during World War II, when hundreds of thousands of southerners flooded the DC area to work in the war effort. They brought their banjos, fiddles, mandolins, guitars and basses with them and in short order infused the region with a new "country music" sound. Roadhouses around the beltway featured bluegrass and like-minded music seven nights a week.

The level of musicianship grew quickly as an elite cadre of players including Buzz Busby, Scotty Stoneman, Smitty Irvin, Earl Taylor, Benny and Vallie Cain and Walter Hensley became regular entertainers in the DC/Baltimore region. And whether it was in the water or just a happy turn of fate, we produced first-rate banjo players almost by the hour.

A couple of years ago, banjoist and good friend Mark Delaney and I began musing about the number of sterling five-

string players that have hailed from the Washington region – and how many are still here but getting older. In that mutual light-bulb moment, the *concept* was born. What began as an effort to record and document a handful of banjo pio-



neers and current professional players grew to encompass 41 pickers in all.

It's an impressive group that includes elders Bill Emerson, Eddie Adcock, Don Bryant, Bill Blackburn, Pete Kuykendall, and Roni Stoneman but also some of the very best next-generation three-finger players like IBMA banjoist of the year Mike Munford, Tom Adams, Chris Warner,

Murphy Henry, Mark Delaney, Dick Smith and clawhammer masters Reed Martin, Cathy Fink, Stephen Wade, Mark Schatz, Paul Brown and wunderkind Victor Furtado.

"The idea for the project came to mind when I started touring. I met so many people who had no idea that Washington, DC, had a bluegrass scene at all -- let alone this area's contributions to the music over the years," said Delaney.

There are plenty of marvelous DC banjoists on the album you've likely never heard of – and that's what makes the project so unique. It's a great opportunity to hear lesser heralded but outstanding pickers like Gina Clowes, Casey Henry, Brennen Ernst, Fred Geiger, Scott Walker and Tommy Neal.

I would argue that there is no other place in the United States that could lay claim to the quantity and quality of banjo players that make the DC region their home. Neither Nashville, Tenn., nor Asheville, NC, neither Roanoke nor Galax, VA.

"We have brought forty-one of the area's top players together (fortunately not all at once) for a celebration of the banjo," said Mindte. "All of these virtuosos are associated with the DC / Baltimore / Northern Virginia area."

The album also offers a wide range of material and traditions, from Munford's dazzling version of *Hot Burrito Breakdown* to Ira Gitlin's original classical tune, *Allegretto con Melanzane*; to Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer's Bob Dylan cover, *Man Gave Names to All The Animals*. The latter features the deep tones of the seldom heard cello banjo.

Adding to the landmark nature of the project, nearly every cut was recorded and captured on video by Mindte at Patuxent studios in Rockville, MD. The banjo players had the pleasure of working with an outstanding studio back-up band: Michael Cleveland on fiddle and mandolin, Danny Knicely on guitar, Marshall Wilborn or Mark Schatz on bass and

Nate Leath on fiddle for old-time tunes.

"We've left out a few banjo players only because we ran out of room, Delaney said. "If it's well received, we'll do a round two."

The album can be purchased at www.pxrec.com

—Randy Barrett