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Big Music Feature

Drinking Songs

Patuxent Records keeps barroom bluegrass alive in Maryland

by Geoffrey Himes



Tom Mindte

Both Patuxent Music, the record label, and Patuxent Studios, the studio, are housed in a long, two-story, white-stucco storage area. Up in the attic are cardboard boxes full of CDs that demonstrate the label's breadth. The roster is dominated by bluegrass artists--both legendary old-timers such as Frank Wakefield and the Stonemans and up-and-comers such as Darren Beachley and Tatiana Hargreaves. Also represented are the blues, jazz, and roots rock.

Downstairs in the dim light of the control room, leaning back in his padded, black producer's chair before the big digital board is Tom Mindte, the founder/owner of both the studio and label. The 53-year-old musician is a big, round man in a black polo shirt, amber-frame glasses, graying

red hair, and a soft voice. His enthusiasm for American roots music can be seen in the photos of Duke Ellington, Bill Monroe, Louis Armstrong, and the Stanley Brothers hanging on the walls. The most significant picture, just above his left shoulder, is a black-velvet painting of Buzz Busby.

In the '60s and '70s, when Mindte was growing up in Rockville, the Baltimore-Washington area was the center of the bluegrass world, and Busby was one of its leading lights. The pudgy mandolinist played fast and hard in the style of the new urban bluegrass that the Appalachian immigrants had brought to the two cities. Busby specialized in applying the fast tremolos and double stops of fiddling to his mandolin playing. Mindte still remembers the first time he heard Busby leading his band at a Greek restaurant in Rockville.

"That's it, I told myself. That's the kind of mandolin I want to play," Mindte recalls. "I started to learn his style, first from his records, then from jamming in the parking lot with him after his shows and eventually by joining his band. Buzz was the best at that barroom bluegrass that grew up around Baltimore and Washington--and in Dayton and Detroit too. You see, down South the musicians played in church halls and school auditoriums, but up here they played in bars and the songs changed accordingly. Instead of just playing those nostalgic songs about the cabin on the hill and mother's grave, they started adapting drinking and cheating songs from mainstream country and arranging them for bluegrass bands.

"Then they started writing their own songs like that. How could they not? These were tough places full of tough people. I remember going to those bluegrass bars in East Baltimore--the Sandpiper Inn, Club Rancho, Cub Hill Inn, the 79 Club. When you walked in the door, you walked onto a floor of sticky beer and into a cloud of cigarette smoke. I thought it was great--this was how it was supposed to be. Bluegrass wasn't meant to be sterile and healthy. It was meant for working-class, beer-and-shot joints."

Mindte was so inspired that he started his own bluegrass band. He named it the Patuxent Partners because the original lead singer Danny Beach lived on the bank of the Patuxent River in Calvert County. The band played a lot of gigs in Southern Maryland because the barroom bluegrass sound still thrived there after it had declined in Baltimore and Washington in the mid-'80s. Mindte started taping shows on his reel-to-reel two-track recorder, and he liked it so much that he bought an eight-track machine and eventually cleared out a room in the storage unit where he kept his sprawling record collection and his father's antique cars. It was in that small back room in 1995 that he recorded an album by Joe Meadows, the fiddler who had worked with both the Stanley Brothers and Bill Monroe.

"It was supposed to be released by Mid-Knight Records," Mindte explains. "But the company went out of business owing me a lot of money. I figured the only way to get my money back was to start my own label and put out the album myself. So I released Joe's *Mountains, Rivers and Meadows* on Patuxent Music in 1996. It sold slowly at first, but Joe told me, 'Don't worry,

bluegrass albums keep selling. Other records in other genres are flashes in the pan, but bluegrass records don't go out of date and eventually you'll make your money back.' He was right--that album is still selling. Bluegrass fans like to buy a CD from the artist and get it autographed. You can't autograph a download."

The label's second album was *Little Bit a Blues* by Warner Williams and Jay Summerour, two Marylanders who updated the Piedmont blues sound of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. It immediately established that Patuxent Music would not be a bluegrass-only label. Mindte documented such local blues acts as Eleanor Ellis and Franklin and Baytop and such jazz artists as pianist John Colianni. Colianni's 2008 Patuxent album, *Johnny Chops*, was so impressive that the pianist's frequent collaborator, guitarist Larry Coryell, has decided to cut his next album in Rockville this fall and release it early next year on Patuxent Music.

One of Patuxent's most important releases this year has been *Nuke the Juke*, a roots-rock gem from Chick Hall Jr. Hall's father was a legendary guitarist around Washington, D.C. who straddled the boundary between country and R&B. He turned down an offer to lead the band on TV's *Jimmy Dean Show* in New York to settle in at his own club, Chick Hall's Surf Club in Hyattsville. There his son absorbed the D.C. Telecaster tradition (shared by similar stay-at-home legends Danny Gatton and Roy Buchanan) and ripped open honky-tonk and soul standards with jazzy guitar licks at weddings, American Legion Halls, and his father's club.

Nuke the Juke is his first album under his own name, and it substantiates the legend. Whether he's backing guest soul singer Barbara Malone on a genre- and gender-bent version of Merle Haggard's "Workin' Man Blues," finessing his way through Ahmad Jamal's jazz hit "Poinciana," or wrestling with a horn section on Willie Mitchell's Memphis-soul instrumental "20-75," Hall blows open familiar standards with startling eruptions of guitar.

Nonetheless string bands remain Patuxent Music's primary focus. "That's the kind of music I play," Mindte points out. "And that's the field where I know the most musicians. Most of the artists I record are either young people just getting started in their careers or else people who have had a long career in the music and have retired from the road but still have something to say."

In the former category are the Baker brothers, mandolinist Taylor and banjoist Jesse, who each released a terrific solo album last year: *Taylor Baker* and *Yessir!*, respectively. Nate Leath, the fiddler for the Old School Freight Train, has released four solo albums for Patuxent--two jazz-combo sessions and two string-band projects. His latest album, last year's *Rockville Pike*, featured two of the best teenage pickers anywhere: 16-year-old mandolinist Sarah Jarosz and 14-year-old fiddler Tatiana Hargreaves. Hargreaves returned to Rockville a year later to record her debut solo album, *Started Out to Ramble*, with help from her brother Alex, Jarosz, and Marylander Mark Schatz.

In the latter category are the Stonemans and Frank Wakefield. With some effort, Mindte was able to convince the three sisters from the famous Stonemans group--mandolinist Donna, banjo-playing Roni, and autoharp-playing Patsy--to make one more album, *Patsy, Donna, and Roni*, this year. Wakefield, who played with Jimmy Martin and Ralph Stanley, taught David Grisman, opened for the Grateful Dead, and made landmark bluegrass recordings with Red Allen, released his third Patuxent album last year, *Ownself Blues*, featuring award-winning fiddler Michael Cleveland. Wakefield will record his fourth Patuxent disc, a collection of Bill Monroe tunes, this fall.

The label's biggest success, though, has been this year's release by Darren Beachley and Legends of the Potomac, *Take Off*, which became the first Patuxent release to hit the *Billboard* bluegrass charts when it rose to No. 11 in May. The quintet features two of the original members of the Seldom Scene--dobro virtuoso Mike Auldridge and bassist Tom Gray--and the group carries on that polished new-grass sound with strong vocals by Beachley and hot solos by Auldridge, banjoist Mark Delaney, and mandolinist Norman Wright. In the Baltimore-Washington tradition, the band adapts such mainstream country tunes as the Louvin Brothers' "You'll Forget," Buck Owens' "I'll Love You Forever and Ever," and Tom T. Hall's "Tall Weeds and Rust" to new-grass arrangements. Hall even sings a guest vocal on the latter tune.

This year also saw the third album from Mindte's own band, the Patuxent Partners, *Seven or Eleven*. Bryan Deere handles the lead vocals, but Mindte supplies the harmonies, and his mandolin is prominent throughout on tunes from Buzz Busby, Scotty Stoneman, and Red Allen. All those years of working on the stage and in the studio with Busby and Wakefield have rubbed off on Mindte, and he can now play that Baltimore-Washington barroom bluegrass sound as well as anyone.

"I like a lot of different kinds of music," Mindte concedes. "But my favorite is still that hard-edged bluegrass I heard in the '70s. I love to play it and I love to record it. It's not an agenda--it's what I like."